

South Brazil Specialties: The Serra Geral of Santa Catarina

a Birding Mato Grosso brief on Urupema and the surrounding region

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Introduction:

The highlands of southern Brazil have long been one of my favourite regions of the country for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fabulous birding on offer in the Serra Geral located in southern Santa Catarina and north-eastern Rio Grande do Sul. The scenic landscapes of rocky *campos* interspersed with distinctive *Araucaria* forests, humid windswept marshes, and montane Atlantic rainforest make for a varied and exciting birding itinerary. The area hosts a couple of highly localized endemics: Long-tailed Cinclodes and Striolated Tit-Spinetail; add in a number of regional endemics and specialties that include Long-tufted Screech-Owl, Mottled Piculet, Planalto Tapaculo, Black-and-white Monjita, Azure Jay, Ochre-breasted Pipit, Chestnut-backed Tanager, Gray-throated Warbling-Finch, Bay-chested Warbling-Finch, and Saffron-Cowled Blackbird. In addition to all that, the Urupema region in the state of Santa Catarina not only hosts a significant

breeding population of the redlisted Black-bellied Seedeater, but it is also the wintering grounds for upwards of 90% of the world's population of the endemic Red-spectacled Parrot.

Having been based on prior visits to the Urupema/Urubici area in the nearby town of Urubici, I was curious to check out the Eco-Pousada Rio dos Touros in the small town of Urupema. The Rio dos Touros had been appearing quite a bit on WikiAves, the Brazilian online bird photo database (www.wikiaves.com.br), and the number of excellent photos of desirable birds drew my attention in particular. This visit was to have been part of a three-week custom tour with a Birding Mato Grosso client, but unfortunately he had to cancel his trip partway through due to a minor health problem. Since I was unable to book myself a flight home immediately, I decided to carry on with at least this part of our itinerary.

Where to Stay:

Without a doubt, the Eco-Pousada Rio dos Touros (www.riodostouros.com.br) is the place to be in Urupema. The fact that there is only one other option in Urupema, a hotel attached to the local gas station, actually has nothing to do with this assertion. Fernando and Rose, the proprietors, took excellent care of me and have done a wonderful job in just a short time with the pousada. They have three en-suite chalets, two of which can lodge two couples each, and the main house with four rooms and two bathrooms. At the moment the main house also houses the pousada's kitchen, but in the near future the kitchen will be moved and the lower floor will be converted into a common area with a small library. Rose cooked all the meals herself, and during meal times I enjoyed the company of a couple of local ornithologists working on impact studies for the projected wind farms which are expected to be installed in the near future. The food was quite good and certainly provided the necessary sustenance to keep us going through the cool, but lengthy summer days.

Fernando himself took me around the Urupema area, and it quickly became obvious he has taken the recent surge in birding visits (due entirely to the Brazilian birding boom and WikiAves) to heart; he knew territories and locations for just about every target bird I could think of, and the ones he didn't know (for species that have yet to be recorded in the region: Sickie-winged Nightjar, for example) he listened to my descriptions of their preferred habitats and took me to potential spots. He has a trail or two on the lodge property and has good relations with his neighbours and is allowed onto their properties. He and Rose also maintain feeders at the lodge: the hummingbird feeders were attracting good numbers of White-throated Hummingbird and Glittering-bellied Emerald during my stay, but have also had the occasional Black Jacobin and a Plovercrest female once; given time they may attract a greater mix of species during the austral summer months. The banana feeder in front of the main house is a delight, attracting a pair of gorgeous Chestnut-backed Tanagers throughout the day, Blue-and-yellow Tanager, Azure-shouldered Tanager, Hepatic Tanager, and Golden-winged Cacique. The feeder is positioned to catch the afternoon light over the main house and the birds positively glow - a photographer's dream.

Fernando is quite interested in conservation and sustainable tourism, and in 2012 organized the *Festival do Papagaio-Charão* (Red-spectacled Parrot Festival) during the month of April when the parrots have arrived in the area to spend the winter feeding in the extensive *Araucaria* groves surrounding Urupema. Apparently the parrots pass over the pousada in the afternoons during the winter, and one needs only step out the door to tick them!

The Birds: the following is an annotated list of selected species seen or heard around Urupema. It is by no means a complete listing of the birds I recorded, but rather a list of the highlights and/or species that may be of interest to the foreign birder.

Brown Tinamou (*Crypturellus obsoletus*) - Heard sporadically from patches of forest on humid slopes, but less common or perhaps less vocal here than in other Atlantic forest locations.

Red-winged Tinamou (*Rhynchotus rufescens*) - Quite common in the highland *campos* and areas fringing the *banhados*.

Spot-winged Wood-Quail (*Odontophorus capueira*) - Heard distantly once from the Morro do Combate.

Chimango Caracara (*Milvago chimango*) - Common around Urupema. They breed at the Eco-Pousada Rio dos Touros.

Red-legged Seriema (*Cariama cristata*) - We saw a pair in rural areas around Urupema, and heard the species at the Eco-Pousada itself.

South American Snipe (*Gallinago paraguaiiae*) - After quite a bit of effort with tape trying for Giant Snipe on the slopes of the Morro do Combate, we flushed a snipe from a roadside pool, catching it in the headlights as it flew across the road. The bird froze beside the car, allowing for a close approach and good photos which show that it was in fact a South American Snipe rather than the Giant Snipe we had been looking for.

Red-spectacled Parrot (*Amazona pretrei*) - This target species is absent from the Urupema area during the austral summer. They begin to arrive in numbers in March-April, with some 90% of the world's population wintering in the area and feeding on the cones of the ubiquitous *Araucaria* pines. Fernando told me that the parrots pass over the pousada during the winter on a daily basis as they fly between roosting and feeding areas.

Vinaceous Parrot (*Amazona vinacea*) - Another species that mainly winters in the region. Rather than migrating from breeding areas in Rio Grande do Sul like the previous species, these birds tend to move up from lower elevations during the winter to take advantage of the abundant *Araucaria* cone crop.

Long-tufted Screech-Owl (*Megascops sanctaecatarinae*) - Although the species is pretty common in south Brazil from Paraná southward, it is a sought-after species for foreign visitors and Brazilian birders alike. Fernando took me to a spot he discovered where the owls are extremely responsive and very photogenic. There are undoubtedly other territories in and around Urupema, but I would recommend anyone interested in photographing this owl to ask Fernando to take you to his stakeout!



Rusty-barred Owl (*Strix hylophila*) - See above. After successfully showing the screech-owl at his stakeout, Fernando took me a short distance to another spot and suggested we play tape for this species. In fact, just like with the screech-owl, he pointed at a particular branch and hinted that the owl might land there. A few seconds later, there it was.



Mottled Piculet (*Picumnus nebulosus*) - We had a pair in roadside scrub on the road to the Tanque *banhado* that appeared to be feeding young in a hole in a fence post. Also found quite easily in the scrubby forest edge on the far side of the pond at the Eco-Pousada Rio dos Touros, where Fernando says they are resident breeders.

Long-tailed Cinclodes (*Cinclodes pabsti*) - Quite common around Urupema, often found atop houses and abandoned buildings. Fernando showed me an old barn on the way to the Morro do Combate where the cinclodes build nests every year inside. The other half of the barn is occupied by a family of Barn Owls.

Striolated Tit-Spinetail (*Leptasthenura striolata*) - Another endemic that is fairly common around Urupema, according to Fernando. We found a very co-operative bird in the stunted forest fringing the Tanque *banhado*, but the species also occurs right at the Eco-Pousada Rio dos Touros.



Araucaria Tit-Spinetail (*Leptasthenura setaria*) - Given the concentrations of *Araucaria* pines around Urupema, it comes as no surprise that this species is common in the area.

Olive Spinetail (*Cranioleuca obsoleta*) - Common throughout the area.

Freckle-breasted Thornbird (*Phacellodomus striaticollis*) - Fernando took me to a nest he knew about at the edge of the Tanque *banhado*, but we were disappointed to find that the nest tree had collapsed recently. The birds were still in the area, however.

Large-tailed Antshrike (*Mackenziaena leachii*) - I found at least two pairs on the grounds of the Eco-Pousada Rio dos Tours. A male was foraging on the lodge driveway beside the highway in broad daylight on the morning I left!

Planalto Tapaculo (*Scytalopus pachecoii*) - Likely one of the most sought-after species to be found around Urupema. Fernando showed me several territories, but we had no luck at any of them, perhaps due to the unseasonably dry conditions the Urupema area had been experiencing. Fortunately, while searching for streambed thickets in an effort to find Canebrake Groundcreeper, we finally heard a singing bird deep down in a steep forested fissure on a property neighbouring the lodge. Fernando glibly suggested we climb down for a look, and ably found an easy way down. Once we chose an appropriate spot, the tapaculo responded readily and even posed for a couple of photos. Rather than taking the long way round and climbing out the way we had come, Fernando led the way up the narrow canyon until we reached a small 3-m waterfall; his 4 year old son climbed onto his back and the two of them shinnied up in a flash! At that point I had no choice but to follow.



Black-and-white Monjita (*Xolmis dominicanus*) - Common enough in the many *banhados* in the Urupema area. We recorded at least four on our first day of birding, and a half dozen or more the following day.

Azure Jay (*Cyanocorax caeruleus*) - A symbolic bird of south Brazil, this noisy and conspicuous species is quite common around Urupema.

Ochre-breasted Pipit (*Anthus nattereri*) - We didn't find this species, but there is at least one record from the region (<http://www.wikiaves.com.br/778945>) and it should be sought by birders visiting the region.

Chestnut-backed Tanager (*Tangara preciosa*) - A pair were regulars at Fernando's fruit feeder at the Eco-Pousada Rio dos Touros.



Blue-and-yellow Tanager (*Pipraeidea bonariensis*) - As above.

Long-tailed Reed-Finch (*Donacospiza albifrons*) - In spite of some effort at some of Fernando's regular spots, we struck out almost everywhere we looked for this one. Finally we found a non-responsive individual at a small *banhado* near an apple orchard just below the Morro do Combate. According to Fernando, the species is usually fairly easy at his regular spots.

Gray-throated Warbling-Finch (*Poospiza cabanisi*) - Fairly common at forest edge. The *cabanisi* taxon was elevated to species status in 2007 (Assis et. al.) and ranges from southern São Paulo to

Rio Grande do Sul, while the Buff-throated Warbling-Finch *P. lateralis* is a Brazilian endemic restricted to montane Atlantic rainforest in south-east Brazil (northern SP, RJ, MG, and ES).

Black-and-rufous Warbling-Finch (*Poospiza nigrorufa*) - Fernando knew a good spot for this species, and with a bit of tape we easily called one in close for a couple of photos.

Black-bellied Seedeater (*Sporophila melanogaster*) - Another of the key species for the area. Considered globally Near Threatened, the species has a breeding stronghold in the highlands of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul, including in the Urupema area. The certain highlight of my time around Urupema was the number of breeding-plumaged males we found in the area's many *banhados*. Protection of these areas is vital to the long-term survival of the species, as like any migratory species, the seedeaters face the double jeopardy of habitat destruction on their breeding grounds and their wintering areas in central Brazil.



Lesser Grass-Finch (*Emberizoides ypirangus*) - Common around Urupema, with at least one pair in just about every *banhado* we birded.

Great Pampa-Finch (*Embernagra platensis*) - Common in *banhados*.



Saffron-cowled Blackbird (*Xanthopsar flavus*) - We saw family groups with juvenile birds in a couple of *banhados*, particularly near the Morro do Combate.