

Part Four. Arica & The North

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Based in Arica, this was the excellent finale to the trip, capturing a slice of birds more typical of neighbouring Peru. Visiting desert oasis in the Azapa and Chaca Valleys, coastal localities in the Arica area and the superb high-altitude sites of Putre and Lauca in the Andes, this was truly a grand experience, not only for birds and mammals, but scenery too.

DAILY LOG 29 December. Azapa Valley & Arica. Arid deserts rise from the outskirts of Arica, totally devoid of vegetation, a world of sand and rock rising into mountains and stretching for hundreds of kilometres north to south. Cutting through this, two thin slivers of greenery, the Lutra Valley to the north and the Azapa a little further south. Both cutting deep through the deserts, these not only serve as routeways between the coast and high Andes, but also are excellent birding locations, the southern outposts of a whole range of essentially Peruvian species. No car this day, so took a collective taxi to San Miguel de Azapa, just 15 km from Arica. Plan was to visit the gardens of the Museo Arqueológico, then another site just beyond the town, both hotspots for hummingbirds. Arriving too early for the museum however, we started by exploring nearby scrub and orchards – plenty of birds here, amongst them Croaking Ground-Doves and their weird calls, Cinereous Conebills, Chestnut-throated Seedeaters and Blue-black Grassquits. Also a dozen or so Vermilion Flycatchers, numerous West Peruvian Doves, Peruvian White-crested Elaenia and masses and masses of Turkey Vultures rising from the dune slopes. By 10 a.m. it was already stinking hot – fortunately the doors of the museum were now opening, allowing us access to their shaded garden, a small oasis of watered lawns, towering palms and, critically, an abundance of flowering shrubs. With mummies, skulls and bones beckoning, my younger companion would have been quite happy to head straight into the museum itself, but was patient enough to allow me to linger for a half hour and more at one particularly productive line of shrubs. Hummingbirds zipping in and out, Oasis Hummingbird common, the tiny Peruvian Sheartail even more so. Some years back, this latter hummingbird was unknown in Chile, but has since colonised the northern valleys and is today the most common species present. Unfortunately, a third hummingbird, the Chilean Woodstar, has simultaneously undergone massive decline, disappearing from its localities in southern Peru and retreating significantly in its few Chilean localities.

Sitting here in the museum gardens, the challenge was of course to find a Chilean Woodstar. Adult males are easy enough, but the females and immatures are very similar to female Peruvian Sheartails. And typically, most of the hummingbirds present were indeed females and immatures! Zipping around at speed, many seeming to show a varying degree in underside shade and throat coloration, none seemed to tick the boxes for Chilean Woodstar. Did get a frustrating glimpse though of what appeared to be a male sporting full tail – was perched briefly at the far side of a bush, then zipped away, never to return.

Heat building, took a little break to satisfy the ghoulish desires of the little one to peer at the Chinchorro mummies. With exhibits depicting the early culture of the Chinchorro people, the small collection of mummified bodies and heads did their job, the little one leaving some time later quite content. Thereafter, the next destination was at a 'hummingbird garden' a couple of kilometres further up the Azapa Valley. This was a smashing site, a dedicated lady turning her relative small plot into a mosaic of shrubs and trees all designed to provide cover and feeding for hummingbirds and others. Winding through the shrubs and an eclectic mix of odd ornaments, armchairs and small gazebos, small paths take you on a journey around the garden. Oasis Hummingbird and Peruvian Sheartail both abundant, hovering at flowers and in general pursuit of each other. Also, after considerable effort with the hummingbirds, I found what was perhaps a female Chilean Woodstar, but I remain somewhat doubtful over this identification, perhaps another female Peruvian Sheartail! The garden is proved good for other species – more Croaking Ground-Doves, my first Slender-billed Finches, four Hooded Siskins and, in an orchard just beyond the fence, four Groove-billed Ani.

A pair of Harris Hawks send panic amongst chickens as they tried to grab a free-ranger, two unknown parakeets flew over. Early afternoon, the heat was now really up! Walked back to the museum for another attempt to relocate the presumed male Chilean Woodstar from earlier in the day. Far less activity in the afternoon, but luck was in – after about 20 minutes, perching in exactly the same spot as had been in the morning, the male Chilean Woodstar did indeed appear, tail perhaps not fully grown, but crossing in its distinctive form when perched. And then, as earlier, off it zipped again, briefly pursued by a second hummingbird, both vanishing beyond the museum grounds.

Thereafter returned to Arica and spent the evening on a beach just north of the town – Peruvian Boobies, Band-tailed Gulls, Grey Gulls, Elegant Terns, Blackish Oystercatchers, just some of the birds present. To the north, vast clouds of gulls and terns roosted on distant beaches ...would check them out in coming days. As dusk approached, I nipped back to the airport to collect a rental car, next morning would see us venturing into the mountains. 30 December. Putre.

Departing at some stupid hour of the morning, crossed the desertscapes and winding roads of the Andean foothills in darkness ...perhaps a good thing in as much as I couldn't see the precipitous drops that are associated with these atrocious roads, more of this later! With the ultimate aim of heading to Lauca National Park and its 5000 m peaks, altitude was always going to be an issue on this leg of the trip. Hoping to mitigate the worse, the plan was to spend the first day birding and acclimatizing at Putre, the altitude here a moderately low 3500 m. A superb birding area, the best locality is a deep gorge just beyond the village, a small stream flowing intermittently through and higher meadows rising above.

Arrived just after dawn and began down a short track into the gorge – tremendous stuff, I had a half dozen new species before even getting to the bottom of the gorge! In no particular order, several Straight-billed Earthcreepers, a party of four White-throated Earthcreepers, both Canyon Canestero and Dark-winged Canestero, numerous Ash-breasted Sierra-Finches and several Chiguanaco Thrushes. Clambering up the other side of the gorge, more good birds, not least Yellow-billed Tit-Tyrants and, swooping around like bee-eaters, several Giant Hummingbirds. It was tough however – a lack of oxygen was leaving us struggling as we climbed towards the grassy meadows beyond, frequent stops required. Not too bad to pause though, Variable Hawks soaring above and lots of passerines moving across the slopes, Band-tailed Seed-eaters fairly common, along with Mourning Sierra-Finches, Ash-breasted Sierra-Finches, Hooded Siskins and Rufous-crowned Sparrows. Up at the meadows, little one elected to find a sunny spot and relax, I set off to find Ornate Tinamou. Big flocks of Bare-faced Ground-Doves feeding in the meadow, plus a whirling flock of mixed Greenish Yellow-Finches and Bright-rumped Yellow-Finches. Also my first White-breasted Chat-Tyrant and, at the meadow fringes, quite a few Black-headed Sierra-Finches and a Plain-breasted Earthcreeper. Andean Hillstars went zooming around, certainly sporting more energy than I had! Gave it a good try, but could not locate any Ornate Tinamou. Retrieved little one and after an hour or so of excellent birding descended back into the gorge, Andean Swallows hawking the slopes, a flock of Streaked Tit-Spinetails moving through the shrubbery, Cream-winged Cinclodes at the valley's bottom. Spent the next few hours exploring nearby areas – many of the same birds, plus one bird that initially confused me ...a pigeon that was not in the guidebook! Turns out they were Spot-winged Pigeons, a species that has recently colonised the mountainous areas of northern Chile. Cream-winged Cinclodes and Andean Hillstars proved common in damper areas of the gorge, so too Cinereous Conebills. Also found a pair of Black-throated Flowerpeckers. Planning to explore a slightly higher area, I then took the old road towards Lauca for a couple of kilometres, reaching an altitude of 4000 metres. However, both exhausted and suffering mid headaches, a snooze seemed the order of the day - finding a good spot to pull off the road, an expanse of gravel circled by tussocks of bunch-grass, soon the chairs were rolled back and we were both asleep! Early evening when I woke ...and, simply amazing, what was scrubbing around in the bunch-grass beside the car? Ornate Tinamou, a pair of them!!! Having busted my gut in the morning to find them, to say I was impressed is an understatement. As they slowly wandered off an adjacent slope, down to Putre village we went, pizza in the local restaurant. We had already decided we would camp at the tinamou site, so in failing light, we returned and took the opportunity to actually drive a little further too. And the rewards, another pair of Ornate Tinamou a couple of kilometres further along and, a new mammal for the list, North Andean Deer, herds of seven and nineteen seen. Back at the original tinamou site, to an absolutely stunning sunset, we put the tent up and vanished inside. At 4000 metres, this was to be a hard night, neither of us sleeping well, headaches gnawing. 31 December. Lauca National Park.

High altitude day, most of our time between 4500 m and 4700 m. Hard going physically with fatigue and headaches from almost moment one as we stopped at a marsh known to hold Diameded Sandpiper-Plover. Though I had seen them at El Yeso, this felt like it had been eons before, so I would have been quite happy to encounter more. Moreover however, this was also the lands of Viscacha, an animal I much desired to see, a weird rabbit-like beastie with big floppy ears and a long tail. And easy they proved to be, a whole colony of them residing on a rocky outcrop above the marsh. In temperatures a degree or two below freezing, these great little animals were all slumbering across the boulders catching the first rays of the morning sun, not in the least bit concerned by sudden human intrusion and quite tame indeed. Seeing these, little one found a good burst of energy and was soon climbing all over the rocks to find more. I left her to it and went to explore the marsh. Didn't find Diameded Sandpiper-Plover, but excellent it was – two Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe amongst the highlights, plus several of the smaller Grey-breasted Seedsnipe, along with Puna Snipe, no shortage of both White-fronted Ground-Tyrant and Puna Tyrant, lots of Cream-winged Cinclodes, my first and only White-winged Cinclodes and several Andean Negrito. Back at the rock outcrop, photographed the Viscacha and a pair of White-winged Duica-Fishes, seeing also pair of White-throated Duica-Finches. Vicuma, the northern relative of the Guanico seen in Patagonia, roamed the opposite slopes, a little rodent scurried across which appeared to be a Bolivian Pericote.

Onward and upward, inducing more fatigue, next stop was at a set of wetlands adjacent to a police checkpoint. Flocks of flamingoes dotted distant pools, congregations of wildfowl there too. My little companion was definitely the worse for wear and opted to sleep in the car while I set off for the pools. Wasn't a big effort walking across the flat plain, but the slightest elevation certainly was. On the first pools, Giant Coots and Puna Teals most serene, Andean Avocet and Andean Gulls also. Scanning, I could see hundreds of Andean Geese, many flying to snow-capped backdrops. Puna Plover would be out there, plus the three flamingo species, but my energy levels were low ...I opted for a lazy approach and returned to explore further by car. Most flamingoes stuck to the pools far away, but one particularly cooperative group had thoughtfully decided to settle upon a roadside pool ...and there, at least 100 Chilean Flamingoes, 60 Andean Flamingoes and 30 James's Flamingoes, the full set on one pool, nice! Hundreds of Speckled Teal and Puna Teal, dozens of Giant Coots, flights of Puna Ibis, four Andean Lapwings, the list of birds went on and on. Took a poor condition road to Laguna Cotacotani, hoped to see Puna Plover here, but didn't see much at all, bar more Viscacha. Returned and stopped in Parinacota village – didn't expect anything here, but was pleasantly surprised ...in addition to a bunch of armed troops suddenly materializing, I encountered not only my only Golden-spotted Ground-Doves of the trip, but my only Andean Flicker too, a superb individual hopping about on a wall in the village centre!

The troops departed, we departed, climbing further again to Lake Changara, a vast shallow pool right on the Bolivian border. Our health went down. Amazing queue of trucks waiting to cross the border, many kilometres of them, all stationary with drivers out and sitting on rocks, chatting, etc. Glad I wasn't in that queue, the few cars that venture up here allowed to zip by without waiting. As for Lake Changara, the fringes were full of birds – hundreds upon hundreds of Giant Coots and Andean Coots, many dozens of Silvery Coots, a good mix of Crested Ducks, Puna Teal

and undoubtedly other species too. Andean Gulls flocked to grab titbits from the bored truck drivers tossing morsels their way. This site honestly deserved a much better visit than I gave it, but my younger companion seemed to be fading rather fast, now without the basic energy to even sit up. Not wishing to transport a dead person back down the mountain, I thought it prudent to respect the perils of altitude sickness and begin a descent. Added Black Siskins on the way down, a flock of six and a single, plus three Puna Miners and another flock of Spot-winged Pigeons, but otherwise made few spots. In my haste, I passed a small ground-tyrant on a fence and paused only long enough to take a photograph and think 'hmm, that is a odd one'. Looking at the picture, it still looks odd ...closest match seems Spot-billed Ground-Tyrant, but it doesn't appear to have to pale spot on the bill!

Decided on a full descent, driving all the way back to the coast. Amazing road, not least for the number of trucks and cars that don't make it – with near non-stop hairpins, drops to gorges below and a near complete lack of safety barriers, wreckage of vehicles that had gone over was a pretty common site, little rock piles dotting the roadside often every few hundred metres, standing as memorials to lost lives. As we descended and oxygen levels returned to normal, headaches vanished, energy levels soared.

Returned to our hotel just as the sun was setting, popped into town to celebrate New Year's Eve, McDonald's again I have to admit. Chileans were beginning to crowd onto the streets, we opted to skip the revelry (or rather I did, she wanted to be on the streets to mark the New Year in). Was fast asleep by the midnight hour. 1 January. Arica & Chaca Valley.

New Year's Day, what better way to kick the year off than to explore the northern beaches of Arica where I had seen the vast flocks of gulls and terns massing. And was it good – not only thousands of gulls on the beach, but an unexpected lagoon on the landward side too. This was a bonus indeed - not massive in size, but the slither of water certainly produced a good range of birds, especially of Nearctic waders spending the northern winter down here. Parking adjacent, Peruvian Meadowlarks were amongst the first birds, about a dozen singing from busstops in the damp stuff, Slender-billed Finches also in this general area. Skirted around the one end of the pool, then slowly walked along the beach, gulls to the one side, the pool to the other. It was an impressive setting, perhaps 20,000 Grey Gulls lining the beach ridge, about 3000 Elegant Terns in clusters amongst them. Also a couple of hundred Band-tailed Gulls and, hogging the edge of the pool, some 1800 Franklin's Gulls. Slightly misty this morning and the sea basically flat, I scanned a few times for a possible Pomarine Skua or something ...what I was not expecting was a largish long-winged petrel meandering just off the beach, looping its way north. Totally unexpected, a Markham's Storm Petrel! Ten minutes later another passed north, this one actually flying up the beach itself and briefly over the pool!

And as for the pool, very nice indeed – fourteen species of Nearctic waders, including no less than 140 Grey Plovers, 45 American Golden Plovers, four Killdeers, at least 25 Semipalmated Plovers, 20 Semipalmated Sandpipers and six Least Sandpipers, all being my only sightings of the species in Chile. Also Black Skimmer, Snowy Egrets and Little Blue Heron, about 25 Black-crowned Night Herons and a Puna Ibis. Plus my only Cinnamon Teals and White-cheeked Pintails of the trip, along with Inca Terns offshore and a grand 450 Turkey Vultures loitering on the beach. New Year Party indeed!

By 10.00 a.m., with the sun now breaking through the mist, I was already on over 50 species, a localised Peruvian Martin one of the final species before I decided to break for a rare breakfast. Passed back through Arica town, plenty of revelers still ambling back from their all-night parties.

Had hoped to find a Tamarugo Conebill later in the day, driving the 60 km to the hyper-arid Chaca Valley. Totally failed on this, walking quite some kilometres in rather high temperatures and little shade. Had further possibilities of Chilean Woodstar here too, but also didn't see. We did however have a rather stunning pair of Burrowing Owls that sat staring at us, plus lots of Peruvian White-crested Eleanias and my only Bran-coloured Flycatcher of the day. In the heat and dust, eventually gave up and returned to Arica for a little siesta and beach time (i.e. little one paddling, me gull watching, etc), Also had a short walk around the Isla del Alacran, adding super close range Surfbirds and Ruddy Turnstones, as well as Band-tailed Gulls chomping on sea urchins. After another stroll at the lagoon (adding no new species), went back to the hotel for a while to await dark. Spotting in the Lutra Valley from dusk, randomly taking small roads though the agricultural plains. Only gave it a couple of hours, one Band-tailed Nightjar flying, two Peruvian Thick-knees calling. And so ended the 1 January, 71 species for the day, heavily dominated by wetland species. 2 January. Roads of Death.

Not for the faint-hearted are Chile's roads in the high Andes. Travelling the Arica to Lauca highway, a key transit route for landlocked Bolivia, is a somewhat sombre experience - as it winds and climbs, so too does the number of roadside memorials increase, many just a few hundred metres apart, each a testament to yet another car or truck that has plunged into a canyon or ended up as a crumpled heap against rocks. At least however this road has asphalt - the minor roads are even worse, one particularly notorious stretch across the border in Bolivia once seeing 200-300 persons die annually on a mere 70 km of road!

Anyhow, up we were going - our plan to drive as far as Zapahuiria, then take a minor road south to Belen and its remnant Polylepis forest. Asphalt all the way. Except it wasn't! As we reached El Tambo, the road was closed, a few cars parked at a barrier across the road. Spoke with a Bolivian in a landcruiser, "closed till midday, road repairs". He knew another way, I opted to follow.

Rough rocky track, narrow, loose gravel, steep slopes, so safety barriers whatsoever ...and, icing on the cake, big drops to the one side, a wall of rocks on the other! Keeps you on your toes, truly an intense experience, kilometre after kilometre of knowing that one slip could well be fatal. Remains of cars far down the slope on several occasions, then a truck and car stopped on a sharp corner. Ropes attached to the truck, guys edging down the slope. We stopped. Better we hadn't - a white car had just gone off, tumbled perhaps 400 metres down a steep scree slope and was now a smashed up wreck. All dead. Images of the last moments flooded my head, can't be a good way to go. Onward we went,

a bit silent for a while, the drive was even more intense now.

Got back to the main road without incident, continued towards Belen. Nice stop a little before Chapiquiña, a Blue-and-yellow Tanager in streamside trees, Black-throated Flowerpecker and Canyon Canastero also here, plus two Black-billed Shrike-Tyrants in a small electricity sub-station. Some kilometres on, reached the Polylepis forest at Belen. High altitude again, approximately 3800 m, so fatigue was again an issue, as was heat this day. Two main targets - Giant Conebill and the 'Orbigny's Chat-Tyrant, both very localised species. Clambered around for a couple of hours, splendid views of the 'Orbigny's Chat-Tyrant, but no sign of Giant Conebill. I guess I should have been here at dawn. Also saw Streaked Tit-Spinetails, Black-headed Sierra-Finches, numerous Mourning Sierra-Finches, both Black Siskin and Hooded Siskin and a good variety of other common species.

With an evening flight from Arica, we eventually decided it was time to descend. Made the mistake of taking an alternative route - rocky and narrow most of the way, gravel not asphalt and drops to the sides again. No way I could average much above 30 km/hour ...more hours of intense concentration, wondering too if we would make it back in time for the flight. Some good birds to add distractions, the highlights a Sparkling Violetear and another flock of Spot-winged Doves.

Midway, fortunately, the road improved considerably ...up went the speed, though those drops and roadside memorials continued to scream caution. Eventually got back to Arica, a sudden wave of nausea hitting me like a brick. Stopped by the sea and for near 30 minutes felt physically ill, even struggling to breathe. Perhaps a sudden release of adrenalin, maybe mixed with some impact of the day's high altitude, I certainly have never experienced anything like that before! Forced some hot tea down my throat, headed for the airport. Late evening, still not feeling exactly brilliant, we boarded a flight for Santiago. Back in the capital, checked into a hotel near the airport. What an amazing day! 3 January. The Finale.

Final day, woke to a hot sunny Santiago ...opted out of any last mad dashes anywhere in favour of a relaxed breakfast at the hotel, Eared Doves in scrubby stuff just adjacent. Over at the airport, Southern Lapwings near the terminal, Chilean Swallows and Chilean Hawk in the same area, our final farewell birds. Boarded an Iberian Airlines flight for the 12 hours to Madrid, connecting onward to London and, after a night in the terminal, to Vilnius. Trip Over! To see a full Systematic List of Birds and Mammals in Chile, 11 Dec 2016 - 3 Jan 2017 [CLICK HERE](#)