

Lost To Science For 60 Years, Táchira Antpitta Is Rediscovered In Venezuelan Andes

By Sarah Gilman

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Jhonathan Miranda never expected to be into birds. But when the Venezuelan biologist got a job at a bird lab as a university student, he set his mind to learning as much as he could about the class Aves. As he organized trips around the country, one particular species lodged in his mind: the [Táchira Antpitta](#), a round, leggy brown bird a little longer than a pencil. It hadn't been seen since a handful of specimens were collected from the Andean cloud forests on the Venezuela-Colombia border in 1955–56. Was it a valid species? Miranda wondered. Did it even exist?

When Miranda found himself in the Venezuelan state of Táchira in 2007, he started looking. In 2009, he spent a month exploring and talking to locals without success. Then, in 2016, the Red Siskin Initiative—a conservation partnership between the Smithsonian Institution and several Venezuelan scientific organizations—tapped Miranda to lead a formal search. Financial support came under the umbrella of the American Bird Conservancy's search for near-extinct birds, known as their [Lost Birds of the Americas](#) project. All Miranda's hard work finally paid off: After extensive research, and a grueling journey into the field, the team found the Táchira Antpitta on their first full day of fieldwork, returning to public consciousness a bird that some feared was gone for good.

"I was so ecstatic I was almost scared," Miranda says of finally laying eyes on the species. "It was kind of like one of those nightmares where you're afraid to move."

The Lost Birds project aims to rediscover three vanished, longshot species—among them the Turquoise-throated Puffleg—an Ecuadorian hummingbird with colors as flamboyant as its name—and Brazil's once-common Kinglet Calyptura. Of these, the Táchira Antpitta was thought to be the likeliest to be found, if searchers could just find the right spot. (Read our [full story about rediscovering lost birds.](#))

Though deforestation was common around the Táchira Antpitta's suspected home, some of the undisturbed forest was protected inside Venezuela's El Tamá National Park. There were also other explanations for the bird dropping off the radar besides extinction: That border had been nearly impossible to visit until recently because of guerilla activity in adjacent Colombia. And as a group, antpittas are legendarily difficult to spot, singing only in the narrow window before dawn and dusk and sticking to the thick undergrowth of steep, soupy woods at high elevations.

Miranda's long years of obsession also gave the team an edge. Digging back through the field journals of the original expedition, he was able to reconstruct its route based in part on the other species listed there—leaf-tossers, other kinds of antpittas, foliage-gleaners. Those clues and local intel told him the original explorers had passed through especially moist cloud forest laced with mossy, rocky habitat and palms. One day last June, after a 15-hour drive, an hour-and-a-half mule trip, and a long rest in a remote house that served as base camp, the team set out at 4:30 a.m. They crossed four streams. They thrashed through thick brush. Then, they heard an unfamiliar call, higher than that of the area's better-known Scaled Antpitta. Before long, they had the first-ever recording of the Táchira Antpitta's song.

Still, it took seven more days for Miranda, who is with the Venezuelan



The Táchira Antpitta had not been seen since its scientific discovery in the mid-1950s. Illustration by John A. Gwynne, courtesy Princeton University Press.

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Three Lost Birds: The American Bird Conservancy's Lost Birds of the Americas project aims to rediscover the Kinglet Calyptura in Brazil and the Turquoise-throated Puffleg in Ecuador, in addition to the recently rediscovered Táchira Antpitta (left to right). Images by William Swainson, John Gould, and John A. Gwynne/Princeton University Press.



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conservation group [Províta](#), to photograph the antpitta. Even then, he got pictures only by setting up a little blind made out of his poncho in a camouflaged spot. For hours he sat completely still in the airless space, his skin crawling with sweat and mosquitoes. Peter Bichier—a member of the expedition who is affiliated with the University of California, Santa Cruz—didn't have much better luck. Tracking the antpitta by sound from a steep, dripping ravine, he followed one into a more open area full of climbing vines called lianas.

"Man, I just couldn't see the damn thing," Bichier says. "It walks like a little rat. It'll be really close to you and make this low sound, and then it's 100 feet from you. You just wanted to throw a rock at it or something. I was desperate. I wanted to cry." Bichier was finally rewarded for his persistence, but he still had to thrash up a cliff to get a glimpse. He lost 12 pounds over the course of the trip.

Ultimately, Bichier says, the team heard four distinct individuals and saw two. In the coming months, they will report their findings in a scientific journal, including how to visually distinguish the birds from other species of antpitta found in the area. Miranda has failed to turn up more Táchira Antpittas in subsequent visits, but he and the team's other scientists suspect they'll find more on future expeditions into similar habitat in Colombia. "The rediscovery provides hope and inspiration that we still have a chance to conserve this species," says Daniel Lebbin, ABC's Vice President of International Programs, who coordinates the Lost Birds effort. "We hope this rediscovery will lead to improved management of and attention for protected areas like El Tamá National Park."

It's unclear how long of a window there will be to determine if the bird needs help and what that might look like, Miranda says. "If we don't know how many, or what's the habitat of the bird, or the behavior, then not much can be done to preserve it." Peace accords recently hammered out in Colombia could force remaining guerilla activity over the border into Venezuela.

Meanwhile, Venezuela is going through its own economic crisis, and the Táchira Antpitta's remaining forest is not that big. "I don't know what's going to happen with natural resources except that there's going to be more and more pressure towards them," Miranda says. "I feel a very strong sense of urgency to do something now"—before the Táchira Antpitta slips out of sight yet again.



The expedition gathered the first photos and sound recordings of the Táchira Antpitta in the wild. *Photo by Jhonathan Miranda.*

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The American Bird Conservancy's [official press release about the discovery](#). A full scientific paper is in the works.



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