

# Bolivian Highlights

After a pre-Labor Day visit to Houston to see friends and family, we set off for Bolivia for the last leg of our makeup birding tours. An early morning flight took us to Panama City, where we caught a second flight to Santa Cruz de la Sierra in Bolivia for the start of a four-week survey of the rich wildlife of this little visited South American jewel.

[All photos from this trip can be found online.](#) If you don't see the information about a shot click on the (i) symbol. On a phone, scroll down to see the info.

Thanks to the matching time zones, we skipped our usual post-airline nap and headed out to see what we could find in the neighborhood. Most of the birds we found were old acquaintances, but we did spot a White-banded Mockingbird, a lifer. We learned that this species was a migrant, only in the area for a short while. Indeed, it was the only one seen on the trip.

The next morning, we visited the Santa Cruz Botanical Garden, where we saw quite a lot. Our first lifer was this lovely Fawn-breasted Wren, usually very difficult to see according to our guides, Andy Whitaker, representing VENT, and a Bolivian expert, Julian Quillen Vidoz, who answered to Julian and Quillen. His middle name is pronounced something like Keeshin.



*Fawn-breasted Wren*

Then, we drove to Refugio Los Volcanes, an area of *Yungas* forest. Here we had to split up to fit into 4WD vehicles to get the lodge. While we were waiting our turn, Julian heard a rare bird, Black-streaked Puffbird. He coaxed a pair from the shadows. By standing on a bench, I was able to capture a photo of one of pair thru a small gap in the branches.



*Black-streaked Puffbird*

An interesting sighting, Mitred Parakeet, was technically a lifer. We have probably seen them in our



*Plush-crested Jay*

neighborhood in San Francisco, flying overhead. However, they usually fly overhead in a mixed flock with the Red-masked Parakeet, a very similar species, so we have never been able to identify them unequivocally. Plush-crested Jays, perhaps the most spectacular Jay, were common in the area.



*Blue-headed Parrot*

The amazing, and appropriately named Blue-headed Parrot was another great sighting.

One of my favorite photos, in the [Best of 2022 album](#), is this stunningly beautiful Fork-tailed Woodnymph. We've seen it several times in our travels, but this was perhaps the best ever. A Young Roadside Hawk visited us regularly at the Lodge.



*Fork-tailed Woodnymph*



*Young Roadie*

Next, we moved on to a different habitat, Chaco. The Chaco Puffbird, as the name suggests, showed up to say hello, but the hit of the day was two colorful Cream-backed Woodpeckers. The picture shows the male.

We spent one night at the lovely El Pueblito Resort, my favorite hotel of the tour. Cute room decorations and wonderful food, including a hamburger that surpassed expectations.

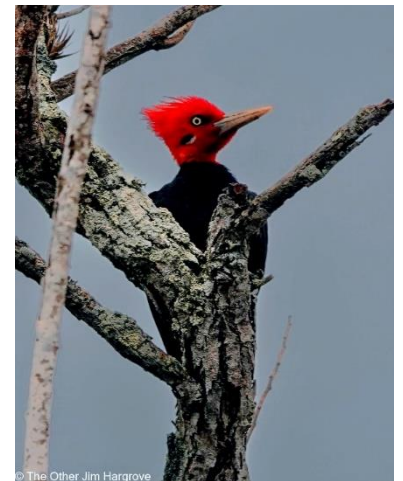
Then, we moved to the next stop on our tour, the Red-fronted

Macaw Ecolodge, a remote spot literally at the end of the road. Once, years ago, I was asked to define my favorite vacation.

“Somewhere at the end of the road, with good birding,” was an easy answer. Well, we were there. The Lodge is maintained by locals, and a Bolivian conservation organization, *Armonia*. The fees paid for our visit help preserve this vital habitat.



*Chaco Puffbird*



*Cream-backed Woodpecker*



*Red-fronted Macaw and Cliff Parakeet*

The Red-fronted Macaws nested and fed across the river, where I had the good luck to catch a pair canoodling — “allopreening” in birdspeak — while a youngster tried to ignore them and a smaller Cliff Parakeet looked on.

Next, we moved to the village of San Isidro, positioning us for birding in some rainforests known as “Siberia” for the temperature. It produced a nice list of birds, but few opportunities for photographs. The weather was not as cooperative as we would have liked, with lots of fog and some rain.

So, after two days, we returned to Santa Cruz and took the afternoon off as the rain continued outside our hotel.

The next day, we hopped a short flight to the town of Trinidad in the Beni region, in the Bolivian Pantanal. This was an amazingly productive place on the shores of a large lake.

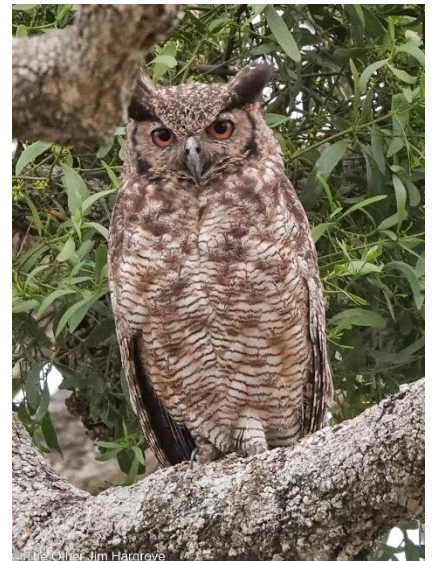
An hour’s drive from Tapacana Lodge took us to the Laney Rickman Nature Reserve. The reserve was established to protect the Blue-throated Macaws, who nest there in small, but fortunately growing, numbers. Chestnut-fronted Macaws also nest on the site. A treat was a group of Great-horned Owls, which may be different from ours, but are currently classified as the same species. The eye color is different.



© The Other Jim Hargrove  
*Blue-throated Macaws*



*Chestnut-fronted Macaw*



© The Other Jim Hargrove  
*Great Horned Owl*

This Red-billed Scythebill seen at Laney Rickman Nature Reserve was a fun sighting, as was this Campo Flicker building a nest in a termite mound.



*Red-billed Scythebill seen at Laney Rickman Nature Reserve*



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*Campo Flicker Working on Nest*

Then, it was time to move up to higher elevation, beginning with a flight to Cochabamba. We arrived in time to visit a large lake reached by walking over a huge dry, sandy area. We were rewarded with good views of flamingos, shorebirds and waterbirds.

The next day, we moved into the mountains above the city. This photo of a Collared Inca hummingbird shows one of the features of the borrowed camera, Direct Manual

Focus. This let me adjust the focus rather than relying on automatic. The latter thought the trees behind the bird was what I wanted.

Here's the original shot and the cropped image. I was happy that the camera could show this bird at such a



*Collared Inca at 50m distance*



*Collared Inca*

great distance.



© The Other Jim Hargrove  
*Streak-fronted Thornbirds*

Two Streak-fronted Thornbirds cooperated enough for a photo showing the hard-to-see Streaked-front. Click on the picture to see the full frame view.

Then we moved to the famous Lake Titicaca, perhaps the highest large lake anywhere. We saw the specialty of the area, two unusual coots, and this fabulous bird: Many-colored Rush-tyrant. One Spanish name for the species is *siete colores*, seven colors. When we first saw this species years ago, we commented that we had seen it *uno color* at a time as it hid in the rushes. This time, we had better luck and got one of my favorite photos of the year. I still have difficulty seeing all seven colors.

The next day, we moved to Hotel Molino Viejo, Old Mill, which was preserved on the property. This was slightly lower elevation than the lake, where the elevator to our room claimed to be the highest such a device in the world.



*Many-colored Rush-tyrant*

Of course, we weren't finished with high altitude birding. On September 23, 2022, we reached the highest point in our lives that wasn't in an airplane, something more than 15,000 feet. I quit looking at my phone when we passed 4600 meters. We'll never do that again.

We did see some of the targets in the area, such as this Gray-breasted Seedsnipe. This is a female. The bird was quite far away.



*Gray-breasted Seedsnipe*

We still had two days to drive the *Camino de la Muerte*, the aptly-named Death Road. This is undoubtedly the scariest road we have traveled on, particularly for those, like me, seated on the side of the bus overlooking the drop. The bottom was nowhere to be seen. The bus crept along. The driver earned his tip, and then some.

We did see some great birds on this route, such as the Band-tailed Fruiteater and Black-faced (or Southern Emerald) Toucanet. The latter used to be called Emerald Toucanet, but it has been split into at least 5 species, and the names are in flux.



*Band-tailed Fruiteater*



*Black-faced Toucanet*

Then, it was time to head to La Paz for our flight home. On the way, we birded along the highway, finding an unexpected (at least by me) set of lovelies to end the trip. This Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager, for example, a truly lovely bird is included in my list of the year's best.



© The Other Jim Hargrove

*Scarlet-bellied Mountain-Tanager*

We still had one final adventure: flying home. The flights from La Paz airport, said to be at 13,500 feet, leave very early to avoid frequent afternoon weather problems. Because of the altitude, the fourth highest airport in the world, the planes fly with less fuel than usual, so the places that can be reached are few. Everyone in our group left on the flight to Bogota around midnight. There, we changed to a flight to Mexico City while the rest of the group flew to various places in the USA. Everyone on both flights wore masks all the time.

When we got to Mexico City, we found our way to the Aero Mexico lounge with help from a local. It involves changing terminals, which requires finding where to board the train to get there. We spent several hours waiting for our flight to San Francisco in the presence of numerous *Nortñeos*. Most did not wear masks.

When we got back home, we both got the latest COVID booster. Alas, it was too late. We both tested positive, though with few symptoms within days. Oh, well. It was still worth the trip. Our guides, who identified more than we did, tallied 650 species of birds, a record for a VENT tour. We had a mere 495, with 109 species we had never seen before, representative of the richness of the area for wildlife.