
Identification of Azure-shouldered Tanager *Thraupis cyanoptera*

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Thraupis, the genus from which the tanager family derives its name, has a range spanning from Mexico to Argentina. It is thus distributed over more of the New World than any other tanager genus except *Piranga*. The genus *Thraupis* consists of eight species, with representatives distributed throughout Central America and from the Andes to the Brazilian coastal lowlands, and also on Trinidad. *Thraupis* species are also generally more abundant than any *Piranga*. Ubiquitous by nature, species of this genus can often be found frequenting human habitation.

The Azure-shouldered Tanager *T. cyanoptera* occurs in south-east Brazil (with one old and somewhat dubious record from eastern Paraguay), where it is considered locally uncommon to fairly common in the hill-forests of Espirito Santo south to northern Rio Grande do Sul. The species was categorized as Near Threatened by Collar *et al.*¹. Azure-shouldered Tanager is sympatric (and syntopic) with three other members of the genus *Thraupis*. Two of these, Palm Tanager *T. palmarum* and Goldenchevroned Tanager *T. ornata* are sufficiently different that no confusion should arise in

identification. Sayaca Tanager *T. sayaca* replaces the Blue-grey Tanager *T. episcopus* (the two constitute a super species, and are possibly conspecific) in southern South America and the two taxa closely resemble Azure-shouldered Tanager.

Features for field separation of Azure-shouldered from Sayaca Tanagers include the formers larger size, heavier bill, bluer (less grey) upperparts, brighter cobalt-blue shoulders (sometimes difficult to see), and, perhaps most helpful, the greenish tinge to the belly and crissum (pale ashy-blue in Sayaca). Perhaps the scarcity of records for Azure-shouldered Tanager is a result of its fondness for more forested areas than Sayaca Tanager, seemingly shunning the scrubby, open habitats that Sayaca so commonly frequents. Also, it is possible that many Azure-shouldered Tanagers are overlooked as observers strive to assess colour-tones or compare structure and bill-sizes in often less than optimum conditions.

Personal observations were made of Azure-shouldered Tanager at the Nova Lombardia Biological Reserver, Espirito Santo, Brazil

during September 1994. At least three individuals were seen feeding near the warden's house, in the company of Golden-chevrons, Palm and Sayaca Tanagers. The birds were attracted by some fruit strewn across the tract at the forest edge, although the Azure-shouldered Tanagers were always the most wary and never actually fed. Though initially identified by the brightness of the shoulders and the edges of the wing feathers, this was frequently hard to discern. The ground foraging behaviour made an assessment of the colour of the underparts difficult. It was discovered that the easiest way to identify the Azure-shouldered Tanagers was by concentrating on the facial pattern on any "blue-grey" tanager seen. The scarcer species exhibited a dark loreal smudge, rather than the plain faced appearance of the Sayaca Tanagers. This combination of a thicker-set bill and dark eye, linked by almost black lores, produced a facial pattern that was extremely helpful for identification (Figure 1). This feature was constantly visible whereas other characteristics such as the brighter blue shoulders (often all but concealed by the scapulars) were often difficult to discern given the brevity of some views. Although the dark lores of Azure-shouldered Tanager are illustrated in Isler & Isler², they are not emphasized sufficiently, and the text omits any mention of this feature.

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* (Third edition, part 2). Cambridge, U.K.: International Council for Bird Preservation.
2. Isler, M. L. & Isler, P. R. (1987) *The tanagers: natural history, distribution, and identification*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

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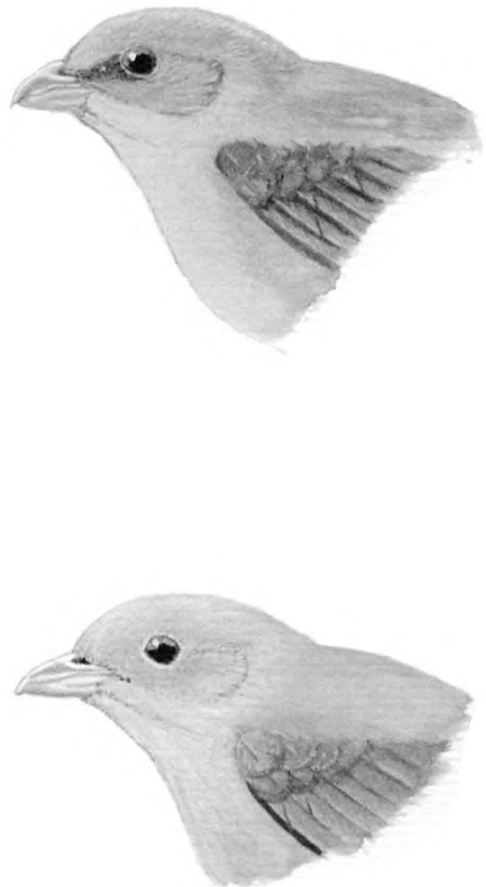


Figure 1. Azure-shouldered Tanager *T. cyanoptera* (top) and Sayaca Tanager *T. sayaca* by R. Simpson