

Southern Ecuador | Nov. 5 – 18, 2022

Trip Report | by Steve Shunk



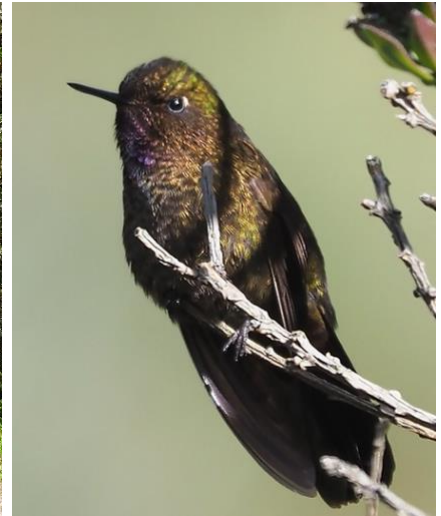
With guides Andrea Molina & Steve Shunk, and participants Donald, Linda, Kathy, Pam, Peter, Rory, and Stephani



From the upper Amazon basin to the Pacific lowlands, our Southern Ecuador tour found over 350 bird species—including 43 species of hummingbirds and 45 flycatchers. We explored alpine lakes at Tres Cruces Pass 4,167 m (13,671 ft.), and we watched flocks of Snail Kites at sea-level wetlands. Our trip supported the nonprofit Jocotoco Conservation Foundation with eight total nights at three of their comfortable lodges, giving us direct access to the best habitats in the region at a range of elevations on both sides of the Andes. Below is a summary of our tour, with highlights from each featured habitat. A few of the group spent an extra day at the end of the trip exploring Antisana National Park, and I have included some notes from this extension.

Sat., Nov. 5 Southern Ecuador

The Ecuadorian Andes are situated between Peru and Colombia, providing a great diversity of habitats across a relatively small geographic area. Ecuador is a hotspot for nature-based tourism, offering a host of wonderful lodges and preserves that draw naturalists and birders seeking a comfortable experience in the neotropical realm. On this encore tour, we visited the southern Andes of Ecuador—both the Atlantic and Pacific slopes—as well as the low-elevation transition zone between the Chocó and Tumbesian ecoregions. We started in Quito,



with casual yet productive birding at the Bougainvillea Lodge, followed by a flight to Cuenca where we spent our first days exploring Cajas National Park. We reached our highest elevations of the trip at Cajas, with spectacular scenery and special birds. After a stopover night in Vilcabamba, we ascended to the Tapichalaca Reserve and Podocarpus National Park, staying three nights at the Jocotoco Foundation's Simpson House. Tapichalaca gave us our first hummingbird station along with memorable antpitta encounters. From here, we descended into the upper Amazon basin at Jocotoco's Copalinga Lodge, followed by three nights at their Umbrellabird Lodge and the days exploring Buenaventura Reserve on the Pacific slope. We ended the tour at Guayaquil.

Birding highlights included hummingbirds at all elevations. We watched Little Sunangel and Collared Inca at Simpson House, Wire-crested Thorntail and Spangled Coquette at Mi Paradise private reserve, Violet-tailed Sylph and White-necked Jacobin at Umbrellabird Lodge and Shining Sunbeam and the endemic Violet-throated Metal-tail in the Cajas highlands. We enjoyed an intimate experience with three Jocotoco Antpittas, a species that was first described for science in 1997! Tumbesian specialties included Rufous-headed Chachalacas at the feeders, a couple of Gray-backed Hawks flying low overhead, noisy Fasciated Wrens and good looks at Three-banded and Gray-and-gold Warblers. We saw Red-headed Barbet and Powerful Woodpecker, plus the endemic El Oro Parakeet and both the Long-wattled and Amazonian Umbrellabirds. The incredibly diverse tanager family, Thraupidae, kept us busy every day, and we tallied nearly 60 tanager species. Needless to say, we had moments when we were overwhelmed with birds! Enjoy this virtual journey through Southern Ecuador.

Sun., Nov. 6 Quito to Cajas

After a casual hotel dinner on arrival night, we departed Quito early the next morning for the short flight to Cuenca, which was highlighted by glimpses of some of Ecuador's stunning glaciated volcanoes. At 2,600 m (8,530 ft.), Cuenca is a clean city, with modern light rail and four rivers running through town. We quickly left the city and drove upstream on the Tomebamba River. Exiting the highway, we drove a cobbled road that featured swaths of native flora and many blooming flowers, with brief looks at Chiguanco Thrush and Brown-bellied Swallow. Ready for some birding, we arrived at the eastern edge of Cajas National Park. We crossed the Cullebrias River and stopped above the shore of Laguna Llaviucu, set at 3,160 m (10,367 ft.). Our casual walk took us about a mile along the western shore of the lake. The wide trail gave us excellent looks at White-throated Tyrannulet and Yellow-breasted Brushfinch, as well as our first encounter with the widespread Spectacled Redstart. The elusive Blackish Tapaculo called from the shrub-covered slopes above. Once we reached the open lake, we found several high-elevation Andean waterbirds including Andean Teal, Andean Gull, and Andean Duck, a close relative of the Ruddy Duck. Among many Slate-colored Coots was one adult with a downy chick. The vegetation along the shore gave us distant looks at Grass Wren and a couple of calling Virginia



Rails, also known as Ecuadorian Rail. The trees and shrubs along the trail brought us our first Great Thrush and Rufous-collared Sparrow of the trip. We drove upslope for lunch at our lodging site, the lovely Dos Chorreras Hosteria, followed by a drive to the old settlement of Guavidula at about 3,500 m (11,482 ft.). Here we heard the haunting call of the Tawny Antpitta, and after some careful searching, we all got excellent scope views of this puffy little bird. Around the old buildings, which have been converted to museum rooms, we found Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and Glowing Puffleg, and the leisurely walk downhill gave us good looks at Mouse-colored Thistletail. We settled into Dos Chorreras before our first formal dinner. This was the most luxurious of our lodging and dining sites for the trip. The main building here is surrounded by woodlands with giant picture windows displaying the nature outside. The structure is built around giant boulders, and a soothing water feature bubbles through the dining room.

Mon., Nov. 7 Cajas National Park

After a hearty breakfast, we lingered outside in the chilly mountain air and found Black Flowerpiercer and Great Thrush, with several Andean Gulls and Andean Teal around the hotel ponds. We spent the rest of the morning exploring the upper reaches of Cajas National Park. These 45-million-year-old mountains were carved by Pleistocene glaciers leaving behind thousands of lakes, nearly 6,000 in all. Habitats at Cajas range from cloud forest to paramo, the latter of which makes up 90 percent of the park. Here we explored the edge of Ecuador's western Andes. A brief stop in Gynoxys shrubland brought us our first endemic bird of the trip. Just like any experienced guide, Andrea got out of the bus and said, "This looks like a great spot for Violet-throated Metal-tail." After less than five minutes, this subtly gorgeous hummingbird made a great showing at close range. But that was only the beginning of this productive stop. We soon found Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and a pair of Tufted Tit-Tyrants, plus a small group of handsome Buff-breasted Mountain-Tanagers. And just before we boarded the bus, an Andean Tit-Spinetail popped up on the Gynoxys trees next to the turnout.

Our next stop took us along a short section of a historic trail dating back to 1860 that provides access to Guayaquil from the Amazon basin. Here, at 4,000 m (13,123 ft.), we sought the Ecuadorian Hillstar, a hummingbird that is near-endemic to Ecuador. This bird specializes on an endemic flower known as Chuquiragua, or spear of fire. Around the historic structures here, we easily found Rufous-winged and Stout-billed Cinclodes among several patches of alpine wildflowers. The hillstar finally made an appearance, followed by the Plumbeous Sierra-Finch. After crossing Tres Cruces pass at 4,167-m (13,671-ft.), we stopped at the park's eastern entrance gate, known as Huagrahuma, or head of the bulls. Among the roadside Polylepis trees, we had a great show from the Shining Sunbeams and a distant Blue-mantled Thornbill. Most importantly, we found a



key Polylepis specialist: Giant Conebill. A Great Sapphirewing made a quick pass while we delighted in the three-note call of the Tawny Antpitta. Before heading back to Dos Chorreras for lunch, we spent some time among the Polylepis and grassy paramo surrounding Laguna Treadora, one of the larger lakes in Cajas Park. With Brown-bellied Swallows overhead, we turned toward a trickling waterfall where a Blue-mantled Thornbill was bathing. On the slow walk back to the bus, we found two more Giant Conebills, while the Many-striped Canastero called from the slope above. We spent the afternoon back at Laguna Llaviucu, this time entering the densely forested east side of the loop trail. Here we encountered our first big mixed flock of songbirds, and in the canopy of a single large tree, we found: Pearled Treerunner, Spectacled Redstart, White-banded Tyrannulet, Streaked Tufted-cheek and Black-crested Warbler. Further down the trail we found another mixed flock, with more redstarts and treerunners plus Amazilia Hummingbird, Blue-backed Conebill and Mountain Wren. A flock of handsome Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucans passed through the canopy and just as a rain shower began, three Turquoise Jays rounded out the day, ending our high-elevation adventures. Llaviucu also produced some great orchids!

Tues., Nov. 8 Cajas to Vilcabamba

We had a long drive today, headed for Vilcabamba, down to 1,595 m (5,233 ft.). Our first stop for fuel and a bathroom at La Paz got us our first good looks at Chiguanco Thrushes, with Great Thrush nearby offering a “great” comparison. Rufous-collared Sparrows sang from the open lots below the fuel station and Eared Doves were in the parking lot. Our first birding stop took us to Reinaldo Espinosa Botanical Garden at 2,160 m (7,086 ft.). We started with a bright Summer Tanager and our first Pacific Hornero, and then a handsome Silvery Tanager bopped around, high in a conifer. Walking through the gardens, we found Golden-rumped Euphonia and Brown-capped Vireo while Three-banded Warblers and Slate-throated Redstarts moved through the trees. But the highlight of this stop was a hummingbird duo, as we had great looks at Rainbow Starfrontlet and the “Loja” Amazilia Hummingbird.

We made a quick stop in Malacatos to look for Chestnut-collared Swallow, to no avail, but we did pick up Fasciated Wren and our first Blue-grey Tanagers in the town square. After checking into our lodge at Hosteria Paraiso, we took a winding drive through the Vilcabamba backroads. We first went in search of Plumbeous Rail, but sadly, the habitat where we used to find this secretive rail had been converted to agriculture. We headed back toward the lodge and just as we crossed a stream, a motmot flew across the road and one of the group saw a “red bird” in the opposite direction. We made a quick stop along the roadside that turned out to be a highlight of the trip! As soon as we got out of the bus, we found the reddish Pacific Hornero and a flock of bright Saffron Finches. While searching for the motmot, we played some pygmy-owl calls and not one, but two Peruvian Pygmy-Owls came in, both calling throughout the stop. We then found a Rufous-browed Peppershrike, a flock of Groove-billed Anis and an Amazilia Hummer. In the middle of the frenzy, a Plumbeous Rail started calling from



the wet meadow below us. We played a recording of its call and it approached the road, but only one in our group actually saw the bird. Meanwhile, Blue-and-white Swallows circled overhead. We ended up finding several of the Pacific subspecies of Pale-legged Hornero, but we never did see the motmot! We ended the day with more horneros and hummers at the lodge.

Wed., Nov. 9 Tapichalaca Reserve and Podocarpus National Park

Our fourth day began with the loud hornero chorus around the lodge, and we enjoyed our first Scrub Blackbird before hitting the road. Our next birding venture was a quest for the Tumbesian-endemic, Elegant Crescentchest, one of four species in the enigmatic Melanopareidae family. We enjoyed a leisurely walk on a nearby dirt road, with tall grasses on the slope above, perfect habitat for the crescentchest. Golden-olive Woodpecker and Smooth-billed Anis got us started, and then we heard our target bird. Blue-and-white Swallows, Blue-gray Tanagers and more horneros distracted us as we tried to get our eyes on the crescentchest. Finally, we were able to see at the bird well—very elegant indeed! Continuing our walk, a Shiny Cowbird and Yellow-browed Sparrow popped up from the meadow above the road, and a Dull-colored Grassquit got away from us before we could get good looks. Around the bend we enjoyed a close flock of noisy Yellow-tailed Orioles, Golden Grosbeak and a Collared Antshrike. A pair of Fulvous-faced Scrub-Tyrants gave us fits, when suddenly another crescentchest started calling, followed by a Peruvian Pygmy-Owl, and then two owls in a nearby tree! As we headed back to the bus, the scolding of a House Wren stood in contrast to the more melodious Rufous-browed Peppershrike.

The morning was warming up, so we headed out for the two-hour drive to the Jocotoco Foundation's Tapichalaca Reserve located on the eastern, Amazonian, slope of the Andes. Our lodging for the next few nights would be the rustic Simpson House. Here, at 2,500 m (8,200 ft.), we would experience a cooler, more humid environment at the border of Podocarpus National Park, surrounded by expansive primary forest. Under low clouds and a misty rain, we arrived at the Simpson House to swarms of hummingbirds. The dominant Chestnut-breasted Coronets were joined by Magenta-throated and Little Sunangels and the handsome Collared Inca. We immersed ourselves in hummers for an hour before lunch followed by a short break. As we filtered back to the porch, Andrea announced the presence of a Powerful Woodpecker below the lodge. We all ran down for distant but clear looks at both male and female woodpeckers, with Chusquea Tapaculo calling in the background. The woodpeckers went their own way, but we easily called in a Black-crested Warbler, and an Orange-breasted Tanager showed well. Joining the haunting tapaculo song were the calls of Chestnut-naped Antpitta and Plain-tailed Wren. High above the lodge, we saw a small flock of Band-tailed Pigeons. We didn't even have to leave the parking area before finding Cinnamon Flycatcher, Green-and-black Fruiteater and two Spectacled Redstarts.



Ushering in our peaceful afternoon, the rain settled and a Fawn-breasted Brilliant came to the feeders along with four Bearded Guans and a Yellow-breasted Brushfinch. A Barred Becard flew low in the canopy and, back down on the road, we heard Slaty-backed Chat-Tyrant and Rufous Spinetail. The afternoon gave us a great introduction to what would be a very productive couple of days.

Thurs., Nov. 10 Antpitta Mania

Our first morning in Tapichalaca started on the deck watching the guans at the feeders. We found Hooded Mountain-Tanager high on the hill and two Scaly-naped Amazons flew over. Russet-crowned Warblers were singing, and the tapaculo's calls continued to haunt the forest around the lodge. We had a morning of antpittas ahead of us. For starters, we followed the local ranger, Diego, a short distance down the trail behind the lodge. We could hear the Chestnut-naped Antpitta, but we really wanted to see it. Diego took care of that. Onto a small side trail he tossed a couple of fat beetle larvae and whistled into the woods. The antpitta came on cue! After very satisfying looks at the bird, we started back toward the lodge, but the distractions were many. A Rufous Wren flushed very close to trail, and then a Rufous Spinetail popped out. We were able to scope a Scaly-naped Amazon in a snag on the ridge, and we had decent looks at a Barred Fruiteater. A tiny Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher came in right over our heads followed by a mixed flock that included three Black-capped Hemispingus and a Plushcap! For our main morning outing, we boarded the bus and drove a short distance up the road to a well-marked trailhead to Sendero Jocotoco. Among the lush primary forest, the trail was lined with ferns and bamboo. Ecuador boasts at least 180 bamboo species, along with hundreds of ferns, and we estimated that there were at least 20-30 different bamboos and dozens of ferns just along our 700-m trail. A few wildflowers and many bromeliads added color to the setting.

The folks in the front of the group got a quick glimpse at an Undulated Antpitta on the trail, our second sighting of this charismatic family. We passed a viewing blind and Diego spread some corn on a small platform feeder—more on this later. We were on a mission, and we soon arrived at a small kiosk with an attractive bench and overhang. We sat down quietly, right on schedule. After no more than a minute, Diego signaled that the antpittas were already coming in. He tossed out some of those juicy grubs, and not one, not two, but three handsome Jocotoco Antpittas sauntered in. The birds took turns walking into the trail, grabbing a grub, and then smacking it on the ground or on a nearby log—a little tenderizing helps the grub go down! The birds were right in front of us, including the well-known “Pancho.” Jocotoco Antpitta was first described for science in 1997, and its presence here was the catalyst for the formation of the Jocotoco Foundation that today includes an impressive network of lodges and reserves that safeguard critical habitat throughout Ecuador. Since then, a small population of Jocotoco Antpittas has been discovered in adjacent Peru, but most of the known territories



lie right here at Tapichalaca. We all got excellent looks and photos, reeling from this amazing experience with a very special bird. With the birds still lingering we continued a short distance down the trail. A Plain-tailed Wren kept us busy, though only giving us cryptic looks. Turning around, a Chestnut-naped Antpitta jumped in front of us on the trail, and a bit further, a Masked Trogon caught our attention, along with a Rufous-browed Peppershrike. We spotted a shining cecropia tree across the canyon, while a Mountain Wren uttered its thin, wispy song on the slope below us. Then we approached the viewing blind we had passed on our way in, but we had to pause to admire both Barred and Green-and-black Fruiteaters that put on a little show for us along with a Rufous-breasted Chat-Tyrant. We filed into the viewing blind and were rewarded with excellent views of the highly sought-after White-throated Quail-Dove below us at the corn feeder. Everyone got great looks at this secretive and elegant bird. Back on the trail, we found a Yellowish Tyrannulet and a stunning Grass-green Tanager. A little further down we found an amazing mixed flock with Blue-capped and Black-and-blue Tanagers joined by Green-and-black Fruiteater, Lacrimose Mountain-Tanager, Pearled Treerunner and Bluish Flowerpiercer. Before reaching the trailhead, two Swallow-tailed Kites flew over, and we saw Hooded Mountain-Tanager, two Plain-tailed Wrens and a small flock of Orange-banded Flycatchers. We rode the bus back to the lodge for a break and another lunch of local cuisine.

Fri., Nov. 11 Afternoon at Valladolid

We spent the next two afternoons downslope in the small town of Valladolid at 1,560 m (5,118 ft.). On our first visit here, we jumped out of the van and found the extremely range-restricted Marañon Thrush, found only in the upper Marañon Valley of Peru and a tiny piece of southern Ecuador. We only had a quick look, but we would be fortunate to find another the next day and get great scope views. In the field next to the road we watched a pair of Silver-beaked Tanagers and two elaenias, Yellow-bellied and Mottle-backed, while a Great Kiskadee called in the distance. And then, at the start of a paved trail, and seemingly without provocation, a frenzy of birds came in. We saw Blue-gray, Blue-necked and Silvery Tanagers, many Saffron Finches, Tropical Kingbird, Streaked Saltator, Chivi Vireo (a cousin of the Red-eyed Vireo), Glittering-throated Emerald, Common Tody-Flycatcher and Black-and-white and Yellow-bellied Seedeaters. This was a quintessential mixed flock of tropical songbirds! Continuing down the trail that followed the Valladolid River, with the light behind us, we had good looks at a few birds on the opposite side of the canyon including Yellow-faced Tyrannulet, two Golden-eared Tanagers, three Tropical Kingbirds and two more Blue-necked Tanagers. We also watched a Torrent Tyrannulet flycatching along the river. Farther still, we found Yellow-throated Chlorospingus, three Great Kiskadees, Slaty-capped Flycatcher and Three-striped Warbler, all making passes across the river. A Rufous-breasted Flycatcher showed well along with a White-bellied Woodstar and Andean Motmot, and we heard Gray-breasted Wood-



Wren as a handsome Red-headed Barbet appeared at the end of the trail. It was a great wrap-up for a day with nearly 75 bird species!

Sat., Nov. 12 Birding Around the Simpson House

We spent the next morning at the feeders. The guans were out along with a couple of Chestnut-capped Brushfinches, all coming to the corn feeder. The hummingbirds were joined by a Fawn-breasted Brilliant and a Speckled Hummingbird, both cloud-forest specialists of the eastern slopes of the Andes. The morning chorus included Great Thrush, Chestnut-naped Antpitta, Black-crested Warbler and Barred Becard. Wandering slowly down the driveway, we had excellent looks at Buff-breasted Mountain-Tanager, Grass-green Tanager and Russet-crowned Warbler. Hooded Mountain-Tanager appeared on the slope and the local Scaly-naped Parrots flew overhead. We moved to the Chestnut-naped Antpitta trail where we encountered a few mixed flocks. Highlights included Gray-hooded Bush-Tanager, Common Chlorospingus, Bluish Flowerpiercer, White-tailed and Black-capped Tyrannulets as well as good looks at Rufous-headed Pygmy-Tyrant. We tried to coax a pair of Chusquea Tapaculos out of the thicket, but they would remain on the heard-only list. After a short break, we headed downhill on the main road. Immediately we ran into another mixed flock with Pearled Treerunner, more bush-tanagers and our first Citrine Warbler. Chestnut-naped and Equatorial Antpittas called from opposite sides of the road, and a little lower we ran into three Yellow-breasted Brushfinches and three Hooded Mountain-Tanagers. One of the highlights of the walk was chasing to get good looks at a handsome Crimson-mantled Woodpecker, which we finally saw well in the scope. Turquoise Jays called and as we made our way past a couple of landslides, two Cinnamon Flycatchers and a Chestnut-bellied Chat-Tyrant shined on the roadside, and then another fast-moving flock moved past. This group included seven Pearled Treerunners and a Masked Flowerpiercer and we got our best looks yet at Grass-green Tanager. As the flock moved around the hill, a Long-tailed Sylph flew above the road.

Sun., Nov. 13 Back at Valladolid

We returned to Valladolid for the afternoon, this time following the road uphill from the river where we immediately ran into yet another mixed flock, this one with Rufous-tailed Tyrant, Streak-necked Flycatcher, Tropical Parula and Ash-browed Spinetail. A pair of White-lined Tanagers joined the flock, and here we finally had good looks at the Marañon Thrush. All it takes is a few meters down the road and you run into more birds! We found another flock with Blue-browed Tanagers, Summer Tanager, Golden-winged Manakin, Lafresnaye's Piculet, Golden-naped Tanager and Montane Foliage-gleaner. Further up the road we found Olivaceous



Woodcreeper, Black-and-white Becard, Blue-necked Tanager, Golden-faced Tyrannulet and a Smoky-brown Woodpecker.

This nondescript dirt road continued to produce new birds. We found White-winged Brushfinch, Rufous-winged Tyrannulet, Common Tody-Flycatcher and Silvery Tanager. Andean Solitaire sang to us from above the road, but we never got an eye on the bird. We were enjoying a female White-booted Racquet-tail when a Broad-winged Hawk flew over, landing on the ridge. Later, we took the bus back to the bridge at the entrance to Valladolid where we ran into Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Mottle-backed Elaenia, Black Phoebe and Golden-rumped Euphonia, then wrapped up the day with a nice flock of Chestnut-collared Swifts.

Mon., Nov. 14 Tapichalaca to Copalinga

After breakfast on day seven—and a quick hummer fix at the feeders—we left Tapichalaca and headed for the town of Vilcabamba. We struck out here a few days earlier when looking for a special swallow, so we thought we'd try it again. In the square, we found plenty of Eared Doves, plus the same family of Fasciated Wrens we'd seen before, with adults feeding fledglings. Just a block away we scanned around the church bell tower and the swallows were in! Active mud nests (think Cliff Swallows from back home) lined the eaves of the Santuario Dionesano Señor de la Caridad, and we counted at least 100 Chestnut-collared Swallows. We enjoyed watching them flush from the tower and swirl around the skyline before returning to their nests and roost sites. Leaving town, we headed for the old Loja-Zamora Road that is situated at about 1,520 m (5,000 ft.). Here the road traversed a scenic canyon, and our main target species was the handsome Torrent Duck. We weren't out of the van five minutes when we found the first two ducks, a male and female, surfing the rapids of the Zamora River. As the pair floated downstream, we watched Blue-and-white Swallows flying around the bridge, visiting a drain pipe in the retaining wall where they had a nest. We put a scope on the site and found four young peering out of the entrance! Down the road we found a mixed flock with two Yellow-throated Chlorospingus, Blackburnian Warbler and a few Three-striped warblers. Both vulture species continued their daily presence, and a flock of "Inca" Green Jays called from across the river, and we found two Black Phoebes and a Gray-breasted Wood-Wren followed by another Black Phoebe who posed at a small waterfall. At our final stop along the river, we watched a flock of Crested Oropendolas fly in, and yet another Black Phoebe worked the river below. We arrived at Copalinga and we immediately immersed in a slew of new birds including Green Honeycreeper, Green-and-gold Tanager, many Palm Tanagers and both Orange-bellied and Thick-billed Euphonias. Multiple Swainson's Thrushes made their "drip" calls from the surrounding forest, and Buff-throated Saltator and Red-crested Finch approached the platform feeders. After the ranger restocked the platform feeders with bananas, it only took a



few minutes for a troupe of White-fronted Capuchins to invade the feeding station. They cleared out the bananas in no time! From the dense forest surrounding the lodge, Russet-backed Oropendola and Canada Warbler kept us busy, while both Black-billed and White-necked Thrushes called from deeper in the canopy. We shuffled ourselves away from the feeders to watch hummingbirds feeding on the verbena and other garden flowers. Within a few minutes, we saw seven hummer species: Wire-crested Thorntail, Little Woodstar, Violet-fronted Brilliant, Many-spotted Hummingbird, White-bellied Woodstar, Golden-tailed Sapphire and Fork-tailed Woodnymph. On our final afternoon outing, we hiked up the trail in search of the lodge's resident Gray Tinamou. Like the antpittas at Tapichalaca, the tinamou has become habituated to being fed by the rangers. On our way up the hill, we found another Green Jay along with Brown Violetear and a striking Spotted Tanager. With the sound of the Bombuscaro River in the canyon below, we watched a Swallow Tanager flycatching at the top of the low canopy. The shrill call of the Masked Tanager preceded the approach of another Russet-backed Oropendola. The Green Jay became a flock of jays, and as if that weren't enough color in the trees, they were joined by a flock of Paradise Tanagers. Like clockwork, the tinamou was already at the viewing blind when we arrived. The ranger dumped a bunch of corn on the trail, and the tinamou was followed by another Green Jay, providing drop-dead looks. We headed back down the trail to take a little break before dinner when a Yellow-headed Manakin started calling. We enjoyed still more Green Jays and an Ecuadorian Tyrannulet as we gathered to do the checklist. Then a pauraque called below the lodge, and a Gray-chinned Hermit made a brief stop at the hummer feeder.

Tues., Nov. 15 Podocarpus Park and Mi Paradise

After a night with the bouncing call of Band-bellied Owl, we awoke to the sound of the pauraque, and while we waited for breakfast, a Sickie-winged Guan made an appearance. Speckled Chachalaca joined us for breakfast, and Sparkling Violetear was the first hummingbird of the morning. Rounding out our breakfast birding, we enjoyed the song of the Tropical Parula while Orange-billed Sparrows and guans came into the feeders. We got an early start on the Podocarpus Trail, part of Podocarpus National Park. One of our first birds was the gorgeous Andean Motmot. A Plain Antvireo made a brief appearance, and we found Masked Tityra around the next bend. We arrived at the ranger station and a superb viewing area cleared of vegetation to provide 360-degree views of tropical splendor. A colony of Russet-backed Oropendolas occupied the trees, and one of the birds continuously displayed above us. But the displays didn't stop there. Without leaving the area, two pairs of Andean Cocks-of-the-rock performed their bowing courtship ritual, and then, rounding out the two-cotinga show, in came a displaying Amazonian Umbrellabird!



Before we headed out again on the trail, a couple of Crested Oropendolas and a Scarlet-rumped Cacique passed through. On our short walk we encountered a small flock with Yellow-throated Chlorospingus, a few Paradise Tanagers and Orange-eared Tanager, all the while with oropendolas squawking overhead. These birds were joined by Yellow-bellied Tanager, Ashy-throated Chlorospingus and a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper. We didn't have to go much farther before running into an amazing mixed flock of tanagers that included Yellow-bellied, Spotted, Golden-eared, Green-and-gold, Golden and Bay-headed along with Green Honeycreeper, Bananaquit, Slate-throated Redstart and a few Blue-naped Chlorophonias! We enjoyed our second look of the trip at Lafresnaye's Piculet and a White-necked Thrush gorged on small fruits above us. Then we found a Green Hermit displaying from low inside the canopy and we watched a female Umbrellabird overhead.

We had a break at the lodge and enjoyed the resident birds as we prepared for our next outing. Olivaceous Woodcreeper ascended the nearby trees while Speckled Chachalaca, Green Jay and Palm Tanagers came to the bananas. After cryptic looks at a Coppery-chested Jacamar, the bird finally came into the open, giving us great scope views. A Buff-throated Saltator passed through and Violet-fronted Brillants and Wire-crested Thorntails perched for us in the cecropia tree. We later headed down the highway a short distance to a small, private reserve that is famous for its hummingbird diversity—because we hadn't seen enough hummingbirds yet! Named "Mi Paradise," the property was heavily planted with purple verbena shrubs, and hummers-a-plenty came in for the show. Golden-tailed Sapphire was joined by Glittering-throated Emerald and a handsome male Wire-crested Thorntail. Sparkling Violetear, Little Woodstar, Amethyst Woodstar and White-bellied Woodstar all made extended appearances. But the highlight of the spot was the hotly anticipated Festive Coquette. We thought we would have to be satisfied with an immature bird, but then a stunning male finally came in for a beautiful viewing experience. Rounding out the afternoon at Mi Paradise, we saw both Scarlet-rumped and Yellow-rumped Caciques, along with a flock of Violaceous Jays. Several tanagers at the site including Palm, Paradise, Yellow-bellied, Swallow, Turquoise and Fawn-breasted. We also found Yellow-crowned and Sooty-headed Tyrannulets, and then heard Dark-breasted Spinetail, and we made a concerted effort to get our eyes on this Amazonian bird. Just before leaving, we enjoyed great looks at a Yellow-bellied Dacnis.

Wed., Nov. 16 Buenaventura and Umbrellabird Lodge

The next morning, we departed Copalinga and drove through Loja to the old Loja-Catamayo Road, which gave us looks at the now-familiar horneros and Chiguanco Thrushes along with White-tipped Dove and Long-tailed Mockingbird. We took a leisurely walk along the road and found four Pacific Parrotlets followed by White-browed Gnatcatcher and Fulvous-faced Scrub-Tyrant. A flock of Gray-rumped Swifts twittered overhead, and the



ubiquitous House Wrens skulked around in the bushes. Traversing the dry, scrubby slope, we spotted an Andean Tinamou crossing the road in front of the bus. Later we flushed a White-tipped Dove down the slope, and our target, Marañon Tyrannulet, responded to our pygmy-owl call. This drive took us to about 2,350 m elevation, or 7,700 ft. After a roadside lunch we reached the entrance road to Umbrellabird Lodge. However, after a kilometer or so, we discovered that the road was washed out. Our driver's skills were on full display as he deftly turned out bus around on the very narrow road. Then we made our way to the lower entrance road, a longer, rugged drive, but we were rewarded when a Yellow-throated Toucan posed for us next to the road. Once we reached the lodge, we went straight to the viewing deck and were swarmed with hummingbirds. Dozens of tiny Green Thorntails seemed to dominate the scene, but they were joined by Andean Emerald, Green-crowned Brilliant, Fawn-breasted Brilliant and a few White-necked Jacobins. Besides the hummingbirds, Bananaquits and Green Honeycreepers visited the nectar feeders, and two Rufous-headed Chachalacas came in for the papayas. As we lost the day's light, the hummers kept feeding and we had to pull ourselves away for dinner.

Thurs., Nov. 17 More at Buenavista

After a soothing rain in the night, the mantled howler monkeys greeted the dawn with their growling chorus. We spent most of the morning on the deck and around the lodge finding White-shouldered Tanager and "Lemon-rumped" Flame-rumped Tanager as well as Black-crowned Antshrike, Plain-brown and Spotted Woodcreepers, and Gray-and-gold and Buff-rumped Warblers. "Pale-Mandibled" Collared Aracaris mobbed the banana feeder and the western mountain coatis mobbed the kitchen. While we waited for our breakfast, the Long-wattled Umbrellabird, namesake of the lodge itself, flew in giving us stunning looks, and Rufous-fronted Wood-Quail called in the distance. After breakfast we could hardly leave the lodge! Violet-bellied Hummingbird approached the feeders and One-colored Becard moved at eye-level through the canopy. The coatis continued to put on a show, bringing their babies to wander the deck, and a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper appeared in the trees, followed by Brown Violetear at the feeders. A handsome White-whiskered Hermit first showed at the flowers and then approached the feeders. Southern Rough-winged Swallows sat on the wire for easy viewing and a pair of Swallow Tanagers worked the trees close to the deck, with a male carrying nesting material. A distant Chestnut-backed Antbird added to the chorus from deep in the forest. Hummingbirds in the flowering tree across the driveway included Long-tailed Hermit and a stunning male Violet-tailed Sylph. Above us, a young male and a female Purple Honeycreeper headed toward the feeders. As the morning progressed, the howler monkeys moved in. Two Saffron Finches brightened up the light post and as we walked down the road through the hummingbird "tunnel," we found both Bay Wren and Black-crowned Antshrikes. "Don't watch the



hummingbirds!” became a rallying cry to keep us from getting distracted by all the hummers buzzing around us. As we descended, a Yellow-throated Toucan called from the canyon and a Thrush-like Schiffornis called from right next to the road. White-throated spadebill bopped around the bushes before finally perching in the open. Two male White-bearded Manakins snapped from the trees above, giving us distant but satisfying looks, and we peered into the foliage, trying in vain to see the Bay Wren, instead seeing an Orange-billed Sparrow. While we tried to coax the wren into view, a Crowned Woodnymph distracted us—see what I meant about the hummers!

When we hit an opening in the roadside vegetation, we found a flycatcher trio: Slaty-capped Flycatcher, Common Tody-Flycatcher and Southern Beardless Tyrannulet. We wrapped up the morning walk with Black-crowned Antshrike, Violet-bellied Hummingbird, Yellow-Yellow-rumped Cacique, and Red-rumped Woodpecker. After lunch and a casual midday break, we took an afternoon walk on the Umbrellabird Trail where the highlights were a pair of White-bearded Manakins and a mixed flock dominated by Yellow-throated Chlorospingus. Sounds from the forest included Song Wren and Rufous Motmot. Back up on the main road, we found two ovenbirds—the Streaked Xenops and Lineated Foliage-gleaner. Olive-streaked Flycatcher and White-whiskered Hermit showed well, and two Crested Guans flushed above us, with two more on the opposite side of the road. Back near the lodge, a Bronze-winged Parrot flew over the canopy. And just when we thought we could get ready for dinner, we heard that one of the rangers found a special owl down the road near the Umbrellabird Trail. We quickly gathered the troops and raced to the trailhead. And tucked away, deep in the forest, was a gorgeous Crested Owl! A great end to the day.

Fri., Nov. 18 Lower Buenaventura

It was our last full day of birding here, but we weren’t quite done with Buenaventura. Once again dragging ourselves away from the hummingbird frenzy at the lodge, we hopped on the bus and drove down the Río Naranjo, on our way to Buenaventura Finca to search for the endemic and endangered El Oro Parakeet. In a similar story as the Jocototo Antpitta, the El Oro Parakeet was not described scientifically until 1988. A relatively plain, greenish parakeet, the bird is unremarkable in appearance but extraordinary in its presence. This extremely range-restricted bird inspired the creation of the Buenaventura Reserve, occurring only on the Pacific slope of Ecuador and only in the provinces of El Oro and Azuay. Only about 120 birds occur at Buenaventura Finca—on about 1,000 hectares (2,471 ac.)—so we would need some luck on our side to see the birds. We arrived on the property, an expanse of humid evergreen forest adjacent to pasture. As soon as we got off the bus, a flock of El Oros zoomed overhead, squawking just like parakeets do. Not a very satisfactory look. We walked up the hill toward the old homestead and watched a pair of Bronze-winged Parrots as howler monkeys



growled in the distance. At the road's end, we heard a Whiskered Wren and got good looks at a Peruvian Tyrannulet. We walked behind the old house, finding two Beryl-spangled Tanagers below us, a striking bird for the day. In the gully below the hill, we heard the haunting song of the Andean Solitaire along with a White-throated Crake, a Chocó and Caribbean rainforest specialist. A Club-winged Manakin also called below us, and we found a Great Black Hawk perched across the canyon. We saw a female Variable Seedeater and an Olive-crowned Yellowthroat sang right in front of us, though seeing the bird proved difficult in the tall grasses. Soon, in the distance, we heard a flock of approaching parakeets. We followed the sound and the flock appeared—16 birds, still at some distance—flying up the canyon. Andrea chased after them, hoping to find the roost spot while the rest of us continued to stake out the top of the hill. I walked around the house to look for Andrea and suddenly a small flock of parakeets flew very low right over the house! For a very brief moment, we all had up-close looks at this endangered gem of El Oro! Back in the upper driveway, we had great looks at two Gray-backed Hawks that soared close overhead and joined two vultures and a third hawk on a rising thermal. Gray-breasted Wood-Wren called from the trees as did Blue-gray Tanager. Just before Andrea rejoined us, we found two mountain-tanagers that at first looked like Blue-winged, however, once Andrea saw our photos, she confirmed that we had seen two Black-chinned Mountain-Tanagers, an enigmatic species that is endemic to the western slope of the Andes in northern Ecuador and western Colombia. These individuals are part of a disjunct population at the extreme southern end of the species' range.

We knew we were done with the parakeets, so we descended the hill, following a trail to a hummingbird station along the Moro River, the Jardin de Colibries, managed by the Jocotoco Foundation and supported by the American Bird Conservancy. We settled in among the swarm of hummers and found no fewer than 10 species, including the star of the show, the Velvet-purple Coronet. A few other specialties gave us excellent looks, such as White-booted Racquet-tail and Violet-tailed Sylph, among the more abundant Andean Emeralds, Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, Green Thorntails, White-necked Jacobins and others. While watching hummers we heard the distinctive calls of the massive Guayaquil Woodpecker and after a few minutes of searching we found an adult male and juvenile female of this gorgeous species, then headed back to the Umbrellabird Lodge for lunch and an afternoon break. That afternoon we wandered downstream along the main entrance road on the outskirts of the preserve. A large flock of White-collared Swifts fed over the canyon, and a pair of Tropical Kingbirds worked the canopy below. We found a Common Tody-Flycatcher below the road while a Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant teased us with its call. A Yellow-throated Toucan persistently called from across the canyon. Suddenly, we got sucked in by our last mixed flock of the trip.



This was truly a grand finale and we identified at least 10 species with both Plain and Streaked Xenops plus Bay-headed, Guira, White-shouldered and Blue-necked Tanagers. A Lesser Greenlet was new for our trip, as was a tiny Black-tailed Flycatcher. As we sorted through the flock, eight Bronze-winged Parrots flew up the canyon and just over the road we had great looks at a Squirrel Cuckoo. Then we found our first and only Olivaceous Piculet of the tour. Finally the Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant flew in, but it eluded good views. Near the end of our walk, a Chocó Toucan called in the distance, and we found a Dusky-capped Flycatcher in the trees along the ridge. Still adding to the trip list, a dozen Short-tailed Swifts flew up the canyon, four Collared Aracaris crossed the road and we saw both male and female One-colored Becards. Our last birds of the afternoon included our first and only Streak-headed Woodcreeper and Yellow-bellied Siskins, a fine finish to our stay at Buenavista Reserve and the Umbrellabird Lodge!

Sat., Nov. 19 Buenavista to Guayaquil

On our final morning of the trip, we spent some quality time at the lodge feeders, garnering good looks at male Purple Honeycreeper and yet another “trip bird” in the adjacent forest, a male Gartered Trogon. Further distractions included many tanagers, hummers and warblers along with Olivaceous Woodcreeper and Black-crowned Antshrike. We saw a Roadside Hawk on the route out. Our drive took us all the way downslope to Camino Puerto Jeli, our first birding at sea level and a very productive roadside stop. We found a series of small ponds teeming with waterfowl, nearly all of which were new for the trip. We saw White-cheeked Pintails, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Wattleed Jacanas, White Ibis and Wood Stork, plus Neotropic Cormorant and Roseate Spoonbill. Land birds along the fringes of the ponds included our first Greater Ani, Ecuadorian Ground-Doves and Great-tailed Grackle. Masked Water-Tyrant and Green Kingfisher fed actively over the water while two Snail Kites and a flock of Pacific Parrotlets looked on. Cocoli and Striated Herons were among the seven heron species we found. We continued northward toward Guayaquil, flanking small wetlands surrounded by huge banana plantations. Southern Rough-winged Swallows lines the wires and fed over the fields, and we saw Pale-banded Pigeons and Social Flycatchers along the road, plus a single Amazon Kingfisher. We stopped for lunch at El Seman, a nice little empanada café surrounded by farmland and a small grove of giant raintrees that we explored after eating. A calling Black-winged Saltator was never seen by the group, but we got excellent looks at Ecuadorian Thrush, Ringed Kingfisher and Black-cheeked Woodpecker. Many Blue-gray Tanagers squeaked from the tops of the trees, and we saw a Spotted Sandpiper along the canal. Yellow-rumped Caciques and Shiny Cowbirds were conspicuous around the fields, and we got nice looks at our only Gray-cheeked Parakeets in the tree right over the restaurant. We had wrapped up our birding for the trip and we made our way toward Guayaquil. That is, we thought we had wrapped up! As we headed down the final stretch of highway, we saw several trees full of raptors with many more in the sky and still more along the power lines. We stopped the bus to check out the scene. Scanning the flock, we realized that nearly all of the birds we saw were Snail Kites. In a



panoramic video taken from the bus, we counted over 500 birds, and we couldn't even see beyond the first line of trees! None of us had even heard of concentrations like this. Though the species is widespread in the neotropics, these birds are apparently part of a disjunct coastal population in western Ecuador. It was an amazing experience—one we will never forget—and a stunning way to end the trip.

In Summary

Over the course of 13 days, including the Antisana extension, we found a stunning 373 species, only 12 of which were found at Antisana (see below). This tally includes 58 species in the tanager family, 45 flycatchers, 43 hummingbirds, 23 ovenbirds, 15 raptors and 13 warblers, including Blackburnian and Canada Warblers, both North American breeders. Among these totals, 23 species were identified only by the guides, and only three birds were heard-only. We explored both the Pacific and Atlantic sides of Ecuador's southern Andes including portions of both the Tumbesian and Chocó ecoregions on the Pacific slope. We visited three preserves owned and managed by the nonprofit Jocotoco Foundation, and all three brought us unique species and memorable experiences. Even some of us who had been to Ecuador before saw over 100 life birds! Thanks to our local guide Andrea Molina, we all left her home country with great memories that will last a lifetime.

Antisana Day-Trip Extension

A few of the group spent the night in Quito prior to the Amazonian tour extension, and I joined them for a day trip to Antisana National Park. We drove southeast from Quito toward the Antisana volcano, one of the largest in Ecuador at 5,753 m, 18,875 ft. The summit remained in the clouds all day, but we still enjoyed an amazing experience in the high Andes. Besides reaching the paramo habitat, our big goal for the day was to see Andean Condors. We ascended the mountain, traversing an impressive lava flow that dates back only 1,600 years. We arrived at our first stop, Mirador Isco, and as soon as we reached the viewing platform, we saw our first condor. Birds in the shrubs surrounding the platform included Black Flowerpiercer, Tyrian Metaltail and Plain-colored Seedeater. We saw two more condors from the platform as well as a Giant Hummingbird feeding at a tall Puya inflorescence. We continued up the mountain finding five more condors before driving a bit further where our first roadside stop brought us both Many-striped and Streak-backed Canasteros as well as Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, Great Thrush and two Carunculated Caracaras. Another condor flew along the ridge and a Plumbeous Sierra-Finch called from a rock pile. A little farther up the road, we stopped at an old farmhouse where we saw another Chestnut-winged Cinclodes and Plumbeous Sierra-Finch. As a bonus here, we enjoyed watching a female Ecuadorian Hillstar feeding along the cliff and carrying nesting material to a the barn. A Stout-billed Cinclodes also showed on the slope above.

Still higher on the road, at just under 4,000 m (13,000 ft.), we encountered an American Kestrel and a herd of over 30 white-tailed deer. An adult Variable Hawk flew along the ridge and a little farther up we watched a Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle feeding on the ground, and then a caracara came in to clean up the mess. We finally reached the paramo, a cold, wet grassland landscape dotted with ponds and rivulets, where the low clouds gave the landscape a spooky atmosphere. We counted at least 26 Andean Gulls and many more caracaras across the paramo, having reached our highest point of the day at about 4,080 m (13,400 ft.). A couple of Plain-capped Ground-Tyrants scurried along the ground, and one flew into the viewing shelter with nesting material. We continued on the road and saw two Andean Ibis flying low over the grassy landscape and then came to Laguna Micacocha, or simply Laguna de la Mica. More gulls lined the shoreline of the lake, which also held Andean Teal, Andean Duck, Neotropic Cormorant, Great Egret and Slate-colored Coot. Sierra-finches and cinclodes were the only songbirds braving the bitter cold and misty habitat. After braving the cold ourselves, we headed back downslope for a delicious lunch at Tambo Condor restaurant. Besides lunch, the restaurant also serves up a host of hummingbirds at its feeders, and we saw Giant Hummingbird, Sparkling Violetear, Shining Sunbeam, Tyrian Metaltail, Black-tailed Trainbearer and Great Sapphirewing buzzing through the gardens. Rounding out the afternoon were lots of Black Flowerpiercers and Rufous-collared Sparrows, and a Tawny Antpitta called from the slope behind the restaurant. We returned to the hotel that afternoon, and all agreed that Antisana was a very worthy addition to the tour!

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Steve Shunk - SS), Peruvian Pygmy-Owl (SS), Spangled Coquette (SS), White-faced Capuchin (SS), Swallow Tanager (SS), Amethyst-throated Sunangel (SS), Group (SS), Violet-throated Metaltail (SS), Cyrtorchilum orchid (SS), Blue-mantled Thornbill (SS), Rainbow Starfrontlet (SS), Yellow-tailed Oriole (SS), Gray-breasted Mountain Toucan (NJ Stock), Blue-gray Tanager (NJ Stock), Collared Inca (SS), Tapichalaca Sign (SS), Group Resting (SS), Chestnut-naped Antpitta (SS), Jocotoco Antpitta (SS), Valladolid Sign (SS), Golden-eared Tanager (SS), Chestnut-bellied Chat-Tyrant (SS), Lafresnaye's Piculet (SS), White-faced Capuchin (SS), Cinnamon Flycatcher (SS), Blue-and-White Swallow Nest (SS), Podocarpus Sign (SS), Green Jay (SS), Green Honeycreeper (SS), Golden-rumped Euphonia (SS), Group Hiking (SS), Green Thorntails (SS), Gray Tinamou (SS), Yellow-rumped Cacique (NJ Stock), Amazonian Umbrellabird (SS), Rufous-headed Chachalaca (SS), Ridge-browed Carpenter Bee (check layout) (SS), Violet-tailed Sylph (SS), Violet-bellied Hummingbird (SS), Erycina Orchid (SS), Black-chinned Mountain-Tanager (SS), Gray-backed Hawk (SS), Guayaquil Woodpecker (SS), Tyrian Metaltail (SS), Andean Condor (SS), Giant Red-winged Grasshopper (SS), Giant Hummingbird (SS), Squirrel Cuckoo (NJ Stock), Antisana Volcano (NJ Stock)