

# Neotropical Birding

THE BIRDING MAGAZINE OF THE NEOTROPICAL BIRD CLUB



Number 3 • Autumn 2008

# Strange-tailed Tyrant

## *Alectrurus risora*

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The Strange-tailed Tyrant is a flagship species for the Southern Cone grasslands, an area of high biodiversity to which conservationists have only recently turned their attention.



Figure 1. Adult male in display flight, 'bouncing along', high above the ground, with elongated tail feathers dropped and spread

Figure 2 (inset). Adult male, showing the distinctive tail shape and bare red throat



Figures 3–6. Different portraits of the same adult male. This individual was colour-ringed as part of a monitoring programme on 3 November 2005, since when he has maintained a breeding territory with 2–3 females

In a family more renowned for taxa clad in dowdy shades of brown or green and perhaps adorned with subtle variations in tertial fringe pattern—the Tyrannidae or tyrant flycatchers—the Strange-tailed Tyrant *Alectrurus risora* stands out. A striking creature in plumage and structure alike, this globally threatened bird is also a fragile reminder of the devastatingly adverse impacts of modern agriculture on natural habitats. As such, it is a charismatic and emblematic figurehead for a

conservation issue that has only penetrated international consciousness in very recent years.

### Plumage

In breeding plumage, the adult male (Figs. 1–9) is mainly black above, with a grey rump, whitish scapulars and tips to the greater coverts. The elongated tail forms a third of the bird's overall length; the modified and twisted outer feathers are

reduced to the shaft at the base and are very broad for the outer two-thirds of the inner web. The throat of bare red skin (Fig. 8) contrasts with the broad black breast-band and white belly. In non-breeding plumage, the tail is less extravagant, the throat is covered by white feathers, and there is more extensive grey feathering (Fig. 9). Males moult into breeding plumage from June and regrow the white throat feathers of non-breeding garb from mid-January. In March–April, birds moult their rectrices more or less simultaneously.

The adult female (Figs. 10–11) is rather less smartly attired, but nevertheless rather attractive in its own way. Mottled brown above, the female's outer two pairs of rectrices are elongated and terminate in a racquet, rather like a male Booted Racket-tail *Ocreatus underwoodii*. A brown pectoral band divides otherwise whitish or buff-tinted underparts. Juveniles resemble the female, although first-year males (Fig. 12) exhibit a darker breast-band and, sometimes, a bare red throat; they may even display to females. Males acquire definitive adult plumage in their second year. Immatures lack the modified outer primary of adults of either sex (Fig. 13a and b) that enables them to make a mechanical sound in flight and antagonistic displays. The fledgling (Fig. 14) resembles the juvenile, but the tail is vestigial and the upperparts more heavily marked.

## Distribution and conservation

The Strange-tailed Tyrant is a bird of the *pampas*, inhabiting marshes and grasslands in southern South America. The species formerly bred in Uruguay, and there are odd records in Brazil as far north as Mato Grosso, but it now appears extinct in both countries<sup>1</sup>. The species persists only in southern Paraguay and northern Argentina, with the total world population thought to have declined drastically to 10,000–20,000 birds<sup>1</sup>. Even in Argentina, however, its range has contracted by a dramatic 90%: the species once summered as far south as Buenos Aires province, but no longer<sup>3</sup>. Sizeable (albeit fragmented) populations remain only in east Formosa and north-east Corrientes provinces<sup>3</sup>. This combination of declining population and diminishing distribution justifies the species' classification as Vulnerable<sup>1</sup>.

Anthropogenic changes in land use are the key reason for the Strange-tailed Tyrant's precarious grasp on the stems of the Southern Cone's remaining natural grasslands. The spread of intensive agriculture has decimated its *pampas* populations. The cultivation of cotton has accelerated the species' extinction in Argentina's

Central Chaco. Elsewhere in Argentina and Paraguay, the rampant spread of soya and rice monocultures, in addition to widespread forestation with non-native *Pinus* and *Eucalyptus* plantations, threatens remnant pockets of natural habitat.

Yet there is hope. Where cattle-ranching is managed sensitively by *gauchos* (the Southern Cone's cowboys, cultural icons integral to the national identity of four countries), natural grasslands can flourish, and with them the Strange-tailed Tyrant. This realisation has inspired a cross-border collaboration by BirdLife International's Americas Partnership, which seeks to save both the *gaucho* lifestyle and the threatened birds of one of the world's most neglected habitats.

The 'Alliance for the Conservation of Southern Cone Grasslands' (for which, see [www.pastizalesdelconosur.org](http://www.pastizalesdelconosur.org)) seeks to create a stakeholder network that mainstreams biodiversity conservation into agriculture and silviculture in key areas for grassland birds. BirdLife Partners are also exploring innovative ways of intertwining the fates of *gaucho* and tyrant, including the creation of a certification scheme for 'bird-friendly beef', whereby ranchers would charge a price differential for beef produced in harmony with grassland wildlife<sup>2</sup>.

## Ecological insights

Until recently, little was known about the ecology of the Strange-tailed Tyrant. This is rather surprising given that this tyrannid is not shy, usually perching conspicuously atop tall grass stems (as Figs. 2–7 aptly demonstrate). However, recent monitoring at the Reserva El Bagual, a private nature reserve managed by Aves Argentinas in Formosa province, has provided much new knowledge<sup>3,4</sup>, some of which we summarise here.

In Formosa, Strange-tailed Tyrants appear to prefer tall grassland dominated by *Elionurus muticus* and *Imperata brasiliensis* in slightly higher (and thus drier) areas, occurring in smaller numbers in extensive, wet and low-lying *Paspalum* grasslands. In Corrientes province to the east, the species prefers low-lying, damp grassland where *Andropogon lateralis* predominate. The species is sociable for a tyrant flycatcher, occurring in small groups even during the breeding season and in flocks of up to 30 in the non-breeding season. Research in Formosa has revealed that the species is sometimes polygynous, a male's territory holding up to three breeding females. Even more

interestingly, females tend to be faithful to the same nesting territory year-after-year, even if the incumbent male should change.

The male has a fantastic undulating display flight, his two long tail feathers spread and either drooped towards the ground or whipped up and down (Fig. 1). Discoveries of a remarkable 470 nests at El Bagual from 1995–2008 reveal that Strange-tailed Tyrants breed between mid-September and mid-January. Ninety per cent of nests are located in tall grass. The nest is an open, grassy cup that is constructed by the female over 7–11 days and placed 10–90 cm above ground. The female lays three white eggs (sometimes two), then incubates (for 16 days), broods (12–15 days; Fig. 15) and feeds the young without assistance from the male.

Unsurprisingly for a tyrannid, Strange-tailed Tyrants are insectivorous, making aerial sallies, catching prey in short flights between grass stems, or even foraging on the ground. Prey includes caterpillars, flies, mantids, beetles and dragonflies. Unusually among grassland birds, this tyrannid compensates for the lower number of flying insects during winter by following army ants and armadillos during rainy periods, catching insects that they flush<sup>4</sup>.

## Seeing Strange-tails

Despite their plummeting population and dwindling range, it is not too difficult to see Strange-tailed Tyrants at several Important Bird Areas in Argentina (for which see the article on pp. 4–11) and Paraguay. Argentina's best site is probably the Reserva Natural Iberá in Corrientes province, where the species is common. Drive the roads either side of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini; in the first 32 km west of the village, one of us (JL) enjoyed views of some 36 individuals in a single hour during November 2007. Another good site is the recently established Santa Olga Lodge in Formosa province ([www.santaolgalodge.com](http://www.santaolgalodge.com)). In Paraguay, the species can be seen near km 100 on Ruta 3 east of Asunción (see pp. 53–58).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Alparamis S.A. and Aves Argentinas for their support of research and conservation at Reserva El Bagual, Canon National Parks Science Scholars Program for their support of Alejandro's work, and Andres Bosso and Rob Clay for comments on a draft of this article.

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The photographs of Strange-tailed Tyrants *Alectrurus risora* on pp. 72–73 and 76–77 were taken by Alejandro Di Giacomo (Figures 8–9, 13, 15) and—all other images—by James C. Lowen ([www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen)). Figures 2–13 and 15 were taken at the Reserva El Bagual, Formosa, Argentina (Figures 2–7 and 10–12 in October 2007). Figures 1 and 14 were taken at Reserva Natural Iberá, Corrientes, Argentina, in November 2007.



Figure 7. The same adult male as Figures 3–6 in mid-gulp as it swallows an insect



Figure 8 (left). Close-up of head of adult male, showing bare red throat



Figure 9 (right). A male in non-breeding plumage, with feathered white throat, extensive grey on the upperparts, regrowing its currently short tail

Figures 10–11 (below). A typical female, probably an adult, showing a buff-brown pectoral band





Figure 12. This first-year male's dark breast and wing-coverts, and scattered dark feathers in the crown, mantle, upper scapulars and ear-coverts suggests that it is starting to moult into a 'first-summer' plumage



Figure 13a and b. Adults (here adult males) have a modified outer primary that enables them to make mechanical noises in flight



Figure 14. A single fledgling that was guarded closely by a female, with the male in Figure 1 nearby  
 Figure 15 (inset). Nest with three chicks