

## **Hummingbirds of Ecuador's Andean Cloud Forest**



Of the over 1,600 species of birds found in Ecuador, at least 130 are hummingbirds. Given the variety of sizes, shapes and colors, it is easy to see why hummingbirds are known as "flying jewels" and "living rainbows." For many wildlife photographers, they are among the most challenging and most fascinating photography subjects. And capturing their crisp image—in flight as they sip nectar from a colorful blossom—is a peak experience for any wildlife shooter.

This trip could easily be titled "Hummingbird Insanity!" From the moment you step out onto the deck of our Ecuadorian cloud forest lodge, scores of hummingbirds buzz around your head! Simultaneously, at each of four strategically placed hummingbird feeding stations, 25 or more birds of 15 to 20 different species vie for position at a feeding port on a feeder. Jewel-tone feathers flash in the light and the air vibrates with sound as the birds fly in all directions. It is, perhaps, the most incredible hummingbird spectacle in the world!

Requiring over 100 pounds of sugar per week (75 to 100 US gallons of mixed sugar water) these high-volume hummingbird feeders afford an amazing opportunity for exceptional bird photography. It is no wonder that this region is sometimes referred to as "Hummingbird Heaven."

Photographing hummingbirds presents several unique challenges. Most noticeably, they are small and very, very fast. Focusing on them seems difficult, and shooting them "frozen" in flight requires advanced flash equipment. To make our hummingbird photography sessions the best possible experience, we have invested in several brand-new multiple flash systems that allow high speed shooting with a deep depth of field to get the entire bird in focus, plus a light-balanced background.

There is no need to worry about gear compatibility. It is easy to sync your 35mm DSLR to our equipment—each photographer will trigger the flash units via radio transmitter in the hot shoe of their camera—and virtually any brand

of camera will work. You must supply a camera, lens (a 100-400mm is best or a 70-200mm is within optimal focal



length for our hummingbird flash set-ups), an electronic cable release and a tripod. Longer lenses, like a 500mm and a dedicated flash unit compatible with your camera body (and a spare if possible), are useful to photograph perched hummingbirds away from our flash set-ups, as well as birds like tanagers, euphonias, trogons, toucanets, barbets and other species that come to fruit-filled feeders and insect-attracting lights placed around the lodge.

To give us a break from the intensity of the frenzied hummingbird shoots, we have scheduled one morning to photograph spectacular polygamous Andean cock-of-the-rock, as the deeply red males ritualistically display to females at a communal lek. This is followed by an afternoon visit to a local wildlife reserve—also well-stocked with bird feeders.

Along with photos of over two dozen hummingbird species possible at our two lodge locations—birds flying, perched and feeding on nectar from colorful flowers—you learn the techniques to set up your own multi-flash system at home. You learn the proper camera and flash settings, how to set up flowers and natural looking perches—and have fun and be wowed while sitting amidst an unbelievable squadron of more than 100 hummingbirds!

Check out Mark Thomas' [trip report](#) from our 2017 hummingbird photo tour



## Tour Itinerary

### Day 1 (Oct 4)

Depart home for Quito, Ecuador. Transfer to our hotel with the majority of the arriving participants or arrange private transportation through our office.

### Day 2

Following breakfast, we head to our temperate forest lodge on the eastern side of the Andes, crossing through the higher altitude páramo habitat. At the highest point of our journey, 13,400 feet, we cross over Papallacta Pass before beginning our descent into the valley. Our beautiful lodge is located 7 miles (11 km) from the hot springs town of Papallacta. This lodge, at 8,850 feet (2,700 meters) offers a number of hummingbirds and other species not found elsewhere during our trip. We arrive mid-morning and begin photographing hummingbirds using our on camera flashes while the hummingbird stations are set up. Shortly after lunch, we begin shooting at our stations where we will be able to capture our first images of hummingbirds frozen in flight. (BLD)

### Days 3–4

Each morning, we may have the opportunity to photograph the first of 5 possible species of antpitta that we should encounter over the coming days. Though our east-slope lodge may not have the sheer numbers of hummingbirds that we will see later at our west-slope lodge, it does offer several higher altitude species like mountain velvetbreast, tourmaline sunangel, chestnut-breasted coronet, golden-breasted and glowing puffleg, white-bellied woodstar, plus the beautiful long-tailed sylph and a host of other birds that are easily found nearby.



The star of the show here is the extraordinary sword-billed hummingbird—the only bird in the world with a bill longer than its body! The bill, used for probing the deepest tubular flowers, is so long the bird can only use its feet to preen its feathers, and it perches holding its bill almost straight up to reduce neck strain and avoid falling off its perch during sleep! The nearby river is also home to torrent ducks and white-capped dippers, which may make for an interesting distraction if there is a lull in the hummingbird activity. (BLD)

### Day 5

Following breakfast we head to the western foothill slopes of the Andes. Our destination is the

Tandayapa Valley, home to one of the most amazing diversity of hummingbirds in the world. Following lunch we set up our multi-flash systems as some photographers shoot perched hummingbirds with their flash mounted atop their camera. At 5,740 feet (1,750 meters), our lodge is located in the heart of the western slope of the Andean cloud forest. Here, amidst more than 100 hummingbirds vying for a position at the feeders, it is possible to see more types of hummers in a 5-minute period than all of the hummingbird species in the United States and Canada! Following breakfast we move to the hummingbird flash set-ups. Except when we take a break for lunch, the flash set-ups (each accommodates two photographers) are available throughout the day on a rotational basis in case one set-up is favored by one species or another. We also shoot a variety of beautifully colored tanagers, barbets, toucanets and other cloud forest species that come to feed at fruit feeders located just outside the front door of our lodge. (BLD)

### **Day 6 - 8**

We spend the next 3 days photographing possibly 15 or more hummingbird species as they come in to dine at our flowers and feeders. One hummingbird species, the booted-racket-tail, stands out as the star of the show, but many others, including western emerald, Andean emerald, violet-tailed sylph, fawn-breasted brilliant, purple-throated woodstar, buff-tailed coronet, green violetear, sparkling violetear and brown violetear are well-represented in this hummingbird smorgasbord.



Depending on weather, and when space is available to us in the bird blind, we have two half-day side trips planned. The first will be to a “bird sanctuary” that maintains both hummingbird feeders as well as fruit feeders. Both can be quite productive. We are at a lower elevation at this sanctuary so we will see several new hummingbirds that we will not see at the lodge, including white-necked Jacobin, white-whiskered hermit and green thorntail. The fruit feeders are regularly visited by crimson-rumped toucanets, rufous motmots and a variety of tanagers and euphonias. We have lunch at a local restaurant overlooking a deep river valley. This restaurant also has fruit and hummingbird feeders that are always busy with birds. After lunch, we return to our lodge and shoot the rest of the day at our hummingbird setups.

On another morning, we are up very early to travel to a private ranch that is home to a leking colony of Andean cock-of-the-rock. We shoot at the lek for about 45 minutes before moving on to try photographing 2 more antpitta species. From there we head further into the property where we will try to find and photograph the final two antpittas on our list. After that, we are treated to a delicious brunch before returning to our lodge. We shoot the rest of the day at our hummingbird setups.

If the weather and the creatures of the night cooperate, we will spend one night photographing bats as they come to our feeders and flowers to feed. This is a unique opportunity and requires no special equipment on the part of the photographers. Our leader brings the flashes and triggering system. You just supply the camera, tripod, lens (zooms work the best), and locking, wired shutter release. This is the exact same equipment used for photographing hummingbirds at our stations. (BLD)

### Day 9

We spend the morning shooting around the lodge. After lunch, we head to our downtown Quito hotel. We meet for our farewell dinner at the hotel restaurant before retiring to our rooms to download images and pack. (BLD)

### Day 10 (Oct 13)

We depart for home. (B)

*Great birds, great guide, great photos!*

—P. Gallagher

*Excellent trip!! Mark really works hard to help everyone maximize their experience.*

—C. Clark



## Trip Details

Oct 04 - Oct 13, 2020

Fee: **\$5,795 from Quito, Ecuador**

Deposit: **\$800**

Limit: **7**

**CONTACT US ABOUT THIS TRIP**

## Tour Leader



**MARK THOMAS**

**SUBSCRIBE!**  
To Our eNewsletter  
(click here)