

## COLOMBIA WESTERN AND CENTRAL CORDILLERA TOUR

### Day 1 (01/09/11):

Early in the afternoon I received a call from Sally advising me that the Elmgrens and Thompsons would be arriving in Cali at 11 pm due to a cancelled flight. Good news for me as Bill and Maxine were arriving at the same time (this meant only one trip to the airport and up the hill for me). I had to juggle the arrival as both parties arrived at different gates but everything went smoothly. We loaded up the bus and headed into Cali and then up the Western Cordillera towards the hotel. After a long drive, and many comments from the group on the interesting drive up the hill (great views of Cali lights), we arrived at the hotel at around 1 am. We got everyone checked in and to bed as I had to head back to Cali to pick up the Shepardsons the next morning at 9 am.

### Day 2 (01/10/11):

I was at the airport at 9 am to greet the Shepardsons, and found them sitting at the gate exit as they had arrived at the international gate instead of the national gate as they should have. They had only been waiting a few minutes, so we loaded up the bus and began our journey up the Western Cordillera, first stopping by my grandmother's house to pick up the "blueberry", my rig. The rest of the group enjoyed a morning of birding along the trails of the hotel, and were excited to start our adventure when I arrived. We birded a while longer along the hotel trails while the Shepardsons freshened up, enjoying views of species such as smoky-brown woodpecker, roadside hawk, and golden-faced tyrannulet.

At the hotel we also met the "Mapalina" (non-profit organization I have partnered with [www.mapalina.com](http://www.mapalina.com)) crew. Jose Eduardo Luna ([jose@mapalina.com](mailto:jose@mapalina.com)) and his sister Paola Andrea began birding with us immediately. After some productive birding, we headed to Parillao, a local restaurant where we enjoyed a Club Colombia cerveza and the whole gang ordered "frijolada", typical Colombian beans served with rice, fried plantains, avocado and the meat of your choice. We accompanied the beer with appetizers consisting of "morcilla" (blood sausage), chorizo, a thin and crunchy "arepa" (typical Colombian corn tortilla that come in many shapes and sizes), and smoked ribs. Our next destination was Finca La Araucana, a property that has been in my family for more than 50 years and named after a humongous monkey puzzle tree (native to Chile) that my grandfather planted for my grandmother when he brought the property. Finca La Araucana produces organic sprouts and vegetables for local restaurants and has an amazing balcony in which to relax and enjoy the birds. We arrived, and began birding immediately as coffee were served. It was a great introduction to Andean tanagers and hummingbirds, and birding from the balcony was quite relaxing. Red-headed barbet, crimson-rumped toucanette, and flame-rumped tanager were some of the highlight of the afternoon. We also enjoyed "obleas" for dessert, thin wafer cookies with caramel, condensed milk and blackberry jam sandwiched in between. A great way to start off day two! As night fell, we maneuvered the muddy driveway at the finca and were soon at the hotel in Km 18. Dinner and rest was in order, with a lot of excitement for the College Football championship, Oregon Ducks vs. Auburn. A whole crew of Oregon fans was ready to cheer on the team by watching the game on the big-screen. Unfortunately the Ducks lost the game by 2 points the last few seconds of the game, but they had a good run.



**A very relaxing way to begin the vacation. Also a great introduction to birds of the Colombian Andes.**

Day 3 (01/11/11): We again rose early to start birding at the hotel gate, where we met Jeni, another Mapalina guide ([jefer.ave@gmail.com](mailto:jefer.ave@gmail.com)). A great day of birding, it was a pleasure to observe over 70 species during the day. Much fun was had by all, beginning with some marvelous views of blue-winged mountain tanager and golden tanager (which we observed throughout the day). A great way to start the morning, we enjoyed listening to white-throated quail in the distance. Excitement was in the air and our first great find was a pair of emerald toucanette. The group also got our first look at highland motmot and learned about the role of slate-throated and golden-fronted whitestarts as nuclei of mixed foraging group. We returned to the hotel for a quick breakfast and then headed back to the road.

Jose had observed a fruiting “uvo” tree on a previous tour with Rockjumpers, and his instinct told him that the fruits should be ripe and there would be a good chance to see many species. We arrived and observed a mixed flock with many species of tanagers, including previously unobserved metallic green, saffron-crowned and golden-naped. We kept walking in search of multicolored tanager, and arrived to the sweet spot of the day in front of a friendly Argentinian man that enjoys birding. Alas, multicolored tanager in a very large group that included golden-olive woodpecker, montane woodcreeper, barred becard, Canada warbler and many more. Extremely satisfied, we kept walking along the road on our way to Zingara, or the hummingbird farm. Asdrubal greeted us and the show began: Long-tailed sylph, white-necked jacobin, brown violetear, bronzy inca, purple-throated woodstar, greenish puffleg and booted racket-tail amongst others. Happy and hungry, we were picked up by the bus and headed to Embajada de Ginebra, for a delicious “sanchocho” (chicken soup with yucca and plantain) accompanied

by a frosty cold Poker beer. As we arrived, the appetizers started to hit the table. First, “patacones” (fried green plantain), followed by “ojaldras” (fried dough), and complemented beautifully with a choice of “hogao” (sautéed onions and tomatoes) or “aji” (onion, cilantro and pepper topping). Then we feasted on sancocho, one of Colombia’s most typical dishes that is served with some amazing locally grown avocados. The abundance of food was overwhelming, and we all commented on the salad that was served in tiny fried plantain bowls. As we finished lunch we observed Andean solitaire and green hermit.

After lunch we returned to the “uvo” tree and feasted on more tanagers, including our first look at bery-spangled tanager. Highlights of the afternoon included golden-headed quetzal (which we used playback to attract), scarlet-fronted parakeet, green and black fruiteater, and the endemic and vulnerable Colombian chachalaca. After a very productive day we returned to the hotel to work on our list and in time for a frosty beer and a light dinner.



**Everybody enjoyed “sancocho”. Why does Jason look so serious? It might be because he is the only one without a Poker in front of him.**

Day 4 (01/12/11):

I arrived early at the hotel and had time to hang out with the group while we had breakfast, then loaded up the van with the “San Antonio Forest” in mind. We parked the van and enjoyed some great views of white-sided flowerpiercer in a garden of a nearby vacation home. As we started walking we had our first

look at golden-crowned flycatcher, and then continued walking in search of a mixed flock. We heard azaras spinetail nearby, and a lot of fun and great views were had as we played back to it and it responded. We continued up the hill to the antenna, and had the pleasure to observe blue-capped tanager for the first time. As we arrived at the antenna we had some good views of golden olive woodpecker and yellow-vented woodpecker. At the antenna we took a small break and had some snacks as we basked in the sunshine.

We headed down the hill and as we were all focused on finding a bird we had yet to identify, Jim yelled out, "there's a raptor on that branch." We all pointed our binoculars at it, and after much deliberation we concluded it was a tiny hawk, most likely a wandering juvenile as our elevation was too high for this bird. Definitely it was the bird of the day, and a first observation for the San Antonio Forest.

Down the hill we went, towards the Dolmetsch Arboretum for our promised picnic. As we arrived at La Holandesa, the bakery (owned by a Dutch woman friend of my family) where we were to pick up our fresh bread, we noticed there was a road closure. As we waited for the bread we had a chance to observe some birds, and then decided to walk to the arboretum, which was only 500 meters away.

We enjoyed a picnic on some benches under some hanging jade plants, with "alfajores" (argentinian cookie) for dessert. A very nice tour of the marvelous gardens ensued, as I did my best to fill in my father's shoes as guide. The crew enjoyed the gardens and learned a little about some plants from around the world. On our way out some of us got lucky and were able to see yet another tanager, the guira. We returned to the hotel and made our list (while Stan went for a jog) and ordered an early dinner in hopes of going to sleep at a decent hour for our early morning the next day. The local police squad greeted us at the hotel as they stopped by for a Coca Cola.



**I did my best to fill in for my dad while we toured the Dolmetsch Arboretum. The picnic was great.**

Day 5 (01/13/11):

We rose extremely early as our goal was to leave the hotel by 4:30 am with a packed breakfast. To my surprise, the crew was loaded up in the van and ready to go so off we went. This morning we met Richard Johnston ([rjohnston@calidris.org.co](mailto:rjohnston@calidris.org.co)), our local guide for the remainder of the trip. Richard works for Calidris, a local non-profit organization that supports conservation of shorebirds in Colombia.

We arrived at Cordoba, a town named after the engineer that built the railroad to Cali. Waiting on the railroad were the “brujitas” (little witches, motorcycle-powered wooden carts that ride on the railroad), our vehicle into the next great birding spot of the trip. We could not help ourselves, so we birded for a while and got to know blue-headed parrot, chestnut-headed oropendola, and dusky pigeon. We loaded up the “brujitas”, some of the group with worried expressions, and off we went. We all enjoyed the ride, consisting of spectacular scenery and a bit of adrenaline.

We arrived in San Cipriano in about 25 minutes, not without first having to unload our “brujita” to allow one loaded with diesel to go by us. The birding started immediately with some great looks at golden-hooded tanager and masked tityra. We crossed town, experiencing the daily life of the lazy town. We

ordered lunch and headed past town, along the san Cipriano River (one of the clearest tropical rivers in the world).

Highlights of the hike up river included chestnut-mandibled toucan, stripe-billed aracari, and black-breasted puffbird. One stop in particular was quite fun, we enjoyed views of white-bearded manakin and chestnut-backed antbird. We then hiked a short side trail with no success and headed to the river to freshen up. Relaxing by the river was delightful, and even more delightful was the “sancocho de pescado” (fish soup with fried fish on the side) we had waiting for us in town. After lunch, we headed back to the “brujitas”. Something very special happened next. We already started moving when another “brujita” showed up and let us know that there was three more behind them and we should wait. This meant a small delay, which we took advantage of the situation and got to see rose-faced parrot at the top of a hollowed out palm stump. It was a truly great way to end the day of birding as we headed back to the Cauca Valley, to the city of Buga. Dinner was a la carte and was accompanied by good times and mouth-watering cerveza.



**A little dose of adrenaline before a stupendous day of birding!**

Day 6 (1/14/11):

We had a light breakfast with some local grape juice, and unsuccessfully tried to pick up hot “pandebonos” (cheese bread) at a nearby bakery. We headed to the Laguna de Sonso, and began birding seconds after we stepped out of the van. A good show with many individuals of great egret,

black vulture, glossy and bare-faced ibis, and vermilion flycatcher. We spent some time there and then began our walk on a road adjacent to the Cauca River and crossing through flooded pastures. Aplomado falcon soared above us, black-bellied ducks made us laugh, and we enjoyed observing aquatic birds such as purple gallinule, common moorhen, wattled jacana and neotropic cormorant. The promised "pandebonos" made an appearance after we sent Jason back to Buga to pick them up, and it only took a short hike by my part back to the van to retrieve them as the road was unpassable. A worthwhile treat, the "pandebonos" lifted the already high spirits of the crew.

We arrived at La Isabela, the reserve headquarters, where we met Dario, the caretaker. Dario pointed out several individuals of lesser nighthawk, as we inspected the damage of the recent flood to the property. We got news that the trail towards the lookout was muddy but walkable, so we began our journey. It did not take us much to get amazing views of our target species of the day, apical flycatcher. A pair hung out in front of us for a good while, the most exciting moment of the day in my opinion. Bar-crested antshrike was also very fun to listen to, and most of us got great looks at it as well.

An odd occurrence, we saw two species of escaped cage birds simultaneously; masked cardinal and red-crowned woodpecker. We headed back to La Isabela and rested in the shade for a few minutes as our walk to the van was in full sun. Exhausted and hot, we made it to the van with enough time to stop along the road for "chontaduro" (orange fruit palm eaten with honey and salt). People were excited to try it, but I suggested we wait and indulge at the edge of the pool with some frosty cold cervezas. Not to pat my own back but it was a great idea, superbly relaxing and refreshing after a great morning of birding. We left the hotel at 3 pm towards Perreira, and arrived at La Suiza lodge in the Otun Quimbaya Sanctuary just in time for dinner. We had dinner and enjoyed doing our list with a few bottles of Chilean wine.



**A hot day but a lot of new birds for our list. Being able to soak in the hotel pool after hot birding was a godsend.**

Day 7 (1/15/11):

As we sipped on our delicious morning coffee and waited for breakfast (eggs and little fried doughs), we decided to bird around the hotel grounds. One of the best ways to start the day, we had good views of Cauca guan and spectacular views of red-ruffed fruitcrow and green jay before breakfast. It so happened that we were able to enjoy these birds all day long, the most individuals of these species I have ever seen, a true delight. The activity was a bit slow during the morning, but we still enjoyed seeing some of the common species of the area. We were picked up by Jason and returned to the hotel for some delicious beans (for the third time, but nobody seemed to mind as every time they were prepared differently every time).

The afternoon we had one species in mind, Torrent duck. The plan was to ride the van directly to the end of the road, but we could not help but stop for a mixed flock that produced the marvelous crested ant tanager. Very content, we headed to the river and it started to pour rain as we arrived at our destination. We waited out the rain with a cup of hot coffee and then headed towards the Otun River. As we arrived everybody got to see torrent tyrannulet, but there were no ducks in sight. So we decided to take a trail in search of ducks. We had no luck along the trail, but on the way back we observed male and female torrent duck. They gave us the show of the day, jumping in and out of the water and riding the rapids. It was a truly epic way to end the afternoon of birding.



**A stroke of luck allowed us ridiculously good views and a great show of a pair of torrent ducks.**

Day 8 (1/16/11):

Today we had breakfast early as we wanted to have an early lunch and be on the road by noon. This time, we birded down the road from the lodge and had some luck with a mixed flock. Also, the entire group was able to see white-capped tanager, the largest tanager in Colombia. The highlights of the morning included wedge-billed hummingbird and black throated mango. We also saw blue-capped tanager, slaty brush-finch and blue-winged mountain tanager.

After lunch we headed down the road to our next destination; the Rio Blanco reserve near Manizales. We were doing great time so we decided to stop at El Lago, a small lake alongside the road near the town of Chinchina. A great idea, as we were able to observe many species in a short amount of time, and a good number of them were new species for the trip. My favorite was blakish rail, an uncommon and hard to see species. We also saw American coot, solitary and spotted sandpiper, greater and lesser yellowlegs, and wattled jacana. We saw 20 species and were only there about twenty minutes.

We were still doing great time, until the unforeseen happened. As we arrived at a toll 30 km from Manizales, we got a flat tire and the driver informed me that they do not carry spares for the front tires. So we adapted the plan, found a local to come pick up the tire and get it fixed while we summoned for another bus to take us to Manizales. After waiting for about 10 minutes the bus arrived and on the way we went to the Manizales bus terminal. We arrived at a very nice terminal, and were soon floating over

the beautiful city in a gondola. The gondola is used as a mass transit system to get people up and down the mountain in a safe and fast way. We arrived downtown and it was happening. Tons of people out and about, commerce going on, music, the works. We decided to walk a round for a while to experience a typical Manizales afternoon. We stopped for a quick roadside snack of “dedos de queso” (cheese fingers), fried dough with cheese and guava jam in the middle. We all enjoyed them and then went to check out some nearby churches, plazas and statues. After some coffee in a mall, Jason picked us up and off we went to Rio Blanco. We stopped briefly for some supplies (including road sodas), and headed up the hill. We arrived to meet Celene, Albeiro and Kelly, our host family. We got settled in and met for dinner after relaxing for a bit.

Chef Celene had prepared for us one of my favorite Colombian dishes, “ajiaco”. It is a chicken and potato soup with three kinds of potatoes, seasoned with “guasca”, a herb native to Colombia. It was served with cream and capers, and during dinner the main topic of conversation was the deliciousness of “ajiaco”. We ate dessert and commented on how some things happen for a reason, and how a small shortcoming led to a very fun afternoon touring the city. I went to bed feeling great about the day.



**The small detour to the lake turned out to be incredibly productive.**

Day 9 (1/17/11): It was an interesting morning because everybody but our driver Jason was at breakfast. When people started asking where he was I explained that he had gone down to Manizales the night before to re-fix our tire. On the way up he got the van stuck and had to spend the night at the house

near the reserve entrance. Luckily, the next morning a TV crew was headed up to film a commercial and they had to help him get unstuck so they could get their equipment to the filming site.

We had breakfast and left Dave in care of Celene, as he had spent the night with fevers and chills. We also met Kelly, Celene's daughter and our local guide for the next two days. After breakfast we headed up the hill after some spectacularly clear views of the Nevado del Ruiz. Then off to the antpitta feeders, where we had the pleasure of close and open views of stripe-headed brush finch, the endemic brown-banded antpitta, and the very handsome chestnut-crowned antpitta.

We continued up the hill and began hiking on a trail that provided the bird of the day. A good number of us were able to get a very good look at ocellated tapaculo, the bird that is drawn in the cover of *Birds of Northern South America* (Restall 2004). Excited about our find, we headed back to the lodge for lunch. As we arrived we saw Dave walking up the hill, he was feeling great and attributed it to Celene's ginger tea. We had lunch and I left the group to bird down the hill as I ran some errands in Manizales. When I arrived to pick up the group at the bottom of the hill I heard the group had seen red-hooded tanager and mountain cacique. And of course we all enjoyed white-capped dipper. We headed up the road for another delectable dinner.



**Everybody looks exhausted after the morning photoshoot with the Manizales tourism crew. What a good looking group!**

Day 10 (1/18/11):

Our second day in Rio Blanco proved to be extremely productive. We again visited the antpitta feeders after breakfast so Dave could check them out. It was fun, but the moment was ruined by an individual black thrush who kept on scaring the antpittas and brush-finches off. So we decided to head up the hill. There was a lot of activity this morning, and we could hear various species of forest skullers including Spillman's tapaculo, blakish tapaculo, chestnut-naped antpitta and bicolored antpitta. We tried for all but only had luck seeing Spillman's tapaculo. We returned to the house at the trailhead and learned about "tejo", one of Colombia's national games played with steel pucks and firecrackers. As we learned about the game we had one of the most diverse mixed flocks of the trip, and a great viewing gallery to enjoy them. In the flock we saw: blue and black tanager, buff-breasted mountain tanager, blue-winged mountain tanager, beryl-spangled tanager, blue-capped tanager, summer tanager, golden-fronted tyrannulet, emerald toucanette, acadian flycatcher, and Andean guan amongst others. When the action was over we began walking on a side rode and heard black-billed mountain toucan and a few of us had a good look at it. As the group was very interested in seeing this bird, we decided to go find it. Back at the "tejo" court, Richard and Kelly walked down the hill about 100 yards to see if they could find it. The rest of the group stayed, and in a few minutes Bill yelled out "toucan." After about five minutes trying to spot the birds hiding behind leaves and branches, one of them came out and gave us the show of a lifetime. Excitement was in the air and we planned to pop a "tejo" firecracker to celebrate. As we were ready to do it, Richard called me and said they had a Quetzal, so we decided to skip the firecracker and head to see the quetzal.

Again we were delighted by golden-headed quetzal, and also had a chance to see grass-green tanager, which was another target we were still missing. One of the most productive days of the tour, we all shared the same level of exhilaration as we headed to lunch. We enjoyed some cervezas (Cerveza Aguila, from the Caribbean) as we waited for lunch. We had lunch, loaded up the van and headed to Manizales for a short city tour, then to enjoy the hot springs at our next hotel. We arrived in time to soak in the mineral-rich hot springs for a few hours and then relax for a while before dinner. Dinner was amazing, accompanied by a few bottles of wine, most of us had pasta in order to carbo-load for our big elevation day. Again, great conversation, jokes, laughing, and highlights of the day made for a great evening.



### **Who could forget the antpitta feeders!**

Day 11 (1/19/20)

We started our big elevation day with a light breakfast and much anticipation about our ascent to 14,000 feet. We climbed for a good while, taking it very slow to ensure we would not suffer from altitude sickness. Our first stop provided the spectacular scarlet-bellied mountain tanager and flying high above us was black-chested buzzard eagle. We also saw black flowerpiercer and viridian metaltail.

We continued to the lagoon, and stopped just before the rest stop to view many-striped cansastero and sedge wren. Then a stop for some coca tea to help with the altitude. At the rest stop we enjoyed watching stout-billed cynclodes coming in and out of a nest on a bank. Then we headed up the hill to a great vista point where we were able to see some snow on the cloud-covered volcano. Here we also saw plumbeous sierra finch working their nests in the ground. We also had great views of Andean siskin as we enjoyed our coca tea.

Our next destination was the entrance to the park, where we would have a really good chance for bearded helmetcrest and tawny antpitta. We hiked along a trail to a weather station and heard tawny antpitta a few times. As we searched, it appeared briefly in a bush and many of us were able to see it. There was no sign of helmetcrest, so we decided to walk down the hill and get away from the noisy crowd at the visitor center.

We had no luck with the helmetcrest, but were not about to give up on it. We headed towards lunch and took some time to relax and eat “bandeja paisa”, a typical sample of foods from the central cordillera region. We made several stops as we headed down the hill in search of the helmetcrest, and at one stop were able to see Andean tit spinetail. A good find, but still no helmetcrest. We loaded the van and began to drive until we heard Linda yell “hummer”. We loaded the van and had some incredible views of bearded helmetcrest (perched for about 2 minutes), which were repeated shortly thereafter. We could now call it a day and go back to soak in the hot springs as happy campers.



**Mindboggling scenery and the bearded helmetcrest were the highlights of this day**

Day 12 (1/19/21)

Headed back to Cali, we stopped to bird at Alcazares, a municipal park just minutes from the city of Manizales. An extremely productive morning, it was not only a great “review” of the Colombian birds we saw on the trip, we also saw many new species including black and white warbler, common toady-flycatcher, and the extraordinary bay-headed tanager. It was great fun to observe migrants including Tennessee warbler and American redstart, as we spent the entire morning birding at just 2 spots. The activity was great, in fact I would say it was almost unbelievable. We worked up an appetite and headed towards Cali after a great morning.

Past Pereira we stopped at a roadside grill with outdoor seating with magnificent view of the Cauca Valley and the Western cordillera behind it. We birded in the restaurant grounds for a while before

ordering lunch, not without refreshing ourselves with some delicious cervezas. With still about 2 hours to get to Cali left, we hit the road in hopes of reaching our plush hotel in time to get cleaned up and enjoy a nice dinner. The group was very impressed with the hotel, and was enjoying a nice glass of wine in the outdoor hotel restaurant when I arrived for pickup. Then to Salerno, the best pizzeria in Cali, for some pizza and beer, good stories, and remembering good times had during the trip. The group also got to meet Alvaro Calonje, my dad (alcalonje@yahoo.com).



**We birded for three hours from two spots, didn't have to move much! Great way to end our birding trip!**

Day 13 (1/20/11)

The Shepardsons and Thomases stayed one more day, and my father invited us for lunch at the Dolmetsch Arboretum. After a short tour of Cali and some shopping by the girls, we headed up to the arboretum as I gave the group a short speech on Colombian history. We arrived at the arboretum and after a couple glasses of wine lunch was served. "Causa Peruana", or Peruvian Cause was the main dish. The story behind the dish is that when Simon Bolivar came to liberate Peru from the Spaniards, his troops were starving and they had no food. So the locals rallied for the troops, and began feeding them what they could find. There was a bountiful crop of potatoes, so the meals they served consisted of mashed potatoes with whatever other food they could find. After lunch we toured another portion of the garden and then headed back to Cali, reminiscing on the great trip we had.