

Photographic documentation of the predation of the Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*) (Passerellidae) by the Great Thrush (*Turdus fuscater*) (Turdidae) in Colombia and a review of its diet based on citizen science data

Documentación fotográfica de la depredación del Copetón (*Zonotrichia capensis*) (Passerellidae) por la Mirla patiamarilla (*Turdus fuscater*) (Turdidae) en Colombia y una revisión de su dieta basada en datos de ciencia ciudadana

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Abstract

Predation and feeding on small vertebrates by birds of the family Turdidae has been reported in recent years, but it is still a poorly understood phenomenon. The Great Thrush (*Turdus fuscater*) is among the species that have been reported to prey upon small vertebrates, but reports are still scarce. In 2025, we photographed this thrush preying on a chick of Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*) in Subachoque, Cundinamarca, Colombia. We reviewed the 10,866 images available on the eBird/Macaulay Library online platform and found seven records of this thrush feeding on mammals, lizards, anuran amphibians and birds. Field and online data confirm that the Great Thrush's diet includes small vertebrates and shows the importance of natural history observations obtained in the field and bird photography as a basis for citizen science and conservation.

Key words: citizen science, Colombia, natural history, Passeriformes

Resumen

Se ha informado en los últimos años sobre la depredación y alimentación de pequeños vertebrados por parte de aves de la familia Turdidae, pero aún es un fenómeno poco comprendido. La Mirla patiamarilla (*Turdus fuscater*) se encuentra entre las especies que presentan esta dieta, pero los informes aún son escasos. En 2025, fotografiamos a esta mirla depredando un joven Copetón (*Zonotrichia capensis*) en Subachoque, Cundinamarca, Colombia. Revisamos las 10.866 imágenes disponibles en la plataforma en línea eBird/Macaulay Library y encontramos siete registros de esta mirla alimentándose de mamíferos, lagartos, anfibios anuros y aves. Los datos de campo y en línea confirman que la dieta de la Mirla patiamarilla también se basa en pequeños vertebrados y demuestran la importancia de las observaciones de historia natural obtenidas en el campo y la fotografía de aves como base para la ciencia ciudadana y la conservación.

Palabras clave: ciencia ciudadana, Colombia, historia natural, Passeriformes



The family Turdidae comprises 192 species in 17 genera that occur in a wide variety of regions worldwide. They occupy distinct habitats and exhibit diverse feeding behaviors, including the occasional consumption of small vertebrates (Winkler *et al.* 2020). Although such information is still scarce in the literature, available records of turdid predation on small vertebrates have been published for various species (e.g., Lopes *et al.* 2005, Sazima & D'Ângelo 2011, Mafia *et al.* 2014). This type of information is

crucial for increasing knowledge about the natural history of birds, especially Neotropical passerines (Callaghan *et al.* 2018).

The Great Thrush *Turdus fuscater* is the largest member of the family Turdidae, measuring between 28 - 33 cm and weighing between 126 - 162 g. Its geographic distribution is restricted to a region of the Andes in South America, which includes Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. It occurs in

various habitat types, including urban areas, at altitudes ranging from 1,300 to 4,200 m above sea level (Escobar Riomalo *et al.* 2020). Its diet primarily consists of small fruits of various species and small invertebrates such as snails, earthworms, and insects. Occasionally, it may prey on small vertebrates, such as mice, lizards, and bird chicks, which it feeds to its young (Stiles *et al.* 2000, 2025, Díaz & García-Mieles 2025). Here we present a photographic record of the predation of the Rufous-collared Sparrow by the Great Thrush in Colombia, including a review of the literature and online birdwatching platforms on vertebrate predation by this species.

On 25 May 2025, at approximately 7:00 h, on private property in the rural area of Subachoque, Department of Cundinamarca, Colombia (05°00'06.2"N, 74°08'38"W, 2820 m), an individual male of *T. fuscater* was observed preying on a chick of Rufous-collared

Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*). The images show that the chick's flight feathers are still short and have a sheath at the base, meaning it could not yet fly and was likely removed from the nest at 2 to 3 weeks of age (F. G. Stiles pers comm.). Presence of the chick parents or other adults was not confirmed nearby. After observing several *T. fuscater* individuals interacting aggressively with each other, one of the thrushes was seen with the *Z. capensis* chick in its beak, likely already dead. The individual of *T. fuscater* was fleeing from conspecifics that were attempting to steal its prey when, during one of its escape flights, it landed behind a large tree, losing the other birds. The individual then began pecking the chick's head, lifting it up and slamming it against the ground, constantly pecking its head and neck, pulling out some feathers, and then pecking its head and neck again, tearing off the chick's skin (Fig. 1). After about 5 minutes of observation, the individual was scared away and the



Figure 1. A Great Thrush (*Turdus fuscater*) individual preying on a Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*) chick (A) suspected individual, just after eluding competitors (B) pecking the chick's head (C) lifting it and slamming it against the ground (D) pecking preferentially at its head and nape (E) plucking some feathers (F) again pecking the head and nape, tearing off the chick's skin. Photos: Fabio Schunck.



Figure 2. Details of the Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*) chick preyed upon by the Great Thrush (*Turdus fuscater*) individual (A) Ventral view (B) Dorsal view. Photos: Fabio Schunck.

chick was examined to assess its injuries and confirm its identification, after which it was left in place (Fig. 2).

A total of 10,866 images of *T. fuscater* available on the online birdwatching platform eBird (<https://ebird.org/home>) and deposited in the Macaulay Library (ML - <https://www.macaulaylibrary.org/>) were consulted automatically (using the filters: foraging or eating and carrying food) and manually, until November 2025.

Of the total (10,866) images available on eBird, only 128 (1,17%) showed records of general feeding behavior (birds with some type of food in their beaks), indicating a varied diet for *T. fuscater*, including fruits (e.g., ML641191466) and invertebrates, such as annelids (ML629743596, ML620830112), millipedes (435274081), insects/dragonflies (614782718), insects/lepidoptera (e.g., ML634581477), aquatic insects (ML383176911), caterpillars (ML614880741/ML614286661), and larvae (ML500895421). Images showing vertebrate predation included two records involving mammals, two lizards, two anuran amphibians, and two birds, being chicks of the Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager (*Anisognathus igniventris*) and Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia*

capensis). All records of predation of small vertebrates occurred between April and December (Table 1).

The documented observation made in Subachoque of the *T. fuscater* individual preying on a *Z. capensis* chick corroborates the available literature that reports this species of thrush preying on bird chicks (Stiles *et al.* 2000, 2025). However, the photographic material and observations obtained here confirm the prey species (*Z. capensis*) and describe the predator's behavior of plucking feathers and skin, likely accessing the internal parts to obtain food. The record made in Ecuador in November 2025 (ML647752774) suggests that predation of *Z. capensis* may be more common than reported in the literature.

Available data on the predation of small vertebrates by *T. fuscater*, especially those accompanied by documentation, are still scarce, yet they show that this group of animals is part of the diet of this species, albeit occasionally and probably associated with reproduction as an important source of animal protein for chicks. The record of predation on an *Anisognathus igniventris* chick, made in Ecuador (ML616920048), shows an individual *T. fuscater* with viscera in its beak, indicating that after opening the bird, it searches for soft parts, a behavior common in other predatory and scavenging birds (Sick 1997).

The data obtained in Subachoque, and mainly on online platforms, show the importance of field observations and citizen science for confirming and producing new information on the natural history of birds, a fundamental approach that supports various types of conservation actions (Callaghan *et al.* 2018). However, among the 128 images of *T. fuscater* foraging obtained, only three are available via the eBird platform's automated search system (using the terms foraging or eating and carrying food). This highlights the system's inefficiency and the need for manual searches, a process that can compromise data quality. We recommend greater data moderation by the platforms and urge photographers to pay closer attention when uploading images by selecting the appropriate behavioral/action categories. The vertebrate diet of birds considered "unconventional predators," such as the Great Thrush, expands the

Table 1. Records from the eBird online platform (Macaulay Library) of vertebrates preyed upon by Great Thrush (*Turdus fuscater*). The locality column includes the country abbreviations of CO for Colombia and EC for Ecuador and the location of the record.

Image number	Locality	Group	Data	Species	Author
ML616920047, 48, 49, 50	EC/Cerro Atacazo	Bird	April 2024	<i>Anisognathus igniventris</i>	Francisco Sornoza
ML647752774	EC/Napo, Papallacta Lake and Town	Bird	November 2025	<i>Zonotrichia capensis</i>	Tuomas Seimola
ML618423404	CO/Lagunas de Sevilla	Amphibian	April 2024	Anuran	Luke Berg
ML639990354	CO/Estancia San Antonio	Amphibian	July 2025	Anuran	Dana Thomas
ML184378761	CO/Recinto del Pensamiento	Reptile	August 2019	Lizard	Jorge L. Peña
ML610515731	CO/Reserva Bioandina - Camino de Entrada	Reptile	October 2023	Lizard	Jean-Marc Alberola
ML610515733					
ML92663411	CO/Canal Boyacá	Mammal	April 2018	Mouse	Dodo Colombia
ML394698751	CO/Vía al Parque	Mammal	December 2019	Mouse	Mike Melton

diversity of local vertebrate predators, making it a relevant issue for the analysis of the food web of Neotropical vertebrate assemblages (Latorres & Borges 2022).

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