

COLOMBIA: CENTRAL & WESTERN ANDES & VALLEYS JULY 18-27, 2019

For many years, traveling in Colombia was considered a risky affair due to the 30-year civil conflict that put much of the country off limits to even the most intrepid travelers. Thankfully this is no longer the case, and the unfortunate political situation that tore this country apart for so long is on the mend. Words like “heal” and “rebuild” are now more a part of the country’s political lexicon than “conflict” and “hostility.” Indeed Colombia is on the rebound and that has opened one of the world’s richest and most fertile avian playgrounds to birders from around the world.

Colombia has the highest bird list of any country in the world. Over 1900 species have been recorded including over 70 endemics. Colombia’s rich bird diversity can be attributed to the magic of geography. The country is large (about the size of Texas) and is transected by three north-south running Andean spines. These cordillera are separated by two deep river valleys through which flow the Rio Magdalena and the Rio Cauca. These three mountain ranges are increasingly wet, east to west, and the differences in moisture, climate and elevation account for an evolutionary miracle that has paved the way for an almost unimaginable number of species to exist.

In addition to the improving military and political situation in Colombia, there have also been giants leaps forward by Colombian ornithological and conservation organizations. The country now has a plethora of private and public reserves that have been created to protect the country’s treasure trove of diversity and to encourage visitors to come and experience it. That said, Colombia has a long way to go to match the tourism infrastructure of Ecuador, Costa Rica and other such countries that got into the business of ecotourism many years ago. A trip to Colombia is not without difficulty as it involves long drives between birding venues, traversing rough roads and without the cushy ecolodges found in some of the neighboring countries. But then again, this is part of the adventure and for those willing to endure a bit of hardship along the way and without expectations that things will be as they are at home, Colombia is a fun and exciting place to go birding.

This tour will be a short and comfortable introduction into the birds of Colombia’s Central and Western Andes with a bit of the Rio Magdalena Valley thrown in. It begins in the bustling and modern city of Medellin which can be reached by several direct flights from the U.S. The city allows easy access to a suburban reserve where three endemics reside: Red-bellied Grackle, Colombian Chachalaca and Yellow-headed Manakin. Medellin also allows easy access to the Rio Claro reserve, located about 2 hours to the east in the Rio Magdalena Valley. We will have three nights at this gorgeous reserve on the banks of the Rio Magdalena and surrounded by lush forests where endemics like White-mantled Barbet, Beautiful Woodpecker and Magdalena Antbird reside.

We will also spend two nights in the quaint mountain town of Jardin. There we will stay in a comfortable country inn located near the Yellow-eared Parrot Reserve (Reserva Natural de las Aves Loro Orejiamarillo). This critically endangered psittacid has been extirpated from most

of its historic range and exists now only in Colombia with a population estimate of about 1500 birds. Recent conservation efforts seem to have stabilized the population above Jardin, and by using 4WD vehicles to reach the ridge above town we should have excellent chances of seeing them. In addition to the parrots, there are many other birds available including Ocellated Tapaculo, Golden-fronted Redstart, Black-collared Jay and on and on. On the outskirts of Jardin there is an active Andean Cock-of-the-Rock lek which the land owner has made accessible for birders. The chance to have close encounters with these striking creatures is always a treat.

The third venue for this tour will take us to the Rio Blanco Reserve in the Central Andes near the university town of Manizales. Here we will spend much of our time near the headquarters building situated at an elevation of 8700 feet and where there can be as many as 50 species of hummingbirds attending the feeders! The reserve also has recently started an antpitta feeding program where as many as 5 of these secretive skulkers can be seen including the endemic Brown-banded Antpitta. In addition to the feeding stations, Rio Blanco also has walkable tracks above the headquarters where a rich variety of flycatchers and tanagers can be found including Buff-breasted and Lacrimose Mountain-Tanagers. We will also spend a couple of hours at Nevados del Ruiz where we can explore the paramo at an elevation of 12,000 feet. There are also hummingbird feeders being maintained here that attract some of the more difficult species like Viridian Metaltail and Golden-breasted Puffleg. Other birds possible at this high elevation include Andean Condor, Andean Pygmy-Owl, White-chinned Thistletail, Slate-colored Seedeater and more. Birding the paramo is often difficult due to the high elevation effects it can have on people, so our time here will be short, but it will be a rare opportunity to experience the avifauna of this remote and inhospitable land. Think cinclodes, tit-spinetails, canasteros and chat-tyrants!

The final venue for the tour will be the Rio Claro Reserve located on the banks of the Rio Claro in the Magdalena Valley. This beautiful private reserve consists of lush riparian forest that is home to several endemics. Even without the endemics it would be a birder's paradise as nearly 500 species have been recorded within its boundaries. There is an active Oilbird cave on the reserve and hiking at dusk along the crystal, clear water to witness the spectacle of hundreds of Oilbirds leaving their roost is a mystical experience. Given its lower elevation, the weather here will be a bit warmer than it is at the higher elevations where we will spend much of our time and that will also lend to a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere.

DAILY ITINERARY: Note that this tour can be taken on its own as a separate 10-day affair or in conjunction with the Santa Marta & Atlantic Coast tour which begins on July 28, 2019.

Day 1, July 18, Arrival in Medellin: Several major airlines have direct flights to Medellin (airport code MDE) from the United States. You can book your arrival today at any time, but try to avoid late night arrivals to mitigate against the possibility of delays or cancellations affecting your arrival date. Once you have collected your luggage and entered the arrival hall, there will be

a driver waiting for you to transfer you to our hotel which is located a short distance from the airport. If by chance there are problems with this transfer, a taxi can be hired for about \$10 USD to transfer you to the hotel. If this happens you will be reimbursed for the fare. We will plan to have a short orientation session sometime this evening to get acquainted. The time of this meeting will be dependent upon everyone's scheduled arrival. There will be no other group activities today and you will be free to explore the area around the hotel on your own or areas further afield. We can help arrange city tours if you need help or ideas. Night in Medellin.

Day 2, July 19, La Romero Reserve and Travel to Jardin: We'll begin this morning with a 20-minute drive to La Romero, a park on the city's outskirts that is a delightful and easy birding venue. The highlight here is the endemic Red-bellied Grackle, a forest dwelling icterid that shatters the negative impression that grackles engender in the minds of most birders. Striking and photogenic, an encounter with bird is certain to get us off to a rousing start. La Romero is also home to 2 other endemics: Colombian Chachalaca (easy) and Yellow-headed Manakin (definitely not easy). We'll spend a couple of hours poking around the fringes and edges of this park where a nice variety of birds will include Pale-eyed Thrush, Green Jay, Black-billed Peppershrike, Golden-naped Tanager, Andean Motmot and many more. By late morning we will begin the drive to the mountain town of Jardin (about 3.5 hours). Here we will stay in a very comfortable hotel that is popular with Colombian tourists and situated at the base of the mountains where the endangered Yellow-eared Parrot resides. Night in Jardin.

Day 3, July 20, Yellow-eared Parrot Reserve (Reserva Natural de las Aves Loro Orejiamarillo): Our primary objective today will be to get good views of the critically endangered Yellow-eared Parrot. This is a large parrot close to the size of one of the smaller species of macaw. Getting to its preferred habitat requires a very early start and the use of 4WD vehicles. We will attempt to reach a small mountain pass at an elevation of about 10,000 feet by sunrise in the hope of seeing flocks of these parrots leaving their evening roosts. If we are fortunate we will get close and personal views of birds as they stop and feed in the fruiting trees that dot the pass. This doesn't always happen, but it isn't an unusual experience and we will keep our fingers crossed. We'll spend the remainder of the day birding our way down the mountain and exploring any remnant forest patches. Possibilities will include Black-billed Mountain-Toucan, White-capped Tanager, Golden-crowned Tanager, Chestnut-crested Cotinga, Tanager Finch, Sword-billed Hummingbird, Barred Fruiteater, Rufous Antpitta, Rufous-breasted Chat-Tyrant, Yellow-vented Woodpecker and much more. Both lunch and breakfast will be eaten in the field to allow us to maximize our birding time. Night in Jardin.

Day 4, July 21, Andean Cock-of-the-Rock lek, Bolombolo endemics and Travel to Manizales: Thanks to the goodwill of a local landowner, we will begin this morning at an Andean Cock-of-the-Rock lek outside Jardin. These colorful and enigmatic birds always put on a spectacular show and this is a place that allows very close approach and excellent photographic opportunities. Then it will be time to make the long drive to the university town of Manizales (about 6 hours). We will break up the drive with a birding stop near the town of Bolombolo for two endemics: Apical Flycatcher and Antioquia Wren; and then continue to Manizales hoping to arrive by early evening. Night in Manizales.

Day 5, July 22, Rio Blanco Reserve: Today we will have a full day to explore the the Rio Blanco reserve, one of Colombia's best birding sites. Here it is possible to see as many as 7 species of antpittas, a group of birds notorious for their skulking and reclusive behavior. An active feeding program that began here several years ago sometimes provides visitors with close range views of these enigmatic birds including the endemic Brown-banded and the near endemic Bicolored. In addition to the antpitta feeding program, the reserve also maintains an elaborate hummingbird feeding station that can attract as many as 50 species of hummingbirds including Tourmaline Sunangel, White-bellied Woodstar, Speckled Hummingbird, Collared and Bronzy Incas, Andean Emerald, Long-tailed Sylph and more. Above the headquarters building there are also a series of trails that provide access exciting birds like Masked Saltator, Dusky Piha, Golden-plumed Parakeet, Red-hooded Tanager, Green-and-black Fruiteater, Powerful Woodpecker, Yellow-billed Cacique and much more. Mixed species flocks are the rule here and the diverse possibilities of tanagers, flycatchers, warblers and finches will surely make this a rich and unforgettable day. Night in Manizales.

Day 6, July 23, Nevado del Ruiz and Travel to Rio Claro: Nevado del Ruiz is situated below Volcan Ruiz at an elevation of just over 12,000 feet. This will be our only chance during the tour to explore this unique Andean habitat that exists between treeline and the permanent snowline and is home to a specialized subset of South American birds. Though it may seem counterintuitive, a number of rarely hummingbirds inhabit this cold and inhospitable Andean tundra including Black-thighed Puffleg, Rainbow-bearded Thornbill, Viridian Metaltail and the spectacular Great Sapphirewing. In wetter areas of the grassy paramo one can find Paramo Seedeater, Sedge Wren, Paramo Tapaculo, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant, Many-striped Canastero, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle and Tawny Antpitta. Unfortunately we will have only a few hours to explore the reserve as it is a 6-hour drive to Rio Claro, the tour's final birding venue. Night at Rio Claro.

Days 7-8, July 24-25, Rio Claro Reserve: This private reserve is located about 3 hours east of Medellin in the Rio Magdalena Valley. It takes its name from the crystal clear river that bisects a lush tropical forest along its banks. The reserve has a nice series of mostly flat trails and is home to several Colombian endemics including White-mantled Barbet, Beautiful Woodpecker, Magdalena Antbird and Sooty Ant-Tanager. However Rio Claro has much more to offer than just the endemics. Nearly 500 species of birds have been recorded within the boundaries of the reserve. In fact, Rio Claro is the #1 ebird hotspot in all of the Colombian state of Antioquia. Two full days will not be enough to scratch the surface here, but we will do our best to try. One of the more spectacular experiences available at Rio Claro is the opportunity to see large numbers of Oilbirds flying from their roosting cave at dusk. These poorly-known nocturnal frugivores are infrequently encountered and seeing such large numbers at close range is a memorable sight indeed. Other birds that are resident at Rio Claro include Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, Olivaceous Piculet, Blue-crowned Manakin, Cinnamon Becard, Rufous Piha, Barred Puffbird, King Vulture, Black-chested Jay, Fulvous-vented Euphonia, Tawny-crested, Dusky-faced and Golden-hooded tanagers, Black-faced Dacnis, Chestnut-headed Oropendola, Orange-billed Sparrow, Gray-cheeked Nunlet, Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner, Fasciated Tiger-Heron, Blue Cotinga and on and on. On one afternoon we will drive east of the reserve into an area of marshy wetlands where we might encounter Northern Screamer and other more common birds associated with open country.

Day 9, July 26, Rio Claro and Travel to Medellin: We will spend a final few hours exploring Rio Claro before returning to Medellin for a final dinner and bird tally. Night in Medellin.

Day 10, July 27, Flights Home: Participants can schedule their flights home anytime this morning.

Those who are participating in both this tour and the Atlantic Coast tour that begins on July 28 will have a free day in Medellin and will fly to Barranquilla on the morning of July 28. We can help organize activities such as city tours or visits to local attractions for anyone interested.

TOUR LIMIT: This maximum number of participants for this tour will be 7.

TRIP COST: The price of this tour is \$3395 double occupancy from Medellin. The quoted price includes all meals beginning with dinner on July 18 and ending with dinner on July 26, nine nights of accommodations beginning and ending in Medellin, all ground transportation during the tour, airport transfers in Medellin, guide service provided by local guides as well as by Jan Hansen from Otus asio Tours, all entrance fees and bottled water throughout the tour. It does not include round trip airfare between your originating destination and Medellin, optional tips to guides and drivers, laundry service or alcoholic beverages (one bottle of the Colombian national beer will be included with dinner). The single supplement for the tour is \$375.

REGISTRATION: A \$500 deposit and a completed and signed registration form are necessary to register for this tour. If you register by email the deposit and paperwork must be received within 10 days of the email in order to secure a place. Final payment will be due 90 days before departure (April 19, 2019). Final invoices will be sent out in early April 2019.

TRIP INSURANCE: Trip insurance is strongly suggested in the event that you need to cancel after you have registered. Tour deposits and remittances have to be made well in advance of the tour and any cancellations made within 90 days of departure cannot be refunded in full. The tour registration form details the refund policy, but cancellations within 60 days of the tour will be limited to the amount that can be recouped from the various vendors and cannot be determined until that time. Trip insurance will be your safeguard against such contingencies.

ACCOMMODATIONS: The lodges and hotels we will stay at during this tour are simple and small, but at the same time they are clean and comfortable. The airport hotel near Medellin is a standard and basic hotel chosen because of its convenient location. The hotel in Jardin is conveniently located on the town square and caters primarily to Colombian tourists. In Manizales the hotel is very modern with spacious rooms and a very helpful, friendly staff. At the Rio Claro reserve we will stay in cabanas that are located in the midst of the forest offering easy access to the prime birding areas. There is

often no hot water at this location but the climate is hot and a cold shower feels refreshing.

Medellin: Hacienda La Extremadura www.laextremadura.com

Jardin: Hotel Valdivia Plaza www.hotelvaldiviaplaza.com

Manizales: Varuna Hotel www.varunahotel.com

Rio Claro: www.rioclaroreservanatural.com

FOOD: This will not be a tour for foodies or those seeking a gourmet experience. That said, the food will be plentiful and tasty, just not exotic or fancy. Vegetarian options will be available in most cases, but it will be simple and limited in scope. Menus will be set at ecolodges while the usual options will be available at larger hotels and in restaurants.

BIRDING AT ELEVATION: We will spend one day at or near 10,000 feet (Yellow-eared Parrot Reserve) and one morning over 12,000 Feet (Nevado del Ruiz). The rest of the tour will be conducted at lower elevations that generally do not give people problems. When we are birding at high elevations we will move slowly and rest frequently. Medications are available that can alleviate the effects of being at high altitude, so if you fall into that category it might be wise to consult a doctor for options.

AIR TRAVEL TO COLOMBIA: This tour begins and ends in Medellin (airport code MDE). At the time of this writing, American Airlines offers the most direct access to Medellin with a daily direct flight from Miami. Other major airlines also access Medellin with connections through Panama or Bogota. If you need help with arranging your flight to Medellin please feel free to contact me and I can assist you.

YELLOW FEVER: The part of Colombia covered by this itinerary is considered very low risk for yellow fever and inoculation is not required, however it is always best to consult your physician and the CDC website for recommendations. Previously, the vaccine was considered good for ten years. As of July 2016 the vaccine is considered valid for the lifetime of the vaccine according to the CDC. Please consult with your physician about whether it is appropriate for you to receive the vaccine or the 10-year booster (there are contraindications for some individuals). People over 70 years of age are generally not given the Yellow Fever vaccine in the US due to possible severe side effects. If you are in this category, a letter stating such from your doctor will suffice for documentation in areas where the vaccine is required for entry.

HEALTH CONCERNS: Please consult your physician or the CDC website for other suggestions about travel-related medications for a trip to this part of Colombia. It is always a good idea to be current on your tetanus vaccine. Malaria is not of great concern on this route although the disease is present in parts of Colombia. It is best to consult your physician regarding any medications for the tour and to make decisions based upon your own peace of mind.

INSECTS: Biting insects are not expected to be a problem on this tour due to much of it being conducted at high elevation. However recent rainfall and moisture levels can sometimes make things worse than expected, so it is always best to be prepared for the possibility of biting insects. The best defense is wearing long-sleeved shirts and long pants and having an adequate supply of repellent.

CURRENCY: The Colombian Peso (COP) is the currency used in Colombia and you will need to use it to pay for incidental expenses like alcoholic beverages and souvenirs. It is best to exchange your dollars for COP at the airport in Medellin as other methods of exchange may be difficult to find once we are underway.

ELECTRICITY: There will be electrical outlets that you can use to recharge batteries at all of the places we stay. Electrical plug-ins in Colombia are of flat two-pin variety, the same as those used in the U.S. It is not unusual to find sockets that lack the third grounding pin, so carrying an adapter for those cases is a good idea. Also, though there are outlets in all of the hotels, power outages are not unusual so it is a good idea to bring several spare batteries or a portable battery pack.

INTERNET ACCESS: Wifi will be available in most of the hotels although it may be accessible only in common areas and not in the rooms. (It is not available at Rio Claro). Cell service is very good in Colombia and you should be able to receive a signal most of the time.

ENTRY INTO COLOMBIA: Visas are not required for travel to Colombia. You will need a valid passport, which has an expiration date six months after your departure date.

FIELD GUIDES: There are two options for field guides for Colombia. The oldest and most comprehensive guide is *Guide to Birds of Colombia* by S. Hilty and W.L. Brown. This is a large book and over 20 years old. It is heavy and cumbersome in the field, but has excellent illustrations and textual coverage of the birds. Because of its age, the taxonomy is outdated. The biggest objection most people have to this book is its size which makes it impractical to carry in the field. A good way to remedy this issue is to cut the plates from the book and have them bound separately.

A more field friendly option is the recently published *Field Guide to the Birds of Colombia* published by ProAves, a Colombian ornithological organization. This is an excellent accessory as the taxonomy is current and the book is much smaller and easier to carry. However the illustrations are not always accurate making out difficult to use as a field identification guide in all cases.

The best choice for having solid reference material in Colombia is to have both Hilty's plates and the ProAves guide at your disposal.

GUIDES: The leaders for this tour will be Jan Hansen from Otus asio Tours and Luis Eduardo Uruena. Luis is a biologist who has been guiding birders in Colombia for 16 years. He has led tours for VENT and Field Guides and is an expert in field identification of Colombian birds and I am very pleased to add him to our cadre of international leaders.

TRANSPORTATION: For most of the tour we will travel in a comfortable mini-bus. When necessary we will use 4WD vehicles to access more rugged areas.

INFORMATION: For additional information regarding this tour contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or at otusasiotours@gmail.com