

# Observing the Bearded Wood Partridge: a rare and elusive species

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Recent research on the Bearded Wood Partridge *Dendrortyx barbatus* has revealed that it is less rare than previously feared, so the conservation status of this galliform has been downgraded from Critically Endangered to Vulnerable. Nevertheless, this sought-after species is difficult to see. This article suggests some sites for birders to try.

**T**hree species of wood partridge *Dendrortyx* occur in the montane forests of Mexico and Central America. The Buffy-crowned Wood Partridge *Dendrortyx leucophrys* is the most southerly, occurring from the Sierra Madre de Chiapas of extreme southern Chiapas, Mexico, south to Costa Rica. The Long-tailed Wood Partridge *D. macroura* is partially sympatric with the Bearded Wood Partridge *D. barbatus*, the two species overlapping on the Pico Orizaba and Cofre de Perote, in eastern Mexico.

Bearded Wood Partridge is a medium-sized, long-tailed galliform, measuring 33–35.5 cm and weighing 350–465 g. It is a strikingly patterned bird of mainly rufous coloration, with bright red to orange-red legs, bill and orbital ring. The crown is pale brown and the upperparts brownish mottled black and buff. The rufous hindneck is streaked grey and the cinnamon flanks are mottled grey and brown. The species' grey chin and throat lend it the beard-like effect enshrined in its English name.

The species inhabits lower montane forest and adjacent shrubby, often riparian-like, habitats in the east-central Mexican states of San Luis Potosí<sup>5</sup>, Hidalgo<sup>8</sup>, Querétaro<sup>3</sup>, Veracruz<sup>4</sup> and Oaxaca<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1); its distribution is restricted to the Southern Sierra Madre Oriental Endemic Bird Area. The Bearded Wood Partridge is classified as Vulnerable (formerly Critically Endangered), the only one of the *Dendrortyx* trio to be globally threatened<sup>2</sup>.

In this article, we set out some findings arising from recent research on Bearded Wood Partridge. We also offer tips on where and how to see this sought-after creature.

## Ecology and distribution

Recent studies<sup>5</sup> have refined the views of Johnsgard<sup>9</sup> concerning the distribution, status and future survival of the Bearded Wood Partridge. The species is not a strict cloud forest specialist as previously believed. We found it not only in older, second-growth forest, forest edge and disturbed habitats associated with shade coffee *fincas* near Coatepec, Veracruz, but also in oak–evergreen forest near Jalpan, Querétaro, provided there is dense undergrowth. Both areas lie at c.900–1,300 m; Bearded seldom occurs higher than 1,500 m. Whereas the range of the Bearded Wood Partridge partially overlaps with that of the Long-tailed Wood Partridge, the two species only very rarely occur together at the same site, as their habitat and altitudinal preferences differ: Long-tailed inhabits humid pine–oak and pine–evergreen forest, both with dense undergrowth, at c.1,200–3,300 m.

The Bearded Wood Partridge was formerly fairly widespread within its small range of 6,900 km<sup>2</sup>, especially in the states of San Luis Potosí<sup>9</sup> and Hidalgo<sup>8</sup>. However, landscape-level habitat change and hunting associated with human expansion have caused numerous local extinctions, resulting in the species' current fragmented distribution. Many populations are restricted to vegetation along creeks and rivers<sup>2</sup>. Whilst no systematic field census of Bearded Wood Partridge populations has been conducted, BirdLife International estimates that the population is now just c.5,400 mature individuals; this represents a 30–49% decline over the past decade, and the largest remaining subpopulation numbers only 250–1,000 individuals<sup>2</sup>.



Above: An adult Bearded Wood Partridge *Dendrortyx barbatus* with a young chick (Juan Cornejo)

Left: A close-up of a Bearded Wood Partridge *Dendrortyx barbatus* chick, recently hatched after incubating for 28–30 days in a grass-lined domed nest (Juan Cornejo)



“Regardless of the location chosen, we stress that patience is important; this species is difficult to see.”



Figure 1. Map of Mexico showing the distribution of the Bearded Wood Partridge *Dendrortyx barbatus*

Left: A captive adult Bearded Wood Partridge *Dendrortyx barbatus* at Africam Safari, Puebla, Mexico. Observing birds in captivity enables documentation of ecological characteristics, such as parental care of chicks, moult and courtship, that are hard to see in the wild. Captive breeding also provides stock for potential carefully managed reintroduction programmes (Juan Cornejo)

Below: This site in Veracruz was formerly good Bearded Wood Partridge *Dendrortyx barbatus* cloud forest habitat, but is now fragmented and devoid of the ground cover needed for foraging and concealment (S. H. Aquilar-Rodriguez)



Bearded Wood Partridge appears to be most abundant in Querétaro<sup>4</sup>, but most likely to be observed in Veracruz. We now suggest some good locations for the species in both states.

## Seeing Bearded Wood Partridge in Querétaro

In recent years, Roberto Pedraza R., an ornithologist with the Grupo Ecológico Sierra Gorda, has found Bearded Wood Partridge at more than 40 localities within the 383,567-ha Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra Gorda, a montane area in north-east Querétaro.

One of the best locations within this reserve for seeing Bearded Wood Partridge is near La Joya (21°28'20"N 99°09'44"W; see Figs. 1–5 in Eitniear *et al.*<sup>3</sup>), 2 km east of José de los Duran. This is a predominantly pine–oak forest in the reserve's core zone, the 4,663-ha Canada de las Avispas. In 1998, we recorded five groups vocalising here in areas of oak–evergreen habitat within the pine–oak landscape. This site also holds several other species of interest to visiting birders, namely: Great Curassow *Crax rubra*, White-crowned Parrot *Pionus senilis*, Red-crowned Parrot *Amazona viridigenalis* (Vulnerable) and Military Macaw *Ara militaris* (Vulnerable). A suite of Mexican endemics also occur: Bumblebee Hummingbird *Atthis heloisa*, Tamaulipas Crow *Corvus imparatus*, Spotted Wren *Campylorhynchus gularis*, Blue Mockingbird *Melanotis caerulescens*, Crimson-collared Grosbeak *Rhodothraupis celaeno* and Rufous-capped Brush Finch *Atlapetes pileatus*.

Reaching the area requires special planning and, in our view, is best achieved with the services of a local tour agency. We suggest that birders contact Laura Domínguez at Sierra Gorda Ecotours (tel: +441 296 0242; e-mail: ecotours@sierragorda.net).

## Finding the species in Veracruz

There are two particularly accessible locations for Bearded Wood Partridge in Veracruz state. The first are the recently introduced birds at Macuilpetl Park in downtown Xalapa, for which access details are provided in Howell<sup>7</sup>. The second site, which holds wild birds, is at nearby Coatepec (19°28'51"N 96°58'50"W)<sup>10</sup>. On each of our visits here during July–October, 1–12 birds responded to playback in cloud forest, shade coffee groves and secondary forest. Access is easiest via hire car from Veracruz airport.

Whilst one can venture into the rural areas alone, it is generally more productive to enlist the services of Pedro Mota and/or his son Claudio (as recommended by Howell<sup>7</sup>) who are both well-known local birding guides. They can be contacted by e-mail (claudiomota\_@hotmail.com) and telephone (+228 816 4128). For a small fee Pedro and/or Claudio will take you to the nearby forest and 'whistle' in the birds, for which the local name is *chivizcoyo*.

This site is also good for birds such as White-faced Quail-Dove *Geotrygon albigacies*, White-naped Brush Finch *Atlapetes albinucha* and Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer *Diglossa baritula*. Additional sites in Veracruz are detailed in Straub<sup>10</sup>, which includes excellent maps. Robert Straub has a birding store, Aveoptica, in Xalapa (tel: +228 818 1894; e-mail: straub\_robert@yahoo.com) and is also available as a guide.

## Tips for seeing Bearded Wood Partridge

This terrestrial species will often respond to playback, but seeing it may require patience and careful stalking. Judging from our studies, this secretive and cryptically plumaged species is most responsive to playback from July–October<sup>4</sup>. The voice is a loud series of whistles, comprising three or four syllables. A commercial recording of this species (in addition to Long-tailed Wood Partridge and Singing Quail *Dactylortyx thoracicus*, a potential confusion species) is on Hardy & Raitt<sup>6</sup>. At the time of writing, the website [www.xeno-canto.org](http://www.xeno-canto.org) (for which see pp. 17–23 of this issue) contains one Bearded Wood Partridge recording which can be downloaded free of charge.

Regardless of the location chosen, we stress that patience is important; this species is difficult to see. In addition, birders should be aware that the terrain of all sites mentioned is physically challenging. Before venturing down another path, encumbered by weighty equipment, take into account the climb back! Nevertheless, such physical exertion has a benefit: it makes any encounter with a Bearded Wood Partridge all the more rewarding.

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