

# Midsummer Night Dreaming in Santa Lucia

BY RICK WRIGHT, WINGING IT EDITOR

The pulse of the night beats fast in Quito, but never faster than at the June solstice. Streets and parks fill with masked and costumed revelers, who sing, dance, and generally carry on in a celebration syncretizing elements of the Incan holiday Inti Raymi with the Catholic feast of St. John the Baptist.

Just as the all-night festivities in the city start to slow, twenty miles across the equator another dance is about to begin. Five birders crouch on a steep slope, their hearts pumping hard with the exhilaration of a moonlit hike through the cloud forest of Santa Lucia. Guans whirr and whoosh invisibly above our heads, and a Cloud-forest Pygmy-Owl toots in the distance; as the first rays of the new sun break above the spine of the Andes, guttural croaks and raucous screams announce the arrival of the featured performers on stage. And for the next hour we watch and listen as some 30 male Andean Cocks-of-the-Rock sing and dance sometimes just a few feet away from us, their beady yellow eyes plainly visible beneath plush crests.

The birds pause for breath, and we quietly follow our guide back to the ridgetop trail, accompanied all the way by the “usual” dazzling array of tanagers and hummingbirds. Toucan Barbets hoot all around us, sounding for all the world like the bass line of a Johnny Cash song transcribed for calliope. Club-winged Manakins display like tiny jack-in-the-boxes, and we are treated to outstanding views of a White-faced Nunbird sunning stolidly on a favorite perch, just one of the rare and vulnerable species that still inhabit this paradise.

A paradise—but just barely. Ten years ago, Santa Lucia’s 1600 acres of subtropical montane forest was threatened by

the same pressures that have destroyed so much of Ecuador’s high-elevation woodland. Fortunately, the *campesino* families who own Santa Lucia recognized that the returns yielded by lumbering, grazing, and farming could never match the land’s real value, and in the 1990s they formed a consortium dedicated to the restoration and preservation of the cloud forest.

This far-sighted gamble paid off. Today, birding groups from around the world make the steep two-and-a-half-hour hike to Santa Lucia’s snug ecolodge, from which a network of trails—some quite challenging, others relatively easy—offers leisurely opportunities for the observation of such highly desirable avian specialties as Plate-billed Mountain Toucan, Giant Antpitta, and Beautiful Jay; September and October offer the greatest species diversity, with an exciting mix of boreal migrants and tropical rarities. Even non-birding guests find themselves awestruck by the landscape, the waterfalls, the dizzying variety of orchids, and the remote chance of encountering an ocelot or spectacled bear. Apart from the rainy season, which typically lasts from February to April, the weather is generally cooperative, with bright, warm mornings followed by damp afternoons and cool evenings—perfect for telling birding stories (but only the true ones, of course) over a candlelight meal.

As one of Ecuador’s earliest successful experiments in meshing community-based conservation with ornitho-tourism, Santa Lucia is a model for preservation efforts throughout South America. With willing partners, the dance will continue long past this solstice season, for the birds, the birders, and the people of the Ecuadorian cloud forest.

For more information on the birds of Santa Lucia, visit [www.santaluciaecuador.com](http://www.santaluciaecuador.com), and click on “birding.”



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