Birding off the beaten path: visiting and documenting the birdlife of poorly surveyed areas

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As Neotropical birders will be all too aware, the region holds great potential for amazing avian discoveries. Little-explored areas are ripe for such revelatory birding, and Pete Hosner prepares us to pursue these pioneering opportunities.

Anyone with a pair of binoculars can go out and make a remarkable birding discovery—and this is one of the wonderful aspects of birding and field ornithology. Previous articles in *Neotropical Birding* have highlighted some of the most notable results from recent ornithological exploration, including new birds for science[1], the rediscovery of 'lost' and poorly known species[2,6], and the provision of important distribution records[5]. I continue the theme with this article, which uses tips from my own travels to inform and inspire readers to consider taking their next birding trip to a locality where nobody knows quite what birding treasures are waiting to be uncovered.

While the possibility of discovering a new species or rediscovering one of the few remaining 'lost' species makes the heart pound, the harsh reality is that these events are rare, even in a lifetime of work. However, there are many other reasons to take the time and effort to visit areas poorly explored by ornithologists and rarely visited by birders. Improving distributional data by providing range extensions or new localities for poorly-known species and birds of conservation interest are frequent and important contributions; just check the contents page of the latest volume of *Cotinga* for several examples. Very few sites (even if regularly visited) have inventories that are well documented and relatively complete, and this lack of basic information often limits birders, biologists and conservationists alike. Creating a site list from scratch for localities lacking such information is an excellent and feasible goal for a birding trip. Finally, many of these sites may be of conservation importance, but until they are surveyed and awareness is raised of their importance, little can be done to protect them.

I was fortunate to join a trip to a poorly surveyed Amazonian locality on my first visit to tropical South America. I had just finished college and went to Peru to work as a field assistant for a good friend, Dan Lebbin. For part of his dissertation, Dan's was researching bird communities in *Guadua* bamboo patches, and had stationed himself at various locations on the río Madre de Dios. To increase his sample size, Dan needed to visit a new major site. A botanist who worked in the area showed Dan some satellite images which suggested that there were extensive areas of bamboo near Iberia, a small town to the north. The area was easily accessible by road, but in a region subject to little ornithological exploration. After some reconnaissance, we began work in forest full of bamboo. By the end of the first day we had produced a major range extension of a then-undescribed bamboo specialist bird now known as Rufous Twisting *Cnipodectes superrufus* (Vulnerable). After a week at the site we had found several other interesting records of restricted-range species, such as Rufous-fronted Antthrush *Formicarius rufifrons* (Near Threatened), White-faced Tody-Tyrant *Poecilotriccus albifacies*, and mist-netted Peru's first documented record of a migrant Veery *Catharus fuscescens*.

Even though the importance of birding new sites is clear, some birders may have hesitations about such a trip. One might ask: 'Isn't this sort of trip much more difficult?', 'Does focusing on a single small area for a long duration mean we see fewer endemics and end up with a shorter trip list?' These are all valid concerns; but, equally, they are all reconcilable.

Compared with the frenetic activity of a fast-paced endemic chase using bird-finding guides or trip reports, travelling to an unknown site with good habitat actually affords the observer much more time *in the field*, and less time in a vehicle. With greater field time, standardised

survey methods for rough abundance estimates and thorough site lists become practicable. Secretive and low-density birds make themselves known to a careful observer. More field time also improves chances of observing novel behaviours or undescribed aspects of reproductive biology for poorly known birds. Hundreds of Neotropical species still lack nest descriptions, and even more are missing details on nesting behavior that can only be observed with repeated visits to an active nest. Overall, it is true that you will observe fewer species if you spend long periods of time at just one or two sites than if you chase around the country—but the information you reveal will be much more valuable, and provide at least as much pleasure.

Birders need not venture too far away from relatively well-known sites to accomplish many of the benefits of visiting under-explored areas. Visiting a different section of a protected area or taking a different fork in a well-visited road can provide a wealth of new information and spark or renew interest in an area. In 2005 I was volunteering for Fundación Jocotoco, mapping out their Ecuadorian reserves and trail systems for conservation planning and more effective ecotourism. As most birders make a quick visit to Tapichalaca reserve to see the spectacular Jocotoco Antpitta *Grallaria ridgelyi* (Endangered) around the lodge, few had the time or inclination to venture down to lower elevations below where the Jocotoco is found. In a few visits, myself and other birders found some spectacular species not seen by visitors such as White-faced Nunbird *Hapaloptila castanea*, Masked Saltator *Saltator cinctus* (Near Threatened) and White-breasted Parakeet *Pyrrhura albipectus* (Vulnerable). The latter was new for the area but is now regularly seen, and the Fundación runs a successful nest box programme. During the course of this work on the parakeets, researchers were able to spend more time in this area and document new regional records of other poorly known and exciting species such as Peruvian Antpitta *Grallaricula peruviana* (Near Threatened) and Bicolored Antvireo *Dysithamnus occidentalis* (Near Threatened).

Site selection

Where you decide to go birding off the beaten path will depend on your trip goals. If you aim to rediscover a particular species, you might choose an obscure type locality or nearby site with similar habitat. But the process of site selection will be completely different if your goal is to make a long trek through the most pristine habitat possible. This is *your* trip; tailor it to your specific interests. Once you have determined the kind of experience you want to have, choose a general region and look for half a dozen or so suitable areas for thorough research. Google Earth is arguably the best method for this stage of preparation, providing good aerial views and information on local topography. However, take care with interpreting its data: it is hard to judge habitat quality from low-resolution images, as agricultural tree plantations can appear to be good forest! Don't forget other sources of information, if available: good road maps and especially topographic maps may help. If you have a region in mind that seems promising, contact some birders that are active in the area: they may make useful suggestions.

Another opportunity to document an unknown avifauna is to visit a newly designated protected area. Governments often use biological information, such as Conservation International's Rapid Assessment Program (RAP) reports, to designate protected areas. While sometimes these are based on all-taxa surveys, other times only a fraction of the fauna and flora is surveyed, and even then only a small portion of the new protected area is surveyed (because of obvious feasibility restrictions). Contacting the administrative office of the protected area or meeting with park staff on location can be an easy way of finding what trails or other means are available to visit less-visited areas.

The next step is to find access to good habitat. All too often areas accessible by road outside of protected areas are characterised by degraded habitat. Exceptions are new roads that offer access to undisturbed areas 'ahead of the chainsaws'. Alternatively use old mule trails, which can be rewarding albeit difficult to locate. Some may be popular for trekking and have good information available online, yet still lead through areas which are ornithologically poorly known. Such trails often lead to small towns and rural communities that have very low population densities, whose inhabitants include excellent local guides with good knowledge of wildlife and access opportunities. However, no matter how much time you spend planning, you will almost always need time *in situ* to search for good habitat, and this may require several days. This is all part of the adventure, so be prepared to accept and embrace difficult habitat searches!

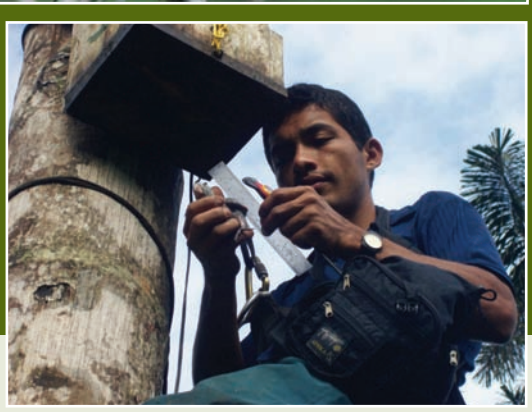
As is always the case when traveling, use caution and be sure that you can visit the area safely. Many areas have a poorly known avifauna as a result of historic political instability. If conditions have improved, this can make for a

Anticlockwise from left:

Rufous Twistwing *Cnipodectes superrufus*, Extremo, Pando, Bolivia (Joe Tobias). Since its initial discovery in Manu National Park it has been found in Pando, Bolivia, and Acre, Brazil

Undescribed flycatcher *Cnemotriccus* sp.?, Coroico, La Paz, Bolivia (Joe Tobias). This flycatcher, thought to be an undescribed member of the genus *Cnemotriccus* inhabits stunted forest growing on ridgetops on the east slope of the Andes in Bolivia

Newly cut roads, like this one leading down the río Satipo Valley, near Toldopampa, Junín, Peru (Pete Hosner), offer an excellent opportunity for exploration



Top and above: A flock of White-breasted Parakeets *Pyrrhura albipectus* at Reserva Tapichalaca, Zamora-Chinchipe, Ecuador (American Bird Conservancy/www.abcbirds.org). Last year parakeets in artificial nest boxes produced the first two known successful broods in the reserve. Right: Checking on growth of a chick (American Bird Conservancy/www.abcbirds.org)

Left: White-faced Tody-Tyrant *Poecilotriccus albifacies*, Extremo, Pando, Bolivia (Joe Tobias); fairly common but local in bamboo at sites near the río Madre de Dios in Peru, and was recently found to the north away from the río Madre de Dios and into Bolivia

very interesting visit, but don't take unnecessary risks. Conditions can also change rapidly, so make sure you have up-to-date information and don't hesitate to change plans accordingly if needed. Involving local residents in your plans is always a good idea when considering safety.

Equipment for finding and documenting observations

Regardless of the skill of the observer, uncommon and unobtrusive bird species tend to be found when they are explicitly searched for; this holds true regardless if the target site is well known or in an unexplored area. One of the most important parts of planning is to make a target list of all species that could be found in the region you are visiting, with a special 'shortlist' of specific target species to focus on finding. This list should include species that could be present but are not currently known from the area, including habitat specialists, nocturnal birds and species that are low density and elusive. After you have drawn up target lists, gather as many vocalisations as possible from published sound recordings and Xeno-canto[4] (www.xeno-canto.org). Then compare this collection to your target list to see which species are missing recordings. Try filling any gaps in by asking other recordists on list-serves or by contacting authors of recent papers on these species. Many sound-recordists (myself included) have a backlog of unarchived recordings—but we are happy to share these on request to facilitate finding new localities. Create a system for fast retrieval of songs to check identifications in the field and bring in target species for observation, better recordings and photographs. Consider different playlists for different specialised habitats (*várzea*, *terra firme*, white sand, *igapó*, bamboo, upper montane forest, etc.) or elevations (1,000–1,500 m, 1,500–2,000 m, etc.).

A basic consideration in a trip to a poorly known area is properly documenting as many species as possible. Usually the easiest method for documentation is recording bird vocalisations. Other advantages to recording are the ability to play back unknown songs to attract birds for visual identification. If you still are unsure of the identification, you can always share your recordings and seek input from other experts. Selecting a recording setup is beyond the scope of this article (but will be the subject of a future *Neotropical Birding* article). There are many excellent digital options. A digital SLR camera with a telephoto lens (or a compact camera with a sizeable zoom) is an excellent complement. Unfortunately, batteries are often a limited factor with digital SLRs. If you are in an area without electricity strongly consider purchasing a power inverter if you will have a vehicle, a solar panel charger, or lots of batteries! Mist-nets are useful, but should only be used by experienced ringers who have appropriate local authorisation. Not only will photographic documentation of birds in the hand be easier, but many groups of birds can actually be very common in a forest yet difficult to detect otherwise, even by voice. Some excellent examples are hummingbirds, especially hermits (*Phaethornis*), as well as manakins (Pipridae) and other understorey species.

Reporting, sharing and publishing observations

After returning home from the field with a wealth of new information, the next critical step is to share it with the birding and ornithological communities. A quick and easy way to share information with other birders is to produce an online trip report at a frequently visited website or a post to a list-serve or forum. While this is a great method to quickly get other birders excited in visiting the area, this type of information is easily lost among the millions of sites and blogs on the web, so there is no substitute for archiving the information in databases and publishing peer-reviewed articles. A great way to get the sightings information archived online is with eBird (www.ebird.org) or other national or regional online archives[3].

A second important way to share your data is by archiving your recordings and photographs in a sound library or photo archive. The easiest and most accessible way of archiving recordings is to post them on Xeno-canto, which also has an active community to aid with the identification of unknown vocalisations[4]. Another excellent option is the Macaulay library (www.macaulaylibrary.org) which has state of the art long-term storage facilities, though unfortunately remote upload of recordings is not currently avaliable. Finally, archive photos of birds (with associated meta-data) at a collection such as VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology) or the Neotropical Bird Club's Neotropical Bird Images website. There are many other ways to post photos online, but to make them as useful as possible, they need associated date, locality, age/sex, and behavioural context information that is searchable by other researchers.

A final step in the documentation of your trip is to publish an article in a peer-reviewed journal. Many journals publish these types of

articles, such as *Cotinga, Ornitología Neotropical* and the *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club*. With the advent of new data management technologies, academic literature is increasingly heading toward open-access, online journals. Some journals in this category include *Boletín Boletín de la Sociedad Antioqueña de Ornitología*, *Ornitología Colombiana* and *Checklist*. Don't be intimidated by publishing if you have not done it before! Find someone with some publishing experience, perhaps a local expert on the region, to have a look over your draft and give comments.

Contributing to conservation

While I was backpacking in Bolivia, Bennett Hennessey suggested that I visit the Serranía Sadiri, an interesting outlying ridge of the Andes that he had a brief chance to visit some years before. He had recorded several outlying ridge specialists that I was interested in seeing, mainly Sharpbill *Oxyruncus cristatus*. I took his advice, and spent nine nights camped out in the area with Ken Behrens and Evan Obercian. The area offered spectacular canopy flocks, scenery and, most surprising, a significant population of Military Macaws *Ara militaris* (Vulnerable), a very rare bird in Bolivia. Bennett had not found them there in the dry season, when this population apparently seasonally inhabits the nearby upper río Tuichi Valley. Following our sightings, Bennett started work to promote further ecotourism in the area and build a small ecotourism lodge that could be managed by the nearby village of San José de Uchupiamonas, who already run the successful Chalalan Lodge nearby.

The ultimate goal for a survey of an exciting new birding site is its protection. The specifics on how to best achieve this goal will be country- and region-specific, but try to find an organisation that shares your passion for protecting bird habitat. Good places to start are the national partners of BirdLife International and the American Bird Conservancy. By making repeated visits to document as many species as possible, involving locals and the birding community, and local conservation groups to spread awareness, this is a very feasible and rewarding long-term goal to work towards that will probably result in further opportunities exploring new and exciting birding destinations.

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