Full Detailed Itinerary - Southern Ecuador: Highland Rarities and Tumbesian Endemics

Day 1: Guayaquil

Upon arrival in Guayaquil you will be met by a driver and transferred to a local hotel for the night.

Day 2: Manglares-Churute to Buenaventura

We'll depart the city early to avoid traffic and head south along the coastal plain to the Manglares-Churute reserve, about 45 minutes away. This area sports an interesting mix of lagoons, mangroves, and semihumid forest, unlike anything else we see on the tour. It's arguably the best place in Ecuador to find the threatened "Pacific" Royal-Flycatcher along with a number of other scarce species including Jet Antbird, Orange-crowned Euphonia, and Common (Mangrove) Black-Hawk. We'll also have our first chance at some of the more common Tumbesian endemics like Superciliated Wren and Ecuadorian Trogon, and with luck should find some Horned Screamers in nearby rice paddies. Later in the morning, we drive south for a few hours; depending on water levels, we may stop at some roadside pools for waterbirds, shorebirds, and waterfowl. In the afternoon we will arrive in Buenaventura reserve, where we spend two nights in the lodge inside the reserve. We begin our birding at the terrific hummingbird feeders, which attract literally swarms of these neat little birds. Emerald-bellied Woodnymph, Violet-belled Hummingbird, and Green Thorntail are just a few of the species that visit. Fruit feeders also attract a variety of interesting birds like Rufous-headed Chachalaca and Pale-mandibled Aracari. Late in the afternoon, we'll take a short but steep trail down into a ravine where the spectacular Long-wattled Umbrellabird can often be seen displaying.

Day 3: Buenaventura

The reserve was created especially to protect the largest known population of the endemic El Oro Parakeet. If the birds are nesting, reserve wardens may be able to take us to active nest sites. Even out of the nesting season, we stand a reasonable chance of finding a small flock during our time here. There are plenty of other birds as well, and activity along the main track through the reserve can often be superb. We will search the beautiful mist-enshrouded forests for local species such as Ochraceous Attila, Song Wren, Esmeraldas Antbird, Club-winged Manakin, Rufous-throated Tanager, Gray-breasted Flycatcher, and Brown-billed Scythebill among hordes of more common birds like Bay-headed Tanager and Blue-necked Tanagers, Bay Wren, Choco Toucan, Spotted Woodcreeper, Ornate Flycatcher, Ecuadorian Thrush, and Scarlet-rumped Cacique . Much of the birding will be on a moderately inclined dirt road through the forest, but we'll have to take short walks on muddy and sometimes steep trails.

Day 4: Buenaventura and El Empalme

After another morning in Buenaventura checking for any birds we are missing, we drive south to the reserve of Jorupe. This drive will take most of the rest of the day, but we'll stop late in the afternoon at some impressive deciduous forest near El Empalme. Among the giant Ceiba trees, we may see White-headed Brush-Finch, Tumbes Sparrow, Tumbes Hummingbird, Baird's Flycatcher, Elegant Crescentchest, and others. We'll arrive at Urraca Lodge around dusk, in the heart of the dry forest of the Jocotoco Foundation's Jorupe Reserve, for a three night stay.

Day 5: Jorupe

It will be nice to not have to drive anywhere this morning as the action starts right around the lodge. With luck, some of the tougher species could visit the feeders early in the morning, such as Pale-browed Tinamou and Ochre-bellied Dove, along with Whooping Motmot, Plumbeous-backed Thrush, White-edged Oriole, White-tailed Jay, and Red-masked Parakeet. Later on, we'll bird the dirt roads and well-built trails targeting shy Tumbesian endemics such as Blackish-headed Spinetail, Henna-hooded Foliage-gleaner, Slaty Becard, and Watkins's Antpitta. Other more common species we might encounter include White-edged and Yellow-tailed Orioles, Collared Antshrike, Plain Antvireo, Ecuadorian Piculet, Speckle-breasted Wren, and Black-capped Sparrow. Owling can often be good, with West Peruvian Screech-Owl and Spectacled Owl often around the lodge at night, and the very rare Buff-fronted Owl has been seen here on a few occasions.

Day 6: Utuana and Sozoranga

Farther from Jorupe, the road takes us up into the mountains again, and the cooler weather will be welcome. Forest patches near Sozoranga (a 45 minute drive) hold yet more Tumbesian endemics like Bay-crowned Brush-Finch, Chapman's Antshrike, Tumbes Tyrannulet, Loja Hummingbird, and Black-cowled Saltator. We continue on up the windy road to the Utuana reserve, where we look for scarce species like Gray-headed Antbird, Rufous-necked Foliage-gleaner, Rusty-breasted Antpitta, Piura Hemispingus, and Jelski's Chat-Tyrant. The unbelievably cute Black-crested Tit-Tyrant is likely to be a highlight, and the hummer feeders here attract Purple-throated Sunangel and Rainbow Starfrontlet. In the afternoon, we bird our way back down to Jorupe.

Day 7: Jorupe to Vilcabamba

There's a lot of driving today, but we'll have time to target anything we still need at either Jorupe or Utuana before leaving the Tumbesian region behind. A short stop in the Catamayo Valley could get us finches such as Drab Seedeater, Chestnut-throated Seedeater, and Band-tailed Sierra-Finch, then we'll head to Vilcabamba for the night, where we'll also try a stakeout for Plumbeous Rail.

Day 8: Cerro Toledo and Tapichalaca

Over the next three days we will concentrate on the temperate forests near the continental divide, home to many spectacular birds. We'll start by taking a rough road to Cerro Toledo, draped by beautiful elfin forest right below treeline. This is the easiest spot to see the near-endemic Neblina Metaltail, and we have a great chance to see the tough-to-find Masked Mountain-Tanager as well. On rare occasions, small flocks of the threatened Red-faced Parrot are encountered. Other birds we may see here include Red-hooded Tanager, Bearded Guan, Paramo Tapaculo, Mouse-colored Thistletail, Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan, Golden-crowned Tanager, and Pale-naped Brush-Finch. In the afternoon we drive over the remote Cordillera de Sabanilla to Tapichalaca reserve, home of the fabled Jocotoco Antpitta, which has become easy to see now that it comes in to a feeder every day to eat worms. We spend two nights in the cozy lodge in the reserve, which has some nice hummer feeders.

Day 9: Tapichalaca

While the Jocotoco Antpitta is our main target today, we should see plenty of other good birds along the trails, such as Chestnut-caped and Slate-crowned Antpittas, Chusquea and Ocellated Tapaculos, Golden-plumed Parakeet, Barred Fruiteater, Black-capped Hemispingus, Orange-banded Flycatcher, White-throated

Quail-Dove, and various mountain-tanagers. Sometimes the reserve rangers know of a day roost for Long-tailed Potoo. The walk up to the Jocotoco feeding area is a narrow forest trail that has some short steep sections, and is often slippery and muddy. Although the walk is not long we will take our time getting up there as there are many birding possibilities en-route. However, we will time our arrival at the antpitta feeding area so that we get there for their regular feeding time of 8:00am. We'll return to the lodge for lunch, and there will be time to the varied hummingbirds visiting the feeders, including Amethyst-throated and Flame-throated Sunangels, Chestnut-breasted Coronet, Collared Inca, and Long-tailed Sylph. In the afternoon, we may bird along the road below the lodge towards the town of Valladolid where occasionally Chestnut-crested Cotinga can be seen, or else spend more time around the lodge.

Day 10: Tapichalaca to Yankuam Lodge

After another morning of birding in Tapichalaca or along the road to Valladolid, we will have a rather long drive (6-7 hours) down the east slope of the Andes to Cabañas Yankuam, where we spend two nights. The last two hours of the trip are along a dirt road through forest patches that can be very birdy, so we'll have some stops to see species like Violaceous Jay, Channel-billed Toucan, Little Woodpecker, Long-tailed Tyrant, and others. We can also look for Bluish-fronted Jacamar, only recently discovered in Ecuador.

Day 11: Maycu reserve and the Nuevo Paraiso Road

This area in the lower foothills of the eastern Andes has come to prominence as the place to see the rare and unique Orange-throated Tanager. There is no easier place in the world to get this strikingly beautiful bird. Other possibilities here include Speckled Chachalaca, Gilded Barbet, Magpie Tanager, Blackish Pewee, Golden-winged Tody-Flycatcher, Black-and-white Tody-Flycatcher, Zimmer's Antbird, White-bellied Pygmy-Tyrant, White-throated Woodpecker, Fulvous Shrike-Tanager, and Ocellated Woodcreeper, along with a plethora of foothill species and even a few birds more typical of the Amazonian lowlands.

Day 12: Yankuam to Yantzaza

After spending another morning birding in this amazingly rich area, we will drive several hours north to Yantzaza for a one-night stay. In the afternoon, we will check a local reserve for the scarce Spangled Coquette.

Day 13: Zarza Forest to Copalinga

This morning we will head up into the Cordillera del Condor near the Peruvian border to search for some very scarce birds like Spectacled Prickletail, Equatorial Graytail, Rufous-browed Tyrannulet, Roraiman Flycatcher, Bar-winged Wood-Wren, Chestnut-bellied Thrush, and Black-streaked Puffbird, along with many other more widespread Andean species. In the afternoon, we drive a few hours to Copalinga Lodge near the edge of Podocarpus National Park, where we spend two nights. The grounds of the lodge are great for hummingbirds like Wire-crested Thorntail, Violet-headed Hummingbird, Violet-fronted Brilliant, Fork-tailed Woodnymph, and Spangled Coquette, and Blackish Nightjar can often be found close by. Tanager feeders here are sometimes very active, and other times strangely abandoned. We'll aim to arrive here in time to see Gray Tinamou, which has become very easy to see in the afternoons from a blind along one of the trails. At night, Band-bellied Owl often calls near the lodge, and we'll track it down if we have the chance.

Day 14: Rio Bombuscaro

We bird an excellent forest trail about 15 minutes from our lodge that has many localized species, including Coppery-chested Jacamar, Ecuadorian Piedtail, White-breasted Parakeet, Amazonian Umbrellabird, Foothill

Elaenia, Olive Finch, Black-billed Treehunter, Blue-rumped Manakin, and Equatorial Graytail. Other more common birds we may see are Paradise and Green-and-gold Tanager, Andean Motmot, Green Hermit, Red-headed Barbet, Lafresnaye's Piculet, and Marble-faced Bristle-Tyrant. In mid-afternoon, we will return to the lodge, where we can either have some relaxed birding around the lodge, or take a short drive to other nearby sites.

Day 15: Old Zamora Road to Saraguro via Huashapamba

We'll start birding along an old dirt road about 25 minutes from Copalinga that passes through some amazingly productive forest patches. Some birds are easier to see here than at Rio Bombuscaro, such as Andean Cock-of-the-rock, Ecuadorian Tyrannulet, Lined Antshrike, and Olivaceous Greenlet. In the afternoon we will travel to Saraguro. Time permitting, we will be stopping at the nearby Huashapamba community forest en-route to check for the rare Red-faced Parrot, which while not guaranteed is best looked for in the afternoons. The next two nights will be spent in a hotel in the town of Saraguro.

Day 16: Cerro Acanama and Huashapamba

We'll spend the morning in treeline forest in the mountains above Saraguro, making a special effort to see the incredible Crescent-faced Antpitta. The antpitta lurks in dense patches of bamboo at the timberline, and with patience and luck we may be able to call one in. Other scarce species, like Black-headed Hemispingus, Flammulated Treehunter, Bearded Guan, Masked Mountain-Tanager, Glowing Puffleg, and Agile Tit-Tyrant also occur here. The very rare Chestnut-bellied Cotinga is also possible, though much luck is required. At the end of the day, we will have the option once again to visit Huashapamba, if we did not pick up the Red-faced Parrot there the evening before. A final night will be spent in the nearby town of Saraguro.

Day 17: Cerro de Arcos to Santa Isabel

A very early departure will be required on this day as we head upwards from the temperate slopes of the Andes, and emerge above the treeline, to where paramo grasslands dominate. Our destination for the morning will be Cerro de Arcos, where in 2017 a completely new hummingbird for the world was discovered, now called the Blue-throated Hillstar. This species, since its recent description in 2018, has already been considered critically-endangered, being known from just three spots in a very small area thus far, on a few mountains in southern Ecuador. We will visit the only easily accessible site for the species currently known. We'll spend the morning looking for the hillstar (sightings are likely). In the afternoon, we will continue our journey to the town of Santa Isabel, where we spend one night.

Day 18: Yunguilla reserve to Cuenca

The dry woodland and scrubby hillsides of Yunguilla are home to the critically endangered Pale-headed Brush-Finch, whose entire known population resides within this reserve. We'll also have a chance to see some other scarce birds such as Little Woodstar and Blue Seedeater, as well as Chestnut-crowned Antpitta. After a morning in the reserve, we will travel north to Cuenca, where we will spend one night in a nice hotel with thermal baths – remember to bring swimwear if you fancy soaking in the steaming pools! We often arrive early enough to have quite a relaxing afternoon.

Day 19: El Cajas National Park

A short drive from Cuenca brings us to this beautiful park, which protects temperate forest and scrub, windswept páramo, patches of Polylepis woodland, and pristine highland lakes. We'll start our birding near one of these lakes where we could find Ecuadorian Rail, Andean Ruddy-Duck, Andean Teal, and Yellow-

billed Pintail, while the surrounding forest has a variety of colorful tanagers and hummers. We'll then stop to look for the endemic Violet-throated Metaltail and local Mouse-colored Thistletail (if we missed it in Cerro Toledo) in roadside scrub, eventually reaching the grassy paramo, where we should pick up Tawny Antpitta, Andean Tit-Spinetail, Many-striped Canastero, Stout-billed Cinclodes, and others. The gnarly Polylepis is loaded with pretty Tit-like Dacnises, and there's a good chance to find a Giant Conebill. The highway through the park continues on to Guayaquil (3 hours), and we will complete a magnificent circuit of the southern part of Ecuador.

Day 20: Departure or Start Extension

If you are not joining the Pacific Coast Extension, the tour ends this morning with a transfer to the international airport.

Tour Extension 1

Day 1: The Santa Elena Peninsula

An early start is required in order to make our way west to the coast, where we will search the coastal scrub on the Santa Elena Peninsula for Necklaced Spinetail, West Peruvian Dove, Short-tailed Woodstar, Parrot-billed Seedeater, Sulphur-throated Finch, Short-tailed Field-Tyrant, and Gray-and-white Tyrannulet among others. The coastal saltpans in this area are packed with hundreds of shorebirds, and sometimes also hold giant Peruvian Pelicans and graceful Chilean Flamingos. A walk out to the beach might get us somber-looking Gray Gulls or handsome Gray-headed Gulls loafing along the tideline. After lunch in a beach town, we head further north to a lodge near Ayampe, overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Day 2: Ayampe area

After breakfast, we will venture into the deciduous woodland alongside the Ayampe River (less than a 30 minute drive from our hotel), a stronghold for the critically endangered Esmeraldas Woodstar. The area also holds scarce Tumbesian species we could have missed on the main tour such as Slaty Becard, Ochre-bellied Dove, Pacific Royal Flycatcher, Gray-backed Hawk, and Saffron Siskin. There are also a number of humid forest birds in the wetter forest patches, where we could find Gartered Trogon, Lesser Greenlet, Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner, White-backed Fire-eye, and others. After lunch back at our chilled out resort, we could either return to Ayampe or bird dry forest farther north along the coast for skulkers like Pale-browed Tinamou and the exquisite Elegant Crescentchest. At dusk we will check the scrub near our resort for the aptly named Scrub Nightjar.

Day 3: Return to Guayaquil

The activities on this day will depend on what we are still looking for. We will begin either in Ayampe again or Machalilla, then make our way south back towards the Santa Elena Peninsula and Guayaquil (around 5 hours away). In the late afternoon we will return to Guayaquil for a final farewell dinner.

Day 4: Departure

The extension ends this morning with a transfer to the international airport.

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