

Ecuador

..... *and the Galapagos Islands*

A Greentours Natural History Holiday

15th September to 12th October 1999

Led by Paul Cardy

Daily reports compiled by Paul Cardy

Day 1 Wednesday 15th September Arrival

After the rather idiosyncratic transit system at Houston Airport, we were soon on our way to Quito. We arrived punctually, to be met by our local agents for the transfer to Café Cultura. We settled into the beautifully decorated rooms and slept!

Day 2 Thursday 16th September Cotopaxi

Before breakfast, I watched sparkling Violet-ear and Rufous-collared Sparrow in the hotel garden, and later whilst waiting for the bus to collect us, the lycaenid, *Callicista bubastis*. The weather started fine this morning, but as we approached Cotopaxi the cloud became much thicker, obscuring the volcano completely. To reach the extensive paramo vegetation in the National Park, we had to drive through non-native Pine and Eucalyptus plantations, but we did see Brown-bellied Swallows at the entrance post, and several of the Llamas that have been introduced here. As we climbed higher, the trackside flora became more and more interesting, with many flowers – *Gentiana cerastioides* was abundant. Also here were some splendid examples of a puya species – a terrestrial bromeliad with very tall ‘furry’ flowering stems. The track brought us out onto the vast open paramo at the base of the volcano, and we were incredibly fortunate on such a cloudy day, that the cloud dispersed briefly to allow fantastic views of the near perfect snow-capped cone, the second highest active volcano in the world. Whilst the group were photographing Cotopaxi, I watched Plain-capped Ground-Tyrants, Andean Lapwings and a surprisingly large number of Baird's Sandpipers in the short turf.

Moving on the short distance to Limpiopungo Lake, we watched Andean Gulls, Andean Teal, both Andean and American Coots and a Greater Yellowlegs. A narrow path took us round the lake to an extensive area of reed. Ray and Kay found it hard to move far from the bus as the incredibly confiding Stout-billed Cinclodes and Plumbeous Sierra-finch allowed excellent photographs. Michael, Mary and I got as far as the reeds. Flowers were again numerous here with the delicate *Gentiana sedifolia* and *Pedicularis incurva* being particularly notable. A pair of Carunculated Caracaras took flight in front of us, and among the many other birds were Yellow-billed Pintail, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and Plain-coloured Seedeater. We had glimpses of two Tapitis, otherwise known as Brazilian Rabbits, a very pretty species. We ate our delicious boxed lunch, overlooking the lake, and shivering a little. Kay spotted an American Kestrel perched atop a pine tree.

After lunch we took the track that leads up to the refugio near the snow line at some 4,800 metres. We didn't get as high up as that, at about 4,500 metres the thin air and cold were enough to make us turn back. The vegetation up here was incredible, for example, the orange flowered *Chuquisahua insignis* on which we watched a pair of Ecuadorian Hillstars feeding. This is one of only twelve endemic Ecuadorian birds, despite there being some 1,600 species found in the country. Up here too we saw Puna Hawk and Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle. The rain was heavy now and we drove down to have a look at the small museum with its eclectic display of stuffed animals - notably the cross-eyed Andean Fox! The scrub around the museum can be very productive for birds, but sadly the weather made it impossible to see much other than a flowerpiecer of some kind and Rufous-naped Brush-finch.

As we drove away from the museum, Miguel spotted a rather bedraggled game-like bird huddled beside the track. This was a Curve-billed Tinamou, a very local high Andean species. We ate dinner at La Rhonda restaurant, where we were serenaded by a group of Andean musicians.

Day 3 Friday 17th September Journey to Sacha Lodge

A leisurely morning was spent in Quito, and other than a Black-tailed Trainbearer outside the hotel, little was recorded.

Late morning we were taken to the 'airport', in fact the small office of the air company that would fly us to Coca. We had to weigh ourselves before being allowed on the plane! Tea and cakes were provided whilst we waited.

The flight in the small aircraft was incredibly smooth and we arrived in Coca very quickly. After the cloudy cool weather in Quito we were hit by the humid heat here. After collecting our luggage from the carousel, an open truck drove us through the muddy streets of the frontier town, where we waited for the boat.

The Napo River was high after all the recent rain. From the boat landing we watched White-winged Swallows and Black Vulture. Because of the high water level birds were difficult to spot on the journey to the lodge, but we did see Great Egret, an Osprey, Drab Water Tyrant and some very dainty Yellow-billed Terns. After about three hours we reached the boat landing for Sacha Lodge and walked along a great boardwalk towards the lodge. Butterflies included *Cissia hesione* and the exotic looking *Helicopsis acis*. Next we boarded two canoes and were paddled across the serene Pilchicocha oxbow lake to the lodge. The large cream flowers of the water philodendrons were very impressive. There was much bird activity with Red-capped Cardinal, Black-capped Donacobius, Orange-winged Parrots, Red-bellied Macaws, Violaceous Jay and Hoatzin. After a welcome drink ('jungle juice') and an introductory talk we were shown to our extremely comfortable cabins and rested before dinner. Our night walk was rewarded with an incredible selection of insects, spiders and lizards, but the highlight for me was a leaf-mimicking Orthopteran, whose wings resembled rotting leaves, complete with missing segments and a midrib!

Day 4 Saturday 18th September Sacha Lodge

We were woken before dawn so we could make an early start to the canopy tower. It had rained in the night and the morning turned out to be overcast but mainly dry, ideal for

continued bird activity. As Mike and Luis paddled us away from the mooring platform we watched a Black-billed Thrush singing from a tree top. The lake was misty and still as we drifted across it and entered a narrow channel through the swamp forest. The atmosphere was fantastic with various figs, palms and bromeliads all around us. We had a few sightings of Rufescent Tiger Heron and a brief look at a Silvered Antbird. From the end of the channel it was a very short walk to the canopy tower. As we climbed the wooden steps up around the huge kapok tree Mike pointed out some White-lined Sac-winged Bats roosting on the trunk. We hadn't even reached the top of the tower before we saw four Many-banded Aracaris in a dead tree, and a Spangled Cotinga, its brilliant blue plumage looking stunning. The morning continued in this vein, with a wealth of birds being seen, many of these very colourful. Blue-and-Yellow Macaws flew past in pairs, as did Chestnut-fronted Macaws and Orange-winged Parrots. An Ivory-billed Aracari joined the more common Many-bandeds, and we had great views of their larger relative the White-throated Toucan. Raptors seen were Hook-billed and Double-toothed Kites. The tree we were in was periodically visited by mixed groups of tanagers and their relatives providing a wonderful variety of bright colours. There were Euphonias - Orange-bellied, Rufous-bellied, Thick-billed and White-lored; Green and Purple Honeycreepers; Dacnises - Yellow-bellied, Black-faced and Blue; and the Tanagers themselves - Green and Gold, Opal-crowned and Opal-rumped. Luis located a rather distant Red Howler Monkey in the scope, and then an Amazonian Umbrellabird. A Laurence's Thrush sang busily in the top of our tree, mimicking other of the local birds. Later in the morning the activity decreased so we headed slowly back to the lodge. At the foot of the tower was a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, and along the channel Long-tailed Hermit, White-chinned Jacamar and White-tailed Trogon. We also saw a beautiful deep blue species of *Eunica* and a Blue Morpho. Back near the lodge a group of about twelve Yellow-spotted Side-necked Turtles sat lined up along a log. Before lunch I watched the beautiful nymphalid *Nessaea obrina* flying near the cabins, pale green on the underside and shining blue and orange patches above. After lunch we explored the environs of the lodge for butterflies. We saw many ithomiids, heliconids, satyrids and skippers. Two different species of *Adelpha* were found. Down near the canoe landing the exotic tailed riordinid *Helicopsis acis* was common. *Marpesia chiron* and *Marpesia petreus* were mud-puddling whilst *Doxocopa pavon* and a *Diaethria* species were attracted to salt deposits in one of the canoes. Kay and Ray elected to stay here to photograph some of the many dragonflies. Michael, Mary and I visited the butterfly house where we learnt about the breeding programme of some forty species for export to butterfly houses in Europe and North America. The large numbers of some species such as *Catonephele orites*, *Morpho achilles* and *Parides vertumnus* allowed easy photography. Mike and Luis then took us along a path through terra firma forest, Luis pointing out various medicinal plants and explaining their uses. We heard Blue-backed Manakins and Mike tried to lure them out with a tape. We arrived at another ox-bow lake, almost choked with encroaching vegetation, and paddled through the narrow channels. Several flycatchers were seen - Eastern and Tropical Kingbirds, Short-crested Flycatcher and Lesser Kiskadee. Three Plumbeous Kites soared above us. Night was falling as we headed back, and fireflies were lighting up. Mike showed us the rare Short-billed Leaf-lover roosting against the trunk of a large tree, and on the opposite side of the tree a Long-billed Woodcreeper, the most distinctive of the Woodcreepers. After dinner we found two very small Spectacled Caiman under the hut.

Day 5 Sunday 19th September Sacha Lodge

Before breakfast there was a Little Hermit feeding on the flowers outside the cabins, and we all watched a Southern Tamandua, of the unicolourous pale form, foraging near the boardwalk. The morning excursion was a long walk through terra firma forest. We were lucky to actually see some forest floor birds including Great Tinamou and Black-faced Antthrush. A Rusty-belted Tapaculo sang regularly but refused to be enticed out. We found a

male White-tailed Trogon sitting motionless in a palm tree. Luis used his sharp eyes to spot a Pale-throated Barbthroat that was sitting in the forest understorey. Troops of both Squirrel Monkeys and Black-mantled Tamarins were found. Luis showed us the burrow of a Giant Armadillo, a rare animal even here, but explained it was unoccupied, as there was not a cloud of mosquitoes around each of the two entrances. Forest interior butterflies such as satyrids and ithomiids were quite numerous. A beautiful transparent *Cithaerias* with red patches on the hindwings was seen regularly. Even riodinids were quite numerous, *Eurybia unxia* among them.

Having returned to the cabins I gave the group a brief talk on basic butterfly classification before lunch. Grey-capped and Social Flycatcher were spotted whilst we ate lunch and then Ray and Kay found a *Urania* moth, not surprisingly mistaking it for a butterfly due to its bright colouration.

Later in the afternoon we were paddled across the lake to walk the boardwalk to the banks of the Napo. The Group were keen to show off their new skills at butterfly identification and we saw several ithomiids and riodinids. A Pygmy Marmoset was a quite wonderful find, scampering about in a tree. Undulated Tinamous call frequently here but today we were lucky enough to actually see one, followed by a Spectacled Chachalaca. As we moved out into the cleared pasture area the butterflies became those characteristic of disturbed habitats - *Eurema albula* and *Eurema nise*, and *Anartia amathea* and *Anartia jatrophae*. The scattered trees were alive with birds, being much easier to see in this open environment. For an hour or so we recorded one species after another, watching many of them in the telescope. There were Yellow-tufted and Spot-breasted Woodpeckers, two Troupials, Roadside Hawks, Giant Cowbirds, Glittering-throated, Emerald and Long-billed Starthroat, a Bare-necked Fruitcrow, and Fork-tailed Palm Swifts. The short grassland itself held Southern Lapwing and Red-breasted Blackbird. As if it all wasn't enough we were able to watch a fantastic sunset of pinks and blues over the Napo. Heard calling after dark were Tropical Screech-Owls, Pauraques and a Common Pottoo.

Day 6 Monday 20th September Return to Quito

After an early breakfast we said our farewells and canoed across the lake to the boardwalk. Several Pale-vented Pigeons were seen and we had a brief look at a White-chinned Jacamar. Near the banks of the Napo was a Blue-crowned Trogon sitting high in a tree, and near the motorised canoe was a White-lored Antpitta hopping around - a seldom seen bird. The river level had subsided somewhat and our journey to Coca was uneventful. Few birds were apparent, but we did see an Osprey and two Black Caracaras. We arrived in Coca a little early and relaxed at the Misionas Hotel whilst we waited for our flight. We were rather surprised when only a few minutes after taking off it was announced that we would soon be landing. The plane was behaving a bit like a bus and was stopping in a small oil town to drop off and collect passengers. Once back in Quito we had a restful afternoon, and reconvened for dinner.

Day 7 Tuesday 21st September The Chiriboga Road to Tinalandia

We travelled to Tinalandia on the old Santo Domingo road, known as the Chiriboga road. It is in effect a transect of the different altitudinal habitats of the west Andean slope. First one crosses paramo, then extensive temperate forest, then through patches of subtropical forest, and finally upper tropical rainforest patches. The road is renowned for its varied birdlife - some 260 species having been recorded along it. Sadly today the weather was against us, the almost continuous rain making birdwatching very difficult.

Having found our way out of Quito we headed up to the Paramo around San Juan. Birds noted beside the road included Southern Yellow Grosbeak, Black-tailed Trainbearer and Glossy Black Thrush. A distant Carunculated Caracara was being mobbed by a falcon. As we entered the temperate forest the flora became more diverse. Several ericaceous shrubs were seen, together with recognisable genera such as *Calceolaria* and even a *Prunella* species. A beautiful large dark nymphalid with deep red markings was common here. This was *Fountainea nessus*, a widespread Andean species. We continued to descend until we reached a bridge over the fast flowing Salsya River. The hoped for Torrent Duck was nowhere to be seen, only Black Phoebes and an American Kestrel. The distinctive pierid *Leptiphobia subargentea* was found here. A little further on we explored a track that led off the road. The butterflies were numerous, many of them mud-puddling. Among several skippers and riodinids were *Hypanartia kefersteini* and *Actinote ozomene*. Birds recorded here were a Roadside Hawk and a Slaty-backed Chat-tyrant.

Having driven through the isolated village of Chiriboga we stopped for lunch in an area of much bird activity. The gorgeous Blue-winged Mountain-Tanager was common here, several of them squabbling noisily with one another. Montane Woodcreepers systematically explored the tree trunks whilst Blue-capped Tanagers and Ashy-throated Bush-Tanagers were active in the tree tops.

As rain set in we had to stop to let the brakes cool off, and discovered we had a puncture. Miguel mended it efficiently and we were soon on our way again. In the late afternoon we came upon another mixed flock. Beautifully coloured Golden, Golden-naped, Flame-faced and Beryl-spangled Tanagers were mixed with Slate-throated Redstarts, Ornate Flycatcher and a Tawny-bellied Hermit. Here too we saw a Crimson-rumped Toucanet and a Toucan Barbet.

Just before joining the main Santo Domingo road we stopped at the bridge over the Rio Pilaton, where impressively large White-collared Swifts were speeding under the bridge, and White-capped Dippers sat on the rocks amid the white water. We arrived at Tinalandia in time to settle in to our comfortable cabins and then walk down the track to dinner.

Day 8 Wednesday 22nd September Tinalandia

I was the only one on the pre-breakfast walk, but despite the continuous light rain, I saw plenty of birds. Almost every epiphyte-laden tree on the golf course seemed to be alive with birds, but unfortunately the poor light made identifying them difficult. Band-backed Wrens were especially noisy and conspicuous, and the distinctively marked Water-tyrant was quite numerous. The latter species is unusual in having a disjunct distribution, one population occurring in western Ecuador and northwest Peru, and the other in south-east Brazil.

Butterflies soon took to the wing, *Cissia hermes* being abundant in the short damp grass. It was difficult to get to breakfast on time with so much happening on the track. One area of bird activity contained Guira Tanagers, a Tropical Parula, Lesser Greenlet and Pale-mandibled Aracaris.

At breakfast we were entertained by the antics of a variety of hummingbirds at the feeders, Green-crowned Brilliants, White-whiskered Hermits, Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds and Crowned Woodnymphs. The over-ripe papayas put out as bait attracted a gorgeous pair of Blue Dacnis, a Black-winged Saltator and rather surprisingly an Orange-billed Sparrow. Butterflies were not to be left out and *Archaeoprepona ammachus*, *Smyrna blomfieldia* and

Caligo eurilochus were also attracted to the fruit. After breakfast I rescued a White-whiskered Hermit from the gents toilet!

The walk backup to the golf course was filled with beautiful butterflies. Heliconiids were especially numerous and included *Dryas iulia*, *Dione juno*, *Heliconius sara* and *Heliconius charitonus*. We had two sightings of splendid *Morpho peleides*, one of the highlights of a visit to the neo-tropics. The variety of skippers was astounding –any two-foot square of grass you cared to select probably contained as many species as the whole of Britain. Nearer the cabins were two pink terrestrial orchids in flower.

Bird activity on the golf course had quietened down a little, but we did see several Pacific Horneros, a Blue-capped Tanager, Black-checked Woodpeckers, and Scrub Blackbird. *Siproeta epaphus* was one of the most spectacular butterflies we saw, and *Perrhybris lypera* was common.

Whilst watching a pair of Streaked Antwrens in a small area of trees, a huge Owl butterfly, *Caligo eurilochus* flopped past, and then settled on a nearby tree. We met up with Ray and Kay, who had been photographing dragonflies on the pond, and butterflies including *Adelpha leucopthalma* and stunning blue *Ancyluris* species.

Michael made a great find as we walked back to the cabins – a Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth sitting high up in a slender tree. We watched the measured movements of this fascinating animal for some time before it decided to start moving away.

Lunch was followed by a siesta, and then we ventured into the forest, one of the remnant patches of west Andean slope primary forest. We hadn't gone far when we came across a large mixed feeding flock of birds. Many were rather drab – Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaner, Plain Xenops, Olivaceous, Wedge-billed, Spotted and Plain-brown Woodcreepers. However, there were some very colourful species such as Orange-fronted and Red-headed Barbets, Crimson-rumped Toucanets and Bay-headed Tanager.

The forest trees were dripping with epiphytes, and ithomiine butterflies sailed along the path. Mary spotted a Broad-billed Motmot sitting motionless on a branch, another one nearby. We'd been watching them for some time, when Kay realised that there was another Sloth in the next tree.

Sadly the rain became heavier, and visibility very poor, but we did see a Western Dwarf Squirrel on our return walk.

Day 9 Thursday 23rd September Tinalandia

Another day spent exploring the rich variety of habitats at Tinalandia. As we ate breakfast the same mixture of hummingbirds species were active at the feeders, whilst the rotting papayas attracted a Dusky-faced Tanager, a bird that is not easy to see well. The *Opsiphanes* butterfly that had been flying around the lights the previous evening was now feeding on the fruit.

Ray and Kay spent the morning photographing, whilst Mary and I ventured further into the forest. Before we started there was a mixed group of birds near to the cabins, including One-coloured Becard and Orange-crowned Euphonia. Just before we entered the forest we came upon a lantana bush that was alive with butterflies, and a Rufous-tailed Jacamar sitting above it ready to catch them. As is often the case with tropical forest birding, many of our sightings

were really just glimpses. However we did see some interesting species including Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, Chestnut-backed Antbird, Bay Wren, Buff-rumped Warbler, and Slaty-tailed Trogon. Butterflies comprised mostly satyrids and ithomiids, such as *Chloreuptychia arnaea* and *Taygetis andromeda*. A Central American Agouti was glimpsed as it foraged on the forest floor. At lunch, there was more rare butterflies on the fruit, including *Colobura dirce* and *Hamadryas amphinome*. After the usual siesta, we had another look at the golf course, where we found Golden-olive Woodpecker, Blue-necked Tanagers, a Squirrel Cuckoo, Golden-faced Tyrannulets, and a 'Yellow-tufted' Dacnis (The west Andean form of Black-faced Dacnis). We also came across the distinctive clay oven shaped nest of the Pacific Hornero. This nest gives the family that horneros belong their colloquial name of Ovenbirds.

In the early evening Sergio, the owner of Tinalandia, took us to the Chiriboga road. At the river bridge we again saw Black Phoebe, Spotted Sandpiper and White-capped Dipper. Sergio told us that there were two Andean Cock-of-the-rock nests under the bridge. Moving on we stopped at a possible Lyre-tailed Nightjar site, but no sooner had we got out of the vehicle then Sergio had found one of these fantastic birds. We watched it in the torchlight for some time, and then it took to the air, flying along the road with its bizarre long tail feathers trailing.

Day 10 Friday 24th September Tinalandia to Mindo

Sadly, it was time to leave Tinalandia, but we were still finding new birds here; this morning we added Olivaceous Piculet and Glossy Flower-piercer to the list.

Our route took us west, towards the coastal lowlands, most of the journey was hot and humid. Near Santo Domingo, we saw a lovely male Vermilion Flycatcher on a wire. It made a change to see a distinctive and easy to identify flycatcher! We drove through banana, pineapple, manioc and date palm plantations with little to note en route. Having spotted a soaring group of American Swallow-tailed Kites we stopped to admire this most distinctive and graceful raptor. Our attention was diverted by a runaway bull that ran past us, followed by a man in a truck shouting 'un toro bravo' out of the window.

Having arrived at the lodge (and learnt not to enter with our shoes on!) we settled down to lunch. The afternoon walk was not particularly productive, mainly due to the weather. We struggled to find a Bay Wren, a Roadside Hawk, a White-capped Dipper, and best of all a Torrent Tyrannulet. Michael and I saw a male Masked Trogon fly over.

Day 11 Saturday 25th September Mindo

The pre-breakfast walk was very quiet, the most activity being around the lodge itself, with a noisy mixed flock of Azara's Spinetails and Yellow-throated Bush-Tanagers. Further along the road we watched a Squirrel Cuckoo, the first of several today. A small mixed feeding flock contained Rufous-throated and Golden Tanagers. The morning was fine and butterflies were soon taking to the wing. Ray and Kay found some interesting damselflies that they were later able to photograph. Back near our cabin the bird activity was greater, with first a Three-striped Warbler, then reasonable views of a pair of Immaculate Antbirds, and then a great flash of bright red from beside the track – a superb male Andean Cock-of-the-Rock that settled not too far from us! As Michael, Mary and I headed out after breakfast we had to persuade the hotel dog not to follow us. In fact it had been quite useful earlier as it had flushed a White-throated Crake, usually a difficult bird to see. There was much butterfly activity around the wooden bridge; *Actinote ozomene* and several skippers were mud-

puddling, as was a very attractive *Diaethria Hypanartia lethe* was nectaring nearby. We took ourselves away from all these butterflies and started the long climb up through the epiphyte-laden forest behind the hotel. The wells of light in the forest contained an assortment of butterflies, notably *Morpho peleides*, and some beautiful iridescent damselflies.

Towards the top of the path we came upon a female Masked Trogon sitting motionless, as they usually do. We were relieved to reach the top of the track and amble slowly down towards the village. This higher road is usually alive with birds and today was no exception. However, the usual rain and poor visibility made things difficult for us. We ended up getting absolutely soaked and arriving back at the hotel rather bedraggled! We came upon one mixed feeding party after another, some of them very large. We saw at least five Toucan Barbets, a delightful endemic. Tanagers were numerous and included such brightly coloured species as White-winged, Golden, and Blue-winged Mountain. Fumarids identified in the murky conditions were Slaty Spinetail and Ruddy Foliage Gleaner.

The road also had some fine butterflies. The lovely *Marpesia xerynthia* was equally beautiful on both wing surfaces. *Oressinoma typhla* was a distinctive satyrid common beside the track. A great variety of impressively coloured grasshoppers, beetles and bugs added to the morning. Several extensive areas of an orange flowered shrub attracted a bevy of hummingbirds. Our favourite was the dapper Booted Racket-tail, with its fluffy white leggings and neat racket tail. The long tail of the Violet-tailed Sylph glowed beautifully when it caught the light. Also seen were Greenish Puffleg, Blue-tailed Emerald and Crowned Woodnymph. We arrived back to the lodge to find an array of four-wheel drive vehicles in the car park, their occupants all eating lunch at our hotel. The afternoon was spent drying off, the continuing rain making an excursion futile. Michael and I did venture out briefly in the early evening did not manage to see anything at all!

Day 12 Sunday 26th September Mindo

A really early start today (4.30) so as to get up to the Cock-of-the-Rock lek at dawn. We picked up our local guide, Efrain, from the plaza in town and headed out on the west Mindo road. We parked by a wooden gate that we passed through, following a muddy track down to the river and then across some damp meadows. As we approached the river we disturbed a Sunbittern but could not fully appreciate its beautiful patterns in the early dawn light. After a somewhat arduous (at this time of the morning!) climb up a zigzag path into the dense forest we arrived at a little clearing with seats cut into the mud! Almost immediately there was a Male Andean Cock-of-the-Rock perched just feet away from us. Several others were calling from surrounding trees. The males gather at leks which a female visits to select the fittest male based on the quality of his plumage and song. All the males look more or less identical to us, but not to the female! We stayed at the lek for an hour and a half watching the birds coming and going. We didn't get any really good view of them, and the photographers were a bit disappointed but it was still a wonderful experience to be among all the activity. Back down in the meadows we turned our attention to other birds, first of which was a male Golden-headed Quetzal. Then Efrain spotted a Bat Falcon, named after its main prey, perched characteristically on top of a dead tree. One flowering shrub was particularly attractive to hummingbirds with Purple-bibbed Whitetip, Crowned Woodnymph, Blue-tailed Emerald and most impressive of all, White-necked Jacobin hovering around it. Several isolated hillside trees supported a large mixed feeding flock. Rather surprisingly Scaly-throated Foliage Gleaner seemed to be its main component. Here too were a Smoky-brown Woodpecker, a couple of Spotted Woodcreepers, a Variegated Bristle-tyrant, a dinky looking Scale-crested Pygmy-tyrant, Tropical Parula, and a stunning male Blackburnian Warbler, one of the few migrant warblers we'd seen. On the way back to the village we stopped to look at a Rufous

Motmot perched close to the road. Before returning to the hotel for an early lunch (or late breakfast!) Efrain showed us his orchid garden. Some 250 species, mostly epiphytic, were cultivated here. A surprising number were in flower; my favourite among them was a *Dracula* (!) species with long streamers on the petals (sepals?) In the afternoon Ray and Kay tried to do some photography before the rains came again, and Michael, Mary and I repeated yesterdays walk and got soaked, again! The weather was really frustrating as there was a wealth of birdlife along the track, mostly concentrated in three very large and varied mixed flocks. New species identified were Ashy-headed Tyrannulet, Spotted Barbtail and Slaty Antwren.

Day 13 Monday 27th September Return to Quito

Once again Michael, Mary and I went on an early morning birding walk, in somewhat better weather. Hummingbirds were again plentiful around the orange-flowered shrubs, especially the lovely Booted Racket-tail. A Violet-tailed Sylph perched for some time on a thin twig, its iridescent crown and throat patched glittering as it turned its head. A noisy flock of parrots attracted our attention, and they obligingly landed in a not too distant tree allowing us to identify them as Red-billed Parrots. The group of parakeets that Mary saw fly over were probably Maroon-tailed. Pride of place this morning went to the three Golden-headed Quetzals that we saw, two of which we got good views of, their green plumage shining in the sun. A small group of Pale-mandibled Aracaris added to the colour. In a small mixed feeding flock we picked up a Scale-crested Pygmy-tyrant, and nearby a Golden-crowned Flycatcher. Mary located a Guayaquil Woodpecker atop a dead tree, and we finished off with a Band-tailed Pigeon. As we headed back butterflies were starting to become active, *Leptophobia caesia* among them. Back down at the wooden bridge were many more including *Siproeta epaphus*, *Marpesia*, a *Diaethria*, and a mixture of pierids.

We said our farewells to George, his staff, and his dog, and wended our way back to Quito. In Mindo we stopped to buy bananas at less than 2 cents each, then, as we drove up the entrance road two Llamas came trotting towards us! The journey took us through extensive forested mountains until we joined the pan-American highway. Other than a couple of American Kestrels, little of note was seen. Having crossed the equator at Motel del Mindo (middle of the world) we arrived at Café Cultura for lunch by the log fire.

Day 14 Tuesday 28th September Pasochoa Forest Reserve

As we drove along the approach road to Pasochoa the hedgerows were alive with birds, and the day was to turn out extremely productive. Pasochoa comprises extensive Chusquea bamboo stands, moss-laden cloud forest and paramo, between about 2700 and 3300 metres. Mary and I braved the rain to explore the open areas around the information centre. At first nothing stirred but suddenly we hit upon a mass of activity. Both Paramo and Plain-coloured Seedeaters moved in small groups through the trees, together with a few Rufous-naped Brush-finches. Black and Masked Flowerpiercers hopped from flower to flower using their specialised bills to pierce the base of the flower. Two Red-crested Cotingas appeared as if out of nowhere and stayed in one tree for some time. They really are quite confiding birds. An incessant single note song coming from deep inside a bush was produced by a Unicoloured Tapaculo, which we managed to glimpse.

We returned to the mini-bus to collect our things for our trek into the reserve. Michael was still feeling unwell, so we left him to rest. In the cedar park we found Black-tailed Trainbearer, Cinereous Conebill and Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager all in the same tree. Our uphill walk took us first into the Chusquea bamboo thickets. Birds were intermittent but when we

came across activity several species were usually involved. Some of the trees in this area were covered in a very robust species of dodder. The first group of birds we discovered was a mixture of no less than three species of Brush-finch – Rufous-naped, Black-headed and Stripe-headed. Species such as Rufous-breasted Chat-tyrant and Spectacled Redstart were common up here and we saw a lot of them. Above the bamboo came a zone of alder trees and it was here that we came across a superb mixed flock that we followed for about twenty minutes. White-banded and White-throated Tyrannulets, Superciliated Hemispingus and Black-crested Warbler were all numerous. Two Streaked Tuftedcheeks, with their bizarre furry white cheeks, searched the epiphyte covered branches. Having entered dwarf moss forest we disturbed two Andean Guans from their treetop resting place. We ate lunch by a lone palm tree, rather an anomaly up here. Many more birds punctuated our descent. Highlights were a Sapphire-vented Puffleg feeding on bromeliads, a Pearled Treerunner very close to the track, and a pair of Plain-tailed Wrens that seemed totally oblivious to us. Once back in the open area we saw a female Mountain Velvetbreast, and had a closer look at a Black Flowerpiercer. We found Michael wandering around the car park where we found a lot of Cinereous Conebills and another Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager. A wonderful finale however to a great day was watching a Sword-billed Hummingbird feeding at a *Datura* bush.

Days 15 - 22 Wed 29th Sept to Wed 6th Oct Galapagos

As I didn't travel to the Galapagos with the group it is rather difficult for me to write an account – a brief summary is all that follows - By all accounts it was a fantastic trip, on a comfortable boat with a good guide, excellent food and pleasant fellow passengers.

Many of the islands' famous endemic birds were seen – Galapagos Penguins, Lava Heron, Galapagos Hawk – apparently one perched next to one of the group whilst she sat on a rock – Lava Gull, Galapagos Dove, two species of Mockingbird; Galapagos and Hood, and a variety of the famous Darwins Finches. Kay celebrated her birthday on the islands and a highlight of the day was a group of dolphins that swam alongside the boat for some distance. A good selection of reptiles were seen too – Land and Marine Iguanas, various Lava Lizards and Giant Tortoises.

Meanwhile I returned to Tinalandia where I found some twenty birds to add to the list – notably Dusky Pigeon, Green Thorntail and White-whiskered Puffbird; several new butterflies; and two species of snake – one very long black Rat Snake that frequented a tree outside the restaurant.

I returned to Quito on the Wednesday to find the city covered in a thin layer of volcanic ash and most of the city's inhabitants with face masks on. Volcano Pichincha had erupted the previous day and the air was still thick with dust. Visibility was very low. As a consequence the airport was closed and the group, initially marooned on the Galapagos, re-routed to Latacinga Airport and travelled to Quito by bus.

Day 23 Thursday 7th October Otavalo

Michael, Mary and I travelled north to Otavalo, with Miguel, to visit the famous Indian market there. The journey itself was beautiful, the clear skies allowing fine views of several snow-capped volcanoes – Cotopaxi, Antiwana, Cayambe and Imbabura. As the main market day is a Saturday, things were quiet today. We had two shopping sprees – jumpers, wall-hangings, hats, Andean music CDs etc. with an interval for lunch in the beautiful Ali Shungu Hotel. Sparkling Violetear was active in the garden.

After a relaxing and very enjoyable day we returned to Quito to be thrown into confusion as we learnt our flight tomorrow had been cancelled due to the volcano. We packed hurriedly and tried to procure tickets for a flight to Lima and thence to Houston. No luck. We were stuck in Quito until Monday! So it was back to Café Cultura.

Day 24 Friday 8th October Quito

Today was a free day, spent in Quito. Amazonas was full of hawkers selling photographs of the volcano.

In the evening we celebrated Mary's birthday with an Italian meal in the Hilton. The waiters even produced a polaroid camera and took a photo of us with the birthday cake.

Day 25 Saturday 9th October Cotopaxi

With a bonus day, we decided on a return visit to the wonderful Cotopaxi National Park. Once again the volcano was enshrouded in cloud, so we concentrated on the flora and fauna! Much of the same birds were present on and around the lake as on our last visit. Baird's Sandpipers were especially numerous today. Michael, Mary and I had superb views of a Solitary Sandpiper sitting amongst the reeds. A small Clouded Yellow butterfly was seen.

Other birds added today were two Tawny Antpittas – excellent view of one, and Tyrian Metaltail, and the wonderfully named Tufted Tit-tyrant by the museum.

Days 26 – 28 Sun 10th - Tues 12th Oct The Journey Home!

Although Continental Airlines had cancelled our flights again (the volcano!) they had made contingency plans for us, a rather improbable routing via Guayaquil, Panama City and Houston, and finally to Gatwick.

We packed hurriedly and took taxis to the airport for the unbooked flights to Guayaquil. We turned out to be first in the queue, and procured seats easily. Having bought our last photos of the volcanic eruption, we said farewell to Quito.

In Guayaquil we were accommodated at the Oro Verde Hotel. The warmth and humidity here came as a shock after our time in the highlands. Guayaquil seemed a vibrant place, and the huge cemetery we drove past, with tombs piled one on top of another, was fascinating.

On Monday morning we travelled to the airport to ensure we were first in the queue. Armed with boarding passes for all three of the flights, and with our luggage booked through to Gatwick, we could relax a little.

All transfers went smoothly, even though we only had fifteen minutes to catch our flight in Panama, and we finally arrived back in England, a little tired, but having enjoyed a wonderful trip.