

New and confirmative bird records from northern Esmeraldas province, Ecuador

Alejandro Solano-Ugalde, Juan F. Freile, Paola Moscoso and Francisco Prieto-Albuja

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Presentamos 18 nuevos registros de aves realizados en el norte de la provincia de Esmeraldas, en su mayoría especies acuáticas o semi-acuáticas, los cuales fueron obtenidos durante censos nacionales de aves acuáticas. Los registros se realizaron en manglares y humedales al norte y sur de San Lorenzo, cerca a la frontera con Colombia, algunos representan extensiones de ámbito (ej. Mirasol Neotropical *Botaurus pinnatus*) y otros los primeros para la provincia de Esmeraldas (ej. Ostrero Americano *Haematopus palliatus*).

The recent publication and update of bird species distributions in *The birds of Ecuador*^{8,9} has permitted the contextualisation of new records and range extensions^{1,2,15}. Continued surveys throughout Ecuador, especially in poorly studied areas, are often producing records that aid a better understanding of the current ranges of birds. Here we report range extensions, additional and new distributional records obtained during waterbird censuses in north-western prov. Esmeraldas, from the Cayapas-Mataje Ecological Reserve. In the late 1990s, several species included here were recorded by K. S. Berg¹⁰ in the same reserve, but because his records are unpublished, we consider it worthwhile to publish evidence of their presence and to make the information available to a wider audience.

Cayapas-Mataje Ecological Reserve (51,300 ha) was established in 1995 and subsequently designated as a Ramsar site (2003) and Important Bird Area (IBA) (2005)⁴. The IBA only fulfilled criterion A1 (threatened species), but recent work suggests that it may also be important for congregatory species (criterion A4)¹¹. Roughly, the IBA embraces 70,000 ha of mangrove and wetlands, including the seasonally flooded freshwater 'Laguna de la Ciudad'⁴. It also encompasses the territories of several Afro-Ecuadorian communities, a number of important watercourses (e.g., the lower ríos Cayapas and Mataje), as well as some areas recently cleared for oil palm monocultures (see Freile & Santander⁴).

On 27–29 July 2007 we visited five sites within the IBA, most in Cayapas-Mataje Ecological Reserve, to conduct waterbird censuses as part of the Wetlands International programme¹². Four sites are within extensive mangrove north of San Lorenzo. 1) Chungal: 'La Pajarera', Pampanal sector (01°23'N 78°50'W); 2) Changuaral: 'La Barca', Palma Real sector (01°27'N 78°52'W); 3) Estero Molina (no coordinates available); 4) San Pedro: 'Malvinas', Puerto Bolívar sector (01°23'N 78°54'W). These were surveyed on 27–28 July, from a small motor boat and on foot where feasible. Large numbers of waterbirds were found. Additionally, on

29 July we surveyed an area of extensive freshwater marshland at Laguna de la Ciudad, 10 km south of La Tola community (01°06'N 79°07'W). At this site, observations were made from a road overlooking the marshes. All sites were selected on the basis of previous knowledge of areas with major waterbird congregations¹², based on previous censuses.

Species accounts

Least Grebe *Tachybaptus dominicus*

Up to 26 were at Laguna de la Ciudad, inhabiting small ponds surrounded by extensive cattle pasture. Regularly recorded north to southern Esmeraldas, with a single record from Porvenir near San Lorenzo (one seen in November 1997 by K. S. Berg, *sensu* Ridgely & Greenfield⁸). These authors suggested that numbers of *T. dominicus* in parts of west Ecuador fluctuate dramatically in response to changes in water levels.

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*

Ten were observed with *T. dominicus* at Laguna de la Ciudad. Previous reports limited to southern Esmeraldas⁸. At least three juveniles were noted, suggesting local breeding.

Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga*

Three at Laguna de la Ciudad, perched on posts. As they were resting, identification from the locally common Neotropic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus* was straightforward. Recorded from the lower río Santiago, south of San Lorenzo; it has been suggested that breeding might occur in Cayapas-Mataje Ecological Reserve (O. Jahn *et al.* *vide* Ridgely & Greenfield⁸). Only females (or juveniles?) were observed.

Fulvous Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*

One observed in flight at Laguna de la Ciudad. Identification was based on its uniform underparts, no white on the wings and dark bare parts⁸.

Previous records are from further south in western Esmeraldas (Atacames-Muisne areas⁸).

Black-bellied Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna autumnalis*

Three groups, totalling up to 17, were observed at Laguna de la Ciudad, both swimming and at rest. The nearest records are from the Chone estuary⁹.

White-cheeked Pintail *Anas bahamensis*

A dispersed group of c.12 was observed at Laguna de la Ciudad. Locally fairly common to common on ponds and lagoons near the coast, as well as on freshwater ponds and lakes north to the Atacames area of western Esmeraldas⁸. Our observation represents the northernmost report in Ecuador.

Pinnated Bittern *Botaurus pinnatus*

This rare and local species was observed on three occasions amongst tall aquatic grass and reedbed borders at Laguna de la Ciudad. Two birds were observed for up to ten minutes, their identity being confirmed by the long, yellowish and heavy bill, greenish legs, and finely and complexly striped, barred and vermiculated upperparts^{8,9}. Previously known from a few scattered records north to the Chone estuary, in central Manabí, but may occur anywhere with extensive suitable habitat^{8,9}.

Cocoi Heron *Ardea cocoi*

Three foraging in damp pastures and abandoned shrimp ponds at Laguna de la Ciudad. Easily identified by the black cap and grey mantle. Although locally fairly common in freshwater habitats in western Ecuador, recent records are all from the Chone estuary southwards^{8,9}. Also recorded from mangroves in the Pedernales-Cojimies area, where 17 were counted in July 2006 (JFF *et al.*; see Santander *et al.*¹³).

Yellow-crowned Night Heron *Nyctanassa violacea*

A single adult at Laguna de la Ciudad. Most recent records are from southern Esmeraldas and northern Manabí³, with 2–3 records from western and northern Esmeraldas^{8,9,11}, suggesting a continuous distribution along the entire Ecuadorian coast.

Common Black Hawk *Buteogallus anthracinus*

One was first heard (its loud calls identified by AS-U) and subsequently located in the subcanopy of tall mangrove at Chungal. Although it was observed near a relatively large nest of dry branches, no further evidence of breeding was obtained. The all-dark plumage and yellowish bare parts were noted, and confusion with other raptors is also unlikely based on the habitat^{8,9}. Previously only known from the Golfo de Guayaquil mangroves^{8,9}, this record confirms the species'

presence in the San Lorenzo mangrove, as initially suggested by K. S. Berg (*vide* Romero¹⁰).

Rufous-necked Wood Rail *Aramides axillaris*

One observed for an extended period bathing at a small shallow estuary adjacent to an extensive mangrove at Changuaral. Previously recorded at very scattered localities in the north^{8,9}, with three observed at Muisne (P. Coopmans *in* Ridgely & Greenfield⁸), two at the Cojimies estuary³, and at least one in mangrove at the Cayapas-Mataje Ecological Reserve (K. S. Berg *vide* Romero¹⁰), but is probably continuously distributed along the Ecuadorian coast in remnant mangrove habitat³.

Common Gallinule *Gallinula chloropus*

Quite numerous at Laguna de la Ciudad, where 69 were counted, of which at least 30% were juveniles. Previously reported north to the Same-Muisne area of western Esmeraldas^{8,9}, but its presence further north is unsurprising.

American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus*

Five, including a pair tending an immature, were observed on a sandy island at San Pedro. A nest was found in 2006¹¹. These records extend the distribution of *H. palliatus* to northern Ecuador, as most previous records were from the south-west^{8,9}, with a single published record from the Canuto delta, northern Manabí⁷.

Wilson's Plover *Charadrius wilsonia*

Thirteen, mostly in non-breeding plumage⁶, were counted on sandy beaches at Changuaral, confirming the observation by K. S. Berg¹⁰. The only other *Charadrius* recorded was *C. semipalmatus*, from which *C. wilsonia* is readily identified by its larger size, longer and heavier bill, broader pectoral band and more extensive white forehead^{6,8}. The species' range north of the Chone estuary^{8,9} is probably continuous³.

Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*

An adult in non-breeding plumage was observed at close range amongst a large flock of Elegant *Sterna elegans* and Royal Terns *S. maxima*. Its large size, pied plumage and unique bill confirmed the identification⁵. Previously unknown from the north Ecuadorian coast, where records—few of them recent and none of large numbers—are all from the Guayas estuary west to the Santa Elena peninsula and nearby beaches^{8,9}.

Masked Water Tyrant *Fluvicola nengeta*

Regular in open pastures and marshes at Laguna de la Ciudad and elsewhere between the wetland and San Lorenzo town. This fairly common species of open and semi-open areas in western Ecuador is seemingly spreading north and east following

habitat modification. Recent records from eastern Esmeraldas and neighbouring Pichincha, Imbabura and Carchi provinces, along with our records support the reported recent range expansion⁸.

Rufous-browed Peppershrike *Cyclarhis gujanensis*

At least two, singing in the subcanopy of mangrove in the Palma Real Sector, were identified by their almost monotonous melodious vocalisations typical of *Cyclarhis*¹⁴. Reported to occur in small numbers north only to west Esmeraldas and west Pichincha^{8,9}; our record confirms previous observations in the same area by K. S. Berg¹⁰ and extends the species' range further north. As we were unable to observe the birds, we do not know if they corresponded to the (undescribed?) form found in south-west Colombia⁸.

Red-breasted Blackbird *Sturnella militaris*

At least six males were observed through telescopes at Laguna de la Ciudad. Identification from Peruvian Meadowlark *S. bellicosa* was based on the solid black upperparts, lack of supercilium, and darker and shorter bill. The species appears to be increasing its range⁸ and will probably continue to spread south to other disturbed areas in western Ecuador. Already known from the eastern lowlands, this record is the first from western Ecuador, although we are aware of several unpublished reports from the same side of the Andes (T. Santander & F. Prieto, AS-U *et al.*, R. S. Ridgely *et al.*).

Most records reported here were to some degree 'expected' whilst others 'merely' confirm previous observations¹⁰ not published in peer-reviewed or mainstream literature^{8,9}. However, few ornithologists have visited the San Lorenzo area, which lies close to the Colombian border, making published knowledge scarce.

Some species reported here merit special attention. The population of *Cyclarhis gujanensis* requires study due to the existence of a presumably undescribed form in adjacent dpto. Nariño in south-west Colombia⁸. The small breeding population of *Haematopus palliatus* in northern Esmeraldas represents an important northward extension; Henry⁷ suggested the Canuto delta (in northern Manabí) to be the northernmost breeding locality. According to local people, the isolated sandy island where we observed the species is of recent origin, making it possible that this population became established recently. We assume that *Sturnella militaris* has colonised western Ecuador from neighbouring Colombia, rather than via dispersal over the Andes from the east Ecuadorian lowlands. Habitat conservation at the visited sites varies considerably. Mangroves in the reserve are still extensive and, although several communities

regularly exploit their natural resources, negative impacts appear to be low. In contrast, marshes at Laguna de la Ciudad have suffered intensive destruction. Extensive cattle ranching, resulting in compacted soils, polluted water and alteration of the dynamics of seasonally flooded areas through dyke building and drainage, was noted. Shrimp ponds also exist, some apparently abandoned but others still operative. In 2006 environmental NGOs petitioned the Ministry of Environment to block further shrimp aquaculture in Laguna de la Ciudad^{11,12}, but we are unaware of any government action to counteract such activities.

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- Alejandro Solano-Ugalde**
Fundación Imaymana, Lincoln 199 y San Ignacio, Quito, Ecuador. E-mail: jhalezion@gmail.com.
- Juan F. Freile**
Fundación Numashir, Casilla Postal 17–12–122, Quito, Ecuador. E-mail: jfreileo@yahoo.com.
- Paola Moscoso**
Escuela de Ciencias Biológicas, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, Quito, Ecuador. E-mail: sindarin85@yahoo.com.
- Francisco Prieto-Albuja**
Fundación Sirua, Alemania 616 Edif. Morales 3B, Quito, Ecuador. E-mail: francisco@sirua.org.