

>> BIRDING SITES NORTHERN PERU BIRDING ROUTE

The Northern Peru Birding Route—diversity and endemics

Rob Williams

Northern Peru is home to a fabulous section of rare and endemic birds and is opening up to ecotourism. This article gives an overview of the region and the key sites for birding.

Travelling the Northern Peru Birding Route, home to many sought-after endemics, is getting easier and easier. Decentralisation of government and a new direction in tourism promotion within Peru is leading to a new emphasis on birding tourism. This change is most apparent in the north where local governments and tourism committees are leading the way in promoting ecotourism with an emphasis on birding, as a key part of the region's development strategy. This is leading to improved

infrastructure, security and increased options for visiting birders.

The most obvious initiatives comprise training of local guides, the development of birder-friendly hotels and restaurants, and helping local communities prepare themselves to receive tourists. Perhaps more importantly, the region's people are starting to see birds—and other wildlife—as an important natural resource to be used wisely, rather than plundered or destroyed without thought. Local communities and



Map of northern Peru depicting a suggested birding route (PromPeru)

>> BIRDING SITES | NORTHERN PERU BIRDING ROUTE

landowners are now creating their own private reserves. Local governments are establishing conservation areas that complement the state system, and are often more accessible for the visitor. Additionally, a string of new lodges and hotels are opening that are designed with birders' needs in mind.

The area was the focus of the 2004 British Birdwatching Fair, and attention from international conservation organisations, such as BirdLife International and the American Bird Conservancy, is also helping to drive this change. In September 2007 the Northern Peru Birding Route will be the focus of the first Birdwatching Fair in South America, to be held in Tarapoto. An area that was previously considered remote and only for the most adventurous birders looks set to become a hot destination for a wider audience of birders attracted by some of South America's best birding.

These changes mean that visiting birders not only get to see a lot of good birds in wonderful settings but also help promote the growing trend towards conservation and sustainable management of the region's natural resources.

Northern Peru is one of the most biologically diverse areas on Earth. The complex topography of the Andes, the strong influence on the climate of two major oceanic currents (the cold Humboldt running north from the Antarctic and the warm North Equatorial) and the proximity of the Amazon lowlands have conspired to create an incredible variety of habitats in a relatively small area. This diversity is reflected in the amazing number of bird species found here, nearly 1,400, including species representative of no less than eight Endemic Bird Areas. The region supports a staggering 146 restricted-range bird species and some 67 that are considered globally threatened,

plus a further 45 that are Near Threatened and five that are considered Data Deficient.

A transect across the Andes from the Pacific coast to the Amazon passes through the complete range of habitats of the region. It allows the birder the chance not only to see some of the world's rarest and most sought-after birds among a respectable trip list, but also to enjoy a spectacular journey through diverse and fascinating landscapes. For the broader-minded, there is also an opportunity to take in some fascinating archaeological sites.

Off the Pacific coast seabirds from the cold Humboldt Current and warm tropical waters mix, and it is possible to see Waved *Phoebastria irrorata* and Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris* (Critically Endangered and Endangered, respectively), Humboldt Penguin *Spheniscus humboldti* (Vulnerable) and Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens* on the same day, in addition to two species of pelican, three boobies, many gulls and terns, and a couple of cormorants. The coastal marshes and mangroves of the region also make a worthwhile stop for the visiting birder, with many shorebirds being regular, and a good chance of Chilean Flamingo *Phoenicopterus chilensis* (Near Threatened). Just inland, the coastal desert is home to a low diversity of species but some sought-after specialties include Least Seedsnipe *Thinocorus rumicivorus*, Tawny-throated Dotterel *Oreopholus ruficollis*, Coastal Miner *Geositta peruviana*, and Cinereous Finch *Piezorhina cinerea*.

Across the narrow coastal plain the foothills of the Andes are covered in lowland Tumbesian dry forest. This habitat is home to a staggering 52 endemic bird species and a couple of days will give a good chance of finding a large selection of these. Near the Ecuadorian border, the semi-deciduous forests of the Cerros de Amotape National Park and adjacent areas hold the greatest diversity of species. Further south, in the dry forests of southern Piura and Lambayeque, a good diversity of species including specialties such as Peruvian Plantcutter *Phytotoma raymondii* (Endangered), Tumbes Tyrant *Tumbezia salvini* (Near Threatened), Sulphur-throated Finch *Sicalis taczanowskii* and the Critically Endangered White-winged Guan *Penelope albipennis* can be found at sites such as Quebrada Limon, Laquipampa Wildlife Reserve and the community-owned Chaparri Private Conservation Area. This area is also home to Andean Condors *Vultur gryphus* and King Vultures *Sacoramphus papa*,

~
 “this previously remote
 region— only for the
 adventurous —looks set to
 become a hot destination for
 birders attracted by some of
 South America's best birding”
 ~

one of the few places in the world where they occur together.

Climbing into the Andes, more humid forest supports a variety of more typically Andean species, including specialities such as Bearded Guan *Penelope barbata* and Grey-headed Antbird *Myrmeciza griseiceps* (both Vulnerable). Side trips from the main route to the montane forests and *páramos* near the Ecuadorian border can be rewarded with a suite of otherwise hard-to-access montane birds. Here the Andean tops reach their lowest height on their entire length and one soon crosses into the arid Marañón Valley with its own suite of 22 endemic species that frequent the cactus scrub and thorn forests. At higher elevations, birds such as the Gray-bellied Comet *Taphroesbia griseiventris* (Endangered) and Great Spinetail *Siptornopsis hypochondriacus* (Vulnerable) can be found near the city of Cajamarca; in the mid-valley at Balsas and Limón, the Yellow-faced Parrotlet *Forpus xanthops* (Vulnerable) and Buff-bridled Inca-Finch *Incaspiza laeta* can be found; and, lower down, specialities include Little Inca-Finch *Incaspiza watkinsi* and Marañón Crescentchest *Melanopareia maranonica* (both Near Threatened).

Across the río Marañón a series of mountain ridges rises before the visitor; each is shrouded with dense forest laden with epiphytes and orchids and home to some truly spectacular and legendary birds. The Cordillera de Colán near Pomacochas is the last refuge of the Marvellous Spatuletail *Loddigesia mirabilis* (Endangered), arguably the world's most sought-after hummingbird and now protected by local people and the American Bird Conservancy. A day spent here, with a bit of luck and patience, should result in good views of this truly spectacular denizen of the understorey.

One of the world's greatest birding spots is Abra Patricia (the highest pass is actually called Abra Juan Pardo on the maps—Abra Patricia is farther down the road) at the top of the Alto Mayo escarpment. The birding here is simply fantastic. On a good day the trees seem to drip birds, as huge mixed-species flocks storm through the forest canopy, assailing the senses with colours and calls. These flocks are dominated by the stunning tanagers with White-capped *Sericossypha albocristata*, Grass-green *Chlorornis riefferii*, Saffron-crowned *Tangara xanthocephala*, Golden-naped *Tangara ruficervix*, Yellow-scarfed *Iridosornis reinhardti* and Silver-backed *Tangara viridicollis* being a selection of those likely to be seen. The forests also support a great diversity of

“Northern Peru supports a staggering 146 restricted-range bird species and some 67 that are considered globally threatened”

hummingbirds with Sword-billed Hummingbird *Ensifera ensifera*, Long-tailed Sylph *Agelaiocercus kingi*, Booted Racquet-tail *Ocreatus underwoodii* and the very local and Endangered Royal Sunangel *Heliangelus regalis* being amongst the highlights. The dense understorey is also worth a look with tinamous, tapaculos and various antpittas all being present, but more frequently heard than seen. Here one should also see the striking Johnson's Tody-Tyrant *Poecilatriccus luluae*, only recently described to science, and this is also the realm of the legendary Long-whiskered Owlet *Xenoglaux loweryi* (Endangered), the world's smallest owl. This area has been the focus of a conservation initiative led by Peruvian NGO Ecoan and the American Bird Conservancy.

Descending from Abra Patricia into the subtropical forests of the Alto Mayo one comes across the gaudy Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruviana*, which can be watched at some well-known leks, such as that at Naranjo, and may also be seen along the roadside, feeding in fruiting trees. These foothill forests are the transition to the lowlands and so hold a new suite of birds and a higher diversity, particularly in groups such as the antbirds and tanagers. With luck species such as White-plumed Antbird *Pithys albifrons*, Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper *Lochmias nematura* and Crested Quetzal *Pharomachrus antisianus* may be found. In lower areas the endemic Huallaga Tanager *Ramphocelus melanogaster* can also be found commonly.

The majority of the lowlands of the río Mayo is now dominated by agricultural areas, but some good birding can be had in the woodlots and protected areas that remain. Several scarce and locally distributed species can be found in the area. One area of particular note is the flooded forest around Tingana, where a local community is protecting their forest and running a small



Above top to bottom:

Long-whiskered Owlet *Xenoglaux loweryi* This enigmatic nightbird occurs at Abra Patricia, but an accessible stake-out remains elusive (Dave Geale)

White-plumed Antbird *Pithys albifrons* This spectacular antbird is notably common on the Cordillera Escalera near Tarapoto (Heinz Plenge)

Male Speckle-chested Piculet *Picumnus steindachneri* This Near Threatened Peruvian endemic can be found in the impressive mixed-species flocks at Abra Patricia (Heinz Plenge)

Above top to bottom:

Male Gray-bellied Comet *Taphrolesbia griseiventris* This very rare and local hummingbird is best seen near the town of Cajamarca in gullies and canyons with natural vegetation (Heinz Plenge)

Male Marvellous Spatuletail *Loddigesia mirabilis* This species has a tiny range on the left bank of the Utucubamba river valley. It can be found reliably with the help of local guides near the town of Pomacochas, or seen near the ancient fortress of Kuelap (Rob Williams)

Sword-billed Hummingbird *Ensifera ensifera* Fairly common in the montane forests of the eastern Andes (Rob Williams)



Clockwise from top left:

Johnson's Tody-Tyrant *Poecilatricus luluae* Only recently described despite having been discovered in the 1970s. This species is quite easily found in roadside vegetation at Abra Patricia (Heinz Plenge)

Tumbes Tyrant *Tumbezia salvini* A rare and very local Peruvian endemic found only in a few dry forest valleys in the foothills of Piura and Lambayeque; most easily seen at the Chaparri Private Conservation Area (Heinz Plenge)

Peruvian Plantcutter *Phytotma raimondii* (male) This Endangered endemic has a highly fragmented population. Good sites for the species include Talara in Piura and Bosque de Pomac Historical Sanctuary in Lambayeque (Heinz Plenge)

Yellow-scarfed Tanager *Iridosornis reinhardtii* This Peruvian endemic is a regular member of flocks in the stunted forests of Abra Patricia (Heinz Plenge)

White-tailed Jay *Cyanocorax mystacalis* This Tumbesian endemic can be found in the dry forests along the coast; it is particularly confiding in the Chaparri Private Conservation Area where it comes to feeding stations (Heinz Plenge)

Dotted Tanager *Tangara varia* (female) Within Peru this species can only be found on the Cordillera Escalera just north of Tarapoto (Heinz Plenge)

>> BIRDING SITES | NORTHERN PERU BIRDING ROUTE

ecotourism enterprise. The area offers the chance of many typically Amazonian species such as macaws, five species of kingfisher, Horned Screamer *Anhima cornuta*, and Limpkin *Aramus guarauna*, as well as several species of monkey and other mammals including Neotropical River Otter *Lontra longicaudis*. This is a good day trip from Moyobamba for those not continuing to Iquitos.

Near the city of Tarapoto, the Cordillera Escalera municipal conservation area offers great birding with species such as Dotted Tanager *Tangara varia*, which in Peru is known only from this area. Nearby dry forests are home to specialities such as the Endangered endemic Ash-throated Antwren *Herpsilochmus parkeri*.

From Tarapoto one can fly to Iquitos (alternatively from Yurimaguas one can take a riverboat on the Amazon) to look for many Amazonian specialities including some unique and highly sought-after species, such as those recently described from the white sand forests of the Allpahuayo-Mishana Reserve (for which see the article by Noam Shany *et al.* on pages 60-68) such as Iquitos Gnatcatcher *Poliophtila clementsii* (Critically Endangered), Allpahuayo Antbird *Percnostola arenarum* (Vulnerable) and Ancient Antwren *Herpsilochmus gentryi* (Near Threatened). Here one can also visit Amazonian river islands and the many specialities they hold. Many lodges can be accessed from Iquitos and provide a range of birding experiences. For those with more time who wish to experience the wilderness of the Amazon, it is highly recommended to take a trip to Laguna El Dorado in Reserva Nacional Pacaya-Samiria. This site offers the visitor one of the best Amazonian lowland rainforest experiences. Here three local communities are caring for the wildlife and managing their resources carefully.

Northern Peru offers an unbeatable birding experience with a large range of habitats and many spectacular birds, including many endemic and threatened species. The birding is also accompanied by spectacular scenery and can be easily combined with some interesting pre-Colombian archaeological sites such as Sipan, Sican, Kuelap and Leymebamba, and museums, including the new Sipan museum in Lambayeque,

where the amazing Moche gold artefacts taken from the tomb of the lord of Sipan can be seen. The area is easily accessed with daily flights from Lima to Chiclayo, Piura, Tumbes, Cajamarca, Tarapoto and Iquitos. A good and continually improving road infrastructure makes access to most areas easy and comfortable, and a selection of new hotels and lodges makes this previously isolated area accessible to birders on all budgets.

During a two-week trip concentrating on the main areas between Chiclayo and Tarapoto one can expect to see in excess of 500 species; the total number would likely rise to nearer 700 in three weeks including the Tumbes or Cajamarca areas as well and could be even higher if the Amazonian lowlands near Iquitos are included. Amongst these 40–50 hummingbirds and 80+ tanagers and allies can be expected. Northern Peru has long been overlooked by mainstream birders and ecotourists but the ongoing development of birding tourism infrastructure in the region looks set to see this become a regular, highly-rated destination. A visit will not only provide the birder with many spectacular species and great birding experiences but can also help and encourage local communities and local people to conserve the birds and wildlife of this amazing area.

ROB WILLIAMS

Ultimate Voyages, Cesar Vallejo K-6, Santa Monica, Cusco, Peru. E-mail: Rob@ultimatevoyages.com

~

“Northern Peru offers an unbeatable birding experience with a large range of habitats and many spectacular birds, including many endemic and threatened species”

~