

# Colombia: Santa Marta, Tayrona & Isla Salamanca | Trip Report

February 17 – 25, 2019 | Written by Elissa Fazio



**Guide: Gustavo Canas-Valle and NJ Host Elissa Fazio, with 10 participants: Alan, Naomi, Brenda, Elaine, Linda, Bette Lynn, Julie, Terry, Jessie, Hannah**





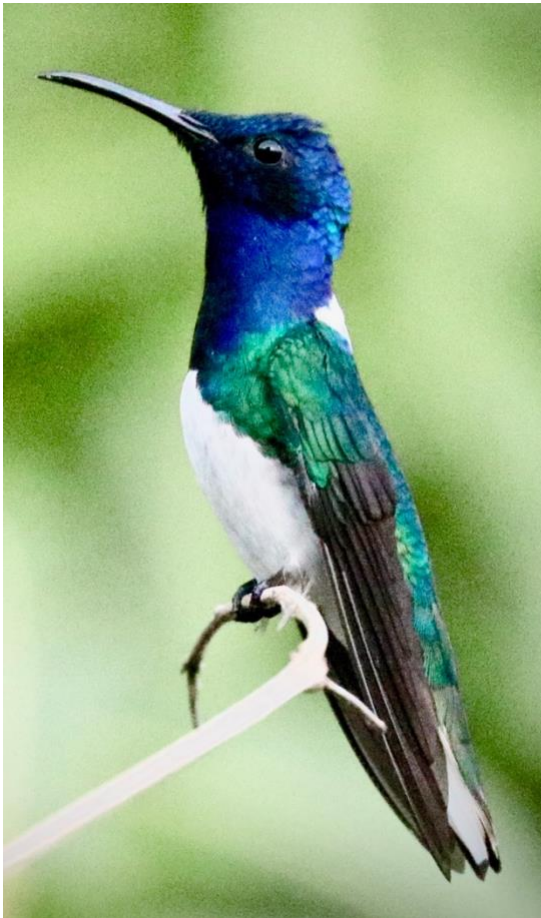


## **Saturday, Feb. 16<sup>th</sup> | Arrivals in Barranquilla**

Most participants arrived late in the evening, with five – Elissa, Linda, Bette Lynn, Brenda and Elaine, all coming in on the same flight. Alan and Naomi had spent the last 2 days visiting with their granddaughter, Jessie, and Hannah, touring Cartagena. Jessie is living in Barranquilla due to a Fulbright Scholarship and she and Hannah will be joining up with us towards the end of the tour. Julie, Terry and Sandy all arrived early and either did some birding or caught up on some much-needed rest after overnight flights. Everyone met up with Gustavo and got checked in at the Barranquilla Plaza for a good night's rest prior to the start of the adventure.

## **Sunday, Feb. 17<sup>th</sup> | Atlantico Universidad Park | Road to Minca**

We woke early and boarded our van to head over to Atlantico Universidad Park, on the lookout for Chestnut-winged Chachalacas. As soon as the van doors opened, we heard the distinctive call of the chachalacas, and all got a good look at these birds in flight and perching. This is quite an active spot. A Ringed Kingfisher flew overhead and a Whooping Motmot made a fleeting appearance. A large flock of Brown-throated Parakeets noisily fed in the flowering trees and pretty quickly, were joined by Yellow-backed, Yellow, and Baltimore Oriole. The very similar Blue-gray and Glaucous Tanager were giving us good looks, affording an opportunity for Gustavo to teach us how to tell the difference between these two very similar species. We had barely walked 10 feet! With all of us spread out along a walkway, we were soon spotting many of the local specialties left and right. Gustavo set the scope up so we could get better-than-binocular looks at Crimson-crested and Red-crowned Woodpecker, Russet-throated Puffbird, Bicolored Wren, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Cattle Tyrant, Buff-throated Saltator, Great Kiskadee and Tropical Kingbird. Our attention was drawn to the open, blue sky where we found Black and Turkey Vulture along with Yellow-headed Caracara. A couple of Yellow-crowned Parrots flew by, calling in that typical "parrot voice", while we watched a small group of Saffron Finch, and Ruddy and Common Ground-Dove feeding on the ground while the chachalacas continued making a spectacle of themselves. What an amazing start to the tour – 26 species in our first hour! Now, with eyes full and bellies empty, we headed back to the hotel to enjoy our first meal together before boarding our van again and heading off to Minca.



Before we headed out of Barranquilla, we hit the grocery store to load up on snacks and other goodies like local beer, wine, nuts,



dried fruit, and bottled water to fill our cooler. We drove along Coastal Route 90 and made multiple stops along the way. Gustavo told us we were heading to an area called “Kilometer 4” and as we made the turn off the main road, we pulled over because Gustavo has spotted something unusual. We parked and walked back to a small pond where we saw domestic geese along with 3 American Flamingo! They were all on one leg, with long necks turned so heads could be tucked – so beautiful. Before long, we observed an odd behavior. One male domestic goose started “attacking” a female goose (maybe it’s “love thing”??) and immediately the flamingos moved in to break things up! Who knew flamingos were peacekeepers of the bird world? We saw a pair of Stripe-backed Wren and more of the same species from earlier in the day before heading further down “KM4”.

As we were driving, a Snail Kite was perched on a fencepost right next to the road so we could all get a great look at that specialized bill. We parked and headed down a trail, through a swamp that was surrounded by cattails. It was quite warm and humid, without any tree cover, so we didn’t spend a long time but boy, it was jam-packed! As we walked, we saw Wattled Jacana and Purple Gallinule in a shallow pond. The small shrubs yielded Yellow-chinned Spinetail, Common Tody-Flycatcher, and White-headed Marsh Tyrant. The habitat bore many of the species one would expect – we heard Sora calling, we saw Smooth-billed Ani, Limpkin, Neotropic Cormorant, Great Blue and Tricolored Heron, Great and Cattle Egret, while Glossy Ibis, Turkey and Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture flew overhead. On our way out, we found Black-necked Stilt, Southern Lapwing, and Lesser Yellowlegs in the nearby shallow water.

On our way to lunch, we made a stop to look for Bronzed Cowbird and even though that species didn’t make an appearance, we found Carib and Great-tailed Grackle along with Shiny Cowbird, as well as, Scaled and Eared Dove. As we were scanning for more, we were thrilled by a “congregation” of over- 300 Bare-faced Ibis flying “en masse” over the treetops! What a sight! We arrived at Tasajera Restaurant and were seated on a large wooden deck that was built out over the Magdalena River delta. All around us we saw “palaphitic” towns, which are, as Gustavo explained, villages built completely over water using stilts. We let Gustavo order many types of local specialty foods, including sea bass – fried and baked, plantain, rice, salad, and our favorite, cazuela, which is a special cooking pot full of yumminess! While we were eating and getting to know one another, we were treated to Magnificent Frigatebirds and Royal Tern fishing over the water while we watched locals “poling” dugout-style boats across the delta.

With satisfied appetites, we headed to Minca, our destination for the day. Because of large vehicle restrictions in town, we transferred to smaller ones and arrived at La Minca Casona where we found a lovely outdoor porch, lined with hummingbird feeders attached to the dining room. While our bags were being delivered to our rooms, we took in the amazing valley views and enjoyed the “hummer acrobatics”! We soon identified White-



necked Jacobin, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, White-vented Plumeleteer, Red-billed Emerald, Long-billed Hermit and even a Keel-billed Toucan! Everyone found it hard to tear themselves away from this “show”, but we needed to get settled in so we could be ready for dinner. We all enjoyed the vegetable cream soup, tangerine juice, tender chicken, fried potatoes and salad. We sat and took care of our first day’s checklist before heading off for a good night’s rest at the lovely inn.

## **Monday, Feb. 18<sup>th</sup> | Minca Birding, Transfer to El Dorado Lodge**

We woke early, got in our three vehicles, and headed out from Casona de Minca to a pull-off on a bend in the road below Minca. In the distance, we saw a large flock of Military Macaws “decorating” the tree line. What a sight to see these beauties out in the wild, flying free. Soon, a flock of Orange-chinned Parakeets flew by and then, some Blue-headed Parrots went by. As we scanned the trees on the hillside behind us, we found Boat-billed, Social and Streaked Flycatcher. A flash of black and white streaked by and most got a good look at the handsome Black-chested Jay. This bird is on Sandy’s “must-see” list, but unfortunately, she didn’t get a good a look. We discovered a large group of Crested Oropendola – a bright yellow bill and bursts of yellow against black, as they flared those tail feathers in flight. As the morning light increased, we noticed movement in the trees and, even though it wasn’t easy to get binos on flitting movement, we persevered and identified Orange-crowned and Baltimore Oriole, Yellow Warbler and a variety of tanagers including Hepatic, Blue-gray, Swallow and one of our favorites, the Crimson-backed. We headed back to the inn for a delicious breakfast and more hummer viewing on the porch. The lushly vegetated grounds of the Casona yielded a nest-building pair of Bi-colored Wrens – the whole group was so surprised at how big these wrens are! We heard the distinctive call of a Keel-billed Toucan and finally tracked him down for a closer look at this iconic species.

With our bags packed and loaded, we started our journey into the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta to our destination at El Dorado Lodge. It didn’t look that far away on paper, but little did we know what an “adventurous” path we’d be on towards the lodge! At about 1000M, we pulled off onto an overlook and encountered an amazing view of the hills and valleys of the sierra. The oropendolas were putting on quite a show for us and in the nearby trees we saw a number of their suspended, long, swinging nests, as well as, a Giant Cowbird. White-collared Swifts danced in the sky above us, in contrast to the Turkey and Black Vultures that lazily soared. One of our group spotted an Empidonax flycatcher and we all commiserated about how difficult it is to nail down the species. With Gustavo’s help, we worked out the identifying features and settled on Willow Flycatcher but soon our attention was grabbed by a lot of movement in the nearby trees. It was a cornucopia of small birds including Lesser Goldfinch, American Redstart, Blackburnian Warbler and the ever-present variety of tanagers, this time including Summer, White-lined, Blue-gray, and Crimson-backed. With much dedication, we all finally got a look at a beautiful Rufous-breasted Wren, Buff-throated Saltator, and Yellow-bellied Seedeater. It turned to mid-morning, and even though we’d had breakfast not too long ago, Gustavo instructed our drivers to break out the “arepa”, a Colombian breakfast specialty that we all dug into with nods of agreement on the “yum” factor. These are pretty much a deep-fried corn fritter with an egg nestled inside. Before we headed out again, our eyes were grabbed by something white against the greenery. It turned out to be a pair of Masked Tityra. They stuck around long enough for Gustavo to get the scope on and then overhead, a King Vulture, in all its majesty, soared overhead, lit by the bright sun. Wow!



Pretty soon, the roughness of the “so-called road” manifested. We’re talking some seriously uneven, rock-strewn, bump-inducing, slow-going road! Suddenly, our lead car pulled over and Gustavo told us that our driver, Tonio, knew where there was a nest of a Scaled Piculet. We found the tree and waited for an appearance. While scanning and waiting, we found a Streak-headed Woodcreeper, a Tropical Kingbird and another Black-chested Jay, which Sandy still didn’t get a good look at! Then, quite suddenly, the piculet showed up, right at the nesthole and then sat and sat on a branch for all of us to admire. How tiny! We headed up the road farther and took another break from the bumpy ride. At this stop, we found more local specialties like the Rusty-breasted Antpitta, Pale-breasted Spinetail, Orange-billed Nightingale Thrush and the endemic Santa Marta Brushfinch. Oh, and we added another tanager - the Bay-headed. By mid-day, we made our lunch stop at a lovely roadside cantina where we got to relax while Gustavo made us sandwiches accompanied by juice and chips – a perfect rest stop before more jostling up the road.

By late afternoon, we were all thrilled to reach El Dorado Lodge at about 1900KM, our home for the next three nights. We made our way out to the deck, which was lined by hummingbird feeders and a frenzy of hummer activity. These were different than the species we saw at Minca – Brown Violetear, Lesser Violetear, and Crowned Woodnymph. We marveled over the beauty of the grounds, filled with flowering shrubs and trees and the infamous compost heap! Fruit-trays were also set out and before too long, we were delighted by the presence of a pair of Blue-naped Chlorophonia. The compost heap was quite an attraction and soon the Band-tailed Guan, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Pale-breasted and Yellow-legged Thrush, Sierra Nevada, and Santa Marta Brushfinch all took advantage of the fruit and veggie fare. A comfy bench near orange trumpet-shaped flowering shrubs, yielded good looks at the White-sided Flowerpiercer. Soon we saw a wasp paralyze a tarantula and drag the spider into its nesthole! What drama! (Most of us sided with the poor tarantula!) While the well-organized and solicitous staff helped most of the group get settled into rooms nearby, Elissa and Sandy were guided to their more-distant “kogi house” lodging. After settling in and prior to dinner some of the group got to see Masked Trogon, White-lored Warbler, Slate-throated Redstart, White-tipped Dove, and White-lined Tanager.



We were all mesmerized by the stunning sunset, as we could see all the way out to the Caribbean Ocean and the lights of Barranquilla in the far distance. The view was magical! We convened for a luscious dinner of celery soup, pork with a stewed/diced tomato topping, salad and mashed yellow potato with guava juice and rice pudding for dessert. After dinner, it was checklist time and then we all happily retreated for much-needed sleep after a very exciting and somewhat tiring day. We have an early call of 4:30 a.m. tomorrow as we make our way further up the mountain for more Santa Marta specialties.

## **Tuesday, Feb. 19<sup>th</sup> – El Dorado Lodge | San Lorenzo Ridge**

Our 4 a.m. wake-up was somewhat of a shock, but all who wanted to make the trip up the mountain in search of Santa Marta Parakeets and other endemics, rose to the occasion and met at the lodge for coffee or tea, before



loading into our vehicles. As Elissa and Sandy made their way along the trail to the lodge in the dark, they were startled – that’s actually an understatement, as they actually had the bejesus scared out of them – by the roaring calls of Red Howler Monkeys! Yikes, what an extraordinary sound! Linda and Bette Lynn elected to sleep-in and spend a relaxing day at the lodge birding and taking photos. It was nice to have multiple options!

As the rest of us slowly made our way up the road, Gustavo heard the call of the Santa Marta Screech Owl. We stopped and soon heard at least three owls calling back and forth. We scanned the trees and barely caught a fleeting glimpse as one of these birds flying right by Sandy’s head! Soon, we did get good looks at a Band-tailed Guan, as it indelicately made its way through the nearby tree branches.

The drive went bumping and bouncing along, and even though it was barely post-dawn, the views were spectacular, as we were above the clouds! We finally topped-out at Cerro Kennedy, just a little past sunrise, and were rewarded with the sight of the Santa Marta Parakeets that we’d been hoping for. We also got a silhouetted, but good look at a White-tailed Starfrontlet feeding on a close by flower stalk. As it got lighter, we walked up the road and found all manner of treasures. We saw Scarlet-fronted Parakeets in good numbers and even got to watch a pair, that were most likely nesting, in the hollowed-out top of a dead palm tree. They posed quite nicely, and for a long time, so we could not only watch, but got to take some good photos. The vegetation on either side of the road bore Montane Woodcreeper, Rusty-headed Spinetail, White-throated and Black-capped Tyrannulet, along with Yellow-crowned Redstart – fanning its tail as it flitted - and Great Thrush. We walked around and through a gate to get better views of the flowering trees, and even though it was way out, we did see the Black-backed Thornbill and Tyrian Metaltail. It was a bit chilly at over 8,000 ft. elevation, with a light mist washing over us and then dissipating away, so we were all delighted when our wonderful drivers broke out the hot chocolate and coffee, along with chicken and spinach sandwiches and fruit. The sun finally made its way over the ridge, so we soaked it up and right in the bushes in front of us, we were entertained by more Santa Marta Brushfinch and the beautiful Rufous-collared Sparrow and Black-cheeked Mountain-Tanager. We decided to walk down the road and have the vehicles follow behind. After a bit, all but Julie and Terry got back in the trucks to head to the San Lorenzo Research Center. We encountered a lovely grassy knoll where we made ourselves at home by sprawling on the grass – ahhh! This is the “quetzal spot” and as soon as we arrived, we heard it but didn’t get to see it. Gustavo assured us that if we were patient, it would return and by golly it did! We got a very nice, long look at a distance, but then it obliged us by landing in the nearby trees, right out in the





open. Unfortunately, just as Terry and Julie arrived, it flew off! Gustavo made it his mission that they get to see it as well, so while the rest of us lazed on the lookout knoll, he tracked it down again for them to see.

We slowly made our way back down to the lodge for a bit of much-welcomed R & R until dinner. We were all so impressed by the staff at the lodge and how delicious the food was. This night we had pumpkin soup – we all agreed that the soups we have had at every dinner have been the tastiest soups ever! Then chicken with veggies, pureed plantain, and a lovely “flan-ish”, jello-type dessert made out of a fruit called “lulo”, in the nightshade family, that looks like a barely-ripened tomato. According to the locals, it has a very bitter flavor but when peeled and a little sugar added, it turns into a refreshing, fruity flavor.



### **Wednesday, Feb. 20<sup>th</sup> | Another Day in the Santa Marta Mountains at El Dorado**

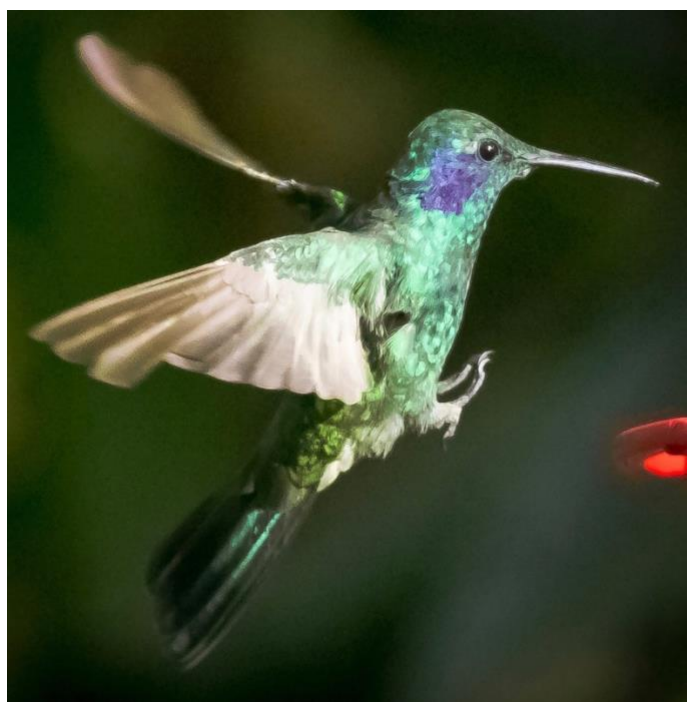
We met up in the dining room at 6 a.m. and walked the road below the lodge to a place where there was a bit of a creek running down the hillside. Gustavo spotted leaves being tossed and, lo and behold, it was the Gray-throated Leaf-tosser! We got to see the behavior but not the bird! Very interesting. We continued birding along the roadside and were rewarded by a pair of Masked Trogons. We saw them repeatedly as they made

their way through the trees. By 7:15 a.m., we made our way back to El Dorado for breakfast.

The plan was to take the jeeps down the road to a place called Palo Alto but as we left the lodge, the howler monkeys started “roaring” again, and we asked Gustavo if we could try to get a good look at them. We went uphill in order to be at “monkey-level” or above, but of course, they stopped calling as soon as we hit a good lookout spot. Luckily, this turned into a fabulous bird “hotspot”. We found the Strong-billed Woodcreeper, the Montane Foliage-gleaner, Brown-capped Vireo, a gorgeous male Blackburnian Warbler, Crested Oropendola, Black-capped and Bay-headed Tanager, and more Black-chested Jays. Finally, Sandy got a good long look at her “most-wanted”. Suddenly, Julie and Elissa spotted an interesting, small bird that had a bit of a crest. They both described the bird in good detail and as we all looked through the field guides, Gustavo thought it was the Sierran Elaenia. This would be rather unusual, as this bird is not normally found at this elevation. Luckily, we got audio of the bird calling, as well as some decent photos. So, Gustavo will submit this sighting, along with the evidence, to eBird and maybe we will have a rare sighting confirmed! We stuck around a bit longer and found Slate-throated Redstart and White-lored Warbler.

We made our way back into the jeeps for a trip down the road, below El Dorado. We pulled off the road because Tonio heard the call of a toucanet. It was the Santa Marta, or Southern Emerald-Toucanet – kind of a smaller version of the toucan. Then we walked a bit further and all got great views of three Keel-billed Toucan. While hearing the call of the Attila, which Gustavo called a “skulker”, and searching we were surprised by a stunning Tropical Parula. We made our way in the jeeps to a spot called Finca Palo Alto. In the trees by this farm area, we found a trove of interesting birds – Olive-striped Flycatcher, Golden-faced Tyrannulet, and Black-headed and Bay-headed Tanager. The Black-crested Jays showed up again and all of us kidded Sandy, making sure she got good looks at “her birds”! The skies were threatening and soon a few raindrops started falling. Luckily, we made our way to a small tienda that had a covered porch, right across the road from some lovely flowering shrubs and trees. Pretty soon the heavens opened, and we felt so lucky to be sheltered and eating snacks! The rain let up and then we saw our target – the Santa Marta Woodstar, a tiny hummingbird that floats like a bumblebee as it feeds. The Lesser and Sparkling Violetear showed up, along with the Crowned Woodnymph, and just as we were getting ready to head out, our other target, the Santa Marta Blossomcrown appeared along with the White-sided and Rusty Flowerpiercer. What a serendipitous spot!

As we headed back to the lodge, Julie, Terry, Gustavo, and Tonio saw a Bicolored Hawk swoop right in front of the jeep. It's a small hawk with interesting markings. Back at the lodge, we had another delicious meal – bean soup, shredded pork with rice, passion fruit juice, and a chocolate-covered coconut treat - and then some welcome “down time”. Linda, Bette Lynn, Alan and Naomi enjoyed sitting on the deck, taking in a nap, taking some photos and generally relaxing while Elissa, Sandy, Gustavo, Julie, Terry, Elaine, and Brenda decided to walk the trail to the “kogi house” that was Sandy and Elissa’s lodging, about a half mile from the main lodge. We found the Black-hooded Thrush, Oropendola, Sierra Nevada Brushfinch and the now, ever-present Black-chested Jays, which delighted Sandy no end! We met back at the lodge for a bit of “deck birding” – we saw the Sickle-winged Guan and Band-tailed Pigeon - checklist time and dinner which was ñame with carrot soup, fish with berry sauce and mixed veggies, mango juice, and a passion fruit gelatin-like dessert. We had an added treat tonight in that Carlos, a lodge staffer, alerted us to the fact that the “nocturnal or ‘owl’ monkeys” were in the trees outside the lodge. He shined the spotlight and we saw three of them. We all remarked that they looked a bit like bush babies. The real name is Grey-handed Night Monkeys. Tonight, we had to pack up for an early start





in the morning. All were a bit sad to be leaving El Dorado where the staff, have really made it feel like home. The birding and hospitality have been outstanding.

## **Thursday, Feb. 21<sup>st</sup> | El Dorado to the Coast, Tayrona**

Just as we were getting our luggage loaded in the jeeps, after breakfast (more arepa – yum!), we got a parting gift from El Dorado – a pair of beautiful Golden Grosbeak! We got multiple looks from above and below before saying our farewells.

At about 1700M, we pulled over at a bend in the road. We walked down a narrow path, looking for the Santa Marta Foliage-gleaner, which eventually appeared. While birding up and down the road, searching for the antbird, we found the Black-hooded Thrush and Groove-billed Toucanet, while White-collared Swifts flew above, along with a passing Sharp-shinned Hawk. At 1500M, we came across another “hotspot”. At first, it seemed kind of quiet and then, at a bend where there was a bit of water and some flowering plants, we noticed a couple of birds foraging on and around a fallen log. It was a pair of Gray-headed Tanager and a couple of Pale-breasted Thrush. As we were enjoying watching these birds, a Cinnamon Flycatcher repeatedly landed on a tree branch across the road affording great looks. Then Montane Foliage-gleaner, Long-billed Hermit, and Groove-billed Toucanet also showed up! After another few minutes, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Blue-naped Chlorophonia, Blackburnian and White-lored Warbler, Slate-throated Redstart, and Bay-headed Tanager added themselves to our list! Fun!

At 1200M, we stopped at another spot with the orange trumpet-shaped flowering shrubs. There was a row of houses and a little restaurant there and as we were scanning the trees, we were entertained by a hen and her chicks taking very vigorous dustbaths – too cute! We spotted the female Coppery Emerald and Crowned Woodnymph Hummingbirds feeding on the trumpet flowers and in the trees, we found Social Flycatcher, Palm and Crimson-backed Tanager, and Red-eyed Vireo. At 1100M, we made another stop and came across Brown-capped and Red-Vireo, more Crested Oropendola, Rusty Flowerpiercer, Streaked Saltator and what do you know – more Black-chested Jays. This had become our “running joke”!

We arrived at El Campano to enjoy our boxed lunch that was made by our friends at El Dorado Lodge. Our hosts helped us arrange tables and chairs for all, as we ate rice with veggies, avocado salad, chips, and juice. As some relaxed, Julie, Terry and Elissa took a walk down the road apiece and found a Plumbeous Kite, perched photogenically, on the tip of a tree branch. As they walked back, they spied a pile of bamboo, logs and other construction materials. They watched some small wren-like birds hopping around and soon realized, yes, they were House Wrens. Soon, the others joined them, and all got a good look at the kite and wrens. Then some beautiful birds were seen, also hopping around the pile. They turned out to be Rufous-capped Warbler - a real show-stopper of a bird! A flock of Scarlet-fronted Parakeets flew overhead to top off a lovely lunch break.

We slowly made our way down the last bit of rough road to the paved road to Tayrona. We made our last stop before Villa Maria, at a place called La Cabaña. It was quite warm and humid and after a short walk, some returned to the vehicles while others decided to continue down the road. At first it was quiet but with perseverance and patience there was reward. We found a Squirrel Cuckoo, while Turkey and Black Vultures in a large group, and a Zone-tailed Hawk soared overhead. The Balsa Wood Trees were blooming with a large, cup-like flower that seemed irresistible to White-bearded Manakin and Bananquit. As we headed back to the cars, we came across Orange-crowned Oriole and Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, as well as a couple of Southern Rough-winged Swallow.

It was a very full day and we finally arrived at Villa Maria in Tayrona, got checked into our bamboo-constructed, two-story, balconied rooms and then met in the outdoor dining room for dinner and checklist. But tonight, we

had the added pleasure of having Jessie, Alan and Naomi's granddaughter, and Hannah, join us for the rest of the tour. Introductions were made; the young women were welcomed into the fold. Delicious mango, passion fruit, peppermint and coconut lemonades were relished while we all savored a family-style dinner of local specialties. A well-deserved, good night's rest was much appreciated.



## Friday Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup> | Tayrona

We gathered early to enjoy birding the hummingbird feeders at the outdoor dining area at Villa Maria. This time, the usual suspects were joined by a couple of newcomers – the Rufous-breasted Hermit and Black-throated Mango. While most stayed to relax by the feeders, a few decided to wander the hotel grounds and were rewarded by a “hotspot” near the pool, which overlooked a lushly vegetated area, affording views all the way out to the Caribbean Ocean. Some of the rewards included Red-crowned Woodpecker, Rosy Thrush-Tanager, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Blue-headed Parrot, and a pair of Gray Seed eaters. We reconvened for a delicious breakfast before boarding the van, driving towards Palomino, and stopping at a spot called Las Gaviotas.

We walked down a dirt road surrounded on either side by rather thick vegetation. At first, we were finding it difficult to lure birds into the open, but before not too long, some really interesting and new species started showing themselves. The Brown-crested Flycatcher started things off and was joined by Streaked Flycatcher and Straight-billed Woodcreeper. Then a real prize was sighted – the Lance-tailed Manakin. A couple of males kept flying back and forth from one side of the road to the other, giving everyone great looks. All the “seasoned” birders were thrilled to see the looks of delight on the faces of Jessie and Hannah, as they took in the beauty of these stunning creatures. Squirrel Cuckoos, Scrub Greenlet, Buff-breasted and Bicolored Wren joined the parade along with Crimson-backed Tanager, Bananaquit and Yellow Warbler. Just as we turned to head out, we unexpectedly encountered three Trinidad Euphonia flitting about in the trees above the road. The perfect cap to a lovely walk!



After another short drive, we disembarked, heading for lunch. Gustavo led us down a road in a small village, along the Taironaka Trail and we entered a park situated along the Don Diego River. We ambled through this conservation area, ending up at a restaurant with a second-story deck overlooking creekside, open terrain. Since the deck was full of patrons, the servers set up a table for us, all to ourselves, near the riverbank – even better! A refreshing limeade-type juice was served but it didn't take long before we all wandered towards the river to take a look. In the middle of the river was a reed-strewn sandbar and soon we were entertained by the sight of some of our favorites all bathing in the shallow water together – Crimson-backed, Blue-gray, Palm, and Summer Tanager along with Bananaquit and Baltimore Oriole – a riot of colors! Then Gustavo called out that there were Red Howler Monkeys in the trees right beside us! A papa and juvenile male were swinging about in the large stand of bamboo. The young male kept testing the patience of the adult, who had to keep reminding the young one who was “in charge”! The acrobatics they displayed were hilarious and marvelous at the same time. Then a Collared Aracari appeared and a large land Iguana added to the tropical display!

No one wanted to tear themselves away from the feathered and furred attractions, but a tantalizing lunch proved irresistible. Calabasas soup, sea bass, coconut rice, plantain and banana, salad, and a coconut dulce de leche dessert – yum! After lunch we all grabbed chairs and plopped ourselves riverside to “watch the show” along the sandbar. The hits just kept coming – Yellow-rumped Cacique, Shiny and Giant Cowbird, Social and Streaked Flycatcher, Prothonotary and Yellow Warbler, Thick-billed Euphonia, Northern Waterthrush, Grayish and Buff-throated Saltator and then a real dazzler, the Blue Dacnis, amazed us all! What an unbelievable spot! Thank you, Gustavo for picking out the perfect location to show off Colombia's riches! We reluctantly headed back to the van. On the walk in, Elissa and Hannah were fairly certain they had seen the White-chinned Sapphire but were hoping to get confirmation. A flowering tree obliged, by offering food to White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and there, again, the White-chinned Sapphire for all to see.

Upon return to Villa Maria, we all got some time to relax before dinner – naps, showers, etc. Doesn't get much better than unwinding in the balcony hammock with pairs of Prothonotary Warblers, Streaked Saltator, Cooper's Hawk and Orange-chinned Parakeets offering a feast for the eyes! And speaking of feasts, dinner didn't disappoint – chicken, fried potatoes, skewers of shrimp and veggies, pork ribs, another veggie medley – delicioso! Checklist, then sleep and then a very early wake-up, as tomorrow brings us to La Guajira.

## **Saturday, Feb. 23<sup>rd</sup> | Tayrona to Santa Marta, La Guajira, San Pedro Alejandrino Manor**

This morning we had the option to spend the morning relaxing at Villa Maria, or to get up at 4 a.m. to venture east into the arid habitat of La Guajira Peninsula, in search of local endemics. Linda, Bette Lynn, Alan, Naomi, Jessie and Hannah decided to enjoy the lodge and walks to the ocean while Brenda, Elaine, Sandy, Elissa, Julie and Terry opted for La Guajira. The six who headed out early, were surprised that their first stop was at a major toll plaza and truck weigh station – not exactly where you would expect to find lots of birds! But, Gustavo explained, through a big conservation effort, the entire area surrounding the toll plaza had undergone a major re-vegetation effort. Through this effort, all kinds of native plants and animals were reappearing. As soon as we stepped out of the van, a flock of 30 or so Green-rumped Parrotlets flew into the trees across the road. As the sun rose higher in the dawn sky, many more species were revealed. Great Kiskadee and Social Flycatcher, Tropical, Gray and Eastern Kingbird, Glaucous Tanager, Red-crowned Woodpecker, and Grayish Saltator were seen scattered amongst the tree branches while Crested Caracara flew above us. As the group scanned the trees and sky, Virgilio, our driver, alerted that one of our target species could be heard and seen – the Rufous-vented Chachalaca! There were at least 8 that were calling and flying through the lower shrubs and as we were all admiring this find, we saw Vermilion Flycatcher, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Carib Grackle, a number of Scaled Dove



and Cattle Egret, along with about 100 Bare-eyed Pigeons! It was hard to reconcile in our minds that a toll plaza could be such a bonanza of delights!

Back on the van, we headed to the village of Camarones, where we picked up a local guide, Jonas, to help us in our search for local specialties. What a change of scenery! We were now in a very arid landscape with acacia trees, candelabra cactus, and yellow-flowering prickly pear where we enjoyed a picnic breakfast of fruit cup, coffee, and cheese with bacon sandwiches. Jonas led us through brushy scrub on the outskirts of an indigenous Huayuu Village. The first things that caught our eyes were Tropical Gnatcatchers darting about. As we crested a short hill, we came upon a small pond with, of all things, Least Sandpiper – the last type of bird expected in such a desert landscape! The Tropical Mockingbird and Great-tailed Grackle were spotted as we began to wend our way along narrow pathways. It all seemed so stark and vacant but looks can be deceiving. With Jonas' remarkable ability, all kinds of birds "appeared" - the White-whiskered Spinetail, White-fringed Antwren, Slender-billed and Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant, Vermilion and Brown-crested Flycatcher, Yellow Oriole, Pileated Finch, Orinoco Saltator, Black-faced Grassquit, Black-crested Antshrike, Russet-throated Puffbird, and Northern Scrub-Flycatcher. Jonas was bent on finding us the Vermilion Cardinal and soon, we found it and got a great scope-view of this beauty. There didn't seem to be much for hummingbirds to feed on, but we got looks at both Red-billed Emerald and Buffy Hummingbird. We kept wandering, and in amongst a thicket, we came across a family of about fourteen Crested Bobwhite. As we drove out of the village, we saw a Crested Caracara on the ground – nice since we had almost exclusively seen these birds in flight. After a short drive, we stopped at Los Flamencos Road where we took another short walk and found a Pearl Kite among more spinetail and local endemics. After dropping Jonas off, as we were heading back to Villa Maria, Virgilio pulled over because he spotted two Double-striped Thick-knees out in a grassy field along the highway. None of us could believe that he saw these two, lone birds while speeding along the highway!

Back at Villa Maria, we picked up the rest of the group, checked out and went down the road about 20 minutes to our lunch stop – Las Acacias, an open-air restaurant along the river. While awaiting our food – vegetable broth soup with cilantro, fried chicken or fish, salad, and mango lemonade – we spotted Greater Yellowlegs and Little Blue Heron wading in the river along with some "wild" Muscovy Ducks. Black Vulture and Zone-tailed Hawk soared above, along with Southern Rough-winged Swallows. Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Social Flycatcher, Tropical Kingbird, Great-tailed Grackle, and Bicolored Wren were spotted in the nearby trees.

We headed down the road towards Santa Marta, an old colonial city, where we made a cultural stop at the Simon Bolivar Monument. The museum is called the Quinta San Pedro Alejandrino and is on the grounds of Simon Bolivar's manor. Gustavo gathered us around and gave us a brief overview of Colombia's colonial history





and most revered revolutionary leader, Simon Bolivar. It has been a real treat to have a guide that is so well-versed in history, as well as the local flora and fauna. Here, we found many historic buildings with very informative commemorative inscriptions, in addition to beautifully landscaped gardens. Many families were out and about enjoying the day, some taking family photos amid the natural backdrop. There were Crested Caracara throughout, affording close-up views and we even spotted a Gray-lined Hawk near a nest, in the park boundary trees. As we headed out to the van, we spotted Orange-winged Parrots in the trees right beside the parking lot. Nice way to end the day!

Virgilio didn't seem fazed by the narrow streets he needed to maneuver in order to get us to Casa Leda – our home for the night. The colorful buildings in this old city really make an attractive impression. Casa Leda was unusual in that its lobby contained a wading pool/spa with fountain and lion sculpture, along with outdoor stairways leading to rooms and a rooftop garden and dining area. We got checked in and then met on the rooftop, where we did our checklist while having an amazing dinner cooked for us in the adjoining outdoor kitchen. So lovely! Wine, good food, great company and then we were off to bed.

## **Sunday, Feb. 24<sup>th</sup> | Tasajera, Isla Salamanca, Barranquilla**

We gathered for breakfast on the rooftop and while enjoying our coffee and juice, pancakes, cayeye, cereal and yogurt, we got a good look at the local environs. Santa Marta was greeting Sunday morning with the toll of church bells. A quick scan of telephone wires and rooftop antennas brought out the field guides. We soon discerned that we were looking at both Gray-breasted and Brown-chested Martins. Magnificent Frigatebird, Turkey Vulture, and Yellow-headed Caracara circled in the distance.

After checkout, making our way back to Barranquilla, we stopped at Tasajera, which was actually not too far from the toll plaza area where we had birded a few days ago. This place had a pier and shallow waters on one side of the road, and a tidal flats area on the other. We soon spotted Little Blue, Green and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron perching atop pilings and in the nearby trees. A Ringed Kingfisher made an appearance and upon further investigation of the pilings along the pier, we saw Brown Pelican,



Laughing Gull, Royal and Elegant Tern, and Neotropic Cormorant. Scanning the tidal flats, we came across Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Black-bellied Plover, and Baird's Sandpiper. Gustavo really helped us work out the ID on the Baird's, as it looks very similar to the Spotted Sandpiper. We saw another type of tern but were unable to decide on either Sooty or Bridled. There were Magnificent Frigatebirds flying around while we drove down the highway, seeing many Great and Snowy Egret fishing in the shallows.

Our next adventure took us to Isla Salamanca. This used to be private property but was now being conserved as a national park. We stopped to pick up our local guide, Omar, and then took a short walk along the river, where we found two Smooth-billed Ani. We were looking for two species of hummingbirds that are endemic to this particular area – the Sapphire-throated and the Sapphire-bellied. In order to get to the other side of the river, we needed to go two-by-two on a small, rope-pulled raft. It was a short trip from one side to the other and while we awaited the arrival of all, we saw Little Blue Heron, Bare-faced Ibis, Scaled and White-tipped Dove. We made our way to some flowering trees and even though it was a bit hot and humid, when we spotted the hummingbirds, all weather thoughts disappeared! These are gorgeous little birds, that obliged by sitting on branches, right out in the open so that great looks and photos could be had! On our walk back to the raft, we saw Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, and Yellow Oriole. At the house beside the river, we found a Snail Kite perched atop a fencepost. A Zone-tailed Hawk soared above us as we made our way back to the van.



Before not too long, we were back in Barranquilla making a lunch stop at a fabulous place called Parilla Lebanesa. This was a very raucous and popular restaurant, made even more so, because it was the beginning days of Carnaval! The large-screened TVs throughout the place were showing live feeds of the Carnaval de Los Niños – groups of children of all ages in frilled and ruffled costumes of all sorts, dancing in choreographed steps down the streets. What a spectacle! Gustavo ordered us an abundant array of specialty dishes to share – lentils, stuffed eggplants and grape leaves, the most delicious ribs, rice dishes and more!

After lunch, we arrived back at the Barranquilla Plaza and got checked into our rooms for our last night of the tour. Gustavo offered a final birding stop for those who wanted to head out, back to the Universidad del Norte, which was our very first stop of the tour. Sandy, Elissa, Bette Lynn, Julie, Terry and Brenda were greeted once again, by a group Chestnut-winged Chachalacas. Many of the same birds we saw the first time, were here again – Yellow Oriole, Saffron Finch, Brown-throated Parakeet, Bicolored Wren, Black and Turkey Vulture, Ruddy Ground Dove and Glaucous Tanager. We heard, but could not see, a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. A Red-billed Emerald was feeding on the flowering trees and then we all spotted another hummingbird. It turned out to be a mystery bird! It looked just like the Sapphire-bellied that we saw earlier on Isla Salamanca, but it didn't have the fork-tailed, which is diagnostic of the species. We all pored over our different field guides but were unable to come up with what this bird was! We got good looks over and over and even get a photo through the scope. Hopefully, some of Gustavo's birding contacts will be able to help make a definitive identification but for us, it was a mystery bird. While looking at the hummer, we saw in the background, a Whooping Motmot. Since we had the scope right there, Gustavo was able to give us all great scope-views of this stunner. What a great way to end the birding part of the tour.



We headed back to the hotel and met up for our pre-dinner checklist task. Gustavo ordered us all different kinds of refreshing juice drinks – watermelon, loganberry, raspberry, strawberry – and he surprised Sandy with a special slice of birthday cake and a “Happy Birthday Song” serenade. We decided to take a short walk down the street for our final dinner together. The manager set up a table for us in a back room all to ourselves, which was a perfect way to celebrate a great trip. We enjoyed coconut lemonades while awaiting our entrees, which were out of this world – penne pasta with shrimp, barbacoa medley, sea bass, and more! A great evening of camaraderie and celebration! We walked back to the hotel to say our final goodbyes as all were departing at different hours of the early morning through late afternoon. We wished each other “bon voyage” and thanks were extended all around for having such a convivial group on this grand adventure.



### Photo Credits:

American Flamingo, Linda Paine (LP); Crested Oropendola, LP; El Dorado Lodge Deck, Elissa Fazio (EF); Crowned Woodnymph, LP; Blue-naped Chlorophonia, LP; Female White-sided Flowerpiercer, LP; White-necked Jacobin, LP; Group Photo, LP; Arepa, EF; Plumbeous Kite, LP; Keel-billed Toucan, LP; Kogi-style Lodge El Dorado, EF; Lesser Violetear, LP; Long-billed Hermit, LP; Hummingbirds at feeder, LP; Villa Maria Lemonades, LP; Villa Maria, EF; Fruiteater, Greg Smith (GS); Golden-breasted Fruiteater, Peg Abbott (PA); Golden-winged Sparrow, PA; Groove-billed Toucanet, PA; Huayuu Village, EF; Carnival Figures Plaza Hotel, EF; Isla Salamanca Raft, EF; Santa Marta Woodstar, LP; El Dorado Lodge, EF; White-tipped Quetzal nest El Dorado, PA; Yellow-fronted Whitestart El Dorado, PA.