

Charm of the Colombian Andes



COFFEE CULTURE



STUNNING BIRDING



THE PARAMO

TRAVEL JOURNAL

TROPICAL
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Colombia is a safe and stable country. It consistently ranks as one of the happiest countries (and occasionally the happiest country) in the world. There's breathtaking scenery, friendly people, wonderful gastronomy, delightful accommodations, and an excellent infrastructure for birding. The Coffee Triangle region is famous for producing the best coffee in the world and is simply a beautiful place to visit.



WRITTEN BY:
B R I A N
R A P O Z A
2023 TOUR
PARTICIPANT

PHOTOS BY:
Birding by Bus

OVERVIEW

With nearly 2,000 bird species recorded within its borders, Colombia is home to more birds than any other country on Earth. This astounding avian diversity is due in large part to Colombia's incredibly diverse topography, with coastal and Amazonian lowlands separated by three massive cordilleras (parallel mountain ranges): the eastern, central and western Colombian Andes. This tour, which began in Medellin on July 23 and ended in Pereira on July 31, focused almost entirely on birding hotspots in Antioquia and Caldas Departments, an area known as the Coffee Triangle. Elevations ranged from about 4,000 feet to over 13,000 feet!

Of the ten birders who joined us for this tour, four reside in Florida, two in North Carolina and the others in Georgia, Illinois, Maryland and Texas. This tour was organized by Eliana and Marc Kramer of Birding by Bus. Eliana was born in Colombia but now makes her home in Miami. Eliana and Marc are both on Tropical Audubon Society's Board of Directors. Our local guide for this tour, Diego Guerrero, has an impressive resume. Not only is he one of Colombia's top birders and guides, but he's also a trained paramedic, a canyoning instructor and an ultra-marathoner!

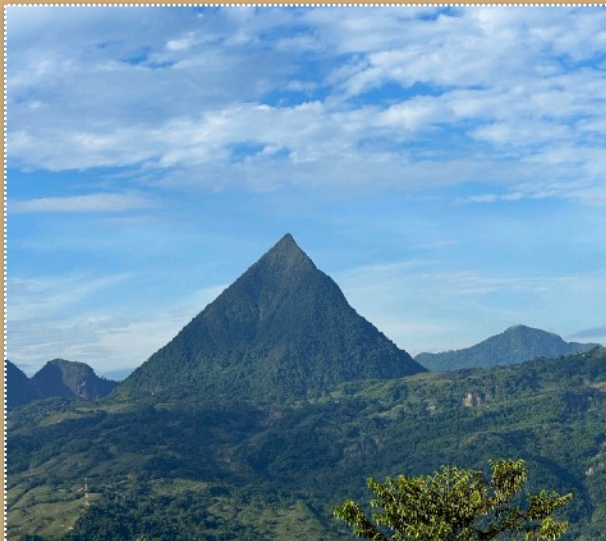


DAY 1 | SUNDAY, JULY 23

Seven of the participants joined me on the flight from Miami, which arrived in Medellin just after 12:00pm local time, which was slightly ahead of schedule. After passing through customs, we were greeted by Birding by Bus's Eliana Ardila Kramer, as well as Diego Guerrero, our local guide and John, our tour driver, who whisked us to Hotel Estelar Square, located near the southern outskirts of the city, where we met the three remaining participants, who had taken earlier flights. After checking in, a few participants explored the neighborhoods around the hotel, where several birds were found, including Ruddy Ground-Dove, Eared Dove, Black Vulture, Acorn and Red-crowned Woodpecker, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Vermilion Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, Blue-and-white Swallow, Black-billed Thrush, Carib Grackle, Palm Tanager and Yellow-faced Grassquit. Later in the evening, as the group was assembling for a welcome dinner, a flock of seven Scarlet Macaws was seen flying by the hotel.



DAY 2 | MONDAY, JULY 24



After breakfast at our hotel, we boarded our bus and headed west into the Cauca Valley, located between the central and western cordilleras in Antioquia Department. Our first birding stop was at Bosques de Quebrada Sinifana, a forested area along the Cauca River near the town of Bolombolo. This area is home to three highly sought-after Colombian endemics: Grayish Piculet, Apical Flycatcher and Antioquia Wren.

While we were unable to find the flycatcher, the group obtained great views of a Grayish Piculet as well as a singing pair of Antioquia Wrens! Even though this wren's flute-like song can be heard from some distance, it inexplicably remained unknown to science until 2010, and wasn't formally named until two years later. Other birds encountered in this area included Squirrel Cuckoo, Green Hermit, White-vented Plumeleteer, Roadside Hawk, Lineated Woodpecker, Black-crowned Antshrike, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Golden-collared Manakin, Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher, Sooty-headed Tyrannulet, Ochre-bellied, Streaked and Piratic Flycatchers, Tropical Gnatcatcher, Clay-colored Thrush, Thick-billed Euphonia, Tropical Parula, Golden-crowned Warbler and Gray-headed Tanager.



We stopped for lunch at Restaurante La Mayoria in Bolombolo, where an Olive-gray Saltator, as well as our first Blue-gray Tanagers and a Bananaquit were seen. We then drove south to Jardin, a quaint town in the western Andes and our home for the next two nights. Our first Southern Lapwings were seen somewhere along the way. After checking into our lodge, Hotel Plantacion, we paid a late-afternoon visit to Jardin's famous Cock-of-the-Rock Lek, located on



private property just outside town. We were able to obtain unbelievable views of several male Andean Cock-of-the-Rock actively displaying. Other birds seen during our visit included two more endemics: Colombian Chachalaca and Red-bellied Grackle, plus Green Jay, Golden Tanager and Green Honeycreeper. We found even more birds around the bridge near the entrance to the property, including Pale-vented Pigeon, Chestnut-collared and White-collared Swifts,

Steely-vented Hummingbird, Bare-faced Ibis, Red-headed Barbet, Bronze-winged Parrot, Rusty-margined Flycatcher, Tropical Mockingbird, Lesser Goldfinch, White-naped Brushfinch, Slate-throated Redstart, Flame-rumped and Crimson-backed Tanagers and Black-winged Saltator. It was a spectacular end to an amazing first full day of birding!



DAY 3 | TUESDAY, JULY 25



This morning, we visited Finca Bambusa, a forested property located in an area where shade-grown coffee is cultivated. Along the way, we pulled over to view a perched pair of Scarlet-fronted Parakeets spotted by Diego. Several other birds were tallied during this stop, including Yellow-headed Caracara, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, House Wren, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Shiny

Cowbird, Scrub Tanager and Yellow-bellied Seedeater. Once at Finca Bambusa, we were served a traditional breakfast while we watched birds coming to their feeders. New species seen at or around the feeders included Gray-headed Dove, Western Emerald, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and Streaked Saltator. During a walk around the property, we added Andean Motmot, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Golden-faced Tyrannulet, Black-chested Jay, Russet-backed Oropendola and Blue-necked Tanager. A Parker's Antbird was heard by some but was seen only by Eliana. A Yellow-backed Oriole was also a heard-only.

As lunchtime approached, we returned to Jardin for a little sightseeing around the central plaza, followed by lunch at a vegetarian restaurant located just outside of town. As would be expected, we encountered large flocks of Rock Pigeons around the central plaza, but we also saw our first Saffron Finch as well as our only Great-tailed Grackles for the trip. Hoping to see a few more birds before lunch, we decided to walk to the restaurant.



The only new species we encountered in residential areas were a couple of Cattle Tyrants, but once we entered an area of pastureland, things began to pick up. Diego led us into one pasture to search for Blackish Rail (he had seen one there a few weeks earlier while landing his hang-glider!) and wouldn't you know it, the bird was still there! Since not everyone (including Eliana) was present the first time it came into the open, Diego had to call it out again, but the bird cooperated, and everyone managed to see it. It was the first of several life birds for Eliana!



Other birds seen before arriving at the restaurant (the memorably named *Revolucion Bananera*) included Colombian Chachalaca, Smooth-billed Ani, White-tailed Hawk, Southern Emerald-Toucanet, Acorn Woodpecker, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Black-chested Jay, Russet-backed Oropendola and Giant Cowbird. Red-bellied Grackles were seen at the restaurant itself, and Southern Lapwing, another Southern Emerald-Toucanet, Bronze-winged Parrot, Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Black Phoebe and Blue-necked Tanager were spotted

along the road beyond the restaurant. Reboarding our bus, we drove to a trail leading to an impressive waterfall known as Cascada La Escalera. We were told that we had a chance for White-capped Dipper somewhere along this trail, but we never expected to see one in the waterfall itself! Other birds seen during our walk included Green Hermit, Andean Motmot, Torrent Tyrannulet, Golden-bellied Flycatcher, White-naped Brushfinch, Slate-throated Redstart, Bay-headed Tanager and Black-winged Saltator.



White-tipped Dove and Gray-breasted Wood-Wren were heard-only.

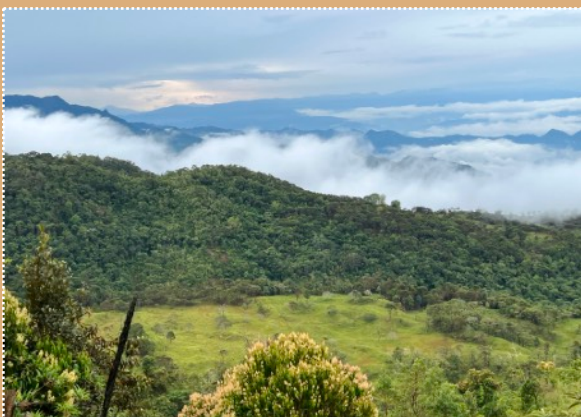
We returned to the lodge for dinner; afterwards, some of us went outside to see if we could find a Tropical Screech-Owl that Eliana had heard last night. We couldn't locate it, but later that night, Eliana heard it again.

DAY 4 | WEDNESDAY, JULY 26

We got an early start this morning, as we had a long drive to today's first birding destination: a reserve created by ProAves, a Colombian NGO, to protect the endemic and endangered Yellow-eared Parrot. Four-wheel drive vehicles were used to get us there, as the Riosucio-Jardin Road, which passes through the reserve, is unpaved and rather poorly maintained. We arrived at the reserve just in time to see a pair of Yellow-eared Parrots fly by in the distance. We saw two others later in the morning and obtained closer looks. Other birds seen along the road included Sickle-winged Guan, Band-tailed Pigeon, Speckle-faced Parrot, Azara's



Spinetail, Mountain Elaenia, Black-collared Jay, Great Thrush, Golden-fronted Redstart, Masked Flowerpiercer and Blue-and-black, Beryl-spangled, Metallic-green and Saffron-crowned Tanagers. A White-capped Tanager was heard but never came into view.



Leaving Antioquia and entering Caldas Department, we spent the rest of the morning at our next birding destination, Mirador el Roble Reserve. We were served a traditional breakfast and later, lunch at the home of a family that lives within the reserve. Feeders behind their home attracted an impressive variety of hummingbirds, including Sparkling and Lesser Violetear, Tourmaline Sunangel, Speckled Hummingbird, Long-tailed Sylph, Collared Inca, Buff-tailed Coronet, Fawn-breasted Brilliant and White-bellied Woodstar. Other birds seen around the house included Southern Emerald-Toucanet, Acorn Woodpecker, Black-billed Peppershrike, Green Jay, Slaty Brushfinch, Giant Cowbird and White-sided Flowerpiercer.

After lunch, our caravan of four-wheel drive vehicles continued the long, bumpy drive to Riosucio and the main highway. John and our bus were waiting for us when we finally arrived in Riosucio. We still had a long drive to our next lodge, Hotel Tinamu Birding Nature

Reserve, but at least we were back on paved roads. We arrived at the lodge, located in the village of San Peregrino, around sunset. A couple of Common Pauraque were calling behind the lodge as dinner was being served but flew off before we could get any views of them.

DAY 5 | THURSDAY, JULY 27



Our morning began with some pre-breakfast birding around the lodge, followed by more birding on one of the reserve's trails after breakfast. We made a stop at an antpitta feeding station that is regularly visited by a Scaled Antpitta, but this bird proved to be much more wary today than the two we saw yesterday. Some in the group, but not all, saw the bird reasonably well. We also visited a Little Tinamou feeding station a couple of times over the course of the morning, but this chicken-like forest skulker never made an appearance while we were watching.

Some of the more cooperative birds we saw over the course of the morning were Colombian Chachalaca, Ruddy Ground-Dove, White-tipped, Gray-headed and Eared Dove, Squirrel Cuckoo, Common Potoo, Green and Stripe-throated Hermit, White-necked Jacobin, White-vented Plumeleater, Bare-faced Ibis, Andean Motmot, Moustached Puffbird, Red-crowned and Lineated Woodpecker, Yellow-headed Caracara, Blue-headed Parrot, Spectacled Parrotlet, Bar-crested Antshrike (on a nest!), Jet Antbird, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Golden-collared Manakin, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Black-tailed Flycatcher, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, Black-billed and Cocoa Thrush, Thick-billed Euphonia, Shiny Cowbird, Golden-crowned and Buff-rumped Warbler, Crimson-backed, Scrub and Bay-headed Tanager, Green Honeycreeper and Saffron Finch. Among the birds that were heard but not seen were Cocoa Woodcreeper, Scaly-breasted Wren and White-breasted Wood-Wren.





In the afternoon, we visited Venecia Farm, a working coffee plantation near our lodge. During our interactive tour, which included a delicious lunch, we learned about the origin and history of coffee and how it's manufactured and distributed. We were given an opportunity to sample a few coffee varieties and even got to pick a few coffee cherries in the field. Since this was a bird-friendly coffee farm, some of us couldn't resist the temptation to look for birds during the tour. White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Bare-faced Ibis, Yellow-headed Caracara, Blue-headed Parrot, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Black Phoebe, Great

Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, Tropical Mockingbird, Cocoa and Black-billed Thrush, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Saffron Finch and Thick-billed Euphonia were among the birds we managed to identify.

DAY 6 | FRIDAY, JULY 28

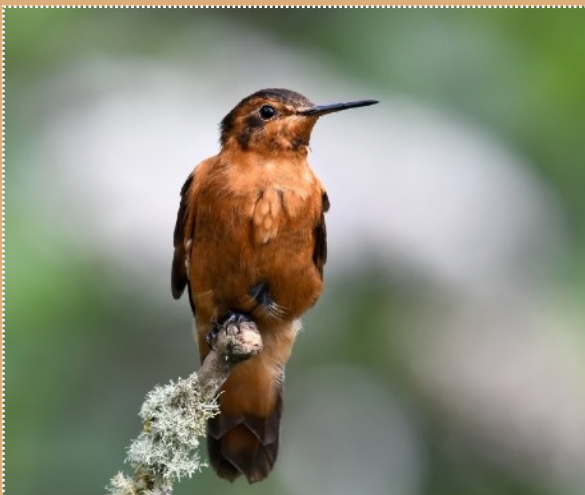
This morning, we bid farewell to Hotel Tinamu and drove to our next birding destination, Rio Blanco Reserve, an area of cloud forest located in the central cordillera and east of the city of Manizales. At the reserve's lodge, we enjoyed a traditional breakfast and later, had lunch there. At the hummingbird feeders outside the lodge, we tallied two new hummingbirds and eleven in total: Sparkling and Lesser Violetear, Tourmaline Sunangel, Speckled Hummingbird, Long-tailed Sylph, Collared and Bronzy Inca, Buff-tailed Coronet, Fawn-breasted Brilliant, White-bellied Woodstar and Andean Emerald.



The reserve has several antpitta feeding stations and we saw a different antpitta at every one! Four in total: Chestnut-crowned, Bicolored, Brown-banded and Slate-crowned Antpitta. At one of the feeders, Carlos, the local antpitta whisperer, called out a Green-and-black Fruiteater that has become so accustomed to being fed that it behaves almost as if it was his pet parrot!



We also found an owl and it was a big one (literally): Stygian Owl. Other birds seen during our exploration of the reserve included Andean Guan, Masked Trogon, Southern Emerald-Toucan, Golden-plumed Parakeet, Montane and Strong-billed Woodcreeper, Azara's Spinetail, Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher, Cinnamon Flycatcher, Mountain Elaenia, Chestnut-bellied Chat-Tyrant, Brown-capped Vireo, Blue-and-white and Brown-bellied Swallow, Mountain Wren, Great Thrush, Slaty Brushfinch, Golden-fronted Redstart, Grass-green Tanager, Blue-winged and Buff-breasted Mountain Tanager, Blue-and-black and Beryl-spangled Tanager, Capped Conebill, White-sided and Masked Flowerpiercer and Masked Saltator. Heard-only birds included Golden-headed Quetzal, Southern Emerald-Toucanet, Scaly-naped Parrot, Spillmann's and Ash-colored Tapaculo, Pearled Treerunner, Barred Becard, Sharpe's Wren and Gray-breasted Wood-Wren.



Mid-afternoon, it was time to move on to our final destination: the high Andean cloud forest and paramo habitat in and around Los Nevados National Park. The centerpiece of this stunningly scenic area is the still-active Nevado del Ruiz volcano. Accommodations for our last three nights of the tour were at Termales del Ruiz Hotel, located in an area of thermal springs at

an elevation of over 11,000 feet. After checking in, some in the group chose to go for a swim in the hotel's thermal pools, while others chose to explore the grounds. Those of us who made it up to one of the bird-feeding areas saw three new hummingbirds: Golden-breasted Puffleg, Shining Sunbeam and Great Sapphirewing.

We had a surprise guest at dinner . . . Marc Kramer, the other half of Birding by Bus! Marc would accompany the group for the rest of the tour.

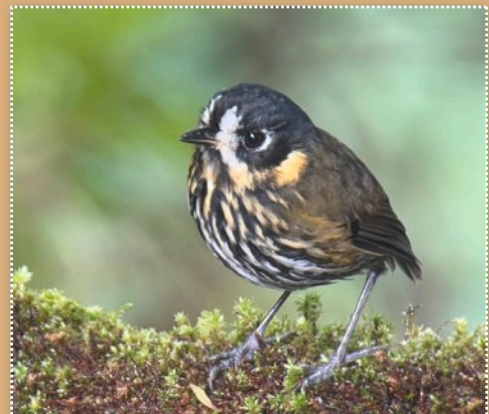
DAY 7 - SATURDAY, JULY 29



Unfortunately, I missed some birding time this morning due to gastrointestinal distress which began overnight. I was able to rejoin the tour mid-day. The group spent most of the day at Hacienda El Bosque, a working cattle ranch located on the main road to Manizales. The installation of feeding stations for antpittas, hummingbirds and fruit-eating birds have converted the ranch in recent years into a major birding hotspot.

Two new antpittas were seen by the group: Equatorial Antpitta (another former member of the Rufous Antpitta complex) and Crescent-faced Antpitta.

Ten hummingbirds were tallied during the group's visit, including five new ones: Purple-backed Thornbill (members of this genus have the shortest bills of any hummingbird), Sword-billed Hummingbird (which has the longest bill of any hummingbird!), Tyrian Metaltail, Buff-winged Starfrontlet and Mountain Velvetbreast. Other amazing birds seen on the ranch included White-throated Quail-Dove,





Black-and-chestnut Eagle, Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan, Pearled Treerunner, Barred Fruiteater, White-banded Tyrannulet, Yellow-bellied Chat-Tyrant, Andean and Hooded Siskin, Gray-browed Brushfinch, Black-capped Hemispingus, Hooded Mountain-Tanager, Blue-black Conebill, Glossy and Black Flowerpiercer and Paramo Seedeater.

A few roadside stops were made on the drive back to the hotel. Along a half-mile stretch of road near an old school, we spotted Andean Teal, Noble Snipe, a flock of Golden-plumed Parakeets, Stout-billed

Cinclodes, Red-crested Cotinga, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and Plain-colored Seedeater. At a lake a short distance from the school, we found Andean Duck and Plumbeous Sierra-Finch. At our third stop, Diego found yet another new hummingbird: a Viridian Metaltail. After considerable searching, Diego also located a Rufous-fronted Parakeet perched high above us on the side of a cliff. This very rare endemic parakeet is only found at high elevations in the central Andes, and seeing one was a great way to end this memorable and highly productive day.



DAY 8 - SUNDAY, JULY 30



We began our last full day of the tour by searching for birds on the grounds of the hotel and along the road that leads to the hotel. First, we visited an antpitta feeding station that produced our tenth and final antpitta of the tour: Tawny Antpitta. We also visited a feeding station that is frequented by an Equatorial Antpitta, which was seen by the group yesterday at Hacienda El Bosque, but today's bird was a no-show.

Other birds seen on the hotel grounds included Shining Sunbeam, Great Sapphirewing, Brown-bellied Swallow, Mountain Wren, Great Thrush, Golden-fronted Redstart, Pale-naped Brushfinch, Scarlet-bellied, Lacrimose and Black-chested Mountain-Tanager and Black Flowerpiercer.

In the hotel's parking area, we found a new hummingbird: Rainbow-bearded Thornbill, along with Golden-breasted Puffleg and Glossy Flowerpiercer. As we began to walk down the road leading from the hotel, Diego heard a Paramo Tapaculo singing very close to the road. Some of us had brief looks before the tapaculo was chased away by a Rufous-collared Sparrow. Other birds seen along the road included White-collared Swift, Tyrian Metaltail and White-throated Tyrannulet. Heard-only birds included Ocellated Tapaculo, Grass Wren and Black-crested Warbler.

The rest of the morning was devoted to an exploration of paramo habitat around the Guali waterfall near Los Nevados National Park. A Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle was spotted along the road while driving up to the waterfall, a popular weekend destination for day-tripping motorcyclists. One of our main target birds in this area was Buffy Helmetcrest, an endemic





hummingbird found only in extremely high-elevation paramo habitat in Colombia's Central Andes. To find this bird, you usually have to look in areas of paramo dominated by Espeletia plants. These unique plants, locally known as "frailejones" (big monks), are the primary nectar source for the hummingbird. We worked hard to find one, walking back and forth along the road and scanning virtually every frailejón in our field of view, but came up empty. Birds we saw while searching for the helmetcrest included Viridian

Metaltail, Andean Tit-Spintail, Many-striped Canestero (a life bird for Diego!), Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant, Grass Wren, Plumbeous Sierra-Finch and Plain-colored Seedeater.

We returned to the hotel for lunch and some relaxation time before reassembling for more birding along the hotel's entrance road. Failing to find anything new after about forty minutes of searching, we were given two options: continue to bird around the hotel or go back up to the high paramo to try one more time to find a helmetcrest. Only two of us chose the second option, so we boarded the bus with Eliana, Diego and a local guide from the hotel and off we went, back to the waterfall area where we searched this morning. This time, though, our luck would be different.

As we tried to keep up with Diego as he searched methodically on one side of the road and then the other, he suddenly stopped and excitedly waved us toward him. He had a hummingbird perched on a flowering bush just a few feet from the road. It was a Buffy Helmetcrest! The bird perched long enough for all of us to enjoy extended, up-close views. We celebrated with a group "happy dance" and my favorite victory





song, “Gonna Fly Now” (the theme from “Rocky”). Victory, indeed, was ours! To top off the experience, we walked up to a canyon just past the waterfall and found another new bird, a Plain-capped Ground-Tyrant, which was a life bird for Eliana!

Meanwhile, back at the hotel, the rest of the group, led by Marc and another hotel guide, were accumulating a respectable list of sightings in and around the hotel, including two new birds for the tour, Superciliaried Hemispingus and Golden-crowned Tanager, plus Tyrian Metaltail, Golden-fronted Redstart and Hooded and Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager. The

Tawny Antpitta was seen again at its feeding station and an Equatorial Antpitta was heard. Other heard-only birds included Rufous-fronted Parakeet, Ocellated Tapaculo and Black-crested Warbler.

DAY 9 - MONDAY, JULY 31

Since our flight wasn't scheduled to depart until mid-afternoon (we were all on the same flight to Miami), we had a little bit of time for birding around the hotel this morning. Nothing new, but we finally got glimpses of Black-crested Warbler, allowing us to take that one off our “heard only” list. Other birds providing “last looks” included Rainbow-bearded Thornbill, Golden-breasted Puffleg, Shining Sunbeam, Buff-winged Starfrontlet, Great Sapphirewing, White-throated Tyrannulet, Grass Wren, Pale-naped Thornbill, Golden-fronted Redstart, Hooded and Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager and Glossy Flowerpiercer.



Arriving at the Pereira airport about noon, the group bid goodbye to Eliana, Marc, Diego and John, checked in and made our way through immigration to our boarding gate. One last trip bird was waiting for us there: a pair of Fork-tailed Flycatchers! That brought the trip count to 241 species, which is slightly higher than average for this tour, according to Eliana. A comprehensive list, as well as all eBird checklists submitted during the tour, is available in the [eBird trip report](#) created for this tour. As expected, the mammal count was low (no hoped-for Spectacled Bear), with just four species identified: Red-tailed Squirrel, Andean Squirrel, South American Opossum and Central American Agouti. A bat or two were seen but remained unidentified. Identification of other critters encountered during the tour will be the responsibility of iNaturalists in the group.

CONCLUSION

On behalf of Tropical Audubon Society, I would like to thank Eliana, Marc, Diego, John, all the local guides and antpitta whisperers, all our four-wheel-drive vehicle drivers, our tour guide at Venecia Coffee Farm, the staff at all of the wonderful hotels and lodges where we stayed, the meal preparers and servers at all the restaurants, farms, ranches and private homes where we ate, and of course, all ten of the amazing tour participants for the parts they all played in making this tour so special.



I'm so grateful for the opportunity to have experienced a Birding by Bus tour in person, so I could see for myself why their tours have become so wildly popular in such a short period of time. Their website promises tours that are "highly personalized and detailed, with first-rate client communication, advanced planning and world-class customer service;" they call it "pampered eco-travel." I can now confirm that they deliver on every one of those commitments. From the moment that Eliana met us at the airport, we all became her "pollitos." From that point forward, she spent every waking hour making sure that all of our expectations and needs were met, and that we were all having an amazing experience in her beloved homeland. Now I understand why Eliana and Marc have so many repeat customers! I can't wait to work with them again in the future.