

Unidentified banded owl *Ciccaba* sp. at Manu National Park, Peru

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Unknown *Ciccaba* sp., Cabañas San Isidro, prov. Napo, Ecuador, October 2011 (Dušan M. Brinkhuizen). As evidenced by the San Isidro 'mystery' owl, there is still much to learn concerning this and other owl genera in South America, and although the Manu *Ciccaba* described here is probably a Rufous-banded *C. albitarsis* × Black-banded Owl *C. huhula* hybrid, other options cannot be entirely discarded.

Much remains to be learned concerning the taxonomy of some Neotropical owls, with several species having been described only within recent decades. The authors of this article describe their observation of what appears to have been a hybrid Rufous-banded × Black-banded Owl in south-east Peru, perhaps providing the first evidence of hybridisation between two species of Neotropical owls, although other possibilities for the bird's identity cannot yet be wholly discounted.

On 31 July 2010, Antonio Ceballos, Marco García, José Portillo, Miguel Rouco and the two first-named authors were visiting Manu National Park, in south-east Peru, on a birding tour led by David Geale. The evening was spent birding the world-famous Manu road between Wayqechas Biological Station and Cock of the Rock lodge (see *Neotrop. Birding* 5: 49–58). When it was already dark, en route to Cock of the Rock lodge, and just a few kilometers before arriving at the lodge, DG spotted an owl perched on a low branch in an open tree, relatively close to the road. Principally given the location and altitude, the bird was quickly identified as a Rufous-banded Owl *Ciccaba albitarsis*⁷. Since the bird was unconcerned by our presence, we left the van and, following a slow approach, we got within 10 m of the bird permitting Miguel Rouco to take some good photographs. The owl remained on the same perch, and did not vocalise throughout the observation, which lasted some 20 minutes.

It was not until dinner that evening, while going through our photographs, that we retrospectively realised that the owl was not a Rufous-banded—or, at least, not a typically plumaged individual—but neither was it a Black-

banded Owl *Ciccaba huhula*, the only other possibility in the area (albeit at an unusually high elevation). After some discussion, we agreed to leave the mysterious owl unidentified and to revisit the issue once the tour had ended.

The precise location of our observation is 13°06'34.55"S 71°55'42.65"W, and the area is situated at 1,435 m on the east slope of the Andes, just 1.4 km in a straight line south-west of Cock of the Rock lodge. This altitude is just below the normal elevational range for Rufous-banded Owl, which typically occurs at 1,700–3,500 m, but well above the usual range of Black-banded Owl, which tends to be found below 500 m^{5,6}. However, the latter species has been recently found as high as 1,500 m in south-east Ecuador¹, and Daniel F. Lane has observed a Black-banded-type owl on the Manu road in 2002 quite close to where our observation was made.

Description of the bird

Based on size, structure, general appearance and plumage details, the owl we observed clearly belonged to the *Ciccaba* group, and in general it showed a mixture of features of Rufous-banded and Black-banded Owls. It was not as richly coloured as Rufous-banded, and the overall coloration was more similar to Black-banded, although the bird appeared fairly bicoloured due to the whitish underparts. The upperparts, including the mantle, wing-coverts and primaries were very dark, with fine barring over the scapulars, mantle and lesser coverts, and much broader bars on the greater coverts and primaries, approaching the pattern exhibited by Rufous-banded. The greater coverts had four pale bars of almost even width with the dark bars. All of these bars were distinctly buff-tinged, and this colour was especially intense on the primaries.

The streaked pattern on the underparts (breast and belly) was similar to that of Rufous-banded Owl, but was black and white rather than rufous and white, and consisted of well-defined black 'anchors', wherein each feather had a black central streak crossed by a terminal bar. This striking pattern was especially distinctive on the very pale flanks and lower belly. On the breast the 'anchors' were replaced by a fine barring (or speckling) which connected with the neck and crown, resembling in this respect Black-banded. These vermiculations partially covered the face, with only a faint and diffuse black mask, quite unlike the consistent and well-defined black mask of Black-banded.



Close-up of the head of the unidentified banded owl (*Ciccaba* sp.), Manu National Park, Peru, July 2010 (Miguel Rouco)

The bare parts—claws and bill—were also intermediate between Rufous-banded and Black-banded, being clearly horn-yellow but less bright and not as intense as in the latter species (which are often described as yellow-orange). Iris colour was difficult to judge because of the reflection, but appeared to be black.

Discussion

There are several possibilities concerning the identity of this owl. Given its intermediate phenotype between Rufous-banded and Black-banded Owls, it seems most reasonable to suggest that the bird was a hybrid between these two species, especially considering that both species, at least locally, do overlap in range. Hybridisation has been proven to occur in some Nearctic *Strix*, at least between Spotted Owl *S. occidentalis* and Barred Owl *S. varia*², which regularly interbreed and produce fertile offspring⁴. Thus hybridisation in the genus *Ciccaba* must be considered feasible, considering that this genus is thought to be closely related to *Strix* and indeed is frequently subsumed within the latter by some authors^{3,5}. Furthermore, considering the observation of a Black-banded in this same area by Dan Lane mentioned above, one could even speculate that 'our' bird might have been the offspring of this owl.

However, other possibilities cannot be discarded as yet. The bird could represent a previously unknown dark form of Rufous-banded Owl, although this does not appear to explain the presence of mixed characters of the two species. Finally, the last option is to consider that it represents a new taxon, presumably closely related to Rufous-banded and Black-banded Owls. This seems to be much less probable than the two previous hypotheses, but taking into account the still unresolved case of the mystery owl from San Isidro in eastern Ecuador (see http://cabanasanisidro.com/pages/birds_and_forest.htm), one must be cautious with these controversial *Ciccaba*. The San Isidro 'mystery' owl is currently believed to be a morphologically anomalous and altitudinally isolated form of Black-banded Owl, but further genetic analysis is required in order to clarify its actual taxonomic rank (M. Lysinger pers. comm.).

In conclusion, we believe that the owl we observed along the Manu Road should be treated as a putative hybrid, but that its identity must be left open until more birds of this phenotype have been observed and documented. Given that

birders very frequently visit this region, further observations can perhaps be expected in the near future, hopefully throwing some additional light on this issue.

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Top row, left to right:

Unidentified banded owl (*Ciccaba* sp.), Manu National Park, Peru, July 2010 (Miguel Rouco). The bird clearly appears bicoloured, with pale underparts contrasting with the dark upperparts. Note the buffy (not white as in Black-banded Owl *C. huhula*) fringes, and horn-yellow bare parts.

Unidentified banded owl (*Ciccaba* sp.), Manu National Park, Peru, July 2010 (Miguel Rouco). The upperparts are distinctly dark as in Black-banded Owl *C. huhula*, but note the broad, buff-tinged barring over the greater coverts and primaries, which character is typical of Rufous-banded Owl *C. albitarsis*.

Unidentified banded owl (*Ciccaba* sp.), Manu National Park, Peru, July 2010 (Miguel Rouco). The underparts pattern points definitely towards Rufous-banded Owl *C. albitarsis*, given the distinctive pattern of dark anchor-shaped marks, rather than well-defined barring as in Black-banded Owl *C. huhula*. In contrast, the facial pattern resembles Black-banded Owl, but appears less striking due to the faint black mask and less bright yellow bill.





Bottom row, left to right:

Black-banded Owl
Ciccaba huhula, Fazenda
Embiara, Mato Grosso
do Sul, Pantanal, Brazil,
November 2010 (Octavio
Campos Salles). Overall,
the black and white
colours of Black-banded
Owl are similar to the
Manu *Ciccaba*, but
note the brighter bare-
parts coloration, barred
underparts, well-marked
black mask, and the
narrower and whiter bars
on the wing-coverts and
primaries of *huhula*.



Rufous-banded Owl
Ciccaba albitarsis,
Cabañas San Isidro,
prov. Napo, Ecuador,
October 2009 (Tadeusz
Stawarczyk). Compared
to the Manu *Ciccaba*,
note the similarities
in the pattern of the
underparts, with obvious
dark anchors unlike the
typically barred pattern of
Black-banded *C. huhula*,
although the colour is
more rufous and white,
rather than black and
white as in the Manu
bird. Rufous-banded
Owl also shows less
brightly coloured bare
parts, compared to both
Black-banded and the
Manu owls, and its head
pattern and upperparts
are far richer rufous.