# Antpittas: from the invisible to the visible, from myth to normality

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An Ecuador-based birding guide and frequent *Neotropical Birding* contributor offers a personal perspective on, and celebration of, antpitta feeding stations—alongside a gazetteer of the Neotropics' most reliable such sites.

**1** Crescent-faced Antpitta *Grallaricula lineifrons*, Hacienda El Bosque, Caldas, Colombia, April 2022 (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours). For decades, this species had near-mythical status among birders. Since 2018, however, birds have come to feeders at Hacienda El Bosque, which has one of several antpitta feeding stations within striking distance of the city of Manizales.

In May 2005, I started working as a full-time tour leader for Tropical Birding Tours and moved to Ecuador as a result. By August, a few short months into my tenure, I played witness to one of the most game-changing initiatives in recent Neotropical birding: the feeding of one of the most difficult groups of birds to see in the region—the highly sought-after antpittas. In that August, an Ecuadorian farmer by the name of Ángel Paz changed birding in the Neotropics forever—and his name became widely known throughout the global birding community.

Twenty years on, the practice of supplementary feeding antpittas has become very firmly established. Moreover, it has spread well beyond Ecuador's borders, having been or still being practiced in Peru, Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil and even as far afield as Costa Rica, a country that has only four species of antpitta, two of which have been attracted to feeding stations. Of the 70 antpitta species in the Grallaridae, an exclusively Neotropical family, nearly half (see box, p8) have, at some time visited a feeding station somewhere within the region. In this article, I tell the antpitta-feeding story from a personal perspective—as someone who has been a direct beneficiary of the approach for 20 years, both as a birder and widely travelled international tour guide—seeking to complement and update previous articles about antpittas and antpitta-feeding in this magazine (e.g., Collins 2006, Woods *et al.* 2010, Borgman 2016, Greeney 2019), including by offering a 'gazetteer' of feeding stations (see box, p13) that goes beyond the nine such sites covered in Woods *et al.* (2010).


**2** Antpitta feeding famously began 21 years ago at what is now known as Refugio Paz de las Aves in Pichincha, Ecuador. Here are some members of the Paz family (Sam Woods/Tropical Birding Tours).

## The genesis of antpitta feeding

First though, some context. In the first half of 2005, the Ecuadorian government had commissioned the first 'eco-route' in South America, which is now known as the 'Paseo del Quinde'. This begins in the national capital of Quito (specifically in San Miguel de Nono), where it includes the reserves of Yanacocha and Zuro Loma, then continues west through the Tandayapa Valley before terminating in Mindo, which was already established as an elite international birding destination. The Paseo del Quinde passes through Andean cloud forest within the endemic-rich Chocó bioregion which, thanks to its proximity to Quito, is often the first or only area that foreign birders visit. As part of the plan, workshops were given to local people living within close proximity of the designated eco-route.

At that time, Ángel Paz was a fruit-farmer from the Andean town of Nanegalito, which lies between Tandayapa and Mindo in Pichincha province. He attended a workshop led by legendary Ecuadorian birding alumnus, Paul Greenfield. The workshop aimed to showcase to local people the opportunities presented by the eco-route for 'avitourism'. It demonstrated that tourists came from all over the world to observe birds in Ecuador. It also highlighted some of the most sought-after local birds, including Andean Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola peruvianus*, whose known leks already acted as honeypots for visiting birders. This particularly piqued Ángel's interest, as he was aware that this scarlet cloud-forest cotinga was present on his property close to Mindo and the Tandayapa Valley, two major lodging places for the many birding tourists already visiting the region.

Inspired, Ángel set about making a single trail to a display area for 'his' Andean Cock-of-the-rock in a parcel of forest adjacent to fields where he was growing *naranjilla*, tree tomatoes and passion fruit. Cutting the narrow, winding access path through steep-sided cloud forest involved some serious work. As Ángel beavered away, digging ever closer to what would become his first Cock-of-the-rock blind (he would eventually build two others—but that is a story for another day), a bold, rotund, rusty-plumaged bird on stilt-like legs took note of his actions, began visiting the newly exposed trail and quickly 'befriended' him.

Although Ángel remained focused on the 'international birder's choice', the iconic Andean

On the other hand, some species of antpitta have proved to be only temporarily reliable. For example, Variegated Antpitta *Grallaria varia* has not been seen for some time near Pousada Oncapintada at Intervales, São Paulo, Brazil (Tavares 2019). The same can be said of Thicket Antpitta *Myrmothera dives* at Donde Cope, a private garden in La Unión de Guápiles, Limon, Costa Rica. The Pale-billed Antpitta *Grallaria carrikeri* at Trocha Cresta de San Lorenzo, Amazonas, Peru, was never really reliably being fed due to low visitation rates to this remote area.

Putting all this together, I have produced a 'gazetteer' of the best antpitta-viewing sites that are currently active (see box, p13). The large majority of these are in the megadiverse countries of Ecuador, Peru and Colombia, which is also where the highest antpitta diversity occurs. Some sites have been reliable for many years—so much so that they have become almost household names for Neotropics-loving birders. These include: Colombia's Reserva Ecológica Río Blanco and Hacienda El Bosque (both near Manizales, in Caldas), and Ecuador's Cabañas San Isidro (Napo), Reserva Tapichalaca (Zamora-Chinchipe) and of course, Refugio Paz de las Aves. Perhaps inspired by the success of these sites, the antpittas' more colourful Old World cousins—the pittas (family Pittidae)—are now routinely fed in Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and the island of Borneo.

In the Neotropics, the approach of habituating and feeding species that are otherwise difficult to see has expanded taxonomically as well as geographically. Again, Ángel and Rodrigo Paz pioneered this. Uninhibited by prior experience of some of the species he was encountering (and carrying only a basic travel guide to a small proportion of Ecuador's wildlife), Ángel was prepared to try his antpitta technique on any species. In the mid-2000s, if you had asked any professional bird guide whether it would be possible to feed another shy denizen of the cloud forest, Dark-backed Wood Quail *Odontophorus melanonotus*, most would have thought it impossible—and would not have even tried. Ángel and Rodrigo not only tried but succeeded—as they did with other birds like Rufous-breasted Antthrush *Formicarius rufipectus*.

Such rewards prompted the unbridled, infectious belief that anything was possible. In 2012 German biologist Nicole Büttner started collecting katydids from her moth trap, run overnight at Un Poco del Chocó lodge in northwest Ecuador, then hand-feeding them to another 'impossible' bird, Banded Ground Cuckoo *Neomorphus radiolosus* (unpocodelchoco.com/banded-ground-cuckoo). This prompted a surge of local and international birders to see and photograph this globally Vulnerable species, myself included (tinyurl.com/woods-bandedgc). Again, this experience finds its echo in Asia, with Bornean Ground Cuckoo *Carpococcyx radiceus* being fed in front of a hide at Sungai Kapur Virgin Jungle Reserve in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo.

**18** Jocotoco Antpitta *Grallaria ridgelyi*, Reserva Tapichalaca, Zamora-Chinchipe, Ecuador, December 2019 (Michael Metayer). Run by the Fundación de Conservacíon Jocotoco, this reserve remains the only site where this spectacular antpitta can be seen reliably. **19** Undulated Antpitta *Grallaria squamigera*, November 2017 (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding Tours antpitta.com) occasionally comes to a feeding station here.