

# Birding the 'Montezuma Road', central Colombia

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Located on the Pacific slope of Colombia's western Andes, Risaralda's 'Montezuma Road' is one of South America's most spectacular birding trails. Over 550 species of birds – many globally threatened and/or endemic – have been seen along the 12-km-long road that ascends Cerro Montezuma. A local guide takes us on a tour of the highlights that this elevational gradient has to offer.

**T**he first time I visited Cerro Montezuma I was blown away by the diversity of birds. Each time I walked up what has become known as the 'Montezuma Road', part of Parque Nacional Tatamá in northwest Risaralda, it seemed that I

would find an entirely new array of species. After a few years of guiding along this trail, I've become familiar with the occurrence patterns of most species. Even so, I'll never cease to be surprised by fortuitous appearances of many truly rare birds.

Unless otherwise stated, all photos taken along the 'Montezuma Road', Risaralda, Colombia, by John Cahill / [johncahillbirding.com](http://johncahillbirding.com)

1 Majestic scenery in the upper elevations of the 'Montezuma Road'.

## >> BIRDING SITES MONTEZUMA, COLOMBIA

The birding here stretches along a 12-km-long road from Montezuma Ecologde at 1,300 m elevation. As it ascends, the road crosses streams, climbs steep mountainsides, twists into ravines and snakes along ridges before arriving at a military base on the top of Cerro Montezuma (2,500 m). Every hundred metres or so rise in altitude produces a totally new set of species. Accordingly, trying to cover the entire altitudinal range in just one day would be a mammoth undertaking. Indeed, even for birders on a tight schedule, a three-day visit is really required to cover the entire road and see the majority of emblematic species. If you are on a more relaxed schedule, six or more days is recommended in order to afford each section the attention it deserves.

In the following pages I suggest an effective way to bird the Montezuma Road, spread across four days. My favourite way to experience Montezuma is to start at the top and work down the mountain, patiently covering each distinct habitat. Each bend of the Montezuma Road has a lot to offer, so local birders split the road into six segments, of which up to three can realistically be covered in a day. Like many places in the Neotropics, birding here largely depends on encountering foraging mixed species flocks. Over time, I worked out the movements of each flock throughout the day, enabling me to judge when to be where along the road. This article shares that learning.

### 1. 'La Base'

A typical first day at Montezuma starts with an early rise followed by a bumpy ride to the top of the mountain (▲ 5°15'15.0"N 76°07'01.7"W; 2,500 m altitude). The birding begins just below a military base ('La Base') with a chorus of dawn birdsong wafting up from the valley hundreds of metres below. The view on a clear day of the imposing rugged Cerro Tatamá – far above even your already lofty position – is as much an attraction as the endemic birds; at 4,100 m this is the highest peak in Colombia's Cordillera Occidental. Here you can encounter the 'ultra-endemic' and globally Endangered Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer *Diglossa gloriosissima* (rediscovered in 2003 following nearly 40 years without a record; Figs. 2–3) plus Black-billed Mountain-Toucan *Andigena nigriroristris* and several highland tanagers. Seasonally, at least, the mega-rare (Critically Endangered) and distinctly glittering Dusky Starfrontlet *Coeligena orina* (Figs. 4–5) is attracted by astutely located hummingbird feeders and often flies in to offer close views.

Grass-green Tanager *Chlorornis riefferii* and Green-and-black Fruiteater *Pipreola riefferii* make their debut at this elevation, flying from treetop to treetop, at times letting birders get excitingly close before taking off into the forest again. Large flocks of heavy-bodied Hooded Mountain-Tanager *Buthraupis montana* show up out of nowhere, noisily feeding on fruiting trees before taking off down the mountain, carrying on in the same fashion as they had barged in only moments before.

Beginning the descent, it's time to look for Purplish-mantled Tanager *Iridisornis porphyrocephalus* (Near Threatened; Fig. 6), which often forages in moss-covered vegetation along the roadside, and both Viridian *Metallura williami* and Tyrian *M. tyrianthina* metaltails (which visit small flowers). Meanwhile Smoky Bush-Tyrant *Myiotheretes fumigatus* is usually detected first by call then spotted perching on an open snag.

Down the road are further hummingbird feeders and denser vegetation. Straining your ears may reveal a Streak-headed Antbird *Drymophila striaticeps* lurking deep in *Chusquea* bamboo thickets. Interrupting the antbird's calls may be the boisterous songs of two Munchique Wood-Wrens *Henicorhina negreti* (Fig. 7), a recently described species that BirdLife International downlisted from Critically Endangered to Vulnerable in 2018. The duettists are impossible to see until pushed out, at which point the pair of mouse-brown birds materialise only a few feet away, totally unafraid, before vanishing back into the dark shadows.

### 2. Los Chorros

The next segment of the trail – Los Chorros – begins just below 2,300m elevation at ▲ 5°15'05.9"N 76°06'38.0"W. Larger trees here create a new habitat, with different birds: for example, Spillmann's Tapaculo *Scytalopus spillmanni* from the hilltop is replaced by Nariño Tapaculo *S. viciniar*. The composition of mixed flocks begins to vary. Bands of Beautiful Jay *Cyanolyca pulchra* are accompanied by Fulvous-dotted Treerunner *Margarornis stellatus*, Sharpe's Wren *Cinnycerthia olivascens* and a wide variety of tanagers and flycatchers. A large flock of the near-endemic Black-chinned Mountain-Tanager *Anisognathus notabilis* often moves through the forest. It's a lucky day when a Tanager Finch *Oreothraupis arremonops* (Vulnerable; Fig. 8) pops up from the brush or a Greater Scythebill *Drymotoxeres pucheranii* (Near Threatened) skirts into view around the mossy trunk of a laurel.