

Sight records of new species for Nicaragua and noteworthy records on range and occurrence

David A. Wiedenfeld, José Morales M. and Martín Lezama L.

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Recientemente en Nicaragua muy pocos trabajos ornitológicos se han completado, y de ellos sólo una mínima fracción se ha publicado. En esta nota reportamos tres nuevas especies para el país (*Mesembrinibis cayennensis*, *Querula purpurata* y *Mimus gilvus*) y nuevas extensiones de rango para otras 20 especies.

Introduction

Nicaragua has been largely forgotten ornithologically, although major works have been published on neighbouring avifaunas, especially Costa Rica¹⁸ and Honduras¹⁶. Little ornithological research has been undertaken in Nicaragua within the last 50 years except that by Thomas R. Howell (see below), and since his time, only sporadic articles have been published. This largely reflects social factors, such as the civil war of the 1970s and 1980s, but also strong ornithological work in neighbouring Costa Rica, which appears to have attracted most of the region's scientific resources. Nonetheless, Nicaragua is worthy of serious ornithological attention, because it occupies an important biogeographical position in the middle of the Central American isthmus, where the ranges of many species begin or end.

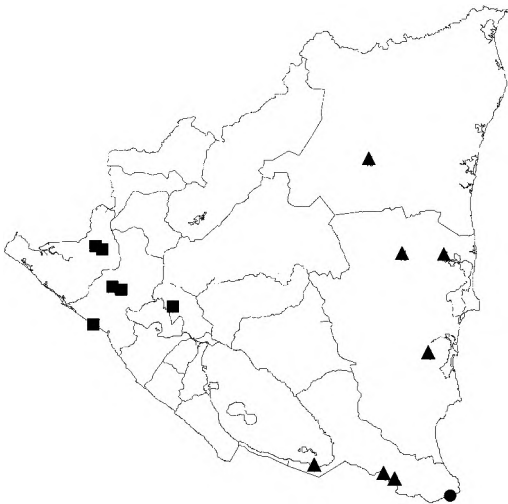


Figure 1. Location of records for species new to Nicaragua. Squares represent sightings of Green Ibis *Mesembrinibis cayennensis*; the circle in the extreme south-east of the country represents the Purple-throated Fruitcrow *Querula purpurata* record; and the triangles represent localities for Tropical Mockingbird *Mimus gilvus*.

Early ornithological research in Nicaragua began with the first collection of birds from El Realejo (Estero Real), in what is today dpto. Chinandega. During the early 19th century, explorations covered the areas near the major seaports and along principal navigable rivers, such as the Escondido, San Juan, and Coco. At the start of the 20th century the first expeditions were made to the volcanoes San Cristóbal and Mombacho, and the islands of Ometepe and Zapatera in Lake Nicaragua, and on the isthmus of Rivas¹¹. In 1922, W. Huber collected birds at various localities along the rios Prinzapolka and Pis Pis, and elsewhere in the Caribbean region⁹. The central part of the country, into which few roads penetrated until recently, received considerable attention from W. R. Richardson, a professional collector who resided in Matagalpa for more than 30 years at the beginning of the 20th century. His collections provided many of the first records in Nicaragua of birds, mammals and reptiles from the pine forests of the central highlands and cloud forests of dpto. Segovia. The most notable of Richardson's ornithological discoveries were published by Miller & Griscom^{12–15}. Ridgway & Friedmann¹⁷ compiled many specimen records from early expeditions in Nicaragua. These records are especially useful when combined with the works of Miller & Griscom from the 1920s.

A Catholic priest, Fr. Bernardo Ponsol, lived in Juigalpa, dpto. Chontales, in the 1940s, and collected more than 1,000 bird specimens¹¹. Most of these are currently housed at the Universidad Centroamericana, Managua, and the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

The most consistent studies of the Nicaraguan avifauna were undertaken by Thomas R. Howell, who began his work in the 1950s and continued until the 1970s, producing several publications^{4–7}, but the majority remains unpublished. More recently, in 1980–1981, James M. Silliman mist-netted and collected throughout Nicaragua, and Juan Carlos Martínez Sánchez began surveying and collecting in the country. However, since the works by Howell, very little has been published on Nicaraguan ornithology outside the country, except occasionally¹⁹.

The present notes are principally a by-product of country-wide research on parrot populations between 1994 and 1999. Our work has involved no collecting or mist-netting, and therefore all reports made here are sight records. We have visited all parts of Nicaragua, from Cosigüina to El Ostional to Waspam to San Juan del Norte, in the periods: 27 November–21 December 1994 and 5 January–4 February 1995 (DWW & JMM), and 2 February–2 April 1999 (DWWW, JMM and MLL). We also include some records from various dates in the 1990s during fieldwork for other projects. These notes provide evidence of three species new to Nicaragua (Green Ibis *Mesembrinibis cayennensis*, Purple-throated Fruitcrow *Querula purpurata* and Tropical Mockingbird *Mimus gilvus*), as well as distributional and temporal extensions for several others. Our discussion below will generally compare our records against unpublished notes by Thomas R. Howell on Nicaraguan bird distributions. Howell's notes rely heavily on specimen records, while our sight records help to fill in some gaps in those collections.

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*

Howell's notes list only four records of this species in Nicaragua, although several of those appear to cover a period of several months. On 8 December 1994, we observed c.10 on Laguna de Moyua, dpto. Matagalpa. On Laguna de Karata, near Puerto Cabezas, Región Autónoma Atlántico Norte (RAAN), we recorded 12 on 17 January 1995; one was at Laguna de Masaya, dpto. Masaya, on 16 February 1999; and 10 were at San Juan del Sur, dpto. Rivas, on 21 February 1999. The species is probably more frequent and widespread in Nicaragua than the few records suggest.

Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*

Common on both coasts, but less so on the great lakes. We observed one near Boca de Sábalo, dpto. Río San Juan, on 28 March 1999. This locality is at least 40 km from Lake Nicaragua and 80 km from the Caribbean coast, and is an extremely unusual locality for this species. The record suggests that the species may move between the lake and coast following the río San Juan. Indeed, if the birds cross the narrow land (in some places no more than 20 km wide) between the Pacific coast and Lake Nicaragua, they may cross from the Pacific to Caribbean following a route across the lake and río San Juan.

American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*

Flocks containing c. 250 American White Pelicans flew over 1.3 km west of Palo Grande (12°58'N 87°02'W), dpto. Chinandega, west of Somotillo, on 7 February 1999. In Nicaragua, Howell had only two band recoveries, from December 1964 and February 1966, both in the north-west of the country. This

suggests that the species probably occurs there regularly. Anderson *et al.*² recently reported the species from adjacent Honduras, the first record in that country. Because the band recoveries from the 1960s and our record are from localities close to the Honduran border, it is likely that the pelican has occurred previously in Honduras, in the Gulf of Fonseca region.

Green Ibis *Mesembrinibis cayennensis*

Known from Costa Rica and río Plátano region of Honduras¹⁰ (also DWW pers. obs., near Wapniyari, río Plátano, 20 August 1992). Howell & Webb⁸ list its range as 'E Honduras to Brazil'. That it should also occur in Nicaragua is unsurprising, but the following are the first country records: five, downstream of El Castillo de la Concepción, dpto. Río San Juan, on the río San Juan on 31 January 1995; six, on 3 February 1995, at three different sites just upstream of Boca de San Carlos, Costa Rica (not San Carlos, Nicaragua), on the Nicaraguan side of the río San Juan. Lezama also has records from Refugio de Vida Silvestre Los Guatuzos, dpto. Río San Juan, in February–May 1997, and near Bluefields, Región Autónoma Atlántico Sur (RAAS), between February and May 1998. We have three records from 1999: two, 2 km north of Empalme de Baká, south of Rosita, RAAN (13°41'N 84°27'W), on 11 March; and a total of eight, at two localities on the río Kurinwás, RAAS, at 12°52'N 84°09'W, on 22 March, and 12°51'N 83°47'W, on 23 March (see Fig. 1). These seven records suggest the species is probably now widespread in Caribbean Nicaragua, presumably as a result of deforestation.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

Howell indicates this to be a rare species in Nicaragua, giving specific instances for only 10 sightings and two specimens. We recorded 32 Ospreys at eight localities during 5 December 1994 to 31 January 1995, and 34 between 11 February and 28 March 1999, with records from both slopes, Lake Managua and Lake Nicaragua. These may include both winter residents and transients. Lezama also reports up to five around Isla Mancarroncito, Solentiname Archipelago, Lake Nicaragua, throughout February 1997. In addition, C. Sharpe (pers. comm.) has several records during the boreal summer: singles at Santo Domingo beach, Isla Ometepe, on 19 July 1998, and at Las Isletas, near Granada, on 4 September 1998. Both localities are on Lake Nicaragua. Sharpe also reported one at Lago Xiloá, dpto. Managua, on 27 June 1998. Although the species breeds in Guatemala and Belize, breeding has not been confirmed in Nicaragua. Blake³ states that non-breeding Ospreys often remain in wintering areas year-round.

Mississippi Kite *Ictinia mississippiensis*

Again, Howell's notes indicate this species to be rarer than is likely, as it must migrate throughout Central America. He lists only a single sighting of two birds by James M. Silliman, just west of Managua, on 23 November 1981. Lezama recorded one in the Refugio de Vida Silvestre Los Guatuzos, dpto. Río San Juan, in March 1997. We recorded it twice: four at Waspam, on the río Coco, RAAN, on 14 March 1999, and one, south of Leimus, RAAN, at 14°40'N 84°02'W, on 15 March 1999. These dates appear early for most migrants, which according to Stiles & Skutch¹⁸ occur in 'late March to early May'. We also recorded Plumbeous Kite *Ictinia plumbea* at several sites on the Caribbean slope.

Northern Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Howell's notes list just one published record, a specimen near Bluefields, RAAS, on 2 October 1892, and two sight records, including one seen several times at Managua, on 25 February–15 May. We observed a female or immature, on 11 December 1994, on the road to San Francisco Libre, dpto. Managua, c. 25 km towards San Francisco Libre from the main highway connecting Managua and Sébaco.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

According to Howell, there are no definite specimen records in Nicaragua, and he lists only three records. We saw one in adult plumage, near Isla del Venado, dpto. León, on 6 December 1994. This corresponds well with one of the records Howell reports, also at Isla del Venado, on 8 December 1982. We also recorded one individual in immature plumage in mangroves along the lower río Escondido, near Bluefields, RAAS, on 25 January 1995, which was being harassed by a pair of Bat Falcons *Falco rufigularis*, permitting a useful size comparison.

Purple Gallinule *Porphyryla martinica*

Howell notes all records for the species in April–May and July. We recorded it on five occasions between 8 December and 28 March: four at Laguna de Moyua, dpto. Matagalpa, on 8 December 1994; and singles on the lower río Kurinwás, RAAS, on 24 January 1995 and 21 March 1999; on the río Kama, near Bluefields, RAAS, on 26 January 1995; and near El Castillo de la Concepción, on the río San Juan, dpto. Río San Juan, on 28 March 1999. The few records probably do not reflect the species' true occurrence during the winter months in Nicaragua.

Crimson-fronted Parakeet *Aratinga finschi*

We recorded the species at Tortuguero, on the río Tortuguero, northern RAAS, on 22 January 1995. Howell did not record it north of the río Escondido, c. 90 km south of Tortuguero. Forest clearance may

have created suitable habitat for the species, permitting it to extend its range northward.

Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*

Four records in March 1999: nine, on 12–13 March 1999, east and west of Sahsa (14°04'N 83°59'W), RAAN; four at San Juan del Norte, dpto. Río San Juan, on 26 March; and a total of 11 along the río San Juan, on 25 and 28 March. Howell lists spring dates as '19 April to 18 May', although Stiles & Skutch¹⁸ give spring dates of 'late March to mid-May'. Our records from near Sahsa appear especially early.

Purple-throated Fruitcrow *Querula purpurata*

Not previously recorded in Nicaragua, although Stiles & Skutch¹⁸ list it for 'Costa Rica (and almost certainly SE Nicaragua) to W Ecuador...'. We recorded a flock of three downstream of El Delta on the Nicaraguan side of the río San Juan on 3 February 1995, confirming Stiles & Skutch's suspicions (see Fig. 1). Forest in this area, part of the extensive and largely intact Si-a-Paz Reserve, is continuous for some distance into Nicaragua, and the species could therefore range as far north as the río Indio or río Maiz.

Tropical Mockingbird *Mimus gilvus*

Our records are the first in Nicaragua. First noted on 3 December 1994, 3.1 km east of the intersection of the Pan-American Highway and road to El Sauce, south-east of Somotillo, dpto. Chinandega (12°56'N 86°49'W). Subsequently recorded at several other sites: 12°56'N 86°48'W, c. 2 km east of the initial sighting, on 7 February 1999; 2 km south of Malpaisillo, dpto. León (12°36'N 86°41'W), on 8 February 1999; 29.3 km north of La Paz Centro, dpto. León, on 5 December 1994; two at Salinas Grandes, dpto. León (12°16'N 86°53'W), on 9–10 February 1999; and one near San Francisco Libre, dpto. Managua (12°26'N 86°11'W), on 15 February 1999 (see Fig. 1). Near Malpaisillo, we observed three, including a pair, one of which briefly carried a small stick, suggesting nesting activity. It is unlikely that Howell, or other collectors, overlooked such a conspicuous bird in this well-surveyed part of Nicaragua. Although possible that it has been introduced to the country through cage-bird escapes, the species has probably reached Nicaragua as a result of natural expansion due to habitat changes. It is known from the Pacific slope of Honduras around San Lorenzo¹⁶, just 50 km from the nearest sites we recorded it in Chinandega. The species' peculiar distribution and tendency for its plumage characters to grade into those of Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos* suggest the systematics of these two forms have yet to be fully elucidated.

Cedar Waxwing *Bombycilla cedrorum*

We observed a single individual at Tortuguero, río Tortuguero, RAAS, on 22 January 1995. Howell knew of no definite records from the Caribbean slope, and suggests that, despite all specimens being from March and April, it is probably a winter resident. Our sight record indicates it to be present on the Caribbean slope and in winter.

Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus*

Howell's extreme dates of occurrence in fall are 12 August–27 October. Howell & Webb⁸ give the latest fall dates for northern Central America and Mexico as 'early November'. We observed a single bird by the road to El Sauce, dpto. León, on 7 December 1994. This record is far out of range of expected dates, and may relate to a winter vagrant. For spring, Howell gives extreme dates from 8 April–6 May⁸. Stiles & Skutch¹⁸ give 'early April' as the earliest spring date for Costa Rica, although Howell & Webb⁸ state it to be 'late March'. We recorded one at San Juan del Norte, dpto. Río San Juan, on 27 March 1999, two weeks earlier than Howell's earliest spring date, although a date that fits within Howell & Webb's⁸ time period.

Rufous-browed Peppershrike *Cyclarhis gujanensis*

We located a singing individual c. 11 km south of Rosita, RAAN (13°49'N 84°25'W), on 11 March 1999. Howell knew of no definite records from the Caribbean slope, but presumed that it occurred there. This record confirms his supposition.

Blue-winged Warbler *Vermivora pinus*

Howell lists only three records from three widely scattered sites on the Caribbean slope, all three from January–February. We recorded a single at San Juan del Norte, dpto. Río San Juan, on 27 March 1999. This is also the locality of the only Nicaraguan specimen. Our record may have been a winter resident or early migrant.

Golden-winged Warbler *Vermivora chrysoptera*

We observed two at San Juan del Norte, dpto. Río San Juan, on 27 March 1999. Both were in female plumage, one in good plumage and the other, possibly a first-year, heavily worn and moulting. Howell lists no winter or spring records, but it winters in Costa Rica and spring transients pass through that country¹⁸.

Palm Tanager *Thraupis palmarum*

Stiles & Skutch¹⁸ give the tanager's range as 'eastern Honduras to W Ecuador...' and the AOU¹ lists it as 'resident in eastern Nicaragua', yet Howell's notes state that it does not occur in Nicaragua north of the río San Juan region, in the extreme south-

east of the country. We recorded a pair at El Cocal (12°50'N 83°50'W), on the lower río Kurinwás near the mouth of Caño Kun-Kun, near the midpoint of the Caribbean coast in Nicaragua, which supports the range asserted by Stiles & Skutch¹⁸.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak *Pheucticus ludovicianus*

We recorded the species twice, both adult males: near Villa Nueva (not far from Somotillo), dpto. Chinandega, on 3 December 1994, and in north-east Managua, on 4 February 1999. Howell knew of only two winter records, near Managua and near León, although it is known as a transient migrant.

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*

Howell recorded it only around Lake Managua and west of Lake Nicaragua, and along the western portion of the río San Juan. Continuing agricultural development, especially rice cultivation, has permitted the species to expand its range. We recorded it at several sites around Cosigüina, dpto. Chinandega, on 5 February 1999, and it can also probably be expected elsewhere in Chinandega and dpto. Matagalpa, near Sébaco. These sites are up to 100 km north of Lake Managua, the nearest population known to Howell. It also appears to have expanded east along the río San Juan, as we found it just upstream from Boca de San Carlos, Costa Rica, on 28 March 1999. Further expansion can also be expected in this area.

Lesser Goldfinch *Carduelis psaltria*

Howell notes its occurrence on Volcán San Cristóbal and adjacent Volcán Casitas, dpto. Chinandega, and San Rafael del Norte, dpto. Jinotega. We recorded one near La Dalia, dpto. Matagalpa, on 12 February 1999. The species, which may be relatively common in Honduras, 100 km to the north, probably occurs in small numbers throughout north Nicaragua.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Howell states that this species was first recorded in Nicaragua by James M. Silliman in 1981, when it was already widespread, but some reports suggest that it was found in Chinandega in 1978. Yet Stiles & Skutch¹⁸ state that it invaded Costa Rica from Nicaragua in 1974. By 1991, it was present in numerous cities and towns on the Pacific slope and central highlands. We recorded it in Potosí (1999), Chinandega (1994, 1999), and Somotillo (1994, 1999), dpto. Chinandega; Malpaisillo (1994), León (1994, 1999), and La Paz Centro (1994, 1999), dpto. León; Matagalpa (1994, 1999), and Muy-Muy (1999), dpto. Matagalpa; Managua, dpto. Managua (1994, 1999); Boaco, dpto. Boaco (1994, 1999); Juigalpa, dpto. Chontales (1999); Granada (1999) and Nandaime (1994), dpto. Granada; Tola (1999), Rivas

(1999), Peñas Blancas (1999), and Moyogalpa (1994, 1999), dpto. Rivas; and in San Carlos, dpto. Río San Juan (1994, 1999). Of these, only San Carlos is on the Caribbean slope. It has apparently not yet colonised Caribbean slope cities such as Puerto Cabezas, RAAN, or Bluefields, RAAS.

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David A. Wiedenfeld

George Miksch Sutton Avian Research Center, P. O. Box 2007, Bartlesville, Oklahoma, 74005, USA. E-mail: dwiedenfeld@ou.edu.

José Morales M.

Oficina de CITES-Nicaragua, Dirección de Biodiversidad y Recursos Naturales, MARENA, Apdo. 5123, Managua, Nicaragua. E-mail: cites@ibw.com.ni.

Martín Lezama L.

Departamento de Ciencias Ambientales, Universidad Centroamericana, P.O. Box 69, Managua, Nicaragua. E-mail: mlezama@ns.uca.edu.ni.