

Colombia: Birding & Culture in the Central Andes with Naturalist Journeys



November 7 – 18, 2022

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Join Naturalist Journeys on our newest itinerary to the top birding country in the world: Colombia! This tour is streamlined for ease of travel, with long stays at two eco-hotels in the middle of the fabulous Andean landscape of central Colombia. We start and end our tour in the beautiful city of Medellín, the “City of Flowers” with a pleasant year-round climate (and with easy air access to the U.S. and other major cities in Colombia). Explore the terrain of the Central Andes which contains a diverse mix of coffee and other agricultural plantations, natural habitat, small towns, and world-class nature reserves. Birding is excellent with numerous species easily seen as we hike trails and visit bird feeding stations for hummingbirds, manikins, tanagers, toucans, motmots, and many more! A cultural break in the middle invites us to explore and experience the legendary “paisa” culture which Medellín and its surrounding department of Antioquia are famous for—those up to the task may consider eating a “bandeja paisa”, a dish that can feed a whole family!

The tour also visits the deep valleys of Colombia’s two major rivers: the Magdalena and the Cauca. In the valley of the Magdalena River, which separates the Central from the Eastern Cordillera, we search for water birds and wetland-associated birds. We also explore the arid valley of the Cauca River, separating the Central and Western Cordilleras, in search of unique dry forest species (some only just recently described to science!) found in the valley floors. Although this trip has a focus on birds and birding, the pace is relaxed and we concentrate not on maximizing the species list, but rather on finding, observing, and learning the many unique birds and other species of wildlife to be found in this region. We supplement our birding with experiencing the varied ecosystems of Colombia and experiencing the warmth and hospitality for which Paisas (Colombians from Antioquia and neighboring departments) are famous for.

Tour Highlights

- Visit this beautiful and biodiverse region of Colombia, the country with the most known bird species in the world, at a relaxing pace
- See unique bird species found in few other places such as Yellow-eared Parrot, Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, Red-bellied Grackle, Golden-headed Quetzal, and manakins, tanagers, and flycatchers too numerous to count!
- Bird with expert Naturalist Journeys and local guides such famous localities as the Rio Claro Reserve (558 bird species recorded, including Oilbird, Beautiful Woodpecker, and Antioquia Bristle-Tyrant) and the Yellow-eared Parrot Reserve (463 bird species recorded, including its namesake species, Purplish-mantled Tanager, Barred Fruiteater, Tanager Finch, and Flammulated Treehunter)
- Enjoy the famous paisa culture with coffee fresh from the farm, wonderful food, and an exploration of Medellín itself in its climate of “eternal spring”, perhaps including an exploration from above on the cable car system, unique in the world
- Search for Andean Cock-of-the-rock on a farm outside of Jardin
- Spend some time in the endangered dry forest ecosystem of the Cauca Valley in search of endemic species such as Antioquia Wren (first described to science in 2006), Apical Flycatcher, and Grayish Piculet.

Tour Summary

12-Day / 11-Night Colombia Birding and Culture Tour

\$4690, from Medellín

Airport is Medellín Jose Maria Cordova International Airport (MDE)

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Mon., Nov. 7 Arrival in Medellín

Welcome to Colombia! Arrive today at Medellín Jose Maria Cordova International Airport (MDE). You can arrive at your leisure; a representative from our local operator transfers you from the airport to our hotel in Medellín in the El Poblado district. Dinner tonight is at your leisure, but please feel free to get acquainted with others on the tour through an informal dinner.

Accommodations at Hotel Estelar Milla de Oro, Medellín

Tues., Nov. 8 La Romera Reserve, Transfer to Rio Claro

After an early breakfast at our hotel, we visit the La Romera Reserve on the outskirts of Medellín. This small local reserve is located in the municipality of Sabaneta, on the western flank of the Central Cordillera at an altitude of about 6,500 ft. Despite its closeness to the urban metropolis of Medellín, it is a zone of refuge for many species of birds and other wildlife. The patches of Andean forest are usually filled with mixed flocks of birds that include tanagers and warblers, as well as endemic and hard-to-find species such as Red-bellied Grackle, Stiles's Tapaculo, Colombian Chachalaca, and the very rare Yellow-headed Manakin. It is a place for birdwatching that provides easy walking with a beautiful view of the city of Medellín. After a morning hiking and birding, we enjoy a lunch at one of the excellent restaurants nearby where we enjoy the exquisite cuisine typical of the region.

After lunch, we continue our travels down and south toward the Magdalena River valley to the Rio Claro Reserve, about three hours away from Medellín. We arrive at our bird-friendly lodging, the Los Colores Ecomarque Ecohotel, in time for some late afternoon birding on the grounds of the hotel, followed by dinner.

Accommodations at Los Colores Ecomarque Ecohotel, Puerto Triunfo (B,L,D)

Wed., Nov. 9 Rio Claro Reserve

This incredible natural reserve is located on the east slope of the Central Cordillera in the valley of the Magdalena River and next to the wonderful Claro River. It is considerably lower in elevation (< 1000 ft) than yesterday, meaning warmer temperatures and different wildlife! The reserve's geology is dominated by limestone covered with tropical rainforest, creating a vast biodiversity and a high degree of endemism compared to other places in the country. At the same time, not only is it home to endemic bird species from the region, but also to amphibians, reptiles, butterflies, insects, and others—a naturalist's delight!

With well over 500 bird species recorded, we have an extraordinary time exploring this reserve. As it is a natural forest remnant that has remained intact for many centuries, this wildlife refuge serves as a home to endangered species such as White-footed Tamarin and Neotropical Otter. The canyon of the Claro River is one of the natural reserves in Colombia with the largest density of recorded species and the highest biodiversity in the department of Antioquia, a place that, without a doubt could be explored many times. We spend the morning exploring the trails looking for species such as Ruby-topaz Hummingbird, Cinnamon Woodpecker, Jet Antbird, Scarlet-browed Tanager, Orange-crowned Oriole, and Fulvous-vented Euphonia. With luck, we find the tracks and maybe are able to see animals such as Agouti, Paca, and Ocelot. We follow the lead of our local guides for the day, but we will spend the morning wildlife-watching in the reserve, return for a delicious lunch at our hotel, and then, after

a brief rest, spend the afternoon exploring different parts of the reserve. This includes a visit to a cave in search of the strange and enigmatic Oilbird; this hike includes some wading in a river, perfect for a hot afternoon! Those wishing for a slower pace may choose to enjoy the hotel's pool or spa or just relax. We end the day with an optional happy hour, review of the species seen during the day, and an excellent dinner.

Accommodations at Los Colores Ecomarque Ecohotel, Puerto Triunfo (B,L,D)

Thurs., Nov. 10 Puerto Triunfo & Magdalena River Valley Wetlands

Today, we descend to the Magdalena River to explore a variety of different, low elevation (500 ft) habitats. Surrounded by the two Cordilleras, it is relatively hot and dry in the lowlands, creating much different habitats. In the savannas surrounding the town of Puerto Triunfo, a high biodiversity of species occurs along a seldom-traveled road at the edge of the wetlands and dry forests very close to the Magdalena River. This is an excellent area for the observation of wetland birds such as Northern Screamer, Russet-crowned Crake, and Wattled Jacana which regularly occur in the area. The savannas, grasslands, low dry forests, and some portions of tropical humid forest are the ideal habitat for a large number of species from the Magdalena lowlands, including Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Savanna Hawk, Red-breasted Meadowlark, and Thick-billed Seed-Finch. This area is an ideal place to for bird photography due to the large number of close-by herons, egrets, shorebirds, and raptors. With some luck, we may be surprised to see some hippopotamuses in the Magdalena River, escapees from captives formerly held by the notorious drug lord Pablo Escobar at his former ranch nearby! We return to our hotel and conclude the day with a review of our sightings for the day and dinner.

Accommodations at Los Colores Ecomarque Ecohotel, Puerto Triunfo (B,L,D)

Fri., Nov. 11 Torre Lavega Farm

Torre Lavega is a private estate belonging to the famous Colombian photographer Rodrigo Gaviria, where there is a wildlife recovery center. It also serves as a natural reserve for the tropical rain forest in this area of the country; this is a very interesting place for bird photography and very pleasant to spend a relaxing amount of time observing and photographing birds. During the day, if time permits, we also visit other nearby places of interest such as the Aquitania Forest or the San Luis Road, where we can find some of the endemic bird species that are usually a little more difficult to see in traditional observation places. We conclude the day by returning to our hotel in the mid-afternoon for a brief rest before dinner.

Accommodations at Los Colores Ecomarque Ecohotel, Puerto Triunfo (B,L,D)

Sat., Nov. 12 Aquitania Road | Transfer to Medellin

Today, we visit another section of the Magdalena Valley in the Department of Caldas. Aquitania Road is a secondary, un-paved road, that goes to the village of Aquitania in the Magdalena Valley. The forests along the road host a great quantity of important species from the tropical rainforests of the Mid-Magdalena Valley. In this area, it is possible to observe birds inside the forests, along forest edges, and in secondary forests such as Sooty Ant-Tanager, White-mantled Barbet, woodpeckers (9 species!), manakins (White-bearded, White-bibbed, Striolated, Golden-headed), toucans, and many others. Birdwatching in Aquitania is very easily done by using an unpaved road to access a small community characterized for having the presence of some endemic species from the country's region. In addition to birds, we look carefully in these forests for several species of primates, including White-footed Tamarin (endemic to Colombia), Red Howler Monkey, and White-faced Capuchin. Tonight enjoy an optional happy hour, a review of the day's sightings, and a lovely dinner.

Accommodations at Hotel Estelar Milla de Oro, Medellin (B,L,D)

Sun., Nov. 13 Medellin Paisa Culture!

We take a break from birding and wildlife watching in the middle of our trip to explore the city of Medellin and experience some of its vibrant paisa culture. Our exact schedule depends on what is going on in town today and

what our interests are, but we might begin (after coffee, of course!) with a short walk in the Medellín Botanical Garden to learn more about common plant species, visit the butterfly exhibit, and see a few more birds. We may also visit the Pueblito Paisa, a replica of an old-style country town from the early 20th Century, the famed Flower Market, the area where the silleteros (men and women who create silletas, or flower arrangements) are from who participate in a famous parade during the annual August Flower Festival, the Plaza Botero (an outdoor sculpture garden featuring the work of the famed artist Fernando Botero), or take a ride on Medellín's unique MetroCable, a system of gondolas linked to the city subway that provide transportation throughout the steep hills surrounding downtown. We end the day with dinner at a unique Medellín restaurant.

Accommodations at Hotel Estelar Milla de Oro, Medellín (B,L,D)

Mon., Nov. 14 Birding to Jardín

We start after breakfast this morning on our several hour drive to the small town of Jardín with some stops on the road to see birds in different ecosystems. The well-named town of Jardín is located at about 5,200 ft and is a town dedicated to the production of coffee, plantains, and other fruits. After we arrive and settle in, we enjoy the gardens of the hotel in the afternoon and the amazing landscapes of this beautiful region of Colombia. After a brief rest, we meet again to review the day's species list and enjoy dinner at this lovely location.

Accommodations at Hacienda Balandú, Jardín (B,L,D)

Tues., Nov. 15

Yellow-eared Parrot Reserve | Alto de Ventanas Reserve Feeders

Today, after breakfast, we explore the higher elevations in the mountains surrounding Jardín. Located in the sector known as Alto Ventanas, about 1.5 hours away from the town of Jardín in the Western Cordillera. Behind it, where the cordillera rises up to 9,500 ft, lives a Yellow-eared Parrot population, almost always found to be strongly associated to remnant wax palm forests. The area is surrounded by patches of high-Andean forests on the higher side and Andean forest on the lower side. The climate here is cooler and wetter than our other locations and it is a place with an incredible biodiversity of birds and magnificent landscapes. We spend the day birding and wildlife-watching along an unpaved road with little traffic in between these beautiful mountains of the western Andes. There are also feeders available at one location, which provide close viewing and photo opportunities. In addition to the parrot, we hope to see many of the over 450 species found in the area, including specialties like hummingbirds (38 species recorded), Black-billed Mountain-Toucan, Barred Fruiteater, Chestnut-crested Cotinga, and Tanager Finch. Returning in mid- to late-afternoon, we have a chance to rest and explore the hotel grounds before dinner.

Accommodations at Hacienda Balandú, Jardín (B,L,D)

Wed., Nov. 16 Cock-of-the-rock Lek | Bambusa Farm Feeders

After an early breakfast at our hotel, we drive a short distance to the Jardín de Rocas Natural Reserve, a small farm located on the side of the rural area just outside Jardín where a permanent Andean Cock-of-the-rock lek still exists. This place is very famous and widely visited by birdwatchers. The cocks-of-the-rock can be seen only inches away from the viewing areas, providing unique opportunities to observe and photograph this beautiful bird species. The owners have installed some feeders, which attract many regional species like tanagers and chachalacas. Access to the cock-of-the-rock lek is a bit steep, but we hike slowly. This reserve has also become a private conservation initiative, which must be highly supported, since this lek is certainly one of the best and most accessible throughout the range.

We also visit the Finca Bambusa, a small farm belonging to the Castaño family, which houses a nursery of ornamental plants from the region and some traditional crops such as coffee and plantain. Mrs. Piedad, a sweet older woman, has been feeding the birds in her garden for some time now. Upon first offering feed, she was

surprised to discover that just a few days later, many tanagers, woodpeckers, chachalacas, hummingbirds, and other species suddenly began to arrive. This led her decision to open the doors of her farm, welcoming all birdwatchers. This is a very pleasant place to spend a few hours observing beautiful species from the Colombian coffee region while enjoying a delicious lunch, a great cup of coffee, taking some amazing photos, and supporting local nature conservation. We return to our hotel in the afternoon for a rest, a review of our sightings, and dinner.

Accommodations at Hacienda Balandú, Jardín (B,L,D)

Thurs., Nov. 17 Bolombolo Dry Forest | Transfer to Medellin

Bolombolo is a town located in the lowlands of the Cauca River valley with a warm climate (temperatures over 30°C). Even though deforestation has significantly affected this area, remnants of dry forest and secondary growth are home to bird species of great interest. The birdwatching places located in the areas surrounding Bolombolo are rural, unpaved roads and usually flat. Some agricultural crops of warmer-climate species and livestock farming are the main economic source of income from these lands. It is a place with a high diversity of species; today we look for three very range-restricted, endemic birds (Antioquia Wren, first described to science in 2006, Apical Flycatcher, and Grayish Piculet). We also look for some of the other interesting birds in the area, such as Black-crowned Antshrike, Striped Cuckoo, Moustached Puffbird, Spectacled Parrotlet, and Guira Tanager. After lunch, we return to Medellin in the early afternoon to give everyone a chance to organize their things, rest, and then celebrate a fantastic trip with a final happy hour, species list review, and dinner.

Accommodations at Hotel Estelar Milla de Oro, Medellin (B,L,D)

Fri., Nov. 18 Departures

Depart at your leisure for home or your final destination today. Transportation to the airport is provided in time for your flight from Medellin.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Travel Information

Arrive in Medellin at the Medellin Jose Maria Cordova International Airport (MDE) at your leisure on November 7. Please plan departures at leisure on November 18.

Cost of the Journey

\$4690 DBL / \$4990 SGL from Medellin, based on double occupancy and includes: airport transfers, accommodations for 11 nights, meals as specified in the itinerary, professional guide services, local guides, local park and reserve entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses.

It does not include roundtrip airfare to or from Medellin, or items of a personal nature like laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, or gratuities for portage or personal services.

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