

Birding adventures in South America



Photo by Vicki Metcalfe

While on the Galapagos Islands, Vicki had a close-up encounter with blue-footed boobies and visited a giant tortoise sanctuary.

By Vicki Metcalfe

Editor's Note: A former resident of New Edinburgh, Vicki now lives in Victoria, B.C. and is a regular contributor to the For the Birds column.

When Ed, my birding friend from Portland, Oregon, suggested I join him on a bird photography trip to Ecuador, I jumped at the chance. Later, a fellow birder from Victoria said if I went to Ecuador, I absolutely had to go to the Galapagos. And so I did.

In November 2019, Ed and I flew to Quito, Ecuador, and were taken to the Puenbo Birding Garden hotel, where we met the five others in the group and our leader, Juan Carlos Vindas. A Costa Rican, Juan Carlos leads bird photography trips in Central and South America through his company Neotropic Photo Tours (neotropicphototours.com).

After a brief stop in the enormous city of Quito, it was off to the rainforest. Despite expert drivers, the roads were often a challenge and even scary, moreso since we were heading into the rainy season. And it was cold – sometimes bone-chillingly cold. Juan Carlos had arranged stays for the group in several lodges which varied in sophistication. In one spot, we were presented with hot-water bottles after dinner because there was no heat in the rooms. But the food was always plentiful and often excellent.

Juan Carlos is a bird pho-

tographer who goes to extreme lengths to help his clients. Some of the setups were amazing. At one spot, the lodge had set up white tarps vertically in the forest and left lights on all night; at daybreak, we watched from a sheltered vantage point while an incredible number and variety of birds came to feast on the moths that had been attracted by the light. For the hummingbird shots, Juan Carlos hid all the nearby feeders, and arranged a ring of flashes on tripods around a photo of blurred greenery with freshly clipped flowers in front. The photographers synced their cameras to the flashes, and took shot after shot, capturing the birds in action.

Overall on my trip I counted 235 bird species, including 49 species of hummingbird and innumerable brilliantly coloured tanagers. Two hundred and two of these were “life birds” – birding lingo for species I’d never seen before. Juan Carlos’ trip tally was 292 species of birds, plus monkeys, kinkajous (tropical rainforest mammals), rabbits, squirrels and Andean deer.

Bird highlights included the amazing hummingbirds and tanagers, but also the saffron-coloured Andean ibis, the toucans with their astonishing beaks, the well-described pearled treerunner and the strange little antpitta (five species) that lives in the deep forest but scurries out to

grab the worms it is fed by its admirers. Having a moss-backed tanager eat banana from my hand was especially memorable!

When most of the group continued into the Amazon, I went on to join a cruise in the Galapagos. I flew from Quito to Isla Baltra to meet our guide Harry and fellow cruisers. Although the catamaran Ocean Spray had capacity for 16, there were only five of us, with 11 crew plus Harry. Needless to say, the service and the sumptuous seafood meals were wonderful.

We swam with the Galapagos penguins, sea lions and sea turtles. Thankfully, we were not joined in the water by huge, sea-going iguana! Birds are not as plentiful on the Galapagos as in the Andes, but I did see 25 species. We hiked to a

wavy albatross colony and had a close-up encounter with blue- and red-footed boobies. The wildlife, including the birds, have no fear reaction to humans. Harry explained it is because there are no predators to fear; the only large animal is the ubiquitous sea lion which eats only fish. We also visited the giant tortoise sanctuary to watch the enormous creatures lumber around.

Cliché though it may be, my birding adventure in Ecuador and the Galapagos was truly the trip of a lifetime.

Vicki's successful cruise in the Galapagos Islands was organized by Cultural and Natural Heritage Tours, a local Ottawa company owned and operated by Manor Park residents Heather Blenkiron and Marc Patry. Visit cnhtours.com.



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