

# Seeing threatened grassland specialities in Argentina's Esteros del Iberá

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The Esteros del Iberá, a vast wetland area in Corrientes province, Argentina, offers fabulous birding. One key element of any trip is seeing the area's globally threatened grassland specialities. Here are some tips on finding them.

All photographs were taken by Milosz Cousins (X @BirdingWarsaw) at the Esteros del Iberá, Corrientes, Argentina, in November or December 2023.

1 A short walk from Portal San Nicolas brings you to an excellent site for the remarkable and greatly sought-after Sickie-winged Nightjar *Eleothreptus anomalus* (Vulnerable).

The Esteros del Iberá (Iberá marshes) of Corrientes province, northeastern Argentina, are the second-largest wetland in the Neotropics (topped only by the Pantanal of Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay) and a must-visit destination for birders visiting northern Argentina. One of Argentina's 43 identified or proposed Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), Iberá—which means 'bright water' in Guaraní—is special in being so huge that it constitutes "a globally unique ecosystem" (Pearman & Areta 2020). Some 1,950 km<sup>2</sup> have been designated as a national park since 2018, with a further 5,530 km<sup>2</sup> afforded the status of 'provincial park'. In an unprecedented rewilding initiative, Jaguar *Panthera onca* (Near Threatened) has been released into the park after a 70-year absence and will hopefully become a permanent presence in the landscape.

Iberá's seemingly boundless landscapes are extremely birdy, topped with a supporting cast of charismatic mammals and reptiles. It is, for example, the easiest place in the country to find a number of restricted-range avian specialities, such as the iconic Strange-tailed Tyrant *Alectrurus risora* (Vulnerable), which features on the national park's logo (see [parqueibera.gob.ar](http://parqueibera.gob.ar)), and the

recently described and enigmatic Ibera Seedeater *Sporophila iberensis* (Endangered).

Far from being a uniform wetland, Iberá is made up of climax grassland; permanent and seasonally inundated, often heavily vegetated, lakes and lagoons (*esteros*); meandering lowland rivers; palm groves and small patches of rainforest. Since the opening of new infrastructure (roads, followed by national-park entrance points), Iberá's huge wilderness has become a lot more accessible to birders than previously. Nevertheless, most if not all tours focus on its eastern side, accessed through Colonia Carlos Pellegrini. This article sets out to suggest an alternative to the classic route and details how to see the most sought-after target birds.

## Portal San Nicolas: the suggested base

Having spent over a month doing fieldwork with grassland birds at Portal San Nicolas (▲ -28.128019, -57.434648), I could be considered somewhat biased as to the choice of site, but there are objective reasons to base yourself here. First, being only 3.5 hours from the provincial capital of

>> BIRDING SITES IBERÁ, ARGENTINA



**6–7** Discovered only in 2001, Ibera Seed-eater *Sporophila iberaensis* (Endangered) is only known to breed at Iberá. As these photos show, adult male plumage is variable. The use of colour rings and geolocators is seeking to identify migration routes and wintering areas. The area's commonest *capuchino* is **8** Tawny-bellied Seed-eater *S. hypoxantha* (adult male).

**9** Another key species to see in the tall grasslands here is Black-and-white Monjita *Heteroxolmis dominica* (male; Endangered).

gate, where birds have been seen displaying over private pastureland at ▲ -28.066917, -57.449997. The national park's flagship species, Strange-tailed Tyrant, is pleasingly abundant in tall, drier grassland. Territorial males perch high up or circle in drone-like display, often chasing one other or pursuing females. They can be seen all along the road in suitable habitat and occur in especially high densities around ▲ -28.069750, -57.448056. Sharing the Strange-tailed Tyrant's habitats are open-country passerines such as Grassland Yellow-Finch *Sicalis luteola*. Greater Rhea *Rhea americana* (Near Threatened) may be seen near the core area for the tyrant, but the species is often shy and usually sprints away once spotted. A pair of Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle *Geranoaetus melanoleucus* regularly hunts this stretch of grassland. Bearded Tachuri *Polystictus pectoralis* (Near Threatened) breeds in the area, as suggested by a fresh juvenile seen off-trail while I was doing

fieldwork. A visit early in the season (October) would presumably produce some singing males in suitable habitat. Long-winged Harrier *Circus buffoni* is easily seen quartering over the plains; it comes in light and dark colour morphs. Wetter areas just north and south of San Nicolas host water-loving tyrannids, such as White-headed Marsh Tyrant *Arundinicola leucocephala*, Black-backed Water Tyrant *Fluvicola albiventer*, Sooty Tyrannulet *Serpophaga nigricans* and Spectacled Tyrant *Hymenops perspicillatus*. Icterids are also well represented, with ten species easily seen. Look for the superb Scarlet-headed Blackbird *Amblyramphus holosericeus* around ▲ -28.123602, -57.434901. Sadly, Saffron-cowled Blackbird *Xanthopsar flavus* (Endangered) has disappeared from San Nicolas, mirroring its drastic range constriction and population slump (estimated, ten years ago, at 80% across three generations: BirdLife International 2024) across Argentina.

Generally, birding around San Nicolas is undemanding, thanks to the open habitat. Seeing crakes, however, is an exception. Ash-throated Crake *Mustelirallus albicollis* is commonly heard calling in inundated vegetation, but proves very difficult to see. With luck, Rufous-sided Crake