

Paraguay – From the Gran Chaco to the Atlantic Forest

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 – 2 Fly UK to Asunción via São Paulo

Day 3 – 5 Gran Chaco

Day 6 Asunción

Day 7 – 9 Vista Alegre

Day 10 – 12 Puerto Bemberg

Day 13 – 14 Fly Iguazú to UK via São Paulo

Post-tour Mbaracayú Extension

Day 13 – 16 Mbaracayú Forest

Day 17 Travel to Asunción

Day 18 – 19 Fly Asunción to UK via São Paulo

Departs

September

Focus

Birds

Grading

A/B. A moderate level of fitness is required with time spent on foot in humid conditions. Early starts and late finishes encouraged. Please see detailed notes at the end of the itinerary before booking.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code PAR01)



From top: Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper, Cock-tailed Tyrant, Green-headed Tanager



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Introduction

Often overlooked in favour of its better-known neighbours, Paraguay is one of South America's most rewarding and exciting birding destinations. Its central position on the continent brings together a wide range of habitats, from the thorn forests and saline lagoons of the Gran Chaco to humid wetlands, rolling farmland, Cerrado savannah and the great Atlantic Forest. This remarkable variety supports around 700 recorded bird species, alongside an impressive range of mammals, reptiles and butterflies.

Our itinerary has been designed to reveal the country's most distinctive habitats and specialities. We begin in the Gran Chaco, a vast and sparsely populated wilderness where dry quebracho woodland, palm savannah and salt lakes hold a compelling collection of regional birds. Here, species such as Black-legged Seriema, Quebracho Crested Tinamou, Crested Gallito, Chaco Earthcreeper, Chaco Owl and Black-bodied Woodpecker provide some of the most sought-after birding in South America.

In southern Paraguay, we explore a gentler landscape of woodland, gardens and productive wetlands, where hummingbirds, parrots, tanagers, rails, crakes and waterbirds add an entirely different dimension to the tour. The journey then continues to the great Atlantic Forest landscapes around Iguazú, spanning Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina, where toucans, manakins, antbirds, manaComfortable accommodation, carefully selected birding sites and a well-paced route make a wonderful showcase of one of the continent's most underappreciated wildlife destinations.

For those continuing on the post-tour extension, Mbaracayú offers the chance to explore one of Paraguay's most important remaining Atlantic Forest reserves and adjacent Cerrado. This extension adds the possibility of Bare-throated Bellbird, Helmeted Woodpecker and the endangered White-winged Nightjar – three of the country's most celebrated birds.



Iguazu Falls

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Itinerary

Day 1

Depart London

For those joining the group flights, we will depart from London Heathrow this evening on a late flight to Asunción, laying over in São Paulo.

Day 2

Arrive Asunción

This morning we will arrive in the capital of Paraguay, Asunción. This city is located on the border with Argentina, separated by the Paraguay River.

On arrival, we'll meet our local driver and transfer to a comfortable hotel in the city, where the remainder of the day will be free for us to relax after our long flights and rest up, ready for an early start in the morning. For those who are keen, we can take an afternoon visit to the Botanical Gardens in the north of the city. This area of subhumid scrub forest will be sure to turn up a good number of birds, including Plush-crested Jay, Sayaca Tanager and the ubiquitous Monk Parakeet.

Overnight: Asunción

Day 3 – 5

Gran Chaco

Today we will set off early, heading north to the thorn scrub forests of the Gran Chaco. This vast expanse of arid shrubland, palm savannahs, and saline lakes remains one of the continent's most understated birding regions. As we travel through the extensive farmland and agricultural landscapes that now cover much of Paraguay, we will begin to encounter an increasing number of pockets of natural habitat that once spanned this entire region. The Chaco is prized by birders for its roster of habitat endemics and range-restricted species. Among the stars of the region are the Black-legged Seriema, Crested Gallito, Spot-winged Falconet, Quebracho Crested Tinamou, Chaco Earthcreeper, Cinereous Tyrant, Many-coloured Chaco Finch and Black-capped Warbling Finch, to name a few. For the next three nights we stay at a comfortable hotel in Filadelfia, the capital of the Chaco, taking part in daily excursions to some of the key habitats.



Black-legged Seriema



Many-coloured Chaco Finch © James Warren

Of these, Fortín Toledo is an excellent introduction to Chacoan birding. Cinereous Tyrant, Many-coloured Chaco Finch, Crested Gallito, Scimitar-billed Woodcreeper and Chaco Chachalaca can all be seen here, while Black-legged Seriema are often heard calling in the mornings, perched atop a fence post. This area of protected land is the site of Proyecto Taguá, a captive breeding and conservation programme for the Chacoan Peccary. Once thought extinct, this species of Peccary was rediscovered in the 1970s and a breeding station was established at Fortín Toledo to protect and increase its numbers.

Laguna Salada is internationally recognised as a Ramsar wetland, one of the most important migratory waterbird sites in the region. Its vast, shallow saline waters attract a large number of Chilean Flamingoes, Coscoroba Swans, Ringed and Brazilian Teal, White-cheeked Pintail, Fulvous, White-faced and Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks and White-tufted, Pied-billed and Least Grebes. The surrounding Chaco vegetation also produces habitat endemics such as Quebracho Crested Tinamou, Crested Gallito, Black-bodied and Cream-backed Woodpeckers, Chaco Earthcreeper and Spot-winged Falconet. Campo María provides another rewarding combination of lagoon, open country and Chaco woodland. The reserve's tower offers wide views over the surrounding landscape of saline lagoons and scrubby vegetation, whilst the forest supports a variety of woodpeckers, woodcreepers, and nightjars.



The Chaco is also an excellent region for mammals. Capybaras are often seen crossing the lagoons, whilst Chaco Mara, Pampas Fox and Grey Brocket Deer may be encountered along quieter tracks. Collared Peccary is another common sight, with chances for its rarer cousin, the Chacoan Peccary.

Night drives are an important part of our time in the Chaco. After dark we will search for the Chaco Owl, one of the region's defining specialities, as well as Scissor-tailed Nightjar, Burrowing Owl and, with luck, Plains Vizcacha and other nocturnal mammals. Giant Anteater and Jaguar always remain a remote possibility.

Overnight: Filadelfia

Day 6

Drive back to Asunción

After a relaxed breakfast, we begin the journey back to Asunción, making several stops en route to stretch our legs and enjoy some roadside birding. We should keep our eyes peeled for Greater Rhea striding across the grasslands, or Southern Screamer perched conspicuously atop a bush.

We arrive back in Asunción this evening, where we will settle into our hotel and enjoy an evening meal together. Afterwards, there will be time to relax and recharge with a good night's sleep, ready for the next stage of our Paraguayan adventure.

Overnight: Asunción

Day 7 – 9

Vista Alegre

This morning we will travel to southern Paraguay, where we will be based at Vista Alegre Natural Resort, a comfortable retreat surrounded by rolling countryside, woodland, gardens and wetlands. The lodge has spacious air-conditioned rooms and a swimming pool offering a relaxing base between excursions.

The grounds themselves can be highly rewarding, with flowering shrubs attracting hummingbirds such as Fork-tailed Woodnymph, Black-throated Mango, Blue-tufted Starthroat and Glittering-bellied Emerald. Whilst the forest edge can produce mixed feeding flocks of Blue-naped Chlorophonia, Swallow Tanager, Magpie Tanager, Black-goggled Tanager and Sayaca Tanager. Parrots are also well represented with Cobalt-rumped Parrotlet, Yellow-chevroned Parakeet, Maroon-bellied Parakeet, Scaly-headed Parrot and Monk Parakeet all possible.



Nearby wetlands, including Lagunas AFSA, can support Least Grebe, Brazilian Teal, Spot-flanked Gallinule, Ash-throated Crake, Wattled Jacana, Pantanal Snipe, White-faced Ibis, Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Whistling Heron and Maguari Stork. Paraguayan wetlands are notably productive for rails, crakes and marsh specialists, though many remain elusive even at good sites.

Overnight: Vista Alegre

Day 10 – 12

Puerto Bemberg – Iguazú Falls, Argentina

After breakfast, we leave Paraguay behind and begin the final stage of our tour, travelling onwards to the spectacular Iguazú Falls. This region provides a dramatic contrast to the open landscapes of Paraguay, with the lush Atlantic Forest supporting a new and exciting range of birds and wildlife.

We will cross the river of three frontiers and entre the Atlantic Forests of Misiones Province, a fitting conclusion to our tour. Our lodge at Puerto Bemberg lies within a private reserve of more than 400 hectares overlooking the Paraná River, with mature rainforest, gardens and forest-edge habitats all accessible from the property.

The reserve's trails offer opportunities to search for forest birds close to the lodge, whilst viewpoints over the Paraná River provide excellent canopy-level perspectives. We will also visit nearby protected areas, including Urugua-í Provincial Park, where we will search for Atlantic Forest specialities such as Black-fronted Piping Guan, Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper and Riverbank Warbler.

Another highlight will be an excursion along Route 101, a 30-kilometre unsealed road through some of the finest remaining forest in Iguazú National Park. Paraná Pine and Palmito Palm forest, bamboo thickets, streams, marshy clearings and sunny roadside edges combine to make this an especially productive area for birding. Possible species include White-bearded Antshrike, Red-breasted Toucan, Creamy-bellied Gnatcatcher, Spot-winged Wood Quail, Scale-throated Hermit, White-eyed and Ochre-breasted Foliage-gleaners, Tufted Antshrike, Swallow-tailed and White-bearded Manakins, Southern Bristle-Tyrant and Red-crowned Ant Tanager.



White-bearded Manakin © James Warren



Swallow-tailed Manakin

We will spend a full day in Iguazú National Park, entering early to enjoy the most productive hours in the forest. The Macuco Trail can be rewarding for Swallow-tailed and Band-tailed Manakins, Surucua Trogon, Blond-crested Woodpecker, Spot-billed Toucanet, Rufous-capped Motmot and a colourful selection of tanagers. Toco Toucans are often seen around the visitor areas, whilst South American Coatis are regular along the trails.

As bird activity begins to ease, our attention will turn to the falls themselves. We will explore a network of walkways offering a variety of perspectives across the cataracts, including the Lower Circuit, before travelling on the park's ecological train to the famous Devil's Throat. Here, vast volumes of water plunge more than 80 metres into a cloud of spray, creating one of the most dramatic spectacles in the natural world.

A particular highlight will be the Great Dusky Swift's, which nest behind the waterfalls. Towards evening, these remarkable birds may gather above the falls before plunging through the cascading water to reach their concealed nesting and roosting sites., providing a memorable finale to our exploration of southern South America's remarkable wildlife.

Overnight: Puerto Bemberg

Day 13 – 14

Depart Iguazú / Arrive London

This morning we will have a final chance to pick up some final species before heading to Iguazú Airport for our flight home, arriving the following day.

Post-tour Mbaracayú Extension

(The minimum number of participants required to run this extension is four; however, we may still be able to operate it with fewer guests for a small per-person supplement.)

Day 13 – 16

Mbaracayú Forest

After a final early-morning birding session, or a relaxed breakfast at the lodge, those continuing on the extension will bid farewell to the main group and begin the journey north to Mbaracayú Forest. This extensive reserve protects one of Paraguay's most important remaining tracts of Atlantic Forest, together with areas of Cerrado, creating an exceptional diversity of habitats within a single landscape.

We will stay at Mbaracayú Lodge, a former research base whose simple but comfortable accommodation provides an atmospheric and well-placed base for exploring the reserve for the next three days/four nights. The lodge's forest setting means that birding begins immediately, with Rufous-capped Motmot, Black-capped Screech Owl, Rufous Nightjar and a range of Atlantic Forest species all possible close to camp. Our principal target is the magnificent Bare-throated Bellbird, Paraguay's national bird. During the breeding season, males advertise from prominent perches with an extraordinary metallic call that carries through the forest.



The reserve is also one of Paraguay's best sites for the scarce Helmeted Woodpecker, a huge regional speciality sometimes referred to as South America's "Ivorybill", together with Spot-billed Toucanet, White-winged Becard, Riverbank Warbler, Eared Pygmy-Tyrant and Blue Dacnis.

Mbaracayú also offers opportunities to explore the surrounding Cerrado, where a very different community of birds occurs amongst dwarf palms, open grassland and scrub. Possible species include White-eared Puffbird, Rufous-winged Antshrike, Collared Crescentchest, Black-throated Saltator, Plumbeous Seedeater and other highly localised Cerrado specialists.

During one evening, we will travel to suitable open Cerrado habitat in search of the endangered White-winged Nightjar, one of South America's rarest and most localised birds. This extraordinary species is most active around dusk, when males may undertake display flights over their territories. Although sightings can never be guaranteed, a calm evening in suitable habitat offers our best opportunity to encounter this spectacular nightjar.



Overnight: Mbaracayú Lodge

Day 17

Travel to Asunción

This morning we will have a last walk around one of the nearby trails before travelling back to Asunción. We will make some birding stops along our drive back to the capital, enjoying the last of our time in this fantastic country.

Overnight: Asunción

Day 18 – 19

Depart Asunción / Arrive London

This morning we will have a final chance to visit the Botanical Gardens or relax at the hotel before heading to Asunción for our return flights home.

Tour Grading

This is an escorted natural history holiday suitable for most people with moderate fitness levels and mobility. Although, you should be prepared for humid, hot, and occasionally muddy conditions, as well as some unpaved roads, uneven trails and biting insects. The majority of our time will be spent observing wildlife on foot.

To fully enjoy the tour, anticipate full days with early starts and late finishes. These extended hours are essential for maximising wildlife-viewing opportunities. Please be aware of this before committing to the tour. While there will be opportunities for relaxation, it's important to note that this is not a leisurely holiday! However, keep in mind that all activities are optional, and you can choose to unwind at the lodges if desired.

Although you can expect clean and comfortable accommodation during the main tour, those opting for the Mbaracayú extension should be accepting of basic lodging, a bumpy drive, hot temperatures and walking on steep/uneven trails.

The eco-tourism industry in Paraguay is relatively new and underdeveloped. While our tours are meticulously planned, occasional inefficiencies in local operations may well arise. Please be aware that these occurrences are largely beyond Naturetrek's control and are a natural part of the travel experience. Rest assured, we are fully equipped to handle any challenges, but embracing a spirit of adventure and patience is needed and this will enhance your enjoyment during the tour.

Tour Focus

The principal focus of this tour is, of course, birds. That said, this is also a wildlife-rich itinerary, and we will remain alert for mammals, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies and other insects throughout. The Gran Chaco in particular offers good opportunities for species such as Capybara, Chaco Mara, Collared Peccary, Pampas Fox, Grey Brocket Deer and Plains Vizcacha, whilst night drives may produce further nocturnal wildlife. We may also encounter snakes and other reptiles, particularly during warmer conditions.

As in much of South America, most mammals are shy, thinly distributed and often most active at dawn, dusk or after dark. Although we will look for them whenever suitable opportunities arise, sightings cannot be guaranteed and mammals will occupy only a small proportion of our time in the field. Participants seeking a safari-style holiday centred on frequent large-mammal encounters should bear this in mind; the primary activity throughout will remain birdwatching, with all other wildlife treated as a welcome and often exciting bonus.

Please do not hesitate to talk to the Operations Manager, Dan Lay (dan@naturetrek.co.uk or 01962 733051), if you have any additional questions regarding this holiday.

Weather, Clothing & Equipment

September in Paraguay is typically warm to hot, with conditions becoming increasingly humid as spring progresses. In the Gran Chaco, daytime temperatures can be high, although mornings may be pleasantly cool, particularly early in the month. Further east, around Vista Alegre and Mbaracayú, conditions are generally more humid, whilst the Atlantic Forest around Iguazú can feel warmer and damper.

Although September is often one of the drier months in much of Paraguay, rain is possible at any time. Showers are usually brief but can be heavy, and weather patterns are increasingly variable. Participants should therefore be prepared for a range of conditions, including hot sunshine, humidity, rain and cooler early mornings. A lightweight waterproof jacket, sun protection, a hat and refillable water bottle are all strongly recommended.

Please inspect the separate clothing list contained within the pre-departure information, a copy of which will be sent upon booking. Binoculars are, of course, essential for this holiday.

What's Included

All accommodation, meals and drinking water are included, starting with dinner on Day 2 and ending with breakfast on Day 14 (day 18 for those taking part in the post-tour extension). Snacks, soft/alcoholic drinks and items of a personal nature are not included in the price of the tour.



Filadelfia

Vista Alegre

Puerto Bemberg

Extending Your Holiday

Please note that there are a limited number of rooms available at Mbaracayú, so this extension operates on a first-come, first-serve basis. If you have specific interests, please let us know, as there are other localities you may wish to visit before or after the tour. Alternatively, this trip can be arranged on an entirely Tailormade basis.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements and your interest in an extension at the time of booking.

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Chaco scrub

