



Figure 1. Nest site of Slaty Bristlefront *Merulaxis ater*, Reserva Ecológica de Guapiaçu, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, after clearance by a park guard; the arrow indicates the site of the hole (David Thorns)

c.3.5 m wide and ascends steeply through mature forest with large tracts of bamboo (Fig. 1). After some 20 seconds, the bird inexplicably disappeared from view. When it reappeared c.15 seconds later, gathering twigs in its bill, DT realised that the bird was nest building inside a tunnel with a small oval-shaped entrance on the bank (Figs. 2–3). Though easily overlooked under normal circumstances, with a little practice the hole was quite easy to see, being c.1.7 m above the trail (at eye level), and only partially concealed by large plants.

DT watched the bird search for nesting material for c.20 minutes, not only along the bank but also on the trail itself, sometimes just 1–2 m away from him. The bird appeared completely oblivious to his presence, ‘absorbed’ in finding appropriate twigs, leaf stems and long, thin leaves. Once an item was selected, the bird gripped it at its mid-point and held it horizontal to the ground and at right angles to its body, before scurrying mouse-like along a regular route to the hole. At least once the bird appeared to go to extraordinary lengths to procure material—persistently but unsuccessfully attempting to ‘wrench’ a particularly suitable twig growing in the ground.

In front of the hole entrance was a rather flat, gravelly area of earth on which the male would pause momentarily on exiting the tunnel, as if surveying the immediate area. Visits to the hole were very



Figures 2–3. Entrance to the cavity used by Slaty Bristlefront *Merulaxis ater* to construct a nest, after clearance by a park guard (Christine S. S. Bernardo)

frequent: the bird spent c.2–3 minutes searching and c.10–20 seconds inside. The search for single items of nest material contrasted strongly with the behaviour of the female, which initially appeared at c.08h50, and also participated in the nest construction but was more furtive, arriving at the site discreetly, carrying small ‘balls’ of soft lichen-like material. The impression was that the female disappeared longer, searching perhaps solely for the finer inner lining of the nest. Neither bird vocalised. The female’s arrival prompted DT to leave the site, to minimise disturbance. Next morning, at c.08h30, DT again found the male boldly searching for leaves, their stems and twigs, whilst the female was once seen carrying fine lichens. It should be noted that neither bird was seen or heard at the site during the late afternoons.

The site was checked again by DT at c.08h00 on 20 January, but

### First breeding data for Slaty Bristlefront *Merulaxis ater*, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Slaty Bristlefront *Merulaxis ater* is a distinctive tapaculo restricted to evergreen forest and mature second growth in south-east Brazil, from southern Bahia to southern Santa Catarina<sup>1</sup>. Due to habitat loss, particularly in the lowlands, the species is considered Near Threatened<sup>1</sup>. It is generally regarded as uncommon and is seldom encountered, as its furtive habits render *M. ater* difficult to observe. The nest is undescribed and there are no published breeding data, beyond a rather vague report of the species being single-brooded<sup>2</sup>.

At c.08h30 on 17 January 2007, at Reserva Ecológica de Guapiaçu, Rio de Janeiro state, DT found a male *M. ater* foraging on an embankment beside the ‘Waterfall Trail’, at a point where the track is

he found that much of the vegetation surrounding the nest hole had been cut by a park guard engaged in trail maintenance. The nest hole was now much more exposed and the birds were not seen. He therefore approached the hole more closely and noted that the interior was cave-like.

DT passed details of the observation to CSSB, and she and Leonardo Savatta subsequently made regular visits to the area in February, spending a total of 165 minutes at the site. The birds were not seen again and it appears that they abandoned the nest. CSSB and LS found bamboo and palm seedlings (e.g. *Astrocaryum aculeatissimum* and *Euterpe edulis*), young ferns and some Melastomataceae vines within a 50-cm radius of the nest hole. The cavity measured 20 cm wide by 15 cm high, and was at least 1.24 m deep, but its shape, with a sharp bend at the end, prevented precise calculation of the latter measurement. The nest site was at an elevation of 215 m, which is perhaps unusually low for the species in the northern half of Rio de Janeiro state, given that here and in Espírito Santo it is considered 'entirely montane' and is mostly recorded at 800–1,800 m<sup>1</sup>.

Along the bank, there are several small cavities similar to that used by *M. ater*. CSSB has noted a woolly opossum (*Caluromys* sp.) entering one such cavity to seek shelter, and other birds observed using them as nests included Rufous-capped Motmot *Baryphthengus ruficapillus*, Rufous-tailed Jacamar *Galbula ruficauda*, Crescent-chested Puffbird *Malacoptila striata*, Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaner *Philydor rufus*, White-eyed Foliage-gleaner *Automolus leucophthalmus* and Southern Rough-winged Swallow *Stelgidopteryx ruficollis* (L. Savatta pers. comm.).

## References

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