



HILLSTAR NATURE

Colombia: High Times in the Cordillera Central

9th- 15th February, 2024

Leaders: Mollee Brown & Yessenia Tapasco



*A view of Manizales from just above Rio Blanco Ecological Reserve in the Central Andes of Colombia.
(Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)*

This short, sweet tour based in the scenic mountains around Manizales offers comfortable lodging, a relaxed pace, a cool crisp climate, good photo opportunities, thermal hot springs, options for trail hikes, with short drives between birding sites and accommodations.

Sporting three Andean mountain ranges, Colombia is a birder's paradise with a remarkable variety of landscapes and climates. We do not use the term 'megadiverse' lightly or inaccurately when referring to this country, which offers some of the highest biodiversity on the planet with near 20% of all bird species on the planet. This week we focus on the Cordillera Central, the Central Andes, birding from an elevation of above 13000 feet down to 4000 feet.

Manizales is the capital of Caldas Department, founded in 1849, and is now home to about 500,000 residents and serves as main hub of coffee production in Colombia's famous "Coffee Triangle". Visiting some of the nation's best birding sites such as Rio Blanco, the Tinamú Birding Reserve, and the National

Natural Park of Los Nevados, we will see the volcano area, wander the Andean forest, take in Andean cloud forest and scan the páramo. All this while taking time to enjoy a fantastic array of hummingbirds, and some snazzy antpittas, as we sip quality “tinto” (coffee) and snap shots.

Detailed itinerary

Day 1, Feb. 9th: Arrival into Pereira

Most international flights arrive into Bogota and some travelers choose to book their travel to Pereira through Bogota, but note there are direct flights from Miami to Pereira (PEI). The latter is best if you can make it work. Plan your international flights from the US to arrive mid-day or mid-afternoon. We will arrange transport to our hotel, El Recinto del Pensamiento, which hosts an orchid garden, a butterfly house, and a nice network of birding trails too. This is our home for our first three nights and we will enjoy a welcome dinner together here on our first night together. If you arrive earlier in the day you can relax at the hotel until our meeting at 630pm for dinner. Meet in the hotel lobby area. Night at El Recinto del Pensamiento in Manizales.



Day 2, Feb. 10th: Just a short 25-minute drive from our hotel is a newly opened reserve known as Bosques de la Chec, catering to birders where we'll plan to spend the bulk of the morning. Featuring a nice feeder array with about a dozen hummingbird species we'll look to connect with Sword-billed

Hummingbird, White-throated Daggerbill, and others. There is also a nice trail here the winds through gorgeous humid montane forest. Weather and luck of course both determine a lot, but we could enjoy sightings of Crimson-mantled Woodpecker, Rusty-faced Parrot (near/regional endemic), Golden-plumed Parakeet, Flammulated Treehnuter and a bunch of others. If the sun emerges early-mid morning, then we are wise to spend some time watching the sky here too as the Black-and-chestnut Eagle is known to cruise the area, in addition to other raptors. We'll do lunch and spend the afternoon at a

*Blue-headed Parrots are common in the foothills of the Central Andes.
(Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)*

nearby coffee farm. There we'll enjoy some local cuisine, sample some locally grown coffee, learn how this coffee farm functions, while also seeing a nice bunch of birds. The coffee farm has a bird list of near 300 species. Night at El Recinto del Pensamiento.

Day 3, Feb. 11th: Tinamú Birding Reserve.

Today we drive about 75 minutes into secondary growth foothill forest to the charming and comfortable Tinamu Lodge & Birding Reserve. A small, quaint little lodge, surrounded by feeders with a nice network of trails, located in San Peregrino village, we will spend the bulk of the day, working this forest of near 40 acres. Here we could bump into endemics such as Grayish Piculet, Colombian Chachalaca and Parker's Antbird, and other specialties such as Bar-crested Antshrike, Mustached Puffbird, Andean Motmot, Blue-lored Antbird, Guira Tanager and Golden-collared Manakin. Photo opps at the feeders are good, and subjects there may include the near-endemics Western Emerald and Scrub Tanager, alongside Steely-vented Hummingbird and more common and widespread species like Green Honeycreeper, Blue-necked Tanager, Long-billed Starthroat, Green Hermit, and Lesser and Sparkling Violetears. Night at the lodge at Tinamú Birding Reserve.



species that just a few years ago were deemed nearly impossible to see. Here at Rio Blanco, they are often seen and seen well.

The "Compra Pan" or Chestnut-crowned Antpitta is among the most handsome of the antpittas. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

Day 4, Feb 12th: Rio Blanco Reserve

Setting out early we will spend most of the day away from the hotel, returning mid-late afternoon, in order to pursue some of the region's most sought-after birds at one of its most famous birding sites.

Rio Blanco provides fabulous birding and has for a long time. It is especially famous as a place to see antpittas, including several species that just a few years ago were deemed nearly impossible to see. Here at Rio Blanco, they are often seen and seen well.

A patch of Cloud Forest (2150-3700m high)

just outside of Manizales, the area is high biodiversity and protects a number of endangered species, with 362 species of birds, and no less than 13 of Colombia endemics. We begin walking with a local ranger who tracks the endemic Brown-banded Antpitta, and the near-endemic Bicolored Antpitta. We'll keep an eye and ear out for the Chestnut-crowned Antpitta and its "compra pan" song, and hope also for the diminutive Slate-crowned Antpitta. The hummingbird feeders may provide species such as Long-tailed Sylph, Speckled Hummingbird, Bronzy Inca, Buff-tailed Coronet and perhaps Fawn-breasted

Brilliant. Keep an eye out for the near-endemic White-throated Daggerbill too. Other species could include Pearled Treerunner, Black-capped and Black-eared Hemispingus, Streak-headed Antbird, Lacrimose Mountain Tanager (named for the teardrop below its eye), the stunning Blue-winged Mountain Tanager, and other jaw-droppers like Andean Motmot, Grass-green Tanager, Golden-plumed Parakeet, Green-and-black Fruiteater, and Gray-browed Brushfinch. Further searching could reveal a Masked Saltator, the dapper Plushcap, a Yellow-billed Cacique, Ash-colored Tapaculo, or dare we hope... Ocellated Tapaculo? Night again in Manizales.



Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan is always a show-stopper.
(Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

Day 5, Feb. 13th: Hacienda el Bosque.

Today we depart early to reach one of the better birding and photography sites in the Central Andes. At the incomparable Hacienda el Bosque, we enjoy a traditional hacienda located just 45-minute drive outside Manizales. With habitats ranging from 2,800 to 3,900m altitude (9500 - 12800 feet) it contains several ecosystems, including pastures for livestock and dairy production, but some good chunks of high Andean forest and paramo. It has been looked after by the same family for decades now and they are working towards making it more and more

attractive to birders and nature enthusiasts. Today they manage sections of it for birders, and the feeding stations attract lots (!) of hummingbirds and tanagers, and are visited by the likes of Collared Inca, White-bellied Woodstar, Mountain Velvetbreast, Sparkling Violetear, Lesser Violetear, Tourmaline Sunangel, Tyrian Metaltail, Buff-Winged Starfrontlet and also the sought-after and gaudy Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan. The main attraction here is one of the most enigmatic antpitta species: the Crescent-faced Antpitta. Here our chances are better than just about anywhere else, but we'll still need some luck. And we also have chances for the Equatorial Antpitta, Barred Fruiteater, and much more. Then we move on to our very comfortable hotel high up in the Central Andes, situated at a thermal hot springs, at edge of the Nevados del Ruiz National Park. Astride the park and the forest, there are a bevy of birds possible here, and so we'll spend two nights at this fabulous hotel and spa. Night at Termales de Ruiz.

Day 6, Feb 14th: Los Nevados National Park. Here, at up near 4000 meters (13,000 feet above sea level) the grounds of our hotel has hosted over 200 species of birds. Hummingbirds are a big part of the experience. Rainbow-bearded Thornbill, Golden-breasted Puffleg, and Shining Sunbeam are often here,

and we'll keep eyes peeled too for the near-endemic Black-thighed Puffleg. A short drive away farther up the peak of the volcano, we have a chance for Buffy Helmetcrest as well. Its entire range is confined to this mountain. Nevado Del Ruiz is a volcanic mountain situated in Los Nevados National Natural Park resting between 2800m and 4000 meter above sea-level (9180 - 13120 feet). It is a combination of paddocks, elfin forest, patches of bamboo, páramo habitat, and then there is the active volcano itself.

The elfin forest and páramo of this massive park are home to endemic species including the rare and local Rufous-fronted Parakeet and we will look for these along with the near-endemic Black-backed Bush Tanager, and Páramo Tapaculo, as we check for roving flocks that may hold Hooded Mountain Tanager, Golden-crowned Tanager, Tawny Antpitta, Stout-billed Cinclodes, Andean Tit-spinetail, Crowned Chat-tyrant, Brown-backed Chat-tyrant, Andean Tit-spinetail or White-chinned Thistletail.



The endemic Buffy Helmetcrest is a high elevation hummingbird, found only in the Cordillera Central. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

The main target of this stunning mountain is the aforementioned endemic, the Buffy Helmetcrest. We will look for this amazing bird in flowering bushes of Espeletia (locally known as 'frailejones', as in the misty they somewhat recall a friar or monk), a unique type of shrub in the sunflower family. These are only in high elevation páramo ecosystems. After searching for it, we'll get lunch back at the hotel and then soak up the action at the feeders, and perhaps take advantage of the therapeutic effects of the Natural hot springs. Night again at Termales de Ruiz.

Day 7, Feb 15th: Birding, breakfast & onwards.

We'll have a last look around the grounds, but after breakfast it is time to move on. Those that fly home will head back to Pereira for their flight out. Those who plan to attend the Colombia Birdfair can be transported to Cali.

NOTE: After the Colombia Birdfair, starting on the 18th of February, Mollee & Yessenia continue with another tour to the Western Andes & the Choco.

¡Hasta pronto! Thank you for joining this Hillstar Nature experience!



*Masked Flowerpiercer is a regular attendant at several of the feeding stations we visit. The photo opps on this trip are excellent.
(Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)*

Tour Price/person*: \$2910

Deposit: \$500

Single supplement: \$225

Final Payment Due: 9 October 2023

*Based on double occupancy at lodgings, with a group size of 4 to 8 registrants. Maximum groups size is 8 registrants, plus guide(s) and driver(s). If less than 4 registrants, trip may be cancelled or re-negotiated. Note that if you want a roommate we can try to find you one, but we cannot guarantee anyone a roommate, and if none is available, you will be charged the single supplement.

The tour price (fee) includes services from upon arrival on Day 1 into Pereira (PEI) until our return to PEI on Day 7, including:

- All meals from dinner on Day 1 through breakfast on Day 7.
- All accommodations from Day 1 through until Day 7.
- All transport from arrival into the Pereira Airport (PEI) on Day 1 through to Day 7 until guests are transported back to PEI mid-day.
- All guiding services, access permits and entrance fees to birding areas.
- Tips for drivers and staff at hotels and restaurants.

Excluded from your tour fee are:

- Any flights. We can advise you on best times for your flights, but we do not book flights or arrange air travel at this time. On some tours that feature internal flights as part of the tour's itinerary and represent travel within that country, we may include the flights as part of the tour price and make those arrangements.
- Alcoholic beverages, laundry services, charges for phone calls, and any other items of a personal nature.
- Visa fees, airport taxes, airline baggage fees, etc.

Documents

All travelers must have a current passport, valid for six months beyond the end date of this tour, with at least 1 blank page for stamps. No visa is required of US citizens entering Colombia. Proof of COVID-19 Vaccination is required to participate in and travel as a part of this tour.

Cancellation Policy

We strongly recommend all guests purchase travel insurance, including coverage for medical evacuation services and trip curtailment, in advance of this tour. It is important to protect against financial losses in the event that registrant becomes unable to participate in the tour. Note that such coverage is often non-refundable so please check with the Hillstar Nature team before purchasing it, to confirm the tour is to proceed as planned.

If cancellation is received:

- 180 days or more prior to the start of the tour, a full refund minus a \$250/person processing fee is issued to registrant(s).
- Between 179 and 90 days prior to the start of the tour, half of the tour fee will be returned to registrant.
- 89 days or less prior to departure, no refund of payments or deposits are issued.

The team at Hillstar Nature reserves the right to refuse service to any registrant/participant who acts disruptive or in a manner inconsistent with the goals of the tour. All guests are expected to comply with

the rules and agenda set forth by the guide(s) of the tour, and to behave in a way that is considerate and conducive to a quality group experience.

Please contact us if you have any questions about if a tour is a good fit for your goals and/or level of fitness.

Pace, Rigor, Climate & Pests

- Fairly relaxed pace. Significant time enjoying bird feeding stations. Great photo opps.
- Early mornings but early nights too. A couple drives of up to 2 hours; some driving along winding mountain roads.
- Very comfortable accommodations with good grounds for birds & photography.
- Time spent at high elevation. Not much rigorous hiking, but some walking on inclines at high altitude. Several afternoons at birding lodge grounds.
- Humid but cool or pleasant weather mostly, but a chance of cold and wet weather. Few if any biting insects expected.

We have baked in a bit of flexibility on this tour, such that those desiring a hike or preferring to relax on certain afternoons have these options and there is a fair amount of stationary birding at lodges with great photo opps. Each morning we rise early, pre-dawn to be in position to take advantage of the best



*A Buff-tailed Coronet and a Sparkling Violetear duke it out at a nectar source. Hummingbirds are a daily feature.
(Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)*

time of day, when birds are most active near daybreak and soon thereafter. About half the days we lunch at our lodging, with time for a mid-day break before we return to birding activities. Often, hanging around the lodge grounds offer us the best chances for the birds we are seeking, or for photos of them. Dinners are at/near our accommodations.

The general plan is to be out birding the first ½ of the day and to have the option to enjoy some relaxing afternoons, taking advantage of our comfortable lodgings, most of which sport feeding stations, good photo opportunities, and trails with specialty birds and more.



Two from our group focus in on a Long-tailed Sylph. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

All birding is done along trails, roadsides, or around grounds of lodgings, and walking is at a slow pace due to elevation, and so as not to startle wildlife and see as much as possible.

Elevation is a consideration on this tour. Please consult your physician regarding travel to areas of high elevation. Elevations range from 4000 to about 14000 feet

(1200-4200m) above sea level during our 9 days together. Especially when up high, but really throughout the tour, we will take our time, and keep a slow and relaxed pace while we seek and enjoy birds and other wildlife. Weather is variable throughout the tour, but generally we expect it to be pleasant or cool, though it can be quite cold when up high. Occasionally it dips down into the 40s or even 30s F when we are up in the páramo, so having a light waterproof (or strongly water-resistant) layer to go over a fleece along with light rain pants that protect from wind and rain are recommended. A hat to warm your head, a pair of gloves, and a neck-warmer are good to have in case it gets cold up in Los Nevados National Natural Park, and then you can always warm yourself at the thermal springs at our lodge after we return. You may find you even prefer having thermal underwear for sleeping and even birding.

Biting insects are usually not an issue when in middle and upper elevations, but still it may be wise to carry a small amount of insect repellent or to consider treating your clothing with repellent prior to departure.

Generally, nature enthusiasts visiting Colombia do not encounter diseases like Malaria, Yellow Fever, etc. but it is possible. We strongly urge guests to consult a doctor about vaccinations and medications prior to travel. Elevation sickness is possible given some of the areas we visit on this tour, so we urge guests to seek medical advice on spending time at high elevation as well.

Packing

Please limit yourself to one mid-size suitcase/duffel and another smaller bag for daily use on outings. Group travel dictates we consider our fellow traveler's comfort, and this includes not over-packing. Laundry services are available at most hotels we visit but having lightweight clothes that can be hand-cleaned in rooms can be an advantage.

Lightweight clothing that is easy to layer is best for this variable climate that can be warm sometimes and downright cold at others. Probably we will encounter some mist or rain, and perhaps wind as well. Lightweight raingear is recommended. Some folks bring umbrellas but if these are utilized they can obstruct viewing in certain situations. Neutral colors are best for our time in the field to limit our visibility to the birds and wildlife we seek. We could encounter some mud along trails and roadsides, so good trail shoes, hiking shoes or hiking boots are recommended for field outings, while a pair of slip-ons, flip flops, or comfortable walking shoes for around the hotels/lodges are good to have as well. People can be surprised at traveling to a country along the equator, only to find themselves up in the mountains where temperatures may drop to near freezing even in July. We definitely recommend a thermal layer and a fleece/sweatshirt that can be layered under a raincoat to keep warm and dry.



A pair of gloves and warm hat are recommended, and a buff (lightweight neck-warmer) for use as a breathing barrier or for warmth can be helpful too. Sunscreen, hat and sunglasses are good for if we encounter bright, clear conditions, especially at elevation. A daypack (small backpack or the like) for your belongings for daily field outings is useful, and some folks find that having a walking stick for balance is nice or having a foldable stool/chair is nice for times when we sit and wait in an area for a bird(s) to

show. Power outlets in Colombia are similar to those in the US/Canada (110v/60Hz). Cell service is good in most areas but can be spotty in the Andes or along curvy mountain roads, and Wi-Fi is offered at all hotels but subject to disruption at times. A small supply of insect repellent is advisable.

Updated: 10 Apr 2023_GLA