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Seeing **White-masked Antbird** *Pithys castaneus* in Peru (the hard way)

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Many birders have a burning desire to see a particular species and will literally travel to the ends of the Earth to do so. This article relates one man's epic journey to track down a striking antbird that, until recently, was known only from a single specimen.



White-masked Antbirds *Pithys castaneus*. Left: in the undergrowth (Göran Altstedt; www.exulans.se). Right: while not a particularly good photo, this videograb captures one of the first exhilarating views that the author had of this species as it clung to a branch for several long and precious seconds! (David Thorns).

For many years one of my most-wanted birds was White-masked Antbird *Pithys castaneus*.

I had dreamt of seeing this mysterious species ever since reading *The birds of South America*⁴ where Bob Ridgely suggested that the single specimen, collected in 1937, might represent a hybrid between a White-plumed Antbird *P. albifrons* and some other unknown member of the *Pithys* genus.

In July 2001, Dan Lane, Thomas Valqui and colleagues from Louisiana State University (USA) sensationally rediscovered the White-masked Antbird during their explorations of white-sand forests along the banks of the río Morona in Loreto, north-east Peru^{1,3}. Not only did the observations confirm this beautiful creature to be a valid species, but they also demonstrated that it was extant. White-masked Antbird is currently

considered Near Threatened by BirdLife International, having previously (and understandably) been classified as Data Deficient².

In 2007, six years after Lane and Valqui's discovery, my dream of clasp eyes on a White-masked Antbird became reality—albeit after quite considerable effort! Since details about finding the bird had been made available in Valqui's book on birding in Peru⁵, seeing *Pithys* appeared to be relatively straightforward. However, my expectations bore little resemblance to my actual experience, so I hope that this account of the trip may be helpful to other birders travelling to this rather remote region.

The journey from Lima began easily enough with a LAN Perú flight to Tarapoto. The next step was to get from Tarapoto to San Lorenzo. Although



Left: Dot-backed Antbird *Hylophylax punctulata* (Scott Olmstead/Tropical Birding). Right: Bicolored Antbird *Gymnophithys leucaspis* (Stephen Davies; www.chlorophonia.com). Both species may be seen in the Tierra Blanca area



Allpahuayo Antbird *Percnostola arenarum* (above) and Ancient Antwren *Herpsilochmus gentryi* (above right) were both described relatively recently and have highly restricted distributions (both Hadoram Shirihaí/*The photographic handbook to taxonomy of birds of the world*)

The usually common and strikingly beautiful White-plumed Antbird *Pithys albifrons* (right) was surprisingly hard to find around Casha-Caño (Heinz Plenge)



an air service exists (run by AMSA whose local contact is Sr. Lincoln; tel: +969 1564), I ended up taking a slow shared-taxi to the small, pleasant town of Yurimaguas on the banks of the río Huallaga. Yurimaguas is literally at the end of the road, onward travel being possible only by air or boat.

The following morning, making my way to the docks at Puerto Abel Guerra, I encountered a colourful, bustling riverbank scene. Large wooden boats with names like *El romantico* slumped under the combined weight of people, chickens, hammocks and piles of bananas. These boats offered a cheap but very slow means of reaching San Lorenzo. I found two companies that ran a more rapid service (Amazon Express and Mayto Express) with the six-hour journey costing 130 soles (US\$52 at the time). However, these boats leave only when full, so I decided against the long wait and plumped for reaching San Lorenzo by air.

The four-seater AMSA flight takes 45 minutes and costs just 70 soles more than the fast boat. Local businessman Roger Rodríguez and I crammed our frames and luggage inside a tiny plane that buffeted its way over a vast green carpet of forest before landing with a bounce on the dirt runway at San Lorenzo.

Valqui⁵ indicates that birders should seek boat transport from San Lorenzo to the village of Tierra Blanca. However, Valqui's suggested contact at San Lorenzo (Charo Ríos Lozano) was unable to help other than directing me towards a local boatman called Kevin. Unfortunately, Kevin's fee plus the cost of 325 litres of gasoline (at 12 soles per litre) were beyond my means for the six-hour one-way speedboat journey.

All of a sudden, things were looking depressingly bleak. I was literally stuck up a river without a paddle. I needed to find an alternative to Kevin's speedboat and to secure return transportation from Tierra Blanca.

Help came from one of Roger Rodríguez's business contacts, a man named Neyra who owns 'Comercial Neyra', a general store on the town plaza. Neyra informed me that a schoolteacher called Walker Gálvez Ruíz was in San Lorenzo buying supplies for residents of Puerto Alegría, a community situated on the opposite side of the river from Tierra Blanca. Walker's canoe would be returning the following morning, and Neyra thought I might be able to hitch a ride. If I could travel with them as far as Puerto Alegría I would be tantalisingly close to the antbird site, so I decided to give it a try.

The next morning I squeezed aboard a long wooden *pequepeque* canoe, heaped high with

SEEING WHITE-MASKED ANTIBIRD THE EASY WAY

While this article is designed to excite birders about independent adventurous travel, I am aware that many readers may prefer a less onerous way of seeing White-masked Antbird. The following three Peru-based tour companies offer trips to see the species:

Birding in Peru www.birding-in-peru.com/birding-antbird-tanager.htm

Kolibri Expeditions
www.kolibriexpeditions.com/birdingperukolibri/perutours/peru_tours.asp?idtour=142

Ultimate Voyages www.ultimatevoyages.com

people, provisions, a pet Common Squirrel Monkey *Saimiri sciureus* and a few chickens panting quietly in the heat. We set off upriver on what was to become a two-day journey.

Any birders attempting this option should be prepared for a long, hot and uncomfortable passage. We travelled non-stop for nine hours before pausing for the night at the small settlement of Puerto América where we slung our hammocks under the roof of an open riverside building. The following morning we set off early, finally reaching Puerto Alegría at midday.

At Puerto Alegría I was introduced to Walker's family and to that of his amicable boatman, Juan Guevara Torres. I was then ferried by Juan, in our now empty canoe, to the tiny village of Tierra Blanca, 30 minutes up and across river. Here I met villagers and made a financial contribution towards the upkeep of the village (something all birders should do). Valqui⁵ suggests two possible guides from Tierra Blanca: Tito Sandoval and Alberto. I chose to employ Alberto and camped under the eaves of his hut, located in a small clearing at Casha-Caño, 30 minutes walk along the same riverbank.

Alberto proved to be excellent company. He has the sharp eyes of a hunter and a very useful whistle, using the latter to entice Undulated Tinamous *Crypturellus undulatus* to parade around us. Although I could tell he was sorely tempted, Alberto kindly refrained from shooting the tinamous in my presence!

Aware that White-masked Antbird is an obligate ant-follower², we were constantly on the lookout for ants. Late in the afternoon of only my second day, Alberto was walking alone near the

clearing with his hut when he discovered an ant swarm. When I returned that night and learnt of his find, Alberto reassured me that we would certainly be able to relocate the ants the following morning. In spite of my companion's assurances I could hardly sleep with worry. My quarry was almost within sight, roosting near those dormant hymenopterans in the pitch black forest just a few metres away . . . the 'pre-tick tension' was unbearable!

The next day dawned and—to my immense relief—proved Alberto right. The antswarm was still present and accompanied by a fantastic supporting cast of ant-followers: Bicolored Antbirds *Gymnopithys leucaspis*, single male Lunulated Antbird *Gymnopithys lunulatus* and Allpahuayo Antbird *Pernostola arenarum* (Vulnerable) as well as several Reddish-winged Bare-eyes *Phlegopsis erythroptera*. But the undeniable stars were my long-awaited White-masked Antbirds.

At least four glorious adults and a juvenile were hanging around a huge, tingling carpet of army ants. My first views were brief, instilling feelings of utter euphoria and intense panic in equal measure. The antbirds were darting around the undergrowth like lively clockwork toys, teasing me with mechanical churring calls as they clasped vertical stems, jerkily hitching up their wings and pumping their tails. The *Pithys* proved to be dominant over the other antbirds present and, after my initial fretting had subsided, became relatively easy to observe around the head of the ant swarm over the following five hours.

While this particular experience was the undoubted highlight of the trip, I was to see many other interesting species in the area over the course of the next four days, including Long-billed Woodcreeper *Nasica longirostris*, the recently described Ancient Antwren *Herpsilochmus gentryi* (Near Threatened), Chestnut-shouldered Antwren *Terenura humeralis*, Dot-backed Antbird *Hylophylax punctulatus*, Amazonian Umbrellabird *Cephalopterus ornatus* and Yellow-crowned Elaenia *Myiopagis flavivertex*.

Mission accomplished, it was time to leave Tierra Blanca. My concerns about arranging return transportation transpired to be unwarranted. It was possible to relay messages back to Puerto Alegre to join Juan Guevara Torres on his weekly canoe run to San Lorenzo. I paid 213 soles to cover Juan's fee and 70 litres of gasoline. Travelling with the current, the return journey to San Lorenzo took just 10 hours.

Given my experience, birders keen to see White-masked Antbird should not be deterred by logistical difficulties but should allow plenty of time for their trip. Birders travelling on a tight budget might do well to consider the option outlined above, namely to contact Walker Gálvez Ruíz (via the telephone exchange in Puerto Alegre: +51 65 812 082) to arrange travel in his canoe which normally (but not always) departs San Lorenzo on a Sunday morning.

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Clockwise from top left:

While looking for White-masked Antbird, we found the superb Long-billed Woodcreeper *Nasica longirostris*. in the várzea forest on the opposite side of the river from Casha-Caño (Octavio Campos Salles; www.octaviosalles.com)

Undulated Tinamou *Crypturellus undulatus* is frequently heard in the area, but a decent whistled imitation improves the chances of seeing it (James Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)

We saw the spectacular Amazonian Umbrellabird *Cephalopterus ornatus* in the early morning near the campsite (Fredrik Forsberg; www.eldifoto.se)

Early morning at the docks in Yurimaguas, where the only way onwards towards the White-masked Antbirds is by boat or plane! Later in the day, this colourful riverbank scene becomes a hive of activity (David Thorns)

Walker Gálvez supervises the unloading of provisions at Puerto Alegría, 30 minutes downriver from Tierra Blanca. What a relief to finally step on land again! (David Thorns)

