

A celebration of antbirds

Jonathan Newman

One keen Neotropical birder—and regular contributor to this magazine—has taken his love of the antbird family to its logical conclusion by seeing every single species. Here’s how that remarkable feat was accomplished in February this year.



All photos taken by Jonathan Newman.

1 Ocellated Antbird *Phaenostictus mcleannani*, Rio Canandé, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, February 2023. A particularly striking member of a fascinating family.

Antbirds. For me, the epitome of Neotropical birding. Sure, there are more species of tyrannid flycatchers. Or, for that matter, of ovenbirds. Many of the huge array of hummingbirds are more colourful. Lots of cotingas have dramatic displays. Wrens come with spectacular songs. But what family really characterizes the experience of birding in Central and South America? What family monopolizes the dawn chorus with their loud-songs? Is responsible for the cohesion of those confusing understory flocks? Is emblematic of so many biomes? From Mexico to Argentina (if not Chile or the Caribbean), it seems that you are never far from an antbird! In *terra firme* forests, up to 45 species can occur at a single site (Zimmer & Isler 2003).

Indeed, antbirds are everywhere. At all levels of the forest, from species that join canopy flocks to those that live in the dark shadows of the forest

floor. Species that specialise in vine tangles; in craning for arthropods amid clusters of dead leaves; or whose lives are restricted to bamboo, to dry forest, to river islands, to white-sand forests or to any one of an array of other microhabitats. And, above all, species that dominate the birding experience at ant swarms. For me, they are the essence of birding in the Amazon and the Chocó (easternmost Panama, and western Colombia and Ecuador). Even in the Andes, antbirds are a core feature of the avifauna.

I have written before about my love for the family (Newman 2025, 2026). As well as being (almost) omnipresent, the *Thamnophilidae* makes for a fascinating group. Just 23 years ago, there were 209 accepted species in the family (Zimmer & Isler 2003). That figure is now 239 species (AviList Core Team 2025), thanks to a mix of new discoveries and better taxonomic understanding. My quest



to see them all has taken me to nearly every Latin American country. To some of them, many times. And antbirds remain a constant fascination.

Seeing most of the antbirds is not that difficult, given enough time birding in the region. Many are widespread. Others cluster together into areas of endemism—for example in the Chocó region, the Marañon of northwestern Peru, the northeastern forests of Brazil or the Atlantic forests of Paraguay through to southeast Brazil. Visits to these regions can provide dozens of range-restricted species. The remaining ones, however, require targeted trips.

The final four

In 2024, I found myself with just four species missing from the entire family of these superb birds. A trip to Roraima, Brazil, in December that year produced incredible encounters with the poorly known Caura Antbird *Myrmelastes caurensis* in some equally amazing habitat (Newman 2026). A month later, in Suriname, I had a great experience with a pair of Band-tailed Antshrikes *Thamnophilus melanothorax*. Skulking

2 As its name suggests, Giant Antshrike *Batara cinerea* (Samaipata, Santa Cruz, Bolivia, October 2025) is the largest member of the antbird family.

3–4 In addition to seeing all described species, the author has seen currently undescribed species such as **3** ‘Inirida Antshrike’ *Thamnophilus* sp. nov. (Inirida, Vichada, Colombia, January 2022) and **4** ‘Inambari-Tambopata Antwren’ *Herpsilochmus* sp. nov. (Yanahuaya, Puno, Peru, January 2024).

in dense, tangled vegetation, it took some work before they showed well, but both members of the pair finally surrendered, completing another antbird genus for me.

This left two species: Brownish-headed Antbird *Myrmelastes brunneiceps* and Yungas Antwren *Myrmotherula grisea*. Both seemed gettable, if difficult, at Sadiri Lodge in northwest La Paz, Bolivia. In October 2025, I spent time at the lodge where the antbird was vocal, but skittish. Views were finally obtained. The antwren took a lot more effort, and I spent several days targeting this one species. Eventually, we found a pair, to great relief.