

Colombia Eastern Andes  
January 2015

### **Day 1 – Thursday, January 15: Bogotá**

Our adventure began Thursday evening at the Hotel Ibis Museo in Bogotá, where we all met for introductions to share interests, expectations and meet Pablo Florez, our local guide.

Colombia currently holds the country record for number of bird species with 1909. Later in our journey we met three young Canadian birders who asked if Pablo holds the record for most species seen. He modestly admitted to 1714, missing mostly pelagics.

Why so many species? The topographic map shows the country has Pacific and Caribbean coastline, the narrow Darien wildlife corridor, connecting all of Central and North America with South America, the Andes split into three mountain ranges, western, central and eastern, two major rivers, the Cauca running between the western and central range, and the nearly 1,000 mile long Magdalena running between the central and eastern range, and, of course, the isolated Santa Marta range, home to the highest peak in the country, and our prime destination.

Dinner was at the Ibis to allow an early departure the next day.

### **Day 2 – Friday, January 16: Chicaque reserve (7,800 ft.) and Jardin Encantado (4,500 ft.) feeders**

Everyone was ready at 5:20 am fortified for our one hour drive to Chicaque private reserve with coffee, bread and fruit. At 5:30, Oscar, our Bogotá driver, drove us west toward Soacha in his 30 passenger bus. We arrived at the 500 ha. Chicaque cloud forest at 6:30. It was cool, but the hummingbird feeders were already being visited by Glowing Puffleg and Collared Inca. Great Thrushes, ubiquitous on our trip, made an appearance. It was magical as clouds moved in and out of the forest. After birding around the Arboloco restaurant, we enjoyed breakfast of arepas, eggs, coffee, chocolate and cheese. We departed by 4WD and by foot to the lower elevation Lodge to see colorful tanagers including Flame-faced and Beryl-spangled as well as migrant Blackburnian Warblers which we saw in many habitats throughout our trip. We returned to Arboloco restaurant for lunch including delicious soup served at nearly every lunch and dinner.

We departed around 2 pm to drive west to much lower elevation Jardin Encantado at San Francisco on the western slope of the eastern Andean range. More than 30 hummingbird feeders at this private home attract a blizzard of birds. The owner uses 900 lbs. of sugar/month, a labor of love. We enjoyed two hours of close up views including endemic Indigo-capped Hummingbird and the striking Black-throated Mango, a feast of hummers.

Returning to Bogotá at 7 pm, we did our first day bird list. Dinner was at Crepes and Waffles, an unexpected name for a great restaurant with good food and a social mission.

### **Day 3 – Saturday, January 17: Florida Wetland and Birding at Flamencos Sanctuary**

Coffee, bread, and fruit at 5:20 am; we then departed to La Florida wetland, west of Bogotá, at the far end of the golf course. The small reed wetland, surrounded by development, is one of only 11 remaining on the high elevation (8,500 ft.) Bogotá savanna, habitat for Subtropical Doradito and endemic Apolinar's Wren. The golf course personnel seemed to appreciate that we were interested in the birds on the edge of where they work. Some of us saw both species and also White-faced Ibis, with planes from the nearby airport in the background.

What a change! We flew from 8,500 ft. Bogotá to hot, humid Riohacha at sea level, arriving for check-in and lunch at Hotel Barbacoa (including lemonade made from scratch). We headed to Flamencos Sanctuary, stopping, oddly it seemed, at Viajes, a dirt road before the toll booth past a new banana plantation and across a small bridge. What an incredible afternoon! Russet-throated Puffbirds, Rufous-vented Chachalacas, Limpkin, and northern migrant Prothonotary Warbler! Just before dark we drove east to meet José, a leader of the Wayuu indigenous community working on developing ecotourism, especially among birders. As dusk approached we had great views of White-whiskered Spinetail.

### **Day 4 – Wednesday, January 18: Guajira Peninsula (Flamencos Sanctuary) & El Dorado lodge**

José met us at Los Camarones, Flamencos Sanctuary. Our early morning walk through dry scrub coastal forest at dawn found Vermilion Cardinal, Scarlet Ibis, and Orinoco Saltator. Vermilion Cardinal male and female made the top ten for the trip. Local residents were bathing and hauling water from the pond, and interested to see us. We hope our visit was viewed as respectful and contributing to protection of the nature in which they live. José showed the crafts his wife and other village women produce and several people bought beautifully crocheted bags

which sell at the Bogotá airport for four times the amount we paid. Our next stop was Camarones Bay for gulls and terns.

Our bus continued west in the heat of the day towards a lunch stop at Las Acacias Restaurant beside an attractive river. At Santa Marta we transferred to four 4 WD vehicles and began our climb, past Minca to El Dorado lodge at just below 6,000 ft on Cuchillo (knife) de San Lorenzo, part of the Santa Marta mountains. The trip was a cross section of habitat changes with altitude. We arrived after dark and checked into our rooms overlooking the forest. Dinner was the first of excellent meals served by the small, but capable staff.

### **Day 5 – Sunday, January 19: El Dorado Lodge**

After breakfast we spent the morning enjoying the fantastic feeders for hummingbirds, grain for Black-faced Wood Quail and Band-tailed Guan (which begged plaintively), fruit feeders for Blue-naped Chlorophonias (on the cover of our bird list), and tanagers, and the compost piles where Slaty-backed Nightingale Thrush and agouti were seen. Carlos, the resident guide, took us on a short walk through the forest to show us two endemic Santa Marta Screech Owls perched for the day. White-tipped Quetzal and Black-headed Trogon were also seen. After lunch including delicious lulo juice (a tomato relative), the cars took us downhill to hummingbird feeders at a little shop where we saw Santa Marta Woodstar, White-lored Warbler, and followed a Grey-throated Leaf-tosser carrying food to its nest, a hole in the dirt bank beside the road.

### **Day 6 – Monday, January 20: San Lorenzo Ridge & El Dorado Bird Reserve**

*(Santa Marta)* We departed at 4:15 am in our four vehicles, climbing slowly to the top of the rutted, eroded road at 8,000 ft. Hats, gloves and heavy jackets were welcome in the morning chill. We saw the moons of Jupiter as we waited in the dark for sunrise and the Santa Marta Parakeets. The parakeets left their roost, circled back and then left for the day. We had a picnic breakfast with hot coffee and chocolate while enjoying spectacular views of the Caribbean below to the northwest and the highest peaks (19,000 ft.) in the country to the southeast. We spent seven hours exploring the highest part of the reserve, seeing Solitary Eagle, hearing the calls of Rusty-headed Spinetails, (like a thin kiskadee) and the three note bell-like call of Sparkling Violetear hummingbirds.

After a late lunch at the Lodge we had a little time to ourselves before setting out back to the lower part of the reserve. Bird list in the Pub was upstaged by a long spectacular sunset over the Caribbean. A night walk on the road found tiny glass frogs in the bromeliad tanks and pumpkin spotted Tarantula lying in wait for prey.

A spotlight on the compost pile exposed a Crab-eating fox checking out the small creatures attracted there.

### **Day 7 – Tuesday, January 21: Birding in Minca**

No one wanted to leave El Dorado, so we walked to the observation tower with endless views of the mountains and the sea. Our drive to the town of Minca was punctuated by birding stops where we found Indigo Bunting, an exciting bird for Pablo and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Both species nest in New England.

After check-in and lunch at Sierra Sound Lodge, with a little wading in the river beside the lodge, we birded the road around Minca ending at hummingbird feeders at the Minca Hotel where White-necked Jacobin and Pale-bellied Hermit were feeding.

### **Day 8 – Thursday, January 22: Minca and Flamencos Sanctuary**

Early breakfast at Sierra Sound Lodge, then we drove up the road where we found Golden-winged Sparrows, Swallow Tanager, Bicolored Wren building a nest, and a group of young Argentine women birders who had just found Keel-billed Toucan. We drove down to Tayrona National Park where local guide Angel joined us to bird the lowland humid forest. A single Lance-tailed Manakin appeared and we watched a Sooty-capped Hermit feed a young one just fledged from the nest. Angel guided us to an ocean overlook and told us some of the history of the indigenous people who still use the park for special ceremonies. Lunch was at EcoHabs restaurant, preceded by wading in the turquoise Caribbean for some of us.

In the afternoon we flew from Santa Marta back to Bogotá where we had another great dinner at Crepes and Waffles in the airport before checking in at Hotel Casona del Patio

### **Day 9 – Friday, January 23: Chingaza National Park (Paramo) and Guasca**

It was drizzling in Bogotá with low visibility when we departed at 5:10 am Chingaza National Park. As our bus climbed to 10,500 ft., we were above the rain clouds and entering the unique habitat of the paramó above treeline. There were lots of cattle pastures along the route, one of the biggest threats to the natural habitat in this area. The unique plants, many in flower, supported very different birds. Breakfast in the field featured granadilla (the smooth yellow-skinned, many seeded fruit, cheese, bananas. The endemic Green-bearded Helmetcrest Hummingbird gave us good views amid the Frailajones (*Espeletia*), strange-looking trees that in the mist look a little like humans (hence the name “friars”).

Many-striped Canastero, Plumbeous Sierra-finch and a brief appearance by the Sword-billed Hummingbird – with a bill longer than its body – were just some of the paramó specialties. We ate a picnic lunch at the national park headquarters building and headed down toward Guasca. En route we saw an extensive old cement factory with giant mural art on the buildings, a film crew making a video, and a brick kiln. A small wetland amid cow pastures had lots of Common Moorhens, Spot-flanked Gallinule and Bogotá Rail. We looked patiently, but most only heard the Rail as a thunderstorm moved in.

Back in Bogotá, it was still raining. We walked to the Wok for dinner, and then met in the living room at Casona del Patio for the final bird list and to share favorite birds and experiences.

The winner for favorite bird was Green-bearded Helmetcrest, the endemic hummingbird of the paramó.

An eight-way tie for second place included Squirrel cuckoo, Blue-billed Currawong, Scarlet-bellied Mountain tanager, Vermilion cardinal, Santa Marta Woodstar, Lineated Woodpecker, Solitary Eagle, Blue-naped Chlorophonia, .

Honorable mention to Sooty-capped Hermit, Glowing Puffleg, Tropical mockingbird, Beryl-spangled tanager, Orange-crowned Oriole, Strong-billed Woodpecker, Amazon Kingfisher, Golden-breasted Fruiteater, Gartered Trogon, Russet-throated Puffbird, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Swallow tanager, Band-tailed Guan, Black-faced Wood Quail, Santa Marta Antpitta, Santa Marta Screech Owl.

El Dorado was a favorite experiences for more than half the group, all-day hummingbirds was near the top as was getting up and out early, Chicaque cloud forest reserve on day one, being in Colombia and seeing the countryside, enjoying the people in our group and the museums.