

BOOK REVIEWS—RESEÑAS DE LIBROS—RESENHAS DE LIVROS

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(To whom books for review should be sent)

Where to Watch Birds in Peru.—Thomas Valqui. 2004. Grafica Ñañez S. A., Lima, Peru. 384 pp. ISBN 9972-33-092-3.

By any standard, Peru is one of the World's premier destinations for the traveling birder. Peru, Colombia, and Brazil vie neck-and-neck for the country with the highest number of bird species found within its borders (some 1800 and counting!). To put this number in perspective, it is approximately twice the number of species that have ever been recorded north of the Mexican border, including all the extreme rarities and one-of-a-kind records, all in a country about the size of Texas. Peru's location on the Equator and its extremely complex topography have given rise to a very high level of speciation and endemism. New species are being described from Peru every year or two; this rate has been sustained since the 1930s. Today, there are about 65 more species known to science from Peru than there were around 1930. These are in addition to 10 or so other species that now are known to occur in Peru but which were originally described from neighboring countries (I. Schulenberg pers. com.). This fascinating and immensely diverse country has lacked a comprehensive guide to the sometimes formidable task of actually getting to the places where the localized species that spice its Amazonian-Andean avifauna may be seen. That gap has now been very ably filled.

Thomas Valqui's "*Where to Watch Birds in Peru*" is what most bird-finding guides to

Latin American countries have not been: authored by a native of the country who has personally visited (often extensively and intensively) almost all the covered locations. That Valqui is also a doctoral candidate at one of the major research centers for Neotropical ornithology (Louisiana State University) and has taken part in a number of field expeditions of the LSU Museum of Natural Science only enhances the depth of his coverage. Indeed his knowledge of the Peruvian avifauna and the land they inhabit is of cutting-edge quality.

A natural result of the author being at home in his native country and being fully versed in its customs, language, and rich culture is that sometimes the effects of the lack of this same ease and familiarity in the visiting birder are underestimated. Indeed, the foreign reader may decide, after digesting the logistics of visiting many of the described areas, that they should go with an organized tour or not at all. As Valqui points out in the introduction, this is often the most practical way to visit many areas, including virtually all of Amazonia. However, those observers with a little spirit of adventure, and armed with the highly detailed information and excellent maps for each locality found in this work, will find that Valqui has smoothed some of the hurdles that confront the foreign birder.

Significant parts of Peru lack the sort of ecotourism infrastructure that traveling birders are used to in countries like Costa Rica, Panama, and Ecuador. However, Ecuador

was where Peru is today just 10 to 12 years ago, and I predict that within another decade many of the remote and difficult-of-access sites treated in this work will have fully functional tourism infrastructures and will be on the list of regularly visited birding locations. And Peru is huge, so there will be a new frontier farther “out there” for the birders who will find the present work most helpful today.

The introduction contains sections that address personal safety and security. Read these carefully. Street crime is endemic to the larger cities, particularly where the incautious tourist makes this enterprise ridiculously easy. Most crime, as Valqui points out, is of the nonviolent grab-and-run variety. The most likely areas for this sort of petty crime are where large numbers of people congregate – street markets, bus stations, and even the national terminal of the Lima airport (personal experience). Thankfully, the truly dangerous days, when the Sendero Luminoso controlled certain regions, are a thing of the past, although a few areas, mostly quite remote, are under the control of illegal drug traffickers. These should be studiously avoided, regardless of what “good birds” live there.

In the matter of transportation, Valqui is a proponent of the hired car with driver. I can personally attest that this mode of birding transportation, rarely practiced in the U. S. or Europe, is by far the most practical and most secure way for persons not with organized groups to make day birding trips into unfamiliar countryside, and is often much less expensive than renting a car without a driver. Almost any hotel will know how to contact reliable drivers who can provide this service.

There is a very nice overview of the biotic complexity of Peru including some excellent color habitat photographs by fellow Peruvian birder Walter Wust and some great habitat maps. The text is further sprinkled with decorative pen-and-ink drawings of Peruvian birds

by Dan Lane, another major researcher turned tour leader with lots of recent Peruvian experience.

Valqui has divided the country into seven logical Bird Watching Regions. These regions, including the numbered sites (151 in all) within each that are given coverage in the text, are displayed on a map on page 55. The regions are: The Southeast – Manu and Tambopata, Cusco and the Southern Interandean Valleys, the Southern Central Pacific Slope, the Central Andes to the Amazon, the Northwest – Tumbes Area, the Manañon and Upper Huallaga, and the Northeast – Loreto Region. My personal experience lies mostly in the first three and the last of these regions so naturally I turned to these accounts first to see how well Valqui’s treatment matched my own experience; very well, as it turned out.

All of the major must-know details are included for each site. As mentioned above, many (in fact, most) areas of Peru are pretty tough to do completely “on your own”. The now famous “Manu Road” is a case in point. Yes, it is possible to rent a vehicle in Cusco and drive it yourself but you will be restricted to camping under generally wet and otherwise unpleasant conditions. Suitable areas for camping are extremely limited due to the steep terrain. Similarly, food, fuel, and potable water are unavailable except in Paucartambo and Pilcopata at opposite ends of the very narrow one way every-other-day part of the road. Valqui points out that one must bring in all their own provisions as the several lodges along the road (some with equipped camping facilities) typically will not accept drop-in guests. Besides the park guard station at the Acjanaco entrance station where the road does actually run alongside the park itself for a short distance, the road is outside the park proper in the “Cultural Zone”, and the land through which it runs is privately owned (much of it by a local conservation organization).

It is likewise true that there is public transportation on this road as is the case with virtually every other road in Peru, regardless of how remote or in what condition it might be. I have availed myself of this method to enter the area many times, but my one return trip via the same coach (one bus arrives at Pilcopata from Cusco every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evening and turns around to return overnight to arrive in Cusco on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings) was without question the most harrowing bus trip I have ever taken anywhere and I do not recommend it.

The beauty of this book is that many areas described have only been recently explored ornithologically and visits by birders will be turning up new discoveries for years to come in some of them. Granted, these kinds of sites are the ones that offer the most formidable logistics, but Valqui has largely demystified the process for us and those willing to work through the details will be in a position to add greatly to the knowledge of the distribution of birds of this complex country. That traditional ecotourism sites are treated as well allows the less adventurous to get the most out of their visits to more well-known places.

Valqui includes a useful list of references including a very complete list of commercially available audio collections of Peruvian birds, all important in Neotropical bird study. There is also a checklist of the birds of Peru using the AOU South American Classification Committee list as a guide, which is available on the web at "<http://www.museum.lsu.edu/~Remsen/SACCBaseline.html>" and which is ever-evolving. Valqui has wisely adopted this conservative approach while noting taxonomic issues that are still in a state of revelation that may well result in changes in the existing Peru list in the not-too-distant future.

The book, printed in Peru, has a very durable soft cover and appears to hold up well to heavy use. The only really unfortunate aspect is a rather large number of typographical errors. These appear to be type-setting errors on the part of the printer but they do detract from what is otherwise a highly recommendable work. Valqui maintains a website (www.tvalqui.com) where updates and corrections are posted; the website also includes information on where to order the book.—John C. Arvin, Research Coordinator, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, 103 W. Hwy 332, Lake Jackson, Texas 77566.

