

# Northern Ecuador: Chocó to Amazonian Foothills

January 16- January 29, 2024

Maximum 4 participants



## Summary

Northern Ecuador is arguably home to the greatest avian diversity of anywhere in the world. This tour explores a cross section of the region from West to East, covering a wide range of elevations on both slopes of the Andes. As a whole this tour aims to keep a relaxed pace and keep moves between accommodations at a minimum. The concentrated nature of Ecuador's diversity means a short drive in any direction can result in a near complete shift in birdlife.

We begin with the Western slope of the Andes, exploring the arid highlands around Quito before descending into the incredibly diverse cloud forests and rainforests of the Chocó bioregion. This area is characterized by a wide array of gemstone-like hummingbirds and tanagers, as well as world class feeding stations catering to birders. The Andes are rich in birdlife from end to end but nowhere is it perhaps so accessible as this region centered around the town of Mindo. Expect close views and excellent photo opportunities. Reserva Amagusa in particular could lay

credible claim to being the best place to photograph birds anywhere in the world. From here we make our way back to the highlands as we head towards the Eastern slope and the Amazon basin.

The second half of the tour will be a thorough exploration of Napo Province, an area roughly half the size of New Jersey that has recorded over 1000 species. From high elevation páramo to Amazonian lowlands this area packs unbelievable diversity of scenery and wildlife into a small area. This side of the Andes is somewhat wilder and more intact than the West, with massive swathes of land protected by the trio of Cayambe-Coca, Sumaco Napo-Galeras, and Antisana National Parks. These parks have limited access by road and are therefore havens for a wonderful array of special wildlife. What limited access there is offers a glimpse into this wild world, with a host of rare species to be found amongst the impressive scenery.

### Itinerary

**Day 1:** This morning we will meet up at Quito Airport's Wyndham Hotel to begin our first day of birding. Our first stop will be the scrubby, aloe-filled valleys immediately



*Volcán Antisana at sunset from the window at El Crater*

West of the airport. A few birds are possible here that won't be seen elsewhere on the tour. Blue-and-Yellow Tanager, Golden-rumped Euphonia, Saffron Finch, Black-tailed Trainbearer, Purple-collared Woodstar, and more inhabit the low vegetation here. From here we will make our way to our first hotel, El Crater, via a quick stop en

route at the pond outside the airport. Here we should find Yellow-billed Pintail, Slate-colored Coot, and any one of a number of rarer waterbirds. El Crater is a unique hotel

perched above the Reserva Geobotánica Pululahua, the crater of a long-dormant volcano which is now filled with a mixture of low-intensity agricultural land and native vegetation. The hotel makes the most of this spectacular location, with massive windows on either side of each room. One end offers spectacular views of the crater, while the other looks out over the city of Quito. On clear days you can see the twin peaks of Volcán Antisana and Volcán Cayambe towering over the city. The grounds here can produce some good birds including the uncommon Green-tailed Trainbearer. Night at El Crater.

**Day 2:** This morning we'll drive a short distance from the hotel to a disused horse racetrack. The dry slopes around the track are home to a host of interesting species including the rare and patchily distributed White-tailed Shrike-Tyrant. In addition to this specialty, we'll look for Tufted Tit-



*Black-tailed Trainbearer is a frequent sight in Quito's dry scrub*

Tyrants, Rusty Flowerpiercer, and more. From here, we'll drive down into the bottom of the crater where we will find a much lush, greener environment dominated by *Chusquea* bamboo. This habitat is host to a number of bamboo specialists, rarest of all here being an extremely small, isolated population of Leymebamba Antpitta found only in the lower sections of Pululahua. The nearest population of this already rare bird is found on the Peruvian border in the extreme South of the country. In addition to this adorable and special bird, we will search for Rufous-chested Tanager, Ash-colored Tapaculo, Mountain Velvetbreast, White-winged Brushfinch, and more. After dinner we'll have an optional excursion back into the crater in search of owls. The low-intensity agriculture here evidently allows prey to thrive as owl diversity in the crater is rich. Possibilities include Stygian Owl, White-throated Screech Owl, Rufous-banded



*Crested Quetzal is a stunning cloud forest specialty*

the West, Mindo. This small cloud forest town is something of an epicenter of neotropical birding. On the way down we'll bird our way down the Bellavista Road, often home to large tanager flocks as well as exciting birds such as Crested Quetzal, Cloud-forest Pygmy-Owl, and the rare Tanager Finch. After checking into our hotel we'll begin exploring

around town, our main target being the rare and recently split Coopman's Elaenia. Alongside this rare flycatcher we should be able to track down White-throated Crake, Pale-legged Hornero, Olive-crowned Yellowthroat, Masked Water-Tyrant, and a few more inhabitants of the

scrubby edge habitat just outside town. Widespread edge species such as Blue-

Owl, Burrowing Owl, Barn Owl, and possibly even the rare Buff-fronted Owl, a South American relative of Boreal and Saw-whet Owls of North America. Night at El Crater.

**Day 3:** After breakfast this morning we'll move to our next destination and base for the rest of our explorations of



*Golden Tanager is a common bird around Mindo*

necked Tanager, Swallow Tanager, Tropical Parula, and more will also likely be present. Night in Mindo.

**Day 4:** This morning we'll get an early start to spend the morning at the iconic Reserva Paz de las Aves. This



*Giant Antpitta is near-impossible to see away from Paz de las Aves*

well established institution of birding tourism is unlike anything else and is truly a bucket list destination for any birder. Over the course of the morning we'll have a good chance at seeing 5 species of antpitta, an otherwise incredibly tricky group of birds to lay eyes on. In addition to the star pair of Giant Antpitta, an otherwise mythical species,



*Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan is always a highlight of the trip*

we should be able to see Ochre-breasted Antpitta, Mustached Antpitta, Yellow-breasted Antpitta, and Chestnut-crowned Antpitta. Other birds regularly seen here include Golden-headed Quetzal, Toucan Barbet, Zeledon's Antbird, Dark-backed Wood-Quail, and a roosting Lyre-tailed Nightjar. As if this wasn't

already more than enough, we should also get the chance to visit an on-site lek of the incredible and bizarre Andean Cock-of-the-Rock. After a morning packed with special

birds we'll head to a nearby feeding station for a relaxing afternoon and a star bird that might be one of the few capable of topping our morning at Paz de Las Aves: Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan. This small toucan's combination of pastel blue, brilliant yellow, deep red, olive-green, and black is truly extraordinary. Despite having a very limited range, found in only a small sliver of cloud-forest in NW Ecuador and extreme SW Colombia, they are actually relatively common and conspicuous here in the heart of their range. Alongside this iconic toucan, other regular visitors to the feeders here include Toucan Barbet, Empress Brilliant, Gorgeted Sunangel, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, Golden-naped Tanager, and many more. It's also probably the most regular site for the rare Hoary Puffleg away from their stronghold on the Colombian border. Night in Mindo.

**Day 5:** This morning we will set off early again to reach San Jorge de Milpe before light. This nearby reserve is a prime example of primary Chocó rainforest and the last few years have seen it begin to host the previously mythical Banded Ground-Cuckoo. This monstrous dinosaur of a ground-



*Banded Ground-Cuckoo put on an excellent show for us in 2023*

dwelling cuckoo occurs at incredibly low densities in primary rainforest of the Chocó lowlands. Recently it has become a semi-regular visitor to a moth sheet deep in the rainforest here at Milpe and January seems to be one of the best months to see it. Our 2023 tour was treated to incredible views which will hopefully be repeated. Other special birds which are possible here include Purple Quail-Dove, Rufous-fronted Wood-Quail, Esmeraldas Antbird, Olive Finch, Tawny-faced Gnatwren, Choco Warbler, Ochre-breasted Tanager, and White-whiskered Puffbird. Most of these birds will be visiting the

moth sheet and should therefore offer close views. Away from the moth sheets we may find a number of other interesting birds including Blue-tailed Trogon, Golden-winged Manakin, Gray-and-Gold Tanager, and Speckled Nightingale-Thrush. We will then search the entrance road for the rare and range-restricted Blue Seedeater before returning to Mindo for the afternoon. Night in Mindo.



*Black-chinned Mountain-Tanager is one of several tanagers which can be photographed well at Amagusa*

**Day 6:** Today's destination will be

Rio Silanche, a reserve protecting a fragment of lowland rainforest further down the slope. The canopy tower here can provide excellent birding and over 100 species should be seen today. Among the main highlights here are Scarlet-breasted Dacnis, Blue-whiskered Tanager, Rufous-winged Tanager, Dusky-faced Tanager, Orange-fronted Barbet, White-tailed Trogon, Gray-headed Kite, and Purple-crowned Fairy. Rarer possibilities here include Lanceolated Monklet and Berlepsch's Tinamou. Night in Mindo.



*Rose-faced Parrots are daily visitors at Amagusa*

**Day 7:** Our final full day in Mindo will see us visiting Reserva Mashpi-Amagusa. This relatively new reserve has established itself as an incredible destination for bird photography as well as a number of rare Chocó endemic species. The

normally rare and range-restricted Orange-breasted Fruiteater is often common and conspicuous here and the feeders are attended by an array of stunning tanagers, from the rare Moss-backed and Glistening-Green Tanagers to more common but no less stunning Flame-faced, Golden, Golden-naped, and Flame-rumped Tanagers. Bananas hung near the dining area attract curious groups of Rose-faced Parrots, while exploring the trails can result in rarities such as Indigo Flowerpiercer, Chocó Vireo, Rufous-brown Solitaire, Black Solitaire, and Yellow-collared Chlorophonia. The hummingbird feeders are equally incredible, with astounding numbers of Green Thorntails, Velvet-purple Coronets, Empress Brilliants, Violet-tailed Sylphs, and more at hands-length. Night in Mindo.

**Day 8:** This morning we will leave Mindo and head towards Quito. After a 3 hour drive we will find ourselves in the dramatically different montane landscape of Antisana National Park. The high peaks, grasslands, and lagoons of the Western edge of this massive national park are home to a great deal of new birds including Ecuadorian

Hillstar, Andean Ibis, Silvery Grebe, Tawny Antpitta, Carunculated Caracara, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, and the iconic Andean Condor. We'll have dinner at a restaurant just outside the park entrance which hosts Giant Hummingbird,



*Shining Sunbeam is named for the rainbow iridescence on its back*

the world's largest hummingbird, at its feeders alongside Great Sapphirewing, Shining Sunbeam, and Tyrian Metaltail. The cliffs across from the restaurant are the main roosting site here for Andean Condor. After watching the condors come in for the



evening, we'll head down to the airport hotel near the base of the road for Papallacta and the East. Night at Quito Airport.

**Day 9:** This morning we'll head high into the Andes, beginning with a stop at the radio antennas above Papallacta Pass. This site is the highest of the tour, topping out at over 14,000 feet asl. Weather here can be tricky. Fog is common and snow is rare but a possibility. Possible rewards for working this tough environment are Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe, a strange high-elevation, ptarmigan-like shorebird, as well as Blue-mantled Thornbill, Tawny Antpitta, Stout-billed and Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, and Variable Hawk. From here we will drop a bit to the entrance of Cayambe-Coca National Park. This area is often good for Rainbow-bearded Thornbill and a suite of Mountain-

Tanagers. The rare Masked Mountain-Tanager is possible alongside Black-chested Mountain-Tanager, Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager, Lacrimose Mountain-Tanager, and Black-backed Bush-Tanagers. We'll then make a brief stop at Laguna Papallacta before heading down to Guango Lodge for



*Tourmaline Sunangel is common at Guango Lodge's feeders*

lunch. The track along the edge of the lake can be good for Buff-winged Starfrontlet, Viridian Metaltail, Sword-billed Hummingbird, Equatorial Antpitta, and the incredibly tricky Crescent-faced Antpitta. The feeders at Guango should produce Tourmaline Sunangel, Long-tailed Sylph, and possibly even Sword-billed Hummingbird. A walk around the lodge's trails will give us a chance at Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan, Torrent Duck, and more tanager flocks. From here we will make our way down the slope to Cabañas San Isidro, our base for the next 3 nights. San Isidro is a beautiful lodge protecting around 4,500 acres of rainforest backing onto Antisana National Park.

After dinner here we will enjoy close views of the localised form of Black-banded Owl, considered by some to be a separate species, “San Isidro” Owl. Every night a pair visit



*The “San Isidro” Owl shows off nightly beside the dining room*

the moth sheet at the restaurant for an easy meal. A salt lick also visible from the dining room balcony is visited semi-regularly by Mountain Tapir. Night at San Isidro.

**Day 10:** This morning we’ll begin where we left off last night at the dining room’s moth sheet. Here we’ll be treated to close views of a diverse

collection of birds taking advantage of this innovative bird feeder. Andean species such as Masked Trogon, Black-billed Peppershrike, Slate-throated Redstart, Cinnamon Flycatcher, Pale-edged Flycatcher, Inca Jay, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, and Russet-backed Oropendola are joined by many of our more familiar neotropical migrants. Canada Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, and Summer Tanager are particularly common and give better views here than they almost ever do in the US. After taking our fill of the

moth sheets we’ll walk a short distance to where a White-bellied Antpitta comes into food most mornings. After breakfast we’ll continue to bird San Isidro, making use of the trails and the entrance road in search of Black-chested Fruiteater, Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher, Streak-headed Antbird, Green-fronted



*Andean Cock-of-the-Rock is a bucket list bird*

Lancebill, Golden-headed Quetzal, and mixed flocks of tanagers. In the afternoon, we'll head a short distance down the road to a hummingbird garden which is home to a



*Night-Monkeys are a nightly visitor to San Isidro*

number of species not found easily at San Isidro itself. Peruvian Racket-tail is common here, as are Violet-fronted Brilliants and Green-backed Hillstars. Usually at least a few Gorgeted Woodstars will also make an appearance. From here we will make our way to Rio Quijos for a visit to their Andean Cock-of-the Rock lek. This lek is

truly remarkable with at least 20-30 birds involved. Close looks are virtually guaranteed. This evening in addition to the Black-banded Owls, we'll have a short night walk in search of the resident Gray-bellied Night-Monkeys. These strange nocturnal monkeys roam the canopy at night in small family groups in search of fruit and are often found at dusk near San Isidro's dining room. Night at San Isidro.

**Day 11:** Today, an optional morning outing will see us head to the nearby Guacamayos Ridge. The trail here is somewhat tricky and the weather conditions can make it tough birding at times, but the potential for rare rewards is excellent. It is the best place in the world for the incredibly rare



*Peruvian Antpitta is mythically rare and adorable*

Peruvian Antpitta and Greater Scythebill and additionally hosts a number of other rarities and scarcities such as Bicolored Antvireo, White-faced Nunbird, Barred Antthrush, Black-billed Mountain-Toucan, Chestnut-breasted Wren, and more. For those who would rather have a more relaxing morning, you'll be able to enjoy a repeat performance of the morning moth sheets and hummingbirds from the dining room balcony. This afternoon we'll head to a few nearby sites in search of a number of middle elevation tanagers such as Yellow-throated Tanager, Blue-browed Tanager, Vermillion Tanager, Golden-eared Tanager, and Orange-eared Tanager. Some of these can be unpredictable and difficult but we should get at least a few of these and some other interesting middle elevation birds. Night at San Isidro.

**Day 12:** This morning we'll be leaving San Isidro early to head lower into the Amazonian foothills to our next destination, Wildsumaco Lodge. Another world class

birding lodge, the food here is at the same high standard as San Isidro and the birds are even more diverse at this lower elevation. 20 species of hummingbird in a morning is possible here. Volcán Sumaco provides a picturesque backdrop, towering over the extensive rainforests of Sumaco Napo-Galeras National Park. En route to the lodge we'll make a number of roadside stops along the Loretto Road. Potential target species along this fantastic birding road include Coppery-chested Jacamar, Western Striolated-Puffbird, Cliff Flycatcher, Blackish Nightjar, Golden-winged Tody-Flycatcher, Rufous-breasted Piculet, Black-billed Seed-Finch, and more. After arriving at Wildsumaco, we'll enjoy the balcony's hummingbird feeders, with several rarer hummingbirds possible such as Napo Sabrewing, Ecuadorian Piedtail, Black-throated Brilliant, and



*Golden-tailed Sapphire is abundant at Wildsumaco's feeders*

Gould's Jewelfront alongside large numbers of Wire-crested Thorntail and Golden-tailed Sapphire. After dinner we'll search the lodge grounds for Foothill Screech-Owl and Band-bellied Owl. Night at Wildsumaco.

**Days 13:** Today will be spent in full dedication to exploring the extensive trail network at Wildsumaco. The lodge has recorded over 500 species and there are enough birds to fill months of searching. A number of globally rare species are possible including Yellow-throated Spadebill, Black Tinamou, Brown Nunlet, Buckley's Forest-Falcon,



*Napo Sabrewing is a frequent visitor at Wildsumaco*

Large-headed Flatbill, Spectacled Bristle-Tyrant, Short-tailed Antthrush, and Chestnut-crowned Gnateater. There are even records of Andean Lanisoma, one of the rarest and least understood species in the world and one of the grails of Andean birding. In addition to these rare and enigmatic species there are an enviable selection of iconic

lowland and foothill species present. Military Macaws fill the air with their discordant screeches alongside the contrastingly melodious song of the Musician Wren. Golden-collared Toucanet, Blue-crowned Trogon, Coppery-chested Jacamar, Blue-rumped Manakin, and Striated Manakin fill the forest with splashes of color. Night at Wildsumaco.

**Day 14:** Today will be the final day of the tour. Flights to the US out of Quito are often late in the evening, so we should have time to slowly make our way back via plenty of interesting birds. We'll likely bird the Sumaco Road on the way out and then head for higher elevations, perhaps attempting some of the tricky birds above Papallacta once more. Flights out this evening.

### **Packing and Preparation Advice**

- If you have any food allergies or dietary restrictions please inform us ahead of time so that we can inform the lodges.
- Travel insurance is strongly recommended for all participants.
- Weather on this tour varies from highs in the 80's in the lower areas to lows in the 30's and 40's above Papallacta so plan to dress accordingly.
- A raincoat and waterproof boots are useful, though boots certainly aren't required at most locations and are available at most lodges if packing space is tight.
- Electrical outlets in Ecuador are the same as in the US so no adapters will be needed.
- The official currency in Ecuador is the US dollar, and cash is advised as not many places accept card payments. Most of the tour is prepaid but cash is useful for tipping lodge staff and for purchasing any souvenirs you wish to take back.
- If packing space is tight, keep in mind that a spotting scope is rarely useful in rainforest habitats and I will be bringing one for the group to use.
- Insect repellent can be useful, though biting insects are rarely as bad in the Neotropics as here in Michigan thankfully.
- To use your cell phone in Ecuador you will either need to enable roaming, purchase an eSIM prior to traveling (inexpensive but requires an unlocked phone), or purchase a SIM card upon arrival at the airport (inexpensive but requires an unlocked phone).
- The Helm Field field guide to the Birds of Ecuador is perhaps the best physical guide for Ecuador, though my favorite identification references are the Birds of Ecuador-Field Guide app by Robert Ridgely and Paul Greenfield, as well as Merlin (free, just make sure to download the Ecuador bird pack in the app).
- The Yellow Fever vaccine is not necessary as the disease is exceedingly rare in Ecuador, with case numbers between zero and single digits recorded annually. That being said, it can be taken out of an abundance of caution and is long lasting, thus useful for future trips elsewhere in the tropics.
- We are not traveling to any province cited by the CDC for risk of malaria, though again malaria drugs can be taken out of an abundance of caution if wished.

### **Pricing**

- \$3950
- Includes all lodging, in-country transport, food, and guiding.
- Alcoholic beverages, flights, and tips are not included.
- \$750 deposit
- To book, email Ben Lucking at [benl.falcon@gmail.com](mailto:benl.falcon@gmail.com)

### **Further Questions**

- Any inquiries, requests, or further questions are welcome and can be directed to Ben Lucking at [benl.falcon@gmail.com](mailto:benl.falcon@gmail.com).