

NOTES ON THE BREEDING, DISTRIBUTION, AND TAXONOMY OF THE OCELLATED POORWILL (*NYCTIPHRYNUS OCELLATUS*) IN HONDURAS

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During one year of residence (January–June 1996 and 1997) in Las Marias along the Río Plátano, depto. Gracias a Dios, Honduras (15°38'N, 84°48'W), I consistently heard an unknown caprimulgid singing in the interior of moist forest. The birds typically sang from perches 2–4 m high and were impossible to locate visually. The call was an emphatic rising and falling trilled note that could be described as “prEEoo”. On 16 May 1997, I observed a caprimulgid about 2 km southwest of Las Marias as it flushed off the ground near a trail in mature tropical moist forest, elevation 100 m. Because the bird flew into dense vegetation, I did not see it well and was not able to positively identify it. However, upon closer inspection of the leaf litter I found one egg that was pinkish cinnamon in color with fine, chestnut spots on the larger, more rounded end. The shape of the egg is best described as “short subelliptical” (see Palmer 1962).

I returned to the same location on 4 June and this time observed the bird on the ground, <1 m from the trail, in the exact loca-

tion as before. The combination of large black spots ringed with pale halos on the scapulars, a whitish throat, and a finely banded tail with outer feathers tipped with white clearly corresponded to the description for the Ocellated Poorwill (*Nyctiphrynus ocellatus*) (Fig. 1). The rufescent overall coloration of the plumage further corresponded as that for a female (*vide* Cleere 1998). When the bird again flushed, two eggs were visible lying in the leaf litter. In contrast to the lightly speckled egg present on 16 May, the second egg was also pinkish cinnamon, but so faintly marked as to appear almost uniform in color.

After identifying the female on the nest, I was able to match recorded *N. ocellatus* calls with those I had been hearing (Hardy *et al.* 1989). Based on the number of vocalizing birds, *N. ocellatus* was fairly common around Las Marias in mature forest.

I subsequently observed this species February–May 1999 near Krausirpe, depto. Gracias a Dios, Honduras (15°02'N, 84°52'W), 70 km south of Las Marias on the Río Patuca. As in Las Marias, the bird was a common resident of mature lowland moist forest. For example, during the predawn of 5 March, I

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FIG. 1. Female Ocellated Poorwill (*Nyctiphrynus ocellatus*) photographed on eggs, 4 June 1997, Las Marias, depto. Gracias a Dios, Honduras.

heard 5 calling individuals on a ridge above Crique Unawás. On 6 May, I saw two birds as they flushed from <1 m from a trail 2 km north of Arenas Blancas (17 km east of Krausirpe). I judged they were fledgelings based on their uneven plumage and absence of well-defined spotting. My observations of nesting birds in close proximity to trails near Krausirpe and in Las Marias suggest a propensity in this species for nesting near trails or open corridors through the forest.

Two other species of *Nyctiphrynus* are known from Mesoamerica, Eared Poorwill (*N. mcleodii*) from western Mexico, and Yucatan Poorwill (*N. yucatanicus*) from the Petén. Similarities in plumage and song characteristics indicate a close relatedness with *N. ocellatus* (Robbins & Ridgely 1992, Ranft & Cleere 1998), but differences in egg coloration are worthy of mention.

The eggs of *N. yucatanicus* have been described as buff in coloration, speckled with

brown (Van Tyne 1935). This compares well with the eggs of *N. ocellatus* I observed, as well as those described by Sick (1993) for Matto Grosso, Brazil as being “slightly pinkish white, the rounded end with fine red spots”. The eggs of *N. mcleodii*, in contrast, are unspotted and ivory white (Schaldach & Phillips 1961). Robbins & Ridgely (1992) argued on the basis of song and plumage characteristics that *N. mcleodii* and *N. yucatanicus* are each other’s closest living relatives. Because of the dramatic difference in egg coloration between *N. mcleodii* and its congeners, further analyses may be needed to clarify the relative relatedness of these three species.

Of the three Mesoamerican species of *Nyctiphrynus*, the distribution of *N. ocellatus* is the most perplexing. Prior to my observations, the species’ range in Mesoamerica was known from a single breeding population near Brasilia, Costa Rica (Stiles & Skutch 1989), and a single specimen collected in

TABLE 1. Fifty-four South American bird species reaching the northern limits of their distribution in the Mosquitia region of northeastern Honduras. Counts (N) are given as a number of species per family or subfamily.

Families	N	Sources
Ardeidae	1	Monroe (1968), Marcus (1983)
Threskiornithidae	1	Marcus (1983)
Falconidae	1	Monroe (1968), Marcus (1983), Anderson <i>et al.</i> (1998)
Cracidae	1	Marcus (1983)
Odontophoridae	2	Monroe (1968)
Rallidae	1	Monroe (1968), Anderson <i>et al.</i> (1998)
Psittacidae	1	Monroe (1968), Marcus (1983)
Caprimulgidae	1	Anderson <i>et al.</i> (1998)
Trochilidae	4	Monroe (1968), Marcus (1983), Anderson <i>et al.</i> (1998)
Trogonidae	1	Monroe (1968)
Momotidae	2	Monroe (1968), Marcus (1983)
Alcedinidae ¹	1	Anderson <i>et al.</i> (1998)
Bucconidae	1	Monroe (1968)
Ramphastidae	2	Monroe (1968)
Picidae	1	Monroe (1968)
Furnariidae	1	Monroe (1968)
Dendrocolaptidae ¹	2	Monroe (1968)
Thamnophilidae	8	Monroe (1968), Marcus (1983)
Formicariidae	3	Monroe (1968), Marcus (1983), Anderson <i>et al.</i> (1998)
Tyrannidae	5	Monroe (1968), Marcus (1983)
Cotingidae	1	Monroe (1968)
Pipridae	1	Monroe (1968)
Hirundinidae	1	Monroe (1968)
Troglodytidae	1	Monroe (1968), Marcus (1983)
Emberizidae	(10)	
Parulinae ¹	2	Monroe (1968)
Thraupinae	5	Monroe (1968), Marcus (1983)
Cardinalinae	1	Marcus (1983)
Emberizinae	1	Monroe (1968)
Icterinae	1	Monroe (1983)

¹For the family indicates a species has been reported only once for Honduras.

northeastern Nicaragua by W. B. Richardson in 1909 (Miller & Griscom 1925). Unfortunately, the exact location where Richardson collected his specimen is itself the source of

potential confusion. Miller & Griscom (1925) in their description of the specimen simply provide “Peña Blanca, northeastern Nicaragua” for the collecting location, the same and

only locality data listed on the actual specimen label (P. Sweet, pers. com.). AOU (1986, 1998) further appends “Depto. Jinotega” to the location for the Richardson specimen. However, there are two localities named Peña Blanca in northeastern Nicaragua. There is a 263 m mountain named Peña Blanca 140 km southeast of Jinotega in depto. Chontales, on the Caribbean slope of the Cordillera Chontaleña. There is also a 546 m mountain named Peña Blanca in the Cordillera Isabela only 35 km northwest of Jinotega in depto. Jinotega. Richardson probably collected his specimen on or near the Jinotega Peña Blanca because in May–June 1909 he collected exclusively in the vicinity of Jinotega and Matagalpa (P. Sweet, pers. com.). However, because *N. ocellatus* is strictly a lowland species, the Chontales site near the Caribbean lowlands seems more likely from a biological standpoint. Therefore, the listing “Depto. Jinotega” as the collecting location of Richardson’s specimen is interesting from either a biogeographical standpoint, or in the historical context of the AOU’s decision to list the range of this species as reaching this far north.

The discovery of this seemingly isolated Honduran population might be expected given that at least 54 South American bird species are at the extreme northern limits of their ranges in the Honduran Mosquitia (Table 1). This total includes species that have been recorded only once for Honduras, some not since the previous century (Monroe 1968). Also, several recent additions to the Honduran avifauna have been derived from the Honduran Mosquitia (Marcus 1983, Anderson *et al.* 1998), a fact that highlights how little the inaccessible lowland forests of this region have been visited by ornithologists. However, all of these species have contiguous ranges in the Nicaraguan Mosquitia, unlike that presently known for *N. ocellatus*. Thus, further study may likely reveal a broader distribution and breeding range for

this species in Nicaragua than is presently known.

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