

NEOTROPICAL BIRDING 6  
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# Capital Birding: **Santiago de Chile**

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*Continuing our series on birding in and around major Neotropical cities, we combine Andean highlands and Pacific lowlands with a tour around Santiago de Chile.*



White-sided Hillstar *Oreotrochilus leucopleurus*, El Yeso, Metropolitan Region, March 2008 (Fabrice Schmitt/Manu Expeditions); this individual is feeding at *Tristerix verticillatus* flowers, a parasitic plant common in central Chile



Left: Diademed Sandpiper-Plover *Phegornis mitchellii*, Baños de Colina, Metropolitan Region, February 2009 (Ignacio Azocar/[www.chileaves.com](http://www.chileaves.com)). El Yeso is one of the most reliable sites anywhere for this beautiful shorebird

Right: Chilean Tinamou *Nothoprocta perdicaria*, Parque Las Chinchillas, IV Region, September 2006 (Fabrice Schmitt/Manu Expeditions). Commonly heard but rarely seen

**L**ocated near the base of the mighty Andes and only 90 minutes drive from the rugged and beautiful Pacific coast, the surprisingly cosmopolitan city of Santiago de Chile is a pleasant base for some excellent and diverse birding. In just a couple of days, you can expect to see 100–130 species, including seven of the 12 Chilean endemics. In this article I identify good birding sites covering a variety of habitats, all within two hours drive of the national capital.

## Habitats, climate, and seasonality

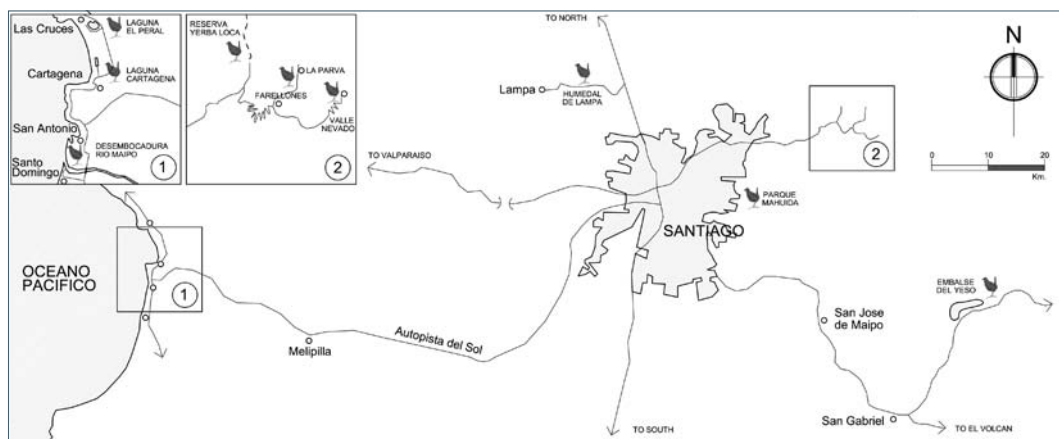
The four main birding habitats around Santiago are: Mediterranean *matorral* shrublands, freshwater wetlands, higher elevation alpine-zone in the Andes, and the coast. I will not cover the great pelagic opportunities from the historic port city of Valparaíso (90 minutes from Santiago) given that seabirding in Chile was treated in detail by Alvaro Jaramillo<sup>2</sup> in *Neotropical Birding* 4.

Centrally located in a long, slender country, Santiago enjoys a Mediterranean-type climate with winter rainfall, warm summers and cool winters; a combination that makes birding easy and pleasurable. Spring (September–November) is the most productive time to bird Santiago.

Local specialities are more active at this season, and the resident avifauna is supplemented by Neotropical migrants. Birding can be good in winter (April–September), although the highlands are inaccessible and almost devoid of birds.

## TRAVELING IN CHILE

Chile is a very safe country and a joy to travel around. Chileans are extremely helpful and warm people, and never seem to tire of expressing their love of the country's natural beauty. Those with interests beyond birding should not forget Chile's world famous vineyards and cultural sites which make any trip to Chile a feast for the senses as well as a boon for the life list. There is accommodation for all budgets in Santiago, but visitors should expect to pay more than in most South American countries. However, the financial increment is a small price to pay in exchange for the capital's urban beauty, smart outdoor restaurants, relative safety and ease of transportation. These reasons are why some of my North American birding friends consider Santiago to be their favourite South American city.



Map of Santiago de Chile showing the location of sites mentioned in the text (Rodrigo Barros)

## Chilean *matorral*: Parque Mahuida

(distance from the city centre: 10 km)

Mahuida is an excellent birding destination, but one best visited early on a weekday as it is crowded on weekends. Close to central Santiago, this park is easily reached by public transport: take the metro to Plaza Egaña station, then a D02 bus (bus stop is on Avenida Ossa, on the same side as the station exit) or taxi to the end of Avenida Larraín. A wide trail ascends the park, passing through some very good *matorral* scrub, in the general direction of a tall red-and-white antenna.

Within the first kilometre of this trail, it is possible to see four of the seven country endemics present in central Chile! You should easily see Chilean Mockingbird *Mimus thenca* (now 'only' near-endemic, as the species has been discovered recently in Argentina) and Moustached Turca *Pterotochos megapodius*, which are both common. Dusky-tailed Canastero *Asthenes humicola* and White-throated Tapaculo *Scelorchilus albicollis* prefer tall, dense scrub. Only the luckiest birder will see Chilean Tinamou *Nothoprocta perdicaria*, although, as with so many members of this family, chances of hearing one are high.

Other species to look out for include Austral Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium nanum*, Giant Hummingbird *Patagonas gigas* (spring–summer only), Striped Woodpecker *Picoides lignarius* and the nominate subspecies of Plain-mantled Tit-Spinetail *Leptasthenura aegithaloides*. The stunning Rufous-tailed Plantcutter *Phytotoma rara* occurs, although it can also be seen in gardens and municipal parks within Santiago. Check the skies for circling raptors such as Black-chested

Buzzard-Eagle *Geranoaetus melanoleucus*, Harris's Hawk *Parabuteo unicinctus* and even the rare Bicolored (Chilean) Hawk *Accipiter bicolor chilensis* (during migration periods and winter).

The park is open from Tuesday–Sunday, opening at 09h00 on Tuesday–Thursday and at 08h00 on other days. The park closes late (22h00 or midnight, depending on the day), enabling birders to look for Band-winged Nightjar *Caprimulgus longirostris* at and after dusk. The entrance fee is c.US\$0.50 pp and US\$3 per vehicle.

## Andean highlands: Farellones

(distance from the city centre: 50 km)

Just one hour's drive from Santiago, the ski resort of Farellones is the easiest location to find central Chile's highland specialists. There is no public transport, so you will need to hitch (which is both feasible and safe) or hire a car. From central Santiago, head north-east along the 'Costanera Norte' highway, exiting at Avenida Presidente Kennedy. This leads into Avenida Las Condes; head straight (east) for few more kilometres, then turn right at a petrol station, signed to Farellones. (The petrol station is near the junction between Avenida Las Condes and Calle San Enrique in Lo Barnechea, which can be reached by public transport; hereafter you can hitch or hire a taxi.) After 15 km, a series of very sharp bends start; all are numbered.

The entrance to Parque Yerba Loca is at bend 15. The key species here is Dusky Tapaculo *Scytalopus fuscus*. Look for this endemic in vegetation along small streams that cross the unpaved reserve road; it does not occur along the paved road. The reserve is open daily from



Top: The boardwalk and hide at El Peral (Mauricio López; [www.mauriciolopez.cl](http://www.mauriciolopez.cl))

Bottom: Fabulous scenery and birding at El Yeso (Rodrigo Moraga)

08h30–17h00 (entrance fee c.US\$4) and is also a good place to try for Chilean Tinamou.

Back on the paved road, heading towards Farellones ski resort, pull over and stop to check rocky areas for another Chilean endemic, Crag Chilia *Ochetorhynchus melanura*. Bend 21 is particularly good for endemics, and you can see Crag Chilia, Chilean Tinamou, Moustached Turca, White-throated Tapaculo and Chilean Mockingbird within a few steps of your car.

Once in Farellones, the road forks: either direction is good and leads to interesting habitat. To the left, towards La Parva, there is good alpine habitat after Farellones resort. Barros<sup>1</sup> provides a map and some details of this area. Here Black-winged Ground Dove *Metriopelia melanoptera*, Rufous-banded Miner *Geositta rufipennis*, Scale-throated Earthcreeper *Upucerthia dumetaria*, Cordilleran Canastero *Asthenes modesta*, White-browed Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola albilora*, and Greater Yellow Finch *Sicalis auriventris* are common. Along the streams, look for Grey-flanked Cinclodes *Cinclodes oustaleti* and Magellanic Tapaculo *Scytalopus magellanicus*. And keep one eye on the sky as Andean Condor *Vultur gryphus* (Near Threatened) is almost guaranteed!

## ORGANISING YOUR TIME IN SANTIAGO

- Half-day available: go to Mahuida if you have a free morning or to Farellones in the afternoon. Expect 40–50 species.
- One full day available: start in Mahuida, then head to Farellones. Spend the end of the afternoon at Lampa marshes. Expect 70–90 species.
- Two days: add the coastal area. Expect 110–130 species. With the help of a local birding agency, you can also organise a pelagic trip from Valparaíso (for details, see Jaramillo<sup>2</sup>).

Turning right at the fork towards Valle Nevado increases your chances of seeing Mountain Caracara *Phalacrocorax maculatus* or Sharp-billed Canastero *Asthenes pyrrholeuca*, the latter in scrub. The slope just below Valle Nevado is the best place to locate Creamy-rumped Miner *Geositta isabellina* (a particular speciality), White-sided Hillstar *Oreotrochilus leucopleurus* and Black-fronted Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola frontalis*.

## Andean highlands: El Yeso

(distance from city centre: 100 km)

The main target at this well-known site is Diademed Sandpiper-Plover *Phegornis mitchellii* (Near Threatened), as many of the area's other montane species can be found around Farellones. Public transport does not go near the site, so you will need your own high-clearance vehicle (a 4x4 is useful but not usually necessary) as the access road may be partly blocked by rockfalls (particularly in spring or after heavy rain).

The first birding spot is nearly two hours from Santiago, so El Yeso takes a full day. One of the easiest ways to reach the Maipo Valley is to drive south from Santiago on the Vespucio highway. At exit 41 (marked Florida), head east on Avenida Florida and drive straight on into the Maipo Valley. The paved road ends 20 minutes after San José de Maipo. Continue straight on for 2 km, then turn left and drive 22 km to El Yeso dam.

Crag Chilia can be found anywhere along this road, although km 4 is the best-known stakeout. Along the river, look for Torrent Duck *Merganetta armata*, Chilean Flicker *Colaptes pitius* and Austral Blackbird *Curaeus curaeus*. Pause around km 12 to look for Spot-billed Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola maculirostris* or the



Clockwise from top:

Crag Chilia *Ochetorhynchus melanura* (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding). Look for this furnariid on rocky slopes along the roads to Farellones or El Yeso

Rufous-banded Miner *Geositta rufipennis*, Punta Choros, IV Region, September 2007 (Pablo Cáceres; [www.flickr.com/photos/pablocaceres](http://www.flickr.com/photos/pablocaceres)). Fairly common in summer around Farellones

Creamy-rumped Miner *Geositta isabellina* Laguna Santa Rosa, III Region, January 2008 (Fabrice Schmitt/Manu Expeditions). A highland speciality found more easily in Chile than Argentina



Clockwise from top left:

Seaside Cinclodes *Cinclodes nigrofumescus*, Caleta Chañaral, III Region, April 2009 (Fabrice Schmitt/Manu Expeditions). A Chilean endemic that is closely related to Surf Cinclodes *C. tacsanowskii*, endemic to Peru

Dusky Tapaculo *Scytalopus fuscus*, Parque Yerba Loca, Metropolitan Region, December 2007 (Fabrice Schmitt/Manu Expeditions). This photograph proves that this skulking species occasionally ventures out into the open!

Moustached Turca *Pterotochos megapodius*, El Yeso, Metropolitan Region, December 2006 (Mauricio López; [www.mauriciolopez.cl](http://www.mauriciolopez.cl)). Often seen in the open on the way to El Yeso

Chilean Mockingbird *Mimus thenca* (inset), Parque Mahuida, Metropolitan Region, October 2006 (Fabrice Schmitt/Manu Expeditions). This near-endemic is common in central Chile

rare Mountain Parakeet *Psilopsiagon aurifrons*. Moustached Turca is common along the first 15 km, often crossing the road. The dam itself is not very productive, so don't expect much more than the odd Crested Duck *Lophonetta specularioides* or Andean Gull *Chroicocephalus serranus*, but lakeshore scrub usually abounds with Yellow-rumped Siskin *Carduelis uropygialis*, Gray-hooded Sierra Finch *Phrygilus gayi* and Mourning Sierra Finch *P. fruticeti*. You may even bump into a slumbering Band-winged Nightjar.

For the main objective (Diademed Sandpiper-Plover, lest you have forgotten), head c.2.5 km beyond the dam, turning left after a small bridge across a stream, and continuing as far as you can on this poor track. In the large bog at the track end, look carefully for the few breeding pairs of 'DSP'. These birds are surprisingly secretive, so the best way to find them is to walk slowly and scan regularly around you: they are often much closer than you think. Please be respectful and keep your visit short. These few pairs are disturbed by hundreds of birders every year, and their breeding success could be affected by disturbance from insensitive visitors.

In the same area, keep an eye out for Gray-breasted Seedsnipe *Thinocorus orbignyianus*, Scale-throated Earthcreeper and Cordilleran Canastero. If you have time and a sturdy vehicle, head farther up this beautiful Andean valley to reach good habitat for other montane species such as Creamy-rumped Miner, Black-fronted Ground Tyrant and Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe *Attagis gayi*.

## Freshwater wetlands: Estero Lampa

(distance from the city centre: 30 km)

Estero Lampa merits a visit for the chance of rarities with the back-up of adding some widespread species to your trip list. To get there, drive north from the city centre on Ruta 5. After c.20 km, follows signs for Lampa. Cross the highway and drive through Estación Colina. Follow the main paved road for c.5 km beyond the railtracks to the wetlands. By public transport, the best bet is to take a *colectivo* (taxis shared by four people and going to a fixed destination) from Puente Cal y Canto metro station in Santiago.

As a result of degradation and contamination, birding the wetland is not particularly pleasant, so visits are usually brief. The number of birds present depends on the (fluctuating) water level. With luck, you should see rarities such as Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis salinasi*, South American Painted Snipe *Nycticryphes semicollaris* and the cryptic tyrant-flycatcher known as

'Lemon Doradito' *Pseudocolopteryx* cf. *citreola* (see Alexander Lees' article on this and other recent taxonomic proposals, pp. 20–27). Common species include Red Shoveler *Anas platalea*, Chiloe Wigeon *Anas sibilatrix*, Cinereous Harrier *Circus cinereus*, Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia*, Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*, Wren-like Rushbird *Phleocryptes melanops*, Spectacled Tyrant *Hymenops pericillata*, Many-colored Rush Tyrant *Tachuris rubigastrea*, Correndera Pipit *Anthus correndera*, Grassland Yellow Finch *Sicalis luteola*, Yellow-winged Blackbird *Agelaius thilius* and Long-tailed Meadowlark *Sturnella loyca*.

## Maipo estuary

(Distance from the city centre: 110 km)

The río Maipo is one of the largest rivers in central Chile. The estuary, 110 km west of Santiago, attracts hundreds (sometimes thousands) of shorebirds, gulls, terns and skimmers. It is also one of the few sites for 'Lemon Doradito'. From Santiago several public buses head to Llo-Lleo (90 minutes; c.US\$6), from where there are *colectivos* to 'Las Rocas'. Tell the driver that you want to go to the estuary ('desembocadura del río Maipo') and get out 200 m from the car park.

If driving, head along Ruta 78 towards San Antonio. Fifteen km before the town, turn towards Leyda and Las Rocas de Santo Domingo. After a few kilometres you reach Leyda reservoir on your right; scan for ducks, coots and Great Grebe *Podiceps major*. Continuing to Las Rocas de Santo Domingo, you cross a long bridge over the río Maipo. Immediately after the bridge, turn right and right again onto an unpaved road that leads to the estuary car park. En route look for White-tailed Kite *Elanus leucurus* and Green-backed Firecrown *Sephanoides sephanoides* (the latter mainly from March–September) then stop in the car park after 1 km (a small fee is payable from December–March). A half-day is sufficient, and the afternoon roost is best.

Near the car park, check rocks for Surfbird *Aphriza virgata* and blackberry bushes for breeding Dusky Tapaculo. Scan the sea for Humboldt Current specialities such as Humboldt Penguin *Spheniscus humboldti* (Vulnerable), Guanay Cormorant *Phalacrocorax bougainvillii* (Near Threatened) and Inca Tern *Larosterna inca* (Near Threatened). The endemic Chilean Dolphin *Cephalorhynchus eutropia* can also be seen from shore.

Follow the beach north looking for shorebirds and gulls. During the austral winter a few Rufous-chested Dotterel *Charadrius modestus*

can be found. Peruvian Pelican *Pelecanus thagus* (Near Threatened), Sanderling *Calidris alba*, Gray Gull *Larus modestus*, South American Tern *Sterna hirundinacea* and Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger cinerascens* sometimes roost in large numbers. Search the latter for individuals with the whitish underwing and broad white trailing edge of the rare *intercedens* subspecies<sup>3</sup>. Keep an eye out for other scarce species such as Snowy-crowned Tern *Sterna trudeaui* and Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*.

On the way back, look along the river shore for Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus* of the race *melanurus*, American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus*, Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus* and, on occasion, Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*. Finally, spend some time by the 'hide' looking for breeding Spectacled Tyrant and 'Lemon Doradito' from November–February. A small trail crosses the dunes from the beach to this hide; take care not to disturb oystercatchers during the breeding season.

## Cartagena and El Peral lagoons

(Distance from city centre: 120 km)

This coastal area contains three sites worth birding. Lying 5 km north of San Antonio, Cartagena is easily accessible by public transport. Walk north along the rocky shoreline of Playa Chica to see Seaside Cinclodes *Cinclodes nigrofumescens* (another Chilean endemic) or Blackish Oystercatcher *Haematopus ater*. Laguna Cartagena is 1 km farther north along the Playa Grande beach. Open daily from 09h00–17h00, this small lagoon is excellent for Spot-flanked Gallinule *Gallinula melanops*, three species of coot and waterfowl such as Coscoroba Swan *Coscoroba coscoroba* (one pair has bred since 2007) or the uncommon Black-headed Duck *Heteronetta atricapilla*. Laguna El Peral lies 5 km north towards El Tabo. Open daily from 09h00–17h30 (although closed 13h00–14h00 at weekends), this lagoon is probably one of the best places to try for Stripe-backed Bittern *Ixobrychus exilis*. Commoner species include Great Grebe, Black-necked Swan *Cygnus melanocoryphus*, Lake Duck *Oxyura vittata*, Plumbeous Rail *Pardirallus sanguinolentus*, Wren-like Rushbird, Dusky Tapaculo, Many-colored Rush Tyrant and Yellow-winged Blackbird.

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- *Public transport in and around Santiago* [www.transantiagoinforma.cl/](http://www.transantiagoinforma.cl/)
- *Red de los Observadores de Aves y Vida Silvestre de Chile* (Chilean naturalist association, organising birding and nature trips and publishing *La Chiricoca*, the Chilean birding magazine) <http://redobservadores.cl/>

map. The following photographers kindly made their images available for potential inclusion: Ignacio Azocar, José Miguel Adaros Diazm, Pablo Cáceres, Christian Fabian Navarrete Aravena, Rodrigo González Pairoa, Mauricio López, Rodrigo Moraga Z., Rodrigo Tapia and Pilar Valenzuela.

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## NBC ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, AUGUST 2010

The Neotropical Bird Club advises members that its 2010 Annual General Meeting (AGM) will take place at the British Birdwatching Fair, Rutland Water, Leicestershire, UK during 20–22 August. The date/time remain to be confirmed; further details will be posted on the Club's website ([www.neotropicalbirdclub.org](http://www.neotropicalbirdclub.org)) as soon as they are available. We also expect to have a special guest speaker. The AGM has been moved from the Club's spring meeting, which will take place as usual on Sunday 30 May 2010 at Cley Village Hall, Norfolk, UK; there will be a series of talks. Details of speakers and opening times will be available on the Club's website.