



# Birding the Llanos of Colombia

January 17-24, 2025



Colombia should be on every birder's bucket list. With the highest species count of any country in the world and an incredible diversity of habitats and ecosystems, one could make multiple visits to this avian rich land and barely begin to scratch the surface of possibilities. As the bumper sticker says, "So many species, so little time." With that in mind I have decided to offer this short 7 day tour that will focus solely on the Colombian llanos, a vast wetland complex that stretches across much of northeastern Colombia and northern Venezuela. Until fairly recently, Venezuela has been the destination of choice for birders wishing to witness the amazing avian spectacle of the llanos, but the current political climate in that country has made it all but impossible to travel there. Fortunately, around the same time that the situation in Venezuela was deteriorating, Colombia began to open up after many years of civil conflict. That was good news for adventurous birders as the llanos ecosystem in Colombia offers much the same experience and species that were available in Venezuela. With exception of a day in Bogota at the beginning and end of the tour, we will be based the entire time at Hato La Aurora, a private cattle ranch that welcomes visitors seeking to explore the llanos. From the ranch it is possible to tour the surrounding area in 4X4 safari vehicles that will allow us to access some of its more remote areas. The birding at Hato La Aurora is amazing and we can expect to see good numbers species like Jabiru, Scarlet and Sharp-tailed Ibis, Scarlet Macaw, Horned Screamer, Sunbittern, Gray-cowled Wood-Rail and Pale-headed Jacamar, a llanos endemic. Though rare, Orinoco Goose is also possible here and both Great and Common Potoos are fairly common around the ranch itself. This will be a relatively easy tour



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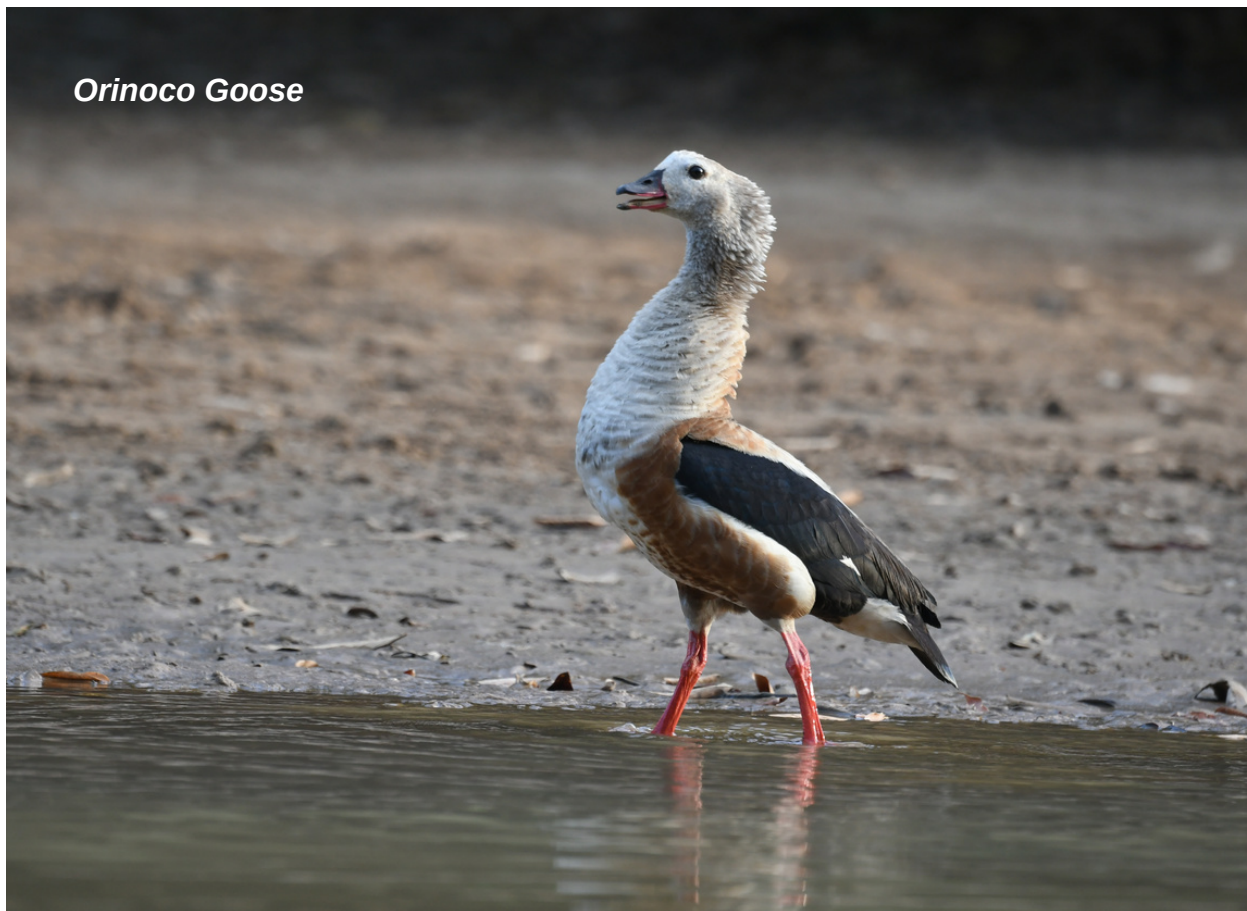
as on most days we will return to the ranch for lunch and a siesta before taking another late afternoon excursion. The flight from Bogota to Yopal is just a little over an hour, so travel is minimal and the food at the ranch is excellent. In addition to the birds in the Llanos there is an exciting list of mammals that are possible including Capybara, which is abundant, Giant Anteater and there is always the chance to encounter a jaguar. Of course the weather in January in this part of Colombia is warm and pleasant, so the trip makes for a welcome respite from the dreary winter weather in much of the U.S. I hope you will consider joining me on this tour to one of South America's wildest and most diverse areas.

## Daily Itinerary

### Day 1: Friday January 17

Participants can arrive in Bogota today at any time although it is suggested that they avoid late night arrivals to limit the possibility of missing a portion of the tour. Upon arrival at the Bogota International Airport, participants will be met by a driver and transferred to a nearby airport hotel. To minimize the risk of flight delays or cancellations causing someone to miss the flight to Yopal, we will spend one full day birding in the Bogota area before traveling to the Llanos. Night in Bogota.

*Orinoco Goose*





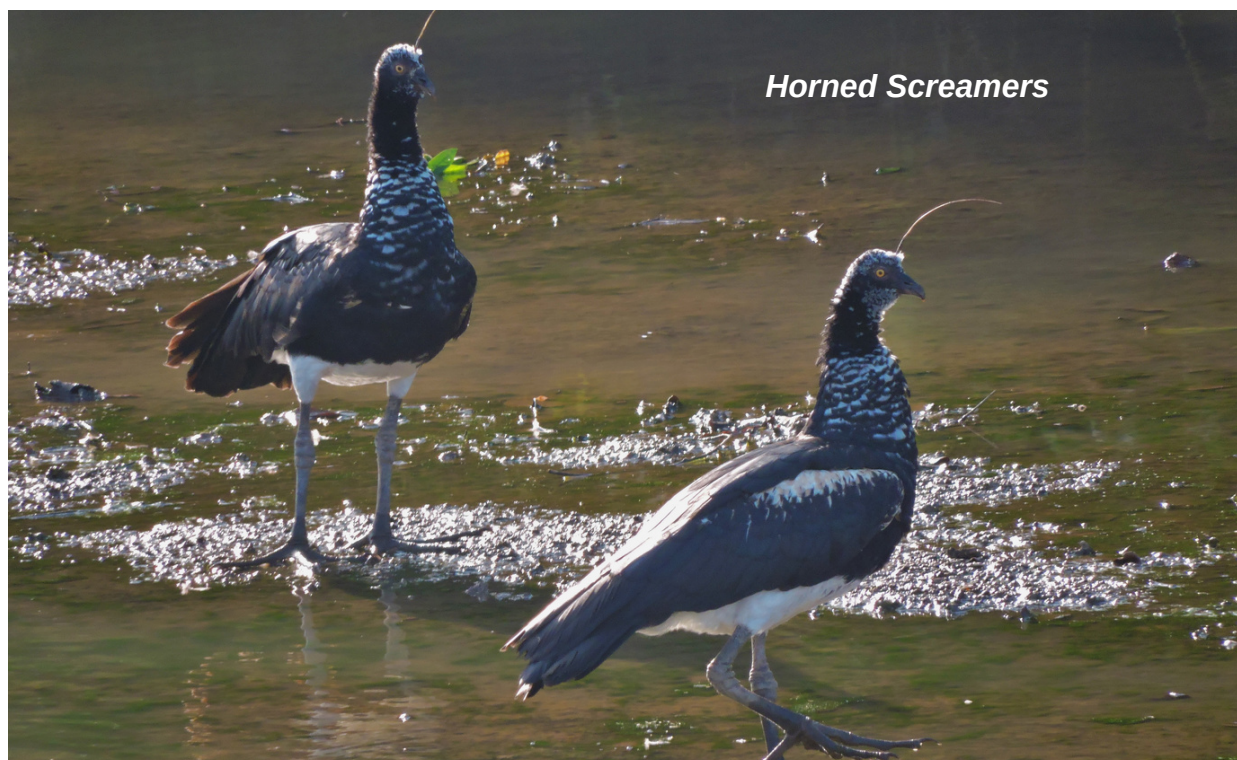
# Birding the Llanos of Colombia

January 17-24, 2025

## Daily Itinerary (cont)

### Day 2: Saturday January 18

Today we will spend much of the day exploring Chingaza National Park located about 2 hours east of Bogota. If the weather is clear we may reach elevations of nearly 12,000 feet, however if it is foggy we will only ascend to about 11,000 feet. The park is a beautiful example of humid Andean forest and paramo, the latter a very unique Andean habitat dominated by a distinctive plant community. As the road climbs higher into the park it passes through a variety of high Andean habitats including high elevation grasslands, elfin forest, humid montane forest and paramo. Some of the birds we will search for at Chingaza include White-chinned Thistletail, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Rufous-browed Conebill, Coppery-bellied Puffleg, Glowing Puffleg, Pale-bellied Tapaculo, Black-collared Jay, Rufous Wren, Hooded and Black-chested Mountain-Tanager, Blue-backed Conebill, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and many more. We will also hope to find the rare and endemic Brown-breasted Parakeet although the majority of the population of this species occurs outside the park boundaries. On the return drive to Bogota we will stop at a hummingbird feeding station where we can relax and watch the swarms of hummingbirds that visit the nectar feeders. Some of the specialties here include Blue-throated Starfrontlet, Green-tailed Trainbearer, Black-tailed Trainbearer, Glowing Puffleg, White-bellied Woodstar, Sword-billed Hummingbird and Longuemare's Sunangel. Night in Bogota.





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January 17-24, 2025

## Daily Itinerary

### Day 3: Sunday January 19

After breakfast at our hotel, we will transfer to the Bogota airport for our flight to Yopal, located at the edge of the Colombian llanos. Upon arrival we will transfer to our 4x4 safari vehicles and begin the 6 hour drive to Hato La Aurora where we will spend the next 5 nights. Though it is a lengthy drive to our lodge there will be ample birding opportunities almost immediately upon departure from Yopal. The entire route will take us deep into the heart of the llanos and there will be numerous roadside wetlands and ponds that will provide both great birding and excellent photo ops. Here we will have our first chances to see one of the world's most impressive storks, the Jabiru, which is fairly common in this part of the Orinoco basin. Other birds that we might encounter during the drive include Whistling Heron, Scarlet Ibis and a host of raptors such as Aplomado Falcon and Savanna and White-tailed hawks. If all goes well we will reach our lodge at Hato La Aurora by late afternoon. Night at Hato La Aurora.

### Days 4-6: Monday-Wednesday, January 20-22

We will have three entire days to delve into the rich variety of habitats around Hato La Aurora. Though wetlands are the primary component of the llanos ecosystem, the area also has patches of riparian gallery forest, tropical dry forest and scrub and grasslands, all of which host a different subset of birds and mammals. In the more forested areas we will hope to see two birds that are endemic to the llanos ecosystem: Pale-headed Jacamar and White-bearded Flycatcher. The jacamar tends to be rather common and easy to find while the flycatcher can be more elusive. In wooded areas along the edge of watercourses we can expect to see Hoatzin, a large clumsy bird that sports an orange crest and whose diet consists solely of foliage. Watching these bizarre characters clamor through the trees is always a highlight for first time visitors to this part of the world.





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January 17-24, 2025

## Daily Itinerary

### Days 4-6: Monday-Wednesday, January 20-22

Another bird that occurs commonly throughout the llanos is the Horned Screamer, a large turkey-sized creature with a spiky vertical appendage protruding from its crown. Like the Hoatzin, Horned Screamers are always an exciting attraction to birders. The spectacular Scalet Ibis, which inhabits northern South America, is also certain to be a show stopper. Its brilliant radiance can be seen at great distances and will add a touch of color to our daily wanderings. Other birds certain to be crowd pleasers include Green-and-rufous Kingfisher, Sunbittern, Sharp-tailed Ibis, Capped Heron, Whistling Heron, White-faced Whistling Duck, Limpkin, Pied Lapwing, Double-striped Thick-knee and Wire-tailed Manakin. If we are very lucky we may also see Orinoco Goose although this species is declining and never a guarantee. In transition zones between wetlands and dry forest we can look for Sepia-capped Flycatcher, Blue-chinned Sapphire and Crestless Curassow. The latter species has been eliminated from much of its former range due to extreme hunting pressure and wild areas like the llanos are one of the only remaining places on earth where one has a reasonable chance of seeing them.



*Two-banded Puffbird*



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January 17-24, 2025

## Daily Itinerary

### Days 4-6: Monday-Wednesday, January 20-22

In addition to the rich avian diversity that the llanos offers, it is also a fascinating cultural experience and provides visitors with an opportunity to see 21st century cowboys in action. Since Hato La Aurora is a working cattle ranch there are always stray animals to lasso and young horses to break. The llanos vaqueros have worked the wild plains since the arrival of the Spaniards to this region in the mid 1500's. Today most people in this part of the world have migrated to the continents ever growing urban centers, but there remain small numbers of "llanos vaqueros" that still live off of and work the land and Hato La Aurora gives visitors a glimpse of this vanishing lifestyle. Of course there are also interesting creatures to see in the llanos beyond the birds. Capybaras, the world's largest rodent, are very common and the possibility of seeing a Giant Anteater or an Anaconda will add a sense of anticipation to every outing. Nights at Hato La Aurora.

### Day 7: Thursday January 23

After a final morning of birding around the ranch we will return to Yopal for a late afternoon flight to Bogota. We will transfer to our hotel where we will have a final farewell dinner and tally our final bird list. Night in Bogota.

### Day 8: Friday January 24:

For participants not continuing on to the *White Sand Forests of Inírida* tour, transfers to the airport will be provided at anytime today. Those who will be participating in both tours will have a free day to reorganize their belongings, do laundry etc.





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## Tour Information

### Tour Size

This maximum number of participants for this tour will be 8.

### Tour Cost

The fee for the tour is \$3795 per person in double occupancy from Bogota. This includes all meals from breakfast on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 8, all accommodations and ground transportation throughout the tour, airport transfers in Bogota, entrance fees and guide services provided by the tour leaders, snacks and potable water on tour vehicles and round trip domestic airfare between Bogota and Yopal. It does not include airfare from your home to Bogota, airport departure taxes (usually included in airline ticket), alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. The single supplement for this tour is \$500. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

### Tour Registration

To register for this tour, please send a signed and completed registration form to Otus asio Tours at 900 Hillsborough Road in Chapel Hill NC 27516. The deposit for this tour is \$500 per person. The deposit is payable by check; credit cards are not accepted. The balance of the tour fee is due 90 days prior to the tour departure date and final invoices will be sent in September 2024.

### Cancellation Policy

Cancellation penalties and refunds are based on the following schedule: if cancellation is made 90 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less \$250 per person is refundable. If cancellation is made fewer than 90 days before departure date and after final payment is received the refunded amount will be limited to the amount that can be recouped from merchants and booking agents. This could be as little as 25% of the tour price. We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.

Refund Schedule Before October 18, 2024: Your deposit minus \$250. Cancellation on or after October 18, 2024: Refund amount dependent upon amounts that can be recouped and may be as little as 25% of the tour price.



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January 17-24, 2025

## Tour Information

### Baggage

Everyone on the tour must limit their luggage to a single bag weighing no more than 15 kilos (32 pounds). The domestic carrier servicing Yopal is small and they are very strict on their baggage limits. Any bags that weigh in excess of the allowed weight will be charged an overweight fee. Soft-sided suitcases and duffels will save weight. In general this is not a trip that requires heavy packing. Cold weather clothing is not necessary due to the warm temperatures, so keeping baggage to a minimum is not difficult. Those continuing on to the La Guajira & Santa Marta tour will need some warmer clothing, but there is a storage room at the hotel in Bogota where you can stow unneeded clothing while in the llanos.

### Climate, Altitude and Trip Difficulty

The tour will be conducted at a leisurely pace, with most walks covering short distances on level roads or trails. In the llanos the elevation will be less than 500 meters and the terrain is very flat. Bogota is situated at an elevation of about 2800 meters, so there it will be cooler, but not cold, and we will only be there for a day. To take advantage of the prime birding activity, we will begin our days at dawn. Early mornings will be cool, but expect hot temperatures and relatively high humidity by mid-day. We will plan to try and take a mid-day break on several days.

### Clothing

Light weight field clothing and casual attire are appropriate for this tour. A couple of pairs of quick dry lightweight pants and shirts that can be washed in the evening will help minimize your packing. We recommend long-sleeved shirts and long pants for protection from biting insects and the sun. Please refrain from wearing brightly colored or white clothing as it tends to frighten the birds. Military camouflage is not appropriate for this trip given the recent civil conflicts in the country. Mosquitoes should not be much of an issue, but biting no-see-ums can be problematic in places, so be sure to pack a good supply of insect repellent as well as plenty of sunscreen. Rubber boots or a pair of water resistant hiking boots will be useful. A comfortable pair of tennis shoes or tevas may be desirable for areas around the hotel.

### Documents

To enter Colombia you will need a passport valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure date. Visas are not required for U.S. citizens entering Colombia.





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## Tour Information

### Health

Please remember to bring any prescription medicine you are taking and to pack it in your carry-on baggage. We recommend that you be up to date with tetanus, typhoid and polio vaccinations, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B. None of these are required but prudent travelers should be current on these things regardless of their destination. Malaria is present in this part of Colombia, so please consult with a physician about appropriate medication. Yellow fever vaccination is not necessary for entry into Colombia, but participants should consider the pros and cons of receiving the vaccine. Again consulting with a travel physician is recommended. There are a few other mosquito and fly borne diseases present in eastern Colombia including Dengue Fever and Zika. There is no vaccine available to protect against these, but contraction rates are very low and the best protection is wearing long-sleeved shirts and long pants and using insect repellent. We recommend checking the CDC website for any current recommendations on visiting this part of Colombia. The web address is [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel). Drinking the tap water is not recommended. Bottled or purified water will be available for purchase throughout the tour.

### Currency

The currency used in Colombia is the Colombian Peso (COP). The current exchange rate is 3495 COP: 1 USD. US dollars are not accepted as currency in Colombia, so you will need Colombian pesos for any cash transactions. You can exchange USD for COP at exchange booths at the airport and there are also ATM's available there that will dispense COP. There is also an ATM at our hotel in Bogota. You will not need a large amount of cash for this tour. Alcoholic drinks, small personal items and tips would be the primary needs for cash. For any purchases made at the hotel in Bogota you can use a credit card.

### Other Trip Essentials

Other important items will be sunglasses, sunscreen, lip balm and an alarm clock. You should also bring a refillable water bottle that you can refill from a large container that will be on our vehicles. A day pack in which to carry things you will need during our birding excursions is always a good idea.

### Miscellaneous

There is no departure tax due at the airport. This fee is included in the cost of your air ticket.

Electricity: 110 volts and the outlets are the same as those in the U.S.

Language: Spanish is the official language

Time: The entire region included in the tour is on Eastern Standard Time.



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## Tour Information

### Internet

Wi-fi and cell service will be available at the hotel in Bogota. The ecolodge at Hato la Aurora has Wi-Fi available in the restaurant area, but the service is spotty and often slow.

### Field Guides

The best field guide for this tour is Steve Hilty's *Birds of Colombia* published by Lynx in 2021.

### Questions

For further information please contact Jan Hansen at [otusasiotours@gmail.com](mailto:otusasiotours@gmail.com) or at 919-259-9423.



*Pale-headed Jacamar*