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# LIVING

# Birds without borders

*For much of the natural world, the two Americas are really one, regardless of what political maps may tell us*

(Second of two parts)

**F**or our last day at Reserva Las Gralarias, a private bird reserve located two hours west of Quito in the Ecuadorian Andes, my daughter, Julia, and I decided to investigate some of the lower elevation areas of the property. In the cloud forest, many plant species are adapted to a very specific combination of rain, sunshine and temperature, and therefore can only occur in a narrow range of elevation. By descending about 400 metres down into the valley, we were told that the mix of birds and plants would be quite different.



**OUR CHANGING SEASONS**  
Drew Monkman

Heading down the steep, meandering trail, we once again heard a variety of loud, often deep, calls emanating from the forest floor. Many belonged to wrens such as the grey-breasted wood-wren, an especially vocal species with an impressive repertoire of vocalizations. Others, how-

ever, were the voices of antpittas, the bird family (Grallaria) for which the reserve is named. These are secretive, terrestrial birds with long legs and large heads. The resonant trill of one species, the mustached antpitta, was reminiscent of a screech owl.

It was soon evident that there were more mixed flocks than the day before, and that the birds were closer to ground level. Within a couple of hours, we had seen at least two dozen species including six Blackburnian warblers and a mourning warbler, another summer visitor to the Kawarthas. It was the tanagers, however, that stole the show with their amazing intensity and diversity of colour. Among the species that graced us with their presence that morning were golden tanager, golden-naped tanager, beryl-naped tanager, metallic-green tanager, blue-winged mountain-tanager, black-chinned mountain-tanager and masked flowerpiercer. Taxonomists should be congratulated for their work in coming up with such evocative names!

As we descended in elevation, there was a noticeable rise in temperature. Bamboo suddenly became quite common and huge heliconia plants, some with leaves nearly a metre long, began to appear. We stopped briefly at one point to watch a bat falcon, perched prominently at the top of a dead palm tree, feasting upon some hapless, smaller bird. A constant stream of feathers drifted downward as the raptor fed. A few moments later, I caught a glance of a nine-banded armadillo that had been digging for insects right on the path. Apart from a squirrel, this was the only wild mammal we saw on the trip.

We eventually came out into a fairly open area where cattle were grazing. Birds were much easier to find here and not limited to mixed flocks. As we were admiring an ornate flycatcher, an attractive little bird with a bright yellow rump, a regal swallow-tailed kite circled overhead. This medium-sized bird of prey is unmistakable with its long, deeply forked tail and snowy-white underparts. Seconds later, an orange-breasted fruiteater — our best bird of the day — landed briefly at eye level in a nearby tree. Bright green above, this member of the Cotinga family has a fiery orange breast and glossy black head. Cotingas are exclusively neotropical birds and much sought after by birders.

Back at the lodge after our eight-hour trek, we enjoyed a delicious Ecuadorian “almuerzo,” the main meal of the day. I then decided to spend some time watching and photographing the many species of hummingbirds coming to the feeders. The hummer activity was non-stop, dusk-to-dawn and even in the rain. Not surprisingly, the half dozen feeders had to be filled several



Marcelo Arias, special to The Examiner



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**A blue-necked tanager (top left); a velvet-purple coronet (above); heliconia flowers; a male toucan barbet (far right); and a choco toucan (immediate right).**

times a day to meet the demand. Some species, such as the buff-tailed coronet, were extremely territorial and would constantly chase away other hummingbirds and flowerpiercers in a cacophony of chirps and buzzing wings. Smaller, less aggressive species like the speckled hummingbird could only occasionally sneak in for a quick sip before being summarily driven off.

Of the 14 species coming to the feeders that day, the two most spectacular were the velvet-purple coronet, a hummingbird that glitters purple and blue-green, and the violet-tailed sylph, a green hummer with a forked blue and purple tail more than twice as long as the bird's body. It looks as if it's flying around with a bridal train in tow! The award for the most comical species, however, would have to go to the booted racket-tail. With large puffs of gleaming white feathers covering its legs and a ridiculously long, forked tail that flares out into blue “rackets” at the end, my daughter thought it resembled an ornately costumed Inuit dancer wearing mukluks. Finally, the winner for the loudest “hum” definitely goes to the purple-throated woodstar. If you can imagine the sound of a tiny, high-pitched weed-whacker, you won't be far off.

Although we tallied only 67 species at Las Gralarias, the other-worldly experience of birding in a cloud forest still made the two days worthwhile. The birding, however, could not compare to what awaited us in nearby Mindo the following day. Looking like a Swiss village that has been parachuted into the foothills of the Andes, Mindo has been known for decades as a great place to enjoy the dazzling diversity of Ecuador's natural history at a very reasonable cost.

Our base in Mindo was the “Jardin de los Pajaros.” The owners of this modest but very

clean hotel were very friendly and helped us with car problems. The next morning, we met our talented guide, Marcelo Arias, in the pre-dawn darkness and headed up a dirt road overlooking the town. In the gathering light, the first birds of the day were a pair of very co-operative crimson-rumped toucanets, feasting on fruit in a cecropia tree. These were followed quickly by close-up views of a masked motmot through Marcelo's scope.

As the sun inched over the horizon, birds seemed to be everywhere. Unlike Las Gralarias, they were perched fairly low and weren't in such a hurry to move on. Most were feeding in fruit-laden trees along the edge of fields adjacent to the road. The excellent light allowed us to see the colours well, and Marcelo had an uncanny ability to show us almost every bird through his Leica scope within seconds. I have rarely birded with someone whose faculties of hearing, sight and concentration were as strong.

By 7 a.m., bird activity was so intense that it was hard to know where to look — tanagers, flycatchers, seedeaters, spintails, warblers and the list goes on. Flocks of red-billed parrots passed low overhead as we marveled at the size and colour of a pair of Choco toucans. At one point, the view through the scope included two adult blue-necked tanagers, a juvenile of the same species and a beautifully marked variable seedeater — all sitting preening in exquisite light. Just behind them a red-billed parrot was enjoying a breakfast of guava.

Continuing up the hill, we added birds like roadside hawk, orange-bellied euphonia, squirrel cuckoo, little cuckoo and slate-throated whitestart. Then, all of a sudden, Marcelo heard a loud, raucous call and drew our attention to a large bird flying up the road ahead of us. “Andean cock-of-the-rock!”

he exclaimed. This blood-red, chicken-sized cotinga with a comical crest is one of Ecuador's most famous birds. We quickly walked ahead, hoping to get a proper look.

While our attention was momentarily focused on a multicoloured female toucan barbet, the loud squawk of the cock-of-the-rock once again exploded from a nearby tree. A split second later, the spectacular bird flew in and perched on a branch just above my head. I just had enough time to focus the binoculars, see the main field marks, and it was gone. Almost at the same time, my daughter, Julia, grabbed my arm and pointed to a male crested quetzal, only several metres away! I couldn't believe our luck.

As we reluctantly began to head back, practicing our Spanish skills with Marcelo, I saw a robin-sized brown bird sitting quietly in the shadows on the side of the road. Looking through my binoculars, I immediately recognized it as a Swainson's thrush, a species we see in migration in the Kawarthas and a common nesting bird of Algonquin Park. Once again, I couldn't help being moved by such a tangible connection between Ontario and Ecuador. Along with the Blackburnian and mourning warblers, I now feel like I know these birds so much better having seen them on their winter territory in the company of giant heliconias, parrots, exotic butterflies and the general tumult of Latin American culture. It makes you realize that for much of the natural world, the two Americas are really one, regardless of what political maps may tell us.

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