

ECUADOR | NATURE SPOT

Bird watchers delight in Mindo Cloud Forest

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Ecuador's rare birds and lush countryside are a nature lover's dream



The Yellow House Lodge is set on the slopes of the Andes Mountains near Mindo, Ecuador. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

Clouds cling to forested hills, cloaking jungle-like growth in a perpetual damp blanket.

Moisture nourishes a rich diversity of life from flowering bromeliads on moss-encrusted trees to giant ferns, rare orchids, butterflies galore and a staggering number of birds.

The Mindo Cloud Forest is on the slopes of the Andes Mountains in Ecuador, two hours west of Quito, and a stone's throw from the equator.

Only a couple thousand people live in Mindo town, but it has become one of the top nature viewing and bird watching spots in South America.

We settle into the Yellow House Lodge on a hillside just outside town. The yard is a riot of colour with flowering amaryllis, plumeria, ginger, banana plants and poinsettias the size of small trees.

Birds include everything from parrots to toucans, cuckoos, warblers and iridescent flashes of every colour imaginable from constantly buzzing hummingbirds.

Ecuador has over 130 species of hummers (Canada has five), and we see several at once each morning at the lodge's feeders. It's mesmerizing to watch them jostling for positions at the feeders and darting around so fast that it's tough to take photos.

The lodge is part of a small farm: a few cattle, dairy and a yard full of chickens that make alarm clocks redundant.

Owner Maria Elena Garzon and her daughters use farm produce for our breakfast, including fresh eggs, juice from various fruit trees in the yard, even coffee from locally grown beans.

Out our back door, a path leads to a network of walking trails through heavily forested hills where a large section of the farm has been preserved in its natural state.

Another highlight is our trip to the Paz farm. Angel Paz is one of eight brothers who lived on a poor subsistence farm where they logged the forest to sell wood and clear land for grazing.

When Angel discovered several rare birds on his land, he and his brother, Rodrigo, turned their attention to tourism and conservation.

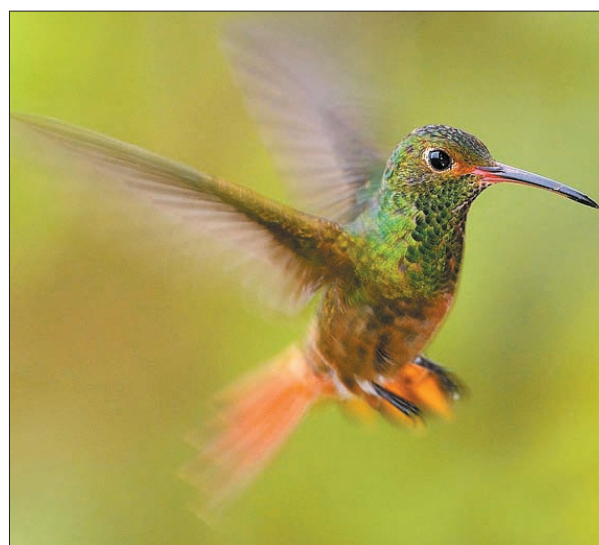
Now Refugio Paz de las Aves (Paz's bird refuge) is on the must-see list for bird nerds visiting Ecuador. After years of hard work, the brothers found that they could make a better living by preserving the forest rather than cutting it down.

Angel picks us up in Mindo at 5 a.m. There's no sleeping in when birds set the schedule.

The 40-minute drive takes us down a rough hilly road with more rocks than gravel.

We arrive just as the sun comes up and immediately head along the damp trail to a viewing platform hidden in thick bush.

At daybreak most mornings, the fire engine red male Andean Cock of the Rock flies around here to impress



Nature enthusiasts can catch a glimpse of hummingbirds like the Empress Brilliant, top, Collared Inca, left and Rufous-tailed, right.

females. Before long, we see brilliant scarlet flashes streak by as a half dozen birds dart through the branches. When they settle down, we see their strange bulbous heads that look like two dark eyes stuck on a big ball of red fluff.

Angel leads us along paths where he calls birds out of the forest. He imitates several birdcalls, but sometimes it's simply "venga, venga," Spanish for "come here."

When calling fails, Angel turns to his secret weapon, a can of worms. Dropping a few juicy crawlies suddenly brings out a Giant Antpitta, an extremely rare and reclusive forest bird almost never seen in the wild.

Later, we see more rare species of antpittas, unusual wood quails, and another dazzling array of hummingbirds, some completely different from those in nearby Mindo.

More than just seeing rare birds, it's a chance to wander through exotic countryside with someone who grew up there, knows every special spot and enthusiastically shares it with visitors.

It brings a whole new meaning to the term farm diversification.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.



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