

&gt;&gt; GLOBALLY THREATENED BIRD WHITE-BEARDED ANTSHRIKE

# Finding a secretive bamboo specialist in Argentina's Atlantic Forest: the White-bearded Antshrike *Biatas nigropectus*

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Nacho Areta explores an excellent Argentine site to see White-bearded Antshrike and hints at the need for taxonomic work comparing the two populations of this globally threatened species.

**T**he Atlantic Forest endemic White-bearded Antshrike *Biatas nigropectus* is among the most difficult of Neotropical birds to see under natural circumstances. It inhabits dense bamboo and rarely vocalises. The species is considered Vulnerable<sup>1</sup> and the main threat it faces seems to be the clearing of its preferred bamboo stands<sup>2</sup>. It has two apparently disjunct populations: the first along the south-east coast of Brazil, and the second in Argentina and inland south-east Brazil<sup>5,6</sup>. Most sightings come from

Itatiaia National Park and Intervalles State Park, Brazil, in the north of its distribution<sup>1</sup>.

## Studying Argentine bamboo

Neotropical ornithologists are becoming increasingly interested in the specialist birds that exploit the changing resources of bamboo. However, not all bamboos are equal, and, accordingly, the White-bearded Antshrike is extremely selective in its habitat requirements in



Figures 1–2. Male White-bearded Antshrike *Biatas nigropectus* at PP Cruce Caballero, Argentina (K. Cockle). Note the extensive black in the chest and absence of a white supercilium

Argentina: so far, it has only been found in dense, continuous and mature stands of the thorny bamboo *Guadua trinii*, known locally as *yatevó* or *tacuara brava*<sup>2</sup>. Records from Brazil are associated with other bamboo species, mostly in the genus *Merostachys*<sup>1,6</sup>.

Until recently, where and how to find this intriguing antbird in Argentina was a mystery. After its first sightings in Argentina in the 1940s-60s, the species remained unreported in the country until the 1990s<sup>4</sup>. Fortunately, extensive playback-based surveys in suitable habitat in Misiones province have revealed several new sites.

Alejandro Bodrati and Kristina Cockle<sup>2</sup> have obtained more records of the White-bearded Antshrike during the last four years than were known for the species in Argentina prior to the 1990s. In particular, the species can regularly be found in the protected Parque Provincial (PP) Cruce Caballero and its surroundings, hence greatly increasing the chances of visiting birders finding this peculiar and handsome antbird. During the non-breeding season most records are of males; females are rarely encountered since they respond more slowly to playback<sup>2</sup>.



Figures 3-4. Male White-bearded Antshrike at Intervalles, Brazil (A. Grosset). Note the reduced black in the chest and the narrow, white supercilium. Note the difference in the coloration of the legs (greyish in western birds from Argentina, in Figs. 1-2 (only feet visible), and bluish in eastern birds from Brazil)



Figure 5. Female White-bearded Antshrike at PP Cruce Caballero, Argentina (K. Cockle)



Figure 6. Female White-bearded Antshrike at Intervalles, Brazil (A. Grosset). Note the difference in the coloration of the legs (greyish in the western bird in Fig. 5 and bluish in eastern birds from Brazil)



**>> GLOBALLY THREATENED BIRD WHITE-BEARDED ANTSHRIKE****Apparent geographical variation**

The male's bold black chest, whitish beard and specific thorny bamboo habitat prevent confusion with any other bird in the Atlantic forest of Argentina (Figs. 1–4). Note also the distinctly flat head and tufted appearance of the pale neck collar (Fig. 2). When excited, both sexes show an erectile crest (the male's is shown in Fig. 4). Female White-bearded Antshrikes have a whitish breast and collar, and a distinct rufous-chestnut crown that contrasts with its brown back (Figs. 5–6). Both sexes show a moderately hooked, silver or ivory bill, which sets the species apart from other obviously hook-billed antshrikes and (in the case of female *Biatas*) from White-collared Foliage-gleaner *Anabazenops fuscus*.

Geographic and/or individual variation in the White-bearded Antshrike needs further documentation, and is a fertile ground to which nature photographers and sound recordists can make substantial contributions. As Mark Pearman first noticed<sup>4</sup>, a white or creamy supercilium might be present or absent in both sexes. However, this variation might be due to their habit of alternately hiding and displaying the supercilium, rather than to its actual absence (compare Figs. 1–6). There is also considerable variation in the extent of black on the male's chest (compare Figs. 1–2 vs. 3–4). Moreover, western birds (i.e. those from Argentina and inland south-east Brazil) apparently lack the conspicuous bluish legs that characterize eastern birds (from coastal south-east Brazil), their legs instead seeming to be a less conspicuous grey (compare Figs. 1–2 vs. 3–4 and Fig. 5 vs. 6).

The voice of the White-bearded Antshrike consists of a series of around eight hollow, fairly spaced notes, the first three ascending in pitch and volume. It recalls the voice of the Plain Antvireo *Dysithamnus mentalis* or that of the Black-throated Trogon *Trogon rufus*, although it has also been likened to the song of the White-shouldered Fire-eye *Pyriglena leucoptera*<sup>4</sup>. Like plumage and bare-part coloration, voices also appear to differ geographically. We are studying this question, which might have consequences for the taxonomy of the species.

**Visiting Parque Provincial Cruce Caballero**

The 600 ha PP Cruce Caballero has no entrance fee and is open year-round. It is conveniently located close to San Pedro, a small town c.100 km south-east by road from Eldorado and c.200 km either from Posadas or Puerto Iguazú. For those

interested in birding the park, the camping area offers a shelter from the rain for tents and occasional visitors. Besides the White-bearded Antshrike, the park holds a host of localised birds including Vinaceous Amazon *Amazona vinacea* (Vulnerable), Helmeted Woodpecker *Dryocopus galeatus* (Vulnerable), and Araucaria Tit-Spintail *Leptasthenura setaria* (Near Threatened) in one of the best preserved patches of Atlantic Paraná pine forest.

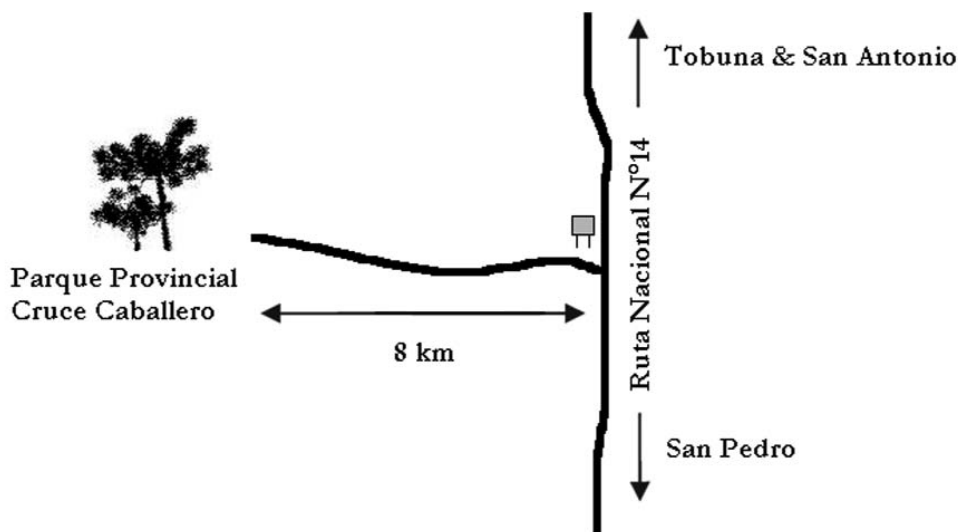
Nestor Fariña, a local ranger working in Misiones and involved in the conservation of Atlantic Forest birds, knows precisely how and where to find the White-bearded Antshrike, and is willing to show visiting birders. You should contact him by e-mail in advance (nestor\_spm@yahoo.com.ar), since he spends much of his time in the forest.

If you are planning a visit on your own, you would do well to take a playback tape in order to see the secretive and silent White-bearded Antshrike; please take care to use it carefully and avoid disturbing this threatened bird. Voices of the White-bearded Antshrike from Brazil can be downloaded from [www.xeno-canto.org](http://www.xeno-canto.org), and our recordings from Argentina will be available on the forthcoming DVD *Bird sounds of southern South America*<sup>3</sup>.

You will also need to identify *yatevó* bamboo. It is the only robust, thorny and tall bamboo in the area, and typically grows in 'tunnels'. You will need to take care to distinguish it from 'tacuapí' *Merostachys clauseni*, which does not form tunnels, lacks thorns and has a rough texture when rubbed up and down. The best spots to find White-bearded Antshrikes are stands of *yatevó* along the road that marks the eastern limit of the park (crossing the park entrance) and along the road between the highway and the park (A. Bodrati pers. comm.). For both, see the map. Vinaceous Amazon and Araucaria Tit-Spintail can be heard and seen around the camping area, particularly near dawn and dusk. Helmeted Woodpecker is more difficult and may require more time searching.

**Getting to Parque Provincial Cruce Caballero**

The province of Misiones has two main airports that offer connections to and from Buenos Aires: the main one in the provincial capital city of Posadas, and a second in the city of Puerto Iguazú. Once in Misiones, head to San Pedro. From Posadas, take Ruta Nacional (RN) 105 and then RN 14 northwards to San Pedro. From Puerto Iguazú, take RN 12 to Eldorado, then Ruta Provincial (RP)



Map showing access to Parque Provincial Cruce Caballero

17 to Pozo Azul, and finally RP 20 which will take you to RN 14 which leads southward (paved) to San Pedro and northward (unpaved) to Parque Provincial Cruce Caballero.

San Pedro is only 28 km from Parque Provincial Cruce Caballero. To get there, take RN 14 towards Tobuna and San Antonio; after the roundabout (where RN 14 meets RP 20), the highway is unpaved. Twenty km from San Pedro there is a sign on the left indicating the main access road to the park. Turn left and follow the signs for the remaining 8 km to the park. The drive from San Pedro to the park takes 40–90 minutes depending on the weather. Most of the time the road can be traveled with regular vehicles, but, in rainy weather (which can occur in any season), a 4WD is necessary. Accommodation in San Pedro is cheap, and two small hotels, Los Lapachos and Hotel American (located on Avenida Güemes, a main avenue and entrance to the town), offer modest but adequate services.

Staying in San Pedro is also a good idea because it enables easy access to the small *Araucaria*-dominated Parque Provincial de la Araucaria on the eastern edge of the town where Vinaceous Amazon, Canebrake Groundcreeper *Clibanornis dendrocolaptoides* (Near Threatened) and Araucaria Tit-Spinetail are easily seen.

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