

Leptotila rufaxilla (Grey-fronted Dove)

Family: Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

Order: Columbiformes (Pigeons, Doves and Dodos)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Grey-fronted dove, *Leptotila rufaxilla*.

[http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/portal/image/image_gallery?uuid=ecad2c60-fe8e-42ea-b1de-57da9cd1300d&groupId=11003, downloaded 27 February 2017]

TRAITS. *Leptotila rufaxilla*, also called the grey-fronted dove or by its Portuguese name, Juriti-gemeadeira, is about 28cm in length with an average wingspan of 14.4cm (Ffrench, 2012). Males, the larger sex, weigh about 150g and females 132g. These birds are predominantly brown, with a white to pale bluish-grey crown (Fig. 1). The eyes are yellow or pale-straw coloured in both sexes and sometimes appear brown in juveniles. Eye-rings, and lores, which are the soft tissues connecting eyes to bill, are red, but duller in females. Greyish pink feathers clothe the breast while the nape and upper mantle are an iridescent slightly purple metallic colour. The nape of males is of greyish purple iridescence, while females have more green-purple iridescence. The flank is white or olive, with creamy-grey undersides. Their backs, upper and lower wingbars are dark olive-brown. Rump and uppertail coverts, which are feathers that even the airflow over the tail, are brown, while undertail is white. Both sexes have wedge-shaped blackish tail-feathers with white tips. They have red legs and feet, and the bill and claws are black. Juveniles look like females, but are browner with rufous upper-body parts (Schauensee and Phelps, 1978).

DISTRIBUTION. Resident over much of South America including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Venezuela, and the island of Trinidad (Fig. 2) (IUCN, 2016).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. They thrive in subtropical/ tropical moist lowland, not exceeding elevations over 2200m Found in various habitats which range from gallery, montane, interior rainforests, bamboo patches, sandy forests, terra firme, várzea (Restall et al., 2006), and sometimes on forest edges which overlaps with *Leptotila verreauxi* (Ffrench, 2012). They avoid drier areas, savannas, and pine forests (Jones, 2003), but relish thick growth near water (Restall et al., 2006). *L. rufaxilla* enjoy ground-level to mid-strata, protected by broad-leafed foliage. A diurnal bird which forages for its food on the ground throughout daylight hours and retreats to its nest or nearby leaf-litter to rest at night.

FOOD AND FEEDING. The majority of time during daylight is spent searching for food. The remainder is allotted to feeding their young, or collecting twigs for nest-construction. They rely on sight for locating food such as seeds, invertebrates, insects such as small butterflies and moths, and small fruit such as berries (Ffrench, 2012). These are ground feeders and thus do not perch themselves high on trees to feed, nor as a vantage point to locate prey.

POPULATION ECOLOGY. Unsociable and found alone or in pairs; rarely small groups, but never in flocks. They have a generational life length of 4.2 years. Thriving in 13 countries and totalling an area of 14,300,000 km², they are not densely populated, with an estimated population size between 500,000-4,999,999 (IUCN, 2016). The nests consist mainly of twigs, built in a short bush or a low branch, usually between 1-8m above ground (Ffrench, 2012).

REPRODUCTION. Breeding occurs throughout the year except for September and October. They produce one or two creamy-white eggs of 29.6 x 21.5mm, and weight 7.7g (Haverschmidt, 1968). The second egg is produced c. one day after the first. Both parents incubate these eggs for 14 days before they hatch (Fig. 3). It is at this period that most parents moult; between June to September and December to April. The juveniles take 15 days to fledge (Ffrench, 2012). Parents feed their young in the form of crop milk (YouTube, 2016). This is a temporary supplement to solid food before the juveniles can ingest seeds. This occurs in stages; initially solely crop milk, then a mixture, and finally softened solid foods. Chicks equally share in the food as both simultaneously stick their beaks into their parent's (Fig. 4).

BEHAVIOUR. These birds are usually found singly or in pairs (Restall et al., 2006). Their flight is fast and direct and therefore avert danger by either flying off clattering their wings to perch in a low tree nearby (Hilty and Brown, 1986), or by silently disappearing into bushes when approached (Schauensee and Phelps, 1978). They are usually more often heard than seen as they would sit in thickets making a deep, hollow, soft wooOOOou, with a higher middle note that is repeated every 3-4 seconds (Jones, 2003).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. *L. rufaxilla* has been identified as a species of Least Concern since 2004 due to the wide area which it is resident of, even though the population size along with the range is decreasing (IUCN, 2016). This can be attributed to deforestation practices for agriculture, mining, and housing, along with hunting, and trapping to be reared as pets.

REFERENCES

- Ffrench, R. (2012). A guide to the birds of Trinidad & Tobago 3rd Ed. New York: Cornell University Press.
Haverschmidt, F. (1968). Birds of Surinam. Edinburgh: Constable.

- Hilty, S. L. and Brown, W. L. (1986). A guide to the Birds of Colombia. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- IUCN. (2016). *Leptotila rufaxilla*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.
<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/summary/22690877/0>.
- Jones, H. L. (2003). Birds of Belize. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Restall, R., Rodner, C. and Lentino, M. (2006). Birds of Northern South America an identification guide. Volume 1: (Species Accounts). London: Yale University Press.
- Schauensee, R. M. and Phelps, W. Jr (1978). A guide to the Birds of Venezuela. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- YouTube. (2016). Gray-fronted Dove feeds nestlings. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upqiyTjGQH0>.

Author: Stefan Chiel Ghany

Posted online: 2017



Fig. 2. Grey-fronted dove geographic distribution.

[<http://maps.iucnredlist.org/map.html?id=22690877>, downloaded 1 March 2017]



Fig. 3. Grey-fronted dove hatchling and egg in loose nest of twigs.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ninho_de_juriti_\(Leptotila_rufaxilla\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ninho_de_juriti_(Leptotila_rufaxilla).jpg), downloaded 5 March 2017]



Fig. 4. Grey-fronted dove feeding hatchlings crop milk.

[<https://youtu.be/upqiyTjGOHo>, downloaded 5 March 2017]

For educational use only - copyright of images remains with original source