

COLOMBIA: ANDEAN ENDEMIC: BOGOTA TO PEREIRA

JULY 17-26, 2020

For many years, traveling in Colombia was considered a risky affair due to the 30-year civil conflict that put much of the country off limits to even the most intrepid travelers. Thankfully this is no longer the case, and the unfortunate political situation that tore this country apart for so long is on the mend. Words like “heal” and “rebuild” are now more a part of the country’s political lexicon than “conflict” and “hostility.” Indeed Colombia is on the rebound and that has opened one of the world’s richest and most fertile avian playgrounds to birders from around the world.

Colombia has the highest bird list of any country in the world. Over 1900 species have been recorded including over 70 endemics. Colombia’s rich bird diversity can be attributed to the magic of geography. The country is large (about the size of Texas) and is transected by three north-south running Andean spines. These cordillera are separated by two deep river valleys through which flow the Rio Magdalena and the Rio Cauca. These three mountain ranges are increasingly wet, east to west, and the differences in moisture, climate and elevation account for an evolutionary miracle that has paved the way for an almost unimaginable number of species to exist.

In addition to the improving military and political situation in Colombia, there have also been giants leaps forward by Colombian ornithological and conservation organizations. The country now has a plethora of private and public reserves that have been created to protect the country’s treasure trove of diversity and to encourage visitors to come and experience it. That said, Colombia has a long way to go to match the tourism infrastructure of Ecuador, Costa Rica and other such countries that got into the business of ecotourism many years ago. A trip to Colombia is not without difficulty as it involves long drives between birding venues, traversing rough roads and without the cushy ecolodges found in some of the neighboring countries. But then again, this is part of the adventure and for those willing to endure a bit of hardship along the way and without expectations that things will be as they are at home, Colombia is a fun and exciting place to go birding.

This tour will begin and end in Bogota, Colombia’s bustling capital city located in the eastern Andean spine at an elevation of over 8600 feet. We will spend several days birding in and around Bogota including visits to two locations in the high Andes and another to a large wetland outside of the city. From there we will drop down into the Magdalena Valley and spend time in and around the city of Ibagué. The final leg of the tour will take us to the western Andes to Otún-Quimbaya and Tatamá National Park, two of Colombia’s most productive birding sites.

The tour is designed for us to focus largely on range restricted endemic species rather than to accumulate a lengthy bird list, although the latter is almost a given on any tour to this amazing country

Although Colombia's infrastructure is not as advanced as some its neighbors, it is not primitive either and is rapidly improving as time passes. Even so, this is a tour where at times we will be driving on bumpy mountain roads (sometimes in 4x4's) to reach the best birding sites. Longer drives between venues can sometimes be inordinately long because even the best highways are 2-lane affairs and large, overloaded trucks slow progress considerably. However, this is what traveling in Colombia entails and in order to arrive at the premier sites a bit of patience and endurance is sometimes required. On long drives we will be traveling in a comfortable, air-conditioned bus with plenty of legroom and luggage space and there will always be snacks and fresh potable water available. The lodges and hotels we use will range from a modern Hilton Garden Inn in Bogota to quaint eco-lodges at several of the reserves. On past tours to Colombia clients have been exceptionally satisfied with the quality of the hotels we use.

Food is generally plentiful and quite good, although the Colombian diet tends to be heavily focused on meat and fresh vegetables are sometimes in short supply. However there are vegetarian options always available though limited in scope. Colombian food is not spicy though there is usually a "salsa picante" available on the table for participants with more adventurous taste buds. The food is generally safe however it is recommended to avoid salads especially in more remote areas. Tap water in Colombia is not potable but there will always be bottled water in the bus and available at meals.

In late July Colombia is entering the beginning of the dry season and heavy all day rains are not expected. That said, this is the tropics and parts of Colombia are considered some of the wettest places on earth, so when birding here one should always be prepared for the possibility of precipitation.

Participants should be in reasonably good physical condition for this trip as we will spend a lot of time on our feet at elevations ranging from less than 1000 feet to nearly 12,000 feet in the high Andes. When we do visit the very high elevation sites it will be only for periods of a couple of hours, so anyone prone to altitude sickness should not have too much difficulty. Most of the birding we do will be on roadsides or fairly well-developed trail systems that are not terribly difficult to navigate on foot. When birding along roadsides the bus will always be close by in the event someone needs a break. Probably the most difficult part of the trip will be simply the amount of time spent on our feet rather than the difficulty of the actual walking. On some days we will break at lunchtime and eat in a restaurant and on other days we will have picnic lunches in the field. Obviously we will have very early starts to take advantage of the best birding times, but that is standard procedure on most any birding tour and shouldn't come as a surprise or be considered a hardship.

Finally, this is a tour that will focus on Colombia's endemic and near-endemic species and anyone signing on should understand that our final list may not be as long as trip lists to Colombia. That is to say that we will be looking for quality rather than quantity during the tour. You should also understand that many of these range-restricted endemics are uncommon and difficult to find, so you shouldn't expect to see every single possibility. However what we can promise is that we will certainly attempt to do so, and that along the way you will

experience the sense of adventure that comes with such a search, and see some of the most breathtaking scenery that the Colombian Andes have to offer.

Day 1, July 17, Arrival in Bogota: Several major airlines have direct flights to Bogota (airport code BOG) from the United States. You can book your arrival today at any time, but try to avoid late night arrivals to mitigate against the possibility of delays or cancellations affecting your arrival date. Also keep in mind that we will begin our birding very early the following morning, so planning to arrive a day or two early to allow time for rest and to acclimate to the elevation is always a good idea. As always we can help with any additional pre-trip accommodations. Once you have collected your luggage and entered the arrival hall, there will be a driver waiting for you to transfer you to our hotel which is located a short distance from the airport. If by chance there are problems with this transfer, a taxi can be hired for about \$10 USD to transfer you to the hotel. If this happens you will be reimbursed for the fare. We will plan to have a short orientation session sometime this evening to get acquainted. The time of this meeting will be dependent upon everyone's scheduled arrival. There will be no other group activities today and you will be free to explore the area around the hotel on your own or areas further afield. We can help arrange city tours if you need help or ideas. Night in Bogota.

Day 2, July 18, Chingaza NP & La Calera Hummingbird Garden: Today we will spend much of the day exploring Chingaza National Park located about 2 hours east of Bogota. If the weather is clear we may reach elevations of nearly 12,000 feet, however if it is foggy we will only ascend to about 11,000 feet. The park is a beautiful example of humid Andean forest and paramo, the latter a very unique Andean habitat dominated by a distinctive plant community. As the road climbs higher into the park it passes through a variety of high Andean habitats including high elevation grasslands, elfin forest, humid montane forest and paramo. Some of the birds we will search for at Chingaza include White-chinned Thistletail, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, **Rufous-browed Conebill**, Amethyst-throated Sunangel, Coppery-bellied Puffleg, Glowing Puffleg, **Pale-bellied Tapaculo**, Black-collared Jay, Rufous Wren, Hooded and Black-chested Mountain-Tanager, Blue-backed Conebill, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and many more. We will also hope to find the rare and endemic **Brown-breasted Parakeet** although the majority of the population of this species occurs outside the park boundaries. On the return drive to Bogota we will stop at La Calera Hummingbird Garden where we can relax and watch the swarms of hummingbirds that visit the nectar feeders. Some of the specialties here include Blue-throated Starfrontlet, Green-tailed Trainbearer, Black-tailed Trainbearer, Glowing Puffleg, White-bellied Woodstar and Sword-billed Hummingbird. This is also a good place to see the endemic **Silvery-throated Spinetail**. Night in Bogota.

Day 3, July 19, Sumapaz NP and travel to Ibagu: This morning we will make a second visit to high elevation paramo, but this time it will be to Sumapaz NP south of Bogota. This is the largest protected region of paramo in Colombia and home to several of Colombia's most sought after endemics. Luckily, most are relatively common and easy to find, provided the weather cooperates, and we will hope for a clear and calm morning during our visit. The two key endemic targets here will be **Apolinar's Wren** and **Green-bearded Helmetcrest**, the latter a peculiar, high-elevation hummingbird that feeds on espletia blossoms. Other birds we hope to find here

include Andean Teal, Noble Snipe, **Bogota Rail**, Bronze-tailed Thornbill, Chesnut-winged Cinclodes, Many-striped Canastero, Tawny Antpitta, Rufous-fronted Conebill, Plumbeous Sierra-Finch and Red-rumped Bush-Tyrant. By early afternoon we will begin the 5-hour drive to Ibagué. Night in Ibagué.

Day 4, July 20, Ukuku Lodge, Nevado del Tolima and travel to Otun-Quimbaya: We will depart Ibagué very early and drive about an hour to Ukuku Lodge, located on the Combeima river. To reach the lodge itself we will have to walk about a mile on a cobblestone track along the river which provides excellent early morning birding. The lodge itself has fruit and hummingbird feeders and is a nice place to sit and bird in a leisurely fashion. We will spend most of the morning birding around the lodge with our focus being on four endemic species: **Tolima Dove, Tolima Blossomcrown, Indigo-capped Hummingbird and Yellow-headed Brush-Finch**. The dove and the blossomcrown don't occur in large numbers and can be difficult to find, but with most of a morning our chances to find all four of the specialties will be excellent. Other possibilities this morning will include Torrent Duck, Gorgeted Woodstar, Booted Racket-tail, Tropical Pewee, Yellow-backed Oriole Tropical Parula, Fawn-breasted Tanager, Metallic-green Tanager and Black-winged Saltator. We will have lunch at the lodge and then begin the 4-hour drive to Otun-Quimbayo National Park. Hopefully we will arrive in time for a little afternoon birding before dinner. Regardless of our arrival time, we will plan a little post-dinner owling with chances to find Tropical Screech-Owl and possibly Rufescent Screech-Owl near the lodge. Night at Otun Quimbayo.

Day 5, July 21, Otun Quimbayo NP: Today we will have a full day this very pleasant part of Colombia where nearly 400 species of birds have been recorded. The park was created to protect the Otun River watershed and is slowly being reforested after large scale logging operations were terminated when the park was established. In addition to the many other birds, we will have a chance to find three more range restricted endemics at Otun-Quimbayo: **Cauca Guan, Crested Ant-Tanager and Chestnut Wood-Quail**. Like most wood-quail, the latter species is secretive and shy, but it is possible to see coveys crossing the trail system and hopefully we will get lucky. The **Cauca Guan**, was once thought to be extinct, but now is fairly common in several protected areas and they can often be quite tame at Otun-Quimbayo. The **Crested Ant-Tanager** moves around in noisy flocks and with time and patience can usually be found. Though we will focus on these three endemics there will be many other species available here including Collared Inca, Andean Motmot, Azara's Spinetail, Green Jay, Flame-rumped Tanager, Streaked Xenops, Montane Foliage-gleaner, Variegated Bristle-Tyrant, Rufous-breasted Flycatcher, Plumbeous-crowned Tyrannulet, Andean Solitaire and Chestnut-breasted Wren (very shy). Night at Otun-Quimbayo.

Day 6, July 22, Otun-Quimbayo and travel to Tatamá National Park: After a final morning at Otun-Quimbayo we will drive to the eastern edge of the Western Andes to the town of Pueblo Rico. There we will transfer to 4x4 vehicles for the last hour of the drive in order to reach Montezuma Lodge, our base for the next 3 nights. Montezuma is a small family run lodge that lacks some of the modern amenities you might be used to (Wi-Fi), but these minor inconveniences will be more than offset by the spectacular birding opportunities afforded to its guests. The lodge has hummingbird and fruit feeders that attract a nice variety of species and the

main birding road in the park begins right at the lodge. Night at Montezuma Lodge in Reserva Natural Cerro Montezuma.

Days 7-8, July 23-24, Reserva Natural Cerro Montezuma and Tatamá National Park:

Reserva Cerro Montezuma is adjacent to Tatamá NP and we will do much of our birding in the actual national park. We will have 2 full days to explore this area where there are numerous Colombian specialties present. On both days we will travel by 4x4's from the lodge on the rugged road leading to the park's higher elevations. Depending upon the condition of the road and the amount of recent rains, we may or may not be able to drive to the highest points. If that is the case we can still reach these areas on foot with excellent birding as we walk. On one day we will try to get above 8000 feet and on the other day we will focus on mid-elevations between 4500 and 5500 feet. This is one of Colombia's premier birding destinations and there are far more birds present than we can possibly find in 2 days, but regardless of the end total we are sure to find some amazing things here. Some of the endemic highlights will **Black-and-gold Tanager, Gold-ringed Tanager, Multicolored Tanager, Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer and Crested Ant-Tanager**. If we can reach the highest points along the road we will have a chance for the endemic **Munchique Wood-Wren**, only first described as a species in 2003! This area is part of the Choco region, an extremely wet area shared by Colombia and Ecuador. Some of the Choco endemics found here (but also possible to see in northwestern Ecuador) include Cloud-forest Pygmy-Owl, Fulvous-dotted Treerunner, Bicolored Antvireo, Orange-breasted Fruiteater, Black Solitaire and Indigo Flowerpiercer. Other exciting but more widespread birds include Barred Hawk, Brown Inca, Greenish Puffleg, Violet-tailed Sylph, Lineated Foliage-gleaner, Uniform Treehunter, Rufous-headed Pygmy-Tyrant, Olivaceous Piha, Rufous-throated Tanager, Flame-faced Tanager, Black-chinned Mountain-Tanager, Dusky Chlorospingus, Tricolored Brushfinch, Club-winged Manakin and Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonia. In summary, the birding here is absolutely fantastic and leaving the place behind will be difficult. Nights at Montezuma Lodge.

Day 9, July 25, Travel to Pereira and return flight to Bogota: After a final breakfast at Montezuma Lodge we will transfer to Pereira for an afternoon flight to Bogota where we will have a final dinner together. Night in Bogota.

Day 10, July 26, Flights Home: Participants can schedule their flights home anytime this morning.

TOUR LIMIT: This maximum number of participants for this tour will be 7.

TRIP COST: The price of this tour is \$3495 double occupancy from Bogota. The quoted price includes all meals beginning with dinner on July 17 and ending with dinner on July 25, nine nights of accommodations beginning and ending in Bogota, all ground transportation during the tour, airport transfers in Bogota, guide service provided by local guides as well as by Jan Hansen from Otus asio Tours, all entrance fees and bottled water throughout the tour. It does not include round trip airfare between your originating destination and Bogota, optional tips to guides and drivers, laundry service or alcoholic

beverages (one bottle of the Colombian national beer will be included with dinner). The single supplement for the tour is \$350.

REGISTRATION: A \$500 deposit and a completed and signed registration form are necessary to register for this tour. If you register by email the deposit and paperwork must be received within 10 days of the email in order to secure a place. Final payment will be due 90 days before departure (April 19, 2020). Final invoices will be sent out in early April 2020.

TRIP INSURANCE: Trip insurance is strongly suggested in the event that you need to cancel after you have registered. Tour deposits and remittances have to be made well in advance of the tour and any cancellations made within 90 days of departure cannot be refunded in full. The tour registration form details the refund policy, but cancellations within 60 days of the tour will be limited to the amount that can be recouped from the various vendors and cannot be determined until that time. Trip insurance will be your safeguard against such contingencies.

ACCOMMODATIONS: The lodges and hotels we will stay at during this tour will range from modern urban style (Bogota and Ibague) to eco-lodges located on forest reserves (Otun-Quimbayo and Montezuma). All will be clean and comfortable, but the lodge at Montezuma is small and lacks some of the more expected amenities like Wi-fi.

FOOD: This will not be a tour for foodies or those seeking a gourmet experience. That said, the food will be plentiful and tasty, just not exotic or fancy. Vegetarian options will be available in most cases, but it will be simple and limited in scope. Menus will be set at ecolodges while the usual options will be available at larger hotels and in restaurants.

BIRDING AT ELEVATION: We will spend parts of two days in the high Andes, possibly as high as 12,000 feet (Chingaza NP and Sumapaz NP), but in both instances we will only be that high for a couple of hours. Bogota is located at 8600 feet and we will spend two nights there. The rest of the tour will be conducted at lower elevations that generally do not give people problems although we may climb as high as 8000 feet in Tatamá NP. When we are birding at high elevations we will move slowly and rest frequently. Medications are available that can alleviate the effects of being at high altitude, so if you fall into that category it might be wise to consult a doctor for options.

AIR TRAVEL TO COLOMBIA: This tour begins and ends in Bogota (airport code BOG). American, Delta and United all offer daily flights into Bogota from the United States, and several other foreign carriers also fly to Bogota (COPA). If you need help with arranging your flight to Bogota, please feel free to contact me and I can assist you.

YELLOW FEVER: Yellow fever is not present in any areas in which this tour will be conducted and vaccination for it is not necessary.

HEALTH CONCERNS: Please consult your physician or the CDC website for other suggestions about travel-related medications for a trip to this part of Colombia. It is always a good idea to be current on your tetanus vaccine. Malaria is not of great concern on this route although the disease is present in parts of Colombia. It is best to consult your physician regarding any medications for the tour and to make decisions based upon your own peace of mind.

INSECTS: Biting insects are not expected to be a problem on this tour due to much of it being conducted at high elevation. However recent rainfall and moisture levels can sometimes make things worse than expected, so it is always best to be prepared for the possibility of biting insects. The best defense is wearing long-sleeved shirts and long pants and having an adequate supply of repellent.

CURRENCY: The Colombian Peso (COP) is the currency used in Colombia and you will need to use it to pay for incidental expenses like alcoholic beverages and souvenirs. It is best to exchange your dollars for COP at the airport in Bogota. There will also be ATM's available in Bogota, Ibague and Pereira and these always provide the best exchange rate. Please be sure to tell your bank that you will be traveling in Colombia during the tour dates so ensure that your debit card works at ATM's.

ELECTRICITY: There will be electrical outlets that you can use to recharge batteries at all of the places we stay. Electrical plug-ins in Colombia are of flat two-pin variety, the same as those used in the U.S. It is not unusual to find sockets that lack the third grounding pin, so carrying an adapter for those cases is a good idea. Also, though there are outlets in all of the hotels, power outages are not unusual so it is a good idea to bring several spare batteries or a portable battery pack.

INTERNET ACCESS: Wifi will be available in most of the hotels although it may be accessible only in common areas and not in the rooms. (It is not available at Montezuma). Cell service is very good in Colombia and you should be able to receive a signal most of the time.

ENTRY INTO COLOMBIA: Visas are not required for travel to Colombia. You will need a valid passport, which has an expiration date six months after your departure date.

FIELD GUIDES: There are two options for field guides for Colombia. The oldest and most comprehensive guide is *Guide to Birds of Colombia* by S. Hilty and W.L. Brown. This is a large book and over 20 years old. It is heavy and cumbersome in the field, but has excellent illustrations and textual coverage of the birds. Because of its age, the taxonomy is outdated. The biggest objection most people have to this book is its size

which makes it impractical to carry in the field. A good way to remedy this issue is to cut the plates from the book and have them bound separately.

A more field friendly option is the recently published *Field Guide to the Birds of Colombia* published by ProAves, a Colombian ornithological organization. This is an excellent accessory as the taxonomy is current and the book is much smaller and easier to carry. However the illustrations are not always accurate making it difficult to use as a field identification guide in all cases.

The best choice for having solid reference material in Colombia is to have both Hilty's plates and the ProAves guide at your disposal.

GUIDES: The leaders for this tour will be Jan Hansen from Otus asio Tours and a local guide provided by our ground agent in Colombia.

TRANSPORTATION: For most of the tour we will travel in a spacious, comfortable air-conditioned bus. When necessary we will use 4WD vehicles to access more rugged areas.

INFORMATION: For additional information regarding this tour contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or at otusasiotours@gmail.com