

First records of Grey-breasted Crake *Laterallus exilis* in Argentina

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Mediante vocalizaciones y observaciones, se han detectado poblaciones de *Laterallus exilis* entre localidades del este de las provincias de Chaco y Formosa, NE Argentina, con la primer confirmación en mayo de 1999. Estas observaciones representan los primeros registros para el país. Grabaciones de cuatro voces pertenecientes a los individuos estudiados, algunas no documentadas previamente, son analizadas, descritas en detalle y comparadas con grabaciones de *L. exilis* y congéneres obtenidas en otros sitios. Se describe un hábitat algo inusual para la especie y se discuten la coloración de las partes desnudas del cuerpo y un presunto comportamiento sedentario.

Introduction

The distribution of *Laterallus* crakes is poorly known as demonstrated by several recent large range extensions from countries where several species were hitherto unknown^{1,6–9}. These discoveries are readily attributable to these species' small size and their secretive, often crepuscular, behaviour within dense habitats of difficult access by man. In each case, the findings resulted from sound-recordings, voice identification and/or mist-net captures, prior to visual identification in the field.

Field observations

On 13 May 1999, MP and GDP tape-recorded some unusual *Laterallus* vocalisations in the north-eastern sector of Isla del Cerrito (27°17'S 58°37'W), eastern Chaco province, north-east Argentina. Three individuals were initially located; a presumed pair and another individual c.2 km away. Four different calls were tape-recorded (see below). Birds approached observers to within 1 m, but remained in dense cover, in response to playback and to pre-recorded tape-recordings of Grey-breasted Crake *L. exilis* and Russet-crowned Crake *L. (Anurolimnas) viridis* (neither species previously known from Argentina). On 14 May 1999, together with HC and AB, we discovered a different pair, c.500 m distant from that of the previous day and, following playback experiments, confirmed visual identification of one bird as *L. exilis*. Further observations of this pair were made by HC and AB on 15 May.

On 15 and 16 October 1999, MP located and tape-recorded three *L. exilis* near Laguna Blanca (25°10'S 58°07'W) on the eastern outskirts of Parque Nacional Río Pilcomayo, eastern Formosa province, where birds also approached, in response to playback, to within 1 m, but always remained hidden in dense grass cover.

Between 1996 and 1999, A. Di Giacomo (pers. comm.) also reports finding the species at Reserva El Bagual, south-east Formosa province, where a small dark crake was flushed on a number of

occasions, and has recently been identified visually as this species.

Plumage and soft parts

One of the Isla del Cerrito birds, observed on several occasions at close range, had a grey face and underparts with contrasting chestnut hindcrown and nape, warm brown mantle and wings, and black barring on the flanks. The iris was strikingly bright red. Tarsus coloration was not determined, but the base of the bill, principally on the lower mandible, was bright yellow. Elsewhere within the range of *L. exilis*, the bill base has been described as green, greenish or bright lime-green^{5,8,10} (MP pers. obs.).

Habitat

Birds at Isla del Cerrito and PN Río Pilcomayo were in 1–1.8 metre-tall dense *Panicum* spp. (almost certainly *P. elephantipes*) grass without surface water. This grass grows in areas following flooding and, although the substrate where the birds were found was dry, the presence of plastic bottles and other detritus at the location demonstrated that the area is subject to periodic inundation. At Isla del Cerritos, several species of trees and bushes were patchily represented in the area e.g. *Mimosa* spp., *Sesbania virgata*, *Sapium haematospermum*, *Enterolobium contorsiliquum*, *Croton urucurana* and *Salix humboldtiana*. Stands of *Scirpus giganteus* sedge were present in standing water but only one observation was made of a bird crossing this habitat. It is noteworthy that we did not record other *Laterallus* spp. at either locality.

Voice

Churred descending trills are representative of all *Laterallus* crake species¹⁰ and in some, e.g. *L. melanophaius* and *leucopyrrhus*, are doubtfully separable to the human ear (pers. obs.), except perhaps by subtle differences in frequency and speed that may be detected only by comparison of sonograms. The trilled voice (proclamation?) of *L. exilis* is similar to that of *L. viridis* and, indeed, the Isla del Cerrito birds responded vocally and by

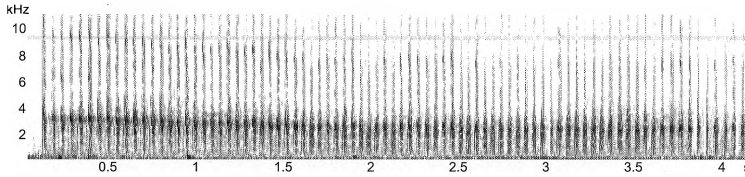


Fig. 1. First 4 secs. of unsolicited trill of *L. exilis*, Isla del Cerrito, Chaco Province, Argentina 13 May 1999 (M. Pearman)

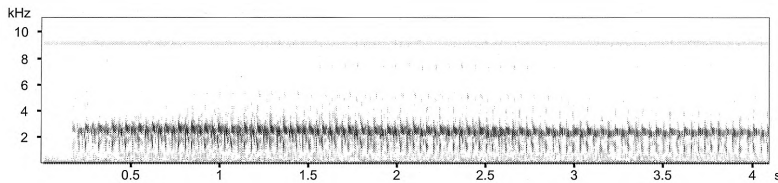


Fig. 2. First 4 secs. of unsolicited trill of *L. viridis*, Reserva Natural Bosque de Mbaracayú, Depto. Canendiyú, Paraguay, 20 September 1995 (M. Pearman)

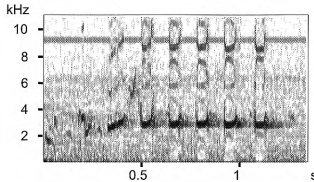


Fig. 3. Dit-dit series of *L. exilis* (segment), Isla del Cerrito, Chaco Province, Argentina, 13 May 1999 (G. Pugnali)

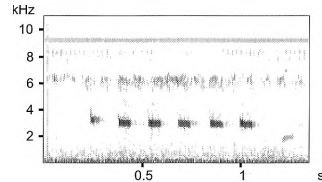
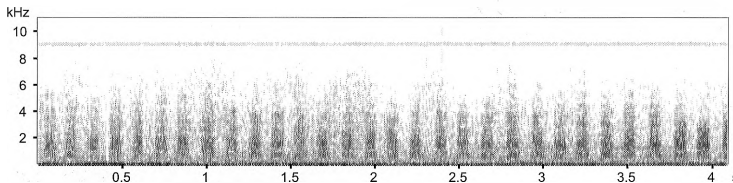


Fig. 4. Dit-dit series of *L. exilis* without introductory note (segment), Puerto Turi, Isla Yacyretá, depto Itapúa, Paraguay, 3 November 1995 (M. Pearman)



Figs. 5. 'Steam locomotive' annoyance call of *L. exilis* (segment), Isla del Cerrito, Chaco Province, Argentina, 13 May 1999 (M. Pearman)

approaching pre-recorded tape-recordings of trills of both *L. viridis* and *L. exilis*. The trills of these two species have an altogether more metallic timbre and less gurgled quality than those of *melanophaius* and *leucopyrrhus*.

Recordings were made using Sony TCM 5000 tape-recorders and Sennheiser ME80 microphones, and later analysed and duplicated using Avisoft SASLab Light 1 and Gram Spectrogram Version 4.1.2.

Trills (proclamation?)

The unsolicited trill of *L. exilis* (Fig. 1) begins at 3.1 kHz and descends to 2.17 kHz in six seconds at a constant speed of 21 notes per second. Some trills

of *exilis* are preceded by a brief introductory trill lasting 0.4 seconds. The trill of *L. viridis* (Fig. 2) also has a duration of six seconds but, in closer analysis, can be seen to be composed of alternate high–low–high frequency notes. These notes begin at 2.8 and 2.45 kHz and descend to 2.45 and 2.1 kHz, with an initial speed of 28 notes per second, slowing to 25 notes in the final second.

A shorter, harsher trill of *L. exilis* was tape-recorded in response to playback. This trill is essentially similar to that described above (Fig. 1), but has a shorter duration (up to 4 seconds); beginning at 3.1 kHz and ending abruptly at 2 kHz, with a speed of 20 notes per second, slowing slightly to 19 notes per second at the end.

Dit-dit call

L. exilis appears to have a voice unique among *Laterallus* crakes, comprising a series of *dit-dit-dit* notes, used in excitement or alarm¹⁰. We tape-recorded this voice at Isla del Cerrito (Fig. 3) and PN Río Pilcomayo. The series often begins with two lower-pitched introductory notes *düt dt*, followed by a monotone series of 7–13 *dit* notes at 3 kHz and with harmonies reaching 9 kHz. The speed is six *dit* notes per second. This voice matches recordings of *L. exilis* from elsewhere (Fig. 4) although the speed of notes varies; a bird on Isla Yacyretá, Paraguay, gave seven notes per second.

Steam locomotive voice

Another, very different and undocumented, voice was tape-recorded in response to playback. This voice, as far as we are aware, is also unique to *L. exilis* and apparently constitutes an annoyance vocalisation (Fig. 5). It commences with 12 introductory *chut* notes, slowly rising from 1.15 to 1.8 kHz in three seconds, followed by a long series (39 seconds) of low-pitched hoarse rasps, at a constant speed of seven per second, sounding very much like a steam locomotive train. More moderate and conservative versions of this type of vocalisation have been described for two other *Laterallus* spp.: *L. ruber*⁹ and *L. jamaicensis*².

All vocalisations of *L. exilis* on Isla del Cerrito were recorded between 09h00 and 13h00 and no unsolicited voices, nor any resulting from playback experiments, were heard at dawn, dusk or any other time. At PN Río Pilcomayo birds vocalised at dawn and dusk, as would be expected of a *Laterallus* crane during the austral spring.

Discussion

L. exilis is a wide-ranging monotypic species with an assumed disjunct distribution as follows: Belize south through Central America to north-west Colombia; northern Venezuela, Trinidad and Guyana; south-west Colombia and north-west Ecuador; Amazon basin in Brazil, south-east Colombia, east Ecuador, east Peru and northern Bolivia; extreme north-east Brazil; south-east Brazil; and southern Paraguay¹⁰.

All Paraguayan records are post-1979, and are from three localities^{4,7,9}; one close to north-east Formosa province, Argentina, and two localities directly opposite Argentine territory: Pilar on the Río Paraguay opposite south-east Formosa province; and Isla Yacyretá on the Río Paraná, opposite northern Corrientes province. Its presence in Argentina was therefore to be expected. Isla del Cerrito is situated at the confluence of the Paraguay and Paraná rivers and lies c.200 km east of Yacyretá. We therefore expect the species to be discovered in suitable habitat along the southern coast of the Río Paraná in northern Corrientes province, and

possibly also in south-west Misiones province, Argentina.

We strongly suspect that the Argentine population is sedentary; birds were loosely paired in May (the austral autumn) and Paraguayan records come from January, August and November^{4,7,9} i.e. in the austral spring, summer and winter. Furthermore, the species is not definitely known to migrate elsewhere within its range, although some movements have been inferred¹⁰.

Cattle had been present at the Isla del Cerrito locality as revealed by recent tracks along all the paths we explored. The presence of several pairs of *L. exilis* in this area suggests cattle do not adversely affect the species.

The location of *L. exilis* in grass without surface water is somewhat unusual for the species. It is usually encountered in habitats with standing water of 5–15 cm depth¹⁰ (MP pers. obs.), and there is only one reference to occurrence in a dry habitat³. We suspect, however, that the birds probably remained in the same grassland that was previously inundated once water levels had receded.

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