

## A recent sighting of Brazilian Merganser *Mergus octosetaceus* in Misiones province, Argentina.

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During the 1993 austral winter, students from the U.K. together with South American scientists undertook a survey of 376 km of forest rivers looking for the elusive Brazilian Merganser *Mergus octosetaceus*. This species is critically threatened<sup>1</sup> and considered to be one of the rarest birds in the Neotropics. A brief report was given by Benstead<sup>2</sup>, with a thorough review of the expeditions findings presented in Benstead *et al.*<sup>3</sup>

Despite an exhaustive search along sections of the former core rivers for Brazilian Merganser in Argentina, the expedition located only one bird, along the Arroyo Pirayminí (26°19'S 54°20'W) on 9 August. This bird was initially seen at a range of over 300 m at 09h15. Shortly after this we passed a rock where it had evidently been preening, as a number of body feathers were found. When the bird became aware of our presence, it retreated downstream, floundering along the surface with its wings beating the water, making it obvious at long range. We originally took this behaviour to be a distraction display and checked all suitable trees along the stretch of river for possible nest sites. However, it soon became obvious that the bird was a non-breeding, flightless individual.

During the day the bird kept ahead of us and usually out of sight around the next bend in the river. We managed to relocate it on a number of occasions, usually resting on rocks at the end of rapids. As the day wore on, the bird allowed a closer approach, and when alarmed at close range it was heard to utter a duck-like *kwok*, reminiscent of a Black-crowned Night-heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* flight call. The bird was under irregular observation from 09h15 to dusk at 18h30, and followed for a total of 13 km. The individual could not be sexed, but

showed a very long crest. Partridge<sup>5</sup> considered females to exhibit shorter crests as a result of wear and tear during copulation (although see Bartmann<sup>1</sup>), a conclusion reinforced by the observation of a pair of merganser displaying on a Brazilian river during which the male bird showed a far longer crest than the female (M. Pearman pers. comm. 1994).

At a distance (>100 m) the bird looked uniformly dark, almost black, but with a noticeably different head shape and a slimmer bill than Neotropic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax olivaceus*. The most striking feature was its large cocked tail which almost completely obscured the rest of the bird when viewed from behind, heading directly downstream. When flapping its wings, the split wing panel of white in the secondaries and greater coverts was seen. Closer examination (<50 m) allowed the dark green head and neck, the long drooping crest and the birds' red legs and feet to be seen.

Although Brazilian Mergansers are shy, their documented territorial behaviour and habit of sticking to watercourses when travelling up and downstream should make them obvious to any form of waterborne survey. Partridge<sup>5</sup> regularly came upon the species



Brazilian Merganser *Mergus octosetaceus* (Mark Pearman)

whilst travelling by boat along the rivers of Misiones, his only complaint being that they rarely strayed into the range of his guns. Additionally our survey coincided with the breeding season when birds are reportedly very vocal and conspicuous. The surveyed section of the Arroyo Piray-mini was heavily degraded and disturbed and is unlikely to support a viable population of mergansers, thus sadly, river survey results show that the Argentine population of Brazilian Mergansers is very low, and probably approaching extinction. Full acknowledgements for this expedition are given in Benstead *et al.*<sup>3</sup>

#### References

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