

Myrmotherula axillaris (White-flanked Antwren)

Family: Thamnophilidae (Ant birds)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. White-flanked antwren, *Myrmotherula axillar*.

<http://antpitta.com/images/photos/antbirds/White-flanked-Antwren-male-pipelineroad>

TRAITS: Two forms of this bird exist, with the first (normally male) being fully black with white spots along the wing and tail, white feathers along the curvature of the wing and white silky feathers on the inconspicuous flank (Fig. 1) (Hilty 2003). The second form consists of individuals with a grey underpart and black feathers only present on the throat and chest. Females and juveniles show brown coloration above along with dots of white on wings which forms two rows, white to yellowish flanks a darker brown coloration on the tails, wings and back (Fig 5). Adults grow up to 105mm. The wings of males and females range from 52-55mm in length. Males weigh 6.5-9.5g while females have a range of 6.5-10g (Ffrench 2012). The short wings accommodate movement through the foliage. Beaks are short and black in colour. Legs are short with forked toes and are black.

ECOLOGY: The white-flanked antwren's range extends from Honduras to Brazil and Bolivia to Venezuela and also takes up residence in Trinidad (Fig. 2). Its range of habitats includes humid lowland forests (Hilty 2003) and primary and secondary forests (Asa Wright

Nature Centre, 2012). These birds are normally found among the lower branches of trees and usually exist in mixed flocks with other insectivores for example antbirds and other antwrens (ffrench 2012).

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION: The white-flanked antwrens is a social bird and can be found in mixed flocks consisting of antshrikes and other birds (Williams 2017). Individuals of the flock may associate with each other throughout a lifetime however the species density of the mixed flocks varies with respect to the amount of space available for nests. The number of white-flanked antwrens found in flocks at a time is normally a small group of 6 individuals (Restall, 2007). Young are reared in small nests by adults (male and female) who both incubate. An incubation period of 16 days has been recorded in Panama (ffrench 2012). The nests consist of a deep cup covered with dead leaves and held together with fibres of rhizomorph and a reddish-brown wreath like structure at the opened end. Nests are positioned on a branch fork. After hatching the young remain with the parents for a long period creating a small family group that may forage together. Flocks containing mainly antwrens (for example checker throated and dot winged antwrens) show more cohesion within the flock with respect to mobbing and foraging behaviours (Wiley 1971).

ACTIVITY: Strictly diurnal, white flanked antwren adults leave nests shortly after dawn in order to forage (Ffrench 2012). These birds are usually active and restless and can be seen flicking wings revealing their white flanks. Rapid movements are observed among the leaves similar to that of a warbler (which may be a member of mixed flock) and interaction with other members within the flock is observed.

FORAGING BEHAVIOUR: The white-flanked antwren is an insectivore feeding mainly on small insects inclusive of caterpillars, spiders and flies. The means of foraging include fast movements over vegetation (leaves and vines) followed by lunges or short sallies if prey is spotted. If foraging on the ground, these birds utilize their short beaks and swift head movements to peck prey then retreat to branches above as prolonged time on the ground increases their chances of becoming prey. Prey may also be caught by means of flying short distances and seizing while in mid-air (ffrench 2012). Foraging as a flock may increase efficiency in prey acquisition as prey may be flushed out of hiding by one member and captured by another.

COMMUNICATION: Vocal communication: the white-flanked antwren's call includes a "chattering trill of piping notes" (Restall 2007) which decreases in pitch over a period of 2-3 seconds. A querulous "chew chew" along with a higher pitched sharper "queep" is produced by the bird. At dawn, a song consisting of around 6-10 whistles can be heard with 2 being produced every second. The songs and calls of this bird vary geographically however, and may differ between particular flocks.

Visual communication: wing and tail movement, holding wing aloft for short periods. The visual displays of the white-flanked antwren have not been described in detail however it is clear that holding the wings aloft signals a threat display to rival birds and even predators as it makes the bird appear bigger in size. The contrasting plumage i.e. the black and white coloration may also provide some form of visual signal and aids in maintaining cohesion of the flock (Restall 2007) by allowing members of the same group to identify each other easily.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR: Little information has been published regarding the sexual behaviour of this species. One clutch normally supports 2 eggs which are small white and speckled with a reddish-brown and sometimes purple coloration at larger end (Hilty 2003). The breeding period varies geographically, with breeding seasons being observed in Costa Rica from March to July, Panama from March to August and French Guiana from February to March (Handbook of the Birds of the Wild 2017). Both parents rear young and alternate foraging and guarding duties. Incubation is also done by both parents and an incubation period of 16 days has been recorded. Breeding period has also been thought to coincide with abundance of arthropods as the readily available food source aids in minimising the energy expense associated with foraging (Wildscreen Arkive). Information with regards to mating rituals of these birds is limited but lack of flashy plumage allows for the inference that mate attraction is by vocalizations as seen in many dull coloured birds.

ANTIPREDATOR BEHAVIOUR: These birds exist within mixed flocks which increase its response to approaching predators due to a greater number of vigilant individuals (Williams 2017). In the event that a predator approaches, members of the flock “mob” the predator to effectively disorienting it resulting in the predator retreating. If a predator approaches the nest, parents flicker wings to expose white underparts (Fig 3) and alert neighbouring birds to initiate the “mobbing” response.

CONSERVATION STATUS: The white-flanked antwren are not globally threatened as they are numerous throughout their range. Some regions of occurrence contain many protected areas (Handbook of the Birds of the Wild 2017).

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Fig 2. White-flanked Antwren geographic distribution.

[\[https://download.ams.birds.cornell.edu/api/v1/asset/39429281\]](https://download.ams.birds.cornell.edu/api/v1/asset/39429281)



Fig. 3. Defensive display of White-flanked Antwren

[\[https://download.ams.birds.cornell.edu/api/v1/asset/50515971\]](https://download.ams.birds.cornell.edu/api/v1/asset/50515971)



Fig. 4. Female White-flanked Antwren building nest.

https://farm1.staticflickr.com/680/23019790626_271a59fd33_b.jpg,



Fig. 5. Coloration differences in male and female white-flanked antwren

<http://www.oiseaux.net/photos/barry.kent.mackay/images/myrmidon.a.flancs.blancs.bkma.0p.jpg>

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