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PUNTA BALCONES, TALARA, PERU



Fig. 1. Faro Negritos, a natural sea observation point at Punta Balcones, Peru.

In June 2016, I made my second self-organized visit in North Peru, birding eight days there, between the Piura coast and Tarapoto in San Martin, east of the Andes. The arrival in Piura was delayed by more than 30 hours, thanks to the unreliability of American Airlines, with a canceled flight, rerouting and several delays in a row, and with a Latam delay between Lima and Piura. The last delay was not about bad management: a small plane crashed on the runway in Lima.

Twice, I had to inform my car rental company in Piura that I would not arrive according to the original or rerouted schedule. American Airlines helped with the calls. At Lima Airport, three hours

were slept at a Wyndham Costa del Sol USD 380 room, on the expense of American Airlines. Unfortunately, the delays also meant that I had to start my driving in Peru at night.

21st to 22nd June, I traveled from Piura to Talara, on the coast, and birded there for the following morning, because the nearby Punta Balcones appeared ideal for seawatching, at least on my maps. The following trip report has been made to explain the situation there for other potential visitors. Despite its favorable location, in theory, the peninsula proved to be not as good for seabird observations as it had appeared, at least not at the time of my visit.

Nevertheless, the area had potential for bird observations, notably in regard to coastal species, and also for seabirds, in a more favorable weather. Exploring new areas is a hit and miss situation for uninformed visitors, but even a miss may have its positive points, in this case two **Peruvian Martins!**

CAR RENTAL

Renting a car in North Peru is not necessarily easy, especially if one desires to visit several states and drive long distances in the region. Then, there are the problems of language and booking by email. According to my experience, most companies do not bother with foreigners.

Nevertheless, with persistence, I have been able to rent cars both in Chiclayo and Piura. In the latter case, I already knew that I would not need a 4x4, for the fine tarmac roads of the region, and was therefore looking for a reliable and economical sedan.

A 2014 model Nissan Tiida was located at North Peruvian Rent-a-car. The rental fee was USD 36 per day in cash, with 200 free kilometers per day. Additional kilometers would have cost PEN 0.25 per kilometer, but because I had so many of them, an agreement was reached by paying for a 10 day rental even though I returned the car after 8 days. Originally, I had booked the car for 9 days, but the delays with American Airlines cut the one day off. I had no problems with the car, which was in a sound condition.

Contact Sr. Miguel M. Vilchez at northperuvian@hotmail.com for a quote. I did my email communication in Spanish, with the help of Google Translate. He considered driving to San Martin dangerous, but I managed to convince him that the roads were fine there, better than in the Chiclayo – Piura area. That is quite true, the regions of the east being wealthier than the arid west, which had in spring 2016 also suffered from El Niño floods. The roads to and around Talara were, however, undamaged and good.

Defensive driving is, nevertheless, the recommendation in Peru, because there are some *locos* out there. Otherwise, driving in Peru is not particularly difficult. The main roads in the north may not

have frequent signs, but orientation is not a problem when there is more or less one highway to follow, side trips on smaller roads. Each village on the way was signposted.



Fig. 2. My North Peruvian Rent-a-car Nissan Tiida.

ACCOMMODATION

In Talara, there are a few hotels and guesthouses, but locating them at night was not easy for a first time visitor. I therefore focused on the easiest to find area, past the airport, along Avenida B. My first choice, **Hotel El Pacifico**, proved to be far too expensive (PEN 450, €120) and did not in any case appear to manifest standards on par with the price tag. Strangely, the staff did not appear to have much interest at all in a potential customer. I really had to twist their arms to find out the current room rates. Well, perhaps their correctly judged me by my appearance and vehicle, in a category not able to afford their rooms!

Next, I tried their neighbor, **El Angolo** (PEN 180, €45, a special rate?), and decided to stay there, in my need to get sleep as soon as possible. The guard helped to carry my suitcase into the room and put the air-conditioning on.

The latter act proved to be a problem, after already having caught cold on a freezing American Airlines flight between Grand Cayman and Dallas/Ft. Worth. The room soon became too cold, but I could not find a way to adjust the temperature, other than shutting off the machine, which soon made the room too hot. In the end, I let the room cool again. At that point, I was too tired to think straight. As a result, I had a sore throat and a running nose for the next two weeks...

THE BIRDS OF PUNTA BALCONES



Fig. 3. A group of **Peruvian Pelicans** at Punta Balcones; somewhat pre-historic creatures.

In the morning of 22nd June, I left the hotel well before sunrise and drove first back to Avenida Ignacio Merino, down towards the coast, and turned south at a large roundabout (see Google Maps). The road was then followed to the coastal settlement of Negritos and beyond it, to Punta Balcones. Unfortunately, the car access to Faro Negritos was closed by fences and ones movements were also restricted along the birdy lagoon east of it, because there was an oil storage area. There were numerous oil rigs off Negritos.

In the south, there was access to the southern end of the lagoon, and the seashore south of it, but the final track to Punta Balcones (-4.683915, -81.319452) was in deep sand, where a 4x4 would have been needed, perhaps even with deflated tires?

The restrictions on access did not probably make much difference, because the visibility was so limited by fog, despite a strong westerly wind, and the heavy surf at the coast. One could see and identify the larger birds close to the coast, such as **Peruvian Pelicans**, **Peruvian** and **Blue-footed Boobies**, but the visibility did not reach far enough, and the views were not clear enough for petrels, for example. What a disappointment after high hopes in regard to the Humboldt Current seabirds! Well, it is a common situation on the coast of Peru, with its persistent fogs. The current is cold and the coast is hot. Perhaps the situation would have improved in the evening?

There were, however, a good number of gulls, terns and shorebirds to watch at the lagoon, and at the southern end of the Negritos Bay, where it was possible to drive to the shore, by turning right by the main oil storage tanks, at a checkpoint with men guarding the site. From there, it would have been possible to walk to the lighthouse, Faro Negritos, along the shore.

As already explained, the weather however was not good enough to merit the one kilometer walk in sand, even though there were shorebirds on the way. Nevertheless, in good visibility, that is what one could do to see some seabirds, by scoping down from the lighthouse ridge. One's car could be parked by the shore, or next to the guard post, in both cases under the eyes of the guards and therefore safe. From the lighthouse, the car would also remain well visible on the open, sandy shore.

The surroundings being extremely arid, my only passerines were several **Coastal Miners**, a lone **Tumbes Sparrow** (slightly W of its known distribution?) along the small coastal track, and a family of **House Sparrows** in Talara. Four **Blue-and-white** and a lone **Barn Swallow** were able to find insects at the lagoon, and a pair of **Northern Crested Caracaras** and a number of **Turkey Vultures** had also been able to adapt in the barren environment.

At sea, the common Peruvian coastal species – **Peruvian Pelicans**, **Peruvian** and **Blue-footed Boobies**, and **Neotropic Cormorants** – dominated, with one **Magnificent Frigatebird** and three **Inca Terns**. The pelicans were also resting at the lagoon, together with **Kelp**, **Belcher's** (1), **Grey** and **Grey-headed Gulls**, and a selection of terns including **Royal** and **Elegant**, and a lone adult **Gull-billed Tern**, another good species for Peru. Six **Black Skimmers** completed the picture, with their characteristic feeding behavior.

The waders were also a pleasure to observe, in the bright morning sun. The most impressive sight was a feeding party of 130 **Wilson's Phalaropes**. The other species included **American Oystercatchers**, **Black-necked Stilts**, **Greater** and **Lesser Yellowlegs**, **Grey Plovers**, **Snowy Plovers**, a **Wilson's Plover**, **Sanderlings** and **Ruddy Turnstones**.



Fig. 4. One of the diverse shorebirds: an **American Oystercatcher**, after prospecting in the mud.

The best birds of the morning were, however, without doubt, the two **Peruvian Martins** of Talara. The rare coastal martins favor coastal cliffs in Piura but I had no idea that they occurred there. First, a glossy blue male was seen flying around by the road, opposite the Villa Petrex area, and a bit further on, a drab female was resting on a wire. I have no idea where these birds might nest. They probably visited the fringe of Talara to feed there.

The town also had few **Grey-breasted Martins**, a northern species with restricted distribution in coastal Peru and a more extensive one in Amazonia. **Tumbes Swallows** were only seen in Piura, along the new *evitamiento* (bypass) south of the city.

All the recorded birds have been included in the following list of 33 species. If the site has not been mentioned, the records have been made in the Negritos-Punta Balcones area. A male **South American Sea Lion** was the only mammal seen at Punta Balcones.

Bird list:

Peruvian Pelican	400+
Peruvian Booby	100+
Blue-footed Booby	10+
Magnificent Frigatebird	1; scarce in Peru?
Neotropic Cormorant	120+
Turkey Vulture	100+, in the general area.
Northern Crested Caracara	2
American Oystercatcher	12
Black-necked Stilt	3
Grey Plover	3
Snowy Plover	12
Wilson's Plover	1
Greater Yellowlegs	30
Lesser Yellowlegs	1
Sanderling	20+
Ruddy Turnstone	10+
Wilson's Phalarope	130
Kelp Gull	600+
Belcher's Gull	1 adult
Grey Gull	100+
Grey-headed Gull	40+; <i>cirrocephalus</i> .
Inca Tern	3 adults
Royal Tern	8
Elegant Tern	4
Gull-billed Tern	1 adult; uncommon in Peru?
Black Skimmer	6

Grey-breasted Martin	5, in Talara.
Peruvian Martin	1 adult male and one adult female, in Talara.
Blue-and-white Swallow	4, <i>peruviana</i> .
(American) Barn Swallow	1
Coastal Miner	15+, in the general area.
Tumbes Sparrow	1, coastal road.
House Sparrow	6, in Talara.



Fig. 5. Grey Gulls had a roost at the southern end of the Punta Balcones lagoon.

IN RETROSPECT

My original plan was to visit the coast in the end of the North Peru journey and stay there for two mornings and one evening, before a flight departure in Piura. The idea was also to look for **Oasis Hummingbirds** in the general area. Unfortunately, American Airlines forcibly reorganized my plans, leaving only one morning for this attempt, which was also made in a state of exhaustion.

Such are the realities of travel in this part of the world. Delays are likely to occur and adapting to them is not necessarily easy. It is a constant struggle against the disorganized tourism services, which were supposed to help one to visit places, for a fee, but may frequently fail to do so. Nevertheless, after the flying in and car rental phases of the organization have been finished, everything tends to go relatively smoothly in North Peru.

Good luck with your visit in Piura!

