

ECUADOR'S CLOUD FOREST HEAVEN
**MEMORABLE
MINDO**

Wonderful accomodation, stunning
landscapes and fascinating fauna
on the Andean western slopes



*Glimpses of winged rainbows
in the cloud forest canopy*



■ Plate-billed
Mountain-toucan
*Andigena
laminirostris*,
montane forest,
Mindo, Ecuador.
On the title
spread, *Pinocchio
anole* *Anolis
proboscis*, male.



■ Green-crowned Woodnymph hummingbird *Thalurania colombica fannyi*, male, Mindo, Ecuador.


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PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

*W*e seldom return twice to the same wildlife photography destination - simply because there's so much to see in the world given our limited amount of time on this planet - so when we do there must be a very good reason for it. We had already been to Mindo, Ecuador, in 2011 (see *Anima Mundi - Adventures in Wildlife Photography* issue 6, April 2012) and we had fallen in love with the place, but when our friend Lucas M. Bustamante of Tropical Herping offered us the opportunity to return there we could not really refuse it. With its astounding natural beauty and biodiversity, Mindo is a delightfully short trip from the capital of Ecuador, Quito, with much to see and do. Nestled into the lush cloudforest, Mindo grew up as a small outpost of scientific researchers interested in Mindo's incredible biodiversity, especially the roughly 350 bird species native to the area. Today Mindo remains a small

community, but it now features a variety of excellent accommodations and restaurants, making it an incredibly pleasant and relaxing place to spend a few days birdwatching, hiking along meandering streams, and enjoying the outstanding local hospitality. Mindo (also known as the Mindo Valley) is a mountainous watershed in the western slopes of the Andes, where two of the most biologically diverse ecoregions in the world meet: the Chocoran lowlands and the Tropical Andes. In this transitional area — which covers an area of 268 square kilometers (103 sq mi) and ranges from 960–3,440 metres (3,150–11,290 ft) above sea level — three rivers (Mindo, Saloya and Cinto) and hundreds of streams irrigate the landscape, which is a patchwork of cloud forests, secondary forests, agricultural land, and human settlements. Politically, Mindo is a collection of rural parishes (Guala,

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 Toucan barbet
Semnornis
ramphastinus,
montane forest,
Mindo,
Ecuador.

Nanegal, Nanegalito, Pacto) that make up the Noroccidental Administrative Zone of Quito Canton, within Pichincha Province in the northern sierra region of Ecuador. The Mindo Valley is among the most heavily visited tourist locations in Ecuador. Nearly 200,000 tourists visit the area annually to enjoy activities such as rafting, tubing, trekking, mountain biking, canyoning, horseback riding, birdwatching, chocolate making and herping. Besides its well-developed tourism infrastructure, it offers several private reserves and lodges known for their montane forests, waterfalls and unique cloud forest biodiversity. Much of the land is privately protected, and an additional 86 square kilometers (33 sq mi) falls within the Mindo-Nambillo Ecological Reserve or Bosque Protector Mindo Nambillo.



Pinocchio anole ■
Anolis proboscis, male,
humid montane forest,
Mindo, Ecuador.

■ Andean cock-of-the-rock
Rupicola peruvianus,
male displaying
on lek.



BIRDWATCHING IN MINDO

Home to over 350 species of birds, Mindo is one of the most gratifying places in Ecuador for birdwatching. Just outside of Mindo proper, the Bosque Protector Mindo-Nambillo and the Amigos de la Naturaleza de Mindo boast incredible varieties of hummingbirds and other species. Among the birds native to Mindo are the rare and exotic cock-of-the-rock, the toucan-barbet, and the golden-headed quetzal. Partially because the scientific community has a considerable presence in Mindo, birdwatching tours here are usually very successful. At a considerably lower altitude than Quito, Mindo's climate is milder than the climate in Quito and other Andean cities. Generally temperatures range from 15°C – 24°C (60°F – 75°F) all year, with no real rainy or dry seasons, although it tends to be driest from May through September. Mindo is also one of those fortunate and rare places where a network of private

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■ Masked trogon *Trogon personatus*, male offering caterpillar to female during courtship.



■ Left, Violet-tailed Sylph *Aglaiocercus coelestis*; top right, Green-crowned Woodnymph hummingbird *Thalurania colombica fannyi*; bottom right, Empress brilliant hummingbird *Heliodoxa imperatrix*, female.



■ Osborne's
Lancehead Pit-
viper *Bothrops
osbornei* sitting
in ambush by
a forest trail,
Septimo
Paraiso.





Green-crowned
Woodnymph
hummingbird
*Thalurania
colombica fannyi.*

properties accessible to the public interconnect seamlessly to conserve the existing habitat. Most of the local lodges feature their own private forest preserve, and lots of wonderful observations can be made just by leisurely strolling along the property itself, without the need to stray afar deep into the forest. One of these lodges is the well-known, award-winning and highly recommended Septimo Paraiso Cloud Forest Reserve, which is where we stayed this time.

SEPTIMO PARAISO FOREST RESERVE

Septimo Paraiso Cloud Forest Reserve is a beautiful private protected area, created in 2001, with the aim of saving and preserving the forest and the diverse ecosystems that are contained within it. It is managed by the Green Mindo Foundation, which is in charge of the conservation and the study of its 420 hectares of pre-montane and montane cloud forest. The Reserve has one of the largest bird counts of the north-western area of Pichincha, with 328 species of birds. Several species of mammal have been observed here, such as puma, spectacled bear, black howler monkey, capuchin monkey, Andean coati, armadillos, white tailed and brocket deer and two-toed sloth to name just a few. Also an incredible

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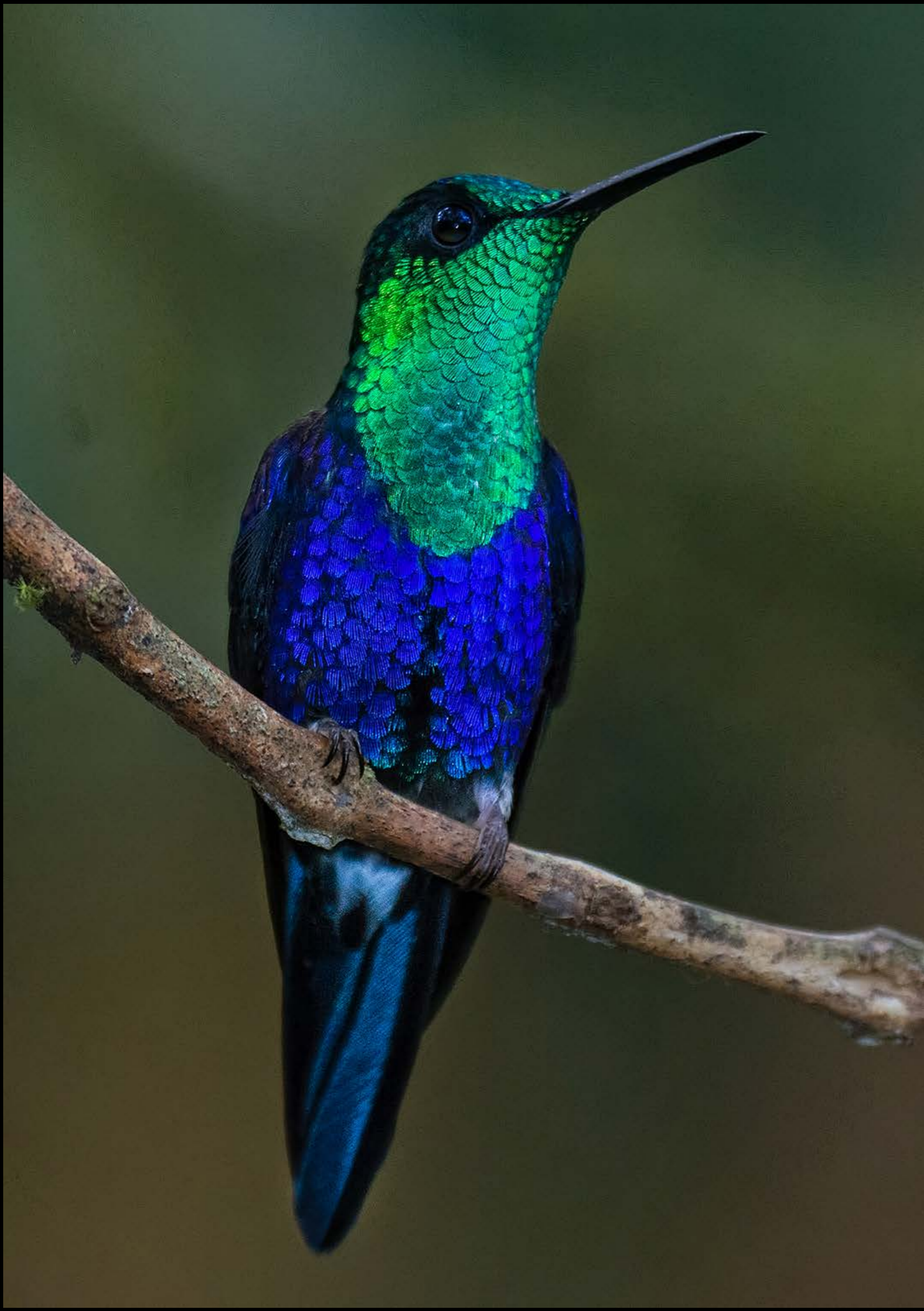


■ Left, Masked trogon *Trogon personatus*, male with tick infestation; right, Andean cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruvianus*, male displaying on lek.





Violet-tailed Sylph ■
Aglaiocercus coelestis.



■ Far left,
 Green-crowned
 Woodnymph
 hummingbird
*Thalurania
 colombica
 fannyi*, male.
 Left, Empress
 brilliant
 hummingbird
*Heliodoxa
 imperatrix*,
 male.

number of reptile and amphibian species had been spotted, plus an overwhelming number of plant species. The altitude within the reserve drastically changes from 950 meters to 1650 meters above sea level. In addition, the isolation of the region has created one of the most delicate, but rich and complex ecosystems known in the Mindo region. Most of the hummingbird photos featured in this article have in fact been taken on the Septimo Paraiso grounds, a few meters from the lodge's entrance, and this is possibly the best place in Mindo to also find and photograph the near-legendary Pinocchio anole, plus a variety of other reptiles. Another outstanding - and quite different - spot for bird photography is the Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve, which is sited at a higher elevation and which can be reached with a short car drive up Mindo's winding hill roads.

BELLAVISTA CLOUD FOREST RESERVE

First founded in 1991, the Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve is a 2,000-acre (8.1 square kms) certified conservation area. The lodge itself comprises guest rooms, 10 km of walking trails and the four storey geodesic dome, which contains a restaurant, viewing platforms and further accommodation. The area won the Audubon Christmas Bird Count for the Americas in 2006, 2007, and 2008. The Bellavista Reserve is also a

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Neotropical Red Squirrel ■
Sciurus granatensis.

Plate-billed
Mountain-toucan
Andigena laminirostris.





Top left, Great Thrush *Turdus fuscater*; ■
top right, Montane Woodcreeper
Lepidocolaptes lacrymiger;
bottom left, Slate-throated Whitestart
Myioborus miniatus, with moth prey;
bottom right, White-winged brush finch
Atlapetes leucopterus.



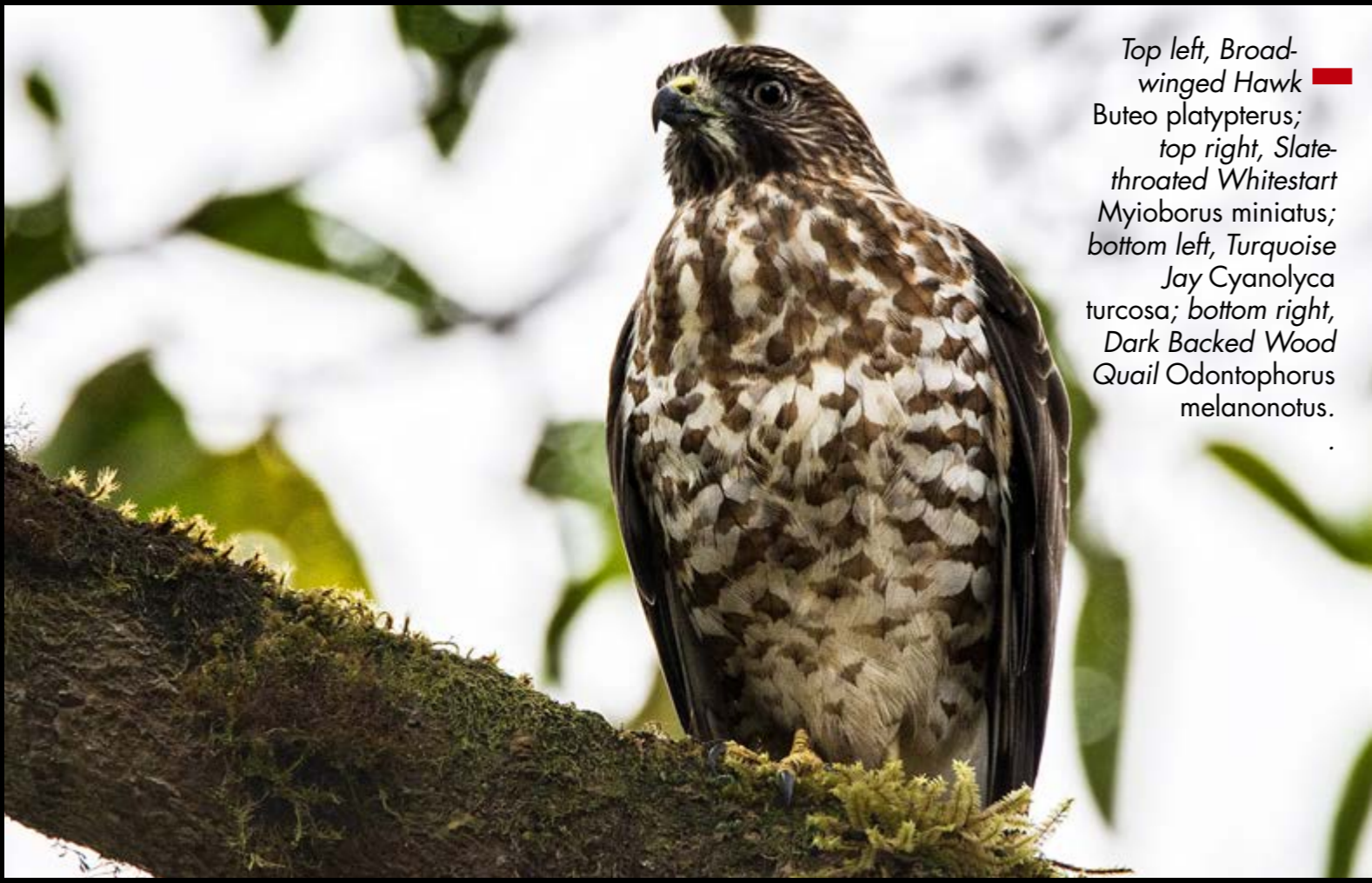


Blue-winged ■
mountain tanager
Anisognathus somptuosus.

*Tiny fluttering iridescent
jewels of the air*




■ Green-crowned
Woodnymph hummingbird
Thalurania colombica
fannyi, male.



Top left, Broad-winged Hawk 
Buteo platypterus;
top right, Slate-throated Whitestart
Myioborus miniatus;
bottom left, Turquoise Jay
Cyanolyca turcosa; bottom right,
Dark Backed Wood Quail
Odontophorus melanonotus.





 *Pinocchio anole* Anolis proboscis, male.

founding member of the Network of Private Protected Forests of Ecuador Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve is in the northern section of the Andes which runs through Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador and consists of two parallel ranges, the Cordillera Occidental and the Cordillera Oriental. The cloud forests of Ecuador - pre-montane/subtropical rainforests - cover the slopes of the Andean mountains from about 900 meters to about 2500 meters. They are forests of high biodiversity, with a variety of little-studied wildlife and plants. The cloud forest is a cool and humid environment with frequent canopy level cloud cover. The Bellavista Reserve is situated at the southern edge of the Chocó/Andean biodiversity hotspot areas which stretch from south western Colombia to northwestern Ecuador. The existence of the hotspots lead to the Bellavista Reserve being declared part of the Mindo Area of International Importance for Birds, the first area so designated in South America, by Birdlife International in 1997. Furthermore, the diversity of epiphytes ("air plants" that grow on other plants) is higher in the cloud forests of Ecuador, Colombia and Peru than anywhere else on the planet, and many orchid species are also found in the Bellavista Reserve. These plants grow in both east and

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Sparkling violetear hummingbird *Colibri coruscans.*



■ Left,
Violet-tailed Sylph
Agelaiocercus
coelestis;
right, *Toucan*
barbet Semnornis
ramphastinus.





*The cloud forest
of the Mindo Valley.*



Left, Buff-
tailed Coronet
hummingbird
*Boissonneaua
flavescens*; right,
Masked trogon
Trogon personatus,
male with moth prey.





■ Neotropical Red Squirrel
Sciurus granatensis.

west tropical and subtropical zones of Ecuador, and only a very few are able to grow in mild or cold zones. The majority of orchids live on trees, as epiphytes, where they can receive heat, light and moist tropical air; others prefer rocks semi-covered with moss, and other orchids grow only at ground level. Within Ecuador 4200 species of orchid have been found, more than 10% of all orchid species worldwide. Bellavista is home to a huge variety of bird species. Hummingbirds are seen particularly often in and around the reserve, with sighted species including the lesser violetear, buff-tailed coronet, sparkling violetear, gorgeted sunangel, Andean emerald, purple-bibbed whitetip, speckled hummingbird, white-booted racket-tail, violet-tailed sylph and purple-throated woodstar. Species such as the tanager-finch, giant antpitta, swallow-tailed nightjar, plush-capped finch, beautiful jay, and white-faced nunbird are also seen, as well as the plate-billed mountain-toucan and toucan barbet. The Andean cock-of-the-rock is also frequently spotted at the nearby lek,

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■ Top left, Spring robber frog *Pristimantis crenunguis*; top right, a mosquito feeds off the head of a rare Osborne's Lancehead Pit-viper *Bothrops osbornei*. Bottom left, Golden Tanager *Tangara arthus goodsoni*; bottom right, Central American agouti *Dasyprocta punctata*.





*Fast-flitting gems of the
neotropical cloud forest*

■ Western emerald
hummingbird
*Chlorostilbon
melanorhynchus*.


Purple-throated
Woodstar hummingbird
Calliphlox mitchellii;
right, Mist Whorltail
lizard *Stenocercus*
varius.





Velvet-purple ■
coronet hummingbird
Boissonneaua jardini,
male flicking
its long tongue.



Left,  Buff-tailed Coronet hummingbird
Boissonneaua flavescens;
right, another Buff-tailed Coronet hummingbird
Boissonneaua flavescens.

where the males and females gather to breed. Mammals seen in the reserve area include the endangered spectacled bear, as well as puma, Andean coati and tayra. The Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve has its own research station available for students and scientists to study all aspects of the cloud forest ecosystem. The Bellavista Reserve is currently used as an active research base for the Payamino Project, which was initiated in 2002, through a partnership between San Jose de Payamino (an Indigenous community in the Ecuadorian Amazon), Zoos Go Wild and Aalborg Zoo, in order to protect the wildlife and culture of the area. The project is supported by a number of universities, including Glasgow and Manchester in the UK and Aarhus and Aalborg in Denmark. These universities run expeditions and field courses and also have post-graduate students carrying out research. The number of studies taking place in the area has grown recently to now cover the birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects and mammals of the Payamino area. Ornithological surveys have been conducted in the area since 2000 and have so far registered more than 260 species of bird. To date, amphibian surveys have revealed that the area has at least 60 native species of frog. ●





Booted Racket-tail ■
Ocreatus underwoodii -
a very tiny but
truly spectacular
hummingbird species.



Western emerald hummingbird
Chlorostilbon melanorhynchus.



■ *Green-crowned
Woodnymph
hummingbird
Thalurania
colombica fannyi.*



■ Left, Pinocchio anole *Anolis proboscis*, male, at Septimo Paraiso; right, Masked trogon *Trogon personatus*, male with grasshopper prey, at Bellavista.





Left, Violet-tailed Sylph *Agelaiocercus coelestis*; right, Montane Woodcreeper *Lepidocolaptes lacrymiger*.



*One of the most sought-after
birdwatching subjects*

■ Andean cock-of-
the-rock *Rupicola
peruvianus*, male
displaying on lek.





Plate-billed ■
Mountain-toucan
Andigena laminirostris.