

SMITHSONIAN MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTIONS  
VOLUME 150 (WHOLE VOLUME)

THE BIRDS OF THE REPUBLIC  
OF PANAMÁ

Part 1.—TINAMIDAE (Tinamous) to  
RYNCHOPIDAE (Skimmers)

By  
ALEXANDER WETMORE

Research Associate  
Smithsonian Institution



(PUBLICATION 4617)

CITY OF WASHINGTON  
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FIG. 1.—The Tacarcuna wood quail, gallito del monte fajado (*Odontophorus diolencos* Wetmore), found on Cerro Malí and Cerro Tacarcuna, Darién (see page 327). Painting by Walter Weber.

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# THE BIRDS OF THE REPUBLIC OF PANAMÁ, PART 1: TINAMIDAE (TINAMOUS) TO RYNCHOPIDAE (SKIMMERS)

By ALEXANDER WETMORE

*Research Associate, Smithsonian Institution*

## INTRODUCTION

THE long, narrow Isthmus of Panamá, which unites North America on the one hand and South America on the other, is a geographic area outstanding in its interest to biologists in the systematic field as the land connection between these two regions of the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Present understanding of geologic history indicates that the two areas were separated by open sea in the Tertiary period for a vast space of time that began in the Paleocene epoch and extended toward the end of the Pliocene. For 50 million years South America remained isolated from other lands, while North America had periodic union with Asia through land connections in the present region of Bering Sea. The great diversity in plant and animal life that now marks the Panamanian land bridge is a reflection of invasions from the two adjacent continental areas. Study of present-day distribution, variation, and relationship in any group is of deep interest and valuable in details of scientific information.

The present account is the first installment of a summary of what is known of the birdlife of the area. My personal studies in the field began in 1944 and have continued annually for approximately three months each year since 1946, with laboratory investigation of specimens and a survey of the published works of others who have made contributions in this region.

The number of kinds of birds known from the isthmus is so large, and materials available are so extensive, that completion of the report has required more time than originally contemplated. As there is increasing demand for information on this subject, especially from those engaged in investigation of diseases where species of birds may be suspected as carriers, it has become desirable to present the summary accounts family by family as they are completed in order that the information may be available. This first installment covers the families in systematic sequence from the tinamous, family Tinamidae,

through the order that includes the shorebirds, gulls, and their allies. A general account of personal field work, with a review of the studies of other ornithologists, and general discussions of the avifauna will be left for the end.

It may be sufficient here to outline briefly the character of the isthmus as included in the present political boundaries of the Republic of Panamá. The entire Caribbean slope and eastern Darién on the Pacific side are the regions of heaviest rainfall. In the northwest, in the Province of Bocas del Toro, there is no marked break in precipitation for any lengthy period throughout the year. The Pacific slope, from the Costa Rican boundary eastward, has a definite dry season, mainly between the latter part of December and the middle or end of April. Because of this difference the denser forest areas are found on the north and in Darién, where originally tree growth was continuous. On the Pacific side there are extensive areas of open savannas. And forest where found is more open and in part deciduous, so that many trees lose their leaves in dry season. These were the original conditions, now extensively modified over great areas that have been cleared for agricultural use. These changes are most marked from the western boundary in Chiriquí east through the Province of Panamá, where most of the original forest cover is gone, and are proceeding rapidly elsewhere. The main areas that still are primitive lie on the Caribbean drainage in the inland mountain and hill area of interior Bocas del Toro, over the interior hills of San Blas, and on the Pacific side on the mountains and hills of the interior from the eastern end of the Province of Panamá through Darién.

The isthmus in the main is in the Tropical Zone, with subtropical zone forest in the mountain regions of the western half. Additional areas of the latter zone of lesser extent are found along the central spine of the Azuero Peninsula, and in the mountains near the Colombian boundary. Limited Temperate Zone conditions extend across the top of the Chiriquí volcano and on some of the higher ridges to the east in Chiriquí and Veraguas.

#### THE LIST OF BIRDS

Each family is introduced by a brief general statement on the group as a whole throughout its entire range. This is followed, where necessary, by a key to the species that have been recorded in Panamá, based on the most evident characters of color, size, and form. While this may be of assistance in naming birds in life, it is

intended primarily for the identification of specimens in hand. The arrangement in the keys is artificial, and may not follow any order of close relationship. The order of the families is that in my latest revision of the classification for living and fossil birds of the world (Smithsonian Misc. Coll., vol. 139, no. 11, June 23, 1960, pp. 1-37).

References to literature, given in parentheses, are sufficiently complete to allow their consultation if desired. A complete bibliography, and with it a gazetteer of localities, will be included in the final part.

The account of each bird begins with the scientific name, followed by vernacular names in English and in Spanish. Where the species is divided into geographic races, if two or more of these are found in Panamá, general information that applies to all is given under a species heading. This includes brief phrases on characters that may help in identification, and a description. The subspecies follow, each with its scientific name and reference, details of color, size, or form on which the race has been recognized, measurements, range in the Republic, and any other pertinent information. If the nominate form is included among these, reference to this name is given under the subspecies in question. Where this race does not reach Panamá, the species heading carries this reference. In variable species of wide range, where only one of the forms is found all these data are included under the heading with the trinomial scientific name. Vernacular names used apply to the species as a whole. No such names are given to separate subspecies.

Vernacular names have been selected with care, with particular reference to usage in standard works that cover the area. This frequently has involved choice, since in wide-ranging species divided in several geographic races it was early custom to assign such a name to each subspecies, often without regard to its related forms. Modern practice gives vernacular names to the species in its entirety, since the former method was cumbersome and frequently misleading. In the case of migrants from the north, the names used are those of the official A.O.U. check-list (Check-list of North American Birds Prepared by a Committee of the American Ornithologists' Union, fifth edition, 1957). With others, particularly tropical species of wide distribution, names frequently have varied so that a choice has been necessary. The attempt with these has been to select the term most often used, and the one most appropriate. In this, the list proposed by Eugene Eisenmann (*The Species of Middle American Birds*, Trans. Linn. Soc. New York, vol. 7, 1955) is definitely valuable.

The Spanish names in many instances offer difficulty. Where the species are known to Panamanian countrymen there is no complication, but there are scores of kinds of birds that are not so recognized. With those that range widely in the American Tropics often there are appropriate names available from other Spanish-speaking countries, and these I have taken wherever practicable. Occasionally with birds of obscure habit it has been necessary to propose names both in English and in Spanish, with care that they may be appropriate.

The scientific names follow the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature of 1961 (with certain reservations and some mis-giving).

Outlines of range and important records are based on an extended survey of literature and of specimens in museums, in addition to information available from my own work in the field. To avoid misunderstanding it should be explained that many of the names of localities on skins collected by J. H. Batty in Panamá at the beginning of this century are not valid. This is particularly true of skins labeled from islands off the coast of Chiriquí. It is certain that Batty visited Isla Coiba, but a considerable part of the specimens that he labeled as from this island came from the mainland, and data attributing numerous skins to other islands in the area are without question fictitious. (See Wetmore, Smithsonian Misc. Coll., vol. 134, no. 9, 1957, pp. 6-8.)

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