

&gt;&gt; PHOTOSPOT BEARDED MOUNTAINEER

# Bearded Mountaineer

## *Oreonympha nobilis*

Joseph Tobias

Not so long ago a photograph of a Bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon guerinii* was posted on the internet (at [www.surfbirds.com](http://www.surfbirds.com)), accompanied by a succinct caption: “The best looking hummer in the world?” Maybe so, but that sounds like a question for a broader ballot. There is some serious competition out there, with the likes of Velvet-purple Coronet *Boissonneaua jardini*, Empress Brilliant *Heliodoxa imperatrix* and Marvellous Spatuletail *Loddigesia mirabilis* (for which see the photograph on p56 of this magazine) heading some private lists of favourites. One contender, a relative of the Bearded Helmetcrest, is the subject of this photospot—the Bearded Mountaineer *Oreonympha nobilis*.

The mountaineer is a majestic animal, a large, unmistakable hummingbird with a white-sided tail and an iridescent bicolored gorget, emerald green at the base, extending down onto the breast in a spear of amethyst. The sides of the crown are glistening blue, separated by a median line of black. This elaborate plumage is clearly intended for head-on courtship or combat, and is much less dramatic when viewed side-on.

The mountaineer is a restricted-range species, endemic to the Peruvian High Andes Endemic Bird Area, occurring at 2,500–3,700 m in arid montane scrub and woodland<sup>3</sup>. It is classified as Least Concern<sup>1</sup> because it is fairly common in several areas, persisting even where habitat is degraded.

The species probably nests in ravines and gorges. Its favoured feeding plants include the

yellow flowers of tobacco *Nicotiana*, Agave, columnar cactuses, and *Eucalyptus*<sup>2</sup>. It hovers with its body held almost vertical when foraging. The photographs that accompany this article are of the nominate race. The northern form, *albolimbata*, has a deep chestnut cap which is bordered with white.

The global range of the mountaineer is small (some 39,000 km<sup>2</sup>), centred on the region of Cusco in the high Andes of southern Peru. The classic site for seeing the species is Laguna Huacarpay, half an hour's drive from Cusco itself. It frequents the tobacco bushes that line the road around this lake, with a favoured area being the garden of the small hostel at the far shore of the lake. A bend or two further, in a clockwise direction, is a nice area of roadside tobacco bushes where nice views are virtually guaranteed, and where these photographs were taken. This species makes Laguna Huacarpay an unmissable stop on the road to Manu National Park.

“The best hummer in the world?” There are quite a few contenders, but the Bearded Mountaineer—a bold little warrior from the valley of the Incas—is certainly amongst them.

### REFERENCES

1. BirdLife International (2006) Species factsheet: *Oreonympha nobilis*. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org> on 2/4/2007.
2. Clements, J.F. & Shany, N. (2001) *A field guide to the birds of Peru*. Temecula, USA: Ibis Publishing Company.
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Bearded Mountaineer *Oreonympha nobilis*, Laguna Huacarpay, Peru, January 2007 (Joseph Tobias)