

Notes on the birds of Parque Nacional Saslaya, Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás, Nicaragua

by Andrew C. Vallely & Liliana Chavarría-Duriaux

Received 13 June 2013

SUMMARY.—We detail records of 23 rare or poorly known species from Parque Nacional Saslaya in the Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás of the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte in Nicaragua. These include the northernmost records of Violaceous Quail-Dove *Geotrygon violacea*, Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher *Todirostrum nigriceps* and Scarlet-thighed Dacnis *Dacnis venusta*. These findings clarify the northern range limits of several Caribbean slope species and highlight the importance of Central America's largest remaining wilderness area for biodiversity conservation.

Recent field work in eastern Honduras has documented northward range extensions for several Central American Caribbean slope species previously thought to reach only to Costa Rica or southern Nicaragua (Marcus 1983, Anderson *et al.* 2004, Vallely *et al.* 2010). Northern Nicaragua also hosts extensive Caribbean slope humid forest but remains little surveyed since the collections of W. W. Huber (1932) at El Edén on 20 March–10 April 1922. In particular, the extensive Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás (RBB), including parts of dpto. Jinotega and the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte (RAAN), and spanning elevations of 200–1,650 m, is poorly explored. RBB encompasses 19,922 km² including buffer zones and several core areas of 8,060 km². This protected area, with those in adjacent eastern Honduras, forms the largest remaining wilderness in Central America. Although the northern RBB is sparsely populated, Parque Nacional Saslaya (PNS) encompassing 631 km² in the south-eastern RBB is threatened by deforestation from small-landholder claims, some well inside the park boundaries (Kaimowitz *et al.* 2003, Stocks *et al.* 2007; ACV, LC-D pers. obs.). Anthropogenic landscapes now almost completely surround the eastern and southern borders of PNS (Stocks *et al.* 2007). While management challenges facing PNS are formidable, the area hosts many rare and poorly known species, and offers valuable opportunities for research, conservation and tourism. We are unaware of previously published reports on the avifauna of PNS and the larger core areas of the RBB to the north are virtually unknown to ornithologists. To date, 262 bird species have been reported in PNS (pers. obs.). Here, we detail observations of 23 rare or poorly known species in PNS, mostly in the río Labú drainage, but also at Cerro El Torito in the western PNS.

Methods

We visited the PNS on 14–20 April 2009 (LC-D), 30 April–8 May 2012 (LC-D) and 3–13 March 2013 (ACV, LC-D). We searched for birds primarily in humid lowland rainforest and along adjacent watercourses. In May 2012 and March 2013 we used a dozen 12 × 2.5 m mist-nets with 30–36 mm mesh size deployed in forest understorey. On 2–8 May 2012 we amassed 546.33 mist net hours, and on 4–12 March 2013 another 582 mist-net hours. Observations were gathered opportunistically along the limited network of existing trails and passable watercourses. Coordinates for sites within PNS are: Cerro El Torito 13°42'50"N, 85°02'50"W, río Labú drainage 13°41'20"N, 85°01'20"W, Camp La Vaquita 13°43'50"N, 85°01'49"W. The locations of these and most other localities mentioned in the text are shown in Fig. 1.

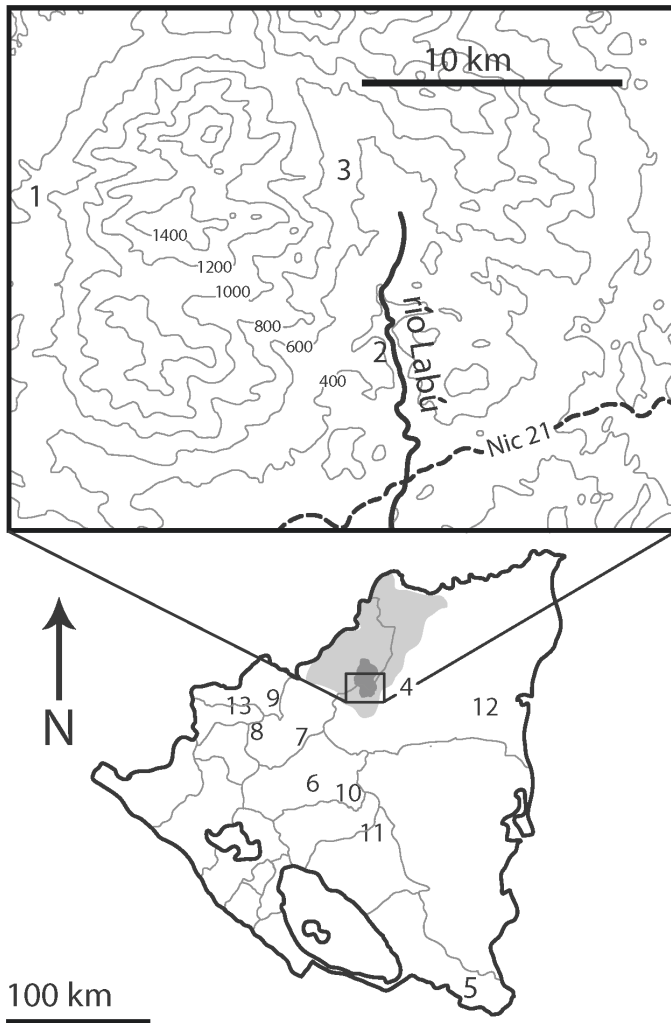


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Parque Nacional Saslaya (PNS, dark shaded area) within the Reserva de Biosfera Bosawás (pale shaded area) in Nicaragua. Inset shows topography and individual sites within PNS. Numbers refer to sites mentioned in the text: (1) Cerro El Torito, PNS; (2) río Labú drainage, PNS; (3) Camp La Vaquita, PNS; (4) El Edén, Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte (RAAN); (5) río San Juan drainage, dpto. Río San Juan; (6) río Grande, dpto. Matagalpa; (7) Peñas Blancas, dpto. Jinotega; (8) Reserva El Jaguar, dpto. Jinotega; (9) Cerros Las Chachagüas, dpto. Jinotega; (10) Cerro Musún, dpto. Matagalpa; (11) Santo Domingo, dpto. Chontales; (12) Alamikangban / Layasiksa area, RAAN; (13) San Rafael del Norte, dpto. Jinotega.

Species accounts

SOLITARY EAGLE *Buteogallus solitarius*

Considered Near Threatened (IUCN 2013) and very rare and local throughout its range. T. R. Howell (*in* Martínez-Sánchez & Will 2010) considered *B. solitarius* hypothetical in Nicaragua and knew of no records. Martínez-Sánchez (2007) mentioned a sight record from the north-central highlands of Nicaragua (dpto. Nueva Segovia) on 18 January 2004. On 3 May and 6 May 2012, LC-D & G. Duriaux observed singles over the río Labú drainage at 425 m. On 11 March 2013 we observed a pair in courtship flight near Camp La Vaquita at c.650 m. A few minutes later a single, persistently vocalising, adult was seen at close range flying low over the canopy. On 13 March 2013 we observed an adult circling over the río Labú drainage at c.400 m. D. Hille (pers. comm.) also observed one at PNS on 15 January 2013. Given the few reports in recent years from northern Central America (outside Belize) we suspect that PNS (and perhaps the greater RBB) may represent an important regional stronghold.

BLACK-AND-WHITE HAWK-EAGLE *Spizaetus melanoleucus*

T. R. Howell (*in* Martínez-Sánchez & Will 2010) listed just two historical records from Nicaragua and the species is generally considered scarce and local over its extensive range. Three records from the río Labú drainage appear to be the first in northern Nicaragua: ACV & LC-D observed a single adult over the río Labú drainage, at 425 m, on 5, 7 and 8 March 2013.

SLATY-BACKED FOREST FALCON *Micrastur mirandollei*

Poorly known in Central America and long thought to range no further north than Costa Rica (AOU 1998). One seen by LC-D on 17 April 2009 at Cerro El Torito, PNS. It clearly showed plain white underparts and a yellow cere, eliminating Semiplumbeous Hawk *Leucopternis semiplumbeus*. ACV & LC-D also heard the distinctive song of *M. mirandollei* in the pre-dawn darkness at c.600 m on the mornings of 9–10 March 2013 at Camp La Vaquita. These are among the northernmost records, as the species has also recently been reported 140 km to the north in dpto. Gracias a Dios in eastern Honduras (Jones & Komar 2013b).

VIOLACEOUS QUAIL-DOVE *Geotrygon violacea*

Particularly rare in Central America, where unrecorded north of Nicaragua. Collected by Richardson early in the 20th century at Peñas Blancas in eastern dpto. Jinotega and in the río San Juan drainage at Los Sábalos (Martínez-Sánchez & Will 2010). More recently found in central Nicaragua at Cerro Musún by LC-D (eBird 2013). On 5 March 2013 ACV observed a single adult female for several minutes at close range in the río Labú drainage at 425 m, which is the northernmost record ever.

SCARLET MACAW *Ara macao*

Described by Huber (1932) as common around El Edén. Decades later T. R. Howell suggested that it was declining on the Caribbean slope of Nicaragua (Martínez-Sánchez & Will 2010). We encountered singles and pairs at Cerro El Torito and in the río Labú drainage, PNS. A. Farnsworth (eBird 2013) also reported it at río Labú on 27 March 1996, and D. Hille (pers. comm.) encountered two at PNS on 18 January 2013. Though the species persists at PNS, large macaws are usually easily detected and our few encounters do not suggest the presence of a large population.

RUFOUS-VENTED GROUND CUCKOO *Neomorphus geoffroyi*

Very poorly known in Nicaragua, with historical specimens from the central foothills at Chontales (Salvin & Godman 1896), río Tuma and Peñas Blancas, and from southern Nicaragua in the río San Juan region at Savala. Unreported in northern Nicaragua since Howell (1971) listed it for the Caribbean lowlands near Waspam, RAAN. We have no conclusive evidence for its presence at río Labú, PNS, but park guards, unprompted by us, described the species in convincing detail and appeared familiar with its natural history. Pending more evidence we regard the species' occurrence as hypothetical.

CENTRAL AMERICAN PYGMY OWL *Glaucidium griseiceps*

Poorly known in northern Nicaragua. Several recent records from the río San Juan drainage on the southern Caribbean slope (Martínez-Sánchez & Will 2010). We heard and recorded this owl's distinctive song on 9 March 2013 at Camp La Vaquita, at c.600 m.

SHORT-TAILED NIGHTHAWK *Lurocalis semitorquatus*

Widespread species known from only a handful of records in Nicaragua, the earliest a specimen taken by Huber (1932) on the río Bambana, RAAN. Additional records are given by Martínez-Sánchez & Will (2010). At dusk on 6 and 12 March 2013 we observed singles in the río Labú drainage PNS. A. Farnsworth (eBird 2013) also reported it there on 27 March 1996.

TODY-MOTMOT *Hylomanes momotula*

Endemic to southern Mexico and Central America, where uncommon and local throughout. LC-D heard and saw one at 835 m at Cerro el Torito on 18 April 2009.

KEEL-BILLED MOTMOT *Electron carinatum*

Scarce, local, endemic to the Caribbean slope foothills of Central America, and treated as Vulnerable (IUCN 2013). We obtained sound-recordings at Camp La Vaquita, at c.600 m, in the río Labú PNS. A. Farnsworth (eBird 2013) also reported the species there on 27 March 1996.

GREAT JACAMAR *Jacamerops aureus*

Long thought to range no further north than Costa Rica (AOU 1998), this widespread but scarce species was first reported from adjacent eastern Honduras in 2004 (Jones 2004, Vallely *et al.* 2010). The first records for Nicaragua were in the río San Juan region (Múnera-Roldán *et al.* 2007). Given decades of habitat destruction, thought to be declining in Central America (e.g. in Costa Rica; Sigel *et al.* 2005). We heard two and observed another at close range responding to playback on 12 March 2008 in the río Labú drainage.

CINNAMON WOODPECKER *Celeus loricatus*

Long known in Nicaragua mainly from the río San Juan region (AOU 1998). T. R. Howell (*in* Martínez-Sánchez & Will 2010) accepted its presence in northern Nicaragua based on a specimen taken at 275 m by Huber (1932) at El Edén, RAAN. Howell remarked that 'if its range is continuous it must be rare in most of eastern Nicaragua to have been missed by every other observer and collector, including Richardson'. We found it common in the río Labú with multiples heard daily and one observed at close range responding strongly to playback. A. Farnsworth (eBird 2013) also reported it on 27 March 1996. ACV & M. Tórriz detected a single by voice near Layasiksa in the eastern lowlands of RAAN on 23 August 2009. In northern Nicaragua may be confined to the interior Caribbean foothills, a little-studied region, and perhaps disjunct in relation to the southern Central American population.

WHITE-FRONTED NUNBIRD *Monasa morphoeus*

This widespread species reaches its northernmost limit in eastern Honduras (AOU 1998, Rasmussen & Collar 2002). It is poorly known in Nicaragua and has perhaps declined in abundance in parts of southern Central America (Sigel *et al.* 2005). We detected the species once by voice on 4 March 2013 in the río Labú drainage. A. Farnsworth (eBird 2013) also reported *M. morphoeus* there on 27 March 1996.

STRIPED WOODHAUNTER *Hyloctistes subulatus*

Reaches its northernmost limit in eastern Honduras (Vallely *et al.* 2010) and known in northern Nicaragua from specimens taken at Río Grande, dpto. Matagalpa, and Peñas Blancas, dpto. Jinotega, by W. B. Richardson in 1908–09 (Miller & Griscom 1925). LC-D

trapped two on 3–4 May 2012 in the río Labú drainage (Jones & Komar 2013a) and ACV observed a single responding to playback there on 15 March 2013.

SCALE-CRESTED PYGMY TYRANT *Lophotriccus pileatus*

Long thought to range no further north than Costa Rica (AOU 1998). Marcus (1983) first reported it from eastern Honduras but the species was unknown in Nicaragua until one was closely observed by LC-D at Cerro El Torito on 17–18 April 2009. On 14 May 2009 LC-D & G. Duriaux observed two at Reserva El Jaguar, dpto. Jinotega. On 23 February 2010 G. Duriaux & LC-D observed one at Cerros Las Chachagüas, dpto. Jinotega (Chavarría & Batchelder 2012). We located two by voice near Camp La Vaquita, c.650 m, in the río Labú drainage on 8–9 March 2013.

BLACK-HEADED TODY-FLYCATCHER *Todirostrum nigriceps*

Poorly known north of Costa Rica. On 5 March 2013 LC-D observed one in the canopy of tall, humid, broadleaf forest in the río Labú drainage, discerning the yellow underparts, long, narrow tail and spatulate bill. A. Farnsworth (eBird 2013) also reported the species in the río Labú drainage on 27 March 1996. These are the northernmost records and represent a range extension of 350 km from the río San Juan region.

GREY-HEADED PIPRITES *Piprites griseiceps*

Endemic to Central America and poorly known. T. R. Howell (*in* Martínez-Sánchez & Will, 2010) knew of just two records in Nicaragua, one collected by Richardson in the río San Juan region, and a specimen secured by Huber (1932) at El Edén. On 10 March 2013 ACV observed one for several minutes as it foraged with a large mixed-species flock in the midstorey of tall humid broadleaf forest at c.600 m at Camp La Vaquita. The bird perched upright in the open on a large branch before making an abrupt, upward sally to pursue a small lepidopteron. The same day LC-D & G. Duriaux observed a single nearby.

WING-BANDED ANTBIRD *Myrmornis torquata*

No documented records in Costa Rica (Stiles & Skutch 1989, Sandoval & Sánchez 2012) and only recently reported in eastern Honduras (Vallely *et al.* 2010), *M. torquata* is considered Near Threatened (IUCN 2013). In Nicaragua, known from specimens collected by W. B. Richardson, including several from Peñas Blancas, Jinotega. Another was collected in 1922 at El Edén (Huber 1932). Recently found to be locally common at Cerro Musún in dpto. Matagalpa (Chavarría & Duriaux 2011, 2013). LC-D trapped two in the río Labú drainage on 3 and 5 May 2012. On 5 March 2013 we captured one, and detected others by voice, in the same area. Known from five sites in northern Nicaragua: Peñas Blancas, dpto. Jinotega, El Edén, RAAN, Cerro Musún, dpto. Matagalpa, río Labú drainage, RAAN, and Santo Domingo, dpto. Chontales. Records from southern Nicaragua in the río San Juan region were presented by Cody (2000) and Múnera-Roldán *et al.* (2007). Some sites listed in the literature are now largely deforested and we assume that the species must be locally extinct, e.g. at Santo Domingo (Salvin 1872) and El Edén (Huber 1932). Our experience suggests that in northern Central America the species prefers tall, humid, broadleaf forest with sparse understorey on steep, well-drained, slopes at 200–1,200 m. Known sites for *M. torquata* in Nicaragua, as in Honduras (Vallely *et al.* 2010), feature irregular forest floors with large boulders or karstic outcrops.

LOVELY COTINGA *Cotinga amabilis*

Poorly documented in Nicaragua and probably declining in Central America (e.g. in Costa Rica; Sigel *et al.* 2005), where it is at best uncommon to rare and local throughout (Snow 2004). Kjeldsen (2005) reported it from Alamikangban in the lowlands of eastern RAAN. We did not find the species but A. Farnsworth (eBird 2013) reported it in the río Labú drainage on 27 March 1996.

THREE-WATTLED BELLBIRD *Procnias tricarunculatus*

Regarded as Vulnerable (IUCN 2013) and undertakes complex migrations (Powell & Bjork 2004), with those of northern populations incompletely understood. LC-D encountered the species at Cerro El Torito on 17 April 2009. We heard several calling in late March 2013 in the río Labú drainage, but the species was not common, with a silent female or young male on 6 March 2013 at c.400 m. Present in the north-central Nicaraguan highlands above 1,200 m in February–June (LC-D pers. obs). We consider those we encountered at 425–600 m in PNS as stragglers or late transients.

BLACK-THROATED WREN *Pheugopedius atrogularis*

Endemic to the Caribbean slope of Central America and poorly known near the northernmost limit of its range. T. R. Howell (*in* Martínez-Sánchez & Will, 2010) considered it to reach no further north than the río Escondido. However, it was recently recorded in eastern Honduras, in dpto. Gracias a Dios (Jones 2004, Vallely *et al.* 2010). LC-D observed one on 17 April 2009 at c.600 m at Cerro El Torito PNS.

AMERICAN DIPPER *Cinclus mexicanus*

Very rare and local in Central America and unreported in Nicaragua since Richardson collected it at San Rafael del Norte in 1892 (Martínez-Sánchez & Will 2010). During May 2012 and March 2013 we observed singles and pairs on most days in appropriate habitat on the río Labú and its tributaries. A Farnsworth also reported the species in this region on 27 March 1996 (eBird 2013). First records from Nicaragua in >100 years.

SCARLET-THIGHED DACNIS *Dacnis venusta*

Long thought to range no further north than Costa Rica (AOU 1998, Isler & Isler 1999), this widespread but scarce species was recently found in Nicaragua in the río San Juan basin at Bartola (Jones & Komar 2012). On 30 April 2012 LC-D observed a male near Rosa Grande in the buffer zone of PNS. In the río Labú drainage, on 5 March 2013, and at Camp La Vaquita, on 7 March 2013, we observed at least two pairs foraging on inflorescences of canopy vines together with Blue Dacnis *D. cayana*, Shining Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes lucidus* and Green Honeycreeper *Chlorophanes spiza*. These are the northernmost records and represent a range extension of 350 km from the río San Juan records.

Acknowledgements

We thank the following people, each of whom provided valuable assistance during field work. Georges Duriaux kindly helped with logistics and shared his observations. Ranger Atanasio Maldonado assisted us in many practical ways and shared his knowledge of the local avifauna. Marvin Tórriz and David Hille also shared their observations. We are grateful to the Ministerio del Ambiente y los Recursos Naturales (MARENA) for granting research permits. ACV is indebted to the staff of the Dept. of Ornithology at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, for permitting access to the collections there as well as for their help in countless other ways. Paul Sweet, John Ascher and Anne Via made useful comments on an early draft. Comments from the referees, Knut Eisermann and Wayne Arendt, as well as the editor, Guy Kirwan, greatly improved the final manuscript.

References:

- American Ornithologists' Union (AOU). 1998. *Check-list of North American birds*. Seventh edn. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington DC.
- Anderson, D. L., Wiedenfeld, D. A., Bechard, M. J. & Novak, S. J. 2004. Avian diversity in the Moskitia region of Honduras. *Orn. Neotrop.* 15: 447–482.
- Chavarría, L. & Duriaux, G. 2011. Captura de *Myrmornis torquata* (Wing-banded Antbird) en Reserva Natural Cerro Musún. *Bol. Zeledonia* 15: 93–97.
- Chavarría, L. & Duriaux, G. 2013. Estado del Hormiguero Alifranjeado *Myrmornis torquata* en Nicaragua. *Cotinga* 35: 71–75.
- Chavarría, L. & Batchelder, R. L. 2012. Seven new records from Nicaragua and range extensions for two additional species. *Cotinga* 34: 28–32.
- Cody, M. L. 2000. Antbird guilds in the lowland rainforests of southeast Nicaragua. *Condor* 102: 784–794.
- eBird. 2013. eBird: an online database of bird distribution and abundance. Cornell Lab of Orn., Ithaca, NY. <http://www.ebird.org> (accessed 10 September 2013).
- Howell, T. R. 1971. An ecological study of the birds of the lowland pine savanna and adjacent rainforest in northeastern Nicaragua. *Living Bird* 10: 185–242.
- Huber, W. 1932. Birds collected in northeastern Nicaragua in 1922. *Proc. Acad. Nat. Sci. Phil.* 84: 205–249.
- Isler, M. L. & Isler, P. R. 1999. *The tanagers*. Second edn. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC.
- IUCN. 2013. IUCN Red List of threatened species. Version 2013.1. www.iucnredlist.org (accessed 10 September 2013).
- Jones, H. L. 2004. The winter season, December 2003 through February 2004: Central America. *N. Amer. Birds* 58: 290–292.
- Jones, H. L. & Komar, O. 2012. The winter season December 2011 through February 2012: Central America. *N. Amer. Birds* 66: 353–359.
- Jones, H. L. & Komar, O. 2013a. Spring migration March through May 2012: Central America. *N. Amer. Birds* 66: 562–566.
- Jones, H. L. & Komar, O. 2013b. The nesting season June through July 2012: Central America. *N. Amer. Birds* 66: 739–742.
- Kaimowitz, D., Faune, A. & Mendoza, R. 2003. Your biosphere is my backyard: the story of Bosawás in Nicaragua. *CIFOR Working Paper* 25.
- Kjeldsen, J. P. 2005. Aves del Municipio Río Prinzapolka, un inventario de base. *Wani* 41: 31–64.
- Marcus, M. J. 1983. Additions to the avifauna of Honduras. *Auk* 100: 621–629.
- Martínez-Sánchez, J. C. 2007. *Lista patrón de las aves de Nicaragua; con información de nuevos registros, distribución y localidades donde observar aves*. Alianza para las Áreas Silvestres, Managua.
- Martínez-Sánchez, J. C. & Will, T. (eds.) 2010. Thomas R. Howell's *Check-list of the birds of Nicaragua* as of 1993. *Orn. Monogr.* 68.
- Miller, W. DeW. & Griscom, L. 1925. Descriptions of new birds from Nicaragua. *Amer. Mus. Novit.* 159: 1–9.
- Múnera-Roldán, C., Cody, M. L., Schiele-Zavala, R. H., Sigel, B., Woltmann, J. S. & Kjeldsen, J. P. 2007. New and noteworthy records of birds from south-eastern Nicaragua. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 127: 152–161.
- Powell, G. & Bjork, R. 2004. Habitat linkages and the conservation of tropical biodiversity as indicated by seasonal migrations of Three-wattled Bellbirds. *Conserv. Biol.* 18: 500–509.
- Rasmussen, P. C. & Collar, N. J. 2002. Family Bucconidae (puffbirds). Pp. 102–138 in del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A. & Sargatal, J. (eds.) *Handbook of the birds of the world*, vol. 7. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.
- Salvin, O. 1872. Notes on the birds of Nicaragua, based upon a collection made at Chontales by Mr. Thomas Belt. *Ibis* (3)2: 311–323.
- Salvin, O. & Godman, F. D. 1896. *Biologia Centrali-Americana. Aves*, vol. 2. Taylor & Francis, London.
- Sandoval, L. & Sánchez, J. E. 2012. *Lista de aves de Costa Rica*. Unión de Ornitólogos de Costa Rica, San José.
- Sigel, B. J., Sherry, T. W. & Young, B. E. 2005. Avian community response to lowland tropical rainforest isolation: 40 years of change at La Selva Biological Station, Costa Rica. *Conserv. Biol.* 20: 111–121.
- Snow, D. W. 2004. Lovely Cotinga *Cotinga amabilis*. P. 93 in del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A. & Christie, D. A. (eds.) *Handbook of the birds of the world*, vol. 9. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.
- Stiles, F. G. & Skutch, A. 1989. *A guide to the birds of Costa Rica*. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Stocks, A., McMahan, B. & Taber, P. 2007. Indigenous, colonist, and government impacts on Nicaragua's Bosawás Reserve. *Conserv. Biol.* 21: 1495–1505.
- Vallely, A. C., Gallardo, R. J. & Ascher, J. A. 2010. Notes on the birds of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve including four new species for Honduras. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 130: 52–60.

Addresses: Andrew C. Vallely, 84 Riverside Drive, Apt. 2F, New York, NY 10024, USA, e-mail: andrewcvallely@gmail.com. Liliana Chavarría-Duriaux, Reserva El Jaguar, Jinotega, Nicaragua, e-mail: orion.liliana@gmail.com