

Ecuador Birds & Mammals | March 5 – 18, 2026

Trip Report by Vernie Aikins



With local guide Jorge Lune and driver Luis Perez, Naturalist Journeys host Vernie Aikins, and our adventurous group Tina, Taylor, Claudia, Jody, Barry, Lee, Kim, TJ, Marianne, Don, and Dave.



Thurs., Mar. 5 Early Arrivals

With a few of us already in Quito and settling into this special country, I offered a small walk in the gardens of the hotel. Hotel Puembo has a lush garden and is a little oasis on the outskirts of the city. After a nice buffet breakfast, we started our walk and were joined by a few others from the hotel. The resident alpaca also joined in for a bit to check things out, before moving on to their napping spot in the shade. Around the grounds, we had our first looks at one of the most common birds of the tour, the Great Thrush; Scrub Tanager and Black-tailed Trainbearer also made an appearance. It was nice to get out and stretch our legs, make introductions, and have a productive stroll before the tour started.

Fri., Mar. 6 Pichincha | Zuro Loma | Guaycapi | Sachatamia

After a scattered assortment of arrivals into Quito, our first full day was upon us. To the west, we were headed over our first volcano. Pichincha Volcano (15,696 ft.) sits on the edge of Quito and was our first foray into the cloud forest. Zuro Loma, a private reserve and one of many we would visit on this tour, was our first stop of the

day. We made our way up the dirt road, high up onto the western slope of Pichincha and came to a stop at Zurolooma. Almost right away, while still standing at the visitor center, we were treated to a Red-crested Cotinga perched on a bush, and hummingbirds buzzing over our heads. Jorge Luna, our local guide, escorted us down to the feeding station they have built there. We had not even fully arrived at the feeders when we were treated to a curious Equatorial Antpitta wondering if we had worms in our pockets. Seeing this egg with legs stopped us all in our tracks, as was such a treat to see these secretive birds pop out from the brush. From there, it just kept getting better. At times, it was hard to tell whether we were dizzy from just the elevation or from the array of birds coming at us from all directions. Tanagers, hummingbirds, and flowerpiercers were everywhere, each one more stunning than the next. “Do I look at this Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager or that Sword-billed Hummingbird? How many species of flowerpiercer am I seeing on that feeder, three or four? That Collared Inca is stunning; I’d better get pictures of it (not knowing that this spectacle of a bird would join us for almost every leg of our adventure).” The “first day excitement” was as thick as the clouds settling over the peak of Pichincha in the background. Before we left, we were treated to two more antpittas, and endless looks at the Sapphire-



vented Puffleg.

We bid farewell to Zurolooma and piled back into the van, starting down the road I dubbed the “Pichincha Chiropractor.” The day had barely started, and we had already seen so much, with more ahead. We followed the Tandayapa Valley down the mountain, back to the highway, where we had lunch at Restaurante Mirador Guaycapi where more hummingbirds were waiting for us. Here, the food was great, and the birding was even better. They had a table set up and waiting for us so that we had a wonderful view of the hummingbird feeders. The restaurant was a little lower in elevation than our stop this morning, so we were treated to new hummingbirds and tanagers. Green-crowned Brilliant made an appearance; and White-necked Jacobin, as hungry as we were, dominated the feeders. A Golden-olive Woodpecker even flew in to say hello. It was hard to finish the brilliant lunch when there were so many birds coming in. In just a short hour-and-a-half we were treated to 10 species of tanager — with the Blue-necked being one of the best-looking, in my opinion, with its electric blue head and neck.

Our guide Jorge's family owned this restaurant and a gorgeous lodge nearby. So, after lunch we headed over there. It was our last stop of the day before heading to Sachatamia, our home for the next few days. At the Guaycapi Lodge, we were greeted like we were part of the family, and we ran into Pancho, the son of the owner of Neblina Forest. With this encounter, we were immediately immersed into how connected and friendly the birding world is in Ecuador. Everyone knew each other, welcomed us with open arms, got coffee flowing, and settled right into showing us this amazing life built around birds. It was truly a special feeling. Guaycapi Lodge sat on a small ridge in the cloud forest, overlooking a stunning valley. Velvet-purple Coronet, appearing black in the low light, shocked us when at just the right angle we could see their blistering purple shimmer. The star here, though, outside of the lodge and the people, was the toucans. Jorge, growing up in this area and birding since he was a little kid could hear it in the distance, even over the chatter of the group. We were all on the lookout for it, and Tina was the first to spot it. It first perched off in the distance, and surveyed the feeders before flying in. After about 30 seconds, it arrived: the Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan swooped in, landing just feet away from the group. Some of us sipped coffee as we marveled at the grays, browns, pinks, and blues on this bird, while some of us couldn't get our cameras or phones up fast enough. As we enjoyed this magnificent bird, its partner arrived, and we were in paradise. With their bellies full of bananas, it was time for the toucans to leave, which was our cue to leave as well.

It had already been a massive day, and we were only one day in. Tomorrow we would head to one of the premier spots in, maybe, all of South America. The fine folks at Sachatamia got us checked in; some headed to their rooms, while others couldn't pull themselves away from the birds. Just outside of the office at Sachatamia, they have a very fruitful feeder setup. We enjoyed our evening here with dinner at the lodge before calling it a wrap on day one.

Sat., Mar. 7

Angel's | Sachatamia | Mindo | Chocolate Tour



From the lodge, we started in the dark and headed to Angel Paz's. The reason for the early start was because we had a special date with some birds not of this planet—the Andean Cock-of-the-rock is a bird that looks more alien than bird. As we made our way down the trail in the dark, we would hear them well before we could see them. Not even moments after arriving at the blind that overlooked their lek, we were treated to our first displays. There were maybe seven males displaying for an unseen female that was probably lower down into trees. This went on for about an hour, with them calling and jumping from branch to branch. At one point, the female must have moved away as all the males exited to our left, only to all return again. Once we had taken in this fiery show, we decided to head out on an antpitta quest. But as we left the lek, a Golden-headed Quetzal made an appearance way up in the trees. Jorge was



able to angle the scope just right so everyone got a look. Afterward, we continued down the trail, looking for the Giant Antpitta; ultimately, we did not have any luck. Our spirits were not low, as we were still excited from the morning display. Plus, it was not even breakfast yet, so there was more to come.

After hiking back up the trail on our way to breakfast, we stopped at a different spot along the woods, where the adorable Yellow-breasted Antpitta put on a show for us. Since the antpitta had its breakfast, we decided it was time for ours. Angel's family made a special breakfast and my favorite empanadas in all of Ecuador. There were also feeders just outside the window to enjoy various hummingbirds while we ate. There was still one more spot to visit before we parted ways with Angel. He had a series of feeders set up on a different part of the property that we wanted to visit. The first of these feeders was overlooking the valley on the side of the ridge, and the second was down below, in the trees. The hillside feeders were almost instantly productive, producing a family of Toucan Barbet and a show-stopping Orange-breasted Fruiteater.

With the excitement of the fruiteater passed, we headed down the hill to the next spot. Just a short walk down the hill, Angel has set up some hummingbird and fruit feeders for everyone to enjoy. With these being below the canopy, we were treated to some new species. One of the first exciting new species was one of the largest woodcreepers in the world, the Strong-billed Woodcreeper. Not only were the birds great, but we also had a mother Agouti and its baby at the feeders. From there, we wrapped up and headed out to our next adventure.

In the afternoon, we headed into the town of Mindo for some birding and a chocolate tour. This town is famous for both. Before the chocolate tour, we birded near a park in town and had some great showings of Bronzed-winged Parrot as well as the always ferocious Common Tody-flycatcher. As we headed into the chocolate tour, we saw other people finishing, each with chocolate-covered faces. This had all of us intrigued, and our questions would be answered at the end of the chocolate tour. They walked us through the entire process. Tasting cocoa beans from their first form in the seed pods, cooking them, rolling them, and peeling them. They showed us how to roast them, and how tea was made from the shells of the bean. We also got to taste some cocoa with spice, like the Mayas first used. A few of us were about to put too many grains of chili powder in ours before our host

panicked and warned us only a few tiny grains were all we needed. She was not wrong! Even with just a few small grains of chili, it was very spicy, yet delicious. As a final act, everyone was offered a sample of the many varieties of chocolate they made, and were shown how rubbing pure cocoa on your face and skin can help keep you looking young, thus answering our most burning question: why was everyone leaving with so much chocolate on their face? It was definitely one of the highlights of the trip.



Sun., Mar. 8 Mashpi-Amagusa | Sacha Gusta

Today we were visiting one of the places I was most excited to visit—the Mashpi region and Reserva Mashpi-Amagusa, which had a plethora of birds, the vast majority of them being new for the trip. The owners of the reserve have created a birder's paradise, with a huge wrap-around patio overlooking feeders and the woods behind. Amagusa is known for Moss-backed Tanager (a Choco Endemic) that come to the feeders, as well as many other vibrant and fun birds. There were so many birds coming in and out, we would forget there were Rose-faced Parrot just feet away. Unlike most parrots, these ones were so quiet while sitting there and eating bananas, it was easy to miss that they were even there. We were also treated to tiny Ornate Flycatcher, Blackburnian Warbler heading north, and stunning treehunters. We even had a mass blast-off of parrots as a Swallow-tailed Kite spooked them. With the tanagers, becards, and woodcreepers putting on such a fabulous show, we needed great determination to pull ourselves away and go up the hill to watch the hummingbirds. But we were treated to Velvet-purple Coronet and Empress Brilliant as a result. After 4 hours, though, we had to call it quits. We still had more birding to do and more bumpy roads to bounce down.

After Amagusa, we headed down the Mashpi Road to Sacha Guatusa Preserve. Some could say this was the most unique pizza place we have ever been. The owners welcomed us into their private reserve, where we were treated to even more new tanagers and barbets. They made us fresh lemonade and homemade wood-fired pizza to accentuate our packed lunches. A toucanet even showed up wanting us to share the pizza. It was a very special place, as we sat there eating our lunch, sharing it with the birds, and blue morpho butterflies bounced by; we felt bliss. After that, we had a long haul back to the hotel for a much-needed break. The early morning was catching up with us. It's hard to stop in such a magical place, surrounded by amazing birds and great people. We needed to rest up, as day four was a big travel day and we needed to be prepared for it.



Mon., Mar. 9 Sachatamia | Sendero Frutti | Guaycapi | Quito

Day four promised to be a big day, and it delivered in more ways than one. Sachatamia, our lovely hotel, had one more spectacle we had not yet taken in: their moth blind. Set at the edge of the property as it met the woods, this spanning moth blind was massive. As we arrived in the dark, small birds, like Three-striped Warbler and Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, were already working on the moth buffet. As the light started to peek through, we got our first showstopper of the morning, a female Masked Trogon. She was there for some of the larger moths that the smaller birds were not brave enough to get. She put on a show for us, tearing into a large moth and leaving a trail of moth dust blowing away in the wind. It was one of the coolest things we got to witness in the entire trip. Next up, was the bird we had all been waiting for, the Long-wattled Umbrellabird. A lot of times these birds can be hard to find, perching way up in the canopy. But at Sachatamia, they come in to feed on the moths. This viewing was short-lived, though, as the bird only came in for one grape and then flew off. After the umbrellabird left, we had both male and female Masked Trogons come in for a snack, staying for a few minutes and allowing for pictures as the light got better. Then, out of nowhere, the umbrellabird was back, and this time it brought its partner. One of them snagged a massive Atlas Moth off the sheet and devoured it. The pair hung around for a few minutes, allowing everyone ample time to enjoy them. We could even see the beginnings of the wattle forming on the male. The entire show was like a high-flying trapeze act with birds flying back and forth across the stage in front of each other, plucking moths, and smashing them and heading back. We had to drag ourselves away from the blind because we still had not eaten breakfast or loaded up the van, yet. We had a lot to see and do today, with more surprises in store.

After breakfast, we were out in front of the lodge, with our bags packed and ready to head down the western slope a little further before making the trek back to Quito for the night. But before we could climb into the van, Luis, our van captain and driver extraordinaire, and Jorge jolted us all alive with excitement. Something very special was spotted in a tree off in the distance—a bird not seen often in this area, or seen often for most people, in general. Some Choco Toucan alerted the guides to its presence, which meant it was something big and dangerous; that bird was the Ornate Hawk-Eagle, perched so majestically in the distance, not disturbed by the ruckus of the toucans one bit. It sat there so everyone could see it in the scope, take pictures, and see it in

the scope again. It was 9 AM on day four, and most of us could have gotten on a plane and went home happy after seeing that absolute stunner of a bird. Eventually, the majestic raptor parted ways, and so did we, bidding farewell to Sachatamia and all its splendor.

Sendero Frutti, or Frutti Tutti as we liked to call it, was a newly discovered gem on the western slope of the Andes. In just a short time, the owner turned the property from hosting fruit tours into a bustling bird haven. In just a few years, with the help of guides around Ecuador, he has refined his feeder stations into one of the must-stop places in the west. Here, we had some looks at our first manakin, motmot, and tinamou of the trip. The White-bearded Manakin, not wanting to be outperformed by the hummingbirds, put on a little show for us under some of the feeders. We also added five new species of hummingbirds here, with a few, like the Violet-bellied Hummingbird, we would see nowhere else. The owners shared cold drinks with us, and we enjoyed their beautiful gardens before heading east and back over the mountains.

After Frutti Tutti, it was just a straight shot over the mountains and into Quito, where we would rest up before our long journey into the Amazon the following day. Our van, though, had other thoughts. And as we were climbing up the slopes of Pichinchi, we had a mechanical issue. After a short time on the side of the road, we were able to get it moving again; but it was clearly not going to make it to Quito. Luckily for us, Luis, our amazing driver, took us back to the spot we had had lunch just a few days ago. From here, we were able to enjoy some welcoming coffee on the perfect balcony, at the Guaycapi restaurant. While we waited for a new bus, we even added a few new species to list for the trip. In a country as species rich as Ecuador, even breaking down in the van is productive. Jorge and Luis had us a new bus in no time, and we were already back on the road. We crossed over the equator on our way into Quito before arriving at our destination for the night.



Tues., Mar. 10

Center

Coca | Napo Wildlife

Day five was a big day, as we were headed to a lodge deep in the Amazon Basin, tucked into Yasuni National Park. To get there, we needed to take a flight, a gas-powered boat, and a canoe. The travel was well worth it. We flew out of the capital of Quito and landed in the small town of Coca. Here, the Napo Wildlife Center and their crew were waiting for us. They are masters of logistics. As they were loading our gear into the truck, Remi, our local guide, was giving us the breakdown of how the day would go—almost down to the minute. We were whisked away, and before we knew it, we were loading onto the boat and speeding down the Napo River, a tributary of the Amazon. We were already seeing new species, too—White-winged Swallow perched along the banks, and vultures circled in the background.

After about two hours, we made it to the staging area, where we transitioned from the big boat to two canoes. Here, we also met the rest of our crew. We had two canoes for the entirety of our stay at the Napo Wildlife



Center, which meant two rowers and a spotter on each canoe, plus Jorge and I as guides. From here, we then transitioned from the Napo River (white water river) to the Anangu (black water river). This smaller, more mineral-rich water changes everything.

Within minutes, canoe one was calling out Zigzag Heron! Unbelievable! This is a very hard bird to see, and some take multiple trips to see it. We got it with just 10 paddle strokes into our stay here. This was a perfect way to set the tone of how the next few days would go. We also got our first primate sightings, as Capuchin and Howler Monkeys moved above us in the canopy. The group also got its first looks at the Hoatzin, a bird affectionately known as the “stink bird”. This bird really should be the mascot of the Napo. They lined the riverbanks and watched us during every moment of our time there. Even in our rooms, we were never far from a Hoatzin.

Once we arrived at our lakeside lodge, the Napo crew jumped right to work. We disembarked the canoes, and they gave us a rundown of the lodge and our room assignments. Our luggage was already canoed ahead of us and awaiting us at our rooms. The service here was perfect. Remi then told us to meet at the dock before dusk for a little night paddle. On our night paddle, we were treated to a Blackish Nightjar escorting us across the lake. At the mouth of the river, large Bull Dog Bat were fishing. The guides shined their lights between the canoes, and we got front row seats to these massive bats catching their dinner for the night. Napo really is one of the most special birding and nature experiences one can do.

We finished the evening like we would every night while we were here, with a delicious buffet. Everyone and everything is brought in by canoe—the wine, the desserts, everything. The lodge is owned by the community and is a huge way for them to earn income while protecting the Yasuni National Park at the same time. The pride they put into every meal, every outing, every small detail is their way of showing us how much they love and care about their land. They value their home and their land more than anything and extending that love and hospitality to outsiders in such a caring and thoughtful way made us love and care about it just as deeply. It was a wonderful reminder of how ecotourism really makes a difference when done right.

Wed., Mar. 11 Kapok Canopy Tower | Anangu Creek

Some of us were treated to some Mop Tree Frog roommates in the night, reminding us we were in the rainforest. We got up and had a great breakfast, followed by a short paddle across the lake. Once across the lake, our destination was just a short 20-minute stroll away: a massive Kapok Tree with a canopy tower built into

its canopy. Along our walk, we saw a very rare amphibian that looked like a giant earthworm. Longer than some people's forearm, this Ringed Caecilian scooted its way slowly across the trail and into the forest. Once we made it to the tower, we had 209 stairs to climb before we could get cozy at the top. Being above the canopy of the rainforest was a real treat; from there, a whole new world opened up. We had the chance to see a variety of tree-topping species. As this king of the rainforest swayed ever so in the wind, the group took in Paradise Tanager with their multicolored helmets. Someone spotted a resting Three-toed Sloth and Howler Monkey. Remi would periodically do a macaw screech and draw in some interested Blue-and-yellow Macaw, who did a few flights around the control tower. Aracari and Fruitcrow were present, and we had eight species of raptor make appearances.

No one wanted to leave the tower, but Remi and Jorge lured the group down with the promise of manakin. There were a couple leks that a few species liked to frequent around the base of the canopy tower. They were able to find us a fairly cooperative male Wire-tailed Manakin. This fiery-colored tiny bird, even though brightly colored, could easily disappear and reappear. Everyone was able to get very good looks at it, though. Once finished there, we headed back to the canoes. But one more stop was needed because some very adorable Tent Making Bats were spotted.



Back at the canoes, we paddled across the lake for our mid-morning break, or what the locals here call it: some "Napó Time." Each time we returned here from an excursion, we were greeted at the dock with ice cold towels and the most refreshing fruit drink. They really know how to treat you at the Napo.

In the evening, we headed out for another excursion. This time, we stayed in the canoes and birded the edge of the lake. We saw some Speckled Chachalaca and Silver-beaked Tanager. As we made our way around the edge of the lake, a supply canoe was entering from the river. This crew informed the guides that they had just spotted something special not far up the river. Our row crew kicked it into high gear, and we were whooshed down the creek. Giant River Otter were what had the crew excited. These wolves of the river were enough to get anyone excited. We rowed downstream to the spot where they were last seen just as dusk was beginning to settle. Unfortunately for us, they had gone to land for the night. It was worth a shot, though. From there we paddled back for dinner and called it a night. Our first full day was a success.

Thurs., Mar. 12 Anangu Creek | Napo Cultural Center | Clay Lick

At dinner each night, Remi gave us our plan for the following day, and day seven was one we didn't want to miss. Every rower, spotter, and guide here intimately knew every creek, river, tree, and branch in the Yasuni. Remi told us that, based on where the otters were last seen last night, they knew the otters had a den nearby. This meant that if we got up as early as a Giant River Otter, piled into the canoes, and headed downstream, we had a very good chance of finding the otters as they woke up and got into the river. So that was our plan for today.

We were up bright and early and laser focused. No amount of Hoatzin, with their punk-rock mohawks, could distract us. Our sole mission was to see the otters this morning. As we arrived at the area, the canoes slowed, and everyone got on high alert. The paddlers could sense that the otters were around; and before we knew it, we started to hear the chatter. Not really visible at first, with brief glimpses through the dense growth on the banks, we could hear their incessant talking. Giant River Otter live in family units, travel as a group, and hunt as a group. They were constantly talking to each other. And our canoe crew knew them so well, they were able to match their speed as we gently glided alongside them while they moved upstream to a feeding spot. They have spent so much time observing them, working alongside them, and living on their river, they can move with them like they are part of the family. They knew every spot where they cross from one side of the creek to the other. This way, they were able to get ahead of them and allow them to cross the water undisturbed. It was like we didn't even exist to the otters. We were just a floating piece of wood as they played and moved like a single ball of energy. We even got good looks at a mom who was carrying a pup in her mouth because it couldn't keep up as they moved to their feeding zone. We spent quality time with them, deeply taking in how they communicated and moved so seamlessly through their river. It was a life-altering experience for me.



After a while, we parted ways with the otters as they went about their day. With our hearts full of joy, it was time to experience what else everyone here works so hard to preserve. We saw a Napo Saki Monkey and a Golden Mantled Tamarin on our way out to the Napo River. Here, we transferred into the motorboat and headed to the Napo Cultural Center. There was an opportunity for shopping here and we got a glimpse of the school and clinic that was funded by the profits from the lodge.



At the cultural center, we also got a slightly different habitat. This meant new birds. One of the first exciting birds was spotted by Jorge—a vibrant but distant Plum-throated Cotinga perched high up, but in the open so we could all see it in the scope. Then, I spotted a Magpie Tanager carrying nesting material. While some went off to shop, I was able to see where the nest was, and everyone got ample scope views so as not to disturb the birds.

After our time here, we had one more place to visit before returning to the lodge. The clay lick. Napo had a wonderful clay lick that had lots of visitors. But one of the main goals were the Scarlet Macaw. These show-stoppers came down to supplement their diet with the minerals here. As we approached, we could hear them in the trees above us. We all took our seats at the covered seating area. Here the waiting game began. The large birds were very skittish and often took their time to come down. It can sometimes take them an hour to decide if it's safe or not. Even one monkey or aguti could come in and reset their “timer.” So, as we waited quietly, we got a very unexpected surprise when out of the jungle trotted a Sunbittern. These river-dwelling birds can be hard to find, and one just strolled out of the forest right in front of everyone. It drank from the pools before disappearing as quickly as it appeared.

Finally, after 30-40 minutes, the macaws reluctantly decided they would come down and drink. We got to see three of them on the ground at one time before they decided it was time to leave. This was our cue to depart as well. By now, it was time for lunch. So, we had lunch in the field at the canoe transfer station.

After lunch, we spent the remaining part of the day paddling the Anagu again. Every time we paddled the river, we were treated to new species. On the paddle back, we saw three species of monkey—Saki, Capuchin, and Squirrel. As we were paddling, Taylor spotted a medium-sized woodcreeper on the bank. We stopped to investigate, only to be treated to a second one flying in. This one was extra special. It was a Long-billed Woodcreeper! It gave us good looks before moving along. But before we even started moving, a Black-tailed Trogon landed right above our heads. As we paddled back, we were treated to Capped Heron, Wattled Jacana, and a swarm of Greater Anis.



Fri., Mar. 13 Harpy Eagle Tower | Anangu Creek

This was our final day in the Amazon, and we saved the best for last. Today we were headed to the newly built canopy tower. This one was on top of a small hill to the south of the Kapok Tree tower, and it was freestanding. The hike was a little longer after we got off the canoes. It was also a little shorter since it was on a hill, and we only had 160 stairs to climb this time. From the moment we arrived at the top of the tower, the birding was fast and furious. Woodcreepers, trogons, and aracarís greeted us. Gilded Barbet was there for a brief glimpse. We also had a few raptors and an

uncommon Yellow-billed Nunbird. Then something very exciting happened. Oscar (a.k.a. little bird), one of the local guides and paddlers, said he had found the queen of the Napo. He had spotted a female Harpy Eagle perched on a distant tree. We could feel the excitement as the tower swayed and everyone moved into position to view. She stayed there for a long time, enough time for everyone to get all the looks and videos they wanted. Even though there was a Purplish Jacamar and a Spangled Cotinga, it was hard not to focus on this massive and majestic bird. It was one of those moments one always hopes to have as a guide, where everyone gets to spend quality time with one of the most special birds in the world. She finally jumped down, snagged a branch for her nest and flew off. Even at a distance we could sense the power in her and see those massive wings as she flew down. It was hard to focus after that, but the birds kept coming. Bare-necked Fruitcrow and Flame-crested Tanager popped in and out of our lives. We also had great looks at Yellow-throated Woodpecker.

On the way back to the canoes, we had two manakin species, Dwarf Tyrant and White-crowned. Our guides also showed us a demonstration of how the natives would signal each other in the past. They would take a giant stick and bang it on the hollow base of the Kapok, and it would send out a massive echoing bellow into the jungle. We made our way back to the creek and the canoes, where a group of Long-nosed Bats were roosting.

Almost back to the hotel, one of the paddlers heard the otters. They were in a little cove just next to the lodge. So, we made a detour to watch them for a bit. They were right out in the open, fishing and playing. We had some quality time with them again. It was such an absolute joy to hear and watch them interact.

After lunch and some "Napo Time," we were back on the water exploring a new part of the creek. Here, we had some looks at Palm Creeper. It kept flying back and forth, from one side of the creek to the other, always high up under the palm fronds, making us work very hard. We also had another manakin. The Pygmy Kingfisher kept toying with us, too, so we headed back to the main creek in search of what was becoming some people's nemesis bird of the trip. After another fleeting glimpse, we moved further downstream, where we finally got looks of one. These tiny kingfishers can be so good at hiding in the tangles on the banks of the river.



Tonight, we had our Napo farewell dinner. All of the meals at Napo were divine. The variety of each night is to be applauded for being so remote. We were also treated to a presentation on how and why the lodge and the area are so important.

Sat., Mar. 14 Napo River | Witco Café | San Isidro

Leaving Napo was bittersweet. We had added over 100 species, and had some

bucket list encounters, but the cloud forest and cooler temps were calling our names. As we paddled out in the dark, we had Zigzag Heron to wave us goodbye. After a dark paddle, we boarded the speed boat for Coca. Napo provided us with one more warm breakfast on the boat. As we were eating, we spotted an Amazonian Umbrellabird and, not far away, Cocoli Heron. With our bellies full and our hearts recharged from the Amazon, we dozed off for our two-hour boat ride.

Once in Coca, we were reunited with our land captain, Luis, for our three-hour drive to San Isidro Lodge. About an hour in, a break was needed, and we just miraculously found the perfect roadside café. As some got coffee, others hung back in the parking lot, looking for birds. It didn't take long before new species started popping up all around us. Within 20 minutes, we had added 6 new species. It was not hard, since we were now headed into the foothills of the eastern slope, a completely new region for us. The flurry of activity drew the others out of the coffee shop; they knew it was serious when Jorge broke out the scope. Luis had found a pair of Chestnut-fronted Macaw across the road. Then Jorge got some Violaceous Jay for us, as well as a rare, White-barred Seedeater. We had to pull ourselves away from this roadside stop, as we still had a few hours to drive.

After an exhilarating drive up into the cloud forest, we made it to San Isidro Lodge. Luis perfectly navigated these windy roads. We all got checked in and explored around the lodge before dinner. San Isidro had the most unique and flavorful dishes of all the restaurants we ate at. As we were finishing dinner, the manager of the lodge informed us that the owl had arrived outside. By owl, she meant the resident, Black-banded Owl, who feeds at the jam-packed moth sheet. The variety and number of moths at this sheet had to be the most productive one I have ever encountered in the Americas. The owl was the perfect nightcap to a long, adventurous day.

Sun., Mar. 15 San Isidro Region

Today, we had the whole day to explore the lodge and the surrounding areas. We were in the foothills, now, and we had a chance to start looking for Torrent Ducks and other species we had not had a chance for yet. The morning started right at the moth sheet; in the exact spot we had ended the night. This time, though, there was no owl, just dozens of other hungry birds. It was a complete feeding frenzy. There were flycatchers, warblers,

hemispingus, and tanagers all coming in, almost all new for the trip. Once the sheet was mostly picked clean, it was time for one more little side quest before breakfast. There was a resident antpitta just at the edge of the woods that liked to have some worms for breakfast. A pair of White-bellied Antpittas came in for their breakfast.

After breakfast, we birded the road, which was quiet due to it being sunny. Plain-tailed Wren sang and sang for us, but never showed. We got, maybe, a glimpse of it moving some blades of grass around. We hiked and drove up the road, searching for Torrent Duck at each river crossing. Water Tyrannulets were seen, though, at one of the river crossings as we kept trekking up the mountain. We hit the end of the road, where we had a very good mixed flock with Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher and Andean Solitaire. Then we headed back for lunch. After lunch, we checked a few more places for Torrent Duck in the nearby town with no luck. Afterward, we had a relaxing evening in the hummingbird garden. We had earned a more relaxed evening with the Collared and Bronzy Incas.



Mon., Mar. 16 San Isidro | Borja Road | El Quetzal | Papallacta

We started off with the moth sheet again before our travel day. We were headed further up the slopes today, to our final hotel at 10,000+ ft. The moth sheet was so productive here at San Isidro Lodge. We had a pair of Masked Trogons spend 20 minutes at the same time right below us, perching side by side. Andean Motmot showed very well, and just a flurry of insect eating birds.

After breakfast, we said our goodbyes and headed further up the mountain. We had a lunch date at El Quetzal Reserve. Before that, however, we searched a valley for Red-breasted Meadowlark. Just as we turned off the highway to start into the valley for our search, we had a nice small mixed flock. This included the Eastern subspecies of Flame-faced Tanager, as well as Saffron-crowned Tanager. Along this road, we got our first glimpse of Antisana (18,875 ft.) and searched for more Torrent Duck before spotting a pair of meadowlarks as we were getting back on the highway.

El Quetzal Reserve is a new preserve that has only been open a year, but their gardens have been attracting some great birds. We had tough looks at a Rufescent Screech-Owl. Our lunch was delicious, with very unique dishes, and the owner/chef came out to greet us herself. After lunch, the star of the show showed up—the Tawny-bellied Hermit, with its long tail, sampled from each feeder before flying off. After a few minutes, it did it again. We also got to share their hummingbird garden with their sweet dog. It was such a zen place to be, sitting on the patio with cold drinks, tiny Woodstar hummingbirds working the flowers like bees, and a nice dog sunbathing at our feet.

Jorge had a secret spot lined up for us next. It was one more place to try for the elusive Torrent Duck that we could not find, but also a very productive spot in general. He had a special bird he was hoping to find for us

there. We worked our way up a dirt road, where Luis dropped us off, and we walked down the road birding. It was quiet at first, before a gorgeous Green-and-black Fruiteater broke the silence. After that, we hit a mixed flock containing a Northern Slaty Brushfinch and some Blue-and-black Tanager. A little further down, Jorge heard and then spotted the bird he was after. The aptly named Powerful Woodpecker. There was a pair working a dead tree just off the side of the road, where we all didn't have to work hard to see these very large birds. It just showed that turning off the road almost anywhere with good habitat still intact could be very productive.

We had missed the Torrent Ducks again, which had now become our new nemesis bird. The promise of high elevations and hot springs, though, left us less sad about missing the ducks. Up the Eastern slopes of the Andes, we went to our last hotel of the trip, Termas Papallacta Hotel Spa. This was just what the doctor ordered after 11 days of touring, with gorgeous rooms and the cherry on top: sprawling hot springs winding their way right out the front of each hotel room.



Tues., Mar. 17 Papallacta | Cayambe-Coca Reserve | Cayambe-Coca Rado Towers

Day 12, Day 12, Day 12. Boy, oh boy, were we in for an epic last full day of the tour, and we didn't even fully know it. We started the day with an early morning optional outing near the local pueblo that a few of us joined. We arrived just as the sun was cracking over the Andes and started birding along the road. Our first bird of the morning was a singing, Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager up on a powerline, welcoming in the new day. The light was barely bright enough to make out the red on the belly. We then worked our way up the road for about an hour; even on just the side of this small, paved road, we had many tanager gems. We already had four species of mountain tanager by 7 AM; how awesome it was here! Buff-banded and Lacrimorse were both new for the trip and, with some work, we got to see both of them well. A Pale-naped Brushfinch also made an appearance ... all before we headed back for breakfast.

Once back at the hotel for breakfast, we had the group reunited and ready for the day ahead. Our main objective for the day was Spectacled Bear, the only bear in South America, and possibly the main objective of the entire tour for some. You just never know when you might find them, but Jorge and Luis knew a good area

to look. So, the plan was set. We would spend as much time looking for the bear as we could, and everything else on the day would be a bonus. As we were headed over the pass, we got our first full views of Antisana, and Luis stopped the bus for us to take in this glorious volcano. There, on the side of the road with trucks whizzing by, we stood in awe of the fourth highest volcano in Ecuador. It was a perfect sunny day, the mountain was not clouded in, and it just sat there in its magnificence, for us to take it all in. It had been playing with us for a few days, and now it was out in all its stunning glory.



Inspired by this mythical mountain, we pressed on and crested the pass. We were now starting down the highway toward Quito. This was the area Luis and Jorge had much luck finding the bears. Every set of eyes in the van were focused on the hillside across the gully to our south. Jorge's instructions were easy, "look for a cow or donkey on the hillside." This was a task we all knew we could handle. He said the bear would be shiny and about that size. We worked our way down the highway but had no luck. As Luis drove slowly, we all scanned every inch of the hillside we could, and Jorge was practically sitting on the dashboard of the van, so he had the least obstructed view. After some searching and no luck, Jorge called out that he had one and it had a cub! The van erupted with excitement! Luis flipped the van around so we could be on the correct side of the highway. We poured out of the van, brimming with excitement. After getting the mom and cub in the scope, Jorge found a third bear. Then, someone else found another! Soon, the hillside was crawling with them. Not only that, but we were also attracting a crowd. A van on the side of the road, with scopes and bins all pointed at the hill, created a mini-Yellowstone traffic jam. Soon, we had multiple cars and a very large tour bus all stopped, gawking across the ravine at the hillside. We shared our scope with people from the large bus and shared in the excitement of the bears. At some point, we even noticed the mom had two cubs, not one! We had bears up high, down low, on the move, and sitting, eating bromeliads. When all was said and done, we had six Spectacled Bears on one hillside. It was one of the most memorable wildlife encounters of my life and for many in the group, I think. We may have seen over 400 species of birds, and a Harpy Eagle, but this was THE moment of the trip for some. The bears provided endless viewing opportunities, and we could have stayed there for hours watching them. But eventually, we had to leave.

Now with the Spectacled Bears checked off everyone's bucket list, it afforded us more time to explore the upper reaches of the Andes. The bears prefer the Paramo habitat, which is above treeline, but now we had time to head even higher. Above this elevation is the Elfin Forest, which introduced all new species we had not yet seen. Luis drove up to 14,000 ft. inside the Cayambe-Coca Reserve. At the end of the road was a series of tours with a series of cow trails we wandered around on. From here, Jorge and Luis set out while I stayed with the group.

They were after a very secretive bird, one that was not easy to find, and was a master of camouflage. As they searched off in the distance, we had views of Plain-capped Ground-Tyrant and Plumbeous Sierra Finch. Then word came in that they had spotted not one, but three of the birds they were after. We all scrambled our way over to where they were, and just below us, over the edge of a little ledge, sat three Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe. Kind of like a small grouse, but bigger than a quail, these beautifully marbled birds just sat, feeding below us on the ground. Their camouflage is so good that, if you turned away for a second and looked back, you would almost think they were gone. In the thin, crisp air up high, we made our way back to the van so we could catch lunch at the hotel. We even added a couple more species on the way down the road.

The day had started so well, and perhaps it was the thin air or the excitement from the bears, but we hatched a plan to try for Torrent Duck one more time. We had not rolled snake-eyes all day, so we had to strike while Lady Luck was on our side. Just down the hill from the hotel was another smaller, beautiful lodge called Guango. They were known to have Torrent Ducks frequenting the river next to their property. I had actually stayed there with my wife two years prior and had seen them there. Guango also had hummingbird gardens with the promise of one or two new species. It had already been a long day, and a long trip, so a few decided to hang back at the thermal springs, (can't blame them!). Papallacta was so enticing and gorgeous, it was hard to want to ever leave there. But we pressed on and headed down the hill. Once at Guango we made straight for the river, first encountering some Green Jay. And then the ducks were spotted. A stunning pair, just sitting so picturesque on a rock, the water splashing behind them from the fast-moving river as it crashed down the mountain. It was like they were there waiting for their photoshoot with a perfect backdrop, completely in their element. Our day felt so complete; our trip felt so complete. Jorge and Luis had done such a wonderful job, we could not have been happier. Back at the hotel, we had our final night's dinner and toasted our wonderful guides and their beautiful country they were so kind to share with us. We saved a little time for one more soak in the hot springs before it was time to pack up and head to bed.



Wed., Mar. 18

Cayambe-Coca Reserve | Quito

Normally, the final day is reserved as a travel day and getting everyone to the airport in time for their flights. Since no one was continuing on to the Galapagos that day, and everyone was on the midnight flight to the U.S., we had some bonus time. The day prior, someone was a little under the weather and had not been able to join the group, which meant they had missed the Spectacled Bears. This did not sit well with Jorge, and we were going to be passing by the same area again. This made him very determined to find one more bear before we made it back to town. We had also missed the bird of Ecuador, the Andean Condor. Jorge tasked himself with

looking for the bear, and I was tasked with finding us a condor. Mission accomplished! Jorge spotted one lone Spectacled Bear on the same hillside, almost in the same area as before. Barry, I think, called out that there was a raptor flying above the ridge. I got my bins on it and, sure enough, it was an Andean Condor, which then turned into two of them. They stayed, soaring over the cliff, then came in closer and flew over the road; everyone got really good looks at them.

For an added bonus, since we had a lot of daylight to kill, we had pre-arranged a city tour in Quito. It was a bit of a shock to be thrust into a city of 3 million people after being in some very remote places in Ecuador, but it also felt great to be in a city that was so alive. We met our city guide and said our goodbyes to Jorge. Parting ways with Jorge was bittersweet; but it was time for us to be on our way, and it was time for him to head back into the cloud forest before his next tour started. Jorge was not only an absolute legend when it came to birding, but he had been so much more as well. He was always looking after the group, making sure everyone was happy and comfortable. Made sure everyone had everything they needed at each meal and as we trekked across the landscape. You form a special bond with someone over two weeks together, so it's never fun to see them go. But, alas, we had to part ways.

We started at the Basílica del Voto Nacional, which broke ground in 1892. This Neogothic church really stood out when compared to all the places we had visited over the last two weeks. We were able to make our way to the very top of the towers and take in some birds eye views of the city. From here, we could also see our next destination. To the south, across the historic part of the city, we could see the statue of the Virgin of the Panecillo. This is the highest statue in Ecuador, and the tallest aluminum statue in the world. After that, we took a walking tour of the historic city center, visiting churches and walking the many scenic plazas. After wrapping up the city tour, we had time to snag some dinner before heading to the airport. Luis was the last of our local crew left and had been such an amazing addition to the team. Not only did he navigate some pretty tricky roads in the van over the last two weeks, keeping everyone feeling nice and safe in the van, but he was also an amazing person and birder, with a great sense of humor. Just fun to be around, like every guide we meet along the way on our Naturalist Journeys adventures. As folks' planes departed, goodbyes were said and memories forged. It was a magical trip with wonderful memories and special people.



Photo credits: Group shot by mountains (Vernie Aikins, VA), White-faced Capuchin (VA), River landscape (VA), Red-headed Barbet (VA), Collared Inca (VA), Green Honeycreeper (VA), Scarlet Macaw (VA), Golden-olive Woodpecker (VA), Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan (VA), Blue-necked Tanager (VA), White-necked Jacobin (VA), Antisana Volcano (VA), Cocoa beans (VA), Violet-tailed Sylph (VA), Andean Cock-of-the-rock (VA), Crimson-rumped Toucanet (VA), Purple-bibbed Whitetip (VA), Emerald Tanager (VA), Velvet-purple Coronet (VA), Rose-faced Parrot (VA), Masked Trogon

(VA), Long-wattled Umbrellabird (VA), Ornate Hawk-Eagle (VA), Dusty-faced Tanager (VA), Hoatzin (VA), Group shot from canoe (VA), Wire-tailed Manakin (VA), Many-banded Aracari (VA), Greater Ani (VA), Giant River Otter (VA), Magpie Tanager (VA), Napo Saki Monkey (VA), Amazon Kingfisher (VA), Andean Motmot (VA), Long-nosed Bat (VA), Green Jay (VA), Gorgeted Woodstar (VA), Tawny-bellied Hermit (VA), Scarlet-rumped Cacique (VA), Peruvian Racket-tail (VA), Pale-naped Brushfinch (VA), Group shot (VA)