

Photospot: Yucatan Gnatcatcher

Steve N. G. Howell

Following taxonomic revisions, welcome to the newest member of a charming and distinctive New World family, the Polioptilidae – and a rather enigmatic Mexican endemic to boot.

Gnatcatchers, along with gnatwrens, form a distinctive New World family, Polioptilidae, although traditionally they were often classified as part of the Old World warbler assemblage. As with many neotropical groups, species limits remain uncertain, and a recent molecular study of the family suggested that many cryptic species remain to be recognised (Smith *et al.* 2018). One finding in that study was that White-lored Gnatcatcher *Polioptila albiventr*s populations in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula (taxon *albiventr*s) were a distinct lineage, more closely related to a branch of 'Tropical Gnatcatcher *P. plumbea*' (itself a taxonomic mess) than to the true White-lored Gnatcatcher, which occurs on the Pacific slope of Middle America. Although once treated as a species (e.g., by Ridgway 1904), Yucatan Gnatcatcher was subsequently lumped into White-lored Gnatcatcher, as was Black-capped Gnatcatcher *P. nigriceps* of northwest Mexico (e.g., Miller *et al.* 1957). With the recent split of Yucatan Gnatcatcher *P. albiventr*s (Chesser *et al.* 2019), all three are now recognised again as species.

Distribution

Yucatan Gnatcatcher is abundant in the northwest coastal areas of the Yucatan Peninsula, from

Dzilam de Bravo west to the vicinity of Celestún. Indeed, it is often one of the commonest birds in the low scrub that borders the coast, as well as in adjacent open mangrove scrub. It occurs inland locally in scrubby thorn forest, such as in the vicinity of Mérida, but there it is much less numerous than along the immediate coast. The eastern range limit remains unclear and may also have changed in recent decades. All reliable specimen localities lie west of Dzilam de Bravo (Paynter 1955). Although Howell & Webb (1995) mapped the range along the coast as east to the border with the state of Quintana Roo, this was based largely on extrapolation from the distribution of other species sharing the same coastal scrub habitat with the gnatcatcher.

My field notes indicate I found 'White-lored Gnatcatcher' twice out of 12 visits to the Río Lagartos area from 1982 through 1996, but without supporting details: at least five birds in 'salt lagoon scrub' on 14 July 1988 and two birds on February 1994; on other visits I found only Blue-grey Gnatcatcher *P. caerulea* (which, oddly, was not noted on the two visits when 'White-lored' was recorded). On this basis, Yucatan (née White-lored) Gnatcatcher was listed by Howell (1999) as occurring in the Río Lagartos area, including east to the saltworks at Las Coloradas. I have not found



All photographs taken by Steve N. G. Howell in Yucatan, Mexico, unless otherwise stated.

1 Yucatan Gnatcatcher *Polioptila albiventr*s in coastal scrub habitat, 10 km west of Dzilam de Bravo, 6 December 2019.