

# Neotropical Birding

THE BIRDING MAGAZINE OF THE NEOTROPICAL BIRD CLUB



Number 23 • Autumn 2018



## The Neotropical Bird Club aims to:

- foster an interest in the birds of the Neotropics amongst birdwatchers throughout the world
- increase awareness of the importance of support for conservation in the region
- mobilise the increasing number of enthusiastic birdwatchers active in the region to contribute to the conservation of Neotropical birds
- provide a forum for the publication of articles and notes about Neotropical birds, their identification and conservation and thus enhance information exchange in this subject area
- channel efforts towards priority species and sites, drawing attention to conservation needs
- publicise the activities of local groups and individuals, and improve liaison and collaboration between these same people and other birdwatchers

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THE BIRDING MAGAZINE OF THE NEOTROPICAL BIRD CLUB

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# Neotropical Birding

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## FRONT COVER

Male Araripe Manakin *Antilophia bokermanni* rain-bathing at Arajara Park, Juazeiro do Norte, Ceará, Brazil, on 1 December 2016 (Rob Hutchinson/ Birdtour Asia). One of many new Neotropical species to feature in David Brewer's article (page 47–54).



Left: Cuban Tody *Todus multicolor*, Topes de Collantes, Sancti Spiritus, Cuba, July 2017 (David Southall/tropicalbirdphotos.com).

# Welcome to *Neotropical Birding* 23!

This is the second issue of *Neotropical Birding* to be made available in digital form as well as hard copy. If you are reading this editorial electronically, thank you for supporting an initiative that was partly prompted by our concern that postal services can be unreliable in several countries, meaning that publications sometimes fail to reach members.

If that chimes a chord with you, then the digital version of this magazine will be right up your street. Moreover, you can also take your digital magazine with you wherever you travel with a tablet (etc). The digital option is also cheaper for you, as the Club saves postage costs: subscription rates are on the inside front cover. If you have already gone digital, please spread the word to friends. If you haven't yet... please do consider it!

We have another cracking issue. On page 3, Stephan Lorenz introduces what he considers to be the ultimate Neotropical trek – to a remote lake in Colombia's Santa Marta mountains to see Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon cyanoaemus*, a recently split, Critically Endangered and visually arresting Andean hummingbird. This is followed (page 13) by a short article on the support given by the 2018 British Birdwatching Fair – where this issue of the magazine is launched – to a new national park in Argentina.

As is often our wont, Globally Threatened Birds feature strongly in the magazine. Ignacio ('Kini') Roesler and colleagues present the latest state of play with Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* in Argentina (page 14). This stunning waterbird has had its share of coverage in this magazine, but not for a few years, so it is high time for an update given the amount of conservation action that has taken place. And if you somehow missed *Tango in the Wind*, a short film about the grebe that went viral last year, check out page 23.

Next up is a fascinating think piece by Josh Jones (page 25), which seeks to remind us of what we may have long forgotten – the exhilaration that characterises our very first experience of birding

in the Neotropics. Can you recall how you *felt* when you first clasped eyes on a hummingbird or a tanager flock or an antpitta? In short, do you remember the first time?

Towards the end of the magazine (page 61), Jeremy Flanagan sets out the sorry tale of the rapid population decline of Peruvian Plantcutter

*Phytotoma raimondii*, another Globally

Threatened Bird. Jeremy is heavily involved in local initiatives to save the species, but where is the Peruvian government on all this? And ditto international interest?

At the northern edge of the Neotropical Bird Club region lies Cuba.

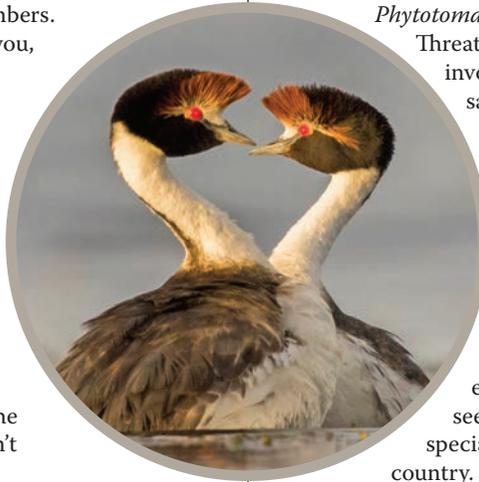
On page 33, Christopher Sharpe – a former editor of this magazine – suggests an exciting and efficient route for seeing the endemics and other specialities of this fascinating country. In doing so, Chris stresses

the importance of employing local guides – an issue that we covered in *Neotropical Birding* 19.

The three other articles this issue are connected by the concept of novelty. On page 47, David Brewer takes us through half-a-century of discovering new species for science in the Neotropics, among the most famous of which is the bird adorning our front cover, Brazil's Araripe Manakin *Antilophia bokermanni*. Tom Schulenberg (page 55) then explains the latest taxonomic changes in the world of Neotropical birds. Time to flick through your notebooks (or digital equivalent) to check whether you have seen the latest taxon deemed worthy of full-species status. Finally, Juan Freile and a host of colleagues explain the importance and work of national bird records committees in the Neotropics (page 68). Their responsibilities include formal acceptance (or otherwise) of candidate additions to national avifaunas. Another reason to locate those notebooks and submit your own records. Happy Neotropical birding!

*James Lowen, Senior Editor*

Inset: Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi*, Meseta del Lago Buenos Aires, Santa Cruz, Argentina, January 2018 (Gonzalo Ignazi)



# The ultimate trek? Seeing Blue-bearded Helmetcrest in Colombia

Stephan Lorenz

Colombia's Santa Marta mountains have become synonymous with brilliant birding. But to see all the range's endemics – particularly the recently rediscovered Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxypogon cyanolaemus*, a Critically Endangered hummingbird – you need to be prepared to put in considerable legwork.

**A**s the day was waning, we finally reached camp at a remote lake high in the Santa Marta mountains of northeast Colombia. The landscape was spectacular: rugged ridgetops framed a lake fed by a small, terraced waterfall

Unless otherwise stated, all photographs were taken (a) on the trek above San Pedro, Ciénaga, Magdalena, Colombia, in February 2017 and (b) by Stephan Lorenz.

on its far side. To the west lay expansive views across grassy *páramo*, and a cloudforest filled the valley below.

It had taken us two days of hiking, with the occasional birding stop, to reach this locale at nearly 4,000 m altitude. After dropping our gear



1



2

1–2 Male Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxypogon cyanolaemus*, taken January 2018 & December 2016 respectively (Sebastian Ballesteros/naturecolombiatrrips.com). The short crest and blue mesial beard are clearly visible.



**3** Female Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon cyanolaemus*, December 2016 (Sebastian Ballesteros/naturecolombiatrrips.com). **4** This female Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon cyanolaemus* was the first individual seen during our trip and also the first record at what is known locally as 'la laguna segunda' (the second lake). The short bill, tail pattern and green mottling on the flanks are clearly visible.

in a grassy clearing, I decided to quickly explore the patch of scrubby woodland nearby. Daylight was fading and the crests of the rocky peaks to the east had turned crimson, their fire reflected in a mirror-like lake. Within minutes, I heard the quiet calls of Santa Marta Wrens *Troglodytes monticola*, a Critically Endangered endemic that is rarely seen by birdwatchers. Frustratingly, the birds refused to budge from the shadowy tangles. I walked a bit further, with the water to my right and the vegetated slope to my left. I noticed a bird swoop up and land atop one of the taller trees upslope. At first, it looked like a small flycatcher, but once I focused my binoculars I realised it was a hummingbird... and not just *any* hummingbird, but the main reason that we had planned this five-day expedition.

I scrambled up the slope to a small clearing and, incredibly, the hummingbird flew down, perching at eye level and offering close views. Scrutinising the bird, I noticed the short, nearly straight bill, buff underparts with throat and flanks mottled with green, and white underside to the broad tail. As the bird turned its head, I was able to discern a hint of a greyish collar, which confirmed

beyond doubt its identity as a female Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon cyanolaemus*.

Barely 10 minutes into the search, I had lucked into one of the rarest hummingbirds in the world – a bird that has been seen by fewer than a dozen birders since its rediscovery in 2015, is a Critically Endangered endemic and was not even recognised as a valid species until 2013. I snapped several photographs before the bird flew off and disappeared over a rise. This was the first time that the species had been recorded at what is locally known as the second lake ('la segunda laguna'); all previous expeditions had needed to go slightly higher to find the species, near what are called the third and fourth lakes. Happy and relieved that the trek had resulted in a surprisingly quick success, I returned to camp.

## Lost for nearly 70 years

With the last of 62 specimens collected in 1946 and no subsequent records, Blue-bearded Helmetcrest had been 'lost' to science for almost 70 years before being rediscovered in 2015 (Rojas & Vasquez 2015). Moreover, it took until 2013 for



**5–7** Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxyopogon cyanolaemus*. **5 & 6** male, December 2016 (Sebastian Ballesteros/naturecolombiatrrips.com); **7** male feeding at *Ternstroemia meridionalis*, January 2017 (Ross Gallardy/budgetbirders.com).

it to be recognised as a valid taxon, distinct from what is now known as Green-bearded Helmetcrest *O. guerinii* (Collar & Salaman 2013).

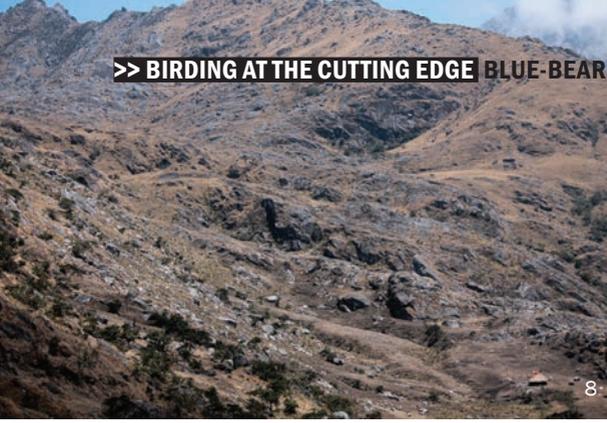
It was this ‘split’ that prompted Carlos Julio Rojas and Christian Vasquez to search for the hummingbird in Colombia’s Parque Nacional Natural Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. While surveying the impacts of fire damage on 4 March 2015, the Colombian conservationists rediscovered Blue-bearded Helmetcrest and obtained the first photographs of the species. Their momentous finding came in the context of both marked habitat degradation and several unsuccessful searches at high elevations during the previous decade, a combination that had previously led BirdLife International’s Nigel Collar to fear that the species might “quite possibly be extinct” (Lowen 2014).

Since its rediscovery, at least three follow-up expeditions have succeeded in finding the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest in the same location (December 2015, December 2016, and our trek in February 2017). Each trip, lasting 4–5 days, recorded 3–4 Blue-bearded Helmetcrests in fragmented forest and scrub patches fringing three

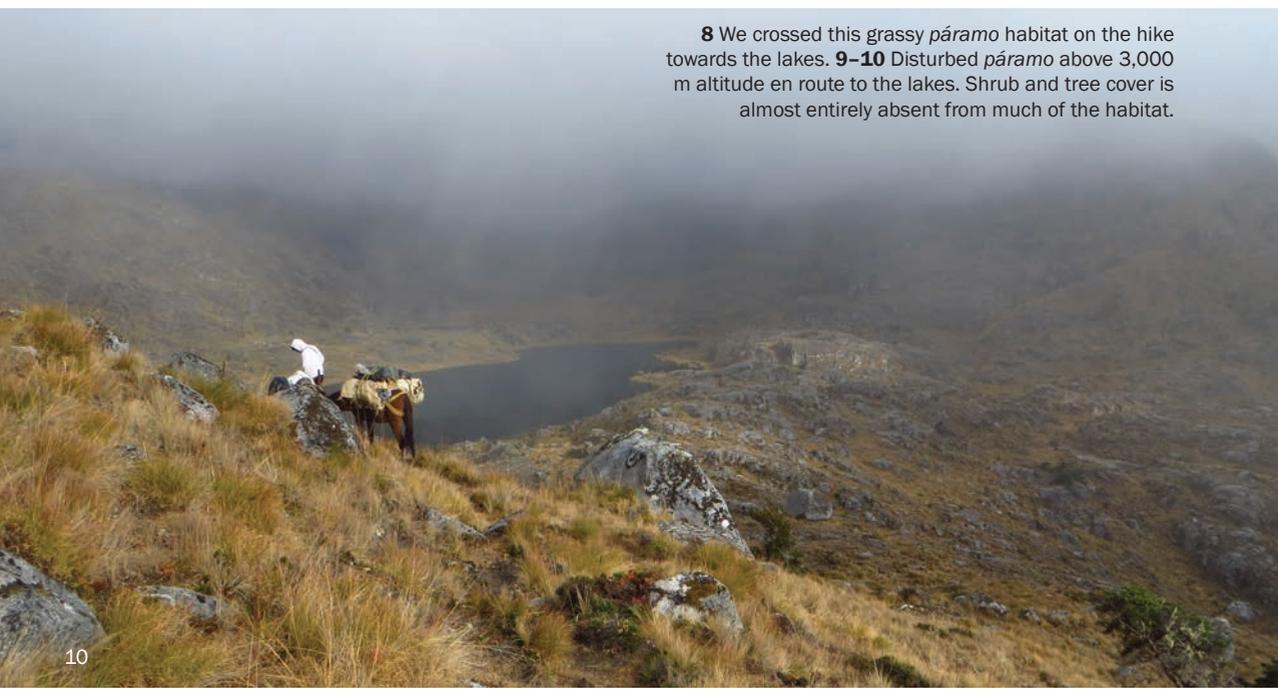


lakes at 3,600–3,800 m altitude on the western slope of the Santa Marta mountains. Nevertheless, the effort involved means that – alongside

>> BIRDING AT THE CUTTING EDGE BLUE-BEARDED HELMETCREST IN COLOMBIA



**8** We crossed this grassy *páramo* habitat on the hike towards the lakes. **9–10** Disturbed *páramo* above 3,000 m altitude en route to the lakes. Shrub and tree cover is almost entirely absent from much of the habitat.



11

**11** The trail follows exposed ridges through grassy paramo. Our expedition demanded the use of pack animals to carry food and equipment.



Santa Marta Wren and Santa Marta Sabrewing *Campylopterus phainocephalus* (Endangered) – Blue-bearded Helmetcrest remains one of the most difficult of the Santa Marta endemics to see. I hope that the details I offer below may make things slightly easier!

## Helmetcrests

Helmetcrests *Oxygogon* are medium-sized hummingbirds with males having a pointed crest, mesial 'beard', short bill, and distinct black faces broken by a buff collar. Females lack crests and mesial stripes, but have distinctive tail and underpart patterns. Until the taxonomic work of Collar & Salaman (2013), just a single species was recognised: Bearded Helmetcrest *O. guerinii* (e.g. Züchner 1999). Four allopatric species are now recognised on the basis of morphological and vocal differences. All are restricted to montane habitats, especially páramo, but also occur in sub-páramo (a transition zone between true páramo and upper montane forest) and adjacent elfin forest.

Three species are endemic to Colombia: Buffy Helmetcrest *Oxygogon stubelii* in the Central Andes (Vulnerable), Green-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon guerinii* in the Eastern Andes, and Blue-bearded Helmetcrest of the Santa Marta Mountains. The final member of the quartet, White-bearded Helmetcrest (*Oxygogon lindenii*), is endemic to the Venezuelan Andes. Blue-bearded

Helmetcrest differs from its congeners by (as its name suggests) purplish-blue mesial 'beard' plus relatively short crest, extensive white tail feathers, and markedly short tail. Female Blue-bearded Helmetcrest has the same tail pattern as the male and extensive green mottling on throat and flanks.

## The conservation context

The survival of Blue-bearded Helmetcrest hangs by a thread. Currently, the species has been documented at a single locality where remaining habitat covers less than 10 hectares. Due to this tiny range, continuing habitat degradation and burning, and miniscule estimated population of 50–249 mature individuals, the species is considered Critically Endangered (BirdLife International 2017). Much uncertainty surrounds Blue-bearded Helmetcrest ecology. Other species of helmetcrest are closely tied to *Espeletia*, a shrub in the sunflower family known locally as *frailejones*. No *Espeletia* occur in the Santa Marta and, indeed, only a single species in the subtribe Espeletiinae (which comprises 126 species across eight genera) is known from this mountain range (*Libanothamnus occultus*). Moreover, this shrub is collected for firewood by local communities (Cuatrecasas 2013).

It is not only the helmetcrest that is threatened in the Santa Marta mountains, but a suite of 22 endemic bird species. Santa Marta has attracted

**12** On lower sections of the trek, there is an excellent chance of encountering the Endangered Santa Marta Parakeet *Pyrrhura viridicata*. **13** Rufous Antpitta *Grallaria rufula* of the subspecies *spatiator*, is a Santa Marta endemic and candidate split. It is fairly common in patches of dense bamboo from 2,500–3,000 m.



12



13

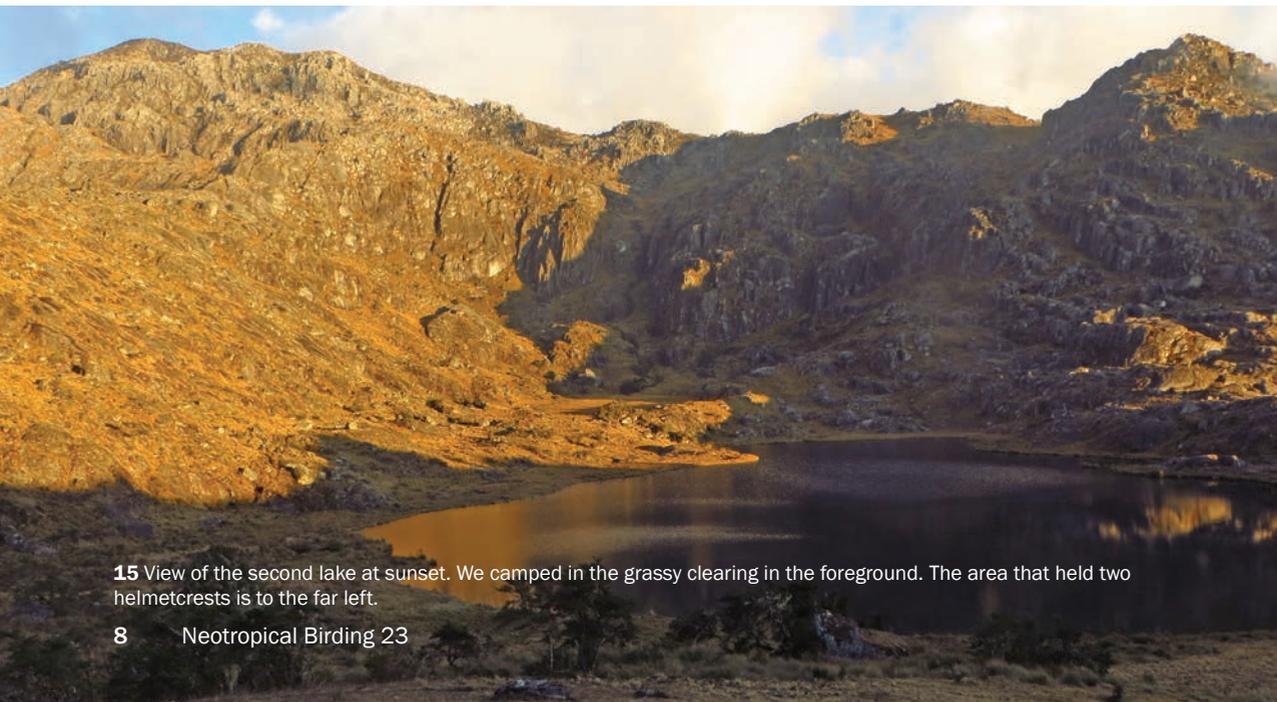
hundreds of birders for more than a decade now, but the majority of birding effort concentrates on the more easily accessible Cuchillo de San Lorenzo (San Lorenzo Ridge). The well-established ProAves El Dorado Reserve and Lodge harbours the majority of Santa Marta endemics, but the highest parts of the ridge only reach 2,700 meters, well below the elevational range of Blue-bearded Helmetcrest and Santa Marta Wren. To see these species (in addition to the other Santa Marta endemics), you need to go higher – and the trek outlined below should help.

## Trekking high for the Helmetcrest

My wife, Claudia Cavazos, joined me for the expedition alongside our local guide. Our trek for Blue-bearded Helmetcrest started on 21 February 2017 in the coastal town of Santa Marta in northern Colombia where we met our local guide Sebastian Ballesteros (see page 11). From here we drove south along the main Highway 90 towards Cienega following Highway 45 south and then turned east (10.881368, -74.152756) onto a rutted, steep dirt road. We twisted up a valley for another hour, glad of a high-clearance vehicle to tackle the rough road. We passed through the small village of El Micu and, just before nightfall, reached the town of San Pedro de la Sierra (10.905912, -74.046378), a long stretch of houses perched atop a steep ridge. San Pedro marks the start of the trek. Although it is possible to buy basic supplies here, it is more efficient to bring food and gear from Santa Marta. San Pedro offers basic accommodation and restaurants.

The following morning we waited for our local mule-driver to arrive that had been arranged by Sebastian Ballesteros and, after some minor delays, we walked along the road leading out of town, soon turning off (10.895677, -74.03747) to follow a steep path that ascended a ridge. The patches of secondary forest and coffee plantations

**13** Despite being Endangered at a global level, Santa Marta Bush Tyrant *Myiotheretes pernix* is relatively common along the trek route, favouring stunted ridge-top forest.



**15** View of the second lake at sunset. We camped in the grassy clearing in the foreground. The area that held two helmetcrests is to the far left.

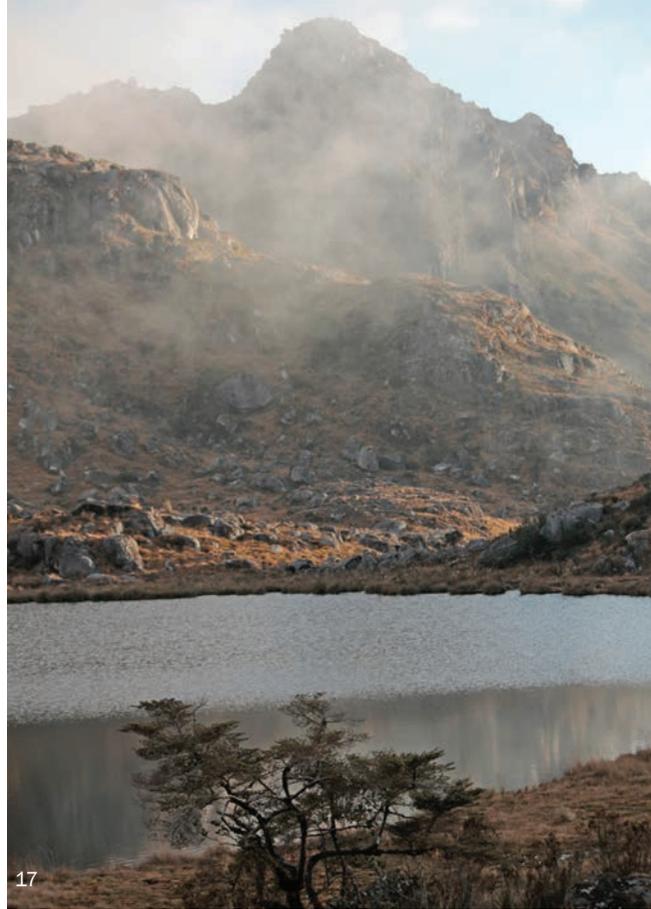
below 2,000 m held several Santa Marta endemics. Santa Marta Antbird *Drymophila hellmayri* (Near Threatened) was common, Santa Marta Foliage-gleaner *Clibanornis rufipectus* (Near Threatened) was easily seen, and Santa Marta Brushfinches *Atlapetes melanocephalus* rummaged through compost piles. In places, decades worth of mule trains had deeply carved the path into the ridge, but eventually we reached flatter sections with remnant forest where Santa Marta Antpitta *Grallaria bangsi* (Vulnerable) called every hundred metres.

As the trail reached the top of a ridge, extensive deforestation was clearly visible, but mature forest remained on the steepest slopes. In areas of secondary growth two male White-tailed Starfrontlets *Coeligena phalerata* chased each other. More widespread Santa Marta endemics recorded during the first day between 1,670–2,575 m altitude included Streak-capped Spinetail *Cranioleuca hellmayri*, Rusty-headed Spinetail *Synallaxis fusciorufa* (Vulnerable), White-colored Warbler *Myiothlypis conspicillata* (Near Threatened), Yellow-crowned Redstart *Myioborus flavivertex* and Black-cheeked Mountain Tanager *Anisognathus melanogenys*. After 13 km and at 2,600 m, we set up camp for the evening. A quick outing after dark resulted in good views of the nightbird recently described by Niels Krabbe (2017) as Santa Marta Screech Owl *Megascops*

**16** Few birders have seen Santa Marta Wren *Troglodytes monticola*, a Critically Endangered species occurring at similar altitudes to Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon cyanolaemus*. We found the species to be fairly common in remnant habitat near the three lakes at c.4,000 m.

**17** View across the second lake with remnant helmetcrest habitat visible in the foreground.

**18** The view across the third lake. In the foreground is the flowering tree frequented by two Blue-bearded Helmetcrests *Oxygogon cyanolaemus*. The best hummingbird habitat is to the right of the lake.



17



18



16

*gilesi*, another endemic that is relatively easy to find during the trek.

On the second morning our local mule-driver suggested an alternative route that swung alongside the valley, following a broad ridge before starting the steep climb towards higher elevations and the páramo. It ended up being an excellent decision since we located the uncommon Santa Marta Parakeet *Pyrrhura viridicata* (Endangered) and found a Rufous Antpitta *Grallaria rufula spatiator*, a likely future spilt, hopping on the trail. In addition, while walking through stunted forest atop ridgelines we found at least three Santa Marta



19



20



21



22

**19** Both male and female Blue-bearded Helmetcrests *Oxygogon cyanolaemus* frequented this flowering bush (*Ternstroemia meridionalis*). **20** Male Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon cyanolaemus* foraging on a tree at the far end of the third lake. This individual showed very well on two visits during our four-hour wait. The bird made short hops and flights between clusters of flowers. **21** One of the (unidentified) flowers visited by a female Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon cyanolaemus*. **22** Male Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon cyanolaemus* (Sebastian Ballesteros/naturecolombiatrrips.com). **23** White-tailed Starfrontlet *Coeligena phalerata*, a Santa Marta endemic. This female frequented a flowering shrub near our final campsite. Note the dusting of pollen on the bird's forehead.

Bush Tyrants *Myiotheretes pernix* (Endangered), a species that can be difficult to find along the San Lorenzo Ridge.

The climb began in earnest with switchbacks criss-crossing a scrubby slope. Watching from various viewpoints resulted in a good diversity



23

of raptors, including the uncommon Black-and-chestnut Eagle *Spizaetus isidori* (Endangered). Grey-breasted Wood Wrens *Henicorhina leucophrys anachoreta* (split by del Hoyo & Collar 2016 as Hermit Wood Wren *H. anachoreta*) skulked in the dense undergrowth halfway up the climb. Reaching the top of the ridge the habitat quickly changed to grassy páramo, which was heavily disturbed by grazing and recent fires so that scrub and tree cover was almost completely absent. The undulating path skirted several ridges, but gradually gained elevation before we finally reached the second lake (10.899259, -73.906282) after hiking 12 km on day two. Here we set up camp for two nights, but not before I had that rapid success with the first helmetcrest!

## Birding around the helmetcrest lakes

The following morning dawned clear and cold, and we set out to explore upslope from camp with the hope of seeing Santa Marta Wren. Carefully following a vocal pair, we eventually obtained excellent views. While the species, reminiscent of Mountain Wren *Troglodytes solstitialis*, often remained low in dense scrub I also observed the wrens climbing high into leafless trees, offering clear views. Throughout the full day we spent birding between the three lakes we recorded a dozen Santa Marta Wrens with vocal groups encountered every hundred meters. For now at least, it appears that Santa Marta Wren – currently classified as Critically Endangered, remember – occurs at relatively high densities within remaining habitat, although populations may be isolated in pockets of remnant elfin forest.

Afterwards, we started the climb towards the two upper lakes, following a faint trail leading across mossy boulders. Before reaching a steeper section, we located another Blue-bearded Helmetcrest: this individual showed a small crest and faint blue coloration on the throat, indicating that it was an immature male. After obtaining photographs, we watched it fly high up the slope and disappear across a distant ridge. This behaviour of flying very high and apparently covering extensive distances had also been noted by previous observers (R. Gallardy pers. comm.). I suspect the birds may be moving between widely scattered food sources within the fragmented habitat.

Climbing past the waterfall at the second lake we reached a rocky, flat area with scattered shrubs. Immediately a female Blue-bearded Helmetcrest approached, investigating us at less than two

## TREK LOGISTICS

Since submitting this article, we have learnt that the local indigenous population has requested that birders do not visit the Helmetcrest site. Discussions are in train to restore access. The text in this box relates to the situation as at February 2017. If access resumes, these details may change. Please take local advice before visiting.

The overall trek could be completed in four days, but it is better to plan for five in order to have a full day at the lakes where Blue-bearded Helmetcrest occurs. In total, the round trip covers 50 km, not including side trips or hiking around the lakes. The trek gains 2,000 m in elevation and includes steep climbs and descents over rugged terrain. The surroundings of the lakes are rocky and some sections are covered in dense vegetation, making progress difficult. Since the trek crosses and enters Kogi tribal lands it is obligatory to seek permission and the assistance of a local guide. Sebastian Ballesteros, an expert birding guide from Nature Colombia Trips (e-mail: fotonatural@live.com; www.naturecolombiatrrips.com), has extensive experience in the area and has completed several helmetcrest treks already.

All food and equipment must be carried up via pack animals, so it helps to travel light. It gets cold at high elevations with regular frost overnight, making it necessary to carry a warm sleeping bag, camping mattress, quality tent and warm clothes. Streams are available throughout the trek to filter or purify water, although at lower elevations the distances between water sources are large.

Make no mistake. The area is remote, accommodation and food in the village of San Pedro are basic, and anyone tackling this trek must be self-sufficient. Any birdwatchers reaching the area of the helmetcrest should make careful observations of behaviours, estimate numbers, and food plants to help collect additional information on this poorly known and endangered species. Please also take the time to explain to local residents the purpose of the trek and the importance of bird conservation, while respecting indigenous lands (for which see Ossola 2016).

metres distance, another behaviour previously noted (R. Gallardy pers. comm.). The bird briefly landed atop a large boulder before flying off, again going upslope and covering quite a distance. We hiked towards the far end of the third lake to stake out a flowering tree. The trail in this section was rocky, sometimes steep and often covered with dense vegetation. Although we noted more Santa Marta Wrens here and along the edge of the fourth

lake, we found Blue-bearded Helmetcrest only at the flowering tree.

Patiently waiting for four hours at the far end of the third lake proved successful as a female Blue-bearded Helmetcrest and, finally, a mature male Blue-bearded Helmetcrest visited twice each to feed on flowers. The female only visited briefly, but was likely perching nearby, hidden in dense scrub. In contrast, the male made one prolonged visit, allowing for close study. Like other high-altitude hummingbirds, the male clung to leaves and twigs while feeding, making short hops and flights between clusters of flowers, sitting still only briefly. During a short second visit the male perched atop a stalk one metre above ground, revealing its throat pattern in perfect light. Like its congeners, Blue-bearded Helmetcrest appears to readily sit out on exposed perches. However, the species may also frequent concealed perches, since birds were difficult to locate during the middle of the day, appearing more active in the morning and evening (as noted by Rojas & Vasquez 2015).

On our final morning, we briefly observed an immature male and female Blue-bearded Helmetcrest at the second lake. These were likely the same individuals observed here previously. We observed agonistic behaviour as the birds chased each other briefly, calling loudly as they flew directly upslope. The female twice visited a cluster of red tubular flowers. The immature male twice approached close, clinging to thin twigs while hanging upside down, a behaviour oddly reminiscent of foraging chickadees *Poecile*.

## Retracing our route

We started our two-day descent mid-morning, recording locally rare Andean Condors *Vultur gryphus* (Near Threatened) soaring overhead. We returned along a slightly different route, camping at an old farmhouse (10.896819, -73.968206) at 2,575 m. Another Santa Marta Screech Owl called briefly right outside the house and, the following morning, a female White-tailed Starfrontlet visited an adjacent flowering bush. The final day of the 5-day expedition saw us descending steeply towards San Pedro, retracing our route. Additional endemics recorded along the trek included the Santa Marta subspecies of Emerald Toucanet *Aulacorhynchus prasinus lautus* (for a reminder of the complicated taxonomy of 'Emerald Toucanets'; see *Neotropical Birding* 20: 25–28), Santa Marta Tapaculo *Scytalopus sanctaemartae*, Brown-rumped Tapaculo *Scytalopus latebricola* and Santa Marta Warbler *Myiothlypis basilica* (Vulnerable). What an amazing trek!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## STEPHAN LORENZ

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# The flamingos, the fable and the fair

James Lowen

The British Birdwatching Fair 2018 will support the creation of Argentina's largest national park, a waterworld home to nearly a million flamingos and shorebirds.

**A** gargantuan pink candyfloss wisps over an immense lake in north-central Argentina before sugar-rushing upwards in a flurry of a hundred thousand wings. Mar Chiquita – South America's second-largest waterbody – harbours most of the planet's Chilean Flamingo *Phoenicopterus chilensis* (Near Threatened) and nearly half its Andean Flamingo *Phoenicoparrus andinus* (Vulnerable). A lagoon with a legend, Mar Chiquita is both imperilled and a national-park-in-waiting. It is also the focus of the British Birdwatching Fair ('Birdfair') 2018, where the Neotropical Bird Club AGM stars a talk on Mar Chiquita by Hernán Casañas (Executive Director, Aves Argentinas).

On this 'little sea', up to 318,000 Chilean Flamingo have been counted, their bubblegum-pink congregation boosted in winter by up to 18,000 Andean Flamingo and smaller numbers of Puna Flamingo *Phoenicoparrus jamesi* (Near Threatened). Shorebird gatherings challenge credulity, notably 600,000 wintering Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor* – roughly one-third of the global population. Meanwhile, the surrounding grasslands, swamps and Chaco forest are home to rare birds such as Sickie-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus anomalus* (Near Threatened), Dot-winged Crake *Porzana spiloptera* (Vulnerable) and Chaco Eagle *Buteogallus coronatus* (Endangered).

A haven for wildlife, unequivocally. But a haven in peril, regrettably. Mar Chiquita drips with official designations, but these haven't kept it safe. Ignominiously, it features among Argentina's handful of Important Bird And Biodiversity Areas In Danger. This claim to infame has spurred action by Aves Argentinas.

The organisation has its plate full. The lake suffers from water extraction and industrial pollution. The wider area is threatened by agricultural intensification, an above-average deforestation rate and unregulated tourism. For

several years, Aves Argentinas has surveyed birds, raised environmental awareness, improved management and clarified land ownership. Then came its masterstroke: an ambitious plan, developed with provincial and national authorities, to create what, at up to 700,000 hectares, should become the country's largest national park. Ansenzuza National Park is expected to be officially designated this year. This is mighty work – worthy of the gods, indeed.

Which brings us to the fable that seasons Mar Chiquita, which both explains the national park's name and celebrates its flamingos. One day, Ansenzuza – the beautiful yet cruel goddess of water – chanced upon a warrior dying in her lagoon. Unexpectedly moved by love for the first time, Ansenzuza wepted as the man succumbed, her torrential tears turning the lake salty. Fellow gods took pity on Ansenzuza. They returned life to the warrior, transforming him into a beautiful, pink bird. From that moment on, flamingos have inhabited the *salina*.

Enshrining the lake's colloquial name in the national park title speaks volumes. Community engagement is integral to Aves Argentinas' strategy. Bolstering the local economy through nature-based tourism is fundamental to project success. It is this inspiring future that Birdfair funds will help create. The goddess Ansenzuza may still weep, but her tears are no longer those of sadness – rather those of joy.

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Chilean Flamingo *Phoenicopterus chilensis*, Argentina, November 2009 (James Lowen/jameslowen.com).

# Sympathy for the grebes: Hooded Grebe conservation programme update (2011–2017)

**Ignacio Roesler, Laura Fasola and Patrick Buchanan**

The remarkable Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* is no stranger to the pages of *Neotropical Birding*, but it is several years since we last heard from the ardent conservationists seeking to prevent this now Critically Endangered bird from succumbing to extinction. High time for an update then – and all the more so since an award-winning video of the waterbird’s display went ‘viral’ in 2017, securing an estimated 20 million hits. That’s a lot of people who are now likely to care passionately about the survival of the *Macá tobiano*.

**T**he recent history of the Hooded Grebe has become major news for many people interested in biodiversity conservation. This

is not simply due to its parlous status (classified as Critically Endangered) but also because this special waterbird has grown as a ‘symbol’ of

**1** Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* colony among floating mats of Water Milfoil *Myriophyllum quitense*, Meseta del Lago Strobel, Santa Cruz, Argentina, December 2017 (Ugo Mellone). High-quality Water Milfoil vegetation is fundamental for the Hooded Grebe colonies. Trophic cascades created by Rainbow Trout *Oncorhynchus mykiss* have a terrible impact on this plant.



Patagonia. Arguably it has also come to signify wildness, being a species that went entirely unnoticed until 1974 mostly because it breeds in the highland plateaus along the southern Andes in Santa Cruz province, where only tough ‘gauchos’ (cowboys) work, and winters on three huge Atlantic estuaries where they become tiny, white dots only detectable by experienced observers (and even then only since 1994!).

Much has changed in the seven years since we last reported on *Macá Tobiano* conservation in this magazine (Imberti & Casañas 2010, Roesler *et al.* 2011). Back then, fear about the fate of the Hooded Grebe was overrunning Argentina’s conservationist community. In those articles, members of the fledgling Proyecto Macá Tobiano (Hooded Grebe Project, a partnership between Aves Argentinas and Ambiente Sur) called the attention of an international audience to an unexplained, drastic drop in the grebe’s population.

In January 2009 (Imberti & Casañas 2010), the first expedition to the plateaus revealed an unexpected absence of grebes at most of the important breeding lakes identified by Johnson (1997). After two further seasons’ fieldwork (Roesler

*et al.* 2011), we had a better and broader picture – if still not an entirely accurate one. Worryingly, we discovered a new, shocking threat with a terrifyingly acute impact. In just a couple nights, a single non-native American Mink *Neovison vison* destroyed an entire grebe colony, killing 33 reproductive adults. This was a ‘double whammy’: zero breeding success in-year, and fewer adults to make future reproductive attempts. The grebe’s situation was even worse than previously imagined...

## Hurting towards extinction?

Things change. As birders and conservationists (indeed, as living creatures) we have to adapt constantly. But in times of urgency, change needs to accelerate. Each summer since 2011, we have surveyed Hooded Grebe breeding populations in Argentinean Patagonia. Each season we have driven long distances along awful tracks and rocky roads to reach remote lakes. So much so that 4x4 trucks have become our second home. We checked up to three times per summer all lakes at which Hooded Grebe had been recorded. We used





2



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2-4 Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi*, Meseta del Lago Buenos Aires, Santa Cruz, Argentina, January 2018 (Gonzalo Ignazi). This plateau near Parque Nacional Patagonia holds more than half the global breeding population of a species whose parlous conservation status and fancy displays have transformed it into an avian celebrity.



5

**5** Mating Hooded Grebes *Podiceps gallardoi*, Meseta del Lago Buenos Aires, Santa Cruz, Argentina, January 2018 (Gonzalo Ignazi). About 95% of adults make at least one breeding attempt per season. In a year, with diligent protection of colonies, as many as 50% of pairs may breed successfully.

satellite imagery to detect new lakes. We searched the entire extent of the bird's potential distribution.

In Roesler *et al.* (2012a) we published a more accurate estimate of the grebe's breeding population. There were no more than 800 adults across six plateaus, with few colonies. The population had dropped by 80% in only 25 years. The situation was possibly even worse than the most heinous scenario developed during 2009! Most of the hypothesised threats were real, and unexpected pressures (such as American Mink: Roesler *et al.* 2012b) were additionally affecting the last remaining populations.

## A 'new era' for the Hooded Grebe Project

Now that we understood the species's true status, knew the location of the most important breeding lakes and could gauge the real impact of each threat, we decided that management action was unavoidable. A protected area had to be created to preserve the best-maintained population; American Mink and Rainbow Trout *Oncorhynchus mykiss* stocks had to be removed from Hooded Grebe breeding lakes; and Kelp Gulls *Larus*

*dominicanus* had to be kept away from grebe nests and small chicks.

The Hooded Grebe Project started an important fundraising campaign. Many institutions, national and international, heard the 'urgent call of the grebe'. A new project was initiated. One project, with one goal: 'to increase the Hooded Grebe population.'

## Conservation actions: ideas and results

In the long term, the impacts of global climate change are the main threat for the Hooded Grebe. There is predicted to be insufficient winter snow to fill lakes and summer wind speeds will increase so that they will, literally, blow the water from the lakes. There is not much we can do about this core problem, although we piloted techniques to mitigate some of the impacts. Our first idea was to use wave-stoppers to protect floating nests. We soon stopped this because the trials were potentially more dangerous than the wind itself, since the strong winds displaced them towards the colony. Oil-control devices (used to manage petroleum spills) were another interesting idea – but that we had to discount because it was impossible to move the devices each season to follow the grebes as they moved breeding lakes (and the lakes were too small and shallow anyway).

These experiences prompted us to re-orientate. We concluded that we were better off investing in actions that could succeed through dedicated human effort and that could have a direct and measurable effect on grebe numbers. To maximise breeding-success rates, our idea was to clear (and keep clear) the remaining important lakes of invasive species.

## Mink control

The priority was to control the most harmful predator, American Mink. Through an extensive search, we delimited the area invaded by Mink. We found that mink were resident in most of western Santa Cruz province, but were frequent visitors rather than permanent occupiers of lakes in the high plateaus. So we took action.

Since 2014 we have run a mink-control programme that has involved thousands of man-hours, hundreds of traps, five river basins and the removal of more than 120 mink. Our success has been clear: over the course of our programme, and within its area of operation, not a single Hooded Grebe has been killed by mink (Fasola & Roesler 2016).



**6** Control of American Mink *Neovison vison* is a cornerstone of the programme to recover Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* populations (Ugo Mellone).

The problem is, however, that grebes are not site faithful. Changes in snow accumulation govern lake conditions. Grebes thus move lakes between (and even during) breeding seasons. Moreover, we have learnt that mink that reach the reproductive lakes are young males dispersing, looking for territories (Fasola & Roesler 2016). Accordingly, the mink-control area needs to be dynamic, not static.

Starting in 2017–2018, we have expanded our operational area with the aim of protecting the whole Laguna Buenos Aires plateau, an area of approximately 5,000 km<sup>2</sup> and 550 km of rivers. The task remains a mighty one, for we have discovered that mink arriving at plateau lakes change radically their hunting habits, feeding mostly on birds, and – worse still – selecting Hooded Grebe amongst thousands of other waterfowl (Fasola & Roesler 2018). Mink control must increase both in effort and extent to avoid this predator expanding further in austral Patagonia.

### The Kelp Gull conundrum

Unlike American Mink, Kelp Gull is native to Patagonia. Its populations have increased as they follow human settlements, birds establishing colonies at unforeseen locations (Roesler *et al.* 2012a) and preying on grebe colonies. To address these problems, we created a new strategy based on ‘colony guardians’ (Roesler *et al.* 2016) whose role is to protect the colonies. From the moment the first nests are built, field technicians camp in

the middle of nowhere for months, staying on site until the moment the final juvenile migrates. The guardians protect eggs and small chicks from gulls and flush native waterbirds (particularly coots *Fulica*) that compete with the grebes for nest-platforms. They have also become the final point of control, should a young male American Mink arrive at a site beyond the programme boundary. Colony guardians have become a major success, improving grebe breeding rates by more than 30% (Roesler *et al.* 2016). This approach has been replicated elsewhere in Argentina by projects aiming to conserve threatened birds (Pucheta *et al.* 2017)

### Fishing for conservation

Rainbow Trout change the macro-invertebrate community of a lake, creating unfavourable conditions for grebe reproduction (Lanceolotti *et al.* 2016). Trout-control sounds easy, right? Target once-important lakes for Hooded Grebes, then catch all the trout in gill-nets. Unfortunately, this is not as simple as it sounds.

Patagonian winds routinely reach 100 km/h. Throw in remote lakes, difficult access and the need to transport the fish and you end up with one of the hardest projects we have embarked upon. We also chose to start with the most difficult (i.e. largest) lake, because this was where we could make the biggest difference. Before trout were illegally introduced to the 500-ha Laguna El Islote in 2001–2002, it was frequented by 1,000-plus



7

**7** Conservationist collecting abandoned Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* eggs to incubate ex-situ, Meseta del Lago Buenos Aires, Santa Cruz, Argentina, January 2017 (María Inés Pereda/Aves Argentinas).

grebes and hosted one of the biggest colonies ever detected (more than 120 pairs).

We started restoration at El Islote in summer 2016–2017. Partnering with local fishermen, we removed more than 3,000 kg of fish and installed physical barriers in the streams that prevent trout from reproducing. This was and remains challenging work, but early signs are positive: fishermen are already noticing a decrease in catch efficiency.

## Ex-situ parenting

Among the more innovative elements of our programme has been to play surrogate grebe parents. We already knew that 95% of Hooded Grebes laying two eggs abandon one, and raise just a single chick. We then noticed that many eggs were lost due to strong winds. Given the grebe's poor reproductive success, we couldn't let those eggs go to waste, so we started a hand-rearing project. We aimed to incubate abandoned grebe eggs from lakes where colony guardians were present and to release fledged birds back into the wild.

This was bold stuff. Nobody had ever tried such ex-situ conservation for a *Podiceps* grebe. Indeed, among South American grebes *per se*, it seems only ever to have been tried for Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps* (MacVean 1988). We tried with the eggs of Hooded Grebe and Silvery Grebe *Podiceps occipitalis*. Although the results have not been the best, we did manage to rear and

release a Silvery Grebe (named 'Botija'). We will continue trying with Hooded Grebe eggs.

## Saving sites

Not long into our fieldwork, we realised that the Meseta (plateau) del Lago Buenos Aires had a substantial grebe population (with numbers that were comparable with those of the 1980s), including several significant colonies. For some reason, the population there appeared neither to have declined in the past 25 years, nor to fluctuate massively between years. If we were asked – hypothetically, of course – to nominate somewhere to create a National Park to protect Hooded Grebes, our answer could only be 'Meseta del Lago Buenos Aires.' Then the hypothetical became real. In 2012 the collective endeavours of individuals from Aves Argentinas (BirdLife International Partner), the country's National Parks Administration, Fundación Flora y Fauna Argentina and the community of Los Antiguos launched a project to create Parque Nacional Patagonia. In December 2014, this too became a reality.

## New hope for the Hooded Grebe

Management and conservation actions are neither cost- nor effort-free. Every summer since 2010, we have driven 40,000 km. But we have accomplished the first primordial step towards our giant goal: we have stabilised Hooded Grebe populations. Even better, 2016–2017 summer censuses and 2016 winter counts showed a slight *increase* in



8 Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* colony, Meseta del Lago Strobel, Santa Cruz, Argentina, December 2017 (Ugo Mellone). That this species is tame is fortunate; it enables conservationists to work right next to colonies, which is essential to protect eggs from Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus*.



9

**9** Adult Hooded Grebes *Podiceps gallardoi* feeding chick, Meseta del Lago Buenos Aires, Santa Cruz, Argentina, January 2018 (Gonzalo Ignazi). If breeding successfully, 95% of pairs raise a single chick – among the lowest productivity of any grebe.

the population. Trends are important, but they need to be maintained. Our initial target was to stop population reduction by controlling threats, but now we need to aim for a real population boost. The most recent censuses indicate that the population may have exceeded 800 breeding individuals. This offers a big incentive to keep on working.

## The (hydroelectric) cloud on the horizon

After thousands of man-hours spent in the field, after superb efforts to minimise the impact of the main threats, and after many institutions (including the Argentine government) have supported the project to preserve remaining Hooded Grebe populations, a brand new threat has emerged that will potentially jeopardise the very survival of this charismatic species. Permission has been granted for two hydroelectric dams to be constructed on the Río Santa Cruz in the near future. This new infrastructure will completely change river flow and will exert massive, as-yet unknown, impacts on the estuarial environment.

Since 2011 we have been simultaneously monitoring the three main estuaries in Santa Cruz where grebes spend the winter: Río Gallegos, Coyle and Santa Cruz–Chico. Our results demonstrate that use of the estuaries varies across the season, which each playing a key role at a different moment. At the start of winter, similar numbers of grebes are counted at each estuary. By the winter's end, just

prior to the spring return to the breeding plateau, birds concentrate in the northernmost estuary (Santa Cruz-Chico). In August 2016 we counted almost 95% of the global population in that single estuary. Talk about putting eggs in a single basket!

Dam construction will have an unknown but potentially devastating effect on the Hooded Grebe should it modify, in particular, the environment at Santa Cruz-Chico. Studies are needed to clarify the grebe's use of the estuaries and its migration routes, and the trophic strategies at the estuaries. The future of the Hooded Grebe depends on our capacity to learn as fast as possible about the species, as well as how we can help it overcome the effects of the transformation of its fragile realm. Only then will we be able to take effective action in order to prevent the ultimate catastrophe: extinction of the Hooded Grebe.

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Saving the Hooded Grebe would not be possible without the support of many (many!) volunteers. There are too many to name them all, but that does not stop us expressing our heartfelt gratitude. The Proyecto Macá Tobiano is an association between Aves Argentinas and Asociación Ambiente Sur, with the support of Flora y Fauna Argentina. Many institutions support the project, including Pan American Energy, Tasso Leventis Foundation, BirdLife International (Preventing Extinctions Programme), Toyota Argentina, Servicios Públicos Santa Cruz, Secretaría de Medio Ambiente de Santa Cruz, MAyDS (Nación), ICFC (Cánada), Patagonia Inc., CAP (Santa Cruz), CREOI, Rufford Small Grants, MBZ and APN (Argentina).



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**10** Displaying Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* and Silvery Grebe *P. occipitalis*, Meseta del Lago Buenos Aires, Santa Cruz, Argentina, January 2018 (Gonzalo Ignazi). Although such interspecific displays are not uncommon, only one hybrid has ever been collected, suggesting successful hybridisation to be extremely rare.

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# Tango in the Wind

Will passion and ingenuity save Patagonia's rarest bird  
[www.living-wild.net/thehoodedgrebe/](http://www.living-wild.net/thehoodedgrebe/)



A FILM BY  
**PAULA & MICHAEL WEBSTER**



**Ed:** to accompany the main article by Kini Roesler and colleagues, I invited Paula and Michael Webster to relate the tale of how they came to make a viral video about the display of the Hooded Grebe.

## TANGO IN THE WIND

Imagine an undulating windswept land serviced by few roads and lived in by few people. A land of volcanoes and glaciers, from which rise a number of steep-sided plateaus, almost impossible to access without a sturdy 4x4. Once on top of a plateau, roads cease all together. The landscape flat and strewn with volcanic rocks, sharp and jagged. The wind unbelievably strong and ceaseless. Dotted across the plateau are numerous small, shallow lagoons – a very few of which hold small numbers of Hooded Grebe. It was this bird that we spent four months filming during 2017.

The lagoon where we spent most time was impossible for a vehicle to approach, so we camped as close as we could, seeking the shelter of a cliff surrounding another lagoon. Each morning it took us two hours to struggle from our camp to the lagoon where the Hooded Grebes were breeding. Thick grassy tussocks covered the ground, separated by rocks and boulders. We walked, heads held low as protection from the wind that howled around our ears, buffeting us one way then the other. Our rucksacks – containing tripods, cameras, sound equipment and food for the day – weighed us down, but also stopped us from blowing away.

At the lagoon we erected a mountain tent in which to hide, observe the birds and set up our equipment out of the wind. Fortunately the birds were not too shy and were often within 75 m of our cameras. As with all grebes, filming the courtship display was our main goal.

The full breeding display had never before been filmed in its entirety. It is spectacular and comical, reminding us of the exotic, sexy movements of a pair of Tango dancers in a Buenos Aires bar. The film we produced, called *Tango in the Wind*, is not just about a beautiful bird. It's about the devotion and spirit of a small group of people working to save an astonishing creature from sliding to extinction. So sit down in an armchair, pour yourself a glass of Argentinean Malbec, fire up your laptop and key in the URL <http://living-wild.net/thehoodedgrebe> and join the 20 million people who have already watched our award-winning 30-minute film.

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# New eyes on the Neotropics

Josh Jones

Most readers of this magazine will probably have been birding the Neotropics for several years (even several decades...). We've long been smitten by its avian riches – perhaps so long indeed that our first encounter with Neotropical birdlife is but a distant memory. Can you remember the feeling when you first set eyes on a toucan or encountered your first tanager flock? Or recall that rush of adrenalin when your inaugural antpitta bounced into view? An experienced European birder – but comparative Neotropical novice – helps us recapture those moments and experience this amazing region afresh.

**M**y first taste of Neotropical birding came on a family holiday to Trinidad & Tobago in 2003. As an impressionable 13-year-old, I found the 'Asa Wright experience' mindblowing. I still vividly recall waking up well before dawn on our first morning, along with my equally excited father, willing for it to get light. Anticipation completely overwhelmed the tiredness induced by the previous day's transatlantic flight.

## The first time

As a paler blue began to creep across the night sky, the forest awakened. All manner of strange and wonderful noises began to emanate from its depths, their sources exotic and, at that point, entirely unknown. Squinting into the half-light, we could make out dark shapes restlessly moving around the lodge bird feeders. I was far too charged up to be patient. I wanted to know what they were, there and then – even though in another 20 minutes, when the sun came up, it would be vividly apparent.

The light improved and soon birds such as Purple Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes caeruleus* and

Green Honeycreeper *Chlorophanes spiza*, White-necked Jacobin *Florisuga mellivora* and 'Blue-crowned' Motmot (as it was back then, pre-split; now Trinidad Motmot *Momotus bahamensis*) became apparent. Orange-winged Parrots *Amazona amazonica* and Blue-headed Parrots *Pionus menstruus* flew overhead. Yes, OK, all what the more experienced Neotropical birder might refer to as 'trash birds', but at the time they left me mesmerised.

The sounds of the forest gradually identified themselves throughout the day. Many of them still live with me today, not least the iconic *bonk* of Bearded Bellbird *Procnias averano* ringing around the valley. Then there were the butterflies and other insects, the flora... At school, my particular interests lay in geography and biology, and I was literally living my childhood dream of visiting the 'rainforest'. I owe everything to my parents for that first taster and for ultimately fuelling my lifelong fascination with the ecozone.

All photos by Josh Jones

1 Abra Patricia, Peru, September 2014. Spectacular birding is set amid equally stunning cloudforest landscape in this pocket of northern Peru.



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2 Sword-billed Hummingbird *Ensifera ensifera*, Observatorio de Colibríes, La Calera, Cundinamarca, Colombia, June 2017. It is impossible to tire of seeing this marvel of creation.

## A second first time? Northern Peru

It was, however, a little over a decade before I was afforded the opportunity to return to the Neotropics. This time, though, it was South America proper. Through my work for BirdGuides.com, a space came up on familiarisation trip to northern Peru in September 2014 – one of the lesser birded, endemic-rich and biodiverse regions of the entire continent. Talk about being thrown back in at the deep end!

I was essentially a first-timer. The few species I ‘knew’ from that Trinidad trip hardly put me in good stead for Peru. Knowing my Palm Tanagers *Thraupis palmarum* from my Blue-grey Tanagers *T. episcopus* wasn’t going to help much. Of course, I crammed as much as possible in the weeks leading up to the trip, and continued ingesting information on the outbound flight. But no amount of research can prepare you for the first-day assault on the senses that a visit to a new part of the Neotropics brings. Nowhere else have I felt such a concoction of emotions when in the field, nor have I looked forward to a day’s birding so keenly.

In the pre-dawn, I was sipping coffee at the famous Owlet Lodge at Abra Patricia in

Amazonas. (Famous, undeniably, but having become so in super-quick time. Let us not forget that nobody saw the Endangered Long-whiskered Owlet *Xenoglaux loweryi* in the field until four years after my inaugural, teenage Neotropical experience. How unexplored this continent is!) I felt like an impatient child as I sat there, willing the first hints of day to arrive so that my surroundings would become birdable. Unidentified birdsong started up all around. I always look forward to birding new destinations, but here my excitement had reached near-unprecedented levels. The only time I could recall such adrenaline-fuelled excitement was ... Asa Wright in 2003. Such is the unrivalled power of the Neotropics.

Then, of course, as first light arrived, the expectancy very rapidly switched to mayhem. Birds were zipping around everywhere, many appearances all too brief to permit identification. One of the first species to perform was one of the world’s truly great birds, Sword-billed Hummingbird *Ensifera ensifera*. As anyone who has seen it will surely agree, the first views of this hummer leave you incredulous as to its evolution. “How ... why?!”

There was so much going on. The birding felt like a fight in which I was struggling to hold



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3 Long-tailed Sylph *Agelaiocercus kingii*, Reserva Ecológica Río Blanco, Manizales, Caldas, Colombia, June 2017. Found throughout the Andes from Bolivia to Venezuela, this widespread species always takes the plaudits.

my own. My mood bounced uncontrollably between elation, frustration, nervousness and helplessness as birds came and went. Some, like Johnson's Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilatriccus luluae* (Endangered), were calling scant feet away, but remained unseen, leaving me exasperated. Others moved through so quickly that they simply evaded identification. There is something perversely wonderful about being naïve and inexperienced in the Neotropics. You routinely feel incapable, clueless and completely inadequate, yet you absolutely love every moment of it.

Thankfully there were some birds that made life so much easier, allowing for glorious views. Having ogled at photos of it on the Internet in the weeks prior to the trip, it was fitting that my first tanager of the day was the beautiful Saffron-crowned *Tangara xanthocephala*, literally glowing in the half-light. Then came Yellow-scarfed Tanager *Iridosornis reinhardti*, one of the must-see birds of northern Peru, and another genuine looker, plus various montane species such as Barred Becard *Pachyramphus versicolor* and Tyrannine Woodcreeper *Dendrocincla tyrannina*.

And then, of course, there were the lodge's feeders, which relieve any frustration that might have lingered from the forest trails. In complete

contrast to the dingy forest floor, where birds are so often frightfully elusive and – dare I say it – a tad dull at times, you can always rely on feeders to put a smile on people's faces. Various tanagers and flowerpiercers busied themselves around the lodge gardens while the hummingbird feeders attracted several species, most notably the spectacular Long-tailed Sylph *Agelaiocercus kingii* and the bee-like White-bellied Woodstar *Chaetocercus mulsant*.

## Rich, bounteous, abundant, diverse

The plethora of life is far from limited to birds. Indeed, the profusion of invertebrates is testament to the pristine nature of the cloud forest in this pocket of Peru. As darkness fell at Abra Patricia, I was treated to the most extraordinary show of Lepidoptera that I have ever witnessed. It is no exaggeration to say moths of every shape and size were frantically surrounding outdoor lights around the lodge. It was literally phenomenal.

Moreover, it is as much the surroundings that make the Neotropical experience as much as the wildlife itself. The Andean cloud forests possess qualities unparalleled in other ecosystems



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**4** Blue-winged Mountain Tanager *Anisognathus somptuosus*, Reserva Río Rio Blanco, Manizales, Caldas, Colombia, June 2017. It may be common and widespread in the Andes – but it's still a sight to behold, with its shockingly attractive colour scheme.

**5** Blue-throated Starfrontlet *Coeligena helianthea*, Observatorio de Colibríes, La Calera, Cundinamarca, Colombia, June 2017. A speciality of the eastern Andes of Colombia, this beautiful hummingbird is easily seen in the outskirts of Bogotá.

**6** Shining Sunbeam *Aglaeactis cupripennis*, Hotel Termas del Ruíz, Caldas, Colombia, June 2017. While the rufous body plumage is striking among hummingbirds, the *pièce de résistance* is arguably its lilac-gold iridescent lower back and rump.

**7** Red-ruffed Fruitcrow *Pyroderus scutatus*, Otún Quimbaya, Risaralda, Colombia, June 2017. This hefty cotinga is remarkably easy to see at Otún.



8 Otún Quimbaya, Risaralda, Colombia, June 2017. The long, bumpy track to Otún Quimbaya and Parque Ucumari offers terrific birding opportunities, with species such as Hooded Antpitta *Grallaricula cucullata*, Multicoloured Tanager *Chlorochrysa nitidissima* and Colombian Screech Owl *Megascops colombianus* all 'gettable' without having to divert off piste.

that I have visited, even compared to other South American landscapes. The gnarled trees, the sodden, moss-covered branches and the enveloping mist that muffles sound and hampers viewing all make birding above 2,000 m altitude in western South America an ethereal, slightly eerie, experience – this otherworldly impression only enhanced by the extraordinary creatures that live here, and vice versa. Mysterious, globally threatened, restricted-range and legendary species such as Crescent-faced Antpitta *Grallaricula lineifrons* (Near Threatened) and Marvellous Spatuletail *Loddigesia mirabilis* (Endangered) are undoubtedly befitting of their elfin surroundings.

I was staggered by northern Peru. The variety of habitats that can be birded in such a relatively small geographical area is quite amazing, ranging from arid semi-desert to high Andean peaks, cloud forests to steamy lowland jungle. Such an extraordinary diversity of habitats in such a relatively small area naturally leads to unrivalled biodiversity. The concept of birding one Andean location, seeing a range of species, then travelling 20 km along the road to another altitude and seeing a completely different suite of birds is, for the first-timer, difficult to take on board. While our final trip tally of 310 species in eight days was child's play by some tour companies' standards, it had beggared my personal belief.

## Captivated by Colombia

The Andes also captivated me in Colombia in June 2017. In the world's most bird-rich country, the mountain range splits into three prongs as it reaches its northern limits. Each cordillera offers its own unique birding opportunities, as I was to find out. Although habitat is somewhat more degraded in many parts of Colombia's eastern and central Cordilleras than it is in northern Peru, good tracts of virgin forest do remain, and here the birding is every bit as special as it is 1,300 km to the south.

In many ways, I was far better prepared for my Colombian excursions. With basic knowledge of both families and species from Peru, the introduction to Colombian birding, up in the hills above Bogotá, was a little less manic than it had been at Abra Patricia three years previously. Given that many of the commoner species were already familiar, it was very satisfying to be able to focus more on local specialities such as Rufous-browed Conebill *Conirostrum rufum*, Golden-fronted Redstart *Myioborus chrysops* and Blue-throated Starfrontlet *Coeligena helianthea*. But, of course, you never quite lose that freneticism ("What on Earth was that?!!") as a multi-species flock quickly moves through and you only get on to the back end of something interesting as it disappears into dense cover up a steep slope far above you...



9 Chestnut-crowned Antpitta *Grallaria ruficapilla*, Reserva Ecológica Rio Blanco, Manizales, Caldas, Colombia, June 2017. Though one of the commonest and most easily seen of its family, close views of this charming species still live long in the memory.

## That first mixed flock!

Indeed, encountering a mixed flock for the very first time is another seminal moment in anyone's Neotropical birding career. Cue total awe and bewilderment as you crane your neck to squint into the canopy. Viewing is so often difficult: light conditions are invariably challenging, birds are often obscured and to the amateur, the *tsip* call-notes all sound similar and are usually little help for identifying the silhouettes moving above you.

The more flocks you filter through, the more honed your skills become. But no two experiences are the same, and thus the anticipation of scouring them never wanes. The best foraging parties I have encountered so far were at the famous Reserva Ecológica Río Blanco, on the outskirts of Manizales (Caldas). Some contained as many as a hundred birds of around 20 species, which brought back that familiar first-time feeling of impotence as birds moved through all around me, from forest floor to canopy – woodcreepers, foliage-gleaners, tyrannulets, woodpeckers, hemispinguses, tanagers and antbirds all playing their part in the experience. The great thing is, you never know what is coming next. I was left thrilled and frustrated in equal measure as perseverance

with one particular flock produced the briefest of views of two Masked Saltators *Saltator cinctus* vanishing upwards – hopefully not the last time I cross paths with this restricted-range (and Near Threatened) scarcity.

## Antpittas: the ultimate Neotropical birds?

Hummingbirds and tanagers are both families that understandably draw the plaudits from any birder visiting South and Central America, but there is another that arguably eclipses even these, being both unrepentantly peculiar and unremittingly enigmatic. No one forgets their first encounter with an antpitta and, thankfully, many members of this unique group are now far easier to see than they have ever been.

Feeding stations dotted around the Neotropics now offer the chance to see habituated individuals (see, e.g., Collins 2006, Woods *et al.* 2011). This isn't necessarily to everyone's taste (see Borgmann 2016 for a discussion). I was 'fortunate' in that my inaugural antpitta was a chance find in an entirely natural setting at Abra de Porculla pass, Amazonas, in northern Peru. Birding the dry slopes, I suddenly



**10** Brown-banded Antpitta *Grallaria milleri*, Reserva Ecológica Río Blanco, Manizales, Caldas, Colombia, June 2017. A Colombian endemic, this is one of up to four species of antpittas that are fed daily on the reserve, with this particular individual even taking worms from the hand.



**11** Hooded Antpitta *Grallaria cucullata*, Otún Quimbaya, Risaralda, Colombia, June 2017. The rufous head and bright yellow bill make this tiny antpitta unmistakable. It is globally threatened, restricted-range and usually difficult to see, yet Otún has recently become a reliable site for it.

found myself confronted by dumpy-looking bird with a huge, dark eye staring back at me from a thicket – the local *albiloris* subspecies of Chestnut-crowned Antpitta *Grallaria ruficapilla*. It sat there for some time, seemingly as fascinated by me as I was by it, before it dropped to the floor and began to feed just metres away – although the slightest bit of movement would send it back into cover again.

As I was to learn, this was about as good as it gets for a non-habituated antpitta. Since that afternoon, I've since spent plenty of time listening to them whilst they, frustratingly, remain invisible. The most galling of these encounters which was with the legendary Crescent-faced Antpitta, near Salento, Quindío, Colombia. This happily sang away for several hours, no more than 20 metres away from me, but refused to show itself. But this, in many ways, is the nature of the beast when it comes to Neotropical birding – you can't see them all, some battles are won and some are lost... and I know when I finally lay eyes on a Crescent-faced some day, it will be all the sweeter for the past experience.

With the lows come the highs. One particular 'win' was with Hooded Antpitta *Grallaria cucullata* (Vulnerable) that, in my still infantile Neotropical birding career, rates as a clear highlight. Gathering at dawn at Otún Quimbaya (Risaralda, Colombia) to watch this ball of fluff suddenly come bouncing through the understorey rates as one of those truly unforgettable moments, its presence announced by a call that sounds every bit as cute as the bird looks. And then there was another morning, in the hills above Pereira (also Risaralda, Colombia), where I whistled an imitation of the Bicoloured Antpitta *Grallaria rufocinerea* (Vulnerable) that was singing from an impossibly dense roadside thicket. This bird, clearly having never been exposed to any sort of playback, responded immediately, hopping out onto a rock just five metres from me before clocking my presence and hurtling back from whence it came.

And that's before mentioning antpitta-feeding. Whatever your thoughts on this practice, there is no denying that it allows birders an intimate experience with a bird that would otherwise

habitually thwart any prospect of good views. Seeing Brown-banded Antpitta *Grallaria milleri* (Vulnerable) and Slate-crowned Antpitta *Grallaricula nana* as well as Bicoloured and Chestnut-crowned at such close quarters, all at Río Blanco, has left me with enduring memories. I'm looking forward to visiting Ecuador sometime soon and seeing the likes of Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea* (Vulnerable) and Jocotoco Antpitta *Grallaria ridgelyi* (Endangered) up close...

## I'll be back... again and again

How swiftly I have become addicted to the region! My insatiable urge to return and explore further has, so far, become stronger each time I have reluctantly left. Since my late teens, I have left few stones unturned in the Western Palearctic and, having now seen virtually all the region's breeding species, I find the Andes calling my name ever more loudly. I crave to once more explore the forests – filtering through flocks, staking out antpittas and immersing myself in the unique atmosphere that the region brings.

The continued run of Neotropical discoveries (or rediscoveries) further exemplifies its appeal. Many parts of South and Central America remain severely under-explored and are consistently throwing up some of the biggest stories in ornithology. A conveyor belt continues to deliver new species to science (the recently described Cordillera Azul Antbird *Myrmoderus eowilsoni* being one of the latest in a long line of remarkable finds; see David Brewer's article, pages 47–54), while range extensions and new populations are constantly being identified. It is a region that

no doubt still has so much to give – and what a dream it would be to be involved in one of those great stories.

This element of the unknown, combined with a biodiversity that is second to none, ensures that the Neotropics have an innate ability to captivate anyone who visits the region. As I have swiftly found on my visits, it is impossible not to be awed by the abundance of life that can be found here – and it is arguably the Andes that best exemplifies this. While I can claim to be little more than a novice in this part of the world, it has already provided me with countless memories. The greatest part of such relative inexperience is that there is still so much of the region left to explore for the first time – and I can't wait.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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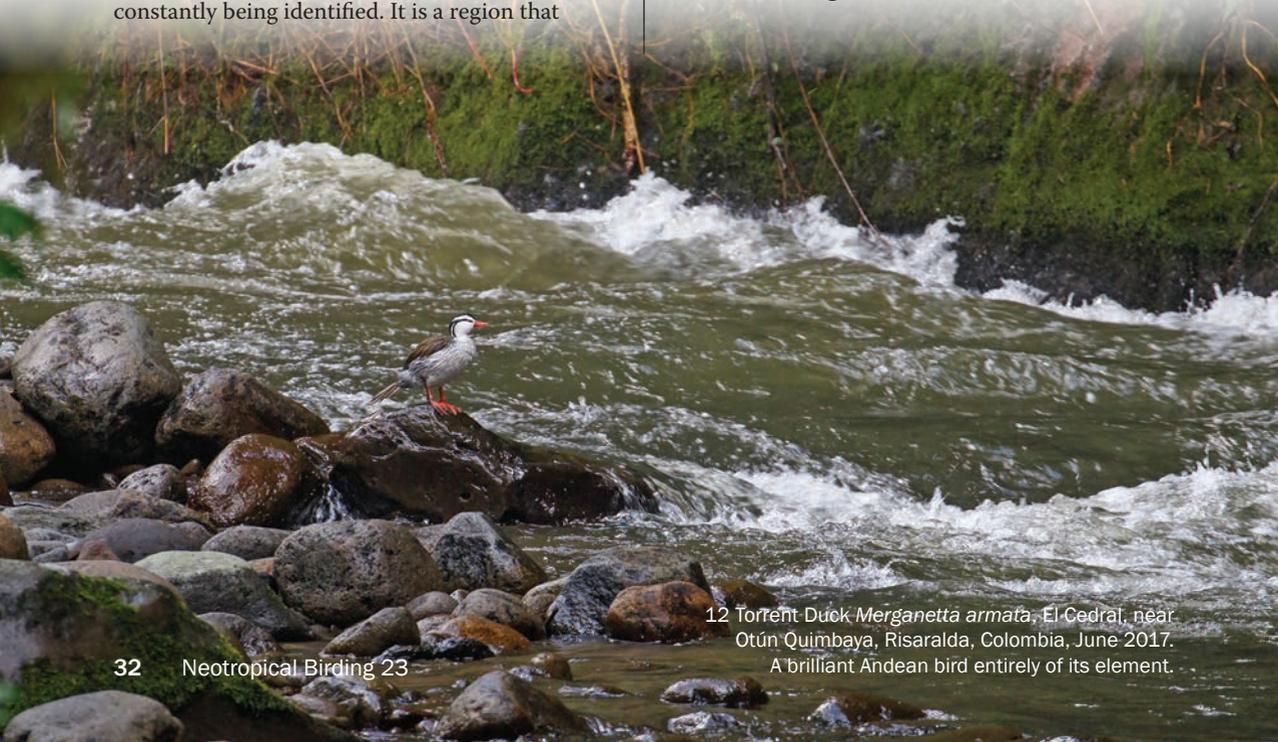
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12 Torrent Duok *Merganetta armata*, El Cedraí, near Otún Quimbaya, Risaralda, Colombia, June 2017.

A brilliant Andean bird entirely of its element.

# Seeing Cuba's endemic birds and other specialities

**Christopher Sharpe**

*For reasons political and cultural as well as avifaunal, Cuba is as enticing a destination as the Caribbean (indeed, arguably the whole Neotropics) has to offer. Here a former Neotropical Birding editor offers insights into the best places to see its endemic birds and other specialities.*

**M**y first visits to Cuba were in 1995, to work with a team of Cuban scientists on the national Biodiversity Country Study. This was during the *período especial*, the 'Special Period' of adverse economic conditions triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Even though everything from toilet paper to fuel, and beef to coffee, had disappeared from daily life, and despite our conservation work being frustrated by

the US embargo on the country, I found Cubans remarkably hospitable, sharing their limited resources unselfishly and even finding a vehicle to take me birding. At that time, few foreign birders visited Cuba, the majority of them Canadians or Europeans. The embargo was a disincentive to US tourism, but some birders and ornithologists from that country nevertheless succeeded in visiting the island.



1 Cuban Grassquit *Tiaris canorus*, La Güira, Pinar del Rio, Cuba, March 2008 (William Price; [pbase.com/tereksandpiper](http://pbase.com/tereksandpiper)).



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2 Cuba's national bird, the common and widespread Cuban Trogon *Priotelus temnurus*, Parque Nacional La Güira, Pinar del Río, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com). 3 Cuban Green Woodpecker *Xiphidiopicus percussus*, La Turba, Zapata Peninsula, Matanzas, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com). This odd-looking woodpecker is a relict, the only member of a genus that appears to have split from *Melanerpes* several million years ago (after the divergence of the sapsuckers *Sphyrapicus*). 4 Cuban Tody *Todus multicolor*, Topes de Collantes, Sancti Spiritus, Cuba, July 2017 (David Southall/tropicalbirdphotos.com). The most colourful of the five species in this Caribbean endemic genus whose closest relations are some motmots.



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Since then, and particularly since 2014, tourism has flourished as US-imposed restrictions have been relaxed, a welcome policy that culminated in the restoration of direct flights in 2016. Although there has been a reversal of political rhetoric of late, such easy international transport continues (at the time of writing...), and large numbers of US citizens visit freely.

Cuba is popular with general tourists and eco-travellers for a number of reasons. Culturally and politically it is unique. It has the most diverse environment of any Caribbean island and in the 1970s had the foresight to create an exceptional network of protected areas conserving representative ecosystems across the country. A complex of 211 conservation units (comprising various designations) protects more than 12% of the total land surface. Several of these are internationally recognised: six Ramsar sites, six UNESCO-MAB Biosphere Reserves and two UNESCO Natural World Heritage Sites.

## Cuba's avifauna

More than 370 bird species have been recorded in Cuba, of which 290 occur regularly, and some 150 breed. The island's position at 20–23°N, oriented west–east across avian flyways, means that a large proportion of its species are migratory, mainly boreal migrants (c.150 species, two-thirds of which are primarily winter visitors, one-third being transients that winter further south). This means that visiting birders will encounter a much greater variety of birds during the Northern Hemisphere winter and spring, and this article is oriented towards a visit at this time. A dozen species are summer visitors, but if a visit is made in February, all but one of these can be seen.

## Endemics and specialities

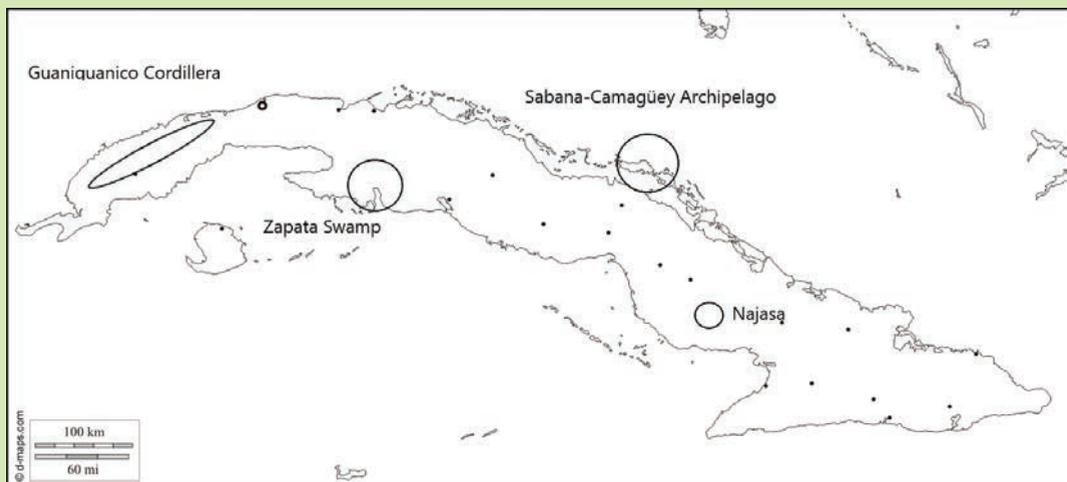
According to the taxonomy followed by Neotropical Bird Club (AOS 2017), 26 species are endemic to Cuba (although other taxonomies produce 27, 28 or more), and a further 25 species

found in Cuba are endemic to the West Indies (see Fig. 6). One species that would have been top of many birders' list, Cuban Macaw *Ara tricolor*, sadly became extinct 150 years ago, while 38 species are of global conservation concern: 18 threatened and 20 Near Threatened. Of these, neither Ivory-billed Woodpecker *Campephilus principalis* nor Bachman's Warbler *Vermivora bachmanii* have been seen since at least the 1980s, and the latter is assessed as Possibly Extinct (BirdLife International 2017). Not seen since 2009, Cuban Kite *Chondrohierax (uncinatus) wilsonii* is considered a (Critically Endangered) species by BirdLife International (2017) but regarded as conspecific with Hook-billed Kite *C. uncinatus* by some authorities, including AOS (2017).

All extant endemics and other specialities can be seen in the western two-thirds of the country, without undertaking the arduous journey to what used to be called the *Oriente*. Even so, Zapata Rail *Cyanolimnas cerverai* (Critically Endangered) has been seen on fewer than a dozen occasions since it was first found in 1926, and its vocalisations remain unknown, so it is likewise not a bird to be expected by the casual visitor. Of the remaining species likely to be sought by visiting birders, all can be reasonably expected within a 9–10 day trip, with Gundlach's Hawk *Accipiter gundlachi* (Endangered) and Zapata Wren *Ferminia cerverai* (Endangered) being arguably the hardest to guarantee, though Red-shouldered Blackbird *Agelaius assimilis* can be stubborn too.

## Birding sites

Here I suggest a number of established birding sites, located in four major regions that should,



>> BIRDING SITES CUBA'S ENDEMIC BIRDS

6 Nationally and regionally endemic birds of Cuba—and where to see them

Species (endemism; conservation status)	SC	ZS	GU	NJ	Key
West Indian Whistling Duck <i>Dendrocygna arborea</i> (R; VU)					1 Infrequently seen by bird tours at least, since it is present April–September, when tours tend not to run; wintering grounds unknown.
Plain Pigeon <i>Patagioenas inornata</i> (R; NT)					
Scaly-naped Pigeon <i>Patagioenas squamosa</i> (R)					2 Despite marked vocal differences between the endemic 'Cuban Nightjar' <i>A. (c.) cubanensis</i> and Hispaniolan Nightjar <i>A. (c.) ekmani</i> , AOS (2017) retains them within Greater Antillean Nightjar <i>Antrostomus cubanensis</i> . The voice of the Cuban Isle of Pines subspecies <i>A. c. insulaepinorum</i> is apparently unknown. Neotropical Bird Club follows AOS (2017) taxonomy.
Blue-headed Quail-Dove <i>Starnoenas cyanocephala</i> (E; EN)					
Grey-fronted Quail-Dove <i>Geotrygon caniceps</i> (E; VU)					3 Endemic Cuban Kite <i>C. (u.) wilsonii</i> treated as a subspecies of widespread Hook-billed Kite <i>C. uncinatus</i> by AOS (2017).
Key West Quail-Dove <i>Geotrygon chrysis</i> (R)					
Great Lizard Cuckoo <i>Coccyzus merlini</i> (R)					4 Treated as conspecific by AOS (2017), molecular data suggest that the endemic 'Cuban' Palm Crow <i>C. (p.) minutus</i> is a separate species from 'Hispaniolan' Palm Crow (Dickinson & Christidis 2014).
Antillean Nighthawk <i>Chordeiles gundlachi</i> <sup>2</sup> (R)					
Greater Antillean (Cuban) Nightjar <i>Antrostomus (c.) cubanensis</i> <sup>2</sup> (R)					5 Cuban breeding endemic, recorded as a vagrant in several other countries, Cuban Martin is thought to winter in South America. It arrives in Cuba at the end of January, leaving by the end of October.
Antillean Palm Swift <i>Tachornis phoenicobia</i> (R)					
Bee Hummingbird <i>Mellisuga helenae</i> (E; NT)					Endemism codes: E = endemic to Cuba; R = endemic to Caribbean region.
Cuban Emerald <i>Chlorostilbon ricardii</i> (R)					
Zapata Rail <i>Cyanolimnas cerverai</i> (E; CR)					Global status codes: NT = Near Threatened; VU = Vulnerable; EN = Endangered; CR = Critically Endangered; CR(PE) = Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct).
Hook-billed (Cuban) Kite <i>Chondrohierax (uncinatus) wilsonii</i> <sup>3</sup> (CR)					
Gundlach's Hawk <i>Accipiter gundlachi</i> (E; EN)					Codes for frequency of observation: ■ = reliably observed on most visits; ■ = requires targeted effort or luck; ■ = historical or infrequently observed.
Cuban Black Hawk <i>Buteogallus gundlachi</i> (E; NT)					
Bare-legged Owl <i>Margarobyas lawrencii</i> (E)					■ = reliably observed on most visits; ■ = requires targeted effort or luck; ■ = historical or infrequently observed.
Cuban Pygmy Owl <i>Glaucidium siju</i> (E)					
Cuban Trogon <i>Priotelus temnurus</i> (E)					
Cuban Tody <i>Todus multicolor</i> (E)					
West Indian Woodpecker <i>Melanerpes supercilii</i> (R)					
Cuban Green Woodpecker <i>Xiphidiopicus percussus</i> (E)					
Fernandina's Flicker <i>Colaptes fernandinae</i> (E; VU)					
Cuban Parakeet <i>Psittacara euops</i> (E; VU)					
Cuban Parrot <i>Amazona leucocephala</i> (R; NT)					
Cuban Pewee <i>Contopus caribaeus</i> (R)					
La Sagra's Flycatcher <i>Myiarchus sagrae</i> (R)					
Loggerhead Kingbird <i>Tyrannus caudifasciatus</i> (R)					
Giant Kingbird <i>Tyrannus cubensis</i> (E; EN)					
Thick-billed Vireo <i>Vireo crassirostris</i> (R)					
Cuban Vireo <i>Vireo gundlachi</i> (E)					
'Cuban' Palm Crow <i>Corvus (palmarum) minutus</i> <sup>4</sup> (R; NT)					
Cuban Crow <i>Corvus nasicus</i> (R)					
Cuban Martin <i>Progne cryptoleuca</i> <sup>5</sup> (E)					
Bahama Swallow <i>Tachycineta cyaneoviridis</i> (R; EN)					
Zapata Wren <i>Ferminia cerverai</i> (E; EN)					
Cuban Gnatcatcher <i>Polioptila lembeyi</i> (E)					
Cuban Solitaire <i>Myadestes elisabeth</i> (E; NT)					
Red-legged Thrush <i>Turdus plumbeus</i> (R)					
Bahama Mockingbird <i>Mimus gundlachi</i> (R)					
Zapata Sparrow <i>Torreornis inexpectata</i> (E; EN)					
Western Spindalis <i>Spindalis zena</i> (R)					
Yellow-headed Warbler <i>Teretistris fernandinae</i> (E)					
Oriente Warbler <i>Teretistris fornsi</i> (E)					
Cuban Oriole <i>Icterus melanopsis</i> (E)					
Red-shouldered Blackbird <i>Agelaius assimilis</i> (E)					
Tawny-shouldered Blackbird <i>Agelaius humeralis</i> (R)					
Cuban Blackbird <i>Ptiloxena atroviolacea</i> (E)					
Greater Antillean Grackle <i>Quiscalus niger</i> (R)					
Olive-capped Warbler <i>Setophaga ptyophila</i> (R)					
Cuban Grassquit <i>Tiaris canorus</i> (E)					
Cuban Bullfinch <i>Melopyrrha nigra</i> (R, NT)					

over the course of a 9–10 day trip, offer the chance for visiting birders to see all of the endemics and specialities currently ‘available’.

## Sabana–Camagüey Archipelago

(1 full day)

With relatively inexpensive package tours, for many the opportunity to enjoy the birds of Cuba comes through a beach holiday. Varadero is Cuba’s best-known resort area, but beach-holidaying birders should prefer the **Sabana–Camagüey Archipelago**, which offers far better birding opportunities and the chance to see a handful of Cuban specialities. Although it stretches over 475 km along the north coast of Cuba and includes more than 2,500 islands, from the birder’s point of view the Sabana–Camagüey Archipelago comprises just four cays of note: Cayo Guillermo, Cayo Coco, Cayo Romano and Cayo Paredón Grande.

This area, known as **Jardines del Rey**, is a mosaic of sandy cays, mangrove forests, palmetto scrub, channels, and saltwater, brackish and even freshwater lagoons. It provides some wonderful coastal birding with impressive numbers of widespread waterbirds from American Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* to Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens* (Near Threatened) and a host of wintering duck and shorebirds. The white morph of Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*, known as ‘Great White Heron’, is frequent. The specialities of this region include two Cuban endemics – Cuban Gnatcatcher *Polioptila lembeyi* and Oriente Warbler *Teretistris fornsi* – and the west Caribbean endemic West Indian Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna arborea* (Vulnerable), Thick-billed Vireo *Vireo crassirostris* and Bahama Mockingbird *Mimus gundlachi*.

Visitors from the US are often surprised to learn that the widespread rumours of hostile Cuban immigration authorities, security problems for those who negotiate the way in, and difficulty re-entering the US from Cuba are quite simply fabricated – Cubans could not be more eager to show off their island to US tourists, they welcome individual visitors warmly, and it is hard to imagine a safer birding destination. Despite more than a century of ignominious history, Cubans often feel a special bond with the US through music, literature and baseball, and ties between family members who live on either side of the Florida Straits. None of the dozens of US citizens with whom I have travelled have ever experienced any kind of problem with US immigration authorities on re-entering the USA.

The attractively plumaged whistling duck is more widespread in Cuba, but most readily located on **Cayo Coco**, where flocks can be found at roost under hotel boardwalks and buildings. The attractive Oriente Warbler (not a ‘true’ warbler, but one of just two members of the Teretistridae, a family endemic to Cuba; the other species is Yellow-headed Warbler *Teretistris fernandinae*) is the easiest of the target birds to see and is fairly catholic in habitat. Thick-billed Vireo and Bahama Mockingbird retain only a toehold on Cuba, and are the most challenging. Both inhabit short palmetto scrub and, since the former (within Cuba) is known to breed only on Cayo Paredón Grande, this is the place to try for them. (Alternatively, the mockingbird shows well at the other end of the Jardines del Rey, on Cayo Guillermo.) Cuban Gnatcatcher is found in the same areas. For those not visiting Zapata Swamp, Cayo Coco and Cayo Romano provide



7 Prime habitat for Thick-billed Vireo *Vireo crassirostris*, Bahama Mockingbird *Mimus gundlachi* and other avian specialities of the cays at the lighthouse, Cayo Paredón Grande, Cuba, March 2016 (Christopher Sharpe/Rockjumper Birding Tours).



8

**8** Undeniably cute, the tail-twitching Cuban Gnatcatcher *Polioptila lembeyi*, Cayo Paredón Grande, Ciego de Ávila, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com).

an opportunity to see Zapata Sparrow *Torreornis inexpectata* (Endangered), specifically the richly coloured cays subspecies *varonai*.

The **Cueva del Jabalí** nightclub (22°32'41"N 78°24'20"W) is an unlikely sounding but rewarding spot on Cayo Coco, where bird baths and water drips attract hosts of migrant and resident birds, the latter including Key West Quail-Dove *Geotrygon chrysis*. Birders can easily while away a few hours here, especially in the heat of the day, and over 150 species have been recorded (eBird 2017). Some of the hotels on Cayo Guillermo and Cayo Coco have taken to feeding Cuban Black Hawks *Buteogallus gundlachi* (Near Threatened), thus improving photographic opportunities. The cays are a particularly good area for the elusive Mangrove Cuckoo *Coccyzus minor*: keep an ear out for its distinctive vocalisations.

Assuming that the visitor does not fly into the Jardines del Rey airport (which is not advisable due to frequent flight delays), the Sabana-Camagüey Archipelago must be reached by driving along the 34-km-long **Cayo Coco causeway**, half of which stretches over open water. It is worth taking this slowly and being prepared to stop on the ample margins, since several birds, such as Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* (sometimes by the hundred), (American) Herring Gull *Larus (argentatus) smithsonianus* and Sandwich (Cabot's) Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis aculflavidus*, are more easily picked up here than anywhere else.



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**9** Punting along the Gonzalo Cut at Santo Tomás in the Zapata Swamp, type locality of Zapata Rail *Cyanolimnas cerverai*, Cuba, February 2016 (Christopher Sharpe/Rockjumper Birding Tours).

## Zapata Swamp (3–4 full days)

Located 150 km south-east of Havana and 5,000km<sup>2</sup> in area, Ciénaga de Zapata (Zapata Swamp) is home to the lion's share (four-fifths) of Cuba's endemics and offers some of the best birding on the island. Indeed, two species are Zapata Swamp endemics. Zapata Rail is not, for the moment at least, a realistic target for those who do not have several months to spend in the swamp. The chances of seeing Zapata Wren are much higher, but it can pose a challenge. The area also provides by far the best chance of seeing several other exciting species, notably Blue-headed Quail-Dove *Starnoenas cyanocephala* (Endangered), Grey-fronted Quail-Dove *Geotrygon caniceps* (Vulnerable), Greater Antillean (Cuban) Nightjar *Antrostomus (c.) cubanensis*, Bee Hummingbird *Mellisuga helenae* (Near Threatened), Bare-legged Owl *Margarobyas lawrencii* and Red-shouldered Blackbird.

The entire region is a UNESCO–MAB Biosphere Reserve and Ramsar site, housing a cluster of nationally protected areas with the Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata at its core. The ideal base for exploring this area is the beach town of **Playa Larga**, at the north of the Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs), which has a government-run cabin complex and plenty of private houses. From here there is access to a variety of birding sites within the wider Zapata Swamp, a heterogeneous conglomeration of productive birding localities that typically requires 3–4 days to explore. Principal among these are the two



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**10** The little brown job that can make or break a Cuba trip: Zapata Wren *Ferminia cerverai*, La Turba, Zapata Peninsula, Matanzas, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com).

**11 & 12** Zapata Sparrow *Torreornis inexpectata*, Zapata, Matanzas, Cuba, May 2013 (William Price; pbase.com/tereksandpiper).

**13** Grey-fronted Quail-Dove *Geotrygon caniceps*, Zapata, Matanzas, April 2008 (William Price; pbase.com/tereksandpiper).

entrance barrier (22°17'03"N 81°13'47"W). The town of Santo Tomás must be reached by dawn to permit an early-morning punt excursion north along the Santo Tomás cut (since birders must employ a guide in order to access the protected areas of Zapata Swamp, your guide will be able to arrange this). This gives the best chance of locating singing Zapata Wren and finding many other specialities. Over the past couple of years, local guides have created boardwalk viewing areas, which allow more comfortable views of the wren. The excursion itself can be enjoyed in its own right by those interested in experiencing the swamp.

After the boat trip, the semi-deciduous forests between the cut and the village can be very productive for endemics (Yellow-headed Warbler, Grey-fronted Quail-Dove and most of the widespread species) as well as boreal migrants. It is a particularly good spot for Worm-eating Warbler *Helmintheros vermivorum* and Swainson's Warbler *Limnothlypis swainsonii*, which are often on wintering territories in close proximity – search for vine-tangles with hanging dead leaves for the former, and deep leaf litter for the latter.

(main) entry points into the swamp proper – Santo Tomás and La Turba – but there are a host of peripheral sites such as Salinas de Brito, Soplillar and Bermejas.

**Santo Tomás** (22°24'23"N 81°26'43"W) is the type locality for Zapata Rail, Zapata Sparrow and Zapata Wren – and remains the best place to see the latter pair. It really is in the heart of the swamp, some 32 km westnorthwest of Playa Larga along a narrow unpaved track, which begins at a park-



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Guides are particularly helpful in knowing stake-outs for several sought-after species. **14** Bare-legged Owl *Margarobyas lawrencii*, near Soplillar, Matanzas, Cuba, July 2017 (David Southall/tropicalbirdphotos.com). **15** Greater Antillean (Cuban) Nightjar *Antrostomus (c.) cubanensis*, Soplillar, Matanzas, Cuba, February 2016 (Christopher Sharpe/Rockjumper Birding Tours). Vocal differences between Cuban and Hispaniolan nightjars will almost certainly prove this to be a Cuban endemic. **16** Fernandina's Flicker *Colaptes fernandinae*, Zapata, Matanzas, Soplillar, Cuba, April 2008 (William Price; pbase.com/tereksandpiper).

**La Turba** (22°26'24"N 81°10'32"W), located on the N edge of Zapata Swamp a few kilometres south of Jagüey Grande, allows easier access to the swamp. It is a good area for Zapata Wren and other specialities, but can be crowded with tour groups during peak birding season when large buses are driven in, which sometimes causes parking problems. The savanna areas are burned here, causing direct loss of habitat and, in the long term, affecting the prospects for seeing the half dozen pairs that currently nest here.

South of Playa Larga, within the Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata, the former commercial salt-pan development of **Salinas de Brito** offers some spectacular Caribbean coastal birding. Raised viewing platforms allow the enjoyment of flocks of American Flamingo and large numbers of herons, ducks and shorebirds. Clapper Rail *Rallus crepitans caribbeus* and

Yellow (also known as Golden or, confusingly, Mangrove, depending on taxonomy) Warbler *Setophaga petechia gundlachi* will be heard, if not seen. Cuban Black Hawk is one of the few Cuban speciality species of the wetland area, but that is not to diminish the experience: an afternoon birding here is unforgettable.

East of the Bay of Pigs, the town of **Soplillar** (22°17'30"N 81°09'10"W) gives access to various tracks and trails east of the town that can be productively walked in search of birds of semi-deciduous forest and palm forests. Local guides are particularly advisable, since the trails are labyrinthine, and guides tend to know which hollow palm trunk harbours the most cooperative Bare-legged Owl, where the Greater Antillean (Cuban) Nightjars happen to be roosting, and where the Fernandina's Flicker *Colaptes fernandinae* (Vulnerable) pair is nesting. Stalking



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The world's smallest warm-blooded animal: Bee Hummingbird *Mellisuga helenae*. **17** Male, Pálpite, Zapata Peninsula, Matanzas, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com). **18** Male, Soplillar, Matanzas, Cuba, July 2017 (David Southall/tropicalbirdphotos.com).

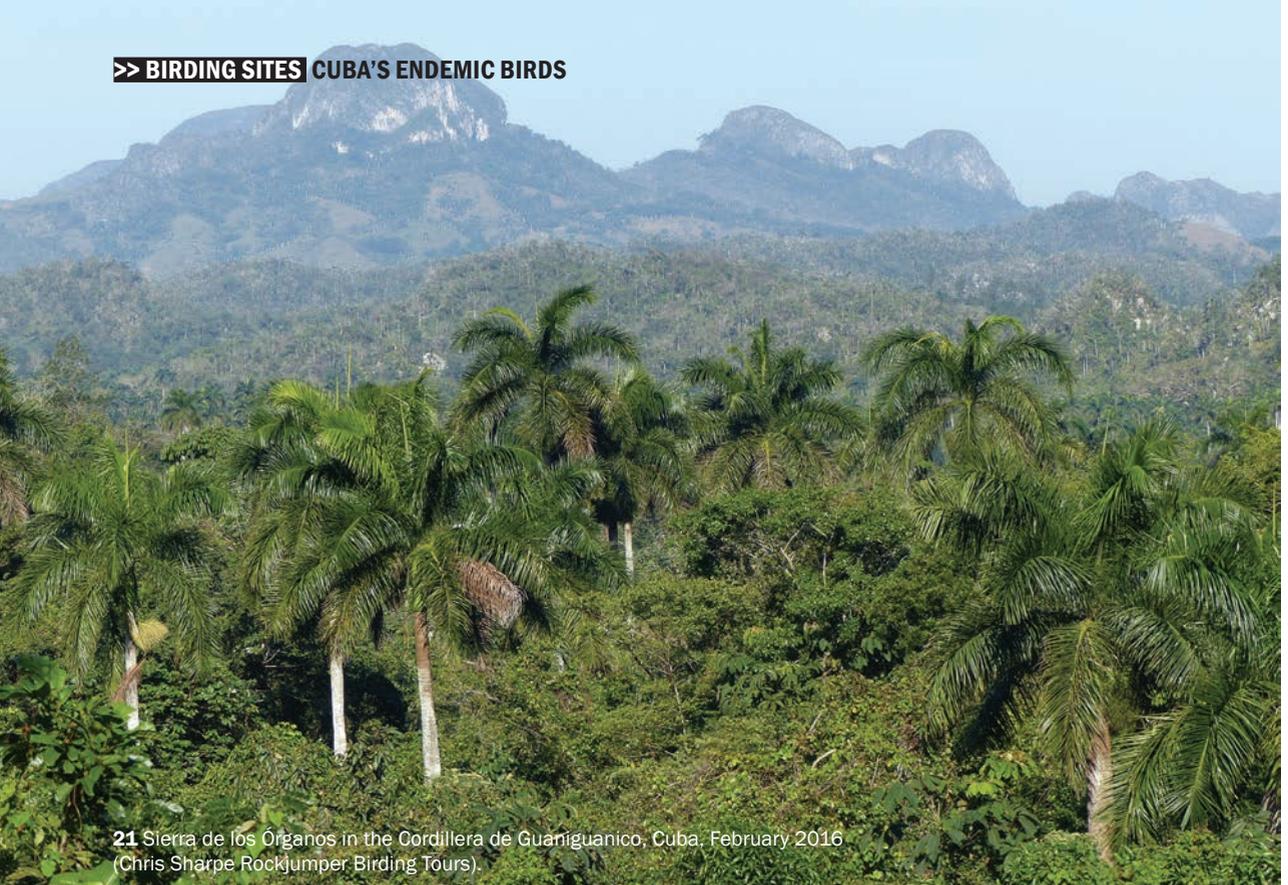
**19** Blue-headed Quail-Dove *Starnoenas cyanocephala*, Cueva de los Peces, Matanzas, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com). Remarkable recent research suggests that this species's nearest relatives are in Australia (see *Neotropical Birding* 20: 25)!

**20** An exceptional daytime view of a Stygian Owl *Asio stygius*, Salinas de Brito, Zapata Peninsula, Matanzas, Cuba, July 2017 (David Southall/tropicalbirdphotos.com).

Grey-fronted Quail-Dove requires stealth and patience, as well as local knowledge.

Further east still, on the margins of Zapata Swamp, **Refugio de Fauna Bermejas** boasts a list

of 200 species. The western outskirts of the town of Bermejas provide reliable roosting sites for



21 Sierra de los Órganos in the Cordillera de Guaniguanico, Cuba, February 2016 (Chris Sharpe Rockjumper Birding Tours).

Cuban Parakeets *Psittacara euops* (Vulnerable), often in garden mango trees. A hide (blind) has been erected on the N side of the road (22°08'25"N 80°57'52"W) to provide improved views of doves. At first light here, with luck (and a judicious scattering of grain by local reserve wardens), one can observe all four species of quail-dove (the more widespread Ruddy *Geotrygon montana* being the least reliable) – more quail-doves than anywhere in the world – together with Zenaida Dove *Zenaida aurita*. Bee Hummingbirds are often to be found on flowers on the south side of the road leading to a house, the owner of which looks after the area and should be tipped. The best site for the species is a private house in Pálpite (22°19'34"N 81°11'01"W), where the owner (Señor Bernabé) likewise maintains a patch of vegetation and provides nectar and fruit feeders.

If Blue-headed Quail-Dove has proven elusive at any of the main birding areas, stop for refreshment at Cueva de los Peces roadside restaurant (22°10'00"N 81°08'15"W), where more than a dozen birds can be seen at a time thanks to feeding by staff. Finally, Stygian Owl *Asio stygius* is more readily seen in the suburbs and dry forests of this region than anywhere else I know. One easy place to look for it is right at the Hotel Playa

Larga, where it can often be found in large trees or near street lights in the early evening close to the main road.

### Guaniguanico Cordillera (2 full days)

Cuban Solitaire *Myadestes elisabeth* (Near Threatened) and Olive-capped Warbler *Setophaga pityophila* share a similar disjunct distribution in extreme west and east Cuba, although the latter is also found in the north Bahamas. In practical terms, the easiest place to encounter the birds is therefore in the Guaniguanico Cordillera, an hour or so west of Havana. The 160-km-long mountain chain runs roughly east–west through the provinces of Pinar del Río and Artemisa. It is split neatly in two – Sierra del Rosario in the east, and Sierra de los Órganos in the west – by the Río San Diego, on which the town of **San Diego de los Baños** (*baños* referring to hot springs) provides the closest base to Havana from which to see the speciality birds. The warbler is associated with Caribbean Pine *Pinus caribaea* stands, which are found at several well-known birding sites, while the solitaire prefers more humid broadleaved or mixed forests.

**Parque La Güira** (Hacienda Cortina by its pre-revolution name), a few kilometres west of San



**22** Regulated harvesting of palm fruits for fodder at Área Protegida de Recursos Manejados Sierra del Chorrillo, Cuba – the haunt of Palm Crow *Corvus palmarum*, Plain Pigeon *Patagioenas inornata*, Cuban Parakeet *Psittacara euops* and Giant Kingbird *Tyrannus cubensis*. February 2016 (Christopher Sharpe/Rockjumper Birding Tours).



23

Diego within, is a nice place to spend an afternoon. Olive-capped Warbler can be found in the pines here (22°37'57"N 83°24'25"W), and Giant Kingbird *Tyrannus cubensis* (Endangered) can occasionally be found. Moreover, the property is home to a host of the more widespread Cuban endemics and plenty of boreal migrants amongst more than 150 species recorded.

Cuban Solitaire is most readily found at **Cueva de los Portales** (22°40'09"N 83°28'45"W), a national monument (commemorating the time that Ernest 'Che' Guevara lived in the cave during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis) half an hour westnorthwest of San Diego (driving through the entrance arch at 22°37'47"N 83°24'21"W). The area is best birded at dawn, when rival solitaires can be heard singing between the car park and the cave entrance.

On the drive to or from Havana, make time to visit Las Terrazas recreation area, within the **Reserva de Biosfera Sierra del Rosario**. This area was denuded of forest during the mid-20th century then replanted in 1968 with over 6 million trees; the name Las Terrazas refers to the 1,360 km of terraces constructed to facilitate the operation. The result is good habitat for Olive-capped Warbler and several other endemics. Fernandina's

**23** Arguably the least dependable of the Cuban endemics: Gundlach's Hawk *Accipiter gundlachi* at the established stake-out, Sierra del Chorrillo, Najasa, Camagüey, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com).

Flicker and Gundlach's Hawk can be seen here, but the small farms within the reserve are best known as sites for the striking Cuban Grassquit *Tiaris canorus*.

One more obligatory stop on the road to Havana is **Niña Bonita reservoir**. A café and bathroom on the east shore make a good viewpoint for scanning the water for unusual ducks, terns and gulls, some of which will not be seen anywhere else. Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* is regular, Redhead *Aythya americana*, Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* and Forster's Tern *S. forsteri* have occurred, and American Wigeon *Anas americana*, Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca* and Canvasback *Aythya valisineria* have been claimed.

### Najasa (1 full day)

The main reason for visiting Najasa, some 600 km east of Havana, is to put the observer within the range of 'Cuban' Palm Crow *Corvus (palmarum) minutus* (Near Threatened), which is now largely restricted to Camagüey province. This is also a

## TIPS FOR BIRDING CUBA

Cuba is an easy country for visitors. There are no venomous reptiles, very few biting insects, next-to-no personal-security issues, very little traffic – and Cuban people are sympathetic and helpful to the visitor. With all these advantages, it sounds like an ideal place for independent birders – and so it is. Nevertheless, for many reasons one should be prepared to work with a local guide in each region. The main reason is that local guides are highly trained (typically biologists actively involved in conservation projects) and usually know their home patch birds exhaustively – not just their visual characteristics, but their songs and calls, their habits and particularly where they are at that particular moment.

Perhaps more importantly, many of the sensitive protected areas *must* be accessed with a guide to ensure that the established protocols are followed; this applies especially to the complex of protected areas covering Zapata Swamp and to the cays. Finally, guide fees are an important source of income to the guides themselves, communities and a growing ecotourism industry. So see your local guides as friends and allies in both birding and conservation; a reputable guide is well worth the investment and will not disappoint. Since guides are virtually a requisite for visiting all these areas, little information is given by way of directions on how to reach birding sites on the assumption that your guide will get you there.

## WHEN TO GO

Having hooked up with a guide for at least part of your trip, the second question is when to go. For those who wish to see wintering birds (and avoid hurricanes!), the answer must be during the Northern Hemisphere winter. However, Cuban Martins *Progne cryptoleuca* are not reliably seen until February, which is the reason that most trips are scheduled during February–April. Note, however, that Antillean Nighthawk *Chordeiles gundlachi* only arrives in any strength during the latter month when many boreal migrants have departed.

## WHAT TO READ

Once the decision to visit Cuba has been taken, one must decide on a field guide. The classic is the *Field guide to the birds of Cuba* (Garrido & Kirkconnell 2000), which combines good text and maps with somewhat antiquated illustrations. Better plates can be found in two field guides to the birds of the West Indies (Raffaele *et al.* 2003 and Arlott 2010), and many birders carry just one of these. A North America field guide will come in handy for those unfamiliar with this avifauna or species' winter plumages. A forthcoming annotated checklist to the birds of Cuba (Kirkconnell *et al.* in prep.) will become a vital resource, providing exhaustive, up-to-date distributional and breeding data, together with insightful taxonomic notes.

stronghold of Plain Pigeon *Patagioenas inornata*, which has been eliminated (by hunting) from much of its former range and is now rarely seen elsewhere on popular birding circuits. It is also a reliable area for Giant Kingbird and Cuban Parakeet. Notwithstanding these specialities, it is a more widespread species that has put *Najasa* on the map in recent years: Gundlach's Hawk. This close relative, or perhaps subspecies, of Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii* is declining and persecuted as a predator of domestic birds to the point at which it is far from guaranteed on a typical birding trip.

The area that birders tend to visit is the Área Protegida de Recursos Manejados Sierra del Chorrillo a few km southeast of *Najasa*. Indeed, there is an official bird walk (Sendero Interpretativo de las Aves, beginning at 21°00'50"N 77°43'38"W), which gives opportunities for seeing all target species. Focus your time on checking stands of Royal Palms *Roystonea regia* as these are favoured by Palm Crows, which can usually be seen alongside superficially similar Cuban Crows *Corvus nasicus*. (The two species are readily separated by call, the Cuban name of *cau ronco* ['hoarse crow'] aptly describing Palm Crow's cawing, while Cuban Crow has a complex repertoire reminiscent of a parrot or even human speech.)

Cuban Parakeet nests in the palms here too. Giant Kingbird can be located by its characteristic call, or by scanning the Kapok *Ceiba pentandra* trees with which it invariably associates. A nest-monitoring programme for Gundlach's Hawk has led to the location of a number of nests, which, in turn, has put this area on the map as perhaps the place to get to grips with the bird. It is typically sought by spending an hour or two at a viewpoint mid-morning; however, this site is far from dependable, and the bird can absent itself for months on end. Finally, nearby **Arroyo Hondo Cemetery** (21°00'16"N 77°44'38"W) is an alternative place for Palm Crow and Giant Kingbird.

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# New bird species from the Neotropics: 50 years of discovery

David Brewer

In a contribution to our occasional series on features related to recently published books, author David Brewer explains how new species to science are revealed, celebrates the primacy of South America for avian novelties but warns that 'new' is often effectively synonymous with 'globally threatened'.



**1** Kaempfer's Woodpecker *Celeus obrieni*, male, Caxias, Maranhão, Brazil, June 2012 (João Quental). After going unobserved for almost 80 years, the rediscovery of this attractive woodpecker caused something of a sensation among Neotropical ornithologists.



3

**2** Cryptic Forest Falcon *Micrastur mintoni*, Rio Azul Jungle Lodge, Novo Progresso, Pará, Brazil, July 2016 (Bruno Rennó). An aptly-named bird; although widely distributed across Brazilian and Bolivian Amazonia, it was only recognised (initially by call) as being distinct from Lined Forest Falcon *M. gilvicollis* in 1997.

**3** Although initially described from the isolated Cerros del Sirá (Huánuco, Peru), Koepcke's Hermit *Phaethornis koepckeae* (Lamas, San Martín, Peru, January 2014; Robert Lewis/wingbeats.org) has since been found in several Peruvian departments.

'vaguely' is not one that modern scientists, of any discipline, are very happy to use; a more precise definition is needed to satisfy our requirements. Hence much effort has been expended on more clearly defining what exactly is meant by this single noun.

In recent years, many professional biologists have started to use what is known as the Phylogenetic Species Concept. This defines a species as any morphologically, behaviourally or genetically diagnosable population. Thus Nelson & Platnick (1981) considered a species as 'simply the smallest detected samples of self-perpetuating organisms that have unique sets of characters'. Cracraft (1983) gives a somewhat similar definition. However, this concept has practical problems, among them, in its purest form, not recognising the issue of subspecies, treating all

**A**n apparently simple question that is frequently asked, of both birdwatchers and professional ornithologists, is 'How many species of birds are there in the world?' And like so many such apparently simple questions, there is no simple answer.

For starters, one has to define a 'species'. In the mid-19th century, Charles Darwin (1859) put it in the proverbial nutshell when he wrote 'No one definition has as yet satisfied all naturalists; but every naturalist knows *vaguely* [my italics] what he means when he speaks of a species'. The word



**4** Grey-winged Cotinga *Tijuca condita*, Nova Friburgo, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 2014 (João Quental). Despite occurring within an hour's drive Brazil's second-largest city, confusion with female Black-and-gold Cotinga *T. atra* meant that this species remained undiscovered until 1980.

**5** Parker's Antbird *Cercomacroides parkeri*, male, Cerro Montezuma, Risaralda, Colombia, December 2001 (Daniel Uribe/birdingtourscolombia.com). The description of this quite widely-distributed species came from a careful analysis of museum specimens.

**6** Fine-barred Piculet *Picumnus subtilis*, Horto Florestal, Rio Branco, Brazil, January 2015 (Robson Czaban/wikiaves.com.br).

forms as equivalent (Erritzoe *et al.* 2007). As a result, with a phylogenetic approach, the number of valid species can be greatly increased, by a factor of two or three.

The more traditional approach, and the one most familiar to naturalists, both amateur and professional, is the Biological Species Concept, wherein individuals in populations are, largely, reproductively isolated; that is, broadly speaking, species do not cross with other species, and where that does occur, such hybrids are generally selected



against and do not persist as separate forms. Although exceptions to this rule do occur, they are exceptions. This concept of species was formalised by, above all others, Ernst Mayr and Theodosius Dobzhansky in the mid-20th century.

So, how many bird species are there? An estimate in the 1940s would have been about 8,500 valid species. Today, a figure of some 10,500 (but an ever-moving target) would be accepted by the majority of ornithologists.

## How new are 'new' species?

How did this increase, in all more than 20%, occur in such a short time? The great majority arose because forms previously regarded as subspecies were reclassified as full species. There has always been a conflict between 'lumpers' and 'splitters'. More recently, modern techniques ranging from our increased technical ability to analyse and compare vocalisations to an ever-increasing use of molecular genetics has had a huge influence on the species total. And this is a process that will undoubtedly continue, as a brief glance at, for example, the 'Taxonomic roundup' and 'Splits, lumps and shuffles' columns which have been a regular feature of, respectively, *Cotinga* and *Neotropical Birding* will attest. Previously monolithic groups such as the Emerald Toucanet *Aulacorhynchus* spp. or the Warbling Antbird *Hypocnemis* spp. have been shown to be far more complex than older, exclusively morphologically based, studies indicated (see Schulenberg 2017 for a synopsis of the former).



7  
 7 Vilacamba Thistletail *Asthenes vilcabambae*, Vilcabamba la Vieja, Vilcabamba, Peru, February 2015 (Miguel Lezama/Tanager Tours). An inhabitant of high-altitude páramo grassland where its population appears to be stable.

Nevertheless, a substantial portion of the increase in known species has involved the description of truly new forms, not derived from splitting. It is perhaps surprising that this is the case. After all, as the world has been explored biologically, surely one must get to the point where there are no new species to be discovered (we are, of course, talking about birds, not insects!) In fact, no less an authority than Ernst Mayr (1946) opined that ‘The period of new discoveries is practically at its end. I doubt if in the entire world as many as 100 species remain to be discovered.’

This has proven to be spectacularly, and interestingly, wrong. In a recently published study, (Brewer 2018), I give an account of some 288 species described worldwide between 1960 and about 2017. A further 50-odd have been revealed in (usually) peer-reviewed literature, without, as yet, a formal type-description. A good many others are known or professed to be ‘in the pipeline’. Adding these to the 57 described between Mayr’s paper (1946) and 1959, we come up with more than 400 new species for which there has been a type description or a valid disclosure, with many more on the way. All this without recourse to splits.

## South America: truly ‘the bird continent’

As might be expected, there is a strong geographical bias in recent discoveries. The Western Palaearctic turned up only two, one

of them cryptic. Africa, South-East Asia and the islands of Indonesia and Melanesia make a substantial contribution. But it is the Neotropics that provide the lion’s share. Slightly more than half of the 288 new species come from the continent of South America, with a further half-dozen from Central America and the Caribbean.

Within South America proper, it will also probably come as no surprise that the largest number of new species comes from Brazil (50), followed shortly by Peru (49). The other Andean nations also add significant numbers; Colombia (17), Ecuador (9), Argentina (8), Venezuela (5) and Bolivia (4).

The distribution of new species among bird families is also, perhaps, rather predictable. After all, if a bird wishes to remain undiscovered, it is a great advantage to be inconspicuous, secretive or nocturnal. Consequently, owls (28 species worldwide, 11 of them from South America) figure prominently. Antpittas, not known for their excessively flamboyant nature, provide seven new species. Although the novel tyrannids do include some strikingly plumaged species, such as Johnson’s Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilotriccus luluae* (globally Endangered) or Salinas Monjita *Xolmis salinarum* (Near Threatened), many of the 17 new tyrannids come from classically confusing genera such as *Phylloscartes*, *Zimmerius*, *Myiopagis* and *Serpophaga*.

In very many cases, discoverers of new species, often rather cryptic species, were alerted by

aural cues. Probably very few of the great 19th-century collectors paid much attention to calls; and an encounter with a volley of birdshot does tend to have something of an inhibitory effect on avian vocalisations. By contrast, in recent years ornithologists have frequently been made aware of the necessity of closer examination of a bird or bird population by song or call. The availability of recording equipment has been very important in this regard, by allowing both the comparison of vocalisations of different bird populations and playback experiments.

Nowhere have vocal clues been more important in unearthing new species than in the tapaculos (Rhinocryptidae), a morphologically conservative and obsessively furtive group of birds. No fewer than 15 new tapaculos, mostly of the genus *Scytalopus*, have been described since 1960, with at least another four on the way. In almost all cases the first indication of something new came from a distinctive vocalisation.

It quite frequently happens that, when a new, rather indistinctive species is described, a careful examination of existing museum material reveals examples, often collected many years ago, which have languished, unrecognised, in bird collections all over the world. Thus, for example, Restinga Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes kronei* (Vulnerable) was detected, by its distinctive call, in 1983. The species

was formally described nearly a decade later (Willis & Oniki 1992). However, an examination of existing material in the Museum of Zoology of Brazil's Universidade de São Paulo revealed a specimen taken in 1898.

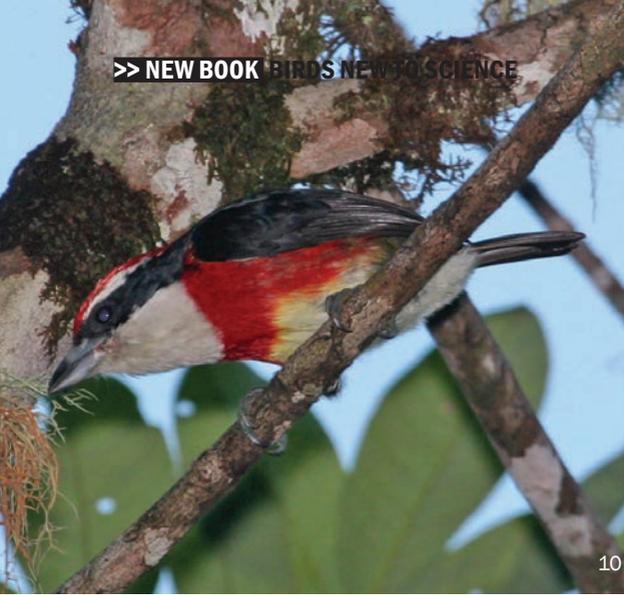
Similarly, while Foothill Eleania *Myiopagis olallai* (Vulnerable) was described, in 2000 (Coopmans & Krabbe 2000), from specimens taken in 1994 and 1996 (again being detected by characteristic vocalisations, in this case famously, by the late Paul Coopmans), a misidentified specimen was already in the American Museum of Natural History; the subspecies *M. o. incognita* was described by Cuervo *et al.* in 2014, based on 1940 and 1951 Venezuelan specimens, widely disjunct from the nominate race, and not so far observed in life. There are several other similar instances from the Neotropics, leading one to speculate that a meticulous examination of already-existing museum material might turn up more novel species. In fact, this has already occurred; Helmut Sick described Stresemann's Bristlefront *Merulaxis stresemanni* (Critically Endangered) in 1960, based on an 1830 specimen. Actual live birds were not observed until 2004, 13 years after Dr Sick's death.

Historically, new species of birds have often been discovered when isolated geographic features are visited for the first time. Unlike Indonesia,

**8** Rufous-browed Hemispingus *Hemispingus rufosuperciliaris*, Bosque Unchog, Peru, December 2009 (Christian Nunes). One of the most distinctive of its genus, more resembling a Rufous-breasted Warbling-finch *Pooispiza rubecula* than any other *Hemispingus*.

**9** Green-capped Tanager *Tangara meyerdeschauenseei*, male, Sandia, Puno, Peru, July 2015 (Miguel Lezama/Tanager Tours). Although the first specimen was collected in 1960, this tanager was only recognised as distinct in 1980.





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**10** 'Sira Barbet *Capito fitzpatricki*', female, Río Shinipo Valley, Cerros del Sirá, Ucayali, Peru, November 2008 (Michael Harvey). Taxonomic authorities are divided on whether this is a valid species or a subspecies of Scarlet-banded Barbet *Capito wallacei*.

**11** Scarlet-banded Barbet *Capito wallacei*, female, Plataforma, San Martín, Peru, July 2014 (Dubi Shapiro; pbase.com/dubisha). Unequivocally one of the most spectacular new birds to have come out of South America in the last 50 years.

**12** Pardusco *Nephelornis oneilli*, Bosque Unchog, Peru, August 2016 (Miguel Lezama/Tanager Tours). An enigmatic little bird of puzzling affinities; now regarded as an odd, atypical tanager.

South America is not rich in the offshore islands that have proven to be such a fertile source of new taxa; instead, mountainous areas, isolated from habitats of similar altitude by intervening lowlands, have contributed numerous new species. Three examples illustrate the point. First, the inaugural access to 'Hill 1538' (aka 'Barbet Peak'; see page 57) in Loreto, Peru quickly produced a charismatic new barbet, Scarlet-banded Barbet *Capito wallacei* (Vulnerable; O'Neill *et al.* 2000). Second, the Cerros de Sira in Peru have yielded some novel species (Graves & Weske 1987, Seeholzer *et al.* 2012), including a spectacular new barbet (the Near Threatened 'Sira Barbet *Capito fitzpatricki*', considered by the South American Classification Committee – whose taxonomy is followed by *Neotropical Birding* – to be a subspecies of Scarlet-banded Barbet) and a new tanager (Sira Tanager *Tangara phillipsi*); and the Sierra de Chiribiquete, an area of sandstone buttes rising some 900 m above the lowland forest of Caquetá, Colombia, harbours Chiribiquete Emerald *Chlorostilbon olivaresi* (Stiles 1996), apparently quite abundantly.



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## What else is out there?

Another frequently posed question is 'How many more new species can we expect?' Pace Mayr (1946), it does not appear that the pipeline is in any danger of running dry. In an appendix, Brewer (2018) lists a further 50-odd species (a dozen Neotropical) that have been 'trailed' but still await formal description, while numerous others have not reached even this stage.

It is probably true to say that most if not all species-rich habitats in South America have now been visited (in contrast to, for example, Indonesia; a truly remarkable four-day expedition



**13** Marsh Tapaculo *Scytalopus iraiensis*, São José dos Pinhais, Paraná, Brazil, November 2012 (Sergio Gregorio da Silva; Instagram: @sergiogregoriophoto). Quite widespread in distribution, but Endangered due to extensive habitat destruction.

**14** Johnson's Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilatriccus luluae*, Abra Patricia, Peru, April 2015 (Miguel Lezama/Tanager Tours). Extensive habitat destruction, especially in the Cordillera de Colán, has rendered this attractive bird Endangered.

in July 2016 to the unexplored Mount Meratus in Borneo produced two new species and one new race: Eaton *et al.* 2016). It seems likely that such treasure houses in South America have by now all been explored. Although it is quite extraordinary that some very easily accessed areas have still turned up conspicuous and unmistakable species – obvious examples are Araripe Manakin *Antilophia bokermanni* (Critically Endangered), Elfín Woods Warbler *Setophaga angelae* (Endangered) and Pink-legged Graveteiro *Acrobatornis fonsecai* (Vulnerable) – leaving one with a sense of wonder that they could have remained undetected for so long, it is probably reasonable to predict that future new discoveries will involve rather unspectacular groups such as tyrant-flycatchers or antbirds (and surely the tapaculo saga has a few more chapters to run?); or cryptic or nocturnal species. One would not be entirely surprised if further owls or nightjars have still to make their appearance.

## New species and conservation priorities

Brewer (2018) concludes with a survey of the conservation status of newly described species. This is, bluntly, alarming. Of the 10,279 extant species of birds recognised by the IUCN Red List in 2015, no fewer than 1,375 (13%) were in one of the categories of global conservation concern (A. Symes *pers.comm.*), which range from Extinct in the Wild to Near Threatened. (Clearly, the Red List

is updated annually, so the present numbers will have changed somewhat, particularly following BirdLife International's adoption of taxonomy presented by del Hoyo & Collar 2014, 2016.)

For newly described species, both worldwide and in the Neotropics, the situation is substantially *more dire*. Of the 154 newly described Neotropical species, a mere 42 (27%) were categorised as Least Concern. The remainder, almost three-quarters, were the subject of conservation anxiety or classified as Data Deficient. Twenty-four species were Near Threatened, 22 Vulnerable, 25 Endangered and a staggering 19 Critically Endangered.

The geographic distribution of species in this last category is informative. Nine come from Brazil, seven from Colombia, and one each from Argentina, Peru and Venezuela. In almost all cases, the culprit (of the species's endangerment) is habitat destruction. The plight of the Brazilian Atlantic Forest is well known, but rampant deforestation in many other countries has and is pushing many species to the brink, and in at least a couple of cases, probably already over it (the Critically Endangered Cryptic Treehunter *Cichlocolaptes mazarbarnetti* being one obvious example). It is sometimes said that South America may be unique among continents in not having lost any species in recent times; this is now probably untrue, and in the near future is depressingly likely to become more so. The study makes a sobering case for immediate and extensive action if we are not to lose yet more species in the Neotropics.



15

**15** Golden-backed Mountain Tanager *Buthraupis aureodorsalis*, Bosque Unchog, Peru, July 2015 (Miguel Lezama/Tanager Tours). One of the most spectacular members of a stunning genus, now Endangered due to habitat destruction.

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# Splits, lumps and shuffles

Thomas S. Schulenberg

This series focuses on recent taxonomic proposals – descriptions of new taxa, splits, lumps or reorganisations – that are likely to be of greatest interest to birders. This latest instalment includes: a new genus of potoo; a long anticipated split in Thrush-like Antpitta, and a remarkable three newly described species, a screech owl, an antbird, and a manakin.

## A name at last for a no-name screech owl

**T**he indefatigable collector M. A. Carriker obtained a specimen, almost 100 years ago, of a screech owl in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, in northern Colombia. Carriker was of the opinion that he had discovered a new species. In the final report on his expedition, however, it was entered as an odd example of

Tropical Screech Owl *Megascops choliba*, with the comment that ‘it certainly differs’ from other specimens, and ‘may very well represent a distinct form’ (Todd & Carriker 1922). The distinctiveness of this specimen was dismissed by later authors (e.g. Meyer de Schauensee 1949), and Todd and Carriker’s comments all but forgotten.

As birders began returning to the Santa Martas, however, there were encounters with a screech owl with a distinctive voice. A recent genetic analysis



Almost a century after first being noticed, the distinctiveness of **1** Santa Marta Screech Owl *Megascops gilesi* (Santa Marta Mountains, Santa Marta, Magdalena, Colombia, January 2016; Glenn Bartley/[glennbartley.com](http://glennbartley.com)) has finally been formally recognised with its description as a full species.

(Dantas *et al.* 2016, reviewed in *Neotropical Birding* 18: 24–25) confirmed that the Santa Marta bird most definitely is *not* related to Tropical, but instead is closer to Peruvian Screech Owl *M. roboratus*, Tawny-bellied Screech Owl *M. watsonii* and Black-capped Screech Owl *M. atricapilla*.

Now Niels Krabbe – another renowned field ornithologist – has formally described this species as Santa Marta Screech Owl *Megascops gilesi*; the species name honours Robert Giles, ‘who funded and took an active part in establishing a bird reserve near the type locality’ (Krabbe 2017). So, an armchair tick for many, as this owl has been reliable in recent years for visiting birders. On the other hand... Krabbe also reviewed the vocalisations of all Neotropical screech owls, and came away with the more disheartening suggestion that two other species may need to be lumped: Colombian Screech Owl *M. colombianus* is not distinguishable, by voice, from Rufescent Screech Owl *M. ingens*; and similarly, Napo Screech Owl *M. napensis* has the same vocalisations as Roraiman Screech Owl *M. roraimae*.

## A new genus for one *Nyctibius*

Potoos *Nyctibius* are well known for their camouflaged plumage and upright posture, with which they mimic a dead snag. But as Rufous Potoo *N. bracteatus* becomes better known, it emerges again and again as the exception to every potoo rule. Costa and colleagues – a veritable dream team of researchers with an avid interest in potoos – enumerate the many ways in which Rufous is the odd potoo out (Costa *et al.* 2018). Genetically it is quite divergent, sitting on a separate branch that places it at the ‘base’ of the potoo phylogenetic tree. Its plumage is not grey and brown but (of course) rufous, heavily spotted with white, especially on the underparts but also on the wing coverts. The iris is yellow, as in most other potoos, but has a unique dark wedge, just below the pupil. The skeleton, especially the skull, also differs in a large number of features from other potoos.

Some of the most intriguing differences between Rufous and all other potoos, however,



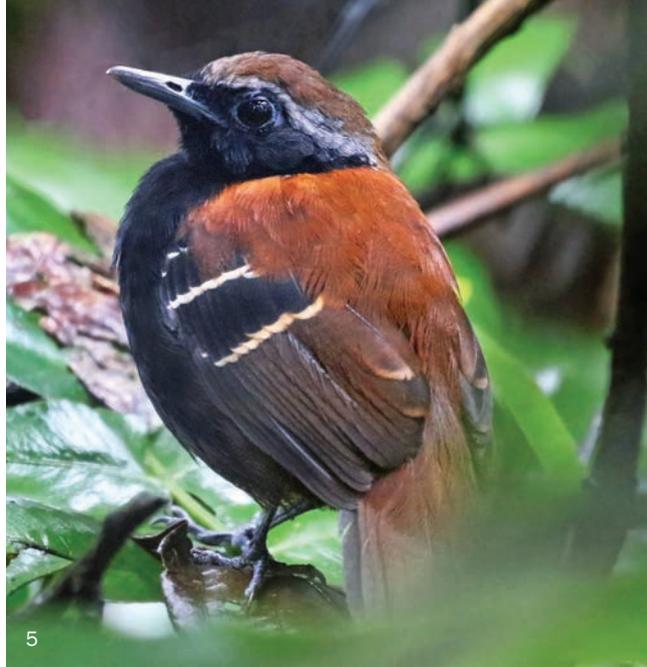
Genetic, plumage and behavioural lines of evidence justify a separate genus (*Phyllaemulor*) for Rufous Potoo *Nyctibius bracteatus*. For example, whereas **2** Great Potoo *N. grandis* (Transpantaneira, Mato Grosso, Brazil, September 2008; James Lowen/jameslowen.com) sits with its body aligned to the substrate, Rufous Potoo **3** perches on thin, roughly horizontal branches (Gareno Lodge, Napo, Ecuador, February 2016; Josh Beck/birdsofpassage.wordpress.com) and **4** even appears to imitate a large dead leaf (Gareno Lodge, Napo, Ecuador, February 2015; Ben Porter/benporterwildlife.co.uk).

are in behaviour. Unlike all other potoos, Rufous does not sit with the body aligned with the substrate, but instead perches on slender, more or less horizontal branches; therefore it positions itself perpendicular to the substrate. Costa *et al.* interpret the combination of roosting posture, and plumage colour, as mimicking the appearance of a large dead leaf, such as often are trapped in forest understory. When disturbed, other species of potoo close the eyes and slowly extend the neck upward, so that the body and bill are parallel to the perch, reinforcing the resemblance to a dead snag. Rufous Potoo does no such thing. Rather, it commences to slowly rock back and forth, which Costa *et al.* interpret as an effort to emulate a large dead leaf stirred by a light breeze. Indeed, Rufous Potoo may commence this rocking behavior under other circumstances as well, but apparently is most frequent in response to understory air currents. The combination of divergent genetics, morphology and plumage, and behaviour, impel Costa *et al.* to propose that a new genus, *Phyllaemulor* (roughly, 'leaf like'), be erected for this thoroughly remarkable bird.

## Striking gold in the Cordillera Azul

The Cordillera Azul is a large, isolated and mostly roadless range of Andean foothills in north-central Peru. This range was unknown ornithologically until the summer of 1996, when John O'Neill organised the first avifaunal survey of the region. When Dan Lane, a participant in the expedition, reached the top of one of the highest points in the Cordillera, he was surprised to discover a strikingly distinct new species, Scarlet-banded Barbet *Capito wallacei* (O'Neill *et al.* 2000). In view of the immense logistical difficulties in reaching 'Barbet Peak', it was big news when intrepid birders Todd Mark and Walter Vargas later discovered a new location for the barbet at a different location, then known as Plataforma. Now called Flor de Café, this site is accessible by road, albeit one that is unpaved and can be notoriously difficult to travel. Still, birders trickled in, eager to tick the barbet.

One such visitor was Josh Beck, who in July 2016 had one of the luckiest days of his birding life when he observed and audio-recorded an unknown terrestrial antbird. In what is close to record time in the modern era to move from discovery to description, Moncrieff *et al.* (2018) formally name this antbird as Cordillera Azul Antbird *Myrmoderus eowilsoni*. This is not yet another wholly grey (male) or brown (female) member of the family, but an honest-to-goodness



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**5** Cordillera Azul Antbird *Myrmoderus eowilsoni*, Flor de Café/Plataforma, San Martín, Peru, October 2016 (Andrew Spencer/Macaulay Library ML41480781). A stunning, entirely new species that somehow eluded detection by even experienced visiting birders.

stunner of an antbird, most similar to Ferruginous-backed Antbird *M. ferrugineus* of eastern Amazonia. Cordillera Azul Antbird remains known only from the vicinity of Flor de Café, but – as turned out to be the case with Scarlet-banded Barbet – no doubt it occurs elsewhere in this cordillera. After all, some highly skilled birders had visited Flor de Café and overlooked this species before Josh Beck encountered it, so it may even turn up at other sites that already have been surveyed. Time will tell on that score. The species name is a nod to E. O. Wilson, the renowned evolutionary biologist and conservationist.

## Lowland antpittas come into focus

Antpittas reach their greatest diversity in the Andes, but the distribution of the group is more widespread, and in fact two genera – *Hylopezus* and *Myrmothera* – primarily occur in humid lowland forests. Carneiro *et al.* (2018) performed a comprehensive phylogenetic survey of these lowland antpittas, based on DNA sequence data. Their study confirmed some relationships suggested by other lines of evidence, but also offered some unexpected insights.

One of the biggest surprises concerns Speckle-breasted Antpitta *Hylopezus nattereri*, which was classified as a subspecies of White-browed Antpitta *H. ochroleucus* until Whitney *et al.* (1995)



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A study of lowland antpittas has produced some fascinating findings. **6** Speckle-breasted Antpitta *Hylopezus nattereri* (Corvo road, Quatro Barras, Paraná, Brazil, June 2013; Adrian Rupp/Adrian Rupp Birding Tours) appears to be a sister species to all other lowland antpittas, and thus worthy of a separate genus. Meanwhile, **7** the widespread Thrush-like Antpitta *Myrmothera campanisona* (Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil, February 2015; Anselmo d’Affonseca) appears to have concealed a distinct species in its taxonomic mix, namely **8** ‘Tapajos Antpitta’ *M. (c.) subcanescens* (Belterra, Pará, Brazil, February 2016; Margi Moss/riosvoadores.com.br).

two species again are not closely related. An unexpected twist is that some *Hylopezus* – Thicket Antpitta *H. dives*, White-lored Antpitta *H. fulviventris* and Amazonian Antpitta *H. berlepschi* – are closer to the genus *Myrmothera* than they are to other *Hylopezus*, and so probably *Myrmothera* will be expanded to include them.

Finally, for listers, there is an important new split. It long has been known that one subspecies of Thrush-like Antpitta *Myrmothera campanisona* – namely *subcanescens*, which occurs in Brazil south of the Amazon and east of the Madeira River – has a song that differs strikingly from that of all other subspecies (Krabbe & Schulenberg 2003). Carneiro *et al.* now show that *subcanescens* also is genetically very distinct: closer, in fact, to Tepui Antpitta *M. simplex* than to other subspecies of Thrush-like! That’s a surprising biogeographic pattern (although in hindsight, the songs of Tepui and *subcanescens* are rather similar ...), but at any rate, that’s an obvious split. Tapajos Antpitta seems to be the going English name for *subcanescens* (del Hoyo & Collar 2016).

documented that these two differ vocally. Carneiro *et al.* find that not only is Speckle-breasted not closely related to White-browed, it is the ‘sister’ to *all* other species of lowland antpittas. They suggest that Speckle-breasted should be classified in a separate genus, which they indicate will be formally described in a separate publication.

The earlier split (Maijer 1998) of Masked Antpitta *H. auricularis* from Spotted Antpitta *H. macularius* also now has genetic support, as Carneiro and colleagues show that these



## Cordillera Azul redux

Scarlet-banded Barbet was not the only ornithological novelty that John O'Neill, Dan Lane and colleagues encountered in the Cordillera Azul back in 1996. On 'Barbet Peak' they also discovered an odd Striped Manakin *Machaeropterus regulus*: the males have a distinctive bold yellow patch on the breast, and their vocalisations also differ from

It has taken more than 20 years since the initial discovery, but **9a & 9b** Painted Manakin *Machaeropterus eckelberryi* (Waqanki Lodge, Moyobamba, San Martín, Peru, October 2015; Michael Harvey/LSU Peru Big Day) has been described as a new species, separate from Striped Manakin *Machaeropterus regulus*. The type description also endorses the split, already adopted by some authorities, between **10** Eastern Striped Manakin *M. regulus* (Serra Bonita Reserve, Camacan, Bahia, Brazil, March 2016; Ciro Albano/NE Brazil Birding) and **11** Western Striped Manakin *M. striolatus* (here subspecies *antioquiae*, Parque Ecológico Miravalle, Jamundí, Valle del Cauca, Colombia, April 2015; Juan José Arango E.: flickr.com/photos/jjarango).

those of standard Striped Manakin, populations of which occurred in the adjacent lowlands. Clearly two species were involved, but the rub is that the yellow-breasted highland form looks eerily similar to another subspecies of Striped Manakin, *aureopectus*, which occurs on the tepuis of southern Venezuela and adjacent Brazil (and adjacent Guyana?). And until recently, the vocalisations of *aureopectus* were undescribed. Newly available recordings of *aureopectus*, however, indicate that (surprisingly) its voice is similar to that of other western Amazonian populations of Striped Manakin.

Armed with this knowledge, then, Lane and colleagues describe the birds from the Cordillera Azul as a new species, Painted Manakin *Machaeropterus eckelberryi*. The species name honours the late Donald R. Eckelberry, 'one of the greatest American bird artists of the twentieth century' and a conservationist who contributed to the establishment of the Asa Wright Nature Centre on Trinidad (Lane *et al.* 2017). And, as with the case of the barbet, no one need fret about access to 'Barbet Peak' to see the new species: Painted Manakin turns out to be readily tickable by road near Moyobamba in the Mayo Valley in northern Peru.

Lane and colleagues also confirm a previously reported difference in vocalisations between Striped Manakins in eastern Brazil (subspecies *regulus*) and those in western South America (Whittaker & Oren 1999). Thus they endorse a split, already adopted by some (del Hoyo & Collar 2016), between Eastern Striped Manakin *M. regulus* and Western Striped Manakin *M. striolatus*.

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Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager  
(David Fisher/[www.neotropicalbirdclub.org](http://www.neotropicalbirdclub.org))

# Last call for the Peruvian Plantcutter

Jeremy Flanagan

Endemic to the coastal desert scrub of north Peru, the Peruvian Plantcutter *Phytotoma raimondii* is on a perilous downward slope. Threatened by continual deforestation and land-use changes, its last remaining sites are ever-smaller and increasingly fragmented. The final nail in the coffin could well be the massive dieback of 'Algarrobo' *Prosopis pallida* trees, which constitutes the key species in the Plantcutter's habitat and a main food source.

**T**he Peruvian Plantcutter inhabits open dry forest, desert scrub and riparian thickets, with records from sea level to 700 m altitude, although most are below 200 m. Being

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Unless otherwise stated, all photos were taken in Peru by Jeremy Flanagan.

herbivorous, it needs habitat with a reasonable diversity of bush and tree species. Such diversity is being lost, however, and with it the plantcutter. The species is currently classed as Endangered by BirdLife International (2018), although I believe that its situation merits a more thorough revision,

1 Male Peruvian Plantcutter *Phytotoma raimondii* on a 'Palo Negro' bush, Lobitos, Piura, October 2017.



>> GLOBALLY THREATENED BIRD PERUVIAN PLANTCUTTER



Threats to the Peruvian Plantcutter are depressingly many and varied. They include: **2** Deforestation of Algarrobo trees in plantcutter habitat, Quebrada Seca, Tumbes, August 2011 (Mónica Romo); **3** the burning of Algarrobo to produce charcoal, Salinas, Lambayeque, August 2017; **4** the illegal processing of Giant Squid *Dosidicus gigas* (using Algarrobo firewood) to produce feed for shrimp farms, Quebrada Ancha, Talara, May 2004; the explosion of invasive plants such as **5** Sponge Cucumber *Luffa operculata*, which suffocates native plants growing underneath, Santuario Histórico Bosque de Pómac, Lambayeque, August 2017; and **6** illegal fly-tipping of waste in plantcutter habitat, Quebrada Ancha, Talara, June 2006.



7 Male Peruvian Plantcutter *Phytotoma raimondii* on an Algarrobo tree, Lobitos, Piura, October 2017.

purging erroneous information and updating its current status. This article draws attention to the variety of issues that, in combination, present an increasingly complicated situation for the conservation of this species.

## Ever fewer, evermore widely separated sites

Endemic to Peru, the plantcutter's range – from the northern state of Tumbes south to Lima state – places it directly at odds with the country's human development. Of Peru's population of nearly 31 million, some 90% live along the coast, with burgeoning urban areas and land increasingly being developed for agriculture. The effect of such development on the plantcutter is clearly reflected in records.

Despite searches, the last records in Lima, from just two sites, were more than 35 years ago (Flanagan *et al.* 2009); it is reasonable to say the species no longer exists in the state. In Ancash, the plantcutter has been recorded at only three sites in the last 20 years, and only one in the last decade. Even worse at this latter site, torrential rain in early

2017 washed away vegetation, and colleagues have been unable to find the plantcutter there as of January 2018.

Further north is La Libertad state. Here the Andes descend almost to the coast, leaving only a narrow strip of low-lying land, which contains a handful of small sites for the plantcutter, surrounded by agriculture. The last remaining large area is north of La Arenita village, near Paijan. As a dry river course, the 500-ha site is unsuitable for farming or housing. Unfortunately, only about 20% of the site comprises suitable plantcutter habitat: perhaps 15–20 pairs cram in here.

Further north in Lambayeque state, the priority site is the 5,890 ha Santuario Histórico de Bosque de Pómac, which conserves adobe structures dating from the Sicán and Moche era. It is the only government-protected area for the plantcutter. The reserve harbours a variety of habitats, from arid scrub to tall, closed-canopy forest dominated by Algarrobo, which is restricted to the Río La Leche. Given that only a small proportion of the reserve, less than 20%, provides suitable plantcutter habitat, my prudent population estimate is around c.100 individuals here – lower than that suggested



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8 Female Peruvian Plantcutter *Phytotoma raimondii* on a Palo Negro bush, Lobitos, Piura, October 2017.

by Nolzco *et al.* (2014), for example. Elsewhere in Lambayeque, birds cling on at the well-known site of Rafán, but other sites have been lost to agricultural expansion over the last few years.

North again, in Piura, the priority area is Talara province, where records are widespread. Here, suitable habitat is generally restricted to dry gullies and valleys where groundwater maintains vegetation. In Peru's northernmost state (Tumbes), there were two reports in 2009 (Sánchez *et al.* 2009), but searches in 2012 failed to find the species (Romo *et al.* 2015). Whether a stable population remains in Tumbes has yet to be established; wider explorations are needed.

Put all this information together, and the plantcutter's overall situation is grim. It has a highly fragmented and declining population, that I estimate comprises c.1,000 individuals in a shrinking range. In my view, chance sightings at new locations probably relate to post-breeding dispersal by juveniles forced to leave their parents' territory (typically 1–3ha in size) in search of suitable new areas (which largely no longer exist). To consider sites briefly occupied by such transitory individuals as implying the existence of

a permanent or viable population would give an erroneously rosy picture of the species's status – and thus needs to be avoided.

## Threats are intensifying

In north Peru's rapidly changing landscape, little is being done to protect Peruvian Plantcutter and its habitat. The recent agricultural boom has seen large areas of land converted to plantations in Piura, Lambayeque and La Libertad. Illegal land invasions are a further threat. Moreover, there is neither specific legislation that protects rare wildlife such as the plantcutter from these land-use changes nor biodiversity-conservation standards in Peru's agricultural policies or practices.

Another serious problem is the invasion of non-native Tamarisk *Tamarix* sp. Trees are filling dry riverbeds; their proliferation is unchecked. A normally dry river course exceeding 40km in length, Quebrada Pariñas in Talara, has become overrun by this exotic. Tamarisks are a conservation nightmare, supplanting native vegetation, monopolising scarce groundwater and exuding saline droplets. The Talara situation

is aggravated by a lack of public or municipal authority awareness that the plant is so aggressive, which means that government agencies have offered no answers for controlling it.

## Algarrobo: the key problem?

A more insidious menace is illegal logging of Algarrobo trees to produce charcoal, mainly for chicken restaurants. With presumably hundreds of people involved, this activity is very difficult to control. And with numerous chicken restaurants depending on this supply there is no viable solution in sight. In January 2018, some 80 Algarrobo trees were removed from a key Plantcutter site near Talara – and this in the wake of years of illegal extraction. Talara's Algarrobo are peculiarly vulnerable given the major local industries of oil production and aquaculture. Thieves steal crude oil, then distil it over fires fed by Algarrobo wood to make rough kerosene. Further damage is caused by illegal processing of Giant Squid *Dosidicus gigas* to produce feed for shrimp farms; the squid is boiled using Algarrobo firewood. These activities have exacerbated deforestation in Talara for over a decade.

The final nail in the Plantcutter's coffin might well be the massive dieback of Algarrobo. This phenomenon was first detected in the state of Ica in southern Peru around 2003 (Whaley *et al.* 2010). It is now well advanced along the northern coast as far as Tumbes. The dieback is caused by a tiny fly *Enallodiplosis discordis* of the gall-midge family Cecidomyiidae, which is specific to the *Prosopis* genus. Exactly how this fly has proliferated and become so devastating is not fully understood, but its impact is manifest.

In some areas of the Bosque de Pómac, 40% of Algarrobo trees are dead (A. Juárez *pers. comm.*) and in some areas of Talara, the figure has reached 80–90% (*pers. obs.*). The dieback also affects rural communities who collect Algarrobo seedpods to produce the popular and nutritious syrup *algarrobina*, and as fodder for livestock. Anecdotal references indicate a reduction in both quantity of seedpods and in quality, as trees become sick and slowly die over several years. While healthy stands of Algarrobo trees can still be found, these are mainly restricted to watercourses where a greater availability of groundwater may increase disease

9 Singing male Peruvian Plantcutter *Phytotoma raimondii*, Lobitos, Piura, October 2017

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Among initiatives being taken to save the Peruvian Plantcutter *Phytotoma raimondii* are: **10** an annual Peruvian Plantcutter day in Talara municipality (May 2016); and **11** schoolchildren planting native trees near El Ñuro, Piura (May 2017).

resistance, and where the trees are protected from felling by local farmers.

Although relevant regional and national authorities have been aware of the dieback for several years, they have yet to take action. The impression given – to conservationists such as me, at least – is that government authorities are standing by while a unique habitat and its associated biodiversity disappear and while rural communities lose an important economic activity. The fate of Algarrobo matters because it is a main food source for the plantcutter. As Algarrobo is the dominant species in this sparse dry-forest habitat, its extirpation has serious consequences for the remaining vegetation. What exactly will happen is unclear – as is whether the Plantcutter viable populations can persist in Algarrobo-stripped habitat. But what is clear is that the deterioration of this dry-forest habitat continues unabated.

Worse, this loss will be irreversible, because reforestation based on Algarrobo would be a futile exercise. Although planted trees grow well, they would be infected by *Enallodiplosis discordis* within a year.

## What to do?

Clearly, the situation of the plantcutter and its habitat is parlous. Official threat categories become academic for those working day-to-day with the species, given that these appear not to galvanise official action. From the field, it looks unlikely that any kind of top-down conservation plan will be implemented. And every day, more of the plantcutter's habitat is destroyed. It is probably not hyperbole to say that no Peruvian Plantcutter now lives more than 20 m from some evidence of human activity, be it a road, track, oil pipeline, house, pylon, plantation, farmland, pig farm, cattle, goats, logging impact, charcoal production site, fly-tipping site or wind turbine. So what to do?

As there are ever fewer sites for the Plantcutter and those sites are being slowly degraded, the obvious recommendation would be to protect remaining sites wherever possible. However, some sites (mainly in La Libertad and Lambayeque) are so small – merely a few hectares – that they do not present realistic opportunities for effective conservation activities. Moreover, the agricultural

boom and land speculation have caused land prices to soar, which is a major constraint to the purchase of terrain for conservation. Buying habitat to create reserves does not seem to be the solution.

But that doesn't mean that action *per se* is futile. Vida Digna, a Peruvian NGO, established the project SOS Peruvian Plantcutter ([www.sosperuvianplantcutter.pe](http://www.sosperuvianplantcutter.pe)) in 2016. In a small way, this initiative seeks to redress some of the problems.

The project has started a small tree nursery in Sullana, Piura, specifically to propagate some important species growing in plantcutter habitat. One key plant is the 'Palo Negro' or 'Canutillo' bush *Grabowskia boerhaaviifolia*, which, fortunately, is easy to propagate and grows quickly and is important in the plantcutter's diet. Unfortunately, other important species such as 'Realengo' *Maytenus octogona*, 'Overo' *Cordia lutea*, 'Zapote' *Colicodendron scabridum*, 'Satuyo' *Cappari cordis crotonoides* and 'Vichayo' *Beautempsia avicennifolia* are difficult to propagate and extremely slow to grow, hampering even medium-scale cultivation. With the loss of the Algarrobo tree it is important to run trials growing other important (but less common) species.

The project has sold plants to a hotel development near Cabo Blanco, Talara, to bolster native vegetation and provide more plantcutter habitat. However, large-scale dry-forest reforestation is prohibitively expensive: only oil/mining companies and hotel chains might be expected to have the funds to spend on even such small-scale projects. At the University of Piura, the project has trialled 'cocoons' (manufactured by Land Life Company: see [www.landlifecompany.com](http://www.landlifecompany.com)) to assist cultivation of plants in arid conditions. This seems to work well, although the widespread use of cocoons in reforestation projects would require significant investment.

In Lobitos village, Talara, the project is collaborating with the NGO EcoSwell ([www.ecoswell.org](http://www.ecoswell.org)), working with local residents to propagate Palo Negro plants and seeking to create more plantcutter habitat around the village. In Talara, three schools have successfully lobbied Talara municipality to declare 25 May as *Día del Cortarrama Peruano* ('Peruvian Plantcutter day'). The project is seeking to have a 100 ha area on the

outskirts of the town declared as a reserve for the plantcutter. Funding from a NBC Conservation Award enabled the project to conduct further fieldwork in Lambayeque. Although the future of the Peruvian Plantcutter remains bleak and is unlikely to change anytime soon, a growing and dedicated caucus is working to raise awareness and to save this species from extinction.

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# An overview of bird records committees in the Neotropics

**Juan Freile, Alejandro Solano-Ugalde, Martyn Kenefick, Alexander Lees, Vitor Piacentini, Luis Sandoval, Thomas Valqui, Fernando Angulo-Pratolongo, Jhonathan Miranda, Olivier Claessens and Christopher Sharpe**

Neotropical bird records committees have been growing in numbers, remit and prominence in recent years. This feature – by members of those committees – explains how and why committees were established and encourages birders to submit their observations directly to committees as well as sharing through other means.

Inventorying the avifauna of the Neotropics seems a never-ending task. As we reach the last recess of the ‘Bird Continent’, moving deeper into mountains, valleys and floodplains, and farther out to sea, and the more in-depth we explore bird taxonomy, the total regional species list continues to grow (Balchin 2007). Thousands of scientific papers, monographs, audio recordings,

field guides and books cram our libraries (Freile *et al.* 2014). Most countries in the Neotropics now have at least one published field guide, checklist or monograph – and some countries have multiples. Further, some landmark publications have even tried to synthesise knowledge at the ‘subcontinental’ scale (Meyer de Schauensee 1966, Howell & Webb 1995, Raffaele *et al.* 1998, Ridgely

1 Sooty Shearwater *Ardenna grisea*, Grand Connétable Island, French Guiana, June 2016 (Kévin Pineau). The first record for French Guiana.





**2** Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*, Kourou, French Guiana, February 2016 (Olivier Tostain). The second record for French Guiana since the creation of the Comité d'Homologation de Guyane.

**3** Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Kourou, French Guiana, March 2014 (Roland Jantot). A regular visitor to French Guiana.

& Tudor 2009). The rapid growth of citizen science initiatives on the back of the digital revolution is increasing exponentially the amount of available biodiversity data, albeit of varying quality (Lees & Martin 2015, Davies *et al.* 2016). Yet our knowledge of the natural history, distribution, systematics, and conservation of Neotropical birds is still riven by shortfalls as is evidenced by the continued flux of rediscoveries, new country records, range extensions, taxonomic changes and even species new to science found in the field (Balchin 2007, Balchin *et al.* 2006).

Our knowledge of the avifauna of Neotropical countries is not homogenous between regions and nation states. Brazil, Argentina and Mexico lead the list of the better-documented Neotropical countries over the last two decades; and several steps behind come Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Peru, Venezuela, Panama, Bolivia and Cuba (Freile *et al.* 2014). The national bird lists of all these countries are considered fairly complete, at least considering contemporary standards of avian taxonomy (Barrowclough *et al.* 2016). National bird lists need periodic revision in order to keep them in line with taxonomic progress, incorporate additions, deletions and substitutions (Obando 2012, Piacentini *et al.* 2015). Reviews and updates are enhanced when peer-reviewed by a team of experts who deliberate about uncertain and remarkable records in the light of new evidence and incoming information (AERC 2016).

Validation committees are necessary in the Neotropics, given the snowballing amount of information archived and 'published' online, along with the steady advancement of formal publication. In particular, there is a need for evidence-based evaluation of first records for a country, which are often extralimital vagrants. The British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) established what is thought to be the oldest records committee

(1878) that compiled the first formal list of British birds (BOU, 1883). The BOU has been responsible for curating the official British bird list since then, and the formal British Birds Rarities Committee was established in 1959. Neotropical birders are a more than century behind, but right on time as Neotropical birding and ornithology continue to grow.

Bird record committees have solid, scientific, expertise-based foundations, and their decisions depend on collective agreements by either unanimity or majority voting of their members, whether they deal with distribution and status only, or handle taxonomy as well (Piacentini *et al.* 2015). Differences aside, all committees depend on combined knowledge and agreed decisions.

## Neotropical committees

To date, most Neotropical countries lack records committees and the seven that exist were established very recently (all since 1995, most since 2005; Fig. 11). Each committee revises and updates the respective country's bird list in two ways. First, by assessing 'old' undocumented or dubious records in the light of new information and by reaching a decision between members. Second, by studying new records which are submitted directly by observers or discovered by committee members on the Internet or in published material. Of course, with some countries' lists surpassing or approaching the 1,000 species bar revising records of *all* species occurring within national boundaries is an insurmountable task – and is not the committees' desire, anyway.

Committee review tends to focus on nominal 'rarities', a broad category that may encompass extralimital vagrants and scarce migrants, major range extensions, very low density and highly threatened residents, and 'missing' species that have not been observed for an extended period



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**4** Bonaparte's Gull *Chroicocephalus philadelphia*, Pacoa, Santa Elena, Ecuador, November 2013 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/sapayoa.com). The first record for Ecuador.

**5** Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens*, Pacoa, Santa Elena, Ecuador, November 2013 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/sapayoa.com). The second Ecuadorian record.



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of time. Some Neotropical committees handle all these types of records; others leave rare residents or range extensions aside. French Guiana has two parallel committees: one for rarities and the country's checklist and one for validating general bird records. Venezuela has two parallel committees as well: one for the country checklist and another for rarities and states' lists. Meanwhile, the Brazilian committee is the only one that maintains its own taxonomy.

## Assessing records

Bird record committees often have to process records of rare species with very different levels of evidence provided by observers. Some records received may be well supported with documentary evidence such as audio recordings, digital images, video or even specimens. Committees face tough decisions about whether to consider records unsupported by such voucher material and some choose not to evaluate records supported by only written notes and field sketches (and even by telemetry or other remote-track protocols; Carlos *et al.* 2010).

A hierarchy of documentary evidence, as suggested by Lees *et al.* (2014) – namely 1) specimens, 2) video footage and 3) photographs and sound recordings – might make committees' work easier. This hierarchical approach may vary between species, audio recordings being more important for some taxa and photographs for others (Lees *et al.* 2014). Still, it is not always possible to safely identify some birds even on the basis of photos, audio or specimens. For such records, additional information in the form of detailed descriptions of the bird(s) seen, sighting conditions (e.g. weather, light, distance, equipment, observers' experience, accompanying birders) is requested, and sometimes advice

is sought from external experts. In future, computer algorithms such as the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Merlin app (<http://merlin.allaboutbirds.org>) may play a role too.

## Committee processes

All records are evaluated and voted on independently by committee members; their votes are submitted to the chairman of the committee, and unresolved cases are recirculated for further assessment and discussion. New country records typically need unanimous voting; other records either unanimous or majority. The number of records received every year by Neotropical committees varies considerably, from less than 15 in some cases to more than 150 in others.

Records are received through each committee's webpage, via social media or by e-mail. Currently, a fair number of interesting records are not submitted to committees despite being uploaded to sites like eBird, WikiAves Brasil, xeno-canto, Internet Bird Collection, Faune-Guyane, or even disseminated on Facebook or Whatsapp chat groups. Some committees monitor such sites in order to keep track of unusual records. After voting, agreement and decision – either via online discussions or actual meetings – annual reports are prepared for publication.

## Reports and publications

Reports are not always annual, but most are published in peer-reviewed journals (e.g. Freile *et al.* 2017, Claessens & CHG 2015, CRAP 2016). Data on localities, observers' names, dates and other details of each record are published, along with documentary evidence. These publications become the official record of committee activities, but more importantly, they are reliable sources



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**6** Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*, road to 'Guatemala', Kourou, French Guiana, November 2012 (Michel Giraud-Audine). The second record for French Guiana and the second documented record for South America.

**7** Dwarf Cuckoo *Coccyua pumila*, Las Palmas, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, June 2016 (Roger Ahlman; [www.pbase.com/ahlman](http://www.pbase.com/ahlman)). The species was first recorded in Ecuador during 2012.



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for tracking down the status of rare species in any given country. They are also acknowledged as authoritative sources for records of rare species, including first country, region or continental records (Renaudier *et al.* 2011, Remsen *et al.* 2016). Likewise, the official list of bird species of each country is periodically published, either on committee webpages (e.g. Sandoval & Sánchez 2017, Freile *et al.* 2015–2017) or in peer-reviewed national journals (e.g. Piacentini *et al.* 2015, CRAP 2016). Whether published online or in a journal, the term 'official' emphasises the revised, discussed, and consented process by a team of experienced professionals, but not (for the avoidance of doubt) the official auspices of national governments. Following these official lists is highly recommended for the sake of stability and consolidation of Neotropical ornithology and birding.

## Some remarkable findings

Literally thousands of records have been reviewed and published by Neotropical committees (Trinidad and Tobago alone has reviewed 1,350 submissions to date), including some unexpected firsts for the country, region and sub-continent; bewildering rediscoveries; and first documentation for previously hypothetical species. This includes, for example, the first South American records of Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* (Claessens & CHG 2015) and Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* (Freile *et al.* 2013); the first Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens* in Peru (CRAP 2012); the first Amethyst Woodstar *Calliphlox amethystina* for Trinidad and Tobago (Kenefick 2016); and the first Mangrove Rail *Rallus longirostris* for Costa Rica (Sandoval & Sánchez 2017).

Some intricate cases have been resolved and others are still being debated. As the 2016–17

Audouin's Gull *Ichthyaeetus audouinii* in Trinidad and Tobago – the first for the Americas (Lallasingh 2018) – aptly illustrates, pretty much any Atlantic gull or even wader might show up. Meanwhile, austral migrants or tropical residents of mainland South American overshooting into Trinidad or Tobago are headaches for the Trinidad and Tobago Bird Status and Distribution Committee; examples include the ubiquitous genera *Elaenia* and *Myiarchus* (Kenefick 2012).

## Some controversial issues

The exponential growth of the eBird initiative requires increasing collaboration between committees, site reviewers and administrators such that interesting records are not lost and are properly evaluated. There are over 4 million images, audio recordings and videos supporting eBird records, but the bulk of hundreds of millions of records are nevertheless undocumented. Likewise, WikiAves (Brazil) hosts a rapidly growing rich media database with nearly 2.3 million photos uploaded by May 2018. It also has fairly consistent internal peer-review and measures in place to prevent permanent loss of voucher images. Interesting records posted to social media and the now seldom-used list-servers may also warrant committee scrutiny and publication; otherwise, there is a higher chance that these data will disappear in the *mare magnum* of the Internet.

Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) pose another big challenge. With several counts in the Neotropics now competing to be the richest in the world, the amount of undocumented records of 'rare' species or unreliable records of others may become an issue. Ideally, and resource permitting, committees need to monitor CBC data as well, in order to ensure that datasets are robust and 'rarities' adequately documented (Dunn *et al.* 2005). A



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**8** Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, Kourou, French Guiana, February 2010 (Jean-Pierre Policard). The second record for French Guiana.

**9** Vermiculated ('Roraiman') Screech Owl *Megascops guatemalae roraimae*, Montagne de Kaw, Régina, French Guiana, December 2010 (Jean-Luc Sibille). First reported in French Guiana during 2009; now known to be a rare resident.

similar approach works for the recently established Global Big Day and for other big birding initiatives (Seeholzer *et al.* 2015).

Committees are entirely dependent on the voluntary work of members and face considerable time and funding constraints, so prioritising their responsibilities is a must. Sharing experiences and advice between Neotropical committees is desirable, and steps towards this goal were taken in a symposium held during the last Neotropical Ornithology Congress, in Manaus, Brazil, in July 2015. There is yet to be an agreement, though, on the adoption of common rules and procedures, as has taken place in Europe (AERC 2016). Some relevant issues that can be agreed upon between Neotropical committees include the relative importance placed on different types of documentation (specimen, video, photo, audio-recording and telemetry track; e.g. Carlos *et al.* 2010), and how to handle the likelihood of escaped birds (with several dozen exotic species being traded as pets in the region) and ship-assisted arrivals as sources of rarities.

Deciding on common rules about whether to consider first national records without voucher evidence is something committees might want to agree on, but this discussion might persist for years. Likewise, debating which taxonomy to follow might last forever. If committee members have differing criteria, a common taxonomy for all Neotropical committees seems to be an improbable distant daydream (Garnett & Christidis 2017). Stability and meticulousness pushes some to prefer conservative taxonomies, speedier decision needs pushes others to prefer more liberal approaches. For Central American and Caribbean countries, an additional matter is their mixture of Nearctic and Neotropic avifaunas and taxonomists. Brazilians handle taxonomy

themselves. Should other committees follow their steps? Should committees stick to one or another taxonomy treaty religiously? Committees might also think about keeping track of abundance/status changes in order to appreciate, to some extent, trends in species populations. Lastly, it is important to have national borders (and territorial seas) well defined – an obvious but usually overlooked task (Straube 2003).

Luckily for readers, we will not get into these discussions any further in the present article! We will briefly plunge into another quarrelsome issue, though...

## A note about rejections

Digital photographs and audio-recordings are the most popular method to document bird records, resulting in a high proportion of accepted records (e.g. more than 90% in French Guiana and Trinidad & Tobago). The near-ubiquitous use of high-quality cameras and audio-recording devices makes obtaining documentary evidence for rarities increasingly the norm.

However, providing hard evidence of a record does not guarantee its acceptance. Identification pitfalls are commoner than we realise (Sibley 2002). For example, records committees have discovered that misidentified museum specimens or photographs supported subsequent records (Nilsson *et al.* 2014), and have even come across a few actual frauds. Lack of convincing evidence, insufficient or deficient descriptions and plain identification mistakes result in rejections of some submitted records. Often, observers are invited to provide further details and re-submit their records when a rejection does not necessarily mean an identification error. But this seldom happens. Some observers feel offended by a rejection. Few

observers (few people, in fact) are happy when someone else proves, or even suggests, that they are wrong.

Acknowledging that uncertainties are part of the birding game is crucial. Even accepted records can be re-examined and rejected in the light of new identification tools or a better knowledge of a species. Of course, committees do not seek to offend anyone. Reviewing and validating records is their job, and they should be professional in their decision-making process. Records submitted by committee members are often rejected as well! Such scrutiny can be retrospective. Some committees have invalidated previous published records in their process of revising their country's bird list, and removed species from the official checklist (CRAP 2012, Nilsson *et al.* 2014).

## Significant records in your notebooks?

Many observers now upload their observations online (see page 71). However, this unprecedented accumulation of data spread over various websites risks information being lost. As more Neotropical records committees are formed it is time to start

**10** Hudson's Black Tyrant *Knipolegus hudsoni*, near La Cachuela, Puerto Maldonado, Madre de Dios, Peru, May 2017 (Andy Walker/Birding Ecotours). There have been several previous records of this species in Peru, but this is the first submitted to the national records committee for voting. At the time of writing, no decision has been made, but, if this record is accepted, the species will probably be considered a rare austral migrant to the country.



## COMMITTEE WEBSITES

Brazil [cbro.org.br](http://cbro.org.br)

Costa Rica [avesdecostarica.org](http://avesdecostarica.org); [uniondeornitologos.com](http://uniondeornitologos.com)

Ecuador [ceroecuador.wordpress.com](http://ceroecuador.wordpress.com)

French Guiana [gepog.pagesperso-orange.fr/CHG](http://gepog.pagesperso-orange.fr/CHG)

Peru [www.corbidi.org/crap.html](http://www.corbidi.org/crap.html)

Trinidad & Tobago [rbc.tffnc.org/index.shtml](http://rbc.tffnc.org/index.shtml)

Venezuela [uvo.ciens.ucv.ve](http://uvo.ciens.ucv.ve)

digging out your old notebooks, and to share us any unpublished noteworthy observations and associated digital vouchers ('rich media = rich data'; Davies *et al.* 2016) you find. Visit our websites, explore country lists of 'rarities', have a look at reporting forms and contact us. Your data may help to fill gaps in our knowledge of species distributions, migration phenology and diversity patterns in the Neotropics. Of course, records even of common species are significant, worth being communicated to national committees, uploaded to online databases like eBird, or formally published.

If you are a Neotropical resident, encourage the ornithological community in your home country to create a records committee. We all will be happy to share our 'know-how'. If you are fond of publishing data yourself, go ahead. A number of regional and international journals are good repositories of this information, including the Neotropical Bird Club's *Cotinga*, the *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club*, *Revista Brasileira de Ornitologia*, *Check List* and *Ornitología Neotropical*, to name just a few.

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## >> FEATURE NEOTROPICAL RECORDS COMMITTEES

**11** General features of South American bird records committees. All committees listed maintain the country's bird list. All committees except those of Brazil and Venezuela produce annual reports. All except Venezuela produce a peer-reviewed report (and Venezuela expects to do so).

Country	Name	Created	Members	Which species	Voting (U = unanimous; M = majority)
Brazil	CBRO	1999	23	Rarities, new records	U
Costa Rica	Unión de Ornítólogos & AOCR	2010/2002	2-5	New records	U
Ecuador	CERO	2011	8-9	Rarities, new records, range extensions	New country: U; others: M
French Guiana	CHG	2005	6-8	Rarities, new records	New country: U; others: M
Peru	CRAP	2008	9-11	First and second country records, first documented records	M
Trinidad and Tobago	TTBSDC	1995	6	First country records, first documented records, rarities, new island records	New country/island: U others: M
Venezuela	CRAV	2010	5	Country and state level rarities, new records, range extensions	U

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# Club Noticeboard

*Compiled by Chris Balchin, NBC Secretary*

## NBC turns 25 in 2019

In 2019, the Neotropical Bird Club will celebrate its 25th anniversary. Details of special events will be made available shortly.

## A Code of Practice for Birders

The Neotropical Bird Club, in line with the other 'regional bird clubs' (i.e. Oriental Bird Club, African Bird Club and the Ornithological Society for the Middle East), has published a guide to good behaviour wherever and whenever they are birding. This is available on our website ([www.neotropicalbirdclub.org](http://www.neotropicalbirdclub.org)).

## Join the NBC community on social media

The Neotropical Bird Club is active on social media. The Neotropical Bird Club Facebook group ([www.facebook.com/groups/31491408108/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/31491408108/)) has nearly 5,200 members, and new threads and images meeting the group's guidelines are posted daily. Neotropical Bird Club's Twitter handle is @NeoBirdClub. We tweet Club news and all things to do with birding, ornithology and bird conservation in the NBC region. Join us!

## Donations – and making them regularly

We are grateful to Kenneth H. Cole, Sybrand de Bruin and James Fritzhand for their recent donations to the Club. We have made it easy for members to make donations to the Club on a regular basis. If you wish to help the Club in this way, please e-mail [secretary@neotropicalbirdclub.org](mailto:secretary@neotropicalbirdclub.org).

## Updated Privacy and Cookies Notice

The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came into effect on 25 May 2018. GDPR enhances previous data protection legislation in order to improve protection of your personal data (such as your name and address). NBC takes your privacy very seriously. We are committed to taking good care of your personal data. We never sell your personal data and only share it with individuals or organisations who need it to provide services for NBC (e.g. to send NBC journals or merchandise to you). We are committed to meeting regulatory requirements: e.g. we will only email or post to you specific information on fundraising trips, raffle tickets, volunteering opportunities and regional developments if you have 'opted in'; you can adjust your preferences at any time at [www.neotropicalbirdclub.org/keeping-in-touch](http://www.neotropicalbirdclub.org/keeping-in-touch).

You can read about how we collect, use and share your personal data, see the 'Privacy and Cookies Notice' at [www.neotropicalbirdclub.org/privacy-cookies](http://www.neotropicalbirdclub.org/privacy-cookies), e-mail [secretary@neotropicalbirdclub.org](mailto:secretary@neotropicalbirdclub.org) or write to us at the Club address on the inside front cover. We will regularly review and update the Club's 'Privacy and Cookies Notice'. We will post any update on the Club website.

## Members' e-mail addresses

With ever increasing postage costs the Club can save considerable money by using e-mail to communicate with members. We would like to move to sending membership renewals by e-mail instead of by post. If we do not have your preferred e-mail address or you have changed it recently it would help the Club if you could please send it to us at [membership@neotropicalbirdclub.org](mailto:membership@neotropicalbirdclub.org).

## Opportunities to help the Club

Do you live near to Rutland Water, UK, and have space (such as an attic) where we might store display material for the Club's stand at the British Birdwatching Fair (Birdfair)? From time to time we need volunteers to take on roles for the Club. These are not trustee positions so do not involve becoming part of Council or attending Council meetings. We are particularly keen to find people with knowledge of web-editing, marketing or database management. In each case, if you are keen to help or learn more, please e-mail [secretary@neotropicalbirdclub.org](mailto:secretary@neotropicalbirdclub.org).

## Sponsored Memberships

Every year we allocate a number of sponsored memberships to people in the Neotropical region who are unable to join the Neotropical Bird Club under normal circumstances.

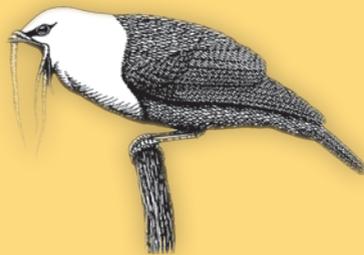
These are chosen from suggestions by Club members. If you know of someone in the Neotropics who you think would benefit from being a member of the NBC, but who cannot afford to join, please e-mail [secretary@neotropicalbirdclub.org](mailto:secretary@neotropicalbirdclub.org). Please pass us their details and explain why you judge the Club should grant them sponsorship.

Please can members consider upgrading their membership to Sponsored Membership level? This will enable the Club to allocate more sponsorships to deserving Neotropical ornithologists and birders. If you choose not to specify a recipient we will allocate one from the list of suggestions submitted by members.

## NBC Corporate Supporters

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- Birding North Peru [www.birdingnorthperu.com](http://www.birdingnorthperu.com)
- Birdquest [www.birdquest-tours.com](http://www.birdquest-tours.com)
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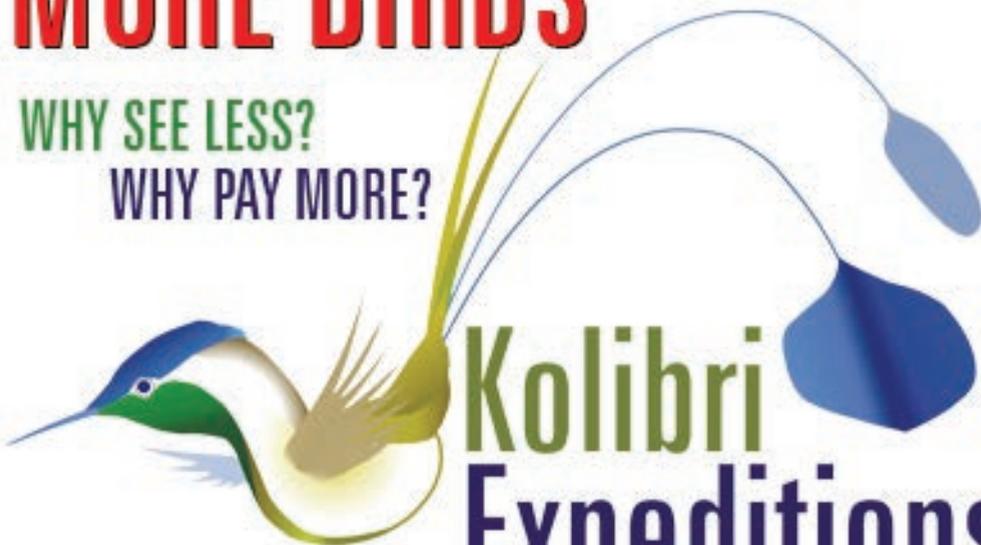
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Contributions should be in English and are considered by the Editor and an Editorial Committee, and accepted subject to editing. All contributions or enquiries should be sent by e-mail to [neotropical.birding@neotropicalbirdclub.org](mailto:neotropical.birding@neotropicalbirdclub.org)

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