



Colombia Birding Tour 2022 Trip Report

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Colombia is the country with the highest number of bird species in the world; it has over 70 endemic birds and about twice as many near-endemics. Yet, for security reasons related to drug-growing and guerrillas, the country was practically closed to tourists. In the last few years Colombia has been opening up and developing its tourism infrastructure and most of this country is now safe to visit. We were accompanied by bird guide Cristian Daza. This was Eagle-Eye Tours's third birding tour to Colombia, and was packed with special birds and varied scenery as we travelled in a semicircular route around the core of the country, visiting the Western, Central and Eastern Andes and adjacent valleys. This semicircular route enabled us to encounter a number of special species, including Red-ruffed Fruitcrow, the spectacular Buffy Helmetcrest, Violet-tailed Sylph, Velvet-purple Coronet and ... well, a total of 53 species of hummingbirds and 46 species of true tanagers. Any tour which sees that many hummingbirds and tanagers and in addition four species of antpittas (plus 7 more heard) is a remarkable tour. In all, in two weeks of birding we recorded an amazing 466 species of birds; also we saw 7 species of mammals, and on one day we recorded over 100 species of birds (over 84 species on 6 days).



Buffy Helmetcrest © Hector Gómez de Silva

Day 1. March 30. Bogotá, Colombia

Arrival day. We met in Bogotá (Eastern Andes), having flown in from different places.

Day 2. March 31. La Florida Park, Jardín Encantado and drive to Rio Claro

We boarded our small bus, our transport for most of the tour, and visited La Florida Park in Bogotá and then left the city heading northward. At La Florida Park we saw the endemic trio of Bogotá Rail, Rufous-browed Conebill and Silvery-throated Spinetail, as well as the disjunct Spot-flanked Gallinule (a species found in Colombia only around Bogotá, otherwise found only in eastern and southern South America) and others.



Bogota Rail © Hank Scarth



Spot-flanked Gallinule © Hank Scarth

Away from Bogotá we stopped first at mid-elevation at Jardín Encantado (“Enchanted Garden”) in the town of San Francisco, where we were mesmerized by the sheer numbers of hummingbirds and Bananaquits, and a few other birds, visiting this private garden. A fairly short drive further we visited the parking lot at Laguna Tabacal for 40 minutes of nonstop birding without having to move far from the bus, finding the near-endemic Short-tailed Emerald among others. The rest of the

afternoon was meant to be a 5-hour drive to Río Claro, but numerous roadblocks where the road was being rebuilt and/or landslides were being cleared doubled the time on the road and, unfortunately, we arrived at our cabins in Río Claro at 11 pm in a downpour! (we got to do some birding at one of the roadblocks, netting the rare Moustached Puffbird and one species which we never saw again on the tour, Scrub Greenlet.



Birders, Rio Claro, Colombia © Hector Gómez de Silva



Rio Claro cabins © Hector Gómez de Silva

Day 3. April 1. Río Claro

Our cabins were immersed in beautiful, tall rainforest. Around the cabins and on the walk from there to the restaurant, we saw puffbirds, trogons, wrens, flycatchers and other tropical birds. Before showing up for breakfast we walked beyond the restaurant to an area with huge limestone boulders on the forest floor, where we found our target bird for the morning, Magdalena Antbird. After breakfast, we headed back to the cabins and beyond to the La Mulata trail, where we had another highly range-restricted target bird, the endemic Antioquia Bristle-Tyrant, and also found another endemic, Beautiful Woodpecker.



Looking for Magdalena Antbird © Hector Gómez de Silva

In the afternoon we drove a short distance to a road that traverses pastures and forest patches, where among the many birds seen was the trip's only White-mantled Barbet (another endemic), Panama Flycatcher, Blue Dacnis and Yellow-backed Tanager. At dusk we again headed beyond the restaurant at Río Claro, this time to wait at the mouth of a cave at the edge of the river for the Oilbirds to emerge. At precisely 6:20 pm, the cave "erupted" with hundreds of Oilbirds pouring out (and a few flying back in) -a spectacle that had us mesmerized for 10 minutes but that continued into the night for who knows how much longer.

Day 4. April 2. Río Claro to Manizales

A relaxed morning of birding around the cabins and restaurants produced several new birds for our trip list and a small family group of the Colombian endemic White-footed Tamarin. Leaving Río Claro toward the Manizales area, we first took a sideroad at Puerto Triunfo where we failed to see our main target (Northern Screamer) but saw many other species that we did not see again in the trip including Russet-throated Puffbird and Short-tailed Swifts, and had an outstanding 15 minute stop in which one raptor species after another flew past (13 species). After lunch nearby, we spent all afternoon driving to our next accommodation, the luxurious Termas del Ruiz hotel high up on the Los Nevados volcanoes above Manizales.



Russet-throated Puffbird © Hank Scarth

Day 5. April 3. Termales del Ruiz and Manizales area

We started the day in the páramo near Termales del Ruiz, seeing the smoking Nevado del Ruiz volcano and many páramo-restricted bird species, the major highlight being the Buffy Helmetcrest. The scenery was outstanding, not only the smoking volcano but also the “Martian landscape” of *Espeletia* plants (required by the Buffy Helmetcrest for nesting material) and “cushion plants” (which may look like soft cushions but are actually more like brain corals: hard as rock).



Nevado del Ruiz, cushion plant © Hector Gómez de Silva



Martian landscape of Espeletia

© Hector Gómez de Silva



Nevado del Ruiz volcano © Hector Gómez de Silva

Back at the hotel, we spent some time at their wonderful hummingbird feeders and fruit feeders, then headed down to Manizales with several birding stops along the way. One memorable moment was when we were playing the call of Andean Pygmy-Owl to attract other birds to approach trying to mob the owl, and an Andean Pygmy-Owl responded and eventually showed up for outstanding full-frame views in the telescope.

Day 6. April 4. Hacienda El Bosque and Río Blanco reserve

We spent the morning at Hacienda El Bosque, a working cattle ranch that preserves patches of cloud forest (60% of the property is forested) and that in the last few years has begun providing food to attract different kinds of birds, the main 3 attractions being Equatorial and Crescent-faced Antpittas and Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan. These different bird have different feeding stations and feeding schedules, and other birds show up at their feeding stations and nearby areas as well. We tried for all three and had success with two of them, but the Crescent-faced Antpitta unfortunately did not show up this time. However, additional birds seen around the feeding stations include Andean Guan and the trip's only White-throated Quail-Doves, Mountain Wren, Barred Fruiteater, Páramo Seedeater, Black-billed Mountain-Toucan, Yellow-breasted Chat-Tyrant, Slaty-backed Chat-Tyrant, Mountain Velvetbreast and Black-thighed Puffleg.



Birders at Hacienda el Bosque © Hector Gómez de Silva

In the afternoon we visited the Río Blanco reserve and had our first views of Andean Motmot, Red-faced Spinetail, Sickle-winged Guan, White-capped Dipper, Golden-plumed Parakeet as well as the trip's only White-capped Tanager and Streaked Tuftedcheek.



Andean Motmot © Hank Scarth

Day 7. April 5. Tinamú reserve and Otun Quimabaya area

We spent the morning at the feeders and trails in Tinamú reserve. We picked up several birds that we didn't see anywhere else on the trip, including Gray-headed Dove, Golden-collared Manakin, Sooty-headed Tyrannulet, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Speckle-breasted Wren, Jet Antbird and the endemic Parker's Antbird, and we also had superb views of Moustached Puffbird and of our first Grayish Piculet. After lunch, we drove to the Otun Quimabaya area, where a short stop at a bridge provided us excellent views of Torrent Duck just before heading to the hotel.



Moustached Puffbird © Hank Scarth



Greyish Piculet © Hank Scarth

Day 8. April 6. Otun Quimbaya area

We spent all day in the Otun Quimbaya area. We boarded two 4-wheel drive jeeps at 5 am to go the 12 km through rainforest to El Cedral, which took us all of 1 hour due to the poor road conditions. The main target here was Hooded Antpitta, which is only reasonably found just after dawn and is practically impossible to see anywhere else. The dawn chorus was at its maximum. A short walk back along the road until we heard the song of our target bird, and a little playback later, and we were seeing Hooded Antpitta -just 30 minutes after arriving at El Cedral. Successful, we allowed ourselves to walk back to the jeeps and have our picnic breakfast, and then, for the rest of the morning, to walk back along the road, followed by the jeeps, seeing what else we could find.



El Cedral © Hector Gómez de Silva

Mountain Tapir is also possible here and we found fresh footprints on the side of the road, but unfortunately no tapir. Lots of other goodies, though, not least of which was Red-ruffed Fruitcrow and the endemic Cauca Guan and endemic Multicolored Tanager. At noon we got back onto the jeeps and drove to a restaurant. After lunch we waited for the rain to stop at a spot where we could see hummingbirds visiting some flowering bushes, and as soon as the rain stopped we saw our target hummingbird (White-throated Daggerbill, formerly known as Wedge-billed Hummingbird) and then drove a bit and got to do a bit more birding at a different section of the road.



Red-ruffed Fruitcrow © Hank Scarth



Multicolored Tanager © Hank Scarth

Day 9. April 7. Travel to Montezuma rainforest

We had a later start in the morning today, since it was mainly a travel day. We watched the birds coming to the hotel's fruit feeders for half an hour after breakfast and then made our way toward Montezuma rainforest, where we would be for two full days. We made a birding stop at the periphery of the Pereira University botanical garden and it was quite birdy, with one major target in mind, the endemic Turquoise Dacnis. Once we found our target we pressed on, stopping at a small shopping center for washrooms, supplies (including wine and beer for our stay at Montezuma) and ATM's. At noon we switched to two 4-wheel drive jeeps again and were driven up to Montezuma rainforest lodge at the lower edge of the Tatamá National Park. Our birding on the next two days would be along the very rough road from the lodge up to the peak of Montezuma, where there is a military base and microwave antennas; everything else between the lodge and the peak is unbroken and unspoiled cloud forest, with different bird species at different elevations. At Montezuma Lodge we had lunch and watched the hummingbird feeders, and then birded the area around the lodge itself for a little over an hour and a half. The lodge hummingbird feeders were amazing, attracting dozens of individuals of 18 species of hummingbirds, with Purple-throated Woodstar, Empress Brilliant, Violet-tailed Sylph and Velvet-purple Coronet being some of the most brightly-colored stars; just before dark there appeared to be something of a feeding frenzy of nervous hummers coming and going and chasing each other away. Other birds around the lodge included Chocó Tapaculo and Black-headed Brush-finch.



Empress Brilliant on flower © Hank Scarth



Long-tailed Sylph © Hank Scarth



Velvet-purple Coronet © Hank Scarth

Day 10. April 8. Montezuma Rainforest

All day was spent at the upper portions of the Montezuma road. The first bird of the day was the species that one basically has to go up to the top of Montezuma to see, Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer. It was very birdy throughout the day, and we bumped into Gold-ringed Tanager (another bird that one basically has to go to Montezuma to see), Tanager Finch, Grass-green Tanager, Rufous Spinetail, Spillman's and Nariño Tapaculo (at exactly the same spot, right in their narrow overlap zone, Spillman's usually higher and Nariño lower), Munchique Wood-Wren, Chami Antpitta, and many many more great birds.



Day 11. April 9. Montezuma Rainforest

All day was spent in the lower portions of the Montezuma road. Highlights included Tatamá Tapaculo, Chocó Vireo, Cloud-forest Pygmy-Owl, Lanceolated Monklet, Fulvous-dotted Treerunner and the “beautiful trio” Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonia, Yellow-collared Chlorophonia and Orange-breasted Fruiteater.



Cloud Forest Pygmy Owl © Hank Scarth

Day 12. April 10. Laguna del Sonso to Cali

Another travel day, starting with the descent from Montezuma on 4-wheel drive jeeps, then switching back to our bus and driving all the way to the Cali area, with a stop for washrooms and another for an exciting bit of birding in the Laguna del Sonso area. At Laguna del Sonso the main birding road was flooded and we had to improvise, but we found a great alternative in which the first bird we saw was our most-wanted target, Dwarf Cuckoo. Then walking along the edge of the busy highway we added several waterbirds to our list, including the strange Horned Screamer. Finally, we drove to the lovely Araucana Lodge near Cali and even had time to do some birding in the lodge grounds.



Dwarf Cuckoo © Hank Scarth

Day 13. April 11. Anchicayá Valley

We spent most of the day at “Doña Dora” in the upper Anchicayá Valley, dropping in elevation from Araucana Lodge. This is a remarkable place where Mrs. Dora and her family attract birds to fruiting trees, fruit feeders and nectar feeders and there is great bird diversity and activity all day long and where the birds allow repeated, close-up views. Some of the most special birds we saw here were Toucan Barbet (we had had a brief glimpse only at Montezuma), Red-headed Barbet and the rare Gray-and-gold Tanager.



Birding near Doña Dora's



Red-headed Barbet © Hank Scarth

After lunch our original plan was to drive and/or walk a little further down the road, but recent violent incidents in the area prevented us from doing that. Instead, we would drive to “km 18” and do a little birding there, though the main birding at “km 18” would be left for the following morning. En route, but less than 1 km from “Doña Dora”, one of Mrs. Dora’s sons showed us a female Lyre-tailed Nightjar with one chick at its nest waist high on a roadside cliff, even as noisy trucks and motorcycles passed through. One would think it was an inappropriate nest spot but perhaps not, the traffic may have deterred potential predators.



Day 14. April 12. Finca La Florida

For our last bit of birding on the tour, we visited Finca La Florida at “km 18”. Here again there are fruit feeders but also a very special feeding station for the endemic, and usually shy, Chestnut Wood-Quail. The wood-quails usually have specific time to show up but for the past few days they had been showing up at irregular hours; in fact, the day before the wood-quails didn’t show up at all, but we were told that that was a good thing because today they’d be starving and very likely would show up. So we hung around the fruit feeders and watched the great birds visiting them, waiting to be called whenever the wood-quails showed up.



Chestnut Wood-Quail © Hank Scarth

Visitors to the fruit-feeders included Multicolored Tanager, this time prolonged, close-up views, not the distant brief views we had had before at Otun and Montezuma. What a bird! What a unique color combination! Near the fruit-feeders we also watched hummingbirds, flower-piercers and Whiskered Wren, and at 930 the call came! We all rushed to the wood-quail feeding area and there they were: a pair (one participant also saw the fledgeling that was in the sidelines for a moment), feeding on the worms and grubs even as the person feeding them crouched nearby. Amazing views! Now we could get on the bus, drive a kilometer or two into the forest and bird there. One of the targets we were looking for was Rufous-crested Tanager, not particularly beautiful but very rare -nevertheless it is known to occur in mixed flocks in the area. Very soon after getting out of the bus, we encountered a mixed flock containing a Rufous-crested Tanager or two as well as a large diversity of other bird species. Finally, in our last few minute of birding before having to go to the Cali airport to get our flights back to Bogotá, Cristian played his very useful “mixed owl recording” and we were surrounded by multitudes of tanagers, flower-piercers, hummingbirds and even a few Andean Solitaires, which we had only heard up until that point on the tour. What an amazing finale! The rest of the day was being driven to the Cali airport and taking our flight back to Bogotá, where we filled out our departure information required by Colombian immigration and those who required them had

their COVID tests done, and of course we had a wonderful final dinner at the hotel.

Day 15. April 13. Departure day.

Our Colombia adventure came to an end, with a plethora of fabulous birds and other wildlife in our memories and our photographs. We ended up seeing a very large number of birds for 2 weeks, including a little over 20 endemics and 35 near-endemics. This tour visited very few warm locations (and only briefly) and few times did we encounter biting insects, because by far most of the tour took place at temperate elevations.