

This tour is especially designed to spend time at the lodges and visitor sites with the most productive feeding stations. We visit both the east and west slopes, but don't need to travel too far from Quito to get to the best action, so travel is kept to a minimum.

Day 1 - Yanacocha and Mindo

We will be picked-up from the hotel by your guide and driver for the 1 ½ hour long drive up to Yanacocha reserve. The Yanacocha reserve, tucked into the high slopes of west side of Volcán Pichincha, is a spectacular chunk of forest run by the Jocotoco Foundation and is home to many sought after, upper-elevation forest species that can be hard to find. Fortunately for us there are some very productive fruit and hummingbird feeder stations right at the reserve entrance where we can spend a full morning photographing some of the more exciting and colorful birds of the zone, such as Andean Guan, Golden-breasted and Sapphire-vented Pufflegs, Great Sapphirewing, Sword-billed Hummingbird, Shining Sunbeam, and Scarlet-bellied and Black-chested Mountain-Tanagers. We may even get lucky and have the opportunity to photograph the worm-fed Equatorial and Tawny Antpittas that the park guards often charm into coming within only a few feet away at times. There are also options to stroll along the easily walked trails that pass through some of the most accessible and best preserved high-elevation, temperate forest in Ecuador.

After a full morning at Yanacocha, and a lunch in the field, it will be time to move down the slope towards the Mindo area to a well-appointed lodge nestled in the subtropical hills above the Mindo valley. We will be stationed right in the heart of the mid-elevation, Chocó endemic region and surrounded by species that make the west-slope such an attraction for birders, like Toucan Barbet, Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan, Beautiful Jay, and maybe even the scarlet form of Andean Cock-of-the-Rock. The possibilities will be many! Night at lodge in the Mindo area.

Day 2 – Mindo lodge grounds and nearby surroundings

This will be our first morning in the Chocó region, one of the most endemic-ridden spots on the planet. During our three days here we'll be situated at ground- zero of the subtropical west-slope, and surrounded by mossy forest just dripping with orchids and special birds. The Mindo area and its surroundings are legendary to birders and a great place from which to base our exploration the zone since it is so central to many of the different and interesting birding and photography areas, and we will visit many of these hotspots. We will hope for Red-headed and Toucan Barbets, Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan, Black-chinned Mountain-Tanager, Black-winged Saltator, Flame-rumped Tanager, Orange-billed Sparrow at the fruit feeders,

Club-winged Manakin down a trail at a nearby lek, and oodles of colorful hummers at the feeders, including Empress Brilliant, Velvet-purple Coronet, Violet-tailed Sylph and White-booted Racket-tail. For those interested in spending some time birding the old-fashioned way, the trails and forested roadsides around the lodges and feeding spots can be great for lower denizen species like Broad-billed Motmot, Uniform Antshrike, and Golden-headed Manakin. Mixed flocks seem to always be on the move where one has a good shot at seeing Spotted Woodcreeper, Red-faced Spinetail, Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner, Scaled Fruiteater, Yellow-collared Chlorophonia, Flame-faced and Metallic-green Tanagers, and so many more. Night birding can be rewarding so we will certainly want to give this a try on an evening or two. Some of the interesting nocturnal species that we could see include Common Potoo, Lyre-tailed and Swallow-tailed Nightjars, Rufescent Screech-Owl, and Mottled and Rufous-banded Owls, depending on where we spend our nights. Whichever way we end up organizing the activities, it will be overwhelming and huge fun! Night at lodge in Mindo area.

Day 3- Morning Paz de Las Aves, afternoon around lodge

Today we will rise early, load our bags and get on our way since we will want to be in position at Paz de Las Aves at first light. The reason for this is to be at their Andean Cock-of-the-Rock lek while the action is still in high gear. After having photographed a few brilliant males in display mode (we hope!), we will follow (the now iconic) Angel Paz through his reserve along a network of trails to try and coax out his many antpitta friends - Giant, Chestnut-crowned, Yellow-breasted, Moustached and Ochre-breasted are regulars - among others. Some of the trails are steep, but we will take our time, maneuvering to get into position for the best angles. Some of the other species that we often see at close range here include Golden-headed Quetzal, Sickle-winged Guan, Dark-backed Wood-Quail, Orange-breasted Fruiteater, Olivaceous Piha, Black-chinned Mountain-Tanager, and Toucan Barbet. We will have another go at the hummingbirds here since he has some well-positioned, very active feeders that attract a healthy variety. Paz de Las Aves isn't only known for the great bird experience, but also for the tasty late brunch that they put on at the end of the visit!

Once we have wrapped up the photography at this world-famous site we will start making our way towards tomorrow's venue, with a few stops along the way for more photographic opportunities. Night in comfortable lodge near Amagusa.

Day 4 – Amagusa feeders and surroundings

For our final morning in the Chocó, we plan to visit a sensational feeding station situated in an isolated set of hills north of the Mindo area, called Amagusa. The climatic conditions and forests here, while not necessarily obvious to our human senses, are different enough so that it is home to a slightly different set of more range-restricted Chocó endemics, and we will dedicate the majority of the morning to be at-the ready at the Amagusa feeding station. Between the feeding station and nearby roadsides, we will especially be on the lookout for Rose-faced Parrot, Pacific Tuftedcheek, Orange-breasted Fruiteater, Black Solitaire, Glistening-green Tanager, Moss-backed Tanager and Indigo Flowerpiercer. A visit to this area really rounds out the entire middle elevation Chocó experience. Afternoon drive back to Quito area and night in hotel there.

Day 5 – Antisana National Park and Guango Lodge

Today it is off to the alpine-like high paramos and then to the east slope, but first we should have a look around the hotel grounds for species typical of the drier central valley, chaparral

scrub is always a good idea. We should be able to find Western Emerald, Sparkling Violetear, Scrub and Blue-and-yellow Tanagers, Rusty Flowerpiercer, Hooded Siskin, Golden Grosbeak and plenty of others that often come into close range in the fruiting and flowering trees right around the hotel. Before too long we will saddle up and get moving to Antisana National Park, about an hour drive away.

The centerpiece of the park is Antisana Volcano, Ecuador's fourth largest mountain at 18,700 feet tall and covered in massive glaciers that are hundreds of feet thick. The mountain is surrounded by "páramo" (a unique Andean grassland environment) and is home to a special set of birds, including the Andean Condor (best place in the country for it!), Andean Ibis, Silvery Grebe, Andean Gull, Black-winged Ground-Dove, Carunculated Caracara, Ecuadorian Hillstar, Many-striped Canastero, Black-billed Shrike-Tyrant, Paramo Pipit and a pretty complete set of the birds typical of the Ecuadorian alpine. The western side of the reserve is made up of high Andean valleys, cliffs and altiplanos, while the eastern side drops away to the Amazon rainforest down below. Other fauna that makes its home in the reserve include pumas, Andean fox, white-tailed deer, mountain tapir, and the elusive and endangered Andean spectacled bear. Arriving to the reserve is part of the experience, as the drive affords spectacular views of the surrounding area, including Quito in the distance below the enormous Pichincha volcano massif.

Much of our morning will be spent tracking down as many of these birds and critters in hopes of ideal light conditions. One of the best spots for hummingbird photography here is a set of productive hummingbird feeders on the way up to the park where we will spend some quality time. Here we will likely get Giant Hummingbird, Tyrian Metaltail, Shining Sunbeam, Black-tailed Trainbearer and maybe even Sword-billed Hummingbird.

Sometime in the early afternoon we will need to make our way to Guango Lodge via the Papallacta Pass, the gateway to the east from Quito. This area is also rich in paramo birdlife. The plan is to have some time to have our first look around here, and with the proper weather, we'll see what goodies we can turn up - maybe a close Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe? - before landing at Guango later on. Red-rumped Bush-Tyrant and even Giant Conebill are some of the other specialties of this area, and some close shots at even just one of these would make it worthwhile! The Papallacta Pass is right on the continental divide, and once we finish up in the paramo, we will work our way down the east-slope - Amazonian drainage now - towards Guango Lodge. On the way we will pass through some beautiful high-elevation temperate forests where in the following days we will have a chance to stop and soak in this birdy zone. Some of the possibilities include Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Viridian Metaltail, White-chinned Thistletail, Red-crested Cotinga, Black-backed Bush-Tanager and Golden-crowned Tanager, just to name a very few. We should arrive to Guango Lodge in the late afternoon/early evening for a first crack at the hummingbird feeders that will be dripping with species such as Tourmaline Sunangel, Sword-billed Hummingbird, Buff-tailed Coronet, Long-tailed Sylph and White-bellied Woodstar. Our packed lunch in the field will allow us to remain flexible with respect to how we plan our birding for the day.

At dinner we will be officially welcomed by the lit fireplace and have our first taste of Ecuador's best known hot toddy, a delicious drink - called "Canelazo" - made from water boiled with real cinnamon, fruit juice and a dash of cane alcohol, that is sure to help warm us up.

After a tasty dinner, and assuming the weather holds, we should give night birding a shot, seeing if we can get an owl or two interested. Night at Guango Lodge.

Day 6 – Guango Lodge reserve and surroundings

Today will be largely devoted to photographing the impressive variety of hummingbirds that visit the feeders at the lodge. Apart from those mentioned above, we could also land Collared Inca, Glowing Puffleg or even Mountain Avocetbill. Other insect and fruit feeding stations around the lodge are likely to attract Andean Guan, Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan, Gray-browed Brushfinch, Mountain Cacique, among others. Along the trails and around the lodge we frequently run into some of the best temperate forest flocks on any of our tours in Ecuador; in a matter of minutes it isn't uncommon to see Bar-bellied Woodpecker, White-banded Tyrannulet, Dusky Piha, Black-capped and Black-eared Hemispingus, Slaty and Pale-naped Brush-Finch, Gray-hooded Bush-Tanager, Lacrimose and Hooded Mountain-Tanagers and even Plushcap. Down by the river we have excellent chances at finding both Torrent Duck and White-capped Dipper for photographic opportunities. At any rate, we will enjoy a hot, sit-down lunch, only feet away from the hummingbird feeders. Night at Guango Lodge.

Day 7 – Guango Lodge morning, afternoon transfer to San Isidro Lodge

Since Guango Lodge is such a fantastic birding spot we will take advantage of another morning here on the grounds to search for any bird species that have eluded us up to this point. Mountain Avocetbill, Gray-breasted Mountain Toucan, Barred Fruiteater, Blue-backed Conebill, and Red-hooded Tanager would all be great finds, all which often come in close enough for photos. We will enjoy another hot, sit-down lunch, and soon after transfer to San Isidro Lodge – about 1 ½ hours down-slope - making a stop or two along the way should time permit. We will shoot to arrive in time to shower up and even try and spotlight the night monkeys at dusk before what will certainly be a memorable dinner. The “mystery” Black-banded-type Owl will probably put in an appearance right off of the main veranda at the dining room, so have cameras ready. This is a gorgeous owl that may one day prove to be a new species to science. Mountain Tapir is also a fairly regular visitor to the gardens next to the dining room as well. Night San Isidro Lodge.

Day 8 – San Isidro Lodge

We will kick the morning off right from the main dining room veranda, where we often find it hard to pull ourselves away... the birds just sometimes keep coming. San Isidro is nestled right in the middle of the subtropical zone, so there will be a new set of birds waiting for us here. Some of the regulars that often come into within only a few meters include Masked Trogon, Montane and Olive-backed Woodcreepers, Golden-crowned Flycatcher, Marble-faced and Variegated Bristle-Tyrants, Black-billed Peppershrike, Inca Jay, Oleaginous Hemispingus, Saffron-crowned Tanager and Scarlet-rumped Cacique. The hummingbird feeders and flowers at the dining room attract a variety of species, including Fawn-breasted Brilliant and Violet-fronted Brilliants, Collared and Bronzy Incas, Chestnut-breasted Coronet, Geoffroy's Daggerbill and Gorgeted Woodstar. After about an hour of this, we will want to visit the bird hide just down into the forest where we might see White-bellied Antpitta, Highland Motmot, Black-eared Hemispingus and Chestnut-capped Brushfinch. The rest of the morning will be spent in the gardens or even along forested roadside at San Isidro where we will be on the lookout for Sickle-winged and Wattled Guans, Powerful Woodpecker, Tyrannine and Strong-billed Woodcreepers, Pearled Treerunner, Barred Becard, Beryl-spangled Tanager, Bluish Flowerpiercer, Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonia and those noisy White-capped Tanagers.

Day 9 – Morning at San Isidro; afternoon travel back to the central valley

After a last look around at San Isidro, we will be on our way back up and over the Andes back to the Quito suburbs, targeting the spots that will best round out the trip. Maybe that last shot at a Gorgeted Woodstar or mountain-tanager. We will get back to our hotel near the airport in the late afternoon/early evening. Night at hotel in the central valley, or international flight out.

