



BIRD LIKE A GIRL

BY BRYONY ANGELL

How Women Helping Women Can Drive Bird Conservation



A birding workshop for girls in Minca, Colombia.

It was late afternoon when we arrived at the timber-framed El Dorado Ecolodge, a welcome sight of hospitality after our bone-rattling ascent through the cloud forest in locally hired four-wheel-drive vehicles. We piled out of our rides, laughing and covered in dust, our feet touching the reassuringly solid ground after several hours of jostling up the pitted dirt roads of the remote Santa Marta mountains near the northern coast of Colombia.

Our group of eight women

comprised four media guests from the US and UK and four Colombian nationals whose vision had brought us together for a novel, all-woman birding tour organized, managed, guided by, and designed for women. We were here to test-run the tour as quasi clients, potential future tour partners with our host—the women-owned and operated Nature Colombia—and as writers and podcasters who would sing the praises of birds seen, accommodations enjoyed, and



A view of Colombia's Santa Marta mountains.

landscapes covered.

El Dorado Lodge and reserve represented more than a respite after that ride: It is a bird sanctuary in an Important Bird Area (IBA) hotspot, managed by Fundación ProAves (Colombia's premier bird conservation organization), with the purpose of protecting the biodiversity of the Santa Marta region, a unique biosphere containing 25 endemic species of birds, including the critically endangered Santa Marta parakeet and Santa Marta screech-owl. The reserve provides stopover and winter residence to migratory birds familiar to North American birders, too, such as Blackburnian warbler and Swainson's thrush.

Birds surrounded us as we unloaded our bags. My companions Ruth Miller and Eliana

Ardila Kramer decided to ignore their luggage, dashing off with bins and cameras fixed to faces. Ruth had birds to add to her world-record-holding life list, and Eliana would be posting later to her thousands of followers on Instagram. I was in impressive lady-birder company.

This trip revealed more than the sorority of our own all-women tour group; we also observed the experience of local women on the ground, those supporting our experience as birding tourists. Our hosts, Luisa Conto and Angela Gomez of Nature Colombia, designed an itinerary that brought us closer to the people whose paths we crossed—in particular the women.

This trip brought together three elements of my identity—woman, birder, conservation

Isa Cortes and her typical ride.



advocate—and was about to demonstrate how much these three identities can collectively and specifically deliver for bird conservation.

We gathered in the gardens beneath the lodge, filled with nectar feeders swarming with shimmering hummingbirds like white-tailed starfrontlets and sparkling violetears. The proximity and numbers of birds at eye level made it hard to concentrate on conversation with my companions, but Angela drew me over.

“Bryony, meet Isa,” she gestured to a young woman I’d seen on arrival, whose demeanor suggested she might be staff of the lodge, though it turned out her

CRISTIAN VASQUEZ

Angela, Isa, and Bryony at El Dorado.



WENDY CLARK

involvement with El Dorado was more complex. She wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the image of a young woman, and the words “Women for Conservation.”

Isabella Cortes Lara, a recent college graduate with a degree in wildlife and fisheries resources, managed the local outreach of Women for Conservation, an initiative of Fundación ProAves. As Isa and Angela explained, the women behind the scenes at El Dorado were not just hospitality staff but participants in a greater experiment of female empowerment in support of bird and biodiversity conservation, an experiment itself led by women, and begun by Isa’s mother, Sara Inés Lara, the executive director of Fundación ProAves.

Isa’s work as project manager combined conservation education with family planning and access to health care for women in the communities surrounding El Dorado and neighboring ProAves reserves. From her base in the nearby town of Minca, Isa walked, hitchhiked, and even caught rides on the back of motorcycles to get around to the remote communities she served. It was her ambition to train local women to be forest guards for ProAves, and eventually, birding guides.

I couldn’t take notes fast enough that afternoon, and for the one and only time on the trip was frustrated that I “had to go



Brown violetear.

bird” with my travel companions before night fell. When we returned to the lodge, Isa had departed back to Minca. Luckily, we’d exchanged contact information and a determination for me to help share the work of Women for Conservation as part of my commitments for this media trip.

Little did we know what was coming with the screeching halt to birding tourism a mere three months later in March 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fast forward a year through the tragedy that the pandemic brought to the world, and I picked up again with Isa and her mother, Sara, the founder of Women for Conservation.

Over Zoom, we caught up on the work of Women for Conservation and discouraging conservation challenges that had resur-

Blue-naped chlorophonias.



faced in Colombia as a result of the pandemic. Isa and a forest guard at El Dorado had recently been threatened, and Isa was now in Medellín, taking a break from field work. “The threats we get are more toward the reserves, not the family planning,” Sara said. “The pandemic has slowed the response of the government and other resources for protected areas. More people are expanding into the protected areas for illegal logging and mining.”

It’s that population pressure on the remaining ecosystems across Colombia that first drove Sara to develop Women for Conservation in 2004 within her role as executive director for Fundación ProAves. She observed that while the ecotourism model run by ProAves was effective for conservation through establishing destination birding and educational tourism, population pressure on the

ProAves reserves was constant.

“We focused on spreading the message for conservation among women and young girls,” she says. “In the nearby communities girls as young as 13 were becoming pregnant and dropping out of school. Family planning with conservation education can be a way to fortify environmental protection. When you invest in family planning, you increase access to education for this population.”

With initial seed funding from the American Birding Conservancy and Audubon Naturalist Society, and partnering with the Colombian family planning agency ProFamilia, Women for Conservation rolled out the pilot in five ProAves reserve sites. Programs now include environmental education, distribution of gas stoves to replace the need for firewood, training for environmentally friendly crafts manufacturing, cooking and hospitality for ecotourism, bird identification, forest guard stewardship, and most specifically, access to reproductive health education and family planning.

Those family planning events take place in the communities of brightly painted open-plan homes tucked into hillsides surrounded by cloud forest. The sound of birdsong is the backdrop to everything, along with the weight of the warm air.

And Sara’s vision to incor-



Isa Cortes, left, with her all-female birding education group.

porate family planning was key, as it turns out. “The family planning portion of what we do is so important. Because of this component we have seen more participation in other activities,” Isa said.

Local women clients quickly adapted the programming to take back to their own communities, and now run many of the programs after initial handoff.

One local woman is Kelly Julio. “Kelly is our field coordinator for Women for Conservation,” Isa said. “She is the president of an ecotourism association that encompasses 10 communities in the Sierra Nevada, and helps us organize events and make diagnostics on what is most needed and urgent. She’s helped us organize all of the women for the

family planning workshops and has attended all of the family-planning brigades.”

Kelly’s local knowledge also introduced another urgent need: “Kelly alerted us to the importance of fire prevention,” Sara said. Through Kelly’s association, Women for Conservation now offers wildfire-prevention workshops throughout the region.

This mention of wildfire abatement brought to mind something I’d heard during my time on the ground at El Dorado. Reviewing my notes from that December trip, I was transported to a pre-dawn morning of birding at the highest elevation of the reserve: the surprising chill at that height of the mountains, the swaying palms growing nowhere else on Earth, the snow-capped peaks

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in the distance, endemic birds all around us, and hearing that this pristine setting almost had been lost to fire just a few years prior.

Our tour group had awoken at 3 a.m. to bird at the San Lorenzo Ridge, the temperature plummeting as we ascended in vehicles. At the top we birded in the surprising chill of still tropical-looking equatorial heights, tallying the Santa Marta parakeet and endemic Santa Marta warbler among the birds seen and heard. Afterward, we ate breakfast on the windswept bluff dotted with parakeet nest boxes and fire-scarred palm trees.

“Fire threatened this spot several years ago,” said Diana

Balcázar, our birding guide for the trip. “The staff at the reserve had to create a fire break to protect this area. These palms are endemic to Santa Marta, and you can also see this is an important nesting spot for the parakeets. It takes decades for a place like this to recover.”

That morning I walked with Diana on the bluff, only beginning to understand the depth of care and diversity of action brought to conservation of this precious ecosystem and its wild birds. Already, everywhere I looked, women seemed to run the bird conservation world here in Santa Marta. “We want to promote women leading,” Sara said. “Our model is flexible because it’s small. We see the results of investments in small groups; we give them leverage with few resources. We’ve found our niche to empower women.” And by doing so, saving birds in Colombia. 🐦

Bryony Angell writes and birds from western Washington state. Birding culture is her beat. Read more of her work at bryonyangell.com.

To learn more about and support Women for Conservation, visit womenforconservation.org.

To support the work of Fundacion ProAves, visit proaves.org/en.

To book a tour to Ecodge El Dorado, support the following women-owned companies—both offer conventional and women-only tours: Nature Colombia, naturecolombia.com; and Birding by Bus, [instagram.com/birdingbybus](https://www.instagram.com/birdingbybus).