

Ecuador - The Andes & Amazon

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 21 February 2019



Golden Tanager by John Wilkinson



Hoatzin by John Wilkinson



Crested Owls by John Neighbour



Peruvian Racket-tail by John Neighbour

Report kindly written by John & Emily Neighbour
Images courtesy of John Neighbour & John Wilkinson



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Tour participants: Manuel Sanchez (leader), Luis (driver) with nine Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 7th February

Seven clients arrived via Amsterdam at Mariscal Sucre Airport in Ecuador in the afternoon. They were met by our Ecuadorian guide Manuel Sanchez at the airport, about a 45 minute drive from Quito, and taken to the Hotel Rio Amazonas in the Mariscal district. Individual arrangements were made for dinner. The group joined Emily and John who had flown out two days in advance to acclimatise to the altitude.

Day 2

Friday 8th February

Breakfast was at 5.30 am in order to make an early start on the drive to Yanacocha Reserve in the hills North-west of the city. This area is a cloud forest, at an even higher altitude than Quito which is at 2,850m.

The weather was cloudy but dry for the walk along the generally level section of the Inca Trail, at an altitude of between 3,500m and 3,700m. Thanks to Manuel's super sharp eyes and ears, we started to get to grips with some of the typical highland birds on the trails - brushfinches, conebills, huge mountain tanagers, tricky tyrannulets and tyrants were seen - the highlights being the Andean Guan that perched close to the trail, giving good views for all, and an obliging Rufous Antpitta. After many birding stops we reached the bird feeding stations about three miles from the starting point. These gave us our first chance to get great views of half a dozen species of hummingbirds competing for sugar water with Glossy and Masked Flowerpiercers.

We then went for a short walk to stare at a beautiful pair of White-throated Screech Owls, who seemed unconcerned by our presence and also a superbly camouflaged Barred Fruiteater. On our return we were served a welcome and tasty lunch by the wives of the reserve wardens. After lunch we checked out the hummingbird feeders outside the restaurant and added some new birds, including Tyrian Metaltail, the Shining Sunbeams trying to cut through the clouds, as well as for many the bird of the day - the Sword-billed Hummingbird - using its incredible bill like a giant straw at the feeder.

Back in the bus we made our way to our next accommodation, with many short stops along the Tandayapa Road to add more birds to the list. Highlights were the Burrowing Owl, looking out grumpily in the fog from its burrow and White-capped Dipper in the rapids lower down. The weather deteriorated as we travelled west and the rain set in. Having stopped so many times en route we arrived at Sacha Tamia Lodge (altitude 1,700m) just as it was getting dark. We were shown to our rooms or cabins and unpacked before meeting for a good dinner. Bird numbers were totted up quickly as everyone was very much ready for bed after a long but successful first day birding.

Day 3

Saturday 9th February

The day started well despite the heavy rain as the Lodge had provided a shelter to view some moths attracted to the lodge lights during the night. After photographing some of these and sitting quietly for a few minutes a large number of birds (including Plain-brown and Strong-billed Woodcreepers, Streak-capped Treehunter, Three-striped Warbler and even a female Masked Trogon turned up for the "all you can eat buffet breakfast" provided by the unfortunate insects! This provided spectacular views of many species rarely seen so clearly.

After a good breakfast the keen birders were driven to the nearby Milpe Reserve, where there was some improvement in the weather. Two of the party stayed behind to relax and explore the lodge grounds and view the many hummingbirds (including a selection of Coronets and Brilliants, Brown Inca, the beautiful Violet-tailed Sylph and the endemic and incredibly cute White-booted Racket-tail at the feeders. The birders also started off at the Milpe feeders adding Andean Emerald and a swarm of Green Thorntails before heading for the forest.

The birding was a bit harder here but patience was rewarded with Bronze-winged Parrots, Yellow-throated and Choco Toucans and a displaying Club-winged Manakin strutting his stuff. The canopy was full of hard to pin down tanagers causing some neck-ache, but eventually brief but reasonable views were obtained of Grey-and-Gold, Rufous-throated, Bay-headed, Beryl-spangled, Black-capped, Swallow and Golden-naped Tanagers. More neck-straining was rewarded with good views of Cerulean Warbler (a rapidly declining North American wood warbler).

The group headed back to the Lodge where the feeders provided easier birding and Black-chinned Mountain, Black-capped, Golden, Golden-naped, Lemon-rumped and Flame-faced Tanagers provided some fantastic colour. After a hearty lunch there was an opportunity to visit the Kinde Luna Reserve a short drive away to practice our hummingbird identification, adding Brown Violetear, Speckled Hummingbird and the tiny Purple-throated Woodstar to the list. A smart White-winged Brushfinch added to the enjoyment. A short walk was taken nearby to look for Mountain Toucans without luck and as the mist increased we headed back to the lodge having added only Band-tailed Pigeons and Plain-breasted Hawk. The keenest then walked the trails near the lodge and were rewarded with excellent albeit dark views in the gloaming of the very rare Cloud-forest Pygmy Owl.

In the evening the rain started again but this did not stop us enjoying the evening meal and the bird count afterwards in the cosy lodge. Mammals made an appearance as John N. bumped into a Long-nosed Armadillo foraging in the shrubbery just near the lodge.

Day 4

Sunday 10th February

After coffee and biscuits we boarded the bus for the short drive to Angel Paz's Reserve. First of all, as dawn broke, we watched the Andean Cock-of-the-Rock lek from a shelter which gave good views and photographic opportunities. Soon we were watching the trees light up with flashes of red as the males performed their bizarre dances every time they thought there was a chance of attracting a female - the dominant males taking centre stage whilst the younger males practised around the edge and higher up in the trees. Despite all their efforts the females seemed unimpressed!

When it was fully light we were led off to be shown a series of shy forest birds that had been trained to come to calls for nutritious snacks. The first stop was for a family party of Dark-backed Wood Quail who came for banana before diving back under cover. The next stops were for Antpittas which were called by Angel by their names (they all seemed to be called Maria) and lured by juicy fat worms. Sometimes they were quite slow to appear but eventually we had good views of the Chestnut-Crowned, Moustached, Yellow-breasted and Ochre-breasted varieties. Sadly the local Giant Antpitta had been killed by a weasel. The final stop was for the incredibly exotic looking Toucan Barbet which showed briefly at the banana. Manuel explained they were usually quite tame but were shy at present as this was the nesting season.

After a tasty brunch provided by Angel's wife we drove back with a few more birding stops en route. The weather improved sufficiently to allow butterflies to emerge. Back at the lodge those watching the feeders were treated to great views of a Crimson-rumped Toucanet and Sickle-winged Guan.

After lunch the keen birders were driven up hill to Santa Rosa Road to bird at a higher altitude. Conditions were not great in the mist and again we dipped on Mountain Toucans but we managed to see Brown-capped Vireo, Blue-winged Mountain Tanager, Red-billed Parrots and some graceful Swallow-tailed Kites. Retreating to the trails around the lodge, Pete amazingly managed to spot the roosting Cloud-forest Pygmy Owl and we were rewarded with good views of Squirrel Cuckoo, singing Choco Brushfinch, the beautiful Ornate Flycatcher and the near endemic Dusky Bush Tanager.

Day 5

Monday 11th February

Another early start with a long drive to Silanche, a reserve at lower altitude with trails and a canopy tower in the Chocó lowlands. Arriving just after dawn the birds were slow to start with but warmed up as the rain eased off. Some of the group remained on the tower whilst others walked trails until late morning. The contrast between the cool mountains and this hot and humid site was a shock but offered the chance to see many new and colourful species. Among the many highlights were Plumbeous Kite, Rose-faced Parrot, Orange-fronted Barbet, Black-striped Woodcreeper, Tawny-faced Gnatwren, the near endemic Scarlet-breasted Dacnis, Scarlet-browed, Blue-necked and Blue-whiskered Tanagers. A stop in a grassy area on the way back was rewarded with Blue-black Grassquit, Yellow-bellied Seedeater, Thick-billed Seedfinch and Striped Cuckoo.

After the drive back to Sachatamia we lunched well and were sad to leave this comfortable and friendly base, heading for Quito to catch the flight to the Amazon the following day. Manuel decided to have one last go for the Plate-billed Mountain Toucan en route at the Miraflores Road. It was misty and didn't look very promising despite having a good view of the back of a Gorgeted Sunangel. After much searching the group was consoling itself by trying to distinguish a Green-and-Black Fruiteater from a bunch of leaves (not easy when the bird is leaf-coloured) when Mandy came running down the hill to say Luis the bus driver had seen and was busy photographing the Toucans. After a breathless walk up the hill due to the altitude we were rewarded with close views of a group of Plate-billed Mountain Toucans in a lichen-shrouded tree in the mist. We watched enthralled until they silently slipped away into the mist. A truly memorable end to our Mindo Cloud Forest experience.

Arriving at Puembo bird garden close to the airport at Quito (2,300m altitude) some had time to check out the feeders in the charming garden before dark and see yet more new species (Black-tailed Trainbearer, Golden Grosbeak and the near endemics - Western Emerald and Scrub Tanager) not to mention the ubiquitous Eared Doves and Great Thrushes.

Day 6

Tuesday 12th February

A leisurely start was possible as the airport was close by. After breakfast there was good birding around the guest house in the large garden, a mixture of lawn and trees of various kinds including avocado meaning most of the group could catch-up with the birds seen the previous evening as well as a beautiful Golden-rumped Euphonia. However, the Saffron Finches just by the breakfast area won the photogenic competition

On the way to the airport we stopped at a reservoir near to the airport and checked out the water birds adding Andean Gull, Andean Coot, Neotropic Cormorant and Yellow-billed Pintail to the list as well as Spotted Sandpiper and both Yellowlegs. The scrubland nearby was also productive, giving good views of Vermilion Flycatcher and a new hummingbird - the tiny Purple-throated Woodstar- feeding right next to the busy airport road!

After a very efficient check in and the short flight to Coca we were taken to the Sacha Lodge HQ in the town centre for a most welcome lunch and then to the boat which would take us on the two-hour trip to the lodge. The boat was comfortable with cushions and a cover to protect against the sun and went incredibly fast only slowing down when the water became shallow. The weather was fine and we enjoyed the views of the River Napo and tantalising glimpses of our first Amazonian birds - Black Skimmer, Swallow-winged Puffbirds and Pied Plovers being the highlights as well as the more familiar egrets and Osprey. On arrival at the lodge dock we walked for 20 minutes along a boardwalk to the canoe dock. These were smaller, paddled by staff, and uncovered. The transfer along a creek to the lake took about 20 minutes and gave us an exciting introduction to the Amazon with close views of a young Anaconda!

We were offered welcome snacks along with the introductory talk in the Balsa, a charming spacious wooden construction on the edge of the lake where we were told breakfasts and lunches would be served throughout our stay. It was hard to focus on the talk due to the nearby Kiskadees, Piratic Flycatchers, White-winged Swallows, Grey-breasted Martins and Yellow-rumped Caciques. After unpacking in our cabins we were offered a short canoe trip on the lake. Fortunately the heavy shower stopped beforehand and we started to familiarise ourselves with the local birds around the lake - Anhinga, Striated Heron, Ringed Kingfisher, the noisy Greater Anis, and best of all the Jurassic Park escapee - the Hoatzin. Our guide told us the claws on the wing were not a left-over from Archaeopteryx but rather an adaptation as the fluffy young when threatened on the nest drop into the water where they float until the danger has passed and then use their clawed wings to climb back up to the nest. As we paddled gently up a narrow creek we added some more specialist birds to the list - the elusive (at least to Graham) White-chinned Jacamar and Orange-crested Manakin.

Dinner was served in another building on stilts further inland, after drinks in the bar while we counted up the day's birds.

Day 7

Wednesday 13th February

We were woken early ready to leave to get to the parrot licks downstream in time for the first influx just after dawn at the first stop on the River Napo. It was still dark as we paddled across the lake in our canoe which gave us the opportunity for views of a Great Potoo flying over our heads in a surprisingly graceful and agile flight - much better than seeing one perched fast asleep trying to pretend to be a tree stump. We then transferred to the bigger boat and headed down the Napo.

On the way we were able to get close to some of the river islands which were at different stages of ecological succession - from newly colonised sandbars with a few grassy plants to pretty mature forest. This was reflected in the birds with a Ladder-tailed Nightjar roosting on a protruding root (almost as good as the Drab Water Tyrant also on the roots), Violaceous Jays and an Amazonian Umbrellabird amongst the forest canopy, a splendid black

and yellow Oriole Blackbird, Black Caracara and lots of Chestnut-bellied Seedfinches in the grassy areas and the stunning Pied Plover on the sandbanks..

As we approached the parrot lick along the river, we could hear the parrots long before we could see them. It was an amazing sight to see so many parrots - tiny Dusky-billed Parrotlets, the aptly named Blue-headed Parrots and the larger Mealy Amazons (showing the floury sheen to their green plumage that gives them their name) all co-operating to gain the necessary minerals for their diet from the exposed cliff. After intense scrutiny a lone Yellow-crowned Amazon was spotted amongst the Mealies.

We then landed a bit further upstream and walked through forest to the second lick which was a muddy pool at the base of a wooded cliff. The noise was incredible as there were at least a hundred Cobalt-winged Parakeets in the trees waiting to come down to drink. They were spooked three times and all flew off with an incredible whirring of tiny wings. We were told there had been a Jaguar at the lick just before we arrived which could explain why they were nervous! While we were waiting we took a short walk to see two magnificent Crested Owls (later voted the birds of the trip) staring at us under their white Denis Healey Eyebrows (younger readers can look him up on the internet)! Once some parakeets had come down they then flew off in a panic response to the raucous calls announcing the arrival of a couple of Scarlet Macaws (unlike the parrots at the cliff, Macaws clearly don't share!). After the macaws left there was a mass arrival of parakeets in a blur of blue and green wings and these were then joined by the orange and black of a few larger Orange-cheeked Parrots. Finally, a usually shy species - Ruddy Quail Dove - came and showed off for the photographers.

After a packed lunch we walked back to the boats. There were still a few birds to be seen in the forest - the much smaller Chestnut-fronted Macaws but sadly no more sighting of the Blue-throated Piping Guan that most had missed on landing. Some of the party also were shown a Whip Snake pretending very successfully to be a small green branch!

On the way back to the lodge we landed on two river islands, originally sandbanks, in the middle of the main river which have their own specialist species. After a bit of gardening and calling, good views were obtained of a Grey-breasted Crake and there were more seedeaters and seedfinches, the incredibly active Spotted Tody Flycatcher and a North American migrant - Willow Flycatcher - which fortunately Manuel was familiar with (the Empidonax flycatchers being a notoriously difficult group to identify).

In the evening we were treated to a barbecue on the Balsa by the shores of the black lake - a perfect end to a perfect day.

Day 8

Thursday 14th February

After another early start for the keenest birders and a slightly later one for the others, we were taken to the canopy walk, accessed via a vertiginous staircase, similar to an electricity pylon, not suitable for anyone without a head for heights! At 30 metres above the ground this gave a fantastic view of the birdlife in the tops of the trees. After a slow start, the birds started to appear. It was great to be able to get views of tanagers without craning our necks and we were soon able to see Green-and Gold, Flame-crested, Masked, Opal-crowned, Opal-rumped and the ludicrously coloured Paradise Tanager as well as Blue and Black-faced Dacnis and Green and Purple Honeycreepers.

Looking down from the canopy was also productive with Purplish Jacamar and Amazonian Trogon using the supports of the walkway as a perch! The surrounding trees started to produce - Spix's Guan, Puffbirds (Pied and White-necked), Gilded Barbet and a number of the Cotinga family - the electric blue Spangled Cotinga, and Bare-necked and Purple-throated Fruitcrow. Raptors were also present with Plumbeous and Double-toothed Kites, Slate-coloured Hawk and a Greater Yellow-headed Vulture spreading its wings like a Cormorant on a dead tree. Slowly more birds started to appear with a group of Many-banded Aracaris coming to look us over and both White-throated and Channel-billed Toucans catching the sun in the distance. Mammal interest was provided by distant Red Howler Monkeys, but all eyes were drawn to a tree where an overly adventurous baby Black-mantled Tamarin was agitating its mother by climbing way up the tree and appearing to get stuck! To our great relief it eventually ran down and jumped back on its mother's back. The birds struck back with a very close Red-stained Woodpecker and Golden-collared Toucanets.

Other members of the party were taken around trails and through the forest picking up Screaming Piha (doing its stuff), Wire-tailed Manakin, Black-faced Antbird and Chestnut Woodpecker and given insights into the life of the natives in the forest. The majority of the staff of Sacha Lodge are from the local forest communities originally.

After lunch and a bit of a rest, during which several people saw a longer Anaconda (the length increased considerably when the story was retold in the bar later) under the main walkway around the resort, we went out in the canoes again, to go up Anaconda creek. Here good views of a large party of Squirrel monkeys were had, plus a male Capuchin which was showing interest in the female Squirrel monkeys (our local guide told us they can hybridise but the hybrid is infertile). Bird life was a bit slow in the heat but was enlivened by a Speckled Chachalaca walking along a branch very close by and the appropriately named Long-billed Woodcreeper flying over the lake with a massive beetle in its beak to feed its young (it was nesting near the Balsa building).

Day 9

Friday 15th February

The early birdwatching was done today at the canopy tower which has a viewing platform in the canopy of the largest tree on the reserve, a Kapok tree. This required a canoe ride across the lake in the dark and then along one of the many creeks. Whilst paddling across the lake, the guides' torches picked out both Tawny-bellied and Tropical Screech Owls within 50 metres of each other. The access was again by a metal staircase, even higher than the canopy walkway. Up in the branches it was possible to get excellent views of the many birds nesting and feeding up there - we really felt we were at home with the various tanagers, honeycreepers, euphonias, aracaris, trogons and flycatchers.

Apart from much closer views of birds seen the previous day, the highlights were two new cotingas - Plum-throated and Purple-throated, excellent views by most of Bare-necked Fruitcrow, Black-faced Dacnis, Lawrence's Thrush, Slender-billed Kite, Green-backed Trogon, Turquoise and Yellow-backed Tanagers, a cute pair of White-browed Purpletufts and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers. The guide then called in a superb Ringed Woodpecker which eventually came very close. Near the end, the cry of "macaws" went up and a pair of Blue & Yellow Macaws treated us to a close flyby. As we paddled back we rudely interrupted a Snail Kite eating a snail and had good views of male and female White-shouldered Antbird and brief views of Black-capped Donacobious around the edges of the lake.

Others walked around the forest and were rewarded with views of a pygmy marmoset followed by piranha fishing (good views of Green-and-Rufous Kingfisher were obtained - probably laughing at the inexperienced fisherman).

After lunch, the heavens opened and from the shelter of the Balsa we enjoyed watching many of the birds taking a quick shower - the Anis looked even more disreputable than normal and the Plumbeous Pigeon kept calling to try and attract a mate. Once the rain had stopped, the keenest birders walked in the very humid forest in search of ground feeding birds. We failed to entice out the Fulvous Antshrike (although we did succeed in attracting quite a few mosquitos) but we had more luck with the Dusky-throated Antshrike, Southern Nightingale Wren and Straight-billed Hermit (our first hummer for a while). We were also shown another pair of stunning Crested Owls.

Others relaxed on the Balsa enjoying the cool breeze and the comfortable chairs and fed ham to the piranhas!

Day 10

Saturday 16th February

Departure day at Sacha Lodge started early as we had a long drive ahead to get to the next lodge, San Isidro. As we got in our canoes to cross the lake, a Black-billed Thrush sang farewell causing pleasure to the rest of the group as only Pete had so far managed to see this bird. We then had to walk along the boardwalk to get to the main river. This time we weren't so burdened by luggage and so had time to find some good birds - Cream-coloured Woodpecker, Black-fronted Nunbird and Eastern Kingbirds. Once at the River Napo, we retraced the boat ride back to Coca with the weather staying fine. We had been lucky that most of our stay had been dry and fine apart from a couple of short downpours. We hurtled along a rate of knots but we still managed to add a new bird - Pearl Kite flying along the edge of an island.

We ate our packed lunches on the bus en route and stopped several times to pick up more new birds - Yellow-tufted Woodpecker, Swallow-tailed Kites, Cliff Flycatchers (on a cliff!) and a roosting Swallow-tailed Nightjar. Particular success was had at the Hollin feeders where most had the second flypast of the Amazonian Umbrella Bird in the car park and a number of new hummingbirds in the garden - Violet-headed, Many-spotted, White-tailed Hillstar and Golden-tailed Sapphire. However, the star hummer - Wire-crested Thornbill - was playing hard to get but just as we were about to give up a superb male was spotted in the verbena bush by John and obligingly posed for photos showing off his Vivienne Westwood styled crest. The gardens also hosted half a dozen maroon coloured female Cock of the Rocks (no males so it was clearly a hen party!), Violaceous Jay and some beautifully coloured tanagers - Blue-necked, Magpie, Green-and-Gold and Saffron Crowned.

Late in the afternoon we stopped by the river in the town of Cosanga - only a short drive from our lodge. After some work we were able to find both a male and female Torrent Duck - living up to their name. A Black Phoebe provided close views but a female Crested Quetzal was sadly distant. On arrival at San Isidro (2,050m) we had time for a brief look round before dark and were checked out by the Inca Jays which had replaced the Violaceous Jays from the Hollin Garden- it was clear that the altitude we had gained would lead to lots more new birds tomorrow!

Before dinner good views of the enigmatic San Isidro or Black-banded Owl were had from the terrace as it called loudly. The true identity and origins of this bird which has such an isolated range are now the subject of a

research project - it could be a race of Black-banded or Black-and-White Owl or a new species - either the ancestor of both or a new evolutionary development.

Day 11

Sunday 17th February

After breakfast there was plenty to look at from the veranda. Birds were coming to eat the moths attracted by the lodge lights overnight and we quickly added Black-billed Peppershrike, Black-eared Hemispingus, Common Bush-tanager, Subtropical Cacique, Montane Woodcreeper, Pale-edged Flycatcher, Canada and Blackburnian Warblers and Rose-breasted Grosbeak to the list.

A whole new cast of hummers were around the feeders. Identification was difficult as there were a whole gang of aggressive Chestnut-breasted Coronets which would chase off all other hummers. However, with a little patience we were able to pin down Collared and Bronzy Incas, Long-tailed Sylph, Fawn-breasted Brilliant, Buff-tailed Coronet and the much-bullied Speckled Hummingbird.

The rest of the morning was spent walking the trails of the estate which includes cloud forest that has never been cleared - the birding was quite hard but patience was rewarded and Mountain Wren, Yellow-vented Woodpecker, Olive-backed Woodcreeper, Variegated Bristle Tyrant and Rufous-breasted, Flavescent and the endangered Lemon-browed Flycatchers were seen as well as the very cute and confiding Cinnamon Flycatcher. Fresh Mountain Tapir tracks were reported by Emily and a camera trap was set in the area by Andy.

After lunch the birders walked along a local road (Vinillos Road) and had an unpleasant interaction with the local farmer who was clearly unhappy that people with cameras were on the road despite it being a public road in a national park. Manuel suspected he had a guilty conscience, strengthened by the arrival of a couple of his workers ostentatiously sharpening their machetes and some quite fierce dogs. Manuel calmed the situation down but we decided discretion was the better part of valour and beat a retreat back to the lodge, assisted by the fact that the birding hadn't been great. Nevertheless, we had seen Crested Quetzal, Bluish Flowerpiercer and Smoke-coloured Pewee.

Other members of the party had taken the, with hindsight, better option of relaxing around the charming buildings, getting up close and personal with the hummingbirds and walking the shorter trails.

Day 12

Monday 18th February

Heavy rain fell overnight and continued on and off all day. Most of the group went out for a long morning, driving around the local area to Guacamayos Ridge and Las Brisas hummingbird feeders. We had a fantastic start as the bushes/trees where we parked the bus were alive with birds - Smoky Bush Tyrant, Spectacled Whitestarts, Lacrimose Mountain Tanager and Russet-crowned and Blackburnian Warblers were the most visible whilst White and Chestnut-collared Swifts hurtled by overhead. We then headed off down the ridge as the rain got increasingly heavy and we understood why it was called a cloud forest! Andy used his bionic eyes to see through the mist and spot a Greater Scythebill and we all had rather blurred views of this rare and hard to find bird. As the rain got harder we decided to head back to the bus but again the car park turned up trumps with Green & Black Fruiteater, Bluish and Masked Flowerpiercers and a selection of tanagers (the highlight being the vivid Grass-Green) keeping us from taking shelter.

We then went on a wild Military Macaw chase in the rain when Manuel was asked by the park rangers to check out a villager's report of a sighting. Things didn't look promising when the villager's dog jumped off the roof to try and attack Manuel as he approached their dwelling but with the local's help we saw a likely nest site but sadly no macaws.

We then drove down to Las Brisas Hummingbird Feeders where we were able to shelter and wait for the rain to stop. Hummers didn't disappoint - we added Tawny-bellied Hermit, Violet-fronted Brilliant (glittering beautifully in the soft light) and the Peruvian Booted Racketail which must have had a different footwear sponsor and so had orange not white boots! Bananaquits enlivened the feeders and the surrounding trees contained Olivaceous Siskins and Bat Falcon whilst the bushes held Azara's Spinetail, Tropical Parula and Marble-faced Bristle Tyrant. More than satisfied with our morning's birding despite the inclement weather we headed back to the lodge.

After a late lunch we said goodbye to Alejandro, our host, and his staff with much regret, but we were assured that the next place was as nice if a little smaller. It is run by the same management. Our spirits were lifted when Andy recovered his trail camera and was delighted to find he had an excellent video of a female Mountain Tapir recorded on his trail camera overnight.

We drove indirectly to Guango Lodge (2,700m), via Bermejo Road and Borja Pass, making several short stops for birding, arriving just before nightfall. Birds added on the journey were White-rumped Hawk which was spotted by Pete on a distant tree and obligingly stayed long enough so we could clinch the identification, yet more tanagers (Golden-eared, Blue-necked, Flame-faced and Saffron-crowned), Torrent Tyrannulet, and last and by no means least - Red-breasted Blackbird in open fields near the oil pipeline that comes from the Amazon.

We were shown our rooms which were all in the main building for the first time, rather than cabins. In the lounge/diner downstairs there was an open fire and a log burner giving a very cosy feel which was necessary as we could all see our breath! Several members of the party took the opportunity to buy jumpers and scarves sold by the lodge. We were fed very well which we had come to expect as the food throughout the trip had always been very good, with a mixture of Ecuadorian and more standard fare. We were given hot water bottles to warm our beds as there was no heating in the bedrooms, and by the time we went to bed the heat from the fires downstairs had permeated upstairs and we were quite cosy.

Day 13

Tuesday 19th February

The morning was spent checking out the feeders and walking the trails around the lodge. We set off down a wide expanse of grass with the river on one side and forest on the other - this open space was maintained by the oil companies as it was the site of the major oil pipeline from the Amazon and gave us a very good vantage point to pick up bird flocks.

Andy soon picked out a shy male Crested Quetzal and then there was the mayhem caused by us hitting a big mixed species flock. Birds were everywhere but also moving fast - the photographers in the party were soon showing signs of having a nervous breakdown as it was hard to work out what to focus on (presumably the whole point from the bird's point of view so as to confuse predators). The open space though allowed us to follow the flock and we soon were able to spot Pearled Treerunner, Streaked Tuftedcheek, Montane Woodcreeper, Rufous-crowned Warblers, White-banded Tyrannulet, Blue-and-Black Tanagers, Capped

Conebills and Grey-Hooded Bush-Tanagers in the canopy. A look in the bushes lower down revealed Black-crested Warbler, Slaty and Pale-naped Brushfinches, Black-eared and Black-capped Hemispingus and an elusive Plushcap spotted by Andy which seemed determined not to show us its best feature! We kept looking for Toucans on the hillside but had to make do with a White-capped Parrot flyby. As we headed towards the river we saw Rufous-breasted Chat Tyrant and then two large and brightly coloured birds a bit bigger than a starling flew over. What on earth were they? - Manuel of course knew from the call and also knew what they were likely to do next and so soon we had cracking views of Hooded Mountain Tanagers. Fantastic birds.

The river was next and didn't disappoint as we had superb views of an immature/young adult Fasciated Tiger Heron practising fishing in the torrent. Not to be outdone, a family of Torrent Ducks duly obliged (male, female and one youngster that kept fluttering its very stubby wings - presumably adapted to swimming underwater). The male and female plumage is so different you wouldn't think they were the same species if you saw them in different habitats. Then it was back to the feeders where we managed to add Tourmaline Sunangel and White-bellied Woodstar to our ever-increasing list of hummers despite the invasion of a non-birding tour party. The party then meandered around the trails separately, John bumped into the bird flock again but still had trouble focusing his camera on a specific bird despite following them around for at least 30 minutes, so focused on the White-capped Dipper instead, Pete staked out and photographed the Slaty-backed Chat-Tyrant and Andy after considerable effort got his Mountain Toucans. Cracking place.

After an early and nutritious lunch we set off to our last stop - the Puembo bird garden near the airport in Quito which involved the small matter of climbing over the Eastern ridge of the Andes. Our first stop was at Papallacta Lake (3,250m) where with telescopes we were able to get reasonable views of Andean and Blue-winged Teals, Andean Coot and an incredibly pale Variable Hawk on a rock. Soon we had added to the raptor list with the very short tailed but broad-winged Black-chested Buzzard Eagle as we climbed to the Cayambe-Coca area (3,700m) which formed a large plateau at the top of the pass.

Soon however, we were climbing up Antennas's Hill (fortunately in the bus as it is at 4,500m altitude) and got out amongst the base of the antennae. Luis - our bus driver - soon spotted the target bird - Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe feeding quietly amongst the tundra like vegetation (known locally as paramo). We were soon able to slowly creep up on the birds (the altitude meant this felt like a sprint) and had fantastic views of their intricate and beautiful plumage - the bird fed and behaved like a Ptarmigan but the richness of its largely brown plumage was reminiscent of snipe. As we headed down feeling light-headed both because of the birds and the altitude we were greeted to our first sight of Andean Condor spotted by Nikki, gliding past, showing its classic shape, huge wings and delicate wingtips. Simply majestic ("awesome" for young people).

We then headed down slowly, stopping to pick up more exotically named paramo specialists - Stout-billed Cinclodes, Andean Tit-Spintail, White-chinned Thistletail, Paramo Ground Tyrant, Red-rumped Bush Tyrant and Brown-backed Chat Tyrant. We arrived at Puembo Bird Garden just in time to have a quick look at the feeders and pick-up Black-tailed Trainbearer, Sparkling Violetear and Western Emerald.

Day 14

Wednesday 20th February

As our flight wasn't until late afternoon we got up early in order to drive up to Antisana Ecological Reserve and pick-up yet more species (4,000 m altitude). Val had already left to start her boat trip in the Galapagos. We had

several stops on the way picking up Red-crested Cotinga (sadly with a flattened crest), Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, Streak-backed and Many-striped Castaneros, parked up Andean Condors, Black-winged Ground Doves, Ecuadorian Hillstar (only the female provided obliging for photos) and Paramo Pipit, but Manuel was keen for us to get to the lake at the top before the weather set in. We arrived and it was quite cold and windy but visibility was good so we were able to add Andean Duck (related to Ruddy Duck) and the shimmering Silvery Grebes on the lake. The surrounding moorland was home to small parties of Andean Ibis, Andean Lapwing, Andean Coot, a few Andean Gulls, Plumbeous Sierra Finch and one of the most bizarre birds of the trip - Carunculated Caracara - which swaggered around the tundra looking tough, only to pounce on incredibly tiny insects and worms.

After ticking them off we descended slightly slower to try to get better views of the paramo specialists but the weather then turned against us.

Our last stop was for lunch in a very friendly local lodge where we picked up - Black Flowerpiercer, Andean Condor, Great Thrush, Hooded Siskin and Giant Hummingbird. Over lunch we completed our final bird checklist and voted for Crested Owl as the bird of the trip (I think we need another people's vote as the Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe was clearly the better bird!).

After lunch we drove straight down to Quito airport in order to get the flight back to Schiphol at 5.30pm via Gyaquil.

Day 15

Thursday 21st February

We eventually arrived back in the UK in the afternoon after a connecting flight from Schiphol and made our way home to start working on our life-lists - it could take some time, especially for the photographers!

Final Thoughts

We had a fantastic trip with lots of diversity in habitat and altitude as reflected by the fact the group saw just over 500 bird species and heard quite a few more. We also did well on mammals which shows the relatively good state of the Ecuadorean countryside. The weather could be challenging at times (especially for the butterfly enthusiast), the cloud forest certainly lived up to its name but it did mean that when our hard work finally paid off as with the Plate-billed Mountain Toucans in the mist - it was a much more memorable experience - no pain, no gain. The trip would not have been nearly as successful without the expert skills and good humour of Manuel our guide, aided and abetted by Luis at times, or with Andy's incredible ability to find birds in all habitats and we all heartily thank them for it.

Importantly, the trip was enjoyable thanks to the friendliness of the locals at the lodges, the excellent local food, the willingness of everyone to chip in and make the best of things and to Manuel for being incredibly knowledgeable and willing to share his knowledge - birds, geography, politics etc and for putting up with our very British and noisy sense of humour (fortunately having lived in Britain for a while it wasn't too much of a shock to him).

Hasta la proxima.

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