The Site Guide

Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve, Costa Rica

ocation Straddling the continental divide in the Cordillera de Tilaran, west central Costa Rica.

Description The Monteverde Preserve is part of an extensive middle elevation forest that extends from 1400 to 1850 meters on both sides of the continental divide. In this region a diverse microclimate, coupled with volcanic soils, supports an unusually large and varied aggregation of plant and animal species. The following site description will deal only with the forest of the Pacific slope. The biology of the Atlantic scope is vastly different, but so inaccessible it will not be visited by any but the most adventuresome.

From November through March a steady, often strong easterly wind buffets the Monteverde forest, wrapping peaks and windward slopes in heavy clouds. The dense forest acts like a filter condensing water from the clouds as they race across this narrow mountain range and quickly dissipate over the torrid Pacific lowlands. Entrapment of cloud moisture is the principal source of precipitation during the windy season. Since the phenomenon is dependent on exposure to rapidly moving ground level clouds, the distribution of precipitation ranges from heavy on exposed ridges to virtually none on protected slopes at lower elevations.

When the wind finally dissipates around the beginning of April, the weather drifts into a rainy season pattern of sun-filled mornings and frequent midday thunderstorms. These storms continue until September when the hurricane season brings a procession of drizzly days that drench Monteverde until even the rain forest can absorb no more water. In November, the easterly winds again pick up and begin the cycle anew.

Four distinct biotic communities, each composed of different species, are represented in the immediate vicinity of Monteverde. Ridges and peaks with an eastern exposure (1600 to 1850 meters) are capped by a dwarf or *Elfin Forest* (H) of short, dense, waxy-leaved trees and shrubs. The five months of incessant wind and fog, coupled with chronically saturated soils, prevents most trees from penetrating a

three-to-four meter, smoothly sculptured canopy that hugs the contour of the ridges. Beneath this shrub-like canopy is a dark gloomy tangle of leaning trunks and branches, short, almost prostrate palms, and a bare, puddle-strewn forest floor.

Behind the ridge tops, sheltered from the shearing force of the winds, but not from their accompanying clouds, the Cloud Forest (H) achieves its most spectacular dimensions of lushness and diversity. This oak-dominated forest supports a luxuriant growth of epiphytic plants which drape the trees in incredible masses of greenery, profusely punctuated by brilliant red blooms of flowering epiphytes. More than a hundred plant species, from hardy lichens to delicate orchids, may be encountered in the profusion of growth on a single canopy tree. It is a forest with the character of a fairyland, an appearance that is heightened by thick muffling fogs and an incessant drip from glistening vegetation.

Slightly lower on the Pacific slope, the character of the forest changes dramatically Less of the wind-carried moisture reaches this forest so it cannot sustain the myriad of epiphytes that depend on frequent soakings for water and nutrients. This Middle Zone Forest (M) is characterized by tall, straight trees that are lightly sprinkled with epiphytes. It is a forest that is dominated by massive fig trees. Ficus spp., which wrap themselves around and eventually strangle other trees in the scramble to reach sunlight. The middle zone has an environment that is especially favorable to trees of the Lauraceae or laureal family. The fruits of this group, one of which is avocado, are the mainstay of guans, trogons, cotingids, toucans, and other large fruit-eating birds that frequent middle elevation forests.

The lowest zone in Monteverde is a Tall Multilayered Forest (L) with an open understory. During the dry season this forest receives moisture only on the windiest days, when sparkling, sun-drenched spray may be blown from clouds hidden on peaks several kilometers away. Consequently epiphytes are scarce and the forest is similar in appearance to an eastern hardwood forest

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Teneral Information Monteverde is one of several excellent birding sites that are readily accessible in Costa Rica. These locations are situated in different Life Zones and each offers a unique avifauna. In Monteverde. the climate is cool and invigorating. Temperatures rarely go above 85° or below 45° Fahrenheit. However, stiff wet winds can make it feel much colder a jacket and rain gear are essential. Birding in Monteverde is at its best between mid-March and late May when most species are breeding. I strongly recommend visits be planned for that period. The months of July and August will be rewarding, but nonbreeding birds in a dense forest are very difficult to locate and may go unseen during short visits During the rest of the year. September through February, frequent inclement weather makes the area very difficult to bird.

ccess The nearest international airport is A Juan Santa Maria in San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica. "Pan Am" and most Central American airlines schedule regular flights from the United States. Rental cars are available at the airport and most hotels. Vehicles with four-wheel drive are recommended, although not essential, for the trip as far as the Monteverde Pension. To reach Monteverde, drive north on the Pan American Highway towards Nicaragua. kilometers (miles) beyond the entrance to Puntarenas, just prior to reaching the Lagarto River Bridge (the third bridge with a steel overhead structure after passing the Puntarenas turnoff), turn right onto a gravel road leading towards the town of Guacimal, Follow this winding mountain road. past Guacimal, for 33 kilometers (20.4 miles) to Santa Elena. Monteverde is 3 kilometers beyond Santa Elena. The drive takes approximately two hours on the Pan American Highway and one and one half hours on the gravel road Monteverde can also be reached by public bus for about five dollars round trip. Buses run continually from San Jose to the port city of Puntarenas, but to make connections to Monteverde the same day leave San Jose by 10:30 a m. Any taxi driver will get you to the proper bus station. At 2:15 p.m., seven days a week, a bus departs from Puntarenas (1/2 block south of the Hotel Cayuga) for Santa Elena, arriving there about 6:00 p.m. From Santa Elena it is a 3 kilometer walk to the Monteverde Pension. Arrival in Santa Elena is often after dark, so have a flashlight handy. The bus returns to Puntarenas at dawn each morning.

Accommodations San Jose has numerous tourist Hotels of varying price and quality. In Monteverde there is one small Pension located two and one half kilometers from the

entrance to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve. The Monteverde Pension is an excellent. though rustic hotel that provides three daily meals hot and cold running water, but no private baths. This Pension, which operates on the European plan, normally accommodates up to a dozen guests, but special arrangements are available for larger groups. Write in advance for reservations to the Monteverde Pension. Apartado 10165, San Jose, Costa Rica, Central America. Primitive cabins (refugios) with cooking facilities and water available from nearby mountain streams are located at two sites within the Preserve. Each is accessible by a three hour hike and may be rented for \$5.00 per day. For reservations and more detailed information write to Wilford Guindon, Manager of the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve. Apartado 10165, San Jose, Costa Rica, Central America.

Birding Birding in the different biotic communities of Monteverde can be as varied as birding different geographic regions of the United States. Even though little more than three kilometers separate the pension from the highest ridges, only fifteen percent of the 244 species of birds recorded in Monteverde occur in all of the biotic communities discussed above.

Some of the best habitat representative of the Lower Zone forest lies just outside the door of the Monteverde Pension. Two short trails lead down to a stream and a third leads back toward the main road. These provide access into remnants of this once extensive forest. The Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Long-tailed Manakin, Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush and White-eared Ground-Sparrow are a few of the commoner species restricted to this habitat Another common resident, the Rufous-andwhite Wren, is frequently overlooked because its song sounds so much like a person whistling. The open forest understory is a good place to watch for Quail-Doves which forage on the leaf littered floor. Hummingbirds, particularly the Striped-tailed, Rufous-tailed, Violet Sabrewing, and Fork-tailed Emerald, frequent the ornamental plantings around the Pension.

The walk from pension to preserve makes a fulfilling trip in itself. When you make this trip you will rarely return in time for lunch so ask the pension staff to pack you a sandwich. Many interesting birds dwell in the second growth and remnants of forest that line the road to the Preserve. Blue-crowned Motmots, which nest in banks along the road, sit quietly on low branches just inside the forest. Emerald Toucanets dart across the road often stopping to scold pedestrians. Most of the species listed as



Above, Elfin forest, Ventana. Right: Epiphyte-laden tree in forest at Monteverde. All photos by George V. N. Powell.

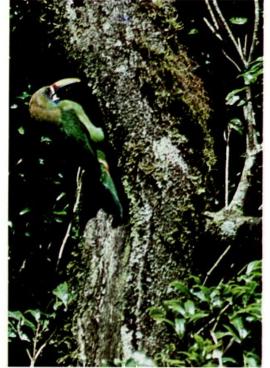
lower zone inhabitants may be observed during the early part of the walk. Watch especially for Orange-bellied Trogon, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Brown Jay, Plain Wren, Clay-Colored Robin, Tawny-crowned Greenlet, Gray-headed Greenlet, Golden-crowned Warbler, which will often be associated with other small insectivores, and Yellow-throated Euphonia.

As you approach the information center of the preserve, the roadsides take on a lush, greener appearance. Slate-throated Redstarts and Common Bush-Tanagers become abundant roadside inhabitants. Also watch for Red-billed Pigeon, Prong-billed Barbet, Masked Tityra, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Yellow-throated Brush-Finch, and Rufouscollared Sparrow. Other changes in the bird life are more subtle. The Mountain Robin replaces the City-colored Robin, and the Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush replaces the Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush. There are usually wild raspberries flowering in the higher pastures; these are excellent locations for Coppery-headed Emerald, Stripe-tailed Hummingbird, and Magenta-throated Woodstar.



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Above, Three-wattled Bellbird.

Left, Emerald Toucanet at nest.

A principal goal for many who come to Monteverde is to see the Resplendent Quetzal. This spectacular species is truly a common resident of both the middle and cloud forest zones. However, in spite of its spectacular colors and brilliance in the sunlight, Quetzals can be difficult to observe in the deep forest shade. A combination of patience and effort is necessary to obtain excellent views of this remarkable species that the ancient Americans considered a divinity. Your best strategy is to search the wooded pastures near the Information Center. In 1976 four pairs nested within a stone's throw of the Information Center and groups of five to seven birds regularly fed in the pasture trees.

From March until June Quetzals are very vocal and feed daily in these pastures, often flying between trees in the clearings, or high into the sky in courtship flights. Their principal vocalizations include: a short plaintiff descending whistle repeated every few seconds, a scold note, "wocka," and a raucous flight call, "wocka wock . . . wocka wocka wock." Ask at the Information Center for help in recognizing the calls. Quetzals vocalize most consistently at dawn, but they continue to call periodically throughout the day. When you hear one, wait for the bird to reveal itself. They frequently remain motionless for 15 to 30 minutes between flights so patience is essential for success. Eventually the Quetzal will take wing, often for a short flight into the canopy to snatch fruit or insects from among the foliage.

Waiting for the Quetzal will not be time wasted. The openness around the Information Center offers excellent birding. You may see any birds categorized as middle level ("M" on the list). Swallow-tailed Kites often drift over. skimming across the tops of trees in search of foraging insects. The Purple-throated Moungem, Magenta-throated Woodstar, and Green Violetear visit the flowering epiphytes that adorn most trees in these clearings. Dark Pewee and Tufted Flycatchers hawk insects from favored perches while Slate-throated Redstarts wander through the pastures both hawking and gleaning. Mountain Elaenia, Paltry Tyrannulet, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, White-throated Robin, Mountain Robin, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Spanglecheeked Tanager, and Silver-throated Tanager are among the species that frequent fruiting trees in the pastures.

A bird which is ubiquituous, but surprisingly difficult to observe, is the Three-wattled Bellbird. The males of this promiscuous species "clang" and squeak throughout the day from perches, usually dead branches that protrude above the canopy. One or two bellbirds are frequently visible from the pastures that are near the information center. If you locate a song perch, you can observe the bellbird when it returns periodically to that site to call. However, bellbirds are extremely wary so you must be as inconspicuous as possible when stalking them.

From the Information Center, there are two ways to proceed: by trail or by road. Each will reward you with new birds and varied views of Monteverde's splendid scenery. There are many miles of trails through deep undisturbed forest. Most lead into the higher, still wetter cloud forest habitat. The road continues as a wide swath, on a gentle incline through two kilometers of cloud forest to the continental divide, the "ventana." From the ventana, if you

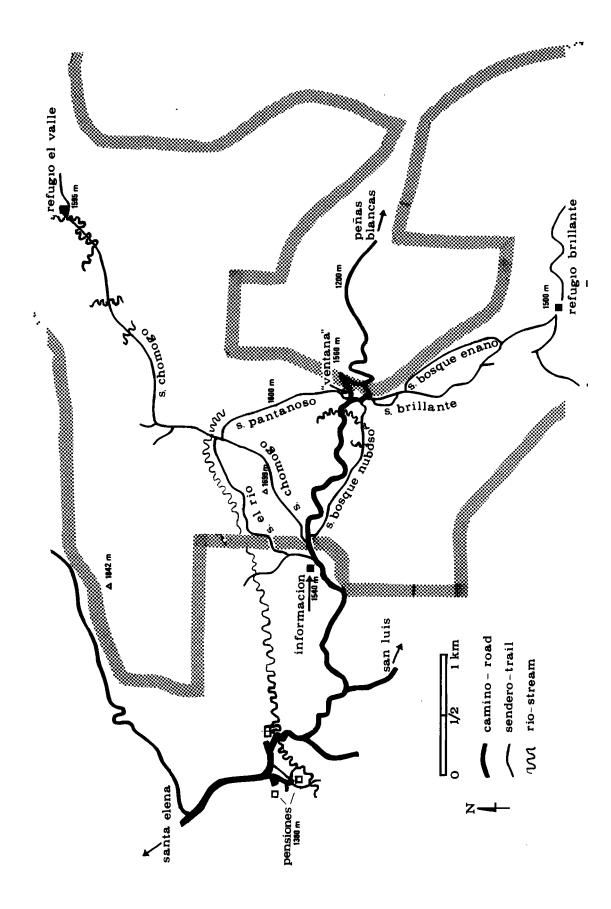
have a clear day, there is an exquisite view of surrounding virgin forest. Since the road is more open than the trails, it can be more rewarding in terms of intimate looks at birds. On your first visit, I recommend you follow the road to the ventaha and return by the Cloud Forest Trail (Sendero Bosque Nuboso). However, the road is often muddy and the Cloud Forest Trail is fairly free of mud, so that may influence your decision.

Leaving the pasture and walking up the road, you immediately move into a wetter forest inhabited by a different avifauna. Black Guans are not uncommon and may appear anywhere from ground level to canopy. Watch for quetzals, toucanets, barbets, and Azurehooded Javs which occasionally cross the road Nesting Streak-breasted Treehunters may be flushed from nests burrowed into the road bank. They retreat across the road alighting nearby to protest the intrusion. Peruse the small birds foraging in the second growth habitat boarding the road for Green Hermit, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Slaty Flowerpiercer, and Golden-browed Chlorophonia: The tiny Ochraceous Wren skulks about much like a typical Troglodytidae, except that this species frequents the dense epiphytic growth high in the canopy. Listen for the gull-like calls of Barred Hawks which perform courtship displays while soaring overhead.

A number of species of the Monteverde avifauna are restricted to the wettest cloud and elfin forest such as is found in the vicinity of the ventana. Here Slate-throated Redstarts give way to Collard Redstarts, Sooty-capped Bush-Tanagers mix with Common Bush-Tanagers, and yet another Nightingale-Thrush, the Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush, becomes the dominant understory thrush species. Other inhabitants of this zone are Ruddy Treerunners, Golden-bellied Flycatchers, Black-andyellow Silky-Flycatchers, Yellow Grosbeak, and Yellow-thighed Finch. In the cloud forest, be particularly attentive to mixed species flocks which are prevalent and often composed of a wide diversity of species.

Many birders will especially wish to see the Wrenthrush, a cloud forest endemic that many taxonomists relegate to a family all its own. While common, Wrenthrushes are so secretive they are difficult to locate without the aid of their vocalizations. Pairs of Wrenthrushes sing in duets, but only the first voice carries through the dense underbrush. This voice is a short shrill note followed by an ascending slur that is reminiscent of the beginning of the song of a Brown Creeper. To maximize your chances of seeing a Wren-thrush, hike to the vicinity of the ventana at dawn and listen for its song. On still mornings I have had excellent success by enter-

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ing the second growth directly to the south of where the road divides for the first time at the Ventana. Just two to three meters off the road you will be immersed by vegetation and if you sit quietly for a while you should pick up the wispy notes of the Wrenthrush as it hops about on or near the ground. Other places to search for Wrenthrushes are along the Brillante and Bosque Enano Trails. After the first couple of hours of daylight, pairs generally restrict their vocalizations to intermittent use of the second note of the first voice so locating them becomes far more difficult.

For those with additional time, the Brillante Trail traverses excellent birding habitat as well as some of the most beautiful forest in Monteverde. First it passes through cloud forest (take the short loop to the right after passing the chain) and then enters the wind stunted elfin forest. This is a good trail on which to observe such hummingbirds, as Fiery-throated Hummingbird, Violet Sabrewing, Greencrowned Brilliant, and Purple-throated Mountaingem which feed on flowers of low hanging epiphytes.

From the Ventana to the Information Center there are three ways to return: the road (45 minute walk); the Cloud Forest Trail (Sendero

Bosque Nuboso), a 1 hour walk; or the Swamp and River Trails (Senderos Pantonoso and Rio), a 1.5 to 2 hour walk. On the trails you are likely to see a different array of birds. On your first day I recommend returning via the Cloud Forest Trail (birds predominantly those listed as middle level or "M"). Birds along the Swamp and River Trails, will be primarily those listed as "M", but any listed as "H" may also be seen on the Swamp Trail. The River Trail parallels a swiftly flowing stream which provides superb scenery, but obscures the songs of birds. On all these forest trails you will frequently hear the flute-like songs of the Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush, (people often ask what bird has a song that sounds like the squeak of a swing) and the higher pitched, more haunting voice of the Black-faced Solitaire. Both are secretive and difficult to see. Three-striped Warblers are often encountered in association with such other small species as Spotted Barbtail, Spotted Woodcreeper, Graybreasted Wood-Wren, and Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch.

Rating — Spring**** (mid-March - late May), Summer*** (July-August), Autumn —, Winter —,

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M H Highland Tinamou (c)
        Magnificant Frigatebird (r)
        Cattle Egret (r)
L M H King Vulture (r)
L M H Black Vulture (c)
L M H Turkey Vulture (c)
L M H Swallow-tailed Kite (c)
  M
        Double-toothed Kite (u)
        Bicolored Hawk (u)
L M H Cooper's Hawk (u)
L M H Sharp-shinned Hawk (u)
        Red-tailed Hawk (u)
L M
        Swainson's Hawk (c)
L M H Broad-winged Hawk (a)
L M H White Hawk (u)
  M H Barred Hawk (c)
        Common Black Hawk (u)
  M H Harpy Eagle (r)
  M H Ornate Hawk-Eagle (r)
        Collared Forest-Falcon (r)
  M H Barred Forst-Falcon (c)
        American Kestrel (c)
L M
        Crested Guan (u)
  M H Black Guan (c)
        Spotted-bellied Bobwhite (u)
L M
L M H White-throated Wood-Quail (c)
        Sunbittern (r)
L M
        Band-tailed Pigeon (a)
  M H Red-billed Pigeon (a)
  M H Ruddy Pigeon (u)
  M H Short-billed Pigeon (a)
     White-tipped Dove (c)
L M H Buff-fronted Quail-Dove (c)
        Ruddy Quail-Dove (u)
  М
        Chiriqui Quail-Dove (r)
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M H Great Green Macaw (r)
L M H Red-fronted Parakeet (u)
     H Barred Parakeet (r)
        Orange-chinned Parakeet (u)
L M H Brown-hooded Parrot (c)
        White-fronted Parrot (u)
L M H Red-colored Parrot (u)
L M
        Squirrel Cuckoo (c)
L M
        Groove-billed Ani (a)
        Lesser Ground-Cuckoo (u)
L M H Barn Owl (r)
  M H Bare-shanked Screech-Owl (c)
L M H Spectacled Owl (u)
        Collared Trogon (r)
        Green Kingfisher (r)
L M
        Blue-crowned Motmot (c)
        Rufous-tailed Jacamar (r)
  M H Prong-billed Barbet (c)
        Red-headed Barbet (r)
L M H Emerald Toucanet (a)
L M
        Keel-billed Toucan (u)
L M
        Golden-olive Woodpecker (u)
L M
        Lineated Woodpecker (r)
        Hoffmann's Woodpecker (c)
T.
        Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (u)
L M
L M H Smoky-brown Woodpecker (c)
        Hairy Woodpecker (u)
  M
L M
        Ruddy Woodcreeper (c)
L M
        Barred Woodcreeper (r)
L M
        Olivaceous Woodcreeper (c)
  M H Wedge-billed Woodcreeper (u)
L M
        Spotted Woodcreeper (c)
L
        Streaked-headed Woodcreeper (u)
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Brown-billed Scythebill (r)

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L M

M	Н	Red-faced Spinetail (c)	L			Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush (u)
		Ruddy Treerunner (c)		M		Cedar Waxwing (r)
M	Н	Spotted Barbtail (c)			Н	Black-and-yellow Silky-Flycatcher (c)
		Buffy Tuftedcheek (r)	L	M		Rufous-browed Peppershrike (c)
L M		Lineated Foliage-gleaner (r)	_	M		Green Shrike-Vireo (u)
L		Spectacled Foliage-gleaner (u)	L	M		Yellow-throated Vireo (u)
L		Ruddy Foliage-gleaner (r)		M		Solitary Vireo (r)
		Streaked-breasted Treehunter (u)		M M		Red-eyed Vireo (u) Yellow-green Vireo (u)
L		Gray-throated Leaf-tosser (c) Russet Antshrike (u)		M		Philadelphia Vireo (u)
М		Plain Antvireo (u)		M		Brown-capped Vireo (c)
M		Slaty Antwren (u)	Ĺ			Tawny-crowned Greenlet (u)
		Immaculate Antbird (r)		М		Gray-headed Greenlet (c)
LM		Black-faced Antthrush (u)	L	M		Chestnut-headed Oropendola (r)
M		Scaled Antpitta (u)	L	M		Baltimore Oriole (u)
L		Spectacled Antpitta (r)		M		Common Meadowlark (c)
		Silvery-fronted Tapaculo (c)		M		Black-and-white Warbler (c)
LM		Long-tailed Manakin (c)		M		Worm-eating Warbler (r)
L M		Bright-rumped Attila (c)		M		Golden-winged Warbler (c)
		Barred Becard (u)		M M		Tennessee Warbler (u) Yellow Warbler (u)
L M		Masked Tityra (c) Bare-necked Umbrellabird (r)		M		Townsend's Warbler (u)
L M		Three-wattled Bellbird (a)		M		Black-throated Green Warbler (c)
L		Black Phoebe (r)		M		Cerulean Warbler (r)
ĽΜ		Eastern Kingbird (u)		M		Blackburnian Warbler (u)
LM		Tropical Kingbird (u)	L	M		Chestnut-sided Warbler (u)
			L	M		Northern Ovenbird (u)
LM		Sulfur-bellied Flycatcher (c)	L	M		Northern Waterthrush (r)
L M		Golden-bellied Flycatcher (c)		M		Louisiana Waterthrush (r)
LM		Social Flycatcher (c)	_	M		Kentucky Warbler (c)
LM		Great Kiskadee (c)		M		Gray-crowned Yellowthroat (c)
LM		Dusky-capped Flycatcher (c)		M		Wilson's Warbler (a)
	Н	Olive-sided Flycatcher (c)	_	M	**	Canada Warbler (u)
LM		Eastern Wood-Pewee (c)	L	M		Slate-throated Redstart (a) Collared Redstart (c)
LM		Western Wood-Pewee (r)		м		Three-striped Warbler (c)
		Dark Pewee (c)	T.	M		Golden-crowned Warbler (c)
LM	п	Yellowish Flycatcher (c) Least Flycatcher (u)	Ĺ			Chestnut-capped Warbler (u)
	н	Tufted Flycatcher (a)			Н	Wrenthrush (c)
		White-throated Spadebill (c)	L	M		Banaquit (c)
		Eye-ringed Flatbill (c)	L	M	Н	Scarlet-thighed Dacnis (c)
L M		Common Tody-Flycatcher (u)				Red-legged Honeycreeper (r)
L M		Scaly-crested Pygmy-Tyrant (u)				Slaty Flower-piercer (c)
		Torrent Tyrannulet (r)	L			Blue-crowned Chlorophonia (c)
L		Yellow-bellied Elaenia (c)		M		Tawny-capped Euphonia (u)
	Н	Mountain Elaenia (a)	L			Scrub Euphonia (r)
LM		Paltry Tyrannulet (a)	L			Yellow-throated Euphonia (c)
		White-fronted Tyrannulet (r)				Spangle-cheeked Tanager (c) Silver-throated Tanager (c)
L		Ochre-bellied Flycatcher (u)	r	M		Blue-gray Tanager (c)
L M L M		Olive-striped Flycatcher (a)		M		Summer Tanager (u)
		Rough-winged Swallow (c) Blue-and-white Swallow (c)				Hepatic Tanager (u)
L		Magpie Jay (r)		M		Scarlet Tanager (u)
LM		Brown Jay (c)	L	M		White-winged Tanager (u)
	Н	Azure-hooded Jay (u)	L			Gray-headed Tanager (r)
		American Dipper (r)	L	M	Н	Common Bush Tanager (a)
LM		Rufous-and-white Wren (c)			Н	Sooty-capped Bush-Tanager (c)
LM		Plain Wren (c)		M		Buff-throated Saltator (c)
LM		Southern House Wren (a)	L			Grayish Saltator (u)
		Ochraceous Wren (a)	_			Yellow Grosbeak (c)
	Н	Gray-breasted Wood-Wren (a)		M		Rose-breasted Grosbeak (u)
M	77	White-throated Robin (c)		M		Yellow-faced Grassquit (c)
		Mountain Robin (a)	L	M		Variable Seedeater (u) Yellow-throated Brush-Finch (c)
L M		Clay-colored Robin (c) Black-faced Solitaire (c)	L			Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch (c)
M M		Wood Thrush (u)	T	M		White-eared Ground-Sparrow (c)
LM		Swainson's Thrush (c)				Slaty Finch (r)
L		Gray-cheeked Thrush (u)				Peg-billed Finch (r)
Ĺ		Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush (c)				Yellow-thighed Finch (c)
	Н	Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush (c)		M		Sooty-faced Finch (u)
		Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush (c)	L	M		Rufous-collared Sparrow (c)