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## NOTES ON THE BLACK CHACHALACA (*PENELOPINA NIGRA*)

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THROUGH its range from eastern Oaxaca to Nicaragua the Black Chachalaca still is a common bird in many places despite depletion or, locally, its complete elimination by hunting and deforestation. Altitudinally it has a broad range, having been recorded from as low as 450 meters elevation in Oaxaca (D. F. Hoffmeister, *Auk*, 68: 508, 1951) to as high as 2,925 meters in Guatemala (D. H. Baepler, *Condor*, 64: 143, 1962), where it probably ascends above this level on a few of the loftiest mountains. This chachalaca's normal lower altitudinal limit in Mexico appears to be about 1,200 meters, but in that country as well as in the other four where it occurs, widespread deforestation above this elevation now often may determine the altitudinal extent of its distribution.

Above approximately 1,500 meters, in most of the species' range, the Black Chachalaca is either the only member of its family present or is sympatric with the Horned Guan (*Oreophasis derbianus*). Interspecific actions involving the chachalaca and this guan apparently have not been reported, and such relations may be minimal since the latter species is usually low in numbers.

When I studied the Horned Guan in early 1965 at El Triunfo (elevation 1,850 meters), municipio Angel Albino Corzo, in the central Sierra Madre de Chiapas, México, I noted the Black Chachalacas (presumably of the race *P. n. nigra*) in moderate numbers. They usually kept within the heavy forest, most often being encountered on the steep slopes and narrow floors of valleys and ravines. They were more often heard than seen. It was not unusual to record five or six individuals in several hours of field work, and occasionally groups of three or four birds were observed. Most were in trees about 5 to 25 meters above ground where they moved with agility from one branch to another. Although I did not sight one on the ground, several were discovered low in trees and had very likely just ascended from the forest floor.



BLACK CHACHALACA, *Penelopina nigra*  
ADULT MALE

From a water color made in the field by Albert E. Gilbert,  
El Triunfo, Chiapas, México

16 March 1965  
(just over one-half natural size)



Figure 1. Downy young Black Chachalacas on Volcán Tajumulco, Guatemala, 11 April 1965.

About El Triunfo the Black Chachalacas were subject to some hunting pressure from the few residents, and often were rather wary. When disturbed they disappeared rapidly, either moving noiselessly among the branches of the trees or flying with an audible rush of wings. Their wraithlike departure was aided by the dense foliage of the broadleaf forest, and particularly the many epiphytes that afforded good concealment. Occasionally, however, individuals would remain motionless in a tree for a brief time while under observation, or, if they were feeding, would continue to move slowly and deliberately about. On several mornings from one to three birds came to feed on fruits about 10 or 12 meters above the ground in a medium-sized tree at the edge of the clearing where camp was located. They remained there even when approached fairly closely by several observers.

The characteristic, high-pitched, rising whistle of the Black Chachalacas was a familiar sound at El Triunfo daily from as early as first light to late afternoon. As D. R. Dickey and A. J. van Rossem (*Field Mus. Nat. Hist., Zool. Ser.*, 23: 144, 1938) noted in El Salvador, these calls would often be answered by birds in other ravines. My imitation of this humanlike whistle occasionally elicited a response. In El Salvador, Dickey and van Rossem described the male Black Chachalaca's "curious, whirring rattle" in flight, as sounding "very much like a policeman's rattle . . .

given on a descending scale." At El Triunfo I was not able to observe a chachalaca while it gave this sound, which was heard infrequently. However, rather than resembling a rattle, it seemed in quality to agree more closely with the sound described for the species by Salvin and Godman (*Biologia Centrali-Americana*, vol. 3, 1897-1904: see p. 278) as "a sort of crashing or rushing noise, like that produced by a falling tree."

A family living on the southwest slope of Volcán Tajumulco in Guatemala had found two downy young Black Chachalacas (Figure 1) in the forest about five days before I arrived. I judged them to be slightly more than a week old. Apparently this plumage of *Penelopina* has not been described. Unfortunately, I was not able to secure the two chicks, so the following description is from notes and color photographs. As well as can be determined from this evidence, these birds had the forehead, median crown, and occiput Blackish Brown mixed with Cinnamon-Rufous, especially posteriorly (capitalized color names are from Ridgway, *Color standards and color nomenclature*, 1912). There were conspicuous, wide, irregular bands of pale Pinkish Buff washed with Vinaceous-Cinnamon and Burnt Sienna bordering each side of the forehead and crown, curving posteriorly and ventrally down the sides of the nape and then anteriorly on the neck, and terminating considerably below the eye. A narrower, irregular bar of Cinnamon crossed the crown of one bird.

Superciliaries, cheeks, and auriculars were Auburn with the Blackish Brown of the occiput blending into Warm Sepia on the lower nape and back which were washed with Cinnamon-Drab. The well developed wing feathers were black with small Cinnamon-Rufous and pale and light Pinkish Cinnamon marks forming about five irregular, transverse rows. The remiges were also tipped with these marks. The whitish chin and throat, more conspicuous on one of the birds, blended abruptly into Burnt Sienna on the breast, which was washed with dark brown, particularly on the sides. The rather bright color of the breast turned paler on the lower breast and abdomen, mixing posteriorly with whitish-brown on the latter area and on the flanks. Thighs were a mixture of Cinnamon, dark brown, and whitish-brown, and rectrices were black with terminal and subterminal pale, brownish-white marks. The bill was black except for a vestige of white on the terminal parts of the upper and lower mandibles and a slightly swollen, pale pinkish-white cere. The iris was a dark, bluish-gray and legs and feet were Purplish Vinaceous.

A downy young specimen of *P. nigra* (subsp. *rufescens*?) was sent to me by Dean Amadon. This specimen (American Museum of Natural History, no. 102677) was taken on 10 May 1908 by W. B. Richardson at Ocotol,

Nicaragua; it appears to be about the same age as the two Guatemalan birds. It has a similar color pattern, but is slightly paler over-all, particularly on throat, sides of head, and lower breast and abdomen. The major color differences involve the wings and tail, which, in the Nicaraguan specimen, are Benzo Brown instead of black, the markings on the wings and tips of the remiges being Cinnamon-Rufous and Cinnamon with no trace of the pale and light Pinkish Cinnamon conspicuous on the Guatemalan individuals. The sexes of the three birds are not known. As might be expected, there is a marked contrast between the essentially dark plumage of these three individuals and the much paler coloration of the downy young *Ortalis* as described by Ridgway and Friedmann (*U.S. Natl. Mus., Bull.* 50, pt. 10, 1946; see p. 32).

In the field the posture and behavior of *Penelopina* called to mind a guan (*Penelope*) more than a chachalaca (*Ortalis*). The similarity to *Penelope* is heightened by the presence of a wattle on the throat and the habit of courtship "drumming" in both genera. F. Vuilleumier (*Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool.*, 134: 3, 1965) noted the intermediate position of *Penelopina* between *Penelope* and *Ortalis*. Apparently its exact relationship and position within the Cracidae remain to be determined. The vernacular name "Black Chachalaca" thus may be a misnomer. However, what eventually might prove to be a more appropriate name "Black Guan," has long been applied to another Middle American species, *Chamaepetes unicolor*.

The frontispiece shows an adult male. These are black with a blue-green gloss and bright red-orange bill, throat wattle and legs. The bare ocular skin is dull reddish-brown in life. Adult females are brownish, barred and vermiculated with black. Immature males are similar to the adult female but more blackish. The color portrait was made at El Triunfo, Chiapas, from a specimen collected by Miguel Alvarez del Toro on 16 March 1965.

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