

Ecuador – Spectacled Bear & Andean Birds Photography Tour

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Quito
Day 2	Quito to Bear Canyon
Day 3 – 5	Bear Canyon
Day 6	Return to Quito
Day 7	Zuroloma & Alambi Cloudforest
Day 8	Chocó Cloudforests
Day 9	Frutti Tour
Day 10	Depart Quito
Day 11	Arrive London.

Departs

February – May & September – November

Focus

Mammals and Birds

Grading

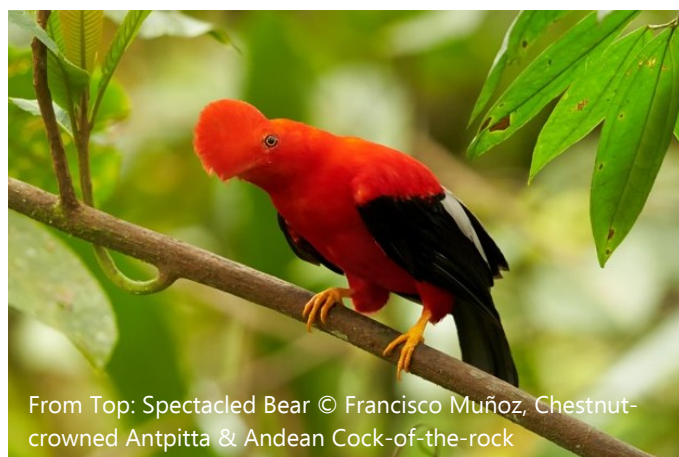
Grade A/B

Dates and Prices

Visit website (tour code ECU21).

Highlights:

- Outstanding opportunities to photograph the elusive Spectacled Bear
- Spectacular Chocó cloudforests packed with hummingbirds, tanagers, toucans, antpittas and other avian specialities
- Comfortable accommodation throughout



From Top: Spectacled Bear © Francisco Muñoz, Chestnut-crowned Antpitta & Andean Cock-of-the-rock



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Introduction

Ecuador is one of the few places on Earth where it is possible to combine close encounters with the elusive Spectacled (Andean) Bear and exceptional bird photography within a single trip. From the cloudforests of the northern Andes to the biodiversity-rich Chocó region, this carefully designed holiday is tailored for nature photographers and wildlife enthusiasts alike.

Our adventure begins at Bear Canyon, widely regarded as one of the finest locations anywhere in the world for observing and photographing Spectacled Bear. Supported by more than 16 years of dedicated conservation work and monitoring, this pioneering project offers remarkable opportunities to watch these fascinating mammals in their natural environment. Accompanied by experienced local trackers with an intimate knowledge of individual bears and their behaviour, we will enjoy unrivalled chances to study and capture images of South America's only bear species.

From here, we travel into the spectacular cloudforests of the Chocó, one of the most species-rich regions on the planet. These lush forests are home to an astonishing diversity of birdlife, including glittering hummingbirds, vibrant tanagers, elusive antpittas, colourful toucans, elegant quetzals, motmots and the unforgettable Andean Cock-of-the-rock. Carefully positioned feeding stations and well-designed photographic setups provide outstanding opportunities to observe and photograph many of these species at close range, while also demonstrating the positive impact of community-led conservation initiatives across the region.

Combining one of the world's premier Spectacled Bear experiences with some of the finest bird photography in the Neotropics, this tour offers an exceptional exploration of Ecuador's remarkable wildlife, breathtaking landscapes and inspiring conservation success stories.



NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Quito

If using the group flights, we will depart London in the morning and arrive in Quito later that evening. On arrival, we will transfer to a comfortable hotel in the city, where the remainder of the evening will be free to relax and recover from the journey before the start of our adventure.

Overnight: Quito

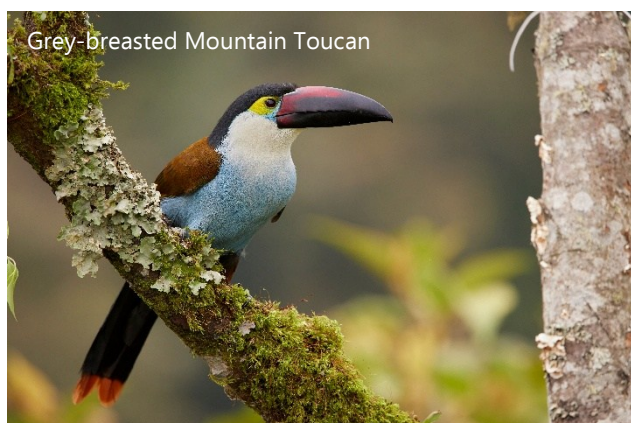
Day 2

Quito to Bear Canyon

This morning, we leave Quito and travel north through the spectacular inter-Andean valleys of Ecuador's Northern Andes, making our way towards Bear Canyon in Imbabura Province. Our route passes through a constantly changing landscape of fertile valleys, cloudforest remnants and dramatic mountain scenery, providing a wonderful introduction to the natural beauty of the Ecuadorian Andes.

Bear Canyon is widely regarded as one of the best places in the world to observe and photograph Spectacled Bear, South America's only bear species. On arrival, we settle into Bear Canyon Lodge, superbly situated on the rim of the canyon and enjoying magnificent views over the surrounding cloudforest.

The area supports a rich variety of Andean birdlife, and our first afternoon offers an excellent opportunity to begin exploring the lodge grounds and nearby forest edge. Possible sightings include Grey-breasted Mountain Toucan, Turquoise Jay, Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager, Andean Guan and Crimson-mantled Woodpecker, together with a colourful array of hummingbirds. With sweeping views across the canyon and our first taste of this remarkable landscape, it is a fitting introduction to the wildlife experiences that await over the coming days.



Depending on bear activity and local conditions, we may have our first opportunity to enter the canyon later this afternoon. Working alongside experienced local trackers, whose knowledge of individual bears

and their movements is invaluable, we carefully explore this remarkable landscape of ancient fig trees, moss-draped forest and drifting cloud.

Encounters with Spectacled Bears can be surprisingly close, sometimes offering outstanding views at relatively short range. Bear Canyon is renowned for the quality of its sightings and, if conditions are favourable, we may enjoy our first unforgettable views of South America's only bear species. For many visitors, watching a Spectacled Bear feeding, resting or moving quietly through the cloudforest ranks among the most memorable wildlife experiences of the entire tour.

Overnight: Bear Canyon Lodge

Day 3 – 5

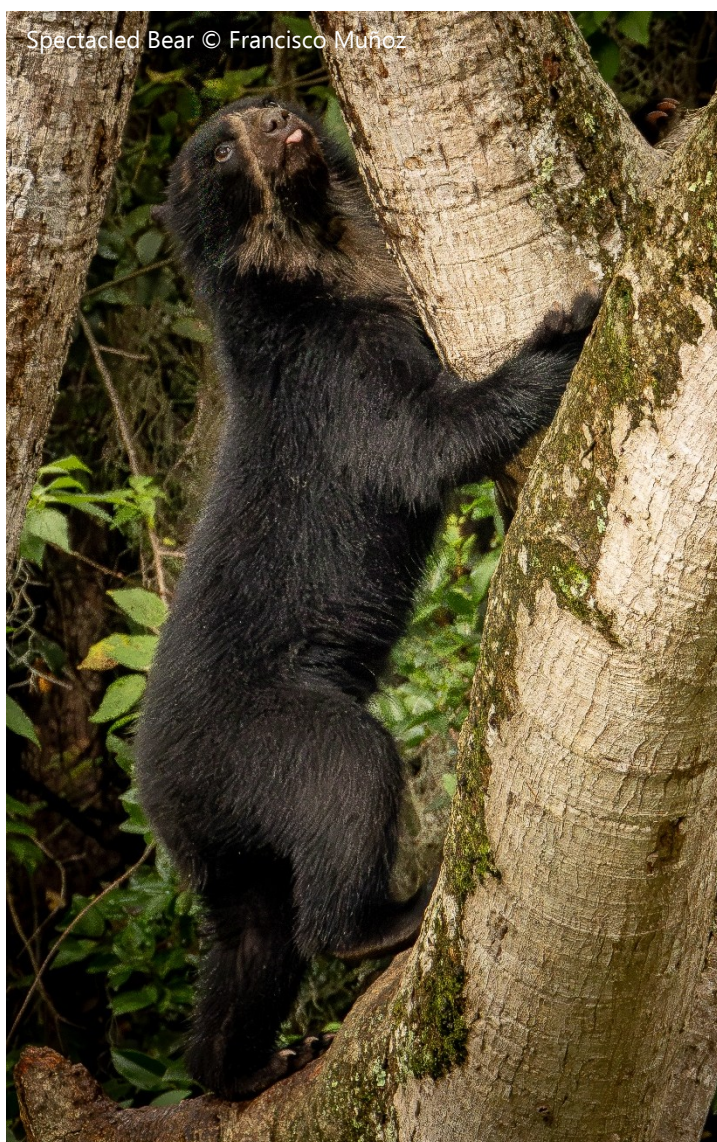
Bear Canyon Photography

Over the next two days, we focus our efforts on Bear Canyon, one of the finest places in the Ecuadorian Andes to observe the remarkable Spectacled Bear. Our programme remains deliberately flexible throughout, allowing us to respond to bear activity and prevailing conditions rather than following a fixed schedule. Experienced local trackers monitor the bears daily and possess an intimate knowledge of

individual animals and their movements, helping to maximise viewing opportunities while ensuring the bears are observed with minimal disturbance.

While searching for bears, the surrounding cloudforest provides a wealth of additional interest. Mixed feeding flocks regularly move through the canopy and along the forest edge, offering chances to see species such as Masked and Rusty Flowerpiercers, Blue-and-yellow and Blue-grey Tanagers, Scrub Tanager, Golden Grosbeak, Tufted Tit-Tyrant and Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet. The rich birdlife, combined with the canyon's dramatic scenery, ensures there is always something to capture our attention between bear sightings.

When bears are located, often feeding or resting high in fruiting fig trees, we carefully descend into the canyon and take up discreet viewing positions. Encounters may involve solitary animals, females with cubs or large males moving through the forest, and sightings of multiple individuals during a visit are entirely possible. Bear Canyon

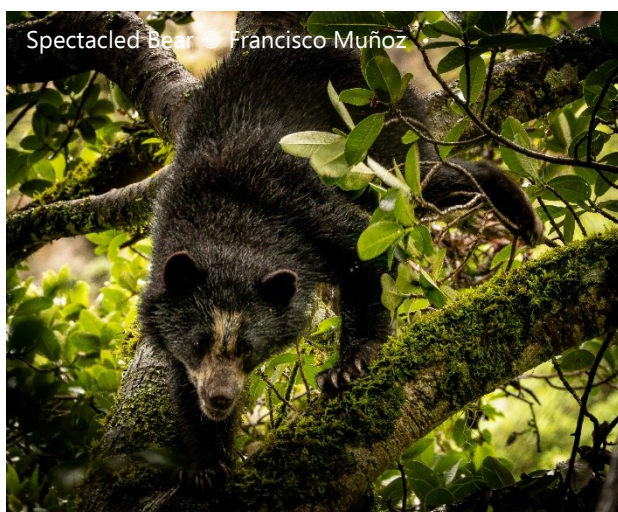


supports an unusually high density of bears and offers exceptional opportunities to watch and photograph this charismatic species in its natural habitat. Extended periods in the field allow us not only to find bears, but also to observe their behaviour, whether feeding, climbing, resting or interacting with other individuals.

The setting itself is every bit as memorable as the wildlife. Steep canyon walls cloaked in cloudforest, ancient fig trees and ever-changing mountain light create a spectacular backdrop for wildlife observation and photography. Throughout our stay, all activities within the canyon are carefully coordinated with the local tracking team, ensuring both safety and adherence to strict conservation protocols while maximising opportunities for close observation and photography.

The canyon supports a wealth of other wildlife, ensuring there is always something of interest to observe. Raptors are frequently seen soaring above the canyon walls on rising thermals, including Harris's Hawk, Variable Hawk, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, American Kestrel, Black Vulture and Turkey Vulture. Mammals such as Andean Fox and squirrels may also be encountered, while more open areas can produce Vermilion Flycatcher, Great Thrush, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Tropical Mockingbird, Saffron Finch, Common Ground Dove and Eared Dove. Blue-and-white Swallows often sweep overhead, adding to the sense of vitality within this rich mountain ecosystem.

As the days progress, we naturally become familiar with individual bears and their daily routines. This unhurried, immersive approach allows for increasingly rewarding observation and photography, often resulting in more intimate views and stronger images. More importantly, it fosters a deeper appreciation not only of the bears themselves, but also of the remarkable Andean cloudforest that supports them.



Between field sessions there will be time to relax at Bear Canyon Lodge, enjoying its peaceful atmosphere, excellent local cuisine and sweeping views across the canyon. These quieter periods provide an opportunity to review photographs, share experiences and reflect on what is likely to be one of the most memorable wildlife encounters in South America.

Day 6

Return to Quito

This morning, we will have a final opportunity to enjoy the wildlife around Bear Canyon Lodge, with time to photograph some of the area's characteristic Andean bird species. The lodge grounds and surrounding cloudforest can be particularly rewarding during the early hours of the day, when hummingbirds, tanagers and other forest birds are at their most active. It also provides a final chance to soak up the atmosphere of this remarkable landscape and reflect on our memorable encounters with the bears.

After lunch, we begin our return journey to Quito, once again travelling through the beautiful highlands of northern Ecuador. The route passes through some magnificent Andean scenery, and we will make occasional stops where time and conditions allow, whether to admire the landscape, photograph mountain vistas or investigate any interesting wildlife encountered along the way.

Arriving back in Quito during the late afternoon, we will transfer to our comfortable hotel for the night. There will be time to relax and enjoy the facilities before the next stage of our exploration of Ecuador's remarkable wildlife and birdlife.

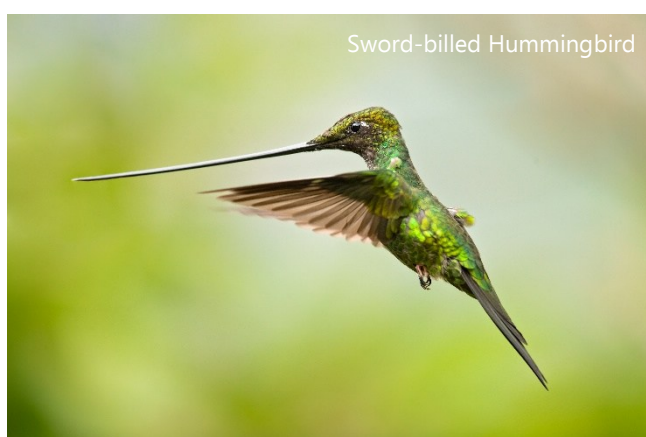
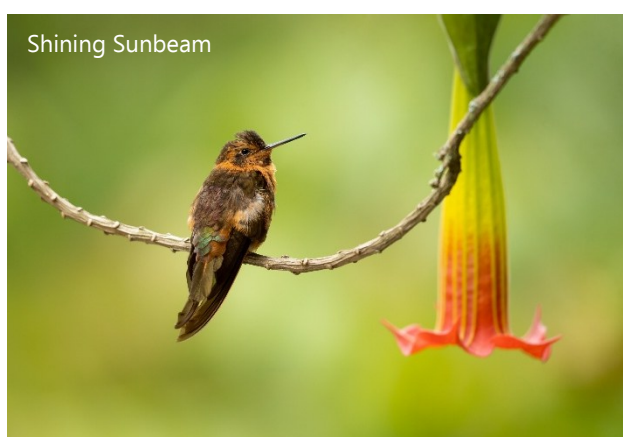
Overnight: Quito

Day 7

Zuroloma Reserve & Alambi Cloudforest

Today we leave Quito and travel west into the cloudforests of north-west Ecuador, part of the Chocó-Andean biodiversity hotspot, one of the most species-rich regions on Earth. As we descend from the high Andes, we will make a series of carefully chosen stops, each offering opportunities to encounter some of the region's most sought-after birds.

Our first destination is Zuroloma Reserve, situated on the slopes of Pichincha Volcano. Surrounded by a mosaic of cloudforest and open Andean habitat, Zuroloma has earned a reputation as one of Ecuador's finest birdwatching and bird photography sites. Here we will search for Andean specialities such as Equatorial, Chestnut-naped and Chestnut-crowned Antpittas, while the feeders attract an impressive variety of hummingbirds, including Sword-billed Hummingbird, Great Sapphirewing, Shining Sunbeam, Buff-winged Starfrontlet and Mountain Velvetbreast. With luck, we may also find the highly localised Black-breasted Puffleg. The surrounding forest often hosts mixed feeding flocks containing tanagers, flowerpiercers and other characteristic Andean species.



Continuing west, we descend into the celebrated Tandayapa Valley, one of South America's premier birdwatching destinations. Here we visit Alambi Reserve, where flowering gardens and well-maintained feeding stations provide excellent opportunities for observation and photography. The hummingbird feeders are often alive with activity and may attract species such as Violet-tailed Sylph, Green-crowned Brilliant, White-necked Jacobin and Purple-bibbed Whitetip. The surrounding cloudforest is equally rewarding, with possibilities including Toucan Barbet, Plate-billed Mountain Toucan, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, Golden-headed Quetzal, Crested Quetzal, Golden Tanager, Flame-faced Tanager, Blue-winged Mountain Tanager and Rufous Motmot. By late afternoon we continue to our lodge, where the rich birdlife of the Chocó region awaits.

We will also spend time at Las Cotingas Bird Reserve, a family-run conservation initiative that provides an excellent example of habitat restoration and sustainable ecotourism. With almost 250 bird species recorded, this attractive reserve can be exceptionally rewarding. Among the species we may encounter are Chocó Toucan, Pale-mandibled Aracari, Orange-breasted Fruiteater, Club-winged Manakin, White-whiskered Hermit, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Scaled Fruiteater, Broad-billed Motmot and the striking Black Solitaire, together with a wealth of other Chocó cloudforest specialities.

After lunch and a productive afternoon of birdwatching, we continue to the lush Mindo Valley, where we will spend the next three nights. Surrounded by species-rich cloudforest and renowned among birdwatchers worldwide, Mindo provides an ideal base from which to explore one of Ecuador's most rewarding wildlife regions. From hummingbird-filled gardens and forest trails to the rich birdlife of the surrounding reserves, this beautiful valley offers an excellent introduction to the extraordinary biodiversity of north-west Ecuador.

Overnight: Mindo Valley

Day 8

Chocó Cloudforests

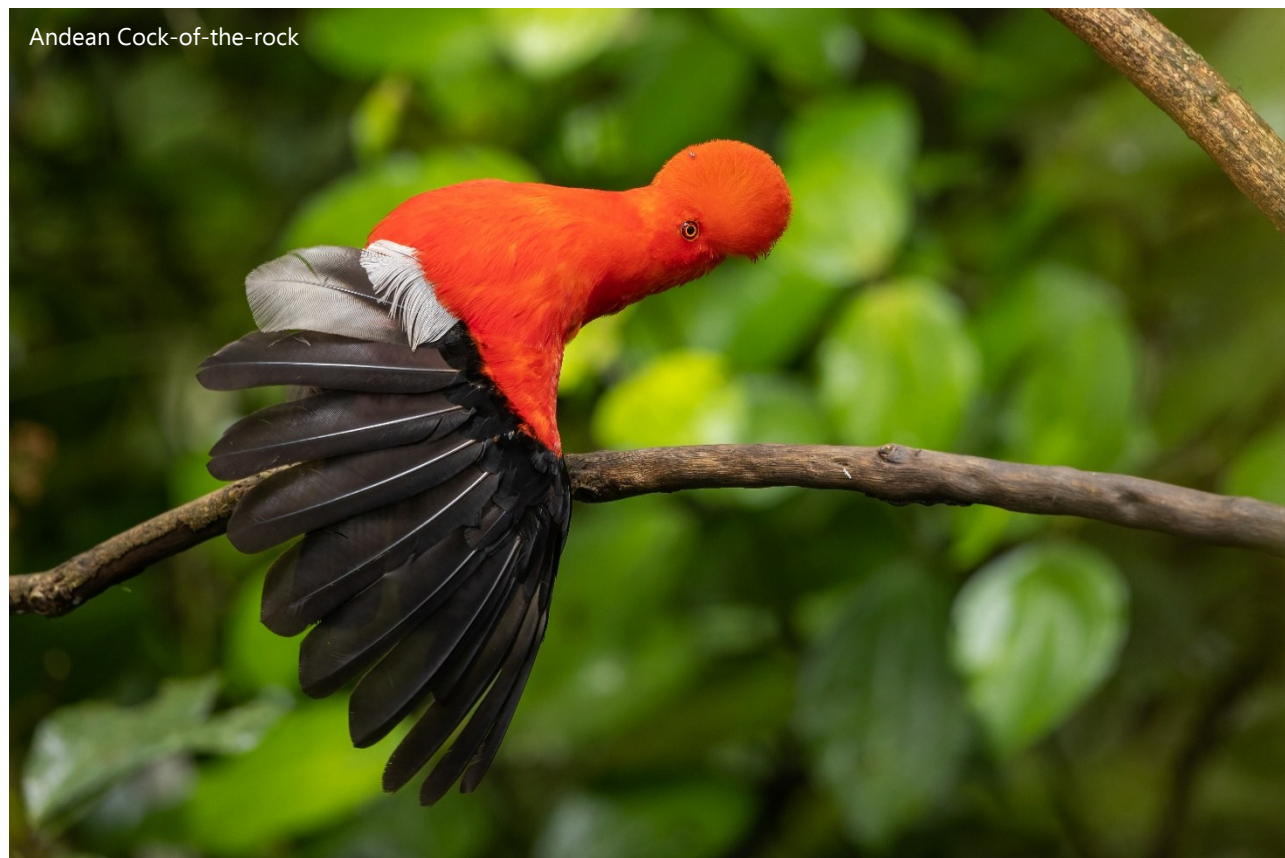
Today we spend a full day exploring the magnificent cloudforests of the Mashpi region, one of the most biologically rich areas in South America. Draped in orchids, bromeliads and mosses, these lush forests support an extraordinary diversity of wildlife and offer exceptional birdwatching opportunities. During the day we visit several well-known sites within the Mashpi-Pachijal Conservation Corridor, including Mashpi-Amagusa, Sacha Guatusa and Santa Elena. Protecting a range of elevations and habitats, these reserves together showcase the remarkable biodiversity of the Chocó region.

The birdlife here is truly spectacular. Mixed feeding flocks moving through the cloudforest may contain Chocó specialities such as Moss-backed, Glistening-green and Rufous-throated Tanagers, while other highlights could include Chocó Toucan, Club-winged Manakin, White-faced Nunbird and the highly sought-after Black-tipped Cotinga. Hummingbird feeders often provide prolonged and close views of an impressive variety of species, including Velvet-purple Coronet, Purple-chested Hummingbird, Tawny-bellied Hermit, Hoary Puffleg, Gorgeted Sunangel, Booted Racket-tail, Green-tailed Trainbearer, Wedge-billed Hummingbird, Purple-throated Woodstar and White-bellied Woodstar.

A particular highlight will be a visit to a traditional Andean Cock-of-the-rock lek. Here, deep within the cloudforest, males gather to perform their remarkable courtship displays, their brilliant orange plumage

glowing against the dark forest backdrop. Few experiences capture the excitement of Neotropical birdwatching quite so well, and for many visitors this provides one of the most memorable wildlife spectacles of the tour.

Beyond its exceptional birdlife, the Mashpi region supports a fascinating variety of other wildlife. The forest trails may reveal mammals, reptiles and amphibians, while colourful butterflies and a rich diversity of insects are ever-present. Primates are occasionally encountered moving through the canopy, and careful searching may uncover well-camouflaged frogs, lizards and other inhabitants of this remarkable cloudforest ecosystem.



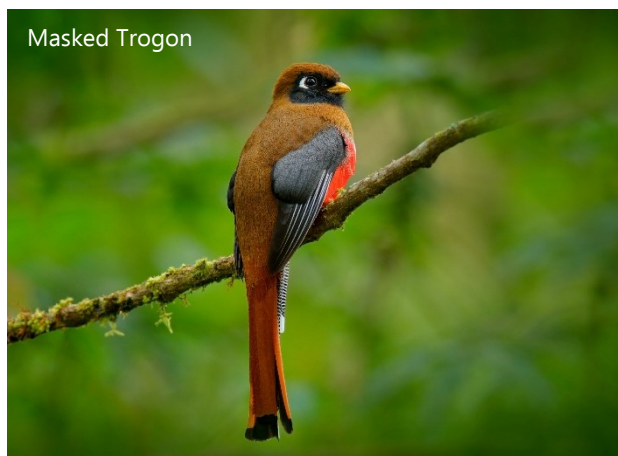
Overnight: Mindo Valley

Day 9

Cloudforest & Frutti Tour

This morning we explore the forests surrounding our lodge, where hummingbird feeders and nearby trails can be exceptionally productive. Among the species we may encounter are Violet-tailed Sylph, Green Thorntail, Booted Racket-tail, White-whiskered Hermit, Green-crowned Brilliant and Purple-throated Woodstar. The surrounding forest also holds a wealth of other birdlife, including Toucan Barbet, Pale-mandibled Aracari, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, Golden-headed Quetzal, Masked Trogon and Broad-billed Motmot. Mixed feeding flocks moving through the canopy may bring a colourful assortment of tanagers, such as Golden-naped, Bay-headed and Beryl-spangled. Throughout the morning we will make a special effort to find the remarkable Long-wattled Umbrellabird, one of the Chocó region's most distinctive and sought-after birds.

Later we visit the Frutti Tour & Birdwatching Project, a family-run initiative where former farmland has been transformed into a haven for birds and native plants. Walking along easy trails, we explore an area rich in fruiting trees and flowering vegetation, attracting a wide variety of species. Regular sightings can include Yellow-throated Toucan, Brown Wood-Rail, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Long-billed Starthroat, Orange-billed Sparrow, Ecuadorian Thrush, Blue-grey Tanager and Saffron Finch. This attractive site offers an excellent introduction to the rich birdlife of north-west Ecuador and provides another rewarding afternoon in the field.



Masked Trogon



Crimson-rumped Toucanet

Overnight: Mindo Valley

Day 10

Mindo to Quito, Depart Quito

After breakfast, we begin our journey back to Quito, travelling through the cloudforests and spectacular Andean scenery that have provided such a memorable backdrop to our exploration of Ecuador's rich birdlife, arriving in good time for our return flights.

Day 11

London

We are due to arrive back in London by early evening.

Tour Grading & Focus

Grade A/B. Walking is generally at an easy to moderate pace, with time spent around lodges, feeding stations and on forest trails. We will use a cable car to access Bear Canyon. Time spent in the field at Bear Canyon is flexible and largely determined by wildlife activity, with periods of waiting often interspersed with short walks to viewing areas. These can sometimes be steep but are never prolonged.

In the Chocó region, most birdwatching takes place along established trails, reserve paths and around feeders, although conditions can be humid and the terrain variable. Throughout the tour there will be opportunities to observe wildlife from lodge grounds and other easily accessible locations.

This holiday is suitable for anyone with a reasonable level of fitness who is comfortable walking on natural trails and spending extended periods outdoors. Early starts will be encouraged to take advantage of peak wildlife activity and the best light conditions. For further information on the grading or the level of fitness required to get the most from this tour, please call the Naturetrek office on 01962 733051 or email info@naturetrek.co.uk.

Weather

Ecuador's climate varies considerably according to altitude and region. In the north-western cloudforests, conditions are generally warm and humid throughout the year, although temperatures can differ noticeably between sites. Lower-elevation areas such as Mindo and Mashpi are typically mild and comfortable, while higher elevations can feel cooler, particularly during the early mornings and evenings.

Regular rainfall and frequent mist are characteristic features of these forests, helping to sustain the lush vegetation and exceptional biodiversity for which the Chocó region is renowned. While showers can occur at any time, they are often localised and can provide excellent birdwatching opportunities, as wildlife activity frequently increases during breaks in the weather. Visitors should therefore be prepared for a range of conditions, from warm sunshine to cool, damp cloudforest environments.

Food & Accommodation Included in the Price

All accommodation, meals and drinking water are included, from dinner on Day 1 through to lunch on Day 10. Snacks, soft drinks, alcoholic beverages and items of a personal nature are not included in the cost of the tour.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.