

# Bolivia: Birding & Nature | Oct. 27 – Nov. 17, 2024 | Trip Report by Greg Butcher



**In Bolivia with Michel Livet, owner of Bolivia Andes & Amazonia, in-country bird guide Hugo Santa Cruz, in-country culture guide Cesar Renjel, Naturalist Journeys guide Greg Butcher, and participants Andrew, Emily, John, Karen, and Tamara**



## **Sun., Oct. 27      Arrival in Santa Cruz | Laguna Guapilo**

Arrivals in Santa Cruz were either 10 p.m. (through Panama) or 2 a.m. (through Bogota). Despite the late arrival times, we were each met by Michel at the airport – what a great start! Emily and John arrived at 10 p.m. October 26, and I arrived at 2 a.m. on the 27<sup>th</sup>. It only (???) took 2 hours to get our visas, so we were raring to go that afternoon to Laguna Guapilo. What a great introduction to Bolivia: 58 species in two hours, including Southern Screamers, Guira Cuckoos, and our only sightings of Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Ringed Teal, Least Grebe, Purple Gallinule, Large-billed Tern, Maguari Stork, Snail Kite, Ringed Kingfisher, Black-backed Water-Tyrant, and Chestnut-capped Blackbird. Then we had our first full night in the fancy Hotel Los Tajibos with its large central pool.

## **Mon., Oct. 28                      Lomas de Arena Santa Cruz**

Andrew joined the group for an early and long morning at Lomas de Arena with 77 species! Our first Tinamou of the trip was Red-winged, and we had Speckled Chachalacas too. We all enjoyed views of a Blue-crowned Trogon.



Our only Aplomado Falcon of the trip zoomed close by. We got good views of pairs of Barred Antshrike and Thrush-like and Fawn-breasted Wrens, plus our only Rufous Casiornis of the trip. The lizard highlight was an Amazon Racrunner. In addition to the wildlife, we enjoyed visiting the high dunes in the middle of a landlocked country.

## **Tues., Oct. 29                      Trinidad Airport | Barba Azul Nature Reserve**

Today we had an early departure from the Santa Cruz Airport to Trinidad and then on two Cessnas to Barba Azul. The Trinidad airport provided a nice diversion with 26 species, including our only Dusky-headed Parakeet. The flight to Barba Azul started off by flying over a large group of migratory Swainson’s Hawks – perhaps as many as 200! We flew over sparsely occupied wet savanna with just a few cattle ranches to break up the natural scenery. We arrived after a short rain that produced an inordinate amount of mud and were assigned stand-alone, private cabins on the Omi River on a path from the main lodge.

## **Tues., Oct. 29 & Fri., Nov. 1                      Barba Azul Nature Reserve**

The main clearing adjacent to the lodge was blackbird central – Crested Oropendolas, Giant Cowbirds, Yellow-rumped Caciques, Orange-backed Troupials, Variable Orioles, and Chopi Blackbirds – so we got to enjoy these species every day. A Tropical Screech-Owl and several cane toads were found gorging on a huge evening beetle outbreak at the lodge. We saw Blue-and-yellow and Chestnut-fronted Macaws daily, and of course our first morning trip was to a known spot for Blue-throated Macaws, where we had leisurely views of 10 mostly in the open in a nearby tree. The Omi River hosted a variety of special waterbirds, including Southern Screamer, Orinoco Goose, Muscovy Duck, Hoatzin, Ash-throated Crake, Jabiru, Anhinga, Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Green and Plumbeous Ibises, White-headed Marsh-Tyrant, and Black-capped Donacobius. River mammals too: Southern Spectacled (or Yacare) and Black Caimans, a daily herd of 20 Capybaras, and both Pampas and Marsh Deer. We were surprised to see two pairs of Red-breasted Meadowlarks courting and fighting over territory near the river. We had single-day observations of Red-billed Curassow, Greater Ani, White-tailed Goldenthrout (a hummingbird), (a truly) Solitary Sandpiper, Greater Yellow-headed Vulture, Chimango Caracara, Large-billed Antwren, Sharp-tailed and Cock-tailed Tyrants, White-throated Kingbird, and Black-faced Tanager. Two evening outings produced both Lesser and Nacunda Nighthawks. Other mammals included Six-banded Armadillo, Agouti, Tamandua (an anteater), South American Coati, and daily encounters (visual or aural) with Black-and-gold Howler Monkeys.



### **Fri., Nov. 1            Barba Azul | Trinidad Airport**

On our last morning at Barba Azul, Hugo and I were shocked to flush a Spotted Rail underfoot near the airfield and pleased to see a flock of 4 Orange-winged Amazons fly by. We landed in Trinidad in a downpour, which resulted in a late flight to Santa Cruz. As a result, I had my best steak of the trip at La Estancia in Trinidad, and we had a good birdlist of 38 species, including our only Plain-breasted Ground-Dove, our first White-eyed Parakeets, and our last Rufous Cachalote.

### **Sat., Nov. 2                    Santa Cruz Botanical Gardens**

Because of our late arrival in Santa Cruz, we got a bit of a late start to the botanical gardens, but we still had good wildlife sightings. It was a good day for small monkeys: we all saw Black-tailed Marmoset, and a few of us also saw White-eared Titi. And it was a good reptile day too: Yellow-headed Sideneck Turtles, Red-footed Tortoises, and small Southern Spectacled (or Yacare) Caimans. It is always good to see a bird species with the host country in the name, so we were glad to see two pairs of Bolivian Slaty-Antshrikes. We saw 3 species of woodcreepers, including our only Black-banded of the trip. We saw our only Golden-crowned Warbler and our first Silver-beaked Tanager. In the afternoon, we drove the road to Porongo, where the highlight was a pair of Swallow Tanagers.

### **Sun., Nov. 3 & Tues., Nov. 5                    Refugio Los Volcanes**

We left Santa Cruz super-early to arrive at Refugio Los Volcanes, at the edge of Amboro National Park, as early as possible. The lodge at Los Volcanes is next to a stream with a waterfall and a natural pool. We saw Dusky-green Oropendolas, a pair of Riverbank Warblers, and a Fasciated Tiger-Heron there. Some of us stayed in a building on a hill near the lodge, while others were in duplex-type cottages on the other side of the hill. One evening while walking to dinner, we thrilled to the really close sounds of Rufous and Tropical Screech-Owls and Rufous Nightjar. Another afternoon/evening we hiked the ambitious Condor Trail for a panoramic view of the valley and King Vulture, Andean Condors, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, and Military Macaws. Los Volcanes has a cornucopia of bird species from the spectacular – White-throated Piping Guan, Amazonian Motmot, Chestnut-eared Aracari, Red-necked Woodpecker, Green-cheeked Parakeet, and Turquoise-fronted Amazon – to the cryptic -- Chestnut-backed Antshrike, Plain Antwreio, Black-capped Antwren, Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaner, and Ochre-cheeked Spinetail. The rarest bird we saw all trip (according to eBird records) was the Bolivian Recurvebill, and we all got good close looks as it moved toward us out of thick bamboo. Another tough bird to see was Yungas Manakin; the males call all day but don't move much. After listening to several close males, we finally found a female! We enjoyed small colorful birds as well, such as Blue-naped Chlorophonia, Bronze-green



Euphonia, and White-winged, Black-goggled, and Guira Tanagers. Bolivian is pretty far south to see many North American breeding birds, so we were happy to find a Blackburnian Warbler even though it was in the dull first-winter female plumage. We maxed out on mammals the first few days of our trip, but we enjoyed agoutis, squirrels, and Brown Capuchin monkeys here.

## **Tues., Nov. 5      Refugio Los Volcanes | Refugio de Los Colibries**

We drove from one refugio to another, from Los Volcanes to Los Colibries (one of the Spanish words for hummingbirds). Like most hummingbird oases, this site had many beautiful flowers, but unlike most birding groups, we didn't spend much time in the gardens. We did get 6 species of hummers here, and I think Fork-tailed Woodnymph was the best. Tamara wants us all to remember that she found the rufous morph of the Tropical Screech-Owl roosting in its tree-hole; Emily (and I'm sure others) got great photos. We got our only Chaco Chachalacas here and our best looks at Ultramarine Grosbeak. We added a couple of North American breeding birds here: Swainson's Thrush and Broad-winged Hawk. We spent the night at one of our favorite lodges, El Pueblito, located with a great view of Samaipata below.

## **Wed., Nov. 6      Km 305 | Red-fronted Macaw Reserve**

We had two very productive roadside stops this morning between Samaipata and the Red-fronted Macaw Lodge. Our first stop produced our only Large and Sierran Elaenias, our first Rufous-collared Sparrows (!), and our first Warbling Finches – Black-capped and Black-and-chestnut. We also enjoyed a hovering White-tailed Kite. The next stop, at Km 305, was loaded with good birds. The 3 Andean Condors were just afterthoughts because we were focused on the small birds: Stripe-crowned and Sooty-fronted Spinetails, White-tipped Plantcutter, the truly Plain Tyrannulet, Fuscous Flycatcher, the recently split Moss-backed Sparrow, our only Orange-headed Tanager, and our first Ringed Warbling-Finch and Gray-crested Finch. When we arrived at the Red-fronted Macaw Reserve, we discovered that there had been enough rain that our van couldn't drive across the river, so we braved the high pedestrian bridge. We had a pleasant walk through the local community's garden plots to the lodge. The cliffs across from the lodge hosted the macaws throughout our visit. The afternoon's birding was productive! We saw our first Andean Swifts, Tawny-headed Swallows, Bolivian Blackbirds, and Blue-tufted Starthroat and finally got a good look at a Spot-backed Puffbird. White-fronted Woodpeckers were everywhere. EBird has not split Cliff from Monk Parakeet, but BirdLife has, and they consider Cliff Parakeet to be a Near-



Threatened Species globally even though they are numerous on the same cliffs as the Red-fronted Macaws. Our meals at the lodge were *al fresco* with good temperatures and no insects.

### **Thurs., Nov. 7                      Red-fronted Macaw Reserve**

We spent the morning climbing the rocks near the macaw cliff to get better photographs of this Critically Endangered species. Luckily, we could get close without disturbing the birds at all. En route, we got a good close-up of a pair of Gray-hooded Parakeets. We had our first views of a Greater Wagtail-Tyrant and a lot of time to figure out if we were looking at Purple or Southern Martins. (We decided they were Purple.) Bolivian Blackbird has a very small range with few sightings (fewer than 1,000 in eBird), so we were impressed when we had 60 in one tree. In the afternoon, we walked out of the village along a dry wash. We don't always talk about the flycatchers, but we added Suiriri and Small-billed Elaenia. After dark, we only had to walk about 50 steps for a close-up of a Scissor-tailed Nightjar both sitting and flying.

### **Fri., Nov. 8                              Laguna Pailones | Km 305**

We left the macaw reserve early to drive back to El Pueblito Lodge above Samaipata with several productive stops along the way. Laguna Pailones produced 46 species, including our only Ocellated Piculets and Southern Scrub-Flycatcher of the trip. Km 305 was productive again. On Wednesday, we chased a shy Bolivian Earthcreeper to no avail; today we watched one fly across the road amid a long (and sometimes close) viewing. It was the third rarest species we saw on the trip (according to eBird)! We had our best views of Red-crested Finches here, and it was the only place on the trip where we saw Bananaquits.

### **Sat., Nov. 9                              Tucuman Parrot Reserve**

It always pays to be alert during an early morning drive, and this morning we picked up Yungas Guan, Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, Buff-necked Ibises, and Cream-backed Woodpeckers. We added Red-faced Guan and Smoky-brown Woodpecker at the parrot reserve, plus our first Red-tailed Comet. This special habitat produced several unique species for us, unfortunately not including Tucuman Parrot. But we did see White-throated Antpitta, Montane Woodcreeper, Spot-breasted Thornbird, Crested Becard, Buff-banded and Sclater's Tyrannulets, Plumbeous Black-Tyrant, Pale-edged Flycatcher, Mountain Wren, White-browed Brushfinch, Golden-winged Cacique, and Fawn-breasted Tanager. In the afternoon, we drove back to Santa Cruz for a good night's sleep before our flight to Cochabamba.



## **Sun., Nov. 10                      Santa Cruz Airport | Laguna Cotapachi**

We drove to the airport early enough to enjoy some of the grassland species in the neighborhood. We had 13 Greater Rheas, plus Red-winged Tinamou, White-bellied Nothura, Burrowing Owl, American Kestrel, and White-browed Meadowlark. After an uneventful flight to Cochabamba, we split up for the afternoon, with some going with Michel to enjoy indigenous markets in Cochabamba and others going with Hugo to hike near Laguna Cotapachi. We had 5 species of ducks, including our first Andean Ducks. We had our only Giant Coot and Streak-backed (or Puna) Canastero, plus our first Plumbeous Rails, Andean Gulls, Puna Ibises, Wren-like Rushbirds, and Yellow-winged Blackbirds. We found large flocks of shorebirds, including an Andean Lapwing, 150 of the resident White-backed subspecies of the Black-necked Stilt, and four species of Arctic-breeding species: 40 Baird's Sandpipers, 30 American Golden-Plovers, 20 Lesser Yellowlegs, and 7 Greater Yellowlegs. We stayed at an old mansion that had been converted into the Hotel Aranjuez. I've never seen so many staircases, and I still don't know where they all lead.

## **Mon., Nov. 11                      San Miguel Polylepis Forest | Cerro Tunari**

We covered a lot of altitude today, from 8,392 feet to 14,651. We spent most of the day in Polylepis forest, an open woodland with small trees and shrubs. At the top of our climb, we were in open Puna grassland with some wet areas with Andean Goose and Crested Duck. We saw a lot of unique birds today, such as our only Mountain Parakeets. It was a big day for South American Ovenbirds (family Furnariidae): Slender-billed Miner, Cream-winged and White-winged Cinclodes, Tawny and Brown-capped Tit-Spinetails, and Maquis and Cordilleran Canasteros. It was also Ground-Tyrant day: Cinereous, Rufous-naped, and White-fronted. Other specialty flycatchers included Tufted Tit-Tyrant, White-winged Black-Tyrant, and d'Orbigny's and White-browed Chat-Tyrants. We saw a number of species in the tanager family, most of them without "tanager" in their names: Rufous-bellied Mountain-Tanager, Giant Conebill, Gray-bellied and Rusty Flowerpiercer, and a number of "finches" that taxonomists now consider "tanagers": Black-hooded, Plumbeous, and Ash-breasted Sierra Finches, Glacier Finch, Cochabamba Mountain Finch, Bright-rumped Yellow-Finch, Rufous-sided and Bolivian Warbling Finches, and Paramo Seedeater. Today we saw the second, fourth, fifth, and eighth rarest birds of the trip: Cochabamba Mountain Finch, Maquis Canastero, Bolivian Warbling Finch, and Rufous-bellied Mountain Tanager.



## **Tues., Nov. 12                      Cochabamba**

Hugo and Andrew went birding today, but the rest of us toured Cochabamba with Michel. We visited the d'Orbigny Natural History Museum, where we learned that Alcide d'Orbigny was a French scientist who traveled South America as a young man, wrote up his results in middle age, and died young at age 54. The parks we visited were over-run with Rock Pigeons, by far our most common bird of the day. Not surprisingly, we saw many old Catholic churches, statues, and monuments.

## **Wed., Nov. 13      Cochabamba | La Paz | Lake Titicaca**

We started early to fly to La Paz (actually, the neighboring city of El Alto), picked up our cultural guide Cesar, and spent all day driving to Lake Titicaca, of course with birding stops along the way. We had 10 flightless Titicaca Grebes at our first lake stop, along with our first Chilean Flamingos, Puna Teal, Many-colored Rush-Tyrant, Andean Negrito, Black Siskin, Cinereous Conebill, Peruvian and Mourning Sierra Finches, and Grassland Yellow-Finch. We took a reed boat to lunch as we debated whether the motif included two dragon heads (our conclusion) or puma heads (the local description). In Bolivia's Copacabana (not to be confused with Brazil's), we visited the large Catholic Basilica and stayed at the modern Hotel Rosario del Lago where all rooms face the lake.

## **Thurs., Nov. 14                      Island of the Sun (Isla del Sol)**

The boat ride from Copacabana to the Island of the Sun took a bit over an hour. The wind was low, and we never experienced the cold temperatures we had all packed for. We hiked for a couple of hours in sunlight along a southern ridge of the island. We had 29 bird species, plus domestic llamas and alpacas. I think only the Black-throated Flowerpiercer, Plain-colored Seedeater, and Band-tailed Sierra Finch were new, and only the American Kestrel and all-white domestic Mallards were species that we could see back home. We had a great traditional picnic-style lunch, called apthapi, with farm-fished trout, several kinds of potatoes, corn, and plantains. After the boat ride back to Copacabana, we visited the marshes north of town where Titicaca Grebe, Puna Teal and Ibis, and Andean Gull, Lapwing, and Flicker reminded us where we were.

## **Fri., Nov. 15                      Tiwanaku | Puma Punku**

Between Lake Titicaca and La Paz lie the ruins of a very important pre-Inca civilization, the Tiwanaku. We visited an excellent museum onsite in addition to the ruins and appreciated Cesar's detailed recital of the histories. We had our best views of Black-winged Ground-Doves today. After Tiwanaku, we drove through the thick traffic of El Alto and descended down the valley into La Paz where we stayed at the Ritz!



## **Sat., Nov. 16      La Paz | Bosquesillo Auquisimana**

We had a great tour of La Paz in the morning, circumnavigating above the city in its cable cars led by our cultural guide Cesar. We visited several shops along the Avenue of the Witches. After lunch, we enjoyed our last birding outing at Bosquesillo Auquisimana overlooking La Paz. We met our first local birdwatchers here, two women planning a Christmas Bird Count here. It was a good place for our last birding adventure: we got our best looks of the trip at both Red-tailed Comet and Giant Hummingbird. We had a good assortment of South American Ovenbirds, including Creamy-breasted Canastero, Streak-fronted Thornbill, and our first Plain-mantled Tit-Spinetail and Rock Earthcreeper. Tufted Tit-Tyrant and White-browed Chat-Tyrant represented the high-elevation flycatchers. We had good views of Brown-backed Mockingbirds and our only Greenish Yellow-Finch. The Andean Swifts reminded us that we were still at elevation.

## **Sun., Nov. 17                      Departures**

Karen, Tamara, and I stayed up for a 3 a.m. flight (through Bogota). Emily and John left at 8 p.m. to Santa Cruz, then Panama. Andrew was picked up by a friend for more South American adventures. Hugo and Michel headed home, and Cesar headed to Lima for another tour. It was a grand three weeks in Bolivia!

Photos by Greg Butcher