

SOUTHERN PATAGONIA (Santa Cruz and Tierra del Fuego)

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During mid December 2005 we travelled with a group of birdwatchers from Stanford University and the Heinz Centre for Science, Economics and the Environment. This was one of the famed “Ed Zacchary Expeditions”, and Southern Patagonia was chosen to look for the bird specialities and great landscapes of the region.

We arrived at El Calafate during an extremely windy afternoon. This weather stayed throughout our visit but still allowed us to make some fine observations. After a quick lunch in town we checked out the edge of Lago Argentino, a massive glacial lake with a turquoise sheen. Here we found our first Upland and Ashy-headed Geese, as well as the neat Double-banded Plover. At the nearby Laguna Nimes, part of a local reserve, all we could do was to



look over the small water body from inside our vehicle, due to the strong winds that was now stronger. We still managed to get great looks at the varied birdlife there. A pair of breeding Black-faced Ibis came back and forth, Cinereous Harriers flew low over the marsh, and Andean Ruddy-ducks, Silver Teals, Yellow-billed Pintails, Austral Negritos and Austral Blackbirds were around. At one point when the wind dropped a bit, we were just about able to walk down to the edge of the Lago Argentino to look for shorebirds. We were lucky and found two Magellanic Plovers. This is one of the specialities of the region, an odd creature that it is now believed to be more closely related to sheathbills than to plovers.

After this successful outing we left for our Estancia, in a peaceful corner of Lago Argentino, for our two-night stay. Here we did some birding as well, but, surprise, it was

too windy for comfort. So we went back to our lodge, a typical sheep farm with lovely gardens and overlooking an active marsh. At least it was sunny!

The next day we visited Los Glaciares National Park. The scenery today couldn't be better really: mountains laden with tall humid sub-Antarctic forests, the huge lake and the massive glacier and on top of that the flower variety provided just the perfect combination. Stopping on the way to check for plantcutters, we were treated with great views of Andean Condors



A view of the Perito Moreno Glacier

flying low over the fields. We also stopped to look for Austral Pygmy-owl, which avoided us, and Chilean Flicker, which we did see. Just before we entered the Park a Culpeo Fox crossed the road slowly, allowing for great views. Thanks to this fortuitous encounter was that we found one of the bird highlights of the trip. We got off the van to see more of the fox, when we heard the characteristic nasal call of the Magellanic Woodpecker. Eventually we found her, busy feeding at eye-level. It stayed around, flew, called, and gave us great views. Eventually we found another female which was tending a nest high on a tree.

The rest of the day went very well, and we found birds like Austral Parakeet, Rufous-tailed Plantcutter, Black-chinned Siskin, Tufted Tit-tyrant, White-browed Ground-tyrant, Thorn-tailed Rayadito and rather distant views of Bronze-winged Duck. However it was agreed that the majestic sight of the Perito Moreno glacier was probably just as good as the woodpecker. We stayed around long enough to see some huge chunks of ice falling and shaking the water with fantastic roar. An Andean Condor that swept past very low overhead was the best possible way to end up a visit to the glacier. After this long day we went back to the Estancia to have a great supper that included rhea meatballs in one of the starters!!

The following morning we had the option of either birding more around the lodge, or try our luck at the mythical Laguna de los Escarchados. So off we went, and on the way there we took a detour to ask for a special permit. This provided spectacular views of a Black-chested buzzard-eagle perched by the road on a fence post. To reach Escarchados required a longish drive and a longer walk. The landscape here is striking. A barren windswept steppe that at first looks



Celebrating the sight of Hooded Grebe!

devoid of any wildlife. The wind, of course, was still blowing strong. But as soon as we started our walk we were greeted by tame Short-billed and Common Miners. Least Seedsnipe were displaying, and a distant Lesser Rhea walked across the fields. Also, the striking Chocolate-vented Tyrant was present in good numbers, with several immature birds included. Their aerial acrobatics have granted the species the nick-name of “harrier jump-jet”!! But we had a mission in Escarchados, the Hooded Grebe. As soon as we had a better view of the lake we set up the scope. It didn’t look promising at all, for all we could see were big birds along the shores. It was only with the second look that we found white floating creatures, and on our third trial we noticed in all their glory, at least five Hooded Grebes floating among a bunch of Silveries. Relief and joy this was, with a “silly dance” and a piece of chocolate celebration. After that we happily went back to town for lunch and some shopping before catching our flight to Ushuaia.

We arrived in Ushuaia late in the afternoon; though at these southerly latitudes it was still brightly lit. This afternoon we could only walk a bit around town and along the sea coast. Here we found the beautiful Dolphin Gull and some Imperial Shags, as well as Common Giant Petrel. We had dinner at a great restaurant, consisting of king crab and other seafood.

Our first real birding day in Tierra del Fuego was spent at the National Park of the same name. This spot combines thick humid forests with lakes and fast-flowing streams and the sea coast. Near the campsite at Lago Roca we were very lucky and found a group of Six Bronze-winged Ducks among some Chiloe Wigeons. These were truly great views of the duck, which we had seen at quite a distance before. So we indulged with these, a pair of Great Grebes and the wigeons and carried on. Once inside the forest, when all looked a bit dull, and when only Austral Thrush and Rayaditos were around, we were caught by complete surprise by an immature Rufous-tailed Hawk perched low inside the forest. It didn't look bothered at all by our presence; it flew twice, and gave looks from all angles. As good as it gets, for a species as seldom encountered as this, so the "silly dance" was again performed. At the park we found other good birds, like the really great views we had of White-throated Treerunner, a pair of Ashy-headed Goose with a bunch of newborn chicks which were utterly tame, a South American Snipe perched on a grassy field, Dark-bellied Cinclodes, Flying Steamer-duck and others. An Austral Pygmy-owl which we eventually saw after quite a bit of playback was another treat. We finished the birding day with good looks of White-throated Caracara and of course, a great dinner.



Immature Rufous-tailed Hawk at Tierra del Fuego National Park

Our last full day in Tierra del Fuego kept the good weather that had been with us the previous days. Early in the morning we went out searching for White-bellied Seedsnipe. This was at the Martial glacier, right above Ushuaia. We had to actually climb to the glacier as the chair lift was under maintenance work. Along the way we didn't see much, but high up above the tree-line we were gratified by great views of Yellow-bridled Finch. We never found a seedsnipe, but the high elevation setting really was worth the exercise. Early in the afternoon we took a walk around town, did some shopping and later

on embarked on a catamaran that took us to Estancia Harberton, along the Beagle Channel. A completely different view of the island this time, we visited sea bird and mammal colonies, where we had South American Fur Seal and Sea Lion, Rock and Imperial Shags, a fantastic pair of Kelp Geese, Fuegian Steamer-ducks, Blackish Oystercatchers and various seabirds like the brave Magellanic Diving-petrels, Wilson's Storm-petrel, the neat Black-browed Albatross and the not-so-neat Common Giant Petrel. At the large Magellanic Penguin colony that we visited we found the still growing group of Gentoo Penguin, now numbering 14 individuals. A late return to Ushuaia didn't mean that we couldn't go and celebrate the last night of the trip and have our last great supper in town. Joined by a nice bottle of wine, of course, the Ed Zaccharians promised to be reunited soon.



Blooming firebush near the glacier