

## *Habia rubica* (Red-crowned Ant-tanager)

Family: Cardinalidae (Saltators and Ant-tanagers)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



**Fig. 1.** Red-crowned ant-tanager, *Habia rubica*.

[[http://www.birdforum.net/opus/Red-crowned\\_Ant-Tanager](http://www.birdforum.net/opus/Red-crowned_Ant-Tanager), downloaded 4 November 2012]

**TRAITS.** Male red-crowned ant-tanagers have a dull red colour, with a livelier shade of red on their throat and breast and a brighter scarlet crest. They are medium sized birds, weighing approximately 34 g. The females weigh approximately 31 g and are identified by a yellow throat contrasting with a honey mustard or yellow-brown body (de Lima Favaro & dos Anjos, 2005).

**ECOLOGY.** *Habia rubica* can be found in temperate, tropical and subtropical habitats ranging from Mexico, northern Argentina to Trinidad (de Lima Favaro & dos Anjos, 2005). They inhabit secondary forests, usually in low vegetation between 1-5 m with dense cover such as ferns, herbs and young trees. They prefer shaded areas making a secondary forest ideal since they ordinarily have one canopy layer. They commonly feed on arthropods and at times berries. *H. rubica* got its common name, red-crowned ant-tanager, because of its physical as well as their behavioural trait of following ants. Army ants would agitate insects from the forest bed during their search for

food. This makes foraging easier for the red-crowned ant-tanagers if they follow the trail of ants, snatching up the disturbed insects in their wake (Willis, 1960b).

**SOCIAL ORGANIZATION.** Non migratory, may exist in mixed species flocks. It is uncertain if they are monogamous or polygamous. Flocks vary in size but generally contain 3-5 birds. Individuals may leave the flock for varying periods and then return (Willis, 1960c). Willis (1960c) observed that one pair may replace another after a territorial dispute when the flock crossed the territorial boundary. Willis (1960a) noted that males sometimes use “chauf” notes when chasing another bird of the family in food disputes.

**ACTIVITY.** The highly vocal, agile, timid and shy red-crowned ant-tanagers can be seen from dusk till dawn. There is slow recruitment of young into populations which may be due to predation and low clutch sizes of one to three young per nest (Willis, 1960b). Ant-tanagers feed on fruits and insects however insects are of lesser interest to the red-crowns. Foraging occurs mainly in the early morning and late afternoon, in the under canopy of the forest (Willis, 1960b).

**COMMUNICATION.** Little is known about how the songs of red-crowned ant-tanagers are used for communication; however the actual songs have been characterized by Willis (1960a). Many notes have been identified. A series of fifty staccato notes in frequent succession is frequently done at a rate of six per second (Willis, 1960a). Females chatter more than males. The chatters are modified “chut-chut-chip” calls of young. Songs vary in notes but males frequently use a “pirtee pirtee pirtee pirtee” song. An uninterrupted song may have ten to twelve songs per minute and pauses between the songs could be twice as long as the song itself.

**SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR.** Reproduction in this species is well documented. Both males and females use the “chuuf” notes to communicate during the reproductive season. The “chauf” notes of red-crowned ant-tanagers consist of one to several very rough, low notes. The ‘chauf’ notes are most often uttered by females being chased by their mates. These notes were among those frequently used when a female flies past her mate on leaving the nest; he then chases her if he does not have food for the young. Although the immediate effect of such “chauf” notes is to break off a chase abruptly, the male often chase his mate again after a brief pause.

The males usually sit and sing while the females are more active during courtship. The precopulatory displays of female ant-tanagers are as follows: females flutter her spread wings through a small arc as she lifts her tail in slow motion to reveal her anal circling. Her abdominal feathers also droop. At times the female may tilt far forward in her displaying and return to a more normal position with her bill up and throat prominent. At low display intensities, when the precopulatory notes are uttered briefly by the male, only slight quivering of the wing tips is retained from this behaviour pattern. After copulation a female may repeat the display many times, with brief pauses as she looks around for food or preening. Displays occur at normal foraging heights (Willis, 1960). The notes given at this time were so rapid that the series sound like “the-e-e-e-e-e-e” and the crest of the females are usually ruffed up and show its yellow centre.

Males hop or flutter toward their females with their tails down and spread. The feathers may be slightly fluffed. On some occasions males may hold their wings upstretched for brief moments when they are beside their females. This occurs before and after copulations. Willis (1960a) noted that on one occasion a male uttered a loud series of “jee” notes when he flew to

the female and sometimes a few faint notes preceded the copulations. Normally actual coitus occurs in silence. Copulations are sometimes followed by bathing or preening sessions. Rarely would an immature bird attempt to copulate with a displaying female. The precopulatory calls of females are normally given at all stages of nesting except for periods when a female is searching for a nest site. Willis (1960a) noted that high-intensities of displays and actual copulation occurred only during nest building and egg laying. The process of pair formation in this species is still unknown however if a female from the pair dies the male quickly finds another.

**NESTING BEHAVIOUR.** Nesting begins in February (dry season) through October however breeding is most frequent in May through August (Ffrench, 1973). Ant-tanagers make dawn songs mainly while nesting as a result dates of breeding can be estimated by listening for the songs. The females do most of the active searching for nesting sites. Usually the nests of ant-tanager are located against the stems of small branches or on the petioles of large leaves. The nests are commonly found in the top canopy of the trees with heights ranging from 1 to 6 m. The nesting location for ant-tanagers is almost always having clear views in one or more direction. The rim of the nest is approximately 12 cm while the total height is approximately 15 cm of which about 7.5 cm represents the nest proper, and 7.5 cm is camouflage material. The open cup of the nest is approximately 3cm deep and forms a relatively small part of the entire structure. Nests are made of materials such as twigs, leaves, vines and mosses. One to three eggs are laid per clutch and weigh about 3.75 g a day before hatching. Eggs are dull, white and ovate with flat blunt ends. The female assumes most of the nest building and all of the incubating responsibility however both feed and remove faecal sacs from the young. The females feed the young more frequently than the males (Willis, 1961).

**JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR.** Young are born with bright brownish salmon coloured skin with no feathers. The bill is cream coloured with a brown tip. No egg tooth is apparent and the abdomen is greatly distended. The eyes are closed with dark grey lids however young are alert raising their heads in response to calls of approaching adults and other vibrations. First vocalizations may be noticed within three days after hatching and the frequency increase as young develops. Young make “chut-chut-chip” chatter call within 15 to 20 days. The feathers then begin to develop and within a week the eyes are completely open. By the ninth day of life young are very active in the nest, flapping their wings with developing feathers. No flight occurs at this point

**ANTIPREDATOR BEHAVIOUR.** These are territorial birds. When an intruder approaches a loud scolding noise is produced as a defence mechanism however if the intruder proceeds to move closer the red-crowned ant-tanager would flee or hide behind nearby vegetation (Willis, 1960b).

## REFERENCES

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**Fig. 2.** Male red-crowned ant-tanager in undergrowth.

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