

A species split in Mexico: Sumichrast's and Nava's Wren *Hylorchilus sumichrasti* and *H. navai*

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Introduction

Until recently, the genus *Hylorchilus* included only one species, Sumichrast's Wren *Hylorchilus sumichrasti*, an endangered species endemic to Mexico³. The two known forms, *H. s. sumichrasti* and *H. s. navai*⁴, were geographically isolated and sedentary. In 1991, a team from the University of East Anglia, U.K., and the Mexican organisations UNAM and ECOSFERA, visited the El Ocote Special Biosphere Reserve in Chiapas to study a population found by ECOSFERA several months before. Recordings of the call of *H. sumichrasti* from the state of Veracruz got no response from birds in El Ocote, and analysis showed the two taxa to be very different. On this evidence, coupled with the already published differences⁵, *H. sumichrasti* was recently split into two monotypic species: Sumichrast's Wren *Hylorchilus sumichrasti* and Nava's Wren *H. navai*¹.

Range

During the last 10 years, *H. sumichrasti* has only been recorded from the Amatlán-Córdoba area (18°50'N 96°55'W) in Veracruz, and Cerro Oro (18°00'N 96°15'W) between Tuxtepec and the Presidente Miguel de la Madrid reservoir in northern Oaxaca⁸. *H. navai* has recently been recorded from three areas, El Ocote Special Biosphere Reserve (17°01'N 93°47'W) in western Chiapas, several localities in the Uxpanapa region (17°10'N 94°10'W) of eastern Veracruz and northern Oaxaca⁸, and in March 1993 at the type-locality, 26 km north-west of Ocozocoautla in Chiapas (R. F. Andrie in litt. 1993). All known localities for both species are shown in Figure 1. The two species have not been found to occur together.

Specific differences

The differences from other species are described and well depicted in the Mexican field guides^{6,7}. Morphological differences between the two species are shown in Plate 1 and are described elsewhere^{1,4,6}. Both call and song are distinct and have been fully described^{1,2}, but essentially the call of *H. navai* is a monosyllabic *peenk* and that

of *H. sumichrasti* a disyllabic *wee-oo*. Singing *H. navai* have at least two song variants¹ and it appears that each individual has its own unique song-type which differs from the descending series of whistles given by *H. sumichrasti* by the undulation in pitch. *Sumichrasti* also has two, possibly three song-types including a short and a long variety. Interestingly, when a song-type specific to one individual *H. navai* was played to a different individual *navai* it would respond by mimicking the other's voice. Copies of the recordings of both these species are kept by the British Library of Wildlife Sounds in London.

Conservation

There are only very limited records of both species (see Figure 1). Both have exacting ecological requirements of limestone outcropping under closed-canopy forest, although both appear to be locally common where suitable habitat persists (e.g. an estimate of 10-25 birds per km² was made at El Ocote in 1992¹). Limestone outcropping is not continuous, so the populations of both species seem likely to have always been patchy within otherwise intact areas of forest. Despite the general unsuitability of limestone areas for ranching, the destruction of surrounding areas leaves appropriate habitat isolated. Under such conditions both species are even more at risk due to their presumed poor dispersal abilities. Direct threats to known sites include a proposal to build a road through the El Ocote reserve which was only recently rejected (one of the three known areas for *H. navai*: see Figure 1) and quarrying operations within a few hundred metres of a population of *H. sumichrasti* at Amatlán. Encouragingly, all *H. sumichrasti* at Amatlán were observed in shaded coffee plantations, indicating that this species has a degree of tolerance to disturbance. Only one of the known localities for *H. navai* is currently under some form of protection, namely the El Ocote Special Biosphere Reserve, and even that was under threat until recently (see above). The proposed Los Chimalapas-Uxpanapa Biosphere Reserve would cover much of the Uxpanapa population of *H. navai*, and its formal designation should be

actively encouraged⁸. None of the sites from which *H. sumichrasti* is known is currently protected.

The Red Data Book³ classified Sumichrast's Wren as "vulnerable/rare" and recognised that there were probably two species. In the most recent analysis of threatened birds², both taxa have been recognised as specifically distinct, and categorised as "vulnerable".

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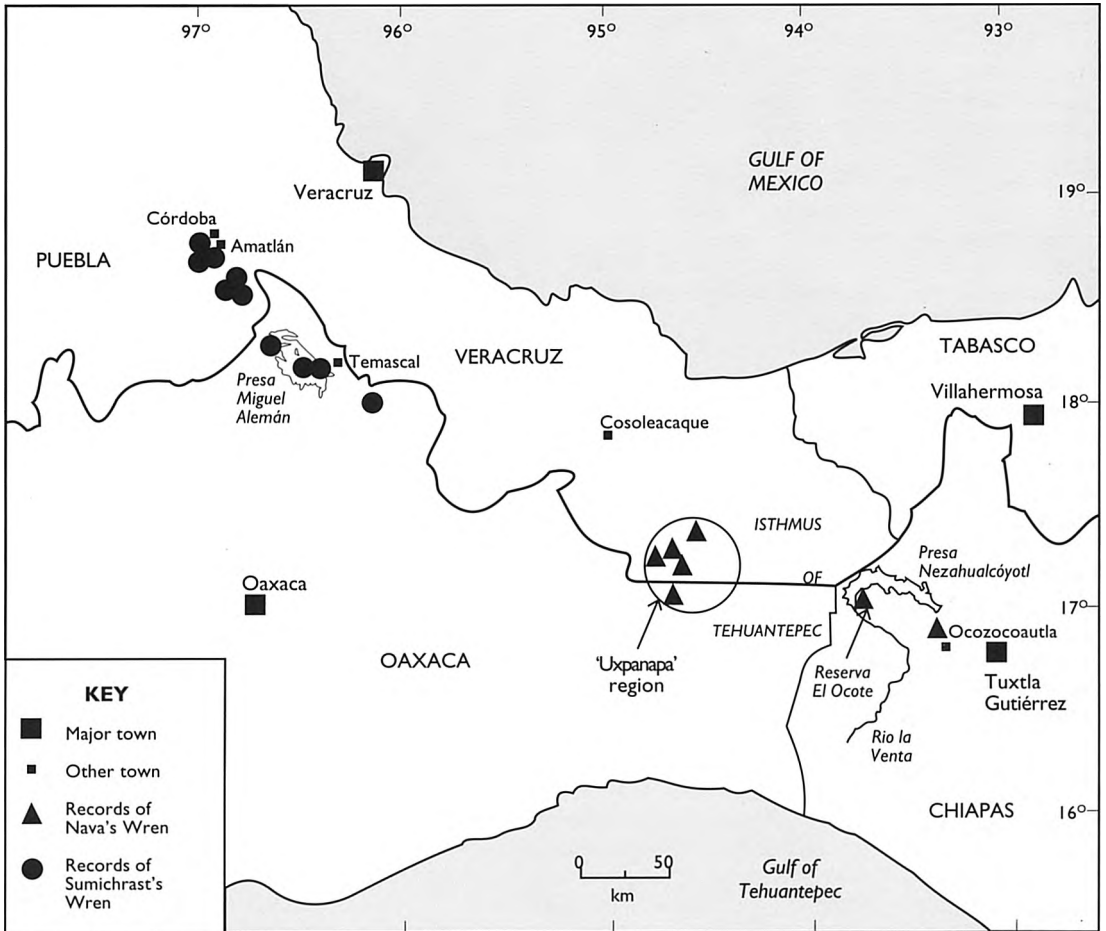


Figure 1. Southern Mexico showing all records of Nava's and Sumichrast's Wren



Nava's Wren *Hylorchilus navai* (P. W. Atkinson)



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Plate 1. Nava's Wren *H. navai* (top) and Sumichrast's Wren *H. sumichrasti* (bottom). Painting by Richard Thewlis