

NEOTROPICAL BIRDING 6
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Finding **Stresemann's Bristlefront** in Minas Gerais, Brazil

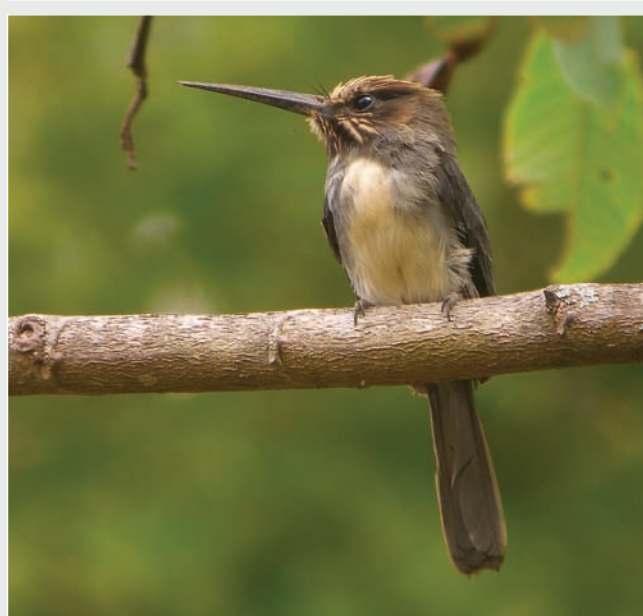
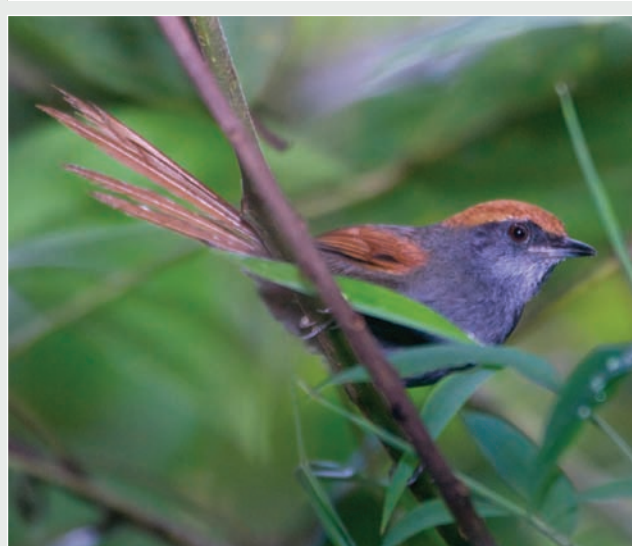
Andrew J. Whitehouse and Rômulo Ribon



Prior to 1995, Stresemann's Bristlefront *Merulaxis stresemanni* had not been recorded for 50 years (and, even then, was known only from two specimens³). Rediscovered that year at Fazenda Jueirana in the state of Bahia¹, this medium-sized, long-tailed tapaculo has not been seen there since. Fortunately, another population was discovered in March 2004 by RR, Edson Ribeiro Luiz, Geraldo Theodoro de Mattos and Fabiana de Castro Morais. The team located at least four individuals at Mata da Balbina (Balbina Forest) in two gullies of humid forest at the top of a small ridge between Bandeira (Minas Gerais state) and Macarani (Bahia). This poorly-known Critically Endangered species has a tiny population (estimated at 50–249 individuals) and miniscule range (35 km²), within which it is severely threatened by fires, logging and a clearance of forest for cattle-ranching and agriculture³. Despite these 'impediments', birders now stand a good chance of seeing this elusive creature. This article gives some suggestions for seeing Stresemann's Bristlefront at Mata da Balbina, which is now protected as the Reserva do Passarinho.

The same Stresemann's Bristlefront *Merulaxis stresemanni*, Reserva do Passarinho, Minas Gerais, October 2008; this bird's plumage is similar to that described by the authors and is likely to be the same individual (Above: Ciro Albano; www.nebrazilbirding.com. Below: Arthur Grosset; www.arthurgrosset.com)





Clockwise from top left:

Male Slaty Bristlefront *Merulaxis ater*, Ubatuba, São Paulo (Arthur Grosset; www.arthurgrosset.com)

Cinnamon-vented Piha *Lipaugus lanioides*, Fazenda Santa Maria, near Trindade, Rio de Janeiro (Hadoram Shirihai/*The photographic handbook to taxonomy of birds of the world*)

Three-toed Jacamar *Jacamaralcyon tridactyla* at Reserva do Passarinho, September 2007 (Nick Athanas/*Tropical Birding*)

Fork-tailed Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus furcatus* at Reserva do Passarinho, October 2008, showing its distinctive tail shape (Arthur Grosset; www.arthurgrosset.com)

Bahia Spinetail *Synallaxis whitneyi*, Boa Nova, Bahia; lucky birders may encounter it at Reserva do Passarinho (Arthur Grosset; www.arthurgrosset.com)

Mata da Balbina or Reserva do Passarinho

Mata da Balbina (15°48'64"S 40°30'86"W) lies within the Arrebol-Matão/Lodo forest complex. 'Balbina' is one of the names given by locals to the western part of the forest tract covering the ridge, also called Fazenda Canadá or Fazenda Serra Azul. In 2007, the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) and Fundação Biodiversitas (a local NGO) collaborated to create the Reserva do Passarinho, a private reserve of 392 ha, to which 194 ha were added two years later. The site, officially known by its reserve name but largely still called Mata da Balbina by local residents, is part of the Bandeira/Macarani Important Bird Area².

The Reserva do Passarinho holds a raft of globally threatened birds in addition to Stresemann's Bristlefront², including Banded Cotinga *Cotinga maculata* and Bahia Spinetail *Synallaxis whitneyi* (both Endangered); Blue-throated Parakeet *Pyrrhura cruentata*, Three-toed Jacamar *Jacamaralcyon tridactyla*, Striated Softtail *Thriphopha macroura*, Pink-legged Graveteiro *Acrobatornis fonsecai*, Plumbeous Antvireo *Dysithamnus plumbeus*, Band-tailed Antwren *Myrmotherula urosticta*, Fork-tailed Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus furcatus* and Black-headed Berryeater *Carpornis melanocephala* (all Vulnerable); and Rio de Janeiro Antbird *Cercomacra brasiliana*, Buff-throated Purpletuff *Iodopleura pipra* and Cinnamon-vented Piha *Lipaugus lanioides* (all Near Threatened). The forest is also home to seven globally threatened mammals, including Yellow-breasted Capuchin *Cebus xanthosternus*, Thin-spined Porcupine *Chaetomys subspinosus* and Giant Armadillo *Priodontes maximus*. So there is plenty to look for while searching for the bristlefront.

Birding Reserva do Passarinho

Dave Willis and AJW visited Mata da Balbina/ Reserva do Passarinho on 26 August 2008, after obtaining directions to the forest from residents of Bandeira. (Access now requires permission from Fundação Biodiversitas; see box on p. 39.) Wet road conditions made the final ascent to the site impossible in a standard vehicle, so we walked the last section. We entered the forest along a steeply sloping and rather slippery track that wound its way up the side of a small, largely cultivated valley and towards the forested hilltop. We birded this clearly defined track throughout the day and also walked a short distance along a side trail that headed to the left just beyond the summit.

Birding was lively throughout the day, and we enjoyed a wide range of Atlantic Forest endemics. Initially, we contented ourselves with seeing a pair of Rio de Janeiro Antbirds and hearing Black-headed Berryeater along the steep path that leads through dense scrub up to the hilltop. Where the trail curved around the hilltop before descending slightly on the other side, it enters taller forest with bamboo. Here we saw Fork-tailed Tody-Tyrant, Bahia Spinetail and lekking Cinnamon-vented Pihás. In a side valley, we found Three-toed Jacamar, and we also encountered this species and Golden-capped Parakeet as we retraced our steps down the hill.

We had with us a recording of a male Stresemann's Bristlefront made the previous year by Nick Athanas (downloaded from www.xeno-canto.org; cut XC15283). After checking the recording we realised that we had actually heard the species briefly earlier in the day whilst walking up the valley-side slope, near the head of the valley, just prior to reaching the hilltop! Returning to this area, we played back the recording. A Stresemann's Bristlefront soon responded and we recorded its voice (now on www.xeno-canto.org; cut XC22834). The bird seemed close to the path but was in thick cover. Seeing it from the trail seemed unlikely, so we ventured a little way into the understorey.

Waiting patiently, albeit with tension mounting, we played occasional sections of Nick's recording and our own cuts. The bird remained elusive, apparently circling us, but always staying several metres away, and invisible. For an hour, we could only muster tantalising glimpses of a shape stealthily darting along the ground. I finally had good views of the bird as it perched up for several seconds, belting out a round of its liquid song. Thereafter we both had good views from time to time. Success! (It goes without saying that birders using playback must do so sensitively to avoid disturbing a Critically Endangered species; the birds' welfare must come first.)

Two interesting observations

This encounter was interesting for two reasons. First, given that the bird was singing, we were surprised that it was in female-type plumage, being brown above and rich rufous below. The chances are that this plumage also relates to the immature male (Ciro Albano *in litt.* 2009, RR); the dark irides are another clue for ageing. Second, the bird's song differed slightly from that on Nick Athanas's recording, ending with a protracted double-note stuttering. Nevertheless, the bird seemed to respond more readily to Athanas's

recording than to our cuts of its own song, often vocalising just before the end of the cut, as if deliberately overlapping. Interestingly, on 30 October 2008, Arthur Grosset (*in litt.* 2009) and Ciro Albano saw what is likely to be the same individual responding in the same way to playback “in an overgrown dry gully that seemed to [Arthur] as being very similar to Slaty Bristlefront habitat”.

Analysis of sonograms reveals certain differences between the songs of Stresemann's Bristlefront (cuts XC15283, XC22834) and the closely related Slaty Bristlefront *Merulaxis ater* (XC37197). The songs of both species are prolonged descending series of notes. On close examination, however, Stresemann's starts at a lower frequency (1.5 khz) than Slaty (2.5 khz) and descends lower (to 0.5–0.8 khz rather than to 1 khz). The notes of Stresemann's song are longer and delivered more slowly (6–8/sec rather than 8–10) and have a thicker timbre. The call notes have a much more nasal quality (recalling a squeaky toy) compared to the clipped, metallic call of Slaty. We also heard some buzzy, whirring sounds, perhaps mechanical noises.

Visit Reserva do Passarinho... and help!

Next to nothing is known about the ecology or seasonality of Stresemann's Bristlefront nor of the size of its population at Reserva do Passarinho. Sueli de Souza Damasceno from Universidade Federal Oura Preto may shed light on these issues through her M.Sc. thesis on the species; fieldwork by Fundação Biodiversitas and ABC may do likewise. It remains possible that the bristlefront may occur in nearby forest remnants; further research is needed to establish its exact status and distribution³. This means that birders visiting the area have a real chance to contribute to our understanding of this clearly very rare species. Use the xeno-canto recordings (sensitively) and get searching!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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VISITING RESERVA DO PASSARINHO

The Fundação Biodiversitas reserve lies between Bandeira and Macarani, two small towns that straddle the Minas Gerais/Bahia border; the turn-off to the reserve is 8–9 km from Bandeira at 15° 49' 23" S 40° 32' 44" W. To obtain permission and make arrangements for your visit, contact Paula Procópio or Gláucia Drummond of Fundação Biodiversitas (tel: +55 31 2129 1300; e-mail: paula@biodiversitas.org.br or glaucia@biodiversitas.org.br). The reserve manager will meet you in Bandeira and provide information for your visit. Without a 4WD you may need to leave your vehicle c.4.6 km from the forest, and even with one you will need to walk at least 600 m. There is a small entrance fee to help support trail maintenance and conservation management at the reserve.

Bandeira is 45 minutes drive north of the larger town of Almenara, initially along a paved road towards Jordania, then along a dirt road on the left. When you reach Bandeira, the small and basic (but cheap and comfortable) Pousada Monteiro can be found near the petrol station. There is further accommodation in Macarani, including Pousada Mangerona (tel: +55 77 3274 2492).

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