

NEOTROPICAL BIRDING 6
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White-winged Potoo

Nyctibius leucopterus:

the first photos of a near-mythical bird

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Potoos are remarkable creatures, but tracking them down can require persistence and luck. Of no species does this appear to be truer than the White-winged Potoo *Nyctibius leucopterus*, which eluded ornithologists for more than 160 years after its discovery. In this article, we showcase the first-ever photographs of this wonderful nightbird.

All photographs are of White-winged Potoo *Nyctibius leucopterus*,
Montagne des Chevaux, French Guiana, June 2009 (Tanguy Deville/ECOBIO)





Despite its rediscovery in 1985 near Manaus in Amazonas state, northern Brazil², the White-winged Potoo *Nyctibius leucopterus* remains generally elusive. Field ornithologists used the first description of its voice² to track down vocalising birds, finding the species at several localities in Amazonian Brazil, north-east Peru, Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana, and—a full decade later—back in the Brazilian Atlantic Forest⁵, where the type specimen was collected in the early 1800s.

In French Guiana, this potoo was discovered in 1995 near the lake of Petit Saut¹. There are subsequent records from half-a-dozen localities spread across the country's forested interior^{1,3,4}. However, all were aural records. Although this potoo is easily attracted by imitating its whistle, it remains very difficult to see. Little surprise, then, that there have been no published photographs... until now.

Following several unsuccessful attempts at watching and photographing this rare canopy-dwelling nightbird, OC concluded that the only chance of success would involve scaling a tree, sitting in the canopy (hopefully at potoo-level) and whistling an imitation of its voice. But we needed a bird on which to try out the hypothesis.

In October 2006 and August 2007, AR located a singing White-winged Potoo along a logging track traversing secondary forest (partly on white sand) near Mana, north-west French Guiana. Unlike other locations known for the species in the country, the site was accessible by car, and thus ideal for our quest. We returned to the site on 11 October 2008 and identified a suitable large emergent tree to climb. Shortly after sunset, OC and TD were within the canopy, enjoying the view and waiting for the avian night shift to start.

Calling Blackish Nightjars *Caprimulgus nigrescens*, Tawny-bellied Screech Owl *Megascops watsonii* and Amazonian Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium hardyi* were the warm-up act. Then, thirty minutes after nightfall, OC and TD started whistling... and were answered immediately! At first, the potoo was a few hundred metres away but then came closer. It even perched briefly on an exposed branch just four metres from TD, but not long enough for him to focus his lens! The potoo remained close and vocal, but was largely out of sight. On two occasions, OC and TD spotted an individual flying over the canopy, just below them. The bird looked noticeably smaller than a Common Potoo *Nyctibius griseus*, and the large white patch on the upperwing was clearly visible in the dark. Two other White-winged Potoos were also calling, but farther away,

and AR managed to spotlight one at mid-level. Unfortunately, dense vegetation prevented AR from approaching to within photographable range.

No photographs then, but we were ecstatic at our partial success. We had all seen a near-mythical bird and heard three singing—a surprise given that it was only a few days after the new moon, and the species was thought to sing mainly just before or during the full moon. The following month we tried again, but only one distant White-winged Potoo answered our whistles and it did not come closer.

On 27 May 2009, TD and Vincent Pelletier were conducting an environmental study prior to deforestation at Montagne des Chevaux, a low hill covered with undisturbed primary forest just c.30 km from Cayenne, the country's capital. At dusk, a White-winged Potoo started singing close to their campsite; a new locality for the species! TD quickly climbed a tree that, conveniently, was already rigged up for fauna and flora inventories of the canopy, and started whistling. Two birds responded, one singing, the other uttering a few short contact calls. During the following hour, he saw one bird four times as it flew around nearby, but without alighting. The next day, in daylight, TD searched unsuccessfully for the roosting bird. However, conjecturing that the bird was still on its daytime roost when giving its opening evening song, he chanced his arm with a tentative diurnal whistle. The potoo responded immediately and insistently from the canopy above TD's head. But, it proved impossible to locate the source of the song from the ground.

One week later, TD and Vincent Pelletier returned to the site. Having climbed a tree to the canopy, TD whistled and the potoo answered. But despite climbing three more trees over three more days, he still could not find the bird! It took a third trip and a total of six trees climbed for TD to locate the potoo's diurnal roost. This time the potoo answered his whistle with a very soft and incomplete song. It was just a few metres away in the canopy, perched on a tiny dead branch. Having been used to seeing potoos roosting in the mid-storey, beside trunks or atop a large vertical broken branch, TD was surprised to find this White-winged Potoo roosting 40 m up in the canopy.

The following day, TD relocated the potoo roosting on a bigger branch, just below the canopy of a 30 m-tall tree. This appeared to be its favourite daytime perch. TD visited the potoo regularly, photographed it and obtained privileged insights into its daytime existence. Potoos are commonly thought to remain motionless all day. But this White-winged Potoo often preened, yawned,

stretched and turned round; gusts of wind almost invariably prompted it to stretch. In the afternoon, when facing the sun, the potoo would swivel its head backwards, as if perturbed by the bright light.

Despite the observer's proximity, the potoo regularly sang during TD's visits. Each dusk, it would sing a dozen times, sometimes more. From 2–4 June, just before full moon, the potoo sang repeatedly all night, almost through to dawn. First songs at dusk and last songs at dawn were given from the diurnal roost. A few days before full moon, it sang intensively each evening, with a second individual singing further away.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These photographs are dedicated to our friend Johan Ingels, 'potoo enthusiast' and aficionado of French Guiana's birds. We thank him warmly for his help with the manuscript. The discovery of the White-winged Potoo and subsequent observations at the Montagne des Chevaux were made during an environmental study of the site by the Cabinet ECOBIOS. We thank Vincent Pelletier for help in the field, and James Lowen for assistance with the draft.

REFERENCES

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NEOTROPICAL BIRDING 5: ERRATA

The editor apologises unreservedly for a fair handful of errors that crept into *Neotropical Birding* 5.

- On p. 17, the lower two photographs should have been credited to the British Ornithologists' Club (who holds copyright) as well as the photographer
- On pp. 17–19, the references to www.xeno-canto.com used an incorrect domain name: as regular users of this community website will know, it should be www.xeno-canto.org
- On p. 46, "p. X" should read "p. 22"
- On p. 47, the English name of *Avocettula recurvirostris* is Fiery-tailed Aulbill not Aulbird
- On p. 54 (despite their names!), Peruvian Recurvebill *Simoxenops ucyalae* is not endemic to Peru, and Manu Antbird *Cercomacra manu* not near-endemic
- On p. 58, the English name of *Poecilatriccus albifacies* is White-cheeked Tody-Flycatcher not White-cheeked Tody-Tyrant

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- Capital birding around Bogotá and Lima
- Birding sites in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay
- Identification workshops for shrike-tyrants, pipits and *Progne* martins
- Features on the thrill of discovering new species for science and birding off the beaten track

From *Neotropical Birding* 7, the magazine will have a new editor. After editing five issues, James Lowen will be taking a back seat, and Juan Ignacio (Nacho) Areta, a top Argentine birder, will be driving the publication forward.