

## Central Colombia Birding Tour - August 2012

by Peter Hawrylyshyn (epna AT rogers.com)

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**Participants:** Peter Hawrylyshyn (Canada), Robert and Hanno Lewis (California-USA)

**Objective:** After many trips to Central America (Costa Rica, Panama, Belize) and South America (Ecuador, Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia), the changing geo-political climate tempted us to visit Colombia for the first time. Our goal was not to amass an impressive 700+ bird list - rather to see specific endemic or “new” birds, and ensure that there would be sufficient time at each site for good photographic opportunities. For these reasons, we elected not to take one of the standard birding tours of Colombia, but rather develop our own custom tour. Unfortunately there is a lack of specific detailed information on Colombian birding sites available on the internet. Hopefully the information collected during this trip will help others planning a birding trip to Colombia.

**Logistics:** We attempted to visit some of best sites for endemics in central Colombia. This involved a tight schedule and some long drives between different birding sites. We relied on a Suzuki Grand Vitara 4x4 (Daniel’s private vehicle). Most sites would not have been accessible without a 4x4. At Las Tangaras, we also had to rent local 4x4 diesel taxis.

We quickly learnt that distance or mileage in Colombia is meaningless. Paved roads are at best two lanes, and more often just rough gravel roads. Landslides are a frequent occurrence, even during the dry season, which will lead to unexpected delays. Major roads/highways are also congested with heavy truck traffic, which are the backbone of Colombia’s transportation infrastructure. On steep mountainous slopes, long traffic line-ups moving at 5-10kpm are very common. On the plus side, most drivers in Colombia are very courteous and generally safe. Patience is a necessity when driving in Colombia. Gasoline is not subsidized in Colombia, and because of various taxes, gasoline prices are about the same as in the US. In hind-sight, we seriously underestimated some of the travel times for the tour.

All GPS co-ordinates and elevations were collected using a Garmin Navigator, which we nicknamed “Suzie”. The unit was not without its faults – enroute to Jardin, she kept wanting to go back to a road closed by a landslide, her maps did not extend into the Choco lowlands beyond Ciudad Bolivar, and the large boulevards with a concrete median and side lanes for traffic confused her in Bogota. Even with the availability of a GPS navigator, it is still advisable to use a local guide or driver in Colombia, as we did.

For identification we used the new Pro Aves field guide to Birds of Colombia, as well as Restall’s Birds of Northern South America. Trip reports that were useful included Jon Hornbuckle (2010), Martin Reid (2009), as well as some of the recent ProAves trip reports.

We also quickly appreciated the expertise and assistance of our guide, Daniel Uribe. His local knowledge helped finalize the sites selected for the tour. At each site we visited, he knew the owners and local guides on a personal/first name basis and was always enthusiastically welcomed. When landslides twice necessitated changing travel plans – a few quick phone calls and everything had been re-arranged. He was a great, safe driver who knew the local roads. His birding skills are excellent, he can use an iPod with a comprehensive library of Colombian bird songs, and importantly he speaks fluent English. He is also one of the best bird photographers in Colombia with a portfolio of over 15,000 images. Without hesitation, we would highly recommend him for anyone considering a birding or nature photography tour of Colombia.

**Weather:** In general, we were very lucky with the weather. Late August is generally considered part of the dry-season for Colombia. It only rained heavily during our first night at Rogitama, flooding parts of the access road; we also encountered some drizzle/light rain at Chingaza NP and then had a rainy morning at the Piha Reserve.

But otherwise we had mostly partly cloudy weather with no rain. Mornings often started with clear skies, and clouds developed as the day progressed, especially at higher elevations where at times it was mostly overcast. There had been heavy rains at Las Tangaras for three days prior to our arrival resulting in a landslide blocking access to the upper forest. But during our stay, we escaped any rain. Temperatures were as hot as 35 degrees Celsius in the Magdalena valley and as cold as 4 degrees Celsius at Los Nevados. High winds became a factor at two sites (La Victoria and Los Nevados).

**Photographs:** galleries of photos from the trip can be found on the last page of the report

### **Itinerary:**

**August 22** - Flight delays by both Air Canada and American Airlines pre-empted any chance at afternoon birding upon arrival in Bogota. Overnight at Marriott Bogota near the airport.

**August 23** - A planned early morning start at La Florida wetlands near Bogota was skipped because of major road construction in the area. Instead visited the Acumonte eco-reserve near La Calera. After lunch proceeded to Rogitama (4 1/2 hour drive). Overnight at Rogitama lodge.

**August 24** - Spent all morning birding at Rogitama in the gardens and nearby trails. After an excellent lunch, we drove back towards Bogota. Late afternoon birding along the road side and at the Embalse de Tomine reservoir. Overnight at Hotel Hacienda Betania near Guatavita.

**August 25** - All day birding Chingaza NP. Late afternoon birding a small wetland near Guasca. Overnight at Hotel Hacienda Betania.

**August 26** - Circumvented Bogota traffic via Sopo & Funza, then drove westward to El Jardín Encantado in San Francisco. Spent the morning photographing hummingbirds at the feeders. After lunch in La Vega, crossed the Magdalena river and drove to La Victoria (1 1/2hour drive). Stopped enroute for some roadside birding. Overnight at small local Hotel La Juana.

**August 27** – Early 5:30 start for breakfast at local cafe, had us at the forest above Victoria by 6AM. Birding the trails all morning was hampered by windy but sunny conditions. After lunch a pleasant local restaurant above town, checked out of hotel and started the drive to ascend the eastern slope of Central Andes to arrive in Manizales (5 hour drive). Overnight at Rio Blanco Lodge.

**August 28** - All day at Rio Blanco: antpitta feeders in early morning, mid-day photographing hummingbirds at feeders, late afternoon birding the trails along ridge. Overnight at Rio Blanco Lodge.

**August 29** - A 5:30 AM start to Los Nevados National Park (Nevado del Ruiz) for paramo birding. After lunch headed down the upper portion of old Los Nevados-Manizales road. Our return to Manizales was delayed by road construction which pre-empted driving to Otun-Quimbaya reserve. Overnight at the new Hotel del Pórtico in Manizales.

**August 30** - Hoping for better weather, elected to visit Los Nevados a 2nd time. We were greeted by 40 degree temperatures and 50 mph winds. After 2 hours, we gave up on attempts to photograph the Helmetcrest and started birding along old Los Nevados - Manizales road. An unplanned oil change in Manizales permitted a 1 1/2 hour visit to the hummingbird feeders at Recinto del Pensamiento, before continuing on to Jardín (5 hr drive). Overnight at Hotel Hacienda Balandú.

**August 31** - A 5AM start to reach the Yellow-Eared Parrot overlook by 6:15AM. By 7AM the over-flights had stopped. Photographed hummingbirds at the new feeders for a couple of hours before starting road side birding as we descended back towards Jardín. After a late lunch at a local grill on the main square in Jardin, we drove to

Las Tangaras (5 hr drive). The last 5-6km stretch from El Carmen (actually El "7") was especially bad due to recent rains taking almost 40 minutes. Overnight at Las Tangaras lodge.

**September 1** – After another 5:30AM start, spent all morning birding along the road and in the forests above the lodge. Early afternoon photographing hummingbirds at the upper level feeders. Due to road conditions, access to this area was a harrowing 40 minute drive only possible with special local 4x4 jeep taxis. Late afternoon spent photographing hummingbirds and other birds around the main lodge. Overnight at Las Tangaras lodge.

**September 2** - Morning birding again along the road and in the forests above the lodges. After an excellent lunch at the lodge, departed for Medellin (4 hour drive). Overnight at Hotel Portales del Campestre.

**September 3** - Early morning birding at La Romera Park in Medellin before driving to ProAves Piha reserve (5 hours). One participant (PH) departed for home via Medellin. Overnight at ProAves lodge.

**September 4 and 5** - All day birding the trails and road at reserve. Overnight ProAves lodge.

**September 6** - Morning birding at the reserve. Afternoon drive back to Medellin. Overnight at Hotel Santiago de Arma in Rionegro (by Medellin airport).

**September 7** - Early morning return flight to California via Miami with American Airlines.

### Daily Activity Reports

**Note:** Birds in **bold** are Colombian endemics (E) or near-endemics (NE).

Transit between the lodges was often accompanied by unscheduled road side birding stops which are not always included in the following reports.

### **August 23**

Our first morning of the tour was spent at Acumonte (N 4 deg 37.6388' W 74 deg 0.4159' Elevation 2800m) which is a private reserve near La Calera (12km/30 minute drive from Bogota) . We had stopped for an excellent breakfast of arepas's and sweet soup from sugar cane (into which you put small cubes of casa fresco) at a road-side cafe in La Calera. A short walk along the Rio Teusacá before the reserve opened produced good views of Super-ciliaried Hemispingus, Black-crested Warbler, **Rufous-browed Conebill (NE)**, Black Flowerpiercer, Pale-naped Brush-Finch and White-throated Tyrannulet. At the reserve there are five hummingbird feeders at three locations around the main home. The main targets here were the Blue-throated and Golden-bellied Starfrontlets, neither of which came to the feeders during our three hour visit. The feeders were sparsely attended (one hummingbird every 5-10 minutes). The most common species at the feeders were Sparking Violetears. There were less frequent visits by Black-tailed Trainbearers, Shining Sunbeams, White-bellied Woodstars and a Great Sapphirewing. A **Coppery-bellied Puffleg (NE)** was seen in a bush just to the left of the main entrance. Sword-billed Humingbird has also been seen here infrequently by other groups. **Silvery-throated Spinetail (E)** was seen at the forest edge of the reserve along with Black-backed Grosbeak, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant, Buff-breasted and Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanagers. The highlight of the morning happened just after we left the reserve, a Pale-bellied or Matorral Tapaculo flew across the road in front of us giving excellent photo opportunities. A Red-crested Cotinga was seen atop a distant tree. The cost to enter the reserve is 20,000 COP per person.

After a quick snack at Acumonte (more arepas, salad and fried plantains), we departed for Rogitama Reserve. We stopped enroute for a traditional lunch (beef ribs, more arepas and cafe con leche). What we thought would be a 2 1/2 hour drive, ending up being our first of many 4-5 hour drives because of road construction, trucks, and heavy traffic in Tunja. Rogitama is located about an hour NW of Tunja near Arcabuco. It had rain heavily just before our arrival, flooding parts of the access road. We were greeted by our charismatic host, Roberto Chavarro, and were soon enjoying an excellent dinner of tilapia, beans and rice. The accommodations were basic but more than adequate. After the long drive, everyone was ready for a good night's sleep.

## August 24

In 1985 when Roberto purchased Rogitama (N 5 deg 47.7151' W 73 deg 27.4308' Elevation 2520m), it was nothing more than grassy hillside pastureland for cattle. Since then he has planted hundreds of native flowers and trees to help restore the forest eco-system. After a delicious breakfast (fresh bread, fruit, juice and coffee), we hit the trails and observed the birds from the second floor balcony decks. Flowering shrubs were everywhere attracting numerous hummingbirds including Sparkling Violetears (dominant species), Lazuline Sabrewings (both male and female), Speckled Hummingbirds, **Black Incas (E)**, **Short-tailed Emeralds (NE)**, Tyrian Metal-tails, and even the infamous Rogitama Sylph. Other notable birds seen included numerous flower-piercers (both White-sided and Black), Azara's Spinetail, Mountain Elaenia, Moustached Brush-Finch, Andean Siskin and Beryl-spangled Tanagers feeding in a fruiting tree. Although this is an excellent site for birders, the overgrowth of flowering shrubs and trees makes photography very challenging.

After a delicious 3 course lunch it was time to head back towards Bogota. Enroute we stopped and birded along the Embalse de Tominé aqua-reservoir near Guatavita. We saw Andean Teals, Ruddy Ducks, Muscovy Ducks, Spotted Sandpiper, American Coots with young chicks, Pied-billed Grebes, Southern Lapwings, Brown-chested Martins, Black-crowned Night-Herons, Cattle Egret (>300), Striated Herons, Great Egrets and Neotropical Cormorants. Numerous guinea pigs were seen running across the marchlands

Shortly after 6:30PM, we arrived at Hotel Hacienda Betania (N 4 deg 48.172' W 73 deg 54.301' Elevation 2894m). This quaint B&B is located about 5 km off the main Guasca-La Calera road, and is about 15-20 minutes from the entrance road leading to Chingaza NP. The life-history of the enchanting owner, Berta, would make a compelling story for a Hollywood movie. She inherited the property from her late father, met considerable resistance as a female land-owner from other local male ranchers, was kidnapped by guerillas for a week before she paid the ransom for her safe release. The inn is a lovely converted farm house with spacious rooms elegantly decorated in period furniture with stunning views overlooking the valley floor. The meals prepared and cooked by Berta herself were all excellent.

## August 25

A 6AM start had us to Chingaza NP by 6:30AM. The turn-off for Chingaza on the main La Calera road is just past the town of Salitre at (N 4 deg 43.391' W 73 deg 57.312' Elevation 2680m). As we ascended the clouds increased, and by mid-morning it was misty with drizzle and by late-morning we had rain at the higher elevations. Several road side stops produced such interesting species as **Rufous-browed Conebills (NE)**, Scarlet-bellied and Hooded Mountain-Tanagers, Rufous Antpitta, White-chinned Thistletails, Black and Masked Flowerpiercers, Black-crested Warblers, Pale-naped Brush-Finch, and Andean Siskin - many with excellent photo opportunities. By mid-day we reached the main park sentry gate (N 4 deg 44.438' W 73 deg 50.694' Elevation 3485m). Because of the rain, we decided to leave the majestic paramo (photo below on left) and descend to lower elevations hoping for better weather. As we descended the rains did abate. Mid-way we found a cut-off trail with numerous flowering flowers that were attracting Glowing and Coppery-bellied Pufflegs. Other hummingbirds seen at higher elevations included a stunning **Bronze-tailed Thornbill (NE)**, **Blue-throated Starfrontlet (NE)**, and Tyrian Metal-tails. We missed on the Black-billed Mountain-Toucans and Brown-breasted Parakeets.



By mid-afternoon it was time to leave for the Siechia wetlands (upper right photo) near the town of Guasca (N 4 deg 51.111' W 73 deg 54.098' Elevation 2668m). The area is actually a reclaimed old quarry in the middle of cattle pastures. Accessing the area would be difficult without a local guide and involves crossing several barbed-wired fences and small streams (ie - rubber boots are a necessity). But without a doubt, this is the best site for **Bogota Rails (E)** - we saw at least 8. As well there were Noble Snipes, **Spot-flanked Gallinules** (*Gallinula melanops bogotensis*), Common Gallinules, Andean Teals, Ruddy Ducks, Black-crowned Night-Herons, Striated Herons and American Coots. An Eastern Meadowlark and Lesser Goldfinches were seen calling amongst the cattle and a White-tailed Kite hovering for prey. After an exhilarating day, we returned to Hotel Hacienda Betania for another great dinner with a celebratory bottle of Chilean merlot.

## August 26

After yet another early 5:30AM breakfast, we drove northward towards Guatavita and then on to Sopó & Funza, thereby circumventing the Sunday morning traffic in Bogota, where weekend cyclists add even further congestion to the roads. We arrived at El Jardin Encantado (N 4 deg 58.734' W 74 deg 17.592' Elevation 1458m) in San Francisco by 9:30AM. It was a short 15-20 drive down into the valley off the main road to La Vega. The owner, Leonor Pardo, has lived there for over twenty years. There are over 30 feeders for the hundreds of hummingbirds flying around her small backyard. Species included the endemic **Indigo-capped Hummingbird (E)**, Sparking Violetears (dominant species), Green and Brown Violetears, Gorgeted and White-bellied Woodstars, Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, Black-throated Mango, Green Hermit (with a nest behind the corner garden statue), White-vented Plumeteer. A single **Red-billed Emerald (male, NE)** and White-necked Jacobin (male) made periodic visits to one feeder. We missed on the Lazuline Sabrewing. A banana feeder also attracted several species of tanagers (Crimson-backed, Palm, Blue-grey and Grey-headed) and Banaquits. The morning was leisurely spent taking perched and multi-flash photos of the hummingbirds.



By early afternoon we departed for Honda where we crossed the Magdalena River after stopping for lunch (grilled chicken&sausage, arepas, beans or rice) at a local grill. It was sunny and hot (35 degrees Celcius). Because of the crowds, we decided to skip visiting Laguna Tabacal, and headed northward towards La Victoria. Shortly after turning off the main highway, we stopped by the river on a goat farm for some late afternoon birding. Here we managed to find a Bat Falcon, several Spectacled Parrotlets, Ringed Kingfisher, Yellow-backed Oriole, Cinnamon Becard, Tropical Gnatcatcher, Great Kiskadee, Mountain and Yellow-bellied Eleania, Saffron Finch, Buff-breasted Wren, and several flycatcher species (Common Tody, Boat-billed, Streaked and Piratic).

As sunset approached, we headed into La Victoria. Our rooms at Hotel La Juana were the most basic accommodations for the trip (22,000COP per night). An excellent dinner (grilled chicken, green beans, rice and ice cold beer) at Sazon Victoriana, a local restaurant above the main town only cost about 11,000COP. We fell asleep to the sounds of street music from the main square.

## August 27

Daniel had arranged for a local cafe on the main square to open at 5:30AM – coffee and basic pastries. By 6:15AM we were at the Bella Vista Reserve (N 5 deg 19.626' W 74 deg 55.411' Elevation 957m) which is a tract of primary forest on the ridge above La Victoria (see above photo). Despite the windy conditions which hampered birding, we got great looks and photos of several endemics **White-mantled Barbet (E)**, **Sooty Ant-Tanager (E)**, and **Velvet-fronted Euphonia (E)**. We also saw and photographed White-bibbed and Golden-headed Manakins, male and female **Bar-crested Antshrikes (NE)**, Olivaceous Piculet, Sooty-headed Tyrannulet, Rufous-naped Greenlet, Blue-necked, Black-faced, Plain-coloured, Scrub, Bay-headed and Golden-hooded Tanagers. Despite several attempts, we missed on the Tody Motmot and Beautiful Woodpecker. We did find a female Rufous-breasted Hermit sitting on a nest swaying beneath a palm leaf and looking as if it would fall off any minute. We also saw the White-bearded Manakin, Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher, White-shouldered Tanager and two groups of Scarlet-fronted Parakeets flying over. All in all a good morning, given the winds.

After a return visit to same local restaurant for lunch, we checked out of the hotel and drove back to Honda (1 hr drive). From there, it was on to Mariquita, after which we started the long steep ascent up the east slope of the Central Andes (from 280m to over 3700m in 2 hours). We finally arrived safely in Manizales at 6PM during rush hour, and then drove a further ½ hr on a rough gravel road up the mountain north of town to reach Rio Blanco. Enroute we stopped to see Lyre-tailed Nightjars and heard Band-winged Nightjars at a road-side cliff overlook.

Rio Blanco is a reserve owned by the local water company (Aguas de Manizales) and operated by FUNDEGAR (Fundacion Ecologica Gabriel Arango Restrepo). The main entry gate (N 5 deg 03.984' W 75 deg 26.907' Elevation 2225m) is about 15-20 minutes from Manizales. The accommodations/lodge (N 5 deg 04.402' W 75 deg 26.260' Elevation 2565m) are about 15 minutes further up the road. They are on the upper floor of the home for the reserve manager (Albeiro). There are three rooms (1 double bed with private WC, 1 single/double with shared WC access, and one single without an adjoining WC). The basic rooms are clean and quiet. Additional accommodations are available in a secondary building for larger groups. All meals were excellent. Given day visitors pay the same entry fee as those staying overnight – it made more sense to stay at the lodge than in Manizales.



## August 28

We had pre-arranged with Albeiro, to start the antpitta feedings at 7:30AM. He has four feeding stations along separate trails near the workers' cabin which is several hundred yards further up the road above the lodge. Albeiro has now trained 6 species of antpittas to come for worms. Generally the morning feedings are better attended by the antpittas. While walking to the first trail, we saw Masked Trogon (male and female), Highland Motmot, Blue-capped Tanagers, and several **Golden-fronted Redstarts (NE)**. The first feeding station is typically attended by the **Brown-banded (E)**, Chestnut-crowned and Chestnut-naped Antpittas. As if on cue, each species came in for amazing photographs at 10-15' distances. A stunning pair of Green-and-black

Fruiteaters (male and female) also readily came in to eat the worms. The second feeding station is normally for the Bicoloured Antpitta (NE), which failed to show – probably nesting. Remarkably, an Undulated Antpitta arrived unexpectedly posing for incredible close-up photos on the forest floor. It was only the third time Albeiro has seen this antpitta at a feeding site, and the first time it has ever been photographed at Rio Blanco. When we reached the third feeding station – the Slate-crowned Antpitta was there waiting to hop in for a few worms. Five antpitta species in 3 hours – what more can one ask for. What Albeiro has accomplished, far surpasses any of the antpitta sites in Ecuador or Central America. His daily fee for a group to see the antpittas is about \$35US.

The late morning and early afternoon were used to take perched and multi-flash photographs at the hummingbird feeders around the lodge. There are about ten feeders around the second floor balcony, as well as flower gardens which attract many hummingbirds. The dominant species are Buff-tailed Coronets, with less frequent visits by Long-tailed Sylphs, Collared Incas, Fawn-breasted Brilliants and Tourmaline Sunangels. The natural lighting and perches setup around the feeders made for excellent photos. Mid-afternoon we drove down to the main gate, where there is another house for the security rangers which also has hummingbird feeders. In the adjoining flower gardens we patiently watched for and finally saw both Wedge-billed Hummingbirds and a Green-fronted Lancebill. At this slightly lower elevation, other hummingbirds included Speckled Hummingbird, Bronzy Inca, White-bellied Woodstars, Fawn-breasted Brilliants and Andean Emeralds.

In the late afternoon we returned to the trails and road along the ridge at the workers' cabin above the main lodge. In the fading light, we saw such notable birds as Tyrannine Woodcreeper, Long-tailed Antbird, Pale-footed Swallow, Slaty Finch, Pearled Treerunner, Masked Saltator, Plushcap, Sickle-winged and Andean Guans, Dusky Piha, Scaly-naped Parrots, Crimson-mantled Woodpeckers, Golden-fronted Redstarts, ... Ocellated, Ash-coloured, Blackish and Spillman's Tapaculos could be heard in the forest. Surprisingly, we saw the Black-headed Hemispingus (rare for the place) and luckily, the entire collection of Hemispingus: Black-capped, Superciliated and Black-eared, true bamboo specialists. In the mixed flocks we also enjoyed the Grey-hooded Bush-Tanager, Capped Conebill, Blue-capped Tanager, Lachrymose Mountain-Tanager, Beryl-spangled and Blue-and-black Tanagers and Slaty Brush-Finch, among others. Over another excellent dinner (fried chicken, rice and green beans in cream sauce with candied figs for dessert), we recounted the incredible day we had just had.

## August 29

After a 5:30AM breakfast (now our daily routine), we headed towards Los Nevados. The park was still officially closed because of recent volcanic activity at Nevado del Ruiz, as posted on a road sign at the cut-off from the main highway. Given the partly cloudy conditions – we were optimistic. By 8AM, we stopped along the road (N 5 deg 00.112' W 75 deg 19.614' Elevation 3651m) having found the nest for a Viridian Metaltail. Rainbow-bearded Thornbills were also feeding in a nearby tree. We heard Paramo Tapaculo, but never got to see the elusive bird. Because the clouds were increasing, we decided to head up to the top. It is about 14km from the main highway to the control gate/ranger station (N 4 56.022 W 75 deg 21.004 Elevation 4132m). When we got there it was windy and 10 degrees Celsius. We could see large white fumaroles from Ruiz in the clouds off to the left. The park ranger did allow us to watch at the adjacent overlook and walk along the road beneath the station. Although we did see several **Bearded Helmetcrests (NE)** – none stayed perched long enough for any good photos, due to the weather, they all quickly dropped back into the bushes. We tried another site along the road towards Villahermosa where it was less windy, but again no luck - saw the bird, but no photos. We were however rewarded when seven **Rufous-fronted Parakeets (E)** flew off the adjacent cliffs allowing for good close-up views. The scenery was breath-taking, and the magnitude/size of the old lava-mud flow from the 1985 eruption was awe-inspiring.

While looking for the Helmetcrests, we enjoyed good views of the Sedge Wren, Stout-billed Cinclodes, Andean Tit-Spintail, White-chinned Thistletail and Many-striped Canastero, along with the Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and Plumbeous Sierra-Finch.

By early-afternoon after a road-side lunch, we headed back down the old Los Nevados to Manizales road. It is now nothing more than a very bumpy stony/gravel track definitely requiring a 4x4 vehicle. The old thermal-springs hotel (N 4 deg 58.226' W 75 deg 22.698' Elevation 3510m) has been closed permanently. However the area just above and below the hotel had numerous red melastoma flowers in bloom. Here we finally saw **Black-thighed Pufflegs (NE)**. The flowers seemed to attract just about every other species of hummingbirds (Rainbow-bearded Thornbills, Purple-backed Thornbills, Viridian and Tyrian Metaltails). We briefly descended further to about 3300m where a new set of hummingbird feeders has been placed along a stream. Daniel spoke with the custodians and after a cup of coffee, it was time to head back to Manizales. We headed back up the mountain, then out along the Los Nevados access road towards to the main highway. However, here we encountered unexpected long delays as the road was down to a single lane for both directions due to ongoing repairs from last year's mudslides. The plan had been to drive to Otun-Quimbaya for the night. Not wanting to drive until 10pm, we decided to spend the night in Manizales. But then we discovered a convention had filled the rooms at several of the bigger hotels. Fortunately, Daniel secured rooms at the new Hotel El Pórtico which had just opened. After an excellent steak dinner accompanied by a stellar Argentinean red malbec, and the first real hot shower in several days, we all enjoyed a good night's sleep in the brand new hotel beds.

### August 30

With the change in plans, we decided to try once more for the Bearded Helmetcrests at Los Nevados. We left earlier (5:15AM) hoping for less wind, and arrived at the ranger station by 7:15AM. Unfortunately, we were greeted by 4 degree Celsius temperatures and even windier 50mph conditions. Again we saw several Helmetcrests, some feeding briefly on purple flowers along the road side, but none perched in the windy conditions. By 9AM, we decided to move on. We headed back down the old Los Nevados-Manizales road (cut off is at N 4 deg 58.118' W 75 deg 21.102' Elevation 4015m). Almost immediately we heard, and then saw and photographed a very co-operative Tawny Antpitta calling in some bushes. We returned to the patches of melastoma flowers near the old thermal-springs hotel. Here again we saw and photographed several female and one male **Black-thighed Pufflegs (NE)**. In an abandoned garden just below the hotel, we also saw and photographed Shining Sunbeams. We moved on to the set of new feeders further down the road – here there was more activity than yesterday and included Great Sapphirewings (male and female), Green-fronted Lancebill(1), **Golden-breasted Pufflegs (NE)**, and Sparking Violetears.

After lunch, we decided to continue down the old road to Manizales. But the forest had become very silent. Despite a couple of stops – no birds were seen. When we reached Manizales (1 ½ hr drive), Daniel decided it was best to perform an oil change before heading into the Choco wilderness. As such we got to visit the hummingbird feeders at Recinto del Pensamiento, while Daniel drove to the local Chevrolet dealership. The feeders were very active – we saw Buff-tailed Coronets (most common), Sparkling and Green Violetears, Tourmaline Sunangels, Long-tailed Sylphs, White-bellied Woodstars, Collared and Bronzy Incas, Speckled Hummingbird, western Andean Emeralds, .... The settings lended themselves well to photographs of perched birds, and would also have been a good site for multi-flash setups if we had had more time.

By 4:30PM we were on the road again. It took until almost 9:45PM to reach Jardin because of a 45 minute delay to clear a landslide and heavy truck traffic. Daniel had called the hotel to ensure dinner waiting for us on our arrival. Hotel Hacienda Balandu was a very attractive hotel – the rooms were large, spacious queen sized beds, free WiFi, a lovely courtyard and swimming pool, ... making it a popular weekend retreat for visitors from Medellin. It is conveniently located above town on the access road to the parrot preserve. Some of the hotels on the main square in Jardin can get noisy after dark.

### August 31

A 5:00AM start had us up to the Yellow Parrot reserve (N 5 deg 32.342' W 75 deg 48.246' Elevation 2900m) by 6:15AM. The 320 acre reserve is operated by ProAves and requires prior permission for visits. The road to the top was again very bumpy and would be difficult without a 4x4 vehicle. We were almost immediately rewarded with good views of 3 **Yellow-eared Parrots (E)** flying overhead. Several more small groups flew by,



but by 7:00AM the parrots could only be heard squawking in distant trees. We then walked up the short trail to the ranger's house (Edward), where there are now 8 hummingbird feeders. We were thrilled when both male and female Mountain Velvetbreasts appeared at the feeders. Other hummingbirds included a male Glowing Puffleg, Collared Incas, Tourmaline Sunangels, Speckled Hummingbirds, Buff-tailed Coronets, and Fawn-breasted Brilliants. Several Masked Flowerpiercers also visited the feeders.



By 9:00AM we decided to start walking back down the road (above right). Initially birding was quite good as we saw Grass-green Tanagers, Rufous and Azara's Spinetails, Olivaceous Piculet, Glossy-black Thrush, Barred Becard, Streak-throated Bush-Tyrant, an elusive Blackish Tapaculo, and a more skittish Rufous-headed Pygmy-Tyrant. A couple of Viridian Metaltails and a Collared Inca were seen bathing in a mini-waterfall. But by 10AM it had become full sun and the birds stopped showing, so we decided to get back in the car. As we started driving down, the clouds increased and we also managed to find several mixed flocks where we picked up Citrine Warblers (*Basileuterus luteoviridis richardsonii*), Lachrymose Mountain-Tanagers, Emerald Toucanet, Streaked Tuftedcheek, Yellow-vented Woodpeckers, **Golden-fronted Redstarts (NE)**, White-naped Brush-Finch, Brown-capped Vireo and **Rufous-breasted Flycatcher (NE)**, among others.

By 1PM we headed back down to Jardin for an excellent late lunch at the Las Margaritas Restaurant on the main square. By 3:30PM we were on the road off to Las Tangaras in the Choco lowlands. The initial stretch to Ciudad Bolivar was along a well-paved road. However, the next 30km stretch to El Carmen quickly deteriorated and became a rough, narrow gravel road which ascended thru coffee plantations up the eastern slope of the western Andes (summit at N 5 deg 52.611' W 76 deg 05.513' Elevation 2165m). As we descended down the western slope toward El Carmen, with darkness the drive became increasingly challenging and precarious. It is definitely a road best driven in daylight. El Carmen is actually located above the main road which passes thru the river-side hamlet of El "7" (N 5 deg 52.051' W 76 deg 08.219' Elevation 1575m). The final 5km from El "7" to Las Tangaras took about 40 minutes over the worst road conditions we had yet encountered. The lodge lies about 50m below the main road on the banks of the Atrato River (below left). Luckily we arrived safely and by 7:30 PM we were enjoying a delicious dinner planning tomorrow's activities with the reserve guardian, Huberney. The rooms at the lodge are very spacious, two double beds per room, a generous desk/work area, hanging racks for coats/gear, multiple electrical outlets with power bars, excellent hot water showers – in short: well planned for birders/photographers.



## September 1

Given yesterday's road conditions and a recent landslide, Daniel had decided to hire a local 4x4 taxi (from El "7") for the drive up to the reserve. The taxi's are actually US army jeeps which have been rebuilt on special suspensions with diesel truck engines and air brakes. Needless to say – the ride up the mountain is not for the faint-hearted. There were narrow curves cut thru fresh landslides with a 500' drops to the canyon floor below. However one quickly realizes that the drivers, such as Jason who drove "El Niño", do the trip daily, and are therefore really quite experienced and amazingly safe.

The Las Tangaras reserve is a fantastic stretch of primary forest. After having seen so many hillsides cleared for cattle pasture, it was exhilarating to see the entire mountain side covered in pristine green forest. It is about a 40 minute ride from the lodge to the hilltop where the forest hummingbird feeders have been located. From there the road/track descends to several trail heads which can then be used to climb higher up the mountain (to access ridge top for **Gold-ringed Tanagers - E**).

Before heading up the mountain, the **Crested Ant-Tanager (E)** can usually be easily seen in the gardens around the lodge. Once up the mountain, we started birding along the road beyond the hummingbird feeders for several hours. We soon saw the much sought after **Black-and-gold Tanagers (E)**, as well as several **Glistening-green (NE)** and Saffron-crowned Tanagers. We heard an Andean Solitaire in the distance. Soon we found some **Purplish-mantled Tanagers (NE)**, **Indigo Flower-piercers (NE)**, and a family of Grey-breasted Wood-Wrens. Although we heard several **Yellow-breasted Antpittas (NE)**, none ever showed well. We spent considerable time trying to photograph a Chestnut-breasted Wren – although we got good looks at the bird, it was always too quick for any good photographs.

By mid-morning Bob, Hanno and Daniel started birding trails deeper into the forest, while I returned to the hummingbird feeders. Noteworthy species they saw included two Golden-headed Quetzals, several **Toucan Barbets (NE)**, a Tawny-bellied Hermit, **Black-chinned Mountain-Tanager (NE)**, Olivaceous Piha, Montane Foliage-Gleaner, Dusky-faced Tanager and Flame-rumped Tanagers. The hummingbird feeders were very active and included **Velvet-purple Coronets (NE)**, **Empress Brilliants (NE)**, **Purple-throated Woodstars (NE)**, **Brown Incas (NE)**, **Violet-tailed Sylphs (NE)**, and a female Booted Rackettail. A key target species, the Greenish Puffleg, obliged us with great photos. Eventually a White-tailed Hillstar also showed once.

By noon, the others arrived and a delicious cooked lunch was brought up to us from the lodge. The early afternoon was spent taking turns at the multi-flash setup, and by 3PM decided to return to the lodge. We later learnt, just behind us, a logging truck got stuck on the landslide which had recently been cleared, making the road impassable. We would have been forced to spend half the night on the mountainside – not a pleasant thought. At the feeders around the lodge, we photographed Steely-vented Hummingbirds (most common), **Purple-throated Woodstars (NE)**, **Brown Incas (NE)**, Andean Emeralds, and Violet-crowned Woodnymphs. In the gardens we also saw and eventually photographed an elusive Red-faced Spinetail .

## September 2

Two of us (Bob and myself) decided with Daniel to brave the trek up to the reserve once more. Hanno had a late morning and birded around the lodge. Up on the mountain, we again birded the road beyond the forest feeders and then split up mid-morning. We got excellent close-up photos of the **Black-and-gold Tanagers (E)** at some fruiting plants. Along the road and trails, Bob saw Slate-throated Redstart, **Scrub Tanager (NE)**, Sharpe's Wren, the highly desirable **Black Solitaire (NE)**, Handsome and Ornate Flycatchers, Choco Tyrannulet, .. Heard but not seen were **Choco Vireo (NE)**, Black-billed Peppershrike and **Nariño Tapaculo (NE)**. At the feeders, the White-tailed Hillstar finally perched several times for great photos. .... By noon it was time to head back down to the lodge for lunch, pack up and then start the 4 hour drive back to Medellin. A couple of road-side birding spots weren't very productive. We encountered heavy Sunday evening traffic getting back into Medellin.

The Hotel Portales del Campestre is a former residence converted to a small B&B inn in a quiet and safe suburb of Medellin. The rooms are large and spacious. Real hot showers were again greatly appreciated. The staff was very accommodating to our late arrival and early departures. Free WiFi allowed us to check on our emails. The meals were well prepared and tasty (breakfast is included in the room rate). The hotel offers excellent value when staying in Medellin.

### September 3

After a hearty breakfast (cereal, eggs & sausages, pastries, juices and coffee), it was for me to say good-bye. I took a taxi to Rionegro and flew Avianca from Medellin back to Bogota and on to Toronto that afternoon. The others headed to the suburb of Sabaneta to visit the small reserve/park called La Romera (N 6 deg 6.657' W 75 deg 36.089') birding the road from the last house to the gate. The key target bird here was the **Red-bellied Grackle (E)** - saw about 10 in small flocks. A pair of **Colombian Chachalaca (E)** showed well. However the prize sighting was a female **Yellow-headed Manakin (NE)** catching small berries on the flight, at a point near the main gate.

By mid-morning it was time to start driving towards the Piha Reserve via Barbosa and Anori. Enroute we stopped at the Porce reservoir bridges where just off the main road we saw Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Bare-faced Ibis, Little Blue Herons, Striated Herons, Cocoi Heron (1), Amazon Kingfisher, and a Grey-necked Wood Rail. Also saw Black-faced Dacnis (stunning bird), four Bronze-winged Parrots and a Russet-crowned Crake.

Eventually we arrived at the Piha Reserve - Arrierito Antioqueño - which is located on the west side of the Central Andes off a dirt road on a canyon edge. The reserve (N 6 deg 59.084' W 75 deg 6.710' Elevation 1646m) is operated by ProAves and is about a 5 hour drive from Medellin.

The banana feeders and surrounding forest attracted numerous tanagers including such species as Golden, Beryl-spangled, Swallow, Silver-throated and Black-capped Tanagers, Ashy-throated Bush-Tanager and Black-faced Dacnis. There were several hummingbird feeders which were active with Steely-vented Hummingbirds, Andean Emeralds, Green-crowned Brilliants, Green-crowned Woodnymphs, White-bellied and Purple-throated Woodstars.

### September 4

Bob, Daniel and Jose (reserve guardian) took a walk along main forest trail while Hanno stayed at the lodge. The weather was cool, but no rain. The first part of the trail was steep, but then levelled off. Saw and photographed lots of birds – best being a Lanceolated Monklet and **Sooty-headed Wren (NE)**. Back at the lodge, lunch was prepared by Norelli (Jose's wife). Early afternoon spent photographing hummingbirds at the feeders around the lodge. At 3PM walked up the road with Jose – but further access was not recommended due to recent vehicle stops and thefts. The road below the lodge was lined with small houses hanging over the hillside, most on stilts. Main course for dinner was some very tough beef. Although food was plentiful, it did not match the quality at Las Tangaras, perhaps because of the tiny kitchen. The guest rooms are however very spacious.

### September 5

Morning walk uphill was curtailed by rain after about 1 ½ hours – returned to lodge. Headed out again by 10:30AM, but this time going downhill. Saw some good birds and managed to see White-crowned Tapaculo and **Parker's Antbird (E)**. Back to the lodge for lunch, and then a brief siesta. Mid-afternoon started birding the water works road which runs steeply downhill and is only accessed with prior permission. Best birds were the **Black-headed Brush-Finch (NE)** and **White-mantled Barbet (E)**.

## September 6

Last morning walk for Bob and Daniel up the “easy” trail. Stopped at the **Chestnut Wood-Quail (E)** feeding station, but only heard them. Saw Striped Woodhaunter, Buff-throated Foliage-Gleaner, Olivaceous Woodcreeper and Golden-winged Manakin. Got good photos of Plain Antvireo. After lunch, it was time to drive back to Medellin and on to the Hotel Santiago de Arma in Rionegro. A couple of road side stops for various birds including Dull-coloured and Blue-black Grassquit, Ruddy-breasted Seedeater, Pale-breasted Spinetail and **Bar-crested Antshrike (NE)**. Said goodbye to Daniel and thanked him for a fabulous birding experience. At the hotel, the rooms were clean, spacious and modern. There was a shuttle to the airport (5 minutes away). A computer hooked up to a printer allowed for preprinting of boarding passes. A late dinner consisted of pizza, Caesar salad and some Chilean red wine. Overall, the hotel was more than adequate given its convenient location.

**Concluding comments:** An amazing trip - we saw about 350 species of which 95 were lifers for Hanno and 62 were lifers for Bob (who saw his 4000<sup>th</sup> life-bird on the trip). We saw 60 species of hummingbirds, which included 14 target birds on my “must-see” list (only missed the Golden-bellied Starfrontlet). Colombia was certainly safe in the areas we visited. We saw only one army checkpoint along the road to the Piha Reserve. Everywhere the people were friendly and always trying to be helpful. Accommodations ranged from very basic (La Victoria) to luxurious (Bogota Marriott), and were more than adequate at all the eco-lodges (ProAves, Rio Blanco and Rogitama). The food was excellent everywhere we visited – importantly, no one got sick. Lastly, a special thanks again to Daniel, without whom, the success of the trip would have been impossible. Plans are already being formulated for a follow-up trip in 2013.

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**Daily Birding Lists:** email Bob Lewis: [bob@wingbeats.org](mailto:bob@wingbeats.org)

**Bird Photographs :** Here are some photos of just a few of the species seen on the trip:



**Indigo-capped Hummingbird**



**Undulated Antpitta**



**Green and Black Fruiteater**



**Mountain Velvetbreast**



**Purplish-mantled Tanager**



**Copper-bellied Puffleg**



**Yellow-eared Parrots**



**Black and Gold Tanager**

More extensive photo portfolios of birds seen on the trip are at:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/boblewis/sets/72157631494733382>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/pahyyz/sets/72157631711359154/>

<http://www.pahphoto.com/nature> under the Colombia folder

Location shots of the trip and sites visited are at:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/pahyyz/sets/72157631737120925/>