

**TASTE OF THE TROPICS.** This big-billed beauty is a keel-billed toucan. It is an abundant species throughout much of Central America.

BIRDING IN  
*paradise*

Discover a whole new world  
of birds in the tropics.

Story and photos by David Shaw

After wandering the same piece of Peru's upper Amazonian rainforest for weeks, I finally felt like I had a grasp on the place. Accustomed to the heat, humidity and constant aroma of soil and moisture, I had also learned to block out the white noise of cicadas, katydids and crickets, and instead was hearing the calls of birds and the roar of howler monkeys.

### Expect the Unexpected

I admit I was beginning to feel a little cocky. I knew the common birds by both sight and sound, and felt like I had already observed all of the species present in the area.

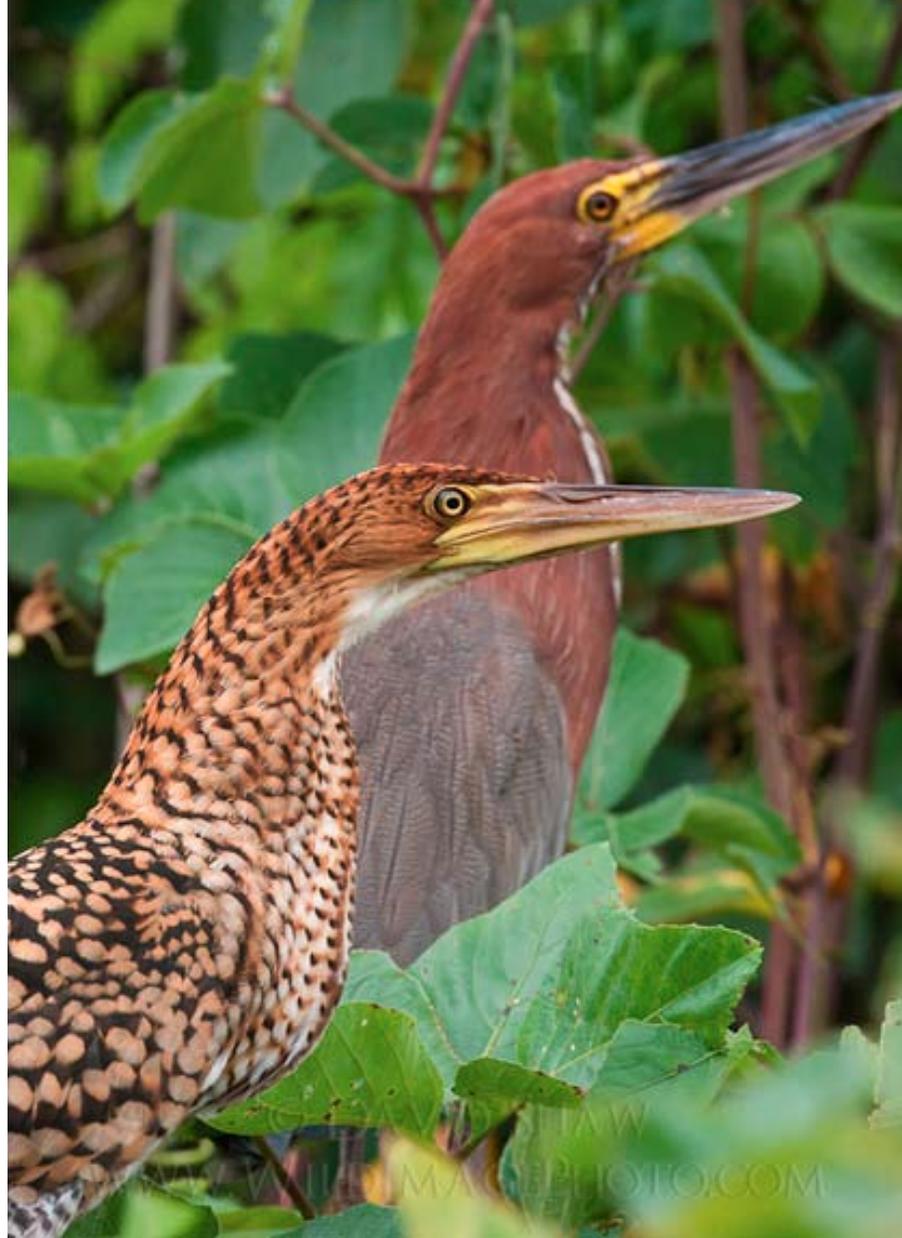
It only took a single call note heard high in the canopy to cut short that notion, along with my growing arrogance. I heard the unexpected call and peered up to search through the maze of backlit branches and leaves. Then, I saw it. Small, short-billed, probably a tanager... whoa! I stopped suddenly.

The bird had ducked into the shade and for a moment was no longer backlit. It had a rainbow of colors. I spotted another bird, and another and another—each one different from the previous. Then there were hundreds, and I was craning my neck painfully, turning, twisting and scrambling along the muddy forest floor to get the best view.

It wasn't just tanagers either—there were woodcreepers up there, too, along with flycatchers, cotingas, antbirds, woodpeckers and furnariids. Each one was new and different, with their field marks and plumages blending into my mind in one confusing avian mishmash. Everything I thought I learned over the past few weeks had flown out the window, and I was lost once again.

#### A WHOLE NEW WORLD OF BIRDS.

A collared redstart (above) in the highlands of western Panama spends its time in the understory layer of the rainforest, which gets minimal sunlight. At right, an adult (back) and a juvenile (front) rufescent tiger-heron perch in a riverside tree in the Yacuma Pampas of Bolivia.



### choosing a tour company

Tour companies with an emphasis on birding seem to be popping up all over the place. We even have a *Birds & Blooms* branded hummingbird tour in Arizona ([countrytours.com](http://countrytours.com)). Do your research with any of these companies. Not all are created equal. Read reviews and compare exactly what you're getting—meals, experiences, guides, etc.

**RAINBOW OF COLORS.** A slaty-tailed trogon boasts bright plumage in the tropical rainforest of southern Veracruz, Mexico.



## A World of Opportunity

The New World Tropics, or Neotropics, are big. Stretching from Mexico to Northern Argentina, the region encompasses a suite of different habitats along the way. Many think of tropical forests and immediately imagine towering lowland rainforests. But there is far more to it.

There are dry forests and seasonal forests, cloud forests, elfin forests and high-altitude Polylepis forests. The list goes on and on. This diversity of habitat has created an incredible array of bird life, along with a fantastic travel opportunity.

The number of species can send a naturalist into sensory overload. On my first visit, with no local guide to lead me or personal experience on which to depend, I felt like someone offered me a giant bowl of mouth-watering ice cream, but forgot to pass the spoon.

Because tropical birding can be so difficult and intimidating, even experienced birders often resort to hiring a guide, or joining an organized tour. Tours can be excellent options. The guides are usually experienced locals who can provide a unique perspective on the places you visit.

While these all-inclusive tours can be expensive, they are definitely worth the price if you're looking for the experience of a lifetime and a chance to see birds in a whole new way.

## Deciding Where to Go

It's difficult and overwhelming to decide on a destination, but doing the research is half the fun. To get you started, we've included a few highlights of great countries for birding. Good luck with your planning.

I never did identify even half of those species flying through the canopy of that Peruvian rainforest. But it didn't matter, I was hooked.

In the years since, I've traveled, guided and conducted research across



**BIRDS OF BOLIVIA.** Above, a pair of James's flamingos wades in a mineral-filled lake in the Altiplano. At right, a bluish-fronted jacamar perches in the rainforest of Madidi National Park. Below, a wattled jacana in the Yacuma Pampas.

the Neotropics, and I still have similar jaw-dropping moments where I'm simply overwhelmed.

I've learned to enjoy those times; they remind me that I don't yet 'know it all' and never will. Somehow, that is all the incentive I need to keep returning to the tropics, and keep my binoculars pointed toward the treetops.

*David Shaw loves birding in unconventional places—the wilder, the better. Madidi National Park in Northern Bolivia tops his list.*



# 7 must-see tropical birding destinations

## SOUTHERN MEXICO

The Yucatan Peninsula, Southern Veracruz, Chiapas and Oaxaca all offer incredible birding opportunities, excellent transportation systems and diverse habitats. This is a large area. If your time is limited, don't try to see it all. In August and September, the world's largest migration of hawks can be seen in Veracruz and is aptly described as a "River of Raptors."

## BELIZE

This small country on the Caribbean coast of Central America is a conservation gem. Despite the deforestation that has run rampant in neighboring countries, more than 75% of Belize remains forested and more than 40% is under formal protection. This means great habitat for birds. Don't miss the primary rainforest of the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary in the southern part of the country.

## JAMAICA

This Caribbean island has around 330 species of birds, not many by Neotropical standards, but a whopping 28 of them are endemic, meaning they occur nowhere else. The pristine forest of Hardwar (pronounced Hardware) Gap is a remote and wild birding highlight.

## COSTA RICA AND PANAMA

The two southernmost countries in Central America have a lot to offer birders, including well-developed tourist infrastructure, large and diverse protected areas, good accommodations and excellent local guides. Check out the highlands of Western Panama for an inviting climate. Here you'll also find strange and wonderful birds like the bare-necked umbrellabird and the resplendent quetzal.

## PERU

The upper Amazonian forests of Southeastern Peru hold the highest number of bird species of any place on the planet. There are many excellent lodges like those run by Manu Nature Tours and the Explorer's Inn. You can also find an assortment of locally operated (and less expensive) options. Birding here can be intimidating and a local guide is worth every dime.

## BOLIVIA

Bolivia is off the beaten path and the tourist infrastructure lags far behind that of other countries in the region. But its natural beauty, intact cultures and friendly people will reward the intrepid traveler. The Chalalan and Mapajo Lodges in Madidi National Park are models for sustainable, community-based ecotourism and the Pampas of the Yacuma River area offers some of the best birding for wetland species in South America.

## BRAZIL

Brazil is too big of a country to squeeze into any one birding trip. But as home to the majority of the great Amazon rainforest, it should not be left off this list. More than 1,800 species make their home in Brazil. Many endemic species can be found in the Atlantic coastal rainforest, while excellent jungle lodges and comfortable boat tours provide access to the Amazon itself.



**DISTINCT LOOK.** Its thick bill and long tail help this smooth-billed ani stand out among the dense, wetland vegetation of the Yacuma Pampas of Bolivia.