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## Focus On: The White-tailed Shrike-tyrant, an extinction prone species?

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The globally threatened White-tailed Shrike-tyrant *Agriornis andicola* lives high above the treeline at elevations between 2,400 and 4,200 m, from Ecuador to north-western Argentina, and is exceedingly rare throughout<sup>1</sup>. It has been suggested that *A. andicola* may rely on stands of *Polylepis*, although its scarcity may not be entirely caused by loss of habitat: there is some evidence that a decline has taken place during this century, but the fact that only 45 specimens have been taken throughout its vast range since the type-specimen was collected in 1859 suggests that it was never common during this time.

Owing to the scarcity of records, the where more than one specimen has been

taken, is Bestión in south-eastern Azuay. The Río Shingata drains through a tunnel to the Amazonian slope, but the river plain (Bestión) is only separated by a 100 m high ridge from the interandean slope, with which it shares flora and fauna. Three specimens of *andicola* were collected there in January 1921, and one on the only subsequent visit by an ornithologist, during 1992.

This 1992 specimen was taken on the semi-humid ridge bordering the arid central valley: this ridge was covered in a mosaic of bunch grass and chaparral (dense 2 m tall bushy vegetation), growing on a 0.5-2 m thick black turf overlying white kaolin; scattered in the bunch grass were 1-2 m tall *Puyas*. The bird perched on bushes and



White-tailed Shrike-tyrant *Agriornis andicola*  
(Jon Fjeldså)

dead branches on a densely bush-covered slope, making flights of 20 to 30 m between perches, and its stomach contents showed it had been feeding on lizards and large insect imagos. In 1992, there was a fringe of *Polylepis* trees along the Río Shingata, surrounded by regularly burned grassland, and a few small *Polylepis* patches where the river plain meets the East Andes proper, but *andicola* was not seen in these patches, thus apparently answering one of the many long-standing questions about this species's ecology.

The altiplano of Tarquí, 20-30 km north-west of Bestión, has an exceptionally dense population of *Agriornis*. Along the edge of the plateau there are still considerable amounts of habitat very similar to that in which *andicola* was found at Bestión, and it may be a good place to look for remaining individuals.

Recent records from northern Chile and southern Peru are likewise from areas with a mixture of bushy growth and open ground. Not a single observation was made in *Polylepis* woodland during surveys of

numerous remnant patches of this habitat in Peru and Bolivia in 1987, so apparently this is not the species's preferred haunts. The habitat in which it has been found however, is still fairly widespread, suggesting that factors other than habitat loss have caused its rarity.

A plausible explanation is that *andicola* is affected by its close relative, *Agriornis montana* which outnumbers it greatly at all known *andicola* localities. The two species share the same diet and are exceedingly similar in appearance, the main difference being *andicola*'s thicker (but not longer), bicoloured beak, blacker and broader streaks on the throat and heavier weight (but fairly similar-sized wings and tail). *Agriornis montana* occupies the same habitat as *andicola*, but is also found in open country devoid of bushes, and ranges south to Patagonia. One possible scenario is that *montana* evolved during isolation in southern Patagonia and later spread northwards to take over *andicola*'s niche entirely. This may prove to be one of the rare cases of recent extinctions not caused by man.

### References

1. Collar, N. J., Gonzaga, L. P., Krabbe, N., Madroño Nieto, A., Naranjo, L. G., Parker, T. A. & Wege, D. C. (1992) *Threatened birds of the Americas: the ICBP/IUCN Red Data Book*. Cambridge, U.K.: International Council for Bird Preservation.

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