Can this intrepid birder and her team break the record?

Dusti Becker
Life Net Nature
6423 S. Bascom Trail
Willcox, AZ 85643
dbecker@lifenetnature.org

“Hasta luego, suerte”, (“good-bye, good luck”), said our cooks Jessica and Alicia as we headed out of camp and up a steep hill in pre-dawn darkness, bellies full of their empanadas and café. Tuna sandwiches and granola would fuel a nine-mile trek from Cerro la Torre’s ridge in the Colonche Hills of western Ecuador down to the village of El Suspiro. Along the way, we would be tallying species for the 2011 Loma Alta Christmas Bird Count.

As compiler of the count for the past eight years, I had more than the trek, the food, and even the birds on my mind. In fact, I was obsessing about breaking the 2008 Loma Alta CBC record of 216 species. This was going to be the year. Not far along the trail a Mottled Owl screamed, then a Little Tinamou quavered and a Choco Screech-Owl trilled—we were off to a good start.

Our volunteer team was hot, composed of six birders from Life Net Nature, an organization that hosts field projects that benefit wildlife and biodiversity. In addition to our cooks Alicia Torres and Jessica Medina, our birders in the field were Larry Vereen, Julia Cibulka, Todd Pepper, Mauricio Torres, Pascual Torres, and myself. We had just finished two weeks of banding, counting hummingbirds at feeders, and doing bird transects in both montane tropical forest and the drier scrub forests in the lowlands of Ecuador. Mauricio, Pascual, and I knew the vocalizations of Loma Alta’s birds, and we would have our work cut out for us. The two dry forest subteams also had good birders, and a group of university students and their biology professor from Guayaquil, Eve Astudillo Sanchez, were counting birds along coastal playas, mudflats, and mangroves. Plus, the weather was perfect. “Yes, we can!” hummed in my thoughts.

Above: Birders intent on getting a good look at the King Vulture perched overhead.

Facing page: “Pacific” pygmy owl active in the daytime; Todd Pepper banding an Elegant Crescent Chest. Photos and Ecuador map/Dusti Becker
Inset courtesy of http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/x2104e/X2104E07.htm

Dusti Becker, a Ph.D. conservation biologist with Life Net Nature, leads several conservation research projects in Ecuador, and is the Loma Alta Christmas Bird Count compiler.
I began researching avian community ecology at Loma Alta in 1996 after helping convince a group of rural villagers who own the area to protect more than 5000 acres of tropical montane forest. Over the years, volunteer teams I had organized discovered that the Loma Alta watershed was home to six endangered species, 19 species that are vulnerable or near-threatened, 36 Tumbesian endemics, 46 Choco/Andean endemics, seven neotropical migrants, and extravagant concentrations of hummingbirds, including the critically endangered Esmeraldas Woodstar. We thought the place was conservation worthy, and so did BirdLife International when they designated the entire Loma Alta watershed as an Important Bird Area (IBA) in 2004.

The first CBC at Loma Alta was in 2003, with a whopping score of 173 species. The Loma Alta count was the third CBC established in Ecuador. Mindo was first; it's a count that leads globally, and it always beats our pants off. Cerro Blanco, south of us and drier, was the second in Ecuador and is a closer competitor. Thanks to a special grant from Washington Crossing Audubon Society (Connecticut), Life Net started the CBC at Loma Alta and has kept it going for the past decade. The grant also provides for environmental education in villages within the Loma Alta IBA.

The communally owned Loma Alta watershed is slowly becoming a birdwatching destination, but big bus groups are not keen to traverse the 11 river crossings to reach El Suspiro. However, steadfast birders will come for the Rare Esmeraldas Woodstars, which are a sure bet there in December and January. Walk upstream from the village and the tiny 1.7-gm hummers will be foraging in flowering Pechiche trees.

To get to the cloud forest that hallmarks the Loma Alta Community Ecological Reserve requires even more determination, and in some years it is certifiably loco to even try. Miles away from any civilized comforts, only Life Net teams dutifully monitoring birds or "into the wild" type birders and photographers are willing to navigate the muddy trails bathed in heavy oceanic fogs.

Fortunately, this was not one of those wet years. It was a la Niña, so no rubber boots were needed. We had clear skies, no breeze, and mild temperatures—perfect count conditions. I was even wearing running shoes, which is nearly unheard of for this time of year. We had no mist to contend with, and no constant drips on head and glasses. I was giddy over the potential to break the record. After all, 2008 had been a wet year, with tough viewing conditions, but it had been spiced up by an endangered Slaty Becard, an American Redstart, and other good luck shorebird and raptors.

I knew the birds we should not miss, so when the Immaculate Antbirds sang, the Collared Trogon perched, and a Gray-backed Hawk and King Vulture circled above, I got that hopeful feeling. Julia Cibulka, a college student with eagle eyes and a deep passion for all things birds, spotted a White-whiskered Puffbird hidden among the vine and tangle along the trail. Mauricio Torres alerted us to the coo of a distant Ochre-bellied Dove and then found a Plain Xenops creeping up a sapling. A Purple-crowned Fairy perched just long enough to make the list, while Speckled Hummingbird, Baron's Hermit, and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird popped about all along the forest trail to Rio Chorillo.

When we reached the river it was time for those frequently thought of tuna sandwiches. Our lunch was accompanied by welcomed sightings of both Bay Wren and Buff-rumped Warbler. Once we finished eating we left cloud forest and passed into transitional forest, patchy with Panama hat fiber fields (Panama hats are actually made in Ecuador!). Where the heck were the Pale-mandibled Aracaris? We missed them, which was not good. "Pascual's team will see them, sin dudo," Mauricio said in optimistic Spanglish.
The other forest team—Pascual Torres, Todd Pepper from Canada, and Larry Vereen from South Carolina—had birded two peaks on Cerro la Torre and were by now following the Rio Valdivia to El Suspiro. They would bird riparian forest the whole way to the village. In contrast, our team was birding cloud forest, moist forest, upland agriculture, and a gradient of forest that would get drier and more disturbed. I knew we needed to find Pale-browed Tinamou, so we hurried on because we had to be in dry forest by dusk.

As soon as we entered the arid scrub habitat, Mauricio grabbed my arm. Yep, we were hearing the buu-eep of a Pale-browed Tinamou. Bingo! And, hey, the whip-poor-will-like song of Anthony’s Nightjar, and—oh, my—a Watkin’s Antpita, too. Might as well hang out for owls, we thought, so we delayed past dark.

Pascual’s team had already made it to El Suspiro, our hike’s end point, and had started to worry about us. Despite their concern they ate dinner without us, “in case they needed energy for a search.” Yeah, right. We heard a Spectacled Owl and another Mottled Owl and then trekked to town around an hour after sunset. All in all, it was a 14-hour day! We were all so beat that we barely compared notes. We did find out that Pascual’s team had seen seven Pale-mandibled Aracaris (whew!), had found an Ecuadorian Trogon, and had encountered a Common Paraque on its nest with one egg.

The next morning the two cloud forest teams checked their tally of 147 species, which was really great. Still obsessing over our numbers, I quickly calculated that we needed 216 minus 147, plus one, leaving us with just 70 more species to find. Piece of cake, I think.
Julio Cacao and Geovanny Catuto, the Loma Alta community President, motorcycled up at 11 A.M. for the scheduled team leader's compilation. They had birded the dry forest near the town of Loma Alta, but they had some bad news. The experts scheduled to bird the dry forest and riparian habitat just above and below El Suspiro couldn't make it. I noticed that Geovanny's eyes were red, and he looked like he might fall asleep any minute. He said it was unfortunate that the CBC fell on the day after his reelection party. Must have been some party, I think. Still, even in the shape they were in, Julio and Geovanny's group brought the count up to 184 species, adding Tumbesian specialties like Pacific Parrotlet, Croaking Ground-Dove, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Pacific Pygmy-Owl, Pacific Elaenia, Baird's Flycatcher, and Snowy-throated Kingbird.

So where is Eve, the coastal team leader? Geovanny gazed over at me, lids half down like a stunned bird, and reported that the students on her team couldn't stay overnight, and she had gone back to Guayaquil with them. This was the first time in the history of the Loma Alta CBC that a subteam leader wasn't at the compilation. The final tally would be a mystery until Eve's team results were revealed. I was staying over at her home the night before leaving Ecuador, so we'd finish compiling in Guayaquil and I'd let everyone know the final count by email. Let's see: 216 – 184 = 22. We just needed 23 species to break the record. Cake, cake...

Here researchers at Loma Alta are treated to a close-up inspection of Collared Trogon (*Trogon collaris*) during a banding session. Of course not all the species in the Loma Atla region are range-restricted, and the Collared Trogon has a wide range from Mexico southward to equatorial South America. However, as with so many species in the tropics, Collared Trogon may represent more than one taxon; time and further research will tell. Photo/Dusti Becker
The next afternoon, Eve and I sat on her balcony, clothes drying and flapping around us, traffic droning below. Eve’s students had used four-letter codes based on scientific names, the norm for internationally trained biology students, so I waited for Eve to translate their results into common names. Her team adds 25 species, putting us over the top. We start high fiving, then exchanging hasta luego, and I leave to get on the plane to come home to Arizona.

Soon after my return, I emailed celebratory braggadocio to CBC participants and birding friends, saying we had broken the famed 2008 record. Next, I started entering the CBC results at the Audubon internet portal, but the site was not open. I was leaving for Kenya to lead another conservation project, so data entry would have to wait. Temporarily stalled, I stashed the count results in my “get to it after Kenya” pile.

When I returned in March, I began carefully entering the Loma Alta CBC records. I tallied 209 species, not 217. Wait a minute, that can’t be right. I rechecked the tally, running the ruler along our list and scrolling the computer pages at the data entry portal looking for the missing species. How had this happened? Finally, I realized with a sinking heart that I had subtracted incorrectly. We needed 33 species to break the record, not 23.

Our final 2011 CBC count for Loma Alta was 209, eight birds shy of breaking any records. Taking a bite of humble pie—pride goeth before a fall, and don’t count your chickens before they hatch—I told everyone that I had made a mistake and inwardly scolded myself for being so obsessed with breaking the record.

Ever the rational primate, I am now thinking, hey, who wants to break the record on the ninth annual CBC anyhow? December 2012 will mark the tenth annual count at Loma Alta, and it could be the count that beats the 2008 record! Let’s just say I am highly motivated and will be on top of my math this year!

Attention Adventurers: If you crave Tumbesian and Choco endemics, please join Dusti and Ecuadorian birding colleagues for the tenth annual Loma Alta CBC. The count will take place on December 22, 2012, with teams organizing the night before at the Loma Alta community center. Life Net Nature (www.lifenetnature.org) is accepting volunteers on a bird-banding expedition in the Colonche Hills, December 9-23, 2012, which includes the CBC at Loma Alta. You can email Dusti at dbecker@lifenetnature.org for more details.