

# Guanentá–Alto Río Fonce Fauna and Flora Sanctuary: a new protected area in the Colombian East Andes

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## Resumen

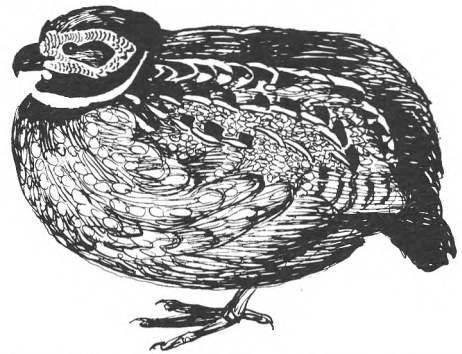
En 1988 BirdLife International se unió a otras ONGs colombianas en una iniciativa para proteger Virolín, uno de los mejores fragmentos aún existentes del bosque raro de roble andino en la cordillera oriental, departamento de Santander, Colombia, y hogar de dos especies de aves globalmente amenazadas, *Odontophorus strophium* y *Coeligena prunellei*. El pasado noviembre, estas iniciativas, con el fuerte compromiso de las comunidades locales, condujeron a que el gobierno colombiano estableciera el Santuario de Flora y Fauna Guanentá–Alto Río Fonce con 10,000 ha de hábitat pristino.

At the headwaters of the Río Fonce, in the East Andes of Santander department, Colombia, is a biologically diverse area, long known to scientists as Virolín. Its impressive landscape is characterised by deep ravines, steep slopes covered in luxurious Andean Oak *Quercus humboldtii*, dwarf *Polylepis* forest on top of sandstone ridges, and wide glacial lakes surrounded by Andean páramo vegetation above the tree-line. The La Rusia páramo is known to be one of the richest for plant species diversity and endemism in the Neotropics<sup>3,5</sup> (J. Hernández pers. comm.). Also, on the surrounding forested ridges are the type (and often only) localities of several endemic amphibians, such as the frogs *Centrolenella acanthiodiocephala*, *Hyla piceigularis* and *Hyla platydactyla*<sup>6</sup>.

Birds comprise one of the most noticeable and diverse natural features in this area. More than 250 species have been recorded, one of which is a Virolín speciality: the Gorgeted Wood-quail *Odontophorus strophium*, a threatened Colombian (East Andes) endemic for which these forests represent the only known stronghold. Additionally, the threatened Black Inca *Coeligena prunellei* (which occurs on the west slope of the East Andes) is found to be abundant in this area<sup>1</sup>. Many other regionally threatened taxa are present in the Virolín sanctuary, such as Wattled Guan *Aburria aburri*, Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruviana*, and several parrots and parakeets such as White-capped Parrot *Pionus tumultuosus*, Scaly-naped Parrot *Amazona mercenaria*, and the globally threatened Flame-winged Parakeet *Pyrrhura calliptera*<sup>1</sup>. Two regionally threatened raptors, the Soli-

tary Eagle *Harpyhaliaetus solitarius* and the Black-and-chestnut Eagle *Oroaetus isidori*, are also believed to occur in the area because of their occurrence in the forests of the La Rusia range, adjacent to the sanctuary.

It has been estimated that more than 100 species of mammal inhabit the area, amongst which the threatened Spectacled Bear *Tremarctos ornatus* stands out: a large female



Gorgeted Wood-quail *Odontophorus strophium* (Jon Fjeldså)

with her cub was recently observed roaming near the upper limit of the forest, and another was recently killed not far away from Virolín.

Efforts to preserve the forests and páramo of the Virolín area began in the early 1960s, when researchers from the Colombian National University Natural Science Institute drew it to the attention of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) for inclusion in a growing list of endangered, but biologically important areas. At the same time, the Colombian Institute for Natural Resources and the Environment (INDERENA) had already included

Virolín amongst 100 sites that represented top priorities for national biological conservation.

Although the forests of Virolín were still standing 20 years later, it was clear that they were increasingly endangered. However, Fundación Natura (a Colombian NGO focused on national biodiversity conservation) responded to the initiative of a local landowner (Alvaro Caycedo) concerned with the disappearance of the oak forests, and started campaigning to legally protect the area. Institutions such as BirdLife International (then ICBP)<sup>1</sup>, the Colombian Electricity Fund for the Environment (FEN Colombia), and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) were the first to join these efforts with timely support, and with help to carry out the basic studies required to justify the preservation of the area (e.g. Brooke<sup>2</sup>). Eighteen months later, detailed vegetation, land-use and land-tenure maps were made available to INDERENA. These complemented floral and faunal inventories provided by scientists from the Colombian National University. INDERENA and Fundación Natura held several workshops at which public expectations and local initiatives for the proposed protected area were built into the final proposal/ feasibility study.

This unprecedented development initiative was promoted in local and national newspapers and environmental magazines, and as a result, regional political leaders and local communities, aware that this natural area represented an important asset for an economically deprived region, started a public support campaign. In November 1993, the Colombian government formally designated 10,000 ha of mostly public land, covered with pristine habitat from 2,200 to 3,900 m, as the Guanentá-Alto Río Fonce Fauna and Flora Sanctuary. This sanctuary is the first protected area designated in Colombia for four years, and the first one set aside in Santander department.

The Guanentá-Alto Río Fonce area stands out not only for its biological value, but for being the first conservation area in the country for which, according to the new constitution, protection is the result of community participation. To cope with new conservation challenges, the relevant institutions are seeking support from international agencies with the aim of making this conservation effort tangibly beneficial to the region and its inhabitants, both human and floral and faunal.



Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruviana*  
(David D. Beadle)

### References

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The Heart of Guanentá Sanctuary: slopes covered by tropical oak forest with high rocky paramo above the tree line (Augusto Repizzo)



Sub-Andean and Andean oak forests of the interior valley of the Guanentá Sanctuary (Augusto Repizzo)