

The Argentine endemics route

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Following our introduction to the birds of the Monte desert in the last issue of *Neotropical Birding*, two of Argentina's top birders and tour guides, and authors of a forthcoming birding site guide to one of South America's largest countries, take us on a short journey through the highlands of the Argentine north-west. Here one can find a broad selection of the country's 15 endemics, along with many other special birds, in less than one week.

Despite its vast territory, Argentina harbours just 15 endemic species of birds, most of which are restricted to the Monte desert, which stretches from central northern Patagonia to the sub-Andean valleys in the north-west of the country (referred to as the 'arid diagonal'). In this article, we will describe a special circuit along which it is possible to find more than the half of the country's endemics in just a few days. This part of the country also boasts a wide selection of habitats, including Puna desert and cloud forests, as well as some of Argentina's most spectacular scenery.

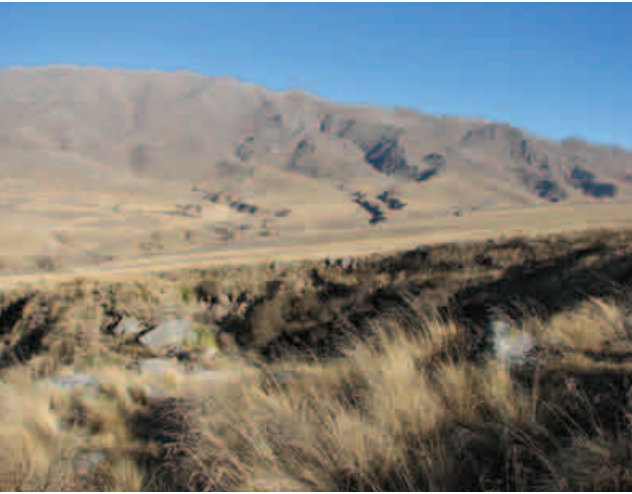
Getting to Tucumán and Tafí del Valle

The city of Tucumán makes the best starting point for a trip to this region and is easily accessible from Buenos Aires by bus (which takes approximately 16 hours and most are of excellent quality) or internal flight (daily from Buenos Aires). The best option is to arrive at night or as early as possible in the morning because the trip from Tucumán to Tafí del Valle can take several hours, and even longer if you elect to bird along this road. Once in Tucumán, the best bet is to take a bus, unless you have your own vehicle. The better buses depart from Tucumán's bus station and reach Tafí del Valle in c.3 hours. If you choose this option, one interesting possibility for birding along the road is to get off en route and camp in an open area adjacent to the main road, but bear in mind that there are no official campsites, services or shops, so it is imperative to come suitably prepared. The road that climbs to Tafí del Valle starts at the town of Acheral, c.50 km south of Tucumán. It is a narrow, winding road that passes through montane forest (Yungas), always following the valley of the río Los Sosa. There are no gas stations along this

road, and just a few houses and almost no shops before El Mollar, just 10 km before Tafí.

Anywhere along this road can be productive for birds, but be aware that there are almost no trails into the forest. Although, as always in the Andes, by stopping at different altitudes you will encounter different bird species, we recommend that you commence by birding in the alder forest above the El Indio monument (an obvious statue beside the road). However, just before this monument there is attractive montane forest, and in the lower parts of the road there is an interesting transitional forest where several Chaco species occur. If you have not already visited anywhere in the tropical Andes of Argentina or the Chaco, then it makes good sense to stop earlier.

Above the El Indio monument the forest becomes much more open than it is lower down, and alder trees and low bushes cover the slopes. This area is the best place to find the first endemic of the trip: Yellow-striped Brush Finch *Atlapetes citrinellus*, which is locally common and is usually found in pairs or small groups foraging among low bushes and / or near the ground. Those parts of the road closest to the river usually offer excellent chances to find Torrent Duck *Merganetta armata* (subspecies *berlepschi*) and Rufous-throated Dipper *Cinclus schulzi*, the latter almost endemic to Argentina, being found elsewhere only in southernmost Bolivia. Fasciated Tiger Heron *Tigrisoma fasciatum* is another possibility along the river, while another near-endemic species that should be looked for in this area is Alder Parrot *Amazona tucumana*, which is usually seen flying over the valley in pairs or small flocks. At dusk, Montane Forest Screech Owl *Megascops hoyi* will be on the keen birder's agenda. Other Yungas specialties that inhabit this area include Rust-and-yellow Tanager *Thlypopsis ruficeps*, Buff-banded Tyrannulet *Mecocerculus hellmayri*, Blue-capped



Above, clockwise from top left: Amaicha del Valle, Tucumán province, Argentina, July 2008 (Diego Monteleone); río Los Sosa, Tucumán province, Argentina, July 2008 (Diego Monteleone); El Infiernillo, Tucumán province, Argentina, July 2008 (Diego Monteleone)

Right: Moreno's (Bare-eyed) Ground Dove *Metriopelia morenoi*, El Infiernillo, Tucumán province, Argentina, October 2007 (Raul Demangel)





Scribble-tailed Canastero
Asthenes maculicauda, El
Infiernillo, Tucumán province,
Argentina, October 2007
(Raul Demangel)



Buff-breasted Earthcreeper
Upucerthia validirostris, El
Infiernillo, Tucumán province,
Argentina, June 2007
(Jorge Spinuzza)

Puffleg *Eriocnemis glaucupoides* and Slender-tailed Woodstar *Microstilbon burmeisteri*, among others. Because the birdlife of the southern Yungas is to some extent seasonal—during the austral winter birds are scarce, silent or wholly absent—the best time to visit this area is in early to mid spring (late September to late November). Furthermore, you should try to avoid the austral summer months (mid December to March) as this is the rainy season. Drive carefully and also be aware that you will be walking beside a main road with rather heavy traffic, mainly trucks and buses, especially at weekends.

As the road continues uphill, the alder forests become more fragmented, forming a mosaic with the grasslands (which are partially natural and partially anthropogenic). Suddenly, the road exits the forest and enters wholly grassy and bushy habitats, which mark the southern Andean páramo, although this habitat lacks the character of, what will be to many readers, the more familiar páramos of the northern Andes. With this abrupt change of habitat, unsurprisingly the birds too change. Soon after entering it the town of Tafí del Valle becomes visible in the distance. Just before the town there is a large artificial lake, the Dique La Angostura or El Mollar, which is worth checking for waterbirds such as Andean Flamingo *Phoenicoparrus andinus*, Andean Goose *Chloephaga melanoptera* and Andean Coot *Fulica ardesiaca*, among others (it is usually even more productive in winter due to the presence of several highland species that spend the coldest months here). Tafí del Valle is a pleasant tourist town, with a varied choice of hotels and restaurants. During winter it is usually quite cold here, so be prepared. Spending one night in Tafí is probably advisable, before starting the second day of the journey in search of more endemics. Because of the short distance back to the alder forest, such an itinerary will also permit you to easily back-track should you have missed any of its specialties the previous day.

El Infiernillo

The El Infiernillo pass has become famous among birders searching for the Andean specialties of this region. If you do not have your own vehicle, the best option is to take a bus from Tafí del Valle's bus station; any bus to Amaicha del Valle or Cafayate will permit you to get off at El Infiernillo. After exploring the area, just hitchhike back or take a returning bus. An alternative option would be to take one of the taxis or 'remisses', which will be much more expensive, but means you could make arrangements for the driver to pick you

up in the afternoon. Take food, suitable clothing (for both cold and warm weather), sunscreen and water (don't drink stream water). The road from Tafí passes through extensive grasslands, mostly grazed by cattle, but also cropped in places. El Infiernillo pass lies at 3,042 m above sea level. Beyond the pass, the road drops abruptly into another, completely different habitat. Focus on the gullies that cross the higher parts of the road. Each of these gullies, which can be scanned from their bridges, can produce an array of locally common endemics such as Tucumán Mountain Finch *Compsospiza baeri*, Moreno's (Bare-eyed) Ground Dove *Metriopelia morenoi* and White-browed Tapaculo *Scytalopus zimmeri*. In our opinion, the best place is one of the streams approximately 6 km before the pass itself, where it is possible to find most of the area's specialties. In a car, it takes approximately 30 minutes from Tafí to reach this 'hot spot', which is easy to find because it is the only place where two streams are crossed by the road (within c.30 m of each other) and then join to flow down into the main valley. Immediately after the first bridge there is a path on the left-hand side, where you can leave the vehicle behind a small hill just a few metres from the road. You could easily spend a whole morning exploring the dense brushland growing on the deep slopes of the gullies here. Other interesting birds include Andean Tinamou *Nothoprocta pentlandii*, Ornate Tinamou *N. ornata*, Black-winged Ground Dove *Metriopelia melanoptera*, Andean Lapwing *Vanellus resplendens*, Lesser Horned Owl *Bubo (virginianus) magellanicus*, Andean Flicker *Colaptes rupicola*, Puna Canastero *Asthenes sclateri*, White-browed Chat-Tyrant *Ochthoeca leucophrys*, Páramo Pipit *Anthus bogotensis*, Hellmayr's Pipit *A. hellmayri*, Plain-colored Seedeater *Catamenia inornata* and Band-tailed Sierra Finch *Phrygilus alaudinus*.

Approximately 5 km further on (i.e. only 1.2 km before the pass) the road turns sharply left and on the right-hand side you will see a wide valley traversed by a narrow stream. This is the best area for another near-endemic species (there are a few poorly documented records from Chile and Bolivia): Buff-breasted Earthcreeper *Upucerthia validirostris*, which might prove to be conspecific with Plain-breasted Earthcreeper *U. jelskii*. The earthcreeper should be searched for on the rocky slopes near the road; it nests in low earth cliffs. This is also a good spot for the uncommon Slender-billed Miner *Geositta tenuirostris* (in the grasslands around the valley) as well as many of the previously mentioned birds, especially White-

browed Tapaculo. Follow the riverbed (or the path on the left-hand side of the stream) and eventually you should find other interesting birds including D'Orbigny's Chat-Tyrant *Ochthoeca oenanthoides*, Ornate Tinamou, Puna (Variable) Hawk *Buteo (polyosoma) poecilochrous*, Ash-breasted Sierra Finch *Phrygilus plebejus*, Cinereous Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola cinereus*, Lesser Horned Owl and Cordilleran Canastero *Asthenes modesta*. After following the stream for c.1 km, you will see on the left-hand side (and higher on the slope) a large patch of dense grass that harbours a local population of Scribble-tailed Canastero *Asthenes maculicauda*. The walk over the last 200 m, from the creek bed to the wettest area, is strenuous and you should tread carefully in the tall grass because the ground is uneven, often muddy and even icy in winter. Finding the canastero should not be difficult, especially if you are familiar with its unmistakable, whistled contact calls. In rockier parts of this area, it is possible to also find White-tailed Shrike-Tyrant *Agriornis albicauda* and Short-tailed Finch *Idiopsar brachyurus*, but exceptional fortune will be required to see either.

Exploration of the upper montane forest below Tafí and the puna grasslands above the town could take 2–3 days, depending on your fortune with finding the specialties. Thereafter you should continue over the Infiernillo pass downslope to reach the only habitat endemic to Argentina: the Monte desert¹. Here you will search for the remainder of the endemics that can be found on this route.

The west slope, Amaicha del Valle and Ruinas de Quilmes

As soon as you cross El Infiernillo pass, the road starts to drop down with a gradual but steady change in the dominant plant species, and, after a few kilometres, an extremely dry habitat is reached, which is characterised by scattered thorn scrub and many tall cacti, locally known as 'Cardón' and similar in shape and size to the saguaro of North America. Continuing the descent, there is a special place to find the next endemic—Steinbach's (Chestnut) Canastero *Pseudasthenes steinbachi*—which, although not very noticeable, is quite easy to find. The site is located approximately 12 km from the pass, and is the third deep gully beyond El Infiernillo in the direction of Amaicha del Valle. Two other good reference points involve a large blue road sign indicating a historic battle and another, green, road sign announcing 'Cuesta de los Cardones.' If you are still in doubt, immediately beyond these two

signs there is a right curve, and thereafter an old house and a large plain full of Cardones will come into view. Look for the canastero in the bushes on the steep slopes along the stream. Playback is usually necessary for a good view, as the species is typically skulking and not easy to find, unless it is calling. Be aware that Rusty-vented Canastero *Asthenes dorbignyi* is also common in this area, but Steinbach's is paler and has less contrasting plumage. Steinbach's Canastero has nested on the riverbank just next to the road in recent years, and this territory appears to be regularly occupied, at least for now. If you are insufficiently fortunate to find the bird elsewhere, there is a reasonable chance of finding one by looking for an active nest, even without playback.

After this stop, continue downhill to Amaicha. The landscape becomes increasingly dry along the roadside, with low *Larrea* (Zygophyllaceae) bushes and scattered *Prosopis* (Fabaceae) trees marking your arrival into true Monte desert.

Amaicha del Valle, a smaller and quieter town than Tafí, makes an appropriate place to spend at least one night while exploring the Monte shrub in its environs. One of the main targets here is Sandy Gallito *Teledromas fuscus*. The best area for this bird is c.6 km north-west of the largest petrol station by the main road. The preferred habitat for this species is rather level ground with plenty of bare soil, sand and scattered shrubs. In spring you will hear its loud voice for most of the day, and the bird usually sings from atop a *Larrea* bush. Seeing one on the ground is more difficult, because this tapaculo is quite shy and runs at high speed from one bush to the next. However, in response to playback the gallito will start to call from on top of a bush.

In the same area there are at least two other endemics to search for. One is the remarkable White-throated Cacholote *Pseudoseisura gutturalis*, whose enormous stick nests in trees and cacti will usually draw your attention before the bird itself is seen. This species usually occurs in small noisy groups, but they can be somewhat difficult to see due to their elusive behaviour. The third endemic of the area is Cinnamon Warbling Finch *Poospiza ornata*, which usually can only be found here if your visit is timed for early spring or winter as it is principally an austral migrant from the central and southern Monte desert. However, with an extra dose of luck, it is possible to find a handful of individuals here year-round, as it seems that a few also breed in this region. The best spot for this warbling finch is the wooded area immediately before the bridge over the río Santa María.



Clockwise from top left:
Rufous-throated Dipper *Cinclus schulzi*, río Los Sosa, Tucumán province, Argentina, June 2009 (Hernán Povedano)
White-browed Tapaculo *Scytalopus superciliaris*, río Los Sosa, Tucumán province, Argentina, June 2009 (Roberto Güller)
White-throated Cacholote *Pseudoseisura gutturalis*, Amaicha del Valle, Tucumán province, Argentina, October 2007 (Raul Demangel)
Tucumán Mountain Finch *Compsospiza baeri*, El Infiernillo Tucumán, June 2009 (Diego Punta Fernández)
Sandy Gallito *Teledromas fuscus*, Amaicha del Valle, Tucumán province, Argentina, October 2007 (Raul Demangel)



Clockwise from top:

Black-crowned Monjita *Xolmis coronatus*,
Ceibas, Entre Ríos province, Argentina,
May 2010 (Jorge La Grotteria)

Steinbach's Canastero *Pseudasthenes steinbachi*,
Sierra de las Quijadas National Park, San Luis,
Argentina, May 2010 (Nacho Areta)

Yellow-striped Brush Finch *Atlapetes citrinellus*, río
Los Sosa, Tucumán province, Argentina, October
2007 (Raul Demangel)



Other interesting birds here include several near-endemics and 'significant others' among them Ringed Warbling Finch *Poospiza torquata*, Burrowing Parrot *Cyanoliceus patagonus* (of the subspecies *andinus*, which is almost all dark), Black-crowned Monjita *Xolmis coronatus*, Crested Gallito *Rhinocrypta lanceolata*, Black-legged Seriema *Chunga burmeisteri*, Elegant Crested Tinamou *Eudromia elegans*, White-banded *Mimus triurus* and Patagonian Mockingbirds *M. patagonicus*, and Greater Wagtail-Tyrant *Stigmatura budytoides*.

Leaving Amaicha you will join the famous (at least in Argentina, due to it being one of the country's longest roads) national route 40, just after crossing the río Santa María. A highly recommended place for birding the xeric woodlands and scrub is the ruins of Quilmes, where there is also a nice hotel, should you wish spend the night here before embarking on the last stretch towards Salta (although do note that this hotel is sometimes closed). The slopes adjacent to the ruins are another good spot for Steinbach's Canastero *Pseudasthenes steinbachi*. Also around the ruins you can find all of the birds already mentioned for Amaicha, although the woodland is denser here. This area is also a good spot for Chaco Owl *Strix chacoensis*.

The Cafayate Valley and Salta city

Strictly speaking, for endemic birds this short trip ends at the city of Cafayate, another rather touristic destination famous for its internationally award-winning wines (which might make another good reason to visit!). But, although there are no more endemics to look for, beyond Cafayate the road enters one of the most memorable landscapes to date on this route, known as the 'enchanted valley' (Quebrada de las Conchas or de Cafayate). Here, erosion has modeled the rock into innumerable shapes in multiple shades of reddish and buff. Quebrada de las Conchas is also a good place to search for birds including

Steinbach's Canastero and Sandy Gallito, affording you an additional opportunity for these species if you missed them elsewhere. The vegetation becomes steadily denser as you head north, and Chaco elements start to appear. Some birds, such as Blue-and-yellow Tanager *Thraupis bonariensis*, Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus margaritaceiventer*, Chaco Chachalaca *Ortalis canicollis*, Chaco Earthcreeper *Tarphonomus certhioides*, Stripe-capped Sparrow *Rhynchospiza strigiceps* and others become reasonably common here.

Far from marking the 'true' end to a north-west Argentina tour, the beautiful city of Salta makes a perfect place to relax for a day or two, before venturing out in search of more target birds, for instance in the stunning montane forests of Calilegua National Park in neighbouring Jujuy, or the specialties of the puna plateau and its magical lagoons in the far north. But this is another story...

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REFERENCE

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