

# Community lodges and conservation through ecotourism: a new birding approach for Bolivia

**Bennett Hennessey**

The recent establishment of several ecotourism lodges is opening up Bolivia to birders, making it easier to see sought-after species at fantastic sites. This article treats us to the avian highlights at these lodges as part of a suggested first trip to this exciting country.

**B**olivia's bird diversity is one of the highest in the world with c.1,400 species recorded, an extraordinary total for a land-locked country. Bolivia's 15 endemics are complemented by more than 100 restricted-range or specialised species that birders can realistically encounter only in Bolivia.

In this article, I aim to offer an overview of a birding route in Bolivia that takes advantage of the country's recently established, fantastic new ecolodges, and that best targets the avian specialities that a birder is least likely to see in neighbouring countries. The suggestions I offer are derived from years of work by Lawrence Rubey and myself in compiling an internet-based guide to birding in Bolivia, located at [www.birdbolivia.com](http://www.birdbolivia.com). Using this resource in conjunction with a general travel guide, such as that published by Lonely Planet<sup>1</sup>, gives birders the detailed access information necessary to independently visit each site mentioned.

## Bolivia's birding highlights

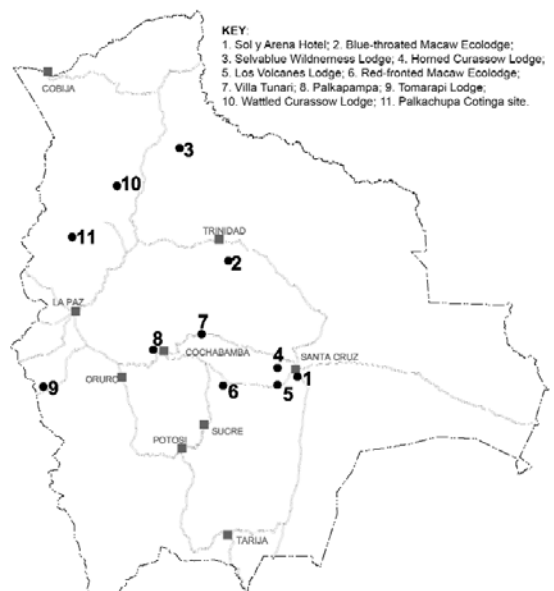
At the heart of any birding trip to Bolivia are two 'must-see' endemic psittacids: the Blue-throated Macaw *Ara glaucogularis* (Critically Endangered) of the Beni savanna and the Red-fronted Macaw *Ara rubrogenys* (Endangered) of the Andean dry valleys. These birds inhabit unique Bolivian habitats that should form focal points of any visit.

## Start in the eastern lowlands

I suggest arriving at Santa Cruz international airport in the tropical lowlands to avoid the need for abrupt adjustment to the altitude of Bolivia's other international airport at La Paz, which lies at 4,000 m. From Santa Cruz airport you can arrange a 4WD transfer to Sol y Arena cabins (US\$50 for a

double room; on-site restaurant), which are located within the savanna, dry forests and marshlands of Lomas de Arena Regional Park. The Bird Conservation Centre of Asociación Armonía, BirdLife International in Bolivia, lies shortly before the park entrance. Feel free to drop in to review your birding plans and Armonía's bird conservation programmes, use our bird library, purchase merchandise from the shop or perhaps support Armonía's bird conservation efforts by becoming a member. (If you wish to visit, it's best to e-mail [armonia@armonia-bo.org](mailto:armonia@armonia-bo.org) in advance.)

The 170 bird species known from Lomas de Arena include Red-legged Seriema *Cariama cristata*, six species of parrots, Toco Toucan *Ramphastos toco* and Bolivian Slaty Antshrike



Map of Bolivia showing sites mentioned in the text

*Thamnophilus sticturus*. Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*, a boreal migrant, is the park's commonest bird in January. The Sol y Arena cabins are surrounded by sandy grassy hills and adjacent to lagunas. The cabin managers can drive birders ten minutes to the ecological trail and Armonía's feeder blind. All in all, Lomas de Arena provides a great way to rest up after a long flight and to whet the appetite for the birding delights ahead.

## The Beni savannas: Blue-throated Macaw Lodge

From Santa Cruz head north to the city of Trinidad, either by an inexpensive domestic flight or a comfortable, overnight *cama bus* (sleeper). Trinidad lies in the Beni savannas, a mosaic of habitats (supporting 600 bird species) mainly comprising seasonally flooded savanna, but also influenced by adjacent ecosystems such as *cerrado*, *chaco*, dry forest and rainforest, all of which have been little affected by cattle-ranching. From Trinidad, I suggest taking a taxi just 1 km south of the city, on the road towards the town of Loreto. Get off at the first 90° bend in the road, before the lake. Here Chestnut-fronted Macaws *Ara severa* and Golden-collared Macaws *A. auricollis* can be seen flying around, and marsh birds present include Scarlet-headed Blackbird *Amblyramphus holosericeus* and Velvet-fronted Grackle *Lamprosar tanagrinus* of the subspecies *boliviensis*, endemic to Beni.

As part of the Asociación Armonía/Loro Parque Fundación Blue-throated Macaw conservation programme, the Blue-throated Macaw Lodge will open in 2009 within a new

reserve (US\$90 pp, full board). The reserve has more than 300 species, including Blue-throated Macaws breeding in nestboxes. Proceeds from the lodge go directly to the conservation programme and reserve. To visit this spectacular site before the lodge is ready, please contact Armonía or [www.birdbolivia.com](http://www.birdbolivia.com). In addition to the big macaw, birders can see Blue-and-yellow Macaw *Ara ararauna*, Peach-fronted Parakeet *Aratinga aurea*, Orange-winged Parrot *Amazona amazonica* and seven other parrots.

The Beni savannas are a photographer's dream, teeming with confiding birds in open habitats. Typical savanna birds such as Crane Hawk *Geranospiza caerulescens*, Laughing Falcon *Herpetotheres cachinnans*, Toco Toucan *Ramphastos tucanus* and Great Rufous Woodcreeper *Xiphocolaptes major* can be enjoyed at close range. The c.100 species that you might expect to see in a day also include Greater Rhea *Rhea americana* (Near Threatened), Jabiru *Jabiru myceteria* and Orinoco Goose *Neochen jubara*



Often considered the most beautiful of macaws, the Red-fronted Macaws *Ara rubrogenys* put on a spectacular show at the ecolodge bearing its name (Mileniusz Spanowicz/Asociación Armonía)



Blue-throated Macaw *Ara glaucogularis* have readily taken to the artificial nest cavities installed by the Asociación Armonía/Loro Parque Fundación conservation programme (Wendy Craig; [www.wendysparrots.com](http://www.wendysparrots.com))

(Near Threatened) as well as large numbers of austral migrants escaping the winter cold in southern South America.

In the dry forest around the lodge itself, make sure you look for Plain Softtail *Thripophaga f. fusciceps*, Velvet-fronted Grackle of the race *boliviensis* and Rufous-crowned Greenlet *Hylophilus poicilotis*: all relate to taxa endemic to Beni that will be elevated to species level with enough research. Finally, keep an eye out for Unicolored Thrush *Turdus haplochrous*, a Near Threatened Bolivian endemic recorded at a few localities in south-east Beni and western Santa Cruz. Mainly known from historical specimens, the thrush has become impossible to find in life. Remarkably for a *Turdus*, its voice remains unknown.

### **Cerrado specialities: Selvablue Wilderness Lodge**

From Trinidad, I suggest a trip to the Bolivian *cerrado* in northern Beni, based at the Selvablue Wilderness Lodge and reserve system (US\$90 pp full board, including local transport; Cessna flight US\$900 return for up to five people). Selvablue offers a variety of trails through savanna, *cerrado*,



Black-masked Finch *Coryphaspiza melanotis* is one of several threatened savanna species that will benefit from the new 2,800-ha Blue-throated Macaw reserve in Beni (Bennett Hennessey/Asociación Armonía)



This Jabiru *Jabiru mycteria* (with a Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus* in the foreground) is one of an awe-inspiring number of austral migrants that concentrate in the Beni savannas from May–September (Cristina Rabadán)



Hooded Mountain Toucan *Andigena cucullata* can be difficult to find; try the Yungas cloud forest at c.3,000 m around Chaparé (Joseph Tobias; [www.neomorphus.com](http://www.neomorphus.com))



White-bellied Woodstar *Chaetocercus mulsant* is one of the many attractive birds possible at the Los Volcanes Lodge (Ross MacLeod)

dry forest and gallery forest, two blinds, use of a 4WD and motor boats, small river routes, crystal-clear water that is great for swimming and snorkelling, and a Blue-and-yellow Macaw observation platform.

As Brazil's *cerrado* falls under the plough, Bolivia's relatively intact habitat becomes increasingly important. It holds biome-restricted species such as Yellow-faced Parrot *Salvatoria xanthops* (Near Threatened and very rare), Horned Sunbeam *Heliactin bilopha*, Ocellated Crake *Micropygia schomburgkii*, Rufous-sided Pygmy Tyrant *Euscarthmus rufomarginatus* (Near Threatened), Sharp-tailed Tyrant *Culicivora caudacuta* (Vulnerable), Coal-crested Finch *Charitospiza eucosoma*, Black-masked Finch *Coryphaspiza melanotis* (Vulnerable) and Black-throated Saltator *Saltator atricollis*. Most of these will be seen during a day's birding, and a good site for both tyrants is 4 km from the lodge on the main road to the cattle ranch; it is worth learning the song of the Pygmy Tyrant.

## The Andes: Horned Curassow Lodge

Returning to Santa Cruz enables visiting birders to begin their acquaintance with the Bolivian Andes. One option is to visit the Horned Curassow Lodge (US\$40 pp, full board) in the north of Amboró National Park, five hours drive north of Santa Cruz on the newly paved road to Cochabamba. This rustic community-operated lodge nestles at the edge of a remaining tongue of Amazonian rainforest abutting foothill forest preferred by Horned Curassow *Pauxi unicornis* (Endangered). Recent research, to be published, will show the Bolivian population of the curassow to merit full species rank; this new endemic should probably be classified as Critically Endangered. Proceeds from the lodge go to the local community as an incentive to protect Horned Curassow habitat. That the lodge exists at all demonstrates that things have progressed considerably since Tobias & del Hoyo<sup>6</sup> drew NBC members' attention—two years ago, in the first issue of *Neotropical Birding*—to the possibilities of seeing this cracid here.

The lodge has trails through the tall forest and foothills, climbing to a viewpoint over the forest. Local guides can escort you to the Oilbird trail where the curassow (called *pilisto* in Bolivia) has been most frequently seen. This is also a good spot for rainforest species such as Razor-billed Curassow *Mitu tuberosa*, Red-and-green Macaw

*Ara chloroptera*, Channel-billed Toucan *Ramphastos vitellinus*, White-throated Toucan *R. tucanus*, Upland Antshrike *Thamnophilus aroyae*, Southern Chestnut-tailed Antbird *Myrmeciza hemimelaena* and Ringed Antpiper *Corythopis torquata*.

## The low Andes: Los Volcanes Lodge

Once back in Santa Cruz you can start ascending the Tucuman (southern) side of the Andes. This mountain chain extends east like an elbow, pointing towards Santa Cruz city. The tip of this 'elbow' would seem to have the potential to be an important boreal migrant bottleneck, worthy of research. North of the 'elbow' is wetter than south, where the sites below are situated.

At 1,000 m elevation, more than 300 species have been recorded at the well-equipped Los Volcanes Lodge (US\$80 pp, full board); there are no actual volcanoes, just sandstone cliff lookalikes. Los Volcanes possesses a breathtaking setting amidst lush green tropical forest surrounded by monumental sandstone pillars. Eight trails of different lengths and two viewpoints access and overlook dry and humid foothill forest.

The target here is Bolivian Recurvebill *Simoxenops striatus*, a Near Threatened species rediscovered in 1989 (see *Neotropical Birding* 2: 7). It really helps to know the song of this understory skulker, which is most frequently found along the Amboró trail between the viewpoint and the river crossing: early mornings are best in the moist river valleys. Other species to look for include Military Macaw *Ara militaris* (Vulnerable; commonest from November–February), Rufescent Screech Owl *Otus ingens*, Subtropical Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium parkeri*, Short-tailed Antthrush *Chamaeza campanisona*, Bolivian Tapaculo *Scytalopus bolivianus*, Green-throated Tanager *Tangara argyrofenges*, White-winged Tanager *Piranga leucoptera*, Slate-colored Seedeater *Sporophila schistacea* and Dusky-green Oropendola *Psarocolius atrovirens*.

## The mid-altitude Andes: Red-fronted Macaw Ecolodge

Higher in the Andes lies the Armonía-supported Red-fronted Macaw Ecolodge (US\$70 pp, full board). The private reserve here protects one of the most important breeding populations of this Endangered endemic. The lodge is at the town of

Perrereta along the dirt road from Santa Cruz to Sucre, 40 km beyond Saipina; access is by 4WD. All proceeds from the lodge go to the local community and reserve management.

A trail leads from the lodge along and up a cliff to a fantastic viewpoint. The cliff and the riverside vegetation are the key areas for birding in this arid region. In addition to Red-fronted Macaws, the target birds are two endemics, Cliff Parakeet *Myiopsitta luchi* and Bolivian Blackbird *Oreopsar bolivianus*, which are relatively easy to see. The trio are present year-round, although activity is greatest during the breeding season (December–April). The site bird list of 130 species includes five additional parrots and Andean Condor *Vultur gryphus* (Near Threatened).

## An altitudinal gradient in the Andes: Yungas around Cochabamba

The next altitudinal step is to Cochabamba, which leads to the Yungas (moist cloud forest) of Chaparé. I suggest birding along the only paved road twisting down through the Yungas from Cochabamba to Villa Tunari, stopping at specific altitudes to search for the endemic Black-throated Thistletail *Schizoeaca harteri* (found around the pass at 3,500 m), and, lower down (3,000 m), for Hooded Mountain Toucan *Andigena cucullata*, Black-winged Parrot *Hapalopsittaca melanotis* and Torrent Duck *Merganetta armata*.

This area is worth a few days and could add 200 species to your trip list. At the lower end of the road is the town of Villa Tunari, set in humid rainforest and the perfect spot to establish a base. There are several decent accommodation options here including Hotel Los Tucanes (US\$80 double, bed and breakfast; on-site restaurant). The hotel can arrange a day trip to a 20 m-high, riverside *kolpa* (salt lick) within Carrasco National Park, where you can watch Blue-and-yellow, Chestnut-fronted and Red-and-green Macaws. After a freshwater fish lunch, you might make the most of the 'dead' time during the afternoon heat by visiting an Oilbird *Steatornis caripensis* cave at the park entrance before finishing at a well-known lek of Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruviana* on the road to El Palmar.

While in Cochabamba, do not pass up the chance to try for Cochabamba Mountain Finch *Poospiza garleppi* (Endangered and endemic) in the threatened *Polylepis* forests. Armonía is working to develop bird tourism trails and infrastructure in the Palkapampa community

## PREPARING FOR YOUR TRIP

At present, no single field guide covers the entirety of Bolivia's birdlife. However, by early 2009 Asociación Armonía will have published the first instalment (Bolivian Yungas) of a three-part field guide, and at least one pan-Bolivia book is in gestation. Until then, the cheapest and most lightweight solution is to combine two guides<sup>4,5</sup>. For forest birds, in particular, knowledge of vocalisations is important, and the best available resources are Sjoerd Mayer's *Birds of Bolivia* CD-ROM<sup>3</sup> and the free downloads on the website [www.xeno-canto.org](http://www.xeno-canto.org) (for which see the article on pp 17–23). In the future, birders will also be able to use a MP3 CD being produced by Armonía. Currently, all Bolivian lodges permit playback; if birders use this tool responsibly and considerately, we should be able to avoid the lodges imposing restrictions on its usage.

### Making reservations

Many of the lodges in this article are new, remote and are not resourced to accept reservations by e-mail or telephone calls in English. The same is true of national airlines. For the smoothest passage, I recommend that you contact a Bolivian travel agency that can deal with enquiries in English and make reservations on your behalf. Most of the lodges are very comfortable, a few rustic, but none is luxurious or priced as such. You can also make reservations for the Red-fronted Macaw Ecolodge through Armonía.

where this species is regularly seen. For further details, check [www.birdbolivia.com](http://www.birdbolivia.com) or e-mail [armonia@armonia-bo.org](mailto:armonia@armonia-bo.org). It is best to day-trip Palkapampa from the city of Cochabamba, a two-hour drive away. Other species here include Maquis Canastero *Asthenes heterura*, Red-crested Cotinga *Ampelion rubrocristatus*, Rufous-bellied Saltator *Saltator rufiventris* (Near Threatened), Giant Conebill *Oreomanes fraseri* (Near Threatened), Carbonated Flowerpiercer *Diglossa carbonaria* and Brown-capped Whitestart *Myioborus bruniceps*.

## The high Andes: Tomarapi Lodge

By now your body should have increased its red blood cell count sufficiently for you to bird the Bolivian highlands without fear of altitude sickness. Following a domestic flight or overnight bus journey to the city of La Paz, I suggest renting a 4WD for the five-hour drive along the road to Arica, Chile, to the spectacular Sajama National Park in Oruro department. (There is no direct bus

from La Paz, although transportation is possible with local assistance and a guide book.) The pleasant Tomarapi Lodge (US\$80 for a double, bed and breakfast; on-site restaurant) makes a good base from which to explore the vast expanse of high-Andean grassland dotted with wetlands and surrounded by snow-capped mountains.

Sajama has a great selection of classic high-Andean birds, with the delightful Diademed Plover *Phegornis mitchellii* (Near Threatened) frequently seen around moist hills. Other birds on the doorstep of Tomarapi include the montane subspecies *tarapacensis* of Lesser Rhea *Pterocnemia pennata* (Near Threatened), Giant Coot *Fulica gigantea*, Andean Avocet *Recurvirostra andina*, Andean Snipe *Gallinago jamesoni*, Gray-breasted Seedsnipe *Thinocorus orbignyianus*, Andean Hillstar *Oreotrochilus estella* and Ochre-naped Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola flavinucha*. From June to September there is a good chance of all three Andean species of flamingo at the waterbodies, including the Vulnerable Andean Flamingo *Phoenicoparrus andinus*.

From Sajama, returning to the city of La Paz enables you to day-trip Lake Titicaca, giving you an opportunity to see the eponymous, flightless and rapidly declining Titicaca Grebe *Rollandia microptera* (Endangered). Airlines usually allow passengers who arrived on international flights to Santa Cruz to leave from La Paz without extra charge, so there should be no need to retrace your steps to Santa Cruz.

## Other possibilities

Of the many possible side-trips that could be added to this itinerary, one stands out if you do



The unique Diademed Plover *Phegornis mitchellii* is a highlight of a trip to Sajama National Park in the high Andes (Pablo Caceres)

not mind a good hike when the reward is a terrific bird. Wattled Curassow *Crax globulosa* (Vulnerable) can be seen near the town of Rurrenabaque (a domestic flight from Santa Cruz, Trinidad or La Paz). In the two years since Tobias & del Hoyo<sup>6</sup> reported on the area in *Neotropical Birding* 1, the **Wattled Curassow Lodge** (US\$70 pp for full board and local transport) has been created as part of the Armonía Wattled Curassow programme. Ecotourism proceeds protect the new indigenous reserve of the San Marcos community. From the lodge it is a day-long hike through tropical forest to the narrow río Negro to reach the last refuge of the Wattled Curassow in Bolivia. Once you are at the river, the curassow is guaranteed.

For the even more adventurous birder (prepared for an 18-hour road trip, for starters), the Palkachupa Cotinga *Phibalura boliviana* clings to survival in its last stronghold<sup>2</sup>, the remaining forest fragments around **Apolo**, near the town of Atén. This gorgeous creature is Critically Endangered and endemic to Bolivia.

Bolivia is still developing tourism infrastructure in many areas, such as **Madidi National Park**, the **Bolivian Pantanal** and the



A testament to the scarcity of the Wattled Curassow *Crax globulosa* is that the first sound-recordings and (blurry) photographs of wild birds were obtained (by the author) as recently as 2001 (Mileniusz Spanowicz/Asociación Armonía)

**Chaco forest**, as well as rehabilitating old structures in **Noel Kempff National Park**. In a country with such high biodiversity, it is impossible to see everything in a single visit, but this suggested trip outline should whet your appetite and give you ample incentive to return.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Lawrence Ruby for planting the seed of a bird-finding guide and to Asociación Armonía staff and the many bird conservation supporters who are making this possible. Oswaldo Maillard kindly provided the map. I appreciate comments on an earlier draft made by Susan Davis and Lawrence Ruby. I thank Juan Carlos Atienza, Pablo Caceres, Wendy Craig, Ross MacLeod, Cristina Rabadán, Mileniusz Spanowicz and Joseph Tobias for the photographs that accompany this article.

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Asociación Armonía is trying to develop a land protection project before fire and removal of trees for fuel cause the destruction of the last remaining forest fragments inhabited by the Palkachupa Cotinga *Phibalura boliviana* (Juan Carlos Atienza/Asociación Armonía)