



I made my pilgrimage in May 2008, and next to the money I spent on doctor fees to have my children delivered, this was the best money I have ever spent. As a funny coincidence, I did the trip together with a world-renowned fertility expert and gynaecologist. Professor Ng Soon Chye, who also happens to be a past President of NSS, a keen bird videographer and a much more pleasant person to travel with than myself.

To sample Neotropical bird life in a limited time span, our destination was a toss-up between Peru and Ecuador, and on advice from my globetrotting friend Iain Ewing we chose Ecuador. Iain knows what he is talking about - Ecuador is truly amazing. In spite of its relative small size (283,000 km<sup>2</sup>), which is less than Malaysia (330,000 km<sup>2</sup>), Ecuador has almost 1,600 different bird species, more than double those of Malaysia (even if you include the Borneo states). Ecuador is one of 17 countries identified by the United Nations as being megadiverse in terms of biological diversity.

Ecuador lies pretty much on the other side of the world from Singapore, flying there going east or west or even straight north is about the same distance. As the name indicates, the Equator runs through the country just north of the picturesque capital Quito, where you land. But what makes Ecuador special is the enormous mountain range of the Andes, which has snow-covered peaks reaching 6,310 metres in Ecuador, and which runs clear through the country.

From Quito, which itself is located at 2,800 metres, it is possible to watch birds one morning on the alpine *paramo* grasslands above the tree limit at 4,000 metres, and then in the afternoon pop down to either East Andes or West Andes at 2,200-1,500 metres, where there are great places to stay. The quality of the eco lodges, food and nature guides easily matches or surpasses what we are used to in South-east Asia. And the birding is truly astonishing. On each side of the Andes range, and at various altitudes, the bird composition will be different.

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# Ecuador

## The best birdwatching in the Neotropics



Just as all able-bodied Muslims should make a trip to Mecca in their lifetime, so should all able-bodied nature lovers make a trip to the Neotropics in theirs. The natural world of the Neotropics (the zoogeographical region of South America) is just so different from anything you will be familiar with in Asia, Australasia or Africa.

Text and photos by **Morten Strange**

Above: Crimson-rumped Toucanet *Aulacorhynchus haematopygus*.

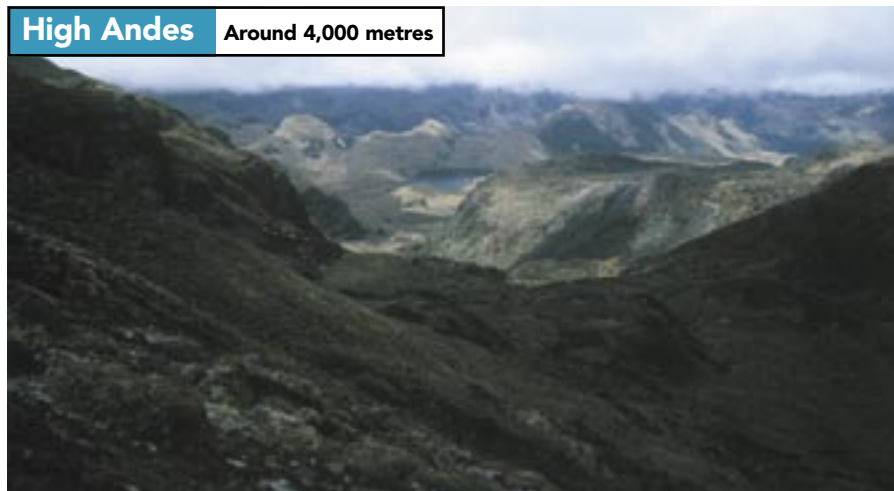
Facing page: Giant Antpitta *Grallaria gigantea*.

Right: Fawn-breasted Brilliant male *Heliodoxa rubinoides* in the hummingbird family.





**High Andes** Around 4,000 metres



**East Andes** Around 2,500 metres



**West Andes** Around 1,500 metres



**Lowland rainforest** A canopy walk at Sacha Lodge, Amazon region



On top of that, Ecuador is also part of the upper reaches of the great Amazon Basin. So from Quito you can drive east for about a day or transfer with a short domestic flight to excellent forest lodges at less than 200 metres above sea level along huge Amazon River tributaries. There you can live in style and sample the enthralling Amazon lowland region avifauna.

During the 12 full field days that Soon Chye and I had in Ecuador, I saw 172 different birds and photographed 139 of those. For the record, I only count species that I identify myself with really good views. But most amazingly, out of the 172, 168 were lifers; the four I knew already were widespread water birds. ALL the forest birds in the Neotropics are different from ours!

There are whole families that you will not find outside of the Americas, such as American vultures, guans, hummingbirds (there are 133 different hummers in Ecuador alone!), motmots, puffbirds, toucans, ovenbirds, woodcreepers, antpittas, tyrant flycatchers, cotingas, vireos, American warblers, cardinals, American blackbirds and a number of other families that I didn't see.

My favorites were the tanagers, family Thraupidae. They are a colourful, vocal and diverse group of Neotropical forest birds with representatives at all arboreal altitudes; I saw 32 species out of a total of 142 for the country. 🌿



**Slate-throated Whitestart** *Myioborus miniatus* in the American warblers family.

*Morten Strange* is a long-time member of NSS and currently editor-in-chief of Nature Watch.

#### MAIN REFERENCE

Ridgely, R.S. & P. Greenfield (2001) *The Birds of Ecuador*. Cornell University Press, New York.

## Birds of the High Andes

■ BIRDS OF ECUADOR Photos by Morten Strange



**Andean Tit-Spinetail**  
*Leptasthenura andicola*



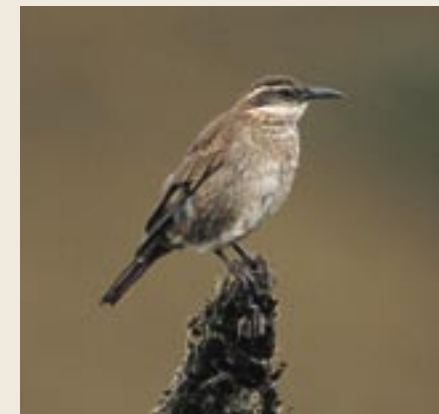
**Carunculated Caracara**  
*Phalcoboenus carunculatus*



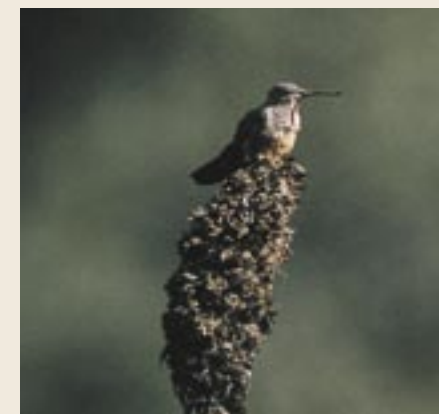
**Great Horned Owl**  
*Bubo virginianus*



**Plumbeous Sierra-Finch male**  
*Phrygilus unicolor*



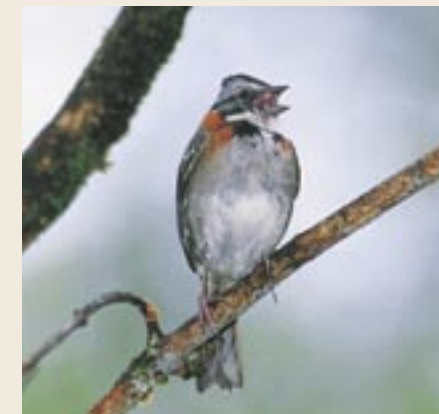
**Bar-winged Cinclodes**  
*Cinclodes fuscus*



**Giant Hummingbird**  
*Patagona gigas*



**Great Thrush male**  
*Turdus fuscater*



**Rufous-collared Sparrow**  
*Zonotrichia capensis*



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**Black-winged Ground-Dove**  
*Metriopelia melanoptera*



**Glossy Flowerpiercer**  
*Diglossa lafresnayii*



**Paramo Ground-Tyrant**  
*Muscisaxicola alpina*



**Stout-billed Cinclodes**  
*Cinclodes excelsior*



# Birds of the West Andes

■ BIRDS OF ECUADOR    Photos by Morten Strange



**Booted Racket-tail male**  
*Ocreatus underwoodii*



**Brown-capped Vireo**  
*Vireo leucophrys*



**Golden Tanager**  
*Tangara arthus*



**Golden-headed Quetzal male**  
*Pharomachrus auriceps*



**Golden-naped Tanager**  
*Tangara ruficervix*



**Green-crowned Woodnymph male**  
*Thalurania fannyi*



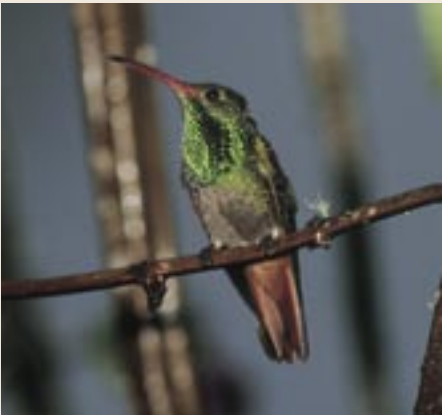
**Palm Tanager**  
*Thraupis palmarum*



**Purple-throated Woodstar male**  
*Calliphlox mitchellii*



**Red-billed Parrot**  
*Pionus sordidus*



**Rufous-tailed Hummingbird male**  
*Amazilia tzacatl*



**Silver-throated Tanager**  
*Tangara icterocephala*



**Violet-tailed Sylph male**  
*Aglaiocercus coelestis*



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# Birds of the East Andes

■ BIRDS OF ECUADOR    Photos by Morten Strange



**Masked Trogon female**  
*Trogon personatus*



**Black-and-white Owl**  
*Strix nigrolineata*



**Blue-backed Conebill**  
*Conirostrum sitticolor*



**Golden-crowned Flycatcher**  
*Myiodynastes chrysocephalus*



**Inca Jay**  
*Cyanocorax yncas*



**Masked Flowerpiercer**  
*Diglossopsis cyanea*



**Montane Woodcreeper**  
*Lepidocolaptes lacrymiger*



**Pearled Treerunner**  
*Margarornis squamiger*



**Spectacled Whitestart**  
*Myioborus melanocephalus*



**Subtropical Cacique**  
*Cacicus uropygialis*



**Tourmaline Sunangel male**  
*Heliangelus exortis*



**Turquoise Jay**  
*Cyanolyca turcosa*



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# Birds of the Amazon

■ BIRDS OF ECUADOR    Photos by Morten Strange



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**Amazonian Violaceous Trogon**  
*Trogon violaceus*



**Gilded Barbet male**  
*Capito auratus*



**Golden-collared Toucanet female**  
*Selenidera reinwardtii*



**Hoatzin**  
*Opisthocomus hoazin*



**Ivory-billed Aracari**  
*Pteroglossus azara*



**Lineated Woodpecker pair**  
*Dryocopus lineatus*



**Little Cuckoo**  
*Piaya minuta*



**Many-banded Aracari**  
*Pteroglossus pluricinctus*



**Purple-throated Fruitcrow male**  
*Querula purpurata*



**Rufous-bellied Euphonia male**  
*Euphonia rufiventris*



**White-fronted Nunbird**  
*Monasa morphoeus*



**White-lored Euphonia male**  
*Euphonia chrysopasta*