



Rufous-faced Crane *Laterallus xenopterus*. 18 August 1996. (Jon Hornbuckle)



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Rufous-sided Crane *L. melanophaius*. July/August 1997. (Jon Hornbuckle)



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Area of savanna in which Rufous-faced Crane *L. xenopterus* and Speckled Rail *Coturnicops notata* were found in 1997. (Jon Hornbuckle)

Rufous-faced Crake *Laterallus xenopterus*: a new species for Bolivia, with notes on its identification, distribution, ecology and conservation

Robin Brace, Jon Hornbuckle and Paul St Pierre

Se describen los primeros registros de *Laterallus xenopterus* para Bolivia, en base a un individuo capturado el 18 agosto 1996 y tres observaciones obtenidas durante agosto 1997, todas en la Estación Biológica del Beni (EBB) (dpto. Beni). Anteriormente a nuestras observaciones, la distribución conocida de esta especie, considerada amenazada⁷, se extendía por sólo unos pocos sitios en Paraguay y un área del Brasil. Las aves fueron localizadas en la sabana semi-inundada caracterizada por la vegetación continua separada por angostos canales, los que claramente facilitan los desplazamientos a nivel del suelo. Si bien el registro de 1996 muestra que *L. xenopterus* puede vivir junto a *L. melanophaius*, nuestras observaciones en 1997 indican, concordando con informaciones anteriores, que *L. xenopterus* parece evitar áreas cubiertas por más que unos pocos centímetros de agua. Se resumen los detalles de identificación, enfatizando las diferencias con *L. melanophaius*.

De particular importancia son (i) el notable barrado blanco y negro en las cobertoras alares, terciarias y escapulares; (ii) la extensión del color rufo de la cabeza sobre la nuca y la espalda, y (iii) el pico corto y relativamente profundo, en parte de color gris-turquesa. Dada la presencia de bastante hábitat aparentemente apropiado para *L. xenopterus* en Beni, se esperan nuevos registros en Bolivia. Las amenazas actuales son mínimas, pero excesivas quemas en la temporada seca, ligadas a la ganadería, podrían bien impedir la posible colonización. También se documenta, nuevamente en la EBB, el primer registro de *Coturnicops notata*, una especie de Datos Insuficientes⁷, para Bolivia: un individuo observado el 30 agosto 1997.

Introduction

The Rufous-faced Crake *Laterallus xenopterus* is a poorly known and secretive railid known from a small number of localities in Paraguay and one area in Brazil^{6–11,13,19} and is considered Vulnerable⁷. On 18 August 1996 a single *L. xenopterus* was mist-netted in the southern part of Beni Biological Station (BBS) Man & Biosphere Reserve, dpto. Beni. This constitutes the first record for Bolivia and a considerable range extension. None was caught during concerted mist-netting at the same site in 1997, but the species was located c.2.5 km away.

Field observations

The 1996 individual was trapped (by JH) within a belt of *Cyperus giganteus* (with a maximum width of 20 m and height of 2 m) fringing the part of Laguna Normandia encompassed by the Estancia El Porvenir and where the BBS field station (14°52'S 66°19'W, c.200 m asl) is located in savanna-based habitat. The mist-net was set in partially flooded (standing water depth of c.5 cm) terrain with narrow 'walkways' between emergent stems, which our 1997 observations showed are used by Rufous-sided Crake *L. melanophaius*. This

cyperacean fringe was punctuated by sedges and some scrub, and gave way to relatively open, seasonally inundated (during October–April) savanna dominated by grasses (e.g. *Sorghastrum setosum* in wet ground and *Andropogon bicornis* in drier areas). Sustained mist-netting at this site in 1997—when the water was deeper (c.15–20 cm)—resulted in the trapping of three *L. melanophaius*, but failed to detect any *L. xenopterus*.

The 1997 records of *L. xenopterus*—one flushed on 10 August and two on 30 August (RCB, JH, PStP)—were in savanna 3 km north of the BBS headquarters. In contrast to some adjacent areas that had dried out completely, this area remained inundated (c.5 cm deep) due to the proximity of a watercourse (curiche). Passage through this area was difficult unless one followed narrow channels between the tussocks of grass at least 1 m high: species were *Rhynchospora globosa* and *Cyperus haspan* (Cyperaceae) throughout, and *Tibouchina octopetala* (Melastomataceae) in places. *L. melanophaius* was not seen in this area, but Ash-throated Crake *Porzana albicollis* and Speckled Rail *Coturnicops notata* were observed on 30 August. *P. albicollis* is distributed widely throughout the savanna, but largely restricted to the wetter

parts; the data deficient Ocellated Crane *Micropygia schomburgkii* is also not uncommon in drier areas.

Identification

A detailed description of *L. xenopterus* is provided by Storer¹⁹. Only those features important for distinguishing the species from other *Laterallus* spp., particularly *L. melanophaius*, are discussed here, as shown by the individual examined in the hand in 1996. These are: (i) especially bold and extensive black-and-white bars on the upperwing-coverts, tertials and scapulars (though often extensive, the white bars in *L. melanophaius* are always narrower and thus less prominent); (ii) head (to below the ear-coverts), nape and mantle entirely rufous, becoming buffy-rufous on the neck sides and upper breast (the extent and brightness of the rufous coloration in *L. melanophaius* varies, but it does not reach the nape or back, although it can extend conspicuously onto the upper breast in some individuals); (iii) black-and-white undertail-coverts, a description consistent with that given by Lowen *et al.*¹¹ (black centrally, but barred black-and-white laterally), but differing from that provided by Storer¹⁹ (given simply as black) (rufous in *L. melanophaius*); (iv) bill short but deep (having a markedly arched culmen), both mandibles being black distally but turquoise-grey proximally (the bill of *L. melanophaius* is greyish with the lateral sides grading proximally to yellow, especially on the lower mandible [pers. obs.], though Myers & Hansen¹³ refer to a greenish lower mandible); (v) prominent crimson-red eye (reddish brown in *L. melanophaius* [pers. obs.]); (vi) legs grey-pink, in accordance with Lowen *et al.*¹¹, Myers & Hanson¹³ (greyish or horn) and Storer¹⁹ (blue-grey) (in *L. melanophaius*, they are flesh-straw coloured [pers. obs.]).

The weight was 68.5 g, heavier than previously recorded (maximum 60 g^{19,20}); wing length (maximum flattened) was 89 mm. No vocalisations attributable to this species have been heard at BBS although the trilling calls of *L. melanophaius* were heard frequently at Laguna Normandia. J. Mazar Barnett (*in litt.* to Taylor & van Perlo²⁰) described it as uttering a trill somewhat longer than those made by congeners, preceded by several whistles.

Habitat preferences

Previous reports indicate that, in common with our observations, *L. xenopterus* typically frequents areas with dense tussock-like vegetation permeated by 'runs', in marshy grassland (wet campos), sometimes on the sides of shallow valleys which

interrupt elevated cerrado^{11,13,19}, but it is not adverse to entering palm groves¹⁴, perhaps prompted by rising water-levels. In Paraguay, such habitats are also the haunt of Red-and-white Crane *L. leucopyrrhus* and, as at BBS, of *Porzana albicollis*. The latter would appear to have more catholic requirements, as it has also been recorded in more marshy terrain, which may border open water; in such situations, it may be accompanied by *L. melanophaius*. It appears that *L. xenopterus* has a narrower habitat range which does not include areas covered by water more than a few cm deep, but as our 1996 observation indicates, it and *L. melanophaius* may occur in close proximity to one another. The shorter tarsi and middle toes of *L. xenopterus*¹⁹ may explain the above, but the functional significance of the more robust bill has not been clarified.

Distribution

In Paraguay, *L. xenopterus* has been recorded from five departments in the centre and south of the country. The type was collected at Horqueta (Concepción) in 1933, singles were collected at Lima (San Pedro) and Pedro Juan Caballero (Amambay) on unknown dates, four specimens were obtained in the Curuguaty area (Canindeyú) between 1976–79 (where it was heard in 1997: R. Clay *in litt.*), one was mist-netted in Reserva Natural del Bosque Mbaracayú (Canindeyú) in 1995, with further records in 1997 (R. Clay *in litt.*, J. Mazar Barnett *in litt.*), and it was found near San Juan Nepomuceno (Caazapá) in 1997 (see^{6-11,13,20} and R. Clay *in litt.*). In Brazil, it occurs in the Brasília area (Distrito Federal) where it is known from one specimen and a number of sightings between 1978–89^{6,14,18}. Our discovery of *L. xenopterus* in lowland Bolivia, geographically remote from other localities, strongly indicates, given the suitable habitat in intervening areas and elsewhere, that the species may be more widespread and less local than suspected. There is abundant seasonal and hyperseasonal wet savanna (the Llanos de Mojos) in Beni¹⁶, and it is likely to be found elsewhere in the department and in adjacent Santa Cruz.

Current threats

Threats from human encroachment or drainage (associated with plantations), prevalent at other sites with *L. xenopterus*^{7,11}, do not pose a problem in Beni as human population density is low and agroforestry development minimal. However, during the dry season extensive areas of savanna on many large estancias in lowland Beni are burnt to promote growth for cattle grazing. These annual

fires may be influential, albeit perhaps more so for crane species preferring drier conditions (e.g. *M. schomburgkii*, see¹⁴ and pers. obs.). Estancia El Porvenir occasionally suffers from large-scale incursions of fires started deliberately in neighbouring properties. 'In-house' burns to aid provision for c.200 head of cattle are controlled and thus limited in extent. Nevertheless, it is clear that the current mix of grazing, trampling and regular burning is having an adverse effect on the savanna environment as a whole, and many of the forest islands in particular⁴. Whether or not the threatened status currently assigned to *L. xenopterus*⁷ is fully justified will become apparent once further population and distributional data are obtained.

An assessment of the local status of *L. xenopterus* at BBS is planned in July–August 1998, when we return to the area, with Earthcorps volunteers, to continue our study of the ecology of threatened and near-threatened savanna birds⁵.

Non-rallid species characteristic of the El Porvenir savanna include Sharp-tailed Tyrant *Culicivora caudacuta* (near-threatened), Sedge Wren *Cistothorus platensis*, Grassland Sparrow *Ammodramus humeralis*, Black-masked Finch *Coryphaspiza melanotis* (threatened), Wedge-tailed Grass-finch *Emberizoides herbicola*, Blue-black Grassquit *Volatinia jacarina* and Dark-throated Seed-eater *Sporophila ruficollis* (near-threatened). Crested Doradito *Pseudocolopteryx sclateri* was observed in both areas concerned³.

Speckled Crane observation and potential additions to the BBS list

A second addition to the BBS list was made in 1997: *Coturnicops notata* (see Field observations), which is also a new species to Bolivia. It was flushed at c.3 m range, affording an excellent view of the white secondaries. This species has an extensive distribution from Colombia to Argentina, but the relative paucity of records suggests that it is grossly under-recorded; consequently, it has been afforded Data Deficient status⁷. BBS is over 1,000 km from the closest known locality in central Paraguay⁹ and more remote still from the only location—Taubaté, São Paulo, Brazil—where it has been reported with any regularity²¹.

With regard to other *Laterallus* species, Grey-breasted Crane *L. exilis*, known in Bolivia from the departments of Beni (closest record to BBS 28 km west of the reserve), La Paz, Pando and Santa Cruz^{1,15,17}, and Russet-crowned Crane *Anurolimnas viridis* (sometimes placed in *Laterallus* and recently reported from Bolivia—north Beni and north-east Santa Cruz^{2,15}—and Paraguay¹²), seem

likely contenders for future addition to the BBS inventory. Additionally, *L. leucopyrrhus* is known from Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil, but has yet to be recorded in Bolivia. It seems likely however, that it will be detected in due course: there is undoubtedly much suitable habitat in Beni.

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Robin Brace

School of Biological Sciences, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK.
E-mail: plzrcb@pln1.life.nottingham.ac.uk

Jon Hornbuckle

35 Grove Road, Sheffield S7 2GY, UK. E-mail: JonHornbu@aol.com

Paul St Pierre

29 Herschell Road, Exeter EX4 6LX, UK.