

Brazil's northern frontier sites: in search of two Rio Branco endemics

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Introduction

The development of Brazil's frontier areas is opening up many hitherto unexplored sites where significant ornithological discoveries can be made. An unsuccessful attempt to explore the area around Boa Vista, Roraima, in 1987 led to a follow-up visit in July 1992 by the author, Eleanor Forrester and Dave Willis from the U.K. and Davis Finch from the U.S.A. The main intention of the visit was to search for two of the area's endemics, the Rio Branco Antbird *Cercomacra carbonaria* and Hoary-throated Spinetail *Poecilurus kollari*. On the same trip part of the state of Amapá was also explored.

Logistics

The poorly developed infrastructure of this region would seem to pose problems for the visitor. It can be extremely difficult to hire a roadworthy vehicle, gasoline may be difficult to acquire and food and accommodation can only be found on an *ad hoc* basis. However, all of these difficulties can be overcome; indeed, in these frontier areas it is the local custom for inhabitants to offer accommodation, gasoline etc. to all travellers, otherwise travel for anyone in these remote areas would prove impossible.

Locating the Rio Branco Antbird and Hoary-throated Spinetail

The road out of Boa Vista to the Venezuelan border was travelled until a right hand track was followed towards Contão (see map). Two days of field observations in various habitats around the Rio Cotingo and the Rio Urucury yielded no records of either species although interesting sightings in a Brazilian context were made (see below). Finally, the track south-east towards Bonfim was taken and near the border with Guyana, a stop at a bridge over the Rio Tacutu at Conceição do Maú produced a pair of *P. kollari* in seasonally flooded forest with dense thickets.

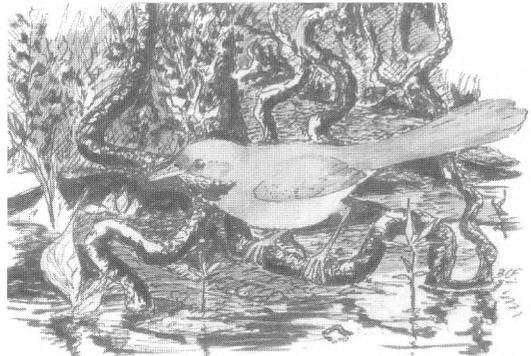
Returning to Boa Vista, *C. carbonaria* was

located by taking a boat up-river to the Ilha São José, a distance of about 10 km. There, in overhanging gallery forest on the island it proved possible to lure several individuals into view using tape play-back.

Notes on the two species

Hoary-throated Spinetail *P. kollari*

This sparsely recorded species was previously known from four skins collected in the 1830s along the Rio Branco, and records up to the mid-1950s along the Rios Cotingo and Surumu¹. It was thought to resemble White-whiskered Spinetail *P. candei* from the arid north of Venezuela and Colombia³ and our field observations confirmed this. The two species closely resemble each other, the main differences being the rufous crown and ear-coverts, brownish-grey forehead and lores, speckled malar stripe and bright rufous tail of *kollari*. The individuals observed foraged close to ground level in dense thickets and vines but ventured higher when agitated. This would appear to be the first record of *P. kollari* since 1956 when it was recorded from the Rio Surumu (a tributary of the lower Rio Tacutu)¹. Subsequent to our observations Davis Finch recorded the species nearby but from the other side of the border in Guyana, during January 1993.



Hoary-throated Spinetail *Poecilurus kollari*
(Bruce C. Forrester)

Rio Branco Antbird *C. carbonaria*

Until recently this was another poorly-known species, recorded by few observers. However, Douglas Stotz found it to be reasonably common (at a number of sites) in suitable riverine habitat with gallery forest¹ (our observations confirmed this abundance and habitat preference). It should be noted that there is a striking resemblance of this species to Jet Antbird *C. nigricans*, a species erroneously attributed to Roraima². Davis Finch recorded *C. carbonaria* in Guyana during January 1993, both this species and *P. kollari* previously being thought to be Brazilian endemics.



Rio Branco Antbird *Cercomacra carbonaria*
(Bruce C. Forrester)

Other sites and birds of interest**Rio Cofingo and Rio Urucury**

This area yielded a number of interesting records: several Pale-eyed Pygmy-Tyrants *Atalotriccus pilaris* were seen, representing a new species record for Brazil. In addition, other observations of local interest included Double-striped Thick-knee *Burhinus bistriatus*, Sun Parakeet *Aratinga solstitialis*, Streak-headed Woodcreeper *Lepidocolaptes souleyetii* and White-bellied Antbird *Myrmeciza longipes*.

Rio Branco marshes, Boa Vista

These vast wetlands (across the river from town) produced a number of notable sightings:

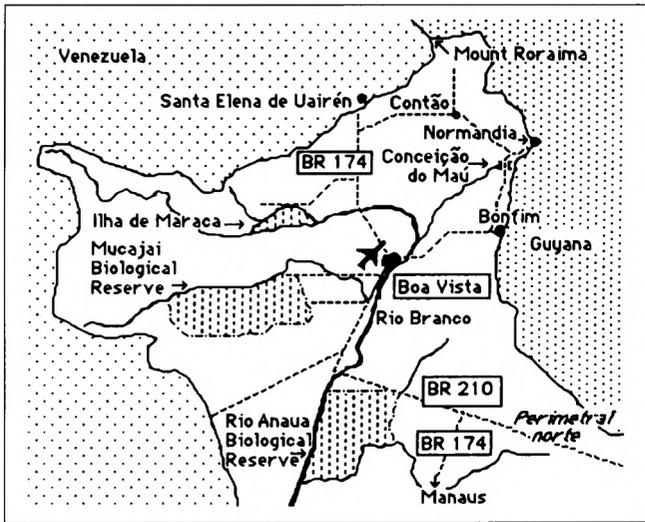
Boat-billed Heron *Cochlearius cochlearia*, Maguari Stork *Ciconia maguari*, Long-winged Harrier *Circus buffoni*, Red-bellied Macaw *Ara manilata*; Brown-throated Parakeet *Aratinga pertinax*, Ruby-topaz Hummingbird *Chrysolampis mosquitus*, Green-tailed Jacamar *Galbula galbula*, Black-crested Antshrike *Sakesphorus canadensis*, Pale-tipped Tyrannulet *Inezia subflava* and Gray Seedeater *Sporophila intermedia*.

Porto Grande

This site is located at the eastern end of the **Perimetral Norte** where this road joins the BR156 in the state of Amapá. The road from Porto Grande west to Serra do Navio is excellent for birds and a number of specialities and range extensions were recorded. In particular Brazil's (presumed) second records of both Todd's Antwren *Herpsilochmus stictocephalus* and Spot-tailed Antwren *Herpsilochmus sticturus* were notable, although Sparkling Violetear *Colibri coruscans*, Long-tailed Tyrant *Colonia colonus*, Sooty-headed Tyrannulet *Phyllomyias griseiceps*, and Yellow-bellied Seedeater *Sporophila nigricollis* all appeared to be range extensions. In addition, Crimson Fruitcrow *Haematoderus militaris* and Crimson-hooded Manakin *Pipra aureola* added a splash of colour. Taking the road to the north-east, towards the town of Amapá, Band-tailed Antshrike *Sakesphorus melanothorax*, Black-chinned Antbird *Hypocnemoides melanopogon* and Silvered Antbird *Sclateria naevia* were all recorded where gallery forest abutted the roadside at river crossings.

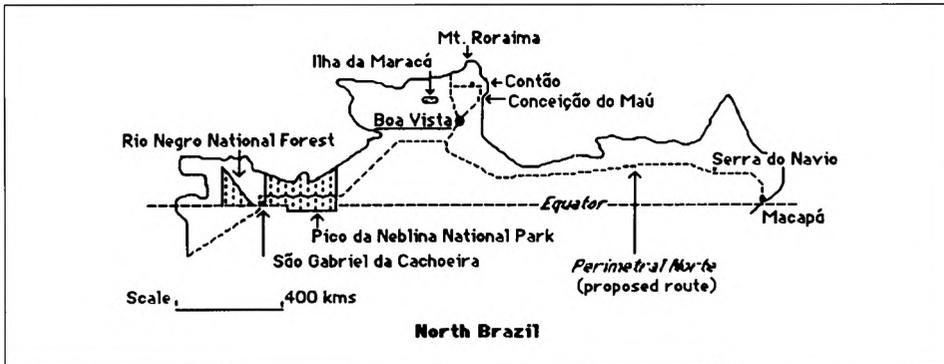
Possible areas for exploration

The construction of the **Perimetral Norte** is going to open up new areas worthy of exploration by birders. In the north-west corner of Brazil, near São Gabriel da Cachoeira (Amazonas state) a road is being constructed through the Pico da Neblina National Park. This park is adjacent to the Venezuelan border and contains Brazil's highest mountain. Nearby, the Rio Negro Forest Reserve is also likely to contain species of interest although the only exploration to date has been on the Venezuelan side of Pico da Neblina⁴. Other sites worthy of mention in northern Roraima include the well documented Ilha de Maracá Biological Reserve and Mount Roraima.



Map 1: Northern Roraima (from Bruce C. Forrester, *Birding Brazil - A Check-list and Site Guide*)

Map 2: Roraima, showing the route of the Perimetral Norte (Bruce C. Forrester)



Conclusion

There are undoubted problems associated with birding in the far north of Brazil, e.g. in the north-west today's explorers will have the added problems of narcotics smuggling, clashes between gold-miners (garimpeiros) and the local Indians and a heavy military presence. However, rich rewards await those observers who wish to expand their horizons beyond the usual sites frequented by birders visiting Brazil. For more information on these and other sites around Brazil see *Birding Brazil: a check-list and sites guide* by Bruce Forrester, 1993.

References

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