

Birding Santa Cruz, Bolivia's largest department

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Trilling Tapaculo *Scytalopus parvirostris* (Daniel Alarcón); difficult to see like other species in the genus, this skulker responded well to playback at Siberia

For a landlocked country, Bolivia's birdlist is nothing short of miraculous. Our authors take us from Amazonian lowlands to Andean highlands in search of the feathered treasures of Santa Cruz department

Santa Cruz is the largest department in Bolivia. It covers one-third of the country and is larger than nations like Ecuador, French Guyana and Suriname. Located in the east of the country, Santa Cruz borders Mato Grosso (Brazil) to the east, the department of Beni to the north, Cochabamba to the west, and Chuquisaca and Paraguay to the south. The most important city in the department is the capital, Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Here, the visitor will find accommodation and other services, and it is also the best base from which to visit the rest of the department. Among habitats, there is some exceptionally well-preserved Chaco, Chiquitano woodlands, large swathes of Amazonian *terra firme* in the north, dry inter-Andean valleys and a large segment of the Pantanal. Santa Cruz is the second bird-richest department in Bolivia, with almost 1,100 species. This total includes 11 of Bolivia's 17 endemics. Here we present the best places to look for most of these endemics, as well as several globally threatened species². Our article complements the one by Bennett Hennessey³, which contains new birding alternatives in the department of Santa Cruz.

Andes

Abra de los Toros

(120 km north-west of capital, c.150 species)
The tourist town of Samaipata is two hours by road from Santa Cruz de la Sierra. From here, several roads enter Parque Nacional Amboró, one of the most spectacular natural reserves on the planet. Access points include La Yunga, Abra de los Toros, Las Lauras and the town of Volcanes. All are good but we prefer Abra de los Toros. Some 112 km from Santa Cruz de la Sierra along the 'old road to Cochabamba' (ruta 7), a well-marked road to the left leads to Achira Sierra Resort. Abra de los Toros lies 45 minutes beyond the resort by 4x4 vehicle.

Where the road ends take a path that leads upwards; after c.100 m take the path to the left, and look for the spectacular Crested Quetzal *Pharomachrus antisianus* and Barred Fruiteater *Pipreola arcuata*. Mixed-species flocks among the tree ferns and in the understorey include Variable Antshrike *Thamnophilus caerulescens aspersiventer*, Slaty Gnateater *Conopophaga ardesiaca*, Rufous-naped Brush Finch *Atlapetes rufinucha* (endemic) and Citrine Warbler *Basileuterus luteoviridis*, while Solitary Eagle *Harpyhaliaetus solitarius* and pairs of Black-winged Parrot *Hapalopsittaca melanotis* fly overhead. The calls of Military

Macaw *Ara militaris* (Vulnerable) can be heard in the valleys during summer.

Pampa Grande, Matarral and Comarapa

(150–220 km north-west of capital, c.200 species)
Leaving the capital, the 'old road to Cochabamba' passes through good birding habitat. From the town of Pampa Grande, through Matarral, and up to Comarapa you traverse c.70 km of inter-Andean valleys dominated by xeric vegetation. Stop first at Pampa Grande, where the best area is c.100 m before the town by the río Seco. In May–August you should find groups up to 60 Red-fronted Macaws *Ara rubrogenys* (endemic and Endangered). Another option for this species is to visit Perereta³.

Beyond the town of Matarral, look for gullies and gorges. These are excellent for Bolivian Earthcreeper *Tarphonomus harterti* (near-endemic, having recently been discovered in Argentina), which normally sings very early in the morning or in the last hours in the afternoon. Stripe-crowned Spinetail *Cranioleuca pyrrhophia*, Rufous-capped Antshrike *Thamnophilus ruficapillus* and the tricky Bolivian Warbling Finch *Poospiza boliviana* (near-endemic) also occur. Around Comarapa, roadside birding offers good chances of finding Striped Woodpecker *Veniliornis lignarius*, Greater Wagtail-Tyrant *Stigmatura budytoides* and Gray-crested Finch *Lophospingus griseocristatus* (near-endemic). There are hotels only in Comarapa, where we recommend Finca la Víspera (tel: +591 3 94 46 082, e-mail: info@lavispera.org).

Siberia

(240 km north-west of capital, c.150 species)
After a night at Comarapa, head c.10 km along the 'old Cochabamba road' to Siberia, and explore the area's gullies for Red-tailed Comet *Sappho sparganura*, Green-tailed Trainbearer *Lesbia nuna*, Spot-breasted Thornbird *Phacellodomus maculipectus* and Creamy-breasted Canastero *Asthenes dorbignyi*. Fifteen km further on, keep your eyes open for Andean Condor *Vultur gryphus* (Near Threatened). Montane cloud forest starts at 2,300 m altitude. Walk the road for two endemics: Black-throated Thistletail *Schizoeaca harterti* and Gray-bellied Flowerpiercer *Diglossa carbonaria*. After 6 km, the road reaches Empalme, where a small road heads right to Khara Huasi village. Some 3–5 km along this secondary road you will reach a good area for the spectacular Hooded Mountain



Top: Male Band-tailed Fruiteater *Pipreola intermedia* (Daniel Alarcón) is a beautiful fruiteater that can be found at Abra de los Toros or Siberia

Bottom: Crested Hornero *Furnarius cristatus* (Daniel Alarcón); a characteristic species of dry areas, it is often found in the Chaco





Top: Brown Jacamar *Brachygalba lugubris* (Daniel Alarcón). Rare in Bolivia, but uncommon at forest edges of the Estación Biológica Caparú

Bottom: Gray-crested Finch *Lophospingus griseocristatus* (Daniel Alarcón) is almost confined to Bolivia and is commonly observed along the road between Pampa Grande and Comarapa



Toucan *Andigena cucullata* (near-endemic). Other interesting species to look for in this area include Trilling Tapaculo *Scytalopus parvirostris*, and, with a little luck, Black-and-chestnut Eagle *Spizaetus isidori* flying over the woodland.

Chaco

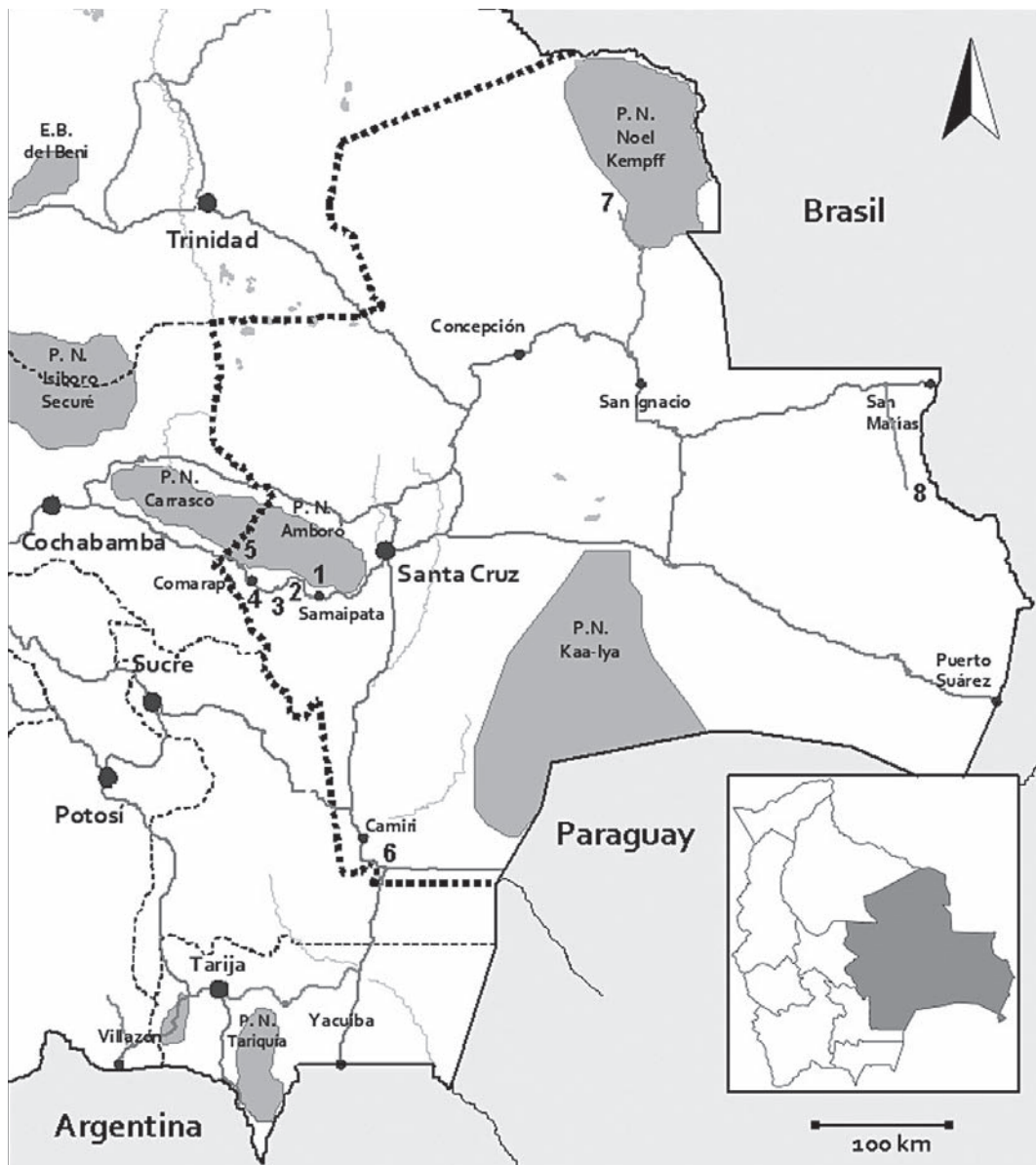
Boyuibe and surrounding areas

(325 km south of capital, c.200 species)

From Santa Cruz, take ruta 9 toward Yacuiba.

The trip to Boyuibe takes five hours along one of

Bolivia's best roads. Probably the best option to stay is Camiri (228 km from Santa Cruz), after which you can continue to Boyuibe. Both localities hold excellent examples of Bolivian Chaco. Once at Boyuibe, take ruta 6 (6 km from the east end of the village), and after 2.6 km take the road to the left. Park and look for Chaco Chachalaca *Ortalis canicollis*, Crested Hornero *Furnarius cristatus*, Short-billed Canastero *Asthenes baeri*, Cinereous Tyrant *Knipolegus striaticeps* and Many-colored Chaco Finch *Saltatricula*



Map showing recommended birding sites in Santa Cruz department, Bolivia. 1–Abra de los toros, 2–Pampa Grande, 3–Matarral, 4–Comarapa, 5–Siberia, 6–Boyuibe, 7–Estacion Biologica Caparu and 8–San Fernando de Pozones.

multicolor. At dusk and dawn, listen for singing Spot-backed Puffbird *Nystalus maculatus* and Stripe-backed Antbird *Myrmorchilus strigilatus*.

Chiquitanía and Amazonía

Estación Biológica Caparú

(550 km north-east of capital, c.560 species) Formerly a cattle ranch, Estancia Caparú is now a biological research station, under the same ownership. To visit Caparú, contact Jaime Rozenman (tel: +591 3 35 52 923, cel: +591 77 39 54 73, e-mail: jaime.rozenman@alke.net). There are two options to reach the site. The faster option is to take a plane from Santa Cruz to Estación Biológica Caparú. The flight takes just one hour and 45 minutes. The slower option is to hire a 4x4 vehicle and take ruta 10 from Santa Cruz to El Carmen (300 km), and from there take a minor road to the left to San José de Campamento (100 km). Here you can arrange to meet a guide to escort you to the ranch. If you are thinking about covering this distance in two days (not a bad idea considering the poor quality of the roads) you should overnight in San Ignacio de Velasco, 71 km from El Carmen. Here there are two excellent hotels: we prefer La Mision (tel: +591 3 96 22 333, www.hotel-lamision.com).

Caparú is an amazing spot due to the quality of the accommodation, the diversity of habitats (Chiquitano woodlands, riverine forest, seasonally flooded woodlands, *terra firme* forests, *cerrado*, wet and dry pampas, and lagoons), and the high number of bird species found in its 20,000 ha. We recommend a visit of 3–5 days. The Estancia has a local guide (Osvaldo Barroso), who can be consulted for specifics. A staggering 150 species can be observed around the main houses of the ranch in a single morning. Several interesting species like Dull-capped Attila *Attila bolivianus* and Fawn-breasted Wren *Thryothorus guarayanus* can be found in the Chiquitano woodland adjacent to the landing strip. In this area, where the forest borders form a mosaic with the wet pampas, Brown Jacamar *Brachygalba lugubris* perches on high and exposed branches. Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja* (Near Threatened) has been observed, so keep an eye on the canopy. A walk through 3 km of wet pampas and grasslands leads to marshlands with Scarlet-headed Blackbird *Amblyramphus holosericeus*; Hoatzin *Opisthocomus hoazin* inhabits the surrounding woodlands. In tall-grass areas groups of the tiny Crested Doradito *Pseudocolaptes sclateri* utter their soft but

BIRDING LOGISTICS

We recommend a minimum of two weeks birding in Santa Cruz; you'll see the highest number of species during June–December. Almost all towns have several accommodation options, but we recommend visiting at least three different hotels before making a decision. Charter flights are a good way to visit sites in the lowlands (make arrangements through Fundación Amigos de la Naturaleza, FAN (tel: +591 3 35 56 800, www.fan-bo.org) or Carlos Gonzáles Weise (cel: +591 77 08 87 32, e-mail: cgweise@hotmail.com, an excellent pilot who speaks perfect English). Otherwise a 4x4 vehicle is advisable. Finally, public transportation is good between major population centres but you must be patient with arrival and departure times! With regard to security in the lowlands, be careful near the Brazilian border in particular. Local people are generally friendly to visitors; in the highlands or in cloud forest areas, you should let the local people know why you are there. Purchase food in advance in Santa Cruz, since it may be scarce in smaller towns. In humid forest, dry forest and wetlands, especially from November–April, remember to always wear long-sleeved shirts and apply insect repellent.

There is currently no field guide to Bolivia, although a checklist is available². We recommend using the Peru guide for the Andes and Amazonian regions of Bolivia⁶ and the Paraguay guide for the Chiquitano Dry Forest, Chaco and Pantanal⁵. To familiarise yourself with bird sounds, use the excellent CD-ROM, *Birds of Bolivia* 2.0⁴.

characteristic ticking calls. On the track to Puesto Lagunitas look for groups of Long-tailed Ground Dove *Uropelia campestris*. Passing the Puesto el Cusi there is an area of *cerrado* where it is possible to find Horned Sungem *Heliactin bilophus*, White-rumped Tanager *Cypsnagra hirundinacea* and the restricted-range Black-and-tawny Seedeater *Sporophila nigrorufa* (Vulnerable). Once at Puesto Lagunitas, search the forest for Agami Heron *Agamia agami*, Spotted Puffbird *Bucco tamatia* and Amazonian Umbrellabird *Cephalopterus ornatus* (see page 21). A nice option is to bird the road to Florida town, where great *terra firme* forest extends for 7 km, with good chances of Black-spotted Bare-eye *Phlegopsis nigromaculata*, Royal Flycatcher *Onychorhynchus coronatus* and Spangled Cotinga *Cotinga cayana*.



Top: Bolivian Earthcreeper *Tarphonomus harterti* (Daniel Alarcón); almost endemic to Bolivia, it is common in the gullies and gorges of Pampa Grande, Matarral and Comarapa

Bottom: Agami Heron *Agamia agami* (Daniel Alarcón); this solitary and beautiful heron is hard to find in forest streams of the Biological Station Caparú



Above: Black-winged Parrot *Hapalopsittaca melanotis* (Daniel Alarcón); this species is rare in montane forests of Abra de los Toros and Siberia. This pair was found near its nest



Left: Black-spotted Bare-eye *Phlegopsis nigromaculata* (Daniel Alarcón). This spectacular antbird is usually found in pairs, but is rare in *terra firme* forests of Estación Biológica Caparú

Pantanal fringes

San Fernando de Pozones

(680 km south-east of capital, c.270 species)

The trip to this area is long but it is worth the effort. 4x4 vehicles are mandatory. You can only visit during the drier months of July–December. From Santa Cruz take ruta 10 east to San Ignacio de Velasco (371 km); overnight here, and don't forget that you are close to Caparú! The next day, set off early and head to Las Petas (260 km); there is no accommodation in this section. From Las Petas, head south toward San Fernando de los Pozones (80 km), which is within the Área de Manejo Integrado San Matias. The road is good for Red-legged Seriema *Cariama cristata*, Red-and-green Macaw *Ara chloropterus* and Green-cheeked Parakeet *Pyrrhura molinae*. Once in San Fernando, nearby gallery forests and scattered woodlands host 10–20 pairs of Hyacinth Macaw *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus* (Endangered). The río San Fernando is great for waterbirds such as Southern Screamer *Chauna torquata* and Boat-billed Heron *Cochlearius cochlearius*. Common species in forest patches and scrub include White-lored Spinetail *Synallaxis albilora* and Rufous Cacholote *Pseudoseisura unirufa*. Visitors can stay at Estancia El Espinal; contact Luiz Añez (tel: +591 3 34 41 850), who lives in the city of Santa Cruz and is fluent in English.

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