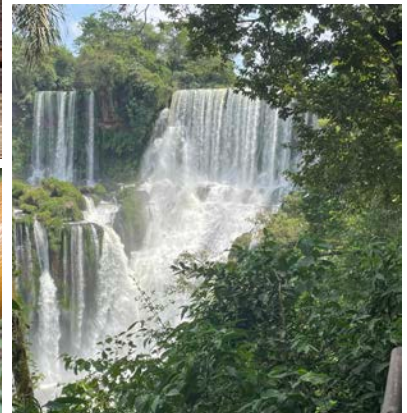


Northwest Argentina w/ Iguazu Falls Extension Mar. 4 - 21, 2024 | Trip Report | by Greg Butcher



Buenos Aires, Jujuy, Salta, Tucuman, and Misiones Provinces with guides Mario Mosqueira and Marcos Sosa, and participants Diane, Mark, Ruth, David, Trudy, Cecilia, Noel, Libby, Alberto, and Shannon



Eight people joined Naturalist Journeys March 4 for an expedition to northwest Argentina, including Jujuy, Salta, and Tucuman Provinces. Seven of them, plus two new adventurers, flew to Misiones Province to see Iguazu Falls and the birds of northeastern Argentina. Greg Butcher was the Naturalist Journeys guide throughout, Mario Mosqueira was the northwest guide, and Marcos Sosa was the northeast guide.

Northwestern Argentina is especially renowned for a unique assemblage of Ovenbirds (family Furnariidae), not at all related to the North American ovenbird, which is a wood-warbler. Neotropical travelers know several of the Ovenbird groups: leaf-tossers, woodcreepers, scythebills, xenops, tuftedcheeks, foliage-gleaners, treehunters, treerunners, and spinetails. Northwest Argentina has representatives of most of these groups, but

it features additional groups that tend to favor more southern South America and often drier habitats. Thus, we enjoyed two weeks getting to know miners, earthcreepers, horneros, cinclodes, tit-spinetails, thornbirds, and canasteros. The leading actor of this group is the widespread Rufous Hornero, with its loud ringing call and unmistakable oven-like nest. We saw and heard this species almost every day. We also enjoyed a couple of songbird groups that represent the Andes Mountains: the sierra-finches and the warbling-finches.

Mon., Mar. 4 Arrival | Costanera Sur, Buenos Aires

In Buenos Aires, Costanera Sur was closed, as it is every Monday, but we saw 37 species in an afternoon walk along the sidewalk next to the park. We saw a few species there that we didn't see in the northwest: Limpkin, Monk and Nanday Parakeets, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, Solitary Black Cacique, Red-crested and Yellow-billed Cardinals, and the inimitable European Starling. We had a great steak dinner that night at Mala Cara near our hotel; an added feature was a power outage, so we ate in the dark!

Tues., Mar. 5 Parque Bicentenario | Hotel Selva Montana

We flew off to Salta the next day and quickly went birding at Parque del Bicentenario, where we picked up a nice variety of 64 species in just two hours. Highlights included a rare Maguari Stork and the always awe-inspiring Southern Screamer. Folks from the Northern Hemisphere are always impressed with the red-breasted Meadowlarks, in this case White-browed. Driving around town, we picked up Yungas Guans, Plush-crested Jays, Toco Toucans, and a Crested Oropendola.

Wed., Mar. 6 Reserva el Huaico | San Lorenzo

Unfortunately, we encountered heavy rains at Reserva del Huaico, limiting us to only 18 species. (Imagine, rain in the Yungas Cloud Forest!) The rain was probably responsible for a perched migratory Plumbeous Kite. One of our favorite birds at Hotel Selva Montana was the tiny Slender-tailed Woodstar; an amazing contrast was the Cream-backed Woodpecker, perched high in a snag above. We also had flyover Buff-necked Ibises there. A roadside stop produced Rufous-capped Antshrike, an Ultramarine Grosbeak, and three Black-capped Warbling Finches. We all enjoyed a visit to the Museum of High Altitude Archeology, better known as the Mummy Museum for the three mummies preserved from the time of the Incas. And our first Cliff Flycatcher thought the front of the museum was a cliff.

Thurs., Mar. 7 Hotel Selva Montana | Campo Alegre | Rio Yala

On March 7, we took the long drive north to Humahuaca, enjoying birds, mountain scenery, and a good lunch at Pura Vida along the way. We transitioned from the Yungas Cloud Forest into first pre-puna, then Puna shrublands with many cardones, a columnar cactus that looks a lot like the North American saguaro. We had many firsts on this drive, including Red-tailed Comet, Plumbeous Rail, Andean Gull, Dot-fronted Woodpecker, Scaly-headed Parrot, White-eyed Parakeet, Rufous-fronted and Spot-breasted Thornbirds, 3 spinetails (Stripe-crowned, Sooty-fronted, Azara's), Greater Wagtail-Tyrant, Fulvous-headed Brushfinch, and Black-backed Grosbeak. We arrived at a dry Humahuaca in Jujuy Province, with the feel of a frontier town. Some of us tried the llama steak for dinner, finding it very tender. Others were conscientious objectors.

Fri., Mar. 8 Humahuaca | Pucara | Hornacal

Just outside of town, we found 3 species of Sierra Finch: Black-hooded, Ash-throated, and Mourning. A couple of the more interesting birds were the squeaky White-tipped Plantcutter and three Tufted Tit-Tyrants. We were surprised to see non-native European Hares. On our way to Pucara, we got leisurely looks at 2 Ornate Tinamous. We continued our acquaintance with some of the many Puna specialty birds: Rufous-banded Miner, Plain-mantled Tit-Tyrant, and 3 herds of vicunas. Next it was our time to drive to 14,000 feet at Hornacal for the

amazing mountain views – which we enjoyed along with an Andean Condor soaring below us. In the afternoon, we visited the 400-year-old church in Uquia and a nearby market for textiles.

Sat., Mar. 9 Humedal Rio Miraflores | Pozuelos

On flamingo day, we started out with a flock of 50 Chilean Flamingos at Humedal Rio Miraflores. They were accompanied by Andean Goose, Puna Ibis, and a big flock of Wilson's Phalaropes, visiting from North America. The famous Laguna de los Pozuelos produced three species of flamingo, two plovers (Andean Lapwing and Puna Plover), Andean Avocet, and a pair of Gray-breasted Seedsnipe. Songbirds included Common and Puna Miners, Cordilleran Canasteros, Andean Negrito, and Ash-breasted, Mourning, and Band-tailed Sierra Finches. On the way back to Humahuaca, Laguna de Huancar produced a good assortment of wetland birds plus a large flock of Mountain Parakeets.

Sun., Mar. 10 Humahuaca | Rio Yala | Coronel Moldes

It was time to retreat from Jujuy Province, but we had leisurely views of a pair of Red-legged Seriemas just before leaving. After passing by Salta on our way farther south, we found a wet spot near the road in Salta, where we found Whistling Herons, Bare-faced and White-faced Ibises, and a flock of 20 Chestnut-capped Blackbirds. We continued on to the town of Coronel Moldes where saw two pairs of Spot-backed Puffbirds, one pair of Black-crested Finches, and a Chaco Chachalaca just across the street from one of our favorite restaurants serving a lightly fried, freshwater Pejerrey fish. Our hotel on the Cabra Corral Reservoir featured a Tropical Screech-Owl at night and a Red Andean Fox during the day.

Mon., Mar. 11 Cabra Corral Lake | Juramento Canyon

In the Moldes area, we couldn't seem to escape Black-legged Seriemas (10 individuals!). Our guide Mario is still worried that we used up all his seriema luck! We looked up to watch a Hook-billed Kite and two Peregrine Falcons overhead, and we looked down to see a Crested Gallito run across the path. We had to look straight ahead to avoid running into huge webs of large colonial poisonous spiders. Red-crested Finch was our colorful bird of the day, and Palo Verde was our colorful tree of the day. In the afternoon, we birded by the river below the dam and were surprised to see a pair of Rufous-sided Crakes out in the open. The land-birding was good too with Dark-billed Cuckoo, Blue-crowned Parakeet, Great and Variable Antshrikes, Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, and Many-colored Chaco Finch.

Tues., Mar. 12 Cueva del Gigante | Los Cardones NP

Then it was time to head farther south and back in the Andes and condors, plus Olive-crowned Crescentchest, Maquis Canastero, Rock Earthcreeper, Cream-winged Cinclodes, Rufous-bellied Mountain Tanager, and good looks at Zimmer's Tapaculo. Cueva del Gigante hosted dozens of Mitred Parakeets and (luckily unseen!) Vampire Bats. We ended the day with good looks at White-throated Cachalote, Sandy Gallito, and our first three Guanacos. We spent the night at an old, stone-floored inn with lots of character!

Wed., Mar. 13 Los Cardones NP | Cuesta del Obispo

We started the next day with gorgeous views of snow-covered Nevado de Cachi. We were rewarded with large flocks of Tawny-throated Dotterels and Andean Flickers and a couple of Least Seedsnipes and Mountain Caracaras. Not only did we have a condor, but also a Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle. Our colorful bird today was Tucuman Mountain Finch. We came to a screeching halt for a pair of very cooperative Elegant Crested-Tinamous. Our guide Mario and driver Cesar outdid themselves tonight with an amazing typical Argentinian barbecue, topped off with a wonderful steak. They cooked in the open fire-pit in the courtyard of the inn. The steak was done just as the skies filled with rain; the lightning in the mountains above us was spectacular!

Thurs., Mar. 14 **Payogasta | Molinos Pond | Cafayate**

On our drive south to Cafayate today on gravel roads, we made several stops, first to buy textiles from local weavers near Seclantes and then to pick up a good bird here and there: Checkered, White-fronted, and Green-barred (Golden-breasted form) Woodpeckers, Steinbach's Canastero, and Straneck's Tyrannulet. We stopped at our fanciest hotel yet, Vinas de Cafayate. A couple of us jumped into the swimming pool, and we all enjoyed dinner there that night.

Fri., Mar. 15 **Tolombon | Quilmes Ruins | Amaicha de Valle**

The next day we visited the memorable Quilmes Ruins in Tucuman Province. Several of the roads were deep with water and mud due to the recent nocturnal rains, but we negotiated everything just fine. The Quilmes tribe resisted the Spanish for 130 years, but eventually suffered defeat and a long, deadly walk to the coast south of Buenos Aires. It was Burrowing Parakeet day -- they were everywhere, in big flocks! We found a meadow with Long-tailed Meadowlarks and a Collared Plover along the river.

Sat., Mar. 16 **Cafayate | Coronel Moldes | Hotel Selva Montana**

There are many gorgeous rock formations on the drive back to Salta. We start in the Calchaqui Valley, drive through Las Conchas Canyon, and end up in the hills above the Lerma Valley. We stopped for lunch in Moldes for one more fresh fish dinner. Our after-lunch reward were great looks at a pair of Great Rufous Woodcreepers, plus two Cream-backed Woodpeckers and a pair of Short-billed Canasteros. After dinner, we went for night birds, but the Yungas Cloud Forest opened up on us again! We said goodbye to Libby and hello to her husband. The next day they would retrace our steps to Pozuelos so he could enjoy the flamingos.

Sun., Mar. 17 **Salta | Hotel Selva de Laurel, Misiones**

We had an early departure from Salta and flew through Buenos Aires to Misiones to see the incomparable Iguazu Falls! We arrived to greet Alberto and Shannon who were joining us from a south seas cruise from Santiago Chile to Buenos Aires, and we all went birding from the hotel to a local pond. Among the new birds were Turquoise-fronted Parrot, Planalto Woodcreeper, Thrush-like Wren, Chestnut-bellied Euphonia, and Magpie Tanager. We had left the northwestern Argentinian Andes and joined the humid Atlantic Forest, called Parana by the Argentinians.

Mon., Mar. 18 **Iguazu Falls National Park | Jardin de Picafores**

We were able to bird in the park before walking to see the falls, and we started with a roosting Common Potoo. We saw Chestnut-eared Aracari, Spot-billed Toucanet, and Toco Toucan -- a great trio! To contrast with the large toucan, we saw a tiny Ochre-collared Piculet. We had Surucua and Atlantic Black-throated Trogons and three species of Manakin: Swallow-tailed, White-bearded, and Band-tailed. There were a few more Tanagers than we saw in the northwest, starting with Goggle-eyed and Green-headed. We had small flocks of Cobalt-winged Parrotlets. As tourists, our group was mesmerized by Iguazu Falls, and then as birdwatchers, we were equally mesmerized by the hummingbird garden, with nine species including Black Jacobin and Swallow-tailed. Both events produced incredible photo opportunities.

Tues., Mar. 19 **The 101 | Iguazu Falls National Park**

We started the morning behind the falls, first at a platform on a wetland next to a road called the 101. Sibilant Sirystes was our best bird there. The walk to the back of the falls produced Purple-crowned Plovercrest (a hummingbird!), Robust Woodpecker, Spot-backed Antshrike, the odd-looking Rufous Gnateater, Eared Pygmy-Tyrant, our first Blue Dacnises, and a surprisingly large number of Black Capuchins (monkeys). Not surprisingly,

the falls called us back for a return visit in the late afternoon, and we were awed by a thousand Great Dusky Swifts swirling around and around and eventually swooping behind the falls to spend the night.

Wed., Mar. 20 Jardín de Picaflores | Hotel Selva de Laurel

We started the day with what we thought was our last birdwalk from the hotel. My favorite bird of the morning was Red-rumped Cacique, a flock of five. We then reprised our trip to the Hummingbird Garden. We had the same nine species, but reveled in the scene. It seemed like there were always 10 hummingbirds in sight at once. The hummingbird garden has been active for 45 years, started by the proprietor's mother. When we got to the airport, we found out that our flight to Buenos Aires was cancelled due to a powerful rainstorm there. The three people with international flights that night got onto an alternative flight, and the rest of us returned to Hotel Selva de Laurel. Our rewards on the evening birdwalk included a flock of Smooth-billed Anis, a Band-tailed Manakin, and a Blue Dacnis.

Thurs., Mar. 21 Hotel Selva de Laurel | Return Home

It was finally our last birdwalk from the hotel. The nearby pond was productive with Least Grebe, a family of Wattled Jacanas, a Striated Heron, and a Green Kingfisher. The local woods produced a Chestnut-eared Aracari, a flock of ten Red-rumped Caciques, three Thrush-like Wrens, and our last pair of Rufous Horneros. We returned to the hotel just in time to avoid a huge deluge of rain, which thankfully blew through pretty quickly. Our afternoon flight was only 45 minutes late, and we all arrived at the international airport (after the obligatory drive through Buenos Aires) in time for our flights home. What a great trip!

Photos by Greg Butcher