
Additions to the avifauna of Nuevo León, Mexico with notes on new breeding records and infrequently seen species

Robert A. Behrstock and Ted L. Eubanks

El 20-21 de mayo y 26 de junio-2 de julio de 1996, observamos pájaros en el estado de Nuevo León, México. Observaciones del Pato Pijiji Alioscuro *Dendrocygna bicolor*, el Zorzalito Piquinaranja *Catharus aurantiirostris*, y el Saltator Grisáceo *Saltator coerulescens*, aparece ser el primero por el Estado. Se discute una población de la cría descubrió recientemente del Chipe Piquigrueso *Icteria virens*. Machos cantando del Vireo Gorrinegro *Vireo atricapillus*, y del Semillerito Vientridorado *Tiaris olivacea*, pueden representar extensiones de sus distribuciones. El Aguililla Braquiura *Buteo brachyurus*, el Águila Real *Aquila chrysaetos*, el Jilguero Pinero Rayado *Carduelis pinus* son observados con poca frecuencia y notamos su presencia.

Introduction

In spite of observations by professional and amateur ornithologists, the seasonal occurrence and distributional status of birds in the north-east Mexican state of Nuevo León remains imperfectly known. Perhaps this is surprising, in light of the close proximity of universities in both Mexico and the USA, the state's strikingly beautiful mountains and deserts, and the presence of several endemic species attractive to birders. We suspect that the seduction of fieldwork in more tropical regions of Mexico has lured biologists away from the northern border.

On 20 and 21 May 1996, TLE and Virginia Eubanks banded several sites in the mountains of Nuevo León. From 26 June to 2 July 1996, both authors and Gretchen Mueller visited those sites as well as others in the state. Most of these were no more than several hours' drive south of the USA-Mexico border, and all could be reached, albeit it with care, in non-four-wheel drive passenger vehicles. Based upon our experience, the first state records of Fulvous Whistling-duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*, Orange-billed Nightingale-thrush *Catharus aurantiirostris* and Grayish Saltator *Saltator coerulescens* are reported. A large and apparently previously unknown population of Yellow-breasted Chat *Icteria virens* is discussed and possible range extensions of Black-capped Vireo *Vireo atricapillus*, and Yellow-faced Grassquit *Tiaris olivacea* are recorded. Short-tailed Hawk *Buteo brachyurus*, Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, and Pine Siskin *Carduelis pinus* are rarely observed in the state, and additional records are noted here.

Additional investigations during the summer months are likely to help clarify the northern or eastern boundaries of many widespread species, especially those associated with the margin of the Sierra Madre Oriental.

Voucher recordings have been deposited at the Center for Bioacoustics, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA. Spanish names of Mexican birds are from Sada *et al.*¹¹. Locations mentioned are depicted in the map.

Fulvous Whistling-duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*

Although this widespread species is common in east Texas, USA, and occurs just to the east in Tamaulipas, Mexico, there appear to be no published records for Nuevo León⁵. On 26 June, two Fulvous Whistling-ducks were on the bank of a small lake along the east side of the Mexico 85 (cuota) toll road, c.73 km south of the international bridge at Laredo. Other waterbirds at this site included: Great Egret *Egretta alba*, Snowy Egret *E. thula*, Black-bellied Whistling-duck *Dendrocygna autumnalis*, Mallard ("Mexican Duck") *Anas platyrhynchos diazi*, Blue-winged Teal *A. discors*, Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus* and Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*. Fulvous Whistling-duck is an aggressive coloniser and strays widely; thus, it is unsurprising to find it somewhat west of its normal range.

Short-tailed Hawk *Buteo brachyurus*

Friedman *et al.*⁴ did not note this species in Nuevo León but mentioned its occurrence in Tamaulipas, where Howell & Webb⁵ mapped it in the more tropical southern half of the state.

On 29 June, a light morph adult was 12.4 km west of Montemorelos along Nuevo León Highway 2 (elevation c.530 m). It soared low over shrub-covered hills on the south side of the road, allowing a suite of field marks separating both colour morph from similar species, e.g. Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni*, White-tailed Hawk *B. albicaudatus*, and Zone-tailed Hawk *B. albonotatus*, to be noted.

Elsewhere in Nuevo León, A. M. Sada (*in litt.* 1996) has observed this species on 7 April (Sierra de Picachos) and, with TLE, in mid-July (near Monterrey). These, along with six accepted Texas records between 1989-1995 in the Lower Rio Grande Valley^{6,7,8} and on the Edward's Plateau⁸, may indicate a northward range expansion.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

This raptor is a rarity in the mountains of north-east Mexico, infrequently observed and less often reported, especially during summer. Urban's¹² summary of the avifauna of neighbouring Coahuila does not mention it; however, in the late 1950s, Ely³ observed individuals south-east of Saltillo, Coahuila during June, July, and October. In Nuevo León, A. M. Sada (*in litt.* 1996) has recorded this species on 12 March, and 12 and 27 December (Sierra de Picachos), 5 February and 11 October (Cerro Potosí) and 25 January, 25 September and 8 October (mountains near Monterrey). These dates suggest an influx of wintering birds, perhaps from north of the Mexican border.

On 1 July, we noted two individuals. During the early afternoon, a subadult was seen 6.9 km west of El Mesquite (c.1,875 m). It flew close to the ground along a low ridge bordering a broad valley filled with a tree-like yucca *Yucca australis*. The hillside below was dry and thinly clad with small bushes, the red-needled barrel cactus *Ferocactus pilosus*, and several species of prickly pear and cholla cactus *Opuntia* spp. Later that afternoon, we observed an adult soaring over tall hills immediately east of the village of Las Esperanzas (c.1,815 m). Nearby were fields with watered crops, land modified for cattle grazing, and a many km-long colony of the endangered Mexican prairie-dog *Cynomys mexicanus*. Prairie-dogs are a known prey of the Golden Eagle².

Orange-billed Nightingale-thrush

Catharus aurantiirostris

Miller et al.¹⁰ mention *Catharus aurantiirostris* in the adjacent states of San Luis Potosí (Xilitla) and south-west Tamaulipas (La Joya de Salas, where nesting documented). Neither they, nor Howell & Webb⁵ who portray distribution similarly, recorded it in Nuevo León.

On 21 May, TLE discovered a singing male c.10 km west of the village of La Cienega. The site was visited again on 27 June and a singing male tape-recorded at 17h10. The next morning, between 08h00 and 08h30, we heard or saw as many as three males in this area. We assume that this late in the season, a cluster of singing males in suitable habitat is indicative of a breeding population. The birds were at c.1,600 m along 2 km of road that follows a narrow canyon bottom with a sparsely-vegetated cliff face to the north and a streambed with riparian vegetation backed by another cliff face to the south. The birds were singing from vegetation near the canyon bottom to c.15 m upslope. Birds from the vicinity of La Cienega or another undiscovered northern Mexican population could be the source of extralimital records, including an individual mist-netted 8 April 1996, less than 400 km north of La Cienega at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge in coastal Texas, USA⁹.

Black-capped Vireo *Vireo atricapillus*

Howell & Webb⁵ indicate Black-capped Vireo breeding in south and south-west Nuevo León. On 21 May, TLE encountered a singing male on a shrubby hillside c.12 km west of La Cienega along the road to Laguna de Sanchez, near the village of San Isidro at c.1,600 m. This would appear to be the north-easternmost Mexican record.

Yellow-breasted Chat *Icteria virens*

Historically, this species was considered to breed in adjacent Tamaulipas, and was collected on 21 July at Galeana, Nuevo León¹⁰. However, Howell & Webb⁵, basing their statements upon the paucity of recent records, consider it perhaps only a former breeder on the Atlantic Slope in Tamaulipas, and map it as only a transient migrant in Nuevo León. Although Dickerman¹ frowned upon basing the absence of chats on a lack of published records (in Coahuila) there seems to be no recent evidence of breeding on the Atlantic Slope.

On 29 June at 11h00, we found many singing chats along Nuevo León Highway 2, just west of Montemorelos (at c.430 m). Those birds initially encountered, two of which were tape-recorded, were in open stands of xeric shrubs including *Acacia* (probably *farnesiana*, often called huisache) and bluestem grass *Andropogon* sp., interspersed with citrus orchards. Other birds present at this site included: Northern Bobwhite *Colinus virginianus*, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea*, Grey-crowned Yellowthroat *Chamaethlypis poliocephala*, Blue Grosbeak *Passerina caerulea*, Varied Bunting *Passerina versicolor*, Olive Sparrow *Arremonops rufivirgatus* and Botteri's Sparrows *Aimophila botterii*. Further west, more chats were present in hedgerows around orchards, and in taller, more dense,

shrubby habitat shared with e.g. Brown Jay *Cyanocorax morio*, Tufted (Black-crested) Titmouse *Parus bicolor*, Yellow-green Vireo *Vireo flavoviridis* and Crimson-collared Grosbeak *Rhodothraupis celaeno*. A total of 25-30 chats was seen or heard, often up to four at a time, many in obvious display flights; this is assumed to be a breeding population. After driving 12.9 km west, and reaching c.540 m, no more chats were recorded.

Grayish Saltator *Saltator coerulescens*

For the Atlantic Slope, Howell & Webb⁵ map Grayish Saltator no further north than south Tamaulipas. On 21 May, TLE observed a possible family group of four in a canyon with dense, relatively dry, deciduous tropical scrub. The site is slightly below Cascada Cola de Caballo (Horsetail Falls) at c.555 m. Other species present then, and on 27 and 29 June (most, at or near their north-eastern limits) included: Blue-crowned Motmot *Momotus momota*, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher *Myiodynastes luteiventris*, Green Jay *Cyanocorax yncas*, Brown Jay *C. morio*, Spot-breasted Wren *Thryothorus maculipectus*, Yellow-green Vireo *Vireo flavoviridis*, Crimson-collared Grosbeak *Rhodothraupis celaeno* and Blue Bunting *Cyanocopsa parellina*.

Yellow-faced Grassquit *Tiaris olivacea*

For the Atlantic seaboard, Miller et al.¹⁰ reported this species as far north as eastern San Luis Potosí and southern Tamaulipas. Subsequently, it has been seen as far north as La Estanzuela, near Monterrey (A. M. Sada *in litt.* 1996), and a singing male was observed on 4 April 1990 near Presa La Boca, Nuevo León (S. N. G. Howell & S. Webb *in litt.* 1996). On 27 and 28 June, at least five singing males (one tape-recorded) and a female were encountered along 15 km of road (c.1,475–1,600 m), east and west of La Cienega, between El Manzano and San Isidro villages. Based on this, it is suspected that the species is established around La Cienega. Most birds were in grazed roadside grasses and weedy plants, often intermixed with a few cultivated crops. One bird sang in the narrow canyon c.10 km west of La Cienega. This species has possibly spread north since the 1950s.

Pine Siskin *Carduelis pinus*

In north-east Mexico, this species is both a breeding bird and migrant. Ely³ collected it around Saltillo, Coahuila, noting the presence of breeding *C. p. macropterus*, and non-breeding *macropterus* and *C. p. pinus* (or a similar but larger subspecies). A. M. Sada (*in litt.* 1996) recorded boreal or altitudinal migrants in the lowlands of Tamaulipas on 22 March and 21 November. Howell & Webb⁵ portray it as a winter visitor to Nuevo León, having inadvertently overlooked their summer observation of 6-7 birds at Cerro Potosí on 12 June 1990 (S. N. G. Howell *in litt.* 1996). At Cerro Potosí on 30 June, it was fairly common in remnant conifer forest on the upper slopes, i.e. above c.3,385 m. Additionally, G. Lasley & C. Sexton (*in litt.* 1996) found one on 15 June 1994, west of La Cienega near San Isidro at c.2,615 m.

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Robert A. Behrstock

9707 S. Gessner #3506, Houston, Texas 77071, USA.

Ted L. Eubanks

Fermata, Inc., 2200 Parkway, Austin, Texas 78703, USA.