

Neotropical News



CARIBBEAN

Montserrat Oriole ups and downs

A major volcanic eruption that began in 1996 has destroyed c.60% of Montserrat's hill forests, which comprise the entire range of the threatened endemic Montserrat Oriole *Icterus oberi*. Worryingly, monitoring since 1997 has also shown a population decline within the remaining 14 km² of intact forest in the Centre Hills. A new research project, aiming to uncover the cause of this decline, began in the 2001 breeding season. The project, which is funded by the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, is a joint initiative of the Montserrat Ministry of Agriculture Lands, Housing & Environment, Montserrat National Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (UK). Initial field work centred on measuring reproductive success and determining causes of reproductive failure. Automated micro nest cameras indicate a high rate of nest predation by rats. Research on adult survivorship and the health of insect food supply has also commenced. In July a remnant population of orioles was discovered by researchers in a small forest patch only 1 km from the summit of the volcano, and entirely surrounded by pyroclastic flows. This astonishing and encouraging discovery was rapidly followed by another major volcanic eruption on Montserrat, in which heavy ash falls were recorded on large areas of the Centre Hills, destroying several oriole nests.

- Geoff M. Hilton, Gerard A. L. Gray, Stephen MacNamara and Chris Bowden *in litt.* October 2001

CENTRAL AMERICA

MEXICO

Another new RAMSAR site

The 61,707 ha Dzilam coastal and marine reserve has been declared a Ramsar site. It lies adjacent to the ria Lagartos Ramsar site, in the north Yucatán Peninsula. More than 20,000 waterbirds are thought to occur.

- *The Ramsar Newsletter* 32: 9 (2001)

Locusts continue to swarm on Socorro Island

Conservationists are expressing increasing concern at the growing locust *Schistocerca* sp. swarm on Socorro. The island is important for its population of the endemic (and critically endangered) Socorro Mockingbird *Mimodes graysoni*. The locust population has apparently grown significantly since 1996, when it was identified as a problem (with one swarm estimated at 50 million). The insects apparently originated from a population in Sinaloa. One observer commented: 'they fly all over the island and practically are destroying the foliage of all trees they touch'. One solution proposed has been spraying with pesticides once the locusts move into degraded habitat thus avoiding affecting endemic fauna). The locusts have apparently developed resistance to one pathogen that has been introduced.

- H. Walter and J. Martinez-Gomez *in litt.* 29 May 2001

SOUTH AMERICA

VENEZUELA

Venezuelan Ornithology Network

The Venezuelan Ornithology Network (OVUM—Ornitólogos Venezolanos Unidos Milagrosamente) was conceived at the VI Neotropical Ornithology Congress in Monterrey in October 1999. The founding members were 13 professional biologists with a keen interest in Venezuelan ornithology. By June 2001, the Network had 85 members, comprising biologists, veterinarians, bird tour guides and enthusiastic amateurs. Interests range from ecology and natural history to conservation and taxonomy. Regular meetings are held in the Colección Ornitológica Phelps. The first Ornithology Symposium was held in November 2000. Its two major topics were the role of birdwatchers in generating information on threatened species and the creation of a Society of Venezuelan Ornithologists. One of the key roles of the Network is coordination of information on Venezuelan birds and to effect this a Venezuelan Rarities Committee has been set up (see below). Funding is being sought for an annual Venezuelan ornithological bulletin. Birdwatchers and ornithologists who would like to subscribe to the OVUM Network are invited to contact Prof. Sandra Giner of the Instituto de Zoología Tropical at the Universidad Central de Venezuela (sginer@strix.ciens.ucv.ve).

- Chris Sharpe *in litt.* June 2001

Venezuelan Rare Birds Committee

The Venezuelan Rare Birds Committee was formed during the First Annual Ornithology Symposium in November 2000. The committee aims to act as a repository of information on rare birds in Venezuela, to evaluate potential new and unusual records and to publicise this information via e-mail, by means of the Venezuelan Ornithology Network (OVUM) and through an annual publication within an existing national journal. The Committee consists of four experts in Venezuelan ornithology, who meet on a regular basis to discuss and evaluate recent records. Species covered by the committee include potential first records; species for which fewer than five records exist for the country; and nationally and globally threatened species. In addition, the Committee gratefully accepts other interesting information, such as early and late dates for migrants, range extensions and unusual behavioural observations. The Committee hopes to improve dialogue between national and visiting ornithologists. Birdwatchers are encouraged to submit records for committee evaluation by e-mail to mlentino@reacciun.ve. A records submission form is available.

- Chris Sharpe *in litt.* June 2001

COLOMBIA

New Ramsar site

The 39,000 ha Laguna de la Cocha has been declared a Ramsar site. The site comprises a volcanic lake surrounded by high-Andean peatlands, and holds a diverse fauna including the threatened Mountain Tapir *Tapir pinchaque* and Spectacled Bear *Tremarctos ornatus*.

- *The Ramsar Newsletter* 32: 8 (2001)

ECUADOR

Mangroves protected

The purchase and destruction of mangroves has been declared illegal in the country. The shrimp aquaculture industry has destroyed half of Ecuador's mangroves since 1960. Of the 207,000 ha of shrimp ponds in the country, some 75% are thought to be illegal. The ruling by the President of Ecuador's Constitutional Tribunal is a landmark for coastal conservationists.

- *Marine Pollution Bull.* 422: 84 (2001)

Another new Ramsar site

The 4,705 ha Isla Santay has been designated a Ramsar site. The island contains intertidal forested wetlands, including mangrove swamps, and is located in the Guayas river delta on the outskirts of the city of Guayaquil.

- *The Ramsar Newsletter* 32: 9 (2001)

Galápagos escapes oil spill

In January 2001, the Galápagos escaped disaster after the tanker *Jessica* ran aground off San Cristobal, spilling 900 tonnes of oil. Fortunately, winds and currents carried the oil away from shore. There was no evidence of the island's endemic fauna having been affected.

- *Marine Pollution Bull.* 423: 165 (2001)

PERU

Candamo Valley protected

In September 2000, the Candamo Valley was declared a national park. Home to 600 species of birds and 14 species of primates, the 142,000 ha site was part of a presidential decree doubling the size of the Bahuaja-Sonene National Park in south-west Peru. The decision came a fortnight after oil giant Exxon-Mobil withdrew from oil exploration in the general area.

- *Wildlife Conserv.* Jan/Feb 2001: 16

Short-winged Grebes surveyed around Lake Titicaca

A group of ornithologists (Gunnar Engblom, David Geale, Diógenes Chahuanca and Gregorio Ferro) recently conducted field work to assess the distribution of Short-winged Grebe *Rollandia microptera*. Study sites comprised the complex of lakes immediately west of Huancane between Lago de Arapa and Lago Titicaca; Lago Umayo and the small lakes immediately to the north; and most of Lago de Arapa. The key site was Lago de Arapa (holding 212 birds, including juveniles), with small numbers (less than 11) found at Chucuito, and Lagunas Umayo, Sunuco, Cuisco, Yanaoco, Huinihui and Titihui. Grebes are threatened by becoming entangled in fishing nets. The nets used are 80–100 m in length, and have been widely used since around 1990. Laguna Cupisco is free of nets and was found to hold a high density of grebes. Local people also harvest grebe eggs for food. Overall, the population is thought to have declined significantly since 1987. A few drought years is thought to be sufficient to create local extinction.

- G. Engblom *in litt.* to BirdLife International, July 2001

BOLIVIA

New Ramsar site

Cuenca de Tajzara has been declared a Ramsar site. It encompasses 5,500 ha of semi-permanent and permanent lakes, high-altitude streams, marshes and high-Andean pastures in the Tajzara basin at 3,700 m. Forty species of birds characteristic of high-Andean aquatic systems occur.

- *The Ramsar Newsletter* 32: 8 (2001)

Last site for Wattled Curassow

Wattled Curassow *Crax globulosa* is still extant in Bolivia. The last official record in Bolivia was from 1937. In August 2001, an

Armonia/BirdLife International team, supported by the Swedish Embassy, conducted Important Bird Area (IBA) field work in the lower tropical *várzea* forest of the lower rio Beni. The team investigated reports from local hunters that curassows persisted in the area. Seven individuals were discovered along the rio Negro, in a remote area with very poor accessibility. Conservation of the area is thought likely to be dependent on creation of a private reserve.

- Bennett Hennessey *in litt.* 25 September 2001

BRAZIL

Oil giant partners with The Nature Conservancy to help restore Brazilian Atlantic forest

In September 2001, Texaco, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Sociedade de Pesquisa em Vida Selvagem e Educação Ambiental (Society for Wildlife Research and Environmental Education or SPVS, a Brazilian NGO) announced a joint project to restore and protect c.1,000 ha of Atlantic forest on the coast of southern Brazil. A US\$3 million investment by Texaco facilitated the 'Antonina Pilot Reforestation Project'. Located in Paraná, the land will be owned and managed by SPVS. TNC will provide technical assistance. The land surrounds an existing 2,800 ha reserve (Morro da Mina), also managed by SPVS. This reserve includes a native plant nursery that produces 100,000 seedlings per year, which will be used to restore degraded areas of the new land area. The project is expected to bring several key benefits. It will help protect the primary source of drinking water for Antonina's population of c.20,000 inhabitants. It will contribute to biodiversity conservation; the site is thought to hold six globally threatened bird species. Finally, the project hopes to create a scientific model to better understand the role that reforestation can play in mitigating climate change. The

project could even qualify for 'carbon credits' under the Kyoto Protocol's 'Clean Development Mechanism'. 'The Antonina Reforestation Pilot Project will help protect one of the most important and ecologically significant places on Earth', said Steve McCormick, TNC President. 'Moreover, it will provide a replicable model for how rainforest conservation and restoration can help combat climate change. We appreciate Texaco's involvement in this innovative effort'.

- Texaco press release, 4 September 2001

Murici protected

The Ecological Station of Murici was created on 29 May 2001, through a federal decree signed by President Cardoso. Lying in Alagoas, the remnant Atlantic forest fragments at Murici are one of the continent's most important areas for the conservation of biodiversity. BirdLife Brasil, together with Sociedade Nordestina de Ecologia, collaborated with IBAMA and the Ministry of the Environment to create the reserve. Thirteen globally threatened bird species occur at Murici, two of which are currently known only from this locality: Alagoas Foliage-gleaner *Philydor novaesi* and Alagoas Antwren *Myrmotherula snowi*. The others are: Orange-bellied Antwren *Terenura sicki*, Alagoas Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes ceciliae*, Golden-tailed Parrotlet *Touit surda*, Plain Spinetail *Synallaxis infuscata*, Scalloped Antbird *Myrmeciza ruficauda*, Black-headed Berryeater *Carpornis melanocephala*, Buff-throated Purpleletuft *Iodopleura pipra*, White-winged Cotinga *Xipholena atropurpurea*, Seven-coloured Tanager *Tangara factuosa*, Forbes's Blackbird *Curaeus forbesi* and Yellow-faced Siskin *Carduelis yarrellii*.

- Jacqueline M. Goerck, BirdLife International—Brazil Programme, *in litt.* June 2001, September 2001

Lear's Macaw census tallies 246 birds

An article in *O Estado de São Paulo*, a Brazilian newspaper, in June 2001, reported that a new census of Lear's Macaws *Anodorynchus leari* in May recorded 246 birds, up from 170 found in a 1999 census.

- <http://www.estadao.com.br/ciencia/noticias/2001/jun/07/280.htm>, courtesy of J. Wall *in litt.* to NEO-ORN, June 2001

Amazon still shrinking—and fast

Deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon was greater in 2000 than at any time since 1995, according to new satellite data released by the government in May 2001. Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE), which monitors deforestation by satellite, issued a provisional estimate for the period August 1999–August 2000, based on a sampling scheme. The mean annual rate of gross deforestation in 1999–2000 was 19,836 km². From August 1998 to August 1999, the mean annual rate of deforestation was 17,259 km². Environment Minister José Sarney Filho said: 'The federal government has done its homework and is doing everything it can to stop deforestation in Brazil.' An environment ministry official added that the government would introduce an environmental licensing system for private properties. The satellite TM-Landsat, used by INPE, does not reveal deforestation of areas smaller than 6.4 ha, thus excluding from its results the impact of hundreds of thousands of small-scale farmers and selective logging of lucrative species. 'The new figures clearly show that efforts by the Brazilian government have failed to stop, or even to slow, deforestation of the Amazon', Greenpeace Amazon campaigner Paulo Adário said. 'This loss of forest cover in the Amazon is unacceptable and unsustainable.' Greenpeace is calling on the Brazilian govern-

ment to reduce deforestation to zero by the year 2010.

- Reported on BIOPLAN list server, 16 May 2001

Developers win first round in Brazil Amazon battle

In early September 2001, a Brazilian congressional commission approved a bill that environmentalists say could accelerate destruction of the Amazon, should it become law. The bill calls for local environmental and land-use studies to form the basis for permitting current limits on logging on private land in the Amazon to be relaxed. Its opponents, however, vowed the bill would not gain approval on the floor of both chambers of Congress, which is required for it to become law. Even if approved, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso has said he would veto it. Moacir Micheletto, from Paraná, who is a supporter of the farming industry, drew up the bill. It advocates the introduction of 'zoning' studies of Amazon forest to determine how much forest can be cut. It seeks to replace a three-year old 'provisional' measure that requires 80% of all private property in the Amazon to be protected, opening the way to reduce that percentage if local studies recommend such changes. 'With the current provisional measure, 20 million Brazilians are unable to produce and take their goods to market', said lawmaker Marcio Bittar,

defending the bill. Environmentalists favour the existing measure and want it to be made permanent. They fear that local governments with inadequate technical expertise may undertake the zoning studies.

- Marco Sibaja, Reuters news service (<http://www.planetark.org>), 7 September 2001

ARGENTINA

Results of Falklands Seabirds Census 2000

Falklands Conservation has advanced its seabird censuses, with several significant results. Detailed surveys by three teams in October–December 2000 targeted all colonies in the archipelago. Gentoo Penguin *Pygoscelis papua* was found to have increased from 65,000 pairs in 1995–96 to 113,000 pairs. However, breeding success was lower than normal, at 0.4 chicks per pair. The Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chrysocome* population was thought to be stable around 272,000 pairs, with the previous estimate of 297,000 pairs in 1995–96 now considered to be an overestimate, due to inaccurate survey methodologies. The species remains a cause for concern, having not recovered its previous high numbers and continues to decline elsewhere in the world. King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus* is thought to have increased from 38 pairs in the 1980s to 344–516 pairs in 2000.

Numbers of chicks are thought to have declined slightly, from 229 in 1995–96 to 175 in 2000. A suitable method of assessing Magellanic Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus* has still not been found. The population of Black-browed Albatross *Diomedea melanophris* is thought to have crashed from 468,000 pairs in 1995–96 to 382,000 pairs in 2000. The authors of the study—Becky Ingham, Andrea Clausen and Nic Huin—calculate that 'this represents a decline of 17,000 per year, or 48 per day, or two per hour'. The worryingly sharp decline is considered due to longline fishing operations over the Patagonian Shelf. As a result, the Falklands Government is expected to introduce a law that requires every longliner in Falkland waters to have an observer on board—to improve the reliability of bycatch figures and increase the use of mitigation measures to reduce mortality.

- *The Warrah* 19: 2–4 (2001)

New Ramsar site

Laguna de Vilama has been declared Argentina's eighth Ramsar site. The area covers 157,000 ha of Andean highland lagoons in Jujuy province, at 4,500 m above sea level. The lagoons support a rich aquatic avifauna, while the surrounding plains hold scarce species such as Greater Rhea *Rhea americana*.

- *The Ramsar Newsletter* 32: 8 (2001)