

New hope for migratory grassland birds of South America

Title

The rich grasslands in South America, home to one of the world's most valuable ecosystems is fast disappearing and migratory grassland birds, which play an important role by dispersing seeds and controlling insects, are also rapidly declining in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

In order to reverse this trend, the Convention on Migratory Species of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP/CMS), in collaboration with BirdLife International and Guyra Paraguay (BirdLife Partner), convened a one-day meeting in Asunción, Paraguay, where Government representatives, scientists and conservationists adopted an action plan for urgent conservation measures to ensure the survival of these birds and their habitats.

CMS Executive Secretary Elizabeth Maruma Mrema said: "The CMS action plan does not only address threats to migratory grassland birds in South America. By preserving their habitat, we safeguard many other endangered species. At the same time we help mitigating climate change because it aims to conserve the grasslands that produce oxygen and act as carbon sinks."

Grassland birds are the gardeners of this formerly rich ecosystem. However, their habitats in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay have been destroyed in recent years due to agricultural and aquacultural activities as well as the timber industry.

Agriculture, in particular the cultivation of soya, has put these important ecosystems at risk as pollution from pesticides and other agrochemicals are carried by drainage and run-off directly into marshes and wetlands.

In addition the natural grasslands are being converted into pastures for cattle and meat export to the world's markets and pastures are frequently burnt to accelerate the food supply for grazing cattle.

The afforestation of pampas with Eucalyptus and pine trees also contributes to widespread habitat loss. This monoculture of non-endemic trees drains valuable wetlands, crucial for species conservation, to satisfy the global demand for paper.

The grassland bird species covered under the CMS agreement are highly-prized as caged song birds which have been illegally captured and kept in cages in private households all over the world.

A major priority of the CMS action plan is protecting and managing the habitats for these migratory grassland birds. New protected areas will be identified to create a viable network of ecosystems and the conservation of the birds needs to be included in their management plans.