



Figure 1. First-winter female Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus varius*, Río Blanco Ecological Reserve, dpto. Caldas, Colombia, 29 January 2011 (Daniel Uribe)

First record of Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus varius* from the Andes

On 5 December 2010, KMB & A. Uribe were with a tour group at Río Blanco Ecological Reserve, dpto. Caldas, Colombia, when AU spotted a woodpecker unfamiliar to him. KMB acquired a very brief view just before the bird flew and recognised it as a sapsucker *Sphyrapicus* sp. None of the other tour participants saw the bird well enough to identify it. KMB's view was insufficient to eliminate Red-naped Sapsucker *S. nuchalis*, but that species occurs as far south only as north-west Mexico^{2,11}, so he tentatively identified the bird as the much more likely Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *S. varius*, which winters regularly in small numbers to Panama⁸ and irregularly to the Netherlands Antilles⁷.

On 29 January 2011, AU was accompanying another tour group led by REW & DU when he spotted the bird in the same location. DU obtained photographs as it approached in response to pre-recorded *S. varius* calls

(although it did not vocalise) and the bird was confirmed as a first-winter female *S. varius*.

The bird's conspicuous white wing patches unequivocally identify it as a *Sphyrapicus* (Fig. 1). REW's field notes mention whitish head stripes with, especially on the nape, some brownish tones; a moderate amount of dull, poorly defined red on the crown (from the photographs, apparently confined to the forecrown) but none on the nape; a white throat; an incomplete, black chest crescent; extensive, blackish streaking and mottling on the sides; extensive, white laddering on the back, tinged with cream and buff; and barred, white, outer rectrices on an otherwise black tail. The photographs also reveal some yellow on the lower belly.

The poorly defined and incomplete head and breast markings indicate a bird in pre-formative moult, which in *S. varius* is typically completed on the wintering grounds⁶. *S. nuchalis*, in contrast, completes the same moult much earlier⁷ and has red on the nape and throat, and a darker back^{2,6}. In *S. varius*, the lack of red on the throat indicates a female. Females of this species winter further south than males¹¹ and greatly outnumber

males in southern parts of the winter range³.

The site where the bird was found (05°04.643'N 75°26.247'W) is characterised by montane secondary forest at 2,700 m beside a single-track, dirt road and close to cleared pasture and a small settlement. This is typical of the species' winter habitat in southern Central America, which is described as forest edge, light woodland and semi-open habitats, chiefly at 900–3,000 m^{8,10,11}.

The December sighting occurred <2 weeks after the first documented records on the South American mainland^{1,4}. Clearly, an unprecedented number of sapsuckers reached South America that winter. The Río Blanco bird constitutes the first record from the Andes and the southernmost ever.

Although we are unaware of any evidence to suggest higher than usual numbers of *S. varius* elsewhere in winter 2010–11, the species' population is increasing overall, which could lead to more extralimital records. For example, in eastern North America the Breeding Bird Survey shows an estimated 2.6% annual population increase in 1999–2009⁹, which is also reflected in 1999–2010 Christmas Bird Count data from the USA, but not from areas further south⁵.

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