

This poorly known tanager is a cloud-forest specialist of the Cordillera de Mérida, western Venezuela, where it has been recorded from just four discrete areas. Although habitat destruction has mainly been concentrated in areas too low for the bird, montane forests have been adversely affected.

DISTRIBUTION The Slaty-backed Hemispingus is endemic to the south-western half of Cordillera de Mérida in northern Táchira and Mérida states, Venezuela, where the few known localities (coordinates from Paynter 1982) are as follows: (*Táchira*) Páramo Zumbador (c.8°00'N 72°05'W), where the bird was reported by Phelps and Phelps (1950), and whence come two recent records (Ridgely and Tudor 1989); (*Mérida*) Páramo La Negra (c.8°15'N 71°40'W) (Phelps and Phelps 1963); Páramo Escorial (c.8°38'N 71°05'W: 10 km north-east of Mérida), where two males and a female (in MHNG) were collected at 3,000 m prior to 1907 (also Phelps and Phelps 1950); "Pico Humboldt trail" near Tabay (8°38'N 71°04'W: the previous record was presumably from along this trail), where birds have been seen regularly in recent years (C. S. Balchin *in litt.* 1988, D. Willis verbally 1992); above La Mucuy (8°37'N 71°01'W: c.10 km north-east of Mérida, and also presumably along the Pico Humboldt trail), where birds were seen in October 1981 (F. G. Stiles *in litt.* 1992); and Páramo de Aricagua (probably between El Muerte at 8°20'N 71°11'W and c.8°13'N 71°08'W) (Phelps and Phelps 1950).

POPULATION Almost nothing is known, although Ridgely and Tudor (1989) considered the species to be "apparently rare", and indeed mentioned that the two recent records from Táchira were of single birds. However, this species has recently been regularly seen along the Pico Humboldt trail (north-east of Mérida) in small parties of up to five birds (C. S. Balchin *in litt.* 1988, Fjeldså and Krabbe 1990, F. G. Stiles *in litt.* 1992, D. Willis verbally 1992) with up to seven birds being seen in two days on this trail (S. Whitehouse *in litt.* 1990), and it is apparently locally common. B. Swift (*in litt.* 1988) suggested that there is a viable population of this species within the Sierra Nevada National Park.

ECOLOGY The Slaty-backed Hemispingus is restricted to the subtropical and temperate zones between 2,600 and 3,200 m (Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps 1978; Ridgely and Tudor 1989 give the lower altitudinal limit as 2,400 m). It inhabits humid montane forest (cloud-, dwarf and elfin forest), especially towards the upper edge of this zone in areas of scattered trees and at the edge of the humid páramos (Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps 1978, Fjeldså and Krabbe 1990). It forages for insects and berries in the lower growth of the forest, near or perhaps on the ground (two birds were seen moving within 1 m of the ground), usually under dense cover (e.g. along streams) and apparently closely associated with bamboo (C. S. Balchin *in litt.* 1988, Ridgely and Tudor 1989, Fjeldså and Krabbe 1990, F. G. Stiles *in litt.* 1992). Single birds and small groups of up to five have been noted, sometimes feeding with mixed-species flocks (Isler and Isler 1987, Ridgely and Tudor 1989; also C. S. Balchin *in litt.* 1988).

THREATS The Slaty-backed Hemispingus has recently been seen only at the Táchira locality and on the Pico Humboldt trail (see Distribution), but almost nothing is known of its current status between these areas, or indeed of its precise ecological requirements (see above). Possible threats to this species are difficult to assess, although it is clear from Huber and Alarcón (1988) that habitat destruction in this cordillera south-west of Mérida has been dramatic (mainly below 2,000 m, but including some cloud-forest areas), with cloud-forest areas between Mérida and San Cristóbal restricted to two large blocks, but with a more extensive area surrounding the páramo north-east of Mérida; further depletion of this habitat could seriously threaten this tanager. Desenne and Strahl (1991) suggested that, owing to rapid deforestation in this area, the Sierra Nevada National Park is one of the most threatened parks in Venezuela.

MEASURES TAKEN The Sierra Nevada National Park (267,200 ha) covers a large area of suitable habitat to the north and east of Mérida, and embraces the records from along the Pico Humboldt trail (CNPPA 1982; see Distribution, and also Threats).

MEASURES PROPOSED The precise ecological requirements of the Slaty-backed Hemispingus are in urgent need of attention: if in fact the bird relies on bamboo-dominated cloud-forest, or areas just on the forest-páramo interface, its effective range could be minute and therefore may be at even greater risk from habitat perturbation. The distributional status of this bird also needs attention, particularly inside Sierra Nevada National Park, along with the state of remaining habitat both inside and outside the park. Conservation initiatives in this area should consider the needs of other endemic birds including the Rusty-faced Parrot *Hapalopsittaca amazonina* (see equivalent section under that species).