

## A walk from San Josecito to Villa Charcas

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### Why should You do this Walk?

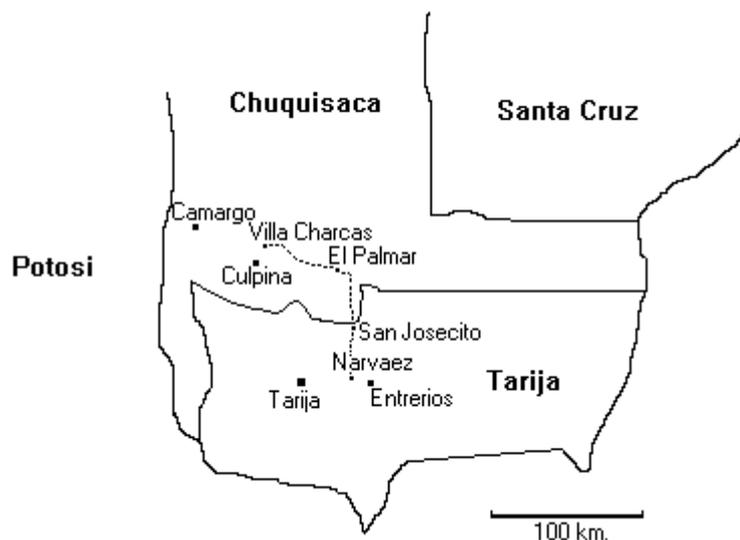
This walk leads you through a remote part of Bolivia, where there are no roads, and where local people travel on foot or on horseback. The trail takes you through a wide range of natural habitats: through the forested Andean foothills and through extensive grasslands, through mossy and dark cloud forests, through deep dry valleys, and finally the walk ends in green fields amidst semidesert country. You will meet colourful and, as everywhere else in Bolivia, friendly and helpful people. You will get to know the rich birdlife of these parts of Bolivia, as this walk description contains notes about the birds you are likely to encounter.

There are plans to build a road from San Josecito to El Palmar. So, do this walk before it is too late!

### Short Description

This walk is strenuous, with many stream and river fordings and several long steep climbs. Sometimes it can become quite hot, especially in the higher parts where there are few trees to protect you from the sun. The total distance covered is approximately 130 km, with 30 km added if you start walking in Narvaez. The vertical distance is about 7.800 meters up and 6.500 meters down.

I myself did this walk in 17 days, but this should be considered as a maximum, as I walked quite slowly with numerous birdwatching stops, and as there were 3 days during which I stayed where I was. The absolute minimum is 6 days (7 days from Narvaez), which is the cumulative total of the walking times according to local people.



The walk starts where the road ends, in San Josecito, a small village south of the Rio Pilaya in the departamento of Tarija. However, as there is little traffic going to San Josecito, especially in the rainy season, you may have to start walking in Narvaez, on the main road between Tarija and Entre Rios. After San Josecito you cross the Rio Pilaya on a long footbridge, to enter the departamento of Chuquisaca.

From San Josecito to El Palmar the trail leads through hilly and sparsely inhabited country, covered with forests, to the lush meadows around the village of El Palmar. On the way you will encounter few people, most of them on their way from El Palmar to the outside world.

From El Palmar the trail brings you to the grasslands on top of Cerro Bufete, the mountain which towers high above the village, winding through lush forest all the way. From here it follows a mountain ridge to the west, with great views on both sides. Initially

you will walk through shrubby and grassy habitats, changing eventually into dark mossy forest. Although the trail is well-maintained and easy to follow, you will encounter few people.

On the top of Cerro Campamentito you enter the rain shadow area. Between here and the tiny village of Portillo the trail crosses several valleys, each one drier than the previous one. From here on the countryside is more densely populated. From the high passes the views of the mountainous scenery are spectacular.

Portillo is at the end of a road with even less traffic than the road to San Josecito. This means that you will probably have to walk for another day, to Villa Charcas, which isn't too bad, as the road follows a high ridge, and the views are great along the way.

Finally you will arrive in the wide, level and (during the rainy season) green valley around Villa Charcas. From Villa Charcas a truck leaves every day to Camargo.

## When to Go?

I walked from Villa Charcas to El Palmar (from there we headed north) together with Jon Fjeldså in September 1991, at the start of the rainy season, and I walked alone from San Josecito to Villa Charcas in March 1992, which is at the end of the rainy season.

I think that this walk is best done during the rainy season (October to April, ie summer), for the following reasons:

- nature is more plentiful during the rainy season. The vegetation is greener, and more birds are singing.
- the weather may be more agreeable. Although it rains more than during the rest of the year, the rainfall in southern Bolivia is not as high as in some other parts of the country. Besides, of this walk only the stretch between El Palmar and Cerro Campamentito receives a lot of rainfall.

On the other hand:

- during the rainy season the road Narvaez-San Josecito is very bad, so that there is little traffic. It may well be that there are more trucks going to San Josecito during the dry season.
- it may be more difficult to cross the Rio Iripirenda (erroneously called the Rio Nuevo on the 1:250.000 topographic map). However, there would only be problems after several days of heavy rain. And horses would probably still be able to cross, so you might ask people if they could help you to get to the other side (most local people travel on horseback).

## The Local People

At lower altitudes during this walk, ie from San Josecito (or Narvaez) up to El Palmar, people are mestizos (ie of mixed blood). Their native language is Spanish. The majority of the population of El Palmar was recently converted by Koreans to the Evangelical Church (whatever that may be).

In the high valleys from before Puca Pampa to the area around Culpina, you will see many people of 100% Indian ancestry, although there are mestizos as well. In Puca Pampa the native language is Quechua, the language of the Incas. In Villa Charcas and Inca Huasi the proportion of Spanish/Quechua speakers is about 50/50, whereas around Culpina everybody seems to speak Spanish again. Fortunately most Quechua-speakers speak Spanish equally well.

Camargo is a little town with a colonial atmosphere, which would not be out-of-place in Spain itself. The population is mainly mestizo, but there are a few full-blooded Spaniards as well.

Only a few people in Bolivia speak a few words of English, and hardly any speak more than a few, so you will need to speak some Spanish when you do this walk.

## Preparations and other Practical Things

**Food.** You will find few shops on this walk. Only San Josecito has shops with a somewhat larger assortment. However, you can probably buy potatoes, chickens, egg and such things from farmers. But I wouldn't bet on it, it is safer to bring your own food.

**Fuel.** As you can buy 98% alcohol in the most remote places in Bolivia (people mix it with water and drink it), I prefer to use a stove which burns alcohol. You can even buy alcohol in El Palmar.

If you run out of fuel, then there is usually plenty of dead wood to make a fire with.

**Clothing.** Normally, in the lower parts of this walk it is hot. Unfortunately, in these parts there are also sometimes quite a few nasty little biting insects ("bichos" in Bolivian Spanish, meaning all kinds of unpleasant insects). So wearing shorts is not really advisable.

During the dry season the regular waves of cold air which sweep across the southern part of South America (known as "Surs" or "Surazos") can bring really cold conditions, especially at higher altitudes. So, during the dry season you should bring some warm clothes. During the rainy season (ie summer) it seldom gets really cold.

**Shoes.** Between San Josecito and El Palmar you will have to ford streams and rivers many times. It may be useful to bring a pair of sneakers for this. Fording streams barefoot is awkward because underwater stones can be very slippery and quite painful.

Biting Animals. Insects are not really a problem during this walk. Only in some open areas at lower altitudes there are irritating little flies which bite. Fortunately you will walk mostly through shady forests. I saw a few snakes, of two different species, in open terrain at higher altitudes, ie between Cerro Campamentito and Villa Charcas. I have been told that, although the bites of both species cause swollen limbs, they are not lethal.

Many local people will ask you if you are not afraid of jaguars ("tigre") and pumas ("leon"). In my opinion these are not really a risk, because people hunt them, they are shy animals, and probably more afraid of you than you are afraid of them.

What to Read. "Backpacking & Trekking in Peru & Bolivia" from Bradt Publications is a useful book.

Bird Books. There is no fieldguide for Bolivia. As this area is close to the southern border, the following book is most useful: "Birds of Argentina & Uruguay, a Field Guide" by T. Narosky and D. Yzurieta of the Asociacion Ornitologica del Plata, ISBN 950-99063-3-6, published by Vazquez Mazzini Editores in Buenos Aires. The English edition is sold in Europe and the U.S., but is often out of stock (in Holland, ask at Natuur & Boek in the Bankastraat in Den Haag). The original Spanish edition is probably for sale only in Argentina. We found only few bird species on this walk that are not described in this field guide, none of them conspicuous.

Another useful book is "Birds of the High Andes" by Jon Fjeldså and Niels Krabbe, ISBN 87-88757-16-1, published by the Zoological Museum of the University of Copenhagen and by Apollo Books, Svendborg, Denmark. It covers birds found above 2500 meters, including many species which occur also at lower elevations. The texts are much more extensive than in the Argentina field guide and the drawings are much better, but it is a rather heavy book to carry around.

An article was written which deals with the results of the trip that Jon Fjeldså and I made in September/October 1991 and the trip that I made alone in March 1992. This article will be published soon.

I also made a detailed trip report of my March 1992 walk. Contact me if you are interested.

## Itinerary

In this description I seldom mention walking times. This is because I walked mostly very slowly myself, as I was watching birds most of the time, and occasionally making sound recordings of their songs and calls. However, I do mention altitudes which, together with the distances measured on the map, should enable you to make a rough estimate of walking times.

The trail is not always easy to follow, as there are sometimes other trails forking off. These other trails are usually smaller, so as a rule of thumb: always take the trail which appears to be the most intensely used. Also, as most local people travelling longer distances travel on horseback, or have mules or donkeys carrying things, another rule is to take the trail with horse droppings. A third rule is to follow the trail which goes into the most logical direction.

### 1. To Narvaez

From most other Bolivian cities Lloyd Aereo Boliviano has several flights a week to Tarija. Flying in Bolivia is cheap, eg the price of a one-way ticket Santa Cruz-Tarija was in March 1992 Bs. 178, to which you have to add Bs. 8 airport tax. This amounts to about US\$50. Prices of return tickets are twice the one-way fare. Alternatively, you can fly with the military airline TAM, which is about 10% cheaper and has smaller and lower-flying (so better views!) planes.

People with lots of time and little money might travel to Tarija by bus. Travelling by bus in Bolivia consumes a lot of time, however. From the nearest city, Potosi, it takes about 12 hours. From La Paz it takes a strenuous 24 hours!

In Tarija, I stayed in Hotel 15 de Abril, which is OK and cost about Bs. 10 for a single. On another occasion, I stayed in Hostal Crystal on the main plaza, which is very good and costs US\$15 or so for a single.

The road to San Josecito forks off the main road Tarija-Entre Rios just before the village of Narvaez. The main road is a good road with plenty of transport. During the day there are micros (ie minibuses), and in the evenings buses headed for Yacuiba travel this road. The micros depart from the "Parada del Chaco", just out of town near the second bridge of the road to Bermejo. Ask the taxi drivers. Buses to Yacuiba leave at 5.00 pm from the bus terminal, and maybe at other times as well. You should get out just before Narvaez, there is a sign "San Josecito" on the side of the road, and the bus driver will probably know.

Alternatively, you may try to get on a truck which is going from Tarija to San Josecito. I don't know where and when they depart. My impression was that during the rainy season at least there is no fixed schedule.

### 2. Narvaez - San Josecito

This road, although for 99% a good and level road, has a few very muddy places during the rainy season. I was amazed that there were still truck drivers who had the guts and the skill to drive this road, especially because one of these muddy stretches was on a slope. But then, Bolivian truckdrivers can do anything (ever been on the La Paz-Coroico road?). When I was here in March 1992, there were only trucks coming back from San Josecito. Which was not so bad, as it is quite a nice road for walking.

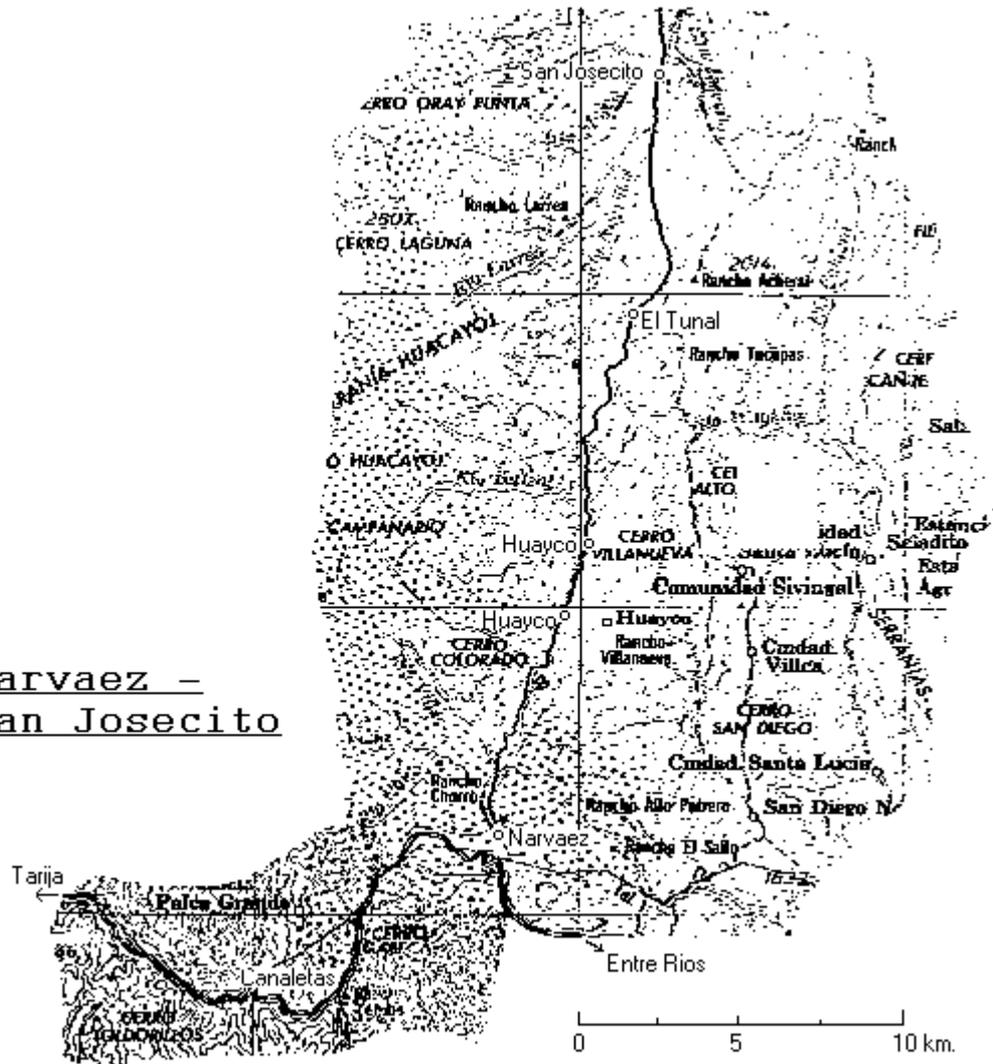
The distance is about 30 km. The road starts at about 1700 meters, stays at about this altitude until the village of El Tunal, and from there descends to the Rio Pilaya at about 900 meters. There is quite a lot of forest, although the area is more inhabited than on the other side of the river.

Up to El Tunal there are good camping opportunities, with nice meadows and clear streams. Between El Tunal and the river there are some clear streams, but I did not see level places to pitch a tent. On the southern bank of the river there are such places, but the river water is muddy.

On the way you pass four villages: a village close to the main road (Narvaez?), Huayco, El Tunal and San Josecito. The village near the main road, Huayco and El Tunal have a shop where you can buy a soft drink and maybe biscuits; the shops in San Josecito have a wider assortment.

Birds. Common birds on this stretch are Turkey Vulture, Roadside Hawk, Mitred Parakeet, Green-cheeked Parakeet, Scaly-headed Parrot, White-bellied Hummingbird (near San Josecito), Tropical Kingbird, Purplish Jay, Plush-crested Jay and Rufous-collared Sparrow.

### Narvaez - San Josecito



### 3. San Josecito - Rio Yahuayhua

After crossing the Rio Pilaya on a long footbridge, the trail continues as a vehicle track on the other side. The track is obviously little used, and not at all during the rainy season, as the river is then too deep to cross by vehicle. There are a few shortcuts, the first is at about a kilometer from the river, with the foot trail leaving the vehicle track to the left and climbing up, and the track curving to the right. After a little while this shortcut crosses a stream, and immediately beyond this stream you should take the trail which ascends the slope, not the one which continues at the same level. There are scattered houses in this area, so you can always ask people. In Cañon Verde itself the woman in the first house on the left sells soft drinks.

Not far beyond Cañon Verde you come across a large, grassy clearing with a few houses. In this clearing the vehicle track ends. When crossing the clearing you should pass a house on your left-hand side, at the same time there are two other houses on your right-hand side further away. After some time the now narrow trail enters the forest again.

Inside the forest the trail follows a small stream for some time. Somewhat further a smaller path forks off to the right. The trail climbs up for some more time, reaches its highest point on a ridge, and then starts traversing the slope to the left and downward, passing clearings on the way.

The trail now descends all the way to the Rio la Vela. There are some side trails, always stay on the widest path (which also is the path that continues in the most logical direction).



#### 4. Rio Yahuayhua - Rio Iripirenda

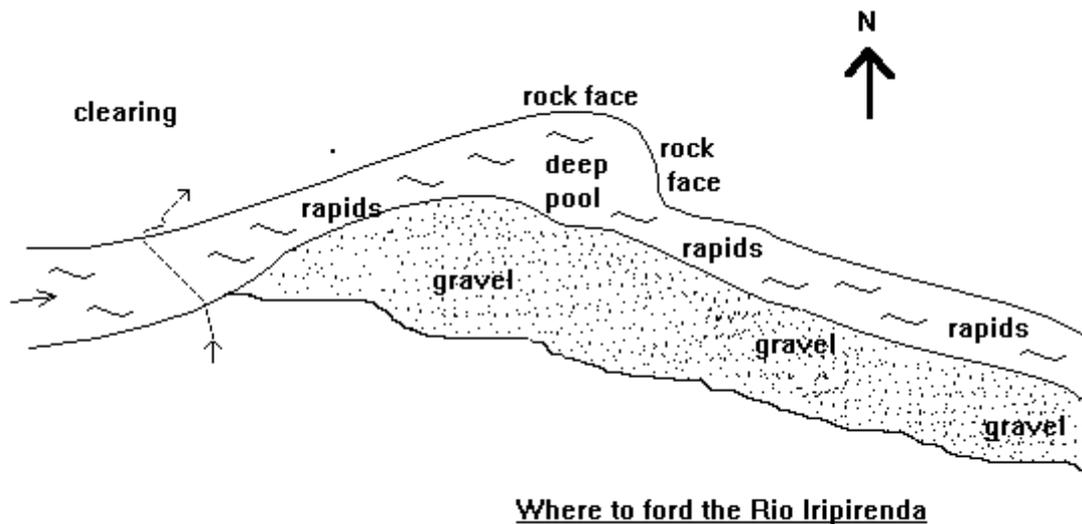
The Rio Yahuayhua is reached in a large clearing. After reaching the river the trail follows the river upstream over a long distance. Initially the trail is on the right-hand side, after that I had some trouble finding it, but when entering the forest again you should be walking on the left-hand side of the river.

The trail now leads through wonderful forest with creepers and strangler figs. There are good camping spots here. The river splits twice in about equally wide streams, follow the one to the right in both cases. After the second split the terrain becomes steeper and the quebrada narrower. The trail now occasionally leaves the quebrada to continue its way along the slope. Finally, at 1500m you reach the highest point on the ridge.

After this highest point a long and not very steep descent follows on a trail without side trails. There are many good camping opportunities in a long quebrada which is followed for some time. After passing a clearing with a house, a few hundred meters beyond the trail climbs up the slope on the right. It then remains level for some time, passes through a cattle gate, and descends again to the stream, which is called the Rio Tueras (950m). The trail follows the stream for some time, and crosses it two times (when crossing it for the second time I managed to slip, and plunged with backpack and all headlong into the water!). After the second crossing the trail leads you to a steep, but not very long, climb up the slope on the right.

After reaching the highest point, the trail gently slopes downwards to the Rio Iripirenda (on the 1:250.000 map erroneously called the Rio Nuevo) through a large cleared area with a few scattered houses. The trail is a bit difficult to find, because there are side trails and the dense and low vegetation occasionally hides it. However, just keep going straight ahead, and after some time you will arrive at the river (at about 800m).

You will now have to find the correct place to ford the river. I myself arrived at the river about 500 meters too far to the right (ie downstream). The best place is just upstream from a rapid, where the river is quite wide and shallow (it came to just above my knees). Downstream from this rapid is a deep pool with steep cliffs on the other side. The fording place itself has some tree trunks half-buried in the sand on the other side, and behind it a small clearing. Far to the left the river disappears out-of-sight, curving to the right. A pole for support is very useful when crossing a river, it is no fun at all having all the contents of your backpack soaked.



Birds. Common birds on this stretch are much the same as on the previous stretch.

#### 5. Rio Iripirenda - El Palmar

On the other side of the river the trail goes a few meters to the right, and then goes up until you have a view of the river from above the rock face. After that it leads through a cattle gate, and descends until it reaches a stream (the Rio Arenal). Here the trail bends sharply to the left, and starts following the stream for some distance. After quite a few stream crossings the trail climbs up to the left, entering a quebrada formed by a smaller side stream.

This is the start of a long climb to an altitude of about 1300m, followed by a level stretch, and finally a descent which ends at about 1100m in the meadows of El Palmar. Upon entering the grasslands, the table mountain in front of you is Cerro Bufete. The walk continues after El Palmar by climbing up the right "leg" of this table mountain (with binoculars you can actually see the last part of this path).

The trail now passes a house, and crosses the Rio Nuevo, a tributary of the Rio Iripirenda. A few hundred meters further the river is crossed again (it is probably possible to avoid these rather unnecessary crossings by making a detour along the right-hand riverbank). After this the trail continues for an hour or so before reaching the village of El Palmar (1200m).

It is easy to find good camping spots in the grasslands of El Palmar.

In El Palmar there are several very small shops, where you can buy alcohol for the stove, candles, flashlight batteries (the big ones), biscuits and so on. The shops are not signposted and often closed because the owners are out-of-town. You can buy a meal in a shop in the first north-south-running street east of the village square, look for a house with a blue door. The owner is friendly and humorous.

El Palmar gives a rather deserted impression. I was told that only on Sundays the village comes to life, as most houses are owned by people who live most of the time on their farms.

**Birds.** Inside the forest the common birds are much the same as on the previous stretch. In the grassland area of El Palmar there are Southern Lapwings, Crested Caracaras, Guira Cuckoos, Tropical Kingbirds, and Rufous-collared Sparrows. On the slopes east of El Palmar you may see Red-legged Seriemas. At dawn and dusk pairs of Turquoise-fronted Parrots fly high overhead from and to their communal roost to the south.

## 6. El Palmar - Cerro Bufete

It is fortunate that the trail to Puca Pampa is well maintained and easy to find, because you will meet few people to ask directions. I have seen only one house and two shepherd huts between El Palmar and Puca Pampa, and few people have reason to travel along this long and mountainous trail. From Cerro Campamentito on you will probably see some people herding cattle, however.

I cannot describe exactly how to find the beginning of the trail which leads up Cerro Bufete, as it seems not very useful to describe my own wanderings before finding it. However, there are plenty of houses here, so you can always ask someone. You should start by leaving El Palmar on the trail which heads north through the grasslands. After about 1 km, maybe even less, a narrower trail splits off to the left which probably brings you to the start of the path to Cerro Bufete.

Once you are in the forest, the trail is remarkable in that it winds along the slopes at a very steady slope, ie there are no steep parts, and it rarely slopes downwards. It is well maintained, and there is no trouble at all following it, once you're on it.

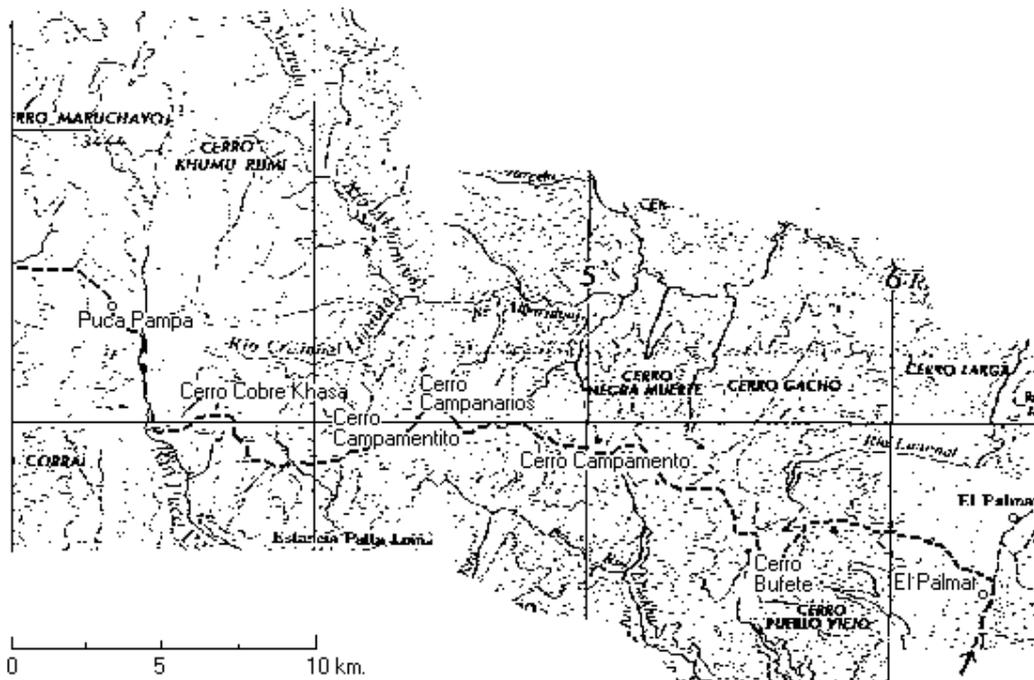
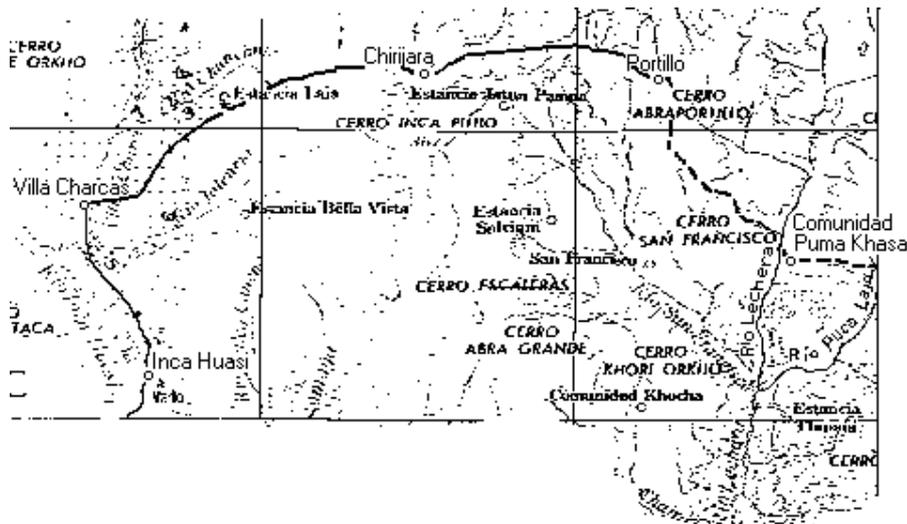
The forests on the slopes of Cerro Bufete are different from the forests which we have seen so far, caused by the higher rainfall on these high and east-facing slopes.

Because the trail winds mostly high along the slope or stays on top of the ridge, it is difficult to find a camping spot with water nearby. I found a good spot at an altitude of about 1500m: in a curve where the trail bends very sharply to the right there is a small patch of grass on the left, and about 100m before it there is a small stream below the trail springing from a well. The stream could be heard from the trail. It may be that this stream does not exist in the dry season. But, unless you are a birdwatcher, you probably want to continue anyway, to the top of the mountain or maybe even further.

At about 1600m a zone with giant treeferns is entered. Somewhat further the trail becomes steeper, and finally you step out of the forest and arrive at the foot of the rocks encircling the mountain. The path now zigzags up the steep face, has a spectacular pitch where it is hewn out in the near-vertical rocks (must be scary for people with vertigo), and finally you end up on the grasslands on top of Cerro Bufete (2300m).

The trail now crosses the grasslands to the other side of the plateau (ie southward). On the way it crosses several streams. The second stream (or was it the third?) springs from a well, which makes it a good location to pitch a tent. After crossing the grasslands, the trail climbs up the southern ridge of the real summit of Cerro Bufete, contours around its northern slopes and descends to a little pass (at about 2500m).

**Birds.** Between 1450m and 1600m Yungas Manakins are much in evidence. Up to 1600m there are Two-banded Warblers, from about 1800m succeeded by Pale-legged Warblers. In March, just before reaching the top, an adult Condor repeatedly sat down on the steep cliffs near the waterfall on the right. A young bird was perched nearby on the slope, so it seems probable that Condors nest here.



## El Palmar - Villa Charcas

### 7. Cerro Bufete - Cerro Campamentito

From the summit of Cerro Bufete the trail starts following the ridge in a westerly direction. Don't expect a level walk however, because the ridge is very "bumpy". Most of the path goes through grassy and shrubby habitats, sometimes with much bamboo. Only shortly before Cerro Campanarios forest is entered again, which soon becomes very humid, mossy and dark. **Note:** Between Cerro Bufete and Cerro Campanarios there are no streams, and there is only one (very small) well about halfway (on the side of the trail, so you can't miss it).

About half an hour after entering the forest there is a reasonable camping spot: a few meters after crossing a small stream is a cleared level area on the right. In September the stream was only a trickle, but still usable. In March the stream was a real stream.

The trail winds horizontally along the northeastern slope of Cerro Campanarios, and after crossing over its northern ridge starts descending to a river. After crossing it (at 2000m), the trail climbs almost to the summit of Cerro Campamentito (2900m). Shortly after the river there are reasonable camping opportunities in the forest, although you have to go back to the river to get water.

After crossing the river impressive forest is entered. Most of the trees are of the species *Podocarpus parlatorei*, of a genus which is found mainly in the southern hemisphere. These conifers provide good timber, and for that reason the bigger *Podocarpus* trees are usually already cut down in more accessible places in the Andes. Higher up on the slope the forest is dominated by smaller Alder trees.

Birds. Red-faced Guans (only inside forest), Green-cheeked Parakeets, Red-tailed Comets, Blue-capped Pufflegs, White-throated Antpittas and Pale-legged Warblers are all rather common.

## 8. Cerro Campamentito - Puca Pampa

From here you enter the "rain shadow" area: when looking to the east and north you see mountains covered with forests, but to the west the slopes are grassy and rocky. From now on, every valley you enter will be drier than the previous one, culminating in the semideserts surrounding Villa Charcas, Culpina and Camargo.

After reaching the highest point close to the summit of Cerro Campamentito, the trail remains close to the ridge for about half an hour, while heading in a generally western direction. The trail is very broad and well maintained. At one point another trail forks off to the left.

Eventually a *Podocarpus* forest with many glades is entered. The trail traverses the forest, descending slowly and heading westward. There are a few streams in the forest and several good camping spots. I myself camped shortly after a stream (I think it was the second), under the trees.

After leaving the forest, the trail curves around the slopes to the right and descends to a beautiful stream inside equally beautiful forest with *Podocarpus* trees and also some *Polylepis* trees (these are the trees with the reddish, papery, peeling bark) at about 2650m. A tent can be pitched just beyond the stream crossing, and wider and more level spots can be found about 200 or 300 meters downstream inside the forest.

After crossing the stream the trail climbs up, initially steeply, to a saddle at 3150m, close to the summit of Cerro Cobre Khasa. From here you have a tremendous view to the west. You can see the pass after Puca Pampa (a bit to the right, in a northwestern direction), and behind it, if you descend down the trail for 100 meters or maybe a bit more, you can see the trail leading up to the ridge before Portillo. The highest mountains in front of you form the final barrier before the valley of Villa Charcas and Inca Huasi.

From Cerro Cobre Khasa the trail leads down into the valley of the Rio Puca Pampa (2650m). Once you have reached the river, start following it upstream. The river is crossed three times, and then the trail climbs up the left bank towards the village of Puca Pampa (at about 2800m).

It seems that Puca Pampa has no shops. However, the second time that I was there, I was able to buy bread straight from the oven, and there was a warm meal as well.

Birds. On this stretch you would be very unlucky not to see Condors. On the southwestern slope of Cerro Campamentito there was a big roost of Alder Parrots in March. Screeching flocks of Mitred Parakeets are regularly seen. Gray-capped Parakeets are quite common along the Rio Puca Pampa. Red-tailed Comets are common. Rufous-collared Sparrows are very common.

## 9. Puca Pampa - Portillo

From Puca Pampa the trail leads up to a pass at about 3100m, from where it descends into the valley of the Rio Puca Laja. From the pass you can see the path zigzagging up the other side of the valley, a bit to the right. Behind it you can see it climbing out of the next valley to the ridge before Portillo.

From the pass you should follow the trail which descends along the slope to the right. It splits in two on two occasions. At the first split I took the higher trail, which contours along the slopes at a gentle angle. At the second split, take the lower trail which heads straight for the path that climbs up the opposite side of the valley (you will arrive at a school when you take the upper one).

After crossing the stream on the valley floor (at about 2500m) the trail ascends the other slope until arriving at a pass at about 2800m. On the pass, take the path which descends to the right. This path does not follow the valley bottom, but traverses its northern slopes. It crosses several small streams, and leads through small *Podocarpus* forests clad in Spanish Moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*). When approaching the river (the Rio Lechera) on the valley floor, do not descend to the school building but head for the start of the trail leading up the opposite slope, a bit more to the right. There are excellent camping opportunities on the valley floor (at about 2250m).

Now follows the last long climb. At about two thirds of the climb the trail ascends on the crest of a small ridge with on its left a wooded ravine with a stream. Finally one arrives at the highest point (at 3180m). Great views from here, and when looking back you can see the trail which comes down from Cerro Cobre Khasa.

The trail now traverses a west-facing slope, descending slowly towards Portillo. Along the way there are two streams. The first stream is very small, the second one much bigger, and as it springs from a well only shortly above the path it is probably safe to drink without adding water purifier.

Birds. Common birds on this stretch are much the same as on the previous stretch. Mitred Parakeets nest in the vertical rock-face to the right of the trail which leads from Puca Pampa up to the pass.

## **10. Portillo - Villa Charcas**

Portillo (2850m) is located at the end of a road which leads to Villa Charcas and Inca Huasi. However, as there is very little traffic and no regular "collectivo" service, you will probably have to continue walking for another day. In the village you can camp on the soccer field (the "cancha"), which has a water tap (and a graveyard behind the goal posts). There are several small shops, but when I was there all of them were closed as the owners were elsewhere.

From Portillo the road climbs up to 3280m, followed by a descent to 3000m, shortly after which you arrive in the village of Chillajara (3125m). All the way the views are wonderful, especially to the north. This area is densely inhabited, with many small fields scattered on the slopes.

Chirijara is a larger village than Portillo, and there are several shops. There is a soccer field just outside the village, to the east, and a water tap in its center.

From Chirijara to Villa Charcas it is a walk of about 4, maybe 5, hours. The road first climbs to an altitude of about 3450m, and then slowly descends until it arrives on the fertile plains around Villa Charcas (roughly at about 3100m). Before arriving on the valley floor, the landscape is extremely dry and the slopes are mostly bare. Nevertheless, people do live here.

There is a huge contrast between the appearances of the valley in September and March. In September the fields are bare, everything is gray and dusty, and you wonder how it is possible that so many people are living here. In March you find out why, as the fields are green with maize, wheat, beans, potatoes, etc. In March it is really beautiful here, with yellow flowers everywhere, and lots of birds all over the place.

When the road arrives on the level valley floor, the road becomes straight and heads for the road Villa Charcas-Inca Huasi somewhere between these two villages. Villa Charcas is visible somewhat to the right. A truck ("collectivo") leaves every day at 09.00am (or later) from Villa Charcas for Camargo. To reach Villa Charcas you should turn right on the first road crossing after reaching the valley floor.

If you are too late for the 09.00am truck, it seems better to go to Inca Huasi ("House of the Inca"), because this village is larger than Villa Charcas, and you have more chance of finding a truck there. Besides, trucks from Villa Charcas pass through Inca Huasi anyway. To get there, follow the straight road after it descends to the valley floor, cross the river, and a little further on you arrive at the main road. Follow this road to the left.

Birds. This stretch has mainly high-altitude birds. Mountain Caracaras and Andean Flickers may be seen. Andean Lapwings are found around Villa Charcas.

## **11. Villa Charcas - Camargo**

With a jeep this journey would take maybe two-and-a-half hours, with a truck it may easily take all day. My journey in March 1992 took especially long because, after a flat tire, the driver and his helper had trouble finding the right combination of wheel nuts to fit on the remaining bolts! (3 had already broken off!).

Between Inca Huasi and Camargo the trucks pass through Culpina (2950m). If, for some reason, you want to spend the night here, there is quite a good hotel in Culpina, close to the square, on the road to Camargo. It is unmarked, so ask people. However, the owner was talking about selling.

Between Culpina and Camargo the road leads through Arizona-like cactus country. Just before reaching the main road Tarija-Potosi on the valley floor, the road passes by the distillery of San Pedro singani. From here it is another 10 km before Camargo is reached.

Camargo (2400m) lies in a beautiful setting, hemmed in on three sides by red cliffs. The surrounding countryside is very dry, but the valley floor is intensely cultivated. The climate is excellent: because of its altitude it rarely gets really hot, and the sky seems to be always blue. Good meals can be had in the open building behind the little square where the trucks pick up passengers. There are two hotels in the street which runs north-south from this same small square. I stayed in Hotel Romay, which is a few hundred meters in the direction of Tarija (ie south).

Camargo is on the main Tarija-Potosi road. Buses halt in Camargo to pick up passengers. In March 1992 the schedule was as follows: 3 buses to Tarija at about 10.00am-11.30am, 1 bus to Tarija at 5.00pm, 1 bus to Potosi at 11.30pm, and probably several more to Potosi later in the night. Both the 5.00pm bus to Tarija and the 11.30pm bus to Potosi had a fixed quota of seats reserved for passengers from Camargo. Most of the bus companies have an "office" in Camargo where you can buy a ticket, and in front of which the bus will stop.

## Bird Descriptions

The following list only describes the most conspicuous birds. Full data can be found in the article and trip report mentioned under the heading "Bird Books" in the section "Preparations and other Practical Things".

In the following, *Primaries* are the long feathers which form the "hand" of the wing. Note also that the lengths given include the bill and the tail.

Note that the occurrence of species may vary during the year, and that some species may be much less conspicuous during the dry non-breeding season.

### Vultures

Turkey Vultures (75cm) are ubiquitous birds. They usually fly alone or in pairs, low above the trees, with their wings held in a V. The wings are a distinct 2-toned black-and-gray, and the head is reddish.

Black Vultures (63cm) are more social birds which are normally seen in small groups, soaring together. Their wings are shorter and broader than those of Turkey Vultures, and the tail is short. They are all black, with a distinctive white patch at the base of the primaries. These birds are common, but not found at higher altitudes.

The King Vulture (75cm) is bigger than the previous 2 species. It is a heavy, conspicuously coloured bird. In flight it is mostly white, except for the black tail, a broad black margin along the rear end of the wing, and a black collar. Its brightly coloured head is mostly red and orange. This bird is usually present in small numbers in forested areas.

The Andean Condor (120cm, wingspan over 300cm!), of course, is the biggest of them all. You can see this bird anywhere, but it is most easily seen in the steep valleys from Cerro Campamentito up to Puca Pampa. Adults are easily recognized by their white collar and the large white areas on the upperside of the wings. Young birds are all-brown, but note the very long finger-like primaries. Of course the size is a distinctive character as well, but it is not always easy to estimate the size of a bird when it soars high overhead.

Condors usually fly alone or in pairs. When you see a group of smaller vultures soaring high up in the sky, there is a good chance that one or more King Vultures and/or Condors are among them.

### Hawks and Falcons

South America may have few big raptors, but it certainly does have beautiful ones, with the Swallow-tailed Kite (60cm) as the winner. This graceful, slender black-and-white bird with its long forked tail is usually seen in small groups above the forest, chasing insects. Once I saw them drinking water from the Rio Pilaya in flight, like swallows. It is seen above forests at all altitudes.

The Savanna Hawk (55cm) is a cinnamon rufous broad-winged buzzard of open country in the lowlands. I found it along the Rio Pilaya and on the grasslands of El Palmar.

The Roadside Hawk (35cm) is the commonest and most conspicuous hawk on this walk. It is a small, short-winged buzzard, mostly brown with a blackish head and fierce yellow eyes. Its call resembles the call of the European Buzzard, and it also produces an hysterical laughter.

The Crested Caracara (55cm) is a big and conspicuous raptor, mostly blackish with large whitish patches on the primaries, a mostly whitish tail with a dark terminal band, and a whitish black-capped head with a red face. It is often seen on the ground. It can be found anywhere, but not inside forest, and most often on plains.

Mountain Caracaras (52cm) are striking black-and-white raptors with a conspicuous red face. Young birds are all-brown. They are found at high altitudes, from 3000 meters to the snowline. I saw them from Portillo onwards and found them to be rather common around Culpina.

The American Kestrel is a small brightly-patterned falcon, found everywhere in open areas.

### Guans

Guans are an exclusively New-World family of pheasant-like birds. The only guan you will certainly encounter is the Red-faced Guan (65cm). This brown bird has a reddish area around the eyes and a red dewlap (ie a piece of bare skin hanging down from the throat). It has a long thin neck with a small head, and a long rounded tail. It is usually encountered on the ground, whereupon they will fly into a treetop, calling loudly, and stay there if you don't move too close, even if they are in full sight. Meanwhile they call continuously.

This bird has a limited distribution: it only occurs in a small area in the northwest of Argentina, and in the Bolivian departamentos Tarija, Chuquisaca and the extreme south of Santa Cruz. Thus its distribution is similar to that of the Alder Parrot. This bird lives in high-altitude forests, and is especially common in the mossy forests from Cerro Campanarios to Cerro Campamentito.

### Seriemas

Red-legged Seriemas (75cm, called Chuña in Spanish) are found on the grassy slopes east of El Palmar, especially on those slopes which are covered with boulders. These big birds are brownish gray, have long red legs and a red bill, and a tuft of forward-pointing feathers on their forehead. They prefer walking to flying, even when chased. Despite their size and the fact that they are common here, I found them quite difficult to find because of their stealthy behaviour and because their general colour blends so well with the boulders. I have included this bird here, because you will probably hear its remarkable loud morning songs when camping near El Palmar.

## Lapwings

Southern Lapwings (35cm) are conspicuous, brightly-patterned and noisy plovers which occur on level grasslands in the lowlands. I have seen them on a field close to the Rio Pilaya and on the grasslands south of El Palmar. Its thin crest is one of the characters which separate it from the next species.

Andean Lapwings (33cm) are equally conspicuous and noisy, and live in similar habitats except that they live at high altitudes. This species is common on the fields in the valleys of Villa Charcas and Culpina.

## Parrots

Some of the most conspicuous birds on this walk are parrots. All parrots are very noisy during their morning and evening flights, but some of them seem to disappear during the day, as they are then feeding and resting quietly. Some parrots, especially the Turquoise-fronted Parrot and the Alder Parrot, are captured or their nest trees are cut down when they have young, to sell them as pets. Some of these parrots are much disliked by the farmers because they raid the maize-fields. Fortunately the locals cannot afford guns for shooting parrots.

By far the biggest parrot in this part of the country is the Military Macaw (71cm), a mostly green long-tailed parrot with a bright red forehead. It is easily recognized by its slow wingbeat and low-pitched raucous calls. It is a bird of the foothill forests. This is not a common bird. I saw some shortly before the Rio Iripirenda and a few in forests surrounding the grasslands of El Palmar.

A much smaller macaw is the Golden-collared Macaw (38cm). This parrot has a long tail and a bright golden collar at the back of its neck. It usually flies in twos or threes, and is more common than the Military Macaw. This is a lowland and foothill bird, you may see it up to El Palmar.

Mitred Parakeets (38cm) are long-tailed green parrots, with red forehead and parts of the face. They have a big horn-colored beak, and usually fly around in very noisy flocks of 20-30 birds. They are quite common at higher elevations, but occur at lower elevations as well. They do not occur inside forests.

The Green-cheeked Parakeet (26cm) is instantly recognizable by its long red tail. It is a fast flier, and usually flies rather low. Its voice is higher-pitched than those of the larger parrots. Usually you first hear them screeching, a few seconds later followed by a small flock whooshing between the treetops. These common birds usually occur inside forest, but sometimes you see them in more open areas as well.

Gray-hooded Parakeets (20cm) are even smaller parrots, occurring in dry valleys at higher elevations. The underside is white, the upperside is green with a black cap, and the tail is long. They have a loud twittering call. They are rather common on shrubby slopes.

Scaly-headed Parrots (30cm) are stocky parrots with short tails, a large white eye-ring, and red undertail coverts (ie the base of the undertail). They fly around in small flocks. When flying the wingbeats are deep but the wings are not raised above the body level. They are birds of the lowlands and foothills, and are especially common between El Tunal and Cañon Verde.

The Alder Parrot (31cm) is a local speciality. It only occurs locally in the Northwestern provinces of Argentina, and in the Bolivian departamentos of Tarija, Chuquisaca and in the extreme south of Santa Cruz. Alder Parrots are high-altitude forest birds, living at 2000-3000 meters. One of the goals of our September 1991 trip was to determine where and how many Alder Parrots were present in this part of Bolivia, as they have declined rapidly in Argentina.

These are medium-sized stocky parrots, mostly green with a red forehead and a conspicuous red patch on the upperside of each wing. They travel around in rather large flocks of up to 100 birds. In March, after the breeding season, I found a big roost of these birds in an area with small alder trees on the southwestern slopes of Cerro Campamentito, not far below the summit. The next day I saw at least 850 birds flying to the roost before dusk, but those were only the birds which came in from the west.

The Turquoise-fronted Parrot (38cm) is equally stocky and mostly green, with red wing-patches, but has a conspicuous yellow head with a bluish forehead. These are birds of the lowlands and the foothills. They nearly always fly in pairs, occasionally in threes, and even when they fly as a group you can clearly distinguish the pairs. This bird is often kept as a pet. People cut down the nesting trees to sell the young, and in many regions of Bolivia one sees more birds in captivity than in the wild. So probably this will be a threatened species soon.

On this walk I saw them over El Palmar, when altogether about 70 birds flew high overhead before dusk, screeching constantly, to a roost somewhere in the south. The next morning they then headed in the opposite direction.

## Cuckoos

Around El Palmar you are bound to see flocks of the remarkable Guira Cuckoo (37cm). These shaggy birds are generally brownish and grayish, have a ruffled crest, a white lower back, and a long black-and-white tail. They are very social, you often see

the whole group of 10-20 birds sitting huddled together, on top of a bush or a hedgerow, their tails pointing in all directions. They fly in a follow-the-leader fashion: the first bird goes somewhere else and the other group members gradually follow, with everybody calling in the meantime.

## Hummingbirds

Hummingbirds are often difficult to identify, as they are so small and fly so fast. You need fast eyes (which I don't have).

In forests up to an altitude of about 1500 meters I saw several Planalto Hermits (15cm). These are rather large, brownish hummingbirds with a long curved bill and white elongated central tail-feathers.

In more open areas the White-bellied Hummingbird (11cm) is often the commonest hummingbird. This hummer, as the name implies, has a white underside, and a green upperside and a rather long slightly curved bill. It usually feeds rather high up in trees and bushes. Its song is a continuous series of loud, high-pitched 'teet' notes, uttered from a high perch where it is usually very visible. In March it was common in the shrubby areas around San Josecito (at 900m), and also on a meadow with many flowers near the summit of Cerro Campamentito (at 2800m).

Red-tailed Comets (12-19cm) are striking hummingbirds with their long glistening golden red tails. The tail of the females is somewhat shorter. This bird is very common at higher altitudes in shrubby areas, from Cerro El Bufete onwards. They prefer drier situations than the White-bellied Hummingbird.

The Blue-capped Puffleg (10cm) lives in higher-altitude forests. The male is a dark glittering green with a shining blue forehead. The female has brightly cinnamon-buff underparts, and lacks the blue forehead. Both sexes have conspicuous white leg-puffs (ie little puffs of feathers surrounding the feet), a dark blue tail, and a short straight bill. These birds usually feed rather low inside or at the edge of forest. We found this bird to be common from halfway up Cerro Bufete up to the forest on the southwestern slope of Cerro Campamentito.

Slender-tailed Woodstars (7-9cm) are extremely small, bumblebee-sized birds. And not only are they as small as bumblebees, they also make the same wingsound and have the same way of slowly drifting from flower to flower. Occasionally one sees them up in the sky chasing insects. The male has a tufted purple throat and elongated outer tail feathers. The female has a short tail and a uniform cinnamon underside. These birds are found in open areas at higher altitudes, from 1600 to 2600 meters. Some woodstars that I saw close to San Josecito may have been *Amethyst Woodstars*, which are equally small.

## Toucans

The Toco Toucan (45cm) is a large black bird with a white throat, a red base of the undertail, a white base of the uppertail, and of course a big banana-like bill, which is orange and yellow with a black tip. These birds are rather common from El Tunal until about halfway up Cerro Bufete. They often move around in groups, and are most conspicuous when calling in the early morning and the late afternoon, producing a constantly repeated, mechanical, loud and rasping sound. You often see them just before dusk, perched on dead branches in the top of a tree.

## Woodpeckers

In forests in the lower areas you will often hear the loud double rattle of Crimson-crested and Cream-backed Woodpeckers (35cm and 32cm). Both are big black-and-white birds with a crested red head (like Woody Woodpecker). The Cream-backed Woodpecker has a whitish upper back, whereas the Crimson-crested Woodpecker has only two narrow white stripes descending from the shoulders.

The Andean Flicker (30cm) is a conspicuous and noisy bird of high-elevation treeless habitats. It is mostly gray-and-black-and-yellowish, the upperside is heavily barred, and it has a pale yellow lower back which is conspicuous in flight. It has a long and slightly curved bill. You normally hear it before you see it. Its call is very loud and sometimes uttered in long series. I found it to be rather common from Puca Pampa onwards.

## Woodcreepers

Woodcreepers are an exclusively New-World family of brown woodpecker-like birds. They have varying amounts of striping or barring, and are most easily identifiable by voice.

The Olivaceous Woodcreeper (16cm) is small, unstreaked and inconspicuous. It is mentioned here mainly because its call is heard all day in all forested areas up to about halfway up Cerro Bufete. The call consists of an initially ascending and then descending series of loud 'weep' notes, often accelerating at the end.

The Great Rufous Woodcreeper (33cm) ) is large, brightly rufous and has a heavy, slightly curved ivory-colored bill. During the day it is silent, and upon your approach it will silently slip to the other side of the tree. Its true numbers are revealed at dawn and at dusk, when its call is heard once or at most a few times, the call consisting of a descending series of loud double notes.

## Antbirds

A bird which you probably won't see but certainly will hear is the White-throated Antpitta (20cm). This secretive ball-shaped long-legged bird has a loud song, consisting of 2 clear whistles, the second higher pitched than the first. I heard it often between Cerro Bufete and Cerro Campamentito.

## **Tyrant Flycatchers**

This huge, exclusively New World family is (in)famous among birdwatchers for its many similar and hard-to-identify species, and the flycatchers of southern Bolivia are no exception. I will only mention a few easy ones.

The White-throated Tyrannulet (12.5cm) is an abundant little bird of higher-altitude forest and shrub, which I found near Narvaez and from about halfway up Cerro Bufete onwards. The upperside is greenish, the underside yellowish, and it has a conspicuous puffy white throat. It is restless and noisy.

Black Phoebes (19cm) live along streams. They are black with a white belly and a conspicuous white pattern on the wings. They are often seen perched on a boulder in the middle of a stream or on a low branch hanging over the water.

The Tropical Kingbird (22cm) is a very common lowland bird. This is a big flycatcher, with a bright yellow underside, a gray head with a whitish throat, a darker upperside and a slightly forked tail. It is a highly visible bird, as it usually perches on exposed branches. It can be found in all non-forested areas up to El Palmar.

## **Manakins**

Manakins are only found in Central and South America. Many species in this family are renowned for their elaborate displays, often performed at a communal lek. Their males advertise and perform an often complex repertoire of stereotyped movements accompanied by bizarre mechanical as well as vocal sounds. The males of many species are brightly colored.

The Yungas Manakin (13cm) is the only manakin in southern Bolivia. The males are black, with a red crown and a light blue back. The females are dingy greenish. This bird is very common in a narrow altitudinal zone from 1450m up to 1600m along the trail which leads up Cerro Bufete. In March they were calling all day, while participating in communal lek displays. The calls are variations on a loud and mellow "kew". These birds are easy to hear, but much less easy to see.

## **Jays**

There are two species of Jays here: the Purplish Jay (33cm), a drab brown bird with a bluish sheen on its tail, and the Plush-crested Jay (37cm), a gaudy blue-and-black-and-whitish bird, very conspicuous with its white-tipped blue tail. Both birds are very noisy, especially when they see people. However, whereas the Purplish Jay only produces loud hoarse calls, the Plush-crested Jay has a wide repertoire of strange metallic calls. Both birds are found from Narvaez to El Palmar, with Purplish Jay occurring until shortly below Cerro Campamentito.

## **Finches**

The Rufous-collared Sparrow (14.5cm) is an ubiquitous, often abundant and highly visible bird. It has a sparrow-like brownish coloration, is slightly crested, has a white throat and a rufous collar. It occurs everywhere on this walk, except inside forest.

The beautiful Fulvous-headed Brush-finch (15cm) is found in higher-altitude forests from Cerro Bufete onwards. The head is mostly rufous, with a yellow moustache and a yellow spot in front of the eye. The back, wings and tail are dark olive green, and the underside is yellow with greenish breast and sides. This species travels through the undergrowth, usually in pairs. It seems to be most common in smaller patches of *Podocarpus* and Alder forest in the rain-shadow area (ie to the west of Cerro Campamentito).

## **Wood-Warblers**

Two similar species of wood-warbler are very common on this walk, replacing each other at different altitudes. The Two-banded Warbler (14.5cm) is an abundant forest bird until halfway up Cerro Bufete. Only slightly higher up the first Pale-legged Warblers (13cm) are seen, and they will remain common until Cerro Campamentito, in humid forest and shrubland. Both species are greenish-yellow above and yellow below, and have a yellow line above the eye (the "eyebrow"). Two-banded Warblers also have a yellow line on top of the head (but this is hard to see), whereas Pale-legged Warblers have a very broad eyebrow. Two-banded Warblers sing alternating duets: one bird sings an ascending phrase, whereupon the other bird follows with a descending phrase, and so on. Pale-legged Warbler also seems to have a duetting song.

Both species travel around in small groups in the undergrowth. When they see you they will often come close, scolding loudly.

A very different species of wood-warbler is the Brown-capped Whitestart (13cm). This species has a long tail with a black center and conspicuous white outer feathers, a yellow underside and a brown cap with narrow white lines above and below the eyes. It has an often heard song, consisting of a fast ascending series of very high-pitched notes. This species occurs in higher-altitude forest and shrub, often in dry areas, from Cerro Bufete onwards.

## **Blackbirds**

The Crested Oropendola (30-45cm) and its relatives are well-known for their colonies of long stockinglike nests hanging from the branches of tall isolated trees, and for their loud gurgling songs which are uttered while falling forward on a branch. The Crested Oropendola is a big mostly-black bird with a yellow tail, a big and pointed ivory-white bill and bluish eyes. The males are much bigger than the females. On this walk, I found it to be not-too-common in lowlands and foothills.