

A few days near Santiago, Chile
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Ian Reid



Although 2015 involved an awful lot of travel for me, I had very little opportunity for foreign birding apart from a couple of days in the US in June, which was enjoyable but yielded very few lifers. However the International Conference on Computer Vision was to be held in Santiago this year, only my third ever trip to South America, so I decided to do my usual thing of tacking a day or two onto the conference.

One bird stood out and was my key target: Diademed Sandpiper-plover is gorgeous looking, near-threatened and restricted to bogs and steppes of the high Andes, so birds do not come much more desirable than this. With breeding sites within a couple of hours of Santiago I was hopeful of adding to my growing and impressive list of rare waders from conference trips that included Mountain Plover, Ibisbill, Crab Plover, Nordmann's Greenshank, Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Wrybill and Black Stilt.

A few other key species are possible using Santiago as a base, which include 7 endemics (including 3 endemic tapaculos), plus key birds such as Andean Condor and South American Painted-snipe.

I originally booked 3 days guiding with Albatross Birding <http://www.albatross-birding.com>, a Santiago-based company, but was forced to reduce this to two when I was invited to give a keynote talk at a workshop immediately after the conference – it was a work-first, bird-second trip after all.

I arrived from Sydney after a 12 hour direct flight that was surprisingly easy. If I had known how easily accessible South America now is from Oz I might've come here sooner... Walking along Avenida Kennedy to meet Ryan Farrell for dinner to talk work and birding, I noted my first lifer, the ubiquitous **Austral Thrush**.

El Yeso Valley, 12th Dec

Still dark outside, at 5.30 sharp, Rodrigo Silva – our guide for the day – was waiting outside the hotel and we drove a short way along Av. Kennedy to pick up Ryan who was also coming out today.

It was about 90mins before we reached the Maipo Valley to the south-east of Santiago. We stopped at a few points to check out the rushing river below us, noting **White-crested Elania** and the endemic but ever-so-common **Chilean Mockingbird**. **Austral Thrushes** and **Rufous-collared Sparrows** were also recorded as we drove.



Rodrigo spotted something down in the valley on a rock, swerved wildly into the wrong carriageway, then regained his composure, and stopped in a conveniently situated pull-in, apologising profusely for his erratic driving. He'd



spotted a **Torrent Duck** on the river! I grabbed my scope from the boot of the car and had a tremendous view of the cracking duck, a superb-looking specialist of the fast-flowing mountain streams of the Andes. I was even able to grab some decent HD video of the duck through the scope, including when it jumped off the rock and showed its prowess in the water and the reason for its name, battling upstream against the fast-flowing torrent. **Eared Doves** were cooing, and we noted our first **Chimango Caracara** as we got back in the car to continue eastwards and upwards.

We joined the road up into the Yeso Valley just above where the Yeso flows into the Maipo and soon after stopped to check out the matorral. Several **Striped Woodpeckers** were vocally moving about and afforded good views, along with our first of the common **Common Diuca-finch** and our only **Tufted Tit-tyrant** of the day. We tried playback for Moustached Turca but without success and started to walk up the tack when a herd of goats and several shepherds on horseback came trundling towards us. We beat a hasty retreat so that Rodrigo could move the car, and as we did so the silhouette of a **Turca** bounded across the track, tickable but an unsatisfactory view for a mega-bird. **Black-winged Ground-dove** and **Austral Blackbird** were also noted.

In an open area a few hundred metres along we stopped again and this time has more luck with the **Moustached Turca**, seen running like a long-legged chicken between clumps of scrub. I even had a close encounter with one that was digging away for worms behind one such clump. It raced away before I could get a picture, giving Ryan and Rodrigo fantastic views from the other side of the scrub. As I stepped out of the car a falcon was powering its way across the valley. I incorrectly called Aplomado Falcon, having been confused by the dark moustachial stripe. Later reference to the couple of poor photos I had managed to snap revealed the true identity to be **American Kestrel**.



Continuing up the valley we came to another of Rodrigo's regular stops. Here we picked up **Plain-mantled Tit-spinetail**, **Dusky-tailed Canastero**, and the endemic and very smart **Crag Chilia**. Four distant **Chilean Flicker** were tickable as they chased each other on a distant crag, white rumps and classic woodpecker bounding flight helpful with ID, but a Giant

Hummingbird that flew past giving barely a glimpse was not added to the list by me. It did not return and I would end the trip without a decent view of this species. We did, however, score with the other possible hummingbird here, **White-sided Hillstar**, which we found perched – although distant it gave great scope views and allowed some passable digi-video.

Scanning the skies across the valley Ryan picked up several soaring raptors. Through the scope I could make out the fingers primaries of a huge bird but they were still too distant, even at 40x for me to get unequivocal views of the white collar of **Andean Condor**, though they could be nothing else. Ryan, somewhat understandably, was unwilling to tick on these views. I was content with the id, but would also have another opportunity later in the week for better views in Farellones. Better views were had of a pair of **Black-chested Buzzard-eagle** that cruised into view, though we would have even better views and photos much later in the day. A **Long-tailed Meadowlark** added to the excitement.

Blue-and-white Swallow and **Grey-hooded Sierra-finch** rounded out the list we had accumulated by 9.30am. This later taxon was a fairly common but very smart presence everywhere above about 1800m a.s.l.

At an open grassy area we stopped and explored. A **Southern Lapwing** posed for photos and I steadily closed in on a thin call from the rocks at the base of a cliff with the bird seemingly unmoved in spite of my presence. Eventually it flushed up the cliff face, clinging on and was revealed to be a just-fledged – and therefore almost tailless – **Tit-spinetail**.

At 10am, now above 2000, we noted our first **White-browed Ground-tyrant**, which would prove fairly common from here onwards. We also clocked our first **Yellow-rumped Siskin**, but decent photos would have to wait until later in the day: the



weather was starting to close in, a few drops of rain falling, and Rodrigo, quite rightly, made the call that we should bypass further stops for ground-tyrants, miners and cinclodes (among other species) and head straight up to DSP territory to nail this crucial target in case the weather deteriorated further. The drive past the reservoir was rather nerve-wracking – a single lane unsealed road with a cliff face on one side and a sheer drop of 60m down into the

reservoir on the other. I was petrified by the fact that to avoid a few bumps on one side Rodrigo would put the wheels of the jeep terrifyingly close to sections of the road that had clearly fallen away into the water below and I flashed back to the similarly nail-biting ascent to Keki Lodge. At one point we encountered a mining truck coming the other way and the truck was forced to reverse 50m to a spot where we could park within inches of the precipice so he could then edge past on the inside.

I breathed a sigh of relief when we left the reservoir behind. Rodrigo pointed out a bog at the top end of the reservoir that he said used to be the traditional site for DSP, but his most recent sighting, just a few days earlier had been higher up in the Parque.

At around 11.15 we pulled up at the gate to the parque where Rodrigo paid the entrance fee and only a few km beyond that we parked at a small bog in a pristine glacial valley with a stunning view up to snow covered peaks. I looked at my watch altimeter which showed 2700m. It was drizzling and I instantly regretted not bringing my rain-jacket.

As I extracted my scope from the boot of the car, a **Gray-breasted Seedsnipe** called and I tracked it down to a boulder on the opposite side of the road. Though a bit distant, this was my first good view of a key secondary target, and the resulting picture in the rain is very atmospheric.

Meanwhile, Rodrigo and Ryan had walked to the edge of the bog and within a minute Rodrigo announced he had my top target. I raced over and demanded directions, but need not have been concerned. A stunning **Diademed Sandpiper-plover** was only a few metres in front of us, feeding unobtrusively on the grass adjacent to a small flooded area. As I watched intently through scope and bins, it picked its way methodically through various tussocks of grass back towards the middle of the boggy area, presumably perfectly aware of our presence.

It was really a stunning little bird: its black down-curved bill merged into a black face with a chestnut collar, with a blaze of a white supercilium that met above the bill and behind the head like a tiara – and which gives rise to its name, the Diademed one (I had to look that up, but apparently a Diadem is a crown). Through the scope and in my pictures the fine vermiculations on the breast are evident.

We were fortunate that the weather now cleared a bit and I wandered around the outskirts of the bog searching for better photographic opportunities that didn't involve me getting soaked. The stunning bird was matched by its stunning location; an incredible steep-sided glacial valley with 5000m peaks on all sides.

Relaxed now that the key target was in the bag, Rodrigo opened up the back of the car and set up an impressive picnic and made coffee for us all. It was only now as I ate that I realized how cold it had become and Ryan and I gripped our coffee mugs just to warm through our numb fingers.



Picture courtesy Rodrigo Silva



Picture courtesy Rodrigo Silva

Once I had got over the initial excitement of the DSP, I started to take more note of the other species that were here. Over lunch and for $\frac{3}{4}$ hour after we built a tidy list of smart high altitude species, which included **Rufous-banded Miner**, **Great Yellow-Finch**, **Black-fronted Ground-tyrant**, **Ochre-naped ground-tyrant** and **Long-billed Earthcreeper**. At around 13:30 we piled back into the car to head further up the valley in search a few more high altitude specialities.



The road continued its rise up the northern side of the valley and we enjoyed an amazing vista down to our right and to the impressive snow-capped peaks ahead, but we could also see that the higher we travelled the trickier the weather. We found a pair of **Yellow-billed Teal** in a small bog a few km up, but it was not until we reached nearly 3000m a.s.l. that we found our next quarry: at an especially wide part of the valley with the naked eye we spied a few white dots on the valley floor. As I set up the scope it started to drizzle, but the scope confirmed that the white dots were in fact **Andean Geese**. With the scope I was also able to pick out a few **Upland Geese**, and **Crested Duck**, virtually invisible to the naked eye because of their greyer plumage. As I continued to watch through the scope the entire scene washed out as the drizzle turned to sleet, then snow, and everything more than 20m away faded from view.

Rodrigo pointed out that we should turn around and head back down the valley, or risk getting stranded up here if the snowfall became any worse. Ryan and I readily agreed; the prospect of being stranded in the Andes in a snow storm was not one that excited us.

Fortunately we just outran the cloud, the snow abated, and soon enough we were back to seeing good birds. Two separate **Gray-breasted Seedsnipe** posed wonderfully on roadside rocks. Our remaining target for this highest part of the day remained elusive, however. Creamy-rumped Miner is a fairly dull looking bird but is one of the local specialties. We tried various spots during our descent but to no avail.



In a lovely area near the rushing stream we found a **Black-fronted Ground-tyrant** and spent quite a bit of time trying for decent photos of the **Yellow-rumped Siskins** which were both common and elusive here. **Plumbeous Sierra-Finch** was new but avoided the CCD for a while. A pair of **Variable Hawks** gave a great display, and a short while later we also saw our only **Mountain Caracara** of the day.

We had now basically exhausted all of the options for the Creamy-rumped. Rodrigo suggested one final crack, a detour to the base of the reservoir – one of the “original” good sites for DSP – and we spent half an hour here finding



few new species including **Plumbeous Sierra-finch**, **Cordillera Canestero** and a smart **Grey-flanked Cinclodes** which fed unobtrusively on the stream.

Finally we decided it call it a day and got back in the car for the hair-raising return journey along the edge of the reservoir. As Rodrigo pulled away from our parking spot, through the car window I noticed another Miner fly up

and land about 20m ahead of the car. My first instinct was to let it go, but then somehow it had seemed just a bit different from the very common Rufous-banded. We tracked it down and bugger me if it wasn't a **Creamy-rumped Miner**. Heavier set than Rufous-banded, lacking the thick black-edge to the winged, we tracked it down for fantastic views, even noting the creamy rump as it dug for insects at the base of clump of vegetation.



Now we really did head for home. One stop just before the hairy

reservoir drive yielded **Sharp-billed Canestero**, but our ½ hour or so just below the dam, where I was hoping we might add Mountain Parakeet did not



yield any further new species, though we saw another **Plumbeous Sierra-finch**, more **Yellow-rumped Siskins**, another **Black-winged Ground-dove**, and a few more **Buff-rumped Miner**. The honour of last new species came just after we had left when Rodrigo screeched to halt with a gorgeous **Mourning Sierra-finch** perched right by the roadside.



Rodrigo dropped us at our hotels back in Santiago a few hours later, tired but very satisfied with how the day had panned out. It had been fabulous, exceeding my expectations in terms of the quality of views of the undoubted star, DSP, and providing a superb supporting cast in one of the most scenic environments I have ever birded.

Lampa wetlands, 15th Dec

I decided to hire a car for a day trip to the coast on the last day of the conference. The timing and economics of this meant that the car would also be available to me for the evening of 15th, so I decided after the last session of the day at the conference to use the long summer evening light to travel the short distance north of Santiago to Lampa wetlands, famous as a regular haunt of South American Painted Snipe. I had read a few trip reports from a similar time of year that had dipped because the area was completely dry. However Rodrigo had given me some cause for optimism – he'd scouted the area a week earlier, and though he did not see a Painted Snipe, he did say there were still some wet areas that may well be holding this small, unobtrusive but beautifully patterned wader. He had also given me directions to a few different spots to try.

I arrived with plenty of daylight left and sought the Puente Negro where the road Cacique Colin crosses the stream. Here I encouragingly found a signpost for a viewing platform – so far so good, but the platform was not immediately obvious, and when I did find it, it was clear there was nowhere to park nearby. I drove east and found a pull-off, some 300m away, and braved the hair-raising walk along the road with no verge, cars and trucks bombing along the narrow carriageway at great speed. Furthermore it became apparent when I reached the platform that the “stream” and surrounding “water meadows” were completely dry.

I tried a few turnoffs and finally found a road named Los Espinos, and parked at GPS -33.281122, -70.806176. From here I could see some distant reeds with gulls flying above, so this seemed as likely a spot as any. I walked south 1/2km to -33.285981, -70.805381, realising when I arrived that it may well have been possible to drive here along a dirt track, visible in the satellite image on google maps, but not easy to find. I noted a couple of **Chimanga Caracara**, the local equivalent of corvids.

As I approached the reeded area numerous **Brown-headed Gulls** circled above me, agitated by my presence, and various common “world birds”, including **Great, Cattle** and **Snowy Egrets**, and **White-backed Stilt**. The ground got softer as I approached and I realised if I was to have any chance of getting a Painted Snipe I was going to get wet and muddy. Oh well!

In the shallow water, clumps of reeds and grass provided decent hiding places for a variety of waders and ducks. I noted **Yellow-billed Pintail**, a possible **Silver Teal**, **Southern Lapwing**, **Lesser Yellowlegs**, **Greater Yellowlegs**. Lots of **Yellow-winged Blackbirds** were in the reeds, but all rather elusive. Plodding around ankle deep in mud I flushed a few **South American Snipe**, but after 45 mins of this, the light just starting to fade I decided tonight would not be my night and retreated, squelching my way back to the dry, boots reeking of the festering mud.

The evening picked up though – as I turned back towards the car I saw a raptor drifting over and zoomed in on a cracking **Cinereous Harrier**, then



I tracked down a thin peep to a small brown bird of the reeds. Better views revealed this to be a **Wren-like Rushbird**. Then even better, a **Many-coloured Rush-tyrant** put in an appearance. This was one I had picked out from the field guide as a top target, so the encounter was disappointingly brief and did not allow any time to properly enjoy its

beautiful colouring or bag photos. As I retreated to the car a few **Chilean Swallows** flew about, and I noted a **Correndera Pipit** on the track.

The coast, 16th Dec

Another key target for me was Inca Tern. Terns are interesting, beautifully elegant birds but most are fairly similarly plumaged: white with grey or black or off-white wings and body and maybe a black cap. Inca Tern breaks the mould, as if, bored of the monotony, God decided to create this taxon with his



puffin pallet, bestowing a rich array of black and red, crazy yellow gape, and to cap it all off an outrageous Salvador Dali tash. I had pored over ebird and noted a few reliable looking hotspots. Ebird also provided a taste of other possible species, chief among these Seaside Cinclodes, Humbolt's Penguin and a chance of Surfbird, my bogey from the North American west coast.

I grabbed some breakfast at the hotel, then bombed along the fast motorway towards the coast. Once off this it was fairly slow going, but I arrived at my first stop, the estuary near Con Con, at about 9am. Apart from the massive development – houses and apartments everywhere right down to the water's edge – this stretch of coastline is reminiscent of Big Sur, 7000km north.

The area was alive with birds and I was

immediately struck by the stunning colours of the bills of numerous **Peruvian Pelicans**, both in flight and perched on rocks along the coast. Various cormorants flew by in small groups and at this stage I was able to identify **Gaunay** (white and black) and **Neotropical** (all black). A flock of thousands of birds on the estuary itself comprised mostly **Franklin's Gulls**, their subtle pink plumage more visible in the huge numbers. A few **Black Skimmers** hid amongst the gulls, and a couple of **Wimbrel** picked their way across the mud

in front of the flock. A separate flock comprised around 400 larger **Kelp Gulls**.

I drove south along the coast road stopping at various spots along the way. First stop was just before a large apartment block where a huge stack in the surf held various cormorants, more **Peruvian Pelicans**, **Kelp Gulls** and my first **Peruvian Boobies**. I found a couple of **Seaside Cinclodes** here, one of my main targets for the coast.



It was strange to observe this strictly coastal Chilean endemic picking its way over the rocks, avoiding the surf, when only a few days earlier I'd been seeing its close cousins 2500m higher up in the mountains.

At around 10am I parked at -32.937308, -71.551649 where almost immediately I landed optics on stunning **Inca Terns**. In fact there were a few hundred here, flying to and from the man-made sea wall and roosting – perhaps breeding – in holes in the wall. I was also able to pick up a solitary **South American Tern**, and noted my first **Red-legged Cormorants** for a couple more ticks.





I chatted to a French birder and photographer here who pointed out it was possible to climb down under the road and get some nice shots looking back up. He was off to do this now. I decided to join him but needed sun-screen first, which I grabbed from my camera bag in the boot of the car. As I applied it, one of the terns flew in and landed on a rock only about 15m away and I fired off a few shots before finishing the sun-screen application. I turned back to put the cream away – but where was my bag? I checked the back seat and front seat and then with a sinking feeling, replayed in my mind taking the cream from the bag. Some *&%\$ had swiped the bag from the boot of the car barely 2m behind me in the minute or so that my back was turned.

I looked in both directions and there was no one but a cleaner sweeping outside the apartments some 150m away. I ran to him and tried to ask whether he had seen anything. I speak no Spanish and he spoke no English. If he had seen it happen, he showed no sign of such. I called down to the French birder who came running back up. I had decided to move on, and he was not minded to leave his car unattended in light of my experience.

I took stock of what was in the bag: optics, memory cards, torches, flash, various other bits and bobs. I would later tote up the value of the bag and contents at around US\$4000. Fortunately I'd had my camera slung over my shoulder, all of the irreplaceable images on the missing memory cards were safely backed up on my laptop back in the hotel, and even my passports – which usually live in the top pocket of this bag – were in the hotel safe. There was nothing further I could do, so I resolved to carry on birding and report the theft when I got back to Santiago and could report it to English-speaking receptionists.

A bit further around the coast I stopped again and viewed the sea and rocks with my scope. Several **Blackish Oystercatchers** were down on the rocks, and was able to pick out two distant **Humboldt Penguin** bobbing about in the waves some 300m from the shore – and I was even able to grab some mediocre digi-scoped video of one of them at 60x magnification.

The final one of my pre-trip targets was surfbird. I was keen of this for various reasons: Attenborough had done a nice piece on this, with some stunning footage of a bird foraging on rocks in pounding surf; I had dipped in both California and Washington, upping the stakes significantly; finally, the fact that it gives its name, in a clever pun, to one of the top world-birding websites. Sadly I would spend the rest of the morning scanning the rocks to no avail. I added a pair of **Black Vultures** and a **Variable Hawk** (juv) and a **Long-tailed Meadowlark**.

At my southern-most stop -32.956212, -71.549293, I noted several **Grey Gulls**, another lifer. I fired off a few photos of these, but didn't really give these birds the attention they deserved. This would come back to bite when I examined the photos: "Hmmm, that's interesting, there are some Turnstones with the Grey Gulls. Doesn't the field guide say that Surfbirds quite often hang about with Turnst... What the... there's a bloody Surfbird in front of that Gull... there's another one! You *%&\$! Oh bollocks." When I 'fessed this up to SMR Young he was adamant that there is no way I can tick Surfbird, even though they appear in *my* photograph. He's probably right.

My original plan was to spend most of the day on the coast, then head inland to La Campana National Park and try for Rufous-legged Owl, as reported by Merrill *et al.* With flash and torches now gone, and feeling tired as I drove past the turnoff to the park, I carried on to the next services and dozed in the car for half an hour. In retrospect this was a mistake. La Campana would have been my best bet for White-throated Tapaculo, one of the endemic skulkers. At the time I mistakenly thought this would be likely, if not

guaranteed, on my second day with Albatross Birding on the way to Farellones in the Andes. In the end we tried hard in the latter part of the day, but with only a possible “heard only” the outcome. I was pissed off with myself since my planning is normally meticulous and this was a silly error.

Instead of La Campana I decided to try Laguna Batuco, another possible location for Painted Snipe. Rodrigo had given me great directions, right down to the instructions to pay a small fee of a few thousand pesos to the old ladies who live next to the brickworks, and through whose house the track into the lagoon runs. I found the place easily, paid my toll, and trundled along. Things went downhill from here. After about a km and without warning, the firm dry track turned into a thin crust above soft mud and I felt my small inadequate 2WD car start to slide. I then made the fateful and silly mistake of trying to turn around, rather than simply reverse out. I succeeded only in getting the car bogged fast, broadside across the track with my front wheels dug deep into the ruts I’d made on the way in. I spun the wheels, tried pushing, tried to jack the car up (all this achieved was to dig the jack itself into the mud, and I looked around for anything such as rocks or planks or branches that I might wedge under the tyres to gain some traction. There was nothing about at all. I resorted to pulling the rubber foot-mats from the car and digging these under the wheels. They helped to the point that I could move the car backwards or forwards about 6 in, but no more. I was stuck fast, and each attempt just made it worse.

I walked back along the track and tried to ask for help at the brickworks. No-one spoke English so I was unable to communicate my predicament. But then I had a stroke of genius – I rang my Spanish friend Lourdes, also at the conference in Chile, and explained to her the situation and got her to translate for me. The news via her was good! They would help me, but it would have to wait for more than an hour until the shift finished. So I waited.

Eventually, after about an hour and half that felt more like double that, the jovial Gonzalo, site maintenance manager at the brickworks, came out and took me in his 4WD to the car. Within minutes he had pulled me clear. Furthermore he turned down my attempts to pay him, eventually only taking 10,000 pesos when I absolutely insisted that the least I could do was to buy him a few beers. Somewhat to his surprise, once clear of the mud, I parked the car safely on the firm ground and set out walking to get to the water. It was now around 6.15 so I still had some daylight left to work with.

I walked north for a km or so, and for just over an hour I scanned the water and the grassy areas, picking up a decent selection of birds,



including a number of lifers. Sadly Painted Snipe would continue to elude me. Five Andean Geese fed on the grass. Other large species included **Great Egret**, **White-faced Ibis** and 5 **Black-necked Swans**. Annoyingly, I did not find any Coscoroba Swans. **Yellow-billed Pintail** was not new, but **Chiloe Wigeon**, **Red Shoveler** and **Speckled Teal** were all lifers. A bird that looked a lot like Ruddy Duck was either **Lake** or **Andean Duck**, but I did not get a photo and failed to note any key diagnostic features that would pin down the id.



I took the opportunity here to scan my way through the various coots on the lake and on its fringes, finding 3 species: **White-winged Coot** (green legs, plain yellowish white frontal plate, **Red-fronted Coot** (green legs, red frontal plate) and **Red-gartered Coot** (yellow legs, and a frontal plate with small red splashes on the sides).

Of the waders, **White-backed Stilts** were of course conspicuous, but I also found 8 **Baird's Sandpipers**. There were lots of **White-tufted Grebes** (South American equivalent of Black-necked) on the lagoon, but I also picked out a single, impressive-looking **Great Grebe**; long, elegant red neck and black face. **Hooded Gulls** were common, I noted a few **Picui Ground-doves**, and as I walked back to the car, I was delighted to find a small black bird with a chestnut back: an **Austral Negrilo**.

At 7.30 I drove the short distance back to Lampa, this time driving as close to the wetland itself along the dirt track as I dared, being particularly conservative with my recent experience foremost in my mind. Already muddy and smelly from my digging exploits at Batuco, I stomped around the fringes of the water meadow from 8 til nearly dark at 8.40 but still without a Painted Snipe to show for my efforts. At least I had given it a good crack. My sole addition was **Collared Plover**. A pair of adults scuttled about on the drier edges, identified by their single continuous chest-band and thin all-black bills.

Back in Santiago quite late, I tried to report the theft to the hotel reception. They took down my details and made notes of the events and said they would call me when they'd got through to the police. I ate in one of the hotel restaurants and added a few touches to my talk for the following day, but by 11.30pm there was no word from them despite a couple of prompts from me, so I decided it would have to wait until morning.

Farellones, Dec 18th

For my second day of guided birding I had decided to go up into the mountains again, this time to Farellones, a ski resort NE of Santiago and where there were a few species not available in El Yeso. In particular I was hopeful of better views of Andean Condor. Possessing the largest wingspan

of any bird of prey, and living in stunning mountain scenery, this taxon is for understandable reasons, iconic.

Rodrigo was now in Patagonia guiding a family group, and Paula Soubleta was to be my guide. Paula arrived a few minutes after our scheduled meet time at my hotel and we putted off to the outskirts of Santiago in her small underpowered 2WD vehicle. Given that I was paying for the vehicle too, I was a bit taken aback, since Rodrigo had arrived in a new-looking and very comfortable Jeep. Paola was good company and a decent guide, though I didn't click with her as well as with Rodrigo a few days earlier.

On the drive up we of course encountered the ubiquitous **Austral Blackbirds**, **Chilean Mockingbirds**, and **House Wren**. At 7.45 we had parked in a small pull-off on one of the switch-backs up steep-sided valley. According to my watch we were at 1470m a.s.l. (I can't be certain, but looking at maps and street-view after the fact I am pretty sure this was at Curva Seis – Curve 6 – at -33.347836, -70.362310).

Immediately we heard a **Chilean Tinamou** calling. Paola set up her speaker and we tried some playback. A second bird started calling, but both were fairly distant, on the other side of the valley. I scanned carefully but without success, but we kept up our vigil for 10mins or more, until suddenly one of the birds flushed from the far side and flew rapidly on whirring wings to our side, dropping below the road and out of sight. Hardly brilliant views, but the day was off to a good start with my first endemic target.

At the next stop, which I *think* was at Curva Catorce (-33.348889, -70.355776) things got even better. We walked along a mountain bike trail a short distance before realising there was another **Chilean Tinamou**, this time *very* close. We hunkered down and waited. It called again off to the side, maybe a little further away, perhaps now aware of our presence. But then I noticed a shape on the track next to a rock that I was sure had not been there moments earlier. Landing bins on it, I realised that there was a Chilean Tinamou walking up the track directly towards us! I soaked in these unexpectedly great views before it slunk off the side of the trail towards where we believed the other bird to be. We approached carefully and could hear both birds close by. I managed closer, but no better views, with the one I relocated now back in dense scrub where I had expected it to be all along.



Back at the car there was some bad news. Paola's rickety-looking portable speaker had apparently shed one its batteries on the walk. If we failed to re-find it we might be without playback for the rest of the day. We therefore wasted valuable time walking back and forth along the track hoping to find that it had simply rolled down and rested by the edge. After 10-15 mins looking we gave up. Two minutes later I

found it in the car, where it had fallen out into the drinks well between driver and passenger. Relief all round.

These early hours also yielded a few roadside birds such as **Plain-mantled Tit-spinetail**, **Tufted Tit-tyrant**, **Eared Dove**, **Common Diuca-finch**, **White-crested Elenia** and – new for me – a **Band-tailed Sierra-finch**. We also saw our first of many **Andean Condors** for the day – nice and unequivocal views compared with the previous week, but they drifted off quickly and I was greedy for better.



As we drove higher we noted **Mourning Sierra-finch** and **Black-chinned Siskin** by the roadside. While stopped to get photos of the latter a **Moustached Turca** called and I located it somewhat distant, but soon enough it appeared close by and posed for great pictures. By 10am we had reached 2000m a.s.l. and now had much better views of condors, with at least 4 in the vicinity, while a couple of **Variable Hawks** gave great close-up perched views. In the village of Farellones itself I located a **White-sided Hillstar** and a **Grey-hooded Sierra-finch**, while Paola was able to pick out a **Rufous-tailed Plantcutter** which we tracked down. This cotinga is fairly common, and rather uninteresting compared to some of the family I have

seen, such as the Bellbirds and Cock-o-the-rocks but I was keen to see it nevertheless.

We carried on through the village higher up the valley until we came a stretch of road lined with poplars (with one even in the middle of the road causing a temporary bifurcation of the carriageways, at -33.344348, -70.299475) when Paola stopped and walked down the road somewhat mysteriously. She peered up into one of the poplars then beckoned me over. Staring down at me, from barely 5m up was a magnificent **Magellanic Horned Owl**. Paola knew this was another target, but had kept this regular roost site under wraps, just in case it failed to deliver.

As it continued to stare down at me somewhat bemused, I snapped away at every angle I could find that gave a clear view through the leaves. We then headed



down a scenic gully below the road where Poala has seen Magellanic Tapaculo in the past. No such luck this time, but we sat on rocks above a rushing stream and enjoyed views of **Buff-winged Cinclodes**, **Grey-flanked Cinclodes**, **Greater Yellow-finch** and a **White-browed Ground-tyrant**. A few **Blue-and-white Swallows** swooped about. Back up near the car I located a **Cordilleran Canestero**. Above the ski-village accommodation a km or so up the mountain I could see at least 16 **Andean Condors** circling and even one or two perched on the buildings themselves. Occasionally one or two would fly over – one pair so close I heard the rushing



of the air over its wings and looked around to see massive outstretched wings soar only metres above my head.

We paused here for a picnic lunch and I made it clear to Paolo that we should prioritise the Tapaculos. It seemed that the only one possible this high was Magellanic, and we had a “small chance” for either White-throated or Dusky on our way back down the mountain – the latter more likely in very dense thickets. I was already regretting my logistical mistake of two days earlier, and I also found myself wondering why we hadn’t tried lower down earlier in the day when usually the conditions are more favourable.

A few km up the road we tried another spot for Magellanic, walking from a ski area car park along a mountain path, across a fast-rushing stream in a steep gully, then out to a boggy area. We turned around empty-handed, and I began to think this latter part of the day may be a write-off. But then as we came back to the stream, suddenly Paola saw something deep below us – there it was, **Magellanic Tapaculo**. All dark and short-tailed, this individual lacked the white-crown that some sport – it was like a small dipper in appearance and even, to an extent, its behaviour. It would disappear for a minute at a time, digging around under stream-side bushes and clumps of grass, then hop onto rocks in the stream, never still for more than a second or two.



Paola played her recording, but I felt there was no way it could be hearing this above the roaring of the tumbling water – I could barely hear it and I was 2m away, let alone the 40-50m to the tapaculo! It carried on feeding unperturbed and unsurprisingly oblivious to the thin recording. I scrambled down the steep bank to get closer, but even though could approach quite near, I found it tough to get a decent pic. I left without bagging what could have been the quintessential image – I finally established a pattern and had my camera ready on the requisite spot before it arrived, only to focus just above the bird for the one shot I had time for. At least I now had one of the Tapaculos and I was somewhat more optimistic for the remainder of the day.

We descended now, and at about 3.30 (and 1800m a.s.l.) we entered Yerba Loca, a sanctuary protecting a vast altitudinal range, from 1500m to over 5400m. We were interested in the lower altitude matorral, where we still had a chance for the other two tapaculos (or another crack at Giant Hummingbird), but again we left empty-handed. By the entrance office a **Moustached Turca** scooted across the track while Paola was paying our fee, and then a **Striped Woodpecker** posed nicely in a tree right next to the office. But this was as birdy as it got. House Wren and Austral Blackbird were the only further species added. At one point we both thought we heard a single call of a White-throated Tapaculo, but it did not call again, and did not respond to playback. We also spent a fair bit of time checking out various dense bits of scrub for Dusky, but not a sniff.

As we left the park a **Black-chested Buzzard-eagle** flew by very close, and the final bird of the day was a lifer, a **Fire-eyed Duicon**.

It would be unfair to say the day had been a disappointment since overall I'd done well with my targets. Maybe it was dipping on two of the endemics, or maybe that I would not have any further chances, but somehow I ended the day with the feeling that it had not lived up to the trip to the Yeso valley. Paola dropped me back at the hotel where I dined at one of the restaurants and packed my bags in preparation for the long flight to London – via Rio and Frankfurt – the next day.



Chilean Tinamou	F endemic
White-tufted Grebe	B
Great Grebe	B
Humboldt Penguin	C
Peruvian Pelican	C
Peruvian Booby	C
Red-legged Cormorant	C
Guanay Cormorant	C
Neotropical Cormorant	C
Great Egret	L, B
Snowy Egret	L
Cattle Egret	L
Black-crowned Night-heron	C
White-face Ibis	B
Black-necked Swan	B
Andean Goose	Y, B
Upland Goose	Y
Crested Duck	Y
Torrent Duck	Maipo Valley
Yellow-billed Pintail	L, B
Speckled Teal	Y
Chiloe Wigeon	B
Red Shoveler	B
Black Vulture	C
Andean Condor	Y, F
Black-chested Buzzard-eagle	Y, F
Cinereous Harrier	L
Variable Hawk	Y, C, F
Chimango Caracara	Y, L
Mountain Caracara	Y
American Kestrel	Y, F
Red-gartered Coot	B
White-winged Coot	B
Red-Fronted Coot	B
Southern Lapwing	Y, L
White-backed Stilt	L
Collared Plover	L
American Oystercatcher	C
Blackish Oystercatcher	C
Diademed Sandpiper-plover	Y
Lesser Yellowlegs	L
Greater Yellowlegs	L
Whimbrel	C
(Ruddy Turnstone)	C (photos afterwards)
(Surfbird)	C (photos afterwards)
Baird's Sandpiper	B
South American Snipe	L

Grey-breasted Seedsnipe	Y
Kelp Gull	C
Grey Gull	C
Franklin's Gull	C
Brown-hooded Gull	L, B
South American Tern	C
Inca Tern	C
Black Skimmer	C
Eared Dove	S
Picui Ground-dove	Y, B
Black-winged Ground-dove	Y
Monk Parakeet	S
Magellanic Horned Owl	F
White-sided Hillstar	Y, F
Chilean Flicker	Y
Striped Woodpecker	Y, F
Creamy-rumped Miner	Y
Rufous-banded Miner	Y, F
Scale-throated Earthcreeper	Y
Crag Chilia	Y, endemic
Chilean Seaside Cinclodes	C
Grey-flanked Cinclodes	Y, F
Bar-winged (Buff-winged) Cinclodes	Y, F
Wren-like Rushbird	L
Plain-mantled Tit-spinetail	Y, F
Sharp-billed Canestero	Y
Cordilleran Canestero	Y, F
Dusky-tailed Canestero	Y
Moustached Turca	Y, F
Magellanic Tapaculo	F
White-browed Ground-tyrant	Y, F
Ochre-naped Ground-tyrant	Y
Black-fronted Ground-tyrant	Y
Austral Negrito	B
Fire-eyed Duicon	F
Many-coloured Rush-tyrant	L
White-crested Elaenia	Y, F
Tufted Tit-tyrant	Y
Chilean Swallow	S, L, Y, F
Blue-and-white Swallow	F
Rufous-tailed Plant-cutter	F
Austral Thrush	S, Y, F
Chilean Mockingbird	Y, F endemic
Correndera Pipit	L
Greater Yellow-finch	Y, F
Yellow-winged Blackbird	L
Long-tailed Meadowlark	Y, C

Grey-hooded Sierra-finch	Y
Mourning Sierra-finch	Y
Band-tailed Sierra-finch	F
Plumbeous Sierra-finch	Y
Common Diuca-finch	Y, F
Rufous-collared Sparrow	Y, S
House Sparrow	S
Black-chinned Siskin	F
Yellow-rumped Siskin	Y

103 species

79 lifers

Y: El Yeso valley

L: Lampa wetlands

B. Laguna Batuco

C: Con-con (near Valparaiso)

S: metropolitan Santiago

F: Farellones