

Ornithology in Abiseo

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The altitudinal range of Río Abiseo National Park (PNRA), from around 300 meters to more than 4000 meters above sea level, means that it is home to several ecosystems.

The forests, high grasslands, lakes and rivers of the PNRA are a refuge for an impressive diversity of birdlife. The PNRA Master Plan (2003-2007) lists more than 400 species, a remarkable number for what remains such a little-known area. Clearly, many more species are waiting to be identified.

In this chapter, we will attempt to highlight the most outstanding aspects of the park's birdlife, focusing upon the habitats visited during our expedition, and including comments related to conservation issues. Most of the birds discussed are dependent upon forests, and the PNRA protects a vast swathe of montane forests of different types, in an excellent state of conservation.

Our exploratory expedition took us into inter-Andean forests with an abundance of native queñua (*Polylepis* sp.) trees, grasslands, lakes, areas of elfin forest, transition forests and cloud forests. In each of these, we were able to identify interesting bird species, and in some cases our observations constituted first sightings.

The *Polylepis*, or queñua, forests in the vicinity of the Chigualen Guard and Control Post (PVC) are home to a considerable variety of birds, including the four endemic Peruvian species we recorded: the black metaltail hummingbird (*Metallura phoebe*), very common in the area; the rusty-crowned tit-spinetail (*Leptasthenura pileata*); the large-footed tapaculo (*Scytalopus macropus*); and the white-cheeked cotinga (*Zaratornis stresemanni*). Our sighting of the last of these marked just the second time the species had been recorded east of the Marañón River, and we were also fortunate enough to observe the feeding behavior of an adult with its young, indicating that the area in question is almost certainly a breeding ground for this species, classified as in danger of extinction and with a restricted distribution. Populations of this species continue to decrease across Peru's territory, and its conservation status is a cause for concern; protected natural areas like the PNRA therefore play an important role in ensuring its long term survival. Other notable species in the area include the stripe-headed antpitta (*Grallaria andicolus*), and the presence of three of Peru's largest hummingbird species: the giant hummingbird (*Patagona gigas*); the great sapphirewing (*Pterophanes cyanopterus*); and the sword-billed hummingbird (*Ensifera ensifera*). Their size makes these hummingbirds easy to spot as they take flight or perch among bushes in the vicinity of flowering plants.

Highland lakes are home to several species of duck, grebes, the puna snipe (*Gallinago andina*), and the Andean gull (*Chroicocephalus serranus*). Seasonally, these lakes also constitute

important resting places for migratory shorebirds on their way to breeding grounds in the Arctic, and to their winter homes on the coasts and wetlands in the southern part of the continent. Areas of high grasslands are home to relatively few birds, and it is clear that overgrazing and the presence of dogs are factors that have impacted on the presence of birdlife in such areas.

The zone known as Pampa de Cuyes is notable for the presence of several patches of elfin forest, a rare habitat that has been affected by the burning of grasslands, and whose conservation is of enormous importance. These elfin forests are home to unique flora and fauna, with a high rate of endemism, including the following birds: the pardusco (*Nephelornis oneilli*); the bay-vented cotinga (*Doliornis sclateri*); and the golden-backed mountain-tanager (*Cnemathraupis aureodorsalis*). Each of these was recorded during the expedition and it seems likely that others also occur, including the rare rufous-browed hemispingus (*Hemispingus rufosuperciliaris*). On the edges of the elfin forest and in small patches of bushes the coppery metaltail (*Metallura theresiae*) and neblina tapaculo (*Scytalopus altirostris*) occur, both of which are endemic to Peru. Another species recorded is the white-chinned thistletail (*Asthenes fuliginosa*), in the subspecies *plengei* (named after Mr. Manuel Plenge, one of Peru's pioneering ornithologists and the uncle of the photographer Heinz Plenge), which possibly warrants consideration as an endemic species, given its limited distribution from San Martín to Huánuco.

At Puerta del Monte, one enters a fantastic cloud forest in pristine condition, and it is from this point that the highest concentration of bird species is encountered. The bamboo understory belonging to the Chusquea genus is an important habitat, due to the existence of several species of specialized birds, such as populations of antpittas, composed of five recorded species. The most abundant species is the endemic rusty-tinged antpitta (*Grallaria przewalskii*), while closer to the grasslands the rufous antpitta (*Grallaria rufula*) is more frequent. But it is the presence of the endemic and little-known pale-billed antpitta (*Grallaria carrikeri*) that is most noteworthy. This antpitta is one of the largest species of the genus and is known in just five places in northeastern Peru (its distribution coincides with the area once occupied by Chachapoyas culture), all of which are difficult to access. During the expedition, individuals were heard singing on several occasions, particularly at the summit of Cerro Central, and the species was sighted in the forests that form part of the ascent to Los Pinchudos. Also recorded were the undulated antpitta (*Grallaria squamigera*) and the chestnut-crowned antpitta (*Grallaria ruficapilla*), with the latter identified to the south of its previously known range.

The Chusquea bamboo stands are also important for tapaculos belonging to the *Scytalopus* genus, with four species recorded, including the large-footed tapaculo (*Scytalopus macropus*), an endemic species and the largest of its group. This species has a preference for habitats along rivers and streams. It was heard at several locations, and an excellent sighting was made of a foraging individual on a fence on the Central River, close to the Playa 2 Camp.

During the descent from the heights of Puerta del Monte, we explored an area of bamboo in which some plants contained seeds. This meant that during our return we were able to identify two specialist Chusquea feeding species that take advantage of the plants' reproduction cycle in

order to exploit the seeds: the slaty finch (*Haplospiza rustica*) and the maroon-chested ground-dove (*Claravis mondetoura*), the latter of which is a very rarely-sighted species, with the fragmentation of forests apparently constituting a severe threat to its survival. One of the highlights of our expedition, the brief recording of this dove was a clear sighting of an adult male on the forest floor.

Another species endemic to this habitat is the Peruvian wren (*Cinnycerthia peruana*), the peculiar characteristic of which is the variable design of its head. Observation of several groups at La Playa and in the vicinity of Gran Pajatén revealed just one individual, with white coloration on the head.

The forests close to these bamboo stands offered up to us the sighting of a white-faced nunbird (*Hapaloptila castanea*), a large puffbird very rarely seen in the cloud forest. Another unusual nocturnal encounter came in the form of a hooded tinamou (*Nothocercus nigrocapillus*), found resting at the base of a tree trunk, in what is unusual behavior for a bird that tends to perch in the upper levels of bushes, as protection from predators.

And in the La Playa sector, on the right bank of the Montecristo River, the abundant presence was observed of very colorful groups of tanagers, most notably the grass-green tanager (*Chlorornis riefferii*), the blue-and-yellow tanager (*Butorhaupis montana*), the red-hooded tanager (*Piranga rubriceps*), and the yellow-scarfed tanager (*Iridosornis reinhardti*).

The presence of fruits in cloud forest trees constitutes an important food source for many frugivorous species, including parrots such as the golden-plumed parakeet (*Leptosittaca branickii*), quetzals, trogons, guans and colorful toucans. Among this last group is the gray-breasted mountain toucan (*Andigena hypoglauca*), but the special attraction of Abiseo is the yellow-browed toucanet (*Aulacorhynchus huallagae*). Also known as the Huallaga toucanet, it was first described in 1933 and is one of the least well-known bird species in Peru, with a small range limited to the most remote cloud forests of the northeastern Andes, around the headwaters of the Huallaga River. To date, this bird has only been sighted at six locations in San Martín, La Libertad and Amazonas. It was recorded for the first time in the PNRA in 1989 by Enrique Ortiz, very close to the La Playa sector, and no other sightings were reported subsequently, until after a lapse of twenty-eight years, during our expedition, at least six individuals were identified in the space of three days, in a small area between Macedonio and Gran Pajatén.

Most were identified by their song in forests far from the trail; but in spite of the difficulty in observing them, photographs were taken of one specimen, feeding at an altitude of 2700 meters. One notable sighting of this species occurred in an open area near Gran Pajatén, where a yellow-browed toucanet was observed among gray-breasted mountain toucans, indicating that both species of toucan form mixed flocks, with no competition for food identified.

The rushing rivers that flow down from the valleys of Abiseo are the habitat of three bird species:

the torrent duck (*Merganetta armata*); the white-capped dipper (*Cinclus leucocephalus*); and the torrent tyrannulet (*Serpophaga cinerea*). All three species are restricted to turbulent waters and are often observed sitting on rocks.

The route from Puerta del Monte was notable for the constant presence of the white-collared jay (*Cyanolyca viridicyanus*) and the mountain cacique (*Cacicus chrysonotus*). Both species were observed in family groups or as part of mixed flocks, creating a contrasting spectacle of color.

Without a doubt, the route followed by our expedition is one of the most fascinating we have experienced, offering exceptional sightings of species much sought after by birdwatchers and nature photographers.

As the reader will have noted, Río Abiseo National Park is not merely an area with enormous potential for the development of specialist birdwatching tourism; its more remote areas, while difficult to access, also offer an excellent scenario for research and the recording of new distribution reports, as well as for the identifying of species new to science. Certainly, this is an area that must continue to be protected.

Black-tailed trainbearer (*Lesbia victoriae*).
Andean condor (*Vultur gryphus*).
Pale-billed antpitta (*Grallaria carrikeri*).
Torrent duck (*Merganetta armata*).
King vulture (*Sarcoramphus papa*).
Yellow-browed toucanet (*Aulacorhynchus huallagae*).

a. White-collared jay (*Cyanolyca viridicyanus*).
b. Yellow-breasted brush finch (*Atlapetes latinuchus*).
c. Andean gull (*Chroicocephalus serranus*).
d. Yellow-scarfed tanager (*Iridosornis reinhardti*).
e. Great thrush (*Turdus fuscater*).
f. Puna teal (*Anas puna*), Andean gull (*Chroicocephalus serranus*), Puna ibis (*Plegadis ridgwayi*).
g. Andean flicker (*Colaptes rupicola*).
h. Masked flowerpiercer (*Diglossa cyanea*).

a. Thick-billed euphonia (*Euphonia laniirostris*).
b. Fiery-capped manakin (*Machaeropterus pyrocephalus*).
c. Rufous-crested coquette (*Lophornis delattrei*).
d. Masked trogon (*Trogon personatus*).
e. Sparkling violetear (*Colibri coruscans*).
f. Rusty-tinged antpitta (*Grallaria przewalskii*).
g. Andean lapwing (*Vanellus resplendens*).
h. Mountain caracara (*Phalcoboenus megalopterus*).

