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NOTES ON GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Recent record and distributional update of *Nyctiphrynus ocellatus* (Tschudi, 1844) (Aves, Caprimulgidae) in southeastern Ecuador

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Abstract. We report new records of the Ocellated Poorwill, *Nyctiphrynus ocellatus* (Tschudi, 1844), from southeastern Ecuador. An individual of *N. ocellatus* was photographed in September 2025 at the Copalinga Reserve, Zamora Chinchipe Province. This observation, along with records from online databases, expands the species' previously known distribution range toward southeastern Ecuador and confirms its presence in and affinity for humid montane forests of the Andean foothills.

Keywords. Ocellated Poorwill, range extension, Zamora Chinchipe

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Introduction

The nightjar family Caprimulgidae is the most widely distributed group within Caprimulgiformes and reaches high diversity in the Neotropics, with 34 species occurring in South America (Cleere 2010; Remsen et al. 2023). In Ecuador, 19 species of caprimulgiform have been documented, including the Ocellated Poorwill, *Nyctiphrynus ocellatus* (Tschudi, 1844), and the Chocó Poorwill, *N. rosenbergi* (Hartert 1895) (Freile and Restall 2018). These are the only two species of *Nyctiphrynus* Bonaparte, 1857 recorded in the country.

Nyctiphrynus ocellatus is a nocturnal bird distributed from Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, whereas in South America it occurs across the Amazon Basin and the Andean foothills of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina (Cleere 2010). In Ecuador, the species has been recorded in humid tropical and premontane forests of the provinces of Sucumbios, Orellana, Napo, Pastaza, Morona Santiago, and Zamora Chinchipe, where it inhabits the understory and forest-edges at low to middle elevations (Ridgely and Greenfield 2001; Freile and Restall 2018). Due to its cryptic plumage and nocturnal habits, *N. ocellatus* has been poorly documented in ornithological studies; therefore, several authors classify it as rare, even in suitable habitats within its known range (Freile and Restall 2018).

Zamora Chinchipe Province, located in southeastern Ecuador, represents a biogeographically important transition zone between the Andes and the Amazon Basin and is characterised by a high diversity of habitats and altitudinal gradients (Sierra et al. 1999; Myers et al. 2000). Despite its recognised ecological importance and documented high diversity of bird species (Crespo-Ramírez et al. 2024), records of nocturnal birds remain limited. To date, only 11 nocturnal bird species have been documented in the immediate study area (Córdova-González and Ordóñez-Delgado 2025). These include one species of the family Steatornithidae, one Nyctibiidae, six Strigidae, and three Caprimulgidae (*Nyctipolus nigrescens*, *Nyctidromus albicollis*, and *N. ocellatus*) (Córdova-González and Ordóñez-Delgado 2025). This emphasises the need for additional documentation to refine the known distribution of cryptic and elusive taxa, such as *N. ocellatus*.

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In this study, we provide an update on the distribution of *N. ocellatus* in Ecuador, based on recent field observations and a review of existing records. According to the existing literature, the distribution of *N. ocellatus* in Ecuador encompasses the northeastern region of the country, primarily below 500 m a.s.l. (Cleere and Kirwan 2020; Freile and Restall 2018; McMullan and Navarrete 2017; Ridgely and Greenfield 2001, 2006), with a single officially published record for the southeast, in the Nangaritza sector at 1400 m a.s.l. (Freile et al. 2013). Through this work, we update the information regarding the species' actual distribution, addressing a knowledge gap that has persisted since the early 2000s.

Study area

The study was conducted at Copalinga Reserve, a privately protected area located in Zamora-Chinchipe Province on the eastern Andean slopes of southern Ecuador. This Reserve has approximately 137 ha of primary forest, with a portion of it previously altered due to selective logging. The canopy in the area reaches heights of 30–40 m and feature such species as *Metteniusa tessmanniana* (Sleumer) Sleumer (Metteniusaceae), *Terminalia oblonga* (Ruiz & Pav.) Steud, *Terminalia amazonia* (J.F. Gmel.) Exell (Combretaceae), *Guarea guidonia* (L.) Sleumer (Meliaceae), *Oenocarpus bataua* Mart., and *Ceroxylon amazonicum* Galeano (Arecaceae). *Protium* sp. (Burseraceae), known locally as copal, and *Inga* sp. (Fabaceae) are the most common taxa and inspired the name of the reserve (Ordóñez-Delgado et al. 2018).

The region has undergone substantial deforestation and fragmentation since the 1970s, particularly at lower elevations typical of the premontane belt (Tapia-Armijos et al. 2015). The climate of the study area is humid throughout the year, with annual mean precipitation exceeding 2000 mm, and annual mean temperature is 19.4 °C reaching a maximum of 30.2 °C (Maldonado 2002; Moser et al. 2007). Regarding the timing of our observation of *Nyctiphrynus ocellatus*, the lunar phase on the date of the sighting corresponded to a waning moon. The study area is located on the eastern escarpment of the Cordillera Real of the Andes, where steep mountain slopes descend toward the Amazonian foreland (Beck et al. 2008). The topography of the study area is dissected, with elevations of ~900–1,600 m a.s.l., which corresponds to lower montane evergreen rainforest (Beck et al. 2008).

Methods

On 15 September 2025 at 10:00 h, Walter Gaona located an individual of *Nyctiphrynus ocellatus* on the Rojo Varado trail of the Reserve, which was photographed by Paul Székely. Furthermore, no playback was used to attract this or any other species; the record was opportunistic, upon finding an individual at a diurnal roost. The identification was confirmed based on the plumage characteristics described by Schulenberg et al. (2010) and Freile and Restall (2018).

To contextualise this observation, we conducted a comprehensive search for national distribution records of *N. ocellatus* in Ecuador across two online biodiversity databases: Macaulay Library (Macaulay Library 2026) and Xeno-canto (Vellinga 2026). Data compilation was restricted to these two primary repositories to ensure direct access to raw media files and facilitate rigorous quality control.

To prevent data inflation, all retrieved entries were subjected to a standardised curation protocol. Duplicates between platforms (e.g. identical audio files uploaded to both Macaulay Library and Xeno-canto) were consolidated into single-record entries. Likewise, multiple submissions by the same observer from the same locality and date were filtered, for example: if an observer submitted multiple entries on the same day at the same location, only distinct temporal events were retained. For multiple photographic entries of the same individual on a given date, we selected the single best-quality photograph that clearly exhibited diagnostic field marks. When an observer provided multiple media files of comparable quality across different dates at the same locality, the earliest recorded date was selected. All validated coordinates and metadata were mapped using QGIS v. 3.40.4 (QGIS Development Team 2025) to generate the national distribution map (Figure 1).

Results

***Nyctiphrynus ocellatus* (Tschudi, 1844)**
Figures 1, 2

New record. ECUADOR — Zamora • Copalinga Reserve; 04°05′02″S, 078°57′56″W; 1360 m a.s.l; 15.IX.2025; Walter Gaona obs.; within montane forest of the eastern foothills of the Andes, on Rojo Varado trail; 1 male adult.

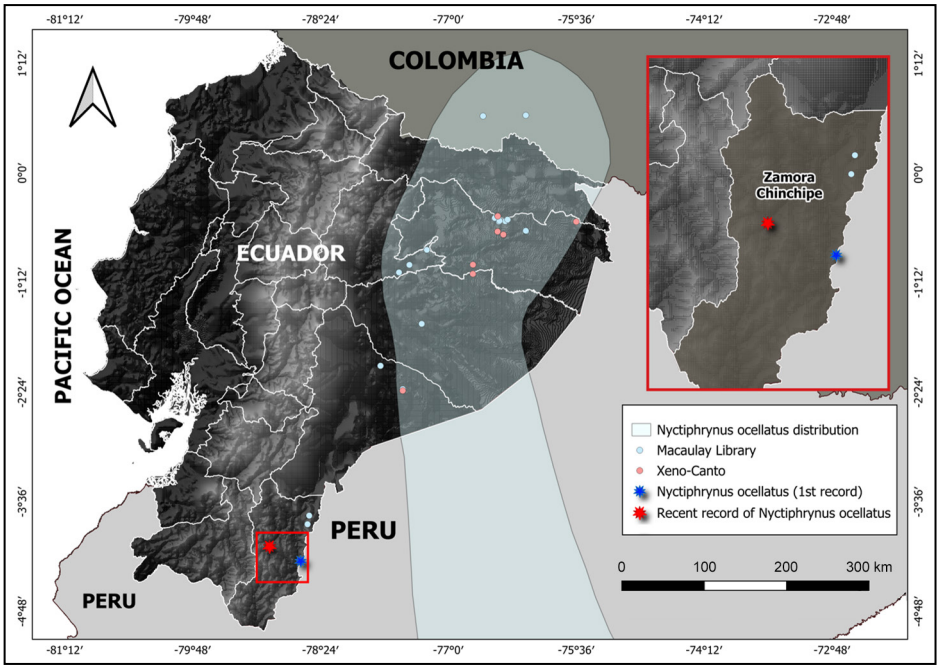

Figure 1. Distribution of *Nyctiphrynus ocellatus* in Ecuador. The light blue area shows the species' distribution according to BirdLife International (2025), and the red dot (inside the red box) represents the new record reported in this study.

Figure 2. *Nyctiphrynus ocellatus* in Reserva Ecológica Copalinga, Zamora Chinchipe. Photograph by Paul Székely.

Identification. The photographed individual (Figure 2) showed a small (~20 cm), compact nightjar with a short, flattened bill, broad at the base, and slightly curved toward the tip, typical of forest-dwelling caprimulgids (Cleere 2010). The bill was dark brown to blackish and bordered by short rictal bristles (Cleere 2010; Freile and Restall 2018). The head displayed fine, pale-speckling on the crown and nape, and the face showed a distinct white band across the upper throat, a reliable diagnostic character for *N. ocellatus* (Anderson 2000; Costa and Ingels 2020). The upper parts were greyish, an indication of a male specimen (Costa and Ingels 2020). The lateral underparts exhibited several conspicuous round, white spots (ocelli), a hallmark feature that gives the species its name (Costa and Ingels 2020). The wings lacked a pale or white patch, a diagnostic field characteristic separating this species from other Ecuadorian nightjars (Freile and Restall 2018). The outer rectrices showed narrow white tips, consistent with the pattern described for the nominate form (Costa and Ingels 2020).

In Ecuador, the only poorwill that *N. ocellatus* may be confused with is *N. rosenbergi*, a species geographically restricted to the northwest of the country (to 1100 m a.s.l.) having darker overall plumage and lacking the bright-white belly spots, as well as having different vocal patterns (Robbins and Ridgely 1992; Freile and Restall 2018). Other sympatric nightjars in the region (e.g. species of *Antrostomus* Bonaparte, 1838, *Systellura* Ridway, 1912, and *Chordeiles* Swainson, 1832) are readily separated by their size, presence of white or buff patches on the wings, or different tail patterning, none of which occur in *N. ocellatus* (Cleere 2010). Thus, the combination of a bold, white throat band, ventral ocelli, and absence of wing patches, confirms the identification of our individual as *N. ocellatus*.

Distribution review. Our search across online databases yielded a total of 43 records for *N. ocellatus* in Ecuador (Figure 1). Of these, 37 records correspond to historically known localities across the Ecuadorian Amazon. Six records originate from Zamora Chinchipe Province. Prior to this work, the only documented record for Zamora Chinchipe was from a Tepuy in Miazi, Cordillera del Cóndor (Freile et al. 2013) (Figure 1). All 43 records are supported by documentary evidence: 25 records are verified by audio recordings (deposited in Macaulay Library (n = 16) and Xeno-canto (n = 9)), while the remaining records are documented with photographic evidence (Appendix Table A1).

Discussion

This study enhances our understanding of the current distribution of *Nyctiphrynus ocellatus* in Ecuador and confirms its presence in the southeastern Amazon region, specifically in northern Zamora Chinchipe Province. Historical records in the country restricted the species' range to the lowland forests and eastern foothills of the Amazon Basin (Figure 1) (Ridgely and Greenfield 2001; Freile and Restall 2018; BirdLife International 2020). Our observation at the Copalinga Reserve not only corroborates previous unpublished reports (Figure 1) but also helps bridge the geographical gap between historical localities, extending its known range by at least 100 km southward the country. This finding further supports the specie´s association with well-preserved humid forests.

Numerous ornithological expeditions have been conducted in Zamora Chinchipe; however, only a 2009 survey of the Cordillera del Cóndor, located on the province's eastern flank, captured a female *N. ocellatus*. This event documented the species' presence in southeastern Ecuador for the first time (9 April 2009) and established its highest elevation record (Freile et al. 2013). Our record from the Copalinga Reserve is located approximately 40 km from that locality and represents the second confirmed occurrence for Zamora Chinchipe Province, 16 years after the initial report. The spatial separation between these two records suggests that *N. ocellatus* is occupying a range of forest types from sandstone tepui environments to mature Amazonian evergreen foothill forest.

That first report, allow us to discuss the low detectability of caprimulgiform birds, which is closely related to their biology. Nightjars are mainly nocturnal, and their cryptic plumage provides effective camouflage against predators, making them difficult to detect in the field (Cleere 2010). In addition, they vocalise more frequently during the breeding season, for example, December in the northeastern part of their geographic range in Ecuador (Hill and Greeney 2000).

Although platforms such as eBird and GBIF contain numerous records of this species, primarily in northeastern Ecuador, few include documentary evidence to verify its presence (e.g. Freile and Restall 2018). Therefore, as proposed by Da Silva et al. (2023), data from some participatory science platforms should be handled with caution, especially regarding cryptic species that are difficult to record and visually identify in the field. Likewise, it is indispensable to have a strict data validation and curation process. This will avoid overestimating species richness in specific regions or disseminating erroneous records, mainly regarding those species that are endemic, threatened, or sensitive to environmental changes.

Moreover, most ornithological studies concentrate their sampling effort during traditional survey periods (e.g. diurnal or evening) (Marks et al. 1999; Watson 2017; Morelli et al. 2022). As a result, taxa such as owls and nightjars are frequently undersampled (Goyette et al. 2011; Joel et al. 2024). The apparent scarcity of records therefore highlights the importance of targeted nocturnal surveys and opportunistic observations—such as the present record—for improving distribution knowledge of cryptic taxa.

The presence of *N. ocellatus* in Zamora Chinchipe is consistent with its broader Neotropical distribution, which extends from central-southern Colombia, northeastern Ecuador, and eastern Peru and southward through Bolivia, Paraguay, and northeastern Argentina to southern Brazil (Anderson 2000; Cleere 2010; Schulenberg et al. 2010). The 16-year interval between the first provincial record and our recent observation further emphasises how limited sampling can obscure the true continuity of populations in southeastern Ecuador.

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Additional information

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The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

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The authors accept full responsibility for the content of the manuscript, including the disclosure of any use of AI. No AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

Author contributions

Conceptualisation: CC-R, LO-D. Data curation: LO-D. Formal analysis: CC-R, LO-D. Investigation: CC-R, LO-D, WG, VC, JA. Validation: LO-D. Visualisation: JA. Writing – original draft: CC-R, L O-D. Writing – review and editing: CC-R, LO-D, WG, VC, JA.

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Data availability

All data that support the findings of this study are available in the main text.

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Appendix

Table A1. Consolidated distribution records of *Nyctiphrynus ocellatus* in Ecuador, compiled from review of online databases (Macaulay Library (record IDs with ML) and Xeno-canto (record IDs with XC)) and the literature. Geographical coordinates have been rounded to four decimal places.

Observer	Date	Locality	Province	Latitude	Longitude	Record type	Record ID
Freile et al. 2013	09-Apr-09	Cordillera del Cóndor, Tepuy	Zamora Chinchipe	−04.2503	−078.6175	Collected	—
Nige Hartley	16-Aug-13	Napo Wildlife Center	Orellana	−00.5325	−076.4458	Photograph	ML101467001
Glenn Seeholzer	24-Nov-09	Tiputini Research Station	Orellana	−00.6323	−076.1520	Audio	ML148506
Keegan Burke	25-Jan-16	Tiputini Biodiversity Station	Orellana	−00.6323	−076.1520	Photograph	ML159176251
Luke Seitz	08-Jan-11	Yasuní Biological Research Station	Orellana	−00.6745	−076.3974	Photograph	ML32397021
Sam Woods	09-Mar-22	Napo Wildlife Center	Orellana	−00.5068	−076.4446	Photograph	ML427530561
Andrew Spencer	18-Aug-10	Yasuní Biological Research Station	Orellana	−00.6745	−076.3974	Audio	ML435076891
Agustin Carrasco	28-Jun-13	Copalinga Lodge	Zamora Chinchipe	−04.0909	−078.9583	Photograph	ML459462401
Rudy Gelis	11-Sep-22	Sunka Biological Station - Cerro Wisui,	Morona Santiago	−02.1112	−077.7434	Audio	ML487836011
Dušan Brinkhuizen	15-Aug-12	Yasuní National Park-Sendero Belisario	Orellana	−00.5103	−076.3515	Photograph	ML578622341
Neil Broekhuizen	07-Feb-22	Napo Wildlife Center	Orellana	−00.5068	−076.4446	Audio	ML608512831
Efrain Toapanta	01-Dec-23	Mandaripanga	Orellana	−00.6240	−076.6207	Photograph	ML611851192
Jay McGowan	02-Nov-23	Tiputini Biodiversity Station	Orellana	−00.6370	−076.1479	Audio	ML612905734
Jamie Jacob	20-Jan-24	Yasuní National Park	Orellana	−00.5274	−076.3777	Photograph	ML614000400
Luis Alberto Salagaje Muela	17-Mar-24	Tiputini Biodiversity Station	Orellana	−00.6324	−076.1503	Audio	ML616179700
Neil Osborne	21-Sep-09	Sacha Lodge-Shipati River and Providencia trail	Orellana	−00.4927	−076.4920	Photograph	ML616330532
Alfonso Jiménez	14-Oct-24	Yachana New Lodge	Napo	−00.8416	−077.2356	Photograph	ML624974902
Glenn Seeholzer	20-Nov-24	A 2km de Comunidad Sapara Llanchamcoha	Pastaza	−01.6516	−077.2921	Audio	ML627108189
Sam Woods	20-Dec-24	Yachana New Lodge	Napo	−00.8416	−077.2356	Photograph	ML628004922
Byron Swift	25-Feb-25	Yachana New Lodge	Napo	−00.8416	−077.2356	Photograph	ML631284892
Jefferson Gualinga	24-Feb-25	Yachana New Lodge	Napo	−00.8416	−077.2356	Audio	ML632113767
Andrew Vallely	07-Mar-25	Tiputini Biodiversity Station	Orellana	−00.6379	−076.1494	Audio	ML632466815
Robert Carr	30-Mar-25	Copalinga Lodge	Zamora Chinchipe	−04.09091	−078.9583	Audio	ML632966325
Jhony Magash	27-Sep-24	El Zarza	Zamora Chinchipe	−03.7520	−078.5239	Photograph	ML635306780
Paulo Clemente Guevara	01-Jun-25	Yachana New Lodge	Napo	−00.8416	−077.2356	Photograph	ML637058423
Juan Francisco Herrera Cueva	05-Jul-25	Yasuní Biological Research Station	Orellana	−00.6745	−076.3974	Audio	ML638844384
Benjamin Filreis	20-Jul-25	Refugio de Vida Silvestre El Zarza	Zamora Chinchipe	−03.8463	−078.5422	Audio	ML639927621
Leonardo Ordóñez-Delgado	16-Sep-25	Copalinga Lodge	Zamora Chinchipe	−04.0909	−078.9583	Photograph	ML642033039
Walter Gaona	15-Sep-25	Copalinga Lodge	Zamora Chinchipe	−04.0912	−078.9573	Photograph	ML642112464
Robin Arnold	26-Jan-24	New tower NWC Orellana	Orellana	−00.5190	−076.3559	Photograph	ML642945978
Sandy Schreven	18-Jan-23	Napo Wildlife Center	Orellana	−00.5235	−076.4395	Photograph	ML650233966
Luis Chancusig	30-Apr-26	Ruta De Fiery Topaz	Pastaza	−01.0885	−077.5410	Audio	ML656209985
Luis Chancusig	26-May-26	Sumac Sacha	Pastaza	−01.0059	−077.4270	Audio	ML658752158
Owen Robertson	11-Jun-26	Yasuní Biological Research Station	Orellana	−00.6745	−076.3974	Audio	ML659552330
Mark Robbins	14-Aug-90	Taisha	Morona Santiago	−02.3667	−077.5000	Audio	ML73732
Jarol Fernando Vaca	13-Mar-26	Shiripuno Lodge & Shiripuno Research Center	Orellana	−01.1048	−076.7317	Audio	XC1089640
Jarol Fernando Vaca	06-Oct-13	Shiripuno Lodge & Shiripuno Research Center	Orellana	−01.004	−076.7310	Audio	XC171871
Niels Krabbe	12-Jul-94	Maxus road km 37 (27 km SSE Pompeya)	Orellana	−00.6410	−076.4610	Audio	XC238696
Niels Krabbe	17-Jul-94	Maxus road km 37 (27 km SSE Pompeya)	Orellana	−00.6410	−076.4610	Audio	XC238697
Mitch Lysinger	14-Jul-98	Sacha Lodge, north bank Río Napo	Sucumbios	−00.4720	−076.4590	Audio	XC260441
Robert S. Ridgely	1992-09-00	Río Pacuyacu	Orellana	−00.5330	−075.6000	Audio	XC274954
Robert S. Ridgely	1990-08-00	Taisha	Morona Santiago	−02.383	−077.5000	Audio	XC274955
Charlie Vogt	01-May-01	Sacha Lodge, Rio Napo	Sucumbios	−00.4714	−076.4603	Audio	XC509832
Andrew Spencer	18-Aug-10	Yasuní Research Station	Orellana	−00.6742	−076.3978	Audio	XC61357