

# The South American Bird Fair

James Lowen

*There cannot be a Neotropical Birding reader of that does not know of the British Birdwatching Fair and most have probably been to it. But how many are acquainted with its equivalents across the world, such as the South American Bird Fair? On the basis that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, your diligent magazine editor attended the most recent such Neotropical event – a now-annual event that was not even a glimmer in someone's eye when the Neotropical Bird Club was established in 1994.*

**T**he first British Birdwatching Fair was held at Rutland Water, UK, in 1989. I wasn't there but, by all accounts, it wasn't much more than a couple of marquees in a field. Nevertheless, it attracted 3,000 visitors and raised £3,000. By the 30th 'Birdfair' in 2018, the event had become dubbed 'the Glastonbury [festival] of birdwatching', was typically receiving up to 20,000 visitors over its three days, showcases products and services from 450 exhibitors, and routinely raises more than £300,000 a time for international conservation projects.

Given such success, little wonder that Birdfair has inspired events across the world. The American Birding Expo ([americanbirdingexpo.com](http://americanbirdingexpo.com)) is an unabashed trade fair – albeit one that also funds small conservation projects – that will next

take place in Philadelphia (USA) in September 2019. The Indian Birding Fair, held annually in Jaipur, turned 21 in February 2018. November the same year marked the ninth Asian Bird Fair ([asianbirdfair.org](http://asianbirdfair.org)) whose explicit mission is to 'celebrate birds across borders'. Founding organisations from across the region take it in turns to host the events; the 2018 fair took place in Taiwan. In the selfsame month, the Colombian city of Manizales hosted the eighth South American Bird Fair ([feriadeaves.com.ar](http://feriadeaves.com.ar)).

As part of a group organised by BirdLife International, I attended this event at the invitation of ProColombia (the country's tourist board), which was a driving force behind what was formally known as 'VIII Feria de Aves de Sudamérica' ([birdfair.net](http://birdfair.net)). This article seeks to



1 The official photo of participants at the VIII Feria de Aves de Sudamérica, Manizales, Colombia, November 2018 (German Montoya).





2–6 Participants at VIII Feria de Aves de Sudamérica, Manizales, Colombia, November 2018 (James Lowen/ [jameslowen.com](https://www.jameslowen.com)). Can you spot *Neotropical Birding* stalwart Tom Schulenberg in Fig. 5?





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Birds seen in forest at the conference venue of Recinto del Pensamiento (Manizales, Colombia, November 2018; all James Lowen/✉ jameslowen.com) included **7** Andean Motmot *Momotus aequatorialis*, **8** Sparkling Violetear *Colibri coruscans*, **9** Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilotriccus ruficeps* and **10** White-sided Flowerpiercer *Diglossa albilatera*.



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On morning excursions away from the conference site, participants enjoyed seeing birds such as **11** the globally threatened Buffy Helmetcrest *Oxypogon stubellii* (Termales del Ruiz, Manizales, Colombia, November 2018; Jim Lawrence).

explain a little of the history of and motivation for the ‘South American Bird Fair’, seasoning the account with personal reflections on the Manizales event. That such an annual event exists at all speaks volumes for how the world of Neotropical birdwatching has changed during the lifetime of the Neotropical Bird Club.

The South American Bird Fair (‘the Feria’) was conceived by Argentine birder Horacio Matarasso. According to Paula Webster, a member of the ten-member organising committee, its objective was and remains “to raise the profile of birdwatching in South America”. For the event’s organisers, the Feria is intended to “provide a space where birdwatchers can be among friends, swapping experiences, sharing knowledge, learning about birds and conservation, presenting research findings and, above all, watching hundreds of birds during field trips”.

The Feria’s scope was local at first – the first four events (2010–13) taking place in the same Argentine city (San Martín de los Andes), but nevertheless attracting participation from elsewhere in the continent. The Feria first ventured ‘abroad’ (and thus arguably started properly justifying its South American moniker) in 2015, when it was held in Paraty, Brazil.

Then it was back to Argentina in 2016, with an event in Buenos Aires. This was the first Feria

that Paula Webster and husband Michael. Swiftly hooked, the couple joined the 2017 event in Puerto Varas, Chile. “The 2017 Feria was a big step up from Buenos Aires,” Michael says. “It was held in a conference centre with simultaneous talks in adjacent rooms.” The Manizales event, however, blew the Websters’ minds. “Thanks to sponsorship from the Colombian Government, this Feria is much bigger and professionally organised,” says Paula. “The venue is amazing, even to the point of simultaneous translation for talks.”

Paula was not wrong about the venue. Recinto El Pensamiento is a plush, city-edge hotel set in expansive private grounds that include small wetlands, trails through a decent area of secondary forest, an orchidarium, a butterfly garden and hummingbird feeders. The British Birdwatching Fair similarly sits alongside a great piece of habitat – the reserves of Rutland Water. Yet birding there is more of an adjunct enjoyed by relatively few attendees.

The vibe of the Manizales event was entirely different, in large part because of its setting. Birding was an integral part of the Feria – emphatically and explicitly the reason for its existence. Participants were actively encouraged to explore the hotel grounds. We did so for a full morning, enjoying good views of birds such as Short-tailed Hawk *Buteo brachyurus*,





12 The banner for the VIII Feria de Aves Sudamericana in Manizales, Colombia, November 2018.

Andean Motmot *Momotus aequatorialis*, Striped Treehunter *Thripadectes holostictus*, Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilatriccus ruficeps* and White-sided Flowerpiercer *Diglossa albilatera*. A variety of North American wood-warblers included Canada Warbler *Cardellina canadensis*, for which ProColombia has become a Species Champion in the BirdLife International Preventing Extinctions Programme. A riot of thraupids included the spectacular Blue-winged Mountain-Tanager *Anisognathus somptuosus*, and hummingbirds zipping around the feeders included Long-tailed Sylph *Agelaiocercus kingii* and Booted Racket-tail *Ocreatus underwoodii*. For the grounds of a conference centre, this was hardly shabby.

Coinciding with the launch by Audubon of the Central Colombia Birding Route ([tinyurl.com/central-Colombia](http://tinyurl.com/central-Colombia)), each morning of the five-day event also saw participants indulge in birding trips to exciting locations around Manizales. Some birded the páramo of Termales del Ruiz, gawping at a remarkably confiding (and globally Vulnerable) Buffy Helmetcrest *Oxypogon stubelii*. Others were enchanted by Río Blanco, particularly its speciality antpittas. This was an



13 The 2019 Fair will take place in Uruguay.

event at which birding took precedence. The Feria's formal business only got going once participants had returned from excursions at lunchtime.

And what a lunch it was! Rather than grabbing a quick sandwich from a trailer, the thousand or so participants at the Feria all sat down together for a buffet of local delights. This was not just a celebration of birds, but a real community experience. A genuine sense of togetherness enriched the whole event. "I reckon 90% of the thousand or so participants are Colombian. Isn't that evidence of the strength of local feeling for birds and birding?" Paula Webster said. "And look around you... everyone is young, keen and trendy." Again, Paula's words struck a chord. Quite unlike Rutland, for example, the vast majority of attendees were in their thirties at best. The gender ratio was not far off even. The Manizales Feria was a vibrant, forward-looking event packed with keen birders, bird researchers and conservationists. It was inspirational.

Of course, not everyone was Colombian; 25 nationalities were represented. Well-known faces – several featuring among the 30-odd guest speakers – included Tim Appleton, *Neotropical Birding* stalwart and all-round Neotropical guru Tom Schulenberg, Brazilian author Martha Angel,



BirdLife International's Jim Lawrence, and a team from Audubon. Lectures aside, the Manizales Feria included an education symposium and other workshop-type sessions (on photography, nature reserves and communicating nature through art), and a small trade fair.

The latter, in particular, provided a striking contrast to the British Birdwatching Fair. Although the conservation heart of the Rutland event beats stridently, visitors experience something that is far more akin to a trade fair than a cultural extravaganza (whatever the Glastonbury parallel might suggest). Pretty much everyone exhibiting, presenting or participating at Rutland wants to sell you something – whether it is optics or organisational membership, a speaker's latest book or a travel company's most exciting tour. (I mean no disrespect here; I myself fall into three of those categories!) In contrast, the Feria's commercial dimension comprised a couple of dozen trestle tables selling local art, crafts and coffee or promoting Colombian lodges. Again, the focus of this event is unashamedly about sharing a love of birds.

To reflect the Feria's continent-wide name, objectives and aspirations – and arguably demonstrating that the concept has now come of age – responsibility for hosting now moves between South American countries each year. Uruguay will hold the ninth Feria (Punta del Este, 31 October to 5 November 2019). “We are really excited to run it,” says Adrián Stagi Nedelcoff of Aves Uruguay (Birdlife in Uruguay). The timing is propitious. “Punta del Este is best known as a high-summer beach resort and party town. City authorities now want to demonstrate that there are great reasons to visit off-season as well – and we are delighted that wildlife-related tourism, including new birding routes, is part of that.”

As with Manizales, the Punta del Este event will see morning excursions plus longer pre- and post-fair trips. “We want to show off the special birds we have got and are focusing on six in particular,” Adrián explains. The sextet are Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*, Mottled Piculet

*Picumnus nebulosus*, Straight-billed Reedhaunter *Limnoides rectirostris*, Crested Black-Tyrant *Knipolegus lophotes*, and the globally threatened pair of Saffron-cowled Blackbird *Xanthopsar flavus* and Yellow Cardinal *Gubernatrix cristata*. Fancy it...?

And what about 2020? “Every year,” said Horatio Matarasso in the concluding session at Manizales, “Feria attendees agree which country will host the next-but-one event.” The Manizales audience endorsed an offer from Cuzco, Peru, to host the Fair in 2020. Candidates for 2021 are Suriname (which was on the shortlist for 2020) and a town well known to Neotropical birders – Mindo in Ecuador. But that's the future. Back in the present, Matarasso signs off the VIII Feria de Aves de Sudamérica: “This has been a fantastic feria with incredible participants. *Viva Colombia y viva Sudamérica!*”

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SOUTH AMERICAN BIRD FAIR  
FERIA DE AVES DE SUDAMÉRICA