

Reserva Natural "Federico Wildermuth": a new nature reserve in the Argentine Pampa

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Resumen

Con su extensión de 500,000 km², la Pampa Argentina es la estepa más grande del hemisferio sur. Hoy, la vegetación y la fauna endémica de la región, un símbolo de Argentina, está en peligro de desaparecer completamente por el desarrollo de la agricultura moderna y la urbanización. Se estableció una reserva de flora y fauna situada cerca de la ciudad de Galvez, provincia de Sta. Fé. La Fundación Federico Wildermuth se creó con el destino de hacer una contribución a la conservación y regeneración de la flora y fauna autóctona, en comun acuerdo con los habitantes, especialistas y organizaciones locales e internacionales. La reserva incluye las tres sociedades vegetales típicas de la pampa con su fauna respectiva: el flechillar, el esparillar y las lagunas. Aparte de sus investigaciones conservacionistas, la fundación desarrolla y proclama modelos que consideran las demandas ecológicas como así también las necesidades agropecuarias.

Introduction

Extending some 500,000 km², more than twice the size of Great Britain, the Argentine pampa is the largest grassland area in the southern hemisphere. Today this whole region, which symbolises Argentina, is severely diminished due to agricultural and urban development. While the wet habitats along the Río Paraná are less threatened, the native grassland, which was the original vegetation of the fertile loess soils, has practically disappeared during the mechanisation and intensification of agriculture. Remnant strips are found only along roadsides and railway embankments. Characteristic birds such as the Red-winged Tinamou *Rhynchotus rufescens* and the Greater Rhea *Rhea americana* have almost totally disappeared from the pampa. Other vertebrate species such as the puma, the pampas deer and the caiman have been reduced to marginal populations. In 1989 a new nature reserve in the province of Santa Fé was established to investigate the regeneration and protection of the natural pampaneian flora and fauna.

Reserva Natural "Federico Wildermuth"

The reserve is situated between Rosario and Santa Fé city on the border of an extensive system of freshwater lagoons. It belongs to the ecotone between the treeless pampaneian region and the humid thornbush woods of the southern chaco. As elements of both regions are present this area is particularly species-

rich. The 1,300 ha reserve is a last refuge for many species in the otherwise heavily cultivated southern portion of Santa Fé province. It supports three broad habitat types along a humidity and salinity gradient.

Since the land has not been ploughed for more than 20 years the higher elevations support an exceptional faunal and floral diversity, the composition of which is apparently very similar to the climax stage of the original grassland. The avifauna in this area is dominated by ground breeding species such as the Spotted Nothura *Nothura maculosa*, although the small woods harbour an important proportion of the 150 species (mainly Tyrannidae and Furnariidae) recorded from the reserve.

The wetland belt and its reedgrass *Scirpus californicus* in the lowest part of the reserve offers breeding habitat for ducks, Gruiformes and impressive mixed colonies of White-faced Ibis *Plegadis chihi*, Great Egret *Casmerodius albus* and Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*. It is also a stop-over site and wintering ground for many migrant birds.

Around the wetland the tussock grass *Spartina argentinensis* is dominant and gives cover to an important population of guinea-pigs (and their predators). Ant-hills in this area provide micro-habitats for a number of specialised organisms. This part was never cultivated. It was instead burned down and used as a pasture before the reserve was established.

The foundation "Federico Wildermuth" was established to contribute to the conservation of these highly neglected communities. With the help of Argentine specialists, the local population and with international cooperation we hope to achieve the aims of the foundation.

Aims and Measures of the Foundation:

Hunting is to be prohibited in the reserve as well as on the adjoining farms, with enforcement carried out in cooperation with the local police.

Models that integrate conservation and agriculture are being developed so that benefits for both systems can be achieved.

Guided tours around the reserve, reports and exhibitions, particularly aimed at schools, will be organised to demonstrate the importance and feasibility of such reserves in agricultural zones.

The enlargement of the reserve for species requiring larger home ranges is planned.

First signs of success

Since disturbance of the wetland and the area around it has ceased, breeding, amongst others, of ibises and egrets has increased dramatically. These birds consume large numbers of locusts and pierid caterpillars, the most important pests in the area. There is thus a tangible benefit from the reserve for the local farmers. In 1992, for the first time in living memory, traces of pumas were found in the area, illustrating the considerable potential of the fauna (and hopefully flora), to recover from long-term disturbance and habitat loss.

From December 1994, the reserve will be open to small groups. For further information please contact:

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Southern Screamer *Chauna torquata* (Johannes Jenny)



Spotted Rail *Pardirallus maculatus* (Johannes Jenny)