



Birding with Children in the Amazon

By Phil Kahler

Five Many-banded Aracari (a type of toucan) are feeding in some trees and have attracted the attention of two Maijuna children. Walking across the field the children sit down in the grass near the edge of their village to get a closer look.



Kris Pflaging with Maijuna children.

They are using binoculars and are quick to fully immerse themselves into the joys of bird watching. I and the other educators in our group look at each other and

smile. The Amazon Binocular Project is working; children in small village schools dotted along the Amazon and Napo Rivers in Northeastern Peru are falling in love with birds.

We asked children at the village school in Saint Martha if they had any favorite animals. To our amazement nearly half of the children responded

with specific bird names! Their teacher had recently attended a workshop where she and one hundred other local



Percy Reyna and Cesar Sevillano with new BirdSleuth curriculum.

instructors received environmental science training. While at the workshop the student's teacher obtained a copy of the new BirdSleuth curriculum designed specifically to teach them about their local birds. The new curriculum was a collaborative effort between Karen Purcell from Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Percy Reyna and Cesar Sevillano, the two bird guides who have been leading our efforts in Amazon schools.

Brian Landever, director of CONAPAC, a local NGO, organized this professional development event for the teachers, and together with Pam Bucur, general manager of Explorama Lodges, created a check-out system for schools to use our binoculars. Both Pam and Brian have noted a huge increase in birds featured in student artwork at remote schools CONAPAC serves.

Teacher participants of the Educator Academy in the Amazon Rainforest, an annual teacher workshop attended



Cesar helping student focus on a bird.

by U.S. educators, assisted Percy and Cesar as they introduced proper binocular use to the students of Saint Martha. This was the first time the students had used binoculars and they were thrilled to practice focusing on distant objects. Percy and Cesar's patient mentoring soon resulted in students spotting birds in a nearby tree. As our time at the school ended, it was obvious the children were hungry for more time with the binoculars.

Sierra High School students from Colorado visited the small school at Canal Pinto for a community service day with CONAPAC officials. They worked with community members to paint the school and plant a garden. Several of the high school students worked side by side with local students to paint a Great Kiskadee and a Ringed Kingfisher on the wall outside the kindergarten classroom. Sierra High School students also brought some binoculars to Peru for the Amazon Binocular Project and took the opportunity to introduce the young Canal Pinto students to their first lesson on how to use binoculars.



Canal Pinto students paint "Victor Diaz", a Great Kiskadee on school.

The Amazon Binocular Project was officially launched in November 2016 when Christa Dillabaugh, director of Amazon Workshops set up the webpage and coordinated with the EcoTeach Foundation to receive donations. In two years' time my students at Tualatin Valley Academy have inspected and cleaned over forty pairs of used binoculars for bird conservation education. Last winter our friends at Eagle Optics provided a deep discount during their "going out of business sale" resulting in donations of fifty pairs of new binoculars. Additional binoculars have been dropped off at the CONAPAC office in Iquitos by educators and visitors to the rainforest. We now have nearly one hundred pairs of binoculars in classroom sets of five being checked out by teachers each month.



Percy birding with students.

Teacher and student demand for binoculars in the Amazon has never been greater. To reach all the CONAPAC schools requesting binoculars we have set our goal at four hundred pairs. These binoculars would make it possible to distribute sets of ten to each of the area CONAPAC schools for loan periods of three months instead of our

current one-month rotation per school. This month we were excited to receive a \$1000 donation that will help us buy twenty new binoculars from Vortex, who has kindly offered to continue the donor discount originally offered to us by Eagle Optics. News about our success with the Amazon Binocular Project is spreading!

Five years ago, I had a pivotal conversation with an extraordinary local guide, Lucio Pando, about his dream of teaching children in the Peruvian Amazon about birds.



Lucio Pando teaching a group of students.

Lucio knew the key to fostering children's appreciation for birds was in helping them to see the intricacies of their plumage and behavior. Lucio's students needed binoculars! While Lucio, our beloved bird guide, is sorely missed, I'm sure he would be very proud of his friends working to make bird conservation education in the Amazon a reality. Please visit our webpage or contact us to learn how to donate funds and/or binoculars to the Amazon Binocular Project.



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