

# Birds & Birdkeeping

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## Brazilian reintro makes history

As forest loss in Brazil is making all the wrong headlines, **ROSEMARY LOW** shares good news about a special bird

### CONSERVATION

**S**EPTEMBER 25 2019 was a historic day in the conservation of South American fauna. A species that had become extinct in the wild was reintroduced to its former range for the first time ever. That species was the Alagoas curassow (*Pauxi mitu*, also known as *Mitu mitu*).

This species is, or was, endemic to the Atlantic rainforest of NE Brazil, a region that has lost 98 per cent of its original forest. At one time the Atlantic forest extended from the eastern coast of Brazil, reaching to small parts of Paraguay and Argentina. Only 14 per cent of this forest persists, and this region is the most heavily populated in Brazil, with 70 per cent (140 million people) of the population living there. It also harbours about 900 bird species. In Brazil, 234 are threatened with extinction, mostly due to deforestation.

These statistics were quoted by Professor Luís Fábio Silveira, speaking at the joint meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club and the Neotropical Bird Club on October 26 2019, at the Natural History Museum in London.

Alagoas is the second smallest Brazilian state, located in the north-east region: the extreme eastern part when you look at the map of Brazil. Deforestation there increased

dramatically in the 1970s when the army planted huge areas of sugar cane for biofuel. This had a disastrous effect on birdlife. The last sightings of the Pernambuco pygmy owl (*Glaucidium mooreorum*) occurred in 1990 (and this bird was not even described as a separate species until 2002.) The cryptic treehunter (*Cichocolaptes mazarbarnetti*) was last seen in 2007 and the Alagoas foliage-gleaner

(*Philydor novaesi*) in 2011. All are now presumed extinct.

Luís Fábio Silveira is the curator of the Bird Collection of the Zoology Museum of the University of São Paulo

(MZUSP), and scientific director there. He specialises in the systematics and conservation of Neotropical birds. Currently he is researching birds in the Pernambuco Centre of Endemism, which includes Alagoas.

### Targets for reintroduction

He is involved with the captive breeding and reintroduction of the Alagoas curassow, Brazilian merganser (*Mergus octosetaceus*), great-billed seed finch (*Sporophila maximiliani*) and golden conure (*Guaruba guarouba*).

This distinguished ornithologist spoke about the curassow, which was believed extinct until its rediscovery in the 1950s. Curassows are big, meaty birds, not unlike turkeys, to which they are related. Hunting and habitat loss devastated its populations until it was on



Alagoas curassow: one eightieth of the world population can be seen in this photograph  
Photo: Prof Luís Fábio Silveira Inset: the remarkable private aviculturist Beto Polezel, 29, of São Paulo is one of only three people with stock of the Alagoas curassow Photo: Rosemary Low

the knife-edge of extinction. Then along came a well-known aviculturist, Pedro Nardelli, who had an exceptional collection of Brazilian birds. He was especially interested in the cracids (curassows and guans). In 1979 he went to Alagoas and captured five individuals of the curassow. Two years later it was believed extinct in the wild.

Nardelli reared three or four young per year from three birds. Two never bred. Of course, the species suffered from an extreme genetic bottleneck, and from hybridisation in captivity. Since 1999 (when there were 44 in two collections), all individuals have been

subjected to genetic management and by 2019 there were 80 pure birds derived from the three founders.

In 2001, Nigel Collar, Britain's most revered ornithologist and taxonomist (with BirdLife International), suggested to Luís that he should go to Alagoas to identify and survey the richest forest fragments. Funded by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), these fragments were surveyed to find reintroduction sites for targeted species and even previously undescribed species. These include a new

trogon: a large colourful forest bird.

It was very encouraging that the owners of the sugar mills were interested in endangered birds and in giving them legal protection on their properties. Another positive step is that environmental fines have been diverted to the creation of private reserves. Since 2018, more than 2,500ha have been protected, with 80 per cent of endemic or threatened bird species of the region residing in them.

So it was that last September three pairs of Alagoas curassows were reintroduced to their original home.

The males carry transmitters so that they can be radio-tracked. Fittingly, this reserve has been named after Pedro Nardelli, who sadly died a month before the release.

In recent months, the scale of forest loss in Brazil has caused deep concern worldwide, not only among environmentalists but also with many members of the public who usually show little interest in such matters. It is therefore heartening to learn of the work of dedicated scientists and conservationists in Brazil who are not only already working to save the most threatened endemic species, but who are also considering cryopreservation of their tissues and captive breeding for insectivorous birds.

Rosemary Low's website is: [www.rosemarylow.co.uk](http://www.rosemarylow.co.uk)



Note the distinctive greyish white patch of bare skin around this Alagoas curassow's ear



Razor-billed curassow: this widespread, closely related Amazonian species differs most obviously in having a white-tipped tail. Inset: Professor Luís Fábio Silveira has a keen interest in the fate of several critically endangered Brazilian species Photo: Prof Luís Fábio Silveira