

New observations of the White-tailed Shrike-tyrant *Agriornis andicola* in southern Ecuador

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Son descritos dos nuevos sitios para el muy local *Agriornis andicola* en las provincias de Azuay y Loja, en el sur de Ecuador, ambas descubiertas en febrero de 1995. Son provistas breves notas acerca de su ciclo de vida e identificación. La aparente escasez de la especie continua siendo un enigma, pero es sugerido, basandose en la extensión del hábitat que parece ser adecuado para la especie, que los observadores han dejado de ver la especie con anterioridad en el sur de Ecuador.

Introduction

The only published records of the White-tailed Shrike-tyrant *Agriornis andicola* in Ecuador since 1923 are a bird collected at Nudo de Cajanuma, Loja province, 04°05'S 79°12'W, 2,400 m on 13 August 1965 (MCZ)¹, and a very worn (presumably nesting) bird collected by NK at Bestión, Azuay province, 03°27'S 79°01'W, 3,075 m on 2 November 1992². As suggested by Krabbe², the altiplano of Tarquí, Azuay province, which holds habitat similar to that at Bestión, has proved a good place to look for it. During fieldwork in January and February 1995 and 1996 we found the species at three new localities in southern Ecuador.

The new records



White-tailed Shrike-tyrant *Agriornis andicola* (Jon Fjeldsà)

On the altiplano of Tarquí, along the Cuenca-Loja road, 4 km south of La Paz and by the pond on the east side of the road, at 03°21'S 79°10'W, 3,000 m, a very worn and secretive bird was observed at close range in chapparral (*Oreocallis*, *Blechnum*, *Hypericum* and ericaceans dominant, hereafter referred to as *Oreocallis* scrub) on 12 February 1995. The bird only perched in, never atop the bushes. The species was seen here again in November 1995 (M. Lysinger pers. comm.), but a visit in mid-December 1995 found all the vegetation there burned to the ground. However, similar habitat is still widespread nearby.

Along the Saraguro-Selva Alegre road, Loja province, 13.7 km beyond Saraguro football field and c.500 m past the right turn to Río Paquishapa at 03°35'S 79°17'W, 2,730 m, a pair was observed for 30 minutes on 13 February 1995. They caught insects by running along the road, once chased each other in the air while vocalising, and seven times perched in *Eucalyptus* trees. The area consists of open farmland and *Eucalyptus* trees, with a few native bushes in the dry quebradas.

Along the Cuenca-Loja road, Loja province, 10-15 km south of Oña and 3 km south of the right turn to "Centro de Retiros Carboncillo", at 03°34'S 79°11'W, 3,090 m, a pair was observed on 24 February 1996. Whilst one perched in pine trees and could only be seen in flight, the other twice perched atop the pines for several minutes, once atop a heap of dirt for a short time, once within a pine tree, and once within an *Oreocallis* bush. This bird also sang, being tape-recorded and twice attracted to playback. It was in worn plumage and the throat streaks were not as conspicuous as in the other individuals seen well, leaving its large size and strong bill (and to a lesser extent the browner plumage) as the best field characters. It is worth re-emphasising that the brown rather than black base of the lower mandible is visible only at close

range (and that in young Black-billed Shrike-tyrants *A. montana* the base of the lower mandible is distinctly pale for several months).

Black-billed Shrike-tyrant was observed at all three localities. It is apparently more easily observed than the White-tailed Shrike-tyrant, as it invariably perches atop bushes and outcrops.

Discussion

The White-tailed Shrike-tyrant is perhaps more widespread in the lower temperate zone of the semi-arid central valley of southern Ecuador than hitherto suspected. However, it seems almost certain that the species is now extinct, or at best extremely local, in northern Ecuador, where it formerly occurred around Quito and Ibarra. The new observations appear to indicate that, at least in Ecuador, the species does not inhabit high open páramo, but instead prefers semi-arid, bushy country, principally between 2,400 and 3,100 m. Historical records reportedly come from c. 3,600 m in northern Ecuador on Pichincha, Antisana, Chimborazo and Gualaquiza, but no recent sightings from these areas exist.

It remains enigmatic why the species is so rare and apparently vanishing. It may be unusually predator-prone, especially to human persecution involving slingshots. The disappearance of bushy habitat in the central valley of northern Ecuador is another possible explanation. Its occurrence in open farmland with *Eucalyptus* trees west of Saraguro is intriguing. The same type of farmland is widespread in the central valleys of Ecuador, so presumably these birds were using marginal habitat. Had they been displaced by Black-billed Shrike-tyrants² or are they individuals persisting in suboptimal habitat?

A study of the species is needed to identify the causes of its disappearance. Observers are urged to check the identity of all shrike-tyrants which appear unusually large and use inconspicuous perches. NK is placing the tape-recording with BLOWS (British Library of Wildlife Sounds, London), where it will be freely available. Observers are kindly requested to forward details of their observations to the senior author, at the address below.

References

1. Collar, N.J., Gonzaga, L.P., Krabbe, N., Madroño Nieto, A., Naranjo, L. G., Parker, T.A. & Wege, D.C. (1992) *Threatened birds of the Americas: the ICPB/ IUCN Red Data Book*. Cambridge, U.K.: International Council for Bird Preservation.
2. Krabbe, N. (1994) The White-tailed Shrike-tyrant, an extinction prone species? *Cotinga* 1: 33-34.

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