

Bird Trip Report – Hooded Grebe
Argentina (Jan 2022)



Rob Jansen
photography

Introduction

About us

We are two enthusiastic nature lovers who travel the world together to search for stunning birds, fascinating mammals and incredible nature. Our world travel started in October 2021 in Chile, where we bought a car to drive through South-America in search of birds and mammals for about 2 years.

Rob Jansen is biologist and wildlife photographer, and thus has a lot of knowledge about species and ecology. He is enthusiastic about all that's in nature, but mainly photographs birds and mammals.

Romy Jansen-Houtzager is a marketing professional. The marketing behind our social media accounts, the look and feel of this report and the website are her work. In the field, she is an excellent spotter and very patient (give me some of her patience ...and hurry!).



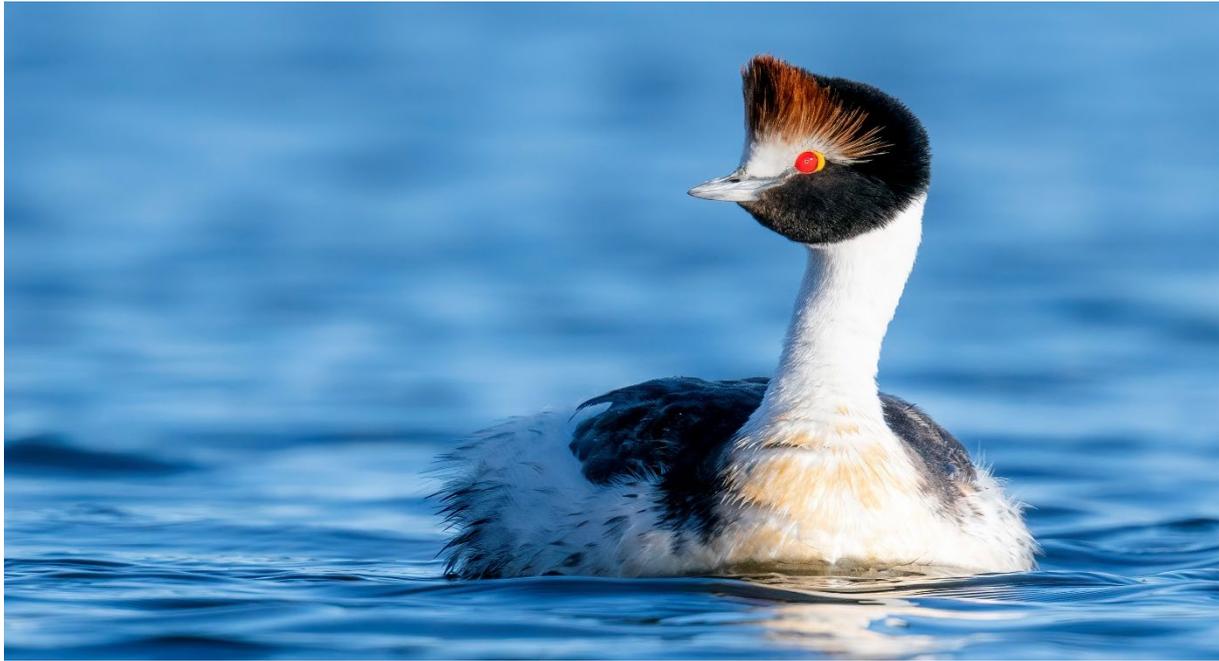
Romy and Rob at the beginning of the trail Meseta Buenos Aires

The Hooded Grebe

The Hooded Grebe is a bird species high on the wish list of many birders. Less than 50 years after this species was discovered in 1974, only ± 800 individuals remain. The population was ± 5000 individuals 20 years ago, but declined rapidly. The 'good' news is that the decline has stabilised for now. Predation of the eggs by Kelp Gulls and predation of the eggs and adults by the introduced American Mink are a huge threat to this species. Introduced salmon and trout (for sport fishing) compete for food. Snowfall is getting less the last few years, with almost no snowfall on the Strobel Plateau since 2019. This means less water to fill up the lagoons the birds breed and feed in. Winds are getting stronger, which dries out the lakes, as well as destroys nests. The plant, *Vinagrilla Myriophyllum elatinoides*, with which they build their nest and between which they find their food (aquatic invertebrates) has been available less as well because of beforementioned reasons.

From conversations we had with people working at the Macá Tobiano project (the Spanish name for the Hooded Grebe), there was no successful breeding the last 4 years. Comparable grebe species reach breeding maturity after 1 year and live 5-10 (some bigger species up to 20) years. This would mean that successful breeding years need to happen fast for the species not to go extinct in the near

future! Luckily there has been a lot of effort to protect them by the project! They monitor the grebes, the nests and guard them against Minks and Gulls. There have been lakes where introduced fish have been caught and there are plans to remove them from more (former) breeding lakes. The project has also made breeding platforms, which the birds have successfully adopted as nesting sites in the summer of 2021/2022. They put extra plant material on there themselves. However, a colony of 8 nests was destroyed by strong winds in January 2022. It's unsure what the future will hold for this species, but it's sure that with climate change a whole lot of action is needed to make sure it doesn't go extinct. The good news, there has finally been breeding success (hedged chicks) in March 2022!



The Hooded Grebe quest

The relatively recent discovery, its rarity and beauty and the inaccessibility of the habitat makes this enigmatic bird a most wanted for many birders traveling to this part of the world. So it was for us! But we found information on the internet was rather scarce, and actually seeing the bird was really difficult! Especially after our experience 'in the field' we like to share the information we have. We hope to be of some aid to birders hoping to see this species while it's still possible.

Winter time (Apr – Sep)

Searching for the Hooded Grebe can be done at multiple places. In the winter the Hooded Grebes gather in estuaries on the Atlantic coast of Argentina, mainly at Rio Gallegos & Punta Loyola (on the river 'Rio Gallegos') and (Puerto) Santa Cruz & Puerto de Punta Quilla (on the river 'Rio Chico') and at Puerto Coig (on the river 'Rio Coyle'). These places are the easiest to reach, lying in the southeast of

Argentina relatively close to the Ruta 3. Views are most likely far away. They show up at other places as well less regularly, but nothing regular enough to build your vacation around it. Best is to look for recent sightings on eBird for these winter locations.

Start of the breeding season (Oct-Nov)

Before the breeding season starts the Grebes gather in lower lying lakes, depending on the amount of snow that has fallen higher up. The best known and accessible lagoon it at Estancia La Angostura (coordinates: [48°37'18.8"S 70°41'57.7"W](#)). The question is if these gatherings are reliable enough to plan your vacation around this time of the year and lagoons like this one. But if you are in the region around that time of the year, it is definitely worth a try!



Breeding season (Dec-Mar) – Meseta de Strobel

As we saw many sightings of Hooded Grebes on eBird on the Strobel plateau (Meseta de Strobel) we looked into this place. Google Maps and other mapping apps showed a road, leading from the Ruta 40 towards Lago Cardiel, and shortly after going north up to the plateau. Sightings were quite regular, so we figured these places were visited by more birders like us. As we drove up we had to open and close two gates (meant to keep out cattle, not visitors), and the road was just fine. There were some recent sightings near Laguna Verde Lodge and on the lakes west of the Rio Barrancoso. The last 10km towards the Laguna Verde Lodge were terrible and that road belongs to the worst roads we drove on during our world travel. As we wanted to search the lakes west of the Rio Barrancoso we drove the road leading towards there, but ended up before a locked gate, belonging to Laguna Verde Lodge. This was the first setback, as it was unknown to us that this land was also part of the lodge. We went there to ask if we could cross their land, which goes up to the river. Upon

asking, the hostess had to call the owners, after which she told us the price for birding the grounds was 120USD per person! We told them we didn't want to bird their land, just cross the 4km towards the river, after which we would bird (not their land). That didn't matter; the price for crossing 4km was 120USD p.p. as well. As this fee wouldn't go to protection of the species but was just to fill the owners' pockets, we decided against it and drove the terrible road back. We noticed a worker from the lodge following us from a distance with a quad for most of the 10km back to the main road. It seemed they were afraid we would have a free look at some remaining lakes near entrance road...

We drove the other road from the T-intersection, going west. Following that for a while and checking all the lakes close to the road we found out that most of them had dried up. This had already been the case for most of the lakes towards the T-intersection, also for all the lakes where there had been Grebe sightings in the last 10 years. As we followed the road we ended up before another locked gate. In front of them was a car with two persons from the Maca Tobiano project of which we got lots of information. They confirmed that searching for the Grebes east of the river was hopeless, and that the only lakes holding Grebes were located on the west of Rio Barrancoso. The roads towards the lakes with the Grebes are apparently even worse than the road to Laguna Verde Lodge. That was the good news. The bad news is that all of these lakes are located on private lands. As they waited for the property owner, we decided to wait for him as well. We asked the owner if we could stay with the project for 1 night/2 days, going in and out at the same time. He wouldn't have to open the gate an extra time and he would have the guarantee that we would be 'supervised' the whole time. The owner said we could, but the price was 300USD.... per person... for just being on his land, sleeping and eating in our own car, nothing more. Obviously we didn't want to sponsor this kind of 'all-tourists-are-ATM-machines'-kind of thinking and we left. Apparently prices like this are normal for all the fly-fishing guests coming to these lodges. The rubbish dump with all the empty beer and wine bottles at Laguna Verde Lodge and the dead Puma on the other terrain (they are legally allowed to shoot them) says enough how much these landowners care about nature and conservation.

Long story short: unless you are prepared to pay a lot of money, don't go here! It's a lot of kilometres, and chances of seeing the Grebes showing up on your own are slim.



Rubbish dump at Laguna Verde Lodge



Dead Puma, most likely (legally) shot



Breeding Season (Dec-Mar) – Meseta Buenos Aires - Hiking

The only place where you can go yourself without being on private land is National Park Patagonia – La Ascensión. The park is relatively new, and trails going up the Meseta Buenos Aires are only open since 2016/2017. The park is free and you don't have to reserve. You have to walk a hike, called Sendero La Meseta, up till [-46.71568, -71.47903](#). The hike is 16km long, one way, and takes about 2 days. Before Covid you were able to drive the first (boring) 6km towards Puesto Amarillo, a former camping area. This one seems permanently closed, so you have to walk all the way from the main station. They will give you a folder, which can be downloaded for on your mobile via their website:

www.parquepatagoniaargentina.org/files/folleto-ascension.pdf



Rob at the beginning of the trail



The main station

The first 6km of the hike are easy, climbing only 150m in altitude. It took us about 1,5h to walk this, although the official time is 2 hours and 15 minutes. From Puesto Amarillo you will start ascending, mostly climbing a part and then hiking level for a while, sometimes going down and up again to pass

a small valley or the stream. You will pass several 'landmarks', until after a total of 12km and a total altitude gain of 770m since the main station, you reach the shelter (refugio) 'Puesto el Rincón'.



The Refugio 'Puesto el Rincón'



The shelter itself

Here there is a pit-toilet, one dome in which one tent can be set up (semi-protected from the wind), a shelter and attached to the shelter one more 'room' in which one bigger or maybe two small tents can be set up. The shelter has a wood stove and there is wood and an axe available (nothing to light it though, bring your own!). There is a table and some old chairs. The shelter offers enough room for about 4-6 air mattresses on the concrete but dusty floor. Water is available from the stream about 150m up the trail. You need to bring your own air mattress, sleeping bag, pillow etc. Nights are cold, and we had freezing temperatures in mid-January, so be prepared. Although the official time from the main station to the refugio is 6 hours and 15 minutes, it took us 4 hours and 45 minutes, and we're not die hard hikers.



Sleeping inside the Refugio 'Puesto el Rincón'



Warming up at the wood stove

We left most of our stuff in the refugio the next morning while walking the last 4km and climbing 400m up to the border of the Meseta. We left at 05.30 when the sun rose enough to see where we would walk. All the lakes near this part of the hike were dried out, so no changes for the Grebes there. The walk up took us about 1,5 hours, the official time being 2 hours and 15 minutes.

**Walking up the Meseta****View from the Meseta**

Right on top of the Meseta there is a sign, which is a good reference point when walking further on the Meseta. You will see one basalt lake right away, and we were lucky enough that the **Hooded Grebes** were in this one! We had 30 Hooded Grebes (together with 22 **Silvery Grebes**) in this one lake. The sun had just gone over the edge of the depression this lake was in, and the edge of the lake was still frozen. The Grebes were calling a lot, sometimes performing their dancing display rituals, handing over pieces of vegetation etc! An amazing sight to see this species! We were lucky the winds were just 2-3Bft early morning, as later the wind gained force up to 5-6Bft, making it even colder.

**Romy with the Hooded Grebes****The first lake on top of the Meseta**

However, when the Grebes are not breeding they might change lakes overnight (they fly at night). You might be less lucky and not find them in the first lake. Then you will have to search for the other lakes. Even though the Meseta is relatively flat, you can't see any of the other lakes right away. The basalt lakes are all sunken into the landscape, and the only thing you might see from a distance is the beginning of the hole. As there are other small mountains, small holes and many rocks and loose sand on the top, it is surprisingly easy to get lost without a good GPS and/or reference point. We tried to go to some other lakes where Grebes were seen recently. Detouring around rocks and hills made us go a wrong way, until we saw a depression of a lake in the distance. We walked towards there and didn't find any other Grebes than Silvery Grebes. This lake turned out to be 1km east of the lakes we actually wanted to visit! You could be unlucky, and that would mean that you have walk 5-7km on top of the Meseta to visit multiple lakes and search for the species. If this takes long, than

you might want to spend a second night in the Refugio. It is also possible to hike up in one day from the main station to the Meseta, and walk back to sleep in the refugio the first day. You could even camp with your own tent on top of the Meseta if the winds are not too strong.



Hard to find any lakes on top of the Meseta

Romy pointing towards the beginning of the trail

We started walking back at 10.00, arriving at the refugio at 11.30, leaving there again at 12.00. At 16.30 we arrived at the station, being exhausted from the long hike and short and cold night. But we were very thrilled that we had seen this amazing species all by ourselves!



Hooded Grebe with a prey (Caddisfly larvae)

The hike up yielded some other nice birds: **Patagonian Yellow-finch**, **Band-tailed Earthcreeper**, **Austral Canastero** and our first **Elegant Crested Tinamou** (common in other parts of Argentina). No mammals besides **Guanaco**, but **Puma** is seen here sometimes. If you are very interested in Tuco-tucos; we saw lots of holes close to each other on the trail just before Roca Guacha (about 4km from the park entrance), similar to the Tuco-tuco colony we had seen at Parque Penguino Rey in Chile.



Breeding Season (Dec-Mar) – Meseta Buenos Aires – Guided Tour

If the 16km hike up to the Meseta, extra kilometres on top of the Meseta and sleeping in a refugio are not your thing... than this might be something for you! Pablo Hernández is a guide who grew up in the region and who has been involved with the species for a very long time! He helps the Maca Tobiano project a lot and if anyone knows where to find this species, it's him! He has set up a camp on top of the mountain and offers all-inclusive guided tours up to the Meseta. He drives you up with his car, and you will spend the night at the camp. Preferably 2 nights as the drive up and down takes a long time, and it's best to have a whole day to search for and observe the species. He quoted us 420 USD for the 2 of us, all in. A fair price for the work he has to do for it and the risk of needing new tires after driving up. He can more or less guarantee you the Grebes, so this is your safest option if this bird is high on your list and you don't mind spending a bit. His emails is tobianoexpediciones at gmail.com or you can reach him via Whatsapp on +54 9 2966 60-3552. He speaks English and Spanish!

See Pablo appearing in this commentary of and on the BBC Documentary 'The Mating Game':

www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPO_9umcg9M&ab_channel=BBCEarth

And a documentary on the Hooded Grebe:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0taBiJB35c&t=730s&ab_channel=JumaraFilms



You made it! Thank you for reading 😊

We hope that this report gives you an idea of when and how to search for this amazing species, and what your options are. The bird can still be seen even if you are a budget birder, but it requires some more effort! If you are less of a budget birder you have a good option as well, and no matter how you go, an adventure it will be!

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