

## LETTERS

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### COMMENTS ON THE FIRST NESTING RECORD OF THE NEST OF A SLATY-BACKED FOREST-FALCON (*MICRASTUR MIRANDOLLEI*) IN THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON

De Vries and Melo (2000, *J. Raptor Res.* 34:148–150) recently reported the first documented nest of a Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon (*Micrastur mirandollei*), based on their studies in Yasuní National Park, Ecuadorian Amazon. Certain details they reported differ markedly from the nesting habits and behavior that my colleagues and I observed for the Barred Forest-Falcon (*M. ruficollis*) (Thorstrom et al. 2000a, *Auk* 117:781–786) and Collared Forest-Falcon (*M. semitorquatus*) (Thorstrom et al. 2000b, *Ornithol. Neotrop.* 11:1–12) in northern Central America, from 1988–96. These differences are profound enough to suggest that the raptor species was possibly misidentified as a forest-falcon, or that the Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon displays some rather uncommon behavior within the genus of *Micrastur*.

De Vries and Melo (2000) reported on 14 September, and again on 23 October 1997, that the nesting forest-falcons had a changeover, implying an incubation and a brooding switch, respectively. I never recorded an incubation or brooding switch during 8 breeding seasons of nest observations of Barred ( $N = 70$  nesting attempts) and Collared Forest-Falcons ( $N = 9$  nesting attempts). For these two forest-falcons, the males' role was providing food to the incubating and brooding female and nestlings. During incubation, the male contact-called to the female upon his arrival to the nest vicinity with prey, and the female exited the nest to receive the prey item where she ate it. On rare occasions, the male entered the cavity while the female ate. The male stayed inside for several minutes either incubating, attempting to incubate or to look at the nest contents, and then he exited the cavity prior to the female's return (Thorstrom 1993, M.S. thesis, Boise State University, Boise, ID U.S.A., Thorstrom et al. 2000a, Thorstrom et al. 2000b).

De Vries and Melo (2000) suspected also that the female fed herself away from the nest and returned to take over incubation or brooding from the male. This does not agree with my observations (Thorstrom et al. 2000a, Thorstrom et al. 2000b) and those of Baker et al. (2000, *Ornithol. Neotrop.* 11:81–82). Only on very rare occasions did the female leave the nest during incubation to feed herself when the male was late with a prey delivery and hunger brought her off the nest (Thorstrom 1993).

De Vries and Melo (2000) describe an open nest constructed of small sticks and deep enough to hide the head of the incubating Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon. In contrast, all described nests for the genus *Micrastur* have been in cavities (Mader 1979, *Condor* 81:320) and all nesting attempts by both Barred Forest-Falcons and Collared Forest-Falcons observed by my colleagues and me in Central America were in tree cavities (Thorstrom et al. 1990, *Condor* 90:237–239, Thorstrom et al. 2000a, Thorstrom et al. 2000b) except the observation by Baker et al. (2000) of a pair of *M. ruficollis* nesting in a cliff pothole below canopy level. There is also a record of a Collared Forest-Falcon nesting in a ruined building (Cobb 1990, cited by Howell and Webb 1995, *The birds of Mexico and Central America*, Oxford Univ. Press, New York, NY U.S.A.). There is one mention of stick nesting by the Lined Forest-Falcon (*M. gilvicollis*) in del Hoyo et al. (1994, *Handbook of the birds of the world*, Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain), but no details were provided. Forest-falcons do appear to have some flexibility in their choice of nest sites, but they seem to prefer a site that simulates a cavity; i.e., trees or cliff potholes surrounded by forests.

The Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon has several described calls: one is a 10–14 nasal *aah* syllables and another a two part series “*ah, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, uah, uah, uah, uah*” (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989, *A guide to the birds of Panama*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ U.S.A.), a chanting series 8–13 nasal, thus contrasting with the 6 calls “*kui kui kui kui kui kui*” reported by de Vries and Melo (2000).

The authors' example of the Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*), a cavity nester that builds a stick nest, does not support their suggestion that the Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon is normally a stick nest builder. Also, their basis for suspecting the forest-falcons built the nest is somewhat vague, i.e., “We did not see the nest being built so we did not know if the falcons had taken an old nest made by another species, but we felt that this was unlikely because we did not see the nest on our regular censuses” (de Vries and Melo 2000). In Central America, forest-falcons were never observed constructing nests out of sticks or carrying nesting material (Thorstrom et al. 2000a, Thorstrom et al. 2000b). However, it is quite possible that forest-falcons can occupy a previously-built nest in a situation that replicates a cavity. There are six known species of *Micrastur*, and the Lined Forest-Falcon may represent two separate species (A. Whittaker pers. comm.), which would make seven. Among these, two (*M. ruficollis*, *M. semitorquatus*) are

known cavity nesters, three (*M. plumbeus*, *M. giticollis*, and the proposed new species) are suspected cavity nesters, and for one nesting details are unknown (*M. buckleyi*). Thus, the report by de Vries and Melo (2000), stating that *M. mirandollei* is a stick builder and nester, contrasts sharply with the large body of evidence from its congeners.

De Vries and Melo (2000) seemed uncertain about their identification of the species they were observing on the nest. They came to the conclusion that the birds they had observed were not Gray-bellied Goshawks (*Accipiter polio-gaster*) because of the white belly and yellow facial area of the supposed female, and the other bird, the supposed male, had buff below with both birds having long legs and three narrow, dirty white tail bands (de Vries and Melo 2000). I suggest that the characteristics that de Vries and Melo used to identify this nesting pair of raptors were not conclusive and that they have misidentified this species. The Grey-bellied Goshawk has dark back and crown, long yellow legs, white to gray belly and female larger than male (del Hoyo et al. 1994). Accipiters have long legs, faint tail bands, and females are larger than males. The size dimorphism was commented on by the authors "the first falcon was smaller and probably the male of the pair." Sexual size dimorphism of forest-falcons was very difficult to distinguish in the field (pers. observ.) because they are only slightly to moderately dimorphic (Thorstrom 1993). Size dimorphism is also a characteristic described for the Grey-bellied Goshawk and Bicolored Hawk (*Accipiter bicolor*) (del Hoyo et al. 1994). The authors did not give any further detailed characteristics of the color of the legs, back, eyes, and crown of the nesting raptors. The nesting behavior and habitat, vocalization, and plumage characteristics suggest that the nesting birds described by de Vries and Melo (2000) were possibly accipiters, either the Grey-bellied Goshawk or Bicolored Hawk.

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