

**Colombia's
Great Plains of
the East:
LOS LLANOS**



**185 BIRD SPECIES
OBSERVED**



**12 MAMMAL
SPECIES OBSERVED**



**8 EXCITED GUESTS
3 BIRD GUIDES**

TRAVEL JOURNAL



LOS LLANOS: COLOMBIA'S COWBOY COUNTRY

Eight intrepid birders and three dynamic trip leaders donned their Colombian Llanero hats to explore the eastern plains of Los Llanos: Colombia's cowboy country. The trip was led by Eliana & Marc Kramer of Birding by Bus, and local guide Camilo Orjuela. Additionally, the Hato La Aurora Reserve had a great group of local guides and ranchmen and women with a deep empirical knowledge of the area; they, along with our other trip leaders, helped guide us to undertake the full Llanos experience.

“Llaneros”
are the
plainsmen,
or cattle
herders, of
South
America.



O V E R V I E W

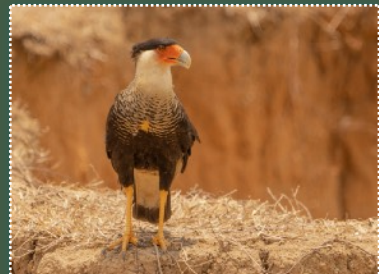
In these plains of the east, a vast tropical grassland is fed by the waters of the Orinoco River which intersect to nurture an explosion of biological life.

This extensive swath of open country in Eastern Colombia's Casanare Department hosts an incredible array of birds, mammals, reptiles, and more. Our group surveyed with curiosity, passion, and excitement in an extraordinary safari-like adventure. Viewing the sheer abundance of wildlife in a wide-open and easily accessible ecosystem was a welcomed contrast to the more challenging dense forest birding of Colombia where birds can be more difficult to spot.

While much of the Llanos area is dedicated to intensive livestock production, wildlife co-exists here. In places where ecotourism is embraced like the Hato La Aurora Reserve, wildlife thrives. From Giant Anteaters to Jaguar, Horned Screemers to Hoatzins, the region is truly magical. Add to that the unique Llanero music and dance, Anaconda wrangling, beautiful sunsets, and cruising the landscape in open-top safari Jeeps — this short tour really packed a punch!

FAVORITE MOMENTS:

- 🐾 Giant Anteaters galloping across the countryside
- 🐾 Jaguar on the prowl in the wetlands - magical!
- 🐾 Gazillions of Capybaras soaking in water holes
- 🐾 Seeing everyone's faces while watching a big flock of 37 Hoatzin
- 🐾 Hearing the nasal horn-like calls of the Sharp-tailed Ibis
- 🐾 Horned Screemers
- 🐾 Scarlet Ibis splashing bursts of color onto the landscape
- 🐾 Burrowing Owls on guard from their mounds
- 🐾 Listening to Llaneros playing the harp, maracas, and cuatro in the evenings
- 🐾 Field Breakfast at the main wetland with thousands of water birds





DAY 1 | EXPLORING BOGOTA AND FLIGHT TO YOPAL

Kicking things off in the high peaks of Colombia's Eastern Andes, our tour group assembled in the capital city of Bogota. A morning visit to the Bogota Botanical Garden was a short but sweet induction into highland birding at 8,500 feet above sea level, with unique birds such as Great Thrush, Andean Siskin, and winter migrants like Canada Warbler. It was a good opportunity to see species that don't set foot anywhere near the lowlands of Los Llanos. From Bogota, the group was whisked away on a short flight eastward to Yopal in the Department of Casanare. Some of the participants who were visiting Colombia for the first time had their introductory tastes of mouthwatering Colombian flavors — jugos (tropical fruit juices), empanadas, patacones (fried green plantains), and traditional entrees like the Bandeja Paisa. After a long day traveling, after dinner we called it a night to get an early start tomorrow on the road from Yopal to Los Llanos!



DAY 2 | ROAD TRIP! CASANARE & HATO LA AURORA

In a caravan of trucks, with everyone's luggage wrapped in heavy-duty black plastic bags to keep the dust out of our gear on the rural backroads, we departed Yopal and headed northeast towards Hato La Aurora. With traditional Llanero music playing on the car radios, we cruised deep into the heart of cowboy country. The lowlands in this part of Colombia are hot and sunny year-round, and sun protection during this trip was a must. What better way to prevent a sunburn than by doing like the Llaneros do — wearing a wide-brimmed Llanero hat complete with a twisted horsehair hat band (Sombrero Topochero). Everyone got new hats! And to quench our thirst along the way, some freshly cut roadside watermelon was relished by all.



As we progressed further into the road trip, fascinating birds such as Sharp-tailed Ibis, Jabiru, and Orinoco Geese began to appear in roadside water holes and the excitement of new birds was rapidly building. Raptors including Black-collared, Savannah, and White-tailed Hawks hunted over fields being plowed where farm machinery stirred up rodents and insects. At one stop, our group was dazzled by a



raucous flock of 37 Hoatzin (yes, Eliana wanted to count them). A thorny scrub tree on the side of the road boasted a massive stick conglomeration, and out from a nest came a pair of Rufous-fronted Thornbirds. While we made a number of roadside stops to appreciate new and range-restricted birds, like the Pale-headed Jacamar, as at some point we had to exert some self-control or we'd never make it to Hato La Aurora — we could literally spend a whole day or more stopping for various birds along the 120 miles of dirt road leading to our destination!

Arriving on the property at the Juan Solito Ecolodge, we checked into the rustic farmhouse “casona” accommodations and dropped our bags. It was only a few minutes before we ran out right outside our rooms for one of the trip specialties, the White-bearded Flycatcher. After lunch and once the heat of the midday sun had waned a bit, we birded a trail along a scrubby area of tropical dry forest. A highlight was a motionless Great Potoo perched in a tree, swaddling her cute little potoo chick! We bushwhacked a bit off trail to get to a Two-banded Puffbird, formerly a subspecies of Russet-throated Puffbird, who sat in the open on a large branch singing a long series of whistles. Other good ones that got everyone excited were Oriole Blackbird, Pale-eyed Pygmy-Tyrant, Scaled Piculet, Gray-headed Kite, and the enormous ogre of a ground bird that is nothing short of a mythological unicorn turkey, the famed Horned Screamer!

DAY 3 | DEEP IN LOS LLANOS: FROM BIRDS TO A BIG KITTY



Our first full day of birding on the Hato La Aurora property began at dawn with a White-tailed Nightjar as our first bird of the day. Always fun to get some nocturnal species in! Burrowing Owls were seemingly everywhere, cute but stern in their facial expressions, perched across the landscape standing up on their burrow entrance mounds — and so many of them. Ibis diversity here was nothing short of remarkable, with at least 6 ibis species including Buff-necked, Sharp-tailed, Bare-faced, Scarlet, White, and Green. The Scarlet Ibis in particular are a blazing burst of vibrant color on the earth-toned dry landscape, and Sharp-tailed Ibis (locally called “Tarotaro” after the sound they make) were a favorite all around. There were numerous seedeaters, sparrows, grass finches, Yellowish Pipits, Red-breasted and



Eastern Meadowlarks, and a variety of blackbirds and cowbirds. A Giant Anteater galloped across the panorama, albeit with a bit of a limp. A pair of Chestnut-eared Aracari peering out of a tree cavity was a delight to see!

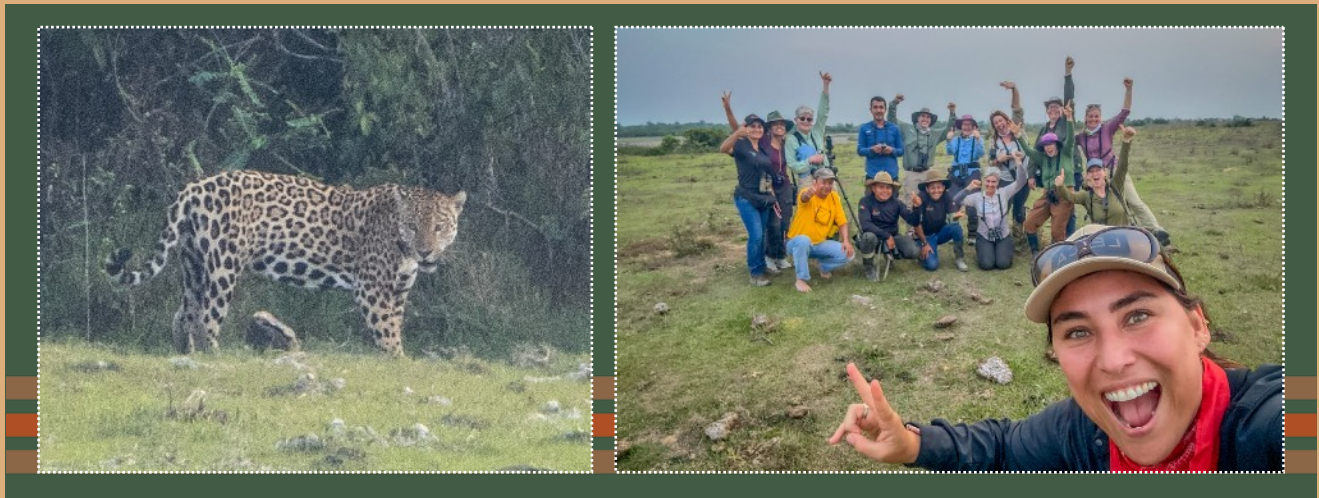
After some breakfast and juicy fresh local pineapple and papaya, we crossed the Ariporo River by longboat and loaded up in trucks and jeeps on the other side. The roads were dusty, uneven, and potholed, but the wildlife on all sides made up for the rough terrain. Capybara literally EVERYWHERE. Hundreds of them in singles, small groups, and bigger herds, some on the drier land and some submerged in water holes like South American hippos. Arriving at the first big wetland at the driest peak of the dry season, the wildlife was super concentrated at what was literally an oasis in the desert. The pools of water, a precious and limited resource in March, hosted a kaleidoscope of color and life. Scarlet Ibis, Jabiru, Black-bellied and White-faced Whistling Duck, Brazilian Teal, Wattled Jacana, Collared Plover, Whistling Herons, and several migratory waterfowl and shorebird species foraged, bathed, and indulged in the rich wetland full of resources. Spectacled Caiman and various water turtles were present in good numbers, and some of the local Llaneros ferreted out



and inspected (i.e. grabbed hold of) a really giant Anaconda from the weedy part of the marsh! We could have stayed there for hours at this one site; as it was, we had 114 species of birds already this morning between this one wetland and the surrounding areas.

In the late afternoon, we figured we'd play against the odds and try our luck at spotting a Jaguar. Jaguar are exceptionally rare to see here, but the best chances occur at the last hours of daylight. The group split up into two and we strategically positioned ourselves at the edge of a big wetland complex where we waited quietly and patiently. Nothing happened for a while.... then, to our great amazement and surprise there it

was! A real live wild Jaguar appeared! The second half of our group that was scouting in another place was called in and although it was lost behind some vegetation for a bit, the entire group eventually got eyes on it. Un-freaking-believable! It was a first sighting for nearly everyone in the group and we were all in complete shock of the magnitude of the great find. At one point, the big kitty stumbled across a Red-footed Tortoise and used its paws to flip the “Morokoi” upside down, but apparently it was too much work to eat a reptile enclosed in a thick shell, so the spotted feline moved on. Watching the jaguar slink through the edge of the marsh was absolutely captivating — we couldn’t believe our eyes. At the end of the day there were countless high fives, big celebrations with smiles, cheers and dancing, and a well-deserved round of Colombian aguardiente (fire water) shots for all!



DAY 4 | RICHNESS IN FAUNA, COWBOY CULTURE, AND MORE



Yesterday’s visit to the main wetland pond was so mind-blowing that it was our first stop again early this morning. Not only for basking in the abundant wildlife, but for a gourmet field breakfast! We all relished a beautiful food spread right in front of the wetland complex with huevos revueltos (scrambled eggs), pan (bread), fresh fruit, coffee, hot chocolate, and the most fabulous breakfast ever. Does breakfast get better than this? The available water concentrated food and resources so that there were not only thousands of birds of many different species, but the Capybaras, White-tailed Deer, and Giant Anteater created an authentic and rich nature





immersion experience. We binned, we scoped, and eked out every last species of shorebird, duck, goose, heron, ibis, egret, stork, and beyond. Highlights were watching Jabiru pull up thick mats of weedy aquatic vegetation with dexterously use of their bills to extract big fish from it, listening to Horned Screamers belting out odd far-carrying calls, and who doesn't love seeing a Sunbittern extend its colorful sun-patterned wings? We tracked down Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, Double-striped Thick-Knee, Pied and Southern Lapwing, Collared Plover, and had good side by side comparisons of the similar Cocoli versus Great Blue Heron. In the surrounding forest, we had great looks at land birds too — Spot-breasted Woodpecker, Green-rumped Parrotlet, Barred Antshrike, Piratic Flycatcher, Spectacled and Black-billed Thrush, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, and White-headed Marsh and Pied Water Tyrants, to name a few.

Wandering further into the reserve, the craquelure of the parched landscape created a mesmerizing pattern to gaze upon. In fact, we stared hard enough at the ground, that standing out from the intricate mud crack patterns was a cryptic bird hidden amongst the tufts of grass on a gently sloped hill - a Nacunda Nighthawk! This particular chunky nighthawk species has extensive white on the chin, underparts, and wings and is nice and contrasty in its plumage. After a midday siesta and once the noon heat dissipated a bit, we took an afternoon walk down a trail in a patch of woodlands followed by a short paddle down the Ariporo River. The river was at markedly low water levels, making it difficult to navigate in the more shallow areas. We enjoyed good looks at a number of tricky flycatchers, including Fuscous Flycatcher (plus we learned that "Fuscous" means dark and somber in color), Sepia-capped, Dusky-capped, Rusty-margined, Streaked, and Variegated Flycatcher, Pale-eyed Pygmy-Tyrant, Pale-tipped Tyrannulet, and several others. Who doesn't love fun and challenging flycatcher ID? We tried our best to



find a King Vulture, which is often a regular bird here, but alas - there were none to be found. So it sometimes goes with finding common birds — sometimes they're not so common!

After a scrumptious fish dinner (or the delicious vegan option of Cargamanto beans) in the evening back at the lodge, the group got to experience one of the central pillars of Llanero culture: their distinct type of music known as joropo. It's the principal musical expression here with the key instruments being the maracas, the harp, and a small guitar known as a cuatro. The lyrics of Llanero songs are highly evocative of place and tend to emphasize place names, the names of birds and animals of the plains, cattle, horses, and a love for the

outdoors. The dance is lively and boisterous, and both Anisetto, Camilo, and a few other musicians donned cowboy hats while singing songs and stomped their feet to the sublime Llanero rhythms.



DAY 5 | CURASSOWS, JACAMARS, AND HOATZINS



With a few hours left for one final morning of birding, the group set out for more dry forest trail birding. This was our last attempt to add additional bird species that prefer the more wooded upland areas of the reserve. Many of the trails we explored were quite narrow, which can be challenging for single-file birding with a group, even though our birding groups are small. Additionally, being in the lowland tropics, there are sometimes biting insects to contend with, which up until now were not much of an issue. But here in cattle country, on this particular trail we discovered there were some unpleasant ticks

to contend with. As our legs brushed against the plants along the trails, some of us picked up a few ticks — just one of the realities of tropical birding. Despite those adversities, we spotted a trio of elusive Crestless Curassow, more Hoatzin, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Wire-tailed Manakin, and Masked Cardinal. Leaf-cutter ants marched in linear fashion beneath our feet and are always interesting to observe when there aren't any birds in sight!

After lunch, it was time to say goodbye to Hato La Aurora and make the return drive back to Yopal for an evening flight back to Bogota. Along the way, we enjoyed some stops for tasty pastries, drinks, and souvenirs. The Yopal airport was good fun for shopping for traditional Colombian ruanas (item of clothing worn like a wrap, but unlike wraps they are cut like a big square with a slit in it rather than like an extra large scarf). While waiting for our plane out, we celebrated with bird-named cervezas and completed our trip checklist which revealed a whopping 185 species for the trip, which is particularly biodiverse for a short tour!





DAY 6 | WISHING WE HAD TWO MORE DAYS!



After breakfast in Bogota, we concluded this tremendous tour to the wild plains of Colombia's East. Some guests departed for their international flights home, while other continued on for more exciting birding in Colombia — our connecting tour to the white sand forests of Inírida!



IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF THE BIRDS SEEN DURING THIS TRIP, PLEASE VISIT THE FOLLOWING LINK:

eBird Trip Report:
<https://ebird.org/tripreport/109114>

