

Ecuador

27 January - 13 February 2001

Participants:

Roger Dodds

Martyn Kenefick

John Leigh

Ivan Martin

Peter Nickless

Tom & Jane Smith



Leaders:

David Hoddinott (Sacha) and Tony Nunnery

Picture: Collared Aracari

A tour where the total list of species amassed by the group, in sixteen days of birding, stands at 524, including no less than 16 Choco endemics, can only be described as an unqualified success. Indeed, the list increases to 525 if we embrace the Peruvian Meadowlark seen by Ivan, Peter & Roger at Guayaquil airport, en route to Quito. Whilst some of us were still flying in from the UK, Canada and Trinidad on 27th January, those arriving early took advantage of an afternoon stroll in a Quito park. With only Sparkling Violet-ear, Great Thrush and Rufous collared Sparrow troubling the notebook, there was still all to play for.

Day 1: A travel day with participants arriving on various flights from North America, The Caribbean and Europe.

Day 2: Up before dawn and clad in cold weather gear, we met Tony and set off in our two jeeps for our introduction to the Paramo. Just an hour's drive from Quito, Yanacocha stands adjacent to Volcan Pichincha at over 11,300ft. In perfect visibility and bright sunshine (but freezing cold) initial comparisons with the Scottish highlands were inevitable, especially for those who saw a Short-eared Owl perched beside a narrow gully. However, we were soon walking the Inca Ridge finding Brown-backed, Crowned and Streak-throated Bush Tyrants, Hooded Mountain-tanagers and Spectacled Whitestarts. Pride of place, however, went to our first Choco endemic, Black-chested Mountain-tanager, a relief as Yanacocha is the only reliable site to find this very local species. Along the ridge, we were introduced to White-throated and White-tailed Tyrannulets and were frustrated for ages with just glimpses of a Unicoloured Tapaculo almost at our feet. We enjoyed close perched views of Sapphire-vented Puffleg and Rufous-naped Brush-finch and found our first large raptor, a 2nd year Black-chested Buzzard Eagle, hovering just like a Rough-legged Buzzard, over a grassy slope. After a packed lunch (shared with a local sheepdog!), we descended to the rustic village of Nono. Here, in a flower garden full of bloom, we enjoyed fantastic feeding displays of Buff-winged Starfrontlet, both Black and Green-tailed Trainbearers, White-bellied Woodstar and best of all, an outrageous Sword-billed Hummingbird. Further along the road, hedgerows yielded Tufted Tit-tyrant, Black-crested Warbler, Blue-backed Conebill, both Glossy and Black Flowerpiercers and the gaudy Southern Yellow Grosbeak. We finally arrived at what Tony described as a "litt'l biddy pond" - the home of a shy Ecuador Rail. Working the bordering trees, we met our first feeding flock which, included Hooded Siskins, Superciliaried Hemispingus and a smart Rufous-chested Tanager (looking like an orange Prothonotary Warbler), and watched a distant perched up Red-chested Cotinga. Sadly, whilst we were watching the treetops, the rail performed at the other end of the pond, for Edwin, our driver! An excellent introductory day; 41 species, most of them new for all of us, and tomorrow...Amazonia.

Day 3: After what was to prove to be our only "lie in" of the trip, we left Quito aboard our 20-seater plane for the thirty minute flight to Francisco de Orellana (known locally as Coca). The moment we disembarked, the change in temperature was obvious. We had gone from Quito at 9,000ft and "mid 50's" to Coca at about sea level and "late 70's". Whilst waiting for the bus to ferry us to the jetty, we had a taste of lowland Ecuador birds; Cobalt-winged Parakeets flew over and a superb adult male Vermilion Flycatcher sat on a telegraph wire whilst Great Kiskadee and Tropical Kingbird were on nearby rooftops. The journey to the river took only a few minutes along the muddy and potholed streets of downtown Coca. The local residents must be so used to "gringo tourists" none seemed to notice us. In just the few minutes between getting off the bus and into our boat, we added two woodpeckers to the list - Yellow-tufted (which would prove to be fairly common and widespread) and Spot-breasted (the only one we were to see). For the next three hours or so we motored up the Rio Napo criss-crossing from one bank to the other. The Napo is some 1600km long and is one of the main tributaries of the Amazon. New birds were seen "thick and fast" amongst a list of more familiar fare. Raptors

included Greater Yellow-headed Vultures as well as the ubiquitous American Black Vulture, both Black and Yellow-headed Caracaras, the graceful Swallow-tailed Kite and the inevitable Osprey. The shallow waters were a haven for large shorebirds with both Snowy and Great White Egrets accompanying Cocoi (White necked) and a locally rare Great Blue Heron. Without question, the "wader highlight" was a delightful party of Pied Lapwings watched at close range, their extensive white in both upper and underwing surfaces rather reminiscent of Egyptian Plovers! However, for the accompanying Sacha guides, the highlight were three winter plumaged Laughing Gulls! It wouldn't be a river trip without kingfishers. Sure enough Amazon, Ringed and Green were eventually added to the tally. A party of 25 lethargic Sand-coloured Nighthawks perched atop one of the bridges was a surprise, and hirundines in the form of White-banded, Bank (Sand Martin) and Barn Swallows latterly provided our escort. We docked shortly after 16.00 but our journey still had two legs to go. Whilst the crew attended to our baggage, we spent the next half hour along a forested boardwalk encountering our first Swallow-wing Puffbirds, Black-tailed Tityra and Scarlet-crowned Barbet together with wintering Eastern Kingbirds and a Blackpoll Warbler from North America. We then jitteringly stepped into our canoes for the smooth and tranquil 10-minute paddle across the lagoon to Sacha Lodge, our home for the next four nights, with Black-capped Donacobius being added to the list. Even as we sat, sipping a welcome beer in the lounge waiting to be allocated our rooms, our list was increasing; a couple of Hoatzins scrambled across the lakeside bushes. But the juvenile Spectacled Owl perched right outside our window was too tame, surely! We were introduced to David, our appointed guide for the duration of our stay, and had our itinerary outlined to us for the next few days. Apparently the previous two weeks had suffered torrential and persistent rain - fingers crossed that today's warmth and sunshine would continue. After dinner, the first of many brilliant Sacha buffets, David took us back out in a canoe in the hope of some nightbirds. Atmospheric definitely, but sadly no birds; just a few bats and a baby Cayman right under the restaurant. A wonderful day with ever changing scenery and a bird list of 63 species.

Day 4: 05.30 breakfast and 06.00 departure but even before that, we tasted Sacha's efficiency. An early morning knock on the door at 05.15 ensured everyone was up and raring to go. The plan was to retrace our steps and start birding from the boardwalk back to the Rio Napo, but Peter even managed to jam a Cuvier's Toucan before we left the Lodge. We set off in our canoe to a glorious sunrise, all concerns of last weeks weather evaporating. Even before we reached the boardwalk, those who had missed yesterdays donacobius were rewarded with excellent views, and we all added Limpkin, a family of Hoatzins, Green-and-rufous Kingfisher and White-chinned Jacamar to our lists. The thirty minute boardwalk took nearly two hours, so good was the birding. Golden-headed Toucanet and Lettered Aracari (pronounced with a "soft c"), a White-bearded Hermit literally weaving its nest to the underside of a leaf, a very timid and flighty Mottled Owl at its daytime roost (how did Eusebio find that!) and the back end of an Undulated Tinamou racing away "chicken style" into the undergrowth. A host of flycatchers included Social, Grey-capped, Boat-billed and Piratic, not forgetting Mottled-backed Elaenia and Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet and our introduction to the tanager family with several twittering Turquoise and an obliging pair of Magpie Tanagers. We then boarded our motorised pirogue to float further up the Napo before entering the narrow, shallow, sunken log-ridden waterway that was the Shipati River. Quickly we learned the art of birding from a canoe, no sudden movements, no standing up! But everything perched up for us; two Blue-throated Piping-guans as big as turkeys, but so graceful, Dusky-headed and Blue-winged Parakeets; the "kingfisher like" White-eared Jacamars, Chestnut-eared Aracari, Bare-necked Fruitcrow and Orange-backed Troupial to name but a few. Our next stage was to enjoy (and sometimes endure) a sweaty tramp through a couple of kilometres of primary forest. Late morning/early afternoon is never easy in the forest, and birds with "ant" in their names are never easy. So it was to David's eternal credit and patience that we managed to find Spot-winged and the (almost) identical Dusky-throated and Cinereous Antshrikes, both Short-billed and Grey Antwrens; and two striking antbirds, Warbling and Spot-backed. Peter and Roger also managed to jam Black-faced Antbird to the envy of the others. When you add the very local Yellow-billed Jacamar, White-tailed Trogon, male Blue-crowned Manakin and (for some) Ruddy Quail-dove to the tally, it really was a successful walk. The return journey produced excellent views of Slender-billed Kite and Roadside Hawk, the metallic toned Greater Ani, Chestnut and the rather rare Rufous-headed Woodpeckers and our introduction to the confusing world of woodcreepers with Plain Brown, Wedge-billed, Barred, Black-banded and Buff-throated. After a well earned shower, a sumptuous dinner and the obligatory few beers, David was still game to try our hand with the torches, this time down a forest trail behind the Lodge. We managed to call in Tawny-bellied Screech-owl and enjoyed? close ups of both Black Tarantula and a very ferocious looking Wolf Spider. A brilliant, but exhausting day with an impressive 94 species and we had to get up even earlier the following day!

Day 5: The knock on the door was 04.15 this morning, inviting us to walk through the forest by torchlight! Our aim, to spend most of the morning atop the Canopy Hide. This stands at an impressive 150ft tall built around a giant Capoc tree and we had to be on top by dawn! By now we were getting fussy about the weather, we needed it to be dry, but didn't want too much sun, overcast would be ideal but we got a scorcher with not a cloud in sight! David pointed out our "markers" - the Cross Tree on one side (apparently he has seen 58 different species perched on it) and a couple of fruiting trees on the other. First new bird for the day, a delightful little ball of fluff sitting right above us (actually a Yellow-browed Tody-flycatcher), shortly followed by two glamorous Masked Crimson Tanagers, later seen building a nest. Both Crested and Russet-backed Oropendolas flitted across our panorama in groups. One such party contained a much smaller, darker individual looking like a cacique with yellow restricted to the outer tail. This proved to be Band-tailed Oropendola, an addition to the Sacha list (and temporary the subject of one upmanship for David, the other guides had to wait until the following day). After a couple of unsuccessful attempts, we finally managed to tape lure in the star woodpecker of the trip; Cream coloured Woodpecker. It actually landed in the tree that formed the central foundation to our treetop perch. Four more woodpeckers quickly followed; Scaly-breasted, Crimson-crested, Chestnut and Red-stained. The theme of large brightly coloured birds continued with excellent perched views of Ivory-billed and Many-coloured Aracaris, Cuvier's

Toucan (at long last for some), a magnificent pair of Great Jacamars, an exquisite male Plum-throated Cotinga and both Purple-throated and Bare-necked Fruitcrows. From out of nowhere, Eusebio appeared with bags draped over both shoulders, our breakfast! By about 08.30 it was getting pretty hot, the thermals were rising and raptors began to soar. After the obligatory Greater Yellow-headed Vultures came Slender-billed, Double-toothed and Swallow-tailed Kites. A couple of rather distant Plumbeous Kites then had to take evasive action to thwart the attack of a harrying Bat Falcon. Of more subtle colour, flycatchers were much in evidence. We soon added Yellow-margined Flycatcher, Slender-footed Tyrannulet, Cinnamon Attila and Black-capped Becard to our trip list. For once our luck evaded us, if only we had been looking in the opposite direction when David shouted "Amazon Umbrellabird". Still we contented ourselves in the knowledge that it was indeed just a microsecond view. We had hoped for tanagers by the bucket-load and their scarcity was perhaps our only other disappointment. However, we still managed to find Opal-rumped, Opal-crowned, Silver-beaked, Turquoise and Masked, together with Rufous-bellied and White-lored Euphonias. By 10.30 it was roasting. The birds were hiding under the canopy and we returned to earth with a magnificent 64 species under the belt. Rather than retrace our steps along the woodland trail, we trekked down to the edge of the swamp forest and made the return leg in luxury, by canoe. We added a nesting Rufous-breasted Hermit and an Ecuador endemic; Orange-breasted Manakin along the way. Most of us let the heat of midday pass us by as we lazed in the hammocks on our balconies. Binoculars fortunately were still close at hand, as a Speckled Chachalaca decided to perch up alongside the cabins. Organised birding reconvened at 15.30. Within ten minutes we had seen one of the best birds of the whole trip, an absolutely huge, magnificent Great Potoo roosting in trees beside the Butterfly Farm. We then crossed the lagoon once more to work the boardwalk forest until mid evening. Amidst the rustle of Squirrel Monkeys in the foliage overhead our attempts at obtaining more tickable views of Undulated Tinamou failed miserably. What we did see was a grey bundle of feathers hurtle "turbo charged" across a clearing (some say with a South African boot print on its undertail coverts) However new birds still arrived on cue with male Silvered Antbird, two Little Woodpeckers, Dusky-capped Flycatcher and White-winged Becard. We also managed to find one of the worlds smallest monkeys; two Pygmy Marmosets peering down at us from the canopy. As darkness fell, we made it a memorable day for "nightbirds" with excellent torchlight views of not only Tropical Screech-owl, but also Crested Owl with its outrageous white ear tufts. And it still wasn't over! Over dinner David asked if we were up to a further brief night-walk. Just ten minutes from the lodge, we were treated to a bizarre roost of both a Short billed Leaf-tosser and a Long billed Woodcreeper "attached" to opposite sides of the trunk of a large fig tree

Day 6: Our final day at Sacha, and another canoe ride across the lagoon in the dark . However all sense of urgency faded abruptly with a magnificent torchlit Agami Heron perched right beside the jetty, a shame it flew before the other party of birders arrived! There followed a "forced march on the boardwalk". It was getting light and we still had some way to go. Even a stunning male Swallow Tanager was given little more than a cursory glance. Our first destination was thirty minutes further up the Rio Napo at a "parrot lek". Flocks gather in the early morning to eat from the riverside clay bank, thereby neutralising the acidity of their normal unripe fruit diet. Right on cue, we were treated to flocks of well over a hundred each of Mealy and Yellow-crowned Parrots (Melee's appreciably larger with a frosty tone to their wings) and rather smaller numbers of the brightly coloured Blue-headed Parrots. Following the brief appearance of a party of 15 Dusky-headed Parakeets, we journeyed further on to land on a couple of river islands. A new habitat for us, long grass and fairly open scrub with trees no more than 30ft tall. - no cricked necks this morning. Almost as soon as we stepped ashore, our first Ladder-tailed Nightjar leapt up from the beach. This island is a renowned roosting area and we were to find at least 6 different birds during the morning. After a flurry of new birds including Lesser Hornero, Oriole Blackbird, both White-bellied and Rusty-backed Spinetails and an elusive Orange-headed Tanager in the line of bushes, we walked into denser vegetation embracing a grove of Cercropia trees. Highlights here included two Black-and-white Antbirds, Spotty Tody-flycatcher and Lesser Wagtail-tyrant together with an Olive-spotted Hummingbird still feeding its fledged young. David's excitement was evident as he managed to add two new species to his own list, Riverside Tyrant and Large-billed Seedfinch. The star bird on the island however was missed by all of us (except for the eagle-eyed Eusebio), a Striped Owl roosting in the Cercropias. By late morning, with the sun beating down, we sailed back down river. Raptors were well in evidence allowing us to add King Vulture, Great Black Hawk (another Sacha rarity), and a distant Black Hawk-eagle. Amongst a small party of the now familiar Yellow-billed Terns flying over a sandbar, was a single Large-billed Tern with its "Sabine's Gull" wing pattern. It was now close to lunchtime, the forest is traditionally quiet and we anticipated an uneventful return across the boardwalk to Sacha. Within minutes, we were looking at a superb Sapphire Quail-dove perched on the bottom branch of a tree right beside the path. Again the heat of the afternoon was spent in one's hammock, the tranquillity pierced for Peter and Martyn with a magnificent low flying adult King Vulture. Our late afternoon walk was along forest trails behind the lodge. A little slow going at first with just Lawrence's Thrush and a skulking Black-faced Antthrush troubling the notebook. However by 17.00, we had descended down to the swamp forest boardwalk. Our arrival was heralded with a close perched adult Rufescent Tiger-heron, but our quest was much rarer; Zigzag Heron. David told us that they responded very slowly to tape lure, and after twenty minutes we were set to give up and had actually started to walk back when Eusebio stopped us (his hearing is even more keen than his eyesight). He had lagged behind and motioned us to follow him about 100 metres further back. With straining ears, we could just about hear a responding call way, way off. After another fifteen minutes of occasional tape play, it appeared perched some 20ft up in an overhanging tree, staring down at us. To see Zigzag, Agami and Rufescent Tiger-herons all in the one day is some feat, and a fitting end to our stay at Sacha. Since leaving Coca, we had seen 212 species between us and this called for a good few beers over dinner.

Day 7: Most of today would be taken up with travelling as we retraced our steps back to Quito and once again sought out our cold weather clothing. There was still time for a few exciting birds along the way; our last Cuvier's Toucan undulating over the lodge as our canoe set out, a Lineated Woodpecker flying over the lagoon, a welcome Lafresnaye's Piculet (for those that missed the one

in the "cross tree") at the end of the boardwalk and the mystery hummingbird by the riverboat jetty which turned out to be Glittering-throated Emerald. We now had a strict timetable to meet and so a fairly uneventful boat ride back to Coca was followed by yet another smooth flight back to Quito. This time however, the clear visibility from the plane featured magnificent snow-capped peaks and the odd volcano. Back at the Hotel Embassy by late afternoon, we had time to "forget about" lowland Amazonia birds, and now swot up on the likely west slope Andean species we might find during the course of the next four days.

Day 8: A 06.00 we meet up with Tony once more, and set off for "his valley". After an hour driving downhill from Quito, we turned off the highway and journeyed to the village of Tandayapa. At just 6,000ft, we were in a whole new avifaunal zone, and in a totally different weather pattern; overcast and drizzle all day. In bushes on the village outskirts, we found our first wintering Black-and-white and Blackburnian Warblers alongside more tropical fare in the form of Red-faced Spinetail, Strong-billed Woodcreeper and Slate-throated Whitestart. Hummingbirds were to play a major role today, a female Green-crowned Brilliant and two diminutive male Booted Racket-tails with their "Pomarine Skua" like spoons were just the forerunners of 21 different hummer species seen by early afternoon. Tandayapa lies on the Nono-Mindo road famous for its bird flocks. Following a breakfast of home-made cakes and jam in the village, we were soon "into tanagers" with Golden, Summer, Metallic-green, Blue-grey, Fawn-breasted and Yellow-rumped feeding alongside Golden-headed Quetzal, Little Cuckoo and both Thick-billed and Orange-bellied Euphonias. Eventually we arrived at Tony's (totally hidden from the road), his landscaped bungalow set in 75 acres of primary rain forest. His partner Barbara was busy refilling the hummingbird feeders which we learned need replenishment every 30 minutes so dependent were their customers. Within minutes of our arrival, we were seeing good numbers of Buff-tailed Coronets, Speckled Hummingbirds and both the confusing Andean and Western Emeralds. Rather more scarce and much more dynamic, were the beautiful Collared Inca, Brown Inca (Choco endemic), Violet-tailed Sylph (Choco endemic), Gorgeted Sunangel (Choco endemic) and Fawn-breasted Brilliant. Much rarer still, a male Empress Brilliant (Choco endemic) came in accompanied by a Purple-throated Woodstar. For some while, there were 30-35 birds on view from the balcony, and every one of them was a hummingbird! Eventually we tore ourselves away from the balcony and walked a couple of forest trails. Whilst we failed to find a roving bird flock, Blue-winged Mountain-tanagers and Blue-capped Tanagers fed actively in the canopy and both Spotted Barbtail and Grey-breasted Wood-wrens chattered in the undergrowth. Hummingbirds still stole the show, coming into a line of forest trail feeders was a magnificent splash of colour, a male Velvet Purple Coronet (Choco endemic). By mid-afternoon, it was time to climb further up the Tandayapa valley to our base for the night, the rather bizarrely constructed Bella Vista Lodge. Having sorted out our accommodation logistics, we decided to walk the forested ridge above Bella Vista and finally found both upper and lower storey feeding flocks. Alongside Pearled Treerunner, Streaked Tuftedcheeks and Montane Woodcreepers were Beryl-spangled Tanager and Dusky Bush-tanagers. Our first Crimson-rumped Toucanet was seen only by a few, but we all had excellent views of both male and female Green-and-black Fruiteater. New flycatchers were much in evidence with pallid coloured Southern Beardless-tyrannulets, followed by Flavescent, Bran-coloured and Streak-necked Flycatchers. The overcast conditions and drizzle meant an early dusk. We had seen 92 species during the day and one more after dark, a roosting Rufescent Screech-owl in the trees outside Bella Vista restaurant.

Day 9: Dawn broke with clear skies and warm sunshine. Birding the road back down from Bella Vista to Tony's house produced a plethora of excellent new birds. The large and colourful were represented by 2 Masked Trogons, a Toucan Barbet (Choco endemic), Red-billed Parrot and Crimson-mantled Woodpecker. Of smaller stature (but just as bright) were Russet-crowned Tody-tyrant and Tropical Parula whilst Brown-capped Vireos and a "prinia like" Long-tailed Antbird kept the more subtle tones represented. As the sun beat down on Tony's balcony, the first raptors and aerial feeders began to show. Alongside the now familiar Roadside Hawks came 2 Plain-breasted Hawks and a Barred Forest-falcon. Amongst the flocks of Chestnut-collared Swifts a subtle difference in jizz heralded a Spot-fronted Swift (for many it was always flying in the wrong direction to see its "spot fronts"!) This is a newly discovered bird in Ecuador, and Tony's balcony is just about the only place to see it. Most of yesterday's hummingbirds were again present, but our energy was directed in calling out those ace skulkers; Spillman's Tapaculo and Azara's Spinetail. As a direct contrast, who could forget the delightful and colourful sight of two pairs of Golden-rumped Euphonias mutually preening in the tree alongside the balcony. Having left Tony's by late morning, we drove back to Bella Vista for lunch and then onward and upward to the head of the Tandayapa valley, birding the roadside forest on the crest and downward slopes into the Mindo valley. One of our target birds, another Choco endemic, Plate-billed Mountain-toucan, was proving elusive but eventually a juvenile flew into a nearby tree. Tyrannine Woodcreeper was another addition to our growing list of this family. Its distinguishing feature being a total lack of distinguishing features! Flycatchers were much in evidence with Black-capped Tyrannulet, Cinnamon Flycatcher and Black-and-white Becard being new for the day. Plain-tailed Wrens called fervently from the undergrowth but were tantalisingly difficult to see whilst accompanying Yellow-throated and Dusky Bush-tanagers and Western Hemispingus were a little more obvious. Higher up in the trees the familiar sight of Blackburnian Warblers and numerous Golden & Beryl-spangled Tanagers and Blue-winged Mountain-tanagers were augmented by Blue-and-black, Silver-throated & Flame-faced Tanagers. A fairly tortuous drive (with just Scrub Blackbird being added to the list) eventually brought us to our accommodation for the next two nights; Mindo Garden Lodge. By now the weather had clouded over but we still managed two new hummingbirds coming into the feeders, White-whiskered Hermit and Green-crowned Woodnymph. For a late afternoon walk, we worked the scrub and forest trail immediately behind the Lodge. Almost immediately Tony pointed out the call of Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, but despite a frantic search, it was a no show. We did, however, have excellent perched views of feeding adult Plate-billed Mountain-toucan. The white-water river that runs right past the Lodge looked excellent for dippers, but again no show. In their place, flycatching from the rocks, were both Black Phoebe and Smoke-coloured Pewee. Those that decided to return to their rooms as dusk fell missed out on (claimed!) good views of a couple of Sicklewinged Guans! All-in-all another very successful day. We saw a total of 95 species and ended the day in some prime habitat. It was

looking good for tomorrow.

Day 10: Again dawn heralded warmth and sunshine. In front of the Lodge first thing were numbers of Silver-throated, Golden & Yellow-rumped Tanagers. We watched both Chestnut-rumped Toucanet and Plate-billed Mountain-toucans coming into a fruiting tree alongside our first new bird of the day; Buff-throated Saltator. Whilst actually outside the restaurant building, a pair of White-flanked Antwrens lurked in the undergrowth. After breakfast we drove out along the Mindo road stopping at a number of access areas to the river. Whilst dippers were still notable by their absence, we did find Torrent Tyrannulets perched where dippers should be. A Sickle-winged Guan clambered high in a fruiting tree was a relief for those who left early the previous evening, but the two curassow sized birds flying along the tree line will always remain a mystery. On driving through Mindo village, a Pacific Hornero was seen skulking like a Cattle Egret in someone's back yard and Plain-breasted, Barred and Roadside Hawks joined the more attractive Swallow-tailed Kites in the skies overhead. By mid morning, we arrived at a small, forested reserve, Mindo Lindo, owned and managed by friends of Tony. Here the feeders abounded with Velvet Purple Coronets and Violet-tailed Sylphs but even these were outnumbered by both Booted Racket-tails and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds. We walked the trails but, a combination of late morning and hot sun made them hard work. Indeed, the only notebook entry was a Masked Trogon. By the time we had finished our lunch, the clouds had swept in and drizzle started to fall but it also began to rain birds! For the next few hours in Mindo Lindo car park area and retracing our steps down the Mindo Road, we saw over 70 species. Again the "large and colourful" were well represented with the familiar Squirrel Cuckoo and Golden-headed Quetzals accompanying at least 5 Pale-mandibled Aracaris (Choco endemic) together with the gaudy Toucan and Red-headed Barbets. Understorey flocks contained both Red-faced and Slaty Spinetails, Lineated, Scaly-throated and Ruddy Foliage-gleaners; a Narino Tapaculo (Choco endemic) for the lucky two who were peering into the correct part of the bush and, at least 8 Three-striped Warblers. Higher in the canopy, fast moving "twittering parties" were made up primarily of Blue-winged Mountain-tanagers and Yellow rumped Tanagers. Other new tanagers included Rufous-throated, Golden-naped and Blue-necked and we enjoyed a substantial "back up list" including White-lined, Summer, Beryl-spangled and Fawn-breasted. Pride of place however, went to 2 rare Choco endemics; Black-chinned Mountain-tanager (which superficially resembles Blue-winged but with much less yellow in the crown and both chin and throat black) and Glittering-green Tanager (we saw at least 3 of these which Tony had seen less than a dozen all told). As always, flycatchers were much in evidence. Slaty-capped and Rusty-margined Flycatchers and Ashy-headed Tyrannulet were new, but the 3 Ornate Flycatchers really stole the show. Perhaps rarest of all was the female Long-wattled Umbrellabird, which flew jerkily across the road, sadly not to be seen again. Back at Mindo Gardens once more, having worked through some accommodation logistical difficulties, we finally caught up with White-capped Dipper; close views of one (which incidentally does not "dip" under water) right beside the bridge. The split second plummet from the treetops of an Andean Cock-of-the-Rock was much less satisfactory however! This effectively brought to an end birding in a wonderful setting.

Day 11: A pre dawn start heading out of the Mindo Valley and then north west along the highway, our destination Pedro Vicente Maldonado (PVM). However, we saw heavy rain clouds in that general direction and so stopped en-route to bird the Los Bancos road. By mid morning the skies had cleared and we headed on west. Sadly PVM is the most degraded area of former forest that we had seen so far, with vast stretches turned over to oil palm plantation and cattle pasture. Within a year, there is a real danger that it will all be gone. The birding was absolutely brilliant perhaps only because species have been pushed close together by the logging. As the skies cleared, our first raptors included Grey-headed and Plumbeous Kites, two Grey-backed Hawks (virtually indistinguishable from Grey Hawk of Central America and the Caribbean) and perhaps best of all, a perched Laughing Falcon from the highway. A good day for parrots today, close views of a feeding flock of Maroon-tailed Parakeets at PVM, plus 3 Pacific Parrotlets and at least 30 Bronzy-winged Parrots flying over Los Bancos. Being both further west and in rather humid Choco forest, there was a new selection of hummingbirds to enjoy. Bronzy Hermit (looking very similar to the more familiar Rufous-breasted Hermit) and Blue-chested and Purple-chested Hummingbirds (looking extremely similar to each other) were rather mundane in appearance when compared to the male White-necked Jacobin and Purple-crowned Fairy seen later in the morning. Green Thorntails and Violet-bellied Hummingbirds were also welcome additions. Adding a large dash of colour to the proceedings were good numbers of the primarily black and yellow Choco Toucans at both sites. Rather more unusual was the creamy-fawn "albino" Pale-mandibled Aracari that got us going for a while. Three new woodpeckers; Black-cheeked, Red-rumped and Powerful brought the running woodpecker total for the trip to a magnificent 15. Flycatchers were a major feature at both sites indeed, we added another 10 to our trip list including Common Tody-flycatcher, Golden-faced Tyrannulet, Cinnamon Becard and Masked Tityra. Warblers were rather thin on the ground; Blackburnians were few and far between as were Slaty-throated Whitestarts, but we added both Olive-crowned Yellowthroat and Buff-rumped Warbler to the tally. Certainly in terms of colour, Tanagers were the highlight once again. New for the trip were Guira, Ochre-breasted, Scarlet-browed, White-shouldered and Moss-backed. But the real excitement was for a rare, local and immaculate Scarlet-and-white Tanager (Tony has only seen this bird twice before). By mid afternoon, it was time to leave the west slope and make the tiring three-hour drive back to Quito. We made one brief stop, short of the city, and walked out onto some low hillside scrub in search of another exceedingly rare species, White-tailed Shrike-tyrant. A distant speck on the horizon just could have been it, but it was just a speck!. We did, however, find 2 Agile Tit-tyrants, so the walk was well worth it. Four days birding the west slopes of the Andes seeing 225 species, 184 of which were new for the trip.

Day 12: A day of stark contrast, directed by extreme changes of weather. We left Quito at 07.30 climbing east. In bright sunshine, and with a clear blue sky, we started off with amazing good fortune. We had climbed barely 1,000ft when an Andean Condor drifted over the road right in front of us, probably at no more than 100ft above us. It is likely that it had just left its night-time roost perch.

We watched it thermal up and then slowly drift over the ridge. Then came cloud, drizzle and then sleet. The "tops" at Papallacta hold several important prizes, the most critical being Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe, Tawny Antpitta and Giant Conebill. Our problem, visibility down to about 30ft and a biting wind. We climbed in the jeeps to just short of 14,000ft, but barely saw a bird. By descending about 1,500ft, visibility cleared (although it was still freezing). There, on a mountain lake, we found a first ducks of the trip; Spectacled Teal and Yellow-billed Pintail together with a few Andean Gulls. Passerines were few and far between in the roadside scrub but one of the several cinclodes seen was definitely Bar-winged Cinclodes. We decided to use the bad weather (and lack of birds) to our advantage, check into our (sumptuous) accommodation, and then try our luck in cloud-forest below the village. Here we were out of the wind, the rain had all but stopped, and birds were plentiful. In the lower storey, we found up to 8 Pearled Treerunners together with Slaty-backed, the beautiful Rufous-breasted and Brown-backed Chat-tyrants. A Streak-throated Bush-tyrant followed a party of Grey-hooded Black-backed Bush-tanagers and higher in the trees, White-banded Tyrannulets passed through alongside Cinereous and Blue-backed Conebills. In the more open scrub, we added two new species of mountain-tanager, Lacrimose and the magnificent Scarlet-bellied Mountain-tanager together with Pale-naped Brush-finch. Back up at Papallacta Lodge, the weather temporarily cleared by late afternoon and in the grounds we were able to add Viridian Metal-tail and Shining Sunbeam to our hummingbird list. By 17.00, it was foul again and we decided to bring birding to a halt. We had only seen 51 species today, but 18 of them were new for us. We therefore settled back to enjoy a piping hot power-shower (and Peter lounged in his jacuzzi!), enjoyed a few beers and an excellent meal. None of us were brave enough to venture out into the garden clad in swimwear to sample the hot springs - frostbite would have set in before we hit the water.

Day 13: Unfortunately the day began as yesterday ended, persistent heavy rain and poor visibility. Shining Sunbeams were braving the weather right by our chalets and a few Olivaceous Siskins shivered against the car park fence but everything else was keeping its head down. Our journey for the next couple of days was to be governed by the logistics of "getting through the roadworks". In their wisdom, the local authorities decided to widen the road below Papallacta village. This meant that the road was closed to all traffic save for brief windows at three hourly intervals. It was obviously essential that we timed our arrival at the spot to coincide with one such window. The journey down, in torrential rain and on mud covered road, was timed to perfection and after an hour or so, we turned off to the south west and stopped to overlook various stretches of the white water at the River Casanga. Our target was Torrent Duck. At the first (and most suitable looking) stretch we failed but did not anticipate finding a Fasciated Tiger-heron perched on nearby rocks (only the second time this has been seen on the river). Our destination, and home for the night was to be San Isidro Lodge, owned and run by two of Tony's closest friends, Mitch and Carmen. We decided to delay our arrival by checking out another stretch of river from a road bridge. Sure enough, right under the bridge, male and female Torrent Duck. Who could forget the way they absolutely launch themselves into the roughest stretches of water. Then, onto San Isidro, hoping the rain would abate. There are some distinct advantages to being in a wonderful Lodge whilst its raining, you can sit in the dry drinking piping hot coffee, watching hummingbirds coming into the feeders. Amongst the many Speckled Hummingbirds and (one of our favourites) Collared Incas, were 3 new species for us; Bronzy Inca, Chestnut-breasted Coronet and the outrageously colourful Long-tailed Sylph. It soon became apparent that there was to be no early let up in the weather. It was too gloomy to walk forest trails and so we birded the roadside edges. Sure enough, a sizeable flock feeding both lower and upper galleries was soon found, although getting good views facing right into the rain was less than easy, especially for those wearing glasses! Many of the species were familiar now; Pearled Treerunners in double figures, Streaked Tuftedcheeks and Montane Woodcreepers, at least 20 Blackburnian Warblers, both Slate-throated and Spectacled Whitestarts and the inevitable Blue-winged Mountain-tanagers. New species with the flock included Yellow-vented Woodpecker, Olive-backed Woodcreeper, Streak-necked, Rufous-breasted and Handsome Flycatchers, Canada Warbler, Saffron-crowned and Black-capped Tanagers. By late afternoon the skies cleared and we walked a trail behind the lodge famous for its dry season Cock-of-the-Rock lek but, in the knowledge that they are difficult to see during the rains. After a patient thirty minutes wait, there was a splash of red, but it was a Golden-headed Quetzal. It quickly flew across the trail and appeared to perch up. On focussing binoculars in the area where we thought it landed, there was another much more vivid splash of red and orange - a male Andean Cock-of-the-Rock in full view, but only for some twenty seconds. Sadly Tom and Jane had only had the briefest of views, and so Tony decided to hang on and try to relocate it, whilst the remainder started to walk back. Towards the end of the trail, we were rewarded with prolonged views of an immaculate Chestnut-capped Brush-finch feeding right on the path. Soon we were back in our rooms and a chance to dry out, followed by one of the finest dinners of the whole trip. On the way down to the restaurant, some of us saw a Rufous-bellied Nighthawk (a recent split from Short-tailed Nighthawk). Later in the evening, a walk back down the road with Mitch produced an excellent perched Andean Potoo. Again today, birds should best be described as "quality not quantity". The weather had done its "darndest" to scupper our enjoyment, but we still managed to see 74 species including some real stars.

Day 14: Yet again, our whole morning was rain affected. Our first two new birds were right by the Lodge; a few Glossy Black Thrushes perched in open treetops whilst a noisy party of at least 10 Green Jays foraged in hedgerows (how did we miss these yesterday!) We decided to retrace our steps down the forest road once again. A feeding flock was twittering through the trees and contained many of the birds seen yesterday. However we managed to add White-crested Elaenia and Black-billed Peppershrike and finally put a face to the fluty song of Andean Solitaire. A soggy walk up an extremely slippery forest trail found many familiar species, but nothing new. There was some excitement with two skulking shapes taking ages to finally show themselves as Rufous Spinetails, on the walk back out. We had to time our return over the pass to coincide with the temporary halt in the roadworks. Leaving straight after lunch, we made good time and allowed ourselves the bonus of a brief stop where both Mountain Velvetbreast and Tourmaline Sunangel performed at the feeders. Unfortunately a combination of a broken down lorry blocking the road, incorrect advice and less

than co-operative road workers caused us about an hours stop waiting to get through the mud, and we finally reached Papallacta village in clearing skies, at about 16.00. A surprising find, soaring over the road, was a light phased Short-tailed Hawk, at least 3,000 ft higher than its recorded range. We raced on upwards, but as we turned off the highway to drive the final hurdle the weather started to close in once more. We found Many-striped Canastero and a few Plumbeous Sierra-finches but despite a fair bit of searching (and a lot of heavy breathing at 14,100 ft) neither of our target birds performed. We had spent three days birding the east slope (it was allegedly the dry season) in almost constant rain. The habitat looked magnificent, the hospitality in our two lodges absolutely first class. We had seen a total of 121 species, 55 of which were new for the trip. Over dinner, we said goodbye to John who was returning to the UK. For the rest of us, a long drive tomorrow back down the west slope, to Tinalandia.

Day 15: The day could not have begun better as we climbed out of Quito up onto the Paramo; a perched Aplomado Falcon on a fence post, not only a new bird for the trip, but a long awaited "lifer" for Tony. Most of today would be spent driving the Chiriboga Road, birding en route. We would pass through several different types of habitat as we descended from 11,000ft right down to the highway, more than 90 km away, at about 3,000ft. High up on the Paramo both Tawny Antpitta and Andean Pygmy-owl were calling, but none came in close. We fared much better with hummingbirds, seeing three species of "pufflegs"; Sapphire-vented for only the second time, Golden-breasted which was new for all of us as, was Hoary Puffleg (Choco endemic). We found plants suitable for Giant Hummingbird, but only Shining Sunbeams were in attendance. Sadly, despite magnificent scenery and a thoroughly enjoyable walk in the sunshine, the only other new bird seen was a Sedge Wren. As we commenced the long and rather tortuous drive, it began to rain, and then the mist came down. Effectively we wrote off the rest of the morning and descended, via the occasional mudslide, to within a couple of miles of the valley bottom and the River Towachi. We decided to walk down to the river, and were soon amidst a number of small but exciting bird flocks. Lower storey groups were mainly made up of Yellow-rumped Tanagers and Pearled Treerunners but also included Red-faced Spinetail and a number of White-tailed and White-banded Tyrannulets and all too brief views of a real star, Plushcap Finch, keeping low in the bamboo. Higher up in the gallery, 3 Barred Becards were new for the trip and amongst a part of Blackburnian and Russet-crowned Warblers, Tropical Parula and Spectacled Whitestarts a real jewel... Yellow-collared Chlorophonia (Choco endemic). Tanagers were numerous; Blue-winged & Scarlet-bellied Mountain-tanagers vied for attention with Golden, Silver-throated and Swallow Tanagers. As we reached the river a male Torrent Duck flew past and, shortly after, we watched another pair. Almost immediately a strange call heralded another brightly coloured new bird; 2 Broad-billed Motmots in trees overhanging the river. A magnificent way to end the birding day or so we thought. We were halfway through dinner, and only a couple of pairs of binoculars between us when a visiting US birder calmly walked into the restaurant to ask if we were interested in seeing the Black-and-white Owl perched on the roof! For some of us, this was the "bird of the trip".

Day 16: All morning spent in the warmth of low altitude forest at Tinalandia. The walk down from our chalets to the restaurant for breakfast was packed with birds. The large and colourful were represented by at least 5 Rufous Motmots and a couple of Crimson-rumped Toucanets whilst Bay Wrens finally showed themselves and Guira, Dusky-faced, Fawn-breasted and White-shouldered Tanagers fed in the trees overhead. After breakfast, we walked a couple of trails leading off of the golf course. Even before we reached the forest, we had startled a couple of Lesser Nighthawks happily roosting in the grass, both Little and Squirrel Cuckoos perched in the adjacent bushes and parties of Swallow-tailed Kites soared overhead. Just as we reached the forest, the couple of Scarlet-rumped Caciques flew past. We made hard work of enticing the trails to show off their skulkers but, eventually everyone had excellent views of Striped Woodhaunter, Pacific Streaked Antwren, White backed Fire-eye and Chestnut-backed Antbird. New flycatchers included One-coloured Becard, Scale-crested Pygmy-tyrant and Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher. We found the endemic Choco Warbler but "a black shape" was the best we could do in describing the Slaty-backed Nightingale-thrush calling like a penny whistle from deep in the undergrowth. Back at the restaurant for lunch a fine Red-headed Barbet came into the feeders on several occasions, but you had to be looking in the right direction to see the brief appearance of the gaudy Orange-billed Sparrow. All too soon it was time to say goodbye our friendly hosts at Tinlandia, make the long return drive back to Quito and savour our final meal at Hotel Embassy. It was also a time for farewells as we were to go our different ways tomorrow, some to the Galapagos, some back to their homes in the UK and Trinidad. We had enjoyed each other's company, been extremely fortunate in having two excellent guides in both Tony and David and had many happy memories.