A Patagonian Jewel: Buenos Aires Plateau

Title
Buenos Aires Plateau will become a protected area

Thanks to the work of Aves Argentinas (BirdLife in Argentina) and the conservation NGOs, Asociación Ambiente Sur and Fundación Flora y Fauna Argentina, the Buenos Aires Plateau will be the core zone of a new protected area. The new Patagonian National Park has also received the support of politicians from the Province of Santa Cruz. This protected area seeks to guarantee the protection of the principal breeding populations of Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi;* include the basaltic pre-Andean plateaus in the national protected area system; and provide a new tourist circuit in the northwest of the province. The project has already been given the go-ahead by the environmental commission of the Santa Cruz regional government and it is hoped that the initiative will become law during the first government session in 2013.

Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* colony © A. Pigazzi

The singularity of the Patagonian environment

The Patagonian region is a unique ecosystem with a unique flora and fauna. The Buenos Aires Plateau, a basaltic formation of approximately 280,000 ha, is located in the northwest of the province of Santa Cruz, within this singular region. The Plateau, lies at an altitude of 900 m with surrounding peaks reaching 2500 m, and is delimited by pronounced rock walls and slopes almost around its entire perimeter. More than 300 lakes are found in the region, among them, the Laguna El Sello of approximately 1800 ha. The Plateau was declared an Important Bird Area (IBA) (AR246) in 2008, due to the regular presence of the Hooded Grebe, amongst other reasons. The Critically Endangered grebe is endemic to the province of Santa Cruz, and has suffered significant population declines over the last decade. It has been estimated that 50% of its known breeding population is concentrated on this plateau. Between 2009 and 2011, three breeding colonies of the Hooded Grebe were discovered at the site, making this the most stable current population. A population of some 7000 Black-necked Swan *Cygnus melancoryphus* is also present, representing one of the most important congregations of this species in Argentina.

Threats and ecosystem services on the Buenos Aires Plateau

As part of the project "Conserving biodiversity on the Buenos Aires Plateau, Patagonia, Argentina", led by Aves Argentinas, activities have been implemented to determine the importance of the biodiversity and ecosystem services provided by the Buenos Aires Plateau and to quantify the main threats to biodiversity in the area. The project is part of the wider High Andean Wetlands Initiative implemented by BirdLife International, and funded by the Aage V. Jensen Charity Foundation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act. Other activities include strengthening capacity among local stakeholder groups in the region and drafting a management plan for the site. The work of Aves Argentinas and Ambiente Sur has also been supported by other donors, as well as through the campaign by BirdLife International and Aves Argentinas to raise funds for the conservation of the Hooded Grebe.

More information on the project

Among the most serious threats to the biodiversity of the plateau is the increase in population of Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*, a generalist bird which competes with the colonies of waterbirds. The increase in population may be due to bad practices in waste management in surrounding communities, together with intense cattle ranching, increasing the potential for scavenging in the gulls. More recently, predation by the introduced, and expanding, American Mink *Neovison vison* was observed at a Hooded Grebe breeding colony. The possibility of introducing exotic salmon or trout species at some of the lakes represents another threat to the waterbirds and biodiversity in general. Not only are waterbirds at risk from predation by the fish, but they also modify the limnological conditions of the lakes. The presence of exotic fish species has already been detected in a few lakes on the plateau. However, fish farming is common among the lakes of the Strobel plateau, formerly the centre of abundance and distribution of the Hooded Grebe, and separated by only 200 km from the Buenos Aires Plateau. Among the ecosystem services and environmental benefits offered by the plateau, the following were prioritised as part of the project: erosion control, water availability, cultural and tourist value. Short and long-term actions were also identified to ensure that the plateau's conservation status is maintained or improved, and therefore safeguard the continued provision of the above environmental services and benefits provided by the site. The next

stages of the project include research to understand the conservation status and ecological requirements of the Hooded Grebe over the winter period, as well as the characteristics of the plateau itself.

This research will provide the National Parks Authority with sufficient technical information to be able to establish the protected area on public land, as well as to identify landowners at critical sites (lakes) for the grebe. The project also contemplates creating distribution maps of the principal threats to biodiversity on the plateau (for example, the presence of American Mink, Kelp Gull, trout, etc). Additionally, a field work phase will be implemented to assess ecosystem services, complementing environmental information needed to appreciate the full value of the plateau and make this information available to local and national authorities. Finally, fundraising efforts will continue to ensure funds for the conservation of the Hooded Grebe and the Buenos Aires Plateau.

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