

PERU

**Manu Biosphere Reserve, Machu Picchu,
Cuzco and Lima**

October 17th-28th

2014



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Prologue

Late in 2013 George and Jen visited Peru with Amazon Birding, driving the Manu Road and visiting Machu Picchu. Unfortunately, I was unable to join them on that trip but, as we considered where to go on our now bi-annual "big birding trip" together, George was very keen to revisit Peru - I was happy to indulge him!

After some discussion we agreed on a trip in late October that would take in the remote rainforest of the Manu Biosphere Reserve, the world famous citadel at Machu Picchu, Huacarpay and San Salvador Lakes near Cuzco, and the last minute bonus of a morning around Lima.

George had such a good experience with Amazon Birding that he engaged them again and set about arranging what would be a logistically challenging and diverse trip. By early October we were all set and raring to go. Peru would not disappoint us.



Lima to the Jungle

October 17th

We spent the night in our basic but adequate hotel in the Miraflores area of Lima. With a few hours to kill before flying to Puerto Maldonado and the start of the trip proper, we decided to take a pre-breakfast stroll; see what we might turn up in a nearby park. Starting off in a city park is a good way to get your eye in before the real action starts and we saw a few new birds including Long-tailed Mockingbird and Amazilia Hummingbird. With our first fix of birding complete, we went back to the hotel and booked a cab to take us to the airport.

The journey was interesting. Lima is a city of some 9 million people and sprawls along the Pacific Coast of Peru. The driving here is hair-raising; possibly even surpassing Quito in its chaotic, reckless abandon. As a person used to obeying things like traffic lights and the number of lanes available, it can be very disconcerting to watch the road ahead. Thankfully, there were some avian distractions to be had along the way. As we reached the highway running alongside the ocean, birds began to appear including distant, tantalising glimpses of the superb Inca Tern. We made it to the airport in one piece and had a well-needed breakfast.

The flight to Puerto Maldonado via Cuzco was uneventful and on time. We landed and stepped out onto the tarmac and a furnace of jungle heat. With luggage retrieved we met our guide, and manager of Amazon Birding, Saturnino Llactahuaman Lastra or Satu for short. We made a brief pit-stop to drop our bags and check-in at our hotel before meeting our driver, Wilbur, and heading off to do some birding nearby. We took a side road off the main highway and the birding began in earnest. These side roads are a great place to bird in the Neotropics as they offer a bit of open space, a chance to walk on relatively even ground and, rather surprisingly, good species diversity. The only inconvenience is the dust thrown up from the passing cars and motorbikes but that's a small price to pay.



Purus Jacamar and Capped Heron

Without having to walk very far at all, we began to rack up new birds for the trip and a few lifers to boot. After a few hours, tired but thoroughly enthused, we went back to the hotel, showered, had dinner and sank a few cold beers. The next day, we would be heading deep into the jungle.

October 18th

An early rise saw us take breakfast at 05.00 and get on the road with Wilbur, heading for the Madre de Dios River and the Manu Birding Lodge, part of the Manu Biosphere Reserve. With a lot of hours travelling ahead of us, we didn't have time to do anything more than pick up a few species from the bus as we went. The highway was quiet and well-maintained, allowing us to bowl along at a decent rate. At one point we passed an illegally established mining village, which looked like a cross between a shanty town and a Wild West frontier town. Satu told us that at night it was a den of prostitution, drinking and fighting. Alas, we had no time to find out for ourselves! After a couple of hours or so, we left the highway and turned onto a rough, unpaved, dirt road, which slowed our pace considerably.

At last, we reached the next staging post on our journey; a boat that would take us across the Inambari River. It was a short journey across water turned a sickly yellow-brown by the effluent from mining further up river – much of it illegal. Satu warned us against eating any fish locally as the water was so heavily contaminated with mercury. It was a sad indictment of man's ability to screw up the environment for all in order to financially benefit the few.



Heading up the Madre de Dios by boat

Once across the river, we loaded up into a taxi and set off for the town of Boca Colorado. The 'road' began on the river's stony beach and we added a few waders to the bird list as we made our way up onto the dirt track beyond. This track was rough and bumpy and with temperatures soaring, the taxi's busted air conditioning meant open windows provided our only cool air. This was fine until another vehicle passed by and the dust cloud and flying stones meant windows needed to be shut. The makeshift wooden bridges across streams and ravines were at times in a shocking state of disrepair but we negotiated them without incident and arrived at Boca Colorado in one piece. Shaken but not stirred.

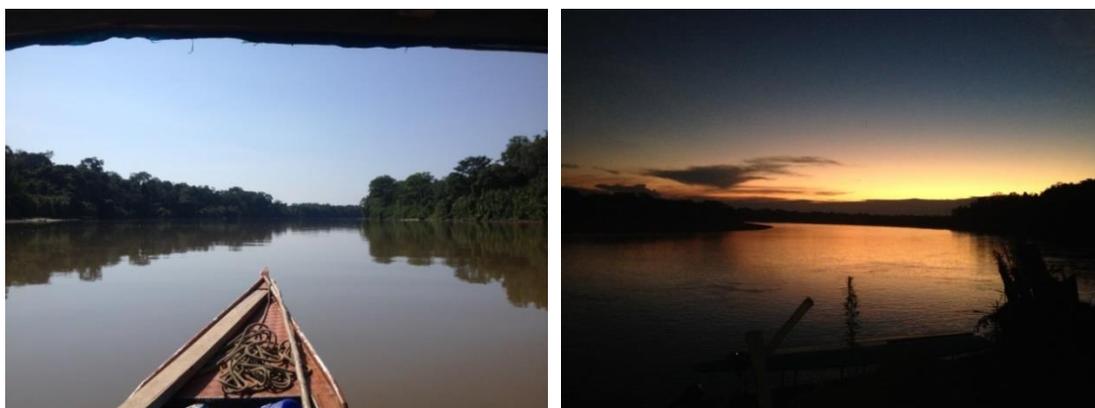
Boca Colorado is a ramshackle collection of houses, a gas station and a small store. Trash and sewage grace the sides of the road, with Black Vultures tucking into whatever disgusting morsels they can scavenge. The surprisingly clean public toilet in the garage forecourt was providing a shady hang-out for one of the local roosters and he had to be shooed away before we could partake. The instant drop in temperature inside proved why he'd chosen that spot. This would be our last brush with this civilisation-of-sorts for the next few days, so we took the chance to stock up on some beers. We also welcomed Juan Jose (Juan-Jo for short) to our party. He's a guide in training under Satu's tutelage and a lovely, friendly bloke to boot.



Satu, Juan-Jo, Raffino and Luis

Down on the river bank, we met two of the guys who'd be looking after us in the jungle - Luis and Raffino. They loaded our bags onto the boat, while we loaded ourselves, donned our lifejackets and sat back to enjoy the six hour ride up the Madre de Dios River to the Manu Birding Lodge.

It's a magical experience zipping along on the surface of a jungle river in a fast-moving canoe. The banks are lined by trees and other greenery, like natural fencing; blue sky spreads out above, peppered with the fluff of clouds; the wind offers solace from the baking sun; trees washed into the river as the bank collapsed or a landslide undermined them, protrude from the water like the skeletons of long-dead dinosaurs; the whoosh and whump of the boat's keel cutting through the water becomes like a heartbeat. Even the rattle and buzz of the outboard motor has a hypnotic quality. It's a very civilised way to travel.



Messing about on the river

Of course, we were birding, so this was no mad dash from A to B. We would often slow, sometimes stop and, now and again, clamber ashore for a 'bush break'. Birds were seen in the air, perched in the bankside vegetation and on the river itself. Whenever anything of interest caught our collective eye, Satu would signal for the driver to slow and we'd check it out.

A magnificent Short-tailed Hawk soared over the trees and a group of Amazonian Swifts buzzed overhead. The very smart White-banded Swallows, with their glossy blue bodies and white neckerchiefs, joined their now ubiquitous White-winged cousins; dining out on the plethora of airborne insect life. Swallow-wing Puffbirds kept lookout and did some flycatching from exposed perches. As we slowed to admire a Roadside Hawk, a Grey-lined Hawk alighted nearby to give good views and a noisy squadron of tiny Dusky-billed Parrotlets screeched past.

In these circumstances, time becomes irrelevant. You become lost in the moment, the next great bird, the sounds and smells all around you. There are no deadlines, ultimatums or disastrous financial consequences to beware of. The modern world melts away and you feel free. It's a privilege afforded to us by these trips that none of the three of us takes for granted. It's also a very good reason to do it in the first place.

Lots of good birds later – including a family party of the critically endangered Orinoco Goose - we arrived at our home for the next three days, the Manu Birding Lodge. Once ashore, we were allocated our basic but comfortable rooms. There is no electricity so we would rely on candles and torches for light and a generator to recharge batteries.



Cooi Heron

The Manu Birding Lodge

In the Lodge grounds, right outside the dining room, was a nesting hummingbird, the Rufous-breasted Hermit and, only a few metres away, a Reddish Hermit was following suit. The nests look both precarious and insufficient for their task; gossamer tangles of spider-webs, feathers, twigs and leaves, stuck on the underside of a banana leaf. Without being alerted to their significance, we would not have paid them any attention.

We took a short jaunt along the forest trails that criss-cross the Lodge property but with the day marching on, we couldn't go too far before dinner. Even so, we managed to see a few new species. We also had our first encounter with the local troop of Red Howler Monkeys. A family group of these rather sullen looking animals moved through the trees above us. With the light fading and our bellies rumbling we headed back to base for food.

This was our first taste (ahem) of cook Alex's prowess in the makeshift kitchen. With only a couple of rings from a butane stove to operate with, by the light of a few candles, he managed to rustle up a three course meal that was not just substantial but delicious. With our stomachs full, we went out night-birding.

Night-birding in the Neotropics is awesome. The jungle sounds become amplified: insects attempt to shout down the nocturnal birds; monkeys and other animals crash about in the canopy; the darkness is absolute; torch beams cut into the black as we walk the trails in single file, looking for owls and nightjars and anything else we could stumble across – sometimes literally. It also has a frisson of jeopardy that adds to the mood.

In the half-light of dusk, the walk proved to be quiet at first. A Rufous-capped Antthrush nearly took George's hat off as it shot past us but, that excitement aside, no other birds responded to the iPod. After traipsing a fair way into the jungle without reward, the darkness now absolute, and with fatigue setting in, we turned back toward the Lodge. On the return leg we did rather better: a fantastic Tawny-bellied Screech Owl came in to challenge its iPod rival and engage us in a staring competition.

Further along the track, Satu stopped and whispered for us to join him. He aimed his torch into the darkness and there, sitting in a tree, was a cat. At first, Satu thought it was an Ocelot but, as it shifted position, he became very excited as he realised it was actually a Little Spotted Cat. They are very rare and this was the first one he'd ever seen. It slid from the tree with typical feline grace and sloped off into the undergrowth. Unfortunately, poor Juan-Jo spent this auspicious moment being attacked by a night-wasp and it was to his immense credit that he didn't cry out in pain when it stung him! As Satu frantically (but quietly) told us to switch off our torches, Juan-Jo began tearing off his clothes, worried the wasp had gotten inside his shirt. After a few moments of hilarity and panic, we escaped the wasp's clutches, Satu removed the sting from Juan-Jo's finger, and order was restored.

Elated at our luck with the cat, and with no lasting harm coming to Juan-Jo, we returned to the Lodge. On the way, with lots of fire-flies buzzing through the darkness, Satu asked us if we'd ever seen one close-up before. We hadn't and when he caught one to show us, we were surprised by how it looked.



A fire-fly in the hand is worth....

Exhausted after a marathon day, we headed for bed, ready to sleep the sleep of the dead; so tired we didn't even have a beer!

October 19th

In the Neotropics, it pays to get up early and get as much done as you can in the morning; before the scorching heat of the early afternoon drives humans and birds alike into the shade and drains their energy. This morning, we were up at 04.30, back in the boat and heading downstream to the Blanquillo clay lick; renowned for drawing in hundreds of parrots and macaws. The birds use these places to supplement their diet with minerals such as sodium that are not accumulated in the plant material they eat.

There was a distinct chill to this early morning air as we set out in the gloom of pre-dawn. Unfortunately, it must have affected Jen's brain adversely. As she went to look at a riverside Osprey, she realised, to her horror, that she'd left her binoculars in the room back at the Lodge! There was no time to go back and retrieve them, so we would just have to muddle through and share as best we could. To say she was gutted was a bit of an understatement. However, the show had to go on.

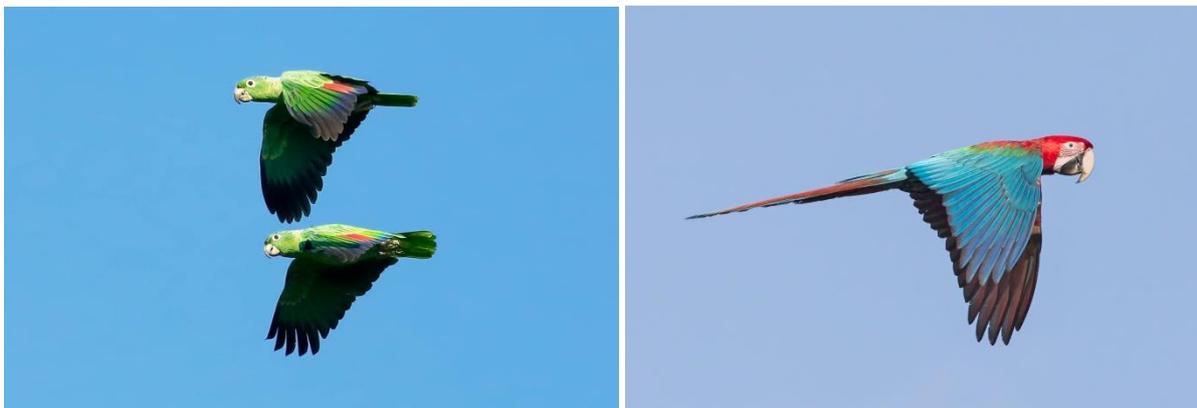
The clay lick can be a big draw for tourists in the peak season but, as we came into shore, it became apparent there were no other tourists' boats tied up and we'd have the place to ourselves – for a

while at least. The walk in turned into a bit of a route-march, with Satu keen to get there and make the most of the daylight. We reached the surprisingly large hide and took off our muddy boots, ready to take in the festival of colour this place promised. It didn't disappoint.



Blanquillo inside and out

From the off we had parrots cawing and screeching as they flew back and forth or perched in the trees in front of the hide. The predominant species at first was Blue-headed Parrot. They were joined by a few Red-and-green Macaws and some simply gorgeous Orange-cheeked Parrots. There were also fly-pasts by stunning Blue-and-yellow Macaws, plus a few Mealy and Yellow-crowned Parrots. Colour by the bucketful but it's always fascinated me that such intensely beautiful and gaudy creatures can have such unattractive, guttural calls. Then again, when you look that good, maybe you don't need to be a sweet talker to win the ladies' hearts?



Mealy Parrots and Red-and-green Macaw

As the numbers of Red-and-green Macaws built up, decorating the trees like Christmas baubles, our attention was drawn to a Chestnut-eared Aracari, which was attempting to raid a nest-hole high in a tree above the claylick. It may not be immediately obvious, but toucans are not just fruit eaters – they are also voracious predators of the nests and eggs of other birds. We took its lead and sated

our own appetites courtesy of a breakfast prepared in advance by Alex. Fresh fruit, pancakes and hot chocolate all went down very nicely.

With George filling up his camera's memory cards and the macaw numbers peaking, we decided to make a move and head back to the boat; birding the trail along the way in a more sedate fashion than we had earlier, making our way to the Blanquilo Lodge. We took some time to chill out here, having lunch and sitting out on some benches afterwards overlooking the river.



Red-and-green Macaws get their licks

Back on the boat, we headed up river a ways and alighted to follow a trail towards the first of two Canopy Towers and Oxbow Lakes we would visit.

Almost as soon as we started walking, a troop of Squirrel Monkeys crashed into the trees alongside the trail – surprisingly noisy for their size. After a few flocks of birds had been sifted for anything new, we made it to the tree that held the canopy tower.

George is, by his own admission, not great with heights. Jen is fine with them. I'm usually ok but standing at the foot of this enormous tree, looking up at the platform adorning its crown, I had some minor doubts. To reach the platform, we needed to climb a metal structure alongside the tree that looked like a giant fire-escape – over 40m of it! George took the lead, fairly motoring up. I was ok at first but had a distinct wobble near the top, feeling very exposed and uncertain; but I was nearly there, so I gritted my teeth and did it.

The view that rewarded this determination was spectacular - a sea of green spreading out in all directions. Both George and I were unable to go right to the edge of the platform but there was no denying it was worth the climb and the churning stomach. We began to see some good birds from up there as well, including the incredible Paradise Tanager. Unfortunately, we'd arrived in the heat

of the afternoon, sweating from our climb, and became the object of much attention from a swarm of sweat bees. These are harmless and don't sting but they are hugely irritating and distracting.

More worrying were a few rather better-equipped wasps that began to come in. With bird activity minimal and insect activity becoming unbearable, we descended to the forest floor again.



Tall tales

Right below the tree was an Oxbow Lake. These are meanders, isolated from the main river when it changes course. They will eventually disappear but, while they are around, provide a haven for wildlife. To experience this, we used a raft. It consisted of a large, square platform on top of two canoes. We sat on folding chairs while two of our support team paddled us along. In the late afternoon light, this was a relaxing and peaceful, dream-like experience. In fact, this was only a taster of the Oxbow Lake experience; a forebear of better things to come. We saw our first extraordinary, prehistoric Hoatzins, and had a brief encounter with a couple of Giant Otters, before our time ran out and we had to dock the raft and head back to the Manu Birding Lodge.



Hoatzin on the Oxbow Lake

The boat ride brought the usual cast of characters we were getting used to encountering from the river and we arrived at the Lodge exhausted. A beer, some dinner and an early night followed.

October 20th

Today would be one of the most memorable of the trip. We were up early again, setting out in the dark to go down river to the Blanco Oxbow Lake.

On arrival, we wasted no time getting to the raft, docked in a small boat-house which was home to a colony of Long-nosed Bats that whirled around in the thatched roof space as we prepared to head out onto the water.

If yesterday's brief foray onto the smaller lake was good, today would be sublime. As the sun rose, the jungle soundtrack built up. Steam gently wafted from the surface of the water, and a supreme calm descended. It's really hard to describe how soothing this experience was. Moving slowly, with the gentle ripple of the paddles in the background, it felt like a different world: paradise. Even when the uproarious braying, bellowing and honking of the Horned Screemers broke the peace, it seemed to fit, to be right for this moment.



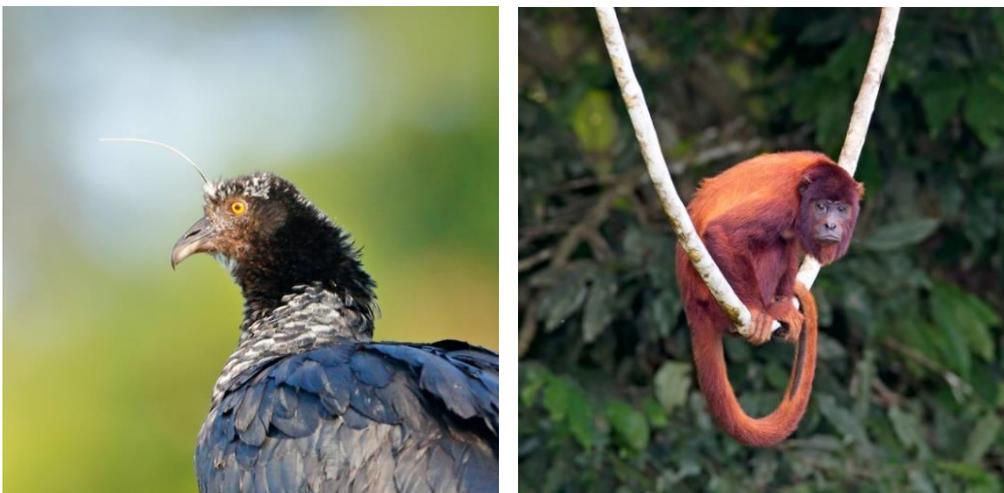
Blanco Oxbow Dreaming

As we settled into our seats, Satu served us breakfast – prepared in advance by Alex. A cup of hot porridge made from a local grain called Kiwica was both warming and delicious. Omelettes, fresh fruit and coffee followed. With the local guys rowing at the back of the raft and us three gringos tucking into our food, it felt a little uncomfortable, a bit too decadent – like the last days of the Raj or suchlike. However, the good humour, civility and relaxed nature of the crew meant these misgivings passed; we expressed our immense gratitude and just enjoyed the moment, the luxury.



Wattled Jacana

Gliding across the channels of open water, between carpets of water lilies, we felt the rest of the world fade away. Macaws and parrots were all around; numerous Wattled Jacanas did their lily-trot; a group of Yellow-billed Teal dabbled; and a Ringed Kingfisher perched on a snag. Then we got our first glimpses and views of the local Giant Otter family as they fished and frolicked ahead of us. It was hard to avoid the died-and-gone-to-heaven cliché making an appearance.



Horned Screamer and Red Howler Monkey

Further down the lake, another extended viewing of the otter family allowed George to take some outstanding photos of them and another troop of Red Howler Monkeys watched us from the trees.



Giant Otter

We decanted from the raft inside the boat house, looking up at the now-roosting bats and agreed the morning had amounted to one of the best experiences of our lives.

Back at the Lodge, we had lunch and took a short rest. Before long, though, the lure of more birding took hold. Juan-Jo said he would catch us up as we headed for the Manakin Trail. After a few new birds – including Round-tailed and Band-tailed Manakins – we hit a quiet spell, walking through the forest with little reward for our efforts as the light began to fade. At a fork in the trail, Satu offered us a choice of a shorter, direct walk back or a longer, loop around. We opted for the loop – and what a good choice that was! As we walked in single file, minus Juan-Jo, who never did catch us up in the end, Satu stopped and whispered a bird name and told us to advance to him very slowly. We weren't sure we'd heard him right but he repeated it and as we reached him he pointed to the Ornate Hawk-Eagle, sitting in a tree, not more than thirty metres from us! This magnificent raptor is hard enough to see in flight but to have it perched so close, inside the forest, was incredible. It looked around at us a couple of times as George tried to get some shots away before flying off into the jungle and out of view. We were ecstatic. Juan-Jo would later be gutted!



Ornate Hawk-eagle

Following the looped track back toward the Lodge, Satu recognised a call and began to try and lure the bird in. Before long, we were looking at an Ocellated Poorwill (a type of nightjar) only a few metres from us. After a few fly-pasts it settled on a branch for us to admire it.

What a day it had been. We returned to the Lodge for dinner and a couple of celebratory beers. Even Satu took a beer in honour of his best ever views of the eagle.

October 21st

Overnight, thunder and lightning had crashed about the sky, while the rain thudded down. Up before dawn, our planned visit to another canopy tower within the Manu Birding Lodge property looked like it might be affected. To be honest, the fact this was our first serious rain of the trip was a sign of how good our luck had been with the weather so far. It's not called a rainforest for nothing!

After breakfast, and with the rain easing, Satu decided we should just get out and get on with it. We agreed! We took the first section of the trail at a fair pace, trying to get to the canopy tower as soon as we could and avoid both the heat of later on and the insects of our previous tower time.

We arrived at the tower and discovered it was a standalone version of the 'fire-escape' we'd used at the last canopy tower. This one was a bit smaller at *only* 30 metres or so but proved almost as daunting and unnerving once we reached the top. With heavy, grey clouds still rolling around the sky

and the rain falling more steadily, sitting on top of a metal tower in a lightning storm, getting soaked, didn't feel like a very sensible idea! We descended with only a couple of species to show for our efforts and made our way to a small clay lick with a hide to sit it out and wait for the rain to pass.

There were a couple of Brown Agouti using the lick when we arrived; one of these large rodents suffering from what looked like a bot-fly infestation. They were soon joined by a pair of very smart Ruddy Quail-Doves. As we waited and watched, an obliging pair of Spot-backed Antbirds flicked about in front of the hide. The male was particularly handsome in his black, rust and white outfit. A Rufous-breasted Hermit zipped in and out and after about an hour or so, the rain finally abated and we headed back to the tower.

This time we got more great views and some more birds for our trouble. We came down from the tower and made our way back to the Lodge via the trail system, picking up a burst of trip and life birds along the way.

After lunch and a bit of a siesta, we reconvened to go back out on the trails and to visit another clay lick where Tapirs were the main attraction. We approached the raised hide at the clay lick in silence, climbed the stairs and took off our boots. There were a couple of Blue-throated Piping Guans in attendance but not much else. The idea was that we would each have a mattress on the hide floor, covered by a mosquito net. We would settle in for the evening, dozing and waiting for someone (Satu!) to spot something interesting and alert us all in turn to wake up.



Blue-throated Piping-Guan and the observers

As darkness descended and we all started to drift off (apart from Satu the redoubtable lookout), the sounds of the jungle night struck up. Cicadas buzzed and trilled. Owls, Piping Guans and other birds called. Branches rattled and shook as monkeys and birds passed by, the extraordinary call of the Giant Monkey Frog (it really is called that) barked out, and George and Juan-Jo snored. At first, the frog's mad call would startle me awake but gradually, like the snoring, I got used to it.

On several occasions during the night, we thought Tapirs were about to enter the lick but they all turned out to be false alarms. The only wildlife revealed when Satu sent his torch beam out into the blackness were bats. It was a unique and relaxing experience but we were never going to stay all

night, as some groups do, so at about 10.30, we decided to return to the Lodge; doing some night-birding along the way.

Throughout our time in the hide a Crested Owl had been growling away in the distance. Once we got out on the trail, Satu called it in on the iPod and then located it sitting high in a tree. It was a truly spectacular beast, with those amazing eyebrows and quite an avian highlight to end the night on. However, the wildlife watching was not entirely finished as we also saw a nice Rainbow Boa and a very smart Amazonian Scarlet Snake in the trail-side vegetation as we made our way back.



Crested Owl

Hummingbird Lodge

October 22nd

Today we would bid farewell to the Manu Birding Lodge and relocate upstream to the Hummingbird Lodge – a property owned by Satu’s brother. After a relatively late breakfast, taken around 06.00, we gathered up our things, said goodbye to the nesting hermits and piled into the boat. As ever, the glistening water, blue sky and whistling breeze helped raise our spirits and wake us up.



A Lodge fit for a hummingbird. In this case, Gould’s Jewelfront

After a couple of hours on the river, we arrived. The accommodation was basic but clean and comfortable. With bags dropped off and a quick freshen up, we headed straight out onto the trails. Not far from the Lodge was a huge fig tree with many dangling lianas, which George, Juan-Jo and I took full advantage of to swing about on like Tarzan – no cheap shots about looking more like Cheetah, thank you! After monkeying about for a bit, we got down to the serious business of birding. As we entered the bamboo stands, we encountered a host of new species but the highlight came when a Razor-billed Curassow – one of the rarest birds we would see on the trip – flapped up the bank, then flew into the trees nearby, stopping long enough for us to see the distinctive casque on its bill. We returned to the Lodge in high spirits, ready for some lunch.

This would be a more relaxed day; a chance to unwind, recharge the batteries and enjoy the hummingbirds that came into the gardens. After lunch and a short siesta, we settled in for a feast of hummers and top notch photographs.



Fork-tailed Woodnymph

After dinner, we went out to the river to take in the spectacular sunset, and sip a cool beer. The sky did not let us down and it felt so tranquil and relaxing sitting on a riverside log, taking it all in.

As it got properly dark, we made our way back to a clearing that was to become the site of the new Lodge. The river is not a static, benign entity and there were fears that the current Lodge could be lost to bank erosion as this hefty body of water shifted course - if it wasn't moved further inland. Luckily for us, it also created a great spot to see birds.

After spotlighting both Common and Great Potoo, Satu and Juan-Jo had to work hard to find us any other night birds. We could hear two or three species calling and singing but none of them wanted to come in close. Eventually, as Jen sensed a shadow fly overhead towards a nearby tree; we got one of our most wanted species – a Spectacled Owl. It sat in the tree allowing George to get some fantastic shots away before we let it be and returned to the Lodge.



Spectacled Owl

As most of the team went to bed, George and I made our way back to the riverbank so he could take some shots of the spectacular night sky; complete with Milky Way. It's fair to say that a couple of the photos worked out ok! It was a memorable and atmospheric way to end another great day.



The Milky Way over the Madre de Dios River

October 23rd

We were up at a modest 05.30 today and the intention was to bird the trails around the Lodge, as well as taking some more time to let George photograph the hummers in the garden. However, with activity in the garden limited after breakfast, we returned to the clearing where we'd seen the Spectacled Owl the previous evening. The cloudless sky promised a very hot day to come and we enjoyed the relative cool of the early morning. The open clearing meant when a bird did appear we invariably got a good look at it.

After a successful run of new birds, we returned to the Lodge for lunch and a siesta as the sun scorched down. Afterwards, another bird-packed jaunt on the trails was followed by some more hummingbird-watching in the gardens and then another spot of night birding, which got us great views of a very handsome Black-banded Owl.

Back at the Lodge after seeing the owl, George was keen to try again for some night sky photos. I was exhausted and declined. That turned out to be a mistake! While I drifted off to sleep, George and Juan-Jo got amazing, close views of a Nine-banded Armadillo. Satu even got out of bed with only his underwear and boots on to witness this amazing creature. Ah, well. Another time ... for the armadillo, that is, not to see Satu in only his undies and boots. Honest!

October 24th

Today would signal the end of our time in the jungle. We'd be returning to Puerto Maldonado and travelling on to the next phase of the trip.

Not too long after setting off in the boat, four magnificent Wood Storks flew off from the riverside. However, we would be well on our way down river before a Great Black Hawk soaring with some vultures would increase the tally further.

The wind whipped George's favourite hat into the river, never to be seen again, and he was pretty upset about it. It was a hat bought on our Ecuador trip and had served him well on many jaunts since. However, it didn't take long before he was able to console himself as to its loss. On a beach, not more than fifty metres away, we saw a male Jaguar! The superlatives available to me in the English language will fail to do justice to this incredible beast. He must have been sunbathing and, as we approached, he stood up and walked off, flicking his tail. With one last look over his shoulder, he eased into the riverside vegetation and out of sight. It was always a long-shot that we'd see one. I never believed we would, but, to get such close views in broad daylight? O...M...G!



Jaguar on the Madre de Dios

A little further on, a huge Jabiru stork stood watch on a mid-river sandbar but, as far as new birds were concerned, that was it.

A kamikaze taxi driver hurled us back from Boca Colorado to the Inambari River with only a Blue Ground-Dove and some very cute Grey-necked Wood-Rail chicks to compensate us for the shredded nerves. It hardly seemed possible but here we were again, with Wilbur behind the wheel of the mini-bus, whisking us back to Puerto Maldonado.

About 30km from the hotel, Satu asked Wilbur to stop at the Parador Turistico Familia Mendez. This family-owned motel, on the main highway, had a small forest and trail behind it. We did ok here despite high winds, a splat or two of rain, and the rumble of not-too-distant-thunder, including fantastic views of the world's smallest flycatcher, the Short-tailed Pygmy-Tyrant. We were treated to some delicious, organic pineapple, grown onsite, before we continued on our way.

With the light fading and our energy levels dropping we headed for the hotel, a delicious meal and a few beers.

Aguas Calientes and Machu Picchu

October 25th

Today had the potential to turn into a version of the Steve Martin film *Trains, Planes and Automobiles*. There would be a lot of travelling in order to get us to Aguas Calientes - the gateway to the mythical Machu Picchu.

Before our flight to Cuzco, we did one last bit of birding around Puerto Maldonado. This time, Satu (and Wilbur) took us down to an unpaved road alongside the river. This road turned out to be pretty busy with construction traffic; huge trucks creating choking dust clouds every now and again. We did manage a few new birds but, before we knew it, our time was up. We returned to the hotel to pack and get ready to fly to Cuzco.

The jungle and the lowlands had been epic. Now, it was time to go to the high country and experience a completely different side of Peru.

The flight to Cuzco went without a hitch. We dropped off half our bags at the hotel for them to store for us and grabbed a snack from a local café to eat on the road. Our next driver, Fernando, met us outside the hotel and we set off by road for Ollantaytambo to catch a train to Aguas Calientes. Unfortunately, Satu's wife and daughter had been taken ill, so he would be dropping us off and returning to Cuzco. We were to meet Juan-Jo in Aguas Calientes for the trip to Machu Picchu the following day.

The outskirts of Cuzco provided a stark contrast to the well-maintained, Colonial architecture of the tourist-friendly city centre. Packs of feral dogs rooted through piles of garbage tipped on the street; people appeared to be living in houses that barely looked fit to keep chickens in; kids dodged the chaotic traffic as best they could; and graffiti adorned almost every building. It always makes me thankful for what I have when I see how some other people in the world have to live.

We didn't make any stops as we drove since we would go on to see all the birds we passed by in a couple of days' time. However, the most astonishing sight on this drive was an old guy taking a dump, right at the side of the road, in full view of the passing traffic! We could hardly believe it. Back home he'd have been arrested for doing that.

Apart from being a bit of a mouthful, Ollantaytambo (pronounced oi-an-tie-tambo) is a picturesque little mountain town. We wished Satu and his family well and made our way to a café George and Jen visited last time they were here: it had a very nice garden out back, with some good birding potential. We didn't have to wait long for the new birds to oblige but it was getting late and the last bird of the day, before the sun set and darkness swallowed the last of the light, was a female hummingbird – the Black-tailed Trainbearer. How appropriate.

We retired to the café and ordered a drink as we waited for the train. The services on Peru Rail are run like a military operation; always on time. So, right when we were supposed to, the immaculately dressed guard checked our ticket and we took our seats. The train was luxurious – leather seats, walls painted with Incan murals, and spotlessly clean.



On the train to Aguas Calientes

The train moves slowly and it took a couple of hours to reach Aguas Calientes, where we decanted along with a throng of expectant, excited tourists. Juan-Jo was there to greet us and take us to our characterful hotel – Gringo Bill's. He got us checked in then went off to his own hotel. We ate a quick spot of dinner and then had an early night. Tomorrow we'd be up early – again! We were keeping our fingers crossed that the rain, which had apparently bucketed down that day, would not return for our visit.

October 26th

We had breakfast at 05.00 and afterwards met Juan-Jo to go and get the bus up to Machu Picchu. When we got to the embarkation point, big queues were already forming. The Peruvian government have set a quota of 5000 people a day on the site in order to limit the impact visitors are having, so everyone needs to book in advance to go there. However, bus tickets are purchased on the day and, in their infinite wisdom, the ticket company was only operating one small kiosk, with one person manning it. Juan-Jo had to queue for nearly an hour. When he did finally get the tickets, we were fast-tracked onto the next bus ahead of a long line of people all travelling as one party; which was nice.



Waiting on a bus in Aguas Calientes

The road up to the site is a hair-raising, snaking, dirt track with dizzying drops on one side. The bus drivers are typically Latin: fond of their accelerator pedal, nonchalant in regard to passenger safety and totally unfazed by any apparent danger. It was an interesting ascent!

We reached the car park in one piece, used the lavatorial facilities and entered the site. This had been a place I'd wanted to visit since I first saw it in books and on TV back in my childhood, so getting my first look at the famous citadel was a very emotional moment. It really is a wonder of the world; a staggering feat of ancient engineering that defies logic in being placed so precipitously high up, at a time well before any lifting equipment or motorised transport was available to help make the task less arduous.



The best thing about this place was that it's not just an impressive ancient monument, set amongst stunning scenery; it's also a great place to see wildlife. After taking a few photographs, we began to explore some of the spots Juan-Jo knew would hold good birds. Thankfully, the rain never materialised and, as the sun began to break through, it warmed up nicely.

We found a very productive little area where we notched up a string of new species, all the while trying to lure in the endemic Inca Wren, but without success.



Juan-Jo took us to a path where he'd had luck with the wrens previously. We sat down on some steps as he played the song on his iPod and the response was incredible. A pair of Inca Wrens came in so close I could have touched them. So close, I couldn't focus my binoculars on them, while the song was so loud it hurt our ears! It took George a few attempts to get decent photos of them but once he did, we moved on.



Looking for the Inca Wren ... there it is!

We took lots more pictures and then agreed it was time to go. There was a botanic garden part way down the valley and Juan-Jo had arranged for the bus to drop us off there. As we were leaving the site, I stopped to take in one last look. The jagged mountain peaks cloaked in greenery, the incredible buildings and the glorious weather combined as if in a magic spell any shaman would be proud of – I'm not ashamed to say that I shed a little tear. We stamped our passports before we left and headed for the bus. Machu Picchu had been all I'd hoped it might be and more.



Machu Picchu

We got off the bus and walked downhill into the botanic gardens. As we reached the administration centre, a flock came in and we racked up new birds. We walked on as the heat began to increase; using the road the buses took as we headed back toward Aguas Calientes. This road was busy with traffic and people alike and it made the birding a bit difficult to enjoy. Nevertheless, we did see some nice birds. Before long, we reached a spot on the river where Juan-Jo and George knew there was an Andean Cock-of-the-rock nesting on a rock-face. Sure enough, there were three chicks huddling together in the nest. When the female appeared and began to feed the youngsters, George and Juan-Jo clambered down to get closer and take a couple of photos.

With our train due in around 3pm, we went back to Aguas Calientes, ate a bit of lunch and collected our bags from the hotel. Juan-Jo and I did a spot of birding around the town, while George and Jen decided to relax and chill out in the restaurant. We got on the train back to Ollantaytambo as per the timetable and, after a spectacular journey back through the mountains, we met up with Fernando again, who drove us back to Cuzco.

By the time we reached Cuzco it was dark. Satu came to say hello and check all was well – we assured him it was. We went straight out for a pizza, before returning to the hotel and turning in early. Tomorrow would be our last full day in Peru and we intended to make the most of it.

Huacarpay Lake and San Salvador Lake

October 27th

Up at 04.00 we met Fernando outside the hotel, with bags already packed for our flight to Lima later that evening. We picked up Juan-Jo on the way and he took us to a small wetland in a town called Huasao. This village is renowned for being where all the shamans live. We had to hope they hadn't put a curse on us! In fact, it proved to be a really productive spot, with a good variety of water birds and a few other species as well. We left Huasao without any shamanic-induced mishaps – who knows, we may even have benefitted from some benevolence - and drove the rest of the way to Huacarpay Lake (pronounced Wha-car-pie). This is a famous wetland about 25km outside Cuzco.



Huacarpay Lake

The main lake is surrounded by reed beds, shallow lagoons and dried-out ponds. At the first place we stopped we got the briefest glimpse of one of the most sought-after birds on the trip – Many-coloured Rush-Tyrant. At the next stop, we got out and walked along a bank in front of a dried out area of mud and added a few new species including the very impressive Giant Hummingbird. Incredibly, as we were watching this bird a local man came to the side of the road and took a dump in full view of us and anyone else that might happen to be passing! I don't think it was the same guy as before, but you never know. Juan-Jo said it was a big problem for the lake that many locals

without any sanitation in their houses used it as a public toilet and, with no government money available to enforce protection, there was nothing much that could be done about it.

We got back in the van and drove round to a spot Juan-Jo knew could be good for the Rush-Tyrant, trying to get a more prolonged look at one. He was right. We did get great views of one as well as some very showy Plumbeous Rails. A little further on, we began to look for another endemic speciality of the area; a large hummingbird with a great name - the Bearded Mountaineer. Another hummer – a Green-tailed Trainbearer - put in an appearance first before Juan-Jo located a female Bearded Mountaineer perching in a bush. Close by we added another endemic species in the form of a Rusty-fronted Canastero. With these successes under our belt, we broke for breakfast at the roadside, even risking a dash of tabasco before noon.



Many-coloured Rush Tyrant

Suitably refreshed, we drove on into the mountains, heading for a high altitude lake called San Salvador. As Fernando swung the bus around numerous hairpins, we edged up and up, and, as we continued up and up, we would stop occasionally and jump out to check on anything that caught our eye. George kept score with an altimeter on his watch and as we reached over 3500m we were amazed to see kids playing football in the local school. We were feeling a little breathless after short walks never mind full-on sports activities.



Taking the high road

Eventually, we hit the top and reached the lake. At 4100m we could really feel the lack of oxygen but we didn't mind – a couple of Andean Geese, a breeding colony of truly giant Giant Coots, a pair of odd-looking Crested Ducks and a few Andean Gulls graced the lake. A Black-crowned Night-Heron was a bit of an unexpected find up here but the really bizarre thing was when it decided to swim about like a duck! None of us had ever seen a heron acting like that before.



San Salvador Lake

Around the lake, the barren, rock-strewn landscape brought us a few new birds but the local indigenous people farming up here were a little suspicious of us. They'd had issues with mining companies prospecting and were unhappy about George taking photos. One woman more or less chased us away from the first place we stopped but a man who approached us further on was appeased by looking at some of George's photographs, and seemed to believe Juan-Jo when he said we were only up there to see the birds. It was a beautiful, rugged place and I could see why they were so protective of it. This high Paramo habitat is one of my personal favourites. It feels a bit like the Highlands of Scotland on steroids.



Andean Goose and Giant Coot

We drove on, past a road crew of women making minor repairs; hardhats plonked on top of traditional headscarves. We eventually stopped when the road began to descend on the other side of the hill. Once we'd eaten lunch, we about turned and headed back the way we'd come, winding back down the hairpins looking for birds.

With time to spare before our flight to Lima, Juan-Jo offered us a chance to swing past Huacarpay Lake again, so we accepted. It didn't add any new birds for the trip but it was enjoyable all the same. George even saw a wild Guinea Pig dart across a gap in the reeds. As we began to flag, we let Juan-Jo and Fernando off the hook and were dropped at the airport with plenty of time to spare. We said our goodbyes and thanked Juan-Jo for a brilliant day. It was quite a way to round off the trip proper. However, it wasn't all over just yet...

Lima (again)

October 28th

We landed in Lima and took a taxi to the same hotel as we stayed in previously. Satu was there waiting for us and we agreed a plan of action for the morning. With no real appetite, we decided against eating out so late and just went to bed. A mini-bus and Satu would be waiting for us at 05.00 the next morning.

Up with the lark again, we met Satu and our driver, Jonathan, in the lobby. This really was our last day and our last birding. I was flying out at 13.40 that day, while George and Jen were not due to leave until 00.40. The plan was to visit a seaside restaurant which had a colony of breeding Inca Terns below it and then visit a wetland reserve on the outskirts of the city. I would be dropped off for my flight and the other two could continue on to another site if they wished.

It was a chilly, misty morning. However, we were soon warmed up by the large numbers of birds down at the beach. Hundreds of stunning Inca Terns, along with a ton of gulls, were joined by a few Peruvian Pelicans and Peruvian Boobies (a kind of gannet by the way, not a bunch of early-morning naturists!). A juvenile pelican with a broken wing was on the beach and a security guard posted at the pier where the restaurant was, told us it had been there for a couple of days. Unfortunately, the same guard wasn't prepared to let us get any closer to the restaurant or the terns, so George's photo opportunities were limited.



Peruvian Pelicans and Inca Terns

We drove out to the nature reserve at Pantanos De Villa but realised it was not supposed to open until 08.30 and it was only 07.00. The reserve is reached via a guarded check point but, try as he might, Satu could not convince them to let us through without tickets. We did a cursory bit of birding along the busy road but we realised we would just have to go and find some breakfast and return at

08.30. It would reduce the time we had available for birding, and preclude any chance to walk the trails, but Satu still thought it would be worth it. He was right.



On the beach

We returned after a trip to a small supermarket and got the necessary tickets, passed the checkpoint and drove out to the lagoon nearest the sea. Set just back from the beach, it was festooned with hundreds of birds. If all this onshore action wasn't impressive enough, the spectacle out at sea was staggering. Peruvian Pelicans, Peruvian Boobies, Franklin's Gulls, various other terns and gulls, a few Black Skimmers and especially large numbers of Guanay Cormorants streamed past in long lines or alighted on the sea throughout our time at the beach. It must have involved thousands of birds.

Before we knew it, George's camera battery was dead and it was time to drop me at the airport. It had been a brilliant way to round off the trip. At the airport I bade my farewells and set off for home.

Peru had been amazing. The range of habitats, the special birds, the jaguar, the Blanco Oxbow Lake, Machu Picchu, the great food, and the top notch guides all contributed to make it an awesome adventure. To have spent this time with two of my best friends made it all the more memorable, significant and joyful. We are very lucky to be able to do what we do and we never take that fact for granted.

Roll on 2016 ...

The final tally of wildlife:

395 species of birds seen with another 34 species heard only, 5 species of monkey, 2 species of big cat, 6 species of reptile, 5 species of rodent, 2 species of bat, and 1 species of mustelid.

