

Birding the Alta Floresta region, northern Mato Grosso, Brazil

Bret M. Whitney

Se describe la observación de aves en la región de Alta Floresta del norte de Mato Grosso, en el sudeste amazónico. Si bien hasta ahora ha sido sub-visitada por ornitólogos, fuera del período agosto–noviembre, el sitio contiene varias aves destacables como *Rhegmatorhina gymnops*, *Nonnula ruficapilla*, *Cercomacra manu*, *Simoxenops ucayalae* y un *Synallaxis* aún no descrito. Se proveen detalles completos sobre la observación de aves en esta magnífica área protegida.

É descrita a observação de aves na região de Alta Floresta ao norte do estado do Mato Grosso, no sudeste da Amazônia. Embora seja ainda relativamente pouco visitada por ornitólogos, fora do período de agosto a novembro, esta área possui várias espécies extremamente interessantes tais como *Rhegmatorhina gymnops*, *Nonnula ruficapilla*, *Cercomacra manu*, *Simoxenops ucayalae* e um furnarídeo do genero *Synallaxis* ainda não descrito. São dados detalhes para observar aves nesta fascinante área protegida.

Introduction

It was my first visit to the Cristalino Jungle Lodge near Alta Floresta, in the far south-eastern corner of Amazonia, and as the boat motored up the narrow, blackwater river we scanned the forested banks and canopy for birds warming up to the early morning sun. Nearing our trailhead, a magnificent pair of Razor-billed Curassows *Mitu tuberosa* were spotted at the water's edge. We cut the engine, allowing the boat to slide quietly toward them. The birds dipped their bills in the cool water, ruffled their feathers in the sun, and eyed us as we approached. This was an exciting moment but as we glided to within a mere 5 m of these huge curassows, and they continued to go about their morning routine scarcely interested in this boatload of birders, I could feel a great (but forcibly stifled!) cheer rising up among us. Those birds clearly had never experienced danger from the presence of man. This impressed all of us deeply, and it's one of the strong sentiments I have for the Cristalino region that brings me back repeatedly. There are few places, even in the deepest recesses of Amazonia, where one can experience such undisturbed wilderness. But let me take you back to the beginning.

Alta Floresta – geography and conservation

Alta Floresta is a small town in the extreme north of Mato Grosso, Brazil, situated near the headwaters of the mighty Tapajós river system, which in this region is called the Rio Teles Pires (or São Manuel on some maps). The town is west of the Teles Pires, on flat or gently rolling terrain. As re-

cently as 30 years ago, virtually the entire region was covered in tall, undisturbed, lowland rainforest. Most of this has been destroyed (for timber, agriculture and pasture) in the past decade.

Fortunately, Alta Floresta is also the birthplace of one of the most important experiments in conservation in all of Amazonia: the Cristalino Ecological Institute (CEI), established in January 1993. The CEI is unique in lower Amazonia in that its objectives combine ecotourism (with much emphasis on birdwatching) with applied research projects designed to turn back the rapid destruction of forests in the region, and to show other landowners in the vicinity that environmental preservation offers a sustainable and profitable landuse. The CEI is east of the Rio Teles Pires and encompasses 630 ha along the pristine Rio Cristalino. It is surrounded by more than 250,000 ha of almost completely undisturbed forest!

The geographic location of the Alta Floresta area in the headwaters of the Tapajós contributes greatly to its ornithological importance because the river separates different populations of many forest birds. This subject is sure to receive heightened attention in the coming years. Although the Alta Floresta/Cristalino region certainly ranks as one of the avifaunally richest areas in lower Amazonia, relatively little birding has been done there. The first visit by observers experienced in Amazonia was by Ted Parker, and Mort and Phyllis Isler in October–November 1989. Since then, the area has been visited annually by several groups of birders, but almost invariably between late August and mid-November. Thus, information on the birdlife



Aerial view of the Rio Cristalino, near Cristalino Ecological Institute, extreme northern Mato Grosso, Brazil. More than half a million acres of forest surround the CEI (CEI/Floresta Tours).



The Cristalino Jungle Lodge on the Rio Cristalino has a floating platform for cooling off in the river on hot afternoons, delicious food and drink, and an excellent trail system which begins right outside the rooms (CEI/Floresta Tours).



Male and female Black-bellied Gnatcatcher *Conopophaga melanogaster*, one of the most spectacular and sought-after of lower Amazonian birds; there is a single sight record in the Alta Floresta region (west of the Rio Teles Pires) (Bret M. Whitney).



Green-and-gold Tanager *Tangara schrankii* is among the flashiest members of the mixed-species canopy flocks in much of Amazonia (Bret M. Whitney).

at other seasons, especially the austral winter when many migrants are to be expected, is almost completely lacking. Even with limited seasonal coverage the bird list is fast approaching 500 species. A nearly complete list of the birds recorded in the Alta Floresta region, which includes important information on distribution and natural history for selected species, will appear in the next few months¹.

Logistics

Alta Floresta can be reached either by bus (a long day's ride) or plane via the town of Cuiabá. Mato Grosso (usually with an international connection through São Paulo). Cuiabá is on the edge of the Brazilian Planalto, in habitat very different from the Amazonian forest at Alta Floresta. A few days around Cuiabá (in cerrado and semi-deciduous forest at Chapada dos Guimarães and/or a visit to the northern Pantanal) will add enormously to your bird list. Most birders book a visit to Alta Floresta through one of the major birding tour companies (Field Guides, Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Focus Tours or Birdquest) or directly through Floresta Tour, which owns and operates the Hotel Floresta Amazônica and Cristalino Jungle Lodge (address at end of article).

Having arrived in Alta Floresta, birders generally head straight to the Hotel Floresta Amazônica, dump bags in the room, and begin birding the excellent trails behind the hotel. A great variety of species has been recorded here, but some of the more noteworthy regulars are White-browed Hawk *Leucopternis kuhli*, five species of macaws, Crimson-bellied Parakeet *Pyrrhura perlata*, Black-bellied Cuckoo *Piaya melanogaster*. Amazonian Pygmy-owl *Glaucidium hardyi*, Paradise Jacamar *Galbula dea*, Collared Puffbird *Bucco capensis*, Black-girdled Barbet *Capito dayi*, Red-necked Araçari *Pteroglossus bitorquatus*, Southern Nightingale-wren *Microcerculus marginatus* and Yellow-shouldered Grosbeak *Caryothraustes humeralis*. There are some other relatively large patches (100–1,000 ha) of forest remaining near Alta Floresta (e.g. one at the far end of the airstrip). It would be rewarding to bird some of these (watch as you arrive on the bus or plane), most of which are unexplored. Some rarities that have been seen just once (and remain undocumented in the area) include Orange-breasted Falcon *Falco deiroleucus*, the enigmatic Golden Parakeet *Guaruba guarouba*², the handsome Black-bellied Gnatcatcher *Conopophaga melanogaster*, and Guianan Gnatcatcher *Poliophtila guianensis*.

Cristalino Jungle Lodge

After some time near Alta Floresta, birders should proceed to the Cristalino Jungle Lodge and stay for as long as time and money permit. Floresta Tour provides transport in vans and boats to the lodge. An excellent birding area on the Alta Floresta side of the Rio Teles Pires is Fazenda Cristalino, approximately one hour's drive from town. A great variety of birds (including most of the ones mentioned above, and good mixed-species flock activity) may be found along the last few km of the main road to the river. Understorey vegetation here seems relatively open, which makes it easier to see such difficult terrestrial birds as Brazilian Tinamou *Crypturellus strigulosus* and Rufous-capped Antthrush *Formicarius colma*. A late morning departure from here will get you to the Cristalino Jungle Lodge (a 45-minute boat ride) in time for lunch.

The lodge is simply one of the best places in all of Amazonia to immerse yourself in the forest and the greatest avifauna on earth. There are new species to seek every day, more to learn and carry with you to the next place you bird in Amazonia. Actually, most birders get their first taste of Amazonian birding in upper Amazonia, at one or more of the lodges or research stations in eastern Peru or Ecuador. Alta Floresta, deep in lower Amazonia, offers not only a different set of local specialities, but also a tremendous variety of more widely distributed species. These more widespread species are just as interesting as the local endemics to most birders who have been to Amazonian Ecuador or Peru, because familiar birds often look and sound so different here. Indeed, geographic variation is remarkable across the Amazon Basin, and birders with a broad geographic experience are best able to keep abreast of and contribute to the fast-growing body of knowledge developing on species taxonomy of South American birds.

The Cristalino Jungle Lodge features eight modern, twin-bedded rooms with private baths, and two large, dormitory-style buildings with four rooms each and space for hammocks. The food is superb (I could write a whole page about it!), and there are plenty of cold drinks. Then there is the forest itself; right outside the rooms and stretching for miles in every direction. Several well-maintained trails provide easy access to forest behind the clearing (a very birdy spot), and there are boats to ferry you along the Cristalino to more distant trails in different types of forest. For birders (or any nature-oriented tourists), this is about as close to paradise as you can get.

The trail system

There are five major trails at the Cristalino Jungle Lodge (good maps are available at the lodge). Two of these, the Trilha Principal (Main Trail) and the Trilha da Taboca (Bamboo Trail), begin at the main lodge clearings and traverse similar tall *terra firme* forest dominated by vines in the midstorey and undergrowth (locally quite dense), with several extensive bamboo patches. Combined length of these trails is about 4,430 m. Where the trails near the river they pass briefly through seasonally flooded forest. The trails are connected by a network of narrower side-trails, which makes it easier to follow the wanderings of mixed-species flocks in the canopy and army antswarms in the understorey. A fine complement of ant-following birds occurs, the real prize being Bare-eyed Antbird *Rhegmatorhina gymnops*. Even Dark-winged Trumpeters *Psophia viridis* sometimes attend the swarms.

The bamboo patches hold some of the most interesting birds in the Alta Floresta area, some of which were poorly known or unknown in Brazil until the past few years, e.g. Rufous-capped Nunlet *Nonnula ruficapilla*, Striated Antbird *Drymophila devillei*, Manu Antbird *Cercomacra manu*, Chestnut-throated Spinetail *Synallaxis cherriei*, Peruvian Recurvebill *Simoxenops ucayalae*, Curve-billed Scythebill *Campylorhamphus procurviodes* and Dusky-tailed Flatbill *Ramphotrigon fuscicauda*. Bamboo at the forest edge is the habitat for yet another local speciality, an undescribed *Synallaxis* spinetail in the Rufous-capped *S. ruficapilla* complex (it appears as Cabanis's Spinetail *S. cabanisi* on the Alta Floresta list¹), which I have been investigating here and elsewhere in South America for a few years.

The other three well-developed trails near the lodge are all reached by boat rides of 10–40 minutes up the Cristalino. The closest one is the Trilha da Serra (Hill Trail, c.1 km long), which begins with a walk through tall, level forest before contouring steeply up the side of a granite dome. The vegetation changes equally abruptly as towering forest gives way to a scrubby, thorny, semi-deciduous association of leguminaceous trees interlaced with thin vines. The dome's rocky summit is carpeted with odd terrestrial bromeliads. This woodland is difficult to penetrate, but passable trails permit one to loop back to the river. A few special birds to watch for here include soaring raptors and swifts (once you're near the top), Blackish Nightjar *Caprimulgus nigrescens* (always a few roosting or nesting on the granite dome), Broad-billed Motmot *Electron platyrhynchum*,

Brown-banded Puffbird *Notharcus ordii* (widespread but seldom seen), Natterer's Slaty Antshrike *Thamnophilus stictocephalus* (split from *T. punctatus*³), White-naped Xenopsaris *Xenopsaris albinucha*, Purple-throated Cotinga *Porphyrolaema porphyrolaema*, White-browed Purpletuff *Iodopleura isabellae*, and a full complement of honeycreepers. This area is also great for seeing canopy species because flocks sometimes descend into low trees around the woodland edge near the top of the dome. Be prepared for lots of annoying (but generally not stinging) sweat bees on the dome, especially on warm mornings after about 09h00.

The next trail upriver is the Trilha do Rafa (Haffer Trail, c.1 km long), which was established a couple of years ago by Jürgen Haffer, during his study of the region's birds. The trail passes through tall forest, paralleling and eventually entering a large bamboo tract, which has all of the bamboo birds. This trail is also good for Snow-capped *Pipra nattereri* and Fiery-capped Manakins *Machaeropterus pyrocephalus*, enough to cause a meltdown in any birder's binoculars. There are also a couple of scattered leks of the fabulous Flame-crowned Manakin *Heterocercus linteatus* in riverine forest between the Serra and Haffer trails.

The trail furthest up the Cristalino is the Trilha das Castanheiras (Brazil Nut Trail, c.1.4 km long), which comprises a loop through very tall, level forest. Some of the Brazil nut trees along the trail are absolutely enormous, the largest trunks I have seen standing inside forest anywhere in Amazonia. This is a great trail for Pavonine Quetzal *Pharomachrus pavoninus*, Rufous-necked Puffbird *Malacoptila rufa* (but watch for it on all trails), Gould's Toucanet *Selenidera gouldi*, Red-necked Woodpecker *Campephilus rubricollis*, Musician Wren *Cyphorhinus aradus*, Tooth-billed Wren *Odontorchilus cinereus* (high with canopy flocks), and canopy flocks in general. Both Harpy *Harpia harpyja* and Crested Eagles *Morphnus guianensis* have been seen on the Castanheiras trail and along the Rio Cristalino.

Conclusion

This has been just a brief scan of the highlights of a birding visit to Alta Floresta and the Cristalino Jungle Lodge, but I hope it serves to show the enthusiasm and support that I and my Neotropical birding friends share for this wonderful place in Amazonia, and the conservation effort the CEI exemplifies. August–November is one of the driest times of year, but local residents say that even during the rainiest months (generally December–

April) the weather is frequently fine for several days at a time. The most efficient way to see a large number of birds in a short time, and to learn a great deal about Amazonian birds and birding techniques, is to join a professionally guided tour company like Field Guides or Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, but if you want to do more finding and identification of birds by yourself or with friends, you can book directly (or through Field Guides for no extra charge). A local English-speaking guide can be arranged to accompany your group at Alta Floresta, and assist you in getting to the best birding trails (but these guides, at present, are not especially knowledgeable on bird finding and identification). Per-day prices, including food and all transportation, are generally more reasonable than at the many lodges in eastern Ecuador and Peru. Two weeks to a month in the Alta Floresta rainforests (combined with almost any other region of Brazil via Varig International Airline's Brazil Airpass) is surely one of the most enjoyable and productive birding vacations or research destinations one could have in South America.

To book visits to Hotel Floresta Amazônica and the Cristalino Jungle Lodge directly, contact:

Vitoria da Riva Carvalho,
Floresta Tour Viagens e Turismo Ltda.,
Av. Perimetral Oeste, 2001
78580-000 Alta Floresta – MT,
Brazil. Tel./fax.: (065) 521-2221/3601,
e-mail <amazon@sanet.com.br>.

Watch for Floresta Tour's upcoming home page on the internet (search "birdwatching, Amazon, Brazil, South America" etc. until the new name is available).

References

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Bret M. Whitney

c/o Field Guides Inc., P. O. Box 160723, Austin, TX 78716-0723, USA.