

Ecuador

December 21-28, 2025

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I visited the Andes in Ecuador for a week over Christmas mostly looking for Andean Bear and Mountain Tapir. I was looking for a week-long mammal-focused itinerary in South America at the last minute during the holidays, as a stop on my way to New Years celebrations in Rio de Janeiro. Ecuador turned out to be a perfect fit – its Andean portion is compact, safe and easy to do independently, using only a rental car and local guides at various lodges.

My planned itinerary included visits to four locations:

- Termas de Papallacta for Mountain Tapir (spoiler: it is no longer there) and Stump-tailed Porcupine, and Andean Bear in the surrounding mountain roads
- San Isidro Lodge for Lemurine Night Monkeys and Black-banded Owl
- Bellavista Lodge for Olinguito, Kinkajou, Tayras and potentially Andean Bear
- Macuipucuna Lodge for Andean Bear

The itinerary changed somewhat after I arrived based on actual sightings, and I ended up following this itinerary instead:

21/12: Arrive at Quito, head to [Termas de Papallacta](#) searching for Andean Bears enroute

22/12: Termas de Papallacta → [Guango Lodge](#) → [San Isidro Lodge](#)

23/12: San Isidro Lodge → Termas de Papallacta and Cayambe-Coca Reserve

24/12: Termas de Papallacta → [Bellavista Lodge](#)

25/12: Bellavista Lodge

26/12: Bellavista Lodge → [Mashpi Amagusa Reserve](#) → [Macuipucuna Lodge](#)

27/12: Macuipucuna Lodge

28/12: Macuipucuna Lodge → [Refugio Paz de Las Aves](#) → [Las Cotingas Bird Reserve](#) → [Alambi Reserve](#)

→ Quito airport for a red-eye flight to Rio de Janeiro

21/12

After an extremely productive layover in [Panama](#), I landed in Quito in the afternoon and headed to pick up my pre-booked rental car from Europcar. My experience with Europcar at Quito airport was very poor and I'd strongly advise to avoid them (see [review](#)).

From the airport I headed towards Termas de Papallacta. I stopped at multiple spots along the road between Pifo and Papallacta where others mentioned seeing Andean Bears, and scanned the cliffs but couldn't find any bears. The highlight was a [Carunculated Caracara](#) mobbing a [Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle](#).

I arrived at Termas de Papallacta about an hour before sunset and headed to the cattle pastures above the hot springs. Those pastures were known as a reliable spot for a collared *Mountain Tapir* individual that used to hang with the herds of cattle. The road towards the pastures was closed so I hiked there but couldn't find the Tapir, and saw only a couple of [Andean Tapeti](#) and some [LLamas](#) before it got dark. After check-in and a great dinner, I set out to look for a Stump-tailed Porcupine as there are a couple of porcupines that live on the hot springs grounds (though these grounds are quite large and full of dense vegetation). I searched for almost 3 hours with a thermal scope, and essentially enlisted most of the security staff onsite to help me find a porcupine, promising a nice reward to any porcupine finder but no one was able to find one. My search only yielded a few more [Andean Tapeti](#) and some unidentified bats.



A curious Llama



Andean Tapeti



Room views at Termas de Papallacta. Not too shabby.

22/12

In the early morning I hiked again to the cow pastures above the hot springs looking for the Tapir, again seeing only **Andean Tapeti**. I ran into a local cattle herder who told me that the Tapir hasn't been seen since early 2024. This was very bad news, as it was the only spot on my itinerary that was supposed to be reliable for Tapir.

After breakfast and checkout I did a quick drive towards Pifo and back searching for bears to no avail and then started driving east towards San Isidro Lodge. I stopped at Guango Lodge enroute hoping to see

Sword-billed Hummingbird, *Grey-breasted Mountain Toucan* and *Torrent Duck* but failed to see all three targets.

While the roads between Quito and Papallacta are in a great condition, this is no longer the case when you continue east towards San Isidro Lodge. The road turns into a narrow mountain road that abruptly changes between paved and unpaved sections, so driving requires a lot more caution.

I eventually arrived at San Isidro Lodge in the late afternoon. So far, my first day in Ecuador wasn't very lucky - but San Isidro was about to mark a stark change for the better.

San Isidro Lodge has absolutely stunning settings in the cloud forest at the eastern slopes of the Andes. The first mammals I saw at San Isidro were a few **Black Agoutis** that often hang out just below the restaurant. At around 18:00, a small crowd gathered by the restaurant entrance area to await the resident family of **Lemurine Night Monkeys** which I was easily able to locate with a thermal shortly after dark. After a lovely dinner, two **Black-banded Owls** showed up to catch moths by the lights of the restaurant and stuck around for a while to everyone's enjoyment. The agoutis, night monkeys and owls all seem to be very reliable at San Isidro.



Black Agouti



Black-banded Owl

The lady at the reception told me that Mountain Tapirs occasionally come to the salt lick below the restaurant with a frequency of about once a week. I was contemplating whether to have a stakeout through the night by the salt-lick below the restaurant in hopes of seeing a tapir. As some lodge guests were still up drinking and chatting at 22:00, lowering the chances of a tapir visit, I decided it would be more productive to get some sleep, and then have a one-hour stakeout between 01:00 and 02:00 in a hail mary attempt for the tapir.

I set an alarm for 00:45, and headed back to the restaurant. Of course, I was the only one there. Well, almost the only one - other than me there was a large male **Mountain Tapir** licking salt at the salt-lick! It

stayed there for almost an hour, giving great views from the restaurant balcony and seemed indifferent to the spotlight. What an absolutely lucky sighting!



Mountain Tapir

23/12

I woke up early to see the bird feeding bonanza at the moth trap by the restaurant which was quite a spectacle with Trogons, Jays, Flycatchers and many other bird species having breakfast. There is also a feeding station for *White-bellied Antpitta* by the restaurant, but the Antpitta didn't want to show itself that morning.



Masked Trogon snacking on a moth



Green Jay

After breakfast I drove back to Termas de Papallacta. Following Jon Hall's advice, I met with Mario and Patricio in the late morning so they could help me find Andean Bears and Mountain Tapirs. Mario said Tapirs would be difficult but bears should be doable. Good thing I saw that tapir the night before. I coordinated with Mario as he speaks better English, but Patricio was my guide for the day.

We started by visiting Cayambe-Coca Reserve and hiking to some lookout points. This was quite the experience - we didn't follow any trails, but instead hiked through paramo grasslands and bogs at 4200 MASL altitude. We didn't see any mammals but the views and the altitude were literally breathtaking. After lunch we drove along a road in Cayambe-Coca Reserve with a few additional lookout points, but failed to see any mammals there either. We did see a few interesting birds - [Andean Condor](#), [Red-crested Cotinga](#) and [Tawny Antpitta](#).

At that point, we decided to change our strategy, get back to the main road and drive between the entrance to Cayambe-Coca Reserve at Virgen del Paramo Papallacta and Pifo, scanning the cliffs for bears. This strategy eventually paid off when Patricio found a mother **Andean Bear** with two cubs. We watched them for 20 minutes or so at ± 300 -400m distance as they fed on bromelias and played before we had to go back as heavy rain started to pour.

I dropped off Patricio at Papallacta and headed to Termas de Papallacta for the night. I tried for *Stump-tailed Porcupine* again, and it turned out that one was seen earlier that evening at the entrance to the public baths section but I wasn't able to locate one despite enlisting several of the hotel staff for the task again.



Andean Bear family and their Bromelias



Mama Bear



cubs

24/12

After breakfast and checkout I crossed Quito to the Western Andes and made it to the phenomenal Bellavista Lodge, arriving around lunchtime. Bellavista Lodge is well-known to mammal-watchers as the best place to see Olinguitos. The daily routine at Bellavista is an early morning birding session, and then a late morning and afternoon hikes focused on birding and plantlife - all with excellent local guides. December is part of the rainy season, and it was very foggy and rained the entire time I was there. The previous trip reports from Bellavista on mammalwatching are mostly from the dry season months (June-August), and the cast of mammals in the wet season is a bit different. First, Kinkajous and Tayras which are common visitors in the dry season are much rarer in the wet season when more fruit is available elsewhere (that's especially true for Tayras). Andean Bears are a hit-or-miss year round, and Olinguitos visit year round though not daily.



Bellavista Cloud Forest

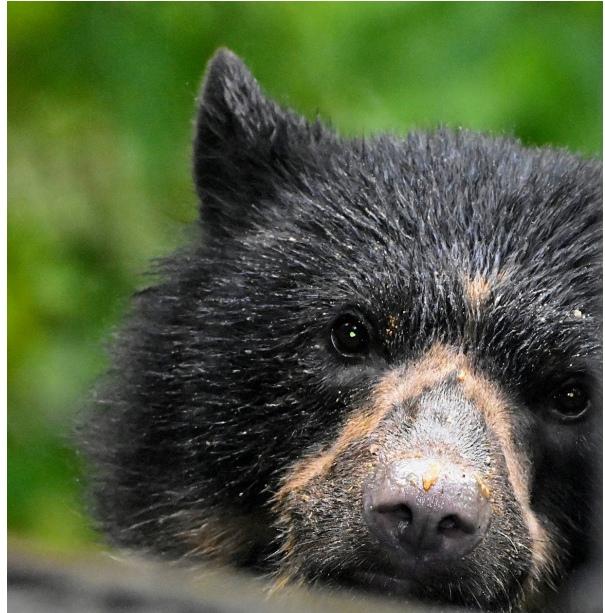
My visit to Bellavista started on a high note. Shortly after my arrival, I heard the call “Oso! Oso!” from one of the staff members. A juvenile male **Andean Bear** was up in a tree about 100m or so from my cabin - a Christmas miracle! The bear later climbed down and headed to the compost dump where it easily opened the lid and munched on some food leftovers. I skipped the afternoon hike, and spent most of the afternoon watching the bear.

Later in the evening the staff organized a fantastic communal Christmas Eve dinner, and during dinner an **Olinguito** came to snag a banana from the feeding station by the restaurant!

After dinner I decided to drive and spotlight along Tandayapa road where [Andreas Jonsson](#) saw a *Clouded Oncilla* in 2023. This is a steep and winding dirt road with a very limited field of vision and driving it at night was not fun. I didn't see an Oncilla, but did see a second **Olinguito** briefly with the thermal scope.



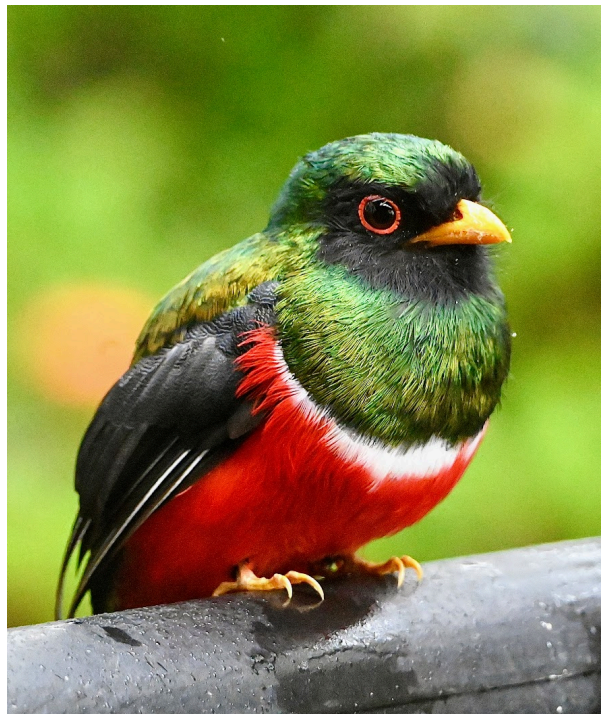
Olinguito



Juvenile Andean Bear playing hide-and-seek



Blue-winged Mountain Tanager



Masked Trogon

25/12

I woke up before sunrise to check out the moth trap by the parking lot before all the other lodge guests joined for a morning birding session. I was rewarded with views of a **Chestnut-crowned Antpitta** that took off as soon as other people arrived. The morning birding session was very productive with highlights of **Plate-billed Mountain Toucan**, **White-faced Nunbird**, Trogons, Tanagers and many others as well as a few **Red-tailed Squirrels**.

I skipped the late morning hike as well, and instead spent time at the hummingbird feeders and later saw the bear again as it made another visit to the compost dump, feasting on leftovers from last night's Christmas dinner. The rain also brought out some enormous earthworms - over a meter long!

I did join the afternoon hike which was uneventful, but the landscapes were very nice.

After dinner I decided to spotlight the road around the entrance to Bellavista, but this time on foot. The guides at Bellavista told me that they see Clouded Oncillas once every few months on that road. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to find an Oncilla or any other interesting wildlife that night.





Giant earthworms!



Behind the scenes

26/12

I left Bellavista an hour and a half before sunrise to visit an [Andean Cock-of-the-Rock](#) lek about an hour away from Bellavista (organized through Bellavista).

I originally planned to visit Macuipucuna for two full days, but the bear season was over there so I decided to look for additional mammal hotspots in the area. Based on a few iNaturalist observations, I learned that a Mountain Coati is a regular visitor to the bird feeders at Mashpi-Amagusa reserve - a lovely little lodge hosted by Sergio and Doris (not to be confused with the high-end Mashpi lodge). It is also the place where [Rob and Romy saw a Pacana in 2023](#), but the *Pacarana* has not been seen since. The drive to Mashpi-Amagusa in rainy and muddy conditions was challenging and took about 2 hours - but was well worth it.

I arrived at Mashpi-Amagusa around 9am and sat at the balcony overlooking the yard for most of the day waiting for the Coati and Tayra that also frequent the bird feeders. Both seem to visit 2-3 times a week. Birding was fantastic with [Rose-faced Parrots](#), [Dark-backed Wood Quails](#), [Red-headed Barbets](#), and many species of tanagers among the species seen with a great photography setup. [Western Dwarf Squirrels](#) were running around the trees in the yard and Sergio also found a very cool-looking [Ribbioned Brittle Snake](#). Then, at around 2pm, a [Mountain Coati](#) arrived and snacked on some bananas! I stayed until 4-5pm hoping for the Tayra to make an appearance but it never came. Eventually I had to leave as I

had a 2-hour drive to Macuipucuna on a bad road and I didn't want to drive after dark. In hindsight, I should have stayed more at Masphi-Amagusa as it seems like a site with better wildlife potential than Macuipucuna.

I arrived at Maquipuquna shortly after dark and just as I arrived, a **Kinkajou** was walking on the lodge's dining room ceiling beams, coming for some bananas that the lodge staff left for it. That kinkajou is a one-eyed male that seems very habituated to human presence.

After dinner I joined some of the other lodge guests for a short and uneventful night walk, and then called it the night.



Mountain Coati



Ribboned Brittle Snake



Mountain Coati



Western Dwarf Squirrel



Golden Tanager



Red-headed Barbet



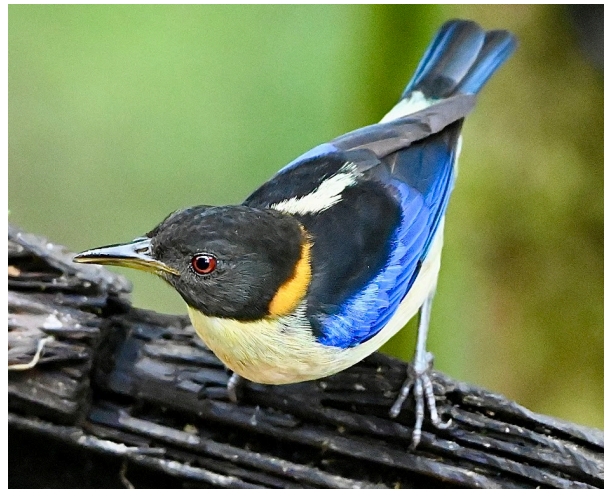
Rose-faced Parrot



Golden-naped Tanager



Moss-backed Tanager



Golden-collared Honeycreeper

27/12

Today I spent all day at Maquipucuna – a beautiful property with a very helpful staff, but not a very productive wildlife watching destination outside the Andean Bear season. Maquipucuna is a reliable site for Andean Bears when the Aguacatillo trees are fruiting, but the fruiting season itself is highly variable (though it often peaks around October-November). Unfortunately the last bear was seen there on December 4th - more than 3 weeks before my arrival.

The day started with an early birding session by a moth trap, and later after breakfast I went on a birding hike with one of the guides. Birding was decent, but not as good as the other lodges I visited, with highlights including **Andean Cock-of-the-Rock** and **Pale-manibled Arcari**.

It was raining heavily in the afternoon, so I just lounged at the lodge. The only interesting sighting was an exhausted **Tiny Hawk** one of the staff members found and brought to the commons area. Shortly after the hawk recovered and flew away.

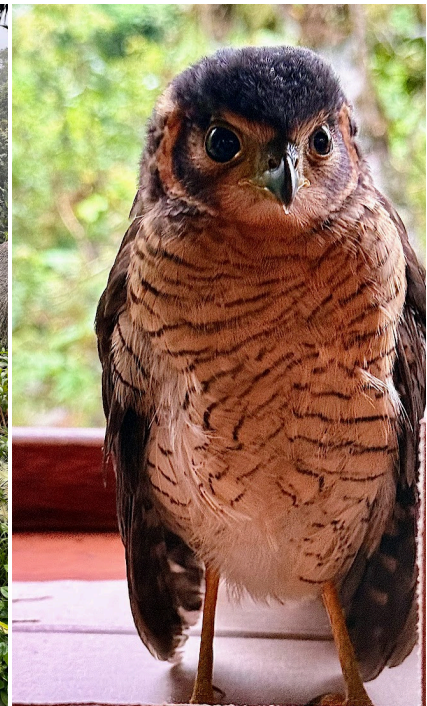
After dark I went on a night walk together with some of the other guests. The highlight was a bat I found with the thermal - most likely a **Northern Little Yellow-eared Bat** according to a bat expert the staff at Maquipucuna knows.



Northern Little
Yellow-eared Bat (?)



The river at Macuipucuna



Tiny Hawk

28/12

Pre-dawn I left Maquipucuna to join a birding group tour at Refugio Paz de las aves, located about an hour away from Maquipucuna. On the drive there I saw a **Northern Black-eared Opossum** crossing the road.

The birding tour was excellent - with highlights including **Andean Cock-of-the-Rock** lek, feeding stations for **Giant Antpitta** and **Yellow-breasted Antpitta**, **Golden-headed Quetzal**, plentiful hummingbirds, and a **Black-and-White Owl**.



Andean Cock-of-the-Rock



Golden-headed Quetzal



Giant Antpitta



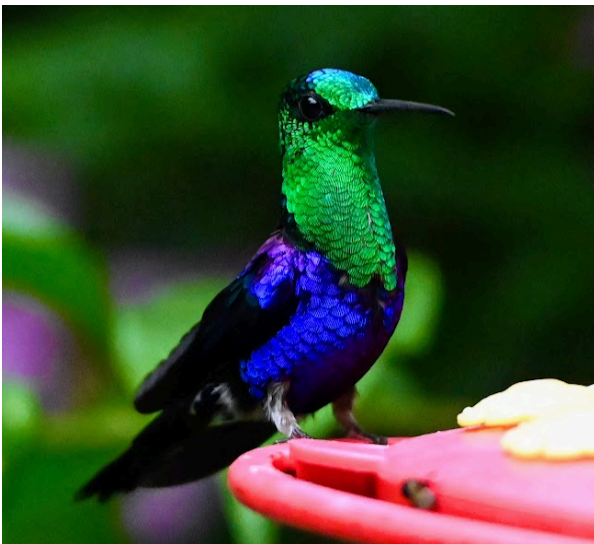
Yellow-breasted Antpitta

At some point though in the late morning, while the guides were out looking for *Ochre-breasted Antpitta* (which they never found that day), I decided to leave the tour and head to Las Cotingas Bird Reserve where Tayras apparently visit the bird feeders on a daily basis. I've seen Tayras before, but always for brief encounters, so I wanted to prioritize a good Tayra photo opportunity.

Las Cotingas is famous for the variety of hummingbirds that frequent the feeders, as well as Toucans (though I didn't see any there). Other than hummingbirds and tanagers, I was entertained by **Central American Agoutis** and **Red-tailed Squirrels** while waiting for the Tayras. Then, after about a two-hour wait, a mother **Tayra** with two subadult cubs finally arrived at the feeders and stayed for several minutes to snack on bananas. According to the owner, a *Mountain Coati* is also a daily visitor to the feeders - often in the late afternoon. But having seen one in Mashpi-Amagusa and with a flight to catch, I didn't stay to find out.



Central American Agouti



Crowned Woodnymph



Tayra

I started my way back to Quito airport, making a short stop at Alambi Reserve. This reserve is mostly known for extensive hummingbirds feeders, but I was there to look for bats following [Andreas Jonsson's report](#). A pair of **Thomas's Broad-nosed Bats** were roosting at the back of the reception building. The guy at the reception gave me directions to a deserted cabin across the road where many more bats roost. I was unable to find it myself, so the guy ended up guiding me for a small fee. Getting to the cabin is non-trivial and the guy had to use a machete to cut our way to the cabin. The cabin was full of bats - mostly **Seba's Short-tailed Bats** and **Common Vampire Bats** but also a couple more **Thomas's Broad-nosed Bats**. After the visit to the cabin I freshened up and continued to the airport for a red-eye flight to Rio de Janeiro.



Thomas's Broad-nosed Bat



Common Vampire Bat

Mammal List

1. Andean Tapeti (*Sylvilagus andinus*)
2. Black Agouti (*Dasyprocta fuliginosa*)
3. Central American Agouti (*Dasyprocta punctata*)
4. Red-tailed Squirrel (*Sciurus granatensis*)
5. Western Dwarf Squirrel (*Microsciurus mimulus*)
6. Lemurine Night Monkey (*Aotus lemurinus*)
7. Mountain Tapir (*Tapirus pinchaque*)
8. Andean Bear (*Tremarctos ornatus*)
9. Olinguito (*Bassaricyon neblina*)
10. Kinkajou (*Potos flavus*)
11. Mountain Coati (*Nasua olivacea*)
12. Tayra (*Eira barbara*)
13. Northern Little Yellow-eared Bat (*Vampyressa thylene*)
14. Seba's Short-tailed Bat (*Carollia perspicillata*)
15. Thomas's Broad-nosed Bat (*Platyrrhinus dorsalis*)
16. Common Vampire Bat (*Desmodus rotundus*)
17. Northern Black-eared Opossum (*Didelphis marsupialis*)



Kinkajou, Maquipucuna



Red-tailed Squirrel, Bellavista



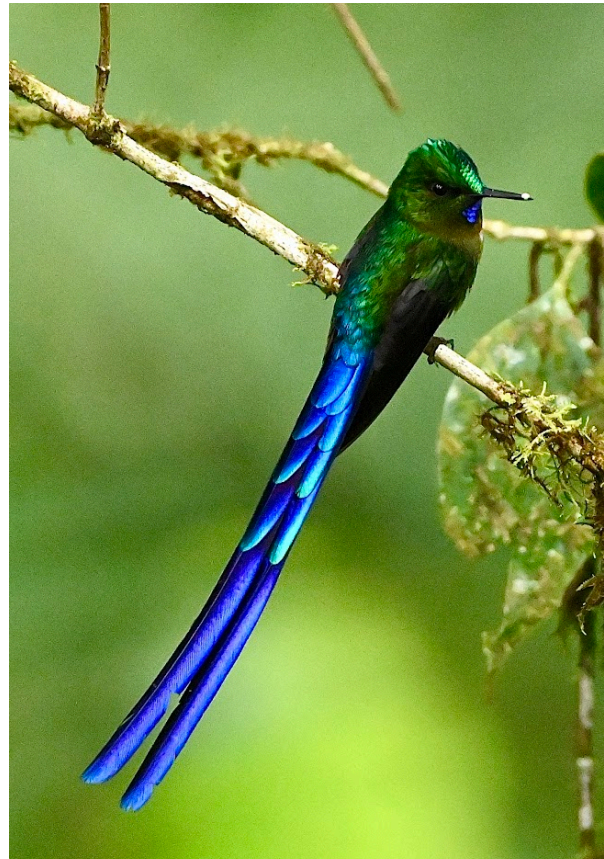
Lemurine Night Monkey, San Isidro



Seba's Short-tailed Bat, Alambi

Bird List

1. Rufous-collared Sparrow
2. Orange-billed Sparrow
3. Choco Brushfinch
4. White-winged Brushfinch
5. Dusky Chlorospingus
6. Yellow-throated Chlorospingus
7. Great Thrush
8. Slaty-backed Nightingale Thrush
9. Swainson's Thrush
10. Masked Flowerpiercer
11. White-sided Flowerpiercer
12. Saffron-crowned Tanager
13. Blue-winged Mountain Tanager
14. Black-chinned Mountain Tanager
15. Golden Tanager
16. Palm Tanager
17. Silver-throated Tanager
18. Summer Tanager
19. White-lined Tanager
20. Swallow Tanager
21. Blue-grey Tanager
22. Ochre-breasted Tanager
23. Beryl-spangled Tanager
24. Golden-naped Tanager
25. Rufous-throated Tanager
26. Flame-faced Tanager
27. Moss-backed Tanager
28. Glistening-green Tanager
29. Flame-rumped Tanager
30. Buff-throated Saltator
31. Black-eared Hemispingus
32. Golden-collared Honeycreeper
33. Cinnamon Flycatcher
34. Rufous-tailed Tody-flycatcher
35. Dusky-capped Flycatcher
36. Rusty-margined Flycatcher
37. Pale-edged Flycatcher
38. Golden-bellied Flycatcher
39. Ornate Flycatcher
40. One-colored Becard



Violet-tailed Sylph



Chestnut-crowned Antpitta

41. Black Phoebe
42. Chivi Vireo
43. White-tailed Tyrannulet
44. Tropical Kingbird
45. Great Kiskadee
46. Mountain Wren
47. Grey-breasted Wood Wren
48. Blackburnian Warbler
49. Canada Warbler
50. Russet-crowned Warbler
51. Buff-rumped Warbler
52. Slate-throated Redstart
53. Orange-bellied Euphonia
54. Tawny Antpitta
55. Chestnut-crowned Antpitta
56. Yellow-breasted Antpitta
57. Giant Antpitta
58. Scarlet-rumped Cacique
59. Russet-backed Oropendola
60. Shiny Cowbird
61. Green Jay
62. Turquoise Jay
63. Strong-billed Woodcreeper
64. Montane Woodcreeper
65. Wedge-billed Woodcreeper
66. Plain Brown Woodcreeper
67. Pearled Treerunner
68. Striped Treehunter
69. Streak-capped Treehunter
70. Spotted Barbtail
71. Red-faced Spinetail
72. Streaked Tuftedcheek
73. Lineated Foliage-gleaner
74. Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner
75. Andean Cock-of-the-Rock
76. Orange-breasted Fruiteater
77. Red-crested Cotinga
78. Zeledon's Antbird
79. Western Fire-eye
80. Plain Antvireo
81. Masked Tityra



Black-and-White Owl



Plate-billed Mountain Toucan

82. Blue-and-White Swallow
83. White-tipped Dove
84. Rock Pigeon
85. Ruddy Quail-Dove
86. White-throated Quail-Dove
87. Black Vulture
88. Turkey Vulture
89. Andean Condor
90. Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle
91. Tiny Hawk
92. Black-banded Owl
93. Black-and-White Owl
94. Carunculated Caracara
95. American Kestrel
96. Collared Inca
97. Brown Inca
98. Speckled Hummingbird
99. Rufous-tailed Hummingbird
100. Fawn-breasted Brilliant
101. Green-crowned Brilliant
102. Violet-tailed Sylph
103. Long-tailed Sylph
104. Buff-tailed Coronet
105. Velvet-purple Coronet
106. Chestnut-breasted Coronet
107. Shining Sunbeam
108. Tourmaline Sunangel
109. Gorgeted Sunangel
110. Sparkling Violetear
111. White-booted Racket-tail
112. Crowned Woodnymph
113. White-necked Jacobin
114. White-whiskered Hermit
115. Purple-bibbed Whitetip
116. Andean Emerald
117. Masked Trogon
118. Collared Trogon
119. Golden-headed Quetzal
120. Barred Parakeet
121. Rose-faced Parrot
122. White-faced Nunbird



White-faced Nunbird



Dark-backed Wood Quails

- 123. White-whiskered Puffbird
- 124. Plate-billed Mountain Toucan
- 125. Pale-mandibled Aracari
- 126. Red-headed Barbet
- 127. Golden-Olive Woodpecker
- 128. Dark-backed Wood Quail
- 129. Common Squirrel-Cuckoo
- 130. Rufous Motmot
- 131. Broad-billed Motmot
- 132. Andean Motmot



Blue-grey Tanager



Black-chinned Mountain Tanager



Rufous-throated Tanager



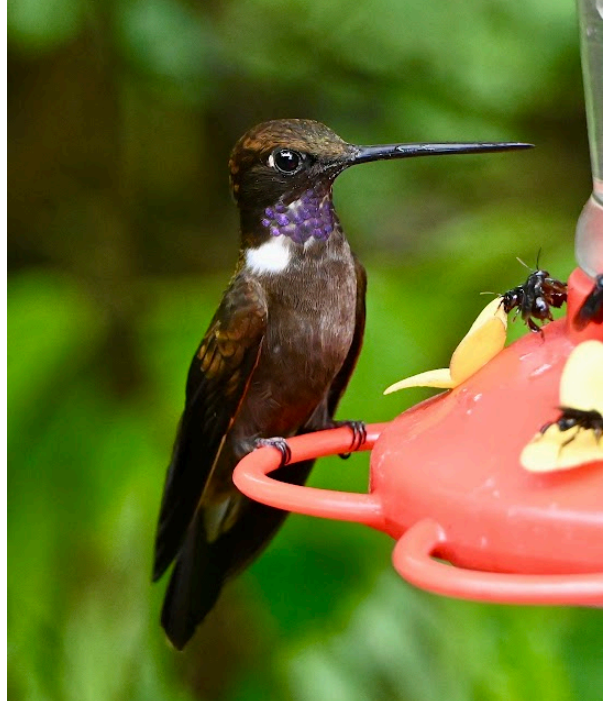
Family Feud



Flame-faced Tanager



Velvet-Purple Coronet



Brown Inca



White-winged Brushfinch



Zeledon's Antbird

Herps

1. W Rain Frog
2. Pastures Rain Frog
3. Ribboned Brittle Snake



Rhino Beetle



Automeris Moth



Pastures Rain Frog