

# Neotropical Birding

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# Capital Birding: Buenos Aires

## Germán Pugnali

In the first of a new series on birding around major cities in the Neotropics, a leading Argentine birder guides us around the vibrant metropolis of Buenos Aires, one of the largest cities in the world—and also one with some of the best urban birding.

**B**uenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, offers great birding opportunities for business visitors or those staying in the city as the starting point for a longer trip around the country.

Argentina's world famous *pampas* grasslands can still be seen near Buenos Aires (albeit modified by agriculture and human settlement). Nestled next to the río de la Plata, a large estuary formed by the ríos Paraná and Uruguay, the city is blessed by the proximity of the marshy and riparian habitats of the *pampas*, which act as magnets for wildlife. In particular, the mosaic of marshes, woodlots and open grasslands is home to a good variety of birds including several rare or local species. Many of the remaining natural areas are protected and open for visitors all year.

Good accommodation and decent transportation links means that it is practical to stay in Buenos Aires and make day trips to nearby birding sites. A wide network of subways and buses connect nearly every point within the city.

There are good train links, taxis are relatively inexpensive and car hire acceptably priced. Additionally, a guided tour is easy to organise.

In this article, I describe a selection of the best birding areas within a radius of c.150 km (and thus feasible for day trips). I aim to provide local insights that go beyond and therefore complement the details contained in a recent guide to birding in world cities<sup>1</sup>.

### Reserva Ecológica Costanera Sur (distance from city centre: 1 km)

Birders visiting Buenos Aires should plan to visit one of the world's best urban nature reserves: Costanera Sur. The 'Reserva Ecológica', as it is commonly known, is the result of a land reclamation project that was abandoned during the 1970s, allowing wildlife to colonise the area. Three major lagoons, extensive stands of *pampas* grass, woodlands and thickets offer birders



Rushes and reedbeds host the tiny, gorgeous Many-colored Rush Tyrant *Tachuris rubrigastra* (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

excellent chances of finding 60–100 species in a day. Since its designation as a reserve in 1986, an impressive 290 species have been recorded within its 360 ha (a PDF checklist can be downloaded from [www.seriemanaturetours.com](http://www.seriemanaturetours.com)).

A ten-minute taxi-ride from downtown, just east of the regenerated docklands of Puerto Madero, the reserve is bordered by the río de la Plata to the east and the city to the west. A well-developed network of trails surrounds and bisects the reserve, allowing visitors access to every corner. Two entrances lead to the trails. The main access in the south ('Brasil gate', at the junction of Avenida Tristán Achával Rodríguez and Padre Migone) is nearer to the lagoons and marshy habitats. The northern entrance ('Viamonte gate' at the junction of Avenidas Costanera Carlos Noel and M. Sanchez de Thompson) starts in a more wooded area and is closer to the city centre. There are two loops to try; both cover the main habitats. The southern circuit is shorter (3.3 km rather than 4.5 km), but is usually crowded on weekend afternoons. A bird hide, developed by Aves Argentinas (BirdLife in Argentina), is being constructed on the causeway separating two large lakes: a well-vegetated waterbody to the north (called the Laguna de las Gaviotas) and one with more open water to the south (the Laguna de los Patos).

The reserve is open every day except Mondays and public holidays, from 08h00–18h00 (or 19h00, Nov–Mar). It is also closed during and after rain. During closures, it is still worth birding the long, thin lake (the Laguna de los Coipos) from the broad walkway by the main road (Avenida Costanera and T. Achaval Rodríguez); also check around the pavement *parillas* (BBQ stalls) for photogenic Monk Parakeets *Myiopsitta monacha*, Guira Cuckoos *Guira guira* and a couple of species of blackbird: Chestnut-capped *Chrysomus ruficapillus* and Yellow-winged *Agelasticus thilius*. A decent map of the site can be found on the Buenos Aires government website; for the URL, see the 'Contact details' box (p. 50).

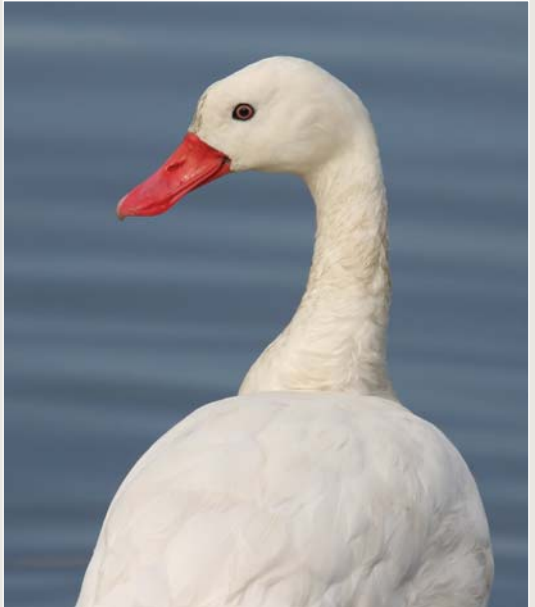
Water level varies seasonally and droughts may occur, but with good levels of water, wildfowl are usually abundant so a telescope is useful. On Laguna de las Gaviotas or Laguna de los Patos, Black-necked *Cygnus melancoryphus* and Coscoroba Swans *Coscoroba coscoroba* quickly

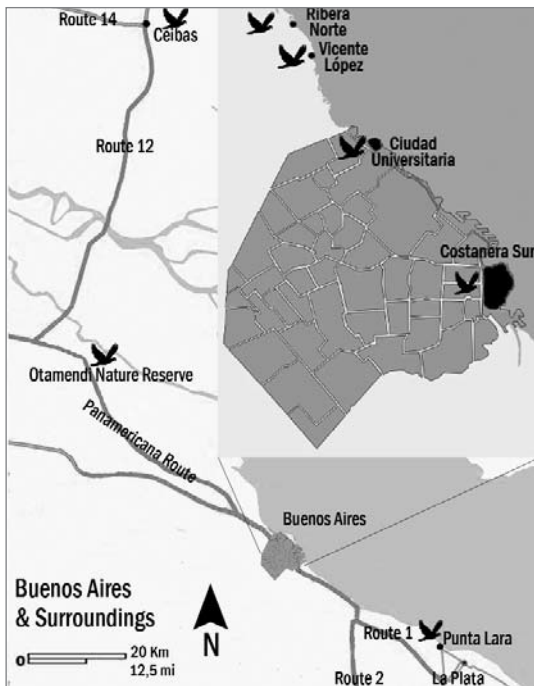
Top to bottom

View across the Reserva Ecológica Costanera Sur towards the city centre (Germán Pugnali)

Coscoroba Swan *Coscoroba coscoroba* is an attractive and common sight at Costanera Sur (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

Stripe-backed Bittern *Ixobrychus involucris* is a highly sought-after inhabitant of *pampas* marshlands (Hernán Rodríguez Goñi)





Map of Buenos Aires showing location of sites featured

catch the eye, and a thorough scan should reveal White-tufted Grebes *Rollandia rolland*, three species of coot *Fulica* spp., Yellow-billed Pintail *Anas georgica*, Speckled Teal *A. flavirostris*, Rosy-billed Pochard *Netta peposaca*, Lake Duck *Oxyura vittata* and Silver Teal *Anas versicolor*. The localised Black-headed Duck *Heteronetta atricapilla* is present year-round, swimming amongst marshy vegetation or resting in the centre of the bigger lagoons. Spot-flanked Gallinule *Gallinula melanops* and Plumbeous Rail *Pardirallus sanguinolentus* are also found along the aquatic vegetation edges.

Among the commoner herons and egrets, scrutinise the more vegetated corners for Rufescent Tiger Heron *Tigrisoma lineatum*, Whistling Heron *Syrigma sibilatrix* and, occasionally, the highly prized Stripe-backed Bittern *Ixobrychus involucris*. South American Painted Snipe *Nycticryphes semicollaris* prefers rush beds, but seeing them is highly dependent on the right water level; a good place recently has been the south-east edge of Laguna de los Coipos. Late in the austral winter (August–September) sees the arrival of Nearctic waders such as the two yellowlegs *Tringa*, an occasional Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica* (Near Threatened), Wilson’s Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor*, Stilt Sandpiper *Calidris himantopus*, Baird’s Sandpiper

*C. bairdii* and White-rumped Sandpiper *C. fuscicollis*, which favour exposed mud or shallow lake edges.

The trails running along the embankments not only offer perfect viewing points over the lagoons, but also facilitate access to a range of landbirds in the pathside vegetation. The unmistakable song of Black-and-rufous Warbling Finch *Poospiza nigrorufa* is commonly heard and the species easily seen, but Black-capped Warbling Finch *P. melanoleuca* takes a little more searching. Shrubs and trees harbour an increasing population of Checkered Woodpecker *Veniliornis mixtus*, Freckle-breasted Thornbird *Phacellodomus striaticollis* (a pampas speciality), Masked Gnatcatcher *Poliophtila dumicola*, Yellow-billed Cardinal *Paroaria capitata* and Rusty-collared Seedeater *Sporophila collaris*. In summer, it is also worth searching for Dark-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus melacoryphus*, White-winged Becard *Pachyramphus polychopterus* and Bran-coloured Flycatcher *Myiophobus fasciatus*. The introduced Nanday Parakeet *Nandayus nenday* is often prominent along the Camino de los Lagartos, having established a substantial population in the city. Upon reaching the dense pampas grass stands, Spectacled Tyrant *Hymenops perspicillatus* and Great Pampa Finch *Embernagra platensis* should be seen. Listen out for the relatively local Sulphur-throated Spinetail *Cranioleuca sulphurifera* and the more widespread Wren-like Rushbird *Phleocryptes melanops*.

The next stop is the wooded platform facing the Laguna de los Macaes. Here, visitors feed the birds, creating great photographic opportunities for Giant Wood Rail *Aramides ypecaha* plus passerines such as Shiny Cowbird *Molothrus bonariensis*, Ultramarine Grosbeak *Cyanocompsa brissonii*, Golden-billed Saltator *Saltator aurantiirostris* and, sometimes, Solitary Black Cacique *Cacicus solitarius* and White-lined Tanager *Tachyphonus rufus*. A few metres away, a viewpoint over the rio de la Plata is worth a scan for Great Grebe *Podiceps major*, Neotropic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*, Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* and Snowy-crowned Tern *Sterna trudeaui*.

### Ciudad Universitaria, Vicente López and Ribera Norte Reserves (10–20 km north of city centre)

These three small reserves are situated along the rio de la Plata shore in the north of Buenos Aires. Holding some different birds to Costanera Sur,

one or more sites can be combined into a half-day trip. As with Costanera Sur, Ribera Norte is closed during and after rain, but the other two reserves have fewer restrictions so can be used as alternatives. Riparian forest and marshes are the main habitats at these sites, so rallids are a speciality. Rufous-sided Crake *Laterallus melanophaius* is common and relatively easy to see at Ribera Norte and Vicente López, particularly in winter when there is less vegetation. Red-and-white Crake *L. leucopyrrhus* requires luck, but the pool in front of the hide at Ribera Norte offers a fair chance. Plumbeous Rail, Giant Wood Rail and Gray-necked Wood Rail *Aramides cajanea* are fairly simple to see and very easy to hear.

To reach the Ciudad Universitaria reserve, drive north-west along Avenida Costanera R. Obligado. Pass the domestic airport on your left and keep right when the road splits. Keep driving with the river on your right until you see the entrance to Ciudad Universitaria. Once inside, look for the two colossal, rectangular, buildings (known as 'Pabellon 2 y 3') and park at the north-east corner of the first (Facultad de Ciencias Exactas y Naturales). Alternatively, simply ask your taxi driver for 'Ciudad Universitaria'. The lagoon is immediately north of the buildings. The reserve has been modified recently as part of a major development involving the city's coast, but most of the marshy vegetation remains. At the time of writing, the works are still underway and access is currently limited to the perimeter, but even this permits good views of Limpkin *Aramus guarauna*, Plumbeous Rail, Rosy-billed Pochard and Wren-like Rushbird. Red-and-white Crake has been seen here.

For the Reserva Ecológica Vicente López, either take the *Tren de la Costa* (riverside train) to Anchorena station which is adjacent to the reserve or drive north along Avenida del Libertador to the suburb of La Lucila then turn right on Calle Paraná, parking in the riverside car park. The reserve is open daily from 09h00–17h00 (18h00 in summer). Despite its tiny size (just 3.5 ha), this reserve can hold interesting species such as Spot-flanked Gallinule, breeding Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*, Cocoi Heron *Ardea cocoi*, Checkered Woodpecker, Bran-colored Flycatcher (in summer), Sooty-fronted Spinetail *Synallaxis frontalis* and White-tipped Plantcutter *Phytotoma rutila*.

If heading to Ribera Norte from Vicente López reserve, either head one stop north on the *Tren de la Costa* or drive north along the riverside until

just beyond the Barrancas railway station. From the station, head north, then turn right onto Calle Almafuerte, then left along an embankment; the reserve entrance is 150 m along on the right. If coming from the city centre, take Avenida del Libertador north to the suburb of Acasusso, then turn right onto Calle Peru. Continue downhill to Barrancas railway station then follow directions as above. The reserve is open from 09h00–18h00 (19h00 in summer). Ribera Norte is excellent for the localised Curve-billed Reedhaunter *Limnornis curvirostris*; try the area either side of the bird hide. Wooded areas may produce the similarly localised Red-rumped Warbling Finch *Poospiza lateralis* (look behind the guard hut, also checking the rushes here for Scarlet-headed Blackbird *Amblyramphus holosericeus*) and Mottled-cheeked Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes ventralis*. Between autumn and spring, White-throated Hummingbird *Leucochloris albicollis* occurs, a good site being the herbarium 150 m from the reserve entrance.

## Reserva Natural Punta Lara

(65 km south of the city centre)

Close to the city of La Plata, this reserve is one of the largest in Buenos Aires province at 6,000 ha and is currently a recipient of a NBC Conservation Award to promote conservation action (for which, see *Cotinga* 28: 7). To get to Punta Lara, head south from Buenos Aires along the Autopista de La Plata. Turn off the motorway at La Plata, but head north-east towards the small town of Punta Lara for 7 km. Continue through the town, with the coast on your right, for another 6 km to reach the reserve gate which is on your left, amidst woodland.

The reserve holds a mix of marsh, forest and *pampas* grassland, resulting in a diverse avifauna: 300 species have been recorded. This diversity is sufficient to merit a visit, but an additional good reason for a visit is to try for Red-and-white Crake, which is not uncommon. Early morning is best, particularly in autumn and winter when there is less vegetation. A good area is the boardwalk behind the reserve headquarters (ask the wardens for permission). Alternatively, continue north past the reserve entrance, follow the road when it turns sharp left and pull up where the woodland ends and roadside rushes predominate. For safety reasons, it is recommended to go there with the company of a warden or local guide.



Left: Straight-billed Reedhaunter *Limnornis curvirostris* is the main target for birders visiting Otamendi (Alec Earnshaw; [www.fotosaves.com.ar](http://www.fotosaves.com.ar))

Right: The noisy Curve-billed Reedhaunter *Limnornis curvirostris* is frequently heard at several marshes around the city (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))



Above: Birders normally drive a few hours south of Buenos Aires city to look for Hudson's Canastero *Asthenes hudsoni* (left) and Bay-capped Wren-Spinetail *Spartanoica maluroides* (right), but, with luck, both Near Threatened species can be found in *Spartina* grasslands close to the city (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

Right: Black-headed Duck *Heteronetta atricapilla* is a speciality of Costanera Sur (Hernán Rodríguez Goñi)





Left: Lark-like Brushrunner *Coryphistera alaudina* is an elegant furnariid reminiscent, as both its English and scientific names suggest, of the Old World larks (Germán Pugnali)

Right: Ribera Norte and Vicente López provide good chances of excellent views of Rufous-sided Crake *Laterallus melanophaius* (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))



Above left and right: Southern Screamer *Chauna torquata* is a typical bird of *pampas* lagoons; it is very unusual, however, to see one swimming (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

Left: White-throated Hummingbird *Leucochloris albicollis* is mainly a winter visitor to Buenos Aires (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))



“the proximity of the marshy and riparian habitats of the *pampas* act as magnets for wildlife”

The extensive *pampas* grasslands further along this road hold Hudson's Canastero *Asthenes hudsoni* and Bay-capped Wren-Spintail *Spartanoica maluroides* (both Near Threatened), as well as good numbers of Rufous-chested Dotterel *Charadrius modestus* in winter. Continuing along this road for 8.5 km will take you back to the motorway, which leads directly to Buenos Aires. Marshy areas in the reserve host Curve-billed Reedhaunter, Sulphur-throated Spintail, Crested Doradito *Pseudocolopteryx sclateri* and Warbling Doradito *P. flaviventris*. The woodlands hold Checkered Woodpecker, Rufous-capped Antshrike *Thamnophilus ruficapillus*, the classy Diademed Tanager *Stephanophorus diadematus* and Red-rumped Warbling Finch.

## Reserva Natural Otamendi

(75 km north of the city centre)

Located on the western side of the río Paraná de las Palmas, the Reserva Natural Otamendi spreads over 3,000 ha of marshy floodplains and woodland (including the southernmost example of *chaco* hardwood). Otamendi is probably the best option for a full day's birding around Buenos Aires, possessing large tracts of intact natural habitat. Moreover, it is only about an hour's drive north-west of the city along the Panamericana highway towards Escobar. Turn off Ruta 9 at km 68, following signs for the small town of Ing. Rómulo Otamendi. Pass through the town and the reserve entrance is signposted to the right. This gives access from the park headquarters to two good birding areas (see below). A third good area is reached by continuing past the reserve entrance and following the road downhill, across the Mitre railway line, where it becomes a dirt track that leads to the río Paraná after 5.5 km. (Travelling by train is not recommended: it is unsafe, time-consuming and logistically complicated.)

Probably the best birding is in this third area, which runs through excellent marshes. The more open areas of the first couple of kilometres are exceptional for the sought-after furnariid duo: Straight-billed Reedhaunter *Limnocites rectirostris* (Near Threatened) and Curve-billed Reedhaunter. Roadside rushes should be explored for the delightful Many-colored Rush Tyrant *Tachuris rubrigastra*, Wren-like Rushbird and Crested Doradito. The two canals running either side of the road offer a good chance of Rufous-sided Crane, especially early in the morning.

This area is also excellent for finding Giant Wood Rail, Snail Kite *Rostrhamus sociabilis*, Long-

## ORGANISING YOUR TIME IN BUENOS AIRES

Half-day available: go to Costanera Sur in order to see many birds (particularly wildfowl) and save time driving. Expect 60–90 species. If Costanera Sur is closed, try the small reserves in the northern suburbs.

One full day available: add Otamendi to your list. Make an early morning start then return to Buenos Aires and spend the afternoon in Costanera Sur. Expect 90–130 species.

One-and-a-half days available: spend a half-day in Costanera and a full day in Otamendi and Ceibas. Expect 100–170 species.

### CONTACT DETAILS

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**Reserva Ecológica Costanera Sur** Tel: +54 11 4315 1320/4129; e-mail: reserva\_cs@buenosaires.gov.ar; www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/med\_ambiente/reserva/?menu\_id=2486

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**Reserva Ecológica Vicente López** Tel: +54 11 4994 6304; e-mail: reservaevlopez@yahoo.com.ar

winged Harrier *Circus buffoni*, Correndera Pipit *Anthus correndera*, Long-tailed Reed Finch *Donacospiza albifrons*, Scarlet-headed Blackbird and Brown-and-yellow Marshbird *Pseudoleistes virescens*. Southern Screamers *Chauna torquata* are also possible. Reaching the río Paraná, the forest becomes thicker: look here for Checkered



Woodpecker, Rufous-capped Antshrike, Rufous-browed Peppershrike *Cyclarhis gujanensis*, Diademed Tanager, Red-rumped Warbling Finch, Ultramarine Grosbeak and even Dusky-legged Guan *Penelope obscura*. In summer, Ash-colored Cuckoo *Coccyua cinerea*, Warbling Doradito and Glaucous-blue Grosbeak *Cyanocompsa glaucocaerulea* are also possible.

When you've finished birding the lower road, return to the park headquarters. Picnic tables and bathrooms are available, so take a breather before heading out again (although beware small crowds on some weekends). From the HQ, a 1.1 km trail called El Talar leads through woods good for a trio of spinetails: Stripe-crowned *Cranioleuca pyrrhophia*, Spix's *Synallaxis spixi* and Sooty-fronted. In summer, these are joined by White-winged Becard, Streaked Flycatcher *Myiodynastes maculatus* and Tawny-crowned Pygmy Tyrant *Euscarthmus meloryphus*. White-tipped Plantcutter (in winter), Diademed Tanager and Ultramarine Grosbeak can also be found here. A wooded viewpoint over the marshes provides good views of flying birds, but a telescope is essential to investigate the distant lagoons.

In addition, a 2.5-km trail leads from the HQ through grassland and marshes to the reserve's major waterbody, the Laguna Grande. To get there, you must hire a licensed guide or park guide from the HQ. This area receives few visitors and offers very good birding. Species are similar to the lower road, but without the reedhaunters. In addition, you have a good chance of Tawny-headed Swallow *Alopochelidon fucata* and Hellmayr's Pipit *Anthus hellmayri*, while Hudson's Canastero and Bay-capped Wren-Spintail are occasional in winter. With great luck, you may flush Dot-winged Crake *Porzana spiloptera* (Vulnerable) from the path or glimpse South American Painted Snipe. Another site for both species is the marshes at nearby Río Lujan, but a visit must be arranged through the HQ.

## Ceibas

### (160 km north of city centre)

Although not in the province of Buenos Aires but in adjacent Entre Ríos, Ceibas is among the best birding locations in Argentina. Only 160 km from the capital and just 90 km beyond Otamendi, the two sites can be combined for a great day out. To get there, head north-west along Ruta 9 past Otamendi, Escobar and Campana, then turn right (north) onto Ruta 12 just before Zarate. After crossing the first Zarate–Brazo Largo bridge you

are in the Paraná delta itself, and the first birds will appear on the roadside (Giant Wood Rail, Scarlet-headed Blackbird, etc). Reaching the village of Ceibas at km 166, Ruta 12 splits and Ruta 14 begins. Leave the highway here and enter the village on the right. Drive through and continue along the dirt road east to access the main birding areas. There is good habitat all along this road, which can be followed for several kilometres; note, however, that it is not driveable after very heavy rain. There is no particular point to stop; just pause wherever you see something interesting!

The wooded savannas of Ceibas are excellent for finding birds of open habitats and *espinal* woods. This drive also provides a good opportunity to come in contact with real Argentine countryside, with horseback *gauchos* riding across extensive cattle ranches.

Hérons, storks, ibises and Roseate Spoonbills *Platalea ajaja* sometimes congregate in large numbers, offering an impressive sight. Savanna Hawks *Buteogallus meridionalis* and Giant Wood Rails frequent the roadside. The beautiful Ringed Teal *Callonetta leucophrys* is usually seen in pools and lagoons, where White-faced Ibis *Plegadis chihi* and Bare-faced Ibis *Phimosus infuscatus* can be found together with Limpkin *Aramus guarana*. Southern Screamers are almost guaranteed.

The marshy habitats are also home to Curve-billed Reedhaunter, Crested Doradito and Warbling Doradito. Many-colored Rush Tyrants are easier to see here than elsewhere, and Spotted Rail *Pardirallus maculatus* is another possibility. At sunset, Nacunda Nighthawks *Podager nacunda* can be seen flying around. The open grasslands hold Spotted Nothura *Nothura maculosa*, Red-winged Tinamou *Rhynchotus rufescens* and various pipits, and, although decreasing, Greater Rheas *Rhea americana* (Near Threatened) can be sighted from the highway.

The woods are an equally interesting feature of this area. Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper *Drymornis bridgesii*, White-fronted Woodpecker *Melanerpes candidus* and White Woodpecker *M. cactorum* all occur, along with many furnarids such as Brown Cacholote *Pseudoseisura lophotes*, Lark-like Brushrunner *Coryphistera alaudina*, Tufted Tit-Spintail *Lephasthenura platensis*, Little Thornbird *Phacellodomus sibilatrix*, Short-billed Canastero *Asthenes baeri*, Chotoy Spintail *Schoeniophylax phryganophilus* and Yellow-chinned Spintail *Certhiaxis cinnamomeus*. Tyrant flycatchers worth mentioning are White Monjita

*Xolmis irupero* and Suiriri Flycatcher *Suiriri suiriri*. White-naped Xenopsaris *Xenopsaris albinucha* is a regular summer visitor whilst Black-crowned Monjita *Xolmis coronatus* and White-tipped Plantcutter are possible in winter.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Diademed Tanager *Stephanophorus diadematus* is a spectacular denizen of riverine woodlands (James C. Lowen; [www.pbase.com/james\\_lowen](http://www.pbase.com/james_lowen))

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