

## POINTS OF VIEW—PUNTOS DE VISTA—PONTOS DE VISTA

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### BIRD RECORDS IN THE SOUTHERN NEOTROPICS: ON THE NEED TO CRITICALLY CHECK SPECIMENS, LITERATURE CITATIONS AND FIELD OBSERVATIONS

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**Registros de aves no Sul dos Neotrópicos: sobre a necessidade de verificação de espécimes, literatura, e observações no campo.**

**Key words:** Field observations, literature, Neotropics, specimens.

In the last 50 years, bird studies in the Neotropics have added ecological and other dimensions to the museum studies common earlier. Unfortunately, many people do not realize that identification of hundreds of species is difficult, and that literature on many of these birds is scattered. Collecting specimens is limited by lack of funds and by government and other restrictions. Many museums in the Neotropics lack resources (finances, personnel) to make specimen-based studies possible.

In the northern hemisphere, ornithologists have long known that bird records need constant checking. In the Neotropics, with few good field guides or museums, ornithologists have to be even more careful. Pressure to “publish or perish,” studies concerning ecological or behavioral factors, and such other aspects as emphasis on statistics have led to scattered errors recently. Working on

birds in southeastern Brazil, I have come across several uncertain records in the last few years, or “new” records for which the authors had not checked the literature. It seems that these sorts of errors are increasing exponentially, and that a warning is necessary.

Also, students can admit occasional mistakes, especially if they are reporting many species in various papers. Souza (1995) reported a coastal White-barred Piculet (*Picumnus cirratus*) from interior northern São Paulo, but when I asked him to check the record he found that it was the interior White-wedged Piculet (*P. albosquamatus*). I myself have made errors in field identification. I reported Bay-winged Cowbirds (*Molothrus badius*) from São Paulo (Willis & Oniki 1985), before remembering that young Screaming Cowbirds (*M. rufoaxillaris*) are mimics; it was actually the latter species, as I

subsequently noted (Willis & Oniki 1993). Here I take the opportunity to correct an error in this latter paper: the Yellow-breasted Flycatcher (*Tolmomyias flaviventris*) seen near Ubatuba was actually a similar looking yellowish tyrannid, the Rough-legged Tyrannulet (*Phyllomyias burmeisteri*), now that I know the latter. The Lesser Nothura (*Nothura minor*) we reported from northern Minas Gerais (Willis & Oniki 1991) may have been a Spotted Nothura (*N. maculosa*), as it was not heard singing and was seen in flight.

A note by Branco *et al.* (2001) reports the Chilean Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus chilensis*) as new in São Paulo. However, the species was previously reported from the Salto Grande Reservoir (Ishikawa-Ferreira *et al.* 1999) and had been photographed on the Itanhaem beach (Tribuna de Santos, April 1991). J. Moojen had found them further north in Rio de Janeiro (Pacheco 1996). One hopes that these birds had not escaped from captivity.

The Dusky-capped Flycatcher (*Myiarchus tuberculifer*) was reported by Höfling & Lencioni (1992) from eastern São Paulo on the basis of a sight record, but no specimens of this hard-to-identify tyrannid are known from the state. E. Höfling (pers. com.) told me that she did not see the bird, which Lencioni reported to her. Unfortunately, the authors had not indicated who did the field work in their study, an error also present in the above report on flamingos. This type of problem is increasing nowadays, notably when an assistant or thesis advisor becomes the first or later author in a publication, due to the fact that professionals are increasingly judged by numbers of publications. Since a thesis is done by the student, it is sufficient that advisors appear in the acknowledgements. Other research projects can be multi-authored, but long author lists are not always best if the field work was done by one or two persons. One needs clear statements of the activities of each participant in multi-authored papers.

Further sight records of the Dusky-capped Flycatcher from the state, mentioned in Figueiredo & Lo (2000) and Centro de Estudos Ornitológicos (2000), also need checking. L. F. Silveira (pers. com.) checked with the observer, who only said he had used a general reference (Sick 1997). This is a case where museum collecting is desirable, even though permission for a scientist to collect specimens is increasingly difficult. Photographs or recording vocalizations might help. Also, experienced ornithologists might be taken to check a record.

In a study of birds visiting a fruit tree near our campus, my former MS student R. Valente (2001) consulted botanists and ecologists but did not check bird identifications with other ornithologists. The Little Cuckoo (*Piaya minuta*) she reported does not occur in São Paulo, the Rusty-margined Flycatcher (*Myiozetetes cayanensis*) not south to Rio Claro [where the Social Flycatcher (*M. similis*) often visits this tree], and the locally unrecorded Grey-fronted Dove (*Leptotila rufaxilla*) is much less likely than the common White-tipped Dove (*L. verreauxi*).

Museum specimens can also require checking. In the Museu Mello Leitão of Santa Teresa, Espírito Santo, founded by A. Ruschi, some “Santa Teresa” specimens are probably birds from elsewhere that died in captivity (Willis & Oniki 2002). In the Museum A. Pergola in Atibaia, São Paulo, specimens of A. Olalla that were provided by a commercial bird stuffer often had labels exchanged incorrectly before ending up at the museum.

Recently, a commission of Brazilian ornithologists is verifying ornithological records for the journal “Nattereria,” as do committees in several other countries. For instance, unrefereed bird lists and field observations of Ruschi have raised so many problems (Vanzolini 1999, Simon 2000, Pacheco & Bauer 2001, Willis & Oniki 2002) that even many of his observations of hummingbird behavior are

probably false. He studied some species and did much to preserve nature and encourage studies, but reported dozens of false “records” to complete his papers or attract attention. Capturing one hummingbird banded in Parana later in Espírito Santo and Pará is very improbable, as is a reported nesting of one-specimen Black-billed Hermit (*Phaethornis nigrirostris*). Grantsau (1988) and the “Handbook of birds of the world” (Schuchmann 1999) become difficult to use whenever Ruschi records are hidden in the text, for one has to verify all the original citations and eliminate possibly false observations based only on Ruschi. Editors often want general texts to be free of citations, but this is disastrous when somebody like Ruschi has falsified a considerable part of research in the past. It is always better to indicate authors in the text, perhaps with superscripts as in the magazines “Nature” and “Science.” It is also important for ornithologists outside the Neotropics to realize that their colleagues in that region are willing to check their observations.

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