

## Pale-throated Serra-finch *Embernagra longicauda*

### Austral Rail *Rallus antarcticus*



## Pale-throated Serra-finch

### *Embernagra longicauda*

Pale-throated Serra-finch *Embernagra longicauda* is endemic to the Espinhaço range<sup>9,10</sup>, in the states of Minas Gerais and Bahia, Brazil. It resembles its close relative, the Great Pampa-finch *E. platensis*. However, Pale-throated Serra-finch is easily recognised by its longer and narrower tail, grey head, white supraloral streak and lower eyelid, and white throat<sup>8</sup>. The two species can be found in the same area, but do not overlap in habitat; Pale-throated Serra-finch generally occurs in dry open areas, sometimes with rocky outcrops, whereas Great Pampa-finch prefers marshlands and damp places<sup>6,8,11</sup>. Voice is a penetrating *tsi-tsowee*<sup>8</sup>, given throughout the day, even in the hottest hours (pers. obs.).

It inhabits mainly open habitats in the mountains, including *campos rupestres*, *campos cerrados* and *campos limpos*, generally above 900 m<sup>6,9,12</sup>. Pale-throated Serra-finch even occurs on the highest peaks of the Espinhaço; the individual in Fig. 1 was photographed at Pico do Inficionado, at 2,050 m, in the Serra do Caraça, Minas Gerais. The birds forage on the rocky outcrops, and in short trees and shrubs, including *canelas-de-ema* (Velloziaceae), for small invertebrates and seeds. Occasionally two feed together<sup>6</sup>. Breeding occurs in the rainy season and the nest is cup-shaped, with two nestlings being the usual clutch<sup>9</sup>.

Recently, *E. longicauda* has been discovered in degraded open habitats, such as deforested areas with rocky outcrops and second growth, away from natural fields in the Espinhaço<sup>5,11</sup>. This is possibly related to its geographic expansion, resulting from deforestation in these localities, where there were once large areas of Atlantic Forest<sup>5,11</sup>.

Despite being endemic to a restricted area<sup>9,10</sup> and being considered near-threatened<sup>1</sup>, Machado *et al.*<sup>5</sup> suggest that *E. longicauda* should be treated within a lower risk category, because it is apparently expanding its range and occurs in a significant number of protected areas. Machado *et al.*<sup>5</sup> also state that the species' habitats are subject to low human degradation, but I disagree: *campos rupestres* have been destroyed by mining activities (principally in the southern Espinhaço), by periodic fires in the dry season and by cattle-grazing.

In Bahia, Pale-throated Serra-finch can be found in Chapada Diamantina National Park<sup>6,7</sup>. In Minas Gerais, the species occurs in a number of protected areas, including Serra do Cipó National Park<sup>3,6</sup>,

Mangabeiras Municipal Park<sup>5</sup>, Protected Area of Barreiro<sup>12</sup>, Protected Area of Mutuca<sup>12</sup>, Peti Reserve<sup>5</sup>, Caraça Reserve<sup>2,3,6</sup>, Itacolomi State Park<sup>1,6,12</sup>, and Protected Area of São José<sup>9</sup>. It is probable that *E. longicauda* will also be found in other areas of suitable habitat, such as the recently created state parks of Grão Mogol, Pico do Itambé and Rio Preto, in Minas Gerais.

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### Austral Rail *Rallus antarcticus*

With only five records in the 20th century and 19 since its discovery, the status of Austral Rail was completely unknown until a small population was discovered in central Santa Cruz, Argentina in 1998<sup>4</sup>. Little was known concerning its biology and numbers and, in consequence, it was classified as Endangered/Extinct (possibly extinct)<sup>2</sup>. The discovery was significant in that it represented the first known population and provided baseline data to search for and study the biology and habitat requirements of the species.

It inhabits marshy oases, within Patagonian steppe, dominated by rushes *Schoenoplectus* (*Scirpus*) *californicus* and usually surrounded by wet meadows with tall, lush grasses, including *Ceratophyllum* sp., *Carex* sp., *Alopecurus* sp. and, predominantly, *Descheupsia poaeioide*. *Myriophyllum* sp. usually covers more open areas. The rail has not been recorded in marshes within southern beech (*Nothofagus* sp.) forests, despite their similar structure and species composition.

Using tape-recordings, further areas of appropriate habitat have been successfully surveyed since the rediscovery: new populations have been found at several localities in southern Santa Cruz<sup>5</sup> and neighbouring Chile<sup>1,3</sup>, and its vocal repertoire better documented. The Chilean records are important as they are from the only protected areas where the species occurs, namely Pali Aike and Torres del Paine National Parks<sup>1</sup>. Given that the species had apparently been overlooked, it was recently downlisted to Vulnerable, under IUCN's criterion C2a (population <10,000 mature individuals with continuing decline and all sub-populations <1,000 individuals)<sup>1</sup>.

Its wintering grounds are unknown, but there is some evidence for at least local movements. At this season, most farms with suitable habitat use the species' favoured marshy areas for cattle or

sheep grazing, and the animals can enter the rushbeds as the water is largely frozen. This practice may represent a key threat to the species' habitat. No rails have been recorded in southern Santa Cruz and neighbouring Chile during July to September, when most marsh vegetation dies until regrowth in September–October.

These first photographs were taken at El Zurdo, Santa Cruz, Argentina (51°59'S 71°41'W), in May 1999, during one of the rare occasions in which individuals stalked from the cover of the dense rushes. They were lured out using tape playback, briefly appearing inquisitively. They spent most time responding to the tape from concealed, tunnel-like, cavities within the rushes. This continued for over 90 minutes after midday, in clear and sunny weather, when the rails appear to prefer to remain in cover.

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