

Playa de Oro:

As remote as you can get in the Chocó lowlands of Ecuador

June 2009 - by Dušan Brinkhuizen and Frank Bills



Introduction

Playa de Oro is a remote village along the Rio Santiago in the province of Esmeraldas, Ecuador. The community of Playa de Oro runs a lodge named "Campamento Tigrillo" located about 20 minutes upstream from the village. It is as remote as you can get into the Ecuadorian Chocó. Sadly, it is also one of the last parts of truly pristine Chocó rainforest left in Ecuador. The forest and the birds are spectacular and we strongly recommend others to visit this fantastic place. Canoe rides, rustic accommodation, local food, local guides and hikes into remote forest will give you a real "expedition" experience.

As far as we know there are only two other Playa de Oro trip reports available online. Scott Olmstead visited the place in November 2008 and published a very useful trip report with detailed site information on surfbirds.com. The main goal of our report is to share our observations by focusing on the birds and the trails and thereby stimulate other birders to make the move. Remember that the birding in the forest can be hard but the quality of the birds is certainly worth it!

We visited the reserve from 7 till 12 June 2009 and spent five nights at the lodge. Some of the trails are moderate to hard but with the great help of the local guides certainly manageable. Great birds like **Ocellated Antbird** and **Lemon-spectacled Tanager** proved to be common and were seen about daily. Also **Broad-billed Sapayoa**, **Streak-chested Antpitta** and **Five-colored Barbet** were surprisingly more common than expected.

Itinerary

Day 1 - Quito to Playa de Oro, Tigrillo Lodge and Paila Trail

Day 2 - Playa de Oro, Peñon del Santo Trail and PuebloTtrail

Day 3 - Playa de Oro, Cascada Trail

Day 4 - Playa de Oro, Angostura Trail and Tigrillo Lodge

Day 5 - Playa de Oro, Cascada Trail

Day 6 - Playa de Oro, Tigrillo Lodge and return to Quito

Day 1 - 7 June 09

Our trip started with a five hour drive from Quito to Selva Alegre. We arrived at 10:00 at Selva Alegre where we took our canoe. The local guides Julio and Domingo loaded the canoe with the supplies for this expedition and soon we were off to the remote Campamento Tigrillo, Playa de Oro. The canoe ride was an adventure as the river was very low and Julio had to use his best skills to get us safe and sound to the lodge. The boat ride was about two hours from Selva Alegre upstream and took as through some spectacular forest patches. The last half hour ride was mostly through pristine Chocó forest and we had the feeling that we were in the Amazon rather than being in western Ecuador. It was difficult to bird from the canoe and **Green Kingfisher**, **Ringed Kingfisher** and **Snowy Egret** were about the only species we saw. We arrived around 13:00 at Campamento Tigrillo where we settled in and had lunch. After lunch we walked the *Paila trail* which starts behind the lodge going upstream. Our first birds were a pair of **Broad-billed Motmots** high up in the canopy. A few minutes later we run into a small understory flock. The first birds we got in our bins were **Broad-billed Sapayoas**!



The two birds were vocally very active and it seemed that they dominated the flock at the time. We had great looks at this pair of Sapayoas as we could even see the yellow crown patch of the male. Other species that we saw in the flock were Lemon-spectacled Tanager and Western Woodhaunter. The flock moved away from us and we continued to walk upstream. A Chestnut-mandibled Toucan was watching us from the canopy and showed itself well. Other species we saw along the trail included White-bearded Manakin, Blue-crowned Manakin, White-flanked Antwren, Checker-throated Antwren and a monospecific flock of Tawny-crested Tanagers. We heard a singing Bicolored Antbird which we got into view as we waited. At the same spot we heard another species of antbird singing which turned out to be a Stub-tailed Antbird. The bird responded well to its song and came in at very close range. A few minutes later we were watching two Ocellated Antbirds which were a great finishing touch of our afternoon of birding. Julio picked us up along the river and brought us back to the camp.

Day 2 - 8 June 09

In the morning we birded the *Peñon del Santo Trail* which starts on the opposite side of the river, just in front of the lodge. In the lower part (flooded forest) we saw **Spotted Antbird**, **Stripe-throated Hermit** and we heard two **Streak-chested Antpitta**. Frank got a glimpse of the antpitta before it flew out of the bush from where it was singing. Higher up the trail we heard **Black-headed Antthrush**. We played the song of the bird once and waited for about ten minutes. Suddenly it called from nearby and there it was! We watched it carefully as it was walking straight towards us. After we had some good views of the bird (and the bird of us) it turned around and disappeared into the understory. Birds in the canopy of the tremendous trees were very hard to see. We watched a canopy flock for at least ten minutes and the only bird we could identify was a **Slate-throated Gnatcatcher**. A male **Five-colored Barbet** was calling from the canopy and we put a lot of effort into finding the bird. Amazingly we both spotted the male independently in the top of a huge tree. Our necks started to hurt as we watched it for a few minutes. The bird was perched very high up but we still got some decent looks of it.



A Tooth-billed Hummingbird hovered in front of our nose but we never got the bird in our bins. We heard Immaculate Antbird singing and again we saw a Chesnut-mandibled Toucan well. We had good looks at a White-breasted Wood-Wren of the subspecies *inornata* which responded well to its own song. Several Crested Guan were calling from nearby. At a certain spot we heard an insect-like call from the midstory. When we located the tiny bird it turned out to be a Golden-crowned Spadebill. We had incredible good views of the bird and enjoyed watching its characteristically shaped bill, remarkable facial pattern and golden crown stripe. Further along the trail we encountered a small flock with Lemon-spectacled Tanager, Western Woodhaunter and Black-striped Woodcreeper. The woodcreeper was singing and as we played its song it showed very well. Domingo spotted a Black-headed Antthrush which we saw well when it crossed the trail. Near the end of the trail we first heard and later saw a Rufous Mourner in the canopy. Just before the river we had an understory flock with Tawny-crowned Greenlet, Plain Xenops and Dusky-faced Tanagers showing well. Julio picked us up again and brought us to the camp for lunch.

At the lodge we saw a large flock (20+) of Chestnut-headed Oropendula together with at least three Cinnamon Becard in the same tree. From the balcony we did a bit of "porch" birding and saw Black-cheeked Woodpecker, nesting Western White-tailed Trogon and a territorial male Long-tailed Tyrant. After lunch we walked the *Pueblo trail* which also starts behind the lodge going downstream. This trail goes to the village of Playa de Oro and it will take you about two hours to get there according to the locals. A Slate-colored Grosbeak was the first bird we saw. A little further down the trail we had good views of both Spotted and Bicolored Antbird. We encountered an understory flock and heard a Broad-billed Sapayoa. We did not get to see the Sapayoa but a White-whiskered Puffbird popped up right in front of us. We also saw Tawny-faced Gnatwren and a pair of Spotcrowned Antvireo. Later on Frank found a Broad-billed Sapayoa at another spot which we saw shortly. On our way back we heard the beautiful song of the Dagua Thrush. It showed well after we had played its song.



We spotted a family of **Mantled Howler Monkeys** and as soon as we left the male started howling at us. We heard a **Streak-chested Antpitta** along the trail and again Frank spotted the bird. This individual cooperated and kept on singing as we approached it. The singing bird showed well and we had great views of it for about ten minutes before we went back for dinner. During our delicious meal we heard a call of an owl behind the lodge. We found it in the spotlight after a long search and it turned out to be an immature **Spectacled Owl**.

Day 3 - 9 June 09

After breakfast we went twenty minutes upstream with the canoe to the *Cascada Trail*. We saw **Buff-rumped Warbler** along the river side and at the beginning of the trail we had **Rufous Motmot**. The morning started off great with a pair of **Olive-backed Quail-Dove** walking on the trail in front of us. A fast moving antibird flock crossed the trail and included **Ocellated**, **Chestnut-backed** and **Bicolored Antbirds**. The trail goes steep uphill where we heard **Crested Guan**. The upper part of the trail is rather flat and goes through spectacular pristine forest with some very large trees. Despite the exciting forest we did not see many birds for about an hour. At a more open spot we finally started to get some birds again and saw **Broad-billed Motmot** and **Dusky Pigeon** up in the canopy. We heard a loud call and glimpsed a large rufous bird. A few minutes later we got great views of two very responsive **Rufous Piha**. At the same spot Frank found a **Rose-faced Parrot** in the midstory that we got to see very well. The trail ends at a waterfall where we had a rest. On our way back we ran into an antswarm. The number of ants and antibirds seemed to grow and we stayed at the spot as long as we could. Five species of antibirds were coming in continuously: **Ocellated**, **Spotted**, **Chestnut-backed**, **Bicolored** and **Immaculate Antbird**. Other species at the antswarm we got to see well were **Tawny-faced Gnatwren** and **Southern Nightingale-Wren**.



A canopy flock was active very high up and we had great difficulties in identifying the birds. The only species we recognized included a male **Scarlet-and-White Tanager**, **Scarlet-browed Tanager** and **Slate-throated Gnatcatcher**. A larger gray bird perched in the top of the tree was most probably a female Black-tipped Cotinga. On our way back for lunch we got excited when we heard the loud calls of two **Great Green Macaw**. The birds flew over at close range. Going farther down the trail we ran into a small flock and had close looks of a male **Five-colored Barbet**. We met Julio at the river who had seen the macaws flying over while he was waiting for us. After lunch we didn't get to see many birds as it was raining late afternoon.

Day 4 - 10 June 09

Again we went for an early morning canoe ride upstream. We went to the Angosturo Trail which starts along the river just opposite of the Cascada Trail. From the canoe we saw a **Bat Falcon** perched, two Rose-faced Parrot and a group of Stripe-billed Araçari. At the start of the trail we got a male Orange-fronted Barbet and a male Masked Tityra. Inside the forest we again heard Great Green Macaws (most probably the same pair as the day before). This time the birds were perched for a while but we could not see them. On the lower part of the trail we ran into a small understory flock with Pacific Flatbill, Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher and Lemon-spectacled Tanager. As we continued to go up we saw a Mealy Amazon perched at a more open spot. The relatively steep trail follows a ridge and at the higher part we started to get good views of the valley on our left hand side. This spot seemed great for canopy flocks as some of the treetops were at eye height. We only got a small midstory flock which included Dot-winged Antwren, White-flanked Antwren, Spot-crowned Antvireo and a White-whiskered Puffbird. At the same spot we had some good views of a Golden-crowned Spadebill. We watched a female-type manakin at close distance for about ten minutes. The bird was eating berries and showed well. It had a rufous wash on the breast. Furthermore, the size of the bird and the leg colour fit well for a Club-winged Manakin. Higher up the trail we had short views of two Ocellated Antbird and a Northern Barred-Woodcreeper showed itself well. On our way back we ran into a recently fledged Chocó Toucan which was perched at eye level along the trail. One of the parents was calling continuously from the canopy.



A mixed-species flock moved high up in the canopy right above us and Frank picked out a **Golden-chested Tanager**. Apart from this highlight not many other birds in this high flock were identified. Suddenly we saw heavy movement in the canopy and a flock of agitated **Brown-headed Spider-Monkeys** passed us at close range. This species is rare and endangered in the Chocó lowlands and we were very lucky to see them. Lower down we ran into another canopy flock and again Frank spotted a **Golden-chested Tanager**! A male **Scarlet-and-white Tanager** and a **Scarlet-browed Tanager** were also present in the same flock. After a late lunch we birded around the lodge. From the balcony we watched **Band-rumped Swifts** and a pair of **Lesser Greenlet**. A canopy flock nearby contained at least three **Blue-whiskered Tanager** and an immature male **Scarlet-breasted Dacnis**. We ended the day with a pair of **Olive-backed Quail-Dove** skulking in the marshy area behind the lodge.

Day 5 - 11 June 09

We decided to spend our last full day at the *Cascada Trail* which turned out to be an excellent choice. In the early morning we glimpsed a small dark tinamou crossing the path. According to Domingo it was the small "black" one, thus most probably a Berlepsch's Tinamou. The following hours we hardly saw any birds and we got a bit disappointed. Our morning highlight was the call of a **Berlepsch's Tinamou** that we heard near the end of the trail. We went back to where the trail makes a steep drop (coming from below this is where the trail starts to get flat). This is where we had seen a canopy flock before and we hoped one would pass by again. We sat down and waited for any sound or movement. Suddenly a big bird flew in from an unknown direction and landed just above our heads! We were watching the bird from underneath and it turned out to be a guan. The bird hopped to another tree where it started to eat fruits in front of our nose! The guan was relatively dark with the back, rump, tail and under parts all uniformly coloured lacking the rufous tinge of Crested Guan. We were positive that we were watching the very rare **Baudo Guan!**



As it was a "lifer" for both of us we did not have any idea what to expect of its size. We both expected a "mini" guan. However, this bird still looked pretty big (but not as huge as a Crested Guan). The fact that it was perched at a ridiculous close distance probably made the bird look bigger. We asked our guide Domingo about the size of the bird and he answered steadfastly: "esta es la pequeña, las grandes son mas ricas". He told us that the guans where more common inside the reserve because outside they were hunted. The smaller ones are easier to hunt because they do not flee when encountered, while the big ones fly away making a lot of noise. This all made sense as our bird was about the tamest guan we ever saw. The rather tame behaviour of the Baudo Guan (as compared to Crested) was also described in the literature and fully supported Domingo's story. The party wasn't over as another big bird flew into the same tree. It was a female **Long-wattled Umbrellabird!** The bird returned for couple of times to get some fruits and we had superb looks of it. At a certain moment it was perched at such close range that we got trouble with getting it into focus! After spending more than two hours at the fruiting tree we decided to walk back to the spot where we had seen an antswarm the other day.

On our way we enjoyed two male **Blue-crowned Manakin** in display. As we came closer towards the end of the trail we heard **Bicolored Antbird** and again we ran into an antswarm (most probably the same as the day before). Apart from **Plain-brown Woodcreeper** being a new trip species, we had the same set of species coming in at the swarm. Again we enjoyed close looks of **Bicolored**, **Spotted**, **Chestnut-backed**, **Immaculate** and **Ocellated Antbirds**. A **Southern Nightingale-Wren** gave a little show by making funny pirouettes from its song post. Activity at the antswarm declined and we went back to see if we could get some more action at the fruiting tree. We waited for a while and heard a **Red-capped Manakin** lekking below. When we went looking for the bird a canopy flock moved in front of us. The first bird we got to see was a male **Lita Woodpecker** showing itself very well.



A **Pacific Flatbill** was moving along in the midstory. A female **Five-colored Barbet** showed up and while we were watching it the bird reminded us somewhat of Scaled Fruiteater. The male barbet came in as well and we enjoyed the pair for a while as the rest of the flock already had moved out of view. Back at the river side we had some nice views of a pair of **Olive-backed Quail-Dove.**



Day 6 - 12 June 09

We took it easy and did a little "porch" birding on our last morning. First we packed our stuff as we had to be ready for the canoe ride back to Selva Alegre at 8:00. A nice observation by Frank was a White-whiskered Puffbird which was perched on the railing of the balcony! In the big tree to our right we saw a smaller flycatcher which we identified as Yellow-margined Flatbill. The bird started calling and confirmed our determination. Our last new tanager for the trip was a Golden-hooded Tanager. During breakfast we discovered a female Pacific Antwren building a nest in front of the window. Our canoe ride back to Selva Alegre was nice and cool, but we didn't get any new birds. On our way back to Quito we did a little bit of roadside birding near Alto Tambo with a Chocó Tapaculo being our best bird.



We look forward to our next trip to this exciting Chocó area in December 2009!

Species (English)	Species (Linneus)		* Heard only
Birds (n=115)			
Great Tinamou	Tinamus	major	*
Berlepsch's Tinamou	Crypturellus	berlepschi	*
Little Tinamou	Crypturellus	soui	*
Baudo Guan	Penelope	ortoni	
Crested Guan	Penelope	purpurascens	*
Striated Heron	Butorides	striata	
Snowy Egret	Egretta	thula	
Turkey Vulture	Cathartes	aura	
Black Vulture	Coragyps	atratus	
Swallow-tailed Kite	Elanoides	forficatus	

Roadside Hawk Buteo magnirostris Bat Falcon Falco rufigularis **Dusky Pigeon** Patagioenas goodsoni Olive-backed Quail-Dove Geotrygon veraguensis Great Green Macaw ambiguus Ara Rose-faced Parrot Pyrilia pulchra Bronze-winged Parrot Pionus chalcopterus Mealy Amazon Amazona farinosa Piaya Squirrel Cuckoo cayana Spectacled Owl Pulsatrix perspicillata White-collared Swift zonaris Streptoprocne Band-rumped Swift Chaetura spinicaudus Stripe-throated Hermit Phaethornis striigularis White-whiskered Hermit Phaethornis yaruqui Tooth-billed Hummingbird Androdon aequatorialis Purple-crowned Fairy Heliothryx barroti Rufous-tailed Hummingbird Amazilia tzacatl Western White-tailed Trogon Trogon chionurus Chocó Trogon Trogon comptus Ringed Kingfisher Megaceryle torquata Green Kingfisher Chloroceryle americana **Broad-billed Motmot** Electron platyrhynchum **Rufous Motmot** Baryphthengus martii White-whiskered Puffbird Malacoptila panamensis Orange-fronted Barbet Capito squamatus Five-colored Barbet Capito quinticolor Chestnut-mandibled Toucan Ramphastos swainsonii Chocó Toucan Ramphastos brevis Stripe-billed Aracari Pteroglossus sanguineus Black-cheeked Woodpecker Melanerpes pucherani Red-rumped Woodpecker Veniliornis kirkii Lita Woodpecker Piculus litae Broad-billed Sapayoa Sapayoa aenigma Western Woodhaunter Hyloctistes virgatus Plain Xenops Xenops minutus Plain-brown Woodcreeper Dendrocincla fuliginosa Wedge-billed Woodcreeper Glyphorynchus spirurus Northern Barred-Woodcreeper Dendrocolaptes sanctithomae Black-striped Woodcreeper Xiphorhynchus lachrymosus Spotted Woodcreeper **Xiphorhynchus** erythropygius Western Slaty-Antshrike Thamnophilus atrinucha Spot-crowned Antvireo Dysithamnus puncticeps Checker-throated Antwren **Epinecrophylla** fulviventris Pacific Antwren Myrmotherula pacifica White-flanked Antwren Myrmotherula axillaris Dot-winged Antwren **Microrhopias** quixensis

Chestnut-backed Antbird	Myrmeciza	exsul	
Stub-tailed Antbird	Myrmeciza	berlepschi	
Immaculate Antbird	Myrmeciza	immaculata	
Bicolored Antbird	Gymnopithys	leucaspis	
Spotted Antbird	Hylophylax	naevioides	
Ocellated Antbird	Phaenostictus	mcleannani	
Black-headed Antthrush	Formicarius	nigricapillus	
Streak-chested Antpitta	Hylopezus	perspicillatus	
Chocó Tapaculo	Scytalopus	chocoensis	*
Brown-capped Tyrannulet	Ornithion	brunneicapillus	
Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant	Lophotriccus	pileatus	*
Common Tody-Flycatcher	Todirostrum	cinereum	
Pacific Flatbill	Rhynchocyclus	pacificus	
Yellow-margined Flatbill	Tolmomyias	flavotectus	
Golden-crowned Spadebill	Platyrinchus	coronatus	
Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher	Myiobius	barbatus	
Long-tailed Tyrant	Colonia	colonus	
Social Flycatcher	Myiozetetes	similis	
Gray-capped Flycatcher	Myiozetetes	granadensis	
Rufous Mourner	Rhytipterna	holerythra	
Rufous Piha	Lipaugus	unirufus	
Long-wattled Umbrellabird	Cephalopterus	penduliger	
Club-winged Manakin	Machaeropterus	deliciosus	
Blue-crowned Manakin	Lepidothrix	coronata	
White-bearded Manakin	Manacus	manacus	
Red-capped Manakin	Pipra	mentalis	*
Masked Tityra	Tityra	semifasciata	
Cinnamon Becard	Pachyramphus	cinnamomeus	
Tawny-crowned Greenlet	Hylophilus	ochraceiceps	
Lesser Greenlet	Hylophilus	decurtatus	
Southern Rough-winged Swallow	Stelgidopteryx	ruficollis	
Gray-breasted Martin	Progne	chalybea	
Southern Nightingale-wren	Microcerculus	marginatus	
House Wren	Troglodytes	aedon	
White-breasted Wood-Wren	Henicorhina	leucosticta	
Song Wren	Cyphorhinus	phaeocephalus	*
Tawny-faced Gnatwren	Microbates	cinereiventris	
Slate-throated Gnatcatcher	Polioptila	schistaceigula	
Dagua Thrush	Turdus	daguae	
Lemon-rumped Tanager	Ramphocelus	icteronatus	
Blue-gray Tanager	Thraupis	episcopus	
Palm Tanager	Thraupis	palmarum	
Golden-chested Tanager	Bangsia	rothschildi	
Gray-and-gold Tanager	Tangara	palmeri	
Golden-hooded Tanager	Tangara	larvata	
Blue-whiskered Tanager	Tangara	johannae	

Scarlet-breasted Dacnis berlepschi Dacnis Scarlet-browed Tanager Heterospingus xanthopygius Scarlet-and-white Tanager Chrysothlypis salmoniDusky-faced Tanager Mitrospingus cassinii Bananaquit Coereba flaveola Slate-colored Grosbeak Saltatorgrossus **Buff-throated Saltator** Saltator maximus Variable Seedeater Sporophila corvina Lemon-spectacled Tanager Chlorothraup isolivacea **Buff-rumped Warbler** Phaeothlypis fulvicauda Chestnut-headed Oropendola Psarocolius wagleriScarlet-rumped Cacique Cacicus uropygialis Orange-bellied Euphonia Euphonia xanthogaster

Mammals (n=2)

Brown-headed Spider-monkey Ateles fusciceps
Mantled Howler Monkey Alouatta palliata

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