



Bird watching for peace in Colombia



Birds are seen in Planadas, Tolima department, Colombia.



As a bird perches on a telegraph pole, two young girls are deep in consultation—is it “*Tiranus melancholicus*,” or perhaps “*Pyrocephalus rubinus*?” The answer is “*rubinus*,” a sparrow with a bright red breast. In the center of Colombia, among the leafy mountains of Planadas, this ornithological debate by indigenous children might seem surprising. With their eyes scanning the mountain, around 30 people, adults and children, are taking part in a day of bird watching. The initiative aims to promote peace in Tolima, a department ravaged by the war waged by the Marxist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) for a half century against the state.

Five years after an historic peace deal brought that conflict to an end, Planadas has rediscovered calm, although some war scars remain. “The birds are an excuse for us to mix,” said Camilo Enciso, founder of the ASOPEP association for ecological producers in Planadas, which promotes the bird watching project. Among those present are the children of former FARC guerrillas, whose parents live in a “reincorporation” camp helping them adapt back to civilian life. There are also members of the Nasa indigenous community that long served as auxiliaries to the army, and peasant families that suffered the brunt of the conflict’s violence.

At peace with nature

At the start of the day, people greet each other, but mix little. Then the walk begins and everyone’s gaze drifts skywards. Colorful birds perched on branches soon capture every-

one’s attention, sparking discussions and warming hearts. “What happens here is unique,” said Diego Calderon, an ornithologist who has come to support the project. “Being at peace with nature helps us to be at peace with ourselves and others,” added Calderon, a FARC hostage in 2004. “Watching birds allows inhabitants to see their territory differently, all the while promoting its ecological and



A bird is seen in Planadas.

tourist value.”

“Before I killed humming birds with my blowpipe to eat. Now I look at them with my children who learn about the richness of our gardens and forests,” said Justiniano Paya, a Nasa leader. Neira, a 32-year-old mother of two and former FARC member, admits to having “difficulties” adapting to civilian life but says this “experience is very gratifying.” “Birds connect us, they teach us to protect what we have here,” she added. “Reconciliation is being built step by step,” said Mayra Luz Ruiz Nedira, a project manager at ASOPEP.