Eagle-Eye Tours



Colombia Trip Report (April 1 - 15, 2024)

Link: Colombia Trip Report (April 1 - 15, 2024)

Written by Héctor Gómez de Silva Colombia is the country with the highest number of bird species in the world, nearly 2000 species; 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 for a few decades. 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 and has nature-lover-friendly lodges and restaurants. We were accompanied by exceptional bird guide Alejandro Nagy, who also knows a lot about other types of wildlife. This, Eagle-Eye Tours's fifth visit to Colombia, 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 (Magdalena Valley, Cauca Valley and Anchicayá Valley). 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 56 species of hummingbirds (plus 1 seen by the leader only). Any tour which sees that many hummingbirds and in addition six species of antpittas (plus 6 more heard) is a remarkable tour. In all, in 13 days of birding we recorded an amazing 487 species of birds (60 heard-only and 2 leader-only); also we saw 7 species of mammals, and a bunch of interesting insects and plants and other wildlife.

Day 1. April 1. Arrival day

We met in Bogotá, having flown in from our respective homes.

Day 2. April 2

We boarded our small bus, our transport for most of the tour, and headed higher up the Eastern Andes, stopping for breakfast at La Calera; further driving took us to the village of Sueva, 20 km further than our original itinerary, where a roadside stop produced a bunch of birds including two mainly Venezuelan species that we would not have a chance to find in the rest of the tour, Ochre-breasted Brushfinch and Crested Spinetail. Returning to our original itinerary, we drove through the

buffer zone of Chingaza National Park, with a whole bunch of other birds including the best view possible of Black-collared Jay, and great views of Black-billed Mountain-Toucan, the endemic Brown-breasted Parakeet (vulnerable), and a Powerful Woodpecker; as well as a huge kettle of 800 or more migrating Mississippi Kites. We ended the drive at the hummingbird feeders at Bosque Guajira and had outstanding close-up views of the near-endemic Blue-fronted Starfrontlet, near-endemic Longuemare's Sunangel, aptly-named Glowing Puffleg and a few other species. Heading back to our Bogotá hotel we stopped in páramo looking for the near-endemic Bronze-tailed Thornbill and found one in less than 10 minutes.



Longuermare's Sunangel © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Day 3. April 3

Before leaving Bogotá, first we visited La Florida Park and then left the city heading northward. At La Florida Park we saw the endemic Bogotá Rail and Silvery-throated Spinetail and many other species including the disjunct Spot-flanked Gallinule (a species found in remote eastern and southern South America with the exception of this population in the Bogotá area). Away from Bogotá we stopped first at a roadside restaurant with hummingbird feeders (and a huge statue of a hummingbird) and saw several species, some of which we never saw again in the tour, namely the tiny Gorgeted Woodstar and Black-tailed Trainbearer. Then we stopped at the upper reaches of lowland birds at Laguna Tabacal, finding the tour's only Stripe-breasted Spinetail among others. The rest of the afternoon was a 5-hour drive to Victoria, plus stops for lunch at a birdy restaurant in La Vega (including our only Plain-colored Tanagers) and at a birdy gas station.

Day 4. April 4

We started our full day at Victoria by having breakfast at a very birdy restaurant, seeing a Large-billed Seed-Finch, Spot-breasted Woodpeckers and many others right after breakfast. The rest of the morning was spent at the Bella Vista Reserve where we saw a troop of White-footed Tamarin and a Magdalena Poison-dart Frog as well as many, many birds. But the endemic Sooty Ant-Tanager eluded us (heard only).



Magdelena Poison Dart Frog © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Group watching poison dart frog © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Lunch was at a restaurant in the periphery of Victoria after which we visited a nearby ranch which had a lek of White-bearded Manakins and a roosting family of Gray-legged Night-Monkeys. After a short siesta at our Victoria hotel, upon leaving the hotel we bumped into an impressive kettle of Swainson’s Hawks on migration and later a smaller kettle of mostly Broad-winged Hawks. In the afternoon we visited a road through pastures with remnant rainforest trees and found the target

bird, the endemic Beautiful Woodpecker, and many other species, including more encounters with kettles of Swainson's Hawks many of which were descending to roost en masse in certain trees at the top of the forested ridge nearby.



Gray-legged Night Monkeys © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Day 5. April 5

We returned to Bella Vista Reserve for an hour the next morning and saw many birds but again failed to see Sooty Ant-Tanager. But at nearby trail we bumped into an interesting assemblage of actively-feeding birds which included a Sooty Ant-Tanager which allowed itself to be seen. After this we left Victoria and drove to an oxbow lake where we were hoping to find the resident pair of Northern Screamers among several other lowland birds. The screamers failed us but we found an impressive number of other species including Pied Water-Tyrants, a pair of Russet-throated Puffbirds and a roosting Lesser Nighthawk. Lunch was at a nearby restaurant and most of the afternoon was spent driving to our next hotel high in the Central Andes, the luxurious Hotel Termales del Ruiz, with several stops for birding and washrooms.



Lesser Nighthawk © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Day 6. April 6

We started with breakfast and a little bit of birding at a restaurant where we saw Stout-billed Cinclodes. Our morning's main birding however was down the mountain 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 hummingbird feeders. We were successful with the first two, unfortunately the mountain-toucans strangely did not show up (heard only). Additional birds seen around the feeding stations included the trip's only Gray-browed Brush-Finch, Mountain Wren, Yellow-browed Chat-Tyrant and Sword-billed Hummingbird. Unexpectedly, at one set of hummingbird feeders there was a bold immature male Tourmaline Sunangel which paused to perch on the participants's knee or cap.



Sword-billed Hummingbird © Héctor Gómez de Silva



A bold Tourmaline Sunangel on hat © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Mid-morning we drove back to Hotel Termales del Ruiz, where we had lunch and staked out the hummingbird- and fruit- feeders for a while, seeing Golden-breasted Puffleg, Shining Sunbeam, Pale-naped Brushfinch, Lacrimose Mountain-Tanager and the gorgeous Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager.



Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager © Héctor Gómez de Silva

In the afternoon, most of the group visited the higher-elevation páramo above Hotel Termales del Ruiz, seeing the smoking Nevado del Ruiz volcano and many páramo-restricted bird species (the rest opted to stay at the hotel to continue staking out the hummingbird-feeders and fruit-feeders). The major was the endemic Buffy Helmetcrest; first we had a distant view of a male but not too long after, after taking a little trail, we had an outstanding encounter with a close-up male sitting on top of a bush. We also saw a very bold Andean Tapeti (cottontail rabbit).



Buffy Helmetcrest © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Andean Tapeti © Héctor Gómez de Silva

The scenery was outstanding, the “Martian landscape” of *Espeletia* plants (required by the Buffy Helmetcrest for nesting material). Later in the afternoon we drove down to a spot where Noble Snipe is known to occur and although the area very recently had been disturbed (partly drained, stocked with farm animals), our local guide surprisingly did find a Noble Snipe.

Day 7. April 7

In the morning we visited the Río Blanco reserve and were quite successful with the antpittas that are the specialty of this reserve, seeing Bicolored, Chestnut-crowned, and Slate-crowned; the endemic Brown-banded, unfortunately, was heard-only.



Bicolored Antpitta © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Chestnut-crowned Antpitta © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Photographing Chestnut-crowned Antpitta © Héctor Gómez de Silva

We also had superb views of Crimson-mantled Woodpecker, a Green-and-black Fruiteater, Scaly-naped Parrot (perched, for once!) and White-capped Dipper and saw many other birds including a roosting Stygian Owl --mixed flocks kept us busy with a multitude of cloud forest species while hummingbird feeders also had us entertained while having lunch. In the afternoon we did the short drive to our hotel in the town of Santa Rosa de Cabal.



Crimson-mantled Woodpecker © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Green-and-black Fruiteater © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Stygian Owl © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Day 8. April 8

Santa Rose de Cabal is the base to explore the nearby mountain where the micro-endemic, critically endangered Indigo-winged Parrot occurs; this species is estimated to number less than 250 mature individuals, though recent conservation efforts in two reserves (including the one above Santa Rosa

de Cabal) have been successful. We boarded two 4-wheel drive vehicles at 450 am to be driven for 1 hour 20 minutes in order to visit this special area. Once here we had breakfast and 1 hour after arriving we were seeing our first Indigo-winged Parrots, a group of 8. For most of the morning groups of this species came and went, feeding on the mistletoe in the trees, and it is hard to know how many individuals we saw in the end but at one point there were 14 individuals visible at one time. Other birds we saw here included the trip's only Mountain Avocetbill, Purple-backed Thornbill, Mountain Velvetbreast, Carunculated Caracara, Hooded Siskin and Rufous-breasted Chat-Tyrant. Mid-morning we drove down to our hotel for lunch and a bit of birding in the hotel grounds, including our best views yet of Andean Motmot. After lunch we drove the short distance to our next hotel, Hotel Kumanday near Otun-Quimbaya reserve. Most of us continued on toward the reserve, birding for an hour and a half.



Andean Motmot © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Indigo-winged Parrot reserve © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Day 9. April 9

We spent all morning in the Otun-Quimbaya area. We boarded the same two 4-wheel drive vehicles at 5 am to go the 12 km through rainforest to El Cedral, which took us most of an 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. Mountain Tapir is also possible here, but unfortunately we did not see any antpitta or tapir. However, we found many birds while walking back along the road, lots of other goodies, not least of which was Red-ruffed Fruitcrow and the endemic Cauca Guan. In the middle of the day, we saw many butterflies including a 98 butterfly or so we thought until it turned out than some had a clear 98 on their hindwing but others had 89!



89 and 98 Butterfly © Héctor Gómez de Silva

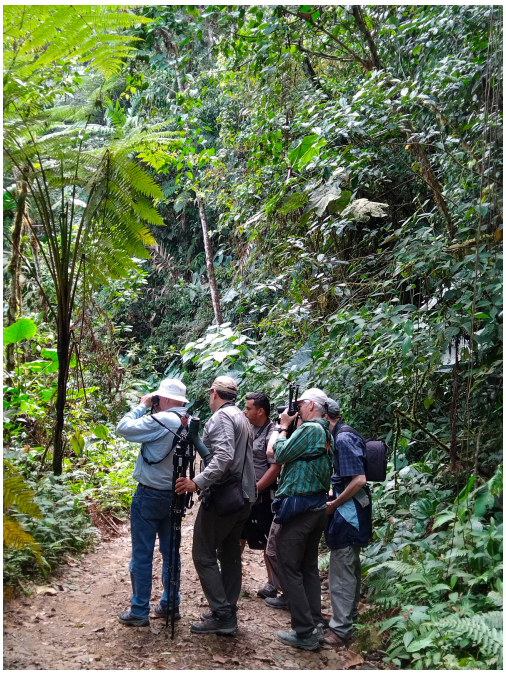
Much of the rest of the day was spent travelling in our bus to Montezuma, where we would be for two full days. But we did stop at a couple of places for birding and washrooms. At 520 pm we switched to three 4-wheel drive jeeps again and were driven up to Montezuma Rainforest Lodge at the lower edge of 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; between the lodge and the peak is unbroken and unspoilt cloud forest, with different bird species at different elevations.



4-wheel drive at Montezuma © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Day 10. April 10

The day started with a pre-dawn drive half way to the summit of the Montezuma road, where we had breakfast. It was very birdy throughout the day, as we descended a short distance by jeep, then walked a little, and so on. We bumped into the endemic Gold-ringed Tanager (another bird that one basically has to go to Montezuma to see) and the beautiful Chestnut-breasted and Yellow-collared Chlorophonias, Orange-breasted Fruiteater, Glistening-green Tanager, Velvet-purple Coronet, a rare White-tipped Sicklebill, South American Leaftosser (beautifully seen), Bicolored Antvireo, Tatamá Tapaculo, and many many more great birds.



Birding in Montezuma © Héctor Gómez de Silva

At the end of the day we drove down to the lodge for an hour of birding at the hummingbird feeders. The lodge hummingbird feeders were amazing as usual, attracting dozens of individuals of 20 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.

Day 11. April 11

We started with a pre-dawn drive to the top of the road where the main target was the species that one basically has to go up to the top of Montezuma to see, Chestnut-bellied Flower-piercer. The rest of the day was spent being driven a short way and then walking down and birding, getting back on the vehicles to be driven down further and then more birding, etc. It was another birdy-all-day, with the added highlight of having many moments with clear, sunny sky and occasional super-special raptors soaring overhead: one each of Black-and-chestnut Eagle, Black Hawk-Eagle and Black-and-white Hawk Eagle. We also saw the micro-endemic Munchique Wood-Wren and a male Golden-headed Quetzal. Another amazing day which again ended in just over and hour mesmerized at the hummingbird feeders and fruit-feeders and a bit of birding around the fishponds, with Blackish Rail and the endemic Grayish Piculet being important additions to the birdlist.

Day 12. April 12

Another travel day, starting with the descent from Montezuma on 4-wheel drive vehicles; we stopped a couple of times to watch birds on the way, including a nesting colony of Chestnut-headed Oropendolas with more than 90 nests in one tree!



Photographing Oropendola nest colony © Héctor Gómez de Silva

At Pueblo Rico we switched back to our bus and started driving to our next hotel, with stops near Apía to see the endemic Turqoise Dacnis, near-endemic Yellow-headed Manakin, and for lunch. After lunch we continued the looooooong drive to Cali, stopping for washrooms and at a marsh to see Horned Screamer (unfortunately, a very distant individual this time). At Cali we checked into our luxurious hotel.



Birding near Apía © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Day 13. April 13

We spent most of the morning at and near “Doña Dora” in the upper Anchicayá Valley. This is a remarkable place where Mrs. Dora and her family attract birds to fruiting trees, fruit feeders and nectar feeders; there is great bird diversity and activity all day long and where the birds allow repeated, close-up views. Even before reaching “Doña Dora” we had a very productive stop where we spent nearly 2 hours watching birds (and having our packed breakfasts), with one of the most special sightings being of a pair of the normally shy Crested Ant-Tanager approaching for repeated close-up, unobstructed views (actually, they were approaching to feed on insects under a light that had been left on all night).



Crested Ant-Tanager © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Once at Doña Dora, some of the most special birds we saw here were Toucan Barbet (we had only heard them at Montezuma), Red-headed Barbet, Spot-crowned Barbet, Glistening-green Tanager, Black-headed Brush-Finch and Uniform Treehunter.



Toucan Barbet © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Due to increased presence of FARC guerrillas beyond Doña Dora, our bus could not drive further, and the group walked the road to try to see some additional birds of the lower parts of the the Anchicayá Valley. We did add the rare Gray-and-gold Tanager (very good views) and Black-headed

Tody-Flycatcher. At Doña Dora we were told there was a female Lyre-tailed Nightjar roosting on the cut bank on the roadside about 1 km from Doña Dora back toward Cali, so upon leaving Doña Dora we stopped to look for it and found it soon enough (very well camouflaged). In the afternoon we did some relaxed birding at the fruit-feeders and hummingbird-feeders at our Cali hotel.



Female Lyre-tailed Nightjar © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Day 14. April 14

For our last bit of birding on the tour, we first visited Finca La Florida at “km 18”. Here again there are fruit feeders and a “moth blanket” that caters for insect-eating birds, as well as a feeding stations for Chestnut Wood-Quail and Little Tinamou. Visitors to the fruit-feeders included Multicolored Tanager, providing close-up though brief views. What a bird! What a unique color combination! The Chestnut Wood-Quail family did show up … but the Little Tinamou did not. Also on the premises were the endemic Colombian Chachalacas and a couple of roosting Common Potoos.



Chestnut Wood-Quails © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Chestnut Wood-Quail © Héctor Gómez de Silva

We also visited Finca Alejandría, where we had a great lunch and watched more fruit-feeders and specially hummingbird-feeders, adding Southern Emerald Toucanets, a Blue-naped Chlorophonia and a female Blue-headed Sapphire to our trip list. The rest of the afternon was spent being driven to the Cali airport and taking our flight back to Bogotá.

Day 15. April 15

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 21 endemics and 33 near-endemics. This tour visited very few warm locations and few times did we encounter biting insects, because by far most of the tour took place at temperate elevations. Colombia Birding Tour species list (eBird)