

Albatross

Birding and Nature Tours



Birding El Yeso Valley. A full day around Santiago, Chile

December 2015

Leader: Rodrigo Silva

Participants: Ian Reid and Ryan Farrell

Albatross Birding & Nature Tours

www.albatross-birding.com

OVERVIEW

This trip report is covering a full day of birding in El Yeso Valley, placed southeast of Santiago, capital city of Chile. El Yeso Valley runs from 1300 up to 3000 meters above sea level and changes from xeric shrubland in the lower portion to bogs and wetlands in the upper part, offering to the visitors one of the most breathtaking Andean landscapes in the central region of the country... I'm not talking yet about the great birding possibilities that it also provides!



The stunning and overwhelming scenery of the Andes at El Yeso Valley.

The trip here covered was led by Rodrigo Silva -from Albatross Birding and Nature Tours- and he was joined by 2 Albatross clients from the USA, Ian Reid and Ryan Farrell. Ian and Ryan are keen and serious birders interested in maximizing birding time and leaving nothing behind and not compromising the chance to get some shots of the birds.

Like everyone visiting El Yeso Valley their main target was to find the marvelous Diademed Sandpiper-Plover, but their wish-list also included Torrent Duck, Upland and Andean Goose, Andean Condor, Grey-breasted Seedsnipe, Mountain Parakeet, White-sided Hillstar, Creamy-rumped Miner, Crag Chilia, Dusky-tailed Canastero, Moustached Turca, Ground-Tyrants (as many species as possible!) and Yellow-rumped Siskin.

With all of this on the list and a single day to do it, we had to work hard and move fast, but the promptness and keen eyes of participants was very helpful to finish the day successfully.



A female of Striped Woodpecker at the lower section of El Yeso Valley. Photo by Ian Reid, participant of the trip.

By special requirement of the participants we began with a hotel pick-up at 05:30. Then we drove straight ahead out of the city, starting to ascend into the Maipo Valley. After 1 hour we reached a suitable area to look for Torrent Duck and after a failed attempt, we got one while driving! We stopped the car, set up the scopes, got some gorgeous views of an adult male going upstream , took some pictures and kept on the way to El Yeso Valley.

By 07:15 we were in our first birding spot, an area non higher than 1300 mts suitable to look for Moustached Turca and Crag Chilia. But birding is like birding and we missed both species in this stop (actually we got a few calls and a glance of a Moustached Turca... but it's doesn't count!). Instead we got excellent views of Striped Woodpecker, Tufted Tit-Tyrant and the first Chilean Mockingbird of the day.

Still in the lower part of the Valley we stopped again to try again for both endemics we missed in the previously spot... and were successful in finding Moustached Turca (superb views in an open area!) and also Dusky-tailed Canastero, but Crag Chilia still on the "to do list" for then.



Ian and Ryan getting a superb view of a Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle at lower section of El Yeso Valley. Photo by Rodrigo Silva

Third time lucky is the saying and that was true for Crag Chilia! We got excellent views of this endemic in a rocky slope just in front of us. But this stop also had a few more specialties waiting for us: Black-chested Buzzard Eagle soaring around, White-sided Hillstar seated in a branch and well spotted by scopes, Giant Hummingbird feeding and calling around, a family of Chilean flickers displaying just over there... and so on.



An extraordinary view of the endemic Crag Chilia! Photo by Ian Reid

After a short drive and still in the lower section of the Valley, we got Southern Lapwing, Long-tailed Meadowlark, Grey-hooded Sierra-Finch and it took us some time to realize that the mystery bird that was calling was a recently-fledged Plain-mantled Tit-Spinetail.

Oh yes, birding hard but also recording valuable data for the First Atlas of the Breeding birds of Chile, led by the Chilean network of birders NGO (ROC). At this stop we also got our first Andean Condors, but regrettably they were a long distance away and up in the mountains, so we didn't get much more than a big black dot with vulture shape and some white somewhere.



Long-tailed Meadowlark at lower section of El Yeso Valley. Photo by Ian Reid.

By 10:15 and just approaching to the the middle part of the valley the weather began to threaten us with some light rain and we could see how the upper part was being covered by grey and dense clouds, so we decided to do not take risks and moved straight ahead up to the proper habitat to look for our main target of the day: the Diademed Sandpiper-Plover, skipping some usual birding spots across the middle portion of the valley.

Nevertheless, we got some common birds at middle section just by the roadside, like Rufous-banded Miner, Buff-winged Cinclodes and White-browed Ground-Tyrant.

We arrived at the right habitat to look for our main target with the plus that Rodrigo had seen a bird in the area a few days ago. We got some rain on the way up, but fortunately the weather was quite pleasant at the moment we arrived. A little bit cold, but no strong wind or rain at all!

As we skipped a few birding stops on the way up, here we got our first encounter with many of the high altitude species like Grey-breasted Seedsnipe, Ochre-naped Ground-Tyrant, Black-fronted Ground-Tyrant, Greater Yellow Finch and Yellow-rumped Siskin.

After enjoying of all these goodies we turned our focus to the Diademed Sandpiper-Plover and it didn't take us long to spot one bird feeding and moving across the bog we were scanning. The climax for the participants and main mission accomplished!



A male of Grey-breasted Seedsnipe calling and displaying just a few meters from our lunch spot! Photo by Ian Reid.



Ian having a close encounter with his most desired bird of the trip, the marvelous Diademed Sandpiper-Plover. Photo by Rodrigo Silva



Meanwhile... at the other side of the lens! Photo by Ian Reid

Since the main goal had been reached and the weather was quite helpful, we decided to stop for a while and enjoy the views of this stunning Andean landscape accompanied by a well deserved picnic lunch.



The lunch set up waiting for the birders to come! Photo by Rodrigo Silva.

By 13:00 we were already lunched and ready to keep on birding. The weather, which had allowed us to enjoy of a pleasant birding and lunch time, became bad again so we decided to climb up as soon and long as we could while still possible. Our following goal were three high altitude waterfowl species: Upland Goose, Andean Goose and Crested Duck.

A slightly rain was followed by a proper one... and as we climbed up, the rain was replaced by snow! But as serious birders, it didn't stop us in our effort to get the geese and the duck. At 2700 mts and with a proper snowstorm, we reached an excellent viewpoint over a bog where we got all the 3 species! Just a short view, hopped into the car and came back down as soon as we could.

Once we reached a safe enough area and the weather became pleasant again –quite cold but not snowing-, we recommenced birding to look for Creamy-rumped Miner, a restricted range species limited to high altitudes. After several unsuccessful attempts we started to think that we would miss the Miner... but our last stop plus the keen eyes of Ian gave us the chance to spot a bird!



After several trials we found one individual of the restricted range Creamy-rumped Miner. Photo by Ian Reid

After this last-minute success, we decided to start our way down through the valley, saving some time to make a short stop in the middle portion of the valley we had missed earlier and in this way try for the single target species we had been missing: Mountain Parakeet. But because it is always good to keep a reason to come back we left the area without finding the bird.

After a long but very productive birding day (52 birds species!) we arrived to the hotel around 19:00 hrs. Both Ian and Ryan with a big smile on their faces!



Ochre-naped Ground-Tyrant. Photo by Ian Reid



Yellow-rumped Siskin. Photo by Ian Reid



Black-fronted Ground-Tyrant. Photo by Ian Reid

BIRD LIST

RR = Restricted-range species (total range < 50,000 km²)

Conservation Status follows Birdlife International

Taxonomic order and notes follows South American Classification Committee

<http://www.museum.lsu.edu/~Remsen/SACCBaseline.html>

NEW WORLD QUAILS

California Quail – *Callipepla californica*

An introduced species currently widely spread. Four birds well seen at lower portion of the valley.

DUCKS

Andean Goose – *Chloephaga melanoptera*

Four birds well seen in a bog at our last stop, 2700 meters over level of the sea.

Upland Goose - *Chloephaga picta picta*

Three individuals seen in the same bog than previously species.

Crested Duck - *Lophonetta specularioides*

A flock at the same spot than previously species.

Torrent Duck – *Merganetta armata*

A superb view of a male steaming up in front of us at Maipo River, on the way to El Yeso Valley.

Yellow-billed Teal - *Anas flavirostris*

We found two individuals of the *oxyptera* subspecies –not so oftenly recorded in Central Region- in the upper section of El Yeso Valley.

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Andean Condor - *Vultur gryphus* Monotypic **NEAR-THREATENED**

A few individuals soaring around but far away on distance...

HAWKS

Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle - *Geranoaetus melanoleucus australis*

One of the highlights of the day with excellent views at lower part of the Valley!

Variable Hawk - *Geranoaetus polyosoma* Monotypic

A marvelous display of birds getting entangled, well documented by Ian's camera.

Formerly a *Buteo*, this species has recently been merged into *Geranoaetus*.

Farquhar (1988) concluded that *Buteo poecilochrous* and *B. polyosoma* are conspecific, as they were formerly treated; he was unable to find any way to reliably diagnose the two forms using plumage characters or measurements. Ridgely & Greenfield (2001), Jaramillo (2003), and Schulenberg et al. (2007)

followed this treatment and suggested "Variable Hawk" be retained for the composite species. Genetic data (Riesing et al. 2003) are consistent with hypothesis that *B. polyosoma* and *B. poecilochrous* are conspecific.

FALCONS

Mountain Caracara – *Phalcoboenus megalopterus*

Two individuals at higher section of the valley.

Chimango Caracara – *Milvago chimango*

One bird seen roadside at middle portion of the valley.

American Kestrel – *Falco sparverius*

Two birds well spotted.

PLOVERS

Southern Lapwing - *Vanellus chilensis*

One of the commonest birds in Central Chile (*chilensis* subspecies), well seen at beginning of the day.

Fjeldsø & Krabbe (1990) and Wiersma (1996) suggested that *Vanellus chilensis* might consist of more than one species but also noted that data so far suggest intergradation between the two subspecies groups - Neotropical reference in Fjeldsø & Krabbe 1990-; Jaramillo (2003) also consider than more than one species is probably involved: two groups exist, southern "Chilean Lapwing" (*chilensis* and *fretensis*) and more northern and eastern "Cayenne Lapwing" (*cayennensis* and *lampronotus*). The two differ in structure, plumage, crest length and colour, soft-part coloration and voice.

Diademed Sandpiper-Plover - *Phegornis mitchellii* Monotypic **NEAR-THREATENED**

The bird of the day by long distance! We got marvelous views of one individual at bog of the upper section of the Valley.

SEEDSNIPES

Grey-breasted Seedsnipe - *Thinocorus orbignyianus*

Superb views and gorgeous photos of +15 birds at upper section of the valley.

PIGEONS

Black-winged Ground-Dove - *Metriopelia melanoptera melanoptera*

Common at high altitude, seen at different points during the day.

Eared Dove - *Zenaida auriculata*

Very common in all the country (*auriculata* subspecies in Central Chile). Well seen at lower part of the valley.

PARROTS

Monk Parakeet – *Myopsitta monachus*

A very successfully introduced species. We got a few birds while driving in to the city.

HUMMINGBIRDS

White-sided Hillstar - *Oreotrochilus leucopleurus* Monotypic

An excellent view by scope of a perched male at lower section of the valley.

Giant Hummingbird - *Patagona gigas*

The largest hummingbird in the World! We got a quick but close view at the same area than previously species (*gigas* subspecies).

WOODPECKERS

Striped Woodpecker - *Veniliornis lignarius* Monotypic

Super close views of 3 individuals at beginning of the day.

Veniliornis lignarius and Chequered Woodpecker *V. mixtus* form a superspecies (Short 1982, Fjeldså & Krabbe 1990, Sibley & Monroe 1990, Winkler & Christie 2002); justification is weak for their treatment as separate species (Short 1970, 1971, 1982); genetic data (Weibel & Moore 2002a, b) confirm their relationship as sister species.

Chilean Flicker - *Colaptes pitius* Monotypic

A family group well seen at lower section.

OVENBIRDS

Rufous-banded Miner - *Geositta rufipennis*

One of the commonest species from mid to upper portion of the valley.

Geositta rufipennis may consist of more than one species (Jaramillo 2003, Remsen 2003).

RR Creamy-rumped Miner – *Geositta isabellina*

After several failed attempts, we got one bird thanks to the keen eyes of Ian close to the bogs just above the Dam.

Scale-throated Earthcreeper - *Upucerthia dumetaria*

Five birds seen from middle to upper parts of the valley (*hypoleuca* subspecies).

RR Crag Chilia - *Ochetorhynchus melanurus* CHILEAN ENDEMIC

Excellent view of one bird feeding on a rocky slope just opposite of us, at lower section of the valley.

Buff-winged Cinclodes - *Cinclodes fuscus* Monotypic

A few birds at any patch of proper habitat from middle to upper sections of the valley.

Gray-flanked Cinclodes - *Cinclodes oustaleti*

One bird well seen and photographed by Ian in the bogs above the dam.

Plain-mantled Tit-Spinetail - *Leptasthenura aegithaloides*

Common in Central Region (*aegithaloides* subspecies) and well seen at beginning of the day at lower section of the valley.

Jaramillo (2003) suggested that *Leptasthenura aegithaloides* might consist of more than one species

Sharp-billed Canastero – *Asthenes pyrroleuca*

Three very cooperative birds well seen at middle portion of the valley.

Cordilleran Canastero - *Asthenes modesta*

One bird well seen at a rocky slopes close to the bogs just up to the dam.

RR Dusky-tailed Canastero - *Pseudasthenes humicola* CHILEAN ENDEMIC

Two birds spotted at lower part of the valley.

TAPACULOS

RR Moustached Turca - *Pterotochos megapodius* CHILEAN ENDEMIC

A large and charismatic tapaculo running in the open! Excellent views at the lower section of the valley, belonging here to the nominate subspecies.

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

White-crested Elaenia - *Elaenia albiceps*

The common summer flycatcher in central Chile (*chilensis* subspecies). Common in the forested area at beginning of El Yeso Road.

Tufted Tit-Tyrant - *Anairetes parulus parulus*

Common and lovely tiny tyrant in Central Chile. Good views at beginning of the day at lower section of the valley.

White-browed Ground-Tyrant - *Muscisaxicola albilora* Monotypic

The default Ground-Tyrant species in the area. We got some sparse individuals along the whole day but a 30+ birds flock at middle portion of the valley.

Black-fronted Ground-Tyrant - *Muscisaxicola frontalis* Monotypic

Five birds and nice photos at upper portion of the valley.

Ochre-naped Ground-tyrant – *Muscisaxicola flavinucha*

Six birds at high altitude bogs, belonging here to the nominate subspecies.

SWALLOWS

Blue-and-white Swallow - *Pygochelidon cyanoleuca patagonica*

Widespread and common across the whole valley.

Chilean Swallow - *Tachycineta meyeni* Monotypic

Common in Central Chile. A few individuals seen at lower section of the valley.

WRENS

House Wren - *Troglodyte (aedon) musculus*

A common species in Central Chile (*chilensis* subspecies).

THRUSHES

Austral Thrush - *Turdus falcklandii magellanicus*

One of the commonest birds in Central Chile. A few individuals seen during the day.

MOCKINGBIRDS

RR Chilean Mockingbird - *Mimus thenca* Monotypic CHILEAN ENDEMIC

Very common in Central Chile. The species is spreading to the south and is now even breeding on Chiloé Island. There are also a few sightings in Argentina, so the species should not be considered any more a Chilean endemic...

SPARROWS

Rufous-collared Sparrow - *Zonotrichia capensis*

A super common species, present everywhere!

Gray-hooded Sierra-Finch - *Phrygilus gayi*

Common in Central Chile. Well seen across the whole valley.

Mourning Sierra-Finch - *Phrygilus fruticeti*

A singing and displaying male well seen at middle portion of the valley.

Plumbeous Sierra-Finch – *Phrygilus unicolor*

A few individuals founded at middle altitude bogs.

Common Diuca-Finch - *Diuca diuca*

A common bird in Central Chile, well seen at beginning of the day.

Greater Yellow-Finch - *Sicalis auriventris*

Common at middle to upper parts of the valley. Excellent views of nice yellow-males at high altitude bogs.

BLACKBIRDS

Austral Blackbird - *Curaeus curaeus*

A common species in Central Chile. Well seen at beginning of the day.

Long-tailed Meadowlark - *Sturnella loyca*

A common but remarkably species. Nice views of a strongly red-chested male at middle section of the valley.

FINCHES

Yellow-rumped Siskin - *Sporagra uropygialis* Monotypic

Excellent views of this wonderful siskin from middle to upper sections of the valley.

MAMMAL LIST

CANIDAE

Culpeo Fox – *Pseudalopex culpaeus*

One individual seen at roadside when we were on the way back home!



Black-chested Buzzard Eagle. Photo by Ian Reid