

**CHARM OF
THE
COLOMBIAN
ANDES**



**231 BIRD SPECIES
OBSERVED**



**HIGHEST ELEVATION
VISITED - 13,520 FT**



**10 HAPPY GUESTS
3 BIRD GUIDES**

TRAVEL JOURNAL



BIRDING THE COFFEE TRIANGLE

Taking place towards the end of the pleasant dry season in the Andes, this 9-day tour covered regions of Colombia’s Western and Central Andes and the Cauca Valley. We spanned elevations as low as 1,650 feet and as high as 13,520 feet. Through four departments, the group experienced a wonderful diversity of Andean birds, lush montane habitats, epic scenery, and the warmth of the Colombian people. At the end of our journey through the heart of Colombia and its Coffee Triangle, our 10 guests wished they would have had “two more days”!

The only risk in visiting Colombia is wanting to stay!



DAY 1 | MEDELLIN

Arriving in the cosmopolitan city of Medellin, our intrepid group of 10 guests and 3 guides began their highly anticipated adventure through Colombia’s magical Coffee Triangle. Eliana & Marc personally received all the eager guests upon arrival at the Medellin International Airport. There’s nothing like a warm welcome right from the start when arriving in a new country!

The Charm of the Andes tour traverses four Colombian departments (states): Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda, and Tolima. Famous for producing the majority of Colombian coffee, this region is renowned for producing some of the best coffee in the world. For birders, not only is this area simply beautiful to visit, with mild and comfortable temperatures, but the Central and Western Andes offers some of the best highland birding in South America. The spectacular nature reserves across the region offer well-preserved forests, comfortable accommodation, and are well-suited for bird photography. Moreover, the Colombian people here are incredibly friendly and there would be ample opportunities to learn about the wonderful culture here.

After being transported to our charming and colorful hotel in Sabaneta on the southern outskirts of Medellin (5,600’), hungry tour participants were welcomed with a bounty of flavorful appetizers. Hot Colombian empanadas, dedos de queso (cheese fingers), and fresh mora (blackberry) juices — que rico! Our orientation meeting was made extra fun with handouts of our curated artisan gift bags, stocked full of useful handcrafted items made by local artists in Colombia and at home in the U.S., as well as plenty of snacks!



DAY 2 | LA ROMERA & BOLOMBOLO

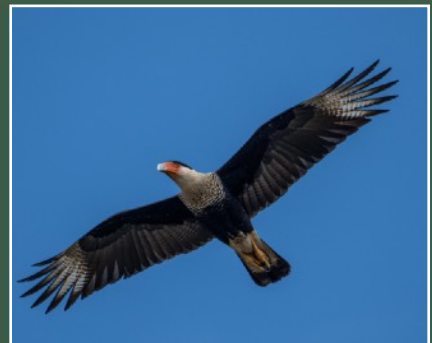
With a drizzle of light rain, our morning birding began at La Romera, a reserve known as one of the most important natural areas in the Aburrá Valley. We stepped right out of

the tour bus at dawn and in the canopy straight above us were Colombian Chacalacas, a Sickle-winged Guan, Red-headed Barbets, and Southern Emerald Toucanets feasting on fruits in the trees. Walking a good paved road, we heard the frog-like trills of the Stiles' Tapaculo in the hills above and the whistled song of the Chestnut Wood-Quail in the canyon below. A male Booted Rackettail with its long paddle-like tail made a quick dash at eye level right in front of our eyes, and an Andean Motmot gave us our first good looks at this iconic Andean species at close range.

A typical Colombian breakfast is often a favorite meal of the day, and today's was no exception. A hearty meal of scrambled eggs with corn, buñuelo (Colombian cheese fritter), arepa with queso blanco (white cheese), croissant, and salchicha (hot dog) was enjoyed by all. Of course the vegans had great options too, including delicious vegan tamales.

Descending in altitude, we made our way out of the Central Andes Cordillera towards the Western Andes, which required a pass-thru of the lower lying Cauca Valley at a mere 1,650' in elevation. It's warmer in temperature at this elevation and so everyone shed a few layers coming out of the cooler mountains for a bit. Here in the lowlands, we stopped for an authentic Colombian almuerzo (lunch) in Bolombolo and took the opportunity to bird a lower elevation and scoop up some lowland species. For every 500 feet of elevation change, the bird species composition changes by 30% — and so there was a good opportunity to spot birds here we wouldn't see in the Central or Western Andes. Grayish Piculet, Antioquia Wren, and Apical Flycatcher, all endemic Colombian species, were great additions to the trip! We also picked up Tropical Gnatcatcher, Black-crowned Antshrike, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, and several other Cauca Valley birds.

From the Cauca Valley we headed back up in elevation to 5,600' to the charming colonial town of Jardín, on the eastern slope of the Western Andes. Here, we based ourselves for the next two nights in this small coffee town in the south part of the Antioquia department. The town's main plaza is colorful, quaint, and lively — one of the prettiest in Colombia.



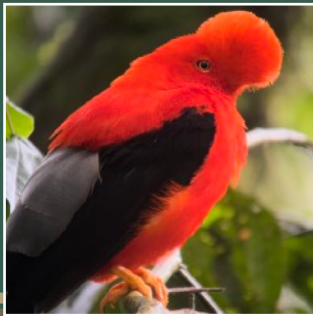


DAY 3 | FINCA BAMBUSA & JARDIN COCK-OF-THE-ROCK LEK

Little known in the birding community, Finca Bambusa in the Western Andes at 5,370' was the first destination for today's birding. Although the morning started off quiet with some light rain for an hour, the rain fortunately let up fairly quickly and the birds came to life. The garden with its nectar and fruit feeders just outside the pleasant home was very attractive to Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, Andean and Western Emeralds, and Bay-headed, Blue-necked, and Blue-gray Tanagers. The "Inca" subspecies of the Green Jay, with its striking white crown and pale eyes, blew everyone away! Although not working the feeders specifically, Black-chested Jays, Russet-winged Oropendolas, Golden-faced Tyrannulets, and a pair of Double-toothed Kites made appearances right around the feeder area. Eating a homemade Antioquia-style breakfast while marveling over all these birds was a delight for all, and it was then time for a walk up the road to see what else nature had in store. A Black Vulture was spotted at close range returning to its nest tucked into the hillside, and although vultures are not usually trip favorites, everyone oohed and aahed when the mama vulture flew in to feed three fluffy vulture chicks! A pair of Colombian-endemic Parker's Antbirds, although quite elusive, gave us on-par looks for what you might expect from an understory skulker. Topping it off, a Common Potoo perched at the end of some dead bamboo, found by our driver, Hermes, was definitely a crowd pleaser.

Following a delicious plant-based lunch, our gang landed at Jardin's renowned Cock-of-the-Rock Reserve at 5,600', which preserves habitat and the perhaps the best mating lek in Colombia for this species. One of the most brilliantly feathered birds in the world, several

male Andean Cock-of-the-Rock put on a dazzling display of dancing antics while making piglike squeals! In addition, we caught great looks at the endemic Red-bellied Grackle, as well as roosting fruit bats and a sleepy pair of Tropical Screech-Owls in a stand of bamboo. As we were about to hop in the tour bus and call it a day, a burst of mixed flock activity just before sunset right on the road out of the reserve was a big surprise! Sometimes the best birding occurs when you least expect it. There was a fantastic mix of tanagers, flycatchers, barbets, brush-finches, anis and more — the group was really pumped. In fact, to quote one of our tour participants, this was the "Best birding day in my life!"





DAY 4 | YELLOW-EARED PARROT RESERVE & MIRADOR EL ROBLES

In the Ventanas area, about a 1.5 hours drive from Jardin, the Yellow-eared Parrot Reserve protects this endemic and endangered namesake bird in the Western Andes. This unique long-tailed parrot, which might be more appropriately called a macaw, is dependent on wax palms for nesting and roosting, which have been relentlessly harvested and cleared for pasture. The road to the reserve is rough, and our group departed Jardin at the crack of dawn in four rugged 4x4 Jeeps. What a ride! Arriving shortly after sunrise, we almost immediately had a few flocks of Yellow-eared Parrots fly past in the distance, but none were super close or landed in sight. We decided to drive to the next birding spot, and within 15 minutes, we were pleasantly surprised to see a healthy group of the parrots calling and active, super close to the road. Everyone jumped out of the jeeps for epic looks and photos of this rare bird, including seeing parent birds regurgitating to fledgling chicks! But wait, there's more! We continued on to the humble home of Martin and Lucia at Mirador El Robles for a wonderful homemade breakfast and hummingbird feeder action. There were tons of hummers sucking down nectar, including goodies such as Mountain Velvetbreast, Tourmaline Sunangel, White-bellied Woodstar, and Long-tailed Sylph. Everyone's energy was soaring and the group was in high spirits to continue on to the antpitta feeding area — a special type of “feeder” where these elusive forest dwellers, historically some of the most difficult birds in the forest to see, are conditioned to come when called by name in exchange for a tasty morsel of juicy earthworms and beetle grubs. Although it was a bit of a muddy uphill slog to the feeders, the group arrived and Martin began to softly call out for “Linda” and “Belleza”, the resident antpittas. With a little patience, everyone was thoroughly rewarded with the best looks ever of Chami Antpitta, Slate-crowned Antpitta, and Green-and-Black Fruit-eater — one of the best experiences of the trip! One of the tour participants got her 1000th life bird with the Chami Antpitta, a big milestone that we soon after celebrated with a big surprise — Birding by Bus lifer cookies!



After returning to Jardin for lunch, it was time to make a longer afternoon drive south from Jardin to the Manizales area, bringing us from the Western Andes back into the Central Andes.



DAY 5 | TINAMU RESERVE & VENECIA COFFEE FARM

Last night was spent in the cabins quietly tucked away into the forest of the Tinamú birding lodge at 4,100' elevation, outside of Manizales. Rain fell hard overnight against the metal roof of our comfortable quarters, loud but soothing at the same time. The accommodations at Tinamú are rustic-meets-modern, with spacious clean rooms and showers where you're surrounded by glass windows that look privately out into the forest. The rain let up by morning, and from bed we could hear the early morning song of Scaly-breasted Wrens, Bar-crested Antshrikes, and Little Tinamous. Although we planned for a later start than usual (7 am meet-up is considered sleeping in on a birding tour!), several guests were already out birding the lodge feeders on their own by 6:30am! Tinamú has a wonderful array of hummingbird and fruit feeders right outside the rooms, so it's easy to wake up and walk right up to the buzzing of White-necked Jacobins, Steely-vented Hummingbirds, and Black-



throated Mangos while Thick-billed Euphonias and Bay-headed Tanagers gorge on bananas. From the balcony of one of the rooms with a second floor, we relished good views of Spectacled Parrotlets feeding on cecropia fruits, Blue-headed Parrot, Streaked Saltator, and more. We heard a singing Blue-colored Antbird below us, but these birds can be difficult and despite working hard to see it, it did not come into view. After another delightful breakfast with fresh fruit and typical Colombian huevos and arepas, we walked the forest trails around the lodge which are thick with good birds of the Central Andes. Golden-collared Manakin, Moustached Puffbird, Green Hermits calling at their lek, and singing Scaled Antpittas delighted our binocular-peering eyes. Scaled Antpitta can be tough to see (as are most antpittas), but just in the last few months the staff at Tinamú has developed an antpitta feeding station for them. With a bit of patience and effort, "Juanita" the Scaled Antpitta made a brief but solid appearance! Roger explained that antpittas come in two flavors; small and large. The larger ones, or the *Grallaria* genus, are generally ground dwelling birds, although they occasionally jump up into the upper forest level for display purposes. The smaller antpittas, or the *Grallaricula*, reside in the low-to-mid story of the forest but not on the ground.

Later in the day, a field trip to the Venecia Coffee Farm delighted our palates and satisfied cravings for exquisite Colombian coffee. The grounds of the property have beautifully manicured gardens, pools, and a lovely lodge, set amidst a working bird-friendly coffee plantation. Johan, a

knowledgeable coffee guide at the farm, walked us through Coffee 101 from the historical origins of coffee to the life of a coffee plant to the stages of the coffee cherry and finally to its sale as a coffee bean. Entering the coffee processing house, we learned all about separating good (sink) from bad (float) coffee cherries, washing and drying the beans, and finally the coffee roasting process. Don't forget the best part — coffee tasting! They do homemade panela-based rum too here — can we add some to our coffee?

In the evening back at the Tinamu Reserve, a Crab-eating Fox made a quick appearance for some, and a vocalizing Common Potoo at sunset was not only heard, but we got close looks at its wondrous glossy eyes!



DAY 6 | RIO BLANCO RESERVE

The Rio Blanco Reserve (7,380'), on the outskirts of Manizales, is a renowned birding hotspot in Colombia and was our destination for the day. The reserve supplies drinking water for Manizales and the department of Caldas, and so the land is protected for its valuable groundwater. Straight off the bat at sunrise, the hummingbird feeders were buzzing with Buff-tailed Coronet, Tourmaline Sunangel, Collared and Bronzy Inca, Fawn-breasted Brilliant, Long-tailed Sylph, and other beautiful hummers. Right outside the main building, the first of three antpitta feeders did not disappoint as we got fantastic looks at Bicolored Antpitta! Following breakfast, we proceeded up the road and got eyes on a Slaty-backed



Chat-Tyrant, a fidgety flycatcher (no lasers!) but pleasing to look at with its contrasty black and rufous coloration accentuated by a striking white eyebrow. The second antpitta “amphitheater” almost immediately had two Chestnut-crowned Antpittas that were striking a pose in every possible position — hamming it up for the cameras. A surprise Gray-browed Brushfinch popped in to the party, but all our jaws dropped when “Raul” the Green-and-Black Fruiteater made an unexpected cameo appearance — and took worms out of Marc's hand!

On the upper Rio Blanco trails, we were fortunate to run into various mixed flocks that were quite productive. Foraging together as a collective unit were great birds including Superciliated and Black-eared Hemispingus, Pearled Treerunner, Streaked Tuftedcheek,

Cinnamon Flycatcher, Capped Conebill, Tyrannine Woodcreeper, Beryl-spangled Tanager, and many more. There were so many birds to look at! Some are slow moving and stay put, while others are more challenging as they move fast and forage way up in the tree canopy. We also worked on seeing a skulky but vocal Streak-headed Antbird, a bird that stays deep in the tangles and brush and offered only partial views — those that were lucky enough got a glimpse of its face! Just before making our way back down the hill, more birds! Black-billed Mountain-Toucan, Southern Emerald-Toucanet, and Hooded Mountain Tanagers made everyone's day. After a delicious lunch, the appearance of the Brown-banded Antpitta at the third antpitta feeding station made for an Antpitta Hat Trick (3 out of 3). And on the way out, a stop at a river crossing yielded not one, but three White-capped Dippers!

In the afternoon, we drove up in elevation to reach our next lodgings at the classy Termales del Ruiz. En route, we stopped for two Andean Lapwings feeding in a farm field — a good high elevation Andean bird. Arriving at the Termales hotel at 11,420', our guests were in awe at the magnificent accommodations that felt more like a high-end ski chalet with a modern and rustic appeal. Situated amongst stunning mountain landscapes, the hotel features natural hot springs fed by mountain water, an active hummingbird and fruit feeder area, fabulously comfortable rooms, and a first-class restaurant. At this elevation, coca tea can help with the altitude, so everyone sipped teas and fruit-infused hot aromaticás while hummingbirds sipped sugar-water straight from their hands!



DAY 7 | HACIENDA EL BOSQUE & TERMALES DEL RUIZ



Hacienda El Bosque, formerly a cattle ranch, has over the past three decades converted part of its original livestock business into eco-tourism. Here at our birding location for the day, the farm still raises cattle in part, but by protecting part of the acreage as native forest, they have attracted a wide variety of incredible birds to the property. As our tour bus drove the bumpy road up into the property, we spotted a small group of Speckle-faced Parrots across the valley— which turned out to be a new bird for the property! We were warmly greeted by Martin at the wonderful restaurant, with steaming hot chocolates and coffees. Enjoying the incredible view, the entire group relished their Colombian breakfasts and then we proceeded to the first antpitta station.

Although we tried for a good long while, the Equatorial Antpitta did not respond and has been absent for the past several weeks. The same goes for the Crescent-faced Antpittas. The guides suspect the antpittas may be nesting or experiencing a territory re-organization at the moment. The Gray-browed Brushfinches did show up on time for their worms, though!

A wide range of hummingbirds zoomed by as we visited the nectar feeders. New ones for the trip were Shining Sunbeam, Buff-winged Starfrontlet, and Sword-billed Hummingbird — and these three species are stunning! Making our way over to the fruit feeders, we spotted a pair of Barred Fruiteaters as well as several Andean Guan, Red-crested Cotingas, and singing Paramo Seedeaters.

The fruit feeder at El Bosque with its bounty of juicy grapes is legendary for attracting a big showy Rhamphastid: the Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan. “Tuki” and his friends made a big entrance, offering super-close views for an epic photographic experience. Marvelous!

Lunch of traditional Ajiaco (chicken and potato soup dish from Bogota) and a delicious chick pea curry for the vegetarians and vegans was mouthwateringly good. You never want to leave this place!

On the way back to Termales, a brief stop at Laguna Negra yielded a handful of feathered paramo goodies: Many-striped Canastero, Stout-billed Cinclodes, Plumbeous Sierra Finch, Plain-colored Seedeater, and Andean Duck.

Back at Termales del Ruiz, everyone had a blast again feeding hummers by hand. We provided our guests with little handheld nectar feeders that look like flowers, and they enjoyed the incessant frenzy of Great Sapphirewings, Golden-bellied Pufflegs, Shining Sunbeams, and Rainbow-bearded Thornbills with their tiny feet perched on human hands. In the evening, the warm inviting hot springs were a delightful way to soak our muscles and relax after all the birding!





DAY 8 | LOS NEVADOS DEL RUIZ NATIONAL PARK



Following buttery croissants, Colombian coffee and hot coca tea, our group began the day with a productive bird walk up the dirt road from Termales del Ruiz. It was a cool but comfortable morning high in the Andes here at 11,000', where a warm hat and some light gloves takes the edge off just fine. Listening and watching for movement, best birds of the morning included Golden-capped Tanager, Purple-backed Thornbill, Black-thighed Puffleg, and Tawny Antpitta. We heard Ocellated Tapaculo at extremely close range, as if it were right in front of us, but as hard as we tried, we couldn't get a visual on this secretive bird. That was easily made up for by the close fly-by of not one, but two Andean Condors! It was time for a field celebration with Lifer Dances for all.

Following breakfast, we set out even higher in elevation, into the paramo habitat within Los Nevados National Park. The target bird here is the endemic Buffy Helmetcrest, a small attractive bearded and crested hummingbird species with a very restricted range in the highest elevations of the Central Andes. Up here in the paramo, species diversity is limited, but we're interested in quality not quantity. And the paramo delivered! Buffy Helmetcrest was spotted almost immediately after stepping out of the van, and we had good looks at several more individuals from the observation deck of the visitor center and along the short trails. With hot coca tea sweetened by panela sugar, we sipped from one hand and wielded binoculars and cameras in the other, getting views of other paramo specialties including Andean Tit-Spinetail, Plumbeous Sierra Finch, and Plain-colored Seedeater. Frailejones plants dotted the alien landscape and we breathed in the cool crisp paramo air. The late afternoon and evening were spent relaxing, casually birding, and soaking in the inviting hot springs at Termales. A lovely farewell dinner was enjoyed by all, and everyone shared their favorite bird of the trip, ranging from Andean Condor to Chami Antpitta to Yellow-eared Parrot and many others. Everyone had special moments to share and memories that were made!



DAY 9 | PEREIRA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

An early departure to the Pereira airport, where some participants headed home on international flights while others joined us for the next leg of the trip in Bogota, exploring the Eastern Andes for more birds!

KNOW

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF THE BIRDS, FLORA AND OTHER FAUNA SEEN DURING THIS TRIP, PLEASE VISIT THE FOLLOWING LINKS:

MORE

eBird Trip Report -

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/73382>

iNaturalist Project -

<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/birding-by-bus-colombian-andes>

