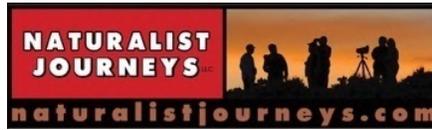
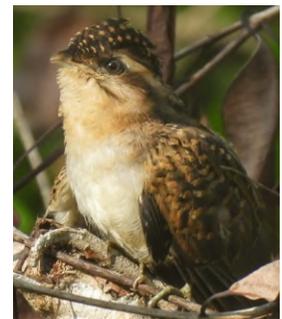


# Guyana: Unspoiled Wilderness | Oct. 17 – 29, 2024 | Trip Report | by Stephen Grace



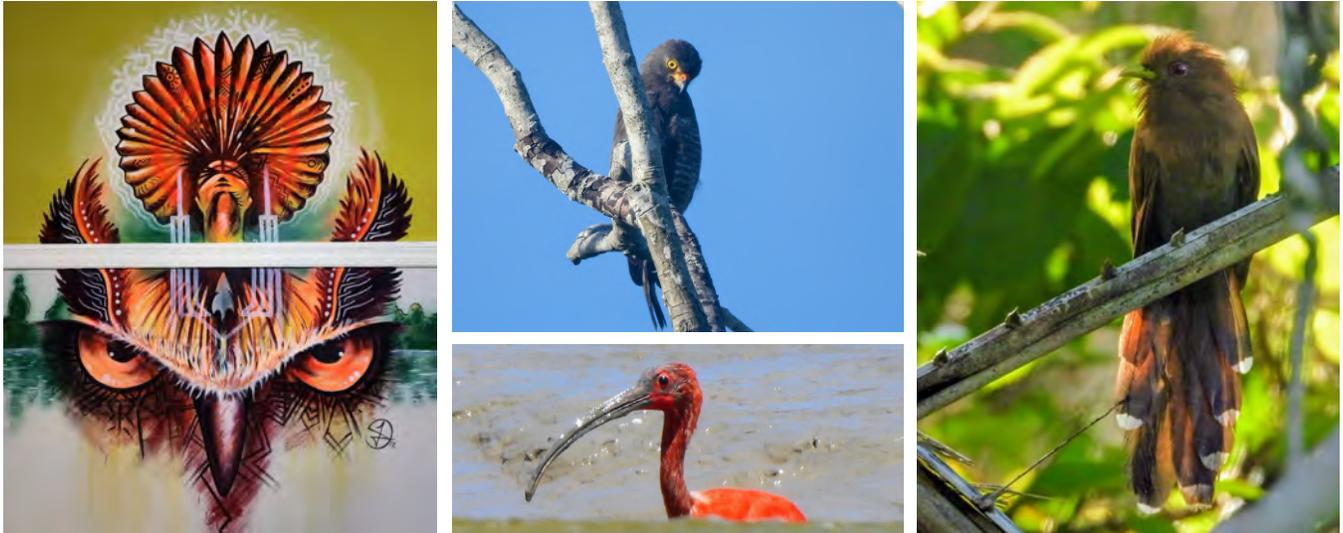
**Naturalist Journeys Tour Leader Stephen Grace with Local Guides Garey Sway and Neil Allicock and Clients Thomas, Heather, Marty and Alex**



## **Thurs., Oct. 17 Guyana | Georgetown**

Anticipation built among our group as we gathered, ready to explore the vibrant birdlife of Guyana. Our journey would be guided by Garey Sway, a Macushi man whose people have lived in the northern Amazon Basin for countless generations. Having grown up attuned to this wilderness, Garey brought an understanding of the land, its birds, and its stories that only deepened our excitement for the journey ahead.

Our day began with a series of remarkable sightings as Garey, along with Bevan Allicock—an artist and birding guide—introduced Alex, Marty, and me to some of Guyana’s avian treasures in the fields and forests around Georgetown. Guyana’s metropolis bustles both with people and birds. We watched as a Long-winged Harrier



hovered over a grassland in search of prey, while a Yellow-headed Caracara perched nearby, giving us superb close-range views of both raptors. As the light grew brighter, flashes of color appeared—a Turquoise Tanager showed itself briefly, displaying its brilliant tropical hues, and a Green-tailed Jacamar sparkled in the sunlight like a gem. Our smiles widened when a Barred Antshrike, known locally as a “jailbird” for its bold black-and-white stripes, made an appearance.

We were treated to exceptional views of both a male and female Green-throated Mango, a hummingbird much less common than its Black-throated cousin. As we peered across a creek at the wispy strands of a Little Hermit’s nest, we were thrilled to spot an American Pygmy Kingfisher—Guyana’s most elusive kingfisher species. To cap off our exhilarating morning, we followed the winding trail of an anaconda through the sand, a thrilling reminder of the wild creatures lurking nearby and the adventures to come.

Later, I greeted Heather and Thomas at the Georgetown airport. As we traveled along the Demerara River on the outskirts of Georgetown, our driver Bevan impressed us with his sharp birding skills. Even amid the city traffic, he spotted a Rufous Crab Hawk perched just off the roadside. We quickly pulled over and got out to admire this striking raptor, whose range is limited to South America’s eastern coast. Just below the hawk, a juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron peered out from the shadows of the riparian vegetation, adding an unexpected highlight to our airport transfer.

We soon settled into the historic Cara Lodge, our base in Georgetown. Built in the 1840s, the lodge radiated timeless charm and greeted us with a warm welcome. That evening, we gathered in its elegant dining room for a delicious welcome dinner, sharing stories and toasting to the journey ahead. We sensed that this adventure into the heart of Guyana’s wilderness would bring challenges, but also life-enriching experiences we’d long remember.

## **Fri., Oct. 18 Mahaica River in Search of Iconic Hoatzin | Georgetown Botanic Garden**

The first full day of our tour immersed us in the extraordinary birdlife of Guyana, beginning with an unforgettable boat trip along the Mahaica River. As we glided through the serene waters and scanned the lush riverbanks, we encountered the iconic Hoatzin—known locally as the Canje Pheasant and celebrated as Guyana’s national bird. This evolutionary marvel, sporting a spiky, punk-rock crest, primarily feeds on leaves,



which it digests in a fermenting foregut—a trait more typical of ruminants than birds. This unusual digestive process has earned it the nickname “Stinkbird” due to the pungent scent it produces.

The Hoatzin possesses another unique adaptation: wing claws on its chicks that allow them to escape predators. If threatened by a hunter like an Emerald Tree Boa, the young birds drop from their nests into the water below. With their wing claws, they can climb out of the water and onto nearby branches, showcasing a fascinating evolutionary survival strategy.

The Hoatzin felt like a relic from a bygone era, as if we had traveled back 65 million years to the time when non-avian dinosaurs vanished, paving the way for the Hoatzin lineage. While its distant relatives have long disappeared, this remarkable bird persists as a living fossil, a testament to nature’s endless creativity and resilience. Just as we marveled at this ancient wonder, the massive head of a Giant Otter broke the surface of the still waters nearby, while two boisterous Black-capped Donacobius filled the air with their squabbling, as if caught in a spirited marital spat.

The river continued to astonish us, revealing a Green-tailed Jacamar gleaming in the sunlight as it perched nearby. The morning’s symphony was enriched by the calls of a Little Cuckoo and the elusive Striped Cuckoo, both of which we glimpsed flitting through the bushes. Meanwhile, a Guianan Red Howler Monkey lounged lazily on a branch, gazing at us with half-closed eyes. Our local guide and boatman, Naresh, who supplements his farming income with these river tours, skillfully navigated us to the best spots for observing the vibrant birds along the narrow, tree-lined river, alive with activity before the blazing sun climbed above the horizon.

After a delicious breakfast feast of dal puri, chickpea and potato curry, and chicken curry prepared by Naresh’s wife at their riverside home, we made a couple of roadside stops on our way back to Georgetown. One highlight was a confiding Rufous Crab Hawk spotted close to the road, while Alex’s keen eyes identified two Scarlet Ibises in a ditch as we drove. At the Georgetown seawall, we were treated to even more Scarlet Ibises, their vibrant colors striking against the dull mud. The morning’s standout sighting was a rarely seen Mangrove Rail, which ventured into the open for a long, clear view—so close that it even surprised our seasoned guide Garey, who had never seen one at such proximity and for so long before.

In the afternoon, we explored the Botanical Gardens in Georgetown, where even more highlights awaited us. Almost immediately, we spotted a Blood-colored Woodpecker, its vibrant crimson plumage catching our attention. This was one of several Guianan Shield endemics we would encounter on our tour.



The Guiana Shield is a geologically ancient region in northeastern South America covering Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, and parts of eastern Venezuela, eastern Colombia, and northern Brazil. Known for its biodiversity and isolated evolution, the Shield is home to unique plant and animal species found nowhere else, known as Guianan Shield endemics. These species evolved in the Shield's stable, rainforest-rich environment, creating a fascinating reservoir of rare and specialized wildlife.

Spotting a Guianan Shield endemic is thrilling, as these species showcase the evolution of life in one of Earth's oldest landscapes. The Blood-colored Woodpecker, with its striking plumage and restricted range along the narrow coastal strip where it evolved, is a standout example. Each sighting of these endemics offers a glimpse into a world shaped by millions of years of isolation and natural selection.

The Botanical Gardens provided an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with species that would become constant companions throughout our journey: Blue-gray, Palm, and Silver-beaked Tanagers, along with Tropical Kingbirds and Great Kiskadees. We noted the subtle differences between the Great Kiskadee and its many lookalike cousins, particularly the Lesser Kiskadee. The Lesser Kiskadee, with its yellow body and high-contrast black-and-white head—nearly identical in coloration to the Great Kiskadee—has a distinct call and a longer, narrower bill protruding from its slimmer head.

We enjoyed excellent views of Brown-throated Parakeets and Orange-winged Parrots, their noisy calls filling the air. A White-bellied Piculet, a woodpecker hardly larger than a sparrow, cooperated for great views, while a Lineated Woodpecker, reminiscent of a Pileated Woodpecker, put on a captivating show. Snail Kites swooped past, and a Black-collared Hawk and a Great Black Hawk perched nearby, allowing us ample time to study their markings. Among the lotus flowers in the canals, a Yellow Oriole fed, its vivid color contrasting beautifully with the green leaves and pink blooms.

Brown Capuchin monkeys leaped through the canopy while Yellow-headed Caracaras engaged in aerial sparring, locking talons and spiraling together through the sky. After some searching, we located Festive Amazons, their green, red, and blue feathers flashing in the dappled sunlight. Unfortunately, this parrot is becoming increasingly rare due to habitat loss and the captive pet trade.

The day concluded with a pair of Blue-and-yellow Macaws performing acrobatics in a palm tree, illuminated by the orange light of the setting sun. Finally, as dusk descended, a flock of Red-shouldered Macaws—a small



species often confused with parakeets—delighted us as they winged toward the palm trees, providing a perfect finale to an extraordinary day.

As we returned to Cara Lodge, we were filled with awe at the sheer abundance and beauty of Guyana’s birds and wildlife, eagerly anticipating what the coming days would bring.

### **Sat., Oct. 19 Off to the Wilds! Kaieteur Falls | Surama Village & Eco-Lodge**

Our adventure into the heart of Guyana’s wilderness began as we climbed aboard a 12-seat Cessna, the hum of the engine filling the cabin while Scarlet Ibises streaked below us across the mudflats. We turned away from the coast and soared above the endless expanse of the Iwokrama Rainforest. One of the world’s most ancient forests, the Iwokrama thrives atop the 1.7-billion-year-old Guiana Shield, a Precambrian geological foundation that has supported life and weathered time beyond human comprehension. Each glimpse from the plane’s windows revealed the vast, untamed terrain of tepuis—flat-topped mountains that rise as isolated, green-cloaked plateaus, like lost worlds above the forest, amid the clouds.

From one of these tepuis plummets Kaieteur Falls, the world’s largest single-drop waterfall, where a river cascades with such force that it rumbles like thunder and sends spray into the sky. After taking in spectacular aerial views as the pilot circled twice—once for each side of the plane—we landed at a small airstrip and hiked toward the falls. With shimmering rainbows forming in the eternal mist, this natural spectacle left us in awe. Giant tank bromeliads clung tenaciously to the cliffs, capturing the mist in tiny pools nestled at the centers of their rosette leaves, where a small wonder hides: the Golden Rocket Frog. No larger than a thumbnail and as brilliant as the element for which it’s named, this tiny creature exists solely in these bromeliads near the falls—a resilient survivor in a living world as ancient as the tepui itself.

Continuing through the rugged surroundings, we spotted White-tipped Swifts flying past and White-collared Swifts disappearing behind the waterfall, where they nest, hidden from the Orange-breasted Falcons that hunt them. A Cliff Flycatcher zipped by and briefly perched, allowing us a good look at its long, rufous wings.

After exploring Kaieteur, we flew to Surama Village in the Northern Amazon Basin and met our driver for the remainder of the tour, a Macushi man named Rensford. Jackie, Angi, and other Macushi people served us lunch and warmly welcomed us to their Surama Eco-Lodge, showing us our accommodations: benabs. These traditional circular huts with thatched roofs featured exteriors adorned with scenes of wildlife and village life



painted by talented local artists. This picturesque village, surrounded by savannah and rainforest, would be our base for the next three nights.

Our arrival was celebrated with terrific sightings: a Lesser Nighthawk roosting on a low branch and other nighthawks sweeping through the dusk skies, a Swallow-winged Puffbird perched atop a snag, and an array of parrots—Red-bellied Macaws, Blue-headed Parrots, and Yellow-crowned Parrots—adding to the lively chorus. The sharply angled silhouettes of Fork-tailed Palm Swifts glided against the sky, and we delighted in close views of Sulphury Flycatchers.

Our evening walk brought us face to face with the Great Potoo, a true master of disguise. “Can you spot the bird? Stumped?” we joked. There it was, blending seamlessly into its perch, resembling a stump in the forest aglow with the day’s last light. With its camouflaged plumage and statue-like stillness, the Great Potoo was nearly invisible. By day, this cryptic bird sits with eyes half-closed, perfectly hidden; by night, it transforms into a silent hunter, calling into the darkness with eerie moans while snatching passing insects.

In the quiet of the night, we listened to Tropical Screech-Owls and Common Pauragues call from the trees, their voices adding a haunting charm to the forest. Garey led us to a Common Potoo, a bird performing an impeccable impression of an upright stick.

Guided by Macushi knowledge accrued over countless centuries, we felt a deep connection to the land and its wildlife. Throughout our stay at Surama, the Macushi shared stories of their people, who have safeguarded this wilderness for generations, ensuring that the ecosystems here remain vibrant and protected.

Our day concluded with an appreciation for this unique partnership: by traveling with Naturalist Journeys, we support the Macushi and other Indigenous communities who work to preserve one of the world’s last untouched wildernesses—a place where the Harpy Eagle still soars and jaguars roam freely, protected by those who know this land best.

## **Sun., Oct. 20 Birding Surama Eco-Lodge**

We began our day with a delicious breakfast prepared by Angi, featuring fresh fruit juices and celebrating Surama’s local flavors, including cassava and papaya grown in the village. As we savored each bite, we admired the art adorning the lodge’s columns and walls. Local artists Bevan Allicock and Laurindo John beautifully captured Surama’s essence with paintings of iconic wildlife—the majestic Harpy Eagle, the wily Giant Otter, and



the vibrant Sun Parakeet. A mural depicting the ritualistic preparation of bitter cassava, a traditional Macushi staple, added cultural depth to the setting, connecting us to generations past.

As we ate, we couldn't resist some early-morning birdwatching, enjoying views of White-throated Toucans perched in distant trees and listening to a Channel-billed Toucan's croaking voice as it passed overhead. Heather noted with amusement how a family of Smooth-billed Anis, charming members of the cuckoo family, perched in a bush at different heights, resembling musical notes on a staff, each bird contributing to nature's morning song. Following breakfast, we set out for a morning walk with guides Laurindo John and Neil Allicock. With Garey attending a family emergency, Neil stepped in as our lead local guide for the remainder of the tour.

The landscape around Surama is a rich mosaic of habitats, blending rainforest and savannah. As we ventured from the village into the open country, we spotted Scarlet and Red-and-green Macaws basking in the morning light, and a regal Savannah Hawk perched against the vast sky.

Heading into the forest, we searched for the Rufous-winged Ground Cuckoo, an elusive terrestrial cuckoo that follows army ant swarms to eat the insects and other creatures that the marauding ants stir up. This is Neil's favorite bird because it's so hard to find and photograph. Some scratching sounds in the underbrush made us hopeful, but this might have been wishful thinking—the noise could have been a lizard. Although our target remained hidden on the forest floor, the thrill of searching for this shy species, highly regarded by Macushi guides, kept our spirits high. Our surrounding rainforest encounters were far from disappointing.

We delighted in spotting a cute White-crowned Manakin and a dazzling Green-backed Trogon, and two beautiful cotingas—the Guianan Red and Pompadour—added bursts of color to the green canopy. The Capuchinbird, one of the strangest Guianan Shield endemics, gave us brief glimpses of its bald, vulturine head while vocalizing like a mooing cow.

We also spotted Wedge-billed and Buff-throated Woodcreepers, and a Black-spotted Barbet—a tiny toucan relative—was a fun find. Cayenne Jays flashed their high-contrast black-and-white patterns among the foliage, revealing glimpses of their beguiling blue eyes, while a Black Nunbird perched in the open, its prominent red beak contrasting against the forest backdrop. A Helmeted Pygmy-Tyrant and a Fasciated Antshrike, with barring finer than that of a Barred Antshrike, flitted among the bushes, offering fleeting looks.



On a bridge above a stream, we experienced what it's like to be a predator mobbed by birds. As Neil played a recording of an Amazonian Pygmy Owl, an astonishing array of species gathered in the canopy overhead, providing great views of dozens of species, many of them new to us, from Bright-rumped Attila to Finch's Euphonia.

Mobbing behavior is a fascinating phenomenon where birds collectively harass a predator. This strategy protects nesting areas, alerts other birds to danger, and deters predators by overwhelming them with stimulation. We, too, felt overwhelmed by the abundance and variety of birds mobbing us—it was hard to know which individual bird to focus on with our binoculars, echoing the confusion an owl experiences when being mobbed. As alarm calls filled the air, various species joined forces, diving and swooping around us in a coordinated display of defense. Witnessing this spectacle highlighted the social dynamics within bird communities, where cooperation enhances survival. The sight of colorful feathers flashing against the sky, accompanied by the cacophony of calls, served as a vivid reminder of the interconnectedness of these species and their strategies for thriving in the wild.

An encounter with an army ant swarm was another thrilling highlight. As the ants marched through the forest, they attracted a flurry of birds. Among them, two particularly eye-catching species—the Rufous-throated Antbird and the White-plumed Antbird—joined the frenzied scene to snatch up insects and other creatures fleeing the advancing ants.

As the midday heat settled in, we returned to the lodge, where Angi treated us to a lunch of local flavors—cassava products, beans, rice, cabbage, tasty chicken, and a homemade hot sauce that was a huge hit with our group. Afterward, we took a siesta to escape the sun, joining the local birds in resting during the day's hot lull. In the late afternoon, we ventured out once more, this time with herons in mind. While searching for our main target, the elusive Zigzag Heron—located in a swamp by Neil with what seemed like superhuman vision—we also spotted a Rufescent Tiger Heron perched resplendently in a tree. This stunning sight would linger in our minds as we drifted off to sleep, dreaming of the next day's adventure, which promised to be the most thrilling of our tour.

## **Mon., Oct. 21 Surama Eco Lodge | Burro Burro River**

Our journey to an active Harpy Eagle nest was the kind of adventure that defined our Naturalist Journeys tour through Guyana. This sighting was a once-in-a-lifetime moment for everyone in our group, a highlight that will remain etched in our memories.



To reach the nesting site, we drove as far as our van could take us and then set off on foot along a rugged forest road toward the Burro Burro River, spotting birds like the striking Guira Tanager along the way. We then boarded a small boat for a thrilling two-hour journey. The river's low water level, typical of the dry season, posed navigational challenges. Our guides expertly maneuvered around downed trees and shallows, occasionally requiring us to hop out and stand on logs while the boat was hauled over obstacles.

Every tricky maneuver was worth it, offering exceptional birdwatching from the boat. Kingfishers flew all around us, bursting with color as they dove into the water. We spotted Ringed Kingfishers—impressively large and as bold as crows—alongside sleek Amazon Kingfishers, smaller Green Kingfishers, and vibrant Green-and-rufous Kingfishers. Adding to the excitement, a King Vulture soared overhead, while colonies of Red-rumped and Yellow-rumped Caciques created a ruckus among their dangling nests. As our Macushi boatman navigated the narrow channel, Painted Parakeets perched nearby, providing excellent views, and we saw Black-necked Aracaris, visually striking toucan relatives. Prehistoric-looking Red-throated Caracaras added intrigue to the trees lining the banks.

As we rounded a bend, we spotted a Rusty Whipsnake rearing up on a sunlit sandbar, while Coatis, raccoon relatives, scampered away from our approach. The misty river air vibrated with a symphony of bird calls—screeches, whistles, and shrieks—creating an exhilarating backdrop as we immersed ourselves in the vibrant life surrounding us.

Finally, we reached a viewing spot across the river from the Harpy Eagle nest. Positioned at a respectful distance, we set up scopes and telephoto lenses. In the nest, a fuzzy white chick sat quietly, its downy feathers and large eyes lending it an endearing appearance that captivated us all. After waiting for nearly two hours, the mother appeared, swooping in with a suddenness that electrified the scene.

She began feeding the chick, carefully tearing strips of meat from a stash in the nest and placing them in the chick's beak. The chick, waiting patiently to be fed, offered us a glimpse into the care and caution this species invests in its young. In the wild, the male hunts, bringing food back to the nest while the larger and stronger female remains vigilant, guarding the chick and watching from nearby trees for potential threats.

The Harpy Eagle is a rare wonder, one of the largest and most powerful eagles in the world, playing a vital role in its rainforest ecosystem by hunting prey like monkeys and sloths in the canopy. With its feathered crown,



intense gaze, and talons rivaling the claws of a grizzly bear, the Harpy Eagle embodies the ferocious beauty of the Amazon. Our encounter with this powerful yet elusive bird left us all awed and grateful for this extraordinary experience in the heart of Guyana's wilderness.

On our return journey along the river, we were accompanied by countless Lemon Migrant butterflies fluttering around us like bright yellow confetti, all moving in the same direction as they enacted their daily migration. A few Big Orange Sulphur butterflies added vibrant pops of color. As we maneuvered close to the riverbank, we spotted a busy little Black-chinned Antbird in the brush, along with brief glimpses of two beautiful and seldom-seen birds: the Sunbittern and the Sungrebe.

That evening, an owl prowl along a dark road turned up a Tawny-bellied Screech-Owl while distant lightning, silent yet bright, illuminated the night.

## **Tues., Oct. 22 Atta Rainforest Lodge | Iwokrama Rainforest**

We began our day with a final morning birding session around Surama, exploring the savannahs, where we spotted species adapted to this habitat, such as the Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch and Plain-crested Elaenia. These grassy, open spaces provided a striking contrast to the dense rainforest we would soon venture into. After a visit to the village school, where we met friendly students and donated school supplies, we had brought along, we headed to Atta Rainforest Lodge. Just as we climbed into the van, two Scarlet Macaws streaked through the sky like colorful comets.

The journey to Atta became a birding expedition as we journeyed deep into the Iwokrama Rainforest. Along the way, we paused to listen for the distant call of an Ornate Hawk-Eagle, its resonant cry echoing through the forest. Large flocks of parakeets flew overhead as we walked along the road, and a striking male Blue Dacnis caught our attention, dazzling us as it flitted between branches.

At one point, we hiked in search of the coveted Guianan Shield endemic, the Guianan Cock-of-the-rock. This iconic cotinga with bright orange plumage nests on rocky cliffs; flamboyant males gather on the forest floor at leks to compete for the attention of the comparatively drab females. However, the birds were notably absent from the lek today. The hike up the rocky hillside in the heat and humidity sapped our energy, and despite our efforts and a two-hour wait, we came up empty-handed. As Neil explained, a regional drought may have driven the birds further afield in search of fruit. Though we didn't see the Guianan Cock-of-the-rock, the experience served as a poignant reminder of how climate change impacts habitats worldwide. As we hiked back to the van, we looked forward to another opportunity to seek out this stunning species.



By midday, we arrived at Atta Rainforest Lodge. The word “atta” means “hammock,” and the lodge lived up to its name, inviting us to relax in the many hammocks scattered around the grounds. After a satisfying lunch, we enjoyed a siesta, letting the heat of the day pass.

As the sun began to dip, a Long-tailed Hermit hovered near the lodge feeders, and we heard the distinctive call of a Gray Mourner, which soon made an appearance. Venturing out on foot along the roads around the lodge into the Iwokrama Rainforest, we encountered abundant birdlife. High in the canopy, Neil spotted a Paradise Jacamar—its slender, striking silhouette culminating in a pointed tail. Though distant, it was unmistakable in our binoculars and scopes.

A host of fascinating species made appearances throughout the afternoon: a Black Nunbird joined a Tropical Kingbird for a dust bath in the road, leading us to wonder if they were engaging in “anting,” a behavior where birds roll in piles of ants, possibly to deter parasites with the ants’ secreted acids. High above, a King Vulture glided, the white panels of its wings flashing against the sky as it kept watch over other vultures below. Unlike Turkey Vultures and Greater and Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, which rely on smell to locate carrion, the King Vulture depends primarily on its sharp vision. Soaring high above the canopy, it watches for other scavengers that have spotted a meal. When it sees vultures gathering, it descends to join the feast, using its size and powerful beak to tear through tougher hides, often allowing smaller vultures access to the carrion once it opens the carcass.

One of the day’s highlights was spotting a Crimson Topaz on its daily commute. We staked out a bridge where a male is known to dip down for a drink of water each morning and evening, briefly perching on his route. This stunning hummingbird captured our attention when its gorget caught the last light of day, sparkling like polished topaz as its crimson body shimmered in the sunset.

We also enjoyed excellent scope views of a Green-and-Rufous Kingfisher along the creek, and we added several new species to our tally, including the Cinnamon-throated Woodcreeper and the Black-bellied Cuckoo. To top off our day, a White-winged Potoo flew overhead, gliding between perches on opposite sides of the road. As we marveled at these sights, the Milky Way splashed across the night sky, untainted by light pollution, marking the end of another unforgettable day in Guyana’s unspoiled wilderness.



### **Wed., Oct. 23 Atta Rainforest Lodge | Canopy Walkway**

Our morning began with another visit to the Cock-of-the-rock lek, our hopes high but tempered by nature's unpredictability. Despite another patient two-hour wait, the vivid orange birds eluded us once more. The empty lek was a reminder that the wild holds no guarantees. Yet, each missed encounter seemed only to deepen our appreciation for the next bird we did see.

Back at Atta, we explored the trails where the rainforest came alive, offering glimpses of its secretive inhabitants. We finally got a good look at a Screaming Piha, a drab gray cotinga often heard with its incessant calls but difficult to see. Gray-winged Trumpeters, their iridescent blue patches flashing in the sunlight, wandered across our path, while Black Curassows moved through the undergrowth like beasts from a bygone age. These large, ancient-looking birds, with their intense eyes and powerful builds, seemed like ambassadors from the distant past, evoking the legacy of their theropod ancestors like Velociraptor. This connection is not merely poetic; birds are indeed modern-day dinosaurs, descending from theropod lineages that thrived during the Mesozoic Era. Fossil evidence and genetic studies reveal that traits we associate with birds today—such as feathers, hollow bones, and specialized respiratory systems—originated in their dinosaur ancestors. As we observed these magnificent creatures, we were reminded of the profound evolutionary history that links the avian life of the rainforest to the giants that disappeared 65 million years ago when a comet collided with Earth, forever altering the biosphere and paving the way for mammals—which ultimately led to the bipedal birders standing in the rainforest with binoculars aimed into the wild.

A Red-necked Woodpecker soon drew our attention, its fiery crest gleaming—a radiant flash against the lush green backdrop of the forest. We climbed steps toward the canopy walkway, appreciating towering trees like Greenheart, Purpleheart, and Brazilian Cedar as we ascended to an elevated view of the forest. From this lofty perch, we were treated to the rare experience of watching a Golden-headed Manakin move through the branches at eye level. Above us, an Ornate Hawk-Eagle wheeled and spiraled in a dazzling display. On a branch below us, we caught sight of a Blue Morpho Dragonfly. Often overshadowed by its butterfly namesake, this shimmering creature captivated us with its structural colors, refracting light into hues that seemed to glow—a miniature marvel amid the towering giants of the rainforest.

After we descended from the walkway and continued exploring Atta's paths, the rainforest revealed one of its more elusive residents: the Black-faced Hawk. Our guide at Atta, Carlon Peters, explained that seeing this handsome hawk so close and for such a long time was a rare treat. Its black mask and white plumage gave the hawk an aura of mystery and elegance. This stealthy ambush hunter that targets small creatures like lizards, frogs, and snakes perched calmly in view, allowing us to admire its beauty and strength—a striking reminder of the intricacies of life in this vibrant ecosystem.



Our afternoon birding session was equally rewarding. We spotted Green and Black-necked Aracaris, and a Paradise Jacamar landed on a snag as we scoped a cacique colony nesting in the swamp trees. Near a stream, a Sungrebe briefly appeared, its reflection a perfect mirror in the water. A Capped Heron wandered into the open, its creamy chest feathers, delicate white plumes, and vibrant blue facial skin making it one of the day's most memorable sightings. Soon, Red-and-green Macaws joined in, their vibrant plumage creating a stunning contrast against the rainforest backdrop. A Blue-throated Piping Guan, a turkey-sized bird feeding on the fruit of a cecropia tree, bounced the flimsy branches as it dined.

When we returned to the van after fleeing a sudden rainstorm, we reflected on the wonders we had witnessed, each encounter deepening our connection to the rainforest and its inhabitants, reminding us that every moment spent in nature is a treasure, even amidst the unpredictability of the wild.

## **Thurs., Oct. 24 White Sand Forest | Rock View Lodge**

After breakfast, we departed Atta Rainforest Lodge and set out toward Rock View Lodge, transitioning from dense rainforest to open savannah. Along the way, we made a series of rewarding birding stops. The recent rain had settled the dust and sparked an incredible surge in bird activity near Atta. Among the highlights were a Guianan Trogon and the electric brilliance of a male Blue Dacnis, accompanied by his bright green female counterpart. Both Gray-breasted Sabrewing and Black-eared Fairy perched nearby, offering fantastic photo opportunities with these stunning hummingbirds. To our excitement, a Bronzy Jacamar revealed itself on a forest perch, its metallic green and bronze plumage shimmering in the morning light.

Our journey continued into a white sand forest, an ecosystem where sandy, nutrient-poor soils support stunted, scrubby trees and distinctive bird species. Here, we encountered Golden-headed Manakins engaged in an energetic lek display, with males sliding and hopping along branches in lively competition for the attention of females, who stood by assessing their dance moves. Adding to our luck, we spotted a Saffron-crested Tyrant-Manakin—a bird whose resemblance to flycatchers vividly illustrates how fluid nature's categories can be.

Later, we trekked along the Harpy Eagle trail, once renowned for its famed eagle nest. Though that nest was abandoned after a tree limb collapsed, the trail remains a birding haven. With Neil's expert machete skills clearing the way, we spotted a Great Jacamar glowing in the filtered rainforest light. Nearby, an army ant swarm had gathered, attracting Ferruginous-backed Antbirds and White-plumed Antbirds—a dynamic display of rainforest life in action.



Upon our arrival at Rock View Lodge on the Rupununi Savannah, we were greeted by Colin Edwards, who shared stories of the lodge’s history. Alongside his Macushi wife, Velda, and their son, Zorba, Colin welcomed us into their world with warm hospitality.

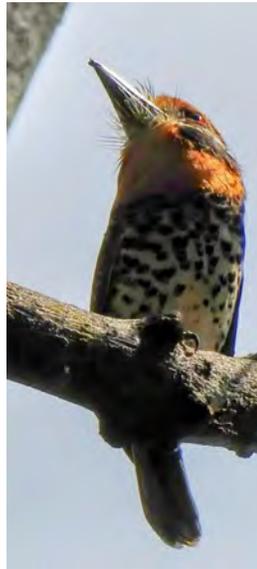
An evening excursion along the Rupununi Road brought even more sightings. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and Great Egrets crowded the wetlands, with statuesque Maguari Storks standing among them. Above us, a White-tailed Hawk, while Fork-tailed and Vermilion Flycatchers perched on bare branches. Red-breasted Meadowlarks swayed on grass-topped perches, catching the last of the day’s breeze. A group favorite, the White-headed Marsh Tyrant, stood out with its striking black-and-white contrast. As dusk settled, the appearance of Jabiru Storks—big, gangly birds reminiscent of prehistoric times—and an Orange-breasted Falcon, a rare raptor, brought the day to a magnificent close.

Today’s encounters underscored the rich diversity of Guyana’s landscapes, from towering rainforest trees to the scrubby woodlands of the white sand forest, to the wide-open savannah interspersed with wetlands. Each habitat offered its own marvels, deepening our appreciation for this multifaceted wilderness and leaving us eager for the adventures that tomorrow would bring.

## **Fri., Oct. 25 Birding the Rupununi River**

We started the day with an early drive to the Rupununi River, where we scanned the shore for White-rumped Sandpipers and American Golden-Plovers, while vibrant Red-capped Cardinals flitted through the bushes. Once aboard a boat piloted by a guide trained at Atta Rainforest Lodge, we were treated to a true bounty of birds. The river’s heronry was alive with activity, especially the unique Boat-billed Herons, whose comically oversized bills and monkey-like calls added charm to the morning. We spotted Green Ibis, their dark emerald plumage contrasting beautifully with the bright green grass along the shore. Familiar Osprey soared above us, plunging toward the water in pursuit of fish, while Large-billed Terns, Yellow-billed Terns, and Black Skimmers patrolled the waters. Among the shorebirds, the Pied Sandpiper stole the show with its striking plumage—one of the world’s most attractive shorebirds. We marveled at a pair of Jabirus on their nest, and an Agami Heron, with its rich coloration and extraordinary dagger bill, quickly became a group favorite.

Lurking near the riverbanks was the Black Caiman, a formidable reptile larger than the American Alligator, embodying both fierce predator and sensitive caregiver. Growing up to twenty feet long and weighing up to a thousand pounds, this apex predator is infamous for its “death roll,” a technique used to subdue prey by



grabbing hold and rolling violently in the water to disorient and tear off chunks of flesh. Despite its fearsome reputation, the Black Caiman exhibits complex social behaviors, communicating through vocalizations and body language. Remarkably, mothers display nurturing instincts, gently carrying their hatchlings in their mouths to transport them safely from the nest to the water—a side of these reptiles often overlooked.

After beaching the boat, we took a walk through the riparian forest, where we encountered local men hunting the water's edge for dragonfish with traditional bows and arrows. We were fascinated by the giant Victoria water lilies, which can grow up to ten feet wide and support the weight of a child. Their flowers bloom at night, trapping beetles for pollination before releasing them the next evening, having changed from white to pink, signaling that they no longer require pollinators. Wattled Jacanas nimbly walked across the lily pads, and we watched Giant Otters feasting on large fish. A Ringed Kingfisher swooped down to catch a whiskered catfish, a fitting preview of our own fish lunch later, featuring the tasty flesh of catfish caught from this river. A cooperative Spotted Puffbird perched above us in the canopy, giving everyone excellent views and photo opportunities, and we even caught a glimpse of a secretive Crestless Curassow among the shadows—another Guianan Shield endemic.

After returning to Rock View Lodge for lunch and a siesta, we ventured out again once the afternoon heat had passed. Our excursion yielded more sightings, including familiar Eastern Meadowlarks and the exotic-sounding White-naped Xenopsaris, a striking member of the Tityra family, distinguished by its handsome black head atop a white body. Our group humorously noted that it was the mirror opposite of the White-headed Marsh Tyrant we had seen earlier.

We also heard, and then spotted, a Southern House Wren—the long-anticipated split of this species from the House Wren had just become official, reflected in eBird that very day. The Southern House Wren appeared noticeably darker than the House Wrens familiar to us in the United States. Its song, while maintaining the frenzied cadence characteristic of House Wrens, carried a subtly altered melody that added to our excitement in recognizing this newly distinguished species.

While birding along Rupununi Road, a Bananaquit added a lively pop of yellow to the scene, a Savannah Hawk perched on a snag, and Gray-cowled Wood Rails, typically shy, ventured into the open. We watched locals wading in water with fishing nets, and at dusk, we witnessed a dreamlike scene as horses emerged from the jungle to frolic in the water, only to disappear back into the forest as quickly as they had appeared. A murmuration of White-winged Swallows danced over the water, eventually settling into a tree for their evening



roost. As the sun set over the savannah, we found ourselves in awe of the natural beauty surrounding us, bringing a perfect close to a spectacular day.

### **Sat., Oct. 26 Across the Rupununi Savannah in Search of Sun Parakeet**

Our day began early, departing the lodge at 3:30 AM in hopes of catching a glimpse of the gorgeous and critically endangered Sun Parakeet. As we drove in the dark, the anticipation was palpable, and we quickly spotted a few nocturnal gems, including Double-striped Thick-knees with their large owl-like eyes and a Pinnated Bittern hidden in the grass.

As we transitioned from the rainforest to the dry savannah, the landscape opened, revealing expansive grasslands dotted with scattered trees and cacti. Along the way, we encountered a few Jabirus with the stature of small humans standing by the roadside, a striking sight against the backdrop of the savannah. The early morning birding yielded a Bearded Tachuri, a shy little kinglet-sized bird that we caught glimpses of as it climbed up plant stems and flitted through the thick grasses. While driving, we saw an American Kestrel perched on a nearby fence wire, offering us close views as we slowed down for a better look.

Arriving at Karasabai, the site where we hoped to catch a glimpse of the endangered Sun Parakeet, we ate a picnic breakfast as the lively dawn calls of the Variable Chachalaca echoed among the forested hills. Eagerly, we listened for the distinctive calls of the Sun Parakeet. Neil, perched atop the van for a better vantage point, spotted a few as they flew into a tree to feed; however, the dense foliage obstructed the view for those of us on the ground.

As a delightful consolation, we were treated to the sight of a handsome Hooded Siskin near a creek, while a stunning Gray-lined Hawk made our hearts soar. Adding to our excitement, a Sooty-capped Hermit—a new hummingbird species for our group—flew in close to Marty as he walked along the road.

Lunch was a delightful affair in a village at the heart of the Rupununi Savannah, surrounded by breathtaking views of mountains in every direction. We shared our meal with local guide Ally and his grandchildren, who brought joy to the moment with high-fives and hugs as we prepared to leave.

After arriving at Manari Ranch, we settled into our rooms for a much-needed rest. As evening approached, we ventured out for some casual birding around the ranch. Least Nighthawks, the smallest of their kind, showcased their white wing-edges as the sun set on the savannah—a satisfying end to a day filled with exploration and beauty.



## Sun., Oct. 27 Ireng River | Gallery Forest

Our morning expedition began with two 4x4 vehicles navigating the rugged roads beyond Marari. The anticipation was high as we ventured into the sprawling savannah, and we were rewarded almost immediately. Red-bellied Macaws flew into nearby palm trees, feeding on the fruits, while Great Egrets elegantly strolled through the wetlands, accompanied by impressive Jabiru Storks. A highlight of our morning drive was a close viewing of several Buff-necked Ibises, observed from the comfort of our expedition vehicles. We also got out to spot a Yellowish Pipit in the tawny grass.

Our local guide, Jeremy Melville, led us through a dense, vine-draped tangle of gallery forest near the Brazil-Guyana border to seek out the Rio Branco Antbird and the Hoary-throated Spinetail—critically endangered species with highly restricted ranges. Although records of these two birds date back to the 1800s, little research was conducted on them until recently. The Hoary-throated Spinetail was discovered in Guyana along the Takutu River in 1932, but the Rio Branco Antbird remained unreported here until 1993. Jeremy, who has conducted population and range studies on these two species through grassroots efforts supported by international funding, provided us with invaluable insights into their behaviors, habitat needs, and conservation status, emphasizing the importance of understanding and protecting these vulnerable species.

Both target species were seen well under Jeremy's guidance, and we also got great looks at an Orange-backed Troupial. Its vibrant colors made its New World Blackbird cousin, the Yellow Oriole perched nearby, seem dull in comparison. A delightful surprise during our morning came in the form of a prickly mammal: Jeremy spotted a Brazilian Porcupine—a species he had only seen twice before, and never this close. It lounged in a tree above our path, its long tail dangling, and its tiny paws gripping branches as it slept.

After a refreshing siesta of our own, we set out on an afternoon excursion to a nearby ranch lake. There, we encountered a variety of wildlife, including Spectacled Caiman, Capybaras, and Southern Plovers. Red-shouldered Macaws, initially hidden in bushes, eventually emerged onto the top branches, offering us excellent views. Across the lake, Red-bellied Macaws flew in and out of palm trees, while the sky filled with hundreds of Barn Swallows and Fork-tailed Palm Swifts, their silhouettes flowing across the dimming horizon. An Osprey was busy hunting, successfully catching a fish—a thrilling sight. As the day transitioned into dusk, we enjoyed a beautiful sunset over the savannah, with evening light pooling in the wetlands before fading into a black sky aflutter with bats.

Later, while walking along a road, the sight of nighthawks was accompanied by the sounds of seedeaters rustling in the bushes as they settled into their roosts. We spotted many Least Nighthawks, along with a couple of larger



Nacunda Nighthawks. The latter revealed their presence with telltale white flashes as they flew through the van headlights.

During our night drive, we were fortunate to see Burrowing Owls charmingly bobbing their heads and blinking their big eyes in the van's lights as we cautiously approached. Our driver, Rensford, was careful to give these delightful owls plenty of time to move out of the way as we returned to the ranch.

At dinner, we were treated to a captivating talk by Lissa Orella, the owner of Manari Ranch. She shared the history of her family's generational ties to the land, a rich tapestry reflecting a blend of Spanish, Portuguese, and Guyanese ancestry. Lissa's passion for her research on Pink River Dolphins shone through as she recounted her role in documenting their previously unknown presence in the Rupununi Wetlands. Just as we were settling into the evening's ambiance and enjoying a custard dessert, a bat fluttered into the dining hall, circling the hand-hewn timber of this historic building on the Rupununi Savannah. The unexpected visitor added a whimsical touch to our already memorable day, a fitting reminder of the vibrant life surrounding us in this enchanting landscape.

## **Mon., Oct. 28 Manari Ranch | Flight to Georgetown**

Our final birding excursion ended with an unforgettable surprise near a village called Moco-Moco. We began our morning at the Manari River, exploring waterfalls nestled in the foothills where arid savannah gives way to lush rainforest. More hummingbirds than we had seen during the entire trip darted around a single tree, and among them were new species for us: the Black-throated Mango, White-chested Emerald, and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. Adding to the avian excitement were an Ochre-ored Flatbill and an Amazonian Grosbeak, a bird with one of the sweetest songs imaginable. Though the Grosbeak mostly kept itself hidden, Alex and Marty managed a glimpse of this elusive songster.

Walking along a road through plantain trees, we spotted our first Amazonian Motmot of the tour—a real stunner. We then climbed over rock slabs beside a cool stream, its clear waters alive with fish and red dragonflies skimming the surface. There we saw a Spotted Tanager, a Boat-billed Flycatcher, and, after a dedicated search, a Channel-billed Toucan hopping through the canopy.

While observing a Purple-throated Fruit Crow—a cotinga with a gleaming purple throat under the right light—we'd just about forgotten its legendary cousin, the Guianan Cock-of-the-rock. After three attempts to see this species—once at a lek at Kaieteur Falls and twice at the lek near Atta Rainforest Lodge—we'd accepted that it was simply not meant to be. We found consolation in the incredible memories we'd made, especially watching a mother Harpy Eagle feed her chick.



Then, just as our tour was winding down, our local guide, Stephano, suddenly shouted, “Cock-of-the-rock!” An electrifying blaze of orange shot through the canopy like a psychedelic missile streaking down from above. We rushed forward, and after a short walk, we were rewarded with stunning views of a Guianan Cock-of-the-rock perched right above us. A second male soon joined, lingering long enough for everyone to savor the moment through binoculars and cameras. It was an exhilarating finale to our time in the rainforest.

Lunch was a delightful affair with Lissa from Manari Ranch, who accompanied us across the border to a Brazilian restaurant. As we dined on a buffet of local flavors, Lissa shared more stories about the ranch and her research on Pink River Dolphins. Afterward, we thanked our guide Neil and driver Rensford and boarded a flight from Lethem to Georgetown, arriving at Cara Lodge for our farewell dinner. It was a jarring transition—from the ancient rhythms and solitude of the wilderness to the frenetic pace and crowds of the metropolis.

Reflecting on our journey, we couldn’t help but wonder: Did we really witness a mother Harpy Eagle, a bird that hunts monkeys, feeding her fuzzy chick in a nest deep in the rainforest? Did horses really appear in a swamp at dusk, frolicking in the water as a murmuration of White-winged Swallows swept across? Did a dazzling orange bird truly streak across the canopy after we descended the rock slabs along a waterfall? Did we really have lunch in Brazil? Or was it all just a vivid dream inspired by the tropical heat?

Our Naturalist Journeys tour in Guyana had come to an end, but the memories of unspoiled wilderness, fascinating people, and extraordinary wildlife will stay with us for years to come. From mist-laden forests alive with the calls of Screaming Pihás to wild rivers where butterflies swirled in vibrant clouds, and from the cactus-dotted Rupununi Savannah glowing at sunrise to the thunderous roar of Kaieteur Falls, we experienced the many wonders of Guyana.

Guided by the expertise of Garey Sway, Neil Allicock, and other knowledgeable local guides, we not only marveled at rare birds but also gained insights into the rich Macushi heritage woven through these breathtaking landscapes. As we returned home, we carried with us the spirit of Guyana—the beauty of its lands and the warmth of its people.

## **Tues., Oct. 29 Departures from Georgetown**

As early morning flights carried our group back to the familiar rhythms of daily life, our hearts still lingered in the vibrant wilderness we had just left behind. The awe of watching Harpy Eagles in their nest, the thrill of our last-minute encounter with the Guianan Cock-of-the-rock—each of us carried a piece of Guyana with us.

This journey was truly transformative. Beyond the birds we had spotted and the wilderness we had explored, it was the bond we forged with the land and the people who call Guyana home that made this experience so meaningful. The connections we made felt like a living part of the landscapes themselves.

As I boarded my flight, I took one last look at the bustling terminal, picturing the lush rainforests, sprawling savannahs, impenetrable mangroves, wild rivers, and rugged mountains of Guyana beyond the airport's walls. It was hard to believe our adventure had come to an end, yet gratitude filled me for the memories we created together. The spirit of Guyana—the beauty of its lands, the resilience of its wildlife, and the richness of its culture—would remain with each of us, inspiring us to carry forward the stories, birds, and people we had come to cherish.

*Photos by Stephen Grace: Group, Kaieteur Falls, Harpy Eagle, Guianan Cock-of-the-rock, Striped Cuckoo, Artwork by the Allicock Family, Roadside Hawk, Squirrel Cuckoo, Local Guide Garey Sway, Green-throated Mango, Green-tailed Jacamar, Lesser Kiskadees, Mangrove Wood Rail, Green-rumped Parrotlet, Wattled Jacana, Kaieteur Falls, Lesser Nighthawk, Great Potoo, Iwokrama Rainforest, Yellow-headed Caracara, White-bellied Piculet, Glittering-throated Emerald, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Surama Eco-Lodge, Kaieteur Falls, Green-backed Trogon, Iwokrama Rainforest Scenics, Harpy Eagle nest, Burro Burro River, Black Nunbird, Iwokrama Canopy Walkway, Black-faced Hawk, Blue-throated Piping Guan, Heliconius Butterfly, Golden-headed Manakin, Birding near Atta Lodge, Black Curassows, Spotted Puffbird, Rock View Lodge, Chestnut Woodpecker, Rupununi Road, Rupununi Savannah, Buff-necked Ibis, Brazilian Porcupine, Savannah Hawk, Moco-Moco, Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock*