

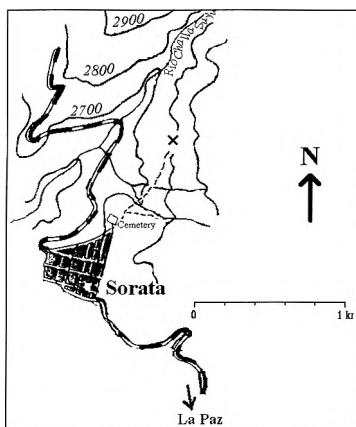
Notes on the occurrence and natural history of Berlepsch's Canastero *Asthenes berlepschi*

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Berlepsch's Canastero *Asthenes berlepschi* is only known from a small area at the northern end of the Cordillera Real, Bolivia where it inhabits the semi-arid vegetation of one isolated rain-shadow valley. It was first collected by Alfonso M. Olalla in 1938, since which time nothing has been published concerning its natural history⁵. Due to its minute range it was documented in Collar *et al.*² as a threatened species.

When seeking suggestions from Jon Fjelds  for useful research to undertake during birding trips to Bolivia one proposal was to try and find out more about *A. berlepschi*, the taxonomic status of which has been doubted (see below). In December 1991 (see¹), with that suggestion in mind, Rolf de By and I found ourselves in the back of a pickup truck on our way to Sorata. That afternoon we were quite surprised to find some very visible canastero nests in *Eucalyptus* trees. A few minutes later we saw our first *A. berlepschi* flying up into a nest.

During the following day-and-a-half we returned repeatedly to this area, put up three mist nets (one of which was hijacked by a bull!), and were lucky enough to catch two *A. berlepschi*. We took photographs (see p16) and blood samples for DNA analysis.



The locality (marked with 'X') where Berlepsch's Canastero *Asthenes berlepschi* was found nesting in December 1991.

Three or four nests were found in this area (one of which was higher up the side valley). All nests were very visible and about 5-10 m up in forks close to the trunk, in 20-30 cm thick, free-standing *Eucalyptus* trees. All trees were standing amid fields and shrubbery. The birds were usually seen skulking in and around shrubbery, much in the way of "Rusty-vented" Canastero *A. dorbignyi*, and the trilled songs we heard (not tape-recorded) from the nest at dusk were also rather like this form.

Other birds found to be common in this area and habitat were Andean Swift *Aeronautes andecolus*, Green-tailed Trainbearer *Lesbia nuna*, White-winged Black-Tyrant *Knipolegus aterrimus*, Cliff Flycatcher *Hirundinea ferruginea*, Rufous-colored Sparrow *Zonotrichia capensis*, House Wren *Troglodytes aedon*, Chiguanco Thrush *Turdus chiguanco*, Golden-billed Saltator *Saltator aurantiirostris* and Cinereous Conebill *Conirostrum cinereum*.

The area is north-east of Sorata in the side valley of the R o Challa Suyu at about 2,800 m (see Map). We followed a trail which went round the southern corner of the cemetery, stayed left at a fork after about 200 m, crossed a small stream and found our birds on the open slope not far beyond (this being only 15 minutes from town). Sorata is a pretty town and is quite popular with tourists so there are a number of hotels (we stayed in Hotel Prefectural). There are also daily buses from La Paz which is just four hours away. Being in a rain-shadow valley, the weather at Sorata is usually excellent.

Some doubt has been cast on the full species status of *A. berlepschi* which, however, shows a distinctive combination of characters but is odd because any one of these characters is found in different populations of the Creamy-breasted Canastero *A. dorbignyi* group⁴ (based on an unpublished character analysis of c.450 specimens: J. Fjelds  *in litt.* 1994). The "Dark-winged" Canastero *Asthenes (dorbignyi) arequipae* comes closest to *A. berlepschi* but further data are required to



Berlepsch's Canastero *Asthenes berlepschi*, caught in a mist-net near Sorata, Bolivia, Dec 1991 (Rolf de By and Sjoerd Mayer)

determine whether species rank is in fact justified for the latter⁴.

As suggestions for further research, it would be interesting to find out more about the taxonomic relationships between *A. berlepschi*, *A. (dorbignyi) arequipae* and *A. dorbignyi*, and to discover how large a range *A. berlepschi* actually has. To both ends, it would be useful to tape-record and photograph (and take blood samples from) birds in other localities in the extensive semi-arid valley system which divides the Cordillera de Apolobamba and the Cordillera Real.

References

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