

An antbird quest... seeing Acre Antshrike in Brazil

Jonathan Newman

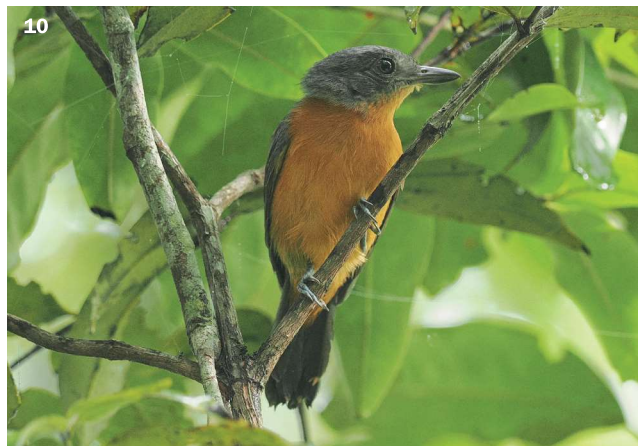
The *Neotropical Birding* team loves a quest—a personal mission to see a sought-after bird. Here a self-professed antbird addict explains why catching up with Acre Antshrike *Thamnophilus divisorius* was so important to him—and how he went about it.

Acre Antshrike. *Thamnophilus divisorius*. A rare, local, poorly known bird confined to extreme western Brazil and neighbouring Peru. A species discovered as recently as in 1996, during a biological survey of the Serra do Divisor in Acre, Brazil and only described as new to science eight years later (Whitney *et al.* 2004), its closest relative being Streak-backed Antshrike *T. insignis* of the pan-tepui region of the Guiana Shield. Subsequently, Acre Antshrike has been documented from several locations just over the border in Peru (Tovar *et al.* 2009, Gonzalez & Acuy 2017). It is restricted to short-stature, nutrient-poor forests on a remote set of ridges, with a dense understorey of bromeliads and ferns. Very few parts of its range are easily accessible. The bird had never seemed to me to be a species I would ever see. Until May 2024, when I found myself on a small boat, heading up the Rio Mõa.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. A flashback to 1992. To a young veterinary student in Cambridge, UK, dreaming of birds beyond the confines of Europe. More specifically, to the wonders of Latin America. Flashy cotingas, colourful manakins, swirling flocks of tanagers and so much more. I had just spent a summer researching birds in the rainforests of Papua New Guinea and the south-west Pacific, but I could feel an almost visceral draw to the treasures of the New World. This needed addressing, so I leapt at the chance to help organise an expedition to the forests of eastern Colombia in the summer of 1992. I was to be the only birder in the group, joining researchers working on bats, tree diversity and dung beetles. This was going to be a steep learning curve for a young British birder familiar with *Phylloscopus* warblers and Old World buntings!

All photographs are by Jonathan Newman and, unless otherwise stated, were taken near Pousada do Miro in the Parque Nacional da Serra do Divisor, Acre, Brazil, during May 2024.

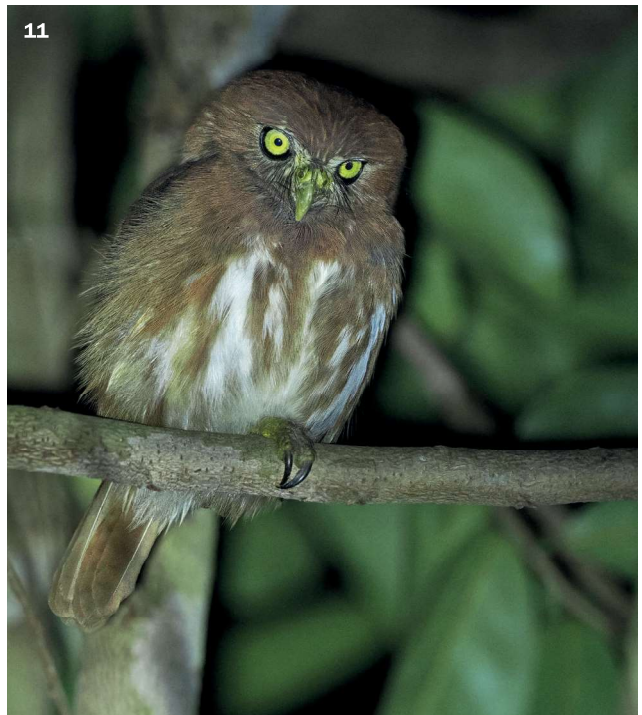
1 Early-morning view on the ridge where Acre Antshrike *Thamnophilus divisorius* occurs.



Just four antbirds left...?

So what next? My remaining four antbirds are scattered across South America. By the time you read this, I will have tried for (and hopefully seen) Caura Antbird *Myrmelastes caurensis* on a return visit to Brazil in December 2024. Band-tailed Antshrike *Thamnophilus melanothorax* will be the focus of a Suriname trip in January 2025. Which leaves just a return to Bolivia for Ashy Antwren *Myrmotherula grisea* and Brownish-headed Antbird *Myrmelastes brunneiceps*.

However, one of the beauties of antbirds is their fascinating biogeography. This means that their taxonomy is regularly being revised, with new species being split, cryptic species discovered and others lumped (see Tom Schulenberg's timely piece about a split in Silvery-cheeked Antshrike *Sakesphoroides cristatus* on p72!). The complex biogeography of the Amazonian basin no doubt holds more surprises to come. In the meantime, on almost every visit to South America, antbirds are omnipresent. Whether in the whirling manic mixed flocks of lowland forest or skulking in waterside *Heliconia* thickets. Whether on transient river islands in Ecuador or inside dense bamboo in south-east Brazil. Or, of course, noisily attending army-ant swarms.



11 Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium brasilianum*. The Neotropics' most widespread member of the genus *Glaucidium*.