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## **Deforestation Threatens Newly Identified Bird in Brazil**

By John R. Platt | September 29, 2014

Discovering a new species isn't always as easy as saying "Look, there's a new species!" In the case of a rare bird recently identified in Brazil, it took about 20 years for scientists to gather enough evidence to classify it as a new species.



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The journey began in the early 1990s when scientists found an isolated population of songbirds in the heavily logged mountains of Bahia, Brazil. At the time researchers labeled the small (12 centimeters in length) birds in this location as a previously

known, widespread species called the [mouse-colored tapaculo](#) (*Scytalopus speluncae*). A second, equally isolated population was discovered nearby in 1999. Three more sites in the mountains of Bahia followed, all heavily degraded by logging and deforestation.

But even as these new populations were discovered, scientists and birders were debating just what constituted a mouse-colored tapaculo. Plumages for the birds varied widely throughout the Atlantic Forest of Brazil. Some scientists wondered if the man who first described the species back in 1835, French zoologist Édouard Ménétriés, had incorrectly described the birds or mixed up the locations where he found his specimens. During the first decade of this century the birds were renamed at least twice. In 2010 the original name of the mouse-colored tapaculo was [reinstated](#) and a second species, the rock tapaculo (*S. petrophilus*) was added.

But that still left the birds in Bahia, which had plumage, songs and other morphological characteristics unlike the other two species. Finding out much about them was hard, though, because the well-camouflaged birds live in the darkness of low, densely tangled branches. Still, researchers from Universidade Federal de Pelotas in Rio Grande do Sul and other institutions were able to observe them, record their songs, measure their bodies and conduct genetic tests. The results indicated they were neither mouse-colored tapaculos nor rock tapaculos.

And so in 2014 we have a new name. A [paper](#) published online August 27 in *The Auk* renames the isolated birds as the Bahian mouse-colored tapaculo (*S. gonzagai*). The authors warn that the species should be considered endangered because it has an estimated population of fewer than 3,000 individuals in five forest remnants that remain "under severe pressure from clandestine timber extraction and outright deforestation."

Part of that new name might not stick. The South American Classification Committee of the American Ornithologists' Union [points out](#) in a proposal to formally name the species that the common name "Bahian mouse-colored tapaculo" doesn't follow species naming rules since the regular "mouse-colored tapaculo" doesn't have a modifier in front of its common name. (They say the editors of *The Auk* were "asleep at the wheel" on this. Oddly enough, the Union publishes *The Auk*.)

That's possibly semantics, but committee members say there is "no question" that the Bahian birds are a unique species. The next challenge, after all of these decades, is to get them formally recognized and protected while they and the forests they live in still exist.

*Photo: Ciro Albano*



**About the Author:** Twice a week, John Platt shines a light on endangered species from all over the globe, exploring not just why they are dying out but also what's being done to rescue them from oblivion. Follow on Twitter [@johnrplatt](#).

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