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THE SLATY SPINETAIL

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The spinetails of the genus *Synallaxis* and of the family Furnariidae form an important part of the bird life of South America, for there are many species in this group, and usually in any one area some member of the genus is common. I have met five of the twelve species of *Synallaxis* that occur in the Republic of Colombia and have always been impressed with their harsh and oft-repeated notes and their manner of skulking in dense, usually low cover. To a Californian, this habitat preference and the general proportion and posture of the birds suggest Wrentits (*Chamaea fasciata*). Ecologically they are the counterpart of that northern Pacific coastal species, exploiting the dense, low brush growth in a similar way and proceeding chiefly by hopping in the branch-work without use of their wings. They are, however, comparatively sluggish.

In the upper Cauca Valley of western Colombia, there are three species of spinetails which have similar markings. Each has cinnamon patches on the crown and the wing coverts and a partly obscured black region on the lower throat. However, the body color differs in them: the Pale-breasted Spinetail (*Synallaxis albescens*) is the lightest, being almost white below; the Azara Spinetail (*Synallaxis azarae*) is darker, with more brown and olive; and the Slaty Spinetail (*Synallaxis brachyura*) is dark slate with much more contrast of the cinnamon areas (see frontispiece by Don R. Eckelberry).

The Pale-breasted Spinetail is widespread in the tropics, ranging from Costa Rica to Trinidad, Bolivia, and Argentina, and in the Cauca area it occupies the hot valley floor chiefly, extending upward locally to the lower Subtropical Zone. The Azara Spinetail is a bird of the Subtropical and Temperate zones and ranges from Colombia and western Venezuela to Bolivia. We found it replacing *albescens* at 6000 feet on the western Andes. The Slaty Spinetail is again a bird of the Tropical Zone, sympatric with *albescens* and ranging from Honduras to western Ecuador.

In the floor of the Cauca Valley, 12 kilometers north of Yumbo, 3800 feet, on December 30, 1958, Mrs. Miller and I found Slaty Spinetails common in the thorn scrub at the edge of the arid western foothills. Here there were organ pipe and opuntia cactuses intermingled with mimosa and catclaw tangles. We estimated that there were at least six of these birds in an area of four acres interspersed with the species *albescens*. *Brachyura* had a deep, heavy chatter that suggested the scolding notes of wrens of the *Thryothorus* group and it seemed to move greater distances through the scrub than did the smaller (20 per cent), weaker-voiced *albescens*. We noted some nests constructed like the one drawn by Eckelberry from his acquaintance with *brachyura* in Costa Rica.

The nest of the Azara Spinetail is a covered mass of sticks, which are not thorny. Unlike that of the Slaty Spinetail it has a horizontal entry tube a foot long, the walls of which are thin and can be seen through. Two such nests of *azarae* at 6500 feet, 4 kilometers north of San Antonio, held two, unmarked white eggs each on March 27 and April 28. Both sets were fresh but complete. The main part of the nest, which is about two feet across, has a roof thatch some six inches thick which protects the softly lined inner nest cup from rain.

Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Berkeley, California, October 24, 1960.