

Splits, lumps and shuffles

Thomas S. Schulenberg

This series focuses on recent taxonomic proposals – descriptions of new taxa, splits, lumps or reorganisations – that are likely to be of greatest interest to birders. This latest instalment includes: the possible lumps of Scale-breasted Woodpecker and South Georgia Pipit; a split in Red-billed Woodcreeper; a split in Highland Elaenia, and yet another possible lump in White-crested Elaenia; and a too-early-to-call-for-a-split-but-keep-an-eye-on-it study of Correndera Pipit.

Sayonara, Scale-breasted Woodpecker?

Scale-breasted Woodpecker *Celeus grammicus* and Waved Woodpecker *C. undatus* are two similar species that replace each other geographically, occupying respectively the western and eastern portions of Amazonia.

There has been some grumbling over the years that a subspecies of Waved (*amacurensis*, of northeastern Venezuela) perhaps belongs instead with Scale-breasted (Short 1982), and reports that not only were their vocalisations indistinguishable (Ridgely & Greenfield 2001), but even that each responded to playback of calls of the other (Restall *et al.* 2006). Nonetheless the species status of the

Just lookalikes or the same species?

1 Scale-breasted Woodpecker *Celeus grammicus*, Iranduba, Amazonas, Brazil, September 2013 (Anselmo d’Affonseca); **2–3** Waved Woodpecker *C. undatus*, both Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil: **2** November 2011 (Anselmo d’Affonseca), **3** May 2017 (Tomaz Nascimento de Melo; lattes.cnpq.br/0736734315806511). The absence of diagnostic vocal, plumage, or genetic differences between the two all seems to lead to the conclusion that there is one fewer species of woodpecker in the world.

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two had not been questioned openly. Not, that is, until the publication of further documentation of the close similarity in vocalisations of these woodpeckers, and, more importantly, evidence that the genetic differences between them also were quite minimal (Benz & Robbins 2011), leading those authors to broach the suggestion that Scaly-breasted and Waved represented only a single species.

Now Sampaio and colleagues (2018) have undertaken a more comprehensive genetic survey of Scale-breasted and Waved Woodpeckers, and went on to review the plumage differences between them. As before, Sampaio *et al.* found no genetic differentiation between the two woodpeckers. This is not necessarily the death knell, as species in the very early stages of divergence from one another are expected to share many genes; but it's not a good sign for recognising two species either. Even worse, Sampaio *et al.* also found that the plumage of Scale-breasted and Waved woodpeckers is variable; it's not so much that they find evidence of a hybrid zone between them as that any given trait supposedly typical of one species can show up in the other, even at sites far removed from any contact between them. Overall, the absence of diagnostic vocal, plumage, or genetic differences between the two all seems to point to a single, dire conclusion: one fewer species of woodpecker in the world.

But how many *Hylexetastes* are there?

Members of the genus *Hylexetastes* are very large, poorly known woodcreepers with low population densities. Most authorities recognise only two species, Bar-bellied Woodcreeper *H. stresemanni* (western Amazonia: weak barring on the belly) and Red-billed Woodcreeper *H. perrotii* (eastern Amazonia: belly unmarked). The easternmost subspecies, *brigidai* of southeastern Amazonia, originally also was described as a species (Silva *et al.* 1995); but this population now is universally recognised as only a subspecies (typically of Red-billed). Azuaje-Rodríguez and colleagues (2019) have stepped up and conducted a thorough genetic survey of these woodcreepers, across the entire range of the genus.

The most important result (important, at least, for the twitching community) is that Red-billed Woodcreeper is split into two major lineages: nominate *perrotii*, of eastern Amazonia north of the Amazon, is more closely related to Bar-bellied Woodcreeper than it is to *uniformis* and *brigidai*, the two subspecies of Red-bellied Woodcreeper found south of the Amazon. This is a very nifty confirmation of the taxonomy adopted by Ridgely & Tudor (2009), who recognised Uniform Woodcreeper *H. uniformis* (including *brigidai* as a subspecies) as separate from 'true'

Under the most liberal concepts of a species, there may be not two species of *Hylexetastes* woodcreeper, but five.

4 Bar-bellied Woodcreeper *Hylexetastes stresemanni*, Manacapuru, Amazonas, Brazil, September 2012. **5** Red-billed Woodcreeper *Hylexetastes p. perrotii*, Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil, June 2014. (Both photos by Anselmo d'Affonseca.)





Genetic and vocal differences suggest a straightforward split between the Andean population of Highland Elaenia *Elaenia o. obscura* (6 Parque Provincial Potrero de Yala, Jujuy, Argentina, October 2014) and the Brazilian population, taxon *sordida* (7 Chapada de Diamantina, Bahia, Brazil, September 2007). (Both photos by Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding.)

Red-billed Woodcreeper. That could be the end of the story, although Azuaje-Rodríguez *et al.* also noticed that subspecies *uniformis* further consists of two genetic lineages (clades), separated by the lower Tapajós River, and that the easternmost lineage is more closely related to *brigidai* than to populations of *uniformis* west of the Tapajós. Under the most liberal concepts of a species, then, there are not two species of *Hylexetastes*, nor three, but five: Bar-bellied Woodcreeper; Red-billed Woodcreeper; Uniform Woodcreeper (the western group of *uniformis*); ‘eastern *uniformis*’ (which may not have a formal scientific name?); and Brigida’s Woodcreeper *H. brigidai*. That’s likely to be farther than most taxonomists are willing to go, at least for now; but for sure, take the two-way split of Red-billed and make the most of it!

Elucidating relationships in the elaenias

It usually is a straightforward enough exercise to tell whether a small flycatcher is a species of *Elaenia* – but distinguishing *which* species of *Elaenia* is where one might run into problems. Unraveling the relationships between the different species also has been a challenge. Frank Rheindt and colleagues have spent years chipping away at a molecular phylogeny for the genus. The latest contribution in this series (Tang *et al.* 2018) reinforces patterns that emerged a decade ago (Rheindt *et al.* 2008, 2009). Evidence continues to mount, for example, that White-crested Elaenia *Elaenia albiceps* is a composite of two different species: the southern subspecies, *chilensis*, is most

closely related to Sierran Elaenia *E. pallatangae*, whereas the five northern subspecies of White-crested Elaenia are related to Mountain Elaenia *E. frantzii*.

This is somewhat surprising in a way, as there are earlier reports of suspected hybridisation in Bolivia between *chilensis* and Small-billed Elaenia *E. parvirostris*, but not with Sierran (Traylor 1982); on the other hand hybridisation was suspected in Ecuador and northern Peru between Sierran and the northern (‘true’) White-crested Elaenia (Zimmer 1941). Anyway, there is not necessarily good news here for twitchers: not only are the genetic similarities between *chilensis* and Sierran Elaenia so great that this alone would suggest that they should be merged (Tang *et al.* 2018), but bioacoustic analysis also showed that the calls of *chilensis* and Sierran Elaenia are overlapping with each other, but that both are distinct from calls of ‘true’ White-crested Elaenia (Chattopadhyay *et al.* 2017). Oh, and one further note: to date Rheindt and colleagues have not explicitly addressed the status of *modesta*, a subspecies of White-crested Elaenia (ranging from northwest Peru to northwest Chile) that also has been treated by some authors as a separate species (Zimmer 1941).

Elsewhere in the genus, earlier authors (e.g. Hellmayr 1927) considered the Andean and Brazilian populations of Highland Elaenia *E. obscura* to be identical; it was not until as late as 1941, when Zimmer (1941) proposed the name *sordida* for the Brazilian subspecies, that these two were acknowledged as different at all. The genetic evidence consistently shows a deep divergence between the two, however, and there even are



Evidence continues to mount that White-crested Elaenia *Elaenia albiceps* comprises two different species: the southern subspecies, *chilensis* (8 Garibaldi Pass, Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, January 2015; Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding) is most closely related to Sierran Elaenia *E. pallatangae* (9 near Pojo Cruce, Cochabamba, Bolivia, February 2018; Tini & Jacob Wijpkema/🐦 wijpkema.org) whereas the five northern subspecies of White-crested Elaenia, the *albiceps* group (10 Ecoruta, Pichincha, Ecuador, April 2013; Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding) are related to Mountain Elaenia *E. frantzii*.

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hints that *sordida* may be more closely related to Great Elaenia *E. dayi* than it is to Andean *obscura* (Rheindt *et al.* 2008, Tang *et al.* 2018). Coupled with vocal differences between the two subspecies (del Hoyo & Collar 2016), this now is an easy split.

The convoluted case of Correndera Pipit

Earlier (Schulenberg 2018) I reported on genetic and vocal evidence that South Georgia Pipit *Anthus antarcticus* is indistinguishable from Correndera Pipit *A. correndera*, and so is a likely candidate for a lump. Lumps of course are the exception to the rule these days, when the more common trend is to discover differences, rather than similarities, when analysing patterns of geographic variation. Now a team of researchers, including some of those who tried to demote South Georgia Pipit, are back with a more comprehensive genetic survey of Correndera Pipit, from across its range (Norambuena *et al.* 2018). As they had reported earlier, South Georgia



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Pipit genetically is deep in the mix among the Correndera Pipit samples; there is nothing to distinguish South Georgia Pipit genetically (at least, among the genes that were sampled). The twist to the story is that Correndera Pipit itself breaks down into two very discrete lineages, one on the Andean plateau and one in the lowlands; not surprisingly, South Georgia Pipit clusters with the lowland Correndera clade.

There are a few complications to this story, however. For example, the divergence between lowland and highland lineages does not map neatly onto subspecies boundaries: birds that are identified as *catamarcae* are represented in both lowland and highland clades. Furthermore, the genetic divergence between the lowland and highland clades is relatively shallow, and there is no similar comprehensive analysis of vocalisations for comparison. Geographically, the transition from highland to lowland genetic clades seems to be very abrupt, but that is based on very few samples from the region of interest. It remains



Genetic analysis suggests that Correndera Pipit *Anthus correndera* breaks down into two very discrete lineages. one on the Andean plateau (**11** Antofagasta de la Sierra, Catamarca, Argentina, January 2018; Pablo Eguia/🐦 aves-pe.blogspot.com.ar) and one in the lowlands (**12** Campos del Tuyu, Buenos Aires, Argentina, August 2007; James Lowen/🐦 jameslowen.com). Not surprisingly, South Georgia Pipit *Anthus antarcticus* (**13** Salisbury Plain, South Georgia, February 2015; Andrew Spencer), which has already been proposed for lumping with Correndera, clusters with the latter's lowland clade. There are, however, a few complications to the story...



to be seen, then, whether the Correndera Pipit story is one of an overlooked cryptic species, or is just a matter of catching a very recent, and still incipient, genetic divergence within a species. That said, the parallels are obvious to the highland/lowland divide within Short-billed Pipit *A. furcatus* (Schulenberg 2018) – birders, take note!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Anselmo d’Affonseca, Ciro Albano (🐦 nebrasilbirding.com), Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding, Jacob Drucker, Pablo Eguia (🐦 aves-pe.blogspot.com.ar), James Lowen (🐦 jameslowen.com), Tomaz Nascimento de Melo (🐦 lattes.cnpq.br/0736734315806511), Andrew Spencer, Luis Urueña (🐦 manakinnaturetours.com) and Tini & Jacob Wijpkema (🐦 wijpkema.org) for offering photographs for potential or actual inclusion, and to Brooke Keeney for sourcing and organising these submissions.

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TAXONOMY AND THE PASSAGE OF TIME

The series 'Splits lumps and shuffles' started out life in *Cotinga* 2, where it was called 'Taxonomic round-up'. The first instalment, compiled by David Wege (the original *Cotinga* editor) and Frank Lambert, contained a number of intriguing taxonomic changes. But which have lasted the ravages of time, at least according to those authorities whose taxonomy is followed by the NBC?

Bicknell's Thrush *Catharus bicknelli* certainly has. Scaly-breasted Thrasher '*Margarops*' *fuscus* still exists, although it is now housed in a new monotypic genus, *Allenia*. 'Spot-breasted' Antwren '*Myrmeciza stictothorax*' remains subsumed within the highly variable Black-throated Antwren '*M.*' *atrothorax*, although also now in a new monotypic genus, *Myrmophylax*. The split of Cobb's Wren *Troglodytes cobbi* from House Wren *T. aedon* is in favour again following brief relumping (see, e.g., *Neotropical Birding* 6: 23).

However, the split of Greater Antillean Nightjar *Caprimulgus* (now *Antrastomus*) *cubanensis* into Hispaniolan (*eckmanii*) and Cuban (*cubanensis*) nightjars is not followed by the American Ornithologists' Society. The proposal that Andean Swallow '*Petrochelidon*' *andecola* join an expanded *Stelgidopteryx* genus has also not lasted. Andean Swallow is now one of three *Oreocheilidon* (none of the other two of which were brigaded in *Stelgidopteryx*), and the only *Stelgidopteryx* is now Southern Rough-winged Swallow *S. ruficollis*. Little wonder we still need Tom Schulenberg's regular updates on splits, lumps and shuffles... Ed.

Taxonomic Round-up



A newly recognised species of *Catharus* thrush
Studies by H. Ouellet of Bicknell's Thrush *Catharus (minimus) bicknelli*, previously treated as a subspecies of Grey-cheeked Thrush *Catharus minimus*, have revealed that these it should be treated as a good species. These taxa show well-marked morphological differences, have different breeding and wintering ranges, and habitat preferences, and are not known to interbreed. Furthermore, the two vocalisations are so different that the two forms do not recognise each other, whilst DNA studies confirm that they are different species. Bicknell's Thrush, which breeds in northern North America is known to winter in eastern North America, with records from Hispaniola, the Caribbean, Cuba, Puerto Rico and St. Croix.
Source: *Wilson Bull.* 105: 545-572, 1993.

A new name for *Myrmeciza immaculata* berlepschi
The transfer of *Pyrrhuloxia* (later *Sipia*) *berlepschi* to the genus *Myrmeciza* has made it necessary to re-name *Myrmeciza immaculata berlepschi* (originally described as a full species, *M. berlepschi*) as *Myrmeciza immaculata macrorhyncha*.
Source: *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club* 113: 190, 1993.

The Greater Antillean Nightjar: is it one species?
Recent work by O. Garrido and G. Reynard on the Greater Antillean Nightjar *Caprimulgus cubanensis* suggests that the plumage and vocalization differences between birds on Cuba and Hispaniola are sufficient to return the taxon to two species: *C. eckmani*, the Hispaniolan Nightjar and *C. cubanensis*, the Cuban Nightjar.
Source: *El Pitirre* 7(1): 5, 1994. Abstracts from the Caribbean Society of Ornithology meeting, 1993.

Geographic variation in the Scaly-breasted Thrasher
The Scaly-breasted Thrasher *Margarops fuscus* is endemic to the Lesser Antilles from St. Martin south to Grenada, occurring in forest, semi-arid woodlands and in settled areas. A recent study of the species by D. Buden has shown the presence of four separate subspecies, three of which are newly described: *M. fuscus allaniticus* is endemic to Barbados; *M. f. hypenemus* is found on the northern Lesser Antilles; *M. f. schwartzii* is endemic to St. Lucia; and the nominate *M. f. fuscus* from Dominica southward to Grenada, excluding St. Lucia and Barbados.
Source: *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club* 113: 75-84, 1993.

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THOMAS S. SCHULENBERG

Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 159 Sapsucker Woods Road, Ithaca, NY, 14850, USA.

✉ tss62@cornell.edu