

The Tawny-throated Dotterel *Oreopholus ruficollis* in northern Chile

Yerko Vilina & Sebastián Teillier

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Yerko Vilina, Unidad de Biología de la Reproducción, Depto. Biología Celular y Genética, Fac. de Medicina, U. de Chile, Casilla 70061, Correo 7, Santiago, Chile
Sebastián Teillier, Laboratorio de Botánica, Fac. Cs. Biológicas, U. Católica, Casilla 114-D, Santiago, Chile.

INTRODUCTION

The Tawny-throated Dotterel *Oreopholus ruficollis* is a typical bird of the semi-arid grasslands of southern South America. In the west of the continent this species can be found from Lambayeque, Peru to Tierra del Fuego between 0 and 4,500 metres above sea level (Meyer de Schauensee 1982). The northern lowland populations are sedentary, whereas those in the highlands descend to lower altitudes in winter. During the winter months the flocks in the southernmost regions migrate latitudinally towards the north (Hayman *et al.* 1986).

METHODS

The scarce information available about the biology of the Tawny-throated Dotterel from northern Chile led us to carry out field work in order to establish the temporal status of this species in this country's northern region. Field work was done on Chanaral Island which is located approximately 60 miles from the Port of Huasco and about 8 km off the mainland (29°02'S 71°37'W). It has a surface area of 507 ha. We have visited the island sporadically since 1988 and periodically from September 1989 to June 1990, stopping there for 5 to 20 days each month. While on the island, we visited different areas and the birds were counted in the SW sector on a

monthly or bimonthly basis. This was done by means of 100 m linear transects. We used 8 x 30 power field glasses. We also made a monthly survey of the mainland coastline at Caleta Chanaral. This paper is the first description of the occurrence and breeding of the Tawny-throated Dotterel on an island in northern Chile.

RESULTS

Tawny-throated Dotterels were usually observed on the island's plains which are located in the western area at 50-100 metres above sea level. The vegetation of the plains is of a xerophilous type and composed chiefly of cacti of the genera *Eulychnia*, *Trichocereus* and *Neoporteria*; shrubs such as *Nolana sedifolia*, *Oxalis gigantea* and *Frankenia chilensis* and a seasonal cover of annual herbs mainly *Amblyopappus pusillus* (Compositae) and *Mesenbrianthemum cristallinum* (Aizoaceae). Our research on the island showed that the Tawny-throated Dotterel is present between May and February but during the latter month only one individual was spotted throughout the island. The linear transects found that the greatest abundance of this species was during winter, between June and September, when humidity is at its highest and the island becomes inaccessible due to bad climatic conditions. As summer advances, the number of birds decreases, finally reaching zero by February. The greatest estimated number of individuals on the island (estimated by

Table 1. Numbers of Tawny-throated Dotterels on Chanaral Island

	MONTHS										
	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	
No. Observed (transects)	7	5	2	3	2	0	0	0	-	20	
Max. estimated number on island	35	25	10	15	10	0	0	0	-	100	



extrapolating the results in the research area to the total area of the island) at the month of peak abundance was 100.

Between September and November the birds were observed mainly in pairs. Later they formed flocks that fed on the plains. On 11 November 1989 a nest was found in the central area of the island, built in a small depression in the ground and surrounded by variegated pebbles arranged in a concentric pattern. In the nest were four eggs, similar to earlier descriptions for that species (Goodall *et al.* 1957). A nest with similar characteristics to those found on the island, and also containing four eggs, was discovered by fishermen from Caleta Chanaral in late December 1989.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Previous field observations in this region of northern Chile found that *Oreopholus ruficollis* was either a visitor or a very abundant species during winter and spring (Millie 1938; Gigoux 1942). Hayman *et al.* (1986) state that those populations are sedentary. Our results do not agree with this conclusion, since birds are absent from the island and the adjacent mainland from mid-summer to mid-fall. The areas to which Dotterels migrate during this period is unknown but they probably migrate to more humid areas such as the high Andes. Nevertheless, there are two species, the Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant *Muscisaxicola macloviana* and the Mourning Sierra-Finch *Phrygilus fruticeti* which show altitudinal migrations and visit the island between fall and spring arriving at the beginning of April, earlier than returning Tawny-throated Dotterels. It is possible that plovers from northern highlands, as well as those from the southernmost regions, coexist on the island between September and January.

The breeding season for this species was formerly thought to be the period from September to October (Goodall *et al.* 1957). We have now extended it until late December.

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