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Espinal Woods & North Ravines 5 and 7-day options

A Journey Through Uruguay's Rarest and Most Pristine Landscapes

The Espinal Woods & North Ravines itinerary is a **7-day** birding journey through two of Uruguay's most distinctive and least explored regions, with the option to condense the program into **5 days** by focusing on two nights in the western Espinal woodlands and two nights in the northern ravines.

The full itinerary encompasses **five of Uruguay's 22 designated Important Bird Areas (IBAs)** and includes visits to **four National Parks**, offering an exceptional diversity of habitats within a compact geographic range. In the west, birding takes place in the rare Espinal woodlands — a habitat marking the easternmost limit of the **Chaco Forest biome** and scarce within Uruguay. Here, participants have the opportunity to observe several range-restricted species closely associated with this unique ecosystem.

Further north, the landscape shifts dramatically to one of the country's most pristine environments: a mosaic of deep ravines, rolling valleys, and dense forests influenced by the **Atlantic Forest biome**. These lush habitats support a distinct avifauna, including characteristic forest species and regional specialties that contrast beautifully with the open woodland bird communities of the Espinal.

Accommodations throughout the journey reflect the regional character of each destination. Guests stay in charming rural inns, a boutique hotel in Uruguay's northernmost city, and a family-run countryside house thoughtfully adapted for visitors, which offers warm, personal hospitality from hosts actively engaged in conservation initiatives and deeply knowledgeable about the local biodiversity, enriching the experience beyond birding alone.

The itinerary is designed to be **flexible and adaptive**. In terms of **physical demand**, the itinerary is highly adaptable. Walking distances, pace, and daily effort can be adjusted to suit different fitness levels without significantly reducing birding



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opportunities, allowing guests to enjoy high-quality observations while remaining comfortable throughout the tour.



Espinal Woods in the West of Uruguay.

Day 1: Montevideo to Uruguay's Western Corridor

- **Pick up** at the agreed time and location in Montevideo Capital City.
- Our first stop will be **Penino Beach**, located within the **Santa Lucía Wetlands Protected Area** (approximately 40-minute drive). Here, the mouth of the Santa Lucía River meets the mighty Río de la Plata, providing rich feeding grounds for waders and shorebirds along the coast. Waterfowl gather in several ponds, while the characteristic **Pampas**

Espinal Woods & North Ravines
Itinerary



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Grasslands are home to tall-grass specialists.

- We then continue with a **5-hour drive to Paysandú Department**, making several birding stops along the way and enjoying lunch at a local restaurant. These stops offer a great introduction to Uruguay's emblematic birdlife, including the industrious **Rufous Hornero** and its adobe "oven" nest, the ubiquitous **Great Kiskadee** and **Monk Parakeet**, the charming **Rufous-collared Sparrow**, and the elegant **Southern Lapwing**.
- Arrival and **check-in** at a country lodge.
- In the **afternoon**, we will explore nearby areas where **Prosopis woodlands** — typical of Uruguay's western region along the Uruguay River— are still preserved. We'll look for species associated with this habitat, particularly members of the **Furnariidae** family, such as the **Brown Cacholote** and **Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper**. This is also a great place to look for the uncommon **White-fronted Woodpecker**.
- **Dinner** at a local restaurant near the lodge.

Day 2: Esteros de Farrapos Protected Area

- **Breakfast** at the lodge.
- After breakfast, we'll take a **40-minute drive to the Esteros de Farrapos Protected Area**, created to safeguard the islands and riverbanks of the **Uruguay River**, which forms the natural border with Argentina. This area encompasses wetlands, riparian forest, and valuable **Espinal woodland**, a habitat now rare in the rest of the country. The birdlife here is an interesting mix of woodland and wetland species.
- We'll begin our birding in the **riverside town of San Javier**, a former Russian colony founded by settlers who arrived in the early 20th century. We'll keep an eye out for **Plush-crested Jays** and **Giant Wood Rails** in the park and along the riverfront.
- **Lunch** at a local restaurant in San Javier, where traditional Russian food is served.
- In the afternoon, we'll return to the protected area to visit **Puerto Viejo**, where we'll walk under the riparian forest in search of **Bicolored Hawk** and **White-barred Piculet**. Later, we'll hike a short trail through a small but well-preserved patch of **Espinal forest**, which often yields **Little Thornbird** and **Lark-like Brushrunner**.



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- Return to the lodge.
- **Dinner** at a local restaurant.

Target birds: Ringed Teal, Giant Wood Rail, White-Barred Piculet, White-Fronted Woodpecker, Bicolored Hawk, Brown Cacholote, Chotoy Spinetail, Lark-Like Brushrunner, Little Thornbird, Tufted Tit-Spinetail, Suiriri Flycatcher, Plush-Crested Jay, Chestnut Seedeater, Dark-Throated Seedeater.



White-naped Xenopsaris. By Steve Hunter.



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Day 3: Northern Borderlands

- **Breakfast** at the lodge and **check-out**.
- After breakfast, we'll take a **3-hour drive to the town of Bella Unión**, the northernmost town of Uruguay, located near the **triple border with Brazil and Argentina**. Upon arrival, we'll **check in** at a boutique hotel.
- **Lunch at La Chacra Restaurant**, a family-run place where most of the ingredients are organically grown on-site.
- In the **afternoon**, we'll explore the **surroundings of Bella Unión**, driving along country roads in search of farmland birds. We'll pay special attention to species calling from roadside hedges such as **Fulvous-crowned Scrub-Tyrant** and **Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant**, both of which can only be found in this area during the tour.
- We'll also visit the nearby **village of Mones Quintela**, home to one of the few **Red-rumped Cacique** breeding colonies in Uruguay.
- At **sunset**, we'll take a short walk along an old, abandoned road leading to a bridge over a calm stream — an ideal spot to listen for the haunting song of the **Little Nightjar**.
- **Dinner** at La Chacra.

Day 4: Rincón de Franquía Protected Area

- **Breakfast** at the hotel.
- Short drive (20 min) to the **Rincón de Franquía Protected Area (IBA)**, located at the confluence of the Uruguay and Cuareim Rivers. This reserve protects valuable riparian forests, ponds, and regenerating pastures, creating a rich mosaic of habitats. Several tropical bird species reach their southernmost distribution limit here and are not found elsewhere in Uruguay. The area has also been remarkable for new bird records in the country — including the **Short-crested Flycatcher** — and for the rediscovery of species such as the **Black-collared Hawk**. In addition to birdlife, we'll keep an eye out for the elusive **Broad-snouted Caiman** that inhabits these wetlands.



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- **Lunch** at La Chacra.
- In the **afternoon**, 30-minute drive to **Colonia Palma** and its surrounding areas. This region preserves one of the best remaining tracts of **Espinal forest**, home to several rare and localized species such as the **White-naped Xenopsaris** and **Pale-breasted Spinetail**, along with a rich community of birds characteristic of this unique habitat.
- **Dinner** at La Chacra.

Target birds for days 3 and 4: Black-collared Hawk, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Greater Ani, Smooth-billed Ani, Squirrel Cuckoo, Dark-billed Cuckoo, Barn Owl, Common Potoo Little Nightjar, Cream-backed Woodpecker, Checkered Woodpecker, Greater Thornbird, Large Elaenia, Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant, Fulvous-crowned Tody-Tyrant, Fuscous Flycatcher, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Short-crested Flycatcher, Rufous Casiornis, Diademed Tanager, Purple-throated Euphonia, Golden-rumped Euphonia, Grayish Saltator, Golden-billed Saltator, Yellow-billed Cardinal, Red-rumped Cacique, White-browed Meadowlark.



Fawn-breasted Tanager. By Bill Pohley.

Day 5: Journey to the heart of Uruguay

- **Breakfast** at the hotel and **check-out**.
- After breakfast, we'll take a 3-hour drive to **Valle del Lunarejo National Park**, located



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in the department of Rivera. This spectacular area features hills, ravines, basaltic grasslands, and marshes. We'll start by birding from a hide facing a marsh that hosts a **nesting colony of herons and storks**, and where **Yellow-chinned Spinetail** can also be observed.

- **Lunch** at **Posada Lunarejo**, a country lodge located a few meters from the hide, surrounded by beautiful hill landscapes.
- After lunch, we'll enter the municipal sector of the National Park, exploring the forested areas in search of **woodland species**, including **Olivaceous Elaenia**.
- By **late afternoon**, we'll drive for about one hour to reach our next accommodation, located in the **Quebrada de Laureles** area, Department of Tacuarembó. This remote and scenic region, designated as an **Important Bird Area (IBA)**, features open basaltic grasslands intersected by deep ravines carved by streams and creeks. These gullies create a stable microclimate that shelters a lush subtropical ravine forest.
- After **check-in** and a short rest, we'll enjoy the **magnificent view** from the dining terrace overlooking one of the country's most pristine landscapes.
- **Dinner** with our warm and welcoming hosts.



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Quebrada de Laureles. View from the terrace at lodge.

Day 6: Quebrada de Laureles — Hills, Ravines and Hidden Waterfalls

Full day dedicated to birding in **Quebrada de Laureles**.

- During this day, we'll explore a variety of habitats, hiking down into ravines, walking along creek beds and visiting small waterfalls. These are home to the **Golden-winged Cacique**, **Fawn-breasted Tanager**, and **Olivaceous Elaenia**, among others.
- The surrounding **highland grasslands** are an excellent area to search for **Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch**, **Long-tailed Reed-Finch**, and the charismatic **Red-legged Seriema**, whose loud, echoing calls can be heard across the hills at dawn. Other characteristic species include **Buff-necked Ibis**, **White-eyed Parakeet**, the striking **Blue-tufted Starthroat**, and the continent's largest bird, the **Greater Rhea**.
- Nearby ponds and marshes host **Maguari Storks**, **Plumbeous Ibises**, and the elusive **Orange-breasted Thornbird**.
- Evening and night walks may reveal nocturnal wildlife, including frogs, armadillos, and foxes. Night birds of interest include **Long-tufted Screech Owl**, the spectacular **Scissor-**



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tailed Nightjar, Band-winged Nightjar, and Common Potoo.

- **All meals** at the accommodation.

Some special birds from days 5 to 7: Greater Rhea, Maguari Stork, Buff-Necked Ibis, Plumbeous Ibis, Crane Hawk, Red-Legged Seriema, White-Eyed Parakeet, Great Horned Owl, Tropical Screech-Owl, Long-Tufted Screech-Owl, Common Potoo, Scissor-Tailed Nightjar, Little Nightjar, Blue-Tufted Starthroat, Cliff Flycatcher, Crested Black-Tyrant, Olivaceous Elaenia, Green-Backed Becard, Orange-Breasted Thornbird, Short-Billed Canastero, Chestnut-Backed Tanager, Fawn-Breasted Tanager, Ultramarine Grosbeak, Chestnut Seedeater, Green-Winged Saltator, Great Pampa-Finch, Red-Crested Finch, Wedge-Tailed Grass Finch, Long-Tailed Reed Finch, Golden-Winged Cacique, Yellow-Rumped Marshbird.



Glaucous-blue Grosbeak. By Bill Pohley.



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Day 7: Final Morning Among the Ravines & Return to Montevideo

- After a hearty **breakfast**, we will explore the high plains and dramatic ravines from a privileged vantage point at canopy level, offering sweeping views across the landscape. This early morning session provides an excellent opportunity to observe specialties such as **Firewood-gatherer**, **Crested Black-Tyrant**, and the striking **Cliff Flycatcher**.
- **Check-out.** We will bid farewell to our hosts and begin our return journey to Montevideo.
- The tour concludes with **drop-off** either at an accommodation in the city or at Montevideo International Airport.

End of services.

| Area | About the accommodations | Services & Amenities |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Farrapos Wetlands | Located near key birding spots. A charming countryside lodge set in peaceful, natural surroundings. Comfortable rooms, warm hospitality and ample outdoor space. Ideal base for relaxing after a day in the field. | Comfortable suites, Wi-Fi, maid service, gallery and seating areas immersed in nature. |
| Rincón de Franquía | A modern and elegant boutique hotel nestled in the northernmost city of Uruguay, just several minutes from the key birding spots. | Comfortable rooms, A/C, Wi-Fi, maid service, laundry, outdoor pool, garden areas for leisure, bar and shared lounge spaces. |
| Quebrada de Laureles | A family-run lodge which offers an immersive rural and nature experience in one of Uruguay's most striking landscapes, providing guests with authentic access to local wildlife. With a limited number of guest rooms, it combines heartfelt hospitality and personalized attention from hosts closely connected to the land. | Home-style meals prepared on-site, walking trails across the quebradas, Wi-Fi in shared spaces, maid service. |



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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 mentioned in the itinerary are based on frequent 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, coffee/tea or additional dishes.