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Birds Present in Pellets of *Tyto alba* (Strigiformes, Tytonidae) from Casa de Piedra, Argentina

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The Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) is the strigiform with the most world-wide distribution. The diet of this raptor is predominantly composed of small mammals (Jaksić et al. 1977, Massoia 1983, Torres Mura and Contreras 1989). Insects make up a small contribution to the Barn Owl's diet as do other non-mammalian vertebrates. The species of birds that have been preyed upon have been poorly documented in the Argentine ornithological literature (Justo and De Santis 1982, Soncini et al. 1985, De Santis and Pagnoni 1989, Nores and Gutierrez 1990, Noriega et al. 1990). Likewise, reports from other regions are also scanty (Herrera and Jaksić 1980, Cerpa and Yanez 1981), and usually list birds as unidentified. Identification problems of avian prey arise as consequence of the great osteologic homogeneity of birds, and the lack of keys or descriptions that could allow a more specific determination. Another difficulty is the extreme fragility of the avian bones found in the pellets.

The aim of this work is to inform about a case of high ornithophagy from Casa de Piedra in La Pampa, Argentina (38°12'S 62°12'W), and to give a list of avian prey remains in 156 pellets. The study area was in the Patagonian zoogeographic domain (Ringuelet 1961). The pellets were collected during November 1983 on the terraces bordering the Colorado River. The identification was made by comparing the remains of humeri and skulls in pellets with known specimens deposited in the Vertebrate Paleontology Division of La Plata Museum.

Results and Discussion

From a total of 259 prey items (Table 1), the number recognizable as birds was 103 (39.8%). The remaining items were mammals, which were described elsewhere (Montalvo et al. 1984). Two species of birds, *Zonotrichia capensis* and *Mimus patagonicus*, comprised 62% of all bird prey eaten by the owls.

Table 1. Prey in the diet of *Tyto alba* from Casa de Piedra, La Pampa (Argentina).

Prey	Number	Percentage
Mammals	156	60.2
Birds	103	39.8
Charadriidae		
Unidentified Charadriidae	1	0.4
Emberizidae		
Zonotrichia capensis	38	14.7
Diuca diuca	6	2.3
Phrygilus fruticeti	3	1.2
Unidentified Emberizidae	6	2.3
Mimidae		
Mimus patagonicus	26	10.0
Furnariidae		
Cinclodes fuscus	6	2.3
Synallaxis albescens	5	1.9
Leptasthenura sp.	1	0.4
Pseudoseisura lophotes	1	0.4
Upucerthia dumetaria	1	0.4
Unidentified Furnariidae	1	0.4
Hirundinidae		
Progne modesta	2	0.8
Columbidae		
Zenaida auriculata	1	0.4
Rhinocryptidae		
Unidentified Rhinocryptidae	1	0.4
Unidentified Passeriformes	4	1.5

The diet included some species with a wide distribution, such as *Zonotrichia capensis, Progne modesta,* and *Zenaida auriculata.* Typical Chacoan species belonging to central domain (Ringuelet 1961), *Pseudoseisura lophotes* and *Synallaxis albescens,* were also found. A marked Patagonian influence was noted through the inclusion of *Mimus patagonicus, Diuca diuca, Phrygilus fruticeti, Cinclodes fuscus* and *Upucerthia dumetaria.* The presence of these species might reflect the zoogeographic placement of Casa de Piedra in the ecotone between the Patagonian and central domains.

This unusually high predation on birds is difficult to explain. Hardy (1989) explained a case of ornithophagy by a seasonal decline in marsupial and rodent populations, a facultative response to the abundance of a secondary food resource. Alternatively, this unusual result may reflect individual differences on the part of an undetermined number of individual Barn Owls studied.

RESUMEN.—La presencia de aves en la dieta de *Tyto alba* está poco documentada en la Argentina. En egagrópilas provenientes de la provincia de La Pampa (Argentina) hemos registrado una elevada ornitofagia, constituyendo las aves el 40% de las presas. Estas aves estaban representadas por 11 especies con predominio de Passeriformes.

Estudios de mayor profundidad son necesarios, resultando difícil por el momento explicar esta desviación hacia el consumo de aves.

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