

Ecotours for Bird Lovers

Discover your dream bird tour and find out what to bring.

By Rebecca Sweat

There are literally hundreds of tour operators around the world involved in some form of ecotourism. Many seek to show visitors the wide range of plants and wildlife in their region; others specialize in tours to see primarily birds, aquatic life or big game, or even a particular species. All of the ecotour operators mentioned below donate a proportion of their proceeds to support conservation projects in their regions:

LATIN AMERICA

1. Bonefish Bum Lodge

Clancy and Libby McClaren, owners of Bonefish Bum Lodge, offer a four-day ecotour to the Yucatan Peninsula's Sian Ka'an Biosphere, which consists more than 70 miles of coastal reefs, savannas, mangroves and tropical forests. Tourists can see Mexican red-headed Amazon parrots and toucans, as well as flamingoes, roseate spoonbills, frigate birds, egrets, pelicans, manatees, spider monkeys, pumas, white-tailed and brocket deer, tapirs, jaguarundies, margays, crocodiles and sea turtles. Tours are sponsored during the winter months and early spring — typically December through the end of April.

2. Explorations Inc.

Florida-based Explorations Inc. sponsors two birding tours to Peru: A one-week riverboat trip down the Amazon river, where tourists cruise through the rain forest and sleep on a riverboat; and a one-week safari tour in which tourists stay at several different lodges in the rain forest, and take daily birdwatching trips into the jungle.

The safari tour includes a visit to the treetop canopy walkway — a suspended walkway system where tourists walk through the treetops. The riverboat and safari tours are each a week in duration. All tours are escorted by a biologist, ornithologist or other scholar from the United States. Sidetrips are available to Cuzco and Machu Picchu at additional costs, which can take place either before or after the main tour. Explorations Inc. also sponsors one-week birdwatching tours to Costa Rica

3. Rainforest Expeditions

Rainforest Expeditions sponsors a seven-day "Parrot Lover's Itinerary" tour to the Tambopata clay lick in Peru. The tours are available once a month from October through March. Guests stay at two different lodges during their visit: Posada Amazonas and the Tambopata Research Center (TRC), both of which are situated next to prime parrot viewing spots. Mornings are spent at the Tambopata clay lick observing the parrots as they congregate to eat mineral salts in the soil, and afternoons are set aside for hiking TRC's extensive and wildlife-rich trails. Guests also have the opportunity to interact with members of the Tambopata Macaw Research Project, a scientific investigation into the biology and conservation of macaws and parrots.

Species typically seen at Posada Amazonas and TRC include: the dusky-billed parrotlet; white-eyed and dusky-headed conures; cobalt-winged parakeets; blue-headed Pionus; white-bellied caiques; scarlet, green-winged, blue-and-gold, chestnut-fronted and red-bellied macaws; mealy and yellow-crowned Amazons; and orange-cheeked (Barraband's) parrots.

4. Tropical Nature Travel

Tropical Nature Travel specializes in custom itineraries for individuals and groups to ecological, archaeological and other tourist destinations in Ecuador, Brazil and Peru. The company sponsors excursions to Ecuador to visit the Napo Wildlife Center reserve. More than 500 species of birds have been recorded here, as well as jaguars, pumas, tapirs, tortoises, giant river otters, paichi and monkeys. Tourists can also take a sidetrip to the Galapagos Islands.

In Brazil, the company organizes tours to the Hyacinth Valley Camp, where tourists can visit the large, custom-built photoblind in front of a feeding spot for a large flock of hyacinth macaws. Sidetrips are available to see the Pantanal, Manaus and the Amazon river, as well as Rio de Janeiro and Iguazu Falls. Tours to Peru can include the Manu biosphere or the Tambopata rain forest to see the parrot clay licks in addition to many other tropical birds, with an optional sidetrip to Machu Picchu, the "lost city" of the Incas.

5. Wasai Lodge & Expeditions

Wasai Lodge & Expeditions organizes several itineraries to the jungles of Peru. Birdwatchers can stay at the Wasai Maldonado Lodge, located in the tropical city of Puerto Maldonado at the bank of the Madre de Dios river; or the Wasai Tambopata Lodge and Peru Wildlife Center, located in the Tambopata Candamo National Park. The basic five-day/four-night tour includes a visit to the Macaw Clay Lick in the Bahuaja Sonene National Park and the paradisiac Sandoval Lake in the Tambopata Candamo National Reserve. Tours can accommodate two to eight passengers.

AFRICA

6. Birding Ecotours

Chris Lotz's company, Birding Ecotours, takes birdwatchers on tours to South Africa and Namibia. The company offers two tours for parrot enthusiasts. The first is a seven-day excursion to Kwazulu and Natal in South Africa to see Cape parrots and Asian rose-ringed parakeets. An optional seven-day extension to Kruger National Park is available to see the brown-headed parrot and possibly Meyer's and grey-headed parrots. Participants can also view a great deal of non-avian wildlife, such as lions, elephants, buffalo, giraffes, antelopes, crocodiles, hippos, cheetahs and leopards.

The second tour option is a seven-day trip to the Waterberg Plateau Game Park in northern Namibia, a prime spot to view the Ruppell's parrot and the rosy-faced lovebird, the white-tailed shrike, damara and Monteiros' hornbill and the rockrunner, as well as African buffalo, black and white rhinos. On both tours, participants can see an diversity of other birds (apart from parrots), as well as large numbers of mammals — both Africa's big game and small mammals.

AUSTRALIA

7. Glenn Holmes & Associates

Ornithologist Glenn Holmes, Ph.D., operates birding tours in a variety of habitats, including rain forest, eucalyptus forest, tropical and temperate woodlands, farmlands and wetlands. The tours depart the cities of Cairns, Atherton or Kuranda, and last anywhere from a half-day to a week or longer.

Parrots seen on Holmes' tours include: the crimson-winged parrot; Australian king parrot; rainbow, scaly-breasted and little lorikeets; pale-headed and crimson rosellas; double-eyed fig parrot; and galah, sulphur-crested and red-tailed black cockatoos. Other birds include bowerbirds, megapodes, birds of paradise, honeyeaters, woodswallows, fairy wrens, butcherbirds, logrunners, thornbills, scrubwrens and the gigantic flightless southern cassowary. The main tour season is May to November.

8. Inala Nature Tours

Tonia Cochran's company, Inala Nature Tours, conducts personalized bird watching and nature tours in Tasmania. Parrots native to the island include the green rosella (an endemic Tasmanian species found nowhere else in the world); the swift parrot; yellow-tailed black, galah and sulphur-crested cockatoos; and the blue-winged parrot. Tourists also have a good chance of seeing the forty-spotted pardalote (endangered and endemic to Tasmania), the firetail finch, grey goshawk, pink robin, olive whistler and the little penguin. Tours operate year-round and are organized on demand.

9. Wild Watch Australia

Wild Watch Australia, headed by biologist, Jonathan Munro, organizes birding and wildlife tours throughout Australia. The most popular areas are Cape York/Iron Range -- habitats for the palm and red-tailed black cockatoos, little corellas, Eclectus, red-cheeked and golden-shouldered parrots, and Marshall's fig parrot -- and the Atherton/Evelyn Tablelands west of Cairns, which is home to king and red-winged parrots; pale-headed and crimson rosellas; red-tailed black, sulphur-crested and galah cockatoos; rainbow, scaly-breasted and little lorikeets; Macleay's fig parrot; and occasionally budgerigars and cockatiels.

What To Bring

- Antibacterial wipes
- Backpack and fanny pack
- Binoculars and spotting scope
- Camera equipment, film and batteries
- English-Spanish/Portuguese dictionary or phrase book if you're traveling to Latin America
- Field guide to birds, notebook and pen
- Flashlight for night walks
- High-energy snack foods
- Insect repellent

- Lightweight books and magazines, along with a book light for reading at night
- Long, quick dry pants and shorts — zip-off pants are the easiest.
- Plastic bags to hold wet or damp clothing
- Rainproof jacket or poncho
- Sensible clothing (layers for weather change)
- Spending money and a credit card
- Sunglasses and a hat for sun protection
- Sunscreen
- Swimsuit
- Passport
- Personal toiletries and medications (most of the lodges are in remote areas and are far from drugstores)
- Walking shoes
- Water canteen

Eco tours