

As if soaring mountain peaks, sultry jungle and mysterious remnants of Inca culture weren't enough, Peru is also home to a glorious array of birdlife, discovers **Ben Illis**



# NEW WORLD symphony

*Here: scarlet macaws live for 40-50 years in the wild and up to 75 years in captivity*



# A

s we paddle silently through the creek, dense jungle foliage on both sides, dappled sunlight plays on the murky brown water ahead. A trickle of sweat runs down my neck. We emerge on to

a large lake and scan the water's edge for unusual movement. To the left, a distant splash. Then another. Feeling the heat, we pick up pace. Our arrival is heralded by a cacophony of whistles, squeaks and grunts.

The longest of the *mustelid* (weasel) family, male giant otters can grow to almost two metres in length. Living and hunting in familial packs – there are seven in this group – these ruthlessly efficient hunters earn their Spanish name *lobo del rio* or 'river wolf'. They arc swiftly through the water with incredible grace, diving for piranha and other lake fish, which they munch noisily, clasped between webbed paws, one elbow propped casually over a root.

A large male surfaces near the canoe with a loud warning bark: giant otters are the most vocal (and most social) of the otters. A smaller female surfaces nearby and exhales as loudly as any cetacean. As they ascend, the otters 'periscope', revealing their unique, mottled, cream-coloured throat patches, which allow individuals to be identified by the pack, as well as by human observers. We follow them for an hour or so, captivated by their grace and hunting prowess: adults eat three kilos of fish a day, some 10 per cent of their body weight.

## AMAZONIAN GIANTS

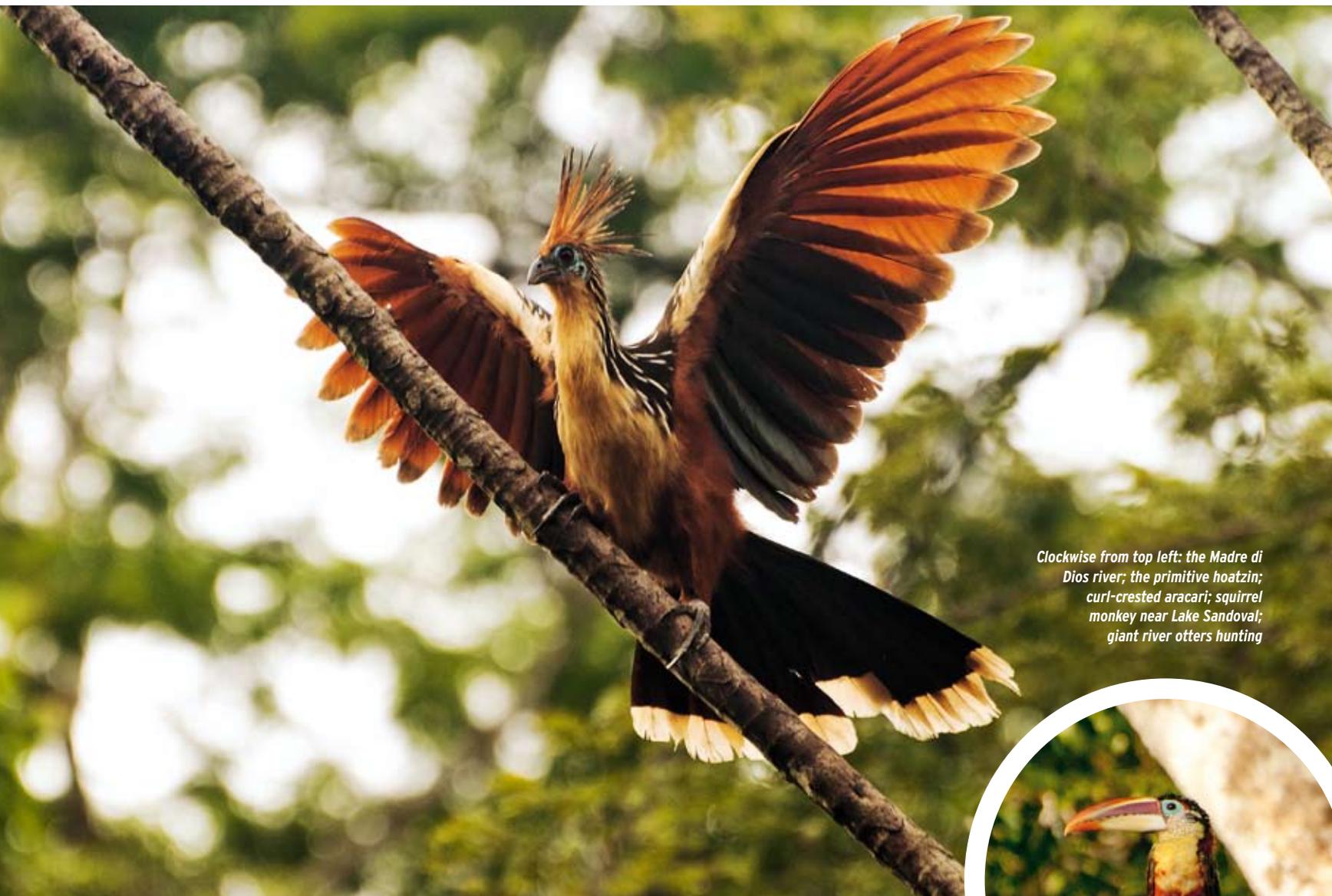
Lake Sandoval lies in the steamy Amazonas region of Southern Peru, one of the best places in the world to spot the endangered giant otter, which exists in similar habitats throughout the Amazon basin. Sandoval is an oxbow of the river Madre di Dios, one of the Amazon's major tributaries, and lies in the Tambopata National Reserve. The lake is easily accessed from our base at the Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica Lodge by a short boat trip and a few kilometres of easy hiking along a well-maintained jungle path, wildlife all around.

En route, we encounter squirrel monkeys scampering through the trees; a comparatively sedate brown capuchin monkey gorging itself on palm fruit; and even a pair of red howler monkeys, high in the canopy above.



**The giant otters arc swiftly through the water with incredible grace, diving for piranha, which they munch noisily**





*Clockwise from top left: the Madre di Dios river; the primitive hoatzin; curl-crested aracari; squirrel monkey near Lake Sandoval; giant river otters hunting*



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Enchanting as these mammals are, it's the birds that have brought me to Peru. I am following in the footsteps of the Birding Rally Challenge, organised to raise awareness of Peru's astonishing diversity of avifauna.

Along the same hike we see a flock of chestnut-fronted macaws at a salt lick on top of a rotting palm stump. Suddenly a pair of blue and yellow macaws fly in and scatter their smaller cousins in pursuit of their own minerals. A solitary white-fronted parrot sits atop a high tree. A group of improbably named horned screamers sound their clattering cry off to my left. A male band-tailed manakin flies directly at me down the path, a flash of fiery red and orange. By the side of the creek lurks a jewel-bright agami heron, stalking the shallows.

For any novice to New World birding, identification is tricky, since many bird families are entirely different from their Old World counterparts. Thus we encounter caracaras – heavily-built falcons that kill with their powerful beak rather than their talons. Bee-eaters are replaced by iridescent jacamars; finches, thrushes and other passerines swapped for equally brightly-coloured tanagers and manakins. Then there are the oddities:

nunbirds and antbirds; sungrebes and sunbitterns, and the myriad parrots, macaws and toucans. I rely on my field guide and, more often, the impressive knowledge of Inkaterra's local guides, who play birdcalls on their phones to lure in a specific species.

### PRIMEVAL BIRDLIFE

A highlight for me (that needed no luring) was the hoatzin, a primitive, pheasant-like bird with a bizarre and markedly reptilian face and a rather comical, spiky crest. Leaf-eating hoatzins are encountered on all the waterways of the region, making scrappy nests in any foliage that overhangs the water. Their young retain claws on the first joint of their wings, enabling them to clamber clumsily back into the nest from the water. Archaeopteryx-like, they hint at a missing link between birds and dinosaurs.

The two Inkaterra lodges in this region are surrounded by a variety of habitats. A good number of fascinating →

species can be spotted just by strolling around the beautifully manicured grounds of the lodges themselves, scattering rabbit-like agoutis as you go. The Reserva Amazonica Lodge also boasts an impressive canopy walkway. Not for the faint-hearted, the seven rope bridges that make up the 30-metre high walkway offer astonishing views across the top of the rainforest, to say nothing of being the perfect place to spot such gems as the curl-crested aracari, a beautiful small toucan with a mop of curls that would have done Barry White proud. It is truly a birder's paradise. On our last evening we take a short boat trip by night and encounter nightjars and a family group of the world's largest rodent, the capybara, grazing by the water's edge.

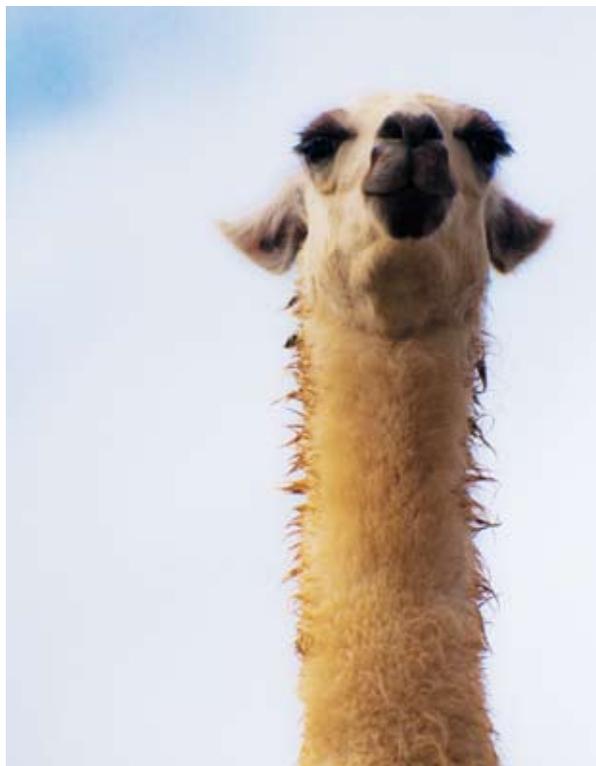
After three rewarding days exploring the region, it's another early start and the long but incredible journey to our next habitat: the mid-altitude cloud forest around Machu Picchu, the legendary lost city of the Incas. We leave the camp in the pitch dark and are treated to a magical dawn over the river as we head an hour upstream by boat to the regional capital of Puerto Maldonado. Here we drive the trans-Andean highway up through the majestic mountains, reaching a high point just shy of 5,000m.

The first pricklings of altitude sickness are felt but abate rapidly as we descend the other side toward Ollantaytambo, departure point for the spectacular train through the Sacred Valley to Aguas Calientes. Traffic-free Aguas Calientes ('Hot Springs') sits at around 2,000m, nestling between the dizzily high peaks just below Machu Picchu itself. Here, the Inkatererra Pueblo Hotel is our base for phase two of the rally. Unfortunately, we hadn't enough time to explore the ancient Inca city of Cusco but it would make a great place to break and acclimatise to the altitude.

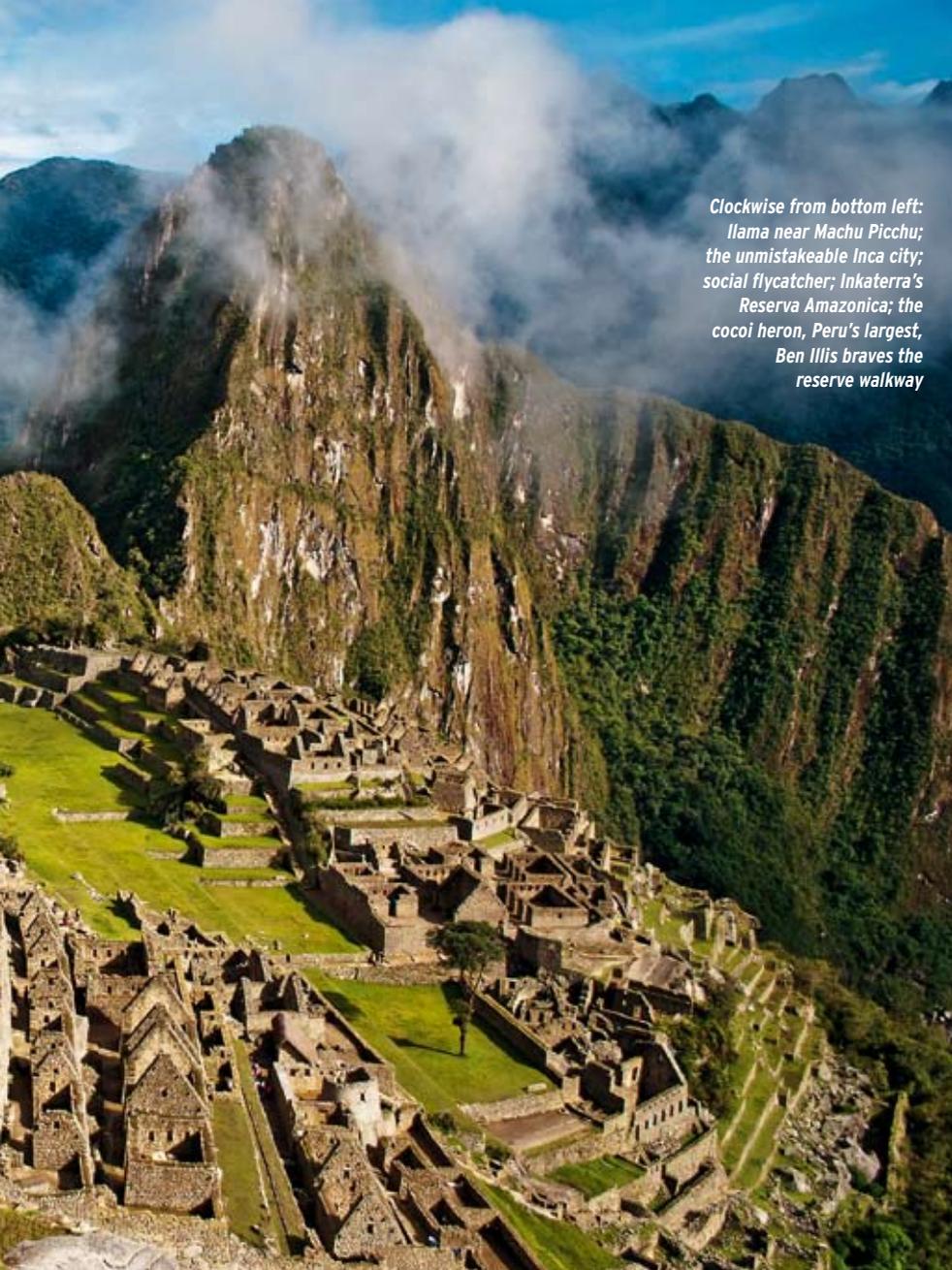
Day one is easy; counting species of hummingbird as I



**We take the bus to go birding at Machu Picchu. We arrive in cloud which, as we reach the summit, abruptly lifts**



Clockwise from bottom left: llama near Machu Picchu; the unmistakable Inca city; social flycatcher; Inkaterra's Reserva Amazonica; the cocoi heron, Peru's largest, Ben Illis braves the reserve walkway



© BEN ILLIS

sip my morning coffee and, as I stroll around the hotel's orchid gardens, observing a beautiful streamer-tailed, blue-crowned motmot. Along the railway, we catch a fleeting glimpse of the Peruvian national bird, the beautiful male Andean cock-of-the-rock.

## BEAR REHABILITATION

Inkaterra operates a conservation NGO called the Inkaterra Asociacion, which runs a spectacled bear rehabilitation programme in the grounds of the hotel. Rescued bears are slowly rehabilitated in progressively larger enclosures and encouraged to forage for their own food, before being released into the cloud forest. Education programmes seek to stop captive bears being used as tourist attractions. Recently, a female was released near here and a few days earlier she was seen, with cubs, just across the river from where I stand. We scan the trees for movement but nothing doing. Spectacled bears are largely arboreal, climbing to the highest boughs of the trees to gorge themselves on fruit. They move – and eat – fast and are notoriously difficult to track. Next time, I tell myself.

The following day we take the bus to go birding at Machu Picchu itself. We arrive in cloud which, as we reach the summit, abruptly lifts. All thoughts of birds leave me as I stare, mesmerised, drinking in this astonishing sight. I wander around the city, marvelling at the architecture and the way it echoes the peaks around it, seemingly drawing some primal energy from the landscape and bringing it into mystical focus. To call it merely a beautiful place is to do it an injustice. It is indescribably powerful. As we leave the citadel, a pair of endemic green and white hummingbirds flit around a flowering shrub, reminding me of my purpose.

Back at the lodge we convene for a final delicious



## BIRD BRAINS

How a birding rally is raising the prolife of Peru's wildlife

Billed as the World Cup of birding, the Birding Rally Challenge is the brainchild of Manuel Bryce, a former senior consultant to the Peruvian Ministry of Tourism, and his old friend Jose Koechlin, owner of the Inkaterra group of hotels and the eco-tourism outfit, ITA. The first BRC took place in November 2012 in the locations mentioned in this article, while the second followed a route from Chiclayo in the north, east through the dry forests of Cajamarca, across the spectacular and unique Marañon Valley into the Amazonas region and on to Tarapoto, capital of the jungle region of San Martín. Six teams of four birders from five nations,

including two of the authors of Princeton Press/Helm's seminal *Birds of Peru*, competed to spot as many different species as possible over the rally. The Louisiana State University's Tigrisomas took the first crown and retained their title over the British Forest Falcons, who took second place on both occasions. Other teams were the South African Zululanders, the Ararajubas of Brazil, the Catalan Tramuntanas and the American E-Birders. In the first rally, the Tigrisomas spotted 493 species in just six days, eclipsing that total with a magnificent 636 in eight days this year. The total species count on the first rally was over



700, while the second was an incredible 864. A huge success, the BRC serves to showcase not only the astonishing biodiversity of Peru, but also the country's rich cultural heritage, dramatically diverse landscapes and legendary hospitality.

