

Project Ortalis '96: interesting and important results of bird surveys in western Ecuador

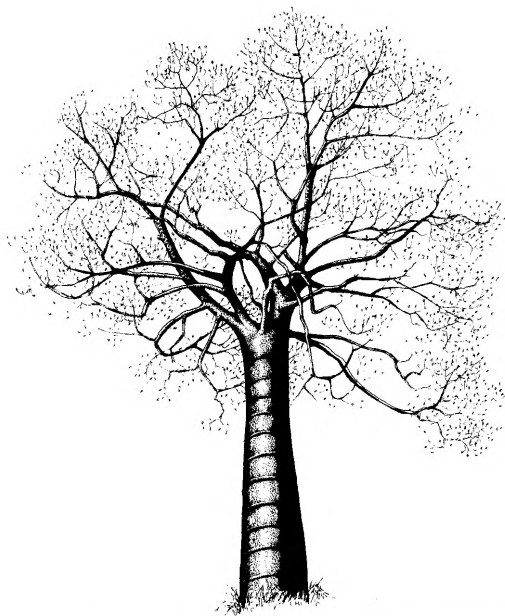
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Entre julio y septiembre de 1996, un grupo anglo-ecuatoriano de biólogos llevaron a cabo diez semanas de trabajo de campo intensivo en tres sitios de la provincia de Guayas, oeste de Ecuador: Bosque Protector Cerro Blanco, Reserva Ecológica Manglares-Churute (ambos designados reservas), y Hacienda González, un sitio hasta ahora inexplorado. Aquí intentamos resumir los resultados más importantes e interesantes del Proyecto Ortalis '96, focalizando en los registros de nueve especies amenazadas, dos casi-amenazadas y 23 endemismos de Tumbes. Se describe biogeográficamente cada sitio de estudio y se relaciona con los varios hábitats en los que diferentes especies con problemas de conservación fueron observadas. Se discute además nueva información sobre la biología e historia natural de varias especies, y se detallan los registros nuevos o de interés en cada sitio. Un total de 261 especies de aves fueron registradas en las tres áreas, lo que resalta la importancia de las mismas para la conservación de la biodiversidad en la región de Tumbes.

Introduction

During July–September 1996, Project Ortalis '96 undertook 10 weeks intensive biological fieldwork at three localities in Guayas province, western Ecuador. The aim of this paper is to summarise the most interesting and important of our findings at each of the three sites, concentrating on the threatened, near-threatened and endemic species recorded. All three are within the Tumbesian Ecuador and Peru Endemic Bird Areas (EBA)⁷, two were already designated reserves and considered as key areas for threatened birds¹². Bosque Protector Cerro Blanco (BPCB) is a relatively accessible and well-studied reserve^{1,9} within easy reach of Guayaquil, while Reserva Ecológica Manglares-Churute (REM-C) is a larger, state-run reserve which has received incomplete ornithological attention. The third site, Hacienda González, a privately-owned property of c. 2,000 ha, 40 km north-west of Guayaquil, was biologically unknown prior to our visit. Fieldwork was undertaken at a range of altitudes, from sea-level to 680 m and in a variety of habitats, including dry scrub, and semi-deciduous, evergreen and very humid premontane forest.

A total of 261 bird species was recorded at the three sites, including nine globally threatened, two near-threatened and 23 Tumbesian endemic species (for full details of results see Pople *et al.*¹⁰). New life-history data were collected on some species of conservation concern and Hacienda González was discovered to be a hitherto unknown site for eight threatened species. Seven species previously unrecorded at BPCB, including an



Pigio Cavanillesia platanifolia (C. M. Isherwood)

Acestrura woodstar which appears likely to have been the endangered Esmeraldas Woodstar *A. berlepschi*, were observed. At REM-C, 26 species not previously confirmed from the reserve were recorded, including species typical of both the Chocó and the Pacific slope of the Andes.

Bosque Protector Cerro Blanco (BPCB)

BPCB is a small, dry forest reserve 14 km west of Guayaquil, near the south-east end of the

Cordillera de la Costa. Although owned by La Cemento Nacional, Ecuador's national cement company, it has been administered on their behalf by Fundación Pro-Bosque since 1993. The name, Cerro Blanco, comes from the white limestone rock underlying the cordillera, the porous nature of which means that plants suffer high levels of water stress during the dry season⁹. Thus, the vegetation is dominated by deciduous species and species with deep penetrating roots, constituting a dry to moist semi-deciduous forest, dominated by "ceibos" *Ceiba trichistandra* on the southern slope, and "pigios" *Cavanillesia platanifolia* on the northern side. The lowlands are covered in disturbed sclerophyllous scrub, while the numerous quebradas hold more evergreen vegetation. The reserve's proximity to the Gulf of Guayaquil means that coastal fog occasionally enshrouds the higher areas and semi-evergreen vegetation also occurs on ridge-tops (which reach 500 m).

During five weeks of fieldwork at a number of study sites within the reserve, 150 of the 207 bird species known from the reserve were recorded, including all eight globally threatened species listed for BPCB³. Furthermore, a pair of Great Green Macaw *Ara ambigua* (lumped with Military Macaw *A. militaris* in Collar *et al.*⁵), and an unidentified female *Acestrura* woodstar, probably Esmeraldas Woodstar *Acestrura berlepschi*, were also observed. As these two species are considered vulnerable and endangered respectively⁵, the reserve's tally of globally threatened species probably now stands at ten (along with six near-threatened species).

Ara ambigua was recorded almost daily along the northern perimeter of the reserve, and on one occasion a pair was observed investigating a possible nest site in a "pigío", the same tree species used in the successful 1994 nesting². Work undertaken after the project had finished revealed that, although the pair appeared to be excavating a nest hole, they did not nest⁸. The female *Acestrura* woodstar was seen on three successive days on the northern edge of the reserve, feeding on flowers of *Vernonia patens*. Further work is required to confirm its identity and to determine whether the bird was a migrant, or if a small population survives in the reserve.

At least two Grey-backed Hawk *Leucopternis occidentalis* were found in each of the four major quebradas visited, and although no breeding behaviour was observed, other workers have confirmed that it breeds in the reserve^{9,11}. It would appear that BPCB supports a significant breeding population, not a remnant as suggested by Collar

*et al.*⁶. Whilst the reserve's population of Rufous-headed Chachalacas *Ortalis erythroptera* was not particularly vocal during our visit, groups were occasionally heard counter-calling. Five distinct groups were heard calling before dawn on two occasions, and combined with c. 20 other sightings, it is estimated that the reserve may support a population in excess of 30 birds. Ochre-bellied Dove *Leptotila ochraceiventris* had only been previously recorded from the reserve during the wet season, and its movements, if any, in the dry season were unclear⁹. The vast majority of our records were from three quebradas, with 2–5 birds in each, confirming its year-round presence here, but apparently moving to the more humid forest elements (e.g. water courses) during the drier months.



Henna-hooded Foliage-gleaner *Hylocryptus erythrocephalus*
(C. M. Isherwood)

Blackish-headed Spinetail *Synallaxis tithys* was recorded from over ten localities during fieldwork, with most records being of 1–2 birds in low, scrubby vegetation. In contrast to other findings^{6,13}, we regularly observed this species in or associating with mixed-species flocks, and birds were typically very vocal. Approximately 15 Henna-hooded Foliage-gleaners *Hylocryptus erythrocephalus* were recorded (one mist-netted), and this species was also regularly observed associating with mixed-species flocks. Low numbers of Grey-breasted Flycatcher *Lathrotriccus griseipectus* and Pacific Royal-flycatcher *Onychorhynchus occidentalis* were recorded, whose presence has been suggested as one of the best indicators of good quality moist forest within the Tumbesian region⁹. Whilst our handful of records of *L. griseipectus* confirm that the species is strongly tied to shady quebradas and moist forest, our field sightings of four *O. occidentalis* (plus one male mist-netted) suggest the latter can tolerate a much broader range of habitats, at least outside the breeding season.

Saffron Siskin *Carduelis siemiradzkii* was recorded on c. 30 occasions in and around the reserve, most commonly in small to medium-sized flocks, but on one occasion in a flock of c. 30 birds. Most

sightings were in open scrubby habitat on the northern edge of the reserve, but flocks also visited Quebrada Canoa to drink and bathe. Finally, two of the six near-threatened species known from the reserve: Pale-browed Tinamou *Crypturellus transfasciatus* and Grey-cheeked Parakeet *Brotogeris pyrrhopterus*, were encouragingly abundant, with flocks of up to 40 of the latter occasionally seen.

Also of interest were seven species new to the reserve, including Black-and-white Owl *Strix nigrolineata* and Bobolink *Dolichonyx oryzivorus* (previously recorded on very few occasions in western Ecuador; R. S. Ridgely *in litt.* 1996).

Hacienda González

This property, of which 600 ha have subsequently been purchased by La Cemento Nacional to be set aside as a forest reserve, is c. 25 km north-west of BPCB in the Cordillera de Chongón. The landowner had reported to Eric Horstman, the director of BPCB, that *Ara ambigua* were regularly seen here and had attempted to breed the previous year. The property can be divided into three broad vegetation types (all primarily deciduous): coarse grassland; "pigío" woodland; and some semi-evergreen forest in quebrada bottoms. Much of the property is open to livestock, and is grazed and badly trampled in areas. The forest appeared to have been extensively logged, with little more than the economically worthless "pigíos" remaining, and only in the steep quebradas, where access was more difficult (for livestock and humans alike), was the vegetation less severely degraded.



Pacific Royal-flycatcher *Onychorhynchus occidentalis*
(C. M. Isherwood)

Amazingly, despite the high degree of disturbance at the site, a total of 108 species was recorded during six days fieldwork, including 21 Tumbesian endemics, two near-threatened species and all of the threatened species known from BPCB (except *Leptotila ochraceiventris* and the *Acestrura* woodstar).

At least five *Leucopternis occidentalis* were recorded, but the sole sighting of *Ortalis erythroptera* was a group of four in an area of badly disturbed scrubby woodland just after dawn one morning. *Ara ambigua* was seen or heard from our camp daily, with at least three individuals present and appearing to range widely each day. They were primarily found in the "pigío" woodland which extends in a band through the property. It seems likely that the birds roosted in this area, but we were unable to find a specific site during our brief visit.

Both threatened furnariids recorded at BPCB, *Synallaxis tithys* and *Hylocryptus erythrocephalus*, were present; the former proved to be the most frequently encountered threatened species. That both species were recorded relatively regularly, despite the high degree of habitat degradation and disturbance, has interesting implications for their habitat requirements. Similarly, our records of *Onychorhynchus occidentalis* (one in the field, plus one male and female mist-netted) in an area of highly disturbed "pigío" woodland, suggest acceptance of a wider range of habitat types than has previously been believed. However, it remains to be seen whether the species is also present in the breeding season, or requires the local presence of moist forest or quebradas for breeding. As at BPCB, the single *Lathrotriccus griseipectus* was in the moister semi-evergreen forest of a quebrada.

The only record of *Carduelis siemiradzkii* was of two birds flying over on one occasion, so further work is needed to show whether it is resident here. The near-threatened *Crypturellus transfasciatus* and *Brotogeris pyrrhopterus* were both noticeably less abundant than at BPCB. Among restricted-range species recorded was White-edged Oriole *Icterus graceannae*, a Tumbesian endemic known from BPCB but not seen during our fieldwork there.

Reserva Ecológica Manglares-Churute (REM-C)

Four weeks of surveys within this large coastal reserve, 40 km south of Guayaquil, were conducted. Compared to the previous two sites, this 35,000 ha state-run reserve is both huge and diverse, comprising Ecuador's most extensive area of mangroves⁴ and an unknown area of remaining forest (we estimate c. 11,000 ha), principally con-



Rufous-headed Chachalaca *Ortalis erythroptera*
(C. M. Isherwood)

centrated on and around Cerro Cimalón and the Cerro Masvale–Pancho Diablo complex, which flank the main highway. At the foot of these, the vegetation is primarily dry semi-deciduous forest/woodland, but this grades through increasingly moist and evergreen vegetation to ridge-top forest at c.650 m, which approaches that described as very humid premontane cloud forest³ (M. Kessler *in litt.* 1997).

Our efforts were divided between the forested cerros, lowlands and mangroves, but concentrated on the ridge-top forests where previous ornithological work had been limited. During the fieldwork, 214 species, 26 of which had not been confirmed to occur in the reserve, were recorded, including 16 Tumbesian endemics, four threatened and two near-threatened species.

Leucopternis occidentalis was less frequently observed than at BPCB, despite the presence of more extensive tracts of evergreen forest, but occurred over ridge-top forest and lower drier woodland. *Ortalis erythroptera* was not seen, possibly reflecting the high levels of hunting apparent within the reserve, but two aural records from Pancho Diablo and Cerro Masvale were made. *Onychorhynchus occidentalis* was observed six times in the field, four in moist ridge-top forest on Cerro Masvale and Cerro Cimalón, and twice in drier lowland woodland. Two females were mist-netted together on the lower slopes of Pancho Diablo. A flock of eight *Carduelis siemiradzkii* was observed on two occasions in scrubby vegetation south of the Fundación Ecológica Andrade offices, representing only the second and third records from the reserve. Two near-threatened species were

recorded: *Brotogeris pyrrhopterus* (relatively common in the lowlands) and *Crypturellus transfasciatus* (two heard calling in the lowlands on two separate occasions).

Among the 26 species not previously confirmed from the reserve were species only rarely recorded away from the Andes, e.g. Line-cheeked Spinetail *Cranioleuca antisensis* and Russet Antshrike *Thamnistes anabatinus*, and others for which REM-C represents one of the southernmost sites at which they occur west of the Andes, e.g. Checker-throated *Myrmotherula fulviventrtris*, White-flanked *M. axillaris* and Dot-winged Antwrens *Microrhopias quixensis*, and White-throated Thrush *Turdus assimilis* (R. S. Ridgely *in litt.* 1997). Also of interest was the presence of species such as Great Tinamou *Tinamus major* and Crested Guan *Penelope purpurascens*, long since lost from many smaller forest remnants in western Ecuador.

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