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# Ecotourism in Latin America: Four Types of Birding Tours

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**Ecotourism in Latin America: Four Types of Birding Tours**Gregory L. Osland, Ph.D. [gosland@butler.edu](mailto:gosland@butler.edu)

Latin America attracts Midwestern birders with its amazing biodiversity, such as the 130 species of hummingbirds found in the small nation of Ecuador. Outstanding Latin American birding areas, including rich, primary forests, are more accessible than sometimes thought. Puerto Rico, a fascinating Caribbean island with rainforests, wild beaches and widely-spoken English, is just five hours south of Indianapolis by plane. Even the most distant nation in Latin America, Chile, is in a similar time zone and has excellent air transportation both into and within the country. Both of those nations have a well-developed and safe highway system. But sometimes birders are uncertain about how to experience the avian riches. This article will describe and compare four types of birding tours and illustrate each type in descriptions of birding trips to a biosphere reserve in Chiapas, Mexico, the Atacama Desert and Andes mountains of northern Chile, Amazonian Ecuador, and natural areas of Puerto Rico. Some of the impressive birds found in each area will be highlighted.

When in Latin America visitors frequently hear about ecotourism and see advertisements about "ecoturismo," but many North Americans may be uncertain about what this type of travel entails. This article will also describe ecotourism and use its elements to help compare the four types of birding tours. Birders traveling in Latin America are often troubled when seeing the inter-related issues of poverty and destruction of natural areas. Governments, environmental organizations, academics, and businesspeople are increasingly trying to discover ways to help develop the economies, while conserving the natural environment. Ecotourism is one of several sustainable development methods that can help address these twin issues. Ecotourism is nature-based travel that embraces principles of sustainability, and thus is managed to conserve the natural environment on which it depends, provide economic benefits to the local community and the industry, and to educate and satisfy tourists (Osland and Mackoy 2004; United Nations World Ecotourism Summit 2002). Although ecotourism can occur in virtually any nation, much attention has centered on ecotourism that may help conserve high-quality, but rapidly diminishing natural areas, some of the most significant of which are in Meso-America and South America (Myer et al. 2000). Several nations in this area are among the most popular eco-tourist destinations in the world, and birding is the most popular type of ecotourism activity.

Ecotourism creates jobs in the threatened natural areas for nature guides, transportation providers, travel agents, lodge and restaurant managers

and workers. The income from ecotourism can give local residents an incentive to conserve forests and wildlife, and can help raise the standard of living of impoverished communities. However, some types of birding tours are better than others in fulfilling the ideals of ecotourism of conserving nature, providing local economic benefits, and satisfying and educating tourists. The prices of the types of birding tours vary significantly, as well. Four types of birding tours are: a full service, group tour with an in-bound, international company such as VENT or Field Guides; a customized, locally-guided tour; an eco-lodge-provided tour; and an independent, self-guided tour.

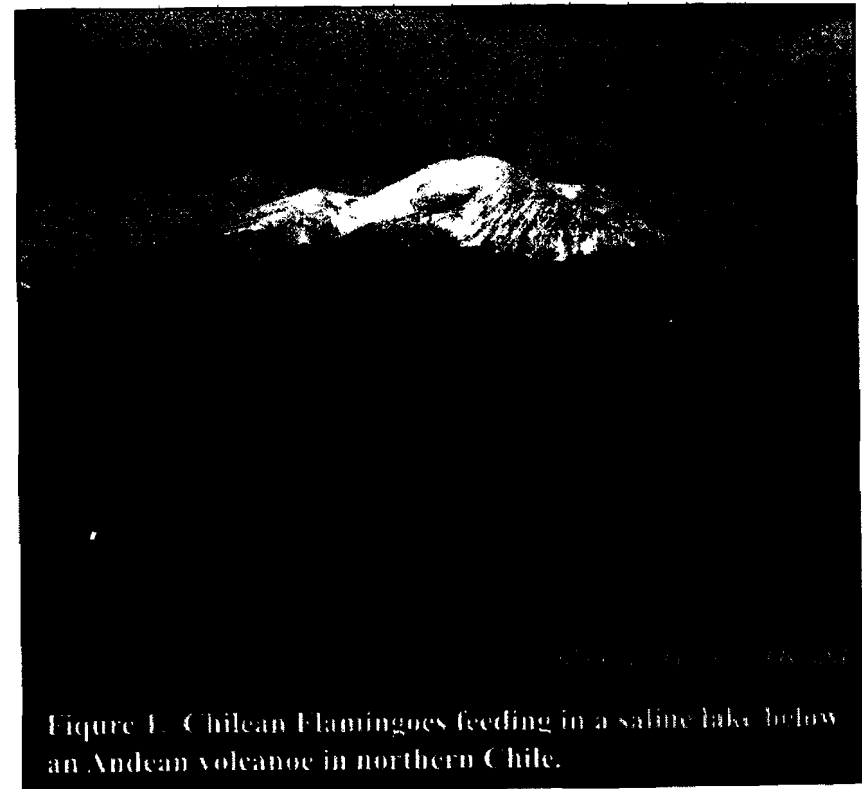


Figure 1. Chilean Flamingoes feeding in a saline lake below an Andean volcano in northern Chile.

**FULL-SERVICE GROUP TOUR TO EL TRIUNFO, MEXICO**

In March 2002 I traveled with a Victor Emanuel Nature Tour (VENT) ([www.ventbird.com](http://www.ventbird.com)) in Southeast Mexico in the state of Chiapas. VENT made all of the arrangements and provided three world-class birders and naturalists

as the guides. Most of the tour took place in a mountainous cloud-forest in one of the least-disturbed, wild areas of Mexico. The biosphere reserve, El Triunfo, is managed by an agency of the Mexican government and by the Nature Conservancy. Access to the core area is limited to organized groups, which must travel on foot, and which use horses or mules to carry food and tents. Fourteen birders from 35 to 75 years of age hiked and took vans for the nine-day tour, which included visits to other rich birding areas of the state of Chiapas. The two most sought-after species in El Triunfo are the threatened, bizarre Horned Guan, and the very local, Azure-rumped Tanager. We were able to have multiple, extended views of both species. Some other impressive species included Ornate Hawk-Eagle, White-bellied Chachalaca, Striped Cuckoo, Fulvous Owl, Black-and-White Owl, 14 species of Hummingbirds (including Emerald-Chinned and Wine), Resplendent Quetzal, and five species of Motmots. When first approaching the base camp at twilight, I nearly stepped on an elusive Scaled Antpitta as it walked across the trail. On another hike I watched a male Long-tailed Manakin perform its distinctive courtship dance in some dense shrubs. We heard the intriguing songs of nine thrushes, including the Brown-backed Solitaire and Spotted Nightingale Thrush, and were also able to get views of each thrush. Hearing the ethereal songs of the thrushes and other birds among trees laden with mosses and orchids in nearly perpetual fog was enchanting and unforgettable. We also observed migrant and local Wood Warblers, including my best views ever of Hermit Warbler, and of the more local Slate-throated Redstart and Fan-tailed Warbler. Yellow Grosbeaks were common around our camp, while Yellow-winged Cacique took some work to locate. Most groups see over 200 species of birds on this tour.

Visiting El Triunfo requires the use of a full-service tour company. I am aware of four international birding companies that have currently been given permission to give tours in the area. VENT offers the highest quality guides, using outstanding birders and scientists to interpret the ecology of the area and to find the target birds for their clients. Overall, El Triunfo, including this VENT tour, is an ecotourism success story. Victor Emanuel, who participates in most of the annual trips to El Triunfo, has agreed to give several hundred dollars of each tourist's fee for conservation and management efforts in the Reserve. Local residents do the cooking and manage the pack animals. They are well paid for their efforts, and thus have a motivation to help protect the Horned Guan and other species that bring tourists to the area. Reversing a downward trend, the numbers of Horned Guan have increased over the last two decades, and the sensitive habitat is being protected. Since there is not enough money to provide full-time park rangers to protect the wildlife and forest, it is apparent that the local residents have 'bought into'

the ideals of ecotourism and are benefiting from protecting the natural area. One of the VENT guides, a Ph.D. botanist, taught us a great deal about the plant ecology as we walked through several distinct habitats, up and down the mountain. All three guides used tapes and their impressive skills and experience to locate a number of bird species that I would probably have not found by myself. However, full-service, in-bound, group tours are the most expensive type of tour, even with minimal accommodations. The 2007 price for an 11-day VENT tour to El Triunfo is \$2,850 per person, double occupancy, including seven nights in tents.

#### CUSTOMIZED, LOCALLY-GUIDED TOUR TO NORTHERN CHILE

Another type of birding tour involves developing a customized itinerary with a local guide, who often can help with transportation, lodging and eating arrangements, too. In January 2006 a colleague and I traveled in northern Chile with the assistance of a local guide, Barbara Knapton, owner of Alto Andino Nature Tours ([www.birdingaltoandino.com](http://www.birdingaltoandino.com)). Barbara helped arrange lodging in a bed and breakfast in the coastal city of Arica, and gave us tips on where to locate some of the endemic species in the area. Hiring a taxi driver for about ten U.S. dollars an hour, my friend and I visited several productive birding areas along the Pacific coast and in the "oases" of the Atacama Desert. The birds that live in this extremely dry area are quite local and specialized, so most of the species we observed were "world lifers." We were pleased to find all three hummingbird species in the Azapa Valley area: the endangered Chilean Woodstar, plus Peruvian Sheartail, and Oasis Hummingbird. The Croaking Ground Dove, with its odd, frog-like vocalization, was easy to locate. Along the coast Kelp Gulls and Band-tailed (Belcher's) Gulls were common, while the gorgeous Inca Tern was also readily found.

Although Barbara will come pick people up in Arica, cost-conscious birders can save money by paying \$4 for a three-hour bus ride to Putre, a small Andean town at about 11 thousand feet in altitude where Barbara owns and manages a bed and breakfast. For one day my colleague and I birded around the town by ourselves, where we found Andean specialties such as Bare-faced Ground Dove, Andean Hillstar (hummingbird), White-winged Cinclodes, Chiguanco Thrush, and Black-hooded Sierra Finch. For parts of three other days, Barbara guided us in the Putre area and in the nearby Lauca National Park, with its snow covered, and occasionally steaming volcanoes of up to 20 thousand feet high. We chose to bird at these very high elevations at a relatively relaxed pace, and were still able to find almost all of our target species in these less diverse, wide open ecosystems.

One day we visited a mountainous cushion bog that had partially frozen during the cold, summer night. Barbara gave me the opportunity to be the first of our party to find the threatened Diademed Sandpiper-Plover sitting on a nest on the bog. The sweeping views of bogs, lakes and high plains allowed us to observe large numbers of waterfowl, raptors, shorebirds, and some exotic families of birds. Some impressive species included Puna Rhea and Puna Tinamou running across the plains, White-tufted Grebe, Andean Goose, three species of Flamingoes, Puna Ibis, Black-chested Buzzard Eagle, Mountain Caracara, Giant Coot, Gray-breasted Seedsnipe, and Andean Lapwing. Barbara helped us distinguish three species of Canastero, and several species each of Tit-Spinetails, Tit-Tyrants, Shrike-Tyrants, and Ground Tyrants. Birders coming to the northern Chilean summertime in January can expect to see about 100 species in the desert and alpine environments in a week, most of which are local. Although these numbers of species are lower than in most other areas of Latin America, the overall experience and individual species seen may be even more memorable and satisfying than when inundated with hundreds of new birds in a week in rain forests.

The costs of this week in northern Chile were much less than a trip with a full-service tour. My friend and I each paid Alto Andino Nature Tours about US\$370 for three days of guiding, local transportation, lodging, and most meals. We incurred a total of about \$600 each for the entire week on the ground. Our guide spoke English and Spanish, so communication was easy. In the times we were not with her, my knowing Spanish was very useful. For non-Spanish speakers, it may have been best to hire her services for the entire week.

With this local, customized tour, all of the money we spent stayed in the local communities; but the overall economic impact on the area was less than that of an expensive group tour such as VENT's. The impact of the few birders who visit northern Chile also does little to motivate local communities to help conserve the natural areas, at this point.

#### ECO-LODGE-PROVIDED TOURS IN AMAZONIAN ECUADOR

One of the most convenient and cost-effective types of tours is to stay at an eco-lodge that is built in or next to an outstanding natural area. These hotels offer daily tours with a nature guide, meals, and transportation (if needed). In May 2003 I stayed at two eco-lodges near the Napo River in eastern Ecuador's Amazon basin - Sacha Lodge and La Selva (laselvajunglelodge.com). Ecuador is one of the most biologically-diverse nations on earth, with approximately 1,600 species of birds, of which 587 have been seen on the 5,000 acres of Sacha Lodge (sachalodge.com) I began each day with a pre-dawn breakfast, and birded with a local guide until sunset, often helped by

an indigenous canoeist or motorboat "captain." Some days there were no other birders: at most there were two other guests birding with us. The biodiversity of this area can overwhelm an alert naturalist. In addition to the three hundred bird species that can be seen in a week, many visitors see marmosets, tamarinds, several species of monkeys, and dozens of species of plants. Towers and suspension walkways above the forest canopy enable birders to see and hear more birds than they can process. Most identifications come aurally. For example, with the help of guides and their tapes, I identified five species of Tinamous, most which gave haunting calls at dusk and sunset. All of my guides grew up in the area, and appeared to know every call, and many nest-sites (e.g. a Long-tailed Potoo's). While hiking the trails they coaxed into view dozens of species of skulking ant swarm followers such as Antbirds, Antwrens, Antshrikes, Antthrushes, and Antpittas. Toucans were easier to observe. Of the seven species in the area, I saw five, including White-throated Toucan and Lettered Aracari. Identifying Flycatchers can be difficult in the United States. But at these two Amazonian eco-lodges birders can be faced with over fifty different Flycatcher species to try to distinguish. Perhaps the most colorful family of birds is the Thraupidae (Tanagers and Honeycreepers). With careful attention a birder may see over twenty species of this family in a week, including the stunning Paradise Tanager and Purple Honeycreeper. Few migrants are found in the Amazon, but I was fortunate to see 35 migrating Sand-colored Nighthawks catching insects over the surface of a small lake when I first entered La Selva Jungle Lodge by canoe.

This type of tour clearly helps to conserve nature and bring economic benefits to the area. The lodges own large tracts of land that they protect from agricultural, forestry and oil development. The indigenous people are motivated not to hunt or clear cut the area, since the ecotourism provides many jobs for guides, transporters, cooks, maids, etc.

A few eco-lodges in Ecuador are even owned and partially managed by indigenous peoples. At eco-lodges birders gain essential help in species identification, usually from local people. Sacha Lodge also offers general nature tours by guides from outside the area who are trained in biology.

Costs vary dramatically, depending on the time of the year, the number of guests per room, the number of days, and the negotiation ability of the tourist. At an historically low demand period in 2003 when traveling by myself, I paid about \$140 a night for lodging, meals, local transportation, and 10-15 hours a day of guiding services. Two people sharing a room may pay up to \$200/day each in 2007 - considerably less than the per day rates of most group tours by organizations such as VENT.

## INDEPENDENT, SELF-GUIDED TOUR TO PUERTO RICO

The fourth type of birding tour available to birders is a "do-it-yourself" tour without a guide. This method requires the most effort; but it is usually the least expensive option, and can be the most satisfying for those who prefer to "find their own birds." For experienced birders visiting easily accessible areas, this is often the preferred option. Surfbirds ([www.surfbirds.com](http://www.surfbirds.com)) is a useful website to visit to get trip reports, lodging suggestions, and other help from world birders. In March 2004 my wife and I flew to Puerto Rico for a week of casual birding and general vacationing. Puerto Rico is a highly-developed Caribbean island, but it still possesses some very good natural areas and 17 endemic bird species. March is probably the best month for birders to visit, since the weather is relatively cool and dry, and birds are active and vocal.

We rented a car for about \$250 a week and drove to El Yunque National Forest, where we stayed at a pleasant lodge on a mountain ridge for a couple of nights ([www.casacubuy.com](http://www.casacubuy.com)). The tiny Puerto Rican Tody delighted us with its "beep bee" calls and short flights across the trails. Scaly-naped Pigeons called from the canopy and were often seen in flight. In the first day we saw six endemics: Puerto Rican Tanager and Puerto Rican Spindalis were two of the easiest species to observe in the rather open tropical rainforest of El Yunque. Driving around the island enables birders to study common Caribbean birds that are usually only viewed as pictures in the North America field guides to US birders who don't venture South. These included White-cheeked Pintail, Zenaida Dove, Bananaquit, Black-faced Grassquit, and Shiny Cowbird. On the grounds of a hotel on the eastern coast we found several interesting hummingbirds - Antillean Mango, Green-throated Carib, and Antillean Crested Hummingbird.

The best birding was in the southwest part of the island, including some drier, thorn forest habitat. We spent several nights based at a former coffee plantation, Hacienda Juanita ([www.haciendajuanita.com](http://www.haciendajuanita.com)), which also gave us the opportunity to experience some of the local cuisine and culture. In the thorn forest the temperatures became hot by late morning and bird activity slowed down dramatically. Early morning birding allowed us to find such endemics as Adelaide's Warbler and Puerto Rican Lizard Cuckoo. As warbler lovers our most highly-sought bird was the rare Elfin Woods Warbler. My wife was the first to spot a male, while scouring the Maricao State Forest. That same morning we also found our first Puerto Rican Vireo and Puerto Rican Pewee. While staying at a typical beach hotel, we saw the rare and declining Yellow-shouldered Blackbird, Antillean Mango, and numerous shorebirds and waders. An unexpected treat was finding the brightly-colored Troupial near the Cabo Rojo lighthouse. On the southwest edge of Puerto

Rico, this lighthouse overlooks a steep slope and rocky coast. Of the approximately 300 species ever seen on the island, visiting birders should find 80-100 species in a week in early spring, including 15 or so endemics.

A week of "self-guided" birding in Puerto Rico can be inexpensive. When sharing costs, two people can have an enjoyable week-long trip for \$400-700 per person (about \$60-\$100 per day, excluding airfare to the destination). But when less money is brought into the economy, there are fewer local economic benefits. The relationship between nature conservation and tourism is also less evident to locals, since self-guided birders are usually not distinguished from beach tourists. Without a guide some species are probably missed, but we were satisfied by what we saw and by our overall experience. Self-guided tours can be very difficult and occasionally, dangerous for newcomers, in some parts of Latin America.

## CONCLUSION

The following chart compares four types of birding tours with the three key elements of eco-tourism - conserving nature, providing local economic benefits, and educating tourists. A fourth criterion is low cost. The ratings for the four situations are based on my judgment. The differences are not statistically significant, but suggest the following conclusions. Overall, full-service group tours and eco-lodge-based tours appear to be the best in attaining the ideals of ecotourism. Both provide local economic benefits and help conserve nature. Eco-lodges may be the best of all four in helping to conserve nature, particularly when land purchases are part of the lodge operations. Group tours, led by world-class birders and naturalists, are generally the best in educating tourists. Self-guided tours may do the least for the nature areas and the local economy, but they have the benefit of being the lowest cost for the birder. In contrast, full-service group tours cost the most. Basing at an eco-lodge or customizing a tour with a local guide are cost-effective, alternative options.

I enjoyed each of the trips and believe each type of tour has value. This article shows that birders today can find options that go beyond the previous two choices of "do it yourself" or "the group tour." Local guides can help customize an excellent, cost-effective tour, and each year comfortable, new eco-lodges with birding guides begin operations in Latin America to help guests enjoy and appreciate birds and wild nature. In the process birders may help conserve nature and improve local economies, as well.

**FROM THE ARCHIVES – PART 8**  
**ANSERIFORMES – FAMILY ANATIDAE – GENUS ANATINAE**  
**- Species Aythya (Diving Ducks)**

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In the Indiana Audubon Quarterly Vol. 84, No. 2, the “dabbling ducks” of the genus Anatidae found in Indiana were treated in evidence-based analyses of bird reports in the Indiana Bird Report Archives (IBRA). There are eighteen additional duck species in the genus which are grouped together as “diving ducks.” The following is a continuation of this examination of the genus Anatidae and involves the five *Aythya* “divers” – Canvasback (*Aythya valisineria*), Redhead (*Aythya americana*), Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*), Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*), and Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*). All are reported annually in spring, fall, and winter and have been reported during the summer season although irregularly and in very small numbers. All but Greater Scaup have been reported nesting but evidence is lacking. The status of reports of a sixth species, Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*) which is currently not included in the Official Indiana Checklist, is also briefly examined.

Table 1  
 A COMPARISON OF BIRDING TOURS

	Conserving Nature	Providing Local Benefits	Educating Tourists	Low Cost	TOTAL
Full-Service Group Tour	3	4	4	1	12
Customized Local Tour	2	3	3	3	11
Eco-lodge Tour	4	4	2	2	12
Self-guided Tour	2	2	2	4	10

Ratings are from 1-5, with 1 low (poor) and 5 high (excellent)

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Species	Specimen	Photo	Subst Nest		Critical Dates	Spring	Maximum Counts		
			Rep	Rep			Summer	Fall	Winter
Canvasback	Yes	Yes	No	No	15 May-30 Sep.	5000	7	500	3500
Redhead	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	1 Jun-31 Aug	4500	12	500	1500
Ring-necked Duck	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	None	6000	7	1500+	2500
Greater Scaup	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	1 May-30 Sep.	1000	2	69	40
Lake Michigan Lesser Scaup	Yes	Yes	No	No	22 July-21 Sep	150	1	200	7230
						5000	13	5270	4000

### SPECIMEN LIST

Like the dabbling ducks, this group of birds is generally well represented by evidence in the form of specimens. Table 1 lists specimens noted in the IBRA as being taken in Indiana and/or are listed on Indiana specimen inventory lists of collections in various institutions throughout the United States. In many cases the current location and/or existence of listed specimens cannot or has not been confirmed due to the extensive time and economic effort necessary to do a thorough inspection of all collections. Also there may be some repetition as specimens may have been transferred from one collection to another.