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The Neotropical Bird Club Conservation Awards Programme 2001–2010

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Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* nest, El Sello Lake, Buenos Aires Plateau, Future Patagonia NP, Argentina (Santiago Imberti)

Introduction

Small grants have been hailed for the big positive impacts they can have for biodiversity and communities in return for a small initial investment (Fisher 2011). Here we review the Neotropical Bird Club's Conservation Awards Programme, with two main aims: 1) to inform supporters of the club of the impacts of the awards, the result of members' on-going contribution; 2) to explain some developments in policy for the awards programme in order to help potential applicants.

Aims of the Programme

The NBC aims to promote "an interest in Neotropical birds and their conservation". To help fulfil the conservation objective, we administer a Conservation Awards Programme. Small grants are awarded to Neotropical nationals to support conservation projects directly involving globally threatened bird species or globally important sites within the region. Past beneficiaries have included both professional and amateur ornithologists and ecologists, students, park guards, NGO staff and environmental consultants. Beneficiaries

are required to provide reports for publication in *Neotropical Birding* or articles for the Club's journal *Cotinga*. NBC also aims to enhance the appreciation of birds and their conservation among local communities through the programme. To achieve this, projects are judged on their consideration of local engagement and conservation outreach. A key aim is to build local and national capacity for conservation: in many cases awards help the beneficiaries to develop skills and experience towards long-term involvement in conservation.

Funding sources

The funds provided as Conservation Awards have come chiefly from membership subscriptions and co-sponsoring organisations such as Swarovski Optik, who contributed five NBC–Swarovski awards, worth almost US\$8,000, between 2001 and 2010. Other funds are raised via the Club's annual raffles and through individual donations. If you are interested in supporting the Conservation Awards Programme please contact NBCAwards@gmail.com.

How are awards chosen?

During the period 2001–2010, applications were assessed by the NBC's Conservation Awards Subcommittee, a panel of volunteers with a range

of skills and experience of bird conservation in the Neotropics. NBC's Country Representatives were consulted on specific projects, in order to provide additional input to the assessment.

The Subcommittee then made recommendations to NBC Council, which approved final funding decisions. From 2000, an agreed set of criteria was used to judge each application, as follows: 1) conservation benefit, 2) suitability of the methodology, 3) proportion of budget, 4) publicity profile, 5) participants' apparent competence, and 6) feasibility.

We have recently changed the way that Conservation Award applications are processed and reviewed. The criteria remain but now two external reviewers, identified with the help of national NBC representatives, are selected from experts on the particular locality or threatened species. This permits greater engagement from Neotropical nationals, and helps to promote the scheme within the region.

NBC currently makes awards of up to US\$2,000 to small-scale bird conservation projects with deadlines on 30th June and 31st December. Both maximum and typical sizes of grants have risen gradually since 2001, being US\$1,500 and US\$1,000, respectively, between 2001 and 2009. The NBC previously accepted applications for projects that would not go ahead without its funding, maintaining a 'proportion of budget'

Table 1: Geographic spread of awards made by NBC in 2001–2009

Country	Number of awards	Total value of all awards	GDP per capita [†]	Number of threatened spp.*	Funding per threatened spp.
Argentina	13	\$13,980	\$17,382	113	\$124
Bolivia	3	\$2,690	\$5,023	111	\$24
Brazil	4	\$2,950	\$11,892	268	\$11
Chile	1	\$370	\$16,078	62	\$6
Colombia	20	\$20,244	\$10,038	195	\$104
Ecuador	5	\$4,330	\$8,372	169	\$26
Paraguay	1	\$1,000	\$5,426	61	\$16
Peru	3	\$3,500	\$9,958	218	\$16
Uruguay	4	\$4,194	\$16,019	37	\$113
Venezuela	4	\$4,600	\$13,480	90	\$51
Mexico	2	\$2,350	\$14,514	110	\$21
Guatemala	1	\$400	\$4,875	40	\$10
Cuba	3	\$3,800	No data	34	\$112
St Lucia	1	\$1,000	\$12,476	9	\$111

*Number of species classified as Extinct, Extinct in the Wild, Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable, Near Threatened or Data Deficient on the IUCN Red List.

[†]2010 population, World Economic Outlook September 2011 database, International Monetary Fund, accessed on 11 November 2011.

assessment criterion. However, recognising the increasing costs associated with conservation projects in the region, and that the level of support the club can provide has not kept pace with this increase we now consider making awards that represent a smaller percentage of the total project budget.

How have funds been spent?

NBC receives about 20 award applications per year. Between 2001 and 2009, the club made 65 awards totalling over US\$65,000. Several projects were co-sponsored by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB; BirdLife in the UK) and / or the World Pheasant Association, taking the total funding to over US\$70,000. Of the 65 awards and US\$65,000, the beneficiaries of ten awards totalling US\$10,155 were site-based projects within Important Bird Areas (IBAs) identified by BirdLife International, whilst the remaining 55 awards and US\$55,000 went to projects focussing on threatened species. NBC has supported work in Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean. During the period 2001–2009, two awards went to Mexico, one to Guatemala (the only Central American award), three to Cuba and one to St. Lucia (the only two of the 30 Caribbean states to receive awards), while 58 awards went to ten of the 13 South American countries (Table 1; Figure 1a). Colombia with US\$20,244 and Argentina with US\$ 13,980 were by some margin the countries that received the most funding.

Overall, five projects totalling US\$6,100 have supported Critically Endangered species, 27 projects totalling US\$27,670 have been for Endangered species and 13 awards totalling US\$12,550 have gone to conserve Vulnerable species. Comparing the amount of funding allocated to each country with the number of threatened species that occur in that country it is clear that some countries with highly threatened avifaunas like Peru, Bolivia and Brazil have received relatively low levels of funding. Furthermore, in considering Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, an indication of the level of funding that may be available nationally to support conservation, it is clear that once again Peru and Bolivia have received relatively modest support from NBC to date (Figure 1).

In the future, this information will be used to promote the Conservation Awards Programme more widely, particularly in Central America and the Caribbean, but also in Peru and Bolivia which

host a diverse and imperilled avifauna. We have also looked at how funding has been allocated across different bird families to see whether taxonomic biases exist in the way funds have been allocated (Appendix 1). The results of this analysis are encouraging, with a fairly even spread of projects across families.

Impacts for birds and their conservation

In this section, we focus on three projects, each exemplary in their own way, and provide highlights from a range of others.

Horned Guan *Oreophasis derbianus*

In 2004, the World Pheasant Association and NBC made a joint award of US\$860 to Ana José Cobar Carranza for her project on the current distribution and conservation of Horned Guan *Oreophasis derbianus* in Guatemala. This was a contribution to a nationwide conservation assessment of the species, and enabled the study of less well-known areas of this Endangered Guan's range in Guatemala.

The study uncovered four previously unknown sites for Horned Guan, two in Huehuetenango and two in San Marcos departments. Interviews with reliable members of local communities also confirmed the continued presence of the species at a number of known sites for the species. Population densities were determined in two areas. The project recommended a range of conservation measures to tackle the problems of hunting and habitat encroachment.

Local communities at some of these sites had already put in place forest protection measures, but following this project, additional communities established Municipal Protected Areas, in part motivated by the potential for local tourism around this flagship species (Cobar Carranza 2006, BirdLife International 2012c). Fire protection and reforestation programmes are under way at two sites (Martínez Saenz 2004). The Swiss non-governmental organisation Helvetas–Pro Bosques has organised a monitoring system for the municipal and regional parks of San Marcos Department and environmental education at Sibinal (Cobar Carranza 2006).

Ana José has gone on to study for a Master's degree in Forest Sciences at the University of Concepción, Chile.

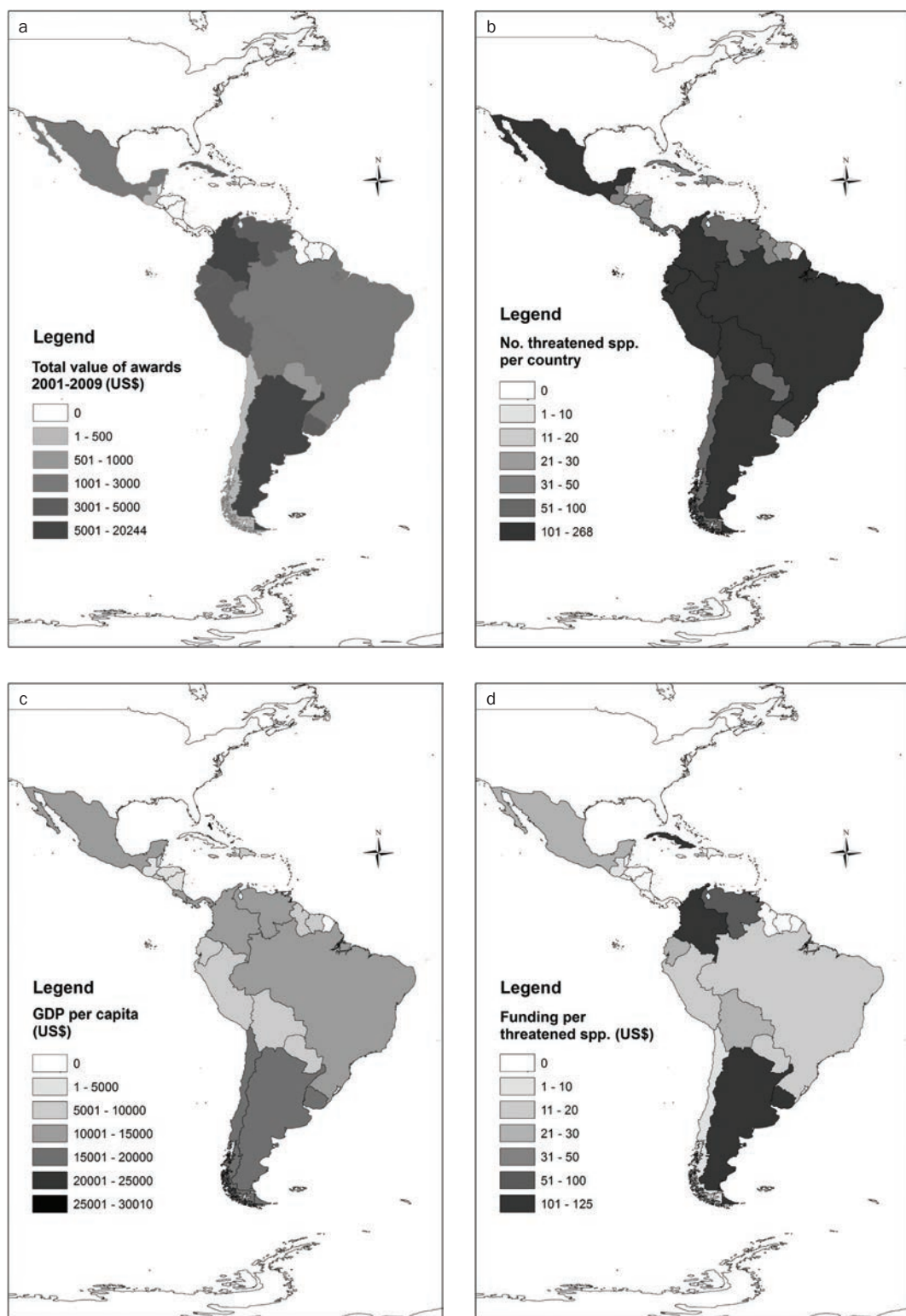


Figure 1: Distribution by country of a) total awards value, b) no. threatened species, c) GDP per capita and d) NBC funding per threatened species.

Río Blanco Important Bird Area, Chocó Endemic Bird Area, Colombia

In 2004, NBC awarded Christian Devenish and Diana Arzuza US\$900 for their environmental education project in the Río Blanco Important Bird Area near Manizales in the Central Cordillera of the Colombian Andes. The reserve covers 3,217 ha of montane humid forest and *páramo*, inhabited by over 320 bird species, of which five were Threatened (this has since risen to eight; BirdLife International 2012).

The project produced a practical and fun resource book of educational activities and worksheets for teachers to use in cross-curricular classes and field trips to the Río Blanco Hydrological and Forest Reserve and Ecological Park. This included suggestions for activities, fact files, a mini-bird guide and a CD of local bird songs. Local involvement in project design made the result outstanding. A pilot group of 15 local teachers met up with the project leaders on three occasions at the Río Blanco reserve for workshops which enabled the team to get to know local teaching methods and ideas for topics and activities to be included in the book. The teachers consequently gained a sense of ownership of the product enabling them to enthuse colleagues across the area. The launch was attended by more than 100 teachers from 104 educational establishments in the Manizales municipality, representing over 40,000 students.

In this way, the project achieved its aim of increasing awareness of conservation issues and the Río Blanco IBA specifically and of changing attitudes in the region, by using birds as a flagship group. Christian Devenish continued to work on bird conservation in Colombia with the Instituto Humboldt, and later went on to edit the Americas IBA directory with BirdLife International in Quito. Diana Arzuza continued working on bird conservation projects as well as museum curation, in Bogotá, and at the bird collection of the Universidad Católica del Ecuador in Quito.

Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi*

In 2008, a generous private donation of US\$1,500 was awarded to Santiago Imberti for his project on the conservation status of the Hooded Grebe, an Argentine breeding endemic. Winter census counts of this formerly Near Threatened species had suggested a reduction in population of at least 40%. The aim of this project was to find out whether this was reflected on the remote

breeding grounds, and whether known threats had worsened in preceding years.

As Imberti and Casañas (2010) reported in *Neotropical Birding*, “many lakes were dry and lacked waterfowl. Of the six key lakes from the 1980s, three were entirely devoid of grebes and the others had far fewer grebes than during that decade. In the 1980s, the total mean number of adults found on these lakes was 1,832; we found just 117 individuals. The equivalent figures for nests were 581 and zero.”

In early 2011, a new threat was identified, with the discovery of one introduced American Mink *Neovison vison* at El Cervecer Lake, together with 33 dead Hooded Grebes that appeared to have been killed by mink. The spread of American Mink onto the Patagonian plateaus is of grave concern for the conservation of waterfowl whose primary predators are thought to have been birds. El Sello, the most important lake for Hooded Grebes, and a refuge for thousands of other breeding waterbirds, is just 25 km from El Cervecer Lake (Roesler *et al.* 2012).

During the first few months of 2012, Aves Argentinas (BirdLife partner in Argentina) and local Patagonian non-governmental organisation, Ambiente Sur, led a team to the breeding grounds to pioneer conservation work. Surveys succeeded in finding new colonies, but only 265 breeding pairs, of which 64 were successful. At El Cervecer, a round-the-clock ‘colony guardian’ scheme was put in place, laying traps for mink and deterring predatory Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus*, which have increased on the plateaus. In the presence of the guardians a 60% breeding-success rate was achieved: three times the average (Ambiente Sur 2012, BirdLife International 2012a).

Hooded Grebe was uplisted to Endangered because of the NBC-funded study. Saving it will require significant funds, but the media coverage achieved in Argentina and international ornithological circles and the success of the conservation measures put in place last season gives cause for optimism (BirdLife International 2012a).

Swallow-tailed Cotinga *Phibalura flavirostris*

In 2007, William Ferrifino was awarded a grant to study the endangered endemic subspecies of Swallow-tailed Cotingas in Bolivia. William, who previously worked as a park guard in Madidi National Park, recorded over 80 nests in 2007, mainly around his home village of Aten, which



Chestnut-bellied Hummingbird
Amazilia castaneiventris, Pro-Aves Cerulean
Warbler Reserve, Colombia, February 2009
(Murray Cooper / www.murraycooperphoto.com)



Sierra Madre Sparrow *Xenospiza baileyi*,
near El Salto, Durango, Mexico, March 2007
(Hadoram Shirihi / Photographic handbook
to birds of the world)

has become the focus of conservation efforts on the species. The NGO Armonía are working with William and the Aten community on species monitoring, habitat protection and reserve creation. Fieldwork sponsored by NBC contributed to the data used to publish a paper proposing a split of this species from the nominate under the name of Palkachupa Cotinga *Phibalura boliviana* (Hennessey 2011).

Sierra Madre Sparrow ***Xenospiza baileyi***

A study by Adán Oliveras de Ita explored the life-history, genetic structure and distribution of the Sierra Madre Sparrow in a grassland-agriculture mosaic south of Mexico City. They found the species to breed only in bunchgrass-covered areas, and using their figures for territory density and the amount of remaining habitat they estimated the total population size to be 5,380–6,150 adults (Oliveras de Ita *et al.* 2001, Oliveras de Ita & Gomez de Silva 2007). Based on this paper the species was considered Endangered by Birdlife International (2012d).

White-collared Kite *Leptodon forbesi*

Sergio Seipke and colleagues received the US\$1,350 Swarovski–NBC Award to investigate the status, identification and ecology of the very poorly known White-collared Kite in north-east Brazil. The team found a total of c.20 pairs in 2007–2008 and identified forest remnants where the species persists. Their work, supported by a thorough museum study, resulted in two important publications: Dénes *et al.* (2011), quantitatively demonstrated the uniqueness of the taxon and presented distributional data, while Seipke *et al.* (2011) provided solid field criteria for the separation of this species from the sympatric Grey-headed Kite *L. cayanensis*.

Occasionally, among the dozens of completed ornithological and conservation projects, one fails to fulfil its objectives. For example, the project to search for new sites for Vulnerable Bolivian endemic Masked Antpitta *Hylopezus auricularis* did not find any, despite use of playback along over 50 km of local tracks and at ten potential sites, including the type locality.

Ongoing benefits to birds

Ruth Muñiz López's Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja* (Near Threatened) project operated in 2003 was so successful that it was adopted by the Ecuadorian

Ministry of the Environment. New nests have been found and a satellite-tracking project established. Interactions with local communities over the years have improved attitudes towards the Harpy Eagle conservation project. Oswaldo Cortes Herrera and his colleagues' projects in the oak forests of the Soatá area of Colombia have expanded to cover a wider range of threatened species. This has enabled his team to successfully apply for further funding from the NBC Conservation Awards Programme. Their ongoing work in this area has located five new sites for Chestnut-bellied Hummingbird *Amazilia castaneiventris* (Endangered) and Niceforo's Wren *Thryophilus nicefori* (Critically Endangered) and a regional conservation action plan was submitted to the local authorities in 2009. In 2006, the NBC made an award to Alejandro Bodrati and his team to produce an inventory of the birds of Cruce Cabellero Provincial Park in the Atlantic Forest of Misiones, north-east Argentina. The project was accompanied by an environmental education campaign, which has been continued since, with visits to 14 local schools each year. Furthermore, Alejandro has worked with local people to establish a small-scale reforestation project. Some 1,500 native trees have been planted in forest plots that had been cleared and farmed. Dan Mac-Lean's 2007 project on Ruddy-headed Geese *Chloephaga rubidiceps* in southern Argentina continues. The project involved designing and printing information materials, discussions with local landowners, and classes for local schoolchildren. This educational work has become self-sustaining, and schools now organise their own awareness-raising campaigns. Cristian Flórez Pai and colleagues have continued their birdwatching courses involving four schools and indigenous Awá communities in the Río Nambí Nature Reserve, in Nariño, south-west Colombia, following their 2007 project. The reserve holds 14 threatened species, for which an annual census has been established. Cristian and his colleagues have since produced a guide to the birds of the reserve aimed at children and young people.

The legacy of the award scheme

To improve the application process, enhance our ongoing communication with past and potential beneficiaries, and help market the programme, the Conservation Awards Subcommittee has surveyed previous award winners. Eleven of twelve questionnaire responses were extremely positive, especially in terms of personal development fostered. The responses indicate that many NBC-

funded projects prove not to be a one-off, and instead lead to ongoing conservation activities with a genuine conservation legacy for birds. Furthermore, some non-respondents are known to be working in ornithology or conservation, suggesting that participation in the programme really has proved a significant rung in the majority of award recipients' career ladders. For example, one respondent commented that the best thing for him personally was: "[acquiring] experience in fieldwork and in project planning. Above all... it was the first significant project I did in my life and it strongly motivated me to press on in ornithology." For another respondent, the best thing was: "[meeting] people who really believe that the conservation of biodiversity is worth the effort and who make an intense effort to that end."

Many beneficiaries have subsequently undertaken post-graduate studies, while those in employment include those people involved with conservation NGOs, lecturers and environmental consultants. The majority of respondents also participate in conservation work or birding during their free time, and several pass their understanding on by giving talks in schools or at bird clubs.

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Many organisations kindly provide excellent raffle prizes to accompany Swarovski Optik's binoculars and the copy of *Handbook of the birds of the world* donated each year by Lynx Edicions. During 2001–09, these were Asa Wright Nature Centre (twice), Blue Waters Inn (twice), British West Indies Airways, Canopy Tower (twice), Guyana Tourist Authority, Limosa Holidays, Manu Expeditions (twice), Serra dos Tucanos Lodge,



Travelling Naturalist, Wilderness Explorers and WildWings (twice). All have helped NBC to raise £1,000–£2,000 per annum via the Birdfair raffle.

Many thanks are also due to Tom Stuart's immediate predecessor running the programme, James Lowen, who ensured a smooth transition and contributed significantly, long after handing over. Conservation Subcommittee members and advisers have also given a lot of their spare time over the years, as has the Club's Council in reviewing funding decisions. We are grateful to Nacho Areta and Guy Kirwan for their patience as this article has been written, and contribution to the editing.

Lastly, the award-winning individuals and teams themselves are an essential part of the programme. The vision, determination and effort needed to bring about a successful conservation project should not be under-estimated. Without their efforts, there would clearly be no Conservation Awards and the status of the birds and habitats they have worked on would, in many cases, be in worse shape than they are. We're sure NBC members share our gratitude and support for you, the conservation practitioners, to keep it up!

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APPENDIX 1: Awards by family

Family	Number of awards	Total value of all awards (US\$)
Albatrosses	1	950
Antbirds	2	2250
Antthrushes and antpittas	1	750
Buntings, American sparrows and allies	5	4100
Cotingas	4	4540
Crows and jays	1	1800
Dippers	1	750
Doves and pigeons	2	2500
Ducks, geese and swans	3	2350
Finches and Hawaiian honeycreepers	1	500
Grebes	1	1500
Guans and curassows	4	3378
Gulls and terns	1	1290
Hummingbirds	2	2352
Larks	1	550
Manakins	1	1440
Mockingbirds and thrashers	1	1000
New World blackbirds	2	2354
New World quails	1	1000
New World vultures	1	370
New World warblers	2	3350
Nightjars	2	2000
Osprey, kites, hawks and eagles	2	2350
Ovenbirds	1	500
Owls	1	1190
Parrots	4	3040
Rails, crakes and allies	1	1000
Tanagers	2	2359
Thick-knees	1	1000
Toucans and barbets	1	1340
Tyrant-flycatchers	2	1500
Wrens	1	900