

It's a Family Affair

A Suggested **Itinerary** for Seeing **All** the

Attempting to see one member of each of the world's bird families has become an increasingly popular pursuit among birders. Given that we share that aim, the two of us got together and designed what we believe is the most efficient strategy to pursue this goal.



Editor's note: Generally, the scientific names for families (e.g., Vireonidae) are capitalized, while the English names for families (e.g., vireos) are not. In this article, however, the English names of families are capitalized for ease of recognition. The ampersand (&) is used only within the name of a family (e.g., Guans, Chachalacas, & Curassows).

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World's Bird Families

There are 234 extant bird families recognized by the eBird/Clements checklist (2015, version 2015), which is the official taxonomy for world lists submitted to ABA's Listing Central. The other major taxonomic authority, the IOC World Bird List (version 5.1, 2015), lists 238 families (for differences, see Appendix 1 in the expanded online edition). While these totals may appear daunting, increasing numbers of birders are managing to see them all. In reality, save for the considerable time and money required, finding a single member of each family is mostly straightforward. In general, where family totals or family names are mentioned below, we use the eBird/Clements taxonomy unless otherwise stated.

Family Feuds: How do world regions compare?

In descending order, the number of bird families supported by continental region are: Asia (125 Clements/124 IOC), Africa (122 Clements/126 IOC), Australasia (110 Clements/112 IOC), North America (103 Clements/IOC), South America (93 Clements/94 IOC), Europe (73 Clements/74 IOC), and Antarctica (7 Clements/IOC). Europe and Antarctica can be skipped entirely on this family listing mission; they hold nothing unique. This is fiscally fortunate, given that they are expensive to visit! However, the relative importance of these regions shifts when we consider families that are endemic to each region. As a result, in order to target all the bird families on Earth, a minimum of five continents and 16 nations must be visited. Below, we outline what is, in our experience, the most efficient route to achieve this quest.

Family Planning: Which countries do I need to visit, what must I target, and where?

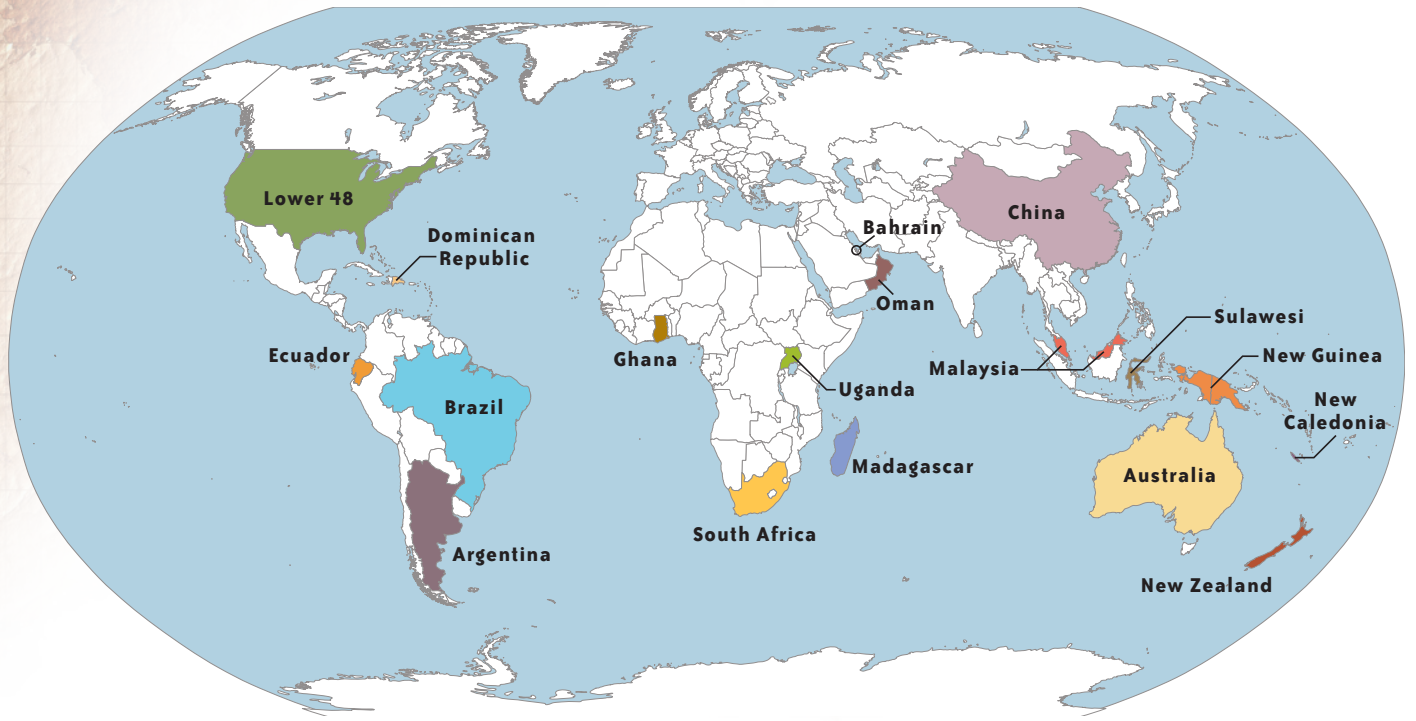
By visiting the 17 countries listed here, you can see the full complement of world bird families. This assumes that dedicated searches are taken for some of the more difficult families like Trumpeters and Scrub-birds. We are not suggesting that the nations in this itinerary are the only, or the best possible, options for all the families.

Left: ■ **Broad-billed Tody** - DOMINICAN REPUBLIC. Photo © Christopher Bainbridge

Right, top to bottom: ■ **Red-legged Seriema** - SOUTH AMERICA. Photo © Bart van Dorp ■ **Egyptian Plover** - AFRICA. Photo © Ken Behrens ■ **Kokako** - NEW ZEALAND. Photo © Matt Binns



World Bird Families



Above:
 ■ Key areas are shown in color.
 Map © Rad Smith

Left:
 ■ Toucan-barbet
 - ECUADOR.
 Photo © Pablo Cervantes Daza/
 tropicalbirding.com

Below:
 ■ Ancient Murrelets
 - NORTH AMERICA.
 Photo © Charlie Wright



They were chosen as the most economical and efficient route for encountering all the families while visiting the fewest countries.

NORTH AMERICA and its associated islands offer up just four families found nowhere else: the Todies and Palmchat in the Caribbean, and the Silky-flycatchers and Olive Warbler in Middle America and the southwestern U.S. The **Dominican Republic** is the best place to start, as the bright green-and-pink Todies and the subdued Palmchat are easily seen here, while the Silky-flycatchers and Olive Warbler are readily found in the U.S. or Mexico.

For most ABA members, this quest can begin close to home. There are six families that are best targeted in North America, and this can be achieved by visiting just two areas in the Lower 48 of the U.S.: a coastal location in cooler months (such as Seattle, Washington or Boston, Massachusetts) and southeast Arizona. The northerly coastal locations should ensure that the Loons, Alcids, Waxwings, and Longspurs & Snow Buntings are all seen. Watching for Skuas & Jaegers also would be advised, as they are much trickier elsewhere on this itinerary. Once these families have been secured, move on to the high deserts and mountains of southeast Arizona. Here, there are six ad-



ditional target families, two of which are essential: Olive Warbler and Silky-flycatchers (in the form of Phainopepla). While here, it is advisable to also track down a representative of New World Quail, Golden-crowned or Ruby-crowned kinglet (Kinglets), Verdin (Penduline-tits), and a member of Cardinals & Allies, as this area offers your best chances for them on this schedule.

On the “Bird Continent” of **SOUTH AMERICA**, there are only 10 endemic bird families. Planning visits to this continent requires interesting logistical choices, as many target families are spread far and wide. However, all the endemic families (Hoatzin, Rheas, Screamers, Trumpeters, Seriemas, Seedsnipe, Crescentchests, Gnateaters, Donacobius, and Magellanic Plover), and a slew of other Neotropical families required to complete the puzzle can all be seen by combining Ecuador, Brazil, and Argentina. The trickiest of the Neotropical families, all of which require time or strategy to see, include Antpittas, Anthruses, Sharpbill, Toucan-barbet, Sapayoa, Oilbird, and Sunbittern. While in South America, it would be a good idea to see Diving-petrels, Dippers, and Finfoots, and it is essential to find Sheathbills.

In northern South America, the tiny nation of **Ecuador** looms, with its promise of Oilbird, Sapayoa, and Toucan-barbets in the

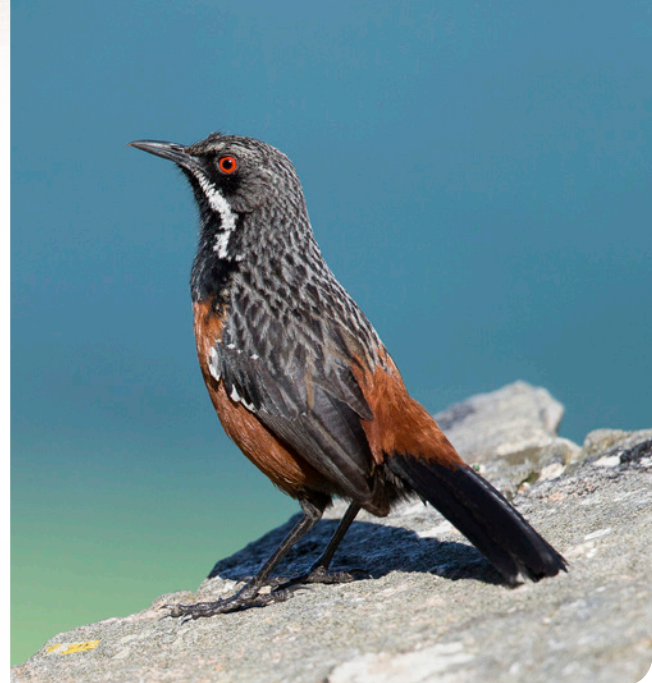
northwest, and Hoatzin lurking in the Amazon. This is the only country where these four families are targeted on our itinerary, so seeing them is critical. While targeting Toucan-barbet in the Mindo/Tandayapa area, it would be wise to pick up Antpittas, Tapaculos, Dippers, and New World Barbets, as they are readily found. The Amazon is excellent for Donacobius, often occupying the same habitat as Hoatzins and Potoos. Ecuador is also a great place to knock off other Neotropical families, such as Guans, Chachalacas, & Curassows; Motmots; Puffbirds; Jacamars; Toucans; Antthruses; Manakins; and Cotingas. So an extended



Clockwise from top left:
 ■ **Apostlebird** - AUSTRALIA. Photo © Dave Curtis
 ■ **Ibisbill** - ASIA. Photo © Ken Behrens
 ■ **Olive Warbler** - ARIZONA.
 Photo © Ron Knight, USFWS
 ■ **Schlegel's Asity** - MADAGASCAR.
 Photo © Ken Behrens



World Bird Families



stay here should be very rewarding.

Next up is gigantic **Brazil**, where three discrete areas must be covered, best timed between June and October: (1) the Chapada and Pantanal (near Cuiabá), (2) the Amazon (out of Alta Floresta), and (3) the southeast (out of Rio de Janeiro). It takes special effort to head north of Cuiabá and into the Chapada to track down the Col-lared Crescentchest, as our strategy does not permit another chance at seeing this family,

Clockwise from bottom:

■ **Scaly Ground Roller** - MADAGASCAR.

Photo © Ken Behrens

■ **Great Jacamar** - SOUTH AMERICA.

Photo © Sam Woods/tropicalbirding.com

■ **Wilson's Bird-of-paradise** - NEW GUINEA.

Photo © Keith Barnes/tropicalbirding.com

■ **Cape Rockjumper** - SOUTH AFRICA.

Photo © Keith Barnes/tropicalbirding.com



although it is also available in southwestern Ecuador and northern Argentina if it is missed in Brazil. The birding is easy in the Pantanal, and a little effort will ensure key families like the gangly-legged Seriemas, the rotund Screamers, and the flashy Sunbittern. Birding along the Pantanal Highway offers families like the Finfoots (Sungrebe is often found along backwater rivers); Limpkin; Rheas; and Guans, Chachalacas, & Curassows. The bizarre Trumpeters are elusive denizens of deep forest, and are a major target in the Brazilian Amazon. This is the only place to get them using our strategy, and is likely to be the toughest of the families to find. The best technique is to spend as much time as possible in their preferred habitat—and to hope! If you fail to connect with a Trumpeter here, you could make a special trip to the Manu area of Peru, which is arguably better for Trumpeters. The Brazilian Amazon will reveal plenty of other families, including Puffbirds, Trogons, Jacamars, Toucans, Manakins, and Donacobius. The final stop on this Brazilian circuit should be a short stay in the Atlantic rainforests of the southeast, close to Rio. A trip to a reserve like Reserva Ecológica de Guapiaçu (REGUA) or Parque Estadual Intervales is recommended for the excellent opportunities to catch up with Sharpbill and Gnateaters.

The final South American destination is **Argentina**, best visited from October to December during the austral spring or summer. Argentina promises three must-get families: the bubblegum-pink-legged Magellanic Plover near El Calafate; the ptarmigan-like Seedsnipe; and Snowy Sheathbills, which scavenge around the penguin colo-

Clockwise from top:

■ **Magpie Goose** - AUSTRALASIA. Photo © (manda)

■ **Feline Owlet-Nightjar** - NEW GUINEA.

Photo © Keith Barnes/tropicalbirding.com

■ **Hypocolius** - MIDDLE EAST.

Photo © Keith Barnes/tropicalbirding.com

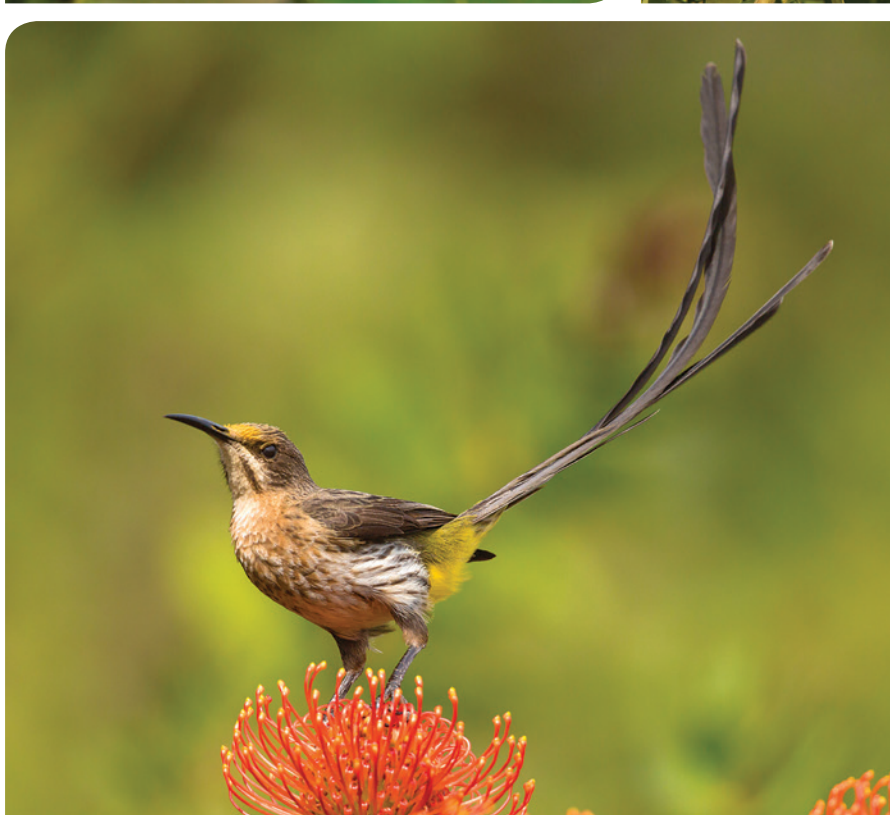
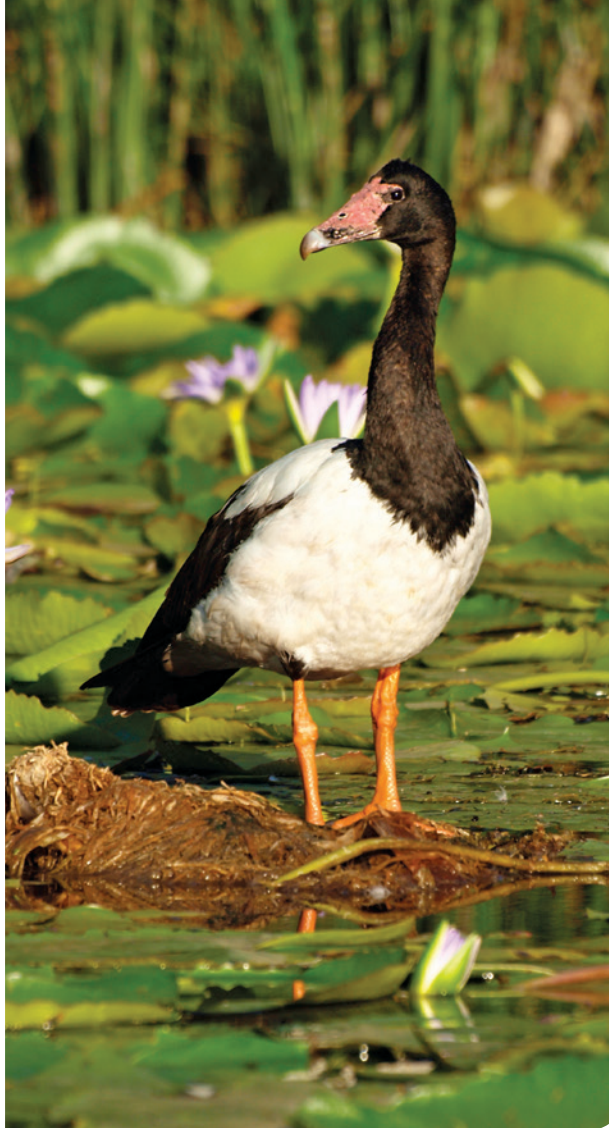
■ **Cape Sugarbird** - SOUTH AFRICA.

Photo © Keith Barnes/tropicalbirding.com

nies. The sheathbill search from a boat ride along the Beagle Channel should also yield Penguins and Diving-Petrels. Sheathbills are essential in Argentina if you prefer to avoid a money-sapping trip to the Subantarctic Islands or Antarctica. Patagonia's grasslands are also excellent for Rheas, Screamers, and the easiest-to-see Tinamous in the world, which should all be sought while you quaff some of the finest red wine in the Americas.

AFRICA boasts a high number of endemic families according to both major taxonomies (27 for eBird/Clements and 30 for IOC). Madagascar leads the way with five families all its own (Mesites, Ground-rollers, Cuckoo-roller, Asities, and Malagasy Warblers). Of the other African-endemic families, the Rockjumpers and Sugarbirds are both very local and best seen in South Africa. Therefore, Madagascar and South Africa are essential. Most of the remaining African-endemic families are more widespread, making planning where to see them less straightforward. The trickiest are Shoebill, Egyptian Plover, Rockfowl, and Dapplethroat & Allies (IOC only). However, by adding Ghana and Uganda into the itinerary, all the African-endemic families, plus many other Old World families, can be found.

The first stop in Africa is **Ghana**, a bastion of political stability and best visited from February to April. The Rockfowl comprise a two-species family found only in west and central Africa, and it is now most easily seen in Ghana. Birds don't get much stranger than this chicken-sized weirdo that dwells within rainforest caves. The "Crocodile Bird", or Egyptian Plover, is another must-get family while in Ghana, available only in the dry north. Ghana is also a good bet for Flufftails, African & Green Broadbills, Yellow Flycatchers (IOC only), Hyliotas, and Indigobirds. There are also more widespread families to encounter, including Guineafowl; Hamerkop; Thick-knees,



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Painted-snipes; Turacos; Woodhoopoes & Scimitar-bills; Hornbills; African Barbets; Honeyguides; Wattle-eyes & Batises; Vangas, Helmetshrikes (IOC only), & Allies; Bushshrikes & Allies; Nicators; and African Warblers. Finfoots can also be sought here if missed elsewhere.

The only nation necessary to visit in East Africa is **Uganda**, the “Pearl of Africa”. The reason for its inclusion is simple: Shoebill, which is most reliably found stalking the papyrus swamps near the capital. It can be visited year-round. A trip into the montane forests in the far south of the country is also essential to find Gray-chested Illadopsis (Babbler), the sole member of the Dapple-throat & Allies family (currently recognized only under IOC) that is targeted using our strategy. Uganda also offers good chances for the following families: Secretary-bird, Cranes, Hamerkop, Ground-Hornbills, Honeyguides, Hyliotas, Fairy Flycatchers, Yellow Flycatchers (IOC only), and Indigobirds. It is a good place to find Finfoots; Thick-knees; Turacos; Mousebirds; Woodhoopoes & Scimitar-bills; African Barbets; African & Green Broadbills; Wattle-eyes & Batises; Oxpeckers; Vangas, Helmetshrikes (IOC only) & Allies; and Bushshrikes & Allies.

South Africa is an essential stop for three families: Ostrich, Rockjumpers, and Sugarbirds (the latter two near-endemic), and all are readily found around Cape Town within a few days any time of year, although Sep-

tember to February would be the most productive time.

Venturing around the Cape should also yield a glut of other important families, including several that are

tricky to find elsewhere, such as Penguins; Secretary-bird, Bustards, Flufftails, Cranes, Sandgrouse, and Fairy Flycatchers. A side trip to Kruger National Park, wonderful for both bird and animal lovers, is recommended to find Oxpeckers and give yourself a further shot at finding Thick-knees; African Barbets; Woodhoopoes & Scimitar-bills; and Ground-Hornbills.

Clockwise from bottom:

■ **Prezvalski’s Pinktail** - CHINA.

Photo © Keith Barnes/tropicalbirding.com

■ **White-necked Picathartes** - GHANA.

Photo © Ken Behrens

■ **Subdesert Mesite** - MADAGASCAR.

Photo © Ken Behrens



Top to bottom:

■ **Cuckoo-roller** - AFRICA.

Photo © Ken Behrens

■ **Spotted Pardalote** - AUSTRALASIA.

Photo © Wayne Butterworth

■ **Masked Tityra** - SOUTH AMERICA.

Photo © Sam Woods/tropicalbirding.com

Other families that may present themselves on a South African trip, which could be needed if missed elsewhere in Africa, are Guineafowl; Hamerkop; Finfoots; Turacos; Mousebirds; Honeyguides; Wattle-eyes & Batises; Bushshrikes & Allies; Vangas, Helmetshrikes (IOC only) & Allies; Nicators; African Warblers; and Sylviid Warblers.

Another critical stop is the island nation of **Madagascar**, which has 11 principal target families. Most standard bird tours on the island from September to November explore the various distinct habitat zones: the dry zone of the west, wet rainforest belt of the east, and spiny forest of the south. By doing this, it is straightforward to pick up all five Malagasy-endemic bird families: Mesites, Ground-rollers, Cuckoo-Roller, Asities, and Malagasy Warblers. Aside from these essential groups, there are six other families that should be sought, too, as most of them are easier here than anywhere else in our plan: Tropicbirds, Crab Plover, Flufftails, Button-quail, Painted-snipes, and Hoopoes.

A quick junket to **Oman** and/or **Bahrain** (easily combined) in the Middle East is recommended as the best way of connecting with the oft-forgotten Hypocolius, a tricky species (and family) away from either Bahrain or western India. It is crucial to time your visit between November and February, as Hypocolius is only a winter visitor. We chose this location over India because it also offers Streaked Scrub Warbler, which is in a monotypic (IOC only), a monotypic family if using IOC taxonomy. This corner of the Arabian Peninsula also offers the greatest number of Crab Plovers on Earth, making it a good backup if you get skunked in Madagascar. Sandgrouse are numerous in this area, and Oman is the nation that offers the greatest variety of Sylviid Warblers, and, therefore, at least one member of these families should be sought if still required while you are there.



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ASIA contains a dozen endemic bird families, three of which are extremely localized. The Tibetan Plateau has to be visited for Przevalski's Pinktail, Borneo's lowland rainforest for Bristlehead, and montane Sulawesi for Hylocitrea. The remaining endemic families are widespread, making the areas in which to chase them less obvious; however, Rail-babbler is best found on peninsular Malaysia and Spotted Elachura

occurs in China. So, China, Malaysia (both the peninsula and Borneo), and Indonesia (Sulawesi) is the optimum combination.

China is one of the largest nations on Earth, and our strategy targets seven different families here, and an additional six families that are best found while here, most of which are generally easy to find. Like Brazil, China deserves an extended stay, with three distinct areas to be covered: (1) the Tibetan provinces of Qinghai and Sichuan for Ibisbill, Wallcreeper, Accentors, Treecreepers, Parrotbills & Allies, and the endemic Przevalski's Pinktail; (2) Southeast China to add Spotted Elachura; and (3) the Xinjiang region for Bearded Reedling, not available elsewhere using this strategy. Other families that are high priority in China are Long-tailed Tits, Dippers, Cupwings, Tree-Babblers, Scimitar-Babblers & Allies, and Laughingthrushes & Allies.

Heading into tropical Asia, a trip to **Malaysia** between March and October is vital. Both the peninsula and the island of Borneo must be visited. Borneo's lowland jungles are the only place where the Bristlehead occurs, and the peninsula's lowland jungles are indispensable for Rail-babbler, which is rarely seen elsewhere. Between the peninsula and Borneo, one should encounter

Vangas, Helmetshrikes & Allies (although the IOC taxonomy treats Woodshrikes in a separate family!); fig-loving Fairy-Bluebirds; and Ioras. Other high-priority families include the majestic Treeswifts, Asian & Grauer's Broadbills, African & Green Broadbills, Leafbirds, and Flowerpeckers. And with 11 Pitta species in Malaysia, it is wise to search for this family here, too, even though arguably they are easier to see in Australia.

The final Asian piece of the jigsaw puzzle is in the archipelago of **Indonesia**, homing in on the island of **Sulawesi** between July and September. The main reason for its inclusion is a dingy and inconspicuous endemic bird and family—Hylocitrea—confined to its mountains. There are no other essential birds on Sulawesi, but the usual areas visited frequently also yield members of the Tree-Babblers, Scimitar-Babblers, & Allies, as well as the Pittas and Treeswifts.

AUSTRALASIA is the world champion of endemic families, with 33 Clements/35 IOC endemic families spread among four distinct areas: New Guinea, New Caledonia, Australia, and New Zealand. New Guinea hosts three (Clements) to seven (IOC) endemic families: Satinbirds, Berrypeckers & Longbills, Tit Berrypecker & Crested Berrypecker, Ifrita, Ploughbill, Mottled Whistler, and Melampittas (the last four only recognised by IOC). A trip to the Gondwanaland relict New Caledonia is essential, for the strange Kagu exists nowhere else. It is so symbolic of the island that it adorns the bank notes. Australia has seven unique bird families: Emu, Plains-wanderer, Lyrebirds, Scrub-

Continued on page 18



Counterclockwise from top: ■ Black-capped Donacobius - SOUTH AMERICA. Photo © Bernard Dupont
■ Shoebill - UGANDA. Photo © Ken Behrens ■ Crested Satinbird - NEW GUINEA.
Photo © Sam Woods/tropicalbirding.com



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birds, Bristlebirds, Pardalotes, and White-winged Chough & Apostlebird. It's also the best place to find several families that are more difficult to find in New Guinea. New Zealand is non-negotiable, with six families confined to the country: Kiwis, New Zealand Parrots, New Zealand Wrens, White-heads, Wattlebirds, and Stitchbird.

The first stop in Australasia is the large, forest-clad island of New Guinea, and nation of **Papua New Guinea** (although for the fittest folks, one could see the same families in the province of West Papua in **Indonesia**). The timing of the visit should be between June and September. The highlands here support three endemic New Guinea families: Satinbirds, Berrypeckers & Longbills, and Tit Berrypecker & Crested Berrypecker. Other likely family additions in the mountains are Boatbills, Australo-Papuan Bellbirds, Sittellas, Quail-thrushes & Jewel-babblers, and the amazing Birds-of-paradise. The highlands are

not the only areas to offer notable families, though, as regular daytime stakeouts for Owllet-Nightjars are often available near the capital Port Moresby, which is also a good place to find roosting Frogmouths.

The island of **New Caledonia** may appear isolated, but there are regular flights from there to both Australia and New Zealand, making all four nations in the region reachable on a single long trip. A short trip to New Caledonia—all the endemic birds of the island can usually be found within three days—is undertaken primarily for one quirky bird in its own family: the dirty-white, carrot-billed, and hoopoe-crested Kagu, a rainforest bird like no other. Once you have this, you are ready to move on to Australia.

The enormous country-cum-continent of **Australia** deserves plenty of time during the austral spring and summer (September to December), with seven endemic families and Magpie-goose, Cassowaries, Whipbirds & Wedgebill, and Logrunners

all more easily found here than in New Guinea. Most of these families are available in the eastern coastal belt, with some time needed to drive into the Outback for a few additional families. A trip to northern Queensland (near Cairns) and southern Queensland (near Brisbane) should yield Cassowaries, Megapodes, Lyrebirds, Woodswallows, Thick-knees, Magpie-goose, Cockatoos, Pittas, Fairywrens, Pardalotes, Whipbirds & Wedgebills, Australasian Treecreepers, Logrunners, Honeyeaters, Pseudo-Babblers, Sittellas, Thornbills & Allies, Bowerbirds, Bellmagpies & Allies, Australian Robins, and Birds-of-paradise. A journey into inland New South Wales is also required for Emu; Plains-wanderer; and White-winged Chough & Apostlebird. Some of the toughest target Aussie families are likely to be Bristlebirds (which often require extended time on the heaths of coastal New South Wales), Quail-thrushes & Jewel-babblers (Spotted Quail-thrush is not too difficult close to

Brisbane); and Scrub-birds. This last family might be the most difficult of the entire set and may require a trip to Western Australia to find the marginally easier Noisy Scrub-bird near Albany.

The final stop on this world tour of bird families is **New Zealand**, a country with low overall diversity but with extraordinarily high levels of endemism, especially at the family level. The country list just tops 350 species, but that includes an amazing six endemic families: the curious Kiwis; New Zealand Parrots (a family with a famous habit of indiscriminate vandalism to human property), Stitchbird, the chickadee-like Whiteheads, the caruncle-adorned Wattlebirds, and the New Zealand Wrens, sometimes described as the most primitive family of songbirds on Earth. These families are all frequently found on a standard bird tour itinerary, covering South Island, Stewart Island, and Tiritiri Matangi Island. While on South Island, the easiest-going pelagic on the planet can be taken out of Kaikoura to add Albatrosses; Shearwaters & Petrels; and Storm-Petrels (Austral Storm Petrels on IOC). It is worth doing other pelagics out of Stewart Island or in the Hauraki Gulf, both of which are good outings to add Diving-Petrels to the list.

Are there potential new families?

A number of species regularly confound taxonomists—both traditional museum scientists and the new breed of DNA phylogeneticists—and may represent potential new families that you should see “just in case” during your quest. Good examples include Swallow-tailed Cotinga in Brazil; Mottled Whistler, Wattled Ploughbill, Rufous-naped Whistler, Crested Pitohui, Crested Bellbird, Melampittas, and Blue-capped Ifrita in New Guinea; Crested Shrike-tit in Australia; Grauer’s Warbler, Green Hylia, and Tit-Hylia in Africa; White-bellied Erpornis and Cinnamon Ibon in Asia; Green-tailed Warbler, White-winged Warbler, and Yellow-headed & Oriente Warblers in the Caribbean; and Bananaquit, Rosy Thrush-Tanager, Wrenthrush, and Yellow-breasted Chat in Central America. Most of these may be found in the countries already suggested, except for Yellow-headed & Oriente Warblers (which would necessitate a visit

to Cuba), Wrenthrush (which is confined to the highlands of Costa Rica and Panama), and Cinnamon Ibon (which requires a trip to the Philippines).

We’ve spent many years thinking about this strategy. By using our advice, you should be able to concentrate on searching for and enjoying all the world’s bird families rather than researching the best strategy by which to see them. 🌍

The authors wish to thank Andrew Spencer, Ken Behrens, Charley Hesse, Rob Hutchinson, and Nick Athanas for providing advice regarding this article.

For a detailed breakdown of families within each continental region, an entire list of bird families regularly available in each nation discussed, and a breakdown of the major family differences between the Clements and IOC taxonomies, check out the expanded web-only content at [XXXXXXXXX](#).

