

The nest and eggs of Rusty-fronted Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilatriccus latirostris*

The genus *Poecilatriccus* comprises 12 species¹¹ of small, stout-bodied flycatchers that generally forage inconspicuously in the dense, tangled undergrowth of humid forest edges^{3,13}. Rusty-fronted Tody-Flycatcher *P. latirostris* inhabits forest edges and second growth, especially along rivers and on river islands, at elevations below 1,100 m along the eastern base of the Andes from east-central Colombia to north-west Bolivia, and throughout western Brazilian Amazonia³. Of the seven recognised subspecies³, *P. l. caniceps* occurs from south-east Colombia and north-west Brazil, south to eastern Peru. In eastern Ecuador it is rare above 700 m¹² and, though inconspicuous, I have found it locally common in *Gynerium* cane and second growth on islands and at edges of larger rivers. Like most of its congeners, the nesting biology of *P. latirostris* is completely undocumented. Here I describe two nests and two clutches of *P. l. caniceps* from eastern Ecuador.

On 26 February 2013 I found two nests of *P. l. caniceps* on the banks of the Napo River (01°01'57.4"S 77°35'11.7"W), near Ahuano, prov. Napo, at 375 m. This area of the river edge is rocky and flat, prone to periodic water inundation annually and affected by massive flooding every few years. The several isolated patches of second growth on the floodplain are characterised by dense stands of *Gynerium*, 3–5 m tall, with only a few trees (predominantly *Inga* and *Cecropia*) emerging above the grass. The 'understorey' comprised tangles of herbaceous vines and small, shrubby legumes (cf. *Calliandra*). Both nests described below were c.150 m from the main course of the river, separated by a near-treeless expanse of sand and rocks that occasionally floods for several days at a time (mostly in May–July).

At 08h15 I discovered an unattended nest with two cold, completely undeveloped eggs. I placed a camera on a tripod c.5

m from the nest and returned three hours later. A review of the video revealed that no adult had visited the nest during this period. The following evening, at 17h45, I flushed an adult from the nest, which paused long enough for me to identify it, before disappearing silently from view. I was unable to closely monitor the nest, but returned on 3 March. At 06h45 the nest was again unattended and the eggs were cold to the touch. Both, however, showed early embryonic development when held up to the light. Video surveillance of the nest from 06h45 to 08h00 revealed no adult activity. On 6 March, at 13h30 the eggs were again cold and showed no further development. Both adults were foraging in the area of the nest but showed no signs of alarm at my presence. On 10 March I carefully approached the nest at 21h40, well after dark. There was no adult on the nest and the eggs were cold and showed no additional development, indicating the nest had been abandoned. During my initial visit on 26 February, only c.10 m from the first nest, I found a second, nearly identical nest.

It contained two eggs, similar in appearance to those in the first nest, but which were completely empty and whose shells crumbled on touching them, indicating they had been abandoned some time ago. Pairs of *P. latirostris* were generally uncommon in this area, and the small distance between the two nests strongly suggests they belonged to the same pair.

Both nests were pyriform balls with a slightly hooded entrance in their lower third, but central to the spherical egg chamber (Fig. 1). Both were suspended as to be isolated from surrounding vegetation within small openings in the understorey. One was attached to the drooping tip of a small shrub and the other to the tip of a thin vine, 1.5 m and 2.4 m above ground, respectively. They were composed almost entirely of strips of *Gynerium* grass, loosely bound with a few rootlets and flexible pale grass fibres. Thinner leaf strips and fibres were used to form a poorly differentiated lining to the lower part of the egg chamber. Broader strips were twisted around the supporting vine above the nest



Figure 1. Two nests of Rusty-fronted Tody-flycatcher *Poecilatriccus latirostris*, near Ahuano, prov. Napo, Ecuador, 28 February 2013; the nest on the left was found with two freshly laid eggs, while that on the right contained two recently abandoned eggs (Harold F. Greeney)

chamber, drooping down to cover the nest and forming the upward 'tail' that gave the nests their teardrop shape. Measurements (cm) for the first and second nests were, respectively: total external height excluding material hanging below the nest 26 and 20; external height of the nest chamber 11.0 and 11.5; external diameter of the nest chamber 9 and 9; external depth (front to back) of the nest chamber 7.0 and 7.5; length of material hanging below the nest in a loose 'tail' 5 and 8 (both had a few pieces hanging as low as 10–15 cm); entrance diameter 3 and 3; entrance height 2.0 and 2.5; extension of entrance hood from the nest 2.0 and 2.5; internal nest chamber diameter 4.0 and 4.5; internal egg cup depth 3.5 and 4.0; internal height of the nest chamber (including cup depth) 8.0 and 8.5. All four eggs were white with dense, very fine cinnamon flecking, relatively evenly distributed (Fig. 2). I was only able to measure and weigh eggs from the first nest, on 26 February, before they showed any signs of development. They measured 16.3 × 11.3 mm and 16.9 × 11.8 mm, and weighed 1.1 g and 1.3 g, respectively.

It is unclear why both nests were abandoned with eggs. That the eggs at the second nest were intact but empty suggests that they were abandoned early in development. Eggs at the first nest were abandoned while I was not in the area, so my presence was unlikely to have been the cause. Most tyrannids in north-east Ecuador breed mainly during the drier months (September–January)^{1,2,5,6}, including the congeneric Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher *P. ruficeps*⁷. It is probable that these two nests of *P. latirostris*, found in the early wet season, may have been late re-nesting attempts that were abandoned due to unfavourable conditions. I predict that further observations will reveal that *P. latirostris* is also a dry-season breeder in the region.

The only previous data concerning nesting of Rusty-fronted Tody-Flycatcher was a



Figure 2. Eggs of Rusty-fronted Tody-flycatcher *Poecilotriccus latirostris*, near Ahuano, prov. Napo, Ecuador, 28 February 2013 (Harold F. Greeney)

nest found under construction at Inocência, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, on 28 February 2009, by D. Bucci (www.wikiaves.com.br/fotogrande.php?f=108141&g=1). That nest (belonging to *P. l. ochropterus*) appears near-identical to those described here. Gilliard⁴ provided a cursory description of unoccupied nests he presumed to belong to Ruddy Tody-Flycatcher *P. russatus*. Although he was probably correct, the nests and eggs of only four other *Poecilotriccus* have been properly described. The nests of Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher *P. sylvia*, of Central and northern South America, and those of Ochre-faced Tody-Flycatcher *P. plumbeiceps* of southern South America are relatively well known^{8,10,14–15}. Nests of *P. ruficeps* have been studied only in north-east Ecuador⁷, and a single partially constructed nest of Black-and-white Tody-Flycatcher *P. capitalis* was recently described from south-east Ecuador⁹. The nests of all these species are very similar to those of *P. latirostris*, both in form and placement, and all four species appear to favour long, thin strips of dead material (e.g. grass) to construct the bulk of the nest. The eggs of *P. latirostris*, however, appear to differ

somewhat from those of the three congeners, all of which lay white eggs with comparatively coarse and sparse cinnamon flecking and spotting, generally forming a ring at the larger end. Sample sizes, however, are still quite small, and further descriptions will be necessary to evaluate the degree of variation both within and between *Poecilotriccus* species.

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