

Colombian Screech-owl

Otus ingens colombianus

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Colombian Screech-owl *Otus ingens colombianus* is a restricted-range taxon, of a relatively widespread species, occurring exclusively on Andean slopes in south-west Colombia and north-west Ecuador south to southern Pichincha and adjacent Cotopaxi provinces, at 1,300–1,850 m^{6,9}. In Ecuador, it is reported as uncommon⁹ to locally rare⁷.

Its taxonomic situation has been subject to much controversy, being initially described as a subspecies of Rufescent Screech-owl *O. ingens*¹¹. Some decades later it was elevated to species rank, based primarily on its large size and proportionately long bare tarsi, and on plumage similarities with the then newly described Cinnamon Screech-owl *O. petersoni*, of which it was considered to be a sister species³. However, its voice was unknown until 1988, when Mark Robbins obtained the first recording and demonstrated that it was very similar to *ingens* (Mark Robbins pers. comm.). Since then, it has been considered as either a race of *ingens* or a separate species^{1,5,6,9} (Mark Robbins pers. comm.). Here we follow the forthcoming *Birds of Ecuador*⁸.

Colombian Screech-owl has been recorded inside primary and tall secondary forests, as well as on forest borders and in open pasture, where it perches on fence posts and tall emergent trees (pers. obs.). The photographs presented in this note are of birds mist-netted at the borders and interior of mature ridge-top forest at two different sites, at 2,000–2,200 m. At one locality—Reserva de Bosque Nublado La Otonga (00°25'S 79°00'W)—the taxon was heard very rarely and captured twice during bird and bat surveys at both canopy and understorey levels. At the second locality—Reserva Rio Guajalito (00°14'S 78°50'W)—one bird was heard in the forest canopy and sub-canopy, and was subsequently mist-netted carrying prey. The small mammal was identified as an Andean Slender Mouse Opossum *Marmosops impavidus*, of which the entire head and forelimbs had already been eaten.

These records constitute an altitudinal extension of its known range of 200–400 m. Screech-owl species in the Ecuadorian Andes appear to replace each other at different altitudes and even geographically^{6,12}. There are very few sites where more than one species is known (e.g. Cajanuma—Parque Nacional Podocarpus, Cordillera de Guacamayos, Reserva Ecología Antisana) and they are apparently segregated according to altitude^{1,3,10}. These patterns are also observed in western lowland and foothills species¹².

As a Chocó endemic, it was ranked Near-threatened by Collar *et al.*² and listed as at low risk within

Ecuador by Granizo *et al.*⁴. Its small distributional range is well covered by protected areas, principally Cotacachi Cayapas Ecological Reserve, which holds an extensive area of pristine cloud forest. Although no other area within its Ecuadorian range has an adequate protection level, some private reserves protect important areas for this and other restricted-range or threatened bird species, namely Bosque Protector Cerro Golondrinas, Reserva Los Cedros, Reserva Maquipucuna (where one was collected in 1993) Reserva Rio Guajalito and Reserva La Otonga.

Very little is known of its natural history and behaviour (or of nominate *ingens*) and further field research is necessary. This bird is one of the focal taxa of Project Otonga-Yumbo, that aims to investigate the effects of habitat alteration in Chocó endemic bird diversity. Fieldwork is currently being undertaken and the final results are expected in mid-2000.

Acknowledgements

P. Jarrín and R. Fonseca provided photographs. Fonseca also shared his field observations, S. Ron helped scan the photos, and N. Marchán and E. López provided field assistance. Mark Robbins and Paul Coopmans made comments on the systematics of this species.

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Colombian Screech-owl
Otus ingens colombianus: top (Rene
Fonseca) and left (Pablo Jarria)



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