Uruguay Major Birding Tour
15 days

Uruguay is a small country in Southern South America. It is approximately 600 km long both from north to south and from east to west. In spite of this tiny territory, many different environments can be found across the land: the Pampas, the Atlantic Forest, savannas, wetlands, ocean coasts, countless water courses, grasslands, ravines, several hill ranges, palm tree forests, and many others. This richness of landscapes results in a great diversity of bird species that can be seen easily, in a short time, and in short distances. The territory is also an important feeding and breeding destination for many migrant species that come in summer and winter, from the north and south of the continent. Furthermore, Uruguay is underexplored by science; biologists are still finding new species of flora and fauna and dozens of new bird species have been recorded just in the last few years.

Rufous Hornero in nest.

On this tour you will visit the most important hotspots for birdwatching in the country. Several Protected Areas and the majority of the Important Bird Areas in Uruguay are included in this itinerary. By the end of the tour approximately 250 bird species can be seen.

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Tour Summary

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Glittering-bellied Emerald.

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Tour Map

- **Capital**: M. Montevideo
- **Accomodations**
  1. Estancia La Paz
  2. Bella Unión
  3. Establecimiento Bichadero
  4. Quebrada de los Cuervos
  5. San Miguel
  6. La Pedrera
  7. Hotel del Lago
- **Day Visits**
  A. Penino Beach
  B. Esteros de Farrapos
  C. Bañado del Indio
  D. Laguna Merín
  E. Punta del Diablo
  F. Laguna de Rocha
  G. Laguna Garzón
  H. José Ignacio
  I. Punta del Este

**Tour Manager**: Florencia Ocampo
**Tour Leader**: Rafael Tosi
Montevideo, Uruguay.
Itinerary and Target Birds

Day 1:
- Pick up at the agreed time and location in Montevideo Capital City (pointer M).
- Time permitting, an early stop at Penino Beach (pointer A) may be possible, located within the Santa Lucía Wetlands Protected Area. Here, the mouth of the Santa Lucía River empties out into the mighty Río de la Plata, providing rich feeding grounds for waders and shorebirds along the coast. Waterfowl congregates in several ponds, while the characteristic Pampas Grass is home to some tall grassland specialists.
- 5-hour drive to Estancia La Paz (pointer 1), with stops for birding along the way. These stops will introduce the visitor to the country’s most common birds. The Rufous Hornero and its architectural adobe masterpiece of a nest, the ubiquitous Great Kiskadee and Monk Parakeet, the cute Rufous-collared Sparrow, and the elegant Southern Lapwing.
- Lunch at Estancia La Paz, a fancy farmstead surrounded by a nice park with amenities such as a pool and tennis court.
- Afternoon birding around the estancia, which preserves some of the typical Prosopis tree groves that in Uruguay occur only in the west, along the Uruguay river. Here we will search for species common to that habitat, rich in the neotropical endemic Furnariidae family like the Brown Cacholote and Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper. This is also a great spot for the rare White-fronted Woodpecker.
- Dinner and overnight at the estancia.

Day 2:

- Birding around the estancia before breakfast time.
- Breakfast at Estancia La Paz.
- After breakfast, 20 minutes driving to Esteros de Farrapos Protected Area (pointer B), created to protect the islands and margins of the Uruguay River, which marks the natural border with Argentina. This area holds wetlands, riparian forest and precious Espinal forest, rare in the rest of the country. Birds include a mix of woodland and wetland species. We will birdwatch at the riverside town of San Javier, a Russian colony founded by settlers fleeing that country in the early 20th century. We’ll be on the lookout for Plush-crested Jays and Giant Wood Rails in the park and coast bordering town.
- Lunch back at Estancia La Paz.
- After lunch, back to the Protected Area to visit Puerto Viejo, where we will walk under the riparian forest searching for the Bicolored Hawk and White-barred Piculet. After that, we’ll hike a short trail through a small patch of well protected Espinal forest which can provide Little Thornbird and Lark-like Brushrunner.
- Back to the estancia for dinner.
- Owling after dinner, the farm grounds are home to both Great-horned Owls and Tropical Screech Owls.

**Target birds:** Bicolored Hawk, Brown Cacholote, Chestnut Seedeater, Chotoy Spinetail, Dark-Throated Seedeater, Giant Wood Rail, Great-Horned Owl, Lark-Like Brushrunner, Little Thornbird, Plush-Crested Jay, Ringed Teal, Scisor-Tailed Nightjar., Suiriri Flycatcher, Tropical Screech Owl, Tufted Tit-Spinetail, White-Barred Piculet, White-Fronted Woodpecker.
Day 3:

- Early start birding the dirt roads close to the estancia, looking for endangered Seedeater species in the tall grass.
- Breakfast at the estancia.
- After breakfast, 3 hours driving to the town of Bella Unión (pointer 2), the northernmost town in Uruguay located near the triple border with Brazil and Argentina. Check-in at Hotel Oriente.
- Ten minutes driving to La Chacra restaurant, run by a local family who grows much of their food organically. A couple of their specialties are the classical Uruguayan chivito, a tenderloin sandwich served hamburger-style, and the regional famous asado, a variety of grilled meats cooked with embers in a special open fire “parrilla”.
- Afternoon in the surroundings of town, driving country roads for farmland birds, paying special attention to those calling from the hedges on the sides of the road, the Fulvous-crowned Scrub-Tyrant and Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant are only found here during the tour. We’ll visit the small town of Mones Quintela, one of
the only places where Red-rumped Caciques have established a breeding colony in the country. At sunset we’ll walk a trail down an abandoned road to an old bridge over a calm stream, a great place for hearing the otherworldly song of the Little Nightjar.

- Dinner at La Chacra.
- Overnight at Hotel Oriente.

**Day 4:**

- Breakfast at Hotel Oriente.
- 20 minutes driving to IBA - Rincón de Franquía Protected Area. This park borders the Uruguay and Cuareim rivers, and protects interesting riparian forest and ponds, as well as pastures where the bush is regenerating. Several tropical bird species have their southernmost range limit here, so they can’t be found in the rest of the country. Also, Rincón de Franquía has been a great place for new bird species records for the country, like the Short-crested Flycatcher, and the rediscovery of others, such as the Black-collared Hawk. In addition to birds, we’ll try to find the secretive Broad-snouted Caiman.
- Lunch at La Chacra.
- Afternoon returning to Rincón de Franquía, visiting the point where the Uruguay and Cuareim rivers meet, marking the Uruguay-Argentina-Brazil triple border, a likely place for the Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture. Evening hike along an easy trail through the bush where Diademed Tanagers and Golden-billed Saltators are common.
- Dinner at La Chacra.
- Overnight at Hotel Oriente.

Day 5:
- Breakfast at Hotel Oriente. Check-out.
- 4-hour drive to Establecimiento Bichadero (pointer 3) located in the Quebradas de Laureles, a remote area in the Department of Tacuarembó. This is an IBA of great scenic beauty, where grasslands on top of basalt soils are cut through by ravines carved by streams and creeks. These gullies keep a stable microclimate allowing the growth of a subtropical lush ecosystem known as ravine forest. Our accommodation is a family ranch managed as a lodge by Darío, Serrana and their three daughters. They provide a welcoming service with typical meals from the Uruguayan countryside, as well as being very knowledgeable local guides.
Lunch at Establecimiento Bichadero.

Afternoon walk around the property. The ranch raises cattle and sheep in the traditional fashion of grazing over natural grasslands, thus all vegetation is native and diverse, supporting a rich variety of life. Some typical birds seen at the ranch include Buff-necked Ibis, White-eyed Parakeet, the striking Blue-tufted Starthroat, and the largest bird in the Americas: the Greater Rhea. The rocky edges of the ravines are an interesting habitat for the Crested Black-Tyrant, Cliff Flycatcher, as well as the Uruguay Marked Gecko.

Dinner and overnight at Bichadero.

Days 6 and 7:

- Full day birding in Quebrada de Laureles area, within and around Posada Bichadero. During these two days we will visit several habitats near our accommodation, including hiking down into the ravines and walking along the creek beds and some small waterfalls. At Bichadero, cattle have been fenced off some gullies in an attempt to let the undergrowth regenerate, resulting in a rich forest floor full of ferns. These are the dwellings of the Golden-winged Cacique, Fawn-breasted Tanager and Olivaceous Elaenia, to name a few. With some luck we might glimpse some mammals like the Brown Brocket Deer or even Coatis. Grasslands can be a good place to look for Great Pampa-Finches, Long-tailed
Reed Finches, or rare summer migrants including some Seedeater species. A special bird here is the Red-legged Seriema, its loud calls being heard in the early morning across the hills. Some nearby ponds are home to Maguari Storks, Plumbeous Ibises and the difficult Orange-breasted Thornbird. Furthermore, evening and night walks provide chances for nocturnal critters including several frog species and mammals like armadillos and foxes. Nocturnal birds include the striking Scissor-tailed Nightjar, Common Potoo and Long-tufted Screech Owl.

- All meals and overnight at Bichadero.


Day 8:
- Breakfast at Bichadero.
6-hour drive to Quebrada de los Cuervos Protected Area (pointer 4). Stops for birding and picnic snack along the way. Our destination is in the middle of the eastern hill ranges, where splotches of hill forest covers the slopes and the landscape mixes grasslands, marshes and streams. The place is also another Important Bird Area because of the occurrence of vulnerable and near threatened bird species like the Straight-billed Reedhaunter, Black-and-white Monjita and Saffron-cowled Blackbird.

Lunch at Posada el Proyecto, where we will also be staying the night. The cattle ranch has been hosting visitors to the protected area for a while, and our host, Angélica, is a superb chef, delighting guests with her homemade cooking.

Afternoon birding around El Proyecto. Angélica’s land is a nice place to explore the pastures and bush for some of the area’s most typical inhabitants, targets are the Mottled Piculet, Dusky-legged Guan, and the Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper. Her land also shows some interesting geology, where slabs of rock jab out from the ground at an angle, giving refuge to a variety of smaller critters from insects to reptiles.

Dinner and overnight at the posada.

Day 9:

- Breakfast at the posada.
- Full day birding in Quebrada de los Cuervos and surroundings. The core of the Protected Area is one of the oldest ones in Uruguay. Here cattle have been absent for a number of decades and as a result, what were once grasslands are now thick scrublands, prime habitat for birds not so common elsewhere, such is the case of the Lesser Grass-Finch and Red-winged Tinamou. The site’s main attraction is the gorge of the ravine itself, molded by the Yerbal Chico stream, and overlooked by an easy to access viewpoint. There is a trail leading down, albeit a difficult one. Birds here include the Green-winged Saltator, Tropical Parula, and of course the three species of vultures that give name to the area. In these ravines the tree of Yerba Mate can be found, the leaves of this tree are used to make the very popular local tea-like drink almost all Uruguayans consume as part of their daily lives. Additionally, along the country roads some bogs form a specific habitat dominated by a plant in the Eryngium genus, known locally as “caraguatá”, which provides suitable habitat for the endangered birds which justify the creation of this IBA.
- All meals and overnight at the Posada El Proyecto.

Day 10:
- Breakfast at Posada El Proyecto. Check-out.
- 3 hours driving to Fortín de San Miguel National Park (pointer 5). The landscape changes in this part of the country: the land is flat and lagoons and marshes dot the countryside. Rice fields abound, and several birds from ibises and storks to ducks and waders use them. The area is part of the Eastern Wetlands IBA, the largest in the country, a refuge that still holds important populations of some endangered species, and serves as wintering grounds for certain migratory shorebirds. We will be staying at the fancy Hotel Fortín de San Miguel, built in stone to resemble the style of the nearby San Miguel fort.
- Lunch at Hotel Fortín de San Miguel.
Afternoon visiting the San Miguel National Park. Within the protected area we will visit the San Miguel fort, built by the Spanish in the 1700s to prevent Portuguese incursions. The park also protects native woods and marshes as well as a herd of domestic cattle belonging to the “criollo” breed, descended from the first cattle brought by the European conquistadors. Birds to look for in the park are the gorgeous Chestnut-backed Tanager and several swallow species easy to spot at the fort and open air gaucho museum. Time allowing, we can visit the border town of Chuy, where going from Uruguay to Brazil is as easy as crossing the street.

Dinner and overnight at Hotel Fortín de San Miguel.

Days 11 and 12:

Full day birding visiting several locations in the Eastern Wetlands IBA within an hour’s drive from the hotel. Bañado del Indio (pointer C) is a great example of what the landscape held before rice farming drained many of the wetlands. An extensive reedbed home to several rails, blackbirds, and plenty of aquatic species. It’s also a great place to find some endangered birds like the Marsh Seedeeater, Black-and-white Monjita, and Saffron-cowed Blackbird. Special targets here are the Pampas endemic Sulphur-bearded and Curve-billed Reedhaunellers. Visitors will find the general landscape quite curious as it is littered with palm trees, sometimes growing in thick groves called “palmares”. The “Butiá” palm is a characteristic sight of southeastern Uruguay, some people making a living out of producing jam, liquor, and other products from its fruits. North of here lies the majestic Laguna Merín (pointer D), which serves as a border with Brazil. Its long beaches are a good place to look for the Large-billed Tern and Collared Plover. All in all, the region holds a great variety of birds and just by driving country roads one can see the likes of Roseate Spoonbills, Savanna Hawks, and Cinereous and Long-winged Harriers up close.

Day 13:

- Breakfast at Fortín de San Miguel and check-out.
- Drive to the next destination stopping along the way at several birding spots including Santa Teresa National Park, which covers 3,000 hectares of native and exotic woods, marshes and ocean coasts. Particularly common here are the Gray-

Black-and-white Monjita (pohleyphoto.com) and Saffron-cowled Blackbird.

Top: Marsh Seedeater and Spotted Rail (pohleyphoto.com). Bottom: Rusty-collared Seedeater, Scarlet-headed Blackbird (pohleyphoto.com), and Plumbeous Rail.

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cowled Wood Rail and White-throated Hummingbird, as well as being one of the few places where Capybara can be seen frequently.

- Stop at the seaside village of Punta del Diablo (pointer E) for lunch at a local restaurant. The place started out as a humble fishing village, but its beaches became an attraction for local tourism and although now the town has grown significantly, it has managed to keep its charm. A seaside walk here is a great way to get familiar with the South Atlantic Ocean.
- Afterwards, 1 hour drive to La Pedrera (pointer 6), another seaside village that holds one of the most beautiful beaches in the country. Our accommodation is Hotel La Pedrera, located a couple of blocks from the ocean.
- After check-in and a short rest, we’ll drive 15 minutes to the neighboring town of La Paloma. This is a larger settlement which gets crowded with tourists every summer. Despite this, the port and lighthouse are good places to look for marine birds, Kelp and Brown-hooded Gulls abound alongside Neotropic Cormorants, and the world’s largest grebe, the Great Grebe, is often found there. Another attraction are the seaside rocks that form tide pools rich in invertebrates, attracting migrating waders such as White-rumped Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and American Golden-Plovers.
- Dinner back at La Pedrera, where a beautifully lit street gathers several small restaurants.
- Overnight at Hotel la Pedrera.

Day 14:

- Early rise before breakfast, driving to the marvelous Laguna de Rocha Protected Area (pointer F). This is a coastal brackish lagoon separated from the ocean by a long sand bar, surrounded by grasslands and marshes. Here birds gather in
massive numbers: Coots and Black-necked and Coscoroba Swans dot the water as far as the eye can see. It’s also great for shorebirds and holds the largest population of Chilean Flamingos in the country. We will explore the western shore of the lagoon on a 2-hour boat trip, which allows close-up encounters with the birds.

- Picnic breakfast by the shores of the lagoon (or back at the hotel in case of bad weather). We’ll have some time to walk around the sandbar where the lagoon opens cyclically to the ocean. During this event salt water enters the lagoon, and some species of fish and crabs follow the flow inwards to breed, completing their reproductive cycle. This is also a gathering place for several waders, terns and skimmers to rest and feed.

- Back to the hotel for check-out, followed by an hour and a half drive to Laguna Garzón Protected Area and its surroundings (pointer G). This area encompasses another coastal lagoon and its surrounding habitats. One of these ecosystems is among the largest remnants of psammophilous scrub, a critically endangered plant formation increasingly encroached by urban sprawl along the coast. In parts, the edges of the lagoon are covered with reeds, where we will make a stop to try and connect with the secretive Wren-like Rushbird and the beautiful Many-colored Rush Tyrant.

- Lunch at Parador La Balsa, a cozy local restaurant located right by the shores of the lagoon. The kitchen is run by Fernando, who specializes in seafood, many of the ingredients he uses being caught in the lagoon itself.

- Afterwards, we’ll keep heading west where the next birding sites include ocean coasts and rocky beaches. The following stop is the rocky point of José Ignacio (pointer H). This fancy seaside village is not only one of the top spots for the wealthy to spend the summer holidays, but a neat place to explore the tide pools for migrating shorebirds such as Ruddy Turnstones and Semipalmated Plovers during the austral summer, and Two-banded Plovers and Buff-winged Cinclodes in winter. Nearby lies José Ignacio lagoon where we will look for shorebirds from a few specific spots. If lucky and in the right season, we might spot Red Knots, Rufous-chested Dotterels, or Olrog’s Gulls.

- Time permitting, we’ll end the day an hour east, at Punta Ballena peninsula. This rocky outcrop extends into the ocean giving an elevated view over the sea. Apart from having great sunsets, this site is home to a unique flora with representatives of local endemisms, one cactus species is only known to exist in this peninsula.

- We will end the day at our accommodation for the night: Hotel del Lago (pointer 7), a five-star hotel surrounded by a wooded park and located at the shores of Laguna del Sauce. Check-in, dinner and overnight at this hotel.
Day 15:

- Early start for a 15-minute drive to the nearby Laguna del Diario. This is a fresh water lagoon surrounded by marshy vegetation where we will look mostly for waterfowl. Possible targets here are the Rufous-sided Crake and Scarlet-headed Blackbird.
- Back to the hotel for Breakfast and check-out.
- We’ll then head into Punta del Este Peninsula (pointer I). This city is a famous beach resort for the whole region, tourists flock here from neighboring countries during the summer increasing the number of people in town almost ten-fold. Despite the urban sprawl, Punta del Este is quite a biodiverse place. We’ll make a quick stop at the peninsula itself, the landmark where the Río de la Plata meets the Atlantic Ocean. The rocky coast here is another place to look for shorebirds, and the port is home to a fun bunch of South American Sea Lions. From June to November the bay is visited by migrating Southern Right Whales, putting up quite a show when they come near the beach.
- Our last stop will be the Esteros de Maldonado, a very important estuary where many migratory birds and waterfowl species congregate along the shores of the Maldonado stream and ocean coasts. The brackish water teems with crabs that tunnel the muddy bottom. Some birds to look for here are the Ringed Kingfisher, Chiloe Wigeon, and the very shy Pampas endemic Bay-capped Wren-Spinetail.
- Afterwards, farewell lunch at a local restaurant.
- Last, 2 hours driving to Carrasco International Airport in Montevideo.

End of Tour

Suggestions: Bring comfortable clothes, water-proof shoes, insect repellent, and sunblock. To avoid an excessive waste of plastic bottles, please, bring your own water bottle. We will provide water everyday to refill it.

Considerations: The itineraries can be modified during on tour due to climate conditions or suggestions from the guide.

Bird lists are based on previous records; the observation of any of these species is not assured.

Conditions: Every meal and accommodation mentioned in the itinerary is included. Tips, travel insurance, flight tickets, soft drinks, alcoholic beverages or extra dishes are not included.
Extensive Bird List