

New birding 'lodges' in Argentina

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Birders visiting Argentina tend to stay in hotels near but not at birding sites because the country lacks lodges of the type found elsewhere in the Neotropics. However, a few new establishments are bucking the trend and may deserve to be added to country's traditional birding route. This article focuses on two of them and highlights a further six.



Note: all photographs were taken at the sites featured in the article. Long-trained Nightjar *Macropsalis forcipata*, Posada Puerto Bemberg, Misiones, June 2009 (Emilio White); there is a good stakeout near the posada

Although a relatively frequent destination for Neotropical birders, Argentina—unlike most Neotropical countries—has relatively few sites such as lodges where visitors can bird and sleep in the same place. Fortunately, there are signs that this is changing, as *estancia* owners build lodgings and offer ecotourism-related services. In this article, I give an overview of two such sites that are not currently on the standard Argentine birding trail—but should be. Both offer good birding and stylish accommodation in a beautiful setting, which may interest those with non-birding partners. And, most encouragingly, both have owners that are committed to conservation. I also outline six other establishments that are managed along similar lines and have considerable avian attractions. Only one of the eight sites is particularly well known to visiting birders. Note that, unlike many lodges elsewhere in South America, only a couple of sites have an in-house birding guide; so you will either need to fend for yourself or hire one of Argentina's excellent birding guides.



Map of Argentina (part) indicating the location of the lodges mentioned relative to Buenos Aires

Key: 1 Santa Olga Lodge; 2 Posada Puerto Bemberg; 3 Yacutinga Lodge; 4 Tacuapí Lodge; 5 Rincón de Socorro; 6 Rincón de Cobo; 7 Bahía Bustamante; 8 Estancia La Angostura

Posada Puerto Bemberg, Misiones

Pretty much every tourist visiting Misiones province in extreme north-east Argentina makes a beeline for Iguazú Falls, a leading candidate to become one of UNESCO's 'seven natural wonders of the world'. Birders are no different, but also spend time in the surrounding Atlantic Forest of the Parque Nacional de Iguazú. Although some birders stay in the national park's sole hotel, most day-trip the area from hotels in and around the town of Puerto Iguazú—and park opening hours means that the best birding is over by the time they are on site.

A new natural history service-offering from a new boutique hotel 45 km by road from Iguazú airport makes for an enticing alternative to staying in Puerto Iguazú. As a hotel, Posada Puerto Bemberg has garnered an excellent reputation in its first year of operation, being lauded by *Condé Nast Traveller* magazine in its 2009 'hot list'. With stunning accommodation, great food and service, as well as details such as L'Occitane bath products and a 'pillow menu', Puerto Bemberg is sure to delight non-birding spouses.

But it's Puerto Bemberg's birding opportunities that sparked my interest. The reserve owners have safeguarded a 400-ha plot of forest which they are converting to a private nature reserve with the help of Aves Argentinas (BirdLife in Argentina). From a birding perspective, the highlights are a pre-dawn stakeout for Long-trained Nightjar *Macropsalis forcipata* (1.3 km along the road east of the *posada*) and an area deep in the forest for Tawny-browed Owl *Pulsatrix koeniswaldiana*; both are Atlantic Forest endemics that are hard to see elsewhere in Argentina.

But there's much else besides, including several species that are easier than at Iguazú. Spot-backed Antshrike *Hypodaleus guttatus* is common and easily seen. It is relatively simple to connect with Brown Tinamou *Crypturellus obsoletus*, Slaty-breasted Wood Rail *Aramides saracura* and Spot-winged Wood Quail *Odontophorus capueira*. Plovercrest *Stephanoxis lalandi* is remarkably common; check out any forest flowers. Woodpeckers include Blond-crested *Ceileus flavescens* and Robust *Campephilus robustus*. Large-tailed Antshrike *Mackenziaena leachii* and Tufted Antshrike *M. severa* inhabit the *Chusquea* bamboo, and this vegetation and the abundant *Guadua* bamboo looks ripe for the discovery of an exciting bamboo specialist such as Temminck's Seedeater *Sporophila falcirostris*

(Endangered). Red-ruffed Fruitcrow *Pyroderus scutatus* is regularly seen. Pavonine Cuckoo *Dromococcyx pavoninus*, Short-tailed Anthrush *Chamaeza campanisona* and Variegated Antpitta *Grallaria varia* are more frequently heard than seen, but the owners are mooting trying an 'antpitta feeding-station' along the lines of those in Colombia and Ecuador (see *Neotropical Birding* 1: 68–70), which should make it more straightforward to see the last-named skulker. Tyrannids include Southern Bristle Tyrant *Phylloscartes eximius* (Near Threatened). There are secluded viewing areas over Ieks of Blue Manakin *Chiroxiphia caudata* and Band-tailed Manakin *Pipra fasciicauda*, both already well-established favourites among less specialised ecotourists.

Access to the forest is through 8 km of trails. There are several viewpoints, inside the forest and out, including a shady, raised platform overlooking the río Paraná and neighbouring Paraguay; a good place for a siesta while keeping an eye open for Barred Forest Falcon *Micrastur ruficollis*, Ferruginous Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium brasilianum*, Rufous-capped Motmot *Baryphthengus ruficapillus*, Spot-billed Toucanet *Selenidera maculirostris* and, overhead, wheeling Great Dusky Swifts *Cypseloides senex*. Around the lodge there are hummingbird feeders (Violet-capped Woodnymph *Thalurania galucopsis* is common) and bird tables that attract Spot-billed Toucanet and tanagers. A motorboat is available for trips along the río Paraná, which provides chances of Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* (scarce in Argentina) and Large-billed Tern *Phaetusa simplex*. Birders are guided by the irrepressible Emilio White, who previously worked for the BBC Natural History Unit and set up the ecotourism programme at Santa Olga Lodge (see p. 54).

While this article takes 'on site birding' as its focus, it would be churlish not to mention Puerto Bemberg's convenient location for other great birding sites. *Posada* visitors have privileged access to a palmito *Euterpe edulis* forest, 45 minutes to the north. Solitary Tinamou *Tinamus solitarius* (Near Threatened), Sharpbill *Oxyruncus cristatus* (a rarity in Argentina) and Saffron Toucanet *Pteroglossus bailloni* (Near Threatened) are easily seen, and large mammals such as South American Tapir *Tapirus terrestris* are attracted to a salt lick. Forty-five minutes to the east of Puerto Bemberg is the Uruzú guardpost of the excellent Parque Provincial Urugua-í, largely dismissed by birding groups for being 'too far' (1.5 hours drive) from Puerto Iguazú. The superb, undisturbed forest here drips with decent birds; Black-fronted Piping Guan *Pipile jacutinga* (Endangered) is reliable from the

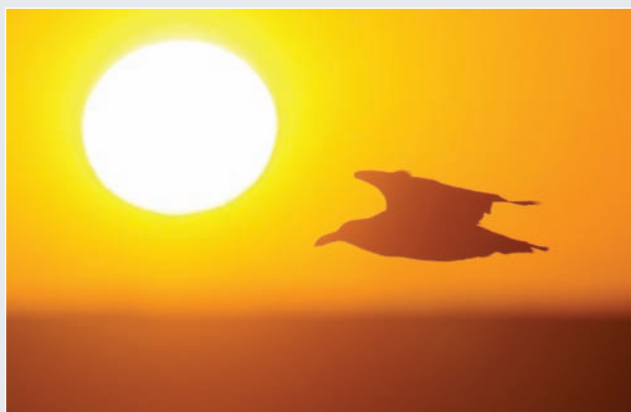
bridge by the guardpost and if Brazilian Merganser *Mergus octosetaceus* (Critically Endangered) were to persist anywhere in Argentina, I'd stake a fair few pesos on it being here. If these two sites were not enough of an added attraction, Puerto Bemberg is just 15 minutes drive farther from Iguazú Falls than Puerto Iguazú.

Rincón de Cobo, Buenos Aires

The second new birding site is not, strictly speaking, a lodge. Rincón de Cobo is a collection of seven delightful (and, in one case, architecturally stunning) cottages in the south of Buenos Aires province. Accommodation is set amidst coastal *pampas* grassland, with private access to the beach. In the light of biological fieldwork conducted in 2008^{1,2}, the site manager, Matías Montoreano, is working with Aves Argentinas to create a private nature reserve. In the meantime, Matías is improving site infrastructure to meet the needs of birding tourists, and may soon welcome daytrippers.

To see *pampas* birds in Buenos Aires, most visiting birders head to Punta Rasa, 60 km north of Rincón de Cobo, but the latter is a hidden gem that would repay a visit—and the accommodation is streets ahead of that in the town of San Clemente de Tuyú, the usual base for Punta Rasa. There is birding interest all year at Rincón de Cobo and the three key habitats to work are the grasslands, beach and woodland. In total, 138 species have been recorded so far.

The best area of grassland holds several *pampas* specialties¹ and lies immediately north-west of the cottage called Lo de Matías. Access is from the main entrance track; heading seaward, park carefully immediately after the sharp right-hand bend and walk north to the gate in the fence. Several pairs of the biome-restricted and potentially globally threatened Hudson's Canastero *Asthenes hudsoni* breed here. The species is relatively easy to find; listen for its trilling call. Bay-capped Wren-Spinetail *Spartanoica maluroides* (Near Threatened) also breeds, and can be common towards the end of the breeding season (e.g. February). Sulphur-throated Spinetail *Cranioleuca sulpherifera* is resident, but most common in autumn (April–May). Crested Doradito *Pseudocolaptes sclateri*, here at its southernmost site², breeds in the marsh near Villanueva cottage, and has been seen in the grassland north-west of Lo de Matías. Bearded Tachuri *Polystictus pectoralis* (Near Threatened) may be more regular than its single record suggests.



Clockwise from top left:

Male Spot-billed Toucanet *Selenidera maculirostris*, Posada Puerto Bemberg, Misiones, May 2009 (Emilio White); a common sight around the hotel gardens and forest

Tawny-browed Owl *Pulsatrix koeniswaldiana*, Posada Puerto Bemberg, Misiones, July 2009 (Emilio White); there are prospects of seeing this Atlantic Forest endemic here

Olog's Gull *Larus atlanticus* at sunrise at Rincón de Cobo, Buenos Aires, May 2009 (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)

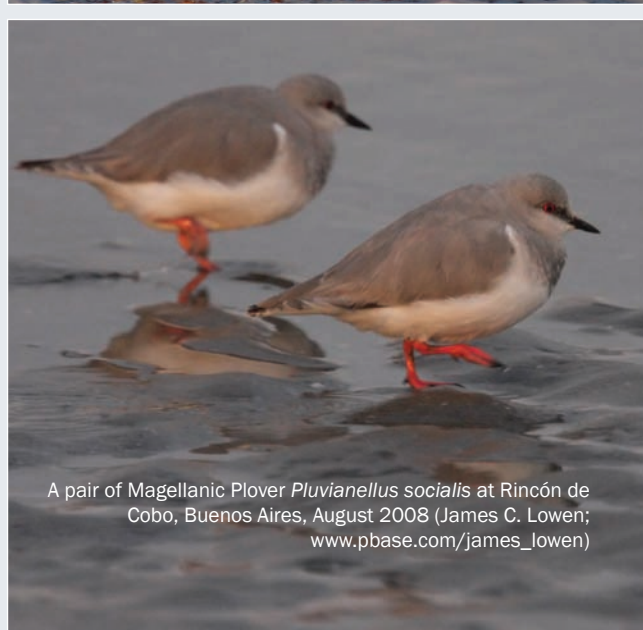
A male Strange-tailed Tyrant *Alectrurus risora* in breeding plumage at Santa Olga Lodge, September 2008 (Ben Lascelles)

Presumed hybrid Black-bodied Woodpecker *Dryocopus schulzi* x Lineated Woodpecker *D. lineatus* at Santa Olga Lodge, July 2008 (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen); note the pale iris which suggests Lineated parentage

Lekking Blue Manakins *Chiroxiphia caudata*
at Posada Puerto Bemberg, Misiones,
September 2009 (Emilio White)



White-headed Steamer Duck *Tachyeres leucocephalus* at Bahía
Bustamante, Chubut, March 2008 (Mariana Burgarella)



A pair of Magellanic Plover *Pluvianellus socialis* at Rincón de
Cobo, Buenos Aires, August 2008 (James C. Lowen;
www.pbase.com/james_lowen)

Adult Bay-capped Wren-Spinetail *Spartanoica
maluroides* at Rincón de Cobo, Buenos Aires, February
2008 (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)



Typical grassland birds such as Spotted Nothura *Nothura maculosa*, Long-winged Harrier *Circus buffoni*, Sedge Wren *Cistothorus platensis*, Freckle-breasted Thornbird *Phacellodomus striaticollis*, Hellmayr's Pipit *Anthus hellmayri*, Spectacled Tyrant *Hymenops perspicillatus*, Long-tailed Reed Finch *Donocospiza albifrons*, Grassland Yellow Finch *Sicalis luteola* and various icterids are common residents. Red-winged Tinamou *Rhynchotus rufescens*, Maguari Stork *Ciconia maguari*, Southern Screamer *Chauna torquata* and various herons, ibises and ducks occur in small numbers. Check the pools scattered around the grassland for Plumbeous Rail *Pardirallus sanguinolentus*, South American Snipe *Gallinago paraguaiiae*, Warbling Doradito *Pseudocolpteryx flaviventris*, Many-colored Rush Tyrant *Tachuris rubrigaster* and Wren-like Rushbird *Phleocryptes melanops*.

The sandy beach is worth a few hours at any season, but is probably at its best in summer (e.g. February, for tern flocks) and winter (e.g. August, for waders). An apparent Elegant Tern *Thalasseus elegans* (Near Threatened) was recorded once. This Pacific endemic had not been claimed from Argentina prior to 2007; details will be published in due course. Small numbers of Olog's Gull *Larus atlanticus* (Vulnerable) occur in autumn at least. Winter waders include Magellanic Plover *Pluvianellus socialis* (Near Threatened; here at its northernmost site²), Rufous-chested Dotterel *Charadrius modestus* and Two-banded Plover *Charadrius falklandicus*. Also check the beach vegetation for Patagonian passerines such as Bar-winged Cinclodes *Cinclodes fuscus*, Dark-faced Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola macloviana* and Austral Negrigo *Lessonia rufa*.

The sea also merits a look. In winter in particular, rare seabirds such as Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophrys* (Endangered), Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*, White-chinned Petrel *Procellaria aequinoctialis* (Vulnerable) and Magellanic Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus* (Near Threatened) may be offshore². And keep an eye out for marine mammals: Southern Elephant Seal *Mirounga leonina* and Killer Whale *Orcinus orca* have been seen. Finally, the small woodlands are worth a brief stop: White-throated Hummingbird *Leucochloris albicollis* and Gray-necked Wood Rail *Aramides cajanea* are fairly common.

Six other options

Hostería Rincón del Socorro, Corrientes province (www.rincondesocorro.com). This lodge lies in a 12,000-ha estancia on the edge of the well-known Iberá wetlands in north-east Argentina. It offers upmarket accommodation amidst grasslands, marshes, *espinal* and Chaco-type woodlands. Birding is excellent; so far, c.300 species have been recorded. These include breeding Crowned Eagle *Harpyhaliaetus coronatus* (Vulnerable), Strange-tailed Tyrant *Alectrurus risora* (Endangered), Yellow Cardinal *Gubernatrix cristata* (Endangered; often seen in the garden) and various threatened *Sporophila* seedeaters. The estancia is a base for much conservation activity. Additional attractions in the adjacent Iberá protected area include Ochre-breasted Pipit *Anthus nattereri* (Vulnerable) and Black-and-white Monjita *Heteroxolmis dominicana* (Endangered). Several lodges in the nearby village of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini also provide access to Iberá.

Santa Olga Lodge, Formosa province (www.santaolgalodge.com.ar). Lying 45 km from Formosa city in north-central Argentina, Santa Olga combines floristic and faunal elements of both the Dry and Humid Chaco. There's quantity and quality here. Highlights include a small population of Strange-tailed Tyrant and regular Crowned Eagle as well as Dry Chaco specialities such as Chaco Owl *Strix chacoensis* and species rare in Argentina such as Bare-faced Currassow *Crax fasciolata*. A checklist can be downloaded from www.seriemanaturetours.com/wildlife_checklists.htm. Mammal-watching is excellent; in my view, second only to the Pantanal within the Neotropics. Santa Olga was due to be treated in greater detail in this article, but, disappointingly, the owner decided in September 2009 to suspend ecotourism services on economic grounds. In time, hopefully, this situation will change, so keep an eye on the lodge website.

Yacutinga Lodge, Misiones province (www.yacutinga.com.ar). Lying in the extreme north-east of the province, 60 km east of Iguazú Falls, this well-established lodge has access to 570 ha of Atlantic Forest. This is a reliable site for Black-capped Screech Owl *Megascops atricapillus*, Mottled Owl *Ciccaba virgata* and Black-banded Owl *C. huhula*, all within a short walk of the accommodation. There are also staked-out leks for three manakin species. A bird checklist with c. 300 species can be downloaded from www.yacutinga.com.ar.

seriemanaturetours.com/wildlife_checklists.htm. Several conservation projects are in train.

Tacuapí Lodge, Misiones province (www.tacuapi.com.ar). A rustic lodge set among 50 ha of Atlantic Forest bordering Parque Provincial Salto Encantado, north-east of Aristóbulo del Valle. The lodge bird list (available from the lodge website) includes Atlantic Forest endemics such as Solitary Tinamou *Tinamus solitarius*, Pileated Parrot *Pionopsitta pileata* and Blackish-blue Seedeater *Amaurospiza moesta* (all Near Threatened). Note that lodge personnel only speak Spanish.

Bahía Bustamante, Chubut province (www.bahiabustamante.com). Lies 250 km south of Trelew (the airport that provides access to the well-visited Península Valdés) on three *estancias* under single ownership that cover 80,000 ha of Patagonian steppe and coast. Like Rincón de Cobo, not strictly a lodge with accommodation comprising cute beachfront cottages. The key birding is along the coast, with access by boat, 4WD, foot and bicycle. White-headed Steamer Duck *Tachyeres leucocephalus* (Near Threatened) is common, particularly along Península Gravina; in the Vernacci Islands, there are colonies of Olrog's Gull *Larus atlanticus* (Vulnerable; 50 pairs) and Magellanic Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus* (Near Threatened; 60,000 birds!). With regular Killer Whale *Orcinus orca* and South American Sea Lion *Otaria flavescens*, *Bahía Bustamante* is a viable alternative to Valdés.

Estancia Angostura, Santa Cruz (www.estanciasdesantacruz.com/LaAngostura/laangostura.htm). A rustic, family-run 19th-century farmhouse, lying just off *rutas nacionales* 29 and 40, c.100 km west-north-west of Gobernador Gregores. Already on the birding route, thanks to it being a stakeout for (and site of the NBC-funded rediscovery of) Austral Rail *Rallus antarcticus* (Vulnerable). The rails can be seen within 100 m of your bedroom, and are easiest on calm, sunny mornings and evenings. Other birds here include abundant Upland Goose *Chloephaga picta*, plentiful Cinereous Harrier *Circus cinereus* and Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus* of the oft-split race *magellanicus*. On *ruta nacional* 29, the turn-off to the estancia is at a crossroads; if you head in the opposite direction to the estancia, you come to a waterfowl-packed lake that holds Chilean Flamingo *Phoenicopterus chilensis* (Near Threatened) and, sometimes, Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi* (Endangered).

PUERTO BEMBERG AND RINCÓN DE COBO: USEFUL INFORMATION

Posada Puerto Bemberg Located 45 km from Puerto Iguazú airport. From here head west for 9 km towards Puerto Iguazú, then turn south (left) on *ruta nacional* 12. After 32 km, at km 1598, turn west (right) into Puerto Libertad, and head straight until the paved road gives way to a dirt road. Continue for 3 km to the Posada. A saloon car is fine, but drive carefully after rain. This boutique hotel comprises stylish modern accommodation set amidst lush gardens adjacent to forest. Day-visits can be arranged. For details, see www.puertobemberg.com; e-mail: info@puertobemberg.com; tel: +54 11 4152 5266.

Rincón de Cobo Located c.360 km south of Buenos Aires, off *ruta nacional* 11, c.15 km south of Mar de Ajó and 30 km north of Pinamar. The entrance track is at km 359.2. A saloon car is usually fine to drive around the estancia, but the dirt tracks can be sandy or muddy, depending on rainfall levels. B&B accommodation in several stylish cottages; other packages may be available on request. For details, see www.rincondecobo.com.ar; e-mail: info@rincondecobo.com.ar; tel: +54 2257 1558 0448.

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