

## Birding Beyond the Coca Curtain

Within Colombia's borders can be found more bird species than in any other country on the planet, but for years nobody dared seek them. Now, with peace on the horizon, can birders help build a strong economic base for local Colombians?

**By Martha Harbison**  
Photography by  
Carlos Villalon



### BIRDING 101

Yerlis Pushaina, a Wayuu guide-trainee, at a field training session in Los Flamencos, Colombia.



**T**HREE A.M. IS HORRIBLE. ALMOST NOTHING happens at that hour that you won't regret later. And yet, at three on a Wednesday morning in June, here I am folding myself into the back of an ancient Toyota Land Cruiser. What, you ask, could possibly inspire me to embark on a bleary pre-dawn odyssey up the flanks of the eastern Andes? To do so voluntarily, even eagerly? The opportunity to see something I could see nowhere else in the world, that's what—the newest bird known to science, first described in March 2015: the Perijá Tapaculo.

The Perijá Tapaculo's namesake is the Serranía del Perijá—the northernmost extent of the eastern Andes. Colombia and Venezuela share a long stretch of border across these mountains, and these peaks and valleys have been a stronghold of guerrilla activity for decades. Even while other parts of Colombia became safe to visit in the early 2000s, the Perijá region languished. In 2004 a Colombian ornithologist, a botanist, and their guide were kidnapped and held captive for months before being released unharmed; the first scientific paper to systematically describe the birdlife in the area was published only in 2014. The Perijá is, in many ways, uncharted terrain for those in the bird biz.

That novelty was reinforced for me over coffee two days ago, sitting on a veranda surrounded by chirruping frogs and humid darkness. One of my travel compatriots, Colombian biologist Patricia Falk, remarked, "I cannot believe I'm in the Perijá. I never thought I'd be able to visit here in my entire life." As an American, the idea that there might be a part of my home country (barring Area 51) that



**OPEN-PLAN OFFICE**

Colombian biologists Gloria Lentijo and Patricia Falk plan the next day's birding expedition on the veranda at Villa Adelaida; above, birding at dawn from *La Pechichona* in the Perijá mountains.

I simply could never visit is utterly foreign. "Growing up in Cali, the Perijá was this faraway, mythical land full of fabulous animals," Falk said. "But its remoteness and the danger meant that almost nobody ever got to visit."

It sure still feels remote at zero-dark-thirty as we huff diesel fumes in the back of *La Pechichona*, a.k.a. "the Spoiled One," the Land Cruiser we hired to haul us up the mountain. Jammed into the back of the truck, which is helpfully outfitted with a long bench on each side of the bed and a huge steel roll-cage overhead, are Falk and another Colombian biologist, Gloria Lentijo; two colleagues from Audubon; a Colombia-based Chilean photographer who has spent years covering the FARC and the drug trade; an internationally known California-based Chilean bird guide named Alvaro Jaramillo; and two local guides. Plus the driver—10 people crammed into one vehicle for a kidney-pulping, multi-hour grind up over 10,000 feet to scout out the region for potential inclusion in a nascent ecotourism-based rural economic development project. The mission: Spend a few days in the Perijá to suss out just where well-heeled gringo birders might go, stay, or fly through as they (er, we) attempt to score more birds for their life lists. The hopeful plan is for ecotourists to inject enough resources into the local economy to keep a meaningful mass of people from engaging in ecosystem-killing illegal mining or clear-cut agriculture.

As we travel into the Perijá mountains, the history of the area takes on the feeling of a Homeric epic. In the foothills sits our home base, the city of Manaure, and I hear a tale of how the guerrillas

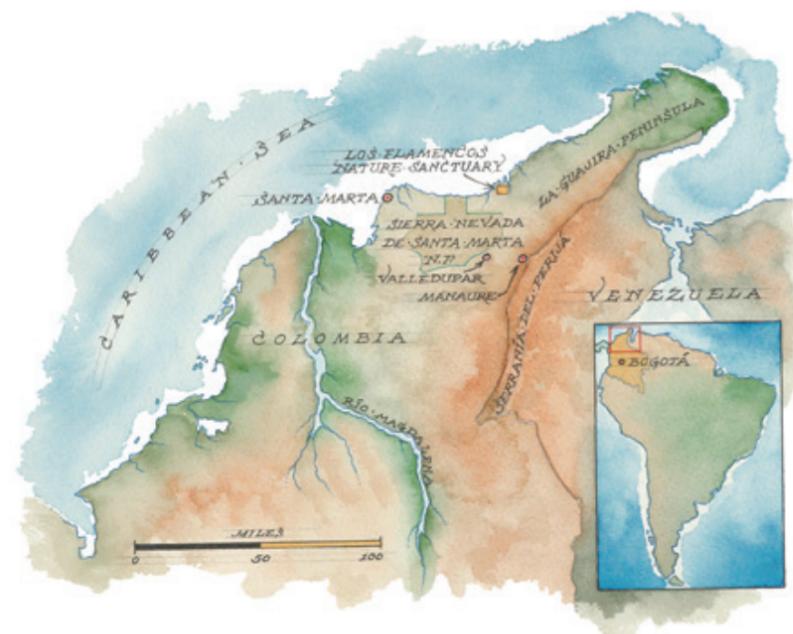
who dot the surrounding hills once tried to run the local police out of town and take over with gunfire and night raids. Up the hill on a high ridge, we overlook a blasted landscape that was a huge opium poppy plantation, and I hear how the Colombian government rained defoliant from the skies, killing the poppies—and most of the other plant life in the area. Above us, way up in the peaks, squat the ruins of a radio broadcast tower, blown up by guerrillas in some indeterminate past when construction was nearing completion. The road up the mountain was originally built as a service road to that tower; today it primarily serves the military patrolling the region and locals just going about their daily existence. We pass small coffee plantations and schools and various homesteader pads—buildings that could have been built last year or last century. Everyone seems to have at least five dogs, all of which chase after us as we lurch our way around hairpin turns, crawling ever higher into the clouds.

It's amazing to me that Audubon would need 10 people to scout a relatively confined habitat and the birds that live here. But as I find out while I'm trying very hard not to paint my companions with my breakfast, nothing is ever easy in remote, mountainous South America.

**C**OLOMBIA SITS ATOP SOUTH AMERICA, flanked by Panama, Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru, and Brazil; its southern reaches straddle the equator. Slashing diagonally across the country are three spurs of the Andes: western, middle, and eastern. A fourth, isolated mountain range called the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta launches out of the northern coastline along the Caribbean—rising from steamy sea level to snow-encrusted 19,000-foot peaks in just more than 26 lateral miles. Coca and coffee plants thrive on the flanks of these mountain ranges, and famous names like Juan Valdez (not a real person) and Pablo Escobar (all too real) attest to the economic juggernauts found therein.

Those mountains offer a lot more to Colombia than just exportable stimulants. Each of the ranges, and the dense tropical jungles between them, houses a variety of habitats for birds and other wildlife. Of most interest to me—and likely you—is the wealth of birdlife. Colombia boasts more than 1,900 bird species, almost one-fifth of all avian biodiversity on the planet. This fecundity made the country a birding destination until the mid-1980s, when it became simply too dangerous to visit.

Even today Colombia presents challenges to the ambitious birder. The most obvious hurdle is its reputation. My parents (themselves birders) and some of my friends gave me the side-eye when I first landed this assignment. The Colombian-born woman who sold me a swimsuit at Paragon Sports in Manhattan warned me to be careful. I say this glibly, secure in the assurance that Colombia is much safer for tourists than it was 10 years ago. Still, portions of the country are off-limits to those who don't have solid connections to the



FARC or the paramilitaries. And while traveling to Colombia is easy, getting around the rough terrain in the Andes and other far-flung locales is not. Then there's an entirely different, but no less sobering, reality: the challenge of identifying birds when you've got more than 1,900 possible IDs from which to choose, especially if you have limited experience with South American bird families. The most up-to-date bird guide to the country, published in 2015 by Colombian bird conservation group ProAves, boasts 32—count 'em—pages of hummingbirds. When you're out in the tropical rainforest trying to identify the tiny psychedelically green gremlin zipping around a red ginger flower, unless you already have a solid background in tropical hummingbirds or you're there with someone who does, you're pretty much out of luck.

So if you want to bird successfully in Colombia, you're going to need someone who knows the area and has a 4x4, someone who knows the birds, and, if you're venturing far off the regular tourist route, someone who knows the local toughs to make sure you can get into sketchy territory without fear of becoming ransom material. And that's where Audubon intends to make a difference. John Myers, director of Audubon's Latin American programs, has forged a collaboration among local conservation NGOs like Patrimonio Natural and Calidris, tourism boards, and service providers to create the Northern Colombia Birding Trail—a series of ecolodges, national parks, and otherwise-notable habitats in the Perijá region, in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, and along the Caribbean coast that provide particularly good birding opportunities for extreme and not-so-extreme birders alike.

The project will train local Colombians to become bird guides and ecotourism service providers, and then entice birders from North America to spend money on those ecotourism amenities, in much the way they currently do in Costa Rica, where tourism generated more than \$2.8 billion in 2015. And money they will spend: According

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MIKE REAGAN

to the World Bank, international tourism brought in \$4.7 billion to Colombia in 2013. (Compare this with two decades ago, when international tourism totaled just \$890 million.) A 2015 report by the Colombian government projects that ecotourism alone will net Colombia \$774 million in 2016, and \$2.43 billion a year by 2026.

**I**N LATE 2015 REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE Colombian government and the FARC announced that a final peace agreement between the two factions might be signed in March, which would end 50 years of brutal civil war. But the scars from that conflict—and the inertia caused by decades of class and political warfare—stubbornly remain. Into this fractured political and social landscape would swoop two competing interests: multinationals eager to plunder the vast mineral wealth hidden in Colombia's mountains, and conservation organizations eager to protect Colombia's unimaginable biodiversity from further degradation. In the middle sit regular Colombians, themselves a hodgepodge of disenfranchised indigenous tribes, nouveau-riche entrepreneurs, intellectuals, old-guard leftists and pro-government functionaries, a growing middle class, rural farmers just trying to get by, and a smattering of heavily armed opportunists hiding out in the jungle and making money with drug smuggling and human trafficking. Those looking to impose some order on that chaos have a lot of work to do.

I am curious to see how the U.S. government plans to handle the situation. So I brave the elaborate security protocol at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá (I have to surrender two photo IDs and all electronic devices, including my voice recorder and phone) to speak to people at USAID, the main funder for the Northern Colombia Birding Trail pilot project.

USAID, an entity with a long and sometimes contentious history in South and Central America, is investing in ecotourism as a way to preserve a critically endangered habitat in northern Colombia called tropical dry forest. It is exactly as it sounds: large expanses of forest that, unlike rain-forest, must endure a dry period each year during which some of the trees lose their leaves. According to USAID, it's one of the most endangered biomes on the planet, targeted frequently for conversion into cropland or grazing land.

Sitting in a cubicle farm that looks like it was lifted straight from Anywhere, USA, Lawrence Rubey, then deputy director of USAID's mission to Colombia, explains that Colombia is an unusual recipient of USAID funds. The country is solidly middle class, with a GDP of almost \$380 billion in 2014. This is in stark contrast to, say, Bolivia, whose 2014 GDP was a mere \$33 billion. And Colombia's natural-resource base is still largely untapped. The country is, in many ways, completely frozen in time; the rampant violence of the last half-century made travel and commerce so difficult that Colombia's



#### BIRDS GALORE

Above: Paco the Keel-billed Toucan hangs out in a tree at Villa Adelaida in Manauere. His owner says that he found Paco abandoned and unable to eat by himself. Opposite, clockwise, from top left: Alvaro Jaramillo, Gloria Lentijo, and Patricia Falk in the Perijá mountains; American Flamingos in Los Flamencos; Jose Luis Pushaina demonstrates how to use a spotting scope; a Longuemare's Sunangel in the Perijá region.

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When I ask directly about the topic, Rubey readily acknowledges that USAID had maintained its investment in Colombia expressly because of the conflict. A destabilized Colombia would spell disaster for the entire region, and it's well within U.S. interests to keep the country on a sustainable path to economic development, especially at the level that reaches regular Colombians. "Colombians must believe they have a stake in the future," Rubey says. He and his colleagues believe that creating economic development via ecotourism is one way to accomplish that, and they're eager to test that theory by investing, via Patrimonio Natural, almost \$300,000 in Audubon's bird-tourism pilot project. In return, Audubon is tasked with successfully training 30 new bilingual bird guides, holding workshops for local tourism operators on how to improve services for tourists, and launching an app that provides information for stops along the Northern Colombia Birding Trail.

On the wall of Rubey's office hangs a large plastic relief map of Colombia, and I find my attention drawn to it while Rubey and Myers talk shop regarding the tourism project I am about to see. My eyes fix on the Santa Marta and La Guajira regions in northern Colombia, and I cannot get over how big the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains are, looming above the flat plains and Caribbean Sea like a huge termite mound. But nestled within that region are more than two dozen endemic and range-restricted birds—and, if Audubon and USAID are right, one of the keys to Colombia's future.

**I**F MOST OF COLOMBIA SEEMS TO BOAST A climate perfect for growing coca, La Guajira peninsula definitely feels like it's the best place to build a meth lab.

La Guajira is flat, parched, and scrubby; the wind constantly gathers the local dust into tremendous clouds that coat everything. The dust gets in your hair, in your eyes, and between your teeth, making every outdoor meal an adventure in grit: ceviche and grit, *arepas de huevo* and grit, *tinto* and grit. The landscape is snarled with thorny bushes, a habitat called xeric shrubland, and the sun is an oppressive presence, smothering everything in white light and heat. Along the main road across the region, not a single official gas station is open—the business has been gutted by a glut of contraband Venezuelan petrol smuggled over the porous stretch of border in the Guajiran desert. To fill up the tank, drivers pull up to a roadside hut lined with plastic jerry cans—known in Colombia as *pimpinas*—full of gasoline, which the *pimpinero* empties into the tank via a kludged cloth filter system. You might assume, based on the pervasive *Road Warrior* vibe, that there wouldn't be a lot of birdlife here; you'd be wrong. The xeric shrubland of La Guajira, in particular around the Los Flamencos nature sanctuary and the nearby town of Camarones, harbors plenty of birds. During one morning stroll, I spy



Double-striped Thick-knees, American Flamingos, Roseate Spoonbills—including one that appears to be someone's pet—terns, herons, caracaras, and a number of endemic and range-restricted species like the Vermilion Cardinal, the Tocuyo Sparrow, and the White-whiskered Spinetail.

It is in this harsh habitat that Alvaro Jaramillo and local professional bird guide Jose Luis Pushaina train the four dozen bird-guide hopefuls enrolled in the pilot program. The students can be neatly grouped into three categories (and three geographies). From Santa Marta, near the famed Tayrona National Park, is a group of already-established nature guides who crave the opportunity to expand their businesses by improving their language skills and learning how to be bird guides in particular. From the town of Valledupar, on the eastern flank of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, is a group of university students, drawn to the program by the charismatic Don Tomás Darío Gutiérrez, a law professor who owns Los Besotes nature reserve in the mountains and hopes to turn it into an ecolodge destination. And from the area around Los Flamencos is the most unusual group of students, from the Wayuu, an indigenous tribe who proudly claim to have never been conquered by the Spanish. According to a number of people I talk to, the Wayuu are big on traditional gender roles, so it's surprising to see that this group includes four women among its ranks.

I tag along with a collection of students as they learn the finer (and grosser) points of bird guiding.

#### WANT TO BIRD IN COLOMBIA?

The Northern Colombia Birding Trail is a network of individual sites that highlights the avian biodiversity in this bird-rich region of Colombia. To connect with trained professional birding guides and operators, find key birding sites such as national parks and private reserves, and see sample itineraries, go to [audubon.org/conservation/ecotourism-colombia](http://audubon.org/conservation/ecotourism-colombia).

For some, this is the first time they've ever used binoculars to look at the birds they've known their whole lives; others are keen to exercise their English skills by pointing out birds to me, like a White-whiskered Spinetail doing that birdy trick of hiding on a bare branch in plain sight. After an hour or so of scurrying around in the scrub, following winding goat tracks and ducking thorns, I squeeze into a taxi with the four Wayuu women—Wendy, Sandra, Luz, and Yerlis—and we set out for Wendy's house, elsewhere in Los Flamencos. I had been asking a lot of nosy questions about day-to-day life among the Wayuu, so they've decided to treat me to a tour of a typical Wayuu home. As we sit in the main room of Wendy's house, the women tell me of the general opposition they've faced. "Your place is taking care of your man and children," says Luz, recounting the most typical sort of comment she gets. But her partner has been supportive (he's also in the guide training program), and so here she is. The other women tell similar stories. Three of the four have children—Wendy's son is just a few months old—and the time commitment to finishing the training is not insignificant: an evening each week, birding expeditions on weekends, and multi-day workshops.

After our domestic interlude, we catch up with the rest of the group to eat a lunch of ham-and-cheese sandwiches and watch wading birds through the spotting scope. Black Skimmers, terns, and flamingos prove to be apt study subjects, hunkering down on the sandbars with their backs to the vicious wind. In the distance behind the

birds squat the shells of cabins—built by Colombia's parks service 10 years ago as an economic development project to bolster local Wayuu and Afro-Caribbean communities. In the arrangement, a group of Afro-Caribbean families would run the lodging concession, renting cabins out to tourists, while the Wayuu would benefit from the local increase in trade. But what started with good intentions has, over a decade, soured significantly. After the parks service unsuccessfully tried to audit the books of the lodge rentals, the Afro-Caribbean families protested, barring anyone from officially renting the cabins. Meanwhile, the parks service employees try to keep the sanctuary running. Thus the stalemate has endured for years, with almost no tourists or tourism money flowing in for either community—a testament, says Myers, to how difficult it can be to work in neglected communities distrustful of the government.

**T**HE RIDE UP THE ANDES FEELS LIKE IT WILL never, ever end. I love birding, and I've endured many a discomfort stalking feathered quarry, but three hours in the back of *La Pechichona*, with its incessant jostling, hydrocarbon reek, and herky-jerky switch between different modes of four-wheel-drive, has almost done me in. I'm not the only one—even Jaramillo looks a little green. But as dawn blooms pink and the truck mercifully stops, all that disappears. The exhaustion and nausea are replaced with a frisson of possibility as a Chestnut-crowned Antpitta calls from the forest. Will we see glossy Black Flower-piercers at this stop? Watermelon-hued Rosy Thrush-Tanagers? Sparkling Violetears or other exotic hummingbirds? How about the Perijá Brush-Finch, another endemic? In fact, over the course of multiple hours and stops, we see them all—except the antpitta. That one eludes us no matter how hard we look.

Four more hours pass before we find our ultimate object, hiding alongside the road at around 9,000 feet. Jaramillo recognizes it first—a soft, unfamiliar birdcall from the bushes. We clump together and stare into the green half-light of the understory, looking for any movement. We *pish* and crane our necks for 10 and then 15 minutes. And then . . . there it is, the Perijá Tapaculo! A tiny drab brown bird hops toward us from the underbrush. I hold my breath as it bounces from branch to the ground and back again—paralyzed with fear that if I lift my binoculars it will flee. But it doesn't, and soon seven pairs of lustrous optics track the bird's every move in silence. This is, it suddenly occurs to me, the most crazy-intense-important moment in my birding life thus far. It's not very often, after all, that one gets to see the newest bird species known to science. The Colombians are just as excited over this otherwise unremarkable brown bird as I am—the thrill bonds us all in the moment. And then the Perijá Tapaculo hops out of view, and out of our lives.

But there are still other species to see, so we



#### **BREAKFAST RUN**

Two inhabitants of Los Flamencos nature sanctuary and their tame Roseate Spoonbill comb the surf for shellfish and snails at dawn.

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take another swig of water, eat another vanilla-flavored cookie or two, and move on. As we climb past 10,000 feet, the vegetation abruptly changes. We've reached the *páramo*, a habitat unique to high elevations in the neotropics. It's here that we find other endemics on our list, including (incredibly, considering how rare it is) the Perijá Thistletail, a gray-brown thrush-size bird that hollers at me from a shrub, and the Perijá Metaltail, an emerald-toned hummingbird with a rich copper fan of tail feathers. At some point the road becomes so bad that we have to abandon *La Pechichona* and continue on foot. As we hit a fork in the road, we find graffiti spray-painted on a rock next to a gnarly tree heavy with bromeliads. The words warn us against trespass, although exactly who is doing the warning is unclear: Guerrillas? Campesinos? The military? Whoever it is, we ignore them and keep climbing.

Earlier in the trip, over successive bottles of Club Colombia Dorada lager, Myers and I made a pact that no matter what, we'd hike to the abandoned house that marks the border with Venezuela. As we trundle along, Jaramillo points out the telltales of the *páramo* ecosystem, like the boggy ground and the many plants from the sunflower family. The farther we march, the narrower the path becomes, changing from a rutted and rocky road wide enough for a truck to a muddy single-track wending its way through the grass. The closer we get to the border, the more (and fresher) horse manure studs the path, until it's nearly impossible to avoid it. Garbage—beer cans, foil snack wrappers, cigarette butts—makes an unwelcome appearance, and it becomes apparent that we've found ourselves on a well-used overland travel route. The area around the abandoned house is similarly filthy, and the walls of the house are covered in graffiti. The group is split in its opinion as to whether this is actually a drug-smuggling trail; we find no definitive evidence either way. We pose for a portrait in front of the house, then turn to leave Venezuela behind.

As I walk back to where we abandoned *La Pechichona*, I take photo after crappy photo on my smartphone, knowing that they'll never manage to convey the majesty of standing high up in the Andes, searching the skies for condors. All I can hope is that they'll prove adequate to a most important task: convincing some of my birder friends—and my skeptical parents—that this is a place they absolutely must visit.

**POSTSCRIPT:** *Six months later, in December, I call Myers to find out how the project went. He tells me that 44 graduated the course, including three of the four Wayuu women. Myers also tells me that he's actually having trouble arranging trips with some of the Audubon-trained guides for expeditions along the Northern Colombia Birding Trail before and after this month's Colombia Birdfair in Cali; many of the guides are already booked up for the season. All things considered, for the speculative bet made by Audubon and USAID, it's a good problem to have. ■*