

EARLY SUMMER IN NW ARGENTINA

TUCUMÁN, SALTA AND JUJUY

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From 26 December 2005–1st January 2006 we travelled throughout Northwest Argentina, one of the country's most dramatic and beautiful regions. This, coupled with the large variety of habitats and the high concentration of endemics make it also one of the most interesting birdwatching and nature destinations. Landscape and culture are imbued with the Inca heritage, which is found in the local music, cuisine and customs.

Our trip started with a flight to Tucumán, where we were picked up by the van and headed towards Tafi del Valle, ~2,000 masl. As soon as we set off we were greeted by Firewood-Gatherer, White Monjita, Baywing, White-browed Blackbird and Fork-tailed Flycatcher, our first set of lowland species. But our aim was to get to the *Yungas* cloud forests along the río Los Sosa. We spent the first afternoon and the following morning along this habitat, searching mostly for Rufous-throated Dipper. We found and observed one for a long period as it fed along the stream. Also here were Torrent Ducks (fantastic views!), the endemic Yellow-striped Brush-Finch, Slender-tailed Woodstar, Black-backed Grosbeak, Buff-banded Tyrannulet, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, and an Andean Condor,

not only in the middle of the forest but perched on top of a dead tree (!!). Near Tafí is a large lake that produced a number of water birds, including Andean Coot and Andean Gull, as well as Subtropical Doradito. Not far upslope are gullies



with alder woodlands where it is relatively easy to find White-browed Tapaculo, which having been split from Zimmer's has become an Argentine endemic.

Further upslope, still not far from Tafí we reached the high-Andean grasslands of El Infiernillo. We spent a great afternoon up there, finding all the specialties: the endemics Tucumán Mountain-Finch and Buff-breasted Earthcreeper, as well as Black

Siskin, Red-tailed Comet, Puna and Andean Canasteros, Andean and Ornate Tinamous, Barn Owl (roosting under a bridge) and more. Late in the afternoon we found, through the aid of the scope, a herd of Guanacos as high up in the slopes as one could see. On the way back a pair of Short-eared Owls chased each other around the open fields putting up a real show. We spent the next morning around there, finding among others Plain-coloured Seedeater, Sparkling Violetear, the endemic Moreno's Ground-Dove, more tapaculos and comets, in a cold and foggy morning.

El Infiernillo is a pass through a notch in the Aconquija range, and as soon as we crossed it we entered the rainshadow. The fog quickly dissipated, the vegetation became dryer and the first columnar cacti appeared. Here we found a cooperative Straight-billed Earthcreeper and a Mountain Viscacha (a large and agile rodent that lives in the scree slopes) sitting quietly among the rocks.

Down slope, on the other side of the Aconquija, we reached a new biome, the “Argentine endemic” *Monte* desert, which of course harbours endemic birds. Of these we readily found White-throated Cacholote and Sandy Gallito. Other species seen included White-bellied Tyrannulet, Yellow-browed Tyrant, White-fronted Woodpecker, Burrowing Parrot and Greater Wagtail-Tyrant. After



lunch in a picturesque hotel—right by pre-Inca ruins, where a Lama walked into the kitchen—we set off to look for the Steinbach's Canastero. This one managed to avoid us, in spite of all our efforts. However, Chaco Earthcreeper, a colony of Burrowing Parrots, a nice pair of Aplomado Falcons, and the scenery which was voted “best of the trip”, paid off for the disappointment.

The next morning we left our Salta hotel very early in order to reach the Cuesta del Obispo, along the road to Cachi. This road took us through the forested area near the

base of the hills, dry scrubby woodlands with a mixture of *Chaco* and *Monte* species, the upper-montane scrubs with most of the specialities, the highland grasslands of the higher slopes, and the barren landscape of the *Puna*, above 3,000 masl. Today the scenery was amazing too, especially our lunch spot with a great view of the whole valley below, and Condors flying low overhead.



Birding here is always fantastic, and includes some of the least-known species in Argentina: Rufous-bellied Saltator, Maquis Canastero, Zimmer's Tapaculo, Scribble-tailed Canastero, Speckle-breasted Thornbird, as well as Rufous-sided Warbling-Finch, Mitred Parakeet, Golden-spotted Ground-Dove and many others.

After this long day we got back to the hotel to indulge in the usual array of *empanadas*, and the corn-based *tamales* and *humitas*, and of course a cool beer.

On the way north to the Quebrada de Humahuaca we stopped at several spots along the Cornisa road. The lush *Yungas* forests here provided a variety of interesting species such as Stripe-headed Brush-Finch, Sclater's Tyrannulet, Plush-crested Jay, Rufous-capped Antshrike, Rusty-browed Warbling-Finch and Black-backed Grosbeak. Once in the dry *Prepuna* of the Quebrada the avifauna changed dramatically. Here we found the highland race of Speckled Teal, Cinnamon Teal, White-winged Black-Tyrant and Andean Swallow, all around a marsh, as well as Black-hooded Sierra-Finch, Patagonian Mockingbird, Blue-and-yellow Tanager and D'Orbigny's Chat-Tyrant. We stopped in Tilcara to taste some Lama dishes in a regional food restaurant and spent time around the colourful market shopping for crafts and music. Later on we moved onto Humahuaca to spend two nights there.

Our last day of the year was a long one and well spent, visiting the high-Andean lakes around Abra Pampa and Pozuelos. The area had received much rain and thus water birds were more sparsely distributed. It was difficult, but eventually our quest for the Puna Flamingo was rewarded with the finding of that single individual that stood out from its fellow pink birds. Giant Coots, the awesome Tawny-throated Dotterel, Grey-breasted Seedsnipe, Mountain Caracara, Mountain Parakeet, Puna and Bright-rumped Yellow-Finches, Andean Avocet, Puna Teal, Short-billed Pipit and a flock (do they “flock”?) of seven Puna Rheas completed this fruitful day. We were also lucky with the mammals, and got great views of Culpeo Fox as well as very close views of the beautiful and elegant Vicuñas, roaming in loose packs through the aridity of the landscape. The varied and dramatic sceneries throughout these last two days rivalled those of the first ones. We had a New Year celebration dinner with yet more Lama and traditional meals at



a nice local restaurant in town.

For the last day of our trip, and the first day of 2006, we visited Yala. Driving south along the Quebrada we caught up with Brown-backed Mockingbird. At Yala the heavy rains had given the clear waters of the stream a very muddy and choppy appearance, and we found no Dippers. Even so, we couldn't have done better. We spotted some of the more usual birds, such as Fawn-breasted Tanager, Slaty Elaenia, Fulvous-headed Brush-Finch, Streak-throated Bush-Tyrant and White-throated Tyrannulet. An amazing finding was that of an immature Black-and-chestnut Eagle (at least uncommon in Argentina) flying around the top of a ridge. We could even notice its crest in the wind as it glided! Later on we heard the guttural calls of Guans. They were doubtlessly Red-faced Guan. They were high on a slope, but the

woods made it impossible to see them. We climbed uphill through the dense vegetation until we found a small open patch. After some playback and moments of tension at least two individuals appeared in sight, jumping clumsily among the vegetation. They were feeding on berries, and we were even able to see them on the scope. What a great bird to end with a great trip!

