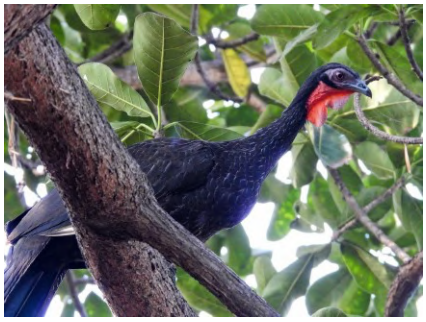
Peru's Avian and Archeological Wonders | July 11– 21, 2025 | w/ Post-Tour Machu Picchu Extension July 21– 25, 2025 | Trip Report by Stephen Grace

Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders Stephen Grace and Juan Cardenas Carrasco with Barb, Ellen, Ana, Carmen, Dori, Ron, Kathy and Gary



Fri., July 11 Lima: Pre-tour Optional Excursion

Our journey began in Peru's vibrant capital with a leisurely breakfast following late-night arrivals. All eight travelers chose to join an optional birding and cultural tour of Lima, thoughtfully arranged by our exceptional local guide, Juan Cardenas Carrasco. Even as we drove through the city's bustling streets, birds beckoned us: Long-tailed Mockingbirds flashed from roadside perches, Amazilia Hummingbirds shimmered among blooming gardens, and male Saffron Finches lit up urban parks with their radiant yellow plumage and orange foreheads.

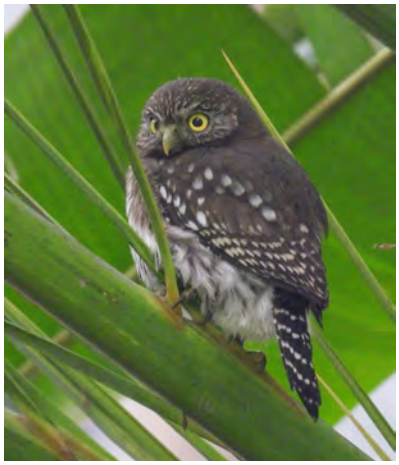
The clear, whistled song of the Rufous-collared Sparrow greeted us—the sound of a bird that would accompany us across the Andes. Croaking Ground Doves amused us with their flatulent frog-like calls. Black Vultures soared over rooftops and perched on railings, while West Peruvian Doves dazzled with bold blue eye-rings. Juan taught us about the unusual plumage of Vermilion Flycatchers: in coastal Peru near Lima, many males are gray morphs, strikingly different from the familiar red morphs found elsewhere. We were lucky to observe both morphs side by side for comparison. Blue-and-white Swallows swooped through the air, and our first Scrub Blackbird—an icterid with glossy black feathers and a bold presence—made an appearance. Bananaquits, though not native to Lima, added their sprightly energy to the cityscape. We also watched Southern Beardless-Tyrannulets bouncing through branches and flitting among stone walls covered in bougainvillea.

But Lima offered more than birds. At the world-class Larco Museum, open-air archives of Moche and other pre-Columbian pottery revealed millennia of artistic expression. Exquisite metallurgy was also on display, including masterfully crafted gold ornaments, ceremonial masks, and intricate jewelry—testaments to the technological and aesthetic brilliance of Peru's ancient cultures.

Outside, we spotted San Pedro cacti growing in the garden—hallucinogenic plants that held ceremonial significance for ancient Peruvian civilizations, particularly in rites of spiritual vision. We lunched in the museum's stunning garden courtyard, where fine cuisine matched the elegance of our surroundings. Several guests tried Peru's national cocktail, the Pisco Sour—a blend of pisco brandy, lime juice, simple syrup, egg white, and bitters. In a country celebrated for its culinary excellence—home to Lima's Maido, named the world's best restaurant in 2025—our meal was a fitting tribute to Peru's rich gastronomic heritage.

Towering adobe pyramids glimpsed as we drove through Lima hinted at the city's deep historical layers. Some ancient sites have recently yielded mummies unearthed during modern construction excavations, a striking collision of past and present. In the colonial center, we wandered grand plazas and admired carved wooden balconies before descending into the catacombs of a centuries-old cathedral, where mosaics of Spanish tile told silent stories of faith and conquest.

Dinner that evening was another highlight: a restaurant near our hotel served fresh scallops torched tableside and a variety of Peruvian specialties, from tangy ceviche to savory lomo saltado. Another round of Pisco Sours marked the perfect close to our first day in Peru—a day that wove together birdsong, ancient stone, and the contemporary spirit of this captivating city.



Sat., July 12 Archaeology at Pachacamac Oracle | Pucusana | Paracas

Today's highlights included an owl and an oracle. We began in Parque El Olivar, where centuries-old olive trees bear living witness to Peru's turbulent colonial past. Originally planted by Spanish colonists in the 16th century, these trees became entangled in Peru's struggle for independence. According to some accounts, retreating Spanish royalists took out their frustration by hacking at the defenseless trees—chopping down many and scarring others before fleeing the newly independent nation. Other versions of the story suggest that Peruvian rebels may have damaged the grove as a symbolic act against colonial rule. Either way, many of the olive trees still bear the scars of sabers and blades—a living testament to Peru's turbulent path to independence.

Birdlife in the park was lively and familiar, yet new surprises awaited. Harris's Hawk—a social raptor beloved by falconers for its cooperative hunting style—soared above and perched in plain view for superb scope looks. Though not native to Peru, this species has become naturalized in the Lima area, likely originating from escaped or released falconry birds that have since established a thriving population. We added Blue-gray Tanager and Eared Dove to our list and admired several Black-crowned Night Herons habituated to humans and posing for close views. A few lucky observers glimpsed the elusive Oasis Hummingbird.

Then, just as we prepared to leave, a thrill: a Peruvian Pygmy-Owl appeared—and then another. We watched one fly into its nest cavity, locking eyes with its penetrating yellow stare. We admired its evolutionary trickery: the false eyespots on the back of its head, designed to deceive would-be predators.

Later, we journeyed south to the archeological site of Pachacamac. Once a pan-Andean pilgrimage center, this coastal complex housed a revered wooden idol with two faces—one looking forward, one back—embodying the Andean concept of duality: past and future, life and death, land and sea. As we wandered the dusty trails, we encountered pottery shards and human bones scattered among the rubble. Amid the silence of the ruins, we also spotted the Peruvian Thick-knee—a large-eyed, nocturnal shorebird of dry ground, perfectly camouflaged in the sunbaked earth.

Joking that our group had petitioned the oracle for penguins, we pressed onward to Pucusana, a picturesque fishing village. There, aboard a small boat piloted by a local fisherman, we ventured into coastal waters. To our delight, we found two Humboldt Penguins courting among Blue-footed Boobies. Inca Terns, with their flamboyant white mustaches, delighted everyone. We saw both Kelp Gulls and Belcher's Gulls, the latter distinguished by their red-tipped bills. Neotropic Cormorants struck dramatic poses with wings outstretched to dry—a classic sight—but nearby, Red-legged Cormorants did not follow suit. Unlike their relatives, these striking

seabirds with bright-red legs and slate-gray plumage neither sun their wings nor nest colonially, making them an unusual cormorant and fascinating species to observe.

We enjoyed close views of Blackish Oystercatchers, followed by flocks of Peruvian Pelicans and a lone Peruvian Booby—its snow-white neck distinguishing it from the abundant Blue-footed Boobies. A Surf Cinclodes crept over intertidal rocks, probing for invertebrates. Nearby, South American Sea Lions lounged along the shore—burly males bellowing and battling for dominance, while slender females slipped quietly into the surf to avoid the commotion.

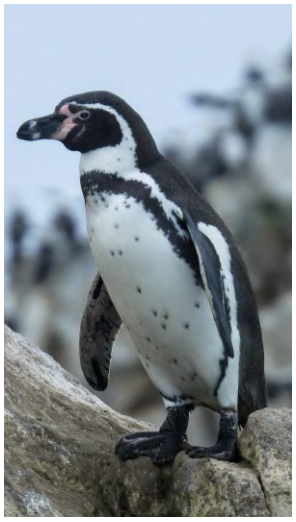
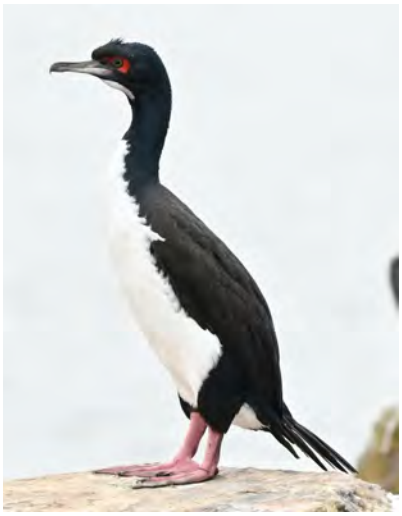
As sunset bathed the Pacific in gold and rose, we drove south along the coast to Paracas, buoyed by the day's breathtaking blend of birds, history, and marine life.

Sun., July 13 Flight Over the Nazca Lines | Paracas National Reserve

The day began with a confiding Great Grebe floating just off Playa El Chaco, steps from our hotel—a statuesque waterbird with a long neck, dagger-like bill, and richly patterned plumage. So close to shore, it seemed to pose for our lenses.

Later, the morning took us skyward over the Nazca Lines—enormous geoglyphs etched into the desert floor more than 1,500 years ago by the Nazca culture. From the air, their full grandeur was revealed: the delicate hummingbird, the elegant spider, a hypnotic spiral, and the haunting figure of the "Astronaut," staring wide-eyed across the arid plateau. We also glimpsed vast trapezoids, zigzags, and straight lines stretching for miles with geometric precision. These designs were made by carefully removing the dark, iron-oxidized stones that cover the desert surface to reveal the lighter-colored sand below. Their preservation over centuries is due to the area's extreme dryness and lack of wind. Scholars continue to debate their meaning—proposals include ceremonial walkways, astronomical calendars, water-related rituals, and sacred symbols aligning earth and cosmos. What's clear is the immense coordination, planning, and symbolic power they represent.

We must also note what the Nazca Lines are not. The popular theory promoted by Erich von Däniken—that these were ancient alien landing strips or messages to extraterrestrials—is pure pseudoscience, rooted not in evidence but in a refusal to credit Indigenous peoples with advanced knowledge and artistic mastery. These demeaning assumptions undermine the true genius of the Nazca civilization, whose achievements need no help from imaginary spacefarers.

In the afternoon, the Paracas National Reserve dazzled. The landscape, tinted red with iron oxide, resembled a Martian plain—eerily beautiful in the rich afternoon light. Through scopes, we admired Chilean Flamingos glowing pink in the sun, their vivid red feet and joints—what appear to be knees but are actually ankles—clearly visible as they waded the shallows. Snowy Plovers scurried across the flats, their pale forms tumbling like windblown cotton balls, while hundreds of Black Skimmers sliced through air and surf in a dazzling display of avian abundance. Ruddy Turnstones, Surfbirds, and Black-bellied Plovers rounded out the spectacle.

For dinner, we returned to the same restaurant where we'd eaten lunch—it was that good. Everyone ordered pizza, and many declared it among the best they'd ever had anywhere in the world. We toasted our good fortune: great birds, great food, and a growing camaraderie among travelers bound by curiosity and awe.

Mon., July 14 Ballestas Islands | Wetlands of Lima

Our fourth day brought us to the rugged Pacific coast for a boat trip to the Ballestas Islands—called "the Galápagos of Peru" for their staggering biodiversity. Although weather altered our original route, we still navigated around islands closer to shore, encountering a spectacle of seabirds. New for our trip was the Guanay Cormorant, named for its association with guano-rich islands. This species was once one of the most abundant seabirds on Earth, and its droppings—guano—formed the foundation of a global fertilizer trade in the 19th century that shaped Peru's economy and international geopolitics. The cormorant's black-and-white plumage exemplifies counter-shading camouflage—dark above and light below—a pattern that helps conceal animals from both predators and prey by blending with the murky ocean depths when viewed from above and the bright sky when seen from below. At Pucusana we had seen just one Peruvian Booby, but here they were in the thousands—squawking, diving, and nesting en masse. Among them, we spotted two Nazca Boobies, far south of their usual range. Juan was surprised and thrilled, and we enjoyed prolonged views.

Other highlights included Blackish Oystercatchers foraging on wave-splashed boulders, elegant Red-legged Cormorants, and squadrons of Peruvian Pelicans flying in formation and perching on rocky outcrops. Seabirds swirled past an unexpected marvel—the immense geoglyph known as the Candelabra. Etched into the rust-colored cliffs, this mysterious symbol stretches over 500 feet tall. So focused were we on photographing seabirds that its sudden appearance stunned us—a perfect convergence of nature and culture.

Though we'd already seen Humboldt Penguins back in Pucusana, they still stole the show here. As seabirds circled the cliffs, we spotted these warm-water penguins patrolling the rocky shoreline. Adapted to life far from

ice, these flightless birds owe their survival to the Humboldt Current—a cold, nutrient-rich upwelling that sustains a vast marine ecosystem along Peru's arid coast. Nesting in crevices and guano-coated rock, one pair had downy chicks nestled between them—a tender image of persistence in a stark land. Comic on land yet perfectly suited to their harsh world, these black-and-white figures seemed painted into a canvas of rust, ochre, and sea blue. We also noted the bare skin on their faces—an adaptation that helps them regulate heat in the intense sun of this coastal desert.

After lunch at a local restaurant, we returned to the Lima area for a productive afternoon of wetland birding. Many-colored Rush Tyrant lived up to its name—dashing through reeds, brilliantly patterned and hyperactive. We had wonderful views and photos. Plumbeous Rail, a typically elusive skulker, was remarkably cooperative. Wren-like Rushbird offered nice looks as well.

As we prepared to leave, a crimson male Vermilion Flycatcher perched nearby, glowing in the afternoon light. Moments later, a Green Kingfisher darted in, landing briefly on a wooden railing before vanishing into the reeds.

Our final stop brought us to a sunset-lit wetland, where Cinnamon Teal, White-cheeked Pintails, Common Gallinules, Puna Ibis, and scores of American Oystercatchers created a scene teeming with life. A Willet added a new species to our growing list. The finale? A Tufted Grebe—rare and elusive—surfaced between dives just long enough for everyone to catch a glimpse.

Not even Lima's infamous traffic could dampen our spirits. We arrived at our hotel tired but glowing, hearts full and checklists brimming with the day's marvels.

Tues., July 15 Flight to Trujillo | Chan Chan

A morning flight brought us to the northern coastal city of Trujillo, a region long celebrated as a cradle of ancient Peruvian civilization. Founded in 1534 by conquistador Francisco Pizarro and named after his hometown in Spain, the city stands amid a landscape that had already flourished for centuries under the Moche and Chimú cultures—powerful civilizations whose enduring legacy still shapes the region today.

We enjoyed a spectacular lunch at a beachside restaurant, seated on the second floor with views of waves breaking below and sea breezes drifting in. Platters of fresh seafood delighted us—some of the best fried fish many of us had ever tasted. The appetizer of cancha, or roasted Peruvian corn, was also a group favorite.

A local archaeology guide, Mercedes, joined us. As we drove through the outskirts of the city, she pointed out the site of a major archaeological discovery—where the remains of dozens of sacrificial victims, many of them children, were unearthed in recent years, drawing international attention to the ritual practices of ancient coastal cultures in Peru.

We also learned about the region's enduring seafaring traditions, including the *caballitos de totora*—narrow reed boats that have plied Peru's coastal waters for over 3,000 years. Crafted from bundled totora reeds, these vessels are still used by artisanal fishermen today and are considered a living link to Peru's earliest maritime civilizations, who rode the waves not for sport, but for survival.

Along a rural road, a stop to admire a Coastal Miner turned into a dramatic encounter: a Savannah Hawk was perched nearby. As we watched, it suddenly dropped into the grass and emerged with a mammal clutched in its talons—an unforgettable moment captured in photos.

In the afternoon, we visited Chan Chan—the sprawling adobe capital of the Chimú Empire and the largest mud-brick city in the world. Built from sun-dried adobe bricks made of earth, water, and organic material, the city was ingeniously adapted to thrive in a desert climate where kiln-fired bricks were neither necessary nor practical. With Mercedes as our expert guide, we explored this UNESCO World Heritage Site, marveling at its intricate geometric friezes and ceremonial courtyards. Eared Doves cooed softly from sparse trees, while American Kestrels glided between the ruins on sharply pointed wings, scanning the ground below for prey. For a bird's-eye view of our own, we climbed to a scenic overlook above the ruins and gazed out over the vast cityscape that once stretched to the Pacific—a testament to the ingenuity and grandeur of this pre-Inca empire.

Dinner brought us back to Trujillo's beautiful colonial plaza, where we dined at our hotel under the glow of historic churches and Spanish-era balconies. The layers of time felt especially vivid here, as we reflected on a day filled with ancient wonders and living traditions.

Wed., July 16 Sinsicap | Huaca de la Luna

Today our tour unfolded across striking elevations and eras—from highland ridges where hummingbirds hovered above thorny scrub to coastal ruins where owls stood sentry among ancient adobe walls.

In the morning, one traveler opted for a cultural tour of Trujillo with Mercedes, beginning with a leisurely breakfast in the historic city. The rest of us departed early, ascending winding roads into the Andes above the

coastal fog. As we climbed past 9,000 feet, the Andean peaks caught the golden light of morning, and tawny puna grasslands stretched beneath a vast sky. Cactus, bromeliads, and wildflowers pushed through the dry soil—an unexpected burst of color and texture in an otherwise austere landscape.

Stopping often to bird, we encountered a vibrant array of species. Carmen—whose sharp eyes had contributed many sightings throughout the trip—spotted a group of Pacific Parrotlets. We admired a vivid male Golden Grosbeak, and nearby, a Peruvian Pygmy-Owl drew a mob of agitated birds, including a dazzling male Peruvian Sheartail with his long, trailing tail. A Purple-collared Woodstar shimmered in the morning light, and we were fortunate to see a Spot-throated Hummingbird—a range-restricted species found only in northern Peru and extreme southern Ecuador. Its appearance sparked conversation about the nature of endemism—true Peruvian endemics versus those shared across borders. While such species hold special appeal for birders, we reminded ourselves not to let the quest for endemic ticks eclipse the wonder of encountering extraordinary birds, regardless of their range maps.

Breakfast in the field was memorable—hot coffee and tea paired with avocado and cream cheese sandwiches, enjoyed with views of the highland landscape. After refueling, we enjoyed excellent views of a Collared Antshrike pair, admiring the contrast between the bold male and subtly marked female. A Fasciated Wren, strikingly patterned and full-voiced, captivated us with its loud, emphatic calls and hefty presence—surely one of the handsomest wrens of the Andes. Carmen also spotted a Black-necked Woodpecker, a handsome species and true Peruvian endemic that gave us extended views. We were equally pleased with a cooperative Rufous-browed Peppershrike—our first vireo of the tour. Usually a canopy-dweller that is difficult to see, this individual offered unusually prolonged, unobstructed looks.

One of the most sought-after birds of the day was the Russet-bellied Spinetail—rare, endangered, and restricted to a narrow elevational band in the Andes of northwestern Peru. It kept us working, but eventually rewarded us with satisfying views as it flitted through dense scrub. The Unicolored Tapaculo, another Peruvian endemic found only in the western Andes of northern Peru, remained elusive to the eye, though we heard its distinctive calls and glimpsed movement in the underbrush. A striking male Hooded Siskin perched cooperatively in view, and we compared the familiar Chiguanco Thrush to the Great Thrush, noting that while the former lacks a prominent eyering, the male Great Thrush displays a bold yellow one—a helpful field mark. A Mourning Sierra-Finch showed well, and although Cordilleran Parakeets called noisily from distant trees, they stayed hidden. The Yellow-billed Tit-Tyrant appeared, its spiky crest and black-and-white zebra striping making it one of the most visually arresting birds of the day in this dry, high-mountain habitat.

As a final highlight, we were treated to views of the Giant Hummingbird—the world's largest hummingbird, a fitting close to a remarkable morning in Peru's rugged northern Andes.

In the afternoon, we descended to the coastal lowlands and stepped into deep time at Huaca de la Luna, the towering adobe temple of the Moche civilization. Like a Russian nesting doll of history, each generation of Moche builders constructed new temples atop the old, layering sacred spaces over centuries. In places where looters had bulldozed into the ruins, we could see multiple layers exposed at once—a time tunnel into the ancient past. The late afternoon light brought dramatic texture to the eroded walls, still bearing traces of painted iconography.

Among the ruins, Burrowing Owls stood watch on sunbaked mounds, blinking in the harsh desert light. These day-active hunters, often reusing burrows of other animals, seemed perfectly at home among the adobe remnants. We also had excellent views of Peruvian Thick-knees—their oversized yellow eyes and cryptic plumage blending with the dusty terrain. Some were resting with their legs sprawled behind them, adding to their quirky charm.

From cloud-piercing peaks to coastal ruins, the day revealed a Peru that is both biologically rich and culturally layered. Birds and archaeological sites alike whispered stories of survival, adaptation, and the enduring rhythms of this extraordinary land.

Thurs., July 17 Cerro Campana and Autopista Panamericana Norte | Huaca del Cao | Chaparri Reserve

We left Trujillo and made our first birding stop in a coastal desert landscape studded with columnar cacti reminiscent of saguaros. Miguel, our driver, remarked that he had never seen the desert so green. In this vivid setting, we found both of our avian targets. First, the Cactus Canastero—a skulking furnariid named for its habit of weaving basket-like (*canasta*) nests. Then, the Great Inca-Finch, a striking member of the genus *Incaspiza*, which includes five species found only in Peru. Though finch-like in appearance, *Incaspiza pulchra* is now considered part of the tanager family (Thraupidae). Restricted to the western slopes of the Andes in central and northern Peru, this regional specialty is a prized sighting for birders. Its bright orange bill glowed as it perched atop a cactus, a bold splash of color in the sunlit desert.

On the drive out, we passed Groove-billed Anis—bizarre black cuckoos with long tails and laterally compressed, hatchet-like bills—truly one of birding's great avian oddities. These highly social birds are often seen in chattering flocks, clambering through low shrubs or perched conspicuously in the open. Their wheezy, squeaky calls and communal behaviors add to their eccentric charm. Known for cooperative breeding, multiple females may lay eggs in a shared nest, with group members helping to raise the young.

Our next cultural stop took us deep into the world of the Moche at the Lady of Cao site. This remarkable archaeological find—discovered by a friend of Juan's—was never looted, and the museum preserves both the treasures of her tomb and her tattooed, mummified remains. With our binoculars, we observed intricate tattoos of serpents and spiders on her arms and hands, symbolic of power and ritual. It was a compelling dive into ancient Peru.

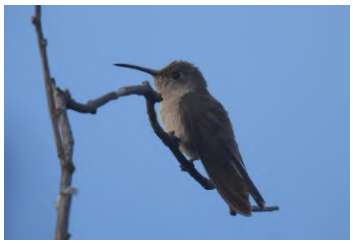
Lunch was another feast at a roadside restaurant—there's no such thing as a light lunch in Peru. Plates of chicken, rice, and potato were topped with delicious guancharri sauce, a peanut-and-pepper-based favorite that won over our group. We spotted a Pacific Hornero while dining—and found its distinctive mud nest, shaped like a round oven, cemented onto a nearby tree.

Our next birding stop brought three endemics: Peruvian Plantcutter—a dry-forest cotinga named for its habit of clipping leaves and twigs with its powerful bill; the bold and richly colored Rufous Flycatcher; and Cinereous Finch, whose name we joked sounded like a villain from a Harry Potter book. We also saw now-familiar species such as Pacific Parrotlet, Amazilia Hummingbird, Bananaquit, and Long-tailed Mockingbird, along with new species: White-browed Gnatcatcher and Baird's Flycatcher, the latter sallying out from perches to catch insects.

On the road to Chaparri, we stopped abruptly for a roadside wetland where Black-necked Stilts mingled—including fluffy, rotund chicks—and a Little Blue Heron moved elegantly through the shallows. Peruvian Meadowlark males, adorned with vivid red breasts, caught the golden light atop scattered bushes.

As the sun dipped low, we turned inland along rural roads toward the Andes. One last roadside delight: a Burrowing Owl family, including two young birds peering from their burrow. Finally, we arrived at Chaparri after a long and wonder-filled day. There, we met our local guide Daniel, who pointed out two nightjar species—Scrub and Tschudi's—roosting right on the road, a thrilling teaser for the birding ahead.

Some of us opted for an evening owl prowl. Though owls remained elusive, we were rewarded with a Black-eared Opossum sighting and a stunning night sky streaked with the Milky Way—"Vía Láctea" in Spanish—spilling



its light over the reserve. Chaparri already felt like a special place.

Fri., July 18 Chaparri Reserve

We spent a full day exploring Chaparri Ecological Reserve, one of Peru's premier community-owned conservation areas. Sechuran Foxes, the region's native canids, trotted through camp with curious ease—wild yet habituated, a sign of successful coexistence. Collared Peccaries—also known as Javelinas—wandered the dry forest trails in small herds, their clacking teeth and low grunts occasionally breaking the quiet.

An optional early morning birding session offered a serene start: we sat quietly by a water feature near the lodge, where hummingbirds gathered in the soft light. Alongside the now-familiar Amazilia Hummingbirds—common yet always striking with their red bills—we observed several new species, including the bold Sparkling Violetear, a large hummingbird that dominates feeders and flowers with its aggressive behavior and shimmering "ear" tufts of iridescent feathers. Also present were the Short-tailed Woodstar and Purple-collared Woodstar, tiny hummingbirds hardly larger than bumblebees, as well as the Tumbes Hummingbird—a dry-forest specialist with a restricted range in southwestern Ecuador and northwestern Peru—a biodiversity hotspot known as the Tumbesian region.

Feeders at the lodge buzzed with activity: Croaking Ground Doves by the dozens, brilliant Golden Grosbeaks, and dazzling White-tailed Jays. The jays—with their bold black, white, and cobalt-blue plumage and piercing yellow eyes—were especially striking. These large, intelligent corvids are another Tumbesian endemic.

Later that morning, we set out on foot along the reserve's trails, pausing at scenic overlooks with sweeping views of canyons and mountains. At one such vantage point, Daniel spotted an Andean Condor—one of the top highlights of the tour. We watched in reverent silence as this massive bird, sacred to many Indigenous Andean cultures, soared across the blue sky, riding thermal updrafts with unwavering wings. Its splayed primaries resembled outstretched fingers gripping the wind.

In the dry forest habitat, Tropical Parulas seemed to be everywhere. We also found several range-restricted species, including Tumbes Chat-Tyrant, Tumbes Pewee, and Tumbesian Tyrannulet. Other birding highlights included the stunning Scarlet-backed Woodpecker—a small, vividly colored species found in the dry forests of western

Ecuador and northwestern Peru—and, most thrilling of all, an encounter with the rare and reintroduced White-winged Guan, an endemic cracid once thought extinct. Chaparri has played a vital role in bringing this species back from the brink.

Another Chaparri conservation success is the Spectacled Bear. We observed a mother and cub in an enclosure, part of a broader rewilding effort. Remarkably, during siesta, one of our group encountered a wild bear on the trail—an unforgettable moment. Though famously portrayed as Paddington in children's books, the real Spectacled Bear is best admired with both awe and caution.

In the late afternoon, we birded at lower elevations with different habitat. We scoped distant flocks of Parrot-billed Seedeaters and Sulphur-throated Finches, and enjoyed close views of a Rufous Flycatcher in glowing light.

After another delicious dinner, we followed the scent of a skunk—and indeed spotted the creature as it scurried into the underbrush. An evening owl prowl brought fleeting glimpses of a Peruvian Screech-Owl, followed by progressively better views until, at last, Daniel located one perfectly perched. We watched it calling into the night, its presence echoing in the stillness—a stunning finale to a day rich with wildlife, conservation success, and connection to place.

Sat., July 19 Reservoir Birding | Huaca Rajada

Our final morning at Chaparri began with another optional hummingbird viewing session at dawn. We spotted a new arrival: the Long-billed Starthroat, with its dramatic bill and gleaming gorget. Yellow-tailed Orioles showed beautifully in the morning light, allowing us to compare them with the now-familiar White-edged Orioles we'd seen throughout Chaparri—both species radiant, splashing color across the sparse forest backdrop.

Just before we sat down for breakfast, someone spotted a raptor soaring in the distance—a Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle. As it banked in the sun, the white of its underparts flashed brilliantly against the morning sky.

Another simple but outstanding meal followed—fresh juices, eggs, and pancakes that rivaled even Lima's fine dining in heart and flavor. A second Andean Condor soared overhead, riding morning thermals—an awe-inspiring sight. We finally had fantastic views of the Elegant Crescentchest, a striking bird that had proven elusive the day before.

At lunch, we met the man who built the lodge and oversees its operations. He shared a moving story of community-led conservation. Peru's dry forests, he explained, are the "ugly duckling" of national conservation—

often overlooked in favor of the Amazon region's rainforests and cloud forests with their colorful, showy species like toucans, motmots, and trogons. Yet the parched landscapes of Chaparri harbor immense biodiversity, much of it endemic. His warmth and the staff's deep commitment were evident throughout our stay. Their work offered a model of how conservation and community can flourish together.

With full hearts, we left Chaparri and began our journey toward Chiclayo. En route, we stopped at Tinajones Reservoir. Although the Crested Ducks we'd hoped for didn't appear—likely dispersed by unusually high water levels—other highlights emerged. Ringed Kingfishers, their size rivaling crows, perched conspicuously and flapped low over the water. Cocoi Herons stood statuesque at the water's edge, reminiscent of Great Blue Herons but distinguished by their black caps and white necks. A Large-billed Tern posed photogenically on a lakeside post, and Common Tody-Flycatchers flitted through the shoreline scrub—tiny, energetic, and endlessly entertaining. Overhead, an Osprey circled wide, a reminder of this species' astonishing distribution across six continents. Nearby, a fisherman cast his net into the reservoir while his family played music on the shore—a compelling glimpse into everyday life along the water.

That afternoon, we shifted gears from natural wonders to cultural marvels at Huaca Rajada—"Split Pyramid." The site in the Lambayeque Valley of northern Peru gets its name from the dramatic split down the center of the mound—believed to have been caused by looters or possibly by erosion or seismic activity—which gave the adobe structure its distinctive appearance.

Inside the museum, we observed owl motifs—cast in copper and clay—etched with reverence. Owls were sacred to the Moche, symbols of night vision, power, and spiritual insight. Outside among the sun-baked ruins, we encountered their living counterparts: Burrowing Owls stood sentinel, blinking steadily in the light. Day-active and nesting in the ground, these small raptors seemed the perfect bridge between ancient symbolism and current reality. Such moments blurred the line between past and present, myth and ecology.

That evening, we arrived in Chiclayo, settled into our hotel, and shared another delicious dinner together. Full of species and stories, we reflected on a day where birds and history had soared in tandem.

Sun., July 20 Playa Eten | The Royal Tombs of Sipán Museum and the Sicán National Museum

An optional early morning excursion took us to Playa Eten, where we successfully located two target species: the Peruvian Pipit—a streaky, ground-dwelling songbird of coastal habitats—and the Tawny-throated Dotterel, a large and elegant plover seen standing alert in open fields. Both offered excellent scope views.

We walked a sandy path through coastal dunes past dozens of Black-necked Stilts to a wetland rich with birdlife. Blue-winged Teal took flight and paddled in the shallows alongside familiar species like Cinnamon Teal, Peruvian Pelicans, Puna Ibis, Snowy Egrets, and a Striated Heron. A flash of color in the reeds revealed a Many-colored Rush Tyrant, and Ellen photographed a mystery bird later identified by Juan as a female Black-lored Yellowthroat—a recent species split from the more widespread Masked Yellowthroat. A distant Peruvian Tern, tiny and swift, skimmed the ocean's surface, and on our return walk, a perched Variable Hawk and Ringed Kingfisher with an enormous Green Iguana behind it closed out a satisfying morning.

Lunch was a coastal highlight and our last opportunity to enjoy Peru's famed seafood along the coast. Many in the group opted for ceviche—a national dish of fresh fish marinated in citrus juice, typically with red onion, cilantro, and a spicy kick. Refreshing, bold, and deeply rooted in Peruvian culinary tradition, it lived up to its reputation.

In the afternoon, we visited the Royal Tombs Museum, which houses the extraordinary artifacts from Sipán. The museum's architecture—modeled after a stepped Moche pyramid—guides visitors from the top down, echoing the way the tomb was excavated. Walter Alva, the renowned Peruvian archaeologist who led the excavation, brought this discovery to global attention. Often referred to as the "Tutankhamun of the Americas," the Sipán tomb earned the nickname because, like the Egyptian pharaoh's burial site, it was found largely intact—a rarity that allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the culture. While looters had disturbed some peripheral areas, the main burial chamber was miraculously untouched, preserving a dazzling array of gold headdresses, intricate jewelry, and ceremonial regalia. Among the items most admired by our group were elaborate beadworks made from Spondylus shells—treasured in Andean societies for their vibrant color and connection to the sea. The exhibit offered an awe-inspiring glimpse into the sophistication, artistry, and ritual world of the Moche elite.

We continued to the Sicán National Museum. The Sicán culture, which flourished between the Moche and Chimú civilizations, is renowned for its metallurgical innovations—including the development of arsenic bronze, a technological leap in pre-Columbian metalwork. Among the museum's highlights were representations of the Winged-Eyed Deity, a recurring figure in Sicán iconography distinguished by its large, stylized eyes shaped like outstretched wings. We marveled at the artistic sophistication and complexity of this vanished world.

Even outside the museums, our binoculars remained close at hand. We spotted Tumbes Swallows—a desert-adapted swallow of northwestern Peru, new for the tour—among flocks of Blue-and-white Swallows, and also enjoyed sightings of Blue-gray Tanagers, Saffron Finches, and Amazilia Hummingbirds.

It was a day that once again celebrated the confluence of birds, history, and the vivid soul of Peru.

Mon., July 21 Bosque de Pómac | Túcume | Flight to Cusco for Extension

We began the day with a morning excursion to Bosque de Pómac, a vast reserve that protects one of the last remnants of tropical dry forest on Peru's northern coast. This distinctive ecosystem—shaped by intense aridity and brief, seasonal rains—is both biologically rich and culturally significant. Scattered among the twisted trunks of Prosopis trees—known as *algarrobo* in Peru and *mesquite* in English-speaking regions—stand ancient adobe pyramids, silent testaments to the pre-Columbian civilizations that once thrived here. These drought-resistant, nitrogen-fixing trees not only anchor the landscape but also help shield the fragile ruins from erosion and sun exposure, while providing vital habitat for the region's birdlife.

Birding highlights included beautiful views of the charismatic White-browed Gnatcatcher, and we finally got glimpses of the elusive Necklaced Spinetail, a notorious skulker in the brush. The Superciliated Wren—a dry forest specialist with bold eyebrows and a bubbly voice—posed obligingly for all. A Streak-headed Woodcreeper was seen briefly as it moved methodically from tree to tree, while a Gray-and-white Tyrannulet flashed its snazzy crest in the canopy above. Burrowing Owls stood once again as familiar sentinels of this arid land, calmly surveying their surroundings. To cap it off, a Cinereous Harrier quartered the dry fields, gliding low and silent in search of prey.

After an ice cream stop—where we delighted in delicious local Peruvian treats on a sweltering day—we traveled to the Túcume Valley of the Pyramids. Túcume is one of the largest archaeological complexes in Peru, home to

26 pyramids and platforms built by successive cultures. The site was originally developed around 1000 CE by the Lambayeque (Sicán) culture, later occupied by the Chimú, and eventually by the Inca shortly before the Spanish conquest. Huaca Larga is the largest of them all—an enormous adobe structure over 2,300 feet long. By comparison, the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt is about 755 feet long on each side. As we stood in awe of this monumental site, a Harris's Hawk perched in view and was admired through the scope.

This concluded the main tour. Fortunately, all eight guests had opted to continue on the Machu Picchu extension. We flew to Lima, switched planes, and continued on a short flight to Cusco.

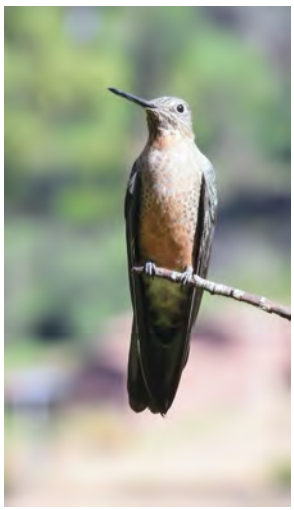
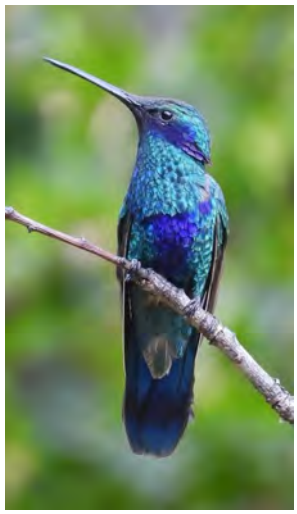
At more than 11,000 feet in elevation, Cusco greeted us with cold air and sparse oxygen. We breathed deeply, ate light dinners, drank plenty of water, and settled in for a night of rest to help acclimatize for the next phase of our Peruvian adventure.

Tues., July 22 Cusco | Sacred Valley of the Inca | Highland Hummingbirds | Ollantaytambo

We began our morning excursions after a buffet breakfast at our hotel—which offered coca tea to help with acclimatization. Coca tea has been used for centuries in the Andes as a traditional herbal remedy reputed to alleviate the effects of high elevation.

We began our morning birding at a high Andean wetland, where we enjoyed excellent views of waterbirds such as Andean Goose and Yellow-billed Teal. A short walk through Cusco's Sacred Garden led us into remnants of Polylepis forest—one of the world's most extraordinary high-elevation ecosystems. Polylepis, a member of the rose family, holds the distinction of being the highest-growing tree genus on Earth, with some species thriving at elevations up to 16,000 feet. These gnarled, wind-sculpted trees are superbly adapted to the harsh alpine climate, their shaggy bark insulating against freezing temperatures and intense UV radiation. Though they may appear scraggly, Polylepis forests create vital microhabitats that support a rich diversity of montane species.

Among the avian highlights was the Black-throated Flowerpiercer, a nectar thief that uses its hooked bill to pierce the base of flowers—stealing nectar while bypassing the pollination process. In contrast, we also observed true nectar feeders such as hummingbirds, which access nectar through the flower's opening and in doing so, pollinate the plants. This striking juxtaposition underscored the ecological interplay between floral thieves and pollinators. Additional sightings included the Spot-winged Pigeon—a large, subtly marked dove of the Andes, and a new member of the Columbidae family for our trip. We also had excellent views of Peruvian

Sierra Finch and Blue-and-yellow Tanager, while a striking Black-backed Grosbeak added vibrant color to the morning's sightings.

While searching for a Puna Snipe along a creek, we were surprised by a weasel that slinked out of a waterpipe—a mammal rarely seen by Juan.

Next, we explored the Sacred Valley of the Inca, birding among stone walls and timeworn ruins. At highland wetlands, we paused to admire Puna Teal, their striking blue bills gleaming in the sunlight. A stop along the river revealed a Torrent Tyrannulet, a unique flycatcher adapted to fast-flowing mountain streams. Perched on rocks or darting over the current, this small, gray-and-white bird is built for agility in rushing water habitats—much like a dipper in form and behavior, though taxonomically unrelated.

Hummingbirds were a particular highlight: we visited two dedicated hummingbird gardens, where numerous Sparkling Violetears dazzled with flashes of electric blue and green in the crisp Andean light. Among other species, we observed Lesser Violetears, Tyrian Metaltails, Green-and-white Hummingbirds, and two of the region's most charismatic species—the elegant Black-tailed Trainbearer and the bold, flamboyant Bearded Mountaineer.

The Great Sapphirewing—huge and gloriously colored—was another standout, rivaled in size only by the Giant Hummingbird, which lived up to its name. About the size of a sparrow, this extraordinary species flies with slow, swallow-like wingbeats. Recent research suggests the Giant Hummingbird will soon be split into two species—migratory and non-migratory forms—and we were fortunate to observe representatives of both.

A bonus at one of the hummingbird gardens: we were granted a rare glimpse of one of the Andes' most elusive treasures—the Undulated Antpitta.

Plump, tailless, and long-legged, antpittas of the family Grallariidae are ground-dwelling enigmas of the Neotropics—heard far more often than seen. Their haunting whistles drift through the undergrowth like ghost calls, while their camouflaged bodies vanish among root and leaf.

The Undulated Antpitta is a master of this art. Its scalloped plumage mirrors the mottled light of the forest floor, where it forages in silence for insects and earthworms. Found along Andean slopes from Venezuela to Bolivia, it

remains one of birding's most sought-after sightings. This moment—a quiet shape in shadow—was one of the tour's most thrilling rewards.

Our day ended in the ancient town of Ollantaytambo, gateway to Machu Picchu, where stone streets and Inca walls set the stage for our next adventure.

Wed., July 23 Machu Picchu

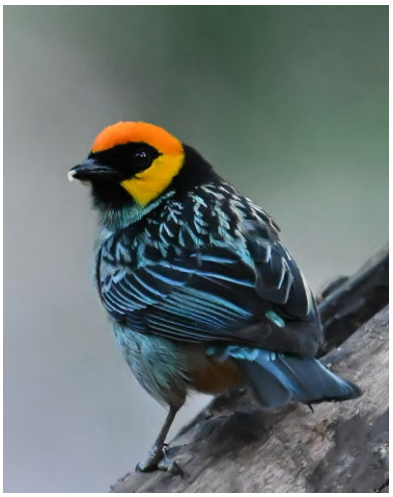
An optional morning birding session around the lodge grounds among Inca terraces initiated a magical day. Highlights included a dazzling Green-tailed Trainbearer, a gorgeous Golden-billed Saltator, and the striking Black-backed Grosbeak. We finally got good looks at a Band-tailed Seedeater—able to clearly see its namesake bands. Andean Gulls wheeled overhead, while a flock of Puna Ibis passed in front of the glowing mountains as the morning sun rose above the Andes.

We boarded a scenic train from Ollantaytambo to the town of Machu Picchu Pueblo, also known as Aguas Calientes. As we followed the course of the Urubamba River, we spotted pairs of Torrent Ducks perched on rocks and navigating the whitewater—males boldly patterned in black and white, females in soft cinnamon tones, both perfectly adapted to life in fast-flowing rivers.

Leaving behind the dry lowlands, we entered the lush cloud forest. From the windows of our train, an Andean Motmot was glimpsed by several delighted members of our group, like an emissary of cloud forest birds.

Upon arrival, we left our luggage at our lodge, Inkaterra, whose grounds offered verdant, bird-filled tranquility. From there, we walked through town and paused at a river, where we saw two White-capped Dippers bobbing on boulders. Then we took a bus up the winding mountain road to the famed citadel.

Our tour extension reached its breathtaking pinnacle at Machu Picchu. Built by the Inca in the mid-15th century, likely under the reign of Emperor Pachacuti, this mountaintop citadel was abandoned during the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, though the Spanish never discovered it. Unknown to the outside world for centuries, it was brought to international attention in 1911 by Yale professor Hiram Bingham III. While its exact purpose remains debated—possibly a royal estate, a ceremonial center, or a sacred retreat—its grandeur and mystery continue to captivate all who visit.



Though our guide Juan has led more than a thousand tours here over several decades, he combined the enthusiasm of a first-time visitor with the wisdom of a seasoned expert who has spent a lifetime studying the site. His knowledge and excitement enriched every stone path, terrace, and temple.

Amid sunlit stone and billowing clouds, we stood before the Temple of the Condor—wings carved in rock, echoing the sky. Earlier in our journey, we watched real Andean Condors soar on mountain thermals, their vast wings silent over sacred valleys. Now, past and present merged: the spirit of the Andes made visible in both stone and flight.

Wildlife and bird sightings enhanced our Machu Picchu experience. We spotted rabbit-like Mountain Viscachas—rodents related to chinchillas—among the ruins. An Orange-breasted Falcon rocketed past in pursuit of a swallow, while Andean Guans crashed around in the trees like arboreal turkeys.

We looked for the Inca Wren, an endemic species found only in the dense bamboo of the region. Though we heard its distinctive song, it remained elusive. We did, however, enjoy good views of a Chestnut-capped Brushfinch in the undergrowth, and while waiting for the bus, we saw Long-tailed Sylphs and Chestnut-breasted Coronets at hummingbird feeders.

The setting sun lit up the clouds and burnished the peaks surrounding the citadel of Machu Picchu, casting the sacred city in golden light—a perfect conclusion to a day steeped in wonder.

Thurs., July 24 Cloud Forest Birding at Inkaterra | Train to Ollantaytambo | Cusco

The morning began spectacularly in the gardens of Inkaterra Lodge, where we encountered a vibrant array of new species—brilliant representatives of the cloud forest. Among the hummingbirds were Gould's Inca, Bronzy Inca, Violet-throated Starfrontlet, and Rufous-booted Racket-tail, each flashing iridescence in the bright mountain light. Among the tanagers, we delighted in views of Hepatic, Silvery, Saffron-crowned, Golden-naped, and Blue-necked—each a brushstroke of tropical color. Warbler sightings included Slate-throated Redstart, Spectacled Redstart, and Russet-crowned Warbler. We observed finch family members like Thick-billed Euphonia, sparrow relatives such as Common Chlorospingus, and flycatchers including Sclater's Tyrannulet. A Golden-olive Woodpecker tapped from the midstory; a Speckle-faced Parrot added bursts of color and raucous

calls. A Masked Trogon, cloaked in deep green and red, perched briefly in the shadows. Overhead, Dusky-green Oropendolas filled the canopy with their strange, mechanical voices.

The highlight of the morning was surely the Andean Cock-of-the-rock—one of the most highly anticipated birds of the tour. Our group was fortunate to see both a brilliant orange male and a more subdued female. As we followed forested trails through a wonderland of orchids, ferns, mosses, butterflies, and epiphyte-draped trees, we encountered an Andean Motmot, its racquet-shaped tail feathers glowing blue in the understory light. A Long-tailed Sylph, flashing dazzling iridescent hues as it nectared on red flowers, was the perfect finale to a magical morning in the cloud forest.

After an exquisite lunch at the lodge, we boarded our return train to Ollantaytambo, enjoying more spectacular views of the river and snowcapped peaks, including the gleaming summit of Mount Veronica.

Since several travelers had expressed interest in the town of Ollantaytambo, we took time to explore its charming alleys. Juan led a fascinating walk through stone-lined streets that revealed layers of history—from pre-Inca to Inca to Spanish colonial to contemporary times, where guinea pigs are still kept in kitchens. Though often viewed as pets elsewhere, in Andean culture, guinea pigs (cuy) are traditionally raised for food, regarded as a delicacy served on special occasions. At the Temple of the Sun, we learned how the Inca once defeated the Spanish by breaching a dam and flooding the battlefield. Though victorious that day, the Inca resistance eventually fell, nearly 40 years after Pizarro's initial conquest.

Driving toward Cusco, we stopped to taste chicha, traditional corn beer, and tried our hand at a local game involving tossing metal disks into holes. Continuing uphill, we paused at a lookout where Juan spotted a Variable Hawk kiting in the wind. The view of the Sacred Valley at sunset—with golden light streaming across the fields and alpenglow on glaciated peaks—was unforgettable.

We arrived in Cusco after dark, the city lit beautifully beneath a starry sky. A final delicious dinner, featuring everything from fresh garden salads to alpaca, awaited us. We settled in and prepared for our last day in Peru.

Fri., July 25 Sacsayhuamán | Sulca Textiles Center | Plaza de Armas | Lima | Departures

We began the morning at Sacsayhuamán, a remarkable Inca ceremonial complex perched above the city. While Machu Picchu astonishes with its location, Sacsayhuamán stuns with its construction—massive limestone blocks, some weighing over 100 tons, fitted together with such precision that not even a blade of grass fits between them. The site is a masterwork of Inca engineering, defying explanation given the lack of wheels or draft animals. Here, we enjoyed superb views of an Andean Lapwing patrolling the grounds—a species we'd previously glimpsed only distantly.

Our next stop was a community center dedicated to traditional Andean crafts. Here, we learned to distinguish between Peru's four native camelid species—Alpaca and Llama, both domesticated; and Guanaco and Vicuña, both wild. The Vicuña, Peru's national animal, is endangered. In a raptor rehabilitation enclosure, we saw Andean Condors up close—magnificent ambassadors for conservation. Artisans in colorful traditional dress demonstrated intricate weaving techniques using alpaca wool. Many of us purchased scarves, hats, and sweaters made of premium baby alpaca fiber, supporting the community and taking home exquisite keepsakes and gifts.

We wrapped up our final day with free time in Cusco's Plaza de Armas, the city's vibrant main square, bustling with activity ahead of Peru's Independence Day on July 28. Children sang, and teens in traditional highland dress rehearsed spirited performances beneath colonial balconies. Lunch at a nearby Chifa restaurant offered a fitting cultural finale—a delicious fusion of Chinese technique and Peruvian ingredients. Throughout the trip, the group had expressed curiosity about Chifa cuisine, and Juan delivered.

We toasted the birds we'd seen, the stories we'd heard, and the friendships we'd made. With hearts full, we headed to the airport and bid farewell to Peru—already dreaming of our next adventure in this extraordinary country.

Photos: Group (Juan Cardenas Carrasco - JC), Pacific Parrotlet (Steve Grace - SG), White-winged Guan (SG), Spectacled Bear (SG), Lima (SG), Guard (Ronald Gangnon - RG), Peruvian Pygmy-Owl (SG), Pucusana (SG), Inca Tern (SG), Santuario Arqueologico de Pachacamac (SG), Nazca Lines Flight (SG), Guanay Cormorant (Gary Yoder - GY), Group Birding by Boat (JC),

Reserva Nacional de Paracas SG), Chan Chan (JC), Andes Series (SG), Huaca de la Luna (JC), Peruvian Thick-knee (RG), El Brujo (SG), Burrowing Owls (SG), Peruvian Plantcutter (SG), Black-necked Stilt (SG), Sechuran Fox (SG), Tumbes Hummingbird (SG), Amazilia Hummingbird (SG), White-tailed Jay (SG), White-winged Guan (SG), Spectacled Bear (SG), Group (JC), Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipán (SG), Group (JC), Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipán (SG), Burrowling Owl (GY), Vermilion Flycatcher (RG), Sparkling Violetear (RG), Undulated Antpitta (GY), Giant Hummingbird (SG), Machu Picchu (SG), Saffron-crowned Tanager (GY), Andean Cock-of-the-Rock (GY), Machu Picchu (SG), Andean Motmot (RG), Andean Condor (SG), Sulca Textiles Center (SG), Cusco (SG), Andean Lapwing (SG)