



Saffron-cowled Blackbird Project 2017 Report



C E C O A L



THE SAFFRON-COWLED BLACKBIRD

The last populations of an Argentina's grasslands icon

100 years ago, saffron-cowled blackbird's spring-summer range reached as far as the center of the state of Buenos Aires. In the year 2000 it was estimated that a small population of 1500 individuals remained in Argentina, concentrated in two isolated areas in the south of the state of Entre Ríos and the north-east of the state of Corrientes. Recent studies indicate that the population continues in decline and the entire Argentinean population is estimated at just 600 individuals. The two areas where the saffron-cowled blackbird can still be found were categorised as Important Areas for the Conservation of Birds in danger of extinction (IAPBs) by Birdlife International due to the high level of modification of these areas as a result of agricultural intensification.

The saffron-cowled blackbird's main threat is the change and loss of reproductive habitat. Poorly planned burning of pastures, intensive cattle farming, the use of agrochemicals and even illegal capture of individuals as cage-birds are the main causes for their decline. However, when a wild population finds itself with so few individuals, the probability of a successful reproductive season is dramatically reduced, especially since the saffron-cowled blackbird is a species in

which the success of each small reproductive colony is strongly affected by natural threats such as brood parasitism from the shiny cowbird, and natural predators.

In 2015 we decided to start a project with the support of the provincial governments of Entre Ríos and Corrientes with the aim of ensuring the successful reproduction of all identified reproductive colonies.

During the three field campaigns undertaken in 2014, 2015 and 2016 we were able to document the threats faced by the saffron-cowled blackbird and see how they caused the reproductive failure of several colonies. Every year there are fewer records of breeding colonies. In Entre Ríos, where it was once easy to find colonies, today only a few colonies remain on roadside verges or in disused cattle pens. The situation is similar in Corrientes, where most of the wetlands once used by reproductive colonies have been drained in order to make way for paddy fields, forestry plantations, or grazing pastures. In these areas one can now find only one or two colonies with very few nests.

CONSERVATION STATUS

How many? **600**

UICN **vulnerable**

Argentina **crítica**

DISTRIBUTION



THREATS

Natural predators

When populations are reduced, natural threats have an increased impact.

Wildlife trafficking and poaching

During the 2015 campaign we witnessed 4 trapping events in reproductive colonies, removing reproductive adults with Young to be sold as cage-birds.

Brood parasitism

Brood parasitism by the shiny cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*). This species has seen an increase in the population with the intensification of agricultural methods.

Habitat transformation

Forestry plantations, agriculture and draining of wetlands unplanned burning of pastureland and intensive cattle farming are the main causes of the change of land use and destruction of the saffron-cowled blackbird's natural habitat.

COLONY GUARDIANS

Active management and nest conservation

Once nesting sites have been localized, we use the “Colony Guardians” technique, as employed in Proyecto Macá Tobiano (the Hooded Grebe Project), where field technicians and volunteers become custodians of the saffron-cowled blackbirds’ nests.

Each nest is identified and each chick is accompanied as it grows, until the moment it leaves the nest. In order to achieve this we camp near each colony in order to combat threats like predators, brood parasites, and illegal bird trappers. The work is carried out in collaboration with the ranches where the colonies are found, with the support of owners and employees alike.

The project’s main aim is to increase the saffron-cowled blackbird’s reproductive success in its breeding colonies, thus causing an increase in population size. We were able to form a united and motivated team to work towards this goal.

OBJECTIVES

Science

Understand the state of remaining populations by studying their reproductive biology, the current state of their habitat and identifying the factors which most threaten saffron-cowled blackbird’s populations in order to devise effective conservation strategies.

Wildlife trafficking

Avoid the capture of saffron-cowled blackbirds as part of the wildlife trafficking industry, and avoid them being kept as pets in the local region.

Communication and outreach

Give local people the power to help conserve natural grasslands and their biodiversity.

Management

Increase the reproductive success by protecting the colonies and nests against multiple threats, and evaluate the saffron-cowled blackbirds response to intensive management methods designed to increase population size.



1. The hunt: **Entre Ríos**

The search for saffron-cowled blackbirds in the state of Entre Ríos was comprised of two steps: The first took place from the 31st of October to the 10th of November, and the second from the 27th of November to the 30th of December, with a final check on the 26th and 27th of December.

Part of the departments of Gualeguay, Islas de Ibicuy, Uruguay, and Gualeguaychú could be travelled using a simple traction vehicle. However, Entre Ríos' minor roads were in very poor condition due to heavy rains in the previous months to the campaign. As a result of this we were restricted to asphalted roads for the first 10 days of the campaign.

During the first stage of the search it was possible to scout minor roads and ranches thanks to the logistical help provided by Fundación Azara (The Azara Foundation). During this stage we were only able to identify a group of roughly 20 individuals in the department of Ibicuy. However, no reproductive colonies were found in the department at that time.

In the second stage of the search we were able to identify a breeding colony, with at least 5 nests and around 20 adults in the area of Gualeguaychú, at the same site as in 2016. We were also able to identify a colony in the town of Ibicuy at a site where there are

no records in recent years. In total, Aves Argentinas and Fundación Azara scouted more than 3500 km in search of colonies.

Other search efforts realized by the group Aves Gualeguaychú (local NGO) and field technicians from El Potrero Reserve, allowed the detection of more reproductive colonies in the department of Gualeguaychú.

The colonies were situated in the remnants of native grasslands found alongside major and minor roads and ranches with cattle grazing on natural pastures. The groups found were of around 20 adults, with colonies having between 3 and 12 nests. Colonies tended to be found in sites where other important grassland bird species (such as the Bearded tachuri or Seedeater species) were also nesting.

Although the landscape in Entre Ríos has been greatly transformed by agricultural activities, the species seems to have a tendency to continue using the same nesting sites as in previous years. This should allow for easy monitoring of the reproduction and status of its populations. However, this season the condition of the roads and difficulty of transit did not allow our teams to work to full capacity.



THE EFFORT	
km	3500
People	8
Days	15
Colonies	2

1. The hunt: Corrientes

The campaign in the state of Corrientes started on the 25th of October with support from the State Government of Corrientes (Department of Parks and Reserves). Park rangers from Carlos Pellegrini helped search for saffron-cowled blackbirds during the first few weeks of the campaign, searching in the departments of Santo Tomé, San Martín and General Alvear. In total 12 groups and 7 colonies were found after a search covering over 3000km. From the 11th of November work continued in conjunction with Local Bird Observers Club “Tingazú”, members of Alianza del Pastizal (The Grassland Alliance), members of Aves Argentinas, and volunteers.

This campaign, nest protection and management were focused in Corrientes, with four colonies being successfully protected. Said colonies were situated in the departments of Santo Tomé and General Alvear and were protected by teams working from three camps in addition to a mobile team dedicated to logistics and scouting for new saffron-cowled blackbird groups.

The colonies found were situated in wetlands with areas of natural grassland, inside actively producing ranches. These sites often become refuges for other emblematic grassland birds, such as the black-and-white monjita, Streamer-tailed tyrant, black-and-yellow marshbird, and other wetland species like the crested doradito.

The main threats to colony sites this nesting season were the burning of grasslands and the expansion of forestry plantations. The transformation of pastureland to forestry plantation over the last few years has caused the loss of various colony sites in north-east of Corrientes.

The main cause of nest failures was depredation, which could be associated with changes in environment. The depredation of nests is greater in areas where natural vegetation is fragmented and in areas where the landscape has been greatly modified as compared to large areas of contiguous natural vegetation.



EFFORT

km 9800

People 17

Days 69

Campsites 4

Colonies 8

2. Management

As in 2015 and 2016, due to the low reproductive success observed in saffron-cowled blackbird colonies in recent years physical protection methods were designed and installed in order to be placed around nests with an end to reduce the impact of natural predators.

Once a colony with active nests was found, the Colony Guardians began to collect data in order to study, amongst other things, the ways in which principal threats affect the colonies, and measure the impact on the saffron-cowled blackbird's reproductive success generated by predators and brood parasites.

Nests in the incubation phase

Nest protection is a two-step process designed in reaction to the specific threats found in each stage of the nesting process. During incubation physical barriers made of shade cloth are used to prevent terrestrial predators – in particular reptiles – from approaching the nest. These barriers are placed in a radius of approximately 4 m² around the nest, preventing access to it. This protection method aims to avoid nest predation without causing disturbance in the area immediately surrounding the nest. The reason for this being that birds are generally sensitive to disturbance in the incubation period and are most likely to abandon their nests during this stage of the nesting process.



Nests with chicks

Nests were also protected after hatching. In this stage nests are more vulnerable to predators due to the continual visitation of adults to the nests in order to feed the chicks, in addition to the sounds and movements made by chicks in the nest. During this stage nest protection consists of a vertical wire mesh tube with a mesh size of 10x10mm, height of 1.5m and 1m of diameter. The tube surrounds the vegetation supporting the nest, and the upper face of the tube is topped with a more open wire grid with a mesh size of approximately 15x15cm. During this stage nests are monitored with camera traps to study nest attendance by parents and every two days to assess chicks survival and growth.



3. Results

THREATS

Habitat transformation

The landscape in Entre Ríos has undergone noticeable changes due to changes in agricultural practices (both in arable and livestock farming), explaining the upward trend in population size of the shiny cowbird, and hence increased threat for host species such as the saffron-cowled blackbird. Meanwhile, in Corrientes, for the second year in a row we observed the disappearance of nest sites as a result of the appearance of forestry plantations.

Natural predators

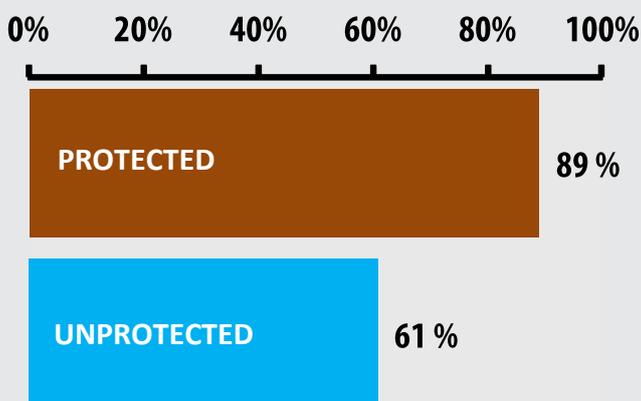
We observed predation in a total of 18 nests – 28% of nests found in the colonies located this year. Signs of raptors, small snakes, South-American racoons and other mammals were found.

Brood parasitism

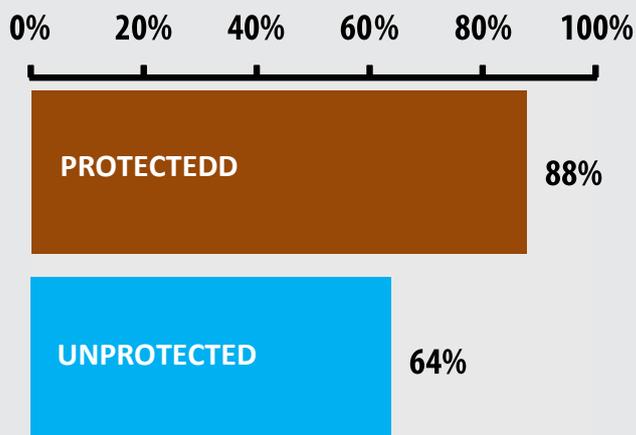
In the colonies located in Corrientes only one nest was found to be parasitized, whilst in Entre Ríos 4 nests were found to be parasitized, all 4 nests being situated in a colony of just 5 nests. Another type of parasitism, found affecting young from 6 nests, was parasitism of nestlings by larvae of *Philornis* sp. This type of parasitism negatively impacts the development and growth of nestlings, affecting the nestlings' tissues and organs.

MANAGEMENT SUCCESS

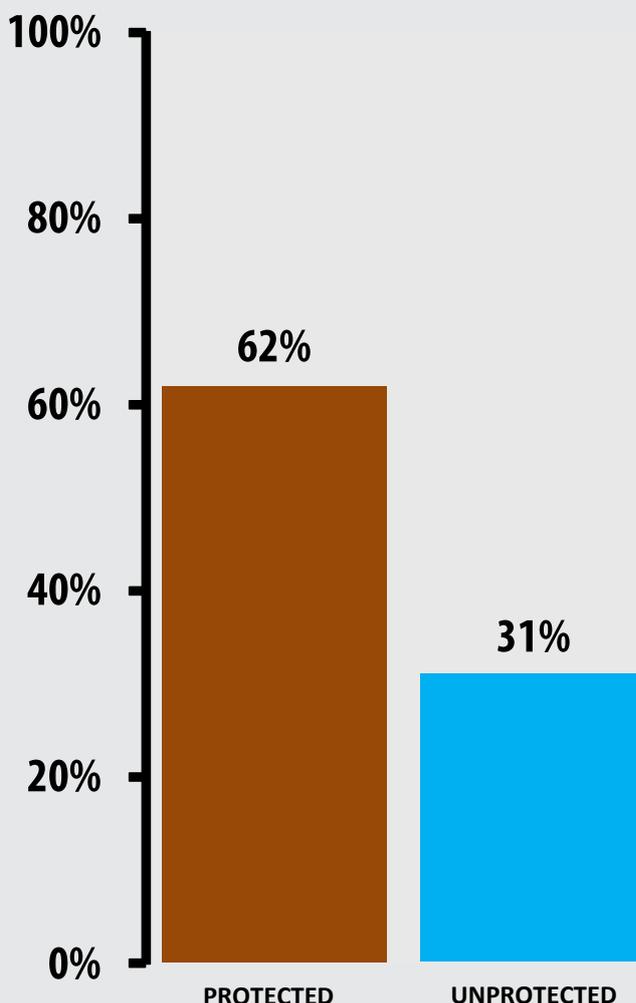
Nests in the incubation stage



Nests with chicks



Success of Colony Guardians

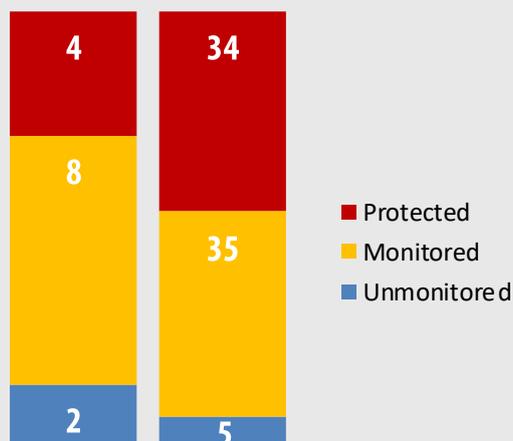


Success is considered when chicks fledge from nest.

3. Results

THE WORK

100 Ringed individuals
28 adults
72 juveniles
67 Successful fledglings



Colonies

Nests

HUMAN EFFORT

231 Man-days
23 people
65 Campaign days

19.191 Km covered
3.311 Natural Resources
15.000 Aves Argentinas
880 Fundación Azara

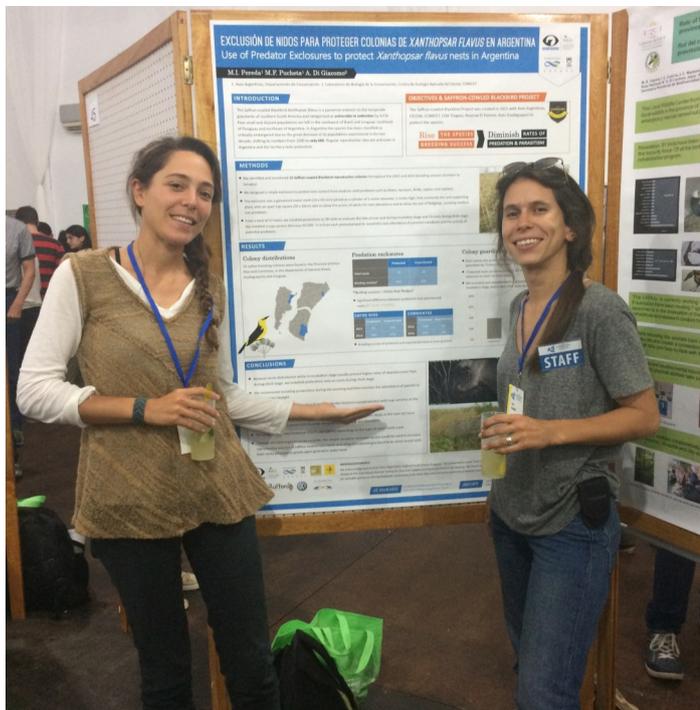


4. Communication

We gave talks, interviews, and presentations in congresses, with the aim of informing and raising awareness about the current environmental situation and the problems faced by the saffron-cowled blackbird, particularly at a local level.

Ornithological congress of the Americas:

We participated in the 16th congress of ornithology (RAO), an international congress with participation from the USA (AFO) and Brazil (SBO). At this congress we presented a poster and gave a talk in a symposium, presenting the results obtained in the 2016 campaign. Throughout the congress we were able to interchange ideas and unite forces with institutions from Paraguay and Brazil for the future protection and study of the saffron-cowled blackbird.



Radio Ciudad, Santo Tomé FM 102,5

We appeared on "Natural", a radio program that raises awareness about environmental, ecological and cultural issues. We were given this slot so that we could share the work we do, the problems currently faced by the saffron-cowled blackbird, and invite the active participation of local citizens.

Radio spots in Ibicuy

From the school Nina 8 "20 de junio" in Ibicuy, Entre Ríos, we worked with children from the 6th grade to raise awareness about the saffron-cowled blackbird, with the children preparing short audio clips which were later circulated on various local radio stations.

Social networks

We worked to increase communication via Aves Argentinas social network accounts through a facebook campaign aimed at obtaining new donors and coverage of fieldwork via instagram, both with very positive repercussions.

7th Birds and Wildlife Fair

In the 7th Birds and Wildlife Fair, a local conservation event held in the Village of Carlos Pellegrini, we shared the results of the 2016 campaign during a 30 minute talk under the topic of "Endangered Birds". The fair, which takes place from the 25th-28th of May each year, is of great importance for Argentinean conservation projects, and helps share and unite knowledge as well as creating opportunities for collaboration between different projects and institutions.



Mural in Ibicuy:

Aves Ibicuy included the saffron-cowled blackbird in a series of murals strategically located in different parts of the town, with an end to increasing awareness about the species.



Nature's Heroes

Birdlife International awards the title of "Nature's Hero" to volunteers world-wide who make a substantial contribution to bird conservation. The volunteers from Proyecto Tordo Amarillo were recognized for their work monitoring Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs), work in local development, and help with the project itself. The volunteers were awarded a diploma and given a special mention BirdLife International's website detailing the work they had been undertaking.



TV Mercosur:

On the 19th of December we appeared on TV Mercosur's local television programme "La Ventana" (The Window), broadcast in General Alvear, where we presented the saffron-cowled blackbird, the problems faced by the species, and the work being done in order to protect it.



Flyers

This year we managed to print and hand out 1000 flyers with information about the project, describing the threats faced by the saffron-cowled blackbird, how to recognize it, and what action to take in the event of witnessing illegal trapping or trafficking, or sale. We also handed out 100 copies of the Aves Argentinas magazine #48 where the saffron-cowled blackbird is featured as the main story.

National media coverage

The news of the presence of blackbirds flocks in Carambola had welcome repercussions in the national media, with articles by La Nación and Infobae helping raise awareness about the species and informing readers about current conservation work.

Pampas Meadowlark workshop

Along with the coordinators of Alianza de Pastizal, we attended a workshop about the situation of the endangered pampas meadowlark. In this workshop (organized by INTA) we presented the results of the saffron-cowled blackbird campaign, and discussed the possibility of using the same or similar techniques in order to protect the pampas meadowlark in the south of the state of Buenos Aires.

Natural Fest

Natural Fest is a cultural event held in Santo Tomé in order to raise awareness about the current environmental situation. The saffron-cowled blackbird was featured in an artistic intervention and homage was given to conservation work for the species.



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SOCIEDAD

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Por **Fernanda Jara** | 17 de febrero de 2018
mjara@infobae.com



MÁS LEÍDAS

1 Facebook: detalles de los dos años que trazaron el camino hacia su desastre



5. Trabajo en red

Department of Natural Resources of Corrientes

The Department of Natural Resources of Corrientes provided two members of the Local Bird Observers Club as “Conservation Agents” in order to better protect the region’s protected areas and their species.



Department of Parks and Reserves of Corrientes

The delegation from Carlo Pellegrini participated in the search for colonies, providing a vehicle, fuel and a park ranger. Together they searched 3311km, and the Park ranger was able to receive training in the search and management of reproductive colonies.

Department of Natural Resources of Entre Ríos

The Department of Natural Resources of Entre Ríos provided the permits necessary for research work and the Guardafauas Provinciales (Provincial Wildlife Guards) certificates for the use in possible trafficking events.



The Interactive Ecopark of the City of Buenos Aires

The zoo provided a technician for 10 days in order to help search for saffron-cowled blackbird colonies, and as Colony Guardian in the event of colonies being found.



Aves Gualeguaychú

El grupo local ha trabajado en la búsqueda y monitoreo de colonias en la provincia de Entre Ríos con dos colonias encontradas.

The Natural History Foundation of AZARA

In the state of Entre Ríos we received logistical help from AZARA through the provision of a 4x4 vehicle and a field technician who helped us for 4 days. We were also lent a different 4x4 for one day and given access to many ranches.



COA Tingazú (bird-watching club)

The Santo Tomé Bird Observers Club (COA Tingazú) participated in the project both through the active protection of colonies as well as in logistical matters. They provided the contacts necessary to enter ranches, offered accommodation, and manpower in the colony searches, protection, and monitoring of chicks.



Aves Ibicuy (bird-watching club)

This group collaborated with communication and environmental education about wildlife trafficking, the saffron-cowled blackbird, and birds in general. They actively participated in the search for colonies and groups.



Conservation Land Trust (CLT), Argentina

Thanks to their restoration work and the presence of protected areas CLT has managed to preserve valuable habitat on its land. A group of more than 50 individuals was found in an area of Los Esteros del Iberá, confirming reproductive sites and possible wintering sites.



Grasslands Alliance

The producer members of the alliance have contributed to the search and preserve the environment of the species through the implementation of good practices.



National Parks Administration

The National Parks Administration”, through its Technical Regional Delegation, fully supports the study of populations of SAFFRON-COWLED BLACKBIRD in the region.”

MILESTONES

1

200% of success in managed nests

With the implementation of nest management, we achieve the breeding success of protected nests be the double of the unprotected nests in a natural situation. That is to say, we managed to double the number of nests with young that managed to leave the nest without being depredated.

3

New sites

Thanks to the great effort made in Corrientes we were able to identify two new breeding colonies, both of which were successful. They were found inside two sites with important changes in land use. Two further important sightings can be added to this: one made by Aves Ibicuy in the same area, and the other thanks to CLT in el Iberá.

2

Monitoring

This year we re-sighted for the first time individuals ringed in previous years. This gives a positive panorama for the monitoring of individuals year-on-year, and for the understanding of their movement patterns. A ringed adult seen in one of the colonies monitored this year was ringed as a chick in 2016.

4

New allies

This year we have managed to strengthen ties with the government of Corrientes, whose help and support was fundamental in the search for reproductive colonies at the start of the campaign. Our team of volunteers and collaborators were recognized for their work to help save the saffron-cowled blackbird, being named "Natures Heroes" by BirdLife International. We have also strengthened ties with CLT following the discovery of the groups of individuals seen in Carambola.





This work was sponsored by:



Pertenece a BirdLife International, una alianza global de organizaciones conservacionistas.

Aves Argentinas is the national institution partner of BirdLife International, that with 100 years of experience works for the conservation of birds and the natural environments of Argentina. It seeks to bring people closer to nature and harvest the passion for birds through active conservation projects based on scientific knowledge; education and the dissemination of research.

www.avesargentinas.org.ar