Breeding of the Greenish Schiffornis (Schiffornis virescens, Tityridae)

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Received on 30 April 2017. Accepted on 23 November 2017.

ABSTRACT: Like several Neotropical bird species, the breeding biology of the seven species of Schiffornis (Tityridae) is poorly known. Only three of these species have some aspects of their breeding biology described. This study provides description of two rare unreported clutches of the Greenish Schiffornis (Schiffornis virescens) housed for more than a century in the egg collection of Museu de Zoologia (MZUSP). Also, we estimated the nesting period for the species based on several scattered evidences of breeding, and compared the data with other Tityridae. Clutch size is of two or three, and museum eggs measure 2.13 ± 0.13 × 1.65 ± 0.08 cm (n = 4). Egg shape varied from oval to elliptical. The breeding season of the Greenish Schiffornis lasts at least between October and February, a known breeding period of forest birds from its distribution range. The still scarce breeding evidences for Schiffornis species and their close relatives call for further field studies, especially when considering the debatable phylogeny of the group.

KEY-WORDS: clutch size, egg measurements, nest, nesting, reproduction.

Our knowledge of the breeding biology of several Neotropical bird species are still lacking or incomplete (Heming et al. 2013, Crozariol 2016a). The genus Schiffornis (Tityridae) currently presents seven species (Remsen-Jr. et al. 2016) with most aspects of their breeding biology still poorly known (Skutch 1969, Sick 1997, Snow 2016). Formerly considered Pipridae, Schiffornis is presently included in Tityridae, placed in a clade with Lanisoma and Laniocera (Prum & Lanyon 1989) in the subfamily Laniisominae (Barber & Rice 2007, Tello et al. 2009) or Schiffornithinae (Ohlson et al. 2013).

Nearly all our knowledge about the breeding biology of the genus consists on a few nests described from three of the seven species. For other two species, the Foothill Schiffornis (Schiffornis aenea) and the Russet-winged Schiffornis (Schiffornis stenorhyncha), the breeding biology knowledge are based only on collected birds in breeding condition (del Hoyo et al. 2017). There is still no information about the Varzea Schiffornis (Schiffornis major) reproductive biology (del Hoyo et al. 2017).

The Northern Schiffornis (Schiffornis veraepacis) has most of its breeding aspects (egg laying season, nest, clutch, eggs, incubation period, nesting, and provisioning) described in Costa Rica (del Hoyo et al. 2017), though it is distributed from south Mexico to west Ecuador. For the Olivaceous Schiffornis (Schiffornis olivacea) there are only descriptions of breeding season (based on adult condition), nest, clutch, and eggs from Suriname and Guiana (del Hoyo et al. 2017). This species is distributed from southeastern Venezuela, to Guianas and northeastern Brazilian Amazon. The Thrush-like Schiffornis (Schiffornis turdina) has nest, clutch, eggs, and incubation and nestling period known from four nests found in Central America (Skutch 1969).

The Greenish Schiffornis (Schiffornis virescens) is a resident insectivorous species which inhabits the understorey of forests and occurs in central and southeast Brazil, east Paraguay and northeast Argentina (Snow 2016). Sexes have similar greenish plumage and are much alike. The only published report of the Greenish Schiffornis nest was given by Snow (2016): “nest found in Brasília, 19th Dec, a large cup of leaves placed 3 m above ground in upright fork of bush, contained 2 eggs”. No additional description or source of information was given. However, this description of the nest differs from most Schiffornis nests described so far (reviewed by Crozariol 2016b).

This study reports on two rare clutches housed in the Museu de Zoologia (MZUSP) egg collection, estimates the nesting period for the species based on several evidences of breeding from museums as well as from the literature and the website wikiaves.com.br, and compare all the breeding evidence about the genus.

We visited and searched for eggs in the following egg collections: Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology (Camarillo, USA), Natural History Museum (Tring, England), Museum fur Naturkundem (Berlin, Germany), “Nationaal Natuurhistorisch Museum”
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(Leiden, Netherlands), Naturhistorisches Museum (Vienna, Austria), National Museums Scotland (Edinburgh, Scotland), Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle (Paris, France), Natural History Museum - Smithsonian Institution (Washington, USA), Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales “Bernardino Rivadavia” (Buenos Aires, Argentina), Museu de La Plata (La Plata, Argentina), Instituto de Investigación de Recursos Biológicos Alexander von Humboldt (Villa de Leiva, Colombia), and in Brazil, Museu de Zoologia-USP (São Paulo), Museu Nacional (Rio de Janeiro), Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi (Belém), Coleção Ornitológica Marcelo Bagno (Brasília), Museu de Ciências e Tecnologia da Unicamp, and Fundação Zoobotânica do Rio Grande do Sul (Porto Alegre). We also visited the online egg collections of the Field Museum of Natural History (Chicago, USA) and California Academy of Science (San Francisco, USA), and the museum database Arctos Collaborative Collection Management Solution (arctos. database.museum). We measured the eggs of the two clutches found using digital photography (Bridge et al. 2007, Troscianko 2014).

We searched for breeding evidence (gonad size) and birds with immature characteristics (fleshy gape or unpneumatized skull, juvenile plumage) on labels and skin specimens at the MZUSP and Natural History Museum. Additionally, we searched the WikiAves website (www.wikiaves.com) on 23–25 March 2016, for photographs of nests, eggs, fledglings and their dates and localities.

We found only two clutches of two eggs each deposited at the MZUSP egg collection. No other Greenish Schiffornis eggs were found elsewhere. The first clutch (eggs 1 and 2 herein) was collected by Ricardo Krone at Itamirim, Iguape, state of São Paulo, Brazil, at an unknown date and labeled as Scotothorus unicolor (MZUSP 2675). This clutch was probably collected around (1895–1906), the period that Krone collected another 200 clutches of several bird species, most at Iguape, São Paulo (eggs from MZUSP and NMW). The second clutch (eggs 3 and 4 herein) has no location or date and was labeled as Heteropelma virescens (no catalog number). By the condition of the eggs and the data slip, it is also probably from early XX century. Both clutches had light color apparently spotless eggs (though rusted with time) of different sizes and shapes (Table 1). Eggs measured $2.13 \pm 0.13 \times 1.65 \pm 0.08$ cm ($n = 4$). The first clutch had similar eggs but one was narrower, while the second had one egg much smaller (~22%) than the other ($n = 4$, Table 1).

The two clutches from MZUSP are in accordance with three additional two-egg clutches for other Schiffornis from northern locations. One clutch (MG 426-427) collected by Emile Snethlage at Santo Antônio do Prata, state of Pará, Brazil, on 12 May 1920, had two white eggs. Similarly a clutch (NHM 1952-8-421) collected by T.A.W. Davis at Mahaicony River, Guyana, on 22 April 1934, had two fresh white eggs. Lastly, a clutch of the Northern Schiffornis Schiffornis v. vereaepacis (MVZ-Berkeley 14376) collected by Prentis T. Burtis at Rio Chalchijapa, Vera Cruz, Mexico, on 3 April 1961, also had two fresh eggs (average size 17.9 × 24.3 mm).

Photos of a nest of the Greenish Schiffornis with three eggs were taken on 18 December 2008 (Table 2) (Wikiaves, WA36059, by A. Bianco). This is in accordance with the three recently described three-egg clutches found in October at Misiones, Argentina (Bodrati & Cockle 2017), but not in accordance with the reports of two eggs from the two MZUSP clutches, the published report by Snow (2016) or the number of eggs reported for Thrush-like Schiffornis (Skutch 1969), Northern Schiffornis, and Olivaceous Schiffornis (del Hoyo et al. 2017). The larger clutches from southern locations (Santa Catarina, Brazil and Misiones, Argentina) compared to the northern ones (Skutch 1969, Snow 2016, del Hoyo et al. 2017) might be explained by a latitudinal increase in clutch size (Jetz et al. 2008, Heming & Marini 2015).

An analysis of 58 skins from MZUSP revealed that a young female with 50% pneumatized skull was caught on 26 November 2011 and a young male with 20% pneumatized skull was caught on 13 March 2012 both at São Paulo state, Brazil. Also, a young male with beak commissure was caught on 17 December 2011 at the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Males had developed testes (8 × 11 and 6 × 8 mm) on 16 November 2005 and 25 November 2011, respectively, also at São Paulo state.

When considering all the reproductive evidence we found, the breeding period of the Greenish Schiffornis lasts at least from October to February, a common period of breeding of forest birds in its distribution range in Brazil (Marini & Durães 2001, Marini et al. 2007, Repenning & Fontana 2011, Maurício et al. 2013, Marques-Santos et al. 2015). Also, a photo of a fledgling perched in a branch taken on 29 February 2013 at Caraguatatuba, São Paulo state (WA 585213, by M. Nema) (Table 2), in agreement with this breeding period. The Northern Schiffornis lays eggs from February to August in several

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Greenish Schiffornis eggs from MZUSP (eggs 1 and 2 Iguape, SP; eggs 3 and 4 unknown location). Egg length and width were measured in ImageJ (see methods for details).

| Egg | Length (cm) | Width (cm) |
|-----|-------------|------------|
| 1   | 2.23        | 1.60       |
| 2   | 2.20        | 1.72       |
| 3   | 2.13        | 1.71       |
| 4   | 1.94        | 1.55       |
| Mean| 2.13        | 1.65       |
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countries in the Northern Hemisphere (del Hoyo et al. 2017). The Olivaceous Schiffornis is suggested to breed from August to September (adults in breeding condition), but a nest with eggs was found in April in Guyana (del Hoyo et al. 2017). Adults in breeding condition of Foothill Schiffornis were collected in March and June in east Ecuador and of Russet-winged Schiffornis from January to June in north Colombia (del Hoyo et al. 2017).

We found no nests at museums, but the description of nests by Bodrati & Cockle (2017) is similar to the nest in the photo published at Wikiaves, but both differ from the description given by Snow (2016). The nests described by Bodrati & Cockle (2017) are much lower (0.43–0.64 m above ground) and though not inserted in cavities, were laterally protected by petioles of tree ferns. Similarly to Wikiaves reports, a nest of the Thrush-like Schiffornis (NHM 1952-8-421) collected by T. A. W. Davis at Mahaicony River, Guyana, was built in a palm cavity. The Northern Schiffornis eggs collected by Prentis T. Burtis in Mexico (MVZ-Berkeley 14376) were in an open nest built entirely with dried leaves lined with black strands, 1.8 m up in a small palm.

Similarly to descriptions of Schiffornis nests and eggs, the Cinereous Mourner (Laniocera hypopyrra) nest consists of a bulky cup made of dry leaves (Londoño & Cadena 2003). The breeding evidence summarized above (nest type, clutch size and egg color and markings) supports the hypothesis of closer relationship between Laniocera and Schiffornis (Prum & Lanyon 1989, Barber & Rice 2007, Tello et al. 2009, Ohlson et al. 2013), and that several of these characteristics are homologous.

Considering all the above, the breeding of the Greenish Schiffornis is similar to that of the Thrush-like Schiffornis and the Northern Schiffornis. The Greenish Schiffornis seems to build its nest in a similar way to the Thrush-like Schiffornis, but at more variable heights (~0.5–3 m, n = 5) than (~1.1–1.5 m, n = 4). Since clutch size, date and location (one clutch) from the MZUSP records are unknown, it makes difficult further comparisons between these clutches and the other records. The still scarce breeding evidences for Schiffornis species and their close relatives (Shrike-like Cotinga Laniisoma elegans, Speckled Mourner Laniocera rufescens and the Cinereous Mourner) call for further field studies, especially when considering its debatable phylogeny.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We thank Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq) and Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Distrito Federal (FAPDF), Brazil, for research funding received by M. Â. M. and N. M. H. and for a fellowship received by M. Â. M. We thank Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES) for a post-doctoral scholarship received by NMH. This research was supported by grants from CNPq and FAPDF. We thank to all museum curators for kindly allowing us to study specimens under their care.

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Associate Editor: Caio G. Machado.