

## Rediscovery and first photograph of male Black-backed Thornbill (*Ramphomicron dorsale*)

The young male was first witnessed at El Dorado Bird Reserve on the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> December 2011 by ProAves Forest Guard Lorenzo Bautista and local guide Marcos Torres, who alerted reserve administrator Sam Martinez. The bird has since become a regular to the same group of feeders in an open habitat of the reserves ecolodge, arriving to feed several times a day. There have been previous observations by guides of a male further up the mountain on the “Cuchilla de San Lorenzo”. Recent trips to this area have also confirmed further sightings, with the individual preferring to feed on a eucalyptus before perching in an adjacent tree.

Believed to be around 1 year old the immature male exhibits the characteristic black back of its name, whilst still displaying the immature white plumes that are currently in moult. Typical behaviour on the feeders involves long stays at the feeder themselves (can be over minute in some instances) before the use of 3 separate perches nearby; a low lying shrub; bare branches of the feeding station itself; or a sparsely vegetated tree level perch. In the first few days of its arrival *R. dorsale* was frequently chased away by 2 other



species of hummingbird, the territorial and aggressive Sparkling Violet Ear (*Colibri coruscans*) and the more docile Violet Crowned Woodnymph (*Thalurania colombica*). However, during the course of the week these birds appeared to become more accepting and *R. dorsale* was predominantly left in peace. It should be noted that *C. coruscans* does still, on occasion, resume its aggressive tendencies to the young male, but as this species is prone to territorial behaviour this is not unusual.

There have been several previous records of *R. dorsale* during the first half of the year in Fundacion Proaves' 1,900 acre El Dorado Bird Reserve. 6 individuals were caught during monthly mist netting endeavours from 2004-2008. These individuals however, were solely juvenile males and females, with a distinct lack of an adult, or even immature, male. Females have been known to visit the feeders at the reserve sparingly, with 1 or 2 recorded sightings since 2010 but, as with the mist netting, no male had ever been seen or photographed at the reserve or at any other location. Previous knowledge of *R. dorsales* has only been gathered through ten specimens ([www.biomap.net](http://www.biomap.net)), nine of which are a likely to be over a hundred years old and 1 more recent specimen from 1972, collected by J. Munves on the same “Cuchilla de San Lorenzo” of recent sightings. Decades of work by the local (and prolific) collector Melbourne J. Carriker also failed to collect a sample of this species and he was left perplexed as to the species' movements and habitat.

Breeding for *R. dorsales* is likely to occur in the timberline-paramo ecotone, with the immature males found at lower elevations tending to be wandering individuals. Habitat preference is likely to



be based around the paramo-subparamo ecotones of the Sierra Nevada and related species *R. microrhynchum* is known to largely occupy these particular habitats. Sadly, these ecotones in the Sierra Nevada are in an incredibly poor state. Research conducted by Niels Krabbe (in conjunction with ProAves) to investigate the paramo in a search for *R. dorsale* and the Santa Marta Wren reported that this paramo was one of the most deprived (highly impoverished and damaged) that Krabbe had ever witnessed in the Andes, with a near complete absence of avifauna. The main causes for this degradation lie in the practices of recent colonist populations who burn the sensitive timberline zone and promote heavy cattle grazing. This, combined with the fragile nature of the

Sierra Nevada's climate (large seasonal fluctuations and high susceptibility to climate change - records show high levels of glacial and snow line melt-back) poses a serious threat to *R. dorsales* and leaves it in a perilous position. Thus, frequent sightings at the reserve feeders and other sightings in the field are clearly an exciting discovery, presenting a great opportunity to learn more about this elusive species and gain further understanding of the effects of these current threats.