

Ecuador – The Andes & Amazon

Naturetrek Tour Report

2nd – 16th November 2023



Pacific Parrotlet



Hoatzin



Golden Tanager



Purple-throated Woodstar

Tour report kindly written by clients Peter Booth and Shirley Bain, photos by Peter Booth



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Tour participants: Andrea Molina (Leader) with six Naturetrek Clients

Day 1

Thursday 2nd November

Following our seamless flight from Amsterdam to Quito, the group was met at the airport by the tour leader and transferred to the first night's hotel on the outskirts of the city. A few of us enjoyed a swift drink at the hotel bar before retiring for an early night, in readiness for the next day's birding.

Day 2

Friday 3rd November

After an early breakfast, which became the norm, we travelled west out of Quito to the Yanacocha Reserve. At around 3500m altitude, the reserve is primarily temperate forest on the slopes of the Pichincha volcano. Birding along the route, we eventually parked up and followed the Inca Trocha Trail. This relatively flat traverse walk, albeit at altitude, allowed us gradually to acclimatise to the reduced oxygen levels found at this height. We gained our first sightings of some of the birds we would see regularly throughout the trip including Great Thrush, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Masked and Glossy Flowerpiercers, Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager and an overhead flypast of a Carunculated Caracara. The small feeding station at the end of the trail attracted a range of hummingbirds including Tyrian Metaltail, Buff-winged Starfrontlet, Great Sapphirewing, Golden-breasted Puffleg, and the amazing Sword-billed Hummingbird. The photographers among us struck lucky as we had extremely close views of a pair of curious Equatorial Antpittas just at the edge of the trail.

Before lunch we had time to visit a second feeder station and had wonderful views of a Shining Sunbeam hummingbird and another speciality, a Superciliated Hemispingus. Lunch was arranged on the reserve at the Zamarrito Café. We were introduced to the first of many different soups to be sampled during our trip and the chilli dip which would appear at every meal, but made to each chef's personal recipe and varying greatly in spiciness. Thankfully, Andrea gave us a warning for the ones with a bigger bite!

The change in weather as we finished lunch was stunning: distant views of the valley and volcanoes beyond had been replaced by a white-out of cloud. Fortunately, this lifted as we descended on our journey west towards Alambi Birding Gardens.

The Alambi Reserve is situated within the Tandayapa valley and has a feeder station with more than ten hummingbird feeders, plus a plantain feeder, at the reserve's lodge. It was difficult to decide in which direction to look as we were met with a continuous buzz of activity. The hummingbird feeders attracted many species including White-necked Jacobin, Brown Violetear, Sparkling Violetear, White-whiskered Hermit, Brown Inca, Crowned Woodnymph, Andean Emerald, Purple-throated Woodstar, and Green-crowned and Fawn-breasted Brilliants. The plantain feeders attracted another great selection of birds including Red-headed Barbet, Thick-billed Euphonia, Yellow-breasted Brushfinch, Spectacled Whitestart, and Lemon-rumped, Golden-naped, Silver-throated and Golden Tanagers.

While surveying the stream below the lodge we acquired decent views of a pair of White-capped Dippers as well as a female Andean Cock-of-the-Rock sitting on her nest underneath the bridge. While retracing our steps back to the lodge, we disturbed a Golden-headed Quetzal which flew from its nest hole in an adjacent tree.

With the light starting to fade we travelled on to the Septimo Paraiso lodge, which would be our base for the next three nights. After a hearty meal and a sample of some of the local beers and wine, we went through the daily bird list which culminated in a total of 59 birds. This was a great start to the trip and as only one of the group had visited Ecuador previously, it provided the rest of the group with an early familiarisation with some of the species we would undoubtedly continue to see during the two weeks.

Day 3

Saturday 4th November

After another early start we arrived at the nearby Sachatamia Lodge just as the sun was peeking over the horizon. Settling in to the lodge's moth trap hide, we were immediately treated to views of Masked Trogon, House Wren, Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, Ecuadorian Thrush and Beryl-spangled Tanager as well as a variety of Woodcreepers, including Plain Brown, Wedge-billed, Montane, Streak-headed and Strong-billed. It was amusing watching one of the latter trying to swallow an enormous beetle, which it took nearly ten minutes eventually to dispatch. As they say, patience is a virtue. A Central American Agouti was also spotted foraging below the feeding stations.

The hummingbird feeders were not as busy as those at the Alambi reserve, but good activity brought several new species and better views of others such as Violet-tailed Sylph, Booted Racket-tail, Velvet-purple Coronet, Empress Brilliant, Speckled Hummingbird and Brown Inca. In the surrounding trees we saw Squirrel Cuckoo, Plumbeous Pigeon, and Dusky Chlorospingus. Patience and persistence were eventually rewarded with good, if brief, views of a Slaty Spinetail feeding in the bushes opposite the feeders.

Leaving the lodge behind, we drove further on and walked along part of the Bellavista Road, another reserve in the cloud forest. Birding here was a little more challenging, but we gained good views of an excellent bird, the Plate-billed Mountain Toucan, as well as a Crimson-mantled Woodpecker, Cinnamon Flycatcher, Barred Hawk and another Golden-headed Quetzal. A Gorgeted Sunangel was spotted feeding on the edges of the overhanging vegetation.

Following lunch at the Septimo Paraiso Lodge we then visited the aptly named Fruttitour Lodge. Our enthusiastic host had set up several plantain and hummingbird feeders, all attracting a plethora of birds from the adjacent wooded areas. Some new hummingbirds were spotted including Green Thorntail, Long-billed Starthroat, Purple-chested Hummingbird and Bronzy Hermit. The plantain feeders attracted several tanagers including Blue-grey, Fawn-breasted, Golden-naped, Blue-and-Black, White-lined and Palm. Additionally, we saw Red-headed Barbet, Thick-billed Euphonia, Orange-bellied Euphonia and three types of woodpecker, namely Golden-olive, Black-cheeked and Lineated.

Birds were not just restricted to the feeders, as the garden had many trees and flowering bushes. Peeking out of the undergrowth we saw Saffron Finch, Pacific Parrotlet, Pygmy Antwren, Great Antshrike, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, Orange-billed Sparrow, Shiny Cowbird and Blackburnian Warbler. A Rusty-margined Flycatcher, drinking in a stream, challenged our ID skills! Another Central American Agouti calmly wandered beneath us looking for scraps dropped by the birds. It had been pleasantly warm if overcast when we arrived, but by 5.30pm a light drizzle had set in: as it was twelve hours after our day had started, we were more than happy to head back to Septimo with time to change before another excellent dinner.

Day 4

Sunday 5th November

Today was a day that promised to be one of the highlights of the trip, a visit to the world-famous Refugio Paz de las Aves. One of the main attractions would be to view the Andean Cock-of-the-Rock lek, where each morning the male birds proclaim their right to be 'top dog'. Arriving at sunrise, we walked down a short trail in the gradually improving light to a hide where we could see, and hear, that the birds were already in full display mode. The hide was close enough to allow decent photographs to be taken although it was still quite difficult to work out where the mouth of the bird was within its weird looking head. Retracing our steps from the trail, Angel Paz, the 'antpitta whisperer', successfully coaxed out a Giant Antpitta with calls and food, something he has been doing for over twenty years now. Along the trail we also gained sight of a distant roosting Common Potoo, perfectly camouflaged as it perched on its favourite tree stump. Relocating to a different part of the reserve we managed to successfully view Moustached and Rufous-breasted Antpittas before we headed off to the lodge for coffee and a traditional brunch of empanadas and bolon dumplings.

Following brunch, we gained close views of Chestnut-crowned and Yellow-breasted Antpittas and had therefore successfully seen all five Antpittas known to inhabit the reserve, and a bonus Rufous-breasted Antthrush too. During one of the stopping points on our way out of the reserve we found a well disguised Lyre-tailed Nightjar resting up.

Lunch was again taken at the Septimo Paraiso Lodge and the afternoon we walked different areas and trails around Milpe Road. This reserve consists of a mixture of primary forest, regenerating forest, and pasture. Here we saw Smooth-billed Ani, Little Cuckoo, Choco Toucan, Yellow-throated Toucan, Guayaquil Woodpecker, Laughing Falcon, Pale-mandibled Aracari, Choco Tyrannulet, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue-black Grassquit and Beryl-spangled Tanager. Overhead, we saw both Black and Turkey Vultures.

With the light fading, we made our journey back to the lodge for the last of our three nights in the Mindo region.

Day 5

Monday 6th November

It was no longer a surprise to be up before dawn, today having a quick coffee before loading the van and leaving Septimo Paradaiso in darkness. We headed back towards Quito, arriving at the Amagusa Reserve around 6.30am, just as the day dawned.

Following a quick box breakfast, we soon settled down on the veranda overlooking the gardens. Several different feeding stations, coupled with the surrounding trees and bushes, successfully attracted a wide variety of birds. Here we saw Little Cuckoo, White-throated Quail-Dove, Eared Dove, Zeladon's Antbird, Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner, Choco Tyrannulet, Social Flycatcher, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, House Wren, Southern Nightingale-Wren, Black-striped Sparrow and Shiny Cowbird. We were also treated to an Indigo Flowerpiercer in action, watching it gently 'attack' each blossom with its specially adapted bill.

On the north side of the lodge along a winding path we located a plantain feeder and a set of hummingbird feeders. The plantain feeder was frequented by many tanagers including a few new species for the trip. The photographers amongst us gained close-up shots of Glistening-green, Blue-grey, Golden-collared, Golden-naped, Flame-faced, Moss-backed, Golden, Lemon-rumped and Rufous-throated Tanagers, the latter a Choco endemic. In the

surrounding trees we spotted Red-faced Spinetail, Orange-breasted Fruiteater, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, White-throated Tuftedcheek and three Rose-faced Parrots.

The hummingbird feeders were busy, and we enjoyed White-whiskered Hermit, Sparkling Violetear, White-throated Daggerbill, Green Thorntail, Violet-tailed Slyph, Black-tailed Trainbearer and Velvet-purple Coronet. We were able to hold small bunches of flowers and get even closer views with the hummingbirds resting on your hand to feed. It was amazing to feel how gentle they were and that they are so light as to feel almost weightless.

Walking some of the trails from the lodge, it seemed a little quiet after the previous activity, but it was soon quality over quantity, with great views of Toucan Barbet and Club-winged Manakin. We also had further opportunities to watch and photograph Golden and Moss-backed Tanagers, Golden-collared Honeycreeper and Ornate Flycatcher.

Setting off in a light drizzle on the next stage of our journey to Quito, we gained sightings of Cattle Egret, Neotropic Cormorant, Snowy Egret, Black Vulture and Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle on the way. We arrived at the outskirts of Quito and passed the monument to the equator, in the late afternoon, for a one-night stay at the extremely welcoming Puembo Birding Garden, run by the Rivadeneira family. Although the gardens are relatively small, there are numerous bushes and tropical flowers which attract the birds. Alongside the outdoor eating area there is a large one-way window which allows guests to view the feeding stations merely two metres away without disturbing the birds. Here we gained good views of Saffron Finch, Shiny Cowbird, Croaking Ground Dove and Band-tailed Pigeon. Black-tailed Trainbearer appeared briefly along with two new birds, Blue-and-Yellow and Scrub Tanagers.

Day 6

Tuesday 7th November

Following another early breakfast, we left for Quito airport to catch our short flight over the eastern Andes to Coca, the gateway for our journey into the Amazon and a four-night stay at the amazing Sacha Lodge. The increase in temperature and humidity was immediately noticeable upon arrival as we walked down the aircraft steps. We were met at the airport by representatives from the lodge and transported initially to a private house to freshen up and to prepare for the river journey ahead. Fully kitted-out in our life vests, we walked down to the jetty at the Napo River where we boarded our motorised canoe. The Napo River is a tributary of the Amazon and at this point is around 500m wide. White-winged Swallows were busy feeding over the water and Swallow-tailed Kites gave great views too. The 80km journey took just under two hours until we disembarked, and then walked for twenty minutes through the forest on a raised boardwalk. Another, yet smaller, jetty eventually loomed out of the trees and here we climbed into a traditional dugout canoe for the final ten-minute ride across the oxbow lake to the lodge. Thankfully, we didn't need to do the paddling ourselves as the role was performed by two of the lodge guides. As we found out during our four-night stay, everything was extremely well-organised and worked like clockwork.

Following a welcome drink and a traditional hearty lunch, we were fitted up with wellington boots and ponchos. We found out later in the week why these were an important part of our attire! Our luggage was already outside our individual cabins and we had a chance to settle in and have a short siesta prior to our afternoon itinerary. The cabins could be described as luxurious with comfortable beds, large bathrooms with a shower area overlooking the jungle, air conditioning, more than ample storage/hanging space and a private outside veranda, again facing the jungle.

After our siesta, we met our guides at the jetty and we climbed back into one of the dugout canoes and set off to paddle around the oxbow lake and up the Bilchicocha Orchid Creek. Here we saw our first Hoatzins, with good close views of these unique birds. We also spotted Greater Ani, Smooth-billed Ani, Anhinga, Green-backed Trogon, Ringed Kingfisher, Green-and-rufous Kingfisher, Cream-coloured Woodpecker, Great and Lesser Kiskadee, Social Flycatcher, Black-capped Donacobius, Black-billed Thrush, Yellow-rumped Cacique, Masked Crimson Tanager and a fleeting glimpse of a Sungrebe skulking in the undergrowth. A family of White-banded Swallows had a favoured perch on the railings next to the restaurant. In addition to the birds we also saw Black Caiman, White Caiman, Black Agouti, Columbian Howler Monkey, White-fronted Capuchin and a very well disguised dozing Three-toed Sloth.

After a three course á la carte meal in the outside restaurant we went through the day's bird list before retiring for some well-deserved sleep.

Day 7

Wednesday 8th November

Today was not a day for the faint-hearted as we were going to spend the morning at Sacha Lodge's world famous 36-metre-high canopy walkway. The 300m elevated walkway is suspended above the forest floor by three observation towers, each having a small observation platform. Having climbed to the top, we literally had a bird's-eye view of the surrounding canopy, where birds were plentiful and varied. We gained sight of Speckled Chachalaca, Spix's Guan, Greater Yellow-headed Vulture, Plumbeous Kite, Crane Hawk, Roadside Hawk, White-tailed and Green-backed Trogons, Gilded Barbet, Lettered Aracari, White-throated Toucan, Yellow-tufted Woodpecker, Black Caracara, Slender-footed Tyrannulet, Cinnamon Atilla, Plum-throated Cotinga, Spangled Cotinga, Black-tailed Tityra, White-browed Purpletuff, Red-eyed Vireo, Russet-backed Oropendola, Crested Oropendola, Yellow-rumped Cacique, Green and Purple Honeycreepers, Yellow-bellied Dacnis, and Flame-crested, Opal-rumped, Masked and Palm Tanagers. A wide range of parrots and macaws flew overhead including Blue-headed Parrot and Black-headed Parrots, Yellow-crowned and Orange Winged Amazons, Dusky-headed Parakeet, and Red-bellied Macaw and Chestnut-fronted Macaws.

Oscar, our Sacha Lodge bird guide also spotted a Giant Potoo from the last section of walkway, but it proved challenging to see, as it required you to stop part-way across, not easy to do at 36m up on a suspended walkway! Oscar also picked up a Wire-tailed Manakin on the walk back through the forest.

Lunch was taken at the lodge and as we were dining we heard the distant calls of Giant Otters across the other side of the oxbow lake. However, luck was on our side, as the family of four otters swam over towards the restaurant and starting feeding just adjacent to the decked area. Lunch was briefly paused as we took in this wonderful and unexpected sight. After lunch we climbed aboard our dugout canoe once more, crossing the lake towards Anaconda Creek. We immediately gained closer views of the Sungrebe as it swam across the lake as well as Great and Lesser Kiskadee, Masked Crimson Tanager and Tropical Kingbird along the lake side. The creek itself it was eerily quiet, but a Zig Zag Heron was a great find. We also passed under a Caiman Lizard sleeping on an overhead tree branch and patience brought views of an Orange-breasted Manakin, Silvered Antbird and Peruvian Warbling Antbird.

A few of the group enjoyed a short night walk with views of fireflies, a tarantula, cicadas and a Tailless Whip-scorpion, as well as a perfect demonstration of the pitch-black environment, when Oscar asked everyone to turn

off the torches to demonstrate how easy it would be to get lost! Another fabulous three-course evening meal was to follow.

Day 8

Thursday 9th November

The primary objective for today was to travel down the Napo River and visit two parrot licks. The first of these was situated high above the river bank where, most mornings, various species of parrot fly in and literally eat clay from the outcrop. These mineral-rich clays are believed to help digestion and to build immunity against disease. At the start of our boat trip we were treated to good views of an Amazonian Umbrella Bird. Once this had flown, our attention was drawn to a Black-fronted Nunbird. This was a good start to a day that was to become more challenging. Upon arrival at the first lick, it could be seen that the clay bank was deserted, but many parrots including Blue-headed Parrot and both Yellow-crowned and Mealy Amazons were flocking higher up the mountainside on the surrounding trees. Circling Black Vultures and Caracaras were, however, clearly making the parrots nervous, and none of them ventured down to the lick. We decided to cut our losses and travelled further down the river to one of the islands.

During the journey we had glimpses of Spotted Sandpiper, Great Egret, Cattle Egret, Black Vulture, Greater Yellow-headed Vulture, Swallow-tailed Kite, Black Caracara and Drab Water Tyrant. Disembarking from the boat, we walked across the sands to the small forested area in the centre of the island. After brief views of Pale-vented Pigeon, Violaceous Jay, Blue-grey Tanager, and Chestnut-bellied Seedeater, we realised why we had been provided with wellington boots and ponchos, as the heavens opened. With the rain set in it was decided that a visit to the second parrot lick would not be fruitful as they don't settle to eat the clay once it is wet, and by now it was torrential. Instead, we sought refuge at the lakeside shelter from the La Selva Lodge where we had our box lunch. In-between the deluges we spotted Scarlet-crowned Barbet, Many-banded Aracari, Turquoise Tanager and Bat Falcon in the overhead canopy and had a brief view of a Striated Heron beside the boats.

Taking advantage of a break in the rain we headed back to Sacha Lodge, clutching our umbrellas and grateful for our ponchos on the boat ride. The rain eased up and the remainder of the afternoon was spent around the oxbow lake and Orchid Creek. The brighter weather appeared to bring out the birds again and around the lakeside, amongst others, we gained views of Greater Ani, Limpkin, Anhinga, Hoatzin, Black-capped Donacobius and Red-capped Cardinal. Within the creek we saw a lovely Rufescent Tiger Heron as well as American Pygmy Kingfisher and Ringed Kingfisher.

Day 9

Friday 10th November

With the previous day's rain behind us, we were all up early again to enjoy a sunny start to our last full day at Sacha Lodge. Excitement mounted as we were to spend the morning at the lodge's 43-metre canopy tower, constructed around a giant kapok tree. The short canoe journey took us back across the lake and down Orchid Creek at 5.30am as dawn was breaking. Fortunately, there was enough light to pick up views of the Agami Heron, as well as a group of Squirrel Monkeys, White-faced Capuchins and Howler Monkeys. Once at the tower, we had fantastic views across the canopy and could even spot the Napo River in the distance. A wide variety of birds was to be seen including Spix's Guan, Double-toothed Kite, Slat-coloured Hawk, Purplish Jacamar, White-fronted Nunbird, Gilded Barbet, Ivory-billed Aracari, Chestnut-eared and Many-banded Aracaris, Golden-collared Toucanet, White-throated Toucan, Yellow-tufted, Ringed and Crimson-crested Woodpeckers, Cobalt-winged Parakeet, Bronze-

winged and Black-headed Parrots, Red-bellied and Blue-and-Yellow Macaws, Buff-throated Woodcreeper, Fasciated Antshrike, Black-faced Antbird, Slender-footed Tyrannulet, Ochre-bellied and Boat Billed Flycatchers, Yellow-margined Flatbill, Plum-throated and Spangled Cotingas, Whit-lored and Rufous-bellied Euphonias, Blackpoll Warbler, Scarlet Tanager, Green and Purple Honeycreepers, Blue and Yellow-bellied Dacnises, and Flame-crested Tanager, Blue-grey, Palm, Green-and-gold, Turquoise, Purple and Opal-crowned Tanagers. A very distant scope view of a Harpy Eagle was also a great spot.

A short walk before heading back to the canoes made it worth wearing the wellies as we had beautiful views of a Night Monkey, peeking out of its daytime rest hole.

Lunch was again taken at the lodge and during our siesta time several of us viewed Russet-backed Oropendola, Violaceous Jay, Yellow-rumped Cacique, and Greater and Smooth-billed Anis from our cabin verandas. A troop of Black-mantled Tamarins entertained us as they navigated the trees next to the cabins. A visit to the butterfly house also proved interesting.

The afternoon was spent paddling around the main creek and then along the Higuera Trail. The weather was again favourable, and we gained further sightings of Sungrebe, Pale-vented Pigeon, Anhinga, Hoatzin, Ringed Kingfisher, Grey-capped and Short-crested Flycatchers, Black-capped Donacobius, Thrush-Like Wren and Red-capped Cardinal, as well as new birds: Sooty Antbird, Grey Antwren and a suitably small Tiny Hawk. As we headed back to the lodge in the dark our local guide spotted a Great Potoo perched in one of the lakeside trees. It was a great end to the day.

Day 10

Saturday 11th November

Departure day, and bags were collected from our lodges at 5.15am, just as the rain began. Tucking into our early breakfast we stared gloomily at the torrential rain sweeping across the lake, by now accompanied by thunder and spectacular lightning. Having donned wellington boots, waterproof trousers and ponchos we braved the canoe trip and boardwalk, arriving at the Napo River jetty a little wet, but appreciating the value of our wet-weather gear! We boarded the motorised canoe for the journey back to Coca. Luckily the canoe had plastic side panels which allowed us to start drying out and, thankfully, before we had reached our destination, the rain had stopped completely.

Having bade farewell to our wellies and ponchos we boarded our minibus along with our (surprisingly dry) luggage which had been transported separately, and headed by road towards Cabanas San Isidro, which would be our base for the next two nights. En route we had a first sighting of Magpie Tanager and a Cliff Flycatcher perched on wires, as well as the ever present Black and Turkey Vultures overhead. We arrived at Cabanas San Isidro just in time for lunch, but were soon out on the veranda which overlooked the gardens, hummingbird feeders and moth trap. Many hummingbirds were flitting around including Sparkling Violetear, Speckled Hummingbird, Long-tailed Sylph, Bronzy Inca, Collared Inca, Chestnut-breasted Coronet, and Fawn-breasted and Violet-fronted Brilliants. The surrounding bushes and trees attracted Olive-backed Woodcreeper, Pale-edged Flycatcher, Blackburnian and Canada Warblers, and Slate-throated Whitestart.

Following lunch, we walked some of the trails and roads adjacent to the lodge. Here we saw Golden-headed Quetzal, Red-billed and White-capped Parrots, Orange-winged Amazon, Torrent Tyrannulet, Common Chlorospingus, Russet-backed and Crested Oropendolas, Black-crested Warbler, Bluish Flowerpiercer and Safron-

crowned Tanager. We were additionally treated to a sighting of a juvenile Andean Potoo, and our guide spotted its mother equally well disguised sitting a mere ten metres away.

Our evening meal was interrupted for a while as we all ran outside to view the (San Isidro) Black-banded Owl which had perched a few metres away from the outside veranda. Like most owls it was completely unfazed by being illuminated by torchlight and the photographers amongst us got some great shots.

Day 11

Sunday 12th November

Rising to another rainy day, it was decided to spend the early morning hours at the lodge. The moth 'sheet' had attracted a good variety on which the birds could feed: a 'pick and mix' breakfast deal! A huge Rothschild's Moth on the veranda was great to see and when Inca Jays selected just this species it was amazing to see them remove the wings and enjoy the rest – not so great for a beautiful moth though! The family of Inca Jays treated us to really great views. We gained good views of a similar set of hummingbirds to those we had seen the previous day and better views of Olive-backed Woodcreeper, Saffron-crowned Tanager, Montane Woodcreeper, Pale-edged and Golden-bellied Flycatchers, Blackburnian and Canada Warblers, Black-billed Peppershrike, Brown-capped Vireo, Swainson's Thrush, Common Chlorospingus, Russet-backed Oropendola, and Slate-throated Whitestart. Several new birds for our trip included Black-eared Hemispingus, Subtropical Cacique, Smoke-coloured Pewee, Mountain Wren and Azara's Spinetail.

A short drive took us up to La Brisa where there was another well set-out hummingbird garden. As hummingbirds are not put off by the rain, we could watch them feed from our sheltered viewpoint, enjoying Lesser Violetear, Purple-crowned Fairy, Peruvian Racket-tail, Purple-bibbed Whitetip and Gorgeted Woodstar, and Bananaquit, the latter happily taking sugar water from the hummingbird feeders.

A walk along the trails in the adjacent gardens and woodland brought views of Squirrel Cuckoo, Broad-winged Hawk and White-throated (Emerald) Toucanet. We returned to San Isidro and a few minutes on the veranda before lunch were rewarded with brief views of Geoffroy's Daggerbill, Tawny-bellied Hermit, and White-tailed Tyrannulet.

After lunch and despite the rain, we headed out on a short drive from the lodge to the Cosanga River where we had successful scope views of a male Torrent Duck, a Black Phoebe and a Torrent Tyrannulet. We walked several stretches of the road back into San Isidro, picking up the elusive Rufous-crowned Tody-flycatcher in the stands of bamboo, as well as a Streak-necked Flycatcher.

In line with our usual routine, we went through the day's listing after dinner, before retiring early to bed for our last night at Cabanas San Isidro.

Day 12

Monday 13th November

A few of us met up on the lodge's veranda prior to breakfast as the sun rose, in order to ascertain which birds would be drawn by the moth trap and surrounding trees. It was relatively quiet on the hummingbird front, but a male Masked Trogon made an appearance alongside Olive-backed and Montane Woodcreeper, s Cinnamon Flycatcher, Scarlet-rumped Cacique and the prize of an Andean Solitaire.

Leaving Cabanas San Isidro behind, we drove over to Concierto de las Aves. On the way in to the lodge we caught views of two Magpie Tanagers, Chestnut-bellied Seedeater, Red-breasted Blackbird and a Sickle-winged Guan. The enthusiastic lodge owner introduced us to his grounds and the beautiful surrounding valley. In the grounds we gained amazing close-up views of a single male Andean Cock-of-the-Rock. Unlike the bright red males we had seen on the west side of the Andes, this male was more orange in colour. The garden also attracted hummingbirds including our first views of Tourmaline Sunangel and an Andean Motmot. Walking slightly further up the valley alongside the river, the best sightings included both male and female Crested Quetzals, although a pair of Torrent Tyrannulets were good too.

We arrived at our destination, Guango Lodge (2400m), in time for a spot of birding before lunch. The two hummingbird feeder stations added two new species (White-bellied Woodstar and Mountain Velvetbreast) to our impressive list of hummers. But others also showed well including Tawny-bellied Hermit, Tourmaline Sunangel, Speckled Hummingbird, Long-tailed Sylph, Sword-billed Hummingbird, Buff-tailed and Chestnut-breasted Coronet, Green-backed Hillstar and Violet-fronted Brilliant. It was always interesting to see which species were dominant over the others: in this instance the Chestnut-breasted Coronet gained most points for behaving like a school bully.

Although we would spend only one night here, we would have sufficient time to walk the various trails, scan the hummingbird feeders and settle down in the garden hide. After lunch, we braved the challenging trail up to the area where the Grey-breasted Mountain Toucan had been reported, with ripe bananas and grapes left out to tempt it closer. Unfortunately, two hours of patience were not rewarded with the toucan, but we did have good views of both Great Thrush and Andean Guan, before it was time to slip-slide down the treacherous path and settle into our overnight accommodation ready for dinner.

Day 13

Tuesday 14th November

We woke up to light rain showers, and following another early breakfast we headed down to the lodge's garden hide. Although the sun had already risen, the birds were still homing in on this part of the forest. We gained good views of Andean Guan, Turquoise and Inca Jays, House Wren, Great Thrush, Grey-browed and Chestnut-capped Brushfinches, Blackburnian Warbler, Grey-hooded Bush Tanager, Hooded Mountain Tanager, Russet-crowned Warbler and Mountain Caciue. Around the lodge itself and the trails we saw Collared Inca, Masked Flowerpiercer and Spectacled Whitestart. By mid-morning the group had split into two, with one group walking down to the river while the others ensconced themselves in front of the hummingbird feeders to practise their photography skills. Good photographs were obtained of Violet-tailed Sylph, White-bellied Woodstar, Buff-tailed and Chestnut-breasted Coronets and Long-tailed Sylph. Those who went down to the river saw a female Torrent Duck as well as a distant White-capped Dipper. Two of the group also braved the slippery slope and were treated to excellent views of the Grey-chested Mountain Toucan.

After a quick lunch it was time to leave Guango Lodge and drive west towards Quito. Our journey included a quick stop at Papallacta Lake where we saw Yellow-billed Pintail and Andean Teal. We then made our way up to the Cayambe Coca Ecological Reserve where the topmost Antennae station is set at 4350m. On the journey, Plain-breasted Hawk was spotted by some, along with Variable Hawk and Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle and the usual Black and Turkey Vultures. The highlight at the top was a very close view of a well-camouflaged and impressive Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe. Stopping the minibus intermittently to walk stretches of road on the way down, we

gained sightings of Chestnut-winged and Stout-billed Cinclodes, Many-striped Canestero, Blue-mantled Thornbill, White-chinned Thistletail, Andean Tit-spinetail, Tawny Antpitta, Rufous-breasted Chat-Tyrant, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and Plumbeous Sierra Finch. As the clouds parted and the sun came out, we had some spectacular views of the glacier-topped Antisana volcano. We stopped once more after leaving the reserve to scan the mountainside, and struck lucky with scope views of a Spectacled Bear making its way up a well-used trail.

By late afternoon we arrived at Puenbo Birding Garden for what would sadly be our last night in Ecuador.

Day 14

Wednesday 15th November

Following our final Ecuadorian breakfast at 5.30am, we bade farewell to our welcoming hosts at Puenbo and drove to the Antisana Ecological Reserve. With light rain and mist, our views of Antisana were not as good as those from the eastern side the previous day, but the scenery was just as spectacular. Due to close control of vehicular access, we had a short wait at the entrance gate, seeing an Andean cowboy mount up, before we entered the reserve. We stopped first at a man-made viewing point and spotted Black Flowerpiercer, Black-tailed Trainbearer and Plumbeous Sierra Finch sitting atop the bushes. We had hoped to see Andean Condor soaring on the thermals, but the cool weather and reduced visibility meant we had to be satisfied with some distant views of a few of them sitting on the mountainside ledges.

Ensuring we were well wrapped up against the cold and wind at this 4000m altitude we ventured out of the minibus in search of high-altitude birds. The rain had luckily stopped and scanning the short grasses and stunted vegetation brought views of Andean Lapwing, Andean Ibis, Carunculated Caracara, Paramo Ground Tyrant, Paramo Pipit, Cinerous Conebill, Plain-coloured Seedeater, and Ecuadorian Hillstar, as well as a herd of White-tailed Deer and better views of Chestnut-winged and Stout-billed Cinclodes.

At La Mica Lake we saw Grass Wren and scanned the water, seeing Andean Duck, Yellow-billed Pintail, Andean Teal, Andean Coot and Laughing Gull. Driving back down towards our lunch stop we paused briefly at the warden's lodge. Here we saw (Feral) Rock Dove, Black-winged Ground Dove, Great Thrush, Eared Dove, Andean Tit-Spinetail, and an extremely confiding Tawny Antpitta.

During our four-course lunch at the Tambo Condor Restaurant we gained close-up views of Tyrian Metaltail and our final hummer of the trip, a Giant Hummingbird on the feeders. Black Flowerpiercers also took advantage of the sugared water feeders. As we left the reserve for our journey to the airport, the photographers amongst us managed to acquire a last photo of the holiday, a perfectly perched Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle.



Clockwise from top left: Glistening Green Tanager, Cock-of-the-Rock, Cinnamon Flycatcher, Equatorial Antpitta



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