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SHORT COMMUNICATION

An undescribed New World warbler (Aves, Parulidae) in the mountains of Cuba?

Um pássaro (Aves, Parulidae) desconhecido nas montanhas de Cuba?

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Abstract

In March 2016, a pair of New World warblers (Parulidae) evidently belonging to an undescribed species were observed in the mountains of eastern Cuba. We discuss the observed features of the birds and their possible systematic affinities.

Keywords: new species, bird, new species, Oriente, Pico Turquino National Park, West Indies.

Resumo

Em março de 2016, dois pássaros (Parulidae), evidentemente pertencentes a uma espécie desconhecida, foram observados nas montanhas do leste de Cuba. As características desses espécimes e suas possíveis afinidades filogenéticas são apresentadas e discutidas.

Palavras chave: espécie nova, Passeriformes, Parque Nacional de Pico Turquino, Índias Ocidentais.

Cuba is currently believed to be the only island of the Greater Antilles to have extensive mountains but no high-elevation endemics among its birds (Raffaele *et al*., 2010). This is surprising because Cuban avifauna in general is diverse and largely unique, and also because the mountains of eastern Cuba are among the most extensive in the region, with very high and still largely undiscovered level of endemism in other taxa (Fa *et al*., 2002). Although these mountains shelter, or have recently sheltered, the last populations of Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis* L., 1758) and Cuban Kite (*Chondrohierax wilsonii* Cassin, 1847), lack of "twitchable" endemics means that this part of the island is usually ignored by visiting birders: of about 60 birding trip reports we could find online, such as eBird, Surfbirds, among others, not a single one mentioned visiting the mountains of the east. Professional ornithological research in Cuba has also been largely focused on the lowlands, although there have been a few recent surveys in the mountains (Guy Kirwan pers. comm.). Recently new subspecies of Cuban Pygmy-owl (*Glaucidium siju* d'Orbigny, 1839) and Oriente Warbler (*Teretistris fornsi* Gundlach, 1858) have been described from the highest part of the mountains, the Pico Turquino area (Garrido, 2000, 2002), although these purported new taxa are not universally accepted.

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On 10 March 2016, about 30 min before sunset and 45 min after a long (~2 hr) bout of heavy rain, we encountered a mixed flock of more than 20 passerines in Pico Turquino National Park (20°01'02"N 76°53'52"W, at 930 m a. s. l), in the transitional zone between montane rainforest and cloud forest (Carabia, 1945). The flock included Oriente, Black-and-white (*Mniotilta varia* L., 1766), Black-throated Blue (*Setophaga caerulescens* Gmelin, 1789), Yellow-throated (*Setophaga dominica* L., 1766), Palm (*Setophaga palmarum* Gmelin, 1789) and Northern Parula (*Setophaga americana* L., 1758) Warblers. The flock also included a pair of warblers that fed exclusively in the leaf litter on the ground. These warblers were considered to be a pair because they were very similar in size, body shape, plumage and behavior, remained within 2 m from each other, and differed only in facial patterns. These warblers (Figure 1) were slightly larger than Oriente Warblers; they seemed heavier-built, slower-moving, shorter-tailed, and held their tails slightly raised. They walked on level ground and hopped to get over obstacles. They had olive upperparts, yellowish underparts, and no wingbars. One bird had yellowish-olive head and prominent whitish eyering; the other had dull-yellow head with less prominent eyering, whitish supercilium and pale malar stripe. In size, structure and behavior they looked very similar to Connecticut Warbler (*Oporornis agilis* Wilson, 1812) of North America (with which one of the authors is well familiar), but the face patterns were clearly different. The birds were silent. We observed them from the distance of 4-10 m for ~3 min, but couldn't photograph them for unforeseeable reasons. The birds were not seen on three subsequent visits to that location.

Plumage details of these birds were unlike any known bird species in the Americas. It is, however, easy to understand why such birds could be easily overlooked by ornithologists working in the area: they remained on the poorly-lit forest floor, were very quiet, had generally drab coloration and were superficially similar to many other warblers with olive-and yellow plumage occurring in eastern Cuba, such as Oriente, Kentucky (*Oreothlypis formosa* Wilson, 1811), Tennessee (*Leiothlypis peregrina* Wilson, 1811), and Wilson's (*Cardellina pusilla* Wilson, 1811) Warblers and the Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas* L., 1766) (Garrett and Dunn, 1997; Raffaele *et al*., 2010). The fact that the birds were not seen during subsequent visits suggests that their preferred habitat might be in a different type of forest, possibly at even higher elevation. High-elevation forests of Cuba are botanically diverse and include pine, broadleaf, elfin and other forest types (Carabia, 1945); and although many Cuban endemics are habitat generalists, some, such as the Cuban Solitaire (*Myadestes elisabeth* Lembeye, 1850) have very narrow habitat requirements (Garrido and Kirkconnell, 2000). Narrow habitat preferences and occurrence at high elevations would explain why the birds have remained undetected: high-elevation forests of Cuba are not accessible by any roads except for the one terminating at the site of our observation, and that road is too steep for most vehicles (pers. obs.).

The possible phylogenetic affinities of these birds are unclear. They might be related to the Connecticut Warbler, but they also share some plumage similarities with the Flavescent Warbler (*Myiothlypis flaveola* Baird, 1865) of South America, the *Teretistris* warblers of Cuba, and the Vitelline Warbler (*Setophaga vitellina* Cory, 1886) of the Cayman Islands and Swan Island. The latter species is polymorphic, with the subspecies occurring on the islands closest to Cuba (*S. v. crawfordii* of Little Cayman and Cayman Brac Is.) looking the most similar to the birds we observed (Curson, 2010). It is worth noticing that the Cayman Islands are part of an underwater ridge continuous with the mountains of the Sierra Maestra, and their fauna has strong Cuban affinities (Khudoley and Meyerhoff, 1971). We encourage all ornithologists and birders visiting the Sierra Maestra to be looking for undescribed bird species, and hope that better documentation will eventually be obtained.

Figure 1. Warblers observed in Pico Turquino National Park, Cuba, on 10 March 2016: a schematic depiction based on sketch drawings and field notes by the authors. Bill and leg colors were not recorded.

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