

# 2021

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Zigzag Heron

**ECUADOR CLOUD FOREST AND AMAZON BASIN  
NOVEMBER 2021**

Ecuador was our first overseas trip since Covid hit us in March 2020. We debated long and hard whether to go but finally decided it would be a test drive for the way travel is surely going to be for the next few years. And yes we had to fly via Frankfurt and Bogota to reach Quito and yes we had the expense of an extra couple of days and nights in a hotel waiting for our PCR test results but in the end things ran smoothly- we felt safe and we had a great holiday and saw some very special birds.



We replaced our cancelled Galapagos trip (they told us the boat was still in dry dock?) with two nights at the very special Mashpi lodge and four nights at Le Selva down in the Amazon Basin.

Mashpi is 2 hours on the tar and nearly another 2 hours on the dirt from Quito. I had enjoyed our first visit to the cloud forest way back in 2008 and was looking forward to the humming birds, tanagers, and whatever else might be visiting the feeders. I think I got six new birds up there but



three I missed photographing- Pacific Tuftedcheek, Choco Warbler and Choco Vireo, but I did manage shots of Tawny-breasted Myiobius, Lineated Foliage-gleaner and Rufous-brown Solitaire.

We visited the feeders each day and had ten species of hummer ( no lifers there Im afraid) Toucan Barbet, a couple of Saltators, and several Tanagers, Moss-backed, Flame-faced, Ochre-breasted and Golden-naped to name but a few. Motmots and Toucanets were also regular visitors to the feeders. The feeders interestingly enough were situated well away from the lodge. They did not want the hummers flying into the very large lodge windows!

On first morning we drove back to the park entrance gate, where they had left the security light on all night. The number of bugs and moths there was spectacular and the birds were simply gorging themselves on the table d'hote menu. We had an incredible two hours there. I did not know which way to turn next. Toucan Barbet, Uniform Treehunter, Broad-billed Motmot, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, Slate-throated Whitestart, Golden-collared Honeycreeper, twelve species of Tanager and Blue-chinned Mountain Tanager- the birds just kept on coming with the views improving all the time as the mist started to clear. In all we had 80 species in two days- not bad for the cloud forest.

This lodge is five star all round- the accommodation, the food, the birds and our bird guide Nestor. They have a comprehensive butterfly house, an observation tower and a long ride across the



canopies which Stephanie tried and enjoyed. So there is something for everyone there.

Our Ecuador holiday was off to a great start.

It is a short 40 minute flight from Quito to Coca, the town from which all the Amazon lodge and boat trips depart. From there it is a two hour boat ride down the Napo river to La Selva. On landing you transfer to a man powered canoe for the 20 minute ride through a river channel to reach the large lake at the top end of which you find La Selva Lodge.



I thought this place was just great. We had a wonderful bird guide called Rodrigo. He was one of those guys that looks at your wanted bird list once and never forgets what you are looking for. The lodge was not busy, two Israeli girls, and us, although there was a larger party coming in the day we left. The food was five-star, our chalet was right on the lake and we could watch the Hoatzin move through the trees alongside us. The Cobolt-winged Parrotlets spent the day in the tree next door and the Paiche fish smacking their tails on the water sounded like gunshots going off.



At La Selva we climbed the observation tower built next to a massive Capoc tree, we did a lot of birding from the canoe around the lake. We went back to the Napo river to visit the Parrot lick ( no licking parrots there I'm afraid) and we visited an island in the middle of the Napo river. There are number of specialist species which can only be found on what they call early succession islands in the river. They are

usually covered with a combination of reeds, low scrubby plants and some young trees-usually willows. In this different habitat you find Castelnau's Antshrike, Black-and-white Antbird, Parker's and White-bellied Spinetail, and River Tyrannulet. We found them all except the White-bellied Spinetail on two trips – the other being from Sacha lodge.

I left Stephanie behind the day we walked for 40 minutes before dawn through the rain forest to the edge of yet another lake. Here we had arranged transport to take us to find the last South American Heron I needed- the Zigzag Heron. A small bird that likes to hide itself along quiet river banks and channels through the forest.

Rodrigo of course knew exactly where to find the bird but it took some time to manoeuvre both bird and boat to a position where I could get a shot in the gloom of the early morning. We picked up two other specials here- Cocha Antshrike and Masked Crimson Tanager. It was a long day and at dusk we set





off to find the Crested Owl- a spectacular bird out early on his nightly patrol.

The two other birds I will remember for many years –sad because I did not photograph either- were Wire-tailed Manakin and Chestnut-belted Gnateater, two beautiful little birds that moved so quickly I never got a shot – but I did come close on a couple of occasions. We got nearly 40 new birds and Rodrigo apologised for not getting more. He

deserved the large tip I gave him.

Our four days were gone in a flash and it was time to move on to our Amazon boat cruise. I was very impressed with La Selva lodge.

Our stay at Sacha was split into two- three nights before the river trip followed by 2 nights following the cruise. It was a long walk from the river to the canoe- about 1.3 kilometres along a muddy trail- not the most auspicious way to start our stay at Sacha. It was then another 20 minute canoe ride to the lodge itself. The lodge facilities were perhaps a little better than La Selva- they had two restaurants- one for breakfasts and lunches and one for the evening meal and the rooms were air-conditioned which is always a nice to have. But the feel was definitely more commercial with lots of European guests who did not have clue about life in the rain forest. The food was ok but not nearly as good as the fare we enjoyed on the rest of the trip



The habitat round the lake was not nearly as good for birding as at La Selva with a lot of secondary growth where the forest had been cut back at some stage and I took an instant dislike to our bird guide who never once tried to target the birds we were looking for but just pointed out what he saw as we did the usual tower and canopy walk, the canoe trips around the lagoon and the trip to the river for the parrot lick-( again no licking parrots) and the early succession islands.

Fortunately we had a different guide for our last two days, but one mornings' birding was completely washed out by heavy rains and we only added a couple of birds to our wanted list.





In between we had our river trip. The Manatee was moored about an hour upstream from Sacha and we boarded to find ourselves just two of four guests for our three night stay. Guests were significantly outnumbered by the crew. We had a very pleasant cabin and the food kept up the excellent standards set at Mashpi and La Selva.

The boat would moor overnight along the river bank and we headed out on the canoes every day. We spent one full day visiting Lake Panacocha where we had good views of the Amazon River Dolphin but the birding was pretty slow and we did not find anything really interesting. A Tropical Screech Owl hiding above us in one of the channels provided a couple of photos.

Our second full day we returned up river to the parrot lick . Again no birds at the main lick but we did find a smaller lick hidden behind some trees where the parrots were coming to feed on the clay. We spent a very interesting 20 minutes there watching the coming and goings- just three species though- Southern Mealy, Blue-headed and Yellow-crowned Parrot which can only be separated from the Mealy after some practice and checking a couple of minor differences. We then had a 3 hour walk in the Yasuni National Park which Stephanie decided to forego- probably a wise decision because the effort (lots of steep ups and downs) was not really worth the couple of birds we saw but it is always interesting to listen to the guide talk about the trees and plants and the myriad of uses to which they can be put.



We also climbed an observation tower in the late afternoon in the Yasuni NP- a hazardous operation along a very slippery path. I have never been a fan of late afternoon birding and other than a couple of Red-bellied Macaws making their way to their roosting sites we saw very little.

The monkeys were good at all three locations and we saw the small squirrel monkeys, the larger White-fronted Capuchins, and the splendid Red Howlers. The smallest of the lot- the tamarins- we found Black and Golden Mantled- were the cutest of the lot.



Add to that a Kinkajou, Tayra, Capybara, Paca , a 3 toed Sloth and Agutis and we had our fair share of mammals as well.

It was great to be out in the real world again after nearly a 2 year stay in South Africa.



