Full Detailed Itinerary - Northern Ecuador Photo Tour

Day 1: Quito

The tour starts this evening in Quito, and you will be transferred to an excellent hotel for the night. If the extension is run before the main tour, this will be the last day of the extension.

Day 2: Antisana to Guango Lodge

Our first morning of the tour will be truly spectacular and for good reason, as we visit the open grasslands surrounding the enormous Antisana volcano. This is often voted as the favorite site of the tour by many, for the wonderful surroundings in which we will be shooting. The towering peak of the Antisana Volcano itself is impressive, with a large snow-covered top, and dramatic rocky sides. The páramo (grassland) is interspersed with rocky outcrops and scenic high Andean lakes dotted with high altitude waterfowl. Indeed the scenery itself may be our biggest photo asset. Aside from these breathtaking Andean scenes, the upper páramo is carpeted with Carunculated Caracaras, a striking pied raptor that occurs here in impressive numbers. Black-faced Ibis patrol these high plains as do Andean Lapwings and large flocks of Andean Gulls. It is a site that will leave a lasting impression, and provide ample shots for processing at the end of the tour. After lunch at a hacienda on site, we shall drive to Guango Lodge, where we will spend two nights

Day 3: Guango Lodge

Guango is a small lodge with great hummingbirds; it will complement our later visit to Tandayapa very well. Guango has a varied set of feeders that attract dozens of hummingbirds, including such extravagant species as the “cartoonesque” Sword-billed Hummingbird, the dapper black-and-white Collared Inca, aggressive Chestnut-breasted Coronet, tiny White-bellied Woodstar, and sublime Tourmaline Sunangel. The hummer feeders are also a target for other local birds, most notably the indigo blue Masked Flowerpiercer that will make a tempting subject for our cameras. The temperate forest that overhangs this comfortable Andean lodge also attracts passing flocks of birds, some of which can be remarkably confiding and photogenic, that including the cerulean-blue Turquoise Jay.

Day 4: Papallacta and Guango to Quito

Weather permitting, we will venture into the páramo grasslands of the high Andes around Papallacta Pass; on clear days we can enjoy spectacular views of several snow-capped volcanoes. The high altitude birds that reside there can be remarkably confiding. Comical cinclodes bound around on the páramo, Tawny Antpittas hop along the roads, and with the use of playback, shier birds like canasteros and tit-spinetails can often be brought in close. At lunch time we will return to Guango, where will have the most of the afternoon to shoot hummingbirds, walk the forest trails behind the lodge, or scan the river alongside for Torrent Ducks. In mid-afternoon, we shall pack up and head to Quito for a night.

Days 5: Zuroloma to Tandayapa Bird Lodge

After leaving Quito, we’ll first visit the Zuroloma reserve. The feeders at this site are just fantastic, regularly attracting Sword-billed Hummingbird, Mountain Velvetbreast, Collared Inca, and Sapphire-vented Puffleg on the hummingbird front, but also Andean Guan, Masked and Glossy Flowerpiercers, Yellow-breasted

Brushfinch, and Blue-capped Tanager too at the other feeders on site. The reserve landowners are also famous for their successful efforts to tame several shy antpitta species, and we will be hoping to connect with an Equatorial or Chestnut-naped Antpitta during our visit too. Away from the feeders, we may see Red-crested Cotinga, Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager, or Black-crested Warbler. By late morning, we will switch over to nearby Yanacocha reserve, where will take lunch after checking out Shining Sunbeams and Great Sapphirewings at their own feeders. In the afternoon, we'll make our way downslope to Tandayapa Bird Lodge, our base for five nights. The lodge is nestled within lush subtropical forest on the west slope of the Andes, an area renowned for its high bird species diversity.

Days 6-9: Northwest Ecuador based out of Tandayapa Bird Lodge

Tandayapa makes a great base to explore the surrounding region, and the lodge itself is one of the best spots for bird photography in Ecuador. This is especially evident in the impressive hummingbird community found right around the lodge that will occupy much of our photographic energies. The lodge feeders attract thousands of individual hummingbirds, with 10-20 species visiting on most days. The most common is usually is the outrageous White-booted Racket-tail, the male of which has a strange long tail, with two paddles at the end. Other regular drop-ins are a number of glistening species like the audacious Violet-tailed Sylph, the standout Purple-bibbed Whitetip, and the gem-like Western Emerald., dinky Purple-throated Woodstar that regularly buzz around the Tandayapa balcony. If hummingbird photography is your goal, you are likely to come away with plenty of shots of over ten species of hummingbird, many of which are hard to photograph elsewhere. Fruit feeders at the lodge can also attract “technicolor” birds like Red-headed Barbet, Blue-winged Mountain-Tanager, or Toucan Barbet. Other species often come in to eat insects attracted to lights, such as flycatchers, woodcreepers, and more. We will also make day trips to other areas within an hour or so of the lodge. Some of these include Birdwatchers House for Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan, Milpe Bird Sanctuary for some different hummingbird species and a chance at the unique Club-winged Manakin, and the Mashpi-Amaguza reserve, which has superb fruit feeders attracting a rainbow of species like Glistening-green Tanager, Moss-backed Tanager, and Velvet-purple Coronet.

Day 10: Paz de las Aves to Quito

We’ll depart very early and head to one of the most important bird sites in the area, the wonderful Paz de las Aves Refuge. This beautiful reserve is set within subtropical forest where the moist, moss-covered trees are burdened with bright red bromeliads. Our early rise will let us visit an area deep within the forest where a short time after dawn the bright scarlet forms of several displaying Andean Cock-of-the-rocks will start the day off with a spectacular forest performance. However, what has made this place such a joy for photographers and birders alike is the habituating of several rare and shy species of the forest floor, especially the antpittas. Giant, Moustached, Yellow-breasted Antpittas, Ochre-breasted, and Chestnut-crowned Antpittas are all possible, with usually at least two of them cooperating on any given visit. Other birds we will be trying to photograph include Dark-backed Wood-Quail, Rufous-breasted Antthrush, and White-capped Dipper. Later in the morning, we may visit one of the other sites mentioned above, or we may return to Tandayapa for a few hours, before returning to Quito for the final night of the tour.

Day 11: Departure

The tour ends this morning with transfers to the airport. If the extension is running after the main tour, this will be the first day of the extension.

Tour Extension 1

Day 1: Quito to Sani Lodge

After a short flight to the lowland city of Coca, staff from Sani Lodge will meet us and take us to a dock, where we'll board a large, covered motorized canoe for the 2.5 hour journey down the Napo River. There won't be much in the way of photo opportunities during this trip, so just sit back in relax. Upon arrival at Sani's dock, you'll have a chance to unpack your camera and get ready. Here in the virgin Amazon rainforest, you never know when something amazing will pop into view and it pays to be prepared! The path to Sani goes along a boardwalk through seasonally flooded várzea forest to another dock at the edge of the Challuayacu River, a small channel that winds through beautiful swamp forest to an oxbow lake. Five species of kingfishers occur along here along with herons and other water-loving species. Shy species like Cocha Antshrike can sometimes be lured into view, and while the dark rainforest makes the photography challenging, with persistence, the right gear, and a little luck, great shots are still possible. We'll have lunch at Sani, and spend the afternoon either on the lake or river, or spend time around the lodge depending on activity. We'll have four nights total based in Sani Lodge. Note: If the extension runs before the main tour, today will be the second day, since you will need to arrive the previous day in Quito.

Days 2-4: Full days based out of Sani Lodge

The day to day activities here are highly subject to change based on current conditions. Local guides are keeping up with the current hotspots, and their knowledge will be vital in deciding where best to spend our days at Sani Lodge. Here are some of the most likely areas we will visit during our time at Sani Lodge: The lodge clearing. The Sani clearing can be a great place to photography numerous colorful species, especially if any trees are fruiting. White-chinned Jacamar, Scarlet-crowned Barbet, various toucans and aracaris, Orange-crested Manakin, Gray-fronted Dove, Masked Crimson and Silver-beaked Tanagers, Purple Honeycreeper, Golden-bellied Euphonia, are some of the possibilities. This is a great area to spend time in during the heat of the day, which can be slow in other locations.
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Oxbow lake and Challuayacu River. Using canoes or a floating platform/blind suitable for tripods, we'll work the edge of the oxbow lake, which is great for getting photos of Hoatzin, Black-capped Donacobius, Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Capped Heron, Pale-vented Pigeon, White-winged Swallow, Lesser Kiskadee, and more. There is usually plenty of light to work with and the photography is easier than in the forest. The previously-mentioned Challuayacu River is darker but offers the chance for perched hummingbirds, manakins, various antbirds, and even monkeys and sloths. Canopy tower. Sani's canopy tower is built into enormous kapok tree, and the platform is the largest we've ever seen, allowing for lots of space to set up a tripod or to move around for the perfect angle. Activity can vary, but if a mixed flock comes through, this can be one of the best places in Sani to get great shots, and there is plenty of light. Some birds we have photographed there include Many-banded Aracari, Paradise and Opal-crowned Tanagers, Great Jacamar, Yellow-billed and White-fronted Nunbirds, Gilded and Lemon-throated Barbets, Cinnamon-throated and Buff-throated Woodcreepers, Black-tailed and Green-backed Trogons, Black-tailed Tityra, Cinnamon Attila, though many more are possible. Near the tower, there is a blind that allows good chances to photograph the dapper Wire-tailed Manakin. More blinds may be installed in the future as well. Yasuní parrot licks. Not far from Sani Lodge are the famous clay licks that on dry days bring in hundreds and hundreds of parrots. Both have blinds and are well worth visiting. Flash is not allowed here, so a very fast lens and a tripod are recommended. The first clay lick is active early, and is great for Yellow-crowned, Mealy, and Blue-headed Parrots, and Dusky-headed Parakeet. Another lick is about a 20 minute walk into the forest and offers a chance at some rare species like Orange-cheeked Parrot, Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlet, and Scarlet Macaw among the hordes of Cobalt-winged Parakeets.
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Napo River islands. River islands hold a totally different set of birds, and the scrub and young forest makes the lighting easier than inside the rainforest. It can be good to spend a few hours looking for the specialties including Oriole Blackbird, Black-and-white Antbird, Castlenau's Antshrike, and Lesser Wagtail-Tyrant. Occasionally a roosting Striped Owl is also found here.

Roosting nightbird stakeouts. Local guides usually know where at least some nightbirds are sleeping during the day, such as Common and Great Potoo, Tropical and Tawny-bellied Screech-owl, and Crested and Mottled Owls. Sometimes they are partly obscured our badly backlit, but other times they show very well allowing for nice shots. It's always worth checking them out.
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Night photography. Numerous bizarre insects, colorful frogs and reptiles, and other macro targets can be found on a night walk behind the lodge. If you are into macro photography, or want to try it out for the first time, it's a lot of fun. Of course there is also a chance for a nightbird or even a night monkey as well.

Day 5: Sani to Quito

Depending on flight schedules, there may be time for some early morning shooting before we have to travel back up the Napo River to Coca and fly back to Quito, where we spend a final night. Flight schedules are variable – sometimes you are back in Quito by lunch, giving you the afternoon to relax, whereas other times flights don't arrive until late afternoon or evening. If the extension runs before the main tour, this will be day 6, and it will be the same day as Day 1 of the main tour.

Day 6: Departure

If the extension runs after the main tour, this is departure day, and transport to the Quito airport will be provided.

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