

## **PERU November 2006**

### **Pauline McKenzie-Lloyd and Sue Morton - January 2007**

As we set off excitement was mixed with some apprehension, as this was my first birding trip outside Europe. But I needn't have worried, everything was taken care of from the moment we got to Sandwich Bay to catch the minibus for Heathrow. No need to even panic about losing the tickets or finding the right car park. A smooth flight to Amsterdam was followed by the longest leg of the trip, to Bonaire in Netherlands Antilles. Grateful to leave the plane for half an hour, we got brief views of airport wildlife; a large Monitor Lizard, Snowy Egret, Brown Pelican, Tropical Mockingbird, Royal Tern and the familiar House Sparrow. On arrival at Lima Airport, we were met by our guide, Eustace Barnes, and were taken to our hotel to catch up on some sleep before a pelagic the next day.

We left land just after dawn on a trip which was memorable for the sheer number of birds seen, of which many were new species for me. When we were well out to sea, a disgusting fishy mixture called Chum was shovelled into the water and this attracted the birds in droves. I stayed at the front of the boat to be near to Eustace and his colleague as they identified the birds. It was a particular joy to see new petrels and get such close views and then, best of all, several Waved Albatross flew quite near to the boat. Humboldt Penguins were also spotted and our route back round Islas Palaminos took us past a massive colony of noisy and smelly Sea Lions.

Next morning we were up very early to catch the 6 a.m. flight to Cusco. From there, we were taken to Huaracarpay Lakes, adding ducks, waders and herons to our growing Peruvian bird list. Swotting up the bird guide really doesn't prepare you for the real thing; the pictures can never do justice to the qualities of Green-tailed Trainbearer, Giant Hummingbird or Bearded Mountaineer! The following day we started our journey down the Manu Road. If I had realised that the road would be so narrow with several thousand feet sheer drop over the edge and the odd waterfall flowing over it, I might have panicked. But with our robust expedition vehicle and our experienced drivers there was no need to worry; besides I was too busy being amazed by the scenery and the wildlife.

We weren't sure what to expect from the campsite at Pillhuata, so when the bus pulled up and Eustace said we had arrived, we looked round expectantly. Slowly it dawned on us that the grassy slope next to the roadside, at present occupied by a small herd of cows, was to be our home for the next two nights. There was a bit of muttering as we went birding but when we returned, our drivers and cooks had worked wonders. All round, tents had sprung up to act as bedrooms, kitchen, dining room and toilet. And what a surprise that the toilet was provided with Andrex 'puppies on a roll', a bit unexpected on a hillside in Peru. Excellent dinners were prepared and served by the light of oil lamps and I cannot praise the two cooks enough, as every meal was tasty and new. In addition, we were supplied with snack bags of goodies between meals, just to keep us going.

We enjoyed our stay in this temperate zone and the number of new birds was hard to keep up with. We saw several species of tanagers, tyrants and hummingbirds, with my favourite for the area being a Great Sapphirewing. It became clear that Eustace was a very skilled birder with a detailed knowledge of the local environment that would prove invaluable on our trip. Next day the camp was expertly packed away and we continued along the Manu Road, stopping frequently to explore the subtropical habitat. We saw our first Golden-headed Quetzals and Golden-bellied Grosbeaks, many new hummingbirds, antwrens and a Versicoloured Barbet. Later we arrived at Cock of the Rock Lodge and sat on the balcony, dazed by the colours and speed of the numerous hummingbirds hovering over the flowers and visiting the feeders, only an arm's length away. Other favourites included the many types of tanager, Squirrel Cuckoo, Screech Owl, Highland Motmot, the weird Umbrella Bird and the unbelievable Lyre-tailed Nightjar. Andean Snipe were certainly heard as, on approach, they sound like a jet engine at full throttle, but they were only seen by a fortunate few. Brown Capuchin Monkeys put on several displays for us, Woolly Monkeys were active nearby and an Agouti came to steal fruit from under the bird table.

Early one morning we visited the Cock of the Rock lek which was quite a spectacle in terms of both sight and sound, but probably our 'star' bird was one we weren't expecting. From the balcony, one of the chaps spotted a large bird of prey flying along the ridge opposite. There was a rush of excitement as it landed on a tree, then through the scope the sheer size and the crest on its head helped identify it as a juvenile Harpy Eagle, a really impressive bird and one not recorded at the Lodge before.

After four nights it was time to continue our journey, gradually descending to areas of more cultivated land. Stopping at a village, we were amazed to find a public telephone that enabled us to make contact with home. Wellies were purchased, which turned out to be a very wise move. We reached a small settlement on the banks of the Madre de Dios River, from where we were taken by boat to Amazonia Lodge. The trip involved having to climb a ladder up a steep muddy bank when disembarking and finally paddling across a stream when the footpath abruptly ended. Fortunately our suitcases were taken up to the Lodge by wheelbarrow and miraculously appeared in our rooms as usual.

We watched the birds from comfortable seats on the veranda. Red-capped Cardinals, a variety of tanagers, Chachalacas and Pale-legged Hornero were regular visitors and nearby was a large colony of bizarre looking Hoatzins. Birding the forest trails was much tougher as the antbirds we were seeking like to lurk in the undergrowth. Eustace had to draw heavily on his reserves of patience to enable as many of us as possible to see the birds. Our second day's walk was quite an adventure as heavy rain the previous week had washed out some of the trails, leaving us to wade along a stream instead. Fine for the tall chaps with big sized wellies, but Sue and I found that the water was quickly over the tops of our boots and we had to squelch along as best we could. For some reason, this amused the rest of the group! However, the discomfort was well worth it for the birds and the views of the Madre de Dios, a tributary of the Amazon.

The next day we awoke to really heavy rain and for several hours we were unable to leave the Lodge as all of the paths were flooded. Brief forays out enabled us to see Swainson's Thrush, Fasciated Tiger-Heron and Amazon Kingfisher, but it was mainly a day for sitting, taking photos and generally relaxing. The following day, water levels had dropped and we climbed a steep forest ridge to reach a canopy hide. I regretted not going right to the top as several new species were seen, but at that point the rain started again and we slipped and slid our way down again, back to the comfort of watching from the veranda.

On leaving Amazonia Lodge, we were reunited with our vehicle and made our way back through the lowland area, seeing a King Vulture when we stopped at the village again. After an overnight stay back at Cock of the Rock Lodge, we climbed steadily to Acjanaco where thick cloud and eventually rain made it difficult to add more than a few species to our total. At last the Inca terraces of Pisac were seen ahead of us and we were back on a 'proper' road again. On reaching Ollantaytambo, we stayed at a comfortable hotel adjacent to the station.

Sue and I got up early the next morning for a walk round the town, accompanied all the way by a local dog. We were nearly left behind as we arrived back at 6.50 a.m. not realising our train would be leaving at 7 a.m. The train passes through spectacular scenery on the way to Machu Picchu and some members of the group amused themselves by counting the number of Torrent Ducks that could be seen in the nearby river. A fleet of modern buses takes visitors from the station to the site and once here, our excellent guide took our minds off birds for a while so that we could appreciate the history and culture of this unique area.

On leaving Machu Picchu, we walked along by the Urubamba River, finding such birds as White-capped Dipper and Torrent Tyrannulet. The train journey back to Cusco was a delight in itself, not only wonderful scenery and Andean Swifts, but also train staff who dressed up to perform in local costume and then gave a fashion show of Alpaca knitwear. Our last night in Peru was marked by dinner at the Inca Grill, where some sampled the Alpaca steak whilst others bravely tried guinea pig, which apparently tastes like duck!

Early next morning we flew back to Lima and experienced a ride across the city in busy traffic, making one long for the peace of the Manu Road. Eventually we reached the fishing village of Pucusana

and following a pleasant lunch in a seafront restaurant, a walk round the harbour gave us views of the rare South American Marine Otter and also Peruvian Seaside Cinclodes, as well as the common, but none-the-less impressive pelicans. An afternoon visit to a marshland reserve on the outskirts of Lima added Peruvian Thick-knee, Killdeer and Great Grebe to our lists, as well as the more homely Peregrine Falcon and Osprey. We were unwilling to leave such an interesting reserve, but eventually had to speed back to the hotel to pick up our luggage for the long flight home.

There are many people to thank for such an enjoyable trip – John for his great organisation, Eustace for his patience and skill in helping us see so many birds, those who worked producing bird lists and planning routes before we even left and our fellow travellers for sharing with us both their telescopes and their very good company. Now, where are we going next time?

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