Ecuador has long been on the radar of birders planning a visit to the neotropics. A small country that is home to roughly 1,600 bird species, Ecuador offers birders the opportunity to rack up tremendous additions to their life lists in a short period of time. It is common for birders to see 500 species in a two- or three-week guided tour. The same qualities that make Ecuador a fantastic birding spot also make it a dream destination for photography.

In January of 2009, I traveled to Ecuador for a five-month bird photography expedition. I would visit each of the main habitat regions throughout Ecuador and photograph nearly 400 species of neotropical birds. I would also learn about the many incredible conservation groups working to protect the birds of Ecuador, and about how North Americans can help these groups achieve their goals. There were so many wonderful experiences—certainly too many to describe adequately in a single article. Here are just a few of my favorite memories from this once-in-a-lifetime trip photographing birds in Ecuador.

“María” the Giant Antpitta

Antpittas are famous among birders for being among the most reclusive and difficult birds to see in the neotropics. These ground dwellers hop about amid the undergrowth searching for worms and insect prey. Although they are often heard by birdwatchers in Ecuador, antpittas generally tend to remain concealed.

The Giant Antpitta (Grallaria gigantea) has traditionally been one of the most difficult members of this family to see. Even birders who have traveled to Ecuador several times have often not seen this bird. All of this changed, however, when one man decided to “train” antpittas to feed on worms. Why Ángel Paz believed that he could accomplish such a feat I have no idea. But he succeeded! Ángel’s farm, “Paz de las Aves,” is now an essential stop for any birder visiting northwestern Ecuador. Not only can “María” the Giant Antpitta be seen—but so can “Willy” the Yellow-breasted Antpitta (G. flavotincta), “José” the Moustached Antpitta (G. alleni), and “Shakira” the Ochre-breasted Antpitta (Grallaricula flavirostris). Add to this the fact that Ángel’s farm also has an active lek of Andean Cocks-of-the-Rock (Rupicola peruviana) and you have yourself a fine morning of neotropical birding. By generating revenue from his beloved antpittas, Angel exemplifies how birding tourism can contribute to habitat conservation.
The Quest for the Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe

The highlands of Ecuador are spectacular. Often enveloped in clouds, the upper slopes of the Andes have an air of mystery about them. They also hold quite a few range-restricted birds. One of the target species for any birder visiting Ecuador is the exceedingly handsome **Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe** (*Attagis gayi*). This ptarmigan-like bird is adorned by a beautiful, ornate feather pattern, and is generally found around 14,000 feet in a wind-swept, tundra-like habitat known as páramo.

Having received a tip about a likely spot to encounter this species, I ventured from the capital city of Quito toward the Papallacta Pass area. From the pass, I traveled up and up a gravel road until I finally reached the location that had been described to me. I searched the slopes for hours and turned up nothing. My back ached from the weight of my camera gear. The cold, damp weather and the exertion of hiking around at this altitude were certainly taking their toll on me. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted my target. A sleepy-looking brown bird perched motionless on a mossy hummock. I was elated. As the clouds lifted to reveal the towering snow-capped peak of the Antisana Volcano in the distance, at last I captured the images I was after.

Why Hike up a Mountain with 80 Pounds of Camera Equipment?

As I plodded along a muddy trail in the southern extreme of Ecuador, I was asking myself this question. My backpack was loaded down with flash stands and artificial backgrounds. My front pack carried two camera bodies and a variety of lenses, including a 500mm f/4 and six flashes. My legs ached from the torturous strain I was subjecting them to. Thank goodness my destination was only about three miles along the trail—I am not sure that my legs could have carried me much farther.

The aches and strain of the hike vanished instantaneously upon my first glimpse of the spectacular **Rainbow Starfrontlet** (*Coeligena iris*). This species is uncommonly found in southern Ecuador. The starfrontlets are regular visitors, however, to a special set of hummingbird feeders at the Utuana Reserve. I spent the morning capturing images of these wonderful little birds, and the excitement and joy of seeing them made the hike back to the car much easier to bear.

Rainbow Starfrontlet.
Hillstars and Hailstorms

One of Ecuador’s most beautiful hummingbirds is the range-restricted Ecuadorian Hillstar (Oreotrichilus chimborazo). This species lives at higher altitudes than any other hummingbird in the world—up to 16,000 feet above sea level. Perhaps the best place to find and photograph these birds is at the base of the Cotopaxi Volcano, where they feed primarily on the orange flowers of the Chuquiragua shrub.

It was a thrill to find and photograph this remarkable bird. I will always remember seeing that bird perched atop its precious orange flowers. But equally entrenched in my mind, and what I will never forget from that day, is how fast I ran back to my car when a hailstorm erupted out of nowhere, pelting me with marble-sized bullets of ice.

The Jocotoco Foundation

Cerro Tapichalaca is a mountain in southern Ecuador where in 1997 Dr. Robert Ridgely, author of *The Birds of Ecuador*, discovered a species of antpitta new to science: the Jocotoco Antpitta (Grallaria ridgelyi). This exciting discovery sparked the formation of the Jocotoco Foundation, which strives to protect rare bird species in Ecuador, and the creation of the Tapichalaca Reserve, along with six others throughout Ecuador.

Rather than have birders and photographers chase after the extremely rare Jocotoco Antpittas (listed as critically endangered by BirdLife International), the foundation decided to try to tame a few, as has been done at other locations in Ecuador—for example, at Paz de las Aves, mentioned previously. After three months of trying to accustom the birds to coming in to feed on worms, foundation biologists finally succeeded. The Tapichalaca Reserve offers an amazing opportunity to see such an extremely rare bird, one that has been known to science for barely a decade, at such close range.
Ten Tanagers in Ten Minutes

One of the greatest spectacles of tropical birding is encountering a mixed-species flock. Dozens of species of birds often group together to travel through the forest and forage as a single unit. One day, while hiking in the eastern foothills, I came across a mixed flock of tanagers working its way through the forest. Unfortunately, as is often the case, the flock was high up in the canopy, making photography impossible.

As the flock passed by, I noticed that the birds were moving in a clear direction toward a hill. If I could get ahead of the flock and up to eye level, I knew there was a chance to photograph them. I raced up the hill and to a vantage point where I found a fruiting Cecropia tree, and I waited. Sure enough, within minutes the parade of colorful tanagers—among them the stunning Green-and-gold Tanager (Tangara schrankii)—came directly toward me, each bird stopping to feed upon the Cecropia fruit no more than 25 feet from me. Within minutes the tanagers had come and gone, but I had captured images of ten species of these unbelievably brilliant birds.

Amazon Adventure

No visit to Ecuador would be complete without spending some time exploring the Amazonian lowlands. Visiting one of nature’s wildest and most special places is an overwhelming experience for any nature lover. I will never forget the black-water lagoons deep in the Amazon overflowing with life, the macaws that would often fly overhead, seeing all six species of New World kingfishers, and the raucous calls of the prehistoric-looking Hoatzin (Opisthocomus hoazin). It was a phenomenal opportunity to climb up more than 100 feet into forest canopy towers, and see cotingsas and aracaris from such a vantage point. To top the experience off, each night as I drifted off to sleep in my tent I could hear the hooting of four species of owls—including the enchanting Tawny-bellied Screech-Owl (Otus watsonii)—calling to each other from nearby jungle trees.

As fascinating as the birds of the Amazon were to me, it was equally impressive and inspiring to know that many of the lodges in Amazonian Ecuador are fully owned and operated by the communities that have lived in the area for generations. Recognizing the long-term sustainability of revenue generation from a living forest, these communities have successfully illustrated the benefits that birding tourism can have on local communities, habitats, and, of course, birds.

Learn more about Glenn Bartley’s efforts to promote ecotourism and bird conservation in Ecuador: <aba.org/birding/v42n3p57w1.pdf>