

Sani Lodge: the best-kept secret in the Ecuadorian Amazon—until now

Nicki Hollamby



Just over two decades ago birding in Amazonian Ecuador was the challenging but exciting preserve of those relatively lucky few who were willing to undergo some degree of privation in order to see some of the wonderful birds of upper Amazonia. Fast forward to the present day and a visit to this superb corner of the Neotropics remains just as exciting, but gone is the need to suffer discomfort to experience the birds and wildlife of this megadiverse region. There are now many lodges specifically geared up to birders along the Napo River, meaning that modern-day visitors are literally spoilt for choice. However, the community-owned, rather than business-operated, Sani is one of the best options, especially if you are still seeking such iconic species as Buckley's Forest Falcon, Rufous Potoo, Brown Nunlet, Cocha Antshrike or Orange-crested Manakin. These are just some of the many hundreds of birds found around this ecofriendly lodge, whose profits are ploughed into improving the lives of the indigenous community, as Nicki Hollamby explains.

Top: Sani Lodge is well sited, being surrounded by forest on three sides (Sani Lodge)

Left: Rufous Potoo *Nyctibius bracteatus*, Gareno Lodge, Napo, Ecuador, February 2010 (Roger Ahlman / www.pbase.com/ahlman)



From the high Andes to the Amazon basin, you are constantly reminded of the country's remarkably diverse avifauna when birding in Ecuador. It is claimed, not without some reason, that there are more birds per square mile here than in any other country in the world. Of the almost 1,600 bird species that have been recorded to date, or approximately 15% of the world's bird species, more than one-third of these are found in the territory of a small indigenous Kichwa community that lives along the banks of the Napo River.

The Violet Island...

Sani Isla (which means 'violet island' in Kichwa) is sandwiched between two of the most biologically diverse ecological reserves in the world, Parque Nacional Yasuní (980,000 ha) to the south and the Reserva de Producción Faunística Cuyabeno (603,380 ha) to the north. Sani territory represents a natural rainforest corridor supporting an outstanding variety of bird species. The lodge offers excellent access to all six major habitats found in the Ecuadorian Amazon, and their territory contains a handful of rare birds not easily found elsewhere, including Rufous Potoo *Nyctibius bracteatus*, Black-necked Red Cotinga *Phoenicircus nigricollis* and the endemic Cocha Antshrike *Thamnophilus praecox*. The first-named is now known to have a widespread range across Amazonia, but Sani represents one of the easiest places to find it, as the local guides are frequently aware of where individuals roost by day. The rare Cocha Antshrike was rediscovered as recently as 1990 following almost three-quarters of a century in obscurity, it being known previously solely from the female holotype. Birders able to time their visit carefully according to prevailing water levels should have the opportunity to find this attractive antbird at Sani, which is still one of the few known localities for this handsome species, although it is predicted to occur in immediately adjacent parts of Colombia and Peru.

Some of the most skilful bird guides in this region of Ecuador were born in Sani Isla and one of the things that makes the birding at Sani so exceptional is that the native guides are as passionate and appreciative of the avifauna as any dedicated Neotropical birder. With their boundless enthusiasm and incredible knowledge of the forest, gained from a lifetime spent under the canopy, they are able to identify and recognise even the tiniest sounds and movements unrecognisable to most. With nearly 15 years' experience as a guide, Domingo Gualinga is one of the leading specialist bird guides at Sani and was the first person to find

both Rufous Potoo and Rusty-margined Flycatcher *Myiozetetes cayanensis* in the region of the lower Napo River.

Diversity on the Napo

Following the short, 30-minute flight from Ecuador's capital, Quito, to the rather unappealing town of Coca (or as it is more correctly known Francisco de Orellana), at the confluence of the mighty Napo with the Coca River, you begin a journey into Amazonia that offers unrivalled birding opportunities from the word 'go'. It is also possible to take a bus from Quito to Coca, but this takes nine hours and is overnight. Another, potentially even more exciting, option would be to 'bird' your way from the capital down the east slope, taking in key sites such as the lodges of San Isidro and Wild Sumaco, and end in Coca. Thereafter, en route to the lodge, which lies two and a half hours downriver from Coca by motorised canoe, you should come across Collared Plover *Charadrius collaris*, Large-billed Tern *Phaetusa simplex*, Little Woodpecker *Veniliornis passerinus*, Capped Heron *Pilherodius pileatus* and, at the right time of year, perhaps a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* hunting above the riparian forest along the riverbanks. These first glimpses of the biological treasures awaiting the visitor are enticing, but insufficient reason to pause your journey, for all of these species and many more await in the environs of the lodge itself. Sani also makes the perfect base from which to visit the famous Anangu Community clay licks, for the great variety of psittacids, among them Blue-headed Parrot *Pionus menstruus*, Dusky-headed Parakeet *Aratinga weddellii*, Mealy Amazon *Amazona farinosa* and Yellow-crowned Amazon *A. ochrocephala*, which congregate in large numbers to consume the mineral-rich clay. The licks are situated less than 30 minutes upriver from Sani, where the rolling hills of the Yasuní National Park meet the Napo River.

Every birder visiting Sani has his or her own targets, of which many are likely to be those birds only found in the riparian forest habitats to which the lodge affords such perfect access, or are otherwise intimately associated with a large Amazonian river. River-island specialities are frequently high on the 'wish lists' of many birders, and although the series of permanent river islands in the Napo within easy reach of the lodge does not boast as many of these 'targets' as can be found in some regions of Amazonian Brazil and Peru, the environs of Sani still boast many of these desiderata. Special birding trips are organised

to some of the closest islands, which boast such species as Olive-spotted Hummingbird *Leucippus chlorocercus*, Brown Jacamar *Brachygalba lugubris*, Rufous-headed Woodpecker *Ceelus spectabilis*, Lesser Hornero *Furnarius minor*, a 'raft' of spinetails including Dark-breasted *Synallaxis albigularis*, Plain-crowned *S. gujanensis*, White-bellied *S. propinqua* and the recently split Parker's *Cranioleuca vulpecula*, as well as Barred *Thamnophilus doliatus* and Castelnau's Antshrikes *T. cryptoleucus*, Black-and-white Antbird *Myrmochanes hemileucus*, River Tyrannulet *Serpophaga hypoleuca*, Lesser Wagtail-Tyrant *Stigmatura napensis* and Orange-headed Tanager *Thlypopsis sordida*. To see all of these will require a degree of good fortune but also an early start and, as always with these specialists, visits to several islands of different 'ages', e.g. young islands for the *Stigmatura* and the *Myrmochanes*, but to much older growth for birds such as Rufous-headed Woodpecker, which is also found on the 'mainland', and Castelnau's Antshrike. Your local guide will be familiar with the best areas.

Within Sani territory

The Napo River not only divides Sani territory into two, but as experienced Amazonian birders well know, like many major rivers it also functions as a barrier for some bird species, with certain species found exclusively on one side or other of the river, such as Chestnut-belted *Conopophaga aurita* (north bank) and Ash-throated Gnatcatcher *C. peruviana* (south). Unsurprisingly, given the general dispersal abilities of birds, this principle applies to other wildlife too. The globally threatened White-bellied Spider Monkey *Ateles belzebuth*, Equatorial Saki *Pithecia aequatorialis* and Golden-mantled Tamarin *Saguinus tripartitus* are only found south of the Napo, whilst in contrast Red Howler Monkey *Alouatta seniculus*, Brown Woolly Monkey *Lagothrix lagotricha*, Black-mantled Tamarin *Saguinus nigricollis* and the endearing Pygmy Marmoset *Callithrix pygmaea* are abundant in the north, but all are rarely seen in the south. You have good chances of encountering at least several of these primates during an average-length trip to the lodge.

The Sani Isla community protects over 40,000 ha of land, which is almost equally divided by the Napo River. Consequently, the indigenous community lives in and protects one of the largest privately owned areas of rainforest in Ecuador. This permits visitors to experience two very different environments and presents an exciting opportunity to observe the diverse avifauna

that persists on either side of the river. Much of the forest bordering the southern side of the Napo is on undulating *terra firme*, typical of the Yasuní. The northern side, where the majority of the Sani Isla community live and the lodge itself is sited, consists mainly of a combination of *terra firme* forest, home to species such as Gray-winged Trumpeter *Psophia crepitans*, Lanceolated Monklet *Micromonacha lanceolata*, White-plumed Antbird *Pithys albifrons* and the localised Ochre-striped Antpitta *Grallaria dignissima*, as well as seasonally flooded *várzea* forest, which habitat is preferred by White-lored Antpitta *Hylopezus fulviventeris* and the range-restricted Orange-crested Manakin *Heterocercus aurantiivertex*. The last-named species is confined to a relatively small region on the borders of Ecuador, Peru and neighbouring Brazil.

Even on a short visit of just four days, keen birders accompanied by a bird guide from Sani can expect to encounter in the region of at least 250 species. By embarking on a longer tour, the visitor will of course increase his or her chance of finding more of the rare and range-restricted species such as Cocha Antshrike, all of which make Sani Lodge such an extraordinary place for birdwatching.

Around the lodge and the Challuacocha Lagoon

Comfortable Sani Lodge is set on the banks of a beautiful black-water lagoon and boasts some great birdwatching opportunities without even having to walk far from your room. From the perfectly sited open bar you have a widespread view of the lagoon, and on a good day could expect to see Rufescent Tiger *Tigrisoma lineatum*, Agami *Agamia agami*, Capped and Cooi Herons *Ardea cocoi*, Masked Crimson Tanager *Ramphocelus nigrogularis*, Yellow-bellied Dacnis *Dacnis flaviventer* and Cinnamon Attila *Attila cinnamomeus*. The channel that connects the lagoon with the main Napo River, which must be traversed to visit the river islands or the parrot clay licks, provides additional opportunities to find at least some of these species. Venture amongst the secondary forest directly surrounding the lodge and you can expect to see the chunky White-eared Jacamar *Galbalcyrhynchus leucotis*, the rather less obvious Yellow-crowned Elaenia *Myiopagis flavivertex*, miniature Short-tailed Pygmy Tyrant *Myiornis ecaudatus*, secretive but vocally obvious Dot-backed Antbird *Hylophylax punctulatus* and Chestnut Woodpecker *Ceelus elegans*. At night, Spectacled Owl *Pulsatrix perspicillata* can

>> BIRDING SITES SANI LODGE

Right: Immature Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja*, Gareno Lodge, Napo, Ecuador, July 2007 (Roger Ahlman / www.pbase.com/ahlman)

Below: Male and female Cocha Antshrike *Thamnophilus praecox*, Sani Lodge, Napo, Ecuador, November 2011 (Roger Ahlman / www.pbase.com/ahlman)

Bottom right: Brown Jacamar *Brachygalba lugubris*, Gareno Lodge, Napo, Ecuador, July 2007 (Roger Ahlman / www.pbase.com/ahlman)

Bottom left: View of Challuacocha Lagoon, the oxbow lake on which the lodge is situated (Sani Lodge)





PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Sani Lodge can be contacted via their new London office, which is located in Greenwich. Phone: 00 44 (0)20 71930400. E-mail: info@sanilodge.co.uk

Sani Lodge has ten individual cabins, sleeping up to three people and a spacious two-storey house divided into four family rooms. All have private modern bathrooms, screened windows, private decking or balconies and traditional leaf-thatched roofs. For a more alfresco experience, there is a raised, sheltered camping area across the lagoon sleeping up to 15 people. Tents, bedding and basic equipment are provided. Meals are taken communally in the small dining room overlooking the lagoon.

Most visitors undertake a range of activities, including visits to the Sani Isla community to experience local life and culture, organised by the *Sani Huarmi* (Sani Women), canoeing and fishing for piranha, using a blowpipe, as well as wildlife viewing and trips to see river dolphins and parrot clay licks. However, special birding packages are routinely provided, and the lodge staff is very well used to looking after those who want to bird and nothing else.

You can find more information about the lodge at <http://www.sanilodge.co.uk>

Top: Male Black-necked Red Cotinga *Phoenicircus nigricollis*, Napo Wildlife Center, Orellana, Ecuador, November 2011 (Roger Ahlman / www.pbase.com/ahlman)

Inset: Lanceolated Monklet *Micromonacha lanceolata*, La Selva Lodge, Orellana, Ecuador, July 2009 (Roger Ahlman / www.pbase.com/ahlman)

Left: The new tower at Sani is now a metal structure leading onto a large, wooden tree platform (Sani Lodge)

sometimes be found around the cabins. Roseate Spoonbill *Platalea ajaja* is the symbol of Sani and, although you cannot set your watch by it, is a real pleasure to see when small numbers of this species visit Sani during their post-breeding migration from around late November to April.

Early-morning and late-afternoon canoe excursions across the Challuacocha Lagoon are a real highlight either alone or guided—depending on how energetic you are feeling. Paddling on the lagoon offers unobstructed views of the lower strata in the diverse habitats of *várzea* and *terra firme* forest, secondary and cut-over forest, as well as the reeds and grasses that fringe large parts of the lagoon. Drifting along with the distinctive but somewhat reassuring ‘laugh’ of the noisy Speckled Chachalaca *Ortalis guttata* in the background, birding on the lagoon produces regular sightings of Limpkin *Aramus guarauna*, Yellow-billed Tern *Sternula superciliaris*, Ringed *Megaceryle torquata* and other kingfishers, White-chinned Jacamar *Galbula tombacea*, Scarlet-crowned Barbet *Capito aurovirens*, Lesser Kiskadee *Philohydor lictor*, Black-capped Donacobius *Donacobius atricapilla* and White-winged Swallow *Tachycineta albiventer*. There is always also the outside possibility of finding the secretive Zigzag Heron *Zebrilus undulatus*. The sharp-eyed might find a small group of the remarkably well-camouflaged Lesser Whiskered Long-nosed Bats *Choeroniscus minor* roosting on the treefall branches that emerge from the lagoon’s surface. The lagoon is also an exciting nocturnal destination, as its surface is illuminated by the eerie orange glow from the eyes of the rare Black Caiman *Melanosuchus niger*, which species has a healthy population in the area.

The tower

One of the birding highlights of a visit to Sani Lodge is spending a morning atop the recently constructed, new 37-m canopy tower, which is sited reasonably close to the south-west corner of the lagoon and constructed around a mighty Kapok *Ceiba pentandra* tree. This permits an exclusive view of and above the rainforest canopy. It also provides a privileged opportunity to observe many birds that are practically impossible to find from a position on the forest floor. The best time of day for the tower is first thing in the morning or during that initial ‘bird boom’ directly following a rainstorm. The late afternoon, while decidedly quieter than the ‘dawn chorus,’ still offers the chance of phenomenal birding with the backdrop

of a fabulous treetop sunset. The tower is also a particularly special place to listen to the frogs and owls commence their evening activities, and to catch a glimpse of the fabulous Amazonian starlit sky, which is normally so hard to see from within the depths of the rainforest.

The Near Threatened Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja* is naturally high on the target list of many birders, be it first-timers or old South American hands, and the canopy tower at Sani is one of the best places in the Napo region to see this magnificent eagle, although sightings are far from guaranteed. Nonetheless, given the increasing number of observations of the species in the environs of Sani, it appears likely that there is a nest in the area, and the local guides are searching intently for it. This would be an incredibly exciting discovery, as rather few nests of Harpy have been found in the wider area of the lower Napo in recent years. Like the Harpy, Crested Eagle *Morphnus guianensis* is also classified as Near Threatened and is recorded even less frequently from the tower at Sani. A rapid population decline, at least in Ecuador, is reinforcing this eagle’s reputation as being notoriously challenging to find, with many a Neotropical birder left disappointed after a search for this stunning bird.

Species of particular note that are recorded with some regularity from the tower include Blue-throated Piping Guan *Pipile cumanensis*, Hook-billed Kite *Chondrohierax uncinatus*, Ornate Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus ornatus*, Long-billed Starthroat *Heliomaster longirostris*, Purplish *Galbula chalcothorax* and Paradise Jacamars *G. dea*, the diminutive Yellow-browed Tody-Flycatcher *Todirostrum chrysocrotaphum*, the bizarre Bare-necked Fruitcrow *Gymnoderus foetidus*, White-browed Purpletuft *Iodopleura isabellae* and Olive Oropendola *Psarocolius yuracares*. Other characteristic and equally attractive species include five species of macaws, Golden-collared Toucanet *Selenidera reinwardtii*, Many-banded *Pteroglossus pluricinctus* and Lettered Araçaris *P. inscriptus*, White-throated *Ramphastos tucanus* and Channel-billed Toucans *R. vitellinus*, White-fronted Nunbird *Monasa morphoeus*, and the comically plumaged Amazonian Umbrellabird *Cephalopterus ornatus*. The superbly coloured Spangled *Cotinga cayana* and Plum-throated Cotingas *C. maynana* can also be seen from the tower, as well as elsewhere at Sani, as can the rare Black-necked Red Cotinga. It is rumoured that a fair few hours walk on the south side of the Napo there is a Black-necked

Red Cotinga lek, but this is not yet confirmed and sightings of this species in the area are far from guaranteed.

Exclusively for the specialists

Certain trails are exclusively maintained with birders in mind, so as not to exert too much pressure on the species that dwell there. Many of these areas are species-specific for birds such as Long-tailed *Nyctibius aethereus* and Rufous Potoos, Collared Puffbird *Bucco capensis* or White-chinned Jacamar. The incredible familiarity that the guides at Sani have for the forest will doubtless lead you to precisely the correct locations to find species such as Black-spotted Bare-eye *Phlegopsis nigromaculata*, the recently described Orange-eyed Flatbill *Tolmomyias traylori*, Buckley's Forest Falcon *Micrastur buckleyi* or even a Rufous-vented Ground Cuckoo *Neomorphus geoffroyi*, which is highly inconspicuous and difficult to see throughout virtually its entire range. Still one of the most mythical of all Amazonian birds, Nocturnal Curassow *Nothocrax urumutum* is incredibly difficult to find during the day, but venture out at night with a guide and a torch, when it begins to utter its muffled calls from concealed perches, and your chances while still far from high are decidedly better.

Sani and sustainability

Sani combines an impressive and memorable jungle trip with ecologically friendly but comfortable tourism (accessible only by canoe, its energy is solar derived, and there is even wireless internet access—weather dependent!). It was one of the first lodges to be established in the lower Napo region and was the first to be done so completely by an indigenous Kichwa community. The lodge is owned and operated by the members of Sani Isla, which means that not only will you enjoy a quality stay and a genuine Amazonian experience, but that all profits generated by the lodge are reinvested into the community in the form of education, healthcare and various other projects.

It is difficult for indigenous communities to participate in the modern world while maintaining the culture and traditions of the past. There are limited opportunities, particularly for women and children within Sani Isla, but it is the lodge and the funding resulting from this ecotourism venture that provide the opportunity for development. To date, projects include the sponsoring of volunteer

English teachers in the school, funding to improve education, and facilitating scholarships to study in Coca and Quito, while the community hopes one day to send students abroad. The *Sani Huarmi* (Sani Women) project brings together the women of the community, who make jewellery and other gifts to sell at the lodge and, recently, in Quito too. The Cacao Project provides jobs and an income for many of the community's families who grow and harvest cacao, which is then pressed and dried in the community centre before being sold to make chocolate, which is then sold in the lodge. In late 2011, money generated by the lodge was used to purchase a boat for the community, so that its members can now visit the markets in Pompeya and Coca, visit family in the city of Coca, or seek medical treatment.

The people of Sani Isla have lived for many years along the banks of the Napo and they possess an incredible knowledge and understanding of the forest that they call home. It is quite an experience to walk in the forest with these captivating people whose lowland Kichwa culture is tied directly to the jungle and whose very manner generates a feeling of both reverence and admiration.

The Sani Isla community regularly comes under pressure to sell their land to both oil companies and other outside investors, and has been offered life-changing sums of money to part with all or parts of it. That they have preferred to maintain their lands as they are is excellent news for birders around the world, as this article has attempted to demonstrate. As well as harbouring more than 20% of Ecuador's oil reserves, Yasuni National Park and the surrounding lowlands are widely considered to be one of the most biologically diverse rainforests in the world, harbouring well over 600 species of birds alone. Due to its remoteness, combined with the protection provided by the Kichwa community of Sani Isla, which your visit should assist in ensuring, Sani is and will continue to be home to such a fantastic diversity of birds.

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Exceptional birding in the Amazon rainforest

Sani Lodge, the best-kept secret in Ecuador



*Cocha Antshrike
photo by Roger Ahlman*

Sani Lodge is an ecolodge in the Napo region of Ecuador where experienced, specialist local guides deliver tailor-made birding expeditions. More than 570 species are found in Sani territory alone, including the endemic Cocha Antshrike, the rare Black-necked Red Cotinga and the Rufous Potoo. Owned and professionally run by an indigenous Amazonian Kichwa community, Sani Lodge is dedicated to ecotourism, environmental conservation and community development.

NBC readers will have the opportunity to visit Pishku Caraguata ('Bird Island') to look for Amazonian Umbrellabird as well as many other species found on the Napo River islands.

For a full species list and any further details please contact us on
Tel: 00 44 (0)20 7193 0400 / E-mail: info@sanilodge.co.uk
or visit our website

www.sanilodge.co.uk

