

## Rufous-morph Bright-rumped Attila (*Attila spadiceus*) with white eyes: Photographic evidence from Peru

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### Abstract

We present photographs from the Peruvian Amazon of a rufous-morph Bright-rumped Attila *Attila spadiceus* with strikingly white eyes. Such individuals, which are evidently quite rare, present a confusion risk with Dull-capped Attila *Attila bolivianus*. We review existing literature on this subject, which until recently suggested that rufous-morph Bright-rumped Attilas never show white eyes, and discuss other examples of similar individuals and their identification from Dull-capped Attila.

**Key words:** *Attila spadiceus*, plumage morphs, Peru

### Resumen

Presentamos fotografías de la Amazonía Peruana de un espécimen del morfo rojizo de *Attila spadiceus* con ojos blancos. Esos individuos, que evidentemente son muy raros, presentan un riesgo de confusión con *Attila bolivianus*. Revisamos la literatura existente sobre este tema, que hasta hace poco sugirió que los *Attila spadiceus* del morfismo rojizo nunca tienen ojos blancos, y examinamos otros ejemplos similares y su separación de *Attila bolivianus*.

**Palabras clave:** *Attila spadiceus*, morfismos de plumaje, Perú

Few Neotropical passerines show as much plumage variation as the Bright-rumped Attila *Attila spadiceus*. Although this is a polytypic species, with twelve subspecies currently recognized by Walther (2004) – falling into two groups, a Middle American one and a South American one, which are perhaps best considered separate species on the basis of vocal data (Leger & Mountjoy 2003) – plumage variation is far greater within individual populations, due to the species also being polymorphic. Three main morphs occur: the common olive morph, a gray one, and a rufous morph, although variation is such that some authors (i.e. Restall et al. 2006) recognize at least two additional morphs. The olive and gray morphs are distinctive, but the rare rufous one shares its mostly uniform rufous-chestnut body plumage with three other species of *Attila*: Cinnamon (*Attila cinnamomeus*), Ochraceous (*A. torridus*), and Dull-capped Attila (*A. bolivianus*). *A. bolivianus* is broadly sympatric *A. spadiceus* in the Amazon basin south of the Amazon river itself. Most recent identification literature has stressed eye color – along with rump color and the presence of wingbars - as

one of the main field characters for separating the two. In fact, Ridgely & Tudor (1994) and Ridgely & Greenfield (2001) consider *A. bolivianus* to be the only *Attila* with yellowish-white eyes, and coin a new English name for it, ‘White-eyed Attila’. Others discuss variation in the eye color of *A. spadiceus*: Hilty (2003) states ‘eyes orangish (usually) to brownish’, Walther (2004) describes them as ‘yellow to orangey-hazel to reddish-brown’, while Restall et al (2006) discuss eye color in the context of polymorphism, finding that although ‘eye color [is] extremely variable, from pale yellow, through orange and red to dark brown’, all rufous-morph specimens they checked had orange eyes. Nonetheless, J. O’Neill (in litt. to the NEOORN-L mailing list) reports three rufous-morph *A. spadiceus* with ‘pale’ eyes in the collection of the Louisiana State Museum of Natural History. Schulenberg et al (2007) are the first field guide authors to explicitly mention the possibility of “strikingly pale” or “whitish” eyes in *A. spadiceus*, including rufous-morph individuals, and to point to this feature as a possible source of confusion between this species and *A. bolivianus*.



**Figure 1. Bright-rumped Attila (*Attila spadiceus*), Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, Loreto, Peru. March 22, 2002 (Photo G. Boano).**

On March 22, 2002, we mist-netted a rufous-plumaged *Attila* with strikingly whitish eyes (Figs. 1 & 2) in rather degraded varzea forest at 20 de Enero (4° 39' S, 73° 49' W, 102 m.a.s.l.), a site near the confluence of the River Yanayacu-Pucate and the River Marañón in the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, Loreto, Peru, where we were conducting a rapid avifaunal survey (Janni et al. in press). The combination of overall rufous plumage and whitish eyes led us to identify it at the time as an *A. bolivianus*, a species which we had heard singing at the nearby site of Yarina (see Janni et al. in press for coordinates). However, closer examination of the photographs and the collected specimen (MCCI 2537) clearly shows it to be an *A. spadiceus*; the most obvious feature pointing to this species is the bright golden-yellow rump, contrasting with the uniform rufous back and tail. Additional features include the paler, cream-colored lower belly, the two wing-bars formed by the paler tips to the median and greater coverts, and the lack of gray coloration on the crown. Measurements also support the identification as *A. spadiceus*, which is smaller than *A. bolivianus*: maximum wing chord 81 mm

(minimum wing chord 80 mm), 3<sup>d</sup> primary 53mm, tail 62 mm, tarsus 21.3 mm, bill 23 mm, ovary 6x2 mm; the individual was sexed as a female. An additional difference between most rufous-morph *A. spadiceus* and *A. bolivianus* is the fact that the former tend to have some faint streaking on the chest, while that of *A. bolivianus* is plain rufous (Schulenberg et al 2007). However, the specimen discussed in this note also has a uniformly rufous chest with no hint of streaking, underlying the degree of variability in *A. spadiceus*, and providing an additional identification pitfall. We are aware of only two other previously published photographs of rufous-morph *A. spadiceus* with whitish eyes: one was in Mayer (2000), and in fact this bird was identified as *A. bolivianus* in the original publication, only to be subsequently re-identified correctly in an online [erratum](http://www.birdsongs.com/Bolivia/version2/errata_e.htm) ([http://www.birdsongs.com/Bolivia/version2/errata\\_e.htm](http://www.birdsongs.com/Bolivia/version2/errata_e.htm)). Another was published in de Vries (2002), and again this bird had been originally identified as *A. bolivianus*. The possibility of silent, white-eyed, rufous *A. spadiceus* being misidentified as *A. bolivianus* has been brought up

by Rowlet (2003), regarding a sight record from Ecuador, the only record from the country and the only one north of the Marañón River. Howell (2002) reports an additional sight record of *A. bolivianus* from Ecuador, although he acknowledged the possibility of an undescribed, white-eyed morph of Bright-rumped Attila that resembles White-eyed Attila in plumage. In fact, in light of additional evidence showing that rufous morph *A. spadiceus* can have white eyes, *A. bolivianus* will be removed from the Ecuadorian list (J. Freile *in litt.*). Paul Coopmans (*in litt* to the NEOORN-L mailing list) also reported a white-eyed, rufous-morph *A. spadiceus* from

Manu, Peru, and another was photographed by D.M. Brinkhuizen in the Jatun Sacha Reserve, Ecuador (J. Freile *in litt.*). As the photos reproduced here and in Mayer (2000) and de Vries (2002) show, such individuals do occur, albeit rarely, over much of the species' Amazonian range, although it remains to be seen whether they also occur elsewhere. In fact, if one is aware of the possibility of rufous-morph *A. spadiceus* with white eyes, identification is rather straightforward thanks to the field marks listed above, as well as vocal differences.



Figure 2. Close-up of the same individual as in Figure 1 (Photo G. Boano).

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