



Winging It

NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION



American Birding®
ASSOCIATION

Vol. 20, no. 3 • June 2008

CONTENTS:

It's Never Too Late	2
Border Wall Resolution	3
Century Club – Panama	6
Books for Birders	8
Geared for Birding	9
Arctic Dreaming	10
Border Wall	11
Sightings	12
Milestones	13
Brave New World	14
Blue-throated Macaws	14
Bicycle Big Year Update	15
World Big Year	16
Fijian Endemic	17
Endorsed Tours	18
Birding for the Blind	19
Birders' Exchange	20
ABA Sales	21
Classifieds	22

Birding for Endangered Endemics in Colombia

CHARLES BELL

We eased ourselves very carefully through a tight barbed-wire fence, pushed through some brush, and moved down into a stream gully. At Luis' suggestion, we dropped down into a rocky grotto, looked up into the base of the thicket—and we froze. There was a loud call—the voice of a Recurve-billed Bushbird. A dark male darted before us, and then a rufous female came in and perched less than 10 feet away. We were awestruck. In front of us was a species that was rediscovered only three years ago after forty years without any sightings. It was at the top of our “wish list” on our Colombia tour. And, we were looking at it in a newly discovered location, near the Colombian ProAves Cerulean Warbler Reserve.

This reserve was one of five ProAves bird reserves that we visited during a 17-day trip to northern Colombia late in 2007. ProAves, founded 10 years ago, is Colombia's principal bird conservation organization. Our tour was by invitation, a “pilot” trip by Tropical

Birding for a group of six experienced birders. It was one of the first International tours hosted by ProAves' tourism division, EcoTurs Colombia.

As we huddled, spellbound in the rock chasm, the female bushbird sat quietly for a few minutes on a low branch giving us ample time to appreciate her bizarre bill, adapted for feeding on bamboo. Such close views led us to appreciate the reasons for the bushbird also being known as “the smiling bird.”

Bushbirds were once quite common in Colombia, as were many other endemic or near-endemic bird species. Now, many of them are classed as “threatened or near-threatened”, primarily due to habitat loss. Land-clearing over the past several hundred years—for timber, farming, mining and now



Recurve-billed Bushbird, Bushbird Reserve, Ocaña, Norte de Santander, Colombia. © Luis Eduardo Uruña

for industrial scale agriculture—has left only widely separated fragments of forest and natural grassland habitat. The distance between habitat fragments becomes painfully clear to the visiting birder who must endure long hours on Colombia's

truck-choked two-lane roads to get from one good birding locale to another.

Yet despite the habitat loss, Colombia still has more bird species than any other country in the world, with the exception of Peru. While it is a big country, with a square area slightly more than that of Texas and California combined, Colombia's extraordinary avian diversity is due more to its unique geography than to its size. The Andes split at the southern end of Colombia into three distinct ranges separated by two very broad valleys, the Cauca and the Magdalena, extending northward. In the far

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Birding for Endangered Endemics in Colombia CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

north, the majestic Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta rises from the Caribbean coast to a height of more than 19,000 feet. The diversity of altitudes and climates creates many different life zones supporting rich species diversity. These ranges and valleys are sufficiently separated to have produced unrivaled avian speciation over the millennia.

We began our tour in Bogotá where we were met by our guides, Nick Athanas and Colombian ornithologist, Luis Eduardo Urueña of ProAves. Our first morning in a marsh on the outskirts of the city, we managed to see the endangered endemic, Bogotá Rail, while Yellow-hooded Blackbirds sang from the tops of reed stems, and a green-billed Spot-flanked Gallinule fed nearby. We managed to get good views of the endangered endemic, Apolinar's Wren, when we stopped by the marsh the next morning. An afternoon climb up a mountain on the east side of the city produced the endemic, Mattoral Tapaculo.

Then we were off on our circuit of five of ProAves's 11 bird reserves scattered throughout the country.

El Paujil Reserve

Getting to El Paujil, the indigenous name for the Blue-billed Curassow, was a tortuous experience. Stuck in a long line of huge trucks, our van crept up over two mountain ranges before dropping precipitously down into the broad Magdalena Valley. The last stage of our journey was by a long riverboat down the Ermitaño River to finally reach one of the last forested areas in the region. It was almost dark and we marveled at our boatman's ability to negotiate the shallows and overhanging branches. We had to climb up a muddy slope to the El Paujil Headquarters Camp, which consisted of a main guesthouse and dining porch, a researchers' bunkhouse, and a new building with two air-conditioned guest rooms.

Our target at El Paujil was the Blue-billed Curassow. The 3000-acre reserve, created in 2003 with donations from the American Bird Conservancy and Conservation International, protects this critically-endangered endemic species. We spent three days walking the trails, all to no avail. The closest we came to the bird was a fresh curassow footprint in a streambed. These birds have been severely hunted and are extremely wary of people. But, we did have very long looks at perched Saffron-headed Parrots, a near-threatened species, the endangered endemic, White-mantled Barbet, and the near-threatened endemic, Sooty Ant-Tanager, with its brilliant scarlet crest.

As we hiked the steep muddy trails of El Paujil, we had good views of the near-threatened, Black-billed Flycatcher, Black-breasted Puffbird, and Scarlet-browed Tanager. The reserve is very good for antbirds. We saw Dull-mantled Antbird by bush-whacking up a gully where Nick heard it calling. The glistening-black, Jet Antbird, appeared along the banks of the Ermitaño River, and we were fascinated by the very unusual Bare-crowned Antbird, which looked a bit like a bald old man.

Cerulean Warbler Reserve

Our next stop was ProAves' Cerulean Warbler Reserve, created in 2005 with help from the American Bird Conservancy and British philanthropist Robert Giles, who also

helped establish EcoTurs Colombia. The reserve, 545 acres of Colombian oak forest, is a relict of a unique subtropical oak forest ecosystem that has been devastated by tree removal across Colombia's eastern Andes. It is a 30 minute drive by 4-wheel drive vehicle above the isolated mountain town of San Vicente de Chucurí.

The reserve and surrounding shade-grown coffee and cocoa plantations are an important wintering location for Cerulean Warblers. Our targets in the reserve were Colombian endemics and other special resident species. We spent a strenuous 13-hour day hiking up the Camino Lengerke, a rock pack-road, built 150 years ago by a German-born engineer. A prize for us, as we reached a high pass, was the endangered endemic, Mountain Grackle, that flew out of the fog in front of us. We also had good sightings of the endemic Black Inca and Moustached Puffbird. One of our most interesting sightings was the endemic Parker's Antbird, discovered just 10 years ago and named after the legendary Ted Parker. We saw a male, a female, and a juvenile of this species.

The following day we birded a shade-grown coffee and cocoa plantation where we had good views of Bar-crested Antshrike while enjoying the endemic Turquoise Dacnis-Tanagers and endemic Indigo-capped Hummingbird near the lodge. We then hiked part-way back up the mountain for the memorable sighting of a female Recurve-billed Bushbird.

Recurve-billed Bushbird Reserve

Although we had already seen the target bird for this reserve, Recurve-billed Bushbird, our schedule called for us to visit the 200-acre preserve, created in 2006 above the mountain town of Ocaña. We were glad we did—we had a wonderful sighting of a jet-black male bushbird, this time in what is described as its preferred habitat, thick stands of grass-like bamboo.

El Dorado Reserve (Santa Marta)

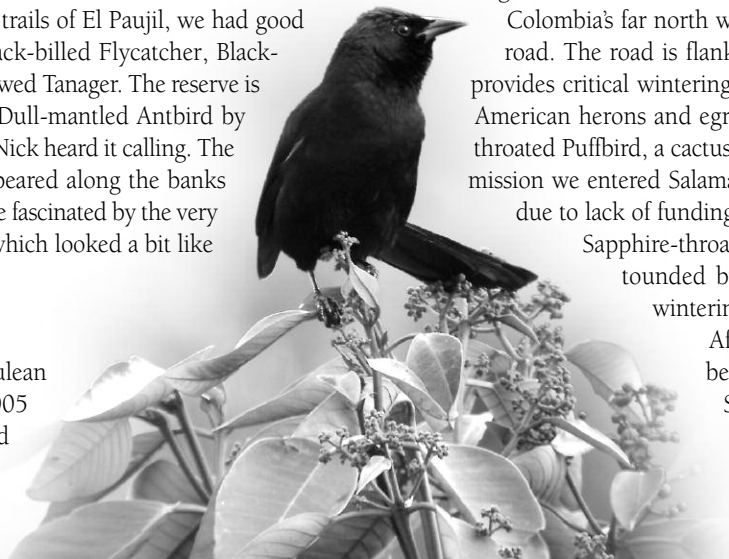
It took a full 10 hours to drive up the Magdalena Valley to the Caribbean coastal resort town of Santa Marta, our jumping-off point for birding the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The trip was remarkable for two things—the huge numbers of 22-wheeler trucks heading in both directions, and the extensive Brahman cattle ranches on the valley floor. We over-

nighted at a hotel on the beach and began our birding in Colombia's far north with a foray along a very busy coastal road. The road is flanked on both sides by a wetland that provides critical wintering habitat for huge numbers of North American herons and egrets. We enjoyed watching a Russet-throated Puffbird, a cactus scrub dweller, and with special permission we entered Salamanca National Park, currently closed due to lack of funding. Here, we had a fleeting view of the

Sapphire-throated Hummingbird, and we were astounded by the tremendous concentration of wintering Prothonotary Warblers.

After a delicious seafood lunch at a beach restaurant, up we went into Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, some-

Mountain Grackle, Reserva Natural de Aves
Reinita Cielo Azul, 3 Dec. '07. © Nick Athanas



times called the “Holy Grail” of birding in the Americas because residing here is the highest concentration of continental, range-restricted bird species found anywhere in the world.

Our high expectations for Santa Marta were more than fulfilled. In two-and-a-half days of birding, we saw 107 species, including 16 endemics, among them Santa Marta Parakeet, Santa Marta Woodstar, Santa Marta Toucanet, Santa Marta Antpitta, Santa Marta Tapaculo, Santa Marta Bush-Tyrant, Santa Marta Warbler, Santa Marta Mountain-Tanager and Santa Marta Brush-Finch. We also saw a screech-owl that differed markedly from other screech-owls. It was discovered in February 2007 beside the El Dorado Reserve’s cabin, and ProAves is currently describing it as a new species, the Santa Marta Screech-Owl. New evidence from ProAves about the Santa Marta subspecies of the Grey-breasted Wood-Wren (*H.l. anachoreta*), and the recently recognized subspecies of Ruddy Foliage-gleaner (*A.r. rufipectus*), suggests they are unique species too.

Non-endemic birds were exciting too. Groove-billed Toucanet, Crimson-crested Woodpecker, Pale-breasted Spinetail, Black-backed Antshrike, Rusty-breasted Antpitta, Golden-breasted Fruiteater, Cinereous Becard, Rufous-breasted and Rufous-and-white Wrens, Golden-bellied Grosbeak, and Orange-crowned Oriole—all stunning species whose names alone evoke the beauty of the birds of the Neotropics. In all, the birding was spectacular. Just sitting on the balcony of the beautiful ProAves Jeniam EcoLodge, I picked up two “armchair ticks” when the Santa Marta Toucanet flew into a nearby tree, soon followed by a White-tipped Quetzal. This, with an excellent cup of Colombian coffee, was the best-ever way to cap-off an exciting day of birding.

Chestnut-capped Piha Reserve

The next leg of our trip involved flying from Santa Marta to Medellin and then driving four-and-a-half hours to the Chestnut-capped Piha Reserve, a 1300-acre forest remnant in an area suffering from extensive deforestation. Accommodations there were very basic, but four new lodge rooms were scheduled for completion in January 2008. An old cow trail led us into the heart of the reserve where we found the endangered endemic, Chestnut-capped Piha, on a side-trail. The piha, uniformly gray with a chestnut cap, was only discovered in 2001. A walk along an old farm road yielded White-crowned Tapaculo, Sooty-headed Wren, the *columbiana* subspecies of Speckled Chachalaca, and another prime target, the endangered endemic, Red-bellied Grackle, as spectacular in its coloration as the piha was drab. Finally, a rare opening in the thick brush gave us acceptable looks at the recently described endemic, Stiles’ Tapaculo.

Yellow-eared Parrot Reserve

The Yellow-eared Parrot Reserve was the last stop on our Colombian circuit. We stayed in the wonderful colonial town of Jardin and took Jeep taxis up a very rough road to the reserve. We settled down on a hilltop in the first light of dawn hoping the endangered endemic, Yellow-eared Parrots would appear. Fog slipped in-and-out, but no parrots. We ate a breakfast of empanadas, fruit, and coffee, and then began to bird our way down the hill. Soon the fog rolled in making it very difficult to see. We saw one fly-by with two parrots, but they were too high, appearing only as shapes. We birded slowly down the road. While enjoying our first good sighting of a Black-billed Mountain-Toucan, the fog lifted somewhat. Two more parrots flew over, low enough to see yellow on their heads. We finally had an acceptable sighting. Then the fog returned.



White-mantled Barbet,
Reserva Natural de Aves, Arriero
Antioqueño, 11 Dec. '07. © Nick Athanas

We had a wonderful mixed-flock appear, but the fog made identifications difficult. Later, we were barraged with a flotilla of seven White-crowned Tanagers, a life bird. The tanagers looked and behaved much more like jays than tanagers. When we finally tired of looking at their whipped-cream appearing heads, we turned our attention to a close mountain-toucan, one of our last good bird encounters of our tour.

My wife, Nancy, and I saw 425 species in Colombia, many of the sightings allowing us the time we cherish for studying birds in their specific habitat. Our list total represents only one-fifth of the country’s species, and only about one-fourth of its endemic birds. We definitely want to go back, now that parts of Colombia are open and safe for birding. We hope the security situation (see sidebar) continues to improve so that all birders from all over the world will be able to explore new areas and new species in this incredibly avian-rich country.

Chuck Bell is a board member of the American Birding Association and the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory. He is a retired senior officer of the U.S. Foreign Service who served at American Embassies in Africa, Europe, and Australasia. He coordinated the ABA tour program from 2000–2003.

Security Situation in Colombia

Colombia is indeed open for birding. But only some parts of it. In the past few years, the security situation has improved considerably, and we always felt quite safe during our carefully designed itinerary. But parts of the country and of some of its cities remain unsafe. The threats in these areas include armed rebels who are known for taking hostages, narco-terrorists, and right-wing militias. Conflict between the National Armed Forces and illegal groups occurs in some areas. In brief, Colombia is not a place to go birding on your own, or with a less-than-reliable tour company. ProAves and its EcoTours Colombia subsidiary know the security situation well and with 65 full-time staff conducting bird research and conservation, they are best qualified to find Colombia’s most-sought-after species. EcoTours Colombia runs custom tours on a regular basis, and they work with other international birding companies including Tropical Birding and other reputable companies. For more information on where and how to bird Colombia safely, see www.ecotours.com.co or contact info@ecotours.org.