

>> BIRDING SITES SANTA LUCIA

# Santa Lucia: a community conservation success in Ecuador

**Sally Johnsen**

Sally Johnsen treats us to a tour of an innovative community-run reserve in the Ecuadorian Chocó.



Clockwise from top left:

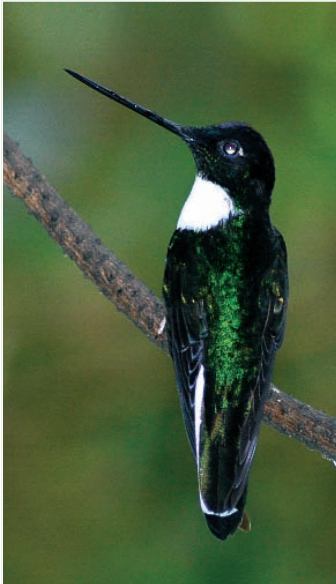
The recently described Cloud-forest Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium nubicola* (Mitch Lysinger)

Plate-billed Mountain Toucan *Andigena laminirostris* is frequently seen at fruiting trees (Bob Pease)

Long-tailed Sylph *Agelaiocercus kingi* (male) is frequently seen at the lodge's sugar water feeders (Sidney Dunkle)

Violet-tailed Sylph *Agelaiocercus coelestis* (male) is common at Santa Lucia (Kevin Schafer / [www.kevinschafer.com](http://www.kevinschafer.com))





Left: Collared Inca *Coeligena torquata* is also attracted to sugar water feeders (Sidney Dunkle)

Centre: The colourful Crimson-mantled Woodpecker *Piculus rivolii* (Mitch Lysinger)

Right: Masked Flowerpiercer *Diglossopsis cyanea* has learned to feed from sugar water feeders (Sidney Dunkle)

Clockwise from right:

Turquoise Jay *Cyanolyca torcosa* catching moths attracted to a light (Sidney Dunkle)

Santa Lucia Lodge has a 360° panoramic view (Santa Lucia Lodge)

White-faced Nunbird *Haploptila castanea* can be seen relatively easily at Santa Lucia (© Kathy Kinnie / www.natural-images-by-kathy.com)

Toucan Barbet *Semnornis ramphastinus*, a colourful Chocó endemic, is a specialty of Santa Lucia (© Kathy Kinnie / www.natural-images-by-kathy.com)



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The Chocó Endemic Bird Area<sup>1</sup>, a zone of endangered humid forest extending along the western slope of the Andes from Colombia into south-west Ecuador, harbours one of the most diverse and dazzling suites of restricted-range birds (and other wildlife) to be found anywhere in the world.

Ecuador is a country jam-packed with a complexity as staggering as any on the planet with respect to its small size. During my trips to this bird-rich country, I have had the opportunity to visit a captivating lodge near Quito where the combination of conservation and social ethic with great birding have impressed me as much as any other site I have seen.

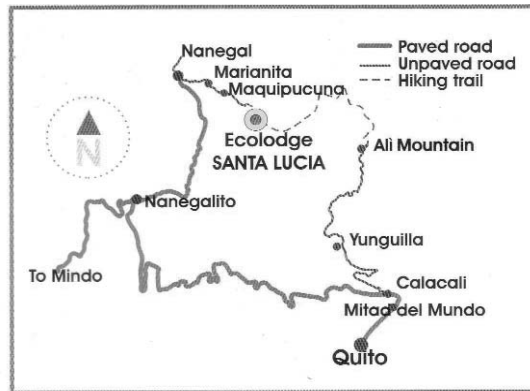
### Santa Lucia: locally run for local benefit

Santa Lucia, a new reserve on the west slope of the Andes, is on the cutting edge of an urgent conservation movement that directly involves community efforts in a trend of sustainable use; leaving the forest standing for the good of local populations, ecotourism and conservation alike.

Located about 80 km north-west of Quito, right in the heart of the mid-elevation Chocó, Santa Lucia protects more than 725 ha of cloud forest, most of it primary. The reserve was formed in 1998 when 12 members of the local community decided to turn their land over to conservation and manage their own resources, opening up the area to ecotourists. Their belief was that ecotourism could provide a sustainable source of income for the cooperative members and would directly or indirectly benefit the residents in neighbouring areas. To this day Santa Lucia is owned and run by local families.

Building the Santa Lucia Lodge was an achievement in itself. It took four men from the cooperative a year of very hard work to construct. Lacking electricity in this remote area, they had to work with a chainsaw and hand tools. The wood used to build the lodge came from fallen trees, as the felling of any live tree is illegal. Items such as the glass panes for the windows, tin roofing, a cast iron stove and a gas refrigerator were carried up the steep, 2 km access trail to the lodge. (I hasten to add that the trail has subsequently been improved and can be managed by an average hiker.)

The Santa Lucia reserve ranges from 1,315–2,800 m altitude. The beautiful lodge is perched at 1,980 m and has panoramic views of the Andes. Luggage is taken up on a separate trail



Getting to Santa Lucia Lodge

by mules which allows visitors to proceed at a leisurely birding pace, stopping at covered benches on the journey up.

The lodge itself has capacity for about 20 guests, with comfortable beds, delicious food and hot showers. Soon cabins with private bathrooms will be built. There is no electricity but the lodge is romantically lit at night with candles; all cooking is done with gas. At night guests are frequently entertained by local people singing and playing South American music with guitars and flutes.

### The birding

Right around the lodge you may choose to simply relax in the hammocks and watch the hummingbird feeders: a long list of species endemic to the Chocó region can be found with ease. During your stay, 'hummers' such as Empress Brilliant *Heliodoxa imperatrix*, Brown Inca *Coeligena wilsoni*, Violet-tailed Sylph *Aglaiocercus coelestis*, Gorgeted Sunangel *Heliangelus strophianus* and Purple-bibbed Whitetip *Urostitte benjamini* are bound to zip in for a visit.

Venturing further afield, you can choose to bird along kilometres of well-maintained trails alone or with the help of a local guide. To date around 400 species have been reported in the environs of the lodge and at lower elevations. The main trail starts at the lodge and ascends slowly; I have seen Tawny-breasted Tinamou *Nothocercus julius* here. One-and-a-half kilometres through the forest lies an open area, which is good for raptors such as Black-and-chestnut Eagle *Oroaetus isidori* and Ornate Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus ornatus*.

A little higher up, the trail leads to the highest point in the reserve, marked by a 15 m high canopy viewpoint birding tower. Here you have a breathtaking 360° view of the surrounding volcanoes. It is also a good place to try for some of the area's most tantalising mid-elevation birds



such as Plate-billed Mountain Toucan *Andigena laminirostris*, Beautiful Jay *Cyanolyca pulchra*, a rainbow of Thraupidae such as Golden-crowned *Iridosornis rufivertex* and Grass-green *Chlorornis riefferii* Tanagers, and Scarlet-bellied *Anisognathus igniventris*, Black-chinned *Anisognathus notabilis* and Hooded *Bathraupis montana* Mountain-Tanagers, to name but a few. This is also an excellent location for the (globally Vulnerable) Giant *Grallaria gigantea* and Chestnut-crowned *Grallaria ruficapilla* Antpittas, which must rank among the most talented skulkers on the continent. You are sure to hear them calling from October through March and may chance upon one venturing onto the trail.

Santa Lucia is also home to other species of antpitta, such as Scaled *Grallaria guatemalensis*, Undulated *Grallaria squamigera*, Ochre-breasted *Grallaricula flavirostris*, Plain-backed *Grallaria haplonota* and (the globally Vulnerable) Moustached *Grallaria alleni*. These birds may be seen on any of the trails in the reserve at appropriate elevations.

Everyone has favorite spots, and the Cascade Trail is one of mine. This gorgeous trail starts behind the Lodge and descends steeply into thick primary forest of giant trees laden with bromeliads, epiphytes, and orchids. After about 1 km it leads to a beautiful waterfall where the water cascades to the river below. This is also an excellent place to find Giant Antpitta and the wary (and globally Vulnerable) Dark-backed Wood-Quail *Odontophorus melanonotus*. The rare and local White-faced Nunbird *Hapaloptila castanea* can sometimes be found here as well, sunning in the trees. Groups of up to four of these lethargic birds are regularly seen, and a monitoring project

has been initiated to learn more about their secretive habits. This is also home to the recently described Cloud-forest Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium nubicola* (for which see *Neotropical Birding* 1: 26).

After walking for about 2 km, passing numerous waterfalls, one finally reaches the river where there is a crystal clear pool for swimming: an ideal place for lunch. Here, look out for such species as the White-tailed Hillstar *Urochroa bougueri* and White-capped Dipper *Cinclus leucocephalus*, which both have a strong affinity for water.

A daily event, which is an absolute must for birders, is a visit to the Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruvianus* lek. Healthy leks of this impressive cotinga are becoming increasingly scarce, and Santa Lucia's owners are proud to protect theirs. Few natural spectacles can compare to the 30+ scarlet males as they display to attract an interested female! The traditional lek site is situated on a high ridge, about one-and-a-half hours walk from the lodge. Access is with a guide only, as finding the lek is difficult and it is protected.

There are two 'performances': one at daybreak, and one at around 14h00. The one in the morning is usually the most active, but requires a pre-dawn walk. This has its own attractions, as you are accompanied by the eerie wailing of Wattled Guans *Aburria aburri* or an early rising Golden-headed Quetzal *Pharomachrus auriceps* as you descend to the river.

Birds are not the only spectacular creatures in Santa Lucia; I once saw a Spectacled Bear *Tremarctos ornatus*, South America's only species of bear, feeding in a fruiting tree quite close to the lodge. Such an encounter only added to the sense of privilege of being at this wonderful, community-run reserve. Great birding, great conservation and a great way to support local livelihoods.

## LOGISTICS

You can reach Santa Lucia in one of two ways. The Lodge can arrange private transportation (US\$60 one way). Alternatively, catch the local bus from Quito to the town of Nanagal, which takes two-and-a-half hours and costs US\$1.60. Then either walk or arrange for the lodge (US\$10) to pick you up for the 6 km-long dirt road to the trailhead leading up to the lodge.

Prices for full board range from USD\$25-45 (plus tax) per day, depending on season and amenities. Packages include a six night/seven day deal with birding guide, access to adjacent reserves and transport to/from Quito for US\$650. The lodge has capacity for about 20 people. For more information please visit [www.santaluciaecuador.com](http://www.santaluciaecuador.com). Please contact the lodge prior to your visit and arrangements can be made. E-mail: [info@santaluciaecuador.com](mailto:info@santaluciaecuador.com) or phone: 00593 2 2157242. Alternatively, contact the author.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCES

1. Stattersfield, A. J., Crosby, M. J., Long, A. J. & Wege, D. C. (1998) *Endemic Bird Areas of the world: priorities for bird conservation*. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International.

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