Birds are everywhere. They are probably one of the most commonly seen groups of animals on a day-to-day basis. We see them so often, we kind of forget about them. On any given day, you may see multiple species in the short span of 10 minutes it takes to walk into your office, from cardinals, mockingbirds, and robins in the trees at eye level, to crows, and turkey vultures soaring in the sky above. Maybe it’s the very fact that they are so common that they are just that easily forgettable. Yet, the United States has rather poor diversity when it comes to numbers of bird species. At least that is, in comparison to the tropics. So as a PhD candidate who studies conservation of bird populations, the chance to present my work at the 2017 International Congress for Conservation Biology in Cartagena, Colombia was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

After discussing my trip with other members of my lab group, we decided to split the trip into two parts, the first of which was a week and a half of birding throughout the Colombian landscape followed by a week solely in Cartagena for the conference and some tourism of the city. For those of you unfamiliar with the activity of birding, it essentially boils down to hiking at a leisurely place while being constantly vigilant for any signs of birds, trying to see all the rare indigenous birds of the region. It involves spending vast amounts of time craning your head to stare at the canopy through binoculars, playing lots of bird calls from mini-speakers, and lots and lots of patience. It is not uncommon for birders to travel to obscure locations with fanatical enthusiasm just to track down a single rare species. While I have never considered myself a “birder” and had never been on a serious birding trip before, both my advisor and my colleague (who is coincidentally from Cali, Colombia) are both serious birders and planned a fantastic trip through the Eastern Andes to tour through areas few tourists have visited. I say few tourists for two reasons: 1) these were areas which are somewhat remote and not well developed, thus providing intact habitat for rare birds, and 2) much of this region was controlled by guerrilla factions of the FARC until the peace deal in November 2016 and their subsequent disarmament in June 2017. Altogether, this trip was sure to be incredibly unique.
My first stop was in Calí where I met up with a couple of my colleagues and we visited the cloud forest of San Antonio in the mountains above the city. This is where my colleague Rubén Dario Palacio does most of his field work for his PhD research. Much like the forests patches I would visit later in my trip, San Antonio is medium size fragment roughly 10,000 hectares of secondary forest (meaning it was cleared some decades ago and forest has grown back, but it is not the same as old growth forests with trees up to 100 years old). Easily accessible by paved roads, we drove up most of the way, got out, and hiked for several hours. Within five minutes, we saw three different species of birds, one of which was endemic to Colombia (endemic meaning can only be found in a particular region). From brilliantly colored flycatchers and warblers to larger birds like motmots and toucanets, the bird diversity was absolutely stunning from the very beginning. Nearby to the San Antonio forest, we also stopped by a little eco-tourist lodge called Finca Alejandria. This was a beautiful little property up in the mountains where they have put out a dozen hummingbird feeders and stands with fresh bananas to attract dozens and dozens of bird species. Before I could even finish my beer, I saw about 10 different types of hummingbirds among other species, but the real spot was the multi-colored tanager, a bird endemic to this specific mountain top, and that looks like a bird created by a child who just opened a new box of Crayolas.

The multicolored tanager is incredibly distinct and hard to miss!

Colombia has the highest diversity of birds in the world
After San Antonio, we stopped at a few more places that all offered their own unique communities of birds. We went to the Cerulean Warbler Reserve above the town of San Vicente de Chucurí (which had a beautiful domed church in the center of town), followed by the Recurve-Billed Bushbird Reserve outside of Ocaña, and then lastly spent time at the top of the Serranía del Perijá mountain range. This last stop was truly the highlight of the entire birding portion of my trip. Extending from the Eastern Andes, this mountain range crosses from Colombia into Venezuela and nearly reaches the shores of the Caribbean. Rather than hiking the 3,500 meters to the top, we were able to drive most of the way up via some rather difficult dirt roads that sometimes provided more hardship than ease. However, once we were at the top, it was truly amazing. Not only were we again greeted by dozens of bejeweled hummingbirds of all sorts of colors, but after hiking above the cloud forest, we were able to witness an entirely different type of habitat than I had seen before. After a certain elevation, the winds become too strong for trees to grow very tall (if at all) and instead you get a grassland on top of mountain called a páramo. These montane grasslands act just like islands since the organisms that live here are usually unable or unwilling to cross the gaps to other mountaintops. Not only was the view of the land from the top an incredible vista, it was where I had my favorite sightings of the trip. The first was of an Andean pygmy owl who we were able to spot when he woke up and started hooting as evening approached. He was just so tiny and adorable and sat there for around 30 minute staring at us before leaving to find his breakfast. The next best sighting was seeing three Andean condors, two parents and a juvenile, soaring right in front of us over a large valley that stretched from Venezuela into Colombia. It was truly a very existential moment for me watching these huge, majestic birds (which are also the national bird of Colombia) soar just a few hundred meters right in front of us. Luckily this happened on our very last morning of the trip, so it ended up being a fantastic ending to an otherwise phenomenal trip.
This pygmy owl was definitely my favorite bird of the trip.

Seeing this Andean condor and its mate and child soaring right in front of us on top of the Andes was a memory I'll cherish forever.
So with the birding portion and pleasure portion of my trip over, it was time for me to get back to work, where I had to head to the beautiful ocean city of Cartagena. The city was once the most important New World port for Span during the colonial era and much of the Old City reflects that. Surrounded by a historic sea wall, the Old City where I stayed is a vibrant (albeit touristy) community full of gorgeous churches and beautiful Spanish colonial architecture. Fortunately I had two days to explore the city before my conference started, so I spent it walking around with colleagues, visiting free museums on the history of gold and emerald mining, as well as eating amazing local food. I even got to spend some time SCUBA diving in some nearby mangrove islands.
The conference itself was a fantastic gathering of a huge number of conservationists working on a variety of topics. On the first day I presented my work titled, “How do globally changing mangrove fragments impact extinction risk of endemic birds?” which was received well by those in attendance. With that finished, I was able to spend the remainder of time focused on networking with a very diverse crowd of attendees. One of the most interesting parts of conservation as a field is how interdisciplinary it has to be. Conservation by its very nature, depends on action undertaken by society. As a result, the most effective conservation efforts are those that not only take the biology and ecology of the environment into account, but also the economics, religion, and politics of the local communities as well. The conference reflected this diversity as well, bringing together scientists, lawyers, economists, and even clergy members from all over the world, with a particular emphasis on those from Latin America.

When I finally boarded my flight home, I was not only exhausted, but also totally fulfilled and exhilarated. In two and half weeks, I saw more bird species than I had in the last five years, became more proficient in Spanish than from my entire middle school education, and met numerous conservationists from a variety of international institutions that I will be in contact with for the rest of my professional life. I can confidently say that this was the most the amazing trip I have taken in years.