

Greater Rhea

Rhea americana

Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Chordata
Class	Aves
Order	Struthioniformes
Family	Rheidae



Native to: Eastern South America. Argentina and Brazil.

Status: Near Threatened

The Greater Rhea is believed to be declining but there are still quite a few across its wide range. The major factors in its decline are ranching and farming along with egg-gathering and habitat loss. The habitual burning of crops in South America has also contributed to their decline. The birds' health is affected by wholesale pesticide and herbicide spraying; while not threatening on a large scale, locally the species may be seriously affected by poisoning.

Appearance & Lifespan

Greater Rheas have fluffy, tattered-looking plumage. The feathers are gray or brown, with lots of individual variation, and the males are generally darker than the females.

Their legs are long and strong and their feet have three toes. Their wings are quite long but they aren't used for flight, they use them during running to maintain balance during tight turns.

Adult Greater Rheas have an average weight of 45–80 lbs and are around 140 cm long from beak to tail; they usually stand about 1.50 m (5 ft) tall. The males are generally bigger than the females and can weigh up to 88 lbs and measure over 150 cm (59 in) long.

The average lifespan for a Greater Rhea in the wild is 15 years.



Behavior & Reproduction

Greater Rheas breed between August and January depending on the climate. Females move around during breeding season, mating with a male and depositing their eggs with the male before leaving him and mating with another male. Males attend the nests and take care of incubation and the hatchlings all on their own. It has recently been found that dominant males may get another male to roost for him while he starts a second nest with a second harem. The nests are used by several females and can contain as many as 80 eggs laid by a dozen females; each individual female's clutch has 5-10 eggs. The average clutch size is 26 eggs from 7 different females.

Rhea eggs measure about 13 x 9 cm and weigh 600 g (21 oz) on average. Their shell is greenish-yellow when fresh but soon fades to dull cream when exposed to light. The nest is a simple shallow and wide scrape in a hidden location, the males drag sticks, grass, and leaves in the area surrounding the nest wide as their neck can reach. The incubation period for the eggs is 29–43 days. All the eggs hatch within 36 hours of each other even though the eggs in one nest were laid as much as two weeks apart. As it seems, when the first young are ready to hatch they start a call resembling a pop-bottle rocket, even while still inside the egg making the hatching time coordinated. Greater Rheas are half-grown about three months after hatching, and sexually mature by their 14th month.

Ecology & Habitat

This species inhabits grassland, as well as savanna, scrub forest, chaparral, and even deserts, though it prefers areas with at least some tall vegetation.

The Rheas favorite foods consist of broad-leaved plants, particularly seeds and fruit when in season. The leaves of particular grass species can be eaten in large amounts as well. Even tough and spiny vegetable matter such as tubers or thistles are eaten. Greater Rheas will also eat small invertebrates including locusts and grasshoppers, cockroaches and other pest insects. Small vertebrates like rodents, snakes, lizards and small birds are also eaten.

At the zoo the Greater Rheas are fed emu pellets, oyster shells, large grit and romaine lettuce.

Did You Know?

1. Rheas are attracted to sparkling objects and sometimes accidentally swallow metallic or glossy items.
2. This species has an elevated resistance to poison, it readily eats scorpions.
3. The greater rhea is the largest of all South American birds and is related to ostriches and emus.



<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/birds/greater-rhea/>



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