

Rare bird not seen in 60 years rediscovered

by Shreya Dasgupta on 27 July 2017 |



- The *Táchira antpitta* (*Grallaria chthonia*) was first recorded during an expedition in the mid-1950s.
- In June last year, scientists decided to look for the bird again.
- During the expedition, the team obtained the first ever photographs and sound recordings of a living *Táchira antpitta*.

In a remote forest in western Venezuela, scientists have rediscovered a bird that was last seen more than 60 years ago.

The plump, brown *Táchira antpitta* (*Grallaria chthonia*) was first recorded during an expedition in the mid-1950s, during which ornithologists collected four specimens of the bird.

Subsequent searches failed to locate the *Táchira antpitta*. Moreover, the ongoing forest loss in the area where the antpitta was first found convinced scientists that the elusive bird was most likely extremely rare. Consequently, the bird was listed as critically endangered on the IUCN Red List.

In June last year, a team of international scientists of the Red Siskin Initiative (RSI) — a partnership between the Smithsonian Institution and various scientific organizations in Venezuela — decided to look for the *Táchira antpitta* once again. The American Bird Conservancy (ABC) helped fund the 2016 expedition as part of its ongoing Search for Lost Birds.

"This species was originally described by William H. Phelps, Jr. of the COP [Colección Ornitológica Phelps] and Alexander Wetmore, former Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution," Michael Braun of the RSI and the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, [said in a statement](#). "It is fitting that the Red Siskin Initiative, in which COP and the Smithsonian are key collaborators, has been instrumental in the rediscovery."

From the previous expedition, scientists knew that the *Táchira antpitta* could be found within dense undergrowth at altitudes of 5,000 to 7,000 feet in a remote part of the Andes. In this rugged landscape, the bird is hard to identify visually, the scientists say, because it looks very similar to related species. But the team expected the *Táchira antpitta* to have a distinct call that would help them spot the bird. There was one problem, though. There were no sound recordings of the long-lost *Táchira antpitta* that the scientists could rely on.

So the team, led by Jhonathan Miranda of RSI, decided to follow the route described in the field notebooks of the first expedition — a series of steep, narrow Andean trails through what is now El Tamá National Park — to reach the site where the antpitta was first seen.

"Others have searched near the type locality referred to in the literature, but they did not precisely locate the route followed by Ramon Urbano who collected specimens of the species," Miranda told Mongabay.

Miranda's team hit jackpot the very first day of their search. They heard a distinctive song of an antpitta that they had never heard before.

"I was amazed," Miranda said. "I stopped for several minutes to listen to the song. Then we ran about 500 meters to locate the exact location of the individual that was calling."

□ The *Táchira antpitta* was first recorded in the mid 1950s. Photo by Jhonathan Miranda.

Over the next week, the team managed to obtain the first ever photographs and sound

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recordings of a living Táchira antpitta. They also confirmed that the songs of the Táchira antpitta were completely different from those of other antpitta species of the *Grallaria* genus.

The team plans to publish their findings in a scientific journal in the coming months and hopes to continue to look for the bird to learn more about its natural history, distribution and its taxonomic relationship with other antpitta species.

"It is worrisome that the bird is only known from a single locality," Miranda said. "However, I hope to be able to locate it in other parts of the Táchira state (in Venezuela) and also in some regions of Colombia."

Daniel Lebbin, ABC's Vice President of International Programs, added: "The rediscovery provides hope and inspiration that we still have a chance to conserve this species. We hope this rediscovery will lead to improved management of and attention for protected areas like El Tamá National Park."

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