Eagle-Eye Tours

Grand Ecuador Itinerary

Link: Grand Ecuador

Tour Overview

Ecuador is one of the world's great birding destinations, combining exceptional diversity with an impressive network of reserves, birding lodges and local conservation initiatives. On our Grand Ecuador Birding Tour, cock-of-the-rock leks, antpitta feeding stations, busy hummingbird feeders and colourful mixed-species flocks provide memorable encounters with some of the country's most distinctive birds.

We explore some of Ecuador's most celebrated birding regions, from the Chocó cloud forests west of Quito and the windswept páramo of the high Andes to the eastern-slope forests around Guango and San Isidro, the foothills of Sumaco and the bird-rich Amazon lowlands. Along the way, we search for Ecuadorian and regional specialties, colourful tanagers and quetzals, high-Andean birds and an extraordinary variety of hummingbirds. In the Amazon, canoe excursions, canopy birding and parrot clay licks reveal an entirely different world of toucans, cotingas, parrots, antbirds and other rainforest wildlife.

With exceptional bird diversity, distinctive regional specialties and memorable birding experiences at every stage, Grand Ecuador showcases the remarkable richness of this small but extraordinarily biodiverse country.

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival In Quito



Our Grand Ecuador birding tour begins near Quito, where we gather at our hotel for an evening orientation and welcome dinner. Depending on arrival times, there may be an opportunity for some introductory birding around the hotel gardens. Great Thrush, Saffron Finch, Scrub Tanager, Vermilion Flycatcher and Black-tailed Trainbearer are among the birds we may encounter. Night near Quito.

Day 2: Zuro Loma, Tandayapa and El Septimo



We begin our exploration of Ecuador's Andes at Zuro Loma, a high-elevation reserve above Nono. Feeding stations offer opportunities to see normally secretive antpittas, with Equatorial Antpitta among the possibilities, while fruit feeders attract colourful mountain tanagers, brushfinches and flowerpiercers. Hummingbirds are particularly diverse here, and we hope to see the remarkable Sword-billed Hummingbird along with several other high-Andean species. As we descend the western slope, the birdlife changes rapidly with elevation. We stop at Tandayapa Bird Lodge or another nearby feeder site, where fruiting trees and feeders may attract Crimson-rumped Toucanet, Rufous Motmot, euphonias and a colourful selection of tanagers, as well as hummingbirds such as Violet-tailed Sylph and White-booted Racket-tail. By afternoon we reach the lodge, our base for the next three nights in the exceptionally diverse Chocó cloud forest. Night at Sachatamia Lodge or similar.

Days 3 and 4: Chocó Cloud Forest



We have two full days to explore the extraordinary birdlife of the Mindo area and surrounding Chocó cloud forest. Our exact schedule will depend on local conditions, current bird activity and reservations at the various sites. At Sachatamia, early-morning activity around the insect light can attract woodcreepers, flycatchers, treehunters and other forest birds, while the grounds and surrounding forest are excellent for mixed-species flocks. Choco Toucan, Golden-headed Quetzal, Crested Guan, Ornate Flycatcher, woodpeckers and a remarkable variety of tanagers are among the possibilities. One morning we plan to visit Refugio Paz de las Aves, famous for its Andean Cock-of-the-rock lek and pioneering antpitta feeding program. Here we hope for excellent views of displaying cock-of-the-rocks and one or more of the normally elusive antpittas. Toucan Barbet, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, Golden-winged Manakin, Orange-breasted Fruiteater and Black-chinned Mountain Tanager are among the many other specialties we may encounter. Another place we expect to visit is Guaycapi, where fruit and hummingbird feeders provide excellent birding and particularly good opportunities for Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan. Fruti Tour is another productive site where possibilities include Red-headed Barbet, Great Antshrike, Black-winged Saltator, Choco Tyrannulet, Pacific Antwren and an assortment of tanagers and hummingbirds. Depending on conditions and bird activity, we may also visit Milpe Bird Sanctuary or bird other productive forest roads in the Mindo area. Nights at Sachatamia Lodge or similar.

Day 5: Across the Andes to Guango Lodge



After some final birding around Sachatamia, we begin our journey back across the Andes. A stop in the dry inter-Andean habitat near Calacalí introduces another distinctive group of birds, with possibilities including Tufted Tit-Tyrant, Ash-breasted Sierra Finch, Band-tailed Seedeater and Golden Grosbeak. Continuing east of Quito, we begin climbing toward Papallacta. We keep watch for birds of the open highlands and scan the surrounding hillsides, where Andean Bear is a rare but exciting possibility. We continue across the Andes to Guango Lodge, situated in beautiful temperate forest on the eastern slope. If time permits, we will begin exploring the lodge grounds, feeders or river before dinner. Night at Guango Lodge.

Day 6: Papallacta Highlands and Guango Lodge



Today we explore the spectacular high-elevation habitats around Papallacta and Cayambe-Coca National Park. Weather plays a major role in our plans, but when conditions cooperate we travel above treeline into páramo habitat at more than 4,000 metres. This open, windswept landscape supports a specialized collection of birds. Stout-billed and Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, Many-striped Canastero, Tawny Antpitta, Grass Wren and Plain-capped Ground-Tyrant are among the species we may encounter. Higher on the slopes we search for Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe and keep watch for Andean Condors soaring above the ridges. Ecuadorian Hillstar is another high-Andean specialty we hope to find. Back at Guango Lodge, we explore the river and mossy temperate forest. Torrent Duck, White-capped Dipper, Fasciated Tiger-Heron and Torrent Tyrannulet may be found along the rushing waterways, while forest birds can include Turquoise Jay, Mountain Cacique, Pearled Treerunner and Hooded Mountain Tanager. The feeders also provide excellent opportunities for eastern-slope hummingbirds such as Long-tailed Sylph and Tourmaline Sunangel. Night at Guango Lodge.

Day 7: Guango Lodge to San Isidro



We spend the morning exploring the trails, feeders and river around Guango before continuing down the eastern slope. Depending on bird activity, we may also look for species such as Gray-breasted Mountain Toucan and Andean Guan around the lodge. On our way to San Isidro, we plan to stop at a local birding reserve such as Bosque El Quetzal. Along with a variety of hummingbirds, the forest and feeders here can produce Pale-edged Flycatcher, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Green Jay and other eastern-slope birds. By afternoon we reach Cabañas San Isidro, surrounded by rich Andean cloud forest. Birding begins right around the lodge, and after dark we may have an opportunity to see the distinctive Black-banded Owl associated with San Isidro. Night at San Isidro Lodge.

Day 8: San Isidro



We have a full day to explore the forests around San Isidro. Birding can begin right from the lodge deck, where forest edge and insect-light activity can attract Andean Motmot, Masked Trogon, Montane Woodcreeper, flycatchers and mixed flocks of tanagers and other songbirds. One special possibility is White-bellied Antpitta, which may visit a feeding area near the lodge. Along the entrance road and surrounding trails we watch for Powerful Woodpecker, Andean Solitaire, Cinnamon Flycatcher, Saffron-crowned and Beryl-spangled Tanagers and Golden-headed Quetzal. The forests here are also excellent for raptors, and with luck we may encounter something exceptional such as Black-and-chestnut Eagle. Night at San Isidro Lodge.

Day 9: San Isidro to WildSumaco



After some final birding around San Isidro, we continue our descent toward the foothills of Sumaco. As we drop in elevation, the bird community changes noticeably. One possible stop along the route gives us an opportunity to look for Cliff Flycatcher on exposed rock faces. Depending on current sightings and the advice of our guides, we may make additional stops at productive roadside forests or known locations for special birds along the way. By late afternoon we reach WildSumaco Lodge, where the surrounding forest, observation areas and feeders provide our first introduction to the remarkably rich foothill birdlife. Night at WildSumaco Lodge.

Days 10–11: WildSumaco and Sumaco Foothills



We have two full days to explore WildSumaco and the surrounding foothill forests. This is one of the most species-rich portions of the tour, and our plans will be guided by current bird activity and the knowledge of our local guide. Early-morning explorations may produce Collared Trogon, Black-streaked Puffbird, Black-faced Antbird, Plain Antvireo and a wide range of foliage-gleaners and other understory birds. Observation areas and roadside flocks can be especially colourful, with Paradise, Spotted and Blue-necked Tanagers, Red-headed Barbet and other canopy birds, while Yellow-throated and Channel-billed Toucans and Military Macaws may appear overhead. Other specialties we hope to find include Coppery-chested Jacamar, Blue-rumped Manakin and the normally secretive Plain-backed and Ochre-breasted Antpittas. The feeders provide another impressive hummingbird spectacle, with Wire-crested Thorntail and Napo Sabrewing among the characteristic species. Our local guides often know where difficult birds are currently appearing, so we may also search for rails, crakes or roosting owls. Blackish Rail is among the possibilities in the surrounding area. Another site we hope to visit is Amarún Pakcha, a community-run forest conservation initiative near Sumaco. An Andean Cock-of-the-rock lek provides an opportunity to see the distinctive eastern population, while Rufous-breasted Wood-Quail, Chestnut-headed Crake and other elusive forest birds are possibilities. Nights at WildSumaco Lodge.

Day 12: Into the Amazon Lowlands



After breakfast we leave WildSumaco and continue downslope toward Coca, watching the landscape and birdlife change as we enter the Amazon lowlands. Parrots and macaws, including Chestnut-fronted Macaw, are among the possibilities along the way. At Coca we meet our Amazonian guides and board a motorized canoe for the journey down the Napo River. After leaving the main river, we continue on foot and by paddle canoe through quiet black-water forest and waterways to Sani Lodge. Even our arrival can be productive, with Hoatzins around the lagoon and possibilities including Sunbittern, Masked Crimson Tanager, Red-capped Cardinal, Black-fronted Nunbird, caciques and parrots. Night at Sani Lodge.

Days 13–15: Amazon Lowlands – Sani Lodge



We have three full days to immerse ourselves in the extraordinary birdlife of the Amazon. Our schedule remains flexible, allowing our local guides to take advantage of weather, water levels and current bird activity. One of our principal excursions is to the canopy tower, where we can look across the rainforest at birds that are often difficult to see from ground level. Cotingas are among the great attractions, with Spangled and Plum-throated Cotingas possible, while aracaris, barbets, toucans, euphonias and tanagers move through the canopy. Parrots and macaws frequently pass overhead, and the tower also provides excellent opportunities to scan for forest raptors. The waterways around Sani support a very different group of birds. Hoatzins are characteristic of the flooded forest, along with Sungrebe, Capped Heron, Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Boat-billed Heron and Black-capped Donacobius. Quiet canoe excursions may also produce Long-billed Woodcreeper, kingfishers and the localized Cocha Antshrike. Forest trails and river-edge habitats offer another impressive collection of Amazonian birds, with possibilities including Great Jacamar, White-necked Puffbird, White-fronted and Black-fronted Nunbirds, Wire-tailed Manakin, Screaming Piha and Amazonian Umbrellabird. We also visit parrot clay licks along the Napo River, where gatherings of Amazons and parakeets can provide one of the great wildlife spectacles of the rainforest. Mealy and Orange-winged Amazons, Dusky-headed and Cobalt-winged Parakeets and other parrots may descend to the clay depending on conditions. An evening canoe outing may give us an opportunity to experience the rainforest after dark and listen or watch for potoos, nightjars and owls. We also hope to visit the Kichwa community of Sani Isla, where Western Pygmy Marmoset and several other monkey species are among the wildlife possibilities. Nights at Sani Lodge.

Day 16: Return to Quito, Tambo Condor and Antisana



We leave Sani early, retracing our route by paddle canoe and motorized boat to Coca before flying back to Quito. After meeting our driver, we head toward Antisana for a final taste of high-Andean birding. At Tambo Condor we watch the surrounding cliffs and ridges for Andean Condor while feeders may attract Giant Hummingbird, Great Sapphirewing and Shining Sunbeam. We continue into the Antisana highlands. Andean Ibis, Carunculated Caracara, Aplomado Falcon and Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle are among the birds we may encounter in the open páramo and surrounding mountains. We return to our hotel near Quito for our final checklist and farewell dinner. Night near Quito.

Day 17: Departure, Quito

Our Grand Ecuador birding tour ends today. You can schedule your international flight anytime today.

What to Expect

Overview

The Grand Ecuador tour is a fast-paced birding tour with frequent early starts, often around 5:00am. Pre-breakfast birding is common, followed by breakfast and another birding session. On many lodge-based days, we return for lunch and a midday break before heading out again in the cooler late afternoon. Some transfer and excursion days are longer and may keep us in the field for much of the day. Occasional optional evening or night outings may be offered for nocturnal birds and other wildlife.

Food

We enjoy excellent meals at our hotels and birding lodges, with some packed breakfasts or lunches. Most dinners are at our accommodation or a nearby restaurant. Each evening we compile the day’s checklist, review our sightings and discuss plans for the following day.

Accommodation

We stay in comfortable hotels and birding lodges ranging from simple and rustic to more modern. Rooms have private bathrooms and hot water. Air conditioning is generally not available; in the Amazon, rooms are screened and equipped with fans.

Walking

Most birding is along quiet roads, lodge grounds and established forest trails, with walks generally short to moderate in length. Our longest walk is approximately 3 km (2 miles) and takes about 2 hours. Trails can be uneven, muddy or slippery after rain, and some excursions involve steps or moderate inclines.

At Sani Lodge, participants should also be comfortable walking forest trails and climbing the stairs to the canopy tower. At high elevations, much of our birding is relatively close to the vehicle, with

only short walks required.

Driving

Most days involve a small to moderate amount of driving, with a few longer transfer days. We usually break longer journeys with birding, meal or rest stops along the way.

Climate

Because this tour covers a wide range of elevations, participants should be prepared for very different conditions from one region to the next.

Around Quito and in the high Andes, mornings and evenings can be quite cool, with temperatures often around 5–15°C (41–59°F). At Papallacta and Antisana, where we may reach more than 4,000 m (13,100 ft), conditions can be cold, windy and exposed, with fog, drizzle or rain possible even when the valleys below are clear.

The western and eastern cloud forests, including areas around Tandayapa, Mindo, Guango, San Isidro and WildSumaco, are generally mild, humid and frequently misty. Daytime temperatures are often around 15–25°C (59–77°F), but rain showers are common and trails can become muddy or slippery.

In the Amazon lowlands around Coca and Sani Lodge, conditions are hot and very humid, with daytime temperatures commonly around 24–32°C (75–90°F). Rain can occur at any time, often in heavy but relatively short showers.

Overall, participants should be prepared for cool high-altitude mornings, mild and damp cloud forest conditions, hot humid lowlands, strong equatorial sun and regular rain throughout the tour.

Elevation

This tour includes several nights and birding excursions at significant elevations. We spend approximately six nights above 2,000 m (6,560 ft), including two nights near Quito at about 2,400 m (7,900 ft), two nights at San Isidro at about 2,050 m (6,700 ft), and two nights at Guango Lodge, our highest overnight location, at approximately 2,700 m (8,900 ft).

On several daytime excursions we travel considerably higher. Zuro Loma reaches approximately 3,100 m (10,200 ft), while our high-Andean birding around Papallacta may take us above 4,200 m (13,800 ft). We may also reach around 4,000 m (13,100 ft) at Antisana. These highest elevations are daytime visits, and we descend to lower elevations to sleep.

The effects of altitude vary considerably between individuals. Anyone with concerns about travelling at altitude, particularly those with heart or lung conditions, should discuss this itinerary with their physician before booking.

Boat Trips

Travel to Sani Lodge includes an approximately three-hour motorized canoe journey down the Napo River. We then walk approximately 10-15 minutes through the forest before transferring to paddle canoes for the final journey to the lodge. The journey is taken in reverse when leaving Sani.

There are no restroom facilities aboard the canoes, and participants should be comfortable getting in and out of both motorized and paddle canoes. Canoes are also used for several wildlife and

birding excursions during our stay.

In Country Flights

The tour includes one short domestic flight from Coca to Quito, approximately 30–40 minutes in duration. The flight is arranged by Eagle-Eye Tours and included in the tour price. Each participant is allowed one 10kg carry-on bag and one 23kg checked bag.

What's Included

Tour Price Includes
- All accommodations - generally good and modern
- All meals & soft drinks
- Guides - 1 guide with 4 - 8 pax, 2 guides with 9 - 12 pax
- Airport transfers
- Includes one in-country flight Coca - Quito
- Park entry/ tour fees
- Gratuities to local driver
- Ground transportation

Tour Price Does Not Include
- Flights to and from Quito
- Travel Insurance
- Items of a personal nature
- Alcoholic beverages
