

Brits scale isolated peak in the remote Peruvian interior – but is this really birding?

By Barry Walker with photos by Barry Wright and Colin Bushell

The topographical map of the isolated region of southern Loreto, in the wilds of northern central Peru, boasts several still-unnamed peaks. We were interested in just one, known as Peak 1538. This unromantic name records the altitude above sea level of this Lost World-like mountain. Conan Doyle could have used an image of 1538 for the dust jacket of his famous novel, and to us it looked like it might still be home to dinosaurs, or some other species lost in time!

In 1996, whilst exploring the headwaters of the Cushabatay River, members of a biological expedition from Louisiana State University in the United States found a striking new species of Barbet (a close relative of the Toucan), which to this day has only been recorded within a few acres of remote forest on a forbidding ridge of 1538.

Such a discovery is the ornithological equivalent of finding a sunken galleon full of lost treasure and was the product of years of dedicated study. Dr. John O'Neil, the LSU expedition leader and mentor, has been in the business of finding birds previously unknown to science for decades and has probably found more species than any other person alive today. As we had not heard of any subsequent expedition attempting to emulate O'Neil's feat, we decided to go and see the bird for ourselves. With the help of information supplied by John O'Neill and Dan Lane of LSU we succeeded in forming a small, select group of like-minded enthusiasts also interested in seeing this truly spectacular creature.

Day One: On a balmy evening in the frontier town of Pucallpa in the central Peruvian Amazon I (Barry Walker of Manu Expeditions, ex-pat Englishman who has been living and birding in Peru for more 20 years), together with Ramiro Avendanio, an experienced expedition cook, and our local expert Orlando Rivas, a native of Pucallpa and member of the original LSU team, met Colin Bushell of Toucan Tours, a UK-based company specializing in hard core birding trips to the Neo-tropics, as he stepped off the flight from Iquitos with the rest of the expedition members. They were a well-travelled and experienced group; Nigel Driver, Chris Collins, Graham Green, Dave Odell and Barry Wright had come from the UK and were joined by Mark Sokol, a native of California.

The first thing on our agenda was cold beer. Indeed, impressive quantities of the local brew were quaffed as I delivered a “put the fear of God into them and then it can only turn out better” speech as we sat in the tropical gardens of the Sol del Oriente Hotel in Pucallpa. A Tropical Screech Owl hooted in someone's back garden nearby, competing in vain with the cacophony of moto-taxis cruising the streets in large marauding bands beyond the garden wall. The owl served as a reminder that this was in fact not a military operation but rather a birdwatching trip. The food was poor and took an ice-age to arrive, but we were already filled with beer and the adrenaline of expectation. We retired

wondering if we would really manage to achieve our objective. All of us, me more than anyone, were preoccupied with thoughts of what lay ahead. After all, I had outfitted the trip and was responsible for logistics and would be the one responsible for failure if anything went wrong.

Day Two: An unusually late start for people like us as we took a leisurely breakfast by the hotel pool, with Gray-capped Flycatchers and Bananaquits joining us for cold coffee and scrambled eggs. “Thank Christ Ramiro will be cooking after tomorrow”, I thought. After I had somehow weathered an exhausting barrage of questions from Mark on where to see every bird in Peru, we gathered our things and headed for the airport.

Hurry up and wait. The plane we had hired to go to some grass airstrip at the end of the world was not there. It was still in Satipo and we were forced to sit around as its estimated time of arrival was modified from twenty minutes to half an hour, then forty-five minutes and so on.

Lunch was an uneventful couple of chicken sandwiches and a can of beer at the airport restaurant – a lacklustre event only enlivened by me squeezing the top off the mayonnaise jar and pouring a litre or so of the stuff over my sandwich, me and all living things within a three foot radius.

Our shouts of joy upon the plane’s arrival were soon cut short by yet another snag which came as no surprise to those of us who were already Peru veterans. The aircraft was too big and the airstrip too small and wet. It was time to rethink and put out of our minds the annoying realisation that the pilot could have pointed out this minor hitch when we had contracted him three months earlier. We decided to send the big plane as far as the asphalted strip at Contamana with most of the team, while I would go straight to Pampa Hermosa in a small 4-seater which would then shuttle everyone, together with the gear and supplies, from Contamana to Pampa Hermosa.

Several hours later we were finally all assembled at the local football pitch in what turned out to be a surprisingly large town and school was cancelled so that everyone could watch the curious gringo roadshow. Down at the river with all our gear we realised that the two boats we had hired would not be enough. A sad sounding Striped Cuckoo lamented resignedly in the mango tree above our heads. A third boat was immediately commandeered and by 4:00pm we were finally on our way upriver along the Cushabatay River. But were we actually moving? Close scrutiny of the riverbank told us that we were, but only just! We all realised then that it was going to be a long, long trip, but as I was the only one with either a map or a GPS, I was the only member of the team who knew just how long it was actually going to be...

Two hours later the sun began to set and we moored on a beach which none of us will ever forget. As we congratulated ourselves for finally embarking on our trip, the first ominous whining of mosquitoes pierced the evening air. Just ten minutes later it was impossible take a breath without inhaling several dozen insects. The beach we had chosen was, without a doubt, the most mosquito-infested place Colin and I had ever experienced in all our years in South America. And this was unanimous. None of us had seen it so

bad, except Orlando, who informed us nonchalantly that the Ucayali River was much worse! No wonder nobody has gone birding there. We survived until morning, but little sleep was had. Only our cook Ramiro's three course meal and an ample dosis of alcohol delivered orally got us through the night.

Day Three and we already felt as if we had been in the field for a week. We even ignored the attractions of the river islands – Parkers and White-bellied Spinetails, Olive-spotted Hummingbirds and Lesser Horneros called to us in vain from the salix bushes beyond the beach. When a Black and White Antbird called, Colin looked at me wryly and shook his head as if to say “Forget it, let's go”. Hot coffee, pancakes and syrup awaited us and as we ate we swapped memories of the night's mosquito wars.

A full day on the river lay before us, spluttering along against the current courtesy of the ubiquitous Briggs and Stratton 12.5 horsepower engines known locally as peccy-peccy's, which are the poor man's only means of transport in this part of the Amazon. Life on the river can begin to pale after the sixtieth Pied Lapwing sighting and the ten thousandth Canary-winged Parakeet. A miserable looking Jabiru moping on a beach seemed to reflect my own feelings. As the sun punished us mercilessly; I noticed that the river appeared pristine and I likened it to the Manu River of southeastern Peru, which I know well. Occasionally, we passed huge, floating rafts of mahogany logs manned by sun beaten and sand fly-ravaged locals, or the odd hunting camp where peccary skins were hung out to dry.

The river and the surrounding area had just been declared a protected area under the grand title of the “The Cordillera Azul/Rio Biabo National Park” and indeed we had gone to some trouble to obtain the necessary permits to make our trip “official”. Nobody seemed to have told the locals yet. It's business as usual along the river and a daily fight to survive anyway you can, such as selling mahogany to the saw-mills of Pucallpa. None of us could blame them, we had all seen the extreme poverty these people endure, and until someone provides them with an alternative way of life their suffering will continue. After all, Britain is the world's number one importer of mahogany and if we hadn't created the demand then these desperate people would not fell the trees.

The stories told by our boatmen of the logging and gold camps high up the Pauya River, complete with gold rush town saloons and good time girls, seemed to indicate that it is the drug barons who currently provide that alternative way of life, and not eco-tourists like us.

In the distance a solitary peak crowned with seven distinct bumps loomed out off the steaming rainforest. It was Siete Puntos, Barbet Peak, Hill 1538, or whatever you want to call it. I looked at the riverbank to judge our speed and then looked back at the peak. “No way”, I thought, “It's too far. We've miscalculated, we're not going to make it”. One of the three engines chose that moment to begin misfiring. Colin drew a finger across his throat in an unmistakable universal gesture. Just before sunset we landed at a beach below the confluence of the Cushabatay and Pauya rivers. We dubbed it the Pauya River Camp, and it was heavenly! No mosquitos, a refreshing swim in the river, the moon and stars above us. Paradise! Spectacled Owls called and Ladder-tailed Nightjars flitted

across the beach as we held a “State of the Expedition Pow-Wow”. “Its quite simple”, I say, “We are not going to make it in the time we have allotted ourselves. We haven’t calculated for the high water and stronger current which is slowing us down, and we have a dodgy engine. We have two choices: call it a day, retreat and go birding somewhere near Pucallpa, or use the two days we have reserved at the end of the trip to do some relaxing birding at a comfy lodge on Yarinacocha lake to get to the Barbet instead”. My speech was met with silence, and I felt like the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro must have done as he drew that famous line in the sand and asked his desperate and despairing men to cross it and follow him further into the unknown. But Nigel and Barry looked at me as if I was daft (and I began to think that I was). It was unanimous, there was nothing else for it, we’d come this far and we weren’t going to give up so easily. Onward!

Day Four dawned fair and promising. We were unable to hire a replacement engine in any of the small farms we passed, so we crowded into two boats and despatched Orlando downriver with the third boat to fix the malfunctioning peccy and inform civilization that we would be delayed by at least two days. “Nos vemos en el pico” said Orlando as he waved goodbye, and I was not the only member of the group wondering whether or not we would.

We hoped to make the trailhead that day but didn’t. Instead we spent another day crawling upriver, gradually getting closer and closer to our objective, our boredom relieved by noisy groups of Black-headed, Orange-winged and Short-tailed Parrots. It was certainly a great way to see parrots and macaws if nothing else. As the river twisted and turned the peak seemed to change position, sometimes in front of us, then off to our right and suddenly behind the boat, when we found ourselves chugging away from it. The GPS confirmed what we could see with our own eyes – that after three hours we were no closer to our objective. The boats gradually became separated and we, the tail enders, arrived at camp well after dark - to the relief of our companions who had begun to grow anxious.

Our guides then told us that it would take us another twenty minutes to reach the trail head. Our spirits lifted at the prospect of finally getting off those damned boats and on to our own feet. Ramiro cheered us up with his excellent food once more and we polished off the last remaining couple of beers, reasoning that it would be senseless to carry them up the hill. A pair of Crested Owls duetted nearby and a Gray Potoo lulled us to sleep.

Day Five: After a short boat ride we reached the trail at last. We separated our gear in order to leave most of our stuff in the boats and take the bare minimum with us for the assault on the peak. It was blissful to enter the forest at last. Its shade enveloped us and familiar bird song surrounded us. Chestnut-crowned Foliage-gleaner, Spot-backed Antbirds, Plain-winged Antshrikes, Plumbeous Antbirds and Yellow-crowned Tyrannulets welcomed us back into their world. We hiked in slowly, birding along the way. A mixed understory flock comprising Whiskered Flycatchers, Cinereous Antshrikes, White-flanked Antwrens and Ocellated Woodcreepers grabbed our attention. Sweating in the mid-afternoon heat, we arrived at our next camp by a clear, rushing stream, where we relaxed and readied ourselves for the next day.

Day Six: Faced with a climb of around one thousand metres that day, we breakfasted before dawn before packing our gear and were ready to leave at first light. Anxious to get started, we ignored a singing Undulated Antshrike just beyond the camp and leave it for on the way back (which was a mistake, we never heard it again). The only birding done that day occurred during the breaks we took to catch our breath during the climb. It was a soul destroying trail. Many times we slogged up a slippery slope, gaining a few hundred metres in altitude only to descend again. This happened over and over again and only after lunch did we notice any real upward progress. We separated into two groups, the slow group and the even slower. Colin, Dave, Nigel, Chris and Barry went ahead in the slow group, whilst Mark, Graham and I followed in the slower group.

The radio crackled into life at around 2:00pm. “We’re at a lookout point and the guides have pointed out the 1000 metre campsite. Its still a long, long way away” said Colin with his usual flair for understatement. My heart sank. It was going to be tough. The teams met up for lunch, only to driven on again by marauding insects. Carrying huge packs of supplies and all our gear, our porters overtook us silently without even breaking into a sweat. It was an impressive performance which made us all feel like wimps.

We continued up and up, and it suddenly seemed that we were really gaining altitude. Annoyingly, Graham insisted on checking his altimeter every thirty paces or so. An ex-trekking guide used to dry high altitude conditions when hiking, I had grossly underestimated how much I would sweat in these tropical rainforest conditions and my water was now running out on the ascent, with no prospect of more fresh water until we made camp. Graham and Mark were carrying much larger amounts of H₂O and, in a good show of team spirit, gamely shared their ration with me. I immediately named them honorary knights of Cusco’s Cross Keys Pub and awarded them free beer for life. “I hope I get out of here to enjoy it” observed Graham.

It was getting late so I buzzed Colin on the radio. “Where the bloody hell are you?”, I asked. “In Camp, just arrived” came the smug reply. “OK, we’ve just passed a landslide with a steep climb and a ceiba tree. How close are we?” Pause... “A long way – an hour plus” replied Colin to our dismay. “Well, send Ramiro down with liquid whether he wants to or not and make it sharpish!” Presently, Ramiro came bounding down the trail like a mountain goat loaded with enough bottles of squash to give us the impetus we needed to struggle into camp just before dark, where we were welcomed in their usual low key but concerned way by our speedier companions. We were now all safe and sound and within striking distance of our target. Spirits were high. The last stretch was in sight and as the sun sank behind the forest the view over the lowlands was marvellous.

Day Seven: Barbet Day! Barry Wright went bounding down the trail like an antelope. I decided (mistakenly, as it turned out) that this would be an easy day and began birding slowly through a poor soil ridge-top forest. Those who hung back with me were rewarded with sightings of a Rufous-winged Antwren and the-soon-to-be-described split form of Fuscous Flycatcher. Sharpbills whistled overhead and Gray-tailed Pihas chimed out now and again. We were struck by the complete lack of Tanagers of the genus *Tangara*, a

normally conspicuous group of frugivores in the Peruvian mountain forests, but conspicuous by their absence here.

We soldiered on. The going was good initially, but all too soon we were confronted with another soul destroying loss of altitude before we finally found ourselves on the flank of the mountain with the final ascent before us. This was straight up hand-over-hand stuff using vines and tree roots to haul ourselves up. I was carrying a raft of sound equipment and it was by no means easy. Up we went, stopping often to rest. It started to feel cooler and bromeliads began to appear. As if in tandem with our spirits, the altimeter started to slowly climb. "I'm in the promised land" said Colin over the radio. This meant that he had reached 1,250 metres above sea level and was now in ideal Barbet habitat. We were one hundred metres below him, our hands full with an undescribed Tapaculo which responded splendidly to tape. "One down, three to go" I remember thinking, referring to the four very special birds we hoped to see on that mountain.

Pressing on, we suddenly found ourselves there. The trees were now festooned with moss and epiphytes. A fruiting *melastome* we had been advised of over the radio produced bird number two on our list, an immature male example of a previously undescribed Manakin. The front runners had seen neither the Manakin nor the Tapaculo as yet, but word came over the radio that some of them had had a brief but good sighting of a Barbet. Finally, after the days on the river and the difficult climb, we were in full birding mode, and out came our tape decks and microphones.

The entire group re-assembled in the mossy forest and we walked on slowly, all our senses alert. I caught some leaf movement to my left and something told me that this was it. And suddenly there it was in all its glory – the Scarlet-banded Barbet, the bird we had suffered so much to see.

Chris, Dave and Nigel were right there with me and had to stifle their simultaneous gasps of astonishment. We now found ourselves watching a pair of Barbets as they displayed on the exposed branches above our heads. It was like a press conference. Video and audio recorders, microphones, binoculars and still cameras were all focused on these glamorous creatures as they performed their bizarre display routine and warbling into the microphones. We soaked it all up, exchanging thumbs-up signals and broad grins. Thank Christ for that, we all seemed to be thinking. We've done it! The ultimate neo-tropical twitch in the bag!

We spent the night on the peak and saw more Barbets, as well as other interesting birds such as the Black Manakin, Slaty Antwren, Wattled Guan, Short-tailed Antthrush, Painted Parakeet, Black-bellied Cuckoo, Gould's Jewelfront, Amazon Barred Woodcreeper, Spotted Nightingale Thrush, Golden-faced and Mottle-cheeked Tyrannulet. And as if that weren't enough, a very co-operative pair of Subtropical Pygmy-owls (*Glaucidium parkeri*) completed for me a set of birds named in honour of my late friend Ted Parker.

Day Nine saw Orlando arrive at the peak, having announced to the world that we were fine, to inform us that our third boat was now up and running. Over the next few days we retraced our steps back to Pampa Hermosa. It was mostly downhill and we continued

birding, finding Sooty and Lunulated Antbirds along the way as well as the fourth bird on our hitlist, the Dotted Tanager, in a mixed flock of Honeycreepers, Dacnis and other Tanagers. Travelling easily downriver, we skipped 'mosquito beach' and reached Pampa Hermoza unscathed, where we did some public relations work with the local school and authorities and then drank the town dry as we celebrated late into the night. But this was Peru, and our journey was not over yet.

Day Twelve: A little before dawn of the next day, the heavens opened and it rained so hard I was sure the planes would not be able to get to us. We were desperate to leave Pampa Hermosa. There was nothing to keep us there now. Our little four seater made it in around midday, just as the sun began to find a way through the clouds. As we flew to Contamana the sky was so overcast that we were forced to navigate a gap a few hundred metres high between the rainforest canopy and the cloud base.

The pilot's GPS told him that Contamana was down there somewhere and eventually, after circling around for a while in zero visibility, he found the airstrip and put the plane down gently. After three more similar shuttle flights we were all in Contamana and we transferred to our larger plane, which fishtailed down the waterlogged runway during takeoff and flew through frequent showers on its way to Pucallpa.

Perhaps due to Ramiro's excellent cooking, our plane was overweight on the return journey, so we left him behind with a pocketful of local currency and instructions to make his own way out. As we taxied before takeoff, I apparently missed a Southern Lapwing, a common bird but one rarely seen in Peru, for when Ramiro joined us later for the end of expedition festivities in Pucallpa, having got out on an afternoon bush plane, he mentioned a funny black and white bird which he had seen on the airstrip. This was not at all funny, of course, to the Peru lister who had missed it!

It had been a tough but enjoyable trip and we had achieved our objective, which we knew in our hearts had been an exceptional feat. We had learned a lot and any future repeat of the trip would be a much more streamlined affair. But would we go back and do it again? Probably not, there are so many other expeditions waiting to be done and so little time. But remember, two of our company's bird tour leaders did not participate in the expedition, so if we are ever asked to lead the trip again I'm sure that they would be up for it!