

The Northern Colombia Birding Trail

*Colombia has the richest
birdlife on the planet with
more than 1,900 species! Enjoy
the spectacle while helping
communities conserve their
local natural heritage.*

Vermilion Cardinal.
Photo: Luis E. Urueña/Manakin Nature Tours

Colombia is one of the world's "megadiverse" countries, hosting close to 10% of the planet's species, with more than 1,900 species of birds—a figure that continues to increase every year. The country has nearly 20 percent of the world's total bird species, including 200 migratory species, 155 threatened birds, and 79 endemics.

Colombia sits atop South America, flanked by Panamá, Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru, and Brazil; its southern reaches straddle the equator. Slashing diagonally across the country are three spurs of the Andes: western, central, and eastern. A fourth, isolated mountain range called the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta launches out of the northern coastline along the Caribbean—rising from steamy sea level to snow-encrusted 5,775m (19,000 foot) peaks. Coffee plants thrive on the flanks of these mountain ranges, but

these mountains offer a lot more to Colombia than just exportable stimulants. Each of the ranges, and the dense tropical jungles between them, house a variety of habitats for birds and other wildlife. The Northern Colombia Birding trail is a series of ecolodges, national parks, and otherwise-notable habitats in the Perijá region, in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, and along the Caribbean coast that provide particularly good birding opportunities for extreme and not-so-extreme birders alike. Here in this region, we will encounter threatened dry forest, proper desert habitats on the Guajira Peninsula (a rarity at this latitude) and an incredible number of Colombian and regionally endemic birds. However, one thing makes this itinerary different from most other birding trips to Colombia. This itinerary goes to sites of critical conservation value and by engaging

local people through birdwatching you can help make a difference. The project trained local Colombians to become bird guides and ecotourism service providers helping give an economic value to birds and the forests that sustain them. The Northern Colombia Birding Trail helps conserve critical habitat and species—it is also helping improve the income of the local communities by generating new jobs. In fact, more than 40 community members and indigenous people from the Wayuu tribe and neighboring towns have been trained to work as bird guides at the route. As these young people become part of the birding economy, they are becoming ambassadors for their local environments, who will work to convince their communities to conserve habitat rather than degrade it. This is conservation of birds and habitat, through bird focused tourism.



Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Photo: Alvaro Jaramillo

The birding sites we visit

ECOPARQUE LOS BESOTES

This private reserve is only 9 km from Valledupar, a pleasant city known for Vallenato music with its distinctive accordion sound and infectious melody. Los Besotes is part of the Santa Marta Range, but lies on its drier eastern side, where an abundance of tropical dry forests are found. Sadly, this forest and Important Bird Area (IBA) is at risk of disappearing. One of the most notable species here is the Blue-billed Curassow, as well as the uncommon Military Macaw. Over 210 species of birds have been found at Los Besotes, as well as wild cats, such as the Ocelot and the Puma. The Grey-handed Night Monkey can be found here, along with White-fronted Capuchin Monkey. Besotes will be our first opportunity to look for the Glaucous Tanager and the gorgeous Golden-winged Sparrow. The Black-backed Antshrike is here in the lower elevations, as well as the Pale-legged Hornero, a form that is sometimes considered a regional endemic (Caribbean Hornero). We will try for some owling at Los Besotes, where the status of owls is still unclear – but we might get lucky!



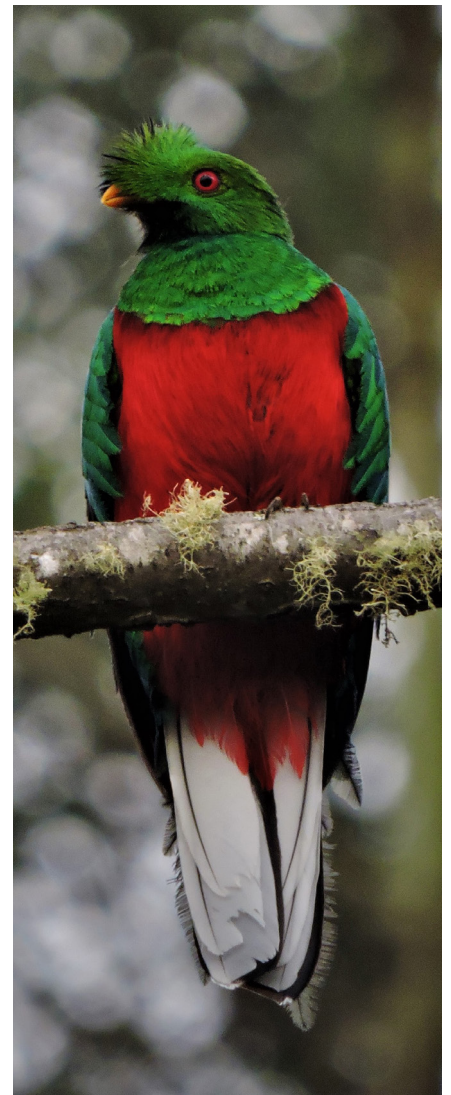
From top to bottom:
Golden-winged Sparrow. Photo: Luis E. Urueña/
Manakin Nature Tours; Ecoparque Los Besotes.
Photo: Gloria Lentijo/Audubon Colombia





SERRANÍA DEL PERIJÁ

The Serranía del Perijá is like the Holy Grail for birders interested in Colombia's birds. This isolated offshoot of the Eastern Andes forms the border with Venezuela and is one of the least explored areas in Colombia. Much of Colombia suffered from internal strife that lingered here for decades, and Perijá was a final stronghold. Yet, since 2009, the area has been clear of political problems, and birders are now beginning to venture to this amazing set of endemic rich mountains. Chamicero del Perijá is a small, but comfortable birding lodge, surrounded by amazing montane forest that has received visitors since 2015. Currently the Serranía del Perijá is considered to have four endemic species, the Perijá Metaltail, Perijá Thistletail, Perijá Brushfinch and the newly described Perijá Tapaculo. However, this is where things get interesting! This area has been out of reach for birders and scientists for decades until now, and even a cursory visit to the Perijá finds that many common species, such as the Rufous Spinetail and the local version of Yellow-breasted Brushfinch, are in fact endemic subspecies. Many new discoveries await as birders and biologists increase their visits to Perijá. This area may not rival Santa Marta in terms of the number of endemics, but it may come close once taxonomy is updated for the birds in this region. New discoveries aside, Perijá is gorgeous, and the morning views across the valley to the Sierra Nevada are breathtaking. Other birds here include Crested and Golden-headed Quetzal, Barred Fruiteater, Andean Condor, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Plushcap and the Buff-breasted Mountain-Tanager. A unique looking form of Lacrimose Mountain-Tanager is common in the higher areas, as well as another unique endemic that may one day be a full species, the local form of the Golden-bellied Starfrontlet. Hook-billed Kites are relatively easy to see here, and with luck the White-rumped Hawk or even Black-and-chestnut Eagle may fly through. The road will take us into páramo habitats, where Rufous-chested Chat Tyrants abound. The Páramo Seedeater can also be seen, as well as many of the Tyrian Metaltail and a few of the stunningly purple-tailed endemic Perijá Metaltail. The ability to move from montane forest to páramo, and then down to foothill subtropical areas, will give us more than enough to look at. This area is right on the cusp of discovery, and now is the time to go!



Clockwise from top left:
Slaty Brushfinch (subsp. Perijá); Crested Quetzal
and Streak-backed Canastero. Photo: Luis E.
Urueña/Manakin Nature Tours

LOS FLAMENCOS FLORA AND FAUNA SANCTUARY

Los Flamencos Sanctuary, a nationally protected area is located in the village of Camarones, just outside of Riohacha. This is the west edge of the Guajira desert, where dry forest becomes shorter and sparser, and bare dry earth separates the trees. Los Flamencos is far from a hostile and barren area. It lies on the coast and has shallow waterbodies that fill as the rains come, and evaporate during the dry season. These evaporating ponds concentrate salt, allowing brine shrimp to bloom which attracts the namesake bird of the park—American Flamingos! Their numbers vary depending on water levels, but they can be seen in the hundreds on a good day. If you have not had enough pink, how about the even brighter Scarlet Ibis? They aggregate here as well, with their close relatives the White Ibis. So close in fact, that a hybrid “Pink Ibis” can be seen here. Gulls, terns, and many migratory shorebirds, as well as breeding shorebirds like the Oystercatcher and Wilson’s Plover can also be seen at Los Flamencos. Retreating to the forest, there is a

series of very attractive regional specialties found here. The sole South American offshoot of a North American group, the Vermilion Cardinal can be seen here. Nothing prepares you, even if you have backyard Northern Cardinals, for the striking red of this species and the ebullient crest making it very distinct from its close relatives to the north. The White-whiskered Spinetail, part of the often drab Spinetail family, is strikingly good looking and may elicit “Wows!” Pecking in the branches and trilling away, is a tiny and colorful woodpecker, the Chestnut Piculet. There are also specialties more somber in tone, such as the Slender-billed Inezia (Tyrannulet) and White-tipped Inezia. A crowd favorite is the Russet-throated Puffbird (the Bobo, or fool bird, as the locals call it), which will sit and stare back at you as hard as you stare at it. In a crowd of what tend to be relatively greenish or grayish and nondescript birds, the saltators, the uncommon Orinoco Saltator, is beautiful looking bird. Don’t ask why there are so many good looking birds in this drab desert

habitat - Just enjoy these wonderful dry forest birds. This area is home to the Wayuu indigenous people, many of whom participated in our guide training process. The Wayuu are known for their colorful bags (or mochilas), which are sold throughout the Guajira region, and you will certainly have a chance to see their craftsmanship.



Clockwise from top right:
Russet-throated Puffbird. Photo: Alvaro Jaramillo;
Bared-eyed Pigeon and Orinoco Saltator. Photo:
José Luis Pushaina







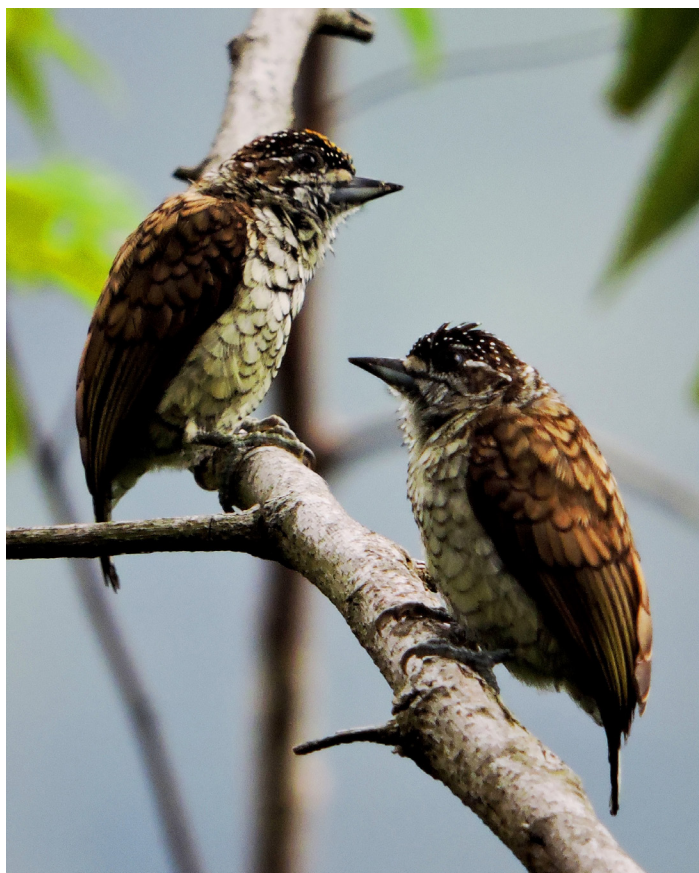
Highlight Species	
LOS FLAMENCOS	American Flamingo (<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>)
	Bare-eyed Pigeon (<i>Patagioenas corensis</i>)
	White-whiskered spinetail (<i>Synallaxis candei</i>)
	Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (<i>Glaucidium brasilianum</i>)
	Slender-billed Tyrannulet (<i>Inezia tenuirostris</i>)
	Vermilion Cardinal (<i>Cardinalis phoeniceus</i>)
	Chestnut Piculet (<i>Picumnus cinnamomeus</i>)
	Russet-throated Puffbird (<i>Hypnelus ruficollis</i>)
SERRANÍA DEL PERIJÁ	Tocuyo Sparrow (<i>Arremonops tocuyensis</i>)
	Golden-bellied Starfrontlet (subsp.Perijá) (<i>Coeligena bonapartei concita</i>)
	Lacrimose Mountain-tanager (subsp.Perijá) (<i>Anisognathus lacrymosus pallidorsalis</i>)
	Painted Parakeet (subsp.Perijá) (<i>Pyrrhura picta caeruleiceps</i>)
	Perijá Brushfinch (<i>Arremon perijanus</i>)
	Perijá Metaltail (<i>Metallura iracunda</i>)
	Perijá Tapaculo (<i>Scytalopus perijanus</i>)
	Rufous Antpitta (subsp.Perijá) (<i>Grallaria rufula saltuensis</i>)
SANTA MARTA MOUNTAINS	Rufous Spinetail (subsp.Perijá) (<i>Synallaxis unirufa munoztebari</i>)
	Yellow-breasted Brushfinch (subsp.Perijá) (<i>Atlapietes latinuchus nigrifrons</i>)
	Black-cheeked Mountain-Tanager (<i>Anisognathus melanogenys</i>)
	Blue-bearded Helmetcrest (<i>Oxygogon cyanoaemus</i>)
	Buff-breasted Mountain-Tanager (subsp.Santa Marta) (<i>Dubusia taeniata carrikeri</i>)
	Santa Marta Antpitta (<i>Grallaria bangsi</i>)
	Santa Marta Blossomcrown (<i>Anthocephala floriceps</i>)
	Santa Marta Brushfinch (<i>Atlapietes melanocephalus</i>)
LOS BESOTES	Santa Marta Foliage-gleaner (<i>Clibanornis rufipectus</i>)
	Santa Marta Screech-Owl (<i>Megascops gilesi</i>)
	Santa Marta Tapaculo (<i>Scytalopus sanctaemartae</i>)
	Santa Marta Warbler (<i>Myiothlypis basilica</i>)
	Santa Marta Woodstar (<i>Chaetocercus astreans</i>)
	Santa Marta Wood-Wren (<i>Henicorhina anachoreta</i>)
	Santa Marta Wren (<i>Troglodytes monticola</i>)
	Santa Marta Antbird (<i>Drymophila hellmayri</i>)
TNP	Santa Marta Bush-Tyrant (<i>Myiotheretes pernix</i>)
	Santa Marta Parakeet (<i>Pyrrhura viridicata</i>)
	Santa Marta Sabrewing (<i>Campylopterus phainopeplus</i>)
	Sierra Nevada Brushfinch (<i>Arremon basilicus</i>)
	White-lored Warbler (<i>Myiothlypis conspicillata</i>)
	White-tailed Starfrontlet (<i>Coeligena phalerata</i>)
	White-tipped Quetzal (<i>Pharomachrus fulgidus</i>)
	Military Macaw (<i>Ara militaris</i>)
LOS BESOTES	Andean Condor (<i>Vultur gryphus</i>)
	Chestnut-winged Chachalaca (<i>Ortalis garrula</i>)
	King Vulture (<i>Sarcorampus papa</i>)
TNP	Lance-tailed Manakin (<i>Chiroxiphia lanceolata</i>)
	Blue-billed Curassow (<i>Crax alberti</i>)

SANTA MARTA MOUNTAINS

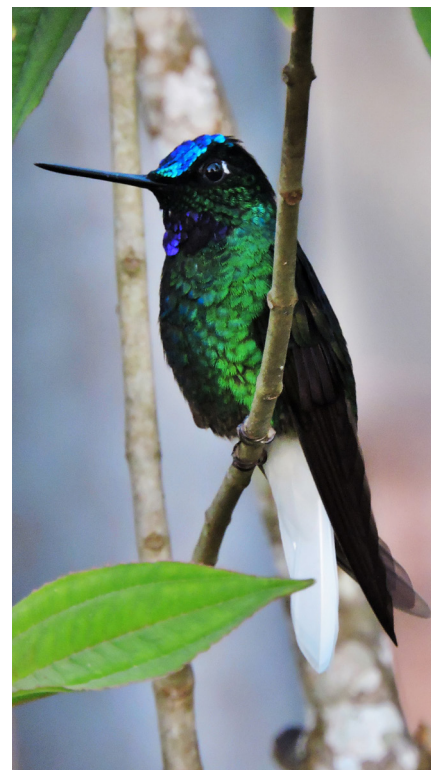
The unique Santa Marta Mountains are not a northern offshoot of the Andes, but a separate and isolated range. They are the world's highest coastal mountain range, and in fact, the highest point in Colombia! The Santa Marta Mountains were created in northern Peru according to recent geological findings, and they have been shifting and traveling northwards over the last 170 million years. For a birder, the main attraction of the Santa Marta Mountains is their incredible endemic richness, home to species not seen anywhere else on earth. Currently 21 endemic species are found here, although taxonomic changes may see this number increase in the coming years. We will bird the Cuchilla de San Lorenzo, a spur of the main Santa Marta Range, which reaches 2,700m (8,858 foot) in elevation. We will stay at El Dorado Ecolodge, and from here we



Clockwise from top right:
Santa Marta Brushfinch; Scaled Piculet and Santa
Marta Parakeet. Photo: Luis E. Urueña/Manakin
Nature Tours



can venture up to the highlands of the Cuchilla, or venture down slope as well. Mountain birds stratify depending on elevation, so being able to sample a varied set of elevations will allow us a good chance of finding endemic birds. One of the most intriguing endemic birds is the Santa Marta Screech owl which can be seen right at the lodge. This owl was noted back in the 1920s in a publication of the birds of Santa Marta by pioneering ornithologists Todd and Carriker. Since then, this bird was quietly waiting for a name, something that happened just in 2017. Many of the endemics are known by the Santa Marta moniker, such as the Santa Marta Parakeet, Santa Marta Antbird, Santa Marta Foliage-Gleaner, Santa Marta Warbler, Santa Marta Woodstar and Santa Marta Brush-Finch, to give but a few examples. Some of the endemics are common and easy to see, others are quite difficult. The Santa Marta Wren for example is not found in the Cuchilla San Lorenzo, while the Santa Marta Sabrewing is mythical in its rarity. Others are troublesome but visible with luck, such as the Black-backed Thornbill and Santa Marta Woodstar, although the gorgeous White-tailed Starfrontlet is usually not difficult to spot. The Santa Marta Blossomcrown, an endemic hummingbird that appears to have a pollen stained forehead, is one we will spend some time on. It is not rare, but you do have to dedicate time to finding this pretty bird. Then of course, there are the ones you trip over, such as Santa Marta Brushfinch, Yellow-crowned Redstart, and Rusty-headed Spinetail, for example. If we are in luck, worm feeders at the lodge will be bringing in the elusive Santa Marta Antpitta, and perhaps the non-endemic but prized Black-fronted Wood-Quail. There is a lot to see here and endemics are but a part of it. Some gorgeous and striking birds such as the White-tipped Quetzal, Band-tailed and Sickle-winged guans, Rosy Thrush-Tanager and the stunning Golden-breasted Fruiteater are not rare. There are various tanagers and a plethora of hummingbirds, as well as the eye-catching Blue-naped Chlorophonias, that come to feeders at the reserve. We will have lots to look at, from our comfortable and well-run birding lodge.



From top to bottom:
White-tailed Starfrontlet. Photo: Luis E. Urueña/
Manakin Nature Tours; Sierra Nevada de Santa
Marta. Photo: Diego Ochoa/Audubon Colombia



TAYRONA NATIONAL PARK

Tayrona is the most visited National Park in Colombia, generally visited for its gorgeous beaches, superb hiking and horseback trail rides. However, with over 280 species of birds present here, perhaps they should be looking at the birds! We will have a morning visit to the park, and if all goes well, the Blue-billed Curassow will show up for us. Otherwise, this is a great place to see species, which are not likely to show up elsewhere on the trip. The stunning Lance-tailed Manakin can be seen in abundance, sometimes be found with its relative, the White-bearded Manakin. The birds here are varied; from the Crane Hawk and Boat-billed Heron to the Greater Ani, White-necked Puffbird and Rufous-tailed Jacamars. The Blue-headed Parrot is common, and Lineated Woodpeckers are impressive to see as they forage in the large trees. White-bellied Antbirds belt out their song from the understory. If we are lucky, they may even make themselves seen. The complex songs of Buff-breasted and Bicolored wrens are heard in the forest, along with the repetitive songs of Scrub Greenlets, the nasal sounds of Barred Antshrikes, and the loud calls of Boat-billed and Streaked flycatchers. It is an active area, full of birds! Crimson-backed Tanagers and the gorgeous Red-legged Honeycreepers give a lot of color to the local flocks. While birding here, it is common to see the Cottontop Tamarin, a gorgeous monkey dwarfed by the less common White-fronted Capuchin. While our visit to Tayrona will be brief, we will see a lot, and enjoy the company of our trained guides who will know exactly where the birds are.

From top to bottom:

White-bearded Manakin. Photo: Alvaro Jaramillo;

White-necked Puffbird. Photo: Luis E. Urueña/

Manakin Nature Tours; Tayrona National Park. Photo:

Hernán Arias





Yellow-crowned Redstart. Photo: Luis E. Urueña/Manakin Nature Tours



Streak-capped Spinetail. Photo: Luis E. Urueña/Manakin Nature Tours

About the physical requirements & pace

Caribbean Colombia has an incredible amount of diversity in a small space. In this compact itinerary we will visit two different mountain ranges, coastal desert, tropical dry forests, and the Caribbean Sea. Although the distances are short between the sites we visit, and roads are good in the lowlands, we do have to contend with some rather poor mountain roads. These are found in Santa Marta as well as the Perijá mountains. On these roads 4 x 4 vehicles are necessary. This tour is a little different from most, and we will be traveling in 2-3 comfortable 4 x 4 vehicles, such as Toyota Land cruisers, during the entire trip. This will allow us to access all areas we want to visit, and provide ample space for luggage. However, during drives, you may not be sitting with a guide, but all vehicles will be in contact. Keep in mind that we make many birding stops where everyone will be birding as a group. We will stay at two birding lodges during our stay, El Dorado in the Santa Marta Mountains and Chamicero del Perijá in Serranía del Perijá. El Dorado is ample, with many cabins and infrastructure to accommodate large groups. However, Chamicero del Perijá is small, with room for 8 guests, limiting the total group size to 8 people. Both of these birding lodges are clean and simple but comfortable. El Dorado is certainly more spacious and comfortable,

but both have the luxury of hot showers, three great meals a day and they work on a birders schedule so we can be out in the morning early and have a siesta in the heat of the day after lunch. Accommodation in cities (Valledupar and Riohacha) will be at local hotels, where we expect relative comfort and good local food. We will have purified or bottled drinking water available throughout the trip. You should be prepared for early morning birding, as it is important to be out before it becomes too hot. Whenever possible we will have an early afternoon break, before continuing out in the late afternoon. Also, for those interested in mammals and night birds there will be opportunities for owling and spotlighting for a mammal or two. Most of our meals will be sit-down, although field lunches or even a field dinner is likely somewhere along the trip. If you have specific food allergies, please communicate these to your tour leader. Note that the tour starts in Valledupar and ends in Santa Marta, but can be organized in different ways. Both of these airports have daily connections with Bogota, on Avianca (Star Alliance) and LAN (Oneworld). If your travel requires overnighing in Bogota, there are hotels close to the airport, which make this comfortable. You may also choose to stay over and hire a local guide for birding there!

Suggested itinerary for Northern Colombia Birding Trail

DAY 1 - ARRIVAL IN VALLEDUPAR.

Please book flights to arrive into Valledupar early in the day. There are a couple of morning flights from Bogota daily. After lunch we will visit the lower parts of Los Besotes Private Reserve and will take a picnic dinner, so that we can stay for some owling on the site. Overnight in Valledupar.

DAY 2 - LOS BESOTES AND TRAVEL TO PERIJÁ.

We will begin the day with another morning exploring the awesome dry forests of Los Besotes, before moving on to the Perijá Mountains. It will take us approximately an hour to reach the foothills, and from there the road becomes rougher and slower. If time permits we will stop for birding once we are above 1500m (4,921 foot) as we work our way up the mountain. We expect an evening arrival at the reserve. Overnight at the Chamicero del Perijá Reserve.

DAY 3 AND DAY 4 - PERIJÁ MOUNTAINS.

On one of these days we will head up to the top of Sabana Rubia, the páramo. Here we have a chance to find the Perijá Thistletail and Perijá Metal-tail. The next day we will explore the elevations slightly above and below the cabins. Overnight at the Chamicero del Perijá Reserve.

DAY 5 - PERIJÁ TO RIOHACHA.

We will bird downslope, after an early start and head to Riohacha. Assuming an early arrival, we will head for an evening of birding at Los Flamencos Reserve. Overnight in Riohacha.

DAY 6 - LOS FLAMENCOS SANCTUARY.

The reserve is only 15 minutes from Riohacha, so we plan on returning to town for lunch and a siesta. However, we will head out early to take in the best birding before the desert heat really begins. For the energetic in the crowd, we shall visit Los Flamencos again this evening. You may choose to rest at the hotel, or visit the beach across the road. Overnight in Riohacha.



Tocuyo Sparrow. Photo: José Luis Pushaina

DAY 7 - TAYRONA NATIONAL PARK TO SANTA MARTA MOUNTAINS.

We will leave Riohacha in the morning for the hour drive to Tayrona National Park, where we will spend the morning. Here we can find some moister forest birds. If we are in luck, the Blue-billed Curassow will make an appearance, although it is very rare. We will drive up the Santa Marta Mountains in the afternoon, stopping to bird as we go. Overnight at the El Dorado Reserve.

DAY 8 AND DAY 9 - SANTA MARTA MOUNTAINS.

We have two days at the El Dorado reserve in Santa Marta Mountains. On at least one day we will head up to the highlands of Cuchilla San Lorenzo in order to see species not present at the lodge. We will have ample time to enjoy the feeders at the lodge, as well as the forest above and below the lodge. Overnight at the El Dorado Reserve.

DAY 10 - SANTA MARTA MOUNTAINS TO SANTA MARTA AIRPORT FLIGHTS BACK TO BOGOTA AND HOME.

We will bird around the lodge, concentrating on what we have not found yet. We have the full morning here, before heading down to Santa Marta and the airport for afternoon flights to Bogota and home.



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Conservation Landscapes Program



PROCOLOMBIA
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The Northern Colombia Birding Trail Project was part of the **Conservation Landscapes Program**, funded by USAID and implemented by Fondo Patrimonio Natural. The purpose of the program was to strengthen the institutional capacity and governance of protected areas in Colombia for long-term conservation, cultural preservation, and the improvement of the livelihoods of the communities associated with these areas and their influence zones.