

NBC Conservation Awards update

Compiled by Christopher Sharpe and Rob Clay

Excitingly, the Neotropical Bird Club Conservation Awards Programme continues to grow, both in the amount of funds the Club is able to grant and in the number of proposals received. The organisers of the Programme share highlights of the bird-conservation work delivered.

The Neotropical Bird Club Conservation Awards Programme (NBC CAP) continues to go from strength to strength. We are very grateful for the ongoing support of the March Conservation Fund of Tides Foundation, which continues to be a major contributor to the NBC Conservation Fund, especially to Ivan Samuels who also plays an active role in project evaluation. Also, special thanks to our sometime Corporate Supporters Birdquest, WINGS/Sunbird and Birding Ecotours, who procured generous donations. We would also like to extend warm thanks to the family of Juan Mazar Barnett, and in particular his mother Cristina, for generously making possible the award in his name. This year, we received a donation in memory of Roger Lewis

Jones, specifically to support projects in southeast Brazil, which enabled us to make an additional grant available to SAVE Brasil for vital work to conserve the Endangered Black-fronted Piping-guan *Pipile jacutinga*. As usual, awards of \$1,500, \$3,000 and \$5,000 were available.

2017 awards

Of eight strong finalists from our January 2017 round of applications, we were able to finance four projects. A total of 68 proposals were received for our July round: 27 made it through to the final evaluation, with 10 successfully obtaining NBC CAP funding. The total amount disbursed during 2017 was \$37,487. The 14 projects financed are summarised in the adjacent box.

PROJECTS FUNDED BY THE NBC CONSERVATION AWARDS PROGRAMME DURING 2017

Ecology and conservation of **Cuban Parakeet *Psittacara euops*** in Parque Nacional El Pico Cristal, eastern Cuba. Inés Lourdes Fernández Rodríguez. Awarded \$3,000.

Foraging habitat of the Endangered **Black-capped Petrel *Pterodroma hasitata***: using spatial ecology to inform conservation. Ernst Rupp, Dominican Republic. Awarded \$2,989.

Distribution, diversity, and abundance of **Grenadian birds**, including endemic and restricted-range species. Ramon Williams, Grenada. Awarded \$1,500.

Natural history and ecology of **Sapphire-bellied Hummingbird *Lepidopygia lilliae***: generating baseline information to monitor and conserve a Critically Endangered hummingbird. Ángela Caguazango, Colombia. Awarded \$3,000.

Analysis of the historical and current geographical distribution of **Psittacids** in Venezuela. Eliana Blanco Pérez, Venezuela. Awarded \$2,920.

Conservation of **Recurve-billed Bushbird (Hormiguero Pico de Hoz) *Clytactantes alixii*** on the eastern slope of Sierra de Perijá, Venezuela. Lisandro Moran Quiroz, Venezuela. Awarded \$2,448.

Programme for the release of **Great Green Macaw *Ara ambiguus guayaquilensis*** in the Ayampe Reserve. Eliana Montenegro, Ecuador. Awarded \$3,000.

Designing nestboxes to conserve the Endangered **Grey-cheeked Parakeet *Brotozeris pyrrhoptera*** and other cavity nesters in western Ecuador. Mike Ellis, Ecuador. Awarded \$2,780.

Distribution and habitat of **Peruvian Plantcutter *Phytotoma raimondii*** in the Pómac Forest Historical Sanctuary (PFHS) and other sites in Lambayeque, Peru. Jeremy Flanagan, Peru. Awarded \$2,600.

Does microclimate change explain observed declines of **terrestrial insectivores**? Vítek Jirinec, Brazil. Awarded \$3,920.

Conservation of game birds in the Brazilian Atlantic Forest: reintroduction and monitoring of **Black-fronted Piping-guan *Pipile jacutinga***. Alecsandra Tassoni, Brazil. Awarded \$4,830.

Protecting breeding **Masafuera Rayadito *Aphrastura masafuerae***. Héctor Gutiérrez Guzmán, Chile. Awarded \$3,000.

Monitoring of **Chaco Eagle *Buteogallus coronatus*** in Telteca. Elena Mendoza, Argentina. Awarded \$1,500.

Population restoration of the Endangered **Yellow Cardinal *Gubernatrix cristata*** in Selva de Montiel Important Bird Area, Entre Ríos, Argentina. Fabricio Reales, Argentina. Awarded \$1,500.

Updates from past awards

The following summary highlights achievements from projects that NBC has already funded, as explained by the recipients.

Zapata Rail in Cuba

Zapata Rail, the most elusive and most poorly-known Cuban endemic bird. New surveys in 2016. \$3,000. Project dates: 2016–2018.

The project received NBC CAP support in 2016, and has been extended to run until at least 2018, thanks to an additional grant (the Pamela and Alexander F. Skutch Research Award from the Association of Field Ornithologists). The main objectives of the project are to find the Critically Endangered Zapata Rail *Cyanolimnas cerverai*, to obtain visual evidence (photographs or videos), and to acquire basic information on its biology. The last previously reported sighting of the rail came from the well-known area of La Turba, in 2014, at a location subsequently destroyed by fire.

In order to orient fieldwork, Nils Navarro interviewed the most experienced local and national ornithologists to compile and evaluate unpublished and published sight records. Nils also analysed letters from Fermín Cervera (the Spanish zoologist commemorated in the scientific name of Zapata Wren *Ferminia cerverai*) to his family. A complete list of sightings made from 1926–2015 was assembled. The most-recent documented sightings came from disturbed areas that were closest to the towns and roads, frequently burned by fires and stressed by intense human impact. It transpired that these areas are located on the outer, more accessible, edges of the swamp. Most exciting of all, Nils discovered what he believes to be the only photograph of the Zapata Rail in the wild, taken by Pedro Regalado almost 50 years ago.

Nils and a team from the Cuban Institute of Ecology and Systematics, Cuban Society for Zoology, and Zapata Swamp National Park Office carried out an expedition to Zapata Swamp during 25 March – 7 April 2017. Seven trail cameras were located in the areas of sawgrass or in ditches, in prime rail habitat close to the wettest areas. Unfortunately – but not unexpectedly – Zapata Rail was not encountered. However, fieldwork in such an important area has spin-off benefits. Since the expedition was timed with the breeding season of various endemic birds, new information was obtained on the natural history of little-known endemic species such as: Grey-fronted Quail-Dove *Geotrygon caniceps* (Vulnerable), Blue-headed Quail-Dove *Starnoenas cyanocephala* (Endangered), Fernandina's Flicker *Colaptes fernandinae* (Vulnerable), Cuban Trogon *Priotelus temnurus* and Bare-legged Owl *Margarobas lawrencii*. Moreover, all information gathered during the field trips will be used to update and enrich the forthcoming *Field guide to the birds of Cuba* on which Nils is presently working.

The subsequent expedition took place in late 2017. This used boats to enter the core zone of Zapata Swamp, in the vicinity of the type-locality for Zapata Rail. In the future, NBC CAP's Chris Sharpe intends to make a visit to the area to meet with the project team.

Nils Navarro

1 Cuban Zapata Rail project team exploring sawgrass in the vicinity of La Turba, Zapata Swamp, Cuba (Nils Navarro).

2 Nils Navarro setting one of the trail cameras in the sawgrass habitat, Zapata Swamp, Cuba (Nils Navarro).

3 Members of the Zapata Rail project team downloading images from the trail cameras in Zapata Swamp, Cuba (Nils Navarro).



Red Siskin in Venezuela

*Assessing the illegal trade in Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus* in Venezuela. \$2,936. Project dates: 2016–ongoing.*

Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus* is a globally Endangered Neotropical bird that has been nearly eliminated throughout its former range across northern Venezuela, Colombia and Trinidad as a result of historic and ongoing over-exploitation for the illegal cagebird trade (Sharpe 2016). Within Venezuela, it is Critically Endangered – and is regarded as the country's most urgent avian-conservation priority.

Although illegal trade has long been identified as the main threat to this songbird, very little is known about how that particular business works. Understanding where Red Siskin extraction occurs, how birds are taken to market, who is involved, and what drives the market, is necessary to facilitate the best possible decision-making for conservation management and reduction of threats. In this project we aim to strengthen efforts to promote the recovery of wild Red Siskin populations in Venezuela by seeking to understand three key aspects of illegal trade. We aim to: determine the key roles of actors in illegal Red Siskin trade, from harvesters to final consumers; characterise actors' motives and their dependence on the context and value of the market; and calculate the extraction rate, defined by the number of individuals sold per year.

During March–October 2017, across 34 localities in central and western Venezuela, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 41 trappers, 20 breeders and six dealers. We interviewed 17 informants (not involved directly in Red Siskin trade) and 18 ornithologists. We also interviewed three breeders from Spain (three breeders), one from Ireland and one from the United States, plus one dealer from Brazil. Additionally, for six months we scrutinised discussion on 122 potentially relevant Facebook groups from Europe, Asia, North America and South America, and on 10 WhatsApp groups from Brazil and Spain.

From the interviews we have compiled 198 confirmed records of Red Siskin trade, while the



4 Captive female Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus*, discovered at an undisclosed location in Venezuela (Jhonathan Miranda).

monitoring of social-media groups produced a further 500 records. Our preliminary analysis of interview data showed that the 198 trade records corresponded to 565 individual Red Siskins. Breeders were involved in 52% of records, with domestic dealers carrying out 20%, and international dealers (importers) accounting for 11% of the records. Local trappers were involved in 13% of trade records for Red Siskin. Some 65% of records indicate demand for adult males. The proportion of Red Siskin trade involving wild birds (49% of records) is similar to that for birds of captive origin.

Over the next few months we will analyse data from social-media groups and combine this with interview data to generate an updated evidence-based traffic-network model. This network approach may yield additional insights into how to identify principal actors with major influence in the network, either because they have a large commercial exchange with others or because they act as links between different actors. We also want to investigate the characteristics of the actors in order to understand how individual actions influence the functioning of the entire Red Siskin trade network.

Arlene B. Cardozo U. and Ada Sánchez-Mercado

REFERENCE

Sharpe, C. (2016) Red Siskin *Sporagra cucullata*. *Neotrop. Birding* 18: 36–40.

Rare birds in northeast Brazil

In pursuit of the rarest: using sound recorders to detect endangered and possibly extinct bird species at Serra do Urubu, Pernambuco, Brazil. \$5,000. Project dates: November 2016 – November 2018.

The Pernambuco Centre of Endemism in northeast Brazil is one of the most threatened regions in the Neotropics. It harbours some of the realm's most imperilled species, several of which are Critically

Endangered, and some – such as Alagoas Foliage-gleaner *Philydor novaesi* and Cryptic Treehunter *Cichlocolaptes mazarbarnetti* – are feared extinct (see Lees *et al.* 2014). Serra do Urubu, within

which the Reserva Particular do Patrimônio Natural Pedra D'Anta is located, is an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area that is home to many of these globally threatened and endemic species, and is therefore a key area for conserving and monitoring them. However, it is often difficult to detect and monitor elusive or threatened species in the wild.

For this project, Brazilian researchers aimed to employ a new method for detecting and monitoring endangered bird species at Pedra D'Anta reserve, using autonomous sound-recording systems and automated species identification. Thanks to a NBC Conservation Award and to the logistical and local support of SAVE Brasil (BirdLife International Partner in Brazil), the team was able to acquire and install five sound-recording systems in the reserve. Since November 2016, four of the systems (the fifth has been stolen) have been recording for roughly 20 days per month, with about a week required for maintenance of the equipment (periodical download of recordings, recharge of batteries and reinstallation). The systems are scheduled to record in short intervals from dawn to sunset, amounting to a total of about 300 hours of recordings each month.

With the first year of the project complete, part of the acoustic data has already been analysed and some tests of automated identification/validation conducted. The large amount of data collected so far confirms the presence of some target species, e.g. Orange-bellied Antwren *Terenura sicki* (Critically Endangered) and Alagoas Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes ceciliae* (Endangered), although others such as Alagoas Foliage-gleaner are sadly absent.

These results, albeit preliminary, help clarify the extent to which existing perceptions of the species' conservation status, based largely on other methods and observations, is correct. In addition to generating extremely important records of threatened species, a further output of this project is the creation of a permanent acoustic record of the avifauna of Pedra D'Anta reserve. This enormous amount of acoustic data can be interpreted to generate ecological information which can be used to understand the structure and dynamics of the avian community in this highly endangered area. The monitoring program will continue, and further work will include moving the recording systems to different parts of the reserve. We will also keep collecting and analysing the acoustic data and producing regular reports and scientific papers.

The records of the threatened species, or even of the possibly extinct ones, will help establish a more reliable baseline for renewed conservation efforts, at least at a local scale. They also indicate the need to urgently apply this technique on a wider scale, including in other forest remnants in the endangered Pernambuco Centre of Endemism.

Rather appropriately, considering the target species named in his memory, this project received the Club's Juan Mazar Barnett award.

*Thiago Vernaschi Vieira da Costa
with Bárbara Cavalcante, Carlos O. A. Gussoni
and Karlla V. C. Barbosa*

REFERENCE

Lees, A. C., Albano, C., Kirwan, G. M., Pacheco, J. F. & Whittaker, A. (2014) The end of hope for Alagoas Foliage-gleaner *Philydor novaesi*? *Neotrop. Birding* 14: 20–28.

5 Reserva Particular do Patrimônio Natural Pedra D'Anta, Pernambuco, Brazil (Carlos Gussoni). **6** Installation of the autonomous recording systems at Pedra D'Anta reserve, Pernambuco, Brazil (Carlos Gussoni). **7** An autonomous recording system set up at Pedra D'Anta reserve, Pernambuco, Brazil (Carlos Gussoni).



Rufous-faced Crake in Paraguay

*Advancing the conservation of Rufous-faced Crake *Laterallus xenopterus*. \$1,500. Project dates: September 2016 – September 2018.*

Rufous-faced Crake *Laterallus xenopterus* is one of the most poorly known members of the Rallidae, and is currently listed as globally Vulnerable.

This secretive species was discovered in 1933 in Paraguay but there was no further information about the bird until 45 years later in 1978, when a specimen was captured by Helmut Sick in Brazil. Since then, a handful of studies have produced new information about the species. Its distribution remains incompletely known, with records from just a few isolated and widely separated localities over a very extensive area between Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay. This project aims to: (1) obtain new high-quality sound-recordings of the vocalisations of Rufous-faced Crake; (2) take blood samples in order to analyse the phylogenetic relationships of the species; (3) create a niche model to predict the distribution of the species; and (4) raise awareness of the species in local communities where the species is known to occur.

The team planned a field trip to Aguara-Ñu, Reserva Natural del Bosque Mbaracayú, Canindeyú, Paraguay, in October 2016. Two weeks

before the visit, a large area of Aguara-Ñu was burned. Fieldwork went ahead, despite the setback, and 16 different Rufous-faced Crake territories were identified. Digital sound-recordings, comprising 1 hour 40 minutes of recorded sound, were made of vocalisations within the different territories. Moreover, previously undocumented vocalisations for the species were discovered. Two individual Rufous-faced Crakes were captured and measured, and blood samples were taken. We also recorded two species of rallid new to Mbaracayú: Rufous-sided Crake *L. melanophaius* and Grey-breasted Crake *L. exilis* (with one individual of the latter captured).

Mbaracayú hosts a school at Jejuí-mi research station. This, like the reserve is managed by Fundación Moisés Bertoni. Through an educational workshop with 17-year-old students, the team assessed the threats to the conservation of the region and the birds that inhabit it, emphasising the problems faced by the Rufous-faced Crake.

Emiliano Agustín Depino

8 Open grassland (*campo limpo*, *cerradão*), the habitat of Rufous-faced Crake *Laterallus xenopterus* in Aguara-Ñu, Reserva Natural del Bosque Mbaracayú, Canindeyú, Paraguay (Emiliano Agustín Depino). **9** Emiliano Depino sound-recording Rufous-faced Crake *Laterallus xenopterus* in a low-lying grassland in Aguara-Ñu, Reserva Natural del Bosque Mbaracayú, Canindeyú, Paraguay (Fabricio Gorleri). **10** Rufous-faced Crake *Laterallus xenopterus* in Aguara-Ñu, Reserva Natural del Bosque Mbaracayú, Canindeyú, Paraguay (Fabricio Gorleri). **11** Emiliano Depino sound-recording Ocellated Crake *Micropygia schomburgkii* in a relatively high-lying, shrubby grassland in Aguara-Ñu, Reserva Natural del Bosque Mbaracayú, Canindeyú, Paraguay (Fabricio Gorleri). **12** Valley slopes at Aguara-Ñu, Reserva Natural del Bosque Mbaracayú, Canindeyú, Paraguay. Foreground: burned hillside dominated by *yatay poñí* palm *Butia paraguayensis*. Background: unburned hillside protected by the swampy low valley (Emiliano Agustín Depino).

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Chaco Eagle in Argentina

Conservation of Chaco Eagle Buteogallus coronatus in Córdoba, Argentina: mapping new areas to protect. \$1,500. Project dates: March 2016 – February 2017.

The project was based on a survey of areas with previous records of Chaco Eagle *Buteogallus coronatus* (Endangered), in order to confirm presence and breeding. During each survey, consultations were also made with local villagers, and during the year some educational activities were carried out. Based on the interviews, unpublished species records were compiled. We prioritised sites where there were recent records of juvenile Chaco Eagle.

Most locals interviewed knew nothing of the species, even though they lived in sites with frequent verified records. Those villagers who were familiar with the species generally recognised it by its characteristic whistling call and habit of eating *quirquinchos* or *mulitas* (armadillos), and did not

view it as a threat to their own way of life. Only in El Chacho, Serrezuela, did respondents indicate that the species is locally persecuted because it eats *mulitas*, and this competition over resources influenced public opinion more than the benefits of snake-depredation offered by the eagle. For their part, rangers, biologists, mountain guides, naturalists and ornithologists – interviewed as inhabitants or frequent visitors – mostly recognised the species but were not so familiar with its habits and conservation status. All showed a wish to collaborate by providing many previously undocumented records.

Prior to the project, there was only one verified nesting site in Córdoba, namely in Luyaba. In this study two other possible breeding sites were identified: Campo El Titán, El Chacho, Serrezuela, and Reserva Privada Natural Los Chorrillos, Tanti. More surveys are needed at these two sites to confirm nesting. A total of six educational activities were carried out, through which 728 people were reached (451 in the province of La Rioja and 277 in the province of Córdoba). Further work is ongoing.

Verónica Serman

The deadlines for Conservation Award Programme applications are 1 January and 1 July each year. Full details of the Awards Programme and application process can be found at www.neotropicalbirdclub.org/conservation/conservation-fund/. Without the generous support of independent organisations and private individuals, the NBC Conservation Awards Programme would be unable to finance so many worthwhile projects. If you or your organisation would like to donate to the programme please contact the authors. With additional funding we will be able to do even more to help local conservationists protect Neotropical birds.

CHRISTOPHER J. SHARPE & ROB CLAY

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Members' e-mail addresses

With ever increasing postage costs the Club can save considerable money by using e-mail to communicate with members. We would like to move to sending membership renewals by e-mail instead of by post. If we do not have your preferred e-mail address or you have changed it recently it would help the Club if you could please send it to us at membership@neotropicalbirdclub.org.

The refreshed NBC website

If you want to keep up to date with what the Neotropical Bird Club is doing then please regularly visit the Club's website at www.neotropicalbirdclub.org. The website also offers a simple way to join the Club or renew your membership. The website's appearance has been slightly altered to accommodate the new online membership options, for which our sincere thanks go to Sue Gregory and Simon Howarth of Zenith Marketing (www.zenith-marketing.co.uk).