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Top The elegant Golden-headed Quetzal. The Incas considered quetzals to be sacred and killing one was punishable by death.

Above The Tandayapa Valley is one of the best spots in the world to see the White-faced Nunbird.

Left In the cloud forests of the Andes, trees are typically laden with bromeliads and other epiphytes.

E C U A D O R

The Andes to the Amazon

TEXT BY KEITH BARNES

In Ecuador, a country smaller than South Africa's Northern Cape Province, 1 560 bird species are crammed into a mêlée of ecosystems erupting with life. Only three other countries in the world hold more bird species, and they too are in South America, the bird continent.

Ecuador's minute size and good infrastructure make it arguably the best country in the world for birdwatchers. The reason is simple: the Equator, Amazon, Andes, Tumbes and Galapagos all converge here, and conspire to create a multitude of diverse habitats, arguably unparalleled anywhere else in the world. The northern tip of the coastal Atacama desert system and the western fringe of lowland Amazonia are separated by about 300 kilometres as the condor flies; the intervening barrier, the Andes, rises to over 6 000 metres above sea level.

A self-confessed AAA (Africa Addict Anonymous), I doubted that birding in the Neotropics could live up to its inflated reputation. I was hopelessly wrong. Where else in the world can you see 700 species in four weeks and still miss out on more than half the birds in the country? What is more, species entirely new to science are still being discovered in Ecuador at the rate of about one a year. In 1999 Bob Ridgley discovered the glorious Jocotoco Antpitta less than 50 kilometres from the city of Loja. The birds are not only varied, they are amongst the world's most spectacular. It is a circus carnival loaded with multi-coloured toucans, tanagers, tapaculos, trogons and tropicbirds.

As the plane drops through the clouds above Quito, Ecuador's capital, the imposing Andes reach up to welcome you. Iain

Campbell, Ecuadorian resident and my travelling companion, had hired a car, and we set off for one of Ecuador's giant mountains, the snow-capped cone of Cotapaxi.



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The glamorous Andean Cock of the Rock in all its glory.

Reaching a height of 5 900 metres above sea level, this is the world's highest active volcano, one of eight in Ecuador. As we gained altitude, the vegetation metamorphosed through various types of forest and scrub until eventually we reached the high-altitude *paramo*, a heath-like vegetation.

This is probably Ecuador's most species-depauperate habitat, and a good place to get to grips with some of the unique bird

families the New World offers. No sooner had the vehicle stopped than a small iridescent bumblebee came past; dismissing it, I continued my search for chat-tyrants and spinetails. 'That's not a bumblebee,' bellowed Iain, 'It's a hummingbird!' The Chimbarazo Hillstar, an endemic Ecuadorian hummer, is indeed diminutive. This minute hovering jewel, clad in iridescent shingles of sapphire, maroon and verdant green, feeds almost exclusively on the orange flowers of a highly localised plant, *Chuquiragua insignis*. Each evening, in order to survive the icy chill of the High Andes' nights, this tiny bird enters a state of torpor, lowering its body temperature from 40 °C to 15 °C, a stunning feat for a warm-blooded creature.

The hillstar's minute global range, like that of many of Ecuador's birds, is restricted to a handful of mountain tops. The species also occurs on Ecuador's famous Papallacta Pass, which traverses the Andes. This is one of the highest road passes in the world and, with the imposing Volcan Antisana looming in the background, surely one of the most impressive. It holds a multitude of Andean specials, including the awe-inspiring Andean Condor; weighing 13 kilograms, this is one of the largest flying birds in the world. Cinclodes and Sierra Finches are common, as is the world's largest hummer, the Giant Hummingbird. The *polylepis* woodland, which resembles South African 'ouhout', is >



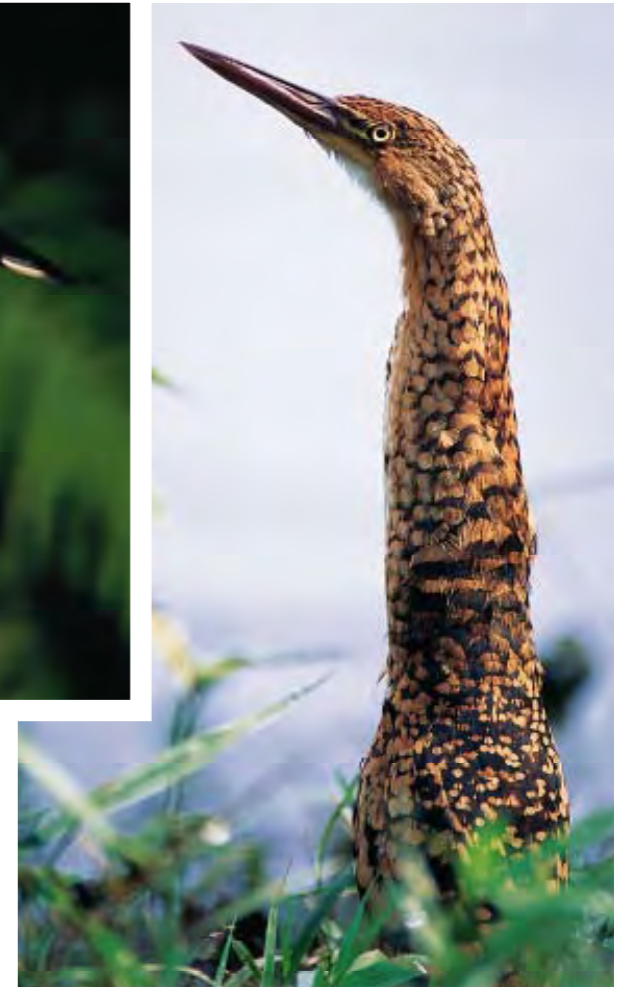
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home to the nuthatch-like Giant Conebill.

We decided to head into the forests of the west Andean slope, and in particular to the Choco region around Mindo and into the awesome Tandayapa Valley near the Columbian border. It was here that my life-list accelerated... The forest can be dead quiet one minute, and the next you are reeling in the adrenaline of a mixed-species party of tanagers with a disotheque of green heads, purple bodies, opal vents, turquoise rumps, crimson legs and tangerine flanks. Utterly convinced that you can identify what you have just seen, the flock post-mortem begins. The only problem is that these colours are found on every bird in the tanager page of your fieldguide, only in different combinations. The names of some of the more common tanagers we saw, like Golden, Flame-faced and Glistening Green tanagers, exemplify the dazzling hues apparent in this group.

Dipping becomes a matter of fact, but eventually you realise that there is no need to panic, you are still seeing more than 30 lifers each morning, and some of them do show themselves very well. Short, pig-like squeals alerted us to what looked like winged, Day-Glo orange rugby balls moving around in the distant sub-canopy.



Above The Andes streams and backwaters hold some great birding treats, such as the superb Fasciated Tiger Heron.

Above left Nature's diminutive helicopters, hummingbirds such as these Buff-tailed Coronets have to be seen to be believed.

Left The delightful Toucan Barbet, a Choco endemic, is not uncommon around Tandayapa Lodge.

Opposite Continuous stretches of Choco forest are now rare, but some do still exist in the Tandayapa Valley.

After a frustrating few minutes, one eventually hopped into a clearing, and then another; there it was, the amorous, glamorous Andean Cock of the Rock in all its glory. The males gather at leks in groups of up to 12 and display communally about two metres away from each other, fanning their tails and giving profile views of their crests; the excitement is raised to a veritable frenzy at the approach of a female.

Rewhistling a low, hooting call heard deep in the forest interior brought a welcome reward – the instant appearance of an exquisite Chestnut-crowned Antpitta at point-blank range, to investigate the intruder.

Three Golden-headed Quetzals, a metre-long trogon species, emerged from the

forest gloom to sun themselves on a bare branch in full view. Then a light clockwork flutter revealed a small party of Pale-mandibled Aracari (mini-toucans) wolfing down fruit in a nearby tree. Their surreal colours and unfeasibly small wings that seem to flutter faster than the speed of sound make them look more like cheap wind-up toys than real birds.

To top it all off, there were the hummingbird feeders on the canopy tower at the Tandayapa Lodge; we had 14 hummer species within three minutes, including good views of the Collared Inca and Choco specials such as the Violet-tailed Sylph.

Being some of the steepest and wettest mountains in the world, the Andes are endowed with a series of incredible riv-

ers. Seething waters spill down the mountain valleys and are habitat for the aptly named Torrent Duck; this small, shy creature has an amazing ability to swim against the current.

Where the streams pan out to form backwaters, the secretive and much sought-after Sunbittern dwells. Its habitat is not unlike that of the African Finfoot, and it certainly looks like a finfoot, but with the head of a lizard and a butterfly's wings. The Sunbittern has one of the most unforgettable predator-avoidance displays in the avian world. Leaping forward, it extends its wings and cranes them forward, presenting concentric circles of orange, red and black which look like giant 'eyes' in the undergrowth, and startles predators >

in the same manner as a butterfly.

Satiated with the splendour of the Andes, and needing to dry out, we made our way to the Pacific coast, which comprises mostly arid scrub and deciduous tropical thorn-forest of Tumbesia, strongly resembling African savanna and woodland. Tumbesia occurs in both northern Peru and southern Ecuador, and is a unique stretch of coast holding many endemic species. Visiting both Cerro Blanco and Machalilla national parks meant we could bird in both the forest and coastal scrub, maximising our list. Highlights included the tailless Superciliated Wren, Croaking Ground Dove, Plumbeous-backed Thrush, Grey-and-Gold Warbler and a large boisterous group of the striking White-tailed Jay.

Included within Machalilla National Park is a superb offshore island, Isla de la Plata. Called 'the poor man's Galapagos', it is a fine substitute for the real thing, particularly for those with either time or money constraints, and it holds breeding populations of many fantastic seabirds. As the boat approaches the island, your sense of anticipation heightens as you see the guano-stained rocks in the distance. All at once you are amongst hordes of Masked and Blue-footed boobies swamping the rocks, birds flying at you from every possible precipice and angle. Magnificent Frigatebirds sweep over the boat looking for scraps, occasionally harrying the hapless boobies that flee, attempting to return to the island to feed their increasingly impatient chicks.

Once on the island you have to search for the rarer breeding seabirds, including the Red-footed Booby, Red-billed Tropicbird and the spectacular Waved Albatross. One of the only tropical albatrosses, five pairs live on the island; the remainder of the world population is on the Galapagos.

Our final destination was the place that no birder worth their weight in lifers can deny wanting to visit – the Amazon Basin. Sacha Lodge, adjacent to Yasuni National Park and nestled on the edge of the Napo River in Ecuadorian Amazonia, is undoubtedly one of the finest birding spots in the world. It is blessed with a remarkable series of walkways over the *varzea* (swamp) forest, a wonderful canopy tower, and access to *terra firma* forest; the expectant Amazonian novice could not find better habitat than this.

The days in the Amazon rank as the finest birding in my life: we saw over 300 species in three days. Outstanding memories include watching a Zigzag Heron for 10 minutes from two metres away, seeing Buckley's Forest Falcon among a plethora of tody-tyrants, tityras, tanagers, parrots, flycatchers and puffbirds from the canopy



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The spectacular Blue-footed Booby, perhaps Ecuador's most popular seabird, is abundant on Isla de la Plata.

tower and standing (with wellies on!) in the middle of an Amazonian ant swarm, watching a profusion of usually skulking antbirds, including the legendary Reddish-winged and Black-spotted bare-eyes, leap into the open to grab fleeing insects that were in the path of the unrelenting march.

The most memorable Amazonian residents were the Hoatzins, which clambered clumsily around the edge of the lagoon adjacent to the lodge. These birds have many prehistoric features and are often regarded as living fossils. Endowed with a hook at the end of their forewings, the youngsters, which leap out of the nest at the first sign of danger and plunge into the water to escape predators, use these lizard-hooks to climb up trees back to the safety of their nests. Hoatzins are also vegetarians, eating mostly leaves, which tends to make digestion problematic and they have the reputation of being the birds with the worst breath in the world!

The Amazon Basin's other wildlife was equally spectacular, and in our few days there we saw a three-toed sloth from the canopy tower, agouti in the forest midstra-

ta, leaf-cutter ants on the forest floor and a lone anaconda in the lake.

Ecuador made such an indelible impression that I vowed to go back; I did, 18 months later. I said I would be happy to see all the same birds again and would be satisfied to leave without a lifer, but in a country with 1 560 species, that can never happen. There can be no argument that South America is *the* bird continent, and for first-timers thinking about going there, I don't believe there would be much argument that Ecuador is the best place to start. □

FACT FILE

BOOKS

Although no fieldguide exists for Ecuador, one is in production. It is best to take a combination of the following books:

- Fjeldsa, J. & Krabbe, N. 1990. *The Birds of the High Andes*. Zoological Museum, University of Copenhagen; Apollo Books, Svendborg, Denmark.
- Hilty, S.L. & Brown, W.L. 1986. *Birds of Columbia*. Princeton University Press. The most useful guide book on the market, covering more than 90 per cent of Ecuador's birds.
- Rachowiecki R. 1996. *Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands*. Lonely Planet.

BIRDING INFORMATION

Visit www.tandayapa.com to check out a piece of Ecuador on the web. Iain Campbell (iainc@tandayapa.com) can provide you with all

the info you need to know about Ecuador, from car hire to guides and accommodation.

ACCESS

Flights arrive from the USA and Canada several times each week, less regularly from Brazil and Argentina. Flights from South Africa would go via São Paulo (Varig), Buenos Aires (Malaysian Airlines) or Madrid (Iberia).

Most roads are adequate to good and the bus network is cheap and extensive.

WHEN TO GO

In such a diverse country, specials can be seen virtually all year round; best times for the north and east are January to July, and for the south February to March. The Amazon is wet most of the year, but especially so in June and July.