

Peru: Cusco to Manu w/ Machu Picchu Extension Oct. 6 – 24, 2023 | Trip Report | by Greg Butcher



With Guides Percy Avendano and Juan Cardenas of Neblina Forest Peru, and participants Donald and Linda and Greg's wife Linda



Fri., Oct. 6 Pucusana | Pantanos de Villa

We only had one day to bird the Peruvian coast, so we made the most of it. We drove from our hotel at the Lima airport to Pucusana, where we boarded a boat to bird the close offshore islands. The highlight of the boat ride was a group of 200+ South American Sea Lions, most of which were hauled out together on a rocky island. Peruvian coastal birds are wonderful, with Humboldt Penguin, Inca Tern, and Red-legged Cormorant leading the pack. One of the rarest birds we saw was Surf Cinclodes, a thrush-like bird found only on the Pacific Coast of southwestern Peru. After the boat ride and a seafood lunch, we visited the Pantanos de Villa marshes, where we saw the spectacular Many-colored Rush Tyrant, Peruvian Meadowlark, Striated Heron, Great Grebe, and Puna Ibis. Don't ask anyone about Lima traffic unless you're ready to hear a long tale of woe!

Sat., Oct. 7 Cusco | Lake Huarcapay

We walked over to the airport and flew to Percy's home town of Cusco, at an altitude over 11,111 feet. Apparently, Percy had trained a Plumbeous Rail to run right at us in Huasao (or Wasau) Wetland, where we also

saw three species of teal, our first hummingbird (out of 46 for the trip; Black-tailed Trainbearer), our first two Andean species (Gull and Flicker), and a surprise visitor from North America, Yellow-billed Cuckoo! We saw wild Guinea Pigs as well, but they weren't as willing to be seen. (They're on the menu in Cusco.) Later in the day, we added two more spectacular hummingbirds: Giant H and Bearded Mountaineer. We had five Chilean Flamingos, always a treat, and our only Cinereous Harrier and Variable Hawk of the trip. Perched in a tree by the side of the road was a Lesser Horned Owl, still a pretty good-sized bird. I get the names Rushbirds and Rush Tyrants mixed up, but the first is Wren-like (brown!) and the second is Many-colored (pretty much every color except brown). We had both today. We had good looks at Rusty-fronted Canastero, a secretive shrub-loving bird endemic to high elevations in Peru. The Giant Hummingbird had a favorite perch at the entrance to our lodge, Villa Mercedes.

Sun., Oct. 8 Villa Mercedes to Wayqecha Biological Station

We went back to Lake Huarcapay for the Yellow-winged Blackbird and enjoyed the gorgeous Blue-and-yellow Tanager, as well as additional looks at Rushbirds and Rush Tyrants. Then we were off on the Manu Road! We had several stops between the lake and the pass, all on the dry side of the pass. Many of the stops are archeological sites for both pre-Inca and Inca civilizations. You could tell we were at elevation because the most interesting birds were Ash-breasted, Peruvian, and Mourning Sierra Finch and Chestnut-breasted Mountain Finch (a Peruvian endemic), plus Mountain Caracara. We added a Peruvian endemic, Creamy-crested Spinetail. When we reached the highest elevation of our trip today at Acjanaco Pass – 12,600 feet, our reward was a Darwin's Nothura (a small tinamou), close by the side of the road. Then the scenery changed immediately from brown/arid to green/wet! Our first big reward was getting a few peeks at Urubamba Antpitta, a recent split from Rufous Antpitta with a very tiny range within Peru. And we got our first Moustached Flowerpiercer, a range-restricted high-elevation species. At our last stop at elevation, we enjoyed Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan, Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager, and Puna Thistletail. Then we dropped down just a bit – to 9,500 feet – to Wayqecha Biological Station, one of 3 research-station-and-ecolodge combos run by Amazon Conservation (U.S.- based) and Conservacion Amazonica (ACCA; Peru-based). We didn't see any bears at Wayqecha, but one of the biologists told us all about the bear research they are pursuing in the area.

The Manu Road

The Manu Road is famous among ornithologists and birdwatchers because of the variety of habitats and elevations it covers. It starts on the dry western side of Peru, then goes over the continental divide at Acjanaco Pass into the wet eastern side. From there, it drops to the Madre de Dios River. The bird species are very different between the wet and dry sides of the pass, and species continue to change as the road drops on the wet side into the Amazon Basin because many of the species are elevational specialists. The road has a great ornithological history because many Peruvian species were first described for Western science from this road. Fifty years ago, Barry Walker and others established the birdwatching route on the road. At that time, it was narrow and steep and had a fearsome (and exciting!) reputation. In the intervening years, the road has widened, become fully paved, and matured into an easy-to-access birding route. As birders, we love to end the route on the Madre de Dios River and bird from a motorized canoe from Atalaya to Boca Colorado; unfortunately, developers are promoting an extension of the road to link up all the way to Puerto Maldonado that would allow extractive and agricultural activities to flourish throughout. Amazon Conservation, ACCA, and others are working against the road extension and other activities that threaten all the natural values of the Manu region.

Mon., Oct. 9 Wayqecha Biological Station

Wayqecha was not the highest elevation on our trip, but it was the coldest. Because we were on the rainy side of the pass, it wasn't surprising that we had rain and fog. But the specialty birds at this elevation made it all worthwhile. The Biological Station has a wonderful feeder with Andean Guan; a big variety of hummingbirds

including Amethyst-throated Sunangel, Long-tailed Sylph, Rufous-capped Thornbill, Scaled Metaltail (one of the rarest species of the trip), Shining Sunbeam, Violet-throated Starfrontlet, and Chestnut-breasted Coronet; and several really cool tanagers including Rust-and-yellow, Blue-capped, Grass-green, Golden-collared, Fawn-breasted, Hooded and Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanagers, and Plushcap. In addition to Wayqecha's grounds, we also birded the nearby Manu Road where we added Crimson-mantled Woodpecker, Red-and-white Antpitta (a Peruvian endemic), Montane Woodcreeper, Pearled Treerunner, Marcapata Spinetail (another Peruvian endemic), Barred Fruiteater, Red-crested Cotinga, Inca Flycatcher (a very nondescript bird, but yet another endemic), Rufous-breasted Chat-Tyrant, White-collared Jay, Mountain Cacique, and Spectacled Redstart.

Tues., Oct. 10 Wayqecha to Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge

As we started downslope, one of the first new birds we encountered was White-eared Solitaire, another elevation specialist, but one that is usually found at lower elevations than Wayqecha. A bit lower we added Handsome Flycatcher. At our next (lower) stop, we added a trio of great birds: Golden-headed Quetzal, Blue-banded Toucanet, and Blue-and-black Tanager. Next, we were stuck because of a bridge repair, but added two tanagers (Beryl-spangled and Saffron-crowned) and a mystery bird. It actually turned out to be an easy ID – immature Red-capped Cardinal, but Percy was flummoxed at first because it was several thousand feet higher elevation than it should have been. We were at 6,000 feet, and it isn't expected until below 1,800 feet. Just another sign that birds have wings, and they don't always read the book.

Wed., Oct. 11 - Thurs., Oct. 12 Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge

At 5,000-foot elevation, the lodge provides a wonderful feeding station primarily for hummingbirds and tanagers. On our first day, the tanagers were a bit intimidated by the Speckled Chachalacas, Russet-backed Oropendolas, and Tayra (a medium-sized predatory weasel), but the hummingbirds were out in full force, including Buff-tailed Sicklebill (one of the rarest species we saw on this tour), Sparkling Violetear, Wire-crested Thorntail, Green-fronted Lancebill, Geoffrey's Daggerbill, Peruvian Piedtail (which is both rare and endemic), Speckled and Many-spotted Hummingbirds (not closely related to each other), Rufous-booted Racket-tail, and Violet-fronted Brilliant. Don't you love the names for tropical hummingbirds?

The great thing about birding on the (Manu) road is that you look up, and there's a Solitary Eagle floating across the sky. But we spent a lot of our time looking in the shadows for gray, brown, and rufous birds like the Yellow-rumped Antwren, by far the rarest bird we saw on this trip and considered globally Endangered. Thank goodness our guide Percy knows all the voices and field marks of obscure-looking birds like Foothill Stipplethroat, Spotted Barbtail, Yellow-breasted Warbling-Antbird, Slaty Gnateater (very rare, but pretty distinctive for a small gray bird), Black-billed Treehunter, and Ash-browed Spinetail. And we were loaded with flycatchers, mostly of various shades of green, blending in with the leaves.

But I'm a guy who loves colorful birds! (I have a British birding friend who calls them "tarted-up" birds.) And we saw lots of those too, including Versicolored Barbet, Blue-naped Chlorophonia, Deep-blue Flowerpiercer, and more beautiful tanagers: Yellow-throated, Orange-eared, Spotted, Golden, and our first Paradise Tanager. And of course, there were a few distinctive birds that aren't clearly colorful or cryptic such as Chestnut-backed Antshrike and Andean Solitaire.

Also staying at the lodge was a guy who travels the world just for one special objective at each location. He was here of course to see the Andean Cock-of-the-Rock lek (a site for display, competition, and mating). We weren't disappointed. We had 10 super-colorful males at the lek, often dancing and chasing each other. And a pair of Andean Motmots to boot!

We were prepared for a letdown after the cocks-of-the-rock, but it was not to be. Just a few miles up the road, we looked out over the riverbed to a big troop of Woolly Monkeys moving through the trees. It made me think of the old Tarzan movies to see them easily swaying from tree to tree using their long arms. The size (and presumably age) variety within the troop was impressive. (I'm remembering one disappointment here: We were within a few yards of a Yungas Manakin lek, we heard them over and over again, but we never got one in our binoculars!)

Local knowledge is precious! At the end of the day, we drove to a spot in the road where two pairs of Lyre-tailed Nightjars flew majestically above us! We closed the day with a Rufescent Screech-Owl.

Fri., Oct. 13 Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge to Manu Biolodge

We were back on the road today, driving from 5,000 feet to 1,700. We dropped into the elevational range of Blue-fronted Lancebill, Epaulet Oriole, and Purple Honeycreeper. We were thrilled with a kettle of 50 migratory Swallow-tailed Kites. Some of the super-specialties today included Chestnut-eared Aracari, Russet-backed Oropendola, and a disappointing rear view of the spectacular Amazonian Umbrellabird. A bit lower, we found our first manakins seen on the trip: White-bearded and Round-tailed. Our destination was Manu Biolodge, part of Manu Biological Station (formerly Villa Carmen). The lodge and station are run by Amazon Conservation and ACCA, just as Wayqecha is, so there is a lot of critical tropical research occurring here, in addition to ecotourism. Our cabins were right on an oxbow lake, making for great birding even during downtimes, including the incomparable Hoatzin! We knew we had reached the Amazonian tropics when the hummingbirds at the feeder included White-bearded Hermit, Gould's Jewelfront, Gray-breasted Sabrewing, Golden-tailed Sapphire, and Sapphire-spangled Emerald. Soon after arrival, we were greeted by a massive rainstorm that inundated the outer half of our cabins and downed numerous large trees and branches. As I headed to the lodge from my cabin, I was shocked by a young Great Potoo on the ground just a few feet from me. As I reached for my camera, it flew off (of course!).

Sat., Oct. 14 Manu Biolodge (formerly Villa Carmen)

We had several more spectacular birds near our cabins (thus discovered early in the morning and seen several times), including Blue-throated Piping-Guan and Purple and Violaceous Jays. One of the last projects I started at my previous job was a survey of North-American-breeding shorebirds that use the greater Amazon Basin in the nonbreeding season. We started contributing to the survey by recording Wilson's Phalarope and Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers along the edge of the oxbow lake. A Scarlet-hooded Barbet, a pair of Bluish-fronted Jacamars, a Rufous-capped Nunlet, a Plum-throated Cotinga, and a pair of Chestnut-fronted Macaws added to our happiness at reaching a tropical climate. We finally started seeing Red-capped Cardinals at the proper (low) elevation. We found our first Olive Oropendolas, plus a Solitary Black Cacique. One of the big controversial trends in Neotropical birding is feeding earthworms to antpittas. I like it! The worms brought in an Amazonian Antpitta, which otherwise would have been very difficult to see. We were only a few miles from the biolodge, so we saw many of the same hummingbirds, but we added White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-breasted Hermit, Black-throated Mango, and Fork-tailed Woodnymph. Just a couple miles from there, another hummingbird-feeding station produced three new species: Reddish Hermit, Rufous-crested Coquette, and Violet-headed Hummingbird. A walk through the nearby woods allowed us to see the habitat-specialist Bamboo Antshrike and the bizarre Red-billed Scythebill and Ringed Antpiper (which may be the most unusual flycatcher of them all). We ended our day with a pair of Black-banded Owls.

Sun., Oct. 15 Manu Biolodge to Tambo Blanquillo

Today was one of the coolest travel days, except for the temperature, which was hot. We drove to the end of the Manu Road (for us) and transferred to the Madre de Dios River for about 6 hours on the river! It is hard to

convey the fun of floating (well, motorized floating) down a tropical river. The possibilities seem endless. We saw big flocks of parakeets – Tui, Cobalt-winged, Dusky-headed, and White-eyed – and a few Macaws – both Red-and-green and Scarlet. Tiny-looking Swallow-winged Puffbirds sat at the top of bare branches overlooking the river. We had a pair of huge Horned Screamers. The best bird (for me, at least) was a Hudsonian Godwit, far from its tundra breeding grounds and from its Patagonian nonbreeding grounds. We had lots of wading birds, swifts, and vultures, including our first King and Greater Yellow-headed Vultures. And that was just the first half! During the second half, we stopped at a small-monkey paradise with Emperor and White-mantled Tamarins and Toppin’s Titi. We also got what turned out to be our only looks at Howler Monkeys, although we heard them every day for the next four days. For birds, we added Amazonian Motmot, two new species of macaws (Red-bellied and Blue-and-yellow), a sandy roost of 10 Sand-colored Nighthawks, and the piece de resistance, a pair of Razor-billed Curassows in the open by the side of the river.

Mon., Oct. 16 **Blanquillo Macaw Clay Lick and Lodge Trails**

Founded in 1988, Tambo Blanquillo Private Reserve offers a lodge, a clay lick, a canopy tower, and several oxbow lakes, in addition to several productive trails and daily access to the Madre de Dios River. Except for the heat and humidity (which comes with the territory), it is a naturalist’s paradise. Even the insects aren’t bad (and the worst ones were sweat bees, which are bothersome, but don’t bite or sting). The number one attraction is the clay lick, which attracts 4 species of macaws – Blue-and-yellow, Chestnut-fronted, Scarlet, and Red-and-green – 4 species of parrots – Orange-cheeked, Blue-headed, Yellow-crowned, and Mealy – and 3 species of parakeets – Tui, Cobalt-winged, and White-eyed. Just counting individuals visible at one time, we had 60 macaws (50 of which were Red-and-green), 90 parrots (50 of which were Blue-headed), and 84 parakeets (including 50 Cobalt-winged and 30 Tui). But of course, we saw other birds too, including Spix’s Guan, Russet-backed Oropendola, and lots of different flycatchers. Late afternoon at the lodge and adjacent trails was productive with a Butterfly Coquette, three swimming Sungrebes, two White-throated Toucans, three flying Bare-necked Fruitcrows, three species of oropendolas (including Olive), four Casqued Caciques, and one Orange-backed Troupial – it was quite an afternoon!

Tues., Oct. 17 **Cocha Camungo Tower and Lake**

This morning we were off to the famous canopy tower and oxbow lake at Cocha Camungo. What a way to start the day at the top of a huge emergent canopy tree! We saw almost all the macaws, parrots, and parakeets that we’d seen the day before at the clay lick, but this time they were flying by at or below eye level. We had eye-to-eye views of several species that are difficult to see any other way. Perhaps the best bird was a Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle at the top of a nearby tree. Actually, it was probably the Spangled Cotinga. Some of the interesting species that joined us in our tree were Purus Jacamar, Western Striolated-Puffbird, and Yellow-browed Tody-Flycatcher (one of the infamous tropical species whose name is longer than it is). We were able to look down on a Slate-colored Hawk and a Cream-colored Woodpecker attracted by the oxbow lake right next to us. After climbing down, we enjoyed a leisurely paddle on the oxbow lake, where we reunited with our friends the Hoatzins, Horned Screamers, Wattled Jacana, Sungrebe, herons and egrets, vultures, and met two new friends: American Pygmy Kingfisher and Pale-eyed Blackbird. We walked out along a very productive forest trail with an antshrike, 3 species of antwrens, an antbird, 2 species of woodcreeper, and (true to their name) Screaming Pihás.

Wed., Oct. 18 **Cocha Blanco | Rio Madre de Dios**

On our first hike of the morning, we startled a White-lipped Peccary that greeted us with a loud snort. We were on our way to one of Tambo Blanquillo’s many oxbow lakes, where we enjoyed a slow paddle on Cocha Blanco, home of the friendliest family of 5 Giant Otters you would ever want to see. During our time there, we drifted closer, then apart, then closer again. The otters seemed as curious about us as we were about them. We had the

usual Amazonian waterbirds, plus a new small parrot – White-bellied – a new parakeet – Rose-fronted – and a fly-over of an Ornate Hawk-Eagle. We took an evening cruise on the big river, seeing Greater Ani, Common Potoo, 3 species of oropendola, Giant Cowbird, and our only Yellow-billed Nunbird of the trip. On the walk to the river from the lodge, we added Riparian Antbird and Drab Water Tyrant.

Thurs., Oct. 19 Tambo Blanquillo to Puerto Maldonado

We saw a surprising number of new species during our last walk on the trails at Tambo Blanquillo. Less surprising is that they were comparatively cryptic species like Varzea Schiffornis, Dwarf Tyrant-Manakin. Black-faced Antthrush, Gray and Chestnut-tailed Antbirds, Pygmy and Sclater's Antwrens, and Great-billed Hermit. The exception was the gorgeous Crimson-crested Woodpecker! Then we were back in the boat on the river, heading towards Puerto Maldonado. The best bird on the river today was the giant Jabiru (stork) all by himself on a sandbar. As we boated down the river, the shores were increasingly populated, with signs of gold extraction. We disembarked at Boca Colorado, a bustling port town. We took a short (but really fast!) taxi ride to pick up our van to Puerto Maldonado. We drove through almost fully deforested areas dominated by agricultural fields. We had left a tropical paradise to experience now-classic Amazon Basin deforestation. As a result, we added three species to our trip list that would not have occurred here in natural vegetation: Red-breasted Meadowlark, Grassland Sparrow, and Ruddy Ground-Dove.

Fri., Oct. 20 Enai Hotel, Puerto Maldonado | Cusco

Our last morning of tropical birding was a short hike from our hotel on the river. We got some last looks at Amazonian birds and filled in a few holes in our list: Double-collared Seedeater, Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, and Aplomado Falcon. Then we were off to the airport for our flight to Lima (where we picked up my wife and had lunch), then Cusco.

Sat., Oct. 21 Cusco to Hotel Pakaritampu

It was time to put our warm clothes back on; our first birding site was Sacsayhuaman Archeological Park with great views above Cusco. It was a great chance for us to reacquaint ourselves with species from the beginning of our trip and for my wife Linda to catch up with us a bit. Next, we stopped at a couple of lakes: Paqla Cocha and Piuray. In case we forgot where we were, seven species today had "Andes" as their first name: Goose, Duck, Swift, Lapwing, Gull, Motmot, and Flicker. One of our top cultural experiences was meeting the women's cooperative at Balcon del Inka, Centro de Textiles, above the town of Chinchero at a high elevation of 11,800 feet. We bought a lot of textiles, at least one from each of the women. Then we had lunch on the porch of a wonderful hummingbird sanctuary (Ensifera Camp) near Urubamba, where we got to compare Black-tailed and Green-tailed Trainbearers to our hearts' content. We recorded 8 species of hummingbirds, including Sword-tailed and Green-and-white (a Peruvian endemic). We also had a flock of 30 Mitred Parakeets and a pair of Red-crested Cotingas. Afterwards, we continued our drive through the Sacred Valley of the Incas, along the Urubamba River, to Hotel Pakaritampu in Ollantaytambo

Sun., Oct. 22 Ollantaytambo to Machu Picchu Pueblo

Hotel Pakaritampu is located on a hillside, so we started the day climbing (a bit) above the hotel. Our only Bare-faced Ground Doves for the tour were two pairs on the hotel roofs. There were enough flowers for 6 species of hummingbirds, including Cusco specialties Bearded Mountaineer and Giant. Then we visited Ollantaytambo's famous Archeological Park to view the Inca ruins, including the large Sun Temple. And then it was time to board the train for Piscacucho and then Machu Picchu Pueblo, the town at the base of the ruins. At the Urubamba River near town, we saw many Torrent Ducks and a pair of Torrent Tyrannulets and finally the bird we had been searching for throughout the high elevation streams: White-capped Dipper! The Inkaterra Pueblo Hotel has

wonderful grounds, and we signed up for their orchid tour. If I remember correctly, they have 300 species on site! We found two new birds for the trip: Gould's Inca and Speckle-faced Parrot.
Rusty Flowerpiercer

Mon., Oct. 23 Machu Picchu!

Our Machu Picchu reservation started right after lunch, so we had all morning to bird the hotel grounds. As seemed to be typical for us, there were 8 species of hummingbirds, in this case including two Violetears: Sparkling and Lesser. Ocellated Piculet, Gray-mantled Wren, and Chestnut-capped Brushfinch were new birds for us, and it was a huge morning for tiny Tyrannulets: White-tailed, Sclater's, and Ashy-headed. We finally got good looks at Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, after hearing them close by on four different days. We took the bus up the mountain for lunch at a restaurant at the entrance. You might think we were so focused on the Inca stories that we forgot about birds, but you'd be wrong: there is at least one Inca Wren that lives in the bamboo patch at the entrance, and we found it both coming and going. (A friend of mine missed it a few years back, so she's a bit jealous!) We were able to explore the ruins at leisure; crowd control is excellent. The photos and stories are everywhere, so I won't repeat them here. Hiram Bingham is a bit of a controversial figure here. He rediscovered the ruins for National Geographic magazine, and his story and photos are everywhere, but of course the locals always knew where the ruins were. My connection is that Hiram's grandson is a neighbor of my brother's, and he's a birder and a conservationist. The upshot of all of the National Geographic publicity was a major vegetation removal and the building of tourism infrastructure for one of the world's most popular historical/archeological destinations. But I'm here to add a few natural history details, such as a full list of the 9 bird species and one mammal we saw: White-tipped Swift, American Kestrel, White-winged Black-Tyrant (our only one of the trip), Brown-capped Vireo, Blue-and-white Swallow, House Wren, Inca Wren, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Capped Conebill, and Mountain Viscacha, a rodent related to a Chinchilla that looks like a rabbit.

Tues., Oct. 24 Machu Picchu Pueblo to Lima Airport

We started the morning like a normal day, birding on the hotel grounds. We saw 38 species in an hour and a half, but only two new ones: Silvery Tanager, a local Andean bird, and Canada Warbler, a friend of ours visiting from the north. Then we boarded the train to start the return journey that wouldn't end for Linda and me until we returned home after noon on the next day. For some reason, the train was side-tracked for maybe an hour, so when the van picked us up, we were in a bit of a rush, which is too bad because we ran into a flock of migratory shorebirds at Represa Chacan, including Wilson's Phalarope, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, and Stilt, Baird's, White-rumped, and Pectoral Sandpipers. For five of those 7 species, they were the only ones we saw on the tour. But we were in a hurry, so there may have been more! We had a quick lunch in Cusco, and we caught our flights in Cusco and Lima, and we returned home with wonderful memories of a once-in-a-lifetime trip to the coast of Peru, Cusco, the Manu Road, Rio Madre de Dios, and world-famous Mach Picchu. If you get a chance, you should go. And if you can go with Percy Avendano as your guide, as we did, you will be especially happy.

Photos: Cusco, Peru Skyline; Blue-and-yellow Macaw (Peg Abbott); Chestnut-backed Antshrike; Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, Blue-naped Chlorophonia, Chestnut-eared Aracari, Long-tailed Sylph

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