

Birding the Paraguayan Dry Chaco —The Big Six

Paul Smith and Rob P. Clay





Facing page: Quebracho Crested Tinamou *Eudromia formosa*, Teniente Enciso National Park, dept. Boquerón, Paraguay, March 2015 (Paul Smith / www.faunaparaguay.com)

Above: Spot-winged Falconet *Spizaipteryx circumcincta*, Capilla del Monte, Cordoba, Argentina, April 2009 (James Lowen / www.jameslowen.com)

At the end of the Chaco War in 1935, fought under some of the harshest environmental conditions of any 20th century conflict, a famous unknown Bolivian soldier chose not to lament his nation's defeat, but instead congratulated the Paraguayans on their victory, adding that he hoped they enjoyed the spoils: the spiders, snakes, spines, dust, merciless sun... If that soldier had been a birder, he might have seen it somewhat differently, and lamented the

loss of some of the wildest and most extreme, yet satisfying birding in southern South America.

The Dry Chaco ecoregion is a harsh environment of low thorny scrub and forest lying in an alluvial plain at the foot of the Andes. It is hot and arid, with a highly-adapted local flora of xerophytic shrubs, bushes and cacti. Few people make it out to this vast wilderness, but those that do are guaranteed a special experience. In fact the Chaco did not really open itself up to mainstream

zoological exploration until the 1970s when Ralph Wetzel led expeditions to study the mammal life and Lester Short began his studies of the region's birds (Short 1975, 1976). Wetzel's most famous discovery was the Chacoan Peccary *Catagonus wagneri*, a pig-like creature at that time known only from subfossil remains and thought to be extinct, but unbelievably found to be surviving happily in the unexplored wilderness of the Dry Chaco in 1972 (Wetzel *et al.* 1975); it is still considered Endangered.

Eighteen species of birds are considered endemic to this environment, including Brushland Tinamou *Nothoprocta cinerascens*, Cream-backed Woodpecker *Campephilus leucopogon*, Chaco Earthcreeper *Tarphonomus certhioides*, Crested Hornero *Furnarius cristatus*, Many-coloured Chaco Finch *Saltatricula multicolor* and Cinereous Tyrant *Knipolegus straticeps*. However the outstanding birds in this region are the so-called 'Chaco Big Six', and these are the targets that top every intrepid Chaco birder's must-see list.

Quebracho Crested Tinamou ***Eudromia formosa***

Poorly-studied, undoubtedly because of its distribution in the driest and most remote areas of the Chaco, this is a semi-gregarious tinamou with a filamentous crest and striped head (Smith *et al.* 2013, Smith 2014). The name comes from its association with Quebracho woodlands, the Red Quebracho (literally "axe-breaker") *Schinopsis lorentzii* and White Quebracho *Aspidosperma quebracho-blanco* being hardwoods which are typically the only large trees to rise above the low canopy of the Chaco thorn forest. This can be a tough bird to catch up with, but the secret is in understanding the behaviour of the species—if you are in the right areas it has a tendency to emerge from cover and pick around on dusty roads at dawn and dusk, at which times they can be remarkably good photographic subjects. Birds in Paraguay are sometimes ascribed to the subspecies *mira*, which was formerly considered a separate species, but is only weakly differentiated, at most, from the nominate subspecies found in the Argentine Chaco.

Black-legged Seriema ***Chunga burmeisteri***

Penetrating further north-west into the most remote and arid parts of the Dry Chaco, this striking but poorly-known species begins to appear. Typically seen in pairs, often on roadsides, the spindly legs, long neck and short bill are

adaptations to a diet that frequently includes snakes (Brooks 2014). The two living species of seriema are in fact the closest living relatives of the now extinct 'terror birds' or Phorusrhacids, the fearsome avian apex predators that roamed the Americas during the Cenozoic period (Marshall 2004). Though the Red-legged Seriema *Cariama cristata* is a commonly encountered bird over much of central South America (including the Paraguayan Chaco), if you want to see the restricted-range Black-legged you will have to head out to the Chaco.

Black-bodied Woodpecker ***Dryocopus schulzi***

Perhaps the most challenging of the Chaco Big Six to find, this Near Threatened woodpecker is extremely locally distributed in semi-open Dry Chaco woodland with scattered dead trees—the availability of the latter and the abundance of Cream-backed Woodpecker *Campephilus leucopogon* perhaps acting as a limiting factor. Obviously closely related to Lineated Woodpecker *Dryocopus lineatus*, with which it was once considered conspecific (Madroño Nieto & Pearman 1992), this is an impressive species which is increasingly threatened by the expansion of the agricultural and ranching frontier in the Chaco region. It is becoming harder and harder to find, but there are still a few remote corners of the Paraguayan Chaco where there is a good chance to see the species. Occasionally birds are seen with white scapular stripes—these are believed to be a morph (referred to as *shiptoni*) and not hybrids with *D. lineatus*.

Chaco Owl *Strix chacoensis*

Few South American owls can rival this one for sheer beauty. A ghostly whitish wood owl, with bright yellow legs, it is at its best when it takes flight and gives a brief flash of the dramatic rufous underwing. Inexplicably, this distinctive species was long considered a subspecies of the Rufous-legged Owl *Strix rufipes* of Patagonia, but it is only superficially similar, inhabits a totally different habitat (arid Chaco woodland, as opposed to the temperate rainforest utilised by *S. rufipes*) and is vocally quite distinct (Cherrie & Reichenberger 1921). In fact the croaky purrs of this species are much more similar to the Rusty-barred Owl *S. hylophila* (an Atlantic Forest endemic that occurs in eastern Paraguay) which is probably its closest relative (Mikkola 2012). Approachable and often tame, Chaco Owls tend to hunt from tall quebracho or Samu'u *Ceiba chodatii* trees

overlooking dirt roads, where they can drop down onto prey. The owl is widespread in the Paraguayan Chaco, even in areas close to human habitation. Combining owl-watching with a night drive spotlighting for mammals is one of the highlights of any Chaco trip.

Spot-winged Falconet *Spiziapteryx circumcincta*

Recalling a scruffy, unkempt kestrel, this aberrant falcon is something of an anomaly. It is noisy (at least at dawn and dusk when it seems to be most active), has a habit of nesting within Monk Parakeet *Myiopsitta monachus* colonies and unlike most falcons has relatively short, rounded wings and an ungraceful, flappy flight pattern (De Lucca 1984, Martella & Bucher 1984). Another poorly known species, it seems to have benefited from the installation of telegraph poles at the far northern end of the Trans Chaco road, both providing the falconet with a prominent perch from which to hunt, and a convenient structure on which Monk Parakeets can hang their gigantic stick condominiums, thereby opening up more options for nesting. Look for it in the vicinity of Médanos del Chaco National Park close to the border with Bolivia.

Crested Gallito *Rhinocrypta lanceolata*

A weirdly atypical, large tapaculo with a pointed crest and cocked tail, it is surprisingly common in scrub and underbrush of thorn forest throughout the Dry Chaco region. The problem is not so much locating a bird as actually getting to see one. The monotone slow clucking series of *ptok* notes is a familiar sound that betrays its presence, but it often spots the would-be observer before the observer spots the bird, which announces its departure with a screechy *weeek weeek weeek* alarm call before rapidly speeding off through the undergrowth like a miniature roadrunner. This is a bird for which patience, persistence and finding a relatively open patch of habitat go a long way towards getting a good look.

And patiently awaiting acceptance

Waiting in the wings is what we believe to be Paraguay's only endemic bird species: The Chaco Nothura *Nothura chacoensis* is found only in grassland areas in the central Paraguayan Chaco. Very poorly known, and rather local in distribution, the definitive word has yet to be spoken as to whether this is a Dry Chaco

subspecies of the widespread Spotted Nothura *N. maculosa*, or a valid addition to the Chaco Big Six.

Also awaiting clarification of its taxonomic status is the Chaco subspecies of the Olive-crowned Crescentchest *Melanopareia maximiliani pallida*, a secretive denizen of bushy fields where its presence is revealed only by a persistent piping call from dense cover. There seems little doubt that this fantastically-coloured, semi-terrestrial gem is a good split from the more widespread nominate form and one day in the near future taxonomists may give the Chaco Big Six the go ahead to inaugurate a new member.

Ever year, an increasing number of intrepid birders stand to gain from these armchair ticks, having been lucky enough to see these birds in one of the most charismatic and challenging environments on the continent. Maybe it's time you joined them?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many of these images were taken during FAUNA Paraguay (www.faunaparaguay.com) tours to the Paraguayan Chaco, thanks to the participants on those trips for making them possible. Additional photographs were provided by James Lowen (www.jameslowen.com), Matt Denton and Nick Athanas (www.tropicalbirding.com). The 2015 Neotropical Bird Club fundraising tour in association with Birdquest / FAUNA Paraguay will visit the Paraguayan Chaco. We thank all of the participants signed up to that trip for their support of worthy conservation and scientific projects throughout the Neotropical region.

PAUL SMITH

FAUNA Paraguay, Carmen De Lara Castro 422, Barrio San Roque, Encarnación, Paraguay.
E-mail: faunaparaguay@gmail.com

ROB P. CLAY

WHSRN Executive Office, Rodríguez de Francia 869, Asunción, Paraguay.
E-mail: robpclay31@yahoo.co.uk

REFERENCES

- Brooks, D. (2014) Ecological notes on seriema species in the Paraguayan Chaco, with observations on *Chunga* biology. *Rev. Bras. Orn.* 22: 234–237.
- Cherrie, G. K. & Reichenberger, E. M. B. (1921) Descriptions of proposed new birds from Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. *Amer. Mus. Novit.* 27: 1–6.
- De Lucca, E. R. (1984) Nidificación del halconcito colorado (*Falco sparverius*) en nidos de cotorra (*Myiopsitta monachus*). *El Hornero* 13: 238–240.
- Madroño Nieto, A. & Pearman, M. (1992) Distribution, status and taxonomy of the near-threatened Black-bodied Woodpecker *Dryocopus schulzi*. *Bird Cons. Int.* 2: 253–271.



Top: Black-legged Seriema *Chunga burmeisteri*, La Patria, dept. Boquerón, Paraguay, February 2015 (Paul Smith / www.faunaparaguay.com)

Left: Black-bodied Woodpecker *Dryocopus schulzi*, Fortín Toledo, dept. Boquerón, Paraguay, October 2010 (Matt Denton)

Chaco Owl *Strix chacoensis*, Teniente Enciso National Park, dept. Boquerón, Paraguay, October 2012 (Paul Smith / www.faunaparaguay.com)





Top left: Crested Gallito *Rhinocrypta lanceolata*, Capilla del Monte, Córdoba, Argentina, April 2009 (James Lowen / www.jameslowen.com)

Top right: Olive-crowned Crescentchest *Melanopareia maximiliani pallida*, Joaquín V. González, Salta, Argentina, November 2009 (Nick Athanas / www.tropicalbirding.com)

Bottom: Chaco Nothura *Nothura chacoensis*, Loma Plata, dept. Boquerón, Paraguay, September 2013 (Paul Smith / <http://www.faunaparaguay.com>)





Spot-winged Falconet *Spizaipteryx circumcincta*, Capilla del Monte, Cordoba, Argentina, April 2009 (James Lowen / www.jameslowen.com)

- Marshall, L. G. (2004) The terror birds of South America. *Sci. Amer. Spec. Ed.* 14: 82–89.
- Martella, M. B. & Bucher, E. H. (1984) Nesting of the spot-winged falconet in monk parakeet nests. *Auk* 101: 614–615.
- Mikkola, H. (2012) Owls of the world. A photographic guide. London: Christopher Helm.
- Short, L. L. (1975) A zoogeographical analysis of the South American Chaco avifauna. *Bull. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.* 154: 163–352.
- Short, L. L. (1976) Notes on a collection of birds from the Paraguayan Chaco. *Amer. Mus. Novit.* 2597: 1–16.
- Smith, P. (2014) Natural history observations on the poorly-studied Quebracho Crested-Tinamou *Eudromia formosa* (Aves, Tinamiformes, Tinamidae). *Hist. Nat. 3a Ser.* 4: 39–44.
- Smith, P., Pearman, M. & Betuel, A. (2013) An unusual record of Quebracho Crested Tinamou *Eudromia formosa* from the dry Chaco of Paraguay, with comments on distribution and behaviour of the species in Paraguay, Argentina and Bolivia. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club* 133: 19–23.
- Wetzel, R. M., Dubos, R. E., Martin, R. L. & Myers, P. (1975) *Catagonus*, an “extinct” peccary alive in Paraguay. *Science* 189: 379–381.