

# Amazon River Cruise | Trip Report

## November 2 – 11, 2018 | Written by Lynn Tennefoss



**Guides: Lynn Tennefoss and Johnnie Moore, with 14 participants: John, Dita, Ron, Barbara, Helen, Jackie, David, Nancy, Bob, Cathy, Steve, Ruth, Karen, Pat (plus 14 participants from Mass. Audubon and their leader Jon Atwood)**

**Pre-tour and Day 1 (Friday, November 2): Arrive in Lima, Meet Group at Hotel**



Most of the group arrived in Lima very early the morning of Friday, November 2 after a long day of flying. We settled into the very comfortable Swissôtel, one of the finest business hotels in Lima, for the first of two nights. After resting and partaking of a delicious and extensive buffet breakfast at the hotel, small groups departed on their own for sightseeing. A short two blocks away, the pre-Incan temple/cemetery/ market called Huaca Huallamarca attracted some to explore its small but remarkable archeological museum, including mummies, and to climb to the top of its pyramidal shape for incongruous views across the very modern district from its mud-brick top. The olive trees in Bosque Olivar are a couple blocks further and gave the opportunity to see some new species including Pacific

and Eared Doves, Scrub Blackbird, Long-tailed Mockingbird, Bananaquit and a very interesting melanistic morph of the Vermilion Flycatcher. Other guests visited the coast for views of the gorgeous Inca Tern from the comfortable terrace of one of Lima's restaurants along the Costa Verde in the Miraflores District. The full group gathered that evening for a delicious dinner at Gaston y Astrid, a short walk from the hotel, where we got to know each other and toasted to the success of the tour (thanks to Bob!).

**Day 2 (Saturday, November 3): Fly to Iquitos, Manatee Rescue Center, Board Zafiro**

After an early breakfast, our Expedition Leader Dennis Osorio met the group in the lobby for our transfer to the airport, and the hour and a half flight to Iquitos, the largest city in Peruvian Amazonia. A bustling river town of nearly 500,000 people, reachable only by air or by boat, Iquitos is alive with moto-taxis, markets and the energy of a rapidly growing metropolis. After a buffet lunch at the Doubletree Hotel, we visited the Manatee Rescue Center for a chance to see some of these elusive, peaceful mammals along with a variety of monkey species (rescued primarily from pet owners) that we would view again on the tour, including Squirrel, Monk Saki, Marmoset, and Woolly Monkeys, along with mammals that we would not see again, including Tatyra, South American Coati and river otter. As on every stop of the tour, local staff generously shared their knowledge with us about the important work they do. The local pond delivered our first Striated Heron, Wattled Jacana, and our only Solitary Sandpiper of the trip, with Fork-tailed Palm Swifts flying overhead. Special treat was the White-headed Marsh Tyrant in the trees by the museum.



Traveling back through Iquitos to board our ship, we marveled at the driving skills of the hundreds of motorcycle and moto-taxi (or tuk-tuk) drivers – not an occupation for the faint at heart! We strolled through a large riverfront market, complete with roast grubs and a huge variety of fruit for sale, to board skiffs that took us out to our home base for the next 8 days, the Zafiro! A large flock of Black-crowned Night-Heron flew over us as we approached the ship, and Great and Snowy Egrets dotted the mudflats.



We settled into our cabins, where our luggage awaited us, and after a safety drill, enjoyed a refreshing drink – soda, beer, wine or Pisco Sours - on the top deck bar, where we introduced ourselves to members of the second group on the ship on a Massachusetts Audubon Society tour. The two groups instantly merged into one, and we enjoyed each other's company through the full extent of the tour. We also met the three ship naturalists who would be our guides and shipboard companions – Edgard, Juan and Victor – along with other ship staff, including Charles the bartender.

### **Day 3 (Sunday, November 4): San Joaquin de Omaguas, Yarapa River**

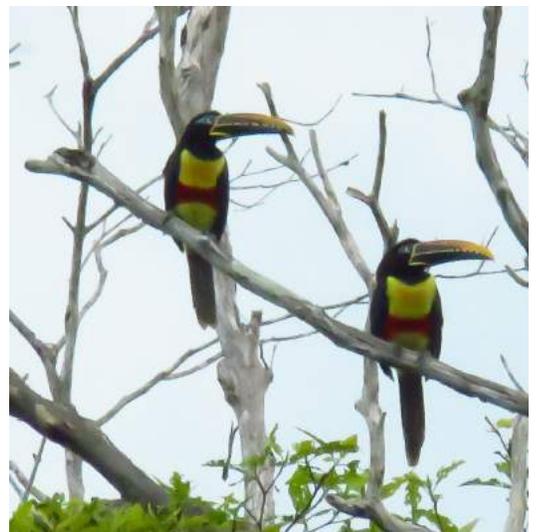


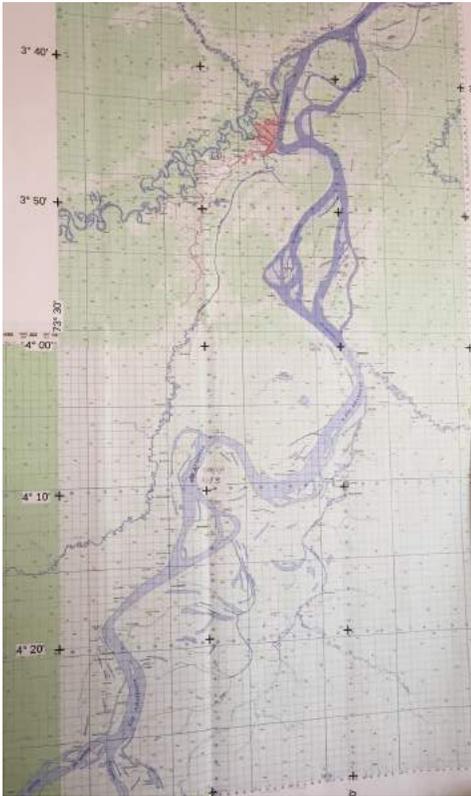
After navigating upstream through the night on the Amazon, we woke to beautiful blue skies and an early sunrise on this amazing river, 1.2 miles wide at this location even though more than 2300 miles from its mouth at the Atlantic Ocean! Many began the tradition of birding on the top deck before breakfast, where new species came fast and furiously. (As with any tour, not everyone saw every species noted in this report, though guides did their best to help us see as much as possible.) White-winged Swallow, Yellow-billed and Large-billed Terns, and Cocoi Heron would be seen daily along the river. Having reached our first creek excursion close to San Joaquin de Omaguas, three skiffs managed by crew of the Zafiro proved

very easy to board, and were a great platform for our shallow water excursions throughout the tour. On our first outing, with the help of our experienced naturalists, we got familiar with common species including Red-capped Cardinal, White-headed Marsh Tyrant, Oriole Blackbird, Amazon Kingfisher, Black-capped Donacobius, Roadside Hawk and the striking Black-collared Hawk, with stunning close-ups of Blue-black Grassquits literally jumping up and down on a stump by the river. We also had our first sighting of Gray River Dolphin and Pink River Dolphin, and Green Iguana in the forest.

Returning to the Zafiro, Dennis gave us an overview of our tour, followed by lunch and a power nap. At about 1 PM, we passed the confluence of the Ucayali and Marañon Rivers, a junction creating the official start of the Amazon River. Our first afternoon lecture featured Johnnie Moore, emeritus professor of Geology at the University of Montana, on the Hydrology of the Amazon River. Johnnie also posted a 3x4 foot map of the river, and proceeded to chart our course for the entire tour – giving perspective that is hard to get from the middle of the river.

That afternoon, our second river excursion brought us to the Yarapa River, where we saw our first monkeys of the tour including Pygmy Marmoset, an Owl Monkey peering out of its nest in a tree stump, and Woolly Monkeys, along with Black-fronted Nunbird, Spot-breasted and





Lineated Woodpeckers, an unusual Ivory-billed Aracari along with the more common Chestnut-eared Aracari. Plum-throated Cotinga, Grayish Saltator and Bare-necked Fruit Crows were crowd pleasers too.

After returning for a short rest and chance to clean up before dinner, we were treated to the first of several concerts by the very talented staff band – truly experts on the Charango (Edgard), guitar (Beckett), pipes/flute, and Peruvian Box Drum (Juan) (developed originally by slaves forbidden to make music with traditional instruments) along with other staff as accompanists, singers and dancers (Romy, Wendy and Edgard can really shake it!). The Jungle Brothers and Sisters were a big hit!

**Day 4 (Monday, November 5): Rio Ucayali, Yanaalpa Creek in Pacaya-Samira National Park, 11 de Agosto Village**

We continued to head upstream on the Ucayali. Our very early pre-breakfast excursion took us up the Yanaalpa River 14 miles upstream from the town of Jenaro Herrera. The quiet morning sparkled with birds, including Green Kingfisher, and two Sungrebe followed 15 minutes later by a Sunbittern – two very hard birds to see. Little and Squirrel Cuckoo, Black-tailed Trogon, Swallow-winged Puffbird, Yellow-tufted and Cream-colored Woodpeckers were seen by members of the group, with great looks at a female Amazon Umbrellabird, the largest passerine in South America, as another highlight.

After a satisfying breakfast, we departed again for our first visit to a Ribereños (river people) village, called 11 de Agosto. There, the village major demonstrated how to harvest yuca (cassava) roots, a staple of the region, and allowed one of us to give it a try – successfully. We then visited a village elder, Señor Alvinos, who talked about his life, his 17 children and 73 grandchildren (with #72 playing at his feet while he spoke). The large living area accommodated all of us easily, and we also visited his kitchen where one of his daughters was mashing and masticating yuca to make “masado” or jungle beer. Luckily, we were not invited to try it! Moving on to the school, local children sang and spoke with us about their studies and their dreams, after which we all did the “hokey-pokey” together and exchanged gifts. Each of us returned with a special drawing of a jungle animal or bird, while we left them with a range of books, art supplies and other items brought as donations by the group. A lovely array of arts and crafts was set up for shoppers on our way back to the skiffs, and many happily supported the artists’ work. Several who chose to remain on board saw a Roseate Spoonbill, and had terrific views of four Gray River Dolphins and one Pink River Dolphin swimming upstream next to the ship.

Jon Atwood, Mass Audubon’s guide, provided his first excellent presentation that afternoon on biodiversity in the tropics. Following that, our planned skiff ride was aborted due to massive lightning strikes taking place nearby, but we birded most congenially from the top deck of the ship instead, spotting Red-bellied and Chestnut-fronted Macaws, Capped Heron, Crimson-crested Woodpecker, terns and much more from the safety of Zafiro as the sun set. Another fabulous concert of traditional and modern Peruvian music took place before dinner that night. Afterwards, a few sat on deck and watched an incredible lightning display that extended over a 90-degree arc. The ship motored on until about 1:30 am, when we reached the start of the Zapote River tributary and tied up for the rest of the evening.



## Day 5 (Tuesday, November 6): Canal de Puinahua, Pacaya River



We took breakfast with us on an early departure skiff ride up the Canal de Puinahua (a tributary of the Ucalayi River that leads to the Pacaya River), finding Dark-breasted Spinetail, Chestnut-bellied Seedeater and Yellow-browed Sparrow, Short-tailed and Mealy Parrots, Piratic Flycatcher among many others. The group delighted in watching Monk Saki Monkeys with their long gray tipped hair. In a fascinating stop, a local villager fishing from his canoe showed us a bag of Monkey Fish fry, caught and sold for the aquarium trade. Upon return to the Zafiro, a presentation by staff on the Pacaya–Samira Reserve explained how important this vast reserve is in terms of preserving habitat along the river and in the Amazon rainforest. Villages exist within the preserve, along with traditional hunting, fishing and agriculture, but limits enforced by a series of volunteer rangers prevent overuse of the resources.

After lunch, Johnnie gave his second lecture, on the Geology of South America and the Amazon, providing a big picture overview of the geologic evolution of the Andes and the Amazon, among other topics. A late afternoon outing up the Pacaya River and into the Reserve came next and we remained in the skiffs through sunset into early evening. It was an amazing sight, as at dusk a mayfly hatch triggered flocks of literally thousands of White-winged Swallows and Yellow-billed Terns, weaving their way in the air above our heads all down the river. Once it was dark enough, Long-nosed Fishing Bats took their place and we spot-lit Great and Common Potoo, Spectacled Caimin and tiny Polka-dot Frogs. The group returned to Zafiro well satisfied with a great evening of birding, and greatly enjoyed the locally-crafted woven frog napkin rings at our places in the dining room, commemorating a key species seen!

## Day 6 (Wednesday, November 7): Pacaya River, El Dorado Creek

Wow, what a morning we had! Our early morning skiff ride again up the Pacaya River started with close-ups of Horned Screamers, at treetop on either side of the river. The “horn” of skin was easy to see and photographers got great shots. Yellow-spotted and Side-necked Turtles slid off logs as we went past, and we found Squirrel Monkeys playing high in the trees. Then, we came on the bird of the day. Not one or two, but a total of 32 Hoatzin in two flocks on each side of the river, sitting low in vegetation right next to the river! Once they settled down, we had amazing close up looks at these incredible birds. Hoatzin are called “flying cows” by locals, as like ruminants, they have a very large crop that processes the leaves that are their main diet. In addition, because fermentation has an odor, they stink! Their nests are over water, and young Hoatzin flee into the water at the sign of danger; they have claws at the joints in their wings that allow them to climb back up to their nests. The birds we encountered were likely several family groups.





As we watched, we also noticed a pair of White-eared Jacamar sitting quietly just upstream, and then a tree trunk covered with tens of sleeping Long-nosed Bat just downstream. The bats cling to the tree bark in long sinuous lines, mimicking the shape of a snake. A tree full of Blue-and-yellow Macaw gave great close-up looks at a species we had seen daily flying far overhead up to that time. Then we found the biggest caiman of the trip, easily five feet long, basking on a log. Winding our way back downstream, observant eyes found a Pauraque at eye level, sleeping on a branch. This location was the furthest upstream we achieved on the trip. On our way to Zafiro for breakfast, we found dolphins feeding in the eddy formed at the mouth of the creek, where it met the main river current.

We returned to a map orientation of our tour, lunch and our daily bird and wildlife check list review. Jon gave his second presentation - a

fact-filled lecture on favorite Amazon birds including Hoatzin, Black-collared Hawk, potoo, toucans, Barred Antshrike and Yellow-rumped Cacique. During the afternoon the Zafira headed back downstream to the Ucayali River, retracing our navigation over the last couple of days. Then at 4 pm the group split into those going birding and fishing, and those just birding, and we zoomed out on the skiffs again. Heading four miles up El Dorado Creek, we encountered Spot-breasted Woodpecker, Red-capped Cardinal, Capped Heron, Orange-backed Troupial, Black-tailed Trogon and more Green Kingfishers. The fisher-people had good luck catching hefty Red-bellied Piranha, which the rest of us enjoyed for dinner, after another round of music with our on-board band as the Zafira continued to navigate downstream.



#### **Day 7 (Thursday, November 8): Kayaking on Supai Creek, visit to San Jose Paranapura**



The long-awaited kayaking outing took place this morning, with eight intrepid kayakers taking a leisurely ride on comfortable, unsinkable plastic sit-on-top boats heading downstream on Supai (Devil) Creek. It was a treat to enjoy the quiet morning from the water, and the birding was good too, with the chance to stop and really watch behavior. We observed Chestnut-eared Aracari, and several Greater Ani chased by a pair of Lesser Kiskadee. Birders and kayakers alike watched several Swallow-tailed Puffbird and a stunning Turquoise Tanager.

We came back to a very full day on the ship, including a very interesting presentation on sites in Northern Peru by Expedition Leader Dennis, and an enthusiastic re-enactment (complete with costumes) of the legend of the Chullachaqui – a forest creature said to frighten off hunters. A Pisco Sour cocktail lesson from our fabulous bartender, Charles, followed and then a ceviche cooking demonstrations by the Chef, who demonstrated his professional skills meal after meal while we were on board.

After lunch and our checklist review, we all got in the skiffs for a short ride to the Village of San Jose Paranupura where we took a short walk to a lake full of incredible giant water lily pads and flowers, and were graced by a protective blessing by the local Shaman, who also provides local remedies to the villagers, and shared his knowledge about certain medicinal plants with us. It was fun to see Squirrel Monkeys in the trees around town and to have another shopping opportunity for local crafts. After our return to the ship, we set out again almost immediately for an exploration by skiff of the confluence of the Marañon and Ucayali Rivers – birthplace of the Amazon River – before Zafiro turned upstream on the Marañon River.



Dinner with a Peruvian theme followed another great session by our onboard band. And we were delighted to help Clemens and Patricia celebrate their anniversary.

**Day 8 (Friday, November 9): Pahuachuro Creek , Terra Firma hike, Gasparito Creek**

We awoke just upstream of Nauta, the largest town on the Marañon River. An early morning birding option followed a quiet black water stream through drifting water lettuce. Pairs of Wattled Jacana flew in front of us, while Ringed Woodpecker, spectacular close-ups of Capped Heron, a Great Potoo on a branch, and Scarlet-crowed and Lemon-Throated Barbets were stars of the morning - along with a Little Woodpecker.

Our field trips to date had focused on the riparian and river habitats of the Amazon and its tributaries with vegetation that is seasonally flooded every year – later this morning, we visited another distinct habitat type: “terra firma” - land that is never flooded. The soils tend to be older and, without the annual flooding, less rich in nutrients, so much of the biomass occurs in vegetation above the ground. We stopped at a village where local guides scouted the forest for special species for us to see as we followed a path into the trees. And we were in luck! A huge Red-tailed Boa, a Pink-toed Tarantula and a Scarlet-red Poison Dart Frog were observed, along with a very special bird – the Yellow-billed Jacamar. In 75 trips on the Amazon, our expedition leader Dennis had never seen this species before. Inland from the river, the weather was hotter and more humid – and we saw the only significant number of mosquitos on the trip. Vegetation included Walking Palms, Giant Heliconia, and a huge Strangler Fig tree, where we took group photos.

We returned to Zafiro for lunch, our last checklist review and map orientation, and then in a surprise for all, went back out in skiffs for a ride up Gasparito Creek and a sunset cruise on the river, complete with champagne toasts to all for a terrific tour. On our return, we really rocked out to the rhythms of the house band – almost everyone got up and danced. The entire ship staff was then introduced and thanked for the terrific job they did to make us feel welcome and well cared for. Our final dinner was delicious as always, with a surprise birthday cake and song for Cathy.



Day 9 (Saturday, November 10):

**Nanay Creek, Iquitos, Flight to Lima**



Our final morning skiff ride took us to Nanay Creek for stunning looks at Yellow-bellied Dacnis, Cinnamon Attila, Black-crested Antshrike, Thick-billed Euphonia, Spotted Tody-Flycatcher, and Black-throated Mango among others. It was a wonderful ending to a fabulous birding tour! It was hard to say goodbye to the warm, friendly and dedicated crew of the Zafiro but our time had come to return via Iquitos to Lima. Brown bag lunches in the Iquitos airport, followed by a quick flight led us back to the relatively cool, dry air of Lima, where most of us took advantage of day rooms at the airport Costa del Sol to rest and prepare for very late night flights home, or the post-tour extension to Machu Picchu.

And so our voyage on the magnificent Amazon River and several of its tributaries came to an end. We traveled 760 miles on the voyage. As our guide Juan would say, “It wasn’t a good tour, it was a GREAT tour!”



Photo Credits: Huaca Huallamarca, Johnnie Moore (JM); Zafiro, Lynn Tennefoss (LT); Skiff, Dennis Osorio (DO); Chestnut-eared Aracari (DO); Map (LT): Black-collared Hawk (DO); Hoatzin (DO); Visiting 11 de Agosto (DO); Breakfast on Skiff (DO); Hoatzin (DO); White-eared Jacamar (DO); David Kayaking (DO); Red-bellied Piranha (DO); Giant Water Lilies (LT); Anniversary couple (DO); Pint-toed Tarantula (DO); Shutterbugs (DO); Group photo with guides and Expedition leader (DO).

## ROUTE MAP NOVEMBER 2018 (Johnnie N. Moore)

