

Interesting bird records from the Colonche Hills, western Ecuador

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Se realizaron observaciones directas y capturas con redes durante los meses de diciembre de 1998 y enero de 1999, en diferentes localidades asociadas con el Parque Nacional Machalilla y la Reserva Ecológica Loma Alta en el occidente del Ecuador. Más de 2.500 horas / red fueron completadas a lo largo de un gradiente de bosque alterado en las laderas y zonas bajas del sistema montañoso Chongón y Colonche. Este estudio presenta nuevos registros de especies de aves para cada localidad, sugiere extensiones de la distribución y describe uso del hábitat por parte de algunas especies de aves, lo cual es de importancia ecológica. Los autores especulan que el evento climático el Niño (1998) pudo haber sido la causa de la extensión de rango observada en este estudio.

In December 1998–January 1999, Earthwatch teams surveyed birds at Machalilla National Park (MNP) and Loma Alta Ecological Reserve (LAER). Bird species lists and descriptions of these protected areas in the Colonche Mountains of western Ecuador have been published elsewhere^{1,2}. Here, we present noteworthy records for the moist premontane forests above 500 m at San Sebastian (MNP) and Cerro La Torre (LAER), and lowlands associated with these protected areas. Range extensions and habitat anomalies are discussed. Species classifications are based on Collar *et al.*³.

Machalilla National Park, Manabí (4–19 December 1998)

Dry forest lowlands and Isla de la Plata (10–50 m):

Esmeraldas Woodstar *Acestrura berlepschi*

Sight records. A female (greyish belly, tawny face, dark green back) was observed drinking at a sulphur spring near Agua Blanca (50 m, dry forest) and visiting a flowering mango tree. Local people report that the species is a consistent visitor, in the afternoons, to the spring. Attempts to mist-net it were unsuccessful as the bird appeared to avoid the 24-mm net. A male *A. berlepschi* was observed perched on dry forest shrubs on Isla de la Plata (50 m), the first record for the island. Identified by its extensive gorget and white belly (not buffy as in *A. bombus*), and tail too long for *Myrmia micrura*. It returned to the same perch several times within 25 m of three observers all familiar with the woodstar group. This endangered species appears to be extremely rare and local in the MNP area.

Cerro San Sebastian— premontane moist forest (500–700 m):

Henna-hooded Foliage-gleaner *Hylocryptus erythrocephalus*

In-hand examination. This endemic Vulnerable species was observed vocalising in highly disturbed scrub and second-growth adjacent to a homestead on Cerro San Sebastian (600 m). It was mist-netted, banded and photographed (Fig. 1). Measurements were as follows: weight—47 g; wing chord—92 mm; tail—85 mm; tarsus—27.8 mm. This species was tape-recorded on San Sebastian in 1992⁶.

Tawny-breasted Flycatcher *Myiobius villosus*

Sight record. Observed in mid-storey of typical moist forest habitat (as described in Hilty & Brown⁵) at 600 m. Not previously recorded on park or regional lists. Lack of eye-ring, perching calmly in mid-storey forest next to a stream, and extensive tawny breast and flanks noted by four independent observers.

Comuna Loma Alta, Guayas (28 December 1998–7 January 1999)

El Suspiro (degraded dry forest, 150 m)

Brown-billed Scythebill *Campylorhamphus pusillus*

In-hand examination. Identification confirmed by bill measurements and from photographs (Fig. 2) subsequently reviewed by Niels Krabbe. New regional record. Usually avoids dry regions, so this was a surprising find at El Suspiro, probably due to wetter conditions caused by El Niño. Apparently sympatric with *C. trochilirostris* in this area, as both were mist-netted at this site. This record extends the range to the west, and is another rare case of finding *C. pusillus* below 300 m.

Blackish-headed Spinetail *Synallaxis tithys*

In-hand examination (Fig. 3). New for Loma Alta. It is noteworthy that this endangered species utilises highly degraded dry-forest habitat.



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However, similar intensity fieldwork prior to the most recent El Niño, when the area was not as green, did not record the species. Previous studies at Machalilla National Park have found *S. tithys* in forested areas transitional between dry and humid forest at c.300 m, and the species has also been recorded at Cerro Blanco, c.200–300 m.

Loma Alta Ecological Reserve, Cerro La Torre (humid forest, 500–750 m)

Choco Screech-owl *Otus centralis*

A small brown *Otus* with rufous tinges (Fig. 4), dark brown irides, half-feathered tarsi, a faint buff nuchal collar, striking reddish-orange eyelids, no rim to the facial disc and a very pale belly with herringbone flecks of black was mist-netted. It obviously belonged to the group of 'brown-eyed screech-owls'^{3,4}, but morphometrics and coloration did not match previously described species. R. Ridgely, J. O'Neill and M. Robbins (pers. comms.) considered the bird to have probably been *Otus vermiculatus*, but subsequent observations and tape recordings made in early 2000 demonstrated that it was Choco Screech-owl, an identification proven through comparison of sonograms. It was not in breeding condition and was moulting its primaries. Measurements: total length with body in upright position—21 cm; weight—121.5 g; wing cord—156 mm; tail—45 mm; culmen from distal end of nostril—12.6 mm.

White-whiskered Puffbird *Malacoptila panamensis*

In-hand examination. Two mist-netted in humid forest (Fig. 5). New reserve record. Landslides caused by El Niño rains may have enhanced breeding habitat in the reserve (cliff banks for burrows). Probably overlooked during previous surveys as the species has been recorded at río Ayampe (Paul Greenfield) and in Machalilla National Park⁶. This record extends the species' distribution a little farther to the south-west.

Russet Antshrike *Thamnistes anabatinus*

In-hand examination. Breeds at Loma Alta; confirmed by mist-netted adult with a well-developed brood patch (Fig. 6). This extends its range southward from Cabeceras de Bilsa (where recorded at 100–300 m), east of Musine⁶.

Barred Woodcreeper *Dendrocolaptes certhia*

In-hand examination. New reserve and Colonche Hills region record. This constitutes a south-westward range extension. The densely barred form we mist-netted (Fig. 7) is consistent with what Ridgely & Tudor⁷ refer to as the *colombianus* group.

Conclusions

The highlands of Loma Alta continue to reveal new records of species more typically associated with the Andes and Chocó regions of western Ecuador. El Niño rains during 1998 extended the 'green season' in the normally arid coastal scrub of south-west Ecuador. Some of the range and habitat-use extensions for the lowlands noted here may have resulted from the lush vegetation growth caused by the unusually large amount of rainfall in 1997–98.

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Figure 1. Henna-hooded Foliage gleaner *Hylocryptus erythrocephalus*, Cerro San Sebastian (D. Becker)

Figure 2. Brown-billed Scythebill *Campylorhamphus pusillus*, Comuna Loma Alta (A. Agreda)

Figure 3. Blackish-headed Spinetail *Synallaxis tithys*, El Suspiro (A. Agreda)

Figure 4. Choco Screech-owl *Otus centralis*, Loma Alta Ecological Reserve (D. Becker)

Figure 5. White-whiskered Puffbird *Malacoptila panamensis*, Loma Alta Ecological Reserve (D. Becker)

Figure 6. Russet Antshrike *Thamnistes anabatinus*, Loma Alta Ecological Reserve (D. Becker)

Figure 7. Barred Woodcreeper *Dendrocolaptes certhia*, Loma Alta Ecological Reserve (D. Becker)

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