

# Ecuador: Biodiversity Across the Andes | March 5 – 17, 2025 | Trip Report | by Rick Weiman



**With host Rick Weiman and local guide Andrea Molina and driver Francisco, and participants Noel, Cecilia, Diane, Barb, Jim, and Holly**



## Wednesday March 5: Arrivals in Ecuador

The group met in the hotel lobby very early for some coffee, to pick up our to-go breakfasts, and to check-out. Some of the group had arrived a day or two early and others just got in the previous night so this was the first time the seven of us were all together. After introductions we met our local guide, Andrea Molina, and headed





to the Quito airport for a short flight to Guayaquil. Once in Guayaquil, we met our driver Francisco and hopped into our spacious van to begin our Ecuadorian adventure.

This tour was designed to start at lower elevations (sea level in Guayaquil) and work our way higher and higher as the tour progressed to help acclimate our bodies to the elevation changes. On our way to our first lodge, the Umbrellabird Lodge in the Buenaventura Reserve, we stopped at the Manglares Churute Ecological Reserve and birded along a dirt road surrounded by wet rice fields and dry forest. In a little under an hour, we had counted 41 species of birds including flocks of Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, White-cheeked Pintails, Black-necked Stilts, a stunning male Comb Duck, close to a dozen endangered Horned Screammers, a large turkey-sized waterfowl. At the end of the road, we came upon Lake Lagartera where the trees were covered in a huge roost of birds, with over 25 Roseate Spoonbills, at least a 100 Neotropic Cormorants, and many Great, Snowy, and Western Cattle Egrets, plus Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night Herons. In the adjacent rice fields, hunting for snails or perched on poles and power lines were over 30 Snail Kites. We watched them feeding on snails and building nests. We also added Cocoi Heron, Savanna Hawk, Limpkin, Ringed Kingfisher, and a flock of Pacific Parrotlets.

After leaving this amazing plethora of bird life, we stopped in the town of Puerto Inca for a filling seafood lunch and then relaxed in the van for a long but scenic drive to the lodge, situated at around 1500 feet in the Buenaventura Reserve. This reserve spans almost 10,000 acres of lower montane cloud forest in the southwestern Andes of Ecuador. This incredibly rich and varied protected area blends elements of the flora and fauna of two ecoregions — the Chocó, which runs from southern Colombia to the reserve area, and the Tumbesian, which runs up from northwestern Peru. Once there, we were welcomed by a Plumbeous Kite perched on a tree by the lodge entrance and were mesmerized by the number of hummingbirds assembled at the feeder stations. We counted 6 species that included White-necked Jacobin, Brown Violetear, many Green Thorntails, a lone Andean Emerald, large Green-crowned Brilliants, and a dazzling Violet-bellied Hummingbird. Dinner was a delicious potato soup starter followed by fresh fish with local vegetables. While we dined, we listened to a Black-and-white Owl calling. We completed our first checklist of the tour and headed to our cabins, excited about the new feathered wonders we'd hopefully find tomorrow.



## Thursday March 6: Buenaventura Reserve | Umbrellabird Lodge

We met in the dining hall around 6:00am for breakfast and coffee followed by some birding on the veranda and around the dining area. All of the same species of hummingbirds were back at the feeders and were joined by a Rufous-tailed Hummingbird; new to the list. A local Western Mountain Coati showed up and did a little begging and was rewarded with a bowl of sugar water. We quickly found out that the hummingbirds were used to people, so with a red bottle cap full of sugar water we soon had them landing on our hands jockeying for position for the best spot to get their drink. As we left the lodge veranda, we flushed a Buff-rumped Warbler. We then took a hike down the main road past the cabins and for the next few hours added many new birds as we walked. These included our first of many tanagers on the tour such as Flame-rumped, White-shouldered, Blue-necked, and Bay-headed. Excitement filled the air when a large toucan flew into a tree, soon followed by two more. We soon learned from Andrea the difference between Choco and Yellow-throated Toucans when both showed up, as they look very similar but have different and distinct calls. New birds kept being added and it was hard for Rick to keep his eBird count current. There went a Chestnut-backed Antbird across the path followed by two elusive White-bearded Manakins. We added both Slaty-winged and Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaners, a Brownish Twistwing, and a colorful Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher. Both a Bay Wren and a Song Wren popped up for a quick view, as did a Sooty-headed Tyrannulet and a Brown-capped Vireo.

After our very birdy walk, we took a break, had lunch at the lodge, then headed up the trail in the van to hike the Umbrellabird trail. The lodge is named after the Long-wattled Umbrellabird, a definite target bird for most of us and an interesting looking one. This large crow-size bird is a rare resident of humid foothill and lowland forests of the Pacific slope of the Andes, from Colombia to southwestern Ecuador. Umbrellabirds form small leks where the all black, crested males display with their long, pendulous wattle which they can lengthen and shorten while displaying. As we walked in the forest single file, anticipation was high as we searched for a dark black shape in the canopy. We had no luck initially, but other birds were there including several Crested Guans crashing through the tree tops, a colorful Ornate Flycatcher, a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, and several Yellow-throated Chlorospingus. A Green-crowned Brilliant hummingbird flew by the group towards the end of our line and that's when Holly spotted a male umbrellabird over the trail, perched directly above our heads. Odds were good that we might've walked by it if not for that hummer. We enjoyed great looks of the bird and its wattle as it moved from branch to branch. Noel even captured a wonderful photo of the bird before it disappeared in the canopy.



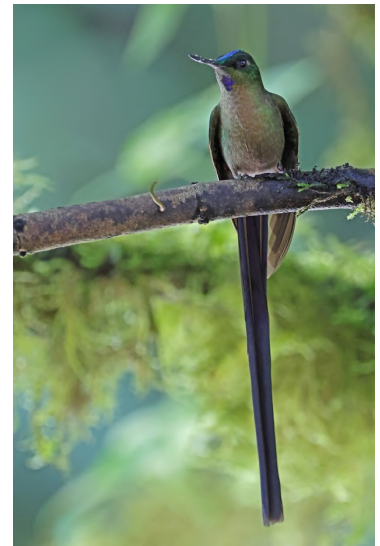


Our group then walked leisurely back down the road to the lodge area and took a short break before completing our checklist and having another wonderful dinner. After dinner we searched for the calling Black-and-white Owl and Andrea found it down by the cabins perched high in a tree in an open area, allowing us good quick looks with the spotlight. A nice way to end the day.

## **Friday, March 7: Upper Buenaventura Reserve | El Oro Parakeet Search | Arenillas Ecological Reserve**

After another early breakfast at the lodge, we departed for a full day of birding in the local reserves. Our first stop was a higher section of the Buenaventura Reserve with our main target bird today the very rare Ecuadorian endemic El Oro Parakeet. After a short drive to a meeting point at the start of the trail, we were met by 3 gentleman driving 4x4 pick-up trucks who would be taking us up the trail that was too rough for our van. A few of us took a quick bathroom break prior to the drive which led Noel to find a perched male Violet-tailed Sylph hummingbird that he hopefully got a good picture of because it was amazing looking. Once at the top of the road, we walked behind an abandoned hacienda and Andrea told us about the nest box program which was started to help grow the population of the parakeets. A few minutes later, a flock of ten El Oro Parakeets flew in and landed in some exposed trees very close to us. We watched them for twenty minutes or more, getting wonderful photos and videos of them. Off in the distance, a large raptor was perched and, when it finally took to the air, we identified it as a Short-tailed Hawk.

It was a gorgeous morning with clear blue skies and comfortable temperatures as we leisurely strolled down the trail we had just been transported up. Andrea heard a manakin snapping its wings and, after some effort, we had a nice view of a male Club-winged Manakin. We added multiple new birds on the walk including Azara's and Line-cheeked Spinetails, Bronze-winged Parrots, Orange-bellied Euphonias, and Black-and-white and Yellow-bellied Seedeaters. As we continued our walk, a Swallow-tailed Kite circled overhead and then soared past us at close range. Two more raptors with white underparts and thick dark black tail bands appeared and gave us great views as they also circled and soared directly over our group. They were a pair of endangered Gray-backed Hawks, found only in western Ecuador and adjacent parts of Peru. Down at the bottom of the trail was a row of hummingbird feeders along a river in an area called the Garden of the Hummingbirds (or Jardin de los Colibríes). We sat and rested while we watched the feeders and added some new ones to the list including



Brown Inca and the sparkling Velvet-purple Coronet, and a few more of the spectacular Violet-tailed Sylphs. We also had a great look at a Gray-breasted Wood-Wren as it hopped from branch to branch, melodically singing in front of us.

We then drove to the Arenillas Ecological Reserve located in the southwestern coastal region of Ecuador in the province of El Oro and very close to the Peru border. The reserve is home to both tropical dry forest and mangrove forests containing more than 42,000 acres; making it one of the most important remnants of dry forest habitat vegetation on the Ecuadorian coast. In the past, this area was part of the military reserve and to conserve dry and semi-arid environments it was officially declared an ecological reserve in 2001. Driving down the dirt road into the preserve, our driver Francisco spotted a very large lizard basking in the middle of the road. Photos were snapped by Jim before it ambled into the brush and Rick later identified it as a Monitor Tegu, a really nice herp to add to our list. We had our box lunch from the lodge in the parking area on some rustic picnic tables and then spent the next 1.5 hours searching for birds we probably would not find elsewhere. We had close looks at a large White-tailed Jay and a pair of Collared Antshrikes. A Golden-olive Woodpecker appeared as did a Groove-billed Ani. Andrea heard a trogon and, after some searching, we had a perched male Ecuadorian Trogon in view. We enjoyed watching several Pacific Horneros capturing insects and flying up into the trees to their impressive dome-shaped mud nests that they build directly on thick branches. One of our final birds, well two actually, were a pair of Peruvian Pygmy-Owls that responded nicely to Andrea's recorded call by perching above us. On the way out of the reserve, some of us had a good view from the van of a perched Amazilia Hummingbird.

It was quite a long and exciting day with so many birds new to most of us that our checklist took a while to complete when we got back. After dinner we met our friend the Black-and-white Owl again, this time perched in a tree right outside the dining area.

## **Saturday, March 8: Umbrellabird Lodge | Catamayo | Copalinga Lodge**

Sadly, today we were leaving the wonderful Umbrellabird Lodge and the Buenaventura Reserve area after breakfast. We lingered on the lodge veranda, saying goodbye to the hummingbirds we had enjoyed watching the past few days. A small family of coati's came by and searched for grubs in the garden below us. As we were





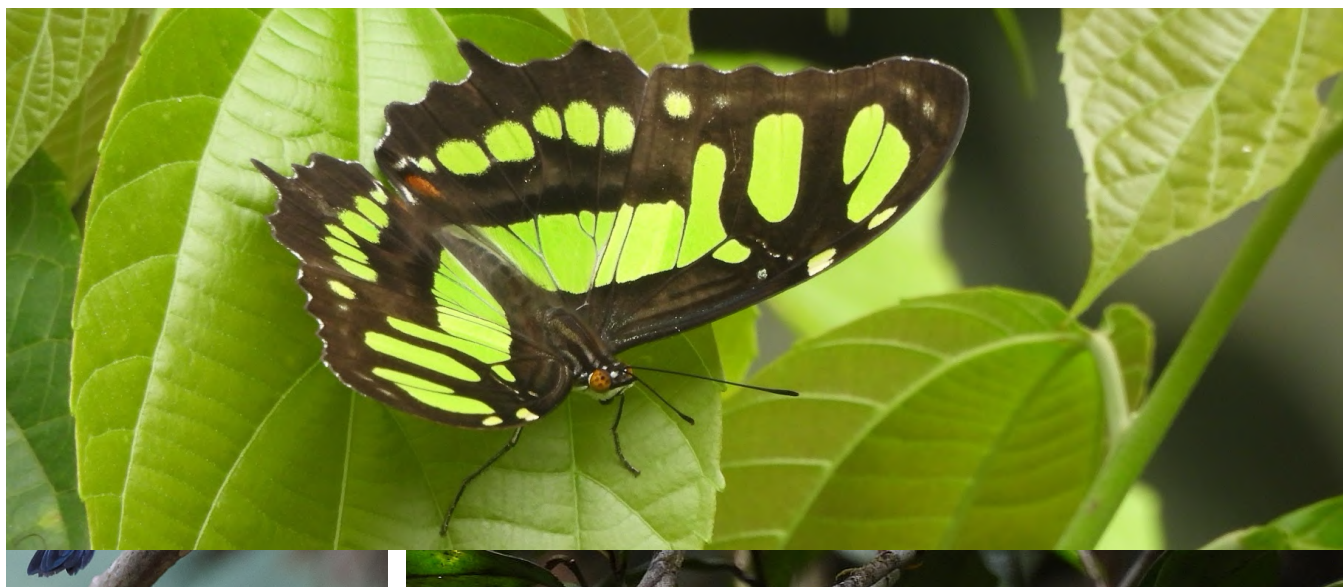
packing up our gear, Andrea spotted a perched male Long-wattled Umbrellabird in our favorite distant toucan tree and we watched it and its wattle, along with a female, fly into the forest together; a fitting ending to our stay here. On our way out of the reserve, a large bird glided past the van and we excitedly hopped out to find it. We found not one, but three Rufous-headed Chachalacas; a Tumbesian endemic species. While the photographers were snapping pictures, Rick spotted a White-whiskered Puffbird perched near the road and we all got wonderful views before it flew into a nearby tree.

We had a long drive over the western slope of the Andes today to the Jocotoco's Copalinga Lodge on the eastern slope. Andrea had planned several stops to break up the trip and the first was near the town of Balsas where we watched some Chestnut-headed Oropendolas flying to and from a large tree full of their hanging basket style nests. While we watched them, several more chachalacas showed up to see what the fuss was all about and a Black Phoebe and half-a-dozen Gray-cheeked Parakeets were added to the list.

We had mentioned to Andrea it would be nice if we could find some local coffee to buy, so we stopped at the Chaguarpamba Su Café and sampled cups of her local blends, and, finding them delicious, purchased many bags to take home with us. While there, we of course searched for anything with feathers and found a nice male perched Golden Grosbeak and a pair of One-colored Becards tending to their nest. The group then stopped in the town of Catamayo and had a box lunch from the lodge in the local park in the center of town. As we dined, we enjoyed watching a pair of large Fasciated Wrens, several Eared Doves and Saffron Finches. After lunch we drove about 15 minutes to a mining road near the Catamayo Relleno Sanitorio (or local garbage dump) and birded the ridge above it. There were many Black Vultures at the site and a surprising 70+ Western Cattle Egrets roosting in trees near the landfill.

In the scrub area, we searched for a few target birds and were successful in finding several Tumbes Sparrows, a pair of White-browed Gnatcatchers, a Dull-colored Grassquit, and a Fulvous-faced Scrub-Tyrant. Elegant Crescentchest was another target bird, but despite our best efforts, it went on the list as heard by most and seen by only a few. On the way out of the dirt mining road, at least half a dozen Long-tailed Mockingbirds flew by the van and just before we turned onto the highway, Francisco spotted a Peruvian Pygmy-Owl in a tree right next to the road.

We then continued our drive up the mountain road to an elevation of 9200 feet and took a brief stop to enjoy the scenic overlook and the town of Loja below us. As we headed down the mountain on the winding



switchback road, we passed multiple waterfalls - one seemingly more impressive than the next - and spotted several Swallow-tailed Kites soaring overhead. We drove through the town of Zamora and soon reached the Copalinga Lodge, our home for the next 3 nights.

After checking into our cabins, a few of us birded the gardens where several new hummingbird species were feeding on the purple flowers of the vervain bushes. We quickly added Wire-crested Thorntail, a female Spangled Coquette, Violet-headed Hummingbird, and the colorful Golden-tailed Sapphire, to our hummer list. A pair of Russet-backed Oropendolas were spotted as were several Silver-beaked Tanagers. Before dinner, we drove the van to a spot Andrea knew where a Blackish Nightjar liked to roost just before dusk and before long, it flew in and perched for all of us to enjoy before dinner.

As we sat down at the dining table, the small staff greeted us with a welcome drink for a toast and we then enjoyed another bowl of delicious soup and a local chicken dish. After dinner, we completed our checklist and then headed off to our cabins to rest up for tomorrow's adventures.

## **Sunday March 9: Podocarpus National Park | Copalinga Lodge | Gray Tinamous!**

After our early breakfast with plenty of fresh fruit and a deliciously blended melon-papaya juice, we boarded the van for a short ride to the entrance to Podocarpus National Park near the Bombuscaro River. Podocarpus National Park covers an expansive area of about 564 square miles; ranging from the Andean highlands down to the Amazon basin, from about 3,300 to over 11,800 feet. The park has a high level of endemic species because it is a meeting point between four ecological systems: Northern Andes, Southern Andes, Amazonian, and Pacific. It is named after the ancient Podocarpus trees, which are among the park's diverse flora including a huge variety of orchids.

We hiked a gradually inclining switchback trail about 0.75 miles to a clearing by the ranger station where we spent most of the morning. During the hike, Andrea spotted another life bird for most of us perched by the side of the trail - a male Swallow Tanager. Arriving at the clearing, we had a good vantage point of passing mixed feeding flocks of tanagers, warblers, and other songbirds, as well as the best chance at spotting one of our target birds, the Amazonian Umbrellabird. Our Canadian friend, Jim, fittingly spotted one of the first birds, a migrant

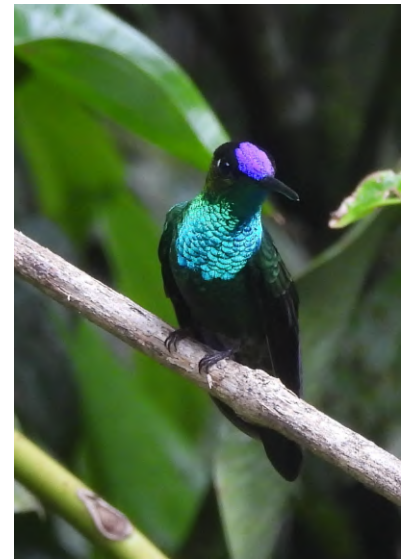
Canada Warbler, one of several seen that day. Other birds filtered in including some spectacular tanagers including the multi-colored Paradise Tanager, as well as Spotted, Golden-eared, Green-and-gold, Orange-eared, Blue-necked, and Golden Tanagers. A dark bird flew into the top of a distant tree and we all thought “Umbrellabird!” but it was actually a female Andean Cock-of-the-rock, not a bad consolation prize. We continued birding, adding Lemon-browed, Ornate, and Slaty-capped Flycatchers, a colorful Blue Dacnis male and female, and then a pair of Amazonian Umbrellabirds flew into view. These birds do not have the long wattles of those seen in the Buenaventura Reserve, but the males are also jet-black with impressive crests. Before we left the area we spotted four more, with the last few being close enough for some nice pictures taken by our photographers Jim, Holly, and Noel.

As we hiked the trail to the parking lot, Rick and Francisco spotted a large bright orange bird flying into the canopy - a male Andean Cock-of-the-rock! It perched long enough for us all to get a binocular view and a quick picture by Holly, before flying to another tree out of view. We stopped at a waterfall we had passed earlier for a group picture and then returned to the lodge for lunch and some garden and feeder station birding in the afternoon. Here, we added Green Jay (Inca race), Crested Oropendola, and Squirrel Cuckoo to our list. At the feeders where bananas, hummingbird nectar, and cracked corn were available, a Speckled Chachalaca showed up with some Gray-fronted Doves, and Andrea found us a perched Coppery-chested Jacamar. Several new hummingbirds were observed including Violet-fronted Brilliant, Fork-tailed Woodnymph, and Many-spotted Hummingbird.

In the late afternoon a light rain fell, but it did not deter us from hiking one of the lodge trails to a blind where cracked corn was spread out for Gray Tinamous. As we waited, we heard the call of a Rufous Motmot. Our patience in the blind was rewarded as a mother Gray Tinamou climbed out of the forest with 3 young chicks in tow. From the blind, we watched them feed only ten feet away from us and then happily headed back down the trail to our rooms to rest up before the checklist and dinner.

During the checklist a Band-bellied Owl called so we rushed into the open garden area where we saw it perched briefly in a tree before flying over our heads through the glow of our flashlights and out of view. Of course, we added it to our list and then enjoyed another delicious local soup and a fresh fish dinner, followed by bananas flambe for dessert.





## **Monday, March 10: Coquette Heaven Gardens | Zamora | Via Genairo | Copalinga Lodge**

Today after breakfast, we drove to a lower elevation area to visit a local couple who had turned their property into a haven for hummingbirds, called Coquette Gardens, near the hamlet of Natentza. Before arriving, we stopped along Gumba-Guayzimi Road for some roadside birding. Our first stop was a small wooded wetland where Barb quickly spotted a perched Ringed Kingfisher. A pair of Many-banded Aracaris flew across the road as did a Greater Yellow-headed Vulture. A stop a bit further down the road gave us White-collared and Gray-rumped Swifts, some Smooth-billed Anis, a loudly calling Slaty-capped Shrike-Vireo, and a Yellow-olive Flatbill.

As we arrived in the driveway of Coquette Heaven, we saw a small jet-black bird with a white cap and a very long-tail perched on a branch – a Long-tailed Tyrant! We watched it sally for insects a few times before we walked up a small hill where a flower filled garden and fresh coffee awaited us. Our target bird, a male Spangled Coquette was quickly spotted feeding on the purple vervain flowers and was soon joined by a female. Other birds among the 18 species spotted here were Amethyst Woodstar, Blue-tailed Emerald, and White-browed and Peruvian Warbling Antbirds. Three new woodpeckers were also added including the tiny Lafresnaye's Piculet, plus a Yellow-tufted and Little Woodpecker.

We returned back to the lodge for lunch and then drove to the town of Zamora where a few stops by the river gave us Spotted Sandpiper, Social Flycatcher, Blue-and-white Swallows, and a pair of Turquoise Tanagers. A heavily forested area known as Via Genairo yielded lots of new birds including a large flock of Blue-headed Parrots, a pair of White-eyed Parakeets, a Yellow-browed Sparrow, and two new warblers - a migrant bright orange male Blackburnian, and a local Tropical Parula. Then it was back to the lodge for our checklist and another wonderful meal that included fried shrimp with a cabbage salad and steamed yucca, followed by a warm banana cake for dessert. Before darkness fell, we watched a pair of Black Agoutis enjoy the cracked corn at the feeder station.

## **Tuesday March 11: Zamora | Loja | Reinaldo Espinosa Botanical Garden | Casa Simpson**

After breakfast this morning, it was with another touch of sadness that we were leaving the wonderful Copalinga Lodge, yet on to our next adventure! However, not before we spent a final half hour birding the garden area. We saw many of the same birds we had become familiar with, but several of us added Pale-throated Barbthroat, Orange-billed Sparrow, Buff-throated Saltator, and Red-crested Finch to the list. After leaving the lodge, we stopped near a bridge over the Zamora River, in an area known as La Fragancia, to search for the colorful Cliff Flycatcher. Soon, two were spotted flying and then perching on a wire. Further down river, Andrea noticed an immature Fasciated Tiger Heron hunting on a rock in the center of the river. Our next stop was along the same river on Old Zamora-Loja Road. We walked along the river road searching for our 3 target species here: Torrent Duck, White-capped Dipper, and Torrent Tyrannulet. During our search, we added Sicklet-winged Guan, Montane Woodcreeper, and Marble-faced Bristle-Tyrant. We soon had a lone dipper foraging around the rapids, and Francisco spotted a distant male Torrent Duck that Andrea and Rick got in their scopes. A bit later, an immature male duck and a female were spotted much closer, with the female diving into an area in the rock wall with a two-tier rushing waterfall. She was soon joined by another male and we watched them plunge into the rapids and feed, seemingly not bothered at all by the onslaught of rushing water. Andrea then had an amazing find when she noticed a roosting Oilbird in a dark crevice near the waterfall. Two more were found with a little scanning, adding another unexpected write-in species for our bird checklist. Oilbirds are interesting in that they are the only nocturnal fruit-eating species of bird in the world. In addition, a female Andean Cock-of-the-rock flew into the same shaded area to perhaps cool off, as the day was now warm and sunny. As we headed back to the van, a pair of Torrent Tyrannulets were noticed feeding alongside the river amongst the rocks, completing our target bird trifecta with a few bonus birds thrown in.

On our way to the Tapichalaca Reserve and our new Jocotoco Foundation lodge called Casa Simpson, we stopped at the Reinaldo Espinosa Botanical Garden in Loja, the oldest botanical garden in Ecuador. As we entered the garden, a large hummingbird was spotted that turned out to be a very territorial Rainbow Starfrontlet patrolling the area. We added several Silvery Tanagers to the list, had good looks at a White-crested Elaenia, and Barb finally got to see an Amazilia Hummingbird that she had missed earlier. We had lunch in the park in a covered gazebo and Noel spotted a green lizard on a post that turned out to be a Collared Whorltail-Iguana. A young one was later spotted as well, adding another new herp to our checklist. Due to some road construction, we spent a little more time in the garden after lunch until the road cleared and added Slate-throated Redstart, Three-banded Warbler, another Blackburnian Warbler, and the by now very common Rufous-





collared Sparrow and Great Thrush. On the way out of the garden, both Shiny and Giant Cowbirds flew into a field and a calling Rufous-browed Peppershrike finally came into view for us.

We then continued our drive to Casa Simpson and upon arrival were quickly greeted by several new hummingbird species and a Masked Flowerpiercer at their feeders. The hummingbirds buzzing around were: Amethyst-throated Sunangel, Collared Inca, Fawn-breasted Brilliant, and the more numerous Chestnut-breasted Coronet which had a neat habit of lifting its wings in the air after it lands. Before dinner, a pair of Bearded Guans landed on the cracked corn feeder station.

## **Wednesday March 12: Tapichalaca Reserve | Jocotoco's Casa Simpson | Village of Valladolid**

After breakfast, our plan was to explore the Tapichalaca Reserve. The reserve is situated just across the Continental Divide on the east or Amazonian slope of the Andes, adjoining the southern extremity of Podocarpus National Park and just north of the Peruvian frontier. Its location makes it an integral part of a significant conservation corridor in southern Ecuador. The reserve ranges in altitude from 5,900 to 11,500 feet, which allows you to experience a cloudy montane humid forest- a cool and wet ecosystem. Over five meters of rain falls annually in this zone compared to a typical two meters in lowland Amazon forest in Ecuador. Our plan was to take a short drive with one of the local rangers and then hike to an area to see the infamous Jocotoco Antpitta. The discovery of this new bird species back in 1997 set off a series of events that would forever change the history of conservation in Ecuador. Ten months after the sighting, Fundación Jocotoco was founded and the Tapichalaca Reserve was created to protect this and many other threatened species. This amazing foundation now protects and manages a network of reserves covering almost 104,000 acres and they cooperatively manage another 188,000 acres of private and communal reserves. Their reserves are home to at least 5,500 species including 10% of all bird species on earth, with many of the species' endemic to Ecuador. Scientists discover new species of birds, frogs, snakes, orchids, and other flora and fauna every year on their reserves due to the 49 distinct ecosystems that reside in them. Three of the lodges we were staying at on this tour are in their reserves and are managed by the foundation and their hard-working, warm, and welcoming staff.



The location chosen for our antpitta search was a new one and it was explained to us that the bird had only just started sporadically coming to this feeding station where fresh large grubs are laid out daily by the rangers. We waited patiently, hoping for one to visit, but unfortunately, we only heard its calls as it proved to be kind of shy that morning. We did spot a Yellow-breasted Brushfinch and, back on the road, we added a pair of Rufous Wrens, a Golden-crowned Tanager, and a flock of 25 Golden-plumed Parakeets that flew by.

We returned to the lodge and birded the local trails and watched a Common Chlorospingus build a nest as a mixed flock went by full of Spectacled Redstarts and several Lacrimose Mountain, Blue-and-black, and Blue-winged Mountain Tanagers. Noel had snapped some pictures and asked Andrea and Rick what the two mystery birds were that he had captured that the rest of us missed, which added Cinnamon Flycatcher and Hooded Mountain Tanager to our morning list.

After lunch, we visited the nearby village of Valladolid with our first stop being one of the rangers' homes where he had a few hummingbird feeders. From the comfort of his covered second story deck, we watched the feeders as it lightly rained and added Bronzy Inca and Long-billed Starthroat hummingbirds to our list. In a nearby tree, a large Marañon Thrush was spotted feeding on berries, mixed in with some Blue-gray Tanagers. The rain stopped, so we walked the streets of the small town, birding along the open fields. We had good looks of a perched Band-tailed Pigeon, a Streaked Saltator, and a comical male Blue-black Grassquit, performing his display routine where he jumps up into the air over and over from his perch. There was a large leafless tree in a field we dubbed the magic tree because birds kept appearing at the top section, giving us wonderful views. There were too many to name, but a few of them were Olive-backed Woodcreeper, Rufous-fronted Thornbird, Golden-faced Tyrannulet, Chivi Vireo, and Mottle-backed and Yellow-bellied Elaenias. Heading back to the van, we noticed our 30<sup>th</sup> and final species during our village walk; a large yellow and black bird perched on the top of a tree. It took some time to identify it, but, with pictures from Holly and the help of the Merlin app, we concluded it was a male Oriole Blackbird that was not supposed to be that far west. Rick posted it to eBird with the picture, perhaps adding a new record for that species for that region.

Back at the lodge, we rested a bit, or birded the garden, and then completed our species checklist before another delicious soup, shrimp dinner, fresh blackberry juice, and an Ecuadorian version of tres leches cake for dessert.





## **Thursday March 13: Tapichalaca Reserve | Antpitta | Vilcabamba Dry Forest | Loja**

After breakfast, Andrea, Rick, Jim, Barb & Holly decided to embark on a 3-mile round trip hike on the original Jocotoco Antpitta trail. Although the local rangers had not been observing that specific antpitta at the feeding station recently, a Chestnut-naped Antpitta had lately been a regular visitor. Noel, Cecilia, and Diane decided to stay at the lodge and enjoy the hummingbirds at the feeders and other birds in the area. It was a crisp clear day and the walk and surrounding view of the mountains and valleys was breathtaking. Clouds floated below us and filled the valleys and it was hard to focus on birds as we enjoyed the scenery as we walked. We added the two birds Noel had photographed - a Cinnamon Flycatcher and a small flock of Hooded Mountain Tanagers - as well as Bronze-olive Pygmy-Tyrant, Mountain and Rufous Wrens, and Chestnut-bellied and Rufous-breasted Chat-Tyrants.

When we arrived at the feeding station area, we sat on the benches and before long a female Barred Fruiteater arrived, grabbing a few grubs and perching for pictures. A flock of Golden-plumed Parakeets flew in close as there were nest boxes put up for them by the rangers in the vicinity. The group moved behind the benches to get a better look and that's when the Chestnut-naped Antpitta decided to appear out of the forest, walking right past Rick with free grubs on its mind. We enjoyed fantastic views of the bird as it grabbed a large grub and whacked it into submission, and then we watched it feed a second bird, apparently one of its almost full-grown offspring. After the antpitta left and the excitement wore off, we thanked the ranger for his efforts and started our walk back. We noticed a large bird fly in with a bright red head, then several more, and found out from Andrea we were enjoying views of an uncommon Red-hooded Tanager, apparently only in the area seasonally. We also added Golden-crowned, Beryl-spangled, and Gray-hooded Bush Tanagers, as well as Black-crested, Blackburnian, and Russet-crowned Warblers.

When we got back to the lodge, we said our goodbyes to the hummingbirds and the staff and departed for the city of Loja, where we would spend one night in the town. Along the way near Yangara, from the van we spotted a pair of resident American Kestrels on a telephone wire.

We made a birding stop at Vilcabamba and walked up the Mandango hiking trail in search of some new birds. We added Croaking Ground Dove and Black-and-white Tanager, as well as Hooded Siskin and Gray-and-gold Warbler, along with better views of several birds that not everyone had been able to see previously. We then



had a late box lunch in a park in the town of Malacatos, and after lunch, visited a catholic church with a large domed roof where at least 50 Chestnut-collared Swallows had made their mud-based colonial nests. We then arrived in Loja and checked into our modern Sonesta Hotel, went through our growing species checklist, and enjoyed dinner in the restaurant before retiring for the evening.

## **Friday March 14: Loja | Huashapamba Reserve | Dos Chorreras**

We decided to visit a spot near the UTPL Loja college campus before breakfast where Andrea knew of a Koepcke's Screech-Owl roost. She played its call as soon as we got out of the van and within 30 seconds one flew into a tree in front of us and called back. Before we could all get our binoculars on, it flew down and out of sight. Frustrated by this lost opportunity for all of us to see the owl, we waited patiently, hoping for its return. It soon flew across the street and landed on a branch with a small rodent in its talons. Its partner also appeared and landed in a nearby bush before flying into the campus. We watched the first owl eat its breakfast and then headed back to the Sonesta Hotel in plenty of time for ours.

After breakfast, we checked out and then visited the Jipiro Park in Loja. We walked around the colorfully decorated park with castles, dinosaur statues, and a miniature Eiffel tower, hoping for some birds. We saw several familiar species like Great Thrush, Great Egret, Fasciated Wren, Golden Grosbeak, and many Pacific Horneros, but no new ones for the list. We then drove a bit and, just outside of Loja, had another target bird in view, as a Chiguanco Thrush perched on a road sign next to the van. Our next stop was the Huashapamba Reserve where, as we drove down a dirt road, a Blackish Tapaculo darted into the underbrush. Only Rick, Andrea, and Holly saw it, so we played its call and heard it answer, but it remained stubbornly hidden. A shadow then passed over us and before disappearing over a ridge, some of us had a quick view of a Mountain Caracara. We watched a female Tyrian Metaltail, a small hummingbird, building a nest, plus added another Rainbow Starfontlet and more Golden-plumed Parakeets. The star of the show was a Crimson-mantled Woodpecker that perched on top of a tall pine tree and remained there for over 10 minutes for great views through our scopes.

We departed the reserve and began our drive to the highest elevation of the tour, the Cajas National Park. Along the way, as we were driving on the Pan-American Highway, Andrea spotted a soaring Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle that at least half the van got a decent look at. We arrived at the Dos Chorreras Lodge (meaning two waterfalls) in the late afternoon and, after checking into our beautiful rooms, we walked around the several





ponds on the property where rainbow trout are raised. Two new birds were immediately added to our list as around 20 Andean Teals were floating in the ponds and more than 50 Andean Gulls circled the area, searching for that perfect junior-sized trout. We also added a new mammal, the local Andean Tapeti (or cottontail rabbit), as several were seen on the dikes around the ponds.

We gathered in a quiet area of the lodge to complete our checklist, next to an enormous rock that the lodge had been built around, and then had a superb order-off-the-menu dinner in the lodge restaurant. Before our dinner, we were presented with a delicious local welcome drink with some white rum on the side for those who wanted to add it. After deciding which of the many dessert choices to try, Andrea led us outside with our flashlights to show us a Band-winged Nightjar that was perched on a rooftop. We watched it in the spotlight as it rose up and gulped down a large moth flying overhead.

## **Saturday March 15: Cajas National Park | Páramos | Ranchos Prado | Lake Llaviucu**

At our amazing buffet breakfast, we met our Cajas National Park local guide Juan, who would join us for most of the day. He told us a little about the history of the park and we learned that it covers 70,000-acres in the highlands of Ecuador and was established in 1996. About 270 lakes (most of glacial origin) and lagoons are present in the páramo of the Cajas, one of the highest concentrations of lakes in the world. Overall, there are over 150 bird species, 44 mammals, and at least 17 species of amphibians. The páramos here cover 90% of the total area of the park and can be described as a tropical wet alpine habitat with the ground being very sponge-like.

At our first stop, we added two new birds - a Tufted Tit-Tyrant and Violet-throated Metaltail. We then drove over the Continental divide and hit an elevation of over 13,000 feet. At the visitor center, we learned from Juan and the dioramas that Alexander Humboldt had visited this area and climbed these mountains in the early 1800's and developed the concept that different plant communities and ecotones varied due to elevation changes. The water here is critical, not only to the flora and fauna of the park but, to major cities like Cuenca, as it is one of the purest sources on earth and is protected by the presence of the national park.

Some additional birds spotted on a short boardwalk trail walk overlooking Lake La Toreadora were Blue-mantled Thornbill, Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, Andean Tit-Spinetail, Black Flowerpiercer, and Plumbeous Sierra Finch.



We then took a ride to the quaint Rancho Prado where we were treated to some delicious fresh hot chocolate. A little birding also ensued, and we were fortunate to see a Tawny Antpitta in the open as well as a Many-striped Canastero. We had been searching the Polylepis trees and their papery peeling bark branches for a special bird, the striking Giant Conebill, that is dependent on these trees. Its bright rusty underparts blend well with Polylepis bark, making it not always easy to find. Just before we left the area, Barb and her eagle eyes spotted one and we all got good looks at another life bird for all of us. Barb got a free beer from Rick at dinner for that find.

We took a short walk across the street to a flower filled páramo next to another small beautiful glacial lake and had more looks at both species of cinclodes, including our first Stout-billed, as well as several robin-like Plain-capped Ground-Tyrants hopping around and perching on small clumps of grass. Another nice find was a small gathering of Andean Lapwings.

We returned to the lodge for a buffet lunch and then took a drive to a lower elevation location along Lake Llaviucu. On the drive, we passed a stream with two White-capped Dippers. We birded along the road and added Sparkling Violetear, a Pearled Treerunner, male Hooded Siskin, more Spectacled Redstarts, and both Black and Masked Flowerpiercers.

Then it was back to the lodge for some shopping in the gift shop, a short rest, and our last species checklist with Andrea. We went around the room and shared our favorite birds and memories of the tour. Collared Inca, that spectacular hummingbird seen at Casa Simpson (Rick & Noel), and Chestnut-naped Antpitta (Holly & Jim) tied for the favorite bird, with votes also going to Torrent Duck (Andrea), Sparkling Violetear (Cecilia), and Paradise Tanager (Barb). Favorite memories or places visited were definitely the three Jocotoco lodges, and many mentioned all the delicious Ecuadorian soups, freshly squeezed juices, and meals, as special memories. We then had our final dinner at this lovely lodge and retired early to get our packing done.

## **Sunday March 16: Dos Chorreras | Cajas National Park at Illincocha Lake | Cuenca**

After breakfast, we birded the hotel grounds for a bit and added two new birds; a Tawny-rumped Tyrannulet and a Superciliaried Hemispingus. We met our new Cajas National Park guide, Amalia, and she accompanied us back to the park to a beautiful location called Lake Illincocha. After a short hike, we were in front of another





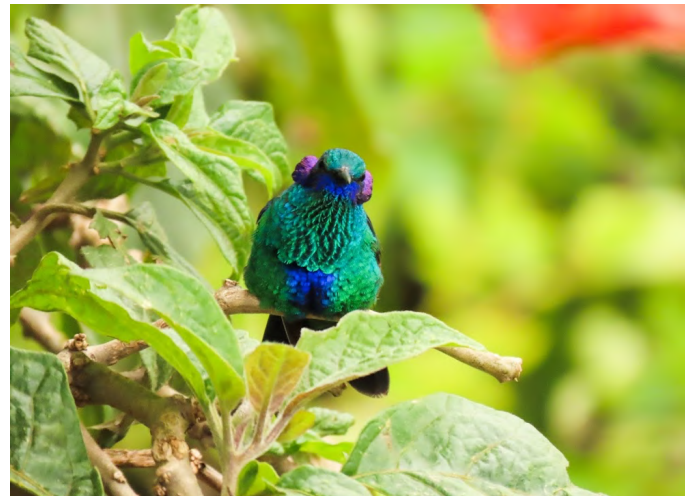
flower-filled field next to the lake where a Blue-mantled Thornbill and several Tit-like Dacnis were spotted. A small group of Plumbeous Sierra Finches searched for seeds alongside half-a-dozen Chestnut-winged Cinclodes. Next, a Tawny Antpitta and a pair of Grass Wrens showed themselves and then one of the most beautiful birds of the entire tour appeared; a stunning male Ecuadorian Hillstar hummingbird. At first it fed on flowers at the back edge of the field, but it slowly made its way closer to us and soon was perched on a flower twenty feet away, feeding while our cameras clicked. Many of the flowers of the páramo are at ground level and we witnessed this hummingbird also hop on the ground from flower to flower; such a unique behavior we were lucky enough to observe.

Before lunch at the lodge, we did some last-minute birding on the hotel grounds down by a stream and those who lingered observed a large new hummingbird, the impressive and very purple Great Sapphirewing. Another Rainbow Starfrontlet flew by as did a small mixed flock of Spectacled Redstarts, joined by a White-banded Tyrannulet and another Superciliaried Hemispingus.

Since lunch at the lodge was our last meal together with Andrea and Francisco, we thanked them for their wonderful guiding and driving skills and for helping make this trip to their beautiful country so memorable for us.

After lunch, Francisco loaded up the van and we departed for the town of Cuenca, Ecuador's third largest city, with our local park guide Amalia joining us. Once we arrived, we walked the beautiful town with her as she explained the history and sites of the city to us. We visited a bustling marketplace, walked through colorfully decorated cobblestone streets, and passed by several majestic catholic churches, impressive open-air plazas, and a bustling park in the city center. Many of the older buildings were constructed with a beautiful pink marble called travertine that is mined locally.

Then, it was on to the Cuenca airport for our flight back to Quito. We said goodbye to Francisco and, after our short flight, arrived in Quito and were dropped off at our airport hotel. This was the last time most of the group would see Andrea other than Rick and Holly, so we said our goodbyes and more thank you's before checking in. We had our final dinner together in the hotel restaurant and shared more stories about our grand Ecuadorian adventure before saying goodbye to our new friends.



## Monday March 17: Antisana Ecological Reserve Extension | Andean Condors | Departures

After an early breakfast at the hotel, Holly and Rick were met by Andrea and our driver for the day, Jorge, for the one-day extension part of the tour to the Antisana Ecological Reserve. Our main target bird was the majestic Andean Condor of which only 130 were counted in the last Ecuador census. It was a cool, misty day with light rain to start, but that did not deter us. We entered the park when it opened at 8:00 and visited a viewing platform facing massive cliff walls on the other side of a valley where the condors were known to roost. Two long waterfalls falling from the side of the rock walls captured our attention before Andrea had 9 roosting condors in the scope. There were a mix of adults and immature birds and we watched them preen from under our umbrellas. The surrounding area was loaded with bushes and flowers, and hummingbirds too. We watched Tyrian Metaltails, Lesser Violetears, and a Black-tailed Trainbearer feed and perch next to our deck viewing point, along with our first Shining Sunbeam of the tour and several Black Flowerpiercers.

We then drove through the Archidona section of the reserve, climbing in elevation until we reached the peak at around 13,400 feet. Andrea encouraged us to drink plenty of water as an altitude sickness prevention tool. It worked well as we felt no ill effects (and we were kind of used to it by now also).

As we drove through the vast páramo, we saw many Carunculated Caracaras walking in the fields searching for insects, worms, or small rodents. Another exciting find was our first Andean Ibis of the tour, and soon at least ten more were counted. We passed by several herds of resting White-tailed Deer, seemingly much larger than those in the states. Other birds we added at our various stops were Black-winged Ground Doves, Stout-billed Cinclodes, Páramo Pipits, and Plain-colored Seed eaters.

Our next stop was at Lake La Mica where we scoped a marshy area at the edge of the lake from a trail high above it. We added Yellow-billed Pintails, a dozen Andean Ducks, more Andean Teals, and several Slate-colored Coots.

Our final stop was at the Tambo Condor Lodge where the owner was a friend of Andrea's. We had a delicious lunch while we watched hummingbirds visiting feeders on the elevated deck. We added more Shining Sunbeams and Sparkling Violetears, as well as Great Sapphirewings and a Giant Hummingbird that dwarfed the other birds at the feeders. Over the cliffs in the distance 11 Andean Condors gracefully soared and Andrea found a perched Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle through the scope. Our last new bird of the tour was a Cinerous Conebill that visited a nectar feeder.

It was time to leave this magical place but not before stopping for a herd of cattle being led by local ranchers on horseback down the same road we were driving on. Holly got dropped off at the hotel as she had a later flight, and Rick went directly to the airport, and just like that our 13 days in Ecuador were over. It was an amazing tour and between the early arrival day and the extension day, 331 species of birds were either seen or heard.

*Photos: Group (Rick Weiman - RW), Violet-bellied Hummingbird (Jim Adamthwaite - JA), Yellow-throated Toucan (JA), Andean Cock-of-the-Rock (Holly Fulton - HF), Saffron Finch (JA), Smooth-billed Ani (JA), Collared Plover (JA), White-necked Jacobin (JA), Long-wattled Umbrellabird (JA), Ornate Flycatcher (JA), Violet-tailed Sylph (JA), White-tailed Jay (Francisco Javier - FJ), Ecuadorian Trogon (Holly Fulton - HF), White-whiskered Puffbird (JA), Swallow Tanager (JA), Andean Cock-of-the-Rock (FJ), Butterfly (RW), Inca Jay (RW), Violet-fronted Brilliant (RW), Golden-tailed Sapphire (RW), Scenic (HF), Hooded Mountain Tanager (NC), Vulture Silhouette (HF), Barred Fruiteater (FJ), Collared Inca (NC), Andean Gull (JA), Scenic (HF), Spectacled Redstart (NC), Masked Flowerpiercer (JA), Group Birding (HF), Ecuadorian Hillstar (NC), Carunculated Caracara (HF), Sparkling Violetear (HF)*