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Colombia: The Andes – Our Inaugural Trip Report November 8-22, 2014

**Guide Gustavo Canas-Valle, tour host Peg Abbott, and 9 participants:
Bob, Torrie, Don, Cindy, Nancy, Cliff, Chan, Robert, and Bev**

Early Arrivals

Columbia was calling! Several of our group ventured ahead of the tour to do some exploring. Chan wanted to check on some of the projects of his non-profit in conservation group, Idea Wild, which makes grants to people on the forefront of research and conservation. They have been especially active in



Colombia, and have several projects in the area. Today, Chan, and his

friend Cliff from Alaska, joined Gustavo to see one of them this day. Cindy had lived in Colombia in years past, and she and Don arrived to see old friends and to explore places she knew. Cali had its own draw – lights of a place long felt to be off limits – lovely to be here and explore! Torrie and Bob love to see the world, they had fun exploring historic neighborhoods around our hotel. Peg and Nancy came in just one night ahead, to rest up from life ahead of travel!

Nov. 8 Arrival in Cali

Two of our flock arrived today, while all others elected to come in early. Those arriving early enjoyed a trip to the Cali Zoo which is set up very much like the San Diego Zoo with large enclosures mimicking natural habitat. They have a marvelous collection including animals of Africa, India, and Australia, but we





focused on native animals to Colombia and enjoyed seeing close up views of Spectacled Bear and Giant Anteater. We found a good number of wild birds, and our photographers enjoyed time with birds in the aviary as well. Bright Flamingoes in the entry pond were hard to ignore.

We ate at two restaurants just across the street for lunch was at leisure having not really started our trip. Peg and Gustavo, Torrie and Bob found delicious Lulo fruit smoothies (a Cali specialty) at a vegetarian place, while the

others enjoyed lavish trays of mariscos at a seafood place.

Gustavo then led those of us that wanted to go on a walking tour of Cali, reviewing the history of Gran Colombia into the present as we went, with a focus on architecture. We passed interesting iron work fencing, walked on streets along a river where a friendly Vermilion Flycatcher said hello, and ended up at a stunning, ornate church. Views of the mountains from the tree-lined river walkway were lovely.



People watching was also grand, and we enjoyed music, a gentleman from the swing era gone by teaching the young ones to dance. Don caught on video his smiling finish saying, "Take me to the doctor!" A friend of Gustavo's joined us for the day, adding her stories. In the park, tired at the end of our

day, we rested, watched the world go by, and conversed among statues.





Dinner was at a fun restaurant that we walked to, on a corner of a colorful street of the San Antonio neighborhood. We wanted something quick, and this was a well-known coffee house with sandwiches, salads, fruit drinks and beer and wine, lots of art, and a lively atmosphere.



Things were well in line for a great week ahead, knowing Gustavo enjoyed our love of food, local culture, and exploring – in addition to finding us a host of great birds!

Sun., Nov. 9

Km 18 Cloud Forest Birding / On to Buga



We set our alarms to meet for a 5:30 breakfast, in order to get out into the field. While few like to get up, it certainly paid off as we had just an incredible birding morning!

Our mission today was to visit one of Colombia's Important Bird Areas (IBA) located on a low pass in the Western Cordillera. Our first introduction to nature in Colombia was to experience some fine stands of cloud forest near 6000 feet in elevation, the area known as

KM 18.

We met local guide, Luis, who shared his knowledge of the area. We walked leisurely along a road, engrossed in finding a rainbow of birds, including Multi-colored Tanager, a great find on Day One!



We passed a lovely farm while walking, and returned to join them for coffee and time at the feeders, where the plethora of tanagers, barbets and hummingbirds lined up for us at feeders!

The place is known as Finca Alejandra, and Raul and Elsa welcome us as Red-headed Barbet, Flame-rumped and Saffron-headed Tanagers, Masked Flowerpiercer, Purple-throated Woodstar, and Long-tailed Sylph lined up at the feeders. After seeing so much, but working hard at it, it

was lovely to perch in a garden and have the birds come to us. We even saw a Golden-headed Quetzal!



We hated to tear ourselves away, but it started to rain so we boarded the bus. Driving out – stop! Chestnut Wood-quail, a prize! Some saw this elusive species from the bus, and with luck it was calm enough to get out and several spotted views from the road.



KM 18 has almost 220 species recorded in this one area alone, shades of things go come!

We then drove a route designed to avoid city traffic, in doing so getting to see lovely rural areas of the western Cordillera of the Andes. There was a lot of truck traffic, passing people on

horseback, vibrant life all around us.

We had lunch at an outdoor barbecue place, right on a corner where life coming and going never stopped. We could look across verdant fields to a small town with an elegant church steeple. People watched us, and we had a grand time sampling many meats, fresh juices, all the foods Gustavo ordered for us that just kept





coming to our delight.

Nap time – on up and over the mountain, to Buga. Our hotel here was simple but charming with an interior courtyard. We could walk to dinner, and felt very comfortable here.

Mon., Nov. 10 El Vinculo Reserve / Laguna de Sonso

We woke to light rain, which would prove typical of the season, but it cleared quickly and only livened up and

freshened up the birds. From Buga we were closer to our intended birding sites for the day than at Cali and we enjoyed a day of little driving.

We went first to a nearby spot where we parked to start walking up a winding road, and our early morning goal was quickly accomplished, a search for endemic Colombian Chachalacas. We found them almost immediately in large spreading trees, but we were viewing them from below. A more rewarding view was gained as we walked up to a covered ramada, where we gazed off to the verdant valley, and had eye-level views of them. While waiting to photograph, Peg discovered that a xxx Parakeet was nesting in eaves of the Guadua Bamboo shade ramada. It was fun to watch them come and go. We got more views of Apical Flycatchers and other species from this fine vantage point.

El Vinculo's 80 hectares of dry forest were preserved in 2006 as a national park. Its views out to the lush Cauca Valley were memorable.

The wetland birding took place at nearby at Reserve Natural Laguna Sonso where a couple of oxbow lakes of the Cauca River provides some ample habitat for species. The area was fairly dry this year, but we found some species of ducks, waders, and marsh birds such as White-headed Marsh Tyrants. It was fun to see a familiar face, Spotted Sandpipers perched on floating logs passing quickly on current of the river. A local vaquero passed by on his horse, accompanied by some working dogs that quickly moved some cattle. A large spreading tree provided shade, and our species count kept growing as we birded comfortably in the shade.





Tues., Nov. 11 Yotoco Reserve /

Today we left Buga early, with the staff at our hotel feeding us in their small dining room so we'd be fortified ahead of our birding. The area is known for its rich biodiversity, and for its program to secure populations of the rare Cauca Guan.



This morning, early, we left for El Vínculo Reserve, which protects a 75-hectare patch of dry forest habitat, home to a biological research station. Located at the bend of a busy highway, we moved away from the sounds of trucks and traffic to the back garden – to find a Red Howler Monkey watching our advance! It stayed there as we sought out one of the endemics, the Turquoise Dacnis, getting good looks just as we arrived and then no others. We did not make it far from the garden, as bird after bird made its way to us.



Our reward for diligent birding was a nice picnic brunch with good Colombian

coffee. We then had a walk through the dry forest and up to a clearing, where we encountered a mixed flock with quick glimpses of endemic Grayish Piculet, and a more cooperative pair of endemic Apical Flycatchers that posed for our inspection. From a hilltop we enjoyed a bird's eye view and a round of lively sightings.



We got good looks at several hummingbirds in the garden, and Bay-headed and Scrub Tanagers came in to the fruiting trees. After lunch, we visited a wetland area and then another area perched above the rich agricultural valley, walking up to a hillside view. The birding was rich, and kept us busy!

We returned to Buga in the late-afternoon, one of the oldest cities (circa 1555) located inland in Colombia, and some went for a walk to see historic parts of the city, known as a pilgrimage site. A central spot that some of our group visited was the Basilica of the Lord of Miracles. It seemed like beer time again, and we found ourselves gravitating to the brewery again, they seemed surprised to see us and were a bit short on food – guess we'd enjoyed too much the night before! No one went hungry and we enjoyed being on this frontier edge of ecotourism.



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We returned to the valley for a restaurant lunch, and in the afternoon we drove to Hacienda El Paraiso, passing police stop along the way, as they inspected our modern bus (which passed with ease) we found a few birds for our list. The drive was a time to rest, watch the scenery, and look forward to the next part of our adventure at a place Gustavo was obviously fond of. He had encouraged us to read one of Colombia's most celebrated historic novels in preparation of the visit.

Our destination was to a place beloved by Colombians but visited by few birding groups, though we



found the place quite birdy as we settled in. El Paraiso was an important manor house, part of one of the richest sugar plantations in the Cauca Valley. The Isaacs, the family of the Colombian author of *María, a South American Romance*, owned all the infrastructure and personnel needed for large scale sugar production. The home is well-preserved, and we had a tour scheduled for the following morning.

In the late afternoon we arrived to a recently built hotel adjacent to Hacienda Paraiso near Palmira. It was new enough that it took a while to get us into our rooms, so we birded from chairs under cover as they served us a welcome juice. The view of the mountains was fantastic! In time we wandered out on the lawn watching Buff-necked and Bare-faced Ibis feed, and finding impossibly-red Vermilion Flycatchers, with a dark black back even brighter than those back home.

The food here was some of the best of the trip, brought out family style with so many luscious things to try, fresh vegetables, meats, potatoes, sauces. We washed it down with very nice wines and for some, cold beer. The night passed quickly and we were soon off to sleep.

Wed., Nov. 12	Hacienda Paraiso and its Tragic Story / North to Armenia
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We woke to heavy rain, and only Peg, Nancy and Gustavo gathered at the appointed time for early birding. We watched the lapwings strut about on the lawn they claimed for home, and a very tame Vermilion Flycatcher. Peg caught up on emails on the handy Wi-Fi, and as we sipped coffee and the rain



let up, others joined us. We then ventured out to walk under huge spreading Mimosa trees around the historic hacienda that is a national monument for the Jorge Isacs CHECK SPELLIG novel, *María*. They were lively with birds, and all got excellent views of Bar-crested Antshirkes. In grassy areas we had Cattle Tyrant, Slate-colored Seedeater. Yellow Warblers and Rusty-margined Flycatchers were numerous.

We had a mid-morning tour set up with a guide at the former home that framed the forbidden love of Estafan and Maria. Their story is a beloved tragedy; experiencing it here at the home it all came alive. Our guide was a good storyteller and drew us into the drama.



Robert and Bev had just read the novel prior to our trip and they peered into the rooms, feeling all the emotion of the story. In this book, descriptions of the Cauca Valley are rich enough to make it the famed piece of literature it is for Colombians.

This was Gustavo's hope when designing our tour, to blend the richness (and excesses!) of the Colombian spirit into our birding venture. He has worked to convince the adjacent hotel we stayed at to grow beyond carting and amusement park themes that draw local families, to embrace the

concept of ecotourism as International audiences find this spot. The tour gave us insight into the daily lives of aristocracy of the valley at the time.

Birding the grounds before lunch, we enjoyed seeing an aggressive pair of lapwings on their nest site, watched Blue-headed and Mealy amazons



fly in good number overhead, and took in views that simply grabbed our attention at every turn. Buff-necked Ibis fed on the lawn, and Tropical Kingbirds uttered their trills.



We enjoyed the hospitality of the Inn very much, and stayed for an excellent lunch. We welcomed creative foods here such as the chicken tamales, fresh beet and carrot salad, avocados just off the trees, yum!



We really hated to leave, but Gustavo had a surprise up his sleeve – a lovely Inn he'd found in the country, with mountain views, an infinity pool, and good birding poolside and on the grounds.



Thurs., Nov. 13 Petroglyphs in Native Bamboo / Botanic Garden Birding / Museo Quimbaya / Artisan Shopping

We started the day with an optional birding jaunt to a nearby area of edge habitat, walking between farms and an open grass area near the airport. We got excellent views of Ruddy-breasted Seedeater and watched a Large-billed Seedeater craft its nest. We found Bar-crested Antshrikes, Saffron Finches, and

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laughed at the antics of a “Johnny Jump-up”, aka Blue-black Grassquit, doing a breeding display. There were Steely-vented Hummingbirds sipping in flowers, and male and female Black-throated Mangos. A Yellow-faced Grassquit pair building a nest put on a good show. We had good hopes of seeing Dwarf Cuckoo here, but no luck today...



We returned for a nice breakfast, and were soon on our way to join the retired director of the local archeological museum, who Gustavo had invited to take us in search of signs of bygone civilizations of the region. The adventure involved boarding four-wheel drive Willies, traditional vehicles of the coffee harvest, to travel up and down a steep drainage. We saw local farm kids in their school uniforms riding



Willies as school buses, papaya trees loaded with fruits and rows and rows of red-cherried coffee bushes. The town square was a busy place, shade beckoning. On the corner where we found the jeeps, fresh goat milk, from the goat, was being served!



At an unmarked stop, we climbed through a fence, descending a faint trail on to the local major river. Here we learned about one of the very few petroglyph sites, a simple pair of spirals etched deep into the stone, now being overgrown by lichen. Our guide told us there was one other site about a kilometer distant and two others far up river – simple but rare and enlightening, particularly with her interpretation. We stood in very dense bamboo laced with thorns, learning why it was hard for the Spanish to make any headway when traveling along these smaller native bamboo-lined rivers.



Our next stop was the Armenia botanic garden, which holds an impressive collection of palms as well as heliconias, melastomes, and other regional flora. They had interpretive signs, and we could have spent a full day here learning at various stations with maps, geologic displays, and information on edible and medicinal plants. Instead we gorged ourselves on birds – the frenetic activity at the entry way hummingbird feeders was amazing, evidenced by birds stacking up six to a feeder! The most common species were White-necked Jacobin, Steely-vented Hummingbird, Black-throated Mango. At a second feeder we found White-bellied Woodstars which looked as small as bees among the larger species.



Tanagers came and went, mainly Scrub, Palm, and Blue-gray. Green Hermits called regularly from forest territories and we got good views of quite a few. At a bird blind, we had VERY close views of Andean (formerly Highland) Motmot, albeit we were at 1400 meters we had this close inspection as well as a calling bird in the forest to confirm it was this species. A posing Green Hermit in deep forest was a treat, as was the show at the feeders!



We returned to the Inn for lunch, a big meal of plantains, white beans, rice, local sausages, red beans and fresh salsa. This and a cold beer, the allure of the indigo-colored infinity pool with view of the Andes called some to declare it was down time – they fully enjoyed the afternoon.

Others plied themselves free of paradise to get back on the bus, bound for Armenia, a large city that we crossed through to get to the excellent Museo Quimbaya. This is one of seven regional museums that are coordinated from the main archeological museum in Bogota. It is run by the Bank of Colombia responsible for the extensive gold collection inside. We had the interpretation of its former director as well as time to browse.

They allowed non-flash photography and it was irresistible to try for capturing the essence of tiny complex human effigies, animal carachtures – especially lizards, frogs, and insects. There were bowls of gold, hats of gold, breast plates – common ornamentation for the common person it seemed of the time. There were also a number of ceramic goods displayed including funereal urns, and one piece of textiles known to be at least 1000 years old. There were spindle drops, water jugs, many objects that revealed only a tiny bit of the former inhabitants of the region.



Then finally, for those enthusiasts, time for shopping! Cindy, who had lived here before, was in search of well-made, typical Colombian hats, black and white in intricate design. Don became the model, at one time wearing three at once. The store owner was most abling, and had other things the rest of us were attracted to such as fresh coffee beans, small curios, and leather goods. Nancy found postcards, not yet common in this country just opening up for tourism. We hit a bit of city traffic but returned safe and sound from an action-packed day.

Dinner was at the hotel, we had plans to have it in Solento, but decided we were so happy where we were, we preferred to eat at “home”.

Fri., Nov. 14 Morning Birding / A Dwarf Cuckoo Reconissance / On to Montezuma



Gustavo led an optional morning walk at sunrise from our hotel, following calls of Crested Bobwhite and Dwarf Cuckoo which both remained elusive. The group spotted a Striped Cuckoo and added Acorn Woodpecker to our growing list. Bev spotted three Gray Fox in the distance which was a treat for all.

For some it was a nice morning to sleep in, or catch up on trip notes with a cup of rich coffee and a view of the Andes so verdant at this time of year. Garden birds included several Vermilion Flycatcher that were most confiding. We had a steady parade of Yellow-

bellied Siskin, Thick-billed Euphonia, House Wren, and Blue-gray Tanager. Bev and Cliff, perched in chairs for the view, had a Dwarf Cuckoo come to visit them in shrubs at very close range! Our group attempt to find them in a hedgerow by the airport, productive for another group earlier this week, was rewarded only by calls.

We were sad to leave, acknowledging the gracious hospitality and truly delicious food and special concern to details made by our hosts, two twin brothers well on their way to creating a great lodge for birders to enjoy. Plates of fresh papaya and pineapple awaited us, fresh squeezed tangerine juice, and eggs lightly scrambled eggs with vegetables on white corn arepas.

We said good-bye to the wonderful brothers and their family who were our hosts at the lovely B and B, perched on a hill with a stunning view of the Andes. We wish them great success!

Today we would return to the wilds, to one of Colombia's prized birding reserves, Montezuma. We reached there by driving through the valley and beyond Pereira, from which we continued on to the mountains and Pueblo Rico, where we transferred to four-wheel drive vehicles driven by local guides.



It took us about an hour to arrive at the Finca Montezuma Eco-lodge in Tatamá National Park. Our first taste of fumes emitted by these hard working vehicles of the region. Bring a bandana to cover your face for a trip to explore this wet montane forest of the Choco bioregion! On the edge of a new birding frontier, we were here, happy to be so, right in the heart of it.

We enjoyed hot fruity tea, and near the feeders, the sights and sounds of this lovely forest ahead of sunset



and dinner. The owners of this lodge are committed to conservation and are enthusiastic about birds, butterflies, and all aspects of ecotourism. The friendly smiles of a new family here to greet us was most welcoming and after slipping and sliding on a greasy mountain road detour taken as a landslide closed

the main highway – an adventure not knowing if we could get through, we were happy to land! What a stunning forest!

Sat., Nov. 15 and Sun., Nov. 16

Two Amazing Days at Montezuma / Tatamá National Park



This was a place of birds, and a place of flowers! Today's walk could not have been more amazing, and it continued to be rich throughout the day. Torrie and Bob were keen on flowers, and Gustavo was the perfect guide, as botany is a real love of his in addition to birds. Our eyes were on full alert for orchids, begonias, and bromeliads, though often the sound of a new species distracted many away from long inspection!

Getting up to the special places was wild, the road was in very poor shape, so our poor jeeps scraped and bumped, at times it was easier and more rewarding to walk, at times we just wanted out to get fresh air and a leg stretch. So we started and stopped, birded each change of forest with increasing elevation, and at the top were well rewarded! Birds and plants were active throughout the day, so with the same pattern of walking and driving down we saw a great deal.





At the top of the road there is a communications station, protected by the army. Men coming and going to their work must have stories about the birdwatchers, but for us to be greeting in the middle of nowhere... They could not have been more friendly, answered our questions, and after some photos and conversation went on their way. This was one of the surprises of the day!



The other surprise was the stunning beauty of the Andes atop the ridge, and after a misty morning, the arrival of sun! We looked out to endless forests draped in bromeliads and other arboreal plants. All around us were native orchids, flowering shrubs, and in them high elevation hummingbirds like Tyanian Metaltail. We found the Munchique Wood-wren and Rufous Spinetail in a cluster of vegetation near the top, and along the way spied mixed flocks that include the endemic Gold-ringed Tanager and Black-and-gold Tanagers. Michelle spied the near endemic Black Solitaire that had been calling, with some work we got looks, and Orange-breasted Fruiteater. With Cerro Tatama in view we photographed many alpine and montane plants. In the cover of forests going down we found Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonia, Indigo Flowerpiercer, and more. (See our Tour Species List for full details).





It was important to have two days, though we went all the way to the top only one, as there was so much to see. This area is part of the Choco bioregion, one of the richest and most diverse in the world.



As much as nature revealed more that we could take in afield, the show did not stop when we got home to the Montezuma cabins. Here carefully tended feeders around the family gardens brought in myriad hummingbirds. Tanagers also came through, and if we watched they sky, raptors.

We learned to identify the endemic White-tailed Hillstar, the male and female Empress Brilliant which looked like two different species, the impossibly cute Booted Raquet-tail, the plentiful White-necked Jacobin and Rufous-tailed and Steely-vented hummingbirds, and in time we added several more to our list: the Green-crowned Woodnymph, Purple-bibbed Whitetip, tiny Purple-throated Woodstar, Black-

throated Mango, the jewel-toned Andean Emerald and the knock-out Violet-tailed Sylph.

Just beyond the feeders were ponds where they grew the fish we enjoyed at dinner, and rows of vegetables that sustained us. The open landscape let us watch Plumbeous Pigeons and parrots fly to their night roosts. Few words to describe all this but – Wow!







Subsequent days we birded sections of the road, focusing on middle and lower reaches of it to find Crested-Ant Tanager, the Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer that is normally high, but seemed to have come down in search of the flowers so abundant at mid-elevation. We loved the confiding nature of the xx Redstart, and on a hillside holding orange berries got surprisingly great views of Glossy Black Thrush. Purple-mantled and Glistening-green Tanagers topped the favorites list at evening, when we gathered around the table to enjoy lush pots of homemade soups and stews, pasta, fresh salads and more. Even flycatchers are great in this realm, carrying names like Ornate and Handsome, quite true!

Montezuma lies in the Western Cordillera of the Andes, simple, inviting, we rate it as legendary for birding! At the heart of it is the family who took care of us in every way, from the cabins and delicious home-cooked food to providing birding expertise. The owner introduced us to her father our final morning, and we met several of her daughters in the field and working in the kitchen. Leopoldina is a fine birder and found us many of the endemic species. We loved her attention to detail and her ideas to make the stay fun, such as lunch being delivered by horseback!

What a privilege to share their land at the entry this fine national park. The efforts Colombia has made, the significant strides to insuring safety and the ability to explore here are now being appreciated by people from around the world.





Mon., Nov. 17

Montezuma Reserve / La Florida



We had one last morning at Montezuma before heading across the valley to explore the eastern cordillera. Coffee, a good breakfast with the hummingbirds, a walk to the bridge, and we were off, saying good-byes to this wonderful family. The four wheel drives took us back to Pueblo Rico where we reunited with our bus and driver who patiently waited for us. It was then down the mountain, this time on the main highway where the landslide had been cleared.



After leaving Montezuma and its wild spaces, home to Bat Falcon, we passed through extensive agriculture, had lunch at a local café in coffee country, and by nightfall got to our lodge in the little village of Florida. We would have been there sooner, but a large noise coming from our bus raised eyebrows in the small town below there, a second loud noise occurred on the winding mountain road to our lodge.

FLAT TIRE x 2.

It was our intent to end the day with a lovely catered dinner at the hotel, indeed we watched the catering truck pass us as we dodged traffic and tried to keep our driver safe to repair the tire. This turned out to be quite a job, so Gustavo called for help. Everyone was safely shuffled to the hotel, then luggage, and yet still - the dinner was being prepared! Our USA personalities came out as we were exhausted from the day, and really wanted our wine and dinner! When Peg arrived to find sad travelers simply waiting, she intervened, basically saying, let us get to the table and serve SOMETHING, then you can bring the rest. With happy bellies we returned to good graces, and the food – once received – was quite good. At the elevation here of 5000 ft. we enjoyed our porches and the pleasant, cool evening before going to sleep. For some, there was a WIFI gathering in comfortable chairs of the office area, connected again after several days.

Wed., Nov. 18

Otún Quimbaya National Park / Río Blanco Reserve



The town of Florida we woke up in turned out to be charming, decorated with children's murals of birds. Bus service here is by the brightly-painted local bus known as the "Chiva". This morning we visited Otún



Quimbaya, a national park located in the foothills on the west slope of the central Andes, which covers more than 1200 acres of forests, a mix of montane to cloud forests at elevations between 5800 and 7400 ft.

We left early, and they were waiting with breakfast at the park's La Suiza headquarters. We found several species before going in to dine, including rare Red-ruffed Fruitcrows which here for some reason are bold and not hard to find!

After breakfast, we set out on a gentle road, finding endemic Cauca Guan, a Collared Trogon, and Inca Jay readily. We walked up to a bridge where some horses came trotting by (some with riders, some free) as we were setting the scope up on a bridge to admire a female Torrent Duck.



We could have lingered here much longer, the birding being very productive, but after lunch we were scheduled to head on to another star-player in the host of great Colombian birding sites – the Río Blanco Reserve above Manizales.



It took much of the afternoon to get here, passing by a most amazing set up bridges and highway tunnels and turns, witnessing an amazing engineering and road-building feat by any country's standards.



We left the urban corridor, started up into the mountains where we stopped in a garden to pick up a few more hummingbirds (never enough!).

By nightfall we settled into our simple but comfortable accommodations at Rio Bravo, set on a hillside in the heart of the reserve.

To our delight, an orphaned and tame toucanet fledgling perched on the porch rail to greet us, and at dusk a fox came in looking for scraps! The couple managing the reserve obviously had a talent with animals, and they certainly took good care of us too.



Rio Blanco Reserve, about 8000 acres, was established to protect the watershed for the city of Manizales, which we could see in the distance at night. A small facility allowed us to stay on site, a real advantage for the birding. Our group filled the rooms of the lodge, and we could not fit another person into the little dining room of the main house. In the coolness of evening the warmth we created was welcomed, and the food was divine.

We sat on the porch after dinner, having gone out to see two species of owls, and just listened to the sounds, looked up at the stars, and off down valley to the city lights. The cool air made for great sleeping, and we knew we'd need to be up early with the birds.



Wed., Nov. 19

Río Blanco Reserve for the Full Day

Rich coffee and a nice breakfast was ready for us early, as up the road we went, some walking, and others catching up in the bus. We were accompanied by local expert guide, XXX, and he wanted to check a few areas before going to the antpitta feeding stations he so faithfully tended. Up to seven species of antpittas have been coming in to feed!

We were in cloud forest and it was misty as we looked for some of the specialties, finding Masked Saltator, a great look at Collared Trogon, some perched Rusty-faced Parrots, a secretive trio of Black-billed Mountain-Toucans, and several surprisingly cooperative Dusky Piha. We were able to find some difficult species, such as Ash-colored Tapaculo, though right after seeing this the brilliant Crimson-mantled Woodpecker stole the show. We watched it pry food out from lush growth on the branches, soon joined by a Pearl Treerunner.

Over the next two days we visited several of the reserves amazing antpitta feeders, where we were able to sit patiently, and wait for Brown-banded, Bicoloured, Chestnut-crowned, and Chestnut-naped and Slate-crowned Antpittas! We were able to see Plushcrown, and several species of hemispingus. At our turn-around point, a big flock of Golden-plumed Parakeets came in. As we'd seen so many tanagers, a final flock with Red-hooded Tanager in good number (half a dozen) was a treat!

Perhaps the top experience was seeing a huge mixed flock of some of the most sought-after species in the Andes, a host of treerunners, tuftedcheeks, and woodcreepers. Not easy birding, but tremendously rewarding! Several got to see Black-billed Peppershrike, and back at the lodge we had several new hummingbirds, including one quick visit by a Swordbill Hummingbird! Most abundant were Buff-tailed Coronets, easily spotted by their habit of extending their wings in a jerking motion while landing. Bronzy and Collared Inca, and Green Violet-ear were great to watch. And at all times the song of Rufous-collared Sparrow.



Sat., Nov. 20

Río Blanco Reserve / Manizales

This morning we enjoyed birding on the road above the cabins, and we made another visit the antpitta feeding stations for the last chance to see some specialties.

After lunch, we drove a short ways from the reserve to Manizales, a city with dramatic views and hills of the Central Andes.

Our downtown hotel in Manizales was a real contrast from our rural accommodations. As several rooms were not ready, some headed out to walk and explore, others to the bar for a beer and WIFI. City goers got to see Bolivar Plaza with its art and bold statues, and the impressive Catedral de Manizales. A student group was dressed in vintage clothing and enjoying a history tour, we listened in, an got invited to see the governor's building.

We had dinner and a briefing, in anticipation of tomorrow's visit to one of the region's most beautiful national parks, Los Nevados. One last field day, an early start ahead.

Fri., Nov. 21

Los Nevados National Park for the Full Day / Pereira



Los Nevados National Park was everything we hoped for and we had a chance to see flora and fauna of the paramo (open high elevation grassland) habitat. We waited for a long time at dawn, hoping for cracking views of Rufous-fronted Parakeets which we expected to see fly over us at a carefully chosen



viewpoing. Not today! A few got distant looks, but we did pick a up good number of other species as we waited. Breakfast was a picnic on the road.



Sat., Nov. 22

Flights from Pereira, Matecaña International Airport

For some it was a VERY early morning! Cliff and Chan were on a later flight to Bogota, so they had time to look for White-capped Dipper and enjoy the river and grounds of our hotel in Florida.

Adios Colombia, until the next adventure!