

A possible re-sighting of the Cherry-throated Tanager *Nemosia rourei* in Espírito Santo, Brazil

Derek A. Scott

Nemosia rourei, endémica del sudeste de Brasil, se conoce sólo por el espécimen tipo colectado en Muriaé, sudeste de Minas Gerais¹, y una bandada de ocho individuos el 8 de agosto de 1941 a c.900 m en la región de Limoeiro–Jatiboca en Espírito Santo⁴. El 5 de octubre de 1995, el autor observó un ave solitaria en la Reserva Biológica Nova Lombardia, Espírito Santo, de apariencia muy similar a la descripción de esta especie, en compañía de otros fruteros. La observación fue breve, pero la garganta rojo brillante contrastando con el resto ventral blanco, alas, cola y máscara negruzcas, iris bien pálido y corona y nuca gris pálido fueron observados. Se discuten discrepancias entre la descripción de la forma de la mancha gular roja por el autor e información ya publicada; el plumaje de la hembra de *Nemosia rourei* es desconocido. La posibilidad de que el ave de octubre de 1995 fuera un híbrido es discutida, así como la improbable posibilidad que una pequeña población de *Nemosia rourei* haya sido pasada por alto en Nova Lombardia, que es comparativamente una reserva bien relevada. Se aconseja a los ornitólogos que visiten el área, que procuren esta especie.

Nemosia rourei, é uma ave endêmica do sudeste brasileiro, sendo conhecida somente através do espécime tipo coletado em Muriaé, sudeste de Minas Gerais, e por um bando de oito indivíduos observados a 900m de altitude na região de Limoeiro-Jatiboca no estado do Espírito Santo no dia 8 de agosto de 1941. No dia 5 de outubro de 1995, o autor observou na Reserva Biológica de Nova Lombardia, Espírito Santo, dentro de um bando de saíras, um indivíduo cuja descrição se assemelha à conhecida para esta espécie. Embora a observação tenha sido breve, foi possível distinguir todas as características básicas que diferenciam a espécie, tais como a garganta vermelho brilhante contrastando com as partes inferiores brancas, asas, cauda e máscara facial negras, iris muito pálido e vértice e nuca cinza pálidos. São discutidas as discrepâncias sobre a forma da mancha vermelha na garganta, entre a descrição do autor e a informação publicada; a plumagem da fêmea de *Nemosia rourei* é desconhecida. É discutida a possibilidade de que o indivíduo de outubro de 1995 seja um híbrido, assim como a pouco provável possibilidade de que uma pequena população de *Nemosia rourei* tenha passado despercebida em Nova Lombardia, a qual, comparativamente, é uma reserva bem estudada. Os ornitólogos que visitem esta área são advertidos para procurarem a espécie.

Introduction

On 5 October 1995, while leading a Birdquest group of birdwatchers around Nova Lombardia Biological Reserve in Espírito Santo, south-east Brazil, I noticed an unusual tanager foraging with a mixed-species flock of tanagers and other small birds in the forest canopy. The bird was found at c.08h00 in a tall tree overhanging the main dirt road from Santa Teresa, in an area of forest c.200 m beyond the turn-off to the reserve headquarters. When first seen, it was almost directly overhead; it appeared to be a smallish tanager with clean white underparts, blackish wings and a very conspicuous bright blood-red throat. Almost immediately, the bird flew off about 50 m and perched in the open on a dead branch of a *Cecropia* tree by the roadside. It remained in full view for a few seconds, then flew off alone high over the canopy. The bird was seen well by Christoph Hrdina (the Tour Director and a keen

naturalist resident in Brazil) who was sufficiently familiar with the birds of south-east Brazil to be as puzzled as I was by the bird's striking red throat. Unfortunately, no other member of the group was able to locate the bird, and it flew off before it could be observed with a telescope. Although we remained in the area for some time, the bird did not reappear, and the rest of the feeding party gradually moved off. We had to leave Nova Lombardia later that morning, and were therefore unable to pursue the search any further.

Description

The bird appeared slightly larger than the Rufous-headed Tanagers *Hemithraupis ruficapilla* and Gilt-edged Tanagers *Tangara cyanoventris* present in the same mixed-species flock. The most striking feature of the bird was its bright red throat, contrasting with the rest of the underparts which were

pure white. Unfortunately, the bird was seen so briefly in side view that precise details of the upperparts and head pattern could not be determined. The wings and tail were mainly black, and the upper mantle appeared to be dark grey, but the lower mantle and back were not seen. The crown and nape were pale grey, contrasting with a broad black mask extending from the forehead to the sides of the head, and the bird had a very pale iris, conspicuous even at 50 m range with x10 binoculars. The white underparts, black mask and pale iris were reminiscent of a male Hooded Tanager *Nemosia pileata*, and the bird resembled this species in general proportions, but the blackish wings and tail, striking red throat and lack of pale loreal spot ruled out the commoner species.

Identification

The possibility of the bird being a Cherry-throated Tanager *Nemosia rourei* immediately came to mind, but no illustration or detailed description of this species was available at the time. Subsequent reference to descriptions in the literature^{2,3,5} and, in particular, reference to the illustrations in Sick⁶ and Isler & Isler² did not resolve the matter. While the bird at Nova Lombardia closely resembled the illustration in Isler & Isler², there was a discrepancy in the extent of red on the throat. The illustrations in both previously mentioned works show the red of the throat extending downwards into a point on the centre of the breast, whereas in the Nova Lombardia bird, the red was confined to the chin and throat and ended squarely, in a similar fashion to the yellow on the throat of a Yellow-backed Tanager *Hemithraupis flavicollis*. Ridgely & Tudor³ describe the bird as having a bright red throat and chest, while Sick⁴ states that the throat and lower neck are blood red forming a pointed shield. This discrepancy does not necessarily rule out the possibility of the bird being a Cherry-throated Tanager, as the plumage of the female remains unknown³.

Previous records

Cherry-throated Tanager is known from the type-specimen collected in the mid-nineteenth century at Muriaé, south-east Minas Gerais¹, and a flock of eight seen by Helmut Sick on 8 August 1941 in treetops at c.900 m in the Limoeiro-Jatiboca region of Espírito Santo⁴. If the species survives, it must either be extremely local or occur at very low densities in a very specific habitat type or narrow altitudinal range which has been neglected by the many workers who have investigated the avifauna of south-east Brazil in recent decades. Ridgely &

Tudor³ questioned its continued survival and Collar *et al.*¹ concluded that it was likely to be extinct, given the deforestation and high level of ornithological coverage at forested sites in the region.

Discussion

The possibility the species might survive in the Nova Lombardia Biological Reserve was considered by Collar *et al.*¹. This well protected reserve of 5,000 ha is situated c.30 km east of the Jatiboca area in Espírito Santo, and lies at a similar elevation (700–900 m). The reserve contains one of the few remaining stands of relatively humid hill forest at these elevations in Espírito Santo, Rio de Janeiro and neighbouring Minas Gerais, and is now of considerable importance for the continued survival of a number of scarce and threatened bird species endemic to the montane forests of south-east Brazil⁷. However, the reserve has been visited by ornithologists on many occasions since the 1970s, and has become an almost obligatory destination for birders and birding groups interested in seeing the endemic birds of south-east Brazil. Thus the absence of records of Cherry-throated Tanager certainly suggests that the reserve does not harbour a resident population of the species.

There are various possible explanations for the bird seen at Nova Lombardia in October 1995, but the two most likely would appear to be either that it was a Cherry-throated Tanager that had wandered from a nearby area which supports a small population, or that it was a hybrid. If it was a Cherry-throated Tanager, the absence of red on the breast could be explained by assuming that the bird was a female, or that there is some variation amongst males. If it was a hybrid, likely parents would be Hooded Tanager, which is relatively common in forest-edge habitats and secondary growth in the nearby lowlands (up to c.600 m), and Rufous-headed Tanager *Hemithraupis ruficapilla*, which is common at Nova Lombardia. If the Nova Lombardia bird was a hybrid, then the possibility that the type-specimen and the birds seen by Sick were hybrids must also be considered. The hybridisation theory is attractive because it explains how a brightly coloured and very distinctive bird of the canopy can appear only 200 m away from the reserve headquarters in a relatively well-studied biological reserve after an absence of over 50 years. Such a hybrid combination, however, would probably not produce an offspring with a blood-red throat, blackish wings and tail, or grey crown. In any event, it is clear that there was an unusual tanager, closely matching *Nemosia rourei*, at Nova Lombardia in October 1995. It is hoped that this

note will encourage ornithologists and birders visiting the Nova Lombardia area in the future to keep a special eye open for a bird with a bright red throat amongst the canopy flocks of tanagers.

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, UK: 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.
3. Ridgely, R. S. & Tudor, G. (1989) *The birds of South America*, 1. Austin: University of Texas Press.
4. Sick, H. (1979) Notes on some Brazilian birds. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club* 99: 115–120.
5. Sick, H. (1985) *Ornitologia Brasileira, uma introdução*, 2. Brasília: Editora Universidade de Brasília.
6. Sick, H. (1993) *Birds in Brazil. A natural history*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
7. Wege, D. C. & Long, A. J. (1995) *Key Areas for threatened birds in the Neotropics*. Cambridge UK: BirdLife International (Conservation Series 5).

Derek A. Scott

Runagate, Far Green, Coaley, Dursley, Glos. GL11 5EL, UK.