

The Grey-bellied Comet – threatened enigma of the Peruvian Andes

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Grey-bellied Comet *Taphrolesbia griseiventris* occurs only in the Andes of northern Peru, and is considered globally Endangered. Little is known about this extremely scarce bird, but best estimates put its population at around a thousand individuals. Recent fires have seriously damaged the Comet's only reliable site, on the Río Chonta, which a local and international campaign is now seeking to restore.

One of Peru's rarest hummingbirds, Grey-bellied Comet *Taphrolesbia griseiventris* remains, for the most part, poorly documented. When *Threatened Birds of the Americas* (Collar *et al.* 1992) was published, knowledge of the bird consisted of a few specimens collected from the 1870s–1920s from the regions of Cajamarca region (at Paucal, Cajamarca city and Cajabamba) and Huánuco (at Cullcui) plus a single sight record by Ted Parker III in 1975 between the towns of Huánuco and La Unión. Even as early as the end of the 19th century, the

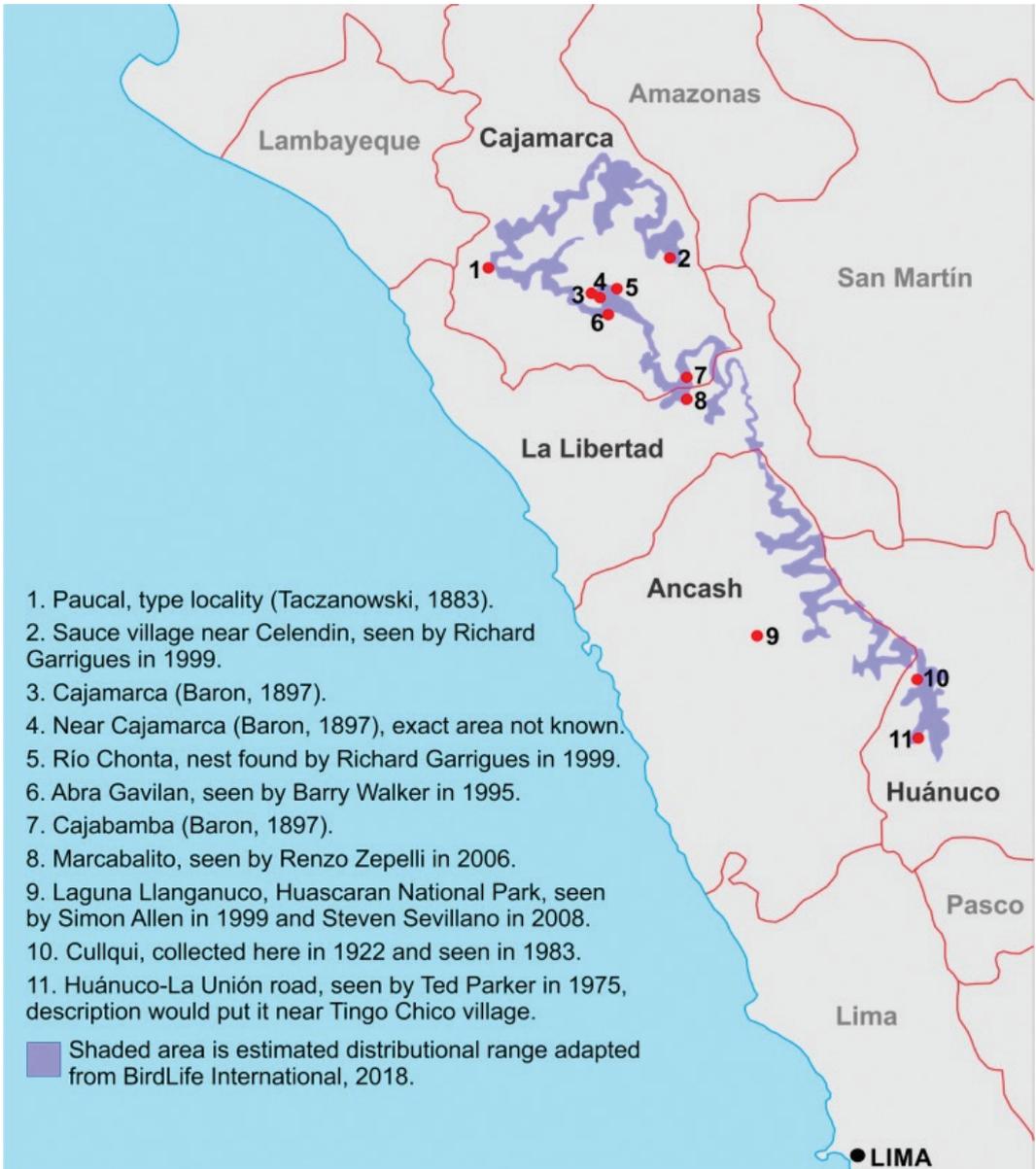
species was considered uncommon and one of Peru's rarer hummingbirds in the region by Oscar Baron (1897), a naturalist who spent considerable time travelling and collecting hummingbirds in the north of the country.

Recent observations

Over time, more sightings emerged. The species was recorded again near Cullcui in 1983 (BirdLife International 2018), although it has not been seen there subsequently. In February 1995, Barry Walker saw two adults below the El Gavilán

1 Male Grey-bellied Comet
Taphrolesbia griseiventris,
Río Chonta, Cajamarca,
Peru, September 2018
(Nick Athanas/
Tropical Birding).





2 Distribution of Grey-bellied Comet *Taphrolesia griseiventris*, with named localities (Jeremy Flanagan).

pass on the road from Cajamarca city to the coast. Simon Allen saw the species in July 1999 near Laguna Llanganuco in Parque Nacional Huascarán, and subsequently Steven Sevillano sighted the species in 2008 (eBird checklist S4315921). The year 1999 saw Richard Garrigues discover a nesting female in the lower Río Chonta valley c.10 km northeast of Cajamarca city in February (where Jonas Nilsson also saw the species in June) plus another female above Sauce village, near Celendin (Garrigues 2001). The species was

also sighted by Renzo Zepelli near Marcabalito, La Libertad Region, in 2006 (BirdLife International, 2018). Such records started to indicate that the Comet was distributed more widely – albeit still very patchily – than previously thought.

Unpicking the enigma

It was Richard Garrigues’s publication (Garrigues 2001) that sparked interest in Río Chonta as a potential area for Grey-bellied Comet conservation.



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3 Male Grey-bellied Comet *Taphrolesia griseiventris*, Río Chonta, Cajamarca, Peru, September 2018 (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding).

4–5 Male Grey-bellied Comet *Taphrolesia griseiventris*, Río Chonta, Cajamarca, Peru, May 2018 (**4** Wilson Díaz Miranda/Green Tours; **5** Carlos Soto).

On the recommendation of Mikko Pyhälä, former Finnish ambassador to Peru, I was invited to Cajamarca in 2000 by Hotel Laguna Seca, in Baños del Inca, to conduct bird surveys. In November, I found Comets at different spots along the Río Chonta. With the continued support of Hotel Laguna Seca, I conducted further studies over the next two years. This included field trips with Rob Williams and Alfredo Begazo in February 2001 during which we found three nests and identified ten food plants. In September 2002 I accompanied a Field Guides Inc tour, led by Rose Ann Rowlett and Richard Webster, to the best spot on the Río Chonta.

And thus the Río Chonta quite quickly became established as *the* spot to see the Comet. This area has provided confirmed records of the species regularly over the last 20 years, which is good news. The troubling bit is that this is the only 'guaranteed' site for a globally threatened species.

Despite searches, the Comet has not been recorded again at Parker's site (BirdLife International 2018). Nor did Rob Williams, Alfredo Begazo and I find it during 2001 surveys at a host of other sites, including El Gavilán pass, Cumbemayo, Namora, La Encañada, Laguna San Nicholas, and the upper Río Chonta as far as Combayo. No new sites have been found in Cajamarca, despite formal fieldwork and birding visits over the last decade or so by experienced Cajamarca birders such as Manuel Roncal, Carlos Soto and brothers Carlos and Wilson Díaz. In November 2018, Manuel Roncal, a professor at Cajamarca National University, and university students searched in vain for the Comet around Cajabamba.

Although data on eBird (ebird.org) suggest that the Comet has been recorded at other sites, I personally consider the information to be dubious for several reasons. One example relates to single observations by individuals on brief visits (e.g. eBird checklists S47530292, S47412158 and S24286847). Some reports cause confusion because they combine bird lists from several sites, then assign this combined catalogue to one site (e.g. the Comet figures on lists for Laguna San Nicolas (eBird S49223874), Municipalidad Choten (eBird S28585358), Cajamarca region (eBird S33074671) and departamento Cajamarca (eBird S36262793). Other records indicate that the observer was traveling and thus do not pinpoint location (eBird S36911054 and S38483426). Finally, some observers have apparently inaccurately located their observations on a map (e.g. eBird S31808714, S27040729 and S38483426). Regretfully, in the case of the Comet,

eBird checklists appear to generate considerable frustration rather than assist research.

Overall, a cautious list of known historical sites for the Comet would comprise 11 locations (Fig. 2). Taken together, these data would seem to underline the hypothesis that Grey-bellied Comet is an extremely rare and localised species and also to highlight that the Río Chonta valley is presently the critical site for the species.

Río Chonta

The Río Chonta runs through a narrow, steep valley and is easily accessed from Cajamarca along the road going to Combayo and beyond. From the lower valley (near the bridge from Ventillas de Otuzco ($\blacktriangle -7.116290^\circ, -78.443515^\circ$) and Richard Garrigues' original site) heading upriver, the Comet has been seen at different spots along a 7 km stretch, up to and around a very narrow canyon in an area known as Sangal ($\blacktriangle -7.083705^\circ, -78.400203^\circ$). To download a Google Earth file (.kmz) that I have prepared, please visit tinyurl.com/chonta2018.

Along the Río Chonta, Grey-bellied Comet inhabits open and generally quite dry scrub with a good diversity of plants. The hummingbird appears restricted to roadside plants and small side valleys with adequate vegetation. In 2002, botanical surveys were conducted along the valley at six spots where there is regular Comet activity (including three known nesting sites). This identified c.60 species of shrub, bush, tree and bromeliad. Two native bushes *Tecoma sambucifolia* and *Delostoma integrifolium* are common food sources for the Comet. Photos have shown the Comet accessing *Delostoma* nectar via existing flowerpiercer *Diglossa* holes.

The habitat at Río Chonta, however, is increasingly under pressure from grazing and burning. Farmers in the region have long converted most reasonably flat land into pasture or cropland. They also apply a practice that is common throughout the Andes, namely burning the scrub every year to stimulate regrowth of browsable vegetation and, intriguingly, in the belief that this activity will bring rains. Highly detrimental to local flora and fauna, such traditional activities will have to be controlled if species such as the Comet are to be protected.

Disaster strikes

In early September 2018 Manuel Roncal alerted Peru's birding community to a fire that was burning out of control on several slopes in the upper Río Chonta valley. Worse still, the fire



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6 The narrow Sangal canyon along the Río Chonta (Cajamarca, Peru, July 2001; Jeremy Flanagan), with healthy vegetation.

7 The area a few steps north of the Sangal canyon (Río Chonta, Cajamarca, Peru, July 2001; Jeremy Flanagan), in an area that would be flooded by a proposed reservoir (page 61).

8 Nest of Grey-bellied Comet *Taphrolesia griseiventris*, Río Chonta, Cajamarca, Peru, July 2001 (Jeremy Flanagan).

9 Nest site up a side ravine at Río Chonta, Cajamarca, Peru, July 2001 (Jeremy Flanagan); nest is hidden by overhanging leaves and roots

10–11 Río Chonta, Cajamarca, Peru (Jeremy Flanagan). Two images of the 2001 nest site at Río Chonta, Cajamarca, Peru (Jeremy Flanagan) – **10** taken in July 2001 and **11** in September 2018 – illustrate the extent to which natural vegetation has been removed.

>> GLOBALLY THREATENED BIRD GREY-BELLIED COMET



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12–17 Native vegetation burnt by fire at the best known site for Grey-bellied Comet *Taphrolesbia griseiventris*: Río Chonta, Cajamarca, Peru, September 2018 (Manuel Roncal-Rabanal).



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was at precisely one of the best spots to see the Comet, where it is known to have nested twice. Manuel had gone there that day to film a television interview on the Comet and birdwatching in Cajamarca but was confronted by an entirely different story. The fire had been started by a local farmer to clear a patch of land, but quickly spread out of control over the steep valley. In total, some 130 hectares of an already scarce habitat was burnt. It was time to act, and quickly too.

Manuel raised the alarm by calling Carlos Díaz of Green Tours, who in turn spread the news to the conservation community. An initial response was

organized by ECOAN (Asociación Ecosistemas Andinos), Peru's leading bird-conservation organisation, with funding swiftly provided by the American Bird Conservancy (ABC). This brought together bird conservationists (including myself), journalists, local authorities and other interested parties for four days in Cajamarca in late September, with the purpose of designing a sustainable conservation plan for the Chonta valley. It was shocking to see at first-hand the damage caused by the fire, especially around the two spots where I had previously watched the Comet rear young. Seeing the Comet against a

backdrop of charred mountainside consolidated participants' shared concern that something needed to be done to conserve the Chonta valley and its unique birdlife.

A rescue plan?

At the time of writing (early December 2018) solid progress has been made. In November, ECOAN president Constantino (Tino) Auca Chutas visited ABC and secured new funding for long-term actions. This will fund an environmental education programme with the local school and a community plant nursery that has capacity to grow 50,000 plants, producing native species on which the Comet can feed and fruit trees to provide extra income for farmers. Cajamarca biologist Carlos Soto has been hired by ECOAN to oversee the nursery, which will also employ members of the local community. Ideally the area needs protecting as a reserve, which ABC and ECOAN are considering. This will call for some creative thinking: a single reserve is probably not feasible due to remnant native vegetation comprising small, highly fragmented patches mixed with agricultural land.

On my visit in early December 2018, I walked the whole 7 km up and down the valley, collecting seeds of native plants. I was struck by the highly degraded nature of the remaining patches of native vegetation. Garnering support from local communities and restoring this valley is not going to be easy. Another consideration is the proposed construction of a reservoir in the upper valley, which will essentially close off the Sangal canyon. How this will affect conservation activities and whether remedial actions can be costed into the reservoir budget are both currently unknown.

Much work lies ahead, in the Chonta valley and beyond. Further searches for Grey-bellied Comet are needed to help clarify its distribution and conservation status which is a prerequisite for potentially protecting additional sites. Conservation work in the Río Chonta valley will also benefit other sought-after species of interest to birders such as Black Metal-tail *Metallura phoebe*, Rusty-crowned Tit-Spintail *Leptasthenura*

pileata, Plain-tailed Warbling-Finch *Microspingus alticola* (Endangered), Rufous-breasted Warbling-Finch *Poospiza rubecula* (Endangered) and Rufous-eared Brush-Finch *Atlapetes rufigenis* (Near Threatened). The determination of those who are striving to restore the Río Chonta valley and its Grey-bellied Comets deserves widespread recognition: their efforts inspire hope that the area will continue to be a key site for these wonderful hummingbirds – and all birders who travel to see them.

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