

>> BIRDING SITES HATO EL CEDRAL

Hato El Cedral and Zigzag Herons

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It is well known that two of the best areas for waterbirds in South America are the Pantanal, which lies mostly in Brazil, and the *Llanos* of Venezuela and Colombia.

In both cases, vast plains are seasonally flooded and attract large numbers of waterbirds both during the wet (breeding) season and drier periods throughout the rest of the year. For many years birdwatchers have been attracted to these areas, especially towards the end of the dry season when often-spectacular concentrations of waterbirds are attracted to drying-out pools and lakes which offer bountiful food that is suddenly readily accessible.

In both areas, certain ranches have recognised the potential for tourism and provide accommodation, food and guided birdwatching excursions on their often-extensive properties. One of the most famous of these is Hato El Cedral in the Venezuelan *Llanos*. This vast ranch has been attracting birdwatchers for some years and I have visited the area regularly since 1997. Even on my earlier visits the numbers of waterbirds were impressive, especially given the number of species that are common at El Cedral but scarce in the surrounding area—for example Orinoco Goose *Neochen jubata* and Pinnated Bittern *Botaurus pinnatus*. But, during my most recent visits (since 2004), the numbers of waterbirds present on the ranch have been truly staggering—so vast, in fact, that I have been unable to count or even estimate them with any degree of confidence. In March 2006 the most numerous species were Black-bellied Whistling-duck *Dendrocygna autumnalis* and White-faced Whistling-duck *D. viduata* which certainly numbered in the hundreds of thousands, possibly millions! These formed numerous frenzied feeding flocks scattered across the main lagoons of the ranch, with each flock containing thousands of whistling-ducks mixed with hundreds of egrets and ibis. At any point, the sky was filled with flocks of birds commuting back and forth across the ranch and the lagoons were black with birds (Fig. 1).

Even for a fairly well-travelled birder, this is a waterbird spectacle to rival or surpass anywhere else on the planet—including the Pantanal in Brazil, Kakadu National Park in Australia, and

Keoladeo National Park (Bharatpur) in India. The only site known to me that has anywhere near as many waterbirds is Lake Nakuru, in Kenya, but those are primarily just two species, Lesser Flamingo *Phoenicopterus minor* and Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*. It is the diversity at Cedral that is so very impressive—three species of storks, 16 herons and egrets, seven species of ibis, one spoonbill, dozens of waders, various terns, skimmers, five species of kingfisher, etc. Amongst these are, inevitably, a number of regularly seen 'rarities'. The already-mentioned Orinoco Goose occurs in hundreds if not thousands, and in March pairs with chicks are a regular sight. That during my 14 visits to the *Llanos* I have never seen this species away from the ranch puts such observations into context. I have seen Pinnated Bittern outside the ranch in one or two favoured spots, but seldom more than single birds. At Cedral it is routine to see 6–10 during any boat trip, often with 3–4 in view at once. The bitterns frequent dense beds of Water Hyacinth *Eichhornia crassipes* and in the same area sharp-eyed observers can spot Azure Gallinule *Porphyrula flavirostris* and Yellow-breasted Crake *Porzana flaviventer*, though both are secretive and with so many other birds to see in every direction, it requires concentrated attention to keep scanning for these species and ignore everything else.

Real rarities also occur here too—at least in an inland Venezuela context—and during past visits we have found an American Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber*, two Tricoloured Herons *Egretta tricolor*, a flock of 11 Grey Plovers *Pluvialis squatarola* and two Ruddy Turnstones *Arenaria interpres*, for all of which there are very few inland records¹. And, in March at least, migrant Upland *Bartramia longicauda* and Buff-breasted Sandpipers *Tryngites subruficollis* are regular visitors to the ranch.

In earlier years the main prize of any boat trip at Cedral was Agami Heron *Agamia agami*, several of which inhabit the quiet backwaters of a wooded area at the south end of the lagoons.

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These are still present and represent one of the highlights of a stay at the ranch, but during the last few years they have been outclassed by the discovery of Zigzag Herons *Zebrilus undulatus*, which seem to be resident in small numbers in the same woodland. Initially the Zigzags were rather shy and hard to see, requiring a stealthy approach, but during our visit in 2006 were much more confiding and I suspect are becoming habituated due to the ranch guides taking visitors to see them almost every day. In 2004 we saw three Zigzag and two Agami Herons, in 2005 one of each, and in 2006 three Zigzag and two Agami.

The birds this year seemed quite oblivious of our group watching them at a distance of only 20 m. Their only sign of nervousness was an occasional downward flick of the tail. Being so tame, they were also quite photogenic and I was able to photograph one adult (Fig. 3) and two different immatures (Figs. 2 and 4). The Agami Herons are also becoming very approachable as may be apparent from Fig. 5! Whilst Zigzags can be seen elsewhere in South America, notably at several of the Amazonian lodges on the río Napo

in Ecuador, they are seldom as obliging as those at El Cedral, which would now seem to be the best place to visit for anyone keen to see this species.

In order to see the birds it is necessary to go on one of the ranch's organised boat trips with one of their resident guides such as Ramón or Victor. The birds are seldom seen from the boat, but require short walks through the woodland along purpose-cut trails. Finding them without one of the local guides would be almost impossible. But Zigzags aside the ranch is well worth visiting for the amazing waterbird show—surely one of the most impressive ornithological spectacles on the planet.

REFERENCE

1. Hilty, S. L. (2003) *Birds of Venezuela*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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Figure 1. Just a small fraction of the waterbird spectacle at Hato El Cedral, Venezuela, 25 March 2006



Figure 2. Immature Zigzag Heron *Zebrilus undulatus* at Hato El Cedral, 25 March 2006



Figure 3 (above left). Adult Zigzag Heron *Zebrilus undulatus* at Hato El Cedral, 25 March 2006

Figure 4 (above right). A different immature Zigzag Heron *Zebrilus undulatus* at Hato El Cedral, 26 March 2006



Figure 5 (left). Adult Agami Heron *Agamia agami*—too close to fit into the frame, 26 March 2006