

**NORTHERN
COLOMBIA
BIRDING &
CULTURAL
TOUR**



**297 BIRD SPECIES
OBSERVED**



**TALLEST COASTAL
MOUNTAIN RANGE**



**RENOWNED FOR
BIOLOGICAL ENDEMISM**

TRAVEL JOURNAL



COLOMBIA AT ITS BEST!

Northern Colombia offers up a tremendous diversity of habitats, birds, and cultural experiences within a compact area that is easy to explore. Our 9-day trip route began in Cartagena and followed the Caribbean coast northward to Barranquilla and Isla Salamanca. From Santa Marta, we progressed upward in elevation to the foothills of Minca, the highlands of El Dorado Reserve, and the upper elevations of the San Lorenzo Ridge. Finally, we birded the lowlands of the Tayrona area and Guajira Peninsula. We explored a variety of different ecosystems including high elevation montane rain forest, foothills, tropical dry forest, wetlands, mangroves and beaches. This tour incorporated not only birding and nature, but also infused and overlaid Colombian and Caribbean culture. Participants learned about the local food from the region, experienced live traditional music and dance, and enjoyed unique handmade crafts.

WRITTEN BY BIRDING BY BUS TOUR GUEST: BARBARA BAILEY



DAY 1 | ARRIVAL IN CARTAGENA

Picked up at Cartagena Airport by Birding By Bus. By the time all were assembled and checked into the hotel, there were 10 guests, two tour leaders, a bird guide and a city guide with the group. The plan for the afternoon was a guided tour of Cartagena. Every question asked was answered. The doors of Cartagena could comprise a tour in and of themselves. The ones with knockers dating from Spanish Colonial times provide hints to the social status and professions of the people who lived behind them. Lions indicate military types, and there were a lot of those because the city was in a constant state of defense against pirates. Iguanas represent royalty or extremely high social status.



DAY 2 | LA BOQUILLA: MANGROVES & MUSIC

Away from the city and into nature, we were punted in dugout canoes through a maze of mangrove forests. I was here two years ago, and was gratified to see that replanting and restoration of the mangrove forests has continued unabated. From microorganisms in the water to tiny crabs to migrating warblers to Osprey hunting for prey ... the entire chain benefits from the care being taken right now. In addition to enjoying tropical species such as the Bicolored Conebill, Cocoli Heron, and White-winged Swallows in the brackish waterways, we also saw a plethora of wintering shorebird species and passerine migrants from North America here.

After a delicious seafood lunch, we enjoyed a short walk along a beautiful beach, ending up at a school of percussion and dance in a “suburb” area of Cartagena called La Boquilla.



The school was created in an effort to reclaim part of the cultural heritage quickly being lost as the tradition of oral history being passed from one generation to the next was waning. We were presented with joyful dancing and drum music and young people creating a safe (and free) school for other young people. In the evening, we headed out of Cartagena, traveling northeastward along the northern coast of Colombia toward Barranquilla and birding at every opportunity that presented itself. An en route Pearl Kite was a great find!



DAY 3 | BARRANQUILLA & ISLA SALAMANCA

Before first light we were already searching the Universidad del Norte neighborhood of Barranquilla for a few target birds. Chestnut-winged Chachalacas, a long-tailed chicken-like bird restricted to the lowlands of Northern Colombia, made a raucous flight from their roost at sunrise. Trinidad Euphonia was a welcomed addition, as were Straight-billed Woodcreeper, Bicolored Wren, and Olivaceous Saltator. Later in the morning at Barranquilla's Malecón (riverside boardwalk), we gathered for a group picture with the flag of Colombia in front of us and the Magdalena River behind us. While posing, we enjoyed watching a Snail Kite snatch up the food it's named for, then gracefully eat it on the wing. It was the closest I've ever seen this raptor in the wild, and it was a highlight moment for sure.

Birds were plentiful along the Kilometer 4 Road in Palermo, as were opportunities to say hello to some of the local Colombians, who unfailingly offered kind smiles and often would point out birds they thought we would enjoy seeing. Highlights here included Dwarf Cuckoo, Russet-throated Puffbird, Turquoise-winged Parrotlet, Black-collared Hawk, and Stripe-backed Wren.

Continuing on the way toward Santa Marta, our driver spotted an amazing bird for us, a Northern Screamer. A Google search on its call confirms that it is aptly named. Every one of our drivers had serious birding skills, and the smart money was always in paying attention to what they had to say.





DAY 4 | MINCA & LA VICTORIA COFFEE FARM

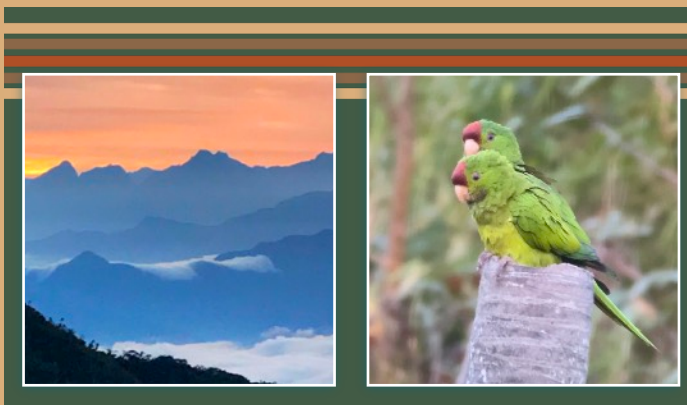
Our tour continued away from the heat of the Caribbean coast and up into the Minca foothills on our way up to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. After the heat of the preceding days, this part of the tour was incredibly restoring. Lower temps, cooler breezes, and best of all - different birds! Our lodgings were at Colores de la Sierra Eco Lodge in Minca, and we loved the huge open dining/lounge area. It was like being in the best treehouse ever imagined. The owners put fruit out for the birds, so we got to see some very cool species up close including Blue-naped Chlorophonia, Golden-winged Sparrow, Bay-headed Tanager, and Chestnut-capped and Tennessee Warbler.



In the afternoon we were treated to a terrific guided tour of La Victoria Coffee Plantation. They produce coffee in small batches, and they make every effort to protect and enhance the hillsides where the coffee is grown. Inferior coffee beans and waste products are worked into some of the richest compost piles I've ever seen. Banana plants are interspersed with the coffee plants to lure birds away from the beans. A nearby stream powers the generator that runs the motors of some quite old but very solid equipment



DAY 5 | SANTA MARTA MOUNTAINS



As we move into day 5, climbing ever higher in the Santa Marta Mountains, I came to think of this as the blurry little jewel, or hummingbird, leg of the Northern Colombia tour. Some of these birds I came to know well, and some I had to trust in the expertise of those around me. The bird guide who was with us the entire time, Roger Rodriguez Ardila, was unflappable about getting us

on the birds, and making sure every single one of us got the best possible chance to see them. Santa Marta Blossomcrown and Santa Marta Woodstar were two endemic hummingbirds of

this region that we got great looks at while making our way up in elevation. Other endemic bird highlights today were Santa Marta Tapaculo and White-lored Warbler.

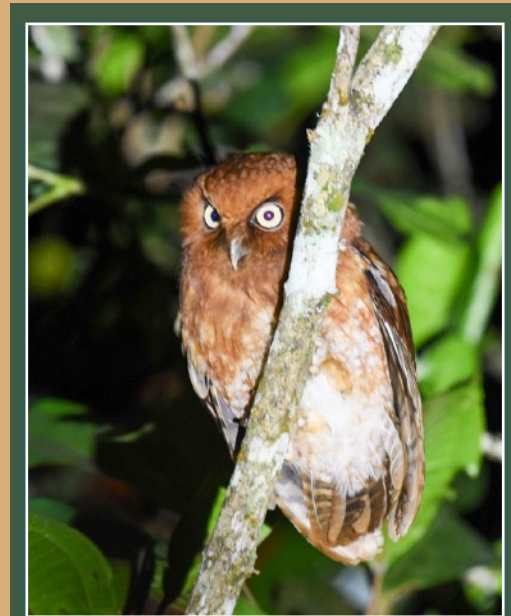
Anywhere Birding By Bus has found individuals working to promote eco-tourism (which so often goes hand in hand with environmental improvements) in Colombia, they try to show them support. On our way up the mountain we met such a family. Doña Sofia and her family have planted lush gardens to attract the local birds, insects, and animals folks like us crave to see. For their part, Birding By Bus will often provide items such as field guides and binoculars, which continue to foster a love for the birds and habitats the families are supporting.

Our accommodations were at El Dorado Lodge, at about 6,500' in the Santa Marta Mountains. Our round rooms with thatched conical roofs (known as Kogihabs) had huge floor to ceiling windows covering a third of the wall space. The view changed constantly as the mountain mist rolled in and out. And the rise and fall of the roars from Howler Monkeys paired with the movement of the mist beautifully. I can still hear it in my mind - as it crescendoed, it sounded like a wild wind rising from a storm, then slowly receded until they started up again. It was eerie and beautiful.



DAY 6 | SAN LORENZO RIDGE & EL DORADO LODGE

This is the day we made it all the way to the very top of the San Lorenzo Ridge at 9,000' — the highest access point you can get to up here with a vehicle. The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is the highest coastal mountain range in the world, and it is breathtaking to see the highest peaks in the range to one side across a river of clouds, and the Caribbean to the other side. Once at the top, we watched the sun rise while our tour leaders and support staff organized a mountaintop breakfast. Coffee, fruit, eggs, arepas - no detail was overlooked. Two of the staff from the lodge came up to help set up and give us breakfast, then one of the women took off back down the mountain ON FOOT to begin preparations for lunch for when we came back down. There is a reason you should think hard and generously about gratuities before you travel. We encountered service like this all along the way.



An incredible day of birding yielded many of the wonderful target species endemic to the Santa Marta Mountains. Santa Marta Bush-Tyrant, Black-backed Thornbill, Hermit Wood-Wren, Santa Marta Warbler, and many others too numerous to list. There are approximately 25 endemic bird species in this small part of Colombia alone, a geographically isolated region renowned for its high degree of biological endemism.

After an incredible day, we had one last surprise planned for us and it required darkness. Behind the dining building at El Dorado Lodge is a small path we all used headlamps to navigate, and then stopped, doused the lights, and waited while the guides played calls. Eventually we heard responses to the calls. I heard two separate responders, and actually got to see one of them - a Santa Marta Screech-Owl! Absolutely a highlight of the trip for me.



DAY 7 | EL DORADO TO LA GUAJIRA



El Dorado Lodge affords lots of opportunities for birding. There is a connecting path between the original lodge and the newer Kogihabs that is full of wonderful birds like trogons and quetzals, the gardens at the original lodge where fruit and nectar are put out for local birds, and the trails up in the newer El Dorado spaces full of hummingbirds and frequented by guans. It was hard to leave all this behind and head back down the mountain.

At the bottom of the mountain, we had to say goodbye to the Santa Marta mountain drivers that operated the 4x4's needed to traverse the rougher roads. They took such good care of all of us. Always going above and beyond what you should ever be able to expect from someone who is only paid to drive. Superlative performance. After saying farewell we headed to our last accommodations for the tour at Finca la Jorará Eco Lodge.





DAY 8 | LA GUAJIRA PENINSULA & THE WAYUU

After breakfast on the 13th we set out for what promised to be a hot day of birding in the tropical dry forest of La Guajira. I did not manage to see a Vermilion Cardinal on my first trip to Northern Colombia, and guide Roger had promised the night before to give it his best shot, but birds don't always cooperate. So what a lovely surprise that it was the first bird I saw at this stop at Riohacha! I was a very happy birder. Other regional specialties we relished views of included Buffy Hummingbird, Orinocan Saltator, Chestnut Piculet, Slender-billed Tyrannulet, and Tocuyo Sparrow.



Next stop this day was to Wayuu tribal lands. It was a privilege to be invited, and we appreciated the invitation to learn about their culture. The Wayuu women wore red, pink, and black costumes for tribal dances inspired by birds to include Vermilion Cardinals, Bobwhites, Flamingoes, and Vultures. A storyteller told us the legend of how women came to be handcrafters of the crocheted mochila bags for which the tribe is known.



DAY 9 | BARRANQUILLA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

A delicious breakfast before heading to the Barranquilla airport and our respective homes. About the food ... I do not eat grain, dairy, processed sugar (whenever avoidable), or beans. A pain in the neck regimen, to be sure. Birding By Bus made sure my dietary wishes were met every step of the way, and I never once felt like I was getting second best. Kudos to them, as they made sure the same was true for every guest on the trip.

At the trip's end, we had tallied a whopping 297 bird species. This was an inspiring and terrific tour experience through a biologically and culturally fascinating part of Colombia — that I have now had the pleasure of exploring for the second time!



TO VIEW THE FULL BIRD SPECIES LIST FOR THIS TRIP, SEE:

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/30861>

