

Birding Suriname

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Few birders currently visit Suriname but, as the country's top ornithologist explains, they are missing a treat. In addition to offering several species that are difficult to see elsewhere, there remains much potential for visitors to make interesting discoveries.



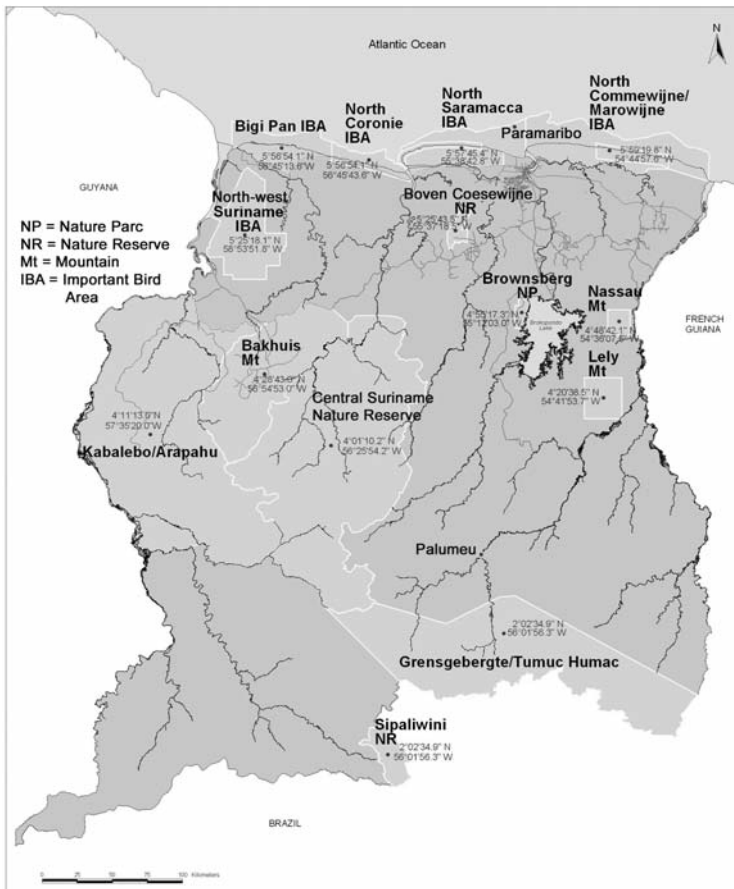
The endemic Arrowhead Piculet *Picumnus minutissimus* is very common in Paramaribo, but best picked up on voice (Foek Chin Joe)

On the Guianan Shield in northern South America lies a forgotten country, Suriname. Ecotourism was enjoyed here even before the word existed. But the combination of a military coup in 1980 and a civil war from 1986–1992 led to the country dropping off the birding radar. Given the country’s bounteous biodiversity, it is time that this unfortunate situation were reversed.

Suriname is largely covered by pristine rainforest, but also houses a treasure trove of ecosystems within a territory slightly smaller than Florida. Vast mudflats are very important for North American shorebirds. A small band of mangrove forest fringes the coast, protecting saline and brackish swamps and lagoons from the sea. Inland lie huge freshwater swamps, then the savanna belt and finally the rainforest, which extends over upland features such as mountain ridges, a few bauxite plateaus, several inselbergs (or monadnocks, isolated outcrops) and a tepui.

The large Brazilian savanna associated with the rio Paru extends north into southern Suriname as the Sipaliwini savanna. Finally, five major rivers snake northwards across the country.

In this article, I give an overview of the main birding areas in Suriname. I focus on sites that give birders a good chance of seeing the country’s target species and reflect the diversity of its habitats. In total, 727 species have been recorded in Suriname (see www1.nhl.nl/~ribot/english/), including seven Near Threatened species and one recently described taxon (Sulphur-breasted Parakeet *Aratinga pintoii*; not yet accepted by the South American Classification Committee) that is likely to be considered Endangered in BirdLife International’s 2009 Red List update. Birders should note that travel in Suriname is very difficult, and many places can only be reached by plane. There are thus clear practical benefits in contracting a local company/guide (for which see the box *Contact details and further information*).



Map of Suriname showing the location of key birding sites and Important Bird Areas (BirdLife International)

Paramaribo

Suriname's capital, Paramaribo, is a good place for birding, lying in what is expected to be designated as a new Endemic Bird Area in the future. More than 450 species have been seen in the city and its environs. Three species that will shortly be classified as restricted-range taxa can usually be seen around town in a single day. Rufous Crab Hawk *Buteogallus aequinoctialis* inhabits mangrove forests north of the city. Blood-coloured Woodpecker *Veniliornis sanguineus* and the endemic Arrowhead Piculet *Picumnus minutissimus* occur in the 'Cultuurtuin' or 'Peperpot'. The piculet is very common and, if you know its call, can be found in many big trees in Paramaribo. Blackish Antbird *Cercomacra nigrescens* and Ashy-headed Greenlet *Hylophilus pectoralis* are easy to find. Spectacular birds such as Scarlet Ibis *Eudocimus ruber*, Roseate Spoonbill *Platalea ajaja* and Wood Stork *Mycteria Americana* can be seen at Warapa creek, which is now accessible by boat and can be reached in a few hours.

The savanna belt

The mosaic of habitats that makes up the savanna belt produces a very rich and interesting landscape. With a bit of luck here, birders can see three species with limited distributions in Suriname: Crested Bobwhite *Colinus cristatus*, Burnished-buff Tanager *Tangara cayana* and the nominate subspecies of Black-faced Tanager *Schistochlamys melanopis*, which is restricted to the east Guianas². Three generally scarce and localised species—Bronzy Jacamar *Galbula leucogastra*, Saffron-crested Tyrant-Manakin *Neopelma chrysocephalum* and Black Manakin *Xenopipo atronitens*—are common in Suriname's stunted white-sand dwarf forests; a good site to search is Hollandse kamp. The Powakka savanna holds the rare Pale-bellied Mourner *Rhytipterna immunda* and the endemic subspecies *albomarginatus* of Swainson's Flycatcher *Myiarchus swainsoni*.

Brownsberg Nature Park

The Brownsberg Nature Park, a bauxite plateau at 450 m altitude, is managed by STINASU (Foundation for Nature Conservation in Suriname, the BirdLife Affiliate in the country). Facilities comprise several comfortable chalets, a hammock camp and a restaurant. Leftovers from the latter attract a group of the normally shy Grey-winged

Trumpeter *Psophia crepitans*, which have become so habituated that they can be photographed at just 5 m range. Three Black Curassows *Crax alector* often join the feast, and an Ornate Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus ornatus* regularly comes close to the lodge, attracted to the plentiful large lizards of the genus *Ameiva*.

The Brownsberg total of nearly 400 species includes 20 antbirds and specialities such as White-throated Pewee *Contopus albogularis*, Red-and-black Grosbeak *Periporphyrus erythromelas* (more common in Suriname than elsewhere in its range¹), White-fronted Manakin *Lepidothrix serena*, White-throated Manakin *Corapipo gutturalis* and Sharpbill *Oxyruncus cristatus*. Ringed Woodpecker *Celeus torquatus* occurs here (as well as at the following two sites); this species is rare and difficult to find throughout its range.

Central Suriname Nature Reserve

The Central Suriname Nature Reserve (CSNR) has a long history of birdwatching; it incorporates the former Raleighvallen/Voltzeberg nature reserve, which was considered a "birdwatcher's paradise" by those who visited it some 50 years ago. Created in 1998 by Conservation International and the Suriname government, CSNR was subsequently designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site 2000 for its pristine tropical rainforest ecosystem. STINASU operates comfortable lodges at different prices near Raleighvallen on Foengoe Island and a hammock camp near Voltzeberg, 2–5 hours walk away.

More than 500 bird species have been recorded in the reserve's 16,000 km² of lowland and montane and primary forest. The biggest attraction is the largest known lek of Guianan Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola rupicola*. Although the breeding season is restricted to December–April, more than 50 males display year around.

On Foengoe, the airstrip is an extremely good place to watch Blue-throated Piping Guan *Pipile cumanensis*, toucans, parrots and macaws in the morning. The nearby forest is a good spot for the spectacular Capuchinbird *Perissocephalus tricolor*. The trail to Voltzeberg is a good area to bump into mixed species flocks, and more than 30 species of antbirds occur. This may be the best spot to find the rare Boat-billed Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus josephinae*, the taxonomically controversial Rose-breasted Chat *Granatellus pelzeni* and Collared Gnatwren *Microbates collaris*.





Opposite page, clockwise from top left:

Black Curassow *Crax alector* feeds on restaurant leftovers at Brownsberg Nature Park (Chris Collins)

The unmistakable Rufous Crab Hawk *Buteogallus aequinoctialis* can be seen in mangroves north of Paramaribo (Chris Collins)

Crimson Topaz *Topaza pella* often hawks for insects above the canopy, but can be seen in the garden of the restaurant at Arapahu (Nick Athanas/Tropical Birding)

A scarce species, Crimson Fruitcrow *Haematoderus militaris* is unusual amongst its family for mainly feeding on insects rather than fruit (Chris Collins)

Ringed Woodpecker *Celeus torquatus* is a target species for birders visiting Suriname: this confiding individual gave views down to 5 m for half-an-hour (Candy McManiman)

Blood-coloured Woodpecker *Veniliornis sanguineus* is best looked for around Paramaribo (Chris Collins)

Above, top: Seeing a ritual fight between two Guianan Cock-of-the-rocks *Rupicola rupicola* is a rare and enthralling experience (Sylvain Cordier)

Above, bottom left: This female Black Manakin *Xenopipo atronitens* is sitting on only second-ever nest discovered for this species (Foek Chin Joe)

Above, bottom right: The bizarre Capuchinbird *Perissocephalus tricolor* can be found at Central Suriname Nature Reserve and Palumeu (Chris Collins)

Around the Voltzberg itself, a 240-m-high inselberg that can be climbed by fit people in 30 minutes, there are at least three territories of the rare and near-endemic Band-tailed Antshrike *Thamnophilus melanothorax*, but finding this unobtrusive species is not straightforward. At dawn the forest resonates to the vocalisations of tinamous, woodcreepers and a trio of forest falcons: Slaty-backed *Micrastur mirandollei*, Lined *M. gilvicolis* and Barred *M. ruficollis*. Atop the inselberg, Cliff Flycatcher *Hirundinea ferruginea* is almost guaranteed, and birders should scan for rare swifts: both White-collared Swift *Streptoprocne zonaris* and White-chinned Swift *Cypseloides cryptus* have been seen (the latter recently discovered in Suriname¹ and very local throughout its range), and Chapman's Swift *Chaetura chapmani* is fairly common.

Suriname's only tepui, the Tafelberg (literally, table mountain) lies in the CSNR. Tropical Gem Tours have a comfortable guesthouse near the airstrip in the nearby Rudi Kappel savanna. Saffron-crested Tyrant-Manakin, Bronzy Jacamar and Black Manakin are common in the stunted forest. Discovered here in 2005 (own data), Pelzeln's Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus inornatus* can be found easily; this very rare species was previously considered endemic to Brazil and only rediscovered there in 1992. In the savanna, the target species are Black-billed Thrush *Turdus ignobilis* and Point-tailed Palmcreeper *Berlepschia rikeri*. Chestnut-bellied Seed Finch *Oryzoborus angolensis*, trapped to near-extinction elsewhere in Suriname, is very common here.

The Tafelberg itself is also very good for birding, but can only be reached by helicopter (see box). Target birds here include Chestnut-tipped Toucanet *Aulacorhynchus derbianus*, Tepui Greenlet *Hylophilus sclateri* and Black-hooded Thrush *Turdus olivater*. The most intriguing denizen is an antvireo *Dysithamnus* sp. that resembles Plumbeous Antvireo *D. plumbeus* of one of the forms *tucuyensis* or *leucostictus*, both of which have strong claims to be full species. The presence of either form would represent a major range extension, and it is not impossible that the Tafelberg birds represent an undescribed taxon². White-collared Swift and White-chinned Swift breed at the tall Augustus waterfall, adjacent to the helicopter landing-pad. Simple accommodation is available, visitors sleeping on mattresses on the floor of a two-storey wooden building.

Access to the CSNR is by river and road (to Raleighvallen only), or by plane to one of three

airstrips. Most of the 1,000 visitors per year opt for the former route, traveling c.185 km south from Paramaribo to Witagron. From Witagron, a 3-hour boat trip up the River Coppename brings birders to the reserve headquarters on Foengo Island.

Boven Coesewijne Nature Reserve

The 27,000-ha Boven Coesewijne Nature Reserve (BCNR) is c.100 km from Paramaribo. The reserve recently opened to tourists and benefits from a conservation programme managed jointly by STINASU, WWF-Guianas and the government's Nature Conservation Division. STINASU has a small lodge (for six people) and a hammock camp. For access details, contact STINASU. Boven Coesewijne is well known for its unique brown-sand savanna, Amazonian Manatee *Trichechus inunguis* and Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* (although these shy mammals are very difficult to see).

Despite little research, more than 300 bird species have already been recorded at BCNR. The gallery forest bordering the River Coesewijne is good for birding, with antbirds including Silvered Antbird *Sclateria naevia* and Black-chinned Antbird *Hypocnemoides melanopogon* (both very common) as well as Guianan Streaked Antwren *Myrmotherula surinamensis*. The rare and near-endemic Glossy-backed Becard *Pachyrhamphus surinamus* has been seen. Along the river itself, Sungrebe *Heliornis fulica* occurs, and Boat-billed Heron *Cochlearius cochlearius* may be seen at night. In the savanna, five species of nightjar, including White-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus cayennensis*, are common, as are Grassland Sparrow *Ammodramus humeralis* and Wedge-tailed Grassfinch. You will need, however, considerable luck to come across Giant Snipe *Gallinago undulata*.

Arapahu

Arapahu is an island in the upper River Corantijn in south-west Suriname; the river forms the border with Guyana. Access involves a 75-minute charter flight with Gum Air from Paramaribo to Amotopo airstrip in Sipaliwini, an 800-m walk and a 30-minute canoe journey. Accommodation is in well-equipped cabins, designed to resemble traditional Bushnegro (indian) huts, managed by Tropical Gem Tours.

Wild rapids flank the southern part of Arapahu. The area is underwatched, and its avifauna is likely to total many more than the 260-odd species recorded so far. Green Ibis *Mesembrinibis cayennensis* is common, as are Scarlet Macaw *Ara macao*, Red-and-green Macaw *A. chloroptera* and Blue-and-yellow Macaw *A. ararauna*. An additional five species of parrots are common, as are a quintet of toucans.

The liana forest on the Suriname side of the River Corantijn is a good place to find Band-tailed Antshrike and McConnell's Spinetail *Synallaxis macconnelli*. Along the riverbanks, Ladder-tailed Nightjar *Hydropsalis climacocerca*, Red-capped Cardinal *Paroaria gularis*, Blackish Antbird and Drab Water Tyrant *Ochthornis littoralis* are common. The garden around the restaurant attracts many hummingbirds such as Crimson Topaz *Topaza pella* and the *cupreicauda* subspecies of Green-bellied Hummingbird *Amazilia viridigaster*. At the nearby 'Muskita krika' creek, all five South American species of kingfisher are common. Curve-billed Scythebill *Campylorhamphus procurvoides* is not rare, and there is a chance of Sunbittern *Europyga helias*.

Kabalebo

Little birding has been done near the Kabalebo airstrip, 90 minutes flight from Paramaribo in western Suriname, but the area's potential is high. In addition to the species list of 300 or so are two undescribed taxa that are the subject of further investigation (own data; apologies for my coyness!). Lodging is in a comfortable, air-conditioned hotel. Seasonally flooded forests flank the River Kabalebo, providing concealment for the largely nocturnal Zigzag Heron *Zebriulus undulatus* and habitat for Green Ibis, which is very common. Away from the river, the *terra firme* forest is rich in woodcreepers, foliage-gleaners, antbirds and antthrushes. Boat-billed Tody-Tyrant has been seen, and the borders of the liana forest offer a fairly good chance to encounter Band-tailed Antshrike, McConnell's Spinetail and Speckled Spinetail *Cranioleuca gutturata*. The airstrip is good for toucans, parrots and macaws.

Palumeu

Palumeu, on the River Tapanahoni in southern Suriname, is 90 minutes flight from Paramaribo. More than 400 species have been recorded. METS Travel and Tours have built comfortable accommodation in traditional Bushnegro style,

CONTACT DETAILS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Further details about the Central Suriname Nature Reserve (CSNR) can be found at www.ci-suriname.org/csnr/eng/Protected_Areas_Programme.htm. For more information on Boven Coesewijne Nature Reserve, see www.wfuguianas.org/our_work/protected_areas/boven_coesewijne/index.cfm.

STINASU (Foundation for Nature Conservation in Suriname) is the country's main national conservation organisation. In addition to its conservation and research programme, STINASU runs wildlife tours, with profits directed towards conservation. For more information, see www.stinasu.com or e-mail stinasu@sr.net. Commercial tour operators include Tropical Gem Tours (www.mytropicalgemtours.com or e-mail: tropicalgemtours@sr.net) and METS Travel and Tours (www.surinamevacations.com or e-mail: mets@sr.net). Tropical Gem Tours is the sole contact for Arapahu and Kappelairstrip, and METS Travel and Tours likewise for Palumeu. To visit the Tafelberg in CSNR, contact Hi-jet helicopter services (tel: 597 432577; e-mail: hi-jetheli@sr.net). To visit Kabalebo, e-mail natureresortkabalebo@hotmail.com.

Websites about birding in Suriname include www.planktonik.com/birdingsuriname/index.html (which also gives details of tours and birding sites) and www.1.nhl.nl/~ribot/English/ (contains photographs, country list and distribution maps).

near a village inhabited by Tareno and Wayana indians.

Several trails made by indigenous people extend far into the forest and provide birders with access. One trail can be reached with a 40-minute boat trip that traverses several rapids. Along this trail, Chestnut-belted Gnateater *Conopophaga aurita* is fairly common, Capuchinbirds are vocal and there is a chance of Band-tailed Antshrike. The elusive Cinnamon-crested Spadebill *Platyrrinchus saturatus* and the rare Cinnamon Manakin-Tyrant *Neopipo cinnamomea* have also been seen, and the lucky birder may come across a Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja* or Crested Eagle *Morphnus guianensis* (both Near Threatened). The trail terminates at a low inselberg called Potihill; this provides a viewpoint over the canopy that is a prime location from which to scan for the spectacular and rare Crimson Fruitcrow *Haematoderus militaris*. Finally, along the river, Green Ibis is common.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

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Clockwise from top right:

Rose-breasted Chat *Granatellus pelzeni* may be a distinctive-looking species, but it remains a taxonomic conundrum. In Suriname, it can be seen at Central Suriname Nature Reserve (Chris Collins)

Although generally rare in Suriname, Red-capped Cardinal *Paroaria gularis* is common at Arapahu (Chris Collins)

Pale-bellied Mourner *Rhytipterna immunda* is rare and difficult to see (Candy McManiman)