



## Ecuador Bird Photography 2024 report with images

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### October 28 - arrival in Quito

Our trip formally began on the afternoon of October 28th, as we settled into our hotel near Quito. Around the garden, we got our first taste of some of the spectacular birdlife of the region: Scrub Tanagers, Blue-and-yellow Tanagers, Blue-grey Tanagers, Croaking Ground Doves, and four species of hummingbird (Western Emerald, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Sparkling Violetear and Black-tailed Trainbearer) which greeted us as we settled in, got to know each other, and went over what to expect for the coming two-week trip.

### October 29 - Journey to the Amazon Rainforest

Our first leg of the trip would be a 5 day trip into the Ecuadorian Amazon, in the vicinity of Yasuni National Park. One of the most biodiverse places on Earth, it's no wonder why visiting the Amazon Rainforest is often considered the top "bucket list" item for nature lovers, and we were about to experience this first hand! Our journey went very smoothly, beginning with a short 30-minute flight from Quito to Coca city, the gateway to the Ecuadorian Amazon. There, we met our local expert trilingual guide Carlos, from the Sani Isla Kichwa indigenous community, and boarded a motor canoe to begin a 3-hour journey up the Napo River. Along the way, we got our first taste of this region, passing small communities situated amongst spectacular forest. We also saw (and photographed) some great birds: Collared Plover, Black Skimmer, King Vulture, Greater Yellow-headed Vulture, Oriole Blackbird, and many more. As we were about to exit the motor canoe to transfer to the paddle canoe for our final journey to Sani Lodge, we spotted what would be the most improbable sighting of the trip: two Black-bellied Plovers! While not an unusual sight for North American residents, this migratory species typically winters along the coast of South America. This sighting was one of very few ever recorded from the Amazon, and was a lifer for our local guides! It also marked a big milestone: the 600th bird species recorded for the Sani Lodge eBird hotspot!

Transferring to the paddled canoes, we made the final journey through the narrow waterways leading to a beautiful lagoon, the site of our lodge and accommodation for the next four nights. The surroundings here make for some of the most spectacular rainforest scenery imaginable. After settling in, we began photographing the resident birds on the lodge grounds, before doing some more bird and wildlife photography from the canoes. Nesting Yellow-rumped Caciques and Russet-backed Oropendola right at the lodge made for particularly excellent photo opportunities, as did the nesting Hoatzin that would become an everyday sight during our stay in the Amazon. These prehistoric-looking birds may be common here, but they sure are spectacular. On a tree branch by the water, we photographed a Sand-colored Nighthawk roosting! We also caught our first looks at some of the local primates, as a group of capuchin and squirrel monkeys swung from branch to branch through the rainforest around our canoe.



*Yellow-rumped Caciques building their nests greeted us as we arrived at our Amazon Rainforest lodge. © Liron Gertsman*



*Hoatzin are remarkable and prehistoric-looking birds, and would be a common sight during our time in the Amazon. Here, an adult perches with its young. © Liron Gertsman*

## **October 30 - Experiencing the Rainforest Canopy**

After a delicious breakfast, we boarded the canoe as the first rays of light appeared in the sky. Making our way towards the nearby canopy tower, we witnessed the daily pilgrimage of birds waking up from their roosts and heading to their feeding areas. Among my favorite to watch in the early morning are the macaws (Blue-and-yellow, Scarlet, Chestnut-fronted and Red-bellied), parrots (Mealy Amazon, Orange-winged Amazon, and Blue-headed Parrot), and parakeets (Cobalt-winged and Dusky-headed) which stream overhead, occasionally stopping to land in trees along the waterways.



*A pair of Orange-winged Amazons, photographed from our canoe. © Liron Gertsman*

After a short journey, we arrived at our destination for the morning: the canopy tower. Built into a spectacular old growth tree, a sturdy staircase leads to a platform nestled in the canopy, which allows for incredible eye-level views of rainforest species that can be very difficult to observe from the ground. White-fronted Nunbird, Gilded Barbet, Many-banded Aracari, Ivory-billed Aracari, White-throated Toucan, Yellow-tufted Woodpecker, Plum-throated Cotinga, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Pink-throated Becard, White-browed Purpletuff, Golden-bellied Euphonia, Paradise Tanager, Masked Crimson Tanager, and Purple Honeycreeper were just a few species of the many species that provided great views in the treetops.



*A Golden-bellied Euphonia, photographed from the canopy tower © Liron Gertsman*

As the sun became more powerful and the air heated up, we returned to the lodge for a delicious lunch followed by some photography workshop time, talking about photography settings and technique as we waited for the late afternoon bird activity to pick up. Heading out once again, an evening bird photography paddle on the lagoon turned up some more amazing birds: Sunbitterns, White-chinned Jacamar and Swallow-tailed Kites, among many others, making for a day with well over 100 bird species observed, with countless spectacular photo opportunities.

## **October 31-November 1st - the magic of Clay Licks**

One of the most spectacular Amazon Rainforest experiences is visiting a clay lick- a place where a multitude of bird and wildlife species gather to obtain important minerals and nutrients from the earth. The most famous and frequent visitors at clay licks are macaws, parrots and parakeets, who ingest the nutrient-rich clay to help counter the impacts of acids and toxins found in many of the fruits that they eat. Not only is it an amazing spectacle to witness, but it makes for incredible photo opportunities! There are three easily accessible clay licks located close to our accommodation at Sani Lodge, and we visited all of them, some of them on more than one occasion. **The macaw tree-lick:** this is a place where a decomposing tree stump attracts many macaws each morning! We visited early, and were treated to beautiful views of Blue-and-yellow Macaws, Chestnut-fronted Macaws, and Red-bellied Macaws. Here, we utilised foreground elements of hanging tree leaves to block and darken distracting background elements and direct the focus of the photos more onto the macaws.



*Blue-and-yellow Macaws at the first of three clay licks we visited. © Liron Gertsman*

**The riverside clay lick:** Viewed from the river, this exposed riverbank is visited by hundreds of parrots and parakeets each day! We saw Mealy Amazons, Dusky-headed Parakeets, Blue-headed Parrots, and one Yellow-crowned Amazon visiting this clay lick. We also spotted some Howler Monkeys in the adjacent trees!



*Mealy Amazons, Blue-headed Parrots and Dusky-headed Parakeets at the riverside clay lick. © Liron Gertsman*

**The forest clay lick:** a short walk from the Napo River leads to a beautiful cave at the base of a lush cliff in the forest, where a pool of nutrient-rich water and clay attracts some spectacular life. We decided to visit this particularly spectacular clay lick two days in a row. On the first day, we were treated to flocks of Orange-cheeked Parrots and Cobalt-winged Parakeets, and we experimented with different shutter speeds to capture the colour and motion of the birds landing and taking off from the clay lick with different styles. On our second visit to the clay lick, the parrots and parakeets were joined by a few gorgeous Scarlet Macaws! We also watched a few Speckled Chachalacas visit the clay lick, and spotted a Fork-tailed Woodnymph (hummingbird) sitting on a nest nearby.



*Scarlet Macaws and Orange-cheeked Parrots at the photogenic forest clay lick. © Liron Gertsman*

Another highlight of the trip came after a morning of visiting clay licks, when we visited the nearby Sani Isla indigenous community (who own and operate Sani Lodge), for a delicious traditional lunch. The local people weren't the only ones giving a warm welcome- we also spotted some fabulous birds in the area, such as the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Slender-billed Kite, Golden-tailed Sapphire, Swallow-winged Puffbird, Ladder-tailed Nightjar, and the White-lored Antpitta. Our day didn't end after dark- for those wanting to do some night photography, we did a night walk one night in search of the small critters of the amazon rainforest. On another night, we took advantage of clear skies to do some astrophotography of the Milky Way!



*We were treated to some fantastic stargazing and astrophotography opportunities during our time*

*in the Amazon, with crystal clear views of the milky way. To the right of the milky way core, comet C/2023 A3 (Tsuchinshan-ATLAS) can be seen, with some distant light pollution from the city of Coca visible on the horizon. © Liron Gertsman*

## **November 2nd - from the Amazon to the Andes**

After 4 amazing nights in the Amazon Rainforest, it was time to head on to the next part of the trip, into the Andes mountains. Saying goodbye to the amazing staff at the lodge, we went for one last paddle through the rainforest channels and back to the main river, where we boarded the motor canoe for the boat trip back to Coca city. Despite it being a travel day, the birds along the way did not disappoint: we got great views (and photos) of Cocoi Heron, Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Roseate Spoonbill, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, and more. Arriving in Coca, we said goodbye to our local Kichwa guide Carlos, hello to José, our local driver and guide joining us for the remainder of the trip. Beginning our drive into the Andes, we stopped at nearby reserve for lunch, where we had delicious food and sightings of 6 hummingbird species (including the spectacular Gould's Jewelfront, Golden-tailed Sapphire and Black-throated Brilliant), as well as a couple Amazon Kingfishers and many other birds. Continuing into the Andes, we slowly gained altitude. We also kept seeing birds, and made a stop to enjoy some Cliff Flycatchers hawking insects along the Loreto Road. Late in the afternoon, we arrived at our destination for the next two nights: San Isidro Lodge, where our lenses were quickly pointed at the multitude of birds flocking around the lodge (including 10 species of hummingbirds, such as the Chestnut-bellied Coronet, Collared Inca, Violet-fronted Brilliant, Geoffroy's Daggerbill, and more). As it got dark, we gathered for our first dinner in the Andes. The day didn't end with dinner however, as we were treated to views of the famous San Isidro Black-banded Owls after dark, a unique and mysterious sub-population of Black-banded Owls known only from this exact area.



*A San Isidro Black-banded Owl with its prey: a large moth, which was attracted by the lights at the lodge. © Liron Gertsman*

### **November 3 - the east slope of the Andes**

Our morning began at San Isidro Lodge, where lights left on the deck overnight attract hundreds of moths and other insects to the nearby trees and exterior surfaces. This in turn, attracts an incredible variety of birds, who gather first thing in the morning to feast on the abundant prey! The birds coming in for the moth feast show little to no fear of humans, making for spectacular viewing and photographic opportunities. Some of the highly cooperative species included masked Trogon, Montane and Olive-backed Woodcreepers, Cinnamon Flycatcher, Black-billed Peppershrike, Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Green Jays, Scarlet-rumped Caciques, and many more. Joining the South American resident species were a few migratory species that breed in North America, such as Blackburnian Warblers, Canada Warblers, and a Swainson's Thrush! A very short walk from the lodge, we also got fantastic views of a White-bellied Antpitta.



*A Green Jay (Inca subspecies) devours a moth © Liron Gertsman*

During the day, we made trips to a couple nearby reserves, where we would have opportunities with even more amazing bird species. At the Wayra Reserve, we spent time with Red-crested Finch, White-lined Tanager, Silver-beaked Tanager, Orange-billed Sparrow, Many-spotted Hummingbird, Squirrel Cuckoo, Coppery-headed Jacamar, and more. Some photogenic Black-mantled Tamarin monkeys were also a highlight!



*Black-mantled Tamarins provided some fantastic views! © Liron Gertsman*

Later in the afternoon, we visited a nearby property where feeders were attracting 11 species of hummingbird, including some spectacular Long-tailed Sylphs, Peruvian Racket-tails, Violet-fronted Brilliants, Green-backed Hillstars, and many more. We also got a brief look at the unique and spectacular Andean Cock-of-the-rock! Our evening ended back at the lodge, where we had more views of the San Isidro Black-banded Owls after dark.



*The spectacular Peruvian Racket-tail provided us with some fabulous views and photo opportunities!*

*© Liron Gertsman*

## November 4-5 - San Isidro to Guango, and into the high Andes

Our morning began again at San Isidro Lodge, where the birds once again came right up to us as they feasted on the morning moths! Joining the species from the day before were some new ones for the trip, including spectacular Summer Tanagers and a Blue-winged Mountain Tanager.



*A Scarlet-rumped Cacique enjoys the morning feast of moths attracted to lights at the lodge. © Liron Gertsman*

Departing San Isidro, we made our way along a nearby road, where we encountered a Southern Lapwing, and got a good look at a Roadside Hawk. We then made our way to a nearby reserve and went for a walk along a river, and managed to find a family of Torrent Ducks (a male and female with three chicks)! Also seen along the river was a Torrent Tyrannulet, and some cooperative Black Phoebes. We then stopped for lunch next to an amazing bird feeding station, where our delicious meal was regularly interrupted by some colourful visitors: Golden-eared Tanager, Golden Tanager, Golden-collared Honeycreeper, Red-headed Barbet, Green Jays, and many more! After lunch, we continued on to Guango Lodge, which would be our base for the next two nights! Here, we had a productive evening walk which produced highlights including Andean Guan, Powerful Woodpecker, Turquoise Jay, and Hooded Mountain Tanagers. The hummingbirds here also provided some nice photo opportunities, with species such as White-bellied Woodstar and Tourmaline Sunangel joining the more common Buff-tailed and Chestnut-breasted Coronets. Our next morning began at a hide next to the lodge, where we waited to see what species would come in to feed on moths attracted overnight by a light. We were treated to some looks at some more secretive forest species, such as Rufous Wren, Mountain Wren, Gray-browed Brushfinch, Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, and Pale-naped Brushfinch. After breakfast, we went for a short hike near the lodge to a feeding station, where we hoped to see the elusive Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan. A pair of Green-and-black Fruiteaters entertained as we waited, but it wasn't long before two Gray-breasted Mountain Toucans revealed themselves, providing spectacular eye-level views and photographic opportunities!



*We had great success with the Gray-breasted Mountain Toucan, and even managed some flight shots! © Liron Gertsman*

After our successful morning toucan mission, we headed out on a trip into the high Andes. Driving up above 4000 metres elevation, we were met with beautiful clear weather, revealing jaw-droppingly spectacular views of the Andes mountains in every direction. Antisana and Cotopaxi volcanoes were on full display, covered by glacial ice. While quite rare, we had a target species in mind up here: the Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe. This incredibly well-camouflaged species is a type of shorebird, despite living in the high Andes mountains and closely resembling the ptarmigan (a chicken-like bird of the northern hemisphere). Remarkably, within seconds of stepping out of the vehicle at the summit, it was spotted: the Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe. We were treated to spectacular views of this unusual bird, and took advantage of the clear day and beautiful views to incorporate some scenic background elements into our compositions.



*We spent time with the elusive Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe, composing this unique bird with the spectacular Cotopaxi Volcano in the background. © Liron Gertsman*

We were also treated to views of other high-elevation species, such as Carunculated Caracara, Variable Hawk, Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, Plumbeous Sierra Finch, Plain-capped Ground-Tyrant, Andean Tit-Spinetail, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant, Rainbow-bearded Thornbill and many more before we descended back down the mountain for lunch. Back at the lodge, we went for an evening walk by the river, highlighted by a Fasciated Tiger-Heron on a nest, and good views of White-capped Dipper!

### **November 6 - across the high andes to the west slope**

After some amazing time on the east slope of the Andes, it was time to cross over to the west slopes. Along the way to our next destination in the Tandayapa Valley, we had some exciting plans to search for some special species in the high Andes. It wasn't long before we spotted our first Andean Condors of the day, soaring along some bluffs next to the road! These spectacular birds have a 10-foot wingspan, making them one of the largest flying birds on Earth. There are also believed to be less than 150 of them in Ecuador, so every sighting is special! Continuing on a little detour in the high Andes, we stopped for some late morning birding at a reserve and restaurant with some fantastic bird feeders. The hummingbird species here included the spectacular Sparkling Violetear, Black-tailed Trainbearer, Tyrian Metaltail, Shining Sunbeam, and Great Sapphirewing. However, one of the most special species here was the largest hummingbird on Earth: the Giant Hummingbird! We had fantastic views and photo opportunities with several. Over an incredible lunch, we saw several more Andean Condors as well as some small groups of Hooded Siskin.



*We were treated to great views of the largest hummingbird on earth: the Giant Hummingbird. ©  
Liron Gertsman*

Wrapping up our foray into the high andes, we headed further west, arriving at our lodge for the next three nights in the Tandayapa valley. We were greeted here by the spectacle of 16 hummingbird species simultaneously visiting the feeders!

### **November 7-8 - the West slope of the andes: experiencing the world-famous bird abundance of the Tandayapa and Mindo area**

Few places on earth can rival the abundance and diversity of easily accessible birding and photography opportunities that can be experienced in the Tandayapa and Mindo area. We spent our first full day here in the area around our lodge, enjoying this incredible abundance. Visiting the “moth light” first thing in the morning, we had fantastic opportunities to see and photograph Toucan Barbet, Montane Woodcreeper, Ornate Flycatcher, Three-striped Warbler, Russet-crowned Warbler and more.



*A pair of beautiful and adorable Ornate Flycatchers, who were visiting the lodge first thing in the morning. © Liron Gertsman*

Over at the fruit feeders, we got amazing repeated views of 10 tanager species (Silver-throated, Golden, Flame-faced, Blue-necked, Black-capped, Golden-naped, Palm, Blue-grey, Flame-rumped and Blue-winged Mountain Tanager). Also visiting the fruit feeders were both Red-headed and Toucan Barbets, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, and Rufous Motmot, among even more amazing species.



*The spectacular Flame-faced Tanager was one of over 10 tanager species visiting the feeders at the lodge. © Liron Gertsman*

Over at the hummingbird feeders, dozens of individuals of over a dozen species could be seen at any time. Some highlights included the Violet-tailed Sylph, White-booted Racket-tail, Purple-bibbed Whitetip, Crowned Woodnymph, Purple-throated Woodstar, and Tawny-bellied Hermit. We also took some time to set up a “hummingbird studio”, using lighting, backdrops, flowers and feeders to capture some incredible studio-like images of these amazing birds.



*This female Green-crowned Brilliant was one of many species that visited our “hummingbird studio” © Liron Gertsman*

In the afternoon, we made a trip down the road to the Bellavista Cloud Forest reserve, where we spent time with some obliging Gorgeted Sunangel, Turquoise Jay, and Blue-winged Mountain Tanager, and well as briefer views of some more elusive species: the Ocellated Tapaculo, Spillmann's Tapaculo, and Golden-headed Quetzal.



*We photographed this Turquoise Jay as it visited a bromeliad to drink water trapped in the base of the leaves. © Liron Gertsman*

The next day, we had a special treat in store for the morning: a visit to the world-famous Refugio Paz De Las Aves. Getting an early start, we began by visiting a “lek” site of the beautiful and unique Andean Cock-of-the-rock. At a “lek”, groups of males gather to display for visiting females looking for a mate. The bright red plumage of these spectacular birds radiated through the forest understory in the early morning light.



*The remarkable Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, one of several males we watched and photographed at their courtship site first thing in the morning. © Liron Gertsman*

After our visit to the lek, it was time to experience what Refugio Paz De Las Aves is best known for: the antpittas. This group of birds were, for a long time, notoriously difficult to see. However, Angel Paz discovered that he could feed them, making them more visible to birders. The result was that the family land and livelihood of farming, logging and hunting was converted to a protected nature reserve, where bird lovers from around the world come to see the antpittas, thereby funding and ensuring the protection of the reserve for years to come. This model of bird ecotourism and conservation has spread, and is now common across South America. Over the course of the morning, we were treated to fantastic views of 5 antpitta species: Giant, Yellow-breasted, Moustached, Ochre-breasted and Chestnut-crowned. We also saw and photographed some other special birds, such as the Rufous-breasted Anthrush and Empress Brilliant hummingbird.



*The Giant Antpitta, the largest antpitta species on earth, is near-endemic to northern Ecuador, and provided our group with remarkable views at Refugio Paz de Las Aves. © Liron Gertsman*

Following our morning visit to Refugio Paz De Las Aves, we continued on to the nearby BirdWatcher's house. Here, we had some fabulous photo opportunities of a Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan, as well as a variety of tanagers and hummingbirds. Of the hummingbirds here, the Violet-purple Coronet was a group favourite.



*The spectacular and photogenic Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan. © Liron Gertsman*

After an action-packed morning and early afternoon, we headed back to the lodge in Tandayapa for some rest and casual evening bird photography, as well as a post-processing session, where we learned a general workflow for editing images of birds, to bring them to life on the screen.

### **November 9-10: back to Quito and departure**

It may have been our final full day of the tour, but there were still some amazing birds and photography opportunities in store. After some morning bird photography at Tandayapa, we headed back in the direction of Quito, making our way to Reserva Zuro Loma. While there were many possible species here to be excited about, there was one particular target in mind: the Sword-billed Hummingbird. It wasn't long before we spotted one, and ended up getting some fantastic views of this ridiculously unique species. We took time to photograph the hummingbirds visiting the feeding stations and flowers at the reserve. In addition to the Sword-billed, we were also treated to fabulous opportunities with Tyrian Metaltail, Sapphire-vented Puffleg, Collared Inca, Sparkling Violetear, Buff-winged Starfrontlet, and Mountain Velvetbreast.



*This gorgeous Sparkling Violetear was one of several hummingbird species that provided us with fantastic photo opportunities on our last full day in Ecuador. © Liron Gertsman*

We also had fantastic views here of Equatorial and Tawny Antpitta coming in to feed on worms, Masked Flowerpeirecers all around, Rufous-breasted Chat-Tyrants visiting the bird bath, and tanagers (Hooded Mountain Tanager and Blue-capped tanager) visiting the fruit feeder. What a special place!



*We took advantage of contrasting lighting to photograph this Hooded Mountain Tanager against a dark backdrop, making for a striking portrait! © Liron Gertsman*

After our visit to Zuro Loma, we continued on to the nearby Yanacocha reserve, where highlights included a cooperative Andean Guan, Great Sapphirewing, White-rumped Hawk, Yellow-breasted Brushfinch, Black-chested Mountain Tanager, and Glossy Flowerpiercer. We then continued on the final stretch back to our hotel in Quito, ending the trip where it all began. We had dinner as we reminisced about the incredible couple of weeks of bird photography in Ecuador, and prepared for our goodbye to each other and this amazing country the following day.



*Our group of eager bird lovers and photographers, with Cotopaxi Volcano in the distance. © Liron Gertsman*

[Ecuador Bird Photography Tour 2024 - eBird list](#)