

NEOTROPICAL BIRDING 6
MARCH 2010

Birding in north-east Brazil, part 1: Ceará, Pernambuco, Alagoas and northern Bahia

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With a raft of endemic and seriously threatened birds, north-east Brazil is a fantastic area for world birders. In the first of a two-part article, one of the region's top birding guides treats us to a tour of the best sites.

Megadiverse Brazil is a paradise for birding, with an avifauna of more than 1,800 species². Most birders visit well-known areas such as the Amazon, Atlantic Forests of south-east Brazil and the Pantanal (the latter treated to an article on pp. 40–47). But, increasingly, local and foreign birders are targeting the previously little-explored north-east of the country. This huge region comprises ecosystems as diverse as the extremely arid

Caatinga, its dense thorny vegetation adorned with terrestrial bromeliads and cacti, through the savanna of the Cerrado, to remnant tracts of moist and exuberant Atlantic Forest; unsurprisingly north-east Brazil contains an amazing seven Endemic Bird Areas⁴. The region is strewn with endemic and threatened birds, and new species (or taxonomic refinements) are still being described every year. Even so, I very much doubt the list is complete...

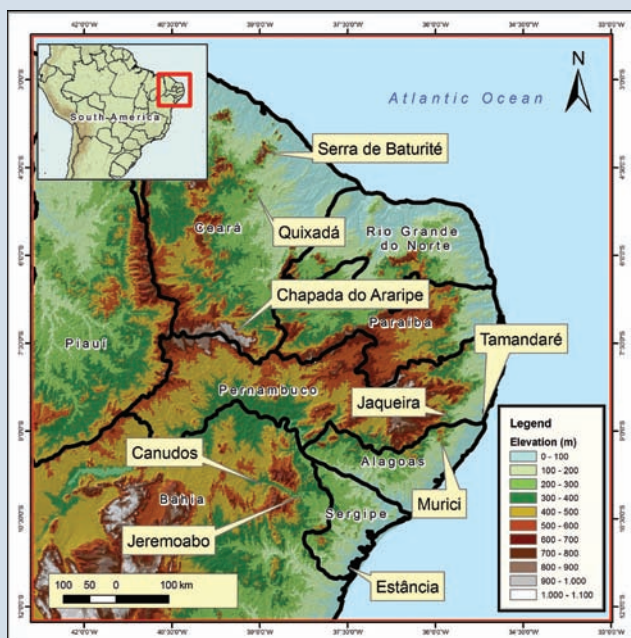
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Lear's Macaw *Anodorhynchus leari*, Biodiversitas Reserve, Canudos, Bahia. Thanks to conservation efforts by the Fundação Biodiversitas, Brazilian authorities and local communities, the population of this amazing species is increasing. In 2009, it was downlisted to Endangered; a success story!





'Gray-breasted Parakeet' *Pyrrhura leucotis griseipectus*, Serra de Baturité, Ceará. The Americas' only Critically Endangered parakeet, with the last remaining small population (at Serra de Baturité) fortunately the subject of a conservation initiative by the NGO Aquasis



Above: Map of north-east Brazil indicating localities mentioned in the text

Right: Spot-winged Wood Quail *Odontophorus capueira plumbeicollis*, Serra de Baturité, Ceará: this subspecies is endemic to the Atlantic Forest of Ceará, Pernambuco and Alagoas



Overview

To bird this amazing region adequately, I calculate that you need at least 23 days. As that is too much for one article, I split my recommendations for birding the region into two parts, with the other to come in a future *Neotropical Birding*. I will cover all but the far north of the vast state of Bahia in the second article. Here I focus on the extreme north-east, namely the states of Ceará, Pernambuco, Alagoas, Sergipe and northernmost Bahia. I start with an overview of the ecosystems and their target species before identifying key sites to visit.

In the state of Ceará, west of Pernambuco and interior of Bahia, the seasonally dry Caatinga holds globally threatened birds such as Lear's Macaw *Anodorhynchus leari* (Endangered), White-browed Guan *Penelope jacucaca* (Vulnerable) and Pectoral Antwren *Herpsilochmus pectoralis* (Vulnerable). Near Threatened specialities include Red-shouldered Spinetail *Gyalophylax hellmayri*, White-browed Antpitta *Hylopezus ochroleucus* and Caatinga Antwren *Herpsilochmus sellowi*. Other targets for birders include Pygmy Nightjar *Caprimulgus hirundinaceus*, Broad-tipped Hermit *Anopetia gounellei*, Spotted Piculet *Picumnus pygmaeus*, Great Xenops *Megaxenops paraguayae*, Caatinga Cacholote *Pseudoseisura cristata*, Silvery-cheeked Antshrike *Sakesphorus cristatus*, White-naped Jay *Cyanocorax cyanopogon*, White-throated Seedeater *Sporophila albogularis* and Red-cowled Cardinal *Paroaria dominicana*.

Extending above the lowland Caatinga are isolated mountain ranges holding enclaves of moist forest. One example is Serra de Baturité in Ceará. The most famous avian inhabitant of such areas is Araripe Manakin *Antilophia bokermanni* (Critically Endangered), which occurs only along the slopes of Chapada do Araripe, southern Ceará. (For a photospot on this fabulous bird, see *Neotropical Birding* 5¹.) Other key birds to see include endemics such as Maroon-faced Parakeet *Pyrrhura leucotis* of the distinctive subspecies *griseipectus* (which BirdLife International considers to be a valid and Critically Endangered species, 'Gray-breasted Parakeet', a treatment currently under consideration by the South American Classification Committee), Buff-breasted Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus mirandae* (Vulnerable) and Ochraceous Piculet *Picumnus limae* (Vulnerable). There are also isolated populations of Amazon and Atlantic species that are likely future splits, such as Gould's Toucanet *Selenidera gouldii baturitensis*,

Rufous Gnateater *Conopophaga lineata cearae*, Rufous-breasted Leastosser *Sclerurus scansor cearensis* and Lesser Woodcreeper *Xiphorhynchus fuscus atlanticus* (for details on the latter, see *Neotropical Birding* 5: 16–17).

One of the Neotropics' most important centres of avian endemism comprises the Atlantic Forest of eastern Alagoas and Pernambuco, north of the rio São Francisco. Unfortunately, the demand for biofuels has inspired the almost wholesale replacement of native forest with sugar cane monoculture, so that only small patches of forest remain. These provide habitat for some of the world's rarest and most threatened birds. Foremost among them are White-collared Kite *Leptodon forbesi*, Alagoas Foliage-gleaner *Philydor novaesi* and Alagoas Antwren *Myrmotherula snowi* (all Critically Endangered). The supporting cast, if one were needed, is provided by Endangered taxa such as Pinto's Spinetail *Synallaxis infusca*, Orange-bellied Antwren *Terenura sicki*, Alagoas Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes ceciliae* and Forbes' Blackbird *Curaeus forbesi*, while other target birds include Long-tailed Woodnymph *Thalurania watertonii* (Near Threatened) and the stunning Seven-colored Tanager *Tangara fastuosa* (Vulnerable).

South of the rio São Francisco in the tiny state of Sergipe, the lowland Atlantic Forest holds Golden-capped Parakeet *Aratinga auricapillus* (Near Threatened), Fringe-backed Fire-eye *Pyriglena atra* (Endangered), the recently split Pernambuco Foliage-gleaner *Automolus lammi* and Sooretama Slaty Antshrike *Thamnophilus ambiguus*.

Key birding sites

Based on my own experience of several years birding in the region, I outline the key sites that should form part of the optimum itinerary for threatened and endemic birds. A good place to start is at the international airport of Fortaleza, Ceará's capital. You can hire a vehicle at the airport then stay overnight in one of the city's many hotels or drive two hours to the village of Guaramiranga, in the Serra de Baturité. The end of the trip can be either in Recife (capital of Pernambuco's capital) or Salvador (Bahia's capital), which both have international airports.

Serra de Baturité, Ceará (04°15'S 38°55'W)

This mountain range lies at c.800 m altitude, c.180 km south of Fortaleza. Slopes of such *brejos* that face prevailing moisture-laden winds are clad in

humid forest, which grades into semi-deciduous forest then xeric Caatinga in lower areas. The key birds here are 'Gray-breasted Parakeet', Ochraceus Piculet, Buff-breasted Tody-Tyrant, and the local (and probably splittable) forms of Spot-winged Wood Quail *Odontophorus capueira plumbeicollis*, Gould's Toucanet, Rufous-breasted Leaf-tosser, Lesser Woodcreeper, Rufous Gnateater, Variable Antshrike *Thamnophilus caerulescens cearensis*, Slender-footed Tyrannulet *Zimmerius gracilipes acer* (although almost certainly a cryptic new taxon is involved), and Red-necked Tanager *Tangara cyanocephala cearensis*. There is also an isolated population of Short-tailed Antthrush *Chamaeza campanisona* with unusual vocalisations; a taxonomic assessment is underway.

The best birding site is Hotel Remanso near Guaramiranga (www.remansohoteldeserra.com.br/diversao.html; open weekends all year and throughout December, January and July). The Remanso property has great forest; bird along the trails and entrance road to see all species mentioned in the preceding paragraph bar 'Gray-breasted Parakeet'. If the accommodation is closed, you can still ask permission to bird the forest, lodging instead at Hotel Alto da Serra (tel: +55 85 33211403). This hotel is very near Guaramiranga; good birds in its gardens include Ochraceus Piculet, Gould's Toucanet, Slender-footed Tyrannulet and Buff-breasted Tody-Tyrant. For 'Gray-breasted Parakeet', I suggest heading to a nearby roost site. Leave Hotel Remanso towards the village of Pacoti. One km before the village, turn left towards Pernambuco village. At 04°12'54.30"S 38°56'36.73"W, turn left onto the dirt road. After exactly 472 m (!), you arrive at a tiny square at 04°13'03.31"S 38°56'49.43"W; arrive by 17h00 and watch the birds come into roost. One-and-a-half days is normally sufficient to see the specialities.

Quixadá, Ceará (04°58'S 39°01'W)

Two hours drive from Serra de Baturité, Quixadá is characterised by *inselbergs* or *monólitos* (strange rock formations that resemble icebergs). At this usually very hot and dry site, the target bird is Pygmy Nightjar *Caprimulgus hirsutidaceus*, which roosts and breeds among the rocks, cacti and terrestrial bromeliads. One of the best places to find it is around Hotel Pedra dos Ventos (www.pedradosventos.com.br), which has good accommodation. While looking for the nightjar, you should find Caatinga birds such as Cactus Parakeet, Red-cowled

TIMING

Time your visit carefully. In the Atlantic Forest of Alagoas and Pernambuco, the 'sugar cane tracks' used to reach sites are usually impassable after rain. The optimum period is September–February, when most areas should be dry. Even then, a 4×4 is essential for sites such as Murici and Jaqueira.

Cardinal, and Campo Troupial *Icterus jamacaii*. An overnight stop should be sufficient.

Chapada do Araripe, Ceará

(07°16'S 39°29'W)

Five hours drive from Quixadá in southern Ceará, the moist forest on the slopes of Chapada do Araripe is the home of Araripe Manakin, most easily seen at Arajara water park, the type locality. Access to the park from the nearby town of Crato is easy; if in doubt, ask one of the ubiquitous and cheap *moto-taxis* to take you. Plentiful trails bring you close to your quarry, and there are also local guides to escort you. Also look for Tawny Piculet *Picumnus fulvescens* and Black-capped Antwren *Herpsilochmus atricapillus*. A good place to stay is Hotel Encosta da Serra (www.encostadaserra.com.br/hotel.php), a few minutes from Crato.

Once you have 'bagged' the manakin, head up to *caatinga* vegetation on the Chapada's plateau. To get there, drive towards Exu (in Pernambuco). Once on the plateau, the road flattens out as it goes through Floresta Nacional do Araripe. Look out for the ICMBio (formerly IBAMA) office on your left. Some 8.4 km later, the forest peters out; turn right here on an unpaved road. After 1.7 km, an excellent trail starts at 07°17'25.34"S 39°33'41.51"W. Bird this trail for Caatinga specialities such as Great Xenops, Red-shouldered Spinetail, Silvery-cheeked Antshrike, the Caatinga form of Barred Antshrike *Thamnophilus doliatus capistratus* (which evidence suggests is a morphologically but not genetically distinct species), Caatinga Antwren, Tawny Piculet, the secretive White-browed Antpitta, and, with luck, White-browed Guan. You should also find Pale-bellied Tyrant-Manakin *Neopelma pallescens*, Gray-eyed Greenlet *Hylophilus amaurocephalus*, Ochre-cheeked Spinetail *Synallaxis scutata*, Stripe-backed Antbird *Myrmorchilus strigilatus* and White-naped Jay. Two days here should do the Chapada justice.



Clockwise from top:

Pygmy Nightjar *Caprimulgus hirundinaceus cearae*, Quixadá, Ceará. An endemic subspecies associated with rocky areas, and easily seen at Quixadá

White-browed Antpitta *Hylopezus ochroleucus*, Chapada do Araripe, Ceará. Favours dense *caatinga* vegetation, usually above 500 m, and is Near Threatened

Male Fringe-backed Fire-eye *Pyriglena atra*, Mata de São João, Bahia. Look for this Endangered antbird between Crasto and Santa Luzia de Itanhi in Sergipe





Clockwise from top left:

Alagoas Foliage-gleaner *Philydor novaesi*, Jaqueira, Pernambuco. Critically Endangered and one of Brazil's rarest birds (no mean feat in this country)

Great Xenops *Megaxenops parnaguae*, Chapada do Araripe, Ceará. Bizarre and endemic to dense *caatinga* vegetation, a good place to see it is the plateau of Chapada do Araripe

Seven-colored Tanager *Tangara fastuosa*, Jaqueira, Pernambuco. Look for this Vulnerable thraupid in canopy flocks on the forest edge at Murici, Jaqueira and Tamandaré



Canudos, Bahia (09°53'S 39°01'W)

From Chapada do Araripe, drive south along highway BR-116, crossing Pernambuco state and entering Bahia. At Bendego, turn left onto the unpaved BR-235, reaching Canudos after 20 km. The drive takes six hours. This area, known as Raso da Catarina, is Lear's Macaw *Anodorhynchus leari* territory. To see up to 200 roosting macaws, seek permission from Paula Oliveira at the NGO Fundação Biodiversitas to visit their private reserve (www.biodiversitas.org.br/canudos_eng/default.asp; e-mail Paula at Paula@biodiversitas.org.br). Alternatively, head to the feeding areas. The best place is Fazenda Toureiro, c.45 km east of Canudos along the BR-235 towards Jeremoabo; the *fazenda* is well known so ask directions if you cannot find it. Accommodation-wise, you can either stay in the very simple Hotel Brasil (tel: +55 75 3494 2039) in Canudos or Hotel Senhor do Bomfim (tel: +55 75 3203 2134) in Jeremoabo, c.60 km beyond Fazenda Toureiro.

Beautiful and rare though the species is, the macaw should not be your only target at Canudos. Along the approach road to the Biodiversitas reserve, look for Broad-tipped Hermit *Anopetia gounellei*, Pectoral Antwren *Herpsilochmus pectoralis*, the strange Scarlet-throated Tanager *Compothraupis loricata* and the local subspecies of Lesser Wagtail-Tyrant *Stigmatura napensis bahiae* and Greater Wagtail-Tyrant *S. budytoides gracilis* (both of which are split as full species by the International Ornithological Congress). More widespread species of interest include Red-legged Seriema *Cariama cristata* and Blue-crowned Parakeet *Aratinga acuticaudata*.

Once in Bahia, those blessed with ample time will probably want to fully explore the enormous state's birding glories (to be covered in part 2 of this article). For those on a tighter schedule, I suggest heading to sites in Sergipe, Alagoas and Pernambuco.

Estância, Sergipe (11°21'S 37°27'W)

From Jeremoabo, head south on the BR-110 to Cicero Dantas. Here head east, on the BA-220. As you cross the state border, the road changes name to SE-270. At the BR-101, turn south to the town of Estância, where the best accommodation is Hotel Magnus (tel: +55 79 3522 2044). The journey takes seven hours. The birding highlight at Estância is Fringe-backed Fire-eye, which occurs in a forest fragment (at 12°41'22.28"S 38°49'36.58"W) near the coast along the road between Santa Luzia do Itanhi and Crasto. Other good birds are Golden-tailed Parrotlet *Touit surdus* (Vulnerable), Golden-

capped Parakeet, Sooretama Slaty Antshrike, Pernambuco Foliage-gleaner and Stripe-necked Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus striatocolis*, a scarce bird in eastern Brazil (although one easily found in the Pantanal; see pp. 40–47). A morning should suffice to see all these species.

Estação Ecológica de Murici, Alagoas

(09°13'S 35°52'W)

From Estância, head north on BR-101 into Alagoas. A few kilometres after Maceio, you reach Messias. After 1–2 km, turn left onto BR-104 for 35 km to União dos Palmares. Here look for signs to the Quilombo Park Hotel (www.hotelquilombo.com/corpo/hotel.asp) which provides a suitable base for your visit to Murici Ecological Station. Reaching Murici is very difficult for several reasons. First, a 4×4 is essential as the tracks are in very poor condition. Second, the drive takes at least 90 minutes, so you will need to ask for an early breakfast (tipping the kitchen staff will be much appreciated!). Finally, directions are impossible to give, and navigating by GPS is almost essential. For anyone who insists on going there unaccompanied, e-mail me for the GPS track. Otherwise, I strongly recommend going with a driver-guide. Quilombo can arrange one for US\$300 per day. Alternatively, I use Senhor Kedson, who charges US\$200 (tel: +55 82 9919 3003).

Murici is rightly one of north-east Brazil's most famous birding sites. In the 1980s, no fewer than four new species for science were described from here: Alagoas Foliage-gleaner, Alagoas Antwren, Alagoas Tyrannulet and Orange-bellied Antwren. All four are very rare but cling on in forest patches that have survived the ravages of sugar cane producers. In the skies above, scan for White-collared Kite *Leptodon forbesi* (Critically Endangered), a recently revalidated and rediscovered species³ that is now being seen with increasing frequency in Alagoas and Pernambuco. Also look for Jandaya Parakeet *Aratinga jandaya*, Seven-colored Tanager, Black-headed Berryeater *Carpornis melanocephala* and Pernambuco Foliage-gleaner. Those with one eye on potential future splits may want to search for the local races of Scalloped Antbird *Myrmeciza ruficauda soror*, Golden-spangled Piculet *Picumnus exilis pernambucensis*, Willis's Antbird *Cercomacra laeta sabinoi*, White-shouldered Antshrike *Thamnophilus aethiops distans*, White-throated Spadebill *Platyrinchus mystaceus niveigularis* and Black-cheeked Gnatcatcher *Conopophaga melanops nigrifrons*. Beware, however, that all

species listed appear to becoming rarer, or, at least, more difficult to see. A back-up site is essential, and I recommend the following.

Reserva Particular do Patrimônio Natural Frei Caneca (aka Jaqueira), Pernambuco (08°44'S 35°47'W)

Owned by the Usina Colônia sugar mill, the reserve has one of the best fragments of montane forest remaining in Pernambuco. Part of the Serra do Urubu mountain range, it is the only site other than Murici from which Alagoas Foliage-gleaner has been recorded. I have never missed this rarity here in my 10+ visits over the past two years, and regularly see two individuals. Moreover, Alagoas Tyrannulet and Orange-bellied Antwren are still common (although I have only seen Alagoas Antwren here once, so please report any sightings to SAVE Brasil, BirdLife in Brazil). More specialties are possible, including Golden-tailed Parrotlet, Long-tailed Woodnymph, Pinto's Spinetail, Buff-throated Purpletuft *Iodopleura pipra leucopygia* (Near Threatened) and Seven-colored Tanager. One day's birding should be sufficient to find these target birds.

To visit, you need the owner's permission (please e-mail me for details or speak with Senhor Zezito, the reserve guard, on +55 81 9968 7641). You will need a 4x4 to reach the reserve. From União dos Palmares, take the BR-104 to Quipapá and then the PE-126 eastwards, which brings you to Jaqueira town. At Jaqueira, take a moto-taxi to Usina Colônia and get directions to the reserve, or better, get the motorcyclist to guide you as you follow in your vehicle. The reserve offers simple accommodation, but you must take food and linen. Senhor Zezito knows the best areas for the threatened birds, and his wife can cook your food. An alternative (in my view, better) is to day-trip from the Quilombo Park Hotel in Alagoas, which is just 90 minutes away. Senhor Kedson, the driver from Murici, knows the way and can take you there and help with arrangements.

Tamandaré, Pernambuco (08°45'S 35°05'W)

The coastal town of Tamandaré attracts birders keen to try for two key species: Pernambuco Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium mooreorum* and White-collared Kite. Despite much searching, the former species remains an enigma; there is only one probable record since its description in 2002. The type locality is the Reserva Biológica de Saltinho (08°43'27"S 35°10'13"W), a few kilometres from Tamandaré. Visitors need

advance permission from ICMBio (the nearest office is in Recife, two hours away, although one is being opened in Tamandaré). Even without the pygmy owl, there is considerable birding interest. This is the best site for Yellow-faced Siskin *Carduelis yarrellii* (Vulnerable), which often feeds on the exotic pine trees *Pinus* sp. near the entrance gate. Along the main trail, look for Smoky-fronted Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilatriccus fumifrons* in the dense shrubbery and keep an eye out for Long-tailed Woodnymph, Willis's Antbird and Seven-colored Tanager.

One of the 'hot' sites for White-collared Kite is the private forests of Engenho Cachoeira Linda (08°48'S 35°19'W). Like Murici, this area is hard to reach, so I suggested that potential visitors e-mail me for the GPS track. To look for this raptor, find a good view over the canopy and watch from early morning (06h00–10h00 is best), when birds tend to display. Ask permission to enter.

Another endemic around Tamandaré is Forbes' Blackbird *Curaeus forbesi* (Endangered). From the Saltinho reserve go south on the PE-060 until you see the signs to Agua Preta (at 08°47'22.20"S 35°11'06.14"W). Here, turn right (west) and drive 1 km to grid reference 08°47'19.22"S 35°11'37.35"W. Look for the blackbird in *Cecropia* trees in the banana and sugar cane plantations. Early mornings are best. Finally, you have a good chance of Red-shouldered Macaw *Diopsittaca nobilis* and Blue-headed Parrot *Pionus menstruus reichenowi* anywhere around Tamandaré.

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Counterclockwise from top right:

Male Scarlet-throated Tanager *Compsothraupis loricata*, Caetit , Bahia. A bizarre, icterid-like tanager that forages in small, noisy flocks in *caatinga* and *cerrado*

Male Ochraceous Piculet *Picumnus limae*, Serra de Batur , Cear . Vulnerable and restricted range, but fairly common in Serra de Batur 

Male Pectoral Antwren *Herpsilochmus pectoralis*, Jeremoabo, Bahia. This Vulnerable species is restricted to north-east Brazil but has a strange, fragmented distribution restricted to north-east Brazil. It is very common at Praia de Pipa (06 13'43"S 35 02'42"W) on the southern coast of Rio Grande do Norte

Male Alagoas Antwren *Myrmotherula snowi*, Murici, Alagoas. Another Critically Endangered endemic, known from just four small forest fragments, notably Murici

White-collared Kite *Leptodon forbesi*, Engenho Cachoeira Linda, Barreiros, Pernambuco. Critically Endangered and finally a subject of conservation attention

