

# Cavity roosting in the Slaty Bristlefront *Merulaxis ater* (Rhinocryptidae)

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**RESUMO:** O Entufado *Merulaxis ater* (Rhinocryptidae) abrigando-se em cavidade. Um par de *Merulaxis ater* foi observado, por dois dias consecutivos no final da tarde, se recolhendo em uma profunda fissura natural em um afloramento de calcário no Parque Estadual Intervales, São Paulo, Brasil. A fissura, parcialmente preenchida por folhas e outros materiais, parecia estar em uso a bastante tempo, sugerindo que esta espécie habitualmente utiliza cavidades como abrigo noturno.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** abrigo, comportamento, cavidades, *Merulaxis ater*, Rhinocryptidae.

**KEY-WORDS:** behavior, cavity, *Merulaxis ater*, Rhinocryptidae, roosting.

The Rhinocryptidae form a widespread Neotropical family mostly made of ground-dwelling birds of skulking habits and very limited flight capacity. The group attains its greatest diversity in the temperate areas of South America, either in open and forest habitats (Krabbe and Schulenberg 2003). The roosting behavior of the Rhinocryptidae is poorly known, although Krabbe and Schulenberg (2003) pointed that many species are likely to sleep in cracks or underground, the same places where they hide when pursued during daytime. Among the forest taxa, *Merulaxis*, a Brazilian Atlantic forest endemic, is among the poorest known, with very little published information on its natural history and ecology (Sick 1997, Krabbe and Schulenberg 2003).

Late afternoon 1 June 2007 at Intervales State Park (Ribeirão Grande, São Paulo, southeastern Brazil) we were photographing *M. ater* at Gruta Colorida (near 24°16'27"S, 48°25'15"W). The Gruta is a deep gully with a limestone outcrop with a cave and several small cavities on the rock face. After one hour of play-back, only a mild response was heard from the male of the pair, usually only the high-pitched introductory notes of its song with one full song.

At 17:20, at dusk, first the male and then the female crossed the trail and approach the limestone outcrop at the rock base. At 17:27 the male approached and was photographed (Fig. 1) before flying directly into a rock cavity. A few moments later it was followed by the female.



FIGURE 1: Male *Merulaxis ater* at Parque Estadual Intervales prior to flying into the roost cavity (R. Silva e Silva).



FIGURE 2: Female *Merulaxis ater* in a rock cavity near its roost (R. Silva e Silva).



FIGURE 3: Grotto on limestone outcrop. The arrow shows the roost cavity (F. Olmos).



FIGURE 4: Entrance of roost cavity illustrating the large quantity of nesting material that fell while birds were bringing material to the roost (F. Olmos).

The following day the birds did not reply to playback but at 17:29 the male approached the cavity. Apparently disturbed by the camera flash it returned to the vegetation. The next approach the male flew into a small grotto before leaving and walking into the nearby dense undergrowth. While seen moving around, it did not return to the cavity. The female seemed less troubled by our presence and was photographed exploring a nearby rock cavity (Fig. 2) and almost perched on the head of our guide in an attempt to fly into the roosting cavity, after which she successfully entered the cavity.

The roosting cavity was about 12 x 24 cm at its opening, 1.45 m above the ground, opening on the right wall of a gothic arch-shaped grotto, completely sheltered from rain. The fissure continued upwards at a shallow angle for > 1 m after which it was no longer visible due to a curve in the tunnel. The “floor” of the fissure was covered by many leaves and other plant material that spilled from the cavity entrance and indicated that it had been nesting materials brought by the birds (Figs. 3, 4).

Several Rhinocryptidae, including *Pterotochos* spp., *Teledromas fuscus*, *Scelorchilus* spp. and *Scytalopus* spp.,

are known to nest in cavities (Fraga and Narosky 1985, Krabbe and Schulenberg 2003), but cavity roosting outside the breeding season has not been reported. As *M. ater* has shown to roost in cavities, it is likely its still undescribed nest (Sick 1997, Krabbe and Schulenberg 2003) will eventually be found in one such cavity.

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