TRAVEL ITINERARY

The Northern Colombia **Birding Trail**

Birding in the Perijá Mountains

Colombia is the birdiest country on earth, and this is not in dispute! There are more species of birds in this country than in any other. It is easy to see why.

Colombia is tropical, yet it also has ample elevation change due to the Andes, furthermore it has both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts. The Andes become complex in Colombia, splitting into three ranges, which increases habitat diversity, as well as rain shadow valleys between the mountains. Lots of different habitats, therefore one has an abundance of bird species. Where we visit it is special even for Colombia, as the Caribbean coast hosts the tallest coastal mountain range on earth—the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Nevada, because the tops of the mountains are high enough to be snowy (Nevada means snowy in Spanish). The northernmost spur of the Andes, the Serranía del Perijá which we also visit, slides up and nearly nudges up alongside the Sierra Nevada. Yet the two mountains are far enough away from each other that they have very different and endemic rich avifaunas. As the old commercials say, "Wait, there is more." Yes, lots more. The threatened dry forests of the region are found between these mountains and in the foothills. These are deciduous forests, not the lush green tropical lowland forests that people associate with tropical areas. But it is these dry forests which are much more scarce and endangered, and host some gorgeous regional specialties. The dry forests become shorter and drier towards the northeast, into the Guajira Peninsula. Here proper desert habitats are found, a rarity at this latitude. So in this short ten day trip we will sample all of this, and we

Above: Perija Mountains. Right: Sierra Nevada

expect not only a wonderfully varied bird list, but an incredible number of Colombian and regional endemic birds including some gorgeous feathered wonders. Where else can you go and have a chance to see three species of quetzal? Well here you do.

Below we describe each region we visit and note some of the birds which are found there. But one thing makes this itinerary different from all other birding trips to Colombia. This itinerary goes to sites from the Project funded by USAID through Patrimonio Natural and executed by National Audubon along with in country partner Calidris and support from the National Park Service. As part of this program we have trained birding guides in the areas we are visiting, both in birding and guiding, but also in English language skills. As these young people become part of the birding economy, they are becoming

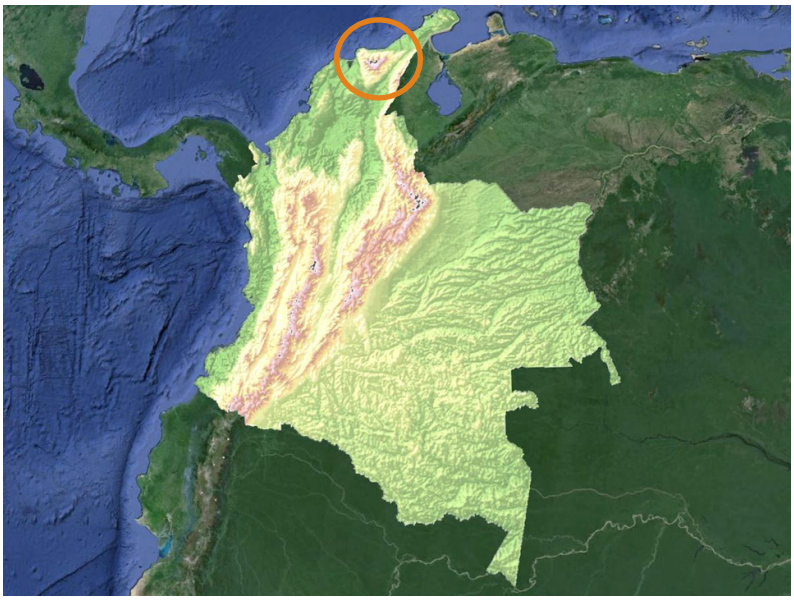
ambassadors for their local environments, and key people who will convince their communities to conserve habitat rather than degrade it. This is conservation of birds and habitats, through bird focused tourism.

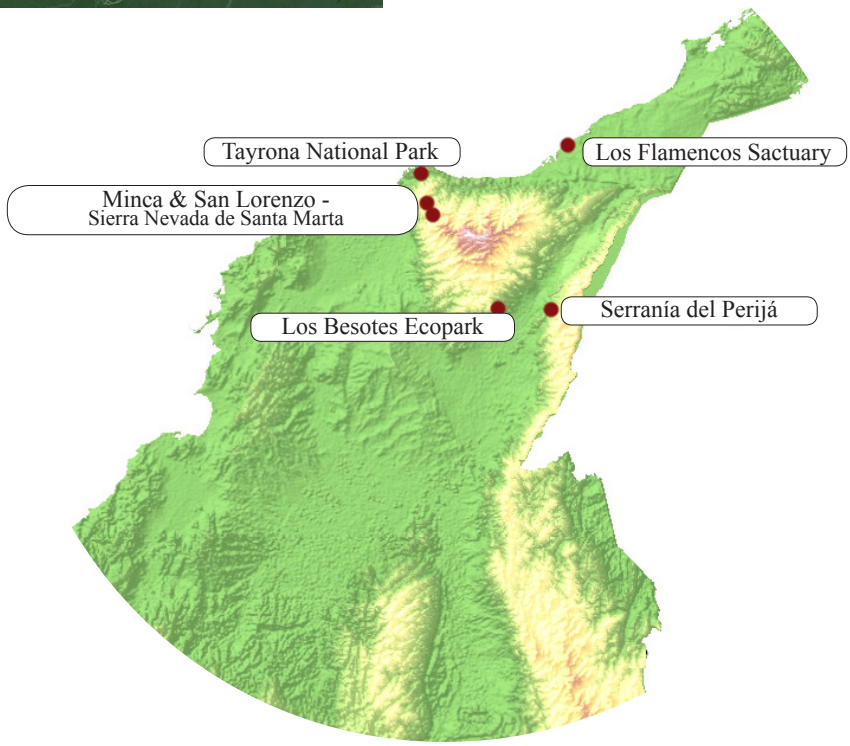
Calidris: Asociación Calidris, based in Cali, Colombia is among the leading bird conservation and research NGOs working in Latin America and the Caribbean. Calidris was founded in 1989 when a group of students from Colombia's Universidad del Valle' s biology department decided to continue the work begun during their elective course on seabirds and shorebirds, under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Luis Germán Naranjo. Calidris' study of shorebirds began by monitoring birds during their annual arrival to the Buenaventura Bay. Currently, Calidris is advancing an expansive portfolio of bird conservation, monitoring and environmental education programs throughout the country. Since 2008 Calidris has worked with the National Park Service promoting capacity building in the study and conservation of birds to Park Rangers and communities around parks in the Colombian Caribbean Region. In 2014, Calidris' Executive Director Luis Fernando Castillo was awarded the country's top honor for a conservation professional leading a national conservation organization. www.calidris.org

CALIDRIS

All bird and site photos are by Alvaro Jaramillo.

Northern Colombia Birding Trail



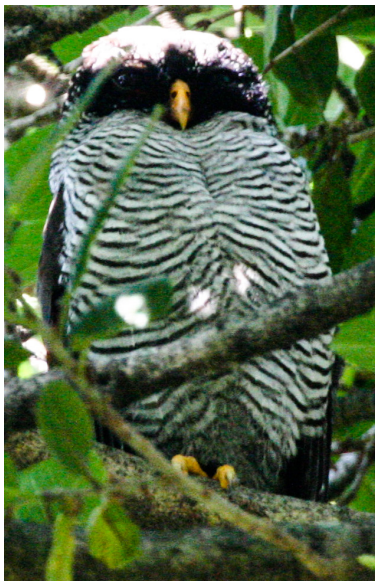


Patrimonio Natural is a Colombian Fund specialized in strategic investments for the conservatiom, use and sustainable management of biodiversity by strengthening the financial sustainability of the National System of Protected Areas of Colombia and other strategies of environmental planning for the conservation,sustainable use and management schemes under public, private or community governance.

USAID DEL PUEBLO DE LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS DE AMÉRICA | PARQUES NACIONALES NATURALES DE COLOMBIA | MINAMBIENTE | patrimonio natural Fondo para la Biodiversidad y Áreas Protegidas

Programa Paisajes de Conservación

The Birding Sites We Visit



Left to right: Violet-crowned Woodnymph; Perija Yellow-breasted Brushfinch; Black-and-white Owl

Eco-parque Los Besotes

This private reserve is only 9 km from Valledupar, a pleasant city known for Vallenato music with its distinctive accordion sound and infectious melody. Los Besotes is part of the Santa Marta Range, but on its drier eastern side, where abundance of tropical dry forests are found. This forest is greatly threatened, and hosts many regional specialties. is an Important Bird Area (IBA) and is also part of the Santa Marta Range, and unfortunately on this trip we will be able to only sample the lower portion. A possible highlight species here is the Blue-billed Curassow, and the uncommon Military Macaw may also be found here. Over 210 species of birds have been found at Los Besotes, as well as densities of cats, such as Ocelot as well as Puma. The Grey-handed Night Monkey can be found here, along with White-fronted Capuchin Monkey. Besotes will be our first opportunity to look for Vermilion Cardinal, Glaucous Tanager, and the gorgeous Golden-winged Sparrow. The Black-backed Antshrike is here in the lower elevations, as well as the Pale-legged Hornero, a form that is sometimes considered a regional endemic (Caribbean Hornero). We will try for some owling at Los Besotes, where the status of owls is still unclear. Who knows we may come up with something surprising!

Serranía del Perijá

The Serranía del Perijá is like the Holy Grail for birders interested in Colombia's birds. This isolated offshoot of the Eastern Andes forms the border with Venezuela and it is one of the least explored areas in Colombia. So much of Colombia suffered from the internal strife that lingered here for decades, and Perijá was a final stronghold. Yet since 2009, the area has been clear of any political problems, and only now are birders beginning to venture to this amazing set of endemic rich mountains A new birding lodge, ranging from dry forest to paramo in the highlands receiving tourists in May of 2015. It is a small, but comfortable lodge and surrounded by amazing montane forest. Currently the Serranía del Perijá is considered to have four endemic species, the Perijá Metaltail, Perijá Thistletail, Perijá Sierrafinch and the newly described Perijá Tapaculo. Yet, this is where things get interesting! This area has been out of reach for birders and scientists for decades until now, and even a cursory visit to the area finds that many common species, such as the Rufous Spinetail and the local version of Yellow-breasted Brushfinch are in fact certainly endemic species! And these are the common ones, many new discoveries await as birders and biologists increase their visits to Perijá. There is a spinetail here that could be a new species, it is little known, and so

Left to right: Yellow Oriole; Perija Mountains; Rufous-chested Chat-Tyrant

far a resolution of what it is has not been reached. Talk about exciting. It may not eventually rival Santa Marta in the number of endemics, but it will come close once taxonomy is updated for these birds. This is a unique area, still being discovered, and not only that but it is gorgeous and wonderful to be in. The morning views across the valley to the Sierra Nevada are breathtaking.

Other birds here include Crested and Golden-headed Quetzal, Barred Fruiteater, Andean Condor, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Plushcap, Buff-breasted Mountain-Tanager. A unique looking form of Lacrimose Mountain-Tanager is common in the higher areas, as well as another unique endemic that may one day be a full species, the local form of the Golden-bellied Starfrontlet. Hook-billed Kites are relatively easy to see here, and with luck the White-rumped Hawk or even Black-and-chestnut Eagle may fly through. The road that reaches the reserve continues into Páramo habitats, where Rufous-chested Chat Tyrants abound, and Páramo Seedeater may be found as well as many Tyrian Metaltail and fewer of the stunningly purple tailed endemic Perijá Metaltail. The ability to move from Montane Forest to Páramo, and then down to foothill subtropical areas will give us more than enough to look at. This area is right on the cusp of discovery, and now is the time to go. Who knows you may be in on a new species even! You never know.

Left to right: White-bearded Manakin; Lance-tailed Manakin; Russet-throated Puffbird

Los Flamencos Flora and Fauna Sanctuary

Very near the city of Riohacha, is Los Flamencos Sanctuary, a Protected area from the National Park Service located in the village of Camarones.. This is the west edge of the Guajira desert, where dry forest becomes shorter and sparser, where bare dry earth separates the trees from each other. But before you have a mistaken idea of a parched world, Los Flamencos is on the coast and it has shallow waterbodies that fill as the rains come, and evaporate during the dry season. These evaporating ponds concentrate salt, and then brine shrimp bloom which brings in the namesake bird of the park—American Flamingos! Their numbers vary depending on water levels, but they can be here in the hundreds on a good day. If you have not had enough pink, how about the even brighter Scarlet Ibis? They concentrate here as well, with their very close relatives the White Ibis. They are so close in fact that every once in a while a hybrid “Pink Ibis” is seen here. Gulls, terns, and many, many migratory shorebirds, as well as breeding shorebirds like Oystercatcher y Wilson's Plover are to be found at Los Flamencos.

Retreating to the forest though, one is quite surprised that a series of very attractive regional specialties are found here. The sole South American offshoot of what is really a North American group, the Vermilion Cardinal can be seen here. Nothing prepares you, even if you have backyard Northern Cardinals, for the striking red of this species, the overdone crest and the very different look to its close relatives from the north. On the ground, a member of a group that is usually very drab and brown, may elicit “wows!” from the crowd—the White-whiskered Spinetail is one heck of a good looking Spinetail. Pecking in the branches and trilling away is a tiny and colorful woodpecker, the Chestnut Piculet. Sure there are specialties that are more somber in tone, such as the Slender-billed Inezia (Tyrannulet), and White-tipped Inezia. A crowd favorite is the Russet-throated Puffbird (the Bobo or fool bird as the locals call it) who will just sit there, staring back at you as hard as you stare at it. In a crowd of what tend to be relatively greenish or grayish and nondescript birds, the saltators, the uncommon Orinoco Saltator actually is quite a good looking bird. Don’t ask why there are so many good looking birds in this drab desert habitat, just enjoy these wonderful dry forest birds.

The local community who are taking part in our project are mainly Wayuu indigenous people. They are known for their colorful bags (mochilas), which are sold throughout the Guajira region, and you will

Left to right: Santa Marta Brushfinch; Band-tailed Guan

certainly have a chance to see their craftsmanship and maybe purchase a bag. The Wayuu are part of the Arawakan language group of people, a highly successful South American group who also ventured north to Central America as well as the Caribbean!

Tayrona National Park

Tayrona is the most visited National Park in Colombia and is a protected area from the National Park Service. It is not visited by most people for the birds, but instead the gorgeous beaches and superb hikes and horseback trail rides you can do here. However, with over 280 species of birds present here, perhaps they should be looking at the birds. We will have a morning visit to the park, and if all things align for us, the Blue-billed Curassow could show up for us. Otherwise, this is a great place to see some species which we are not as likely to see elsewhere on the trip. One abundant bird that is easiest to see here than anywhere is the stunning Lance-tailed Manakin. Sometimes it can be found with its relative, the White-bearded Manakin. The birds here are varied, from Crane Hawk and Boat-billed Heron to Greater Ani, White-necked Puffbird and Rufous-tailed Jacamars. Blue-headed Parrot is common, and Lineated Woodpeckers are impressive to see as they forage on the large trees. White-bellied Antbirds belt out their song from the understory, if one is lucky they will even show themselves. The complex songs of Buff-breasted and Bicolored wrens are heard in the forest, along with the repetitive songs of Scrub Greenlets, nasal sounds of Barred Antshrikes or loud calls of Boat-billed and Streaked flycatchers. It is an active area, full of birds! Crimson-backed Tanagers and the gorgeous Red-legged Honeycreepers give a lot of color to the local flocks. While birding here it is common to see the Cottontop Tamarin, a gorgeous little monkey dwarfed by the less common White-fronted Capuchin. While our visit to Tayrona will be cursory, we will see a lot, and enjoy the company of our trained guides here who will have the pulse on where the birds are.

Santa Marta Mountains

The Santa Marta Mountains are unique. They are not a northern offshoot of the Andes, but a separate and isolated range. They are the world's highest coastal mountain range, and in fact the highest point in Colombia! The Santa Marta Mountains were created in northern Peru according to recent geological findings, and they have been shifting and traveling northwards during the last 170 million years. For the birder the intense attraction of the Santa Marta Mountains is that they are incredibly rich in endemic birds, species you cannot see

Clockwise from top left: White-tailed Starfrontlet; Rosy Thrush-Tanager; Stygian Owl

anywhere else on earth. Currently 19 endemic species are found here, although taxonomic changes may see this number increase in the coming years. We will bird the Cuchilla de San Lorenzo, a spur off the main Santa Marta Range, which reaches to 2700m in elevation. We will stay at El Dorado Ecolodge. From here we can venture higher up to the highlands of the cuchilla, or venture down slope as well. Mountain birds stratify depending on elevation, so being able to sample a varied set of elevations will allow us a good chance of finding the endemic birds.

One of the most intriguing of the endemic birds is an unnamed screech owl which can be seen right at the lodge. This owl was noted back in the 1920s in a publication of the birds of Santa Marta by pioneering ornithologists Todd and Carriker. This bird has been here quietly waiting for birders to finally give it a name, something that is rumored to be happening in the near future. For now, one can actually go and see a bird without a name! Many of the endemics let you know they are by the Santa Marta moniker, such as the Santa Marta Parakeet, Santa Marta Antbird, Santa Marta Foliage-Gleaner, Santa Marta Warbler, Santa Marta Woodstar and Santa Marta Brush-Finch to give but a few examples. Some of the endemics are common and easy to see, others are quite difficult. The Santa Marta Wren for example is not found in the Cuchilla San Lorenzo, while the Santa Marta Sabrewing is mythical in its rarity. Others are troublesome but visible with luck, such as the Black-backed Thornbill and Santa Marta Woodstar, although the gorgeous White-tailed Starfrontlet is usually not difficult. The Santa Marta

Blossomcrown, an endemic hummingbird that looks to have a pollen stained forehead is one we will spend some time on, it is not rare, but you do have to dedicate time to finding this pretty bird. Then of course, there are the ones you trip over, such as Santa Marta Brushfinch, Yellow-crowned Redstart, and Rusty-headed Spinetail for example. If we are in luck, worm feeders at the lodge will be bringing in the elusive Santa Marta Antpitta, and perhaps the non-endemic but prized Black-fronted Wood-Quail.

There is a lot to see here and endemics are but a part of it. Some gorgeous and striking birds such as the White-tipped Quetzal, Band-tailed and Sickle-winged guans, Rosy Thrush-Tanager and the stunning Golden-breasted Fruiteater are not rare. There are various tanagers and a plethora of hummingbirds, as well as the eye catching Blue-naped Chlorophonias come to feeders at the reserve. We will have lots and lots to look at, and will be able to stay in a comfortable and well run birding lodge.

Keel-billed Toucan

ABOUT THE PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS & PACE

Caribbean Colombia has an incredible amount of diversity in a small space. In this compact itinerary we will visit two different mountain ranges, coastal desert, tropical dry forests, and the Caribbean Sea. Although the distances are not great between the sites we visit, and roads are good in the lowlands, we do have to contend with some rather poor mountain roads. These are found in Santa Marta as well as the Perijá mountains. On these roads 4 x 4 vehicles are necessary. So this tour is a little different from most in that we will be traveling on 2–3 comfortable 4 x 4 vehicles, such as Toyota Land cruisers during the entire trip. This will allow us access to all areas we want to go, comfort given the road needs, as well as space for luggage. The negative is that during drives you may not be sitting with a guide, but all vehicles will be in radio contact, and keep in mind that we do many birding stops where everyone will be birding as a group.

We will stay at two birding lodges during our stay, El Dorado in the Santa Marta Mountains and Chamicero del Perijá in said mountains. El Dorado is ample, with many cabins and infrastructure to accommodate large groups. However, Chamicero del Perijá is small, with room for 8 passengers plus guides and drivers. So this and our vehicle needs will limit our group size to 8 people. Both of these birding lodges are clean and simple but comfortable, El Dorado is certainly more spacious and comfortable but both have the luxury of hot showers, three great meals a day, and they work on a birders schedule so we can be out in the morning early and have a siesta in the heat of the day after lunch. Accommodations in cities (Valledupar and Riohacha) will be at local hotels, we expect relative comfort and good local food but these will not be fancy 5 star type hotels. We will have purified or bottled drinking water available throughout the trip.

One should be prepared for early morning birding, as it is important to be out before it becomes too hot. Whenever possible we shall have an early afternoon break, before continuing out in the late afternoon. Also for those interested in mammals and night birds there will be some opportunities for owling and maybe spotlighting for a mammal or two. Most of our meals will be sit-down meals, although field lunches or even a field dinner is likely somewhere along the trip. If you have specific food allergies, please communicate these to us on signing up. Note that the tour starts in Valledupar and ends in Santa Marta. Both of these airports have daily connections with Bogota, with Avianca (Star Alliance) as well as LAN (Oneworld). If your travel needs require overnighting in Bogota, there are close hotels to the airport which make this comfortable, and you may also choose to stay over and hire a local guide for birding here!

Itinerary for Northern Colombia Birding Trail

Day 1—ARRIVAL IN VALLEDUPAR. Please book flights to arrive into Valledupar early in the day. There are a couple of morning flights from Bogota daily. After lunch we will visit the lower parts of Los Besotes Private Reserve and will take a picnic dinner so that we may be able to stay for some owling on the site. Overnight in Valledupar.

Day 2—LOS BESOTES AND TRAVEL TO PERIJÁ. We will begin the day with another morning exploring the awesome dry forests of Los Besotes, before moving on to the Perijá Mountains. It will take us approximately an hour to reach the foothills, and from there the road becomes rougher and slower. If time permits we shall be stopping for birding once we are above 1500 m elevation as we work our way up the mountain. We expect an evening arrival at the reserve. Overnight at the Chamizero del Perijá Reserve.

Day 3—PERIJÁ MOUNTAINS. On one of these days we will head up to the top of Sabana Rubia, the Páramo. Here we have a chance to find the Perijá Thistletail, and Perijá Metaltail. On the other day we shall work the elevations slightly above and below the cabins. Overnight at the Chamizero del Perijá Reserve.

Day 4—PERIJÁ MOUNTAINS. On one of these days we will head up to the top of Sabana Rubia, the Páramo. Here we have a chance to find the Perijá Thistletail, and Perijá Metaltail. On the other day we shall work the elevations slightly above and below the cabins. Overnight at the Chamizero del Perijá Reserve.

Day 5—PERIJÁ TO RIOHACHA. We bird downslope, after an early start and head to Riohacha. Assuming an early arrival we will head for an evening of birding at Los Flamencos Reserve. Overnight in Riohacha.

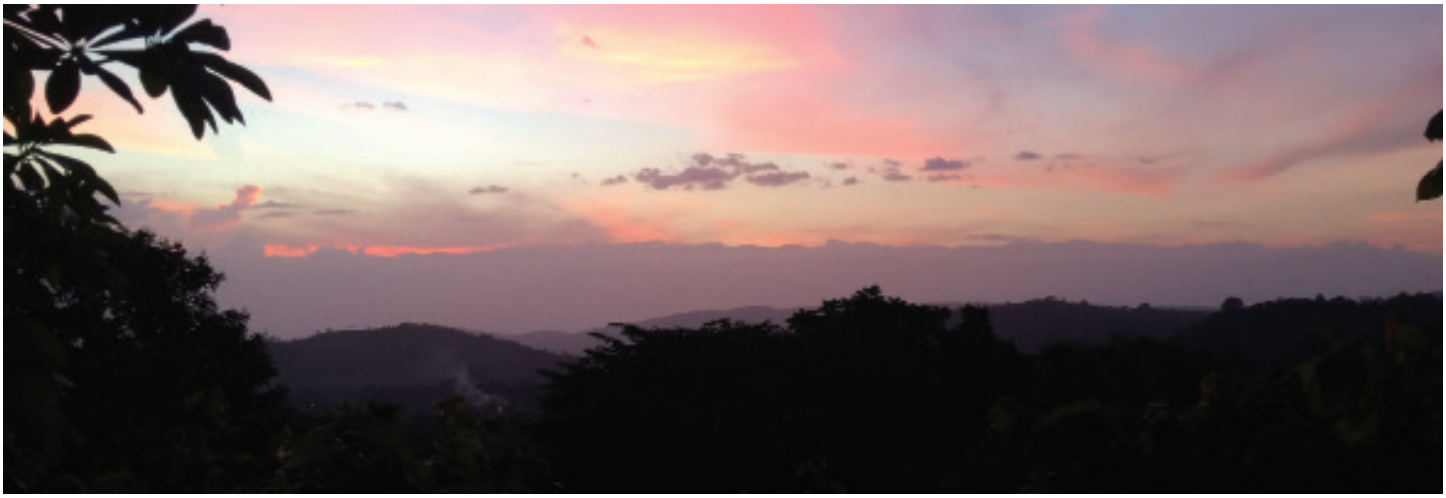
Day 6—LOS FLAMENCOS SANCTUARY. The reserve is only 15 minutes from Riohacha, so we plan on returning to town for lunch and siesta. However, we will head out early to take in the best birding before the desert heat really begins. For the energetic in the crowd, we shall visit Los Flamencos again this evening. You may choose to rest at the hotel, or visit the beach across the road. Overnight in Riohacha.

Day 7—TAYRONA NATIONAL PARK TO SANTA MARTA MOUNTAINS. We will leave Riohacha in the morning for the hour or so drive to Tayrona National Park where we will spend the morning. Here we can find some moister forest birds. If we are in great luck, the Blue-billed Curassow will make an appearance, although it is very rare. We will drive up the Santa Marta Mountains in the afternoon, stopping to bird as we go. Overnight at the El Dorado Reserve.

Day 9—SANTA MARTA MOUNTAINS. We have two days at the El Dorado reserve in Santa Marta Mountains. On at least one day we will head up to the highlands of Cuchilla San Lorenzo in order to see species not present at the lodge. We will have ample time to enjoy the feeders at the lodge as well as the forest above and below the Lodge. Overnight at the El Dorado Reserve.

Day 9—SANTA MARTA MOUNTAINS. We have two days at the El Dorado reserve in Santa Marta Mountains. On at least one day we will head up to the highlands of Cuchilla San Lorenzo in order to see species not present at the lodge. We will have ample time to enjoy the feeders at the lodge as well as the forest above and below the Lodge. Overnight at the El Dorado Reserve.

Day 10—SANTA MARTA MOUNTAINS TO SANTA MARTA AIRPORT FLIGHTS BACK TO BOGOTA AND HOME. We will bird around the lodge, concentrating on what we have not found yet. We have the full morning here, before heading down to Santa Marta and the airport for afternoon flights to Bogota and home.



TRIPS AND SET DEPARTURES

Northern Colombia Birding Trail
with Diego Calderon and Jose Luis Pushaina
Dates TBD

Northern Colombia Birding Trail with Western Andes pre-trip
with Steve Hilty and Gabo Utria
Dates TBD
space highly limited

Northern Colombia Birding Trail
with Alvaro Jaramillo
Dates TBD

For more information on the price and availability of set departures and other tours, please contact:

Chris Calonje
Owner/Tour Leader
Colombia Birdwatch

Toll Free USA and Canada: 1 (855) 631-8907
Colombia (57)3185942891
chriscalonje@gmail.com
www.colombiabirdwatch.com

LOCAL GUIDES
Excellent local guides will accompany groups in each locale. Each will have completed Audubon's extensive guide training program and will be conversant in basic English.

Top to bottom: Santa Marta sunset; Santa Marta Warbler; Lazuline Sabrewing

MEET THE TRIP LEADERS

Diego Calderon-Franco is a biologist from the Universidad de Antioquia in Colombia and the owner and lead guide for COLOMBIA Birding. Diego has been involved in exploring poorly known remote areas in the Neotropics with special emphasis in Colombia; his former academic research included sexual display behavior of manakins, natural history of migratory birds, and systematics of Galloanserae. Diego has been birding and guiding all over Colombia in the paramos and cloud forests of the Andes and its valleys (Magdalena & Cauca), the Pacific verdant Choco, the Santa Marta mts. and its surrounding Caribbean lowlands and desert, the Eastern Llanos savannas, and the lowlands of Amazonia and Guiana. His Colombia bird list currently totals over 1,450 species and he is co-author of the description of the Antioquia Wren, one of the most recent Colombian endemic birds found new to science. Diego also guides overseas and outside Colombia for Sunrise Birding and Zoothera Global Birding, including such destinations as Brazil, Guyana and Madagascar.

Steve Hilty is the senior author of *A Guide to the Birds of Colombia*, and author of *Birds of Venezuela*, both by Princeton University Press, as well as the popular *Birds of Tropical America, A watcher's introduction to behavior, breeding and diversity*. He has also written a number of scientific papers on birds and plants, has described two species of birds new to science in Venezuela, and another, with a team of scientists, in Colombia. He also wrote the text and species accounts for the tanager family for the acclaimed *Handbook of Birds of the World*, published by Lynx Press in Barcelona. Steve holds a Ph.D. in zoology from the University of Arizona and has worked at the Arid Lands Department at the University of Arizona, as a consultant to The Nature Conservancy, and as a broker with Merrill Lynch. He is currently a research associate in ornithology at the University of Kansas Biodiversity Institute. Since 1983 he has worked for Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, guiding trips throughout North and South America, and co-leading trips to India, the Orient, and Australasian regions. With more than four decades of experience in South America and a wide range of natural history interests, he brings a unique breadth of expertise to his Neotropical tours. At night he often turns his binoculars towards the skies for stargazing. Steve lives in Kansas City with his wife, Beverly. They have two daughters.

Alvaro Jaramillo, owner of Alvaro's Adventures, was born in Chile but began birding in Toronto, where he lived as a youth. He was trained in ecology and evolution with a particular interest in bird behavior. Research forays and backpacking trips introduced Alvaro to the riches of the Neotropics, where he has traveled extensively. He is the author of the Birds of Chile, an authoritative yet portable field guide to Chile's birds. Alvaro writes the *Identify Yourself* column in *Bird Watcher's Digest*. Alvaro recently wrote part of the sparrow chapter for the *Handbook of Birds of the World*, and the new *ABA Field Guide to Birds of California*. He was recently granted the Eisenmann Medal by the Linnean Society of New York, it is awarded occasionally for excellence in ornithology and encouragement of the amateur. Alvaro lives with his family in Half Moon Bay, California.

José Luis Pushaina is a local bird guide for the Guajira Península in Colombia. He is a member of the Wayúu indigenous group. José Luis has extensive experience guiding in tropical dry forest in the Caribbean, one of the most endangered ecosystems in Colombia. Under his guidance, you can learn about birds and their meaning for the Wayúu culture as well as increase your odds for seeing hard to find rarities like Tocuyo Sparrow.

Gabriel Utria is a biologist from the Universidad del Magdalena, and grew up in the San Lorenzo reserch station in the Sierra Nevada. His mother ran the lodge, so he grew up birding trecking in the area. Gabriel has participated in the design and implementation of bird conservation strategies in Colombia's Caribbean region, emphasizing his efforts on dry tropical forest ecosystems. He is also involved in a project to identify critical habitat for migratory species that visit the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.