



from
the field....

Short-billed Pigeon

by Jack Clinton-Eitniew
Chairman, AFA Conservation Committee
San Antonio, Texas

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The long and winding Hummingbird Highway laces through some of the best birdwatching areas of Belize. Due to this, visitors to that country frequently travel the often treacherous highway in hopes of adding to their birdwatching "life list." The highway, however, has changed a great deal during the decade that I had been visiting the Central American country. Once it seemed to slice through the forest, like taking a wedge out of a tree trunk. You had a first class view of the forest and its inhabitants as they darted across the road. If widening the highway wasn't enough, in recent years, plots of land near the road have been burned and cleared for agricultural purposes. One such area, however, near Belize's famed Blue Hole Park, remained undisturbed and undoubtedly was being inhabited by a variety of birds. It was

the blue-black grosbeak (*Cyanocompsa cyanoides*) that initially caught my eye as it fed on a flowering plant near the road's shoulder. Having observed a number of such grosbeaks in Mexico, I soon began searching the



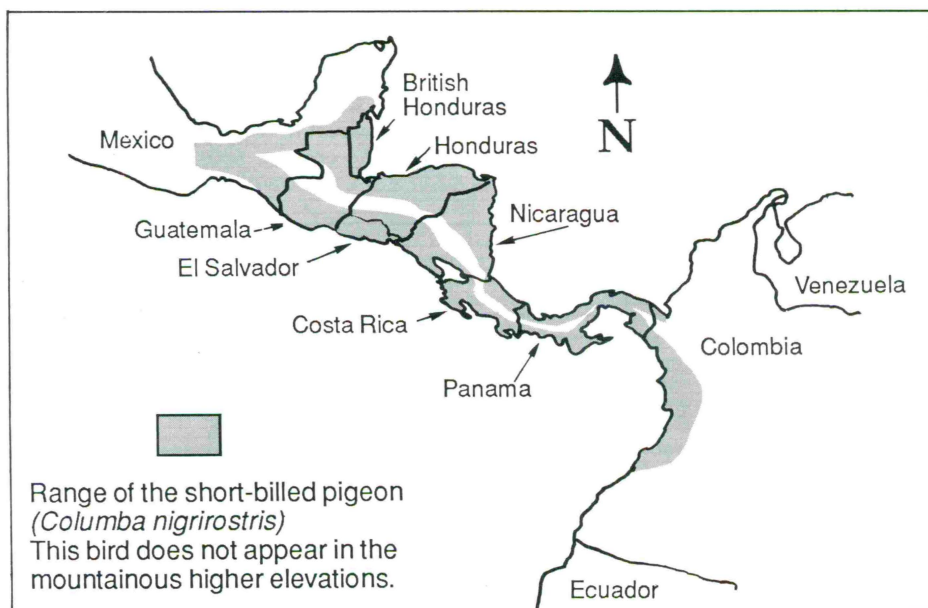
With binoculars confirming identification, this short-billed pigeon was still a bit too far away for my 400 mm camera lens.

tree tops for additional inhabitants. Shortly thereafter, I spotted two mourning dove-sized pigeons sitting motionlessly high in a treetop. Through my 400 mm Nikor lens I could hardly identify the species but, upon closer examination with my binoculars, it appeared they were a pair of short-billed pigeons (*Columba nigristrois*).

Occurring from southern Mexico (northern Veracruz) to northwestern Colombia, the pigeon is a bird of the forest, seldom venturing to the forest floor. In fact it is, as stated by Ridgely, "heard more often than it is seen." The short-billed is a member of the genus *Columba*, being one of 52 species ranging from the popular, well known pink pigeon (*C. mayeri*), to the little known Bonin Island pigeon (*C. versicolor*). Warm brown in coloration with a black bill and red eyes, it closely resembles the ruddy pigeon (*C. subvinacea*), a resident of tropical forest from Costa Rica to Brazil. The ruddy, however, is a bit more brownish in coloration whereas the short-billed is rather olive. In addition, ruddy pigeons are said to inhabit more highland forest contrasting to the short-billed which is generally encountered in tropical lowland areas.

Being rather lethargic and unsuspecting, it is often difficult to locate as it does not flock, as do other pigeons, and seldom perches atop of trees in clearings like the larger, pale-vented pigeon. Mating for life, a typical twig nest is constructed high in the forest. Unless one is able to locate such structures during their construction, by observation of the male's numerous journeys with nesting material, it is very unlikely that you will locate it. Hidden amongst the dense foliage of the treetops, even the naturalist Alexander Skutch has been unable to locate such and makes reference to one discovered by Alexander Wetmore. The diet of the species consists of a variety of berries including mistletoe, black Miconia, Cecropia fruiting bodies and pokeweed fruits.

According to John Pire of the International Dove Society,* the short-billed pigeon is not being maintained by any of the several hundred IDS members. In order to hear one (and have a chance to observe one) you will have to travel south of the border into a tropical forest. Several other neotropical pigeons/doves are available and bred in captivity rather frequently. One such species, the gray-headed dove, will be the subject of next issue's column. ●



*The International Dove Society, Carroll W. Perry, Treasurer/Secretary of Membership, 2507 3rd Ave. North, Texas City, Texas 77590.

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