



Howell vs. Reality

by

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Without “A guide to the birds of Mexico and Northern Central America” by Steve N. G. Howell and Sophie Webb, 1995, it would have been a lot more difficult to get a hold of the Mexican species. No doubt about that. With distribution maps of all species registered in the country it is a valuable tool (the only one) when trying to figure out which species are realistic to find in a certain area. And with illustrations often faithfully showing the necessary details to distinguish one species from another the inexperienced birder has had good opportunity to advance more rapidly (supplement by “The North American Bird Guide” by David Sibley, 2000, is essential though).

But as one acquires more and more knowledge by experience, it soon becomes evident that what at first looked like a solid rock upon which to rest and rely, now starts to soften at the edges and with time becomes more or less spongy in its substance.

But in fact, this should not come as a surprise since Howell himself, in the book, expresses very clearly that a lot of information is still missing about the Mexican birds.

The problem is that the distribution maps for many species are based on assumptions rather than facts. And for various species are erroneous. The lacking correctness is probably more expressed in the areas of Mexico he never visited himself. Among these Aguascalientes and highland species from Queretaro to mention a few areas.

This small note is not intended as a critic towards the author, but rather to let new readers and birders in the area understand that they should not rely too heavily on the maps. Sound and precise judgement on site is the key. Observe the habitat and the bird well to draw the right conclusions.

And then you might ask: Where are the Mexicans in all this? Why don't THEY produce this new, and highly needed, information since it's their country?

Well, it happens that an ongoing project, “Avifaunas estatales de México”, actually is working on defining the status of the species for every state in the country (You find information about it here (in spanish) www.huitzil.net).

So, hopefully, with these results, we will have a more precise tool to work with in the field.