

Finding Grey-headed Warbler *Basileuterus griseiceps* on Cerro Negro, Monagas, Venezuela

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Cotinga 14 (2000): 30–32

El Chiví Gargantigris *Basileuterus griseiceps* sólo se conoce de unos pocos sitios de la Cordillera de Caripe, Monagas, del noreste de Venezuela. Es registrado en estado Crítico y es generalmente considerado como una de las aves endémicas más raras de Venezuela. Boesman & Curson¹ proveieron datos sobre el estado de la conservación de la especie, inclusive los detalles sobre siete veces recientes que se vio la especie en dos sitios, las dos en Monagas: Cerro Negro, y Los Cumbres de San Bonifacio; Colvée pone al día esta información. Sin embargo, pocos detalles han sido publicadas sobre exactamente como y donde se puede ver a esta especie. En esta nota doy los detalles de como se puede ver a esta ave en Cerro Negro, con el propósito de estimular la colección de más información sobre esta especie sumamente amenazada.

Grey-headed Warbler *Basileuterus griseiceps* is known from only a handful of sites in the Cordillera de Caripe, Monagas, north-east Venezuela². It is listed as Critical³ and is one of the rarest Venezuelan endemics⁶. Boesman & Curson¹ provided an update on the species' conservation status, including details of seven recent sightings from two sites, both in Monagas: Cerro Negro, and Los Cumbres de San Bonifacio. However, rather few details have been published as to exactly how and where birds can be seen. In this note I provide details of how to see the species on Cerro Negro, with the aim of stimulating the collection of more information about this highly threatened species.

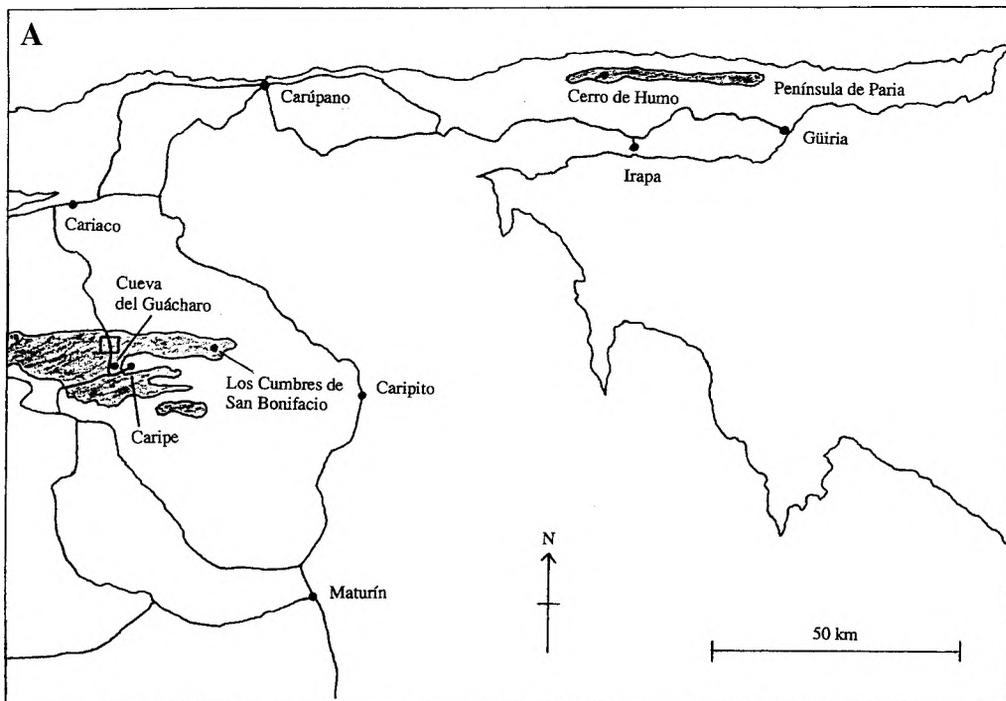
The outstanding birdwatching site guide to Venezuela⁵ provides the best information to date as to finding *B. griseiceps* on Cerro Negro, as follows: 'Many birders hope to see the Grey-headed Warbler while in Caripe. If this is one of your goals in life, you will need a guide and very good physical condition, for finding the bird requires a no-nonsense hike. There are one or two Park Guard/Guides at the cave who know how to reach the heights of Cerro Negro and are your best option, so you should ask around and establish contact with one of them at the Visitors Center, requesting help to go up Cerro Negro by the Sabana de Piedra entrance. Plan to leave at dawn to climb the hill, and count on approximately a six-hour round-trip'.

Wheatley¹² also mentions the species, stating that 'after one record in 30 years, the gravely endangered Grey-headed Warbler was recorded on Cerro Negro in 1993'. This sentence is placed under the account for Cerro de Humo, Península de Paria, and Cerro Negro and the rest of the Cordillera de Caripe are indeed close to Paria (c.200 km), and are included within the same Endemic Bird Area (032)¹⁰. However, Cerro Negro is actually within the Parque Nacional Cueva de los Guácharos, with Sabana de Piedra, only a few kilometres from the Oilbird *Steatornis caripensis* caves⁸. Hence Wege & Long¹¹

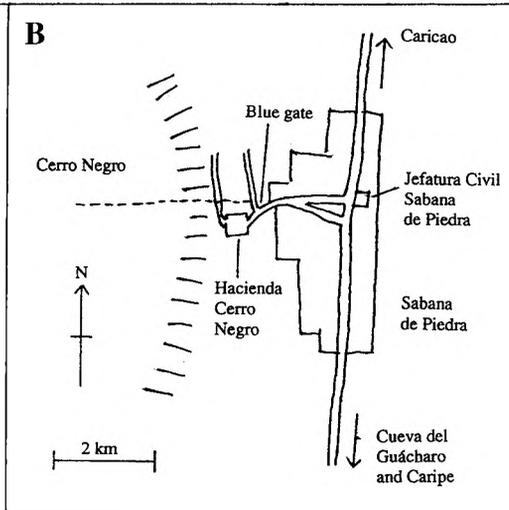
combine Cerro Negro with El Guácharo as Key Area VE23. Wheatley¹², details the national park as a separate site, which is a shame because, as Goodwin⁵ indicates, it would be quite feasible for many of the birdwatching visitors to the Oilbird caves to climb Cerro Negro within the same day.

I visited the Cordillera de Caripe in 1999, leaving Caracas for Maturín by overnight bus on the 12 July and travelling from Maturín to Caripe by por puesta (shared taxi) on the morning of the 13 July. Having visited the oilbird caves at noon I then hitched the short distance west along the road to Sabana de Piedra, the village at the base of Cerro Negro. I visited the Hacienda Cerro Negro—which appears to manage much of the land on this northern flank of the mountain for understorey coffee production—to attempt to obtain permission to visit the mountain through their land. The hacienda lies at the end of the paved road which proceeds uphill south from the main road opposite the blue and white 'Jefatura Civil Sabana de Piedra' (Fig. 1). However, I found the hacienda deserted and instead accessed the mountain via an obvious path through an open blue gate a little below it. This path leads steeply uphill through understorey coffee interspersed with open grassland (c.3 hours slow climb). It eventually reaches apparently virgin cloud forest on the steepest slopes at c.1,800 m elevation and above. I slept the night of 13 July in this forest, and birded my way down the next morning.

I saw a single *B. griseiceps* at 17h00 on the 13 July and at 07h00 the next day, both times in association with a single Slate-throated Whitestart *Myioborus miniatus*. On both occasions, the whitestart was observed first and was considerably more conspicuous than the warbler, which only drew attention to itself by a rather harsh *thack* or *chack*. On the first day I watched the two birds foraging c.2 m up in the understorey of the forest close to a treefall for five minutes until they were disturbed by a hawk (which I only glimpsed) and disappeared.



Map 1. A—North-east Venezuela showing the Cordillera de Caripe (land over 1,000 m shaded grey); B—Sabana de Piedra showing access to Cerro Negro.



The next morning I watched the (same?) two birds from above for 10 minutes as they foraged c.1 m up in brush mainly composed of the bare branches of the fallen tree before moving off into the undisturbed forest understorey. On this occasion I observed the warbler to lean forward and flick its tail upwards. Both of my sightings appeared to be of adult birds with the legs and underparts particularly bright yellow and the white lores very obvious^{1,4,6,7}. I heard no vocalisations from the warbler apart from the *thack* call, which is presumably the *tseck* call noted by Boesman & Curson¹.

The understorey of Cerro Negro's cloud forest is still being cleared for coffee cultivation, which probably constitutes a major threat to this understorey species, despite the retention of the forest canopy¹. The most urgent conservation requirement for the species' survival is, therefore, the minimisation of new coffee cultivation within El Guácharo National Park. This should also benefit the threatened White-tailed Sabrewing *Campylopterus ensipennis*, White-throated Barbtail *Margarornis tatei* and Venezuelan Flowerpiercer *Diglossa venezuelensis*, which occur on both Cerro Negro (although I did not record them here) and on Península de Paria⁹. A useful proximate contribution toward this goal would be the establishment of

a dialogue with the owners of the Hacienda Cerro Negro. Ideally, one could envisage the hacienda renting guide services and accommodation to visiting ecotourists, which could provide the hacienda owners with an incentive to reduce understorey clearance on the upper slopes of Cerro Negro. Birders planning to look for *B. griseiceps* are encouraged to contact the Sociedad Conservacionista Audubon de Venezuela (Apartado No. 80450, Caracas 1080-A, Venezuela) for news of any developments along these lines.

Acknowledgements

For help with my trip to Venezuela, thanks, above all, to Clemencia Rodner and her family, Robin Restall and the rest of the staff of the Coleccion Ornitológica Phelps, and Chris Sharpe and Iokiñe Rodríguez, Mary Lou Goodwin, Dan Brooks and Leon Gonzalez Diaz. Thanks also to Peter Boesman, Paul Coopmans, Alex Jahn, Guy Kirwan and David Wege for providing information.

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