

Focus On: Ochre-bellied Dove

Leptotila ochraceiventris

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Ochre-bellied Dove *Leptotila ochraceiventris* (Richard Thewlis)

Of the 10 Neotropical doves in the genus *Leptotila*, three are classified as globally threatened in the Americas Red Data Book⁶, namely: Grenada Dove *L. wellsii* of the West Indies, Tolima Dove *L. conoveri* of central Colombia, and Ochre-bellied Dove *L. ochraceiventris* of western Ecuador and adjacent north-west Peru (the Tumbesian region). Recent fieldwork in the Tumbesian region has yielded important new information on *L. ochraceiventris* which has confirmed its status as one of the most threatened of the Neotropical columbids. The main aim of this article is to highlight some of the recent findings on the ecology and habitat preferences of *L. ochraceiventris*. Information is also provided on the known altitudinal and geographical range of the species. It is hoped that the data presented here will help ornithologists visiting Ecuador and Peru to find this shy and enigmatic species, thereby increasing our knowledge of it.

The Ochre-bellied Dove *L. ochraceiventris* is confined to western Ecuador and adjacent north-west Peru, a range it shares with 54 other species restricted to the so-called Tumbesian centre of endemism or Tumbesian western Ecuador and Peru Endemic Bird Area^{3,4,7}. This area is one of the most topographically and vegetationally complex regions in South America, supporting no less than 17 different vegetation types (including 13 forest types) in an area of c.50,000 km². This region possesses a strongly seasonal climate, with the period from January to April usually very wet in contrast to the rest of year¹⁰. Due to this seasonality the region supports tropical deciduous and semi-deciduous forests, rare at such latitudes elsewhere in South America.

First described in 1912, *L. ochraceiventris* was collected in small numbers during the first two decades of the twentieth century in the lowlands of south-west Ecuador and

adjacent north-western Peru, by ornithologists from the American Museum of Natural History. Their early fieldwork was summarized by Chapman⁵ who stated that the dove was "not uncommon in the deciduous forests of south-west Ecuador". Between 1926 and 1980, however, there were only two records: one each from Ecuador and Peru, though this was most probably as a result of the lack of survey effort within its range. It was only in the 1980s when intensive surveys recommenced that it became clear that a large population decline had occurred since the 1920s, leaving the bird uncommon or rare at a few scattered sites in the Tumbesian region, and missing from many of its historical localities. There were no records between 1961 and 1979, and the species was "rediscovered" near Piñas in El Oro Province, Ecuador, in August 1980¹², but was not found again until January-March 1986, this time in Peru at Canchaque (Piura Dept.) and Campo Verde in the Tumbes National Forest (Tumbes Dept.) (M. Kessler *in litt.* 1991).

Surveys since 1989, especially in the El Oro and Loja provinces, south-west Ecuador, have gathered much needed basic data on the birds habitat preferences and ecology; they have also extended the known range of *L. ochraceiventris* both geographically and altitudinally. It has now been recorded from 23 localities in the Ecuadorian provinces of Manabí, Los Ríos, Guayas, Chimborazo, El Oro and Loja, and the Peruvian departments of Tumbes and Piura, embracing elevations from sea-level to 2,625 m, though most reports come from between 500 and 1,800 m. The centre of abundance appears to be the south-western provinces of Ecuador, although it should be noted that this region has received the most intensive survey effort. The recent sightings of the species in montane cloud-forest above Ayabaca in northern Peru at 2,625 m¹ unexpectedly extended the known upper altitudinal limit of *L. ochraceiventris* by almost 1,000 m into the temperate zone. The only sites at which the species has recently been reported numerous are within the Tumbes National Forest, part of the North-

West Peru Biosphere Reserve (extreme north-western Peru)¹¹.

Leptotila ochraceiventris inhabits a broad spectrum of habitat types, ranging from Dry *Ceiba trichistandra*-dominated Deciduous Forests to the most humid forest type of the Tumbesian region, very humid premontane cloud-forest. Although by far the majority of records come from within forest, the species has also been recorded in scrub, but usually in areas adjacent to forest. *Leptotila ochraceiventris* is a forest understorey species, favouring the zone from the forest floor to about 3 m up, although it has occasionally been found feeding higher up in fruiting trees. Areas with a thick covering of leaf litter seem especially favoured, and wherever the understorey has a more evergreen character, the chances of a sighting are increased. Although virtually nothing is known of its feeding habits, birds have been observed taking the marble-sized fruits of the *Trichilia* tree¹.

It is thought that *L. ochraceiventris* may be a local migrant, moving from one forest type to another seasonally (and only in certain years). For example, the dove was recorded at Buenaventura (El Oro Province, 3°40'S 79°44'W) in August 1980 and August 1988¹², but not during detailed surveys at other months (e.g. February and March 1991², September 1991¹³) nor during intensive fieldwork in June and July 1985¹² (data suggest that these movements occur at other sites in south-west Ecuador). Movements within forests also seem to occur, with birds moving to the more humid areas, such as those found along water courses, during the dry season.

Leptotila ochraceiventris is usually encountered walking quietly on the forest floor. They can be a difficult species to observe, since the sound of an approaching observer's footsteps in crunchy leaf litter usually causes the bird to move quickly away from the observer to safety, or to a low branch or other suitable perch, only descending to the ground again if the observer remains still and silent. Frequently the only view ob-

tained is of the upperparts as birds fly away. At such times, the tail pattern is the key to correct identification (see below). One of the best strategies to find the species is simply to wait quietly overlooking suitable areas. These include water holes or streams where the species often gathers to drink along with larger numbers of commoner doves, especially White-tipped Doves *L. verreauxi*, and fruiting trees which are known to be attractive to doves. One continuous 12 hour water-hole survey at Tambo Negro in southern Loja Province, Ecuador in September 1989 revealed a minimum of 26 *L. verreauxi* and seven *L. ochraceiventris* drinking at just one tiny pool. Individual *L. ochraceiventris* were visible for up to several minutes as they made their way down the valley sides, drank, and quietly retreated.

Field identification is not difficult given a clear view. *Leptotila ochraceiventris* is the most beautiful and brightly coloured of the *Leptotila* doves, yet has still never been illustrated in colour. The overall pattern bears some resemblance to *L. verreauxi*, except the upperparts are duller in coloration and the crown, nape and mantle are suffused with purple. The underparts are rich buff ("ochre") from the belly downwards becoming suffused with purple on the breast, creating a two-tone effect. In contrast to the dark iris of *L. verreauxi*, the iris of *L. ochraceiventris* is pale. They are smaller and more slightly built than *L. verreauxi*; this being especially noticeable when the two are together. The tail of *L. ochraceiventris* is distinctively marked and is a valuable identification feature given a brief flight view: only the outer two tail feathers on each side have white spots; in *L. verreauxi* most of the tail feathers show white spots in flight. The call of *L. ochraceiventris* is a deep resonant "whoouur" of about one second duration, rising and then falling in pitch. Birds have been heard mainly during January to April at the majority of sites (the breeding season for many bird species in south-west Ecuador^{2,9}), although at a few sites calls were heard only during August.

The future for the Ochre-bellied Dove *L. ochraceiventris* is uncertain: 95% of lowland south-western Ecuador has been deforested, and those patches which remain continue to be at risk⁸ - the picture is little better in Peru. Although the bird occurs inside several officially protected areas, notably the Machalilla National Park in Ecuador and the Tumbes National Forest in Peru, these areas are far from secure at present, owing to their inadequate staffing levels and the park authorities' meagre resources. Forest understorey is especially vulnerable in the Tumbesian region, since it is trampled and grazed by cattle and semi-wild goats and mules, and is exploited by local people for firewood, even inside the existing reserves. The species will only survive if extensive areas of forest still with an intact understorey can be safeguarded through the designation of further reserves and the adequate protection of existing reserves. Each local community has a role to play in protecting their own forest patches. Such action is not only necessary to protect the unique avifauna of the region but also to regulate water and nutrient supply to cultivated areas and to prevent soil erosion. The conservation of *L. ochraceiventris* should be seen as only a small part of an integrated environmental plan for the Tumbesian region aimed at preserving its biodiversity, but also maximizing the benefits local people derive from future conservation action. The foundations of such a plan will soon be published by BirdLife International³.

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