



# COLOMBIA

*Nothing succeeds like excess*

South Africa and Colombia share several similarities. For instance, Colombia's population and territory sizes are almost the same (South Africa is the world's 25th largest country and Colombia the 26th) and both are included in Conservation International's list of the planet's 17 mega-diverse countries. However, this South American nation, named after Christopher Columbus, leaves its African counterpart in the dust when it comes to its wealth of birds. South Africa's official list of 842 species pales by comparison with Colombia's world record of 1 889. In fact, per square kilometre, Colombia is considered the most mega-diverse country on earth. So what makes this nation the king of the bird world? ▶



## LAND OF PLENTY

Colombia's world rankings in biodiversity

**Overall biodiversity:** 2nd in the world (supports about 10 per cent of all the world's species)

**Biodiversity per square kilometre:** 1st  
**Amphibians:** 1st (623 species)

**Birds:** 1st (1 889 species)

**Butterflies:** 2nd (about 14 000 species)  
**Flowering plants:** 2nd (about 51 200 species)

**Freshwater fish:** 2nd (about 3 200 species)

**Mammals:** 4th (467 species)

**Reptiles:** 3rd (518 species)



is understandable given the years of unrest caused by paramilitary rebel groups such as FARC and drug networks including the notorious Medellín cartel. The good news, however, is that this era of terror now seems a thing of the past, following a massive government offensive, which was backed by the US. Almost all of Colombia is now safe to visit, and while I was there I encountered only welcoming and friendly people.

Once you've decided to go, the crucial decision is choosing your destinations. Colombia has 116 Important Bird Areas and hundreds of recognised birding sites – even unscheduled roadside stops can produce world-class birding. Most birders visiting the country end up selecting an itinerary based on the Andean cordilleras and inter-Andean valleys, combined with the Santa Marta region. The motivation for this is that these zones harbour most of the endemic species, are accessible and offer good tourism infrastructure. Colombia's Amazon region, for instance, is not well developed and so is a mission to explore, whereas the same birds it hosts can be found more easily in the Brazilian or Ecuadorian Amazon regions.

The bustling capital city of Bogotá is the gateway to Colombia. Crowded onto a 2500-metre-high plateau on the western slope of the Eastern Andes and overlooking the Magdalena Valley, this picturesque city boasts some fantastic colonial architecture (as well as the worst traffic jams I

have ever encountered). Within the city, it's worth visiting La Florida, a marshland that supports the secretive Bogota Rail and obscure Apolinar's Wren, both localised endemics. A dramatic cable-car ride is necessary to reach the monastery complex of Monserrate, perched atop the Andes and offering incredible views of the surrounding city. Here you can get your first experience of hummingbirds; the flowers are aflutter with the evocatively named Shining Sunbeam, Black-tailed Trainbearer, Glowing Puffleg and Tyrian Metaltail. For us, though, it was the incomparable Sword-billed Hummingbird that stole the show here.

A day's outing is necessary to explore Chingaza National Park above Bogotá and as you ascend through farmlands into subtropical cloudforests, then elfin forests and finally open páramo, the bird-life changes dramatically. Key targets are the elusive Brown-breasted Parakeet and several localised hummingbirds, including Blue-fronted Starfrontlet, Coppery-bellied Puffleg and Bronze-tailed Thornbill. Bird flocks are a feature of most Colombian forests and the species can come at you almost unbelievably thick and fast. Flocks we encountered included such delights as the endemic Rufous-browed Conebill and Silvery-throated Spinetail, and the near-endemic Golden-fronted Whitestart and Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager (which is as beautiful as its name suggests). The high páramo, dotted with giant lobelia plants, hosts its own unique avifauna, ▷



**Opposite** Cerro Montezuma's rainforests on Colombia's West Andean cordillera are one of the wettest locations on earth.

**Top** A male Andean Cock-of-the-rock at the Jardín lek.

**Above** The Plushcap, a member of the tanager family, occurs in mixed flocks in the understorey of bamboo stands.

**Previous spread** Green-crowned Woodnymph is one of Colombia's 162 hummingbird species.



**COLOMBIA HAS 116 IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS AND HUNDREDS OF RECOGNISED BIRDING SITES – EVEN UNSCHEDULED ROADSIDE STOPS CAN PRODUCE WORLD-CLASS BIRDING**

Colombia is situated on the bird continent, South America (Africa is 70 per cent larger than South America, yet hosts nearly 40 per cent fewer bird species). It also has several unique geographical features, one of which is that it's the only South American nation to have coastlines stretching along both the Pacific and Caribbean. In addition, it encompasses a vast swathe of the Amazon rainforest and the llanos (an immense, often flooded tropical grassland biome shared with Venezuela). However, the main reason for Colombia's incredible diversity of birds and other wildlife may be attributed to its mountains. In the north lies an isolated yet extremely diverse massif called the Santa Marta Mountains. Further to the south are the mighty Andes, which in Colombia split into three great chains (or cordilleras) with two fertile valleys nestled between them, each of which hosts its own specialised avifauna.

So how does one get to grips with this almost overwhelming diversity during a trip to Colombia? At the top of the priority list for many people wishing to visit the country will be safety, a concern that



**ON (JARDÍN'S) OUTSKIRTS CAN BE FOUND ONE OF THE WORLD'S AVIAN EXTRAVAGANZAS, A DISPLAY LEK OF THE SPECTACULAR ANDEAN COCK-OF-THE-ROCK**

including the long-legged Tawny Antpitta, Many-striped Canastero and the highly sought-after Bearded Helmetcrest, a near-endemic hummingbird that occurs in a few areas of high páramo.

**I**n the Magdalena Valley, which lies between the Central and Eastern Andes, is the superb lowland tropical rainforest birding area of Río Claro. One of the undoubted highlights here is visiting a cave that hosts about 250 pairs of the remarkable Oilbird. Designated its

own family, this relative of the nightjars is renowned for its echolocation abilities, essential for navigating in the pitch-black caves, and even from quite a distance the birds' weird clicks, groans and shrieks can be heard. Other key targets that we succeeded in finding included the recently described Antioquia Bristle-Tyrant, the endemic White-mantled Barbet, the electric Blue Cotinga, Saffron-headed Parrot and the minuscule Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant. A wetland to the north of Río Claro supports a localised population of Northern Screamers and is excellent for other waterbirds.

Continuing our circuit of Colombia's most recommended birding sites, we ascend the Central Andes to visit Arrierito Antioqueño Bird Reserve, known colloquially as the Chestnut-capped Piha Reserve. This private forest is owned by the

organisation ProAves, which is responsible for a good deal of pioneering conservation work in Colombia. It purchased the land to protect the endangered and recently described Chestnut-capped Piha, but many other bird species abound. I rate the time I spent there as one of my most enjoyable days' birding in more than 20 years of world travel. Highlights included such mouth-watering species as the rare Brown-billed Scythebill, Chestnut-crowned Gnateater, Indigo Flowerpiercer, the migratory Cerulean Warbler and the stunning Golden-breasted Fruiteater, as well as the endemic Parker's Antbird, Red-bellied Grackle and Stiles's Tapaculo. Colourful tanagers are a feature of this reserve and the rare Grey-and-gold, Purplish-mantled and Speckled, as well as the endemic Multi-coloured, are a few of the many we observed.

Further south along the Central Andes, where little has changed for more than a century, the *pueblo* (village) of Jardín is a delight to explore. On its outskirts can be found one of the world's avian extravaganzas, a display lek of the spectacular Andean Cock-of-the-rock. Males of this bizarre giant cotinga gather in a forested ravine to perform and show their full splendour to admiring females. While thus occupied, they completely ignore spellbound birders and photographers.

Above Jardín is the Loro Orejiamarillo Nature Reserve, also owned by ProAves and proclaimed to protect a population of approximately 600 endangered Yellow-eared Parrots that was discovered here in 2000. During our visit, part of the access road had been obliterated by landslides but we were able to hike over the debris and find these beautiful parrots, as well as other superb ▷

**Above, left** A pair of Toucan Barbets, a restricted-range species, photographed at Cerro Montezuma.

**Top** Tapaculos are the South American equivalents of flufftails and are often very difficult to observe. This is Paramo Tapaculo.

**Above** The secretive Chestnut-crowned Antpitta is most easily seen at antpitta worm-feeding stations.



IN THREE WEEKS, WE RECORDED IN EXCESS OF 700 OF COLOMBIA'S BIRDS, INCLUDING MORE THAN 70 HUMMINGBIRDS, OVER 60 TANAGERS, A DOZEN ANTPITTAS, 11 TAPACULOS AND MUCH MORE BESIDES

skulkers into view. This has proved hugely successful and time spent at these feeders produced fantastic views of not only such shy gems as Chestnut-crowned, Chestnut-naped, Slate-crowned and the endemic and little-known Brown-banded antpittas, but also Black-and-green Fruiteater, Highland Motmot and Chestnut-capped Brush-finch. Nectar feeders positioned around the lodge are constantly abuzz with hummingbirds and although Buff-tailed Coronets dominated, we also saw Long-tailed Sylph, Speckled Hummingbird, the boldly patterned Collared Inca and the charming Tourmaline Sunangel. Space precludes elaborating on our many highlights, but some of the most noteworthy birds here were the massive Powerful and brilliant Crimson-backed woodpeckers, aberrant Grass-green and White-capped tanagers, Golden-headed Quetzal, Rusty-faced Parrot, the exceedingly rare Masked Saltator, Ornate Flycatcher, Plushcap and busy White-capped Dipper.

Remote Cerro Montezuma is situated in the Western Andes and is one of the wettest places on our green planet. To access the region's vast and little-known humid cloudforests and the rare birds that inhabit them, you need to take a 4x4 drive from Pueblo Rico to reach Leopoldina's farm, where the charming lady of the same name and her daughters welcome birders into their home. Then a two-hour pre-dawn horseback ride along a steep mountain trail brings you into 'the zone', where such mouth-watering species as the endemic Gold-ringed and Black-and-gold tanagers, Fulvous-dotted Treerunner, Black Solitaire, Choco Vireo, Olivaceous Piha, Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonia, Toucan Barbet, Olive Finch, Club-winged Manakin and hummingbirds such as the massive Empress Brilliant, Brown Inca

birds, including the endemic and Critically Endangered Munchique Wood-Wren and the highly sought-after Chestnut-crested Cotinga, Tanager Finch and Black-billed Mountain Toucan.

Within Colombia's Coffee Triangle lies Río Blanco Nature Reserve, where a simple but welcoming eco-lodge provides the gateway to an amazingly rich cloudforest. Near the lodge, several antpitta feeding stations have been established to encourage these normally reserved understory



**Top** The endangered Santa Marta Parakeet is restricted to the Santa Marta range.

**Above** Montane Woodcreepers are not uncommon in mixed bird flocks working through mid-storey forests.

**Opposite** The elegant Long-tailed Sylph photographed in the process of nectar feeding.



and White-tailed Hillstar can be found. New species are regularly being discovered here, including an as-yet-undescribed tapaculo (provisionally named Alto Pisonés Tapaculo) that we were fortunate enough to locate. Despite the dampness, this is birding at its very best.

From Colombia's tropical Caribbean coastline rises a remarkable geological feature: the isolated Santa Marta range whose snow-capped peaks are Colombia's highest (and in fact the highest coastal mountains in the world). The habitat on Santa Marta supports 19 endemic birds, plus numerous endemic subspecies (several of which are likely to be elevated to full species status). ProAves owns another reserve here called El Dorado and, after bumping and grinding our way up a rough track the likes of which I have only seen in Angola, we arrived at the pleasant lodge.

Hummingbird feeders attract the beautiful White-tailed Starfrontlet, tiny Santa Marta Woodstar, rare Lazuline Sabrewing and, if you are very lucky, a Blossomcrown. The lodge's compost heap is the stake-out for the sought-after Black-fronted Wood

Quail and a nearby feeder lured in a reclusive Santa Marta Antpitta. Beyond the lodge at higher elevations other endemics abound, including Rusty-headed Spinetail and the furtive Brown-rumped Tapaculo, Yellow-crowned Whitestart, Santa Marta Mountain Tanager and the rare Santa Marta Warbler. We were very fortunate to enjoy close encounters with the endangered Santa Marta Parakeet and scarce Santa Marta Bush Tyrant. Other beauties we saw in the area's busy forests included the dazzling White-tipped Quetzal, Santa Marta Toucanet, Lined Quail-Dove, Coppery Emerald, the arboreal Streak-capped Spinetail, secretive Santa Marta Foliage-gleaner and the endemic White-lored Warbler. A special nocturnal excursion was successful in that it produced the as-yet-undescribed Santa Marta Screech Owl no more than an arm's length away.

In three weeks, we recorded in excess of 700 of Colombia's birds, including more than 70 hummingbirds, over 60 tanagers, a dozen antpittas, 11 tapaculos and much more besides. This is birding at its very best and every ardent birder should seriously consider visiting Colombia for the experience of a lifetime. □

## KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Colombia is best visited between November and March or in July and August as these are the drier months. The advantage of November to March is that the North American overwintering migrants are also present, but if possible avoid the busy Christmas holiday period of late December to mid-January.

Unless you have a lot of time and speak Spanish, independent birding travel is not recommended. Most of the major world bird-tour companies offer tours to Colombia. Rockjumper Birding Tours [www.rockjumperbirding.com](http://www.rockjumperbirding.com) is the only South Africa-based company that goes to this birding Mecca.

### Recommended books

McMullan, M., Donegan, T. and Quevedo, A. *Field Guide to the Birds of Colombia*. ProAves, 2010.  
Restall, R., Rodner, C., and Lentino, M. *Birds of Northern South America* (two volumes). Helm Field Guides, 2006.