

# Neotropical Birding

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# Antpitta Paradise: A 2010 Update

**Sam Woods, Nick Athanas and Scott Olmstead**

*Grallaria*, *Grallaricula*, *Hylopezus*, in other words, Neotropical antpittas, continue to make things easier for birders by abandoning their secretive habits and approaching a growing number of feeding stations.



Birders used to have to struggle to see this celebrity species—the Jicoteco Antpitta *Grallaria ridgelyi*—but now several come in each day at Tapichalaca (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)





Counterclockwise from top right:

The bird that changed it all: Maria. The successful habituation of this individual led to the subsequent fashion of antpitta feeding all over Ecuador that has since spread into Colombia too (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding)

The adult Jocotoco Antpittas *Grallaria ridgelyi* occasionally even brought their young to be fed too (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

While Jocotoco Antpittas *Grallaria ridgelyi* dominate the feeders at Tapichalaca, occasionally a Chestnut-naped Antpitta *G. nuchalis* can sneak in for a morsel (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)



**A**lmost five years have passed now since the 'revolution' of antpitta feeding stations began at the small finca Paz de las Aves in Pichincha, Ecuador, and was brought to our attention in the very first issue of *Neotropical Birding*<sup>1</sup>. A lot has changed since then, most notably that the habituation of antpittas and dedicated feeding stations has now been taken up with great success at other sites in Ecuador, and also in Colombia, where successful antpitta feeding stations have been set up in at least four reserves. Antpittas remain shy, extremely elusive species and therefore always highly-desired by birders visiting the Neotropics. It would seem that now more than ever is a great time to visit South America, as there is such a variety of antpittas available easily through such feeding stations. This article will outline the latest situation with antpitta feeding stations in Ecuador and Colombia to aid focusing your efforts if antpittas are key target species.

## Paz de las Aves (Pichincha, Ecuador)

This is the original 'antpitta farm', where everything began when local farmer Angel Paz managed to habituate a Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea*. This subtropical reserve (2,700 m) on the west slope of the Andes, close to the birding town of Mindo, regularly attracts Giant and Yellow-breasted *Grallaria flavotincta* Antpittas, and sometimes Moustached *Grallaria alleni* and Ochre-breasted Antpitta *Grallaricula flavirostris*. The latter is arguably the least reliable of the species, with Giant and Yellow-breasted remaining the most reliable. It is almost impossible to visit the reserve without seeing at least one antpitta species. In our experience an average antpitta tally is two species, although it is also possible to walk away with all four species. It should also be noted that Angel has a number of different individuals of each species, with up to three Yellow-breasted Antpittas recorded on some occasions and at least the same number of Giant Antpittas!

**Getting there:** The reserve is located c.5 km up a rough track on the left (south) side of the main paved road from Quito to La Independencia, about half-way between Nanegalito and the turn to Mindo. The track entrance is on a bend c.100 m before kilometre 66. It is best to make a reservation (tel: +593 8 725 3674) a few days before visiting to make sure there is space on the day. Angel is based in Nanegalito and can meet you there or at the road entrance to avoid getting lost. The reserve is often closed on Sundays.

## Tandayapa Bird Lodge (Pichincha, Ecuador)

This lodge set within the subtropical forests (1,750m) of north-west Ecuador has been well established on the birding circuit for years, being a superb base for going after many Chocó endemics, and has also rightfully gained a reputation as one of the best hummingbird lodges in the world. Over thirty hummingbird species have been recorded at the lodge, and regular counts of over twenty species occur at their feeders in a single day. In early July 2010, a young Giant Antpitta started coming in to be fed on worms right beside the lodge. The bird has been very reliable, coming in to be fed twice a day and is often around in between those times too. The bird has been exceptionally tame and confiding, sometimes hopping around below the crowded hummer feeders, and even shocking everyone by hopping into the lodge one morning during breakfast, to a very surprised bunch of birders staying there at the time. Many people have since photographed this bird from their beds! Although by late 2010 this confiding bird named Rosita had disappeared it is hoped it may return again. Tandayapa also has another antpitta attraction during the wet season when a Scaled Antpitta *Grallaria guatemalensis* regularly comes in to feed on worms in front of their blind in the early mornings.

**Getting there:** The lodge is less than 60 km from Quito by car, 6 km north of the main paved highway to Esmeraldas (the last 6 km on a quiet unpaved road).

## Guango Lodge (Napo, Ecuador)

This small lodge on the eastern side of the Andes (2,700 m) is especially famous for its large concentrations of temperate hummingbirds, although they have also managed to habituate a pair of Chestnut-crowned Antpittas *Grallaria ruficapilla* around their small parking lot. Although it has been known to show up at noon or late afternoon it is perhaps most reliably seen in the early mornings. One of the local staff is very dedicated and will spend quite some time whistling the bird in, often to great effect!

**Getting there:** Guango Lodge is just an hour-and-a-half drive east from Quito. The lodge is 11 km further east down the main highway from Papallacta town towards Baeza. Advanced reservations are not necessary for day visits, but a \$5 fee is charged.

## Cabañas San Isidro (Napo, Ecuador)

This renowned birding lodge on the eastern slope of the Andes (2,000 m) was quick to catch onto the concept of an antpitta feeding station as the staff at San Isidro set about habituating their own special species with great success. They regularly attract two species, the widespread Chestnut-crowned Antpitta, and more notably the ultra-shy White-bellied Antpitta *Grallaria hypoleuca*. The latter is arguably one of the most difficult antpitta species to see well under 'normal' field conditions and so the lodge provides a unique chance of seeing this elusive bird very well. Up to three individuals have been known to come in at one time, although there are periods of weeks or even months when they do not visit. A pair of Chestnut-crowned Antpittas is also habituated and if around usually appear somewhere between the lodge restaurant and the cabins, even in the flowerbeds!

**Getting there:** San Isidro is about a three-hour drive east of Quito and about an hour past Guango. From Baeza take the road to Tena, and just before the town of Cosanga take a side road to the right signed for San Isidro. The lodge is to the left, a further 3 km up this side road. Advanced reservations are recommended (e-mail: [info@cabanasanisidro.com](mailto:info@cabanasanisidro.com)) and a US\$10 day use fee is charged for non-guests.

## Tapichalaca (Zamora-Chinchipe, Ecuador)

This temperate forest lodge (2,600 m) deep in southern Ecuador is world-famous as being the site of the discovery of the distinctive Jocotoco Antpitta *Grallaria ridgelyi*, and remains to this day, the only reliable place to find this rare species. Of all the antpitta feeding stations this has been perhaps the most successful. Since the staff began the habituation process more than four years ago, the pair of Jocotoco Antpittas has become extremely reliable, even to the point it could be called the easiest antpitta to see, by virtue of their faithful returning to the feeding station daily. Even when the adults do not come, as happened in early 2010, their offspring from the previous year continues to visit the station, and can be remarkably tame, and persistent. This bird actually followed us down the trail for some 15 minutes on one occasion! All the birds can be exceptionally tame, and can often approach to within just a few metres of visitors. Occasionally a Chestnut-naped Antpitta *Grallaria nuchalis* is also attracted to

the feeder, although this seems to be much less reliable, approximately once a week in early 2010.

**Getting there:** Tapichalaca is about a two-hour drive south of Loja, via the towns of Vilcabamba and Yangana. The lodge is signed on the left side of the road as you are heading south, within a kilometer of a small house painted with birds on the right side of the road. Advanced reservations are recommended; day visitors not staying at the lodge are charged a US\$15 fee.

## Colibrí del Sol Reserve (Antioquia, Colombia)

This reserve is located at the northern end of Colombia's Western Andes, encompassing high elevation temperate forest and páramo. While the Dusky Starfrontlet *Coeligena orina* put this reserve on the map, it's an antpitta that has been making headlines of late. Discovered only in February 2008, this new species was coming every day in early 2010 in both the morning and afternoon. The taxon has been given two different names by two different sets of authors, Fenwick's Antpitta *Grallaria fenwickorum*<sup>2</sup> and Urroa Antpitta *Grallaria urraoensis*<sup>3</sup>. It remains to be seen which name will be accepted by the ornithological community. It is a very shy species, and visitors are unlikely to see one away from the feeder. Chestnut-naped Antpitta is also an occasional visitor.

**Getting there:** The trail to the reserve starts about a 30-minute drive from the town of Urroa, which is about a four-hour drive from Medellín. It's about a two hour hike to the cabin (horses are available), and the feeding station is a five-minute walk from the cabin. Visits to the reserve must be organized through the ecotourism branch of ProAves Colombia (e-mail: [info@ecoturs.org](mailto:info@ecoturs.org)).

## El Dorado Lodge (Magdalena, Colombia)

The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia has at least 18 endemic bird species, including one antpitta, the Santa Marta Antpitta *Grallaria bangsi*. While this can be one of the easiest *Grallaria* antpittas to see, some visitors do miss it or end up with very poor views. The new antpitta feeder here is very welcome news. The antpitta first visited the worm feeder in March 2010, but was not yet coming every day, so visitors are advised to check each afternoon of their stay. It's best to look just before sunset as the late afternoon light strikes the feeding area.





This page, clockwise from top left:

It might take a few tries, but patient birders should see Santa Marta Antpitta *Grallaria bangsi* at the El Dorado Lodge feeder (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

The bird with two names. Fenwick's/Urrao Antpitta comes in daily to the worm feeder at Colibrí del Sol Reserve (ProAves Colombia)

A classic shot of Maria, the Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea* that put Angel Paz on the map (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

The remote Loros Andinos reserve in Colombia is the only place we know that has successfully attracted an Undulated Antpitta *Grallaria squamigera* (ProAves Colombia)

Facing page, clockwise from top left:

While the most faithful Moustached Antpitta *Grallaria alleni* at Paz de las Aves remains Susan, occasionally up to three different birds can make an appearance in one morning. On this morning Jose also turned up to be fed by Angel (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding)

Even when not coming in to the Guango feeding area, the local pair of Chestnut-crowned Antpittas *Grallaria ruficapilla* can be regularly heard close by (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding)

Willy, one of the Yellow-breasted Antpittas *Grallaria flavotincta* at Paz de las Aves (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

Angel Paz has nicknamed the local Ochre-breasted Antpitta *Grallaricula flavirostris* Shakira as it has a habit (like many *Grallaricula*) of wiggling their hips like the famous Colombian pop star of the same name! (Scott Olmstead/Tropical Birding)







**Getting there:** The lodge is about a two-hour drive from the city of Santa Marta. The last hour is on a very rough road that requires a 4x4. Visits to the lodge must be organized through the ecotourism branch of ProAves Colombia (e-mail: info@ecoturs.org). The antpitta feeder is only 200 m from the lodge.

## **Loros Andinos Reserve (Quindío, Colombia)**

This new reserve was established in 2009 to protect several species of threatened parrots, including Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* and Indigo-winged Parrot *Hapalopsittaca fuertesi*. In early 2010, an Undulated Antpitta *Grallaria squamigera* started regularly visiting a worm feeder near the reserve warden's cabin. As this reserve is rarely visited, it is hard to keep tabs on it, but the antpitta is reported to come in most days.

**Getting there:** The reserve is about a five-hour drive from either Ibagué or Cali. Access to the reserve is difficult and must be organised through the ecotourism branch of ProAves Colombia (e-mail: info@ecoturs.org).

## **Rio Blanco Reserve (Caldas, Colombia)**

This reserve is owned by Aguas de Manizales, the municipal water company of the city of Manizales, and the ecotourism project is managed by the Fundación Ecológica Gabriel Arango Restrepo. Whilst there is rustic accommodation in the reserve, many visitors stay in Manizales and visit the reserve as a day trip. As of November 2009, Brown-banded Antpitta *Grallaria milleri* and Chestnut-crowned Antpitta were both daily visitors. The Chestnut-crowned Antpittas are very bold and dominate the feeder, but it is still possible to get good views of the scarcer Brown-banded. There have even been reports of Bicolored Antpitta *Grallaria rufocinerea* and Slate-crowned Antpitta *Grallaricula nana* visiting the feeder.

**Getting there:** The reserve and lodge are about a 40-minute drive from the city of Manizales, on the road to the village of Las Palomas. The antpitta feeder is a ten-minute walk from the lodge. Staying at the lodge is not necessary to see the antpittas, but there is a charge of 20,000 Colombian Pesos per person for day visits and hiring a local guide is required. Permits and guides can be obtained through the foundation by contacting Sergio Ocampo (e-mail: socampo@aguasdeamanizales.com.co).

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