

# The Heart of Darkness

by Noah K. Strycker

**G**oing up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. . . . The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of over-shadowed distances.

—Joseph Conrad,  
*Heart of Darkness*

Drifting along Ecuador's wide Napo River—three plane rides, a three-hour drive, a two-hour boat ride, a 25-minute hike and a dugout canoe trip away from home—I felt like I had arrived at Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

Rather than heading toward an unknown destination with no hope of return, I was happily on my way to the birding Mecca of Sacha Lodge and having the time of my life.

In August 2005, I attended the first-ever Young Adult Birders' Conference, organized by the American Birding Association to bring together birders ages 19 to 25 for educational workshops and birding in neotropical Ecuador. The conference lasted a week, based from Tandayapa Bird Lodge on the west side, with a week-long extension to the high Andes and Sacha Lodge in the Amazon basin on the east side. About 15 of us came, saw and did our best to conquer, with the exuberance of youth, the tropical birdlife of Ecuador.

If the luxurious, lush and lovely Sacha Lodge was the highlight of my trip, its new 940-foot canopy walkway provided the sparkle. Our group rose before dawn



BLACK-TAILED TROGON BY NOAH K. STRYCKER

to hike through the jungle with flashlights ablaze and rubber boots sloshing in muddy trails to reach the base of the tower. A spiraling journey upward on a metal staircase lifted us to ever-more-breathtaking (literally!) views through the vertical levels of forest until breaking through 100 feet above the ground and above the tops of the tallest trees.

Three metal towers supported two narrow, suspended walkways that swayed as we traversed. We birded mostly from the towers, which provided stable platforms for spotting scopes. Our group spent the entire morning perched with the birds, gazing at a rare Ornate Hawk-Eagle and about 10 other raptor species, studying seldom-seen canopy specialists such as Dugand's Antwren and glorying in a large and colorful mixed flock of tanagers, flycatchers, toucans and other species passing through the treetops. What a thrill to photograph a Black-tailed Trogon perched

on a branch about 10 feet below my feet!

The hummingbirds of Tandayapa Valley must be one of the seven avian wonders of the world. You think Arizona has hummingbirds? Bush league compared to the Tandayapa Valley.

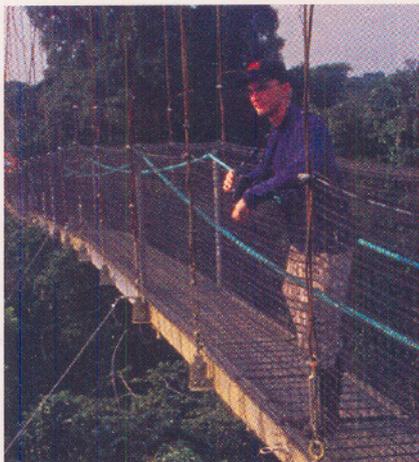
We found more than 50 species of *colibri* (the Spanish word for "hummingbird"), including some spectacular ones—the Giant Hummingbird, largest in the world, which looks like a swallow in flight; the Booted Racket-tail, a diminutive hummer with loooooong tail feathers tipped with plate-like "rackets;" the Shining Sunbeam, one of the top five coolest bird names ever; and the incredible Sword-billed

Hummingbird, which must hold up its beak to keep from falling over. The chits and snarls of hummer squabbles greeted us everywhere.

Though tiny, Ecuador is a great place for birding because of its large diversity of habitats, including portions of the coast, western lowland rain forest, the Andes and Amazon basin. To round out our checklist, we spent a day in the high Andes of central Ecuador above treeline.

Our bus chugged up and up along a narrow road, clinging at times to cliff faces, to reach high slopes near the Antisana Volcano overlooking the Central Valley. Here, at more than 13,000 feet, we breathed the rarefied air and birded along the road while Andean Condors soared overhead and rare Black-faced Ibis foraged in a stubbly grass field.

In 13 days, we compiled a trip list of 550 species, about 5 percent of the world's bird species. Not bad! I saw 385 life birds,



reaching my 1,000th-species milestone with a Lyre-tailed Nightjar on the first evening.

One early morning during the first week, our busload of birders wound along the dusty gravel road up and away from the lodge. Patrick, a geographic information systems major, tinkered with his fancy hand-held global positioning system unit. He suddenly shouted, "We're nearing the equator, guys!"

Our guides instructed the bus driver, a native Ecuadorian improbably named Vladimir, to stop. We tumbled out and walked the last few feet until the digits on the GPS unit displayed straight zeros. We were standing on Earth's exact middle—in theory, a lofty concept but in practice, just another stretch of dusty road.

As we started to pose for a photo, a shout went up: "Barred Becard!" We were off and running into the Southern Hemisphere, photo op forgotten, chasing over the hilltop to see what bird might be waiting on the other side.

### And One More Thing

Last year, I participated in five Christmas Bird Counts, three of them consecutively, in my home state of Oregon. I thought that was a pretty full load for the CBC season—until I read about Kelly McKay, an Illinois biologist who did a count on each day of the period, an incredible 23 consecutive CBCs! Sounds like a challenge to me. Who can top that? Send e-mail to [birdboy@bkpix.com](mailto:birdboy@bkpix.com).

College sophomore Noah K. Strycker writes about, photographs, draws and studies birds in Oregon and elsewhere.



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