

# Dot-winged Crake *Porzana spiloptera*: a shadow in the pampas salty grasslands

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The size of a small rodent, this elusive crake inhabits the densest brackish grasslands in the Pampas of eastern Argentina, being fleetingly observed mostly when flushed. The proud discoverers of its vocalisations promise that seeing this rail will no longer be an arduous task.

Above: Impressive close-up of the head of the same adult individual showing its remarkable red iris (Río Lujan, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Luis Pagano)

Right: Unusual view of a tame Dot-winged Crake walking during daylight by a tidal channel at the edge of brackish grasslands near the ocean (note the sandy soil and shells). Unlike in previous photos, this bird—presumably alert—carries its tail erect (Reserva Provincial Punta Rasa, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Juan Ignacio Areta)



Above left, top and bottom: Dorsal and lateral views of a mist-netted Dot-winged Crake showing the spotted design of the wing coverts, the barring on the lower flanks and its short tail. Note also the olive-brown colour of its striped neck from which it differs from the Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis* (Río Lujan, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Ulises Ornstein)

Above right, top and bottom: Adult in a typical secretive attitude as it comes out slowly from the grassland to forage on the edges of tidal channels at sunset (Reserva Provincial Punta Rasa, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Alan Tate)



**D**ot-winged Crake *Porzana spiloptera* is a local, little-known inhabitant of brackish grasslands with dense clumps of tussock-type grass (*Spartina sp.*)<sup>14</sup>. The majority of specimens come from the center of Argentina (especially Laguna Mar Chiquita, Córdoba) and the eastern pampas, with many records from Buenos Aires (16 localities with recent records from eight)<sup>5,12,15</sup>. Furthermore, there are records from Santa Fe, while the other supposed records from Mendoza, San Luis, San Juan and La Rioja may represent confusion with Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis*<sup>5,9</sup>. Lastly, a single bird recently found dead on the bridge between Corrientes and Chaco provinces represents the first record from the north-east region of the country<sup>13</sup>. Outside of Argentina, the crane is known from old records in southern Uruguay (Canelones, Colonia, Maldonado and Montevideo) and recent sightings from two sites in Brazil (Rio Grande do Sul)<sup>1,3,6,7,8,10</sup>.

Only some 15 specimens are held in museums in Argentina testifying to its secretive habits and the difficulty in capturing it, even at the center of its distribution. Although information is scarce, it has been categorized as Vulnerable and it is believed that the population is small and fragmented. The lack of knowledge of its vocalisations, its secretive habits, a small number of experienced observers in the area and the possibility that it performs local movements triggered by seasonal and annual changes in water level, all complicate the evaluation of its conservation status<sup>2,5</sup>.

Given its elusive habits and the unknown voice, this species is a trophy for any birder visiting the Argentine pampas. All too often, long walks in the muddy, saltflat grasslands by groups of birders return no reward, whilst lucky birders will flush a single individual and get a glimpse of its characteristic wing pattern in flight. The classic sites to search for Dot-winged Crake are the Río Lujan near Otamendi National Reserve, Albufera Mar Chiquita and Punta Rasa, all in Buenos Aires province<sup>4,11</sup>.

In late January 2010, while leading a tour in Punta Rasa, DM heard an unknown voice—reminiscent of that of Black Rail—coming out of the grass. Unable to record it at that moment, he tried to flush it without success, while the bird moved quickly near the ground singing at intervals of about five minutes. The mystery persisted for about nine months, until during a visit to the area of Río Lujan in October 2010 we were fortunate enough to hear the same unidentified voice. This time we identified the bird by sight and made several tape-recordings of its song and

call which represent the discovery and the first recording of the vocalisations of Dot-winged Crake (Monteleone *et al.* in prep.). In the following visit, and with the help of play-back, we were able to lure an individual into a net. It was measured, photographed and quickly released. Thanks to the recordings of its vocalisations, more birders will be able to enjoy this mysterious rail. Armed with its vocalisations, we are now following the next steps into the research of its natural history and distribution, while trying to find its as yet undiscovered nest.

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