

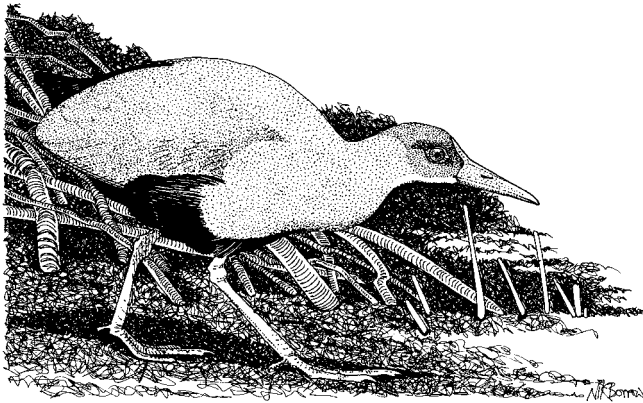
REMOTE ECUADOR

The Wonders of the Chocó

Friday 3rd September – Sunday 19th September 2010 (17 days)

Leader: János Oláh

Group Size Limit: 9



Brown Wood-Rail (Nik Borrow)

Although only a relatively small country, Ecuador holds an extraordinary 1600 bird species, more than any other country of a similar size and not far behind the avifaunas of its far larger neighbours, Colombia and Peru. Ecuador is so amazingly diverse that a single trip cannot possibly do it justice, and most birders leave after their first visit with an overwhelming desire for more.

During this exciting adventure we shall be concentrating on the northwest of the country, the Chocó. Designated as Birdlife International's endemic bird area number 41, the Chocó region covers the humid forest belt stretching from southwestern Colombia to northwestern Ecuador and is home to about 90 range-restricted species, of which 75 occur in Ecuador. The main focus of this tour will be to seek out as many of these special birds as possible, including some of the most difficult Chocó endemics, like the enigmatic and super-elusive Banded Ground-Cuckoo, the rare Baudó Guan and the awesome Rufous-

crowned Antpitta. Seeing any of these superb birds would be amongst the experiences of a lifetime for most birders! In addition, we will also be trying for the similarly exciting and once poorly-known, but now relatively straightforward to find, Giant and Moustached Antpittas in the Mindo region, while in the far north of Ecuador we will explore some remote patches of highland forest that hold some interesting specialities, including the amazing Crescent-faced Antpitta, surely the prettiest of them all, and the recently-described Chestnut-bellied Cotinga.

After starting our travels in Quito, we will investigate some splendid patches of temperate cloudforest high on the slopes of Pichincha volcano, where hummingbird feeders attract such iridescent jewels as Sword-billed Hummingbird, Golden-breasted Puffleg and Rainbow-bearded Thornbill.

We will then descend to the Mindo area where those who have visited the area before will surely be able to catch up on some uncommon birds they missed

previously, and where the feeders now feature such amazing creatures as Velvet-purple Coronet, Purple-bibbed Whitetip and Empress Brilliant. At the Mindo Loma Reserve and elsewhere in the Mindo area we will look for such seldom-seen birds as Cloudforest Pygmy-Owl, Hoary Puffleg, Uniform Treehunter and Orange-breasted Fruiteater. A morning visit to Angel Paz's 'antpitta forest' should result in unforgettable views of the once almost mythical Giant, Yellow-breasted and Moustached Antpittas. Seeing these rare and skulking birds is definitely an astonishing and unmissable experience when visiting Ecuador! Those of us who have toiled for days scouring the understorey of the cloudforest for the briefest of glimpses of these ultimate prizes can certainly appreciate what a golden opportunity Angel has given us all.

After visiting a Lanceolated Monklet territory, we will head for the Jocotoco Foundation's Río Canandé Reserve, which protects some beautiful primary foothill forest, a habitat which is disappearing all too fast in Ecuador. This area has recently gained prominence due to sightings of the very rare and elusive Banded Ground-Cuckoo. While we should consider ourselves

lucky to come across this spectacular bird, a lot of other interesting species can be found here, including such threatened Chocó endemics as Rose-faced Parrot, Scarlet-breasted Dacnis and Plumbeous Forest-Falcon, and the area is also home to other stars like Plumbeous Hawk, Chocó Screech-Owl, Purple-chested and Tooth-billed Hummingbirds, Chocó Poorwill, Long-wattled Umbrellabird, Pacific Flatbill and the dazzling Blue-whiskered, Rufous-winged, Moss-backed and Golden-chested Tanagers.

From this great reserve we will venture further northward and take a boat journey to Playa de Oro in the drainage of the Cayapas River. Based at a comfortable lodge, we will explore the vast forests of the Cotacachi-Cayapas Reserve, where such dream birds as Baudo Guan and Broad-billed Sapayoa are possible. Here we have our best chance for the elusive Rufous-crowned Antpitta, nowadays thought to be a giant gnateater rather than a true antpitta, which sometimes joins raiding army ant swarms attended by Bicoloured, Spotted and Ocellated Antbirds. Other sought-after birds that inhabit the forests in this area include Semiplumbeous Hawk, Stub-tailed Antbird, and Scarlet-and-white and Lemon-





Toucan Barbet (Michael Hodgson)

spectacled Tanagers.

Towards the Colombian border, we will visit the swamp forest of Humedal de Yalaré where we will seek out such goodies as Brown Wood-Rail, Five-coloured Barbet, Stripe-billed Aracari and Black-tipped Cotinga.

Afterwards we will head into the foothills again to visit the Awa reserve near Lita in the Mira river valley. From here we continue to the high Andes of northernmost Ecuador where we will hope to find the recently described and hard-to-find Chestnut-bellied Cotinga, the unique Black-thighed Puffleg, the neatly patterned Crescent-faced Antpitta and the dazzling Masked Mountain-Tanager in the windswept elfin forests of Cerro Mongus.

This amazing journey will be rounded off by investigating some remnant habitat patches in the northern valleys which may yield such goodies as Ecuadorian Rail and Blue-headed Sapphire.

Birdquest has operated tours to Ecuador since 1989.

Itinerary

Day 1 Morning flight from London bound for Quito, arriving in the late afternoon for an overnight stay.

Day 2 We will start our

birding in the vicinity of Quito, and surely no other Latin American capital can rival its splendid natural setting. Above the city rises the awesome Pichincha volcano, which still smokes occasionally (a 1999 eruption sent a 10-km-tall ash cloud into the stratosphere!). While the city-facing slopes have long since been brought under cultivation, the western side of the mountain is clothed in uninterrupted and magnificent cloudforest from treeline down to upper tropical elevations. Via a maze of little country roads, we shall drive up the volcano to Yanacocha, an area of extraordinarily beautiful upper temperate forest that seems light years away from the bustling city. Here an amazing set of feeders attracts a bewildering variety of hummingbirds, and we are likely to see Shining Sunbeam, Mountain Velvetbreast, Great Sapphirewing, the amazing Sword-billed Hummingbird, Golden-breasted and Sapphire-vented Pufflegs, Buff-winged Starfrontlet, Tyrian Metaltail and Rainbow-bearded Thornbill, whilst sneaky Glossy and Masked Flowerpiercers, their sharp bills crossed at the tip like tiny scateurs, steal away the sweet liquid by nipping at the bases of some nearby flowers. This is also the best

place in the country to see the exquisite Black-chested Mountain-Tanager. Among the other birds we may find in this invigorating habitat are Andean Pygmy-Owl, Barbellied Woodpecker, Azara's and White-browed Spinetails, Pearled Treerunner, Blackish Tapaculo, White-throated Tyrannulet, Tufted Tit-Tyrant, Crowned Chat-Tyrant, Barred Fruiteater, Brown-bellied Swallow, Great Thrush, Rufous Wren, Spectacled Whitestart, Blue-backed Conebill, Golden-crowned Tanager, Scarlet-bellied and Hooded Mountain-Tanagers, Rufous-collared Sparrow, and Rufous-naped and Stripe-headed Brush-Finches. If we are very fortunate we will even come across the delightful Rufous Antpitta or the much larger Undulated Antpitta. Later we shall descend the western slope of the Andes to the Mindo area for a three nights stay.

Days 3-4 As we cover the Mindo region on our classic Northern Ecuador tour, this time we will concentrate our efforts on the more localized and hard to see species, including Spot-fronted Swift, Hoary Puffleg, Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan, Rufous-winged Tyrannulet, Olivaceous Piha, the skulking Tanager Finch and the smart Orange-breasted Fruiteater. The latter species was likely more common in the past before massive deforestation in the nearby lowlands brought about a decrease in the annual precipitation in the region. Nowadays only very small numbers are still found in a very narrow elevational band, and at this time of year they tend to visit a particular species of fruit-bearing palm tree. One morning we will visit Angel Paz's 'antpitta forest', which only opened in 2005 but soon became a 'not-to-be-missed' experience of the Mindo area. Here, Giant, Yellow-breasted and Moustached Antpittas have been habituated to eat provided earthworms by

some of the local guides, and as long as these individuals survive (or are replaced) we will have a good chance of seeing up to all three of these normally very elusive birds! We even have a good chance for Dark-backed Wood-Quail and both Scaled and Orange-breasted Fruiteaters. While in the Mindo area we will carefully check the mixed canopy flocks, which may hold Red-faced Spinetail, the elusive Pacific Tuftedcheek, Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner, Spotted Woodcreeper, Tropical Parula and a host of colourful tanagers. A feeding table is frequented by Black-chinned and Blue-winged Mountain-Tanagers, as well as the lovely Golden-naped Tanager, and a great set of hummingbird feeders attracts Buff-tailed and Velvet-purple Coronets, Purple-bibbed Whitetip, Brown Inca, Green-crowned and Empress Brilliants, and Violet-tailed Sylph. At night we shall make an effort to locate the furtive Colombian Screech-Owl, sometimes lumped with Rufescent Screech-Owl, but probably better regarded as a distinct species.

Other birds we are likely to come across in the Mindo area include Turkey Vulture, American Swallow-tailed Kite, Dusky Pigeon, Bronze-winged Parrot, the distinctive Chocó race of the Maroon-tailed Parakeet, Golden-headed Quetzal, Masked Trogon, Smoky-brown, Golden-olive, Crimson-mantled and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, Chestnut-collared Swift, Speckled Hummingbird, Green and Sparkling Violetears, Western Emerald, Green-crowned Woodnymph, Andean Emerald, Green-crowned and Fawn-breasted Brilliants, Collared Inca, Buff-tailed Coronet, Gorgeted Sunangel, Booted Racket-tail, Violet-tailed Sylph, Wedge-billed Hummingbird, Purple-throated Woodstar, Pacific Hornero, Red-faced and Slaty Spinetails, Tawny-throated Leaf-tosser, Streak-headed



Tanager-Finch (Nik Borrow)

Woodcreeper, Rufous-rumped Antwren, Nariño and Spillmann's Tapaculos, White-tailed Tyrannulet, Barred Becard, White-crested Elaenia, Bronze-olive Pygmy-Tyrant, Golden-crowned, Flavescent, Common Tufted, Ornate and White-ringed Flycatchers, Smoke-coloured Pewee, Snowy-throated Kingbird, White-thighed and Blue-and-white Swallows, Band-backed, Sepia-brown and House Wrens, Grey-breasted Wood-Wren, Andean Solitaire, Black-crested and Citrine Warblers, Slate-throated Whitestart, Olive-crowned Yellowthroat, Bananaquit, Green Honeycreeper, Thick-billed and Orange-bellied Euphonias, Capped Conebill, Fawn-breasted, Saffron-crowned, Flame-faced, Beryl-spangled, Grass-green and Lemon-rumped Tanagers, Western Hemispingus, Dusky-Bush Tanager, Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch, Blue-black Grassquit, Buff-throated and Black-winged Saltators, Slate-coloured Grosbeak, and Variable and Yellow-bellied Seedeaters. We may even come across the shy Cloud-forest Pygmy-Owl, the secretive Olivaceous Piha, the rapidly declining Glistening-green Tanager or the colourful Chestnut-breasted Chlorophonia.

Day 5 After spending much of the day in the Mindo area we will head for Pedro Vicente

Maldonado for an overnight stay.

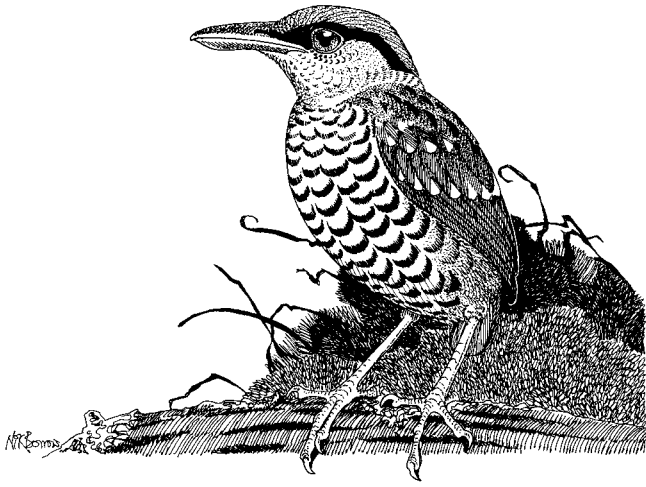
Day 6 In the early morning we will check a forest patch close to our hotel for the sought-after Lanceolated Monklet and the scarce Double-banded Greytail before we head north into the southeastern part of Esmeraldas province, where the Jocotoco Foundation has recently established its Río Canandé Reserve, for a three nights stay. The reserve currently includes about 900 hectares of secondary and beautiful primary foothill forest, but plans exist to extend the size to 10,000 hectares! The surrounding forests have been opened for selective logging, but can be amazingly birdy. Cleared areas and agricultural land en route hold such open country species as Pacific Parrotlet, Masked Water-Tyrant, Ecuadorian Thrush, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Shiny Cowbird, Scrub Blackbird and even the highly localized Slate-coloured Seedeater.

Days 7-8 We will start our birding at Río Canandé on the lodge porch, where hummingbird feeders attract White-whiskered and Stripe-throated Hermits, Band-tailed Barbthroat, Green-crowned Woodnymph and Purple-chested Hummingbird. The surrounding trees are often alive with birds such

as Sooty-headed, Southern Beardless and Yellow-crowned Tyrannulets, Rusty-margined Flycatcher, Cinnamon Becard and Yellow-tailed Oriole, and we shall keep an eye on the crowns of more distant forest giants for the large Chestnut-mandibled and Chocó Toucans. A trail leads from the lodge into the forest interior, where mixed understory flocks hold Spot-crowned Antwren, Checker-throated Antwren, Pacific Flatbill and Tawny-faced Gnatwren. Fruiting trees attract Chocó, Western White-tailed, Collared and Black-throated Trogons, and one of our principal targets will be the dazzling Scarlet-chested Dacnis, which often comes in to feed on small canopy berries. If we are fortunate, we will come across a roving army ant swarm attended by the amazing Bicoloured, Ocellated and Immaculate Antbirds, often in the company of Plain-brown and Northern Barred Woodcreepers. Where the trail heads up a steeper ridge, we will try to find the noisy Rufous Piha on its lek, and we will also look for playful Red-capped Manakins on their display grounds. The road that leads through the selectively-logged forest offers excellent opportunities for watching canopy flocks, and perched parrots and flycatchers, and we hope to observe the beautiful Rose-faced Parrot, which is still common in this nearly uninhabited area, and other specialities such as Grey-backed Hawk or the secretive Plumbeous Forest-Falcon. The remarkable Long-wattled Umbrellabird also occurs in the reserve. Mixed flocks regularly make their rounds through the crowns of the tallest, epiphyte-laden trees, and these canopy flocks often contain such colourful gems as Scarlet-and-white, Grey-and-gold, Emerald, Silver-throated, Blue-necked, Golden-hooded, Blue-whiskered, Bay-headed, Rufous-winged and Scarlet-browed Tanagers,

and sometimes the handsome Golden-chested Tanager. We may also come across the smart Lita Woodpecker and the awkward Moss-backed Tanager. At night we will go out to look for Chocó Screech-Owl and Chocó Poorwill, while the more widespread Spectacled Owl delivers its reverberating hoots around the lodge on some nights. With luck, we will come across two or three of the harder-to-see birds of the area, such as Rufous-fronted Wood-Quail, Tawny-faced Quail, Indigo-crowned Quail-Dove, Great Jacamar, Chocó Woodpecker or Rufous-crowned Antpitta. The little-known Banded Ground-Cuckoo has recently been discovered to inhabit the forest here. Ground-cuckoos are an extremely interesting and much sought-after group of birds, but seeing these magnificent creatures is usually very difficult and requires a great deal of luck. Banded Ground-Cuckoo is one of the least-known of the Chocó endemics, with only a handful of sightings in recent years. We will be hoping to come across an army ant swarm or hear the low dove-like moaning call of the ground-cuckoo, but we will consider ourselves extremely lucky if we come across this enigmatic symbol of the Chocó.

Other birds we may find in the course of our stay include Tiny Hawk, Ornate Hawk-Eagle, Blue Ground-Dove, Pallid Dove, Red-lore Amazon, Little and Striped Cuckoos, White-collared and Band-rumped Swifts, White-tipped Sicklebill, Tooth-billed Hummingbird, White-necked Jacobin, Purple-crowned Fairy, Broad-billed and Rufous Motmots, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Barred Puffbird, Orange-fronted and Red-headed Barbets, the near-endemic Pale-mandibled Aracari, Olivaceous Piculet, Red-rumped and Crimson-bellied Woodpeckers, Western Woodhaunter, Double-banded Greytail, Ruddy



Rufous-crowned Antpitta (Nik Borrow)

Foliage-gleaner, Plain Xenops, Black-striped Woodcreeper, Brown Scythebill, Great and Western Slaty Antshrikes, Pacific Antwren, the different-looking western race of the Dot-winged Antwren, Chestnut-backed Antbird, Brown-capped and Golden-faced Tyrannulets, Grey and Yellow-bellied Elaenias, Ochre-bellied and Slaty-capped Flycatchers, Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Black-headed and Common Tody-Flycatchers, Yellow-margined Flatbill, Long-tailed Tyrant, Western Sirystes, Masked and Black-crowned Tityras, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Slaty-capped Shrike-Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Lesser Greenlet, Dagua Thrush, Grey-mantled, Bay, and Stripe-throated Wrens, the distinctive *inornata* race of the White-breasted Wood-Wren (likely to represent a distinct species), Southern Nightingale-Wren, Tropical and Slate-throated Gnatcatchers, Chocó and Buff-rumped Warblers, Yellow-tufted and Scarlet-thighed Dacnises, Fulvous-vented and Orange-crowned Euphonias, Ochre-breasted, Tawny-crested and Dusky-faced Tanagers, Orange-billed Sparrow and Scarlet-rumped Cacique.

Day 9 After a final morning in the Río Canandé Reserve and its surroundings we shall take the ferry across the Río Canandé and head for the Pacific coast to the north of the city of Esmeraldas for an overnight stay.

Day 10 This morning we shall visit the Humedal de Yalaré, nominally a forest reserve though the sound of distant chainsaws is often in the air! Our main targets here will be two secretive rails, the threatened Brown Wood-Rail and the unobtrusive Uniform Crake. Other specialities in the area include the raucous Rufous-headed Chachalaca, the loud-mouthed Black-breasted Puffbird and the gaudy Stripe-billed Aracari. In addition, we may find Slaty-tailed Trogon, Pied Puffbird, Guayaquil Woodpecker, Dusky and Spotted Antbirds, Greenish Elaenia, Rufous Mourner, Streaked Flycatcher and Flammulated Attila (split from Bright-rumped). With a modicum of luck we will even find the handsome Semiplumbeous Hawk or the splendid Blue Cotinga, while nearby cleared areas hold Ecuadorian Ground-Dove, a species rapidly spreading northward in the wake of deforestation. Mantled

Howler Monkeys still persist in this threatened forest. Later we shall head for the town of Borbon where we shall board the motorized dugouts that will take us up the Río Cayapas to Playa de Oro Lodge for a two nights stay. This pleasant lodge will be our base for visiting the Cotacachi-Cayapas Reserve.

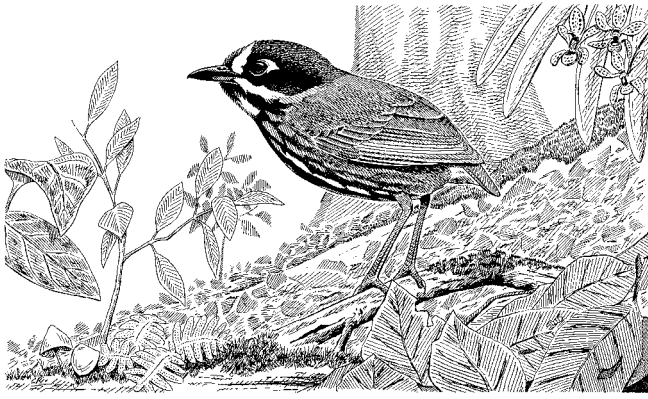
Day 11 Our main purpose in visiting the tall Chocó forests of the Cotacachi-Cayapas Reserve is to have our best chance of seeing the elusive Rufous-crowned Antpitta, now thought to be a huge gnatcatcher rather than a true antpitta! We will focus our efforts on this hard-to-find skulker, but we will also look for some other birds that are much rarer or absent in the Río Canandé area, such as the rarely seen and highly threatened Baudo Guan, the uncommon Berlepsch's Tinamou (which we may well hear, though seeing this very wary species is extremely difficult), Plumbeous Hawk, and the lovely Five-coloured Barbet. Around the lodge itself, Stub-tailed Antbird is not uncommon and the terrestrial Black-headed Antthrush regularly announces its presence with its echoing song, so we will make serious efforts to get good views of these forest floor skulkers. More widespread species that can be found here include White-whiskered Puffbird, Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner, Song Wren, Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher and the noisy Lemon-spectacled Tanager, and if we are fortunate we will come across Olive-backed Quail-Dove, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, the Chocó race of the Green Manakin (possibly a distinct species) or the enigmatic Broad-billed Sapayoa, now placed in its own family. At night we shall listen for the distinctive hoots of the Black-and-white Owl.

Day 12 After a final morning in the Cotacachi-Cayapas Reserve we shall head for San Lorenzo for a two nights stay.

Day 13 After a second visit to the Humedal de Yalaré or remnant forest patches near San Lorenzo we shall drive into the lower foothills and explore another area for the Golden-chested Tanager should we have missed it earlier. This is also an excellent viewpoint to search for the snow-white Black-tipped Cotinga. Other birds we may find in the wet forests here include Green Thorntail, Russet Antshrike, Club-winged Manakin, Chocó Tapaculo, Chocó Warbler, Rufous-throated and Blue-whiskered Tanagers, and Yellow-collared Chlorophonia. More open areas hold White-lined Tanager and Thick-billed Seed-Finch, in addition to the distinctive *brachyptera* race of the Lesser Elaenia, which is probably a separate species.

Day 14 Rising early, we will drive towards Lita and pay a visit to the Awa Indian reserve in the Mika river valley. The Awa reserve is a good place for Chocó specialities and in particular offers good chances for seeing Rufous-crowned Antpitta. During the afternoon we will drive to the dry, inter-Andean, Chota Valley for a two nights stay at Ambuquí.

Day 15 The gnarled elfin forests and paramos of Cerro Mongus are one of only a handful of remote localities where the recently discovered Chestnut-bellied Cotinga is known to occur, though finding this reclusive species will require a fair share of good fortune. We shall leave early to drive up the mountain and hope to get into the elfin forest by early morning. We shall concentrate our efforts on several viewpoints from where we will diligently scan the treetops for one of South America's most elusive cotingas. More common is the smart Red-crested Cotinga, and we also have a good chance of encountering other elfin forest specialists such as the gorgeous Masked Mountain-Tanager and the exquisite Crescent-faced



Crescent-faced Antpitta (Craig Robson)

Antpitta. With luck, we will also encounter the unusual Black-thighed Puffleg, which reaches the southern limits of its range in this area. On a clear day the scenery here can be truly stunning, with the snow-capped Cayambe towering over the verdant landscape towards the south, the distant contours of Colombia's Chiles and Cumbal volcanoes looming above the northern horizon and the deeply eroded Chota Valley dominating the landscape towards the west. More widespread birds may include Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Variable Hawk, Andean Snipe, Band-tailed Pigeon, White-chinned Thistletail, Streaked Tuftedcheek, Paramo Tapaculo,

Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant, Grass Wren, Lacrimose Mountain-Tanager, Blue-and-black Tanager, Black-backed Bush-Tanager and Pale-naped Brush-Finch. As always in this habitat, the amount of bird activity is largely dependant on weather conditions. If the road conditions allow us to arrive early enough, we will try for White-throated Screech-Owl before dawn.

Day 16 This morning we will check the flowering *Hibiscus* in the gardens and hedgerows of the arid Chota Valley for the handsome and localized Blue-headed Sapphire. We will also look for the rather dull Scrub Tanager, widespread in Colombia but in Ecuador only found in the northern valleys,

while other birds found in this area include American Kestrel, Eared Dove, Common Ground-Dove, White-tipped Dove, White-tipped Swift, Vermilion Flycatcher, Band-tailed Seedeater, Ash-breasted Sierra-Finch and Hooded Siskin. En route to Quito, we shall stop at Laguna San Pablo to look for the secretive Ecuadorian Rail. More widespread birds found here include Pied-billed Grebe, Yellow-billed Pintail, Andean Ruddy-Duck, Andean Coot, Andean Gull and – a species fast expanding its range in Ecuador – Southern Lapwing. Upon reaching the capital we shall catch an evening flight bound for London.

Day 17 Afternoon arrival at London.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotels/lodges are mostly of normal Birdquest standard. At Río Canandé we will stay at the simple reserve headquarters lodge, where there are five rooms with bunk beds and private bathrooms, but no electricity. Road transport is by small coach and roads are variable in quality.

Walking: The walking effort is mostly easy or moderate, but there are a few optional harder walks.

Climate: Rather variable. In the Chocó lowlands most days are rather hot and humid, with a mixture of sunshine and overcast conditions. A fair amount of rain should be expected as the Chocó region has up to a metre of precipitation annually and even during the 'dry' season there is considerable rainfall! In the mountains conditions are similar, but temperatures range from warm and pleasant to cold.

Bird Photography:

Opportunities are worthwhile.

Tour Price: £3460, €4083, \$5709 London/London (or £2680, €3162, \$4422 Quito/Quito). Price includes all transportation (including all flights), all accommodations, all meals, bottled water, some drinks, all excursions, all entrance fees, all tips for local drivers/guides and for accommodations/restaurants, leader services.

Single Room Supplement:

£225, €266, \$371. Anyone having to share a room at Río Canandé will be given an appropriate refund.

Deposit: £350, €413, \$578. If booking more than 12 months before departure, the initial deposit is only £150, €177, \$248.