Paraguay tends to be overlooked by travelling birders. Half-remembered tales of dictatorship (which ended nearly 20 years ago), the absence of a field guide in English, and a wariness of the unknown have led to Paraguayan writers dubbing their country ‘South America’s forgotten heart’. For the adventurous birder, however, such uncertainties make Paraguay an exciting destination, a country where regular birders are a rare species and every field trip holds the promise of discovery. Moreover, Paraguay is now one of the cheapest, safest and most culturally traditional countries on the continent.

Although Paraguay’s bird list (just over 700 species) is dwarfed by that of equatorial countries, it is considerably longer than those of comparably sized lowland areas in neighbouring countries. Moreover, Paraguay is compact, so birders can easily see a broad variety of regional endemics in a trip as short as a week or ten days.

Lying at the intersection of five of South America’s most threatened biomes—Humid Chaco, Dry Chaco, Atlantic Forest, Cerrado and Mesopotamian grasslands—Paraguay offers birders a diverse list and several sought-after species. The major attractions are the chaco (in the west) and the Atlantic Forest (east), but the cerrado (north-east) and Mesopotamian grasslands (south) hold some of the country’s most exciting avian attractions. Here we recommend some of Paraguay’s top birding sites.

**Ruta Transchaco**

The Ruta Transchaco, which leads to the Bolivian border, is now almost entirely paved. The first 350 km run through the Humid Chaco: lush, seasonally flooded palm savanna that harbours scores of raptors, herons, ibises, spoonbills and storks. Roadside reedbeds (as at km 79) can produce wintering Dinelli’s Doradito *Pseudocolopteryx dinelliana* (Near Threatened) and Stripe-backed Bittern *Ixobrychus involucris*. A

Two juvenile White-winged Nightjars *Caprimulgus candicans*, one of the world’s rarest caprimulgids, perched on a termite mound (Paul Smith; www.faunaparaguay.com)
Cuenca Alta del Riacho Yacaré Sur

Known locally as the ‘central Chaco lagoons,’ the upper watershed of the Yacaré Sur holds a series of saline lagoons located just east of the Mennonite towns of Loma Plata and Filadelfía. Access requires a 4WD and a decent map (available from service stations in Filadelfía and Loma Plata). Water levels are unpredictable, but the lagoons often provide an important staging post for migrating Neartic waders and hold internationally important concentrations of waterbirds. As many as 5,000 Chilean Flamingos Phoenicopterus chilensis (Near Threatened) gather at the Chaco Lodge–Campo María lagoon complex, being best observed from the Campo María private reserve.

The surrounding scrub is a great place for chaco specialities such as Chaco Chachalaca Ortalis canicollis, Cream-backed Woodpecker Campephilus leucopogon, Chaco Earthcreeper Tarphonotus certhioides, Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper Drymornis bridgesii, Lark-like Brushrunner Coryphistera alaudina, Crested Hornero Furnarius cristatus and Many-colored Chaco Finch Saltatrix multicolor. Black-bodied Woodpecker Dryocopus schulzi (Near Threatened) is a big draw, but by no means easy to find: try Fortín Toledo, 9 km west of km 475 on the Ruta Transchaco. Loma Plata or Filadelfía are both good bases, with several comfortable hotels and decent restaurants. An excellent alternative is the Mennonite resort of Laguna Capitán where there are excellent visitor facilities including a kitchen, but all food and drinking water must be brought in. Visits to national parks such as these must be arranged in advance with the Secretaría del Ambiente (SEAM, the Ministry of the Environment; tel: +595 21 283403; www.paraguaysilvestre.org.py).

Other sites in the Chaco

Lying directly north of the central Chaco Mennonite colonies, PN Defensores del Chaco is the largest of Paraguay’s national parks. Getting there requires a 4WD and visitor facilities are limited, a good option being to camp at the base of Cerro León. To get to the park HQ, head north from Filadelfía via Fortín Teniente Montanía. Local bird specialities include Bolivian Slaty Antshrike Thamnophilus sticturus, Black-bellied Antwren Formicivora melanogaster and White-shouldered Spinetail Synallaxis albilora. Drive the park tracks in search of Jaguar Panthera onca (which is regularly seen), Puma and Brazilian Tapir.

PN Río Negro in the Paraguayan Pantanal is a pristine wilderness, accessible by road (15–17 hours from Asunción) only during late April to September. Alternatively, the park can be reached
by boat from Concepción or charter flights from Asunción. The area has a distinct avifauna including Cinereous-breasted Spinetail *Synallaxis hyposodia* and Gray-crested Cacholote *Pseudoseisura unirufa* in addition to spectacular concentrations of waterbirds (best October–January). Mammalian highlights include Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* and Marsh Deer *Blastocerus dichotomus*. Accommodation is available at Tres Gigantes (Three Giants) Biological Station, run by Guyra Paraguay (BirdLife in Paraguay; tel: +595 21 223567; e-mail: guyra@guyra.org.py) and Fortín Patria Lodge (Tel: +595 21 446890; www.fortinpatrialodge.com). It is best to arrange access through these organisations.

**Laguna Blanca**

North-east Paraguay presents an intriguing mix of humid forest and *cerrado*, the latter a rapidly disappearing savanna formation with a threatened birdlife. A fantastic site is Estancia Laguna Blanca, where a rustic ranch lies on the white-sand beach of a crystal-clear lagoon. Access and accommodation should be arranged with the owners (e-mail: malvinaduarte@hotmail.com; tel: +595 981 558–671; www.lagunablanca.com.py). En route from Asunción on Ruta 3, at km 100, take a 3 km diversion onto the road towards Juan de Mena to look for Strange-tailed Tyrants *Alectrurus risorum* (Vulnerable) perched on roadside fences.

There are two great reasons for visiting Laguna Blanca. This is the only known site outside Brazil for Lesser Nothura *Nothura minor* (Vulnerable) and one of only three known breeding sites for White-winged Nightjar *Caprimulgus candicans* (Endangered). Search for both from tracks in the north of the estancia. In late afternoon, listen for the nothura in scrubby woodland on higher terrain. For the spectacular caprimulgid, search open *cerrado* at night.

In addition, no fewer than ten globally threatened or Near Threatened birds have been recorded at Laguna Blanca. Species to search for include Cock-tailed Tyrant *Alectrurus tricolor* (Vulnerable), Sharp-tailed Tyrant *Culicivora caudacuta* (Vulnerable), Bearded Tachuri *Thamnophilus polystictus* (Near Threatened), White-rumped Tanager *Cypsnagra plumbea*, Black-masked Finch *Coryphaspiza melanotis* (Vulnerable) and Curl-crested Jay *Cyanocorax cristatellus*. During October and November, Laguna Blanca is also an important migration stopover for a trio of rare seedeaters: Marsh *Sporophila palustris* (Endangered), Dark-throated *S. ruficollis* (Near Threatened) and Chestnut *S. cinnamomea* (Vulnerable). There are historical records of Rufous-faced Crane *Laterallus xenopterus* (Vulnerable) from this area; it may await rediscovery by birders willing to get their feet wet in marshes around Arroyo Clementina!

**Reserva Natural del Bosque Mbaracayú**

One of Paraguay’s best-known and best-protected reserves, Mbaracayú combines a large block of Atlantic Forest with a unique island of *cerrado*. This is the best place in Paraguay to see Bare-throated Bellbird *Procnias nudicollis* (Vulnerable; most easily found in gallery forest along the río Jeju’mi) and Black-fronted Piping Guan *Pipile jacutinga* (Endangered; best looked for along the track between Lagunita and Horqueta’mi). Many other Atlantic Forest specialities occur: the ‘Bosque Encantado’ (‘enchanted forest’), between km 1.5 and 2.0 from the Jeju’mi visitors’ centre in the west of the reserve, can be particularly productive. Birds here include Long-tailed Potoo *Nyctibius aethereus*, Helmeted Woodpecker *Dryocopus galeatus* (Vulnerable) and São Paulo Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes paulista* (Near Threatened).

Thirty km east of Jeju’mi along driveable tracks lies Aguara Ñu. This 5,000-ha tract of *cerrado* is renowned for being the site where White-winged Nightjar and Rufous-faced Crane were rediscovered in Paraguay in 1995. In recent years more new species for Paraguay have been discovered here than anywhere else, among them Russet-crowned Crane *Anurolimnas viridis*, Spot-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus maculicaudus* and Rufous-winged Antshrike *Thamnophilus torquatus*. The area around the guard post can yield Ocellated Crane *Micropygia schomburgkii*. Nearby valleys hold Giant Snipe *Gallinago undulata* and Rufous-faced Crane. Look for White-winged Nightjar in open areas on the ridge-tops (though you must be accompanied by a guard). During October and November, search areas of tall grass for migrant seedeaters *Sporophila* as at Laguna Blanca.

Mbaracayú is c.40 km north of the town of Curuguaty. Buses from Asunción run daily via here en route to Villa Ygatimi, the town nearest the reserve. Visits should be arranged with the Fundación Moisés Bertoni, the reserve’s manager.
An increasingly popular birding destination is San Rafael, c.150 km north-east of Encarnación. The country’s largest block of Atlantic Forest and the site with the longest bird list, San Rafael warrants as many days as you can manage. Readily seen Atlantic Forest endemics include Helmeted Woodpecker, Russet-winged Spadebill Platyrinchus leucoryphus (Vulnerable), Blackish-blue Seedeater Amaurospiza moesta (Near Threatened), Saffron Toucanet Pteroglossus bailloni (Near Threatened), Bay-ringed Tyrannulet Phylloscartes sylvius (Near Threatened) and São Paulo Tyrannulet. The reserve also includes an extensive area of Mesopotamian grassland, notably at Guyra Reta, which is well worth visiting for species such as Sickle-winged Nightjar Eleothreptus anomalus (Near Threatened), Giant Snipe, Cock-tailed Tyrant, Lesser Grassfinch Emberizoides ypiranganus and Saffron-cowled Blackbird Xanthospar flavius (Vulnerable).

Most of the forest birds can be found on the 15 km of trails at ECOSARA (see http://www.faunaparaguay.com/ecosara.html), where comfortable accommodation and home-cooked

Despite obvious differences, the handsome Chaco Owl Strix chacoensis has been split only recently from the more southerly Rufous-legged Owl S. rufipes (Marcelo Bombaci; www.faunaparaguay.com)

Bearded Tachuri Polyseticus pectoralis remains relatively easy to see in undisturbed areas of native grassland (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)
Above: Marsh Seedeater *Sporophila palustris* is rare in the humid grasslands of southern Paraguay. Intriguingly, this individual has some rufous in the scapulars. An article on taxonomic complexities in the genus *Sporophila* is scheduled for a future issue of *Neotropical Birding* (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)

Below: Chilean Flamingos *Phoenicopterus chilensis* at sunset at Campo María Private Reserve (Frank Fragano; www.faunaparaguay.com)

Southern Paraguay is one of the last strongholds of the distinctive and rare Ochre-breasted Pipit *Anthus nattereri* (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

Mbaracayú is the best place to see the threatened Bare-throated Bellbird *Procnias nudicollis*; this is a female (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

Above: The frog-like call of the Spot-billed Toucanet *Selenidera maculirostris* betrays its presence in Paraguay’s Atlantic Forests (Myriam Velázquez/Fundación Moisés Bertoni)

Below: The extraordinary wing shape of the male Sickle-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus anomalus* gives the species its English name (Hugo del Castillo; www.faunaparaguay.com)

Above: Marsh Seedeater *Sporophila palustris* is rare in the humid grasslands of southern Paraguay. Intriguingly, this individual has some rufous in the scapulars. An article on taxonomic complexities in the genus *Sporophila* is scheduled for a future issue of *Neotropical Birding* (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)

Below: Chilean Flamingos *Phoenicopterus chilensis* at sunset at Campo María Private Reserve (Frank Fragano; www.faunaparaguay.com)
meals are available. To arrange access, contact Christine Hostettler of ECOSARA (ecosaraparaguay@gmail.com, +595 769 295046). For access to Guyra Reta (4WD essential), contact Guyra Paraguay, who own and manage this area. A bus leaves Encarnación at 08h00 daily, arriving at the town of Ynambú, from where Christine can arrange transport to Ecosara.

Mesopotamian grasslands
Southern Paraguay is typified by gently rolling grasslands and broad floodplains that provide excellent habitat for threatened species such as Strange-tailed Tyrant, Ochre-breasted Pipit Anthus nattereri (Vulnerable), Saffron-cowed Blackbird and (during October–February) a handful of brightly coloured seedeaters: Marsh, Chestnut, Dark-throated and Rufous-rumped Seedeeater Sporophila hypochroma (Near Threatened). Search marshes along Ruta 1 from the junction with the Ayolas road toward Encarnación: try the first few kilometres from this intersection, around km 260 on Ruta 1, and the marsh immediately east of General Delgado. Another good area is directly north of Coronel Bogado, particularly the marshes at San Miguel Potrero. Ask the local community for permission to enter; the local name for Saffron-cowed Blackbird is chopi sa’yju. Ochre-breasted Pipit is localised: two good areas to search are Estero Ypyta, along tracks just north-west of San Miguel Potrero, and the extensive flat grasslands of Ñu Guazu, west of General Artigas. Both Narosky’s Seedeeater Sporophila zelichi (Critically Endangered) and Chestnut Seedeeater have been found breeding at the latter site.

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