

Birding the Manu Biosphere Reserve, Peru

Barry Walker

Manu has always been close to the Neotropical Bird Club's heart, forming the destination for our first-ever Club tour in 1997. More than a decade on, who better to help us explore the 'new' Manu than the leader of that seminal trip who had already been birding Manu for 15 years—and who will also co-lead the Club's forthcoming tour to Guyana?

Peru stands at the top of many an international birder's agenda. Complex patterns of biogeography and topography have blessed the country with some of the world's greatest avian diversity and density. Approximately 1,700–1,750 bird species are known to occur in Peru; 45% of all Neotropical birds and 18% of the world's avifauna! Only Colombia and Brazil have (slightly) greater avian diversity. Many species new to science have been discovered recently in Peru (including from the Manu region upon which I focus this article), some of which await formal description. Moreover, unlike some other top-ranking Neotropical birding destinations, Peru retains extensive tracts of little-disturbed habitat. Throw into the mix Peru's rich history and culture, and the country becomes unmissable. Little wonder that virtually all well-known bird tour companies have Peru on their menu of birding holidays.



Golden-headed Quetzal
Pharomachrus auriceps is one of the star attractions of Manu's mid-altitude cloud forests (Roger Ahlman; www.pbase.com/ahlman)

Manu Biosphere Reserve

Nowhere is this amazing diversity more evident than in the tropical and temperate forests and associated habitats of the Reserva Biosfera de Manu (hereafter called Manu Biosphere Reserve, the name by which most birders know it) in south-east Peru. A UNESCO World Heritage Site of nearly 1.9 million ha, comprised of the Manu National Park, associated multiple-use zones and native community lands. Manu lies on the east slope of the Andes and protects almost the entire watershed of the río Manu and most tributaries of the río Alto Madre de Dios. The reserve encompasses a vast range of altitudinal zones and habitat types, peaking at more than 4,000 m in the chilly high Andes, and descending to hot, humid lowland Amazonian forests at 350 m. Up to ten types of lowland forest have been identified in this part of the south-west Amazon, and these can be further subdivided into many distinctive microhabitats.

This biological wealth is also evident at the species level. Some 300 species of tree are often crammed into a single hectare of lowland forest. More than 1,300 butterfly species have been recorded in one area of Manu (Pakitzta). During a typical tour, wildlife-watchers encounter at least eight species of primate, enjoy South American

Tapir *Tapirus terrestris* and other mammals by night at clay-licks, bump into a Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* family on an oxbow lake, and frequently see Jaguar *Panthera onca* along rivers.

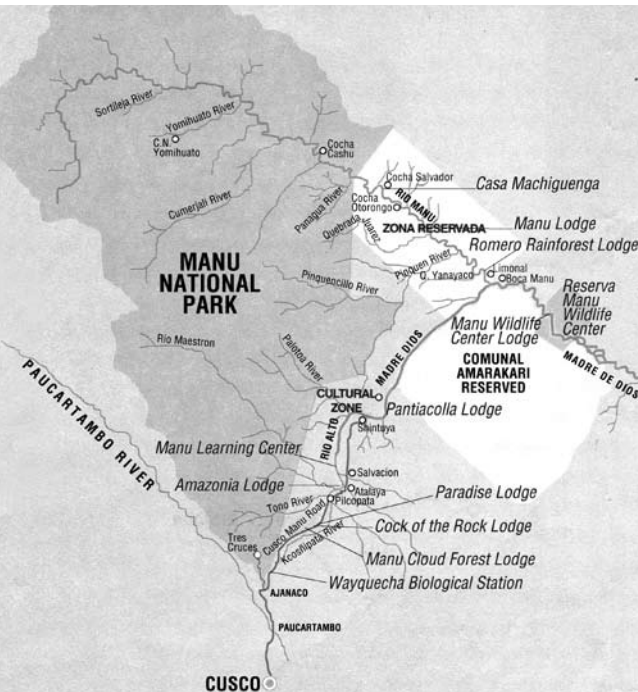
But it is the avian richness that tends to enthrall most visitors to Manu. The total of 1,020 species so far recorded is not only higher than that of any other protected area worldwide but also eclipses that of many entire countries (even favoured birding destinations such as Costa Rica). Moreover, two-thirds of the reserve remain unexplored; many additional bird species and, remarkably, uncontacted indigenous tribes are likely to inhabit these remote areas.

Visiting Manu

Some 5,000 visitors make the trip to Manu each year, roughly 5% being dedicated birders. On a typical 2–3 week trip covering all altitudes, birders accompanied by experienced leaders regularly record 550–650 species. There is something for everyone at Manu. Some birders start early, finish late and ‘bird until they drop’. Others come for a relaxed birding holiday, staying at comfortable lodges, visiting macaw licks (called *collpas*), paddling on oxbow lakes and passing a leisurely morning atop one of the many canopy towers. As access is restricted, almost all visitors come on a tour: only authorised operators can take visitors into Manu National Park and all must be accompanied by an official guide. Granted, almost all Manu bird specialities and much other wildlife can be seen in adjacent areas, but even these are remote, so access is really only feasible as part of a tour or if you are sponsored by a lodge or NGO working in the area.

Highlights of a typical tour

A typical Manu trip starts from Cusco at 3,300 m, crosses the last Andean mountain range, drops down the east slope of the Andes into the lowland Amazon forests, and returns by air from the frontier town of Puerto Maldonado to Lima or Cusco. Cusco is a major hub for exploring Inca culture, most famously at the ruins of Machu Picchu, and for adventure sports (so there is plenty to interest a non-birding spouse!). On the first day of a trip, birders usually visit the wetlands of Huacarpay, 30 minutes drive from Cusco, the ancient Inca capital of Peru, where Andean waterfowl and marshbirds abound. Here the beautiful Bearded Mountaineer *Oreonympha nobilis*, a restricted-range species endemic to southern Peru, can be seen feeding



Map of Manu Biosphere Reserve, showing location of lodges mentioned in the article

on tree tobacco. (For a taster of this splendid hummingbird, see Joe Tobias's photospot in *Neotropical Birding* 2: 83–85.) The endemic Rusty-fronted Canastero *Asthenes ottoni* is also here.

The route then proceeds to the humid eastern Andean slopes where the grasslands at Ajcanacu pass at 3,500 m hold high-altitude tinamous, the recently described Diademed Tapaculo *Scytalopus schulenbergi* and Scribble-tailed Canastero *Asthenes maculicauda* at its northernmost limit. The stunted elfin forest along the roadside hosts several tanagers, flowerpiercers and the restricted-range Puna Thistletail *Schizoeaca helleri*, found nowhere else in the reserve. Ornithologically, this is one of the poorest-known sectors of Manu; additional species are bound to be discovered in due course. Using Wayquecha Biological Station, Esperanza, as a base, you can work the area comfortably.

Descending from 3,400 m to 2,500 m, elfin forest grades into upper elevation humid cloud forest characterised by treeferns and *Chusquea* bamboo stands. The narrow, little-used road provides excellent birding. Highlights include Gray-breasted Mountain Toucan *Andigena hypoglauca* (Near Threatened; relatively common), Swallow-tailed Nightjar *Uropsalis segmentata*, Mountain Cacique *Cacicus chrysonotus*, the stunning Barred Fruiteater *Pipreola arcuata*, the endemic Marcapata Spinetail *Cranioleuca marcapatae* and White-collared Jay *Cyanolyca viridicyana*. To get into the understorey and search for its elusive inhabitants, head to Wayquecha Biological Station. With patience and luck, birders may see the endemic and localised Red-and-white Antpitta *Grallaria erythroleuca*, Undulated Antpitta *Grallaria squamigera* and Hooded Tinamou *Nothocercus nigrocapillus*.

Continuing down the 'Manu road' through unbroken humid forest, visitors will perceive a shift in the bird community with every 500 m drop in altitude. Forests below 1,900 m (and particularly at 900–1,500 m) are home to Peru's national bird, Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruviana*. Manu has to be the easiest place to witness the remarkable lek of this species, one of the world's great ornithological spectacles. Just four minutes' walk from the breakfast table at Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge, a comfortable 20-person hide provides stunning views of this cotinga and offers great photographic opportunities. This is one of Manu's magical moments: to be in the hide as dawn breaks, hear the birds start their manoeuvres and watch proceedings build up to a raucous dancing climax. The lodge also offers a small but interesting trail system.

Mid-altitude cloud forests are under pressure in much of South America, being replaced by tea, coffee and coca plantations. In Manu, however, cloud forests remain intact and birds abound. Birding can be fantastic as large foraging flocks containing several dozen species move through, some sally-gleaning or probing crevices, others climbing tree trunks or branches. Birders should see scores of woodpeckers, woodcreepers, furnariids, tyrant-flycatchers and tanagers. Star species include Golden-headed Quetzal *Pharomachrus auriceps* and Crested Quetzal *P. antisianus*, Blue-banded Toucanet *Aulacorhynchus coeruleicinctis*, Versicolored Barbet *Eubucco versicolor*, Lanceolated Monklet *Micromonacha lanceolata*, Chestnut-breasted Wren *Cyphorhinus thoracicus*, the endemic Cerulean-capped Manakin *Pipra coeruleocapilla*, Slaty Gnateater *Conopophaga ardesiaca* and Peruvian Piedtail *Phlogophilus harterti*, a Near Threatened endemic.

Leaving behind the Andean foothills, the road passes through a populated area between Chontachaca and Pilcopata, a region cultivated since the Inca period. This is Manu's sole area for open-country birds such as Scissor-tailed Nightjar *Hydropsalis torquata* and Yellow Tyrannulet *Capsiempis flaveola*. Moving on, birders soon reach the near-pristine forests of the western Amazon, which have the world's highest diversity of birdlife per hectare of terrestrial habitat. Here the ríos Manu and Alto Madre de Dios meander slowly in a broadly easterly direction and it is time to take to the water in motorised canoes.

In June–October (the dry season), exposed white-sand and pebble beaches provide valuable and undisturbed nest-sites for Orinoco Goose *Neochen jubata* (Near Threatened), Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*, Large-billed Tern *Phaetusa simplex*, Yellow-billed Tern *Sterna superciliaris*, Pied Plover *Hoploxypterus cayanus*, Collared Plover *Charadrius collaris* and Sand-colored Nighthawk *Chordeiles rupestris*. Jabiru *Jabiru mycteria*, Wood Stork *Mycteria americana*, Roseate Spoonbill *Ajaja ajaja* and a variety of egrets and herons also gather on the beaches. In late July and August, they are joined by Nearctic waders on their southbound post-breeding migration.

Due to natural river dynamics, many oxbow lakes have been created. Their development varies considerably from recently formed waterbodies to very old, overgrown lakes with almost no water. On the many oxbows that flank the rivers, look for Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga*, Agami Heron *Agamia agami*, Boat-billed Heron *Cochlearius cochlearius*, Sunbittern *Eurypyga helias*, Sungrebe

Right: The stunning Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruviana* is easily seen lekking at the lodge that bears its name (Ian Merrill)

Along oxbow lakes in Manu, look for (bottom) the unique Hoatzin *Opisthocomus hoazin* (Roger Ahlman; www.pbase.com/ahlman) and (below, inset) delightful Sungrebe *Heliornis fulica* (James C. Lowen; www.pbase.com/james_lowen)





In lowland forests along the río Madre de Díos, search the canopy for Curl-crested Aracari *Pteroglossus beauharnaesii* (right: Alejandro Tabini) and Plum-throated Cotinga *Cotinga maynana* (below left: Hadoram Shirihai/*The photographic handbook to taxonomy of birds of the world*)

Right, top to bottom

With patience and luck, birders may see the localised Red-and-white Antpitta *Grallaria erythroleuca* at Wayquecha Biological Station (Ian Merrill)

You will need to get into *Guadua* bamboo thickets to look for (middle) Peruvian Recurvebill *Simoxenops ucayalae* and (bottom) Manu Antbird *Cercomacra manu* (Daniel J. Lebbin)



Heliornis fulica, Wattled Jacana *Jacana jacana*, Muscovy Duck *Cairina moschata*, Rufous-sided Crane *Laterallus melanophaius*, the prehistoric-looking Hoatzin *Opisthocomus hoazin*, Silvered Antbird *Sclateria naevia*, Amazonian Streaked Antwren *Myrmotherula multostriata*, Red-capped Cardinal *Paroaria gularis* and Pale-eyed Blackbird *Agelaius xanthophthalmus*.

Finally, we reach the pristine lowland forests that hold more than 580 species and offer some of the trickiest but most exciting birding on the continent. In large stands of woody bamboo *Guadua*, birders target Rufous-headed Woodpecker *Celeus spectabilis*, the near-endemic Manu Antbird *Cercomacra manu*, the endemic White-cheeked Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilatriccus albifacies*, Peruvian Recurvebill *Simoxenops ucayalae* (Near Threatened and endemic) and Large-headed Flatbill *Ramphotrigon megacephala*.

Certain bamboo patches in Manu are known to hold the recently described and restricted-range Rufous Twistwing *Cnipodectes superrufa*. Recently formed islands and river-edge habitats hold willow-dependent and restricted-range species such as River Tyrannulet *Serpophaga hypoleuca* and Rufous-breasted Antthrush *Formicarius rufipectus* (Near Threatened) as well as more widespread species such as Orange-headed Tanager *Thlypopsis sordida* and Hooded Tanager *Nemosia pileata*. Transitional floodplain and *terra firme* forest hold a bewildering variety of antbirds, foliage-gleaners and tyrant-flycatchers, sometimes in mixed flocks of 60–80 species.

Choosing your Manu trip

When choosing a tour to Manu, birders should consider a number of issues, including the following. Are the areas visited protected? Do large indicator species such as curassows, macaws or trumpeters still occur there? Does the tour visit a site with an oxbow lake that can be accessed by canoe? Does the tour provide access to the rainforest canopy by visiting sites with canopy towers? Do trails at the sites visited traverse a series of high-quality forest types, particularly bamboo? Is there a *collpa* or other salt-lick nearby? Are the boats and vehicles reliable? Does the tour leader know the birds and their calls? If the answer to all these questions is yes, then you should have a very good birding tour.

An overview of Manu lodges

On a typical Manu tour, birders base themselves at three or more lodges to be sure of covering the gamut of habitats at different elevations.

Birders should ensure that they visit seasonally flooded, *terra firme* and transitional floodplain forests, bamboo patches, oxbow lakes and river margins, and use any canopy towers or viewing platforms available. Birds in the cloud forests and highlands are active through most of the day with no discernable peak in activity, particularly if there is mist or light drizzle. In the lowland rainforests, birds are most active from dawn until about 10h00 so early starts are essential. The remainder of this article gives snapshots of the lodges of greatest interest to birders.

The Manu road

Wayquecha Biological Station is the only accommodation in the higher temperate cloud forest. Run by a Peruvian NGO, Wayquecha lies at 2,800 m and is c.5 hours drive from Cusco. Developed for researchers, the Biological Station also takes a very limited number of birders in twin-rooms. You must book through a tour operator that has an existing agreement with the station. Golden-plumed Parakeet *Leptosittaca branickii* (Vulnerable), the much-desired Red-and-white Antpitta and White-throated Screech Owl *Megascops albogularis* occur.

Manu Cloud Forest Lodge, owned by Manu Nature Tours, is two hours slow drive further along the road. At 1,550 m altitude, it lies between cloud forest-covered slopes and is adjacent to a narrow 120-m-high waterfall and two streams that descend to the río Qosñipata. There is en-suite accommodation for 16 guests, private verandas and a sauna in which to relax after a hard day's birding. The river noise is frustrating for hearing birdsong but the bridge is a good vantage point for Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper *Lochmias nematura*. The area is good for Crested Quetzal and there is tall forest nearby.

Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge is located 180 km (5–6 hours drive) from Cusco and is owned by the NGO Peru Verde. It lies in cool, mosquito-free cloud forest at 1,300 m near the Kosñipata Valley, which is just 15 minutes drive below the lodge. As its name suggests, the lodge is a great site for lekking *Rupicola*. Other good birds include Wattled Guan *Aburria aburri* (Near Threatened), Andean Guan *Penelope montagnii*, two Near Threatened eagles (Black-and-chestnut Eagle *Oroaetus isidori* and Solitary Eagle *Harpyhaliaetus solitarius*), Black-streaked Puffbird *Malacoptila fulvogularis* and Yellow-rumped Antwren *Terenura sharpei* (Endangered and restricted-range). Accommodation comprises eight double bungalows arranged around a tropical garden with well-established hummingbird-

and other bird-feeders. A small trail system is good for Black Tinamou *Tinamus osgoodi*.

The adjacent **Paradise Lodge**, owned by a Cusco-based consortium, is an alternative base for birding the cloud forest. The lodge has panoramic views, accommodation for 16 people and a restaurant. The garden is good for birding, with feeders providing close views of many species included Many-spotted Hummingbird *Taphrosipilus hypostictus* and the rare endemic Rufous-webbed Brilliant *Heliodoxa branickii*. There are no trails. A few bends below the lodge birders including the author have found a tanager new to science that is awaiting formal description!

Along the río Alto Madre de Díos

Amazonia Lodge is 90 minutes straight drive from the last two mentioned lodges, at 500 m in the Manu foothills. This charming former working *hacienda* is owned and managed by the Yabar family, who have two avid birder sons. The lodge is located in Atalaya at the end of the Manu road on the opposite bank of the río Alto Madre de Díos. To get to the lodge, take a 10-minute boatride across the river then walk for 15 minutes. There is good accommodation for 24 people, with shared bathrooms and hot showers. All rooms have a balcony overlooking a lush tropical garden with *Vervania* bushes full of butterflies and feeders for hummingbirds and tanagers. There is a good trail system giving access to various habitats. The old 'jeep track' is a must because of its Band-tailed Manakin *Pipra fasciicauda* and Fiery-capped Manakin *Machaeropterus pyrocephalus* leks. Trails rise into the hill forest where Foothill Antwren *Myrmotherula spodiota*, Rufous-tailed Antwren *M. erythrura*, Hairy-crested Antbird *Rhegmatorhina melanosticta* and Sooty Antbird *Myrmeciza fortis* can be found. The lodge is one of the best places to see Koepcke's Hermit *Phaethornis koepckeae* (Near Threatened and endemic). Nightbirding is excellent with many owls and three species of potoo *Nyctibius*. In total, more than 600 species have been recorded.

Manu Learning Centre is located on the río Alto Madre de Díos about one hour by river from Amazonia Lodge. The Centre serves field researchers, educational groups, volunteers and guests alike. It has large bedrooms and a comfortable communal kitchen and dining room. The lodge area attracts an array of parrots and macaws thanks to the spectacular red mineral lick carved out by the río Alto Madre de Díos. The lodge has one of the few *collpas* along the río Alto Madre de Díos. Blue-headed Macaws *Ara couloni* (Vulnerable) visit daily, as do various

GETTING TO MANU

From Lima, the Peruvian capital, you need to get to Cusco. Airlines flying this route are LAN, Star Peru and TACA. From Cusco it is possible to hire a vehicle in Cusco and self-drive as far as Atalaya but not beyond. There is also an intermittent and unreliable air service from Cusco to Boca Manu Aerodrome in the lowlands, from where boats reach Romero Rainforest Lodge in an hour and Manu Wildlife Centre in 90 minutes. In reality, however, access and logistics are so complex and time-consuming that it makes sense to take a tour with a reliable operator. A number of foreign and national companies run birding trips to Manu: Amazonia Lodge, American Birding Association, Audubon Society, Birdfinders, Birdquest, Birdtreks, Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris, Field Guides Inc., Kolibri Expeditions, Inkanatura Travel, Manu Expeditions Birding Tours, Ornitholidays, Pantiacolla Tours, Rockjumper Birding Tours, Sunbird, Tanager Tours, Toucan Tours, Tropical Birding, Ultimate Voyages, Ventures, Victor Emmanuel Nature Tours, Wildside Birding and WINGS.

TIMING

Birding in Manu is good year-round. The area has a wide range of climates, from the cold, dry Andes to the hot, humid Amazon forests. Cold snaps (*friajes*) occur in May–July and can reduce birdsong. June is the coldest month and October to March the warmest. The rainy season is December–April: rain is heavier in the lowlands than the highlands and more birding time may be lost. Mist and drizzle are common all year round in montane forest regions, where the temperature can drop to just a few degrees above zero. During May–June large macaws only infrequently visit the clay licks.

parrots, parakeets (Dusky-headed *Aratinga weddellii* and White-eyed *A. leucophthalma*), guans, pigeons and doves. The gathering attracts raptors such as Ornate Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus ornatus*. Another attraction is two terrestrial clay-licks that attract mammals such as large herds of White-lipped Peccary *Tayassu pecari* and occasionally predators such as Jaguar.

Pantiacolla Lodge, run by Pantiacolla tours, is set in beautiful rainforest on bluffs overlooking the río Alto Madre de Díos at the base of the Pantiacolla Mountains. These rise behind the lodge to over 1,200 m and contribute to the area's highly diverse wildlife. Accommodation comprises bungalows with a total of 14 double rooms; separate bathrooms are nearby as is a spacious, comfortable dining area and bar. There is a good network of trails, hides and viewing platforms



Top, both pages: Red-and-green Macaw *Ara chloropterus* are usually seen in flight (above: with Cobalt-winged Parakeets *Brotogeris cyanoptera* in the background) or (right) at a *collpa* (Roger Ahlman; www.pbase.com/ahlman)

Inset: The Vulnerable Blue-headed Macaw *Ara couloni* visits the *collpa* at Manu Learning Centre (Mark Stafford/www.parrotsinternational.com)

Río Alto Madre de Díos at Atalaya (Barry Walker/Manu Expeditions)





Occurring at high altitude near Cusco, Bearded Mountaineer *Oreonympha nobilis* is one of the first targets for birders on a Manu trip (Fabrice Schmitt/Manu Expeditions)

that the owners are continually expanding. Some 500 species have been recorded here. This is a good place to see bamboo specialists such as White-cheeked Tody-Tyrant *Poecilatriccus albifacies* and Brown-rumped Foliage-gleaner *Automolus melanopezus*. Hill forest trails produce similar species to the previous lodge.

Up the río Manu and into the National Park

Romero Rainforest Lodge is due to re-open in late 2009 after being refurbished. Owned by Manu Expeditions Birding Tours and run in conjunction with Manu Learning Centre, this lodge lies along the río Manu one hour from the confluence with the río Madre de Díos and the Boca Manu Aerodrome. Tastefully decorated, the lodge has eight twin rooms and two singles with private bathroom facilities and hot water. An extensive trail network covers all kinds of micro-habitats, including oxbow lakes. With Black-faced Cotinga *Conioptilon mcilhennyi* in the garden and more than 550 bird species already recorded, this will become one of the best birding lodges in Peru.

Manu Lodge, owned by Manu Nature Tours, is constructed from fine mahogany cut from driftwood that lines the río Manú following the annual floods. It is the only lodge in Manu located on the shores of an oxbow lake. The lodge is supported by reinforced stilts and contains accommodation for up to 24 people with shared bathrooms plus a large dining room and lounge. The elusive Rufous-fronted Anthrush *Formicarius rufifrons* is here and this is the best place in Manu to see White-throated Jacamar *Brachygalba albogularis*.

Casa Machiguenga lies near the remote Cocha Salvador, a lake as deep within Manu National Park as tourists are allowed to visit. Matsigenka Indians established, own and manage the lodge which has excellent access to primary forest and oxbow lakes. More than 500 species occur, including Razor-billed Curassow *Mitu tuberosum*, Agami Heron and Black-faced Cotinga, plus many furnariids and antbirds. Accommodation is in ten simple, rustic double bungalows with communal bathrooms, but visitors must bring their own food and towels. The Cocha Salvador area is a popular destination for non-birding tourism and there are several basic camps run by local tour operators based in Cusco.

Down the río Madre de Díos to the macaw lick

Manu Wildlife Centre consists of 22 double bungalows built in the style of the local Machiguenga indigenous communities and with en suite bathrooms. It is owned by Manu

Expeditions Birding Tours and a local conservation group Peru Verde. The lodge is strategically located amidst a variety of forest types including bamboo, *terra firme*, transitional floodplain and *varzúa*. The lodge bird list is 580 species.

The *collpa* at Blanquillo, 25 minutes away by boat, attracts hundreds of parrots and macaws, notably Red-and-green Macaw *Ara chloropterus*, Orange-cheeked Parrot *Pionopsitta barrabandi*, Mealy Parrot *Amazona farinosa*, Yellow-crowned Parrot *A. ochrocephala* and Blue-headed Parrot *Pionus menstruus*. Floating platforms provide access to four oxbow lakes, where visitors can see three Giant Otter families and birds such as Sungrebe, Horned Screamer *Anhima cornuta*, Band-tailed Antbird *Hypocnemoides maculicauda* and Silvered Antbird. South American Tapir regularly visits a salt lick one hour's walk from the lodge through pristine forest. At noon, small forest parrots visit to eat clay; these include Rose-fronted Parakeet *Pyrrhura roseifrons*, Black-capped Parakeet *P. rupicola* and Dusky-billed Parrotlet *Forpus sclateri*. A viewing platform with sleeping facilities is available at the salt lick.

Two canopy towers, one just ten minutes walk from the lodge, provide access to the upper strata of the forest. These are good places from which to look for Plum-throated Cotinga *Cotinga maynana*, Spangled Cotinga *C. cayana*, Purple-throated Cotinga *Porphyrolaema porphyrolaema*, Yellow-shouldered Grosbeak *Parkerthraustes humeralis*, Striolated Puffbird *Nystalus striolatus*, White-necked Puffbird *Notharchus hyperhynchus*, Curl-crested Aracari *Pteroglossus beauharnaesii*, Lettered Aracari *P. inscriptus*, Sclater's Antwren *Myrmotherula sclateri*, Chestnut-shouldered Antwren *Terenura humeralis* and much more.

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