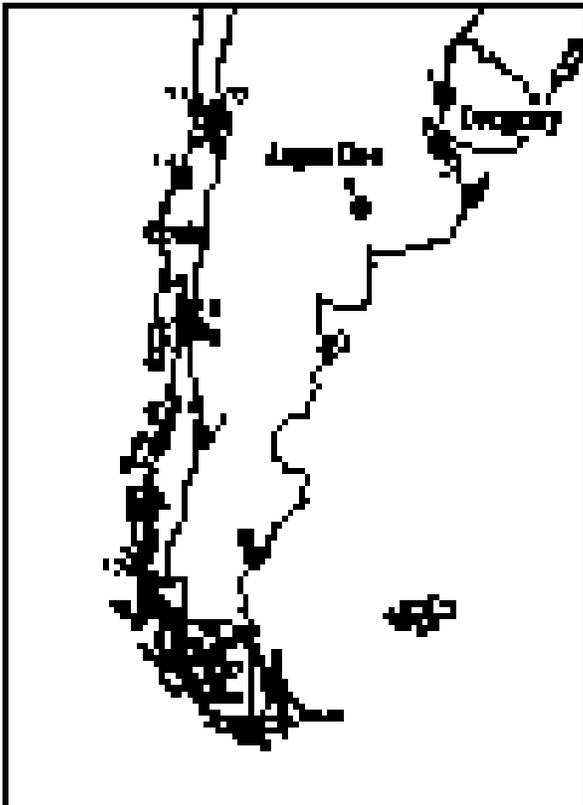


Known from a fair number of records from southern Argentina and southern Chile, this marshbird has not been recorded since 1959, and may already be extinct or nearly so, owing presumably to the destruction of wet grasslands by grazing sheep and man's activities.

DISTRIBUTION The Austral Rail has been recorded from Buenos Aires province, Argentina, and Valparaiso province, Chile, south to Tierra del Fuego, but the only definite austral summer (i.e. breeding season) records are from “central Chile” plus Llanquihué and Magallanes provinces, Chile, and Río Negro, Chubut and north-eastern Tierra del Fuego provinces, Argentina. On the following evidence the species may possibly breed or have bred throughout its Chilean range, while it still needs to be established whether Argentine records from Buenos Aires are of migrants only.



Argentina Records (north to south, coordinates from Paynter 1985) are: (*Entre Ríos*) near Concepción del Uruguay¹, where there were possible nineteenth-century sightings (Barrows 1884); (*Buenos Aires*) possibly Barracas al Sud² (adjacent to Avellaneda, 34°39'S 58°22'W), where two nests with eggs were found in early November 1900 (Hartert and Venturi 1909) but no parent birds were procured, so that the record remains doubtful (Hellmayr and Conover 1942); Partido de Lomas de Zamora³ (34°45'S 58°25'W), where a specimen (in BMNH) was killed by dogs in the swamp in June 1884 (Withington and Sclater 1888, Sharpe 1894); Cabo San Antonio⁴, where a bird was collected in July 1899 (Gibson 1920); Carhué⁵, April 1881 (Barrows 1884; specimen in MCZ); (*Río Negro*) El Bolsón⁶ (41°58'S 71°31'W), where a bird

was collected in October 1959 (Navas 1962); (*Chubut*) Valle del Lago Blanco⁷ (c.45°54'S 71°15'W), November 1901 (specimen in BMNH; also Hellmayr and Conover 1942); (*Santa Cruz*) lower río Chico⁸, March 1897 (Scott and Sharpe 1904; specimen in FMNH); (*Tierra del Fuego*) río Grande Norte⁹ (53°47'S 67°42'W, exact locality and date obtained unknown; specimen labelled "Río Grande Norte" donated to AMNH by the museum at Punta Arenas: Humphrey *et al.* 1970; see also Chapman 1933); Viamonte¹⁰, February 1931 (Humphrey *et al.* 1970; specimen in BMNH).

Chile SOMA (1935-1942) listed Talca and Linares provinces for the species, but in the absence of supporting evidence they are not considered further here. Records (north to south, coordinates from OG 1967) are: "Central Chile", where eight eggs were collected in October of an unspecified year (Oates 1901); (*Valparaiso*) "Valparaiso"¹¹ (old record determined by J. Fjeldså *in litt.* 1988); (*Santiago*) Fundo (*sic*), San Ignacio¹² (33°20'S 70°42'W), where a nest with six eggs found in November 1940 was attributed to this species, although identity was considered uncertain (six eggs in WFVZ); Viluco¹³ (33°47'S 70°48'W), undated (Philippi 1858); (*Colchagua*) Cauquenes¹⁴, undated (Reed 1877); (*Llanquihué*) Puntagudo¹⁵ (41°05'S 72°16'W), Peulla and Cayutué¹⁶ (41°16'S 72°16'W) (all three at Lago Todos los Santos), undated (Goodall *et al.* 1951, Johnson 1965); (*Magallanes*) Bahía Tom¹⁷ (50°12'S 74°47'W), north-eastern Isla Madre de Dios, where a bird was collected in April 1879 (Sharpe 1881); Puerto Mayne¹⁸ (51°19'S 74°05'W), Isla Evans, where a bird was collected in March 1880 (Sharpe 1881); Punta Arenas¹⁹, January 1876 (specimens in BMNH; Sclater and Salvin 1878a) and February 1883 (Oustalet 1891). There are additional records without specific data from "Chile", "Central Chile", "Santiago province" and "Straits of Magellan", this last being the type-locality (Hellmayr 1932).

POPULATION The Austral Rail has evidently become extremely rare and the absence of records in the past 30 years from a region where ornithological activity has not been insignificant gives serious cause for alarm. Only two specimens have been collected since 1901, one in 1931 and one in 1959 (see Distribution). Withington (1888) found the species to be rather common at Carhué in Buenos Aires in early April 1881. Rails are generally difficult to detect, but the paucity of specimens and sightings of this species suggests that it was already genuinely rare at the turn of the century. J. Koslowsky only secured a single specimen during intensive collecting from 1899 to 1901 in Chubut, Argentina (Hellmayr and Conover 1942), and a similarly experienced collector, A. Kovács, also only ever recorded a single individual in Patagonia (Navas 1962). In Llanquihué, Chile, a Dr Wolffhügel (in Johnson 1965) saw a few every winter, and stated that the species bred in the reedbeds in Lago Todos los Santos, both at Peulla and Puntagudo, as well as in the extensive reedbeds at the mouth of río Cayutué; no data concerning these records were given. Recent searches in the area produced no records, and the species is not even known by the guards of the present-day park (D. Willis *in litt.* 1991; see Measures Taken).

ECOLOGY Johnson (1965) considered the species "possibly the least known Chilean bird". It inhabits marshy fields, lake shores with rushy areas, and reedbeds (Johnson 1965, Meyer de Schauensee 1970, Fjeldså and Krabbe 1990), although a few birds were known to spend the winter months in the garden of a house garden at Cayutué, where they appeared to be very tame (Johnson 1965).

Little is known about feeding; one stomach contained a mass of partially digested Trichoptera *Limnophilus meridionalis* (Humphrey *et al.* 1970), and during winter at Cayutué very tame birds were observed feeding on grubs found underneath decomposing leaves, and even eating the leftovers of a dog's dinner (Johnson 1965). Its diet is probably not very different from that of the similar Virginia Rail *Rallus limicola*, which Ripley (1977) stated consists of slugs, snails, small fish, insect larvae and earthworms.

Nesting probably occurs throughout its range (Navas 1962), but the only nest which can be safely attributed to this species was found in October in central Chile and contained eight eggs (Oates 1901). The nest found near San Ignacio, Santiago (possibly belonging to this species), on 1 November 1940 contained six fresh eggs, and was placed on the ground under a thick bramble *Rubus* bordering an irrigation canal; the eggs were in a depression with a scanty lining of grass bents and rushes (information from WFVZ card index). Two more nests attributed to this species were found in a lagoon, early November 1900, each 20 cm above the water in a grass tussock, and each containing four eggs (Hartert and Venturi 1909).

Northwards post-breeding migration seems to occur or to have occurred, at least in the most southerly populations; this would take place at the end of March and early in April (Navas 1962).

THREATS The reasons for the species's scarcity are not clear; Fjelds  (1988) has identified the overgrazing and disappearance of practically all tall-grass habitat in Patagonia as a possible cause. Scott and Carbonell (1986) reported the proposed development of Lago Todos los Santos despite its protected area status (see below).

MEASURES TAKEN None is known other than that Lago Todos los Santos is protected within the contiguous Puyehue and Vicente P rez National Parks (Scott and Carbonell 1986; but see above).

MEASURES PROPOSED It is difficult to suggest a conservation strategy for such an unknown and wide-ranging species, but clearly the first priority is simply to locate remaining populations. Localities where the species was previously found and where preferred habitats still exist should be surveyed; other suitable areas within its range should be visited as well in case any overlooked populations survive. Surveys would be most useful at the beginning of the breeding season (i.e. October for northern populations and later, perhaps November and December, for the more southerly ones), when an effort should be made to record its voice, which could then greatly facilitate the further location of birds.