

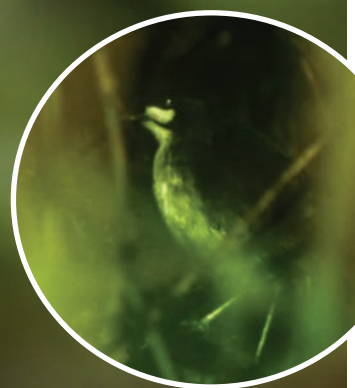
Discovering the **Jocotoco**

Robert S. Ridgely

Inaugurating a new, occasional feature in *Neotropical Birding*, Bob Ridgely, one of the founders of Fundación Jocotoco and world-renowned field guide author, relates our first tale of discovery—that of the Jocotoco Antpitta *Grallaria ridgelyi*, surely one of the most remarkable ‘new’ birds described to science in modern times. Despite its rarity, but thanks to the foresight and dedication of the staff of Fundación Jocotoco, this spectacular bird can now be seen by anyone willing to make the ‘trek’ to what is still a relatively remote part of southern Ecuador. We will aim to capture the thrill behind other recently described or long-lost but subsequently rediscovered species in future issues of *Neotropical Birding*.

Main photo: A classic portrait of an adult Jocotoco Antpitta *Grallaria ridgelyi* (Glenn Bartley); the birds are primarily terrestrial, and can run very rapidly, but they also hop on branches and stumps up to 3–4 m above the ground. Jocotoco Antpittas hardly ever fly.

Inset: Taken the day following the bird’s discovery, on 21 November 1997, this image was taken in heavy rain close to (but well below) the spot where the pair was first recorded and seen (Robert S. Ridgely).





Above: The legs and feet are long and very strong, but for feeding only the (quite heavy) bill is used. Reclusive and very hard to see under normal conditions, now the antpittas are easily observed at the Tapichalaca feeding station (Aldo Sornoza).

Left: The Jocotoco Antpittas *Grallaria ridgelyi* now are habituated to come to be fed at around 08h30 every day, and they virtually ignore the people who come to see them (Francisco Sornoza). Sometimes they almost literally hop onto your boots! This individual is a juvenile.

Inset: A pair of resident Jocotoco Antpittas *Grallaria ridgelyi* has brought with them a series of young birds to the feeder since early 2007. Juveniles are easily recognised by their much browner crowns, brownish irides (less carmine) and duller-coloured legs—all of which characters are gradually lost within a year after fledging, at which point they disperse (Roger Ahlman).



Creating *The birds of Ecuador* was a huge undertaking—little did I know, when Paul Greenfield and I started out, way back around 1980. For much of that period I was employed at the Ornithology Department of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, and ‘Ecuador’ became one of my most important projects. Early on it became clear that not enough was known about Ecuadorian birds to write the truly authoritative book that we were envisioning, so a massive amount of field research had to be planned, and gradually executed. This involved going virtually everywhere in the country—I doubt there are many Ecuadorians who have seen as much of their country as I have! Of course many exciting discoveries were made, and almost contrary to logic, these discoveries seemed to become easier as we learned more: it wasn’t so much luck as having a prepared mind.

The highlight came very late in this research process. I had come to realise that my knowledge of bird vocalisations was relatively weak in the Andes of Ecuador’s far south-eastern corner, and so I decided to put together a recording-oriented trip with my old friend John Moore, scheduled for November 1997. John’s late wife Ruth accompanied us, and we had the good fortune to also have an excellent, then up-and-coming, young Ecuadorian ornithologist, Lelis Navarrete, with us as well. One of the founders of the ecotourism company Neblina Travel, another old friend, Mercedes Rivadeneira, wanted to accompany us—and of course I agreed. We explored a number of areas in the Zamora region, and despite less than ideal hotels (this was long before the opening of wonderful little lodges like Copalinga), were enjoying good success. I then suggested that we transfer to another nice country hotel that I knew, the Hosteria Vilcabamba in the town of the same name. Vilcabamba is now well known for its preponderance of centenarians, but that wasn’t the treasure we were after: we wanted recordings of some of the lesser-known birds found on the Andean slopes nearby.

I had been to this region a couple times before, but had never spent any time at a place known as Quebrada Honda (‘deep valley’) where, not far to the south of an arm of Podocarpus National Park, I knew that a rough mule trail dropped down from a saddle just off the road into a valley far below. Despite its high elevation (c.2,600 m), the area was starting to be settled, though quite a bit of decent forest was reputed to remain, even along the road and trail. After spending a couple days at Cajanuma (a sector of the national park), one day, 20 November, we decided to give it a

try. Departing very early, we drove for more than two and a half hours, mostly in the dark, arriving at the trailhead around 06h30. Conditions were perfect: overcast, no rain, and most important no appreciable wind. Climbing a rise, we paused to view the valley below us, where Scaly-naped Amazons *Amazona mercenaria* and Golden-plumed Parakeets *Leptosittaca branickii* were flying past in small parties. Far below first I, then Lelis and John too, heard a soft measured hooting, which continued long enough for us to look quizzically at each other with that ‘what was that?’ look familiar to all field ornithologists. I thought I knew pretty much every major bird vocalisation in this part of the Andes (even if I didn’t have recordings of many of them), but I was drawing a blank. Lelis and John too. But it was a long way off and then it quit, and we had to assume it was a weird variant call of something, what we didn’t know—but there was no way to find out.

So down we hiked, a couple of miles, meeting groups of *campesinos* whose mules were hauling out planks of *Podocarpus* wood pilfered from the national park on the distant side of the valley. The weather remained favourable, with plenty of bird activity, mainly tanager-dominated flocks but also several interesting vocalising birds like the local endemic, Orange-banded Flycatcher *Myiophobus lintoni*. Lelis and John lingered behind, improving their recordings of the southern *pyrrhops* form of Black-throated Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus granadensis*, which sounds notably different from northern birds and is thus probably better treated as a separate species. I continued slowly downslope, entering an area with a particularly heavy bamboo understorey. And then, suddenly, the voice we had heard in the distance early in the morning burst out, the hooting this time very close. Instantly my directional microphone was whipped out and I started to record, praying that the bird would keep up and that no mule train would appear from below. It was loud, and the others came down, tiptoeing closer but maintaining the recorder’s etiquette of trying not to disturb the person making the ‘primary’ recording. After a very long minute and a half, the bird paused and I managed to breathe. Then we clustered together and softly I tried playback.

So often when you do this, nothing happens. The singing bird isn’t territorial, or it starts to rain and the bird moves off, something. This time, however, quite the contrary. A big bird crashed closer, through the dense bamboo, then paused, still out of sight. A quick shot more of tape and up it hopped, into my full view. “My God, look at that” (that actually wasn’t quite what I said, but

no matter...). I knew instantly: no ornithologist or birder had ever seen this fabulous creature before! And it was close! So close I was afraid to move, but I had to, because the others still couldn't quite see it. But then one more little hop, and there it was, for all to see. We could hardly stand up, we were trembling so much with excitement, but we had to because then the bird started to sing again, and all three recorders swung into action. We just stood there, transfixed, as this extraordinary bird disported in plain sight, right in front of us. Then a second bird appeared, presumably its mate, essentially identical in appearance; it called much less. Feverishly, we recorded every detail into our tape-recorders, fearing that at any moment the birds would move off, but they didn't, remaining in view for a full 20 minutes.

And what a 20 minutes! Rarely has one bird created so much ornithological excitement, or ultimately had such an impact. We continued to search for other birds, and even found and taped some good ones, but it was all pretty anti-climatic. Our intention had been to leave the area the next day, but we changed our plans in order to return, in part because I wanted to try and photograph the bird (naturally I had neglected to bring my camera the first day!). Weather conditions were much less favourable, with considerable rain and wind, but we persevered and for hours 'trolled' with our tapes from the day before. Finally we heard a faint response, far below the trail, but decided to pursue it anyway, crashing through the dense undergrowth and getting soaked in the process. Eventually, Lelis and John were able to lure it in, but today the bird mostly remained hidden; nonetheless I managed to obtain a few shots, including one that proved to be in reasonable focus (this was, of course, well before digital cameras had revolutionised this aspect of the documentation process).

I had my proof: there really was an incredible bird out there, we weren't just dreaming. Returning to the USA and the Academy in triumph, the news soon spread. Two months later, having organised an expedition to study the bird in as much detail as we could manage, we were back. The antpitta proved to be known to a few local people, who thought it was an owl and nocturnal in behaviour (the bird does sing a little at night). As they called it the 'jocotoco' from its song, we decided to use that name too. John Moore wanted the bird to be named for me, and so with some reluctance I acquiesced, and asked my friend Niels Krabbe, an expert on Andean birds and long-time resident of Ecuador, to prepare the paper describing it. Less than two years later the bird was introduced



The lodge at Tapichalaca, called Casa Simpson after one of Fundación Jocotoco's primary backers Nigel Simpson, provides a welcome refuge when it is rainy and chilly (David Agro). Hummingbird feeders provide fabulous birding entertainment even then.

to science as *Grallaria ridgelyi*, the Jocotoco Antpitta¹.

Usually that would be the end of our involvement: we had done our job, the bird had been discovered and now had its name, and its relationships had been elucidated. Now we would go on with our regular, scientific work. But in this case the bird was so fantastic, and its discovery was so dramatic, that a group of friends and I decided we just couldn't let it end there. The Jocotoco Antpitta was clearly at risk from extinction: it was known from only this one small area, and much of that region had already been impacted by settlers eager to establish smallholdings for their cattle, no matter how marginal the conditions. And so, in 1998, Fundación Jocotoco was founded, an organisation whose sole mission was, and remains, to purchase and protect the habitats of Ecuador's rarest birds, starting with the antpitta but then expanding to include other imperiled species, among them El Oro Parakeet *Pyrrhura orcesi* and Pale-headed Brush Finch *Atlapetes pallidiceps*. Fundación Jocotoco has become a huge success, but that's a story for another time.

REFERENCE

1. Krabbe, N., Agro, D. J., Rice, N. H., Jacome, M., Navarrete, L. & Sornoza M., F. (1999) A new species of antpitta (Formicariidae: *Grallaria*) from the southern Ecuadorian Andes. *Auk* 116: 882–890.

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Jocotocos are very large antpittas, and are very dominant at the feeders. Occasionally a Chestnut-naped Antpitta *Grallaria nuchalis* will come in, but rarely can they linger. By voice it is clear that Chestnut-naped is considerably more numerous at Tapichalaca than Jocotoco (Francisco Sornoza).



Below, clockwise from right:

Several groups of the beautiful White-breasted Parakeet *Pyrrhura albipectus* inhabit montane forest and forest edge at lower elevations in Tapichalaca Reserve (Aldo Sornoza). Like other *Pyrrhura*, they are almost always encountered in flocks of 6–12 birds and they are cooperative breeders; the provision of nest boxes appears to be permitting a slow increase in numbers of this globally threatened species.

At least several dozen pairs of Golden-plumed Parakeets *Leptosittaca branickii* (inset) nest at Tapichalaca, originally mainly in senescent hollowed-out wax palms, but now increasingly in nest boxes provided for them (Francisco Sornoza). They are present mainly in December–June.

Franco Mendoza, the foundation's chief guard at Tapichalaca, is in charge of the antpitta-feeding programme (Francisco Sornoza). A native species of (very large!) earthworm is harvested from a series of seepage zones.

White-throated Quail-Doves *Geotrygon frenata* come regularly to ground corn at a special feeder along the trail to the Jocotoco feeding area (V. Laux). Within the last year, Tawny-breasted Tinamous *Nothocercus julius* have begun to appear too—but they're very shy!

