

Birding extreme **southern Suriname:** Kwamalasamutu and the Sipaliwini savanna

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Perceived difficulties of access have often dampened birdwatchers' interest in the central Guianan state of Suriname, and this applies especially to the far south of the country. Here, two researchers who have spent considerable time exploring this still rather remote area introduce us to the many avian possibilities in southernmost Suriname, as well as highlighting the potential for new ornithological discoveries in this poorly birded region.



Suriname, like the other Guianan countries, has received relatively little attention from birders. For those few that do visit, the trip is usually limited to the coastal zone and reserves in the northern and central parts of the country such as the Brownsberg Nature Park and Raleighvallen-Voltzberg in the Central Suriname Nature Reserve. An excellent introduction to these and other sites was the focus of Otte Ottema's article in *Neotropical Birding* 4⁴. Often expensive and with many logistical challenges, Suriname's remote southern interior has remained virtually unvisited. Recent developments, however, have made sites in southern Suriname more accessible and a birding trip may now reasonably include an extension to this region.

The Sipaliwini savanna is home to a number of birds found nowhere else in Suriname, among them: the striking Horned Sungem *Heliactin bilophus* (facing page), Serra do Cipó, Minas Gerais, Brazil (Nick Athanas), White-rumped Tanager *Cypsnagra hirundinacea* (above right), Serra do Cipó, Minas Gerais, Brazil (Nick Athanas), Rufous-sided Pygmy Tyrant *Euscarthmus rufomarginatus* (above left), Mugugê, Chapada Diamantina, Bahia, Brazil (Nick Athanas). Look for the sungem and tanager in areas of open *cerrado* with scattered sandpaper trees *Curatella americana*. Pygmy tyrants prefer wet meadows where they often occur alongside Bearded Tachuri *Polystictus pectoralis*.

In July–August 2006 and again in June–July 2007, we visited Kwamalasamutu and the Sipaliwini savanna in southern Suriname. Few tourists make it to these destinations, making it important that visitors plan carefully and be prepared for limited facilities and rustic accommodation. Though neither area is particularly conducive to fast-paced 'twitching' in search of specialties, Kwamalasamutu and the Sipaliwini offer exceptional birding opportunities and the potential to make exciting new discoveries. As emphasised by Pete Hosner's recent *Neotropical Birding* article¹, there are special advantages to birding 'off the beaten path' and southern Suriname is a region where this is particularly true. This article describes two interesting sites in the area and provides an introduction to the birds found there.

Kwamalasamutu and the Werehpai Cultural Reserve

Located roughly one and half hours flight south of Paramaribo, the Amerindian village of Kwamalasamutu is situated at the edge of the Sipaliwini River amidst one of the world's largest remaining expanses of unbroken rainforest. Home to approximately 800 people, Kwamalasamutu is the largest village in the region and the centre of the Trio government. As quickly becomes clear





Open grassland with scattered sandpaper trees *Curatella americana* (facing page, top) near Mamia Pakoro provides habitat for species such as White-banded *Neothraupis fasciata* and White-rumped Tanagers *Cypsnagra hirundinacea*, Chalk-browed Mockingbird *Mimus saturninus* and Narrow-billed Woodcreeper *Lepidocolaptes angustirostris* (John C. Mittermeier). Nearby *Mauritia* palm swamps (facing page, bottom) are excellent for Point-tailed Palmcreeper *Berlepschia rikeri*, Red-bellied Macaw *Orthopsittaca manillita* and others (John C. Mittermeier).

The extensive forest surrounding Kwamalasamutu village (left) provides prime habitat for many Guianan Shield forest species (John C. Mittermeier)

A climb to the top of the Vier Gebroeders hills (top) offers spectacular views over the surrounding landscape (John C. Mittermeier).

from the flocks of macaws flying overhead and the chorus of toucans, Kwamalasamutu is located in prime birding habitat.

Almost anywhere around Kwamalasamutu has the potential to hold interesting bird species and it is worth asking local guides for up-to-date information and taking time to explore. A good place to begin is Werehpai, a locally protected area located about an hour's boat ride upriver of the village. Traditional restrictions have long prohibited hunting in this area and as a result

several species of monkeys and gamebirds can be seen here.

The canoe trip upriver from Kwamalasamutu to Werehpai offers excellent birding: Drab Water Tyrants *Octhornis littoralis* and roosting Ladder-tailed Nightjars *Hydropsalis climacocerca* are frequent along the riverbank, Black-collared Swallows *Atticora melanoleuca* and White-banded Swallows *A. fasciata* are common, and canopy species such as Chestnut-fronted Macaw *Ara severa*, Red-fan Parrot *Derophtys accipitrinus*,



The Sipaliwini savanna is home to a number of birds found nowhere else in Suriname, among them: Least Nighthawk *Chordeiles pusillus*, Mamia Pakoro, Sipaliwini savanna, Suriname (top, John C. Mittermeier) and Scissor-tailed Nightjar *Hydropsalis torquata*, Mamia Pakoro, Sipaliwini savanna, Suriname (above, John C. Mittermeier). Nighthawks are commonly seen flying over the savanna at dusk while the nightjars can be found roosting around rocky outcrops during the day.



A popular species in zoos and aquariums around the world, the Blue Poison Dart Frog *Dendrobates azureus*, or 'okopipi', is endemic to a few small forest patches in the Sipaliwini savanna (John C. Mittermeier)

Look for the regionally endemic McConnell's Spinetail *Synallaxis macconelli* in the secondary forest at the start of the Werehpai trail; this individual was mist-netted there in August 2006 (John C. Mittermeier)



The discovery of White-banded Tanager *Neothraupis fasciata*, Mamia Pakoro, Sipaliwini savanna, Suriname (John C. Mittermeier) and Ocellated Crake *Micropygia schomburgki*, Mamia Pakoro, Sipaliwini savanna, Suriname (John C. Mittermeier) in the Sipaliwini savanna provide fine examples of the type of contribution birders can make to the ornithological knowledge of this region. A Brazilian species recorded almost exclusively from habitats south of the Amazon, the tanager was unknown in Suriname until our visit in 2006 revealed it to be common in savanna habitats around Mamia Pakoro. The crake, meanwhile, went unrecorded in Suriname until our second visit to Mamia Pakoro in 2007 when we found it to be uncommon in areas of dense grass at the edges of wet gullies.



TRAVELLING TO KWAMALASAMUTU

Facilities are limited in Kwamalasamutu and virtually non-existent in the Sipaliwini, so it is important to bring some necessary supplies with you. Contacting a local guide and making arrangements beforehand is also essential to a successful trip. Tourism operators in Paramaribo can help with this; in particular, Access Travel (597-424533, www.surinametravel.com), has experience arranging travel to Kwamalasamutu. Otte Ottema guides birding tours in Suriname and may be able to help organise a trip to the region (otteottema@yahoo.com, www.planktonik.com/birdingsuriname/).

For those interested in organising their visit independently, charter flights to Kwamalasamutu and the Sipaliwini can be arranged with Gum Air (597-498760, www.gumair.com) or Blue Wing (597-498760, www.bluewingairlines.com). At present, Blue Wing operates a weekly scheduled flight to Kwamalasamutu on Thursdays. Weight requirements are strict but this new service makes a potential visit to Kwamalasamutu more affordable (US\$425 round trip for 100 kg, at the time of writing). Stunning views of the forests and granite inselbergs of the Central Suriname Nature Reserve are to be had along the way.

In Kwamalasamutu, the lodge at Iwana Saamu has room for 12 people and beds equipped with mosquito netting. Expect to pay roughly US\$40/day for lodging and a local guide, plus an additional US\$15/day if you decide to hire your own cook. While the local guides are still being trained in the common names of many of the bird species, their knowledge and spotting skills are remarkable. John Rudolph (597-8910889) in Kwamalasamutu can help you arrange accommodation at Iwana Saamu.

Green Aracari *Pteroglossus viridis* and Bare-necked Fruitcrow *Gymnoderus foetidus* can be observed at the forest edge. During the mid-morning hours, the river is a good place to spot soaring raptors such as King Vulture *Sarcoramphus papa*, Hook-billed Kite *Chondrohierax uncinatus* and Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus melanoleucus*.

At Werehpai, a rustic camp beside the river marks the beginning of a c.7-km loop trail leading through the forest. The trail cuts through a

narrow strip of secondary forest before quickly transitioning to primary *terra firme* forest; at the furthest point from the river, it reaches a set of rocky outcrops home to an impressive collection of Amerindian petroglyphs. While most species of interest will be in the *terra firme*, the area directly around the camp should not be overlooked. The regional endemics Band-tailed Antshrike *Thamnophilus melanothorax* and McConnell's Spinetail *Synallaxis macconelli* have been observed close to the camp. In the primary forest, potential species include Black Curassow *Crax alector*, Guianan Toucanet *Selenidera culik*, Black-spotted Barbet *Capito niger*, Golden-collared Woodpecker *Veniliornis cassini*, Red-billed Woodcreeper *Hylexetastes perrotii*, Todd's Antwren *Herpsilochmus stictocephalus*, Ferruginous-backed Antbird *Myrmeciza ferruginea*, Wing-banded Antbird *Myrmornis torquata*, Spotted Antpitta *Hylopezus macularius*, Boat-billed Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus josephinae* and Capuchinbird *Perissocephalus tricolor*. Army ant swarms are attended by White-plumed *Pithys albifrons* and Scale-backed Antbirds *Willisornis poecilinotus* as well as the regional endemics Rufous-throated Antbird *Gymnopathys rufigula* and Guianan Warbling Antbird *Hypocnemis cantator*. In addition to the expected species, the Werehpai trail offers a chance to see some of Suriname's scarcer forest birds. For example, Black-faced Hawk *Leucopternis melanops* has been observed along this trail and local people report that Crimson Fruitcrow *Haematoderus militaris* is also present in the area. Mammals include seven species of monkeys and two species of brocket deer, as well as Brazilian Tapir *Tapirus terrestris*, Puma *Felis concolor* and Jaguar *Panthera onca*. The rocky outcrops at the end of the trail are also worth checking for birds. Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock *Rupicola rupicola* has been seen and there may be a lek of this spectacular species somewhere in the area.

Continuing upriver from Werehpai offers more river edge birding and the potential for mammal sightings as you move further from the village. Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja* occurs in this area and in the past has nested at a creek approximately two hours beyond Werehpai. It is worth asking locally if there is an active 'gonini' nest in the area (although be aware that 'gonini' can also refer to some of the large hawk-eagle species). Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* is a possibility in the river above Werehpai.

In the past two years, Conservation International–Suriname and the local people from

Kwamalasamutu have established an ecotourist lodge at Iwaana Saamu, a site just upriver of the village (see Box). An additional loop trail has been completed here and another trail connects the lodge to the village (a 1–2 hour hike), whilst a more extensive network of trails is also in the process of being constructed. Although these were not yet open at the time of our visit, they probably offer a similar set of species to Werehpai. In addition to the established trails, local guides can take you on a large network of narrow paths and hunting routes around the village; for those with time to explore, this is a worthwhile option.

Sipaliwini Nature Reserve

For the truly adventurous, the Sipaliwini Nature Reserve offers a birding experience unlike any other in Suriname. This open savanna habitat along the country's southern border is connected to the larger Parú–Trombetas savanna across the border in Brazil. A number of the bird species in this area are typical of the Brazilian Cerrado and some of them are found nowhere else in the Guianan region.

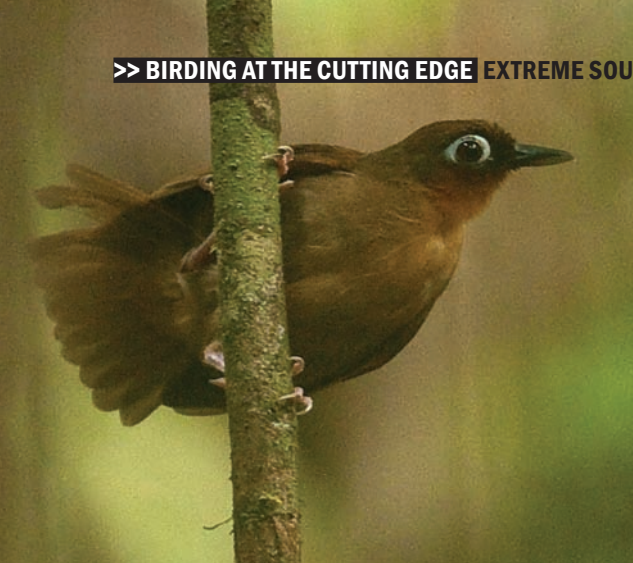
An excellent base for exploring the savanna is Mamia Pakoro, a set of simple huts adjacent to the Vier Gebroeders airstrip (see adjacent box). Sited on an elevated portion of campo grassland bordered by flooded meadows and *Mauritia* palm swamps, Mamia Pakoro offers easy access to a diverse array of nearby habitats. Red-bellied Macaws *Orthopsittaca manilata* and Point-tailed Palmcreepers *Berlepschia rikeri* are common and easily observed in the stands of *Mauritia* palms near the airstrip. The surrounding swampy areas are home to Giant Snipe *Gallinago undulata*, Bearded Tachuri *Polystictus pectoralis*, Rufous-sided Pygmy Tyrant *Euscarthmus rufomarginatus*, Capped Seedeater *Sporophila bouvreuil* and White-bellied Seedeater *S. leucoptera*. Ocellated Crane *Micropygia schomburgkii* can be heard and, with luck, seen in areas of dense grass at the edges of swamps. Least Nighthawks *Chordeiles pusillus* are commonly seen at dusk and Scissor-tailed Nightjar *Hydropsalis torquata* roost around rocky outcrops. Cerrado habitats with scattered trees are home to Peach-fronted Parakeet *Aratinga aurea*, Swallow-tailed Hummingbird *Eupetomena macroura*, Horned Sungem *Heliactin bilophus*, Gray Monjita *Xolmis cinereus* and White-throated Kingbird *Tyrannus albogularis*. Mixed-species flocks moving through these areas contain another suite of exciting birds: Narrow-billed Woodcreeper *Lepidocolaptes angustirostris*, Suiriri Flycatcher

TRAVELLING TO THE SIPALIWINI SAVANNA

The Sipaliwini savanna can be reached by charter flight to the Vier Gebroeders airstrip at Mamia Pakoro (c.2 hours from Paramaribo, contact Gum Air or Blue Wing). Furthermore, Mamia Pakoro is only about 30-minutes flight from Kwamalasamutu and for those travelling by charter plane, one or two nights in the savanna could make an easy addition to a trip to Werehpai. The airstrip at Mamia Pakoro has three simple thatch huts where hammocks or tents can be set up. The accommodation is basic and visitors should be prepared to bring their own food and supplies (two tanks collect rainwater for drinking). Staying here requires notifying Sipaliwini village at least a few days in advance so that they can send someone to check the airstrip, and contacting the Natuur Beheer (Nature Conservation Division) in Paramaribo (597-47431). The best way to get in touch with Sipaliwini village is by radio via Kwamalasamutu (John Rudolph can help organise this).

Suiriri suiriri, Chalk-browed Mockingbird *Mimus saturninus*, White-banded Tanager *Neothraupis fasciata* and White-rumped Tanager *Cypsnagra hirundinacea*. Tapir trails crisscross the swamps and Giant Anteater *Myrmecophaga tridactyla* and Crab-eating Fox *Cerdocyon thous* inhabit the open savanna.

Forest islands within the savanna also provide good birding opportunities. Small patches of forest south and east of Mamia Pakoro harbour species such as Variable Chachalaca *Ortalis motmot*, Sooty-capped Hermit *Phaethornis augusti*, White-bellied Antbird *Myrmeciza longipes*, Pale-bellied Tyrant-Manakin *Neopelma pallescens* and Burnished-buff Tanager *Tangara cayana*. The largest and most productive forest patches are those near the Vier Gebroeders ('Four Brothers') hills. No visit to the Sipaliwini is complete without a hike to the Vier Gebroeders (c.6 km from Mamia Pakoro). The forests around the hills contain a number of species not found in more open areas of the savanna. Among these, the highlight will undoubtedly be the flocks of Sulfur-breasted Parakeets *Aratinga maculata* that can be heard flying noisily overhead and observed feeding within the canopy. The Vier Gebroeders and nearby hills are also the only place on Earth





Primary forest along the Werehpai trail, as well as the canoe trip from Kwamalasamutu, offers the potential to see an exciting array of species including: Rufous-throated Antbird *Gymnopathys rufigula*, Iwokrama Forest Reserve, Guyana, October 2009 (facing page, top left, Hadoram Shirihai / *Photographic handbook to birds of the world*), Black Curassow *Crax alector*, north of Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil, September 2009 (facing page, bottom, Hadoram Shirihai / *Photographic handbook to birds of the world*), female Guianan Toucanet *Selenidera culik*, ZF2 tower, north of Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil, September 2009 (above, Hadoram Shirihai / *Photographic handbook to birds of the world*), Ferruginous-backed Antbird *Myrmeciza ferruginea*, north of Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil (facing page, top right, Nick Athanas), male Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock *Rupicola rupicola*, Presidente Figueiredo, Amazonas, Brazil, September 2009 (above right, Hadoram Shirihai / *Photographic handbook to birds of the world*) and Black-collared Swallow *Atticora melanoleuca*, Iwokrama River Lodge, Guyana, October 2009 (right, Hadoram Shirihai / *Photographic handbook to birds of the world*)





Giant Otters *Pteronura brasiliensis*, Iwokrama River Lodge, Guyana, October 2009 (Hadoram Shirihai / *Photographic handbook to birds of the world*)

to observe the striking Blue Poison Dart Frog *Dendrobates azureus*. Climbing to the top of the Vier Gebroeders provides a stunning 360° panorama of the surrounding savanna, forested hills and distant jungle-covered mountains across the border in Brazil. With no human habitation in sight, this vista provides a feeling of being in a true wilderness.

A visit to Kwamalasamutu and the Sipaliwini requires careful planning and patience. For those willing to make the effort, however, birding in this remote corner of Suriname will undoubtedly prove to be a memorable experience. Most exciting, every visit offers the opportunity to contribute valuable information to our ornithological knowledge of the region. Simply keeping a careful record of your daily sightings and behavioural observations can lead to exciting discoveries. For example, trips to the Sipaliwini in 2003 and 2006–07 produced a total of eight new species for the country including unexpected surprises such as the Cerrado endemic White-banded Tanager^{2,3}. At Werehpai in 2006, JCM discovered the first recorded nest of Band-tailed Antshrike⁵ while birding near the rocky outcrops at the end of the trail. In an ornithological frontier like southern Suriname, who knows what else is still waiting to be discovered?

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