

To the Amazon and back. Trip Report. Fred & Elizabeth Hodgson & Chris Towers. December 11th 2010– January 10th 2011

It was all the Icelandic Volcano's fault. If Air Namibia had picked up the phone during the problems we would have gone to Namibia. But they didn't so we got to look at some other reports while waiting. One was Paola and Marco's report on Ecuador and the Galapagos. I had never been to South America and never had a real desire to do so. I had memories of a favourite childhood book "Amazon Adventure" which had filled my head with Anacondas, Jaguar, Piranha, Giant Ant Eaters and unfriendly locals who shrunk your head as a trophy.

At this stage all I knew about Ecuador was from that book and from School Geography where I learned to draw the Equator across South America by joining Quito, Ecuador to the Amazon Delta. So we got to googling a few places, one of which turned up a trip into the deep jungle in a canoe and camping with the descendants of those head hunters. Well why not? Let's do it! So we got the plane tickets, bought the bird book and started booking. A chance talk with friend Chris revealed he already had the book. He said it was very heavy to carry around and offered to do this menial task. So the party was now three. We split the trip into sectors to allow time in different Eco zones with 13 nights in the Amazon and then up into the Cloud Forest and the high Andes.

Ecuador is five hours behind GMT. Being on the Equator days are roughly 12 hours long. No real seasons but the change in altitude from sea level to over 14,000' did give climatic variations and much bio diversity.

Entry requirements: - No visa as such is required but you do sign a form on entry to say you will not disrupt the economy by getting a job. As if???

Local currency is the US\$. We carried folding money with only a small reserve in T/Chqs.

Getting there, back and around. The Capital city is Quito is at 8,000' so can literally be described as breath-taking. We searched for flights and ended up routing from Manchester to Quito with a change of plane and layover in Atlanta, Georgia with Delta. This worked well at first until Delta messed around with schedules and we had 24 hours in Atlanta thrust upon us. However we made light of this by using Birding Pal and a sweet lady called Darlene Moore acted as our guide for some Atlanta birding with southern hospitality. This got the trip list off to a good start (49) despite the freezing weather.

Food & Drink. Beer is called Pilsener and comes in 600ml bottles. Like all lagers it is best drunk cold but due to weather being also cold it lost its edge a bit. Several places had supplies of Chilean wine etc. Food was generally wholesome but it was hard to fathom at times which school of cuisine it owed its allegiance too.

Bugs, n Bowels. Peel it, boil it or forget it. Certainly in the hotter parts although Hygiene standards appeared acceptable in the main Lodges. Nobody got sick. Tap water, when available is definitely a "No No!" Not even for tooth brushing. Malaria is a problem in the Amazon so Prophylactics are mandatory as is the use of a net if the room/tent is not screened. There are also various other biting critters but whilst I got the odd nip from a Conger Ant poor Elizabeth had her legs truly chewed from some sharp grasses.

Accommodations. With one exception these were up to expectations. For details see text.

Kit carried. We all had decent binoculars and I had my new Fuji FS100. We took lots of spare batteries, chargers and Plug adaptors. Chris had a multi socket Adaptor which saved the day for us.

Books? "The Birds of Ecuador" by Ridgely & Greenfield is the definitive work. As stated it weighs heavy but Paola told me a neat trick of splitting out the Colour Plates from the main text thereby making two Books, the heavier 2nd portion which could stay at the Lodge. What she did not tell me was to make a bloody index to make finding the plates easier. As Chris was acting as Sherpa I simply left my heavy 'half' at home anyway. I took along maps but rarely referred to them

Now to the trip itself: - 11th December – 13th. In transit. Due to Delta messing up, this was spent locating at MAN, flying to ATL on 12th and birding with Darlene in ATL the morning of 13th before flying on to Quito at 17.00 that evening. This worked well until we arrived in Quito at 22.30 to find our pre-paid arranged "Meet and Greet" was nowhere to be seen. After hanging around a while we were persuaded by a happy Taxi driver that he knew our destination and he would convey us there. When he found the state of the road to Hosterias San Jorge he was less happy but we made it.

December 14th-15th. Hosterias San Jorge. Also called San Jorge Eco Lodge. We chose this place for its proximity to the airport and as a buffer against flight delays. It was OK apart from the strong smell of wet varnish. The climb back to our Room from the Restaurant each time was taxing as we were at 10,000'. Early morning birding in the grounds got us off to a good start with Fred finding Swordbilled Humming bird and a Shikra-like Hawk that he thinks was Plain-breasted. Tanagers, Hummers and Flower-piercers were also seen including the Black Trainbearer.

December 15th-20th. Picked up and driven to the Airport for our VIP flight over the Andes to Francisco de Orellana (known locally as "Coca".) on the Napo (Amazon) river. Here we were introduced to our Guide Domingo Gualinga, who was to be with us for the next 13 nights and days, before we boarded a 'turbo canoe' for the three hour trip down river to Sani Lodge.



After transferring to a smaller canoe for the smaller private river to Sani Lagoon we arrived at Sani Lodge our home for six nights. A beautiful and peaceful location in the Amazonian forest run by the local Sani Community. Accommodation was in Cabanas with dining centrally in large wooden restaurant and bar area overlooking the lagoon. We spent our time here, birding the woods, canoeing the backwaters and climbing the 100' tower to a platform in the Canopy. Our first day started well with target birds Hoatzin, Cream-coloured Woodpecker, and Wire-tailed Manakin all showing so nicely we may as well have gone straight home. BUT there was more, much much more!

Each day Domingo had some place new to try, usually by canoe and out onto the main

river again but sometimes up the small river until we could go no further. We saw lots of Monkeys, mainly Red Howlers, and plenty of birds. In fact I never want to see another Antbird as long as I live. This was a great place to enjoy the wonders of the Amazon.



21st – 28th December 2010. The big adventure. First back up to Coca where we shopped and met Tom, Peter and Mariella who were to come with us. Ootobo our Huarani host produced a bus and we set off down the Via Aucas (Road of Savages) for about two hours before stopping at the Government control post where we all undertook a medical examination. We also were briefed on possible contact with “Uncontacted” tribes and given details on how to call for help and rescue if needed. A plane would come for us in 8 days time. Then we embarked on canoes with Ootobo and family and set off down the Shirupino River for a few hours to where Ootobo had set up camp for the night. Dinner was prepared and we all turned in to our tents. Next day was much of the same except we drifted down quietly along some sections, as the river got bigger, in order to see wildlife and birds better. Lots of Caiman and we saw

our first Pink River Dolphins. We also saw the latter half of a Giant Anteater that had just swum the river. Rain was threatening so we got a move on and got to our second temporary Campsite before dark where again our hosts had prepared a nourishing but basic meal. We managed to get to know our hosts better as Ootobo had some Spanish and his Uncle came and told us many tales of how they lived in times past. He also sang/chanted for us. I was struck by how similar this chanting was to what we hear from North American “Indians”.

The following day had us back on the river, drifting and cruising, with a lunchtime picnic on a Mudbar that Tom called a “Beach”. He has never seen a beach! Our sightings grew and we had this river to ourselves. Around 16.00 we arrived at Ootobo’s home Camp and all the family turned out to greet us. We had expected a Cabana but it fell down so we pitched our tents in an open shelter called a Carapace. This is where our head torches came into their own and with ‘dry’ storage we had more room in the tents now. First of all we went to pay our respects to Ootobo’s parents as village Headman and did a bit of birding too of course. For the next 5 days we wandered the Jungle visiting Saltlicks etc., to see what wildlife visited. Lots of Macaws and Parrots and we added Spider, Capuchin and Woolly Monkey to the list too. One evening there was roast



chicken and the tribe turned out for a share. It transpired it was Christmas Day when Tom produced a bottle of Tanqueray Gin. Next day it was Peter’s birthday (36) so we found a Brandy too. Our last canoe trip yielded the much sought after Fiery Topaz



and Sun Grebe. And so it was time head downstream to our rendezvous with a Cessna. Everyone turned out to see us off dressed in their Sunday best birthday suits. The plane came in on time and we said our goodbyes and flew out. The trip was due to take 70 minutes and when we landed after only 30 or so, the Captain told us it was to wait out bad weather at Shell/Puyo. We waited an hour or so, took off and then landed again further west on another very wet strip. So wet the Pilot opted not to stop but turned round and took off again before his wheels sank in the mud. Just as Elizabeth was commenting on how close the ground and trees were getting we saw Shell/Puyo ahead and some welcome tar.

We collected our bags and hugged Domingo “goodbye and thanks”. What a splendid guide he was. He is Sani and we wondered how he would get on with Huarani people but he ended up best friends with Ootobo and will go back there.

We took a Taxi to Banos, about an hour away, where we were due to stay at Posada delle Arte. This was a welcome place where we all had Beers and a bath but not necessarily in that order. We took a cab up to view the local Volcano “Tungurahua” which was erupting and threatening to close the road. It was a fascinating sight. Back for dinner and a good nights sleep.

December 29th – January 3rd 2011.

Having been out of contact for so long, everyone was pleased and surprised that our lift arrived exactly on the dot of 10.00 for the transfer to El Monte in Mindo. This was a long drive back over the Andes and skirting Quito. We were surprised that so much open land had been lost to small farms etc. There seemed no end to it. After Quito we crossed the Monument for the Equator and it came on to rain. The Cloud Forest lived up to its name. Our home for the next six nights was El Monte Eco Lodge which was nicely laid out with well spaced Cabanas around a central Communal Building and eating area. The persistent damp was a down side especially as the forest was dark anyway and my Wellies had a large split.

Access in and out was via a Ropeway/Trolley so it was private enough. Birdlife was prolific with even a Common Potoo (Large Nightjar type bird.) roosting in the garden and Sun Bitterns haunting the Carp pools. Our days here were spent exploring the forest tracks with side excursions to an Orchid Farm, Butterfly Breeding centre and a Chocolate factory. I scored one over on Chris when I declined to get up at 4.00 to go looking for Cock of the Rock birds. I stayed in bed and was pleased to hear that he had found them after a climb in the dark. I was even more pleased when next day we found one next to the track and I got my pictures AND a lie in bed.



To get back to Quito we were guided by a great young lady, Julia and her driver husband Felix, who took us the scenic eco

route along the old road via Bellavista where we called out a Chestnut-crowned AntPitta to the compost heap. We saw lots of new birds to add to our growing total including some nice Trogon, Toucans and the sought after Toucan- Barbet. Around 16.00 we arrived back in Hosterias San Jorge Quito where we had started our journey.

January 4th – 8th. Our old room was waiting for us again and we spent the first day visiting the city of Quito. We were not particularly impressed but the new Basilica was worth a look.

6th – 7th Due to San Jorge's strange pricing we declined their day trips and had made contact with a guide who would take us over Papallacta Pass and the eastern side of the Andes once more. Gabriel was really good at birds and we first took the old redundant road and got even more birds and an Andean Rabbit. At the top of the pass we detoured up to the Antenna at 14,000' where the air was both thin and cold. We found no Condors but did get the target birds of Tawny AntPitta and some other small stuff such as Many-striped Canastero. We also saw and photo'd a Stoat like creature that Gabriel had never seen before. Then we set off down the other side to Guango Lodge for lunch where we let Chris catch up with Sword-billed Hummingbird among others using the feeders. We searched the river banks and found Torrent Ducks, Blackburnian Warblers and Spectacled Whitestarts. Then on down to the beautiful Cabanas San Isidro for the night. These really were to our taste and very comfortable. Add birds in the Reserve and what more do you want? Inca Jays were everywhere and at night there were Nighthawks around the lights and the enigmatic "Mystery" Owl also put in an appearance. Not in the Books yet and thus not certain if a new species or an eastern relative of Black and White from the western Andes. Dinner was taken in the Restaurant and we retired for an early start next day.



Another day and the birds kept coming. First we went to find Maria, a friendly White-bellied AntPitta that comes to the gardener for worms when called. We were lucky and she brought two friends along too. We also got close to a Red-eared Agouti. Out in the reserve and more Torrent Ducks, a great pair of Powerful Woodpeckers, several Tanagers and a mentally disturbed Tyrannine Wood Creeper. We finished off with a pair of White-capped Parrots. After an excellent lunch we set off on the journey back to Quito with a few stops for birds along the way. At the Pass our third and final volcano, Antisana put in a snow-capped appearance for us. We arrived at San Jorge for dinner after dark.



January 8th was spent on admin, writing up lists and hiking the Waterfall trail where we saw a beautiful Humming bird, no bigger than a Bumble Bee and mainly Black and White. We also found fresh Puma pug marks but not the owner. We also got slightly lost but managed to find our way home again in time for lunch and a Beer.

After Dinner we packed and left for the Airport where we learned our flight home had been cancelled. They blamed weather in Europe but this was a lie!

January 9th. Arriving at Atlanta again at 6.00 we got the shuttle back to Best Western where I had booked a room for the three of us to rest in rather than hang around the Airport for 15 hours. So we got some sleep and Chris and Fred went out in the cold for more birds, seeing lots of old friends and adding Mockingbird and House Sparrow to our Georgia list. Then we had a late lunch at a "Wendy's" purely in the interests of research. Then back to the Airport to check in for LHR (Not MAN or LGW as booked) We boarded on time and due to this consolidation the plane was packed. We then sat at the Gate for pushback for 4 hours while it snowed a little (about 5mm at most.) So by now it was:-

January 10th. And we were fed up. A woman two rows in front was coughing all the trip and we blame her for Elizabeth's cold and cough on our return. We got airborne around 1.30, had our delayed "Dinner" at about 2.30 and went to sleep. We woke up as the map thing indicated Lands end and LHR 80 minutes away. We landed there at 13.50, with our margin for our MAN connection down to just over the hour. Did Delta care? Did they heck! We said hurried goodbyes to Chris, who was relieved not to be in Detroit or Amsterdam where Delta had tried to send him, and fled for the transfer to T5. We made it and boarded at 15.00 but it was no surprise to find at MAN that our luggage had not. We had booked Bewley's for the night in anticipation of problems when FlyBe had cancelled our 14.30 flight home which was lucky as we would have missed both that and the later one FlyBe wanted to put us on!

So to Bewley's for a nice Dinner and bed. Attempts to contact BA about our luggage on the numbers provided failed totally.

January 11th. We had booked the first 08.30 flight home. So after another night in our clothes we checked in without luggage. Even BA could not get the phones to answer. Pathetic. On arrival at IOM even our taxi failed to show up!! Getting home and switching on the PC I tracked our missing luggage On Line. It worked and I found it. The eedjits had sent it on to IOM last night but with no tags. More Pathetic still. So a phone call to a very relieved lady at IOM, who had the bags but no details, soon re-united us and we could start unpacking.

So ends our Amazon Adventure packed with action from start to finish. Total bird count came out at 444, plus 51 in Georgia, so 5 short of 500. We can do better than this.



The true heroes of this trip.
Domingo, Otopo and his son.

Not forgetting Elizabeth and Chris as they use the El Monte Ropeway over the river.

