

Field identification, ecology and status of the Sickle-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus anomalus*

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Resumen

El estudio del *Eleothreptus anomalus* mediante observaciones personales y revisión bibliográfica y de especímenes en museos muestra nuevos aspectos acerca de su identificación en el campo, comportamiento, preferencia de hábitat y estatus. Se ha descubierto que no se puede identificar el macho por la forma del ala durante el vuelo, que es en aleteo, debido a que solo posee vestigios de las remeras secundarias. Los criterios más útiles para determinar la identificación en el campo de ambos sexos son la coloración del plumaje general pardo grisáceo, la extensión de las primarias hasta la mitad de la cola, las cuatro rayas negras en las timoneras y las partes ventrales barreadas de negro. Algunos individuos se caracterizan por un collar nucal punteado de canela y una línea de puntos en los ápices de las escapulares. Se ha observado que los ambientes más representativos de la especie son la selva en galería, el monte y el bosque transicional, y no en los campos, bañados y esteros cercanas, tal como se creía hasta ahora. En Paraná, y probablemente el resto de Brasil, se encuentra el *E. anomalus* como especie no migratoria, mientras que en la región argentina de la Mesopotamia es migrador austral, desplazándose al norte en invierno. Aunque la especie se ha registrado en un área muy extensa, no se conocen registros múltiples de períodos de más de un año de nidificación, salvo en una ocasión. Por esto, se cree que la densidad de la población de esta especie es muy baja. La única amenaza para *E. anomalus* es la modificación del hábitat, que actualmente es mínimo, aunque se prevé una gran expansión de la forestación comercial en la Mesopotamia en los próximos años.

Introduction

The Sickle-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus anomalus* is one of the least known of the South American Caprimulgidae, despite being distributed over a wide area from central and south-eastern Brazil through eastern Paraguay and northern Argentina. It seems the total number of museum specimens is 25 and there appear to be no multiple sight records or multiple specimens collected at any single locality over more than two breeding years.

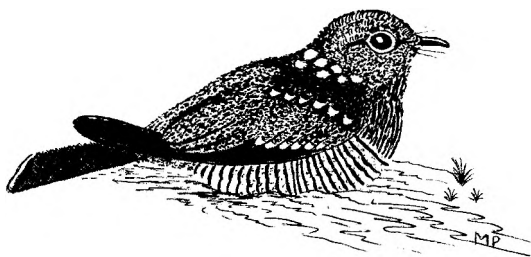
Having studied a pair of *E. anomalus* for lengthy periods in south-east Entre Ríos province, Argentina during December 1991 and January 1992, our experience is that field identification of this species is not as straightforward as has been implied in various field guides.

Field identification

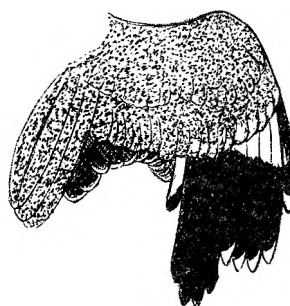
The identification of male *E. anomalus* in the field based on wing shape (see^{1,6}) was found to be of no use even given a daylight flight view. A bird observed on several occasions at Puerto Boca (33°03'S 58°26'W), Entre Ríos had an odd flight action with exaggerated fluttering wings

and in which the wing shape could never be determined. The flight action always gave the impression of an injured bird. EA observed the same behaviour with an individual flushed in daylight at Ceibas, Entre Ríos in November 1987. Interestingly Pereyra⁹ was the first to note this behaviour and claimed these observations only during the nesting period in Tostado, Santa Fé province, Argentina (but see below). Although *Eleothreptus* at Puerto Boca could be observed for long periods on the ground at a distance of 20 m, birds became jumpy and nervous on close approach, the male flushing with the same fluttering flight action. It seems probable that this is the typical flight action of the male with its vestigial secondaries limiting the uplift in flight, thus creating the necessity for faster wing beats.

In Argentina the species cohabits with other nightjars, e.g. Little Nightjar *Caprimulgus parvulus*, Scissor-tailed Nightjar *Hydropsalis brasiliensis* and Rufous Nightjar *C. rufus*. We were able to make direct size comparisons in the field, with *E. anomalus* being strikingly smaller than the other species mentioned. *Eleothreptus* actually ranks



Male Sickle-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus anomalus*
(Mark Pearman)



Upper-wing of male Sickle-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus anomalus* (from MACN 46.153) (Mark Pearman)

as one of the smallest of the worlds nightjars with a length of just 182-194 mm (N=2 males).

As with other similar sized nightjars, *E. anomalus* appears large-headed. The general plumage colouration is light grey-brown although females tend to be darker, making this the palest looking Caprimulgid within its range. Some individuals show a nuchal collar composed of buffy spots and a row of buffy spots at the tips of the scapulars and pale-tips to the greater coverts but these features are not present on all museum specimens. When on the ground the exposed primaries are typically held in a gently curving arc projecting half way along the length of the tail. Several distinctive features of the males remiges, such as the white-tipped primaries P6-10 and the extensive pale buff bases to the primaries (more extensive on the inner webs, especially P6-9 and remarkably so on P1) are cloaked by the longer unmarked primaries P2-5 on the closed wing and are thus not visible in the field. At least four blackish tail bars are visible on both sexes, the basal one actually a spot in the uppertail coverts. However, the broad buff-white tips to all but the central rectrices on the male are hidden on the closed tail and are very difficult to see in flight at night. Barring on the lower underparts is fairly evident in the field and is another useful identification feature.

Ecology

E. anomalus has been considered an inhabitant of marshes or areas near to water^{6,10} but our observations (combined with a review of published and unpublished Argentine records and recently published Brazilian locality data¹¹) suggest that the more representative habitat is gallery forest, *monte* (chaco-type

woodland), or transitional woodland. Observations at Puerto Boca come from the edge of *monte*, close to the Río Gualaguaychu, and at Ceibas (EA) an individual was found roosting on the ground in a hollow earth depression inside semi-modified chaco-type woodland with no understorey. The suggested association with lakes⁴ is supported by few records^{5,11}, while a large number of Argentine records come from areas adjacent to rivers, although as many again come from sites away from water.

Extensive searches (1991-1993) in open wetlands such as the Esteros de Iberá, Corrientes and the Paraná Delta, Entre Ríos/Buenos Aires revealed a general absence of Caprimulgidae. Evidently *E. anomalus* does not inhabit marshes but has long been associated with marshland due to the often close proximity of gallery forest and *monte* to marshland or grasslands.

The song of the *E. anomalus* remains unknown. However, a series of *tchup* notes were delivered infrequently at night and tape-recorded in January 1992 (NSA collection). This vocalization was given by a male on the ground and in flight and is believed to be a contact call.

Status and threats

There appear to be several indications that *E. anomalus* is a genuinely scarce and localised species. Searches in the austral summer of 1992-1993 at 18 study localities in Mesopotamia, Argentina during surveys of grasslands, wetlands and associated edge habitats failed to reveal any new observations, despite the availability of much apparently suitable habitat and an abundance of other Caprimulgidae in the gallery forest and *monte*.

The pair at Puerto Boca could not be located towards the end of the austral summer (in April 1992), and were not present at all in the 1992-1993 austral summer (nor since), although the edge of the *monte* had been disturbed and cut in places.

All but two (unconfirmed) of the nineteen Argentine records refer to birds in the austral summer, while records in Brazil are year-round with breeding confirmed for August in Paraná and November and December in São Paulo state^{3,8,11}. It seems likely that *E. anomalus* is a migrant in the southern part of its range where the austral winters are cold and other Caprimulgidae are absent at this time of year. The species presumably occurs in Uruguay during the austral summer but has yet to be recorded. The overall scarcity of records suggests that the species occurs at low density.

Given that *E. anomalus* is now known to inhabit a variety of wooded habitats, it should be stressed that such habitats are not under immediate threat within Mesopotamia, while these woodlands do appear to be at greater risk in neighbouring Paraguay and Brazil. Distributional records of the species are widely dispersed over a huge area but there is currently no data to suggest it is declining. This would seem to justify a switch from the Red Data Book² category of "Insufficiently known" to "Rare". The species has been recorded with certainty from four protected areas: single records at Brasília National Park (Distrito Federal)¹¹, Cambuí Biological Reserve, Curitiba (Paraná)¹¹ and Mburucuyá National Park (Corrientes) (Hutton pers. comm.) and two records for P.N. El Palmar (Entre Ríos)². However, land protection seems an ineffective conservation measure until sites of regular occurrence are located. The projected expansion of the forestry industry in north-east Argentina by the Argentine government is expected to be a reality during the next few years and will lead to the introduction of large *Pinus* and *Eucalyptus* plantations. Such a modification is likely to have a detrimental effect on *E. anomalus* and 10 other threatened grassland and wetland species⁷.

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