

>> NEW BOOK THE BIRDS OF NORTHERN SOUTH AMERICA

The problems with plumage variation

Robin Restall

When I retired 11 years ago and settled in Venezuela, my intention was to work with birds and see what contribution I could make, if any. I began working as a volunteer at the Colección Ornitología Phelps (COP), in Caracas, and became increasingly involved in the taxonomy of specimens in the collection. As visiting birders came to the museum to acquire help identifying their 'mystery' birds, I came to recognise what I termed the 'shoehorn' syndrome whereby an unidentified bird is 'shoehorned' onto a certain plate in the field guide and 'ticked' as the species it appears closest to. Furthermore, I was finding it difficult or even impossible to identify or confirm tentative identifications of many specimens.

The more I became involved, the more frustrated I was at the paucity of illustrations and details of geographical variation in the literature for northern South America, and I decided that I should do something about it. If the illustrations didn't exist, then I would paint them. The field guides by that time were fairly good but they did not even depict all of the species, let alone all of their plumages. In my naivety, I imagined that I could prepare the artwork in a year or two, and two colleagues at the museum volunteered to assemble the basic text and distribution maps. In addition, I would research describing the subspecies. In our enthusiasm and innocence, we decided to embrace all of northern South America, from Ecuador to French Guiana, including the Netherlands Antilles and Trinidad & Tobago. In the end, the book has taken ten years and we would all like a few more years to apply the lessons we learned during its progress!

The accompanying plate from the book (no. 175: antpittas 4) is a perfect example of the book's great strength, and weakness. On the right-hand side are depicted 12 individuals of a single species, Scaled Antpitta *Grallaria guatemalensis*, including four races of the five that occur in the region covered by the book. For one race, I have illustrated four plumages revealing the progression from juvenile to adult, a sequence that can be applied to the other races depicted. There are also single adults of two more races and five adults of

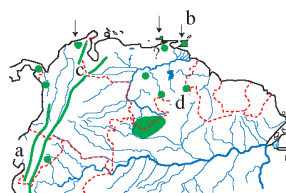
the race *roraimae* that show well the extent of individual variation within a widespread race (or are there new races awaiting description?). Finally, there is an example of the classic taxonomist's problem—a taxon known from only a single specimen. There are many cases in the book of species or subspecies having been described from a lone specimen—with arguments and learned papers postulating that it is a hybrid, or extinct, or an aberrant individual, or something else. This particular bird was collected on Isla Margarita, off the north-east coast of Venezuela, and is the only specimen from that island. Billy Phelps senior did not like describing new taxa from single specimens, so this one was set aside with the remark, 'await further specimens'.

In contrast, the two drawings of Variegated Antpitta *G. varia*, are perfectly adequate depictions of adult birds representing each of the two races that occur in the region, but I had very few specimens to hand and simply do not know whether there are significant plumage differences between juvenile, immature and adult, or whether the species has the propensity for variation shown by Scaled Antpitta.

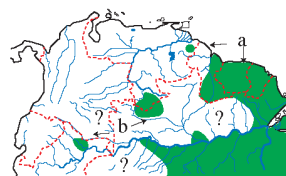
The third species illustrated on the plate, Plain-backed Antpitta *G. haplonota*, illustrates another phenomenon that appears far less in the literature than in real life, the distinct morph—an alternative plumage that occurs (usually, but not necessarily) throughout the range of the species. In this case, the COP series from Paria Peninsula, and that I had available from Ecuador, were both too small for a green morph to be included—that is, if it occurs in either race! It is certainly quite distinctive, but that in itself suggests an avenue for further research into the integrity of the taxon.

Birds of northern South America: an identification guide by Robin Restall, with Clemencia Rodner and Miguel Lentino, is published in two volumes by Christopher Helm, London. Volume 1 (800 pages) contains the species accounts and Volume 2 (640 pages) the maps and colour plates. Over 2,300 species are included, with almost 6,400 individual colour illustrations and many line drawings.

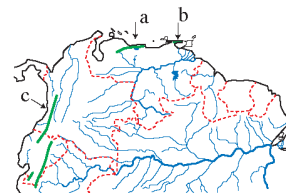
PLATE 174: ANTPITTAS 4



1 Scaled Antpitta
18cm; T-Te; R; lf/r



2 Variegated Antpitta
20.5cm; T-LS; R; lf/u



3 Plain-backed Antpitta
17cm; UT-S; R; lc/r

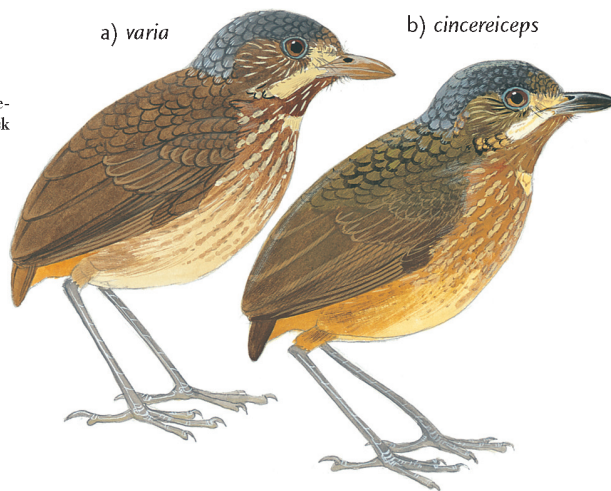
damp, wet forest
floor and secondary
woodland

2 Variegated Antpitta
Grallaria varia

a) *varia*

b) *cincereiceps*

mostly active pre-
dawn and at dusk

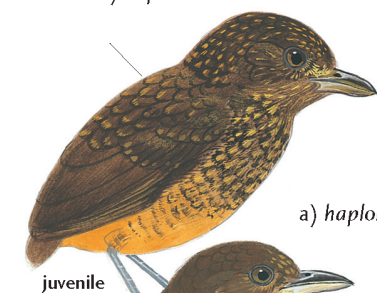


Double-page spread from the forthcoming
*The birds of northern South America: an
identification guide* by Robin Restall,
Clemencia Rodner and Miguel Lentino
depicting geographical and age-related
plumage variation in three species of
Grallaria antpittas. Artwork by Robin Restall.

a) *haplonota*

3 Plain-backed Antpitta
Grallaria haplonota

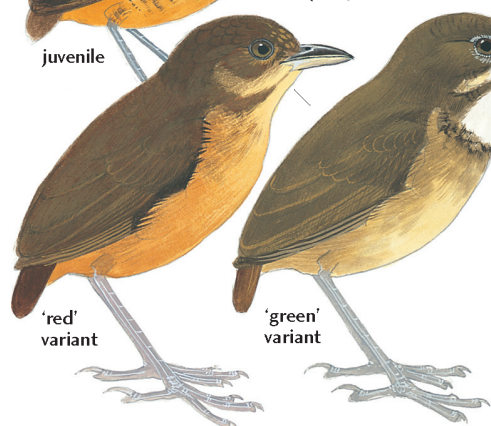
race *chaplinae* (d) is like *haplonota*
but more greenish-olive on back,
crown lightly scaled black



a) *haplonota*

b) *pariae*

c) *parambae*



'red'
variant

'green'
variant

in dense undergrowth
of cloud forest,
favours steep slopes

1 Scaled Antpitta
Grallaria guatemalensis

