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## Eastern Wetlands & Ravines 7 days

### *A Journey Through Eastern Uruguay's Birding Hotspots*

This itinerary offers an in-depth exploration of eastern Uruguay, one of the most diverse and rewarding birding regions in the country. Birdwatching sites included in this journey are located within eight Important Bird Areas (IBAs), encompassing a **remarkable mosaic of habitats** such as coastal lagoons, wetlands, psammophilous forests, ravine forests, oceanic shorelines, and grasslands.

The tour focuses on a significant number of **range-restricted and habitat-specialist species**, making it especially appealing to experienced birders. Wetland and coastal birds are often observed at close range and in high concentrations, providing excellent opportunities for **detailed observation and photography**. Forested environments—both ravine and coastal woodlands—offer ideal conditions for prolonged encounters with colorful and charismatic species, many of which can be observed at eye level and in good light.

The itinerary can be offered as a **5-day or 7-day experience**, depending on guests' availability and interests. The **5-day version** focuses on the eastern wetlands and coastal habitats, while the extended **7-day option** includes additional time in the Quebrada de los Cuervos Protected Area, a highly scenic ravine landscape that significantly increases habitat diversity and overall species richness. Alternatively, shorter versions may be achieved by reducing the number of nights at selected accommodations, without compromising the core birding experience.

In terms of **physical demand**, the itinerary is highly adaptable. Walking distances, pace, and daily effort can be adjusted to suit different fitness levels



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without significantly reducing birding opportunities, allowing guests to enjoy high-quality observations while remaining comfortable throughout the tour.

The itinerary is designed to be **flexible and adaptive**. Depending on the starting point, the order of destinations can be adjusted to minimize travel times and maximize time in the field, ensuring the best possible birding experience throughout the tour.



Quebrada de los Cuervos Protected Area.

#### Day 1: From Montevideo to Quebrada de los Cuervos

- **5-hour drive to Quebrada de los Cuervos Protected Area**, with birding stops and a picnic snack along the way.

Our destination lies in the heart of the eastern hill ranges, where patches of hill forest cover the slopes and the landscape combines **grasslands, marshes, and streams**. This



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area is also an **Important Bird Area (IBA)** due to the presence of vulnerable and near-threatened species such as **Straight-billed Reedhaunter**, **Black-and-white Monjita**, and **Saffron-cowled Blackbird**.

- **Lunch at Estancia El Proyecto**, our accommodation for the night. This traditional cattle ranch has long welcomed visitors to the protected area. Our host, **Angélica**, is an exceptional cook known for her **homemade meals**, which are always a highlight of the stay.
- **Afternoon birding** around El Proyecto. Angélica's land is ideal for exploring **pastures and bushland**, where we may find **Mottled Piculet**, **Dusky-legged Guan**, and **Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper**. The property also features striking rock formations, where angled slabs of stone provide shelter for a variety of small creatures, from insects to reptiles.
- **Dinner and overnight at El Proyecto**.



*Lesser Grass-Finch. Photo by Bill Pohley.*



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## Day 2: Exploring Quebrada de los Cuervos

- **Breakfast** at El Proyecto.
- **Full day birding** in **Quebrada de los Cuervos** and its surroundings.

This is one of Uruguay's **oldest protected areas**, where cattle have been absent for decades. As a result, former grasslands have regenerated into dense scrublands, providing habitat for species uncommon elsewhere, such as the **Lesser Grass-Finch** and **Red-winged Tinamou**.

The area's main attraction is the dramatic **gorge** itself, where **wooded slopes** harbor species like **Gray-throated Warbling Finch** and **Green-winged Saltator**, along with the **three vulture species** that give the site its name.

In these ravines grows the **Yerba Mate tree**, whose leaves are used to make the traditional tea-like drink consumed daily by nearly all Uruguayans.

Along the surrounding country roads, bogs dominated by **Eryngium plants** (known locally as caraguatá) provide essential habitat for the **endangered species** that justify the creation of this **Important Bird Area**.

- **All meals and overnight at Estancia El Proyecto.**

## Day 3: Wetlands & History at Fortín de San Miguel

- **Breakfast** at Estancia El Proyecto. **Check-out**.
- We'll begin our journey heading east, driving about 3 hours to **Fortín de San Miguel National Park**. As we approach this region, the landscape transforms — the rolling hills give way to vast plains dotted with lagoons, marshes, and rice fields that host countless bird species. This area forms part of the **Eastern Wetlands Important Bird Area (IBA)**, the largest in Uruguay, home to endangered species and a key refuge for migratory shorebirds.
- **Lunch at Hotel Fortín de San Miguel.**  
Our lodging, Hotel Fortín de San Miguel, was built in stone to evoke the style of the nearby 18th-century fort, blending history and nature in perfect harmony.



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- **Afternoon visit to San Miguel National Park.**

Inside the protected area, we'll explore the **historic San Miguel Fort**, originally built by the Spanish in the 1700s to defend the frontier against Portuguese expansion. The park also preserves patches of native woodland, extensive marshes, and a herd of "**criollo**" **cattle**, descendants of the first European livestock introduced to South America. Birds to look for include the striking **Chestnut-backed Tanager** and various swallow species that gather near the fort and the open-air Gaucho Museum. We may also take a short drive to **Chuy**, the border town where Uruguay and Brazil meet seamlessly — crossing the street takes you from one country to the other.

- **Dinner and overnight at Hotel Fortín de San Miguel.**



Black-and-white Monjita. Photo by Bill Pohley.

#### Day 4: Birding the Eastern Wetlands IBA

- **Full day birding in the Eastern Wetlands.**

Today we'll dedicate the entire day to exploring several birding sites within an hour's



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drive of our hotel. These wetlands provide a glimpse of what the Uruguayan lowlands looked like before rice farming reshaped the landscape. The **reedbeds** are home to rails, blackbirds, and numerous aquatic species. This area is crucial for several endangered species, such as the **Marsh Seedeater**, **Black-and-white Monjita**, and **Saffron-cowled Blackbird**. Among our top targets are the **Sulphur-bearded** and **Curve-billed Reedhaunters**, two Pampas endemics.

- The landscape here is particularly remarkable, dotted with groves of native **Butiá palms**, forming the characteristic *palmares* of southeastern Uruguay. Some local families produce jam and liquor from the fruits of these palms, a distinctive cultural feature of the region.
- Driving along country roads often rewards birders with views of **Roseate Spoonbills**, **Savanna Hawks**, and **Cinereous and Long-winged Harriers** patrolling the fields.
- **Dinner and overnight at Hotel Fortín de San Miguel.**

#### **Day 5: Between forests and the Sea**

- **Breakfast** at Fortín de San Miguel and **check-out**.
- We'll start our journey south, heading toward the Atlantic coast.
- **Birding en route to La Paloma.**  
Our first stop will be **Santa Teresa National Park**, a 3,000-hectare reserve protecting native and exotic woods, marshes, and ocean coastline. Here we may spot **Gray-cowled Wood Rails** and **White-throated Hummingbirds**, and it's also one of the best places to see **Capybaras** in Uruguay.
- Next, we'll stop at the seaside village of **Punta del Diablo** for lunch at a local restaurant. Once a quiet fishing village, it now attracts local tourism while retaining its rustic charm. A seaside walk here is a beautiful way to experience the **South Atlantic Ocean**.
- Afterwards, we'll continue driving about one hour to **La Paloma**, a coastal town with some of the most scenic beaches in the country. Our accommodation, **Sotavento Beach Hotel**, lies right in front of the ocean.



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- **Afternoon birding by the port and lighthouse.**  
These are excellent sites for marine species such as **Kelp and Brown-hooded Gulls**, **Neotropic Cormorants**, and the impressive **Great Grebe**, the world's largest grebe. The tide pools along the rocky shore attract migratory waders like **White-rumped Sandpipers**, **Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs**, and **American Golden-Plovers**.
- **Dinner at La Paloma** along the town's charming pedestrian street lined with small, cozy restaurants.
- **Overnight at Sotavento Beach Hotel.**



Marsh Seedeater. Photo by Bill Pohley.

#### Day 6: Lagoons & Coastal Birds

- **Breakfast** at Sotavento.
- Fifteen minutes from La Paloma lies the stunning **Laguna de Rocha Protected Area**, a vast brackish lagoon separated from the sea by a long sandbar and surrounded by



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grasslands and marshes. It's a haven for **Chilean Flamingos**, **Coots**, and **Black-necked and Coscoroba Swans**, often gathering in huge numbers. We'll explore the eastern shore and walk along the sandbar where the lagoon periodically opens to the ocean, creating a unique ecological exchange.

- Afterwards, we'll drive about an hour to **Laguna Garzón Protected Area**, which encompasses another coastal lagoon and one of the largest remnants of **psammophilous scrub**, an endangered plant community along the coast.
- **Lunch at La Balsa Restaurant**, run by a local chef known for his seafood dishes prepared with ingredients freshly caught from the lagoon.
- **Afternoon birding around Laguna Garzón and José Ignacio Lagoon**. We'll search for the **Wren-like Rushbird** and the colorful **Many-colored Rush Tyrant** among the reeds.
- **Dinner and overnight back at Sotavento Beach Hotel**.



*Chilean Flamingos and other birds at Laguna de Rocha Protected Area.*

#### **Day 7: Estuaries and Ocean Shores of Maldonado**

- **Breakfast and check-out.**
- We'll drive for about an hour and a half to **Laguna José Ignacio**, an excellent area for shorebirds and terns, including **Snowy-crowned**, **Yellow-billed**, and **Sandwich Terns**, as well as **Collared Plovers** and **Black-necked Stilts**.



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- We continue next to **Esteros de Maldonado**, a vital estuary where migratory birds and waterfowl thrive along the Maldonado stream and coastal wetlands. The muddy banks are rich in crabs that attract **Ringed Kingfishers**, **Chiloe Wigeons**, and the elusive **Bay-capped Wren-Spinetail**, a Pampas endemic.
- Next, we'll continue across **Punta del Este Peninsula**, birding along ocean shores, rocky beaches, and small wetlands. Despite being a famous summer resort, the area remains surprisingly biodiverse. The rocky peninsula marks the meeting point between the **Río de la Plata** and the **Atlantic Ocean**, offering opportunities to see **Ruddy Turnstones** and **Semipalmated Plovers**, as well as **South American Sea Lions** lounging by the port.
- We'll then visit **Laguna del Diario**, a freshwater lagoon surrounded by marshy vegetation, to look for **Rufous-sided Crake** and **Scarlet-headed Blackbird**.
- **Farewell lunch at Punta Ballena.**  
Our final stop is Punta Ballena Peninsula, an iconic rocky outcrop overlooking the ocean. From here we can enjoy a **panoramic farewell to Uruguay's coast**. The site hosts unique coastal flora, including a cactus species found nowhere else on Earth.
- **Drop-off at the previously agreed location.**

**End of tour.**



*Rocky coasts of the Southwest Atlantic Ocean.*



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## What to bring

Bring comfortable clothing, waterproof footwear (if possible), insect repellent, and sunscreen. To reduce plastic waste, please bring your own reusable water bottle. Bottled water will be available throughout the tour for refills.

## Tour Considerations

Daily itineraries may be slightly adjusted during the tour due to weather conditions or at the guide's discretion to enhance the overall experience and maximize birding opportunities. Bird lists are based on previous records; sightings of specific species cannot be guaranteed.

## What's Included / What's Not Included

All transport, meals and accommodations mentioned in the itinerary are included. Not included: tips (except for restaurant staff), travel insurance, flight tickets, alcoholic beverages, or additional dishes.