

The remarkable rediscovery of the Kinglet *Calyptura Calyptura cristata*

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Confirming the continued existence of the Kinglet Calyptura... would cause much excitement in the ornithological world, and is the greatest prize yet awaiting the growing cadre of field ornithologists in se. Brazil (Ridgely & Tudor 1994, *The birds of South America*, 2: 737)

This is a story that is incomplete. It began a long time ago, in the early years of the 19th century. The entry of foreigners in Brazil was forbidden until the arrival of D. João VI and the Portuguese Court, in 1808. Brazil was then often referred to as *terra incognita*, so little known was this vast and distant territory. The opening of ports and admission of foreign travelers to Brazil brought a fabulous revelation of our natural treasures in that century—e.g., the majority of the country's bird species was described in this period—compared with accumulated knowledge since Brazil's discovery, when explorers could be counted on one's fingers.

The principal contributions to Brazilian ornithology, before 1808, were the experiences of the naturalist George Marcgrave (1610–1644) during the Dutch invasion of the north-east, and the expeditions of Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira (1756–1815), in the Amazon and central west, in the second half of the 18th century. Among the hundreds of species described during the 19th century were three mysterious species collected around Rio de Janeiro: Black-hooded Antwren *Formicivora erythronotos*, Cherry-throated Tanager *Nemosia rourei* and Kinglet *Calyptura Calyptura cristata*.

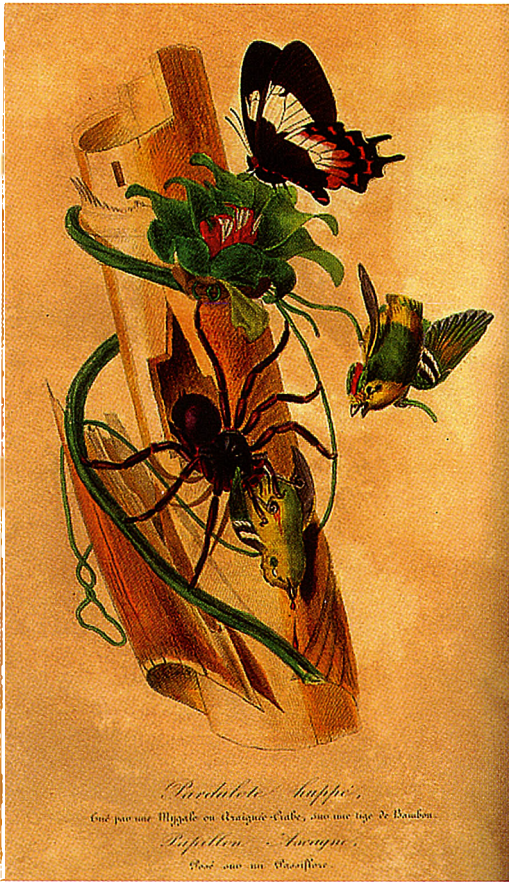
Let us now advance far ahead, to the mid-1980s, a landmark decade in the history of Brazilian ornithology owing to the publication of *Ornitologia brasileira* by Helmut Sick and the formation of several state chapters of the Clube de Observadores de Aves (COA). Sick's book constituted a watershed because, more than an ornithology textbook, it was a comprehensive treatment of Brazil's avifauna, with a wealth of new information and a high literary quality that unchained a tide of interest by specialists and laymen. Both young students and other nature enthusiasts met for lectures and field trips, with an authoritative textbook, providing the principal ingredients for the dissemination of knowledge beyond the few Brazilian ornithologists working in museums. The investigation of Brazil's avifauna had been in the hands of very few professionals and even fewer amateurs until the advent of Sick's book. With the foundation of COA-RJ (Rio

de Janeiro chapter), in January 1985, a group of professionals and amateurs became an active nucleus dedicated initially to the study of birds in Rio de Janeiro state. The members were honoured by Sick's participation in several meetings. On field trips, conversations concerning the three species that had disappeared since the 19th century were constant during innumerable hours spent on roads and trails. We dreamed that at any moment we would stumble on one of them. Despite some published suggestions to the contrary, we were unconvinced that Kinglet *Calyptura* and Black-hooded Antwren were extinct, because the localities mentioned for them still held relatively well-preserved forest. For Cherry-throated Tanager, in addition to the species' description in 1870, we had Sick's sighting, in 1941, of a flock at Limoeiro-Jatiboca, Espírito Santo (recognised only in 1976, when he was finally able to identify the strange tanagers he had seen). We will not dwell on the rediscoveries of the Black-hooded Antwren and Cherry-throated Tanager here, but now focus on the remarkable rediscovery of the Kinglet *Calyptura* more than 100 years after it was last collected, around 1890. It is an amazing fact, however, that there exist approximately 50 specimens of this tiniest cotinga scattered in many of the world's museums. Thus, at least 150 years ago the Kinglet *Calyptura* must not have been so uncommon close to Rio de Janeiro.

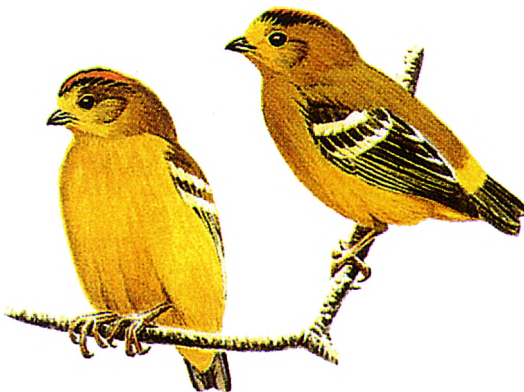
The rediscovery by Ricardo Parrini

'*Rara avis in terris*'. From the Latin 'Rare bird on earth', which serves to express, in more than one way, the singular quality of Kinglet *Calyptura*.

It seems like yesterday! The memories of the afternoon of 27 October 1996 live strong, when one of us (Pacheco) spread the word to a small group of colleagues about the most 'anxiously awaited' ornithological news of the century: the rediscovery of the Kinglet *Calyptura*. If that sentence seems exaggerated, it is nothing compared to the 20 preceding years of accumulated expectations. The



original call from Ricardo Parrini was challenging, almost a tease. He did not want to state categorically what he had seen, preferring to lead Pacheco to the same conclusion he had reached. Presenting a thorough account of the events and details he had observed, as they unfolded before his eyes earlier that morning, he certainly achieved his goal. Within a short time it became clear that Parrini wanted to say that he had found the Kinglet Calyptura. Yes, that tiny creature that so many times had stimulated the dreams of birdwatchers of our generation. The pursuit of this enigmatic little bird—whose disconcerting absence had endured for more than a century—had become the Holy Grail of birdwatchers in Rio de Janeiro. Much as the rediscovery of Black-hooded Antwren had unfolded in 1987, Pacheco hurried to plan with Ricardo an immediate visit to the site, in the company of a small group of colleagues. Unlike the earlier rediscovery, when Fernando and Cacilda Carvalho, members of the COA-RJ, had observed what they thought to be Black-hooded Antwren, but requiring confirmation, Parrini's report of the Kinglet Calyptura, while cautious, was as concrete as possible and the identification could not have been confused. Ricardo is among the most diligent and talented current observers of Brazilian birds. In our opinion, this, together with his many years of accumulated study and experience, make him one of the brightest stars in Brazilian birding.



Upper left: Illustration from *Le Jardin des Plantes* by Emmanuel Lemaout, vol. 2, edited by L. Curmer, Paris, 1843. There is a brief text concerning Kinglet Calyptura *Calyptura calyptura cristata*, then known as *Pardalote cristatus*, Vieillot, or, as it was called in French, *Le Pardalote huppé*. Below the picture is the following caption: 'Pardalote huppé, tué par une mygale ou araignée-crabe, sur une tige de bambou. Papillon Ascagne posé sur un passiflore' ['Crested Pardalote' killed by a tarantula on a thatch of bamboo. Papillon Ascagne posed on a passionfruit flower].

Left: Pair of Kinglet Calyptura *Calyptura cristata* (male on left). Illustration by John P. O'Neill for *Sick's Birds in Brazil: a natural history* (1993)

Our colleagues, Luis P. Gonzaga, Carlos E. Carvalho, Claudia Bauer and Glória D. Castiglioni, were contacted that day and all were prepared to be at the site early next morning. The protagonist, Parrini, would accompany us in order to show the exact spot where he had seen two individuals at the top of a tree, on the slope of the Serra dos Órgãos, at a place with the odd name 'Buraco da Sunta' (Sunta's Hole), at c.550 m. It is reached by a narrow cobblestone road within a private housing development that leaves the uphill highway at the famous 'Garrafão curve' (Big Bottle). This curve is the tightest of the many bends along the Rio-Teresópolis highway, and is immediately before a large petrol station, also called 'Garrafão'. On 28 October, we arrived at 06h20 and waited along the cobblestone road, at a place where we could watch the top of the tree where the rediscovery had taken place, at 06h30 the previous morning. But the morning was characterised by heavy rains and thick fog, preventing clear observation of the treetops.

The next day, 29 October, we all returned to the historic spot. Much to our relief, the weather had improved. Parrini informed us that 'the little bird had flown in from downslope at 06h30 and had perched in that treetop'. To our surprise and enormous elation, at precisely 06h30, a diminutive bird crossed the same air space and stopped for a few seconds in the tree where Parrini had observed Kinglet Calyptura two days before. The minute individual immediately moved to another treetop that was hidden from us by other trees. Until this moment, we could not be certain that we were dealing with Kinglet Calyptura, but our intuition did not respect that. We scrambled for a place that afforded a better view of the canopy. This spot proved to be a small soccer field surrounded by forest, with a few scattered houses in the vicinity. Luckily, we were in an environmentally friendly housing development. Our brief sighting had given the impression of a tiny silhouette with a very peculiar flight pattern—and the certainty that it was a Kinglet Calyptura was growing within us. We had obtained an important search image that would serve us well.

Minutes later, from our privileged position, we watched a single Kinglet Calyptura perched on a treetop beside a clump of mistletoe. Armed with two good scopes, all the basic details of the plumage were observed; the brilliant red crest, the black stripe on the side of the crown, the green back, the double white wingbars and the yellow belly. Wow! On that minuscule bird (the small size was really impressive) our attention was especially attracted to its vertical posture and the red crest, which was held erect. The erect posture and vertically opened crest disagreed with various illustrations of the species—all made from stuffed specimens. This observation, by Pacheco, Parrini, Bauer and Carvalho (Gonzaga and Castiglioni, unfortunately, missed the sighting,

because they had decided to walk the road), left everyone in high excitement for several minutes after the bird had departed. What a heart-stopper! On both occasions (including the brief flyover), we noted that there were two birds. However, only one had perched in the open where it was visible. We spent the whole morning in the area but made no additional sightings.

On 30 October, we again returned to the site, this time with Fonseca and Francisco (Chico) Pontual. The latter, equipped with professional video equipment, intended to document the Kinglet Calyptura. One group was positioned in the small soccer field (Pacheco, Bauer, Pontual and Carvalho), while Gonzaga and Fonseca decided to walk around the area. To their frustration, twice the pair of Kinglet Calyptura was briefly observed from the soccer field. In one instance, the closest sighting of all, it was possible to note the yellow rump band contrasting with the green mantle.

On four sightings during these two days (Carvalho saw the bird on two other occasions during the same period), the Kinglet Calypturas appeared not to have vocalised—at least not noticeably. Furthermore, we did not observe them feeding, merely repeating a routine of flights, with brief pauses to rest on specific treetops. We kept our tape recorders switched on, with microphones pointing at the birds, constantly while in our sights, but unfortunately no calls were registered. Pontual also failed in his efforts to film them. A pity!

Hoping to obtain aural or photographic documentation, our group took turns visiting the site, returning nine times during the next 30 days, but no further observations were made. We hoped that by learning Kinglet Calyptura's vocalisation that the *Iodopleura* phenomenon could be repeated. When we finally learnt the voice of the tiny Buff-throated Purpletuft *Iodopleura pipra*, we found it repeatedly at a series of localities, including some that we considered we knew very well. In the absence of further encounters, we decided, in late November, to divulge the essential news, i.e. that Kinglet Calyptura still existed! And how wonderful that news was (and is). Several news items were sent over the Internet and published in periodicals, including a brief news item in *Cotinga* 7: 9, from a letter by Gonzaga. A note of the rediscovery was included in the new edition of *Ornitologia brasileira*, officially launched in February 1997 during the Sixth Brazilian Congress of Ornithology.

In 1998, the Kinglet Calyptura became the symbol of the Seventh Brazilian Congress of Ornithology, in Rio de Janeiro. Due to the publicity, we are aware of c.20 additional visits to the site, since December 1996, by our group and a series of colleagues (mainly foreigners) in an attempt to find Kinglet Calyptura again. Thus, the story is still unfolding and we still need to learn something of

the natural history of this tiny jewel of the Atlantic Forest, which Ricardo Parrini, in one brief and exciting moment, has 'removed' from the list of extinct species!

Acknowledgements

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