Okay, so you’ve signed up for a tropical birding trip to some cool place like Costa Rica or Peru, and you’ve plunked down your $1,000 for airfare and $5,000 (!) for the trip. If you’ve paid for a private tour, congratulations. But if you’re like the rest of us mere mortals, you’re going to be stuck with 7–12 other people for two weeks, birding in conditions that are rainy, hot or cold (or both), and difficult in many other ways.

Many tropical birds, such as antbirds and tinamous, live their entire lives in the dark shadows of the forest understory. They will never venture out into the open; some are so sensitive that they won’t even cross a narrow trail. These birds are difficult to see even if it’s just you and a guide. With ten people it’s nearly impossible.

Make no mistake about it—In the rough-and-tumble world of “full-contact birding for lifers,” the other people on your tour are not your friends. Some of them will be loud and aggressive; some will be whiny and needy; some are looking to socialize; many will be novice birders on their first trip to the tropics. They will get in your way, assure that you will miss important birds, and provide numerous opportunities for frustration during the trip. After the trip is over, you will never see them again for the rest of your life.

Birding in the Tropics
If you have never been on a guided trip to the tropics, here’s how the birding goes:
(1) You’re walking as a group on a road, with dense forest on either side. The guide hears something and stops. Everyone clusters around the guide, peering into the bushes where he is looking. Chances are there will be someone in front of you whom you’ll have to look around. Someone will not have paid attention to what’s going on, and will ask you, “What bird are we looking at?”
(2) You’re traveling single file along a narrow jungle trail. Only the first several people behind the guide have any idea what’s going on, and the rest have little hope of seeing anything. The people in the rear hear excited whispering from the front, but can see nothing and are frustrated. It seems like the same two people are always at the front of the line.
(3) The guide gathers everyone together to try to “tape a bird out.” With a large group, the only hope of seeing some shy birds is for the guide to play the song, luring the bird out of the shadows for a brief look. This technique may or may not work, depending on the whether the bird has already been “taped out” (so many people have used tapes in the area that the bird will no longer respond when its song is played), the discipline of the group, and the time of year (many birds are more responsive during their breeding season). Even when taping works, the bird is usually fooled for only a second or two, popping up briefly, then vanishing for good. Only the lucky birders who happen to be in the right place will get a look. Sometimes the bird will stay around so everyone gets a satisfying look; but then someone shouts, “There it is!” or points at it, and the bird is gone.

Notes from a Crabby Birder
A frequent traveler to tropical America makes an appeal to fellow tour participants
Behavior in the Field
The first rule of behavior is: Be quiet! The quieter the group is as a whole, the more birds you will see. If you can’t shut up while out birding, you need to take up a different hobby. I would suggest butterflies; they don’t hear. Also, try not to make sudden movements; birds are really sensitive to motion. Don’t point, or if you must, do so in a non-jerky manner, with the finger close to the chest. Lift and lower your binoculars slowly. In general, do everything in slow motion, as if you are stuck in molasses. After a week in the tropical heat, tired and sweaty, covered in insect repellent and sunscreen, you may, in fact, feel as though you’re moving through molasses.

If you spot a bird, speak quietly and use conventional methods like the “clock system.” For example: “It’s at about eight o’clock, two feet in from the edge.” It does no good to shout, “It’s in the green tree!” Unless there’s only one green tree out there—not likely.

When the group is clustered together, stand still, particularly if you’re in the front. The people behind you are moving slowly to try to get a look around you, and if you move, it screws them up. Try not to step in front of someone who is looking through binoculars at something. If you’re standing in front and have seen the bird, try to move slowly out of the way to let others have a turn; next time it could be you who’s still trying to see the bird. If you have dropped back to pee or take a photo, or for some other reason, approach the group slowly and quietly; the tour

What’s wrong with this picture? For starters, the floppy hats on the heads of some of the birders peering into the bushes, trying to see a Black-streaked Puffbird. The author is the guy in the brown t-shirt and beige baseball hat, but he’s having a hard time seeing beyond the floppy hats. In this article, a grouchy birder makes a plea for common sense and common decency on international bird tours: Pay attention to the guide, don’t talk loud, and don’t be clueless. And, please, no floppy hats. Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge, Manu Mountains, Peru.
participants may be looking at something, and you don’t want to scare it off.

Clothing
The conventional wisdom for clothing is: Don’t wear bright clothing. This rule is silly. Birds don’t care what we’re wearing, except maybe for hummingbirds, which are sometimes attracted to reds. I include this rule mainly because bright clothing tends to offend the other birdwatchers. Leave the Hawaiian shirts at home.

Umbrellas can be highly practical for walking along in tropical downpours. However, if you’re using an umbrella, step to the rear when the group stops to look at a bird; nobody can see anything standing behind someone who is holding an umbrella. I realize that you have probably been advised to wear a wide-brimmed hat for sun protection, but these large floppy hats are a real nuisance when everyone is clustered together trying to peer into the bushes. Take it off, or better yet, just wear a simple baseball cap and sunscreen. You’ll also look less like an idiotic birdwatching geek.

Some clothing is noisier than others. Plastic and particularly Gore-Tex clothing, principally rain pants, that swish noisily as you walk, are amazingly annoying. Corduroy pants make quite a swish-swish sound on some people, and some of those plastic zip-off travel pants can be pretty swishy too. Velcro closures on pockets make an unbelievably irritating sound. I have gotten so that I can, while listening to professional tapes of bird songs, recognize the sound of some thoughtless person opening a jacket pocket in the background. I have removed all the Velcro closures from my Gore-Tex rain parka; it still works just fine.

Equipment
You’ve already spent thousands of dollars to go birding in the tropics. Invest in a decent pair of binoculars and learn how to use them. You may ask, “Why do you care if I see birds or not?” and the short answer is, “Actually, I don’t.” But time the guide spends helping only you see a bird everyone else has already seen means fewer new birds for everyone.

Practice and understand focusing in front of and behind things. Frequently the guide will say something like: “See that post out there; look about ten feet behind it on the
ground.” I have actually seen a guide grab a pair of binoculars out of the hands of a hopeless client, focus them, and hand them back.

It is in fact easier to use more expensive binoculars, which produce brighter images and offer more precise focusing, better eye relief, wider fields of view, and so forth. If you don’t understand these concepts, check out the betterviewdesired.com website. The better binoculars are also usually waterproof and nitrogen-purged, which will prevent them from fogging up in humid conditions.

Typically, your guide will have a “group scope,” a powerful telescope mounted on a tripod. He’ll point it at a perched bird, and everyone can have a great look. When using a group scope, step up quickly, get your look, and then step away to let others have their turn; the bird may fly away at any moment. Don’t kick the tripod or move the scope when taking your turn. If you don’t see the bird, it may have flown, but it may be there and you just can’t find it in the scope view. Refocus the scope and take another look. If you still can’t see it, step away and let someone else have a look. If you wear glasses, practice beforehand to see whether you’re better off using them while looking through the scope. Practice with the scope when there is no bird around, not when the group is using it.

A word about photography: You are not on a private tour and, in general, it is rude and inconsiderate to assume, simply because you have carted along a Canon with a 400mm lens, that you somehow have more of a right to approach the bird than the rest of us do. By the way, you have no right to hold up the group by trying to photograph a bird while the rest of us want to move on. Get over it; you’re just going to have to fit in your photos without holding up or distracting the birding.

Digiscoping is the “art” of shooting pictures through a spotting scope with a camera, often a small point-and-shoot digital camera. The results can be stunning! Don’t assume, however, that you are entitled to use the group scope for digiscoping.

**Interacting with the Guide**

Your guide typically will be an expert birder whose skills and experience with tropical birding far surpass yours.

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In this scene, birders are standing on a road and looking into the forest. Notice how the woman in the blue jacket is standing in front of the guide (the fellow with the white pants). Note also that the guy in the purple jacket is apart from the group, too close to the vegetation. Meanwhile, the “group scope” is lugged along for virtually every excursion in the field. *Manu Road, Peru.*
Don’t assume your native guide was wearing a loincloth last week; he may be a university-educated ornithologist who happens to live in the country in which you’re birding. The native guide is usually too polite to discipline the group (a possible hefty tip at the end of the trip may be at stake, after all). It’s usually up to someone in the group to point out improper behavior. If this happens to you, take it with good humor and don’t get defensive or offended.

As a rule, if you see the bird, the guide probably sees it too. If you hear the bird’s call, the guide certainly hears it too. If it’s a large colorful bird right in front of the group, the guide sees it. If he doesn’t call attention to it, there may be several reasons: (1) You’ve already seen it, or (2) He knows you’ll see many of them later and he’s focused on something else that is more important. In any case, it is probably not a good idea to distract the guide at this point. This is a subtle situation. If you know you are seeing a new trip bird and you sense that the guide has not noticed it, by all means call attention to it, but it’s very annoying to the group to have someone pointing out a bird everyone’s seen 50 times.

When standing, don’t get in front of the guide, unless he puts you there. When walking along a road or trail, don’t go ahead of the guide; by walking ahead, you may “bump” birds, causing them to fly away before anyone has a chance to see them. Don’t distract the guide with trivial questions or comments; there’s plenty of time to tell him about the birds at your feeder at home when you’re riding in the bus.

I know you’re on vacation, but for the sake of the group, be prepared to pay attention to what the guide says and maybe take notes. A native guide may have difficulty pronouncing some of the English bird names. On a recent trip, I was trying to ask a Peruvian guide about the genus *Empidonax* (small olive flycatchers), and he thought I was asking about ant-pitta nests. On the same trip, I had to endure a Belgian fellow and two German women trying, in a second language, to understand the guide pronouncing the English bird names in a second
Even if you couldn’t care less if you see another little drab antwren, the bird may be a lifer for many of the other birders, and your thoughtless actions could wreck it for everyone else.

Narrow Jungle Trails

As I noted earlier, walking in a long line, single file, on a narrow jungle trail, can be an unpleasant and frustrating situation; sometimes only the first several people behind the guide will see the bird before it flushes and is gone. Basic fairness and civility, along with a certain maturity, fatalism, and sense of humor, are required. The group can minimize hard feelings by agreeing beforehand that no one spends more than five minutes behind the leader before dropping back to the end of the line. Try to keep up; don’t lag or stop if there are people behind you. When the guide stops on the trail, the people in the front should move around him and bunch up as much as possible to let the people in the rear have a chance to see the bird. Try to avoid snapping sticks or dry

(third?) language. What a mess.

Many of the birds you’ll see will be from avian taxa that are totally unfamiliar, like cinclodes and foliage-gleaners. It’s nearly impossible to master the subtle identification of all the unfamiliar birds you may encounter, and no one expects you to. But consider studying the field guide to your area beforehand, simply to familiarize yourself with the general families of birds and with some of the weird bird names. You haven’t fully experienced birding until you hear a Spanish speaker try to pronounce Taczanowski’s Ground-Tyrant or Mouse-colored Thistletail. If others didn’t hear the bird name or something else important the guide says, help them, but quietly. Nothing will drive you crazy like people who ask five times what bird that was. Do us all a favor and carry a 3x5 card and a pencil to write down confusing names, to be sorted out during the evening checklist.

When the guide is recording or playing, trying to lure a bird in, be really quiet. The recording equipment will pick up everything, including your rustling around, coughing, etc. Don’t wander around. Stay still, and stay with the group. When the bird pops up, don’t point and shout, “There it is!” Everyone’s looking in the same place you are; they see it, too. Remember, your actions affect everyone in the group. Even if you couldn’t care less if you see another little drab antwren, the bird may be a lifer for many of the other birders, and your thoughtless actions could wreck it for everyone else.

These birders, gathered on the roof of Panama’s fabled Canopy Tower, will be your constant companions for 16 hours a day for the next two weeks. Here they are all doing the right thing. They’re all looking at the bird, nobody’s being clueless, and even the photographer isn’t being obnoxious. Soberania National Park, Panama.

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leaves. Often people in the rear cannot hear what the guide is saying. Pass the information back quietly so everyone can know what’s going on.

**Feeding Flocks**
The group is walking along the road, and it’s pretty quiet. Some people are starting to grumble about how there are no birds around. Suddenly the forest comes alive with chirps and motion. Birds are everywhere; tanagers are moving through the canopy, woodpeckers and woodcreepers are flitting from trunk to trunk, small dark birds are hopping in the underbrush. This is a feeding flock or “bird party”; scores of birds move through together in a matter of minutes. Everyone panics, trying to see as much as possible. I actually had a tour leader shout, “Every man for himself!” on one occasion. You can’t possibly identify all the birds, and everyone sees something different. Then it gets quiet again.

A good leader will calmly and quietly point out and identify the birds as they move by. The rules are simple: Look where the leader is looking as he calls out the bird names. That’s your best chance to see the most birds. And don’t distract the leader; wait until the flock is gone before asking questions and comparing notes.

**Group Psychology**
It is an essential aspect of group psychology: Understand managing disappointment and masking elation. You are bound to miss some birds that others see, and you will probably see birds that others miss. Nobody wants to hear you going on and on about the beauty of a bird they missed. (British birders call this “getting gripped off.”) By the same token, sulking if you missed a bird will cheapen the experience for those who managed to enjoy it.

Finally, remember that you have been thrown together in close quarters with a group of perfect strangers. While you all share a love of adventure and birding, you may have very little else in common. Socializing is great, and who knows?—You might meet the partner of your dreams. But it’s not likely, and, in general, no one else is interested in:

- Your politics or religion
- How obnoxious Americans are (if you’re European)
- How obnoxious Europeans are (if you’re American)
- Where else you’ve traveled to (we’ve all been there)
- Who you know in the birding world (celebrity name-dropping?)
- How much better the birding was here last time
- Where you saw the bird before, or how you “sure don’t see that in Wichita”
- How sick you are of the bugs, the heat, the food, etc.
- The birds you have at home
- Your silly jokes or puns

Save your inane comments for back on the bus or over a beer with dinner, and even then, spare me.

It is dinnertime at a campsite at 9,200 feet in the Andes. Now is the time for chit-chat. Now it is okay to ask the guide about that “cool flower” you saw. *Pillahuata, Peru.*