

# Photographing Maria-bonita

## *Taeniotriccus andrei*

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It wouldn't be unfair to say most of the 360 species of tyrant-flycatchers recognised by SACC<sup>2</sup> are pretty unassuming, and at least from a layman's perspective, pretty 'dull and boring'. Quite what constitutes a tyrant flycatcher however, has now been heavily challenged with the latest CBRO checklist<sup>1</sup> now incorporating a new family—the Rhynchocyclidae—which includes the genera *Atalotriccus*, *Lophotriccus*, *Hemitriccus*, *Myiornis*, *Poecilotriccus*, *Todirostrum*, *Rhynchocyclus*, *Tolmomyias*, *Corythopis*, *Phylloscartes*, *Leptopogon*, *Mionectes*, *Cnipodectes* and *Taeniotriccus*. Furthermore *Myiobius*, *Terenotriccus* and *Onychorhynchus* are now incorporated into the Tityridae and *Piprites* is now in the Tyrannidae!

Of course connoisseurs of the Tyrannidae immediately cry 'foul' at accusations of their charges being in any way 'dull' and invariably speak of the subtle plumage nuances, the identification challenge or even the chance of glory and ornithological immortality in the discovery of a new species. All this may be true, and we certainly consider ourselves Tyrannidophiles, but the species that tend to be on the top of birder's 'hit-lists' are not usually those at the 'brown with two wing-bars' end of the spectrum. Quite on the contrary, this place is occupied by the phenotypically liberal species such as Many-coloured Rush-tyrant *Tachuris rubrigastra*, Ornate Flycatcher *Myiotriccus ornatus*, Royal Flycatcher *Onychorhynchus coronatus* and the fabulous Streamer-tailed Tyrant *Gubernetes yetapa*. These exceptions to the tyrannid rule-of-thumb sit in monotypic genera (according to current taxonomy) and share their distinctiveness with another spectacular flycatcher: the Black-chested Tyrant *Taeniotriccus andrei* or to use its more appealing Portuguese common name—Maria-bonita. This charismatic, enigmatic, species was practically unknown in life until its voice was finally sound-recorded in the Serra dos Carajas in south-eastern Para state, Amazonian Brazil<sup>2</sup> in 2004. Then, Kevin Zimmer and Andrew Whittaker followed up a 2001 sighting of the species by Jeremy Minns, Guy Kirwan and Dave Beadle and

found the species to be locally common in *varzea* and vine-dominated forest.

The Maria-bonita had doubtless gone undetected by vocally-biased field ornithologists because of its unassuming voice (e.g. [www.xeno-canto.org: XC59238](http://www.xeno-canto.org/XC59238)) which resembles that of an anuran or an insect, rather than a bird. AL's semi-obsession with the species started in 2003 when Andrew Whittaker provocatively opened an old battered copy of Ridgely and Tudor<sup>1</sup> on plate 36 and asked him which species he'd most like to see. No contest really... From that point on, Black-chested Tyrant pretty much topped AL's Southern Amazonian most-wanted list along with the likes of White-winged Potoo *Nyctibius leucopterus*, Crimson Fruitcrow *Haematoderus militaris* and Rondonia Bushbird *Clytoctantes atrogularis*.

Fast-forward to 2010 when AL and NM, along with Antonita Santana are handling the avian component of the multidisciplinary '*Analise custobeneficio entre Conservaao e Desenvolvimento*' project; carrying out a three-month microbasin-based field campaign in the municipality of Paragominas, in north-eastern Para state. Chances of finally meeting the Maria-bonita were growing, and we weren't to be disappointed. On our third day in the field AL heard the species' unobtrusive vocalisations on a point count within dense vine-rich secondary *terra firme* forest. This first 'micro-basin' yielded a further nine detections of the species but it was not until the second week that we actually got a chance to use playback to try and see the singer. Up to that point, we had only encountered calling birds early in the morning, and could not afford the time to leave our posts and waste valuable data-collection time in the interests of merely *seeing* for ourselves one of the world's most exciting subsoscine passerines! So the watershed moment came on 5th August 2010 when binoculars and briefly DSLR came into alignment with this legendary vine-skulker. We were lucky, not least because we saw the bird *despite* the fact that AL's speakers ran out of juice almost immediately after he pressed the play button. That moment, when the bird appeared wraith-like in the dark understorey, before posing



Above left to right: First contact with Maria-bonita, perched quietly in the understory (Alexander Lees, 5 August 2010); Finding a territory with a relatively open understory was worth the effort (Alexander Lees, 7 September 2010)

Below left to right: The contrast between the black chest and the red head sometimes give the bird a 'bald' appearance (Alexander Lees, 14 September 2010); Maria-bonita's 'crest' is seldom raised but here you can see that its elongated crown feathers stretch down onto the mantle (Alexander Lees, 14 September 2010)





Above: A Maria-bonita out in the sun—a rare event indeed! (Alexander Lees, 14 September 2010)

Below left: Maria-bonita 'still life' (Alexander Lees, 14 September 2010)

Below right: Our final visual encounter with the species, in logged primary forest close to the Rio Capim, Paragominas (Alexander Lees, 19 November 2010)





Degraded (logged and burnt) primary forest in Paragominas, Pará, Brazil. Although bad news for most forest bird species, Black-chested Tyrants probably benefit from these disturbance events which favour dark, dense vine-dominated understoreys (Alexander Lees, 5 August 2010).

briefly on a sunlit perch provided an adrenalin hit that lasted the best part of a week... But the single in-focus image depicting the whole bird, although nominally 'atmospheric', did leave a lot to be desired; perennially sage *Taeniotriccus*—veteran photographer Arthur Grosset put it best '*they don't like to have their photo taken do they?*' The next opportunity to try and get an image came on the 6th September when NM found a number of territories in a *várzea* transect close to the Rio Capim. The next day, AL arrived for the second round of point counts with his trusty (and rather battered) Canon by his side and after finishing science for the day managed to corner a relatively confiding individual in an area of relatively open *várzea*. Ten minutes and some better images later it was smiles all round. Quite unexpectedly, one week later, AL and A. Santana found themselves listening to a singing Maria-bonita whilst undertaking a midmorning point count in a *very* degraded patch of young secondary forest. This was obviously an opportunity too good to miss and on completing the subsequent rather dull series of point counts, we rushed back to the spot where the bird had been singing and pressed the play button on the Edirol. Thirty seconds later, there was Para's most-wanted in dappled shade—no flash required. Opportunities like that don't come round very often and with a minimal amount of technical prowess we managed to secure some images that finally do this beautiful bird some justice.... Now, in late October we have recorded *Taeniotriccus* at

over 20 sites and are already looking ahead to the prospect of modelling the species distribution both within the municipality and then extrapolating across the eastern Amazon—given that the species has now been found as far west as central-north Mato Grosso, just how under-estimated is its global distribution...?

#### REFERENCES

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