

WorldBirdwatch

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In this issue ...

**Power to
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**Hooded Grebe
Spoon-billed Sandpiper
Southern Ethiopia**

Hooded Grebe: the next member of the 'extinct grebes club'?



Patagonia has long attracted the attention of naturalists from all parts of the globe. Yet this remote region, which includes the planet's southernmost wetlands and grasslands, still holds many of the natural world's mysteries.

In 1974, Mauricio Rumboll, a remarkable Argentinean naturalist, took part in one of the great discoveries that Patagonia yields from time to time. He was immensely surprised when one of his students brought to his attention a grebe that he soon realised was new to science. It was an outstanding discovery, all the more surprising when we consider that the Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* is a rather conspicuous and large bird, about half a kilogram in weight, with colourful plumage, a distinctive voice and an attractive breeding display.

The emerging conservation groups in Argentina reacted

quickly through Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina (FVSA, the Wildlife Foundation of Argentina) by creating a private reserve at Los Escarchados lagoon, where the grebe was discovered, about 150 km east of the well known Perito Moreno Glacier (Los Glaciares National Park).

At first, only some 250 Hooded Grebes were thought to exist; the species was considered the rarest bird in the country. In the subsequent two decades, a thorough survey of the plateaus of Santa Cruz province was undertaken and the estimated grebe population was believed to be 3,000–5,000. This was probably a considerable underestimate, given the technological limitations of fieldwork in those days. In 1994, it was downlisted from Threatened to Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List.

During the breeding season, the grebe occurs solely

on the high plateaus east of the Andes. It breeds on a few basaltic lakes in the interior of Santa Cruz, extreme south-west Argentina, with only occasional and poorly documented records from near Torres del Paine, in Magallanes, southern Chile.

In winter, the species undertakes an extraordinary journey. When the high plateau lakes are frozen, the majority of the population moves to the Atlantic coast of Santa Cruz province, crossing the Patagonian steppe. The only known wintering grounds are the río Santa Cruz, Coyle and Gallegos estuaries. The grebes migrate at night, making their movements hard to track, so the mystery of where they went in winter was not solved until 1994. But the whereabouts of the immature birds during this harsh season and their migration routes, remain a big unknown.

Collecting field data on the species is harsh to say the least, given the inhospitable habitat it lives in, the ferocity of the weather, the poor accessibility and the huge distances to be covered. The plateau lakes are checked by researchers in 4WD vehicles, on horseback, or even on foot. The researchers go equipped with clothing and camping gear designed for high mountain expeditions.

After the winter discoveries of 1994, a period of silence and calm followed. The assumption was that the grebe was safe, given its numbers and the remoteness of its habitat. Almost a decade went by. Then, news of the very low numbers found in winter counts by the Asociación Ambiente Sur (AS), based in Santa Cruz, was picked up by BirdLife Partner Aves Argentinas (AA).

In 2009, a team of naturalists and technicians from AS and AA surveyed the most

Hooded Grebe was only
discovered in 1974
(Diego Punta Fernandez)



relevant plateau lakes over three weeks, counting grebes and attempting to locate breeding colonies. The outcome was disheartening: many of the lakes were dry or becoming clogged with silt as a result of the general desertification of the region, leading to changes in the composition of the water. Water levels at known breeding sites were 2–3 m lower than in previous years.

Climate change might be a major threat to this species and its habitat: anecdotal reports suggest that recent winter snowfall has been much reduced, without a corresponding increase in precipitation at other times. Strong winds have caused around 50% of all breeding attempts in the last three years (2009–2011) to fail. Recent investigations indicate that wind gusts have significantly increased in recent decades. At other times this threat would be marginal; with adult mortality naturally

very low, the species may be adapted to survive a succession of poor breeding seasons. But, with numbers falling so rapidly, the loss of entire breeding colonies to wind damage could have a significant impact.

Counts on the wintering grounds suggested a decline of 40% over seven years. Surveys conducted in December 2006 and January 2009, which revisited key known breeding sites surveyed in 1987 and 1998, also found sharp declines. Numbers fell from 452 to 51 at Laguna del Sello. Laguna del Islote, Tolderia Grande and Lagunas Encadenadas, (700, 90 and 198 individuals respectively in previous counts), no Hooded Grebes were found. The species was uplisted from Near Threatened to Endangered in 2009.

The situation has worsened since then: data obtained in the last three seasons point to a clear reduction in the estimated

population, perhaps close to 80%, when compared to that recorded in the 1980s. In the 1980s an average of 2,500 individuals were found at the 78 most important lakes, but in 2010/11 only 400 were detected, despite surveying most of those 78 lakes and around 120 other lakes.

While there is speculation that numbers fluctuate dramatically at breeding sites from year to year, driven by movements rather than actual population fluctuations, the overall declines detected on the wintering and breeding grounds appeared to be real and rapid.

“Our teams started to be worried when we realised that there was more than one cause to tackle if we were to conserve the grebe”, said Gustavo Costa, President of Aves Argentinas.

In many of the lakes in the grebe’s core distribution, exotic trout were being introduced. “Trout rearing has reached the

most isolated places. This industry is threatening not only the future of the grebe but also the rest of the wildlife present in those environments”, Gustavo Costa added. Also evident are the increasing numbers of Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*, a known predator of the grebe that has benefited both from the fish industry and from poor waste management at human settlements.

As if these problems were not enough to push an already struggling species over the edge, a breeding colony which AA and AS were studying in March 2011 was devastated by another pest that is advancing in western Patagonia: the American Mink *Neovison vison*. Over 30 breeding adults were killed, and over 40 eggs abandoned.

“This was a sad day, but at least it meant that we had discovered one other reason for its decline—and a very frightening one at that—that



ABOVE Surveying Hooded Grebes requires working in very remote areas (Diego Punta Fernandez)

BELOW Introduced American Mink killed over 30 breeding adults in March (Ignacio Roesler)



could allow us to implement suitable management actions in the field", said Gustavo Costa.

Members of the research team in 2010 also observed Hooded Grebes nests being robbed by Black-necked Swan *Cygnus melancoryphus*, behaviour which had not been previously recorded and which may indicate that environmental changes are leading to increases in interspecific competition.

A stark shadow was cast over Aves Argentinas's findings when, in May 2010, Alaotra Grebe *Tachybaptus rufolavatus* of Madagascar was declared extinct; this was the third known grebe extinction since the last quarter of the 20th century, after Colombian Grebe *Podiceps andinus* and Atitlan Grebe *Podilymbus gigas*. This followed news that the Critically Endangered Junín Grebe *Podiceps taczanowskii*, which already had a population of

fewer than 250 individuals, had suffered a further population decline.

"This is why we are developing an action plan for the Hooded Grebe, that involves research, pest control and advocacy at every level", said Dr Andrés Bosso, Director of the International Cooperation Programme of Aves Argentinas. The meeting to develop the species action plan took place at Aves Argentinas's headquarters, in July 2009, bringing together specialists from Ambiente Sur, Aves Argentinas, and Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina.

"We need to strengthen the protected areas system in the region", Andrés Bosso added. "Eight Important Bird Areas (IBAs) contain the species, but only one is fully protected." The site where the species was discovered in 1974, Laguna Los Escarchados, was declared a

reserve in 1979, but is now known to hold only a marginal population. Six individuals were recorded within Perito Moreno National Park, Argentina in 1992. Key breeding lakes in the core of the grebe's range lack any kind of legal protection, but the population stronghold on Meseta de Strobel is afforded some protection by its remoteness and inaccessibility.

"Thanks to support from the AV Jensen Foundation, we are prioritising Lago Buenos Aires plateau", says Fabián Rabuffetti, Director of Conservation at Aves Argentinas. "This site should be declared a Ramsar site (a wetland of international importance) and there are opportunities to create a national park in this area." Among the targets of the action plan is advocacy at a national level for the creation of a Hooded Grebe National Park.

The wild territories inhabited by Hooded Grebe also harbour a vast number of animal and plant rarities, including endemic and/or undescribed lizards. They are important for populations of restricted-range birds which occur only in the Southern Patagonia Endemic Bird Area. Significant percentages of the world population of migrant Nearctic shorebirds such as Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii* and Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor* use these wetlands as wintering habitat. Finally, cultural artefacts such as petroglyphs and rock paintings dating as far back as 10,000 years are abundant on many sheltered rock faces overlooking the lakes used by the birds.

"This is a fascinating and complex scenario. Its destiny depends massively on urgent concrete conservation actions to ensure the existence of its most significant jewel, the Hooded Grebe," said Gustavo Costa. "If we were not to act accordingly, the future decade could witness the disappearance of a Patagonian symbol and a beautiful representative of this attractive avian family. We have just enough time to avoid this

incredible 'new' species fluttering to the same fate as the Alaotra Grebe, the Colombian Grebe and the Atitlan Grebe. Several key organisations are investing in this. They need our help."

Aves Argentinas is seeking funding for a range of actions to ensure the survival of the Hooded Grebe, including implementation of summer and winter surveys in 2012, 2013 and 2014, embracing the entirety of the Buenos Aires, Asador, Las Vizcachas, Viedma, Cardiel and Strobel plateaus, the Coyle and Gallegos estuaries, as well as any of the plateaus reachable in winter. Surveys will also be carried out on previously unsearched plateaus.

On the ground, conservation agents will be assigned to the species' breeding and wintering grounds during 2012, 2013 and 2014, to execute a monitoring plan and implement conservation measures.

There will be a programme to eradicate mink, to control Kelp Gull numbers on the breeding grounds and to protect breeding sites from strong winds. Local farm workers will be encouraged to become 'Guardians of the Hooded Grebe', monitoring the presence or absence of the birds, and giving early warnings of potential new threats to the species. The conservationists will seek agreements with landowners on the plateaus and purchase and protect properties as private reserves.

Ringling/banding and satellite tracking will be used to improve knowledge of the birds' movements and to determine where juvenile Hooded Grebes spend the winter. Simultaneously, there will be a campaign to raise awareness of Hooded Grebe among the people of Argentina and to have the bird declared a National Monument.

WB

By **Hernán Casañas,**
Santiago Imberti and
Ignacio Roesler

HOODED GREBE APPEAL



In early 2011, thirty breeding adult Hooded Grebes were killed by introduced American Mink. Forty eggs were also abandoned. This loss is unsustainable for the species.

Urgent funds are needed now to implement the measures needed to protect grebes this coming breeding season. We need your help to prevent this happening again. Please support the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme and its work for Hooded Grebe.

☒ *Yes – I would like to support BirdLife's work for Hooded Grebe*

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