

Antpitta paradise

Chris Collins

For many birders visiting northern Ecuador, one of the most-wanted genera is the *Grallaria* antpittas.

With the exception of Tawny *G. quitensis* and Chestnut-crowned Antpittas *G. ruficapilla*, however, the majority of the other species can be extremely tough to find and, consequently, many visitors leave the country disappointed having missed birds such as Giant *G. gigantea*, Moustached *G. alleni* and Yellow-breasted Antpittas *G. flavotincta*.

The opening, by Ángel Paz, of Refugio Paz de las Aves has, however, dramatically altered the odds of encountering these species and birders can now witness the almost surreal spectacle of seeing at least eight antpittas in one morning (three Giants, 4+ Yellow-breasted and one



Figure 1a–c. Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea* (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding). In *Cotinga* 2, Krabbe et al.¹ published all known records of Giant Antpitta since 1958, with the number in the early 1990s being in only single figures. Since then, however, sightings have increased dramatically and given the evidence from Refugio Paz de las Aves, it would appear that where favourable conditions exist, the species can in fact be relatively numerous. Giant Antpitta resembles the much commoner Undulated Antpitta *G. squamigera*, but Giant is c.10% larger with a more massive bill, a rufous forehead, much narrower black scalloping on the underparts, and a buffier throat with no suggestion of a dark malar.



Moustached in January 2006). What makes the experience even more incredible, however, is that the birds have become more-or-less habituated to people and can regularly be watched at a range of less than 3–4 m, feeding on giant earthworms!

When Ángel, a resident of nearby Nanegalito (a small town near Mindo), first permitted visitors onto his land, it was to see a small Andean Cock-of-the-Rock *Rupicola peruvianus* lek. However, he soon discovered that birders were interested in other species too and that was when he started feeding the antpittas. Over the course of several months, increasing numbers of birds responded to his efforts and visitors now stand an excellent chance of seeing all three antpittas as well as Dark-backed Wood-quail *Odontophorus*

melanotus (another species he feeds on a regular basis) and Andean Cock-of-the-Rock.

Visiting Refugio Paz de las Aves

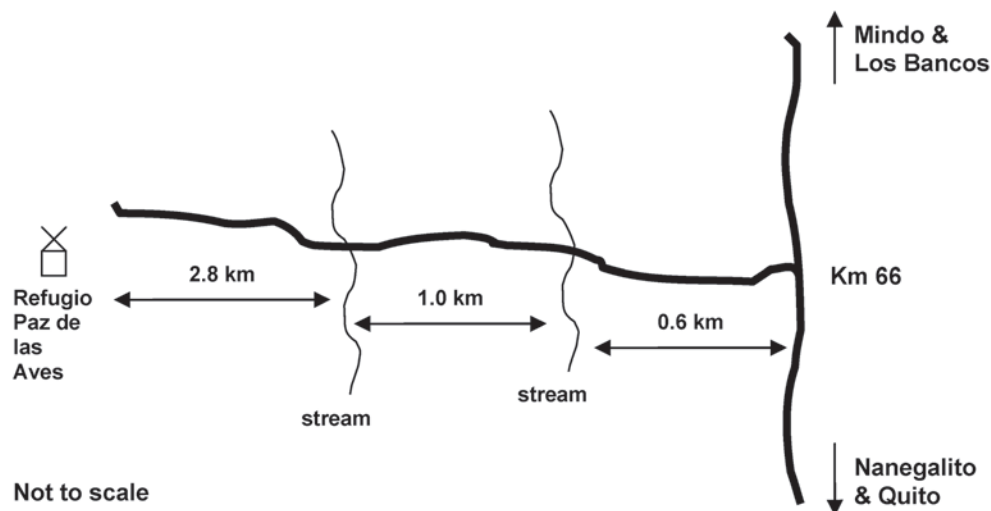
As Ángel Paz does not live permanently at the Refugio and access is impossible without him, it is important that all those wanting to visit the reserve make arrangements in advance. Bookings can be made through a number of the Ecuadorian ecotourism companies and lodges (e.g. Tropical Birding/Tandayapa Bird Lodge), but for those wishing to make their own arrangements, two other options are possible: those sufficiently fluent in Spanish (Ángel does not speak English) can telephone him on 2116243, or you can e-mail an



Figure 2 (above). Moustached Antpitta *Grallaria alleni* (Steve Blain/Tropical Birding). Described by Ridgely & Tudor² as 'very local and rare in the Andes of Colombia', this species has been known from Ecuador for about a decade. Of the three speciality antpittas at Refugio Paz de las Aves, this is probably the hardest to see, with only one individual being encountered regularly in January 2006. Moustached Antpitta resembles the much more widespread Scaled Antpitta *G. guatemalensis*. They are much the same size, but Moustached has darker upperparts and a whitish belly, and has a blackish-scaled white malar stripe.

Figure 3 (below). Yellow-breasted Antpitta *Grallaria flavotincta* (Steve Blain/Tropical Birding). This species is restricted to the west slope of the Andes and occurs mainly in Colombia. The southern end of its range just extends into north-west Ecuador where it is much sought-after. It is obviously closely related to White-bellied Antpitta *G. hypoleuca* but the latter is restricted to the east slope of the Andes and their ranges do not overlap.





English-speaking friend of his, Hector Clavijo (hectorclavijo@yahoo.com or cellphone 09 9931507) listing the date(s), preferably giving several options, when you wish to visit. This service will incur a modest booking fee payable to Ángel. Entry to the Refugio costs US\$10 per person which includes Angel's fee for acting as your guide.

Getting to Refugio Paz de las Aves

Accessing Refugio Paz de las Aves is relatively straightforward from Quito (see map above), with the easiest option being the main road from Quito towards Los Bancos (also the fastest route to Mindo). At km 66, turn left (there was a sign in January 2006) and follow the main track for 4.4 km. The Refugio is on your left. As the entrance road is only a dirt track and involves fording a small river, a 4*4 vehicle is certainly recommended, but for the sufficiently determined there is always the option of 'chancing it' with a conventional vehicle or walking once the road conditions deteriorate.

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REFERENCES

1. Krabbe, N., DeSmet, G., Greenfield, P., Jácome, M., Matheus, J. C. & Sornoza, F. (1994) Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea*. *Cotinga* 2: 32–34.
2. Ridgely, R. S. & Tudor, G. (1994) *The birds of South America*, 2. Austin: University of Texas Press.

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