



Still So Much To Discover

An **A**tpitta range extension allows a birder to contribute to science

■ Reserva Natural de las Aves El Dorado, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia.
Photo © Mark W. Lockwood

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As I walked along a dirt road in northern Colombia in early 2015, listening to the arresting cries of countless birds emanating from the surrounding forest, I suddenly spotted what looked like an upright potato with long legs. Its quick dashes were punctuated by sudden stops as it hopped along the verge up ahead. The creature's unmistakable shape and movements brought an immediate and delighted smile to my face. An antpitta!

A generally secretive family of Neotropical understory birds, antpittas have frustrated legions of birders with their furtive habits and impenetrable haunts. Although the birds are much more often heard than seen, today's birders are sometimes treated to the sight of antpittas that are attracted to the playback of recorded calls or enticed with gifts of tantalizing worms. With the exception of the easy-to-see Tawny Antpitta, which hops around in the open above treeline, unorchestrated glimpses of these elusive, fast-moving, long-legged birds are a fortuitous treat and a thrill for any visitor to tropical America.

Binoculars glued to my face, I watched the antpitta cross the road up ahead and then approach with a confiding nonchalance. My eyes roamed avidly over the bird's grayish cap, brown back, dark crescents overlaid on a yellowish front, white throat, and dark cheek stripe. All the while, I tried

to memorize every feature so I could secure an identification.

"The endemic Santa Marta Antpitta", my birding companion breathed.

Puzzled, I glanced away from the bird. "It *should* be the Santa Marta Antpitta," I agreed doubtfully, "but it looks nothing like the way it's shown in the guide." Itching to pull out my field guide but unwilling to tear my eyes away from the captivating bird, I watched as the antpitta came within 20 feet (6 meters). It seemed to want to move past us and hopped off the road into the ditch to do so, disappearing for a moment. Seconds later, it reappeared within a few feet before vanishing into the undergrowth.

Pulling out my field guide, I leafed through an impressive trove of painted birds—with



■ Undulated Antpitta.
Photo © Jay Packer

Discovering an Antpitta

over 1,900 species, Colombia has a greater diversity of birds than any other country in the world—until I arrived at the antpittas. This ground-dwelling family of just over 50 species feeds on earthworms, grubs, ants, beetles, and other invertebrates, usually in and below the forest understory. The greatest diversity of antpittas resides in cloudforests: those cool, mysterious, montane haunts that drip with epiphytes and condensed fog.

Relatively few antpitta species occur at high elevations in the isolated Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, where I was walking, although the region has more resident birds than does the continental U.S., and among them is a globally impressive concentration of endemic bird species. I had seen the aptly-named Rufous Antpitta high on a ridgetop the morning before. I knew that the seldom-seen Scaled Antpitta also occurred in the area. But the plump, big-eyed antpitta that had just approached so fearlessly was boldly marked, unlike the only other antpitta that was supposed to live in the region: the endemic, brown-backed, streak-chested Santa Marta Antpitta.

My antpitta's relatively large size and ochraceous front, heavily marked with dark, wavy lines that looked like hesitant smiles, made it readily identifiable. But though it appeared to be an Undulated Antpitta, our guide book did not show this bird

occurring in the Santa Marta mountains.

Later, we ran into a local bird guide and assailed him with excited proclamations of having seen an Undulated Antpitta. "No," the skeptical Colombian declared with an authoritative tone that brooked no argument, "they don't occur here." Pulling out a digital camera, we showed him the photos my fellow birder had taken of our audacious antpitta. The guide gaped.

"That's an Undulated Antpitta!" he said excitedly. We all beamed at each other. Another visitor to the area chimed in dismissively, "Undulated Antpitta? Oh, I've seen them."

"But not here," quickly countered the guide. "They don't occur here. Or at least not that I've heard of, and I've worked in the area for three years. I'll check around with other guides to see if anyone else has ever seen one in this area, and we can check eBird, too."

I had been astonished during my too-brief two-week sojourn in Colombia at how prevalently eBird, a worldwide program developed and spearheaded by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology for birders to catalog their sightings, was used by Colombian bird guides and area birders.

Conducting a search for Undulated Antpitta in eBird showed no sightings in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta or, indeed, anywhere in far northern Colombia. The nearest sighting was over 350 miles away, just north of Medellín. For many migrants, this would be an insignificant distance and one would expect occasional sightings of birds that had purposely or accidentally traveled such a short distance astray. But the ground-dwelling antpittas

have poor flight capabilities, and arid valleys, large rivers, cleared habitat, and sometimes roads are barriers that prevent many forest understory birds in the tropics from moving even short distances.

Researchers in Panama graphically illustrated the inability or unwillingness of many tropical forest understory birds to cross seemingly innocuous "barriers" by transporting birds that they captured to varying distances from a lakeshore and then releasing them to test their willingness to fly over water. A Checker-throated Antwren, which until fairly recently was included in the same taxonomic family as antpittas, is better equipped for flight than are the larger, ground-dwelling antpittas, yet one dropped into the water within 300 ft. (90 m). Several other antwrens couldn't travel as far as 600 ft. (180 m). (All birds were quickly rescued and returned to shore.) Antpittas' long legs, short tails, and relatively stout bodies are characteristics of terrestrial rather than aerial birds, and most antpittas walk, run, and hop far more readily than they fly.

Given the inability or reluctance of many antpittas to fly significant distances, it was unlikely that our Undulated Antpitta was a vagrant from parts unknown. It seemed more likely that this elusive species had been overlooked in the Santa Marta region, despite the area being one of the most heavily-birded locales in Colombia.

Upon my return to the U.S., I excitedly entered my Undulated Antpitta sighting into eBird, providing as much information as I could. It was several months before one of the conscientious cadre of experts that verify innumerable questionable eBird sightings around the world contacted me,



■ Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia.
Photo © Mark W. Lockwood

expressing understandable skepticism about my identification and asking if I had captured any images. Again, the photos I sent to him provided the unequivocal evidence that my words and my limited expertise in tropical ornithology did not. “An Undulated Antpitta,” Nick Bayly, migratory species manager for SELVA, a Colombian non-governmental conservation and research organization, quickly confirmed. He then passed the photos onto other Colombian experts for further verification and discussion.

Several days later, after mulling the sighting and taking note of the significant range extension that it represented for this little-known species, Bayly encouraged me to draft a description of my sighting and submit it to a Colombian ornithological journal. Months later, *Boletín SAO* published my modest contribution to our ever-expanding knowledge of South America’s avifauna.

With countries such as Colombia hosting more and more birders, opportunities are virtually limitless for both amateurs and professionals to contribute to scientific knowledge about bird locations, ranges, behaviors, and other vital natural history and conservation information. Biologist Robert Ridgely, for example, discovered the striking Jocotoco Antpitta—a large, brown-backed, gray-bellied antpitta with a passion for worms and a bold white patch under its garnet eye—as recently as 1997. And while new bird species are not often found, new information about known species is learned daily, and relationships among tropical birds are constantly being reevaluated and revised. Birders can make valuable contributions to this growing knowledge base—contributions that have real and important conservation implications. Because animals in isolated locations often develop traits that are adapted to local conditions and differ from their ancestral populations, further study may show that “my” Undulated Antpitta differs from those in other parts of Colombia and Ecuador. Given the high level of endemism in the isolated Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and the limited flight capabilities of antpittas, who knows? Perhaps my serendipitous find will one day be classified as a new subspecies: the Santa Marta Undulated Antpitta! 🌍