

Birds of sand: birding the central Monte Desert

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The temporary creeks in sandy areas of the Monte are the best places to find the incredibly fast Sandy Gallito *Teledromas fuscus*; the only genus-level endemic of the Monte (General Roca, Río Negro, Jaime Prieto)

Deserts are not usually a prominent feature of the Neotropical imagery, ranking well below forests, wetlands and grasslands for the average birder. Our authors argue, convincingly, that this will change for those birders experiencing the arid Monte Desert of Argentina where most Endemics are found.



Above left: The nest-master of the Monte is the White-throated Cacholote *Pseudoseisura gutturalis*, a large, predatory, noisy and duetting furnariid endemic to this desert (General Roca, Río Negro, Ignacio Hernández/www.imagenesdelviento.com.ar)

Above right: Rufous-banded Miner *Geositta rufipennis* present in this area sing *rufipennis*-type voices and are of considerable taxonomic interest since they appear to be close to the southern boundary between the two vocal types that will eventually be considered separate species (Ignacio Hernández/www.imagenesdelviento.com.ar)

Elegant-crested Tinamou *Eudromia elegans* can be locally common and gather frequently in groups of up to nine individuals (General Roca, Río Negro, Ignacio Hernández/www.imagenesdelviento.com.ar)



Not lush, not green, not full of colourful birds, not megaornithodiverse... but why base our description of the Monte Desert on what it is not? Perhaps the unique forest ecosystems of the Neotropics have left little room for interest in those habitats that do not seem to fit the concept of tropical paradise. Indeed, the word Neotropics is full of intention and meaning, full of history: the new tropics, the place where the treasures are hidden amidst the forests, the little-known land of Hylea, the green carpet that in its splendid isolation was neglected by the European world while philosophy arose in Greece. Let us recapitulate. Let us begin from the beginning.

The Monte Desert *is* a scrub-desert characterised by the presence of several species of creosote *Larrea* spp.⁴ As a biogeographic region, the Monte is endemic to Argentina and ranges from sea level to c.2,000 m in the Andes. The biome extends from 24°35'S in Salta province to 44°20'S in Chubut province through the provinces of Tucumán, Catamarca, La Rioja, San Luis, San Juan, Mendoza, La Pampa, Neuquén and Río Negro^{2,4}. From an ornithological perspective, it represents not only a formidable ecological barrier but also a virtually ignored area of endemism. Sandy Gallito *Teledromas fuscus*, White-throated Cacholote *Pseudoseisura gutturalis*, Patagonian Canastero *Pseudasthenes patagonica*, Steinbach's Canastero *P. steinbachi*, Lesser Shrike-Tyrant *Agriornis murinus*, Hudson's Black-Tyrant *Knipolegus hudsoni*, Rusty-backed Monjita *Neoxolmis rubetra*, Black-crowned Monjita *Xolmis coronata*, Carbonated Sierra Finch *Phrygilus carbonarius* and Cinnamon Warbling Finch *Poospiza ornata* are all endemic to or near-endemic breeders in the Monte Desert—since some also occur in adjacent Patagonian steppe or transitional Chaco woodland around salt-flats.

Who said that charm comes in colour? We hope to convince you of the opposite; the Monte Desert is here to help us in this task. In this article we propose that you visit four localities in the provinces of Neuquén and Río Negro at the northern tip of Argentine Patagonia, an area characterised by *mesetas* (table-top mountains) and their *bardas* (cliffs) in wind- and water-eroded arid landscapes.

Neuquén outskirts

The city of Neuquén is bordered by two large rivers: the Río Neuquén and Río Limay, which meet at *confluencia* to form the Río Negro, which in turn flows to the Atlantic Ocean. This oasis in the desert has been extensively cultivated, but

IMPORTANT ADVICE

Winds tend to prevail in the afternoon, when it may be best to bird closer to more sheltered waterbodies.

You will be birding in a desert. Even if relatively close to civilisation, you need to be ready for any situation that may arise. You can forget your binoculars but please don't forget to take water!

native vegetation is present along the rivers and along the irrigation channels amidst the apples, pears and peaches, yet the *monte* is never far away.

Native willow *Salix humboldtiana* and exotic tree stands (mostly *Betula* sp. and *Fraxinus* sp.) are visited by Black-chinned Siskins *Carduelis* cf. *barbata* throughout the region, even in the middle of the cities and in small populated areas. The Monte/Oasis populations of Black-chinned Siskins are the subject of a complex taxonomic study by our group: the grey females and the young-looking breeding males⁶ are very different in plumage and morphology from the typical *Nothofagus* forest forms and might well represent an undescribed taxon^{3,5}. Stay tuned for upcoming news on this one!

While on provincial road 7 between Neuquén and Centenario, turn west at the Parque Industrial Neuquén (38°54'31.69"S 68°04'56.92"W) and drive along the paved road (some parts may be unpaved). Take the dirt road to the right (at 38°55'12.43"S 68°15'14.86"W): this area should produce Sandy Gallito and Patagonian Canastero. Large family groups of Elegant-crested Tinamou *Eudromia elegans* can be seen crossing the road at dusk and Rusty-backed Monjitas will be seen perching atop *Larrea* bushes or running on the ground. Always remember this advice: many Monte birds will be running or hopping on the ground! A long walk increases your chances of connecting with White-throated Cacholote, Yellow-billed *Anairetes flavirostris* and Tufted A. *parulus* Tit-Tyrants and your chance of seeing both Grey-bellied *Agriornis micropterus* and Lesser Shrike-Tyrant *A. murinus*, the former of which is rather partial to the local subspecies of Rufous-collared Sparrow *Zonotrichia capensis choraules* (which has a peculiar Monte dialect).

El Chocón

The hydroelectric Chocón dam, interrupting the natural course of the Río Limay, is one of the country's main energy suppliers. From Neuquén,

take national road 22 south for c.50 km and then road 237 keeping towards Bariloche. Drive for 25 km and turn left at the town of El Chocón immediately after descending from the top of the *meseta*. The dam can be crossed and will take you from Neuquén to Río Negro province. This small town is growing steadily, and here you can find all that is required to spend a full birding day.

The flattest areas are great for Patagonian Canastero, Plain-backed Tit-Spinetail *Leptasthenura aegithaloides*, Tufted Tit-Tyrant and the less common Yellow-billed Tit-Tyrant and White-winged Black Tyrant *Knipolegus aterrimus*. Straneck's Tyrannulet *Serpophaga griseicapilla* as well as duetting pairs of Greater Wagtail-Tyrant *Stigmatura budytoides* usually occur in denser vegetation. Do not miss the sandy creeks! Sandy Gallitos nest on the banks, singing while shaking their wings atop bushes and run quickly on the ground in this area.

Carbonated Sierra Finch is found more easily on the Río Negro side, in the first large valley after crossing the dam, together with Mourning Sierra Finches *Phrygilus fruticeti*: both species are commonly seen while making their characteristic parachuting display flights. Band-tailed Earthcreeper *Ochetorhynchus (Eremobius) phoenicurus* is also fairly common here and Band-winged Nightjars *Caprimulgus longirostris* will sing during the warm nights close to the *bardas*.

Lago Pellegrini

From Neuquén, take provincial road 7 to Centenario. At the second roundabout in Centenario take the second exit towards Cinco Saltos. Then on reaching a large roundabout take the second exit, and drive just 200 m along Ruta Nacional (RN) 151 northwards and turn right (Ruta Provincial [RP] 70) to enter Cinco Saltos (if coming from General Roca, take RN 22 and then RN 151 until you reach the same large roundabout). Drive through the town and turn left after crossing the bridge. Keep on the paved road for 15 km until reaching Lago Pellegrini. Turn left at the police checkpoint to enter Monte habitat (feel free to take any of the dirt roads) or continue straight ahead to the village of Lago Pellegrini and the extensive wetland on the west of the peninsula.

In the more humid and dense sections of Monte, Sharp-billed Canastero *Asthenes pyrrholeuca* and the outrageous Crested Gallito *Rhinocrypta lanceolata* are frequent. The gallito can be hard to see, but by tracking singing birds atop bushes you should be able to approach fairly

WHERE, WHEN, HOW

Neuquén is the most important city of the Patagonia and the gateway to its joys. It is easily reached by plane from the main cities in Patagonia, northwest Argentina and from the capital city of Buenos Aires. It will be easy to find somewhere to stay here, although we would recommend Puente de Palos (www.puentedepalos.com) on the outskirts of Neuquén, close to the town of Centenario. The three custom-made houses in the farm, the nearby Río Neuquén and the certainty of observing the not-black-chinned Black-chinned Siskins while drinking a good Patagonian red wine speak for themselves. From here, you will be less than an hour's drive from all the birding destinations described in this article.

The city of Roca is only 45 km from Neuquén along Ruta Nacional 22. Here, a good choice is the hotel of the Fundación Cultural Patagonia (www.hotellafundaciongaleon.com).

Northern Patagonia is cold in winter and hot in summer. The best time of the year for birding is from October–January when all the important summer migrants will be present and breeding activity will be at its peak.

close without disturbing them. White-throated Cacholote is common in the area. Their enormous stick-nests betray their presence; but they can, however, be tough to locate: do not try to wait by a nest hoping for them to come close, since most of the nests that you will find are out of use. Sandy soils are good for Sandy Gallito.

The extensive reedbeds and calm waters close to the shore are crammed with birdlife. Wildfowl includes displaying and breeding Black-necked Swan *Cygnus melancoryphus*, Coscoroba Swan *Coscoroba coscoroba* and Argentine Ruddy Duck *Oxyura vitatta*, three coot species, three grebe species, five swallow species and large numbers of Many-coloured Rush Tyrant *Tachuris rubrigastra*. This is probably one of the best places in the world to see and study Stripe-backed Bittern *Ixobrychus involucris*: it is incredibly common—singing and foraging birds can be easily seen without playback. Tamarisk *Tamarix gallica* thickets, more than any other habitat in the lagoon, is the haunt of the recently split Lemon (or Ticking) Doradito *Pseudocolaptes citreola*¹ (see *Neotropical Birding* 6: 27) and occasional pairs of Greater Wagtail-Tyrant can be found.





Above left and right: Black-chinned Siskins *Carduelis barbata* in the Monte region are quite different from birds in the Patagonian forests; males usually look like young birds and females are grey overall. This pair shows typically plumaged birds (General Roca, Río Negro, Ignacio Hernández/www.imagenesdelviento.com.ar)

Left: Plain-backed Tit Spinetail *Leptasthenura aegithaloides* is an agile dweller of arid environments regularly found clinging to bushes and rarely feeding on the ground (General Roca, Río Negro, Jaime Prieto)

Below: Rusty-backed Monjita *Neoxolmis rubetra* breeds in shrubby steppes of the Monte and southern Patagonia migrating northwards during the austral winter (Koluel Kaike, Santa Cruz, Santiago Imberti)

Facing page, clockwise from top:

Band-tailed Earthcreeper *Ochetorhynchus [Eremobius] phoenicurus* is a bold inhabitant of dry areas (General Roca, Río Negro, Jaime Prieto)

Crested Gallito *Rhinocrypta lanceolata* prefers denser and taller shrubbery in the Monte Desert, unlike its more open-area congener, the Sandy Gallito (General Roca, Río Negro, Jaime Prieto)

Amongst the stick-nest builders, the Patagonian Canastero *Pseudasthenes patagonica* is a ubiquitous engineer of the arid Patagonian lands (General Roca, Río Negro, Jaime Prieto)

Carbonated Sierra Finch *Phrygilus carbonarius* is migratory and will only be encountered in the region during the breeding season (Viedma, Río Negro, Juan María Raggio)



Paso Córdova

Take RN 22 from Neuquén to General Roca. Once you cross the bridge over the Neuquén River, you have entered Río Negro province; cross the toll and stay on RN 22 towards General Roca. At the roundabout where the RN 22 meets the RP 6 take the latter south and cross the river. Both red and grey *bardas* are good places for Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle *Geranoaetus melanoleucus*, Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus cassini*, Magellanic Horned Owl *Bubo magellanicus*, nesting Blue-and-white Swallow *Pygochelidon cyanoleuca*, Chilean Swallow *Tachycineta meyeni*, Southern Martin *Progne elegans*, Andean Swift *Aeronautes andecolus*, Rufous-banded Miner *Geositta rufipennis*, Cordilleran Canastero *Asthenes modesta* and White-winged Black Tyrant. Keep driving for another 8 km until you reach the top of Cerro Tres Cruces. Up on the flat top as well as at the foot of the *bardas* that you've just left, look for Carbonated Sierra Finch, Rusty-backed and Black-crowned Monjitas, Patagonian and Sharp-billed Canasteros, White-throated Cacholotes and Common Diuca Finches. With perseverance you may turn up the nomadic/migratory Cinnamon Warbling Finch whose presence is hard to predict anywhere. Back along the river and agricultural valley, wildfowl, migratory shorebirds and tyrants (including Straneck's Tyrannulet), Black-chinned Siskins and White-tipped Plantcutter *Phytotoma rara* will keep you busy.

If you decide to take provincial road 6 to the north from the roundabout, you will reach the airport roundabout: left takes you to the airport, right takes you to General Roca, but pass the airport roundabout by 5 km and you will be in good terrain for some specialities that are harder to find to the south of the river in this area, including Band-tailed Earthcreeper, Patagonian Canastero and both Crested and Sandy Gallitos. The dirt roads around the airport are good for Carbonated Sierra Finch and Rusty-backed Monjita.

Further away in the Monte...

The Monte is a large region, and there is not a single place where you will be able to find all the endemics in close proximity to each other. Thus, we recommend two distant localities to find two endemics that are extremely hard to find or absent from the places that we have described. Las Grutas, in coastal Río Negro province, is an excellent place to look for Hudson's Black Tyrant,

although note that the extremely similar White-winged Black Tyrant also occurs there. Parque Nacional Sierra de las Quijadas, in San Luis province, is a top place for Steinbach's Canastero (see page 25), and we have recently discovered Hudson's Black Tyrants displaying in the Salinas del Bebedero close to San Luis city.

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