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AUGUST 2014



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South American Safaris | *Peru*



For the Birds



THE PERUVIAN AMAZON PROVES THE PERFECT SETTING FOR THE SUPER BOWL OF BIRDING. BY JACK SMITH



Birding Rally Challenge competitors had their eyes and ears on (clockwise from top) scarlet macaws, curl-crested aracarís, bat falcons, and great kiskadees.



LEFT, TOP RIGHT, AND FAR RIGHT: ERNESTO BENAVIDES

There was something surreal about the scene in the Peruvian rain forest, where a dozen men were peering intently into the darkness as if summoning the dawn. It would not be long before the group—laden with binoculars, scopes, cameras, and GPS and digital sound devices—would disperse into the wilderness.

Some would venture into a dense jungle laced with footbridges swaying 100 feet above the forest floor; others would head by boat into swamps and creeks. In a few days their quest would conclude amid the mountainside ruins of an ancient civilization. Along the way, they might encounter a mysterious masked fruiteater, an elegant lyre-tailed nightjar, or a jaunty Andean cock-of-the-rock. Whatever the discoveries, the week was bound to be filled with excitement, as the Birding Rally Challenge—known to



From top: The competition began at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, home to slate-throated redstarts and lemon-throated barbets.

the cognoscenti as the Super Bowl of Birding—was about to begin.

Birding, as the rally's competitors were quick to point out, is not to be confused with the more common pastime of bird-watching. "Bird-watching is a hobby; birding is an obsession," said James Currie, the host of *Birding Adventures TV* and a consultant on the 2011 birding movie *The Big Year*, as he sipped a bracing cup of *esencia del café*, the tar-like coffee libation Peruvians take diluted with warm water. "You rise before dawn and keep going

until after dark, through wilderness and desert and mud. It's grueling. It takes you places you might otherwise never go, and you get to know people you might normally never meet."

This would be especially true of the Birding Rally Challenge Southern Peru 2013, which had

drawn some of the world's most distinguished birders from such disparate locations as the United States, Great Britain, South Africa, and Colombia to the Amazon basin to compete for the coveted title of birding's best. The first

few days of the challenge would revolve around the Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, a more than 40,000-acre private ecological preserve with a striking timber luxury lodge built entirely by hand. "There was no machinery involved at all; we built this place with machetes and axes," said José Koechlin von Stein, the Peruvian ecotourism impresario whose other properties include the

elegant Inkaterra La Casona in Cuzco, Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción near Lake Sandoval, and the posh Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, where, five days hence, the rally would end amid much jubilation and numerous rounds of pisco sours.

"Our properties are designed to open the wonders of the Peruvian Amazon to luxury travelers while respecting the local ecosystems and cultures," said Koechlin. "The Amazon is a marvelous learning experience."

It is also a marvelous place for a birding competition. Peru's varied ecosystems—from lush wetlands to vibrant cloud forests—are home to no fewer than 1,836 avian species, one-fifth of all the known varieties in the world. The country ranks second in the world for bird diversity and, according to the experts, is the best for observable birds. "There is always something new to see," said Dan Lane, a coauthor of *Birds of Peru* and a competitor in the 2013 challenge. "In the 1960s we thought all the bird species had been found, but we've found 15 more species this year alone."

Given the diversity of species, the variety of ecosystems, and the prestige of the Birding Rally Challenge, the rules for the event were remarkably simple. The semiannual competition (a Northern Peru edition is held in June), which Koechlin's nonprofit Inkaterra Association launched in 2012, consisted in this case of five teams of three birders each, with one local guide per team. Each team had to cover an assigned itinerary from 5 am to 6 pm, counting the number of unique bird species it could identify by sight or sound. The winners would be the team that identified the greatest number of birds, with no physical proof—photo, video, or audio—required.





The lodge at the 40,000-acre Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica.

As with any event involving top competitors, some participants will go to extremes to win. There was a rumor going around that one of the teams had shown up in the Amazon two weeks early to scout out the habitats, though each of the teams denied any part in this skulduggery. Still, one had to wonder: Wouldn't it be awfully easy to cheat? Who is to know if a birder *really* caught a glimpse of the legendary bar-winged wood wren or Lulu's tody-flycatcher, or whether he was making it all up to impress the girls back home? "If there's any suspicion of cheating, we shine a bright lamp in their face and interrogate them until they crack," said Barry Walker, the UK's honorary consul in Cuzco and one of two judges officiating over the rally.

"Actually, if someone wants to cheat, that's easy to do," he acknowledged. "But there's a code of honor; if I challenge a bird count, it's usually because of an innocent mistake. You get invited to these events based on reputation. Sometimes I'll have four or five questions per team, but no one gets upset. Most of the birders on

this rally are pros in one way or another."

So who were these guys and why had they come so far to compete in such an esoteric contest? Lane, a research associate at Louisiana State University, has been birding since he was 3 years old. "I just always thought birds were really cool," he explained. "A lot of hotshot competitive birders start at about the same age. I'd always appreciated birds for their aesthetic properties, both visually and aurally, as well as for their ability to fly. They are an easy way to identify with nature, and in this world where concrete, plastic, and motor noise are replacing natural things in our lives, a connection with nature is something more and more people are looking for."

According to the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife's *State of the Birds* report, birding and bird-watching contributed \$36 billion to the U.S. economy in 2009, the latest year for which figures are available. An addendum to a 2011 study—the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation—found that birders represent a kind of elite: the higher an individual's educational and income levels, the greater the likelihood he or she will be a birder.

Despite the big bucks associated with birding and bird-watching, there was no purse to speak of at the end of the Birding Rally Challenge. Still, there were more than bragging rights hanging on the outcome of the event. For instance, Lane and his teammates—Jesse Fagan, a mathematician from Texas, and Fernando Angulo, a Peruvian conservationist—were competing to raise funds for the endangered marvelous spatuletail, a hummingbird that is endemic to Northern Peru.

With the rally about to begin, the spatuletail's odds were looking good. After all, Lane is not only a recognized expert on Peruvian birds of all sorts, but also widely known for his uncanny hearing. And in the upper echelon of birding, hearing is as important as seeing, if not more so. "Seventy percent of the birds we find are first identified by their call," said Fagan, as he pulled on a pair of rubber boots for the first stage of the rally. "In some habitats, the foliage is so dense you can't see the birds at arm's length. But you can almost always hear them."

As if on cue, we heard the call of a nearby russet-backed oropendola. One of the Amazon's most common birds, it makes a sound like water dripping intermittently into a bucket. Having one outside your window overnight—as I did—is akin to water torture. But with the sun breaking over the horizon, the oropendola's sound was the birders' call to pack up their gear and head briskly into the jungle. The Birding Rally Challenge was officially under way.

ONE OF THE first things they will tell you at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica is never go into the Amazon without a guide. The wisdom of this advice became apparent from the moment I ventured beyond the tree-trunk



Above: Birders on Lake Sandoval.
Below: A thrush-like wren.



pathways that crisscross the property. A warning sign was tacked up where a rough path cut into the murky interior; farther within, the foliage became a canopy with the sun casting a glow into Middle Earth. "This is the best place to find birds," said my guide, Wilson, on our hike through the reserve. We came to a series of lad-



ders and began climbing, higher and higher and up to a leafy aerie 100 feet above the ground, where a series of footbridges were strung Indiana Jones-style between 10 platforms and observation towers. "There are some species of animals up here that have never been seen by people on the ground, but here you're eye to eye with them," Wilson said. "You see things and hear things you will never see from below."

As if on cue, a King vulture swooshed by like a pop-eyed pterodactyl on the prowl, its large wings fluttering as it passed. Wilson laughed when I hit the deck. "The rain forest is the haven for every possible kind of animal and vegetation," he continued as we returned to the forest floor. "Here's a walking tree; it 'walks' 20 to 30 centimeters toward the sunlight every year. Over here is a poisonous milky tree. The Indians use its poison for fishing, but you have to eat the fish well fried." When asked about the tapir that had been spotted moving around the lodge, Wilson replied, "It's sticking close to humans in case there are any jaguars around."

For any guide at the reserve, a command of birdcalls is a requisite skill. Throughout the day, the woodland

chatter was continuous. One bird would call, "Over here! Over here!" while another complained, "Let me eat! Let me eat!" and a third piped up, "Lickety lack! Lickety lack!"

That chatter, of course, was under the constant surveillance of the competitors, who at the time were scattered among the reserve's various habitats. Along the Madre de Dios River, the Field Guides team was busy identifying such flashy avians as the paradise tanager, Orinoco goose, white-chested swift, long-crested pygmy tyrant, and bamboo antshrike, among others. At the end of the first day, the team tallied a total of 131 birds—only good enough for fourth place.

The next day, the birders boarded a flat-bottomed canoe for the ride to Lake Sandoval, a mirrorlike oxbow that is home to red howler monkeys, sloths, bears, black caymans, and giant river otters that bobbed up and down beside the boat as if inviting the competitors to a watery game of Whac-a-Mole. A seemingly endless variety of birds—herons, egrets, parrots, vultures, hawks, ospreys, hummingbirds—live around the lake. The area is also home to some 18 native tribes, who can be highly protective of their rare woods and other resources, as numerous illegal loggers have learned to their peril.

The Field Guides team had better luck on the lake than on the river, but just barely: Their two-day bird count landed them in third place, behind the Sunbirds from Great Britain and Surbound Expeditions from the States.

After the event's final day in the lowlands, the birders clambered aboard the narrow-gauge Orient-Express train for the ride to Machu Picchu, the famed mountainside city of the Inca Empire and a place of haunting ruins. For the Field Guides team, the Machu Picchu area also yielded such memorable birds as the golden-browed chat-tyrant, scaled antpitta, trilling tapaculo, Cuzco brush finch, olive-sided flycatcher, booted racket-tail, and white-eared solitaire. With the contest set to end the next day at noon, the team had moved into second place.

The next morning at 4:00, the team disappeared down the road that leads past the railroad and out of Machu Picchu in search of more birds. That evening, after all the teams had returned and the judges had tallied the final results, the excitement mounted as the judges prepared to announce the winners. The early report was that Surbound had secured the winning total, but one of the team's birds was disqualified. No matter, with a score of 457—two birds ahead of both Surbound and the Sunbirds—the Field Guides team was declared the winner. The announcement was followed by much cheering, toasts, and dancing about while Lane related for the first but certainly not the last time how he heard the winning bird by accident on the way to his room. ■

Birding Rally Challenge, www.worldbirdingrally.com; **Inkaterra**, www.inkaterra.com