

Guyana: South America's overlooked birding destination

Chris Collins

Guyana does not feature on many Neotropical birders' radar as a key destination, but the country has developed an ecotourist infrastructure and has lots of birdlife to offer the visitor.



The stunning Ferruginous-backed Antbird *Myrmeciza ferruginea* (male pictured) occurs at a number of sites in northern Guyana (Nick Athanas)

Introduction

For many birders contemplating their next trip to or within the Neotropics, one country rarely considered as a possible destination is Guyana. With no endemics and a national list of 'only' 900 species, this South American country is one of the least visited by birders. Given that Guyana is relatively small (with an area marginally less than that of the UK), English-speaking and has vast tracts of untouched rainforest, this situation is somewhat surprising. All the more so because of the quality of the birds which can be seen on a relatively short visit.

Indeed, when I visited Guyana in November 2006 as part of a small group, we were impressed by both the number of species we saw in a little over a week (370) and their 'quality'. Many of the species we encountered would feature high on many a Neotropical birder's 'most wanted' list. As the country also offers some great places to stay, spectacular scenery and one of the best canopy platforms in the continent, it certainly deserves more attention from the birding community than it currently receives.

Birding logistics

Unlike countries such as Ecuador, where there are now a considerable number of accommodation options and it is possible for the visitor to hire a vehicle and set off with little or nothing booked in advance, birders visiting Guyana are strongly advised to make advance arrangements, as there are relatively few lodging options at the key sites and prior bookings are needed for most, if not all, of these.

For those on a relatively tight schedule, internal scheduled or charter flights can also be organised (through, e.g., www.roraimaairways.com) and whilst these are not always particularly cheap, they do offer extremely rapid access to prime birding habitats. One problem many birders may experience with the scheduled flights, however, is that the standard baggage allowance is only about 10 kg per person, although additional weight can generally be reserved in advance for a comparatively low cost.

Accommodation bookings can either be made directly with individual lodges (see below) or via a local tour operator who can also arrange internal/charter flights and guides (although our experience suggested that there are currently only a few good in-country birding guides).

During our visit, logistical arrangements were organised by Wilderness Explorers

www.wilderness-explorers.com. We can recommend this local company, although alternative options are available.

Birding sites

With so few visitors going to Guyana, access to certain parts of the country, such as the Guianan Tepuis, is currently extremely difficult. However, we visited the coastal strip and central interior and these offer great birding. The following provides a brief summary of some of our experiences.

Botanical Gardens, Georgetown

Despite being only a short taxi-ride from downtown Georgetown and covering less than 50 ha, the Botanical Gardens are well worth a visit as this is one of the best sites in the country to look for the localised Blood-coloured Woodpecker *Veniliornis sanguineus*. Found only in the coastal lowlands of the Guianas and Suriname this bird is reasonably reliable at the Botanical Gardens, despite the somewhat urban surroundings.

Other species which can be seen include Pinnated Bittern *Botaurus pinnatus*, Brown-throated Parakeet *Aratinga pertinax*, Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus*, Golden-spangled Piculet *Picumnus exilis*, White-bellied Piculet *P. spilogaster*, Black-crested Antshrike *Sakesphorus canadensis*, Spotted Tody-Flycatcher *Todirostrum maculatum* and Wing-barred Seedeater *Sporophila americana*. Although a number of macaw species are also present, it is thought that at least some of these originate from escaped cagebirds.

Entry to the Botanical Gardens is free and the gates open at 6am. Early morning visits are recommended as the area can become relatively busy later in the day, especially at weekends.

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Iwokrama Rainforest Reserve

This protected area in Central Guyana covers almost half a million ha of forest. For many, it was the highlight of our trip. Access is possible by road (partly dirt) from Georgetown, but the journey is over 330 km and can take upwards of eight hours, so an internal or charter flight is a good idea. Depending on your itinerary, a number of airstrips can be used and by flying into one and out of another, the amount of time spent travelling can be reduced to a bare minimum.

During our visit, we stayed at four locations (the Iwokrama Forest Field Station, Atta Rainforest Camp Lodge, Rockview Lodge and Surama Eco-lodge). All are within a couple of hours of each other, and if time allows it is undoubtedly worth birding the majority, or even all.

The Iwokrama Forest Field Station (www.iwokrama.org) and the Atta Rainforest Camp Lodge (www.iwokramacanopywalkway.com) are both situated within the reserve and allow immediate access to great birding habitat. The Field Station has comfortable cabins with private facilities. At the Rainforest Camp, the only option was to sleep in hammocks or 'camping cots' under a corrugated roof. There are, however, plans to upgrade the facilities (apparently to a series of private rooms). For those who prefer to avoid Atta's somewhat basic sleeping arrangements, both the Surama Eco-lodge and Rockview Lodge provide excellent alternatives with comfortable accommodation at both.

Iwokrama Forest Field Station

Built in a forest clearing by the río Essequibo, the Field Station is a research centre that also provides visitor accommodation. A number of trails lead directly into the forest from the clearing itself and we saw Black Nunbird *Monasa atra*, Chestnut-rumped Woodcreeper *Xiphorhynchus pardalotus*, Amazonian Antshrike *Thamnophilus amazonicus*, Brown-bellied Antwren *Myrmotherula gutturalis*, Spot-tailed Antwren *Herpsilochmus sticturus* and Todd's Antwren *H. stictocephalus*.

Nearby, we saw Spotted Puffbird *Bucco tamatia*, Guianan Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola rupicola*, Green Aracari *Pteroglossus viridis*, Guianan Toucanet *Selenidera culik*, Guianan Red Cotinga *Phoenicircus carnifex*, Pompadour Cotinga *Xipholena punicea* and Rufous-crowned Elaenia *Elaenia ruficeps*.

This area also holds three species of considerable interest to the Neotropical birder, namely White-winged Potoo *Nyctibius*

leucopterus, Rufous Potoo *N. bracteatus* and Rufous-winged Ground-cuckoo *Neomorphus rufipennis*. Whilst we did not have any luck with seeing these three, the potoos are reputed to be not uncommon in the area, so it may be worth synchronising a visit with the full moon (allegedly the best time to look for these birds).

Atta Rainforest Camp Lodge

This lodge provides access to what is without doubt one of Guyana's great ornithological highlights, the Iwokrama Canopy Walkway. Unlike many of the canopy platforms in Ecuador, Peru, Brazil etc which are generally constructed around a single emergent tree, this walkway links several trees by suspension bridges and has five separate platforms.

Although not all platforms offer uninterrupted views over the canopy, it is well worth spending as long as possible on the 150 m long walkway. During our two visits we notched up an impressive list of species including Painted Parakeet *Pyrrhura picta*, Rufous-throated Sapphire *Hylocharis sapphirina*, the recently split Guianan Puffbird *Notharchus macrorhynchos*, Green Aracari *Pteroglossus viridis*, Waved Woodpecker *Celeus undatus*, Pygmy Antwren *Myrmotherula brachyura*, Guianan Streaked-Antwren *M. surinamensis*, Spot-tailed Antwren *Herpsilochmus sticturus*, Todd's Antwren *H. stictocephalus*, Dusky Purpletuft *Iodopleura fusca*, Purple-breasted Cotinga *Cotinga cotinga*, and Buff-cheeked Greenlet *Hylophilus muscicapinus*.

For those frustrated by back-breaking views of *Herpsilochmus* antwrens usually more than 30 m up, the Canopy Walkway certainly offers a unique opportunity to study these birds at point blank range. We had great looks at both Spot-tailed and Todd's Antwrens.

Despite a major temptation to spend all of one's time up in the canopy, birding the forest around both the Lodge and the base of the walkway is highly recommended. In the comparatively short time we were there, we saw Black-throated Antshrike *Frederickena viridis*, Crimson Fruitcrow *Haematoderus militaris* and Red-and-black Grosbeak *Periporphyrus erythromelas*. The area around the lodge is a great place to see the usually timid Black Curassow *Crax alector*, as at least one family party has become habituated and regularly feeds in the clearing.



Described by Hilty² as “a genuine rarity”, the Black-faced Hawk *Leucopternis melanops* can be found in the Iwokrama Reserve (Nick Athanas)



Caica Parrot *Gypopsitta caica* is a relatively uncommon resident in the Iwokrama Reserve (Nick Athanas)



Waved Woodpecker *Celeus undatus* (female pictured) is not uncommon in parts of the Iwokrama Reserve and was regularly seen from the canopy walkway at Atta Rainforest Camp Lodge (Nick Athanas)



Brown-throated Parakeet *Aratinga pertinax* is relatively common in drier habitats around Iwokrama (Chris Collins)



Spotted Puffbird *Bucco tamatia* is relatively numerous around Iwokrama (Nick Athanas)



At Iwokrama Reserve and Kaieteur Falls, local people take visitors to one of several leks of the spectacular male Guianan Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola rupicola* (Nick Athanas)



Recent work³ has elevated the Guianan Streaked-Antwren *Myrmotherula surinamensis* (male pictured) to full species rank (Chris Collins)



Male Todd's Antwren *Herpsilochmus stictocephalus* differs from Spot-tailed Antwren *Herpsilochmus sticturus* in the white spots on its forehead, although these can be hard to see. Both species can be seen at Iwokrama Forest Field Station and Atta Rainforest Camp Lodge. The latter's canopy walkway provides a close vantage point (Chris Collins)



Despite its fairly extensive South American range, the Bearded Tachuri *Polystictus pectoralis* remains poorly known in northern South America. It is, however, not uncommon in savanna near Karanambu (Chris Collins)



Red Siskin *Carduelis cucullata* (male pictured) is globally Endangered, having suffered a very rapid population decline as a result of trapping for the cage-bird trade. It can be found near Dadanawa Ranch (Mark Robbins)

Rock View Lodge

Although only an hour or so south-west of the Iwokrama Reserve, the habitat around Rock View is very different from the Field Station and Atta Rainforest Camp, as this lodge nestles at the base of the foothills of the Pakaraima mountains on the edge of the vast Rupununi savanna.

The change in vegetation means there is a very different set of birds to look for and it is possible to access both the grasslands and nearby forested hills. During a brief visit to these habitats, we saw Double-striped Thick-knee *Burhinus bistriatus*, Green-tailed Jacamar *Galbula galbula*, Spotted Puffbird, White-bellied Antbird *Myrmeciza longipes* and Finsch's Euphonia *Euphonia finschi*.

For those keen on their 'creature comforts' even when in isolated locations, Rock View is certainly a very pleasant place to stay, with great food and the added luxury of a swimming pool! Further information can be found on the lodge's website (www.rockviewlodge.com), although, at the time of writing, some sections were badly out of date.

Like many of the lodges mentioned in this article, Rock View has a nearby airstrip which we used as our access point to Central Guyana.

Karanambu Ranch

About 40 km south-west of Rock View Lodge is the renowned Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* rehabilitation centre at Karanambu Ranch. This has several cabañas where visitors are able to stay. For birders coming from the Iwokrama area, one option is to travel the latter part of this journey by motorised canoe along the Rupununi River. Whilst this takes 2–3 hours, it is an excellent way to look for river-edge species which, at dawn or dusk, could include Crestless Curassow *Mitu tomentosa*.

Karanambu Ranch has good access to nearby gallery forest and grassland savanna. During our visit we saw a number of species which we did not

see elsewhere on the trip, including great views of Capuchinbird *Perissocephalus tricolor*. This bizarre-looking cotinga leks a short distance from the lodge, and the recommended local bird guide, Ken Mandoo, knows exactly where to find it.

In the nearby savanna, we saw several Bearded Tachuri *Polystictis pectoralis* (Near Threatened) but had no luck with Crestless Curassow. This species inhabits riverine gallery forest, but is wary (unlike the habituated Black Curassows at Atta Rainforest Camp).

As well as the rehabilitating Giant Otters, Karanambu's mammalian attractions include Giant Anteaters *Myrmecophaga tridactyla*. Although apparently not uncommon in the nearby grasslands, they are prone to wander extensively. If you wish to search for them, it is advisable to make an advance request to enable the lodge to arrange for a local guide to track one down in advance of your arrival.

Kaieteur Falls

Although this site is primarily visited by day-trippers who fly in to see the truly spectacular 228 m-high Kaieteur Falls (the world's highest free-falling waterfall), this locality is also a reasonable birding site. It can be visited as a pre-arranged 'request stop' by those travelling by charter flight between Georgetown and other birding locations such as Iwokrama.

As well as a reasonably accessible Guianan Cock-of-the-rock lek, other species which can be found here include both White-chinned *Cypseloides cryptus* and White-tipped Swifts *Aeronautes montivagus*. We were fortunate to have good views of an Orange-breasted Falcon *Falco deiroleucus* hunting swifts, and others have suggested that this species may be moderately reliable at this site.

Although there was no accommodation available at the time of our visit, one of the park buildings is to be converted to allow small groups to stay. For those keen to do this, we suggest contacting one of the local ground operators for an update.

Other options

With so few birders in and visiting Guyana, large parts of the country are rarely visited. For those keen to add to our knowledge of Neotropical birds, Guyana certainly offers the potential for making interesting discoveries.

For example, in 2000, the Endangered Red Siskin *Carduelis cucullata* was discovered near to

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the Dadanawa Ranch in south-west Guyana, almost 1,000 km from the nearest known locality in Venezuela¹. The population here is thought to be several thousand birds. With a highly fragmented distribution and ongoing trapping for the cage bird trade, this 'new' population is of key importance for the conservation of this species. Fortunately, the owners are keen to help protect this species and have guides who can help visiting birders look for it.

Other birds in the vicinity of the Dadanawa include the Near Threatened Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja* which is known to nest nearby. For those keen on large mammals, this area is said to have a healthy population of both Jaguar *Panthera onca* and Tapir *Tapirus terrestris*.

Information on visiting this site can be obtained from a Guianan-based ground agent or from the lodge's website (www.dadanawaranch.com).

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