

## Status of White-bellied Spinetail *Synallaxis propinqua* in French Guiana and Amapá (Brazil)

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Received 24 August 2011

The known range of the furtive White-bellied Spinetail *Synallaxis propinqua*, usually described as an obligate river island species (Remsen & Parker 1983, Rosenberg 1990), comprises widely separated localities from eastern French Guiana and northern Brazil throughout Amazonia to extreme south-east Colombia, eastern Ecuador, north-east Peru and north-east Bolivia, where it is locally fairly common along major rivers (Pacheco 1995, Remsen 2003). It prefers early-successional, low brushy growth, mainly on sandbars and river islands, but also on sandy river margins, consisting of dense *Tessaria* thickets and young *Gynerium* cane, interspersed with grass, tangles and low bushes (Remsen 2003). The species is difficult to observe, with singles or pairs moving on or near the ground, almost never in the open. Its presence is usually revealed by its strange, often-heard, low-pitched and nasal song (Ridgely & Tudor 1994, Remsen 2003). We report here on the current status of this spinetail in French Guiana and adjacent Amapá in Brazil.

### French Guiana

Tostain *et al.* (1992) mentioned *S. propinqua* as occurring around Saül and in the basin of the Oyapock River in French Guiana. The only evidence for its occurrence there is specimen CM 68107 in the Carnegie Museum of Natural History (Pittsburgh, USA), and there has been some confusion as to the precise collecting locality. Samuel M. Klages collected this adult female *S. propinqua* at Pied Saut on the Oyapock River on 18 March 1918 (Fig. 1). In his own catalogue, Klages gave this specimen the serial no. 16339. Based on it, Vaurie (1980) mentioned the Oyapock River as the north-eastern limit of the species' range, and Tostain *et al.* (1992) included this spinetail in the avifauna of French Guiana.

Stephens & Traylor (1985) considered Pied Saut as being on the 'Oyapock River above Saint Georges (03°53'N, 51°48'W) at foot of rapids; not located'. However, the locality had already been given as Pierre Saut by Haverschmidt (1972), and later corrected to Pied Saut by Parkes (1973). The 1:100,000 tourist map of the French Institut Géographique National for Guyane: Cayenne – Saint-Georges shows a locality Piedsaut on the north bank of the Oyapock River, c.12 km upstream of Saint-Georges, at the foot of the first rapids on this river. Obviously Piedsaut is a misspelling of Pied Saut, meaning 'foot (of) rapid'. Using the same map, we calculate the coordinates of this locality as 03°48'30"N, 51°52'30"W.

For a total of nearly 32 weeks during the period 1999–2009, JI studied the avifauna within c.25 km around Saül, without finding *S. propinqua*. There is no major river with river islands in this region and JI never found other habitat suitable for this spinetail. The only *Synallaxis* that are common in and around Saül are McConnell's *S. macconnelli* and Plain-crowned Spinetails *S. gujanensis*. The former is known in French Guiana from scattered localities in the interior, and the only known population of the latter in the interior of this French department is around Saül (Dick *et al.* 1984, Tostain *et al.* 1992, Restall *et al.* 2006).

In 2010, on 10–13 March and 13–15 April, AR searched for *S. propinqua*, using playback of its typical song, around Ouanary (c.04°13'N, 51°40'W), on the banks of the Ouanary River, and on the river islands of Biche (c.04°07'N, 51°39'W) and Jonc (c.04°10'N, 51°38'W) on the Brazilian side of the river, all in the bay of the Oyapock River. Similar



Figure 1. White-bellied Spinetail *Synallaxis propinqua*, specimen CM 68107, collected by Samuel M. Klages at Pied Saut, French Guiana, on 18 March 1918, and held in the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh (© Carnegie Museum)

searches were conducted on 12–13 June inland along the Oyapock River, on Îlets Marécage and Barbosa ( $c.03^{\circ}50'N$ ,  $51^{\circ}51'W$ ),  $c.9$  km upstream of Saint-Georges, and at Saut Maripa and Saut Cafésoca ( $c.03^{\circ}48'N$ ,  $51^{\circ}53'W$ ) near Pied Saut,  $c.13$  km upstream of Saint-Georges. No *S. propinqua* were heard or seen.

None of the islands in the Oyapock River visited by AR was covered by low brushy vegetation, the preferred habitat of *S. propinqua*. Most islands now possess taller second growth, a habitat largely unsuitable for this spinetail. The vegetation of these islands in the early 1900s, when Klages collected his specimen, is unknown. Because of the lack of recent observations, the list of the birds of French Guiana (CHG 2011) now places this spinetail in category B, i.e. a species not recorded since the publication of Tostain *et al.* (1992).



Figure 2. White-bellied Spinetail *Synallaxis propinqua*, Parazinho Island, Reserva Biológica do Parazinho, Amapá, Brazil, 16 September 2005 (Kurazo M. Okada Aguiar)

### Amapá (Brazil)

Novaes (1974) did not mention *S. propinqua* for the Território do Amapá. However, KMOA has recently found it at two localities in the state of Amapá in extreme north-east Brazil, adjacent to French Guiana. On Parazinho ( $00^{\circ}53'N$ ,  $49^{\circ}59'W$ ), one of the islands of

the Bailique archipelago in the Amazon River mouth, and part of the Reserva Biológica do Parazinho, the species was found at the fringes of the island in riparian vegetation typical of estuarine areas. It was, however rare, as during a seven-day stay on 15–22 September 2005, KMOA mist-netted just one individual, on 16 September (Fig. 2). The Reserva Biológica do Lago Piratuba, is a c.375,000-ha reserve bordered to the south by the Araguari River, to the east and north by the Atlantic Ocean and to the west by the savannas of Amapá (01°10'–01°50'N, 49°34'–50°34'W). Aguiar *et al.* (2010) found *S. propinqua* in this reserve on 3–13 June 2006 during the wet season. It was seen in riparian vegetation consisting of bamboo and mangrove along the Paratur River and on grass-covered islands in the same river, which were inundated at high tide. However, it was not found there on 5–16 November 2005 and 10–30 November 2006, during the dry season. Within inland areas of the reserve, the following spinetails were also observed: Plain-crowned *S. gujanensis*, Pale-breasted *S. albescens* and Yellow-chinned *Certhiaxis cinnamomeus*.

## Discussion

It is possible that the preferred habitat of *S. propinqua* in French Guiana has, over the past century, disappeared through a natural evolution of the vegetation of the islands in the Oyapock River, because no suitable habitat was found during the recent searches along this river by AR. We suspect that *S. propinqua* no longer occurs in French Guiana. *S. propinqua* has also been found in the lower Rio Branco basin in Roraima (Pacheco 1995, Naka *et al.* 2006) and therefore the Brazilian states of Amapá and Roraima form the current northern limit of the species' distribution in the Guiana Shield.

We may even speculate whether a breeding population ever existed along the Oyapock, or whether Samuel Klages perhaps collected an individual searching for suitable habitat. The fluvial system of the Oyapock is less dynamic than that of the Amazon because of its lower flow, which does not permit the formation of new islands or the renewal after flooding of the vegetation of existing islands, needed to attract pioneer species.

*S. propinqua* is usually described as an obligate river island species, specialised on the understorey of successional vegetation. However, this habitat is ephemeral because islands are constantly moving downstream, and are partially or even wholly inundated both by high tides and during the rainy season(s) (Remsen & Parker 1983, Rosenberg 1990, Aguiar *et al.* 2010). Therefore, this spinetail must also possess the ability to wander in search of new suitable habitat, even away from river islands, such as low riparian vegetation on riverbanks and at edges of islands, as demonstrated by our observations in Amapá.

## Acknowledgements

We thank James Dean, Morton Isler, J. V. Remsen, Paul Sweet and François Vuilleumier for helping to locate Klages's specimen of *S. propinqua*. Stephen P. Rogers kindly sent photographs and data associated with this specimen. Caio J. Carlos, Nigel Cleere and Travis Rosenberry helped with relevant literature, and Jean-Pierre Policard assisted to locate Pied Saut. Comments by Frederik Brammer, Olivier Claessens and Des Jackson on a draft are greatly appreciated, whilst Fernando Pacheco, Marcos Pérsio and J. V. Remsen provided useful reviews of the submitted version. We thank Guy M. Kirwan for editing the manuscript.

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