



Albert Earl Gilbert

The Horned Curassow *Pauxi unicornis*, no longer a myth
(Al Gilbert, reproduced with permission from *Curassows and related birds*¹)

>> BIRDING AT THE CUTTING EDGE TWO RARE CURASSOWS

Birding in Bolivia: putting two rare curassows on the map

Joseph A. Tobias and Josep del Hoyo

The Wattled Curassow *Crax globulosa* and Horned Curassow *Pauxi unicornis* are creatures of myth and fantasy. How many ornithologists have caught a glimpse of even one of them? Not many. And how many people of any description—globe-trotting birder or tribal hunter, living or dead—have seen them both in the wild? Virtually, if not actually, none; that is until now!

In the space of one week we searched for these species at two Bolivian sites, and met with great success. The purpose of this article is to spread the word that this satisfying experience is available to anyone halfway adventurous. Anyone, that is, with about nine days and a few hundred dollars to spare.

This was not always the case. Wattled Curassow—known locally as the ‘Mamaco’—was only recently rediscovered in Bolivia³, where it is known to survive along a single Amazonian backwater (aside from some remote sites in Colombia, Peru and Brazil). Horned Curassow—aka the ‘Unicornbird’—lives far from roads in the heart of a montane wilderness where few ornithologists have ventured. The subspecies *koepckeae* occurs in Peru, but here it seems restricted to the remote Cerros de Sira. The nominate race, with the tallest, straightest horn, is the most spectacular member of the genus *Pauxi*, and (if previous unsubstantiated Peruvian records are rejected) is a highly threatened Bolivian endemic, perhaps worthy of species rank^{1,2}. Until recently both these curassows were essentially inaccessible to birders—no tours had ever tried to track them down, and no reliable sites were known—so it marks a major change in fortune that both can now be seen in such a short space of time.

This transformation owes much to the pioneering work of Asociación Armonía, a vibrant conservation organisation based in Santa Cruz de la Sierra. In line with its role as the Bolivian partner of BirdLife International, Armonía has established a range of Threatened Species projects, two of which target these rare curassows. In both cases, Armonía’s staff has been involved from the outset, participating in

explorations that led to a clearer understanding of distribution and status, initiating studies of ecology and biology, and finally establishing community-based conservation projects. As part of this ongoing work, and in the hope of ensuring sustainable community involvement, two new ecotourism projects are being developed. As first customers, we took great pleasure in visiting them in September 2005.

We started with the Wattled Curassow, for which the key locality is the río Negro, a minor tributary of the río Beni, in dpto. Beni and the site of the species’ rediscovery in Bolivia in 2001, as a result of which the Mamaco Project has been established. The guiding vision behind the project is an ecotourism venture managed by an indigenous community, thereby offering a sustainable development option for local people. Already, the project has its own boat (with canopy), its own tents and inflatable mattresses, plus a team of cooks, porters and guides. We took this trip with Hugo Aranibar, the knowledgeable and accommodating Bolivian biologist who coordinates the project.

The first leg of the journey involves a five-hour boat ride from Rurrenabaque, itself served by daily flights from La Paz. Once disembarked at San Marcos, visitors continue by foot to an intermediate camp, at a small lake graced with Hoatzin *Opisthocomus hoazin* and Sungrebe *Heliornis fulica*, two hours from the south bank of the Beni. The site itself, the upper río Negro, is reached the following afternoon following a further seven-hour walk. This schedule may sound gruelling, but the trails are presently clear and flat, the pace is relaxed, and a team of porters carries all your food and equipment. This means that visitors are free to walk unencumbered,

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Lower elevation foothill forest in Parque Nacional Amboró, Bolivia, home to the Horned Curassow *Pauxi unicornis* (J. A Tobias)

which is fortunate as the path passes through some interesting habitat, including extensive *várzea* and shorter stature semi-deciduous forest.

On the second morning the quest begins. Fortunately, with the help of local guides, this doesn't usually take too long. Wattled Curassows and Razor-billed Curassows *Mitu tuberosa* are often found in tall riverine trees at this site, sometimes in mixed groups, roosting, loafing or foraging for fruit. They are shy after decades of hunting, but sufficiently common that anyone spending a full day has a very good chance of seeing both species quite well. Over the course of two mornings we saw seven different Wattled Curassows, including a family group, along with perhaps 20 sightings of Razor-bills. It was almost too easy, but this kind of success-rate makes the long walk worthwhile.

A visit to the río Negro should be undertaken in the dry season, July–December, as otherwise much of the forest is flooded. On the basis of our experience, we suggest that the trip should be planned as follows: **DAY 1** Take an early flight from La Paz to Rurrenabaque, and meet a Mamaco Project staff-member at the airport. Set out by boat around 10am, and reach, after the five-hour boat ride and two-hour walk, the intermediate camp on the río Negro trek. If you

leave much later from Rurrenabaque you risk falling short of the intermediate camp, and leaving yourself a longer walk the following day. **DAY 2** Arrive at the río Negro in the afternoon after a seven-hour walk. Look for Wattled Curassow, and sleep in the riverside tented camp. **DAY 3** Make a further search for Wattled Curassow in the morning, leaving in the afternoon for one of two intermediate camps (four or seven hours away, respectively). **DAY 4** Walk the rest of the way to the río Beni (five or two hours distant, depending on which camp is reached the evening before), and meet the return boat before noon, allowing enough time to reach Rurrenabaque before nightfall (the upriver boat ride occupies around six hours). Check in for a hot shower and a good sleep at the Hotel Asai in Rurre, just one block from the La Perla restaurant, an ideal place to sample a celebratory beer (fingers crossed!) and one of the local river fish specialities.

Flights leave Rurrenabaque each morning for several tantalising destinations, including Riberalta, Trinidad and Santa Cruz. Once you have made your way to the latter, you are ready to start afresh in search of another rare curassow.

By the time of our visit, Armonía's Horned Curassow Project was at a relatively early stage of development, and our mission was characterised

by an experimental flavour, which we enjoyed. We hired a car for five days in Santa Cruz, picked up Rodrigo Soria, coordinator of the project, and drove to Ichilo, the northernmost guard post of Parque Nacional Amboró. Here, accompanied by a team of porters from Ichilo village, and a park guard named Salvatierra, we began to climb the first ridge of the Andes. We reached the summit campsite, a mere 700 m above sea level, after only one hour of walking, but be warned that the last section involves a very steep ascent.

At dawn the next day we walked the main ridge trail through verdant forest, hearing a singing Horned Curassow around 7am. When we clambered down the rugged slope in pursuit, the bird vanished like a sprite. After a full morning on this trail we began to feel uneasy about our chances of success, and bemoaned the lack of further trails cutting across the slopes where the habitat seemed better. Arriving back at camp defeated, fearing another week was needed to find our bird, we bumped into Salvatierra.

By his expression we judged him to be pleased with himself, not to say smug, so we quizzed him about his morning. He had walked up from the guard post at dawn to accompany us, he reported, but had taken the right-hand ridge-trail where we had taken a left, and—now he came to the source of his good humour—about 100 m along he had found a Horned Curassow near the trail. At first we couldn't quite believe him, thinking he was pulling our leg, but then he fished out his Sony snapshot camera, opened the latest file, zoomed in, and presented it triumphantly. There, we could just make out, dimly but unmistakably, the iconic head of the Unicornbird.

Ah, the digital age. Whereas painful truths were once discarded as mere fancy, now we have Bolivian park guards with point-and-shoot cameras. We had taken the wrong turn, evidently, but we were thrilled to have come so close. Salvatierra's sighting revitalised us, and we struck confidently along the right-hand trail first thing the next morning. Within an hour there was a sharp note from somewhere close by, low to our left, the alarm note of a curassow, but temptingly unfamiliar. We froze, and moments later a huge black-and-white bird fluttered onto a higher perch, half obscured, its outlandish blue bayonet held aloft. We crept about elatedly, eventually getting a clear view, until it dropped from its perch and sailed downslope into hidden canopies. In this case, you'll just have to take our word for it. Our views lasted only a few blissful seconds, the video stayed in its case, the camera fell

accidentally in all the excitement and the hot-shoe of the flash broke off (again!). Alas, we can offer no digital record of our success, and perhaps that is a fitting outcome for a bird as close to myth as *Pauxi unicornis*.

We did see another individual a few hours later, equally well, equally briefly, and we could hear two more singing downslope. On the basis of these observations, and Rodrigo's records from various sites, this seems to be the best and most accessible locality to look for the species. Again, we suggest the following itinerary for an assault on Ichilo ridge: **DAY 1** Leave Santa Cruz early and drive three hours with a project staff-member to Ichilo guard post (the road is rough for the last few kilometres, so make sure you have a fairly large 4'4 for the trip—at some stage such might be available through the Horned Curassow Project). Pick up porters at Ichilo, leaving the car at the guard post, and walk one hour to the ridge camp. **DAY 2** Walk the main ridge trail from dawn, hoping to bump into a Horned Curassow. **DAY 3** Ditto, until successful. Given the relatively healthy population at this site, it's hard to imagine that it would take more than four days to find a Horned Curassow.

Early morning is the best time to search for them, afternoons the worst, and the optimum season is October–December; by early September the birds were singing plenty, but the ridgetop streams were still dry, so we had to arrange for a porter to fetch water daily from the foot of the ridge (take containers!); by January torrential rains may pose just the opposite problem. If camping is unthinkable, it would be possible to stay in rustic cabins near the guard post, and undertake the one-hour climb each day.

If you take these trips, there is a multitude of other species to look for along the way. You might find Orinoco Geese *Neochen jubatus* along the río

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Field photographs of male (top) and female (bottom) Wattled Curassow *Crax globulosa* taken at río Negro, dpto. Beni, Bolivia (J. A. Tobias)



Beni, Sulphur-bellied Tyrant-manakins *Neopelma sulphureus* at the río Negro, or Band-bellied Owls *Pulsatrix melanota* at Ichilo. And there is always the option of tagging on a trip to see Bolivia's endemic macaws, the Blue-throated Macaw *Ara glaucogularis* and Red-fronted Macaw *A. rubrogenys*.

Most importantly, not only will you have a very good chance of tracking down two magnificent curassows, you might just play a part in safeguarding their future, which still hangs by a thread. If the San Marcos community sees no profit in protecting Mamacos, it is hard to believe they won't return to the río Negro to hunt them. On the Ichilo ridge trail, too, we found freshly spent cartridges, and heard that hunters enter the national park almost at will (the guards, poorly paid and ill-equipped at the best of times, rarely venture on patrol). In both cases, carefully managed, low-key ecotourism has the potential to have an impact. And your trip will make a difference. If you are interested in taking any of these trips, you should get in touch with Armonía: armonia@armonia-bo.org. Whatever happens, this is Bolivia we are talking about. It's certain to be an adventure!

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