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Finding scarce and gaudy tanagers in the Ecuadorian Chocó

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Few birders can fail to be enthralled by the flocks of tanagers that dazzle their way through Andean forests. Our authors take us off Ecuador's standard birding route in search of nine of the Chocó's most sought-after thraupids.



The most desired gaudy tanager in Ecuador is Purplish-mantled Tanager *Iridosornis porphyrocephala*; this photograph was taken in Colombia (Murray Cooper)



With their colours and forms reminiscent of the surrealist artwork by Joan Miró, tanagers (Thraupidae) are among the most sought-after and astonishing of all Neotropical families. Although some species are readily seen in mixed flocks that cavort through forests, edges and even clearings with scattered trees, others are more retiring and difficult to find, which adds to their allure. Moreover, whilst picturesque thraupids such as Golden Tanager *Tangara arthus*, Beryl-spangled Tanager *T. nigroviridis*, Bay-headed Tanager *T. gyrola* and Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager *Anisognathus igniventris* are widely distributed, other species are confined to small portions of the designated Endemic Bird Areas (EBAs)¹⁰, so seeing them often involves considerable effort.

The famous Chocó EBA extends, roughly, from Pacific Colombia to north-west Ecuador. It houses an impressive 62 endemic bird species, of which 18 are tanagers and allied taxa. Some Chocoan tanagers occur throughout the region, but others are restricted to narrow altitudinal belts along Andean foothills to the subtropics.

Birding the Chocó has become straightforward since the construction of new roads, although such development has detrimental consequences for forest conservation. In Ecuador, the Ibarra–San

Clockwise from top left:

Flame-faced Tanager (Daniel Lebbin) and Blue-winged Mountain Tanager *Anisognathus somptuosus* (Joseph Tobias/www.neomorphus.com) are two of several commoner tanagers that provide a colourful backdrop to the suite of rarer species upon which this article focuses

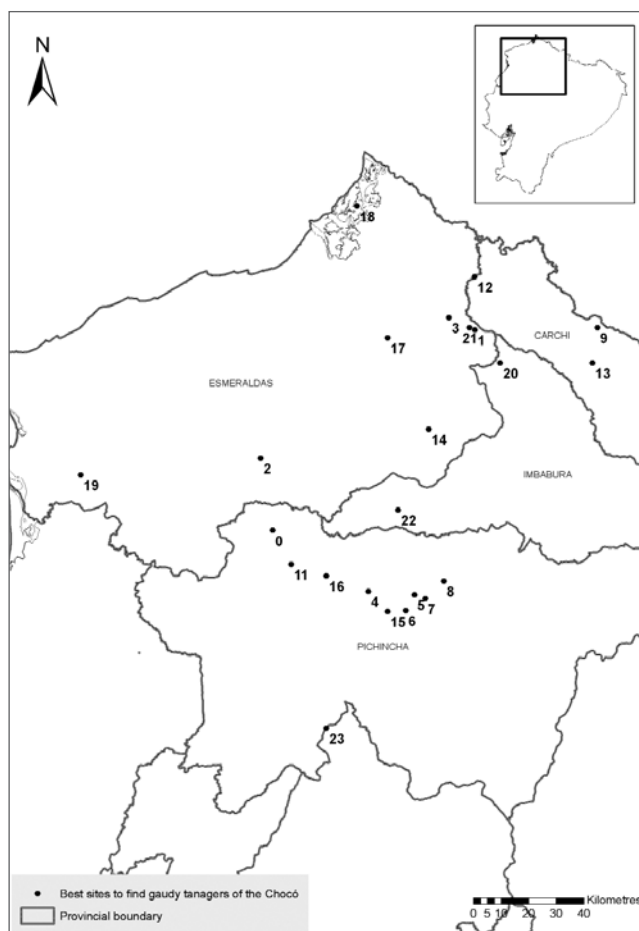
Moss-backed Tanager *Bangsia edwardsi* is found along the Milpe road, including at the Santuario de Aves Milpe (Fundación ProAves)

(Inset) The rare Golden-chested Tanager *Bangsia rothschildi* at its best-known site: Salto del Tigre bridge, Imbabura province (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

The gorgeous Black-chinned Mountain Tanager *Anisognathus notabilis* is fairly common in mossy cloud forests (Murray Cooper)

Lorenzo, Calacalí–La Independencia and Aloag–Santo Domingo main roads provide fairly easy access to Chocó forests, while secondary roads, mule trails, the old railway and navigable rivers enter less-disturbed areas where larger populations of Chocoan birds thrive.

Here, we summarise the best sites in Ecuador for nine sought-after tanagers endemic to the Chocó. We aim to motivate birders to venture off the beaten track to see these target species. Most sites mentioned in the text are shown in the map on p. 50.



Map of northwest Ecuador showing main birding sites mentioned in the text:

0: Salto del Tigre (600–650 m); 1: Siete Cascadas (600–700 m); 2: Reserva Canandé (500–600 m); 3: El Placer (600–700 m); 4: Milpe road (1,000–1,100 m); 5: Ángel Paz (1,800–1,900 m); 6: San Tadeo (1,600–1,700 m); 7: Tandayapa (1,800–2,000 m); 8: Reserva Maquipucuna (1,300–2,800 m); 9: Maldonado (1,800–2,000 m); 11: Santuario de Aves Río Silanche (300–400 m); 12: Reserva Étnica y Forestal Awá (100–2,000 m); 13: Reserva Cerro Golondrinas (1,600–3,000 m); 14: Reserva Ecológica Cotacachi–Cayapas (100–4,900 m); 15: Mindo (1,400–1,600 m); 16: Reserva Mangaloma (500–700 m); 17: Playa de Oro (100–200 m); 18: Reserva Ecológica Cayapas–Mataje (0–50 m); 19: Reserva Ecológica Mache–Chindul (100–600 m); 20: Lita (500–550 m); 21: Finca La Ponderosa (600–650 m); 22: Reserva Los Cedros (1,200–2,700 m); 23: Reserva Otonga (1,300–2,100 m). Reserva Awacachi (50–900 m) is not mapped.

ched, are usually present in fruiting trees along the first section of the trail. It is best not to descend too far as the trail is steep and the uphill return tough going; moreover, the noise of the raging torrent in the gorge drowns out bird vocalisations.

Further south, the recently established Reserva Canandé, owned by the Fundación de Conservación Jocotoco, is worth a try. The Banded Ground Cuckoo trail (formerly known as the Great Green Macaw trail) provides the best opportunity to see Golden-chested Tanager. The trail is

long and fairly steep, so the best strategy is to leave early and resist the temptation to bird too much on the way. Doing otherwise might mean you arrive at the ridge top too late to see the tanager.

Alternatively, bring provisions to enable you to stay all day; in mid-afternoon one might bump into a group of *Bangsia* while descending the ridge.

Foraging in the canopy and upper-middle storey, Golden-chested Tanagers move in small family groups of 3–6 individuals. Groups can be quite vocal, alerting the birder to their presence with a simple, rapid series of buzzy and ascending trills. Although occasionally joining mixed tanager flocks, this *Bangsia* also moves independently, and it is easy to overlook silent pairs.

Moss-backed Tanager *Bangsia edwardsi*

This equally magnificent *Bangsia* is regarded as the speciality of the upper foothills. Although described as numerous in El Placer (Esmeraldas province), the

Golden-chested Tanager *Bangsia rothschildi*

The exceptional Paul Coopmans discovered this magnificent *Bangsia* at Rumiñahui–Salto del Tigre⁹, 140 km from Quito on the border between the provinces of Pichincha and Imbabura. Unfortunately, recent visits have produced few sightings as the forest here has been highly modified.

There is now more chance of seeing this rare tanager farther north. At km 111 on the Ibarra–San Lorenzo road, Reserva–Hostería Siete Cascadas provides good forest in which to search. Once in Siete Cascadas, the main trail along the abandoned Lita–San Lorenzo railway provides the easiest access to appropriate habitat. Regenerating *Cecropia*-dominated patches of secondary forest here provide good habitat for frugivorous tanagers. Another good area is the main trail that descends to the río Mira, where extensive primary forest remains. Many tanagers, including Golden-

majority of recent sightings have been concentrated in Pichincha province. The best places to look are found along the easily accessible Milpe road, at km 91 on the Calacalí–La Independencia main road just before San Miguel de Los Bancos. Although formerly not uncommon in Santuario de Aves Milpe, the species has apparently declined or become seasonal here, perhaps as a result of over-zealous playback by visiting birders.

In Milpe, the best area to try is the trail that leads from the car park to the experimental shade-grown coffee plantation. Look for Moss-backed Tanager amidst the tanager flocks thronging the numerous fruiting *Miconia* and *Cecropia* trees on the forest edge. The species has also sometimes been seen around Mirador 1.

Birders have had good results along the Milpe road where secondary forest reaches the gravel track and at the neighbouring Milpe Gardens and San Jorge de Milpe reserves. Further down the road there is little accessible forest until the dead-end at the río Pachijal gorge. Of the few birders that have ventured this far, some have found Moss-backed. Indeed, any road that provides access to the río Pachijal forests is worth exploring.

Like the congeneric Golden-chested Tanager, Moss-backed Tanagers are usually found from the middle storey upwards. Moss-backed, however, is more challenging to find, as the species is less (or only seasonally?) vocal, tends not to forage in family groups and is more lethargic.

Black-chinned Mountain Tanager *Anisognathus notabilis*

Whilst rarer than the congeneric Blue-winged Mountain Tanager *Anisognathus somptuosus*, the stunning Black-chinned Mountain Tanager is nevertheless readily found only at a few sites, mainly in western Pichincha. A recently discovered ‘stakeout’ is Angel Paz’s already unmissable ‘antpitta farm’, which was the subject of an article in the first issue of *Neotropical Birding*². Visitors normally watch the ‘frugivore theatre performance’ after enjoying the Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruvianus* lek. On good days at the ‘play’, when you may see up to three pairs of Black-chinned Mountain Tanagers hopping towards the bananas that they share with other exciting birds such as Sickie-winged Guan *Chamaepetes goudotii*, Crimson-rumped Toucanet *Aulacorhynchus haematopygus*, Toucan Barbet *Sennornis ramphastinus* (Near Threatened) and Olivaceous Piha *Snowornis cryptolophus*. The best period is probably May–September when there are fewer natural fruits available in the forest.

Black-chinned Mountain Tanager has also been seen on many occasions in tanager flocks along forest edges of the lower stretches of the famous old Nono–Mindó road, near the town of San Tadeo. Another good site is the Reserva Otonga, farther south, which marks the southern limit of the distribution of several Chocó endemics^{1,4}. Black-chinned Mountain Tanager is often found just below the research station, and it also regularly associates with Blue-winged Mountain Tanager at the forest edge or in the canopy throughout the trail network. Look for the duo feeding together in *Miconia* and *Cecropia* trees, and in *Anthurium* epiphytes. Other well-known sites include Mindó Loma (km 73.5 along Calacalí–La Independencia road), the old Tandayapa road and the mid-elevations of Reserva Maquipucuna.

Black-chinned Mountain Tanagers tend to travel in pairs or small groups, often with other tanagers, in the middle or upper storeys. In comparison with Blue-winged Mountain Tanager, Black-chinned is less noisy and conspicuous, tending to skulk more in dense foliage.

Purplish-mantled Tanager *Iridosornis porphyrocephalus*

The mysterious and breathtaking Purplish-mantled Tanager (Near Threatened) is seemingly the most poorly known and most-desired tanager in the Ecuadorian Chocó. During the last decade, hundreds of birders and ornithologists have scoured Chocoan forests for this species, particularly in Pichincha. But aside from a few recent sightings contained in trip reports, the last documented record in Ecuador was some 25 years ago, when Niels Krabbe⁹ found the species on the Maldonado road adjacent to the Colombian border; the area is currently out-of-bounds to visitors as a result of guerrilla activity. A claim⁸ from Parque Nacional Podocarpus in Loja province (well south of the Chocó) surely relates to a misidentification. More intriguing is a currently unconfirmed report (R. W. Paz pers. comm.) from Santuario de Aves Río Silanche on the renowned Pedro Vicente Maldonado road; if confirmed (and the locality is well outside the suggested altitudinal range in Ecuador⁹), this area would merit further attention.

Good places to search are the remote but extensively forested Reserva Étnica y Forestal Awá and the nearby Reserva Cerro Golondrinas in Carchi province, and possibly some remote areas in Reserva Ecológica Cotacachi–Cayapas.



Glistening-green Tanager *Chlorochrysa phoenicotis*

Glistening-green Tanager is not hard to find at a number of sites in Pichincha province, mainly along the Calacalí–La Independencia road. Sites include forest borders along the Milpe road and most reserves within the ‘Estribaciones Occidentales del Volcán Pichincha’ Important Bird Area⁵. Glistening-greens have also titillated birders visiting Mirador Río Blanco (in the outskirts of San Miguel de Los Bancos) where it is one of a number of tanagers attracted to bananas. The Mirador also puts on a great hummingbird show, with up to 10 species in a good morning.

Other sites for Glistening-green Tanager include Reserva Cerro Golondrinas, along a steep trail just after an abandoned pasture and a small stream, and Reserva Santa Lucía in north-west Pichincha (for which see *Neotropical Birding* 37). Here, birders should search just a few metres from the lodge where the trail from the Yunguilla community meets another trail descending to the lower reaches of Reserva Maquipucuna. Until recently, the entrance road to Mindo also offered great opportunities for Glistening-green Tanager (and many other thraupids). However, the recent growth in weekend tourism and associated traffic now complicates roadside birding. Above Mindo, there are a few records of Glistening-green Tanager visiting feeding trays at Sachatamia Lodge and along the lower stretches of the old Nono–Mindo road, specifically at San Tadeo.

Although gaudily plumaged, Glistening-green Tanagers can be easy to miss amidst the bright green leaves of the middle to upper canopy. Indeed, birders are often taken by surprise as one of the jade-coloured ‘leaves’ hops along a branch to grab a small *Miconia* berry. Like its congeners, Glistening-green Tanager has weak calls, and birds are not normally detected on voice.

Blue-whiskered Tanager *Tangara johannae*

This pretty *Tangara* is uncommon in lowland rainforest, but also reaches the Andean foothills. Along the Ibarra–San Lorenzo road in Esmeraldas province, Blue-whiskered Tanager has been seen in secondary forest bordering the Minas Viejas road, just above Alto Tambo. At the headquarters of the Corredor Biológico Sirúa–Awacachi, at km 30 on the Ibarra–San Lorenzo road, the species is seen regularly in forest bordering the entrance road and along the muddy main trail heading towards the river. Alternatively, farther south and in Pichincha province, turn off towards Pachijal at km 104.5 on the Calacalí–La Independencia road. After a few kilometres, a sign marks a new reserve, Mangaloma Chocó. Here, the blue trail ends at a viewpoint where the canopy of many secondary forest trees (e.g. *Miconia*, *Cecropia* and *Ficus*) is at about eye-level. Mixed flocks with lots of tanagers actively foraging here are a good sign that Blue-whiskered may be present.

At km 127 on the Calacalí–La Independencia road is the turn-off for the Pedro Vicente Maldonado road. Regrettably, much of the forest here has been cleared, but a relatively small tract is protected in the Santuario de Aves Río Silanche. The canopy tower is a must for tanager enthusiasts; on good days, the stunning mixed flocks include Blue-whiskered. It is worth checking any noisy group of tanagers that you bump into along the access road or the gentle looping trails.

Blue-whiskered Tanager is not uncommon at Playa de Oro, an area recently reopened for tourism in a relatively remote area of Esmeraldas province. Search mixed tanager flocks on the forest edge, along the first trail entering forest and even directly below the cabins. Other sites with records⁵ of this lovely *Tangara* include Reserva Étnica y Forestal Awá, the Reserva Ecológicas



Left to right:

Though Near Threatened, Blue-whiskered Tanager *Tangara johannae* is regularly seen in mixed tanager flocks at some lowland and foothill sites (Scott Olmstead/Tropical Birding)

Scarlet-breasted Dacnis *Dacnis berlepschi* is one of the rarest and most glamorous members of its genus (José Illanes/Tropical Birding)

The jade-coloured Glistening-green Tanager *Chlorochrysa phoenicotis* is frequently seen in flocks at the forest edge or at feeding stations (Lindsay Dimitri; www.lifenet.org)

The striking Scarlet-and-white Tanager *Chrysothlypis salmوني* inhabits the forest canopy and is most easily seen at Finca La Ponderosa (Juan D. Ramírez)

Cayapas–Mataje and Mache–Chindul, and Reserva Canandé, but we have not been fortunate enough to visit them all.

This *Tangara* mainly inhabits the upper canopy, but may descend to lower levels when accompanying mixed flocks. At such times, it gives better views, particularly when on the forest edge.

Scarlet-breasted Dacnis *Dacnis berlepschi*

The Scarlet-breasted Dacnis is probably the most striking member of its genus. It is also one of the rarest, being classified as Vulnerable. The dazzling male, in particular, is ample reward for hours of neck-breaking scrutiny of the Chocó canopy. Best sites include the headquarters of the Corredor Biológico Sirúa-Awacachi, where it is regular in secondary growth and gardens around the experimental butterfly-farm. Another good site is the Porvenir road, 8 km from the turn off to San Lorenzo, along the Costanera main road, from the junction driving south towards Esmeraldas city.

Good sites in Pichincha include the canopy tower at Santuario de Aves Río Silanche. At Reserva Mangaloma, look for the dacnis at the viewpoint described in the Blue-whiskered Tanager account. Scarlet-breasted Dacnis is not uncommon at Playa de Oro and is also readily found in canopy flocks at Reserva Canandé. Less accessible sites include Reserva Étnica y Forestal Awá and Reserva Ecológica Cotacachi–Cayapas, while recent sightings at the forest edge along the río Pitzara in Pichincha are encouraging.

Scarlet-breasted Dacnis can be quite vocal, particularly at dawn. Birders wishing to locate this canopy jewel would do well to learn how to distinguish its vocalisations from similar high-pitched short notes given by many tanagers.

Scarlet-and-white Tanager *Chrysothlypis salmوني*

A striking, sexually dichromatic thraupid, the Scarlet-and-white Tanager is among the most wanted of all Chocó endemics. The most accessible site for this feathered ruby is at the clearly signposted Finca La Ponderosa, a small farm with *Tilapia* fishponds just above Alto Tambo in Esmeraldas province. La Ponderosa holds extensive secondary forest dominated by Melastomataceae trees. Scarlet-and-white Tanager is seen regularly in the forest edge around the guardhouse and along a short partially forested trail that leads to a streamside clearing.

In Pichincha, there are old records from the Pedro Vicente Maldonado road. Widespread forest fragmentation here may have caused local extinctions, but there remains a good chance at the Santuario de Aves Río Silanche. Numerous recent records in the forest-edge canopy at the Reserva Mangaloma include a flock of nine birds watched devouring berries of a *Coussapoa* tree.

Scarlet-and-white Tanager has also been found in the río Pachijal, further along the Milpe road. At Playa de Oro, *Chrysothlypis* is fairly common on the forest edge and in clearings with tall trees. It has also been recorded at sites along the Ibarra–San Lorenzo road such as El Placer, Lita and Ventanas¹¹.

A small, slender bird, Scarlet-and-white Tanagers tend to feed in the outer canopy foliage. Listen for males calling from the canopy of tall trees and look for them (and the duller females) in mixed flocks.

Yellow-green Bush Tanager *Chlorospingus flavovirens*

Although dowdy rather than gaudy, the Yellow-green Bush Tanager merits inclusion in this article on account of its rarity. Classified as Vulnerable,

this species is locally fairly common in Colombia (occurring, for example, at the Reservas Naturales El Pangán and Río Nambi³ in Nariño department), but surprisingly rare in Ecuador.

Indeed, the only recent records come from Esmeraldas province, in El Placer⁹. Its presence is suspected at Reserva Étnica y Forestal Awá, and birders might also search for it at Cerro Golondrinas, Los Cedros, Maquipucuna and the large and still rather remote Reserva Ecológica Cotacachi–Cayapas.

In Pichincha, there are recent, undocumented reports from the río Pachijal gorge, accessed from the Milpe road. In the absence of documentary evidence, some argue that these probably relate to misidentifications. We urge further visits to this area, camera and soundrecording equipment in hand, in order to unravel the mystery.

Virtually nothing is known about the ecology of this *Chlorospingus* in Ecuador. In Colombia, it is a noisy denizen of the upper strata, where it moves along mossy and epiphyte-laden branches and limbs⁶.

Conclusion: enjoy these gems!

It is always exciting to see Chocó endemics. While most birders will continue to head to well-known sites, we encourage visitors and locals alike to venture into little-explored areas or to newly established reserves with fledgling bird lists. As new data are gathered on the whereabouts of restricted-range tanagers, we should be able to better understand distributional patterns and seasonal movements. This is particularly pertinent given our suspicion that species such as Purplish-mantled Tanager may expand their range following productive breeding seasons. We should also all pay attention to and record the natural history of Chocó birds, to help conservationists understand and interpret the impacts of forest loss on birds.

Hundreds of journal pages can be filled with observations and assessments of gaudy tanagers. For now, however, we prefer that readers cease digesting our musings. Instead, grab your binoculars and head to the Ecuadorian Chocó to enjoy this rainbow of tanagers with your own eyes!

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