

## **Ecuador May 2019**

### **Independent Birding Trip - Quito and Surrounds**

There was a lot of outdated information on the various websites, trip reports and books I used for my trip, so this report from May 2019 just serves to assist with providing an update on locations, access and contacts rather than what you will find at those locations.

We hired an SUV for the duration of the trip and were able to access places more easily than if we were dependant on other forms of transport.

Note: If you are self-driving, don't trust Google Maps navigation to get you to rural places. More likely to get you lost on the wrong road.

Cell Phone - Claro is far better than Movistar for both reception in rural places and understanding of recharge packages.

#### **Antisana:**

Altitude 3100 – 4050 meters

Just outside of Quito this is a great place for high altitude species and especially for Condor. There is a breeding colony on the cliffs opposite the Tambo Condor restaurant. Easily visible from the dining area.

We also stayed in their lodging for the night, it's a bit of a steep hike - 320 metres below the restaurant (especially as you are at 3500 meter altitude).

But once there, you have spectacular vistas from the balcony over the gorge below and the Condors nesting on the opposite cliffs.

To get to Antisana take the road through the town of Pintag and then look for the sign that says Reserva Antisana & Lake Mica

There's a section of extremely bad road where they are mining, but after that it's easy access on a good road up to the Volcano and Lake areas.

Tambo Condor is easily located on this road too, not too far from where you enter the actual reserve.

The reserve entrance is gated and guarded so you need to sign in. No entry fee. Opened from 8AM to 5PM

Lake Mica also has a guarded hut, you have to show your passport once again and sign in. There are toilets on site.

The speciality water birds area is fairly easily to view just a hundred or so meters further on at the edge of the lake. I did not need a scope to see them.

#### **Antennas:**

Altitude 4060 - 4370 meters

Part of the Cayambe-Coca Nature Reserve and is gated and manned. Opening hours 8AM to 5PM.

Coming from Quito look out for the Virgin roadside shrine. The entrance road is right opposite, but tricky to spot or enter. Best to stop at the Virgin and find a gap to safely cross over and get onto this road.

50 meters or so onto this road it forks, take the right hand fork up to the guard house a short drive from here.

No entrance fee, show your passport and sign in with the guard. Toilets are available and there are some handmade souvenirs for sale.

The 3.6 kilometre road up to Antennas is unpaved and poor in a few places. Near the top, go past the main parking area and the mirador (view point) right up to the actual Antennas. From there there's a footpath leading further upwards to the highest Antennas.

The main Seedsnipe area is on the left of this footpath. Walk up this footpath for 50 – 100 meters and you have several good vantage points to scout down onto the area below. There is also a trail going down, so you can also hike down into this area and beyond. Due to the altitude you need a very decent level fitness to explore further afield. Weather is very changeable.

### **Papallacta:**

Altitude 3250 – 3700 meters

The road to reserve above the town is gated. Opening hours 8AM to 3PM

Get an entrance ticket at the guarded Papallacta Hotel & Spa baths entrance, the road to the Caymbe-Coca reserve starts from just after the Hotel Spa parking area.

This 5 kilometre road is unpaved and very poor in a few places with landslides and rock falls likely. You will need at least an hour to drive it one way.

The rangers station and toilets are located at the top of the road which is the entrance to the 1 kilometer Cascada Milagrosa walking trail.

### **Guango Lodge:**

Altitude 2700 meters

Opens at 7h30 for day visitors, just ring the gate bell. Entrance for day visitor is \$5 p.p for 3 hours. (Not very strict on the time limit if you happen to stay longer on the trails).

The Lodge entrance is 10 kilometers down from Papallacta, easily spotted on the right just after crossing the river Guango bridge.

Self guided walks, they will give you a map and supply wellingtons too. Distances on the map can be deceptive and further than you think, I found the best birding quite close to the lodge.

Hummingbirds feeders are great especially if it's raining.

You can have breakfast by arrangement, but at \$13 p.p it's way expensive for a very basic and uninspired meal.

Good response on WhatsApp +593999246899 – Speaks English

### **Pululahua:**

Well worth a visit into the crater. There is only a footpath entrance from the Mirador viewpoint

To drive down you need to take the unpaved road just before the town of Calacali. The road looks like it's just access to some factories and it's easy to miss the sign.

There is a manned gate just as you come into the reserve area where you have to show your passport and sign in. You need at least an hour to drive into the crater. The road is fairly good and quiet.

We stayed at the Pululahua Hostal Ecolodge. Renato the owner is a birder with excellent local knowledge and he's also given a web presence to some smaller birding ventures that are excellent to visit.

Bird along the road in and out of the crater, best time is in the morning. On the way to the Hostal at the bottom of the crater, just past the farmlands and close to the volcanic lava

mound, there is a narrow footpath that goes down to the farmlands below. This is a good Antpitta and birding location. 20 meters further along the road on the right is a spot you can pull over with an open gallery viewpoint.  
You can WhatsApp Renato +593991914333

### **Mindo Town & Surrounds**

Altitude 1280 – 1540 meters

#### **Yellow House & Trails:**

Hacienda San Vincente's entrance is situated just off the town square and then up a drive on top of a hill overlooking Mindo.

You can either stay there, which includes the trails, or pay an admission of \$6.

From the house there's quite a steep main trail / road that goes through farmland and Guava orchards for 1.8 km up to where the forest trails start.

This main trail / road continues for another 1 kilometer passing entrances and exits of the side-shoot looping trails 1, 2 and 3.

So it's 2.88 km from the house to the start of trails 4 and 5 if you stay on the main one with an elevation change of 240 meters.

Doing trails 1, 2 and 3 from the house and back again is 6.7 km and will take a minimum of 4 hours walking.

At the entrance to trail 3 that leads to an observation point, there is a toilet.

At the main house there are Hummingbird & Tanager feeders for staying guests. Lots of Agouties in the gardens and a natural swimming hole to have a dip.

#### **Mindo Real:**

A very good choice if you want another "birder friendly" accommodation option to stay in Mindo. It's owned by close relatives of the Yellow House family, one of the original settlers to the area.

Situated only 700 meters outside the town in 2 acres of lush gardens with plenty birds and bordering on the river where there's also a breeding Dipper. If you travel with non-birders this place is ideal to please both sides.

Maria, the owners daughter can speak English and help you make outward travel arrangements if needed.

#### **Via de las Cascadas:**

From the yellow and red metal bridge it's 3.5 km uphill to the Tarabita Cable Car that takes people across to visit the Cascada Nambillo.

If driving, there's a huge parking space at the Tarabita lookout. From there you can bird the unpaved and fairly quiet road going back down to town through forest.

This top section of the road is more forested with a easy incline. Bird parties can be found quite frequently.

There's also a Cock of the Rock lek and 2 km walking trail called Reserva Las Tangaras +593969824972 – You have to call and pay for entrance. I did not walk the trail nor call this number, so can't vouch if it's working.

**Alambi:**

Altitude 1480 Meters

\$5 entrance for day visitors. Hummingbird feeders are exceptional. They use 36 liters a day to keep them going.

**The Old Road:**

From Alambi this fairly good unpaved road climbs up past Tandayapa and Pacha Quindi to Bellavista at 2240 meters and then down again past Birdwatchers House to meet the main road just a few kilometers before the Mindo turnoff.

**Avez de la Paz:**

Altitude 1670 – 1900 (Entrance to Lodge – Antpittas are slightly higher up)

\$35 - \$40 for day visitors. That includes a very nice breakfast.

You meet at the Cock-of-the-Rock lek at 6AM. This area is also where the “tame” Wood-Quails are.

Coming from Mindo allow at least 1 hour to get there.

The turnoff road to Aves is exactly 13 kilometers from the turnoff to Mindo on the right, it's on a sharp bend so easy to miss as the sign is not prominent coming from that direction in the dark.

The access road can be very bad in places with possible landslides after heavy rain.

Take this unpaved road for 1 kilometer and park on the road when you see a house up on the left.

Then walk and look for a small footpath leading into the forest on the righthand side of the road. The Lek entrance is through a gate a short distance down, but the guides will meet you on the road.

The actual Aves de la Paz lodge is another 3 kilometers further up the road driving from the lek. (4.3 kilometers from the main road) The road is especially bad where it crosses the river as there is mining going on there. After rain you might not get in without a 4x4.

**Mashpi Amagusa:**

Altitude 750 – 1700 meters

This is a must visit if you want to see some otherwise rare and confined Choco species.

Glistening Green Tanager, Moss Backed Tanager, Rufous Throated Tanager, Indigo Flowerpiercer, Orange Breasted Fruiteater, Choco Vireo, Yello Collared Chlorophonia, Yellow Bellied Siskin, Tricoloured Brushfinch, White Tipped Sicklebill , Empress Brilliant etc

Coming from Mindo to Nagelito take the Tulipe road turnoff to Pacto. It's the same turnoff as to the Oilbird Caves from the main road.

From the town of Pacto follow the big Mashpi Lodge sign boards along a very rough & unpaved road through another two villages until you eventually get to the Mirador Mashpi lookout point where the clearly marked turnoff is.

Amagusa is located another kilometer on the left, a few hundred meters before the gated entrance to Mashpi Lodge on the same road.

If there's no one there, park your car at the Reserva Amagusa sign and go through the gate onto a footpath that leads down to the buildings and then around to the right and up again to the feeders.

If it's early and there's no one at the feeders, just hang around watching the birds until they eventually appear.

The property owner's son Sergio Basantes and his wife Doris have superb knowledge of all the birds and can guide you to the other good locations within short walking distance.

At the main feeders there is also a "tame" and cheeky Tayra (Giant Weasel) that pinches the feeder bananas.

Entrance to the feeders is \$10 per person. I paid another \$10 for a morning's guided tour.

There are apparently plans afoot for lodging too.

Sergio is available on WhatsApp - +593981183057 (Only speaks Spanish)

### **El Chontal Oil Bird Caves:**

Elevation 700 meters

Coming from Mindo to Nagelito take the Tulipe road turnoff for 13 kilometers, go through Tulipe and continue until you see a Y turnoff for El Chontal on your right.

There's no sign for El Chontal but on the fork of the turnoff is a place called Café de Quito.

From there it's exactly 17 kilometers on mostly unpaved road and through several villages to the entrance of the farm.

At the farm Hugo Morales or one of the family will hop into your transport to take you 5.4 km further down the road to the gated entrance of the Oilbird Caves.

You basically drive right up to the entrance of the cave / narrow gully that is a roosting site for approx 15 – 25 birds and walk about 20 metres up the steps alongside a cascade of water.

You can get very close to some of them and it's only sensible to avoid flash photography and minimize disturbance.

Entrance fee is \$10 per person paid to whoever takes you to the location.

You can contact Hugo via WhatsApp +593982671837 to let him know what time you're coming. Late AM early PM is good. (Only speaks Spanish)

### **Milpe:**

Elevation 1020 – 1150 Meters

A short hop from Mindo and situated just before Los Bancos ( km91) on the right and then a 0.7 km drive up the unpaved access road to the gate.

Parking, reception, cafeteria, toilets and bird feeders as you enter. Loads of walking trails, ask at reception for guidance if you're after something specific.

I found the trail map a bit confusing (i.e. what's written on the map isn't on the trail) and it's also hard to actually follow the various trails as they intersect. Some of the trails can be very steep and muddy.

A short drive further up the road is the Milpe Botanical station with more trails – all included in the admission fee.

If you going on to Rio Silanche, get a 3 day pass for \$22 p.p. This includes access to all their reserves in the area.

### **23 de Junio Umbrella Bird Lek:**

Altitude 1100 – 1420

From Los Bancos take the left hand road the goes down to the river and valley below the town, at the Y keep left, go over the river bridge and up again till you see a turnoff on your left with a Birdwatching signpost.

From the main road turnoff it's 6.8 km down a fairly good unpaved road to the 23 de Junio village and Luis's place which is the first house just after the church on the left.

He has rooms for overnight accommodation from £45 (no hot water) and that includes meals and his expert guiding services in the afternoon and next morning.

The Umbrellabird lek is a further 4.6 km drive + 750 meter walk from his house high on a hill overlooking the surrounding forest.

About 16 – 20 male birds gather here early every morning to call and display with the slight hope of attracting one of the 4 female birds in the area.

Signal is very poor in this area so it's best to phone the land line.

Luis Ajila – Home +59323612919 / Movil +593990639057 (Only speaks Spanish)

### **Rio Silanche:**

Elevation 330 - 430 meters

From Los Bancos take the road down to Pedro Vincente Maldonado, you bypass this town (look out for the many many speed bumps) .

The turnoff to Silanche is actually just after km 126 (not 127) where there are a few roadside stalls and shops.

From the main road turnoff it's just under 7 kilometers to the entrance along a fairly good unpaved road.

Just past the mines there's a great bit of riparian forest on the left and also a big tree with open gallery right alongside the road on the right. I saw loads of species at this location coming back from Silanche.

Carrying on, when you get to a Y in the road +- 4.5 km's, take the right hand road.

There's some good observation points overlooking the forest on the road just before getting to Rio Silanche.

If you arrive before 9 / 10am and the gate is closed don't worry, just open it and go in. The Wardens that look after the site and nursery have to travel in daily from afar and only get there when they can.

The nursery and wardens building is straight ahead about 100 meters. Just before that on the left is a short drivable track to the observation tower.

The tower is really good to spot flying and canopy birds. Some guides use it to tape in birds.

There are three forest walking trails. Two starting from the tower. The one on the left is a short 0.35 km loop. The one on the right (if you keep bearing right) is 1.2 km coming out by the nursery again.

The third trail starts diagonally across the main road where trail 2 meets it, and is a loop of 0.76 km (steeper than the other trails).

Just walk the trails and hopefully you will hook into a feeding party at some point.

### **Mangaloma:**

No answer on any of the phone numbers or email. Presumed closed when we tried.

We even drove up to the lodge gate (5 km down an unpaved road) rang the bell from the main gate, but it was all firmly shut.

Don't go there unless you can get hold of them.