

In search of a mystery new tinamou in the remote Brazilian Amazon

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All photographs were taken in the Parque Nacional da Serra do Divisor, Acre, Brazil, during August 2025 by Hugo Foxonet/Manikup Birding Tours (✉ manikupbirdingtours.wordpress.com f tinyurl.com/FB-ManikupBirdingTours).

1 Parque Nacional da Serra do Divisor from the air.

In this day and age, it seems astonishing that a bird as large and vocal as a tinamou can be described as wholly new to science—not as a split, but as a hitherto overlooked species. As one intrepid birder reports, the merest sniff of such a creature in Amazonian Brazil was enough to get the juices flowing, flights booked and luggage packed...

Planning a birdwatching trip in the Brazilian Amazon requires meticulous preparation, involving an understanding of the geographical boundaries that shape a landscape that, at first glance, appears quite uniform, but upon closer examination, reveals itself to be infinitely diverse. Indeed, numerous large rivers divide Amazonia into as many centres of endemism, generating a cryptic diversification that remains largely underestimated (Milá *et al.* 2012, Fernandes 2013). Many taxa are therefore regularly elevated to species rank, based on sometimes subtle differences in plumage or vocalizations. It thus becomes essential for the avid birder in search of rare birds to refine their preparation by targeting, within each interfluvium, the taxa (sometimes still undescribed) that differ from

others—without overlooking a single one.

The presence of isolated habitats within this immense forest block is also a major driver of diversification. For example, the exploration of *campinaranas* habitat (low white-sand Amazonian forests) has revealed the existence of numerous bird species previously unknown to science (e.g., Cohn-Haft *et al.* 2013, Whitney *et al.* 2013). Likewise, bamboo forests harbour many highly specialized species that occur solely in this restricted habitat, some of which have been discovered only recently, such as Rondonia Bushbird *Clytoctantes atrogularis* (Lanyon *et al.* 1990; Near Threatened), Rufous Twistwing *Cnipodectes superrufus* (Lane *et al.* 2007; Vulnerable) and Acre Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus cohnhafti* (Zimmer *et al.* 2013; Near Threatened).

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Isolated mountain ranges within this immense forest block are also synonymous with endemism. The best-known example is the tepui region in the north, which remains largely unexplored. However, smaller uplands also occur south of the Amazon. One of them, the Serra do Divisor, is particularly famous for hosting one of the most recently discovered, localized and inaccessible antbirds in the world: Acre Antshrike *Thamnophilus divisorius* (Whitney *et al.* 2004). It was precisely while conducting bibliographic research on this species ahead of my trip to Brazil that I happened upon a rumour concerning a strange tinamou song heard by a few birdwatchers on a ridge of this isolated range.

Where it all began

Let's wind back to 2022. I was actively preparing a future birdwatching trip to Brazil, focusing on the Amazonian regions of Acre, Rondônia and southwestern Amazonas. These areas are renowned for a large number of rare and hard-to-access species, as well as for several major ornithological discoveries made in relatively recent years. High levels of endemism, cryptic diversity, undescribed species... preparing such a trip requires meticulous planning and extensive bibliographic research.

The legendary Acre Antshrike immediately stood out as a must-see species—one of the main pillars of this adventure. However, its isolated range meant devoting nearly an entire week to the Serra do Divisor alone, half of which would be spent travelling. I absolutely had to make the most of the remaining four full days in the field to find as many rare Amazonian specialities as possible, including the near-mythical Red-billed Ground Cuckoo *Neomorphus pucheranii* (for which, see Newman 2025b), so that I could later focus more efficiently on my remaining targets at other sites. I therefore began combing through data from eBird (www.ebird.org) and WikiAves (wikiaves.com.br) to optimize my stay.

And that's how it all started. In a simple eBird checklist (ebird.org/checklist/S97735196) from only a few months previously, in November 2021, Josh Beck and Julien Mazenauer listed a 'Tinamidae sp.' (tinamou), accompanied by a brief comment: "*Crypturellus*-type song heard. Sounds like a potentially new taxon. Failing to see thus far." No further details.

I searched desperately for additional information but found nothing else mentioning



2 View from Pousada do Miro of the forested ridge where Slaty-masked Tinamou *Crypturellus resonans* and Acre Antshrike *Thamnophilus divisorius* both occur.

this mysterious tinamou. No paper. No sound-recordings. No trip reports. No other unidentified tinamou records from this area in databases. Not even a social-media comment suggesting the possibility of a new species in Brazil. Nothing.

And so birthed an obsession that would haunt me for the next three years. In the months that followed, I watched obsessively for any new eBird lists from the Serra do Divisor. On the one hand, I hoped to learn more about this mysterious song and, on the other, I prayed that no one would unravel the secret of a new species before my visit, assuming one were to even exist.

Questions constantly filled my mind. Was it really conceivable that a tinamou could have gone unnoticed for all these years in the Amazon? What might it look like? How different could its song be for it to suggest a new species?

Then, one day... a second eBird checklist appeared (www.ebird.org/checklist/S115568379), from Ross Gallardy and Jason Horn, dated 15 July, 2022. Once again it listed a 'Tinamidae sp.', with the comment: "New *Crypturellus*. Brief views of a single bird that was called in. Small tinamou with a brownish/rusty head. Couldn't see the rest of the body." No photo. Still no recording attached. A fleeting observation accompanied by a vague description that could match, on a brief view, roughly half of the tinamou species already known from the area.

Although the eBird checklist shed little light on this possible new species, it made one thing certain: this enigma instantly became one of the top three objectives for my Brazilian trip, alongside White-tailed Tityra *Tityra leucura*, then known from a single specimen collected in 1829 and an undocumented report from 2006 (Whittaker 2008), and Elusive Antpitta *Grallaria eludens*, for which no photo of a living bird existed at the time.