

# Capital Birding: Bogotá

**Diego Calderón-F.**

Our latest in the series on birding in and around major Neotropical cities is devoted to the large array of options near Bogotá, the capital of the number one country in terms of bird diversity in the world: Colombia.

**S**prawling over a huge plateau 2,600 m above sea level in the heart of the East Andes, the city of Bogotá (population seven million) has interesting birds to satisfy anyone, from birding groups starting a long countrywide trip, to the visitor with only a few hours available to target some endemics. The mix of habitats is the secret to this: swamps full of waterbirds, mega-rich Andean cloud forests with mixed flocks, páramo vegetation with its unique specialties, successfully restored open areas where endemics have found new shelter, premontane wet forests with a drier Magdalena Valley influence, and the 'busiest' hummingbird feeders in the foothills.

Lodging and dining options are available in Bogotá to suit every budget, and with growing tourism and development in recent years seem to be endless now. Public transportation is inexpensive (but slightly more so than in Costa Rica, Panama or Ecuador) and the Transmilenio bus system covers most of the city. Taxis can also take you anywhere in the city and the near environs, and there's always the option to rent a car (still much more expensive than in other Latin American countries). Local guides are available and national and the larger foreign tour operators offer birding itineraries in and

around Bogotá. Security is particularly strong around the capital, and in my opinion potential visitors need worry no more than when birding a city park in any other large Neotropical city. Just use common sense while visiting places near highly populated neighbourhoods, take good care of your equipment and follow any local advice to avoid any potential risks.

Because the birding options in and around Bogotá are so varied, I will focus on a couple of the best sites (in my opinion) within each area to give an idea of what to look for and where. Keep in mind that there are many more options beyond those I will describe here, and local guides can take you to some great alternative spots.

## City swamps (c.2,600 m)

Bogotá is largely built on or near marshy areas, with the result that there are many swamps within the city limits, meaning that birders have easy access to rewarding spots. Although these swamps are home to an interesting cross-section of the endemic Bogotá avifauna, and restoration and conservation projects are ongoing, water quality is such that you should be prepared for some unpleasant odours. Almost all of these swamps are good sites to find the well-known endemic Bogotá Rail *Rallus semiplumbeus*





Above: Apolinar's Wren  
*Cistothorus apolinari apolinari*  
(Pete Morris / Birdquest)

Left: Apolinar's Wren  
*Cistothorus apolinari*  
*hernandezi* (Diego Calderón-F. /  
[www.colombiabirding.com](http://www.colombiabirding.com))



Clockwise from top:

Black-headed Hemispingus *Hemispingus verticalis* (Jussi Vakkala / [www.jussivakkala.com](http://www.jussivakkala.com))

Black-chested Mountain Tanager *Buthraupis eximia* (David Southall / [www.tropicalbirdphotos.com](http://www.tropicalbirdphotos.com))

Rufous-browed Conebill *Conirostrum rufum* (Alex Samyn)

Male Black Inca *Coeligena prunellei* (Tim Boucher)

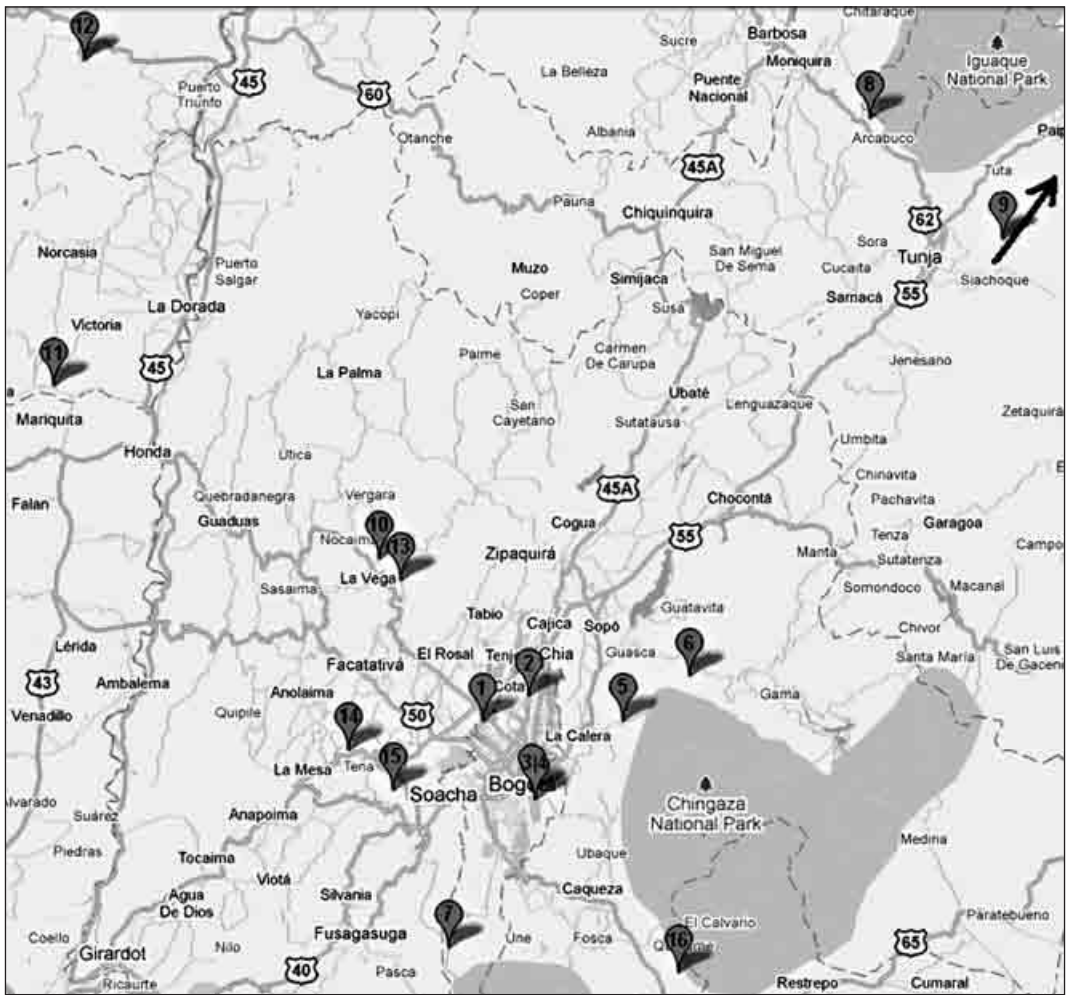


Figure 1. Map showing sites in and around Bogotá mentioned in the text: (1) Parque La Florida; (2) Humedal La Conejera; (3) Cerro Monserrate; (4) Cerro Guadalupe; (5) Chingaza National Park; (6) Guasca / Bioandina; (7) Sumapaz National Park; (8) Rogitama Reserve; (9) Soatá (route to); (10) Laguna de Tabacal; (11) Victoria; (12) Río Claro; (13) Jardín Encantado; (14) Laguna de Pedro Palo; (15) Chicaque Natural Park; and (16) Monterredondo. The right-hand map shows those sites within the city limits.



and the nominate race of the endemic Apolinar's Wren *Cistothorus apolinari*, which is confined to reedbeds. Other special birds include the endemic Silvery-throated Spinetail *Synallaxis subpudica*, the near-endemic Rufous-browed Conebill *Conirostrum rufum* and the secretive Noble Snipe *Gallinago nobilis*. They are also important for range-restricted endemic subspecies such as the *bogotensis* forms of Spot-flanked Gallinule *Gallinula melanops*, Least Bittern *Ixobrychus*

*exilis* and Yellow-hooded Blackbird *Chrysomus icterocephalus* (see p. 34), among others. Highland wetlands above Bogotá, traditionally known as the 'old gravel pits', also offer very productive birding, but are trickier to reach without a local guide.

**Parque La Florida** is located at the Calle 80 entrance to Bogotá, if coming from Medellín (La Vega highway). If you are already in Bogotá, take the Transmilenio to the Portal Norte and then either take a taxi (which should cost slightly more than the minimum fee) or take any bus leaving Bogotá towards Siberia, Medellín, La Vega or Honda; c.1 km after crossing the río Bogotá and just before the first possible return on the highway, keep your eyes out to the left for a paved entrance with a couple of signs announcing the park. From here, you can walk to the second (main public) gate, where park staff should be able to give advice. Note that you should concentrate on the right-hand side swampy area and not that on the left, which can be crowded with people at weekends. In addition to the specialties already mentioned, Subtropical Doradito *Pseudocolopteryx acutipennis* can be found, but only extremely fortunate birders get to see it in the reeds here!

**Humedal La Conejera** is located in the suburb of Suba in north-west Bogotá. If taking a taxi let the driver know you want to go to 'Suba Compartir' (before getting in always check if the driver knows this place). The other option is to take the Transmilenio to Portal Suba and from there it is a short taxi ride, or take any of the local buses passing 'Compartir', and leave the bus at the 'Bienestar Familiar - ICBF', an educational institution. Finding the park gate can be tricky, as it is hidden behind buildings, so ask in a local grocery store or one of the neighbourhood security guards. Once inside, explore both trails surrounding the swamp, that on the right for Bogotá Rail and to the left for Apolinar's Wren.

## City mountains / Cerros

(c.2,800–3,100 m)

Towering like a fortress over the east of the city are the mountains known locally as 'Los Cerros Orientales'; these mountains still hold patches of highland forest and are sufficiently close to the city to provide for a very convenient morning of birding. Expect to find spectacularly named hummingbirds such as Black-tailed Trainbearer *Lesbia victoriae*, Sword-billed Hummingbird *Ensifera ensifera* and Shining Sunbeam *Aglaeactis cupripennis*. The highly coveted Plushcap *Catamblyrhynchus diadema* and the tiny Agile Tit-

## ORGANISING YOUR TIME IN BOGOTÁ

Few hours available: take a taxi to Parque La Florida, especially if you need to remain near the airport; otherwise, you might try Humedal La Conejera or even a quick visit to Monserrate, taking a taxi to the base.

Half-day available: if interested in waterbirds, you could start with an early visit to Humedal La Conejera and then head to Parque La Florida to focus on missing targets or vice versa. If forest birds are your priority, ascend the Cerro Monserrate and return before noon to explore the base of Cerro Guadalupe. Brief visits to Chingaza or Sumapaz National Parks and even Laguna de Tabacal, Jardín Encantado or Laguna de Pedro Palo are possible if you have your own transport.

One full day available: Rogitama could even be combined with a city swamp late in the afternoon, while alternatively Monterredondo makes for a perfect full-day trip with the possibility to reach the peak of Buena Vista along the old road to Villavicencio in the afternoon for lower east-slope birds. Combining Sumapaz, Chingaza, Pedro Palo, Tabacal or Jardín Encantado with any of the city swamps, or Monserrate, is also a good option for covering diverse habitats. Tabacal or Pedro Palo plus Jardín Encantado make for another perfect 'combo', or just spend the entire day at Chicaque Natural Park!

Tyrant *Anairetes agilis* are among the rarer birds in this area. Furthermore, the panoramic view of Bogotá also makes these *cerros* worth a visit.

**Cerro Monserrate** is the most commonly visited of these mountains and is well known to both locals and foreign tourists; try to avoid weekends as there are usually many religious visitors. To reach Monserrate take the Transmilenio to Las Aguas station, near the Universidad de Los Andes; from there walk just c.5 blocks north-east towards the mountain to reach the main access. There is both a cable car and a



Clockwise from top:

Male Blue-throated Starfrontlet *Coeligena helianthea*  
(Mauricio Rueda)

Bronze-tailed Thornbill *Chalcostigma heteropogon*  
(Diego Calderón-F. / [www.colombiabirding.com](http://www.colombiabirding.com))

The unique specimen of Bogotá Sunangel *Heliangelus zusii*  
(Gary Graves / Smithsonian Institution)

Bogotá Rail *Rallus semiplumbeus* (Benjamin Freeman)





Clockwise from top:  
Brown-breasted Parakeet *Pyrrhura calliptera*  
(Pete Morris / Birdquest)  
Least Bittern *Ixobrychus exilis bogotensis* (Pete Morris / Birdquest)  
Male Golden-bellied Starfrontlet *Coeligena bonapartei*  
(Miguel Jaramillo)  
Cundinamarca Antpitta *Grallaria kaestneri*  
(Andrés M. Cuervo)

railway to take you up top, or you can just hike uphill. Once atop Monserrate, explore the gardens around the restaurants (highly recommended for lunch!) for hummingbirds (Black-tailed Trainbearer and Shining Sunbeam are common), and then head to the much quieter ridge north of the handicrafts passageway to look for mountain tanagers and flowerpiercers.

**Cerro Guadalupe** is the other regularly visited mountain, which also has religious significance and can also be very busy with weekend visitors, especially on Sundays. To reach Guadalupe, you can take a taxi from the Las Aguas Transmilenio station, but if you are near the main Bogotá bus terminal, the best option is to catch a bus to Choachí and descend at the Cerro Guadalupe entrance. You can bird along the entrance road, where dense patches of bamboo within the forest should be searched for Plushcap and many other species associated with mixed flocks. However, because safety is an issue, it is strongly recommended that you take a local guide with you.

## Montane Andean forests and páramos (c.3,400–3,900 m)

East of Bogotá are two vast national parks that rate among my favourite highland birding sites in the area. The following three sites are all just 1.0–1.5 hours from Bogotá, but unfortunately they are not easily reached using public transportation. However, local guides and operators can easily take care of the logistics for you making planning a trip to any of them a 'piece of cake'. Among birds to search for are the colourful Scarlet-bellied *Anisognathus igniventris*, Buff-breasted *Dubusia taeniata* and the uncommon Black-chested Mountain Tanagers *Buthraupis eximia*. Mixed flocks should harbour more specialties like Rufous-browed Conebill and the occasional Black-headed Hemispingus *Hemispingus verticalis*. Antpittas are numerous; Tawny *Grallaria quitensis* and Chestnut-crowned *G. ruficapilla* being the easiest, while Rufous *G. rufula* and Undulated *G. squamigera* require considerably more work. Concerning hummingbirds, this is simply heaven for range-restricted and near-endemic species! Blue-throated Starfrontlet *Coeligena helianthea*, Glowing *Eriocnemis vestita* and Coppery-bellied Pufflegs *E. cupreovertris*, Great Sapphirewing *Pterophanes cyanopterus*, Bronze-tailed Thornbill *Chalcostigma heteropogon* and Bearded Helmetcrest *Oxygogon guerini* are all present.

**Chingaza National Park** can be accessed via more than one entrance, but my preferred route is the main one. To get there, leave Bogotá via La

## CONTACT DETAILS

Tourism websites: [www.bogotaturismo.gov.co](http://www.bogotaturismo.gov.co) and [www.colombia.travel](http://www.colombia.travel)

Transmilenio bus system: [www.transmilenio.gov.co](http://www.transmilenio.gov.co)

Humedal La Conejera: [visitasconejera@gmail.com](mailto:visitasconejera@gmail.com)

Cerro Monserrate: [www.cerromonserrate.com](http://www.cerromonserrate.com); tel: +57 (1) 284 57 00

Chingaza and Sumapaz National Parks: [www.parquesnacionales.gov.co](http://www.parquesnacionales.gov.co)

Rogitama Reserve: owners Roberto & Ginette, tel: 57 300 383 4649, 313 216 4807 or 300 570 2502

Laguna de Tabacal: restaurant owners Jorge & Maria Estrella, tel: 57 310 325 2527 or 312 502 6609

Jardín Encantado: [www.jardinencantado.net](http://www.jardinencantado.net); owner Leonor Pardo, tel: +57 310 875 5507

Chicaque Natural Park: [www.chicaque.com](http://www.chicaque.com)

Calera (from Bogotá bus station embark for either La Calera, Guasca, Guatavita or Gachetá) and just after passing the town there is a national park sign (brown with yellow letters) on the right. Follow this road and the national park signs will guide you until you reach the lower area of elfin forest. Birding starts here, and you can walk the dirt road to the top and then to the more level part where frailejones (*Espeletia*: Asteraceae), other páramo plants and low bamboo clusters are quite common. The lower part of the forest is amazing for mixed flocks and pufflegs; do not forget that the race of Golden-fronted Redstart *Myioborus ornatus* here has a beautiful all-white face. The upper area offers Streak-backed *Asthenes wyatti* and Many-striped Canasteros *A. flammulata*, plus Páramo Pipit *Anthus bogotensis*. Continuing beyond the national park gate gives you a chance of Brown-breasted Parakeet *Pyrrhura calliptera*, but I prefer the Guasca / Bioandina area further north-east of La Calera to search for this endemic.

**Sumapaz National Park** is another large, well-preserved area close to the capital, which can be accessed using private transportation, by leaving Bogotá on Avenida Boyacá towards San Juan de



Sumapaz via Usme. If using public transportation, from Bogotá bus station take the daily service to San Juan de Sumapaz (ask for return times). Birding starts c.2 km beyond the end of the paved road where dwarf vegetation takes over. From here just walk the road for Bronze-tailed Thornbill and Bearded Helmetcrest. Tawny Antpitta can be relatively easy with playback—but remember you need a recording of the appropriate subspecies (*alticola*). In contrast to the endemic Apolinar's Wrens in Bogotá, the (recently described) subspecies (*hernandezii*) here does not inhabit reed swamps, but rather is found in dense bamboo, and instead of being found in pairs it occurs in large groups of up to ten individuals. Morphometrics and song also differ, and there is no overlap in their elevational ranges<sup>1,8</sup>. You should make an effort to see this wren in Sumapaz, as it could be a split in the future.

**Rogitama Reserve** (2,700m) has been converted from pastures and pines to productive birding habitat in recent years. To get there, take a three-hour bus ride to Arcabuco in Boyacá department (via Tunja), where the reserve staff will be happy to pick you up. Once in the reserve, explore the trails, main entrance and gardens around the house to find Short-tailed Emerald *Chlorostilbon poortmani*, Lazuline Sabrewing *Campylopterus falcatus* and the endemic Black Inca *Coeligena prunellei*. The nearby oak forests should produce Pale-bellied (formerly Matorral) Tapaculo *Scytalopus griseicollis* as well as the recently described endemic *yariguierum* form of Yellow-breasted Brush Finch *Atlapetes latinuchus*. Also, if visiting Rogitama you really should consider (if time is available) continuing three additional hours north-east to Soatá, which is the best area in Colombia for endemics such as Mountain Grackle *Macroagelaius subalaris*, Chestnut-bellied Hummingbird *Amazilia castaneiventris* and Niceforo's Wren *Thryothorus nicefori*.

## Magdalena Valley-slope tropical wet forests

(c.1,300–2,200 m)

Less than two hours from Bogotá, as you head towards the Magdalena Valley lowlands, the warmer forests of this region support an entirely different set of birds; Bar-crested Antshrike *Thamnophilus multistriatus*, Spectacled Parrotlet *Forpus conspicillatus*, Stripe-breasted Spinetail *Synallaxis cinnamomea* and Scrub Tanager *Tangara vitriolina* are common. Of course, every

location is unique, so I describe just a few of my favourite spots.

**Laguna de Tabacal** is a small natural park 7 km from La Vega on the road to Supatá. To get there, take a bus from Bogotá towards either of these towns. Explore the parking lot for Black-bellied Wren *Thryothorus fasciatoventris*, Ruddy Foliage-gleaner *Automolus rubiginosus* and Red-billed Scythebill *Campylorhamphus trochilirostris*; the main entrance is also a good site for the tricky Rosy Thrush-Tanager *Rhodinocichla rosea*. Beyond the gate, there are two options: follow the main rocky trail to the lake, where White-throated Crake *Laterallus albigularis* and Black Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus tyrannus* can usually be seen, or take the first dirt trail to the right to search for White-bellied Antbird *Myrmeciza longipes*, Rusty-breasted Antpitta *Grallaricula ferrugineipectus*, Gray-throated Warbler *Basileuterus cinereicollis* and a lek of White-bearded Manakin *Manacus manacus*. Birding Tabacal will whet your appetite for the spectacular humid lowland forests of Victoria or Río Claro in the Magdalena Valley, where you can find rare and exciting endemics such as White-mantled Barbet *Capito hypoleucus*, Sooty Ant Tanager *Habia gutturalis* and Antioquia Bristle Tyrant *Phylloscartes lanyoni*, to name just a few!

**Jardín Encantado** is a private house with c.30 hummingbird feeders that has recently been opened to the public. Take a bus to San Francisco de Sales either from La Vega (c.30 minutes) or from Bogotá (c.2 hours) and get off at the first block beyond the town entrance. From there, turn left and walk <400 m to the house named 'La Tortuguita' on the left-hand side of the road. Once inside, just relax and enjoy superb close-up views of the endemic Indigo-capped Hummingbird *Amazilia cyanifrons* and the tiny Gorgeted Woodstar *Chaetocercus heliodor*, along with mangos, violetears, emeralds and hermits. The gracious owner will provide lemonade or coffee while you are dazzled by the spectacle; some lucky birdwatchers have had 'nose-to-bill' encounters with the astonishing Ruby-topaz Hummingbird *Chrysolampis mosquitus*!

**Laguna de Pedro Palo** is a municipal reserve that can be reached by taking a bus from Bogotá to Tena or La Mesa (buses to Anapoima or Girardot also pass this site) and getting off at 'Restaurante Paisa El Rancho de Jairo' (at km 31 on the road to La Mesa). Here you can have a good *criollo* breakfast while watching tanagers and euphonias on the banana feeders. After a delicious breakfast look for a small, steep, road on the opposite side of the main highway; follow this straight to the





Facing page clockwise from top:

Noble Snipe *Gallinago nobilis* (Keith Betton)

Rufous Antpitta *Grallaria rufula* (Steve Bird / Zoothera Global Birding)

Tawny Antpitta *Grallaria quitensis alticola* (Diego Calderón-F. / [www.colombiabirding.com](http://www.colombiabirding.com))

Above: Moustached Brush Finch *Atlapetes albofrenatus* (Pete Morris / Birdquest)

lagoon (the only possible detour is to the left). The entire road is very good for near-endemics such as Moustached Brush Finch *Atlapetes albofrenatus*, Ash-browed Spinetail *Cranioleuca curtata* and Rufous-naped Greenlet *Hylophilus semibrunneus*. The best area for the endemics Turquoise Dacnis *Dacnis hartlaubi* and Black Inca is around the lagoon itself. Denser forest patches along this road have been very reliable for Moustached Puffbird *Malacoptila mystacalis* and Speckle-breasted (Colombian) Wren *Thryothorus sclateri*, and on my last trip to this area I recorded the enigmatic Yellow-headed Manakin *Xenopipo flavicapilla* for the first time. Note that Laguna de Pedro Palo lies close to Chicaque Natural Park, which is a great site for Golden-bellied Starfrontlet *Coeligena*

*bonapartei* and the isolated Colombian population of Brown Tinamou *Crypturellus obsoletus*.

## Llanos slope montane forest and páramo (c.2,000–3,100 m)

Along the main road connecting Bogotá with the immense savannas to the east (known as 'Los Llanos' in Colombia and Venezuela) there are still large tracts of high-quality forest on the Andean slope. Recent findings in this area include a 'brand new' population of Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis*<sup>6</sup> and new localities for Buff-fronted Owl *Aegolius harrisi*. However, the main birding area discussed here has become famous as one of the few localities for the endemic Cundinamarca Antpitta *Grallaria kaestneri*<sup>7</sup>. As an aside, I always advise visitors with time to continue downslope to the lowlands where Orinoco Goose *Neochen jubata*, Hoatzin *Opisthocomus hoazin*, and hundreds of egrets, herons, ibises and storks gather together.

**Monterredondo** is in the environs of Guayabetal, and 4WD is needed to negotiate the steep, rocky road. You can drive yourself or take

any public bus from Bogotá to Guayabetal or Villavicencio. After approximately one hour look for a pedestrian bridge, where a white sign on the right announces Monterredondo (20–30 minutes before Guayabetal). If you do not have your own 4WD, go to Guayabetal and hire a jeep. Start birding as soon as you reach dense forest, mainly to the left of the road, after c.30 bumpy minutes; at this point, lively mixed flocks appear containing Golden-winged Manakin *Masius chrysopterus* and Ochre-breasted Brush Finch *Atlapetes semirufus*. White-capped Tanager *Sericossypha albocristata*, Golden-headed Quetzal *Pharomachrus auriceps* and Black-collared Jay *Cyanolyca armillata* are all easily found along here, while Ocellated Tapaculo *Acropternis orthonyx* and Cundinamarca Antpitta will require more work. If you are lucky, a Lined Quail-Dove *Geotrygon linearis* will cross in front of you, or a bunch of noisy Brown-breasted Parakeets will fly in and hopefully perch in view. If you make it to the higher pass towards El Calvario, expect to see the scarce Greater Scythebill *Campylorhamphus pucherani*, Ash-colored *Myornis senilis* and Páramo Tapaculos *Scytalopus opacus*, and Páramo Pipit.

These are just a few brief notes concerning some of the most productive birding options in and around Bogotá, but the list is far from comprehensive! There are many more excellent sites out there waiting to be birded<sup>5</sup>. And, always keep in mind that if while birding near Bogotá you happen to see a stunning dark bluish hummingbird with a long forked tail and straight black bill, you just might have rediscovered the presumed extinct<sup>2–4</sup> and certainly mythical Bogotá Sunangel *Heliangelus zusii*!

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