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NOTEWORTHY OBSERVATIONS OF THE BIRDS OF FALCÓN STATE, NORTHWESTERN VENEZUELA

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Observaciones relevantes de las aves del Estado Falcón, noroeste de Venezuela.

Key words: Breeding, distribution, Falcón state, new records, Venezuela.

INTRODUCTION

The state of Falcón (24,800 km^2), located in northwestern Venezuela (Fig. 1), has a warm and humid tropical climate. The state is mainly covered by xerophytic vegetation with a few areas of humid forests largely restricted to mountain ranges in central (Sierra de San Luis, 1550 m) and southern Falcón (Sierra de Churuguara, 1000 m), as well as at the center of the Paraguaná Peninsula (Cerro Santa Ana, 850 m) (Klein 1999). Falcón state also has an extensive coastal line of c. 685 km (Klein 1999). Forests, arid scrub and coastal areas provide a wide array of habitats for both resident and migratory bird species.

From an ornithological perspective, Falcón state has been considerably neglected. Broad information on Falcón's birdlife can be found in the general works of Phelps & Meyer De Schauensee (1979) and Hilty (2003). However, very few detailed studies of Falcon's avifauna have been conducted, and most of these have focused on the birds of the Paraguaná Peninsula. Barnes & Phelps (1940) compiled the first list of birds for Paraguaná. Bosque (1984) conducted the only extensive study on the avifauna of this Peninsula by focusing on the structure and diversity of bird communities inhabiting arid zones. Some bird inventories have been also carried out at the Cerro Santa Ana (Bisbal 1990) and at the Laguna de Boca de Caño Wildlife Refuge (Bisbal 2001).

In the Neotropics there is a great need to improve the current knowledge of avian distributions, since bird distributional patterns are key components of many research and conservation initiatives (Rojas-Soto & Oliveras de Ita 2005). In this article, we provide range extensions and new breeding records for 15 birds of Falcón state.

METHODS

We conducted five one-week field trips (May 2003, June 2004, September 2004, and November 2004 and May 2005) to several areas of Falcón state (Fig. 1) (from north to south).

Paraguaná Peninsula. This area is predominantly

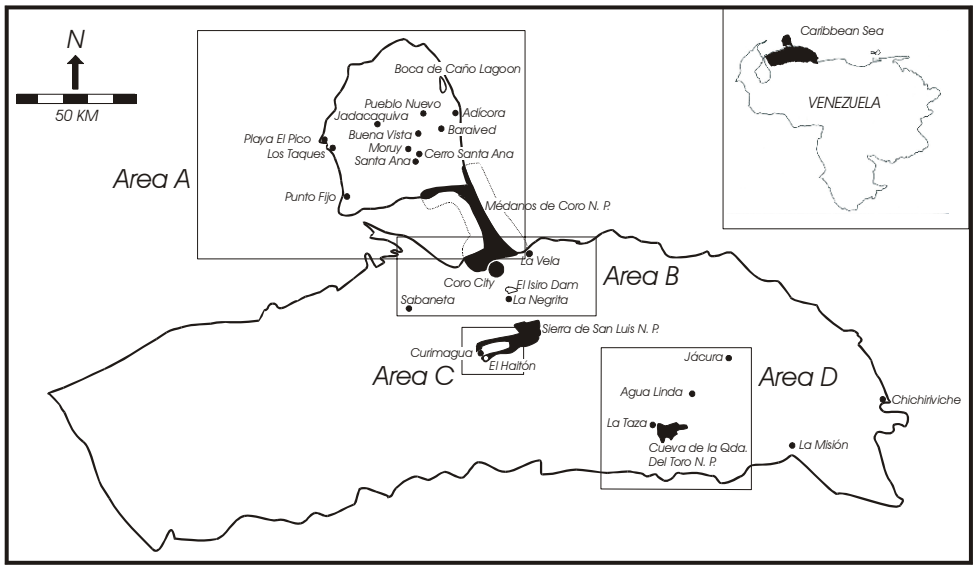

FIG. 1. Map of Falcón state, indicating sites and areas mentioned in the text.

covered by arid scrub, except for deciduous and humid forests along the foothills of the Cerro Santa Ana (91,280 ha, 850 m). Within the Peninsula we visited Playa El Pico (11°51'35"N, 70°17'50"W), Los Taques (11°49'22"N, 70°15'13"W), Punto Fijo (11° 41'48"N, 70°10'36"W), Moruy (11°49'19"N, 69°58'55"W), Buena Vista (11°52'30"N, 69° 56'37"W), Pueblo Nuevo (11°56'53"N, 69° 55'15"W), Adícora (11°56'33"N, 69°48' 30"W), and arid scrub patches surrounding the Boca de Caño lagoon (12°01'37'N, 69°51'27'W) and the road to Baraived (11°50'40"N, 69°50'17"W).

Surroundings of the city of Coro. Although arid scrub is also the main vegetation type in this area, the presence of many human settlements (including Falcón's capital city, Coro, 245,000 inhabitants) has resulted in extensive habitat modification. This area also includes an artificial water body, the El Isiro dam (19 km^2). We conducted observations south of Coro along the road to La Negrita (11°18' 45"N, 69°37'47"W), west of Coro along the road to Sabaneta (11°15'39"N, 69°59'37"W), and east of Coro at La Vela (11°27'35"N, 69°33'59"W) and at El Carrizal (11°28'15"N, 69°32'30"W).

Sierra de San Luis. Most of this isolated mountain range is protected within the Sierra de San Luis National Park (20,000 ha, 200–1500 m). The park includes a wide variety of vegetation types that ranges from deciduous forests to premontane humid forests. We visited the Sierra de San Luis National Park and made observations at two localities: Curimagua (11°10'31"N, 69°40'20"W) and El Haitón (a few km west of Curimagua).

Sierra de Churuguara. The major vegetation type along the sierra is the tropical dry forest, but humid forests are also found at higher elevations. We made observations on the roads from Jácura (11°04'00"N, 68°51'00"W) to La Taza (10°51'01"N, 69°10'07"W) and from Churuguara (10°48'56"N, 69°32'10"W)

to Barquisimeto, Lara state, and at the Cueva de la Quebrada del Toro National Park (8500 ha, 400-1100 m).

Species were recorded visually or acoustically and in many cases photographic documentation and tape recordings were obtained. Four mist nets were operated during one day (06:00–10:00 h and 16:00–18:30 h) at the Paraguaná Peninsula and near the city of Coro during the field trips conducted from June 2004 to May 2005.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We documented the presence of 11 species outside their previously reported distributional range and gathered additional information on the breeding biology of four other taxa.

Range extensions

Southern Lapwing (Vanellus chilensis). It is a widespread and common resident species throughout the lowlands of most of the northern half of Venezuela (Hilty 2003). In Falcón, however, sightings are restricted to the easternmost part of the state (Hilty 2003). A couple of birds were observed along the road to La Negrita, a few km south of El Isiro dam on 22 May 2003. At this same site, one individual was seen and another one heard on 9 June 2004. Two more individuals were observed in an area of temporary ponds in La Vela de Coro, along the road to Morón on 11 June 2004. On 8 and 9 May 2005, two individuals were observed feeding at the border of an artificial lagoon between Pueblo Nuevo and Jadacaquiva in the Paraguaná Peninsula. Also on May 2005, several individuals were seen at three different sites near Coro: Isiro Dam, Médanos de Coro National Park, and 20 km west of the city along the road to Maracaibo. All these records come from a general area for which Hilty (2003) considers the presence of this species to be uncertain.

White-rumped Sandpiper (Calidris fuscicollis). This is an uncommon transient during September–December and March–May (Hilty 2003). In Falcón state, the species was previously reported only at Chichiriviche (Hilty 2003). We observed a group of seven individuals in breeding plumage at Playa El Pico on 7 and 8 June 2004. These are the first records for the Paraguaná Peninsula and also represent the latest spring observations reported for Venezuela, or oversummerers.

Plain-breasted Ground-dove (Columbina minuta). One male was mist-netted in a patch of arid scrub surrounding the Boca de Caño lagoon on 16 November 2004. This species is widely distributed in Venezuelan lowlands but, in Falcón it was previously reported only from Cerro Misión, in the south-eastern corner of the state. It inhabits open areas and borders of dry forests (Hilty 2003). The species was not previously recorded in coastal arid scrub. The bird was captured after a strong storm which might explain the presence of this bird outside its normal habitat and known range.

Scarlet-fronted Parakeet (Aratinga wagleri). This parrot inhabits humid mountain forests, where it is a fairly common resident (Hilty 2003). Previous records for Falcón state were restricted to the central mountains at Sierra de San Luis (Hilty 2003). A small flock was observed near La Taza, within the Cueva de la Quebrada del Toro National Park in the eastern portion of Sierra de Churuguara, on 14 June 2004. According to local residents the species is common and breeds in the area. This observation puts the species in an additional mountain range within Falcón, one that lies within a distributional gap for the species (between the Sierra de San Luis and the Coastal Cordillera).

Dark-billed Cuckoo (Coccyzus melacoryphus). This is a common resident in the llanos and

open areas in the northeastern coast of Venezuela. Austral migrants have also been reported from these regions from May to October (Hilty 2003). One individual was mist-netted in a patch of arid scrub in the surroundings of La Negrita on 28 June 2005. This is the first record of the species in northwestern Venezuelas arid belt and the second for Falcón state (Hilty 2003).

Great Horned Owl (Bubo virginianus). This is a local resident species (fairly common in llanos) that favors a range of open and forested areas (Hilty 2003). On the morning of the 15 May 2005, one bird was observed while being mobbed by two Tropical Mockingbirds (*Mimus gilvus*) in an arid scrub patch, 20 km west of Coro. The species has not been reported for coastal Venezuela (Hilty 2003).

Glittering-throated Emerald (Amazilia fimbriata). This bird is known from most of Venezuela, but in Falcón records are restricted to the east up to Mirimire and Cumarebo (Phelps & Phelps, Jr. 1958, Hilty 2003). On 22 May 2003, one individual was seen foraging, together with other hummingbird species, the Ruby-topaz Hummingbird (*Chrysolampis mosquitus*) and the Black-throated Mango (*Anthrocothorax nigricollis*) in flower patches (11°10'04"N, 69°41'00"W, elevation 1113 m) growing in secondary growth along the road from Curimagua to El Haitón within the Sierra de San Luis. Previous records in Falcón are restricted to lowlands in the eastern part of the state (Hilty 2003).

Bran-colored Flycatcher (Myiophobus fasciatus). This is a common resident species reported only for easternmost Falcón (Chichiriviche area, Hilty 2003). On 14 June 2004, one individual was seen in secondary forest along a road within the Cueva de la Quebrada del Toro National Park. On 17 May 2005, another individual was observed foraging on a second growth patch between Curimagua and El Haitón within the Sierra de San Luis. These observations represent a westward expansion of about 150 km in northwestern Venezuela.

Bearded Bellbird (Procnias averano). In Falcón the bird was previously known only from Sierra de San Luis area (Hilty 2003), where we recorded two singing males at El Haitón on 22 May 2003. On 14 June 2004, al least three males were singing simultaneously in the forest in the surroundings of the cave that gives its name to the Cueva de la Quebrada del Toro National Park. The latter observation fills the gap between Sierra de San Luis and the mountains of Yaracuy (Coastal Cordillera), the two nearest areas from where the species is known.

Bare-eyed Thrush (Turdus nudigenis). This species, which is common north of the Orinoco, has been recorded in Falcón only recently at two localities (La Misión and Churuguara) in the extreme southern part of the state (Phelps & Meyer De Schauensee 1979, Hilty 2003). One bird was seen on 22 May 2003 in secondary vegetation along the road from Curimagua to El Haitón in the Sierra de San Luis National Park. This is the first report for this mountain chain and for the northern half of the state in general.

Carib Grackle (Quiscalus lugubris). Phelps & Meyer de Schauensee (1979) provided no records of this common and widespread species for Falcón state. According to Hilty (2003), however, the bird is present in Coro and Chichiriviche, but not in the Paraguaná Peninsula. On 21 May 2003, a small group was observed in Adícora. During 6–9 June 2004, the species was found in the following towns and hamlets of the Paraguaná Peninsula (from east to west): Adícora, Baraived, Pueblo Nuevo, Buena Vista, Santa Ana,

Moruy, Punto Fijo, and Los Taques. The species was observed also along the following roads: Coro-Adícora, Adícora-Pueblo Nuevo, Pueblo Nuevo-Punto Fijo (both through Jadacaquiva and Moruy). The species is common at least throughout the southern two thirds of the Peninsula including the isthmus in Médanos de Coro National Park. This seems to be a recent natural range expansion of this species which has already reached Aruba (probably through the Paraguaná Peninsula) (J. Wells pers. com.).

Breeding records

Snowy Plover (Charadrius alexandrinus). According to Phelps & Meyer De Schauensee (1979), this plover is a resident species on several Venezuelan offshore islands, and records throughout the first half of the year suggest breeding status there (Hilty 2003). Conversely, Bisbal (2001), who provides the first record of this bird for the Paraguaná Peninsula, considers it as a migrant species in this area. We observed a pair of this species with three chicks at a small coastal lagoon close to Playa El Pico (c. 11°51'16"N, 70°18'00"W), western Paraguaná Peninsula, on 7–8 June 2004. This is the first breeding record for this shorebird in Venezuela, and it is in agreement with the reported common clutch size (three eggs) for the species (Canevari *et al.* 2001). This species has been reported breeding in the nearby islands of Curaçao and Bonaire (Voous 1983), and chicks have been observed during March and July in Bonaire (J. Wells pers. com.).

American Oystercatcher (Haematopus palliatus). This is an uncommon resident species in Venezuelan coasts and offshore islands (Hilty 2003). The first two breeding records in Venezuela were recently reported for Araya (Marin *et al.* 2003) and Paraguaná Peninsulas (Rodríguez-Ferraro & Azpiroz 2004). We found two more nests (one with two eggs on 7 June 2004, and another one with one egg on 8 June 2004) at the same site (Playa El Pico) reported by Rodríguez-Ferraro & Azpiroz (2004). In fact, one of the nests was located very close (< 50 m) from the place where the first nest for the Paraguaná Peninsula was found in 2003. These observations highlight the importance of Playa El Pico for the reproduction of this species in Venezuela.

White-whiskered Spinetail (Synallaxis candei). In Venezuela, this bird is restricted to arid regions of the northwest (Hilty 2003). Bosque & Lentino (1987) provided the first details of the species breeding biology, and report their nesting activity from October to December in the Paraguaná Peninsula. We saw one pair involved in nest construction in an arid scrub a few km southeast of Baraived (11°50'40"N, 69°50'17"W), eastern Paraguaná Peninsula on 9 June 2004. The construction of the base of the nest was well advanced. In this same area, a second inactive nest was found. On 10 June 2004, about 2 km south of Sabaneta on the road to Agua Clara, some 30 km southwest of Coro, another pair was observed carrying insects to a nest, an indication that they were feeding chick(s). The characteristics of the nests we found match the description provided by Bosque & Lentino (1987). During May 2004, an unusual amount of rainfall for that period of the year was recorded in the Paraguaná Peninsula (pers. observ.). This might have been used by birds as a cue to initiate breeding activities and might be related to our findings of nests outside the reported nesting season in this area for this species. There is strong evidence that in seasonally unpredictable environments, such as Neotropical arid zones, bird species can be opportunistic breeders, starting their reproductive activities after heavy rains (Hau 2001, Tarroux & McNeil 2003). Thus, these breeding records are probably an opportunistic

response to the atypical quantities of rainfall recorded on May 2004 in northern Falcón.

Northern Scrub-flycatcher (Sublegatus arenarum). On 22 May 2003, one individual was observed building a nest a few km east of La Negrita on the road to Acurigua. At least one bird was building a nest a few km southeast of Baraived on 6–9 June 2004. Also one individual was seen incubating a few km east of La Negrita along the road to Curimagua on 9–10 June 2004, and an adult feeding a fledgling a few km south of Sabaneta on the road to Agua Clara, on 10 June 2004. C. Bosque (pers. com.) found two nests of this species (with two chicks and two eggs, respectively) in the Paraguaná Peninsula on 14 and 28 May 1979. According to all these data, the breeding season for the species in northern Falcón, extends at least from May to June. These dates agree with those reported in Trinidad, where breeding was recorded only in May (ffrench 1991). Unlike the previous species, and according to the available data, this bird presumably breeds regularly in May–June, and thus is not dependant on rainfall for reproduction. It would be interesting to find out whether this species does not breed at all during the period of the year with highest rainfall (December-January).

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