

# Speckled Rail *Coturnicops notatus*: unravelling an enigma

Alejandro Di Giacomo and Mark Pearman

Very few birders have seen the diminutive Speckled Rail *Coturnicops notatus* and very little is known about it. Here we showcase some of the few photographs of the species in existence.



Ever since the holotype was collected aboard HMS *Beagle* in the río de la Plata, Uruguay, in 1841, the Speckled Rail *Coturnicops notatus* (often called Speckled Crane) has been an avian enigma. Very few birders have seen this nocturnal railid, black in plumage and similar in length to a House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*. The Speckled Rail skulks in dense vegetation up to one metre tall, and only 18 specimens are held in the world's museum collections<sup>3,6,7</sup>. Virtually nothing is known about the species's natural history. The rail's nest and eggs remain undescribed and its migratory status is subject to conflicting opinions<sup>2</sup>. No recordings of this rail's vocalisations have been published. Unsurprisingly, the Speckled Rail has been considered "one of the rarest Neotropical birds"<sup>4</sup> and "genuinely rare"<sup>2</sup>. However, BirdLife International now consider it to be Least Concern<sup>1</sup>, although for reasons that are unclear.

Although specimen labels reveal that the Speckled Rail is (or, at least, was) widespread in South America, it has only been recorded on one occasion in each of Bolivia, Guyana, and Colombia. The species has been found twice in Venezuela, three times in Paraguay, on five occasions in Brazil and six times in Uruguay<sup>9</sup>.

In contrast to these scant data, Speckled Rail is now known from 22 localities in Argentina<sup>8</sup>. Multiple sight records in the austral spring and summer from three sites in Buenos Aires province

(Reserva Nacional Otamendi, Reserva Municipal Punta Rasa and Reserva de Biosfera Albufera Mar Chiquita)<sup>5,8</sup> strongly suggest that these coastal and deltaic saltmarshes may comprise a core breeding area.

In Formosa province, some 1,200 km north-north-west of the putative Argentine breeding grounds, lies the Reserva El Bagual, owned by Alpamis S. A. and managed by Aves Argentinas (BirdLife in Argentina). Located in the humid Chaco, this reserve exhibits some floral similarities (i.e. in terms of dense marsh vegetation) to the trio of sites in Buenos Aires province. During 13 years of fieldwork at El Bagual, Speckled Rail has been recorded regularly in small numbers during winter and early spring<sup>3</sup>, the only 'blank' years being those dominated by large grass fires and/or drought (e.g. 2008).

At El Bagual, Speckled Rail has only been detected by observers on horseback in tall, dense marsh grass<sup>3</sup>: the horses flush the railid as they traverse the vegetation. In August 2005, surveys targeting this species struck gold, with a *gaucho* horseman capturing an individual by hand.

This gave us an unprecedented opportunity to seek to unravel the enigma that comprises the Speckled Rail. Our close examination of the individual revealed new biometric, soft-part and plumage data that will be published elsewhere. We took blood samples and marked the bird with



colour rings. We quickly constructed a spacious pen in the marsh near the capture site, enabling us to photograph the bird in its natural habitat, to gather data on its nocturnal behaviour and to make the first sound-recordings of the species. The bird was released the following morning.

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#### ALEJANDRO G. DI GIACOMO

Conservation Department, Aves Argentinas, Matheu 1246/8 (C1249 AAB), Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Conservation Manager, Reserva Ecológica El Bagual, Formosa, Argentina. E-mail: elbagual@avesargentinas.org.ar

#### MARK PEARMAN

Buenos Aires, Argentina.  
E-mail: markpearman@speedy.com.ar





Speckled Rail *Coturnicops notatus* at Reserva El Bagual, Formosa province, Argentina, August 2005 (Alejandro Di Giacomo)



