

This little-known, secretive tanager inhabits humid páramo forest ecotone in the Andes of eastern Ecuador and immediately adjacent Peru and Colombia. The ubiquitous tradition of burning páramo grassland has almost completely destroyed its habitat.

DISTRIBUTION The Masked Mountain-tanager (see Remarks 1) is known from six areas in southern Colombia, Ecuador and northernmost Peru.

Colombia The five records comprise two specimens, taken at 3,300 and 3,450 m, and three sightings, one of them at 3,000 m; all are from what is now Puracé National Park in the Volcán Puracé region at the southern end of the Central Andes in eastern Cauca department; one of the specimens was taken above Puracé, the other at Páramo de Puracé, near Laguna San Rafael (where Willis 1988 recorded the species in April 1962), while one of the sightings was at km 143 on the Popayán–Neiva road in July 1976, and the other was at km 35 (Paletará) on the Coconuco road in June 1980 (Hilty and Silliman 1983, Hilty and Brown 1986). A population may exist at the northern end of the Central Andes, from where there is a recent sighting by Colombian ornithologists of the Bay-vented Cotinga *Doliornis sclateri* (TAP), a species known to share habitat with the Masked Mountain-tanager in Ecuador (Bloch *et al.* 1991, Robbins *et al.* in prep.).

Ecuador The species is known only from the eastern Andes, records being: west slope of Cerro Mongus, 3,400–3,500 m, south-eastern Carchi province, at c.0°22'N 77°52'W, March 1992 (Robbins *et al.* in prep.); south-eastern end of Culebrillas valley (not located, but 20° north of west of Mt Sangay [c.2°00'S 78°20'W] in what is now Sangay National Park), elevation not specified but above 3,350 m, August 1929 (Moore 1934a,b); Cordillera Zapote-Najda on the border of Azuay and Morona-Santiago provinces near the Gualaceo–General P. Limón G. road, c.3°01'S 78°38'W, 3,250–3,350 m, June 1984 (two specimens in ZMUC) and subsequently (P. Coopmans verbally 1990, R. A. Rowlett and J. C. Arvin *per* B. M. Whitney *in litt.* 1991); Podocarpus National Park, in the border area of Loja and Zamora-Chinchi provinces, at 4°06'11"S 79°06'09"W, from mid-1980s down to the present (D. Platt *in litt.* 1987, Bloch *et al.* 1991, J. Fjeldså verbally 1991). It undoubtedly occurs more widely in the eastern Andes, though in dwindling numbers, and a sizeable population may occur in the ornithologically poorly explored Cordillera de los Llanganates, northern Tungurahua and south-eastern Napo provinces, where much habitat may remain (NK).

Peru The species was found on Cerro Chinguela, 2,900 m, Piura, near the border of Cajamarca department, at 5°07'S 79°23'W, July 1980 (Parker *et al.* 1985; coordinates from Graves 1980), although searches there in August 1989 were unsuccessful (B. M. Whitney *in litt.* 1991). It seems doubtful that the species occurs further south, where several intensive expeditions by LSUMZ in its habitat have failed to find it (TAP).

POPULATION The species has generally been reported to be rare or uncommon (Parker *et al.* 1985, Hilty and Brown 1986, Bloch *et al.* 1991, Robbins *et al.* in prep.). Its secretive habits may have led to its being somewhat overlooked (see Ecology), and in the right habitat (at Cajanuma) it could be judged fairly common, with 4–5 individuals along a 2 km trail (C. Rahbek *in litt.* 1992), but it seems highly doubtful that the population exceeds 5,000 birds (three pairs per km straight line), and it may well be considerably smaller; furthermore, numbers must be dwindling rapidly as regular burning causes the grassland–forest ecotone to narrow to a few metres and the altitude of the treeline to descend (NK).

ECOLOGY The Masked Mountain-tanager inhabits very humid areas, where it frequents mossy stunted elfin and treeline forest, as well as scattered bushes, mountain bamboo, giant grasses and dense brush above the forest (Moore 1934b, Hilty and Silliman 1983, Parker *et al.* 1985, Hilty and Brown 1986, Fjeldså and Krabbe 1990, Bloch *et al.* 1991, Robbins *et al.* in prep.). Although records range from as low as 2,900 m to no higher than 3,550 m (see Distribution), the species is nearly always found (an exception

being Cajanuma, where birds penetrate elfin forest in mixed-species flocks: C. Rahbek *in litt.* 1992) at or above the treeline (Moore 1934b, Parker *et al.* 1985, Hilty and Brown 1986, Fjeldså and Krabbe 1990, Bloch *et al.* 1991), which naturally occurred up to near 4,000 m in some parts of northern Ecuador, lower in southern Ecuador and northernmost Peru, but which has now been lowered considerably by the activities of man in most places (NK). Singles, pairs, or groups of up to four may follow mixed-species flocks with other frugivores such as Black-chested Mountain-tanager *Buthraupis eximia*, Pale-naped Brush-finch *Atlapetes pallidinucha* and Black-backed Bush-tanager *Urothraupis stolzmanni*; it is a very furtive species, and it may forage silently and rather slowly along thick, moss-covered branches or in the interior or near the top of dense bushes and shrubs, eating berries at the tips of branches in treetops or sallying clumsily for flying insects, and crossing openings quickly, occasionally flying as far as 25 m while following a mixed-species flock (Moore 1934b, Parker *et al.* 1985, Hilty and Brown 1986, Isler and Isler 1987, Fjeldså and Krabbe 1990, Bloch *et al.* 1991, J. Fjeldså verbally 1991, B. M. Whitney *in litt.* 1991, Robbins *et al.* in prep.). Stomach contents have included seeds and green fruit (Isler and Isler 1987, Robbins *et al.* in prep.); birds have been seen to take a small reddish berry (B. M. Whitney *in litt.* 1991). A female in breeding condition was taken in Colombia on 28 February (Hilty and Brown 1985). Food-begging by a recently fledged juvenile was observed in February 1990 (R. A. Rowlett and J. C. Arvin *per* B. M. Whitney *in litt.* 1991). Immatures have been collected in Carchi on 22 March (Robbins *et al.* in prep.) and in Morona-Santiago on 12 June (specimen in ZMUC).

THREATS The consistent burning of páramo grasslands in most parts of the high Andes has prohibited regeneration of bushes and trees, lowered the treeline several hundred metres, and almost completely destroyed the species's habitat; reasons for this burning vary from promotion of fresh growth for (generally very few) cattle to beliefs that the fire will cause rain (NK).

MEASURES TAKEN The species occurs within three national parks (see Distribution). However, records from as low as 3,000 m in Puracé National Park in Colombia suggest that burning of the páramo grasslands may occur there (NK). No burning currently seems to take place in Podocarpus National Park in southern Ecuador (D. Espinosa verbally 1991). There is no available data on burning from Sangay National Park, although suitable habitat for the species is restricted to the eastern part of the park, and burning certainly takes place in some other Ecuadorian protected areas (NK).

MEASURES PROPOSED Burning of páramo grassland within national parks should be strictly prohibited and these areas not used for domestic animals. Initiatives to explain to local communities why this action is being taken, and to seek to find acceptable alternatives for the farmers thus affected, will certainly also be necessary. Surveys are needed of the areas in Colombia and Ecuador where this species is anticipated (see Distribution). In all the above, consideration should also be given to other species with similar habitat needs (see Remarks 2) or distributions. For example, in Puracé National Park this tanager

occurs with five other threatened species, the details of which are given in the equivalent section under Bicoloured Antpitta *Grallaria rufocinerea*.

REMARKS (1) A separate genus *Tephrophilus* was erected for *wetmorei*, mainly on the basis of its bill shape and relatively strong feet, and the Buff-breasted Mountain-tanager *Dubusia taeniata*, with its somewhat similar colour pattern and wing-formula, was believed to be its closest relative (Moore 1934a). However, later authors (e.g. Meyer de Schauensee 1970) have placed *wetmorei* in *Buthraupis* and retained *Dubusia* as a valid genus. (2) The almost complete destruction of the entire ecosystem forming this species's habitat has undoubtedly seriously affected other species of bird with similar habitat requirements, such as the Black-backed Bush-tanager *Urothraupis stolzmanni* and the Bay-vented Cotinga. The latter, however, also occurs south and east of the río Marañón, where a sizeable tract of habitat still occurs from San Martín to Huánuco (see account of Golden-backed Mountain-tanager *Buthraupis aureodorsalis*).