

BIRDING SOUTHERN ARGENTINA

By Russ Koppendrayner

On October 28, 2006, in Buenos Aires, I met 12 co-clients and 2 guides for 15 days of birding, south through the Pampas, Patagonia, and Tierra de Fuego regions of Argentina. These Southern Argentina destinations have a good tourist infrastructure and excellent food. While drinking bottled products in almost all locales, we did enjoy the fruits and salads with no ill effects. I'd been eagerly anticipating this trip since my visit to the high Andes in Northwest Argentina in 2005.

The first few days were spent in the Pampas, south of Buenos Aires. This flat landscape of wetlands and grasslands has mostly been converted to grazing, leaving little native vegetation, a fate similar to that of the North American grasslands. However, the birding was still excellent. A few highlights for me included the southern screamer, a huge waterfowl that, when vocal, lives up to its name. We saw these birds on the ground and also amazingly, soaring. Another favorite was the many-colored reed-tyrant, a small flycatcher found in some marsh grasses. Equally spectacular was the scarlet-headed blackbird, perched atop cattails, glowing in the sun.

Argentina's Patagonia is a vast arid area that would comprise the heart of our trip. We flew to different areas and explored by bus from each city. Buenos Aires to Tierra del Fuego was nearly 1500 miles. Patagonian habitats varied from a small tree, brush-land called "monte scrub" in the north to more arid grassland in the south. Again, the birds could be spectacular, beginning with the burrowing parrots of the las Grutas sea cliffs. Walking inside the Magellanic Penguin colony at Punta Tomba was a lifetime experience. Despite the fact that activity was minimal, due to it being egg incubation time, we came within a few feet of walking birds and nests. We also saw species rarely seen by birders. The yellow cardinal is rare because it is prized as a cage bird, and the hooded grebe experience was memorable, both for the beauty of the bird and the bus ride over gravel roads for most of 2 days to reach this inaccessible area. Mammal highlights of this region were a few huge bull elephant seals lounging on the beach, plus a zodiac trip for up close views of southern right whales in Golfo Nuevo. We also had numerous encounters with guanacos, a llama relative.

The last few days found us based in Ushuaia, the southernmost community in the world, on the island of Tierra del Fuego. We had striking dolphin gulls and powerful Chilean skuas on our hotel grounds right on the Beagle Channel. A boat trip on the channel found us black-browed albatross, flightless steamer ducks, and the unique snowy sheathbill, among others. November 12th found me heading for the Ushuaia airport filled with these and many other memories for the trip home.

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