



ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

Ecuador

Tailor-made: Snipe Quest

22nd to 24th April 2019 (3 days)

Trip Report



Imperial Snipe

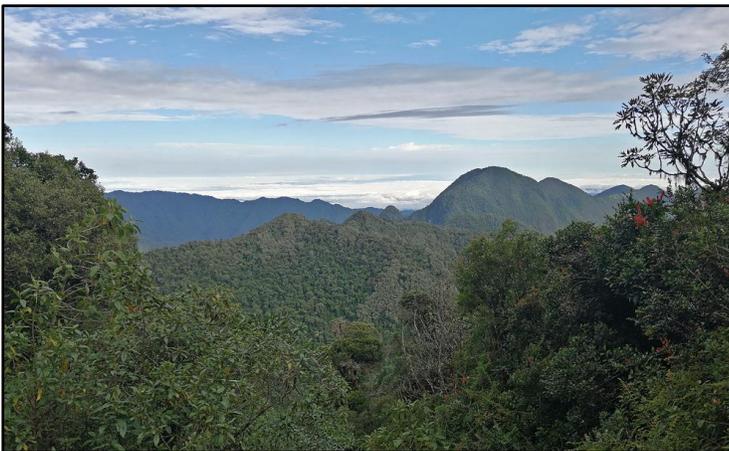
Trip report compiled by Tour Leader: Dušan Brinkhuizen

All photos taken by Dušan Brinkhuizen

Tour Summary

Targeting specific and difficult bird species is one of the advantages of a tailor-made birding trip. Colin Rogers has been keen to see as many waders in the world as possible, and came with a very special request: “would it be possible to try and target the three Gallinago snipe in the high Andes of Ecuador?” Surely we could try to search for Andean, Noble and Imperial Snipe, but none of these cryptic and elusive creatures is easily observed, especially not the latter species, which still remains quite mythical. Even though Colin was carefully informed about the slim chances of success, and the other challenges of such a target trip, our Snipe Quest was on!

We had three days to tackle this incredibly challenging quest. Based in Quito, we had quick access to both the east and west slope of the Andes, and we decided to start with the rarest and trickiest species first: the Imperial or Banded Snipe (*Gallinago imperialis*). It was discovered in Ecuador only as recently as 1990, and before that the Imperial Snipe was practically unknown (apart from a 19th-century specimen from Colombia and some sightings in Peru). It was Niels Krabbe that had discovered a population at Yanacocha, on the northern slope of the Pichincha Volcano just above Quito. Niels had informed us that the species was typically most vocal between December and March, when it performs pre-dawn aerial displays. Thus, finding it in late April was kind of a long shot, but we had nothing to lose!



Yanacocha Elfin Forest, habitat of the Imperial Snipe

On April 22nd, we started our adventure at 4:00 am by driving up the north-western flanks of the Pichincha Volcano to an elevation of c. 3,600 m. It was still pretty dark when we arrived at Yanacocha, but the sky was clear and there was hardly any wind: nearly perfect conditions. We walked the Inca trail in the hope of hearing the snipe, but only a Band-winged Nightjar was singing. A little further up the trail, we spotlighted the nightjar which showed itself nicely on the trail. A White-throated Screech Owl also briefly vocalised. Suddenly, we heard the distinct call of an Imperial Snipe.

It was very brief but there was no doubt a bird was present in the dense elfin forest below us! We quickly took a side trail into the forest to get closer to where the bird had called from. It was slowly getting light and, in the meantime, the bird had stopped vocalising. We carefully continued along the trail and, lower down, we suddenly heard a loud call from a large bird being flushed from the forest floor. Miraculously, it did not fly off but landed in a mossy tree right below us at eye-level: it was the mythical Imperial Snipe! Fully thrilled, we froze, as did the snipe, and we watched it for a minute or two before we carefully moved in order to secure a picture. To our surprise, the Imperial Snipe stayed in the tree for a prolonged time and we got to watch and photograph it down to the finest details: a truly exceptional and mind-blowing sighting! In a state of ecstasy, we left the bird and tried a Chestnut-naped Antpitta territory that was nearby. Colin quickly got us on the antpitta, and the views we got were pretty incredible too. It was an adult of the distinct west-slope race *obsoleta*, a poorly-known taxon and a probable future split. We then walked back to the snipe tree for a quick check, but the bird had left. After this slam-dunk, we returned to the restaurant for a celebratory coffee and breakfast. A quick peek at the feeders produced gems like Buff-winged Starfrontlet, Shining Sunbeam, Great Sapphirewing, Tyrian Metaltail, Sapphire-vented Puffleg and the extraordinary Sword-billed Hummingbird! A male Plain-breasted Hawk and a pair of Superciliaried Hemispingus were some of the other bonus species that we got.

Since we still had most of the day to continue our snipe quest, we decided to visit the Teleferico of Quito. This cable car is the easiest and quickest way to get to the high-elevation páramo of the Pichincha Volcano: habitat of the Andean or Jameson's Snipe (*Gallinago jamesoni*). Up at 4,100 m elevation, we walked the extensive páramo grasslands in the hope of seeing or flushing a snipe. Suddenly, we were surprised by instant hail, thunder and lightning! We took shelter in a ditch, and it was a rather scary experience. As soon as the heavy weather had moved by, we quickly left the danger zone and aborted our mission. Some of the bonus birds that we got to see nicely up there included Many-striped Canastero, Black-billed Shrike-Tyrant, Stout-billed Cinclodes, Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant and an obliging Tawny Antpitta!

The following day, we drove up the vast east-slope to the antennas of Papallacta at an elevation of around 4,300 m. The weather was great, and recent sightings of Andean Snipe by others were our inspiration for continuing our quest. We searched the scenic, almost moon-like landscape of the high peaks



Imperial Snipe sighting taken with cellphone

first, before descending the grassy slopes: the thin air at this elevation made the going a little slower than usual! After a couple of hours of searching in the morning, we finally located a vocalising Andean Snipe. The bird called a couple of times, but it was clearly hidden in dense scrub in the valley below us. After some effort, we got close to where the bird was calling, but it remained silent for the next hour or so. After a while, we hiked back to the vehicle in the hope of finding another more cooperative individual, but no luck. Around noon, we decided to venture to slightly lower elevations to search for the almost equally tricky Noble or Páramo Snipe (*Gallinago nobilis*), another poorly-known species. With our



Noble Snipe habitat at Papallacta

rubber boots on, we waded through a wet field in the hope of flushing a snipe. About half an hour later, our tactic paid off: a Noble Snipe flushed in front of my feet! The bird gave its distinct alarm call while it flew in a perfectly straight line, passing Colin nicely. The views that we got were excellent, and field marks like the rufous tail, barred flanks and contrasting white belly were all noted! We briefly went to the spot where the bird had landed in the hope of getting a photo, but we were unable to relocate it. Anyway, there was no need for better views, so we went down to the hot springs for a nice late lunch.

The next morning, we were back at the desolate antennas early for our second (and

final!) attempt at seeing Andean Snipe. The weather was miserable, and it was very cold compared to the day before. Would this perhaps bring the snipe out? We made a tactical plan to carefully search a slope with lots of muddy ditches that we hadn't searched properly the day before. The wind wasn't as

bad on this side of the mountain, but it was still freezing cold! We split up to increase our chances of running into a snipe, but kept close contact with a set of walky-talkies. After a couple of hours, it was Colin that said the magic words: “I’ve got the bird”. Up near the antennas, Colin had managed point-blank views of an adult Andean Snipe that walked and posed in front of him. The bird moved away fairly quickly, but he couldn’t have asked for better views. Mission accomplished!

Annotated List of species recorded

Note: Number in brackets () indicate number of days on the tour the species was recorded.

Birds (48 in total: 38 seen, 10 heard)

Nomenclature and taxonomy follows Gill, F and D Donsker (Eds). 2019. IOC World Bird List (v 9.1).

Status codes: **E** = Endemic, **NE** = Near-endemic, **I** = Introduced

IUCN codes: **CR** = Critically endangered, **EN** = Endangered, **VU** = Vulnerable, **EW** = Extinct in the Wild, **NT** = Near Threatened, **DD** = Data Deficient

Tinamous *Tinamidae*

Tawny-breasted Tinamou

(1) 1 heard Yanacocha 22.4.

Nothocercus julius

Ducks, Geese & Swans *Anatidae*

Yellow-billed Pintail

(1) Laguna Papallacta 23.4.

Anas georgica spinicauda

Andean Teal

(1) Papallacta Pass 23.4 and Laguna Papallacta 23.4.

Anas andium andium

Chachalacas, Curassows & Guans *Cracidae*

Andean Guan

(1) 1 heard Yanacocha 22.4.

Penelope montagnii atrogularis

Cormorants and Shags *Phalacrocoracidae*

Neotropic Cormorant

(1) Laguna Papallacta 23.4.

Phalacrocorax brasilianus brasilianus

New World Vultures *Cathartidae*

Black Vulture

(2) Quito 23.4 and Quito 24.4.

Coragyps atratus

Kites, Hawks & Eagles *Accipitridae*

Plain-breasted Hawk

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

Adult male in flight.

Accipiter ventralis

Variable Hawk

(1) Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4.

A pair.

Geranoaetus polyosoma poecilochrous

Rails, Crakes & Coots Rallidae**Andean Coot***Fulica ardesiaca atrura*

(1) Laguna Papallacta 23.4.

Sandpipers and Allies Scolopacidae**Noble Snipe (NT)***Gallinago nobilis*

(1) Papallacta Pass 23.4.

Adult flushed and observed very well, showing all the id-marks. It' distinct alarm call was heard.

Jameson's Snipe*Gallinago jamesoni*

(2) 1 heard Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4 and Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 24.4.

Superb views of an adult up at the very top of the antennas. The previous day a hidden bird remained heard-only.

Imperial Snipe (NT)*Gallinago imperialis*

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

Mind-blowing views of an adult perched in the forest.

Pigeons and Doves Columbidae**Eared Dove***Zenaida auriculata hypoleuca*

(1) Quito 24.4.

Owls Strigidae**White-throated Screech Owl***Megascops albogularis macabrus*

(1) 1 heard Yanacocha 22.4.

Nightjars and Allies Caprimulgidae**Band-winged Nightjar***Systellura longirostris ruficervix*

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

Showing nicely on the Inca trail.

Hummingbirds Trochilidae**Sparkling Violetear***Colibri coruscans coruscans*

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

At the feeders.

Shining Sunbeam*Aglaeactis cupripennis cupripennis*

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

At the feeders.

Buff-winged Starfrontlet*Coeligena lutetiae albimaculata*

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

At the feeders.

Sword-billed Hummingbird*Ensifera ensifera*

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

At the feeders. A male.

Great Sapphirewing*Pterophanes cyanopterus peruvianus*

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

At the feeders.

Sapphire-vented Puffleg (1) Yanacocha 22.4. At the feeders.	<i>Eriocnemis luciani luciani</i>
Golden-breasted Puffleg (1) Yanacocha 22.4.	<i>Eriocnemis mosquera</i>
Tyrian Metaltail (1) Yanacocha 22.4. At the feeders.	<i>Metallura tyrianthina quitensis</i>
Blue-mantled Thornbill (2) Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4 and Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 24.4. Observed foraging at very high elevation.	<i>Chalcostigma stanleyi stanleyi</i>

Falcons and Caracaras Falconidae

Carunculated Caracara (1) Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4.	<i>Phalcoboenus carunculatus</i>
---	----------------------------------

Ovenbirds and Woodcreepers Furnariidae

Chestnut-winged Cinclodes (2) Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4 and Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 24.4.	<i>Cinclodes albidiventris albidiventris</i>
Stout-billed Cinclodes (2) Quito--Teleferico 22.4 and Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4. Tame birds at Teleferico.	<i>Cinclodes excelsior excelsior</i>
Many-striped Canastero (1) Quito--Teleferico 22.4. Showing nicely in the tall grass.	<i>Asthenes flammulata flammulata</i>

Antpittas Grallariidae

Undulated Antpitta (1) 1 heard Yanacocha 22.4.	<i>Grallaria squamigera squamigera</i>
Chestnut-naped Antpitta (1) Yanacocha 22.4. Fantastic views of the distinct <i>obsoleta</i> race, a probable split.	<i>Grallaria nuchalis obsoleta</i>
Rufous Antpitta (1) 1 heard Yanacocha 22.4.	<i>Grallaria rufula rufula</i>
Tawny Antpitta (2) 1 heard Yanacocha 22.4, Quito--Teleferico 22.4 and Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4. Seen well on various occasions.	<i>Grallaria quitensis quitensis</i>

Tapaculos Rhinocryptidae

Spillmann's Tapaculo (1) 1 heard Yanacocha 22.4.	<i>Scytalopus spillmanni</i>
Paramo Tapaculo (1) 1 heard Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4.	<i>Scytalopus opacus opacus</i>

Tyrant Flycatchers Tyrannidae

Paramo Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola alpinus alpinus*

(1) Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4.

Black-billed Shrike-Tyrant *Agriornis montanus solitarius*

(1) Quito--Teleferico 22.4.

Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant *Ochthoeca fumicolor brunneifrons*

(1) Quito--Teleferico 22.4.

Cotingas Cotingidae

Barred Fruiteater *Pipreola arcuata arcuata*

(1) 1 heard Yanacocha 22.4.

Swallows Hirundinidae

Brown-bellied Swallow *Notiochelidon murina murina*

(2) Yanacocha 22.4, Quito--Teleferico 22.4 and Papallacta Pass 23.4.

Wrens Troglodytidae

Grass Wren *Cistothorus platensis aequatorialis*

(2) 1 heard Quito--Teleferico 22.4 and 1 heard Papallacta Pass 23.4.

Thrushes and Allies Turdidae

Great Thrush *Turdus fuscater quindio*

(3) Yanacocha 22.4, Quito--Teleferico 22.4, Laguna Papallacta 23.4 and Quito 24.4.

New World Buntings and Sparrows Passerellidae

Rufous-collared Sparrow *Zonotrichia capensis costaricensis*

(2) Yanacocha 22.4 and Quito 24.4.

New World Warblers Parulidae

Black-crested Warbler *Myiothlypis nigrocristata*

(1) 1 heard Yanacocha 22.4.

Tanagers and allies Thraupidae

Superciliaried Hemispingus *Hemispingus superciliaris nigrifrons*

(1) 2 Yanacocha 22.4.

Black-chested Mountain Tanager *Buthraupis eximia chloronota*

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

Glossy Flowerpiercer *Diglossa lafresnayii*

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

Masked Flowerpiercer *Diglossa cyanea cyanea*

(1) Yanacocha 22.4.

Plumbeous Sierra Finch *Phrygilus unicolor geospizopsis*

(2) Quito--Teleferico 22.4 and Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4.

Mammals (1 in total: 1 seen)

Status codes: E = Endemic, NE = Near-endemic, I = Introduced

IUCN codes: CR = Critically endangered, EN = Endangered, VU = Vulnerable, EW = Extinct in the Wild, NT = Near Threatened, DD = Data Deficient

Deer Cervidae

White-tailed Deer

(1) Las Antennas, Papallacta Pass 23.4.

Odocoileus virginianus ustus

Rockjumper Birding Ltd

The Hive, Lot 23

Centre Commercial du Barachois

La Place Cap, Tamarin

Mauritius

Tel: (USA & Canada) toll-free: 1-888-990-5552

Email: info@rockjumperbirding.com

Alternative email: rockjumperbirding@yahoo.com

Website: www.rockjumperbirding.com