

SPRING IN NORTHERN ARGENTINA

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This is the birding report of a group of birders from the USA who travelled to Northern Argentina in October–November 2002, visiting six Argentine provinces. We started our trip at Costanera Sur, a reserve right between the city of Buenos Aires and the rio de la Plata. The marshes, grasslands and light woodlands of the reserve were very productive, and here we got acquainted with a number of species typical from the pampas region. Three species of coots, Coscoroba and Black-necked swans and other species of wildfowl. Two rarely seen species, Masked Duck and Spotted Rail gave outstanding views! Black-headed Ducks were less cooperative. Many birds were nesting here, with Yellow-browed Tyrants nest-building, Black-masked Gnatcatchers sitting on a nest, a Green-barred Woodpecker going in its hole, etc. Eventually we got good views of specialties such as Many-coloured Rush-tyrant and Sulphur-bearded Spinetail. Other common pampas birds that we had the chance to study were the Black-and-rufous Warbling-finch, the bold Spectacled Tyrant and Great Pampas Finch.

After a great lunch we headed to Otamendi Reserve, recognised as a ‘Key Area’ for the conservation of birds in the Neotropics. Here we found a nest of Straight-billed Reedhaunter (a near-threatened species), and most of us saw this skulker well. Curvebilled Reedhaunter and Sooty Tyrannulet were much more cooperative and we got great looks. Several species of blackbirds inhabited the dense marshes, including the spectacular Scarlet-headed Blackbird. Another great view of Spotted Rail in the same day was truly unheard of for both Hernan and Juan.

Around the gallery woodlands we met upon a number of interesting birds, including great views of Diademed Tanager, Epaulet Oriole, Rufous-capped Antshrike, Checkered Woodpecker, Gilded Sapphire and White-throated Hummingbird. The next morning we were not allowed in, but we still got good views of the Spix’s Spinetail in the scrubby woods. Ceibas proved to be ‘ovenbird city’. We saw Stripe-crowned and Tufted Tit-spinetail, Little Thornbird, Short-billed Canastero and Brown Cacholote. The odd and

raucous Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper was seen well by all. Other nice birds in the light woodlands were Southern Scrub and Suiriri flycatchers, Streaked Flycatcher, Brown-chested Martin, the odd White-naped Xenopsaris and the beautiful Ringed Teal, as well as Speckled teals perched in high eucalypt branches. Yellowish Pipit displayed in the open fields. That afternoon we drove to Gualeguaychu, where we went right down to the spot for Saffron-cowled Blackbirds. We were quite lucky here as we saw a pair very well, and just as they flew off, a pair of Black-and-white Monjitas appeared in the scene. These two globally-threatened species certainly made the day. At night we got a good look at a flying Scissor-tailed Nightjar (Gordon's favourite until Lyre-tailed blew our heads off), and a Tropical Screech-owl.

The next day we visited the gallery woodlands that held a number of special birds. Two species of warblers, Glaucous Blue Grosbeak, Rufous-rumped Warbling-finch, the colourful Blue-and-yellow Tanager, Solitary Caciques and Tawny-crowned Pygmy-tyrant and Blue-billed Blacktyrant. In the afternoon we drove around the fields, to bump into a wonderful flock of c. 30 Saffron beasts, and while we were at it we got super views of another near-threatened grassland species, the beautiful and tiny Bearded Tachuri, displaying and all. We also found a pair of the striking Grey Monjita. It was a great afternoon, so we didn't mind having to push the truck a bit in that muddy road.

The next couple of days were a bit grim, due to a cold front full of freezing drizzle that we had to go through. However, we got something out of our visit to San Francisco, in Cordoba, as we saw a number of grassland species, such as the Grassland Yellow-finch (by the zillions), Blue-black Grassquit, Spot-breasted Thrushes. The highlight was Dinelli's Doradito, yet another near-threatened species. We saw the Tachuri again (trash bird!). Our first bit of mountains, of what was a mainly high altitude trip, were the Sierras Grandes, in Cordoba. The degraded sierran chaco scrub at the foothills was productive, and we saw here White-bellied Tyrannulet, Stripe-capped Sparrow, Chaco Earthcreeper (a true skulker; yes it was!), Tawny-headed Swallow. The highlight that afternoon was the neat Many-coloured Chaco-finch.

But the key area here was high up in the Pampa de Achala. Here, it took us just a while to find all the specialties, in the rocky landscape. The endemic Cordoba Cinclodes, plus local races of Rufous-banded Miner, Oustalet's (Olrog's) and White-winged Cinclodes, Puna Canastero, Long-tailed Meadowlark. Other interesting birds here included Sedge Wrens, and great views of a spectacular male Red-tailed Comet. Even if not an endemic, the bird of the day was certainly Olive-crowned Crescentchest. What great views we had!

That afternoon we visited the lush Sierran Chaco woodlands. A number of new local birds were seen here, including Lark-like Brushrunner, Ferruginous Pygmy-owl and mobbing Blue-tufted Starthroats, White Monjitas, Pearly-vented Tody-tyrant and others. The highlight was the rare Black-bodied Woodpecker, which surprised us all by popping up without even doing playback, within minutes of entering the trail. The contender for bird of the day today was Spot-winged Falconet, which we saw being harassed by an American Kestrel. Great afternoon, and great meal that evening with a bit of a dance show included. A bit of culture!

A main target area in Cordoba was the Salinas Grandes, some 200 km away. The dry chaco woodlands here were very productive, and we saw many great birds, including the nice Black-crested Finch, Harris' Hawk, Chaco Puffbird, White-banded Mockingbird, Red-pileated Finch seen by Amy and Jim when they stayed in after lunch (miraculously they didn't melt!) and others. Worth mentioning was the Brushland Tinamou that was lured to playback. The highlight was certainly the Salinas Monjita! This near-threatened species is considered so mainly on the basis of its tiny range. Not only we saw this well, but Julie also found a nest (great pix Cathy!), which had just been described a few months before. Dang... That evening we stopped by for the spectacular Chaco Owl (needless to say that we saw it), and a bonus was the Little Nightjar that flew past.

We left the dry wastelands and headed up for our first bit of cloudforest habitats (*Yungas*). Along the way, in Tucuman province, we stopped by at some scrubby fields where we saw some good birds including Black-and-chestnut Warbling-finch, Greyish

Saltator and Common Thornbirds. More Dinelli's Doraditos were found as well. The birdy yungas along the rio Los Sosa were great that afternoon. Eventually we found our target species there, Torrent Duck, and the globally-threatened Rufous-throated Dipper. We also found the truly beautiful Yellow-striped Brush-finch, one of the eight (out of 12) continental Argentina endemics that we saw. This was also a good introduction to the yungas avifauna, and here we studied Buff-browed Foliagegleaners (to add to Amy's breeding birds list), White-throated Tyrannulets, Rusty-browed Warbling-finch, White-bellied Hummingbird, Highland Elaenia, Azara's Spinetails and several others. We had fantastic scope views of Mitred Parakeets. Near Tafi del Valle we stopped at a reservoir, to look for the high Andes race of Speckled Teal, Andean Coot, Andean Lapwing and a few other floating birds. Gordon thought we went mad claiming Andean Moose!!

Tafi del Valle is at the treeline, and as we climbed up the mountains we entered the high Andean grasslands. The avifauna changed completely here, and we found a number of typical species at the 3000 m pass, El Infiernillo, including Slender-billed miners, Cordilleran and more Puna canasteros, Buff-breasted Earthcreepers, Band-tailed, Plumbeous and Ash-breasted Sierra-finches, Black and Thick-billed Siskins, White-browed Chat-tyrant, a Black-chested Buzard-eagle that circled overhead, the curious Andean Flickers and quite a few others. The special birds here were, however, Moreno's Ground-dove, the lethargic and 'stylish' Tucuman Mountain-finch, and the fantastic views of White-browed Tapaculo!

While one side of the Aconquija mountains was wet and lush, the other one is dry and scrubby. But this surely didn't mean less interesting. Climbing down back to around 2000 m we entered the 'Monte' desert, which in this part of the country is found as pockets of scrub in the mountain valleys. The creosote bush here is the same as in the deserts of SW USA. The key species here included the endemics Sandy Gallito, which we all eventually saw, and White-throated Cacholote which required a lot of unusual patience. However, the consensus was that the highlight today was the Lama lunch!!, The stylish hotel was one of the most pleasant stops of the trip.

As we drove north, we entered an area of amazing scenic beauty, and a few stops along the way delivered interesting species such as Grey-hooded Parakeet, Yellow-billed Tit-tyrant, the endemic Steinbach's Canastero, and great views of an Elegant Crested Tinamou (thanks Maxine!!). A huge flock of noisy Burrowing Parrots was a treat.

Without noticing much we ended up climbing to almost 4000 m. A couple of stops in the way served to get more views of the Gallito and Cacholote, as well as the aptly named Giant Hummingbird, Sparkling Violetear and White-tailed Shrike-tyrant. Out in the open grasslands we found a troupe of Guanacos, and a flock of the beautiful and boldly patterned Chestnut-throated Dotterels. A Cinnamon-bellied Ground-tyrant was an unexpected encounter.

Here we started climbing down following a scrubby valley. This, the Cuesta del Obispo (Cathy, check your spelling!) holds some of the most interesting species in Argentina. Up at the top we found White-browed Chat-tyrant, Cinereous Ground-tyrant, the great Rock Earthcreeper and other usual suspects. Along the way we had great views of some interesting species such as Rusty Flower-piercer, D'orbigny's Canastero, Brown-capped Tit-spinetail. The day was cold and cloudy, but we still managed to find the rare and near-threatened Maquis Canastero, and a pair of the spectacular Rufous-bellied Saltator. Further down, as the scrub gave way to the wetter woodlands, we stopped for a pair of Spot-breasted Thornbirds, and a few Dusky-legged Guans at the river-bed. Juan and Hernan also got good recordings of White-bellied Tyrannulet. Thanks for being quiet!

Our hotel at Salta was a great birding spot, and we were within walking distance of some nice woodlands. Here we were treated by a few male Slender-tailed Woodstars, some of them displaying, a spectacular Cream-backed Woodpecker, Golden-winged Cacique, Red-eyed Vireos, White-winged Becards, the tiny White-barred Piculets and quite a few others. The highlight was certainly the Red-legged Seriema. Great views! From here we took it easy and drove to our next spot, Calilegua N.P., through the nice forest of the Santa Laura pass. Here we had the chance to study well some of the

commoner yungas species such as Sclater's Tyrannulet, Mountain Wren, the common but nice Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Squirrel Cuckoo, the neat Fulvous-headed Brush-finch, Cinnamon Flycatcher and more. Calilegua is a prime birding spot in Argentina, and the first afternoon we devoted to work the lower tracts of dry transitional woodland. The skulking Ochre-cheeked Spinetail was eventually seen by all of us, and so we got good views of Black-capped Antwren, Ochre-faced Tody-tyrant, Grey Elaenia, Purple-throated Euphonia, Streaked Xenops, etc. The highlights came in after dusk, oh yes. Rufous Nightjar was seen briefly, but eventually we lured a spectacular Spectacled Owl in. It was very cooperative and we got fantastic views. Not to worry about the glimpse of nightjar, the next day Jim and Amy found a bird at the nest for us, and we saw the displaying adult in broad day light.

The next couple of days were spent working the higher tracts of yungas forests. And we saw a lot of birds. Slaty Elaenia and Andean Slaty-thrush were everywhere. A couple of Hook-billed Kites were seen soaring high up, Dot-fronted and Golden-olive Woodpeckers, Fawn-breasted Tanager, Swallow-tailed Kite, Rothschild's Swift and many others were found at the lower elevations. Half-way up we came upon some spectacular birds, including White-throated Antpitta, Giant Antshrike, Crested Oropendola and King Vulture. The montane woodlands had its own special things, with Alder Amazons that flew past in huge flocks, a Blue-capped Puffleg, Buff-banded Tyrannulet, Hoy's Screech Owl, Andean Tyrant, Yungas Pygmy-owl and many others. The impressive Black-banded Owl added to a bulky list of nine owls seen. Only the enigmatic Buff-fronted Owl slipped through, although we heard it a couple of times.

We left Calilegua to go up into the barren altiplano again. On the way, we found typical prepuna species around Humahuaca. These included the Brown-backed Mockingbird, the beautiful Black-hooded Sierra-finch, Andean Swift and Spot-billed Ground-tyrant. Further up along the mountains we met with Puna Yellow-finches, Grey-hooded Sierra-finches, Bright-rumped Yellow-finch, Puna Miner, Andean Negrito, a few Andean Geese and Puna Ibis. We had to leave Pozuelos for the way back, due to road

conditions. We then continued back up to La Quiaca. Although we didn't see all that many birds, the ones here are quite special. Bare-eyed Ground-dove, Citron-headed Yellow-finch and Wedge-tailed Hillstar all occur very locally in Argentina, and the latter two were only recently found here. Taking a road east into the barren Puna was productive. Not only we found Vicuñas, giving great views, but two species of Seedsnipe, and, although we had seen them twice before, we had amazing views of Andean Condors perched at a carcass and then taking off. Magnificent creatures. Today we also found Golden-spotted Ground-dove and Plain-breasted Earthcreeper, which perhaps only represents part of a cline including Buff-breasted. When we headed west, late in the afternoon, we eventually flushed Puna Tinamous from a bare slope.

On the way back from the northernmost tip of the country we were then able to go into Pozuelos. The small lake with the specialities we had to reach by foot, but it was nonetheless worth the effort, as we found Giant and Horned coots (Tony got his treat here!), and an impressive number of wildfowl. Puna Rhea was a great find today. Our trip south stopped in Yala, not only a pleasant spot (and a great breakfast!) but a very interesting place for the birds. The Alder woodlands here held a number of yungas birds, most notably the Smoky-brown Woodpecker, Crested Becard and Rustand-yellow Tanager. We also had even better views of Rufous-throated Dipper (a beauty). However, the true highlights here were Red-faced Guan, and Lyre-tailed Nightjar (truly amazing, and the bird of the trip!).

From here we went down again to the hot and sweaty Chaco woodlands. A few of good birds were seen on the way, including Large Elaenia, Bicolored Hawk and Plain Tyrannulet. Even though fairly degraded the dry woodlands were quite productive. Here we found the nice Turquoise-fronted Amazon, Ultramarine Grosbeak, Cinereous Tyrant, the spectacular Red-billed Scythebill, and quite a few others. Tataupa Tinamous managed to walk back and forth but right out of view. However, the weird Black-legged Seriema and the boldly patterned and noisy Stripe-backed Antbird were very cooperative and became the birds of the day. After enjoying a great pic-nic lunch we birded around



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the town of J.V. Gonzalez, to add a couple more species to the list. This was the end to a great and enjoyable trip, where we saw 452 species, we drove through some of the most spectacular scenery of the country. We also had the chance to enjoy great food and some prime accommodation.