



Map by J.L.H.

BIRDING IN PERU, PART I: THE SOUTHERN COAST

by Bruce A. Sorrie, Mansfield

The fact that Peru boasts more species of birds than any other country in the world is perhaps reason enough to plan a trip there. If one then considers that these birds often occur in incredible numbers or in places of spectacular beauty, then a trip becomes imperative, particularly for the adventuresome birder. A relatively poor country, Peru often experiences supply problems, and roads may go unrepaired for weeks, but if one remains flexible and tries to think ahead, the birding will repay any inconvenience.

I assume that birders will opt for the increased mobility and freedom offered by a rental car as opposed to other means of transportation. Because the entire Peruvian coast is linked by the Pan American Highway, one can get around relatively easily by bus, truck (cheaper, but guaranteed to provide unnecessary thrills), or by hitchhiking, but the options for birding are limited. Another method of travel, which I have not tried, is to hire a car with driver for one to several days. This may not be as expensive as a rental car and at once solves your linguistic problems with toll collectors, military checkpoints, hotel clerks, etc. As of January 1985, Avis, Budget, Dollar, Hertz, and National maintained rental offices at the Lima airport as well as in town near Plaza San Martin or at the Hotel Sheraton complex. However, only Dollar and Hertz offered unlimited mileage and had those cars available. One firm's international office in the United States assured me that I could obtain unlimited mileage in Peru, but their Lima office thought otherwise. Perhaps I could have if I had signed a contract and placed a deposit before traveling to Lima, but who knows? Be flexible, and go to the next counter.

While you are in Lima completing your travel plans and buying equipment and supplies (one cannot count on much packaged food, film, mechanical gizmos, etc., outside of Lima), you may wish to do some local birding to satisfy your craving. City parks, particularly those found southeast from downtown along Avenue Arequipa to Miraflores, yield some of the widespread members of the coastal oasis avifauna; Turkey and Black vultures, Croaking Ground-Dove, White-winged Dove, Oasis Hummingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher (mostly the sooty-brown coastal race), Blue-and-white Swallow, House Wren, Cinereous Conebill, Shiny Cowbird, and Rufous-collared Sparrow. Just outside of town off the Pan Am Highway are Villa Country Club and marshes where Plumbeous Rail, Many-colored Rush-tyrant, Wren-like Rushbird, Red-breasted Meadowlark, and assorted migrants and vagrants can usually be found. Nearby coastal bluffs and beaches will provide your first glimpses of Peruvian Pelican, Peruvian Booby, Kelp Gull, Band-tailed Gull, and perhaps some migrant shorebirds, terns, and Franklin's Gulls.

The guidebooks for the Peruvian coast are Maria Koepcke's The Birds of the Department of Lima, Peru (1970, reprinted in 1984) and An Annotated Checklist of Peruvian Birds by Parker, Parker, and Plenge (1982). Note that much birding has been done since the former was written, and you can expect to see more species of migrants. The latter book, a superb publication of its kind, is an up-to-date compilation of the ranges and abundance of all 1700 species in the country. An in-depth account of the seabirds and ecological conditions of the Humboldt Current can be found in Murphy (1936). His more popular account (Murphy, 1925) is informative as well as entertaining.

About 250 kilometers south of Lima is Parque Nacional de Paracas, famous for its abundant seabird life. Rugged cliffs, promontories, and offshore islands provide nesting and loafing space for hundreds of thousands (formerly millions, before extensive guano mining and overfishing reduced the populations) of cormorants (Guanay, Red-legged, and Neotropic), Peruvian Pelicans, Peruvian Boobies, Inca Terns, gulls (Band-tailed, Kelp), with small numbers of Humboldt Penguins and Peruvian Diving-Petrels. Exposed mudflats and rocky shores attract a variety of larids, shorebirds, etc. The drive down from Lima is fast, comfortable, and unbelievable: for miles on end, not a speck of vegetation grows on the barren sandy and stony hills. Only where a river descends to the sea does vegetation flourish; these oases will be discussed later. The towering Andes form a rain shadow that, coupled with the cold Humboldt Current, produces a climate in which no measurable precipitation falls for years at a time. Nearly all of the Paracas Peninsula is such a desert.

First-rate lodging and dining can be had at the Hotel Paracas, right on the bay shore several kilometers south of Pisco. More rustic lodging, but adequate and much cheaper, is at Hotel Mirador, just northeast of Hotel Paracas by the road to the National Park. Both hotels run boats out to the Ballestas Islands, the seabird nesting islands, departing about 7:30 A.M. and returning about noon. I prefer the Mirador's boat, for the boatman, like the hotel owner, is eager to please birders and brings the launch right up close for great views and pictures. Aside from the species mentioned above, one can expect Northern and Red phalaropes, Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers, Franklin's and Swallow-tailed gulls (rare) in the austral summer; Chilean Skua, Wilson's Storm-Petrel, Cape Petrel, Southern Fulmar, Giant Petrel (Fulmar), and Sooty Shearwater in the austral winter. At the latter season, many other Procellariiformes are possible, including Wedge-rumped, White-vented, Sooty, and Ringed storm-petrels, White-chinned (Shoemaker) and Pink-footed shearwaters, Black-browed and Galapagos albatrosses, and Slender-billed Prion. Unfortunately, the best seabirding lies just a few kilometers west over deeper water, so tourists rarely see the fancier stuff.

What they do see, however, is one of the ornithological spectacles of the world. Despite great bird population losses due to overfishing of the anchovies, the Ballestas teem with nesting

birds while others are constantly flying to and from feeding areas. Southern Sea Lions socialize on stony beaches. If you are fortunate, the boatman will find the big feeding flock in the bay and steer you through an unforgettable scene. I have estimated such flocks at 200,000 to 400,000 birds, all diving, plunging, wheeling about, and flying on madly, this way and that, to overtake the anchovy school. Seabird numbers crash during El Niño, when warm tropical waters move southward and cause widespread fish die-offs and localized rain, but bounce back following the return of cold, more nutrient-rich, waters.

The southern end of Paracas Bay provides shallow water and mud-flats for shorebirds, waders, and larids. The list of species seen here is impressive, but many more species will probably be found. The contrasts are mind-boggling: Dunlin, Puna Plover, and Snowy-crowned (Trudeau's) Tern are all possible on the same day. Chilean Flamingos (migrants from high-altitude breeding localities), Gray-hooded and Gray gulls, Peruvian and South American terns, and Snowy Plover grace the shores, while Great Grebes (locally resident?) fish in shallow water. Migrants from the north include Peregrine Falcon, Surfbird, Osprey, phalaropes, Marbled Godwit, various peep, Gull-billed, Elegant, Sandwich, Royal, and Common terns, and more Franklin's Gulls than you may care to look at. There is a small natural history museum and visitor's center and a small cultural museum at the southwest corner of the bay. Coastal Miner (a Peruvian ovenbird) is a shoo-in there, and the examples of pre-Colombian weaving show extraordinary craftsmanship. Be sure to check in with the park rangers before going out on the flats.

The south side of the peninsula is rockier, with steep cliffs that plunge into the deep. The fishing village of Lagunilla has some rocky intertidal areas, good for Blackish Oystercatcher, Whimbrel, Surfbird, and that amazing passerine - the Seaside Cinclodes, the only species of landbird to spend its life on the Peruvian rocky seashore, feeding on small marine animals. Beyond is a series of high cliffs with views down to Southern Fur Seals,



Big feeding flock, cormorants and boobies Photo by Bruce A. Sorrie
Paracas, Peru



Coastal hills and tunnel
North of Ocoña, Peru

Photo by Bruce A. Sorrie

Peruvian Boobies, Inca Terns, and, in season, Giant Petrels, Cape Petrels, etc. Here also a few Andean Condors are regularly seen flying to and from roosting points.

East of the Mirador Hotel along a bumpy connector road to the Pan Am Highway is a weird habitat of nearly flat sandy stretches that have become encrusted with salt. A species of *Distichlis* grass sparsely covers large areas, interspersed with a few groves of date palms. Not much lives in these flats except crickets and, at night, Peruvian Thick-knees. Tawny-throated Dotterels may appear here but are more often found in cultivated fields near Pisco. Just north of the town of Pisco, a series of wet coastal marshes and ponds formerly existed, supporting White-tufted Grebe, Plumbeous Rail, various waterfowl and egrets, Wren-like Rushbird, Yellowish Pipit, Many-colored Rush-Tyrant, Red-breasted Meadowlark, etc. Similar wetlands existed on the east side of the Pan Am Highway a few kilometers north of town. Through draining, grazing, and other human activities, the marshes do not offer much now, but they are worth a look because there is nothing similar for miles around.

South of Paracas, long barren stretches with neither plant nor bird are relieved by oasis villages and towns. Larger ones like Ica have converted most of their riversides and marshes to cropland, but the diligent observer can turn up Croaking Ground-Dove, Oasis and Amazilia hummers, White-winged Dove, Groove-billed Ani, Burrowing Owl, Vermilion Flycatcher, Long-tailed Mockingbird, Cinereous Conebill, Shiny Cowbird, Streaked Saltator, Blue-black Grassquit, Parrot-billed and Chestnut-throated seedeaters,

Slender-billed Finch, Hooded Siskin, and Rufous-crowned Sparrow. At Ocoña, Andean Swifts, normally birds of higher altitudes, zoom past coastal headlands.

Only Ocoña, Camaná, and Mejía (just south of Mollendo) have any decent marshes. Those of Ocoña and Camaná have largely been converted to rice paddies, but Camaná still supports natural and seminatural pools with all of the birds mentioned above for Pisco plus Black-faced Ibis (now extremely rare on the coast), Yellow-billed and White-cheeked pintails, Cinnamon and Blue-winged teal, Ruddy Duck, Slate-colored and American coot, many shorebirds, and Chilean Flamingo. Camaná gets little coverage so is not well-known among birders, but because similar habitats are so far apart along coastal Peru and Chile, such marshes act as magnets to lure any wayward bird from the north, the south, the Andes, or even Amazonia. The Mejía marshes are largely natural but have been impacted by grazing and some rice-growing. Nonetheless, they are probably the best coastal marsh habitat in Peru and have recently been declared a preserve. Like Camaná they are extensive during wet seasons and shrink during dry periods but are excellent birding anytime. Mr. Robin Hughes of Mollendo has kept careful notes for more than twenty years and has documented a remarkable list of regulars and vagrants. Most of the Camaná birds are found here, plus Great Grebe, Least Bittern, Aplomado Falcon, Red-fronted Coot (rare, but found in the first marshy pool south of Mejía village), Black-necked Stilt (the southern race with a white crown), Tawny-throated Dotterel (especially in alfalfa fields), Black Skimmer, Southern Martin, plus such unlikely vagrants as Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Wood Stork, Puna (James') Flamingo, Andean Gull, Puna Ibis, Hudsonian Godwit, Wilson's (Thick-billed) Plover, Giant Coot, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and Puna and Speckled teal. From May to August, one can do very well scoping the ocean for seabirds; almost any on the Peru list are possible. A good road splits the marshes, but in dry seasons, it is often necessary to walk out southward between marshes and ocean to get a look at open pools. Take the dirt track that leads west and south from the cement entrance sign to the sanctuary.

Most of the Pan Am Highway from Lima south to the border of Chile passes through an area that one might flatteringly call desolate. Aside from the riverside vegetation or coastal marsh, there is only one other habitat that will attract the birder: the chaparral/cactus scrub known as "loma." Loma develops locally where fog strikes the rocky headlands and hills regularly enough (May to November) to produce a low, sparse, thorny growth. As a plant community, it is almost endemic to Peru. There is an excellent example one hundred kilometers north of Lima - the Reserva Nacional de Lachay. Here one can find Andean Tinamou, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Bare-faced Ground-Dove, Mountain Parakeet, Band-winged Nightjar, Peruvian Sheartail, Black-necked Woodpecker, Thick-billed Miner, Cactus Canastero, Chiguanco Thrush, Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant, Band-tailed Seed-eater, Band-tailed Sierra-Finch, as well as most of the "oasis" species mentioned above. Many of these species are seasonal, departing the loma when it

is dry and leafless (February to May). The Peruvian Plantcutter reaches its southern range limit in the Fortaleza Valley not very far north of Lachay.

South of Lima, the best examples of loma are at Atiquipa Valley; south of Atico; south of Ocoña; and at Matarani-Mollendo. Bird-life is similar to Lachay but with south shore specialties such as Grayish Miner and Least Seedsnipe. However, I know far too little about species present in the southern lomas to hazard a list. Very few birders visit the southern lomas, and there is much to be learned.

For those traveling as far as Mollendo, I strongly recommend a side trip to Arequipa, Peru's second city. It is full of colonial charm and is situated at an elevation of 7500 feet against a backdrop of volcanic peaks that rise to 19,000 feet. From here, the avifauna becomes rapidly very different as one ascends the Andes, and true puna can be reached in about three hours. The Peruvian Puna [a cold, dry, rocky Andean grassland above 10,000 feet] will be the subject of a subsequent article.

For the birder, as for any visitor to this country, there are many aspects of Peru (beyond the scope of this article) that make travel there fascinating - the people, their crafts and customs, the geology, physiography, and climate, Peruvian history and archeology, and the great variety of flora and fauna of this land below the equator. These you must experience for yourself.

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BRUCE A. SORRIE is a biologist specializing in ornithology and botany. He currently is Program Botanist for the Massachusetts Natural Heritage Program, a statewide inventory of rare flora, fauna, and biotic communities. Through his efforts, nearly 80 percent of the 250 rare plant species of the state have been re-discovered. Previously, he worked as a banding biologist at the bird observatories at Point Reyes and Manomet, where he helped develop techniques of capturing, ageing, and sexing migrant birds. An avid photographer, he has accumulated a large collection of bird and plant shots, which he uses to illustrate lectures on a wide variety of natural history topics. In 1978-79, he spent five months in Amazonian Peru and in the high Andes, working as a jungle naturalist and observing birds. Since then he has returned several times, primarily to study puna zone bird distribution but also as a tour leader to Peru and many other neotropical countries. Bruce has been a member of the Bird Observer staff since its incorporation in 1975.



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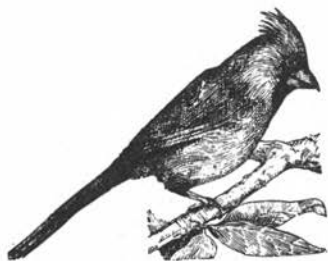
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