

Exciting Sightings

By Jane A. Lyons

I have been fascinated by potoos for a long time. I recall as a child visiting a zoo with my parents (in Houston, I think) where I saw a Frogmouth (not really a potoo but possibly related). The Frogmouth stood motionless on the floor of its large enclosure, looking much like a ceramic statue. As I watched, a zookeeper came into the enclosure, walked up to the Frogmouth and tossed a dead white mouse into the bird's mouth, which opened for about 2 seconds and then closed. The bird never moved anything else, and the zookeeper turned around and walked out. Holy moly, I remember thinking to myself. What was that??!

Many years later, in the late 1980s, on various birding trips around Mexico, we would go out at night to drive along the fields and roads spotlighting for birds and mammals and especially scanning the many fenceposts to try to find a potoo. The Northern Potoo there and found in much of Central America was described as having eyeshine that looked like "burning coals". I remember vividly the first one we saw and, indeed, its eyeshine was stunning and looked like huge florescent red-orange eyes staring at us in the darkness. In Venezuela in 1991, I heard my first Common Potoo song in the hotel parking lot in Maracay, a long, loud, sad and unforgettable song. I saw from about six feet away the endemic subspecies Jamaican Potoo at Marshalls' Pen in Mandeville, Jamaica. I have seen 6 of the 7 extant species of potoo, including the Long-tailed Potoo at La Selva in Ecuador, the really weird Rufous Potoo at Gareno in Ecuador and the Andean Potoo both in Ecuador and along the Manu Road in Peru. The Common Potoo and the Great Potoo are found throughout much of South America. I still 'need' to see the White-winged Potoo found in remote zones of Amazonian Brazil and Guyana. Most of the potoos I have seen have been perched either on top of a tree stump or a fence post. Only once have I seen one actually fly.



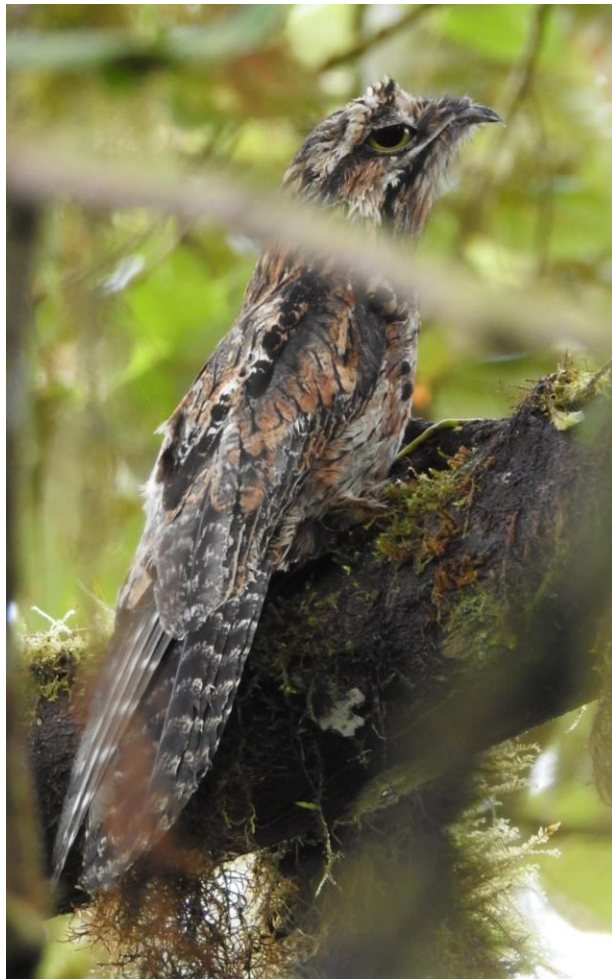
Rufous Potoo, 2008



Andean Potoo, 2008

Photos by Jane A. Lyons

Potoos are a very ancient lineage, with fossils some 25 million years old having been found in France and Germany. Now found only in the Neotropics, the family Nyctibiidae contains only one genus *Nyctibius* with seven species. Research has not been able to determine exactly how, or even if, potoos are related to nightjars, oilbirds and frogmouths. The general consensus is that the current seven potoo species are very old and exceedingly divergent from each other and from all other families. Currently all potoo species are placed in the same genus although the genetic divergence within this genus is considered greater than divergence normally found between genera and even between families. And in fact, potoo species divergence is quite likely the greatest genetic divergence known within any single genus of birds, something that seems quite odd given how similar each potoo species seems to us humans. This means that any of the current seven potoo species could be designated a separate genus at some point, given the appropriate research. And the related importance of this is that perhaps there could even still be undescribed cryptic species and multiple genera of potoo. Confirmed records from Nariño in southwest Colombia, i.e., the Chocó bioregion, of the Long-tailed (Amazonian) Potoo, coupled with only minimal long-term observations and field research in this large area, make it at least possible that a second potoo species could exist in the highly biodiverse and endemic-rich Chocó bioregion.



A Common Potoo at our upper Santa Rosa site at 2260 m elevation. This beautiful potoo flew in to a branch and stayed warily watching us. It is exhibiting its ‘stretched-upwards fairly disturbed’ pose.

Photo by Milton Delgado, 2021.

Five of the seven known species of potoo occur in Ecuador, but only one, the Common Potoo, is found at Reserva Las Galarias (RLG). This species is sometimes called the Gray Potoo, although ours all seem to be some shade of brown. We know of four regular nesting territories of the Common Potoo at RLG.



Adult and chick at RLG at 2068 m elevation. Potoos are monogamous, and both female and male potoos care for their one chick. Here both chick and adult are in their 'fairly relaxed undisturbed' pose.

Photo by Milton Delgado, 2019



Looking very much like a young Barn Owl, this is the same potoo chick, several weeks older. Note its relaxed pose, not stretched upward. Its eyelid is slightly open, although potoos have slits in their eyelids allowing them to see even when their eyelids are fully closed.

Photo by Jane A. Lyons, 2019

Is this an owl or a potoo?



Photo by Mauricio Ruano, 2019



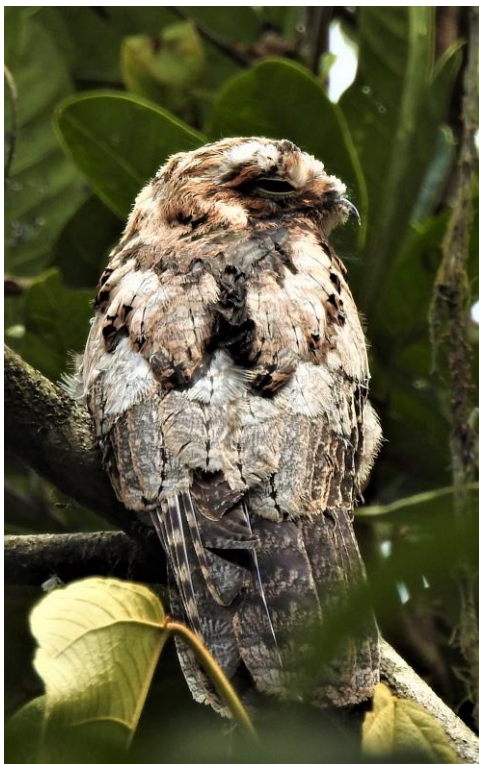
At first I thought it was a young Great-horned Owl, a species not found in Ecuador.

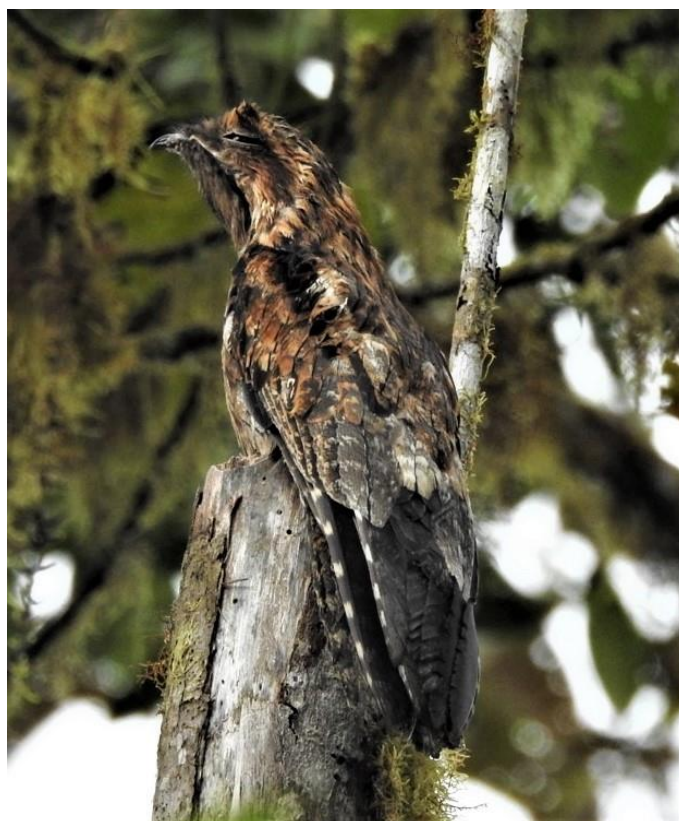
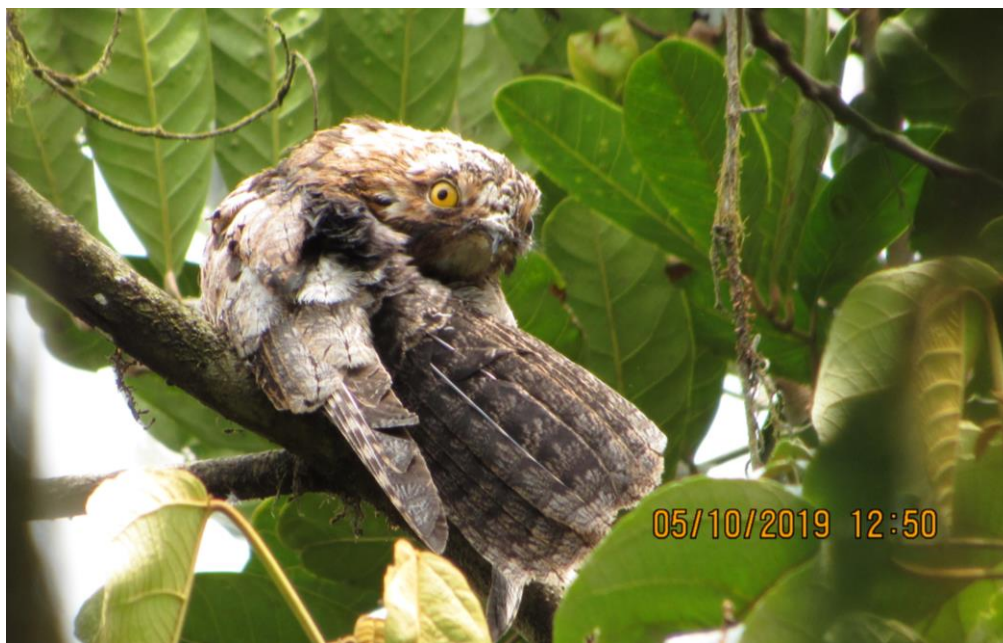
Photo by Milton Delgado, 2019



A very nice series of photos of a juvenile Common Potoo behind our guest house, actively preening at mid-day. This is likely the same bird as the chick on the tree stump.

Photos by Mauricio Ruano





Adult Common Potoo, likely parent of juvenile above

Photo by Jane A. Lyons



Nestling Common Potoo along Guan Gulch Trail at RLG in 2015.

Photos by Jane A. Lyons



Adult with chick under its belly feathers

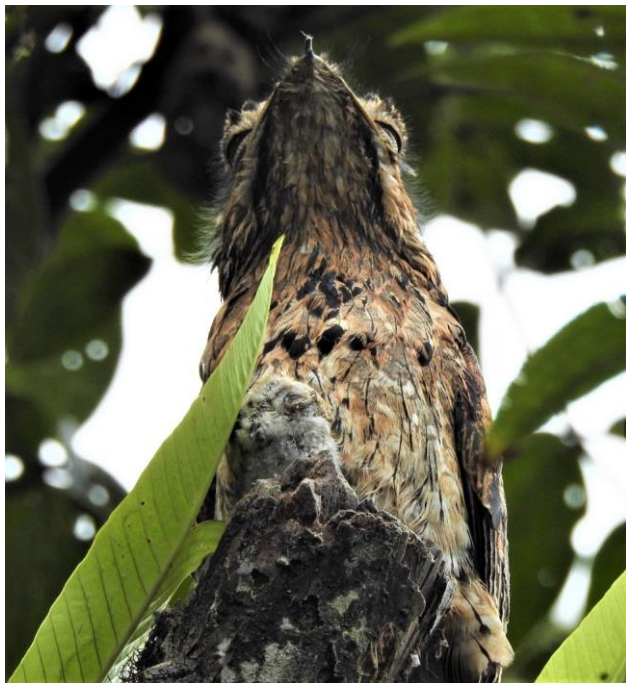


Adult and same chick at upper Santa Rosa nest site at RLG showing 'very alert disturbed' pose, with body and bill stretched upwards.

Photos by Jane A. Lyons, 2020.



Adult leaning against tree trunk with chick under belly feathers.



Photos by Milton Delgado, 2020



Common Potoo on upper Santa Rosa nest site, showing fairly relaxed pose but with eyelid open just a bit to watch us.

Photo by Milton Delgado, 2020

It is always a privilege to be able to watch a bird's nesting behavior but especially so for secretive nocturnal species such as the strange and fascinating potoos.



References:

Cohn-Haft, M. 1999. "Family Nyctibiidae (Potoos)". *in* del Hoyo, J.; Elliot, A. & Sargatal, J. (eds). Handbook of the Birds of the World. Volume 5: Barn-Owls to Hummingbirds. Lynx Editions, Barcelona.

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