

Go Slow in Ecuador

Naturetrek Tour Report

5th – 15th December 2025



Yellow-breasted Brushfinch



Booted Racket-tail



Glistening-green Tanager



Purple-bibbed Whitetip

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Pre-tour Quito extension

Day 1

Friday 5th December

The UK clients' flight left Heathrow early in the morning, and connected via Madrid, delivering them to Ecuador late afternoon local time. Two clients also flew in from the USA.

Day 2

Saturday 6th December

Quito Old Town and Botanical Gardens

7-21°C; clear, sunny, and quite warm in the afternoon

Five clients had signed up for the Quito History and Culture Pre-tour Extension. After a hotel breakfast buffet, we met Ivan, our guide, and Marco, our driver, and off we went to El Panecillo, a 200m hill which overlooks Quito. Perched at 3016m, we had a lovely view of the city, which is long (40km), but not wide (~3km).

Atop El Panecillo (Spanish for small piece of bread) is a 45m tall statue of the Virgin Mary. Designed by the Spanish Artist Agustín de la Herrán Matorras, the Virgin of El Panecillo is made of more than seven thousand pieces of aluminium. While the design is typical of a traditional madonna, a unique feature is her wings. Under her watchful eye, we marvelled at the seventeen volcanoes that ring the city. Quito is truly cradled by the Andes.

And there were birds to be seen! Rufous-collared Sparrow (quite striking, but very common), Eared Ground Doves, Great Thrush and the always delightful Black-tailed Trainbearer were easily seen. Brown-bellied Swallows (rather dark) and an American Kestrel flew overhead, and Sparkling Violetears were also spotted.

We headed back into Quito, a word that was probably derived from *quitsa* in Tsafiki, the native language of the Quito tribe which inhabited the region. *Quitsa* translates to “centre of the world”. Quito was the first city (along with Krakow) to be designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in 1978. Colonial and indigenous influences were all around us. For example, the plaza was built by the Spaniards at the place where the indigenous people from all around the area met to sell their goods. Catholic churches are abundant, but often oriented to the sun and the moon, a nod to the indigenous people. A highlight of our city tour was seeing the inside of the Church of the Society of Jesus (Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús), a church founded by the Jesuit Order in 1605. It took 160 years to complete and the inside is *completely* covered with gold leaf. The entire church is illuminated by natural light. It was stunning!

We walked around the city, taking in its vibrancy. A fun surprise was a request from the Tourist Police for a picture of our group posing with them as...tourists. We happily complied. The city pulsed with energy as it was celebrating its foundation 491 years ago (Las Fiestas de Quito). We explored the La Ronda area (the original old town), and then had a delicious lunch. Afterwards, we all felt like having a siesta; alas it was not possible, since we were heading to the Botanical Garden about twenty minutes from our hotel.

The Quito Botanical Garden features plants and trees from many different Ecuadorian biomes. Ivan was not just a font of knowledge about the city, but also a capable birder. Great Thrush, Sparkling Violetear and Black-tailed Trainbearer were seen again. Mallard, Golden Grosbeak, Cinereous Conebill, Vermillion Flycatcher and Purple Gallinule were also seen. Two of us had good looks at a bird high up in the canopy, which we later worked out was a Chivi Vireo. In all, we saw sixteen species of birds over the day, and everyone in the group saw at least one life bird.

We returned to our hotel to find the street blocked: it was time for the Las Fiestas de Quito parade. School marching bands played (heavy on the drums) and participants twirled and danced well into the night. There were also late-night fireworks. We ate dinner at the hotel buffet and did the checklist, before returning to our room to prepare for our 6.00am start, to visit Antisana National Park.

Day 3

Sunday 7th December

Antisana National Park

Clear and sunny; a bit chilly due to the altitude (4200m), but no wind

Manuel, our guide, and José, our driver, met us at 6.00am, and we were quickly on our way for the one-hour drive from Quito to the high slopes of the *páramo* and Antisana National Park. As the sun rose, we could see many of the volcanoes that surround Quito. It seemed a bit incongruous to have snow-capped volcanoes at the equator, and they were a beautiful sight.

Our first stop was to check for Andean Condors at their nesting site. We easily saw three adults, which, like us, were waiting for the day to warm up and (in their cases) for the first thermals to arise. From the overlook we saw Andean Gull, Tyrian Metaltail, Shining Sunbeam, Black Flowerpiercer, Plain-colored Seedeater and Sparkling Violetear. Grass Wren was heard but not seen. And we had a real treat: we saw not one, but two Spectacled Bears, the only species of bear in South America. They were likely both females, or a female and a juvenile, and one was heartily noshing on a Puya bromeliad, their favourite food. What a good way to start our day!

We continued to Antisana National Park, enjoying the spectacular scenery. Around us were several volcanoes, many above 5000m; some were dormant, some were not. As far as the eye could see was the northern Andean *páramo*, an ecosystem only found in Ecuador and Colombia. Broadly described as an alpine tundra, it comprises short and tall (tussock) grasses, cushion plants (low-growing and matted), and rosette plants (efficient at capturing sunlight and water), as well as shrubs and trees. The grasses ranged in colour from light straw to darker brown, as well as a variety of greens. Some of the cushion plants were bright green, while others were duller, but all were hugging the ground, some showing delicate flowers in yellow, pink, blue or white. Five Llamas and many White-tailed Deer were seen from the road. From the smallest flowers to the tallest volcanoes (Cotopaxi and Antisana), the sense of scale was breathtaking.

Against this backdrop, we identified a number of birds: Carunculated Caracara (endemic to the northern Andes), American Kestrel, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Brown-bellied Swallow, Black-winged Ground Dove, and Chestnut-winged and Stout-billed Cinclodes (endemic to the northern Andes), as well as the usual suspects in Great Thrush, Rufous-collared Sparrow and Cinereous Conebill. We had good views of an Aplomado Falcon and

Paramo Pipit. Spectacled Whitestart, Tufted Tit-Tyrant, Plumbeous Sierra Finch and Plain-capped Ground Tyrant were seen, and a Variable Hawk adorned the sky above us. At the entrance to the park, Manuel heard a Tawny Antpitta (a near-endemic). Just as he was explaining that they are generally shy and hard to see, two flew out into full view. Nice birds!

We headed to Laguna de Mica, a beautiful high-altitude lagoon, hoping for Silvery Grebe. There was no wind, which greatly helped our search. One Neotropic Cormorant flew by, as did three Baird's Sandpipers. The Silvery Grebe was cooperative, but Andean Coot and Ruddy Duck were far away. No worries: we eventually had a good look at them from the other side of the lagoon, as well as Andean Teal and Andean Duck. In the bushes next to the lagoon were lots of cinclodes, and a beautiful Ecuadorian Hillstar, another near-endemic. With such good conditions, we didn't want to leave, but lunch was calling us at Tambo Condor.

As we were driving back, Manuel saw a Many-striped Canastero fly across the road. Stop the van! *Canastero* is a Spanish word for basket maker, which describes their nest. These birds can be difficult to see in dense shrubs, but they occasionally perch in the open. Once it was pinned down, we all had excellent views of its bold white streaking, and we heard it singing.

For lunch, our starter was *locro*, a traditional potato soup. We had a choice of main course, and ended the meal with a sweet fig and cheese dessert. After coffee, we turned our attention to the feeders on the balcony. Within a minute, we heard a loud, sharp call, and then a Giant Hummingbird hopped onto the feeder. The largest hummingbird in the world, its size was impressive, although its plumage was rather drab. Other hummingbirds seen at the numerous feeders were Sword-billed Hummingbird, Black-tailed Trainbearer, Sparkling Violetear and Great Sapphirewing. Bush birds included Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant, Hooded Siskin, Spectacled Whitestart and Yellow-breasted Brushfinch. Eventually, we needed to make the drive back to Quito, so we all walked slowly to the van (the elevation humbled anyone who attempted fast walking). We saw Black Vulture on our drive back from Antisana.

At checklist time, there was no clear consensus for the title of Bird of the Day. Silvery Grebe was a target bird for one of us, so his choice was easy. Others were partial to the Many-striped Canastero, while others still were torn between Andean Condor and Many-striped Canastero. As a result, the furnariiid was the winner of the day, with three votes.

Just in time for our welcome dinner, the final two group members arrived from the UK, one of whom was the sole photographer in the group (her pictures grace this report). Manuel summarized our plans for tomorrow, and we all went off to bed in anticipation of another great day.

Main tour

Day 1

Sunday 7th December

Clients joining the main tour only flew in from London, and met up with their five colleagues in their Quito hotel.

Day 2

Monday 8th December

Quito to Guaycapi Lodge via Zuroloma

Sunny and bright

The weather continued to be cold in the early morning, but sunny and warm the rest of the day. Eared Dove was the first sighting of the day, as we pulled out from the hotel. Our driver, José, calmly negotiated Quito's Monday morning traffic. After about an hour, we stopped along the old Nono/Mindo road and checked the temperate forest. Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager was seen, and Blackish Tapaculo was heard. The forest was generally quiet, but we were rewarded with two Andean Condors perched in the grass, which later gave us aerial views. A Páramo Rabbit scuttered across the road.

Our primary destination this morning was Reserva Zuroloma, a beautiful reserve in the shadow of Ruku Pichincha and Wawa Pichincha nearby: the latter is one of the active volcanoes surrounding Quito. At 4784m, it is hard to miss Pichincha's twin peaks on the horizon. The last eruption was in 1999, and it covered Quito in a layer of ash. Pichincha also played prominently in Ecuador's independence: General Sucre's army defeated the Spanish colonial army on its southeast slopes in 1822.



Chestnut-naped Antpitta



Green Thorntail

Reserva Zuroloma is a highlands reserve located at 3200m, and is famous for bird observation and photography. A short hike down the trail brought us to ten hummingbird feeders, and a small hollow where we hoped to see antpittas. Thanks to some juicy worms that proved irresistible, everyone saw Chestnut-crowned Antpitta (described as a plump ball on sticks by Merlin) and Chestnut-naped Antpitta. A few of us also saw a Tawny

Antpitta, which appeared briefly to the left of the other antpittas. Manuel didn't realize that we'd spotted Chestnut-crowned Antpitta, so he was a bit surprised during the checklist that evening, but a photo from a point-and-shoot camera confirmed the identification!

We turned our attention to the hummingbird feeders. Where to look first? There were so many possibilities. The hummingbirds came in all sizes: Collared Inca (large with a flashy white throat), Sapphire-vented Puffleg (large and lanky) and Buff-winged Starfrontlet (large and long billed) were in contrast with the small Speckled Hummingbird and the tiny White-bellied Woodstar, which was the size of a large bumblebee. The Masked Flowerpiercer was a study in contrasts: all blue body, black mask and beautiful red eye. Black, Glossy and White-sided Flowerpiercers were also seen. Although common, the Hooded Mountain Tanager was a show stopper with its bold colours: blue back, black head, red eye, and brilliant yellow breast. Yellow-breasted Brushfinch was also striking, with its yellow breast, black face, and rufous crown.



Hooded Mountain Tanager



Tyrian Metaltail

Reluctantly, we headed a short distance further, to four more feeders. Was there more to be seen? Yes! Sparkling Violetear, Mountain Velvetbreast, Sword-billed Hummingbird, Gorged Sunangel (a Chocó endemic) and Tyrian Metaltail rounded out the list. Eventually we hiked back up the path. One client, who seemed to always be in the right place at the right time, also saw a Blue-capped Tanager. Fortunately for the rest of the group, this Andean thrupid showed very well at Guaycapi Lodge later on.

On the way to our lunch stop, we stopped along the road and found White-crested Elaenia, White-tailed Tyrannulet, Band-tailed Pigeon, White-tipped and Rock Doves (the latter introduced), Slaty-backed Chat-Tyrant, Blackburnian Warbler, Black Phoebe and Rusty-margined Flycatcher. A few of us managed to have a short glimpse of a very reluctant and secretive group of Andean Guans, and Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle and Black Vulture were seen as well.

We had a tasty lunch at Mirador Guaycapi Restaurant. While eating, we watched the hummingbird feeders and the fruit that had been put out for the other birds. The variety was excellent, and Manuel did a superb job of keeping them all straight for us. Hummingbirds included Purple-throated Woodstar, Andean Emerald, White-necked Jacobin, Green-crowned Brilliant, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and Crowned Woodnymph. Tanagers were well represented too, with Palm, Lemon-rumped, Silver-throated, Golden, Golden-naped, Blue-winged Mountain, Blue-grey, Summer, Blue-necked, and Black-capped Tanagers, all seemingly vying for 'Best in Show'. But the extravaganza didn't stop there: Red-headed Barbet, Thick-billed and Orange-bellied Euphonias, Tropical Parula and Bananaquit all made an appearance.

In the afternoon, we headed to Guaycapi Lodge, a family-run lodge which opened just a year ago. *Guaycapi* is the Quechua word for water flow, according to its owner and manager, Jorge. The main veranda and each room look out onto the cloud forest. From the veranda in the late afternoon, we saw Purple-bibbed Whitetip, Violet-tailed Sylph, Brown Inca, Velvet-purple Coronet (all of them Chocó endemics), Brown Violetear, Buff-tailed Coronet, Slate-throated Whitestart, White-winged Brushfinch, Empress Brilliant, Andean and Western Emeralds, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, and White-winged and Blue-winged Mountain Tanagers. Barred Parakeets raced across the sky on their way to roost.

In all, we saw at least seventy species over the day. While many birds were considered for Bird of the Day, Violet-tailed Sylph received the most votes. After an early start, significant driving, and action-packed birding, we were happy to settle into a leisurely dinner. Everyone enjoyed the *canelazo*, a hot welcome drink, containing *naranjilla* or other fruit juice, sugar, lemon, and cinnamon, with an optional addition of sugar cane alcohol. This was followed by a starter of courgette (zucchini) soup. Although we had a choice of entrée, most of us opted for mushroom omelette, which came with yummy potato cakes and seasoned asparagus. The dessert was pineapple in red wine. Sated with both food and birds, we happily retired to our rooms to prepare for our very early start in the morning.



Strong-billed Woodcreeper



Violet-tailed Sylph

Day 3

El Refugio de Las Aves and Guaycapi Lodge

Sunny and clear

Tuesday 9th December

We left at 5.00am to experience the Andean Cock-of-the-rock lek at the El Refugio Paz de Las Aves, or the Antpittas Reserve. Upon arrival, we scurried down the trail to the hide. Bingo! We immediately saw two and,

ultimately, saw five Andean Cocks-of-the-rock. The males made pig-like sounds and danced for the females: it was quite a show. Although we saw adult males and juveniles, no females responded, probably because they were caring for chicks. Timing is everything at the lek: it was probably quiet within fifteen minutes of our departure, so the very early start had been a necessity.

Now that we had the Andean Cock-of-the-rock under our belt, we set our sights on seeing a variety of antpittas: Giant, Moustached, Yellow-breasted, Chestnut-crowned, and Ochre-breasted were all possibilities. How? The answer is the persistence of Ángel Paz. Ángel and his family were farming the land when he discovered a small Andean Cock-of-the-rock lek in 2004. The local bird lodges encouraged him to clear a path to the lek to allow visitor access, and to allow him to diversify his income. As the path was being cleared, he noticed a plain, chunky bird, and he began to feed it worms. For months, he never missed a day, and eventually he earned the trust of his beloved antpittas, which are typically shy and hard to see in the wild. Birdwatchers began to visit to see the results of his efforts.

While the antpittas love the worms they are offered, it is not a done deal that they will be seen on any given day. On the day we were there, Ángel had no luck attracting the Giant Antpitta (endemic to the northern Andes) the first time. We waited patiently at the top of the trail while he coaxed Susana (he has named all the antpittas) out of hiding. Our second attempt was successful (although her partner, José, never showed). While waiting to descend the trail, we checked the trees and saw Blue-winged Mountain Tanager, Ecuadorian Thrush, Crested Guan, Red-faced Spinetail, Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Blackburnian Warbler, Common Squirrel Cuckoo, Flavescent Flycatcher and Velvet-purple Coronet. A Swallow-tailed Kite was low in the sky.



Cinnamon Flycatcher



Yellow-breasted Antpitta

Next, Ángel searched for Willamina, a Yellow-breasted Antpitta, another endemic of the region. This is a beautifully-coloured bird, and we saw its pale-yellow belly surrounded by rufous brown in good light. Like the antpittas, we were hungry too, and we enjoyed a lovely brunch at the Refuge, consisting of *bolón* (green plantain cooked and fried in a ball) and Ecuadorian cheese *empanadas*. We washed these tasty dishes down with good coffee (although some teabags mysteriously appeared from one client's pockets). From the veranda, we saw Montane Woodcreeper, Beryl-spangled Tanager and Dusky Chlorospingus (a Chocó endemic). Blue-and-white and Southern Rough-winged Swallows flew overhead.

Sufficiently fuelled, we headed down a steep trail in the hope of seeing a Moustached Antpitta, a very local endemic of the northern Andes. In the hush of the forest, Ángel called plaintively: “*Maria. Venga. Venga*” (Come). And she did come, which was a thrill for all of us.

Next, we tried for Ochre-breasted Antpitta. We waited at a staging area (with feeders) for Ángel to signal us to descend, but, alas, this antpitta was not to be found. As compensation, we had good views of Toucan Barbet (a Chocó endemic) and Crimson-rumped Toucanet, as well as an agouti and a Red-tailed Squirrel. Grey-headed Kite and Broad-winged Hawk were heard, and some had brief views, while Turkey Vultures were high in the sky. Swainson's Thrush and White-winged Brushfinch were also seen.

We arrived back at the lodge, and after a quick refresh in our rooms, we gathered for lunch. Having had brunch earlier, some of us just ate the starter (tuna cucumber rolls) and the dessert: strawberry sherbet with a dab of condensed milk in a chocolate-coated parfait glass. But a few choose also to have an entrée. We were well-fed at this lodge!

After some downtime, we met at the veranda for a quick look, before taking the van a short distance down the road. "A quick look"? Hah! An hour and fifteen minutes later, we were still on the veranda, bombarded by birds. There were hummingbirds in abundance: White-necked Jacobin, Sparkling and Brown Violetears, Brown Inca, Buff-tailed Coronet, White-booted Racket-tail, Fawn-breasted, Green-crowned and Empress Briliants, Speckled and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Violet-tailed Sylph, Purple-throated Woodstar, Western and Andean Emeralds and Crowned Woodnymph.

And there were so many birds in the trees! Early on we had good views of Red-headed Barbet in a semi-distant tree, which was named "the Barbet Tree", creating a perfect point of reference. "Masked Flowerpiercer in the Barbet Tree." "On it!" "Beryl-spangled Tanager in the Barbet Tree." "Got it!" Closer to the veranda, we saw tanagers (Blue-capped, Golden, Golden-naped, Blue-grey and Black-capped), flycatchers (Ornate and Golden-bellied) and euphonias (Thick-billed and Orange-bellied). A Squirrel Cuckoo hid in a notch in a tree, and Purple-bibbed Whitetip, White-crested Elaenia, White-tailed Tyrannulet, Chivi Vireo, White-sided Flowerpiercer and Strong-billed Woodcreeper rounded out the list. A real treat was good views of Scaled Fruiteater (our Bird of the Day).

We got used to seeing Tropical Kingbird on the wires near our rooms, and we could always count on seeing Rufous-collared Sparrows. We knew the day was coming to an end when Barred Parakeets and Red-billed Parrots flew overhead. After completing the checklist and eating dinner (vegetable soup, steak or tomato rellenos, and lemon cake), we were ready to return to our rooms. It had been a fantastic day.

Day 4

Wednesday 10th December

Bellavista Road, Old Nanagalito Road, Alambi Reserve

Clear

Any chance of overnight showers dissipated, and the weather remained clear and sunny. Breakfast was at 6.30am, with a choice of eggs with toast, bacon, fruit, yogurt, and muesli. After our early start yesterday, today's breakfast was more casual.

The plan this morning was to bird the Bellavista Road. Our first sighting was a pair of Red-billed Parrots: it was nice to see them up close rather than high in the sky on their way back to their roost. The forest was rather quiet

this morning, although we did see a family of Beryl-spangled Tanagers. As we were enjoying our forest walk (but keeping our eyes peeled), Manuel found a Cinnamon Flycatcher. It stayed long enough for him to get it in the scope, and we had good views of both the back and the front. Spillmann's Tapaculo (a near-endemic) was heard.

We visited a small hide (at 2300 m), which didn't yield any birds, but we had a lovely view of the western slope of the Andes. Andes come from the Quechua word *Antis* (think Antisana), which means "where the ancestors are". We appreciated Manuel's outstanding bird identification skills, but also all the cultural titbits that he imparted.

As often happens in a quiet forest, all of a sudden a mixed flock came in: there was such a flurry of activity! Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Capped Conebill, Grass-green and Beryl-spangled Tanagers, Grey-hooded Bush Tanager, White-tailed Tyrannulet, and great looks at the Streaked Tuftedcheek. We heard, then saw, a Turquoise Jay, a beautiful blue jay with a thick, black mask, which was later voted Bird of the Day.

Manuel was so good at identifying the birds for us, but sometimes there is a need to check a photo or drawing to cement a bird in the brain. Some of us used Merlin on our phones, but our secret weapon was one of our colleagues' self-made field guide. In preparation for the trip, he had created a very specific, colour-coded compilation of likely birds. He was always ready to help by showing a quick picture or a comparison. We affectionately teased him about his system, which Manuel dubbed "the Bible."

At the junction of the road, we took the right fork, keeping our eyes out for the big target birds, Toucan Barbet and Golden-headed Quetzal. We had no luck in those regards, but we did have a look at an unexpected big bird on the ride home: Wattled Guan. These birds are hard to see in the dense forest, and are most often detected by voice. Manuel's ability to hear and then identify birds was a source of wonder throughout the trip. Other birds seen this morning included Turkey and Black Vultures, and Swallow-tailed Kite.

We had been out in the field all morning, and were looking forward to lunch back at the lodge, which did not disappoint: guacamole starter (not a drop was left), followed by a choice of tilapia with shrimp sauce, chicken, or lentil tortilla. Dessert was unfamiliar to most of us: a jellied fruit purée with a bit of condensed milk on top.

After a brief break, we headed back out for afternoon birding on the Bellavista road. Some of the birds seen were White-tipped Dove, Band-tailed Pigeon, Western Cattle Egret, Swallow-tailed Kite, Blue-and-white Swallow, Tropical Kingbird and Rufous-collared Sparrow. On Old Nanagalito Road we stopped to check for seedeaters. We saw hundreds of Black-and-white Seedeaters flying by. When they perched, we had good views of both males and females. We expected a flock, but the *size* of this flock was quite surprising.

Our final destination was Reserva Alambi. This is a family-run reserve in the Chocó Andean ecosystem. This ecosystem has extremely high biodiversity, not just of birds, but of plants and vertebrates too. Part of the reason is due to the physical isolation of the forests of the western Andes. Unfortunately, much deforestation took place in the earlier twentieth century, due to the establishment of banana and palm plantations, mining, and illegal logging. Reserva Alambi is an important conservation site, because 90% of the land is still primary forest.

Fabián has created a lovely garden, where hummingbirds and tanagers can be viewed and photographed. The first clue to the number of hummingbirds was the noise that you hear when approaching the garden. There was a constant hum from their extremely fast wingbeats, and warning chirps as they defended their territory and tried to

keep others away from the feeders. Thank goodness for Manuel calling out what we were seeing: White-necked Jacobin, White-whiskered and Tawny-bellied Hermits, Sparkling and Brown Violetears, Brown Inca, and Buff-tailed and Velvet-purple Coronets. Furthermore, there were Purple-bibbed Whitetip, White-booted Racket-tail, Fawn-breasted and Green-crowned Brilliant, Rufous-tailed and Speckled Hummingbirds, Violet-tailed Sylph, Purple-throated Woodstar, Crowned Woodnymph, and Andean Emerald. It was a true hummingbird extravaganza!

Fabián asked if anyone wanted to hold the top of a feeder in their hand. One of us was game and was rewarded with many hummingbirds hovering over her hand while feeding. The White-booted Racket-tail actually perched on her fingers. Smiles all around!

In addition to the hummingbirds, we saw a variety of tanagers: Blue-winged Mountain Tanager, Golden, Golden-naped, Lemon-rumped), Swallow, White-lined and Black-capped Tanagers. Other birds seen were Thick-billed and Orange-bellied Euphonias, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Masked Flowerpiercer and Bananaquit. They were enjoying the garden as much as we were.

Some of us took a short walk to the river, with our target bird being Torrent Duck. We saw Ornate Flycatcher, Black Phoebe, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, Buff-throated Saltator, and Black-and-chestnut Eagle. We had good views of the Jesus Lizard (Common Basilisk) sunning itself on a rock.

Two birds that can be seen at Reserva Alambi are motmots and quetzals, and we walked a forest path to try to find them, but they proved to be elusive. Just as we were ready to leave, Fabián signalled that he had heard a Golden-headed Quetzal. Up the trail we went, and thanks to Fabián and Manuel, we all had good looks at this beautiful bird. Now it really was time to go, and Manuel signalled for José to bring up the van. But José was not bringing up the van, because he had spotted a Rufous Motmot. We quietly sprinted down the trail, and ended up seeing three of them. Now it really, really was time to go, and we headed back to the lodge with good memories of a very productive day. We completed the checklist and ate dinner: soup, lasagne, and flan. As we had another early day tomorrow, we all headed back to our rooms shortly after dinner.

Day 5

Thursday 11th December

Mashpi Road, Reserva Amagusa, and Sachatamia

Cloudy, foggy, then sunny and clear

A 5.00am breakfast was necessary, as we needed to be packed and ready to leave by 5.30am, in order to beat the scheduled road closure from 7.00am until 2.00pm in the Mashpi Region. Thanks to José's excellent driving, we made it easily, and arrived as planned at Reserva Amagusa, where we saw an incredible number of birds. In fact, this would turn out to be our biggest day yet, at eighty-four species seen, and five more heard only.

The reserve was founded by Sergio and his wife, Doris, in 2012. At 1700m, it is an important part of the Chocó-Andino de Pichincha Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO-designated biosphere reserve that runs along the Western Andes. Reserva Amagusa boasts twenty-four endemic bird species, and we saw eleven of them, including Indigo Flowerpiercer, Moss-backed, Glistening-green, Rufous-throated and Ochre-breasted Tanagers, Black-chinned

Mountain Tanager, Velvet-purple Coronet, Violet-tailed Sylph, White-whiskered Hermit, Narino Tapaculo, Rose-faced Parrot, Black Solitaire, Toucan Barbet (just heard, with a quick glimpse) and Orange-breasted Fruiteater.

Between Sergio and Manuel identifying birds, it was hard to know which way to look. Enamoured by tanagers? As well as those listed above, we saw White-winged, Summer, White-lined, Lemon-rumped, Blue-winged Mountain, Beryl-spangled, Golden, Golden-napped, Blue-grey, Palm, and Blue-necked Tanagers, as well as Golden-collared Honeycreeper. There were such wonderful photographic opportunities.

A superfan of hummingbirds? We saw White-necked Jacobin, Tawny-bellied Hermit (on the road), Brown Inca, White-booted Racket-tail, Green-crowned Brilliant, Purple-throated Woodstar and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. More photographs!

Partial to flycatchers? We had Slaty-capped, Ornate and Golden-bellied Flycatchers, Bronze-olive Pygmy Tyrant, One-colored Becard and Tropical Kingbird.

And we had some write-ins on the checklist: the Great Antshrike with its bright red eye, the uncommon Black-crowned Antshrike, White-throated Daggerbill (a small hummingbird), Band-tailed Barbthroat (a scarce hummingbird in the reserve) and Greenish Elaenia (a small flycatcher which perches quietly). The unexpected is always fun.

There were many birds whose appearances would turn out to be our only sightings of them on this trip: Common Pauraque, which roosts on the ground during the day, Little Cuckoo, which is a miniature version of the Squirrel Cuckoo seen for the last two days, Zeledon's Antbird, notable for its pale blue skin around the eye, the very small Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, Black-billed Peppershrike, which boasts a hooked bill, the striking Bay Wren, and Olive-crowned Yellowthroat.

The original Reserva Amagua had only one blind, but today there are features that attract many birds: hummingbird feeders, fruit stations, a stump covered in maize, a moth screen, and native trees and plants. And this is not to mention the big, blue sky. Against this backdrop we saw so many birds: White-tipped Dove, Ruddy Pigeon, White-collared Swift, Black-and-chestnut Eagle, Southern Rough-winged and Blue-and-white Swallows, Chivi Vireo, Southern House Wren, Ecuadorian Thrush, Thick-billed and Orange-bellied Euphonias, Dusky Chlorospingus, Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Shiny Cowbird, Slate-throated Whitestart and Variable Seedeater. To round out the list, there were the heard-only species: Golden-headed Quetzal, Pacific Tuftedcheek, Grey-breasted Wood Wren, Andean Solitaire and Three-banded Warbler.

While the focus was the vast number of birds to be seen, we did have a few interesting non-avian sightings. Agoutis are always fun to watch, but Tayras are particularly fascinating. Sleek and agile, they are good climbers, as evidenced by one snatching not one, but two, bananas from the fruit station. Red-tailed Squirrel was familiar, but Western Dwarf Squirrel was new. Sitting below the viewing balcony was a Spectacled Owl Butterfly, which captured our attention and our cameras. This butterfly is huge with a wingspan of some 20cm. Size could be a disadvantage in this case, but two adaptations help to balance the equation: the wings look like the eyes of an owl and the wing pattern resembles a snake. Even though it was right in front of us, it was not easy to see at first.

Reserva Amagusa was fabulous, but it was time to move on. Our departure was again timed so we could traverse the road when it was open. It took a few hours to reach our final destination: Sachatamia Lodge. After having been assigned rooms, and a brief rest, we toured the grounds. There were two hides, a lagoon, a tower, an indoor swimming pool and, of course, feeders and viewing areas. Such a lovely setting! We never had to go farther than the parking lot to see Pacific Hornero, Lineated Foliage-gleaner, Choco Brushfinch (a Chocó endemic), and Scrub Blackbird.

We met at 6.30pm for the checklist, and voted Glistening-green Tanager as the Bird of the Day. Then we settled in for dinner. Some of us have become partial to *canelazo*, the hot welcome drink. For dinner we had soup, a choice of entrées, and dessert; a similar pattern, but each meal was unique and tasty. Today had been a spectacular day, but now sleep was calling us.

Day 6

Friday 12th December

Mindo town and surroundings and San Tadeo Road

Sunny, then cloudy

Breakfast was a choice of any style of egg, along with fruit, bread, and coffee or tea. After a brief wash-up we headed to Mindo, just twenty minutes away. Our plans were first to check the rivers, particularly for Torrent Duck and White-capped Dipper, and then to search the mixed forests on secondary roads.

Mindo is only a small town (population c.3000), but is a hub of activity. It is a well-known destination for birdwatching, but it also attracts hikers, butterfly lovers, orchid seekers, zipliners and river tubers. Three big rivers are found near Mindo (the Mindo, Saloya and Cinto Rivers), as well as hundreds of tributaries. Our first stop was on the road overlooking a section of the Río Mindo.

Of course, we kept an eye out for our target birds, but our group was first enthralled by the Swallow Tanagers. The males are bright cerulean blue, with a black mask and white breast. The females are bright green with a yellow belly, so together the flock is very colourful. But it was the behavior that was fascinating. They differ from other tanagers in that they are smaller, perch upright, and behave like a flycatcher, catching insects in mid-air. Seeing such a large flock catching insects over the river went a long way towards their being voted our Bird of the Day. Later in the day, we saw other tanagers: Beryl-spangled, Lemon-rumped, Silver-throated, Blue-grey and Palm. Fawn-breasted Tanager was seen by some.

The mixed forest yielded Slaty Spinetail, Black-winged Saltator, Red-headed Barbet, Cinnamon Becard, Choco Warbler, Scaly-throated and Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaners, Olivaceous Piculet, Streaked Xenops, Yellow-throated and Dusky Chlorospinguses, Chivi Vireo, Slate-throated Whitestart, Variable Seedeater, Broad-billed Motmot and Scale-crested Pygmy Tyrant. Three-banded Warbler was heard. Forest birding can be challenging, and we appreciated Manuel hearing, seeing, and identifying the various species along the roads, as well as making sure that everyone had seen each bird.

We continued to check the roads, rivers, and streams throughout the morning. Birds seen in or near the water included Masked Water Tyrant, Black Phoebe, and Snowy and Western Cattle Egrets. We had good views of

Barred and Broad-winged Hawks. Some easily identified birds included Rock Dove (introduced), Band-tailed Pigeon, Scrub Blackbird, Black and Turkey Vultures, Rusty-margined and Ornate Flycatchers, Tropical Kingbird, Orange-bellied Euphonia and Rufous-collared Sparrow. When swallows appeared, they were either Southern Rough-winged or Blue-and-white.

We decided to check the Río Mindo again at another spot, only to discover that it was getting busy with the local recreational crowd. Many were sunbathing in or near the river: not the best birdwatching conditions. Two of us managed to see a Torrent Tyrannulet on a rock amid the bathers.

We returned to the lodge for a lunch of hearts of palm salad (a flavour similar to artichoke), beef stroganoff or vegetarian rice, and orange cake with ice cream. After lunch there was time for a siesta or other activities, as we were not due back at the van until 3.30pm.

We had a slight change of afternoon plans. One of our main targets was another Chocó endemic, Plate-billed Mountain Toucan. Manuel was in contact with his network of bird spotters, and they informed him that the toucans were not coming to the feeders. The probable reason was that the toucans were caring for their chicks. Also, the weather had changed. The sun had disappeared and the cloudy sky suggested a slight chance of rain. So, we were on our own regarding the Plate-billed Mountain Toucan.

Our first foray on the road was met with silence: there was not a bird to be heard or seen. The change in weather had certainly affected the bird activity. However, we changed locations and had good views of the Plate-billed Mountain Toucan from the road: lucky us! This was an extraordinary bird. Well-named for the yellow plate on its bill, it is also characterized by red and black on the bill, a bright eye surrounded by blue and yellow, a blue-grey breast, a copper back, and red tail coverts. It really was a sight to be seen. The toucan was the highlight of the afternoon, but we also saw Gorgeted Sunangel and Red-billed Parrots.

We returned to Sachatamia Lodge. At 6.30pm we did the checklist, followed by dinner. The starter was ham and cheese roll (or just cheese), then shrimp or veggie burger, and a dessert of meringue with *sapodilla* (sweet and soft like a pear, but a bit grainier, and very yummy). “Elevator” music played in the background and someone knew the name and lyrics of nearly every song. That led to a discussion of bands from the 60s, 70s, and beyond. Like a mixed flock that suddenly came in we were picking off our favourites: The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and others who were part of the “British invasion” (as it was described in the U.S.). Strong female voices such as Janis Joplin, Grace Slick, Stevie Nicks and Christine McVie... Michael Jackson, Elton John...the list was endless. Good dinner and good conversation: but it was time to get some sleep ahead of our early start in the morning.

Day 7

Saturday 13th December

Sachatamia Lodge, Milpe and Mindo

Cloudy

We had a 5.30am start this morning, to take advantage of one of the hides at the lodge. We silently walked the short distance to the blind, which attracts birds due to its moth screen. It was dark and quiet when we arrived, but soon birds were coming in fast and furious.

Worthy of special mention are the birds we saw that we would not see elsewhere on the trip: Tawny-breasted Myiobius, Grey-breasted Wood Wren (although heard previously), Masked Trogan and Spotted Woodcreeper. Other birds seen at the hide included Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Lineated Foliage-gleaner, Three-banded Warbler, Slate-throated Whitestart, and Plain-brown and Strong-billed Woodcreepers.

After breakfast, we headed to the Milpe Bird Sanctuary, which was a bit lower in elevation than our lodge. The sanctuary offered hiking trails, gardens with feeders, and a one-storey observation tower. We began with a lovely hike on a series of trails in the cloud forest, but we also checked for birds along the road later in the morning.

On our forest walk, two of us had good views of Orange-billed Sparrow in a thicket, while the rest of us had glimpses. Pale-mandibled Aracari, a small toucan, was a nice find. This was a good day for birds not yet seen on the trip: Collared Trogan, Smoky-brown Woodpecker, Club-winged Manakin, Green Honeycreeper, Dusky-faced Tanager, Yellow-bellied Seedeater and White-collared Swift were racked up. We heard Chestnut-backed Antbird, and saw Buff-fronted and Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaners foraging.

At the feeders in the garden, we saw White-necked Jacobin, White-whiskered Hermit, Brown Violetear, Velvet-purple Coronet, Purple-bibbed Whitetip, White-booted Racket-tail, Empress Brilliant, Violet-tailed Sylph, Purple-throated Woodstar, Crowned Woodnymph, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Andean Emerald, Green Thorntail and Bananaquit. We left our photographer to her arts while the rest of us climbed the one-storey tower to see what we could see.

From the tower, those of us who had missed the Orange-billed Sparrow earlier had good looks. We had been searching for Yellow-throated Toucan and now we saw one...two...three... We eventually estimated up to fifteen in the canopy. Whatever the number, we had great views of this large bird, with its oversized bill and beautiful yellow throat and face. It was no surprise that it was voted our Bird of the Day.

Speaking of colour, we couldn't overlook the tanagers: the bright red Summer Tanager, the Golden Tanager with its contrasting black ear patch, Lemon-rumped Tanager, jet black with a bright yellow rump, and the aptly-named Silver-throated, Blue-grey and Rufous-throated Tanagers.

The number of birds seen at Milpe continued to expand: One-colored Becard, Ornate Flycatcher, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Swainson's and Ecuadorian Thrushes, Orange-bellied Euphonia, Slate-throated Whitestart, and Buff-throated Saltator. Buff-rumped Warbler and Yellow-collared Chlorophonia made their first appearances on the checklist. Along the road, we heard Grey-headed Kite, White-bearded Manakin and Slate-colored Grosbeak. Western Wood Pewee and Yellow Tyrannulet (a write-in) were first sightings for the trip. Yellow-throated Chlorospingus and Variable Seedeater showed, and some saw Canada Warbler. One client spotted a hawk as we were driving. "José, stop the van! Back up the van!" We all had good views of a Roadside Hawk, another new bird for us.

It was such a busy morning! We headed back to Sachatamia Lodge for lunch, consisting of *sancocho* (meat soup) or cheese *empanada*, lamb or vegetarian spaghetti, and flan. After lunch, we had free time until we met back at 4.00pm to search the rivers near Mindo once more. We saw Torrent Tyrannulet, Black Phoebe, Masked Water Tyrant, One-colored Becard and Rusty-margined Flycatcher. Around the grounds of the lodge, we saw Orange-bellied

Euphonia, Swainson's and Ecuadorian Thrushes, Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, Scrub Blackbird and Buff-throated Saltator.

Common birds seen today included White-tipped Dove, Ruddy Pigeon, Snowy and Western Cattle Egrets, Tropical Kingbird, Blue-and-white Swallow and Rufous-collared Sparrow. Our only mammal of the day was Red-tailed Squirrel.

Reviewing the checklist, we discovered that we had identified seventy-five birds today, of which fifteen would turn out to be "one-day wonders". Not too shabby! We celebrated with a dinner of onion soup with crisps, vegetarian peppers, tilapia or pork with asparagus, and tiramisu.

Day 8

Sunday 14th December

Frutti Tour, Río Blanco and Sachatamia Lodge

Cloudy

After breakfast, we headed to Sendero Frutti Tour, a short drive from our lodge. Formerly limited to fruit production, since 2020 Pedro Vincente has developed the property into a bird watching area supreme. Our first stop was at the hummingbird feeders and the fruit feeding stations. We could comfortably sit under a covered observation deck and look out in three directions. This set-up allowed us time to study and photograph a wide array of birds, at close range.

At only 600m, we had dropped down into the Lower Tropical Zone. Different zone, different birds, we hoped: and so it proved. We saw a variety of beautiful and interesting birds from the deck, many not yet seen on this trip: Blue-black Grassquit, Black-cheeked and Golden-olive Woodpeckers, Black-throated Mango, Pacific Parrotlet (a Tumbesian endemic), Pacific Antwren, Choco Tyrannulet (a Chocó endemic), Bronzed-winged Parrot, Maroon-tailed Parakeet (the Chocó endemic subspecies, *pacifica*), Boat-billed Flycatcher, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Purple-crowned Fairy, Purple-chested Hummingbird (a Chocó endemic), and two write-ins, Violet-bellied Hummingbird and Bronzy Hermit. Little Tinamou was heard and briefly seen by one of us. We appreciated seeing the Great Antshrike again (first seen at Amagusa), with its beautiful red eyes.

While we saw many new hummingbirds, we also had time to observe some of our old favourites: White-necked Jacobin, White-whiskered Hermit, Brown Inca, White-booted Racket-tail, Green-crowned Brilliant, Purple-throated Woodstar, Crowned Woodnymph, Green Thorntail and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. Tanagers are always a treat, and Summer, White-lined, Lemon-rumped, Golden, Silver-throated, Blue-grey and Palm Tanagers did not disappoint. Saffron Finches showed well.

Some of us climbed the four-storey observation tower which gave good views over the entire area. Thanks to Manuel's excellent eyes and ears, we saw many species, including a distant Guayaquil Woodpecker and Pacific Antwren, and Grey-breasted Martin (a write-in) was seen by some.

After a delightful morning, we drove to Río Blanco. The river was beautiful with torrents and eddies providing potential habitat for Torrent Duck's, despite this being a site at its lower elevation limit. But the bird remained elusive. Luckily, just being in such a lovely environment was worth it.

Lunch consisted of *sancocho* (meat soup) or palm heart salad, vegetarian lasagne or chicken, and a sinful dessert: chocolate cake drizzled with chocolate sauce. After a brief break we met back at 3.30pm to see what we could find on the grounds of Sachatamia. Our first stop was the 40m tower. From there we saw Black and Turkey Vultures, Thick-billed Euphonia, Choco Tyrannulet and Blackburnian Warbler. We heard Cloud-forest Pygmy Owl (endemic to the Andean portion of the Chocó biogeographic region) calling, perhaps from across the river.

Finding the Cloud-forest Pygmy Owl would be hard, but Manuel suggested that we walk the trail toward the river. The forest was extremely quiet, and when we arrived at the junction to return to the lodge, we paused to give José a chance to scout for the birds that Manuel was calling and looking for down the river trail. Our forest walk became much more exciting when José indicated that a pair of Long-wattled Umbrellabirds (a Chocó endemic) were headed our way. We had decent views of the female.

Feeling bold, we continued on the river trail where Manuel had heard Cloud-forest Pygmy Owl calling. At just 15cm long, it is not an easy bird to see, but Manuel had spotted it. We all lined up behind him to view this amazing owl through a very small 'window' in the vegetation. Kudos to Manuel for hearing the bird while we were high on the tower, finding the well-hidden bird in a tree, and managing to get all of us a view through an impossibly small window. Well done! We had a little bounce in our step as we climbed the trail towards the lodge, celebrating two brilliant birds late in the day.

At checklist, we had almost seventy-five species seen, fifteen of them new for the trip. Dinner was vegetarian or meat soup, ravioli or spaghetti with Bolognese, pomodoro or pesto sauce, and crêpes Suzette. Afterwards, Greg thanked José in Spanish for his excellent driving, good birding eyes, and calm and friendly manner. A vote of thanks was raised for Manuel, for his superb guiding, incredible ability to hear, see and identify birds, and his unending patience with us. We all agreed that he is a man of passion. We had been blessed to have Manuel and José for these past ten days.

Day 9

Monday 15th December

Río Alambi near Nanegal, Reserva Alambi, Calacali and Quito's airport reservoir

Sunny and pleasant

Sadly, this was our last day in Ecuador. The day started with a leisurely breakfast at 6.00am, with enough time to get bags packed and be out by 7.15am. We made our way back to Quito today, but in a roundabout way.

Our first stop was a section of the Río Alambi, next to a tilapia farm. We had good views of White-capped Dipper, Black Phoebe, Swallow Tanager, Spotted Sandpiper, Black Vulture, Rusty-margined Flycatcher, Blue-and-white Swallow and Torrent Tyrannulet. Southern House Wren was heard.

Changing locations, a Ringed Kingfisher was easy to see sitting on a wire and perusing the river. We found Buff-rumped Warbler, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Black and Turkey Vultures, Great Egret and Southern Lapwing. In the grass sitting in the long shadow of a tree was a Noble Snipe. That was a huge surprise and one of Manuel's best spots of the trip! Smooth-billed Anis were seen along the road.

We made our way to Reserva Alambi for a second visit, and for brunch. We were again welcomed by Fabián. The hummingbirds were out in full force, and he coaxed two more of us to feed the hummingbirds by hand. Having been inspired by the experience last time, we took the bait (so to speak), and can attest to the sheer joy of having such small birds in such close proximity.

One of us had missed Crimson-rumped Toucanet the last time around. Fabián showed us where the toucanet nest was, as well as a video he had taken of nest activity, and Manuel took a few of us over to see it. It was so well hidden, even when we knew where to look. Although we did not see the toucanet, we were rewarded with a great view of a Black-and-chestnut Eagle soaring, and near the river we saw a Torrent Tyrannulet.

As we edged closer to Quito airport, we gained altitude as we approached Calacalí, located at 2725m. We had a quick look at the motocross track, and saw American Kestrel, Eared Dove, and Ash-breasted Sierra Finch (which it turns out is actually a tanager, after genetic analysis; the clade includes all the Galapagos 'finches', too!). We also had a glimpse of the Equator Monument in the central square. As an aside, a French expedition determined the placement of the equator in 1736, and the monument marks this achievement, but it turns out the French were off by about 240m. The exact position of the equatorial line is precisely located at the Cerro Catequilla archaeological site north of Quito. The Pre-Columbian Quito-Cara people had got it right all along!

With planes landing and taking off nearby, we made one last stop at airport reservoir. Our target bird was Yellow-billed Pintail, which we saw, and we also added Andean Coot, Pied-billed Grebe, male and female Vermillion Flycatchers, Great and Snowy Egrets, Cocoi Heron and Southern Lapwing. A Purple-collared Woodstar flew by incredibly fast, but we couldn't get a bead on it.

Those with an early evening flight were dropped off at the airport. Two others would come back later for their 1.30am red-eye flight to the United States; they joined another client at Puembo Birding Garden for dinner and conversation. She would stay overnight there and fly home the next day, but not before seeing Croaking Ground Dove, Eared Dove, Cinereous Conebill and Scrub Tanager.

In a word, the trip was fantastic. Most of us saw more than 200 species, and the group as a whole recorded 267 bird species (heard and seen). One client inched ever closer to 5000 world birds. All of us increased our life lists, and our photographer had hundreds and hundreds of photos to sort through. We had made so many good memories of birds, nature, people and culture. Thank you, Manuel, José, Naturetrek, and all those, named and unnamed, who made this trip unforgettable.

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