World-class Birding in Colombia's Coffee Triangle
Jan. 22 – Feb. 9, 2025 | Trip Report by Greg Butcher

With Naturalist Journeys guide Greg Butcher, Manakin Nature Tours guide Manuel Espejo, and participants Bev, two Davids, Geri, two Nancys, Neil, Peter, Scott, and Susan

We enjoyed a wonderful tour in Colombia's coffee country (plus Cali). We were wet a few times, almost never hot, and not as cold as we feared at altitude. We all saw many life birds and found 342 species (378 including the extension) with 47 (49) hummingbird species, 39 (41) flycatchers, 54 (62) tanagers, and 14(15) migrants from North America, including 5(6) warblers, 4 sandpipers, Blue-winged Teal, Laughing Gull, Acadian Flycatcher, Swainson's Thrush, and Summer Tanager. Perhaps because the region is relatively well populated by humans, we saw few mammals. The most frequent was Red-tailed Squirrel, and we also saw agoutis on several days. We saw three species of snakes, Green Iguanas, and several *Anolis* lizards. We enjoyed dragonflies and butterflies, including a few *Morpho* butterflies. We visited the Western Andean Cordillera (twice including the extension), the Central Andean Cordillera (coffee country!), and the Cauca River Valley in between the two cordilleras. One of the participants walked 96 miles total (yay for FitBit)! The food was wonderful; and given the temperate weather, we had little need for heating or air conditioning at night.

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Tuesday, January 21 Arrival in Pereira

Five of us arrived this evening, and Bev (but not her luggage) was already there.

Wednesday, January 22 Hotel Sonesta Pereira

We picked up Bev's luggage and also discovered that the hotel had a great nature walk around the outside of the grounds. Our first official bird walk was 4 pm with 32 species, including my lifer Grayish Piculet, our first of many Spectacled Parrotlets, a Cattle Tyrant (but no cows), three Yellow Orioles, three species of tanager, and 60(!) Saffron Finches. We enjoyed our welcome dinner for the extension in the hotel.

Thursday, January 23 Drive to Montezuma Rainforest Lodge

Our main job today was to get to Montezuma Rainforest Lodge, but we stopped in the middle of the road at the Turquoise Dacnis tree (known to botanists as a *Coussapoa* tree). The tree had at least 23 species in it, including our first of many Andean Motmots and Blue-headed Parrots. According to the latest taxonomy, the 7 tanager species we saw included 4 with tanager in the name (Flame-rumped, Scrub, Bay-headed, and Guira), the Turquois Dacnis, Green Honeycreeper, and Buff-throated Saltator, but NOT the Hepatic and Summer Tanagers, which are now considered Cardinals! We arrived at the lodge before lunch and were astonished with the best hummingbird feeder of the entire trip, with 15 species! We hope they were all able to avoid the Tayra (a large weasel) that was hanging out. Adding to the joy were two species of oropendola: Russet-backed and Chestnut-headed. We were greeted by the now famous (because of a great article in *Birding* magazine) Michelle Tapasco, who doubled as our hostess and local field guide over the next few days. Our afternoon hike on the Montezuma Road produced our first Purplish-mantled and Golden Tanagers, Moustached Puffbird and Red-headed Barbet, and surprisingly our only Wedge-billed Woodcreeper. Meals at the lodge were delicious!

Friday and Saturday, January 24 & 25 The Famous Montezuma Road

One of the features of birding on the Montezuma Road is that we have 4-wheel drive vehicles to drive us to the top each trip and we get to walk mostly downhill. We had an early start this morning and drove to 8,500 feet near the top of the road to be sure to see the Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer that comes to a feeder there only early in the morning. We were rewarded with the flowerpiercer (and 3 other species of flowerpiercers this morning) and 10 species of hummingbirds, including several that we hadn't seen the day before at the lodge, such as Tourmaline Sunangel, Greenish Puffleg, Brown and Collared Incas, and Violet-tailed Sylph. Special tanagers this morning included Gold-ringed, Grass-green, Beryl-spangled, and Hooded Mountain Tanager. We

were able to lure out a pair of Munchique Wood-wrens, common but only at this altitude. One of the top birds of the morning was Golden-headed Quetzal, even though it was a bit muted in fog.

The mountain road revealed many more specialties during our two full days there such as Broad-billed Motmot, Lanceolated Monklet, Green-and-black and Orange-breasted Fruiteaters, and Chestnut-breasted and Yellow-collared Chlorophonias. Two other beautiful species were Black-and-gold Tanager and Black Solitaire. For raptors, we had a Barred Hawk and a Swallow-tailed Kite. We didn't ignore the antbirds; we saw Plain Antvireo and Streak-headed Antbird. The Choco region includes the Pacific slope of the Western Andean Cordillera, so we were happy to see the Choco Brushfinch and the Choco Warbler. We didn't see much water, but we did see a Fasciated Tiger-heron on a forested stream, a pair of Blackish Rails at the fishponds near the lodge, and a pair of White-capped Dippers from the bridge over the river near the lodge. We learned about Colombian biogeography when we went 10 days without seeing many of these species, but re-encountered several when we returned to the Western Cordillera of the Andes farther south near Cali.

Sunday, January 26 Arrival in Pereira / From Montezuma or USA

This morning the folks on the extension drove back to Pereira; we were surprised to see almost nothing in the Turquoise Dacnis tree due to a high wind. At the Hotel Sonesta Pereira, we met up with the new folks who weren't on the extension. We walked around the hotel periphery again with another 30 species, including Red-crowned and Golden-olive Woodpeckers and Streaked Saltator, but only 30 Saffron Finches this time. Afterwards, we enjoyed another welcome dinner in the hotel.

Monday, January 27 Hacienda Venecia / Casa Bourbon

Hacienda Venecia is a coffee plantation with a very educational presentation and tour. Of course, we started with birdwatching and picked up 35 species. We added several new birds for the trip, including Sparkling Violetear, Rufous-naped Greenlet, and American Redstart. Three of my relatives back home asked for Colombian coffee, but two of them asked for dark roast. Our guide made it clear that he did not condone creating dark roast from quality Colombian coffee, so only my son Casey got his requested medium roast. After our coffee tour, we headed to Casa Bourbon for the next four nights. We arrived in time for a bird walk, and saw 30 species, including our first Chestnut-collared Swifts and Yellow-backed Oriole. Some of us could see a nesting pair of Southern Lapwings from their hotel windows.

Tuesday, January 28 Otun-Quimbaya Flora & Fauna Sanctuary

I had been to Otun-Quimbaya a dozen years ago and was looking forward to our return. I wasn't disappointed! We arrived at dawn at El Cedral section for Sickle-winged Guan, Colombian Rufescent Screech-Owl, Moustached Antpitta, and Gray-breasted Wood-Wren. After breakfast, we saw two of the must-see birds here, Red-ruffed

Fruitcrow and Multicolored Tanager, plus several other good ones such as Green-fronted Lancebill, Rufous-breasted Flycatcher, Crested Ant-Tanager, and Blue-winged Mountain Tanager. It's not every day that birders get to see both Variegated AND Marble-faced Bristle-Tyrant and with good enough looks that they might be able to tell them apart. If I told you we saw Torrent Duck, Torrent Tyrannulet, Black Phoebe, and White-capped Dipper, you might guess that we were on a bridge over a river, and you'd be right. We will debate forever if Manuel was unlucky, lucky, or just playing with our emotions when we got our best look at Red-ruffed Fruitcrow and our only look at Cauca Guans late in the afternoon. It doesn't matter; we enjoyed both species!

Wednesday, January 29 El Cortaderal / Campo Alegre

Most of the best birds on this trip were at high elevation, and we drove to our first high elevation (after Cerro Montezuma) this morning. Almost all the birds we saw here were special, but I will mention Andean Guan, Mountain Velvetbreast (hummingbird), Scaly-naped Amazon (parrot), Paramo Grass Wren, Andean Siskin, Colombian Golden-fronted Redstart, Blue-backed Conebill, Blue-and-black Tanager, and three Mountain Tanagers: Hooded, Lacrimose, and Scarlet-bellied. I am unable to mention a target bird we missed; you'll have to contact me to find out. Nearby, a bit later, we added Mountain Avocetbill and Purple-backed Thornbill (two more hummers), Black-billed Mountain Toucan, Bronze-winged Parrot, Golden-plumed Parakeet, Agile Tit-Tyrant, Black Flowerpiercer, and White-capped Tanager. What a wonderful sample of the high Central Andean Cordillera!

Thursday, January 30 Pereira Botanical Garden / Cameguadua Reservoir

We stayed at lower elevation today, enjoying the botanical garden in the city. Our target again was Turquoise Dacnis, so everyone on the main tour could see it. Success! We all enjoyed a pair of Chestnut-fronted Macaws. Another highlight was a pair of the endemic Parker's Antbird that we coaxed out of the underbrush. It wasn't recognized as a species until 1997, and it was named for Ted Parker, a highly talented field ornithologist who died in a plane crash at a young age. We also saw the Cauca Poison Frog here. Cameguadua Reservoir was the first of only two wetland sites on this tour, so we all enjoyed the 52 species we found here. We had four species of North American shorebirds plus Laughing Gulls and a surprising 200 Blue-winged Teal. We enjoyed Blackish and Gray-cowled Wood Rails. Purple Gallinules are always popular. We had Ruddy-breasted and Yellow-bellied Seedeaters and a Lesser Goldfinch among the small birds.

Friday, January 31 Sancocho Experience / Drive to Tinamu Lodge

Today was Sancocho Day. We visited the local market to buy the ingredients, where the locals seemed even more interested in us than we were in them. Back at Casa Bourbon, we helped Maria cook the soup (or stew),

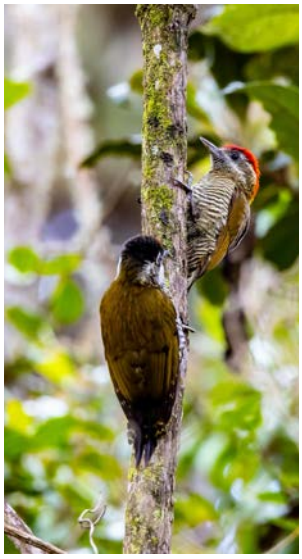
mostly by chopping. We got in our last bird walk at Casa Bourbon, highlighted by a perched Laughing Falcon. We also picked up Striped Cuckoo, Spot-breasted Woodpecker, and Golden-faced Tyrannulet. We arrived at Tinamou Birding Lodge by 4, in time to enjoy the hummingbird and tanager feeders, highlighted by White-vented Plumeleteer and six species of tanagers, including Crimson-backed. The Flame-rumped Tanagers were a special treat with flame-rumps, lemon-rumps, and hybrids all visiting the feeder. We went to sleep with the sounds of Pauraques in our ears.

Saturday, February 1 Rio Blanco Ecological Reserve

Neotropical birding isn't what it used to be now that so many lodges are feeding antpittas. Yay! We benefited by driving to Rio Blanco to get close-ups of two Chestnut-crowned and one Slate-crowned Antpitta. There were 10 species at the hummingbird feeders, highlighted by White-throated Daggerbill, Long-tailed Sylph, Sparkling and Lesser Violetears, Collared Inca, and Fawn-breasted Brilliant. We had two species of Mountain Tanagers (Blue-winged and Buff-breasted) and two species of Guans (Andean and Sickle-winged). For more gaudy birds, we saw Golden-headed Quetzal, Southern Emerald-Toucanet, and Black-billed Mountain-Toucan. By ignoring the gaudy birds, we were able to pick out Montane Woodcreeper, Streaked Tuftedcheek, Striped Treehunter, Pearled Treerunner, and Sharpe's Wren, plus three species of Hemispingus (small nondescript tanagers): Black-capped, Black-eared, and Superciliated. Lunch was in a new café on the grounds. We returned to Tinamu in time to enjoy the hummingbird and tanager feeders from the comfort of the porch.

Sunday, February 2 Finca La Romelia

All tours visit a variety of sites, but few include an orchid and citrus farm. We were lucky that our guide Manuel is an orchid expert and that he is good friends with another, Don "Chorizo". So we were invited to Finca La Romelia for the day. We didn't let a little rain dampen the experience. One of our first sightings was a roosting Spectacled Owl that was among the wettest birds I've ever seen. Ultramarine Grosbeak was one of our main targets; it was elusive, but most people got fleeting glimpses. Three other targets were Jet Antbird, Great Antshrike, and Colombian Speckle-breasted Wren, all skulkers and all successfully seen. Colombian Chachalaca and Andean Motmot were a lot easier! And the orchids were spectacular! Manuel specializes in micro-orchids and kept amazing us with tiny flowers we could barely see, but Don Chorizo is more traditional, preferring the big showy flowers that we all know and love. We had another excellent lunch here!



Monday, February 3 Tinamu Lodge / Hotel Termales del Ruiz

Before leaving Tinamu, we had a successful morning walk. Blue-lored Antbirds came to worms, and Gray-headed Dove and Cocoa Thrush came to grain. We visited the very active Golden-headed Manakin lek, where the males dance to attract females. It was a good morning for North American breeding warblers, with Black-and-white, Blackburnian, Canada, and American Redstart, plus a pair of fun tropical warblers, the streamside Buff-rumped and the flocking Golden-crowned. Then it was time to drive to the real elevation, our hotel at 11,000 feet. When we arrived, we were enveloped in thick fog and could barely make out the Pale-naped Brushfinches, Glossy Flowerpiercer, or the ubiquitous Great Thrush and Rufous-collared Sparrows. But the hummingbird feeders were active with Tyrian Metaltail, Golden-breasted Puffleg, Buff-winged Starfrontlet, Great Sapphirewing, and the world's tamest Shining Sunbeam. The small birdlist was completed with a pair of close-up Mountain Tanagers: Lacrimose and Scarlet-bellied.

Tuesday, February 4 Los Nevados del Ruiz

We started the morning along the roadside at Birder's Alley, also known as Bosque de San Carlos. Our cooperative target here was Rainbow-bearded Thornbill. Someone will need to explain to me why so many high-altitude Colombian hummingbirds have such dramatic beards; I don't think they're all related to each other. We also picked up some high-elevation forest specialties such as Golden-crowned Tanager, Blue-backed Conebill, Black-backed Bush Tanager, and Plumbeous Sierra Finch. We drove a bit higher to a pond and an open grassland and found Andean Duck, Andean Teal, Paramo Grass Wren, Stout-billed Cinclodes, and to top it off, a flushed Noble Snipe! At 13,500 feet elevation at the entrance to the national park (Los Nevados), we had one target bird, and several of us saw it perched up before we got off the van: Buffy Helmetcrest (hummingbird). It hung around throughout our stay. Several of us saw a cool bird I missed: Andean Tit-Spinetail. There is one word that strikes terror into the hearts of Latin American birders: tapaculo. Especially tapaculos of the infamous genus *Scytalopus*. I can't even tell you what tapaculo means! They are small and black, and they sing often from within impenetrable cover. However, one small Paramo Tapaculo forgot to read the book and hopped out in the open for several *minutes*. We have photos as proof!

Wednesday, February 5 Hacienda el Bosque

It is important to be lucky as well as good, and it is also important to have a bus driver who knows birds. As we were driving away from Hotel Termales del Ruiz for the last time, a flock of 12 birds flew across the road. Fortunately for us, some of them landed in a bare tree next to the road, and we all got binocular-filling views of the rare and beautiful Rufous-fronted Parakeet. Again, we have photos to prove it! (As you all know, the bird

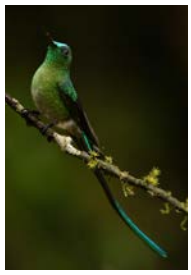
photos aren't mine.) Our destination was another antpitta feeding site, Hacienda el Bosque. Unfortunately, not all the antpittas are fully trained, but the Equatorial Antpitta was totally cooperative! When it comes to hummingbirds, there are a few that stand out above the rest, and Sword-billed is definitely one. We reveled in multiple views here! Black-thighed Puffleg isn't as dramatic, but we were happy to see it here nonetheless. When birders talk about quail doves, it's usually about the one that was calling and sounded like it was inches away but never seen. So, when a White-throated Quail-Dove showed up in the open under a feeder, we all rejoiced! Gray-breasted Mountain Toucan was another exciting bird to see at the feeder. I hesitate to call birds "cute", but it's hard to resist with Chat-Tyrants; we had good views of Yellow-bellied here. Three Paramo Seedeaters reminded us that we were still at elevation. Our trip was short on mammals; and we saw our only rabbit here, the Common Tapeti, a bit smaller than a cottontail with smaller ears.

Thursday, February 6 Travel to Cali / Parque de la Uva

We left early this morning for our only long-distance drive of the trip, to Cali. We stopped off for our first bird walk in the Cauca River Valley, at Parque de la Uva. Our top target here was Ruby-topaz Hummingbird, and we found a male along with other hummers in the Aloe plantation. We added a Pearl Kite on a wire overhead. The park was loaded with 11 species of flycatchers, some challenging to identify. With the help of our photographers, we confirmed Yellow-olive Flatbill, Yellow-crowned and Sooty-headed Tyrannulets, and Greenish Elaenia among the other, easier ones.

Friday, February 7 Dona Dora

One of the highlights of the trip was spending the day at Dona Dora, near the old road between Cali and Buenaventura. We hiked down a steep trail before dawn to capture the 6 male Andean Cocks-of-the-Rock displaying on their lek. One male was so close we could almost touch him, and even I got an iPhone photo in the dark. Almost as iconic is the pair of Toucan Barbets that come to the fruit feeders; they aren't toucans or barbets, but their own, related family. The Toucan Barbets were joined by two species of real Barbets, Spot-crowned and Red-headed. We also enjoyed a Western Andean Cordilleran specialty, Ochre-breasted Tanager, at a moth feeder that attracts insect-eaters at dawn. Rufous-throated Tanager was also new for us. We finally got good looks at a Bay Wren, a relatively common species that is very difficult to see. It was interesting to see that the suite of hummingbirds here is very similar to the birds we saw during the extension at Cerro Montezuma, demonstrating the Western Andean Cordilleran connection. A walk along the nearby road produced a roosting Lyre-tailed Nightjar and one of the world's smallest birds, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant.



Saturday, February 8 Western Andean Cordillera

On our last full day together, we had a couple of stops near the old Cali-Buenaventura Road. Our penchant for seeing parakeets from the van was renewed when a flock of 10 Scarlet-fronted Parakeets flew by as we were approaching La Florida. We added two new Tanagers to our tally there: Saffron-crowned and Rufous-crested. And now that Saltators are considered tanagers, we added a third: Black-winged. Our last new hummingbird was Bronzy Inca. After a long wait, three Chestnut Wood-Quail gave us long looks at a feeder at La Florida. We found a Barred Becard in a tree, and our continued search for cryptic Furnariids (South American Ovenbirds) produced a Streak-capped Treehunter. A long drive through Cali to La Minga proved disappointing because of heavy rain, but we managed 30 species, including 11 hummingbirds, including several favorites: White-necked Jacobin, White-throated Daggerbill, Long-tailed Sylph, and White-booted Racket-tail. Blue-winged was our last Mountain Tanager, and we said goodbye to Golden and Multicolored Tanagers in the rain. Nancy and Scott returned to La Minga for several nights after the tour and confirmed that they found a lot more birds without the rain.

Sunday, February 9 Laguna de Sonso / Departures

Several folks left this morning, and the rest of us went to only our second wetland visit of the trip. We picked up 82 species; and because it was only our second wetland, we added a number of new species for the tour. We were also lucky because our local guide could pinpoint several roosting species: Common and Lesser Nighthawks, Common Potoo, and Tropical Screech-Owl. The coolest birds of the morning were probably the two Horned Screamers. We added typical neotropical waterbirds such as Limpkin, Anhinga, Snail Kite, and Amazon and Ringed Kingfishers, plus northern South American songbirds Pied Water-Tyrant and Yellow-hooded Blackbird. The biggest surprise for me was finding 7 – count 'em, 7! – Pinnated Bitterns. I'm used to seeing my bitterns one at a time! Neil flew out this afternoon, and Manuel flew to Bogota to join his next tour.

Monday, February 10 Last Departures (except Nancy & Scott)

Bev and I left in the middle of the night for 5 am flights while Geri got to sleep in prior to her afternoon flight. Nancy and Scott stayed behind to enjoy several days at La Minga. It was a grand three weeks in Colombia!

Photos: Red-headed Barbet (Peter Heidrich - PH), Multicolored Tanager (PH), Andean Cock-of-the-Rock (PH), Chestnut-fronted Macaw (PH), Thoas Swallowtail (David Ammerman - DA), Red-crowned Woodpecker (DA), Saffron Finch (DA), Roadside Hawk (DA), Streaked Saltator (DA), Moustached Puffbird (DA), Long-billed Starthroat (DA), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (DA), Bar-crested Antshrike (DA), Crimson-backed Tanager (DA), Carib Grackle (DA), Southern Emerald Toucanet (DA), Red-ruffed Fruitcrow (DA), Bar-bellied Woodpecker (DA), Turquoise Dacnis (DA), Blue-headed Parrot (DA), Pied-billed Grebe (DA), Steely-vented Hummingbird (DA), Sword-billed Hummingbird (PH), Sparkling Violetear (PH), Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan (PH), Glistening-green Tanager (PH), Long-tailed Sylph (PH)