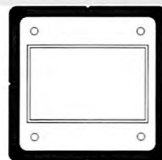


Swallow-tailed Cotinga

Phibalura flavirostris



The monotypic genus *Phibalura* is largely confined to a small corner of south-eastern South America: the Swallow-tailed Cotinga has an extensive range in coastal areas of Brazil, from Minas Gerais south to Rio Grande do Sul. Inland, records are from Goiás in Brazil south to eastern Paraguay (west to Guairá) and north-eastern Argentina (Misiones)^{1,4,5}.

A small population on the east slope of the Bolivian Andes in La Paz (previously known from two 1926 specimens and a third without locality details⁵ but recently rediscovered in the Bolivian Andes, M. Pearman pers. comm.¹), initially appears surprising. However, *Phibalura* (along with *Laniisoma*) is thought to be one of several cotingid genera whose origins lie in the geologically older Brazilian highlands, which subsequently dispersed across the extensive lowland gap to colonise the younger Andes.

Swallow-tailed Cotingas are migratory, breeding in the mountains and descending to lower elevations in the winter. Some records from the extremities of its range (e.g. Goiás, Brazil) may reflect such movements. In Rio Grande do Sul, all records fall between September and March, indicating that the species undertakes an austral migration^{4,5}. Such displacement is shared with one other cotingid – White-tipped Plantcutter *Phytotoma rutila* – a genus only recently placed within the Cotinginae^{3,4}. Similarly the Bolivian records may constitute migrant stragglers from the main range to the east. Swallow-tailed Cotingas occur principally below 1,400 m; the Andean records are thought to derive from a locality at c. 2,000 m, though no altitude was recorded for the specimens⁵.

This handsome bird is rarely seen by casual observers. Throughout the range it is rare or locally uncommon, inhabiting forest edge, borders of woodlots and even gardens provided there are scattered trees. In the breeding season, when the species is quiet and unobtrusive, they are usually found singly or in pairs. Spectacular parties of 15-20 birds have been recorded during migration^{1,4}.

Phibalura is unique amongst the Cotinginae as it is the only species in which the tail is mark-

edly longer than the wing. Although mistletoe berries are the main food source, the long swallow-like tail allows added manoeuvrability in flight and it is the only cotingid genus other than *Iodopleura* (purpletufts) that regularly hawks flying insects (short sallies are recorded in the feeding behaviour of *Ampelion*)¹.

The nest is inconspicuous and cup-shaped, slightly flattened and mostly of lichens placed on horizontal branches up to 18 m above ground. This structure is intermediate between the two groups of cotingas, loosely termed as “lowland” and “montane” by Snow⁵. The former group, principally found in tropical zones where predators are frequent, build flimsy, saucer-shaped nests supported by small twigs. The inconspicuousness is enhanced by the nest being attended solely by the female. In cooler montane zones a more “conventional” cup-shaped construction, of lichens and mosses is utilised. It is believed that the need for inconspicuousness is reduced because of the fewer predators at higher elevations^{2,5}.

In common with montane cotingid genera such as *Pipreola* and *Ampelion*, *Phibalura* lays 2-3 eggs and both parents attend the nest and feed the young. Most observations suggest a conventional breeding cycle is employed. However, evidence exists (although scant and incomplete) that male and female Swallow-tailed Cotingas may attend separate nests, once the female has laid a clutch in each. This phenomenon is unknown in passerine birds.

A perched Swallow-tailed Cotinga is totally distinctive: Black-headed Berryeater *Carpornis melanocephalus* (in eastern Brazil), and *Pipreola* fruiteaters (in the Andes) are the only confusion species. If seen well, birds of either sex are unmistakable. The yellow and white underparts, scaled with black (more extensive in the female) and the densely barred mantle and rump are immediately obvious even if one fails to notice that incredible tail! Less conspicuous is the partially concealed reddish nuchal crest. This, along with feeding habits, parallels the Andean cotingid genus *Ampelion* – considered to be the closest relatives of *Phibalura*. Geographical variation is slight, although Bolivian birds are longer-tailed than their south-east Brazilian counterparts. Immatures are

browner and possess more heavily marked underparts. Moulting information for *Phibalura* is scarce, but it appears females moult earlier than males, a feature unique within the Cotinginae^{1,5}.

Swallow-tailed Cotinga is one of the most sought-after birds by birders visiting the south-eastern corner of the "bird continent". Unfortunately it appears to be declining and may deserve formal threatened status⁴.

References

1. Barnes, E., Bushell, C. & Green, G. (in prep.) *Cotingas and manakins*. Mountfield, East Sussex: Pica Press.
2. Kricher, J. C. (1989) *A neotropical companion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
3. Prum, R. O. (1990) A test of the monophyly of the Manakins (Pipridae) and Cotingas (Cotingidae) based on morphology. *Occ. Papers Mus. Zool. Univ. Mich.* 723: 1 - 44.
4. Ridgely, R. S. & Tudor, G. (1994) *The birds of South America*, 2. Austin: University of Texas Press.
5. Snow, D. W. (1982) *The cotingas: bellbirds, umbrellabirds and other species*. British Museum (Natural History), London: Cornell University Press.

Colin Bushell

13 Chaulden Terrace, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP1 2AN, U.K.

Back cover

Top left: Swallow-tailed Cotinga *Phibalura flavirostris*, Itatiaia National Park, Brazil (Chris Gibbons)

Top right: Swallow-tailed Cotinga *Phibalura flavirostris*, nest with nestlings, Itatiaia National Park, Brazil (Chris Gibbons)

Bottom left and right: West Peruvian Screech-owl *Otus roboratus*, Río Calvas at Hacienda Linderos, extreme southern Loja, Ecuador: August 1991 (Robert S. R. Williams)

Swallow-tailed Cotinga *Phibalura flavirostris*
(Chris Gibbons)



West Peruvian Screech-owl *Otus roboratus*
(Robert S. R. Williams)



Please direct correspondence to:
The Senior Editor, Neotropical Bird Club, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Beds. SG19 2DL, U.K.