

First documented records of Pearly-breasted Cuckoo *Coccyzus euleri* for French Guiana, and an overlooked specimen from Ecuador

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Of the eight *Coccyzus* cuckoos resident in or visitors to continental South America, Pearly-breasted Cuckoo *C. euleri* is one of the rarest and least known. Although it is reported across most of South America east of the Andes, the species' breeding range is poorly known (Payne 1997). Breeding has been reported in northern Argentina, in Paraguay, in southern and eastern Brazil, and as far north as Roraima in northern Brazil (Payne 1997, 2005). The latter is based on a female (FMNH 343751) collected in October with an ovary measuring 14×10 mm, two exploded follicles and an enlarged oviduct. Northern Brazil lies far from other known breeding areas and, although a migrant could possess developed gonads prior to reaching its breeding grounds, these data prove breeding (S. W. Cardiff, M. A. Echeverry-Galvis, A. Jones, J. V. Remsen, D. Willard *in litt.* 2010). Elsewhere, Pearly-breasted Cuckoos are probably only austral migrants, as suggested by dates and the paucity of records.

Only two records are known in Bolivia, both from dpto. Santa Cruz (Vidoz *et al.* 2010). Two specimens and a presumed sight record are available from Esmeraldas, Pichincha and Napo provinces in northern Ecuador (Ridgely & Greenfield 2001; R. S. Ridgely *in litt.* 2008). The species has been reported from just two localities in northern and eastern Colombia (Hilty & Brown 1986). Pearly-breasted Cuckoo is uncommon and irregular in Venezuela, where the species has been reported in the Distrito Federal and from Isla Margarita, Mérida, Amazonas, Apure and Bolívar, but its status in the country is unclear (Hilty 2003, Payne 2005). A vagrant collected on Sombrero Island, the northernmost of the Lesser Antilles, is the only validated record for North America (Banks 1988, AOU 1998). Two claims in central

Panama, in June 2007 and June 2009 (Anon. 2009a, 2009b), were rejected by the Panama Records Committee (D. Montañez & G. Berguido *in litt.* 2010).

However, records outside the species' usual range should be treated cautiously, due to the risk of confusion with Yellow-billed Cuckoo *C. americanus*, and the species may be overlooked for the same reason. Moreover, poor descriptions in field guides and the relative lack of available photographs of *C. euleri* do not facilitate its identification by observers unfamiliar with it, making the species' true range difficult to divine.

Pearly-breasted Cuckoo is a rare austral migrant to the Guianas. In Guyana, it is scarce in lowland forests (Braun *et al.* 2007), while in Surinam the species is known from three specimens collected on the coastal plain in Para district, one on 28 August 1905 and two on 20 September 1964 (Ottema *et al.* 2009). Until recently, there was no proof of its occurrence in French Guiana. Tostain *et al.* (1992) mentioned one in riparian swamp forest by the Counama River on 26 July 1990, but the species was subsequently removed from the country's bird list due to lack of evidence (Claessens & Renaudier *in prep.*). Here we describe the first confirmed records in French Guiana. Simultaneously, a check of the bird collection of the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris (MNHN) revealed a misidentified specimen of *C. euleri* from Ecuador, which is the only specimen of this species at MNHN.

First records in French Guiana

On 9 August 2009, TD photographed a *Coccyzus* cuckoo in the canopy of a *Sterculia* (Malvaceae) tree at Saut Pararé on the Arataye River, in Nouragues Nature Reserve, in central west French Guiana (04°02'N, 52°41'W). The bird was present for *c.*2 minutes on the same perch before disappearing. Unfortunately, TD did not see the bird in flight, so was unable to attest to the presence or absence of any rufous in the primaries. However, the photograph (Fig. 1) shows the slim and elongated body, long tail held closed and in line with the back, and long, pointed, somewhat drooping wings; bicoloured, pointed and slightly hooked bill, the mandible yellow with a black tip and the maxilla mainly black; grey (not yellow) eye-ring; uniform brown upperparts, including the head, mantle and uppertail; pale grey breast with no salmon tinge, and whitish undertail-coverts; no mask around the eye and no grey line on the cheeks; and no rufous in the primaries.

Among *Coccyzus* potential in the region, only *C. americanus* and *C. euleri* exhibit a combination of bicoloured bill and whitish or greyish underparts. The pearl grey instead of whitish breast, grey not yellow eye-ring, and lack of rufous in the primaries are usually considered key features to distinguish *euleri* from *americanus* (Hilty 2003, Restall *et al.* 2006). However, none of these characters is absolute. *C. americanus* with a grey eye-ring are not rare; most are first-years, but a few adults lack the yellow eye-ring typical of the species (Payne 2005). The colour of the underparts varies in *americanus* from pure white to pale grey, and any shadow can make them appear darker, making this character difficult to judge in the field. Furthermore, the extent of rufous in the wings is highly variable. On some specimens at MNHN it is restricted to the inner web of the primaries, making the rufous hardly visible on the closed wing. However, the colour is usually obvious, even when perched and should have been visible on the drooping wings of the French Guiana bird, if present. In any case, a combination of these three characters in *C. americanus* would be highly unlikely.

Date, habitat and locality reinforce the identification as *C. euleri*. All 21 records of *C. americanus* in French Guiana have been in mid September to late May (GEPOG 2010, Renaudier *et al.* 2010, Claessens & Renaudier *in prep.*). In Surinam, the 24 published records are in October–November and late March–early June (Ottema *et al.* 2009). Early August would be very early for *C. americanus* in French Guiana, but a normal date for an austral

migrant like *C. euleri*. Furthermore, *C. americanus* regularly occurs in semi-open and bushy habitats in coastal French Guiana. There is just one, recent, record, on 21 April 2010, by L. Epelboin *et al.*, in forest, in the Montagne de Kaw in north-east French Guiana, i.e. near the coastal plain. There was an unusual influx of the species into French Guiana during spring 2010 (data from Comité d'Homologation de Guyane), which might explain this observation away from 'typical' habitat. *C. americanus* is an uncommon visitor to Amazonian Brazil, where it occurs in *várzea* and open habitats (Stotz *et al.* 1992; M. Cohn-Haft *in litt.* 2009). In contrast, *C. euleri* is a regular migrant to Amazonian Brazil and a canopy-dwelling species, favouring primary *terra firme* (M. Cohn-Haft *in litt.* 2009). An observation in the canopy of primary forest in French Guiana conforms much more to *euleri* than *americanus*.

The French Guiana Rarities Committee (CHG) has accepted the record as the first confirmed record of *C. euleri* in the country. Subsequently, on 15–17 September 2010, AR observed and tape-recorded at least seven cuckoos at two sites c.20 km apart between Roura (04°43'N, 52°19'W) and Regina (04°18'N, 52°08'W), in north-east French Guiana, including five at one site. Both sites were in forest c.45 km inland and comprised a primary forest edge along a road and a low (25 m tall) dense secondary forest, respectively, both adjacent to the primary forest that covers the interior of French Guiana. All of the birds were in the canopy, sometimes just a few hundred metres apart. One cuckoo sang spontaneously, another emitted a rattling call. All responded to playback of a recording of the song of *C. euleri* (XC6036, from Brazil, by C. Albano; www.xeno-canto.org) by singing or calling instantly and repeatedly. Recordings made by AR are also deposited at www.xeno-canto.org (XC72105–109). One bird flew over the observer in response to playback, but the others did not approach and even moved away while calling or singing. Songs and rattling calls were similar to those of *C. euleri* on www.xeno-canto.org. Visual observation was difficult. However, those birds which were seen were rather small *Coccyzus* with a noticeably slim body, large white terminal spots on the underside of the long tail, brownish upperparts, a black mask, a black bill with a yellow mandible, all-whitish underparts and no rufous in the wings. However, these records were validated by the CHG based on the following: (1) location well inside forest, and habitat, i.e. canopy; (2) the large number of birds involved on a date very early for migrant *C. americanus*, but consistent with the occurrence of *C. euleri*; (3) the lack of any other records of *C. americanus* during the same period (there was none during the entire autumn migration); (4) the birds' strong reaction to playback of the song of *C. euleri*; and (5) intense vocal activity which is more likely in *C. euleri* pre-breeding than for *C. americanus* during autumn migration. Voice and plumage characters reinforced the identification of these birds as *C. euleri*.

Overlooked specimen from Ecuador

While checking the bird collection at the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris (MNHN), OC examined *Coccyzus* specimens looking for specific distinctive characters and variation. The collection contained no *C. euleri* but 30 *C. americanus* from North America, the Antilles and northern South America. One (MNHN 1937-76; Fig. 2) from Ecuador and labelled '*Coccyzus americanus?* subsp.' instead showed characters consistent with *C. euleri*. Its wings had no trace of any rufous in the primaries, even on their inner webs. *C. americanus* usually shows prominent rufous in the wings (Hilty 2003, Restall 2006), which becomes paler over the primary- and greater coverts. However, in a few individuals (e.g. MNHN 1922-51) the rufous is restricted to the inner webs of the primaries and is hardly visible in the closed wing. It is, however, always present and conspicuous in the open wing, e.g. in flight. Narrow and inconspicuous rufous fringes to the greater primary-coverts of MNHN 1937-76 might indicate a juvenile despite the annotation '*♂ ad.*' in the Catalogue



Figure 1. Pearly-breasted Cuckoo *Coccyzus euleri*, Saut Pararé, Nouragues Nature Reserve, French Guiana, 9 August 2009 (Tanguy Deville / ECOBIOS)



Figure 2. Pearly-breasted Cuckoo *Coccyzus euleri*, specimen MNHN 1937-76 from north-west Ecuador, Collection Mammifères et Oiseaux, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris (Olivier Claessens)

Général. In any case, this is not a specific character of *americanus*, as in *C. americanus* this colour is never restricted to the covert fringes but extends mainly over the inner webs of the primaries becoming paler on the outer webs and the wing-coverts. Its breast was greyer than that of *americanus* specimens, which difference was slight but obvious. The breast colour in *euleri* is not always as dark as in some photographs or illustrations (M. Cohn-Haft *in litt.* 2009) making this character the least useful for identifying *C. euleri*. Nonetheless, a bird with a contrasting grey breast is probably this species, and in combination with other characters strongly points to *C. euleri* (M. Cohn-Haft *in litt.* 2009). MNHN 1937-76 is slightly but obviously smaller than most *americanus* specimens, with a noticeably slimmer body, although size and shape in specimens greatly depends on preparation techniques, making this an unreliable character. Measurements were as follows: wing 136 mm (chord) / 137 mm (stretched), tail 120 mm, bill depth 7.6 mm, bill length 18.5 mm (nostrils to tip), 21.3 mm (feathers to tip) and 27.5 mm (skull to tip). Wing length is longer than the range given by Banks (1988) and at the upper limit given by Payne (2005) for *C. euleri*.

The bicoloured bill is shared by both species, and eye-ring colour could not be judged. Ridgely & Greenfield (2001) mention that the latter is not a reliable character, which point merits further investigation. The tail feathers showed pronounced wear and were typical of a juvenile *Coccyzus* (Payne 2005). They were noticeably narrower and more pointed than those of *C. americanus* specimens examined, possibly all of which were adults; the undertail was duller than that of *americanus*, and the large pale terminal spots, which were narrower and elongate, appeared also duller and less 'neat'. The bird had extensive ochraceous on the belly, but this is due to the persistence of fat in the poorly prepared skin (K. Voisin pers. comm.).

This combination of characters identifies the specimen as a Pearly-breasted Cuckoo, which becomes the only *C. euleri* specimen held at MNHN and only the fourth published record for Ecuador.

The Catalogue Général at MNHN contains the following details regarding this specimen and the circumstances of its collection (translated): 'Collection of birds from Ecuador (Esmeralda area), bought from Mr Olalla, naturalist at Quito. *Coccyzus americanus*

(L.)? subsp. Adult male'. It was registered together with 170 other specimens probably collected in north-west Ecuador, such as Pallid Dove *Leptotila pallida*, Bronze-winged Parrot *Pionus chalcopterus*, Black-cheeked Woodpecker *Melanerpes pucherani*, Scarlet-backed Woodpecker *Veniliornis callonotus*, Red-rumped Woodpecker *V. kirkii cecillii*, Guayaquil Woodpecker *Campyphilus guayaquilensis* and Lineated Woodpecker *Dryocopus lineatus fuscipennis*. In Ecuador, *C. euleri* was known from two specimens, singles taken in prov. Esmeraldas (held at the Academy of Natural Sciences Philadelphia, ANSP 185132) and at Mindo, prov. Pichincha (now in the Mejía collection, Quito), and a sight record at Jatun Sacha, prov. Napo (Ridgely & Greenfield 2001; R. S. Ridgely *in litt.* 2008). The *C. euleri* specimen at MNHN thus constitutes an additional record for north-west Ecuador. The label states that it was collected at San Mateo, Esmeraldas, on 30 September 1936, indicating that the bird was taken pre-breeding. San Mateo (00°58'S, 80°50'W) is a coastal village south-west of Manta, in central Manabí (Paynter 1993).

The specimen's label makes no mention of age and the indication 'adult' in the Catalogue Général is erroneous, as the shape and colour of the tail feathers, and the dull tail spots, indicate that the bird is a juvenile (Pyle 1997, Payne 2005), as might also the rufous fringes to the primary-coverts. Sex was presumably deduced from a gonadal inspection, as there are no plumage differences between the sexes.

Berlioz (1937) reported an 'immature' male *C. a. americanus* collected at San Mateo, Esmeraldas, on 30 September 1936. He noticed 'obvious traces of immaturity on tail feathers' together with the 'total absence of rufous tinge on the underwing and on flight feathers', which he interpreted as being indicative of an immature. Although Berlioz did not mention the specimen's number, we are confident that he was referring to MNHN 1937-76, because its measurements, description, locality, date and collector ('a well-known professional collector from Quito') perfectly fit this specimen. It seems unsurprising that both its collector Olalla and Berlioz misidentified it as *C. americanus*, considering the rarity of *C. euleri* in Ecuador and the poor knowledge of the species' identification and taxonomy at that time.

The taxonomic status of *C. euleri* has long been controversial, complicated by its synonymy with *Coccyzus julieni* Lawrence, 1864. The latter, described from a Sombrero Island specimen, was often considered a subspecies of *C. americanus* (e.g., by Cory 1919). Although some earlier authors (e.g. Peters 1940) recognised South American *euleri* as specifically distinct from *americanus*, the '*euleri* / *julieni* / *americanus* complex' remained diversely treated until Banks (1988) showed that *euleri* and *julieni* were synonyms and should be treated as a species apart from *americanus*. The name *euleri* was then definitively established against *julieni* (ICZN 1992). The history of this case was synthesised by Willis & Oniki (1990). Thus, the label of the MNHN specimen '*Coccyzus americanus* (L.)? subsp.' also reflects the uncertain taxonomy of the time.

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