

OBSERVATIONS ON THE NESTING AND DIET OF THE WHITE-CAPPED TANAGER (*SERICOSSYPHA ALBOCRISTATA*) IN EASTERN ECUADOR

Harold F. Greeney^{1,2}, Jose Simbaña¹, Kimberly S. Sheldon^{1,4}, Alan Craik³, & Robert Jonsson³

¹Yanayacu Biological Station and Center for Creative Studies, c/o Foch 721 y Amazonas, Quito, Ecuador. *E-mail:* revmmoss@yahoo.com

²Research Associate, Museo Ecuatoriano de Ciencias Naturales, Rumipamba 341 y Av. Los Shyris, Quito, Ecuador.

³Avestravel, P.O. Box 17-07-9219, Quito, Ecuador S.A.

⁴Department of Biology, University of Washington, Box 351800, 24 Kincaid Hall, Seattle, Washington 98195-1800, USA.

Observaciones sobre el nido y forageo del Tangara Caretíblanca (*Sericossypha albocristata*) en el este del Ecuador.

Key words: Nest, Andes, nestling, White-capped Tanager, *Sericossypha albocristata*.

The White-capped Tanager (*Sericossypha albocristata*) ranges from northwest Venezuela south through the eastern Andes to central Peru. Where present, they are conspicuous as their wide-ranging flocks move noisily through the canopy, often accompanied by caciques and jays (Hilty & Brown 1986, Isler & Isler 1999, Ridgely & Greenfield 2001).

On 15 January 2006 we discovered an active nest of White-capped Tanager along the Burmejo River (GPS 00°31'25S, 77°53'53W, 2000 m elev.), half way between Baeza and Cosanga on the road to Tena in the Napo Province of eastern Ecuador. The nest was placed in the crown of a 12 m tall tree fern (Cyatheaceae), which emerged from a 4 m high, dense thicket of *Chusquea* bamboo (Fig. 1). The nest was situated centrally over

the trunk where the fern fronds emerged, and was well hidden by the surrounding fronds. At the time of discovery, we were able to determine that the nest contained at least one well-feathered nestling (dull white was observed on the head). At this time, and until fledging, the vocalizations of the nestling(s) were very loud, two-note “tew-tew” calls, rivaling that of the raucus adults. Begging calls would begin upon arrival of an adult in the nest tree, and often continued for up to 10 min after the adults left.

During the following week, we visited the nest several times and made observations from a hidden position, roughly 30 m away. We determined that at least 4 individuals were bringing food to the nest; three adult plumaged males and one female. On 8 out of 11

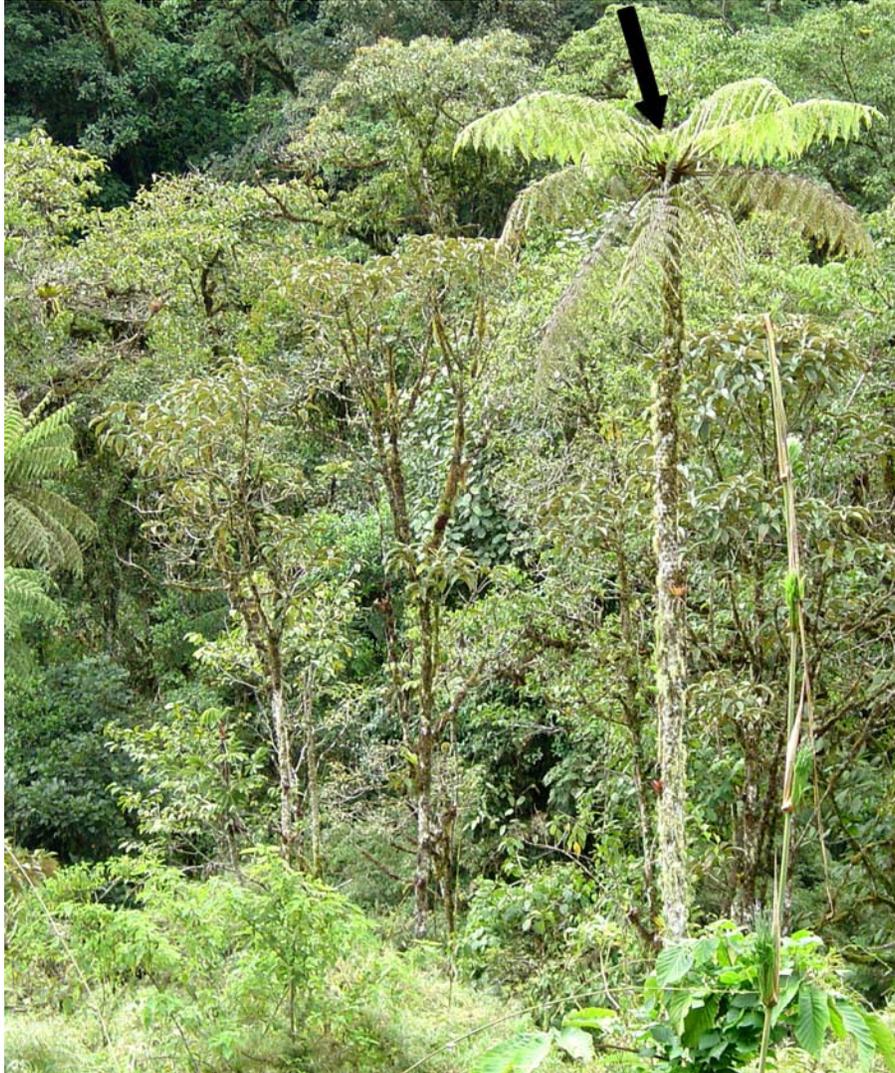


FIG 1. The nesting site of White-capped Tanager (*Sericossypha albocristata*) at the top of a tree fern (arrow) near Baeza in eastern Ecuador, January 2006. Photo by H. F. Greeney.

visits observed, only three adults arrived at the nest (two males and one female), always flying together to perch near the tops of trees 15–25 m from the nest, calling loudly. They then approached the nest individually, waiting until the previous adult left the nest. We were unable to determine food items brought by

adults, but they appeared remarkably uniform. No food item seemed to differ from the others, and all were fairly large masses of white, pulpy material. Based on 8 years of experience working in the area, we speculate that this was either the pulpy fruit of a common *Hedyosmum* (Chloranthaceae) tree, which

is a common food source of birds in the area (HFG pers. observ.), or large quantities of wasp larvae (see below).

On 22 January at mid-day, a single nestling was perched mid-way out on a fern frond adjacent to the nest and fed in this position by the adults. We believe the nestling likely fledged that day or soon thereafter. When we returned to collect the nest on 21 February, we found it destroyed by newly emerging fern fronds, and thus were unable to gather specific measurements. We were able to determine, however, that the nest was a large, rather frail cup of rootlets and long pale fibers woven loosely together and partially woven around the bases of adjacent fern fronds. The poorly defined lining was built of slightly finer, paler fibers. We estimate that the cup was 1012 cm in diameter on the inside.

Prior to the reproductive event described above, we made only two observations of foraging of White-capped Tanager, which is surprising given how often they are seen in the area. The first, on 26 March 2002, involved a flock of at least 6 individuals feeding on the fruits of *Cecropia* (Cecropiaceae). Subsequently, on 3 September 2004, we observed two individuals feeding on the larvae of a paper-wasp nest (Vespidae) situated 8 m above the ground in an epiphyte clump. Both individuals took turns tearing open parts of the nest to consume the fleshy white larvae inside. Upon our arrival, the wasp nest was mostly destroyed and when the birds left 15 min later, little remained of its original structure. The white material fed to nestlings strongly resembled what these wasp larvae looked like in the adults bills.

Isler & Isler (1999) report “fruit pulp, seeds, ants, wasps, bees, coleopterans, dipteran larvae, and a snail shell” as the stomach contents of seven White-capped Tanagers. Undoubtedly, adult hymenopterans are consumed while plundering a nest, and it is unlikely that the soft-bodied larvae would last

long enough inside the gut for proper identification. We suggest, therefore, that the destruction of wasp nests by White-capped Tanagers may be more common than the dearth of information in the literature would suggest. This is further supported by reports from several locals who informed RJ that “este pajarito come muchas avispas.”

Cooperative breeding has been reported for at least 10 species in 5 genera of tanagers (Skutch 1961, Willis 1961, Snow & Collins 1962, Sick 1985, Long & Heatch 1994, Isler & Isler 1999, Gelis *et al.* 2006). Our data show that White-capped Tanager should now be included among them. We hope this note encourages others to publish any observations on the breeding or foraging of this poorly known species.

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