

A Tropical Birding CUSTOM tour

Ecuador Custom Tour:

The "Ground-Cuckoo Twitch"

19th – **23**rd February **2022**



A Dream Bird and a Dream Twitch: This Banded Ground-Cuckoo was the reason *Tim* jumped on a plane at the last minute from Florida to try and catch sight of this extreme rarity before it disappeared off the birding map once again, as they always do (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours).

Guided by Sam Woods

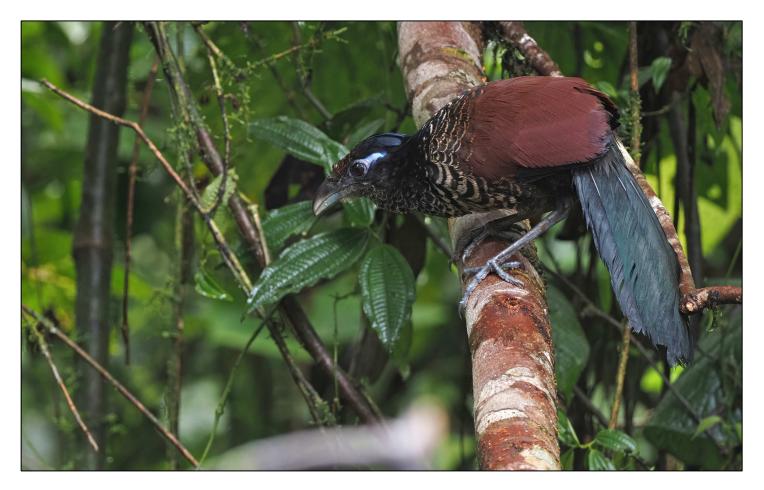
Birds in the photos within this report are denoted in RED, all photos by Sam Woods.

TOUR SUMMARY:

In January 2022, news trickled through the birding community in Ecuador that the extremely rare Banded Ground-Cuckoo had been regularly sighted at a sanctuary in Milpe, near the famous birding town of Mindo. By the end of the month, news was rising to fever pitch and the news had reached many North Americans who were keen to see this bird on the rare occasion it looks like it might be "gettable". On hearing that one of the TROPICAL BIRDING guides, Andres Vasquez, had managed to twitch it with a US friend of his, (Rick), Tim contacted Sam to put a GROUND-CUCKOO plan in action. He was prepared to fly in from Florida especially for a short, sharp trip to try and get this ground-cuckoo, before it would, inevitably, go to ground again. In short, and seemingly against all odds (read on for the full story), Tim, Sam and Keith had a magical hour or so with the Banded Ground-Cuckoo (photos page 1 & 3), as it actively foraged around a swarm of army ants (their preferred mobile "habitat"), called regularly and also was heard regularly bill snapping, making for a near perfect sighting, of a truly difficult bird to track down, due to its undoubted rarity coupled with its nomadic nature, following army ant swarms through dense forest over large areas of inaccessible Andean foothills. To this end, the tour was extremely successful, and good use of just 5 days of birding, where we also saw some other good specialties of the endemic-rich Choco bioregion of Northwest Ecuador, with other birds like Glistening-green, Moss-backed and Black-chinned Mountain Tanagers (photos page 6), featuring, along with Rose-faced Parrots (below), Black and Rufous-brown Solitaires (photo page 8), Choco Vireo, Blue-tailed Trogon, and Orange-breasted Fruiteater (photo page 8). This was supplemented by some quality high Andean birds, like Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe (photo page 9), Jameson's Snipe (photo page 10), and Red-rumped Bush-Tyrant too.



Day 1 (of birding): 20th February – Milpe and Veintitres de Junio Reserve.



This was one of those epic birding days that will certainly live long in the memory of the "ballsy" participant who arranged this high-risk tour, and for the guide too. There are some days in birding that will never be forgotten and stand out whatever has happened before and whatever happens in the future, they are so singularly distinctive and adrenalin-filled they will always be regarded as a classic experience. Circumstances can often dictate how a bird's sighting is reviewed after the event, and how it is ranked. Going for a seemingly tough bird and getting it without a hitch and no barriers in the way can sometimes leave the feeling of getting a toughie rather flat. The birds that have a challenge to seeing them or have proved troublesome on the way to getting them are often more highly rated and more memorable. And so it was the case for the *Ground-Cuckoo* in this instance.

Tim had hatched this plan for a February timed "twitch" shortly after it became clear the cuckoo had been seen with rare regularity for much of January 2022. What he did not foresee, (and could not have foreseen), was that right at the time he plotted this plan, it was also exactly the time when the cuckoo disappeared once more, as they characteristically do. Its ecology is a nomadic one, foraging in a mobile habitat of swarms of army ants that can cover quite some ground. Unbeknown to us when we started the planning of the trip, the local army ant swarm that it had followed into *Milpe*, had left the property, and were gone, seemingly taking the *cuckoo* with it. Sam also visited a week earlier than this tour but had not had a sniff of it.

Indeed, some hardy folks (including one of the World's leading bird listers) had spent SIX consecutive days on site, with the sole purpose of finding the cuckoo, but had not managed to sight it. The odds were going down as each day passed, so that by the time *Tim* arrived, and a few weeks with no cuckoo sightings had gone by, our enthusiasm for it had been diminished. The recent January sightings had unsurprisingly been associated with an influx of a large number of swarming army ants into the reserve. *No ants, no cuckoo*.

So, with this all in our minds, we set off before dawn all the same – the January sightings of the cuckoo had largely been around dawn time, with the bird sometimes visiting a moth trap at that time. Overnight, unusually heavy rains had wreaked havoc in the area, and we needed to try three different routes to get to the reserve, as trees had come down and blocked two of these. At the third option, a tree was down, but a man with a chainsaw was found closeby who soon opened the way for us. All this led us to arrive at the cuckoo reserve very late, well after dawn, and well after the supposed best time for it to visit the moth trap. On reaching the reserve, with even less hope than we had the night before, as a result of our late arrival, we met the local guide, who informed us that the cuckoo had not visited the moth trap anyhow. As we made our first conversations with him, a Bicolored Antbird called just behind him. Both us and the local guide were excited to hear this, as it is an obligate ant follower, and it is usually a good indication of the presence of army ants. The local guide quickly confirmed this was the first indication of ants in weeks (i.e. since the last sightings of the cuckoo). Soon after other ant following species were noted (including Spotted Nightingale-Thrush, Esmeraldas Antbird, and Ochrebreasted Antpitta), and it was clear ants were around, although we could not actually locate the ants themselves. We were excited, as the local guide was also excited and voiced he thought the cuckoo could be with this swarm. We changed position to view the birds at the swarm and tried playback of the cuckoo. Almost immediately, to our great shock, the low distinctive "hoot" of a cuckoo replying was heard. Then, with a little playback, Sam spotted the bird advancing towards us! Moments of panic and high-octane excitement ensued, before we all had eyes on this dream bird. We had all got looks, but not amazing looks, cause for muted celebration at least! We changed our position to the main trail when we could not locate the bird, and soon stumbled onto a clear line of ants on the trail. We tried several positions, during which time the cuckoo repeatedly gave its distinctive bill clapping sound, to keep tensions high. Finally, after hearing the bird for some time, it remarkably emerged up onto an open log for all to see in its entirety. The whole body was in full glorious view. We all commented that we could not imagine any better views of the bird and so left the cuckoo and the swarm alone.

After this, anything was a bonus, and we added a few more good birds on site there too, like **Blue-tailed (Choco) Trogon** and **Rufous-fronted Wood-Quail**. After that, greedily, we journeyed on to *Veintitres de Junio*, in search of **Long-wattled Umbrellabird** another major target for Tim. Our luck was clearly in on this day, and we saw a male from the vehicle, before we had even reached the main area. We were ecstatic and enjoyed repeated views of the bird from inside and outside of our vehicle. *Umbrellabird* and *Ground-Cuckoo* in the same day were the clear highlights, which are unlikely to be repeated anytime soon. As a postscript, the *cuckoo* did not get any more regular following our visit, and so we were truly fortunate on this occasion!



Crowned Woodnymph was also seen at Milpe (Sam Woods).

Day 2: 21st February – Mashpi.

This day was originally assigned as a second day to search for the *Banded Ground-Cuckoo*. With such a resounding success story with the *cuckoo* the day before, we found ourselves with a "spare" day to play with and focus in on any extra lifers for *Tim. Mashpi* offered the most locally, and so we went there for the day, as *Rose-faced Parrot, Choco Vireo, Rufous-brown Solitaire*, and *Golden-collared Honeycreeper* were all possible there...

We set off before first light, which had arrived before we reached the reserve. At *Reserva Amagusa* we watched up to nine different Rose-faced Parrots (photo page 2), come into the bananas, while Maroon-tailed Parakeets came in to perch nearby too. At the feeders, a stream of birds came and went, which included a pair of Golden-collared Honeycreeper, as well as other superb birds like Glistening-green, Moss-backed and Black-chinned Mountain-Tanagers (photos next page). A pair of Orange-breasted Fruiteaters (photo page 8), also gave us eye-popping looks nearby too. Indigo Flowerpiercer, another very local specialty of this Choco bioregion, was also noted. The hummingbird feeders held an eclectic mix of gorgeous Choco hummingbirds, including Violet-tailed Sylph, Velvet-purple Coronet (photo page 7), Brown Inca, and Purple-bibbed Whitetip.



Moss-backed and Black-chinned Mountain Tanagers were both seen at the Mashpi feeders (Sam Woods).



A walk down the road brought us **Black Solitaire** and better still, good looks at a calling **Choco Vireo**, another specialty on *Tim's* list. We also took a hike on a more difficult, steep, trail at Sergio's recommendation, which yielded the hoped for Rufous-brown Solitaire. A later patrol of the forest further along the road towards the town of *Mashpi*, brought yet more quality bird sightings, including **Gray-and-gold and Emerald Tanagers**, **Choco Tyrannulet**, **Slaty-capped Shrike-Vireo**, and **Orange-fronted Barbet**, among others! In the evening, we arrived back in Tandayapa Bird Lodge for a final night before departing for the east for the final few days of this short tour.



The spectacular Velvet-purple Coronet visited the Mashpi feeders too (Sam Woods).



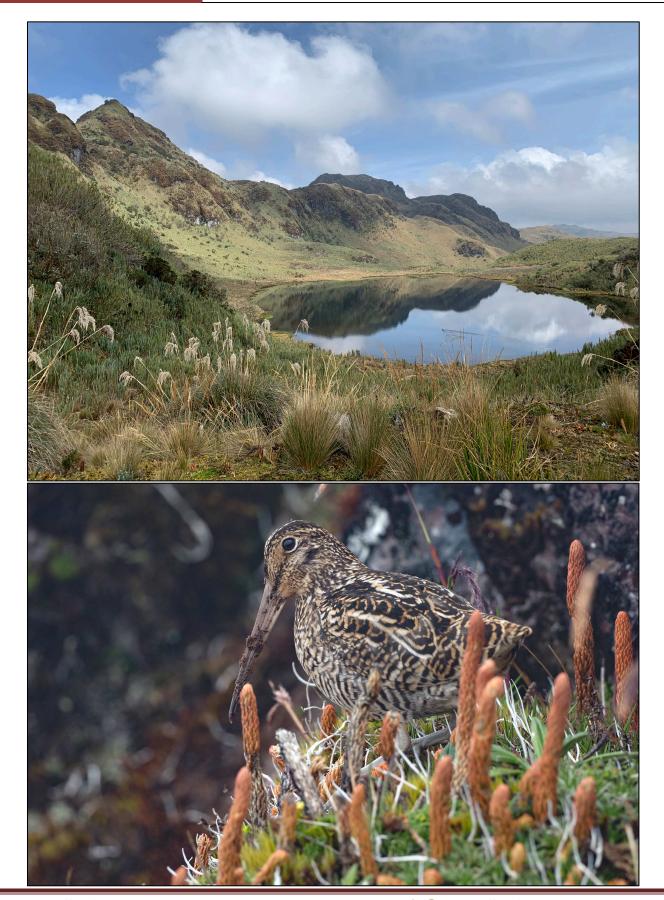
Two more Mashpi specialties: Rufous-brown Solitaire and Orange-breasted Fruiteater (Sam Woods).

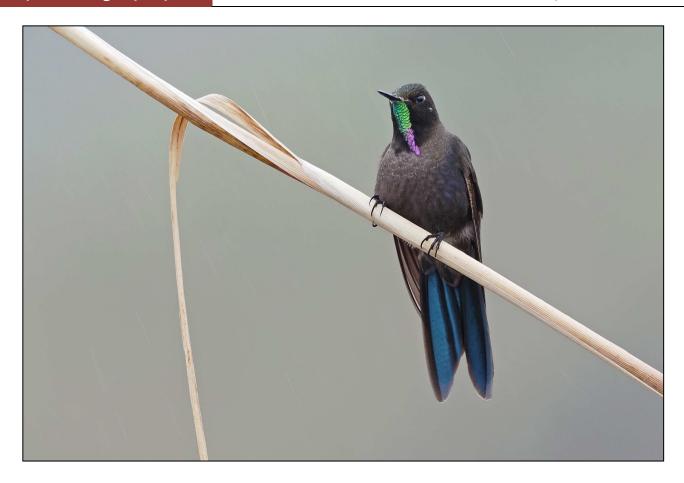


Days 4 & 5: 22nd-23rd February – Cayambe-Coca NP and Papallacta Pass area.

We left Tandayapa Bird Lodge in the dark of night, to drive over to the east side of the Andes and climb up into the high Andes for our final two days of this whistlestop tour. Our goals for the end of the trip were clear: try and find a Spectacled Bear, and some high Andean birds that *Tim* was missing. On the former, we came up short. In spite of finding a number of signs of recent bear activity (i.e. demolished puya plants), we simply could not find a bear or a tapir, in spite of covering areas where they had been very recently, and with the use of a thermal scope at our disposal too. However, on the bird front, things went well. We drove up to the highest point of the tour, at a lofty 4200m/13,780ft, above Papallacta Pass for the highest-dwelling bird in Ecuador, the Rufousbellied Seedsnipe (photo below). While searching for that ptarmigan-like, high Andean shorebirds among the bofedal bogs in the paramo grasslands, Sam came upon an even more difficult target, a Jameson's Snipe (photo next page) foraging on a muddy incline. Tim barely had time to take that in, before Keith indicated he had refound the seedsnipe, which had done a disappearing act a short time before. Therefore, within minutes, Tim added Jameson's Snipe AND Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe onto his list while standing amongst some of the best landscapes the Ecuadorian Andes has to offer. The rest of our good birds came, while scouring the paramo covered slopes for Spectacled Bears. Cayambe-Coca National Park was productive for a handsome, rare high Andean flycatcher, with regular sightings of **Red-rumped Bush-Tyrant** there, a species that is not normally "regular" anywhere. In the same park we also got to see a Blue-mantled Thornbill (photo page 11), with its metallic beard lit up by the sun, to round out a very enjoyable trip, where, once the ground-cuckoo was "in the bag", everything else was just gravy!







CHECKLIST:

BIRDS

The taxonomy of the bird list follows Clements, James F., White, Anthony W., and Fitzpatrick, John W. The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World. Cornell, 2007. This list is up to date with changes published by Cornell in August 2021.

(H) - INCIDATES A SPECIES THAT WAS HEARD ONLY.

(GO) – INDICATES A SPECIES RECORDED BY THE GUIDE ONLY.

NEW WORLD QUAIL	ODONTOPHORIDAE
Rufous-fronted Wood-Quail	Odontophorus erythrops

PIGEONS AND DOVES Rock Pigeon Columba livia

Ruddy Pigeon Patagioenas subvinacea
White-throated Quail-Dove Zentrygon frenata

Eared Dove Zenaida auriculata

CUCKOOS CUCULIDAE

Banded Ground-Cuckoo

NIGHTJARS AND ALLIES

Rufous-bellied Nighthawk Band-winged Nightjar

SWIFTS

Chestnut-collared Swift White-collared Swift

HUMMINGBIRDS

White-necked Jacobin White-whiskered Hermit Green-fronted Lancebill

White-throated (Choco) Daggerbill

Brown Violetear Gorgeted Sunangel Green Thorntail Violet-tailed Sylph

Rainbow-bearded Thornbill

Shining Sunbeam Brown Inca Collared Inca

Buff-winged Starfrontlet Great Sapphirewing Buff-tailed Coronet Velvet-purple Coronet

Purple-bibbed Whitetip Fawn-breasted Brilliant

Green-crowned Brilliant Empress Brilliant

Booted Racket-tail

Purple-throated Woodstar

Crowned (Green-crowned) Woodnymph

Andean Emerald

Rufous-tailed Hummingbird Violet-bellied Hummingbird

RAILS, GALLINULES, AND COOTS

White-throated Crake

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS

Andean Lapwing

CORMORANTS AND SHAGS

Neotropic Cormorant

CAPRIMULGIDAE

Lurocalis rufiventris Systellura longirostris

APODIDAE

Streptoprocne rutila Streptoprocne zonaris

TROCHILIDAE

Florisuga mellivora Phaethornis yaruqui Doryfera ludovicae Schistes albogularis Colibri delphinae

Heliangelus strophianus Discosura conversii Aglaiocercus coelestis Chalcostigma herrani Aglaeactis cupripennis Coeligena wilsoni Coeligena torquata Coeligena lutetiae

Pterophanes cyanopterus
Boissonneaua flavescens
Boissonneaua jardini
Ocreatus underwoodii
Urosticte benjamini
Heliodoxa rubinoides
Heliodoxa jacula
Heliodoxa imperatrix
Philodice mitchellii
Thalurania colombica
Uranomitra franciae
Amazilia tzacatl

RALLIDAE

Damophila julie

Laterallus albigularis

CHARADRIIDAE

Vanellus resplendens

PHALACROCORACIDAE

Phalacrocorax brasilianus

HERONS, EGRETS, AND BITTERNS

Cattle Egret

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture Turkey Vulture

HAWKS, EAGLES, AND KITES

Hook-billed Kite Swallow-tailed Kite Roadside Hawk Variable Hawk

Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle

Gray-lined Hawk

OWLS

Rufescent Screech-Owl

TROGONS

Golden-headed Quetzal Blue-tailed (Chocó) Trogon (Western) White-tailed Trogon

Collared Trogon Masked Trogon

MOTMOTS

Rufous Motmot Broad-billed Motmot

NEW WORLD BARBETS

Orange-fronted Barbet Red-headed Barbet

TOUCAN-BARBETS

Toucan Barbet

TOUCANS

Crimson-rumped Toucanet
Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan
Collared (Pale-mandibled) Aracari
Yellow-throated (Chestnut-mandibled) Toucan
Choco Toucan

WOODPECKERS

Lineated Woodpecker

ARDEIDAE

Bubulcus ibis

CATHARTIDAE

Coragyps atratus Cathartes aura jota

ACCIPITRIDAE

Chondrohierax uncinatus
Elanoides forficatus
Rupornis magnirostris
Geranoaetus polyosoma
Geranoaetus melanoleucus
Buteo nitidus

STRIGIDAE

Megascops ingens

TROGONIDAE

Pharomachrus auriceps
Trogon comptus
Trogon chionurus
Trogon collaris
Trogon personatus

MOMOTIDAE

Baryphthengus martii Electron platyrhynchum

CAPITONIDAE

Capito squamatus Eubucco bourcierii

SEMNORNITHIDAE

Semnornis ramphastinus

RAMPHASTIDAE

Aulacorhynchus haematopygus

Andigena laminirostris

Pteroglossus torquatus erythropygius Ramphastos ambiguus swainsonii

Ramphastos brevis

PICIDAE

Dryocopus lineatus

FALCONS AND CARACARAS

Carunculated Caracara

NEW WORLD AND AFRICAN PARROTS

Rose-faced Parrot

Speckle-faced (White-capped) Parrot

Bronze-winged Parrot Maroon-tailed Parakeet

TYPICAL ANTBIRDS

Rufous-rumped Antwren

Slaty Antwren

Streak-headed (Long-tailed) Antbird

Chestnut-backed Antbird

Esmeraldas Antbird

Zeledon's (Immaculate) Antbird

Bicolored Antbird

ANTPITTAS

Chestnut-crowned Antpitta

Tawny Antpitta

Ochre-breasted Antpitta

TAPACULOS

Paramo Tapaculo

OVENBIRDS AND WOODCREEPERS

Plain-brown Woodcreeper

Wedge-billed Woodcreeper

Spotted Woodcreeper

Buffy (Pacific) Tuftedcheek

Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaner

Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner

Streak-capped Treehunter

Striped (Western) Woodhaunter

Spotted Barbtail

Pearled Treerunner

Red-faced Spinetail

Azara's Spinetail

Rufous Spinetail

MANAKINS

Golden-winged Manakin

White-bearded Manakin

Club-winged Manakin

FALCONIDAE

Phalcoboenus carunculatus

Psittacidae

Pyrilia pulchra

Pionus tumultuosus seniloides

Pionus chalcopterus

Pyrrhura melanura pacifica

THAMNOPHILIDAE

Euchrepomis callinota

Myrmotherula schisticolor

Drymophila striaticeps

Poliocrania exsul

Sipia nigricauda

Hafferia zeledoni

Gymnopithys bicolor aequatorialis

GRALLARIIDAE

Grallaria ruficapilla

Grallaria quitensis

Grallaricula flavirostris

RHINOCRYPTIDAE

Scytalopus opacus

FURNARIIDAE

Dendrocincla fuliginosa

Glyphorynchus spirurus

Xiphorhynchus erythropygius

Pseudocolaptes lawrencii johnsoni

Dendroma rufa

Anabacerthia variegaticeps

Thripadectes virgaticeps

Automolus subulatus assimilis

Premnoplex brunnescens

Margarornis squamiger

Cranioleuca erythrops

Synallaxis azarae

Synallaxis unirufa

PIPRIDAE

Masius chrysopterus

Manacus manacus

Machaeropterus deliciosus

COTINGAS

Orange-breasted Fruiteater Long-wattled Umbrellabird

TITYRAS AND ALLIES

Northern (Thrush-like) Schiffornis Barred Becard

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet
White-throated Tyrannulet
Streak-necked Flycatcher
Olive-striped Flycatcher
Slaty-capped Flycatcher

Choco (Golden-faced) Tyrannulet

Ornate Flycatcher

Bronze-olive Pygmy-Tyrant Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant

Smoke-colored Pewee

Black Phoebe

Masked Water-Tyrant Crowned Chat-Tyrant Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant Dusky-capped Flycatcher Rusty-margined Flycatcher Golden-crowned Flycatcher

Tropical Kingbird

VIREOS AND ALLIES

Black-billed Peppershrike Slaty-capped Shrike-Vireo

Lesser Greenlet Choco Vireo

Brown-capped Vireo

SWALLOWS

Blue-and-white Swallow Brown-bellied Swallow

GNATCATCHERS

Tawny-faced Gnatwren

WRENS

Scaly-breasted (Southern Nightingale) Wren House Wren

COTINGIDAE

Pipreola jucunda

Cephalopterus penduliger

TITYRIDAE

Schiffornis veraepacis rosenbergi Pachyramphus versicolor

TYRANNIDAE

Camptostoma obsoletum Mecocerculus leucophrys Mionectes striaticollis Mionectes olivaceus Leptopogon superciliaris

Zimmerius (chrysops) albigularis

Myiotriccus ornatus
Pseudotriccus pelzelni
Lophotriccus pileatus
Contopus fumigatus
Sayornis nigricans
Fluvicola nengeta
Ochthoeca frontalis
Ochthoeca fumicolor
Myiarchus tuberculifer
Myiozetetes cayanensis
Myiodynastes chrysocephalus
Tyrannus melancholicus

VIREONIDAE

Cyclarhis nigrirostris Vireolanius leucotis Pachysylvia decurtata

Vireo masteri Vireo leucophrys

HIRUNDINIDAE

Pygochelidon cyanoleuca Orochelidon murina

POLIOPTILIDAE

Microbates cinereiventris

TROGLODYTIDAE

Microcerculus marginatus
Troglodytes aedon

Bay Wren

Gray-breasted Wood-Wren

THRUSHES AND ALLIES

Andean Solitaire

Speckled (Spotted) Nightingale-Thrush

Swainson's Thrush Black Solitaire

Rufous-brown Solitaire

Ecuadorian Thrush

Great Thrush

FINCHES, EUPHONIAS AND ALLIES

Orange-bellied Euphonia

Yellow-collared Chlorophonia

NEW WORLD SPARROWS

Yellow-throated Chlorospingus (Bush-

Tanager)

Dusky Chlorospingus (Bush-Tanager)

Black-striped Sparrow

Orange-billed Sparrow

Rufous-collared Sparrow

Tricolored Brushfinch

TROUPIALS AND ALLIES

Scrub Blackbird

Shiny Cowbird

Scarlet-rumped Cacique

Russet-backed Oropendola

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

Olive-crowned Yellowthroat

Tropical Parula

Three-striped Warbler

Black-crested Warbler

Buff-rumped Warbler

Golden-bellied (Chocó) Warbler

Slate-throated Redstart (Whitestart)

Spectacled Redstart (Whitestart)

MITROSPINGID TANAGERS

Dusky-faced Tanager

Cantorchilus nigricapillus

Henicorhina leucophrys

TURDIDAE

Myadestes ralloides

Catharus maculatus

Catharus ustulatus

Entomodestes coracinus

Cichlopsis leucogenys

Turdus maculirostris

Turdus fuscater

FRINGILLIDAE

Euphonia xanthogaster

Chlorophonia flavirostris

PASSERELLIDAE

Chlorospingus flavigularis

Chlorospingus semifuscus

Arremonops conirostris

Arremon aurantiirostris

Zonotrichia capensis

Atlapetes tricolor

ICTERIDAE

Dives warczewiczi

Molothrus bonariensis

Cacicus uropygialis pacificus

Psarocolius angustifrons

PARULIDAE

Geothlypis semiflava

Setophaga pitiayumi

Basileuterus tristriatus

Myiothlypis nigrocristata

Myiothlypis fulvicauda

Myiothlypis chrysogaster chlorophrys

Myioborus miniatus

Myioborus melanocephalus

MITROSPINGIDAE

Mitrospingus cassinii

CARDINALS AND ALLIES

Summer Tanager

Ochre-breasted Tanager Rose-breasted Grosbeak

TANAGERS AND ALLIES

Flame-rumped (Lemon-rumped) Tanager

Moss-backed Tanager

Black-chested Mountain Tanager Black-chinned Mountain Tanager

Glistening-green Tanager

Blue-gray Tanager Palm Tanager

Golden-naped Tanager
Gray-and-gold Tanager
Blue-necked Tanager
Rufous-throated Tanager
Beryl-spangled Tanager
Bay-headed Tanager

Flame-faced Tanager (Yellow-faced)

Golden Tanager Emerald Tanager

Black-faced (Yellow-tufted) Dacnis

Green Honeycreeper

Golden-collared Honeycreeper

Glossy Flowerpiercer
Black Flowerpiercer
Indigo Flowerpiercer
Masked Flowerpiercer
Plumbeous Sierra Finch
Variable Seedeater

Buff-throated Saltator Black-winged Saltator

Bananaquit

CARDINALIDAE

Piranga rubra

Chlorothraupis stolzmanni Pheucticus Iudovicianus

THRAUPIDAE

Ramphocelus flammigerus icteronotus

Bangsia edwardsi Cnemathraupis eximia Anisognathus notabilis Chlorochrysa phoenicotis

Thraupis episcopus
Thraupis palmarum
Chalcothraupis ruficervix
Poecilostreptus palmeri
Stilpnia cyanicollis
Ixothraupis rufigula
Tangara nigroviridis

Tangara gyrola

Tangara parzudakii lunigera

Tangara arthus Tangara florida

Dacnis lineata aequatorialis

Chlorophanes spiza

Iridophanes pulcherrimus

Diglossa lafresnayii
Diglossa humeralis
Diglossa indigotica
Diglossa cyanea
Phrygilus unicolor
Sporophila corvina
Coereba flaveola
Saltator maximus
Saltator atripennis