

Birding Paraguay, the ‘forgotten heart’ of South America

Paul Smith and Rob Clay



Paraguay is currently off the standard birding circuit but, as two local birders explain, this should not be the case. The country’s location at the intersection of five threatened biomes means that it holds a mouthwatering assemblage of birds as reward for the intrepid birder.

Paraguay tends to be overlooked by travelling birders. Half-remembered tales of dictatorship (which ended nearly 20 years ago), the absence of a field guide in English, and a wariness of the unknown have led to Paraguayan writers dubbing their country ‘South America’s forgotten heart’. For the adventurous birder, however, such uncertainties make Paraguay an exciting destination, a country where regular birders are a rare species and every field trip holds the promise of discovery. Moreover, Paraguay is now one of the cheapest, safest and most culturally traditional countries on the continent.

Although Paraguay’s bird list (just over 700 species) is dwarfed by that of equatorial countries, it is considerably longer than those of comparably sized lowland areas in neighbouring countries. Moreover, Paraguay is compact, so birders can easily see a broad variety of regional endemics in a trip as short as a week or ten days.

Lying at the intersection of five of South America’s most threatened biomes—Humid Chaco, Dry Chaco, Atlantic Forest, Cerrado and Mesopotamian grasslands—Paraguay offers

birders a diverse list and several sought-after species. The major attractions are the *chaco* (in the west) and the Atlantic Forest (east), but the *cerrado* (north-east) and Mesopotamian grasslands (south) hold some of the country’s most exciting avian attractions. Here we recommend some of Paraguay’s top birding sites.

Ruta Transchaco

The Ruta Transchaco, which leads to the Bolivian border, is now almost entirely paved. The first 350 km run through the Humid Chaco: lush, seasonally flooded palm savanna that harbours scores of raptors, herons, ibises, spoonbills and storks. Roadside reedbeds (as at km 79) can produce wintering Dinelli’s Doradito *Pseudocolopteryx dinelliana* (Near Threatened) and Stripe-backed Bittern *Ixobrychus involucris*. A

Two juvenile White-winged Nightjars *Caprimulgus candicans*, one of the world’s rarest caprimulgids, perched on a termite mound (Paul Smith; www.faanaparaguay.com)

quieter option is the almost entirely unpaved Ruta 12, running parallel to the río Pilcomayo. The area can easily be visited on a day trip from Asunción; alternatively, Pirahú at km 250 is one of several accommodation options along the first part of the Ruta Transchaco.

Cuenca Alta del Riacho Yacaré Sur

Known locally as the 'central Chaco lagoons', the upper watershed of the Yacaré Sur holds a series of saline lagoons located just east of the Mennonite towns of Loma Plata and Filadelfía. Access requires a 4WD and a decent map (available from service stations in Filadelfía and Loma Plata). Water levels are unpredictable, but the lagoons often provide an important staging post for migrating Nearctic waders and hold internationally important concentrations of waterbirds. As many as 5,000 Chilean Flamingos *Phoenicopterus chilensis* (Near Threatened) gather at the Chaco Lodge–Campo María lagoon complex, being best observed from the Campo María private reserve.

The surrounding scrub is a great place for *chaco* specialities such as Chaco Chachalaca *Ortalis canicollis*, Cream-backed Woodpecker *Campephilus leucopogon*, Chaco Earthcreeper *Tarphonomus certhioides*, Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper *Drymornis bridgesii*, Lark-like Brushrunner *Coryphistera alaudina*, Crested Hornero *Furnarius cristatus* and Many-colored Chaco Finch *Saltatricula multicolor*. Black-bodied Woodpecker *Dryocopus schulzi* (Near Threatened) is a big draw, but by no means easy to find: try Fortín Toledo, 9 km west of km 475 on the Ruta Transchaco. Loma Plata or Filadelfía are both good bases, with several comfortable hotels and decent restaurants. An excellent alternative is the Mennonite resort of Laguna Capitán where gardens attract Orange-backed Troupial *Icterus croconotus* and White-bellied Nothura *Nothura boraquira* (book in advance by telephone: +595 99 1650101). Search pastures for the enigmatic Chaco Nothura *Nothura chacoensis*, Paraguay's sole endemic, as you drive between sites.

Teniente Agripino Enciso and Médanos del Chaco

Two Parques Nacionales (PN; National Parks) in the Dry Chaco offer opportunities to see the bird specialities of this dense, stunted thorn-forest, provided you can put up with lots of dust and the frequent strong, hot winds. At km 650 on the Ruta Transchaco, 'Enciso' was created to protect Chaco

Peccary *Catagonus wagneri*, considered a 'fossil' species until its rediscovery in 1976.

Great Rufous Woodcreeper *Xiphocolaptes major*, Ringed Warbling Finch *Poospiza torquata* (of the distinctive southern subspecies *pectoralis*) and Black-backed Grosbeak *Pheucticus aureoventris* are among the eye-catching birds here. In winter, look for the charismatic Black-crested Finch *Lophospingus pusillus* and the undescribed tyrannid commonly called 'Gray-crowned Tyrannulet' (the scientific name frequently used for this species, *Serpophaga griseiceps*, is actually a junior synonym of White-bellied Tyrannulet *S. munda*³). Semi-open areas are the haunt of Black-legged Seriema *Chunga burmeisteri*, and night drives should reveal Chaco Owl *Strix chacoensis* and, with luck, mammals such as Puma *Puma concolor* and Brazilian Tapir *Tapirus terrestris*.

A further 50 km towards the Bolivian border is PN Médanos del Chaco. More open than Enciso but equally dry, this is *the* place to search for Spot-winged Falconet *Spizaipteryx circumcincta* and Crested Gallito *Rhinocrypta lanceolata*. In late afternoon, there is a great chance of seeing Quebracho Crested Tinamou *Eudromia formosa* feeding on the Ruta Transchaco, and be sure to check exposed treetops for Crowned Eagle *Harpypyhaliaetus coronatus* (Endangered).

Accommodation for both sites is at Enciso, where there are excellent visitor facilities including a kitchen, but all food and drinking water must be brought in. Visits to national parks such as these must be arranged in advance with the Secretaria del Ambiente (SEAM, the Ministry of the Environment; tel: +595 21 283403; www.paraguaysilvestre.org.py).

Other sites in the Chaco

Lying directly north of the central Chaco Mennonite colonies, **PN Defensores del Chaco** is the largest of Paraguay's national parks. Getting there requires a 4WD and visitor facilities are limited, a good option being to camp at the base of Cerro León. To get to the park HQ, head north from Filadelfía via Fortín Teniente Montanía. Local bird specialities include Bolivian Slaty Antshrike *Thamnophilus sticturus*, Black-bellied Antwren *Formicivora melanogaster* and White-colored Spinetail *Synallaxis albilora*. Drive the park tracks in search of Jaguar *Panthera onca* (which is regularly seen), Puma and Brazilian Tapir.

PN Río Negro in the Paraguayan Pantanal is a pristine wilderness, accessible by road (15–17 hours from Asunción) only during late April to September. Alternatively, the park can be reached

by boat from Concepción or charter flights from Asunción. The area has a distinct avifauna including Cinereous-breasted Spinetail *Synallaxis hypospodia* and Gray-crested Cacholote *Pseudoseisura unirufa* in addition to spectacular concentrations of waterbirds (best October–January). Mammalian highlights include Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* and Marsh Deer *Blastocerus dichotomus*. Accommodation is available at Tres Gigantes (Three Giants) Biological Station, run by Guyra Paraguay (BirdLife in Paraguay; tel: +595 21 223567; e-mail: guyra@guyra.org.py) and Fortín Patria Lodge (Tel: +595 21 446890; www.fortinpatrialodge.com). It is best to arrange access through these organisations.

Laguna Blanca

North-east Paraguay presents an intriguing mix of humid forest and *cerrado*, the latter a rapidly disappearing savanna formation with a threatened birdlife. A fantastic site is Estancia Laguna Blanca, where a rustic ranch lies on the white-sand beach of a crystal-clear lagoon. Access and accommodation should be arranged with the owners (e-mail: malvinaduarte@hotmail.com; tel: +595 981 558–671; www.lagunablanca.com.py). En route from Asunción on Ruta 3, at km 100, take a 3 km diversion onto the road towards Juan de Mena to look for Strange-tailed Tyrants *Alectrurus risora* (Vulnerable) perched on roadside fences.

There are two great reasons for visiting Laguna Blanca. This is the only known site outside Brazil for Lesser Nothura *Nothura minor* (Vulnerable) and one of only three known breeding sites for White-winged Nightjar *Caprimulgus candicans* (Endangered). Search for both from tracks in the north of the estancia. In late afternoon, listen for the nothura in scrubby grassland on higher terrain. For the spectacular caprimulgid, search open *cerrado* at night.

In addition, no fewer than ten globally threatened or Near Threatened birds have been recorded at Laguna Blanca. Species to search for include Cock-tailed Tyrant *Alectrurus tricolor* (Vulnerable), Sharp-tailed Tyrant *Culicivora caudacuta* (Vulnerable), Bearded Tachuri *Polystictus pectoralis* (Near Threatened), White-banded Tanager *Neothraupis fasciata* (Near Threatened), White-rumped Tanager *Cypsnagra hirundinacea*, Black-throated Saltator *Saltator atricollis*, Plumbeous Seedeater *Sporophila plumbea*, Black-masked Finch *Coryphaspiza melanotis* (Vulnerable) and Curl-crested Jay *Cyanocorax cristatellus*. During October and November, Laguna Blanca is also an important

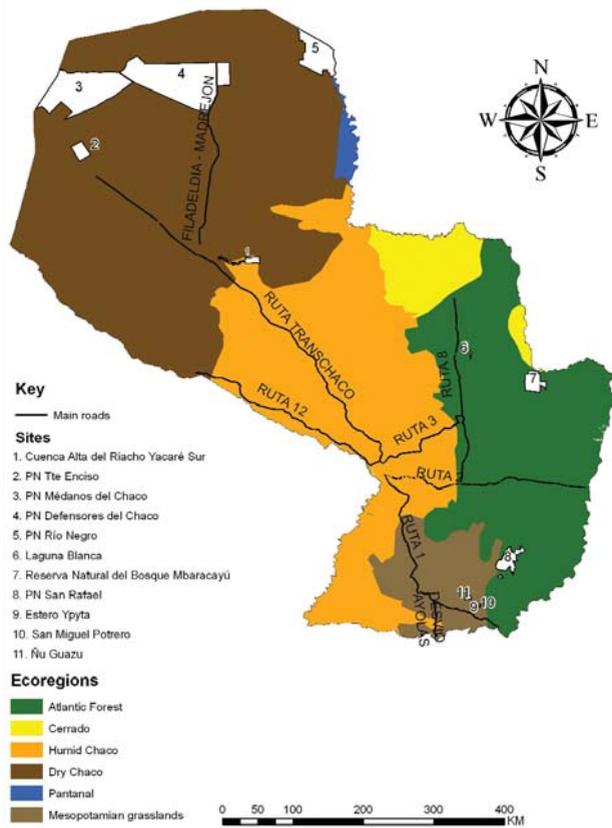
migration stopover for a trio of rare seedeaters: Marsh *Sporophila palustris* (Endangered), Dark-throated *S. ruficollis* (Near Threatened) and Chestnut *S. cinnamomea* (Vulnerable). There are historical records of Rufous-faced Crake *Laterallus xenopterus* (Vulnerable) from this area; it may await rediscovery by birders willing to get their feet wet in marshes around Arroyo Clementina!

Reserva Natural del Bosque Mbaracayú

One of Paraguay's best-known and best-protected reserves, Mbaracayú combines a large block of Atlantic Forest with a unique island of *cerrado*. This is the best place in Paraguay to see Bare-throated Bellbird *Procnias nudicollis* (Vulnerable; most easily found in gallery forest along the río Jejuí'mí) and Black-fronted Piping Guan *Pipile jacutinga* (Endangered; best looked for along the track between Lagunita and Horqueta'mi). Many other Atlantic Forest specialities occur: the 'Bosque Encantado' ('enchanted forest'), between km 1.5 and 2.0 from the Jejuí'mi visitors' centre in the west of the reserve, can be particularly productive. Birds here include Long-tailed Potoo *Nyctibius aethereus*, Helmeted Woodpecker *Dryocopus galeatus* (Vulnerable) and São Paulo Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes paulista* (Near Threatened).

Thirty km east of Jejuí'mi along driveable tracks lies Aguara Ñu. This 5,000-ha tract of *cerrado* is renowned for being the site where White-winged Nightjar and Rufous-faced Crake were rediscovered in Paraguay in 1995. In recent years more new species for Paraguay have been discovered here than anywhere else, among them Russet-crowned Crake *Anurolimnas viridis*, Spotted-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus maculicaudus* and Rufous-winged Antshrike *Thamnophilus torquatus*. The area around the guard post can yield Ocellated Crake *Micropygia schomburgkii*. Nearby valleys hold Giant Snipe *Gallinago undulata* and Rufous-faced Crake. Look for White-winged Nightjar in open areas on the ridge-tops (though you must be accompanied by a guard). During October and November, search areas of tall grass for migrant seedeaters *Sporophila* as at Laguna Blanca.

Mbaracayú is c.40 km north of the town of Curuguaty. Buses from Asunción run daily via here en route to Villa Ygatimi, the town nearest the reserve. Visits should be arranged with the Fundación Moisés Bertoni, the reserve's manager



Map of Paraguay showing sites mentioned in the text

(Tel: +595 21 608740; e-mail: mbertoni@mbertoni.org.py). Special permission is required to visit Aguara Ñu.

Parque Nacional San Rafael

An increasingly popular birding destination is San Rafael, c.150 km north-east of Encarnación. The country's largest block of Atlantic Forest⁵ and the site with the longest bird list, San Rafael warrants as many days as you can manage. Readily seen Atlantic Forest endemics include Helmeted Woodpecker, Russet-winged Spadebill *Platyrrinchus leucorhynchus* (Vulnerable), Blackish-blue Seedeater *Amaurospiza moesta* (Near Threatened), Saffron Toucanet *Pteroglossus bailloni* (Near Threatened), Bay-ringed Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes sylviolus* (Near Threatened) and São Paulo Tyrannulet. The reserve also includes an extensive area of Mesopotamian grassland, notably at Guyra Reta, which is well worth visiting for species such as Sickie-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus anomalus* (Near Threatened), Giant Snipe, Cock-tailed Tyrant, Lesser Grassfinch *Emberizoides ypiranganus* and Saffron-cowled Blackbird *Xanthospiza flavus* (Vulnerable).

Most of the forest birds can be found on the 15 km of trails at ECOSARA (see <http://www.faanaparaguay.com/ecosara.html>), where comfortable accommodation and home-cooked



Despite obvious differences, the handsome Chaco Owl *Strix chacoensis* has been split only recently from the more southerly Rufous-legged Owl *S. rufipes* (Marcelo Bombaci; www.faanaparaguay.com)



Bearded Tachuri *Polystictus pectoralis* remains relatively easy to see in undisturbed areas of native grassland (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)



Above: The frog-like call of the Spot-billed Toucanet *Selenidera maculirostris* betrays its presence in Paraguay's Atlantic Forests (Myriam Velázquez/Fundación Moisés Bertoni)

Below: The extraordinary wing shape of the male Sickle-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus anomalus* gives the species its English name (Hugo del Castillo; www.faunaparaguay.com)



Southern Paraguay is one of the last strongholds of the distinctive and rare Ochre-breasted Pipit *Anthus nattereri* (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)



Mbaracayú is the best place to see the threatened Bare-throated Bellbird *Procnias nudicollis*: this is a female (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)



Above: Marsh Seedeater *Sporophila palustris* is rare in the humid grasslands of southern Paraguay. Intriguingly, this individual has some rufous in the scapulars. An article on taxonomic complexities in the genus *Sporophila* is scheduled for a future issue of *Neotropical Birding* (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)

Below: Chilean Flamingos *Phoenicopterus chilensis* at sunset at Campo María Private Reserve (Frank Fragano; www.faunaparaguay.com)



meals are available. To arrange access, contact Christine Hostettler of ECOSARA (ecosarapaguay@gmail.com, +595 769 295046). For access to Guyra Reta (4WD essential), contact Guyra Paraguay, who own and manage this area. A bus leaves Encarnación at 08h00 daily, arriving at the town of Ynambú, from where Christine can arrange transport to Ecosara.

Mesopotamian grasslands

Southern Paraguay is typified by gently rolling grasslands and broad floodplains that provide excellent habitat for threatened species such as Strange-tailed Tyrant, Ochre-breasted Pipit *Anthus nattereri* (Vulnerable), Saffron-cowled Blackbird and (during October–February) a handful of brightly coloured seedeaters: Marsh, Chestnut, Dark-throated and Rufous-rumped Seedeater *Sporophila hypochroma* (Near Threatened). Search **marshes along Ruta 1** from the junction with the Ayolas road toward Encarnación: try the first few kilometres from this intersection, around km 260 on Ruta 1, and the marsh immediately east of General Delgado. Another good area is directly north of Coronel Bogado, particularly the marshes at **San Miguel Potrero**. Ask the local community for permission to enter; the local name for Saffron-cowled Blackbird is *chopi sa'yju*. Ochre-breasted Pipit is localised: two good areas to search are **Estero Ypyta**, along tracks just north-west of San Miguel Potrero, and the extensive flat grasslands of **Ñu Guazu**, west of General Artigas. Both Narosky's Seedeater *Sporophila zelichi* (Critically Endangered) and Chestnut Seedeater have been found breeding at the latter site.

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BIRDING LOGISTICS

Paraguay lacks a highly developed tourism infrastructure, so we strongly advise birders to plan their trip carefully beforehand. The climate is generally hot and humid, although can be surprisingly cool in winter (May–August). The Chaco is drier and temperatures regularly reach c.45 °C. Great birding is available year-round, although activity is often greatest during spring (September–October). Birders wanting to see the grassland seedeaters *Sporophila* spp. should visit during late October–November.

Away from the major cities accommodation is comfortable but rustic, and some sites require advance permission to visit. Those visiting the Chaco will need to take their own supplies, including a spare tank of petrol, as opportunities to re-fuel are few. Although there is a reasonable network of paved roads and a decent public bus service, access to the best birding destinations requires a 4WD.

Guidance about potential itineraries and access to individual sites can be sought from the authors or via two websites (and links thereon):

www.faunaparaguay.com and www.guyra.org.py.

The authors are preparing the first English-language field guide to the birds of Paraguay; until publication, we suggest combining two existing guides^{4,6} with an atlas containing point locality distribution maps² and an annotated checklist¹.

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