

>> FEATURE RECENTLY REDISCOVERED SPECIES

Back from the dead!

A potpourri of recent rediscoveries in the Neotropics

Chris Balchin

The first issue of *Neotropical Birding* featured articles on poorly known Neotropical birds and newly described species. Here Chris Balchin charts a complementary course through recent rediscoveries; birds feared extinct, but now refound.



Long-whiskered Owlet *Xenoglaux loweryi* at Abra Patricia, Peru, 2007 (Dave Geale)

The rediscovery of a lost species is arguably more important than the discovery of a new species, though finding either is the dream of many birders and ornithologists. The main difference is that a lost species has a definable presence; it can be specifically discussed, considered, debated and evaluated, and can therefore become part of birding lore. In contrast, one can only speculate what the next new species to be discovered will be. Add to this the joy or even relief that a species has not been lost forever, and one can easily see why a rediscovery carries such importance. Most rediscoveries can be anticipated, particularly with the opening of formerly 'no go' areas in countries such as Colombia, yet others are the result of unstinting and determined fieldwork, whilst others are the result of pure chance. This article celebrates some recent rediscoveries—most since the Club's establishment in 1994—recognising the finders' contribution to ornithology and bird conservation. The selection of species is fairly arbitrary and governed mainly by the availability of publishable photographs.

Plain-flanked Rail

Rallus wetmorei

This rare denizen of the northern Venezuelan mangroves was originally discovered in 1943, but subsequently went missing between 1951 and 1999. David Ascanio and Robert Ridgely took the honours when they found a healthy population near Tucacas in the province of Falcón (see Steve Hilty's 2003 publication *Birds of Venezuela*, p. 273). Potential observers of this Endangered species should be aware of the possibility of confusion with Clapper Rail *R. longirostris* which inhabits the same mangroves, as the barring on Clapper Rail may not be that easy to see in the undergrowth.

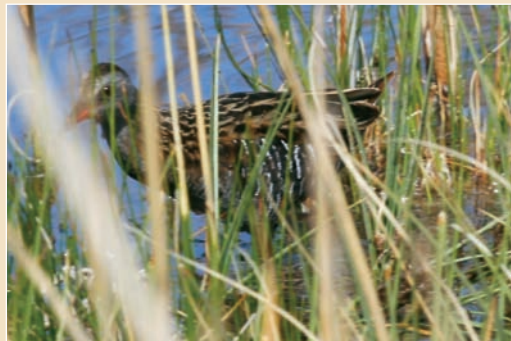
Austral Rail

Rallus antarcticus

In the early 1990s, BirdLife International's Nigel Collar once commented to me that the rediscovery of Austral Rail was the biggest avian prize available for anyone birding Argentina, as it was inconceivable to him that this rail had become extinct. However, the prize was not claimed until



Plain-flanked Rail *Rallus wetmorei*: note the plumage variation in this species (Left: David Southall/Ascanio Birding Tours; Right: Ron Hoff)



Left: Austral Rail *Rallus antarcticus* (George L. Armistead)

Right: Austral Rail *Rallus antarcticus* at Hacienda Angostura, Argentina, November 2006 (Fabrice Schmitt)

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January 1998, when Juan Mazar Barnett, Marco della Seta, Santiago Imberti and German Pugnali decided to make a concerted effort to locate the species. They reasoned that as the Austral Rail was closely allied to Virginia Rail *R. limicola* its voice might be similar. They thus checked all suitable habitat along the Calafate to La Angostura road, Santa Cruz province, by playing a tape of Virginia Rail. On arriving at Estancia La Angostura, they had not even commenced playback when they heard what had to be Austral Rail. One individual was tape-recorded and gave sufficiently good views to validate the rediscovery (*Cotinga* 10: 96–101). Since that day, the rail has been found at a number of sites and even in Chile; its global conservation status is currently evaluated as Vulnerable. The estancia of the original discovery remains one of the best sites to see the species—as demonstrated by the accompanying photographs.

Blue-throated Macaw *Ara glaucogularis*

For most of the 20th century the Blue-throated Macaw was poorly known, with a few specimens and a low number of birds entering the pet trade from Beni, Bolivia. Within Bolivia its distribution was understood by traffickers, which in 1992 Charles Munn reviewed and published internationally (*Wilson Bull.* 105: 694–695). The population was only known north and south of Trinidad until the discovery of a new population 100 km west in 2004 by Mauricio Herrera/Armonía. The Armonía/Loro Parque Fundación Blue-throated Macaw conservation program has subsequently estimated the population to be 150–250 individuals. The species remains Critically Endangered due to the illegal pet trade and habitat destruction. As part of Armonía's conservation actions, they are developing a tourism project protecting the species and its habitat in Beni.

Long-whiskered Owlet *Xenoglaux loweryi*

Discovered in 1976 and known only from two sites, the Long-whiskered Owlet has drawn many ornithologists to the Abra Patricia area of northern Peru hoping to catch a glimpse of this near-mythical beast, whilst its appearance on the cover of *The annotated checklist of Peruvian birds* (published in 1982 by Ted Parker *et al.*) ensured that it became known to a wide audience. Eventually, a group of researchers including Dan Lane and Thomas Valqui struck lucky in 2002,

“Discovered in 1976, the Long-whiskered Owlet has drawn many to Abra Patricia, hoping to catch a glimpse of this near-mythical beast”

when the species was rediscovered, or, more correctly, proven to be still extant (see *Bird Conservation* December 2005: 24). Only when the owl's habits are known will its true population and status be truly understood; it is currently considered Endangered. In the meantime the best policy is to ensure the protection of the forest around Abra Patricia, the main site from which this enigmatic beast is known. In February 2007 researchers from the Peruvian conservation group Asociación Ecosistemas Andinos (ECOAN) encountered a bird in daylight and were able to make prolonged observations as well as obtaining a series of photographs, two of which are shown here, along with one from 2002. Full details can be found at <http://www.abcbirds.org/media/releases/whiskeredowl.htm>

Black-breasted Puffleg *Eriocnemis nigrivestis*

First described in 1852, from Tumbaco in Ecuador, the Black-breasted Puffleg was presumably once quite common as there are over 100 specimens in museums (see, e.g., BirdLife International (2000) *Threatened Birds of the World*, p. 317). The species was not seen between 1950 and 1980, when three were seen. It was not until 1993 that the species was located with some regularity on the isolated forest ridges at Yanacocha, on the slopes of Volcán Pichincha, above the city of Quito (*Cotinga* 1: 8–9). Apparently the puffleg is not resident at this site, as the species is absent between February and November, when it is believed to migrate to lower altitudes in search of flowering food plants. The species is considered Critically Endangered. Recent publicity has led to the forest at Yanacocha being protected by the Ecuadorian authorities.

Colourful Puffleg *Eriocnemis mirabilis*

The most ornate member of the genus *Eriocnemis*, Colourful Puffleg, is aptly named. Since its

discovery by John Dunning in 1967, at Cerro Charguayaco, Cauca, in south-west Colombia, the species has eluded many who have searched for it, though Mark Pearman was lucky, observing a male and two females at "Planchon" in April 1987. In 1994 Luis Mazariegos set himself the task of relocating the species and after numerous visits to the type locality his perseverance paid off in November 1997 when he observed and photographed a female. This species is very local and has only ever been seen in the vicinity of Cerro Charguayaco within Munchique National Park, where it favours wet forest at 2,200–2,440 m, but like Black-breasted Puffleg, the species is thought to undertake altitudinal migrations. It is considered Critically Endangered.

Kaempfer's Woodpecker *Celeus obrieni*

Joe Tobias *et al.* used the first issue of *Neotropical Birding* (1: 10) to postulate that this apparently 'lost' bird (only shortly beforehand elevated to species level) might be ripe for rediscovery. Astonishingly, within weeks, they were proven correct. On 21 October 2006 Advaldo Dias do Prado and Professor Pedro Ribeiro were undertaking a faunal survey as part of an environmental impact assessment for proposed road improvements, near Gioatins, Itacajá, Tocantins, northern Brazil. They removed an unidentified woodpecker from their mist-net which they later identified as Kaempfer's Woodpecker (A. Dias do Prado *in litt.* 2007). Thankfully, ornithologists on subsequent visits to the area have also encountered this stunning woodpecker. The process of understanding its behaviour and status is now underway. Further details of the rediscovery will be published in a forthcoming edition of *Cotinga*.

Bolivian Recurvebill *Syndactyla striatus*

Apparently skulking and restricted to a narrow altitudinal range of 650–900 m along the eastern Andes, in the Yungas of Bolivia, a gap of 48 years between records of the Bolivian Recurvebill is perhaps unsurprising. The species was rediscovered in August 1989, by Ted Parker, John Bates and Guy Cox, during a survey of the río Saguayo Valley within Amboro National Park, dpto. Santa Cruz (*Wilson Bull.* 104: 173–178). There are now recent records from fewer than ten locations (<http://www.birdlife.org>). In theory, its distinctive vocalisations should enable the species' presence to be easily detected, so this recurvebill

may be genuinely rare and sparsely distributed. It is considered globally Vulnerable.

Orinoco Softtail *Thripophaga cherriei*

This furnariid is only known from its isolated type locality along the río Capuana, a low-lying affluent of the upper río Orinoco in southern Venezuela, where it was discovered in 1890. The Orinoco Softtail was obviously fairly common in 1970 when G. Pérez apparently obtained 23 specimens in one month (see Steve Hilty's *Birds of Venezuela*, p. 486). It was not seen again until June 1999 when the species was relocated by Javier Colvée and Tomás Revilla, with subsequent observations of up to three individuals, and a single bird trapped at Junglaven (*Handbook of Birds of the World* 8: 301). That it inhabits such a remote area of Venezuela has no doubt helped to preserve its mystery and for the present may well ensure its survival. The size and extent of the population of this Vulnerable species are almost completely unknown, but the bird appears to be easily located by the few birders who have ventured to the area.

Black-hooded Antwren *Formicivora erythronotos*

Although rediscovered as 'long ago' as 1987, this species had been missing for over 100 years, and consequently had been feared extinct. Such a distinctive species may have gone unseen for two reasons. The type locality was probably incorrect and the species had been placed in the wrong genus. These errors choked efforts to rediscover it, because observers were looking in the wrong place, for the wrong sort of bird and listening for inappropriate vocalisations. However, since 1987 the species has been found at six separate sites, all in one of the most developed areas of Brazil (<http://www.birdlife.org> and *Handbook of Birds of the World* 8: 616), which just goes to show how difficult it is to categorically declare that a species has been extirpated. The male really is one of the best-looking of all the antbirds, as the accompanying photograph demonstrates.

White-masked Antbird *Pithys castaneus*

Known from a single specimen collected in the Peruvian Amazon in 1937, but often dismissed as a hybrid, with hindsight it is hard to envisage which other species of antbird could hybridise with White-plumed Antbird *P. albifrons* to produce White-masked Antbird. So, it was perhaps not wholly unexpected when the



Blue-throated Macaw *Ara glaucogularis* (Joseph Tobias/ Asociación Armonía)

Opposite page top four
(clockwise from top left)

Bolivian Recurvebill *Simoxenops striatus* at
Illampu, Pílan range, Bolivia, March 2005
(Joseph Tobias)

Orinoco Softtail *Thripophaga cherriei* at
Guacharaca, Venezuela, December 2006
(David Southall/Ascanio Birding)

White-masked Antbird *Pithys castaneus* at
Santiago Comania Reserved Zone, Loreto,
Peru (José Álvarez Alonso)

Male Black-hooded Antwren *Formicivora
erythronotos* at Mambucaba, Rio de Janeiro,
Brazil, November 2006 (Hadoram
Shirihai/*The photographic handbook to
taxonomy of birds of the world*)



Long-whiskered Owlets *Xenoglaux loweryi* at Abra Patricia, Peru. Left: the 2002 bird (Dan Lane);
Right: the 2007 record (Dave Geale)



Above, left to right:

Male Black-breasted Puffleg *Eriocnemis nigrivestis* at Yanacocha, Ecuador (Steve Blain/Tropical Birding)

Male Colourful Puffleg *Eriocnemis mirabilis* at El Planchon, Colombia, September 2006 (Juan Pablo López)

Kaempfer's Woodpecker *Celeus obrieni* at Gioatins, Tocantins, Brazil, October 2006 (Guilherme R.C. Silva)



Below: Minas Gerais Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes roquettei* at Pirapora, Minas Gerais, Brazil, November 2006 (Hadoram Shirihai/The photographic handbook to taxonomy of birds of the world)



Above: Juvenile Pale-headed Brush-Finch *Atlapetes pallidiceps* at Yungallia, Ecuador, September 2005 (Mark Gurney)

Left: Niceforo's Wren *Thyrothorus nicefori* at San Gil, Colombia, July 2006 (Oswaldo Cortes)

Far left: Kaempfer's Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus kaempferi* at Volta Vehla, Santa Catarina, Brazil, July 2000 (Dante Buzzetti)

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announcement of its rediscovery was made. On 4 July 2001, Thomas Valqui was working in white-sand forest along the río Morona, Loreto, Peru, when he found the species amongst the followers of an antswarm (*Wilson J. Orn.* 118: 13–22). Valqui had known that it was likely to be somewhere in the vastness of the northern Peruvian Amazon and had even joked with his colleagues that they might find the bird one day. However, this was truly a chance encounter. After over 60 years, White-masked Antbird had finally revealed its true identity. The challenge now is to unravel the status and ecological requirements of this Data Deficient species.

Minas Gerais Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes roquettei*

This species was known from a single female collected at Brejo Januária, Minas Gerais, Brazil, in 1926. Following sightings in 1977 on both sides of the río São Francisco, it went unrecorded during searches between 1985 and 1987. The species was, however, located in 1993, 190 km south of the type locality, at Várzea de Palma, near Pirapora; it was subsequently found at this site in 1998, 1999 and from 2002 until the present (*Bird Conserv. Intern.* 12: 241–253). In 1995, Marcos Raposo obtained a male specimen at Francisco Dumont, 60 km further south. Furthermore, since then an additional specimen has been located and the species found at a handful of additional sites (see, e.g., *Cotinga* 26: 84–85), all in Minas Gerais, although one, Mocambinho, is almost on the border with Bahia. This Critically Endangered species is dependent on dry tropical semi-deciduous woodland, which is now restricted to small isolated patches due to agricultural development. Recent observations suggest that it is largely a canopy-dweller and does not join mixed-species flocks. Minas Gerais Tyrannulet has a characteristic feeding behaviour, whereby it flies diagonally down, then suddenly loops up to a lower branch; these sallies being over a distance of

about 1 m. It also calls continuously whilst feeding, which should aid location, particularly if playback is used.

Kaempfer's Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus kaempferi*

Persistence and patience by Mark Pearman in 1991 brought about the rediscovery of this species at Salto do Pirai, near Joinville, Santa Catarina, south-east Brazil, previously known from a single specimen collected in 1923 by Emil Kaempfer (*Bird Conserv. Intern.* 10: 371–379). Subsequently, a specimen from Brusque taken in 1950 was identified in the Museu Nacional de Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. After spending two days around the locality where Kaempfer obtained his specimen, Mark was able to observe a single bird over a ten-minute period. Subsequently, there have been regular observations at this site, and the species has also been found at a new site, the Reserva Particular do Patrimônio Natural de Volta Velha, near Itapoá, Santa Catarina, some 30 km to the north-east and, even more recently, at APA Guaratuba in south-east Paraná (*Cotinga* 20: 95–96). The Critically Endangered Kaempfer's Tody-Tyrant is generally a bird of the understorey, staying within a few metres of the ground. It has some similarities with Fork-tailed Tody-Tyrant *H. furcatus*. Care should be taken to eliminate Eye-ringed Tody-Tyrant *H. orbitatum* which occurs in the same habitat: Kaempfer's brownish tones to the head and neck, lack of an eye-ring and the noticeably forked tail are the best features.

Niceforo's Wren *Thyrothorus nicefori*

Though there is some discussion as to the taxonomic validity of this Critically Endangered species, there is no doubt about its 'disappearance' and 're-appearance'. Ten specimens were collected during the 1940s at San Gil on the río Fonce, south of Bucaramanga, in Colombia (<http://www.birdlife.org>; *Handbook of Birds of the World*: 10: 428). There were no further records until two birds were observed by Peter Kaestner near to the type locality in 1989 and again in 2000 (see the 2002 *Libro rojo de aves de Colombia* by L.M. Renjifo *et al.*). There have been subsequent records by Oswaldo Cortes and colleagues in Soata, Boyaca (see *Cotinga* 27: 74–77), a range extension of about 100 km south, and some 50 km to the west by Thomas Donegan and colleagues in the Yariguies mountains (for which see a paper later this year in *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club*). In truth, the rediscovery of Niceforo's Wren in the dry

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forest around the type locality was expected, as until recently the area has been difficult to visit due to guerrilla activity. Sadly, its isolation has not helped its preservation and it is still a very rare species.

Pale-headed Brush-Finch *Atlapetes pallidiceps*

Known from a small area in southern Ecuador, the Pale-headed Brush-Finch was not seen between 1969 and 1998 when, in November of the latter year, a population of just four pairs was located in the Yunguilla Valley, Azuay, Ecuador, by Ana Ágreda, Niels Krabbe and Orfa Rodríguez (*Cotinga* 11: 50–54). More birds were found nearby, but subsequent searches elsewhere have failed to find it and the species' range is apparently no larger than 1 km². In 2003, the breeding population was conservatively estimated at 33 pairs. Thankfully, 27 ha of the species' habitat has been purchased by Fundación Jocotoco; this area has been fenced off and is actively managed for the species. Local involvement is crucial to the species' survival and this was demonstrated when a fire threatened to destroy the habitat, but was put out by local community members. The villagers have even named each territory after

famous ornithologists. The Critically Endangered Pale-headed Brush-Finch could be confused with the White-headed Brush-Finch *A. albiceps*, but the latter has a pure white face contrasting with a dark crown and nape. The two species appear to be completely parapatric, as White-headed is found well to the south of Pale-headed, in extreme southern Ecuador and north-west Peru.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the following photographers for their invaluable contribution to this article: José Álvarez Alonso, George L. Armistead, Steve Blain, Dante Buzzetti, Oswaldo Cortes, Dave Geale, Mark Gurney, Dan Lane, Juan Pablo López, Fabrice Schmitt, Hadoram Shirihai, Guilherme Silva, David Southall and Joe Tobias. Hadoram Shirihai's photographs were taken during a photographic trip to Brazil as part of his work towards *The photographic handbook to taxonomy of birds of the world* by Jornvall & Shirihai. I also thank David Ascanio, Diego Calderón, Guy Kirwan, Jeremy Minns and Advaldo Dias do Prado for their assistance with this article.

CHRIS BALCHIN

Hillview, Clacton Road, Wix, Manningtree, Essex CO11 2RU, UK. E-mail: csbalchin@cotinga.demon.co.uk

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