

Cactus Canastero

Asthenes cactorum

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Some may consider a canastero to be a strange subject for a photospot: a little brown job that looks like many of its congeners. But with Cactus Canastero, the authors of this article have discovered that there is more than meets the eye in terms of the species's habitat preferences, breeding behaviour, taxonomy and conservation. Never judge a book by its cover!

Cactus Canastero *Asthenes cactorum* is a furnariid endemic to *departamentos* Lima, Ica and Arequipa in central and south-west Peru. Classified as restricted-range, it is present only in the Peru–Chile Pacific slope Endemic Bird Area¹¹ and is uncommon¹². Formerly Near Threatened⁴, it is currently considered Least Concern by BirdLife International². Described just 50 years ago⁶, Cactus Canastero forms a superspecies with Cordilleran Canastero *A. modesta*^{8,10}, which occurs along the Andes south from central Peru into lowland Patagonia.

Habitat

Cactus Canastero only inhabits *lomas* (small hummocks) and dry creek beds with xerophytic vegetation. As the species's common and scientific names suggest, this canastero is inseparable from tall cacti, on which it nests and forages. Favoured cacti such as *Weberbauerocereus weberbaueri*, *W. rahuui*, and *Haageocereus* spp. are globally threatened endemics^{1,3}, which suggests that bird conservationists should keep an eye on this canastero.

Taxonomy

Drilling down into this species's taxonomy increases the conservation complexity. Three subspecies of Cactus Canastero have been identified; each is restricted to a small area^{5,7,9} with little or no gene flow likely between them. The nominate *A. c. cactorum* occurs at 100–1,700 m altitude (occasionally from 50 m) around Atico in northern coastal Arequipa. The most widely distributed subspecies is *monticola*, which ranges from 2,200–2,500 m (occasionally from 700 m) in Lima, Ica and Arequipa. The subspecies *lachayensis* has a highly restricted

distribution of just 5,070 ha in a tiny altitudinal range (250–300 m) in Lima's Lomas de Lachay; there are 20 breeding pairs at Lachay (E. Málaga pers. comm.). Away from these areas, there are intriguing but undocumented sight records of Cactus Canastero in Ayacucho at 4,300 m¹³ (which would represent a huge altitudinal extension and, we think, is more likely to relate to Cordilleran Canastero *Asthenes modesta*) and in La Libertad at 600 m (C. Chávez pers. comm.), as well as an isolated population of what may be an undescribed subspecies in Arequipa (own data).

Some authorities cast doubt on this division into subspecies, suggesting that plumage and morphological variation appears to be clinal⁸. Having reviewed specimens, we disagree. In our view, the differences between subspecies are distinctive, if subtle. Nominate *cactorum* is distinguished by its relatively pale ochraceous colouring. The subspecies *monticola* (Figs. 1–6) is larger than *cactorum*, and browner in overall plumage. It has darker central rectrices, less uniform underparts, with a darker vent and chin patch, paler breast and wing-band. The subspecies *lachayensis* (Fig. 7) is small, has very dark central rectrices with dark reddish-brown lateral borders⁷ and exhibits a pinkish-grey tinge to the plumage.

Through laboratory analysis and field studies, one of us (MU) has also revealed a suite of other differences between the subspecies that will be published in due course. As a taster, there is consistent variation between the taxa in: measurements, habitat choice, the species of cactus used for nesting and vocalisations (although the latter have yet to be documented through recordings). Further work is underway, including analyses of molecular samples and moult strategy; in addition to the possible undescribed subspecies mentioned above, we suspect



Anticlockwise from top:

Figures 1–2. Immatures: note fresh plumage, prominent supercilium, largely yellow bill and gape line

Figure 3. Adult perched on *Weberbauerocereus weberbaueri* cactus: note chin patch and grey bill





Clockwise from top left:

Figure 4. Adult with flying insect

Figure 5. Adult (left) feeding juvenile

Figure 6. Adult feeding on or at cactus fruit

Figure 7. Adult Cactus Canastero *Asthenes cactorum* of the subspecies *lachayensis*, Guayabito, Reserva Nacional Lachay, Lima, Peru. This very rare subspecies is, paradoxically, the one most frequently seen by birders, due to its proximity to Lima (Alejandro Tabini)

Figures 1–6: Cactus Canastero *Asthenes cactorum monticola*, Reserva Municipal Parque Ecológico Alto Selva Alegre, Arequipa, Peru (Tor Egil Høgsås)

that more than one species may be involved. Moreover, MU's fieldwork has doubled the number of localities known for the species (from 10 to 21), and identified a further 70 potential sites in the country as a whole. Most of the new localities relate to the widespread subspecies *monticola*, and we remain concerned about the conservation status of the species as a whole.

The photographs

Despite its tiny range and population, the most well-known and frequently photographed population of Cactus Canastero is the subspecies *lachayensis* in the Lomas of Lachay, a paradox undoubtedly due to the site being a regular birding spot close to the national capital. As far as we are aware, the images on pp. 76–77 are the first ever published of the subspecies *monticola* and may provide some useful information on this poorly known taxon. Taken in March 2008, the photographs show adult foraging behaviour (Figs. 4–6) and juveniles (Figs 1–2, 5). The breeding pair fed fledglings with insects and green caterpillars (Figs. 4–5), some captured on cactus. We observed an adult feeding on cactus fruits (Fig. 6). We also observed breeding behaviour (nest construction and active nests) in December 2008, which suggests that the population breeds during the rainy season at least (December–March).

Conservation

The photographs were taken at the Reserva Municipal Parque Ecológico Alto Selva Alegre, a few km from the city of Arequipa at 2,500 m. This is only one of two protected areas from which the species is known (the other is the Reserva Nacional de Lachay and relates to the subspecies *lachayensis*). Moreover, protection here is nominal given that this site is quarried for construction materials, and no conservation action is visible. Given the species's dependence on globally threatened cactus, this is of concern.

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