

## PERU- PERHAPS?

NOVEMBER 29<sup>th</sup> to DECEMBER 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018

By Andy Bissitt

### DAY 1.

Was I dreaming, or could I really hear a Woodpigeon playing pan pipes? It wasn't even light yet. Next up was a Eurasian Starling which had somehow acquired a microphone and amplifier! Oh, hang on. I'm in Lima, remember! The species that I'd really heard were **West Peruvian Dove** and Scrub Blackbird, distorted in my mind by jet-lag and the fact we hadn't reached our hotel until after 4.00 a.m. U.K. time.



After a breakfast with enough of a Western flavour (not spaghetti) for my liking, it was time to venture forth into the vast sprawl that is Lima. In such an environment, it was no surprise that the birdlife was going to be concentrated on the shore and out to sea, and even though I'd overlooked the Pacific on a couple of previous occasions in North America, here virtually everything was new. The cast of birds was cosmic: the endemic Peruvian Seaside Cinclodes, Belcher's (band-tailed) Gull, Peruvian Booby, Peruvian Pelican and Red-legged Cormorant to name but a few. Now this might not make sense to some people, perhaps most, but I had decided to make this trip mainly because I just had to see Inca Tern. It is just one of those 'stop and stare' birds, whether just a photograph in a book or in the flesh, and even though the rocks and surrounding skies thronged with them, you just could not bring yourself to call them common. They looked like giant Black Terns dressed for the Mardi Gras.

After this brief stop, we made our way down the coast to Pantanos de Villa, an oasis amid the chaos, and it oozed birds. Here we had our first semi-distant views of the much wanted Peruvian Thick-knee, but with a sky full of Black and Turkey vultures, Harris's Hawk, American Kestrel and Peregrine Falcon, they were keeping their heads down. Moving on to the main site by the ocean, deciding whether to concentrate on waders, waterfowl or passerines was a dilemma, but the list of birds I managed to compile proved that I overcame it, such as Andean Coot (one form has a very different yellow shield on its forehead), Yellow-hooded Blackbird, Andean Duck, Amazilia Hummingbird and the behemoth Great Grebe. And when you thought that you'd seen it all, hundreds of Franklin's and **Grey-hooded Gulls** would rise to fill the void.

Anyway, we had a boat to catch so we had to beat a hasty retreat to Pucusana Beach. The vessel was on the small side, so it was a good job that the birds and beasts helped take my mind off the Pacific Ocean lapping away within touching distance.



In fact, only Humboldt Penguin was new for the tour with all the other species already having been spied from dry-land, but the sky being full of Boobies, Terns and Cormorants – especially when the ‘chum’ came out – made it worthwhile. Other wildlife was represented by South American sea lions and a couple of marine otters.

After lunch, we pressed on back towards Lima so as to connect with the road east into the Andes. There was though still time to make a short diversion to take a look at what we could find by the Lurin River, a place you could easily pass if you didn’t know it was there. It was notable for a first look at the cute (sorry, but they are) Pacific Parrotlet, and the slightly less gaudy Chestnut-throated Seedeater, whilst Bran-coloured Flycatcher was notable for being a write-in for the tour list. Then it was time for the first instalment of our climb, the overnight accommodation being at about 1100m. No problem – so far!

## DAY 2.

The ‘easy’ bit over, it was now time to get hardcore. Early attempts at viewing birds did not come to much as gaining acceptable views of birds halfway up hillsides in fairly dense scrub is never a breeze. Only a Pied-crested Tit-Tyrant gave any sort of view, although an Andean Tinamou did the best it could for a bird restricted to scratching around on the floor. The tempo was raised when one of the party spotted a female Torrent Duck in the river valley directly behind us. So as not to consider my mission over after day one, I had (pre-holiday) extended my ‘must-see’ species list to three, and here was the second of them. However, I did not count it as a full ‘tick’ as I really wanted to see the male. Anyway, onwards and upwards, and it was back in the minibus that I spotted the next new species for the trip. I suppose if I was going to spot anything first, it was going to be this one – a pair of White-capped Dippers. I say that because of the number of times I’ve kept a look out for dippers on roadside streams in our local area and elsewhere in the U.K. Typically, they were making use of a man-made environment, a hydro-electric power plant, and the rough water it was creating. This was another species I grudgingly came to accept that I would like to see when researching the tour, and it was a nice bird. A Black Phoebe here was another write-in. After a cloud of Collared Swifts played on high, things again became difficult to see clearly. Even the plainness of the Thick-billed Miners and Greenish Yellow Finches was appreciated as they showed up close and in the open, but it took outstanding views of the endemic Great Inca Finch to stoke up the excitement. Ash-breasted Sierra Finch was also a new tick for me. It was about here that I asked what altitude we were now at: it was 2200m. It felt higher. Whilst trying to make out what some dots were several hundred feet below us, I noted a Culpeo (formerly Andean fox) crossing the river. At least it was a lot easier to see than the birds were at this distance. A little further up the road we found a more open area which

certainly aided our requirement to be able to watch birds and note their finer points at length. It yielded dapper Rusty-bellied Brushfinches, White-browed Chat-Tyrant, Brown-bellied Swallows, Oasis Hummingbird and Bronze-tailed Comet, all beautifully lit by the strong sunshine. Things were not quite perfect though, and a short decent down a track to call out a Pacific Pygmy Owl found me out. The return walk was only slightly uphill, but I could feel things were not as they should be, and quite soon I was struggling to breathe and close to fainting. Only by bending over could I take in any air; as soon as I tried to stand up straight I was in trouble. I was saved by the leader providing something which I think I saw was 100% alcoholic spirit (no, not for drinking purposes) which I was encouraged to breathe in from my hands. At least the feeling of passing out was taken away as I was getting enough oxygen to my lungs now, and eventually I was able to make my way back to the minibus to recover. So whilst the rest of the party was seeing the endemic Rufous-breasted Warbling Finch, which was even a lifer for the leaders, I was contemplating the tour being over for me. I had previously been to 3300m before without any effect, so I could not understand what was going on.

We continued on to our next 'hotel' (and I use the word in the widest possible sense) at Huachupampa (altitude 2920m) for a siesta, which came at the right time for me. After about 75 minutes, I was feeling well enough to venture outside for a fitness test, and a few minutes wandering around confirmed I was O.K. to continue. Good news as I was able to witness the formidable Giant Hummingbird for the first time – half bat-half nightjar – as it floated about above the scrub. A dusk stake out for contentious split 'Lesser' Horned Owl was fruitless (we did see a pair later in the tour), but we did witness the fabulous **Golden Grosbeak** going to roost. On the day, I had missed a lifer, but it was obviously more important that I was able to go ahead with the rest of the trip.



### DAY 3.

If I was a holiday rep attempting to sell this trip to the reader, you would not see the next sentence in my pitch. On this part of the trip certain death is literally just over a meter away! The road is steep and winding, with the vehicle having to execute three-point turns at some bends, and the vertical drop over the unprotected side of the gravelly road is in the order of about 1500 feet. So what did we do? We went up and down the most precarious bit three times (once in the dark!), twice yesterday and again this morning. The main reason for this was a very good one: to see a rare, range-restricted endemic, so you had to grin (grimace in truth) and bear it. Firstly, we encountered Streak-throated Bush-Tyrant, an imposing bird, and Black-chested Buzzard-eagle. But these were soon pushed back in the memory as, after an anxious wait, our quarry at last responded to the ubiquitous Pygmy Owl calls: brilliant **Black-necked Woodpecker**. Many woodpeckers are look-alikes, but this one is a stand-out act and to see it well in what was actually scattered, poor-quality habitat was a real bonus. It was close to being bird of the trip at this point.



Hoping this was not to be literally our last lifer, we weaved our way back up the mountain towards where the 'real' high-life was, on the roof of the Andes. The true tree cover of the region is Polylepis woodland (not the introduced Eucalyptus where we had seen the woodpecker), which holds several threatened species which are disappearing as one tree type replaces the other. Parking the transport at the foot of an escarpment, we climbed the slope towards a patch of polylepis. A Cream-winged Cinclodes was a rather tame start, but we were soon scrambling for the best spot from which to view the rarely seen White-cheeked Cotinga – a bird not recorded on recent tours to the area with this Company and one certainly not on my radar. After seeing it well we spied a distant flock of Rufous-webbed Bush-Tyrants, distinctive with their cinnamon wing-linings and occasional kestrel-like hovering flight. Soon we had as distinctive a hummingbird as it is possible to see zipping about us: The Black Metaltail, whilst a glance skywards found a Mountain Caracara cruising the rim of the rock face. This was followed by good views of the attractive Variable Hawk. The only disappointment was that we failed to connect with the polylepis specialist Giant Conebill. One for next time? I'm afraid not.



Whilst eating our fried chicken lunch, the first two Andean Geese flew down the road, but we were not in too much of a hurry to chase them as we enjoyed the food, the chance to relax and the views. A quick stroll whilst the driver and one of the guides tidied up brought better views of the earlier-seen Black-throated Flowerpiercer, and there were Canasteros and Earthcreepers to sort out. But Rusty-crowned Tit-Spinetail and Bright-rumped Yellow Finches probably stole the show as they were more pleasing to the eye. We also caught up with the Andean Geese and got to grips with Ground-Tyrants (e.g. White-fronted and Rufous-naped). Again, there is a sigh of relief when you come across a no-mistake species like White-winged Duica Finch which were quite common at this altitude.

After a short drive, we were soon scanning a couple of draughty lakes situated in the valley below the road. The big stars here (literally in one case) were Giant Coots, Andean Gulls and a couple of Grebe species; Silvery and White-tufted. Suddenly, about halfway between us and the lakes, a pair of Aplomado Falcons alighted from nowhere giving stunning, prolonged views which in the case of any raptor is always preferable to a dot in the sky. Time was catching up with us so it was a quick 'stop, scan and identify' at the next lake where we managed to add White-winged Cinclodes, one of the more readily identified of the family with its chestnut wings and back. We had a chilly trek over some boggy ground in our first attempt at finding some of the specialities of the area, but only Andean Lapwing was at home. As we reached the motel-cum-lorry park at San Mateo for a two-night stay I could look back on a day which was certainly near the top of my best-ever, where even in fairly extreme conditions birds had been plentiful and varied. Sometimes you have to suffer for your pleasures!

#### DAY 4.

Icicles clung to overhangs at the side of the road in the cold morning air, setting the stage for some of the hottest species imaginable. A first stop on the road, which took us back up to the plateau we had last been on the previous afternoon, had several species of Sierra-Finch, but also the striking Black Siskin which I only ever saw in flight unfortunately. Further on a shout of 'stop' went up as one of the big 'wants' to be found in this terrain flew past the vehicle, and soon we were getting the views we had hoped for of a pair of Andean Flickers. This was certainly a memory-maker which the next find, a Puna Ground-Tyrant, was not. Even so, it was the only one of the trip so we had to be grateful. Walking across the half frozen bog though, we only had one thing in mind, and after a call from one of the leaders, there it was; the jewel in the crown of my three 'must-sees': Diademed Sandpiper-Plover. Surely on the bucket-list of anybody besotted with the magic of birds, it lived up to the tantalising image drawn when I first saw a photograph of it. Even so, I thought it would only ever be a picture in a book; now here it was in the flesh. It was going to take something looking like or acting out of the ordinary to divert our attention from this, and from nowhere there it was: the hopping-hummer – Olivaceous Thornbill! Try to imagine (or just look up a video online) a largish hummingbird picking out tiny flowers at ground level on frozen tundra at 4700m. It isn't easy. It is as far removed as possible from what one might call a typical hummingbird, either in its choice of surroundings or its behaviour. It's true to say that this display captivated us just as much as the plover had. After these two however, only a distant Grey-breasted Seedsnipe and the indistinct Andean Swallow added to the scene, and I began to marvel at how up to four species of butterfly played out their lives in these bleak surroundings. Andean Geese posed for photographs with 'not very wild' Alpacas in the background as proof that the surroundings were not too bleak for mankind to exert its influence.

It was now time to raise the stakes, and the altitude (4780m) even higher as we parked up and slowly set out in search of the last real star of this part of the mountains. There had to be a big reason to stretch your lungs to the very limit, and there was; probably the rarest species we were expecting to see – **White-bellied Cinclodes**. Numbering only a few hundred, this imposing bird dwarfed its cousins and left us in no doubt that this was the real deal (after a few false alarms involving some other species of Cinclodes).



Lunch was therefore taken in high spirits, and there was still time for more birding! A foaming white-water river (Rio Blanco if you will) added the final few percent required to complete the 'big three'. Regrettably, views of a male Torrent Duck were distant and brief so we had to make do with reviewing White-headed Dippers and Black-throated Flowerpiercer. I suppose one of the drawbacks of taking an organised trip is that the leaders have a 'shopping list' of species which are likely to be those most sought after by participants (as well as making sure that rival tour groups don't appear more appealing), so bringing the ultra-skulking Stripe-headed Antpitta into the open became an exercise in patience. So with calls both of the bird and the Pygmy Owl on 'repeat' we waited in what appeared to be in vain. Eventually something slipped across the river almost unseen, and after a bit more 'encouragement' posed

(sort of) on a low wall just above the scrub. I suppose you had to grit your teeth and say that had it not been coerced in this way it would have gone undetected; and it was worth seeing in all its shadowy presence. Job done, and everyone happy. If you weren't, you were indeed hard to please.

#### DAY 5.

It was hard to believe, as we assembled outside our 'digs' in San Mateo, that a lifer was to be found just on the other side of the extraordinarily busy highway that stood before us. Yet with the aid of the portable 'Pygmy Owl' playing at full blast, we were allowed otherwise unlikely views of the excellent Golden-billed Saltator hiding in the eucalyptus growing in the grounds of the tumbledown farmyard. A lifer on a plate is never to be sniffed at. This truth was rammed home upon our return to the Rio Blanco valley of the previous afternoon when putting names to distant, frustratingly glimpsed birds like members of the Tit-Spinetail (including near-endemic Streak-backed) family and others proved to be an unalloyed nightmare. When a Yellow-billed Tit-Tyrant made itself known in a nearby bush, there was almost spontaneous applause at this gesture. A further blessing was bestowed on us by a Variable Hawk giving perched views at close quarters: a really smart raptor in this particular morph. Not so accommodating was a sky-high condor which I would not have been happy with had it been my first ever. I'd also seen Hooded Siskin before, but it was still pleasant to be able to watch several without too much strain on the eyes being involved. As for **Giant Hummingbird**, you surely couldn't ever tire of seeing this champion of its family – the World's biggest.

We were seeing all the key species, one way or another, but there had not been much to make one just stop and observe. It was therefore a welcome change to witness a charming piece of interaction between two hummingbirds. The unexpected Shining Sunbeam (not as good as it sounds) was playing hard to get, popping up over a wall for a second or two, then dropping out of sight. If you weren't looking at the right bit of wall, you missed it. Thankfully, a Black Metaltail flew too close to the Sunbeam's airspace and they clashed and sparred in mid-air before us, one all black, the other a warm mid-brown, but otherwise the same size and shape, a sepia mirror-image of sorts. This was something to cheer us as we set off back towards Lima and the human jungle.



#### DAY 6.

So I'd seen all my target birds and the Andes were behind us. It was therefore going to take a lot to make me focus 100%. It was in the event good planning that saw us visiting a site which easily ranked alongside those we had been to in the previous few days. Firstly though, we stopped at Puerto Viejo which was a fairly sedate start. It had a few Peruvian Meadowlarks dotted around in the reeds, the breast of these birds a brilliant red in the male, and a couple of new species in Puna Ibis and the monochrome Coastal Miner, a lark in everything but name. The real action began



under a now blazing sun at Azpitia Fields, an area of traditional crop land which was being farmed by hand. As you'd expect when agriculture is not practised intensively it teemed with birds, but it did mean that the growth of plant life was a bit uncontrolled making viewing a bit of a lottery at times. Still, this added to the excitement as birds popped up which you did not even know where there. These were mainly Seed eaters and Finches which, with females and immatures involved, you could spend several years sorting out. Some, like the Parrot-billed Seed eater, were kind of straightforward, others posed questions you didn't realise were there to ask. Take Band-tailed Seed eater. A smart, bright looking bird sitting atop a bush grabbed my attention: I hadn't seen this before. Our guide announced it was a male of the aforementioned species. Fair enough. Later, whilst perusing a fellow traveller's field guide, an illustration leapt out at me – Band-tailed Sierra Finch. Similar, but different, this was one of the dilemmas I spoke of earlier. My word against that of the leader. I guess I lose.

Before all of this came about, I was far too distracted by views of some 'unmistakable' new species such as the odd looking Short-tailed Field-Tyrant, Streaked Saltator and a male and female Collared Warbling-Finch, another near-endemic. There was also a far better look than we'd had to date of **Croaking Ground-Dove**, whilst a series of near misses as we tried to get any reasonable view of the tiny Peruvian Shearwater was finally brought to a conclusion when I spotted an immature male at rest low in the scrub. I'd have loved to have stayed and got to grips with the Seed eaters; for instance, I did not see enough to convince me I was seeing Drab Seed eaters which truly live up to their name. However, there was still quite a drive ahead of us at the end of which was a birding dreamland. A beach hosting North American waders, terns, egrets and gulls was just a few steps away from La Hacienda Hotel (4 star), Ica province, and a short stroll in the setting sun found a family of Peruvian Thick-knees and Burrowing Owls, as well as allowing unrivalled photographic opportunities. There was obviously a sense of winding down, but you could not complain when presented with this scenario; or could you?



#### DAY 7.

At least to begin with things were different. The tide was out, so a lot more Semi-palmated Sandpipers, Greater Yellowlegs, Whimbrel, Little Blue Heron and others were to be found. Still these were outnumbered by flocks of Elegant Terns, Franklin's Gulls and the perfectly wonderful Black Skimmers. The **Peruvian Thick-knees** could also be watched in better light. After breakfast it was on towards Paracas port to embark on our second boat trip, this time to the fabled 'guano islands' that make up the Ballestas. Only one new bird was on the cards, but I was hoping it might have more meaning than just that, and it did to some extent. But even though the sight and sound of hundreds and thousands of seabirds was uplifting and gave me a feeling that perhaps all is not wrong in the world, it was tempered by the fact that these numbers were already much reduced and falling. Anyway, we duly saw the

Guanay Cormorants, with supporting cast of Boobies, Terns and Pelicans, and were then whisked off back to the port: all a bit 'touristy' in reality. We then had a quick look around the port area at the waders and gulls including Least and Baird's Sandpipers, Turnstones and Semi-palmated Plovers. The locals, meanwhile, were fighting a losing battle with the plastic on the beach. Still, they were trying I suppose. As we walked to lunch, the sound of music and singing, and food being shared around, had me asking the leader whether it was an early Christmas party. 'Someone has died', was his sobering reply. Even so, they were receiving quite a send-off!

The afternoon was split between the semi-sublime, and the ridiculous. For some reason (time-killing?), the leader decided we needed to try and find a bird never before seen on this trip (Slender-billed Finch for the record). Not a bad idea perhaps? The only thing wrong with it being that the places where we looked for it were such poor-quality habitat that there was nothing else to see (except for American Kestrel). It was a Spartan area of semi-desert with a few areas of dying shrubs, rushy plants and trees, and it was very warm and sunny. Let's just say that enthusiasm waned very quickly. The last patch we tried was a bit healthier looking but was badly littered and near the road. Here, a few small birds had us guessing once or twice, but apart from a female Vermillion Flycatcher on a nest (in leafless shrub) it was one episode to forget quickly.

The Pisco wetlands looked similar to areas already visited with its mix of marsh and open water, but we did add the odd new bird; a handful of Stilt Sandpipers and flocks of Chilean Flamingos. As there was now very little chance of my seeing birds I hadn't seen before elsewhere, I turned to 'insect mode' and chased down a few interesting dragonflies, wasps and beetles which were far more fascinating. I was not happy when called over to the distant beach to see only a Snowy Plover (unhappier still when I found it had gone)! The leader also found a solitary Laughing Gull amongst the myriad of Franklin's which was quite a feat. I must confess though that continuing to find places such as this, which were heaving with birds, was comforting in the modern world. The fact that no one else was watching them was either a good thing or a bit worrying. It all depends on your outlook.



## DAY 8.

And so, to the finale. We had just about four hours to collect some more lasting memories of the place, and perhaps a surprise bird or two. True this was not very likely, although on the morning beach-walk I did recover the Snowy Plover of the previous day as well as Hudsonian Godwit. Then we made our way to the Paracas Reserve, a huge sandy waste washed by the Pacific Ocean. As you might imagine what life there was concentrated along the coastline, and so we said our last farewells to Blackish Oystercatchers, Seaside Cinclodes and especially **Inca Tern** –



the whole reason for me being here really. As the usually nailed-on Grey Gull had completely gone to ground (probably a product of El Nino), the only target bird we had was Surfbird. As I had already seen this one as well, I was more taken with a pair of Peru Pacific Iguanas which darted among the trash cans like a couple of dustbin dinosaurs. We drove around a bay to a small port where the birds were incredibly tame: if you didn't get a decent shot of a Peruvian Pelican here you must have been holding your camera the wrong way round. The same also went for Black-crowned Night Heron, Belcher's Gull and a few others, whilst an endless stream of flypast Elegant Terns made another lasting impression. Whilst the others continued their quest for the Surfbird, I sat down on a rock watching the sea roll up the beach and dwelt on the irony of the single Guanay Cormorant also sitting on a rock a few dozen meters off-shore. I didn't totally switch off though, and the occasion scan with my binoculars across the same rocks paid off when something that wasn't a Turnstone or a Spotted Sandpiper (for a change) emerged from the blind side of one such wave washed 'island'. At that moment the leader strolled up behind me to say 'Let's go'. Instead, I pointed out that I thought I'd just seen a Surfbird which, with his 'scope he was able to confirm. It felt good that I was able to extend the birdwatching for the trip by another twenty minutes as the bird played hide and seek whilst everyone tried to get a good look at it. As it was a 'lifer' for at least one of the group I'm sure it meant as much to him as the Inca Tern did to me, and that was a great deal. So it was that what mattered most was the experience of visiting a remote and unique place, with the number of 'ticks' gained a very distant second. If you want to experience that for yourself, I would recommend Peru – perhaps?



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