Eagle-Eye Tours



An introduction to Neotropical bird families

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The Neotropics are the tropical areas of the Americas and offer arguably the most exciting and exhilarating birding to be found anywhere in the world! Flipping through a field guide to the birds of any South American or Central American country – Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Panama and so on – a birder will be struck by the astonishing diversity of birds and the amazing parade of exotic families - Toucans, Aracaris, Jacamars, Motmots, Trogons, Cotingas, Manakins, Antbirds, Leaftossers, Woodcreepers, Foliage-gleaners, Puffbirds, Barbets, Parrots and Macaws, with dozens of hummingbirds and hundreds of flycatchers and tanagers. **Toucans** are the quintessential tropical birds, instantly recognizable by their unusual, oversized bills. They are native to the tropics of the Americas and favour old-growth forests where they nest in holes in large old trees. Toucans mostly eat fruit, but will occasionally eat insects, small birds, and lizards if the opportunity arises. They are excellent seed dispersers, helping to spread the seeds of fruit trees throughout their forest home. Toucans and their smaller cousins the aracaris and toucanets all have large, often brightly-coloured bills, which is unusually big for their body size. The bill itself however is remarkably light; it is formed by a matrix of thin criss-crossed bony 'rods', filled-in with a spongy form of keratin, creating a horny sheath (similar to fingernails) with serrated edges resembling teeth used for tearing fruit.



Keel Billed Toucan

Another fascinating family of birds in the neotropics are the **Motmots**, so called after the call note of one species which sounds like “mot-mot”. They occur mainly in the tropical forests of Central America and are brightly coloured, heavy-billed birds that perch in shady areas from which they launch out to capture prey, such as insects or lizards. A feature of most species is that they have a distinctive racquet-like tip to their tails. The barbs near the end of the two longest (central) tail feathers are weak, and fall off with abrasion from substrates, or during preening, leaving a length of bare shaft, thus creating this raquet shape. Motmots also have a peculiar behaviour of wagging their tails from side to side, possibly to indicate to a potential predator that is has been seen and the motmot is ready to escape.



Turquoise-browed Motmot

Jacamars and their close relatives the **puffbirds** occur from Mexico throughout the neotropics to Brazil, and are principally birds of low-altitude forests, especially favouring forest edges. Jacamars are elegant, iridescent birds with long bills and tails, often with bright glossy plumage; their hunting behaviour is to sit and wait on a favoured perch, and should a prey (often a butterfly or a moth) come flying by, to sally out and capture it. Most jacamars nest in holes in the banks of rivers, and both male and female incubate the eggs and provide food for the young. Puffbirds are quiet, unobtrusive birds that spend a good part of each day sitting on a perch and waiting for prey to pass by. They lack the iridescent colours of jacamars, being mainly brown, rufous or grey, with large heads, large eyes, and flattened bills with a hooked tip. Their loose plumage and short tails makes them look stout and puffy, giving rise to the name puffbird.



Rufous-tailed Jacamar



White-whiskered Puffbird © Jared Clarke The **cotingas** are a large family of neotropics birds that include some amazing species; the exquisite cock-of-the-rocks which are a blazing orange, red and black, the umbrellabirds with their bizarre head and breast adornments, the bellbirds with peculiar wattles and with one of the loudest calls in the bird world, the Screaming Piha with equally loud and far-carrying cries. Some species (such as cock-of-the-rocks) are renowned for their lekking behaviour: the males gather in a favoured location close to the forest floor where they call and display to try to attract a female.



Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock © Paul Prior



Three-wattled Bellbird

Macaws are a group of New World parrots that sport long tails and are brightly coloured, and are a favourite for the caged bird industry. Most macaws occur in rainforests although some prefer savannas. They have proportionately larger bills, longer tails and bare facial patches which distinguish them from other parrots, and have loud raucous calls that can be heard from long distances away. Interestingly, the bare facial patches are as unique as a fingerprint. They nest in holes high up in tall tropical trees. They have zygodactyl toes, in which the first and fourth toes point backwards; this allows a macaw to pick up objects such as a fruit and hold it in its claws whilst eating it.



Scarlet Macaw

Trogons and **quetzals** are residents of tropical forests, primarily in the Americas although some trogons occur in Africa and Asia. They have broad bills and weak legs, and feed on insects and fruit. They have soft and colourful plumage, with the Resplendent Quetzal having long plumes from the upper tail coverts and, like many trogons, is a superb study of brilliant greens, reds and whites. Trogons, along with other species in Central America, undergo altitudinal migrations, from breeding habitats in mountainous areas to lower altitudes at different seasons. They are generally inactive outside of infrequent flights, spending much time perched quietly and motionless on a favoured perch.



Guianan Trogon



Resplendent Quetzal

Manakins are small, compact, short-tailed birds with rounded wings and large heads, that occupy the lower canopy of tropical forests in the New World. Plumage of males is often a striking pattern of black, reds, yellows and blues, with long decorative tail or crown feathers, whereas females are usually a dull green or brown. However manakins are well known for their bizarre courtship displays that include dances and distinctive vocalizations of whistles, trills and buzzes. Courtship displays are particularly spectacular and elaborate in those manakin species that lek; in fact, in some species, two or more males cooperate in a visually remarkable performance to impress a female, involving heavily modified wing feathers which they use to make buzzing and snapping sounds.



Red-capped Manakin

Hummingbirds are only found in the Americas, and the greatest diversity of hummingbirds is found in northern South America, especially in the Andes. The smallest bird in the world is the Bee Hummingbird, of Cuba, and the largest is the Giant Hummingbird, native to the Andes. They are specialized for feeding on flower nectar, but all species also consume flying insects or spiders. They are known as hummingbirds because of the humming sound created by their beating wings, which flap at high frequencies audible to humans. They hover in mid-air at rapid wing-flapping rates, which vary from around 12 beats per second in the largest species to around 80 per second in small hummingbirds. Several species have striking plumage coloration and long and bizarrely shaped tail feathers, and many species have coevolved with flowers; this coevolution matches the hummingbird's bill length, bill curvature, and body mass with morphological traits of plants, such as corolla length, curvature, and volume.



Violet Sabrewing

Not all tropical birds are brilliantly coloured. The **Ovenbird** family includes a huge array of species that are essentially shades of brown – woodcreepers, tree-runners, foliage-gleaners, spinetails and more. Woodcreepers are medium-sized woodland birds that behave like tree creepers; they forage on the trunks and branches of mature trees, and have specialized stiff tail feathers for bracing on the upright tree. They are found usually in tropical forests and have their highest diversity in the Amazon basin. One feature of some woodcreepers is their association with army ants; when army ants swarm, several species of birds attend the swarm, snapping up prey items that are attempting to flee the ants. Some species of woodcreepers appear to be obligate army ant followers, that is they are found consistently with army ants.



Plain Brown Woodcreeper © Jared Clarke

With so many unique and amazing birds, the tropics may seem overwhelming for a first time birding visitor. We offer a couple of tours that offer a good introduction to neotropical birding including our Trinidad & Tobago Birding Tour or our Belize & Tikal Birding Tour, where those exciting families occur but with fewer confusing species.