


An update on birding in Guyana

following the Neotropical Bird Club Guyana 2009 tour

Chris Collins and Barry Walker

Continuing the saga on the birds of Guyana, two top bird guides demonstrate why this small country should be held in the highest praise when speaking of birds.



Rufous-winged Ground Cuckoo
Neomorphus rufipennis is one of
the top specialities possible at Atta
Rainforest Lodge (Clive Good)

In late November 2009, nine members of the Neotropical Bird Club (NBC) joined Barry Walker and Chris Collins for a highly successful 17-day bird tour to Guyana. The twin objectives of the trip were to look for a range of poorly known species whilst at the same time raising important funds for the Club. The trip exceeded expectations on both fronts with over £4,000 raised for NBC and 385 species recorded. These included an excellent selection of Guianan Shield endemics as well as ten species of cotingas, 14 woodpeckers, 31 antbirds and 17 parrots.

In this article, we describe some of the locations visited on the tour that were not referred to in a previous article published in *Neotropical Birding*¹, and provide further information on some of the sites that were covered earlier.

Coastal birding near Georgetown

Although Guyana has received many international plaudits for its commitment to preserve the thousands of square kilometres of untouched rainforests that remain within the country's borders, unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the mangroves and coastal woodlands which continue to be cleared at an alarming rate.

These habitats are home to three restricted-range birds, Blood-coloured Woodpecker *Veniliornis sanguineus*, White-bellied Piculet *Picumnus spilogaster* and Rufous Crab Hawk *Buteogallus aequinoctialis*. On the tour we visited an area known as Abary Bridge, approximately 50 km east of Georgetown, and were able to find all three species. This is one of the few areas where suitable vegetation still remains.

Another poorly known species around Abary is the Guianan Gnatcatcher *Polioptila guianensis*. Despite extensive searches we have never seen the Guianan Piculet *Picumnus minutissimus* in this area. The River Courantyne, which separates Guyana from neighbouring Suriname, might well serve as a natural barrier for the piculet, which seems to be reasonably common in Suriname but is apparently replaced by White-bellied Piculet *P. spilogaster* on the Guianan side.

Lethem, southern Guyana

The area around Lethem in southern Guyana is rarely visited by birders, however, for those wanting to see some of Guyana's real specialities, namely Sun Parakeet *Aratinga solstitialis* (Endangered), Red Siskin *Carduelis cucullata*

(Endangered), Rio Branco Antbird *Cercomacra carbonaria* (Near Threatened) and Hoary-throated Spinetail *Synallaxis kollari* (Endangered)², this modest town makes an excellent base.

On the tour we spent three days making a series of day trips to look for these species.

Undoubtedly the most spectacular of these four is the Sun Parakeet which 30 years ago was common across the Guianas. Huge numbers were, however, caught for the cagebird trade and by the late 1980s the only place where it could be found in Guyana was near the isolated community of Karasabai. This village is on the border with Brazil in south-west Guyana and even here the birds were trapped in vast numbers. For reasons which remain a mystery, when the number of birds was reputed to have reached single figures, the villagers decided to ban trapping and began protecting the birds. Since then, numbers have slowly increased and there are now thought to be about 300 or so parrots in the area. Despite this, finding them can present a challenge and anyone contemplating a visit should obtain advance permission, as the community is unfamiliar with the concept of birders, and remain suspicious of anyone who they consider could be a parrot trapper. During the tour we visited an area approximately 6 km from the village, where we enjoyed great looks at nine parakeets with one pair occupying a nesting hole. The birds do, however, range widely and an alternative option is to hire a boat and search along the nearby river where at least 30 individuals were seen by CC on a previous visit in 2008.

Rio Branco Antbird and Hoary-throated Spinetail occur in the highly fragmented and threatened gallery forest along the rio Branco (in Brazil) and its main tributaries. Although Lethem is located on the Takatu River (a tributary of the Branco), neither species seems to have been found along this waterway despite the existence of seemingly suitable habitat. On the tour, therefore, we visited another tributary (the Ireng River) which can be reached in the dry season by a 4x4. When conditions are wetter, it is necessary to hire a boat in Lethem and travel down the Takatu for a couple of hours to its confluence with the Ireng. Recent agricultural expansion has seriously reduced the available habitat for these two species but both can be found within a couple of kilometres of the confluence of the Takatu and Ireng Rivers, and on the tour we enjoyed good looks at both birds.

The final speciality is Red Siskin, another species which has been decimated by the cagebird trade and is now extinct across much



Above, top and inset right: Red Siskin *Carduelis cucullata* (Hadoram Shirihai/*Birds of the world: a photographic handbook*) suffered a marked population decline due to the cagebird trade and is treated as Endangered by BirdLife International, but can be found close to Dadanawa Ranch

Above, middle and bottom: Rufous-winged Ground Cuckoo *Neomorphus rufipennis* is one of the top specialities possible at Atta Rainforest Lodge (Clive Good)"

Opposite page, clockwise from top:

Grey-winged Trumpeter *Psophia crepitans* (Hadoram Shirihai/*Birds of the world: a photographic handbook*). Although Grey-winged Trumpeters can be found throughout much of northern Amazonia, they are especially numerous in parts of Guyana

Following a marked population decline due to intensive trapping for the cagebird trade, the Sun Parakeet *Aratinga solstitialis* is slowly recovering and can be seen near Karasabai village on the border with Brazil (Chris Collins)

Female Black-throated Antshrike *Frederickena viridis* (Hadoram Shirihai/*Birds of the world: a photographic handbook*)

Hoary-throated Spinetail *Synallaxis kollari* (Hadoram Shirihai/*Birds of the world: a photographic handbook*). This Endangered species is only found in gallery forest along the rio Branco and some of its tributaries. Lethem makes an excellent base as the species can be found along the nearby Ireng River

Female Crimson Fruitcrow *Haematoderus militaris* (Hadoram Shirihai/*Birds of the world: a photographic handbook*); the clearing at the Atta Rainforest Lodge is probably one of the most reliable sites in the world for this spectacular Guianan speciality



of its former range, with many of the remaining populations seriously fragmented. It was only in recent years that it was discovered in Guyana, with this population being over 950 km from the nearest known site in Venezuela. Today, however, the Guyanese birds are being studied and protected from bird-trappers by an active local conservation society. With their assistance one stands a good chance of finding this spectacular bird. Three Red Siskins were seen by tour members at one locality; however, to protect the birds we will not publish further details here and recommend that anyone who wishes to look for this species contact Dadanawa Ranch.

For those with sufficient time, the 'conventional' strategy is to stay at Dadanawa Ranch for two or three days, although if your time is limited it is possible to get to some of the sites on a day trip from Lethem. Be warned, however, the journey is similar to that to Karasabai and is a gruelling 4 hours in each direction on extremely rough tracks!

Surama, central Guyana

A few details about visiting this delightful ecolodge were provided in a previous article in *Neotropical Birding*¹. Subsequently, considerably more research has been undertaken and some important birds have been recorded in the area, making a visit strongly recommended. Indeed this area is probably one of the best places in the Neotropics to look for Rufous-winged Ground Cuckoo *Neomorphus rufipennis* and we have seen this species on five occasions. Despite this, it remains a tough species to find and although we heard it on the tour, the bird did not come in to playback.

Another recent discovery is a Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja* nest only a couple of kilometres from the village. Birders staying at the ecolodge are able to visit this with one of the local guides. Unfortunately at the time of the tour, the chick had fledged, although since then the adult birds have returned regularly to the nest.

Other regional endemics which can be seen around Surama include Red-legged Tinamou *Crypturellus erythropus*, Painted Parakeet *Pyrrhura picta*, Guianan Puffbird *Notharchus macrorhynchos*, Spot-tailed *Herpsilochmus sticturus* and Todd's *H. stictocephalus* Antwrens, Guianan Warbling Antbird *Hypocnemis cantator*, Blue-backed Tanager *Cyanicterus cyanicterus* and Finsch's Euphonia *Euphonia finschi*.

Atta Rainforest Lodge, central Guyana

The major attraction at Atta Lodge is a 154-m-long canopy walkway which allows visitors to get great looks at an excellent range of species (see *Neotropical Birding* 2 article for further details). Birding around the lodge clearing can also be very productive and this is probably the most reliable place in Guyana for the spectacular Crimson Fruitcrow *Haematoderus militaris*, and an excellent site for Black Curassow *Crax alector*, as there is a family party which regularly pass through the clearing.

Perhaps the most important target at Atta is the poorly known White-winged Potoo *Nyctibius leucopterus* (treated to a photospot in *Neotropical Birding* 6: 72–75) which seems to be not uncommon in the area. After dark it can be found at both the walkway and around the lodge clearing. To stand any chance of seeing this potoo, one generally needs a bright moon-lit night as well as some good fortune: on the tour we enjoyed scope views of a bird illuminated by torchlight.

Other specialities which can be seen here include the range-restricted Black-throated Antshrike *Frederickena viridis* as well as more widespread species such as Grey-winged Trumpeter *Psophia crepitans*, Red-fan Parrot *Deroptyus accipitrinus*, Tiny Tyrant-Manakin *Tyrannetes virescens* and Pompadour Cotinga *Xipholena punicea*.

REFERENCES

1. Collins, C. (2007) Guyana: South America's overlooked birding destination. *Neotrop. Birding* 2: 69–75.
2. BirdLife International (2009) Species factsheets: *Synallaxis kollari*, *Cercomacra carbonaria*, *Carduelis cucullata*. www.birdlife.org/datazone

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