

## NORTH AMERICAN MIGRANT PASSERINES AT TWO NON-FORESTED SITES IN VENEZUELA

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Abstract.—Fourteen species of passerine nearctic migrants to the neotropics were observed at two non-forested sites in interior Venezuela, over >20 yr. Eleven species were found in a secondary-scrub habitat in northern Venezuela and 12 were observed at a site in the central llanos. Behavioral notes are reported in addition to extensions of months of occurrence for five species, and seven new state records.

### PASERIFORMES MIGRATORIOS EN DOS LOCALIDADES NO-FORESTADAS DE VENEZUELA

Sinopsis.—En un período >20 años, se han observado 14 especies de paseriformes migratorios del neoártico en dos localidades no-forestadas del interior de Venezuela. Se encontraron 11 de las especies en habitat caracterizado como matorral secundario de la parte norte de Venezuela, y 12 en una localidad de los llanos centrales. En el trabajo se informan además 7 nuevos registros para estados de Venezuela, se discute el período de estadía de cinco de las aves, y se ofrecen generalidades sobre la conducta de las 14 especies.

Currently there is concern about the diminishing numbers of some North American migrants to the neotropics (Keast and Morton 1980, Rappole et al. 1983, Robbins et al. 1986, Terborgh 1989). To address this problem, numerous authors call for more detailed observations of nearctic migrants on their wintering grounds (see Hagan and Johnston 1992). Most North American passerine migrants to the neotropics are found in forested habitats (Rappole et al. 1983), but Leck (1985) in Mexico, Karr (1976) in Panama, and Robinson et al. (1986) in Peru, reported that high numbers are also found in edge, scrub and secondary habitats. In Venezuela nearctic migrants are reported to be found from coastal mangroves to montane wet forests at >3000 m (Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps 1978).

I found 14 nearctic passerine species at two climatically harsh, low altitude, non-forested Venezuelan sites. Both sites regularly experience an approximately 5–6-mo dry season from about November through April at the time migrants are generally present. The migrants appeared to be transients at both sites, although at some places a few may spend the boreal winter (McNeil 1982, Schwartz 1964). Some nearctic migrants used the same harsh, non-forested sites on their northward journeys at the extreme height of the Venezuelan dry season.

The regional field guide (Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps 1978) gives months of occurrence, elevation ranges and Venezuelan states for most species. This paper extends those months of occurrence for five species, adds seven new states, and gives behavioral notes for all 14 species.

## STUDY SITES AND METHODS

One study site was 30 km south of Caracas, in the south-facing foothills of the Costal Cordillera at Urbanización Los Anaucos (10°19'N, 66°51'W), state of Miranda. I lived there, and studied the birds from 1966 to 1984, making brief visits in 1985, 1987, 1988 and 1993. The second site was 45 km south of Calabozo, state of Guárico, at Fundo Pecuario Masaguaral (08°31'N, 67°35'W), where I studied birds from 1971 to the present. At both sites most annual rainfall was between May and November (Thomas 1985) with a strong dry season in between, during which many of the predominantly deciduous trees were bare. The Los Anaucos site (elevation 550–800 m; 141 ha) consisted of secondary-scrub with much mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*) and a few widely scattered houses surrounded by yards and gardens. The original forest cover of this area was lost over 400 yr ago with the earliest arrival of Europeans. Masaguaral (elevation 63 m; 10,000 ha) is a large cattle ranch with grazed fields, widely scattered large trees and some gallery forest, although few observations were made in the gallery forest. The llanos habitat, although used by humans, may not be greatly modified from its state before European colonization. For more detailed descriptions of the sites, and their avifauna by month, breeding and abundance, see Thomas (1979, 1993).

I kept lists of all species observed at both sites while I studied endemic South American birds. Although I mist-netted at both sites, only a few ( $n = 16$ ) nearctic migrants were captured incidentally to other work, as compared with >2100 neotropical birds. Weights of those birds are in Thomas (1982, 1990). One species occasionally recorded at both sites, the Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*) is not considered because I could not separate sightings of resident races from migrants. For non-flocking birds the total number found is indicated in parenthesis following the site name.

## RESULTS

*Bank Swallow (Riparia riparia)*.—Masaguaral only. On 26 Apr. 1983 I mist-netted a single bird that had an incomplete chest band, but two other individuals flying overhead had complete chest bands; usually 5–100 Bank Swallows were observed, often with much larger flocks of the next species, in December, January, February and April. Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps (1978) report only October–November occurrence in Venezuela, and none from Guárico.

*Barn Swallow (Hirundo rustica)*.—Los Anaucos. Once, on 10 Dec. 1969. Masaguaral. This species was common in the llanos but found irregularly in all months except June–August; flocks varied from 10–100 birds, but over 5000 roosted <1 km from Masaguaral in January–February 1976. On 26 Apr. 1983 a large volume of water was pumped into a drying lagoon starting at 0800 hours. By 1130 a flock of about 40 swallows appeared and foraged as low as 20 cm along the advancing edge of fresh water, exploiting a suddenly available source of prey. Large numbers of transient Barn Swallows congregated at the Guárico Dam, close to Calabozo, from mid-April through early May of each year.

*Veery (Catharus fuscescens)*.—Los Anaucos (2). On 31 Oct. 1983; on 20 Oct. 1981 a Veery was attracted out of thick underbrush to a commotion caused by resident birds at a rare ant swarm, but it did not remain there. Willis (1966) reported that Veeries in Panama are regularly attracted to ant swarms. Masaguaral (4). On 25 Oct. 1978 a single bird twice ate the ripe red flesh of the common annona fruit (*Annona jahnii*). A Veery mist-netted on 3 May 1985 had freshly molted remiges, but worn and broken rectrices, and was missing the distal 3 mm of the culmen. This Veery weighed 44.4 g, well over the average 31.2 g of migrating Veeries in Pennsylvania (Dunning 1984), suggesting, in spite of bill damage, that it had good migratory fat reserves. Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps (1978) had no records for May nor any as low as 63 m, and no records for Miranda or Guárico.

*Gray-cheeked Thrush (Catharus minimus)*.—Los Anaucos (2). One found with a Connecticut Warbler (*Oporornis agilis*) on 27 Apr. 1969 in open scrub; another on 7 Nov. 1983. Masaguaral (3). Two different birds netted there on 15 and 16 Nov. 1980, both in open scrub.

*Tennessee Warbler (Vermivora peregrina)*.—Los Anaucos only (5). On 4 Apr. 1968 a bird ate small fruits from a native vine; two birds chased each other 21 Apr. 1970 while both appeared to be foraging among seeds of a thick-leaved epiphyte; on 20 Jan. 1980 a mist-netted bird had its forehead stained pink, possibly from the red pollen of a *Combretum* spp. vine, a nectar source. In January and February these warblers were frequently seen in Colonia Tovar (state of Aragua) with their entire foreheads and throats heavily stained pink. Morton (1980) describes similar staining of Tennessee Warblers in Panama. On 4 Apr. 1982 a bird foraged in the lower outer branches of a semi-leafless masaguaro tree (*Albizia guachapele*), by flitting out to the freshly foliated branch tips. At the same time a male American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*) foraged in the upper center branches just below the thin canopy. Both birds appeared to be gleaning tiny prey in the emerging foliage.

*Yellow Warbler (Dendroica petechia)*.—Los Anaucos (16). Birds were seen in November, February, March and April; on 5–7 Feb. 1969 a bird returned repeatedly to a yard to feed on small insects on an apamate tree (*Tabebuia rosea*); 31 Mar. 1982, four birds spent time in a masaguaro tree, the next day from 0935 to 1003 hours at least 10 Yellow Warblers in parties of 3–5 fed quickly by gleaning insects attracted to the blossoms of a flowering avocado tree (*Persea americana*), along with three resident species. Masaguaral (12). Seen in all months October–March; a 1 Nov. 1977 bird caught and ate a 2 cm pale buff-colored adult lepidoptera; 7 Feb. 1984 a Yellow Warbler sang briefly from low bushes; 11 Mar. 1991 a bird in fresh plumage foraged in bushes at 0.50–1.50 m. For about 12 min on 13 Mar. 1991 a Yellow Warbler foraged along an 8 cm diameter, nearly horizontal branch of a large leaf matapalo (*Ficus* spp.) by hopping along the branch and probing all the leaves it could reach from the branch. On 14 and 15 Mar. 1992 a bird sang as it foraged in low trees and hedgerow bushes but apparently left the area as it was not found there

again. All observations were presumably of the migrant subspecies *D. p. aestiva* because the polytypic resident Yellow Warbler is confined to mangroves along the Caribbean coast (Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps 1978).

*Blackpoll Warbler (Dendroica striata)*.—Los Anaucos (3). A male was seen on 16 May 1966; on 11 May 1976 a female in fresh plumage ate tiny (<2 mm) insects from the branches of an avocado tree; on 13 Oct. 1981 an immature plumaged bird fed actively in the lower canopy of a mesquite tree (*Prosopis juliflora*). Masaguaral (1). On 21 Oct. 1979 a bird in immature plumage fed in leaves of the upper branches of a large isolated caro tree (*Enterolebium cyclocarpum*). All birds were seen well, and each time yellow legs, with conspicuously orange-yellow feet, were noted. Haverschmidt (1968) remarks that Blackpolls in Suriname can be identified by their distinctly "ochre-colored feet." The two Los Anaucos sightings extend the known period of Venezuelan presence.

*American Redstart (Setophaga ruticilla)*.—Los Anaucos (31). In all months October–May; on 3 Nov. 1981 a female foraged rapidly at 2–4 m in a ceiba tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), gleaning prey from the underside of leaves, once it was supplanted and later chased by a resident Slaty-capped Flycatcher (*Leptopogon superciliaris*); three redstarts were seen together in the canopy of a masaguaro tree on 15 Oct. 1981; on 1 Apr. 1982 a female accompanied a Yellow Warbler in a large bamboo clump. Late birds were seen on 30 May 1967 and 19 May 1981. Only five of 25 Los Anaucos birds were in second year male plumage. A few individuals may have spent the winter in Los Anaucos, but often months passed between sightings in the same areas suggesting the birds were transients. Masaguaral (6). Observed in September, October, February, April and 14 May 1990. The May records at both sites are the first reported from Venezuela.

*Northern Waterthrush (Seiurus noveboracensis)*.—Los Anaucos (4). Birds on 22 May 1966 and 1 May 1985 extend the Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps (1978) dates; one was mist-netted on 26 Oct. 1981. Masaguaral (13). September–April, except for December and February.

*Connecticut Warbler (Oporornis agilis)*.—Los Anaucos (5). One on 27 Apr. 1969 with a Gray-cheeked Thrush; on 25, 26, 27 Oct. 1981, at least three different birds were found in scrub on the ground near a dry water course; a 16 Oct. 1984 bird chipped as it foraged 1.5–3 m high in mesquite trees. Masaguaral (1). A bird was caught 28 Apr. 1984 in a mist net set over shallow water for shorebirds at a lagoon. These are new state records for both Miranda and Guárico.

*Summer Tanager (Piranga rubra)*.—Los Anaucos (4). A male on 22 Nov. 1969 and a female in March 1970. At 1645 hours on 26 Oct. 1981 a female gave a rapidly repeated 'che-beck' call and was answered with the same call by an unseen bird, while it foraged at paper wasp nests. One bird, perhaps both, apparently roosted nearby because the 'che-beck' call was heard again at about 0550 the next morning. Masaguaral (1). A male on 2 Jan. 1977.

*Rose-breasted Grosbeak (Pheucticus ludovicianus)*.—Los Anaucos only

(1). A lone female foraged in garden citrus trees on 17 Oct. 1981; it was a first record for Miranda.

*Dickcissel* (*Spiza americana*).—Masaguaral only. November–March, although numbers varied, nearby rice farmers considered it a serious pest. On 7 Mar. 1970, 4 km south of Calabozo, I watched an immense monospecific flock of Dickcissels flying northward. During 1 h (1745–1845 hours), the number was estimated to be nearly two million individuals (P. Alden in litt.). At 1830 hours on 31 Jan. 1977 I encountered a small tight flock of 50–75 birds flying parallel to the straight highway just south of Masaguaral. Their steady flight was timed at 60 km/h for 2 km; an estimated 10,000+ birds roosted at Masaguaral on the evenings of 17 and 18 Nov. 1978.

*Bobolink* (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*).—Masaguaral only. In October 1978 about 50 birds perched over an open marsh in low bushes, a first record for Guárico.

#### DISCUSSION

Venezuela is probably not an important wintering ground for any nearctic species of birds. With the exceptions of the Blackpoll and Connecticut Warblers, Dickcissel and Bobolink, the species I found mostly spend the northern winter in the Caribbean islands and Central America (Rappole et al. 1983). McKenzie and Noble (1989) review Caribbean records for the infrequently documented Connecticut Warbler.

The Bank Swallow, Veery, Blackpoll Warbler, American Redstart and Northern Waterthrush were found in Venezuela as late as May. Cherrie (1916) made five collecting trips to the Orinoco region (1897–1907), and noted that the American Redstart, Yellow Warbler and Blackpoll are “not uncommon October to early May.” He found the Northern Waterthrush in the same months but “much less common.” Schwartz (1964) also reported Northern Waterthrushes to about 20 May, and an unusual mid-June bird. Sick (1971) reported several Blackpolls in mid-May at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Although I found Connecticut Warblers on 27 and 28 April in different years, I had no May records. Voous (1983), however, recorded them from 9 to 17 May in the Netherlands Antilles. The age class of these seasonally “late” birds was not determined, but all, except possibly some male redstarts, appeared to be in fully adult breeding plumage. Nearly all spring migrating White-rumped Sandpipers (*Calidris fuscicollis*) passed through Masaguaral in late April and May (Thomas 1987) with some reaching Texas and Kansas by mid or late May. Thus Venezuelan May passerine migrants might still reach northern breeding destinations.

My observations were of birds that generally remained at the study sites for less than 24 h, some seemingly for only a few minutes, suggesting that they were transients. In both spring and fall, migrant warblers were often seen with a conspecific or another species of nearctic migrant. Their appearances were, however, highly irregular. For example, from 13 Oct.

to 3 Nov. 1981 I saw 10 individuals of seven species in Los Anaucos, but none were found with an intensive effort the following year at the same site during the same 3-wk period. Hilty and Brown (1986) indicate that all of these birds, with the exception of the Tennessee Warbler, winter at least as far south as the Brazilian Amazonas. Tennessee Warblers in Los Anaucos behaved like transients even though at this site they may be very close to the southern edge of their range in Venezuela. Guatopo National Park, about 30 km south of Los Anaucos, is a higher elevation forest habitat where Tennessee Warblers are occasionally found (Morton 1979). Continuing southward, however, across the llanos of Venezuela, the next most likely habitat is 500 km distant in the Territorio Amazonas where this species has yet to be reported. This paper extends the Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps (1978) state records for the Bank Swallow, Veery (two states), Connecticut Warbler (two states), Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Bobolink.

Although my observations for >20 yr are few, they are from relatively small areas of wide-spread similar habitat in Venezuela. Researchers of nearctic migrants should consider the presence and behavior of birds in less than optimal habitats such as these. Sightings at Masaguaral, with the exceptions of migrant hirundines and finches, were of usually one or two individuals on a given day. In contrast, an Audubon Christmas Bird Count 1 Jan. 1977 (Anonymous 1977), used Masaguaral as the center of the 24-km diameter. That day 10 observers recorded 11 Yellow Warblers and 10 Northern Waterthrushes over the much larger area that included rice fields and extensive gallery forest, suggesting more individuals than my records, as well as wintering residence.

There is no reason to believe that this relatively small number of migrant species could have a significant effect on neotropical birds and their resources in these two habitats. Dickcissels, as observed by Fretwell (1980), have "erratic residency." The rice fields that attracted such large numbers in the llanos have existed only since the mid-1960s, and already many have been converted to cattle pasture. This relatively rapid and local change in land use could affect the behavior of highly mobile Dickcissels.

It is unlikely that human activity in the near future might extensively alter the long-term Los Anaucos type of secondary-scrub or the llanos, two climatically harsh habitats that are wide-spread in Venezuela. Thus, these passerine migrants to the neotropics, using these habitats especially as transients, may not be contributing to current population declines.

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### PASSERINE BANDING GUIDE TO BE REVISED

I will be revising IDENTIFICATION GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN PASSERINES, with a hoped-for publication date sometime in 1995. The 2nd edition will be expanded to include additional accounts on Doves and Woodpeckers plus a few more peripheral passerine species, and short descriptors of all North American subspecies. The latter will be based on original descriptions by Ridgeway and others (plus additional museum specimen data), and will follow the taxonomy of the American Ornithologists' Union (1957 and subsequent revisions). I seek comments, criticisms, updated information and relevant reprints or manuscripts, *especially from banders* who have used the 1st edition. Feedback has been and will be appreciated, and all correspondents will be acknowledged.

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