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A global overview of the conservation,
management and research of the
world's waterbird flyways

Edited by G.C. Boere, C.A. Galbraith and D.A. Stroud

*Assisted by L.K. Bridge, I. Colquhoun, D.A. Scott,
D.B.A. Thompson and L.G. Underhill*



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The Ruddy-headed Goose *Chloephaga rubidiceps* mainland population: a flyway perspective

Daniel E. Blanco¹, Ricardo Matus², Olivia Blank², Victoria M. de la Balze¹ & Sergio M. Zalba³

¹ Wetlands International, 25 de Mayo 758 10° I, Buenos Aires 1002, Argentina. (email: deblanco@wamani.apc.org)

² José Robert 0289, Punta Arenas, Chile.

³ GEKKO, Universidad Nacional del Sur, San Juan 670 (8000) Bahía Blanca, Argentina.

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ABSTRACT

The mainland population of the Ruddy-headed Goose *Chloephaga rubidiceps* is currently estimated at around 1 000 individuals and breeds in southern Patagonia, Chile and Argentina, and winters in southern Buenos Aires province, Argentina. Numbers have seriously declined since the 1950s (Canevari 1996), and at present is considered in danger of extinction in both Argentina and Chile (Glade 1993, García Fernández *et al.* 1997). This study provides an overview of the species' ecology and conservation from research carried out by Wetlands International during the last seven years.

The Ruddy-headed Goose exists in two well-defined populations: a sedentary one restricted to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands and a migratory one that breeds in southern Patagonia, Chile and Argentina and during the winter migrates northwards to the southern Pampas in Buenos Aires Province, Argentina. The latter is the "mainland and Tierra del Fuego" population, currently in serious danger of extinction. Throughout this paper it is referred to as the mainland population.

The Ruddy-headed Goose mainland population is migratory, has a small population size and very restricted distribution (Canevari 1996, Blanco *et al.* 2003a.). Breeding areas are located in mainland Chile along the Straits of Magellan from San Juan to Pali Aike, and in the northern portion of Tierra del Fuego Island (Madsen *et al.* 2003). Brood-rearing sites, such as San Gregorio and San Juan, are characterized by swamps and/or open water offering retreat in case of predation attempts by foxes (Madsen *et al.* 2003).

After the breeding season the Ruddy-headed Goose migrates north to Buenos Aires Province, Argentina. The migration route is still unknown, but twice a year geese fly across Patagonia, which separates the breeding and wintering quarters, covering around 1 500 km. Three uncertain records suggest the use of an inland corridor close to the coast (Wetlands International unpubl. data).

During the non-breeding season the species concentrates in San Cayetano and Tres Arroyos districts, in southern Buenos Aires province (Blanco *et al.* 2003a). This region, where they share the habitat with other *Chloephaga* geese (*Ch. picta* Upland Goose and *Ch. poliocephala* Ashy-headed Goose), is predominantly agricultural with a mosaic of crops, mainly wheat and planted pastures.

Recent studies estimated the mainland population size as 900-1 178 individuals from breeding and wintering areas respectively ((Madsen *et al.* 2003, Blanco *et al.* 2003), (Table 1). Due to its critical status, the species is listed in Appendices I and II of the Bonn Convention (CMS) and was included in CMS Resolutions 4.2 and 5.1 for "Concerted Actions".

The main cause of the population decline appears to be an increase in nest depredation resulting from the introduction in 1951 of the Patagonian Fox *Pseudalopex griseus* to the island of

Table 1. Ruddy-headed Goose status (Wetlands International 2002)

Population	Migration status	Estimate	Trend
Mainland and Tierra del Fuego	Migratory	900-1 178 ⁽¹⁾	Decreasing
Malvinas / Falkland Islands	Sedentary	42 000-81 000	Stable

⁽¹⁾ Confidence interval 95%: 491-1865 (Blanco *et al.* 2003b).

Tierra del Fuego (Madsen *et al.* 2003). A further threat is the location of this population's wintering distribution in the main wheat cropping areas of Argentina, where *Chloephaga* (sheldgeese) have been traditionally persecuted by local farmers who do not distinguish the Ruddy-headed Goose from the other two species (Blanco *et al.* 2001, De la Balze & Blanco 2002). To a lesser degree, sport hunting, habitat modification and agrochemical poisoning are additional threats to the species.

After seven years of studies, Wetlands International and its partners have achieved the following:

- a database with updated information on Ruddy-headed Goose mainland population distribution and numbers;
- a manual and "Action Plan" for the conservation of the species (Blanco *et al.* 2001),
- the creation of the San Juan Reserve, located in the mouth of the San Juan River, 60 km south of Punta Arenas (XII Region, Chile), where Ruddy-headed Goose nests were recently discovered;
- the development of a "Water Management Plan" for the San Gregorio area;
- an intensive public awareness campaign - brochures, magazines articles, posters, etc.; and
- an internet Forum to help track the species during migration.

The critical status of the Ruddy-headed Goose mainland population points to the need for re-categorisation of its status at a global scale. Although more research is needed, there is a possibility that the two populations (mainland and the Malvinas/Falklands) could be different subspecies.

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Ruddy-headed Geese *Chloephaga rubidiceps*. Photo: Andrew Douse.