

Adventure Birding with Heike Brieschke in northern Ecuador in January, 2018

Since many years, it was my great wish to learn to know Dr. Heike Brieschke's place of action in Ecuador and to realize her offer to guide a natural history study trip through Ecuador. Finally, in January 2018 I could fulfil this desire. The flight from Amsterdam to Quito by KLM (January 3rd) was a first, good experience. She picked us up at the international airport of Quito and took us to a very nice place, Casa Magnolia, in the suburbs of the Ecuadorian capital where we spent the first good night in South America after a long flight. Casa Magnolia provided a very good welcome into a very different world. We – these are Norbert Bahr who already once travelled with Heike Brieschke through Ecuador, his wife Elke, who became very curious about his reports, and myself.

The next morning, January 4th, we left the Quito region early aiming to the Andes. The sky was clear and brilliant, we had a marvellous view on the fascinating mountains and went on scarcely frequented highways, passing prehistoric appearing polylepis woods and many road signs to be aware for rare animals, e.g. Spectacled Bears that may cross the roads. A walk close to the directional aerials in an altitude of 4.300 m (14.100 ft) presented our first observations of birds and mammals adapted to the High Andes. At noon time, we arrived at San Isidro Lodge in 1.200 m (3.940 ft) in the lower region of the Cloud Forest zone. We had a rich supper and just after it a first walk to the impressive land scape. However, the good weather changed to rain – but, what could a rain forest be without rain?

San Isidro is a wonderful place to learn to know the regional avifauna and, as well, provides a unique possibility to see a very special bird species: there lives an owl very similar to a species well-known from the Amazonian lowlands, but occurring only in cloud forest region and with a very different call, and hitherto undescribed! We were lucky to observe this owl already in our first night! San Isidro offers a large, covered terrace where feeders attract hummingbirds of many species and individuals from the first light in the morning till the evening. They provide a very attractive break between walks in the cloud forest or when too much rain prevented those. A large, though not high observation platform close to the dormitories permitted great views to the surrounding where many species of birds can be observed.

We spent two great days in San Isidro and had luck to observe at wonderful weather conditions at many times. A particular rewarding place was some lamps close to the entrance to the lodge where many birds of several species arrived at very first light to collect insects who gathered there at night. It was an impressive performance to see how a small trogon took a very large moth for breakfast. Another particular presentation was an early morning feeding of a White-bellied Antpitta which was conditioned by a member of the lodge team to come to a defined place at a certain time span to receive some small worms – a wonderful opportunity to observe this bird almost invisible in its natural habitat.

Starting at San Isidro we visited one morning the Cordillera de Huacamayos close to the lodge and belonging to Antisana national park. From a small mountain trail which already existed in the Inca period and being the only connection between Quito and the lowlands near Tena at those times we walked for several hundred meters into the area. There we observed mainly passerines in mixed flocks. Between such phases of intensive activity there

was almost no bird to be seen – a typical experience in tropical forests where the best observation periods are the first as well as the last two hours of daylight.

After having had a wonderful early morning bird walk the next day, January 7th, we left San Isidro to our next station. Along the road we passed magnificent cloud forest areas and had great observations of raptors and Cliff Flycatchers by the way. At noon time we arrived at our next stop, the Wildsumaco lodge in 1.600 m (5.250 ft) of altitude. Due to a different zonation level, we could expect many other bird species that were not occurring at San Isidro. At Wildsumaco as well the guests enjoy a large, though not covered terrace with many feeding stations for hummingbirds and fruit-eaters. Not only tanagers, but as well larger birds interested in ripe fruits like barbets, toucans and guans gathered here.

In Wildsumaco, as well antpittas are conditioned to certain feeding times and places. Here we met Plain-backed and Ochre-breasted Antpittas. Small thrushes, resident and migratory species, were attracted as well, but they were always chased away by the dominant antpittas. The lodge offers an impressive variety of different habitats in its vicinity. Besides of primary and secondary forests we visited open, only extensively used areas where we observed woodpeckers, pigeons, many passerines and even two species of macaws, Chestnut-fronted and Military Macaw. Close to a small wetland area we were lucky to see a Blackish Rail after having attracted it by voice recording. Particular owls were identified thanks to Heike's experience in their calls, but we could merely notice a shadow of the Tropical Screech-owl passing us at several times. Close to the lodge we heard the voice of a Band-bellied Owl but failed to see it at its diurnal resting-place. Rain falls were heavy, but concentrated at night or at noon time when we had lunch, thus they did not really affect our observation walks. When rain did not stop one morning after breakfast, we had great sightings of, particularly, small birds close to the the lodge, among them again many species that we had not seen before. Of course, we confirmed Heike a perfect time management with regard to precipitations.

After spending three nights and two full days of bird observation, we left Wildsumaco after breakfast with direction to the eastern lowlands. Close to the site where we crossed the Napo River we visited Laguna Paikawe. This lagoon is artificial and constructed as a ring canal with a connecting water course in the center, similar to an Θ . Many bird species specialized on river edges and lake shores discovered and settled at this particular place, among them Hoatzin, Purple Gallinule, Greater Ani, and Violaceous Jay. We observed many of them at short distance while gliding slowly in flat and open canoas. After lunch in a nice restaurant nearby we went on almost or completely unpaved roads far into the territory controlled by oil companies in the eastern Amazonian lowlands of the Oriente. Different from the generally expected flat landscape, the region is covered by foothills of the Andes for far more than the whole eastern territory of Ecuador. Finally we reached our next station, the Gareno lodge located at about 400 m (1310 ft). It is situated in the territory belonging to the American native people of the Oriente, the Huarani. Some sparsely clothed women awaited our arrival to offer baskets, table-mats, purses, or fully-effective blow-pipes with arrows. Of course, we bought some of those trade items for a fair price.

Gareno lodge is a very rustic place. Due to the temperature, all rooms are open and protected by mosquito nets. However, running Wasser and, lately invented, electricity are

available, thus, a certain basic comfort is given. But a unique tropical nature and many different bird species not occurring in higher altitudes compensate anything of comfort that may lack temporarily. Close to the Gareno lodge we observed on forest trails, above a water course, and along the road and enjoyed great sightings of Fiery Topaz, White-plumed Antbird, Rufous Potoo, Crested Owl among many other birds. Characteristic for a rain forest area we experienced many rainfalls, sometimes at night, sometimes by day when we spent time in the large and protected lunch room where we could observe the bird activities outside. Here, as well, Heike's organization did not prevent us from observing new bird species as well as impressions – at least we wanted to see it this way. Unwelcome were merely tiny bees very interested in our corporal liquids (sweat and lachrymal fluid) that sometimes could be very inconvenient. Another problem was the difficult observation of small birds in the tree-tops along the roads – trees here in the lowlands are much higher as in upper altitudes and to direct the binoculars almost vertical permanently caused some impact on our nape muscles. However, there is no award without sweat!

We left Gareno in the early morning of January 13th with destination to San Pedro del Río Napo to realize a boat trip on the Napo stream and some of its smaller tributaries. The weather was beautiful, but there were only few birds to be observed from the river. We had quite more observations when we returned by foot from the stream to the village, e.g. We then went by car to the city of Tena where we had a typical Ecuadorian lunch in a small restaurant – and unperceived received some pathogens which severely disturbed our digestion and general condition for the following days. Our next aim was Guango lodge located close to the road to Quito in 2.700 m (8.860 ft). Here we enjoyed again great hummingbird observations at carefully tended feeders.

However, our possibilities to look for birds in the very close vicinity of Guango were limited by the activities of the local oil company which had to dig up and seal again their pipeline. As a consequence, trails were closed and we were forced to use detours to reach our observation areas. However, we were lucky to see several adult Torrent Ducks, among them one female with three ducklets, White-capped Dippers, or a mixed flock of several tanagers and New World warblers in best light so we could determine almost every species. A particular highlight was the, though very short observation of a Blackish Tapaculo in the forest floor, a member of a bird group regularly almost invisible in its habitat. Here as well rain fall was limited to the times when we were not observing outside – another proof for Heike's time management! In Guango we saw our first Sword-billed Hummingbird and had, for a very short moment, the impressive view on a Mountain Tapir – even for Heike it was the very first observation of this rare mammal.

Very early, at 4.00 o'clock of January 15th, and in heavy rains we left Guango to enjoy a full observation day at different sites in western localities. To realize this we had to drive a roundabout way to Quito, which proved to be difficult with respect to the morning rushhour. However, we reached the Yanacocha reserve of the Jocotoco Foundation early enough. In an altitude of 3.600 m (1.180 ft) we observed High Andean hummingbirds like Great Sapphirewing, different species of buntings and flowerpiercers as well as an Andean Guan.

Our stay in the habitat of Polylepis trees and the uppermost rain forest, elfin forest, was characterized by few sunlight and increasing contact with clouds, but without rain. Not

earlier than when we had left the unpaved gravel road, the worst of our whole trip, the access to Yanacocha, it began to rain without pause. Thus, we renounced a detour to Bellavista – although the name sounds rewarding, we would not have had possibilities to observe. Instead, we went directly to Mindo in the rain forest area of the western Andean slopes. The rest of this day as well as our first night in the last lodging of our journey we spent with nature and birds loving owners of Hostal Hacienda San Vicente at the village's margin.

Mindo is located at 1.100 m (3.600 ft). Here, in the west of the Andes, our stay was dominated by the rainy season, and we could hear rain falling the whole night. However, in the early morning, the rain stopped, and we left the hostel in the very first light to spend the time from 6.00 to 7.00 o'clock observing displaying Andean Cocks-of-the-Rock. We did not see any female, thus this morning probably was a kind of fitness training or the confirmation of dominance of the present males. Close to this lek we met a pair of Dark-backed Wood-quails with two chicks and a Golden-headed Quetzal. These observations we already enjoyed on the territory of „Refugio Paz de las Aves“ belonging to Angel Paz and his family. This veritable friend of nature protects a large area of primary forest for the conservation of birds and other animals. He was the one to develop a method to condition antpittas, and we were lucky to observe three species, with the Giant Antpitta as the most impressive of these. In the adjoining forest we saw a pair of Plate-billed Mountain-Toucans with a fledgling looking outside of its nest hole, and a Crested Quetzal.

The afternoon we spent at Mindo Lindo, home of Heike and her husband Pedro Peñafiel, and their daughters. Located at 1.700 m (5.580 ft), the couple realized an ecological center of the region where they teach ecology and sustainability to the people of Ecuador and host many guests from all over the world. Mindo Lindo is a private reserve where the former cattle ground was changed to species-rich secondary growth and a small paradise for nature within 25 years. Their feeders attracted more hummingbird species than we could observe at any other place of our trip in Ecuador, as well as many fruit-eating birds like tanagers and barbets.

The next morning, 17th January, we started very early to arrive at Río Silanche reserve belonging to the Mindo Cloud Forest Foundation in the first daylight. There we entered an observation platform at about 20 m (66 ft) and were quite surrounded by larger birds. Hawks, woodpeckers, parrots and many more could be observed at short distances, and again we were lucky to enjoy hours without any rain. On the way back to Mindo we had another interesting sighting of birds at several stops. Even at our lunch break in a small restaurant at San Miguel de los Bancos we enjoyed new highlight at its feeders for hummingbirds and fruit-eating bird species. Once returned to Mindo, we got a very good impression of our hostel's area where we observed other different species at feeders for hummingbirds and fruit-eaters, e.g. Rufous Motmots. Besides, we got a good impression of the town and visited the „Quetzal“ restaurant and chocolate factory.

The next morning, 18th January, already was the beginning of our last whole day in Ecuador. Heike picked us up very early and brought us to Calicali where we visited a small remnant of natural dry bushland vegetation. Situated between a road with many business properties along a slope and a valley used by people for various reasons we had to pass a wild garbage

dump to enjoy a particular area inhabited by many interesting, particularly small birds like Black-tailed Trainbearer, Tufted Tit-tyrant or Ash-breasted Sierra-finch. On the way back to the road we were enclosed in clouds – what a great luck that this did not happen while we were observing the local avifauna!

Our next destination was the Antisana national park, with the Laguna Mica in particular, to areas that we like: plenty of nature with only few people. High in the mountains with low bush vegetation and páramo at about 4.000 m (13.100 ft) and the large Mica Lake we observed Carunculated Caracaras, White-collared Swifts close to the ground, Andean Ibises, Andean Gulls, Yellow-billed Pintails, Andean Teals as well as Andean Ducks – and the first Andean Condors. Our stay was short, though intensive, and cold. So we were glad to warm up in a small and nice restaurant where an open fire provided pleasant warmth. Even here we were lucky to have great observations of five Andean Condors, Black-chested Buzzard-eagle, Golden-bellied Grosbeak and Giant Hummingbird.

We then had to return to the suburbs of Quito and stayed again at Casa Magnolia where we had already spent the first night of our stay in Ecuador. The observation of birds came to an end, but even here we saw a Saffron Finch, a species not detected before. Altogether, we could observe 420 species of birds, with the majority not only in short views, but with many details of their biology and behavior.

Our last day in Ecuador, 19th January, started with a prolonged visit of the tourist market in Quito. There we found a large offer of traditional and typical products of Ecuador in a tremendous selection. Looking for some gifts for our beloved ones at home we found a great variety between small and large items. Ecuador presented itself as a rich country in many aspects. We can only be thankful to Heike Brieschke for the magnificent insights into the avifauna of one of the countries with the highest number of bird species in the world. I hope that this report will encourage many people interested in nature and birds to travel with Heike Brieschke through Ecuador.

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