

El Encanto

A Refuge for

Colombia's

Enchanting

Endemics

NOTA DEL EDITOR: Para una traducción en español, visiten aba.org/birding/vojta2025

When I arrive at El Encanto Nature Reserve in January, I'm welcomed by abundant birds, a peaceful ambience, and the gracious presence of the reserve owners, the Molina Cruz family. Brilliant hummingbirds zip past me in the front flower garden, and later, the endemic Tolima Dove steps cautiously out of the shadows to gobble up kernels of corn. Located on the Colombian Massif (or *macizo*), where three branches of the Andes unite, El Encanto is currently one of the top birding hotspots in the department of Huila; it has 367 species listed on eBird. In fact, one-fourth of all bird species in Colombia have been recorded between El Encanto and the nearby La Drymophila Reserve, owned and managed by the same family. The two reserves shelter twenty species that are extremely rare or endemic to Colombia, which makes the pair of sites noteworthy destinations for bird enthusiasts and photographers from all over the world.

The delightful surroundings and astonishing biodiversity of these properties create the impression that the Molina Cruz family has always enjoyed an enviable life. In truth, the backstory is shadowed with pain, tragedy, and economic hardships; conditions that were only overcome by family togetherness and a special relationship with birds. What happened at El Encanto is a story worth knowing, and with permission from the Molina Cruz family, I will share it with you.

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• During 18 months of Covid lockdown, Michael Molina Cruz and his family planted over 2,000 trees on their property that are beneficial to birds. El Encanto Nature Reserve in Colombia. 18 Jan 2023. Photo © Christina D. Vojta.

In 1984, Melida Cruz (the current matron of the family) left her father's home to join her mother in another village. On the very day she arrived at her new home, the entire village was forced to flee due to approaching guerrillas who, in those days, roamed at will throughout that part of Colombia. For months afterwards, Melida and her step-siblings lived in a bamboo-framed mud hut, while her mother and stepfather did whatever they could to feed the family and keep them safe. Melida helped by gathering doves and songbirds from makeshift horsehair traps so her mother could sell them in the local market. The task upset her because she knew that each bird would either be killed for its feathers or kept in someone's cage until it died. She was old enough to understand, though, that her family needed every centavo to survive.

One day, among the captured honeycreepers and barbets, she discovered a bird that made her gasp in delight—a tanager with coppery-gold cheeks and a rusty belly, whose throat and flanks shimmered with an unbelievable shade of green. Not the deep green of coffee leaves or banana plants, but a soft green with hints of glittering blue. On the bird's wings and back, the same unearthly color glowed through bold streaks of black. Melida absorbed the bird's beauty as she unsnarled its gorgeous feathers from the horsehair. Then, she paused and contemplated the small creature.

"Fly away, pretty one. Fly away, and never find this trap again!" She lifted her arm, opened her palm, and watched the multi-colored ball of feathers flit away. It wasn't the first time she had released a bird, but it was to be her last. Mamá, who came into the garden at that moment, banned her from gathering any more captured birds and arranged that soon after, she would earn money by cooking meals for coffee pickers. Despite the arduous work of her new job, Melida never regretted her decision to grant freedom to that little bird. Many years later, when Melida was a wife and mother, the Golden-eared Tanager (*tángara pechirrufa* in Colombian Spanish), would reappear in her life. Then, roles would be reversed in a most extraordinary way.

Melida Cruz married Antonio Molina, a coffee picker with ambitions to own his own farm. In 1997, they bought 12 acres (5 ha) of land that sloped down to Río Guarapas; the property had abundant trees and a few livestock pastures. They cleared the forest and began to grow coffee out in the sun with little competition from other vegetation—in the same manner as their neighbors. Like the owners of other coffee fincas, they fought against numerous pests that always reduced their harvest, and most of their meager profits went toward paying off the mortgage.

Tragedy changed everything. Their first child, Helina, grew ill from leukemia and passed away when she was only five years old. The young girl had always adored wildlife and wild places, so Antonio and Melida made a conscious choice, in her honor, to adopt the permaculture style of coffee growing: They allowed the natural world to be part of their coffee plantation. Through the sowing of seeds and planting of saplings, they gradually restored their property, which they called "El Encanto" ("the enchanted place"), into a remarkable landscape with over 40 species of trees and many shrubs. Although Helina would never see the forest that her parents nurtured in her memory, the transformed land



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

● Antonio Molina has transformed himself from former coffee grower to "antpitta whisperer." As co-owner of El Encanto and La Drymophila nature reserves in Colombia's Huila department, he maintains scores of fruit, grain, and nectar feeders on a daily basis. 18 Jan 2023. Photo © Christina D. Vojta.

● Red-bellied Grackle is a striking Colombian endemic and a raucous member of the avifauna at La Drymophila Nature Reserve in Huila. 1 Apr 2022. Photo © Jhonnier Arango/TheAndeanBirder.

● Anyela Molina Cruz (right) is the chef of El Encanto and prepares exquisite cuisine for the lodge's guests. Here, she and her assistant, Aide Acosta Baos, have delivered field lunches to birders who set off from the lodge to reach La Drymophila Nature Reserve before dawn. Huila, Colombia. 18 Jan 2023. Photo © Christina D. Vojta.

● The East Andean Antbird (*Drymophila caudata*) had gone missing in the area for three years, but Michael Molina Cruz discovered a small, stable population on property he purchased near El Encanto. And, thus, La Drymophila Nature Reserve, named after the antbird, came into being. Huila, Colombia. 16 Jun 2024. Photo © Michael Molina Cruz.



LEFT TO RIGHT:

● Thirty years after Melida Cruz Beltrán released a Golden-eared Tanager from her mother's horsehair trap, the species changed her destiny by appearing on the property she and her husband owned. The tanager helped to boost their property from an obscure lodge to a top birding destination. El Encanto Nature Reserve offers birders up-close-and-personal views of this stunning species, which is usually glimpsed through leaves and it forages high in the forest canopy. El Encanto Nature Reserve, Colombia. 8 Sep 2022. *Photo © Michael Molina Cruz.*

● Antonio Cruz scatters grain at a blind that is regularly visited by White-bellied Antpitta in La Drymophila Nature Reserve, Huila, Colombia. 18 Jan 2023. *Photo © Christina D. Vojta.*

● The adorable Hooded Antpitta is nowhere seen more easily and better than at the feeders in La Drymophila Nature Reserve in Huila, Colombia. 16 Jun 2024. *Photo © Michael Molina Cruz.*

would have an enormous influence on the lives of the couple's two other children, Michael and Anyela.

Michael never wanted to be a coffee farmer. Like Helina, he felt a close connection with nature and spent much of his time exploring the forest around his home. He learned there were other ways to make a living when his parents decided to augment their income by offering lodging to travelers on their way to nearby Cueva de los Guácharos National Park. Along with lodging, the Molina Cruz family provided tours of their organic coffee farm. Their coffee production reached an all-time high in 2009, enabling them to build an extension to their house for more tourists.

Michael loved to hear the stories of biodiversity and interconnectedness that his father told their visitors. He watched with pride as their integrated approach to land stewardship enabled



the property to qualify as a nature reserve. In 2015, El Encanto officially became part of Colombia's National Network of Civil Society Nature Reserves, a collection of private properties purposefully managed, at least in part, as natural habitat. He was only 16 when he left home for the university in nearby Popayán to get a degree in ecotourism so he could take charge of that side of the family business.

Graduation never came. Despite their commitment to permaculture, the coffee plants were not completely protected from blights and plagues, and the family eventually fell into economic hardship when a region-wide plague destroyed their crops. Moreover, two years into Michael's degree program, his father lost an eye and needed help back home. The family lost its only other source of income when Cueva de los Guácharos National Park, which had been turned over to a

local concessionaire for management, closed its gates. Tourists no longer filled the rooms at El Encanto. On top of everything, his 14-year-old sister Anyela became pregnant.

Given the unpredictable income they gained from coffee farming, Michael suggested rebranding their farm as a birding destination. They had already promoted a high diversity of bird species by interplanting coffee with native vegetation and by setting up nectar and fruit feeders. To Michael, it was only a matter of advertising. Antonio, however, had made his living in the coffee business his entire life, and the idea of turning away from that livelihood seemed foolish.

Undeterred, Michael plowed forward. He bought an old pair of World War II binoculars and Steven Hilty's three-pound tome, *A Field Guide to the Birds of Colombia*. He began to look for birds around El Encanto and nearby

properties to find out which species were present. He created a Facebook page for El Encanto and posted photos of tanagers, honeycreepers, and other feathered beauties. The more he learned, the more he posted online, and gradually, a trickle of birders and photographers started to reserve the rooms that had been left empty by the national park closure. This new source of income enabled the family to hang onto their land, although it wasn't enough to get ahead.

Then came 2017, when for the first time, Colombia finally recorded the most species of birds in a single day on May 13: Global Big Day. Interest in Colombian birds immediately rose. Hoping to ride this wave of success, Michael, only 19 years old at the time, reached out to several ecotourism businesses and encouraged them to come to El Encanto. Nobody responded. Colombia was overflowing with







CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT:

- El Encanto Nature Reserve in Huila is the place to see Tolima Blossomcrown. This charming central Colombian endemic is often seen, as shown here, feeding from the flowers of porterweed (*Stachytarpheta sp.*). 7 Jun 2024. Photo © Michael Molina Cruz.

- Schwartz's Antthrush is one of twenty rare and/or endemic species that can be regularly seen at El Encanto and La Drymophila nature reserves, making this pair of sites beloved destinations for birders and photographers from around the world. La Drymophila Nature Reserve, Huila, Colombia. 26 Jan 2024. Photo © Jhonnier Arango/TheAndeanBirder.

- The near-threatened Dusky-headed Brushfinch is a Colombian endemic with an extremely restricted range in the southern Magdalena drainage. Like most *Atlapetes* brushfinches, it is often found well above the ground in tangles at the forest edge. This one was photographed in Huila on 12 Apr 2025. Photo © Phil Chaon.

- In order to keep up with the voracious appetites of two species of antpittas and the rare Schwartz's Antthrush at three active blinds, the Molina Cruz family raises its own worms, fed on compost from its kitchen. La Drymophila Nature Reserve, Huila, Colombia. 18 Jan 2023. Photo © Mike Malmquist.

toucans and tanagers, and the major tour operators didn't need to travel to a small nature reserve in the hills above the tiny town of Palestina to find them.

Then, a Golden-eared Tanager, the magical little bird that, 30 years earlier, Melida had released from capture, appeared at El Encanto during the darkest hours, almost as if to save the Molina Cruz family from financial ruin. In reality, the species had probably been flitting around El Encanto for a long time, but the first eBird record at the refuge was in 2015. Then, tanagers began to appear reliably and the lodge's feeders. El Encanto offered birders up-close-and-personal views of this stunning species, which is usually only glimpsed through leaves as it forages high in the forest canopy—if it is glimpsed at all.

Word spread among birders that El Encanto wasn't simply a nice place to visit, but an essential place for anyone who wanted to see a Golden-eared Tanager in Colombia. Moreover, Colombian-endemic species were discovered on the property: Tolima Dove and Dusky-headed Brushfinch, both of which had distributions scarcely larger than the surrounding mountains. Gradually, over the next two years, the trickle of birders and bird photographers became a steady flow.

The entire family began to hope for a future in birds. They cut back on coffee growing and maintained only enough production to serve and sell to guests. Antonio, freed from the labors of growing coffee, took on the responsibility of keeping bird feeders filled—a daunting task, because some feeders had to be filled several times a day. Melida continued her day-to-day tasks of managing the hotel side of their business. Michael, now a skilled birder, began to lead bird tours on the property.

Meanwhile, during the family crisis, Michael's sister Anyela gave birth to a darling boy, Martín. She had always helped prepare meals for guests, and now, with more clients than ever, she saw a niche for herself. After Martín no longer needed constant care, she attended culinary school and emerged as an accomplished chef, impressing her guests (including me) with attractive breakfasts, lavish lunches, and elaborate dinners. Her dishes were bursting with flavor and usually served with flower garnishes.

By 2019, it seemed that El Encanto could indeed become a successful upscale lodge for birders and photographers. The family was finally able to pay off the property, increase its savings, and plant over 2,000 trees that were beneficial to birds. Things were going so well that Michael began to dream of buying a new car—a Renault Duster, a high-clearance, four-by-four SUV that could navigate the steep dirt roads of the Andes.

He also had his eye on a sizable tract of forested land nearby. He had permission from the owner to bird there, and one day, in the

span of an hour, he was amazed to find over 80 species of birds around a single fig tree. At that moment, he vowed that if the property ever went up for sale, he would buy it for the sake of those birds. Forests were rapidly disappearing around them, and many parcels of land were being cleared for endless rows of dragon fruit. He'd recently witnessed the effects of habitat loss when a nearby bamboo forest had been cleared and burned to make room for a coffee plantation. It had been the only place where the rare East Andean [Long-tailed] Antbird was found locally, and despite months of searching adjacent areas, he never saw one again.

The property went up for sale right when Michael had saved enough money to buy the car of his dreams. "I had to make a decision," he told me. "Car for myself, or land for the birds." He smiled at the memory. "I chose land for the birds."

It wasn't long before he reaped the rewards of his decision. Almost as soon as he set foot on the forested property, he discovered an East Andean Antbird, the species he had thought had vanished from the local hills! Inadvertently, he had protected habitat for the very species he had looked for in vain for nearly three years. In honor of the tiny bird, he named the new property Reserva La Drymophila, after the antbird (*Drymophila caudata*).

But then, only a few months after using the bulk of the family's savings to buy the land, COVID-19 exploded around the world, and on 20 March 2020, all of Colombia went into lockdown. Originally, the national quarantine was set for three weeks, but as COVID continued its unstoppable spread, the decree was extended again and again, and El Encanto was unable to operate for 18 months. The Molina Cruz family found itself in the middle of not simply an economic crisis, but an existential one. They'd put all their energy and resources into ecotourism, and suddenly, there were no tourists. By then, they had more than their immediate family to feed—they had uncountable numbers of birds eating an astonishing amount of fruits, grain, and sugar water. They had to keep feeding the birds so they would still be around when the COVID lockdown was over and tourists returned, but it was impossible to know when that might happen. Their small farm didn't produce enough food for the birds, so they had to buy it, and that also meant buying gas to transport it. The family's savings quickly dissolved. In desperation, Michael set up websites to sell coffee online and to ask for donations through crowd-funding. He had no idea whether they could raise enough money to keep food on the table, let alone pay bills, but he felt he had to try.

What transpired was beyond the family's wildest dreams. Funds poured in from around the world, along with messages of encouragement. The crowdsourcing not only provided financial relief but also served as a resounding endorsement from birders, photographers, and friends that El Encanto was a highly significant nature reserve, and that the Molina Cruz family members were exemplary land stewards. Antonio, Melida, Michael, and Anyela sometimes broke into tears after reading words of support that came with the contributions. The family had been saved again—not by birds this time, but by birders who appreciated their dedication to preserving and fostering a high-quality birding environment.

With renewed hope that El Encanto would survive, the family used the lonely days of lockdown to further increase the biodiversity of their farm and to enhance its capacity for tourists. They continued to plant trees, improve guest rooms, record species, and feed birds. Michael posted photos



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

- Wood-quail are generally shy birds, but as with antpittas, feeders have changed the game. Chestnut Wood-Quail is endemic to Colombia and can be seen and photographed well, as shown here, at La Drymophila Nature Reserve in Huila. 26 Jan 2024. Photo © Jhonnier Arango/TheAndeanBirder.
- Each member of the Molina-Cruz family finds joy in the distinct contribution each of them brings to their business and home, El Encanto Nature Reserve. Antonio (far left) and Melida (fourth from left) bought the property in 1997. Antonio maintains all of the feeders while Melida runs the business side of the lodge. Their daughter Anyela (third from left) is the reserve's exquisite chef while their son Michael (second from right) is the marketing coordinator, media expert, and bird guide. Others in the photo are their support staff. Martín (front row) is Anyela's son and, with hope, the continuation of the reserve's future. El Encanto Nature Reserve, Colombia. 18 Jan 2023. Photo © Mike Malmquist.
- This dapper White-bellied Antpitta was photographed at the antpitta feeding station at La Drymophila Nature Reserve in Huila, Colombia on 16 Jun 2024. Photo © Michael Molina Cruz.



on Facebook of tanagers, orchids, and Anyela's amazing cuisine to make sure that El Encanto wasn't forgotten.

The newly purchased land, Reserva La Drymophila, became a pandemic project, too. Initially, the land wasn't suitable for ecotourism because it had no roads or trails. However, as Michael and other birders thrashed through brush to find what lived there, they discovered several other range-restricted species hiding within the thick foliage; among them are Schwartz's Antthrush, Hooded Antpitta, and Tolima Blossomcrown. Gradually, the family built trails and set up observation blinds for future guests.

Antonio, always hoping to lure in some of the sought-after species, began to sprinkle small quantities of grain and mealworms near the blinds on a daily basis. Tolima Dove was the first to arrive, but it took nearly 18 months for Schwartz's Antthrush and two species of antpitta to finally enter the clearings—a tribute to Antonio's perseverance. He also installed a suite of nectar feeders, and gradually, over the long months of the pandemic, he was rewarded with 16 species of hummingbirds, including Tolima Blossomcrown, Geoffroy's Daggerbill, and Violet-fronted Brilliant. The Molina Cruz family was finally ready to showcase Reserva La Drymophila when they reopened El Encanto in October 2021.

The family had not simply survived the pandemic; it had taken advantage of the quiet time to foster an intimate relationship with the birds. Family members learned vocalizations, habits, and habitats of a growing array of rare, endangered, and endemic species that are nearly unknown to the rest of the world. Moreover, they focused on how they might enhance the bird-viewing experience for guests, with more acreage, more viewing options, more guest rooms, and yes—more species to see.

When they reopened, they were ready to take their properties to new heights.

Today, El Encanto and La Drymophila are top birding destinations in Colombia. The original property at El Encanto currently has five rooms for guests and a restaurant capacity for 40 hungry travelers. Anyela busily prepares breakfasts for birders and photographers who want to leave for La Drymophila at dawn. Mouth-watering lunches fill the restaurant tables, while field lunches are neatly wrapped in the large leaves of *hoja santa*. Anyela's evening specialties, like *lazaña de platano* and *asado huilense*, are presented so beautifully that guests frequently take photos of their plates before eating.

The birds at El Encanto and La Drymophila provide a visual buffet of feathers in all shapes imaginable and across all colors of the rainbow. Forty species of hummingbirds have been documented across both reserves. Moreover, due to the careful placement of feeders and blinds, the lighting for photography is exquisite, even for the most secretive species.

Antonio's task of feeding birds is almost a full-time job. In the span of a week, the feathered community consumes 200 pounds of bananas, 55 pounds of corn, and over 4 pounds of mealworms, while hummingbirds slurp up nectar made from 25 pounds of sugar. Neighboring farms supply much of the needed produce, so they, too, have benefited from El Encanto's ecotourism.

Birds are not the only reason to visit El Encanto, however. The property



● The view from El Encanto Nature Reserve in Huila, Colombia. 1 Sep 2024. Photo © Roger Rodríguez Ardila.

now has over 70 documented species of trees and at least 200 species of orchids that are, in themselves, an attraction for visitors. The walk down to the river is a delight for everyone. At La Drymophila, visitors often spot brown capuchins (*Sapajus apella*) and other monkeys, too.

The best part of both reserves, though, is the people who make up the Molina Cruz family. Their happiness is as natural as the song of the antbird, and everyone who comes to El Encanto can't help but feel part of it. After hearing their story, I know that one source of their joy is the experience of having gone through dark days and emerging

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stronger and better. Moreover, each member of the family finds individual pleasure in making a distinct contribution to the synergistic whole. There's another component to their happiness, though, that touches on the spiritual. It's the joy that springs from not simply living on the land, but living *within* it. The Molina Cruz family has enriched the natural community around them and become an integral part of it. They are as dependent on the birds as the birds are dependent on them. This relationship is the very essence of interconnectedness—the survival of individuals and species due to

reciprocal exchanges with other individuals and species. Through planting trees and offering food, the biodiversity they foster and nurture provides them with a livelihood that will carry them well into the future.

Before leaving El Encanto, I saunter out toward the back patio for a final glimpse of whatever birds might be at the feeders. On the way, I pass the miniature gift shop, where Melida is wearing a radiant smile with a row of coffee mugs in front of her, each printed with one of Michael's artistic renditions of special birds that are part of their lives. I walk past the kitchen

and catch a whiff of savory aromas and glimpse Anyela and her assistant preparing the day's lunch. She looks up and greets me by name, an impressive feat in a lodge full of guests. Antonio is taking photos of birds surrounding the empty fruit feeders while restocking them with bananas and papayas. Michael is there, too, and as I approach, he smiles and points to a feeder where a Golden-eared Tanager had just landed. I watch the bird flash its golden ear coverts as it neatly folds in its green-and-black wings. I can't say for sure, but the bird seems to be looking right at Michael. It's a beautiful sight to see. 📸



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