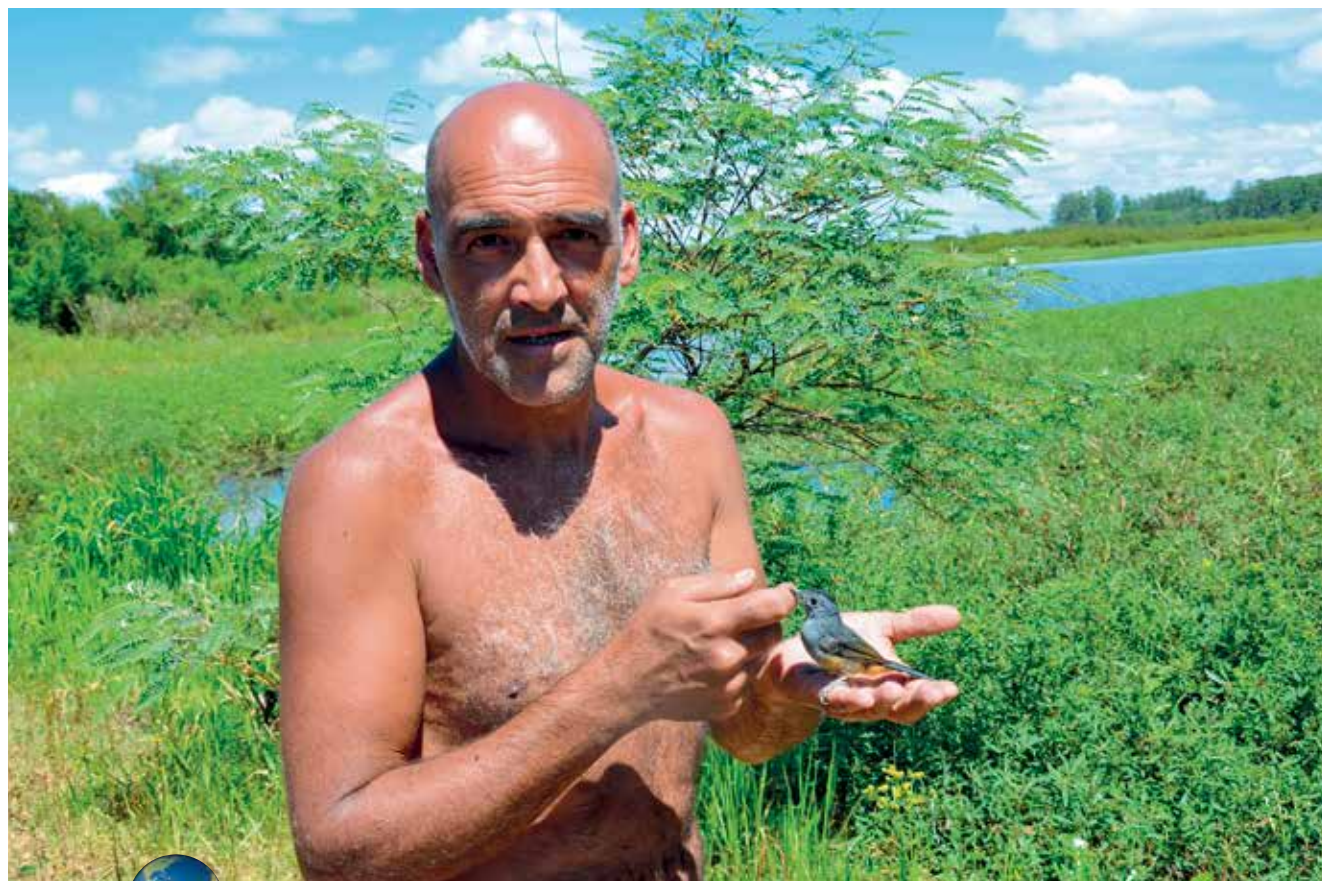


All-inclusive aquarist vacations:



Above: Felipe Cantera, aquarist, with bird.

Dream biotopes like the Arroyo Cuaró are inviting spots for fish collectors.

Felipe Cantera's Eco Tours

The air is a stifling 107.6°F (42°C) and sweat is trickling down my back. In front of me sits a deeply tanned and relaxed Felipe Cantera, who, after two weeks of collecting fishes in Uruguay, has agreed to talk to *AMAZONAS* about himself and his work. For more than 15 years, Felipe has guided groups of hobbyists and other natural history enthusiasts in this small country between the Uruguay River and the Atlantic coast.

AMAZONAS: Felipe, I want to thank you for agreeing to talk to me about work in this heat!

Felipe Cantera: No problem—I am used to it. Our summers are always very hot and it never gets very cold here, even in the winter—unlike Scandinavia.

I understand that you lived for a number of years in Sweden?

Yes. I was born and raised in Uruguay, but when I was a teenager we moved to Sweden. Twenty-two years later, in late 1996, I came back to Uruguay to build my business here.

Tell me about your business and how it got started.

Even as a child I was interested in the cichlids of Uruguay. I collected and bred them in my aquarium. While in Sweden I raised mainly reptiles at first. However, I always kept a few aquariums, and the only fishes that interested me were those from my home country. That is still true today, although for a few years now I have kept species from other countries. My grandfather and father lived on a ranch near Centurion, and as a child I used to commute between there and Montevideo.

I love my native land; as a young man, I regularly flew back to Uruguay from Sweden and spent the summers here. Starting in about 1991, I began to systematically explore the various habitats of the fishes here. I have gradually developed good contacts all over the country and always know where I can stay for the night. In 1996, I finally returned to Uruguay for good.

Nothing interests me as much as the natural world, and am glad that I've turned my passion into a profession.

In addition to some exporting, I have mainly focused on guiding nature trips. Originally, I brought groups from Scandinavia. Since then I've had Americans, Canadians, Germans, and Austrians go on the road with me.

You offer fish-collecting trips. Can you tell us more about that?

I offer natural history trips for groups of 4–10 people. It's not just about fishes—I do many short trips with people from Uruguay who are interested in birds, reptiles, and amphibians. The fish research journeys are mainly interesting to foreigners. The itinerary and duration of each trip depends on the wishes of the customers and what fishes they want to catch. I take care of the transportation, accommodations, and meals. In addition, I have all the necessary licenses, and each participant receives a veterinary certificate and an export license for a certain number of fishes. Uruguay is a safe country, it's easy to get around, and I know all the beautiful places and the fishes living here.

That sounds like the perfect full-service trip. During our tour, I got the impression that you do a good job of sharing your passion for the fishes of your country while offering the reliability that northern Europeans expect. You and your guests are all addicted to cichlids, and most tour groups come mainly to see *Gymnogeophagus* and company, right?

That's right. I am an extreme cichlidophile, and so are my guests. Nevertheless, there are also people who are interested in other fish groups. You, for instance, are here to see other fishes!

That's true, and I was not disappointed. Although Uruguay is quite small, there are a number of species here that are not yet scientifically described.

Oh, yes! I think there are two new *Crenicichla*, three *Australoheros*, and one or two *Cichlasoma* spp., and in the east there are many forms of *Geophagus* cf. *brasiliensis* and, of course, *Gymnogeophagus* species. Of these, at least 10 or 11 forms are certainly different and might prove to be new species. It is a shame that no scientist is working with these fishes.

Why is that? I know that you have already taken scientists like Sven Kullander and Luiz Malabarba around the country and these trips resulted in various descriptions. Why was there no further work done based on these?

In Uruguay, ichthyologists have no earning potential. Promising students go to other countries after their studies. Moreover, nobody is anxious to revise complex groups like the *Gymnogeophagus*. They are too confusing, there are too many species. Working with small, manageable genera, as novel as possible and with only one or two species, is more lucrative. Doing this you can quickly make a name for yourself and get a good job. At least, this is what I've been told. Studying the cichlids here is much too difficult and takes too long—and the catfish-



While traveling in Uruguay, we used these barrels with battery-operated pumps to hold our catch.

The guests' fishes are held in an open-air facility until they leave.

es and tetras are even worse. That is not an attractive scenario.

That's too bad, because the Uruguayan cichlids are splendid animals and disprove the notion that Uruguay is "the land



Gymnogeophagus gymnogenys from the Arroyo India Muerte are among Felipe's favorites. This freshly caught male, shown in a photo cuvette, sports fantastic colors.

of gray fishes." I've also heard that many people believe that the fishes here are all cold-water fishes?

That is nonsense, of course! You just experienced rivers where the temperature is 84°F (29°C) or higher. However, we do have distinct seasons, and the fishes in our waters have to endure quite high temperatures in the summer and rather cool temperatures in the winter. Sure, in the south sometimes the air temperature gets below 50°F (10°C), but only for a short time. Generally, one can say that the fishes of Uruguay should be kept cool—about 57–59°F (14–15°C)—for at least two months a year. This can be easily accomplished, for example, in an unheated greenhouse or basement, or even in a summer garden pond. The rest of the year, the animals do well in an aquarium that is normally heated, not too warm, and can tolerate rather high temperatures for a few



Felipe's operation comprises about 30 aquariums.

weeks. However, the change of seasons is important. Kept properly, they are enduring, very interesting, and attractive animals that propagate readily.

That sounds all very simple!

Yes, absolutely. The best way to experience it is to visit Uruguay and take one of my tours. I also promise an excellent piece of meat from the land of the gauchos! 🐟

Felipe Cantera lives with his wife, Helen, and their children, Corina and Mateo, in Salinas, a small, tranquil coastal town near the capital, Montevideo. He keeps about 30 aquariums, various snakes, and other animals, and maintains a holding facility for the fishes captured on the tours. In addition to Spanish and Swedish, Felipe speaks very good English and knows everybody in the country. For further information, check out Acva Terra Eco Tours (www.aqvater.com). You can get a quote for a customized trip by e-mailing Felipe at fcantera@adinet.com.uy.



Besides cichlids, there are other fishes here that are still unknown to the aquarium hobby; this beautiful *Leporinus amae* from the Río Cuareim, which borders Brazil in the Departamento Artigas, is one example.



Many cichlids from Uruguay are scientifically undescribed, including this *Australoheros* sp. "Red Ceibal."