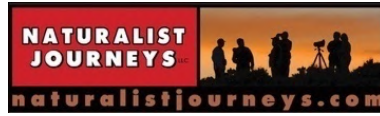


# Birds and Mammals of Ecuador's Andes

## Nov. 3-15, 2024 | Trip Report | by Wes Larson



With Wes Larson, Jorge Luna and eight participants:  
Georgia, Jim, Beth, Patty, Jackie, Emily, Chuck and Barb

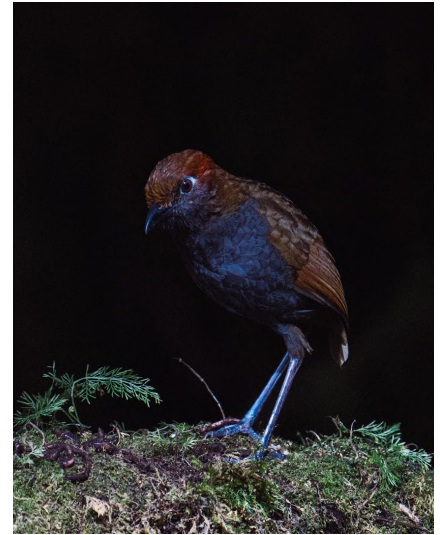


### Sun., Nov. 3

### Zuraloma and Travel to Sachatamia

With everyone arriving the previous day at different times, we were able to gather as a full group early in the morning in our beautiful Quito hotel. We had an early coffee and box breakfast, then headed out on the road with our local guide Jorge. He explained some of the different geological, social and economic facts about Quito and Ecuador as we drove, and we marveled at the beautiful city tucked below several active volcanoes. As we continued, the surrounding area became more rural and greener, and we climbed into the steep foothills on the western side of the Andes. Our first stop was Zuraloma, a farm that has been converted into a birding haven, and we had some incredible luck at the feeders, with highlights including three different Antpitta species, Sword-Billed Hummingbirds, Masked Flowerpiercers and Hooded Mountain Tanagers. There were so many hummingbirds it was almost overwhelming, and we all agreed it was the perfect start to the day.

We then continued driving the windy mountain roads of the western slope of the Andes and we gradually descended into much more tropical and lush cloud forest. Our next stop would be Guaycapi, a new lodge that held a lot of birds that we had not yet seen. Those birds included several new species of hummingbirds like the Violet-tailed Sylph and lots of different tanagers, with some highlights being the Beryl-spangled Tanager and the Golden Tanager. We went on a short hike that produced a few different woodcreepers as well as a number of other new birds for the group, and then we got back in the bus and headed toward our lodge, Sachatamia, for



the next three nights. The lodge and the food are both amazing and before dinner we completed our species list and then discussed our excitement for the trip over a delicious meal and some canelazo, a particularly delicious warm Ecuadorian drink.

## **Mon., Nov. 4                      Exploring the Chaco Cloud Forests**

Today we woke up very early and headed toward Refugio de Paz, a world-renowned refuge for both Andean Cock-of-the-Rock and various antpittas. When we arrived, we walked through the beautiful cloud forest to a private hide where we spent about 90 minutes in awe as we watched roughly a dozen male Cock-of-the-Rocks compete for the attention of a few females. It was a visual and auditory treat and an amazing way to start off the morning. We spent the next few hours with Angel, the owner of the refuge, as he took us around and showed us some of the different species of antpitta that have become habituated to his presence, and we got some truly amazing looks at the otherwise elusive birds. Speaking of elusive, we also got a stupendous show from a pair of Toucan Barbets as they danced and called in trees around the refuge. To top it all off we had a delicious meal cooked by members of Angel's family. It was a perfect morning filled with incredibly charismatic birds, and we were all smiles as we drove back to Sachatamia for lunch.

Following lunch and a short break, we headed for a drive on the eco-road, a dirt road that runs through some pristine cloud forest preserves and it great for some road birding. Our target was the Plate-billed Mountain Toucan, and after a fair amount of looking and calling, we were finally granted a short look at a beautiful individual in a tree high above. The drive back to the lodge was incredibly beautiful too and we marveled at what looked like a sea of low clouds spreading out from the foothills to what seemed to be infinity. The species list and another delicious meal wrapped up our second night in this incredible part of Ecuador.

## **Tues., Nov. 5                      2<sup>nd</sup> Full Day in the Chaco Cloud Forests**

Today we started around 6 am at a bird blind near the Sachatamia lodge; the light was on overnight, and the large number of insects had drawn in birds like the Rufous Motmot, Masked Trogon and a variety of flycatchers, wrens and woodcreepers. It was an excellent way to start the morning followed by a delicious breakfast with a view of the valley below. Following breakfast, we took a short break and then got into the bus and headed toward the lowlands of the Chaco Forest for a chance at some new birds. We arrived at a small birding station and immediately were able to view and photograph a number of new woodpeckers, tanagers, finches, parrots and hummingbirds. It's amazing how much a couple thousand feet of elevation can change the bird life, and as we were watching we also saw a few lizards including a particularly beautiful Green Iguana. Some bird highlights



included the Lineated Woodpecker, Pacific Parrotlet and White-whiskered Hermit. It was a wonderful way to spend the morning and lunch.

On the way back to the lodge, we decided to swing by Mindo to look for a Stygian Owl, which we were lucky enough to find. We stopped at a shop to buy some local chocolate and then headed back to Sachatamia for some well-earned rest, downtime and birding around the lodge after a couple very busy days. The species list and another wonderful dinner followed and then some of our group went on a night walk where we found a tarantula, several frogs, anole lizards and a rare treat, an Olinguito! These recently described mammals are hard to find and our guide Jorge was one of the people to first describe them, so it was fun finding one with him!

### **Wed., Nov. 6                      Mashpi and Leaving the Chaco Cloud Forest**

We woke up early this morning to drive roughly 90 minutes to the Mashpi area of the Chaco forest. This part of the cloud forest is a bit higher and has slightly different vegetation, and as a result, we found a lot of new birds for the trip. We stopped at the Amagusa birding area where we saw Rose-faced Parrots, Glistening Green Tanagers, Red-headed Barbets and a rare treat, the Tooth-billed Hummingbird! Plus, lots and lots of other great birds too, including a habituated Bronze-winged Parrot named Lulu. It was a wonderful stop with amazing birding. We were in high spirits as we loaded into the bus and headed to the home of the Neblina owner, Xavier, as he told us that we had a good chance of seeing a rare mammal there – the elusive Tayra. Indeed, we did see it as it fed on some bananas at a bird feeder. Seeing these large members of the weasel family is always such a treat and this was no exception. Add to that, we got to watch a couple Club-winged Manakin males do a display and a dance in an effort to attract a female. The solid bones in these bird’s wings make it possible for them to vibrate them and make a very distinctive song as they dance, and it’s pretty breathtaking. Following the stop at Xavier’s house, we proceeded on to a local restaurant where we ate our lunch and saw some amazing tanagers, including the Bay-headed Tanager, the Blue-necked Tanager and the Summer Tanager. It was an amazing quick stop with some brightly colored birds, and as we drove to Quito for the night, it was easy to see that this had been a standout day of the trip.

### **Thurs., Nov. 7                      Arriving in the Amazon!**

Today we got up early to head to the airport and catch a 25-minute flight to Coca, and the entrance to the Ecuadorian Amazon. After arriving we got into a small bus and drove to the small port where the boats to Napo Wildlife Center arrive. We enjoyed some coffee and then got into the motorboats and rode the roughly 2.5



hours down the Napo River while enjoying a nice box lunch and some beautiful scenery. After arriving at the entrance to the creek, we got into two canoes and started paddling up the creek toward the Napo Wildlife Center, and we almost immediately started seeing birds and mammals. Some highlights of the trip were some especially playful Squirrel Monkeys, a great sighting of the Napo Saki Monkey, brief looks at a Zigzag Heron eating a frog, and some great Trogons and Hoatzins. It was a wonderful introduction to the area and after paddling the whole creek to the lake on a particularly hot Amazon day, we settled into our almost unbelievably beautiful accommodations. Following our species list, we had a nice introductory presentation to the region and the Napo Wildlife Center, followed by a delicious dinner.

**Fri., Nov. 8 Full Day at Napo Wildlife Center**

Rising before dawn, we enjoyed a delicious fresh breakfast at the main lodge and then got into our canoes and paddled to the other side of the lake. We then walked about 25 minutes through the steamy jungle that was starting to wake up with the calls of a lot of different birds and primates. We arrived at a large observation tower and climbed to a height that put us above the canopy of the rainforest. Everywhere you turned there was some new kind of bird and we were dazzled by 6 different species of toucans, 4 species of macaw, brilliant Paradise Tanagers and multicolored honeycreepers and cotingas, a King Vulture and many other birds. In fact, we saw almost 40 new species of birds during the morning, as well as a few reptiles and amphibians too. It was an amazing first morning in the tropical rainforest of Ecuador and when we arrived back at the dock, we were thrilled to be greeted by the hotel staff with a cold face towel and some refreshing juice.

Following a bit of down time and some rest, we got into the canoes and paddled up the creek to do our best to find giant river otters. It wasn't long before we saw an absolutely beautiful Agami Heron and as we were watching it, a family of Giant Otters showed up. We followed them upstream and spent quite a while with them as they played by our boats and hunted fish. The family had several young with them and it was a really special experience to spend so much time so close to them. We had a number of great bird encounters aside from the Agami Heron as well, including Blue and Yellow Macaws, several kingfisher species, Capped Herons, and a handful of other amazing birds. After returning to the lodge, we did our species list, ate dinner, and then a few from our group went on an after-dinner night walk where the highlights were a Peacock Katydid, a Great Tinamou, some large tarantulas and a handful of small reptiles and amphibians.



## Sat., Nov. 9

### Parrot Clay Licks and the Napo Community Center

Today we left at 5:30 am to make our way down the creek toward the Napo River. Along the way we saw another Agami heron, as well as a few other familiar favorites. As we got to the mouth of the creek where it meets the river, we unloaded and hiked into the jungle along a well-established pathway. Our destination was a small clay lick famous for its visiting parrots, and as we were waiting we could hear the sound of macaws overhead. While the macaws never landed, we did get some great views of Orange-cheeked Parrots, one of the more beautiful resident parrots, as well as Cobalt-winged Parakeets. We then left to get in a motorboat and headed to a local indigenous community where we learned about some of the customs of the Kichwa people and got to sample some of the local cuisine as well (including some large grubs!) It was a nice introduction to some of the culture of the area and after taking a quick look at a Three-toed Sloth asleep in a nearby tree, we headed back to the mouth of the creek for some lunch, and then a pretty hot midday paddle back to the lodge. Along the way we had a great look at an Orange crested Manakin, as well as some of our best looks at White-throated Toucans. We capped the night off with some refreshing tropical drinks, a rousing species list, and a wonderful dinner. Some of us also walked down to the dock for a close-up view of some Black Caiman hunting fish in the dark.

## Sun., Nov. 10

### Jungle Walks and Boat Rides

Today we took advantage of the whole day to explore the area more around the Napo Wildlife Center. Some of our crew left early for a nice walk near the creek where Spix's Night Monkey, Yellow-bellied Spider Monkey and White-capped Manakin were the main attractions. Some of the group left for a boat ride and a tower climb and had some great views of White-throated Toucans and some other familiar favorites. An incoming rainstorm cut both of those trips short, but because the area has been lacking in rain as of late, it was some welcome precipitation and it made the normally hot jungle air much more tolerable for a sleepy afternoon.

Following lunch and a short break, we got in the canoes and paddled to the other side of the lake and once again hiked to the canopy observation tower. We had a very nice and very humid evening and saw some wonderful birds and mammals including the gorgeous Wire-tailed Manakin male, a particularly striking Olive Oropendola, a few puff birds and a beautiful Opal-rumped Tanager. It was a really nice way to spend our last afternoon and evening in the Amazon jungle, and as we paddled across the lake back to the lodge during sunset, we all quietly reflected on how good Napo had been to us.



## **Mon., Nov. 11                      Leaving Napo and Traveling to the Quito Valley**

Before sunrise we canoed away from the Napo Wildlife center and bid farewell to a truly spectacular place. Along the way we managed to spot a Cream-colored Woodpecker and a Salvin's Curassow along with a few other species that we had seen previously. The sky was beginning to lighten as we made it to the end of the creek and got into our motorboat for the 2.5-hour ride back to Coca. Many of us spent that ride staring at the passing jungle or appreciating a good excuse for a nap. Once we made it to Coca, we reunited with our driver, Franklin, and headed off in the van through the lowland forests of eastern Ecuador. This part of the country is truly beautiful, and we did our best to take it all in with stops to visit a waterfall and some hummingbird feeders (where we saw some new hummingbirds including a fan favorite Golden-tailed Sapphire) and also a nice stop for lunch overlooking a beautiful jungle river. Today was mostly dedicated to travel, and we were all a bit tired when we got to the beautiful Cabañas San Isidro, one of the oldest birding stations in Ecuador, and definitely one of the ones with the best rooms and most delicious food. Although we were all tired, we were also excited at the prospect of a new location with new birds and looking forward to what tomorrow would bring us.

## **Tues., Nov. 12                      Full Day at San Isidro**

This morning, we got up and met at the feeders where a light had been left on overnight, and a lot of birds had gathered to feed on insects. Immediately we saw Andean Motmot, Masked Trogon, Cinnamon Flycatcher and the always beautiful and mischievous Inca Jay. One of the best things about Ecuador is the change you see in bird life as you move vertically through different elevations, and the birds in this area are different from all the other places we had been so far. We also walked down to an area where the local guides feed a White-bellied Antpitta, but the bird decided not to show this particular morning.

Following breakfast, some of our group opted to stay around the lodge and bird, while others went on a hike and searched for some new species. They managed to see a Golden-headed Quetzal, a couple new tanagers and a few other unique birds that were new to the trip.

In the afternoon, we traveled to a small birding station a bit lower in the cloud forest where we were treated to a few new hummingbirds including the Peruvian Racquet-tail and the Geoffrey's Daggerbill. We also picked up some other new birds including Saffron-crowned Tanager and Lemon-browed Flycatcher. It was a nice afternoon that allowed us some time to say goodbye to the cloud forest portion of our trip, and an ecosystem that had been very good to us.



During our species list meeting, a Black-banded Owl appeared, and we went out on the deck of the San Isidro lodge and spent some time watching their flagship bird. Then following dinner, a rainstorm lulled our guests to sleep while a loud thunderstorm woke them right back up!

### **Wed., Nov. 13                      Travel to Papallacta**

We woke up and once again did some birding around the deck of the restaurant near Cabañas San Isidro. We had great looks at Masked Trogons once again, as well as Inca Jays and lots of other beautiful cloud forest birds. We tried once more for the local Antpitta, but it decided it wanted to stay obscured in the jungle. After a nice filling breakfast, we set off for our next destination. Along the way and as we got higher in altitude, we began our search for one of our target mammals in the area, the Mountain or Woolly Tapir. Scanning the high-altitude meadows on the way to our hotel, we did not find the tapir, but we all soaked in the beautiful surroundings and were lucky to see a gorgeous Andean Cock-of-the-Rock fly across the road. Once we got the Papallacta region, we immediately noticed a few new birds like the Shining Sunbeam hummingbird and the Black Flowerpiercer, and we headed up a small dirt road in an effort to get up into the Paramo ecosystem to once again look for the tapir and, if we were lucky, a Spectacled Bear. Although we struck out on both mammals, we did see a group of Masked Mountain Tanagers, a rare bird for the area with an extremely limited range, and we managed to spot and identify a number of other species that call the high mountain paramo their home.

We checked into our gorgeous hot-springs hotel, and some of our group immediately got into the pools ranging from cold to warm to piping hot and enjoyed some wonderful relaxation time among the beautiful Andes mountains. Following lunch and a break to relax, part of our group walked up the hill next to the stream and continued the search for the tapir. Although we still did not spot the elusive mammal, we did enjoy a beautiful view of the Antisana volcano and a wonderful walk next to a high mountain stream in some endemic forest vegetation. The outing was followed by a lively species list and the first of two delicious dinners at Termas de Papallacta.

### **Thurs., Nov. 14                      Looking for Andean Bears in the Paramo**

Today our main target was Andean bears. These bears are the only bear species in South America and they are often called by their popular nickname, spectacled bear, as their fur can sometimes have facial patterns that resemble spectacles. In order to try to find this elusive bear, we decided to drive the high mountain pass that leads to Quito and scan the open paramo meadows. We scanned for hours, and we were giving up hope of



seeing the bear when a Carunculated Caracara flew by and we stopped to look at it. As we followed the bird, Jorge started yelling “OSO! OSO! OSO!” which is Spanish for “BEAR! BEAR! BEAR!” We quickly ran out of the bus and Jorge directed our eyes toward an outcropping where a distant bear was chewing on some vegetation and moving around the mountainside. We watched the bear for about an hour as it quickly traversed the mountainside, and as we headed back to the hotel, everyone was in extremely high spirits. Andean bears had been the main mammal target for a lot of people on the trip, so it was a special experience to say the least.

Back at the hotel we took a long break so some of the guests could take advantage of the spa and the different pools around the hotel. In the afternoon some of the group once again took a walk up the hill to scan for tapir, but unfortunately the tapir, which had been seen recently, was not appearing for our group. But with the good luck that we had had with the bear in the morning, no one was upset that we did not see the Mountain Tapir. It was a great day and we wrapped up the night and voted for our favorite bird and favorite mammal of the trip, with the Andean Cock-of-the-Rock and the Andean Bear winning the vote!

## **Fri., Nov. 15                      Antisana National Park, Tambo Condor and Farewells!**

A very early morning was necessary today to get us to our destination, the Antisana National Park. After about a two-hour drive we arrived at a great spot to see some new hummingbirds and also look for Andean Condor, both of which we saw! One of the showstoppers was the always-amazing Giant Hummingbird, and then we had some great light on some of our familiar favorites like the Sparkling Violet-Ear and the Great Sapphirewing. After watching a family of Andean Condors circle higher and higher for a while, we got back into the bus and drove to the Antisana National Park entrance, where we almost immediately started seeing some new birds. We found multiple species of Cinclodes, Ecuadorian Hillstars, Plain-Colored Sierra Finches and a few other great birds. We also had really close views of Carunculated Caracaras - one of the more sought-after birds on the trip. One of the best parts of this part of the trip is the open vistas and gorgeous views of the Antisana volcano, and more than once we had to stop to take photos of the almost unbelievable surroundings.

After spending about two hours in the park, we drove back to Tambo Condor where a delicious, freshly made lunch was waiting for us. It was also Georgia’s birthday, so we celebrated with some ice cream cake while we watched a Tufted Tit-tyrant bounce through some of the nearby bushes. It was a very fun last meal together and we got into the bus and drove back down to Quito. The time had come to say goodbye and we said some warm and even teary goodbyes to people that had become friends over the previous two weeks. This was a particularly fun group to travel with and we had a range of different types of naturalists on this trip; full of great



stories, good laughs and warm smiles. We saw over 350 bird species in total, some incredible mammals, and lots of good herps as well. It was an amazing trip that I'm sure all of us will be thinking about for a long time.

*Photos by Wes Larson: Agami Heron, Caiman, Paradise Tanager, Napo Saki Monkey, Andean Cock of the Rock, Equatorial Antpitta, Sword-billed Hummingbird, Chestnut-naped Antpitta, Velvet Purple Coronet, Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, Giant Antpitta, Beryl-spangled Tanager, Yellow-bellied Antpitta, Gem Anole, Violet-tailed Sylph, Flame-faced Tanager, Toucan Barbet, Orange-breasted Fruiteater, White-booted Racket-tail, Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan, Rufous Motmot, Pale-billed Aracari, Tyra, Squirrel Monkey, Napo Saki Monkey, Zigzag Heron, Agami Heron*