



# BIRD LIKE A GIRL

BY BRYONY ANGELL

## Women Birding Guides: A Growing Trend



**Andrea Molina,  
Ecuador.**

Readers, meet your next international birding trip leader. She's a country national of a birding hotspot with years of experience. She might not only be your guide but your tour operator and driver, too. She's the new face of international birding travel.

Florencia Ocampo of Birding with Me (Uruguay [birdingwithme.com](http://birdingwithme.com)), Eliana Ardila Kramer of Birding By Bus (Colombia, [facebook.com/birdingbybus](https://www.facebook.com/birdingbybus)),

[birdingbybus](http://birdingbybus)), Tati Pongiluppi of Brazil Birding Experts (Brazil, [brazilbirdingexperts.com](http://brazilbirdingexperts.com)), and Andrea Molina, who guides through Neblina Forest Birding Tours (Ecuador, [neblinaforest.com](http://neblinaforest.com)) are four women leading birding trips in their respective natal countries.

The experience of birding in these countries is as different as the women themselves. Uruguay is brand-new to birding, while Ecuador's birding economy is 30

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years old. Brazil's vast landscape means a guide might be a regional specialist, while a guide in a smaller country might cover the whole terrain.

All four women are committed to bird conservation and visitors who revere those birds. They share why it's important to resume birding travel.

## How is the birding distinct in your country?

**Florencia:** Uruguay is small with a low population density. The distances are short and you spend less time in the car and more in the field. We have different environments that exist in neighboring countries, like patches of Atlantic Forest from Brazil in the Northeast and fragments of the Misiones rainforest from Argentina in the North. We have coastline and lagoons, even islands with nesting terns.

We do not have endemic species, but we have species restricted to small areas where the behavior of the birds is easy to see. The near-threatened straight-billed reedhaunter is a target bird easily observed, recorded, and photographed. Here, it jumps out of the reeds, where elsewhere it behaves more cryptically.

**Andrea:** Ecuador opened up to birding tourism over 30 years ago and is now established as a



**Eliana Ardila  
Kramer,  
Colombia.**

destination for both serious and beginner birders. The area of Mindo was the start of birding tourism. Before, it was a place for bird research and study. It's only an hour away from the capital, Quito; it can be a day trip for a family; and the birds are easy to see, with hummingbird feeding stations and banana feeders for the tanagers, honeycreepers, and euphonias. You can see 30 species of hummingbirds in a single location.

**Tati:** The majority of birding guides in Brazil are also scientists. I worked as a conservation biologist for BirdLife International before becoming a guide. And there is a small number of domestic birders. Only about 16 percent of nature guides in Brazil are women, and most of



**Florencia  
Ocampo,  
Uruguay.**

us specialize in a few regions rather than the whole country. I live in Espiritu Santo, in the southeast of Brazil, and guide in this area, the Pantanal, and the Northeast.

**Eliana:** Not only do visitors fall in love with the birds, but with Colombians. Colombians are some of the most welcoming, happy, and respectful people you will ever meet. It is in our culture to be nice to others, to help you out if you need something, to make you feel like family.

**Q** How does the birding tourism you lead impact the

## local communities and natural areas where you take visitors?

**Tati:** When we stay in a lodge that is local and family owned, versus a big hotel, and employ people from the local community, they see the economic value of the wild birds.

**Andrea:** We visit homes and properties that are managed by locals. These are people who see potential with their property. In a lot of cases, it's the women who initiate it because they are the ones at home noticing the birds. [Birding ecotourism] creates a new way to make money, even part-time. Plus, their kids can do something beyond farming. It gives women independence in their own homes.

**Florencia:** International visitors can influence a landowner's mindset. One family in the north was already developing ecotourism on their property. Their cattle were previously free-ranging, degrading the nearby forest. They now rotate their cattle grazing after learning the importance of habitat restoration for the local birds.

**Eliana:** Learning about the culture of the place we are birding is a win for the birds. One example: If we are visiting a part of Colombia where coffee is important for culture, learning about the impacts of coffee-growing on the farmers, habitats, and birds will give the

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visitor a better understanding of why Bird Friendly Coffee is so important. Birders then see why it is so beneficial to pay extra for a coffee that is shade-grown and pays the farmers a fair amount.

**Q** How does being a female guide influence your experience guiding and the experience of your clients? What makes you different as a woman leader?

**Andrea:** Some women clients have told me that they are embarrassed to admit they haven't seen a bird when they are with a male guide, birding as a group. Not with me, however.

**Tati:** Women clients feel comfortable talking to me about body issues, like requests to go to the bathroom in the bush. In one situation, it wasn't the bathroom, it was swimming. I had a couple on a private tour and we took a lunch break during the peak heat of the day. I invited them to come swimming with me. The husband declined but the wife joined me. She told me that in 20 years of birding with her husband, this was her first time going to the beach, and that it was because of me, their female guide, inviting her! I'm a driver, which is unusual for a woman in Brazil. I recently also became a mother to a (now one-year-old) daughter, balancing my profession.

**Florencia:** I am fortunate that



in Uruguay I do not experience a disadvantage as a solo female birding guide. I cannot say the same for my experience guiding in neighboring countries, however. I am a tour operator, guide, and driver in Uruguay, where in other countries it's more difficult to do all three because of prejudice.

**Eliana:** I've been on mixed (multigender) tours as both a client and a guide, so I can share different perspectives. Men seem on a mission to see as many birds as possible, while women like to slow down to see both the bird and its behavior. As a tour leader, I plan accordingly to even out the itinerary. I have

learned to get to know my guests ahead of time, learn what they like and expect, and then show it to them on the trip!

### **Q** What is the conservation situation in your country?

**Florencia:** Important Bird Areas (IBAs), national parks—Uruguay is late to conservation in this way. Even though Uruguay signed the International Convention for Biodiversity in 1992, the country's first protected area wasn't established until 2000! At that same time, some state schools began offering careers in ecotourism. Yet our culture does not have a conscience for conservation; it's not integrated into (general) education. With few government-protected areas, conservation is reliant on private land ownership, if the owner is interested. The rate at which we are losing these areas is amazing, year to year. We need more bird watchers coming here.

**Tati:** We're in one of the worst times for conservation. The government (of Jair Bolsonaro) is bad-mouthing conservation nongovernmental organizations. Patrolling and enforcement in parks is reduced, and the government is giving companies access to natural areas without any environmental assessment. Climate change has made the rainy season much shorter now, too. Many areas of

the country are burning.

**Andrea:** Ecuador's Ministry of Tourism recognizes that ecotourism is part of the whole that supports the country. Birders can visit both national parks run by the government and private preserves run by the Jocotoco Foundation, which preserves specific areas and involves local people in protecting species. It is different from ProAves in Colombia. [Colombia's bird conservation organization, ProAves, operates ecolodges in its privately owned preserves across Colombia]. Here, the lodges in buffer zones like the Amazon basin are not supported by a single organization or agency. And there is still pressure for production, logging, and mining.

**Eliana:** One upside of Colombia's recent history is that a lot of [natural] areas are still intact. Areas formerly controlled by guerrilla groups are now possible to visit, and some former guerrillas—including women—are training to be birding guides. Those same areas need to be protected while birding tourism is getting established.

### **Q** How can birder tourists impact bird conservation before, during, and after a trip to your country?

**Florencia:** Visitors can say something to the owners of the places we visit, either while there,

or write a note of appreciation. What was great about the stay? What could be better? The owners need to pay their bills, and need to know the positive connection between what they are trying to do and the birders who come only a few times a year.

**Andrea:** Spread the word that Ecuador is safe, with great infrastructure, established ecotourism, and that we are more than the Galapagos.

**Tati:** Visitors can share what they saw, what drew them to Brazil, what's great about this country, and that it's safe. I encourage donating to American Bird Conservancy, which supports many bird conservation projects here.

**Eliana:** Colombians are waiting eagerly for visitors to return! I show a love for my country that I hope is contagious. When I finished my last tour, all nine guests said they could not wait to come back.

## **Q** What is your biggest personal dream as a guide, doing what you do?

**Tati:** I desire to have a positive impact on conservation through birding tourism, offering a great experience with Brazilian nature, involving local communities in our process, and supporting conservation actions.

**Florencia:** I am positive that ecotourism can change local at-

titudes toward nature, especially the next generation. Imagine a child seeing dozens of people carrying cameras, scopes, and binoculars, and making such a big deal just to see the birds he takes for granted? It is my dream to inspire such environmental consciousness among locals.

**Eliana:** I'm on a mission to show the world that Colombia is safe and welcoming. I left the country when I was nine, but it's in my heart. The image Americans still have of Colombia is hard for me to see. Doing these tours shows visitors what's possible in Colombia.

**Andrea:** I already live my dream. What I have done already as a woman is more than I expected as a child. My dream is for more women to have the chance to live as I do, stay single, choose to not have kids, and not be criticized or judged [for these choices]. My dream is for women all over the world.

These interviews were conducted via Zoom, email, and phone call, and edited for clarity. You can reach each of these women via her own or company name online or on social media. ✍

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