

Protecting the Pampas

In 2006, four BirdLife Partners formed the Southern Cone Grasslands Alliance to secure the long-term conservation of Pampas. Six years later we take a look at progress.

The Southern Cone grasslands are important for resident and migratory birds (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)

The temperate grasslands of southern South America (the 'Southern Cone' of Pampas grasslands) originally encompassed an area of over one million km² in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil's Rio Grande do Sul state (Brazil) and southern Paraguay. These grasslands comprise one of the richest grazing areas in the world, but are also of global importance for biodiversity conservation.

Over 400 species of native grasses, 400 bird species and more than 85 mammals are known from the Southern Cone grasslands. In addition to endemic and biome-dependent bird species such as Marsh

Sporophila palustris and Chestnut Seedeaters *S. cinnamomea*, Saffron-cowled Blackbird *Xanthopsar flavus*, Strange-tailed Tyrant *Alectrurus risora* and Ochre-breasted Pipit *Anthus nattereri* (all globally threatened), a key element of the biodiversity is a suite of North American-breeding migrants which depend on the grasslands for their wintering habitat.

Seedeaters need tall grasses, but other species depend on a mosaic of habitats. Ochre-breasted Pipits, for example, need a mix of tussocky long grass and patches of short grass. In the absence of herds of large wild herbivores, cattle create the

mosaic they require. At the other extreme to the seedeaters, some of the North American-breeding migrants, such as Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis* require a short sward.

Only a tiny percentage of the Southern Cone grasslands remain in a natural state, and even this remnant is threatened by agricultural intensification. For ranchers, whose grazing livestock helped maintain the natural grasslands, the economics of traditional beef productions cannot compete with crops such as soybeans, or afforestation with alien species such as pine and Eucalyptus. The four national BirdLife Partners

have jointly identified 137 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in the region, but the total might have been higher: some candidate sites were destroyed before they could be assessed, while others were lost during the identification process.

In 2006, the four BirdLife Partners, Aves Argentinas, Aves Uruguay, SAVE Brazil and Guyra Paraguay, formed the Southern Cone Grasslands Alliance (Alianza de Pastizal del Conosur), with funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, Aage V Jensen Charity Foundation, US Forest Service and the Canadian

Wildlife Service. The Alliance's chief aim is to secure the long-term conservation of 'Pampas' grassland biodiversity by implementing a model for beef ranchers that combines production with conservation. A cornerstone of the Alliance's approach has been the development of a 'bird friendly' natural grasslands beef certification protocol. The market for such certified meat, which commands higher prices, is primarily in the USA and Europe, but there is growing regional demand. A World Bank-GEF project in Argentina, led by Aves Argentinas and the Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina is currently developing a 'proof of concept' of the Alliance's certification protocol.

Nine Alliance pilot sites have been established, four in Argentina, one each in Brazil and Paraguay, and three in Uruguay. All the sites are within IBAs, and range from a single ranch to a multiple properties. Currently, there are Alliance activities at 34 ranches covering a total of over 115,000 ha, of which best management practices are being implemented on 24,000 ha. By the end of the current project cycle, in 12–18 months' time, the Alliance hopes to have a minimum of 55,000 ha under best management. The best management practices being implemented include variable stocking rates, rotational grazing, restoration of corridors of native grasslands, and use of fire as a management tool. The results of ongoing monitoring of the benefits for grassland-dependent birds results in the management practices being refined and improved.

The Alliance's activities are coordinated within each country by national coordinators based in the BirdLife Partners and overall by the BirdLife International Americas Secretariat through a Regional Coordinator, with the support of the Senior Conservation Manager, Rob Clay. He says the project has generated huge

interest from ranchers and, increasingly, from meat production and distribution corporations too. "The success of the project has emphasised the importance of getting the ranchers involved from the very beginning."

In the space of a year between 2010 and 2011, the number of people attending the annual Meeting of Natural Grassland Ranchers doubled, from 150 to 300. This annual meeting has become an important cornerstone of the conservation-production agenda in the Southern Cone. It provides an ideal stage for the exchange of experiences between producers, researchers and conservationists, and enables the development of joint agendas for the conservation of natural grasslands through livestock ranching.

Among international participants at the fifth meeting in 2011 were staff members and consultants from National Audubon (BirdLife in the USA) involved in grassland bird conservation work in the North American Prairies. They came to learn from the Alliance's work, and to share their experiences of working with ranchers under Audubon's Prairie Birds Initiative. Another international participant, from BirdLife co-Partner Nature Canada, conducted an external evaluation of the Alliance experience to date, and will share it with North America's Commission for Environmental Cooperation grasslands conservation project in Canada, the USA and Mexico.

The fifth meeting was attended and supported by one of the Alliance's newest supporters, Marfrig. Among the biggest meat producers in the region, Marfrig operates in Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina. "Marfrig's involvement could extend the benefits to producers and grassland biodiversity landscape-wide", Rob Clay explains. He adds that the Alliance has also started discussions with McDonalds, as

part of the global hamburger giant's commitment to sustainability. "This could have huge implications, since the certified beef market is interested only in the prime cuts, which make up a small proportion of the meat that comes from each cow."

Ranchers have adopted the Alliance's logo, the Saffron-cowled Blackbird, with enthusiasm. "It's popping up everywhere in advertising and marketing material", Rob Clay says. To that extent, they have begun to take on the bird conservation message. "Most of the ranchers are very familiar with the natural forage plants of the grasslands, but less so with the birds that depend on them. At the annual meeting, there is a

field trip at which all the ranchers look around and discuss the quality of the pasture—they hold up samples of the grasses, and have some heated debates over them. We try to build on their knowledge and experience. We've produced a pocket guide to forage plants and grassland birds—common and rare—as a step to engaging them in monitoring biodiversity on their ranches. There is some informal contact already, such as ranchers reporting breeding Saffron-cowled Blackbirds."

In addition to year-round, site-specific monitoring of birds and forage plants, an annual wintering shorebird survey is carried out at each of the pilot sites. This concentrates on three Neotropical migrants, American

Tawny-bellied Seedeaters are dependent on the grass seeds for food (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)





ABOVE Members of the Southern Cone Grasslands Alliance (Anibal Parera)

BELOW Buff-breasted Sandpiper being banded for study of its movements (Anibal Parera)



Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*, Upland Sandpiper *Bartramia longicauda* and Buff-breasted Sandpiper, which are priority species for key North American Alliance supporters, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the US Forest Service-International Programs, and the Canadian Wildlife Service. Other migrants of concern include the Bobolink *Dolichonyx oryzivorus* and Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni* (see Box).

A particular focus of monitoring at the pilot site in Paraguay has been the use of rice paddies by waterbirds and grassland species. Meetings between rice farmers and Guyra Paraguay led to the signing of an agreement with the Association of Rice Growers of the Lower Tebicuary Watershed, to promote the conservation of natural ecosystems and of the biodiversity that occurs in rice fields.

"Our main focus is on grasslands, but we are also

looking at rice, as the most biodiversity-friendly of crops", says Rob Clay. "The two are sometimes found together: as well as the site in Paraguay, there is a pilot site in Argentina that is half cattle, half rice. With help of SEO/BirdLife (Spanish Partner), who have extensive experience of growing conservation-grade organic rice in sites of high biodiversity importance in Spain, we brought together rice growers around the region, and have submitted a proposal to support the work to potential donors, including one in Spain."

Conservation of the grassland provides the farmers with other potential sources of income. Ecotourism (both international and national) is expanding in the region, and the Alliance is carrying out feasibility studies for ecotourism initiatives at two of the sites. During the fifth Meeting of Natural Grassland Ranchers, a workshop obtained input from

ranchers on the environmental services their natural grasslands provide, and discussed how to capture these values in an index. The results from this workshop will be used as the starting point for developing the index during 2012, through a project supported by the InterAmerican Development Bank and coordinated by Aves Uruguay. This, in turn, will be used to develop novel incentives for grasslands conservation based on market schemes and tax and credit benefits.

The Alliance is also working closely with the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), and in particular with the national focal points for the Convention's Memorandum of Understanding for the Conservation of Migratory Grassland Birds in South America, signed between the four governments of the Southern Cone grasslands, plus Bolivia. Development of the MoU's action plan was led by Cristina Morales, the national coordinator in Guyra Paraguay, and CMS Scientific Councilor for Paraguay.

At a national level, various activities are helping to build sustainability. In Argentina, Aves Argentinas' network of Local Conservation Groups is increasingly becoming involved in Alliance conservation actions. Aves Argentinas has also signed MoUs with all landowners participating in the Alliance, and has facilitated the possibility of them applying to the national "Conservar la Argentina" small

grants scheme. In Brazil, SAVE Brasil has been working to build the capacity of Apropampa, a non-profit association of ranchers, which has similar aims to the Alliance with an additional cultural dimension (the Pampa Gaucho campaign). Guyra Paraguay has been building links between university-based agronomists and producers, and Aves Uruguay works with the World Bank-GEF funded 'Responsible Production' project, which has greatly increased the number of producers adopting best practices for the management of natural grasslands.

"In common with other grasslands around the world, conservation of the Southern Cone grasslands has received very little attention", says Rob Clay. "Just 2% are included within protected areas, so the conservation of what remains is dependent on private landowners and cattle ranchers in particular. The success of the Alliance's work has drawn attention from cattle producers and grassland conservationists elsewhere in the world, particularly from North America, but also as far away as Russia. In fact, the Alliance has been so successful in promoting natural grass-fed beef that it has developed almost too much in favour of the ranchers, and we need to make sure the biodiversity continues to benefits too!"

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By Nick Langley

Swainson's Hawks have the second longest migration of all raptor species, travelling over 10,000 km between their breeding grounds in North America and wintering grounds in the Southern Cone grasslands, where they feed mostly on insects. Swainson's Hawks have in the past suffered mass poisoning from the use of pesticides in the grasslands. When three Swainson's Hawks leave their breeding grounds later this year, they will be carrying satellite transmitters fitted by National Audubon (BirdLife in the USA). Although this species has been tagged and tracked before, this year's project will for the first time enable audiences worldwide to follow their migration path live via the Internet. This is an incredible opportunity to engage a large, global audience in the unfolding story about the miracle of hawk migration, says Matt Jeffery, Senior Program Manager for Audubon's International Alliances Program.