

On the Road

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

Naming favorites is a risky thing, but it's hard to resist the temptation when you're birding a place as exotic and as exciting as Ecuador. During this fall's ABA Conference in Quito, I was convinced with every new bird and every new site that I had seen "the best"—only to find each one outdazzled by the next.

All the same, if I had to pass out the golden apple, Tandayapa Bird Lodge (www.tandayapa.lodge) would take the hard-fought prize. Our brief mid-Conference visit had been impressive enough, with tanager flocks moving past at eye-level and a nearly incredible abundance and variety of hummingbirds gobbling sugar water on the deck. But the Lodge truly came into its estimable own for me during the three days I was fortunate enough to stay there with ABA friends after the Conference. Early morning walks led to the famous compost heap, where Immaculate Antbirds, Russet-crowned Warblers, and Chestnut-capped Brushfinches vied for hapless moths under the lights; at dawn, we sometimes shared the trails with White-throated Quail-Doves and Rufous-breasted Antthrushes, legendary skulkers more easily seen here than perhaps anywhere else.

The Lodge is set low in the Tandayapa Valley, above the village, where Andean Cocks-of-the-rock flash along the brushy streambed, and below the upper valley, where Plate-



Photo © Rick Wright, wingsbirds.com.

billed Mountain-Toucans and (for the lucky few) Tanager Finches lurk. A good road winds up the valley, taking birders from site to site, bird to bird—and providing a stunning affirmation of a new model for birding travel and conservation in the American tropics.

As Paul Greenfield, executive director of the Mindo Cloudforest Foundation (www.mindocloudforest.org), explained in his Conference lecture, North American "birding trails" tend to be designed as a series of destinations, strung together like pearls on a convenient chain. In the Neotropics, in contrast, it is that chain itself that is precious; roads there, rather than merely linking disparate localities, are themselves the destination. The Tandayapa Road is itself a birding site of the first order, and walking and slowly driving the road over several days produced spectacular sightings of rare birds and common, from Beautiful Jays to Speckled Hummingbirds.

And tropical roads bring visitors into contact with more than birds. The establishment of Mindo Cloudforest's ecoroutes is also intended to improve the standard of living of local people and to increase their awareness of the value of the natural habitats they live among. Connecting ecotourism and the welfare of local communities is the best hope for success for conservation in the Neotropics; let's all hope that the road to Tandayapa is the road to the future for South America's birds and their habitats.



Beautiful Jay. Photo © Rick Wright, wingsbirds.com.

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