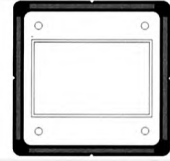




Rufous Rufous-bellied Saltator *Saltator rufiventris* (Mark Pearman).

## Rufous-bellied Saltator

*Saltator rufiventris*



The striking plumage and scarcity of Rufous-bellied Saltator *Saltator rufiventris* make it a much sought-after speciality for birders visiting the Andes of Bolivia and north-west Argentina, where it occupies a narrow elevational band across the departments of La Paz, Cochabamba, Potosí, Chuquisaca and Tarija (Bolivia), and provinces of Jujuy and Salta (Argentina)<sup>1,2,4</sup> (Fig. 1). Cochabamba is the main centre of abundance and the species is readily seen at a number of localities around the department capital of the same name. Elsewhere it is very local and known from very few localities in each of the remaining departments and provinces. The type-locality near Inquisivi, La Paz remains the only known locality in that department, and the species was fairly common there in 1993<sup>4</sup>. Elsewhere in Bolivia, *S. rufiventris* was recorded for the first time in Tarija department in 1992, and in Potosí during 1995<sup>4</sup>.



Rufous-bellied Saltator *Saltator rufiventris* habitat (Mark Pearman).

*Saltator rufiventris* was first discovered in Argentina as recently as 1970 on Cerro Calilegua, Jujuy<sup>5</sup>, and was subsequently found in Salta province, in 1986<sup>8</sup>. Rather than expanding its range, it seems likely that the species has been overlooked due to a lack of visiting observers to southern Bolivia and north-west Argentina, an area where the species has a low population density. That the nest and eggs of this colourful saltator remain undescribed, further implies that *S. rufiventris* is generally a rare species.

*Saltator rufiventris* has been recorded from 2,500–3,975 m, with the majority of records coming from 2,600–3,200 m.<sup>1,4</sup> The species inhabits the semi-arid temperate zone on shrubby slopes of watered valleys, riparian thickets, hedgerows and bushes in the alder *Alnus acuminata* zone of upper montane forest, and sometimes also in Andean agricultural land. Patches of *Polylepis* woodland are found at most of the Bolivian localities but at none of the Argentine sites (pers. obs.)<sup>3</sup>. Throughout its range, *S. rufiventris* typically occurs at low density, foraging in pairs or family groups, although as many as 60 birds were observed in a nightly roost above Cochabamba city<sup>2</sup>.

It has been suggested that the species may be dependent on mistletoe *Tristerix* sp., parasitising *Polylepis* and *Alnus* woodlands in the Bolivian portion of its range<sup>1</sup>; however, many food sources have been recorded including fruits of *Berberis* and *Heteromelas* shrubs, *Schinus molle*, plant fibres, seeds and insects<sup>3,6,7</sup>. A pair studied daily at San

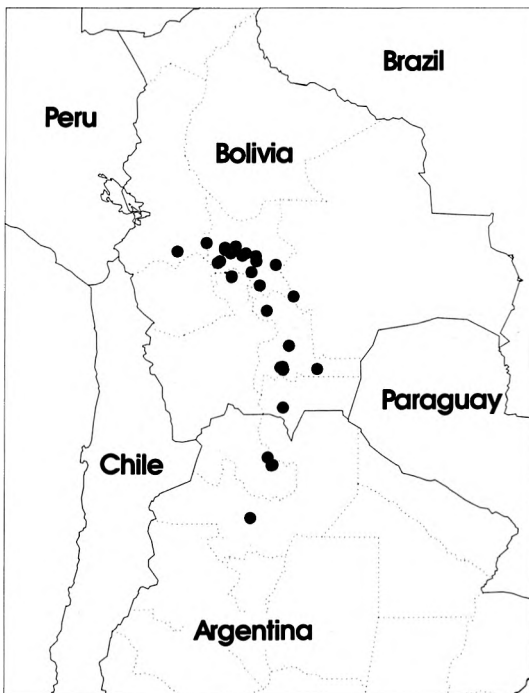


Figure 1 Distribution of Rufous-bellied Saltator *Saltator rufiventris*

Martín, Salta in January 1997 frequented a relatively dense shrub-covered slope, and fed principally on *Brachyotum* berries during the first and last three hours of light. *S. rufiventris* manoeuvred lethargically and often clumsily to pluck berries, sometimes angling the body head downwards at 45° and jumping from one cluster to the next. This diet was supplemented by young leaves of an introduced *Salix* sp., and by young grass shoots on the ground. Ground feeding has been recorded in two other instances<sup>1,7</sup>. In dense shrub zones, *S. rufiventris* can appear as suddenly as it disappears, often for periods of several hours with no apparent nearby feeding station.

Although not previously described as sexually dimorphic, the plumbeous contour feathers on the dorsal surface and breast of the male are more washed-out in the female; and the lower breast, belly and vent are brick-red in the male and a lighter shade of chestnut in the female. Males also show a prominent leaden flank patch extending towards the tarsus, barely visible in the female. The striking red iris of *S. rufiventris* (reddish chestnut or amber in the female) is a feature also shared by Masked Saltator *S. cinctus* of the northern Andes.

The contact calls of *S. rufiventris* are unusual for the genus, being low-pitched, single, gruff psittacid-like, notes: *kau*, *cao* or *pau*. The song or proclamation voice of the male is a short and rapid, high-pitched springy series: *chi wi-cher wi-cher wi-cher*.

### Acknowledgements

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