

Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* – Last chance to see?



(Photo by Alejandro Capelli)

Well probably not, but its decline continues and it is therefore much harder to see these days. This report records what I have learnt about seeing them in March 2023, and I hope is of help to others wanting to see this special, critically endangered species.

The trip

I had the good fortune of being left some money in my Aunt Peggy's Will and decided to blow much of it on seeing Hooded Grebe at the end of the birding trip I had already planned to Antarctica and Argentina. As I was already spending my final week in Patagonia, I set about organising a trip up to the Strobel Plateau for the Grebes.

I realised that this would be very difficult to organise by myself, so used the services of Alejandro Capelli, a local bird guide based in El Calafate. This worked better than I could have hoped: Alejandro researched which lakes the Grebes were breeding on this year and arranged for us to get access, as they were on a private Estancia (cattle ranch). As someone who doesn't speak Spanish, this would have been very difficult to do by myself. We also used his high-clearance vehicle and he did all of the driving. He speaks excellent English and was great company.

Day 1 – 12th March 2023

Alejandro picked me up in El Calafate at 7am and we drove to the Strobel Plateau. We stopped briefly along the way at various birding sites. Much of the latter part of the journey was on unmade roads and a high-clearance vehicle was essential. We camped the night on the Plateau. The weather became increasingly windy during the day and was gale force up on the Plateau – not uncommon for Patagonia. This compromised the birding, but we still saw 10+ Lesser Rhea, a Black-faced Ibis, 2 Variable Hawk, a Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, 8 Least Seedsnipe, c43 Tawny-throated Dotterel, 2 Short-billed Miner (and many Miner sp. probably also this species), 3 Scale-throated Earthcreeper, a Cordilleran Canastero, a Cinnamon-bellied Ground Tyrant, a Greater Yellow or Patagonian Yellow Finch (that I couldn't identify to a species given the brief view), and a Diuca Finch; as well as 75+ Guanaco, and a Greater or Patagonian Armadillo (that I couldn't identify to a species).

Day 2 – 13th March 2023

We got up at dawn and drove on to the gated entrance to the Estancia Lago Strobel where we had arranged to meet the owner Ángel Rodríguez. He spoke almost no English, so Alejandro needed to translate, but I found him kind and also thoughtful of my needs as a birder. We changed to his four-wheel drive vehicle and drove for a couple of very bumpy hours in first gear to one of the lakes on the west side of the Plateau. Here was the camping site for the two friendly volunteers from the Hooded Grebe Project (the Aves Argentinas conservation project to save the species). This lake held a pair of adult Hooded Grebes, that were in a group of Silvery Grebes close to the near shore.

We then walked for about half-an-hour to another lake, where there were three pairs of Hooded Grebes, including one pair with a full-grown chick that was nearly in juvenile plumage. The chick was being constantly monitored by one of the volunteers, who recorded what food the chick was given and, if necessary, was on hand to try and protect it from predation. The chick and its parents stayed on the opposite side of the lake from the Project's observation point where we were.

The lakes are small enough that the Grebes give good views and are on view the whole time, but a scope is necessary for a good view when they are on the far side of a lake.

After eating lunch, we left and started the long journey back to El Calafate, getting back about 10.30pm. The weather was over-cast and often wet on the Plateau – again, not uncommon in Patagonia.

Other species seen that day were 5 Lesser Rhea, 4 Flying Steamer Duck, 35+ Silvery Grebe, a Black-faced Ibis, 3 Variable Hawk, a White-throated Caracara, 5 Tawny-throated Dotterel, 2 Rufous-chested Dotterel, 6 Least Seedsnipe, 3 Short-billed Miner (and many Miner sp. probably also this species), 2 Scale-throated Earthcreeper, 3 Cordilleran Canastero, 2 Austral Negrito, 6 Cinnamon-bellied Ground Tyrant, a Chilean Swallow, 30+ Mourning Sierra Finch,

and c10 Grey-headed Sierra Finch; as well as a South American Grey Fox, a Humbolt's Hog-nosed Skunk, a Silky Tuco-tuco, a probable Southern Mountain Cavy, and 100+ Guanaco.

So ended a truly memorable couple of days.

The current status of Hooded Grebes

Hooded Grebe had a population of 784 breeding adults in the 2018-19 breeding season, distributed mostly on the Strobel Plateau (367 adults), Buenos Aires Plateau (222 adults) and Siberia Plateau (118 adults) in southern Argentina. Numbers of breeding adults seemed to be stable from 2015-16, but breeding success has declined from this time until only one fledged in 2018-19. The Hooded Grebe Project began in 2011. (Roesler & Fasola 2019)

I could not find any more recent information on the internet.

The two Hooded Grebe Project volunteers told me about the more recent status of Hooded Grebe, via translation by Alejandro. I have been unable to verify this information from other sources, including emailing and asking Aves Argentinas.

The Project volunteers said that this year the population on the Strobel Plateau was 349 breeding adults in 2022-23. The only chick in the whole of Argentina to have survived this year was the one we saw – making my sighting all the more special, but also deeply poignant and sad. This was due in the most part to stormy weather that destroyed the nests, followed by predation of all but one of the few surviving chicks. They also said that in 2021-22 only four chicks survived, and none in 2020-21 and 2019-20, and only one in 2018-19 as noted above. If this low rate of breeding success continues, they seem doomed to extinction, despite the great work of the Project.

According to the Project volunteers, birds breeding on the Strobel Plateau arrive in October and congregate on the larger lakes, often on the eastern side of the Plateau. They then check out other lakes before dispersing to the ones that have the right conditions for breeding that year. Therefore, *they can breed on different lakes each year, so it is essential to establish where they are in any one season.* The Strobel Plateau is vast, with numerous lakes and much of it is remote; with the Grebes nesting on lakes that are mostly on private land in the west, that requires a four-wheel drive for at least some of the journey. At the end of the breeding season in March, they depart from the Plateau and migrate back to the estuaries of the Santa Cruz and Gallegos rivers for the winter. Some had already departed by the time I was there, so I would suggest that you go earlier in the year than I did.

I hope that paying to see the Grebes at Estancia Lago Strobel would help the landowner to see greater value in them and their conservation. If more of us go, the more he may do so, and thereby give the species a better chance of survival.

Further information

I assume that El Calafate is the likely starting point, due to its airport and relative accessibility from elsewhere in Argentina.

I would recommend the services of Alejandro, who is based in El Calafate.

He is on +54 9 2966 44 9644 and uses WhatsApp, his email is alejandromcapelli@gmail.com and see him on instagram @alejandro_capelli

There are various options for seeing the Grebes:

The Strobel Plateau is a two, or better still three-day trip from El Calafate. If I'd had the time, I would have added the extra day so that I could have done more birding on the Strobel Plateau. As described, we went to Estancia Lago Strobel. Another area on the Strobel Plateau is Laguna Verde Lodge. They charge US \$120 per person and you have to explore the different lagoons on your own. A guide and high-clearance or four-by-four vehicle are necessary. We didn't do this as there were no Grebes breeding there in 2023.

There are various options for over-night accommodation on the Strobel Plateau. I camped to keep the cost down as well as to be on the Plateau at dawn and dusk for both the wildlife and the Patagonian scenery. There are some Estancia that have accommodation and Alejandro can provide information about these and if necessary book something.

There is also the Patagonia National Park, but this is a much longer drive from El Calafate and, at least in 2023, it then required a 10Km hike each way to get to the lake being used for breeding.

Occasionally a pair of Hooded Grebes may nest at a more accessible site for a season, see eBird for this possibility.

Costings:

Alejandro charged me his usual US \$350 per day for his service as guide and for use of his high-clearance vehicle and fuel. He provided some of the food and the beer/wine for the evening. He charges US \$200 if you use your own vehicle.

The cost of getting access to Estancia Lago Strobel was US \$200 per person, so I paid \$400 for both Alejandro and myself. This included being driven to the lake in the essential four-wheel drive vehicle, as well as a nice packed-lunch, and a gift of a little cattlehide cup for drinking maté. You would not be able to use your own vehicle. They normally charge for a minimum of three people, so US \$600, but charged us for two to help us out and for Alejandro to get to know the area and hopefully bring more birders in future.

The total cost was therefore US \$1100 – by some way the most expensive bird I've seen, but worth it!

Other bird species on the Strobel Plateau that I didn't see:

See eBird obviously, but the likely species of interest include Patagonian Tinamou, Austral Rail (we didn't go to a site), and Chocolate-vented Ground Tyrant (I think they had already departed north by the time I was there),

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Reference

Roesler, K. & Fasola, L. (2019). *PROYECTO MACÁ TOBIANO INFORME FINAL 2018-2019*. Aves Argentinas. www.avesargentinas.org.ar/sites/default/files/informe_PMT_2019_0.pdf#overlay-context=noticia/proyecto-mac%25C3%25A1-tobiano-informe-final-2018-2019 (accessed 20th May 2023)