

BANDING IN THE SWAMP FORESTS OF PERU: BBBO DONATES NETS TO STUDENT RESEARCH



Up at 4:30. It will still be dark for another hour and everything is quiet save the irregular patter of water droplets falling from moisture laden leaves.

Having eaten a quick bowl of oatmeal I sling my daypack over my shoulder and head off down the trail at a quick gait worried I will not reach my study site before day break. I have 3 km to cover and as I am alone walking down these dark trails, my mind easily wanders towards thoughts of stalking jaguar. The start of the dawn chorus brings a welcome distraction with the first Blue-crowned Motmots beginning their repetitive baritone duet, “whoop whoop...whoop whoop...” They are quickly followed by the first woodcreeper rattles and toucan yelps until, finally, the whole forest is awake, the sun has broken through the canopy, and I find myself deep within a palm forest, opening my nets.

Exploring this habitat is a challenge as this palm forest is, in fact, a swamp. Set about a half meter below the surrounding floodplain forest, the perpetual standing water and subsequent decomposition of fallen palm fronds creates a harsh ‘blackwater’ environment that

keeps the floral diversity very low. Within minutes of slogging through a swamp, your pants are muddy beyond bleaching. If you do not carefully test the path in front of you for deep spots, your boots will soon be flooded.

Looking at the habitat for the first time two summers ago, I was intrigued. There were descriptions of the Peruvian avifauna found in terra firme forest, floodplain forest, river islands, and *Guadua* bamboo. Yet here was a discrete, extensive (up to 10 square km in area), and distinctive habitat of which almost nothing was documented. I had the opportunity to work in southeast Peru again this past summer. The site of this field work was Los Amigos Research Station where I assisted a graduate student in a raptor toxicology study for the first half of the summer. Of course, working with live Neotropical raptors is exceedingly interesting and exciting work but the field session ended in early July and my classes

didn't start until late August. What is an aspiring Neotropical ornithologist with a growing interest in palm swamps to do for the remainder of his summer? Before I left for Peru in the spring of 2007 I had considered this question and decided that I would use that time to document the avifauna of these palm swamps. Braddock Bay Bird Observatory helped me immensely to this end, generously and on short notice, donating a set of their old mist-nets which were essential to my methodology.

It is now 7:00 a.m. and I am just finishing my first net check. I have erected 11 nets in a straight line through a portion of the swamp with a fairly closed canopy. The first net check brought in a female Fork-tailed Woodnymph (a hummingbird), three Ochre-bellied Flycatchers, and four female White-bearded Manakins. During this first check I heard something reminiscent of a pig snorting very close to the lane. At first I thought it may be a tapir, the largest mammal in South America. While not particularly dangerous, this ungulate can reach 700 pounds, so disturbing one did not seem the most prudent course of action. I proceeded cautiously along the lane, peering into the vegetation to get a look. Much to my surprise, there was not a 700 pound ungulate but a 20 gram male White-bearded Manakin in full display. These small birds have modified secondaries that they snap together over their backs to create a variety of crackling and snorting noises, much to the interest of female manakins.

When not processing birds caught in the nets, I am always taking note of birds I observe foraging in the swamp. Yet, in contrast to the surrounding terre firme and floodplain forests, observations are at a premium as bird activity seems to be low, even this early in the morning. Of the few birds that I do regularly record, the most interesting is the Point-tailed Palmcreeper. This species is closely related to the neotropical foliage-gleaners and woodcreepers and is completely dependent on large stands of *Mauritia flexuosa* found in this swamp. It is a striking bird to be sure with rich chestnut on the back, wings, and tail, streaked black and white on the head which extends down the throat to the vent, and a long, sharp silver bill. It resides exclusively in the palm fronds of the swamp's canopy, probing into the crevices of the crowns and dead hanging fronds. Its call is a distinctive ringing rattle which is most often given in a duet with its mate.

Though I will never catch this distinctive denizen of the swamps, the mist-nets provide me with a steady flow of birds (and the occasional bat), and 17 days later I have clocked 1,103 net-hours from two different palm swamps with 200 captures

representing 43 species. The most common species captured were White-bearded Manakins, Band-tailed Manakins, and Ochre-bellied Flycatchers. Of these, it appears that White-bearded Manakins, at least in southeastern Peru, are confined to the understory of palm swamps. This pattern is likely due to competition in other habitats forcing these manakins into the palm swamps, rather than due to any sort of specialization like that exhibited by the palmcreeper.



Now, back in the frozen north, I am comparing the diversity of my mist-net capture data to similar mist-net samplings from the surrounding habitats at Los Amigos Research Station. This has been the most thorough study to date on the birds residing in Peruvian palm swamps and has encouraged me to further delve into questions of habitat preference of Neotropical birds.

I am very grateful to Braddock Bay Bird Observatory for providing me with mist-nets and thus for the opportunity to focus my passion for the Neotropics on my own research project. I would especially like to thank David Bonter and Betsy Brooks for coordinating, on short notice, the use of BBBO's mist-nets.

- Glenn Seeholzer ♦

Previous page: Cornell University student Glenn Seeholzer tends to mist nets in the swamp forest of Peru. Above: A Buff-throated Woodcreeper, photo by Glenn Seeholzer.