

Caño Colorado: a lowland tropical forest in north-east Venezuela

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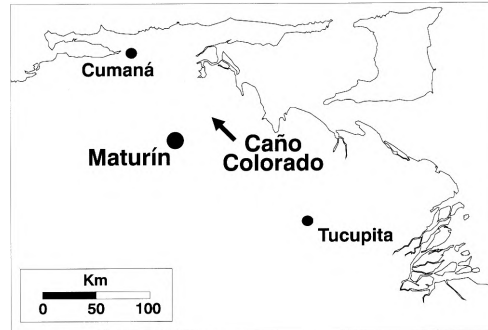
Resumen

La selva tropical en el nor-este de Venezuela no ha sido estudiada profundamente. El autor describe un sitio en el nor-este del estado Monagas, Caño Colorado, donde ha observadas unas 220 especies de aves, de las cuales unos 40 no habien sido observadas antes en el estado Monagas, y 16 especies son nuevos para el nor-este de Venezuela. Se puede considerar la selva de esta region como una extension en el norte de las selvas Guayanan al otro lado del Orinoco. Se puede esperar que esta isla de selva en el norte tenga vida endemica, tal como por ejemplo el Telegrafista Punteado *Picumnus nigropunctatus* en el caso de las aves. El tipo de selva que se encuentra en Caño Colorado es principalmente *varzea*, y muchos especies observadas son tipicos pro este habitat. El sitio en peligro por la expansion de las plantaciones de palmas para la extraccion de aceite, y urge determinar el tamaño de estas selvas para poder tomar acciones para preservar una parte importante de las mismas en el nor-este de Venezuela.

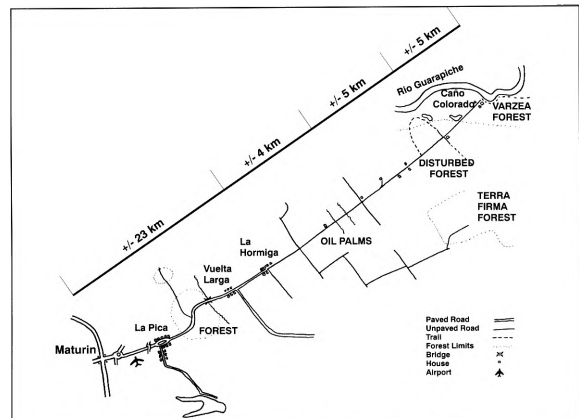
Introduction

Venezuela is widely known as an ornithological paradise. Many birders get their first Neotropical experience in north-western Venezuela, and yet remarkably few have made it to the north-east. Any visits are generally brief and limited to the Oilbird *Steatornis caripensis* cave in Caripe, or a search for the Paria endemics in the coastal mountains. To many, it will come as a surprise that north-east Venezuela contains tropical lowland forest. There is some evidence for the occurrence of tropical forest species in the state of Sucre¹, but Monagas state seems completely unexplored.

The aim of this article is to introduce a tract of tropical forest in north-east Monagas which harbours some interesting



Map 1: Caño Colorado, north-east Venezuela



Map 2: Caño Colorado (Peter Boesman)

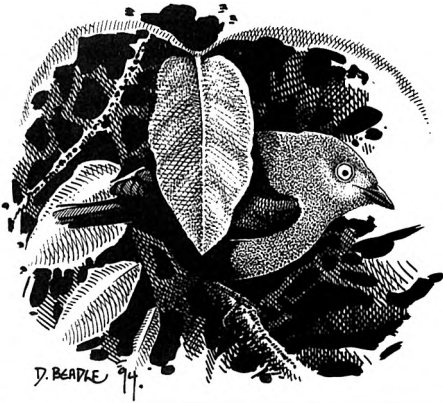
species. As access is relatively easy, it might be worthwhile including the site in Venezuelan birding itineraries, especially as it lies on route from Caripe or the Paria peninsula to the state of Bolívar in the south.

Description of the area

The area is known as Caño Colorado and is located east of Maturín, the capital of Monagas (Map 1). When taking the road to La Pica, which passes the airport of Maturín, the road becomes unpaved after some 23 km. Caño Colorado proper begins at this point (Map 2). Around 20 years ago the area was mainly forested and was included within the "Reserva Forestal

Guarapiche". Unfortunately, when the cultivation of African oil-palms made the area economically valuable, deforestation began (a legitimate activity within a "reserva forestal"). At present, the first 9 km of dirt road passes through degraded habitat, primarily comprising oil-palm plantations. Further on, the forest becomes increasingly intact. There are many side roads along which other patches of good forest can presumably be reached.

The whole area is below 20 m altitude and in the wet season (June–September) the last 8 km of the main road is inaccessible by car.



Crimson-hooded Manakin *Pipra aureola* (David D. Beadle)

At this time, large areas of forest are flooded (i.e. várzea), whilst terra firme is restricted to raised areas. The várzea is characterised by a relatively open understory, a low canopy and (especially from the caño onwards) many natural palms. Caño Colorado is probably representative of the large area of intact habitat that still exists behind the mangroves and swamps lining the coast of Sucre and Delta Amacuro (Fig. 1).

Birding the Caño Colorado

A wide variety of species can be seen in the deforested area and along forest borders where observation is easier, but many of the more interesting species occur only in continuous forest. A morning walk down the main track normally produces 90–100 bird species, which is remarkable for a forested area north of the Orinoco with one basic habitat at one altitude.

Several larger forest species are still present despite hunting pressure from the "campesinos". One can walk for hours, however, without seeing anybody, which makes

birding a delight. From July 1993 to August 1994, I made some 20 visits to the area, mainly in the dry season, and observed a total of 220 species. Of these, no less than 40 (18%) are not mentioned by Meyer de Schauensee & Phelps¹ for Monagas state, and 16 species are new for north-eastern Venezuela. The area undoubtedly holds many more species as I averaged five new species for the local checklist on each of my last five visits.

Birding is best from just before dawn until 10h00, at which time it begins to get too hot. Access is easy from January to April, but during the wet season the area is virtually impenetrable as grass grows to head-height, and water reaches a depth of 30–80 cm in the flooded forest.

Typical birds

Caño Colorado can be considered part of the northernmost extension of the Guayanian tropical forests. This forest in eastern Sucre, north-eastern Monagas and northern Delta Amacuro is somewhat isolated because of the Orinoco delta, and thus it is neither surprising that several Guayanian/Amazonian species reach their northernmost limit there, nor that the majority of Guayanian/Amazonian species do not range as far north (due to the barrier effect of the Río Orinoco).

As a consequence of the area's partial isolation, one might expect some degree of endemism, which is indeed the case, though primarily at the subspecific level. An interesting example is Black-dotted Piculet *Picumnus (spilogaster) nigropunctatus* which is only known from this general area. As this forest is essentially unvisited by collectors, it potentially holds a number of undescribed taxa.

A list of typical Guayanian/Amazonian species which have been observed at Caño Colorado, at the northern limit of their distribution, is presented in Table 1. It is clear from this list that the occurrence of many of these species so far north was not previously realised. As many Guayanian/Amazonian birds are not present, however, it appears that other birds not usually associated with this type of habitat have colonised or remained in the area because of the lack of competition. As examples, it is surprising to find Red-legged Tinamou *Crypturellus erythropus* in várzea forest substituting for Undulated Tinamou *C. undulatus* and Variegated Tinamou *C.*

variegatus. The same is true for Russet-throated Puffbird *Hypnelus ruficollis* (replacing *Bucco* puffbirds), Rufous-and-white Wren *Thryothorus rufalba* (replacing Coraya Wren *T. coraya*) and Golden-fronted Greenlet *Hylophilus aurantiifrons* (for Buff-cheeked Greenlet *H. muscicapinus*). The replacement species are normally confined to much drier habitats. Additionally, because of recent deforestation, several species typical of savanna or llanos-type habitat have colonised the more open areas.

The following annotated list comprises species that are difficult to observe in other parts of Venezuela, or whose presence at Caño Colorado constitutes a notable range-extension. It also reveals that the typical birds of Caño Colorado are characteristic of várzea forest, humid forest and woodland edge, i.e. the habitats prevalent at this site.

Blue-throated Piping-guan *Pipile cumanensis* A single record along the forest edge constitutes an important range-extension. Preferring river-edge, this species probably occurs east of Caño Colorado up to Pedernales, only 15 km from Trinidad. The distributional proximity of this species to Trinidad Piping-guan *P. pipile* is a new and intriguing discovery.

Blue-and-yellow Macaw *Ara ararauna* This beautiful macaw is still present in good numbers, and several small groups (normally of 2-3 birds, but up to 20) can be seen daily. They are mainly observed in early morning and late afternoon in the dry season, when flying to and from their roosts. Along the furthest part of the main track they are frequently encountered feeding in the canopy.

Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlet *Touit huetti* This small parrot is relatively common, though mainly in the wet season, when Lilac-tailed Parrotlet *T. batavica* is also common. Largest numbers included flocks of c.30 birds in early morning flights of Psittacidae. This species is rarely observed in Venezuela and is apparently uncommon and local throughout its large range.

Black-dotted Piculet *Picumnus (spilogaster) nigropunctatus* This is a common bird at Caño Colorado, with observations of up to 15 birds/day in the dry season. It is present in all habitats, though mainly at forest borders. It is difficult to believe that until

recently this (sub)species was known from only two sites in Delta Amacuro, and the female plumage was undescribed. It has now also been found in north-eastern Sucre and around Tucupita, Delta Amacuro (S. Hilty pers. comm.), although Caño Colorado is one of the easiest places to see this (sub)species, the range of which is from central Delta Amacuro to north-eastern Monagas and eastern Sucre. Although recently lumped with White-bellied Piculet *P. spilogaster*, it probably deserves full species status.

Ringed Woodpecker *Celeus torquatus* Uncommon and far outnumbered by Cream-coloured Woodpecker *C. flavus* and Chestnut Woodpecker *C. elegans*, which are both exceptionally common. *C. torquatus* is uncommon everywhere and Caño Colorado is the most northerly site in its known range.

Striped Woodcreeper *Xiphorhynchus obsoletus* This is another interesting northward range extension. This species is relatively common, especially along the furthest part of the track because of its preference for várzea forest and swamps.

Jet Antbird *Cercomacra nigricans* One of the typical, common antbirds of Caño Colorado, being much commoner than at most other Venezuelan sites.

Black-chinned Antbird *Hypocnemoides melanopogon* and Silvered Antbird *Sclateria naevia* Interestingly, this Guayanan/Amazonian species pair both occur at Caño Colorado. Their affinity for várzea forest and swampy habitats presumably facilitated the crossing of the Orinoco delta.



Black-chinned Antbird *Hypocnemoides melanopogon* (David D. Beadle)

Crimson-hooded Manakin *Pipra aureola* The only manakin observed at Caño Colorado, where it is common. There are several leks along the main track, but not on the furthest swampy stretches.

Yellow-crowned Elaenia *Myiopagis flavivertex* This species is common, especially in the wet season when it can be heard everywhere in the forest. In Venezuela it has only previously been recorded from Delta Amacuro and Amazonas.

Cinnamon Attila *Attila cinnamomeus* There is probably no other area in Venezuela where this species is so abundant and easily observed. Singing birds can be heard all day, but mainly at dawn.

Velvet-fronted Grackle *Lamprosar tanagrinus* A very common bird of the area, and one which is difficult to see elsewhere in Venezuela.

The future

The area is, as previously stated, under serious threat from the expansion of oil-palm plantations. If this expansion continues it can be expected that the whole area up to Caño Colorado will be transformed within 20 years. It seems important that a representative portion is preserved. In order to take the appropriate conservation action, there is an urgent need to investigate the extent and quality of these northern tropical forests. This study has shown how little was previously known about the region. It also indicates that much is left to discover, including the probable presence of endemic taxa as yet undescribed.

Table 1: Typical Guayanan/ Amazonian species occurring at Caño Colorado

(* formerly not known from Monagas; ** formerly not known from north-east Venezuela)

Greater Yellow-headed Vulture
*Cathartes melambrotus***
Blue-throated Piping-guan
*Pipile cumanensis***
Grey-winged Trumpeter
Psophia crepitans
Blue-and-yellow Macaw
Ara ararauna
White-eyed Parakeet
Aratinga leucophthalmus
Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlet
Touit huetti
Golden-winged Parakeet
Brotogeris chrysopterus
Black-headed Parrot
*Pionites melanocephala**

Reddish Hermit
*Phaethornis ruber***
White-chested Emerald
Amazilia chionopectus
Plain-bellied Emerald
*Amazilia leucogaster***
Long-billed Starthroat
*Heliomaster longirostris**
Black-necked Aracari
Pteroglossus aracari
Channel-billed Toucan
*Ramphastos vitellinus**
Red-billed Toucan
Ramphastos tucanus
Ringed Woodpecker
*Celeus torquatus***
Cream-coloured Woodpecker
Celeus flavus
Chestnut Woodpecker
Celeus elegans
Golden-collared Woodpecker
*Veniliornis cassini***
Striped Woodcreeper
*Xiphorhynchus obsoletus***
Curve-billed Scythebill
*Campylorhamphus procurviroides***
White-flanked Antwren
*Myrmotherula axillaris***
Black-chinned Antbird
*Hypocnemoides melanopogon***
Silvered Antbird
*Sclateria naevia**
Crimson-hooded Manakin
Pipra aureola
Drab Water-tyrant
*Ochthornis littoralis***
Cinnamon Attila
*Attila cinnamomeus**
Greyish Mourner
*Rhtipterna simplex***
Cinereous Mourner
*Laniocera hypopyrrha***
Rufous-tailed Flatbill
*Ramphotricon ruficauda***
Short-tailed Pygmy-tyrant
*Myiornis ecaudatus**
Yellow-crowned Elaenia
*Myiopagis flavivertex***
Turquoise Tanager
*Tangara mexicana**
Green Oropendola
Psarocolius viridis
Velvet-fronted Grackle
Lamprosar tanagrinus

Reference

- Meyer de Schauensee, R. & Phelps, W. (1978) *A guide to the birds of Venezuela*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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