

**Cloud Forests  
of Northern  
Ecuador  
Women's Tour**



AUTHENTIC CULTURE



EPIC BIRDING



FRIENDSHIP

# TRAVEL JOURNAL



## **FOOTHILLS AND PEAKS OF THE WESTERN & EASTERN ANDES**

The Andes of Northern Ecuador offer outstanding birding opportunities with some of the highest species diversity per square kilometer on the planet. In addition, this is an area rich in traditional culture. This year's trip was designed as a women's tour, offering a delightful chance for a group of nature-loving sisters to bond together, explore, laugh, and revel in a region known as a paradise for birders and explorers alike.



WRITTEN BY:  
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PARTICIPANT**

PHOTOS BY:  
**BIRDING BY BUS**

## DAY 0 | FLYING TOWARD ADVENTURE

THURSDAY, AUGUST 31, 2023 - THRU LAS VEGAS &amp; MIAMI TO QUITO

As the plane began its descent into the cloudy skies over Quito, I felt my tension begin to ease. Despite the altitude, I felt myself breathing easier knowing this trip I had dreamed about was finally becoming a reality. For someone who prides herself on having traveled to 47 of the 50 U.S. states, I am woefully not well traveled internationally and had been anxious in the weeks leading up to this Ecuador adventure. I flew in a day early, concerned that rough weather or other flight delays could cause a travel disruption.



Rather than being the stress-inducing travel day I anticipated, the trip from Las Vegas to Quito, via Miami, was downright delightful! Arriving at my departure gate in Las Vegas, I was surprised to see a dear birding friend. He and his spouse were en route to Guatemala via my same flight to Miami! What a joy to catch up with each other before our flight. Being a seasoned traveler, my friend helped me navigate to my gate in Miami before giving me a good luck hug that buoyed me for the rest of the day. My flight to Quito similarly calmed me as I sat next to a chatty artist flying home to Ecuador. She regaled me with travel advice and tips, and spoke happily about her country's amazing birds and people. I already felt enveloped in warmth nearly every step of the way on my journey, and that was before I met Eliana and Marc!

Arriving in Quito, I breezed through security and met up with veteran Birding by Bus client, Susan. We chatted and snagged our luggage before making our way out into the terminal, where our beaming tour leaders Eliana and Marc Kramer welcomed us with literal open arms. I could barely contain my excitement and, ever the birder, eagerly peered out the bus window to spot my first species in Ecuador! Unsurprisingly, Eared Doves fluttered around the airport, and I smiled to myself as I had my first birding "tick" of the trip.

DAY 1 | WELCOMED BY QUITO  
FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2023 - QUITO

Our tour would not officially begin until late afternoon today, but there was a special morning outing in store for those of us who arrived a day early. Our birding guide Andrea Molina Castro, cultural guide Alejandro Valenzuela Guerrero, bus driver Edgar, and BBB co-leader Marc took some of us on an “unofficial” birding tour of the Quito Botanical Gardens. The gardens were a great introduction to some of the more common species we would continue to see throughout the trip. Additionally, it gave several of us a chance to begin to get to know one another. Strolling through the gardens, we giggled at the Great Thrushes who seemed to be around every corner, pluckily foraging by the footpaths or perching just inches above us as we searched for more uncommon birds. Although we would see most of the morning species elsewhere on the tour, this was the only stop where we enjoyed views of Striated Heron as it hunted in a small pond, as well as a thrilling flyover of White-throated Hawk. We also were in awe at the botanical beauties found in the greenhouses. I could have stayed all day in the orchid houses, where a mind-boggling variety of monkey-faced, spider, and other orchid species enthralled our group.

After the leisurely morning, our full group assembled and officially kicked off our “Cloud Forests of Northern Ecuador” birding tour with a toast. If



there had been any doubts before, I knew then this trip was going to be full of surprises, not to mention fun! After a round of introductions, we loaded up our bus for an engaging tour led by our cultural guide, Alé. Alé’s pride in his country and genuine love of people, both tourists and locals, shines through in every interaction he has with others. He shared with us the history of



Quito, regaling with tales from indigenous cultures and mysteries of political intrigue during early colonial times, and spoke eloquently about the city’s modern life. From a remarkable viewpoint at Parque Itchimbia, we saw firsthand how the city nestles into the mountains, with neighborhoods spreading out from the city center. We then toured Quito’s Historic Center, the first city district named a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and marveled at the artistry of the Escuela Quitena architecture. This baroque style combines indigenous, Spanish, Moorish, and other European traditions into a truly unique architecture that defines Quito. In the old town, the streets pulsated with musicians vying for an audience, vendors hawking for a sale, and melodious bells striking the hour.



Our first tour day ended as it began just a few hours earlier, with another toast, this time with Canelazo. The sweet and spiced hot toddy filled us with a glow as we settled into dinner, helping conversations flow easily and preparing us for the warmth and friendships to be shared in the days ahead.

## DAY 2 | BIRDING SPLENDOR

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2023 - RESERVA YANACocha, ECORUTA NONO-TANDAYAPA ROAD, & ALAMBI PRESERVE



Alarm clocks rang early on our second day so we could experience the exceptional dawn birding at Yanacocha Preserve. Located on the slopes of the Pichincha Volcano, the high elevation preserve provides staggering views of the surrounding mountains, hiking through the abundantly lush cloud forest, and fantastic birding.



Yanacocha preserves vital habitat for the critically endangered Black-breasted Puffleg, estimated to have only about 250 individuals remaining in the wild. Although we did not see that highly scarce hummer, Sapphire-vented and Golden-breasted Pufflegs darted mesmerizingly around us. We hardly noticed our own puffing up the mountain road as we listened carefully for mixed flocks of songbirds and scanned the skies for raptors. An Aplomado Falcon streaked through the sky, first one direction, then the next. Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanagers called to each other through the

trees, and Spectacled Redstarts flitted close as they noshed on insects. Mountain Velvetbreasts, Great Sapphirewings, and a Sword-billed Hummingbird competed for the claim of the most striking hummingbird species. Up a small side trail, an Equatorial Antpitta silently but boldly foraged near us on the forest floor, allowing for extended viewing of this sweet chestnut-brown bird. As we hiked back down, perhaps some of us thinking that the “bird show” of the day was over, we were flabbergasted when an Andean Condor floated by seemingly out of nowhere! I think we all had grins plastered across our faces for the rest of the hike down the trail. Our hosts may have thought us a little giddy as we sang a rousing rendition of “You are my sunbeam, my Shining Sunbeam,” after glimpsing a couple of those birds at the lower feeders. We rounded out our visit with a delicious lunch, garnishing our squash soup with popcorn and ají sauce, before loading the bus for our afternoon’s journey toward Mindo.



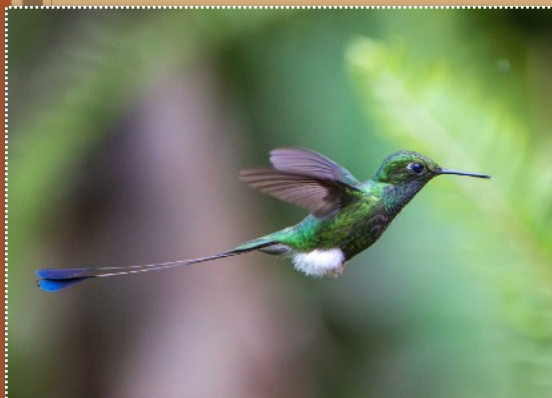
Our drive on the Nono-Tandayapa ecoroute first meandered through the bucolic countryside, then back into denser forest as we journeyed toward Mindo. This scenic route produced some true “birding by bus,” as we had glimpses of our first Andean Cock-of-the-rock, Red-crested Cotinga, and Golden-headed Quetzal. We learned to scan the silvery-leaved Cecropia trees, whose fruits are a favorite of many species of birds.

Andrea abruptly halted our drive when she spied a small group of Plate-billed Mountain-Toucans in a dark and dense stand of roadside forest. We exited the bus as stealthily as a group of fourteen people can, in awe of Andrea’s skill at spotting these birds! Having watched hours of videos online of these birds, I marveled that we were seeing them live. My cheeks already ached from smiling so much, and I had no idea what the afternoon would bring!

Driving into Alambi Reserve, one could be forgiven for thinking that this humble family-run reserve would provide a more subdued birding experience. However, Alambi Reserve is a hummingbird’s paradise, and we are just living in it! Fourteen species and many dozen individuals of these flying jewels were zipping all around us. Buzzy drama grew as hummers vied for



prime positions at the nectar stations, posting up on nearby flowers and shrubs to stake their claims. White-booted Racket-tails were especially entrancing as their oval-tipped tail feathers gracefully trailed when they danced from feeders to flowers. A highlight of our visit was the opportunity to hold mini-feeders so that hummingbirds would sip nectar out of our hands. Despite having experience banding hummingbirds, I



was overcome with emotion when they landed whisper-soft, their little bodies vibrating as they trustingly sipped from my palm. Perhaps unlike any other bird families, hummingbirds encompass the breadth of what birds can represent, from delicate splendor to ferocious intensity. It was exhilarating and humbling to interact with these creatures in such a personal way.

As we pulled into our lodge for the next three nights, I found myself thinking, “Did all of those incredible birding experiences really happen in just one day?” Indeed, they did, and we were only wrapping up Day 2!



## DAY 3 | A RAINBOW OF TANAGERS

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2023 - MASHPI AMAGUSA RESERVE & MINDO



Séptimo Paraíso Lodge served as our charming home base in Mindo, with staff eager to ensure guests were comfy and never went hungry during our stay. I'm not sure I'll ever have fresh juice as delicious as we had for each meal at the hotel's restaurant! These mealtimes solidified our group's friendships, as we got to know one another, laughing at uproarious stories, sharing details of our lives, and recounting our trip's best moments.

The cloud forest lived up to its name on Day 3, as we braved mist and drizzle during a remarkable day of birding at the family-owned Mashpi Amagusa Reserve. We began the day overlooking a garden with marvelous views of Rose-faced Parrots, Zeledon's Antbird, and several flycatchers, among other species. Hummingbird stations brought in multiple species, including handsome Violet-tailed Sylphs and Velvet-Purple Coronets; once again we had another opportunity to feed hummingbirds out of our hands! However, songbirds ruled the proverbial roost at Amagusa. In between light rain showers, we delighted in fourteen tanager species, as well as multiple brushfinches, warblers, and wrens. Glistening-green Tanagers stunned with their verdant intensity. Rufous-throated, Golden-naped, Flame-faced,



Blue-gray, and Moss-backed Tanagers showed off a rainbow of tanager colors. A family of Golden Tanagers tried to steal the show as a young bird begged insistently again and again for a taste of plantain from its beleaguered parent.



After finding an impressive 59 species during our morning at Mashpi Amagusa Reserve, making the day even more meaningful was hearing firsthand from Sergio Basantes about his family's commitment to improving their land for critically needed bird habitat. In just a few short years, they have made great strides in transitioning their farmland into another premier site of conservation for birds in Ecuador.



If some of us found our energy flagging after a busy few days of birding, we were soon reenergized by a chocolate tour and tasting at Mindo Chocolate. Ecuador has a rich chocolate-making tradition, and early indigenous peoples in Ecuador are believed to be the earliest known cultivators of the cacao plant. We learned how modern day chocolate makers choose, roast, and grind the cacao beans to make their delicious confections. We savored and compared different types of chocolate, and many of us took home chocolate bars and cocoa powder - the tastiest of souvenirs! Rounding out a trip to a new town would not be complete for a birder without at least a little bit of birding, and we happily logged about 30 species from the porch of the chocolate shop. Eliana and Andrea had an additional treat in store, as they took us to a



known roosting spot for the mysterious Stygian Owl. The gloomy-plumaged owl seemed unfazed by us as it dozed in the treetops. How could it be sleeping so calmly when the streets of Mindo bustled below?



## DAY 4 | THE PEACE OF THE BIRDS

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2023 - PAZ DE LAS AVES REFUGE & MINDO



After a deep sleep of our own, our group again awoke early for a pre-dawn drive to Refugio Paz de las Aves, one of the most famous bird refuges in the country. The “Peace of the Birds” refuge and the Paz family, the refuge’s owners and operators, certainly live up to their names. The refuge was established by the Angel and Rodrigo Paz families in 2005 after the brothers discovered that their family’s land was home to several bird species endemic

to the Chocó cloud forest. Once involved in logging, the family soon realized the value of saving their precious forest and conserving habitat for the special birds that make it their home.

We began our storybook day at the refuge with an early morning hike through a dense section of cloud forest to an Andean Cock-of-the-Rock lek, where oddly crested males of the species gather to attract females for mating. Their raucous calls can be heard throughout the forest, well before the scarlet-red males are seen. Quietly crowding into the bird blind, we had to restrain our excitement as the cheeky birds began to display loudly, hopping around in the branches, and bobbing up and down to show off for the hidden females!

The Andean Cock-of-the-Rock show starkly contrasted with the next magnificent bird encounter we would have from the blind. After we watched the





lek for a while, Angel Paz then directed our attention to the trail leading to the blind. We settled ourselves as Angel set out a few juicy worms on a mossy stump and called out to the bird. Soon, a Giant Antpitta, shaped just like an “egg with legs,” hopped out from the forest. The bird obligingly nibbled on the worm breakfast, the first of five Antpitta species we would see that day! Angel and Rodrigo both have the uncanny ability to mimic various antpitta calls, using these vocalizations to signal to the birds when their meal is ready. These gentle, shy birds, outfitted in varying shades of brown and camouflage

patterns, would surely be nearly impossible to see, if not for Angel’s and Rodrigo’s calls and the worm “spaghetti” that entice the antpittas out of the cover of the forest.

Other fabulous birds at the refuge included two stunning jade green Crimson-rumped Toucanets, multicolored Toucan Barbets and Beryl-spangled Tanagers, sixteen hummingbird species, a pair of Powerful Woodpeckers, a dapper Black-and-white Owl, and a personal favorite, a sleepy, muppet-like Common Potoo. I could go on and on listing many more awe-inspiring birding moments of the day. However, I simply encourage any birder who is able to visit the extraordinary Refugio Paz de las Aves for themselves. What the Paz family has accomplished to help the birds of the Chocó bioregion will inspire anyone who cares about the conservation of birds and their habitats.





**DAY 5 | A SWEET TASTE OF OTAVALO**  
**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2023 - SACHATAMIA LODGE, MITAD DEL MUNDO, AND OTAVALO**



We would bid farewell to the wonders of the Mindo Valley on Day 5, but not before dawn birding from the moth blind at Sachatamia Lodge. The lodge attracts moths overnight by setting up a white sheet and light, which turns into a breakfast buffet for the birds at sunrise. Normally shy and skulking woodcreepers and foliage-gleaners joined a Rufous Motmot, Ecuadorian Thrush, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, and Masked Trogons, among many other species, in feasting upon a meal of moths. We were torn between rooting for the intricately beautiful moths and the hungry birds we so desperately love! After the moth banquet, we birded the grounds of

Sachatamia Lodge, admiring the lush gardens, the cloud-blanketed hillsides, and their many species of birds and butterflies.

After saying our goodbyes, we boarded our bus to wind our way toward Otavalo, northeast of Quito. The bus ride gave us time to relax, listen to Alé's melodic serenades, and enjoy the scenery of the countryside. We took a fun detour along this leg of the journey, stopping at Mitad del Mundo, or Middle of the World City. This sprawling park serves as a monument to the Equator, with fascinating exhibitions of both ancient cultures, as well as the beginnings of the modern history of Ecuador. We lined up for our requisite "one foot in each hemisphere" photos before







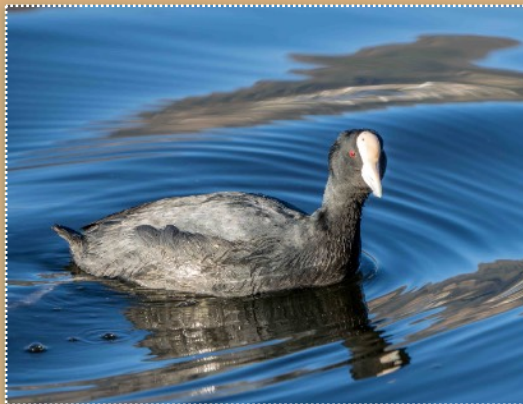
ascending to the monument’s viewing platform, awestruck at the sweeping views from the top. As we approached Otavalo, Eliana had a few additional surprises in store. A roadside stop for a taste of bizcochos delighted us all. Somewhat like the marriage of biscotti and shortbread, these flaky delicacies were addictingly delicious dipped in dulce de leche or eaten with cheese and jam. Another quick stop on the way, and Alé bought us all roses, celebrating Ecuador’s bustling flower industry! These stops left us all in high spirits, already feeling so welcomed by the hospitality of Otavalo.

Despite an early start, Day 5 afforded moments to recharge while also opening us to new experiences within this remarkable country. We ended our day nestled into our rooms at the Cabañas del Lago, where a crackling fireplace and a hot water bottle, amusingly encased in a felt chicken, ensured a cozy night’s sleep.



## DAY 6 - CULTURA Y CASCADAS

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2023 - SAN PABLO LAKE & OTAVALO



On Days 5-7, our group was introduced to the rich culture of the Otavalo region. Although, as a group of birders, we snuck in some time for our hobby when we could! Before our first cultural excursion of the day, some of us gathered for early morning birding on the grounds of our cabañas, situated on San Pablo Lake.

The Southern Lapwings, Andean Ducks, Yellow-billed Pintails, and

Slate-colored Coots reminded us of the waterfowl and waders back home, while a variety of songbirds flitted hungrily about in the cold morning air.



The cultural experiences of the day gave us insight into how many locals were preserving the traditions of their people. We began by visiting a weaving business and nonprofit called Totora Wasi, led by Kichwuan artisan and businesswoman Martha Gonza. The totora reed weavings here were charming, but we were touched to learn that the studio is dedicated to employing women escaping abusive marriages. Martha Gonza is a force for good in her community, creating sustainable products while also improving the lives of women in her community.

While still reflecting on this stirring visit, we headed to the Cascadas de Peguche, where a hike through a protected forest led us to a waterfall sacred to the local indigenous community. Although not on a birding outing per se, my seatmate Amy mentioned on our drive that she hoped to see a certain bird. A few steps into our hike, we noticed a fluttering in the trees - the Crimson-mantled Woodpecker that Amy had wished for! Buoyant after this auspicious encounter, we savored the rest of the walk, contemplating the history Ale shared, and drinking in the beauty of the area. Making our way back to our bus, we felt fortunate again as an Andean Condor soared overhead. Could there be a more perfect way to end this hike? Not for a birder!



The cultural adventures of the day were not over yet. The morning wrapped up with a visit to the studio of Segundo Lema, known also as "Taita Gundo." We learned some of the indigenous music history of his region, including how descendants of the Incas had maintained their musical traditions. He performed a mini-concert for us, demonstrating





instruments that ranged from tiny palm sized whistles, to large five-foot long pipes known as “condor’s wings.” Although he has performed around the world, Taita Gundo’s most important work is at home, where his family continues to pass down the musical heritage of the Kichwuan culture.

After such a busy morning, we enjoyed lunch in town and an afternoon stroll through the world famous Otavalo market. The market teemed with vendors selling rainbow hued textiles, jewelry, clothing, artwork, and more. Some friendly haggling netted our group with presents and souvenirs to serve as lifelong reminders of our unforgettable visit to this community.



## DAY 7 - BIRDING WITH A VIEW

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2023 - PAPALLACTA RADIO ANTENNAS

There was a buzz among our group the morning of our seventh day because we knew that in a few short hours we would be traveling through the famous Papallacta Pass to cross the spine of the Andes. Before we left Otavalo, we went to meet José Cotacachi, a gifted local textile artist. Stepping into the weaving studio transported us to a different era. We saw how raw wool is spun into yarn, and were





enthralled by a demonstration of the natural materials used to create incredibly rich dyes. Watching José Cotacachi masterfully weave his art on his massive loom was like watching a virtuoso playing a fine grand piano. He graciously answered our many questions, discussed the meaning behind some of his pieces, and shared how he has taken younger people under his wing to help this art form continue for future generations. Laden with many newly purchased weavings and colorful bundles of yarn, we travelers were mentally working out



how these new purchases would fit in our suitcases!

As we continued on our journey toward Papallacta, the scenery melted from city scenes, to forested countryside, to the open plains of Andean páramo. Our destination, the Papallacta Antennas station, emerged at the top of a mountain within Ecuador’s Cayambe Coca National Park. Refreshingly crisp mountain air invigorated us, and we felt lucky to have open roads and clear vistas as just a couple days prior a snowstorm blanketed the area. While the birding pace slowed, the sublime panorama of snow-capped mountains and crystal blue lakes, as well as the diversity of the high altitude flora kept us mesmerized. At 13,500 feet in elevation, cups of tea warmed us as we searched for avian specialties of the páramo. Blue-mantled Thornbills, Plain-capped Ground-Tyrants, and Stout-billed Cinclodes paid our group no mind as they munched on almost invisible insects. A favorite sighting of mine was the White-chinned Thistletail, a small brown bird with a long spiky tail that looks almost like knitting needles. Along our drive, our ever-watching birding guide Andrea taught us to keep close attention on the orange-flowered Chuquiraga bushes for a target species, the Ecuadorian Hillstar. As we retraced our drive back down the mountain, we were

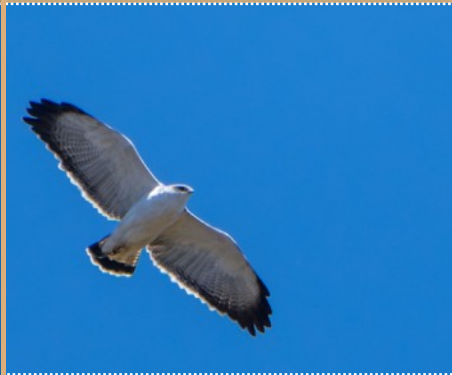




treated to a sighting of this large, brilliantly purple-hooded hummingbird, just as expected among the Chuquiraga flowers! To warm up after a chilly day, several of us luxuriated in an after-dinner soak in our hotel's hot-spring pools, sighing contentedly as we relaxed under starry Andean skies.

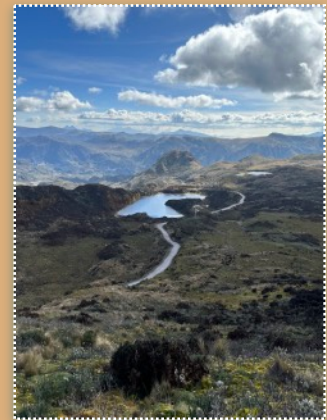
## DAY 8 - A DUCKING GOOD DAY!

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2023 - PAPALLACTA AREA & GUANGO LODGE



The next morning found us back on the mountaintop with clear bluebird skies. Our target bird, the Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe, sadly continued to elude us. Despite this missed species, we couldn't complain as Variable Hawks and Carunculated Caracara soared among the mountaintops, and rufous brown Tawny Antpittas and Chestnut-winged Cinclodes welcomed

us from the ground. We continued to have great looks at many of the previous day's birds, while Kris, Katherine, Linda, and I ventured on a short hike to take in more of the spectacular scenery, watching as White-tailed Deer glided across the hillside below us. After we decided the seedsnipe had bested us, we continued down the eastern slope of the Andes to Guango Lodge for an afternoon of birding.



If the five-star meal served by Guango Lodge were any indication, our well-fed group suspected we were in for a special afternoon of birding. Situated in the cloud forest on the eastern slope of the Andes, Guango Lodge boasts sightings of over 300 bird species. Nectar stations in the gardens gifted us close views, and plenty of photography opportunities, of

nine hummingbird species, including Chestnut-breasted Coronet, White-bellied Woodstar, Collared Inca, and Tourmaline Sunangel.

The stars of the day, however, were a pair of Torrent Ducks fearlessly hurtling themselves into the rapids of the Rio Quijos. A striking pair, the male sports a black-and-white head and flame-orange bill, whereas the female displays a rich rust-brown. These ducks spend many minutes perched up and preening on rocks, only to mess their feathers up again by belly-flopping into the roiling waters. In the water, they thrust their heads below the gurgling surface to feed. Between their funny poses while preening and their death-defying jumps into the river, the Torrent Ducks offered high entertainment for our group as we watched them for the better part of an hour.



After the amusement of the Torrent Ducks, our group split into those wanting to go back to the hummingbird feeders, and others of us choosing to hike and see what we might find along the trails. Those of us in the hiking group were wondering if we had made the right call, as the birding seemed to have petered out. However, a group of raucous and vibrant Turquoise Jays soon diverted us, comically reminding us of the various jay species from back home. A few minutes later, as we hiked back toward the lodge, we stumbled onto one of the famous mixed flocks of

the cloud forest! An interestingly varied combination of birds searched along the forest's edge for food, including Gray-hooded Bush Tanager,



Pale-naped Brushfinch, Pearled Treerunner, Bar-bellied Woodpecker, and Blue-backed and Capped Conebills.

We were sad to say goodbye to our kind hosts at Guango Lodge, but we knew we had our final birding lodge to look forward to - Guango's sister lodge, Cabañas San Isidro. Edgar, our driver with nerves of steel, navigated the winding road heading downslope, as we took in idyllic views of waterfalls, forested hills, and local villages. The luxurious cabins at San Isidro are nestled in the rainforest, with the grounds abundant with wildlife.



Already content from such a full day, we headed to dinner hoping for one more bird sighting that evening. The “San Isidro Owls” did not disappoint as two birds perched in nearby trees, hunting down moths attracted to the lodge’s lights. Found only in a localized patch near San Isidro, the San Isidro Owl displays characteristics of Black-banded Owl and Black-and-white Owl, but lives at a higher elevation than both of those species. After hearing about this enigmatic owl for many years, I was thrilled to add this mysterious bird to my life list, although it is not technically “countable” as its own species...yet! (Currently, this species is still officially considered part of Black-banded Owl)



## DAY 9 - BREEZY BIRDING

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2023 - SAN ISIDRO LODGE & LA BRISA HUMMINGBIRD FEEDERS

Knowing our time in Ecuador would soon be coming to a close, our group spent Day 9 reveling in a wealth of birding moments at San Isidro Lodge and the nearby property La Brisa. Between sips of coffee on San Isidro’s birding platform, we caught ourselves laughing at the antics of the Green

Jays as they feasted on moths. Known colloquially as querrequerre, translated as grouch or curmudgeon, this “Inca” subspecies of the Green Jay of Texas, Mexico, and Central America is full of personality - showy and noisy, with bright yellow eyes that must strike fear into any insect in its path! Scarlet-rumped Cacique also entertained us by showing off their fascinating flower-piercing strategy for sipping nectar. A White-bellied Antpitta practically sauntered into view, surprising us with an unexpected sighting for the trip! A pair of rufous-toned species, the Squirrel Cuckoo and Cinnamon Flycatcher, had our rapt attention as they actively searched for insects, with the cuckoo flapping awkwardly between branches, while the flycatcher sallied serenely back and forth to a favorite perch. A new species of hummingbird, the tiny Geoffroy’s Daggerbill, darted in and out of the leaves, competing with the Black-crested Warbler as one of the more difficult species of the trip to photograph!

After a successful morning’s birding, some of us accepted the challenge of venturing forth on a bird walk up the nearby road, despite the looming gray clouds. Thankfully, Edgar followed us with the bus, letting us duck back on whenever the drizzle became heavy. An adorable Rufous-Crowned Tody-







Flycatcher seemed to pose just for us while catching its brunch at the forest's edge. A jaunt through the cloud forest, however, would not be complete without the flurry of a mixed flock. After a rather quiet few minutes, we realized a feeding flock was streaming by in the trees along the roadside. Andrea, Eliana, and Marc worked admirably to help us locate the birds that were being identified, an unenviable task as the birds were in constant motion as they fed overhead. In the frenzy of birds, we caught glimpses of a few new species for the trip, including White-sided and Bluish Flowerpiercer, Fawn-breasted Tanager, and Rufous Spinetail, among several other species that we already had on our list. After the rush of this flock, we were driven by the rain back to our bus, grateful that Edgar rescued us from a downpour!

Midday, we took a break from birding to dry out and enjoy one of the lodge's famously gourmet lunches. Then, we headed over to La Brisa, a family owned and operated birding site that boasts sightings of nearly forty hummingbird species. The cheerful garden buzzed with birds and butterflies. Our first sighting of a Peruvian Racket-tail tickled us all with its fluffy orange "go-go boots." Other new hummingbird species included the striking Green-backed Hillstar, elegant with an iridescent blue throat, and the diminutive Gorgeted Woodstar, somewhat grumpy-looking with a hovering flight reminiscent of a bee. A Bananaquit amused us as it did an impression of a hummingbird at the feeders. A walk down a path led some of us to an overlook where Andean Motmot called and a Blue-necked Tanager stood like a sentinel as we gladly took its photograph. A flock of parrots flew by as we took in the scenery and Russet-backed Oropendolas partied in the shady canopy overhead.





Before dinner, Eliana and Marc hosted a magical candle-lit gathering to celebrate Brittany, Katherine and Ale's birthdays. Ale and Anita sang a soul-stirring duet, and few of us had dry eyes by the end. Sighing, I wished this trip could last a while longer; maybe not forever, but at least a couple more weeks. My husband would understand, wouldn't he?



## DAY 10 - A LONG GOODBYE

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2023 - SAN ISIDRO LODGE & RIO BERMEJO

Day 10 of our tour dawned with mixed emotions for our birding group. Some of us were continuing directly on to other adventures, while most were returning back to our day-to-day lives. Spouses, children, friends, and pets had been missed, for sure, but there's something magical about being able to experience the pure joy of one's hobby for ten days. Although we were due back in Quito later in the afternoon, we braved the rainy weather to experience the enchantment of Ecuador's northern cloud forest one last day.

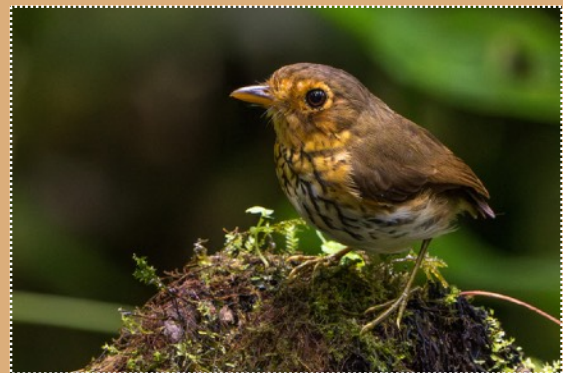
San Isidro still held several new wonders for us, including a Sicklet-winged Guan that hopped its way through the dark treetops over the lodge. Despite being among the largest bird species we met on our tour, it moved gracefully as it hopped from branch to branch, speedily making its way through the massive canopy. At the other end of the size spectrum, a perky Marble-faced Bristle-Tyrant snapped up insects as it snacked among the leaves. Before we said goodbye to the lodge, conversations flowed to what had been our favorite sightings of the trip. Some of us were partial to the mammals, the Black Agouti or mama and baby Mountain Tapir we



had spotted. The moth species that the birds readily gobbled had been magnificent in their diversity. Many of us could not believe our luck to have seen 44 hummingbird and 9 antpitta species on this tour. My favorite species, however, nearly did not make our trip's list...

On our final afternoon, Andrea led us on an expedition along a mountain road situated along the Rio Bermejo. The precipitation level wavered from a damp mist to steady rainfall, and we scampered in and out of the bus as birds were located. I had a certain species of toucanet in

mind throughout the trip, knowing that our only chance for seeing the bird would be on this eastern slope of the Andes Mountains. As the rainfall increased, hope began to wane that this species would be seen, and Edgar turned the bus around for us to head back to the lodge. Sharp-eyed Brittany, however, called out that she thought she had something interesting in the trees! Andrea took a look and confirmed that these were our birds. Staying calm to not scare away the birds, we contained our squeals as we quickly bounded out of the bus. Two grass green Southern Emerald-Toucanets nearly blended into the rain-soaked foliage, but their yellow-and-white lined bill could not be missed. We had just enough time with these birding gems to click a few photos before they slipped back into the forest.



Bird tour complete, we settled into a happy exhaustion as Edgar steered our bus back over the Andes, heading toward Quito. Foggy rain enveloped us for much of the drive through the mountains, adding a dreamy quality to the end of the trip. A cheerful last dinner together solidified friendships, with a few of us already chatting about our next birding adventures. Barb, Emily, and I met in the wee hours of the morning to head to the airport together, and I was grateful to be sharing this flight with friends.



As our flight took off at dawn, joy, warmth, and gratitude washed over me. My first Birding by Bus tour exceeded my expectations. Not only were the birds and scenery magnificent, but Eliana and Marc ensured we were well taken care of every mile of our journey together. After landing back in the states, my first conversation with my husband had me asking, “So, are you cool with me traveling with Birding by Bus again next year?”

