

## Blue Manakin *Chiroxiphia caudata*



The Blue (or Swallow-tailed) Manakin *Chiroxiphia caudata*, illustrated on the front and back covers, is one of five species in the genus *Chiroxiphia* which geographically replace each other from southern Mexico to eastern Paraguay. It is found in humid forests in eastern Brazil, north-eastern Argentina and eastern Paraguay. Throughout its range it is a relatively common bird and its call is one of the characteristic sounds of the forest. Blue Manakins mostly occur below 1,500 m; north of Rio de Janeiro, where its range overlaps with Blue-backed Manakin *C. pareola*, Blue Manakin is found only above 500 m, whereas Blue-backed occurs only in the lowlands.

The genus *Chiroxiphia* is unusual among the Pipridae in that teams of males cooperate in joint dance-displays for females. In the Blue Manakin a group of males use several dance perches communally. Within the group, an age-based linear dominance hierarchy exists. The dominant male acts as a sentinel, calling repeatedly from a high perch above the display area. This call, a *chorreeo* or *chorreeo-cho-cho* is a characteristic sound in the forests of eastern Paraguay, and serves to attract females to the display area, and occasionally is given by two males in duet.

If a female arrives, the dominant male and one or two (occasionally more) males descend to the dance perch (usually a horizontal vine within 1.5 m of the ground) and perform a cooperative precopulatory dance. During this dance, the female perches at one end of the vine, whilst the males perch along the vine, orientated towards the female. The dance begins with the male nearest to the female jumping up and flying toward her, briefly hovering in front and then flying to the back of the line of males and taking the position originally occupied by the bird farthest from the female. Meanwhile, the other males have all moved one place forward. Each bird, in turn, repeats this movement, describing a circular path in front of the female. These backward cartwheels are accompanied by a twangy *qua-*

*a-a-a*. As the display progresses, the jumps become flatter with the males approaching the female more closely, such that one early observer of the dance described the males as “queuing to kiss the female”<sup>2</sup>. This joint display finishes when the dominant male jumps but turns to face the other males and whilst hovering in front of them utters a shrill *eeek-eeek-eeek*. Soon after this the other males leave the perch, and the dominant male proceeds with a solo display which consists of laboured “butterfly” flights from and around the display perch. If the female is sufficiently excited, copulation then follows on the display perch.

With rare exception, only the dominant male copulates in any one perch zone. Dominance is largely age-based, so with such limited opportunities for present reproductive success it pays young males to follow strategies which ensure long-term survival and eventual ascent to dominant male status. Such strategic responses include cooperation and delayed plumage maturation. In Blue Manakins it takes a minimum of two years from the post-juvenile moult for males to acquire the definitive male plumage. The preceding pre-definitive plumages are age-specific transitional stages between the all green juvenile plumage and the definitive male plumage. First, the red cap is acquired, then the black face and throat, wings and tail, and finally the remaining green plumage is replaced by blue. Females of all ages are green, though some show red in the crown; the extent of this perhaps increases with age.

The breeding season of Blue Manakins in Paraguay extends from late July through to January, with a peak of activity in September to November. Only the female is involved in nest-related and brood-rearing duties. The nest is a fibrous cup placed in a fork in a small sapling usually between knee and head height. Clutch size is usually two. Manakins are largely frugivorous, but do occasionally eat insects, and especially feed them to nestlings within the first few days of hatching.

Apart from personal observations in Paraguay, the above information comes from the work of Dr Mercedes Foster with Blue Manakins, also in Paraguay<sup>1</sup>.

#### References

1. Foster, M. S. (1981) Cooperative behaviour and social organisation in the Swallow-tailed Manakin (*Chiroxiphia caudata*). *Behav. Ecol. Sociobiol.* 9: 167-177.
2. Snow, D. W. (1976) *The web of adaptation: bird studies in the American tropics*. New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Co.

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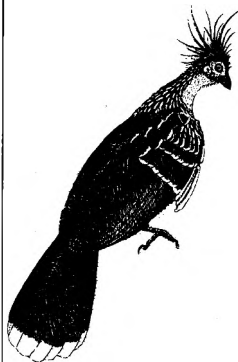
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(Roger Barnes)

