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# LIVING

# Birds of Ecuador

*Reserva Las Galarías is a private nature reserve in one of the most diverse bird areas in the world*

(First of two parts)

At first, the warbler-sized bird appeared only in silhouette, moving quickly among the mist-shrouded leaves, moss and vines of the upper canopy, and allowing only split-second, half-concealed views



**OUR CHANGING SEASONS**  
Drew Monkman

before it darted off to investigate yet another leaf or branch for potential food. The mixed flock of tanagers, woodcreepers and vireos that kept it company seemed possessed of the same restless urgency. An occasional flash of orange, however, piqued my curiosity as to what it might be. Then, when my aching neck could almost take no more, the bird stopped briefly in a patch of sunlight, just long enough to see the flaming orange, jet black and immaculate white of a male Blackburnian warbler. To me, this tiny bird was the very embodiment of how the far flung forests of Ecuador are linked to the pine and hemlock woodlands of central Ontario where the Blackburnian makes its summer home. It also seemed more real to me that bird conservation efforts only make sense when pursued on both the breeding and wintering grounds of a given species.

Ecuador is located on the northwestern coast of South America, directly south of Colombia and north of Peru. For a country that is only about the size of Colorado, it has many faces. These include Andean peaks, mid-altitude cloud forests, lowland tropical rain forests, and, 1,000 kilometre off the coast, the Galapagos Islands. This storied archipelago is still home to the animals whose evolutionary adaptations shaped Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

The country's 13.4 million inhabitants speak primarily Spanish. In addition, Quechua, an indigenous language, is still widely used. Ecuador's main exports, in order of importance, are petroleum, bananas, shrimp, coffee and cut flowers. Its capital, Quito, once part of the Inca empire, has some of the best-preserved colonial Spanish architecture in South America.

After renting a car in Quito, my daughter, Julia, and I drove north to the town of Otavalo, where we spent a couple of hours at South America's most famous indigenous market. Here, traditionally attired men and women sell some of the finest clothing and crafts — ponchos, sweaters, tapestries, jewelry, paintings, etc. — to be found anywhere. Having stocked up on gifts, we then returned to Quito and headed west to Reserva Las Galarías, a private nature reserve located near Mindo in one of the most diverse bird areas in the world. Covering 450 acres, the reserve lies between 1,700 and 2,200 metres elevation. A total of 240 bird species of 43 families have been recorded on here since its creation in 1999. Of these, 12 per cent are endemic — found nowhere else — to the Choco Biogeographic Region of the Andes West Slope.

Arriving at the turnout to the reserve after dark, we had to drive up a steep, rock-strewn gravel road for three kilometres. In fact, I was never able to take the car out of first gear. Fireflies helped light the way as a chorus of tree frogs sang in the background, encouraged by the light rain. Having to dodge the odd errant cow or horse also added to the interest. The rather harrowing drive was worth it, however, since the accommodation and hummingbird-filled gardens at Las Galarías turned out to be superb.

Birds were not the only attraction, however. On the first evening, we spent nearly an hour photographing the huge array of moths and beetles that were attracted to the outdoor lights. These included rhinoceros beetles, famous for their huge size and the horn-like structure on the



Marcelo Arias, special to The Examiner

head, and moths of every colour and pattern.

Rising before dawn to a delicious breakfast, we quickly headed out onto the extensive trail network with our guide, Pablo. A variety of hummingbirds were already coming to the feeders and jostling noisily with each other for position. It was the exotic song of a nightingale-thrush, however, that really told us our Ecuadorian birding adventure had begun.

Entering the forest, the first thing one notices is that the trunks and branches of all of the trees are completely obscured by thick layers of epiphytes such as mosses, ferns, orchids and bromeliads. Epiphytes are plants that grow on trees without actually harming them or acting as parasites. They simply take up space on trunks and branches.

Orchids, of which this area is home to 400 species, are among the most famous epiphytes. Although we saw orchid leaves almost everywhere, we were only able to find a few species that were in flower. This is not surprising, since many tropical species have flowers that are so small that you need a hand lens to see them. Bromeliads, of which the pineapple is the best known example, are easily identified by their pointed leaves which grow in a circular pattern. At their base is a central tank, or cistern, which collects rain water. This tank actually serves as a small aquatic ecosystem and is actually home to various amphibians during part of their life cycle.

The sound of water dripping was everywhere, too. Every afternoon, dense clouds drift through and over the forests, bathing the vegetation in moisture. Rains usually follow late in the day, especially during this, the rainy season.

Focusing once again on birds, we were soon busy trying to identify the strange, sometimes other-worldly voices calling from the forest — the loud, rollicking song of the dark-backed wood-quail, the paired whistled notes of the rufous-breasted antthrush, the constant dry chips of the green violetear hummingbird, and the chatter of noisy parrots flying above the treetops. Actually seeing any birds was proving difficult, however. Welcome to tropical birding.

As we moved along the wet, slippery trail, there was soon movement on some low, moss-laden branches near the forest edge.



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Three pheasant-sized sickle-winged guans came into view and afforded us good looks of their rufous bellies and blue facial skin.

After this brief flurry of excitement, the next 20 minutes or so were almost birdless. We seriously wondered what was happening. Then, as if out of nowhere, the canopy slowly came to life with the chip notes of several dozen birds. With Pablo's help, we were able to identify by sight and/or sound blue-winged mountain tanager, golden tanager, dusky bush-tanager, montane woodcreeper, brown-capped vireo, slate-throated whitestart and, finally, a Blackburnian warbler. For me, it was just as satisfying to see the Blackburnian, a species that nests in the Kawarthas, as to see the more exotic species such as tanagers. Somehow, catching up with this bird on its wintering grounds was very fulfilling and provided a deeper understanding of what the bird's full year cycle is all about. Over the course of the next two days, the Blackburnian would become one of the most common birds we'd see.

This pattern of literally no birds for half an hour or so followed by a whirl of activity for five to 10 minutes would continue for our entire stay at Galarías. Even when birds were present, however, actually seeing them was not easy. Often, they appeared only in silhouette, usually half-hidden behind a leaf. In the afternoon, mist rolled through from time to time as well, further obscuring our views. Our guide did his best to coax birds into showing themselves by playing recordings of their songs. This proved only partly successful, however. On one occasion,

**Clockwise, from top left: a masked trogon; birding in the cloud forest of the western Andes (left to right) are Jose Gagnon, Julia Monkman and Pablo Fuentes; a caterpillar perfectly disguised as a fallen feather; and a blue-winged mountain tanager.**

Pablo's constant playing of a plate-billed mountain toucan song succeeded in luring in a beautiful pair of masked trogons. They sat quietly, affording us long, leisurely looks at their red belly and barred tail. The mountain-toucans, unfortunately, were nowhere to be seen.

Hummingbirds would regularly buzz around us, probably attracted initially by my red coat. Most of these were tawny-bellied hermits, an inner forest species that is often seen nectaring at red heliconia flowers that are common everywhere.

When there were no birds to hear or see, our attention turned to the amazing diversity of leaves, fungi, fruit and flowers. Petals and half-eaten fruit were common underfoot, evidence that a flock of birds had been eating overhead. A handful of ruddy coloured leaves, ready to be shed, were present on most trees as well. Yet, surprisingly enough, insects were strangely absent. It was as if they were all in hiding. We were, however, quite intrigued to see a caterpillar that looked like a perfect imitation of a fallen white, downy feather — quill and all.

Heading back to the lodge, we felt privileged to have experienced the unique cloud forest ecosystem but still felt somewhat disappointed by the relative absence of birds. As we'll see next week, this was about to change.

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