

## ESTANCIA LAGUNA BLANCA – PARAGUAY’S FORGOTTEN TREASURE

**Paul Smith<sup>A</sup>, Hemme Batjes<sup>B</sup>, Hugo del Castillo<sup>C</sup> & Bryan Wainwright<sup>D</sup>**

<sup>A</sup> Carmen de Lara Castro 422, Barrio San Roque, Encarnación, Paraguay  
[paraguaybirds@yahoo.com.ar](mailto:paraguaybirds@yahoo.com.ar)

<sup>B</sup> [hemme@wxs.nl](mailto:hemme@wxs.nl)

<sup>C</sup> Guyra Paraguay, Coronel Rafael Franco 381, Asunción, Paraguay  
[hugodc@guyra.org.py](mailto:hugodc@guyra.org.py)

<sup>D</sup> Tomas Romero Perreira 22a, Barrio Centro, Encarnación, Paraguay  
[bryanwainwright@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bryanwainwright@yahoo.co.uk)

Whilst the rest of South America has been swept away by the tide of the birdwatching revolution, Paraguay has been somewhat left behind. It is not that there are no birds, in fact the birdwatching here is spectacular, it is just that people seem to forget that the country even exists!. Despite our location in the heart of this great continent, the eyes of the travelling birdwatcher seem to be almost magnetically drawn to our bigger, more “fashionable” neighbours – Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia. Of course this lack of foreign interest makes the job of Paraguayan conservationists that much harder, and despite the tireless efforts of groups such as Guyra Paraguay ([www.guyra.org.py](http://www.guyra.org.py)) the destruction of the natural wonders of this beautiful country gathers pace with every passing year.

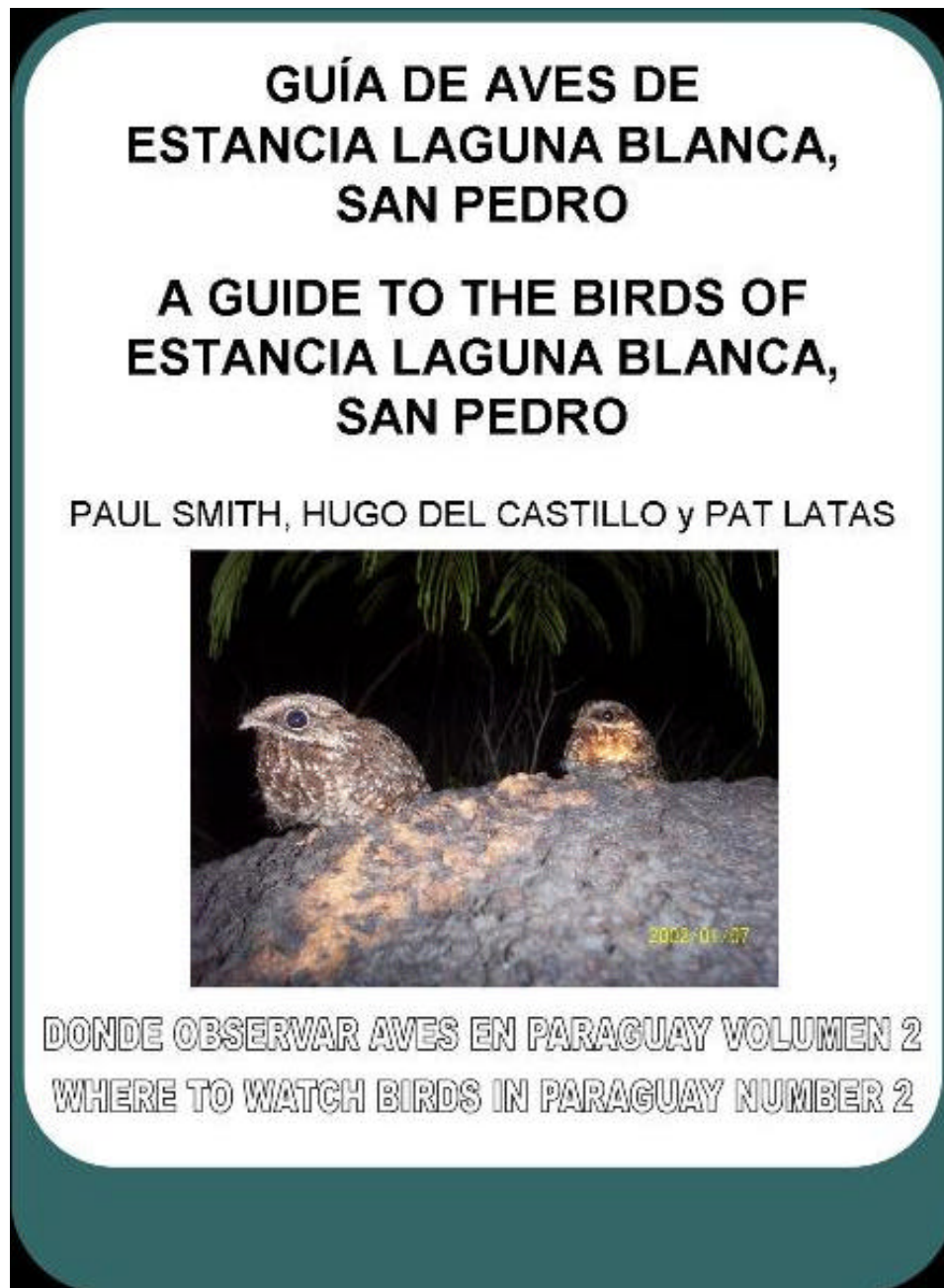
Sadly the attitude of the Paraguayan public to conservation is

generally one of indifference. Snappy government slogans such as “*producción es progreso*” have led to the commonly held belief that land not being used for something is somehow “wasted”, and that conservationists are therefore hell-bent on keeping the country in the “dark ages”. The fact that large tracts of Paraguayan land are actually farmed by foreigners who promptly take the proceeds abroad is something that the government does not seem too keen to invent a slogan about!

In an effort to drum up some local interest in the stunning but under-appreciated birdlife of this country an idea was hatched with Guyra Paraguay to produce a series of bilingual “mini-fieldguides” (Spanish/English) to the best birding destinations in Paraguay. To generate interest abroad and to finance costs of fieldwork a “not-for-profit” volunteer scheme was developed whereby volunteers pay to take part in

month-long species inventories of a prime birding site, and then assist in the writing and production of the mini-guide resulting from it (Fig. 1). The first project at the Tirol Atlantic forest

(Departamento Itapua) proved to be a huge success, and so a second project in the cerrado of Estancia Laguna Blanca, Departamento San Pedro (Fig. 2) was scheduled for November 2005.



**Figure 1.** Proposed cover of the mini field guide to the Birds of Laguna Blanca.



**Figure 2.** Map showing the location of Laguna Blanca and the political departments of Paraguay.

While everybody from Tijuana to Timbuktu knows about the destruction of the rainforest, the disappearance of the South American cerrado has happened rather more quietly. The tragedy is that this unique scrubby-savanna, while not much to look at, is home to a greater biodiversity than the famous African savannas. Destruction of the cerrado in Brazil has been particularly alarming, but the situation in Paraguay isn't too bad yet, partly because the sandy soils on which cerrado grows makes for poor farming and at best mediocre grazing. However as demand for land increases, the pressure on the cerrado will intensify and it is imperative that the Paraguayan public learn of its importance sooner rather than later.

Previous Guyra Paraguay fieldwork at Laguna Blanca had recorded a total of 8 threatened and 4 near threatened bird species – equivalent to or better than some of the best birding areas on the continent. The addition of two further threatened species recorded during our November fieldwork – the vulnerable Helmeted Woodpecker *Dryocopus galeatus* and the endangered Marsh Seedeater *Sporophila palustris* – surely make the site one of critical international conservation importance.

We recorded all of the threatened and non-threatened species during our fieldwork with the exception of the Crowned Eagle *Harpyhaliaetus coronatus*, and most seemed to have healthy, stable populations – at least for now! Prince amongst these rare birds was the much sought after White-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus candicans* (recorded regularly at only 3 sites on earth, 2 of which are in Paraguay) an endangered, but extremely approachable species that was easy to locate on night drives (Fig. 3). The sight of a glorious male floating ghost-like through the cerrado is unforgettable. Better still was our discovery of a pair of small chicks of this species, perched on a termite mound and looking distinctly confused by our presence - just beating the field full of displaying Cock-tailed Tyrants *Alectrurus tricolour* and singing male Bare-necked Bellbirds *Procnias nudicollis* (Fig. 4) as the most special moment of the project. Another “big tick” is the Lesser Nothura *Nothura minor* a tiny tinamou discovered here by a Guyra Paraguay team in 2003 and the only known location for the species outside of Brazil. We found it with relative ease once the voice was learned and with care it could be approached to within a few metres, confident that its cryptic colouration would afford it protection.



**Figure 3.** Female White-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus candicans* Laguna Blanca Nov 2005 (Photo Paul Smith)



**Figure 4.** Displaying male Bare-necked Bellbird *Procnias nudicollis* Laguna Blanca Nov 2005 (Photo Hemme Batjes)

With such a wealth of ornithological gems it is a mystery why Estancia Laguna Blanca isn't more well known outside of Paraguay. There is a glorious crystal clear lake for swimming (the water is so pure it is drinkable) and a stunning white sand beach for relaxing away the hottest hours of the day, waiting for the birding activity to pick up again (Fig. 5). Tragically though, costs of upkeep of the estancia have forced the owner to look for tenants (with soya farmers and cattle-ranchers the most likely takers) and if more ecologically-minded visitors cannot be

attracted to the site then the cerrado here could easily be altered beyond all recognition, with catastrophic consequences for its birds. Guyra Paraguay's recognition of the site as an IBA (Important Bird Area) is the first step towards the long-term conservation of the Estancia, but more work needs to be done. Thanks to the hard work of our volunteers it is to be hoped that the Field Guide to the Birds of Laguna Blanca (Guía de Campo de las Aves de Laguna Blanca) will play some small part in guaranteeing the continued protection of this very special place.



**Figure 5.** The beach and crystal clear waters at Laguna Blanca. (Photo Paul Smith)

### **THREATENED BIRDS OF LAGUNA BLANCA**

Lesser Nothura *Nothura minor* VUL  
Crowned Eagle *Harpyhaliaetus coronatus* END  
White-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus candicans* END  
Helmeted Woodpecker *Dryocopus galeatus* VUL  
Sharp-tailed Grass-tyrant *Culicivora caudacuta* VUL  
Cock-tailed Tyrant *Alectrurus tricolor* VUL  
Bare-necked Bellbird *Procnias nudicollis* VUL  
Black-masked Finch *Coryphaspiza melanotis* VUL  
Marsh Seedeater *Sporophila palustris* END  
Chestnut Seedeater *Sporophila cinnamomea* VUL

### **NEAR THREATENED BIRDS OF LAGUNA BLANCA**

Greater Rhea *Rhea americana*  
Bearded Tachuri *Polystictus pectoralis*  
White-banded Tanager *Neothraupis fasciatus*  
Dark-throated Seedeater *Sporophila ruficollis*

For more information about the Mini Field Guide project or to become a volunteer please contact Paul Smith at [paraguaybirds@yahoo.com.ar](mailto:paraguaybirds@yahoo.com.ar).