



WILDLIFE NOTES

Elegant Trogon

Trogon elegans

This nearly mythical visitor to extreme southwestern New Mexico is closely related to the Quetzal and was revered by the Maya and Aztec Indians.

RANGE

Elegant Trogons are primarily non-migratory Mexican residents; however, a small number routinely spend summers in southeastern Arizona where they may nest. Even fewer visit and breed in the bootheel of New Mexico. They are listed as rare in the Peloncillo and Animas Mountains (Hidalgo County), but can be reliably found in no more than 1 or 2 canyons in New Mexico. Individuals may arrive in April and depart in September or November as temperatures cool and food becomes scarce.

Although vagrant or “casual” birds have been seen farther north and east in New Mexico, moist sycamore canyons of the bootheel are the best place to find them. Any sightings are rare. Even in southeast Arizona where they are predictable, there are fewer than 50 pairs in an area of over 10,000 square miles.

HABITAT

Elegant Trogons are picky about their habitat in the U.S. — they prefer to be among sycamores along flowing streams in the pine-oak woodlands of otherwise arid canyons. Few places in the southwest have sufficient water flow for sycamore trees in riparian areas,

but trogons find these conditions between 4000 and 7000 feet in mountain ranges along the Mexican border in Arizona and New Mexico.

DESCRIPTION

Elegant Trogons are perhaps the most beautiful of New Mexican birds, exotic tropical jewels in wooded canyons and streamside sycamores. The brilliant plumage makes them stunning creatures. Adult males have deep iridescent green upper parts and throat, but slight shifts in lighting can render this color black to metallic bronze. The belly is geranium red, separated from the deep green of the neck by a white crescent across the chest. The upper side of the long, squared-off tail has iridescent copper green central feathers tipped in black (the former name was Coppery-tailed Trogon). The outer tail feathers are mostly white.

Females are duller versions of the males, brownish where he is glossy green, pinkish where he is red. Their undertails are very pale with fine dusky barring. Females have a whitish ear spot or tear-streak on the side of their heads.

Elegant Trogons are jay or crow-sized birds, measuring 10 to 14 inches (about half of which is tail). Their short round wings span 12-13 inches. Both sexes have round heads, short necks, large eyes, broad but short saw-toothed yellow



Photo by John Obenaus

bills, tiny feet and orange eye rings. The birds also share a distinct characteristic with parrots and woodpeckers: two of their four toes point backward. Most birds perch with only one of their four toes pointing back.

BEHAVIOR

In spite of their striking coloration, when Elegant Trogons are sitting in the shady canopies, they may be difficult to see. They are sedate and generally quiet, remaining motionless for long periods. Were it not for their frequent calling during the breeding season, trogons would

often escape notice. The bold croaking call brings an exotic touch to the woodlands.

Male Elegant Trogons are highly territorial. They begin calling at dawn, call monotonously until mid-morning and then again at dusk. In Arizona, territories run about one-half mile, generally along or near streams.

The casual flight of this species is woodpecker-like, slow and heavily undulating, but individuals are capable of swift and direct flight and amazing maneuverability when escaping from hawks or other dangers.

Adults will defend their nests and young from hawks, ravens, squirrels and snakes, but human disturbance has caused abandonment of nests.

DIET/FEEDING

Elegant Trogons feed on a wide variety of insects, especially big ones such as katydids, cicadas, walking-sticks, grasshoppers, mantids, and large caterpillars as well as beetles and moths. They have been known to eat small lizards. They also eat many small fruits and berries such as wild grapes and chokecherries. These food items are frequently gleaned by mid-air hovering.

This species has a remarkable ability to distinguish objects in the low light of the shady woodlands. Like owls, trogons not only have acute vision, but also can turn their heads through a wide arc.

REPRODUCTION

Elegant Trogons are monogamous. Some birds may be paired by the time they arrive at Arizona and New Mexico breeding sites, but others may court and bond after arrival. Males will identify a suitable nest cavity, sometimes competing with other males for the site, then call from inside or lead a female to the cavity. If the female enters the nest, the bond is made.

Over 80% of U.S. nests are in cavities in live or dead sycamores, with oaks, cottonwoods and willows also used. Acorn Woodpeckers or flickers may have made the original holes. Trogons seem to prefer cavities 12 to 40 feet above the ground, typically about 25 feet and up. Little or no nesting material is brought in; eggs are laid on the unlined bottom of the hole or on accumulated debris.

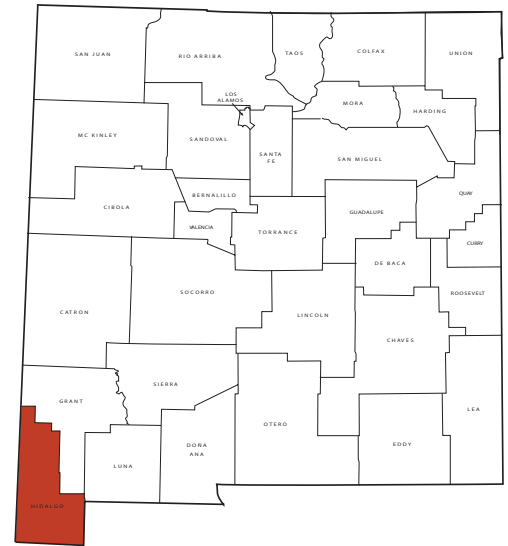
Two to four white eggs, about an inch in diameter, are laid anywhere from April to the end of June. Incubation duties are shared for about three weeks with the female sitting at night and at midday, the male in early morning and late afternoon. The naked, helpless young are fed by both parents. A few eggs each year isn't a very high reproductive rate, especially considering about half of the young fall prey to snakes, raptors and small mammals.

CONSERVATION

The Elegant Trogon is listed as state-endangered in New Mexico. Erratic occurrence and small numbers in the US, and especially in New Mexico, make it difficult to detect trends. Data from Arizona indicate fairly stable populations.

The specific streamside nesting requirements of this species make it vulnerable to disturbance and habitat destruction. Large, old trees with cavities may be a limiting factor; the birds' feet and bill are too weak to excavate their own. Threats include degradation and loss of riparian habitat through stream diversion, groundwater withdrawal, erosion, and overgrazing.

Where it occurs in the U. S., the



bird draws birders and photographers like disciples to Mecca. Some overzealous people have caused abandonment of nests by overuse of taped trogon calls or by getting too close to the nest.

Elegant Trogon needs are habitat protection/restoration and people management.

Management efforts to enhance sycamore and oak populations for breeding and foraging habitat might include reducing grazing along riparian corridors, reducing diversions and groundwater withdrawal to maintain stream flow, prohibiting cutting of large snags for firewood, and minimizing disturbance from birdwatchers and photographers by closing nest sites or limiting approach distance to nests and banning use of recorded calls.

These elegant visitors are an indicator species of ecologically rich and healthy canyons. Where trogons are found there is also an abundance of other species and quality habitat.

Wildlife Notes are published by
the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.
This note and many others are available online at
http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/education/wildlife_notes/WildlifeNotes.htm
You may download, copy and distribute these.

For further information call the Conservation Education Section at
(505) 476-8119 or 476-8095.