

Bringing Birding to the Heart of South America

BY PAUL SMITH

Centuries of neglect by travelers have made beautiful Paraguay into South America's forgotten corner, a place nobody ever talks about and nobody ever visits. Especially from the birder's point of view, this is hard to understand. With five major habitat types, Paraguay boasts a uniquely diverse avifauna, much of it accessible with little effort, expense, or traveling time. In the space of a week, you can tick off Chaco endemics like Black-legged Seriema and Chaco Owl, Atlantic forest specialties such as Bare-necked Bellbird and Helmeted Woodpecker, and round things off with endangered cerrado attractions like White-winged Nightjar and Lesser Nothura.

But if birders don't really understand Paraguay, it seems that Paraguayans understand birders even less. Talking to a portly local in a run-down bar in Ciudad del Este about my desire to see Green-winged Macaw, I was surprised when the mildly inebriated man told me that he could take me to see one the very next day, "100% guaranteed!" It turned out, though, that the bird the man had in mind belonged to his next-door neighbor.

"I was really hoping to see a wild one."

"What for?" he replied. "You'll never get as close to a wild one as this! Look! You can even touch it!" he added, prodding its balding torso and almost losing a pudgy finger.

How had the birdwatching revolution passed Paraguay by?

The country was cheap, friendly, and accommodating, and the scenery spectacular; so why didn't more birders include it on their itinerary? One reason seemed to stand out: the lack of a decent field guide. And I decided that if nobody else was going to do it, then I'd write one myself.

With the assistance and support of Guyra Paraguay, the country's approachable and well-organized Birdlife International partner, I set about preparing the first English-language field guide to the country's birds—but it wasn't long before my idea began to mushroom.

The success of conservation in any country requires that the residents appreciate the value of biodiversity, an appreciation that seemed



to be lacking in Paraguay. I had heard a farmer describe a patch of pristine Atlantic forest as "monte" (scrubland), while a senior citizen triumphantly told me about smashing in the skull of every snake and snake-like creature he had encountered since the age of 4 (and being bitten only twice). Even my landlord, an educated man, was astounded at the age of 58 by his first Purple-throated Euphonia: I was unable to convince him that it hadn't escaped from a zoo.

An English-language field guide wasn't going to be much

use to any of these people. And so, after discussions with Guyra, the idea was expanded to include a series of basic Spanish/English "mini-guides" aimed at Paraguayans, land-owners and tourists alike. To finance the production of these volumes, we cooked up a scheme whereby paying volunteers would help conduct species inventories, population censuses, and scientific analyses, and assist in writing mini-guides to each project site. The first project rapidly filled its quota of volunteers, among them the renowned bird illustrator Derek Onley, who generously offered to prepare original plates for the guide. That first group was a cosmopolitan one; besides Derek (a Brit living in New Zealand), there was Bryan Wainwright from the UK,



Rufous-capped Motmot; photo Paul Smith

Hemme Batjes from the Netherlands, and Regis Nossent from Belgium, plus myself and two Guyra staff—all of us from very different backgrounds, all of us serving the same conservation ethic.

The first project was carried out at Hotel Tirol, in the southern department of Itapúa, with one of the last areas of nearly pristine humid Atlantic forest in southern Paraguay. As recently as 50 years ago, such forest blanketed almost all of eastern Paraguay; today, less than 8% remains. The situation is no less catastrophic in neighboring Brazil and Argentina, leading Conservation International to declare the habitat as of “Critical Conservation Importance.”

The hotel itself proved an excellent base. A favorite of European royalty and the Paraguayan elite, Hotel Tirol is still friendly and comfortable, thanks to the down-to-earth hospitality of its owners, the Reynares family. The fruiting branches of the lush forest surrounding the hotel bent each morning under the weight of birds: Chestnut-eared Araçaris, Ruby-crowned Tanagers, Purple-throated Euphonias, Blue-naped Chlorophonias, and Blue Dacnis were among the most spectacular species in these mixed flocks. Atlantic forest endemics such as Southern Bristle-Tyrant, White-spotted Woodpecker, and Chestnut-headed Tanager were easily ticked off at no more than staggering distance from the hotel bar. Our team’s

surveys also discovered no less than 5 new species for Tirol, prince among them the glorious Robust Woodpecker, a prime indicator of healthy forest in this part of the world. Just as exciting, a Diademed Tanager provided the first Paraguayan record in over a decade.

It has still not occurred to the Paraguayan tourist industry in general that anyone would travel to the country “just to see a few birds.” But the Reynares family’s interest in the work conducted in their forest suggests that at least this small tract at Hotel Tirol has a bright and healthy future.

We have drawn up a list of 10 projected titles in the “Where to Watch Birds in Paraguay” series. The next project is scheduled for the cerrado grassland site of Laguna Blanca, one of only three known global sites for White-winged Nighthawk and the likeliest locality for Dwarf Tinamou in the country. With the help and hard work of our volunteers, we hope to produce a series of affordable books that will contribute to the conservation of the avifauna of this beautiful and enigmatic country, unraveling some of its ornithological mysteries and assuring that its remarkable “naturaleza” survives to be enjoyed by future generations of Paraguayans.

For more information or to volunteer, write to the author at paraguaybirds@yahoo.com.ar.

The Relationship List

BY MARCIA MARVIN

MILESTONE: “Chebek!” was the congratulatory song of the 500th bird seen together by Mark Miller and Marcia Marvin: a Least Flycatcher near the Clark Fork River in Idaho on May 30, 2005. The first bird on the couple’s list was the Blue-footed Booby at Yaquina Head on the Oregon coast in September, 2002.

On Saturday, September 7, 2002, I was headed to Newport, Oregon, for a pelagic trip that I had rescheduled in April due to breast cancer surgery. I was looking forward to the trip, which was to take place the following afternoon. On Sunday morning, I thought I’d check out Yaquina Head for birdlife. When I arrived, there was much more activity than I had anticipated, and as I got out of the car, a park employee asked me if I was there to see the booby. I was incredulous! I was probably the only birder there who had arrived unaware of the presence of this rarity.

I set up my scope and soon began talking to the person next to me, a man I thought I recognized as someone I had seen at the local Birders’ Night. As we waited for the booby to reappear, we scoped the surface of the water, from which

birds seemed to materialize like magic: all three scoters, Western and Clark’s Grebes, Marbled Murrelet (lifer!), Rhinoceros Auklet (another!), and many more. We said goodbye when I left for my pelagic trip, but a few days later I noticed in one of Mark’s birding listserv messages the word “whom,” a word not often seen in internet communication. I mentioned this to him in an e-mail, and we began an interchange in which we discovered that we were both as interested in words as we were in birds. We were a match.

Very early in our relationship, we began keeping track of the birds we had seen together. In the three years since we met, we have birded in eleven states, and among the many wonderful birds we’ve experienced together are Gray-tailed Tattler (Alaska), Elegant Trogon (Arizona), Brown Booby (California), Wood Thrush (Connecticut), American Redstart (Idaho), Black-throated Blue Warbler (Massachusetts), Gray Partridge (Montana), Northern Hawk-Owl (Oregon), Crimson-collared Grosbeak (Texas), Black-tailed Gull (Washington), and Blue-headed Vireo (Wisconsin). We celebrate each new bird with a kiss, and then with a flourish mark an X in the ABA Checklist. My life—and of course my life list—have been greatly enriched.