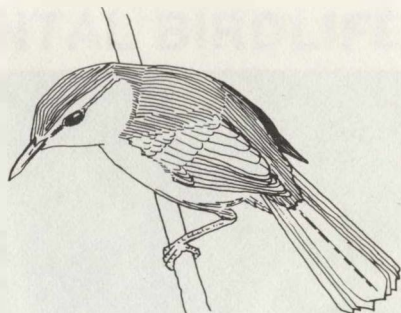


A difficult field problem from the Neotropics is clarified by a knowledge of the habitat choice and behavior typical of each genus. Here, an expert offers some clues



An Introduction to Foliage-gleaner Identification

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Editors' note: Ted Parker had already established a reputation in North America as a brilliant fieldman before he turned his attention to the tropics. Now, after ornithological travels spanning the length of Latin America (from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego — with over forty months of intensive fieldwork in Peru alone), plus thousands of hours of museum study, he is uniquely qualified to discuss the field identification of Neotropical birds. Few ornithologists have ever had the comparative experience necessary to write the following article.

The foliage-gleaners form an important (if sometimes confusing) element in the birdlife of Neotropical forests. Only three species reach the geographic area of Continental Birdlife's primary interest; but to acknowledge the increasing numbers of North American observers subject to "Neotropical fever," we are willing occasionally to stretch our southern boundaries to take in papers of outstanding significance — like this one — from the heart of the tropics. Even if you don't expect ever to reach South America, read this article for its format: as Parker points out, the generic breakdown employed here could be used to clarify identification of difficult groups elsewhere in the world.

The purpose of this article is threefold: 1) to aid observers with the identification of Neotropical foliage-gleaners, 2) to acquaint more experienced tropical field ornithologists with several little-known genera, and 3) to introduce readers of this journal to a format for identification articles that emphasizes generic, as opposed to specific, field characters. This may be adapted for difficult multi-generic groups anywhere in the world (e.g., North American sparrows).

Foliage-gleaners are members of the very large Neotropical family Furnariidae. They are drab, mainly brown birds that inhabit the darkened interior of rainforests and cloudforests of Central and South America. Owing to their coloration and rather secretive behavior, many are very similar in appearance and difficult to identify in the field. In my way of thinking, members of the following genera are foliage-gleaners (not all share that generic English name) in the sense that they are similarly sized and patterned and thus easily confused: *Philydor*, *Ancistrops*, *Hyloctistes*, *Automolus*,

Simoxenops, *Anabacerthia*, *Syndactyla*, *Thripadectes*, *Cichlocolaptes*, *Hylodyptes*, *Anabazenops* and *Heliobletus*. Some of these genera and their species can easily be recognized with the aid of the plumage and (more importantly) range descriptions given in de Schauensee's (1970) *A Guide to the Birds of South America*; in some regions only one or two species occur. But in the heart of the tropics (western Amazonia) several genera and many species are found together. Here the serious observer needs to be aware of behavioral and ecological differences among them.

The value of learning generic characteristics should be obvious. In perusing trip and locality lists from South America I often come upon notations such as "foliage-gleaner sp.?" without any reference to a possible genus, or "Rufous-tailed Foliage-gleaner (tail very rufous!)." Unfortunately, the English names of these birds are only rarely an aid to their identification. More often than not, in fact, they cause confusion. For example, the Chestnut-winged Foliage-gleaner *Philydor erythropterus* is often confused with the Chestnut-winged Hookbill *Ancistrops strigilatus*, since the two are very similar in appearance and habitat preference. I've heard observers remark, "I'm looking at a foliage-gleaner with chestnut wings . . . must be a —," and then after I point out the possibility of confusing that species with a hookbill they say, "But no, the bill of this bird is not obviously hooked." Chestnut wings and hooked bill are irrelevant as field marks for separating the two. What's more, some observers seem to shy away from considering the species with an unusual name, "hookbill" in this instance.

When using the following synopsis of generic characteristics, keep in mind that it is not an infallible key for field identification. Not all individuals of a genus or species will exhibit all of the characteristics given here; there is geographic variation in color and behavior. Consider all comments under each heading as parts of a whole description, like different field marks. In this article I have not described many calls or songs since they have never aided me much in distinguishing between species. Most foliage-gleaners, like woodcreepers, are most vocal in the predawn semi-darkness, when it is impossible to distinguish subtle color differences.

Don't be alarmed by my use of Latin names. Using the descriptive term "Philydor-like" as opposed to "Automolus-like" for a foliage-gleaner is no different from distinguishing between "Empidonax-like" and "Myiarchus-like" flycatchers. A synopsis of the characteristics of each foliage-gleaner genus is given below; following this, I offer field marks for some confusing congeners that are sympatric (occur in the same areas).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GENERA OF FOLIAGE-GLEANERS

***Philydor*:** Nine species; most inhabit lowland rainforests. Slim birds, averaging 16.5cm (6.5") in length. Arboreal, they characteristically frequent middle heights; at least two are canopy dwellers. Often seen gleaning live leaves or probing clumps of dead, curled ones on slender limbs within crowns of middlestory trees. All are very active.

***Ancistrops*:** One species. Easily confused with *Philydor* (*erythropterus* and *ruficaudatus*; see species accounts below). Hops along limbs and rummages in vine tangles in subcanopy, often close to trunks. Seems to avoid dense foliage. Tends to be more sluggish than members of last group. Widespread in terra firme (upland) rainforest; occasionally noted in floodplain forest.

Hyloctistes: One species. Somewhat like *Ancistrops* but darker, more heavily streaked above and below. Usually seen at mid-heights close to trunks (especially about vine tangles). Occasionally in undergrowth and perhaps often overlooked there because of its shy and active behavior.

Automolus: Nine species, all but one restricted to lowland forests. Several are easily confused with *Philydor* spp., but most are conspicuously larger (averaging 19cm or 7.5" in length) with proportionately larger, thicker bills. All spend most of their time in undergrowth, within 5m of the ground. More vocal than previous groups; most make their presence known by uttering loud one- or two-noted calls.

Simoxenops: Two species; restricted to SE Peru and N Bolivia. Very *Automolus*-like (see below under *Automolus rubiginosus*), but with heavier, distinctive bills. Occur in low-lying rainforest not far from water, where solitary individuals, pairs or family (?) groups probe the loosened bark on trunks and limbs of fallen trees. Sluggish. Uncommon. The call note is a single, fairly loud "chek."

Anabacerthia: Three montane species. Small *Philydor*-sized birds with streaked underparts and distinctive head patterns. Seen from mid-heights up into sub-canopy foliage. They actively search bromeliads and vine tangles; often in clear view.

Syndactyla: Three species, all montane. In size and color pattern like members of last group, but with more heavily streaked under- and upperparts. These remain within 5m of the ground in dense forest undergrowth, and can be confused with some species of next genus. Active and difficult to observe.

Thripadectes: Six montane species. Large (averaging 20.5cm or 8" in length) with heavy bills. Most have distinctive, heavily streaked underparts. They are usually seen within 5m of the ground probing rotting trunks, bromeliads, etc. Larger and more phlegmatic than members of last group.

Cichlocolaptes: One species; primarily montane in SE Brazil. Behaviorally and morphologically reminiscent of *Hyloctistes* or *Thripadectes*. Seen at all levels (based on four observations), mainly probing epiphytic plants.

Hylocryptus: Two poorly known, widely allopatric species with restricted ranges (SW Ecuador-NW Peru; S Brazil). *H. erythrocephalus* (of the first-mentioned region) is apparently confined to streamside thickets of the Subtropical Zone where it stays close to the ground. One seen briefly hopped along slender limbs of woody shrubs only a meter or so above ground. Looks more like a hornero (genus *Furnarius*) than any other foliage-gleaner. Uncommon or rare.

Anabazenops: One species; endemic to SE Brazil. A strikingly patterned *Philydor*- or *Anabacerthia*-like bird. Seen at all levels in forest, but especially at mid-heights in bamboo thickets. Active, conspicuous. Common.

Heliobletus: One species; range as in last. A small, highly arboreal species that hops along limbs at mid-heights in montane forest. More *Xenops*-like than any other genus mentioned in this paper. Uncommon.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SIMILAR SPECIES OF THE CANOPY AND SUBCANOPY

Philydor erythropterus: Easily confused with *Ancistrops*. This species is usually seen foraging at the ends of limbs amidst foliage, including palm fronds (as opposed to vine tangles or foliage near limbs close to trunks, favored by *Ancistrops*). It has a distinctive bright ochraceous-orange throat and loreal region

which contrast with the buffy-gray posterior underparts and uniform grayish upperparts. Both *Ancistrops* and *Philydor ruficaudatus* have pale yellowish, dusky-streaked underparts: the former is large with a buff-streaked back (and chestnut wings); the latter is a typical small *Philydor* (see below). *P. erythropterus* is often seen in partially flooded or transitional forest, whereas *Ancistrops* seems to prefer terra firme. I have seen both species together in the same flock in the former habitat.

***Philydor erythrocerus* and *P. ruficaudatus*:** Typical members of the genus. I have found the former to be common in terra firme forests throughout eastern Peru. It is more variable in appearance than *ruficaudatus*, having either cinnamon or pale buffy-gray underparts and a bold superciliary. These (the yellower) two species are difficult to distinguish at any distance. I don't know how (or if) they separate out ecologically.

***Philydor pyrrhodes*:** Very distinctive. Eyebrow and underparts bright cinnamon, wings dark slate. Unlike other *Philydor* species this one stays within 5m of the ground in open undergrowth. It might be confused with *P. rufus*, but the latter is a canopy bird that is apparently very local away from mountains (except in Brazil-N Argentina).

***Automolus infuscatus*:** Very similar to *A. dorsalis*, but most lack any trace of the postocular line that characterizes *dorsalis*. *A. infuscatus* is widespread and common in western Amazonia, especially in floodplain forest. *A. dorsalis* is mainly a bird of hill forest. Both occur together in a narrow zone of high jungle between S Colombia and S Peru.

***Automolus ochrolaemus*:** Widespread and easily distinguished throughout much of its range. In Amazonia it might be confused with *A. melanopezus* which is apparently local, occurring in low-lying forest not far from water. The latter is distinguished by its bright ochraceous-orange throat (especially bright in malar region), lack of the buffy eye-ring of *ochrolaemus*, and bright red or orange eye; the bird appears very uniform at a distance. *A. ochrolaemus* occurs in a variety of habitats.

***Automolus rubiginosus*:** Widespread and fairly distinctive. Uniform dark brown with an ochraceous-buffy throat. *A. rufipileatus* appears similarly uniform at a distance, but it is paler, more grayish-brown below and has a bright orange eye. I get the impression that where the two occur together in Peru, *rufipileatus* prefers clearing edges and secondary forest, and *rubiginosus* frequents primary forest (mainly terra firme). *Simoxenops ucayalae* might be mistaken for *A. rubiginosus*, but it is more uniformly orangish-brown and has a prominent post-ocular line and massive bill.

***Philydor rufus*:** Widespread in mountain forests. A conspicuous member of canopy mixed flocks, being the only foliage-gleaner in highland areas that dwells in tree-top foliage and vine tangles. Easily confused with the Peruvian (long-tailed) subspecies of the antbird *Thamnistes anabatinus*, but it is larger and has a gray crown and pointed tail feathers. In SE Brazil *rufus* is often seen in association with the very similar (in coloration and behavior) *Orchesticus abeillei*, a tanager! The latter differs in having a short, stout bill, dark brown crown and typical tanager tail.

APPENDIX: ENGLISH NAMES OF FOLIAGE-GLEANERS

The English and Latin names given below follow those in Meyer de Schauensee's (1966) *The Species of Birds of South America*; they are thus also in accord with the names in *A Guide to the Birds of South America* (Meyer de Schauensee 1970) and *A Guide to the Birds of Venezuela* (Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps 1978). Note that the order in which genera are listed below follows the order used in this paper, which (rather than following strict taxonomic sequence) was designed for ease of presentation of field characters.

A revision of the entire family Furnariidae proposed by Vaurie (1971) would result in the 'lumping' of several of the genera discussed here; for example, some of the smaller ones would disappear into *Philydor*. Vaurie's classification has not yet been adopted in any of the popular bird books available or (to our knowledge) in press. At any rate, the characteristics discussed here by Parker should remain useful to the field observer, whether the groupings continue to be classified as genera or are reduced to mere subgenera or species groups. — *The Editors*

Philydor

- P. atricapillus*, Black-capped Foliage-gleaner
- P. hylobius*, Neblina Foliage-gleaner
- P. erythrocerus*, Rufous-rumped Foliage-gleaner
- P. pyrrhodes*, Cinnamon-rumped Foliage-gleaner
- P. dimidiatus*, Russet-mantled Foliage-gleaner
- P. lichtensteini*, Ochre-breasted Foliage-gleaner
- P. rufus*, Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaner
- P. erythropterus*, Chestnut-winged Foliage-gleaner
- P. ruficaudatus*, Rufous-tailed Foliage-gleaner

Ancistrops

- A. strigilatus*, Chestnut-winged Hookbill

Hyloctistes

- H. subulatus*, Striped Woodhaunter

Automolus

- A. leucophthalmus*, White-eyed Foliage-gleaner
- A. infuscatus*, Olive-backed Foliage-gleaner
- A. dorsalis*, Crested Foliage-gleaner
- A. rubiginosus*, Ruddy Foliage-gleaner
- A. roraimae*, White-throated Foliage-gleaner
- A. ochrolaemus*, Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner
- A. rufipileatus*, Chestnut-crowned Foliage-gleaner
- A. ruficollis*, Rufous-necked Foliage-gleaner
- A. melanopezus*, Brown-rumped Foliage-gleaner

Simoxenops

- S. ucayalae*, Peruvian Recurvebill
- S. striatus*, Bolivian Recurvebill

Anabacerthia

- A. variegaticeps*, Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner
A. striaticollis, Montane Foliage-gleaner
A. amaurotis, White-browed Foliage-gleaner

Syndactyla

- S. rufosuperciliata*, Buff-browed Foliage-gleaner
S. subalaris, Lineated Foliage-gleaner
S. guttulata, Guttulated Foliage-gleaner

Thripadectes

- T. flammulatus*, Flammulated Treehunter
T. holostictus, Striped Treehunter
T. melanorhynchus, Black-billed Treehunter
T. virgaticeps, Streak-capped Treehunter
T. scrutator, Buff-throated Treehunter
T. ignobilis, Uniform Treehunter

Cichlocolaptes

- C. leucophrys*, Pale-browed Treehunter

Hylocryptus

- H. erythrocephalus*, Henna-hooded Foliage-gleaner
H. rectirostris, Chestnut-capped Foliage-gleaner

Anabazenops

- A. fuscus*, White-collared Foliage-gleaner

Heliobletus

- H. contaminatus*, Sharp-billed Treehunter

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