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Charmed by Rayaditos

A Birding Trip to Patagonia

I sat down in the Jorge Newbery Airport terminal to wait for my boarding call. The chaotic streets of Buenos Aires receded from my mind, and in their place, the promise of Patagonia began to take shape: Lesser Rheas (cousins of the ostrich) running pell-mell through the grassy steppe, flamingos holding yogic poses in shallow waters, and the short-tailed silhouettes of buzzard-eagles wheeling around the sun. The boarding call came, and in a few hours, our plane would touch down in one of the most magnificently scenic landscapes on the planet.

Patagonia is a region within Chile and Argentina that occupies the southernmost portion of South America. Its borders run from the Colorado River in the north to Cape Horn in the south, and west to east from Pacific to Atlantic oceans. It's the size of California, Nevada, and Arizona combined but with only a tiny fraction of the population. Here, the final section of the Andes Mountains—some 1,100 miles long and topping off at over 15,000 feet in elevation—stretches down Patagonia's western side.

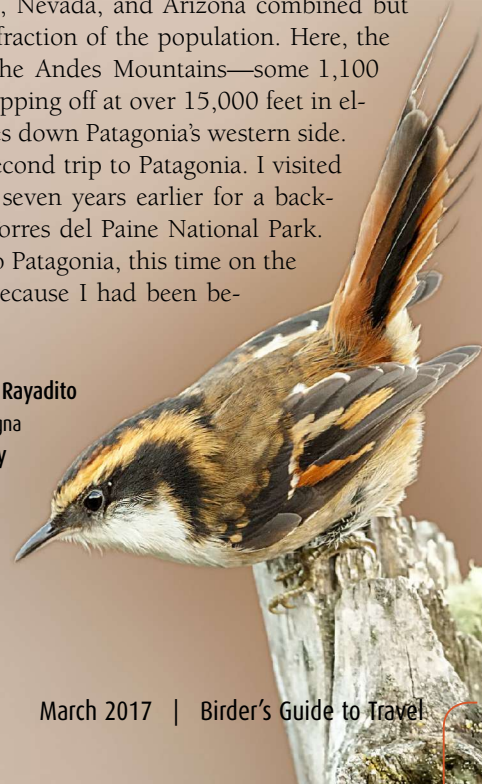
This was my second trip to Patagonia. I visited the Chilean side seven years earlier for a backpacking trip in Torres del Paine National Park. I was returning to Patagonia, this time on the Argentine side, because I had been be-

RIGHT: Thorn-tailed Rayadito

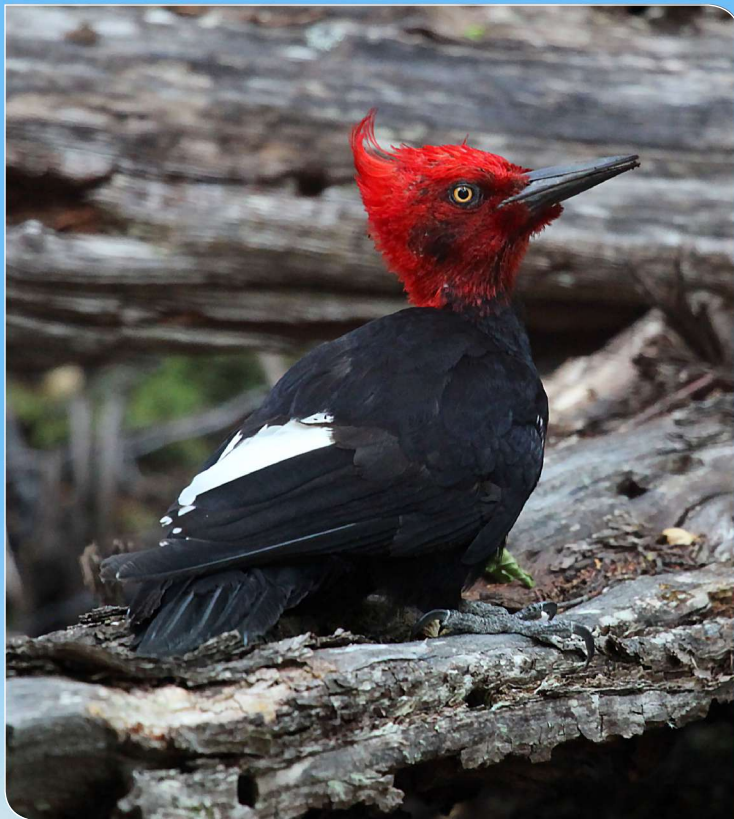
Photo © Alejandro Insegna

LEFT: Mount Fitz Roy

Photo © OST



Birding Trip to **Patagonia**



■ ABOVE: **Chucao Tapaculo** Photo © Alex Giltjes
■ LEFT: **Magellanic Woodpecker** Photo © Liam Quinn
■ BELOW: **Castaño Overo Glacier, Cerro Tronador**
Photo © Brandon Breen

witched by the place, like so many others before me. Charles Darwin visited the wind-scourged Patagonian steppe as a 24-year-old man, and later in life, he tried to understand its lingering appeal. He came to no conclusion, but he wrote that the landscape's allure "must be partly owing to the free scope given to the imagination". For me, the spell of Patagonia comes from the primeval feel of the place. Civilization seems far away. There's a sense that secrets will be revealed at any moment, perhaps in the form of an orange-breasted bird or a porcelain orchid.

Our plane touched down at the El Calafate airport



under a bright southern sky. The glacier-fed waters of Lago Argentino glowed eerily and beautifully nearby. After a cheap meal of empanadas, I explored the town. I quickly discovered that El Calafate was a place I could live. Tiny, brightly-painted homes with window flowerbeds lined quiet streets. When I started to notice signs featuring hand-painted flamingos that pointed the way to the Laguna Nimez Reserve, I followed them.

The Laguna Nimez Reserve, just a short walk from downtown El Calafate, is a peaceful site with excellent birding. Modest in size, the reserve contains two large ponds and a 1.5-mile-long walking trail. The reserve was awash in blooms. Tall grasses, featuring the first exhibitions from autumn's palette, undulated in the wind. A group of ten Chilean Flamingos stood in the placid waters of the main pond.

As the sun headed for the horizon, the light in the reserve grew steadily richer. A pair of Coscoroba Swans with bright red bills circled the reserve and then landed on the pond, joining Crested Ducks, Ruddy Ducks, Chiloé Wigeon, and Red Shovelers. As I followed the trail through some tall shrubs, out popped a small, black bird with contrasting yellow beak and eye-rings: a Spectacled Tyrant. Next, a Chimango Caracara alighted on a fence post and stood on one leg.

The birds of Laguna Nimez showed little fear of people, much like the birds of the Galápagos, Mauritius, and other places where birds evolved without regular human contact. One of my best moments at Nimez involved an intrepid Plumbeous Rail. This plump, gray-and-brown marsh bird emerged from a clump of reeds and cocked his head a few times to better see me through merlot-red eyes. I sat down in the trail. The rail approached to within a few feet of me, lingered for a while, and then walked off in measured steps.

An impressive feature of Laguna Nimez was its handmade signs. One wooden sign featured the flamboyant outline of the Tufted Tit-Tyrant, a diminutive flycatcher with two curved feather tufts on its crown and hence the nickname of "little bull". A colorful mural of local



■ Patagonia, shared by Chile and Argentina, is the southernmost portion of South America.

Map © Rad Smith



■ Patagonian Sierra-finch

Photo © Brandon Breen

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■ The portion of southern Patagonia visited by the author. Map © Rad Smith

■ The portion of northern Patagonia visited by the author. Map © Rad Smith





■ LEFT: **Tufted Tit-Tyrant** Photo © João Quental



■ RIGHT: **Plumbeous Rail** Photo © Brandon Breen

birds added cheer to a viewing blind. Even the “no dogs” sign—a circle with a slash over the silhouette of a terrier—featured a meadowlark perched on the circle. These signs demonstrated the care, attention, and love of place necessary for nature conservation. The best message on a sign was straightforward: *donde vivas conserva la naturaleza* (conserve nature where you live).

The next morning, I teamed up with a young American woman I met in Buenos Aires and re-encountered in

the streets of El Calafate. We followed a narrow earthen path that crisscrossed the Calafate Creek and led into the Andean foothills. We watched a flock of Black-chinned Siskins foraging greedily, and later an elegant raptor landed on a fencepost: a male American Kestrel but with a whiter belly and more subtle facial markings than kestrels in North America.

Canyon walls rose up on either side of us as we ventured farther. We came to a marshy area where Blue-

and-white Swallows flew reconnaissance missions past us in sweeping arcs. Then, in a moment of mutual surprise, a handful of South American Snipe flushed before us. We continued through thorny scrub and were met by a male Rufous-tailed Plantcutter with orange-red undersides and crown, white wing spots, and impatient-looking red eyes. Next, a massive raptor with a tail so short it barely protruded beyond its wings—a Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle—flew



■ **Lesser Rheas near the Sierra Baguales in Chile.**

Photo © David Bell

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overhead, slowing down over us as if passing through a speed zone.

The Calafate Creek was visible as a bright green ribbon of well-watered vegetation amongst the tan, olive, and straw hues of the surrounding, treeless Patagonian steppe. A little farther on, we noticed a large, dark raptor hopping around the base of a cliff opposite us. I checked in my *Birds of Southern South America and Antarctica* field guide but could not find a match. How could such a large raptor defy identification? It seemed the mystery would remain, but then an adult buzzard-eagle clutching a mammal in its talons flew in and landed next to the dark raptor: meal delivery for its offspring. It was nearing our dinner time, too. We started homeward toward the surreal, turquoise waters of Lago Argentino—their color the result of fine sediment created when rocks pulverize rocks under the unimaginable weight of glaciers.

The next day, I boarded a bus for an hour-long ride to Los Glaciares National Park to see the famous Perito Moreno Glacier. The great mountains rose to meet our transport as we hurtled toward them. The glacier viewing area in the park included a large indoor café and miles of boardwalk integrated unobtrusively within a peninsular tongue of southern beech forest that stopped just short of licking the glacier. Glancing up from the parking area, I noticed an Andean Condor high overhead, soaring

■ LEFT: Andean Condor Photo © João Quental

■ BELOW: Coscoroba Swans

Photo © João Quental



sedately on plank-like wings in a world accessible to a privileged few.

I set out on the boardwalk and soon disappeared into the forest. The beech trees, which grew to only a modest height, possessed a wizened, welcoming appearance: moss-covered trunks, dainty leaves, and gently curving limbs that had never known haste. From within the forest came the soft, pleasing trills of Thorn-tailed Rayaditos: small, chickadee-like birds with large black-and-buffy heads and spiny tails. Up ahead, squatting idly on the boardwalk, was a medium-sized brown bird: a Chilean Flicker, looking professorial in its subdued wardrobe.

The boardwalk emerged from the forest at intervals to spectacular views of the glacier. Craggy ice peaks, glowing in pale shades of blue, jutted out of the glacier's frontal wall; below, ice chunks floated and bobbed in steely, stippled waters; and the glacier itself extended back in sweeping contours to inhospitable highlands. Then, an anomalous, tropical sound: the squeaky, screechy flight calls of... parrots? Soon a group of 10 or so Austral Parakeets—the most southerly occurring parrot species in the world—flew past at speed, their long, burnt-red tails trailing behind green bodies.

The next day I undertook a more ambitious outing: a day hike to Laguna de los Tres to view the granite peaks of Fitz Roy, Poincenot, and Saint-Exupéry. In the morning, I hopped on a bus for a three-hour ride north to the small tourist town of El Chaltén; en route, we passed a few pairs of Lesser Rheas, a large Patagonian gray fox, a Red-backed Hawk, and several groups of llama-like guanacos. The bus dropped me off at 11 a.m. and my return bus departed at 5 p.m., giving me exactly six hours to complete the 15-mile round-trip hike with 2,500 feet of elevation gain. I started toward the trailhead on the opposite



■ TOP LEFT: **Austral Pygmy-Owl**

Photo © Brandon Breen

■ TOP RIGHT: **Spectacled Tyrant**

Photo © Norton Santos

■ BOTTOM: **Waterfalls from Castaño Overo Glacier**

Photo © Brandon Breen



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side of town at a brisk pace. The day was perfect: cloudless and 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

The trail climbed into a southern beech forest. Thorn-tailed Rayaditos, omnipresent and trilling soothingly, sounded in contrast to the doleful tones of the White-crested Elaenias that seemed to cry, “Me!... Me!... Me!” House Wrens, Rufous-collared Sparrows, and Patagonian Sierra-Finches were likewise common. I came to an overlook of the Río de las Vueltas (River of the Turns), a milky, glacier-fed river winding through a flat valley hemmed in by steep mountains. The trail skirted a hillside, and the mighty peaks came into view. The lowest of these, Saint-Exupéry, was named after a hero of mine, the French writer and pioneering aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, best known in the U.S. as the author of *The Little Prince*.

I continued through more forest to the shores and pellucid waters of Lake Capri. I lunched there briefly, again with a view of those awesome peaks, before continuing at my quickened pace. The trail was popular with trekkers but not so full as to be crowded. As the trail wound through scrubby vegetation, I glanced to my right and stopped abruptly. There was something, rounded and plump, in the shadow of the tree. I looked through my binoculars: it was an Austral Pygmy-Owl, and only several feet away! I admired this diurnal hunter and then had the pleasure of pointing it out to a mother-and-daughter duo who came up the trail behind me.

Up ahead, I came to a small red-rock stream with multiple short cascades and my most picturesque view yet of Mount Fitz Roy, Poincenot Spire, and Saint-Exupéry Spire. These repeated views re-

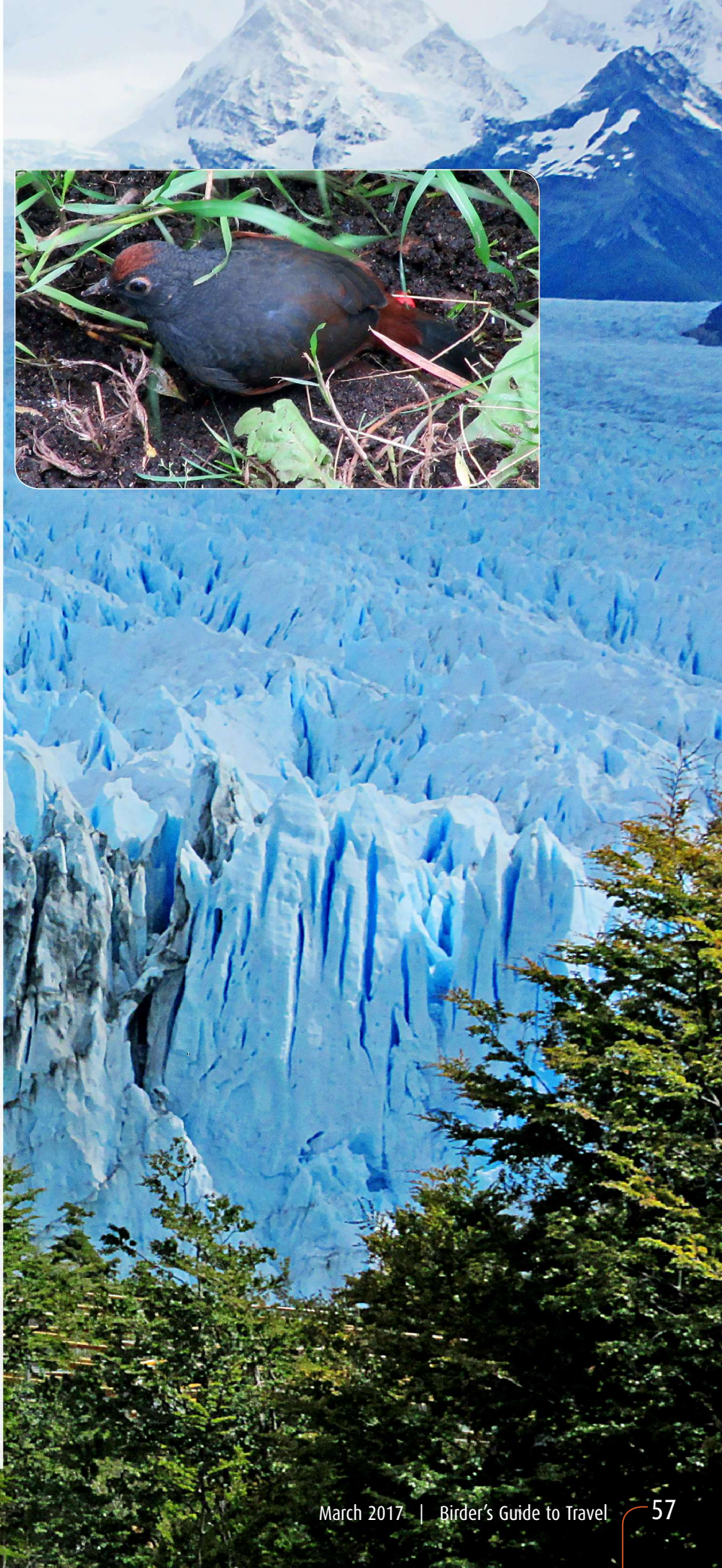


LEFT TO RIGHT:

- Chiloé Wigeons Photo © Brian Ralphs
- Austral Parakeet Photo © João Quental
- Black-throated Huet-huet Photo © Brandon Breen

BACKGROUND:

- Perito Moreno Glacier Photo © Brandon Breen



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minded me of the Japanese woodblock artist Katsushika Hokusai and his famous *36 Views of Mount Fuji* collection. I hiked on through marshy land. An American Kestrel hunted along a hillside, and an Austral Thrush appeared in a treetop at the edge of the forest. I made it up the final demanding section of switchbacks to my destination: a front-row seat to views of Mount Fitz Roy, Laguna de los Tres, and the saw-toothed ridges that bordered the enormous Southern Patagonian Ice Field.

My final adventure occurred in northern Patagonia's Nahuel Huapi National

Park. To arrive there, I took a 25-hour bus ride from El Calafate to San Carlos de Bariloche, and then a two-hour bus ride to the Pampa Linda park headquarters. I registered at the ranger station for a two-day hike with an overnight stay at the Otto Meiling Refuge.

The trail started through scrubby vegetation before delving into a forest. I crossed a swift, glacier-fed river on a wooden bridge, and thereafter the trail made lazy switchbacks through giant Patagonian cypresses. Then the silence was broken by what sounded like a very large woodpecker. I stopped and scanned for movement ... there! High in a cypress, clinging to the main trunk was the black body and fiery-red head of a male Magellanic Woodpecker, a member of the *Campephilus* genus of grub-loving woodpeckers that includes the extinct Ivory-billed and Imperial woodpeckers.

Soon the black-and-white female appeared, too; she flew into a tree near me, providing a view of her outrageously long, black, floppy crest. A little later, an upright and jaunty little bird happened across my path—longish legs, orange breast, zebra-striped belly, and an up-cocked tail: a Chucao Tapaculo,

a secretive understory bird, often heard but rarely seen. The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda wrote of the chucao's mournful-sounding vocalization: *Suddenly the voice of chucao as if nobody existed but that cry of all the solitude united.*

Now I had come to the steepest section of the trail, which made tight switchbacks as it climbed out of the forest into the transition zone where stunted vegetation and far-reaching views predominated. I saw innumerable mountains, the Pampa Linda valley, and the Castaño Overo Glacier with its dozen waterfalls. It was here I started to see condors. First, a couple of juveniles flew past and then a subadult male with a nascent white collar. The condors made several passes, and then I looked



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:

■ Rufus-tailed Plantcutter

Photo © João Qüental

■ Gray-flanked Cinclodes

Photo © Brandon Breen

■ Black-faced Ibis

Photo © Brandon Breen

■ American Kestrel Photo © Brandon Breen





■ ABOVE: Laguna de los Tres
with Mount Fitz Roy behind.

Photo © Brandon Breen

■ RIGHT: Ruddy Duck

Photo © Brandon Breen



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■ LEFT: The ramshackle Otto Meiling Refuge, with Cerro Tronador behind.

Photo © Brandon Breen

■ BACKGROUND: Río de las Vueltas

Photo © Brandon Breen

toward Paso de los Nubes (Pass of the Clouds) and saw what appeared to be a swarm of gnats but in fact were faraway Andean Condors, about 30 of them circling together.

I continued hiking to the refuge: a basic structure with a weatherworn charm. The second floor was one large bedroom where each night mattresses were laid side by side to accommodate however many travelers showed up. Mount Tronador (the “Thunderer”), an old vol-

cano, loomed over the refuge, and a glacier came down the mountain on either side of the refuge. The refuge staff served goulash for dinner that night, and the atmosphere was warm and festive as people traded stories and freely poured each other’s wine.

Later, a few of us walked out into the cold, clear night. I had several times read about stars so close you could touch them, but this was my first night when the stars appeared within reach. There was Orion,

the Southern Cross, and the Magellanic Clouds: two dwarf galaxies visible from the southern hemisphere. Despite the clear sky, there came the sound of thunder. But this was not the thunder of light and searing heat, it was the thunder of ice. The Alerce Glacier had calved, sending forth a resounding grumble that reached two communal gatherings: one of ragged human travelers in awe of Patagonia, the other a roost of Andean Condors to which the entire world was Patagonia. 🌐

