



**Occasional Papers**  
**OF THE**  
**Boston Society of Natural History.**

---

CRITICAL NOTES ON RARE PANAMA BIRDS.

BY LUDLOW GRISCOM.

---

THE brief systematic notes that follow are submitted in advance of a distributional check-list of Panama birds, now in press. The nature of this check list precludes systematic discussion and the description of new forms, which should have priority of publication.

Once again it is a pleasant duty to thank the authorities of the Bird Department of the British Museum for the opportunity of examining some of their treasures.

***Mecocerculus superciliaris*** (Sclater and Salvin).

One of the rarest and least known Tyrant Flycatchers in the world is the subject of the present notes. It was originally described as *Leptotriccus superciliaris*, and the description was based on two specimens collected by Arcé at Chitra and Calovevora, two small hamlets in the humid strip at the base of the mountains on the Pacific slope in Veraguas, western Panama. The species was next reported from northeastern Costa Rica, where Ridgway secured a female on March 29, 1908. The next specimen to be secured, though previously unrecorded, was collected at Tapalisa, Pacific slope of extreme eastern Darien, on Feb. 24, 1915. It is in the American Museum of Natural History, no. 135,932. The latest contribution to our knowledge of this species is Hellmayr's note in the Catalogue of the Tyrannidæ. While his transfer of the species to the genus *Mecocerculus* does not seem very satisfactory to me, he reports a trade skin from Bogota in the Paris Museum, of which he gives a minute and critical description, as the only specimen seen by him.

One of my objects in visiting Europe during the summer of 1934 was to examine the types or other specimens of all species

of Central American birds, which were not represented in American collections at least by topotypes. One of these, naturally, was *Mecocerculus superciliaris*. I had long been familiar with the New York specimen, and had suspected that it would not be racially identical with West Panama or Costa Rica birds.

In addition to the two original Arcé specimens, the British Museum proved to have a third specimen, here recorded for the first time; ♂, Carrillo, northeast Costa Rica; Nov. 17, 1898; coll. C. F. Underwood.

An examination of the types revealed at once the great pallor of the Darien specimen, and Hellmayr's minute comparative description of the Bogota specimen in Paris shows that this bird's characters agree with the Darien specimen. There are consequently two subspecies, as follows:

1. *Mecocerculus superciliaris superciliaris* (Sclater and Salvin).

Known at present from two specimens from northeast Costa Rica and two more from the Pacific slope of Veraguas. Much brighter green above and yellower below. Pileum dark slate gray to blackish in sharper contrast with back, which is bright olive green. Throat and chest relatively darker gray, with a distinct clouded and mottled effect. Abdomen, vent and underwing coverts brighter and deeper lemon yellow. The ♂ from Carrillo, Costa Rica, measures, wing, 53 mm.; the underwing coverts are much brighter yellow than the two Veraguas specimens, which are sexed ♀, the wings 48 and 50 mm. One of these females has the throat very slightly darker gray than the other two, while the other Veraguas female has the pileum distinctly blacker than the other two.

2. *Mecocerculus superciliaris palloris*, subsp. nov.

Known at present from the type, Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist., no. 135,932, from Tapalisa, eastern Panama, as recorded above, and the 'Bogota' trade skin in Paris. Generally paler and duller than typical *superciliaris*. Pileum grayer, less black, less sharply contrasted with the duller olive green back. Throat and chest paler gray, without the clouded and mottled effect. Belly and vent paler lemon yellow, the underwing coverts whitish with a faint yellowish tinge.

A final word on the generic position of this species. I agree heartily with Dr. Hellmayr that it is not congeneric with the genotype, *sylviolus* of southeastern Brazil, though I qualify this statement by adding that the basis for it is the current criterion for 'generic' characters in these small Tyrants. It is equally true that *Leptotriccus flaviventris* Hartert, transferred by Hellmayr to *Pogonotriccus*, is not strictly congeneric with *sylviolus* either. However it is also true that *superciliaris*, a humid tropical zone species, is not really congeneric with the Andean *Mecocerculus*, nor is *flaviventris* strictly congeneric with *Pogonotriccus*, on exactly the same criteria used in comparing them with *Leptotriccus sylviolus*. We have in this family of birds a welter of small, obscurely colored little birds, which have been placed in various genera, on the basis of characters, which would not be given the slightest weight in an older and more stabilized group. Here and there, very rare and little-known species, known only to two or three specialists in each generation, and widely scattered in the museums of the world, refuse to fit even into the minute divisions currently recognized.

One modern school, as an arbitrary rule of thumb, contentedly describes the necessary number of monotypic genera, based inevitably on even poorer and slenderer characters. This system has the merit of eliminating practically all necessity for thinking, judgment, or critical opinion in ornithology, which becomes a branch of technology rather than biology. It is much simpler to be an ornithologist, as nothing is required to become one save acute powers of observation and a sufficient working vocabulary to record the observations.

But another school of thought considers that such a summary affords prima facie evidence of there being too many genera already. Dr. Hellmayr's footnotes amply describe in just what respects these two little Tyrants do not fit into the genera to which he provisionally refers them. I shall gladly follow his classification, until it is improved on the only possible basis. A satisfactory revision of the genera of the Tyrannidæ will be made by the man who can compare *every species* simultaneously. It will not be made by the man who has seen almost every species at one time or another, nor by the man who has two thirds of them

before him, and reads up on the other third or ignores them altogether. I wish Dr. Hellmayr would undertake it. But in the meantime, as I am unable to undertake this revision, I leave the species *superciliaris* in *Mecocerculus*. I agree with Dr. Hellmayr that it did not fit in *Leptotriccus*, I agree with him as to just what respects it does not fit in *Mecocerculus*, presumably we agree that it is not worth describing as a monotypic genus, and I can find no genus in which it fits perfectly, that Dr. Hellmayr overlooked. I consequently do not refer it to any other genus, as this would be about as much scientific progress, as another throw of dice in a game of craps.

#### **Vireo carmioli Baird.**

This little mountain Vireo is now a comparatively well-known bird in the highlands of Costa Rica. In Panama, however, there are only two specimens on record from the Volcan de Chiriqui; one collected by Arcé many years ago, now in the British Museum; the other secured by W. W. Brown, now in the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy. It is consequently worth recording that Rex R. Benson secured 6 specimens in November and December, 1931, at a coffee finca known as El Quiel on the Volcan de Chiriqui.

#### **Hylophilus viridiflavus Lawrence.**

This species is endemic in the Arid Tropical Zone of the Pacific Slope from southwestern Costa Rica to the Rio Chepo in Darien just east of the Canal Zone. Contrary to the relative paucity of specimens in museums, it is really quite a common scrub-inhabiting bird in this area. Mrs. Davison has recently described a proposed paler race, *pallescens*, from Costa Rica and western Chiriqui (*Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington*, 1932, p. 168). While she does not list her material, she mentions a 'series' from southwestern Costa Rica, 2 specimens from Concepcion, Chiriqui (one, the type) and 2 from eastern Chiriqui, which are stated to agree very well with Lawrence's original description of a bird from Panama City. Much to my regret, I am unable to recognize this race. I have seen 5 birds from southwestern Costa Rica, 3

from western Chiriqui, 1 from eastern Chiriqui, 1 from Veraguas, 2 from Coclé, 10 topotypes from Panama City and 3 from Río Chepo, Darien. I can find no differences whatever between series from the two opposite ends of the range, but I note that birds in fresh post-nuptial moult are greener, less ashy above, and yellower, less white below than other birds taken at other seasons of the year. There is an excellent contrast between June and December specimens before me from southwestern Costa Rica.