

Known from just one affluent of the upper río Orinoco, Venezuela, this extremely rare ovenbird has been recorded just twice, although this area does not appear to be under immediate threat from habitat destruction.

DISTRIBUTION The Orinoco Softtail is known only from the vicinity of the type-locality along the upper río Orinoco, Amazonas state, southern Venezuela (coordinates are from Paynter 1982). It was first collected in February 1899, when a male and female (in AMNH) were taken at “Capuano” (= río Capuana, c.4°42’N 67°50’W), a small affluent on the right bank of the upper río Orinoco, c.30 km south of the confluence of the río Vichada (originating in Colombia) (also von Berlepsch and Hartert 1902, Phelps and Phelps 1950). Subsequent specimens (four in AMNH and ANSP), taken in March 1970, also originated from along the río Capuana, at 120 m.

POPULATION Only six specimens of this species have been collected (see above), and there are apparently no other records of the bird: its population remains essentially unknown, as are its distribution limits.

ECOLOGY The río Capuana is at about 100 m (Paynter 1982), and the most recent specimens (in AMNH, ANSP) were apparently taken at 120 m, the bird obviously being one of the lowland tropical zone (also Phelps and Phelps 1950). The habitat of these specimens is described (museum label data) as “caños” (i.e. streams), Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps (1978) giving the habitat as rainforest and clearings along river banks and small caños, where birds actively clamber about in bushes and brush. However, Vaurie (1980) suggested that the Orinoco Softtail is found apparently only on the banks of the ríos Capuana and Orinoco, and not within the forest. The forest in this area (along the rivers), is quite specialized tall (and dense) riverine forest with little undergrowth (Huber and Alarcón 1988); small clearings may be infrequent. This species has only been recorded in February and March, and a male (in ANSP) taken in March 1970 had “gonads small”: the male taken in February was in “much worn plumage” (von Berlepsch and Hartert 1902). Whether or not the Orinoco Softtail exhibits any seasonal movements (e.g. to higher ground to the east) is unknown.

THREATS None is known. However, Puerto Ayacucho (c.150 km north of the type-locality) is developing as a trade and tourist centre for the region (see Goodwin 1990), and the situation needs to be monitored with care as this species is only known from a possibly specialized vegetation adjacent to rivers, which may be at more risk than forests of the interior.

MEASURES TAKEN The Sipapo Forest Reserve (12,155 km²) covers the area of this species's distribution (DGPOA), but it is doubtful if this has resulted in any enforced protection of habitats adjacent to the rivers.

MEASURES PROPOSED It is important to assess the ecological requirements and distributional status of the Orinoco Softtail. Surveys, initially in the vicinity of the type-locality, are required to determine what habitat this bird needs; once this has been done, searches can be made in similar habitat elsewhere along the Orinoco (including areas within Colombia), and a more complete picture of this species's distribution determined. If in fact the species has specific requirements and is as restricted in range as current records suggest, there may be considerable cause for concern, and its habitat will need to be protected from future developments.