Mexico and northern Central America's biggest bird mystery: the 'Songless Antpitta'?

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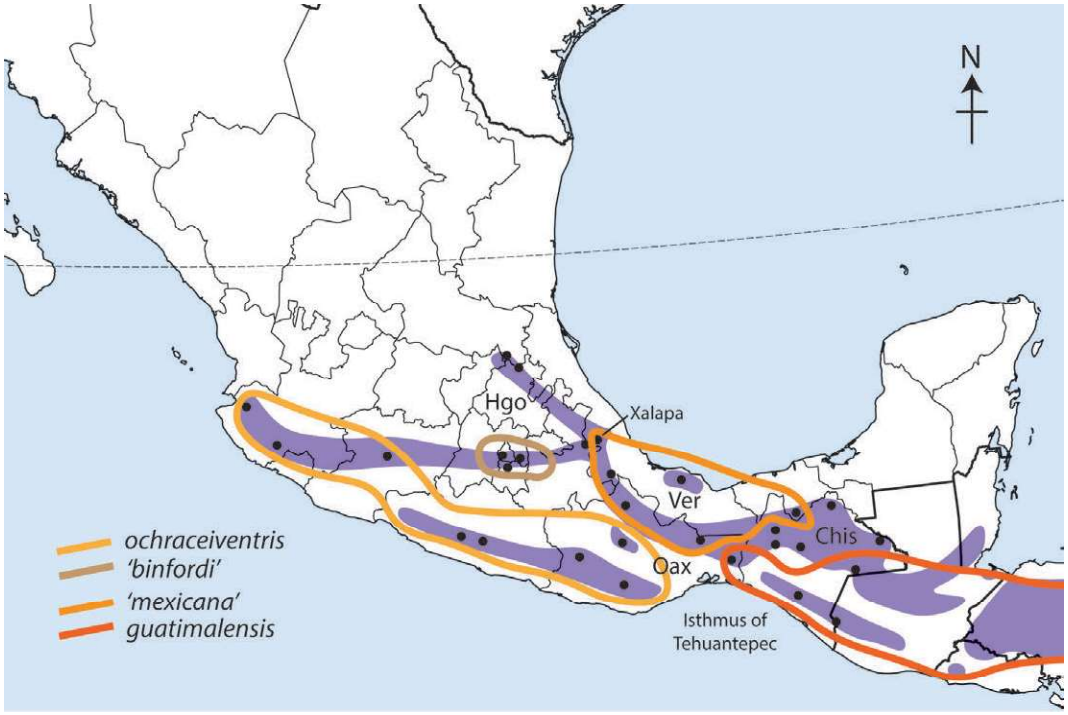
Careful detective work suggests that there may be more to Middle America's 'Scaled Antpittas' than meets the eye. Or, indeed, the ear.

1 Comparison of *ochraceiventris* (left) and '*mexicana*' (right) Scaled Antpittas *Grallaria guatimalensis* (Dale Dyer, from Howell & Dyer in prep.).

Antpittas comprise a neotropical family of mostly terrestrial and notoriously elusive birds found from Mexico to northern Argentina, with their greatest species diversity in subtropical regions of the Andes. Scaled Antpitta *Grallaria guatimalensis* is by far the most widespread species, ranging from central Mexico south to Bolivia, with 11 subspecies described: five in Middle America and six in South America (Dickerman 1990, Krabbe & Schulenberg 2003, Greeney 2018, Gill *et al.* 2025). For such a widespread neotropical bird of disjunct subtropical habitats, it seems inconceivable in these days of taxonomic overhaul that Scaled Antpitta comprises simply a single species. A molecular analysis is overdue and would undoubtedly help shine some light into relationships among Scaled Antpitta taxa, although such analyses in isolation do not necessarily help in terms of defining biological species (Howell 2021).



2 Subspecies ranges of Scaled Antpitta *Grallaria guatimalensis* in Mexico and northern Central America, as defined by Dickerman (1990) based on specimen examination. Dots indicate a representative selection of specimen-record and confirmed sight-record localities in Mexico (mostly from Greeney 2018). Purple shading shows inferred range, from Howell & Dyer (in prep.). Mexican state abbreviations are: Chis (Chiapas), Hgo (Hidalgo), Oax (Oaxaca) and Ver (Veracruz).

Most of the described Scaled Antpitta subspecies look rather similar, differing mainly in plumage tones, such as the intensity of ventral coloration, leading del Hoyo & Collar (2016) to comment that: "Races *carmelitae* and *sororia* only doubtfully distinct from *regulus*..." Conversely, Navarro-S. & Peterson (2004) offered an alternative reality, splitting Mexican populations alone into three 'species' based on minor plumage differences. As with many suboscines, however, plumage may be a poor taxonomic indicator, and song may be more informative.

For example, the distinctly different song of the southernmost taxon *sororia* (Schulenberg *et al.* 2007; https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/626280469; pers. obs.), which occurs from southern Peru to central Bolivia, indicates it is surely better treated as a separate species. From recordings on Xeno-Canto (XC; xeno-canto.org), songs of the widespread Andean subspecies *regulus* and Guianan Shield *roraimae* sound fairly similar to one another, whereas small samples of the more localized taxa *carmelitae* from north Colombia (e.g., XC17256) and (presumed) *chocoensis* of east Panama and northwest Colombia (XC308320, 308321) sound somewhat different, suggesting further cryptic species may be involved; the song of the Trinidad taxon *aripoensis* appears to be unrecorded. Likewise, and somewhat remarkably given the wide geographic area and large number of field observers involved, within Middle America there appears to be not a single confirmed song recording of any Scaled Antpitta taxon (see discussion below). Here I wish to draw attention to this ornithological mystery in the hope of spurring observers to redress the enigma of Middle America's 'Songless Antpitta', especially with respect to Mexican populations.

Distribution and plumage variation

The described subspecies of Scaled Antpitta in Middle America are as follows: *ochraceiventris* in western Mexico; *binfordi* in central Mexico; *mexicana* in southeastern Mexico; nominate *guatimalensis* ranging from southernmost Mexico to Nicaragua; and *princeps* in Costa Rica and western Panama (Ridgway 1911, Dickerman 1990; Figs. 2–3). Sample sizes used to describe