

# Birding in Bolivia

**29 November 2002 - 1 January 2003**

**by Paola Ricceri & Marco Salvioni – Switzerland**

*Some practical information:*

Rates during our stay 1\$ = 7.30 Bolivianos / 1 SFr = 5 Bolivianos

We already knew North and Central America, but South America was entirely new for the two of us and so when a good friend of us moved to work in Bolivia we decided to take the opportunity and pay a visit. Although December is not known to be the best period to visit Bolivia, because of the raining season, it was a good period for us to take a full month off, and so we went. Actually, only the Beni lowland was really inaccessible, for the rest we had no major troubles caused by the rain.

We found three other very helpful Bolivian trip reports in the web and because those already contain all the general information a visitor may need, we do pass this section and start directly with our itinerary. A complete bird list follows as an Excel file.

*Books:*

- Footprint, Bolivia Handbook. Alan Murphy. Second edition 2000. *Good one*
- A Field Guide to the Birds of Peru. J. Clemens & N. Shany. Lynx Editions, 2001. *A new but quite disappointing book, many plates don't make justice to the real birds and it doesn't help with the too many different-looking Bolivian subspecies! No distribution maps.*
- Collins Illustrated Checklist Birds of Southern South America. M. R. de la Peña & M. Rumboll, 1998. *Pocket-sized, including most of the species missing in Birds of Peru, but no much help with "LBJs" plates and flying raptors.*
- Birds of the High Andes. J. Fjedsa & N. Krabbe, 1990. *Heavy and expensive book but excellent indeed, all the Bolivian subspecies well illustrated. Indispensable to visit the highlands. Michael, our bird guide, took it along during a 12 day tour.*

*Trip reports used at the planning stage and during our stay:*

[www.birdtours.co.uk](http://www.birdtours.co.uk); [www.camacdonald.com/birding](http://www.camacdonald.com/birding)

- **Bolivia, November 2001. By Jan Vermeulen. Birdtours, UK**
- **Birding trip report Bolivia Sept/Oct 2000. By John van der Woude, NL.**
- **Bolivia, 09 – 28 October 2001. By Mark Van Beirs. Birdquest Tours, UK.**

**Itinerary**

*November 29-30: Europe-Bolivia/Santa Cruz-Samaipata*

**At 21.00 flight with VARIG -Brazilian Airlines from Milan/Malpensa arriving at São Paulo, Brazil, the next morning. Again aVARIG flight from São Paulo arriving in Santa Cruz/Viru Viru airport at 10.45.Our friend Fabio came to pick us up at the airport and we went straight to town (Borrowing owls just outside the airport!) and from there to Samaipata, a 2-3 hour drive (depending on the state of the car and the weather) by express taxi.**

**We stayed at La Vispera (24\$/double room with bathroom), relaxing and bird-friendly lodge some 20 mins walk from “downtown”. Saffron finch, Creamy-bellied and Rufous-bellied Thrushes, Guira cuckoo, House wren and Rufous hornero were common neighbours. No much else done in the remaining of this long and tiring day.**

*December 1: Samaipata*

**A quite and take-it-easy day. After breakfast at the popular “La Chakana” restaurant we took an easy 2 1/2 hour walk following the dirt road in the direction of San Juan del Rosario, almost all the way up to he little white Church. Not too many birds, all of them but Black and Turkey vultures new for us, included a single Spot-backed puffbird.**

### *December 2: Samaipata-Santa Cruz*

Another easy morning birding round La Vispera. After lunch we went to Santa Cruz with a taxi in quite poor conditions, actually the brakes broke down on the way... fortunately nothing happened and the driver even managed to fix them, more or less. Night at the cheap but clean Cañada Hotel (3\$/pp), very close by the Samaipata-Santa Cruz espresso taxi office. Tomorrow the 4 night/5 day trip to Chalalan Lodge, inside the large Madidi N.Pk, begins. Hour friend booked it through Amazonas.

### *December 3: Santa Cruz-Rurrenabaque*

Early morning start under heavy rain. 1.20 h flight with Amazonas from Trompillo airport to Trinidad (Beni), on a small but new 12 seats airplane. 26°C and sunshine in Trinidad, where we ended up waiting for some unscheduled 7 ½ hours... before the other airplane coming from La Paz could finally arrive (poor weather conditions in La Paz, we've been told) and take us the 45 mins to San Borja and then another 20 mins to Rurrenabaque. This last part of the flight was something of incredible beauty, in and out of stormy clouds and shining sun, something only Richard Bach could perfectly describe in his books. Nelson, our guide from Amazonas, was at the airport waiting and he took us to the nice Hotel Oriental, where we managed to see just a few new birds before the sun set. Excellent dinner at "La Perla di Rurre" restaurant.

The airport at Trinidad has plenty of good birds to watch and by simply walking around the place we had some 25 species, most of them never seen again like a group of flying Horned screamers, Ruddy ground-dove, Campo flicker (*Beni ssp campestris*), Cattle tyrant, Boat-billed flycatcher, Brown-chested martin, Chalk-browed mockingbird, Rusty-collared seedeater, Red-crested cardinal and Greyish Saltator. Just near the airport's gate a wet area had our first three nice Capybaras.

Knowing that we had so many hours to wait we could have taken a taxi and visit the town of Trinidad or the nearby lagoon which certainly could have added more great species.

### *December 4: Rurrenabaque-Chalalan*

The noisy heavy rain started in the middle of the night and lasted most of the 5 hours boat trip to Chalalan! The long, slender, wooden boat had only a sort of narrow roof, so we made good use of our rain ponchos. The first 2 hours upstream the large and powerful Rio Beni (carrying lots of brown water and large driftwoods!) and then 3 hours upstream Rio Tuichi, into Madidi N.Pk.

The foggy and wet, but warm, scenery offered a good number of water birds we would not meet again on the trip. Capped heron, Wood stork, Roseate spoonbill, Orinoco goose, Osprey, Great-black hawk, Black and Red-throated caracaras, Pied

lapwing, Yellow-billed and Large-billed terns, Black skimmer, Sand-coloured nighthawk (hundreds!), White-winged, White-banded and Southern rough-winged swallows.

From Chalalan's "harbour" a 1800m trail takes you through the middle of a green jungle to the beautiful and comfortable lodge, set at the side of a nice lagoon which offers a bit of an open area in the middle of the thick Amazonian forest. A large tree holds breeding Amazonian oropendolas, singing all day long their gorgeous song (don't miss the chance to watch a singing one, good fun!). The rooms are very nice with mosquito nets, very handy to keep most of the many XXL-sized insects outside... Hoazins were common near the water, and the lake had Anhinga, Agami heron, Olivaceous cormorant, Least grebes and Sungrebes. A night walk added the Noisy night monkey.

Chalalan Eco-lodge sees you inside Madidi N.Pk.. It is owned by the local community of San José village, another 3 hours upstream, and the friendly atmosphere together with good food makes you really feel welcome. This beautiful place offers many hiking opportunities inside the reach forest and the lagoon is suitable for swimming, Caimans permitting! Highly recommended! Chalalan has a web site.

#### *December 5-6: Chalalan*

Every day has a morning, afternoon and night activity giving you the opportunity to bird as much as possible in the frustrating thick forest. Nelson really knew his birds and bird calls and spoke very good English. We took 4 different hikes during the day and two canoe trips, one in the afternoon and one by night, which added Paraque and Caimans to the list.

Other animals seen: Brown capuchin and Squirrel monkeys, Red howler-monkeys, Collared peccary, Agouti, Tent-making and Long-nosed bats, Amazon tree-boa, Amazon horned frog, White-lined leaf-frog, Common tree frog, Spot-legged dart-frog and many good-sized insects and spiders.

#### *December 7: Chalalan-Rurrenabaque-Santa Cruz-Samaipata*

On the way back the boat took only about three hours to Rurrenabaque. No rain, much less water in both rivers but also fewer birds; Ruddy pigeon, Capybaras and many butterflies. We smoothly flew back to Santa Cruz via San Borja and Trinidad, and again espresso taxi to Samaipata/La Vispera.

**Birds seen at Rurrenabaque and Chalalan: 88 species**

*December 8: Samaipata-Mataral (1'400m)*

**Rainy morning to relax a bit. This afternoon a 12 day birding tour with Michael Blendinger, an Argentinian biologist working as a bird guide in Samaipata (*e-mail: mblendinger@cotas.com.bo*) begins. With a 4x4 rented in Santa Cruz we started to explore the dirt but well maintained Old Road Samaipata-Cochabamba and stopped to camp at the side of a small farmland road, in dry Mataral, near the Rock paintings. Lots of new good species seen, including a female Scissor-tailed nightjar at dusk, after a gorgeous sunset.**

*December 9: Mataral-Laguna Verde-Siberia-Incallajta*

**This is going to be a long day. Early morning walk towards the Rock paintings, spotting many good birds along the way saw us never reaching the historical site. Andean parakeet, Greater wagtail-tyrant, Euler's, Three-striped and Crowned slaty flycatchers, Red-eyed vireo, Purple-throated euphonia, Black-crested and Grey-crested finches and Saffron-billed sparrow among the specials.**

**Scenic drive through a dry valley with many blooming cactus, and just after the village of Comarapa we saw the only White-tailed hawk of the trip. From Comarapa a rough 4x4 road climbs up till Laguna Verde, where in a couple of hours we added Red-necked woodpecker. Back to Comarapa and the Old Road towards Cochabamba, till we entered the Siberia cloud forest. Pretty wet, foggy and chilly but many blooming orchids and good birds including Red-crested cotinga, White-crested Elaenia, White-throated tyrannulet, Glossy-black thrush and Straw-backed tanager. At 18.30, almost dark, we hit the road again in the dense fog with a male Scissor-tailed nightjar taking off in the car's head lights. Dead tired we arrived at Incallajta at 23.00, where we camped at the side of the road near the Ruins' gate (a new but useless campground has been created here!).**

**Birds seen at Mataral: 48 species**

**Birds seen at Siberia: 18 species**

*December 10: Incallajta-Cochabamba*

**Wow, what a place to wake up in the sunny morning! Visiting the ruins and surrounding many birds took much of our morning. Grey-hooded and mountain parakeets, Brown-capped tit-spinetail, Azara's spinetail, Creamy-breasted canastero, Rufous-capped ant-shrike, Great kiskadee, Brown-capped redstart, Rufous-sided warbling-finch, Fulvous-headed brush-finch, Rufous-bellied saltator and a flight-display of a pair of HUGE Andean condors. We arrived in Cochabamba in the heat of the day and visited the nearby Alalay lagoon (the access to the lagoon opposite the town looked quite safe). Puna teal, Black-necked stilts,**

**Andean avocets, Plumbeous rail, Andean coot, Wren-like rushbird, Many-coloured rush-tyrant, Yellow-winged blackbird. Night at the very nice and peaceful Hostal Florida with a welcome shower (14\$/double room with bathroom).**

**Birds seen at Incallajta: 28 species**

**Birds seen at Alalay lagoon: 32 species**

*December 11: Cochabamba-Carrasco N.Pk.*

**Another morning visit to the lagoon added both Lesser & Greater yellowlegs and Whilson's phalarope.**

**Direction Sacata-Santa Cruz, before Cotani we left the main road and entered the Old Chapare Road, climbing up through Cotani Alto and up again till a foggy and cold mountain pass at about 4'500m. Here the road gets definitely rough and goes down the other side facing the Amazonian and entering Carrasco N.Pk.. The rain, the bad condition of the road and the steepness of the sides were quite a feeling as we slowly drove down through elfin and cloud forests, till 2'400m. Magically here the rain stopped and the fog opened to reveal what a stunning place we were in. In the middle of an absolute wilderness!**

**This road used to connect Cochabamba to Santa Cruz until some years ago, when a new and much easier one was built through Corani. The many large land slides made this old one inaccessible anymore from about 2'200m, where there is a mine, downwards. Till that altitude the road is maintained, at least passable, by the mine workers coming here by truck about once in a while. Because we've met the truck up the pass we knew we were not going to meet another human being for the next three days.**

*December 12: Carrasco N.Pk.*

**After the night rain we enjoyed a gorgeous sunrise at 5.20. We walked the road the way down to the mine, adding many new good birds. And in the afternoon we explored the road upwards again. Nice singing frogs and few mosquito. Plumbeous pigeon, Andean pygmy-owl, Gould's inca, Great shappirewing, Amethyst-throated sunangel, Blue-mantled thornbill, Hooded mountain-toucan, Plain-brasted earthcreeper, Black-throated thistletail, Zimmer's tapaculo, Band-tailed and Barred fruit eaters, Crowned, Slaty-backed, D'Orbigny's, Rufous-breasted and Brown-backed chat-tyrants, Pale-footed swallow, White-collared jay, Citrine warbler, White-browed and Blue-backed conebills, Grass-green tanager, Three-striped hemisphingus, Hooded and Blue-winged Mountain-tanagers, Plumbeous sierra-finch, Moustached and Masked flowerpiersers.**

*December 13: Carrasco N.Pk.-Cochabamba*

Michael planned to camp three nights in here but although the place was really worthy, the high humidity made us decide to leave one day earlier. So, with many stops on the slow way up (average speed 4-5km per hour!) we headed back towards Cochabamba. Just above the (cold) elfin forest and near the *Polylepis* trees we saw our first Viscacha. Night in Cochabamba, Hostal Florida, where we could dry our things up.

Birds seen at Carrasco N. Pk.: 40 species

*December 14: Cochabamba-Lake Poopo*

Drive along the main Cochabamba-La Paz road, through a mountain pass at about 4'800m and first Llamas and Alpacas. Good road, many kids and dogs bagging at the side of it.

At Caracollo we headed south through the sad-looking mining town of Oruro and then to Lake Uru Uru, almost totally dry and holding only Yellow-billed pintail. Another long drive with Andean lapwings, Puna ibis, Mountain caracara on the way till we reached Lake Poopo, much drier than we expected it to be in the rainy season. At Challapata we entered a rough 4x4 trail towards the lake, first along a river (Crested and Speckled ducks, Black-crowned night heron, Andean flicker), then through some abandoned fields and then just off road till the soil was hard enough to hold the car's weight. Borrowing and Short-eared owls, Chimango caracara, Black-winged ground-dove, Common and Puna miners. And many *Ctenomys* rodents all over the place. Chilean flamingos visible far in the horizon, the soil being too muddy to get closer and the birds being too shy because of human persecution (hunted for food). We camped in the middle of nowhere again, underneath an incredibly beautiful, chilly night sky.

*December 15: Lake Poopo-Salar de Uyuni*

Gorgeous sunrise with a group of wild Vicuñas and fresh Lesser Rhea's paw prints. The water in the lake too far to get any closer, we headed back towards the main road with a large Black-chested buzzard-eagle. Very dusty long drive with Quinoa fields before the white Salar de Uyuni finally appeared on the horizon. A stop near a little river on the way brought a few Bair'd sandpipers. At Colchani we stopped at a "garage" to add a plastic cover underneath the car's engine and we took the "mechanic" along as a guide in this endless, flat, white place. A visit to the salt-Hotel at the entrance of the Salar is a must. After an 80km drive on the flat salt crust, at Incahuasi Island, a trail takes you through thousand-year old cactus (growing 1cm per year) Golden-spotted ground-dove, and Black-hooded Sierra-finch, but we continued another 10km to finally "land" on our target place, Isla Pescado. Nobody around, very cold wind blowing at sunset.

## **Birds seen at Uru Uru and Lake Poopo: 34 species**

### *December 16: Salar de Uyuni-Potosì*

An early start could not be missed in such a place, it looked like being in the middle of Antarctica! Black-hooded Sierra-finch, an unidentified “rufous-capped” ground-tyrant and lovely Viscachas. A pity we soon had to head back, it would have been great to walk the 10 km distance to Incahuasi Island! At Colchani the car received a first “car wash” and then the second in Uyuni. No more than 10km after Uyuni we had our first flat tire but we decided to trust our luck and our second spare tire and keep driving the very long 200km to Potosì. Our first and only 4 Lesser Rheas along this road that soon turned out to hold the best scenery we’ve seen in our Bolivian trip! Landscape of stunning beauty for at least 100km, a real pity we didn’t have time to stop and camp here! Some 30km before Potosì we had our second flat tire and so we only reached the town dead tired again, by night. Night at the nice and recently renovated Jerusalem hotel (20\$/double room with bathroom).

### *December 17: Potosì-Sucre*

Potosì is the highest town in the world but one only feels the 4’000m when walking the uphill streets. Here taking an Aspirin can really help! Visiting the water reservoir from 4’500m, the many lakes above town, we added Silvery grebes, Grey-breasted seedsnipe, Andean flicker, Rock earthcreeper, Puna ground-tyrant, Ash-breasted sierra-finch. Another 2-3 hour drive to Sucre (2’790m) on a smooth paved road through a very man-made habitat. Sucre is a very nice town and deserves a visit. Colonial white buildings, lots of flowers and friendly atmosphere. Night at Hostal Los Pinos (18\$/double room with bathroom).

## **Birds seen round Potosì: 18 species**

### *December 18: Sucre-Comarapa*

Just after Sucre we did some birding along a side dirt road with Black-billed shrike-tyrant, Great pampa-finch and Bolivian blackbird. After Aiquile the landscape got nicer, dry but green vegetation. Two flat tires together this time! Cliff parakeets on the way. Along the beautiful Saipina Valley we suddenly had an incredible meeting with the endangered Red-fronted macaw, what saw the three of us jumping out of the car to enjoy no less than 20 of this endangered birds playing swiftly on the wings. What a luck and what a sight! At San Isidro we had our tires fixed and by night, very tired again, we reached Hotel Paraiso (11\$/double room with bathroom) in Comarapa.

*December 19: Comarapa-Samaipata*

A walk along another dirt side road just after Comarapa to admire blooming cactus and other already familiar birds, including Andean condor. Round lunch time, nauseated by the too long days in the car, we arrived in Samaipata, where we discovered that our friend Fabio got pretty sick indeed.

The 12 day birding tour brought us many species of birds and took us in very interesting places, but honestly, the second part up the Altipiano included too many long driving hours and too little birding. Michael really knows his birds and the area between Samaipata and Cochabamba and without his help the many Bolivian *ssp* could not have been identified. Anyway, if we would have to do it again we would have simply taken him for the first week and then rent a car with driver to do the Altipiano, where there are fewer birds. Night at La Vispera.

Birds seen round Comarapa: 33 species

In total we did 2'730km, to and from Santa Cruz.

*December 19-29: around Samaipata*

It was originally planned to spend Christmas visiting La Paz and Titicaca Lake with Fabio, but because he was too sick we decided to stay in Samaipata with him instead. Honestly, the idea of another 16 hour/one way long bus trip to La Paz wasn't tempting at all and actually we managed to see places round this nice village we would have missed otherwise. For the next 10 days we stayed at the simple but comfortable Hotel Don Jorge (7\$/double room with bathroom), situated inside the village.

**El Fuerte:**

One day, with the local guide Don Gilberto, we took the 5 hour hike through nice valleys to El Fuerte. He doesn't speak English nether he knows the birds but we had a good time, adding Squirrel cockoo. Two unidentified tinamous, a big and a small one, took off in front of us a couple of times; we are not sure but we thought them to be Red-winged and Darwin's.

**Laguna Volcán & Cuevas waterfalls:**

Here you only need a taxi for the whole day (20\$) to take you the some 50km, down towards Santa Cruz, to the beginning of the dirt road to Laguna Volcán (signposted) facing the beautiful red rock you'll certainly notice from the road. The 2.5km hike to the lagoon (1'150m) starts here, take plenty of time because there are plenty of birds to watch on the way! Arriving early, but not too early, in the morning with the first rising thermals we had three King vultures together in a mix flock with Turkey and Black ones. At the Lagoon we were supposed to pay a little

entrance but there was nobody there. We didn't see the Andean duck, but breeding Pied-billed grebe, Plumbeous kite, Wattled Jacana, Green-cheeked parakeet, Chestnut-eared aracari, what could be a Crested oropendola (not well seen) and many incredibly elegant Swallow-tailed kites.

On the way back we stopped at Cuevas waterfall, the 5 Bolivianos entrance fee is definitely worthy, Swallow tanager, Grey-necked wood-rail, Swainson's thrush, Brown-capped vireo, Pectoral sparrow and plenty of Swallow-tailed kites again. We really enjoyed this exciting day!

**Amboró N.Pk from Samaipata**

Looking at the cloud wrapped round the mountain tops, where Amboró N.Pk. begins, doesn't really feel attractive on a sunny blue-sky day, but once you enter the fascinating cloud forest not even the mud bothers anymore!

**Amboró N.Pk.-Las Yunga (2'300m):**

We organised this hike with another local (German) guide Frank (not a birder) and because he was not available today, Yolly, his assistant, came with us. 45\$ including the taxi taking us the some rough 25km to the beginning of the trail, inside the cloud forest. Nearly 3 hours hiking down and up again inside a wet tree fern forest. Very frustrating birding but nice place to see.

**Amboró N.Pk.-Las Lauras (2'200m):**

This time Frank came with us (50\$ car included), 1.30 h 4x4 drive along another even rougher road, the last section being inside a private property you need a key to enter. 15 Bolivianos/each to pay at the very friendly people living at the beginning of the trail, but the price also included coffee and excellent cheese-empanadas on the way back! As soon as we entered the forest, good to bring some adrenaline, we discovered fresh Jaguar paw prints in the mud. We knew the big cat was there somewhere and even though we didn't see it, we knew it certainly did see us! The very nice 5 hour hike in this wet green jungle added Masked trogon, Blue-banded toucanet and a close by male Crested quetzal!

We hiked another 2 hours from half the drive back to Samaipata, in the hot and bright afternoon.

We took many morning hikes exploring a good part of the dirt roads, trails and cow trails round the village of Samaipata. Even though it got very difficult to add new species, we managed to add Planalto hermit and Green violet-ear, enjoying anyway our stay.

**Birds seen round Samaipata: 59 species**

*December 30: Samaipata-Santa Cruz*

An easy morning helping our friend Fabio getting organised to come back to Switzerland with us. Later we took our last espresso taxi to Santa Cruz. Night at Hotel Cañada, hot and humid air.

*December 31: Santa Cruz-Europa*

Departure from Viru Viru airport, in a very hot day, at 16.20 with VARIG to São Paulo/Brazil and from there at 23.45 departure to Milan/Malpensa where we arrived after a smooth and quite flight on January 1, at 14.20. Thousands of fire works exploding underneath us, all over São Paulo, to welcome 2003 at midnight.

Birds seeing during our Bolivian trip: 302 species.

And here is the bird list: [in HTML](#)

(<http://www.bolivianbeauty.com/TripReports/PaolaMarcoBirdlist.htm>) and [in Excel](#) (<http://www.bolivianbeauty.com/TripReports/PaolaMarcoBirdlist.xls>) format

Paola Ricceri & Marco Salvioni

SWITZERLAND

e-mail: [tropicbird@bluewin.ch](mailto:tropicbird@bluewin.ch)