

Colombia - Santa Marta 2023 Trip Report

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Santa Marta - From sea to sky and back in 6 days

Day 1: Flight day...

... at least for some of us. Installed in the rather luxurious Movich Buro by mid-afternoon, we then convened for introductions and supper in the hotel restaurant. The group size was a very manageable five, and with the excellent and energetic Manuel Espejo leading us we were in for a real treat of a trip, exploring this uniquely isolated mountain range, a hotbed of biodiversity and endemism.

Day 2: The coast and commencing the ascent

And off we headed, nice and early on our first day of birding fun. Today we were concentrating on typical lowland Caribbean species, with a couple of local specialities on the radar as well. We reached our first destination - Palermo, also known as km4 - in good time, with plenty of bird activity at this early hour: **Stripe-backed Wrens**, **Streaked** and **Olive-grey Saltators**, **Carib Grackles**, and **Ruddy Ground Doves**. While we scanned for our first regional endemic we were amply entertained by multiple **Yellow Orioles**, **Blue-grey Tanagers**, and a good selection of the more common flycatchers: **Yellow-bellied Elaenias**, **Panama Flycatcher**, **Cattle Tyrants**, and **Tropical Kingbirds**. Constant scanning finally paid off when the completely uninspiring **Bronze-brown Cowbird** perched up for prolonged scope views. Still considered a sub-species (of Bronze Cowbird) by many authors, Manuel was convincing in his argument for full species status. Nevertheless, to be quite honest, most sane members of the team preferred to look instead at **Spot-breasted Woodpecker**, **Glaucous Tanager**, and fly-by **Roseate Spoonbills**. We turned our attention to the nearby wetland, where several handsome **Pied Water-Tyrants** fed alongside **Wattled Jacanas**, **Yellow-hooded Blackbird**, and **White-headed Marsh-Tyrant**. I was pretty surprised to hear a **Sora** break into full whinny but, true to form, it's stayed in deep cover. Out over the marsh several **Large-billed Terns** were seen moving towards the coast, along with a constant procession of various herons. **Snail Kites** grappled with Apple Snails, and both **Bare-faced** and **Glossy Ibis** probed in the nearby wetland-edge agriculture.



Russet-throated Puffbird © Paul Prior

As we stood out on the wetland dike, we could hear the local **Chestnut-winged Chachalacas** start their insistent raucousness, and we filed back towards the scrub and trees in the hopes of encountering them. Our broadcast failed to inspire but we did manage to find ourselves a fine, looking **Chestnut Piculet**, a pair of **Dwarf Cuckoos**, **Pale-legged Horneros**, and a very cooperative **Russet-throated Puffbird**. Next, we followed a local park ranger to the nearby Isla de Salamanca Park where we hoped to bump into the extremely scarce Sapphire-bellied Hummingbird. Sadly, every hummer that posed for photos in the mangroves turned out to be the very similar **Sapphire-throated Hummingbird**. But the park visit was still worthwhile, providing us with good looks at **Northern Scrub-Flycatcher**, **Yellow-chinned Spinetail**, an **American Pygmy Kingfisher**, and a nesting pair of **Black-necked Stilts**. The heat of the day was now very much upon us, and so we retreated to the van and drove east to the rendezvous with the three 4WD vehicles that would be our trusty steeds as we moved inland and upslope.



Our group at Isla Salamanca © Paul Prior

We stopped in Minca for an excellent lunch menu overlooking the edge of town where migrants such as **Tennessee Warbler**, **American Redstart**, and **Hepatic Tanager** were foraging, and a pair of **Streaked Flycatchers** were attending their well-hidden nest, and **Bicoloured Wrens** busied themselves around the patio. A short drive after lunch, brought us to the Colores de La Sierra Hotel, and a well-earned siesta. At 4pm we headed out for a late afternoon stroll in search of some of the local goodies. These were indeed present but pulling them in for better views was nigh on impossible - perhaps the time of day was just not conducive. However, we did manage good looks at less cryptic species such as **Whooping Motmot**, **Swallow Tanager**, **Streaked Saltator**, **Yellow-backed Orioles**, **Chestnut-capped Warbler** and a high-flying **King Vulture**.



Day 3: The foothills and beyond

Our trio of drivers picked us up in the trusty 4WD vehicles and we continued onwards and upwards. Since we didn't need to arrive at El Dorado until lunchtime we were able to make multiple stops for some of the lower elevations specialities. The first of these proved very responsive albeit still rather skulking: a pair of **Golden-winged Sparrows** at the roadside, although it was difficult remaining focussed when we were being so beautifully serenaded by a pair of **Rufous-and-White Wrens**. Our next stop presented several excellent species. First the broadcast managed to persuade a pair of **Groove-billed Toucanets** to pay a visit, and then Manuel orchestrated a really amazing encounter with a **Santa Marta Tapaculo**. I think this may have been the easiest Tapaculo observation I've ever had - they are generally such a difficult family to put eyes on! Along the same stretch of road we also encountered **Santa Marta Antbird**, a pair of **Ruddy Woodcreepers**, and **Santa Marta Foliage-gleaner**. A pair of **Swallow Tanagers** was building a nest under a roadside bank, which provided wonderful looks, but sadly the **Rusty-breasted Antpittas** were not as confiding.



Swallow Tanager © Paul Prior

Continuing on our way, we reached a roadside homestead that posted an array of hummingbird feeders but these had been commandeered by the bullying **Crowned Woodnymphs**, which kept our smaller target species away. Finally, having transitioned to a road that made very plain just why we were being taxed in 4WD "jeeps", we reached El Dorado, and immediately it was obvious that this was the place to be! The feeders outback were abuzz with **Brown** and **Lesser Violetears**, **Crowned Woodnymphs** and a dazzling pair of **White-tailed Starfrontlets**. Both **Santa Marta** and **Sierra Nevada Brushfinches** foraged in the extensive gardens, while **White-tipped Doves** paraded by the compost pile.



White-tailed Starfrontlet © Paul Prior

After lunch the plan was to transport the group and all our luggage by “tricycle” up the increasingly bumpy road to the Kogihabs (individual cabins styled on the huts used by the local indigenous Kogi people). About halfway along the road it became apparent that the “tricycle” could not cope with my massive weight, and so I opted to hoof the remainder of the distance, which was actually a really pleasant, unstrenuous hike. And then, when we broke into the clearing, where the cabins were located ... my, what a view, all the way down to Santa Marta and the Caribbean. Spectacular! We met at 4pm for a slow walk back down to the main lodge, picking up great, looks at **Cinnamon Flycatcher**, **Grey-breasted Woodwren** (the endemic *bangsi* subspecies), **White-lored Warbler**, and a pair of **White-tipped Quetzal** at their nest, less than 100 m from the restaurant.



Day 4: Up to the Ridge

Today our game plan was to be up at the San Lorenzo Ridge for daybreak. Although the “summit” was only a few hundred metres above our accommodations, the switch-back road is so extremely bumpy we needed to give our vehicles a good hour or so to make the distance. This was an adventure! We stopped several times to unsuccessfully call for owls, but on the last stop we were at least treated to an amazing chorus of **Band-tailed Guans**, calling loon-like throughout the valleys, while nearby the somewhat less cacophonous **Sickle-winged Guan** treated us to a few fluttering wing-drums. By just after sunrise we made it to the ridge and piled out of the cars into unfortunately rather blustery conditions. The wax palms swayed in the breeze and we could hear the famous **Santa Marta Parakeets** calling just out of view. Patient scanning rewarded a few members of the group with looks at the trio of birds down-slope on the south side of the ridge but conditions were far from ideal. Every now and again large group of parakeets would fly over raising our hopes, but these were all **Scarlet-fronted Parakeets**.



View from the ridge © Paul Prior

We moved along the ridge track and were afforded excellent looks at a party of **Santa Marta Warblers**; then, while we broke into our boxed breakfast a lone **Black-backed Thornbill** perched up on a nearby shrub. **Santa Marta Brushfinches** were numerous and one stop along the track produced a string of local goodies: **Black-headed Tanager**, **Black-cheeked** (or Santa Marta) **Mountain Tanager**, **Hermit Woodwrens**, **Mountain Elaenia**, and a lone **Streak-capped Spinetail**. Some of the other ridge-birds were certainly present (by song) but the wind remained strong and denied us any real chance at pulling out either the **Brown-rumped Tapaculo**, or the **Sierra Nevada Antpitta**, but they came incredibly close in the swaying understory.



Santa Marta Brushfinch © Paul Prior

We decided to try our luck a little further back along the road, picking up both **Yellow-crowned** and **Slate-throated Redstarts**, **Montane Woodcreeper**, **White-throated** and **Spectacled Tyrannulets**, and an assortment of cool endemic flutterbys. The birding on the ridge had been a little subpar but the scenery was spectacular, and naturalists - amateur or otherwise - always find something to get excited about. In this unique location, the plants were to the fore: various heliconias and bromeliads, endemic palms, and acres of "dwarf" bamboo. In the afternoon, after a much-needed siesta, part of the group birded the back-trail from the cabins, leading to the main lodge. Manuel and one of the group lucked in on a **Black-throated Tody-Tyrant**, but we could not relocate this little gem. Our main target was the fruiteater and the leaftosser! The former could be heard, whining in the canopy, but only afforded the briefest of glimpses. The latter - the **Grey-throated Leaftosser** - put on an excellent display, living up to its name and seemingly entirely unconcerned about its audience. Elsewhere along the trail, we encountered a foraging party of **Southern Emerald Toucanets**, and stopped by to get more excellent looks at the nesting **White-tipped Quetzals**. Just as supper was about to start we were informed that the local troupe of **Grey-handed Night Monkeys** were visiting the feeder hoisted in the canopy adjacent to the restaurant. The animals were pretty nervous and therefore very brief in their visit, but we were all treated to flood-lit views of these globally, vulnerable primates, including a mother and tiny young.



White-tipped Quetzal © Paul Prior

Day 5: In the vicinity of El Dorado

The group was given the opportunity to return to the Cuchilla - the ridge - for a repeat of the previous day in the hopes that the conditions would be calmer and more conducive to birding. Just one keener was up for the return and so Manuel accompanied that one person back up to the ridge. Meanwhile, the rest of us made the most of a slightly more relaxed start to the day, taking breakfast, looking out over the feeders and checking out the spectacular moths that had been drawn to the lodge-lights overnight (including a spectacular *Copaxa winbrechliniani*, a type of Emperor or Giant Silk Moth).



Cacique and Louis drove us slowly down the road as far as Cincinati, making plenty of stops to try for various forest species. Once again, the **Santa Marta Antpitta** teased us with his bobwhite impersonations, but **Grey-breasted Woodwrens** were more amenable and more importantly we at last managed to get looks at the **Golden-breasted Fruiteaters**. We turned around near Cincinati but stayed for some time checking the banks of flowers around the buildings, where we got great looks at a female **Santa Marta Blossomcrown** and a **Red-billed Parrot**. A bigger surprise was the large flycatcher perched way up on the ridge by the house: an **Olive-sided Flycatcher**! The flowerbanks also drew in **Rusty Flowerpiercers** and **Tennessee Warblers**, and the same species were visiting the feeders at the Mountain Hotel where the group also picked up only our second and third **Black-headed Tanagers** and a new hummer species: **Steely-vented Hummingbird**. The same location also produced **Spectacled Tyrannulet**, **Swallow Tanagers**, and **Bicoloured Wrens**.



Tennessee Warbler © Paul Prior

Back at El Dorado, Manuel's little group of one had returned from a very successful (and very windless) visit to the ridge, where they'd struck gold with great looks at **Flammulated Treehunter**, **Santa Marta Parakeet**, both **Santa Marta** and **Sierra Nevada Antpittas**, and another **Black-backed Thornbill**. Half the group reconvened at 3 o'clock to take La Cumbia trail south from the cabins. Here we were treated to great looks at both **Black-banded** and **Strong-billed Woodcreepers**, a female **Tyrian Metaltail**, and even better views of a female **White-tipped Quetzal** whom we unintentionally disturbed from her dust-bath on the trail in front of us. We stood and waited and sure enough she returned to the path and gave incredible views but chose not to continue her ablutions with such an audience so close by. We returned by the same route and then continued along the back-trail to the restaurant at twilight, with the local **Santa Marta Screech-owl**, trilling softly in the distance. Speaking to other guests at the hotel it seems the local owls have become habituated to the typical playbacks that visitors broadcast (i.e., the Merlin App recordings) and no one was having any success.



La Cumbre trail © Paul Prior

Day 6: Return to the Caribbean coast

After a relatively leisurely breakfast, we bade farewell to El Dorado, and started the long, bumpy ride downhill. There was still a chance to pick up on a couple of missing species; first and foremost, **Rusty-breasted Antpitta**. Having heard one as we drove along, Manuel marshalled us into good viewing positions looking downhill into slightly sparser understory. With bated breath, we waited, and then at last the little star hopped into view. We all got excellent looks - well done, Manuel!



Rusty-breasted Antpitta © Paul Prior

A little further down the road the lead car came to a sudden stop: they'd flushed a small, dark hawk from the road-side. There was some confusion over the identification, but either way, having broadcast calls of one of the suspects, we realized we were now being watched from on high by an elegant-looking **Plain-breasted Hawk**, the local resident subspecies of Sharp-shinned Hawk. At the now familiar road-side buildings near Cincinnati, we stopped to check the flowerbeds for hummers: the same female **Santa Marta Blossomcrown** was still being bullied by the local **Crowned Woodnymphs**. An immature plumaged **White-rumped Hawk** drifted high overhead - a good addition to the trip list. **Masked Trogon**, **Groove-billed Toucanet** and both **White-sided** and **Rusty Flowerpiercers** showed up before at last we had to roll on down to the coast. Just before Minca we stopped again in the hopes of relocating a reported roosting Black-and-White Owl, but although we drew a blank on this, we did happen upon a couple of new flycatchers: first, a very confiding **Bright-rumped Attila**, and then an odd-looking, tailless bird that turned out to be a **Yellow-olive Flycatcher** (sans tail feathers), building a nest right over the road.



Bright-rumped Attila © Paul Prior

Our first stop in the lowlands - Las Tinajas - was along a track that Manuel informed us was until recently being used to smuggle contraband gasoline from Venezuela. An entirely new habitat for the trip - dry, scrubby forest - brought us an entirely new suite of species, including **White-fringed Antwren**, **White-chinned Sapphire**, and a couple of **Black-backed Antshrikes**. From here we headed to a nearby roadside restaurant, in part to re-organize the last night of the trip since we had just learned that all roads to our final destination - Riohacha - were well and truly blockaded as part of an ongoing indigenous peoples' demonstration. We rerouted to the nearby La Jorara Eco-hotel and settled in for the afternoon, meeting up again at 4pm for a hike along the adjacent riverbank. Here we continued to encounter lowland species, including **Forest Elaenia**, **Rufous-tailed Jacamars**, **Trinidad Euphonia**, **Grey-headed Tanager**, **Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher**, **White-bearded Manakin**, and a good number of **Lance-tailed Manakins** including a trio of spectacular looking displaying males. In the grounds of La Jorara a gorgeous **Gaige's Rainbow Lizard** was a nice addition to the non-avian aspect of the tour.



Gaige's Rainbow Lizard © Paul Prior

Day 7: The rarest of the rare!

The hotel had kindly arranged an early breakfast for us to facilitate rerouting to Santa Marta airport, leaving us a good few hours to explore the Tayrona National Park en route. The early hour was important because we had high hopes of bumping into the park's most famous resident. Sure enough, just minutes after driving through the entrance gates, we found ourselves looking at a group of five of the rarest birds of the trip: the critically endangered **Blue-billed Curassow**! Manuel was beside himself with excitement, he could not believe our luck! The huge birds lumbered about in the canopy of one of the roadside trees before finally flying deeper into the forest cover. Too easy! We now had a good three hours to explore the park some thing that had never even been on our agenda. By the park ranger compound we were treated to great looks at a nervously hyperactive troupe of **Cottontop Tamarins**. Nearby a group of **Crested Guans** foraged in the canopy, and the few trees in the compound clearing afforded great looks at a nesting pair of **Unicoloured Becard**, **Golden-fronted Greenlets** and **Yellow-crowned Tyrannulets**, while overhead we caught a flyby from a couple of pairs of **Military Macaws**. Back out on the main park road we found **Blue-headed Parrot**, **White-necked Puffbird**, **Orange-crowned Oriole**, and a **Black-crowned Antshrike**. The park ranger then steered us off track to ogle a roosting **Great Potoo** and here we were also treated to close flyover views of **Grey-headed Kite**. Finally, as we were about to leave the park, we were told of a nearby **Spectacled Owl** right next to the busy park entrance.



White-necked Puffbird © Paul Prior

It had been a hectic last morning of birding, completely improvised by Manuel and our drivers, but a huge success. Now we needed to head post-haste to Santa Marta to check-in for our rescheduled flights to Bogota. It had been a wonderful but all too brief visit to what is one of the world's biodiversity hotspots; an absolutely unique location - our flying visit had barely scratched the surface. Although as a group we had done remarkably well in seeing so many of the endemic bird species, this small region also hosts dozens and dozens of endemic frogs, invertebrates, plants. The El Dorado Reserve and the San Lorenzo Ridge is currently pretty much the only safe point of access into this wonderful region but hopefully this will change as the political situation in Colombia continues to improve.