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SOUTHWESTERN COLOMBIA BIRDING TOUR

15 DAYS/ 14 NIGHTS

OVERVIEW

With more than 1,950 species (almost 20% of the world's total) counted so far, Colombia has more species of birds than any other country on the planet. It is easy to see why. Colombia is tropical, yet it also has ample elevation changes due to the Andes mountain range. Furthermore it has both the Pacific and Caribbean coastlines. Many different habitats ensure an abundance of bird species, with new ones still being discovered and new records being announced often.

The Km. 18 and San Antonio Cloud Forest provide an excellent introduction to birding in the Colombian Andes. More than 100 years ago, Frank Chapman, of the American Museum of Natural History, spent some time researching the bird diversity of this forest, which concluded in the first detailed bird survey for Colombia. The birding in the area is amazing, with mixed-species flocks of Multicolored, Purplish-mantled, Scrub and Golden-naped Tanagers foraging alongside Scaled Fruiteater, Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonia and Golden-headed and Crested Quetzal.

Another area of equal importance in Colombia's ornithological history is found along the Old Buenaventura Road, which descends from the western Andes to the Pacific Ocean along the Anchicaya River watershed and is one of Colombia's newest destinations to open up to birding. The birding along this gradient of insurmountable diversity is such that it inspired Steve Hilty to start work on "A Guide to the Birds of Colombia" in 1986, the first ornithological field guide for South America. This tour also takes you to a prolific wetland area in the Cauca Valley in search of an assortment of dry forest species as well as shorebirds and aquatic birds. The Sonso Lagoon is one of Colombia's largest wetland reserves and home to Little and Dwarf Cuckoos, Jet Antbird, Blackish Rail and even the elusive Horned Screamer. With luck one may encounter endemics such as Bar-crested Antshrike, and the endemics Apical Flycatcher and Grayish Piculet. At the Montezuma Lodge in the Choco Bioregion, a biodiversity hotspot, chances for the endemic Gold-ringed Tanager and Munchique Wood-wren, as well as the recently discovered "Alto Pisones" Tapaculo. Montezuma is revered as one of the best birding sites in Colombia, especially if you are in the hunt for Choco endemics such as Black Solitaire, Violet-tailed Sylph and Orange-breasted Fruiteater.

The route then climbs to the central Andean range, the Otun-Quimbaya Sanctuary in search of the endemic Cauca Guan and for the best views in the world of Red-ruffed Fruitcrow. At the world-renowned Rio Blanco Reserve near Manizales, there are excellent chances for some of the Antpittas, plus many other cloud forest and montane birds. After more ascending, one can soak in hot springs overlooking the scenic Central Andes, and look for species adapted to high elevations in Los Nevados National Park with the beautiful Nevado del Ruiz as a backdrop. This tour starts and ends in Cali.

DAILY SUMMARY

DAY 1	Arrival in Cali
DAY 2	The Famous Km. 18
DAY 3	El Descanso Feeders and Upper Anchicaya Watershed
DAY 4	Lower Anchicaya Watershed
DAY 5	San Antonio Forest and Andean Cock-of-the-rock Lek and Buga
DAY 6	Sonso Lagoon and Montezuma Lodge
DAY 7	Higher elevations of Tatama National Park
DAY 8	Lower elevations of Tatama National Park
DAY 9	Montezuma Lodge and Otun-Quimbaya
DAY 10	Otun-Quimbaya Flora and Fauna Sanctuary
DAY 11	Rio Blanco
DAY 12	Rio Blanco and Los Nevados NP
DAY 13	Los Nevados National Park
DAY 14	Los Nevados National Park
Day 15	Drive to Cali and Depature

DETAILED DAILY ITINERARY

DAY 1: Arrival in Cali

After arriving at Alfonso Bonilla Aragón International Airport in Cali, you will be met by your Nature Travel Bird Guide and be transported to your comfortable city hotel.

Santiago de Cali, usually known by its short name "Cali", is the capital of the Valle del Cauca department. As the only major Colombian city with access to the Pacific Coast, Cali is the main urban and economic centre in southwest Colombia, and has one of the fastest-growing economies in the country. The city was founded on 25 July 1536 by the Spanish conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar. Cali is also a centre for sports in Colombia, and is the only Colombian city to have hosted the Pan American Games. It is also a hotspot for salsa dancing, and the city boasts many famous salsa dancing clubs.

After settling in and if time permits we will do some birding in the area around our accommodation. Parks in the city may yield a list of over 30 species even on a short walk! We will enjoy a sundowner drink and welcome dinner at our accommodation and the Tour plan for the next 15 days will be discussed while we all get to know each other.

 **Accommodation: Hotel Araucana**

DAY 2: The Famous Km 18

Today we spend the morning around the famous Km. 18, located on an 1800-meter (5,900-foot) pass 18 kilometers (11 miles) northwest of Cali along the road that connects Cali with the port city of Buenaventura. Birding can be very productive here, and we will look for four endemics – Chestnut Wood-Quail, Colombian Chachalaca, Grayish Piculet and the spectacular Multicolored Tanager. This area is a tanager paradise, where we have a good chance to see Purplish-mantled, Summer, Beryl-spangles, Flame-rumped, Golden, Metallic-green, Saffron-crowned, and Golden-naped tanagers as well as Ashy-throated Bush-Tanager and Blue-winged Mountain-Tanager.

We hope to be dazzled by an impressive show of hummingbirds at a private house along the same road, including the beautifully ornate Long-tailed Sylph, Booted Racket-tail, Blue-headed Sapphire, Green and Brown Violetears, Fawn-breasted Brilliant, Speckled Hummingbird, White-necked Jacobin, and Tawny-bellied Hermit. Birding the forest can also produce many near-endemics such as Scrub Tanager, Purple-throated Woodstar, Nariño Tapaculo, Purplish-mantled Tanager and Yellow-headed Manakin. Here we may see striking birds such as Green-and-black Fruiteater, Chestnut-breasted and Blue-naped Chlorophonia, the inconspicuous Golden-headed Quetzal, Scarlet-fronted Parakeet, Red-faced Spinetail, Spotted and Rusty-winged Barbtails, Streaked Xenops, and the noisy, inquisitive Crimson-rumped Toucanet. We will also listen and search for species with interesting calls and songs, like the hawk-like whistle of the Scaled Fruiteater, warbling song of Black-billed Peppershrike, and beautiful flute-like song of Andean Solitaire. Other

species we may find are Chestnut-breasted Wren, Greenish Puffleg, Montane Woodcreeper, Scale-crested Pygmy-tyrant, and the hyperactive Cinnamon Flycatcher.

We then return to our hotel in Cali and enjoy dinner and a comfortable night's rest.

🏠 **Accommodation: Hotel La Araucana**

DAY 3: El Descanso Feeders and Upper Anchicaya Watershed

Perhaps Colombia's most famous birding location, the Anchicaya watershed is located along the edge of the Farallones National Park, one of the most diverse parks on the planet. The birding begins just 5 minutes from the hotel via a paved road that can offer many of the Choco endemics that this mega diverse locality has to offer. Over 300 species have been recorded along this road, and we will be surrounded by lush vegetation and gorgeous waterfalls. Our first day on the Anchicaya road will allow time to enjoy the upper portion of the road and some very well-maintained feeders at our breakfast spot where Rufous-throated, Glistening-green and Silver-throated Tanagers are known to occur.

The road will surely yield many highly prized species Golden-collared Honeycreeper, White-whiskered Puffbird, Uniform Treehunter, Sooty-headed Wren, Green Thorntail and White-tailed Hillstar. One of the main targets main targets is Toucan Barbet, sporting 5 different colours elegantly while still having a tough demeanour.

We will search the skies for Barred Hawk, Ornate Hawk-eagle and Swallow-tailed Kites, whilst keeping an eye out for the attractive Ornate Flycatcher feeding on low branches. Another mega target is the recently described Pisones Tapaculo. The road can be extremely productive and it rarely disappoints.

After a good birding day we head to our overnight accommodation for dinner, ticking lifer lists and a good night's rest.

🏠 **Accommodation: Hotel EPSA Lodge**

DAY 4: Lower Anchicaya Watershed

Birding again on this day is done within the reserve and on lightly traveled roads, in search of species such as Choco Trogon, Lita Woodpecker and Baudo Guan. The tanagers can be quite a treat, with chances for Scarlet-and-white, Golden-chested, Gray-and-gold, and Scarlet-browed Tanagers among many others. Lunch on the road will provide for a long day of birding, as we seek out other goodies such as Long-tailed Tyrant, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Lanceolated Monklet, Bay Wren, Cinnamon Woodpecker, Collared Aracari and colonies of Russet-backed Oropendolas.

The area is teeming with many of our friends with the word “ant” in their name, and if we are lucky enough to encounter an ant swarm the action can bring birds such as Stub-tailed, Immaculate, as well as Streaked and Pacific Antwren amongst many others.

The afternoon is spent birding the road back up the western Andes to Hotel Araucana. One doesn't have to look far to find species such as White-whiskered Puffbird, Purple-throated Fruitcrow and Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Pacific Flatbill, Cinnamon Becard, White-ringed Flycatcher, Blue-black Grosbeak, and Blue-crowned and Golden-collared Manakin.

We will settle in for dinner, overlooking the day's sightings and a good night's rest.

🏠 **Accommodation: Hotel Araucana**

DAY 5: San Antonio Forest and Andean Cock-of-the-rock Lek and Buga

We will spend the morning birding in the pristine cloud forest of the San Antonio Forest. Here we may see striking birds such as Green-and-black Fruiteater, Chestnut-breasted and Blue-naped Chlorophonia, the inconspicuous Golden-headed Quetzal, Scarlet-fronted Parakeet, Red-faced Spinetail, Spotted and Rusty-winged Barbtails, Streaked Xenops, and the noisy, inquisitive Crimson-rumped Toucanet.

We will also listen and search for species with interesting calls and songs, like the hawk-like whistle of the Scaled Fruiteater, warbling song of Black-billed Peppershrike, and beautiful flute-like song of Andean Solitaire. Other species we may find are Chestnut-breasted Wren, Greenish Puffleg, Montane Woodcreeper, Scale-crested Pygmy-tyrant, and the hyperactive Cinnamon Flycatcher.

At 2 pm we will visit an active Andean Cock-of-the rock lek for some close-up views of this magnificent bird's display. This 25-minute hike will take us down a steep trail to their lek near the river. After the lek we will make our way towards Buga, a marvelous city and one of the most important religious pilgrimage centers in Colombia.

Our colonial hotel has a large swimming pool and impressive architecture. We will enjoy dinner and a good night's rest after all the excitement of the day.

🏠 **Accommodation: Hotel Guadalajara de Buga**

DAY 6: Sonso Lagoon and Montezuma Lodge

We will start early to take a 10-minute drive to this 1900 acre wetland gem. It is one of the only remaining wetlands in the Cauca Valley and is teeming with birds, making it one of Colombia's best wetland birding locations. Here we will search the marshes and lagoons that line the Cauca River for Fulvous and Black-bellied Whistling-ducks, Roseate Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Anhinga, Little Blue, Cocoi, and Striated Herons, Snowy Egret, Black-necked Stilt and Snail Kite. We are likely to find Wattled Jacana, which have a polyandry mating system, where females mate with many males within a breeding season.

Other interesting species we might spot include the endemics Apical Flycatcher and Grayish Piculet, Jet Antbird, Blackish Rail, Ruby-topaz Hummingbird, and Horned Screamer.

Along riparian areas we may find Greater Ani, Ringed Kingfisher, Crested and Yellow-headed Caracara, Red-crowned and Spot-breasted Woodpeckers, and Cocoa Woodcreeper.

Lunch is at the hotel with time to prepare for a 5-hour drive to Montezuma Lodge, which will require a transfer to 4x4 vehicles. It is well worth the effort, as Montezuma Lodge is legendary amongst birders the world over.

🏠 Accommodation: Montezuma Lodge

DAY 7: Higher elevations of Tatama National Park

The Montezuma Lodge offers unsurpassed hospitality and magnificent feeders and birding right from the lodge, and boast a 13 km road of pristine forest that covers a 1,400-meter (4,500 ft.) altitudinal gradient. A very early start will have us at the top of the hill by sunrise, in hopes of making the best out of a long day of birding. Our targets at the higher elevation are the endemics Munchique Wood-wren and Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer, which should be easy to see in the open areas of the top of the hill. The long descent will provide opportunities for some nice species, including Flame-faced Tanager, Glossy-black Thrush, Barre Fruiteater, Tanager Finch, and Black-and-gold, Rufous-throated, and Golden-chested Tanagers.

We will have a picnic lunch along the way to maximize our birding, allowing time to get after forest skullers such as Alto Pisones and Spillman's Tapaculos and Yellow-bellied and Hooded Antpittas.

A long day of birding will come with the reward of incredible hospitality, an exquisite home-cooked meal and a good night's sleep.

🏠 Accommodation: Montezuma Lodge

DAY 8: Lower Elevations of Tatama National Park

The park never fails to provide and impress, and seeking out Colombian endemics such as Gold-ringed Tanager and Chestnut Wood-quail can be exhilarating. If the weather is on our side, we will have fantastic views of Cerro Tatama, with hopes of running into species such as the endemic Beautiful Jay, Orange-breasted Fruiteater, White-faced Nunbird, Glistening-green Tanager, Streak-capped Treehunter, Lineated Foliage-gleaner, Olivaceous Piha, and Indigo Flowerpiercer.

River crossings will give us a chance for White-capped Dipper, and we won't have to venture too far from the lodge to have chances for Toucan Barbet, Black Solitaire, Choco Vireo and the beautiful Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonia.

We will arrive at the lodge in time to scope out the hummingbird feeders with visitors such as Violet-tailed Sylph, Empress Brilliant, White-tailed Hillstar, Purple-bibbed Whitetip, Andean Emerald, and the near endemic Purple-throated Woodstar.

We will enjoy another home-cooked meal and a good night's sleep.

🏠 **Accommodation: Montezuma Lodge**

DAY 9: Montezuma Lodge and Otun-Quimbaya

After breakfast we will have time to enjoy the banana feeders where Silver-throated Tanager, Buff-throated Saltator, and Golden-naped Tanagers take turns at the bananas in a semi-polite manner. Also, the kitchen staff sets out maize for a population of Blackish Rail that live in a nearby wetland, affording great views of this usually hard-to-see bird.

After lunch we will head towards the Otun-Quimbaya Reserve, a 4-hour drive. Otún-Quimbaya is located on the central Andes near the city of Pereira and is a flora and fauna wonderland known to reward us with a large number of species. We will drive through the city of Pereira, and wind along the Otun River, finally arriving at the locally run and rustic lodge for dinner and our overnight stay.

🏠 **Accommodation: Yarumo Blanco Cabins**

DAY 10: Otun-Quimbaya Flora and Fauna Sanctuary

We will raise predawn to look for Choco endemic Colombian Screech-Owl, and then continue birding at the Otun-Quimbaya Reserve right at the doorsteps of our hotel. The Otun-Quimbaya Reserve is a flora and fauna sanctuary located on the west slope of the Central Cordillera, and is home to the Wax Palm, the tallest palm in the world and the national tree of Colombia.

These palms, unlike most other species of palm, thrive at high altitudes and cool climates found here. We will also be received by the sounds of Howler Monkeys and the endangered, endemic Cauca Guan, once believed to be extinct until rediscovery of a population in 1990.

Otun-Quimbaya is also one of the best places in the world to observe Red-ruffed Fruitcrow. We will search for endemics – Chestnut Wood-Quail, recently described Stiles's Tapaculo – and near endemics, like Moustached Antpitta, the handsome Rufous-breasted Flycatcher, and bright-colored Golden-fronted Whitestart. Other impressive birds we hope to find include Three-striped, Russet-crowned, and Canada Warblers, Masked Trogon, Green Jay, Andean Motmot, Blue-naped Chlorophonia, and Orange-bellied Euphonia.

We will also look for Black-billed Mountain-Toucan, Chestnut-breasted Wren, Plumbeous-crowned Tyrannulet, Marble-faced and Variegated Bristle-tyrants, and Glossy and Masked Flowerpiercers.

The afternoon drive along the Otun River will be devoted to finding the famous Torrent Duck en route to Manizales, a 3.5-hour drive; a stop at a roadside lake may yield more aquatic species for the list including Pied-billed Grebe and Ruddy Duck. The next two nights are spent at the Rio Blanco Reserve, 30 minutes from Manizales, touted as one of the three best birding sites in the world.

Accommodations for the next two nights are rustic, but comfortable and clean, and with unsurpassed hospitality.

🏠 Accommodation: Rio Blanco Lodge

DAY 11: Rio Blanco

The Rio Blanco Reserve is owned by Aguas de Manizales, the local water company, and is situated along an altitudinal gradient, therefore including a wide variety of ecosystems. We could possibly observe five Antpitta species at feeders located within a short hike from the lodge, including the endemic and endangered Brown-banded, and the elusive Bicolored, Chestnut-crowned, Chestnut-naped, and Slate-crowned Antpittas. Other feeder visitors seldom seen include Slaty-backed Nightingale Thrush and Stripe-headed Brush-Finch.

Additional species observed in Rio Blanco include the uncommon and endangered Rufous-fronted and Golden-plumed Parakeets and the very rare and sought-after Masked Saltator.

The reserve boasts the following and we may encounter Tyrannine Woodcreeper, Golden-fronted Whitestart, Dusky Piha, Lachrymose and Buff-breasted Mountain-tanagers, showy Grass-green and White-capped Tanagers, Powerful Woodpecker, and the hard to see Ocellated, Blackish, and Spillman's Tapaculos.

Other less common species that are possible are Long-tailed and Black-billed Peppershrike, the handsome Plushcap, Red-hooded Tanager, Mountain Cacique, and the endangered Golden-plumed Parakeet.

After all that excitement we return to our lodging for dinner and overnight stay.

🏠 Accommodation: Rio Blanco Lodge

DAY 12: Rio Blanco and Los Nevados NP

Today we have a chance to visit the reserve's several well-maintained hummingbird feeders that attract a great variety of hummingbirds. During our morning coffees, up to 20 species of hummingbirds may be seen including Tourmaline Sunangel, Buff-tailed Coronet, Fawn-breasted Brilliant, Collared and Bronzy Inca, Speckled Hummingbird, Green and Sparkling Violetear, the tiny, slow-flying White-bellied Woodstar, and the showy Long-tailed Sylph.

In the afternoon we will drive up the mountain to spend two nights at Hotel Termales del Ruiz, at 11,000 feet (3300m), where we can relax in its mineral-rich, medicinal hot springs and enjoy scenic views of the central Andes.

 **Accommodation: Hotel Termales del Ruiz**

DAY 13: Los Nevados National Park

We will explore Los Nevados National Park, located on the highest part of the Colombian central Andes. We will wind through patches of forest that open up to Paramo, an ecosystem of tropical grasslands above the treeline, toward the picturesque 5,300-meter (17,400-foot) volcano Nevado del Ruiz. The scenery in Paramo is magical and surreal, with velvety Frailejon plants adding to this effect. Frailejon plants belong to the Espeletia genus and are endemic to Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador.

The tour reaches elevations up to 3,950 meters (13,000 feet), so it will be cold. Here the goal is to find species adapted to high elevations like the endemic Buffy Helmetcrest and the near endemic Rainbow-bearded Thornbill, both of which sometimes forage on the ground. Also possible are Viridian Metaltail, Stout-billed Cinclodes, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant, the beautiful Golden-crowned Tanager, near endemic Black-backed Bush-Tanager, and Glossy Flowerpiercer.

We may also find a variety of seedeaters in the Paramo, including Plumbeous Sierra-Finch plus Paramo and Plain-colored seedeaters.

In the afternoon we return to the hotel for drinks, dinner and a good night's rest.

 **Accommodation: Hotel Termales del Ruiz**

DAY 14: Los Nevados National Park

The morning is spent searching for any targets that may have been missed and enjoying the hummingbird feeders at the hotel. There is also a chance to look for the very rare and endangered endemic Rufous-fronted Parakeet along a two-kilometer stretch of road that passes through elfin forest, an ecosystem of dwarfed plants. We also hope to spot the very tame Tawny Antpitta, a common companion in this area.

On the drive down to the Pereira airport the road passes by some interesting spots, including a glacial lake, Laguna Negra, where one may find goodies such as Many-striped Canastero, White-tailed Hawk, the rare Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Andean Tit-Spinetail, White-chinned Thistletail, Andean or Ruddy Duck, Andean Teal, Grass or Sedge Wren, and Pale-naped Brush-Finch.

We will return to the hotel for one last dip in the hot springs and a last dinner together as a group.

🏠 Accommodation: Hotel Termales del Ruiz

DAY 15: Drive to Cali and Departure

Our final morning's birding will be done around the lodge before we depart for the hotel in Cali after an exciting 14 days of birding in Colombia.

Once in Cali, you will be transported to the airport to connect to your flights back home.

INCLUSIONS:

- All accommodation
- Breakfast, lunch and dinner
- Bottled water in vehicle
- Air-conditioned Vehicle
- Fuel
- Park entry fees
- Full time services of a personal Nature Travel bird guide

EXCLUSIONS:

- Items of a personal nature
- International flights
- Laundry
- Gifts
- Souvenirs
- Tips
- Alcoholic beverages and drinks

INFORMATION:

Colombia has an incredible amount of diversity in a relatively small space. In this compact itinerary we will visit two different mountain ranges, a low-lying valley and the high altitude paramo ecosystem.

Please note that we will be sleeping at 11,000 feet (3300m) for 2 nights during our visit to the paramo ecosystem. We will mostly be birding on dirt roads or wide trails with the vehicle nearby in case participants want to take a rest. Please note that roads may be steep and slippery and we may occasionally venture off into small trails that spur off the roads. We suggest that you generally practice carrying your equipment for the amount of time and distances that you may encounter during this trip so you are well prepared!

We will have purified or bottled drinking water available throughout the trip. One should be prepared for early morning birding, as it is important to be out before it becomes too hot. Whenever possible we shall have an early afternoon break, before continuing out in the late afternoon. Also for those interested in mammals and night birds there will be some opportunities for owling and maybe spotlighting for a mammal or two.

Most of our meals will be sit-down meals, although field lunches or even a field dinner is likely somewhere along the trip. If you have specific food allergies, please communicate these to us on signing up.

Lodging will consist of a mix of 3-4 star hotels in cities, a lovely boutique hotel near Km. 18, a comfortable lodge in the Anchicaya Reserve, a basic lodge in Montezuma and a mountain resort in Los Nevados NP. There is a river near the lodge at Montezuma, a pool at the hotel in Buga, so pack your swim wear! Our hotel in Los Nevados has natural hot springs, but be advised it is situated at 11,000 feet (3350m) in elevation. We expect relative comfort, hot showers, and excellent local food and provide a nice variety of snacks and purified or bottled drinking water available throughout the trip.

Thank you for choosing Nature Travel Birding.