

Sisterhood of the Traveling Birders

Birding Tours For Women

The experience of seeing birds can be revelatory because of the company you keep. In my experience, that company is sister birders. As a media guest on the Dec. 2019 inaugural “Female Birders Flocking to Colombia” tour—designed by Bogotá-based Ángela Gómez and Luisa Conto of Nature Colombia and led by Colombian birding guide Diana Balcázar-Niño—one moment of many stands out to me.

Our group of eight women (the three named above plus Wendy McGlynn, Eliana Ardila Kramer, Ruth Miller, ProColombia official Juliana Torres Nieto, and myself) forged a sorority of laughs and an emotional connection beyond the birds we sought. When we arrived on the eighth day at the scrub desert of the Camarones area of the La Guajira Peninsula on the Caribbean coast, our group’s enveloping energy embraced a ninth woman, Audubon-trained local birding guide Yerly Pushaina Cotes, a member of the Wayuu indigenous community and the area’s only resident female birding guide. With expansive blue sky overhead, we followed her deep into the tall, dry scrub, looking for regional specialties like Buffy Hummingbird, Red-billed Emerald, Russet-throated Puffbird, and Chestnut Piculet.

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Yerly's body language shifted abruptly in that distinct birding-guide way when she heard and then spotted an endemic Tocuyo Sparrow, a prize bird for this site. We were thrilled at the sighting—hushed, but with total, unabashed glee—and celebrated Yerly's growing confidence as a guide. Then, *blam!* Wendy spotted a rainbow. Could its appearance in this dry desert of all places portend a blessing in the morning? We took it as a "yes," and snapped a group portrait with said rainbow.

I wondered later about a few things. Would Yerly have been hired if we were not all women? Would our collective sentimental enthusiasm for the weather have gone over the same among a mixed group? Maybe, maybe not, but this woman opines that being among a like-identified group of women contributed to a level of comfort that made the birding better.

Birders can now ask these questions, with birding tourism picking back up after the COVID-19 pandemic and companies beginning to offer women-only birding trips. Travel with sister birders can provide a very different birding experience from that of a mixed-gender tour.

For context, gender-specific trip packages already exist in other travel niches. Women-only retreats and adventures are offered by companies as femme-specific as Damesly to the mass market outdoor retailer REI Adventures. The pandemic has created a pent-up wanderlust that can only further fuel this rise in hyper-focused touring. Birding travel can bring in new birders who might want a more tailored-to-her experience outside of the sometimes-competitive atmosphere and often male-dominated birding group tour. The very idea could open birding tourism to other demographic-specific group trips by emphasizing a safe space.

And it's not just the clientele that such a tour pivot could support: A woman-focused itinerary can also create economic opportunities for women country nationals in birding hotspots, and ultimately lead to bird conservation.

Birding clients and tour organizers are asking for and planning these trips right now. I talked to over a dozen birder peers, industry experts, and professional guides, and below is what I learned, in their words. Quotations have been minimally edited for style and clarity.

■ **Ángela Gómez and Luisa Conto navigating a road under construction while en route to El Dorado Ecolodge, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. 6 Dec 2019. Photo © Bryony Angell.**

Why women-only group birding trips?

Izzy Arévalo Wong, Birding Trip Client: I'm happy to see these international women-only trips being offered. I've been on a mixed trip with a male leader and male local guides, and only two other women in the group, both of them traveling solo. The women were not accommodated in the same way as the men on the trip. It was always the women who missed the birds—if she didn't reach the scope in time or the scope was placed too high for her, for example. I noticed this, but, sadly, I am so used to it that I didn't say anything at the time. Traveling with a woman leader would be different, because that perception dynamic

as a woman changes your experience. I would not have to worry about sexual harassment (within the group) or any of the other things we fold into our lives as women.

Kim Score, Independent Birding Guide: As a female guide, I've noticed more of my clients are women. In conversations with other women birders, we've discussed the unique benefits of a women-only tour, such as emotional safety and feeling supported and respected by like-identified women with shared lived experience; to be in a safe space to explore and identify the challenges that women in birding face.

Keith Valentine, General Manager, Rock-jumper Birding Tours: We wanted to create a space where like-minded women could get together and travel, explore, and appreciate the environment, birds, and other wildlife in a

safe space. Some female clients have asked for more interactive opportunities with local communities. Women are flourishing in the local birding tour industry and eco-tourism in general, whether it be as property owners, park rangers, or site guides. Otherwise, female-identified clients are largely looking for itineraries that maximize the chance to see the greatest variety of birds, quality birding sites, particular special species, other iconic wildlife, and a wide variety of different habitats.

Barb Bailey, Birding Trip Client: Some women are only now feeling their voices can be heard, and it would be irresponsible of me to say, "X doesn't happen because it never happened to me, so that's not why I make my decisions". Women really DO need an option where they don't have to be in close quarters with men if they don't want to be. Many women have (had adverse) ex-

■ Rainbow over our group of birders in Camarones, La Guajira, Colombia. 9 Dec 2019. Photo © Wendy McGlynn.





periences with men. It feels only right that they should have an option where they can choose the makeup of the group they want to be with and be able to have an amazing birding experience.

Ana Paula Oxom, Independent Birding Guide: I have a sense of what female clients are looking for on tours because I have traveled on birding trips before, too, not as a guide, but as a participant. Although all of us have different preferences in tours, regardless of sex or gender identity/expression, I think most women look for a safe group to go birding with, to connect with other female birders, and to go birding in an environment with a lower risk of encountering sexism.

Who benefits from a women-only birding trip, and how?

Devon Bradley, Birding Trip Client: I have heard other women say that they enjoy women-only birding groups because they are less competitive. I am a somewhat competitive person by nature and the data-driven part of my brain enjoys listing, so I do not see this approach to birding as mutually exclusive with listing. However, I do think that competitive-

ness manifests differently among most women and there is less intensity among a group of women birders.

Ana Paula Oxom: At an industry level, competitiveness rather than cooperation is a culture that marginalizes many women. Creating a niche for women without that competition can not only create a better birding experience, but also generate more opportunities for women within the industry.

Ángela Gómez, Co-owner, Nature Colombia: In Colombia, we saw that women weren't visible (to each other or to birding clients) and few women were motivated to

become birding guides. We wanted to elevate women who live in the communities where we were taking birders. As women, we could all help each other.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

■ Napping on the minibus. Colombia. 6 Dec 2019. Photo © Ruth Miller.

■ Colombian birding guide Diana Balcázar-Niño with the author. Los Flamencos, Colombia. 9 Dec 2019. Photo © Ruth Miller.

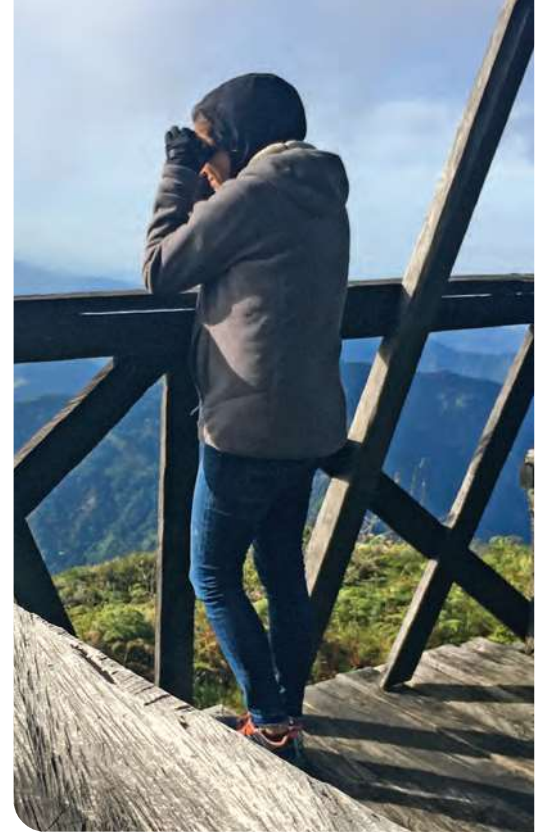
■ Blue-naped Chlorophonia. Santa Marta, Colombia. Dec 2019. Photo © Eliana Ardila Kramer.



Luisa Conto, Co-owner, Nature Colombia: Our “Female Birders Flocking to Colombia” tour focuses on watching birds, but the itinerary also supports conservation-related life projects of Colombian women living in the country’s birding areas. Among these are environmentally-friendly crafts, cooking, and hospitality for ecotourism, and training local women for careers in bird-guiding and forest-guarding. Ecotourism, especially when it involves woman-owned enterprises and initiatives, provides an opportunity for women to get ahead with their families and their community under very difficult social

and economic conditions, and this tour addresses that reality directly.

Mariel Abreu, Co-owner, Nature Is Awesome (speaking about a September 2016 trip to Cuba she co-led with Cuban country national Tania Piñero Cordero): Our city guide in Havana (was) a university student who was empowered by the number of women birding as a group. She loves looking at birds, has become quite the birder, and is now a bird guide herself! We chose woman-owned *casas particulares* (essentially Cuban-style AirBNBs) for the entirety of the trip,



■ Juliana Torres Nieto scans the San Lorenzo Ridge. Sierra de Santa Marta, Colombia. 7 Dec 2019. Photo © Bryony Angell.

How to Find an All-Women Birding Tour

Searching Google for “all women birding trip” or “women-only birding trip,” for instance, does not yet yield a satisfactory result for the international tours available. More birders will find these tours if tour operators anticipate this need for specific language in the descriptions of their trips. Google may have more to suggest by the time this article is published, but until birding tour companies provide inclusive search terms for gender presentation and safety to describe their tour packages (hello, Search Engine Optimization, also known as SEO), most of the trips below will be found by word of mouth. So birders, start vocalizing, and companies, start using language that is standard for the demographic you are targeting, and is easily searchable.

A growing list of companies now offer all-women, multi-day birding tours in the Western Hemisphere and Europe. Many of the companies are woman-owned or founded, and woman-run.

■ **Nature Colombia** (www.naturecolombia.com) hosted Female Birders Flocking to Colombia, the trip that inspired this article. The company offers this same tour of northern Colombia’s Caribbean coast, plus two more women-only tours in the central Andes and the Amazon region.

■ **Birding By Bus** (birdingbybus.com) offers women-only (led by Eliana Ardila Kramer) and mixed tours (with her husband and co-owner, Marc Kramer) to Colombia’s birding hotspots, Portugal, and Alaska, and trips to more countries are in the works.

■ **Natural Selections Tours** (naturalselectionstours.com) offers an all-women tour of Guatemala led by Kim Score and Guatemalan country national Ana Paula Oxom.

■ **Rockjumper Tours** (rockjumperbirding.com) offers a “ladies-only” trip to Brazil, led by Holly Faithfull with Brazilian birding guide Tati Pongiluppi as co-guide and driver. “Rockjumper has a range of tour categories such as budget, highlights, comprehensive, mega, remote and more which are all operated at different pace and with different objectives in mind. From 2023 we will be offering relaxed birding tours to over 20 different countries,” says General Manager Keith Valentine.

■ **Birding Languedoc** (birdinglanguedoc.org), a woman-founded-and-operated non-profit in the south of France, offers a women-only birding trip in the Western Mediterranean.

Special Accommodations

Most international birding tours require a minimum level of fitness and would not be considered compliant with the U.S. Americans With Disabilities Act. Nor will an all-women tour accommodate children if you’re a parent with caregiving responsibilities. As yet, there are no birding tours designed to accommodate family groups with small or school-age children.

which would host group meals, exchange ideas, and teach the group about the meals they were making. Our hosts loved the idea of these sorts of trips. They’ve mostly been exposed to European birders who were almost exclusively male, so a group of women birders was a new concept for them.

Who is the target audience for these trips?

Izzy Arévalo Wong: Birding is still considered kind of an elite hobby, and these international trips are even more of a luxury. People of color are a newer demographic to this hobby, and tend to be younger and have fewer resources. Add to that the societal expectations of women; if a woman wants to take extra time and money for a trip, who will take care of the kids or give her the time off? Unless a woman (is childless) and has the financial resources, and unless the travel company shares representational language and client images on their website, and maybe offers some kind of financial assistance, it will be more challenging for more women of color to participate in these trips.

Molly Adams, Founder of Feminist Bird Club:

I've provided language suggestions for (birding trip leaders) to use, but haven't yet endorsed any trips because, while inclusive language is important in attracting an audience of diverse genders, if the trip leaders or participants don't have experience actually supporting trans and non-binary birders, it could be misleading and end up being an uncomfortable or unsafe experience for the birders.

Kim Score: What we're really trying to avoid is the toxic masculine, which is often goal-oriented, competitive, aggressive, invulnerable, emotionally avoidant, heterosexist, misogynistic, and prone to the objectification of women and nature. Having a toxic masculine presence on a tour makes for a stressful, emotionally unsafe environment for other group members, no matter their gender.

What experience might you expect on an all-women birding trip?

Keith Valentine: On the whole, obviously much time will be spent listening to women's personal stories. I suspect the group dynamic would be quite different from that of a mixed or all-male group, although I have received mixed comments from women when I raised the topic with them.



Eliana Ardila Kramer, Co-owner of Birding By Bus:

I have not seen a big demand for intensive birding-only women's tours that lack the cultural aspects or appreciate other aspects of nature. That said, a tour itinerary is adapted during the tour, depending on the collective interest of the particular group that is on tour. If I have a lot of intensive birders, then we will do more birding. If the group prefers a slower pace and wants to incorporate other activities besides birding, we can adapt. (But) no matter what trip you are on with us, you will get some

■ TOP: Birders in the Santa Marta Mountains. El Dorado Reserve, Colombia. 7 Dec 2019. Photo © Breiner Tarazona.

■ BOTTOM: Vermilion Cardinals. La Guajira, Colombia. Dec 2019. Photo © Eliana Ardila Kramer.

cultural aspects included in the trip. If we learn about the culture, about the locations we are visiting, we will be more likely to learn to love it, appreciate it, and therefore protect it.



Kim Score: There is an implied emotional safety and like-minded camaraderie on a “women-only” trip that is attractive to those craving authentic connections in an inclusive environment.

Devon Bradley: I find that there is a certain ease to birding with women. Almost as if I can unclench my shoulders a bit. In my experience, birding with women moves at a different pace—there is room to reflect on plants and butterflies and mushrooms, but certainly not at the expense of birds! I find the dynamic among women allows for a more free and unburdened exchange of thoughts and ideas (and bird identification without fear of being ridiculed!).

Molly Adams: I’m non-binary and do not identify as a woman, so I would expect to feel uncomfortable on an “all-women trip.” I personally would be interested in a queer-only trip rather than one restricted to particular genders.

Holly Faithfull, Independent Birding and Wildlife Guide: Being hardcore and focused when looking for birds isn’t a male prerogative! It’s all about finding the right type of trip for each client.

What are the constraints to more all-women tours becoming available across the globe?

Ana Paula Oxom: The first thought I had (was) safety. I have traveled to many countries around the world, and the one question I always ask myself is, “Will I feel safe traveling to that country as a woman?” So, talking about constraints, safety is key. Safety is a general concern across the tourism industry, but I think it is heightened for women.

Keith Valentine: One-hundred percent (it) is the access to quality international and local birding guides. There are sadly still so few female bird guides/tour leaders in the industry that, when you look at it from a global perspective, one simply cannot entertain the idea of running ladies-only bird tours to most countries across the globe. We are really only considering those countries where we have access to quality local female guides, drivers, and agents. This can be surprisingly difficult to find and shows how far we still have to go to empower women in this sector. To open up more trips for all-women groups right now, we would have to use local male guides and drivers.

Holly Faithfull: One of the big pluses of women-only tours will be trying to support

female guides (since there are still so few around the world, in wildlife generally and birding in particular), with the hope of encouraging other women to get into guiding or working in birding tourism. Hopefully, we will be encouraging more female guides (and staff) to work with all tours in future.

Acknowledgments

The author traveled on the Women Birders Flocking to Colombia trip as a media guest, which means that, in addition to the tour, her flight to Colombia, meals, and accommodations were covered by ProColombia, the organization promoting tourism and non-extractive trade and investment in Colombia. International birding travel is a luxury, and it is a form of birding travel normally inaccessible to her without the help and generosity of many participants. She is grateful to ProColombia and Ángela Gómez and Luisa Conto of Nature Colombia, as well as her extended family—with whom she arranged childcare support while away—and her employer, through which she accessed paid time off from her day job in order to travel. She paid for her own travel insurance and vaccinations prior to the trip, and she budgeted additional money in both U.S. cash and local currency for gratuities for hotel staff, drivers, guides, and cultural interpreters.

Accepting a place on such a trip came with the expectation that she would afterwards produce media pieces to promote birding travel to Colombia. This article is one of several written since that trip in 2019. 🌍

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