

Taxonomy and systematics

The recognized extant species are:

- Greater rhea *Rhea americana*
 - *R. a. americana*, found in the cerrados (bushlands) and caatinga of central and eastern Brazil.
 - *R. a. intermedia*, southeastern Brazil in Rio Grande do Sul and Uruguay.
 - *R. a. nobilis*, eastern Paraguay, east of Rio Paraguay.
 - *R. a. araneipes*, chaco of Paraguay to Bolivia and Mato Grosso in Brazil.
 - *R. a. albescens*, plains of Argentina south of Rio Negro.
- Lesser rhea *Rhea pennata*
 - *R. p. garleppi*, puna of southeastern Peru, southwestern Bolivia, and northwestern Argentina.
 - *R. p. tarapacensis*, northern Chile from Atacama to Tarapacá.
 - *R. p. pennata*, Patagonian steppes in southern Argentina and southern Chile.



Greater rheas (*Rhea americana*) dustbathing. The two individuals on the left are leucistic.

Rhea pennata was not always in the *Rhea* genus. In 2008 the SACC, the last holdout, approved the merging of the genera, *Rhea* and *Pterocnemia* on August 7, 2008. This merging of genera leaves only the *Rhea* genus. A third species of rhea, *Rhea nana*, was described by Lydekker in 1894 based on a single egg found in Patagonia, but today no major authorities consider it valid.

Description

Rheas are large, flightless birds with grey-brown plumage, long legs and long necks, similar to an ostrich. Large males of *R. americana* can reach 170 cm (67 in) tall at the head, 100 cm (39 in) at the back and can weigh up to 40 kg (88 lb). The lesser rhea is somewhat smaller as they are only 90 cm (35 in) tall at the back. Their wings are large for a flightless bird (250 cm (8.2 ft)) and are spread while running, to act like sails. Unlike most birds, rheas have only three toes. Their tarsus has 18 to 22 horizontal plates on the front of it. They also store urine separately in an expansion of the cloaca.

Distribution and habitat

Rheas are from South America only and are limited within the continent to Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. They are grassland birds and both species prefer open land. The greater rheas live in open grasslands, pampas, and chaco woodlands. They prefer to breed near water and prefer lowlands, seldom going above 1,500 metres (4,900 ft). On the other hand, the lesser rhea will utilize most shrubland, grassland, even desert salt puna up to 4,500 metres (14,800 ft).

Behavior

Individual and flocking

Rheas tend to be silent birds with the exception being when they are chicks or when the male is seeking a mate. During breeding season, the male will attempt to attract females by calling. This call is a loud booming noise. While calling like this, they will lift the front of their body, ruffle their plumage, all while keeping their neck stiff. They will then extend and raise their wings, and run short distances, alternating with their wings. He may then single out a female and walk alongside or in front of her with a lowered head and spread wings. If the female notices him, then he will wave his neck back and forth in a figure-eight. Finally, a female may offer herself and copulation will commence.

During the non-breeding season they may form flocks of between 20 and 25 birds, although the lesser rhea forms smaller flocks than this. When in danger they flee in a zig-zag course, utilizing first one wing then the other, similar to a rudder. During breeding season the flocks break up.

Diet

For the most part, rheas are vegetarian and prefer broad-leafed plants but will also eat fruits, seeds and roots, as well as insects such as grasshoppers and small reptiles and rodents. Young rheas will generally eat only insects for the first few days. Outside of the breeding season they will gather in flocks and will feed with deer and cattle.

Reproduction

Rheas are polygamous, with males courting between two and twelve females. After mating, the male builds a nest, in which each female lays her eggs in turn. The nest consists of a simple scrape in the ground, lined with grass and leaves.^[1] The male incubates from ten to sixty eggs. The male will utilize a decoy system and place some eggs outside the nest and sacrifice these to predators, so that they won't attempt to get inside the nest. The male may utilize another subordinate male to incubate his eggs, while he finds another harem to start a second nest. The chicks hatch within 36 hours of each other. The females, meanwhile, may move on and mate with other males. While caring for the young, the males will charge at any perceived threat that approach the chicks including female rheas and humans. The young reach full adult size in about six months but do not breed until they reach two years of age.



A rhea gallivanting.

Status and conservation

Both the lesser rhea and the greater rhea are seeing shrinking wild numbers and shrinking habitat. Both are considered near threatened by the IUCN and have been for the last 15 years. The IUCN also states that they are both approaching vulnerable status.

Human interaction

Rheas have many uses in South America. Feathers are used for feather dusters, skins are used for cloaks or leather, and their meat is a staple to many people. The gaucho people traditionally hunt rheas on horseback, throwing *bolas*, a throwing device consisting of three balls joined by rope, at their legs which immobilises the bird. The rhea is pictured on Argentina's 1 Centavo coin minted in 1987.

References



Rhea meat

External links

- Rhea videos (<http://ibc.lynxeds.com/family/rheas-rheidae>) on the Internet Bird Collection

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