

Cyanerpes cyaneus (Red-legged Honeycreeper)

Family: Thraupidae (Tanagers and Honeycreepers)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Red-legged honeycreeper, *Cyanerpes cyaneus*.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red-legged_honeycreeper, downloaded 11 September 2016]

TRAITS. Red-legged honeycreepers, *Cyanerpes cyaneus*, are a species of small songbird within the tanager family. They have a length of 11.5-13cm, with an average of 12.2cm and a weight of 14g (Bouglouan, 2016; Ridgely and Tudor, 2009). These songbirds display sexual dimorphism where the adult breeding males exhibit a bright purplish-blue plumage with a contrasting turquoise blue crown (Ridgely and Gwynne, 1989), black wings, tail, upper back, and a small mask around the eyes (Hilty, 2002). The bill is also black, slender, long and decurved, and the males have bright red legs with black claws (Fig. 1). The underwings are bright yellow and only visible during flight. The females possess olive green plumage with a white stripe above the eye, a dull yellow belly with olive streaks on the breast, brown wings, and purple legs with black claws (Bond et al., 1999; Ridgely and Tudor 2009). Like the male, the female bears yellow underwings and a similar coloured and shaped beak. The adult males during the ‘eclipse’ or non-breeding phase resemble the females, however they still retain their black wings and tail and

bright red legs (Howell and Webb, 1995; Ridgely and Gwynne, 1989). The juvenile males resembles the non-breeding males however they possess brown legs (Bouglouan, 2016) whilst the juvenile females are similar to the adult females.

ECOLOGY. This species can be found in central Brazil, southern Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, northern Bolivia and Trinidad and Tobago (Fig. 2). Though they maybe tropical birds, during the winter season in Mexico and Cuba, they locally migrate to warmer areas. They mostly occur up to 900-1100m, but occasionally up to 1200m (Bouglouan, 2016). They suspend their cup-shaped nests in areas that are semi-open with scattered secondary growth of hedges and trees and the edges of forests and woodland (Howell and Webb, 1995; Ridgely and Gwynne, 1989). They also live in residential gardens and plantations like cocoa, coffee and citrus (Hilty, 2002). The canopies of the trees are their main sites for foraging for food like nectar, fruits, seeds and small insects. Due to the decurved shape of their bill they have the ability to drink nectar from narrow-opening flowers, puncture holes within the fruit in order to obtain their seeds (Hilty, 2002) and capture insects in small crevices on branches and in mid-air (Burnie, 2016).

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION. These birds are very sociable and reside in large flocks of the same or mixed species. At the foraging canopies they can be seen in flocks of 100 and more, sharing food and interacting with other honeycreepers, for instance the purple honeycreeper *Cyanerpes caeruleus*, or other birds such as tanagers (Bouglouan, 2016). During the breeding season, they congregate into flocks of 15, however when it's time to mate they separate into pairs (Hilty, 2002). During the winter season they congregate into flocks of 50 and more and locally migrate to warmer regions within the country (Bouglouan, 2016; Howell and Webb, 1995).

ACTIVITY. These birds display a restless and energetic behaviour and are diurnal hence they perform most of their activities during the day. Rarely will they be seen active at night. During the day they feed at the many canopy foraging sites with similar and differing species of birds and feed on small insects. They also like to take baths in the rainwater that accumulates in the bromeliads' central cup.

FORAGING BEHAVIOUR. They forage in groups of 100 and more birds, either of the same or differing species, at the differing flowering sites in the canopy. In Trinidad only a small number of the tropical birds feed on nectar whilst the majority feed on fruits (Fig. 3) (Snow and Snow, 1971). They are very fond of the seeds found in the fleshy arils, which are pods of seeds found within the pomegranate fruit, and they use their pointed bills to puncture holes in the fruit in order to extract its seeds (Snow and Snow, 1971). By foraging in a large flock, it gives the red-legged honeycreepers an advantage for there will be more than one pair of eyes looking out for the presence of predators like the ferruginous pygmy-owl, *Glaucidium brasilianum*, as well as provide a greater knowledge on the location of the fruits and the flowering trees. The interaction between the red-legged honeycreepers and the flowering trees is a mutualistic bond. The small birds gain food from the flowers whilst in return the birds play the role of pollinators. The pollen from the flowers will reside on the plumage of the birds enabling them to be transported to other plants. Apart from the plant foods, they also feed on small insects. Due to their sharp eyesight they have ability to the see the tiniest of insects on the underside and crevices of branches and twigs as well as ambush the insects when they are approaching the flowers (Snow and Snow, 1971).

COMMUNICATION. At the break of dawn the red-legged honeycreeper emits an unmusical, weak ‘chat’ and ‘tisp’ noise (Howell and Webb, 1995) and during the day it emits a series of calls that range from a rolling and slight nasal ‘srrip’ and a high pitched ‘shree’ sound (Bouglouan, 2016). It also emits a ‘meeah’ or ‘meeihr’ sound that resembles the tropical gnatcatcher, *Polioptila plumbea*, however it’s much more buzzy and rougher and during flight, the birds emit a thin, sharp, high-pitched ‘ssit ssit’ sound (Howell and Webb, 1995).

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR. The breeding season occurs from January to June and during this season the males exhibit a bright purplish-blue plumage with a contrasting turquoise crown to signal to the females that they are prepared for breeding. When they choose each other, the females will build a cup-shaped nest from fibres, rootlets and flowers about 3-15m up in a tree and then between February and June, they lay 2-3 eggs, white and speckled with light brown spots at the larger end (Bouglouan, 2016). It takes about 12-14 days for the eggs to incubate and after that period, the babies hatch blind and dependent. Both of the parents will exhibit parental care by providing regurgitated food and protection from predators. After 14 more days the hatchlings develop into fledglings and are ready for flight. The juveniles resemble the adult females however during development the males begin to moult until they gain the adult plumage (Fig. 4).

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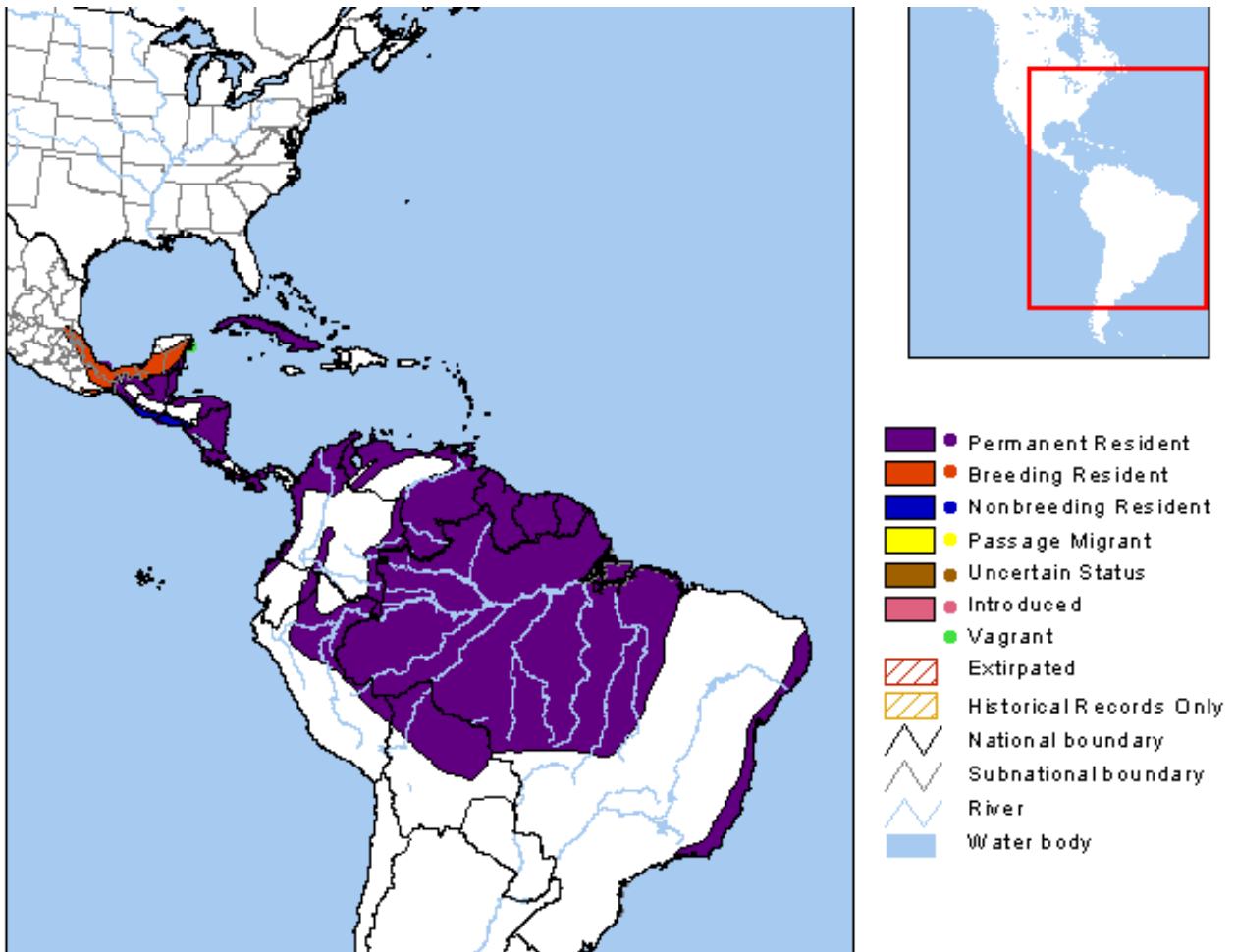


Fig. 2. Geographical distribution of the red-legged honeycreeper.

[http://www.birdphotos.com/photos/v?q=gallery&g2_view=xebug.ShowTree&g2_code=RangeMap&g2_species=Red-legged%20Honeycreeper, downloaded 1 November 2016]



Fig. 3. Red-legged honeycreeper feeding on *Tabernaemontana donnell-smithii* fruit.

[http://birdernaturalist.blogspot.com/2015_03_01_archive.html, downloaded 1 November 2016]



Fig. 4. Juvenile male red-legged honeycreeper moulting to the adult breeding phase.

[<http://www.billholsten.com/apps/photos/photo?photoid=121310487>, downloaded 1 November 2016]