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Rediscovery of the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest

Redescubrimiento del Barbudito Azul Oxypogon cyanolaemus

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***Fotografía portada* / Cover photograph**
Blue-bearded Helmetcrest –*Oxypogon cyanolaemus* - Parque Nacional Natural Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. C. J. Rojas.

Conservación Colombiana *es publicada gracias al apoyo de nuestros donantes:*

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Editorial

In this edition of *Conservación Colombiana*, we are proud to announce the exciting news of rediscovery of one of the world's most strikingly beautiful bird species, the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxypogon cyanolaemus*. This long-lost hummingbird was found by two of Fundación ProAves' reserve staff, Carlos Julio Rojas and Christian Vasquez, representing an important story of grass roots conservation action in South America. We are humbly pleased that the authors have chosen the foundation's scientific journal to publish this story, given the interest of major international journals and world press that other claimed rediscoveries have attracted in the past (cf. Fitzpatrick *et al*. 2005).

The rediscovery of the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest, almost 70 years since the last record, gives hope for potentially avoiding an extinction which some thought had already happened. However, its situation is perilous and requires urgent attention.

In recent decades, several other 'lost' species have been rediscovered in Colombia, although none of them has been lost for as long as this one. Some of these species have subsequently become subject to well-established conservation measures, including the Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* (Salaman *et al*. 2007), Dusky Starfrontlet *Coeligena orina* (Krabbe *et al*. 2005) and Recurve-billed Bushbird *Clytoctantes alixii* (Laverde *et al*. 2005) all of which are now protected in ProAves nature reserves. It is hoped that populations of Colombia's remaining lost species, particularly Antioquia Brush-Finch *Atlapetes blancae* (last recorded in 1971: Donegan 2009) and Bogota Sunangel *Heliangelus zusii* (last recorded in 1909: Graves 1993) can also one day be located and protected. Fundación ProAves is keen to work with the National Parks authority and indigenous peoples to find a solution to the challenges of conserving remaining populations of this beautiful hummingbird.

We and the authors have decided, for now, not to disclose the exact observation locality, due to its remoteness and the potential effects that numbers of birdwatchers might have on the species.

We also felt that this important discovery should be shared immediately with the ornithological, conservation community and the world, so have brought forward publication of this edition of our bi-annual scientific journal from its scheduled May publication date. This has meant that some other manuscripts which had been pencilled in for this edition but which have not yet completed the review and editorial process will be held back until the October 2015 edition, *Conservación Colombiana* 23, is published.

Consejo Editorial, Conservación Colombiana

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Rediscovery of the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxypogon cyanolaemus*, a hummingbird lost for almost 70 years

Redescubrimiento del Barbudito Azul Oxypogon cyanolaemus, un colibrí perdido para casi 70 años

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Abstract
We present the first photographs in life of Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxypogon cyanolaemus*. This hummingbird species is endemic to high elevations of the Santa Marta mountains in Colombia. It was last recorded in 1946, despite various searches. Three individuals were observed in a remote part of the mountain range, in páramo that had recently been decimated by a fire started by local inhabitants. Urgent conservation action at this locality is warranted.

Keywords Conservation, Santa Marta mountains, rediscovery, Colombia

Resumen
Presentamos las primeras fotografías del colibrí el Barbudito Azul *Oxypogon cyanolaemus* vivo. Esta especie, es endémica de las elevaciones altas de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta en Colombia. Fue registrada por última vez en 1946 a pesar de varias búsquedas. Tres individuos fueron observados en un área remota de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, en un páramo recientemente quemado por habitantes locales. Se necesitan acciones de conservación urgentes en esta localidad.

Palabras clave Conservación, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, redescubrimiento, Colombia

Introduction
The taxonomy and conservation status of the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest, an endemic of the Santa Marta mountains of Colombia, were recently studied by Collar & Salaman (2013). They summarised the situation of the species as follows: "*Oxypogon cyanolaemus* appears to be in serious danger. Of 62 *cyanolaemus* museum specimens logged by Project BioMap (Biomap Alliance 2013) the most recent were collected in 1946 by M. A. Carriker (23 specimens held in USNM). There appear to be no records of it since that time. In February 2007 Niels Krabbe undertook a brief survey of the paramo on the southern slope of the Santa Marta Massif for Fundación ProAves, but no *Oxypogon* was sound recorded (Krabbe 2008) or reported (N. Krabbe *in litt*. 2007). Todd & Carriker (1922) noted that *cyanolaemus* was 'found very sparingly' and 'very shy', and also noted 'Bushes and shrubbery are scare on this paramo [Paramo de Mamarongo], hence the few birds found there', possibly indicating habitat degradation. Strewe & Navarro (2004) found a pair of the very rare Santa Marta Wren *Troglodytes monticola* at high elevations on Santa Marta but did not record *Oxypogon*. Luna & Quevedo (2012) recently carried out surveys at higher elevations in the Santa Marta mountains, also encountering *T. monticola* and finding important populations of *Ramphomicron dorsale* in remaining patches of subparamo, but similarly did not record *Oxypogon*." The species was subsequently declared Critically Endangered by BirdLife International (2015).

As a result of Collar & Salaman (2013) drawing attention to the plight of this species, we have been looking out for it in connection with our conservation work based at Fundación ProAves' Reserva Natural de Aves El Dorado. The reserve lies below elevations suitable for *Oxypogon* but is contiguous with the large national park, which covers higher elevations.

Methods
During a prolonged and particularly intense dry season in February 2015, National Park staff made us aware of an ongoing issue with fires being set by indigenous peoples across the Parque Nacional Natural Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Fig. 3). Due to a concern about the environmental impacts of these fires, we used some of our vacation time to explore the higher elevations of the mountain range and record the fires that were destroying fragile natural habitats (Fig. 6).

Observations
At 11:00 AM on 4 March 2015, during surveys of fires in high elevations (3,930 m elevation) of the Sierra

Nevada de Santa Marta some 14 hours by foot above ProAves' reserve, CJS saw a small bird move quickly past him and perch on a bush nearby. He took a quick photograph of it before it flew off. The photograph on the camera screen revealed the striking plumage of the long-lost Blue-bearded Helmetcrest.

We then decided to set up camp and for the next two days conducted observations around the area. We documented a total of three individuals of the Helmetcrest within three tiny scattered patches of habitat on steep hillsides and surrounded by the remains of burnt vegetation, all in an area of less than 10 hectares.

Figure 1. First ever photographs in life of the spectacular Blue-bearded Helmetcrest (*Oxypogon cyanolaemus*).

Oxypogon hummingbirds are typically closely associated with Frailejon plants (*Espeletia*). The sole endemic Frailejon species in the Sierra Nevada, *Libanothamnus occultus*, was sparsely present where we saw the hummingbird, with none in flower at this time. There were few surviving flower shrubs or plants where we located the species, but we did document and photograph feeding on four herbaceous and shrub flowering plants that are presently being identified.

Individuals clung to vegetation while feeding and also hovered. All were totally silent during periods of perching and feeding. However, a flight call broadly reminiscent of Green Violetear *Colibri thalassinus* was heard during prolonged direct flights across larger distances. Unfortunately, we were unable to make sound recordings of vocalisations.

Figure 2. Blue-bearded Helmetcrest (*Oxypogon cyanolaemus*) in low vegetation (same individual as Fig. 1).

Individuals were predominantly seen in the morning from 08:00-09:30 hours (after night-time frost had melted) and from 16:00-18:00 hours, before probably staying at a nearby roost. Between 9:30 to 16:00 hours, we suspect that individuals may have wandered across a larger area in search of flowers before returning to this key site. Unfortunately, other areas outside the 10 studied hectares of natural habitat were severely affected by burning and almost all natural vegetation except grasses was destroyed, so we suspect their flowering resources to be thinly distributed over a broader area of potentially hundreds of hectares.

Various photographs of the Helmetcrest were taken (Figs. 1-2). Collar & Salaman (2013) illustrated specimens of all species in the genus and analysed plumage differences. They considered *O. cyanolaemus* uniquely to possess a (narrowly white-bordered) glittering purplish-blue beard, dull greenish sheen on the crown-sides, brown-and-whitish mottled underparts, a white undertail except for dark distal edges and central rectrices and a relatively short crest. All these features are clearly visible from the photographs presented here. The photographs

presented here clearly match those of *O. cyanolaemus* specimens in Collar & Salaman (2013). Blue-bearded Helmetcrest is a highly distinctive species in its plumage and no other species in this genus is expected at the observation locality high in the Santa Marta mountains. There can be no doubt as to the identification based on the photographs presented, and that this long-lost species has finally been found.

Several pairs of the Critically Endangered Santa Marta Wren *Troglodytes monticola* were also present alongside the Helmetcrest. This species was itself only recently rediscovered (Luna & Quevedo 2012) and the discovery of a new locality gives further hope for its conservation.

Conservation issues

The highest elevations of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta were declared a National Park in 1964. Fifteen years later, in 1979, the park was declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Several indigenous reserves cover the mountain range, with approximately 50,000 indigenous people present, principally of the ethnic groups the Kogis and Arhuacos.

Figure 3. Fires being set across the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, nearby a Kogi farmstead.

Sadly, the survival of the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest hangs by a thread. The impacts of recent fire damage are everywhere to be seen around the site of its rediscovery, with many charred remnants of natural paramo plant species (Figs. 4-5). Local people allege that Kogi indigenous peoples have been setting fires and running pigs and cattle across the higher parts of the massif. It is crucial that fires are stopped immediately and that cattle and pigs are removed from the highest elevations of the Santa Marta mountains to allow the fragile páramo ecosystem to recover. If this is not done, this unique hummingbird and equally rare plants which comprise its habitat could become extinct.

Unfortunately, the situation for introducing practical conservation measures to protect this species is complicated, because indigenous peoples living in Colombia's national parks are afforded special rights to carry on their livelihoods. In contrast, over one million inhabitants of the dry, arid lowlands below the Sierra Nevada depend on the filtration and provision of water from its snow-capped mountains, páramo and montane forest ecosystems. Further degradation of the páramo by fires for livestock production not only endangers the survival of the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest, but could also result in further desertification and pollution impacting downstream human populations.

Figures 4-5. Environmental damage caused by forest fires, even affecting vegetation clinging to steep rocky hillsides above 4,200 meters elevation.

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta National Park has been considered the world's most important protected area for the conservation of threatened terrestrial species – rated across over 173,000 protected areas worldwide (Le Saout *et al*. 2014). The damaged habitats of the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest are already subject to the highest possible level of legal protection

in Colombia. The prioritisation of the region for conservation attention is already well-justified and legal protection are therefore already theoretically in place. Conservation efforts should therefore focus on environmental education and other community initiatives with the collaboration of conservation organisations, the National Parks authority, and indigenous peoples. Working with local communities to find solutions that protect their interests and livelihoods while beginning to protect and restore tracts of paramo habitat needs to be stressed. Further initiatives are needed to survey other remaining paramo patches for the Helmetcrest and Wren, to investigate their ecology and habitat needs and to find better-preserved habitat. We also need to understand better the farming practices of the Kogis in more detail and consider how these can be reconciled with conservation outcomes.

If all these groups understand better the importance of saving the Blue-bearded Helmetcrest and its habitats, it is possible that such collaborations could lead to better prospects for the future of threatened species of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta – the planet's most irreplaceable mountain for biodiversity.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 6: The authors searching for fires across the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.

Noteworthy bird records on San Andrés island, Colombia

Registros notables de aves en la isla de San Andrés, Colombia

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Abstract

A Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus* was observed at sea off San Andrés island, Colombia in January 2015. Various distant photographs were taken. It is discussed whether these photographs objectively allow identification for treatment as a first 'confirmed' national record. Noteworthy records on San Andrés from the same week are presented of Neotropical Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianum* and American Coot *Fulica americana*. All these birds were observed during a period of storms.

Keywords Vagrants, confirmed record, freshwater, coot, storm

Resumen

Se observó un Cormorán Orejudo *Phalacrocorax auritus* en el mar cerca la isla San Andrés, Colombia en enero de 2015. Se tomaron varias fotografías a distancia. Se discute acá si estas fotografías objectivamente facilitan la identificación de la especie para su tratamiento como el primer registro 'confirmado' para el país. Se presentan detalles de otros registros interesantes en el mismo periodo: Cormorán Neotropical *Phalacrocorax brasilianum* y Focha Americana *Fulica americana*. Todos estas especies, fueron observadas durante un periodo de tempestades.

Palabras clave Accidentales, registros confirmados, focha, tempestad

Introduction

San Andrés is a Caribbean island lying *c*.160 km east of Nicaragua, but forms a contiguous part of Colombia's national territory. The island, and neighbouring Providencia, are host to various endemic landbirds, some of which are afforded species rank. The islands have been the subject of several historic expeditions and studies (Cory 1887, Fisher & Wetmore 1931, Bond & Meyer de Schauensee 1944, Bond 1950, Paulson *et al*. 1969, Russell *et al*. 1979, Tye & Tye 1991). More recently, the island has emerged as an important area for long-term migratory monitoring programmes and bird conservation initiatives (McNish 2003, Salaman *et al*. 2008, Pachecho Garzón 2012). A number of new national records for Colombia have been recorded in San Andrés and its neighbouring island Providencia in recent years, particularly during the autumn migratory period, when unusual species can sometimes occur (Salaman *et al*. 2008, Pachecho Garzón 2012, Ward-Bolivar & Lasso-Zapata 2012).

Methods

We observed birds at various localities across the whole of San Andrés island from 6-9 January 2015, using observations, taking some sound recordings and photographs. Details of localities are set out in the species accounts under "Results" below. During 5-7 January 2015, a mild tropical storm affected the region, with force 5-6 easterly winds and interspersed heavy showers.

Results: Noteworthy Records

Neotropical Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*

We observed a Neotropical Cormorant flying low over Big Pond (12˚32'51"N, 81˚43'14"W), an inland lake, on 8 January 2015 at *c*.7am. It was accompanied by a female Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*. The pair flew in from the west, descending, and then departed east, ascending. The frigatebird came to the water surface to drink but the cormorant only circled the water body, coming in less close. The cormorant is illustrated in Fig. 1. It is clearly *P. brasilianus* on account of tail length and shape, its broad neck and the lack of an extensive gular pouch.

Although the occurrence of this species in San Andrés is widely cited, the only previous record appears to be that of McNish (2003), who published a photograph of unspecified location or date. None of the other previous studies cited in the Introduction includes any cormorant records and there are no historical cormorant specimens logged for San Andrés (Biomap Alliance Participants 2014). This is apparently the first record for the island with a documented locality and date.

Figure 1. Neotropical Cormorant over Big Pond, 8 January 2015. BH.

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*

On 6 January 2015, TD observed this species in the Bahia de San Andrés, on sea between the northernmost point of the marina and Decameron Aquarium hotel (12˚34.46"N, 81˚41.20"W). The location is on the north-east corner of San Andrés, close to the most easterly point of the island. The hotel comprises a series of round buildings on artificial islands, creating calm waters between the islands and adjacent marina point. When a heavy rain shower subsided at around 10 am, the cormorant was seen at close quarters (*c*.20 m distance). It was flushed and started to move gradually away, diving actively. An extensive yellow/orange gular pouch was clearly present, which was a little paler towards the neck. It had a relatively heavy bill, long and slender neck and bill, rounded head, a stubby, rounded tail and blackish mantle, wings and tail. The bird was identified immediately as an adult Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus* in winter plumage. The observer knows this species from 'twitching' the first Western Palearctic bird at Billingham, Cleveland, in 1989 (Williams 1996) and during more recent visits to Florida.

A photograph of the bird was taken using a smartphone (Fig. 2) and then later with a camera (Figs. 3-4). By the time the camera shots were taken, the bird was more distant, dived relentlessly and became increasingly distant, before rounding the small peninsula illustrated behind it in Fig. 3, and becoming out of sight.

Figure 2: Double-crested Cormorant on San Andrés, blurred photograph taken with phone. TD.

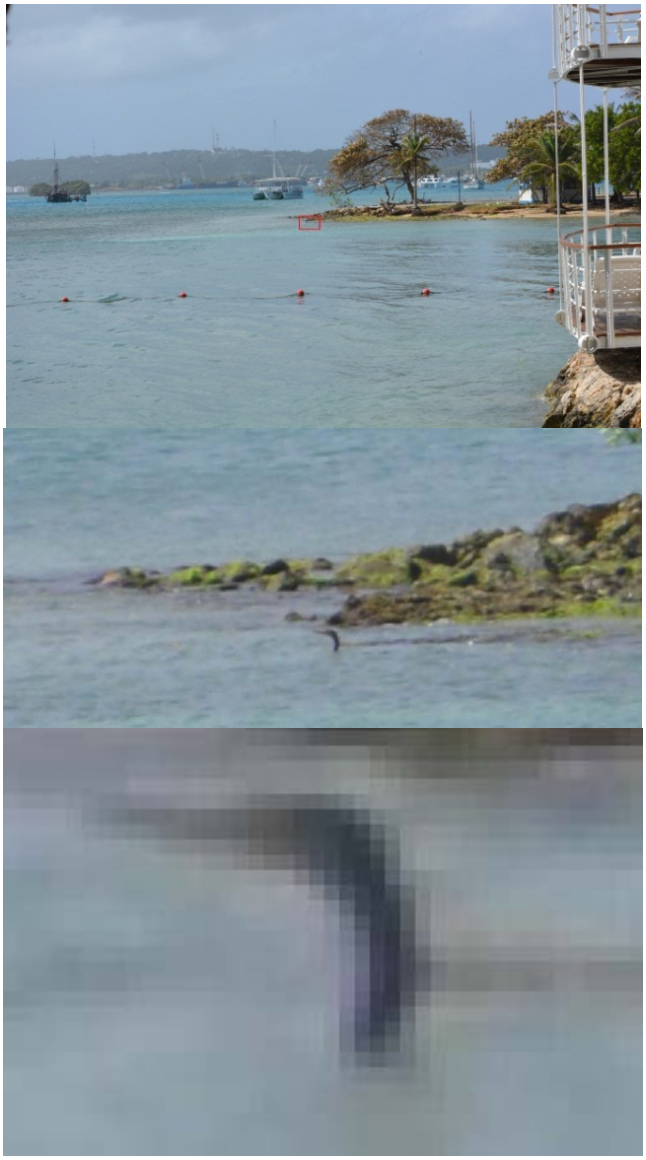

Figure 3: Double-crested Cormorant on San Andrés, showing location of bird and close up of the same image with two progressive expansions of the same. TD.

This observation constitutes the second published Colombian record and the first for San Andrés island. The only previous published record relates to a bird

observed at Represa Agua Dulce, Isla Providencia (13°20'35"N, 81°23'13"W) on 22 October 2001 by Paul Salaman and Robert Burridge (Salaman *et al*. 2008).

Figs. 2-4 clearly show an individual of the family Phalacrocoracidae, with a long, kinked black neck, upturned bill about the same length as the head and much of the body underwater whilst swimming. In Fig. 3, the bird is emerging from a dive, with only the neck and head visible. Other shots in Fig. 4 show the body of the same bird when swimming, demonstrating that this is not an Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga* (a species in which only the neck is held above water when swimming). Figs. 2-4 are too blurred to allow plumage details, tail length proportions or bare skin coloration to be shown clearly. However, some identification features are discernible from the photographs, all of which point to it being of *P. auritus* and not Neotropical Cormorant *P. brasilianus* (see e.g. Orta *et al*. 2014):

1. A long and heavy bill, even perhaps longer than average for *P. auritus* and most unlike that of (generally) shorter- and stouter-billed *P. brasilianus*.
2. The head shape is slender and gradually rounded, not 'bumped' towards the rear crown as often seen in *P. brasilianus.* Double-crested Cormorant only shows head tufts in the breeding season.
3. Brownish pixels (reflecting the orange/yellow gular patch) are visible in the close up image of the head (Fig. 3), at least from the bill to the mid-head (gular) distally, typical for *P. auritus*. In *P. brasilianus*, the gular pouch is more restricted.
4. The neck is rather long and slender for *P brasilianus* (see also Fig. 4).
5. Although both species occur in freshwater and salt water, *P. auritus* is more typically a salt water species, especially in the Caribbean region (Bond 1961).

This was not therefore the Neotropical Cormorant seen two days later and discussed above. Finally, Great Cormorant *P. carbo* is considered a possible vagrant to the Yucatán (Howell & Webb 1995) but is more robust, typically with a white gular pouch and sits higher in water.

For independent verification, two ornithologists closely familiar with both possible cormorant species were sent the photographs, with a note they were from Colombia but without further explanation or suggestion as to identification. Both thought the photographs most likely to depict a Double-crested Cormorant, for some of the reasons stated above.

With the growth of digital photography, there have been other instances of non-ideal photographs taken in the field of new or previously unconfirmed species for Colombia. In some cases, relatively hazy photographs have been enough to allow objective identification and treatment of new records as 'confirmed' first national records (e.g. Freeman *et al*. 2012's Worm-eating Warbler *Helmitheros vermivorum*; see Donegan *et al*. 2012), meaning that species need no longer be treated as "hypothetical" nationally. The photographs presented here are clearly a cormorant and various discernible features point to *P. auritus*, consistent with field observations. These materials may therefore be considered sufficient to comprise evidence of a confirmed record.

American Coot *Fulica americana*

We observed a flock of *c*.30-40 American Coots *Fulica americana* at San Luis pond (referred to as 'Dorna Pond' by Pacheco Garzón 2012; 12˚31'19"N, 81˚42'55"W) on 7 January 2015 (Fig. 5). They can be identified as of this species and not Caribbean Coot *Fulica caribaea* by their relatively unextensive white crown shields, which lack yellow markings. This species was apparently first recorded on the island by Paulson *et al*. (1969) in the winter of 1966-7 in large groups of up to 100 individuals. Although no locality was specified, the authors referred to ponds south of San Luis as being a most productive observation point for waterbirds, so our records likely refer to the same locality. McNish (2003) includes a photograph of unspecified date or location but the species is not reported in other subsequent ornithological studies or in historical collections (Biomap Alliance Participants 2014). The subspecies which occurs on San Andrés (*americana*) was not previously documented in Colombia by a photographic record of known locality and date.

Other migratory species

Various other migrants were recorded. None of these are new records for the island (Pacheco Garzón 2012). Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* (Big Pond, 8 January), Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularius* (Big Pond, 8 January and Aquarium, 6 January), Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* (rocky coast on north-west of island, 7 January), Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon* (flew past at at sea north of the airport, 7 January), Louisiana Waterthrush *Parkesia motacilla* (Big Pond, 8 January), Black-and-white Warbler

Mniotilta varia (Big Pond, 8 January), Yellow Warbler *Setophaga petechia* (Big Pond, 8 January), Magnolia Warbler *Setophaga magnolia* (scrub near *P. auritus* observation locality at marina, 6 & 8 January), American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla* (Big Pond, 8 January), Palm Warbler *Setophaga palmarum* (scrub near marina, 6 January), Tennessee Warbler *Oreothlypis peregrina* (Big Pond, 8 January), Grey Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis* (scrub near marina, 6 & 8 January) and Wood Thrush *Hylocichla mustelina* (scrub near marina, 6 January). All were presumably over-wintering.

Discussion

This minor influx of unusual waterbird species to San Andrés in early January 2015 was doubtless connected to the weather conditions. The Double-crested Cormorant appears to have been grounded by heavy rain on a promentory of the island, whilst the Neotropical Cormorant seems to have been lost, on account of its erratic movements. Recent studies on San Andrés (Salaman *et al*. 2008, Pachecho 2012) have often focused on the October migration period, when interesting "falls" of diverse passerines sometimes occur. In the mid-winter, some seabird and other non-resident species make further movements south, as is evidenced from the several recent records of Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*, Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* and Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* in northern Colombia in January (Salaman *et al*. 1998, Fagan & McMullan 2013). Periods of mid-winter storms may merit further observation efforts on the islands. Doubtless, many migratory or partially migratory bird species of the Caribbean region remain to be recorded on San Andrés.

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Figure 4: Other photographs of the same bird shown in Figs 2-3. These probably only allow identification to genus, but note the visible body in the water and relatively slender neck. TD.

Figure 5. American Coots, San Luis pools, 7 January 2015. TD.

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