

# Then and now: a look at the 'antpitta revolution' of the past 25 years

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A stand-out article from *Cotinga* 2 was Niels Krabbe's synopsis of the state of knowledge about Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea*. Including details of recent field records in Ecuador, this really got the juices flowing about a then-mythical beast. How times have changed! Neotropical Birding invited the modern-day guru of all things grallarid – and author of the 2018 book *Antpittas and gnateaters*, reviewed on page 86 – to give his perspective on 25 years of antpitta-related revelations.



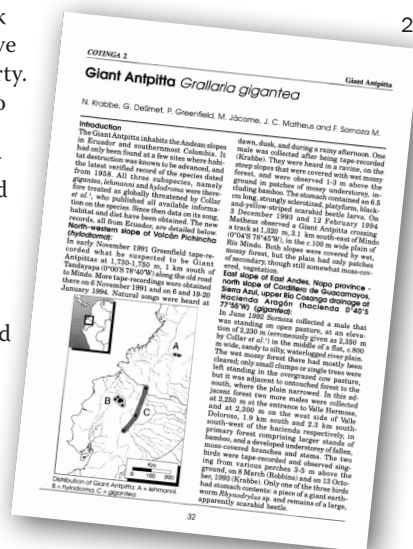
**1** Giant Antpitta  
*Grallaria gigantea*,  
November 2016 (James  
Lowen/ jameslowen.com),  
the subject of the *Cotinga* 2  
paper by Niels Krabbe et al.  
(1994).



When invited to write this article, the stated premise was to illustrate how our knowledge of antpittas has changed since the publication of Niels Krabbe *et al.*'s (1994) article published in *Cotinga* 2 (Fig. 1), exactly a quarter of a century ago, concerning the Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea* (Fig. 2). Although I count myself among those of us most aware of these changes, I confess I was still shocked to (re) read the first paragraph, wherein Krabbe and company reveal that, prior that date, the Giant Antpitta had gone virtually unrecorded for over 35 years! Indeed, recently summarised information on this species (Collar *et al.* 1992) substantiated this, mentioning that it was last seen in Colombia in 1959 and that, since 1958, it was known in Ecuador from only a handful of sight records and from one specimen of the nominate race collected in the upper Río Cosanga drainage (Napó province). Krabbe *et al.* went on to describe most or all of these recent Ecuadorian records in a way that, though rich with details and natural history, did little to boost the hopes of birdwatchers yearning to catch a glimpse of a Giant Antpitta on their next Andean foray. Certainly no one could have predicted what would happen 'next'.

In the early 2000s, just outside of the town of Mindo, Pichincha province, northwest

Ecuador, a farmer named Ángel Paz joined many other residents of the region in responding to the growing avitourism industry by charging birdwatchers to visit the Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruviana* lek that was active on his property. As he grew to understand the mentality of birders and their (oft-unrequited!) passion for antpittas, Ángel realised that cock-of-the-rock were not the only bird that twitchers would



2 The article on Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea* in *Cotinga* 2, by Niels Krabbe *et al.* (1994). As this article demonstrates, how times have changed...

Paz de las Aves, Pichincha, Ecuador, was the place that started it all. As well as Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea* (Fig. 1, opposite), its stellar antpitta cast includes: 3 Immature Moustached Antpitta *G. allenii*, November 2009 (Nigel Voaden; [flickr.com/photos/nvoaden/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nvoaden/)); and 4 Yellow-breasted Antpitta *G. flavotincta* (James Lowen/[flickr.com/photos/jameslowen/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jameslowen/)).







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Río Blanco, Caldas, Colombia has become a hotspot for birders keen to see antpittas. Its leggy stars include: **5** Chestnut-crowned Antpitta *Grallaria ruficapilla*, May 2017, and **6** Bicoloured Antpitta *G. rufocinerea*, February 2019 (both Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding); and **7** Brown-banded Antpitta *G. milleri*, May 2012 (Juan José Arango; [flickr.com/photos/jjarango/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jjarango/)).



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Another protagonist at Río Blanco, Caldas, Colombia, is **8** Chestnut-naped Antpitta *G. nuchalis*, May 2012 (Juan José Arango; [flickr.com/photos/jjarango/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jjarango/)).

**9** Chestnut-naped Antpittas at Tapchalaca, Zamora-Chinchipe, Ecuador, look rather different to those in Colombia... (November 2017; Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding).

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In Peru, an exciting site is Fundo Alto Nieva, San Martín, where target species include: **10** Rusty-tinged Antpitta *Grallaria przewalskii*, May 2017 (Carlos Calle; [flickr.com/photos/guiacalles](https://www.flickr.com/photos/guiacalles)) and **11** Ochre-fronted Antpitta *Grallarica ochraceifrons*, September 2018 (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding).

get up ridiculously early to see. In fact, some of the most prized species were those that had accompanied him for years on his early-morning treks out to his fields; the plump, feathered shadows bouncing ridiculously down the trails ahead of him.

By starting to feed worms to these spring-loaded companions, Ángel revolutionised, almost overnight, the way most birding tourists see their first antpitta. Only a few years after Ángel's worm-fed wonders (at the time, three species) were revealed to the world through an article in the first issue of *Neotropical Birding* (Collins 2006), no fewer than 15 species of antpittas were being regularly attracted to feeders in Colombia and Ecuador (Woods *et al.* 2011)! With the subsequent addition of feeding stations across the Neotropics the list of feeder-visiting species continues to grow, and now includes such rarities as Rufous-crowned Antpitta *Pittasoma rufopileatum*, now considered a member of the Conopophagidae, and Peruvian Antpitta *Grallarica peruviana* (Greeney 2018, Solano-Ugalde 2019).



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When NBC was established in 1994, it would have been unimaginable to get such good photos of this titchy pair: **12** Crescent-faced Antpitta *Grallaricula lineifrons*, El Bosque, Caldas, Colombia, October 2018 (Juan José Arango; [flickr.com/photos/jjarango/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jjarango/)); and **13** Hooded Antpitta *G. cucullata*, Otún Quimbaya, Risaralda, Colombia, August 2016 (Juan José Arango; [flickr.com/photos/jjarango/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jjarango/)).

Antpittas have long been highly-prized by birdwatchers, and their shy nature and seemingly supernatural ability to vocalise from the undergrowth only metres away while remaining unseen is legendary. So why do they so quickly adapt to receiving meals from humans? The reasons why antpittas appear to be particularly easy to 'train' in this way remain unclear, but it has been hypothesised that one of their natural foraging practices may be to follow large Andean mammals such as Spectacled Bear *Tremarctos ornatus* and Mountain Tapir *Tapirus pinchaque*, grabbing up worms and other food exposed by the passage of these animals as they disturb the litter, overturn logs, and tear apart bromeliads in their own search for food (Greeney 2012). The parallels between a foraging Mountain Tapir and groups of humans lumbering through the forest with a clatter of camera gear and squishing boots are clear, but perhaps best left unelaborated.

On the science side of things, the growth in available information on the natural history and

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breeding biology of antpittas over the past 25 years has mirrored the increasing ease with which they are added to birders' checklists. Like the birds themselves, the nests and nesting behaviour of antpittas have long evaded the attentions of ornithologists. Although the first species of antpitta was described over 235 years ago (Thrush-





At the time of NBC's formation, these two species had yet to be described: **14** Jocotoco Antpitta *Grallaria ridgelyi* (immature, Tapichalaca, Zamora-Chinchipec, Ecuador, December 2008; Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding); and **15-16** Urrao Antpitta *G. urraoensis* (or *fenwickorum*), Colibri del Sol, Colombia, January 2010 (Nigel Voaden; [flickr.com/photos/nvoaden/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nvoaden/)). Controversially, the latter has already been assigned two scientific and at least three common names. The South American Classification Committee – followed by *Neotropical Birding* – uses *urraoensis* although, as Greeney (2018) notes, "strict adherence to International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN) regulations requires the use of *fenwickorum* until such time as, and if, ICZN issues a contrary ruling".





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The mountains of the Andes are 'antpitta central' for good reason. Here are four more: **17** Immature Scaled Antpitta *Grallaria guatemalensis*, Tandayapa Bird Lodge, Pichincha, June 2013 (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding); **18** White-bellied Antpitta *G. hypoleuca*, San Isidro Lodge, province, November 2009 (Nigel Voaden; [flickr.com/photos/nvoaden/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nvoaden/)); **19** Slate-crowned Antpitta *Grallaricula nana*, Reserva Río Blanco, Manizales, Caldas, Colombia, January 2014 (Steve Huggins; [pbase.com/sjhuggins/](https://pbase.com/sjhuggins/)); and the notably high-altitude **20** Stripe-headed Antpitta *Grallaria andicolus*, Cruz Conga, Cajamarca, Peru, August 2017 (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding).





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Antpitta diversity is less rich in the lowlands, but this does not mean that there aren't goodies to find (Figs. 21–22 by Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding): **21** White-lored Antpitta *Hylopezus fulviventeris*, Sani Lodge, Sucumbíos, May 2015; **22** Alta Floresta Antpitta *H. whittakeri*, Cristalino Jungle Lodge, Mato Grosso, Brazil, July 2012, which was split from Spotted Antpitta *Hylopezus macularius* a few years ago (see *Neotropical Birding* 11: 36–38 for details); **23** Variegated Antpitta *Grallaria varia*, Brazil, June 2016 (Ciro Albano/NE Brazil Birding).



like Antpitta *Myrmothera campanisona*, in 1783), the first mention of their reproductive habits did not appear in the literature for almost 50 years (zu Weid 1831), despite the avid enthusiasm with which bird nests were searched for by egg collectors of that time.

This initial information involved only the cursory mention of nest of the Variegated Antpitta *Grallaria varia*; moreover, this was (probably) partially incorrect, as it was said to be on the ground (zu Weid 1831). It took until the early 20th century for a fairly well-documented description of an antpitta nest to be published (Todd & Carriker 1922), in this case, Rusty-breasted Antpitta *Grallaria ferruginepectus*. In fact, the first detailed description of an antpitta nest was not on record until the middle of the century (Edwards & Lea 1955); for Scaled Antpitta *Grallaria guatemalensis* (Fig. 17), some 170 years after the description of the first antpitta.

Like the scarcity of Giant Antpitta sightings reported by Krabbe *et al.* (1994), by the 1980s the nests of only six species of antpittas had been described (Wiedenfeld 1982), one of which had been described erroneously (Martin & Greeney 2006) and one of which was known only from captivity (Bell & Bruning 1976). Our knowledge of antpitta nests, however, changed dramatically at the turn of the 20th century.

By 2008 the number of antpittas with described nests had more than doubled, with several species studied in detail for the first time (Greeney *et al.* 2008). Enthusiasm for the study of antpitta reproductive biology continued, and according to the most recent summary of all things antpitta (Greeney 2018), the nests are now known for more than half of all described species of Grallariidae. Rather aptly, and to bring us full circle, one of the newly described nests is that of the Giant Antpitta (Solano-Ugalde *et al.* 2009), based on a nest built by the very antpittas habituated by Ángel Paz, where the antpitta revolution has its roots.

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