

## Wednesday, September 4 – Drive through Málaga Pass

Today we're driving up the Andes then through the Málaga Pass and down the east side of the mountains for a bit. We are picked up by Doris and Vergilio at 6:00 am sharp and we're on our way. The staff at K'yuchi Rumi kindly get up early to serve us their usual hearty breakfast. The drive today is mainly for birds; there are some unique species at these high altitudes.

The original Quechua name for the pass was Panticalla, and most of the locals here still refer to it by that name. The Spanish re-named it Málaga in the 1500's which is on most of the maps but the local people know and use its "real" name. Doris has several places where she knows it is likely we'll find certain birds. Overall we stopped 5-6 times and saw something at every stop except the next to last one of the day.

It's a wonderful drive . . . although if it were one of us doing the driving it would have not been so. We are on a paved 2-lane blacktop highway in good condition, so the road itself is never a problem, just the continual blind curves and switchbacks. Our thanks to Vergilio for doing all of the hard work of driving while Ann, Doris and Ed chat comfortably, watch for birds or likely places to stop and look for them.



Before we are too high up and still in densely forested terrain, Vergilio spots an Andean Parakeet in bushes along the road. We are in a good place to stop so we pull over and have a look. This bird normally lives in high tree-tops and travels in large flocks. So this one is in a place where it "shouldn't be" and flying solo; this is an unusual sighting.





The road up to and through the pass is a thing of beauty. Great scenery, mostly open land, green at first; later arid, little or no color mostly “earth tones”. But always with majestic snow-capped mountains all around. Mile after mile of switchbacks, up and down. At this point, looking back down at the road is like looking down at a bowl of spaghetti spilled on the mountainside. Poor Vergilio. Some road repair going on; this road gets a lot of freezing and thawing. Two weeks ago, the pass was closed due to an unseasonal two feet of snow. Since this road is a main artery between eastern and western central Peru, many people were stuck on the “wrong side” for them.



The mountains are otherworldly. Huge, massive shouldered, high, snow capped, glacier skirted, desolate, black, brown, sage green and gray. These are much bigger mountains than we have in the US and certainly more purely massive than any we have seen elsewhere. The snow line is much higher than in the U.S. due to the lack of moisture in the air. Since we’re on the western slope, the air is pretty well squeezed dry by the mountains.





After the Amazon basin and the eastern slope get their generous rains from the prevailing easterlies (westerlies in the northern hemisphere, easterlies in the southern), there's nothing left for the poor, thirsty western slope. There are pre-Incan ruins around but not much Incan, perhaps even they were put off by the inhospitable environment. But the Inca Trail marches right through the pass joining Urubamba and Ollantaytambo with Machu Pichu.



As usual the most beautiful birds are in the most miserable places. We stop at several Indian farms where there are lovely finches, some found only in Peru. The farms make you want to cry. Brings new meaning to poor. All they can grow are potatoes due to the altitude and temperature. They raise sheep, pigs, cattle. Trash everywhere. In the city, in the town, it's cleaner; in the countryside, few people know the meaning of

trashcan. Ban the plastic bag and bottle quickly (but they don't). Or offer money for collected bags and bottles (but they don't).





One spot is great for hummingbirds and we see several species. This shrub is a special favorite of theirs. Usually hummers prefer bright red or orange blossoms, but this one is a very pale, dull yellow, almost cream-colored. The nectar in it must be fantastic, or perhaps at these high altitudes the more colorful blossoms are scarce and the birds have adapted to what is at hand.



Ann's favorite bird of the trip is an Andean Lapwing which we see today for the first time (with a couple more sightings later). Not spectacular coloring, but really a very pretty, "tailored" looking bird with wonderful iridescence on the back and beautiful red eyes. We also have some great views of the Andean Flicker. Similar to our Flickers at home but much



*left: Andean Lapwing, above: Andean Flicker*

Just before we reach the pass we see Andean Condors floating far above us. Doris tells us that this is generally as close as most tourists get to them. We pull over and watch for a while, and at one point we can see 10 or more at one time. Some good views of them through Doris's scope but they are too far away for us to get any decent pictures.

We've started the day in the Urubamba valley, an elevation around 8,000 feet and the pass is almost 14,000 feet, so it is a drive of up, up and more up. And it is COLD this morning at these altitudes! The day warms a little with the ever-present sun as we keep going higher but we never really "catch up" with the full warmth of the sun and it remains cold all day. However, as we say of the Arizona heat, "but it's a DRY cold". It is more comfortable because of this and the sun, than many Chicago winter days of damp, biting cold.

After we go over the pass and start to descend on the eastern slope, we pass/are passed by a bicycle tour group. We kept passing them, then they passing us and etc. as we slowed or stopped to look at birds. They're coasting the loooong downhill and we only encounter them at a mutual stop once. As soon as we're on our way down the eastern slope there is a "greenness" added to the landscape, and it continues getting greener as we descend.





Still at very high altitude, we come to a little wetland area dotted with small ponds. There we see Andean Goose, Puna Ibis and some Teal. It's a beautiful, open area (above the tree line) and reminds Ed a bit of the Alaskan tundra in its "character". We've seen all sorts of interesting vegetation and flowers.



above: Andean Goose, right: Puna Ibis





We drive about 75 kilometers down the eastern slope, probably going down in altitude by 1,500 feet or more. The surroundings become quite green as we descend, sometimes very thick “jungle-like” growth. This is the rainy side of the mountains, so everything is greener. Our destination is a favorite “hot spot” for birds that Doris knows about. As luck would have it that was the only place on today’s trip where we see NO birds. We turn and start to drive back up to return to Urubamba and K’yuchi Rumi.



After a few kilometers we stop for a roadside picnic lunch that Doris has prepared. This seems to be the typical thing in Peru. It’s similar to the lunch at the conclusion of our raft trip yesterday. There is a nice, grassy area along the road and there we stop.



As we begin unloading, a cow comes near and watches us (hoping that we aren’t eating beef, we suppose, don’t think they care for “people food”). By the time we have table, chairs and food set out and begin to eat we have 2 more visitors. They were polite but attentive . . . by this time the cow has lost interest however. The dogs are hungry but well-mannered and don’t try to come near us to beg or snatch and run. This was exactly what we experienced yesterday after our raft trip. Presumably the dogs have all been kicked often enough to discourage those

habits, but still they wish, they hope . . .

The lunch is delicious with plenty of avocados. When we finish we pack up and are on our way back. We stop one last time near another farm, and here we do see more birds. Then the long drive back “home”. It was a good day for birding and we saw 35-40 new (to us) species. And the wonderful scenery along the way is just a great bonus.

