

Austral Rail

Rallus antarcticus

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With only five records in the last century, and nineteen since its discovery, the status of Austral Rail was completely unknown until a small population was discovered in C Santa Cruz, Argentina in 1998⁴. Little was known about its biology and numbers and therefore, it was classified as “Endangered/Extinct” (possibly extinct)². The new discovery was significant in that it represented the first actual population found for the species, and provided baseline data to start new searches and studies on the biology and habitat requirements of this still rare species.

The rail lives in marshy oases in the Patagonian steppe, that are dominated by rushes *Schoenoplectus (Scirpus) californicus*, usually surrounded of wet meadows with tall and lush grasses including *Ceratophyllum* sp., *Carex* sp., *Alopecurus* sp. and predominantly *Descheupsia poaeioides*. More open areas are usually covered by milfoil *Myriophyllum* sp. The rail has not been recorded yet in marshes within the southern-beech (*Nothofagus* sp.) forests, in spite of their similar structure and species composition.

With the aid of tape-recordings new areas of appropriate habitat were surveyed since the rediscovery, with relative success. New populations have been found in a number of localities in S Santa Cruz⁵ and neighbouring Chile^{1,3}, and its vocal repertoire better documented. The Chilean records are important since both represent the only protected areas where the species occurs, namely the Pali Aike and Torres del Paine National Parks¹. It could then be assumed that the species had been overlooked, and hence its status needed revision. Accordingly it was recently downlisted to Vulnerable, under IUCN’s criterion C2a (population < 10,000 mature individuals with continuing decline and all subpopulations < 1,000 individuals)¹.

Its wintering grounds remain unknown, but there is some evidence of at least local movements. During this season, most of the farms that have portions of suitable habitat use these areas for cattle or sheep grazing, and the animals can enter the rushbeds as the water remains largely frozen. This practice may represent an important threat to the species’ habitat. No rails have been recorded in the area between July and September, when most of the marsh vegetation dies until it starts growing again in September–October.

These first pictures were taken at El Zurdo, Santa Cruz, Argentina (51°59’S, 71°41’W), in May 1999, during one of the rare occasions in which the rails would stalk out of the cover of the dense rushes. They were lured out with tape playback, and briefly exposed themselves inquisitively. Otherwise they spent most of the time responding to the tape from the safety of concealed tunnel-like cavities within the rushes. This continued for over 90 minutes after midday, despite the clear and sunny weather, when the rails seem to avoid exposure.

References

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