

New occurrences of *Melanerpes cactorum* (D'Orbigny, 1840) (Aves, Picidae) in Brazilian territory.

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Resumo

Melanerpes cactorum (d'Orbigny, 1840) (Aves, Picidae) foi observado a 24 abr. 1986 e 27 maio 1989 no extremo sul do Pantanal Matogrossense, Brasil, na mesma estrita região da única observação da espécie no Brasil, a 28 out. 1958. Os autores sugerem que a espécie tem uma pequena população residente no Brasil centro-ocidental, no limite oriental de sua distribuição.

Unitermos: Aves, Picidae, *Melanerpes cactorum*, distribuição, Brasil, Pantanal Matogrossense, comportamento.

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Summary

Melanerpes cactorum (d'Orbigny, 1840) (Aves, Picidae) was observed on 24 April 1986 and 27 May 1989 at the extreme south of the Pantanal of Mato Grosso do Sul State, Brazil, at the same region of the only previous record of the species in Brazil, on 28 Oct. 1958. The authors suggest that the species has a small but resident population in the Central Western Brazil.

Key words: Aves, Picidae, *Melanerpes cactorum*, distribution, Brazil, Pantanal of Mato Grosso, behaviour.

On 28 October 1958 two individuals of *Melanerpes cactorum* (d'Orbigny, 1840) (Aves, Picidae) were collected at Miranda Estancia, State of Mato Grosso do Sul, Central Western Brazil, (Sick, 1961; Aguirre & Aldrichi, 1983; Aguirre, 1984). The species had not been recorded in Brazil until then. A third member of the group was shot but not recovered. The specimens were deposited in the collection of the Museu da Fauna (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Aguirre & Aldrichi, 1983): BRASIL, Mato Grosso do Sul, Fazenda Miranda Estancia, Miranda, 28 X 1958, A. C. Aguirre col.: male, MFRJ 1602 and female, MFRJ 1603.

In consequence of that discovery, Schauensee (1966) and Pinto (1978) listed the species as occurring in Brazil. The nearest museum-documented occurrence found in literature refers to three specimens from Puerto Guarani, Paraguay, distant about 220 kilometres south-western of Miranda Estancia (Costa, 1949).

On 24 April 1986 the authors, looking for birds at Estancia Caiman (a 52,000 hectares subset of the original 250,000 hectares of Miranda Estancia; Almeida et al., 1986), observed two individuals of *M. cactorum*, half hour before the night-fall and about six metres high on a vertical trunk in a dense savanna. The birds flew off immediately. The site is about 56° 25' W and 19° 57' S.

The landscape surrounding the sighting place, named **Pantanal**, is a very flat plain about 100 m a.s.l., flooded annually from December to March (or to May, depending upon the year), with a marked drought season from April to October.

The savanna vegetation presents tracts of inundable thickets of shrubs, trees and palms (Arecaceae, mainly the slender, high-trunked *Copernicia australis* Becc., isolated or in groups and *Acrocomia mokayayba* Barb. Rodr., bulky, scattered and medium-sized) with frequent climbers, and tracts of semicaducifolious forests on flat hills (0.50 to 2.00 metres higher than maximum flooding levels) with dense stands of palms (bulky, low-trunked, umbrofilous *Scheelea phalerata* (Mart.) Burret). There are many permanent and seasonal shallow lagoons of variable sizes. More details of the environment are found in Jones, 1950 and Lago-Paiva, 1985 and 1989. The farm is extensively used for zebu cattle breeding, and relatively well conserved despite annual fires and strong cattle pressure on the environment.

On 27 May 1989 the author senior alone, walking on the same cattle trail of the 1986 sighting ("corredor da Séde"), about one hour before the night-fall, observed in a site about 200 metres distant of the 1989 site of observation, three individuals of *M. cactorum*. The birds were perched in vertical position on a dead tree branch less than ten centimetres in thick, about five metres high, in an open savanna environment. The birds pecked the wood fast and almost silently, while jumping over the branch in a spiral trajectory. When the upper bird reached the top of the branch, about two metres higher, it flew to the basis of another erect branch of the same dead tree. The other birds immediately followed the first bird, repeating the same sequence. The upper bird, reaching again the top of the branch, always pecking, flew off to a tract of dense thicket nearby, in which it penetrated after a short overflight. The other birds of the group followed it at once. The flight was very fast, deliberate and straight. During all the display the author was eight metres away from the birds, that kept silent. An attempt to follow the birds in the thicket resulted unsuccessful and the author lost sight of the birds. The birds had the throat, the fore neck and the nape visibly yellow.

Little is known about the behaviour and habitat use of *M. cactorum* (Short, 1982). Partridge (1953) observed that in Argentina few individuals were seen alone, but more frequently the birds formed groups of up to five individuals; when a member of the flock flew off, the others followed it, and when the first perched, the others came down with it, always visible in upper branches or dead trunks, calling loudly. Short (1970) found in Argentina *M. cactorum* common even in areas with less cacti, particularly those in which palm trees grow; breeding season apparently starts in September and the presumed nesting sites encountered in Argentina were all in palm trees.

For Short (1982) groups of three to five individuals are found in the breeding season, that occurs in October to December in Paraguay. Short (1970) collected two adult males at different holes in palm trees; flying birds disappeared rapidly from view, and were relatively inconspicuous in their movement through the air. He found the flight of that species "of a peculiar, darting nature which struck me as quite unwoodpecker-like".

M. cactorum inhabits scrub woodland as Chaco, palms in partly wooded areas, from near sea level up to 2400 m a.s.l. (Short, 1982). These habitats agree with the environment of the Pantanal.

Short (1982) says that the males have small red patch of feathers nearly hidden in the black of the midcrown. The authors could not see any red on the head of the individuals briefly observed at Estancia Caiman, but it may be due to the inconspicuousness of that red spot under field conditions.

Sick (1961) hypothesized that the species visited Brazil only occasionally, out of the breeding season, but admitted that the birds could have adopted palm trunks for cavity-nesting, instead of the columnar cactus cited in literature. Sick (1985) suggested that the individuals of that species probably perform seasonal migrations, being collected in October only as a visitor.

The encounter of *M. cactorum* by three researchers in October, April and May, between 1958 and 1989 in the same region, must be viewed as an evidence of year-round residence of a population of the species in Brazilian territory, where the birds must breed. Anyway, the Brazilian population must be marginal and very reduced, the birds being rare (about 400 hours of field work were performed by the authors at the farm). More field work is needed in the rediscovery site and in the region that separates Estancia Caiman and the Bolivian border.

Eight other species of woodpeckers were observed by the authors in the vicinity of *M. cactorum* rediscovery site: *Picumnus albosquamatus* d'Orbigny, *Colaptes campestris* (Vicillot), *C. melanochloros* (Gmelin), *Celex lugubris* (Malherbe), *Dryocopus lineatus* (L.), *Melanerpes candidus* (Otto), *Veniliornis passerinus* (L.) and *Campephilus melanoleucus* (Gmelin).

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