

## Notas Breves

RANGE EXTENSIONS OF TWO SPECIES OF “RED-BREASTED” MEADOWLARKS  
(ICTERIDAE: *STURNELLA*) IN COLOMBIAAmpliaciones de las distribuciones de dos especies “pechirrojas” de *Sturnella*  
(Icteridae) en ColombiaJuan Carlos De Las Casas<sup>1</sup>

Departamento de Biología y Grupo de Ornitología Universidad Nacional GOUN, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá. Correo Electrónico: JCBird21@yahoo.com.

F. Gary Stiles

Instituto de Ciencias Naturales, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Apartado 7495, Bogotá.  
Correo Electrónico: fgstiles@unal.edu.co

Ivón A. Bolívar

Departamento de Biología y Grupo de Ornitología Universidad Nacional GOUN, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá

Johanna I. Murillo

Departamento de Biología, Universidad de Nariño, Pasto, Nariño

## ABSTRACT

We present new distributional records of two species of “red-breasted” meadowlarks of open grasslands and pastures in Colombia. The Red-breasted Blackbird *S. militaris* is recorded for the first time along the Colombian Amazon, where it probably arrived in the 1990's following the establishment of cattle raising in the area. We report the Peruvian Meadowlark (*S. bellicosa*) for the first time from Colombia, from the Tumaco area of Nariño, and present observations on its behavior. We also report two specimens of this species from the same area taken 35 years ago, suggesting that this range extension is not recent but has been overlooked.

**Key words:** Colombia, distribution, meadowlarks, new records, *Sturnella bellicosa*, *Sturnella militaris*.

## RESUMEN

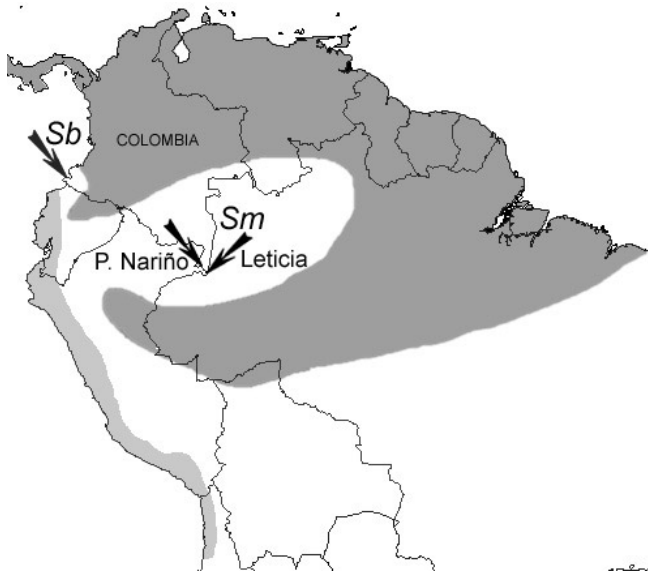
Presentamos nuevos registros de distribución para dos especies “pechorrojas” del género *Sturnella*, aves de pastizales abiertos, en Colombia. Se informa de los primeros registros de *S. militaris* a lo largo del Río Amazonas en Colombia, donde aparentemente llegó después del establecimiento de la ganadería extensiva en la zona en la década de los 90. También registramos por primera vez en territorio colombiano a *S. bellicosa*, basado en nuestras observaciones y la colecta de un ejemplar cerca de Tumaco, Nariño; presentamos observaciones sobre su comportamiento de cortejo. Además de nuestras observaciones, comunicamos dos ejemplares inéditos de la misma región, coleccionados hace 35 años, que sugieren que esta extensión de distribución no es reciente sino ha sido pasado por alto.

**Palabras clave:** Colombia, distribución, nuevos registros, *Sturnella bellicosa*, *Sturnella militaris*.

The meadowlarks (*Sturnella*) are the most specialized members of the large Neotropical family Icteridae for terrestrial foraging in open, grassy habitats (Short 1968). Like most open country birds, their distributions may be limited by forest barriers, and they often can expand their ranges rapidly when these are removed (Kiff 1975). Because most ornithologists and birders concentrate their efforts in forested areas, these range expansions are not always detected immediately, in spite of the fact that the birds are often conspicuous in their habitats (e.g., Stiles et al. 1999). Here we document a recent range expansion of the Red-breasted Blackbird, *S. militaris*, and an apparently overlooked one of the Peruvian Meadowlark, *S. bellicosa*. We also present information on the vocalizations and behaviour of the latter species in Colombia.

**Red-breasted Blackbird, *Sturnella militaris*:** This species is rather widely distributed in northern and western Colombia (although still apparently local on the Pacific slope, south to Guapi, Cauca) and in the Llanos; in recent decades it has spread southward along the eastern base of the Andes into eastern Ecuador (Hilty & Brown 1986, Ridgely & Greenfield 2001). Also in recent years it has expanded its range greatly in parts of the Amazon basin in response to widespread deforestation (Ridgely & Tudor 1989). However, *S. militaris* was not recorded by personnel of the Instituto de Ciencias Naturales anywhere in the Amazonian lowlands of Colombia during widespread collecting activities in the 1960's and 1970's. Prior to about 1990 no cattle raising occurred in the Leticia area but from this date onwards

<sup>1</sup> Dirección actual: Corporación Sentido Natural. Calle 54ª 8-11 Of 102B. Bogotá



**Figure 1.** Map of the previously known distributions of *Sturnella militaris* (Sm) and *S. bellicosa* (Sb), in South America, with the sites of the observations reported here (arrows).

increasing areas of forest have been cleared for pasture along the road extending northwards for ca. 25 km from the city, and locally along the banks of the Río Amazonas (E. Cuao, pers. comm.). On 28 October 1996, FGS saw at least two *S. militaris* males in pastures ca. 7 km north of Leticia and during the following days noted several others in pastures along the N bank of the Río Amazonas as far west as Puerto Nariño. On 27 April 2001, males or pairs were seen at 7 and 10 km N Leticia in pastures, and on 18 October 2001 a pair was seen by JCC and IB in short grass near the waterfront in Puerto Nariño (Fig.1). A recognizable photograph of a male perched on the fence surrounding the airport at Leticia (Fig.2) was obtained by Luis Quintero of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia on 12 April 2002. The closest published records of *S. militaris* in the Amazonian region are from ca. 100 km south in Acre, Brazil (Ridgely & Tudor 1989).

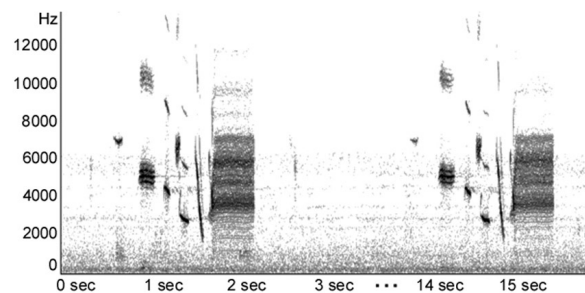
**Peruvian Meadowlark, *Sturnella bellicosa*:** This meadowlark had not been definitely recorded in Colombia although Hilty & Brown (1986) adverted its possible presence based on sightings of “red-breasted” blackbirds near Barbaças, Nariño in 1978 by D Gardner *et al.* FGS also saw a red-breasted male blackbird in a pasture near Altaquer, Nariño on 18 March 1995. However, because these records were about equidistant between the nearest records of *S. bellicosa* (Esmeraldas, Ecuador) and *militaris* (Guapi, Cauca) and no specimens were obtained, there was no certainty regarding the species involved.

On 25 March 2002, on Isla del Morro, Municipio de Tumaco, Departamento de Nariño (Fig. 1), JCC and JM observed two males and one female of *S. bellicosa* in short cut grass near



**Figure 2.** Male *Sturnella militaris* perched on a barbed-wire fence at the edge of the airport of Leticia, Amazonas, 12 October 2002. (Photo: L. Quintero).

the La Florida Airport (1°48'N 78°45'W), an open area dominated by *Panicum* sp. and *Paspalum* spp. grasses. The birds appeared to be engaged in courtship and we were able to record two vocalizations from a male, one involving a display. The first vocalization (Fig.3) is delivered either from a perch or from the ground, while the second, a longer, more complex phrase, is given while the male executes a flight display (Fig.4). In this display, the male begins to fly close to the ground and suddenly rises to a height of several meters, singing for the first two seconds; he stops flapping about half-way up, and upon attaining the maximum elevation he begins to dive rapidly downward. As he approaches the ground, the male begins to flap quickly, concludes its song and flutters down to land close to a female. On 28 March, we set five mist nets in this area and by playing back this vocalization succeeded in attracting and capturing an adult male, which we collected (Fig.5). The specimen is now no. 34185 in the ornithological collection of the Instituto de Ciencias Naturales, Museo de Historia Natural (ICN-MHN), Universidad Nacional de Colombia. The specimen had enlarged testes (left testis 8.5x4.4 mm, right 5.6x5.6 mm), a fully ossified skull, light fat deposits, fairly fresh plumage and weighed 75 g (see Table 1 for other measurements).



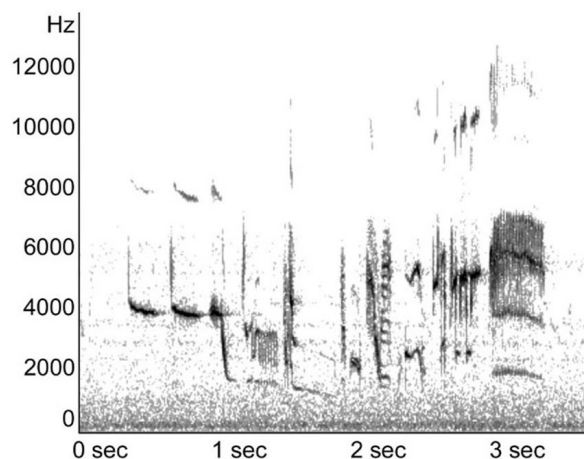
**Figure 3.** Sonogram of the song of a perched male *Sturnella bellicosa* recorded on 25 March 2003 at the La Florida Airport on Isla del Morro, Tumaco, Nariño.

**Table 1.** Measurements (in mm) of specimens of Peruvian Meadowlarks (*Sturnella bellicosa*) from Colombia, and of five specimens (means, standard deviations) of each sex of Red-breasted Blackbirds (*S. militaris*) from the collection of the Instituto de Ciencias Naturales, for comparison.

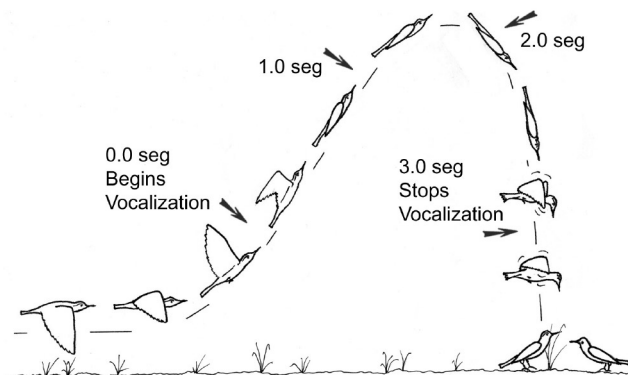
Specimens	Age, Sex	Length of exposed culmen	Length of flattened, closed wing	Length of tail	Length of tarsus
<i>S. bellicosa</i> PUJ 125	Adult female	22.9	92.5	52.0	32.6
<i>S. bellicosa</i> PUJ 665	Adult male	-- (broken)	105.0	67.0	35.0
<i>S. bellicosa</i> ICN 34185	Adult male	26.1	116.0	72.0	36.6
<i>S. militaris</i>	Adult males (n = 5)	19.9 ± 0.6	96.6 ± 2.7	55.2 ± 3.3	29.0 ± 1.1
<i>S. militaris</i>	Adult females (n = 5)	17.9 ± 0.5	85.0 ± 2.1	51.8 ± 3.1	26.8 ± 1.0

On 17 July 2002, JCC and JM returned to Isla del Morro and observed and heard several more Peruvian Meadowlarks. They were very common in the grasslands along the La Florida airport. We saw several fledged young with adult females and males, indicating that the birds had nested in the interval since our earlier visit.

a.



b.



**Figure 4.a.** Sonogram of the flight song display of a male *Sturnella bellicosa*, recorded at the same time and place as that of Fig.3. **b.** The aerial display of the male *S. bellicosa*; the horizontal (time) axis corresponds with that of Fig.4a.



**Figure 5.** Adult male *Sturnella bellicosa* captured on 28 March 2002 on Isla del Morro, Tumaco, Nariño.

Interestingly, this is not the first time that Peruvian Meadowlarks had been collected in Colombia. In the collection of the Museo Javeriano de Historia Natural Lorenzo Uribe SJ at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá are a male (PUJ 665) and a female (PUJ 125) collected by Bernardo Diez, S. J. on 10 July 1968 at Tumaco. FGS had noticed the female while cataloging this collection in 1990. He suspected that it might represent *S. bellicosa*, but did not make a definite identification for lack of comparative material or good illustrations, labeling it simply "*Sturnella* sp.". He advised JCC and IB of this possible record and, upon visiting this collection, they also found the male, not seen by FGS, and confirmed that both were *S. bellicosa*. Measurements of both specimens (and the ICN specimen mentioned above) are much larger than the corresponding measurements of *S. militaris*, sex for sex (Table 1). Both specimens are in worn plumage (consistent with the fresher plumage of our March specimen). The Peruvian Meadowlark was not recorded in apparently suitable habitat around Tumaco by Chapman's collector W. B. Richardson in July, 1912 (Chapman 1917) and evidently entered this area sometime in the following half century. The aforementioned sight records in 1978 and 1995 can thus be

ascribed to this species with a high degree of certainty, as *S. militaris* remains unrecorded south of Cauca Department on the Pacific slope of Colombia.

We thank William Bonilla and Gustavo Alarcón for their assistance on field, Luis Quintero for his photo, Camilo Peraza of the Museo Javeriano de Historia Natural Lorenzo Uribe for permission to examine the specimens of *S. bellicosa* there, and an anonymous reviewer for comments on the manuscript. Walter Weber, the Neotropical Bird Club, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Idea Wild and Instituto Alexander von Humboldt provided financial support for another investigation, which indirectly made possible the new record and collection for Colombia.

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