

Neotropical Birding

THE BIRDING MAGAZINE OF THE NEOTROPICAL BIRD CLUB



Number 28 • Spring 2021

Neotropical Birding

BIRDING MAGAZINE OF THE NEOTROPICAL BIRD CLUB • NUMBER 28 • SPRING 2021

EDITORIAL

- 2** Welcome to *Neotropical Birding* 28
JAMES LOWEN

BIRDING SITES

- 3** Uruguay: gateway to Neotropical
birdlife
ADRIÁN B. AZPIROZ

FEATURE

- 17** Saving Galápagos landbirds
BEN STOCKWELL

NEW BOOK

- 28** Field identification of some look-alike
Serpophaga tyrannulets and Plain
Inezia from Argentina
MARK PEARMAN AND JUAN I. ARETA

FEATURE

- 35** Conservation action *does* prevent
extinctions: a Neotropical perspective
JAMES LOWEN

IDENTIFICATION WORKSHOP

- 45** The identification of Junin Grebe
Podiceps taczanowskii
DAVID FISHER

FEATURE

- 49** Global Bird Weekend – in the
Neotropics
PENNY ROBINSON

FEATURE

- 53** Saving the lord of the Andean skies
JAMES LOWEN

SPLITS, LUMPS AND SHUFFLES

- 60** Splits, lumps and shuffles
THOMAS S. SCHULENBERG

PHOTOSPOT

- 69** Photospot: Ocellated Crake in the
Brazilian Cerrado
DANIEL BRANCH

REVIEWS

- 72** Birds of Argentina and the
South-west Atlantic
RAYMOND JEFFERS
- 73** The birds of Cuba: an annotated
checklist
PETE MORRIS
- 74** Illustrated checklist of the mammals
of the world
JAMES LOWEN
- 75** All the birds of the world
JAMES LOWEN
- 77** Aves do Sudeste do Brasil
JAMES LOWEN

NBC NOTICEBOARD

- 78** NBC Noticeboard
CHRIS BALCHIN

CONSERVATION FUND

- 80** NBC Conservation Awards, 2019–20
ROB CLAY

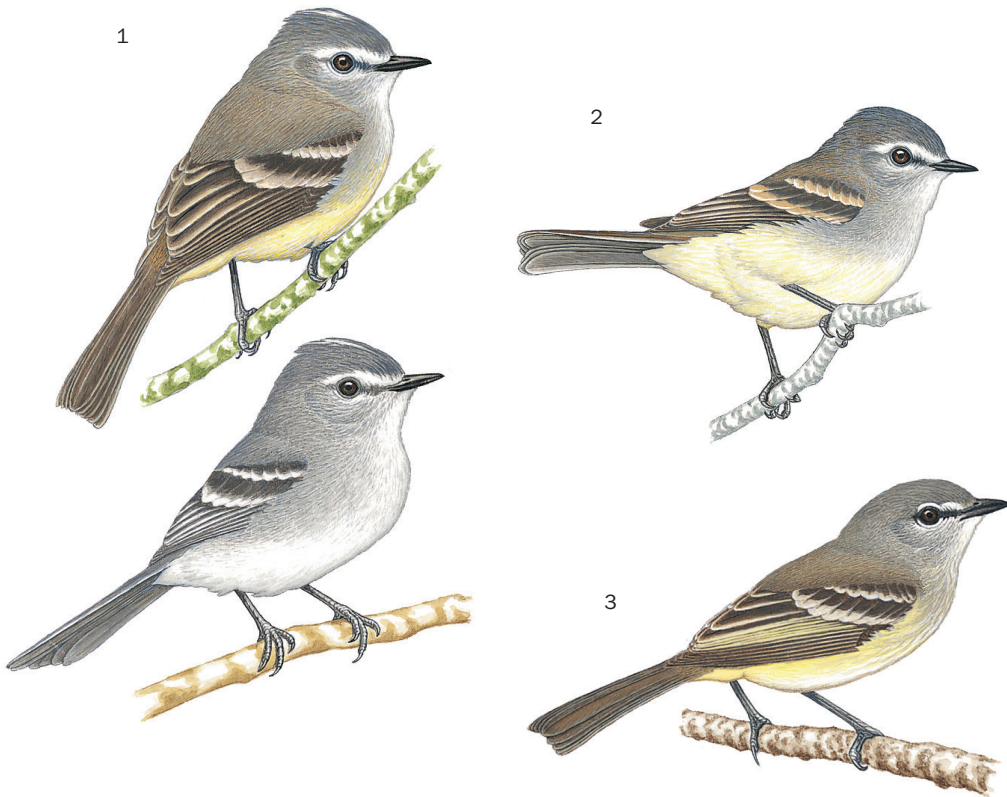
FRONT COVER

Singing male Chestnut Seedeater
Sporophila cinnamomea, west
of Guichón, Paysandú, Uruguay,
November 2009 (Adrián Azpiroz/Wild
Punta del Este). One of several globally
threatened birds that are readily
found in Uruguay's native grasslands
(p3). This *capuchino* also breeds in
neighbouring Argentina, a country that
features twice in this issue (p28, p72).

Field identification of some look-alike *Serpophaga* tyrannulets and Plain Inezia from Argentina

Mark Pearman and Juan I. Areta

The authors of the much-anticipated field guide to the *Birds of Argentina and the South-west Atlantic* help us with the identification of some tricky tyrant-flycatchers of southern South America.



1–3 Illustrations of the three species, reproduced from *Birds of Argentina and the South-west Atlantic* (Pearman & Areta 2020): **1** White-crested Tyrannulet *Serpophaga subcristata*: (top) subspecies *S. s. subcristata* and (bottom) *S. s. munda*; **2** Straneck's Tyrannulet *Serpophaga griseicapilla*; **3** Plain Inezia *Inezia inornata*.

Here we take a new and critical look at the identification of three open-country tyrant-flycatchers from Argentina and the wider Southern Cone – White-crested Tyrannulet *Serpophaga subcristata*, Straneck’s Tyrannulet *S. griseicapilla* and Plain Inezia *Inezia inornata* – that appear extremely similar in plumage. Seasonally, they also overlap with one another in various parts of their ranges, but their distributions have been woefully portrayed in the literature, causing many headaches. Each is relatively straightforward to distinguish by voice, yet they have many vocalisations, which adds to the confusion. Some behavioural traits also aid identification and are discussed in a final section.

Plumage and structure

White-crested Tyrannulet

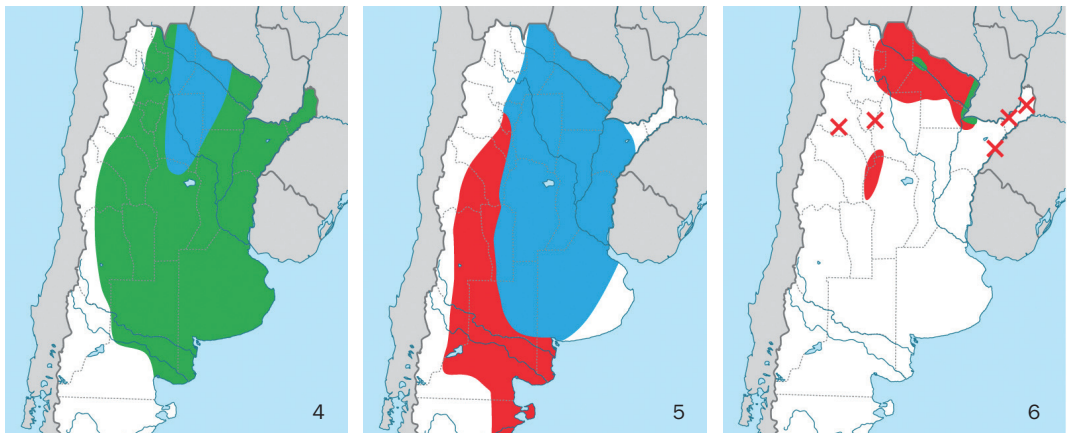
A very widespread species that we treat – both here and in Pearman & Areta (2020) – as being conspecific with ‘White-bellied Tyrannulet *Serpophaga munda*’. (This is in contrast to the South American Classification Committee or SACC, whose taxonomy is followed by this magazine, which currently allocates species status to *munda*.) We do so because they are vocally identical, readily respond to reciprocal playback experiments and because western–southern *munda* intergrades with eastern *subcristata* in a broad swathe running north to south through the humid Chaco, south to at least eastern Córdoba province, Argentina (Bó 1969, Straneck 1993; see also Krabbe 2015 and Fig. 10 below). Furthermore, a study has shown that they differ by

only 0.2% in the mitochondrial ND2 gene (Rheindt *et al.* 2008), indicating little genetic differentiation. Despite scepticism (Herzog 2001), Straneck’s (1993) results have stood the test of time and show that ‘White-bellied Tyrannulet’ should be considered conspecific with White-crested Tyrannulet.

Pure *munda* occurs in arid habitats and normally lacks yellow on the belly (although birds in fresh plumage may exhibit a very pale yellow wash to the lower belly) and also lacks olive on the back, so there is no confusion with Straneck’s Tyrannulet or Plain Inezia. However, intermediate White-crested (*subcristata* x *munda* intergrades) can look extremely similar to Straneck’s, at which point structural features and voice become crucial for correct identification. Pure white-bellied birds, and possibly also intermediate ones, apparently wander widely outside of the breeding season, but their movements are not well understood.

The yellow-bellied and olive-backed nominate White-crested Tyrannulet will soon become a familiar bird if one spends any time in eastern Argentina. It is mostly resident within its range, unlike the two confusion species below which largely undertake austral migrations. To identify White-crested Tyrannulet, look for:

- a semi-concealed, narrow to broad white coronal stripe;
- a peaked crown and semi-erectile crest; and
- a fairly strong yellow belly and olivaceous back (eastern *subcristata*) or a white to very washed-out and restricted yellowish lower belly (in fresh plumage) and grey back (western *munda*). Beware of intermediates over a broad area in central Argentina.



4–6 Maps of distribution in Argentina of the three species, reproduced from *Birds of Argentina and the South-west Atlantic* (Pearman & Areta 2020): **4** White-crested Tyrannulet *Serpophaga subcristata*; **5** Straneck’s Tyrannulet *Serpophaga griseicapilla*; and **6** Plain Inezia *Inezia inornata*. Key: green = year-round resident; blue = winter visitor; red = spring–summer resident.



7



8



9



10

7 The white-bellied subspecies of White-crested Tyrannulet *Serpophaga subcristata munda*, Cerro de La Virgen, outskirts of Salta city, Salta, Argentina, December 2019 (Jorge Quiroga). Note the crested appearance with a white coronal streak, grey back and clean white belly.

8–9 White-crested Tyrannulet *Serpophaga s. subcristata*: **8** Saladillo, Buenos Aires, Argentina, April 2008 (Miguel Angel Roda); **9** Parque Villarino, Santa Fe, Argentina, July 2019 (Horacio Luna). In both images, note the crested appearance with a white coronal streak, fairly strong yellow belly, olive back and 'normal' tail length. Excited birds can show a bifurcated crest with a full white centre, unlike Straneck's Tyrannulet *S. griseicapilla*.

10 White-crested Tyrannulet *Serpophaga s. munda x subcristata* intergrade, Las Acequias, Córdoba, Argentina, October 2020 (Ramiro Ramirez). Note the crested appearance with a white coronal streak, very washed-out yellow belly and 'normal' tail length. The back can be grey or show an olive tinge.



11



12



13



14

11–12 Straneck's Tyrannulet *Serpophaga griseicapilla*: **11** Reserva Natural Formosa, Formosa, Argentina, June 2014 (Juan I. Areta); **12** Área Natural Protegida Paso Córdoba, outskirts of General Roca (aka Fiske Menuco), Río Negro, Argentina, August 2012 (Ignacio Hernández). In both images, note the semi-erectile crest with some black and white feather bases but no coronal streak, olive back, paler yellow belly than nominate White-crested Tyrannulet *Serpophaga s. subcristata*, and particularly the short tail. Note the difference that light conditions or the comparative freshness/wear of plumage can make to the species's appearance.

13–14 Plain Inezia *Inezia inornata*: **13** Reserva Natural Formosa, Formosa, Argentina, April 2014 (Juan I. Areta); **14** Reserva Natural Formosa, Formosa, Argentina, October 2013 (Gabriel Núñez). In both images, note: the rounded crown and lack of a crest; that the supercilium does not extend behind the eye and ends in an eye-ring which is broken at the rear; and the yellow reaching sides of the breast plus subtle grey breast flammulations (which are not always present).

Straneck's Tyrannulet

This cryptic species was confused for decades with its allies until Roberto Straneck's pioneering bioacoustic work uncovered its existence. Despite some controversy on the application of its scientific name (Straneck 1993, Herzog & Mazar Barnett 2004, Straneck 2007), it is clear that the species deserves full recognition. It breeds exclusively in Argentina as far south as northern Patagonia, occurring throughout the *monte* desert (an ecoregion restricted to Argentina). Within its breeding range, Straneck's Tyrannulet overlaps only with the white-bellied subspecies *munda* of White-crested Tyrannulet, which is fairly easily distinguished (compare Figs. 7 and 11). The problem arises from April to October (and more rarely November/December) when Straneck's spreads out all across northern and central Argentina. During this period it overlaps with both taxa of White-crested Tyrannulet and also with Plain Inezia throughout the Chaco and in western Córdoba. To identify Straneck's Tyrannulet, look for:

- sparse black and white feather bases in the central crown, never forming a broad stripe;
- a very subtle peaked crown and semi-erectile crest;
- a pale, washed-out, yellow belly; and
- a comparatively shorter tail than White-crested Tyrannulet.

Plain Inezia

Also known (including by SACC) as Plain Tyrannulet, this species is very similar in plumage to both Straneck's Tyrannulet and nominate White-crested Tyrannulet. Structurally, it is a little more chunky and larger billed than both confusion species, and it is more sluggish than *Serpophaga*. Although often overlooked or misidentified, Plain Inezia is abundant in the Chaco (especially the dry Chaco) of northern Argentina. It is largely an austral migrant, being present from September to March but exhibits some pockets of residency, especially in riverine habitats. To identify Plain Inezia, look for:

- a rounded crown without any peaked or crested appearance;
- supercilium ends at the eye in a broad, but broken, eye-ring;
- black loreal line extends just behind the eye, breaking the eye-ring;
- yellow extends to the sides on the breast where it is brighter than on the belly;
- grey breast flammulations are diagnostic but not always present; and
- stouter and often marginally longer bill than *Serpophaga*.

Voice

Vocalisations provide the best assurance to identification in these little tyrant-flycatchers. Beware that all three species can be found in mixed-species flocks during the austral winter in northern Argentina. Plain Inezia is mostly a summer breeder in the Chaco region, but some may remain in winter, thereby overlapping with overwintering Straneck's and both subspecies of White-crested. At this time of the year, it is not uncommon to hear one species only to observe one of the others in the same flock, making it difficult to correlate vocalisations with plumage features.

Songs of white-bellied (*munda*) and yellow-bellied (*subcristata*) White-crested Tyrannulets, as well as intermediates, are a loud series of 5–6 (sometimes more) whistled notes, *tsil-tsil-tsil-tsil-tsil*, followed by 7–18 (sometimes many more) notes *cliclcl-cl-cl-cliclcl...* Calls include a rapid metallic rattle *TIRIRIP* and a high-pitched, very commonly heard, syncopated phrase *chip che-rip chep*. None of these vocalisations should cause confusion with Straneck's Tyrannulet, but note that the fast final segment of the song may recall a slow trill.

The little-known song of Straneck's Tyrannulet is given largely on its breeding grounds and seldom during the non-breeding season; it is a soft, high-pitched, rapid trill, generally preceded by 1–4 flat, high-pitched introductory notes *TWIE-TWI-tirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr*. The call is a relatively high-pitched *tee-trrrrrrrr* with a clear but short break between the introduction and somewhat descending fast trill. This can be heard mostly in winter, when the species overlaps with Plain Inezia.

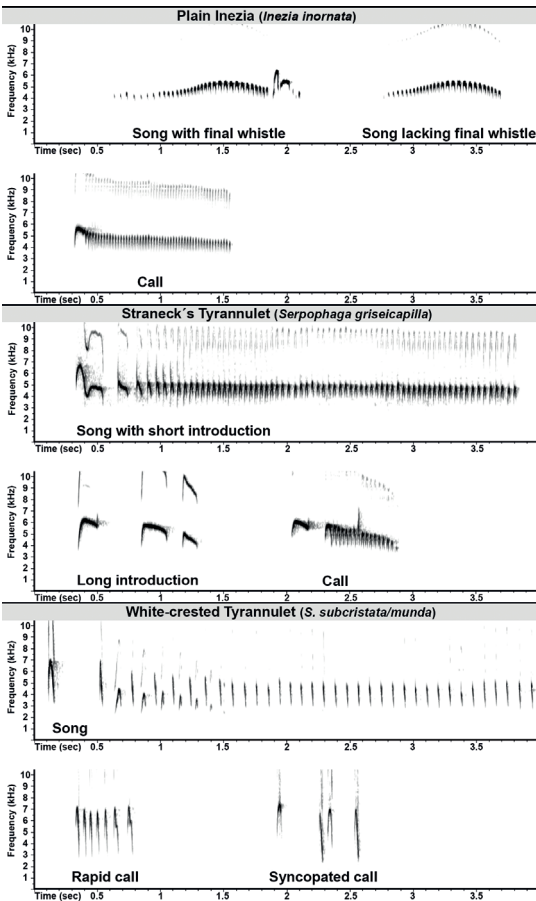
Plain Inezia's song is a rising and falling trill, frequently followed by an emphatic whistle *trrrrrrrEEEEu-tee*. The call is a fast *teeewrrrrrrrrrrrr...*, without a break between the introduction and evenly-pitched fast trill. It is heard mostly in winter, when the species overlaps with Straneck's Tyrannulet. Interestingly, the calls of the distantly related Plain Inezia and Straneck's Tyrannulet share an impressive similarity, suggesting perhaps some degree of convergence among them. From a birder's perspective, caution is advised mostly during the winter!

Behaviour

Both White-crested Tyrannulet and Straneck's Tyrannulet are furtive species that are always on the move while gleaning with sallies or perch-gleaning. It is difficult or impossible to distinguish

the two species on behaviour alone. Plain Inezia on the other hand is quite sluggish, and it spends a considerable amount of time looking upwards, with its head tilted diagonally. This is a useful identification feature.

15 Sonograms of song(s) and calls of Plain Inezia *Inezia inornata*, Straneck's Tyrannulet *Serpophaga griseicapilla* and White-crested Tyrannulet *S. subcristata* (reproduced from *Birds of Argentina and the South-west Atlantic*: Pearman & Areta 2020).



Final remarks

Very worn adults can be extremely drab and therefore trickier to identify than birds in fresh or moderately worn plumage. Wing-bars vary from white or whitish to buffy in adult White-crested Tyrannulet and Straneck's Tyrannulet, but are consistently white or whitish in adult Plain Inezia. Juveniles of all species have rusty wing-bars and are browner backed than adults, sometimes

showing a paler belly. Although we know more about plumages and distributions than previously, confident identification depends critically on vocalisations. Using the foundation laid out here, as-yet undiscovered identification criteria may be uncovered in the future when more photographic vouchers of sound-recorded individuals become available.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks go to Christopher Helm/Bloomsbury for permission to reprint maps, illustrations and sonograms from *Birds of Argentina and the South-west Atlantic* (Pearman & Areta 2020), and to the artists Jorge Rodríguez Mata and Aldo Chiappe. We also thank Gabriel Núñez, Ramiro Ramírez, Jorge Quiroga, Miguel Ángel Roda, Horacio Luna and Ignacio Hernández for providing photographs for this article.

REFERENCES

- Bó, N. (1969) Acerca de la afinidad de dos formas geográficas de *Serpophaga*. *Neotrópica* 15: 54–58.
- Herzog, S. K. (2001) A re-evaluation of Straneck's (1993) data on the taxonomic status of *Serpophaga subcristata* and *S. munda* (Passeriformes: Tyrannidae): conspecifics or semispecies? *Bull. Brit. Ornithol. Club* 121: 273–277.
- Herzog, S. K. & Mazar-Barnett, J. (2004) On the validity and confused identity of *Serpophaga griseiceps* Berlioz 1959 (Tyrannidae). *Auk* 121: 415–421.
- Krabbe, N.K. (2015) *Serpophaga [subcristata]* vocalizations. Accessed from <https://www.xeno-canto.org/article/189> on 20 November 2020.
- Pearman, M. & Areta, J. I. (2020) *Birds of Argentina and the South-west Atlantic*. London: Christopher Helm.
- Rheinhardt, F. E., Norman, J. A. & Christidis, L. (2008) Phylogenetic relationships of tyrant-flycatchers (Aves: Tyrannidae), with an emphasis on the elaeiniine assemblage. *Mol. Phyl. & Evol.* 46: 88–101.
- Straneck, R. (1993) Aportes para la unificación de *Serpophaga subcristata* y *Serpophaga munda*, y la revalidación de *Serpophaga griseiceps* (Aves: Tyrannidae). *Rev. del Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales 'Bernardino Rivadavia'*, *Zoología* 16: 51–63.
- Straneck, R. (2007) Una nueva especie de *Serpophaga* (Aves: Tyrannidae). *Rev. FAVE – Ciencias Veterinarias* 6: 31–42.

MARK PEARMAN

✉ megaxenops@gmail.com

JUAN I. ARETA

Laboratorio de Ecología, Comportamiento y Sonidos Naturales (ECOSON), Instituto de Bio y Geociencias del Noroeste Argentino (IBIGEO-CONICET), Rosario de Lerma (4405), Salta, Argentina.
✉ esporofila@yahoo.com.ar