

Seeking out Atlantic Forest specialities at Reserva Ecológica de Guapiaçu

Lee Dingain



REGUA is perhaps the most reliable site for the rare Shrike-like Cotinga *Laniisoma elegans* (Lee Dingain/www.leedingain.blogspot.com)

Most Brazilian endemics are concentrated in the coastal Atlantic Forest, severely threatened by urbanisation and deforestation. Birders visiting REGUA will contribute to the conservation of this ecosystem and its unique birds, learning at the same time why this reserve is ranked among the top South American birding-sites



The Atlantic Forest is high on the list of places to visit for many birders. Stretching for over 2,500 km along Brazil's Atlantic coastline, from the state of Rio Grande do Norte in the north, to the border with Uruguay in the south, and inland into north-east Argentina and eastern Paraguay¹ the Atlantic Forest comprises a variety of habitats including humid evergreen forest, dry forest, montane pine and restinga¹. Geographic isolation from other great expanses of forest in South America has resulted in a highly biodiverse ecoregion characterised by high levels of endemism: 199 bird species are endemic to the biome⁴ and around 80% of all Brazilian endemics are found here!

All photographs were taken at Reserva Ecológica de Guapiaçu, Rio de Janeiro State, Brazil.

Top to bottom:

The REGUA wetland (Lee Dingain/www.leedingain.blogspot.com)

Middle left: The elusive Spotted Bamboo-wren *Psilorhamphus guttatus* is regular on the Elfin Forest Trail (Adilei Carvalho da Cunha)

Eastern Striped Manakin *Machaeropterus regulus* is on the southern edge of its range at REGUA (Lee Dingain/www.leedingain.blogspot.com)

The Slaty Bristlefront *Merulaxis ater* is another Atlantic Forest endemic to be encountered in the Elfin Forest Trail (Leonardo Pimentel/savatttone.multiply.com)

The Atlantic Forest has suffered a devastating loss of habitat. Over 400 years of clearance for timber, agriculture, mining and plantations have left only around 7% of the original forest cover. Most of this is now highly fragmented, usually found on the steeper slopes where logging was difficult, and very little primary forest remains and much of it at least selectively logged. Despite the destruction, most of this unique diversity can still be found in scattered forest fragments. There are four Endemic Bird Areas (EBAs) within the Atlantic Forest, two of which occur in the south: the Atlantic Forest lowlands and the Atlantic Forest mountains. The Atlantic Forest lowlands EBA lies mainly on the coastal slope, extending from sea level up to 1,700 m. Made up largely of humid evergreen forest, with stands of bamboo at higher elevations, the EBA also includes small areas of coastal scrubby woodland known as restinga, and some mangroves³. With ten endemic genera and 55 restricted-range species³, this EBA supports a similar number of endemics to the Chocó region of western Colombia and Ecuador, and with so much lowland forest now lost or degraded, a high number of the species found here are threatened, including 31 of the EBA's restricted-range species³. The Atlantic Forest mountains EBA consists of humid forest, elfin forest and coniferous *Araucaria* and *Podocarpus*³. Ranging from 500 to 2,800 m, the EBA is centred at the southern end of the biome, with smaller areas found all along the coastal mountains. Most of the 23 restricted-range species found here overlap with the Atlantic Forest lowlands, however, three threatened species are confined to this EBA³.

Reserva Ecológica de Guapiaçu, commonly known as REGUA, lies in the upper Guapiaçu watershed on the coastal slope of the Serra dos Órgãos, c.80 km north-east of Rio de Janeiro, and in recent years has become a well known birding destination. Now protecting over 7,000 hectares of Atlantic Forest, the reserve ranges in altitude from 30 to 2,000 m, spanning both EBAs, but is best known as a lowland site. Extensive blocks of lowland forest survive here and an excellent network of trails (marked every 50 m) allows easy access up to 900 m. With 453 species recorded on the reserve, including 117 Atlantic Forest endemics and 61 Brazilian endemics, birders can expect a list of 250-300 species from a five day visit, with another 50 or so species possible on excursions from the lodge. REGUA supports a number of difficult species that feature on many birders wish-lists. No fewer than 12 threatened species are found at REGUA, a high number for one locality,

EXCURSIONS FROM REGUA

Birders usually take excursions from the lodge to nearby Macaé de Cima, Pico da Caledônia or Serra dos Órgãos National Park for the high altitude specialities such as Itatiaia Thistletail *Oreophylax moreirae* and Grey-winged Cotinga *Tijuca condita*. In addition, three threatened species not found at REGUA can be seen on excursions from the lodge.

A couple of hours drive east of REGUA, the highly threatened coastal restinga habitat is home to the Restinga Antwren *Formicivora littoralis*. This Critically Endangered species is still fairly numerous in the restinga around the town of Cabo Frio, but its habitat is rapidly disappearing under a sea of holiday resorts and urban sprawl. Nearby lagoons can produce Roseate Spoonbill *Platalea ajaja* and a variety of waders, rails and terns.

On the other side of the Serra dos Órgãos about three hours from REGUA, tiny degraded fragments of Atlantic Dry Forest still persist. These are the last stronghold of the Three-toed Jacamar *Jacamaralcyon tridactyla*, and fortunately, this Vulnerable Brazilian Atlantic Forest endemic is still relatively easy to find here. Also possible on this excursion are Red-legged Seriema *Cariama cristata*, Blue-winged Macaw *Primolius maracana*, Serra Antwren *Formicivora serrana* and Rio de Janeiro Antbird *Cercomacra brasiliana*.

Pico da Caledônia, a two hour drive from REGUA, is one of the highest peaks of the Serra dos Órgãos at 2,219 m, and one of only a few known sites for the difficult Grey-winged Cotinga (Vulnerable). Other species regularly seen here include Itatiaia Thistletail, Swallow-tailed Cotinga *Phibalura flavirostris*, Black-and-gold Cotinga *Tijuca atra*, Mouse-colored (Serra do Mar) Tapaculo *Scytalopus speluncae* and Plovercrest *Stephanoxis lalandi*.

and birders have an excellent chance of finding six of these; White-necked Hawk *Leucopternis lacernulatus* (Vulnerable), Golden-tailed Parrotlet *Touit surdus* (Vulnerable), Salvadori's Antwren *Myrmotherula minor* (Vulnerable), Russet-winged Spadebill *Platyrinchus leucoryphus* (Vulnerable), Bare-throated Bellbird *Procnias nudicollis* (Vulnerable) and Black-legged Dacnis *Dacnis nigripes* (Vulnerable). This article looks at where and when to find these and many other Atlantic Forest specialities.

The Waterfall Trail

The Waterfall Trail is particularly good for three key species: White-necked Hawk, Bare-throated Bellbird and White-bellied Tanager *Tangara brasiliensis*. White-necked Hawk is frequently observed over the large clearing at post 1150 (or in the forest just after) and Bare-throated Bellbird are fairly common, especially around post 1850, where males can often be seen singing from exposed branches (they are surprisingly difficult to find when silent). The recently split White-bellied Tanager (previously considered conspecific with Turquoise Tanager *Tangara mexicana*) is often encountered along the first 300 m of the trail and around the saw mill along the dirt road 500 m before the trail head.

The list for the Waterfall Trail is extensive but key species to look out for include Saw-billed Hermit *Ramphodon naevius* (try the feeders at the start of the trail), Rufous-capped Motmot *Baryphthengus ruficapillus*, Buff-bellied Puffbird *Notharchus swainsoni*, Crescent-chested Puffbird *Malacoptila striata* (post 850), Spot-billed Toucanet *Selenidera maculirostris*, Spot-backed Antshrike *Hypodaleus guttatus*, Spot-breasted Antvireo *Dysithamnus stictothorax*, Star-throated Antwren *Myrmotherula gularis*, Unicoloured Antwren *Myrmotherula unicolor*, Scaled Antbird *Drymophila squamata*, Black-cheeked Gnatcatcher *Conopophaga melanops*, Rufous-capped Antthrush *Formicarius colma*, Rufous-breasted Leaf-tosser *Sclerurus scansor*, Black-capped Foliage-gleaner *Philydor atricapillus*, Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper *Lochmias nematura* (often at the waterfall – post 2500), Southern Antpiper *Corythopus delalandi* (regular between posts 650 and 750), Eye-ringed Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus orbitatus*, Grey-hooded Attila *Attila rufus*, Pin-tailed Manakin *Ilicura militaris* (posts 1400 to 1850), Rufous-headed Tanager *Hemithraupis ruficapilla*, Black-throated Grosbeak *Saltator fuliginosus* and Blue-naped Chlorophonia *Chlorophonia cyanea*. If you are lucky you might encounter a roosting Long-tailed Potoo *Nyctibius aethereus*, with birds occasionally found between posts 600 and 1450.

The Elfin Forest Trail

Starting at post 2350 of the Waterfall Trail, the Elfin Forest Trail is difficult and very steep in places, but the excellent birding makes the effort well worthwhile. The trail is particularly good for three threatened species: Salvadori's Antwren, Russet-winged Spadebill and Golden-tailed Parrotlet, and several of the 26 Near-Threatened

VISITING REGUA AND GUAPI ASSU BIRD LODGE

Although now protected by law, the Atlantic Forest remains under intense pressure from urbanisation, small scale clearance and hunting. REGUA is an excellent example of how birding can make a direct contribution to habitat conservation.

Guapi Assu Bird Lodge, situated beside the wetland, provides high quality accommodation and is non-profit, with all income going towards REGUA's conservation work. REGUA's skilled guides know the birds extremely well and will greatly improve your chances of seeing some of the more difficult species. For more information about REGUA and visiting the reserve explore www.regua.org.

species found at REGUA. Salvadori's Antwren has a tiny fragmented range and is far from easy to catch up with, but pairs or small groups of up to five birds can often be found between posts 800 and 1750, sometimes accompanying mixed species flocks. The rare Russet-winged Spadebill is also regular here, especially along the first 700 m of the trail (the Grey Trail, between posts 850 to 950, is another reliable spot, particularly in the early morning). Golden-tailed Parrotlet appears to be increasing at REGUA and birds are now frequently heard flying over the canopy on the Elfin Forest Trail. Seeing them can be tricky, but persevering birders have had great views of feeding flocks.

The first 900 m of the trail are particularly good for Blue-bellied Parrot *Triclarina malachitacea*, whilst Brown Tanager *Orchesticus abeillei* can be fairly common from post 750 onwards. Slaty Bristlefront *Merulaxis ater* and Green-chinned Euphonia *Euphonia chalybea* are both frequent around post 1750. Two threatened and nomadic bamboo specialists can also be found on this trail: Temminck's Seedeater *Sporophila falcirostris* (Vulnerable) can be sometimes numerous (from post 1750 onwards) and Buffy-fronted Seedeater *Sporophila frontalis* (Vulnerable) can be seen when the bamboo near the top of the trail (around post 2550) is seeding. The bamboo here also offers a very good chance of Spotted Bamboowren *Psilorhamphus guttatus* as well as Half-collared Sparrow *Arremon semitorquatus*, and the threatened White-bearded Antshrike *Biatas nigropectus* (Vulnerable) is present but only rarely seen. Birders that make it to the top of the trail (an altitude of 900 m) will find themselves surrounded





Facing page, clockwise from top:

Giant Snipe *Gallinago undulate* is a notoriously difficult species to connect with. They are fairly common at REGUA and often show well between July and December (Lee Dingain/www.leedingain.blogspot.com)

The threatened Salvadori's Antwren *Myrmotherula minor* is frequently encountered at REGUA; here a female (Leonardo Pimentel/www.savattone.multiply.com)

White-bellied Tanager *Tangara brasiliensis*, recently split to constitute a new Brazilian Atlantic Forest endemic, frequents the lowland areas of the reserve (Lee Dingain/www.leedingain.blogspot.com)

Russet-winged Spadebill *Platyrinchus leucoryphus* is a rare and declining Atlantic Forest endemic. Birders have a good chance of finding one at REGUA (Leonardo Pimentel/www.savattone.multiply.com)

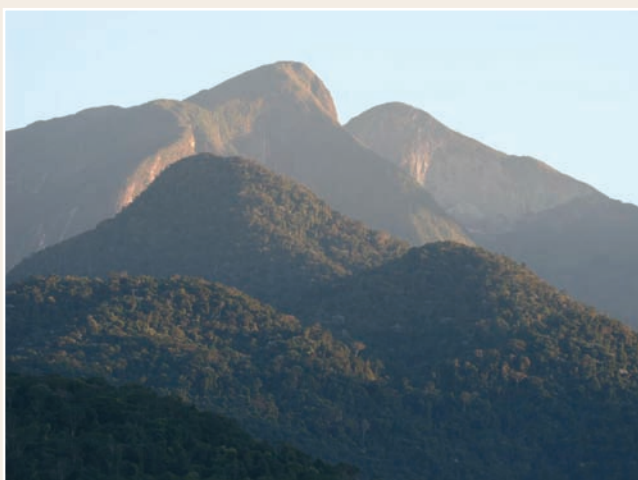
Endemic to Brazil's Atlantic Forest, the threatened Black-legged Dacnis *Dacnis nigripes* has recently become a regular visitor around the REGUA wetland (Alan Martin)

This page, clockwise from top:

The threatened Buffy-fronted Seedeater *Sporophila frontalis* is frequent, though erratic at REGUA, and are easier to find when the bamboo is seeding (Leonardo Pimentel/www.savattone.multiply.com)

The endemic Tawny-browed Owl *Pulsatrix koeniswaldiana* can be found at the REGUA conservation centre and the lodge (Lee Dingain/www.leedingain.blogspot.com)

A panoramic view of mountains at REGUA (Lee Dingain/www.leedingain.blogspot.com)



by pristine elfin forest and stunning views. Look for Mantled Hawk *Leucopternis polionotus* and Saffron Toucanet *Pteroglossus bailloni* here.

Other interesting species on this trail include Spot-winged Wood-Quail *Odontophorus capueira*, Least Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium minutissimum*, Brazilian Ruby *Clytolaema rubricauda*, Giant Antshrike *Batara cinerea*, Ferruginous Antbird *Drymophila ferruginea*, Ochre-rumped Antbird *Drymophila ochropygus*, Rufous Gnateater *Conopophaga lineata*, Variegated Antpitta *Grallaria varia*, Short-tailed Antthrush *Chamaeza campanisoma* (especially along the first 700 m), Such's Antthrush *Chamaeza meruloides*, Black-billed Scythebill *Campylorhamphus falcularius*, White-browed Foliage-gleaner *Anabacerthia amaurotis*, Oustalet's Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes oustaleti*, Olive-green Tanager *Orthogonyx chloricterus* and Azure-shouldered Tanager *Thraupis cyanopectus*. The largest, and one of the rarest, primates in South America – Southern Woolly Spider Monkey *Brachyteles arachnoides* – is also present.

One of the most eagerly sought-after species at REGUA is Shrike-like Cotinga or Elegant Mourner *Laniisoma elegans*. REGUA is the place to see this rare bird, and a number of regular breeding and wintering places have been located. From September to November the birds move to higher elevations to breed, when the most accessible territories are on the Elfin Forest Trail. There are often two singing males here, one around post 750 and another at post 1750. From April to August they are found at lower elevations (and therefore more accessible) at the São José Trail (try the first 200 m) and at the Waterfall Trail (often around post 650 or from post 1350 to 1400). Mysteriously, the birds appear to be absent from REGUA between December and February.

The 4×4 Track

The unmarked (but obvious) trail, known simply as the 4×4 Track, leads from the Small Wetland up to a derelict house (Casa Anibal) at 350 m altitude. The only known territory of Eastern Striped Manakin *Machaeropterus regulus* at REGUA (recently split by most authorities from Western Striped Manakin *M. striolatus* of Amazonia²) is located on this trail. Try for the manakin about 15 minutes after the first obvious switchback (preferably with a guide). Sightings are much more frequent in the early mornings and August to November appears to be best.

At the top of the track the overgrown garden frequently holds Frilled Coquette *Lophornis*

magnificus and the adjacent fig trees attract large numbers of birds when fruiting. The trail continues past the house where it narrows. This is an excellent spot for White-bibbed Antbird *Myrmeciza loricata* (also try the trail just before you reach the house) and Slaty Bristlefront.

Other key species found along the trail include White-necked and Mantled Hawks, Black Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus tyrannus*, Plain Parakeet *Brotogeris tirica*, Eared Pygmy-Tyrant *Myiornis auricularis*, Large-headed Flatbill *Ramphotrigon megacephalum*, Bare-throated Bellbird and White-bellied Tanager.

The REGUA Wetland

REGUA has been restoring some of the swampy wetlands that once existed across much of the coastal plain. In 2005, pasture that was once an orchid-rich *Tabebuia* swamp was transformed into an area of lakes, channels and reed beds. *Tabebuia* have been replanted and biodiversity has increased dramatically.

The threatened Black-legged Dacnis *Dacnis nigripes* (Vulnerable) has recently become a regular visitor to REGUA. For the last two years small numbers have appeared at the wetland between January and May, including several immature birds indicating successful breeding nearby. To look for them, walk down the lodge drive, turn sharp right on to the obvious track by the volunteer accommodation and continue until you reach the wetland and cross a small concrete bridge. Check the trees on the right for the next 40 m.

Another species that has become a speciality of the REGUA wetland is Masked Duck *Nomonyx dominica*. They are present between March and November, remaining scarce until August when numbers increase, peaking in October. They may be found anywhere at the wetland, but the wall of the dam leading towards the tower hide is the best place to scan from.

Several rail species are worth trying for at the wetland. Walk across the dam and turn left towards the tower hide. Rufous-sided Crake *Laterallus melanophaius* and Blackish Rail *Pardirallus nigricans* are in the reeds just before and after the small bridge (late afternoon or early morning is best). Russet-crowned Crake *Laterallus viridis* is common on the surrounding grassy slopes, and although difficult, a little patience can sometimes yield good views. Try the grassy slope on the far side of the wetland (walk past the tower hide and at the end of the trail, turn left at the T-junction and continue until you reach an old

cattle shelter on the left). For Ash-throated Crake *Porzana albicollis*, continue along the path until it bends sharply left. The long grass at the junction with a smaller trail on the right is often productive and birds are sometimes seen crossing the trail (try for Striped Owl *Rhinoptynx clamator*, Common Potoo *Nyctibius griseus* and Scissor-tailed Nightjar *Hydropsalis torquata* at night here). A few metres further on the trail passes a second trail on the right before reaching a pool on the left. Crakes are often seen crossing the trail to the right of the pool.

Another of REGUA's most sought-after specialities can also be found at the wetland. Despite their size, Giant Snipe *Gallinago undulata* are notoriously difficult to catch up with. Mainly nocturnal, they can be virtually impossible to find unless they are calling. At REGUA they roost in the wetland during the day and fly out at dusk to feed in the surrounding grassy fields. The best time to look for them is between July and December when the birds are most vocal (they are very difficult outside of this period). Birds can be seen in flight (often poorly) at dusk from the bend in the trail at the west corner of the wetland (see directions for Ash-throated Crake), however, a visit to one of the feeding grounds at dusk with one of REGUA's guides can produce incredible views.

Over 200 species of birds have now been recorded at the wetland, including rarities such as Stripe-backed Bittern *Ixobrychus involucris*, Roseate Spoonbill *Platalea ajaja*, Sungrebe *Heliornis fulica* and the threatened Crowned Eagle *Harpyhaliaetus coronatus* (Endangered). Other species to look out for around the wetland and along the surrounding forest edge include Rufescent Tiger-Heron *Tigrisoma lineatum*, Pinnated Bittern *Botaurus pinnatus* (check the reeds from the tower hide), Capped Heron *Ptilerodius pileatus*, Grey-headed Kite *Leptodon cayanensis*, Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus melanoleucus*, Aplomado Falcon *Falco femoralis*, South American Snipe *Gallinago paraguaiiae*, Greater Ani *Crotophaga major*, Tawny-browed Owl *Pulsatrix koeniswaldiana* (often around the REGUA conservation centre and the lodge at night), Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift *Panyptila cayannensis*, White-chinned Sapphire *Hylocharis cyanus*, Rufous-capped Motmot *Baryphthengus ruficapillus*, Crescent-chested Puffbird, Tufted Antshrike *Mackenziana severa*, Sooretama Slaty Antshrike *Thamnophilus ambiguus*, White-flanked Antwren *Myrmotherula axillaris*, Wing-banded Hornero *Furnarius figulus*, Yellow-lored Tody-Flycatcher *Todirostrum poliocephalum*, Sooty Tyrannulet *Serpophaga nigricans*, Lemon-chested

TIMING

The peak period for visiting birders is from early spring to summer (August-November) when most species are more vocal and summer migrants are also present. This is also the best time to try for Giant Snipe and Eastern Striped Manakin, both very difficult outside of this period. REGUA is also good between April and July. Shrike-like Cotinga move to lower elevations (and are therefore more accessible) and Black-legged Dacnis are present. The weather is also cooler and drier at this time and activity often remains high throughout the day.

Greenlet *Hylophilus thoracicus*, Long-billed Wren *Thryothorus longirostris*, Hooded Tanager *Nemosia pileata* and Pileated Finch *Coryphospingus pileatus*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to REGUA guides Adilei Carvalho da Cunha and Leonardo Pimentel for their invaluable assistance collecting site data and for providing their excellent photographs. Thanks to Alan Martin, Chris Townend and Rachel Walls for commenting on the draft and thanks to Alan Martin for additional photographs. Finally, a special thank you to Nicholas and Raquel Locke for all their hard work creating and managing this important reserve.

REFERENCES

1. Conservation International (2010) *Biodiversity Hotspots: Atlantic Forest*. www.biodiversityhotspots.org/xp/Hotspots/atlantic_forest/Pages/default.aspx (accessed 10 July 2010)
2. del Hoyo, J., Elliot, A. & Christie, D. (eds.) (2004) *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, 9. Barcelona: Lynx Edicions.
3. Stattersfield, A. J., Crosby, M. J., Long, A. J. & Wege, D. C. (1998) *Endemic Bird Areas of the World: Priorities for Biodiversity Conservation*. Cambridge: BirdLife International.
4. Stotz, D. F., Fitzpatrick, J. W., Parker, T. A. & Moskovits, D. K. (1996) *Neotropical Birds: Ecology and Conservation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

LEE DINGAIN

42 Cromwell Road, Worcester Park, Surrey KT4 7JR, UK.
E-mail: lee.dingain@gmail.com