

Colombia - Western Andes and Santa Marta mountains

27 February to 18 March 2025

Connecting the isthmus of Central American with the vast South American continent to the south, Colombia is a large country, more than twice the size of France. It has the distinction of being the only South American country with a coastline on both the Pacific and Caribbean, its varied habitats and elevations hosting the world's most diverse avifauna, including more than 100 endemic species of bird. Our tour embraced two of the most renown birding areas. Firstly, the Colombian Andes whose intricate geography of local climates and landscapes has produced one of the world's most biodiverse regions. Here we explored the high paramo and cloud forest, with visits to vibrant hummingbird feeders and antpitta feeding stations in lower elevation forests. Secondly, and quite separate, the isolated Santa Marta mountains overlook the sparkling Caribbean and here we targeted the rich endemic birdlife of this very special region.

Group members were Mark and Sue Cook, Malcolm Goodman, Bob and Patricia Martin, Alan and Caroline Quirk. Lance and Nick from Birding Abroad travelled as customers this time, whilst our close friend of many years John McLoughlin, who had visited Colombia on many previous occasions, was the principal tour guide. We were accompanied throughout by local Colombian bird guides and ground staff.



Friday 28 February: Following an overnight flight from London we arrived in Bogota at 3:45am, passing swiftly through immigration before taking a short internal flight to Periera in the Central Andes. It was already bright and sunny as we waited for our guide outside Periera

airport, excitedly watching our first birds of the trip which included Eared Doves, Southern Rough-winged Swallows, bright yellow Saffron Finches and even two Yellow-headed Caracaras. Shortly Juan Lopez from Medellin arrived and after quick introductions we were heading out of the city and along the Otun river valley. First impressions were of colourful communities with many walls covered in graffiti art much of which depicted images of the natural world. Our first lodge, Kumunday, was a welcoming place where the group was housed in a mix of accommodation with most in the main lodge and others in an adjacent house.

After settling in we took stock and enjoyed a late breakfast, our first taste of Colombian home cooking: eggs, fresh fruit, coffee and delicious fruit juices and hot chocolate. The bird feeders in the lodge garden provided a leisurely introduction to Neotropical birding with open country species such as Cattle Tyrant, Shiny Cowbird, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird and the Rufous-collared Sparrow seen, all of which would become familiar with almost daily sightings on the tour. These were accompanied by the comings and goings of small parties of Thick-billed Euphonia, both Scrub and Blue-grey Tanagers as well as several each of Black-billed Thrush, Summer Tanager, Flame-rumped Tanager, Palm Tanager and a smart, Red-crowned Woodpecker. The roadside wires provided perches for the abundant Blue-and-white Swallows, whilst overhead our first overwintering Broad-winged Hawk of the tour soared over the valley.



Instant colour: Summer, Blue-grey and Palm Tanagers at the lodge feeders

Birding wise the tour started at the nearby Otun Quimbaya sanctuary, a well-known home to the endemic Cauca Guan. The Quimbaya were the indigenous people who occupied this region prior to the Spanish conquest and Kumunday means “white beautiful” the local name given to the snow-capped volcano which dominates the landscape here. After our late breakfast we decanted into three 4x4 jeeps to take us up the road to the Otun Quimbaya

reserve before heading back for lunch and then returning to the centre mid-afternoon. Each stage of the trail produced a fabulous array of birds. The fast-flowing Otun river held a pair of White-capped Dippers, with a couple of tiny Torrent Tyrannulets flycatching at the edges, and finally after several checks of suitable stretches of river, a fabulous female Torrent Duck, which showed well, passing underneath the small bridge which we were using as a vantage point – a much desired and true emblematic bird of the Andean mountain rivers. A few Black Phoebe stayed loyal to the water's edge, whilst a couple of Cinnamon Flycatchers made sorties out from dead branches and a Slate-throated Redstart flicked through the mid-story.



One of five species of dipper in the world, the White-capped favours Andean streams

American wood-warblers were also in evidence and on this first afternoon we had good views of two rare Cerulean Warblers, both smart males, whose relatively quick feeding action in the sunny leaves of the *Cecropia* trees contrasted with the slower, slightly more ponderous foraging of nearby Canada Warblers, Tropical Parula and numerous Blackburnian Warblers.

Evening meal was taken at the lodge at 7:30pm followed by the first of many early nights.

Saturday 1 March: We spent our second day again at the Otun Quimbaya sanctuary and travelled along a well-used dirt road to a place known as El Cedral. A hearty lunch of soup and chicken was enjoyed at the restaurant there. A group from Los Angeles Zoo were engaged in a study of the local Mountain Tapirs which visit this spot. Apparently young tapirs show no fear of man and readily drop in for food and even medical attention at the centre. On the bridge a flash of stunning orange revealed a female Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, perhaps the surprise sighting of the day as the nearest known lek is at least 25 km away.

We soon got the picture of forest birding in that we heard a lot more than we saw. Our first encounters were with no-show Parker's Antbird and an equally tricky encounter with our first

tapaculo, the shy Stile's Tapaculo. Juan was persistent if nothing else, and we succeeded with our next attempt, a White-crowned Tapaculo. The vast array of hummingbirds was one of the main reasons we were here in Latin America and our first encounters included a Bronzy Inca and then a nectar feeding Green-fronted Lancebill at El Cedral.

In addition to the endemic Cauca Guan, the other star bird of this area is the Red-ruffed Fruitcrow, and we had several good views of this stunning bird. Also, at El Cedral we had our introduction to the diverse brushfinch family, with a couple of nice White-naped showing nicely on the ground, and the tanager list began to creep up with the addition of Black-capped, Beryl-spangled and the stunning Golden shown below.



Sunday 2 March: We departed Kumunday around 7:00am and drove back through Pereira. It was a Sunday, a day when many Colombian cities are closed to traffic to allow joggers and cyclists the run of the city's roads. Today there was marathon in progress with hundreds of pink clad runners being applauded through the streets. Heading west across the cloudy Cauca valley the sun finally broke through as we climbed the eastern slope of the Western Andes towards the town of Apia. Mid-morning we broke our journey on the San Jaun ridge at the Apia Birding Trail, a new lodge created for birders with many feeders and flowering shrubs to attract tanagers and hummingbirds. Amazingly, a Tatama Tapaculo had recently been encouraged to visit the feeding station, giving us excellent looks at this rather unknown and very secretive bird. A wintering Swainson's Thrush had also learned the trick and this too showed nicely.

At the reserve centre itself, new hummingbirds entertaining us included Tawny-bellied Hermit, Greenish Puffleg and Steely-vented Hummingbird. A fine Red-headed Barbet sat out in the open, and an Andean Solitaire began singing. Overhead, five Swallow-tailed Kites showed

briefly as they soared over the forest canopy. A pair of Golden-breasted Fruiteaters provided a roadside attraction whilst a stunning Blue-winged Mountain-tanager gave the group their first sighting of this charismatic family.

By midday we had arrived in the town of Pueblo Rico, 'rich town', where we transferred into three 4x4 jeeps for the final leg of the journey to Montezuma Ecolodge in the Tatama National Park. It took one hour and a half with the final few kilometres of 'road' being no more than a rough track. Black Vultures were common in the skies above the forests and cultivated land here. After checking in and sorting out our rooms for the next three nights, we spent a relaxing afternoon in front of the hummingbird feeders which attracted no less than a dozen species, quite a challenge for most of the group. White-necked Jacobin, Empress Brilliant, Purple-throated Woodstar, Buff-tailed Coronet, Andean Emerald, Green-crowned Brilliant, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Crowned Woodnymph, Purple-bibbed Whitetip, Green Thorntail, Rufous-gaped Hillstar and Booted Raquet-tail, completed this group.



We marvelled at the multitude of hummingbirds – here a male Booted Raquet-tail

A small pool at the lodge was home to a confiding Black Rail, whilst a couple of Plumbeous Pigeons perched in nearby trees. Three close Hepatic Tanagers gave us the opportunity to compare them with the more common Summer Tanagers, and we noted that the Flame-rumped Tanagers here were of the 'Lemon-rumped' variety which predominate in the Choco region. The orange or true 'Flame-rumped' subspecies are endemic to Colombia. Heavy rains, a feature of the Choco region, came on as darkness fell at 5:00pm.

Monday 3 March: We were up early and ready for the full Montezuma experience. Stimulated by a slug of black coffee at 5:15am, there followed a one hour and a half drive up the dirt mountain road to the peak of Cerro Montezuma, which offered stunning views of the Tatama mountain range. Here the highest peaks, clad in cloud this morning, form a watershed known in local cultural and spiritual tradition as the 'grandfather of all rivers'. An al fresco breakfast was enjoyed at a specially constructed birding platform, but it wasn't long before the clouds closed in again. Decorated with bird feeders we shared our fare with the endemic Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer, a species only found at this high elevation. A first glimpse was had of the glamorous Violet-tailed Sylph hummingbird as it joined Tourmaline Sunangels and Buff-

tailed Coronets and the gorgeous Velvet-purple Coronet. Hopping around the entrance gate of the army base (the only reason an accessible road reaches these heady heights) were several Giant Thrushes. These outsize blackbirds would become another familiar bird of high elevations throughout the tour. Many Brown-bellied Swallows circled the high ground here.

The pattern of the day was to start high and then slowly descend the winding road back down the mountain to the lodge. Along the way sturdy platforms provided stable viewing stands and shelter from the rain which fell heavy at times and at regular intervals.

At our first stop we located an Andean Pygmy-owl high on the ridge, its presence given away by a horde of anxious hummingbirds. A pair of Ocellated Tapaculos called tantalisingly close to the road but refused to show whilst a vocal Narino Tapaculo did likewise. A mixed bunch of tanagers included the endemic Gold-ringed Tanager, Purplish-mantled Tanager and the rather dull by comparison Dusky Chlorosphingus.

Our freshly prepared lunch was delivered by motorbike at 12:30pm directly from the lodge, everything working like clockwork. An amazing array of new birds came thick and fast, Smoky Bush-tyrants, Masked Flowerpiercers, Rufous Wrens, Green-and-black Fruiteaters, Rufous Spinetails, solitaires, tapaculos and tanagers.



Masked Flowerpiercer is the most commonly seen of its congeners in the region, all having slightly upturned bills, pointed and hooked at the tip, to pierce holes in flower corollas for nectar

The day sped quickly by and before we knew it, we were on our final stop of the day, viewing from the sturdiest platform as the rains came down heavier than ever. It was interesting to note that bird activity peaked rather than diminished in these conditions. A tall fruiting *Cecropia*

attracted a great variety of Western Andean specialities including Black Solitaire, the iridescent Glistening-green Tanager, Black-chinned Mountain-tanager, a Fulvous-dotted Treerunner and a pair of Handsome Flycatchers whilst Brown Inca and Violet-tailed Sylphs were feeding at point blank range at the sugar feeders; incredible. After a long wait for the rain to stop, we continued our descent on foot bumping straight into a pair of Lanceolated Monklets sitting together above the forest trail, a rather fortunate encounter as they are normally rather tricky to see. Close by a loud metallic call came from a tiny bird in the canopy, a shy Black-headed Tody-flycatcher. After this breathless finish it was back to the lodge, where of mammalian interest, a Central American Agouti, was visiting the feeders for any spilt fruit. Log call and a welcome supper brought the day to an end.



Tuesday 4 March: This morning it was back up the road towards Cerro Montezuma for our second day in the Tatama National Park. Breakfast was taken at a lower platform today as we were scheduled to bird the mid-elevations of the mountain. Stunning views could be had looking down towards our lodge and across to the paramo topped peaks of the tall mountain range and beyond. Visible in the distance was a permanent shroud of clouds cloaking the slopes of the Western Andes, the wettest biogeographical region on the planet. A bold Chestnut-capped Brushfinch hopped out into the open along the track. Once again 'hummers' provided distraction as we tucked into arepas, eggs and coffee. A perched Green-fronted Lancebill sat stationary allowing prolonged views whilst a Greenish Puffleg buzzed nervously around. The stunning black and white colours of Collared Incas were by now familiar whilst Velvet-purple Coronets never fail to impress.

Echoing around the forest was the simple repetitive 'song' of the Yellow-breasted Antpitta which continued to elude us. However, we obtained better success with a cooperative male Bicoloured Antvireo; as with many 'ant-things' the male is black and the female a deep

brunette. Observing an endemic Streak-headed Antbird proved to be a tough challenge whilst a Narino Tapaculo surprised everyone by popping up high off the ground. Yet more new birds included Choco Brushfinch and some Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonias with welcome repeat views of the Gold-ringed Tanager. Mixed bird flocks held Tyrannine Woodcreeper, Lineated Foliage-gleaner, Golden-collared Honeycreeper, Beryl-spangled Tanager, Purplish-mantled Tanager and Blue-necked Tanager (shown below), some finally showing at eye level!



Our tasty, freshly cooked lunch was once again delivered via motorbike courier from the lodge. However, the weather closed in soon afterwards, though we continued to bird between the rain breaks. As we walked downhill a large bird wave engulfed us and it proved challenging to simply keep up with the flow of birds. Two Beautiful Jays arrived first and then a party of Fulvous-dotted Treerunners appeared overhead just as another birding tour group rather fortuitously appeared. Juan then attracted a pair of Toucan Barbets out of the mist but despite his best efforts we were left with mostly monochrome looks at this Choco stunner. We fared better with some lekking Club-winged Manakins with one male showing well high over the track. Given the weather conditions we set off back for the lodge which would offer shelter and more coffee!

The lodge gardens held another endemic in the form of a Greyish Piculet whilst Black-cheeked Woodpecker and a scarce Black-headed Brushfinch visited the feeders. Both Flame-rumped and Yellow-rumped Tanagers were regular visitors, sometimes joined by similarly stunning Crimson-backed Tanagers. Palm and Blue-grey Tanagers had become familiar ever presents but Silver-throated Tanagers were not to be encountered again.

Wednesday 5 March: In contrast to previous nights, it was calm with little rain at the Montezuma Lodge and with the luxury of a 'late breakfast' delivered at the table, we could enjoy scrambled eggs, granola and yoghurt and of course fresh coffee. We were also to have a break from the 4x4s, well at least for the first kilometre or so. Bird waves were on the agenda with the anticipation of yet more new species at the lower elevation forest between the bridges.

Our walk started literally with a crash and a breaking of branches as a pair of guans crossed overhead. However, these proved to be no ordinary guans as views revealed a pair of the generally shy Wattled Guans which proceeded to give the group their best views ever. The male was more focused on display and sat out giving its startling rushing call which being rather drawn out could better be described as a song. With head back, swollen red throat and his yellow wattles dangling, he gave an impressive display as shown below. Meanwhile a second bird, presumably the female, slipped away quietly.



At the first bend we hit our first bird wave of the day and new species came thick and fast: Lemon-browed Flycatcher, Streaked Xenops, White-winged Becard, Bay Wren, a strikingly blue Bay-headed Tanager plus equally stunning Blue-necked and Golden-hooded Tanagers. As was by now to be expected, the Choco Tapaculo proved to be a no show.

As can happen in even these most bird-filled forests, a quiet period ensued, so we called up the jeeps for a change of scene and drove along the track to the third bridge. Slowly walking downhill, we were soon amongst a 'mega-flock' and spent the next half hour picking out and then losing birds so fast it was like sand slipping through our fingers. The species included both Yellow-breasted and Rufous-rumped Antwrens, both Wedge-billed and Olive-backed Woodcreepers, as well as Buff-fronted and Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaners, Red-faced

Spinetail, Black Solitaire plus another near endemic in the form of the distinctive Choco Vireo complete with eyestripes and wing bars. A noisy flock of Crested Ant-tanagers went unseen in the valley below, whilst the trees filled with tanagers including new for the trip Rufous-throated Tanager, Metallic-green Tanager as well as more Glistening-green Tanagers and a Yellow-throated Chlorosphingus (formerly known as Yellow-throated Bush-tanager).

When we paused for breath, it was time to head back down the weather-worn track for the final time past fallen trees and over the raging torrents of crystal-clear waters fomenting in the river below. At the lodge, a buffet lunch of wholesome soup and some delightful, breaded aubergine, *berenjena* in Spanish, was presented along with tasty, caramelized plantain. It was time to leave Montezuma and the Western Andes and continue our journey back east towards Manizales, located in the Central Andes. All too soon we were back in the main square of Apia, which lies at an elevation of just over 1600 m and was only founded less than 200 years ago by settlers from the east of the country. Located in a prime coffee growing region we took the opportunity for a break and take a relaxing cup of coffee and local cakes before continuing our journey. After being shaken around in Toyota pickups we welcomed the comforts of a Mercedes coach driven by an old friend Mauricio, also from Medellin. He was to accompany us on the next phase of our journey into the Central Andes, and we were soon at our stylish city hotel in Manizales.



Thursday 6 March: We awoke to the joys of hot showers and a cooked breakfast at 6:00am. Today was going to be one of those memorable days on a modern-day bird tour, a full-on birders show! Our destination was the Hacienda El Bosque, a working montane cattle ranch and home to some extremely rare and range restricted species. The owner's son had previously initiated an unrivalled experience for bird and wildlife photographers alike by patiently establishing a feeding station to lure the diminutive Crescent-faced Antpitta, a rare and most sought-after species, with a distribution limited to *chusquea* bamboo forests of the High Andes between Colombia and neighbouring Ecuador

Before approaching the feeding station, we enjoyed a pair of Paramo Seedeaters at the trail edge, and then quietly took our positions amongst other birders and photographers as our host placed out some food whilst uttering a variety of peculiar sounds to which the bird had become conditioned. Sure enough, the 'antpitta whispering' worked, the Crescent-faced showing with amazing tameness, as shown by the photograph overleaf, with other more unwanted avian visitors to the worm platter discouraged by the deployment of a water pistol!



However, the venture has grown and now encompasses many other tricky to find Andean forest birds, such as the Equatorial Antpitta we watched at another station and the amazingly charismatic Grey-breasted Mountain-toucan at a third station. Attempts to steal the show came from a visiting Barred Fruiteater not to mention the Yellow-bellied Chat-tyrant and the Sword-billed Hummingbirds shown below.



In the afternoon we had planned a visit to the high paramo on the fringes of the Parc National Nevados del Ruiz. There was some concern with the enveloping mist surrounding El Bosque but we had no need to worry as we drove higher up the mountain where the mist rolled back to reveal the stunning paramo complete with giant *Espeletias*. At the Brisas visitor centre the temperatures were considerably cooler as we were now at an elevation around 4000m. Here we could feel the lack of oxygen which was combatted by cups of coca tea and more cakes. The park is the home of an active volcano which has been smouldering since 2010, and we watched the ash falling on the surrounding landscape when we went higher for better views of the volcano late in the day. In the past eruptions have met with tragedy – sadly in November 1985 landslides killed 23,000 people in the now deserted village of Amaro. On a cloudless day, the volcano can be viewed from four departments of the country, and we were to gain a second view from our mountain top lodge a few days later.

Our main avian targets here were few but would remain long in the memory. Firstly, an adult Andean Condor circled overhead, and we gained repeat views of this giant as it drifted back and forth amongst the swirling mists. What a bird!



Andean Condor – such an iconic sight in the Andean skies above our heads

The star hummingbird was the Buffy Helmetcrest which lit up the shrubbery behind the visitor centre, a specialist species only encountered at high elevations. This is one of four species of helmetcrest that inhabit the northern Andes. Retracing our steps we took lunch at the Restaurante Cumanday, recognise the familiar name? Facing the Laguna Negra this is a well-recognised roadside birding stop. The lake held both Andean Duck and Andean Teal whilst we found a pair of localised Andean Lapwings in fields which lay along a nearby dirt road where we also located a Tawny Antpitta on the open hillside. A woman on horseback came to collect her daughter from the restaurant after she had been dropped there by the school. How quickly people of remote areas straddle the old life and the new. All too soon the daylight was going so we headed back on the one hour or so winding journey back to our own retreat in Manizales, what an amazing day it had been on all levels.

Friday 7 March: An interesting diversion to the itinerary meant that we would now spend an extra morning in Manizales before transferring to Armenia for an overnight stay. Rio Blanco is maintained by Aguas de Manizales for watershed protection. Within lies a reserve made famous by the pioneering of antpitta feeding in Colombia. Recently things have changed and an American couple, Denis and Adriana have purchased land within the reserve. Their newly opened Owls Watch Ecolodge encompasses the Enchanted Garden Forest, commanding stunning views over the city, and of course the celebrated volcano on a sunny day. A local lad Danielle is now the reserve guide, and John had collaborated with him before, so it was good to meet up again. As with Hacienda El Bosque, things have moved up a gear and we were soon enjoying good views of the endemic Brown-banded Antpitta, as shown below.



Close by a confiding Black-billed Mountain-toucan performed; as on the previous day with the Grey-breasted Mountain-toucan, it was simply attracted to grapes. From another carefully constructed platform we were offered coffee and carrot cake whilst around us Masked Trogons and Highland Motmot appeared and overhead a huge Black-and-Chestnut Eagle. Masked Saltator is one of the special birds of this location and we were fortunate to encounter a foraging pair, a species not seen on every visit to Colombia. Not as scarce but equally special was the Crimson-mantled Woodpecker.

There was more bird feeding magic to follow involving the impressive Chestnut-crowned Antpitta, a species we had hitherto only heard. Then a special trick brought out a gorgeous Rufous-crowned Tody-flycatcher into the open where it posed for photographs. Lunch was even more special than could have been anticipated. During the morning Danielle had asked us what we would like and most jumped at the opportunity of a curry with the choice of either Indian or Thai on offer.

Three species of tapaculo had to remain 'heard only', Blackish, Spillmann's and Ash-coloured. These cryptic mouse like species inhabit specific elevation bands on the mountains and are largely distinguished by their calls. At the entrance garden we had been captivated by the wasp like White-bellied Woodstars which in flight produce an audible hum! The recently split White-throated or Choco Daggerbill could be found 'trap-lining' the ornamental flowers whilst the sylphs were now Long-tailed Sylph, a distinct species from the Violet-tailed birds of the Western Andes.

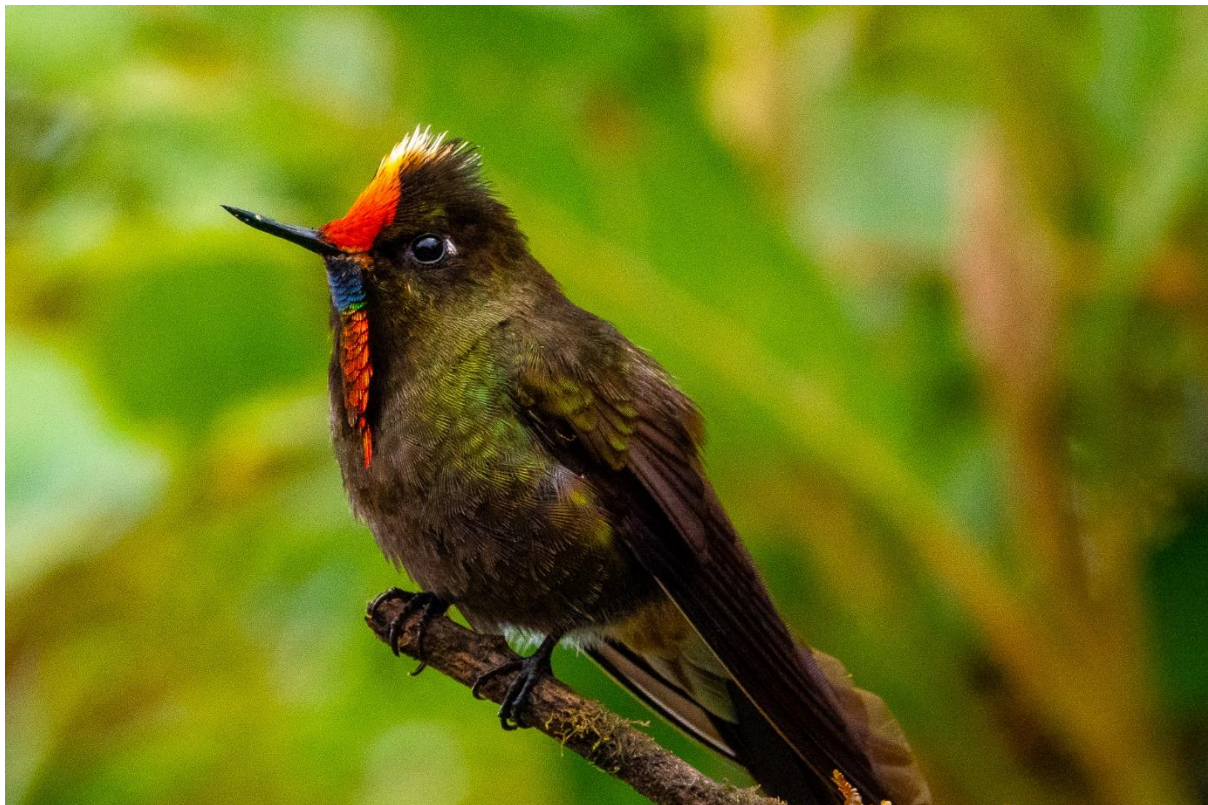


The magnificent Long-tailed Sylph, one of several hummingbirds to trap-line, visiting floral food sources in a regularly repeated sequence

Sadly, it was now time to say goodbye to our travelling companion Juan Lopez who had other engagements to honour, so after our farewells we left Manizales south along the Cauca valley to Armenia another famous capital of the 'ejercito de café' or coffee country. We enjoyed a rural retreat hotel, the Terra Tacuara (*tacuara* is a well-known plant in the bamboo family), all to ourselves although it seemed to lack some of the standard hotel facilities at times. However, a round of cold beers some freshly cooked food and of course a smattering of new birds kept

the day running. Lineated and Spot-breasted Woodpeckers were settled for the evening in the tall trees around the lodge and a displaying male Pauraque made several passes across the lawn at dusk.

Saturday 8 March: The high altitude La Linea road is an astonishing feat of engineering and it was from here that we made a diversion to the Paramo Cuchilla de Campanario, our next planned stop in the Central Andes. Our guide Diego and his sidekick Marcus were waiting with all-terrain jeeps for some pre-breakfast birding along the 'old road' leading to a mountain top radar station. Such roads give easy access to high elevation elfin forest that otherwise birders would not be able to reach. This plan worked perfectly, and we enjoyed views of some of the country's most tricky birds to see. Chestnut-bellied Cotinga had been a mythical bird in Colombia until very recently, whilst the Masked Mountain-tanager is another difficult to encounter High Andean speciality. A Carunculated Caracara flew overhead whilst amongst the scrub, mixed flocks contained both Glossy and Black Flowerpiercers, Golden-crowned Tanager plus both Scarlet-bellied and Lacrimose Mountain-tanagers. Best of all however, was a male Rainbow-bearded Thornbill which after a little wait gave walk away views at the side of the path, simply an amazing hummingbird as shown below.



As we descended the La Linea mountain pass it now appeared almost deserted of traffic in huge contrast to earlier in the day. Our next destination was the Aneime valley, a hidden jewel amongst the high passes of the Central Andes. A major surprise en-route was the garden of Diego's family, El Retorno de los Colibris, an E-bird hotspot no less which was brilliantly full of birds. The garden is famous for a selection of Colombian endemics which today included four species: Colombian Chachalaca, Tolima Dove, Tolima Blossomcrown, and the abundant Indigo-capped Hummingbird. At lunch, which was another delicious feast, we sat amongst a cloud of hummingbirds, which included dozens of Sparkling Violetears. Additional new hummingbird species included Crowned Woodnymphs, White-vented Plumeleteer. After lunch we were rushed into a corner of the garden where a White-tipped Sicklebill fed at a selection of specially planted vines.



Tolima Blossomcrown, a vulnerable endemic hummingbird with fewer than 4500 individuals



One of the many Indigo-capped Hummingbirds in the garden famed for its hummingbirds

It was all a bit overwhelming but there was no time to rest as our nights' accommodation was at the head of the valley another two hours' drive away. Of course, the journey was broken again for more birds including a pair of the endemic Yellow-headed Brushfinches. Once again, we needed to transfer into three 4x4 jeeps which are essential for the mountain roads. By late afternoon we were well up the valley and made a stop at a stand of Wax Palms, the site of a known parrot roost.



Three species engaged in a series of noisy fly pasts, initially the attractive Golden-plumed Parakeets followed by Bronze-winged Parrots and finally the endemic Yellow-eared Parrot. The parrots would land in broken topped palm trunks allowing for excellent views and photos.



A Golden-plumed Parakeet – threatened by high altitude forest clearance

After an enjoyable hour we headed off again with another hour of steady travelling before arriving at the new Pro Aves lodge just after 6:00pm. The recent rains had made the earthen track rather treacherous, so we made the last stretch on foot with bags carried on strong shoulders.

After dinner most folk tucked themselves deep under their blankets in the wooden lodge cabins as it was a very cool night at this altitude. A hardy few persisted in the darkness and obtained stunning views of a Rufous-banded Owl which landed close to the lodge whilst an American Barn Owl gave a brief fly past.

Sunday 9 March: The Indigo-winged Parrot lodge opened in December 2024 and being over 3000 m in elevation, it can be slightly challenging here both when walking during the day and when cold at night. However, it was well worth the overnight chill to awake to the stunning views at dawn the next day. Breakfast was taken in the top floor restaurant with mountains all around. Below lived the warden Wilson and his wife, and their young son. They looked after us very well providing food, sustenance, extra blankets, and a friendly hospitable welcome.

At 7.00am we set off into the elfin forest that constitutes the Giles Fuertsi ProAves reserve and as we walked slowly along, two Chestnut-naped Antpittas came out onto the path!



Further on at the viewpoint, mist hung over the hillside and although we could hear the endemic Indigo-winged Parrots, unfortunately we could not see them! Small numbers of Yellow-eared and Scaly-naped Parrots flew over as they departed their roost sites nearby. Despite our best efforts on both mornings, we failed to obtain looks at the sought-after Indigo-winged Parrot. They appeared to be foraging in forest on the far side of the ridge and therefore out of view. However, as we waited Sword-billed Hummingbirds jousting with Black-thighed Pufflegs and Tourmaline Sunangels at the feeders.



Another group favourite found at a wide range of altitudes, Purple-throated Woodstar

Diego returned with coffee and snacks mid-morning as we enjoyed an array of montane birdlife which included mixed parties of mountain-tanagers whilst a distant Andean Pygmy-owl called its monotonous calls. A vocal, Grey-breasted Mountain-toucan passed through whilst small birds included lively Black-crested Warblers. A slow descent to the lodge produced nice views of a foraging male Purple-backed Thornbill, new for the trip. Whilst some saw a Grass-green Tanager others spied a Bar-bellied Woodpecker, birds which proved hard to pick out even in elfin forest. At the lodge, a gang of Red-crested Cotingas sat sentinel at eye level from the restaurant balcony.

After lunch part of the group returned to the reserve whilst others headed up the valley to the open paramo with its still quietness and stunning views. An elusive Mountain Avocetbill was seen on the drive along with a couple of Viridian Metaltails. The paramo was quiet apart from singing Grass (Paramo) Wrens and a confiding Andean Tit-spinetail. Those remaining within the reserve had a fly-by Carunculated Caracara and close views of a confiding Tawny Antpitta along the trails.

Back at the lodge the fire was lit, and a pleasant evening meal was served with accompanying tasty yellow potatoes. The humble potato has its origin here in the Andes where indigenous folk learnt to eat the poisonous tubers of this nightshade relative along with portions of clay which contained an antidote to the poison. Gradually the tubers were cultivated and thousands of varieties produced until introduced to Europeans by Sir Francis Drake. ** Historical note Drake stole the potatoes from the Spanish who had already discovered them!

Monday 10 March: Soon after first light the Indigo-winged Parrots could be heard in the forest but sadly again they were not seen. Good numbers of Yellow-eared Parrots flighted over the

lodge whilst four species of antpitta could be heard: Undulated, Tawny, Equatorial and Chestnut-naped. In the distance the clouds had lifted and the summit of the impressive Del Ruiz volcano could be viewed.



Yellow-eared Parrot, thought to be extinct until rediscovery in 1999 and thankfully increasing

Departing at 9.00am we descended the now dried out track, but someone still needs to even out the bumps! On the way, a large bird wave brought us to a stop. A pair of brightly coloured, Red-hooded Tanagers stood out in the treetops, and we watched in wonder as other new

species appeared. Green Jay, Emerald Toucanet, Strong-billed Woodcreeper, both Bicoloured and Capped Conebill and a strikingly blue and yellow Buff-breasted Mountain-tanager. By late morning we were basking in the warm sun in Diego's 'hummingbird' garden. A tasty lunch was waiting on the table with delicious and freshly made blackberry juice on the side. As we climbed aboard Mauricio's bus for the drive back to Armenia, we took away lasting memories of the squadrons of hummingbirds.

Our flight was delayed which is not an unusual event in Colombia as weather conditions over the Andes can change in a moment. This meant our onward flight to Santa Marta was also put back, but this gave us the opportunity to enjoy the delights of crepes and waffles in Bogota airport. Our re-scheduled 9.00pm flight left on time and all too soon we had landed at the coastal airport of Santa Marta from where we were whisked away in a fleet of ancient Toyotas up to the hill town of Minca, the gateway to the Santa Marta mountains. At our eco-hotel we were lulled to sleep by the unfamiliar buzz of new cicadas and the clinks of a million tiny frogs.

Tuesday 11 March: Breakfast at the Hotel Colores de la Sierra was a relaxed affair, but no one had told the birds! The restaurant feeders were covered in more than 20 Tennessee Warblers and a host of tanagers. Eventually everyone enjoyed their eggs "con gusto" as we awaited the arrival of our next guide Breiner who was to join us for our adventure in the Sierra de Santa Marta over the next few days. The terrace overlooked some super habitat where we noted a Whooping Motmot, Bicoloured Wren and several Swallow Tanagers, one of which is shown below.



We made our way slowly up the dirt road to higher elevations with regular stops to check out the birdlife, much of it new with many endemic species or subspecies. At lower elevations above Minca it was hot and sunny for the first time on the tour as we tried to locate, with limited success, our first Santa Marta endemics such as the Santa Marta Antbird and the Santa Marta Foliage-gleaner, both of which only occur at the lower elevations.

Halfway up the mountain we stopped for lunch at the Mountain House Lodge a recently opened venture which is providing more choice of accommodation for visiting birders and photographers. Plentiful feeders attracted a good variety of birds but sadly not the rarely seen Santa Marta Sabrewing which been around during the previous week. This endemic species has recently been rediscovered on the south side of the mountain range and only rarely strays to the north side. Still, there were lots of birds to see including gangs of Crowned Woodnymphs, a different subspecies to the Green-crowned Woodnymph which we had encountered in the west. Another new species was the striking Lazuline Sabrewing (photograph below) a close relative in fact of the Santa Marta Sabrewing.



By late afternoon we finally reached the Pro Aves lodge at El Dorado. Whilst waiting for the usual slow room allocation, we enjoyed fine views of the endemic White-tailed Starfrontlet at

the lodge feeders. The El Dorado ridge is separated from the main block of the Sierra de Santa Marta mountains which itself remains indigenous lands which are off limit. The Pro Aves reserve protects some 1024 hectares of montane forest between the elevations of 1500-2700m. Later we enjoyed the novelty of tuk-tuk taxi rides to the new restaurant perched up high on the adjacent ridge top. With its stunning vistas over snow-capped peaks down to the distant Caribbean coastline it was a fantastic way to finish our day and enjoy some quality food and wines.



Wednesday 12 March: We were awake and ready to go at 4:00am for the slow and super bumpy ride to the summit of the Cuchilla Ridge, home to many of the mountain's iconic birds. A pre-dawn stop was made whilst we located two calling Santa Marta Screech-owls, a species that we would find later in the day close to the lodge. Meanwhile an inquisitive endemic antpitta found itself at our feet - the robin like Sierra Nevada Antpitta, one of the former Rufous Antpitta grouping. The actual Santa Marta Antpitta called from the forest but the 'whisperer' at the summit failed to lure one in for us on this occasion. Despite this no-show we did amazingly well for the other endemics. Four Santa Marta Parakeets flew in at 6:40 am and landed in a large eucalyptus for a few minutes. Fortunately, they returned an hour later to give closer and more prolonged views. A female White-tailed Starfrontlet visited the feeders along with the Santa Marta subspecies of the Tyrian Metaltail. In quick succession in between our field breakfast, we enjoyed views of both Rusty-headed and Streak-capped Spinetails, Santa Marta Warbler, Yellow-crowned Whitestart, Santa Marta Tanager and Carriker's Mountain-tanager (Buff-breasted). A Santa Marta Bush-tyrant offered good views as it sat atop a nearby tree, as did a superb male (Northern) Golden Grosbeak, sub species *laubmanni*.

As the next hour progressed, even more specialities came our way: Grey-throated (Santa Marta) Toucanet, Hermit Wood-wren, a shy Flammulated Treehunter, whilst the skulking Brown-rumped Tapaculo was a 'heard only'. Another attraction here were the numerous pairs

of Scarlet-fronted Parakeets scattered amongst the rather denuded and fire damaged forest which is found along the ridge top.



Heading slowly back down to the lodge we stopped on the way for a confiding pair of White-tipped Quetzals, true stunners as shown below.



We tried at a recent spot for the endemic Black-backed Thornbill but all we could find were more Tyrian Metaltails. A White-rumped Hawk gave its shrill call from the forest but remained

undetected. A forester here explained how they are slowly clearing the mountain of non-native trees planted in a hurried response to the rapid deforestation witnessed in former years. More new species included the Montane Woodcreeper and the Montane Foliage-gleaner.

After lunch most of the group accompanied Breiner on a walk along the El Buho (Owl) trail which was aptly named as we encountered a roosting Santa Marta Screech-owl. Well to be truthful, it was Breiner who located the roosting owl, which was no great surprise really. This recently described endemic has become increasingly elusive, so this sighting was much appreciated, we even managed the photograph shown below.



A Sierra Nevada Brushfinch was also new as were not one but three rather vocal Grey-throated Leaf-tossers which gave themselves up in the end. It was a tricky but rewarding late afternoon walk which gave everyone brilliant views of one of the most enigmatic of owls. Back at the restaurant we enjoyed more tasty food and Chilean wine, meanwhile the promised cold beers did not arrive until after most folk had left! It had been another momentous day discovering the birdlife of the Santa Marta mountains.

Thursday 13 March: Another early start as we started our return journey down the mountain for breakfast. We tucked into the regular lashings of coffee and scrambled eggs at Tienda Sofia another of the roadside birding café ventures which have sprung up across Colombia. Sofia, our host, called in some Sierra Nevada Brushfinches which came to the feeding station whilst some noisy, Red-billed Parrots flew overhead. She had also planted an array of flowering shrubs, such as *verbena* and *lantana*, specifically for attracting hummingbirds. We waited for the endemic Santa Marta Blossomcrown with some success as one showed but only briefly, but at a second spot further down, bingo, everyone obtained ace views of the bird both perched and feeding. The star attraction however was a nesting pair of the stunning Blue-naped Chlorophonias, the striking male of which is shown overleaf.



Lunch was again at the Mountain House with its super wholesome food and friendly staff. Here we said our farewells to our excellent guide Breiner and met Saddam Rosillo who would accompany us for the rest of the afternoon. Continuing rapidly to lower elevation we re-acquainted ourselves with hot sunny weather. The birdlife was different with a Central American flavour. New birds included a fine King Vulture, two Plumbeous Kites, a Barred Antshrike, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, White-bearded Manakin, Rufous-and-White Wren and yet another new hummer in the form of a Pale-bellied Hermit. Late afternoon we arrived at the Kokkos Beach resort for a two-night stay on the seafront. A complete contrast in accommodation and we enjoyed more tasty comida with the feel of hot sand under our toes.



Friday 14 March: A relaxed start to the day with a leisurely breakfast on the beach. Our new guide Angel arrived to take us to the nearby Tayrona National Park, in time for opening at 8.00am, though we still had a 50-minute wait in the queue at the entrance gate!

Tayrona is one of the most popular national parks in the country which is no surprise as it is a lovely place, bordering the seafront on the Caribbean coast complete with white sand beaches and palm trees. Occupying a 20 mile stretch of coastline the forest is continuous with the higher elevations of Santa Marta allowing birds and mammals to pass freely between the different elevations. We walked selected sections of the access road which acts as a forest trail. New birds appeared such as huge Crested Guans, the impressive White-necked Puffbird, a Bright-rumped Attila complete with gecko to impress his partner, Crested Oropendola, Black-crowned Antshrike and a shy but vocal Southern Bentbill. Multiple views were enjoyed of the gorgeous Rufous-tailed Jacamar shown below, with three birds perched together at one point.



Golden-fronted Greenlets stayed high in the canopy as did the tail cocking Trilling Gnatwren. Another neck strainer was a male, White-chinned Sapphire hummingbird which called monotonously from high up in the canopy. The real stars of the show at Tayrona are of course the Lance-tailed Manakins (shown overleaf) whose bell like calls ring throughout the forest.



Lunch was taken near the park entrance where the main attraction was a troop of the endemic Cotton-topped Tamarins which came to a banana feeder.



The stream backing onto our lunch stop produced a surprise Green Kingfisher, albeit only briefly. All told it had proved to have been a good morning for primates with Colombian Red Howler Monkeys and a large gang of the bruising Santa Marta Capuchins to add to the tamarins.

After a 'heat of the day' siesta back at the hotel we returned to the park for a late afternoon visit. Black-crowned Antshrike was a new addition along with a Cocoa Woodcreeper and an impressive pair of Crimson-crested Woodpeckers. The finale was provided by an impressive Great Potoo at its roost high up in a tree. Back at Kokkos Beach a full moon shone over the Caribbean as we chatted to some friendly Colombians from Washington and Bogota.

Saturday 15 March: To beat the crowds, we entered the park early before the official opening time of 8:00am, however we still had to queue to leave a couple of hours later! The plan was to have a crack at locating an endemic *cracid*, the Blue-billed Curassow which had been calling regularly on recent mornings. We did hear one call deep in the forest, but it soon stopped vocalising which prevented us from tracking it down. Being there early meant we did notice some extra new birds such as a pair of One-coloured Becards in a clearing and two pairs of White-bellied Antbirds, vocal but elusive. As the tourists started to arrive it was time to leave for breakfast which we again enjoyed on the Kokkos beachfront. All too soon it was time to check out again and prepare for our journey to the final destination of the tour, the Camarones in Guajira, one of the driest regions of Colombia.

A new landscape opened out, more savannah like with thorn scrub and the birdlife also changed accordingly. At one stop we encountered Brown-throated and Orange-chinned Parakeets and some stunning Yellow Orioles. At another we found Aplomado Falcon, Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures and Savannah Hawks at the roadside. Marshes held a host of Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons whilst Wood Storks circled overhead, and a Limpkin lurked in and out of cover. Small parties of Fork-tailed Flycatchers hawked from the lines of fenceposts.



Savanna Hawk. A widespread South American species inhabiting savanna and swamp edges where they prey on small frogs, lizards, small mammals and insects

Our lunch stop was a local enterprise serving dishes of shrimps and rice 'arroz con camarones' whilst a Caribbean Grey Saltator frequented the garden. We left the highway and followed a network of dirt roads which ran between the coastal lagoons. The sky was clear blue, and the sun shone down uncompromisingly on our travel weary group.

The Mar Azul lodge offered some shade and the opportunity of studying a whole new suite of birdlife at the feeders. These were cunningly constructed from cactus stumps with titbits buried in the crowns. Black-faced Grassquits were the most abundant visitors whilst Tropical Gnatcatcher and Tropical Mockingbird added a touch of the Caribbean. However, Orinoco Saltators, a Buffy Hummingbird and the striking Vermillion Cardinal shown below were the star visitors to the feeders.



Our day ended on the seafront checking through large flocks of terns, gulls, and shorebirds, with Magnificent Frigatebirds sailing overhead. Our already bulging trip list was increased with more familiar species such as (Eastern) Willet, Short-billed Dowitcher, Caspian Terns in good numbers plus plenty of Royal and Cabots Terns. Amongst the gathering of many hundreds of Laughing Gulls, we picked out a Colombian rarity in the form of a South American Grey-headed Gull. An impressive selection of herons foraging along the estuarine shoreline included Roseate Spoonbill, Tricoloured Heron, Snowy and Reddish Egret.

Sunday 16 March: We skipped an early breakfast to allow us time to venture into the dry thorn scrub forest of the Guajira peninsula before the heat of the day arrived. Today accompanied by Angel and a local guide from the community, another Jonny!

The day started with Green-fronted Parrotlets in the lodge gardens and Glaucous Tanagers in the local town. We made steady progress through the dry scrub with new birds seemingly popping up on the top of every other bush. Firstly, a Trinidad Euphonia followed by Bare-eyed

Pigeons and Blue-capped Parakeets. Our two guides did an amazing job of both finding the birds and showing them to everyone. Next a Russet-throated Puffbird, a pair of awkward to see Tocuyo Sparrows, Chestnut Piculet, White-browed Spinetail, Slender-billed and Pale-tipped Inezias, a Northern Scrub-flycatcher, a male Black-backed Antshrike, White-fringed Antwrens, stunning Vermillion Cardinals and Orinocan Saltators, ending with a tree full of birds including Red-billed Emerald and Shining-green Hummingbirds.

Many of the species are endemic to this very dry region which straddles the border with neighbouring Venezuela. With limited rainfall people struggle to live here so it was a privilege to be accompanied by enthusiastic folk who wish to preserve the habitat for wildlife alongside the indigenous community. A small area of freshwater pools provided feeding for several overwintering Blue-winged Teal and three Solitary Sandpipers as well as briefly seen Northern Waterthrush.



Following a final look at the Camarones wetlands we took lunch at a breezy seafront restaurant serving healthy portions of shrimps, lobster and Red Snapper, the latter being just superb. We soaked up our last memories of the Caribbean coast as warm winds blew through our shady lunch spot as we chilled out in preparation for our flight back to the capital Bogota later in the afternoon. The day ended with us safely ensconced in our comfortable airport hotel.

Monday 17 March: This morning entailed an early pick up with a hearty breakfast taken at La Baguette café in the small town of Guasca, one hour and half drive away, high above Bogota. It seemed cold up in the mountains after our spell on the Caribbean coast and a cooked breakfast was just what was needed. It was here that we met up with Fredy, local orchid expert, and bird 'whisperer'. In the last year he has created a new reserve, the Finca Muisca reserve situated along Highway 50 high in the Eastern Andes. Fredy was accompanied by other clients, a Dutch couple who were keen to see Spectacled Bear, so a second guide arrived who accompanied us to the mountain reserve.

At the high point in the road, we pulled over as the low mists swirled around the elfin cloud forest that covered the west slope of the mountain. It soon became apparent that the trees were full of mountain-tanagers and we secured second looks at the stunning Golden-crowned

Tanager whilst a new species for us was the Black-chested Mountain-tanager which soon appeared. They accompanied the now familiar but equally impressive, Red-bellied Mountain-tanagers. Hummingbirds whizzed around non-stop, and we ascertained that four species were involved with Great Sapphirewing, Glowing Puffleg, White-bellied Woodstar and Tyrian Metaltail, unfortunately only the latter gave repeat views, and was the only one that we had seen well before!

The paramo was shrouded in cloud so we continued onto the finca which hosts the new reserve. A walk along the road produced a lot of activity including a few Black-billed Mountain-toucans which are nice to observe away from the feeding stations. A Slaty-backed Chat-tyrant called close by but remained elusive, but a striking Streak-throated Bush-tyrant did show well. By now heavy rain was falling, so we strode on to the finca where we found shelter at the old farmhouse. Fredy had been busy here and as well as making orchid collections he has set up some new hummingbird feeders. This was a real bonus as we caught up with the near endemic Blue-throated Starfrontlet, an absolute stunner, and one that we had not expected to see.



Blue-throated Starfrontlet, an inhabitant of humid montane forest

Several diminutive White-bellied Woodstars danced between the feeders seemingly undeterred by the deluge. Nearby we learned that there was an Andean Potoo at a roost site in the forest which Fredy was willing to show us. After splashing across an old meadow, we lined up for gripping views of another super hard to see montane specialist. However, we had to abandon hopes of seeing the Muisca Antpitta and another tapaculo due to the continuing heavy rain.



Andean Potoo sitting motionless at its daytime roost. Its cryptic colouration helping to give it the appearance of a tree stump from a distance

To compensate a little, we stopped on the return journey to come across our final endemic of the tour, a pair of Rufous-browed Conebills, shown on the photograph below. Backtracking to Guasca we revisited La Baguette and enjoyed some warming *Ajiaco*, the local dish of chicken soup with avocado and cream which was simply delicious.



All too soon we were heading through the Bogota traffic to the Habitel hotel where we relaxed and packed before having a final drink together, reflecting on what an amazing and enjoyable experience it had been in Colombia.

Overcoming so many logistical challenges, we had been well supported by our ground crews, helping to make the tour a fine success. Our bird list total was a very impressive 521 species, testament to the immense avian diversity of the country and to yet another well organised tour.

We would like to thank John for steering us through a complex yet fabulous tour with his usual warmth and humour and for sharing his knowledge and passion for Colombia's astonishing birdlife.

We were soon on our way to the nearby Bogota airport for the overnight flight to London, arriving on time the next day.

Many thanks to Bob and John for the use of their photographs in this report.