

For March 2022 CHIRP

Wisps from the Cloud Forest: Goodbye winter, Hello spring!

By Jane A. Lyons

The normal pattern at Reserva Las Gralarias (RLG) is that by mid-February/early March the altitudinal migratory birds have returned to nest while the northern neotropical migrants such as Blackburnian Warbler, Swainson's Thrush and Broad-winged Hawk are still vacationing on the reserve. We now know that we have three individual Broad-winged Hawks overwintering at RLG plus, as a recent birder said, 'very many' Blackburnians now in their prime, brilliant, breeding season plumage. Unfortunately, the numbers of neotropical migrant passerines seen have declined significantly over the years in our entire area, so we assume that is due to low breeding success of migrant passerines in their summer breeding habitat.



One of our (at least) three overwintering individuals of Broad-winged Hawk heard and seen at all elevations at RLG.

Photo by Milton Delgado

I always wonder why the breeding season migrants show up in the first half of February since it is still very wintry, and spring seems a long time away. But by early March our three species of migrant hummingbirds - the Lesser Violetear being first to arrive around 10 February, then by the end of March, the Brown and Sparkling Violetears, as well as Crested Quetzal arriving - all can claim they were correct as March does in fact bring us springtime. It begins, then ends, then begins again, then ends again...then slowly we note sunny warm mornings and less rainfall. We begin to see lizards and butterflies sunning, birds soaring and swifts twittering overhead.



Left: Barred Hawk



Right: Brown Violetear

Photos by Milton Delgado

Normally seen and heard flying high overhead, in March two Barred Hawk were observed perched in different zones of the reserve. Widespread but in small numbers this impressive buteo was seen perched just above my car. Perhaps they will nest at RLG?

Our earlier winter nesters include most of the larger species such as Powerful Woodpecker and Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan which by March are mostly finished caring for their recent offspring. The toucans are now just hanging around our banana feeders enjoying their turn at vacation.



Photo by Milton Delgado

By March the springtime nesting birds begin a frantic search for the perfect moss for their nests, seemingly aware that drier weather (and less moss) is on the way, so they must hurry. This year we have been surrounded by two species in different genera of expert nest-builders, both abundant and widespread but dependent on a specific habitat type, i.e., with plenty of nest-worthy moss: numerous Gray-breasted Wood-Wren (*Henicorhina leucophrys*) which have nested along our walkways for many years, and now also a clan of Sepia-brown (or Sharpe's) Wren (*Cinnycerthia olivascens*) also nesting around our patios and currently on their third nest.

The wood-wrens build their nests as a pair, male and female working together draping moss on a branch and eventually adding the well-hidden nest chamber below. They scurry around in the undergrowth much like mice then zip up to their nest site at about 1-2 m high. The pair is quite attentive to the nest and nestlings, but while at the nest all are so completely quiet that I almost always think the nest must be empty until during one late afternoon the young will fledge and scatter everywhere noisily, giving the

parents immense cause for concern as they chatter loudly to collect their young back together and quickly disappear into the undergrowth.



Adult Gray-breasted Wood-Wren in our garden

The Sepia-brown Wren (Sharpe's Wren) (*Cinnycerthia olivascens*) nesting regime is quite different. The males call very loudly and incessantly at 6.30am. This is their 'call-to-work' after which a group of some 5 individuals joins the leader and heads toward their current building project. I call them the "building crew". Each individual collects the perfect moss or stick or leaf, and then carefully, making no noise, one individual wren at a time will zoom up along the tree trunk or sneak quickly along nearby vegetation to the top of their nest, insert in the appropriate place the moss or leaf it is carrying, and then will drop down and flit away as the next individual flies up and does the same thing. They also rob old wood-wren nests of almost all the nest material and insert that into their nest. The building crew's nest ends up being the size of a basketball, not perfectly round but a rather large squarish structure made of dark moss and looking like just a big blob of moss. There is a barely visible nest hole which leads to the actual nest chamber at the bottom of the nest. After about an hour of morning construction work, the building crew heads out to feed and then is called back by the foreman around noon to work more on the nest. They actually construct two nests at once. Some say that one is a 'dummy' nest, but I find it hard to think these birds would waste so much effort on building two nests and think perhaps one is where the construction crew stays at night or perhaps is even for a second female or maybe visiting relatives. Once the eggs are laid and the female incubates them, select individuals become the feeding crew, again, sneaking quickly through the vegetation one at a time taking food into the nest. These impressive nests are built in fairly open vegetation between 2-5 m above the ground. Such cooperative breeding species are known among many families of birds and in many cases the helpers at the nest are in fact offspring from previous years.

Wrens in general are known as superb singers and manic nest builders, and Sepia-brown Wrens are prime examples of both. This Sepia-brown Wren (below) is seen in its favorite mossy habitat eyeing which clump of moss to carry to the group's nest and another one is perched briefly next to its clan's nest.



Photos by Milton Delgado



A completed nest of a clan of Sepia-brown Wren. The nest chamber entry hole is visible.

Photo by Jane A. Lyons

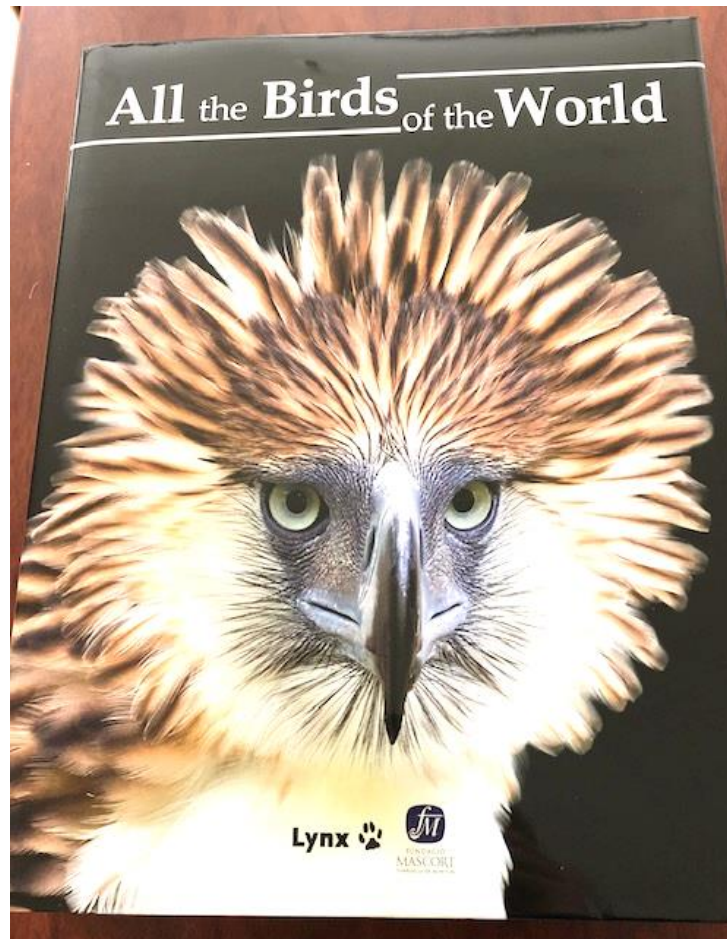
On the other hand, some of our other springtime nesters such as the hummingbirds need only one female that weaves a few sticks, moss and nest lining material of something soft and dry such as tree fern scales to make a perfectly adequate nest where she lays, protects and rears her two eggs – with no help from anyone. Also beyond our manic and noisy wrens, March brought us much other bird activity, including the elusive Olivaceous Piha (*Snowornis cryptolophus*) observed at our lower elevation Santa Rosa site and actually heard making its enigmatic half-syllable call of “urk”. This song-less immobile species of cotinga is basically the exact opposite of our wrens.



Olivaceous Piha

Photo by Milton Delgado

Also, in March I finally received my copy of “All the Birds of the World” by Lynx Edicions headquartered in Barcelona, Spain. My original copy fell victim to a Covid-19 broken supply chain and disappeared somewhere between Switzerland and Belgium. However, I did finally receive my replacement copy, and the book is well worth waiting for as it is stunning with superb artwork, maps, up-to-date taxonomy and information. It has 967 pages and weighs 8 pounds and is currently out of stock but will be reprinted in late April. Anyone wanting to purchase a copy can use one of my coupons with a 10€ discount. Just let me know and I can send you the details.





Also, Happy Birthday! to Pumpkin in March 2022, our long-time resident Velvet-purple Coronet still guarding his feeder and his corner of the garden since arriving as a fledgling in March 2011.

Photo by Jane A. Lyons

By late March life felt almost back to normal with numerous birding groups as well as field researchers finally back in the field.



It was good to have guests regularly at RLG – fully vaccinated and mask-free, and happy to breathe our very clean and oxygen-rich cloud forest air.

Photo by Milton Delgado



We enjoyed a visit from key researchers of the Swiss-sponsored two-year project studying hummingbird-plant interactions at RLG and other sites in the northern Andes. They enjoyed the easiness of watching hummers at our feeders as well as our now-famous coffee and homemade banana cake.

Photo by Jane A. Lyons

Intrepid birders, after 9 days of birding the cloud forest, finished their tour with a Covid test at the airport clinic followed by a day of spectacular paramo birding face-to-face with the glacier at Antisana NP.

Photo by Milton Delgado

