
Birding in Parque Nacional Noel Kempff Mercado, Bolivia

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Cotinga 16 (2001): 91–96

Más de seicentas especies de aves se han registrado en el Parque Nacional Noel Kempff Mercado, que extiende sobre 1.6 millones de hectarias en el noreste de Bolivia, en la frontera con Brasil. El Parque se encuentra donde se reúnen dos de las más importantes ecosistemas de Sudamérica: los bosques de Amazonia y las pampas del Escudo Precámbrico. Por esto, el parque tiene una avifauna diversa y interesante incluyendo varias especies cuasi-endémicas al Brasil, como *Pipile cufubi*, *Pyrrhura perlata*, *Pteroglossus bitorquatus*, *Melanopareia torquata*, *Pipra nattereri* y *Sporophila nigrorufa*. El campamento principal del parque se llama Flor de Oro y está situado entre el río Iténez y una pequeña pampa. En el río y sus bahías se ven muchas especies comunes de aves acuáticas y algunos mamíferos como tal *Pteronura brasiliensis* y *Inia geoffrensis*, mientras en la pampa se encuentran una población importante de *Sporophila nigrorufa* y varias otras especies típicas de la región como *Crypturellus parvirostris*, *Ramphastos toco*, *Formicivora rufa*, y la muy hermosa *Heliactin bilophum*. En el centro del parque se puede visitar el campamento Los Fierros. En la pampa extensa de este se ven muchas de las mismas especies que en Flor de Oro y otras como *Rhea americana*, *Mimus saturninus*, y *Cypsnagra hirundinacea*. Este sitio es también uno de los mejores en el parque para ver el boroche *Chrysocyon brachyurus*. Alrededor del campamento y de la pampa en Los Fierros hay bosques de varios tipos, que son más ricos en aves que los bosques en Flor de Oro. Aquí se encuentran algunas especies de distribución restringida como *Pipile cufubi*, *Pyrrhura perlata*, *Pteroglossus bitorquatus*, *Pipra nattereri* y *Penelope superciliosus*. Ornólogos que quisieran visitar el PNNKM deben ponerse en contacto con el departamento de ecoturismo de la Fundación Amigos de la Naturaleza en Santa Cruz de la Sierra.

Bolivia is cheap, friendly, generally safe and, with nearly 1,400 species to offer the adventurous birder, one of the most exciting birding destinations on Earth. Over 600 species are found in Parque Nacional Noel Kempff Mercado (PNNKM), in the north-east of the country on the border with Brazil. Covering 1.6 million ha, the park lies at the meeting place of two of the great ecosystems of South America, the savannas of the Brazilian Shield and rainforests of Amazonia. For this reason it has a fascinating and diverse avifauna, including a number of species otherwise found only in Brazil, such as Red-throated Piping-guan *Pipile cufubi*, Crimson-bellied Parakeet *Pyrrhura perlata*, Red-necked Araçari *Pteroglossus bitorquatus*, Collared Crescentchest *Melanopareia torquata*, Snowy-capped Manakin *Pipra nattereri* and Black-and-tawny Seed-eater *Sporophila nigrorufa*.

The park is essentially an island between four rivers; the Iténez, Verde, Tarvo and Paraguá, and its eastern border is dominated by a massive table mountain, the Meseta Huanchaca. The year is marked by wet (October–March) and dry seasons (April–September). Many species undertake local movements and inter-seasonal changes in behaviour, and austral migrants, notably many tyrant flycatchers, are present only in the dry season, but the majority of PNNKM's specialities are resident and can be observed year-round. The park's lowland savannas are seasonally inundated and birding in the wet season inevitably involves getting very wet. Birders visiting PNNKM should divide their time between Flor de Oro in the north and Los Fierros in the south. If financially possible, you may also wish to visit Huanchaca Uno, atop the meseta, which is a short flight by light aircraft from Flor de Oro and hosts some of the area's specialities. The park is managed by Fundación Amigos de la Naturaleza (FAN), which is based in Santa Cruz city and must be contacted before visiting PNNKM.

Flor de Oro

Designed with wealthy tourists in mind, Flor de Oro offers fine accommodation and excellent food for such a remote lodge, but this is reflected in its prices. Access is normally by light aircraft from Santa Cruz. The flight takes c.3.5 hours and affords spectacular views of the mosaic of savanna and forest covering the park's lowlands and meseta. Visitors for whom the flight is prohibitively expensive can travel by road to the community of Piso Firme (three days in dry conditions) and then, depending on boat availability, by river to Flor de Oro (several hours that, depending on season, can provide excellent birding and mammal watching). The three-day road journey from Santa Cruz to Piso Firme could be prolonged by a stay in Los Fierros, which is accessed from the community of Florida (two days from Santa Cruz). If you prefer not to hire a vehicle, it may be possible to book spaces in a FAN vehicle travelling to the park, but there is essentially no public transport into the area. All visitors to Piso Firme should be aware that there is a significant malaria problem within the community.

Flor de Oro is a small savanna bordered by extensive rainforest, the cliffs of the meseta and the río Iténez. It affords opportunities to see many of tropical South America's classic birds, as well as several local rarities of interest to experienced Neotropical birders. Visitors should arrange (with FAN in Santa Cruz) to take a boat trip to the extensive *bahías* (bays that meander from the main river), at least once by day and once by night. In the daytime, the *bahías* offer excellent chances of seeing Hoatzin *Opisthocomus hoazin*, Scarlet Macaw *Ara macao*, Capped Heron *Pilherodius pileatus*, Southern Screamer *Chauna torquata* and five species of kingfisher. Sunbittern *Eurypyga helias* and Sungrebe *Heliornis fulica* are easiest to observe in the driest period of the year (June–September). Frequently observed mammals include Pink River Dolphin *Inia geoffrensis*, Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* Brown Capuchin

Cebus apella and Spider Monkey *Ateles belzebuth chamek*. (Spider monkeys at PNNKM were formerly regarded as a race of Black Spider Monkey *A. paniscus*, but a recent taxonomic revision³ considers them to be a race of White-bellied Spider Monkey *A. belzebuth*. As the animals in PNNKM are pure black, the misleading common name White-bellied Spider Monkey is avoided here.) At night, you may be able to approach Black Caiman *Melanosuchus niger* to within metres, while Grey *Nyctibius griseus* and Great Potoos *N. grandis*, Pauraque *Nyctidromus albicollis* and Band-tailed Nighthawk *Nyctiprogne leucopyga* are often seen, the latter usually at dusk.

Flor de Oro's most exciting habitat is its savanna and birders should explore the trails that cut through it, especially that which passes through several wet-season territories of the endangered Black-and-tawny Seedeater to reach the Isla de la Orquídea, a forest island, which during the dry season boasts a huge roost of egrets, herons and storks. Common birds here include Small-billed Tinamou *Crypturellus parvirostris*, Toco Toucan *Ramphastos toco*, Blue-and-yellow Macaw *Ara ararauna*, Orange-winged Amazona *amazonica* and Yellow-crowned Parrots *A. ochrocephala*, Peach-fronted Parakeet *Aratinga aurea*, Yellow-chevroned Parakeet *Brotoyeris chiriri*, Rusty-backed Antwren *Formicivora rufa*, White Woodpecker *Melanerpes candidus*, Wedge-tailed Grass-finch *Emberizoides herbicola* and Black-faced Tanager *Schistoclamys melanopis*. More time in the savanna may be required to find scarcer species such as Red-bellied Macaw *Ara manilata*, Long-winged Harrier *Circus buffoni*, the exquisite Horned Sungem *Heliactin bilophum* and extremely shy Ocellated Crake *Micropygia schomburgkii*.

While the forest at Flor de Oro is relatively poor, many species are nevertheless easy to see there, including Blackish Antbird *Cercomacra nigrescens*, Amazonian Antshrike *Thamnophilus amazonicus*, Band-tailed Antbird *Hypocnemoides maculicauda*, Black-throated Antbird *Myrmeciza atrothorax*, Straight-billed Woodcreeper *Xiphorhynchus picus*, Rufous-tailed Jacamar *Galbula ruficauda* and Moustached Wren *Thryothorus genibarbis*. Grey Antbird *Cercomacra cinerascens* is common but difficult to see as it habitually lurks high in liana tangles. Rarity-hunters should listen for the 'ticking' call of Zimmer's Tody-tyrant *Hemitriccus minimus*, which has a restricted global distribution, but is quite often seen here. Better forest is found on the trail to Lago Caimán, but this is a long walk from Flor de Oro through savanna subject to deep flooding in the wet season.

Huanchaca Uno

Those who can afford the flight from Flor de Oro to Huanchaca Uno (20 minutes each way) should consider spending a day there to search for some of the park's Brazilian Shield specialities. Here, in the savanna, the endangered Rufous-sided Pygmy-tyrant *Euscarthmus rufomarginatus* is found, as are White-banded Tanager *Neothraupis fasciata* and Black-throated Saltator *Saltator atricollis*. However, visitors to Huanchaca Uno should be aware that, in the dry season, bees and other insects can make the site literally unbearable.

Los Fierros

Los Fierros is reached by crossing the río Paraguá at Florida, which is two days by road from Santa Cruz and a day from Piso Firme. Once across the river, it takes c.1 hour, driving through diverse forest, to reach the camp. Razor-billed Curassow *Mitu tuberosa* is almost guaranteed on this road and regularly seen mammals include Tapir *Tapirus terrestris*, Puma *Felis concolor* and Jaguar *Panthera onca*.

The camp, though basic, is paradise for Neotropical birders. In one corner stands a dead tree used daily by roosting Yellow-tufted Woodpecker *Melanerpes cruentatus*, Chestnut-fronted Macaw *Ara severa* and groups of Chestnut-eared *Pteroglossus castanotis* and Lettered Araçaris *P. incriptus*. Occasionally, the rare Red-necked Araçari also visits the camp, which has many fruiting *Cecropia* and fig trees that regularly attract Spix's Guan *Penelope jaquacu*, Red-throated *Pipile cumanensis* and Blue-throated Piping-guans *P. cujubi* and confusing hybrids between the two. Blue-and-yellow Macaw, Turquoise-fronted Parrot *Amazona aestiva* and Bat Falcon *Falco ruficularis* are also seen almost daily in camp.

The adjacent airstrip is fringed by tall forest, which provides excellent opportunities to find larger forest birds such as piping-guans, Cuvier's *Ramphastos tucanus* and Yellow-ridged Toucans *R. vitellinus*, Bare-necked Fruitcrow *Gymnoderus foetidus*, Screaming Piha *Lipaugus vociferans*, Red-throated *Daptrius americanus* and Black Caracaras *D. ater*, Blue-headed Parrot *Pionus menstruus* and Olive Oropendola *Psarocolius bifasciatus*. Raptors occasionally seen over the airstrip include two of South America's most breathtaking birds, Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja* and Ornate Hawk-eagle *Spizaetus ornatus*.

A road from the camp passes through 3 km of forest before reaching an extensive savanna. Trails leading from the forested section of this road and the airstrip are productive for forest birding, as is the road from Florida. Ask park guards for directions to the trails. Most of the species at Flor de Oro are common here too, as are Reddish Hermit *Phaethornis ruber*, Red-headed Manakin *Pipra rubrocapilla*, Chestnut-tailed Antbird *Myrmeciza hemimelaena*, Warbling Antbird *Hypocnemis cantator* and Short-tailed Pygmy-tyrant *Myiornis ecaudatus*. Moderately common species including Snethlage's Tody-tyrant *Hemitriccus minor*, Fiery-capped Manakin *Machaeopterus pyrocephalus*, White-shouldered *Thamnophilus aethiops* and Plain-winged Antshrikes *T. schistaceus* and Brazilian Tinamou *Crypturellus strigulosus* are almost invariably located by voice, so birders should familiarise themselves with these species' vocalisations. Also listen for the shrieks of Crimson-bellied Parakeet passing overhead. Canopy flocks here are typically announced by the calls of Buff-cheeked Greenlet *Hylophilus muscicapinus* and Forest Elaenia *Myiopagis gaimardii*, and usually contain Paradise Tanager *Tangara chilensis*, Yellow-rumped Tanager *Hemithraupis flavicollis*, Hooded Tanager *Nemosia pileata* and Rufous-winged Antwren *Herpsilochmus rufimarginatus*, with occasional highlights such as Grey-chested Greenlet *Hylophilus semicinereus*, Tooth-billed Wren *Odontorchilus cinereus* and

Rose-breasted Chat *Granatellus pelzelni*.

After 3 km in the forest, the road extends a further 10 km through various types of savanna where Plain-crested Elaenia *Elaenia cristata*, Collared Crescentchest, Pale-breasted Spinetail *Synallaxis albescens* and Chalk-browed Mockingbird *Mimus saturninus* are all common. Birders should also search for Swallow-tailed Hummingbird *Eupetomena macroura*, Horned Sungem, Campo Suiriri *Suiriri affinis*, Grey Monjita *Xolmis cinerea*, White-eared Puffbird *Nystalus chacuru* and the spectacular display of White-rumped Tanager *Cypsnagra hirundinacea*. The last-named species favours taller, more shrubby savanna, such as that in the final kilometre before the road re-enters forest. At c.9 km into the savanna, a road to the left leads to the base of the meseta and the start of a difficult ascent on foot, known as Los Españoles. The forest/savanna interface along the road has Rusty-margined Guan *Penelope superciliaris*, while the tall humid forest at the base of the meseta is the best in Los Fierros and contains the beautiful Snowy-capped Manakin. It is here that understory flocks, announced by Red-crowned Ant-tanagers *Habia rubica*, are most easily located. These typically contain Red-stained Woodpecker *Veniliornis affinis*, White-fronted Nunbird *Monasa morphoeus*, Buff-throated *Xiphorhynchus guttatus* and Lineated Woodcreepers *Lepidocolaptes albolineatus*, Wing-barred Piprites *Piprites chloris* and Flame-crested *Tachyphonus cristatus* and White-shouldered Tanagers *T. luctuosus*. Only experienced drivers should attempt to negotiate this road, which may have hazards such as fallen trees and collapsed bridges, and only those in excellent health should consider walking the Los Españoles trail, which scales the side of the meseta to reach an open savanna known as Huanchaca Dos, where the highly restricted Pampas Deer *Ozotoceros bezoarticus* is found.

All visits to Los Fierros should include as many night drives as possible as the area is excellent for nocturnal birds and mammals. The camp itself usually has calling Great Potoo, Spectacled Owl *Pulsatrix perspicillata*, Pauraque and Little Nightjar *Caprimulgus parvulus*. Crested Owl *Lophotrix cristata*, Tawny-bellied Screech-owl *Otus watsonii*, Ocellated Poorwill *Nyctiphrynus ocellatus* and Rufous Nightjar *Caprimulgus rufus* are often heard here, but are very difficult to see. In the savanna, Scissor-tailed Nightjar *Hydropsalis brasiliana* is common on the road, especially during migration when it can be abundant, and during the wet season the two-note song of Spot-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus maculicaudus* is heard here too. This is one of the best places in the park for seeing Maned Wolf *Chrysocyon brachyurus*, which leaves scats, prints and its unmistakable scent along the entire road. Tapirs are also relatively common in the savanna and surrounding forest.

Note

A detailed description of the avifauna of PNNKM is available in Bates *et al.*¹. Our article is not intended as such and refers only to species that birders have realistic chances of encountering during a short trip to the park. Many of the rarest birds at PNNKM, which are consequently of most interest to birders, are either seen very infrequently, e.g. Gould's Toucanet *Selenidera gouldii*, Rusty-necked Piculet *Picumnus fuscus* and Black-girdled Barbet *Capito dayi*, or are usually found only in remote areas of the meseta, e.g. Campo Miner *Geobates poecilopterus*, Curl-crested Jay *Cyanocorax cristatellus*, Sharp-tailed Tyrant *Culicivora caudacuta*, Blue Finch *Porphyrospiza caeruleascens* and Coal-crested Finch *Charitospiza eucosma*. It is possible to see some of the cerrado specialities at Huanchaca Uno or Huanchaca Dos, but do not expect to find them without devoting considerable time and expenditure to camping in remote and hostile areas. Birders visiting the forests atop the meseta should be aware that in recent years a number of people have contracted leishmaniasis there.

Planning a trip

For a complete and current listing of trips, costs and departure dates please refer to the following web site: www.seebolivia.com, where you will be able to identify a responsible tour operator capable of helping you organise a visit to Noel Kempff. Only by prior arrangement can spaces in boats, planes and vehicles be reserved. Various packages are available, which in Los Fierros include the cheaper option of self-catering. The park is extremely remote and potentially dangerous, so birders must respect the advice and instructions of the park guards. Always inform them where you are going and when you plan to return, and accept with grace if they insist on accompanying you.

A near-complete list of the park's birds was published in Killeen & Schulenberg⁵. Most of the park's species are illustrated in either Hilty & Brown⁴ or de la Peña & Rumboll⁷. Several Brazilian near-endemics are depicted in Sick¹⁰ and all passerines are described in Ridgely & Tudor^{8,9}. Sjoerd Mayer's excellent CD-ROM of *Birds of Bolivia*⁶ includes many recordings made in PNNKM and is invaluable for learning the calls of many of the park's specialities. Many of the park's mammals are described and illustrated in Emmons & Feer², and all species recorded there are listed in Killeen & Schulenberg⁵.

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