



When most tourists visit Ecuador, their itineraries include the Galapagos Islands and the historic center of the capital, Quito. When U.S. Ambassador to Ecuador Heather Hodges is sight-seeing, she often travels off the beaten track with a guide to the birds of Ecuador.

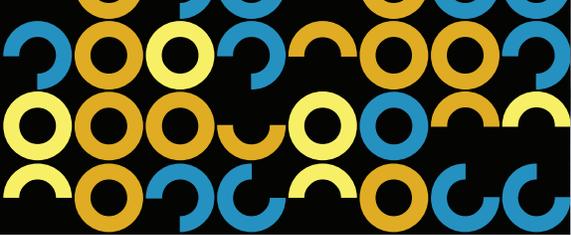
So equipped, she has visited lush lowland rain forests, watched flamingos snap up shrimp on salt pans on the southwest coast and searched for a “mystery owl” at San Isidro Lodge in the highland subtropical cloud forest. In her nearly three years in Ecuador, she has visited 18 of the country’s 24 provinces and become adept at spotting birds from the back seat of the Chevrolet Suburban in which she travels or even from the window of a taxiing airplane.



Feathered Friends

Ambassador’s hobby strengthens environmental diplomacy

/// By Marta Youth



Recent Enthusiast

Ambassador Hodges said she has enjoyed watching backyard birds since her childhood in Cleveland, Ohio, but birding became a passion only in recent years.

“I’ve been in the Foreign Service 30 years and lived in many bird-rich countries,” she said. “I try not to think about all the birds I missed earlier in my career.”

In 2008, she celebrated her confirmation as ambassador by visiting One Good Tern, an outdoor store in Alexandria, Va., where she bought her now prized pair of Swarovski binoculars, a step up for her practice of birding.

Ecuador, about the size of Colorado, is home to more than 1,600 of the world’s 10,000 bird species (versus around 900 species in North America). Ambassador Hodges’ marked-up, weather-beaten field guide reveals that she has seen about a third of the country’s species since arriving in August 2008.

When she bought the guide, she said she was delighted to discover that the authors were the distinguished U.S. ornithologists Robert S. Ridgely and Paul J. Greenfield. Ridgely is president and a founder of the Jocotoco Foundation, which protects endangered bird species in Ecuador, and Greenfield resides in Ecuador and directs the Mindo Cloudforest Foundation, which he founded to support conservation of the habitat of Ecuadorian birds and foster ecotourism.

The ambassador’s birding knowledge and her growing interest in biodiversity and wildlife conservation have made her welcome in Ecuador’s active environment and conservation circles. In late 2010, she brought together federal and municipal government officials, nongovernmental organizations and private foundations to jointly work to secure land for a new national wildlife reserve that will help protect watersheds and rare bird species, including Ecuador’s national bird, the Andean condor.

For the 2010 Independence Day celebration of the U.S. Embassy in Quito, Ambassador Hodges designated the Jocotoco Foundation and the Mindo Cloudforest Foundation as organizations where guests could send donations in lieu of the flowers traditionally offered on national days in Ecuador. Representatives of both foundations said they were pleased with the attention and recognition generated.

Her interest has also encouraged American companies to become more involved in environmental issues in the country.

Posts’ Birders

The ambassador is part of a small but enthusiastic group of birders at Embassy Quito. While they cannot venture out of Quito as often as they would like, the birders say they make the most of the city’s bird life through Saturday visits to its Botanical Gardens, a green oasis for migratory birds. They also search for owls in the trees at the ambassador’s residence at dusk.

“I’ve met far more expert Foreign Service birders over the years,” Ambassador Hodges said. “Compared with many of them, I am just beginning, but I am so glad I caught on in time for my tour in Ecuador.”



Ambassador Heather Hodges observes birds during her visit to Cajas National Park. **Below:** Among the embassy staff and family members who got the bird-watching bug are from left, Jody Chritton, Howard Youth, the author, Jon Selle, Deputy Chief of Mission Andrew Chritton, Ambassador Hodges and Wes Carrington.



Ambassador Hodges said she likes to engage Americans and Ecuadorians about the importance of conservation and the richness of Ecuador’s natural patrimony.

“I especially like to talk about birding and the environment with students,” she said. “It is important they gain an appreciation for how unique and abundant the wildlife here is, and that they recognize that their country is a special place.”

Local media outlets have reported on the ambassador’s birding forays, which may boost interest in ecotourism. On a recent trip, a television camera crew followed Hodges and Greenfield as they bird-watched and talked about conservation efforts in Mindo. Several journalists said they were impressed with Hodges’ knowledge and appreciation for the country’s flora and fauna, and were surprised to observe the variety of birds in the cloud forest less than two hours from Quito.

Ambassador Hodges summed it up best: “Not only have I enjoyed seeing an amazing array of gorgeous birds here, but through this hobby I have really come to appreciate this stunning country and have met some remarkable Americans and Ecuadorians who are committed to preserving the habitat and wildlife here.” ■

The author is the information officer at the U.S. Embassy in Quito.