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Capital Birding: Quito

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In the second instalment of our series on birding in and around major Neotropical cities, a leading Ecuadorian birder describes the avian delights that greet visitors to Quito, among them a spectacular array of hummingbirds and tanagers.

A nesting female Lyre-tailed Nightjar *Uropsalis lyra*: this fantastic bird occurs along the Ecoruta El Paseo del Quinde and in the Cordillera de Guacamayos (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

San Francisco de Quito, the capital of Ecuador, is an amazing spot to start your travels through the avian wonders of the tropical Andes. Located in the middle of the world at latitude 0° and on the eastern slope of the mighty Pichincha volcano, Quito is surrounded by such varied habitats that, in a single day, you can have breakfast while birding in dry thorn scrub forests, then lunch at evergreen mountain forests where mixed flocks provide scintillating action, and spend the afternoon at highland *páramos* covered by wet grasslands.

Quito and its environs offer a variety of good accommodation catering for all budgets—from hotels in the vibrant centre to lodges where you wake with the dawn chorus. Transportation is inexpensive; the public system includes urban and provincial buses, a trolleybus line and two bus rapid-transit routes. Taxis provide a good option for a day trip, and, if you want complete flexibility, car hire is available (although a bit pricey). In this article, I provide an overview of some of the best

birding areas in and around Quito, so that when you (next) visit, you might understand why the city is nicknamed the 'little face of God.'

Quito's urban parks

(Within the city, 5–10 minutes by taxi from most city hotels.)

Quito has three urban parks worth birding. Common inhabitants include Eared Dove *Zenaida auriculata*, Sparkling Violetear *Colibri coruscans*, Black-tailed Trainbearer *Lesbia victoriae*, Great Thrush *Turdus fuscater*, Black Flowerpiercer *Diglossa humeralis*, Cinereous Conebill *Conirostrum cinereum*, Rufous-collared Sparrow *Zonotrichia capensis*, Golden-bellied Grosbeak *Pheucticus chrysogaster*, Hooded Siskin *Carduelis magellanica*, Fawn-breasted Tanager *Pipraeidea melanonota*, Blue-and-yellow Tanager *Thraupis bonariensis* and Band-tailed Seedeater *Catamenia analis*. In open areas with scattered trees, look for



Top to bottom:

Map of Quito showing location of featured sites

The last remaining population of Black-faced Ibis *Theristicus melanopis* in Ecuador is restricted to the páramo peat bogs and wet grasslands of Antisana (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

Limpiopungo lagoon gives birders the best chance of seeing the elusive Noble Snipe *Gallinago nobilis* (Barry Wright)

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*, Vermilion Flycatcher *Pyrocephalus rubinus* and Smoke-colored Pewee *Contopus fumigatus*. From October–March, it is worth searching for Nearctic migrants such as Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, Swainson’s Thrush *Catharus ustulatus*, Blackburnian Warbler *Dendroica fusca*, Rose-breasted Grosbeak *Pheucticus ludovicianus*, Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus* and Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*.

Parque La Carolina is located in the heart of Quito’s business district and the Jardín Botánico de Quito is its oasis, offering a fine, neatly laid-out sample of Andean habitats. Access is from the Avenida de los Shyris side of the park, through the narrow Calle Rumipamba that enters the park opposite Avenida República de El Salvador. The Jardín Botánico is open daily from 09h00–16h30;



La Carolina is open 24 hours but should be visited only during daylight.

Parque Itchimbía is located next to the colonial centre of Quito, a UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Site. Native Andean vegetation and small ponds provide good birding habitat. To reach the park, take a bus marked 'El Dorado' or any bus that drops you at the junction of Avenidas 10 de Agosto and Gran Colombia, from where it is an uphill walk along Calle Antonio Elizalde and then to the main entrance on Calle José Aguirre. The park is open daily from 06h00–18h00.

At 5.7 km², **Parque Metropolitano de Quito** (open daily from 06h00–18h00) is the largest urban park in South America. Of its two entrances, the better birding areas are accessed via the main one on the west side at Calle Guanguiltagua. If travelling by bus, get off at Estadio Olímpico Atahualpa, walk uphill along Calle Manuel M. Sánchez, cross Avenida Eloy Alfaro and continue uphill for two blocks to Calle Guanguiltagua. It is a 10-minute walk to a beautiful ravine called Quebrada Ashintaco which is adjacent to the first car park and full of native Andean vegetation. Here there is a good chance of Tyrian Metaltail *Metallura tyrianthina*, White-bellied Woodstar *Chetocercus mulsant*, Shining Sunbeam *Aglaeactis cupripennis*, Tufted Tit-Tyrant *Anairetes parulus*, Crimson-mantled Woodpecker *Colaptes rivolii* and Streak-throated Bush Tyrant *Myiotheretes striaticollis*. The adjacent Jardín de los Colibríes (hummingbird garden), established by Aves&Conservación (BirdLife in Ecuador), offers good viewing and photographic opportunities.

Western Andean forests

(Ecoruta El Paseo del Quinde starts in the outskirts of Quito and runs for c.50 km, depending on entry and exit points; road condition is generally good, but a 4WD is recommended during the winter.)

The **El Paseo del Quinde 'ecoroute'** is a hotspot for any birder, giving opportunities to see more than 450 species! In an altitudinal gradient of c.2,000 m, the route provides easy access to five different ecosystems: inter-Andean valleys, páramo, montane forest, cloud forest, and subtropical forest. It has two main access points (see map on p. 41). Entry point A starts c.6 km north from Centro Comercial El Bosque, on Avenida Occidental, where the 'old Nono road' starts, and continues through the towns of Rundupamba, Alambí, Tandayapa, Santa Rosa and

ORGANISING YOUR TIME IN QUITO

Few hours available: go to one of the urban parks.

Half-day available: try a section of the ecoroute, e.g., Quito–Nono–Alambí (access route A) or Quito–San Antonio de Pichincha–Calacalí (access route B).

Alternatively, make an early start and head straight for Yanacocha, Pululahua, Tandayapa, Paschocha or even Cotopaxi.

One full day: four good options present themselves.

First, visit Paschocha and Cotopaxi. Second, go to the Reserva Ecológica Antisana, walk along La Ovejera and around La Mica. Third, explore the entire Papallacta region, including páramos and the lagoon, then continue 11 km beyond the town to Guango Lodge. Fourth, make an early morning start on the ecoroute, entering at point A. At km 15 explore either: (a) cloud forests and inter-Andean valleys (in which case, head towards Nono–La Merced de Nono–Calacalí–San Antonio de Pichincha and return to Quito) or (b) cloud forests and subtropical forests (in which case, head towards Alambí–La Sierra–Tandayapa–Santa Rosa–San Tadeo and return to Quito via the Nanegalito–Calacalí highway).

One-and-a-half days available: One option is to spend a full day in the ecoroute; on the first day explore the montane areas, including Yanacocha. Overnight at one of several reserves and lodges in the Tandayapa valley, and spend the next morning on the subtropical zone on your way back to Quito. Another option is to go to the Papallacta region, explore the páramos and highland forests during the morning and head towards the forests on the Cordillera de Guacamayos, exploring and sleeping at either Guango or San Isidro.

San Tadeo. Entry point B starts at the Quito–San Antonio de Pichincha–Calacalí road; at km 26 turn left onto the Nono–Alambi road. The entire route is clearly marked with blue signs, and an excellent guide can be obtained from Mindo Cloudforest Foundation. Roadside birding is uniformly excellent since the road crosses high-quality forests, particularly beyond Nono. Nevertheless, it is worth indicating some key birding areas.

If starting the route at point B, the scrub between the towns of Pomasqui, San Antonio de Pichincha and Calacalí (especially that in the **Reserva Geobotánica Pululahua**) is excellent for Common Ground Dove *Columbina passerina*, Giant Hummingbird *Patagona gigas*, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird *Amazilia tzacatl*, Golden-rumped

Euphonia *Euphonia cyanocephala*, Scrub Tanager *Tangara vitriolina* and Streaked Saltator *Saltator striatipictus*. If starting at point A, listen for the unmistakable calls of Azara's Spinetail *Synallaxis azarae*, Chestnut-crowned Antpitta *Grallaria ruficapilla* and Blackish Tapaculo *Scytalopus latrans* in the first few kilometres, although you will need a little searching to see them. Hosteria San Jorge provides good accommodation and access to excellent woodland trails where you may find several high-Andean birds including the gorgeous Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager *Anisognathus igniventris*.

At km 8.7 there is a turnoff towards **Reserva Yanacocha**, home to Quito's emblematic bird, Black-breasted Puffleg *Eriocnemis nigrivestis*. Seeing this Critically Endangered hummingbird is challenging but feeder stations provide the best chance. Birding at Yanacocha starts along the entrance road ascending to the guard station, but the reserve has hiking trails that provide excellent birding amidst pristine elfin forests dominated by *Polylepis* trees. Of the 20 or so hummingbird species at Yanacocha, several stand out: the amazing Sword-billed Hummingbird *Ensifera ensifera*, Great Sapphirewing *Pterophanes cyanopterus*, Mountain Velvetbreast *Lafresnaya lafresnayi*, Sapphire-vented Puffleg *Eriocnemis luciani*, Golden-breasted Puffleg *Eriocnemis mosquera*, Purple-backed Thornbill *Ramphomicron microrynchum*, Rainbow-bearded Thornbill *Chalcostigma herrani* and Buff-winged Starfrontlet *Coeligena lutetiae*. Yanacocha's trails are also excellent for Imperial Snipe *Gallinago imperialis* (Near Threatened; best looked for at dusk feeding near the treeline or in noisy display overhead), Black-chested Mountain Tanager *Buthraupis eximia* (search for small groups around the treeline) and the localised Giant Conebill *Oreomanes fraseri* (Near Threatened) in dense tracts of *Polylepis*.

Beyond Nono, on the roads to **Tandayapa and San Tadeo** (access route A) or towards **La Merced de Nono** (access route B), keep your eyes peeled for hyperactive and multicoloured mixed flocks. Careful examination may reveal Streaked Tuftedcheek *Pseudocolaptes boissonneautii*, Red-headed Barbet *Eubucco bourcierii*, Beryl-spangled Tanager *Tangara nigroviridis*, Golden Tanager *Tangara arthus*, Flame-faced Tanager *Tangara parzudakii*, Grass-green Tanager *Chlorornis riefferii*, Spectacled Redstart *Myioborus melanocephalus*, Pearled Treerunner *Margarornis squamiger* and Turquoise Jay *Cyanolyca turcosa*. Scrutinise the forest for Andean Guan *Penelope*

montagnii, Andean Pygmy Owl *Glauucidium jardini*, Band-tailed Pigeon *Patagioenas fasciata*, Golden-headed Quetzal *Pharomachrus auriceps*, Masked Trogon *Trogon personatus*, Red-billed Parrot *Pionus sordidus*, Plate-billed Mountain Toucan *Andigena laminirostris* and Toucan Barbet *Semnornis ramphastinus*. Listen for the unmistakable vocalisations of the two last-named species (both Near Threatened), for which recordings can be downloaded from www.xeno-canto.org. Also look for Gorgeted Sunangel *Helianthus strophianus*, Velvet-purple Coronet *Boissonneaua jardini*, Club-winged Manakin *Machaeropterus deliciosus*, Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruvianus* and Rufous-crowned Tody Flycatcher *Poecilatriccus ruficeps*. Be prepared to enjoy hundreds of birds!

Several lodges and reserves around **Nono, Tandayapa and San Tadeo** provide excellent accommodation and birding trails. In particular, I like Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve and Sachatamia Lodge (where there is a lek of the Vulnerable Long-wattled Umbrellabird *Cephalopterus penduliger*). The Tandayapa area, particularly the road between the town and Bellavista, is exceptional for two rare and beautiful species: Tanager Finch *Oreothraupis arremonops* (Vulnerable) and White-faced Nunbird *Haploptila castanea* (which sometimes perches for long periods on low branches along the road). For the riverine duo of Torrent Duck *Merganetta armata* and White-capped Dipper *Cinclus leucocephalus*, check the río Alambi where it crosses the road between Alambi and Tandayapa.

Eastern Andean forests and páramos

(From Quito to: Antisana, 90 km south-east; Pasochoa, 45 km south-east; Cotopaxi, 90 km south; Papallacta, 80 km east; Cuyuja-Baeza area, c.140 km east. Roads are in good condition, but a 4WD is recommended if going beyond Papallacta.)

Among the best sites for highland birds in Ecuador are the montane forests and páramos (Andean peat bogs and wet grasslands intermingled with scrublands, forest patches and wetlands) near Quito. Look to the skies for Andean Condor *Vultur gryphus* (Near Threatened and rare this far north), Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle *Geranoaetus melanoleucus*, Cinereous Harrier *Circus cinereus*, Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* and Variable Hawk *Buteo polyosoma*.



Quito and its environs are fantastic for hummingbirds such as (clockwise from top left): Great Sapphirewing *Pterophanes cyanopterus* (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding), Sword-billed Hummingbird *Ensifera ensifera* (Scott Olmstead/Tropical Birding), Black-breasted Puffleg *Eriocnemis nigrivestis* (Aldo Sornoza) and Ecuadorian Hillstar *Oreotrochilus chimborazo* (Scott Olmstead/Tropical Birding). Yanacocha provides the best chance of seeing Black-breasted Puffleg, which is Critically Endangered.



Left, top to bottom:

Red-headed Barbet *Eubucco bourcierii* is a gorgeous denizen of subtropical forests (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

Found around Papallacta, Masked Mountain Tanager *Buthraupis wetmorei* (Vulnerable) is threatened by habitat destruction and climate change (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding)

Endemic to the west slope of the Andes, the lovely Plate-billed Mountain Toucan *Andigena laminirostris* is a speciality of the Ecoruta El Paseo del Quinde (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

Above, top to bottom:

Blackburnian Warbler *Dendroica fusca* visits Quito every year during the North American winter (Joseph Tobias; www.neomorphus.com)

Scrub Tanager *Tangara vitriolina* is regularly seen in the inter-Andean thorny scrub (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

Tanager Finch *Oreothraupis arremonops* (Vulnerable) is one of the specialities of Tandayapa (Joseph Tobias; www.neomorphus.com)

The *páramos* are excellent for Curve-billed Tinamou *Nothoprocta curvirostris*, Andean Lapwing *Vanellus resplendens*, Black-winged Ground Dove *Metriopelia melanoptera*, Stout-billed Cinclodes *Cinclodes excelsior*, Many-striped Canastero *Asthenes flammulata*, Andean Tit-Spintail *Leptasthenura andicola*, Paramo Pipit *Anthus bogotensis* and Plumbeous Sierra Finch *Phrygilus unicolor*. Seek out Ecuadorian Hillstar *Oreotrochilus chimborazo* at patches of orange *Chuquiragua* flowers. On lagoons look for Andean Teal *Anas andium*, Yellow-billed Pintail *Anas georgica*, Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis*, Slate-colored Coot *Fulica ardesiaca* and Andean Gull *Chroicocephalus serranus*. Between October and April, migratory waterbirds include Sora *Porzana carolina*, Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*, Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* and Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*.

The **Antisana volcano** and its lagoon, La Mica, are part of the Reserva Ecológica Antisana but are mostly private, thus visitor permits must be obtained from the owners of Hacienda Antisana (see *Contact details* box). From Quito, head south-east towards Pintag and take the road to Antisana, presenting your permits at two control points. Before La Mica lies the *páramo* of La Ovejera, home to Ecuador's only colony of Black-faced Ibis *Theristicus melanopis* and a good site for close views of Carunculated Caracara *Phalacrocorax carunculatus*. La Mica holds one of the country's few remaining breeding colonies of Silvery Grebe *Podiceps occipitalis*.

Refugio de Vida Silvestre Pasochoa, located on the slopes of an extinct volcano, preserves one of the last remnants of native inter-Andean montane forest near Quito. Head south from Quito to Tambillo, then take the road to Amaguaña for 5 km before turning right onto the reserve entrance road. With public transport, take a bus to Amaguaña, from where you can either hire a pick-up truck at the town's central park, or continue by bus to El Ejido, from where it is a 6 km walk to Pasochoa. Red-crested Cotinga *Ampelion rubrocristata* and Ocellated Tapaculo *Acropternis orthonyx* are two of the reserve's specialities; the blue, yellow and green trails are best.

South of Pasochoa, **Parque Nacional Cotopaxi** lies on the slopes of the eponymous volcano, the world's highest active volcano. Head south along the Panamericana Sur to reach the main entrance road 25 km south of Machachi. Buses can drop visitors at the park entrance or at Lasso. Pick-up trucks can be hired from Lasso, Latacunga or Machachi. Five km along the

CONTACT DETAILS

Aves&Conservación (*BirdLife in Ecuador*) For general information and guided visits to Parque Metropolitano. Tel: +593 2 2271 800/2249 968; e-mail: alara@avesconservacion.org; www.avesconservacion.org

Tourism websites www.quito.com.ec (Quito) and www.vivecuador.com (Ecuador)

Jardín Botánico de Quito Tel: +593 2 3330 828; e-mail: infofba@jardinbotanicoquito.com; www.jardinbotanicoquito.com

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Mindo Cloudforest Foundation Ask for the guide to reserves, accommodation and food along the Ecoruta El Paseo del Quinde. Tel: + 593 9 3551 949; e-mail: info@mindocloudforest.org; www.mindocloudforest.org

Hosteria San Jorge Tel: +593 2 2247 549; www.hosteriasanjorge.com

Reserva Yanacocha Managed by Fundación de Conservación Jocotoco. Tel: +593 2 2272 013; e-mail: fjocotoco@andinanet.net; www.fjocotoco.org

Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve Tel: +593 2 2116 232; www.bellavistacloudforest.com

Sachatamia Lodge Tel: +593 2 3900 907; www.sachatamia.com

Hacienda Antisana For entry permits, contact Sr. José Delgado. Tel/Fax: +593 2 2435 828/2462 013

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Hosteria La Ciénega Tel: +593 2 2541 337; www.hosterialacienega.com

Termas de Papallacta Tel: +593 2 2568 989; www.papallacta.com.ec

Cabañas San Isidro and Guango Lodge Tel: +593 2 2547 403; http://cabanasanisidro.com

Taxis Central Radio Taxis: +593 2 2500 600; **Teletaxi:** +593 2 2222 222; **American Taxi:** +593 2 2526 000.

entrance road is a small administration centre and museum; from here, it is 6 km to Limpiopungo lagoon. Reedbeds behind Limpiopungo hold Noble Snipe *Gallinago nobilis* and the localised subspecies *aequatorialis* of Virginia (Ecuadorian) Rail *Rallus limicola*. If you want to stay in the area, the splendid 300-year-old Hosteria La

Ciénega is excellent; Subtropical Doradito *Pseudocolopteryx acutipennis* has been recorded in marshy grasslands here and Barn Owl *Tyto alba* is present in the gardens.

The **Papallacta** area is part of the Reserva Ecológica Cayambe–Coca. Head east from Quito to the towns of Papallacta and Baeza; if travelling by bus, get off at La Virgen (Papallacta pass) or at the town of Papallacta (or the adjacent turn-off for Papallacta Hot Springs). From La Virgen, follow the unpaved sideroad north towards the antennae. This is one of the best spots for the Ecuadorian endemic subspecies *latreillii* of Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe *Attagis gayi*. From the Hot Springs, take the road east and walk beyond the reserve guardpost into the Sector Lagunas de Papallacta. In the elfin forests here, search mixed flocks for three rare tanagers: Masked Mountain Tanager *Buthraupis wetmorei* (Vulnerable), Black-backed Bush Tanager *Urothraupis stolzmanni* and Golden-crowned Tanager *Iridosornis rufivertex*. The Mountain Tanager can also be seen near the large lagoon on the highway. An excellent option for accommodation is Termas de Papallacta, a spa-resort with relaxing hot springs.

Continuing east of Papallacta towards the towns of Cuyuja and Baeza leads birders to the **Cordillera de Guacamayos**, which is covered by high montane and cloud forests with more than 350 bird species. This article cannot hope to do full justice to the area's feathered delights, but some of the most interesting species include: Highland Tinamou *Nothocercus bonapartei*, Black-and-chestnut Eagle *Spizaetus isidori* (Near Threatened), Wattled Guan *Aburria aburri* (Near Threatened), Andean Potoo *Nyctibius maculosus*, Black-billed Mountain Toucan *Andigena nigrirostris*, Bicolored Antvireo *Dysithamnus occidentalis* (Vulnerable), Peruvian Antpitta *Grallaricula peruviana* (Near Threatened), Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea* (Vulnerable), Dusky Piha *Lipaugus fuscocinereus* and White-rimmed Brush Finch *Atlapetes leucopis*.

Mixed flocks will keep you busy looking for species such as Streak-capped Treehunter *Thripadectes virgaticeps*, Marble-faced Bristle Tyrant *Phylloscartes ophthalmicus*, Black-chested Fruiteater *Pipreola lubomirskii*, Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonia *Chlorophonia pyrrhophrys*, Golden-collared Honeycreeper *Iridophanes pulcherrimus*, Red-hooded Tanager *Piranga rubriceps*, White-capped Tanager *Sericossypha albocristata* and Scarlet-rumped Cacique *Cacicus uropygialis*. Up to 30 species of hummingbird inhabit the area, and you may find Bronzy Inca *Coeligena coeligena*,

Chestnut-breasted Coronet *Boissonneaua matthewsii*, Gorgeted Woodstar *Chaetocercus heliodor*, Rufous-vented Whitetip *Urosticte ruficrissa*, Violet-fronted Brilliant *Heliodoxa leadbeateri*, Glowing Puffleg *Eriocnemis vestita* and Mountain Avocetbill *Opisthoprora eurypytera*. Staying overnight is a good idea; in my view, two of the best options are Cabañas San Isidro and Guango Lodge.

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