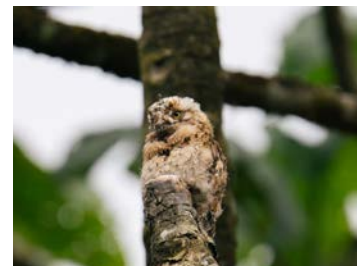
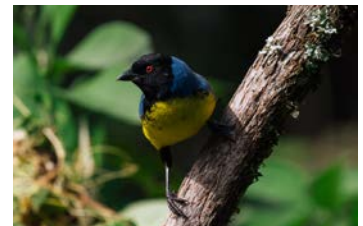


# Birds and Mammals of Ecuador's Andes

## Nov. 6 – 18, 2023 | Trip Report | by Wes Larson



With guide Wes Larson and participants: Jessie, Nathan, David, Michael, Susan, Mark, Lois, Mary, Guy, and Elizabeth



**Mon., Nov. 6**

### Quito to Sachatamia Lodge

Even though some of our group arrived late the night before, we got up early to eat breakfast, get to know each other quickly, and leave for our first day exploring the Andes. It was easy to tell from even just the first breakfast that we were going to have a really good group, and the weather was great, and spirits were high as we piled into the van and drove off for Quito, and then the mountains. Xavier is from the area, so he was able to share information and stories during the whole drive, and by the time we arrived at our first stop, we all had learned a lot about the area around Quito and the high montane forest.



Our first stop was Zuraloma Reserve, and it didn't disappoint. The feeders were full of hummingbirds and tanagers, and it didn't take us long to get a few target birds, including the Sword-billed Hummingbird and the Hooded Mountain-Tanager. Then we walked down a short path where we were very lucky to visit an antpitta feeder and see an elusive equatorial antpitta eat a few worms. For many in the group it was their first antpitta, and it was an incredible sighting! Other birds included the Red-bellied Mountain-Tanager and the Yellow-breasted Brushfinch.

After leaving Zuraloma, we continued along the road and dropped down into the cloud forest, which was every bit as lush and beautiful as Xavier had described to us. We marveled at the incredible vegetation and the occasional bird including some White-capped Dippers, a quick Masked Trogon and a Golden-headed Quetzal. We ate lunch in a beautiful restaurant overlooking some very active feeders and we managed to pick up some new birds during lunch, including a few new species of tanagers, euphonias and hummingbirds.

Next, we visited another hummingbird feeder station near the river, and these were our busiest yet! We found White-booted Racket-tails, Purple-throated Woodstars and many more. We then went on a short walk to a bridge, where Xavier showed us a female Andean Cock-of-the-Rock on her nest! Pretty crazy to get so many target birds on our first day of the trip. We drove to Sachatamia Lodge and were greeted by even more hummingbird feeders, as well as some feeders that were popular with the local agoutis. This is a beautiful lodge with delicious food, and our first species list that night was done over canelazo, a traditional Ecuadorian drink that is perfect for a misty evening.

## **Tues., Nov. 7                      Full Day in the Sachatamia Region**

We woke up early this morning at the Sachatamia Lodge and after a quick coffee we headed up to a nearby blind where a sheet attracted moths and beetles all night. The large number of insects had attracted a lot of birds and we watched for over an hour as woodcreepers, trogons, flycatchers, redstarts, wrens, warblers and other birds plucked moths off of the sheet. It was a wonderful experience to sit there and watch as the forest came alive. It was a perfect morning in the cloud forest, and we had a delicious breakfast afterward back in the





dining room. We then piled into the van and went down to the nearby town of Mindo where we walked on some rural roads and found many great birds including our first toucan, the Choco Toucan! The town of Mindo is beautiful, and we had particularly nice weather as we explored the roads and jungles in the area.

Lunch was back in the lodge, but it was interrupted when another guest spied a Long-wattled Umbrellabird! The gorgeous male bird was perched in a tree near the lodge, and most of our guests got a great look at him before he took off and flew into some distant trees. Then after a quick squabble with some Yellow-throated Toucans, the umbrellabird left, but we had great views of the toucans. Right after that we also saw a Red-headed Barbet and several great tanagers and other birds at one of the feeders near the lodge. We went on a short drive afterward to a protected area not far from Mindo, and found a few new hummingbirds as well as a female umbrellabird, a Chestnut Aracari and a big spider that may have been a wandering spider.

One of the best treats of the day was right before dinner when Xavier's friend Johnny showed us some of the beautiful frogs that can be found in the area, as well as a gorgeous equatorial anole. It was a real treat and we all got to get up close with the stunning amphibians. We reviewed the species list at dinner sad to say goodbye to Sachatamia, but excited to see what comes next!

## **Wed., Nov. 8                      Leaving Sachatamia and Heading to Bellavista**

Today we got up early and left the Sachatamia Lodge right after breakfast. Xavier had a full day planned for us, and the stops did not disappoint. The first was at the Mashpi Amagusa Preserve, where feeders were set up with hummingbirds, tanagers and other insect- and fruit-eating birds in mind. And we saw a LOT of birds at this stop. Some of the favorites included Glistening-green Tanager, Rose-cheeked Parrots, Chestnut-capped Brushfinch and Cinnamon Becard. There were several different feeder set-ups, each with its own target birds. One that we all particularly liked was the feeder that attracted tanagers, and we got great looks at rufous-throated tanagers, black-chinned mountain tanagers, with Flame-faced Tanagers topping the list. The hummingbird feeders were also very productive, and many from our group agreed that we could have spent an entire day at just this one spot.



Next, we drove to a property that Xavier owns. A beautiful Tyra was raiding the bananas at one of the feeders. These elusive mustelids are difficult to see in the wild, but this one liked bananas! Next, some of the group relaxed around the property while the rest hiked up the hill to see some of the projects that Xavier had started on the property to draw in more birds. Then we ate a box lunch on the balcony while we enjoyed the stunning view of the surrounding cloud forest. We then drove a bumpy, windy road to Bellavista Lodge, situated on top of a ridge with incredible views of the deep jungle-covered valleys. Part of the group went for a short while others watched the feeders. Then we reviewed the species list and enjoyed a tasty local dinner.

### **Thurs., Nov. 9                      Leaving Bellavista and the Cloud Forest**

Today we got up at Bellavista Lodge to see what kind of insects had accumulated in the moth traps, and we watched as the birds swept in and grabbed moths and other insects, including many woodcreepers, tanagers and spectacular Toucan Barbets. After breakfast, some of our group headed to the feeders hoping to see the elusive Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan. The feeders were a bit slow, but we did see Plate-billed Mountain-Toucans on our return to Bellavista! It was a very nice farewell to the cloud forest ecosystem, and after lunch in the lodge we departed for Quito for some relaxation time at the Holiday Inn.

### **Fri., Nov. 10                      Flight to Coca and Travel to Napo Wildlife Center**

After a nice breakfast in the hotel lobby, we loaded into the van and made a short drive to the airport and our flights to Coca. Situated on the Napo River, Coca is a gateway city to the Ecuadorian Amazon. We got a briefing at the Napo dock and then departed on a large and very comfortable motorized canoe. On the way we experienced our first rainforest thunderstorm, but it was brief, and the clouds parted as we approached Yasuni National Park. Here we transferred to smaller canoes, paddling a section of the river rich in bird and mammal life. We saw Three-toed Cloth, Napo Saki Monkeys, White-fronted Capuchin monkeys, Squirrel Monkeys and Giant River Otters. Everyone was buzzing as we approached the lake where the Napo Wildlife Center is situated, and then we were speechless as the lodge came into view. The stunning cabanas, lodge and tower all sit above the picturesque Amazon lake--it's hard to imagine a more beautiful jungle lodge. As we arrived, a friendly worker greeted us with a cool towel and a refreshing glass of juice, then we entered the lodge, heard a brief





presentation and settled into our amazing rooms. It's hard to put into words just how special this place is, and we were excited for the next three days as we reviewed our species list over dinner.

## **Sat. Nov. 11                      Full Day in the Napo Wildlife Center Area**

We woke to an incredible downpour. Our plan to visit the observation tower at 5:00 a.m. had to be delayed by two hours, so we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and waited for the rain let up. We boarded the boats at 7 a.m., drifting past the Hoatzins on our way to a beautiful jungle trail that leads to the canopy tower. It's a lot of stairs, but once we arrived at the top, we immediately began seeing birds including a Crested Eagle(!) Paradise Tanagers, White-throated Toucans, Crimson-crested Woodpeckers, and a very beautiful flyby of a group of Scarlet Macaws. Mammals and reptiles were plentiful too, and we saw both Two-toed and Three-toed Sloths, as well as Titi Monkeys and a Thorntail Iguana. On the walk back to the boats we had a nice look at a Wire-tailed Manakin lek, as well as some beautiful frogs and toads. When we reached the boat, we learned that a massive anaconda was seen sunning itself on the other side of the lake, so we paddled over there and everyone got a look at the snake, which was easily 16 feet long.

We had a nice lunch in the lodge followed by a few hours of down time. Then we paddled up another creek that feeds into the lake. On the way we watched as a family of giant otters played with their young in the water. We found a lot of new birds too, including our first look at Blue-and-yellow Macaws. It was a perfect afternoon in a rainforest paradise and by the end of the day the weather was gorgeous and clear.

After dinner a small group went on a night walk with our two guides, finding a few impressive spider species, as well as snakes, lizards and frogs. It was nice to see the lush forest come alive at night and to get a better view of some of its more elusive inhabitants.

## **Sun., Nov. 12                      Full Day at Napo Wildlife Center**

Today we started at the crack of dawn again, and lucky for us the weather was absolutely beautiful. As we made our way down the creek, we managed to see some new birds including a gorgeous Agami Heron! We also saw



Boat-billed Herons, night-herons, Common Potoo and many other birds. Mammals weren't scarce either. Both boats saw Golden-mantled Tamarins, which is the mascot of Napo Wildlife Center, so we were happy to see this charismatic little primate. When we reached the Napo River, we got into motorboats and headed to a large clay lick. Hundreds of parrots and parakeets were nervously flying around until a few hesitantly landed on the clay, soon joined by others. It was amazing to see the massive flocks of Blue-headed and Mealy Parrots as well as other species, and especially incredible to see them at a nutrient source that is completely natural.

Next, we visited a small community that has had great success with macaw sightings, and we got nice looks at both Blue-and-yellow and Chestnut-fronted Macaws. We also found a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, and briefly saw some Scarlet-crowned Barbets. Then we crossed the river and went on a short hike to a second "wet" clay lick. Even though it was oppressively humid, none of us really cared because we were watching Orange-cheeked Parrots, Cobalt-winged Parakeets and, a bit later, Scarlet Macaws all taking turns drinking from a pool of mineral-laden water beneath the lick. It was incredibly peaceful watching the macaws, largest of the parrots, as they quietly consumed the minerals they need to counteract the acidic fruits and berries that make up the majority of their diet. After eating lunch at the Welcome Center, we returned to the lodge where we all had a free afternoon. Some visited the nearby tower, while others dozed on the comfortable beds and hammocks in their cabanas. When we regrouped in the evening for drinks before dinner, a brief power outage interrupted our review of the species list, but we enjoyed our drinks in the dark. Suddenly we were joined by a kinkajou that appeared at the entrance to the lodge and climbed one of the posts to the second floor. A completely unexpected sighting! As soon as the power came back on, we sat down to a great dinner and did our nightly species list, tired and happy.

## **Mon., Nov. 13                      Full Day at Napo Wildlife Center**

In the morning, we walked down the creek and immediately started seeing birds including another look at the Common Potoo and a few Boat-billed Herons. A group of Chestnut-fronted Macaws flew over and a lone White-throated Toucan as well. We boarded the motorized canoes and sped off to an island where an Amazonian Umbrellabird was building a nest. We stopped at the clay lick on the way and saw hundreds of parrots on the lick and hundreds more perched or in flight vying for a spot! Some of the trees were bending over from the weight of dozens and dozens of parrots, truly a breathtaking spectacle to see and hear so many brightly colored birds in one spot.





We saw the umbrella bird as we approached the island, our second umbrellabird species of the trip! Getting out of the boats, we also noticed seedeaters, nightjars and a Tody-flycatcher. Then we visited a local Añangu community where many of the Kichua women from the Napo area work, and they had prepared a special cultural experience for us. Seated in a traditional dwelling, we learned about the Kichua lifestyle, their dances, songs and other cultural practices. They shared some of the local drinks and cuisine, which were a bit too grubby for a few of our participants. Learning firsthand how the Kichua people thrived for thousands of years really helped to give context to just how lucky we were to be visitors in the Amazon region of Ecuador, and that these gracious people were willing to share their culture and wilderness to us.

After lunch at the Napo Welcome Center, we returned to the lodge in the canoes. It was quite hot in the tropical sun, and most of our group opted for a relaxing afternoon. Michael and our guides went on a canoe trip and had saw howler and spider monkeys as well as a few new birds for the trip. A beautiful thunderstorm and double rainbow closed out our last night in Napo, and we made plans for an early departure the next day over dinner.

## **Tues., Nov. 14                      Leaving Napo and Return to Cloud Forest**

It's always hard to say goodbye to a place as special as Napo. We began our journey in the smaller canoes, paddling for about 90 minutes. On our way, we encountered a Zigzag Heron, one of the most elusive members of the heron family and a true prize of the Amazon! Next, we transferred to the larger, motorized canoes for a 2.5-hour cruise up the main river channel on our way back to Coca where we reunited with Franklin, our bus driver, and set out for the Andean foothills once again. As we gained elevation, we passed from tropical to subtropical rainforest, and then back into cloud forest. The difference in ecosystems (and temperatures) was very noticeable. Xavier pointed out a Cliff Flycatcher, a fairly nondescript brown bird, but it only exists in a very small part of Ecuador, so it was a treat to see. We stopped for coffee at a nice roadside shop along the way and made stops at a few rivers too to look for Torrent Ducks and Torrent Tyrannulets, only finding the later. Cabanas San Isidro was a welcome sight for our group, with its luxuriant rooms and wonderful meals. That evening we were fortunate to see the "San Isidro Owl," a close relative to the Black-banded Owl that may in fact be a



distinct species. Everyone in our group got a nice long look at the charismatic owl before we retired to our rooms for the night.

## **Wed., Nov. 15                      Full Day Exploring the Eastern Cloud Forest**

Most of our group woke up early to inspect the moth sheet that had been prepared the night before. And it was very active! We saw some familiar birds grabbing insects including Masked Trogon, Montane Woodcreeper and Blackburnian Warbler. But with them were Canada Warblers, Inca Jays and Mountain Wrens. Next, we walked a short trail to a feeding station where White-bellied Antpitta is sometimes seen. But despite some calling and coaxing with fresh worms, the elusive bird decided to stay in the dense forest.

We enjoyed a wonderful Ecuadorian breakfast and then set out for a morning excursion, walking some of the nearby roads where we found Summer Tanager, Hooded Siskin and a beautiful Crimson-mantled Woodpecker. It was nice to see the countryside in this part of Ecuador and after a lot of van time, our group was happy to stretch our legs a bit. After lunch we explored the lower forest and visited a neighboring ecolodge where we saw a few new hummingbirds and a Flame-eared Tanager. A nearby river had a pair of Torrent Ducks feeding in the rapids. Next, we took a 40-minute drive to a nearby nature preserve and hiked a steep but short trail to a blind where we sat in stunned silence as we watched 30+ Andean Cock-of-the-Rocks as they displayed in a large lek. An unforgettable experience and one of the highlights of the trip for many. Then we returned for one more delicious dinner at San Isidro.

## **Thurs., Nov. 16                      San Isidro to Termas de Papallacta**

In the morning the photographers were clicking away at the moth sheet. We could hear the antpitta calling in the woods, but it didn't come in for worms at the feeding station. One of the highlights at Cabanas San Isidro is the food, and we enjoyed another amazing Ecuadorian breakfast before packing up the van and heading toward our final destination in the Andes of Ecuador: Termas de Papallacta.

We continued climbing, passing from cloud forest into montane forest and then into paramo grasslands, the region above the treeline, and below the snowline. This is the realm of the spectacled bear, and while we didn't see any of these large herbivores, we did find several new birds including Dark-bellied Cinclodes and Black-





chedsted Buzzard-Eagle. It was cold and windy, and at nearly 14,000 feet, it felt like the top of the world. After a box lunch, we descended to Papallacta and the Termas de Papallacta. This lodge features more than a dozen hot spring pools, and we decided to take the rest of the afternoon to relax and enjoy the warm water and beautiful surroundings. A mountain tapir was spotted on a nearby slope, so we took a short walk to view this large, secretive mammal as it grazed in a mountain pasture. Then we met for dinner and reviewed our species list.

## **Fri., Nov. 17                      Exploring Antisana Reserve**

After an early breakfast we drove to Antisana, a beautiful mountain reserve high in the Andes. Our first stop was Tambo Condor, an ecolodge where Andean Condors can often be seen and where there have been several sightings of Spectacled Bear. Not long after we arrived, we saw two condors flying along the ridge across the valley. Hummingbirds were also plentiful at this lodge, and we picked up a few new species including Giant Hummingbird and Great Sapphirewing. Next, our local guide Pancho led us on a walk in the high alpine landscape. Andean Hillstar was one of our goals, and we had great looks at this regional specialty. We also found large herds of South American white-tailed deer. We continued our drive further into the park, entering a valley with great views of Cotopaxi and Antisana and a lot of great bird life as well including Andean Ibis, Carunculated Caracara and Andean gulls.

We returned to Tambo Condor for a tasty lunch in a room with huge windows overlooking the gorgeous valley and condor roosts. Following lunch, we did a bit more birding at the feeders and then returned to our hotel in Papallacta. Everyone did their own thing in the afternoon, soaking in the hot springs, napping or walking the trails around the lodge. That night we met up for our species list and voted on the bird and mammal of the trip, with Booted Racket-tail winning first prize for birds, and the giant otters winning for mammals. Then we enjoyed a lovely farewell dinner together and reminisced over our time in Ecuador.

## **Sat., Nov. 18                      Morning in Papallacta and Return to Quito**

After a leisurely breakfast we decided to do one last birding trip at a nearby lake where we found Tufted Tit-Tyrant, Bar-bellied Woodpecker, Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager and Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle. We also had clear skies that offered breathtaking, cloudless views of Antisana. Then it was time to pack up and drive to Quito. We visited the beautiful Cumbaya neighborhood and had some amazing pizza at a restaurant that Xavier

recommended. It was a wonderful journey with a terrific group, and I feel lucky to have experienced such beautiful birds, mammals and places with all of you!

*Photo Credits: Napo Wildlife Center (Jessie Hallstrom - JH), Napo Saki Monkey (Wes Larson - WL), Hooded Mountain Tanager (WL), Andean Potoo (WL), Plate-billed Mountain Toucan (WL), Andean Cock-of-the-rock (WL), Glass Frog (WL), Golden-headed Quetzal (Lois Ports - LP), Capped Heron (WL), Enjoying the view (JH), Sword-billed Hummingbird (LP), Grass Green Tanager (LP), Equatorial Antpitta (WL), Masked Trogon (WL), Booted Racquet-tail (WL), Swing (JH), Long-wattled Umbrellabird (WL), Yellow-throated Toucan (WL), Exploring (JH), Montane Woodcreeper (Nathan Welch - NW), Golden Grosbeak (NW), Velvet-purple Coronet (WL), Sloth (LP), Blue-winged Mountain-tanager (WL), Toucan Barbet (WL), Turquoise Jay (WL), Admiring the Canopy (NW), Napo Wildlife Center (JH), Hoatzin (WL), Blue-and-yellow Macaws (WL), Golden Mantled Tamarin (WL), Parrots flying (WL), Anaconda (WL), Black-banded Owl (WL), Inca Jay (WL), Cinnamon Flycatcher (WL), Dog (JH), Tawny Antpitta (WL), River view (Michael Meriwether), Scenic with horses (JH), Tayra (WL), Glistening-green Tanager (NW), Carunculated Caracara (WL), Violet-tailed Sylph (David Welch)*