

Birding from Bogota

Dec. 6 - 12, 2024 | Trip Report | by Peg Abbott



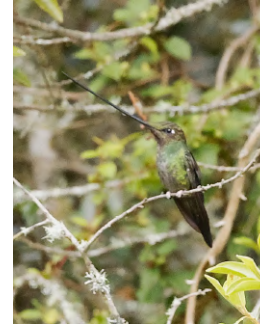
Guide Manuel Espejo, with Naturalist Journeys host Peg Abbott, and 8 participants, Alida, Andrew, Bill, Craig, Dana, Janet, Mark and Martha.



Fri., Dec. 6 Bogota | Parque Puente Sopo | Zipaquirá

Everyone arrived early, one to a few days, to enjoy a bit of sight- seeing in Bogota. Our guide Manuel came to join us for breakfast this day, and he helped us get pack ed up and on our comfortable sprinter bus to head north of Bogota.

We enjoyed our first birding at Parque Puente Sopo, a greenspace with trails, a small rush-filled wetland, and lake. Some of first sightings included Bare-faced Ibis, Andean Teal, and Andean Duck. Exciting for us was spotting our first Colombian endemic, the Silvery-throated Spinetail feeding in a tree alongside winter-arriving North American migrants, two Blackburnian Warblers. We also heard the endemic Bogota Rail.



Luis Ureneña, co-founder of our partner company in Colombia, Manakin Tours, met us for lunch along with his two lively young daughters Amelia and Martina. They brought us a copy of a brand new Colombian field guide hot off the press making us all the more eager to explore. It was fun for Peg to make this personal connection after so many shared hours of planning. And, the restaurant was lovely, with great menu choices and a fun atmosphere, setting the tone for good days ahead.

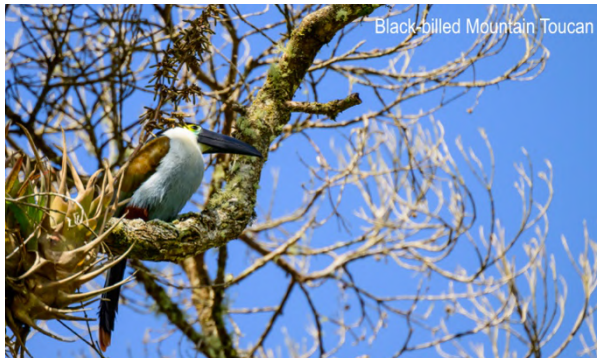
The rest of the afternoon we visited an attraction that gets a lot of attention in Colombia, where a once thriving salt mine has been converted to house artwork of the former miners. It features big powerful artwork on a religious theme, with lights playing on massive crosses carved from the limestone and set in alcoves, with a Stations of the Cross theme. We walked a long way in the underground maze, and once back in the light of day, we decided in future years, we'd not repeat this, but instead be out with the birds. It was fun to see, but not our thing...

From here we went to our boutique hotel in the city of Zipaquirá, a few blocks off of the plaza. We were visiting at a festive time, and the plaza was fully decked out for Christmas. Everyone settled in and it was no time before lively conversation and laughter rang out from the bar. We went together down to the plaza and ate dinner upstairs at the Labriego, which had big windows looking out on the plaza and festivities going on there. Christmas lights and decorations were cheerful; we had fun walking back to through the plaza before turning in for the night.

Sat., Dec. 7 Chingaza National Park | Spectacled Bear

We left with excitement to explore the unique paramo, and seeing the vegetation change as we climbed in elevation was fascinating. We started just shy of the park, looking down over an expanse of wild and wonderful plant life, and found our first higher elevation hummingbirds, Sparkling Violetear, and both Purple-backed and Bronze-tailed Thornbills. We did some birding at the entrance, where we also watched a quick film in the Visitor Center to get oriented and to learn the rules and regs. There was a bit of confusion on what to do with our plastic bottles for later in the trip, but they kindly stored them and we did support their regulation of no plastics in the park.

This was a long but full day, and we covered a lot of miles scoping hillsides in search of the elusive Spectacled Bear. This park is often a good place to see them feeding on their favorite food plant, Puya - a tall type of bromeliad that is abundant here. Some of our birding highlights included Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, White-throated



Black-billed Mountain Toucan



Tyrannulet, Grass Wrens feeding along the lakeshore, Golden-fronted Redstart, Rufous-browed Conebill, White-sided Flowerpiercer and Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager. We had a picnic lunch, and returned with no bear sighting, but a better understanding of the high elevation habitats of the Andes and a number of great birds.

We enjoyed hot showers and a bit of down time at our boutique hotel on our return. The bartender took good care of our thirsty ones, and afterwards, we walked through the town square to dine again at the restaurant Labriego where the waiters were pleased to see us return.

Sun., Dec. 8 Observatory of the Andes | Bosque Guajira | BioAndina Reserve | La Florida

With Manuel's advice, we planned an easier day for ourselves today than what was on our original itinerary, with less driving and less chance for traffic and Sunday local crowds at regional parks. It was a bonus that we did not have to leave as early, and Manuel chose a European-style bakery with fresh hot breads, omelets, coffees and Capuchinos for us to start the day. The shop was inviting and full of Christmas decorations. Two young girls eating there were dressed in fancy white dresses. One twirled around and said she was headed to her first communion - very cute!

We wanted to spend time at two different hummingbird feeders to have time to study and observe and photograph these winged gems. We met a colleague of Manuel's who shares his passion for birds and orchids. Freddie leases a farm in the buffer zone of Chingaza NNP. We stopped several times on the remote winding road leading into that farm, for once we hit native forests, there were special species to find. A group of five Black-billed Mountain Toucan put on a good show plucking fruit, bending over to rattle their bills, and at time posing on moss-covered limbs between big bromeliads. Their fancy red "underwear" showed when they bent to feed - what a bird! A Mountain Elaenia and two Blackburnian Warblers were also nearby. At the next stop we learned the feeder location had been changed, but were so fortunate to stop as two endemic Brown-breasted Parakeets flew in. Birding often does that; when you get stuck on one thing, another is revealed! We got the parrots in the scopes and Manuel digiscoped a video.

Milar Vargas, our amazing driver, had some challenging driving on a dirt two-track but managed it in style and saved us a lot of walking. The feeder area had benches in a nice covered area and the action started up fast and



White-bellied Woodstar (Male)



furiously. White-bellied Woodstars were the most common, joined by Longuemare's Sunangels, Blue-fronted Starfrontlets and both Lesser and Sparkling Violetears. A magnificent Sword-billed Hummingbird came in for a couple of passes, returning to the same perch. Freddie added more sugar water and our keenest photographers stayed on.

Some of our group then followed Freddie into the woods to enjoy his dedicated months of work to tame an endemic *Musica Antpitta* to come in for worms set up in a natural wooded glen. He called the antpitta by name, explaining it was just in training and still shy. It took a few minutes but she appeared - a warm rufous-caramel color, eager for a quick bite. A side-bonus to this effort is even more incredible, a Pale-billed Tapaculo coming to feed! Freddie called this bird, which came in readily to its own feeding area and made several passes. A bit later it visited the adjacent antpitta site as a little thief to steal more worms!

We hated to go, but another feeder area called. Along the way, diligent Manuel offered to try to wrangle up a Noble Snipe, sliding on his back under an electric fence and making a loop through wetlands. Not a success, but a valiant effort.

Our next stop was hosted by Catie and Mambo, Catie's Alaskan Malamute dog that sang a welcome to us as we spread out in the feeder sitting area. We had many of the same species here at these feeders, but added Glowing Puffleg and Mountain Velvetbreast. The Swordbill was also more cooperative here and our photographers were grateful. A rare raptor, Black-and-chestnut Eagle, known as a species of wild terrain, announced its presence by calling. We searched for some time over an amazing landscape, but we did not see them. Just as we were to "load up", Manuel called us over. We kept seeing more species, and quite memorable this time was getting good looks at male Masked Trogon.

We were running late, but still squeaked out time for seeing Green-and-black Fruiteater, and by a local bridge, a female Torrent Duck. Today was a banner birding day as we found a lot of the pretty, as well as difficult and local species.



Mon., Dec. 9 Reserva Chiguaza | Sumapaz National Park | Road Down the Andes | Villavicencio Hotel Aitabu

We left at 5 AM to beat traffic out of Bogota, and were amazed to be greeted so warmly at our breakfast place at such an hour. It was a private set-up in a rural location an hour away, just at the base where the road climbs up to Sumapaz NNP. Daniel and his wife, Sandra, had the wood cookstove fired up, coffee, tea, and hot chocolate ready, and soon they were plating up fresh farm eggs, arepas, and plantains. A fruit plate with bananas and fresh papaya added color. We were there at first light but spotted Yellow-backed Oriole and a migrant pewee (hard to tell without calling if Eastern Wood, or Western Wood) before we left. We'd return for lunch and likely more bird action.

It started to drizzle, then rain, and conditions at the first lagoon we stopped at were downright bleak. At just over 11,000 feet, drizzle and cold looked like they might grab the day. We found Andean Ducks and Andean Teal and a Many-striped Canastero, with first glimpses at the endemic Boyaga Antpitta (a split from Tawny), and cracking views of a vociferous Apolinar's Wren, another endemic. We found a pair of Scarlet-breasted Mountain Tanagers that seemed to glow with color in the silvery lichen-clad trees.

The views and vegetation were splendid; a vast sense of place we would only get a taste of. After making a series of stops, our bird sightings improved, and at our turn-around point we even found a prize we were after, the Green-bearded Helmetcrest - a high elevation hummingbird. We dipped on Bogota Rail despite a lot of tries; likely the weather was keeping them quiet and under cover. We stopped at a small store where a trip to the bathroom revealed 9 small German Shepard puppies cuddled up close to the woodstove. Mom was on patrol outside, which we did not mind - she zig-zagged a wet area as we were on the prowl for Noble Snipe. Andrew was the only one of our group to find this prize as one jumped up and flew across the road.

On the way back we stopped by an abandoned farm where Mark pointed out the former concrete fish ponds. This was shy of the military checkpoint and soon two soldiers carrying weapons were headed our way. Turns out they were all smiles and curious about the birds (and the birders). We lent them binoculars to look at Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and Chestnut-winged Cinclodes. They helped us find the prize bird of the day (very local at high elevation), the Red-rumped Bush-Tyrant.



At times we paused to gawk at the scenery or to compose scenic photos. The paramo had an other-worldly beauty all of its own. The sun broke through at various points as we admired Rufous-browed Conebill, Black-chested Buzzard Eagle, and other paramo species.

Daniel and Sandra were ready for our return with hot soup, a Colombian specialty dish with chicken, multiple types of potatoes, corn, avocado and herbs. With a refreshing tea of mint, yerba buena, and lemongrass, we all relaxed in the warmth of sun and hospitality. Glowing Puffleg and Green-tailed Trainbearer were seen at the feeders.

We had to break away with a three-hour drive ahead of us, dropping out of the mountains to the edge of the llanos that afternoon. We were soon mesmerized by the engineering of this very modern road, which was most impressively designed to navigate this dramatic descent.

We reached the hotel before dark and right in the parking lot there was an explosion of birds. Only a few stayed out to gawk, it was time for a freshen up and showers!

Tues., Dec. 10 Villavicencio | Bavaria Forest | Llanos Roadside Birding

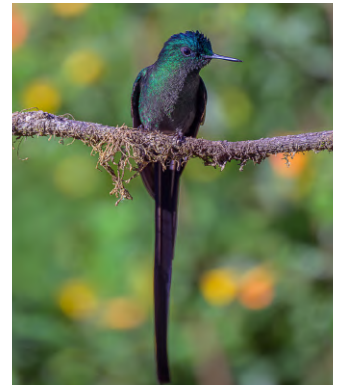
We woke up to the night calls of Common Paraque outside our rooms giving way to chatter of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and squawks of Red-bellied Macaws leaving their palms.

We headed out early to Bosque Bavaria, a private reserve on lands of one of the breweries. Local guide Alfonso and his crew were there to greet us in green matching T-shirts and wearing big smiles. This local team has been diligent to clean up this biodiverse area and return it to being a great experience. During a morning of walking on a quiet uphill road that traversed the park, we found fifty species.

We walked at a birder's pace, getting good views of Blue-fronted Lancebill, a striking hummingbird almost right away. With some patience, we got good views of Amazonian Motmot and Green-backed Trigon perched in the lush forest. Alfonso was our main guide and he had several young helpers keen to do some spotting. We focused in on some birds of the forest understory; finding Moustached Antwren, Dusky Antbird, and White-browed Antbird. Mixed flicks included several beautiful tanager species, wintering and resident wood warblers, and Buff-throated Woodcreeper. We sorted through numerous small flycatchers and found our first euphonias. The prize



Rusty-margined Flycatcher



of the day - a surprise as it was perched right out in the open on a tree limb crossing the road - was seeing a pair of Great Potoo, a nocturnal species the color of bark with a long tail and a huge wide bill. Its mate was just up the road on a more cryptic perch. Wow!

We came down the mountain finding leaf-cutter ants, several beautiful butterfly species (including a big electric-blue Morpho) and the lek of a White-bearded Manakin. We shared cold drinks and photos with our guides and wished them luck with this excellent conservation project.

We returned for lunch and a nice break, then birded a bit on the hotel grounds, finding Oriole Blackbird, Lesser Kiskadee, and Burnished Buff Tanagers. At 3:30 we left to sample a bit of the llanos - Villavicencio is a beautifully situated city where the mountains level out. It is the hub and supply center for Colombia's cattle ranching culture, with a verdant backdrop of mountains. At about 1200 feet elevation, this afternoon's sun and balmy temperatures felt warm - such a contrast to yesterday's rain and wind on the paramo!

We had hopes of finding Giant Anteater in a string of cattle fields where a colleague of Manuel's had videotaped them a week prior. But a duo of large livestock guard dogs was roaming the area, likely affecting our chances. We did find 34 bird species, many of them new, and the roadside birding in afternoon light in the company of artistic-quality Brahma cattle was a delight. We saw Brown-throated Parakeets, an Aplomado Falcon, Yellow-headed Caracara, both Eastern and Red-breasted Meadowlarks, and a White-headed Marsh Tyrant. We stayed until sunset catching views of Scarlet Ibis returning from a huge Moriche Palm wetland area across the fields, gleaming in sunset light.

Dinner was back at the Hotel Aitabu. As we were in beef country, many had beef in some form and a nice flan for dessert. Fresh avocado and plantain chips were nice accompaniment.

Wed., Dec. 11 Hotel Aitabu | La Herreria | Finca Las Hermanas | Bogota

The final day of our "short and sweet" Birding from Bogota week arrived with promise of a sun-bright day. Manuel had announced that he did not set the early departure time this day, the Cundinamarca Antpitta did! So we got out early with the promise of an excellent breakfast atop the mountain where this endemic species lives in a narrow altitudinal range and this was one of the only places to see it.



A family had had their lives changed by a bird. They quickly adapted their farming lifestyle to meet the interest of birders that kept coming to find a special species. They were trained and began patiently acclimating a pair of Cundinamarca Antpittas to come into a mossy forest clade, where the birds felt secure due to a big log spanning over a moss-clad area, presenting them a place to hide.

We had to reach this mountain top site in 4 x 4 vehicles. Three Land Rovers and their skilled drivers worked hard to get us up there. It was an adventure with a fine reward! We went up and up - a distant cell phone tower our navigation beacon. The views from the top were incredible, looking out to the Andes and the high country near and beyond that of Sumapaz NNP. The drivers ground down to low gear, and finally we rounded a corner to find a brightly-colored farmhouse painted with bird murals and a welcoming smile from the daughter of the family who spoke very good English and seemed delighted to practice that with us. Hummingbirds were coming fast and furiously into feeders, the chickens that provided us with eggs were strutting about, and we settled in at a long table set for breakfast. The coffee was fresh and delicious and the breakfast was one of the best of the trip.

Now, the antpittas awaited us! We walked a short trail that honors Peter Kaestner, the first person to see 10,000 birds in the world (and who has a dedication to preserving land in Colombia). He worked with the American Bird Conservancy to establish a private reserve at this location and they hire the local family. Each has their role, from spotting birds to cooking breakfast. We followed the bird guide and invited in by his voice, in no time two appeared, a female and her young of the year. They bounced around rapidly, like little mice in the forest. Being so close, seeing their big eyes and feeding antics was magical!

Back at the feeders we marveled at Long-tailed Sylph, Bronzy and Collared Inca, and tiny Speckled Hummingbirds. A Black Flowerpiercer stole nectar from orange flowers in a thick hedgerow. The background to our photos was pure mountain splendor!

The ride back down was quick and felt less dramatic than the unknown trip up, and soon we were back on the main modern paved road. Our final stop was at a garden and coffee farm that provided us lunch and another chance for birding in the mid-montane forests. We saw over a dozen new species, including flashy Green Jays and Magpie and Blue-naped Hummingbirds. Spectacled Thrushes were numerous and the feeders frenzied with life.



Fork-tailed Woodnymph



Finca Las Hermanas was a high-end estate, specializing in coffee, and they served us a gracious, traditional lunch of rice and beans, fresh salsa and sauteed ground beef, with avocados and fruit. But best of all, they shared the nest site of a Band-bellied Owl where a pumpkin-colored large fledgling sat in a picturesque tree. It stole our hearts and was the grand finale to our trip.

We shared our trip highlights over dinner later this evening; one being driving the road from Bogota on the plateau to the llanos of the lowlands. This road is a true engineering feat, with lanes on steep pitched slopes stacked and at times winding over and under each other. The scenery was dramatic and construction impressive. Tearing ourselves away from the bird feeders and owl pin-up star, we wound our way back to Bogota.

Thurs., Dec. 12 Departures

Our tour concluded today and our flock dispersed, with Andrew staying on to switch gears and enjoy cuisine and fun in the city while others got on flights going various directions. This was the inaugural trip and we'll make a few tweaks based on this group's advice. We had a lot of fun with each other and will begin to process all the wonderful photos and memories.

Photos: Group Photo (Peg Abbott - PA), Masked Trogon (PA), Sparkling Violetear (PA), Black-billed Mountain Toucan (PA), Chingaza National Park (Dana Swan - DS), White-sided Flowerpiercer (PA), Wildflowers (PA), Sword-billed Hummingbird (PA), Green-and-black Fruiteater (PA), Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager (PA), Rufous-browed Conebill (PA), Boyaca Antpitta (PA), birdwatching (DA), White-bellied Woodstar (DS), Amazonian Motmot (PA), Green-backed Trogon (PA), Sumapaz National Park (DS), Great Pootoo (PA), Whistling Heron (PA), Rusty-margined Flycatcher (DS), Band-bellied Owl (PA), Scenic (PA), Green Jay (PA), Long-tailed Sylph (DS), Leaving Casa Hillebrand (DS), Blue-necked Tanager (DS), Collared Inca (DS)