

The Birder's Eye

A Tropical Connection

Hummingbirds swarm the feeders like a frenzy of crazed insects. There must be at least 8 to 10 species involved in this crazy-sounding melee, all jostling for a place at the feeder – and it's March! No, this is not Western North Carolina unless climate change has sped up and palm trees have appeared along the Blue Ridge Parkway! This is actually the Andes of Northwestern Ecuador where hummingbird diversity has produced close to 100 species in a relatively small area. As well as this bewildering array of hummingbirds, many of "our" summer birds spend a good portion of the winter months in these mountainous wet forests.



Purple-bibbed Whitetip by Simon

I was spending 10 days in the Andes on a birding tour with a small group of hummingbird enthusiasts, enjoying species with almost improbable names, such as Velvet-purple Coronet, Black-tailed Trainbearer and Empress Brilliant – to name just a few. But what was equally as exciting to many of us was to run into some more familiar names and faces. It was exciting for us to see large numbers of the northern-breeding Swainson's Thrush. Almost every fruiting tree on the east slope seemed to have more than its fair share of this spotted thrush. It was certainly abundant in many of the mid-elevation forests we visited, which it shares with wintering Summer and Scarlet Tanagers. Summer Tanagers tended to be seen singly, but Scarlets were more gregarious with some trees hosting up to a dozen at a time, many of the males still molting from their green to red plumage.



Giant Hummingbird by Simon

The most abundant wintering warbler on the east slope was the Canada Warbler and most bird flocks seemed to have at least one feeding quietly alongside the more unfamiliar antbirds, woodcreepers and foliage-gleaners. Almost as abundant, but on both slopes was the Blackburnian Warbler. Again they tended to feed singly but often high in the canopy where they joined many of the resident tanagers looking for insects in the abundant leaf cover. A male Cerulean Warbler was an unexpected find, and the brilliant sky-blue plumage was a beautiful sight against the glossy green leaves.

Small numbers of both Eastern and Western Wood-Pewees were moving north in the more open deforested areas along both slopes; most remaining unidentified unless they called. Single Broad-winged Hawks were occasionally found during our birding outings, with 3 one day that were probably heading north. Other uncommon northern migrants

we found during our stay included Chimney Swift, Black-and-white and Tennessee Warblers, Cliff Swallow, Lesser Yellowlegs and Spotted Sandpiper.

We only had a short time to be immersed in the beauty and nature of the Ecuadorian Andes and had a snapshot of the incredible birdlife found in this rugged part of the world before we had to return to our regular lives. We tend to hear nothing but bad news most of the time, but seeing and hearing how many people are working hard to protect the forests and birdlife of Ecuador was heartening. As well as protecting the local hummingbirds, tanagers and parrots, “our” birds also benefit even though they are only winter visitors in this part of the world and will soon be flying north to breed in our forests.

Simon Thompson



Lesser Yellowlegs by Simon