

Seeing **Rufous-crowned Antpitta** (and more!) at Mashpi Shungo reserve, Ecuador

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*In the past couple of years, some amazing photographs of Rufous-crowned Antpitta *Pittasoma rufopileatum* – an exquisite, unusual and rare Chocó endemic – have graced the internet. So, what’s the deal? Neotropical birder Alejandro Solano extends us an invitation to find out for ourselves.*



1-2 “Recently an adult male [Rufous-crowned Antpitta *Pittasoma rufopileatum*] has been trained to receive food from humans in the fashion now well known for *Grallaria antpittas*” (Greeney 2018). This is that selfsame antpitta, named ‘Shunguito’. Both images taken at Mashpi Shungo, Ecuador: **1** August 2018 (Andrés Vasquez N./Tropical Birding Tours); **2** January 2017 (Pete Morris/Birdquest; page 4).



A gorgeous-looking bird, and one seldom seen to the point of myth. A bird that has long prompted chat, desire and rêverie among birders and even experienced field ornithologists. And a bird that can now be seen, with outstanding ease and at point-blank range, in the 'birdy' foothills of Ecuador's Chocó forests, from where this article has been penned. Hop forward... Rufous-crowned Antpitta!

The backstory

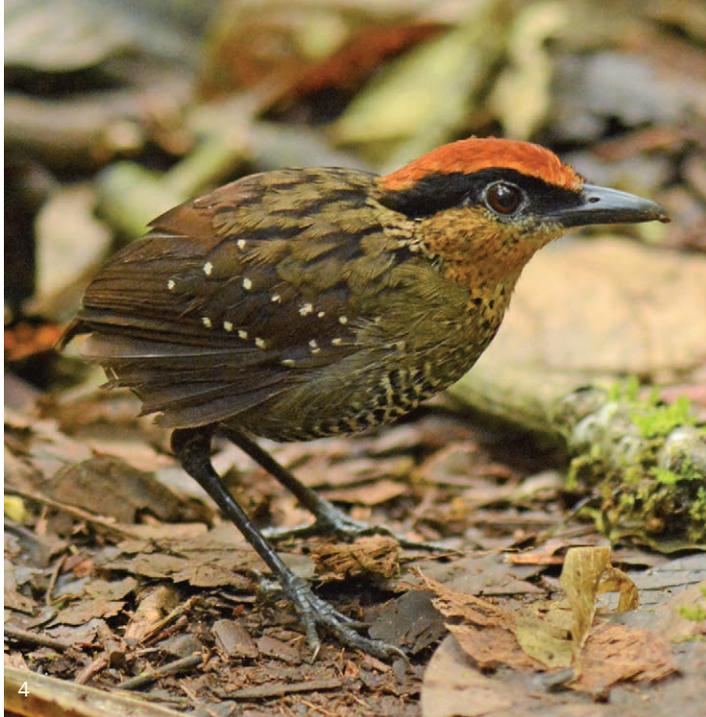
A decade or so ago a team of young field biologists (myself among them) were hired to conduct wildlife inventories in a remote part of Esmeraldas province, northwest Ecuador, with the aim of justifying the establishment of a new protected area for the Chachi, an ethnic group facing encroachment of their living space by timber companies. I remember fantasising about what Chocó endemic birds we might find. Northwest

Ecuador and western Colombia contain most of this fascinating bioregion. Lush tropical forest used to dominate the landscape but, largely due to logging and oil-palm monoculture, most of it has unfortunately disappeared.

After nearly two months of fieldwork many Chocó endemics made their way onto our lists... but one very important bird was seemingly missing! The forest looked and sounded perfect for it, but there was no sign of Rufous-crowned Antpitta anywhere we searched. Years unfurled until finally I had the pleasure of coming across a gaudy female in Reserva Mangaloma near Pachijal. This reserve has become known among birders as a good place to catch up with Banded Ground-Cuckoo *Neomorphus radiolosus* (globally Endangered) – a species that I was also happy to see here. Little wonder that this small reserve has turned into a favorite stop on Ecuador's northwestern birding circuit.



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3–4 “While foraging, [Rufous-crowned Antpitta *Pittasoma rufopileatum*] often pauses abruptly, freezing in a somewhat awkward-looking, spread-leg stance” (Greeney 2018). All images (of ‘Shunguito’) taken at Mashpi Shungo, Pichincha, Ecuador: **3** October 2018 (Philippe Moine/Terra Firme Birdwatching); **4** June 2015 (Xavier Amigo/Ecuador Experience).

The *Pittasoma*, in brief

Rufous-crowned Antpitta is one of two species in the genus *Pittasoma* which – despite being called antpitta by most authorities – is now housed in the family Conopophagidae (gnateaters) and is sometimes informally known as ‘gnatpitta’ among birders (e.g. Greeney 2018). It is endemic to the Chocó bioregion, found in three subspecies (*rosenbergi*, *harterti* and nominate *rufopileatum*) from northwestern Colombia south to northwestern Ecuador. Although “generally shy and difficult to observe, with a dearth of published behavioural information” (Greeney 2018), it is always seen on or close to the ground in very wet forests, generally below 1,100 m (Greeney 2013). It is poorly known, generally considered rare and local (Krabbe & Schulenberg 2003, Greeney 2018) and, at a global level, is categorised as Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2018). Until recently few birders and experienced field ornithologists – even those with the good fortune to live in Ecuador – had got as far as glimpsing one. Given its stunning appearance – barred and banded, spotted and scalloped, and with that glorious chestnut cap – every birder I know wants to see one. Now their dream may come true – and with both ease and convenience.

Mashpi Shungo reserve

The Ecuadorian Chocó has long been a part of the Neotropical birding trail, but each year now seems to reveal new sites to see exciting birds. Among them is the Mashpi area, which has featured at least twice in the pages of this magazine (Brinkhuizen 2013, Lowen 2017). Mashpi is the name of a river, a community, a now-famous luxury lodge and a whole valley. Now there’s another dimension to Mashpi – bird-rich tropical forest on a farm that produces high-quality, ‘bird-friendly’ and artisanal chocolate from locally grown cacao (see chocomashpi.com).

Mashpi Shungo is located in the valley of the same name, close to the community of San José de Mashpi. Covering 56 ha in an elevational range of 500–800 m, it includes both a forest-restoration project (covering 80% of the property) and a small private reserve. In 2015, we found a beautiful male Rufous-crowned Antpitta here. The encounter took us by surprise, but being taken aback didn’t stop us from thinking about how to make the most of the unexpected opportunity. After all, Ecuador is the ‘ancestral home’ of antpitta feeding (see, e.g., Collins 2006, Woods *et al.* 2011, Lowen 2017)!



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VISITING MASHPI SHUNGO RESERVE

From Quito take the main highway west past Nanegalito, the turn-off to Mindo and San Miguel de los Bancos. At km 104, turn right towards Pachijal. Roughly halfway between the latter community and Guayabillas, turn right following the sign to Mashpi. You will reach the Finca Agroecológica Mashpi Shungo after 3.5 km. In order to maximise your chances we appreciate you e-mailing, phoning or sending a WhatsApp message 2 or 3 days in advance (✉ jhalezion@gmail.com; tel: +593 967731489). The reserve does not offer food or lodging but we can help to organise these for you locally.

Check Mashpi Shungo's tanager flocks for gems such as **5** Blue-whiskered Tanager *Tangara johannae* (Valle del Cauca, Colombia, September 2017; Peter Hawrylyshyn, Canada) and **6** Scarlet-and-white Tanager *Chrysothlypis salmomi* (Anchicaya Valley, Colombia, September 2017; Robert Lewis/🐦 wingbeats.org).

Seeing the *Pittasoma* at Mashpi Shungo

Accordingly, we worked hard for nearly two months and eventually managed to encourage this individual to come to earthworms along what is now known as the 'Pittasoma trail'. Since then we have been working with neighbours from the community, among them Danilo Chalá. Danilo has come to be nicknamed 'Don Grillo' ('Mr Cricket'), because it was with his assistance that we came to discover that the *Pittasoma* prefers being rewarded with crickets or grasshoppers over worms! We will be consolidating what we have learnt about this little-studied creature – in terms of territory, habitat and ecology – into a paper for publication in the near future.

Now that we and 'Shunguito', as the habituated individual has become known, understand one

another, our success rate with showing him off to numerous visiting birders and tour groups has reached 85%. Even better, when Shunguito emerges from the forest, he generally gives excellent, prolonged views at very close range (sometimes too close for the camera!). As the images that accompany this feature demonstrate, Shunguito has become rather a fine photographic model. How good can things get?

And there's more...

A number of other species of interest to birders, particularly exciting Chocó endemics, occur at Mashpi Shungo. These include Berlepsch's Tinamou *Crypturellus berlepschi*, which is presently best looked for along the first 100 m of trail, early in the morning. We are, however, seeking to 'train' individuals of this species to visit a feeding station on the same trail as Shunguito

Other interesting species to look for at Mashpi-Shungo (where all were photographed) include **7-8**: **7** Rose-faced Parrot *Pyrilia pulchra* (August 2008; Murray Cooper/@murraycooper); **8** Blue-tailed Trogon *Trogon comptus* (September 2010; Vincent Mouret/Terra Firme Birdwatching).



which will make things even easier. Rose-faced Parrot *Pyrilia pulchra* and Orange-fronted Barbet *Capito squamatus* can be seen in the reserve's forest, but are actually easier to see at large figs *Ficus* sp. in areas where the habitat is being restored. Scarlet-and-white Tanager *Chrysothlypis salmomi* and Blue-whiskered Tanager *Tangara johannae* (Near Threatened) are stunning

frugivores that are mostly found at the more mature forest close to the first ridge along the Pittasoma trail. The trick to seeing Scarlet-and-white Tanager is to learn the vocalisations as the birds tend to occur solitarily high in the canopy (although sometimes join flocks). For the exquisite Blue-whiskered Tanager, scanning fast-moving mixed flocks is usually the best approach; look out for a bird peering under branches (a distinctive behaviour when you get your eye in).

After a morning birding the forest, visitors are invited to take a farm-to-bar chocolate tour; Ecuador justly prides itself on producing the world's best chocolate! In the wider grounds of Mashpi Shungo, there is a bird table stocked with bananas (perfect for seeing the commoner tanagers) and a natural (i.e. plastic-free) hummingbird garden; the combination provides a convenient place for birders to eat a packed lunch. You could stay longer – birding away the afternoon along the Río Mashpi perhaps, or exploring the habitat-restoration plots where, inspiringly, birdlife now abounds. In the early years of the reserve, 54 species of birds were identified in these plots; now over 180 species have been reported. Overall the reserve total currently stands at nearly 350 species, so there is lot to entertain you. Furthermore, visitor facilities are on the up. By the time you read this, the reserve should have launched its first website (www.mashpi-shungo-reserve.org) and, later this year, a campaign will be launched to build a much-needed canopy tower.



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9 Collared Aracari *Pteroglossus torquatus* (March 2014; Murray Cooper/@murraycooper); and 10 Orange-fronted Barbet *Capito squamatus* (male excavating nest hole, December 2004; Murray Cooper/@murraycooper).



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TRANS-ATLANTIC WEEKEND TWITCHES

To give a measure of the global interest in seeing an accessible Rufous-crowned Antpitta, I invited Pete Morris to clarify a throwaway remark (about a “weekend twitch from the UK”) that he made when he posted photos of Shunguito on the website surfbirds.com. Pete’s explanation makes for fascinating reading – and shows quite what a globalised world we now inhabit. Ed.

“I was due to lead Birdquest’s Southern Ecuador tour, so on the off-chance that the *Pittasoma* might still present, I booked travel via Quito with a few days stopover rather than flying direct to Guayaquil. The first morning I went to Mashpi Shungo and, with Alejandro Solano-Ugalde’s help, enjoyed brilliant views of the bird. Job done! Having already inspired UK world-lister Alan Lewis to fly to Japan for a weekend to twitch Baer’s Pochard [*Aythya baeri*], I let him know that he ought to visit Mashpi Shungo soon. I also texted two other friends, Dave and Sue Williamson, as I knew it was Dave’s most wanted bird in the world!”

“Alan was initially toying with visiting a couple of months later, then suddenly announced that he was coming the following weekend! Meanwhile, Dave and Sue, who were flying to Panama a month later, hastily rearranged their flights to travel via Quito. On his first day, Alan dipped – and was none too happy! Great things come to those who wait, however, and Shunguito appeared on cue the following day, much to Alan’s great relief. Smiles were restored, and Alan returned to Quito airport that evening for his flight back to London. Thankfully Dave and Sue’s visit was more straightforward and they saw the *Pittasoma* at the first attempt. In a couple of simple text messages, then, I instigated two successful trans-Atlantic twitches. And, since return, I’ve been telling everyone who will listen that they too need to go as soon as they can!”

Pete Morris, Birdquest