
Notes on the avifauna of the upper Bermejo River (Argentina and Bolivia) with a new species for Argentina

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Durante un relevamiento invernal de cinco días por el alto valle del río Bermejo (Argentina y Bolivia), detectamos 140 especies de aves. Entre ellas, registramos por primera vez en la Argentina a *Buteo albonotatus*, y por segunda vez a *Egretta caerulea*. Presentamos aquí datos sobre el estatus e historia natural de 12 especies de aves.

The Bermejo River is the one of the main tributaries of the Paraguay–Paraná River system, and flows from south-west Bolivia to north-east Argentina, through varied habitats from the Andean chain to the plains of the lower Chaco. It is the most important river crossing the dry western Chaco. During more humid times, the Bermejo River possibly acted as a corridor for forest birds between the (interior) Atlantic Forest and the Yungas (montane) Forests of north-west Argentina and south Bolivia¹¹. Despite a number of contributions^{3,4} the avifauna of its mountainous upper course is relatively little known. The area is currently threatened by the development of hydroelectric projects that will flood sections of two national parks (P. N. Tariquia in Bolivia, P. N. Baritu in Argentina).

During 18–22 July 1998, we visited the upper Bermejo valley in Salta province (Argentina) and dpto. Tarija (Bolivia). We also visited some of its tributaries. From north to south these were: Arroyo de las Moras, Río Arazayal (22°40'S 64°25'W, altitude 450 m at its mouth), Río Pescado, and the Río Grande de Tarija (or Tarija). The natural vegetation included dry Chaco woodland (with *Prosopis* sp.) in the bottomlands (up to 350 m altitude), riparian woodlands of 'bobo' *Tessaria integrifolia*, willow *Salix humboldtiana* and the giant grass *Gynerium sagittatum* on the banks of the main rivers, and several types of montane forest on the slopes above 500 m. Characteristic plants of the lower montane forest were the large 'maromas' *Ficus maroma* and the 'pico tucán' *Heliconia subalata*. Forests at 350–500 m were mostly deciduous and dominated by cebil *Anadenanthera colubrina*. Annual rainfall, in the area surveyed, ranges from 800 to over 1,700 mm, with a definite dry season (May–September). However, east-facing mountains receive additional moisture from fogs and low clouds during the dry period (pers. obs.). Forests on the Argentinian side of the Bermejo appeared relatively undisturbed.

We recorded a total of 147 species, and the following accounts deal with the most noteworthy records, or those associated with riparian habitats (which are likely to be affected by the development of the hydroelectric schemes).

Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*

Two juveniles, recognised by their bicoloured bills and greenish legs, and an adult were at the junction of the Bermejo and Tarija rivers (Juntas de San Antonio: 22°51'S 64°20'W) on the Bolivian / Argentinian border, on 21 July 1998. They associated with a flock of Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*, and foraged for fish on the rocky beaches of the river. This is the second record in Argentina, and the first record for Salta Province (and apparently also for Tarija). The first Argentinian record was in Formosa Province⁶.

Fasciated Tiger-heron *Tigrisoma fasciatum*

A pair on Arroyo de las Moras were perched on boulders in the rapids. The species is considered endangered in Argentina⁸, and its habitat would be adversely affected by the construction of the planned hydroelectric plants.

Orinoco Goose *Neochen jubata*

In the 1970s, the upper Bermejo and its tributaries were the stronghold of the species in Argentina¹³. We failed to find the species in the Juntas de San Antonio or in the main tributaries of the Bermejo. The species may be close to extinction in Argentina, where it is considered endangered⁸, and is also declining in Bolivia⁷.

Zone-tailed Hawk *Buteo albonotatus*

One flying above Arroyo de las Moras, on 19 July 1998, is the first Argentinian record. We both have experience with the species. Its silhouette and tilting flight resembled that of Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*, but the diagnostic dark-feathered head was clearly seen. The species has been reported close to the Argentinian border in the Paraguayan chaco⁹ and has also been seen in the subtropical forests of Cochabamba, Bolivia¹⁵.

Great Black Hawk *Buteogallus urubitinga*

Abundant along major rivers. Both adults and juveniles were present, often around deep river pools that swarmed with fish during the dry season.

Solitary Eagle *Harpyhaliaetus solitarius*

A pair soaring over the Río Arazayal. Considered near-threatened on a global level⁵ and vulnerable in Argentina⁸.

Dusky-legged Guan *Penelope obscura*

Guan recognised as belonging to the subspecies *bridgesii* (with prominent white edging to the wing coverts²) were recorded at almost all sites, including Chaco and riparian woodland at Juntas de San Antonio. The lower Bermejo is inhabited by the subspecies *obscura*^{2,14} and perhaps, as hypothesised by Nores¹¹, the two forms could have formerly met along the river.

White-throated Antpitta *Grallaria albigula*

Many heard, and responding to playback, in lower montane forest (at 600 m), 6 km north of the Río Arazayal. Known from few Argentinian localities¹³, and previously only recorded above 800 m¹⁴.

White-necked Thrush *Turdus albicollis*

Briefly seen and tape-recorded singing in forest undergrowth near the Río Arazayal. Previously recorded at this locality by Olrog¹² but few other records in north-west Argentina.

Yellowish Pipit *Anthus lutescens*

The only pipit observed, and frequent on the Juntas de San Antonio, where it foraged on sandy and rocky shores, and also on temporary pools covered with mats of drying algae. Its song is very similar to those in eastern Argentina.

Crested Oropendola *Psarocolius decumanus*

Flocks of up to 50 birds observed in all vegetation types in the valley, from Chaco to montane forest, and including banana and citrus plantations.

Giant Cowbird *Scaphidura oryzivora*

First reported in Salta by Nores & Yzurieta¹⁰. We recorded groups of up to 10 birds, usually on the ground in the banks or dry channels of the Bermejo, and turning small stones while foraging. The species appears to be resident in this area.

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