Project Update: March 2024

From February 10 to March 8 2024, we carried out our fourth field campaign. The outreach campaign done last year has been a success, with 46 Chaco eagle independent sightings to date, featuring adults or immatures. In the last field campaign during the Chaco eagle reproductive period (October to March), we traversed the whole province, from south to north, driving and walking more than 7000 km, and covering the departments of Ojo de Agua, Atamisqui, Guasayán, Banda, Jiménez, Copo, Alberdi, Moreno, Sarmiento and Avellaneda. Thus, this field campaign has covered almost all the departments where the outreach campaign was done, all of them with significative sightings which attracted our attention.

We have visually confirmed the territories of 10 Chaco eagle pairs. This is a great number, given that there were very few sightings in the province prior to our presence in the area. We are now estimating the territories, using our GPS data from other marked pairs at similar latitudes (i.e., the marked individuals in Santa Fe province from the Rufford project in 2021/2022), to send this information to interested parties, such as the Forests and Wildlife Direction of Santiago del Estero province. Our intention is to promote the protection of these sites, to enhance the conservation of the Chaco eagle territories discovered. However, we have seen most Chaco eagle pairs without their corresponding fledgling. As we know from other places and seasons, Chaco eagle chicks fledge during January or February, so one could assume that in March they should be flying with their parents (this is known as parental dependence period). The fact that we did not see any fledgling with its parents makes us think that: (1) most pairs have not tried to breed this year (because of climate issues, as said in previous reports); or (2) active nests have failed. This has made it difficult to find Chaco eagle nests in Santiago del Estero province. We hope that with all the people now involved in our research and conservation cause, we will be able to find an active nest next season. In this case, we were able to find two additional Chaco eagle old (unused or inactive) nests, which will be monitored during the following years.

Also, we have found and identified another potential mortality source for the Chaco eagle: drowning in open air water (or irrigation) canals. There is 250 km long water canal in northern Santiago del Estero province, encompassing two of our Chaco eagle territories, where more than 35 wildlife species have been documented drowning, including endangered species such as the giant anteater (*Myrmecophaga trydactyla)*, and the Chaco tortoise (*Chelonoidis chilensis*), and where two raptor species have been identified so far. This makes Chaco eagle populations vulnerable to fall in the canal (for the same reasons explained in the water reservoirs); however, rescue ramps would not be effective at all in this case, since water is running fast and animals would not be able to cling, or hold, to the rescue ramp. We are now urgently working in a strong collaborative effort with Santiago del Estero province, the canal construction company and some Argentinian NGOs to look for solutions to this conservation issue.

The good news is, the 2021 Rufford project in Santa Fe is still yielding great results. We have successfully banded and GPS-tagged two fledglings in western Santa Fe province (just at the border with Santiago del Estero province), and we are now signing the first Chaco eagle regional conservation programme ever done for this species. This is a milestone that will promote Chaco eagle conservation in the Chaco ecoregion, and increase the chances of survival of this endangered species.

We also visited, for the first time ever, Copo National Park, situated in the north-eastern border of Santiago del Estero and which is close to Impenetrable National Park (Chaco province). It is commonly said that these two national parks are key for the conservation of most Dry Chaco species, such as the Chaco eagle, the giant anteater, the Chacoan peccary, the giant armadillo, and the Chaco tortoise, to name a few. We traversed all the park (nearly 100,000 ha), visited some potential Chaco eagle territories and trained some park ranger in the searching of active nests. We also gave a talk to rural workers, park rangers, landowners and neighbors of the area, on the identification and conservation of Chaco eagle and other wildlife.

Last but not least, in the territories mentioned, we have installed around 20 rescue ramps to reduce Chaco eagle (and other wildlife) drownings. The measure has received significant attention, with lots of producers asking us on the materials and procedure. In the next few months, we expect more rescue ramps to be installed by the rural workers themselves.

We thank The Rufford Foundation for their support to carry out this key project in Santiago del Estero province, northern Argentina.