

Encountering Santa Marta Sabrewing at the Mountain House feeders

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A tour leader describes the thrill of connecting with an enigmatic and Critically Endangered endemic in Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains.

While leading a tour for Oriole Birding in March 2025, I found myself based for a few nights at El Dorado Lodge, the ProAves-run reserve in Magdalena, which lies amid the fabled Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains of Colombia. The main reason for visiting this isolated mountain range—isolated from the main Andes mountain chain and enjoying a spectacular setting towering over the country's Caribbean coast—is its incredible array of endemics. Most of these are eminently 'gettable' on a short trip. *Most*, but not all.

At least one species—Blue-bearded Helmetcrest *Oxypogon cyanolaemus* (Endangered)—requires much planning and a long trek with camping at high altitude, which was beyond the remit of our tour (you can read

about the trek in Lorenz 2018). Another—the mythical Santa Marta Sabrewing *Campylopterus phainopeplus* (Critically Endangered)—has been largely considered unattainable for visiting birders. In fact, it went missing, presumed extinct, for 64 years prior to 2010 (BirdLife International 2026), although the record that year (tinyurl.com/ProAves-SMS) has since been considered as “inconclusive” (Botero-Delgadillo *et al.* 2025). Either way, Santa Marta Sabrewing became a focal species for the ‘Search for Lost Birds’ partnership (see, e.g., Mittermeier *et al.* 2022), which targeted birds lacking documented records in the previous decade, and was even feared extinct in a recent review of threatened Colombian birds (Salaman *et al.* 2022).

All photos were taken by Ashley Saunders/Oriole Birding (orolebirding.com) at Mountain House Lodge, Magdalena, Colombia, in March 2025.

1 Male Santa Marta Sabrewing *Campylopterus phainopeplus* showing the iridescent blue throat and breast.

