

Cauca Valley, Colombia

November 1-13, 2014

November 1-2: Day 0, Bogota

After a nice dinner with Granny and Arlys Bing, we had dessert back at the condo hours before leaving for the airport to begin our second trip to Colombia this year. Our flight left at midnight, and 4½ later, we set down in Bogota's very modern airport. We met our excellent guide, Xavier Muñoz, in the Crepes and Waffles restaurant there.

We had finished breakfast, which was excellent, when Xavier appeared. Linda had left to make sure we hadn't missed him at our alternate meeting location, but we got back together and took a shuttle to the Aloft Airport Hotel nearby. Amazingly, they had a room ready for us early in the morning, so we were able to drop our bags before setting off for some birding in the Bogota Botanical Gardens. The hotel was brand new, LEED certified, and quiet for something so close to the airport.

In the Botanical Gardens, we renewed acquaintance with some old friends: Eared Doves, Rufous-collared Sparrow, and especially Great Thrush, which were so abundant that we took a (pretty) good photo of a male. Notice the bright orange eye ring, a distinctive feature of a male.



The gardens were having a big orchid show for several weeks. Colombia has about 4000 species of orchids. Linda loved this



beautiful slipper orchid.

We didn't have any lifers during the morning, but we enjoyed what we saw, which included a number of migrants from North America.



Of course, no report of the first day would be complete without a nice bug photo. Linda spotted a small butterfly on the back of Xavier's shirt. It turned out to be more interesting in a close-up photo than to our naked eye, some nice patterning in the wings. It was about 1cm (.4") in size.

We returned to the hotel around noon, ordered a meal from room service, and napped.

Got back together with Xavier to discuss plans for tomorrow. Breakfast at 6:00 with bags packed and ready to go.

Then, with a couple of drinks to help us sleep, we headed for bed.

Day 1: November 3, 2014: Bogota, then onto the Cauca Valley

Up early, we packed up and met the rest of the group, all of whom had arrived late last night. Jim and Mary Rodgers, another couple about our age, experienced birders and travelers; Lynne Shaeffer, the organizer of the trip; Alicia Nelson, another retired Nurse Practitioner, who acquired the nickname “Princess” from Xavier; Linda Valdez, whom we discovered had great ability to spot birds, and who is fluent in Spanish; and Bobby Hughes, our old friend from Rice who told us about the trip. (I hope that I finally have the names correct.)

After a delicious breakfast, we set off to bird at *Parque La Florida*, a remnant of the marshes that once covered much of the area around Bogota. We had several endemics as target birds, but the main one was the elusive Bogota Rail, found nowhere else. We drove thru a bewildering series of city streets to get to the park, which was so close to the airport that we could see planes landing and taking off.



The rail lived up to its reputation. We spent a lot of time looking for it, managing to add some lifers during the process. The first was the lovely Yellow-hooded Blackbird, a close relative to the Yellow-headed Blackbird we have at home. We worked hard to get a decent photo. The one shown here is the best we could manage. Fortunately, there were lots of them around.

We also saw the Subtropical Doradito, a curious little bird that may be put into its own family someday.

Finally, when we were thinking it was about time to leave, Linda Valdez spotted a rail moving in the reeds. It came out and gave us a good look. The rest of the group moved over to where we stood and managed some brief sightings. The best was to come, though. We saw the bird catch a small eel that it didn't eat. We soon learned why. A fuzzy black chick came running out of the reeds demanding food. This was repeated a couple of times. We elevated our rating from the original 4+ to a full 5 stars, the first of the trip, and on Day 1. (We actually had an automatic 5 star view of two

Eared Doves copulating yesterday, but...)



Then, we moved to the other side of the park, a restored area where non-native vegetation has been replaced with over 6000 native specimens. Instead of a marsh and a dirty canal, we had a nice lake to view. This produced a good collection of ducks and some shorebirds, including an immature swimming Common Gallinule that confused us for a while. We loved this amazing *Fuscia* plant, with smaller flowers but larger clusters than those we have back home.

Then, it was time to go to the airport for our flight to Armenia, which took about an hour. We reclaimed our bags, which we transferred to our van. Then we went birding along a road by the airport. Amazingly, this proved to be very productive. With planes landing and taking off on the other side of the road, we spotted one nice bird after another. We saw more Vermillion Flycatchers than we would have believed possible, male and female together with several young birds.

We had stunning looks at Dwarf Cuckoo, a bird that had eluded us in the past. They may have been nesting.

When we did the checklist we had a surprising 8 lifers out of 60 total species, a great start. Tomorrow, we move to a higher elevation, a cloud forest.

Stay tuned.

November 4, 2014: Cañon del Barbas and on to Montezuma

We spent the night in a hotel in the small town of *Filandia*. When Alicia saw the very modern bathroom attached to her otherwise ancient room, she exclaimed that it must be intended for a Queen. She thus was promoted from *Princeza* to *La Reyna*.

After breakfast, we drove to *Cañon del Barbas*, not far from town. We started walking up a trail that gave a wonderful view of the valley. We looked down on the treetops, which unfortunately were mostly obscured by a drizzling rain. Most of the birds we saw were not in the canyon itself, but along the road in some weedy growth. Still, the morning produced some of the target birds we hoped to see including the endemic Indigo Dacnis and a Scrub Tanager that is difficult to find elsewhere. The weather precluded any decent photos of birds, so we contented ourselves with the many flowers along the road margins. The orchids are truly fantastic, as mentioned earlier.

Then, we set off to drive to Montezuma Lodge near Tatama National Park. The word means “grandfather,” according to Xavier. I guess it is a familiar term, as he quickly added, “Abuelo,” by way of explanation. The park is about 20 years old and difficult to get to. More on that later.



A small butterfly hitched a ride on the bus we were in. I wanted to get a photo, but was unable to focus because of the bouncing. When we stopped for some road work, I snapped this shot. This is approximately life size.

We stopped at a pond in a field by the side of the road where we added some species to the list. The most interesting bird was a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, which all of us had seen frequently in Texas, where it is a common summer resident. Somehow, we found it hard to identify in an unexpected location. Xavier knew what it was and we finally accepted his analysis despite all of agreeing that it “sure looks different.”

Roadwork on our route slowed our progress to the point that we altered the schedule and stopped for lunch in the village of Apia instead of our original target. The road is open only certain hours each day, so we had to plan carefully to get past the road work without spending an extra night.

Finally, we arrived at the spot where we abandoned our bus for two four-wheel-drive vehicles for the rest of the way to the lodge. After 90 minutes of bone jarring travel, we finally saw the lodge. We had been warned that it is “basic, but clean and comfortable,” and that proved accurate. Mark Pretti, who led our trip to the Santa Marta

area, reported after a scouting trip that most of Colombia needed infrastructure improvements to be ready for prime time. We tend to agree. More on this later.



Still, we found enough new hummingbirds at the feeders to make us forget the trip, and dinner was excellent. The light was fading, which made photography tricky, but I did manage to get one decent photo of a male Long-tailed Sylph by using a flash.

As usual, though, we found it easier to take pictures of bugs than birds. Two fabulous insect were waiting for us on the wall of the bungalow containing our bedrooms. The first was this glass-winged fly, which we haven't identified yet. We saw and photographed the same bug in Southern Ecuador last year. We haven't identified it from that sighting.



The butterfly below was waiting for us in the bedroom Linda and I occupy. Again, we don't have an id. Once we get access to the internet again, we may be able to find out more.



Tomorrow, breakfast is at 5:00 so we can get to the top of the road into the park early. The plan is to drive to the top in one of the 4WD vehicles we used to get this far. Then we will walk the 3km back to the lodge. Lunch will magically appear at noon while we make our slow way down. Should be interesting.

One of the new hummingbirds was the Empress Brilliant. Naturally, we insisted the *La Reyna*, should take a new title, and she became *La Empreza*.

November 5, 2014: Montezuma Road

Things didn't work out as planned today. The ride up the mountain, took quite a bit longer than the promised 50 minutes. If we planned to drive 3km in 50 minutes, you can imagine what the road looks like. Just in case, though, I have provided a picture of one of the trickier spots along the way.

Linda and I discussed whether this was the worst road we had been on. I still hold out the Sani Pass "road" from South Africa into Lesotho as the worst, but this one



certainly belongs on the short list. The picture shows Mary working her way carefully down in late afternoon.

The early morning was foggy, which was no surprise as we are in a cloud forest. That nomenclature is a subject of some debate, as the definition is, “a forest where the moisture comes in the form of fog.” We found out that wasn’t quite right as it began to rain fairly heavily as we ate lunch, which was delivered by horseback at noon.

We birded in the rain for a while, holding an umbrella in one hand and binoculars in the other. To my amazement, we had several nice sightings during this time. The rain let up after an hour or so, and we quickly found some of the endemics the area is famous for. Then, the rain came again in earnest.

We boarded the 4WD again and headed back to the lodge, forgetting the plan to walk. The rain made the going treacherous. Several times the tires slipped before finally gaining enough traction to get up the slope. You would think that going downhill would be easier than up, but this wasn’t the case this time.



Every so often, the weather gods toyed with us. We tried walking some more, only to find the rain returning. Instead of birds, we focused on the orchids. Here is an interesting specimen in Linda’s hand.

A bit later, we saw this wonderful purple orchid, my vote for the best one so far.

When we were about 1km from the lodge, one of the tires gave up the ghost. We had already heard ominous noises from the springs that provided some semblance of suspension, but the loud hiss of escaping air was unmistakable. We piled out of the truck and started walking

back down what was now a muddy track with water running down the sides.

Our driver proved to be very competent at changing tires, and reappeared some ten minutes later in time to ferry us the last few hundred meters.

We found some new hummingbirds and another delicious meal to assuage us somewhat, as well as a surprising 11 lifers for the day. That turned into 12 lifers when I reviewed the sightings. The checklist has White-fronted Nunbird listed and Xavier called that out when he meant White-faced Nunbird, which was not on the list. After correcting the error, we had another lifer.



Tomorrow, we get to sleep in. Breakfast at 5:45.

November 6, 2014: Birding up the road on foot. Travel to La Suiza Lodge

During the night, we heard rain on the roof several times. About 3:30 in the morning, the sky really opened and we listened to a strong storm for some time. The road would be tricky.



After our late breakfast, we set off birding, first around the dining area searching for Blackish Rail without success, then up the road we had driven yesterday. Today, we walked, a welcome change, though it cut down on how far we could go. We managed about 1km, shortly after navigating a very muddy bridge across the Rio Claro. The river may be *claro*, but the forest is definitely *sucio*. In the process, I discovered that my boots were not as waterproof as I had wished. Some water leaked in thru the stitching; my socks were sodden.

I took this picture of Linda trying to keep her shoes dry and clean by staying on the railing of the bridge. Linda Valdez is shouting encouragement from the far side.

We plodded on.

Lucky we did!

We had several mixed flocks that paused long enough to produce several unexpected species. One of our favorites was the Crested Ant Tanager, which looks amazingly like our Cardinal, a case of convergent evolution, as they are totally unrelated.



We had great looks at a Bat Falcon, a bird with so many 5-star sightings that I am considering raising the bar for the species. This one allowed us to approach close enough for a great shot. Thru the scope, we could see that he was feeding on a bird, probably some kind of swallow. Later Mary, who went back early, told us she saw him taking food to what was likely a nest at the base of the tree. He

went down with food and came back without any.

Along the way, we encountered these two grasshoppers on a big leaf. The larger one is the male. The colors are fabulous.

That was about it for photographs. The forest was dark and the birds swift.

After lunch at 11:00, we set off on what was billed as a drive of “about three hours.” That estimate was a bit off due to the roadwork that seems to be ubiquitous in Colombia. Of course, the roads are in need of some work, so it seems a bit churlish to complain. It did make the trip a trifle long, though. Most of us took the opportunity to catch up on sleep.



We stopped along the road near a rushing stream that Xavier had a hunch would produce something good. He was right. We saw a pair of Torrent Ducks, always fun to watch. We have 5-star views recorded, but we still enjoyed watching them dive into the fast moving river and swim *upstream*. (Supposedly, they never swim downstream.) Lynne has a fantastic photo that I hope to include later.

While we were watching the Torrent Ducks, a pair of White-capped Dippers popped up onto a rock. These two species are found only in fast-flowing streams in the Andes.

Just to ice the cake, a Red-ruffed Fruitcrow flew overhead and landed in a tree across the road. This is a very special species on everybody's wish list. The tour description promised that this is the best place in South America to see one. Alas, the bird didn't stay around very long. We hope to have another chance tomorrow.

With that stop, it was almost 5:00pm when we transferred into 4WD vehicles again. Another half hour found us at La Suiza Lodge, just as the last light of day faded. I am writing this while waiting for dinner in about an hour. No WiFi here, so I guess it will be some time before I had a chance to send this out.

November 7, 2014: Birding Otun Quimbaya then drive to Rio Blanco

It's time to talk about accommodations here in this part of Colombia. They are not up to our usual standards. I noticed a decal for Trip Advisor on the window of the lobby of La Suiza and hoped that meant we would have access to the internet. Nope. Well, at least we would have a decent room and meal in a location that gives new meaning to "out of the way." I give it two stars simply for being there. Unfortunately, I did not feel inclined to award it any more.

The room was missing a few essentials, such as an electrical outlet. A table held a forlorn lamp with no place to plug it in.

Dinner was equally disappointing. They insisted on serving us some beef that could have been used for repairing tires. I toyed with a few bites, then ate the soup, a staple of every meal, and left the rest.

However, it was near a lovely forest. We spent the morning walking down the road toward the entrance to a national park. We soon added several good sightings of the Red-ruffed Fruitcrow, a bird found in only a few spots, this being the easiest to get to. We also saw Cauca Guan, a bird thought to be extinct until some were rediscovered here about 25 years ago.

Most of the bird watching was frustrating. The forest was dense, and hard to see anything. We did find this interesting Heliconia butterfly that we photographed.

After a lunch consisting of the same beef as dinner, we set off driving to the Rio Blanco Preserve, where we will spend two nights.

In Colombia's defense, we need to point out that they are just now emerging from a prolonged civil war. 10 years ago, no American would have been allowed into the areas we are in. "Instant hostages," was the fate of anyone foolish enough to venture there. So, Colombianos have some catching up to do. Ecuador, with many fabulous birds and much better infrastructure gets our recommendation.

When we drove thru the city of Manizales into an industrial area and turned onto a trash strewn gravel road, I didn't have much hope for Rio Blanco.



I couldn't have been more wrong.

November 8-9, 2014: Birding Rio Blanco

When we arrived at the lodge, a Crab-eating Fox was prowling around. Lynne, Alicia, and Linda had great views while Jim was checking out the facilities, which were Spartan, something appropriate for graduate students. We had a room with four bunk beds and two other beds, none of which was large enough for two people. Once again, we had no electrical outlet, and of course, no internet access. We also lacked hot water and heat, so sleeping alone meant we couldn't huddle together for warmth. The temperature stayed on the high side of freezing, but it dropped into the 40s. I found an extra blanket and appropriated it. Linda claimed to be warm enough with only three covers. I needed four.

We got up early for breakfast at 5:30, which turned out to be better than the previous two days. Lynn was sick with a serious case of *turista*, but fortified with several meds, joined us for the morning.



It was fabulous.

The feeders produced two lovely birds, neither of which was a lifer, but we like them regardless. The one on the left is a Blue-winged Mountain Tanager. The one on the right above is a Masked Flowerpiercer.



We also had a brand new set of hummingbirds to watch at the feeders. Amazingly, none of the hummingbirds that we saw were lifers, but we didn't remember most of them as we saw them years ago.



After that, we set off up the road to higher elevation. We started at about 2500 m (about 8500 feet) and went up to 2800m (about 9000 feet) at our highest point. The bus drove us part of the way and we walked the rest.

Alvedo, the local guide who lives at the lodge with his wife and son, took us to three spots where he has habituated Ant Pittas to come out for worms. An enterprising Ecuadorean, Angel Paz, started this trend



several years ago. (See <http://www.refugiopazdelasaves.com/>). Now, everyone is trying to copy his technique.

Alvedo showed us four species of Ant Pittas, and I managed to get good photos of three of them. The one on the left is a Chestnut-crowned Antpitta. The one on the right, a Slate-crowned Antpitta. The third one is a Bicolored Antpitta. We also saw a Brown-banded Antpitta, but he wouldn't sit still long enough for a photo.

We had several mixed flocks during our walk, where a number of birds show up at the same time. They feed together, benefitting from having a number of different birds in the one group. I love the activity of these flocks. You madly try to see everything, switching rapidly from one bird to another.

When the activity died down, it was time for the human group to feed. Then, we had an afternoon siesta before setting out again.

It rained during our siesta, so we delayed our departure a bit, but set out anyway, birding with umbrellas held aloft to keep our binoculars clear. We soldiered on until dusk, when we tried to find some owls and nightjars, but they must have been discouraged by the rain and wouldn't cooperate.

After a very nice dinner, we retired to our cold cabins and burrowed under the covers. Tomorrow, we get to sleep late. Breakfast at 6:00.

The next morning was a repeat of the first, but we did manage to find some new and interesting birds. The best was the Black-billed Mountain Toucan. We had a marvelous look at a pair of these spectacular and rare birds, which I nominated for Bird of the Trip (BOTT), displacing the Bogota Rail from the top spot.



After lunch and another nap, when it rained again, we set off walking down rather than up. This produced some new birds, including two that posed for photos.

This Highland Motmot sat in one spot while we snapped frame after frame. Motmots hunt by remaining motionless waiting for an unsuspecting insect to fly close. Then they snatch it and, as often as not, return to the same perch. A bit later on, we had a very cooperative Pale-edged Flycatcher. Usually, I don't even think of trying to photograph flycatchers as they are too difficult. But this one was different. He must have thought



himself invisible. He wasn't.

Finally, it was time to bid goodbye to what turned out to be a wonderful experience, even though it had its down side. We

drove into the nearby city of Manizales (population about 500,000) where we stayed in a modern hotel for a change. Hot water was plentiful, and we have internet access.

Of course, there is a dark side. We have to get up at 3:30 in the morning to leave for our next spot at an elevation of 3800m (12000 feet).

So, I have to close now. We probably won't have net access again for three days.



of Colombia's active volcanos, spewing steam, but fortunately nothing else. We had some very nice birds there but they didn't cooperate for the camera.

However, when we arrived at the top, the *Brisas* center of the *Parque Nacional Natural Los Nevados*, we did manage to get one good photo. Our main target bird was the Bearded Helmetcrest, a strange hummingbird that lives only at high altitudes. It feeds on *frailejon* flowers, which occur only in the *paramo* habitat. Actually, the species has been split into at least three different species. The one we saw was the Buffy Bearded Helmetcrest according to our field guide. The software doesn't recognize the split yet. We managed a "record shot" of the bird, but nothing good. Again, Lynne a serious and talented



November 10, 2014: Paramo Birding, then on to La Victoria

Today, we headed up to the highest elevation of the trip: 4138 meters according to a sign at the top. That works out to about 12,800 feet. I was a bit worried about going so high as I have had problems in the past, but as we had spent over a week at various levels up to 2800 meters, we had acclimated well.

We started a bit lower down, along a side road, with farmlands far below and typical "elfin forest" above us. In the distance, we could see one



photographer has a good photo that I will include later if possible.

We also saw a couple of Tawny Antpittas, one of which posed for the photo at left. We have seen this Antpitta before, several times in fact.



My notes on a previous sighting state that until Angel Paz revolutionized Antpitta watching, this was the only Antpitta seen regularly. It isn't as shy as the others.

After lunch at a surprisingly modern café on the highway, we proceeded to the town of La Victoria, where we will spend the next two nights. I wasn't expecting much, so I wasn't disappointed to learn that we had no hot water. To my amazement, though, we have WiFi. A network called *Internet para Todos*, is completely wide open. I have a massive 5.5 Mbps of speed, but it seems to be enough to work with. We stopped for about an hour along the road and found some new ones to add to the list, including at least one lifer, a White-eared Conebill that was much prettier than the drab picture in the field guide. I am beginning to wish I had waited until I used the guide in Colombia before giving it a glowing review. However, despite a few shortcomings, this second edition is a major improvement over the first one.

I know you are wondering where the spider pictures are. I've included one from yesterday, a strange looking specimen sitting in the middle of a beautiful, symmetric orb web. The spider is about 1cm (.4") long.



After our early start this morning, I am ready to hit the sack. More tomorrow.

November 11, 2014: Bellavista Preserve



agricultural doings that was new to most of us. In case you can't figure out what the bucket is there for, it is collecting sap from a rubber tree. We found a small rubber plantation on the site. At least one member of the group said, "I didn't know they did that anymore."

We saw a sizable flock of cute Spectacled Parrotlets, small parrots slightly larger than sparrows. They fed actively on a tree before flying off without giving me a chance for a photo.

It poured rain during the night, especially around 3:30 in the morning, when it was hard enough to wake me up. So, our start was delayed. After breakfast at 6:00, we sipped coffee on the third floor deck where we ate and watched typical city birds come to feast on bananas.

About 7:30 the rain had tapered off enough and we set off for a day of birding at the nearby Bellavista Preserve. This is mostly second growth forest and some agricultural land. The preserve also includes a large parrot rehabilitation operation with many birds in open-air cages.

Here is an example of the



That doesn't mean that the day was completely photo-free. A cooperative Blue-necked Tanager let me capture the image on the right. Usually, we have seen these birds at feeders, where photography is somewhat easier. This picture would be better if I were good enough with Photoshop to remove the stick blocking part of his head. Although the bird is named "Blue-necked," we have always wondered why it isn't "Blue-headed." There is probably another Tanager somewhere with that name. When the sun hits him, the colors simply glow.

We returned to our hotel for lunch and an altogether too short nap before setting out again. We walked a few different trails, looking for new birds and found several.

One interesting find was the Black-faced Tanager, which Linda thought might be a lifer. However, when we checked it, we discovered that we had seen it in Brazil in 1985! (And not since.)



The Bird of the Day was a mammal, a group of Bare-faced Tamarins, the only new mammal for the trip.

Everyone except me got looks at a group of six Sooty Ant Tanagers, an endemic to the area and new for all. I had chosen the wrong time to hang back for a short break. We are due to go back to the same area in the morning before heading to our penultimate destination on the tour, La Vega, on the way back to Bogota. I ran off a report tonight and found that Linda and I have both seen and heard over 300 species so far. I have 54 lifers and she has 55. In the process, we have erased three "half birds," those seen by one of us but not both. We have also "cleaned up" several sightings, getting a good look as birds we had not seen well the first time. One example: the 4.5 star view we had today of a Plain Xenops, a cute little bird that we had seen several times, but never this well.

After lunch today, I continued our new tradition of snapping photos of us before a huge tree. Today, it was just Linda. Maybe tomorrow we can get someone to take the phot of both of us. The Ceiba tree behind Linda is said to be 90 years old. It dominates the central town square, where it compete for attention with a disco bar that plays until

11:00pm. Linda resorted to earplugs and Ambien to get to sleep last night.

Stay tuned for a couple more reports. I am not sure about La Vega, but we will certainly be able to send out this report and several lists from Bogota before flying back to Houston.

November 12, 2014: Birding in the lowlands



The plan for today was to visit Bellavista Preserve again, but that didn't happen. We had drizzling rain at our hotel in La Victoria, but by the time we got to the preserve it was raining steadily. So, we headed instead out the main highway, stopping along the way to walk past several farms. That doesn't mean that the surroundings weren't pretty. Check out the tree on the hill. There were several of these pretty lavender items sprinkled in among the green.

For the first day since the Botanical Garden in Bogota, we had no new lifers, but we added a number of birds to the list for the trip. The best bird of the day was this stunning male Yellow-tufted Dacnis. The only other time we saw this species, it was a drab female.

Linda spotted this interesting dragonfly in a wet spot by the side of the road. It looks like a “setwing,” but we haven’t tried to get an ID on it yet.

In the full size image, you can see the venation in the wings clearly. However, if I included that large a picture in this email, I’d be here much later than I plan waiting for it to upload. We have some of the best WiFi connections in days, but it still takes quite a while to get anything done.

After lunch, we just drove to the town of La Vega. We plan to spend the



morning here tomorrow before completing our trip.

There is one last birding stop, a

garden in the town of San Francisco on the way to Bogota. It is famous for all the hummingbirds there. The garden is variously called *Jardin de Colibris* or *Jardin Encantada*. That means Garden of Hummingbirds or Enchanted Garden. Most travel guides to Colombia mention the place. Then, before the big traffic jam, we plan to go back to the airport hotel in Bogota for the trip home on the 14th.



Our drive was illustrative. Colombia is still digging out from the disastrous civil war. Road work is simply a fact of life when driving. Today, no sooner had we entered the

new divided highway that we encountered a line of parked trucks waiting for their chance to travel thru the road construction ahead. Fortunately, the restrictions didn’t apply to our bus. Hernan, our driver, snaked his way past one truck, then weaved past a long line of parked vehicles without drivers present, to finally get back on the road. Of course, by that time we were down to one lane again.

All this has to be considered in context. Ten years ago, we would not be allowed to visit the areas where we have spent the past week and a half. Nor would we have been stupid enough to attempt such a visit. Birders visiting the area would soon have a new designation, “hostage.”

The contrast with neighboring Ecuador cannot be ignored. The roads there are in much better shape, and the lodges are incomparably better. Even in Colombia, the Santa Marta area that we visited earlier this year is in much better shape than the Cauca Valley.

I couldn’t help wondering as we passed one new apartment complex after another whether the previous buildings had been destroyed. Most of the towns looked new and modern. That is certainly true of the hotel, despite the endemic problem of getting hot water in the bath. We managed today by asking at the desk, then waiting some time before running the shower on nothing but hot until the temperature was tolerable. Yesterday and the day before we made do with cold water, which means we didn’t spend very long in our ablutions.

Still, it has been a very interesting trip from the point of view of nature, biodiversity, etc. The country is very beautiful and rich in many ways. Much of the blame for the problems here can be laid squarely at our own doorstep. The insane War on Drugs, which we have pursued four times as Prohibition, led to the rise of the drug

cartels. Indeed, if you ask someone on the street what they know of Cali or Medellin, the answer will surely involve the cartels. Now, the locals inform us that peace is possible only because the cartels have moved to Mexico, and we all know the result of that.

We love the birding here, but we will wait a few years before coming back. There are simply too many other places to go.

I will probably send out one final update tomorrow and post reports on the birds seen.

November 13, 2014: La Vega and Jardin Encantado

We slept in on the final day of our trip, going to breakfast at the late hour of 6:00. Then, with the bus loaded with bags for the final time, we drove into the hills above La Vega. There, we found a new explanation for all the new buildings in town. It seems that La Vega is an exurb of Bogota, a mere 50km away. The new condos include some weekend homes for wealthy inhabitants of the big city.

As we walked along the road further into the hills, we passed one estate after another. Our binocs showed even more palatial homes a bit further off the beaten track. We still managed to find some interesting birds in the area. We even had another chance to miss seeing Parker's Antbird, an incredibly secretive species named for the legendary Ted Parker. He was an amazing ornithologist, capable of identifying hundreds of birds by call alone. We had the privilege of meeting him on our first South American tour in 1985. Unfortunately, he was killed in a plane crash only a few years later. There are several species named in his honor, all difficult birds, just as he would have wished.

We actually had a very brief glimpse of Parker's Antbird, but decided it was not good enough for a "tickable count."



Saffron finches have been an almost daily occurrence during the trip. They are lovely birds, so Linda suggested we include a photo of them even though they are quite common. Our records of them cover several pages in multiple countries, beginning with our first trip, Brazil 1985.

Here are two of them on the lawn of a park we visited this morning.





After the morning outing, we celebrated Lynne's 71st birthday at a local restaurant where some of us sated our hunger with a large soup while the rest attacked an amazing hamburger big enough for two people. There was a lot of hamburger sharing.

One of our most memorable sightings from 1985 in Brazil was a spectacular view of Ruby-topaz hummingbirds, an incredibly lovely bird. The male sometimes extends his crest, making him even more amazing, and we were lucky enough to see that on a *Finca* in the Pantanal. The species was on the list for this trip, and we hoped to see it again after almost 30 years when we visited the *Jardin Encantado*. This Enchanted Garden is the home of a woman who has tended over 32 hummingbird feeders for more than 28 years. Each feeder, well, except two that seem to have been added later, is numbered to make it easy to tell each other where to look. She told us she buys 900 pounds of sugar a month.

We did see a female Ruby-topaz briefly, which made us realize what a fabulous experience our first view was.

This was the final stop on our tour, and a fabulous climax to what has been a surprisingly successful tour despite some rather “basic” accommodations. Linda and I each tallied 344 species (some heard only) including 56 lifers for me and 57 for Linda. This brought our percentage of birds seen to 43% for the world and 40% for South America. It appears that our *bucket list* goal of 50% of the birds of the world is achievable.

We aren’t sure what the correct word is for a gathering of hummingbirds, but when I suggested “dazzle” over dinner, it was received enthusiastically. We will end today’s report the way the trip ended, with a Dazzle of Hummingbirds.

		
<p>Female Gorgetted Woodstar</p>	<p>Male Gorgetted Woodstar</p>	<p>Indigo Capped Hummingbird, our only lifer at the Garden</p>
		
<p>Sparkling Violetear</p>	<p>Rufous-tailed Hummingbird</p>	<p>White-vented Plumeleteer</p>

Afterword: Xavier Muñoz

We found Xavier to be an excellent guide. Several things we particularly liked:

- His nice personality
- His knowledge of the birds and songs
- His use of technology, recorded playbacks, laser pointer, etc. There was that incident with the Streaked Saltator, which flew every time Xavier used the pointer, but nobody's perfect.
- His willingness to admit a mistake. Everyone missed an ID. (Even I do!) I liked the fact that he was willing to change after considering all the evidence. This includes a willingness to check the field guide, something that not all tour guides do.

Now, if he would just figure out how to estimate driving time, I'd raise his grade from A- to A.

Afterword: Wimberly Birding Society

When Bobby Hughes told us the WBS was looking for two people to fill the roster for the trip, we opted in. This may have had the effect of keeping other people more closely attuned to the group from joining the trip. However, we thoroughly enjoyed the company and felt very welcome, even as weird Californians and ex-pat Texans. *Muchas gracias.*

Afterword: Aloft Airport Hotel

This hotel demonstrated again the "second time around syndrome." When we stayed there the first night, I found the place about what I'd expect from a decent airport hotel. Nothing special. The dinner menu was quite limited, but the location was good, and the free shuttle was a nice feature.

When we got there at the end of the trip, it struck me as fabuloso. The shower had real hot water. The TV worked and had CNN in English. (Still vapid, but at least it was better than Futbol where I didn't know who was playing.) The internet service was good, and stayed up the entire time we were there. Most importantly, our modern and spacious room was *quiet*, despite a boisterous party in the lobby with a live band.

Half-priced Mojitas were a big hit at dinner. Linda had two, which made Jim fear that he'd need a luggage cart to get her to the room. The mood was ebullient when Linda requested votes of the Bird of the Trip.

Alicia: All the tanagers and the Striped Cuckoo.

Mary: Whooping Motmot

Jim R: Too hard to pick one

Lynne: Torrent Ducks

Linda V: Sparkling Violetear

Xavier and Me: Black-billed Mountain Toucan

Bobby: Wattled Jacana

Linda H: Bogota Rail, because it is small, elusive, and it fed chicks. (A close second on my list.)

However, Linda now says that if she hadn't had two Mojitas she would have produced her usual lengthy list:

- Bay Wren for its song.
- Bearded Helmetcrest for being generally incredible, and seen well.
- Chestnut-crowned Antpitta, which greeted us on the road before we even got to its usual, wormy feeding place.
- Male Yellow-tufted Dacnis, for being beautiful.
- Strong-billed and Montane Woodcreepers, just because she saw all the field marks well, and often.
- Purple-bibbed Whitetip (hummingbird), which narrowly beat out the always-popular White-necked Jacobin. We saw it in 2008 in the Mindo area, making it an example of a “virtual lifer.”
- Rufous-capped Tody-tyrant, which we labored over and finally had good looks for both of us.
- Rufous-capped Warbler, a bird we have seen even in Texas (in 2000), but still like for its beauty.
- She could go on, but this is getting out of hand.



Xavier Muñoz on the left. Hernan, our driver for most of the trip, as *Oso Anteojos*, Spectacled Bear, on the right. I hope to include a group photo from someone else. Mine is no good.