
Natural history notes on some little-known birds in north-west Argentina

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Presentamos aquí los resultados de diversas campañas realizadas al noroeste de Argentina donde encontramos especies con pocos registros en el país o cuya presencia en la región representa una extensión de su distribución. Sobre 15 especies tratadas se dan a conocer datos sobre biología e historia natural, siendo algunas de ellas recientemente registradas por primera vez en la Argentina, y en general poco conocidas. La gran mayoría de localidades referidas en el texto se encuentran sobre la ladera oriental de las Sierras de Sta. Victoria, de Zenta y de Cerros Colorados, en las provincias de Salta y Jujuy; dentro de una faja altitudinal de 1.400 a 3.500 m. Así se cubrieron hábitats que van desde la nuboselva hasta los pastizales y pedregales altoandinos. Nuestras observaciones se concentraron en sectores con bosques de queñoas *Polylepis* sp. que se encuentran actualmente fragmentados y en forma remanente, sobretudo cerca de Santa Victoria, Salta, donde se hallan solo en laderas abruptas o quebradas profundas. Sin embargo sectores de queñoales en aparente buen estado de conservación, fueron explorados en cercanías de Alto Calilegua, Jujuy. En cambio, porciones de bosques de *Polylepis* en aparente buen estado de conservación fueron explorados en las cercanías de Alto Calilegua, Jujuy. La Queñoa se encuentra en general amenazadas por la explotación de su madera para leña. Varias especies poco conocidas y amenazadas están directamente asociadas a la queñoa, habitando entre bosquecillos abiertos hasta bosques con árboles de gran tamaño y sotobosque de matorral denso. Este hábitat conforma una unidad que hasta ahora había pasado desapercibida en la Argentina y es conocido culturalmente como los “Valles”. Ocupa principalmente el sur de Bolivia en los departamentos Tarija, Chuquisaca y Santa Cruz, apareciendo sobre el noroeste argentino como una continuación directa desde Bolivia.

Introduction

North-west Argentina has historically received comparatively less ornithological attention than other areas of the country. Therefore it is unsurprising, given recent levels of observer activity in this region, that a wealth of new distributional data has been published in the last few years. Here, we present the results of visits to Jujuy by JMB, AB and GB between 21 July–25 August 1996; to Tucumán, Salta and Jujuy by JMB, GP and MdS between 20 September–3 October 1997, and by RC and Mario Mosqueira during several trips to Jujuy and Salta over the last few years. We include new and interesting observations on the distribution, habitat and behaviour of several species, many of which have been only recently reported in Argentina. Information on Andean Swallow *Stelgidopteryx andecola* and Giant Conebill *Oreomanes fraseri*, both species new to Argentina, will be published elsewhere.

Bare-faced Ground-dove *Metriopelia ceciliae*

Since its discovery in Argentina, in Salta province, there have only been two published reports of its presence^{1,23}. The latter authors mention the occurrence of the species in relatively small groups. There have been no subsequent reports from Salta and it appears to be locally fairly common in extreme northern Jujuy.

Between 30–31 July 1996, JMB observed it at La Quiaca and Yavi. Groups of 5–10 birds were found at both localities, usually feeding on the ground and always around habitation. On numerous occasions, the species was seen perched on roofs or walls. At Yavi, several groups were found and a total of at least 50 individuals was estimated to be present. Birds were present on the slopes of a small hill with open soil, rocky ground and scattered small bushes. RC has recorded it commonly at La Quiaca and Yavi, feeding in hen-houses and house yards. On 23 August 1997, groups of 3–8 birds were found in Yavi camping area, perched on poplars and other introduced trees. It is evident that the species breeds in Argentina (as previously suspected) and its population has increased since the first records.

White-tipped Swift *Aeronautes montivagus*

Recently reported for the first time in Argentina by Moschione²², who recorded a group of 12 individuals at Mesada de las Colmenas, Calilegua National Park. Although it has been reported since on a number of occasions from the same area¹¹, we consider it appropriate to publish our observations, which provide new data on its habits and habitat, as well as establishing the species' presence at several new localities in Argentina.

On 30 September 1995, RC observed a flock of 30 in Mesada de las Colmenas. Between 23–26 July 1996 JMB, in the company of other observers, saw groups of 15–20 individuals at Las Juntas and up to c.150 birds at

Totoritas (both localities at mid-elevations in Calilegua National Park). Records of this species in Calilegua appear to be concentrated between Las Juntas and Mesada de las Colmenas (between 700–1,150 m.), but becoming scarcer near the latter.

On 13–14 August 1996, JMB, AB and GB saw groups of c.50 individuals flying over the deep canyon of the río Valle Grande opposite San Francisco at 1,600 m. On 15 August 1996, c.100 birds were flying over the same river on the outskirts of Valle Grande at 1,900 m. On 16–17 August 1996, c.20 birds were over the río Valle Colorado, near Valle Colorado at 1,900 m, together with some *A. andecolus*.

Their behaviour was thus. They always flew over deep canyons, remaining at the same altitude even when passing over a ridge (as at Totoritas, where they were just 20–40 m overhead). In large groups, they worked an large area over the river canyon, erratically describing wide circles. After some time, they would all move toward another area to continue their routine afresh. In the early morning of 25 August 1997, RC *et al.* found a group of six, together with four Ashy-tailed Swift *Chaetura andrei* at Abra de Cañas (1,700 m), Calilegua National Park, flying fast just above the tree-tops and occasionally passing between the branches. Interestingly, none were seen during a visit to Calilegua between 29 September–3 October 1997 (JMB, GP and MdS).

Wedge-tailed Hillstar *Oreotrochilus adela*

Recently discovered in Argentina by Alvarez & Blendinguer², at Yavi, where it apparently favours gardens in the village.

On 31 July 1996, JMB surveyed the area of Yavi Chico, having found no hummingbirds at Yavi the previous day. A female was found perched atop a *Prosopis*-like small tree. Two other hummingbirds seen in flight could, on the basis of their long and slightly decurved bills, also be attributed to this species. All three were in a ravine by a stream near the village. This area was densely covered by the *Prosopis*-like small trees and ‘pajabrava’ (Cortadeira) in the small gullies running down to the stream. Abundant ‘ligas’ (Loranthaceae) covering the vegetation were flowering at this time and probably constitutes the species’ main food source in winter. A male was found near Yavi on 25 September 1997, around a tall rock wall with abundant terrestrial bromeliads (JMB, GP and MdS). On 10 November 1997, R. Güller (*in litt.* 1998) found a pair in the same area at Yavi feeding exclusively on the yellow flower of a bromeliad growing in a rocky crevice.

Striped Woodpecker *Picoides lignarius*

Krabbe recorded it in Portillo, Chuquisaca department, Bolivia in *Podocarpus* forest and *Alnus* shrubbery, fields and bushes at 2,500–2,700 m, the vegetation which subsequently grades into the higher *Polylepis* groves. The species has been recorded in La Paz, Bolivia in slightly more humid habitat^{18,19}.

The first record for Salta province and the first in Argentina of the northern population, previously considered endemic to Bolivia, was a single on 27 September 1997, in a small, steep-sided quebrada near Santa Victoria, Salta, at c.2,700 m. It was moving slowly, low down in the vegetation (an open woodland of *Polylepis* trees and *Baccharis* shrubs). It was solitary, working the central part of each bush, climbing a short way before moving to another plant. It was not seen to feed or perch on *Polylepis*.

Smoky-brown Woodpecker

Veniliornis fumigatus

Since Olrog²⁹ first mentioned the species for Argentina, no additional information has been published concerning its presence or habits in Argentina, hence its inclusion here. Olrog²⁹ recorded it in *Alnus* and *Polylepis* woodland between 2,200–2,600 m, but later³⁰ reported the species in humid forest and woodland between 1,700–2,500 m.

On 30 September 1995, RC found a male near Mesada de las Colmenas, Calilegua National Park at 1,200 m near a calling male Dot-fronted Woodpecker *V. frontalis*. On 25 July 1996, 4–6 birds (apparently a family group) were seen from the RP 83 road in Calilegua National Park, near Sevenguillar (1,400 m), where Alder *Alnus acuminata* forest appears (JMB, I. Roesler and A. Libermann). They were in an area of light woodland with dense shrubbery and tangles along some tree-trunks, moving in a lethargic manner through sections of denser vegetation and occasionally climbing the alders. From time-to-time, a soft *cuíp* contact call was heard. On 9 August 1996, a solitary bird (probably a female) was found in the bare canopy of a patch of alder woodland, near an area known as Campo Colorado on the trail to Alto Calilegua. Alders only reached this area as ‘tongues’ through the more humid quebradas or shaded slopes. There were also some small, scattered Queñoas bushes (*Polylepis*). JMB, AB and GB saw two separate males on 12 August 1996 on the trail from Alto Calilegua to Valle Grande (c.2,000–2,300 m). They were feeding up to 2.5 m above ground, in an area mostly covered by *Eugenia* sp. elfin forest. On 15–16 August 1996, solitary birds were seen in low woodland with abundant *Eugenia* sp., between Valle Grande and Valle Colorado. On 24 August 1997, a lethargic male was near Abra de Cañas (1,700 m), Calilegua National Park (RC). Single males were seen at c.1,600 m in Calilegua National Park on 1–2 October 1997 (JMB, GP and MdS).

We conclude that the species is not scarce and appears to be frequent in areas of suitable habitat. Our

observations were in low, dry montane woodland, where there is a profusion of *Eugenia* sp. and *Alnus acuminata*. These observations are also largely commensurate with Olrog's²⁹ view that *V. fumigatus* replaces *V. frontalis* at higher altitudes, although the two species appear to overlap to some extent. Our lowest records were between 1,200–1,400 m.

Plain-breasted Earthcreeper *Upucerthia jelskii*

The first report of this form in Argentina was by Zotta⁴⁷, who mentioned *U. validirostris pallida* on the basis of a female collected by E. Budin in San Antonio de los Cobres, Salta. Although *validirostris* and *jelskii* have been considered distinct by most recent authors, more complete data of their presence and sympatry in northern Argentina is needed to elucidate their true taxonomic relationship¹⁴. Since Zotta's report⁴⁷, only Narosky *et al.*²⁴ has mentioned this species' occurrence in Argentina, describing a nest found by G. Höy in the Cordillera de Salta, Salta province on 18 November 1980.

The species was found in April 1994, south of Pozuelos (Muñayoc) and subsequently, on several occasions, near Abra Pampa, Jujuy, usually in pairs (RC). Two pairs were found on 31 July 1996 near Suripujio, Jujuy, at c.3,600 m (JMB). Their bills were short compared to *U. validirostris* from eg. Tucumán, and the birds were generally duller. Very terrestrial, they ran fast through the turf and between small bushes in stony grassland, by the side of a stream which in places had formed small sandstone cliffs.

A pair was seen nearby on 26 September 1997, with one individual coming out from a hole in the cliff (JMB, GP and MdS). A soft slightly downward-inflected trill *tuírrrrrr* was noted on both occasions. Between 18–21 August 1996, two apparent family groups were seen in the vicinity of Santa Ana, Jujuy (JMB, AB and GB). These birds resembled those near Suripujio in that they were generally paler and duller, and had relatively shorter bills than *U. validirostris* from further south. These birds also delivered the same trills, sometimes with several high-pitched, metallic *tyiik* introductory notes. Descriptions of the voices of *validirostris* and *jelskii*^{14,39} do not assist in their in-the-field differentiation.

A specimen was collected. It was a female, apparently young, with skull partially (15–20%) ossified, heavy fat on breast and back, heavily worn plumage and slight body moult. The specimen has been deposited at the Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales (MACN), although two liver samples are deposited at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). Its measurements were: wing flat 85, and exposed culmen 31 mm.

An obvious coloration cline exists, with birds from further south (*validirostris*) being brighter and buffier with more extensive (and brighter) rufous on the wings and tail than those from the north (*jelskii/pallida*). Vaurie⁴⁴, who drew attention to this, considered them conspecific. Ridgely & Tudor³⁹, however, state that there is a "quite marked break in size" between these forms. A brief study of specimens at Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales (MACN) found a clear cline in measurements, a fact already established by Vaurie⁴⁴. Further, measurements published in the literature^{12,16,25,44} also largely show this pattern, with birds from the north having the following measurements: wing 81–91 mm, bill 31–39 mm, tail 65–78 mm and those from the southern part of the range the following: wing 85–97 mm, bill 34–44 mm and tail 75–87 mm.

A thorough comparison of specimens is beyond the scope of this paper, but this, coupled with DNA studies and more complete analysis of vocalisations and playback tests, could produce a definitive answer as to their taxonomic status. Cabot⁶ reported the first specimen of *U. validirostris* for Bolivia, but published no plumage or measurement, and thus we cannot be sure of its specific identity without further study.

Tawny Tit-spinetail *Leptasthenura yanacensis*

On 10–11 August 1996, two pairs were found on a slope above Alto Calilegua, at c.2,900 m (JMB, GB). We found *L. yanacensis* in habitat remarkably like that described for the species by Vuilleumier⁴⁵: a relatively steep slope with dense bunchgrass and areas of bare rocky ground with patches of dense shrubbery (*Baccharis*). A second habitat type, described for the species by the same author; a mix of light *Polylepis* woodland and shrubbery, was also found in the same general area, and it is likely that the species also occurred there.

The birds moved rapidly, working the central parts of the bushes, and were also seen foraging on small ground plants on several occasions. The birds were more active in late afternoon. Quite confiding, close observer approach was possible as the birds rapidly moved through the dense shrubbery, apparently unperturbed.

They delivered soft, dry *tshíp* calls, contrasting with the more emphatic, sharp and relatively harsh *tiíp* calls of *L. fuliginiceps*, which at times was found in close proximity. They also uttered more complex, longer trills of several notes, generally in duets.

Between 11h30–17h45 on 11 August 1996, two separate mist-nets were erected in the area where the birds had been found the previous day and that morning, but we were unable to catch any individuals. However, we obtained photographs and poor quality tape-recordings of the calls and trills described above.

On 27 September 1997, two individuals were in quebrada Sacha Runa, near Santa Victoria, Salta at 2,900–3,000 m (JMB, GP and MdS). They moved actively through the fine branches of some small *Polylepis*

trees in the steep walls of the quebrada. One was observed to constantly sally from the floor to a nearby cloud of insects. This area resembled that described as the second habitat type for this species by Vuilleumier⁴⁵.

These records represent a downslope range-extension of at least 600 m³². It has been recorded in Tarija, Bolivia at 3,000 m (near Sama in October 1982) and at 2,850–3,100 m in Tariquia in October 1992, in similar *Polylepis* habitat^{20,27}.

The species was known from 3,600–4,600 m from Ancash to Lima through the Cordillera Blanca, and from Abra Málaga to Puno, in Peru; and in La Paz, Cochabamba, Potosí and Tarija departments in Bolivia where it is locally common¹⁴. Bolivian birds apparently represent an undescribed subspecies¹⁴, and this form probably corresponds to Argentinian populations. Although the species appears scarce and localised in Peru, where it was only rediscovered in 1974³¹, it appears to be common in Bolivia⁴⁵. *L. yanacensis* is considered near-threatened⁹ but its status in Bolivia, which seems similar to that in Argentina, this classification seems overcautious. There are now nine reports in Argentina²¹ and it is possibly expanding its range southwards.

Maquis Canastero *Asthenes heterura*

Vuilleumier⁴⁵ first published observations of this taxon, which was formerly considered a race of *A. pudibunda*. To date, the only additional information available is that contained in Fjeldså & Krabbe¹⁴ and Ridgely & Tudor³⁹. Vuilleumier⁴⁵ describes its habits and vocalisations, which first alerted us to its presence. The species has been recorded six times in Argentina, including the observation described below²¹.

On 12 August 1996, while surveying the trail between Alto Calilegua and Valle Grande and c.2–3 km from the former, JMB, AB and GB heard—in early morning—what were unmistakably this species' calls. One bird was seen moving upslope and it became apparent that two individuals were calling to one another. It is possible that a third bird may have been present.

The birds were at c.2,500 m on a steep slope covered with tall clumps of *Festuca* bunchgrass, interspersed with areas of short turf and patches of bare soil. There were also some dry bushes with branches less than 1 m above the grass, and other scattered bushes with scant foliage. Further downslope, there was light *Polylepis* woodland and the opposite slope held a 'tongue' of alders *Alnus acuminata* reaching relatively high.

With some regularity, we heard the soft *tuírrrrr* calls, lasting c.0.3–0.5 seconds, accelerating towards the end and falling slightly in pitch, which were tape-recorded.

The observed bird moved along the ground, well below the tops of the grass, although on two occasions it sang, in the open, from the top of a dead shrub. These observations accord with those of Vuilleumier⁴⁵, although this author refers to a more shrubby habitat for the species. Other species found nearby were *Phacellodomus maculipectus* and *Poospiza hypochondria*.

The bird had a longish tail, brownish rufous with dull brown central rectrices. Upperparts greyish brown; underparts somewhat paler with a slight buffy tinge. It had a gular patch which appeared dark with cinnamon borders. The remiges were notably rufous, especially in flight. Short, narrow and inconspicuous eyebrow and loreal area buffy cream.

The species was previously considered endemic to Bolivia, where it was known from La Paz, Cochabamba, Chuquisaca and Tarija departments³. Fjeldså & Krabbe¹⁴ considered it fairly common, whereas Ridgely & Tudor³⁹ regard it as uncommon. Although not considered by Collar *et al.*⁸, it was subsequently treated as vulnerable based on habitat modification through firewood collection, clearance for agriculture and overgrazing⁹. Although the area where we found the species is subject to grazing pressure from goats, this is not extensive and does not appear to threaten the species. Another cause of concern in the area is wood extraction, both shrubs and *Polylepis* trees, by local people. Although this is a serious problem in the area, the canasteros were found in an open area, and thus appear in no imminent danger from this activity. Parker *et al.*³² assigned this species a low conservation priority.

Spot-breasted Thornbird

Phacellodomus maculipectus

Very little has been published on this species, whose taxonomic status has been debated. Nores & Yzurieta²⁶ and Ridgely & Tudor³⁹ have published virtually all that is known of it. We made some observations on the habits of the species in Salta and Jujuy.

On 14 November 1994, RC and Davis Finch found a breeding pair near La Caldera, Salta, in degraded montane forest with scattered tall trees and dense chaco-type shrubbery, at c.1,300 m. The nest was in the open c.4 m above ground on a strong branch of a large *Tipuana tipu* tree. Both birds were calling constantly and responded to playback. The same nest, and presumably the same pair, were seen in the same area on 12 November 1995. In November 1996 the nest appeared to have been abandoned, although a pair of thornbirds responded to playback in its vicinity and a new active nest, c.3 m above ground, in the centre of the tree and surrounded by spiny branches was found (RC). Subsequently, a pair of Saffron Finch *Sicalis flaveola* was observed entering the disused thornbird nest.

Between, 9–11 August 1996, JMB, AB and GB found it to be fairly common in dense shrubbery near habitation at and above Alto Calilegua (2,700–2,900 m). Usually in stands of *Baccharis*, they were commonly seen on or near the ground. This habitat, which could be described as upper montane shrubbery or arid montane scrub³² with groves of *Polylepis*, also held species such as *Leptasthenura yanacensis*, *L. fuliginiceps*, *Anairetes parulus*, *Atlapetes fulviceps*, *Poospiza hypochondria* and others that were found alongside the thornbirds. This represents an upward range extension of c.400 m^{32,41}. The species was found in similar habitat in valleys near Valle Colorado, at 1,900 m, between 16–18 August 1996.

On 24 September 1997, several pairs were found near Lagunas de Yala at 2,000 m, in an area of montane woodland with loose groves of *Alnus acuminata* and *Baccharis* (JMB, GP and MdS). Rather tame but skulking, they held the tail slightly cocked. There appeared to be an active nest, with a pair constantly calling and moving back and forth without carrying any material.

Fjeldså & Mayer¹⁵ recorded the species in south Bolivia between 1,800–3,100 m in the transition between temporarily humid and semi-evergreen zones, covered by *Alnus*, *Podocarpus* and *Miconia*. Apart from the difference in nest architecture (which recalls that of *P. rufifrons*), we concur with Nores & Yzurieta²⁶ and *contra* Ridgely & Tudor³⁹ that *maculipectus* has a distinct song. Although both species have a similar vocalisation pattern, *maculipectus* has a slightly lower pitched song, often consisting of 10–25 notes delivered at a faster pace than *striaticollis*, whose typical song, in contrast, consists of 5–15 evenly spaced notes and has a stronger descending effect. A nest found in El Rey National Park at 1,700 m in an *Alnus* grove, and mentioned under *P. rufifrons*⁴, undeniably belongs to *maculipectus*.

Rufous-webbed Tyrant *Polioptila rufipennis*

Rumboll⁴⁰ reported the species' presence in Argentina, on the basis of one observed in Lagunillas, near Pozuelos. No additional observations have been published, although there are several other records in press. With the observations detailed here, there are now 12 reports for Argentina²¹.

On 10 August 1996, two pairs were found close together on a gentle slope just above Alto Calilegua (JMB and GB), 1–2 km from the area where *L. yanacensis* was found (see above). The birds were in a wide area of short turf with scattered shrubs and areas of large boulders piled together, bordered on two sides by shallow ravines.

They perched on the shrubs (most were dry), from where they glided to the ground to take prey. They would remain on the ground for short periods, apparently consuming the prey before returning to a perch. On a few occasions, the second member of the pair rapidly flew to its mate when it had captured prey. They were also seen flying quite high and hovering. A soft, high-pitched finch-like *prii-i* was regularly delivered, which coincides with the call described by Fjeldså & Krabbe¹⁴. Photographs of 1–2 individuals were obtained.

On 18 August 1996, a single was found on the trail between Valle Colorado and Santa Ana, at c.3,100–3,200 m) where the habitat becomes high Andean steppe (JMB, AB and GB). This bird was always seen in flight over a very steep slope of short grass and rocky ground. The bird took advantage of updrafts to stay high above the ground, practically immobile, either searching for prey or performing an aerial display as described by Vuilleumier⁴⁵. After apparently observing the ground for a short period, it dropped in undulating glides toward another area of the slope, where it would pause in mid-flight, showing great agility and skill.

On 26–27 September 1997, at least three birds were perching on large boulders on a very gentle slope of short turf, c.5 km from Rodeo Pampa, Salta at c.3,300 m (JMB, GP and MdS). Nearby, a pair was nest-building in the fork of a horizontal branch of a 4 m tall *Polylepis* high in the steep walls of quebrada Sacha Runa, at c.3,000 m. The birds were collecting small twigs from the ground on the ridge of the quebrada. Working separately, on approaching the nest they would remain on a nearby *Polylepis* before flying to the nest, quickly placing the material and leaving again. The nest was rather large, cup-shaped and loosely constructed of dry stems, moss-covered twigs and grass.

The majority of these observations agree with Vuilleumier's notes^{45,46}, who also mentions⁴⁵ that the distribution of this species appears to be closely related to that of *L. yanacensis* in terms of habitat requirements. Both are usually recorded in more humid *Polylepis* woodland in the north of their ranges, and dryer shrubbery or *Polylepis* in the south. However, Fjeldså¹³ believes variation in *P. rufipennis* does not correlate with climate. Geographic variation in *P. rufipennis* appears to be the same as that outlined for *L. yanacensis*¹⁴. The species is apparently extending its range south, as suggested by recent records in Bolivia and Argentina. It was first reported in Oruro, Bolivia in 1967⁴⁵, and was discovered in Chuquisaca and Tarija (Bolivia's southernmost departments) between 1989–1995³. That this bold tyrant went unrecorded in Argentina until 1990 also suggests this, as it is hard to believe that it had been overlooked previously, especially given the 12 reports in the last seven years. The Argentine population probably belong to the subspecies *bolivianus*, recently described by Fjeldså¹³, although this requires proof.

Puna Ground-tyrant *Muscisaxicola juninensis*

Only one certain record of this species in Argentina: Lillo¹⁷ mentions a specimen collected by E. Budin at Laguna Colorada, Maimará on 17 June 1908, at 4,000 m. Fjeldså & Krabbe¹⁴, without evidence, mention its occurrence as far south as Tucumán, and Ridgely & Tudor³⁹ appear to repeat this error. We present the first records for Salta province.

M. Mosqueira found a bird on road RN 40 within Los Cardones National Park, Salta in July 1989. On 15 September 1994, one was on clayish ground, with several *M. cinerea*, on Cerro Negro (4,000 m) in Los Cardones National Park (RC). On 19 August 1996, a pair was foraging on the gravel shores of Laguna Verde, by the road between Santa Ana and Humahuaca 10–15 km from the former, at c.4,500 m (JMB, AB and GB). One was photographed. *Cinclodes fuscus*, *Asthenes modesta*, and *Phrygilus dorsalis* were also found in this area. On 26–28 September 1997, up to five groups (pairs or solitary birds) were on the RP 7 between La Quiaca (Jujuy) and Santa Victoria, Salta (JMB, GP and MdS). All were above 4,000 m in different microhabitats within the puna, although no accurate altitudinal measurements could be taken. A pair was running around on a boggy field which formed an open valley, with small streams crossing it. Another pair was capturing insects on a landslide of large black (volcanic?) rocks, accompanying a troop of Chinchillón or Vizcachón, *Lagidium viscacia* (Mammalia: Chinchillidae). Solitary birds were seen on gentle slopes covered by high Andean grassland in rocky terrain. In most cases, the birds ran, catching insects in flight or from the ground. The general behaviour was similar to that of other species in the genus.

These observations demonstrate that the species has apparently been overlooked in Argentina, perhaps due to identification problems with White-browed Ground-tyrant *M. albilora*, and that in areas of suitable habitat it is fairly common. *M. juninensis* is typically paler and greyer overall, with a dull brown area in the centre of the crown (*albilora* has a more extensive area of rufous-brown) and a shorter and less conspicuous whitish eyebrow.

Rufous-throated Dipper *Cinclus schulzi*

Notes on the habits and several new localities for this poorly known species are presented. Previously undocumented foraging behaviour is described.

The species was previously known in Salta province only from the Orán and Baritú area (with one exception)⁸. M. Mosqueira found this species at several new localities as follows: Los Saguanes, Arroyo Castellanos, 3 km north of San Lorenzo—a nest containing two chicks, located in a rock crevice 1 m above the water course and covered with dead leaves and feathers, in January 1994; Río Pulares, 5 km from Chicoana on the road to Cachi—one bird in September 1995; Río Blanco, 3 km from Campo Quijano—recorded in February 1996; Río Manzano, 4 km from Corralito—several birds in January 1995. All these localities are on the forested western slopes of the Valle de Lerma.

Other records in Salta were made by JMB, GP and MdS. A single was heard on 26 September 1997 on a main tributary of the Santa Victoria river near Rodeo Pampa at c.3,150 m. A different pair was seen on 26–27 September 1997 on the Sacha Runa river, at 2,900–3,000 m.

On 13 August 1996, a lone bird apparently immature, as the reddish throat patch appeared reduced and had some dark feathers giving it a dirty appearance, was observed (JMB, AB and GB). Juvenile plumage is apparently unknown¹⁴. The bird was in a stretch of arroyo Yerba Buena that appeared to have been modified, near the small village of the same name. On 16–17 August 1996, a pair and a third individual were found on Valle Colorado river near the village. The lone individual was apparently an intruder in the pair's territory. The pair performed a type of display with their bodies raised, stretching the legs and neck, and with the bill pointing upwards. On 21 August we counted seven birds 500 m downstream of the latter observation. On several occasions we observed birds chasing each other. Several feeding techniques were observed as follows. Birds were never seen diving in the manner of *C. cinclus*. Typically (JMB pers. obs.), the species uses a number of preferred spots to catch prey; often a stone on the edge of a small rapid where the water runs faster. Perched on these—occasionally slipping—they strike swiftly to presumably catch insects on the water's surface. One waded in a calm pool in the river until it floated, swimming a short distance before returning to shore. Another chased flying insects, jumping between rocks in short flights. This bird once plunged from a high rock (c.70 cm above the water) into a section of fast-flowing water and immediately came out. Other foraging methods observed were similar to those previously described⁴³.

No interaction with *Cinclodes fuscus* was noted. This species mostly occurs in pairs along different stretches of river, and usually away from the main stream in areas where the stony riverbed was uncovered, leaving small pools of standing water. It occasionally approached the stream's shores, but never fed in its centre, as dippers do. However, such areas are presumably wet during the rainy season, a factor not taken into account by Tyler & Tyler⁴³ when describing areas without dippers.

Our observations demonstrate that the species is not restricted to the Alder altitudinal band, as suggested by Tyler & Tyler⁴³, as it also inhabits areas of mixed montane forest, *Polylepis*, *Podocarpus* woodlands and streams with only shrub cover nearby^{20, pers.obs.}. Stream width usually varied in areas with dippers. However, all possessed stone banks where nests are sited. Although Valle Colorado was visited during the non-breeding

season, the species most probably breeds in the suitable stone banks of the river canyon, which possesses 'good' habitat as defined by Tyler & Tyler⁴³. Threats to the species due to water catchment and hydro-electric schemes appear slight as most streams are on remote and sometimes inaccessible mountain slopes where such plans are unrealistic.

Rufous-bellied Saltator *Saltator rufiventris*

On 18 August 1996 one was encountered on the trail between Valle Colorado and Santa Ana, at c.3,300–3,400 m (JMB, AB and GB) on a slope of high Andean grassland, in an area crossed by a narrow stream with stands of dense 'chilcas' (*Baccharis*). On humid ground by the stream there were dense patches of a single-leaved clover. The species was unsuccessfully searched for along lower parts of the trail, in different habitat which appeared more suitable for the species (ie. light *Polylepis* woodlands mixed with humid ravines of dense shrubs and open *Alnus* woodland). It was relatively tame, although it stayed in cover. It eventually fed on the ground on the above-mentioned clovers, delivering a faint, high-pitched *pritch* call, reminiscent of a *Phrygilus*. A single was recorded in a *Salix* grove in Santa Ana by P. Rodríguez in August 1994 and it appears likely that a small population survives in this area.

On 23 September 1997, an apparent family group of at least three birds was in a quebrada near San Martín, Salta (JMB, GP and MdS), where Pearman³⁴ reported a pair. These were flushed from the ground, under dense shrubs near a stream where they were apparently feeding with *Poospiza (Compsospiza) baeri*. The general area consisted of an open grassy slope with patches of dense and tall *Baccharis* and *Salix* by the stream. One *Salix* contained a large, thick cup-shaped nest in its finer branches, with birds being seen nearby; two of these appeared to be immature, being paler with a diffuse border between the plumbeous breast and the rest of the reddish underparts.

On 26–27 September 1997, the same observers located at least three pairs between Santa Victoria and quebrada Sacha Runa, Salta at 2,500–2,900 m. One was in hedgerows near a house within a patch of *Salix*, and the others were among the dense *Baccharis* shrub cover in the quebradas. Only once was a pair observed in association with *Polylepis*, a bird perched atop a tall tree in a small patch near a house, before flying to its mate in light *Polylepis* woodland on the opposite side of a wide quebrada. The birds in Salta were tape-recorded; the calls matching those described by Pearman³⁴.

Our observations, together with others from Cachi, Salta (S. Imberti pers. comm.) contrast with the habitat described for the species from Bolivia, where it is apparently closely tied to *Polylepis*^{8,37,38}. This does not seem the case in Argentina (except for that outlined above), where it is usually found in areas of dry shrubbery on high slopes or quebradas. This, and other aspects, of its biology were discussed by Pearman³⁴. Regarding the habitat preferences, it is interesting to note that *S. aurantirostris* is known in the area of Santa Ana, Jujuy as Sietevicios, while Sietevicios Costero is used for *S. rufiventris*. The latter name refers to the vegetational fringe, where shrubs give way to high altitude grassland.

Short-tailed Finch *Idiopsar brachyurus*

Little is known of the ecology and distribution of this enigmatic species in Argentina. The only published reports are those of Dabbene¹⁰, Swales⁴², Budin⁵ and Olrog²⁸. The most recent record was by Peris & Alabarce³⁵, who found two separate individuals between 2,800–2,900 m and 2,900–3,060 m in early autumn in the Tafi del Valle, Tucumán. We consider it worthwhile to publish our data from Tucumán and Jujuy as it updates information concerning this species in Argentina.

Between 18–20 August 1996, two, apparently resident, pairs were present in Santa Ana village, at 3,500–3,600 m (JMB, AB and GB); *contra* Fjeldså & Krabbe¹⁴ they were always quite tame. It is remarkable that they occurred in a microhabitat quite different to that previously described^{14,36}, where it was described as being associated almost exclusively with grassland slopes near large boulders in puna. Our birds were usually seen perched on 'pircas' (man-made stone-walls), adobe roofs on an overgrown vacant lot, or on dirt streets within the village. They pecked grass seeds from roofs or the ground, and a male was even seen drinking water from a dripping faucet on the street.

The inconspicuous, but high-pitched and relatively harsh, *tziit* contact calls were heard, which match those described by previous authors. Mogensen describes the species' song as a "series of monotonous whistles"¹⁰.

On one occasion a female and subsequently a pair were seen on a ravine wall, with rocky ground, patches of bare soil and clumps of 'tussock' grass, outside the village. They picked seeds from the ground. Here the female was seen perched on a larger stone in the manner described by Remsen *et al.*³⁶. It seems plausible that these birds came from higher elevations to spend the winter in the lower 'cerros', moving up again in the breeding season. However, the species is not known to perform altitudinal movements, and Mogensen (in¹⁰) records them as sedentary in Aconquija. Furthermore, a female was seen apparently investigating several holes and crevices in 'adobe' walls. Thus, it is also possible that it breeds in the village.

Notably, on 21 September 1997, up to eight birds in groups of 3–4, were found in a gully above El Infiernillo,

Tucumán, between 3,200–3,500 m (JMB, GP and MdS). Here, the situation more closely matched the published literature; the birds being in a deep, steep-sided quebrada with short clumps of *Festuca* bunchgrass and large boulders. They perched on the boulders, but in the heat of the day they remained in the crevices or under large rocks. The species frequently uses its large bill for extensive digging, both on lichen-encrusted boulders and in turf, presumably for insect material (M. Pearman *in litt.* 1998). Their irides were dull reddish, legs pale pinky lilac, and the bills horn-grey with paler mandibles.

Citron-headed Yellow-finch *Sicalis luteocephala*

First recorded in Argentina by Pearman³³; Abadie¹ subsequently published additional observations. Despite these being the only published records of the species in Argentina, we know of several unpublished records by various observers. Here, we present observations that shed new light on the species' status in the country.

RC found 12 birds feeding on sandy ground by the río Toquero on 5 September 1995. Another group of 30 was seen on the shore of Laguna Larga, near Pozuelos on 20 August 1996. These records are the first away from the La Quiaca–Yavi area, Jujuy. On 30 July 1996, c.20 were found at La Quiaca. Later the same day, c.100 birds in a compact flock roosted by a bridge over the arroyo Sansana. Subsequently, JMB estimated up to 250 individuals moving in the same direction in groups of 20–50 birds around Yavi. These birds were apparently commuting to a roost. The following morning, c.100 were seen on the outskirts of Yavi Chico mostly feeding on the ground, on areas of bare soil and rocky ground with scattered bushes. On 23 August 1996, RC saw up to 20 birds on the outskirts of Yavi Chico, feeding in a mixed flock of Mourning Sierra-finch *Phrygilus fruticeti*, Band-tailed Sierra-finch *P. alaudinus* and Bright-rumped Yellow-finch *Sicalis uropgialis*. In all cases the species was observed in and around habitation. The species has been observed dust-bathing communally in groups of up to 40 (between La Quiaca and so Sansana), and during the hottest periods of the day, birds entered burrows, 1.1 m up, on a vertical earth riverbank. Two individuals, in what appeared to be adult male plumage, assumed begging behaviour among a communal group. Contact calls of this species, given in flight and when perched, comprise low-pitched *clep-clep* and *chuk-chuk* notes. The song is a high-pitched musical trill (M. Pearman *in litt.* 1998). Two groups of 10–15 birds were found at Yavi on 10 November 1997 (R. Güller *et al. in litt.* 1998). It is evident that the species has established itself in this area and that the population has increased significantly since the first report of pairs or small flocks.

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