

Christmas in Ecuador | Dec. 22–29, 2023

Trip Report | by Andrea Molina



Compiled by Andrea Molina, with participants Yvonne Butorac, Beverly Agler, Craig Roberts, Mark Nofsinger, Jennifer Clarke, Paul Clarke, Kim Whiteres and Sheila Mills.



Ecuador, a country the size of Colorado with more than 1,700 species of birds, is one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. Featuring a heritage of colonial architecture and rich in culture and traditions, it's an ideal destination for birders any time of year, but especially to celebrate Christmas! Our group enjoyed a wonderful week together, exploring haciendas, volcanos, local artisans and unique landscapes and, of course, wonderful birds and wildlife!

Fri., Dec. 22 **Cotopaxi National Park | Limpiopungo Lake**

We departed the Quito Airport Holiday Inn at 7:30 a.m. for the short drive to Cotopaxi National Park. The park extends into three provinces: Pichincha, Napo and Cotopaxi and is named after the active volcano, the third highest in the world at 19,347 feet. On the way, we picked up Jimena, our local guide, who took us to the Interpretative Center and introduced us to the history, wildlife and plant life that can be found in the park.

Next, we took a short walk on a high-elevation trail where we found the vocal Tawny Antpitta, White-throated Tyrannulet and two beautiful hummingbirds: Purple-backed Thornbill and Black-tailed Trainbearer.



We stopped at the Tambopaxi Restaurant for lunch and a warm drink and found a Black-billed Shrike-Tyrant and a Plumbeous Sierra-Finch right in the parking area! An Ecuadorian Hillstar was visiting flowers in the garden, which we could see while enjoying our tasty lunch. A storm came through quickly with heavy rain and hail. When we arrived at Limpiopungo Lake, the weather was still bad, and we just make a quick visit. Still, we managed to see Yellow-billed Pintail, Andean Duck, Andean Teal and Andean Coot.

We drove about an hour to reach the main road again, arriving at San Agustin del Callo Hacienda, our accommodations for the next two nights. We checked in and some people took a walk in the gardens, finding Black-backed Grosbeak, Tufted Tit-Tyrant and Blue-and-yellow Tanagers. At 6 p.m. we gathered in the cozy living room by the fireplace to review our checklist and enjoy a local drink named canelazo, which is prepared with hot cinnamon tea, naranjilla and a combination of sweet spices to keep you warm, especially if sugar cane rum is added! Afterwards, we enjoyed our first dinner together and then spent the night in the peaceful hacienda.

Sat., Dec. 23 Greenhouse Tour

After a delicious breakfast, we joined the staff in feeding llamas! We each had a basket of carrots that we carried out onto the main patio and had fun interacting with these gentle animals. Then we visited a rose plantation to learn about one of Ecuador's top exports known for their very long stems.

Don Julio greeted us at Rose Success Cia Ltd. and gave us a tour of the greenhouses. He explained the business and answered our questions while showing us the variety of colors and sizes. Their busiest time of year is preparing for Valentine's Day! After our tour, we visited a little shop where the staff offered us a rose liquor and chocolate mixed with rose petals. On our way back, Bev spotted a raptor that turned out to be a young Aplomado Falcon that stayed cooperatively close for a while so everyone had good views. The group enjoyed lunch back at the Hacienda and after a short rest we wandered around the entrance road and found some good birds including Black-crested Warbler, a huge group of Barn Swallows, White-crested Elaenia, and our driver, Jose, spotted a Short-eared Owl in the distance. We walked a bit further to get better views of the owl and discovered a Peruvian Meadowlark perched on a wire just as the rain started. We walked back to the Hacienda and then gathered to work on the checklist and have dinner.

Sun., Dec. 24 to Imbabura Province | Hacienda Cusin

Today we traveled from Cotopaxi Province towards Imbabura Province, driving on a section of the Pan-American Highway known as the Avenue of Volcanoes. We broke up the drive with a stop at the equator, zero degrees



latitude! The Interactive Center was quite interesting with its huge solar clock and a nice garden with over 50 agave species from around the world. Continuing north, we crossed San Pablo Lake and arrived at our new accommodations for the next three nights, Hacienda Cusin, where we received a warm welcome and were served another traditional lunch prepared with local ingredients and fresh vegetables from their garden. Afterwards our host accompanied us on a short tour around the property, sharing the history of the place and enjoy of the beautiful and lush green areas.

Then we took a short drive to San Pablo Lake, located at the base of the Imbabura Volcano. The reeds along shore are the perfect habitat for the local Subtropical Doradito, and although it responded to the playback, it was still quite elusive, but with patience we had great views. We also caught a quick glimpse of a Virginia Rail, a subspecies that occurs in Ecuador. Other birds seen there were Vermillion Flycatcher, a huge group of Andean Coot, Neotropical Cormorant, Pied-billed Grebe and Hooded Siskin.

We drove back to the hacienda a bit early since it was Christmas Eve. At 5:30 we were called to the main patio where a group of local women performed a traditional dance, played music and sang a few songs while staff served us a local cocktail. At 7:00 we were served dinner, a lovely meal with special recipes from the chef. After our little celebration it was time to go to bed and rest for the next day.

Mon., Dec. 25 Christmas Day | Cuicocha Lake | Ñanda-Mañachi House

Christmas Day! We had breakfast at 7:00 and then drove to Cuicocha Lake, located in Cotacachi-Cayapas National Park. At nearly 10,000 feet, this high-altitude lake formed in a volcanic crater and is a stunning location.

As soon as we started down the trail, a Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager called, followed by Azara's Spinetail, Masked Flowerpiercer and a better view of Grass Wren. Weather in the cloud forest is always changing, and we noticed as the clouds moved in quickly and a light rain started to fall. A Blackish Tapaculo could be heard not far from the trail, but typical for this family, it didn't show itself.

On our return we found Plain-colored Seedeaters and another Black-tailed Trainbearer, this time perched nicely on top of bushes that were also being visited by Sparkling Violetears. Just before we reached the parking area, a Chestnut-crowned Antpitta came into the open for only a few seconds, giving most of the group the chance to see this wonderful bird that is usually only heard! We returned to the hacienda and enjoyed a tasty lunch. After a short break, we drove to Peguche to visit a local weaver's workshop, where Jose Cotacachi the owner, met us. He gave us a tour and explained how he produces natural dyes using beetles (cochinilla) that live on cactus, herbs, lemon juice and baking soda. He produces his beautiful tapestries with his own unique mix of colors and



traditional designs, and we had the chance to see his work in the small gift shop. Next, we visited the Ñanda-Mañachi House, a well-known family of musicians where Luis showed us the instruments, and even played a few short melodies for us. His home is like a museum, displaying many different wind instruments from Andean countries and there were also a few items for sale. Afterwards we walked through the small town, admiring the murals and keeping an eye out for urban birds like Shiny Cowbird. A small garden planted with corn hosted Black-and-white Seedeaters, Ashy-breasted Sierra-Finch, Hooded Siskin and Long-tailed Mockingbird, a total success! On our drive back to the hacienda we encountered heavy rain, so we detoured a little bit, visiting a local shop to purchase bizcochos and manjar de leche, a local delicacy, made with cheese -- the perfect snack to finish our day! Then we continued our drive back to the lodge to review the checklist and enjoy dinner.

Tues., Dec. 26 Plaza de Ponchos | Lake San Pablo

This morning, we visited the Otavalo market, a.k.a. Plaza de Ponchos, where there are dozens of indigenous artists selling textiles, fabric, t-shirts, bags, hats, belts and many colorful things. After exploring on our own for about an hour-and-a-half, we decided to visit a nearby park, finding Scrub Tanager, Summer Tanager, Golden Grosbeak, Black Phoebe and a quick look at a Canada Warbler. Not bad for a shopping day!

We returned to Lake San Pablo for Lunch at Cabañas del Lago, located on the opposite shore of the lake from our last visit. As we waited for our food, we scanned the lake, finding Andean Coot, Ash-breasted Sierra-Finch and even Cinereous Conebill! Before leaving, we made one final stop in Zuleta, a village known for its fine embroidery. Here we Carmita who showed us the work that she has been doing since she was a kid, and shared the traditional way to do it, all without stopping her work on a basket cover! She explained that she and other women from the area make products for local hotels and shops, and also sell items in the capitol city Quito.

Back at the hacienda, we explored the gardens, finding Southern Beardless Tyrannulet and a Smoke-colored Pewee that, despite our efforts, would only show us its back! After a short rest, we met to review the checklist and enjoy dinner.

Wed., Dec. 27 Antisana | Searching for Andean Condor

We had an early breakfast at 6:00. Today we were going to Antisana in search of one of the most emblematic birds of Ecuador: Andean Condor! Driving east, we crossed back through Quito and began climbing into the high Andes. No sooner had we arrived at our destination, Tambocondor, we immediately saw four condors soaring above! Pulling over at a viewpoint, we set up the scope and observed a family group, with the adults perched and two juveniles practicing their flying skills.



We took our time, watching these magnificent birds when, suddenly, the adults spread their long wings and took to the sky again! As we watched, a young Spectacled Bear came into view, feeding in the thick vegetation! A quick adjustment to the scope and we had amazing views of this seldom-seen mountain mammal. Grinning ear-to-ear, we pulled into the restaurant and scanned the gardens for three resident hummingbirds: Great Sapphirewing, Shining Sunbeam and Giant Hummingbird. We didn't stay long because we to reach the higher elevations before the clouds arrived. We made a few brief stops to see Chestnut-winged and Stout-billed Cinclodes as well as a female Ecuadorian Hillstar and Paramo Sierra-Finch.

When we finally arrived to the paramo, a wet landscape that lies above the tree line, but below the snow line, we began to see many new birds. Andean Ibis, Back-winged Ground-Dove, Carunculated Caracara and Andean Gull. A bit further was La Mica Lake, which unfortunately was crowded. We took a short walk, hoping to find a less crowded area to scan for Silvery Grebe, but there were too many people walking near the shore. We did find a Many-striped Canastero calling from a bush as a consolation. We decided to return to Tambocondor Restaurant to check the feeders again. The restaurant served a tasty, local lunch, and as we ate, a Giant Hummingbird made a few brief visits to the feeders. We could also see Great Sapphirewing, Sparkling Violetear and Black Flowerpiercer. After lunch we descended a bit and arrived at our wonderful lodging: the Papallacta Hot Spring Resort. We arrived with some time to soak in the thermal pools before dinner.

Thurs., Dec. 28 Cayambe-Coca Ecological Reserve

We made a short drive before breakfast to explore this beautiful mountain habitat nearby the entrance of the hot springs. In a small patch of native vegetation, we found Pale-naped Brush-Finch, Buff-breasted Mountain-Tanager, Viridian Metaltail and Hooded Mountain-Tanager, then drove back for breakfast. and to get ready for our next location.

Our plan this morning was to visit the highest point of the Cayambe-Coca Ecological Reserve, an area near a radio tower at nearly 13,500 feet elevation. It was a 40-minute drive, and on the way the weather was quickly getting worse. When we arrived, the area was shrouded in clouds and mist. Our main target here was Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe, and just as we began our search, a guy gave us directions to where he said he had seen a bear, at least that's what most of the group understood. Following his directions, we came upon two Rufous-bellied Seedsnipes that were quite close! On our way back, we made a few quick stops for high-altitude specialties like White-chinned Thistletail, Andean Tit-Spinetail and a Blue-mantled Thornbill that perched right in front of us. A Tawny Antpitta was very responsive, coming out into the open. Since the weather was improving, we kept walking and found a beautiful, male Ecuadorian Hillstar and a Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant. Then we returned to pick up Mark and Craig before continuing to Guango Lodge for lunch and birding.



The lodge is a popular birding destination, and we started by the hummingbird feeders next to the parking lot where we saw Tourmaline Sunangel, Buff-tailed Coronet and Speckled Hummingbird, then we went to the restaurant for lunch. Later we walked along the river looking for Torrent Duck, but just two ducklings were seen. A handsome Fasciated Tiger-Heron was present in the river, and despite the rain, we still managed to see Gray-breasted Mountain Toucan and both Turquoise and Green Jays. We returned to the feeders where Chestnut-breasted Coronet and Collared Inca were observed as we watched a pair of Mountain Caciques collecting nesting material in front of us. We made the short drive back to Papallacta Hot Springs and reviewed the day's checklist before diner.

Fri., Dec. 29 **Departures**

Our last morning so we planned to take advantage of every minute. Before breakfast, we walked around the lodge and found Mountain Wren, Blackburnian Warbler, Hooded Siskin and Tyrian Metaltail. After breakfast we drove a bit up the mountain from the Hotel searching for target birds. We walked along the road and after a little while we found a mixed feeding flock that included Masked Mountain-Tanager and Black-backed Bush-Tanager. We also saw Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager, and Beverly spotted a female Rainbow-bearded Thornbill that was being chased by a Viridian Metaltail. There was a lot of activity, but Paul spotted the Mountain-Tanager at the top of a tall tree! An excellent excursion but it was time to return to the Hotel, load the bags and make our way to the airport.

Such a wonderful way to spend a truly memorable Christmas holiday together!

Photos: Scenic (Andrea Molina - AM), Hooded Mountain-Tanager (NJ Stock), Carunculated Caracara (AM), Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan (NJ Stock), Great Sapphirewing (NJ Stock), Tawny Antpitta (NJ Stock), Scenic (AM), Group with Llamas (AM), Sparkling Violetear (Sheila Mills - SM), Llama (SM), Butterfly (SM), Dancers (Yvonne Butorac), Mural (SM)

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