

# “Weird Wings”: the enigmatic *Eleothreptus* nightjars of Paraguay

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**D**umpy, big head, huge eyes, weird wings (Pearman & Abadie 1995, Smith *et al.* 2006): that just about sums up the jizz of the *Eleothreptus* nightjars, an enigmatic pair of little-known Caprimulgids, with their core distribution in the heart of South America (Cleere 1998). The two species, the White-winged and Sickle-winged Nightjars, are distinctive, highly-localised and threatened with extinction, a combination guaranteed to make the average birder’s mouth water.

Unusual amongst Caprimulgids is that both species employ a lek breeding system, which results in a clumped distribution within the known range (Clay *et al.* 2000). Neither species is very vocal, but both use modified primaries to produce mechanical sounds that are audible at close range (Straneck & Viñas 1994, Clay *et al.* 2000). Consequently, what looks to the untrained eye like apparently suitable habitat may be rejected in favour of long-standing display areas, habitually visited by females. While this creates challenges for conservationists, it is an advantage for birders who can have easy, unforgettable encounters with these remarkably approachable and breathtakingly beautiful species.

The endangered White-winged Nightjar *E. candicans* is endemic to the *cerrado* grasslands of northeastern Paraguay and adjacent Brazil (Lowen *et al.* 1996, Rodrigues *et al.* 1999), with odd records from Bolivia (Davis & Flores 1994, Grim & Sumbera 2006). The world population is estimated to be between 600 and 1700 mature individuals (BirdLife International 2013), and it is known to breed at just three localities: two of these are in Paraguay (Aguara Ñu, Dpto Canindeyú and on the outskirts of Reserva Natural Laguna Blanca, San Pedro department) and one is in Brazil (Emas National Park, Goiás State) (Lowen *et al.* 1996, Clay *et al.* 1998, Rodrigues *et al.* 1999, Smith *et al.* 2006).

Males perform elaborate ‘butterfly’ display flights, showing off their eye-catching white wings and tail—a mesmerising sight for females for human observers alike—before alighting on an exposed anthill, a critical component of display

areas (Clay *et al.* 2000, Pople 2003). Females lack the extensive white areas on the plumage, but share the distinctive shape of the genus (Clay *et al.* 2000).

With Emas National Park ravaged by fires in recent years and no current population estimate available for Brazil, the Paraguayan localities have assumed increased significance. The population of about 20 to 75 pairs at Aguara Ñu has been effectively conserved as part of the Mbaracayú Biosphere Reserve, thanks to the work of the Fundación Moises Bertoni (Lowen *et al.* 1996). However, consolidating the conservation of the perhaps declining Laguna Blanca population, which resides on 200 ha of private land belonging to a Brazilian *Eucalyptus* forester, is now a conservation priority in Paraguay. Local conservation group Para La Tierra is working to raise awareness about the plight of this population, and features the species as its logo.

The near-threatened Sickle-winged Nightjar *E. anomalus* has a wider range, but is equally localised, with the core of the distribution associated with the gallery forests and Mesopotamian grasslands of Paraguay and northern Argentina, and isolated populations in southeastern Brazil (Pearman & Abadie 1995, Cleere 1998). In males the curved primaries are so exaggerated as to suggest a deformity, but they function to produce a mechanical buzzing sound used in display (Cleere 1998). Scattered records from across Paraguay hint at a wider, or perhaps contracting distribution (Guyra Paraguay 2005), but the only reliable breeding area that is known for the species in the country is on Isla Yacyretá in the Paraná River. Thanks to the work of the Yacyretá Binacional company, the conservation of this population has been effectively secured with the declaration of the island as a reserve.

Despite the obvious similarities between these two species in both breeding system, structure and appearance, only recently have ornithologists begun to realise how closely related they are (Cleere 2002, 2007), a testament to the mystique that has long surrounded these weird-winged nightbirds.



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Fig 1: Male White-winged Nightjar *E. candidans* in characteristic pose on an anthill, Reserva Natural Laguna Blanca, San Pedro department, Paraguay (Paul Smith / [www.faunaparaguay.com](http://www.faunaparaguay.com)).



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Fig 2: Wing of the male White-winged Nightjar *E. candidans* with partially grown outer secondaries following moult, Reserva Natural Laguna Blanca, San Pedro department, Paraguay (Karina Atkinson / Para La Tierra / [www.paralatierra.org](http://www.paralatierra.org)).



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Fig 3: Female White-winged Nightjar *E. candidans* showing big-headed, big-eyed jizz, Reserva Natural Laguna Blanca, San Pedro department, Paraguay (Karina Atkinson / Para La Tierra / [www.paralatierra.org](http://www.paralatierra.org)).

Fig 4: Immature White-winged Nightjar *E. candidans* with typically rich brownish colouration, Reserva Natural Laguna Blanca, San Pedro department, Paraguay (Karina Atkinson / Para La Tierra / [www.paralatierra.org](http://www.paralatierra.org)).

Fig 5: Wing of immature White-winged Nightjar *E. candidans* showing normal wing shape of the species, Reserva Natural Laguna Blanca, San Pedro department, Paraguay (Karina Atkinson / Para La Tierra / [www.paralatierra.org](http://www.paralatierra.org)).

Fig 6: The White-winged Nightjar *E. candidans* features in the logo of local Paraguayan conservation group Para La Tierra, based at Reserva Natural Laguna Blanca, San Pedro department.



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Fig 7: Male Sickie-winged Nightjar *E. anomalus*, Isla Yacyretá, Misiones department, Paraguay (Paul Smith / [www.faunaparaguay.com](http://www.faunaparaguay.com)).

Fig 8-9: The highly-modified wing shape of the male Sickie-winged Nightjar *E. anomalus*, near Ituzaingo, Misiones province, Argentina (Phil Palmer / [www.birdholidays.co.uk](http://www.birdholidays.co.uk))

Fig 10: Female Sickie-winged Nightjar *E. anomalus*, Isla Yacyretá, Misiones department, Paraguay (Hugo del Castillo / [www.faunaparaguay.com](http://www.faunaparaguay.com)).

Fig 11: The 'normal' barred primaries of the female Sickie-winged Nightjar *E. anomalus*, Isla Yacyretá, Misiones department, Paraguay (Hugo del Castillo / [www.faunaparaguay.com](http://www.faunaparaguay.com)).

Fig 12: Immature Sickie-winged Nightjar *E. anomalus*, Isla Yacyretá, Misiones department, Paraguay (Arne Lesterhuis / [www.faunaparaguay.com](http://www.faunaparaguay.com)).



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