



# First record of the Whistling Heron, *Syrigma sibilatrix* (Temminck, 1824) (Aves: Ardeidae) in Costa Rica

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**Abstract:** We present the first record of Whistling Heron, *Syrigma sibilatrix*, for Costa Rica, a species considered restricted to South America. An individual was observed foraging in a soccer field at Manzanillo, Limon province, Costa Rica. This sighting represents the northernmost record of its distribution range.

**Key words:** New avian record; Central America; Limon Province; Manzanillo

*Syrigma sibilatrix* (Temminck, 1824: 271) is a medium-sized heron (50–58 cm) (Hilty 2003) commonly reported from South America. Two different populations, separated by the Amazon Basin, are known (Kushlan et al. 1982). The subspecies *S. s. fostersmithi* (Friedmann, 1949) is distributed in Colombia and Venezuela, while *S. s. sibilatrix* (Temminck, 1824) is located in some areas of Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina (Blake 1977; Clements et al. 2015). *Syrigma sibilatrix* is one of the less aquatic species among the herons of the Ardeidae. Nonetheless, it may inhabit shallow wetlands (i.e., few cm deep) such as marshy areas, wet grasslands, rice paddies and muddy shores (Kushlan et al. 1982; Hilty 2003; Mena and Jahn 2003; BirdLife International 2012). In Costa Rica, 19 Ardeidae species have been recorded, but there is no previous record for *S. sibilatrix* (Garrigues and Dean 2014). Here, we describe the first record of this species for Costa Rica.

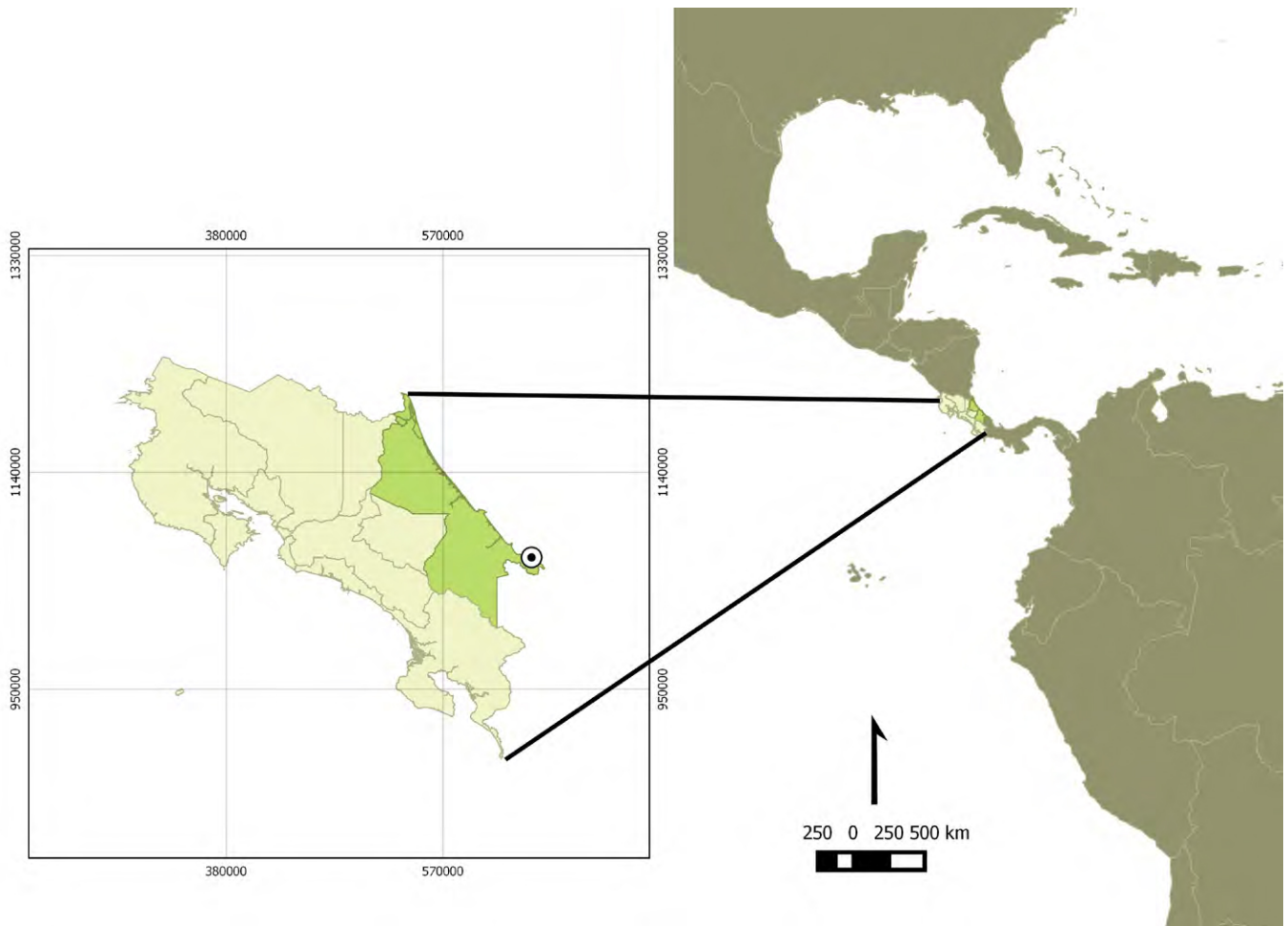
On 16 February 2016, we observed an individual of *S. sibilatrix* foraging at the soccer field in Manzanillo, Limon province (09°38'01.59" N, 082°39'21.25" W) (Figures 1 and 2). The soccer field is located 40 m from the sea, and is covered in short grass, with few trees surrounding. The site was partially flooded and muddy due to previous rains. We observed the heron continuously between 09:00 and 10:00 h, from ca. 25 m away and photographed it (Figure 2). From 10:00 to 15:00 h the heron remained in the area, sometimes making short flights to nearby trees.

We identified the species based on the presence of gray wings with buff tips, blue skin in the loreal region and a large pink bill with black tip (Mena and Jahn 2003; Dean 2012).

Comparing with the Official List of the Birds of Costa Rica (Garrigues et al. 2015) and the List of Birds of Costa Rica (Sandoval and Sánchez 2016), this is the first documented record of *S. sibilatrix* in the country, which may be considered an accidental record. Although we could not precisely determine the subspecies, the individual recorded likely belongs to *S. s. fostersmithi*, the closest population to Costa Rica.

Whistling Herons have been reported in some countries outside their usual distribution range. For example, Whistling Heron is considered a species of hypothetical occurrence in Ecuador, according to the List of Birds of Ecuador, because there is no material evidence to validate its occurrence (Freile et al. 2015), although a record was published by Mena and Jahn (2003) on 24 August 2000 in Orellana province. In Chile its status is listed as vagrant according to the List of Birds of Chile (Barros et al. 2015), as it was observed by Díaz and Schmitt (2010) on December 22, 2009 in Chacabuco province. The only records from outside of South America are from Panama, indicating a northward movement outside its typical distribution range. The first record for Panama was in 2010, with other reports in 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 (eBird 2016). The two most recent records are from Malibu lagoon, New Gorgona (Panamanian Pacific) from 5 January 2016 to 2 February 2016; and from Fort Sherman and the road between Colon and Gatun (Panamanian Caribbean) on 6 February 2016. As the most recent sighting in Panama was 10 days before ours in Costa Rica, and the distance between the two locations is approximately 300 km, the possibility that both records are of the same individual cannot be dismissed.

Across its known distribution range the Whistling Heron is considered sedentary or resident, making only short local movements (Sharpe et al. 2001; Dean



**Figure 1.** Location of the first record of *Syrigma sibilatrix* in Costa Rica, a soccer field in Manzanillo, Limon province.



**Figure 2.** *Syrigma sibilatrix* in the soccer field at Manzanillo, Limon province, Costa Rica, 16 February 2016 (Jesús Alfaro photo).

2012). However, a gradual expansion in its range could be occurring, possibly associated with habitat loss by agriculture, as well as other human-induced landscape changes (Blamires et al. 2005; Dean 2012).

*Syrigma sibilatrix* often forages in open areas, either alone or in pairs (Kushlan et al. 1982). During our observations, the individual actively foraged in various sectors of the soccer field. Its behavior consisted of slowly walking until a prey was spotted; it then remained upright, approached cautiously and caught the prey with a quick movement. Such behavior is consistent with those reported in literature (Kushlan et al. 1982; Hilty 2003). We observed grasshoppers and earthworms being caught, as well as a juvenile toad, likely *Rhinella marina* (Linnaeus, 1758), which was released and pecked at, but not consumed.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This observation was made in the company of María Venegas Vargas and Juan Diego Castro Salazar. We thank those who contributed their records of the Whistling Heron in Panama to eBird. Finally, we thank Víctor Acosta Chaves, Verónica Venegas Vargas and Esteban Meneses Rojas for their comments on this note.

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**Author contributions:** AR and VV made the sighting, identified the species and wrote the text.

**Received:** 23 March 2016

**Accepted:** 5 August 2016

**Academic editor:** Jeferson Vizentin-Bugoni