

New localities for the Austral Rail *Rallus antarcticus* in Argentina, and first record from the Falkland Islands

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La Gallineta Chica *Rallus antarcticus* es conocida principalmente para el sur de la provincia de Santa Cruz, en el sur de la Patagonia Argentina, donde ha sido re-descubierta en Enero de 1998⁵ y subsecuentemente hallada en un área adyacente, aunque menor, en Chile⁴. Estudios posteriores han revelado varias localidades nuevas, contándose hasta 125 individuos en Santa Cruz, y descubriéndose dos nidos en Chile, lo cual permitió reevaluar el estatus de conservación de la especie, pasando de En peligro/Extinta² a Vulnerable¹. Se reportan dos nuevas localidades para la Gallineta chica *Rallus antarcticus*, donde se presume reproducción, en el noreste de la provincia de Santa Cruz y nordeste de la provincia del Chubut, Argentina. Los registros fueron realizados cerca de la costa Atlántica, extendiéndose el rango de distribución de la especie por aproximadamente 825 km al nordeste, desde 48°37'S hasta 42°45'S. También reportamos dos vagrantes, uno de la costa del Chubut y otro de las Malvinas, siendo este el primero para las islas.

The Austral Rail *Rallus antarcticus* is known primarily from southern Santa Cruz province in southern Patagonia, Argentina, where it was rediscovered in January 1998⁵, being subsequently found in an adjacent, but smaller, area of Chile⁴. Additional surveys have revealed several new localities and up to 125 individuals in Santa Cruz (Mazar Barnett & Imberti unpubl.), plus the discovery of two nests in Chile (A. Jaramillo *et al. in litt.*), permitting a re-evaluation of the species' conservation status from Endangered/Extinct² to Vulnerable¹.

This contribution reports on new, presumed breeding, localities in extreme north-east Santa Cruz and extreme north-east Chubut provinces, which extend the known modern-day range from 48°37'S to 42°45'S or by 825 km north-east. We also report vagrant records from coastal Chubut and the first from the Falkland Islands.

Observations

Estancia La Estrella, Santa Cruz province (47°19'S 65°57'W). In the late afternoon of 12 May 1998, MP and Richard Johnson tape-recorded an Austral Rail regularly singing from a small (c.40 m-radius) and notably tall (c.2.2 m) *Schoenoplectus* rushbed irrigated by continuous flowing water from a wind pump 35 m away. All attempts to view the bird, using direct playback and playback of other birds recorded in Santa Cruz, on 12–13 May, when it sang regularly throughout daylight hours, were inhibited by the tall dense nature of the rushes, except that twice the passage of a moving bird could be traced by the moving tips of young lower peripheral rushes. On playing the voice to estancia workers and asking if they knew anything of the bird, one farmhand immediately used the name Pidén Chico, which is the Chilean name applied to Austral Rail, and went on to describe a small rail with a “narrow red bill” which sang “year after

year” in the same marsh. When asked if more than one bird was ever heard, the reply was negative.

Rada Tilly, Chubut province (45°55'S 67°33'W). On the evening of 6 March 2001, an Austral Rail was observed and photographed (archived in the Aves Argentinas library, Buenos Aires) by DV and Lis Medina. The bird was found in an urban area, 500 m from the Atlantic Ocean and close to a permanent brackish pond (700 m from the coast) in which several species of aquatic birds occur. It was first seen at dusk, at c.21h30, when it landed close to the observers. The bird flew with difficulty, occasionally losing control, against the strong westerly wind (estimated at 70–80 km/h). After a very low flight, it landed in front of a house and then moved to a grassier area in a garden, permitting approach to within 1 m. After being photographed, the bird moved away and remained under a large parked truck. The observers returned to the area the following day but the bird could not be relocated.

Peninsula Valdés, Chubut Province (42°52'S 63°37'W). At midday on 27 November 2002, an Austral Rail was heard by GP at an undisclosed locality on the peninsula. It was calling from a shallow, brackish pond created by permanent overflow from a watermill. This small wetland was narrower than 10 m at its widest point and c.60 m long. A dense stand of rushes (Cyperaceae) covered most of the wetland, with only a few patches of open water, preventing any observations, although the bird responded to playback. Its voice was recorded using a video camera. On 22 December 2002, GP, Hernán Rodríguez Goñi and Miguel Castelino returned to the same site at midday, when at least two birds responded to playback, and tape-recordings were made. Although the birds approached closer on playback, it was only possible

to see them by entering the marsh, when two birds were flushed.

On 13 January 2003, MP, Frank Lambert, Alan Eardley and Barry Scampion were able to obtain repeated views, at close range, of two birds at the same locality. One walked or ran between the legs of MP on three occasions, and one was also seen in flight, when the tarsus clearly protruded beyond the tail. Both were of a similar size, neither vocalised and there was no evidence that the birds were breeding or had bred, although this seems possible.

On 4 June 2003, Luis Segura and Carlos Saibene returned to the same lagoon but failed to find the species, despite using the same techniques as previous observers. However, by August 2003, a pair was again present, with one vocalising, and both were observed by Joe Tobias, Nat Seddon and Stuart Butchart (pers. comm.). Thereafter, on 3 October 2003, one was observed by MP *et al.* at distances down to 1 m. During these observations, rush cover was naturally low after dying back in winter, making the birds more visible, but the only bird found in October was not vocalising, did not audibly respond to a pre-recorded tape, repeatedly returned to a specific area of the marsh and appeared unusually nervous. It is conceivable that it was undertaking distraction behaviour for an incubating mate, but this was not investigated in order to minimise the risk of nest desertion.

Ship Harbour, New Island North Nature Reserve, Falkland Islands (c.51°47'S 61°09'W). An Austral Rail was observed during the early afternoon of 10, 18 and 25 May 2002. It possibly had arrived in the area earlier, but it was not seen after 25 May. The observations were made in a small pool beside a ditch draining water from a carrot garden. During the first encounter, TC was able to approach to within 2 m and the bird was highly visible, but flew off when he attempted to obtain an even closer view. The flight was sudden, explosive, with an almost vertical take-off and rapid wingbeats, the legs dangling slightly. The short low flight ended in some long grass c.20 m distant. Once on the ground, it ran very quickly in bursts, looking somewhat like a rat *Rattus* until lost in the gloom. Throughout the observation it was silent. During the second and third encounters, photographs were obtained and the bird was very tame, and was even briefly picked up. Once, it was observed walking in the stream (8–10 cm deep and about the same width) with only its head and shoulders above the waterline. Swimming behaviour, with a similarly submerged body, has been also observed in Río Chico, Santa Cruz province⁵ and at El Zurdo, Santa Cruz (MP pers. obs.). This individual probably arrived from the South American mainland during a northerly to north-easterly gale on 6–7 May.

Discussion

The records presented here clearly fall into two categories. Austral Rail has not been previously recorded in the Falkland Islands⁹. Whilst habitat for this and another of our sightings is not that previously considered typical for the species⁵, several Austral Rails were reported to have overwintered in a garden at Cayutué, Chile². There are relatively few reports of railid vagrancy in South America and related offshore areas^{6,7,8}, but the birds at Rada Tilly and the Falklands were undoubtedly vagrants blown off course by strong westerly winds, which are common in the area, possibly while undertaking seasonal movements. Although gardens are not 'normal' habitat for Austral Rails, such relatively wet, green areas could represent a last option of suitable habitat for a vagrant, either in the Patagonian desert or the Atlantic Ocean.

In contrast, the other records reported here clearly involve potential, if not regular, breeders, although they seemingly involved isolated pairs, which appears unusual in the species. The only previous record of Austral Rail in Chubut province was made by Koslowsky, who collected one in 1901, at Lago Blanco³, in the extreme south-west of the province, a waterbody now half its former size and lacking the rush habitat of 40 years ago (S. Imberti pers. comm.). Nevertheless, this historical record comes from that part of the province closest to the Andes, and therefore has little relevance to the coastal sightings from the other extreme of the province, especially when one considers that Chubut covers 224,686 km², and thus a truly vast area must be surveyed for other Austral Rail populations.

Both of the novel 'resident' records mentioned here come from extremely isolated rushbeds, which remain wet only through sustained water flow from wind pumps. Our information suggests that these marshes have been extant for several, if not many, years. The habitat at Estancia La Estrella, combined with sound-recordings of a territorial bird and reports from an estancia worker there, strongly points to the existence of a hitherto unknown breeding site. Likewise, five records in different months over two breeding seasons from the marsh on Peninsula Valdés, along with possible distraction display after territorial song had been recorded and two birds seen a month earlier, also suggests a far-removed, disjunct breeding site. It is possible that other rushbeds of a similar nature may offer isolated pockets of breeding habitat close to the Patagonian coast, unlike the extensive rushbeds densely populated by the species in extreme southern Patagonia.

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