

Northwest Argentina w/ Iguazu Falls Extension | March 4 - 20, 2025 | Trip Report by Greg Butcher



Buenos Aires, Jujuy, Salta, Tucuman, and Misiones Provinces with guides Ricardo Clark, Mario Mosqueira, and Martino Esteche, and participants Amy, Aubrey, Charlie, Diane, Laura, Richard, and Sheila



Seven people joined Naturalist Journeys March 4 for an expedition to Buenos Aires, to northwest Argentina, including Jujuy, Salta, and Tucuman Provinces, and then on to Misiones Province to see Iguazu Falls and the birds of northeastern Argentina. Greg Butcher was the Naturalist Journeys guide throughout, Ricardo Clark was the Buenos Aires guide, Mario Mosqueira was the northwest guide, and Martino Esteche was the northeast guide.

Northwestern Argentina is especially renowned for glorious mountain views and a unique assemblage of Ovenbirds (family Furnariidae), not at all related to the North American ovenbird, which is a wood-warbler. Neotropical travelers know several of the Ovenbird groups: tapaculos, leaftossers, woodcreepers, scythebills, xenops, tuftedcheeks, foliage-gleaners, treehunters, treerunners, and spinetails. Northwest Argentina has representatives of most of these groups, but it features additional groups that tend to favor more southern South America and often drier habitats. Thus, we enjoyed two weeks getting to know miners, earthcreepers, horneros, cinclodes, tit-spinetails, thornbirds, and canasteros. The leading actor of this group is the widespread



Rufous Hornero, with its loud ringing call, chest-high prance, and unmistakable oven-like nest. We saw and heard this species almost every day. We also enjoyed a couple of songbird groups that represent the Andes Mountains: the sierra-finches and the warbling-finches.

On the other hand, northeastern Argentina features the amazing Iguazu Falls and birds of the Atlantic Forest, found mostly in Brazil. Some Argentinians refer to this forest now as Parana, named after the river that the falls flow into and reflecting the fact that deforestation has separated the area around the falls from the remaining Atlantic Forest of Brazil.

Tuesday, March 4 Arrival / Buenos Aires

We all arrived on Monday or Tuesday and met at 2 for a tour of Buenos Aires, a large and beautiful city on the south shore of the Rio de la Plata estuary. We had a great steak dinner (with Malbec of course) for our welcome dinner as we got to know each other.

Wednesday, March 5 Costanera Sur, Buenos Aires

Unfortunately, the trails at Costanera Sur were closed due to mud caused by recent rains, but we saw 52 species walking along the sidewalk next to the park. We saw a few species there that we didn't see in the northwest: Monk and Nanday Parakeets, Red-crested Cardinal, and the inimitable European Starling. Plus an equally non-native Crested Myna. Our day in Buenos Aires was historic: the television was full of stories about the 35 degree Celsius temperature (95 Fahrenheit) that felt like 44 (111!) because of the sun and humidity.

Thursday, March 6 Parque Bicentenario / Hotel Selva Montana

We flew off to Salta the next day and quickly went birding at Parque del Bicentenario in San Lorenzo, where we picked up a nice variety of 49 species in just two hours. Highlights included the always awe-inspiring Southern Screamer, a Whistling Heron, a family of Purple Gallinules, Fulvous and White-faced Whistling Ducks, and a large flock of Chestnut-capped Blackbirds. On the drier side, we had Spot-backed Puffbird, White-barred Piculet, Ultramarine Grosbeak, and our first warbling finch: Black-and-chestnut. In the late afternoon, we drove to a raucous pre-roost gathering of 120(!) rare and range-limited Tucuman Amazons. We added White Monjitas and Crested Oropendolas nearby. We were worried about possible rain the next night, so we visited the Huaico Reserve after dinner for the even rarer Montane Forest Screech-Owl.

Friday, March 7 Reserva del Huaico / Rio Corralito

Last year we encountered heavy rains at Reserva del Huaico, but this year we had a warm, sunny day! We enjoyed a large group of Yungas Guans, a Dot-fronted Woodpecker, a wide-open Rufous-capped Antshrike, a



Mountain Wren, and a shy Andean Slaty Thrush. This was our best sample of the always wet Yungas Forest of northwest Argentina. We drove to the Rio Corralito for lunch, encountering a pair of Red-legged Seriemas along the way and three different Torrent Ducks along the river. Two Black-chested Buzzard-Eagles were quite obliging; unfortunately, the lone Black-and-chestnut Eagle only made a brief appearance over the hillside. As was true throughout the trip, the river flow was impressive!

Saturday, March 8

Hotel Selva Montana / Rio Yala / Humahuaca

Today we took the long drive north to Humahuaca, enjoying birds, mountain scenery, and a good picnic lunch along the way. We transitioned from the Yungas Cloud Forest into first pre-puna, then Puna shrublands with many cardones, a columnar cactus that looks a lot like the North American saguaro. We climbed from 5,600 feet to 10,000. I learned something new this year: En route to Humahuaca, we passed over the Tropic of Capricorn into the southern tropics, even though it was hard to realize that at such a high elevation.

Our first stop was a lake near Campo Alegre where we found our first Great Grebe, Wood Storks, Buff-necked Ibises, and Crowned Slaty Flycatcher. A second wetland stop, this time at Molle Punco in Jujuy Province, produced our only Plumbeous Rails, a beautiful Roseate Spoonbill, and our first Andean Gulls. After driving through newly opened roads after a surprisingly severe rainstorm (the day before we got there), we arrived at a dry Humahuaca, with the feel of a frontier town. We visited the Rio Grande River just south of town for our first Canastero (Creamy-breasted), White-tipped Plantcutter, White-winged Black-Tyrant, Spectacled Tyrant, Andean Swallows, Great Pampa Finches, and Long-tailed Meadowlarks, one of the South American red-breasted species that are so surprising to North Americans who are used to yellow-breasted meadowlarks. After birding, we enjoyed Humahuaca's multi-day masked celebration full of parades and bands. The native people of Humahuaca are Coyas (or Qullas). Their ancestors were part of the southern extension of the Incas.

Sunday, March 9

Humahuaca / Chorillos / Rio Grande

Just outside of town, we found 3 species of Sierra Finch (Black-hooded, Ash-throated, and Mourning) plus Brown-backed Mockingbird, Blue-and-yellow Tanager, and both Hooded and Black Siskins. A couple of the more interesting birds were three Yellow-billed Tit-Tyrants, d'Orbigny's Chat-Tyrant, and Band-tailed Seedeater. As we drove higher, we began a two-day Ornate Tinamou experience. We had leisurely looks at at least a half dozen with several more fleeting glances along the road. We added Cordilleran Canastero and Rufous-naped Ground-Tyrant.



Monday, March 10

Pozuelos / Arbolito Solo / Lagunillas

Today was our second day at 10,000-foot-plus elevation, so we weren't surprised to see a Mountain Caracara and several herds of vicunas from the van. On flamingo day, we started out with a single Andean Flamingo at Humedal Rio Miraflores. It was accompanied by Crested Duck, Puna Teal, Puna Ibis, and Andean Avocet. A productive stop at Arbolito Solo produced Straight-billed and Buff-breasted Earthcreepers, Streak-fronted Thornbird, and Puna, Bright-rumped, and Greenish Yellow-Finches. The famous Laguna de los Pozuelos was closed because of muddy roads after the rains, but we got close. Our first reward was a very cooperative Lesser Rhea! We had Andean Geese and Andean Lapwings. Songbirds included Common and Puna Miners, and Puna Pipit. Our best Pozuelos alternative was Lagunillas. We had a flock of 25 Chilean Flamingos and five Andean Flamingos accompanied by about 50 Giant Coots and 100 Slate-colored Coots. We enjoyed shorebird visitors from North America: Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Pectoral and Stilt Sandpipers, and Wilson's Phalaropes. The Black-necked Stilts were of the South American form, and an Andean Negrito confirmed that we were still South.

Tuesday, March 11

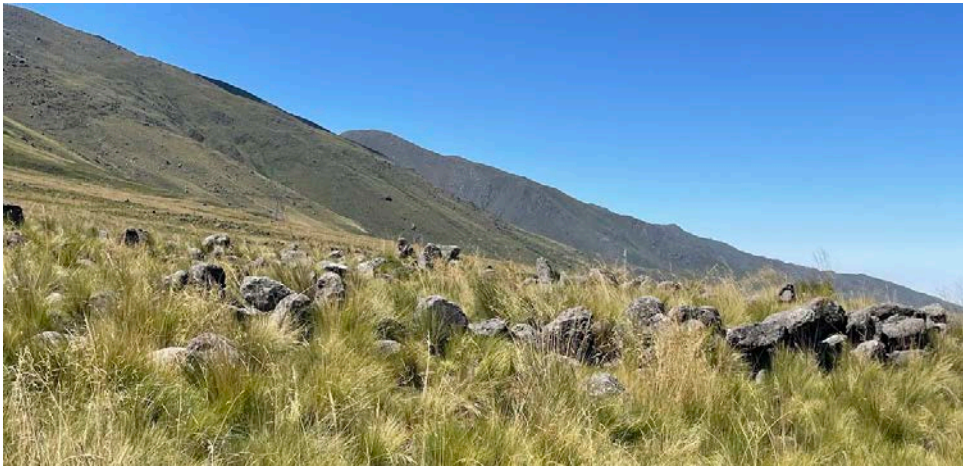
Abra Pampa / Rio Yala / El Sauce

It was time to retreat from Jujuy Province (and the Tropic of Capricorn), but we made a few stops along the way: first for Rufous-banded Miners, then for Andean Swifts, and then of course for the three Andean Condors swirling overhead with the Black and Turkey Vultures – and the Aplomado Falcon low over the ridge. Our last stop in Jujuy was our return to the Rio Yala and one of our top targets of the trip. We stopped on the bridge over the river and got out several times to walk next to the river. We had covered all the accessible parts of the river and were preparing to climb back to the van when a small gray songbird perched on a rock nearby, and yes, it had a rufous throat patch: it was the Rufous-throated Dipper, and it gave us long looks, even flying next to us and perching on a second rock. Our penultimate stop of the day was the edge of a field in El Sauce in Salta Province. We added Chaco Chachalaca, Dark-billed Cuckoo, Stripe-backed Antbird, Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, and an unsatisfying view of a female Red-crested Finch. Before dark, we returned to our home-away-from-home Hotel Selva Montana, where I had a most relieving sight: a Slender-tailed Woodstar was feeding on the flowers near the front entrance. Last year it was a constant presence there – and nowhere else on the trip! So we were able to tally another major target species (and a White-bellied Hummingbird too)!

Wednesday, March 12

Cueva del Gigante / Los Cardones NP

This morning we headed south and west, back into the dry side of the mountains. Our first stop produced our best views of Red-tailed Comet, Gray-hooded Parakeet, Cliff Flycatcher, and two Warbling Finches: Black-and-chestnut and Rufous-sided. Our next stop, just by the side of the road, had some gems: our second species of Tinamou (Andean), Cream-winged Cinclodes, Brown-capped Tit-Spinetail, Subtropical Doradito, and the two rarest birds of the trip: Maquis Canastero and Zimmer's Tapaculo. The next stop produced three unique species



for the trip: Black-billed Shrike-Tyrant, White-browed Chat-Tyrant, and Gray-hooded Sierra Finch. Now we were in Los Cardones National Park, and we found one of our target birds, Tawny-throated Dotterel, along with Hellmayr's Pipit, Cinereous Harrier, and two species of ground doves: Black-winged and Golden-spotted. Tin-tin Valley was our last stop of the day, where we were astonished by a flock of 120 Burrowing Parakeets. We also picked up Patagonian Mockingbird and Diuca Finch here.

Thursday, March 13 Los Cardones NP / Cachi

We spent the night at an elegant hotel on the edge of Cachi. As we drove out in the morning, we were stopped by gorgeous views of the snow-capped Nevado de Cachi. Our best birds of early morning were two very shy Elegant Crested-Tinamous and a trio of Ovenbirds: Sandy Gallito, Steinbach's Canastero, and White-throated Cachalote. In the afternoon, we wandered a bit south on National Route 40 where it seemed like every cactus had a White-fronted Woodpecker, except for the one with a Green-barred Woodpecker. (The local form is recognized as a full species by some authorities with the name Golden-breasted Woodpecker.) We added several Greater Wagtail-Tyrants and a Ringed Warbling Finch.

Friday, March 14 Cachi / Dique San Carlos / Finca Albarossa

On our mountain-filled drive south to Cafayate today on gravel roads, we made several stops, first to buy textiles from local weavers near Seclantes and then to pick up a good bird here and there: along the roadside for more Andean Swifts and Andean Condors and then at Dique San Carlos for more waterbirds. At the lake, we saw our only Coscoroba Swans and added Andean Ducks, White-winged and Red-gartered Coots, and White-tufted Grebe. After a tour of a local vineyard, we stayed overnight at Finca Albarossa in Tucuman Province.

Saturday, March 15 Quilmes Bridge / Los Menhires / Quilmes Ruins

We started birding at Finca Albarossa with Spot-winged Pigeon, Guira Cuckoos, and good looks at Sandy Gallitos. We found Collared Plover, White Monjita, and Patagonia Mockingbirds from the bridge. Nearby, we found a spot for a Black-crowned Monjita. We climbed higher in elevation to a wonderful grassy Parque de Los Menhires where we found some very rare birds, including Bare-eyed Ground-Dove, White-browed Tapaculo, White-winged Cinclodes, and Streak-backed Canastero. After lunch, we visited the memorable Quilmes Ruins in Tucuman Province. The Quilmes tribe resisted the Spanish for 130 years, but eventually suffered defeat and a long, deadly walk to the coast south of Buenos Aires. En route to the ruins, we picked up a Straneck's Tyrannulet and at the ruins itself, a Chaco Earthcreeper. It was another Burrowing Parakeet day -- they were everywhere, in big flocks!



Sunday, March 16 Cafayate / Coronel Moldes / Laguna La Quintita

There are many gorgeous rock formations on the drive back to Salta. We started in the Calchaqui Valley, drove through Las Conchas Canyon and Lerma Valley. We had quick stops for Many-colored Chaco Finch and then for Blue-crowned Parakeet. We stopped for lunch in Coronel Moldes for a wonderful fresh fish dinner of pejerrey or Argentinian silverside. Our after-lunch rewards were many: Black-legged Seriema (!), Crested Gallito, Black-crested Finch, and a pair of Short-billed Canasteros. Laguna La Quintita was loaded with waterbirds, including 33 Great Grebes and 40 Bare-faced Ibises!

Monday, March 17 Salta to Misiones / Selva de Laurel Hotel

We had an early departure from Salta and flew through Buenos Aires to Misiones to see the incomparable Iguazu Falls and to meet our new guide Martino Esteche! We arrived in time to go birding from the hotel (Selva de Laurel) to a local pond. Among the new birds were Gray-rumped Swift, Violet-crowned Woodnymph, Chestnut-crowned Becard, Thrush-like Wren, Red-rumped Cacique, and Magpie Tanager. We saw three species of woodpecker: White, Yellow-fronted, and White-spotted. We had left the northwestern Argentinian Andes and joined the humid Atlantic Forest, called Parana Forest by the Argentinians, and the change in species composition was dramatic.

Tuesday, March 18 Iguazu Falls / Sendero Macuco / Area Cataratas

We were able to bird in the national park on Sendero Macuco before walking to see the falls, and we started with Plush-crested Jays, which seemed to be the #1 park ambassadors. We enjoyed the contrast between a very large Toco Toucan and a very small Ochre-collared Piculet and two very small Eared Pygmy-Tyrants. Our first trogon was Atlantic Black-throated and our best hummingbird was a Purple-crowned Plovercrest. The Macuco Trail reliably produces 3 species of Manakin: Swallow-tailed, White-bearded, and Band-tailed. As tourists, our group was mesmerized by Iguazu Falls, and as birders, the visit was enhanced by the flock of 100 Great Dusky Swifts, two Rufescent Tiger-Herons, and a wild Muscovy Duck.

Wednesday, March 19 Iguazu Falls Ruta 101 / Garganta del Diablo

Ruta 101 is becoming more and more well known among the birders. There's a blind next to a wetland that produced two Blackish Rails and another Rufescent Tiger-Heron. A small stream under the road hosted a pair of Riverbank Warblers with a small mixed-species tanager flock nearby including Chestnut-headed, Ruby-crowned, Black-goggled, and Guira plus a Gray-hooded Flycatcher. Birding from the road made it easier to see good birds like Sibilant Sirystes, Surucua Trogon, Planalto Woodcreeper, Wing-barred Piprites, Chestnut-vented Conebill, and the surprisingly common Swallow Tanager. Not surprisingly, the falls called us back for a return visit in the



afternoon; we visited Garganta del Diablo. We saw several common waterbirds, including three Snail Kites. We had the usual afternoon lull for songbirds, but enjoyed both Violaceous and Chestnut-bellied Euphonias. We had a small flurry of songbirds on our way out of the park, highlighted by a Green-headed Tanager.

Thursday, March 20

Hotel Selva de Laurel / Jardin de Picaflares

We started the day with our last birdwalk from the hotel. We enjoyed repeats of Red-rumped Caciques, Magpie Tanagers, Saffron-billed Sparrows, and a Squirrel Cuckoo. We had a heck of a time getting away. I heard loud thumps on top of my cabin and exited to find a family of Brown Capuchins (monkeys), and I alerted my neighbors to their presence. Just over the van was a pair of Chestnut-eared Aracaris. Then we were finally off to the Hummingbird Garden. We had seven species, with an uncountable number of individuals, and we reveled in the scene. It seemed like there were always 10 hummingbirds in sight at once. Swallow-tailed Hummingbird and Versicolored Emerald were new ones for us. The hummingbird garden has been active for 45 years, started by the proprietor's mother. After a local lunch, we were off to the airport, flights to Buenos Aires, transfer to the international airport, and flights home. What a great set of memories to bring home with us!

Report Photos by Greg Butcher