First description of the nest of Mottle-backed Elaenia *Elaenia gigas*

Mottle-backed Elaenia *Elaenia gigas* inhabits the east slope of the Andes from southern Colombia to south-west Bolivia[4]. In Ecuador it frequents river valleys and shrubby clearings with scattered trees, in the lowlands and foothills mostly below 1,250 m[4,5].

The breeding biology of *Elaenia* flycatchers is not well documented. Of the 18 species in Middle and South America[1], Mottle-backed Elaenia is one of three for which there is no information (the others being Great Elaenia *E. dayi* and Brownish Elaenia *E. pelzelni*). For most species, data are limited to descriptions of nests and clutch sizes[2]. Only Lesser Elaenia *E. chiriquensis* and Yellow-bellied Elaenia *E. flavogaster* have been studied in detail[3,6]. Here we describe the nest of Mottle-backed Elaenia.

Figure 1. Nest (post-fledging) of Mottle-backed Elaenia *Elaenia gigas*, Chontayacu Valley, prov. Napo, eastern Ecuador, at 1,125 m (Jose Simbaña)

On 9 October 2007, we found a nesting pair of Mottle-backed Elaenias in the Chontayacu Valley (00°43'S 77°46'W), near Narupa, prov. Napo, Ecuador, at 1,125 m. We easily recognised them by their bifurcated crests with white centres, and the mottled pattern on their mantles. Both birds were carrying food, but did not approach the nest in our presence. On 10 October we observed both adults displace a group of four Greater Anis *Crotophaga major* and, from a concealed location, we observed one adult deliver food to the nest. It remained several minutes, and the heads of two small nestlings were clearly visible as they begged in the presence of the adult. When we returned on 21 October, both nestlings were still in the nest and appeared ready to fledge, but on 22 October the nest was empty with no signs of disturbance. We feel, given the size of the nestlings, that they successfully left the nest. Given that other *Elaenia* incubate c.14–16 days and fledge at 15–17 days[2], we estimate that the clutch was initiated around 20–24 September.

The nest was 13 m above ground in the canopy of a 15-m tall *Piptocoma discolor* tree (Asteraceae). The isolated tree was c.8 m from a frequently used road, c.15 m from a 5–8-m-wide river, and c.25 m from disturbed forest. The simple nest was suspended between the branches of a single vertical fork, the two supporting arms of which were 9 and 5 mm in diameter. The supporting branch just below the fork was 11 mm in diameter. The cup was entirely of pale rootlets interwoven and wrapped circularly, such that some of them passed around the supporting branches (Fig. 1). The nest was additionally bound to the supports with sparse spiderwebs. The nest's inner diameter (measured at perpendicular angles) was 6.0 × 6.5 cm and the cup was 4.5 cm deep. There was no differentiable lining and no external decoration (i.e., lichen, moss, etc). Externally, the nest measured 8.0 × 8.5 cm wide by 5.0 cm tall at the lowest point and 6.5 cm at the attachment points. There were 5–6 loose rootlets dangling below the nest up to 7 cm.

A comparison of the nest materials and the architectural complexity of all elaenias for which nest descriptions are available[2], suggests that the nest of Mottle-backed Elaenia is among the most simply constructed (i.e., without lining or decoration).

Acknowledgements

Jose Hidalgo provided helpful corrections to earlier versions of this manuscript. We thank Field Guides Inc., the Maryland Ornithological Society, Population Biology Foundation, John V. & the late Ruth Ann Moore, Matt Kaplan, Tim Metz and the PBNHS for supporting our field work. This is publication no. 182 of the Yanayacu Natural History Research Group.

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Received 19 March 2008, final revision accepted 11 February 2009