

# Greater Rhea

*Rhea americana*



**Class:** *Aves*

**Order:** *Struthioniformes*

**Family:** *Rheidae*

**Characteristics:** The greater rhea is one of the largest birds on the planet. They can measure up to 5.5 feet tall and weigh up to 55 pounds. It has long, muscular legs and an oblong football shaped body. They have a very long, flexible neck and a small head. The feathers of the rhea are gray with black around the head, neck, and shoulders. The under-feathers are white. Males tend to be larger and darker than females. The rhea does not fly, but still possesses large wings for other purposes ([Cornell](#)).

**Behavior:** During the spring and summer months, male rheas are solitary, females form small groups, and yearlings form flocks until they are about 2. For winter, males, females, and chicks all come together in a large flock of 20-100 individuals. ([Animal Diversity](#)) Rheas are often seen grazing near deer, guanacos, and livestock. They are very [fast runners](#), reaching speeds up to 40 mph, and great swimmers as well ([Arkive](#)).

**Reproduction:** Rheas are unusual in their reproductive behaviors. At the start of mating season, males become very [territorial](#) and begin to herd females into his territory using a [courtship display](#) of outstretched wings and a lowered neck. The male will also use a booming vocalization ([ASAG](#)). The males build a shallow nest on the ground. Females and males will have many partners throughout the breeding season. The female will mate with one male and lay her 5-10 eggs in the nest, then move on to a different male to lay more eggs in his nest. The eggs are a greenish-yellow color and are very large. The male rheas [incubate the eggs](#), as many as 80 from different females, for 29-43 days. The males also are the only caregiver of the hatchlings for 6-8 months. The [hatchlings](#) are light brown with dark stripes ([Beauty of Birds](#)).

**Diet:** Wild: Broad-leaved plants, clover, seeds, roots and fruits. They also eat insects, and small vertebrates. ([Animal Diversity](#))  
Zoo: Ratite pellet, greens, oyster shell, and dog chow.

**Conservation:** The [IUCN Redlist](#) has classified the rhea as near threatened. This classification is mostly due to the decline of the species from egg collection, and hunting for meat and skin. The rhea are also rapidly losing their habitat to agriculture and ranching developments in the grasslands. Idaho Falls Zoo participates in the rhea SSP for the protection of the species.

**FYI:** The greater rhea is the largest bird in the Americas ([ASAG](#)). There is a small population of greater rhea in Germany from three pairs that escaped from a farm in 2000. The small group now numbers over 100 individuals and is protected by the German government ([Beauty of Birds](#)).



## Range & Habitat:

Found in tall grassland, open woodland and wooded pampas of Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina.



**Lifespan:** 30-40 years in captivity, 15 years in the wild.

**Special Adaptations:** Rheas are flightless birds, but use their wings as [rudders](#) when running ([ASAG](#)).

## IUCN Conservation Status:

Near Threatened

