

Punta Rasa, South America's first vagrant trap?

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La región de Punta Rasa, en la provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina, se propone como la primer 'trampa' de aves errantes de Sudamérica. Su posición geográfica, forma de península y diversidad de ambientes, aparentemente atrae a aves perdidas. Se presenta una lista de especies errantes, incluyendo datos sobre su presencia en la zona. Se clarifica la situación de algunas especies previamente consideradas hipotéticas para Buenos Aires y se proporcionan además datos de dos especies nuevas para la provincia.

Introduction

Bird migration dynamics in South America are little known. It is only recently that much attention has been paid to understanding migration and seasonal movements within the continent⁵. Even less is known concerning vagrancy in the continent, and, due to the lack of baseline data for many areas, vagrants can be mistaken for range extensions. Regular sightings in North America of Neotropical migrant species such as Fork-tailed Flycatcher *Tyrannus savana*, Tropical Kingbird *T. melancholicus*, and occasional records of rarer taxa such as White-collared Swift *Streptoprocne zonaris*, Variegated Flycatcher *Empidonomus varius* and Brown-chested Martin *Progne tapera* demonstrate that, like Nearctic breeding migrants, Neotropical migrants also become disoriented and can be found far out of range. This note reports on unusual sightings made while conducting research at Punta Rasa, Buenos Aires, Argentina, summarises observations made there by others, and suggests that the relatively large number of rarities observed there qualify the area as a vagrant trap. As far as I know, this is the first site documented to show vagrant trap qualities in continental South America.

Punta Rasa is a peninsula c.350 km south of Buenos Aires city, near the town of San Clemente del Tuyú, Buenos Aires province. The site is regularly visited by foreign and local ornithologists and birders. Estación Biológica Punta Rasa conducts a bird banding programme in the area, and also focuses research on terns and shorebirds that use the area, as well as engaging in conservation education. As such, it is a relatively well-studied site and has gained prominence in Argentina as a good area to watch birds, particularly spectacular migrating flocks of shorebirds. Less attention has been paid to passerines, but diligent observations by the biological station personnel, along with those of visiting birders, have resulted in some surprising finds. I include such records here, particularly as these are not well known outside Argentina.

Punta Rasa possesses a diverse set of habitats, including native pampas grassland, saltmarsh, freshwater marsh, thickets largely composed of hackberry *Celtis tala* known as 'talaes', tidal

mudflats, sand-dunes, and human-altered habitats such as non-native forest near the lighthouse. The lighthouse grounds have old stands of introduced tree species, principally cypress and *Eucalyptus*, forming a tall woodland isolated by several kilometres from other similar habitats or hackberry woodlands.

My observations were made while performing a study of Screaming *Molothrus rufoaxillaris* and Bay-winged Cowbirds *Molothrus badius* during 15 October 1991–14 January 1992 and 4 November 1992–16 January 1993. All observations were made unsystematically. Most time was spent walking around the site conducting nest checks. During the periods I spent there, a total of 193 species was recorded within 25 km of Punta Rasa. The following list highlights some of the more interesting observations made there.

Species accounts

Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*

One juvenile on 21 December 1991. Regarded as an annual summer visitor to Punta Rasa but seldom remains for any length of time (E. Bremer pers. comm.). The maximum day count is seven, all juveniles¹⁶. The species is generally considered a vagrant or accidental visitor to Argentina (M. Pearman and J. Mazar Barnett unpubl.), with most records from coastal Buenos Aires¹⁷.

Andean Flamingo *Phoenicopterus andinus*

One adult on 16 December 1991 was relocated on 26 December 1991. During the second observation I obtained distant, but diagnostic photographs of the Andean Flamingo within a flock of Chilean Flamingo *Phoenicopterus chilensis*. The photo has been deposited with the Asociación Ornitológica del Plata (AOP). Steullet & Deautier²⁵ cite a previous record of this species from Buenos Aires, province but it was not included in Ringuelet & Aramburu²⁴. More recently, Narosky & Di Giacomo¹⁷ include this species as hypothetical for the province based on previous citations. No substantiated evidence exists that the species had occurred in Buenos Aires previous to this record. Andean Flamingo is rarely

observed away from the high Andes, although there is a population at Mar Chiquita, Córdoba province, and there are a number of records from extreme south-east Brazil³. In addition, Puna Flamingo *P. jamesi* has been recorded from Chubut, Argentina²⁰. It appears that these flamingos may be more prone to wandering than previously suspected, and that flocks of Chilean Flamingo should be carefully scrutinised for other species.

Plumbeous Kite *Ictinia plumbea*

Peter Burke and I observed and photographed four individuals on 24 November 1991. First located in early morning perching on tall *Eucalyptus* trees, E. Bremer of the Estación Biológica also observed the birds. Photos have been deposited at AOP. Two were adults and the others immatures. They arrived following a huge movement of Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni* following a swarm of migrant dragonflies⁹. There is one previous province record: a juvenile captured by Runnacles at the nearby town of General Lavalle²⁵. Plumbeous Kite rarely reaches farther south than Corrientes¹⁹.

Willet *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*

Observed three times feeding on the tidal mudflats during both years. At least two birds were involved as one seen on 27–29 December 1991 was not as heavily barred below as that observed on 7 January 1992. This species has been seen at Punta Rasa several times previously and is probably annual (E. Bremer pers. comm.). However, Narosky & Di Giacomo¹⁷ only note one province record, also at Punta Rasa. It is unknown to which subspecies Argentine birds belong.

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*

The first record of this species for South America was of one photographed at Punta Rasa during December 1987–January 1988²³. There have been two subsequent continent records, including another in Buenos Aires province, at Saladillo¹⁷, and one in Brazil¹⁴.

Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*

One basic-plumaged individual observed feeding with White-rumped Sandpipers *Calidris fuscicollis*, on 25 December 1991, is the second record for Buenos Aires province. The first was a flock of six in November 1979, at nearby San Clemente del Tuyú¹⁷.

Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus*

On the morning of 1 January 1993, Dr Jim Rising located an alternate-plumaged dowitcher foraging on the mudflats at San Clemente del Tuyú. It was too distant to identify positively, but appeared to be a Short-billed Dowitcher. Fortunately, I was able to relocate what was presumably the same bird near the tip of Punta Rasa on 8 January 1993 at much

closer quarters. The spotted pattern and general coloration was consistent with Short-billed Dowitcher, perhaps of the subspecies *caurinus*^{10,11}. As it flew, it gave the diagnostic *tu tu tu* call of this species.

There are few records of dowitchers from Argentina, and most of these have been in basic plumage, making visual identification impossible². Curiously, a specimen from Buenos Aires province²⁹ was in definitive alternate plumage at a time of year when it should have been in basic plumage (25 October). Zotta²⁹ identified it as a Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*. However, it appears that this specimen is more likely a Short-billed Dowitcher (M. Pearman pers. comm.), but should be compared with a large series to ascertain its identity correctly. Based on Zotta's identification of this specimen, other Argentine records of dowitchers have been assumed to be Long-billed Dowitchers^{17,29}. However, Long-billed Dowitcher winters farther north than Short-billed and is, therefore, probably less likely to occur in Argentina. Clarification of the status of either or both of species in Argentina is required. The sight record from January 1993 is the first in Argentina of which the identity was verified by voice. Of the remaining nine dowitcher records, three were at Punta Rasa (M. Pearman and J. Mazar Barnett unpubl.).

Long-tailed Jaeger *Stercorarius longicaudus*

A basic-plumaged adult was seen with a juvenile Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus* on 16 October 1991. Recently, the wintering grounds have been discovered c.200 nautical miles offshore from Viedma, Argentina²⁶. This pelagic species is seldom seen from shore, particularly in South America. However, Wetmore²⁷ observed 1,200 jaegers, of which 94% were this species, during a severe storm on 4–7 November 1920 in the region of Punta Rasa. There is only one other record for this species in Buenos Aires¹⁷.

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*

A basic-plumaged individual was located within a flock of 2,500 Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* on 26 December 1991. Another was discovered in similar circumstances on 31 December 1992. There are five published records of Black Tern in Buenos Aires province¹⁷, including two from Punta Rasa^{15,17} and one from nearby General Lavalle¹⁷. There are now at least 10 province records, half or so from Punta Rasa (M. Pearman pers. comm.).

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*

A largely basic-plumaged adult was within a flock of 400 Common Terns and 2,000 South American Terns *Sterna hirundinacea* on 6 November 1992. The difference in body proportions was readily apparent when next to the Common Terns. It was both

shorter billed and distinctly shorter legged than Common Tern. It retained some vestiges of the dark grey breeding plumage on the underparts. I systematically searched flocks of Common Tern for this species on many other occasions without success, suggesting that this species is genuinely rare here. Few mentions of the species are available from the province^{22,24} and Narosky & Di Giacomo¹⁷ treat its occurrence as hypothetical and strictly pelagic in the region.

Least Tern *Sterna antillarum*

An immature was observed on 5 January 1993. The identification criteria to separate this species from the similar Yellow-billed Tern *Sterna supercilialis* are poorly understood. However, immature Yellow-billed Tern has a yellow bill, while young Least Tern has a black bill. The bill of Yellow-billed Tern appears large for the overall size of the species. The bird observed in January 1993 had a small black bill. On 24 November 1998 one in basic plumage was seen at Punta Rasa within a large flock of terns (D. Fisher pers. comm.). There are three other records for this species in Buenos Aires: one was captured at Punta Rasa²¹ and, of the other two sightings, one was also there¹⁸.

Sandwich Tern *Sterna (s.) sandvicensis*

Previously known from four records in the province, including one from Punta Rasa¹⁷, I observed singles, either immatures or basic-plumaged adults usually with other terns, on six occasions: 8 & 9 December 1991 (different individuals), 26 December 1991, 6 January 1992, 8 November 1992 and 31 December 1992. The bird on 9 December 1991 was unusual in having an almost entirely black crown and no yellow tip to the bill. The more common Cayenne Tern *Sterna (s.) eurygnatha* is usually considered conspecific with Sandwich Tern. At Punta Rasa, Cayenne Terns with dark bill-bases are commonly observed, but differ structurally from Sandwich Tern in having longer bills and legs and being appreciably larger. In addition, the yellow bill-tip of Sandwich is smaller and more strongly demarcated than on variant Cayenne Terns, which have a greater and less clearly demarcated area of yellow on the bill. These dark-billed Cayenne Terns are more likely to be an uncommon variant rather than hybrids between this and Sandwich Tern, as the reported hybrid zone is in northernmost South America. Sandwich Terns observed at Punta Rasa are presumed to be overwintering North American breeders. One immature, on 8 November 1992, had a metal leg band and was perhaps banded in North America.

Spot-winged Pigeon *Columba maculosa*

One in flight with a flock of Picazuro Pigeon *Columba picazuro* on 20 November 1992. This

species is typical of chaco and thorny woodlands and is largely restricted to the west and north of the province with scattered records in the pampas of the east¹⁷. However, it may be more overlooked and much more common in the east than previously considered.

Blue-crowned Parakeet *Aratinga acuticaudata*

Another chaco species that has been recorded at Punta Rasa: an adult on 27 November 1991 and possibly a juvenile on 7 January 1992. The second bird was bathing, making positive ageing difficult, but its head appeared entirely green. Both birds were associated with Monk Parakeets *Myiopsitta monacha*. The species has been observed previously at Punta Rasa (E. Bremer pers. comm.). A strong possibility exists that these records involve cagebird escapes, but the species could as easily have arrived as a vagrant. The birds I observed showed no sign of cage wear or evidence of captivity. Unlike White-eyed *Aratinga leucophthalmus* and Black-hooded Parakeets *Nandayus nenday*, this species has not established a feral population (from escapees) around Buenos Aires¹⁷. Talar woodlands extend north creating a corridor with the espinal woodlands of Mesopotamia, perhaps permitting species such as Blue-crowned Parakeet to range south within suitable habitat (M. Pearman pers. comm.).

Burrowing Parrot *Cyanoliseus patagonus*

One was present during 1–5 December 1991 and two on 5–6 November 1992, while 12 were seen on 30 November 1992. I attributed the first observation to an escaped cagebird but the larger numbers recorded subsequently forced me re-evaluate this hypothesis. Formerly, this species was an uncommon visitor to the area⁷ and is still relatively common in the south of the province¹⁷. All birds observed at Punta Rasa were of the expected Patagonian subspecies *C. p. patagonus*⁶. The species is now extremely rare this far north in Buenos Aires province.

Chestnut-bellied Nighthawk *Lurocalis nattereri*

At sunset on 11 November 1992, I observed this odd, bat-like nightjar flying over a field near Punta Rasa lighthouse. Sufficient light was available to observe the paler throat and lack of pale wing markings. It was relocated in late afternoon the following day, when it was heard calling. An imitation of its whistled *tu-wheet* call successfully attracted the bird and I was able to show it to P. Bremer of the biological station. The calls matched recordings of *L. nattereri* in Hardy *et al.*⁸. This species is an austral migrant, reaching northernmost Argentina in spring, where it breeds. This is the first report from Buenos Aires and probably the first south of Misiones province.

Ashy-tailed Swift *Chaetura (andrei) meridionalis*
This austral migrant has not previously been observed south of Córdoba. On 12 November 1992, one was observed over the road to the lighthouse (M. Rumboll & S. Hilty pers. comm.). This is the first report in Buenos Aires. It is interesting to note that the swift and nighthawk arrived within one day of each other and share a similar breeding range as well as being austral migrants. A mummified corpse of this species was recovered inside a building on the Falkland Islands, suggesting a tendency for long-distance vagrancy²⁸. Marín¹³ recommends that species status be accorded to this taxon, formerly treated as *C. andrei meridionalis*, and suggests the English name Sick's Swift.

Southern Beardless Tyrannulet *Camptostoma obsoletum*

Members of AOP located one at the south end of San Clemente del Tuyú on 15 November 1992 (M. Babarskas, J. Mazar Barnett pers. comm.). I observed this species on four occasions, involving 3–4 individuals, during 1992: a fresh-plumaged juvenile on 19 November, one heard on 25 November and singles on 10 and 14 December (the last was adult). Apparently, this species has been observed at least once previously at Punta Rasa (Moschione *vide* G. Battaglia) but no details are available. This is a rare species in Buenos Aires; only recently has it been proven to breed in the extreme north of the province¹⁷. The Punta Rasa records are the southernmost for this migratory species. More recently, however, this species has been regularly observed at Punta Rasa (J. Mazar Barnett pers. comm.) and it is unclear whether the species' range has expanded southward or if all records pertain to migrants. The first hypothesis appears more likely.

Streaked Flycatcher *Myiodynastes maculatus*

I recorded this species on 6 and 20 December 1991. Both individuals were only present for one day. Streaked Flycatcher is an austral migrant that is common in the north of the province, probably breeding south to Punta Lara near the city of La Plata¹². The Punta Rasa records presumably relate to overshooting southbound migrants or wandering individuals.

Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*

On 6 November 1992 a well-worn adult (particularly on the tail) was found in a small bush near the lighthouse. This is the second report for Punta Rasa (E. Bremer & M. Rumboll observed one several years ago). These are the only reports from Buenos Aires province of this long-distance migrant and it is not listed by Narosky & Di Giacomo¹⁷. In Argentina, Eastern Kingbird only regularly reaches Misiones province, where it is rare. However, the

species is prone to vagrancy and has been recorded on the Falkland Islands (January) and South Georgia Island (November)²⁸.

Plush-crested Jay *Cyanocorax chrysops*

One in a small park in San Clemente del Tuyú on 15 December 1991 was almost certainly an escaped cagebird, but as Narosky & Di Giacomo¹⁷ cite records from the Federal Capital and note that some may have been true vagrants, I have included it here.

White-necked Thrush *Turdus albicollis*

Bremer & Bremer⁴ reported a pair at Punta Rasa in February 1985. This species regularly ranges no further south than southern Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil and Uruguay, but has been recently observed in north-east Corrientes (M. Pearman pers. comm.). It is not known if this species is migratory.

Swallow Tanager *Tersinia viridis*

Bremer & Bremer⁴ discuss an observation of a female Swallow Tanager that remained for several days in January 1985 near the lighthouse. Swallow Tanager does not normally range further south than Misiones province, but is known to be migratory. There are three records in Buenos Aires province¹⁷.

Fawn-breasted Tanager *Pipraeidea melanonota*

This species appears to be spreading south in Argentina (G. Pugnali pers. comm.) and is found regularly south to Corrientes province. There is at least one record from Punta Rasa¹⁷.

Blue-black Grassquit *Volatinia jacarina*

An adult male was in the woods near the lighthouse on 7 January 1992. Blue-black Grassquit reaches the north-easternmost part of the province, where it is rare¹⁷ and this is the southernmost record of this species.

Bobolink *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*

M. Rumboll (pers. comm.) photographed an alternate-plumaged male at Punta Rasa during May in the early 1980s. Most records of this species in Buenos Aires are historical: Narosky & Di Giacomo¹⁷ list only two records in the province during the last 33 years. All other records of Bobolink in Buenos Aires are from the north-east of the province.

Discussion

The above records demonstrate that, like Point Reyes (California), Point Pelee (Ontario) and Cape May (New Jersey), the mix of a peninsula, a large body of water, mudflats and some trees, makes Punta Rasa a regular trap for vagrant birds. While the list of vagrants is not, at present, long, observer coverage at Punta Rasa has been only a tiny fraction of that at the above-mentioned North American

locales. I propose that Punta Rasa is the first *bona fide* vagrant trap identified in mainland South America, but that further scrutiny will identify many more. In particular, the desert oases of Chile (and probably Peru) have promise as vagrant traps.

On a disturbing note, the tip of Punta Rasa has recently been turned into a 'theme park' called Bahía Aventura. While the trees have been left standing, much of the understorey has been altered and the grass is now regularly mown. It is unknown how this will affect landbird use of the area, but the greater numbers of tourists at the site will surely affect its ornithological importance. The area supports several threatened species such as Dot-winged Crane *Porzana spiloptera* and Olog's Gull *Larus atlanticus* whose populations may be impacted by this development. Some positive benefits are likely, due to the Biological Station's education programmes that are sponsored by Bahía Aventura. An entrance fee is now payable in order to visit the site. Birders are encouraged to visit Punta Rasa to assess the effects of this new development and perhaps to find more vagrants.

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