Full Detailed Itinerary - Northwest Argentina: The Andes, Yungas, and Monte Desert

Day 1: Arrival in Tucumán

After your arrival in this northern Argentinian city, we will transfer you to a hotel for two nights.

Day 2: Trancas area and Tucumán

We will start our tour by visiting an area that is not particularly beautiful or pristine, but nonetheless has surprisingly good birding within a mixture of farmland and patches of fragmented forest. This will be a great introduction to some dry Chaco species with good chances to see striking furnariids like Lark-like Bushrunner and Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper, which are not possible on the rest of the tour. We also have a decent chance to see the often difficult and highly sought-after Black-legged Seriema and Olive-crowned Crescentchest. We may also get our first White-tipped Plantcutters, Chaco Earthcreepers, and plenty of widespread Argentine birds.

Day 3: Rio Los Sosa Valley and Tafí del Valle

In the early morning, we shall drive up into the Andes north of the city. We shall be looking for one of the potential birds of the trip straight off the bat; as we wind through the forested Rio Los Sosa Valley, we will check the river regularly for Rufous-throated Dipper, and Torrent Duck, and the forest is also home to the endemic Yellow-striped Brushfinch. In the afternoon we'll check a lake on the edge of Tafi del Valle for waterbirds, like Rosy-billed Pochard and Red Shoveler, among the more common waterfowl. Along the shore we may also find Paraguayan Snipe. The first of two nights will be spent in Tafí del Valle.

Day 4: El Infiernillo and Rio Los Sosa

We'll bird this high mountain pass at dawn for Buff-breasted Earthcreeper, the handsome Tucuman Mountain-Finch, Andean Tinamou, White-browed Tapaculo, and Hellmayr's Pipit. Flower patches lower down the valley could hold Andean and White-sided Hillstars, Giant Hummingbird, or Sparkling Violetear. The plan for the afternoon will depend on what we still are looking for; but we may return to the Rio Los Sosa Valley to look for Rufous-throated Dipper, Slaty Elaenia or Tucuman Parrot, among others. A second night will be spent in Tafí del Valle.

Day 5: Tafí del Valle to Cafayate

Many people will enjoy the chance to sample some of the region's best wines, and by the end of the day, we'll arrive at a vineyard in Cafayate, a world-renowned wine-growing area, where we'll overnight. Before then we shall visit the "Monte Desert", where huge stick nests may lead us to one our targets, the noisy White-throated Cachalote. This same tinder dry-habitat is also home to the pallid Sandy Gallito, and we'll also check thorn scrub en-route where White-tipped Plantcutter, Tufted Tit-Spinetail and Sharp-billed Canastero can be found. Crossing an area of wet grasslands en-route may also yield Spectacled Tyrant or Long-tailed Meadowlark. Closer to Cafayate we may also find groups of White-fronted Woodpeckers clinging to the side of huge, saguaro-like cacti. In the afternoon we can go in search of Chaco Earthcreeper

and Burrowing Parakeets near our hotel – if we see our targets quickly, we may take a tour of one of the nearby vineyards, with chances for wine-tasting. A single night will be spent at a vineyard in Cafayate.

Day 6: Cafayate to Cachi

The highlight of the morning is likely to be the scenery more than the birds, as we drive through dramatic craggy areas of the Andes peppered with burnt red rocks. Eventually, we'll drive a road that snakes up a steep valley known as the Cuesta del Obispo, where roadside scrub and woodland hold some extremely localized species like Bare-eyed Ground-Dove, Rufous-sided Warbling-Finch, Maquis Canastero, and Rufous-bellied Mountain Tanager, along with more common birds, including Brown-capped Tit-Spinetail, Yellow-billed and Tufted Tit-Tyrants, and Rusty Flowerpiercer. We will also get further chances at the much sought after White-tipped Plantcutter, should we need it. The night will be spent in the wonderful town of Cachi.

Day 7: Cardones National Park to Salta via Huaico Reserve

We'll start out the day in the dramatic surroundings of Cardones National Park, a high altitude site, where large saguaro-like cacti punctuate the landscape, which provides our best chance at tracking down the Elegant Crested Tinamou. After spending time with the tinamous, we'll head to Salta for the night, passing through the same area for Rufous-bellied Mountain Tanager, should we need further time to search for it. In the afternoon we'll bird the markedly different Yungas forest near our hotel, where Dot-fronted Woodpecker occurs, and at night, we'll visit a private forest reserve closeby, where both Hoy's and Tropical Screech-Owls can be found. The night will be spent in a quiet mountain hotel outside of the city, which sometimes boasts Cream-backed Woodpeckers and Plush-crested Jays in its garden.

Day 8: Salta to Yala

This will be a varied day, as we combine various wetlands with some great birding in verdant Yungas cloudforest. Among the waterbirds we hope to find are Coscoroba Swan, Cinnamon and Brazilian Teals, Rosy-billed Pochard, and several coot species. If we are lucky, we may also find the scarce Ringed Teal too. One particular lake will be visited for the chance to see Tawny-headed Swallow, White Monjita, and Yellowish Pipit. We shall then shall work our way through the scrub and Yungas along the Cornisa Road, our best chance to find Red-legged Seriema, Two-banded Warbler, Green-cheeked Parakeet, and Giant Antshrike. In the afternoon, we shall visit Yala, a forest park that offers a good chance to find Red-faced Guan, Yungas Pygmy-Owl and Rust-and-yellow Tanager, among others. It also gives a further opportunity to find both Torrent Duck and Rufous-throated Dipper, should we need to do so. The night will be spent near Yala.

Day 9: Yala to Abra Pampa

We'll return to the cloudforest at Yala in the morning to track down anything we're still missing from the day before, which could include Fulvous-headed Brushfinch, Rusty-browed Warbling-Finch, Slender-tailed Woodstar, Rufous-capped Antshrike, Plumbeous Black-Tyrant, Large-tailed Dove, Buff-banded and Sclater's Tyrannulets, and White-browed Brushfinch. Later in the morning, we'll head higher up into the Andes, into the open puna highlands near Abra Pampa. En-route, we'll check a high Andean lagoon for Giant Coot, White-tufted and Silvery Grebes, and Puna Teal. In the afternoon, we'll search the arid puna around town for Puna Miner, Gray-bellied Shrike-tyrant, Bright-rumped Yellow-Finch, and Andean Negrito. The night will be spent in a simple hotel in the tiny town of Abra Pampa.

Day 10: Laguna de los Pozuelos

An early start is necessary today as we drive a long way on dirt roads to the remote Laguna de los Pozuelos. This lake is home to three species of flamingo (Andean, Chilean, and James's), along with the elegant Andean Avocet, and (in some years) Giant Coots too, and other Andean waterbirds, like Puna Plover and Puna Teal. The water level of this lake fluctuates tremendously from year to year, and we will modify our birding accordingly – in dry years, we can see most of the birds on other lakes. In the last five years or so, water levels have dropped remarkably at this site, and so have the numbers of birds. While it is still a very worthwhile site to visit, we feel the need to warn you that the past numbers of thousands of waterbirds (including flamingos) have reduced to mere dozens in recent tours. This is the result of a long term drought in the region. We have still managed to find most, if not all, of the key species on most tours, just very individuals of them. The dry puna around the lake is good for Golden-spotted Ground-Dove, Gray-breasted Seedsnipe, Short-billed Pipit, and a variety of finches. It is also a good area to see Ornate Tinamous crossing the tracks. Herds of Vicugnas roam the lake edge, and we'll also keep a lookout for Lesser Rheas. In the afternoon, we'll drive to La Quiaca, located right on the border with Bolivia, for a two-night stay. Late in the afternoon, there should be time to drive a dirt road nearby which can be good for Least Seedsnipe and Tawny-throated Dotterel, and will give us another shot at finding rheas again of needed.

Day 11: Sierra de Santa Victoria and Yavi

We'll need another early start as we drive east to a 14,700 ft (4500 m) pass, the highest elevation we reach on the tour. The scenery here is nothing short of spectacular, and while species numbers are low, what we do see is quite different from previous days. The smartly-dressed Red-backed Sierra-Finch is usually easy to find, and we'll also look for Ornate Tinamou, Mountain Parakeet, Slender-billed Miner, Straight-billed and Buff-breasted Earthcreepers, Puna Canastero, Cream-winged Cinclodes, Black-fronted, Puna, and Cinereous Ground-Tyrants, Andean Swallow, Brown-backed Mockingbird, Andean Hillstar, and more. If the weather is good, we stand a good chance of seeing Andean Condors on the wing too. Later on, we'll bird some montane scrub lower down for Puna Yellow-Finch, Rufous-banded Miner, and Plain-mantled Tit-Spinetail before driving back west. We'll spend the afternoon in the historic village of Yavi. A river runs through this village, providing water for small farms and creating an oasis that is amazingly "birdy". This is the best place in Argentina for Citron-headed Yellow-Finch and Wedge-tailed Hillstar, and while these are the biggest targets, we'll see plenty of other great birds that may include Black-hooded and Mourning Sierra-Finches, Yellow-billed Tit-Tyrant, Spot-winged Pigeon, Bare-faced and Black-winged Ground-Doves, d'Orbigny's Chat-Tyrant, Brown-backed Mockingbird, White-winged Black-Tyrant, and Andean Swift. A second night will be spent in La Quiaca.

Day 12: La Quiaca to Salta

We'll spend the morning targeting anything else we still need in this area before driving back to Salta, where we spend another night in the same comfortable hotel used on the night of day 6. The drive back south is nothing short of spectacular as we pass through the world famous Humahuaca Valley, with its patchwork of multicolored rock faces. En-route we may check out some wetlands for waterbirds and Southern Martins, and shall take a side trip to a quiet forested road, which plays host to birds like Black-and-chestnut Warbling-Finch, Great Rufous Woodcreeper, and Rufous-capped Antshrike. In the afternoon, we'll look for foothill species in the Yungas, such as Moss-backed Sparrow, Giant Antshrike, Green-cheeked Parakeet, and Yungas Sparrow. On this night, we may do some nightbirding targeting Montane Forest Screech-owl and Scissor-tailed Nightjar.

Day 13: Palomitas to Salta/Start Iguazu Falls Extension

Today we drive down into the dry foothills east of Salta. Some superb birds can be found here along an easy dirt road, such as Many-colored Chaco Finch, Spot-backed Puffbird, Ultramarine Grosbeak, Stripe-backed Antbird, Black-capped Warbling-Finch, Checkered and Cream-backed Woodpeckers, Chaco Chachalaca, Little and Rufous-fronted Thornbirds, Chaco Earthcreeper, and Brushland and Tataupa Tinamous. Red-legged Seriema is sometimes easy to see in some open fields farther along the road, but we will need a lot of luck to find the smaller and shier Black-legged Seriema, which also occurs in the area. We'll return to Salta airport for lunch and departures, or to fly to Iguazu, if joining the Iguazu Falls Extension.

Tour Extension 1

Day 1: Salta to Iguazú Falls

We'll fly this afternoon to Puerto Iguazú, and then transfer to a hotel inside the National Park, where we'll spend the next three nights.

Days 2-3: Iguazu Falls

We will have two full days to explore not only the massive waterfalls, for which the area is most famous for, but also the surrounding subtropical rainforests, which are alive with birds, and will offer up a long list of species not possible on the main tour. Many birds just creep into Argentina here, and so we'll be on the lookout for many highly local Argentinian birds during these days. The park is dissected by many forest trails, and boardwalks, many of the latter of which allow spectacular views of the namesake Falls.

*PLEASE NOTE: Visits to viewing platforms are included within the tour fee; however, if you wish to take a boat ride to Garganta del Diablo to see the falls from another perspective, either by day or night (e.g. if there is a full moon), this is at extra cost. If you wish to get further details on this, please contact our office in advance of the tour.

We'll have plenty of time to enjoy both the forest birds and the dramatic waterfalls in our two full days on site, for an extension, which is starkly different in scenery and birding from the rest of the tour. The bird list for the park is immense, and we will split our time between walking forest trails into the deeper rainforest, with walking easy forest roads that bisect more open forest, which provides easier birding, and offers up excellent birds. Some of the other many species available in the park include, Black-fronted Piping-Guan, Great Dusky Swift, Surucua Trogon, Rufous-capped Motmot, Toco and Red-breasted Toucans, Chestnut-eared Aracari, Yellow-fronted, Blond-crested and Robust Woodpeckers, Spot-backed and Tufted Antshrikes, Ochre-breasted Foliage-Gleaner, Ochre-collared Piculet, Gray-hooded Flycatcher, Southern Antpipit, Riverbank Warbler, Swallow-tailed Manakin, Red-rumped Cacique, Chestnut-bellied Euphonia, Blue Dacnis and Green-headed Tanager. The possibilities for these days are huge and no two visits are the same in an area this diverse. We will certainly add many standout birds in just two days in this mega-rich birding area, while enjoying what for many is the finest set of waterfalls on Earth, rivaling even Niagra and Angel Falls for their visual impact. One either one of these days, or the departure day, we will also visit a hummingbird garden, where up to 8 species visit in this season, often including Black-throated Mango, Gilded Sapphire, Black Jacobin, and Versicolored and Glittering-bellied Emeralds. Other feeders on site also regularly attract the stunning regional endemic Green-headed Tanager. These two nights will also be spent in Puerto Iguazu.

Day 4: Departure from Iguazu

In the morning we'll transfer to Cataratas del Iguazu International Airport to connect with flights to other parts of Argentina (e.g. Buenos Aires), in order to connect with international departures.

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