

WorldWideWonders



EXPLORING ECUADOR'S PARAMO DEL ANTISANA

ISLANDS IN THE SKY

The barren, high-altitude landscape which lies at the feet of a mighty volcano in the Andes of South America



Paramo landscape at the Antisana Ecological Reserve
High altitude landscape at 4,000 meters with specialized, resilient clump grasses. In the opening spread, the Antisana volcano.



Carunculated Caracara (*Phalcoboenus carunculatus*)

A common raptor and scavenger of the Antisana alpine tundra ecosystem.

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An ideal day excursion from Ecuador's high-altitude capital Quito, the spectacular Antisana Ecological Reserve covers an area of roughly 1.197 square km (296,000 acres), comprising the Antisana volcano itself, the attendant surrounding paramo and the Condor Bioreserve. The Antisana volcano itself is a large, glacier covered stratovolcano located 50 km located SE of Quito, on the eastern margin of the Cordillera Real, at the latitude where the volcanic chain of the Northern Volcanic Zone is widest. The Antisana is one of the largest volcanoes and highest peaks in Ecuador - its complex contains 2 generations of volcanic edifices, an older volcano cut by calderas and eroded by glaciers, and a young cone. The term "paramo", on the other hand, identifies a variety of alpine tundra ecosystems: however, most researchers classify the paramo according to its regional placement in the northern Andes of South America and adjacent southern Central America. The paramo is the ecosystem of the regions above the continuous forest line, yet below the permanent snowline, and of its three recognized zones (superparamo, grass paramo and subparamo, depending on altitude), the one which can be visited at the feet of the Antisana belongs to the middle one. The grass paramo here extends from 3,500 to 4,100 mt (11,500–13,500 ft), and is composed of mostly tussock-grasses and bunch-grasses. This unique high-altitude environment has a very flat, undulating,

barren appearance and a continuous vegetation and plant cover with a year-round yellowish to brown look due to the combination of dead and living grasses, with *Calamagrostis* and *Festuca* tending to dominate this habitat. Other common vegetation includes large and small shrubs, stunted trees, cushion plants, herbs, and rosette plants. Some animals commonly found in paramo ecosystems include the Andean fox, the White-tailed deer, and the Spectacled bear, which occasionally forages in the high paramo looking for its favored food, *Puya* bromeliads. Amphibians have been well documented in paramo ecosystems, including salamanders such as *Bolitoglossa* species and frogs such as *Eleutherodactylus* species. Sixty-nine species of birds are considered to be "total users" of paramo habitats, with 41 species making it their primary habitat. The legendary Andean Condor, a truly gigantic bird, is strictly protected and can be regularly seen here; other bird families in the paramo include eagles, hummingbirds, finches and flycatchers. Paramos are however isolated habitats with a patchy distribution - truly, immense, lonely "islands in the sky". The sensation of isolation here is unique - the wide, endless expanse of the horizon, the clear sky, the incessant wind and the light-headedness induced in most by the high altitude all conspire to make the Paramo del Antisana a destination the true lover of nature and wildlife cannot afford to miss. ●



Glaciers of the Antisana volcano

A rare view of the ice-covered Antisana summit, which is obscured by clouds most of the time.



Paramo landscape at the Antisana Ecological Reserve

High altitude landscape at 4,000 meters, Paramo of the Antisana volcano National Park, the Andes, Ecuador.



Variable Hawk (*Geranoaetus polyosoma*)
One of the most common raptor species found in the barren, wind-swept environment of the Antisana paramo.



Paramo landscape at the Antisana Ecological Reserve
High altitude landscape at 4,000 meters, Paramo of the Antisana National Park.



White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*),
The vast expanses of the paramo offer little concealment to the few large mammals found there.



Andean Teal (*Anas andium*)

The high-altitude lakes of the Antisana paramo host a great number of migratory aquatic birds.



Andean Lapwing (*Vanellus resplendens*)

An ubiquitous species whose unmistakable call echoes on the vast, apparently deserted expanses of the paramo.



White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

At such extreme altitudes this usually wary species can be closely approached - if using some caution and stealth.



High altitude specialized clump grasses
A typical feature of the paramo or South American Andean tundra environment.

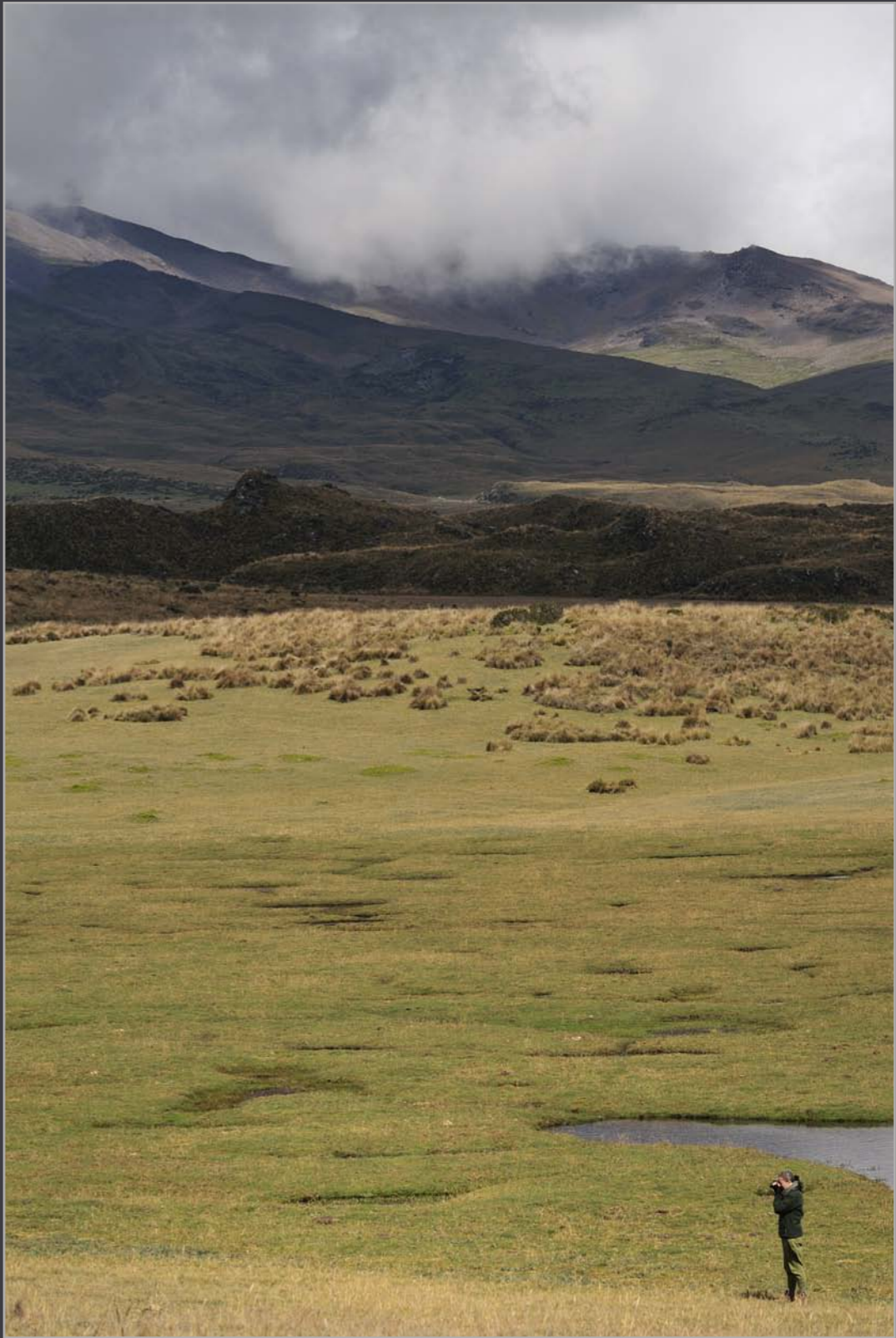


Paramo landscape at the Antisana Ecological Reserve

Photography at such extreme heights requires higher than usual concentration - altitude sickness strikes many visitors.



White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)
Paramo of the Antisana volcano National Park, the Andes, Ecuador.



Paramo landscape at the Antisana Ecological Reserve
The clarity of air here affords stunning, far-reaching vistas.



Andean Condor (*Vultur gryphus*), a rare image of a couple in the wild, with male at right
The uniqueness of this image warrants publication despite its admittedly indifferent quality (Photo Carlos Antonio Rodriguez).



Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*)
Waders and waterbirds are common along the shores of the Andean lakes here.



Glaciers of the Antisana
A rare glimpse of the ice-covered slopes of the volcano.

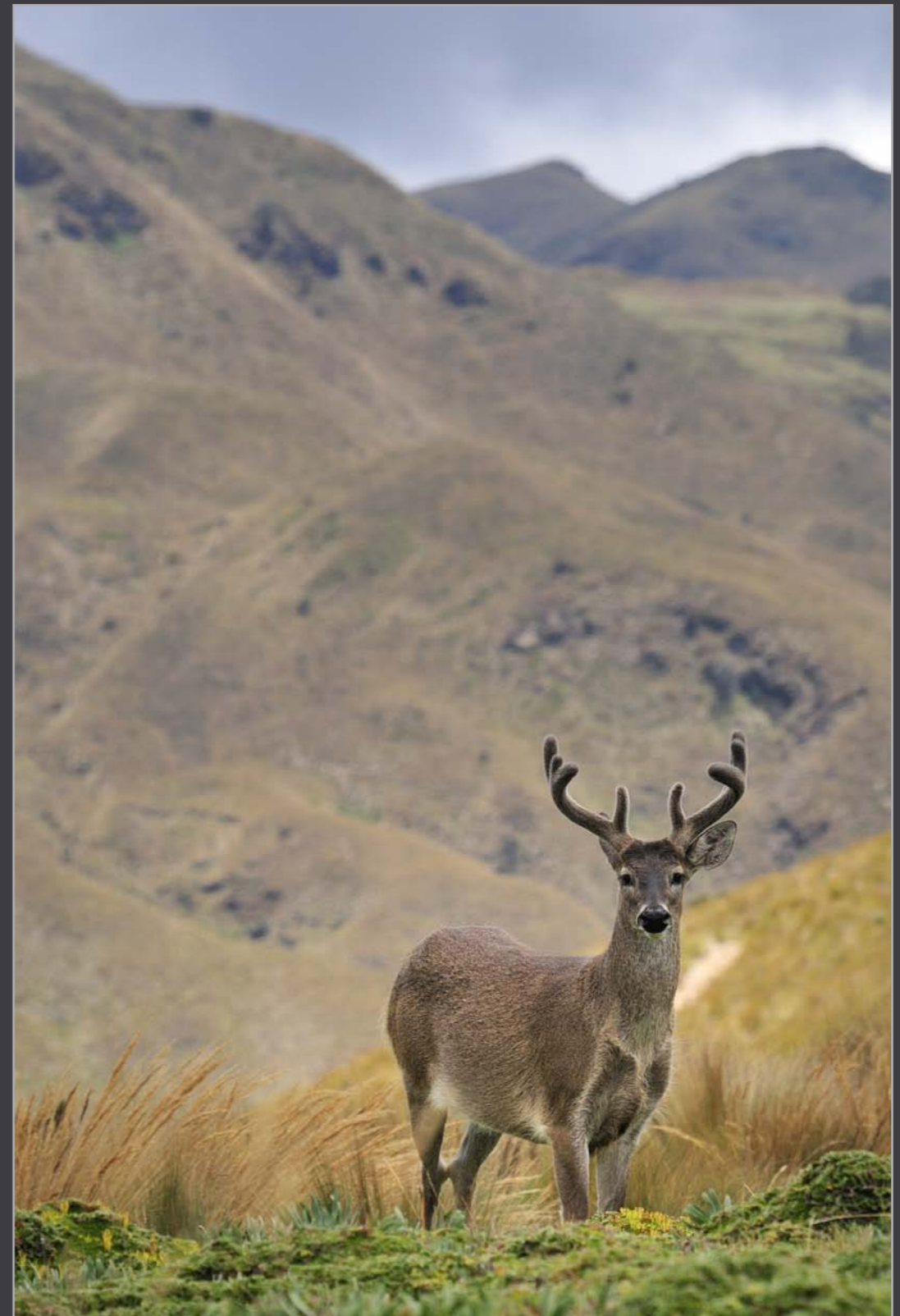


White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

The freezing high-altitude lakes of the Antisana - nestled among semi-barren, wind-swept hillocks - often attract small herds of deer.



Andean Gull (*Croicocephalus serranus*)
Even gull species - surprisingly - can be seen at such high altitudes.



White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)
Large mammals are scarce in the harsh paramo environment.



Chestnut-winged Cinclodes (*Cinclodes albidiventris*)
This unassuming species is feathering its nest. Notice specialized tussock marsh vegetation.

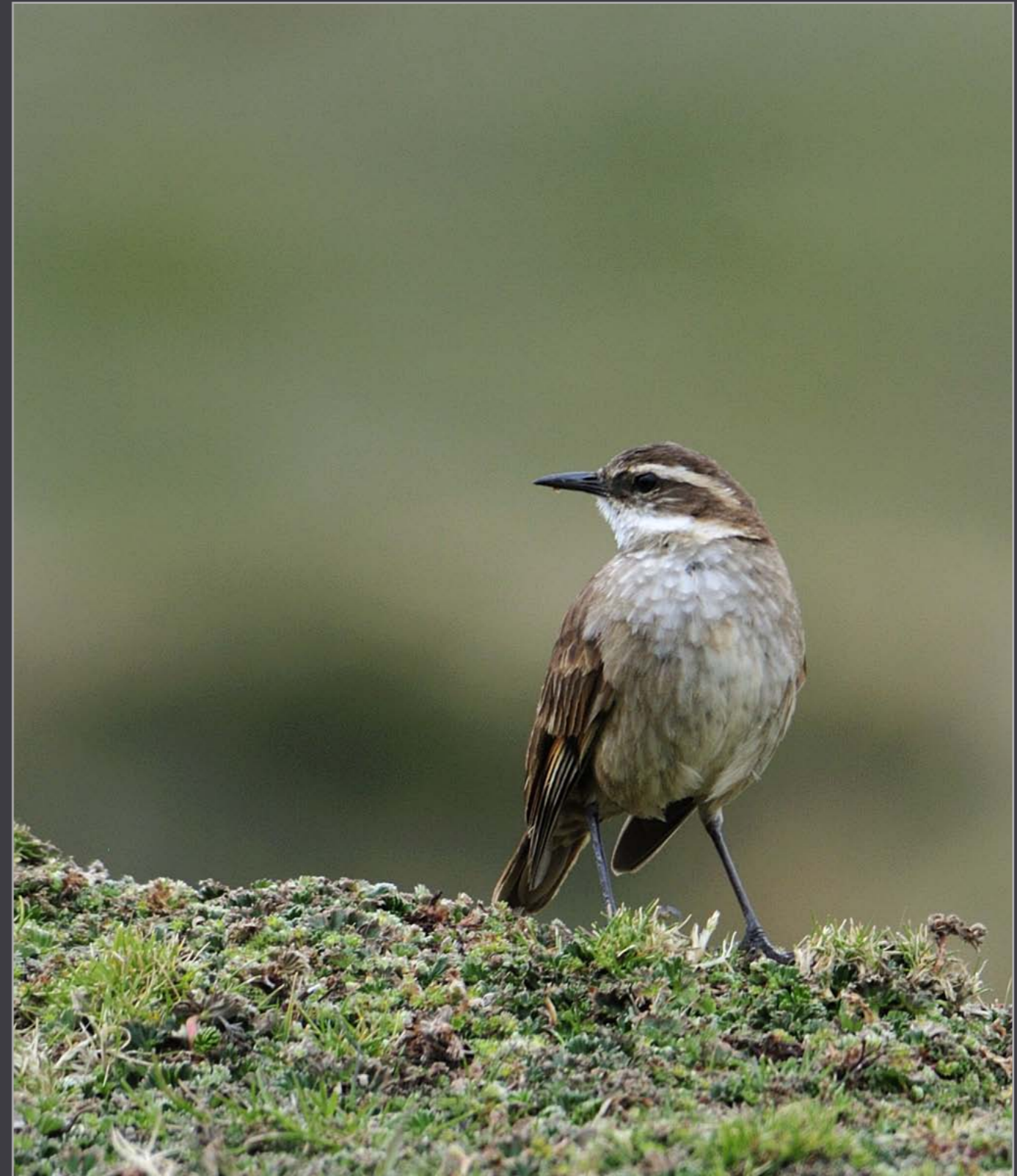


Paramo landscape at the Antisana Ecological Reserve

The Antisana volcano, half-hidden by clouds - towers above the far-reaching horizon of the Andean paramo.



Carunculated Caracara (*Phalacroboenus carunculatus*)
A scroungy-looking juvenile at the Paramo of the Antisana.



Chestnut-winged Cinclodes (*Cinclodes albidiventris*)
A small and unassuming but commonly observed inhabitant of the Antisana paramo.



High altitude specialized vegetation

Hardy *Calamagrostis* and *Festuca* grasses dominate the wind-swept, cold paramo steppes.



Glaciers of the Antisana

The slopes of the volcano are permanently covered in ice and snow.



Andean Condor (*Vultur gryphus*), male in flight

Soaring Condors are commonly seen at the Antisana, but very rarely this close (Photo Carlos Antonio Rodriguez)