

Recognize *Riccordia elegans* as a species, subspecies, or doubtful taxon

Riccordia elegans is known from a single specimen taken in 1860, but from an unknown locality somewhere in the Caribbean. Both *elegans* and *R. bracei* (also known from a single specimen) have a long history of taxonomic uncertainty, but the now-extinct *R. bracei* has recently been considered a full species by NACC, based on work of Graves and Olson (1987). The sole specimen of *bracei* was taken on New Providence Island in the Bahamas in 1877.

Riccordia ricordii is common on Cuba and on islands in the northern and western Bahamas (Grand Bahama, Great Abaco, Andros, Green Cay), but is not known from New Providence (Bündgen and Kirwan 2021). The other three species of *Riccordia* are found elsewhere in the Caribbean on Hispaniola (*swainsonii*), Puerto Rico (*maugaeus*), and Dominica and Martinique (*bicolor*) and are all extant.

Both *Riccordia elegans* and *R. bracei* have been considered full species by some authors, but both have been controversial because the descriptions are based on unique holotypes that are poorly preserved (*bracei*), or for which the collecting locality remains a mystery (*elegans*). HBW-Birdlife considers *elegans* to be a valid species, with the following comment: “Described from a single specimen, dated 1860; recently shown to be a valid species (Weller 1999). Monotypic.” Clements also considers *elegans* to be a valid taxon, but considers it a subspecies of *bracei*.

New evidence:

Weller (1999) examined the single specimen of *R. elegans* and based on morphology determined that it was unlikely to be a hybrid given that it was not intermediate between any other known taxa, including Bahamas populations of *R. ricordii* (sometimes separated as the subspecies *aeneoviridis*). The specimen of *elegans* has a fairly distinctive (within the genus) copper-purple rump and upper side to the tail. That information, plus the fact that the other *Riccordia* are each found on different islands, led Weller (1999) to suggest that *R. elegans* was likely found on a different island where there are (or were) no congeners, possibly Jamaica or elsewhere in the Bahamas. Although these hypotheses are certainly possible, the lack of a known distribution makes it difficult to assess. That paper, including photos of the type specimen of *elegans* is available here:

<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/40025454#page/215/mode/1up>

Additional photos of this specimen are inserted below, courtesy of Paul Donald.





Terry Chesser has also provided photos of the sole specimen of *R. bracei* (the specimen with the red tag) in comparison with a series of specimens of *R. ricordii*, which are shown below:



The Clements checklist (in Birds of the World) now considers *elegans* to be a subspecies of *R. bracei* (Greeney 2021) with the following comments: the subspecies *elegans* has been of questionable taxonomic status and generic affinity since its discovery. Gould (27) suggested that *elegans* was similar in many respects to *Chlorostilbon* species, and subsequent authors placed it in a variety of genera, most of which have now been merged with *Amazilia* (6, 16, 17, 28, 21). In general, however, during much of the past century *elegans* has either been ignored, overlooked, or viewed with reservations as to its validity (17, 21, 29, 30, 31). Although its precise status may never be fully elucidated, Weller's (4) careful examination of available evidence suggested that *elegans* is best placed in *Chlorostilbon* [= *Riccordia*], and is worthy of recognition, either as a full species (25) or as a subspecies of *bracei* (32).

Although the analysis of Weller (1999) does seem to indicate that the specimen is unlikely to be a hybrid, there is no strong evidence supporting its status as a species or subspecies. Without distributional information, lumping it with another taxon (e.g. *bracei*, as the Clement's list has done), or maybe *ricordii*, seems to be, at best, a guess. The fairly distinctive dorsal color is not shown by any other species in the genus, perhaps suggesting that if the taxon is valid, that it should be designated a separate species.

The Working Group on Avian Classification (WGAC) recently considered this issue and voted to consider *elegans* as a "taxon of uncertain status". Comments on that proposal noted that the distinctive plumage (e.g. dorsal coloration) was very different from that of *R. bracei*, so a subspecific treatment was not likely. Given that there are so many unknowns (e.g. distribution, no genetic data), treatment as a full species was considered premature.

Recommendation:

We agree with the WGAC on this issue. Although Weller (1999) did a commendable job with the available data, there is considerable uncertainty about this specimen that precludes a taxonomic treatment with any certainty. Especially troublesome is the lack of a locality. Even though Weller (1999) concluded based on morphology that the specimen was not likely the product of hybridization, this could be confirmed with genetic data. Stable isotope data could perhaps be used to elucidate the geographic source of the specimen.

We recommend treating *R. elegans* as a form of doubtful status (**YES on C** below), which would add the taxon to the checklist category of Appendix C. If voting for a full species status, a separate English name proposal would be necessary.

Please vote on the following:

- A) Treat *Riccordia elegans* as a full species
- B) Treat *Riccordia elegans* as a subspecies of *R. bracei*
- C) Treat *Riccordia elegans* as a form of doubtful status

Literature Cited

- Bündgen, R. and G. M. Kirwan. 2021. Cuban Emerald (*Riccordia riccordii*), version 1.1. In Birds of the World (J. del Hoyo, A. Elliott, J. Sargatal, D. A. Christie, and E. de Juana, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.cubeme1.01.1>
- Graves, G. R., and S. L. Olson. 1987. *Chlorostilbon bracei* Lawrence, an extinct species of hummingbird from New Province Island, Bahamas. *Auk* 104(2):296–302.
- Greeney, H. F. 2021. Brace's Emerald (*Riccordia bracei*), version 1.2. In Birds of the World (H. F. Greeney and B. K. Keeney, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.braeme1.01.2>
- Weller, A.-A. 1999. On types of trochilids in The Natural History Museum, Tring II. Re-evaluation of *Erythronota* (?) *elegans* Gould 1860: a presumed extinct species of the genus *Chlorostilbon*. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 119(3):197–202.

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