

# The Northern Peru Birding Route: Introduction





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## The Northern Peru Birding Route

**One expects the tropics to be biologically diverse - no surprise there, but one area of the world compresses so much diversity and endemism into such a relatively small area that superlatives quickly become redundant. And while the very word Peru conjures up images of ancient fortresses, rainforests and friendly folk, these images do not convey the realities, complexities and sheer beauty of northern Peru.**

North Peru consists of eight political departments, now called Regions; from north bordering Ecuador, south along the coast we have Tumbes, Piura, Lambayeque and La Libertad, then Cajamarca and Amazonas straddling the Andes, and finally San Martin and Loreto in the eastern lowlands. The Andes are relatively low in northern Peru, with the additional quirks of the inter-Andean valleys of the Huancabamba, Utcubamba and Marañón rivers. This complex topography and the influence of oceanic currents has resulted in many ecosystems which blend into each other and the evolution of many highly geographically-restricted bird species, as well as an impressive overall biodiversity. A rough tally for the eight regions gives some 1,600 bird species, of which 150 can be considered as range-restricted (or endemic), with 63 wholly endemic to Peru.



A tour based on the main route from Chiclayo to Tarapoto, lasting from 10 to 14 days can expect to see over 500 species, while adding on extra days with the Pedro Ruiz to Cajamarca route, should bring this total close to 700 species, including around 50 species of hummingbirds and 80 or so tanagers and allies. The following text gives a brief review of the journey over these two main routes.

The coast and foothills of the west slope of the Andes of northern Peru form part of the Tumbesian Endemic Bird Area, shared with south-west Ecuador. Ranked as one of the top endemic bird areas globally, the region holds some 58 endemic species, many of which are now threatened. Most of these endemic species and many others will be easily seen on a tour during three to four days spent on the coast. Key species include the critically threatened White-winged Guan, the endangered Peruvian Plantcutter, two threatened species of Foliage-gleaners, Ecuadorian Trogon and many more. Highlight of visiting the coast is a stay at Chaparrí lodge, nestled in a green ravine at the base of mount Chaparrí. The lodge not only provides a great start to tours, but also a wonderful introduction to Peruvian cuisine. A visit to the village of Casupe outside the Chaparrí reserve, at 1,000 m, will give additional Tumbesian species not found lower down. Searching for the Peruvian Plantcutter will take you to the Bosque de Pómac Historical Sanctuary, where ancient pyramids of pre-Incan cultures rise through the forested coastal plain.

Moving east into the Andean foothills, the route takes you over the lowest pass of the Andes, Abra Porcuya at 2,140 m. Just before the pass a side trail leads to forest and scrub where higher altitude Tumbesian endemics are found and key species the Piura Chat-tyrant. Dropping over the other side of the pass, the route runs alongside the Río Huancabamba for over a hundred kilometres until it meets the Río Marañón; you are now in Cajamarca Region. The Marañón valley represents another endemic bird area, with 24 endemic species including Little Inca-Finch and Marañón Crescentchest amongst other species found in the dry forests and cactus scrub of the area. Before the Río Marañón is the junction for Jaén town, where most tours will spend a night. On the outskirts of Jaén to the west is the Gotas de Agua private reserve, owned by local school teacher Luciano Troyes and family. This is a good spot for the Tatuapa Tinamou and Little Inca-Finch. Driving north out of Jaén and just after Tamborapa a side road to La Coipa passes through some great forest. The stop here can provide



Marañon Spinetail, Military Macaw and Purple-throated Euphonia. Back on the main road, a couple of stops around Bagua Chica and Bagua Grande will provide more dry forest species as well as Spotted Rail, Grey-breasted Crake and Paint-billed Crake around rice fields. After Bagua Grande the road starts to rise in altitude towards the Cordillera de Colán, home to some of the superstars of the northern route.

The next main town is Pedro Ruiz and an important junction for birding in the north. Continuing east on the main highway will take you to Tarapoto, while taking the road south is the start of the Utcubamba - Leymebamba to Cajamarca route. Pedro Ruiz is also the area where the jewel in the crown of the northern route is found; the stunning Marvelous Spatuletail hummingbird. Some 20 km after Pedro Ruiz is the Huembo reserve, a joint venture lead by the Peruvian NGO Ecoan and the local farming community. Seeing the Marvelous Spatuletail here is as good as guaranteed, as well as eleven other hummingbird species and other birds. Up and onwards the next regular stop is Río Chido, taking the new road up a side valley to San Lorenzo village. From here the key species are Pale-billed Antpitta, Large-footed Tapaculo, Rufous-capped Antshrike and Russet-mantled Softtail.

Ten minutes further along the road is the pleasant town of Florida, overlooking Pomacochas Lake at 2,300 m. A well maintained visitor's centre, with short pier, is a good spot for birding and generally quiet in the morning. If time allows a boat trip can be organized on the lake, exploring the far shores and visiting local farming communities. Note that Florida is the last main town before crossing over into the Alto Mayo river drainage. After Florida the road dips then rises again to the pass at Abra Patricia – the beginning of the most species-rich segment of the northern route.

Well-known in the birding world, the Abra Patricia area has improved greatly since early expeditions in the 70's found new species such as the Long-whiskered Owlet, Ochre-fronted Antpitta and Johnson's Tody-Flycatcher. The forest around the pass is now protected as the Abra Patricia – Alto Nieva private conservation area, owned by Ecoan, with an excellent lodge that provides the perfect base for exploring the lower forests over two to three days. The reserve and adjoining Alto Mayo Protection Forest (182,000 ha) hold an impressive array of species. The road descends through spectacular subtropical forests and along the lower section of the road Afluente (1,375 m) and Aguas Verdes (1,180 m) are regular stops with interesting side trails to explore for Speckle-chested Piculet, Equatorial Graytail, Marble-faced Bristle-Tyrant, Spectacled Bristle-Tyrant, Ecuadorian Piedtail, Huallaga Tanager and many more.

After Aguas Verdes the land is quite flat and dominated by agriculture. The next main towns and area of interest are Rioja and Moyobamba. Before Rioja a side trip to the village of Tambo will allow a pleasant canoe trip through flooded forests, with many typically Amazonian species such as macaws, toucans and kingfishers. The scrub and palm patches around the area are also of interest with Buckley's Forest-Falcon, Russet-crowned Crake, Point-tailed Palmcreeper, Stripe-necked Tody-Tyrant, Burnished-buff Tanager, amongst others. Near-by is the Yacumama recreational centre where you can bird inside the centre or explore the trail outside which passes through secondary forest and scrub.



Continuing the journey, and before Moyobamba, is the village of Calzada with its solitary mountain called Morro de Calzada. A steep hiking trail leads to the top at 1,450 m although it is not necessary to



climb the mountain for birding. Key species include the Rufous Nightjar, Blackish Nightjar, Spot-tailed Nightjar, Black-eared Fairy, Cinereous-breasted Spinetail, Mishana Tyrannulet, and White-browed Purpletuft. Between Calzada and Moyobamba is the private reserve of Fundo La Julianita (54 ha), with similar forest to Calzada and the flatter terrain here might be better for some birders. Also just before Moyobamba a short side trip takes you to Wilson's Pond, with the occasional Crested Duck and other aquatic species.

Next stop is Moyobamba, the capital of San Martín Region and often an overnight spot. Flanking the town to the south is the low lying ridge of Mishquiyacu-Rumiyacu. Some 86 ha of this forested area is the private reserve of Waqanki - with easy access from Moyobamba. The reserve has a good trail system, hummingbird feeders, orchid and bromeliad garden and some 300 bird species. It also has a new lodge, providing great accommodation within the reserve. Close to Waqanki, the Casa de Seiso also provides accommodation, some interesting food (Japanese chef) and more birding trails to explore. Some 12 km after Moyobamba is Quiscarrumi Bridge, with a resident colony of Oilbirds under the bridge. This site is now being protected by the local community, with improvements being made for visitors. From here the road continues on to Tarapoto, sometimes running alongside the Mayo River and passing some pleasant villages with a warm tropical feel to them.



Tarapoto is situated near the confluence of the Mayo and Huallaga rivers and will usually require two to three days to visit the sites of interest in the area. Taking the Yurimaguas road to the north-east, the road rises in altitude as it crosses through the Cordillera Escalera Regional Conservation Area and provides good birding from the road. Heading out of Tarapoto good sites include Fundo Wayra Sacha reserve, where the access track and reserve provide quiet birding away from the road and regular sightings of the Great Potoo. Further up the road the Ahuashiyacu Falls and Biodiversity Centre provide good facilities to park and explore the forest. Birding is good from the road all along this section up to the Tunnel (1,020 m.), where the road cuts through the ridge. Top birds here include the Blackish Nightjar, Ruddy Foliage-Gleaner, Rufous-winged Antwren, Golden-headed Manakin, Dotted Tanager and Yellow-bellied Tanager. Some 6 km after the Tunnel is the ACONABIKH centre, with feeders and observation tower providing great views of Koepcke's Hermit, Gould's Jewelfront, Black-throated Brilliant and another 16 species of hummingbird.

The road south from Tarapoto takes you to the next suite of sites. A side trail from Juan Guerra and the Shapaja road from the roundabout before Colombia Bridge will give Northern Slaty-Antshrike (subspecies *huallagae*), Rufous-fronted Thornbird, Chestnut-throated Spinetail, Barred Antshrike and Mishana Tyrannulet. After Shapaja town the road continues to Pumarinri Lodge overlooking the Huallaga River. Crossing Colombia Bridge the road follows the Huallaga River south to Juanjui. Good sites in this area include Puerto Lopez on the river, then crossing the river by barge the track goes to the Sauce town on shores of Lake Sauce. Back on the main road traveling down to Buenos Aires the junction here will take you along Quebrada Upaquihoa on the road to Santa Rosa. Good birds at these sites include the Planalto Hermit, Rufous-fronted Thornbird, Chestnut-throated Spinetail, Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant, Rufous Casiornis, Mishana Tyrannulet and Ashy-headed Greenlet. An additional site may be included depending on the tour, which requires a tough journey to the remote site of Plataforma to see the Scarlet-banded Barbet.

The sites around Tarapoto represent the end of the main route from Chiclayo. Tours may end here or head back to Pedro Ruiz to include the journey to Cajamarca as part of longer tours.



From Pedro Ruiz the journey ahead includes some of the most picturesque and stunning landscape Peru has to offer. The drive south from Pedro Ruiz follows the Utcubamba River uphill to Leymebamba. The valley is often steep-sided with dry vegetation that contrasts with the green pastures and orchards along the river. Fourteen kilometers from Pedro Ruiz is the turnoff for Gocta Falls and Cocachimba village. At 771 m, the falls have been ranked as the fifth highest in the world and are well worth the hike. Birds along the way include a Cock-of-the-Rock lek and the Speckle-chested Piculet. The Gocta Lodge in Cocachimba village provides excellent accommodation and all rooms have views of the waterfall.

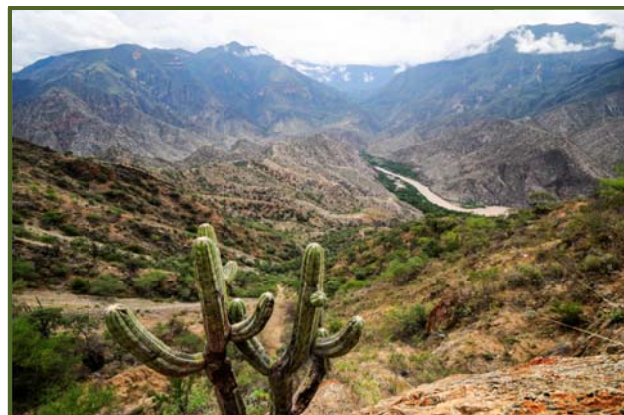


Back on the main road keep an eye out for Torrent Ducks, River Tyrannulet and herons along the river, as well as brief stops to check for Koepcke's Screech-Owl. The next side trip of interest is Kuelap, a Chachapoyan culture fortress perched at 3,000 m above the valley. This impressive fortress is some 600 m in length and 100 m wide, with evidence showing construction started sometime around the 6th century AD. After Kuelap the next stop is Leymebamba town, where tours generally spend the night.

The pleasant town of Leymebamba is situated at 2,400 m above the headwaters of the Utcubamba River. The town is well-known for its excellent museum which houses a collection of some 200 Chachapoyan mummies rescued from the Laguna de los Condores. The museum is on the road out of town and next to it is the Kentitambo Lodge, which provides excellent boutique-style accommodation for small groups. Kentitambo also has hummingbird feeders, with up to 18 species, including Marvelous Spatuletail and Sword-billed Hummingbird. Just after the museum is the track up the Río Atuen. This site is good for birding with Andean Condors, Golden-headed Quetzals and Grey-breasted Mountain-Toucan amongst many others.

Leymebamba is also the last main stop before the next stage of the journey, which involves a spectacular crossing of the Marañón River. The road from Leymebamba climbs to 3,600 m to a pass called Calla Calla, although in the birding world it became known as Abra Barro Negro – black mud pass. However, the road has recently been improved; meaning no more mud of any colour and the journey itself is a highlight of the whole tour. Key species around the pass include White-chinned Thistletail, Russet-mantled Softtail, Baron's Spinetail and Rufous-capped Antshrike. After the pass the road winds down the mountain side for 60 km to the town of Chacanto at 850 m on the Marañón River.

Chacanto is often referred to as Balsas, although Balsas is the next village along the river. The orchards and gardens should provide the Peruvian Pigeon and Marañón Thrush; while the threatened Yellow-faced Parrotlet and Black-necked Woodpecker should be found in the drier cactus scrub on the valley sides. Climbing up the other side of the valley, a stop around the village of Limón, will give Chestnut-backed Thornbird and Gray-





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winged Inca-Finch. The road continues to climb to the pass at El Lanche village at 3,100 m and then drops down to the busy market town of Celendin at 2,600 m. From Celendin another climb begins to the highest point of the northern route near Micuypampa village at 3,760 m. Along the way the tour will stop near Cruz Conga village to look for the *cajamarcae* form of the Rufous Antpitta. From the pass it is basically downhill to Cajamarca city, with stops near La Encañada to look for the Rufous-eared Brush-Finch. Cajamarca city will normally be the end of a tour, although a few more sites in the vicinity will be visited.

Near Cajamarca the Chonta River is the best area to find the extremely rare and threatened Gray-bellied Comet and other highland specialties. The main road south-east of Cajamarca takes you to Chugur village, just before San Marcos, where the cactus scrub is the place to find the Great Spinetail, as well as White-winged Black-Tyrant and Buff-bridled Inca-Finch. Back in Cajamarca the main road to the coast goes over Abra Gavilan pass at 3,200 m. Birding is good along this section of road from the pass downhill with Unicolored Tapaculo and Rufous-backed Inca-Finch. Also of interest is Cumbemayo, some 20 km from Cajamarca. While the site is a tourist attraction for the pre-Inca water channels cut into the rock, it is a good area for the Straited Earthcreeper and other highland grass and scrub species.

The Northern Peru Birding Route offers an unbeatable range of birds and habitats, along an unforgettable trip through spectacular scenery. Tours can be tailored to meet the needs of clients. Some tours can be combined with more of north Peru's historical heritage, with pre-Columbian sites such as Sipán, Sicán, Kuelap, Revash, Otuzco and many more. Whatever you decide, North Peru will surpass your expectations.

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