

Seven new records for Nicaragua and range extensions for two additional species

Liliana Chavarría and Robert L. Batchelder

Received 15 September 2011; final revision accepted 23 February 2012

Cotinga 34 (2012): 28–32

Reportamos siete nuevas especies para Nicaragua: *Recurvirostra americana*, *Petrochelidon fulva*, *Lophotriccus pileatus*, *Tyrannus vociferans*, *Aphelocoma unicolor*, *Catharus minimus* y *C. dryas*. Además describimos extensiones significativas de rango y dos especies que aunque ya habían sido reportadas en el país son poco conocidas. Los reportes están basados en observaciones visuales, con excepción de *Catharus minimus* y *C. dryas* que fueron capturados en redes de niebla.

Nicaragua is ornithologically one of the least visited and studied countries in Central America. A modest increase in birding tourism in recent years, coupled with a growing number of bird conservation and monitoring activities, has helped fill some of the large gaps in knowledge concerning the status and distribution of Nicaragua's birds. Here we report seven new species to the country's checklist—which now stands at 725 species—and provide geographical and altitudinal range extensions of these and two other taxa which, although already reported from Nicaragua, are poorly known in the country. Unless otherwise noted, all of the species accounts are based on sight records. Our primary points of reference for new reports and range extensions are Martínez-Sánchez¹¹ and Martínez-Sánchez & Will¹².

Sites and Methods

In 2010–11, M. Bienert (MB) made monthly visits to the commercial salt evaporation ponds and surrounding mangroves and dry coastal scrub at Salinas Grandes (12°15'30"N 86°50'50"W; 0 m), on Nicaragua's Pacific coast 68 km north-west of Managua and 18 km south of the departmental capital, León. His informal surveys of resident and migratory aquatic birds also took him to Las Peñitas (12°21'20.70"N 87°01'0.64"W; 0 m) at the north end of Juan Venado Island Nature Reserve, 20 km north-west of Salinas Grandes, also in León. During a three-week birding tour of Nicaragua, on 15 March–3 April 2011, Managua-based R. Batchelder (RB) and German biologist K. Steiof (KS) spent eight days at Refugio Bartola on the río San Juan in south-eastern Nicaragua, with visits to nearby sites including Aguas Frescas (10°57'N 84°20'40"W; 60 m). They also visited several sites in Nicaragua's central highlands, including El Jaguar Reserve, Jinotega (13°14'15.87"N 86°03'9.51"W; 1,300 m).

L. Chavarría (LC), G. Duriaux (GD), O. Rodríguez (OR) & M. Siles (MS) spent three days at El Torito mountain (13°42'28.70"N 85°02'04.96"W; 867 m), near Siuna at the southern end of

Nicaragua's massive BOSAWAS Biosphere Reserve in April 2009.

LC & GD, who own the El Jaguar coffee farm and cloud forest preserve in Jinotega, frequently surveyed the 120-ha El Jaguar Reserve and also conducted monthly mist-net monitoring of overwintering migrants with the assistance of OR & MS, who work at El Jaguar as resident guides for visiting birders. W. J. Arendt (WJA) & M. Tórrez (MT) joined LC & GD from October 2007 to September 2010, to conduct monitoring and banding activities at El Jaguar.

In October 2009, LC & GD conducted a rapid ecological assessment financed by Desarrolladora del Mar S.A. at a site known as Talón de Brito, near Tola, Rivas (11°20'14.48"N 85°57'36.51"W; 44 m) in dry forest in the south-west Pacific lowlands.

F. Muñoz (FM), A. Pinell (AP), A. Rugama (AR), N. Gámez (NG), K. Olstad (KO) & G. Foley (GF) visited Miraflores Nature Reserve (13°11'44.65"N 86°16'14.87"W; 1,312 m). Located 25 km north-east of Estelí, Miraflores is a 250-km² reserve comprising private and cooperatively owned lands at 800–1,450 m. The reserve is characterised by a mix of drier, open, agricultural land at lower altitudes and remnant cloud forest patches higher up.

In late February 2011, A. Bringskog (AB) & FM visited El Mogotón (13°45'25"N 86°23'38"W; 2,107 m), near San Fernando, Nueva Segovia. El Mogotón is Nicaragua's highest peak and straddles the border with Honduras. Its slopes are characterised by dry pine-oak habitat below 1,200 m and cloud forest above 1,300 m.

S. Vilchez (SV), R. Mendieta (RM) & J. M. Zolotoff (JMZ) undertook monthly mist-netting at Mombacho Volcano Nature Reserve, Granada (11°50'4"N 85°58'48"W; 1,000 m) under the auspices of the MoSI (Monitoreo de Supervivencia Invernal) programme, which monitors overwintering migrants. It is sponsored by the Institute for Bird Populations (IBP) and others, and the programme observes a standardised protocol at >170 stations between Mexico and Colombia, including at 12 sites in Nicaragua. The Mombacho reserve's MoSI



station 'BOSQ' is located in cloud forest near the top of the volcano, at c.1,000 m. Annual rainfall is 2,000 mm and mean temperature is 23°C. H. Jarquín (HJ) was coordinator of a MoSI station within the vast Indio-Maiz Biosphere Reserve (11°10'34"N 84°13'58"W; 200 m), in south-east Nicaragua at the border with Costa Rica. The reserve is dominated by lowland forest with annual precipitation of 3,000 mm.

O. Arróliga (OA) surveyed the avifauna of the Tepesomoto-La Pataste Nature Reserve, Somoto (13°19'43.67"N 86°36'19.24"W; 1,200–1,736 m) in December 2010, for the Nicaraguan government's

Figure 1. Google Earth map of Nicaragua showing sites mentioned in the text: 1. Salinas Grandes, 2. Las Peñitas, 3. Tepesomoto-La Pataste Nature Reserve, 4. El Mogotón, 5. Miraflores Nature Reserve, 6. El Jaguar Reserve, 7. El Torito, 8. Indio-Maiz Biosphere Reserve, 9. Aguas Frescas, 10. Talón de Brito, and 11. Mombacho Volcano Natural Reserve.



Figure 2. American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana* with Black-necked Stilts *Himantopus mexicanus*, Salinas Grandes, León, Nicaragua, 15 January 2011 (Manfred Bienert)



Figure 3. Chuck-will's-widow *Caprimulgus carolinensis*, El Jaguar Reserve, Jinotega, Nicaragua, 2 April 2011 (Klemens Steiof)



Figures 4–5. Cave Swallows *Petrochelidon fulva pallida*, Las Peñitas, León, Nicaragua, 6 February 2011 (Manfred Bienert). Note the relatively pale throat and breast, and contrastingly darker rufous forehead.

Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA). Tepesomoto-La Pataste is in north-west Nicaragua, comprises 10,200 ha, and encompasses several volcanic peaks, including Volcán Somoto (1,730 m) and Pataste (1,736 m).

Species accounts

American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana*

On 31 October 2010, MB observed one in a flock of Black-necked Stilts *Himantopus mexicanus* at Salinas Grandes. He subsequently photographed what was presumably the same bird on 14 November 2010, 15 January 2011 (Fig. 2) and 14 August 2011. The bird was identified by its size, upturned bill, long grey-bluish legs, and its distinctive black-and-white plumage. It was seen again, by MB, LC, GD & RB, on 21 August 2011. MB has encountered the species on three more recent visits to Salinas Grandes, including on 8 December 2011 when four individuals were present. *R. americana* mainly winters in marshes along the Pacific coast of northern California, the Gulf coast of the USA, in Mexico from Baja California to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and uncommonly to Guatemala, and parts of the northern West Indies¹. It was first recorded in El Salvador in 1993⁸, where it has been reported on at least six subsequent occasions^{3,9}. It is a vagrant to Costa Rica¹⁴, with records from even further south, e.g., in Panama, Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador^{1,2}. This is the first documented record for Nicaragua.

Chuck-will's-widow *Caprimulgus carolinensis*

After hearing the distinctive call of a Chuck-will's-widow just before dawn on the mornings of 31 March–2 April 2011, KS & RB located the bird on the evening of 2 April 2011, perched on a roadside log just metres from their cabin at El Jaguar Reserve (Fig. 3). Martínez-Sánchez¹¹ described this North American breeder as a local winter visitor to Nicaragua's Pacific slope, from sea level to 300 m. Garrigues & Dean⁵ considered Chuck-will's-widow to be a 'very uncommon (or seldom detected) North American migrant from October to April, mostly in lowlands', which is 'usually silent' in Costa Rica, and presumably also in Nicaragua. Our record is noteworthy not only because the bird called on three consecutive mornings but also because it was 1,000 m above its published altitudinal range in Nicaragua.

Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant *Lophotriccus pileatus*

On 17 April 2009, LC, GD, MS & OR heard a bird calling insistently in primary forest at El Torito, in the BOSAWAS Biosphere Reserve. After several minutes they saw a tiny flycatcher with a rufous-tipped, nearly flat crest. The bird also

had a pale iris, grey chest and throat with darker streaking, and olive-green upperparts and wings. The wingbars and fringes to the secondaries and tertiaries were yellowish. Next day, the observers found the same bird again, calling as if defending a territory. The bird perched on tiny branches in the understorey, very close to the main trunk of a tree, 8–9 m above ground, sallying for insects before returning to the same or a nearby branch. GD & LC encountered another on 14 May 2009 at El Jaguar Reserve. Recognising the call from their encounter with the species a month earlier, they found a pair at 09h00, which they also relocated in the vicinity the same afternoon. On 12 August 2009, at 10h30, GD & LC saw two (possibly a pair) in the core area of El Jaguar. The birds were in the understorey 1–5 m above ground. These observations represent the first records of the species for Nicaragua. Although recent range expansion is possible, it is also conceivable that *L. pileatus* was previously overlooked in the country.

Cassin's Kingbird *Tyrannus vociferans*

At 09h30 on 4 January 2010, at Mesas del Moropotenté in the Miraflores Nature Reserve, FM, AP & AR heard a song that they initially believed to that of a Tropical Mockingbird *Mimus gilvus*, which is abundant there. However, they soon realised that it was a kingbird *Tyrannus* sp., and noting the lack of white in the outermost rectrices, they eliminated Western Kingbird *T. verticalis*. They also eliminated Tropical Kingbird *T. melancholicus* because the bird had a grey chest, a contrasting white malar below the eye and a square-ended black tail tipped white. They eventually observed three birds of the same species in grassland with scattered trees, along the road from Estelí to Yalí. Moropotenté is a plateau at 1,100–1,300 m, characterised by open areas with bushes and medium-sized trees. On 10 November 2010, at Los Volcancitos in the same reserve, FM, KO, NG & GF observed five individuals in grassland surrounded by cloud forest. The birds moved (and sang) within a flock of several Western Kingbirds and the observers noted agonistic interactions between the two species. The song was compared with a recording of Cassin's Kingbird, which revealed it to be identical. Cassin's Kingbird breeds in the arid south-west USA to central Mexico, and winters south to Honduras¹. It is therefore unsurprising to find it in dry grassland in northern Nicaragua, where it has perhaps previously gone unnoticed. It is noteworthy, however, that the birds were singing. These are the first records for Nicaragua.

Unicoloured Jay *Aphelocoma unicolor*

At 11h30 on 20 February 2011, at El Mogotón, FM & AB, attracted by the strong and persistent alarm-calls of several birds, observed a jay approach

and perch in a nearby tree c.8 m above ground. They saw the bird only briefly, but long enough to see the uniform deep blue coloration and absence of black in the head, permitting the observers to eliminate the commoner jay species in this area: Bushy-crested Jay *Cyanocorax melanocyanus* and Steller's Jay *Cyanocitta stelleri*. The bird was within a flock in the midstorey of cloud forest, but the dense foliage prevented identification of the other flock members. Within its range, Unicoloured Jay inhabits evergreen and pine-oak forest at 1,300–3,300 m, and is endemic to southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador^{1,6}. This report, the first for Nicaragua, suggests that *A. unicolor* is also present in appropriate habitat along the border with Honduras above 1,500 m.

Spotted Nightingale-Thrush *Catharus dryas*

On 15–17 December 2010, OA trapped four adults in mist-nets at Tepesomoto-La Pataste Nature Reserve while conducting an inventory of the reserve's avifauna. Because he cut a 1-mm notch in the fifth, right rectrix of each bird captured, he was able to determine that four different birds were involved. Collectively, these represent the first records of *C. dryas* in Nicaragua. The species was previously known from Oaxaca in southern Mexico to central Honduras, and in Colombia to northern Argentina^{1,6}.

Grey-cheeked Thrush *Catharus minimus*

On 22 January 2005, SV captured an immature in cloud forest adjacent to the lower slopes of Mombacho Volcano Nature Reserve. WJA, LC, MT & MS trapped an immature in cloud forest at El Jaguar Reserve on 16 October 2007. On the same date, three immatures and one adult were trapped by HJ in the Indio-Maiz Biosphere Reserve, and two more adults were trapped there on 17 October 2007. On 19 October 2007, WJA, MT, LC & MS trapped an adult *C. minimus* at 08h30 in sun coffee within El Jaguar Reserve. On 20 October 2009, LC, GD & WJA trapped an adult in Pacific dry forest at Talón de Brito, during a rapid ecological assessment. On 14 November 2009, RM & JMZ captured an adult in cloud forest at Mombacho Volcano Nature Reserve. This species mostly spends the non-breeding season in northern South America, with a few overwintering in the Caribbean⁷. Throughout Central America, spring and autumn migrants have been primarily recorded on the Atlantic slope^{1,6,13}. Our Pacific slope records suggest the species is a passage migrant along both coasts of Nicaragua. Moreover, SV's January 2005 record, along with two more recent records not mentioned here (from February 2009 and December 2010) suggest that at least a few may overwinter in Nicaragua.

Cave Swallow *Petrochelidon fulva*

On 6 February 2011, between 06h45 and 07h00, MB photographed a flock of c.100 swallows at Las Peñitas. Although the flock included c.10 Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* and five Mangrove Swallows *Tachycineta albilinea*, the vast majority (c.85 individuals) were Cave Swallows, probably of the north-western race *P. f. pallida*, which is at least partially migratory, rather than one of the principally Caribbean subspecies, which are apparently largely sedentary, except birds on Cuba¹⁵. Two subspecies groups are frequently recognised, and more than one species might be involved¹⁵. Compared to the other forms, *P. f. pallida* is larger, with a paler throat, collar, forehead and rump patch, whereas those populations in the Caribbean generally possess more extensive and deeper cinnamon coloration¹⁵. Those birds photographed by MB (Figs. 4–5) possessed a pale rufous throat and breast that did not contrast markedly with the belly, pale ear-coverts and a broad pale area on the nape, a rufous (not buff) forehead, and a smaller, darker cap than Cliff Swallow *P. pyrrhonota*. Because Cave Swallow represents an addition to the Nicaragua checklist, the photographs were sent to T. Will, B. Howe, S. West, O. Komar, J. C. Martínez-Sánchez and LC, all of whom are familiar with the species, to confirm the identification. Cave Swallow is increasing and apparently expanding along the Pacific coast of Central America, with reports in Guatemala⁴, El Salvador¹⁵, Honduras⁷, north-west Costa Rica (S. West *in litt.* 2011), Panama^{1,13}, and now in Nicaragua.

Cerulean Warbler *Setophaga cerulea*

On 22 March 2011, RB & KS observed an adult male at Aguas Frescas, foraging high in second growth with a mixed-species flock. This site is in the Caribbean lowlands, c.60 km from the Atlantic coast at the border with Costa Rica. This observation is earlier than most spring records of this rare passage migrant, and suggests that *S. cerulea* may migrate, in part, over land through Costa Rica, rather than crossing the Caribbean Sea from Colombia to northern Nicaragua, where it is believed to visit higher elevation massifs (such as Peñas Blancas) several hundred km north of Aguas Frescas.

Acknowledgements

We thank all of those who contributed their records to this manuscript. Tom Will, Bill Howe, Steve West, Oliver Komar and Juan Carlos Martínez-Sánchez helped confirm the identification of *Petrochelidon fulva*, and provided key information concerning the species' status in Central America. Desarrolladora del Mar S.A. financed the rapid ecological assessment that led to the record of *Catharus minimus* at Talón

de Brito. We are also grateful to Dr Wayne J. Arendt for his constructive feedback and recommendations for improving the manuscript.

References

- American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) (1998) *Check-list of North American birds*. Seventh edn. Lawrence, KA: American Ornithologists' Union.
- Donegan, T., Quevedo, A., McMullan, M. & Salaman, P. (2011) Revision of the status of bird species occurring or reported in Colombia 2011. *Conserv. Colombiana* 15: 4–21.
- eBird (2011) eBird: an online database of bird distribution and abundance. Version 2. Ithaca, New York. <http://www.ebird.org> (accessed 20 February 2012).
- Eisermann, K. & Avendaño, C. (2007) *Lista comentada de las aves de Guatemala*. Barcelona: Lynx Edicions.
- Garrigues, R. & Dean, R. (2007) *The birds of Costa Rica*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Howell, S. N. G. & Webb, S. (1995) *A guide to the birds of Mexico and northern Central America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jenner, T., Komar, O. & Narish, A. (2007) Noteworthy bird records from the Gulf of Fonseca, Honduras. *Cotinga* 28: 13–20.
- Komar, O. (2001) Contribuciones a la avifauna de El Salvador. *Cotinga* 16: 40–45.
- Komar, O. (2003) Notes on autumn bird migration in coastal El Salvador. *Orn. Neotrop.* 14: 39–46.
- Lowther, P. E., Rimmer, C. C., Kessel, B., Johnson, S. L. & Ellison, W. G. (2001) Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*). In: Poole, A. (ed.) *The birds of North America online*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Lab of Ornithology. <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/591> (accessed 4 March 2011).
- Martínez-Sánchez, J. C. (2007) *Lista patrón de las aves de Nicaragua*. Managua: Alianza para las Areas Silvestres.
- Martínez-Sánchez, J. C. & Will, T. (eds.) (2010) Thomas R. Howell's *Check-list of the birds of Nicaragua as of 1993*. *Orn. Monogr.* 68.
- Ridgely R. S. & Gwynne, J. (1993) *Guía de las aves de Panamá incluyendo Costa Rica, Nicaragua y Honduras*. Panama City: Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza.
- Stiles, F. G. & Skutch, A. F. (1989) *A guide to the birds of Costa Rica*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, A. K. (2004) Family Hirundinidae (swallows and martins). In: del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A. & Christie, D. A. (eds.) *Handbook of the birds of the world, 9*. Barcelona: Lynx Edicions.

Liliana Chavarría

Reserva El Jaguar, Jinotega, Nicaragua. E-mail: orion.liliana@gmail.com.

Robert L. Batchelder

Unit 3240 Box 12, DPO AA 34012, USA. E-mail: batchelder@yahoo.com.