

Unusual birds, rarely seen on bird stamps – The Screamers

The original intention of this series of articles was to highlight more unusual species of birds which typically are rarely found on bird stamps. For this entry, I have chosen the Screamers and unless you have visited South America even as a bird-watcher, you may not be familiar with the *Anhimidae* to signify their Latin family name. Simplistically they are considered to be a primitive relative of the *Anseriformes* or Ducks, Geese and Swans of the world. They are only found in the Neotropics, specifically South America, and are represented by just three species split in two genera. My research suggests there are only eight stamps illustrating the family; two of these are from countries (Bhutan and Grenadines of Grenada) where the family does not exist in the wild.

Screamers are large stocky birds weighing up to 5 kg and superficially may look more like game birds than waterfowl given their relatively small chicken-like head and bill.



Horned Screamer (*Anhima cornuta*) -

Inhabits much of the Northern half of South America



Screamers are usually found in wetland habitat and their fairly long and sturdy legs feature feet with long toes similar to Jacanas and are thus suitable for traversing marshy vegetation. Plumage is generally grey, brown or black with some white feathering on the head or wings; in the field the sexes appear similar though males tend to be a little larger than the females.



Northern or Black-necked Screamer (*Chauna chavaria*)-

Found only in Northern Colombia and North-western Venezuela

I guess most people ask the obvious question as to their English vernacular name which relates to their calls that are extraordinarily loud and unmelodious. The phenomenal volume can be audible up to three kilometres away and is often exaggerated by other birds joining the cacophony of sound whether generated in the air, at roosting sites or as part of the breeding behaviour.



Southern or Crested Screamer (*Chauna torquata*) –

Inhabits Bolivia, southern Brazil and northern Argentina and is probably the most abundant of the three species but more in contact (conflict?) with humans.

Another feature of Screamers is the prominent sharp, long and curved spurs carried on the front edge of the wings. This is reminiscent of another close relative, the Spur-winged Goose found in Africa. The spurs are presumed to be for defensive purposes in defending territory or competing for a mate and sometimes broken off spurs have been found embedded in the breast of another individual. These, like the “horn” of the Horned Screamer can be regenerated.



Two more examples of the Southern or Crested Screamer

Screamers have been recorded breeding in all months of the year but tend to favour the southern springtime with eggs laid in September and October. The nest is a mound of vegetation usually collected from the area around the nest site and is typically close to water; this offers a refuge for the chicks which are able to leave the nest as soon as they have hatched but are unable to run or fly at this stage. The adults often form a pair-bond for several years or even for life and maintain a breeding territory of their own. Screamers are strong flyers despite their bulky appearance and outside the breeding season can form large flocks of hundreds or even thousands of birds. They will roost standing in pools of water but are equally comfortable in the upper branches of trees.

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