

## COLOMBIA WESTERN AND CENTRAL CORDILLERA TOUR

Day 1 (11/27/10):

I arrived at the airport to meet Ken, with no sign of the rest of the group. Kate was already in Cali, but had arrived at the wrong end of the airport. Kate found us soon and after dropping her luggage in the car and having a “pandebono” (cheese bread), we returned to the terminal to wait for the rest. The flights were delayed, so we had time to visit, learn about each other, and indulge in some “avena” (oatmeal drink) and “chontaduro” (small, orange palm fruit with honey and salt). Jude and Ruth arrived finally and we began our adventure. Lunch was our priority at this point, so we headed to Crepes and Waffles, a restaurant I like to support as they only employ women that are head’s of a family. Lunch was enjoyed by all (except Ken), and we headed up the western cordillera as the group enjoyed the amazing vistas.

Finca La Araucana, my family farm that produces organic sprouts and vegetables for local restaurants, was our destination. We arrived, and began birding immediately as “mandarina” (tangerine) juice and coffee were served. It was a great introduction to Andean tanagers and hummingbirds, and birding from the balcony was quite relaxing. A great way to start off day one! 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.



Day 2 (11/28/10):

We rose early to head to EL Bosque de San Antonio, where we 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)), his sister Paola Andrea, and Chato accompanied us as we hiked towards the television antenna at the top of the hill. The activity was a bit slow but we enjoyed watching a pair of azara’s spinetail working a patch of native ferns and began to become familiar with the sounds of common Andean birds.

After reaching the antenna hunger was in the air, so we headed to the vehicles for the short drive to La Embajada de Ginebra. We were greeted by a lovely staff that promptly served a sample of their homemade wine, which reminded many of us of port. Then 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” (soup with plantain, yucca, chicken and corn), 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 hummingbirds and our first highland motmot of the trip.

Back to the Bosque de San Antonio for an afternoon of birding, where we were all fortunate enough to see the “target” species of the forest, the spectacular multicolored tanager.



Day 3 (11/29/10):

On day three we rose very early in order to make it to the town of El Queremal for breakfast, where we had “pericos” (scrambled eggs with onion and tomatoes), “arepas” (thick corn tortillas, we tried various different kinds throughout the trip), and hot chocolate. We met Viviana Vidal Astudillo (viviana@vidalastudillo.com ) our guide for the next two days. Jose Luna also accompanied us on this leg of the trip. On the way to breakfast we took some time to discuss Colombian history, and what the last 30 years of civil war has meant for the country. We began our descent towards the pacific slope, our first stop at a 100+ individual flock of Mealy Parrots. It was quite a spectacle. Amazing views were had as the parrots gorged on fruit trees and flew in and out of the Digua River canyon below us.

We made a couple more stops on the way down, where we saw stripe-billed aracari, broad-billed motmot and the very common flame-rumped tanager, which in the Choco Bioregion has a yellow rump (as opposed to the red rump in the cloud forest). We arrived at El Danubio and checked in to our modest hotel, and had about an hour to kill before lunch. So the group birded while I spoke with the army captain of the nearby military base. Lunch was served and after a siesta we headed out towards The Waterfall. By the river we spotted a fasciated tiger heron, and had very good looks at it.

We birded on the way to the waterfall, stopping for some great views of long-tailed tyrant. We met a squad of Colombian Army soldiers on the way who were very pleasant and perplexed by what we were doing. We reached the waterfall and took some great pictures and headed back to dinner, where we enjoyed a glass of wine while working on our list for the day. We spent the night at El Danubio.



Day 4 (11/30/10):

We rose very early and it was already raining. After breakfast we headed to “La Virgen”, a spot along the road with a statue of a virgin and some excellent views. We birded all morning, and it was a delight to listen to the sounds of white-bearded manakin. We also saw many tanagers today, including ducky-faced, silver-throated, tawny-crested and emerald. The morning was productive and we headed to El Danubio for lunch.

Rain started to fall again as we loaded up the van and headed up the hill towards El Queremal. All was going well until we reached a tree that had fallen across the road, and with no machete in the van Jose and I went hiking along the road in search of one, which we found at a farmer’s house a couple hundred yards away. We returned the machete, and Marco, our driver volunteered to work on the log for the first half hour. Jose and I laughed, handed him the machete and he was done in less than 5 minutes. Success! On the way out we again observed the spectacle of the mealy parrots. We returned to El 18 for the night.



Day 5 (12/01/10): We again rose early but we started birding at the hotel gate. A great day of birding, it was a pleasure to observe chestnut wood quail after Ken's idea of placing the ipod with its call on the opposite side of the road worked to perfection. A great way to start the morning, Jude and Ken separated from the group for a while in search of a white-throated quail-dove that we had been hearing for a while.

We birded along the road on our way to Zingara, or the hummingbird farm. Esdrubal 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. We were picked up by the driver, taken to the hotel for lunch and then began our descent into the Cauca Valley en route to Buga. We arrived in Buga in time for some birding around the hotel grounds (where an escaped parrot was observed), a dip in the pool and some freshening up before dinner in the hotel's marvelous dining room.



Day 6 (12/02/10):

We met our guide for the day, Richard Johnston (rjohnston@calidris.org.co), at the hotel very early in the morning. Richard works for Calidris, a local non-profit organization that supports conservation of shorebirds. Our original destination, Laguna de Sonso, was flooded due to the extreme rainy season and we observed nearby houses under several meters of water on the way to our Plan B destination. It was raining very hard, but nobody seemed to mind except our driver as he stared at our muddy boots. Our first bird was anhinga, followed by black-bellied and fulvous whistling ducks.

Our new birding area was flooded as well, but we were able to bird along a levee as it rained. From here we observed the usual suspects; bare-faced ibis, purple gallinule, wattled jacana, crested caracara and snail kite. As the levee got muddier, we decided to head back and try one of the Cauca River oxbows, named chiquique. We again birded on a levee, but this one exhibited riparian vegetation so the rest of the morning was great. Highlights included a ruby topaz hummingbird, guira tanager, and dwarf cuckoo. At the end of the birding session we spent some time trying for another cuckoo but were unsuccessful.

We headed back to the hotel for lunch, and we all had the same typical Buga dish. A potato and beef soup served with arepas and avocado. We ate, packed up and began our journey to Pereira.

We stopped at the entrance to Pereira and met William Pena, who gracefully invited to his private home to view his hummingbird feeders. He has ten feeders, which he set up about 16 months ago. He is very proud of his visitors, and we had fun conversing him and watching the birds from the balcony while it rained. On the way out, his wife had to show us her Christmas decorations, which she was also very proud of. We then headed to the Otun Quimbaya Sanctuary, arriving just in time for dinner.



Day 7 (12/03/10):

Waking up at the reserve was great, while we waited for breakfast a group of 12 British birders showed up and there was a lot of commotion in the air. First some great views of red-ruffed fruit crow, then some decent views of the endemic Cauca Guan, thought to be extinct until the Otun population was rediscovered in 1990. We had our breakfast and then loaded up the van, hoping to drive up the road to stay away from the large group.

The first great bird, or birds, along the road were a family of torrent ducks with 2 chicks. A very cute scene which we observed for about ten minutes, as the Otun River roared past us. We continued hiking along the road, and found the strong-billed woodcreeper working up the trunk of a large tree, a truly impressive bird. More river views gave us our first look at a white-capped dipper, braving the torrents of the Otun River, which was flowing at full capacity. We returned to the lodge for lunch and packed up to head to Rio Blanco. The food at La Suiza Lodge was very good and the beds very comfortable, and the staff was great.

We arrived in Rio Blanco and had enough time to make a stop at the hummingbird feeders, where we were delighted by collared inca and fawn-breasted brilliant. Then up the road to check in at the lodge. At the lodge we met Chef Celene, who throughout our stay continued to amaze us with her delectable soups.



Day 8 (12/04/10):

We rose early and had “pericos “ and a new type of arepa, yellow and thin and complemented perfectly by “guayaba” (guava) jam, of course made at home by chef Celene. Ahhhh, it was so nice to wake up at the lodge, as we were already birding before breakfast was served. As the British group arrived, the prospect of birding near a group that large, quickly had us on our way up the hill. Guiding us was also Gisella, a local young girl that has been trained to guide birders in the park. She is also a talented artist and creates beautiful hand-drawn t-shirts of the local birds. We decided the antpitta feeders could wait until the afternoon. The morning was productive, we had fun observing streaked xenops and montane woodcreeper doing their thing in a large mixed flock. Also has some very close-up looks of golden-crowned flycatcher. We returned to the lodge for lunch and Celene once again got thumbs up for her soup.

We took a short break after lunch as it was raining pretty hard, and then headed down the hill. I had to go into town to pick up laundry and get some cough medicine for our driver Luis, so the plan was to pick up the group on the way up. I found the group at the hummingbird house at the entrance of the reserve, the rain had stopped so we took a little stroll along the aqueduct structures. To our surprise, a hummingbird that was new to the group, greenfronted lancebill. Exciting to see as we were got in the van in time to meet Albeiro, the worm man, who was scheduled to take us to the antpitta feeders located a a short walk away from the lodge. We arrived at the feeders and got some close-up views of chestnut-headed antpitta, the endemic brown-banded antpitta, and stripe-headed brush-finch. Just in time for a yummy dinner by chef Celene at the lodge.



Day 9 (12/05/10):

We rose early for breakfast and birded around the lodge, blessed by the clearest morning we have had all trip. We joked that it might be Ken's first day of his trip with no rain, as we all knew it was his birthday. Great views of the Nevado del Ruiz (glacier volcano) were had by all, and we headed up the hill to meet up with Albeiro, our worm man, to have a few more looks at the antpittas. Views were had and while we tried to photograph the forest skullers, the girls told us to we had to go in search of some new birds. So we headed up to the crest of the hill, and while observing a mixed flock Albeiro tapped my shoulder and pointed at a woodpecker he had never seen before. I got a quick look at it, then Ken, enough to be able to call it a yellow-bellied sapsucker. A first for the reserve, and very exciting for those who saw it. We communicated the find to Sergio Ocampo, director of Rio Blanco, and he too was excited with our find. A first occurrence this far south, Ken decided to write something about the unusual occurrence.

We headed down the hill for lunch, and after a short break decided to get aride up the hill to hike along the trail in search of some hard to see species. Daniel suggested we try for ocellated tapaculo, pictured on the front page of the Restall guide to Birds of Northern South America. We heard it and hid ourselves in the forest while playing calls for it, we could hear it close but nobody in the group was able to get a good look. We hiked for a while, saw some great good flocks, and returning to the lodge decided to check out Albeiro's secret spot, a good chance to see the tapaculo again. Part of the group hiked down a treacherous trail to try again, and tried and tried but with no success. Could hear the bird nearby but never got close enough. Tired and hungry, we headed back to the lodge to load up the van, very excited about our next destination. On the way down we stopped at the hummingbird house for one last try at wedge-billed hummingbird, with success!!! The Hotel Termales del Otono was our goal, near Manizales and offering some very relaxing hot springs to relax our tired bodies. On the way there, we stopped at a city park to try for stile's tapaculo, with no success, but some of us had some looks at long-tailed antbird. We headed to the hotel, soaked in the hot springs, and had a scrumptious dinner accompanied by some wine and some birthday cake for dessert. Then off to bed, as I committed the mistake of letting the hotel crew have their way with the leftover birthday cake.



Day 10 (12/06/10):

With news that the road to the “Nevados National Park”, our next destination, was closed due to heavy rain and mudslides, we decided to bird along an access road to the park that was still drivable. It was good birding, with numerous mixed flocks with many species, but at one point we became nervous about the condition of the road and decided to head back. We had a late breakfast at the hotel and a few hours to soak in the hot springs and relax at the hotel. We headed for lunch at a nice restaurant with hummingbird feeders, some of us snacked a little because everybody was full from a late breakfast.

We then headed to El Recinto del Pensamiento, a very nice hotel with some trails and very active hummingbird feeders. We saw 12 species, and then enjoyed a walk along the trails. We met a young, enthusiastic guide who also photographed birds but spoke little English. After a nice hike we headed to Manizales to dinner at Don Joaco, a small place in the trendy area of town that served typical dishes. We all tried a variety of appetizers, and had light dinners in lieu of the appetizing! Then back to the hotel.



Day 11 (12/07/10):

Great news!!!! The road to “Los Nevados” was now open!!! So, in lieu of birding in Manizales, we headed up the mountain. I was worried about Kate, who said she suffered of altitude sickness, but her tough demeanor made me feel more relaxed. We had packed a breakfast of yogurt, fruit, and “avena” (liquid oatmeal), which we all enjoyed. Wow was this a successful day, and even more considering we thought we were not going to be able to make it.

Our first stop yielded an incredible variety of special birds. A crew of scarlet-bellied mountain-tanager, with an amazing red color greeted us, as another group of pale-naped brush-finch delighted our eyes. We were also lucky enough to observe male and female plumbeous sierr-finch, and andean tit-spinetail.

and then headed towards a remnant glacial lagoon. As we sipped on coca tea, a favorite cure for altitude sickness, we observed ruddy duck floating in the lagoon. With our altitude sickness fix, we headed up the hill, stopping at a restaurant along the road to ask for an early lunch, as we needed to get back to Cali before dark.

Arriving at the park entrance, we were all feeling cold (4,200 meters is almost 13,000 feet) but on a mission to find tawny antpitta and bearded helmetcrest. We set along the trail to Daniel’s favorite spot, and suddenly Ruth spotted the hummingbird we were after. I got a good look, and so did Jude, but Kate was behind a bush (*espletia* sp. the bird’s major food source). Daniel commented on the lack of *Espletia* flowers, which made the search for bearded helmetcrest even harder. We were on a mission for Kate to see this bird, so we walked down the trail to see if it appeared. As I walked down a small side trail, a very conspicuous tawny antpitta jumped on a bush in plain view of everybody. The excitement was unbelievable, as everybody enjoyed marvelous views of the bird. Again and again, more individuals appeared to the delight of the group. We decide to head back to the lodge, whilst searching for bearded helmetcrest. Alas, one appeared, perched just meters from Kate, as she got the best view anybody had during our afternoon in the paramo ecosystem. All happy, we headed down the hill for lunch, and then got to see our last target species, stout-billed cinclodes hanging out by the road. Then down to Manizales to try to make it to Cali before nightfall.

Well, we hoped for good weather, but the story of our trip was rain, and boy did we get some. Leaving Manizales we had to take a detour because of a landslide, and all was good until we hit the valley. As soon as we descended into the Cauca Valley, the lightning storm of all lightining storm hit us. It was a slow, very safe drive, luckily we had stocked up on snacks and yogurt for the girls. We made it to Cali by 7 pm, I went to pick up the “blueberry” (my very dependable little car), and returned to the hotel to have dinner with the group. We decided on an Argentinean restaurant, were the most talked about delicacy was “chimichurri”, a steak sauce made of olive oil, garlic and parsley (sometimes made with cilantro). A great way to end a very successful day.



HAD TO INCLUDE THIS ONE, FOR POSTERITY!!!!!!!!!!



IN SEARCH OF HIGH ALTITUDE SPECIALISTS!!!

Day 12 (12/08/10): Our last day in Cali was quite relaxing; we met at Hotel Casa de Alferéz at 8:30 after a breakfast buffet which was quite enjoyed. The morning started with a drive up the hill to the Dolmetsch Arboretum, where we hoped to do some birding as well as enjoy the extremely diverse gardens of the arboretum. We started the tour by picking up a couple hiking partners (dog and cat), and stopped at the Costa Rican Zamia garden, where we talked about my brother Michael Calonje's work with them around the world. We proceeded to tour the garden, learning about many of the species of this 2,200 species rich arboretum. We saw fishtail palms, various lilies, the jade plant, and plenty of cycads, orchids and ornamental plants from all over the world.

At one point we were greeted by a group of Colombian chacalacas, as well as green jay and crimson – rumped toucanette. We walked through the propagation green house, then up the hill through the vegetable garden to arrive at the cacti section. We all enjoyed the intimidating walk through the cacti, and sat on some benches with a good view with our friend Trueno (Lightning). On our way out we had the pleasure of meeting Francois Dolmetsch, who invited us for some tea, fresh aromatic water and brownies made by a local baker. It was a very pleasant visit in which we talked about music, Colombia and learned a little about Francois. We visited for a while and then headed towards Finca La Araucana, stopping by Parillao for lunch. We munched on chorizo, blood sausage (Kate's favorite) and smoked ribs before indulging in "sancocho" and a "frijolada" (beans). Rain started as a jug of mandarina (tangerine) juice was served, so we decided to go bird from the balcony at La Araucana to stay out of the rain. We stopped for some bananas, and some took a short nap in the car while Ken set out the bananas.

As rain fell intermittently, activity was off and on, and we were all on high alert for the bay-headed tanager, common at the finca but not seen by Kate and Jude. Alas, it appeared and everybody had great looks at it. Great way to end the trip, the group went for a walk along the trails at the farm to end the day.

On the way down to Cali we stopped for some "obleas", thin cookies with caramel, condensed milk and blackberry jam, deeeelicious! The night ended with some of the best "empanadas" in Colombia, along the Rio Cali as we enjoyed the relaxing Cali breeze. It was also the last opportunity to try a "lulada", lulo juice with chunks that some compared to kiwis. A great way to end the tour, the group returned to the plush hotel for a little rest before a very early flight.



HAPPY FACES ALL AROUND!!!!



AT THE ARBORETUM, LUCKILY WE GOT TO MEET FRANCOIS, A CHARACTER!!!

Day 13 (12/09/10):

Ruth and I enjoyed a great day at the zoo, where we actually saw a leopard catch a bird and eat it up, it was quite a scene. Then great pizza at Salerno's, a small tour through Cali and a nap at my "abuela's" (grandmother's) house. Then Valeriano, our driver from Day one, took her to the airport for her flight home. She landed, used the restroom, and sent us all an email. Had a great time with you guys, hope to see you all at Godwit Days, and feel free to contact me if you ever make it to the Klamath Basin. I have a four-bedroom house with a great deck and plenty of space for guests. Cheers,

Chris