

Eared Trogon—immigrant or visitor?

*The story of the appearance
of Euptilotis neoxenus in
the mountains of southern Arizona*

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WITHOUT DOUBT THE MOST extraordinary avian occurrence in the Southwest during 1977 was the appearance in Arizona's Chiricahua Mountains of *Euptilotis neoxenus*, the Eared Trogon, heretofore known only from the mountains of northwestern Mexico. Even there, few ornithologists have seen the species in life. During the past decade or so, with better roads penetrating the remote Sierra Madre, and more accommodations attractive to tourists, small numbers of avid birdwatchers began to visit Durango and Sinaloa in search of this and other endemics. Still, only a scant half-dozen of my dedicated birding friends have found the bird, and I missed it on each of my visits. It is a little-known, low-density species, fully deserving the term *rare*. At least one record exists from near Colonia Garcia in Chihuahua, only 95 miles south of the international boundary (R. Ridgway, *Birds of North and Middle America*, U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 50, Part 5, 1911.). Farther west, near the Chihuahua-Sonora line, J.T. Marshall, Jr. (*Birds of Pine-Oak Woodland in Southern Arizona and Adjacent Mexico*, Pacific Coast Avifauna 32, 1957), found it as far north as the Upper Rio Gavilán and the Arch Valley in the Sierra Madre. The latter site is about 135 airline miles southeast of the Chiricahuas. Although these localities lie not far away, probably no one ever seriously considered this scarce bird a likely candidate for occurrence in the United States.

On the morning of October 18, 1977, Kim

Innes, in the South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon in the Chiricahuas, saw and heard an unfamiliar large bird that looked like a trogon. She did not see it well. Nevertheless, her report at the American Museum's Southwest Research Station prompted Ruth Morse to mention that three days earlier, in the South Fork, she too had observed a trogon "that squealed." To Richard Taylor, a local Forest Service employee who had been studying the canyon's Elegant or Copper-tailed Trogons for some time, this called for investigation. He had never heard *Trogon elegans* utter notes answering this description. On October 23 he and Vincent Roth identified the moot bird as a male Eared Trogon. The following day, they, Barbara Roth, Sally and Walter Spofford and Bert and Millie Schaughency made a concerted effort to document its presence. All saw the bird well, and they secured tape recordings and photographs.

A few days later the news was on most of the country's rare bird alerts, and hopeful, eager birders were flying and driving in from all points of the compass. Sally Spofford telephoned the information to me from Portal, and I'm certain there was no more excited a recipient of the news than I. (Having had field experience with 932 of the 1000 birds on the Mexican list over the past three decades, most of the few remaining landbirds are difficult to find.) To have one of my two "most-wanted" Mexican species a mere two hours

away in our own country was difficult to believe.

LONG BEFORE DAYBREAK, my wife and I were in the car *en route* to Cave Creek. Even when we arrived, people were scattered along two miles of trail, largely silent, ears and eyes straining. Few birds were in evidence. Mexican Jays called occasionally, an Arizona Woodpecker rattled, and at intervals we heard the chatter of Bridled Titmice. We were better prepared than most birders, knowing from Ted Parker's tape recordings the vocalizations of nesting Eared Trogons in Durango, and we had also heard a tape made of the Chiricahua bird two days earlier. But it did us little good. Although someone found an Elegant Trogon far up the canyon, a full day's work by over 50 experienced persons disclosed no trace of *Euptilotis*. Disappointment was great. Further, there was Bill Roe's disquieting report of the Eared Trogon being pursued by a Sharp-shinned Hawk on the preceding afternoon.

Then three days later Sally phoned again. The bird was back! Our limbs still feeling the effects of the preceding weekend's repeated treks up and down the canyon, we arrived at South Fork Campground early on November 12 prepared for extensive hiking. But we hardly had gone two hundred paces when that distinctive, loud upslurred squeal—vaguely reminiscent of a Great-tailed Grackle's (*Cassidix mexicanus*) but with a brief terminal 'chuck'—announced our bird. Seconds later it flew from an Arizona cypress, cackling loudly and flashing its white ventral tail surface, distinctly calling to mind a Resplendent Quetzal (*Pharomachrus mocinno*)—probably a closer relative of *Euptilotis* than of any other Mexican trogon. At least two inches longer than an Elegant Trogon and with longer wings than I had expected, the Eared was impressively large overhead. Its ample tail was widespread, and as it swooped into a madrone tree the blue iridescence again recalled my first quetzal over a Chiapas cloud forest years ago, appearing as a red, white and blue bird with no hint of green anywhere. Similarly, no green was visible at first in the backlit Eared Trogon, viewed as he was against the sky. Perched, he impressed me as a small-

headed, rather stocky bird, built more like a female quetzal than one of the smaller trogons. In profile, his lower back and rump projected outward to an extreme degree.

HE WAS EXCEEDINGLY VOCIFEROUS. Each flight, except those short ones to snatch a madrone berry, was accompanied by a loud *cac-ac-ac-ac*. Upon alighting he produced the squeal, or squeal-chuck, invariably with a pronounced pump of his handsome tail; he gave this call repeatedly. At intervals a wholly different sound was uttered—a series of more melodious tremolos in a minor key, initially very soft but rapidly increasing in volume and becoming sufficiently loud to be audible at 200 meters: *eeep eeep EEEP EEEP EEEP*. It was somewhat raptor-like, bringing to mind the insistent food call of a young Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*). Walter Spofford later told me it reminded him of a nestling Peregrine's begging call. This "song-call" was not accompanied by tail-pumping. After recording all three vocalizations, I played back a bit of his voice and to the song-call he immediately responded by flying high in my direction. He then perched some 30 meters above ground in a tall cypress where he repeated the call several times. Not wanting to risk driving him away I refrained from further experimentation after a second try with the recorder produced an identical result. A poor whistled imitation also prompted the bird to fly nearer and to repeat his call.

The trogon's eye-ring was merely gray, not red as depicted in the Peterson-Chalif guide (*A Field Guide to Mexican Birds*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1973). Nor was the bill truly black; it was instead gray and very pale—almost blue-gray—at the base of the mandible. The bird's iris was black-looking, the inside of its mouth deep orange. Once, near at hand, as he thrust his head forward to call, his slim, almost filamentous ear-tufts showed momentarily. Most of the time they were invisible, flattened against the head. In proper light his back was vividly green and this continued around in front to meet the bright geranium red of the lower breast and belly. From above, in all lights, the tail was shining blue. The head, however, seemed to largely lack iridescence, and I assumed the

bird to be in subadult plumage.

Satisfied with numerous views, detailed notes and a reel of good tape, we were back in Silver City by noon of the same day. I continued to give much thought to the trogon, but suppressed the desire to spend more time along Cave Creek in deference to other duties. Then a week later Sally was again on the telephone. Would I believe two Eared Trogons? David Wharton had seen the second bird, a female, on November 16, and Dr. Charles McMoran saw them both the following day. Despite the reports of these reliable observers, the presence of two birds seemed nearly incredible, so with Allan Zimmerman I was on the South Fork Trail again early on November 19. We found the Chiricahuas manufacturing their own weather once more. Dense cloud obscured the higher peaks and spilled mistily into the various canyons. Patches of snow showed through the high trees above us. It was violently windy, and we feared the trogons would be silenced. Surely any notes uttered could scarcely be heard above the roar of wind down the canyon, the accompanying noise of swaying conifers and the veritable clatter of big dry sycamore leaves falling by the hundreds on all sides.

LUCKILY, BARRY ZIMMER was up the trail and by good fortune he had seen both trogons minutes earlier. Though largely silent, what we assumed to be the male called occasionally and between gusts we tracked him down. To be sure, a female with slaty head and gray-brown breast accompanied him, perching nearby and following each time he flew. When separated, the two remained in contact with the song-call, and even when perched near one another both birds uttered a "whisper" version of this vocalization.

After feeding awhile, the two trogons retired to an oak thicket away from the trail, remaining almost motionless and quiet except for infrequent whispered tremolos, during the next 40 minutes. Then they returned to the madrones where they fed on the plump berry-like fruits which matched in hue the red of their under-parts. These fruits of *Arbutus arizonica* provided the bulk of the trogons' November diet, and like much of



Female (sub-adult?) Eared Trogon, South Fork, Cave Creek Canyon, Nov. 26, 1977. Photo/ Richard Taylor.

their insect food in warmer weather, were largely secured on the wing. Noteworthy was the trogon's abrupt descent from a branch—just as if it suddenly fell—before levelling out and darting to a fruit cluster.

Before we left the Chiricahuas that day, I told Walter Spofford that the male trogon we viewed appeared different in certain respects from the one I described in detail in my notes a week earlier. There obviously were two trogons in the vicinity; could there be three? Spofford, too, had wondered about this because of near-simultaneous reports of a male in separate localities. However, the birds regularly covered a mile or more of the canyon bottom once or twice each day, and they were known to move rapidly. I nevertheless remained suspicious.

On November 28, Rick Taylor informed me that he'd definitely seen a third bird—a green-breasted male but with this glittering color speckled with brown, as was the red immediately below. The next day I spoke with the Spoffords who by then suspected *four* trogons to be present. November 30 found my wife and me in the canyon once again. The morning was clear and calm, and by 0900 we had three birds calling together: a splendid, fully adult male consorting with the female—the two side by side—plus a second, less brightly colored, male. None of these was Rick Taylor's mottled (and apparently

immature) bird which reportedly also had less white in the tail, so we knew there to be four altogether. The female, as well as both males we observed, regularly employed the squeal and song-call. I could not be certain if she cackled in flight like the males. Her narrow bare eye-ring was pale gray as were those of the other two birds, and her bill was dark gray becoming pale blue-gray basally. As in the male, this light color emphasized the very broad base when viewed from the front, whereas in profile the bill seemed small. At least two of the trogons showed their "ears" and these were revealed in several photographs. Always they projected horizontally at the back of the head, and they were visible only against the sky. In contrast to some recent field guide illustrations, the wings were not short like those of other trogons; their tips extended almost to the white portion of the tail, and they usually were below the body. I was repeatedly impressed with the bigness of both tail and wings in flight. Often, when at rest, the bird's head was pulled back and the chest thrust forward. In profile this combined with the exaggerated projection of the rump to make the bird appear quite grotesque.



Female Eared Trogon, showing the "hump-backed" stance posture. Note the "ear" showing. Photo/Ralph A. Fisher, Jr.

IT HAS SEEMED MOST UNLIKELY that four Eared Trogons wandered separately out of Chihuahua to converge on one small Arizona canyon. Naturally there has been speculation on the possibility of a breeding pair somewhere in the Chiricahuas during 1977. Had there been a real northward movement

of Eared Trogons late in the year should we not reasonably expect other records, perhaps from the mountains of southern New Mexico which lie directly between the Chiricahuas and the northernmost known Mexican stations for the bird? We know that *Trogon elegans* moves across southwestern New Mexico occasionally. However, there is much less suitable habitat for any trogon there than in Arizona, and New Mexico has comparatively few serious birders in the field. The Animas Mountains may well harbor an Eared Trogon or two, but access to the range is now restricted and entry difficult. Furthermore, there are very few roads into the Peloncillo Range astride the New Mexico-Arizona line. Seekers of Eared Trogons east of the Chiricahuas probably would have to backpack into the most likely canyons. And to the West? The legendary Huachuas have seemed as likely for this species as the Chiricahuas, perhaps more so. After the second bird was known to be inhabiting Cave Creek, we began to think it just a question of time and of which precise spot. We had not long to wait; Betty Jones discovered a male Eared Trogon in Ramsey Canyon in the Huachuas on the first of December.

Others may turn up, but I suspect the Cave Creek population will remain the largest and best known. This canyon is perhaps unique in its considerable length, and in the extent of its particular combination of xeric vegetation on the canyon walls subtended by pine-oak woods and finally the well-developed riparian forest below. We know next to nothing of the Eared Trogon's precise ecological niche, but these are good-sized, far-ranging birds probably requiring fairly large canyons and/or extensive tracts of pine-oak and madrone woodland; there may be some seasonal variation in their preferred habitat. Cave Creek Canyon has seemed quite acceptable thus far, but insufficient food supply will prevent them from wintering there. However, they may remain somewhere in the Chiricahuas. It is anyone's guess as to how they would fare if still present when the usual numbers of Elegant Trogons return to breed. Although *Trogon elegans* normally leaves Arizona in winter, occasional individuals remain, subsisting largely on fruit. One has been sharing Cave

Creek Canyon with his larger eared relatives, and Taylor has seen it drive the male and female *Euptilotis* away from a food-tree on one occasion. The competition factor may be important. In Mexico, the two species seem to overlap very little, although Marshall found them together in one Chihuahuan locality. Farther south, in the Durangan and Sinaloan high country, Eared and Mountain Trogons (*T. mexicanus*) are sympatric. Certainly throughout much of their area of overlap the widespread *mexicanus* is a fairly common bird, the Eared Trogon rare and local.

THE CHIRICAHUA'S EARED TROGONS easily could disappear before spring. We have had no report of the species since December 2, 1977. Nevertheless, a breeding attempt may not be altogether unlikely, and steps to provide protection of the birds from interference may be initiated should nesting take place in Cave Creek Canyon. We know Elegant Trogons to be particularly susceptible to even slight disturbance when breeding. (One photographer last year, although working briefly and at a respectable distance, caused a pair to desert their nest with young. I am aware of three records of nest desertion from similar causes and Taylor knows of ten.) Should *Euptilotis* attempt to nest here we do not want it to fail because of human activity.

The number of visitors to see the Eared Trogons reached 800 in little more than a month. People came from nearly every state and at least three foreign countries. Over one weekend nearly 100 per day were on the narrow South Fork Trail. Although practically all were quiet, considerate and well-behaved, it would seem obvious that no nesting trogon could tolerate so much human visitation, and visitor pressure will build as spring approaches. Even without the lure of Eared Trogons, Cave Creek's campgrounds are filled—mostly with bird-seekers—as early as April. For the purpose of seeing Elegant Trogons, people now journey to southeastern Arizona in impressive numbers—enough to total an estimated 25,000 observer-days per year according to Taylor—and most of the visitors descend upon this one canyon in the Chiricahuas.

Sorely needed is some sort of management plan with native wildlife receiving top priority. Bird-watching visitors to Cave Creek Canyon may in the near future have to operate under a degree of restriction and inconvenience to which they are unaccustomed, but it will be well worth the limitations if there exists a chance to retain these magnificent trogons—both species—as part of our avifauna.

The Eared Trogons' visitation may be a one-time occurrence. On the other hand, we do not know to what extent various biological factors or habitat destruction in Mexico may stimulate an exodus of additional individuals or pairs to come. Footholds made not long ago by the Thick-billed Kingbird (*Tyrannus crassirostris*) and Five-striped Sparrow (*Aimophila quinquestriata*) for example, have resulted in regular United States breeding populations of these species, which were not even mentioned in the 1957 edition of the A.O.U. Check-List. The Eared Trogon may now be joining the ranks of the Black-capped Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila nigricaps*), Rufous-capped Warbler (*Basileuterus rufifrons*) and others which appear to be establishing a beachhead in our borderlands.

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