

# Ecuador - The Andes & Amazon

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 25 November 2018



Chestnut-crowned Antpitta by Marie Kedward



Hoatzin by Jackie Newcombe



Saffron Finch by Alex Raeder



Long-tailed Sylph by Alex Raeder

Report kindly compiled by Marie Kedward  
Images courtesy of Marie Kedward, Jackie Newcombe and Alex Raeder



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Tour participants: Manuel Sanchez (Leader) with eight Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Sunday 11th November

Following our flight to Quito, the group met in the airport for the transfer to the first night's hotel. After a long journey the odd drink or light meal was enjoyed by some of the group before retiring for an early night, in readiness for the next day's plans.

## Day 2

Monday 12th November

Our trip was to start in the Western Andean Highlands, so after a quick breakfast we headed out of Quito at 6am to Yanacocha Reserve. After a journey of an hour or so, and the bus being 'herded' by a few cattle, we arrived at the reserve. The first birds to be seen were close views of Spectacled Whitestart and White-throated Tyrannulet.

The morning's walk gave us a clue in to the birds we could expect to see, including three Mountain Tanagers and several of the 132 hummingbird species that Ecuador has to offer. Among these were great views of the Swordbill Hummingbird, a first for many in the group. Iridescence was given to the hummingbirds by the sun streaming over the Andean mountains.

After a morning walking, a well-earned lunch was in order, and we weren't disappointed by the staff at the Yanacocha lodge, who served a superb three course lunch, with the combination of soup and salty popcorn being a first but enjoyable experience! Lunch was well timed as the clouds rolled in and heavy rain came to Yanacocha.

Departing the reserve, the afternoon was to consist of driving the Nono to Tandayapa road, with stops along the way to observe more birds. Stops were made for Andean Lapwing, Burrowing Owl and mixed feeding flocks near the roadside. A Plate-billed Toucan gave a fleeting glimpse and of course we hoped we'd have better views of this species later in the holiday.

After a leisurely journey, the group checked in to Sachatamia Lodge for the next three nights. Following the chance to settle into the comfortable cabins, another lovely meal was enjoyed to round off the day. The checklist was done and with 49 species being seen through the day, the group was hopeful this was a sign of things to come for the trip!

## Day 3

Tuesday 13th November

Another early start saw a visit to the Andean Cock of the Rock lek, not far from the hotel. A number of males were seen displaying, their vivid red plumage beheld by all. Alongside the Cock of the Rock were the first views of Golden-headed Quetzal.

On the trail to the Antpitta reserve we had views of a very obliging Dark-backed Wood Rail and a Golden-headed Quetzal that gave the group excellent views standing out in the open. Also on the drive was a brief toilet stop that proved very productive on the birding front, with a number of new sightings for the trip, all within a

stone's throw of where the bus had stopped. As well as new species, we had better views of the likes of Crimson-rumped Toucanet.

At the reserve great views were had of Chestnut-crowned Antpitta and Yellow-breasted Antpitta, thanks to the 'Antpitta Whisperer' in the shape of Angel, owner of the reserve. The walk also gave great views of a family of Plate-billed Toucans.

Before the promise of brunch and coffee, was a short hike to see two further Antpitta, species; Moustached and Ochre-breasted Antpitta. The group was also graced by a Toucan Barbet peeping out of its nest hole to inspect the curious visitors.

Following a satisfying brunch, there were hummingbirds aplenty on the feeders, with the first great views of Violet Tailed Sylph, among others. After a short ride back to the hotel the group spent time around the nectar and fruit feeders, observing numerous hummingbirds as well as various tanagers, euphonias and a visit from the charismatic Pale Billed Aracari.

After lunch, and due to the onset of cloud and rain, we walked a trail in the hotel grounds. This proved productive for woodcreepers, foliage hunters and tree gleaners.

Some of the group remained by the feeders for the last of the light before reconvening for the checklist and dinner. Following another delightful meal, a night walk was taken which was awash with moths, some of which found new resting posts on members of the group! It was a chance to take in the chorus of frogs around the lodge as they echoed around the forest like a Mexican Wave.

Among the sights of the day for the group were the family of Plate-billed Toucans, the various wood creepers and the endearing Dark-backed Wood Rails which came out to feed on an eagerly accepted banana from one of the guides!

## Day 4

## Wednesday 14th November

After breakfast, the plan was to head straight to Milpe Reserve, however, the birding in the hotel car park proved too good to pass up! Woodcreepers, wrens and warblers were among the visitors, as well as the beautiful Flame-faced Tanager. Once the birds felt able to let us move on, we made our way to Milpe, located in the upper lowlands. Although only a short distance from Sachatamia, the small drop in altitude showed a noticeable difference in both temperature and humidity. The sun was out and the temperature warm, which unfortunately meant the birds of the forest were mostly inactive, although a range of hummingbirds, tanagers and a couple of toucans were seen around the feeding stations. A short drive down the road provided similar results and under the circumstances we decided to return to the hotel.

On return to the hotel, a mid-morning coffee was welcome as the group congregated to take in the views of the birds feeding at the fruit station. Among the visitors were various tanagers and a couple of cheeky Aracarís. Following our lunch break, we took a short drive to a local house, which had in its garden numerous fruit and nectar feeders. One sight to behold here was a hummingbird taking a shower under a little waterfall in the garden.

That evening saw our last dinner at Sachatamia and it had been an enjoyable stay, with the surrounding areas giving us plenty of appetite for the rest of the holiday.

## Day 5

## Thursday 15th November

Our final morning at Sachatamia Lodge dawned with a visit to the light trap following breakfast. For the moths that remain, a visit from insect eating birds is likely. These include woodcreepers, flycatchers, wrens and trogons. Good views were had of the usually elusive Grey-breasted Wren, as well as a family of Masked Trogons, with a chance to witness the mother teaching her youngster which moths he should choose!

A second visit was made to Milpe Reserve and due to the overcast weather, this proved much more successful. Species seen were Choco Trogon, Club-winged Manakin and Broad-billed Motmot. Following lunch, we prepared to travel to Quito for an overnight stay. Part of the journey consisted of birding along a remote road and also a brief stop at the equator monument in San Antonio.

Upon arrival at Quito and the Puenbo Birding Garden Hotel, the group had dinner and completed our checklist to bring the total up to 185 species for the trip so far!

## Day 6

## Friday 16th November

After breakfast time was spent birding around the hotel grounds of the aptly named, Puenbo Birding Garden. A number of new species were picked up, some of which are specialities of the dry, arid conditions around this area. A short transfer was then taken to the airport for the domestic flight to Coca, for onward travel to Sacha Lodge, located in the Amazon lowlands.

Due to its location, travel to Sacha from Coca was completed by canoe along the Napo River. Along the way stops were made to view various heron and egret species, as well as the striking Pied Plover. A short walk through the jungle led to another canoe which took us to the lodge, located on the edge of a black water oxbow lake. Following a warm welcome and some Amazonian snacks, we checked in to our comfortable rooms. Heading to sleep that night, with only mosquito nets at the windows in the cabins, we were sung to sleep by the chorus of frogs and insects.

## Day 7

## Saturday 17th November

Our first day dawned in Sacha and the group had been split in to two, with one group specifically for birding and the other for a more generalist approach. The birding group was earlier to rise and headed to the canopy walkway, which was the first activity of the day. The generalist group followed slightly later and joined the birding group at the walkway after seeing a family of Saddleback Tamarin Monkeys and learning some interesting facts about the medicinal plants of the forest from a local guide.

As a thunderstorm approached, a retreat back to the lodge was made for coffee and birding from the restaurant, located next to the oxbow lake. After lunch and some free time, the group again split for a canoe ride down

'Anaconda Creek'. Whilst no Anacondas were seen, hawks, ant birds, woodpeckers and the first Jacamar and Limpkin of the trip were observed.

The final activity was a night walk through some of the hotel grounds and in to the forest. Whilst the key targets were owls, other nocturnal creatures were seen, including Spix's Night Monkey.

## Day 8

## Sunday 18th November

A 4.30am wake-up call signalled the start of Day 8 and a trip to two parrot licks. The group travelled back to the Napo and headed down river, seeing Great Potoo and Ladder-tailed Nightjar along the way. Amazon Kingfisher, Yellow-crested Caracara, Cocoli Heron and Great Egret were also seen before the first parrots made an appearance. The first parrot lick was located next to the river and while the parrots didn't come down to the clay during our stop, they were easily audible! On closer inspection, the trees were 'alive' with parrots in large numbers. Flashes of green and blue shot around as the parrots communicated noisily with each other, all trying to decide who would be the first to take the plunge for their daily dose of clay.

As the parrots were remaining in the tress, the group moved on to their next stop. Disembarking from the boat, a short trek into the jungle was taken to reach the area where the parrots congregate. A few birds were observed before the Scarlet Macaws made their presence known with their easily recognisable calls. Being much louder and larger than the other parrots in the area, they are the first in the queue for the clay. However, despite this being a daily task that they have to complete, they were obviously cautious and took time coming down to the lick, all the while communicating up in the trees. Once down however, the group were treated to spectacular views of these magnificent birds, their bright colours being illuminated against the brown of the clay.

The macaws left the lick after having their fill and made way for the smaller parrots and parakeets that visit the lick. Again cautious, it took time for the birds to come down from the trees. Among the cacophony of calls, the first bird braved the drop to the clay and opened the floodgates for the rest to join. Striking Orange-cheeked and Cobalt-winged Parrots were aplenty as each bird took its turn on the clay. Flashes of blue, green, orange and red went in all directions before the birds headed back up to the trees.

As the parrots moved on, the group had its packed lunch, before heading off into the jungle once more to track down some more 'first' birds. Great-billed Hermit was among the species seen before the rain set in and a slightly sodden group headed back to the boat, nonetheless pleased with the mornings activity. Catching the boat again, the group headed to two river islands to take in some species that are specialists only to these habitats. With the sun out again, views were had of Little Woodpecker, among others, before the temperature became too hot for both the birds and their spectators. As a long but rewarding day drew to a close, the group headed back to the hotel for a freshen up and well-earned dinner!

## Day 9

## Monday 19th November

Following breakfast, the group took a canoe ride across the oxbow lake and along one of the many creeks to another canopy tower, this time built alongside a Capoc tree. With the sun shining, the views out across the rainforest were magnificent, along with our fair share of close bird sightings as we shared the upper branches of

the Capoc tree with them. There was also a close encounter with a tarantula! After a productive morning, the group descended the tree back to firm ground and rode the canoes back to Sacha.

The group once again narrowly avoided the rain and on arrival back at the hotel had free time until later on that afternoon. Following a short trip to the butterfly farm located in the grounds of Sacha, the group partook in a late afternoon canoe ride and remained out until just after dark. A quick change and we had our final evening meal at Sacha. With its menu changing every evening, the group agreed the food had been thoroughly delightful during the stay...as well of course as it being located in a most wondrous place.

## Day 10

## Tuesday 20th November

An early, and very wet, departure from Sacha saw the group heading out of the Amazon rainforest and back towards the Andes. The bus met us in Coca, before starting to climb back in to the mountains, with a number of stops on the way. Lunch was taken at a delightful roadside stop, with views of new species of hummingbird being enjoyed while the sandwiches were dished out.

We moved onwards towards our next hotel. Brief stops were made along the way, including one in an area where we would be walking later during our stay in the area - we hoped the weather would improve by then. Our final stop before arriving at the hotel yielded decent views of male and female Torrent Ducks navigating their way down river, a species a number of us had hoped to see. We then settled in to yet another comfortable hotel before dinner, reflecting on the views and experiences of the Amazon Rainforest.

## Day 11

## Wednesday 21st November

The day started with some birding around the hotel grounds before we headed out in the bus for a slow drive on the roads near the hotel. Occasional stops and short walks were made, with a stop near a local stream proving productive for Torrent Tyrannulet, Crested Quetzal, bush tanagers and a few species of flycatcher. Good views of a Roadside Hawk were also appreciated by the group.

We returned to the hotel for a mid-morning coffee and birding around the feeders by the restaurant. Whilst the beautiful Inca Jays seen earlier in the morning didn't put in an appearance, intimate views were had of the hummingbirds coming to the feeders, with some being very interested in bright belongings such as jumpers and phone cases belonging to the group!

Following lunch, we again headed out for 'bus birding' around the local roads. Rain, however, stopped play as birds were reluctant to come out - and no one could really blame them! As such, we returned to the hotel and sat near another set of feeders in the grounds. Despite the conditions, a few hardy new species delighted the group before the light faded.

After another satisfying dinner, we took a night walk to search for owls and other nocturnal species. Thankfully the rain had cleared and whilst owls were heard, only very brief glimpses were had by some as they flew over the road. Still, satisfied by the day, we returned to the hotel just before the onset of further rain.

## Day 12

Thursday 22nd November

Following breakfast and some fabulous views of the local Inca Jays, the group headed to the mountain pathway where we had stopped briefly a couple of days previously. Our wish for better weather came true, and the lack of cloud cover couldn't have made a bigger difference so we were able to marvel at the staggering views and scenery. In total contrast, it was so clear this morning that the Amazon rainforest could be seen in the distance.

As the group walked the same path previously trodden by the first settlers in the Ecuadorian rainforest, new mountain species were seen and we were able to enjoy a lengthy walk - and despite the altitude, we could even remove layers of clothing due to the beautiful conditions. However, as we learned in the Amazon, lovely weather such as this is often followed by a rainstorm and sure enough, the cloud cover started to roll in late morning. Just in time (again) the group returned to the bus, the view - or lack of it - totally transformed.

After saying goodbye to San Isidras, we set off towards our next hotel, making the obligatory birding stops on the way. On one road a 'short walk' turned in to quite a lengthy trek due to the number of species. Golden-headed and Crested Quetzals were seen, along with Highland Motmot, Speckle-faced Parrots, Inca Jay and Emerald Toucanets - who posed co-operatively for photos! In addition, the group had unexpected views of Cock of the Rock, this time the males resplendent in bright orange plumage, as opposed to the red we had seen earlier in the trip.

The rest of the bus journey took us through breathtaking mountain passes, again offering stunning views down valleys and up to snow-capped mountains. As darkness fell, we rolled in to Papallacta and the call of the thermal spring pools was something that was answered by some of the group before taking dinner.

## Day 13

Friday 23rd November

As morning dawned, we were given the first views of our new surroundings. With some of the surrounding Andean mountains being snow-capped, it was understandably chilly at first light. However, with no cloud cover, the morning soon warmed up as we set out for our post-breakfast walk - up at the highest altitude yet! As most of the group braved the walk against the altitude, a couple of members stayed by the visitor centre to take in the views of the valley and surrounding mountains.

Later in the morning we travelled to Guango Lodge where we took in views of more local hummingbird specialities on the various feeders, and with the sun still shining brightly, could appreciate the wonder of their iridescence. On the way, Andean Teal were seen at the local water works. Following a return to Papallacta and lunch, the group boarded the bus for its journey back down to Quito and a second stay at Puembo Gardens. Stops and short walks from the bus were made.

As the group enjoyed its final evening meal together (including the beautiful avocados grown in Puembo's garden), it was a chance to reflect on the trip and wonder what our last day may hold...

## Day 14

Saturday 24th November

We packed up our suitcases for the final time and headed out for our last day in Ecuador. Good views of the rare Andean Ibis were in store as well as our last chance to get to grips with some of the beautiful names such as Black-tailed Train Bearer, Chestnut-winged Cinclodes and Tyrian Metaltail. The Ecuadorian Hillstar was also another beautiful species, and the last of the 52 hummingbirds the group saw.

As we took our last lunch before heading to the airport, and completed the checklist for the final time, the group was delighted with the memories gathered and especially so with the fact that we had recorded over 400 species during the course of the trip. From the Sparking Violet-ear, to the Hoatzin, who's DNA has remained unchanged for 65 million years, each species had been gratefully received.

Some of the last glimpses granted to us by the Andes were of the Andean Condor and Giant Hummingbird (aptly named, given its size compared with other members of the family) and I feel that there was no doubt that the whole group had a fabulous time in the impressive and diverse country.

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Velvet-purple Coronet by Jackie Newcombe



Yellow-breasted Antpitta by Alex Raeder