

New distributional and ecological information on birds in south-western Guatemala

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Se reportan las observaciones de aves de la Finca Dos Marías, una plantación de café de 128 ha de bosque intacto en el piedemonte del Pacífico, en el sudoeste de Guatemala. Se discuten las extensiones de distribución para *Micrastur ruficollis* y *Dendrocolaptes sanctithomae*, y se incluyen notas sobre varias especies escasas como *Tangara cabanisi*. También se presenta la primera descripción del canto del picaflor *Amazilia cyanura*.

Introduction

The humid Pacific foothills of the Sierra Madre from Chiapas through Guatemala and El Salvador support several taxa restricted to the North Central American Highlands and North Central American Pacific Slope Endemic Bird Areas⁵. The avifauna is enriched by elements of the lowland rainforest community more typical of the Caribbean slope of northern Guatemala, with several species restricted, in southern Guatemala, to a narrow band of humid forest from the lower Pacific foothills to the mostly cleared coastal lowlands (e.g. Long-billed Starthroat *Heliomaster longirostris*, Collared Trogon *Trogon collaris*, Eye-ringed Flatbill *Rhynchocyclus brevirostris*; see Griscom¹, Howell & Webb⁹). Due to a history of civil unrest in the region, ornithologists or birders have infrequently visited this habitat, particularly in south-west Guatemala. Peterson *et al.*⁴ identify basic avifaunal inventories as a 'first, and most critical, need' to advance ornithological knowledge of northern Central America. I report on significant observations of birds from Finca Dos

Marías, a coffee plantation that supports 128 ha of forest in the Pacific foothills, surveyed briefly on 21–22 January 1997 and 9–15 January 2002.

Study area and methods

Finca Dos Marías (hereafter FDM), which has operated since the mid-1800s, is in the foothills of the Sierra Madre in extreme south-west Guatemala (dpto. San Marcos), and 4 km north of the village of La Reforma (14°48'N 91°49'W). It is drained by the río Chisná, which flows unobstructed for c.15 km south of FDM until it joins the río Naranjo north of Coatepeque. The forest of FDM has been identified as part of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas Moist Forest⁷. Covering steep slopes at 1,500–1,900 m, it is characterised by high rainfall, tall, broadleaf evergreen trees (pines absent), tree ferns, abundant epiphytes and dense moss on older trees. According to the owners, fog blankets the forest virtually every night, all year. A single truck trail (dirt) forms a loop that accesses most of the forest, and permits guards (employed by FDM) to discourage poaching

and woodcutting. Outside the property, this forest extends somewhat onto neighbouring properties at similar elevations, which, based on brief visits, supports a similar avifauna (pers. obs.). Coffee (mainly 'sun coffee') dominates the landscape below c.1,500 m, and forms a virtual monoculture of *Coffea arabica* 2–3 m high, with small trees (<5 m) planted to control erosion.

Surveys were conducted by slowly walking the single road through the forest each day, beginning at dawn and continuing until mid-afternoon, and recording numbers and species of birds heard and seen. The start and end points were varied so that each day both the upper and lower portions of the road were surveyed roughly equally. Edge habitats were surveyed before and after each survey (en route to and from the forest), and the pure coffee plantations were surveyed mainly in the mid-afternoon, with the exception of one early morning and one late afternoon period. The total periods spent in forest, edge and pure coffee plantation during the 2002 visit were c.40, 15 and five hours respectively.

Results

Ten species confined to southern Mexico and northern Central America (endemic, *sensu* Stattersfield *et al.*⁵) were recorded at the site during this brief visit, and it is possible that additional time in the area would have detected more. These were: Highland Guan *Penelopina nigra* (apparently overlooked as an endemic by Stattersfield *et al.*⁵), Blue-tailed Hummingbird *Amazilia cyanura*, Green-throated Mountain-gem *Lampornis viridipallens*, Wine-throated Hummingbird *Atthis ellioti*, Blue-throated Motmot *Aspatha gularis*, Black-capped Swallow *Notiochelidon pileata*, Bushy-crested Jay *Cyanocorax melanocyanus*, Rufous-collared Robin *Turdus rufitorques*, Blue-and-white Mockingbird *Melanotis hypoleucus* and Azure-rumped Tanager *Tangara cabanisi*. The last-named species is considered Endangered⁶, and Highland Guan and Resplendent Quetzal *Pharomachrus mocinno* are listed as Near Threatened.

The three most commonly recorded species in the forest at FDM during the 2002 visit were Brown-backed Solitaire *Myadestes occidentalis*, Swainson's Thrush *Catharus ustulatus* and Wilson's Warbler *Wilsonia pusilla*, all of which were heard virtually constantly on surveys within the forest (>50/day). Also recorded daily in the forest, generally in double figures, were Townsend's Warbler *Dendroica townsendi*, Azure-rumped Tanager, Grey Silky-flycatcher *Ptilionyx cinereus*, Eye-ringed Flatbill, Greater Pewee *Contopus pertinax*, Yellowish Flycatcher *Empidonax flavescens* and Collared Trogon. Fruiting trees attracted large numbers of frugivores, especially Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Phaeucticus ludovicianus, Rufous-collared and Black Robins *Turdus infuscatus* and Western Tanager *Piranga ludoviciana*.

Edge habitats, including flowering *Inga* and fruiting *Cecropia* trees within abandoned coffee fields, supported large numbers of Blue-tailed Hummingbird, Tennessee Warbler *Vermivora peregrina*, Yellow-winged Tanager *Thraupis abbas*, Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus* and Baltimore Oriole *Icterus galbula*. Though surveyed relatively briefly during this study, the coffee itself supported very few birds, with small flocks dominated by Neotropical migrants (esp. Tennessee and Wilson's Warblers) and a handful of residents (e.g. Clay-coloured Robin *Turdus grayi* and White-winged Tanager *Piranga leucoptera*). Several species deserve mention, being out of range or poorly known in Guatemala³.

Black Hawk-eagle *Spizaetus tyrannus*

Rare and local on the Pacific coast, several were detected both in 1997 and 2002, with a single on 8 January 2002 downslope of FDM c.10 km to the south.

Barred Forest-falcon *Micrastur ruficollis*

Like the above species, mainly confined to Caribbean slope forests. Howell & Webb³ placed a '?' over southern Guatemala in its range map, but give localities west (Chiapas) and east (El Salvador) along the coastal cordillera. An adult was observed from c.30 m perched beside the trail through the interior of the forest (at c.1,700 m) on 9 January 2002. It was identified by its small size, very slim build and proportionately long tail; bright yellow-orange cere extending to include a broad area of orbital skin; very fine blackish barring on the entire underparts; uniform pearl-grey head, throat and upperparts; and several alternating pale/blackish bands on tail, the black bands being much broader. It remained perched for c.1 minute, permitting close study, and bowed its head several times with a strange 'rowing' motion typical of *Micrastur* and other raptors. Finally, it flew silently and low into the forest.

Blue-tailed Hummingbird *Amazilia cyanura*

Represented here by the narrowly endemic race *A. c. guatemalae*, this hummingbird was very common at FDM during both visits, especially at flowering *Inga* trees. Howell & Webb³ listed the species' song as 'undescribed'. One individual studied closely on 9 January 2002 repeatedly delivered a weak, wheezy three-note song, followed by a slow, rhythmic ticking: *weehk-wi-DEEK? wik, k, k, k, k*. The first portion was very similar in cadence to Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus*, and almost identical in tone to Copper-rumped Hummingbird *A. tobaci*, which

delivers a three-note (widely spaced) descending song (pers. obs.). Once learned, the song was heard constantly where groups of these birds were feeding.

Northern Barred Woodcreeper *Dendrocolaptes sanctithomae*

Though none was seen, at least six (including two counter-singing) were heard in the forest interior at FDM. Their loud, distinctive song, a rhythmic, slightly descending series of loud, up-slurred whistles (*KURR-ee?*, *KURR-ee?*, *KURR-ee?*), was heard almost exclusively before 09h00. This vocalisation has a distinctive cadence compared to the similar-sounding Strong-billed Woodcreeper *Xiphocolaptes promeropirhynchus*. These records support the existence of an isolated population in the humid foothill belt of south-west Guatemala, which was not recognised by Howell & Webb³.

Azure-rumped Tanager *Tangara cabanisi*

Endemic to a narrow coastal range of Chiapas (Mexico) and Guatemala, and considered Endangered and declining⁶, the species was until very recently known from just one area in Guatemala (Zunil, dpto. Quezaltenango), and from only one protected area of the world, El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve, in Chiapas⁶. It was found to be fairly common in the forest at FDM, which is consistent with previously published descriptions of the preferred habitat of the species². Up to 25 birds per day were encountered, generally in groups of 2–5 individuals. It was found mainly at the lower elevations of the forest (below c. 1,700 m), and only in habitat with a strong component of emergent forest trees (>30 m high). Azure-rumped Tanager was invariably found in groups of other frugivores, especially Yellow-winged Tanager, Grey Silky-Flycatcher, Swainson's Thrush, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and *Turdus* spp.

To augment the description of its vocalisations in Howell and Webb³, what appears to be the song is a drawn-out, lisping *FSEEEee-ew-weEEE?* with a cadence strongly reminiscent of the song of Eastern Wood-pewee *Contopus virens*. This was often followed by a rapid, clicking *t-t-t-t-t*, similar to but drier and less bell-like than the twittering notes of Common Bush-tanager *Chlorospingus ophthalmicus*. Though high-pitched, both vocalisations were quite loud, and often given at

midday when few other species were vocalising in the forest interior. It also occasionally delivered a rapid, sputtering *p-p-p-pt-pt* when engaged in chasing behaviour, flying rapidly from tree to tree.

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