

Guyana: Unspoiled Wilderness | March 27 – April 8, 2025 | Trip Report by Stephen Grace



Naturalist Journeys Tour Leader Stephen Grace with Local Guides Bevan Allicock, Garey Sway, Laurindo John, Carlon Peters and Jeremy Melville and Clients Taryn, Wes, Leslie, Walt and Ann.



Thurs., Mar. 27 Georgetown | The Diamond

Our adventure began in Guyana's capital, where tall palms swayed in the tropical breeze, the scent of warm rain lingered in the air, and Great Kiskadees called from telephone wires above brightly painted buildings and the lively bustle of the streets. Of the five of us who arrived early in Georgetown, Leslie, Walt, and I opted to join local guides Bevan Allicock and Ron Allicock for an afternoon of bonus birding. They led us to the Diamond—a mosaic of fields, forest edges, and wetlands on the city's outskirts—a microcosm of the biodiversity this country holds in abundance.



Here, we encountered many species that would become familiar companions in the days ahead. Tropical Kingbirds sallied from open perches, while vividly attired tanagers— Blue-gray, Palm, and Silver-beaked—flitted through the foliage. Smooth-billed Anis clambered through the brush like a band of feathered mischief-makers, and Wattled Jacanas stepped daintily across lily pads, their oversized feet barely dimpling the water's surface. Overhead, Fork-tailed Palm Swifts sliced the air in quicksilver arcs.

From the trees came the raucous chorus of Variable Chachalacas—large, arboreal birds crashing through the branches like clumsy turkeys, their calls ringing out through the humid air. A sudden flash of yellow caught our eye: an unusually bold Masked Yellowthroat. Normally shy and brush-loving, this warbler stepped into the open, its black bandit's mask crisp in the golden light.

Two hummingbirds, elusive and electrifying, stole the show. A Green-throated Mango—uncommon and regal—perched long enough for us to admire it in detail. A White-tailed Goldenthrout zipped through a flowering field, pausing just long enough to leave us breathless.

As the sun sank low, we stood in reverent silence, watching day give way to dusk. Birds retreated into the shadows to roost, while bats emerged to flap through the fading light, chasing insects into the deepening night. It was a moving overture to our Guyanese journey—a first taste of wildness that promised much more to come.

Back at the elegant Cara Lodge, Leslie, Walt, and I joined Taryn and Wes for dinner and raised our glasses to the adventures ahead.

Fri., Mar. 28 Mahaica River in Search of the Iconic Hoatzin | Georgetown Botanical Garden

Ann joined us this morning, and our adventure began with an auspicious sighting. As we drove toward the Mahaica River, a Crested Caracara stood boldly in the road—a striking omen that good birding lay ahead.

Upon arrival, we boarded a boat captained by Naresh, whose steady hand and deep knowledge of the river would guide us on a bird-filled journey. Barely minutes into the ride, we encountered one of the river's most iconic residents: the Hoatzin. Perched in the moco-moco plants with their arrow-shaped leaves crowding the riverbanks, these prehistoric-looking birds dazzled us with their bizarre biology—leaf-eaters with fermentation chambers like a cow's, and chicks that hatch with clawed wings to climb through bushes after dropping from their nests into the water below. Watching them felt like stepping back in time, and their vocalizations amused us: croaking and grunting like smoky-throated cartoon characters.



Cool, overcast skies made for a pleasant morning, and—as if nature were on our side—a drenching rain held off until after we left the river.

In the riverside brush, we spotted a pair of Green-tailed Jacamars—male and female glittering side by side, his throat gleaming white, hers a rusty tone. Overhead, a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture soared. Bevan worked tirelessly to help us glimpse the elusive Silvered Antbird. Other highlights included Little Cuckoo, Striped Cuckoo, Long-winged Harrier, Boat-billed Flycatcher, and the ever-animated Black-capped Donacobius.

Beyond the bird sightings, Guianan Red Howlers mesmerized us—their coppery fur catching the morning light as these large, leaf-eating monkeys lounged in trees along the river, occasionally moving languidly through the branches. Every bend in the waterway held a new surprise, each sighting another thread in the vibrant tapestry of the jungle-fringed Mahaica River.

A special treat awaited us when Naresh brought us to his riverfront home, where his wife Shanti had prepared a delicious Indian meal—puri, roti, chana, and bananas as sweet as candy. We relaxed on their veranda as the skies opened up, the first of many downpours that became a theme of the tour. The rain, though unusual for the season, cooled the heat and kept the dust down—a welcome gift.

On the return drive, we spotted our first Black-collared Hawk. With muddy boots and quiet persistence, Bevan eventually tracked down a Rufous Crab Hawk for us, though initially it offered only shy glimpses from within the mangroves. As we searched, we took time to admire the mangroves themselves—marveling at their aerial roots for oxygen, salt-shedding leaves, and live-bearing reproduction.

We also had a good chuckle over the aptly named Mouse-colored Tyrannulet—its name perhaps more exciting than its modest appearance!

At the Atlantic seawall, we were treated to a spectacular spread of shorebirds—tiny peeps darting across the mudflats and larger species like Willets and Whimbrels foraging along the tideline. When mixed flocks took to the air, the scene exploded with motion and light—an electrifying display of abundance, bounty, and beauty. Most unforgettable, though, were the Scarlet Ibis: their vivid, flaming-red plumage almost surreal against the muted tones of the mud.

And then, as if to reward our earlier search, a Rufous Crab Hawk perched boldly on a snag beside the path—perfectly still, ideally framed, and utterly confiding. It was the view we’d hoped for all along.



After lunch, we headed to the Georgetown Botanical Gardens, where a breeding colony of Great Egrets put on a show—plumes flaring and lores glowing bright green. As we trained our scopes on Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, a massive Green Iguana strolled right through our field of view—an unexpected and charming photo-bomb.

In the stately palms, Blue-and-yellow Macaws and Yellow-crowned Amazons posed like royalty, their vibrant plumage gleaming in the late-day light. We admired the tiny, charismatic White-bellied Piculet —charming in both name and behavior—and watched a Snail Kite methodically work at the spiraled shell of its prey. Overhead, Yellow-headed Caracaras drifted on broad wings, their flight relaxed and almost meandering, as if they had all the time in the world.

Then, in the warm glow of day's end, Bevan delivered one final gift: a Blood-colored Woodpecker, its scarlet feathers ablaze. Sought after by avid birders, this species is endemic to the Guiana Shield—a vast, ancient expanse of exposed Precambrian rock that underlies much of northeastern South America, including much of Guyana. Rich in biodiversity and geological history, the Shield is one of the oldest landforms on Earth, dating back nearly two billion years. Its forests harbor countless species found nowhere else. The Blood-colored Woodpecker, with its limited range and vivid plumage, felt like a rare and radiant prize—one last reminder of the deep-time wonders this landscape holds.

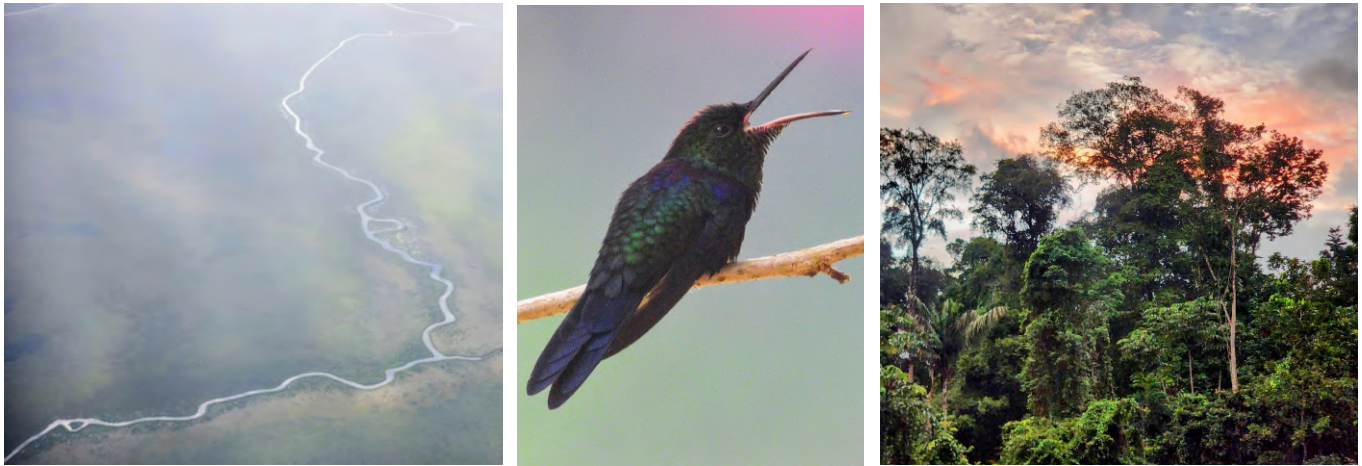
And as if scripted, a Toco Toucan appeared on a sunlit snag, flashing its massive orange bill—capping off a day that had already given us so much.

Sat., Mar. 29 Flight into the Wild | Atta Rainforest Lodge

Our day began with high hopes for a flight to the famous Kaieteur Falls, but the ever-unpredictable Guyanese weather had other plans. Stormy skies grounded any chance of safely landing near the falls, so our tiny twelve-seater Cessna carried us directly from Georgetown to an airstrip near Atta Rainforest Lodge. While we missed the falls, the flight itself was exhilarating—first skimming the Atlantic coast, then dipping low over the endless emerald canopy of the Iwokrama Rainforest, one of the last great wild places on Earth.

Eighty percent of Guyana is cloaked in forest, and most of it remains pristine primary rainforest. With just 800,000 people in a country the size of Idaho, it is one of the least populated nations in the world. Still largely untouched, Guyana's rainforest endures in part thanks to ecotourism initiatives led by Indigenous communities—safeguarding both biodiversity and cultural heritage.

After landing, we bid farewell to our guide Bevan and met our new team: local guide Garey Sway and driver Rensford, both Macushi men from Surama. While we waited for our van, we began birding right at the airstrip and were quickly rewarded with a Mealy Amazon—a hefty, lime-colored parrot and a new species for our tour.



As we slowly made our way toward Atta Rainforest Lodge, we stopped frequently to bird along the road. Highlights included the striking Blue-cheeked Parrot—another Guiana Shield endemic—and a group of Long-nosed Bats roosting upside-down under a log, shifting our focus momentarily from birds to mammals.

We had our first look at a White-throated Toucan, its oversized black bill glimmering in the muted forest light. Then came a dazzling string of sightings: a Yellow-tufted Woodpecker, its face blazing bright; unmistakably tropical Black-tailed Tityras; electric-blue Red-legged Honeycreepers and their vibrantly colored cousins, the Purple Honeycreepers. A pair of Blue Dacnis added even more hues to the mix—male in bright turquoise, female in apple green—so strikingly different they could have been mistaken for separate species.

But the real showstopper was a Guianan Trogon, perched in a sunlit window through the canopy. Its yellow eyering, barred tail, and shimmering blue back held our gaze for several minutes. This was also our first introduction to the Screaming Piha—an omnipresent voice of the rainforest. Though we heard it constantly, seeing this drab-colored cotinga of the treetops was another matter.

A Squirrel Cuckoo streaked across the road like a furry, cinnamon-colored arrow, and a Great Black Hawk held court in a massive Silk Cotton tree. When the regal raptor finally took flight, its broad wings and crisp white tail band stood out starkly against the green backdrop.

By mid-afternoon, intermittent rain showers had left the roads muddy but kept the heat manageable and the air fresh. We arrived at Atta Rainforest Lodge in time for lunch, where we were treated to the first of many delicious meals: beans, zesty greens, and perfectly cooked chicken—all sourced nearby.

After a restful siesta to escape the day's hottest hours, we set out again for afternoon birding in a nearby swamp. It felt like every bird in the world had congregated there. A jaw-dropping Capped Heron stood poised and elegant, its pale plumage glowing against the reeds. Dozens of macaws—Red-and-green, Scarlet, and Red-bellied—screeched overhead and perched in snags. Black Caracaras landed in the treetops, and an Anhinga surprised us by acting oddly—nibbling at leaves and climbing toward the canopy, as if confused about its identity.

Other highlights included a Rusty-margined Flycatcher darting out to snag insects, the comical yet handsome Black-necked Aracari, and the always-lovely Blue-gray Tanager—a common bird, yes, but admired by our group for its quiet beauty amid the rainforest's more flamboyant show-stealers.

As the sun dipped, we noticed how quickly darkness descends in the tropics. There's no lingering twilight like we're used to in temperate latitudes—just an abrupt shift from day to night, as if someone flipped a switch.



With nightfall came an entirely new dimension of the jungle. The forest was alive with sound and rich with earthy scents. We set out for night birding and were rewarded with excellent views of a stunning Black-banded Owl—a species rarely seen. To encounter such a secretive creature under the forest canopy was a thrill and the perfect ending to our first full day in the interior of this wild, remarkable country.

Sun., Mar. 30 Atta Rainforest Lodge | Canopy Walkway

We rose early to beat the heat and headed out along the trails at Atta Rainforest Lodge. The long, guttural roars of Guyanan Red Howlers rippled through the damp air like echoes from a lost world. To spot a Chestnut Woodpecker high in the canopy, we had to engage in a bit of morning yoga—leaning back and stretching our necks to peer into the towering rainforest trees.

A pair of Gray-winged Trumpeters strutted across the path ahead of us like forest royalty. Along the way, we paused to admire some of the remarkable trees of the Guiana Shield—Purpleheart and Greenheart among them, each with a story etched in its grain. We also encountered a massive bulletwood tree, or balata, bearing the saw scars of past tappings. Its latex once served as a rubber substitute and is still used by local artisans to craft figurines and forest animals, sold as keepsakes and reminders of this unique ecosystem. Garey enriched our walk with insights into the ethnobotany and Indigenous knowledge passed down over millennia. He pointed out a vine that can be opened with a knife to release life-saving water in an emergency, and Capadulla, a forest liana believed to have aphrodisiac properties. We also learned of a plant used in traditional remedies for snakebite—an example of the deep medicinal wisdom rooted in this landscape.

The climb to the canopy walkway was no small feat—one hundred slippery steps, each taken with care to avoid disturbing the Bullet Ants along the way. Their sting is said to be among the most painful in the animal kingdom. But the reward at the top was worth every cautious step: a Green Aracari feeding at eye level, and toucans perched farther off, their silhouettes etched against the soft morning light. A Squirrel Cuckoo entertained us with its acrobatics, leaping from branch to branch with the nimble skill of its namesake.

Up there in the canopy, we paused to take it all in—not just the birds, but the silence. No hum of engines, no airplanes tracing contrails overhead. Just the wind in the leaves, the flutter of wings, and the layered sounds of the forest. In a world saturated with human noise, such true natural quiet has become a rarity. Here, it felt like a gift.

The wild tangle of life around Atta Rainforest Lodge proved the perfect setting for a brief immersion in forest ecology 101.



Tropical rainforests are incredibly lush—but ironically, they grow on some of the poorest soils on Earth. Most of the nutrients are locked up in the living biomass—the trees, vines, and other organisms—rather than in the soil itself. When leaves fall, they’re quickly decomposed and recycled by fungi, microbes, and insects, and the nutrients are reabsorbed almost immediately by nearby roots. It’s a system of lightning-fast turnover, where nothing goes to waste.

We noted one of the forest’s hallmark features: towering emergent trees rising above the canopy. These giants are supported by flared, dramatic buttress roots—architectural marvels that help stabilize the trees in the shallow, saturated soils below. Since there’s no deep taproot to anchor them, these flying buttresses act like fins to keep the trees upright in storms and high winds.

The trunks were wrapped in a dense weave of lianas—woody vines that climb their way to the canopy, hitching a ride toward the sunlight without having to build a massive trunk of their own. We also saw an abundance of epiphytes: orchids, ferns, and bromeliads growing on branches high above the forest floor. These plants don’t steal from their hosts, but instead use trees as scaffolding to reach the light, capturing rain and nutrients from the air.

Every layer of the forest—canopy, understory, shrub layer, and forest floor—is teeming with life. Yet everything here is part of an ongoing competition: for sunlight, nutrients, water, and space. It’s a complex, finely balanced ecosystem, where cooperation and competition often go hand in hand.

This living green architecture of the rainforest—layered, dynamic, and full of adaptations—made for an awe-inspiring classroom.

After breakfast back at the lodge, we returned to the trails and were soon captivated by the endless industry of Leafcutter Ants. Thousands of them moved in precise formation, carving narrow highways across the forest floor—tiny empires of movement and intent. Each ant carried a fragment of leaf overhead like a green sail, marching it back to the nest to nourish the fungus they meticulously farm—a symbiotic relationship millions of years in the making. As we watched this botanical ballet unfold, a sudden rustle in the understory drew our attention upward. A mixed flock moved through, and among its diverse members we spotted a Fasciated Antshrike and a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper—both striking and new additions to our growing species list.

Lunch brought a dose of hummingbird magic: a shimmering male Fork-tailed Woodnymph darted among flowering plants near the lodge, while a Long-tailed Hermit zipped in to visit the feeders. Giant Ameiva lizards—also known as Amazon Racerunners—scurried across the paths and vanished into holes like speedy forest phantoms.



After a siesta, we ventured back into the rainforest for more birding. Channel-billed and White-throated Toucans gave us excellent views of their massive bills. Used for fruit plucking, nest-raiding, and even thermoregulation, the bills appear heavy and cumbersome but are surprisingly light, thanks to their airy keratin structure. We also glimpsed a Purple-throated Fruitcrow, its namesake throat flashing in the sun, and a striking Black Nunbird with a lipstick-red bill. Both species are cotingas, and both are endemics of the Guiana Shield.

As dusk settled over the forest, a Short-tailed Nighthawk emerged, weaving through the air in pursuit of insects. Above the canopy, Swallow-tailed Kites caught the last golden light of the day, gliding effortlessly on updrafts.

We capped off the evening with a view of Jupiter through the scope—four of its largest moons glowing beside the gas giant. Back at the lodge, we dined in the open air beneath a black sky, untainted by light pollution and sparkling with stars. It was a fitting close to a day spent deep within one of the last great intact rainforest ecosystems on Earth—our pale blue dot, adrift in the cosmos, the only known world to cradle life.

Mon., Mar. 31 Surama Eco-Lodge

We followed our now-familiar rhythm: an early morning start to beat the heat and catch the birds before their midday siesta. Today's birding took us into a white sand forest—a strikingly different habitat from the lush rainforest. Here, short, scrubby trees grow in acidic, nutrient-poor soil, and some bird species have adapted specifically to this unique environment.

One of those specialists, the Saffron-crested Tyrant-Manakin, made an appearance, its crest catching the light in the low canopy. We also encountered a dazzling Golden-headed Manakin, its glowing yellow crown flaring like a beacon in the shadows. We lingered for long, satisfying views of Guianan and Green-backed Trogons, perched still and stately, as if posing just for us.

Back at the lodge, we enjoyed breakfast and said goodbye to Carlon Peters, our local guide who not only helped Garey track down birds for the group but also generously shared his digiscoping expertise—teaching us how to photograph birds through the spotting scope using just a phone.

After departing Atta Rainforest Lodge, we continued toward Surama, our next base. Along the way, we stopped for a forest hike. Somewhere deep in the understory, Garey heard the telltale call of a Rufous-winged Ground-Cuckoo—a secretive bird more often heard than seen, and one of the most sought-after species in Guyana. We approached as stealthily as we could, heartbeats rising with every careful step. Though we never laid eyes on the bird, it was thrilling to know we stood just feet away from one of the rainforest's most elusive inhabitants.



We did, however, see monkeys—a troop of Wedge-capped Capuchins swinging through the trees, and excellent looks at Guianan Black Spider Monkeys, including a mother with her baby clinging tightly as she traveled through the canopy

The trail became rugged as we climbed a hill and passed through a cave. On the other side, tucked into the shadows of a cliff face, we found a Guianan Cock-of-the-rock nest, with a female incubating eggs. Around a nearby boulder, the forest opened to reveal a lek, where three males were gathered. One of them, radiant in full orange glory, stole the show.

Lekking is a courtship behavior in which males gather in designated arenas to display for females—each hoping to outshine the others with dramatic postures, calls, and colors. We soaked in stunning views and captured memorable photos. And just when we thought the moment couldn't get better, an Amazonian Motmot appeared, its pendulum-like tail dangling from a shaded perch.

By late afternoon we reached Surama Eco-Lodge, where we were warmly welcomed by our Macushi hosts. We shared the first of many excellent meals—fresh fish, tropical fruits, flavorful juices, and farine, the staple cassava flour that can be added to just about anything. We learned how cassava, a starchy root, lies at the heart of Macushi culture. A large mural in the dining area depicted the entire process of cassava preparation.

Afterward, we rested in our benabs—traditional thatched-roof huts adorned with artwork by Bevan, our Macushi guide and driver back in Georgetown.

Once the worst of the heat had passed, we headed out for afternoon birding. Laurindo John joined Garey to help guide us. Like Bevan, Laurindo is a talented Macushi artist whose paintings of animals and plants decorate the lodge's common areas. Both are adept with computers and tech-savvy yet deeply rooted in traditional knowledge—masters of jungle survival skills passed down through generations. Bevan and Laurindo seem to bridge past and future as the Macushi people navigate a path between ancient lifeways and modernity.

We started birding just near our benabs, where we found roosting Lesser Nighthawks, perfectly camouflaged on low branches. A spunky Yellow-bellied Elaenia caught our attention, its crest splitting neatly down the middle.

We walked across a forest floor that floods during the rainy season, searching for night-roosting birds. Lovely purple orchids—epiphytes growing on tree limbs—caught our eyes as we scanned for movement. Perched in plain sight, disguised as a broken limb, was a Great Potoo, followed soon after in a snag on the savannah by its smaller cousin, the Common Potoo—both masters of camouflage.



As we neared a wetland area, a Black-collared Hawk soared into view—a handsome raptor, though its namesake collar can be hard to spot. Some suggest “White-headed Hawk” might be a more fitting name. Dozens of hummingbirds zipped through the dimming air: Rufous-throated Sapphires and Glittering-throated Emeralds shimmered in the golden light.

A surprise showstopper was the Rufous-browed Peppershrike, a colorful vireo that typically stays high in the canopy. This one perched low, offering rare and prolonged views. On the savanna’s edge, Swallow-winged Puffbirds posed atop trees, and as we stepped out onto the open grassland, a flock of Fork-tailed Flycatchers descended onto a bush.

The day ended with a flourish—cumulus clouds ablaze in the setting sun and the distant Pakaraima Mountains glowing like a painting, reminding us how deeply we had stepped into the wild, radiant beauty of the Guiana Shield.

Tues., Apr. 1 Surama Eco-Lodge | Burro-Burro River

After an early breakfast, we took a short van ride to the start of a long hike through the rainforest, bound for the Burro-Burro River. Our target: one of the most exciting and sought-after birds in the world, a species that can only be found by traveling deep into the rainforest. Because we had a long walk and boat trip ahead of us, we didn’t stop often for birding along the way, but we did enjoy a fun pairing: a clumsy Spix’s Guan and an elegant Scaled Pigeon perched side by side in the same tree.

Even more thrilling than the birds we saw were the animals we heard—or saw signs of. From deep in the forest came the moans and barks of White-lipped Peccaries, powerful wild pigs that roam in herds numbering in the hundreds. Though we never caught sight of them, it was electrifying to know they were close, crashing through the undergrowth, and perhaps aware of us long before we heard them. These formidable mammals are key prey for jaguars.

We also found fresh tracks and trails made by South America’s largest land mammal, the South American Tapir. Though this animal remained elusive, the idea of these shy, nocturnal browsers moving through the wilderness added a layer of intrigue to our journey—deep into the heart of primary rainforest touched by neither road nor saw. What creatures were watching us from the shadows as we passed by, never seen?

At the river landing, a Gray-lined Hawk and a Plumbeous Kite greeted us, perched nearby as if to mark the next leg of our journey. We boarded a small wooden boat piloted by a local Macushi man and headed upriver, slipping deeper into the Iwokrama Rainforest. The river was narrow, wild, and winding, and we often had to duck under low branches as we made our way toward a rare treasure.



As we traveled, the birdlife was extraordinary. Ringed, Amazon, and Green Kingfishers dove for fish and perched on branches along the banks, and we were especially thrilled to spot a Green-and-rufous Kingfisher that glowed like burnished copper in the dappled light. Painted Parakeets flapped overhead, King Vultures soared among clouds, and colonies of Crested Oropendolas, along with Red-rumped and Yellow-rumped Caciques, swung their long woven nests from riverside trees. Toucans yelped and croaked, and Cocoi Herons and Anhingas shadowed our boat like silent escorts, rising ahead of us as we passed.

We watched fish boil at the edges of the river—wolfish, according to our guides—and heard stories of electric eels that haunt these waters. Spectacled Caimans lounged along the muddy banks, while smaller Dwarf Caimans eyed us from the shallows. There was a feeling of mutual curiosity—of being watched as closely as we were watching. Purple Jacaranda flowers added splashes of color to the green canopy. As the rain cleared and the sun burst through, the forest gleamed with light and life.

When we reached our destination, we climbed out of the boat and followed a short trail through towering Mora trees. These rainforest giants—some hundreds of years old—were sheathed in epiphytes, strangled with lianas, and flared at the base with enormous buttresses, anchoring them in the shallow, saturated soil.

Across the river, high in a massive Silk-cotton tree, sat the nest of a Harpy Eagle—lord of the canopy, slayer of monkeys and sloths. The nest was empty. We followed Garey along nearby forest paths to scan the canopy from different angles. Then—there it was. The chick, nearly adult-sized but still clad in fuzzy juvenile plumage, sat quietly on a branch amid the jungle foliage. Though it had fledged, it would remain near the nest for months, waiting for its parents to return with prey. We didn't witness a feeding, but the prolonged views of this iconic eagle in the wild were unforgettable.

The raptor magic continued on our return journey. An Ornate Hawk-Eagle, regal and richly marked, perched in a riverside tree so close we didn't need binoculars. Garey was stunned—he said he'd rarely seen one perched, and never at such close range.

Even after our long river expedition, we rallied for a bit of night birding. As dusk gave way to darkness, Garey and Laurindo led us down a faint path into the forest. Just before a rain shower hit, we spotted a Tawny-bellied Screech-Owl perched at close range, its round eyes reflecting our lights. Driving back to Surama, our headlights revealed more nocturnal life: White-tailed Nightjars and Common Pauraques glinting back at us in the beam. We watched them flush and flutter into the rain-slashed night—ghostly silhouettes vanishing into the dark, as the rainforest revealed some of its many mysteries.



Wed., Apr. 2 Surama Eco-Lodge

An overnight rainfall lingered into morning, so we took our time over breakfast at Surama, listening to Garey recount the village's pioneering role in community-based ecotourism. The Macushi people had no model to follow—they had to invent their own path forward. Hearing how they built something lasting, rooted in cultural heritage and ecological values, was both humbling and deeply inspiring.

Garey also shared stories and legends, including that of Bush Dai-Dai—a wild, humanoid figure said to roam the forest, part guardian, part enigma. Like a rainforest yeti, he's rarely seen but always felt, watching from the shadows.

When the rain finally let up, we ventured into the forest for a hike. Vines coiled around tree trunks like anacondas, and the leaves overhead were astonishingly large—canoe-sized, it seemed. The smells were lush and complex: damp earth, sweet blossoms, and the ripe, loamy scent of decay. In the dim, dripping understory, a White-bellied Antbird startled us by posing in the open—offering unusually long, unobstructed views.

But the day's true highlight came when we reached a Capuchinbird lek. These large, bizarre cotingas—with bald, blue-gray heads and hunched, monk-like posture—are unforgettable in appearance. Even more remarkable is their call: a low, mechanical groan, like a distant engine straining to turn over, or a surreal bovine moan echoing through the trees. We watched several males puff up and produce their eerie song in hopes of attracting a mate. It was part nature documentary, part fever dream—an otherworldly display we'll never forget.

The rainforest continued to offer its gifts: a Collared Puffbird perched like a storybook character, and a Ferruginous-backed Antbird stepped into view, allowing us to admire its brilliant blue facial skin and deep chestnut plumage.

In the afternoon, we visited the village school and met administrators, teachers, and children. What began as a formal introduction quickly turned joyful and spontaneous as a game of hide-and-seek erupted on the playground. We donated school supplies and learned more about Surama's history—how ecotourism not only protects the forest, but creates opportunities for the next generation. Where jobs once pulled people away, they now invite them to stay and thrive. The children's laughter and beaming smiles lifted our spirits and offered a hopeful glimpse of the future.

After lunch and a siesta, we headed out for roadside birding. Blue-headed Parrots gave us excellent perched views, and a pair of Blue Dacnis—male and female—dropped in nearby, dazzling us with their electric blues and greens.



We worked hard to track an Amazonian Pygmy-Owl, which called persistently but stayed hidden behind dense vines. At last, it emerged—a thrilling reward. These tiny owls emit a high-pitched tooting call that often draws a crowd of mobbing songbirds. Recognizing the owl as a predator, they overwhelm it with noise and chaos to protect themselves—disrupting the hunter’s focus and foiling its plans.

A mixed flock moved through, with Flame-crested and Yellow-backed Tanagers adding vibrant splashes to the late afternoon light. As dusk settled over the forest, a Common Potoo flared overhead and landed in view. We paused to scan for owls—and then, suddenly, an Ocelot stepped onto the road and lingered in our lights. An elusive jungle cat, rarely seen—it was a moment of pure wonder.

And the night wasn’t done. A Spectacled Owl flew in and perched in full view, regal and watchful. We stood transfixed by this powerful, enigmatic predator.

Then came one last revelation: on the drive back to Surama, a Fer-de-lance—the infamous venomous pit viper of the Neotropics—slithered across the road. We stopped at a safe distance to admire its muscular coils and intricate, cryptic patterns. A creature of deadly beauty, it felt like the perfect punctuation to a day steeped in rainforest mystery.

Back at Surama, we spent the evening with Kenneth, a Macushi herpetology expert. He told us hair-raising tales of Bushmasters—twelve-foot snakes with tail spines and eerie, whistling calls, said to hunt in pairs. He spoke, too, of the time he misidentified a coral snake and was bitten—a sobering story, told with humility, humor, and deep knowledge.

There is so much wisdom here—centuries of Amerindian relationship with the land and its creatures. We learned about the Macushi land ethic: a simple, profound commitment to care for the living system that cares for you. That truth echoed through every story, every encounter, every step we took, venturing deeper into the wild.

Thurs., Apr. 3 Iwokrama Rainforest | Rock View Lodge

Today we said farewell to our friends at Surama and began the next chapter of our journey. Rain lingered through the morning, but just as we set out to bird, the clouds lifted—a lucky break that ushered in a dazzling flurry of sightings.

We kicked things off with stunning views of both Red-necked and Cream-colored Woodpeckers, their contrasting plumages mesmerizing against the rain-washed forest. Overhead, Red-bellied Macaws sliced through the air with their squeaky calls, and a Spangled Cotinga shimmered in the canopy like a living gem. Once again, the vivid pair of Blue Dacnis—male and female—appeared side by side, still breathtaking even after earlier sightings.



Two Guiana Shield endemics made welcome appearances: the Green Aracari, sporting its oversized red, yellow and blue bill and vibrant green back and wings, and the Guianan Toucanet, another colorful new addition to the group's list. Nearby, a Green Oropendola sat bathed in perfect light—its bicolored bill tipped with orange, piercing blue eyes alert, and whimsical feather tufts trailing from its sleek head.

A walk into the rainforest brought an unexpected downpour—but the dense canopy absorbed most of it, sheltering us in a softly dripping green cathedral. Deep beneath the canopy, a White-throated Toucan clambered clumsily through low branches, offering a comical, close-up encounter with a species usually seen silhouetted against the sky. Then the trees erupted with movement: a troop of Wedge-capped Capuchin Monkeys swung above us, their acrobatics equal parts playful and mesmerizing.

We lunched at Surama Junction, where Rensford's mother treated us to a generous home-cooked feast. Between bites, she shared stories of Macushi traditions—rites of passage and ancestral beliefs that remain woven into daily life. Overhead, cacique colonies bustled in the trees, and King Vultures soared on thermals, their massive wings drawing our eyes skyward. After our meal, we swayed in hammocks, digesting both food and stories, when a massive Gold Tegu lizard strutted from the undergrowth, drawing gasps from the group.

From there, we left the emerald embrace of the Iwokrama Rainforest and entered the Rupununi Savannah, where the land unfurled into wide-open grasslands rimmed by distant ridgelines. A whole new ecosystem lay before us — and with it, a new cast of avian characters.

We settled into our rooms at Rock View Lodge, and during our afternoon birding session, we spotted Crested Bobwhite darting across the road and Vermilion Flycatchers flickering like coals above the grasses. An American Kestrel descended from its perch to snatch a rodent, then returned with its prey in talons, silhouetted in sharp relief against the sun. A sprightly Bananaquit brought grins all around—a bright yellow burst of energy.

As dusk settled over the savannah, we found ourselves encircled by swallows, and swifts, all swirling in an aerial ballet against the deepening sky. The day closed with our first Rupununi sunset—the sky shifting through molten gold and ember red, then softening to indigo as we spotted kingfishers and hawks in the fading light.

We gathered on the upstairs verandah of Rock View Lodge, nibbling on plantain chips and sipping fresh lime juice and cocktails made with local rum. As the evening settled in, we reviewed our checklist, recounting a day brimming with wonder and transitions.

From rainforest to savannah, from toucans and cotingas to kestrels and bobwhites, today was a day of farewells and fresh beginnings—a bridge between lush green forest and golden, wind-swept horizons.



Fri., Apr. 4 Rupununi Savannah | Rupununi River

We began our day with birding near Rock View Lodge, followed by a hike up to Panorama Point—a rocky hilltop that more than lived up to its name. From this lofty perch, the Rupununi Savannah stretched endlessly in all directions, a patchwork of golden grasses and scattered trees under a cloud-dappled sky. Morning light stirred the birds into action, and the hillside came alive with movement and color.

A Blue-tailed Emerald shimmered on its perch, sunlight playing across its iridescent feathers like light through stained glass. Familiar companions such as Palm Tanagers and Tropical Kingbirds abounded, but we were especially thrilled to add new birds to our growing list. An Ashy-headed Greenlet foraged methodically through the foliage—quiet, elusive, and beautifully understated. Then came a truly unforgettable sight: a Crane Hawk soaring below us. From our elevated vantage point, we could clearly see the raptor’s elegant glide. Knowing its remarkable adaptation—double-jointed ankles that allow it to reach into tree cavities for hidden prey—made the encounter all the more fascinating.

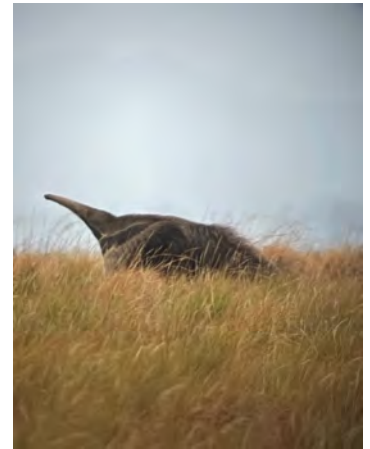
In the afternoon, we traded dry for water, embarking on a boat trip along the Rupununi River. Caimans were everywhere—Spectacled and Black—the latter gliding silently like shadows through the muddy shallows, larger and more imposing than the American Alligator. Sometimes, only their eyes betrayed their presence, watching us from just above the waterline.

The riverbanks teemed with resting birds: Large-billed Terns, their oversized orange bills catching the eye, and Black Skimmers, their elongated lower mandibles hinting at the dramatic feeding style for which they’re known. Against the lush foliage, Capped Herons stood out like ivory figurines, their elegance impossible to miss. A Rufescent Tiger-Heron crouched motionless as we passed, its rusty plumage glowing against the green.

We beached our boat and set off for a short walk along the sandy shore, savoring the cool, late afternoon air. Then came a sound that stopped us in our tracks—the eerie, flute-like whistle of an Undulated Tinamou, one of the Neotropics’ most elusive birds. Though it stayed hidden, its voice drifted across the river like a phantom’s song—haunting, distant, and unforgettable.

One of the day’s most striking sights was a Pied Plover, a shorebird so boldly patterned it seemed drawn in ink: black-and-white plumage set against a chestnut back, walking the sandbanks like a living painting. As the sun dipped low, the river turned to glass, reflecting pastel hues of peach and lavender. We drifted slowly, savoring the moment, grateful for Ely, our skilled boatman, whose calm confidence and warm spirit made the experience even more memorable.

Back at Rock View Lodge, we gathered for drinks and our daily checklist, sharing highlights and laughter under the stars. Dinner was followed by an early turn-in—another full and beautiful day in the heart of the Rupununi.



Sat., Apr. 5 Across the Rupununi Savannah in Search of Sun Parakeet | Manari Ranch

An early start—out the gates of Rock View at 4:30 a.m., headlights slicing the dark as we headed for Karasabai in search of Sun Parakeets. The savannah was cool and quiet, but not for long. A Giant Anteater stopped us in our tracks—an impossibly strange and magnificent beast, lumbering across the grass with long, curved claws and a tubular snout, flicking its tongue as it sniffed the earth for termites. We had time to marvel.

Capybaras, the world's largest rodents, greeted us next. We walked out to a pond for closer looks at these charismatic creatures, and in the reeds we found Crested Doradito—one of our most sought-after savannah birds. Nearby, Yellow-chinned Spinetails flitted in the bushes, and a flock of White-faced Whistling-Ducks took off with squeaky-toy calls.

The drive across the savannah brought more surprises: Double-striped Thick-knees lurking in the grasses, their enormous yellow eyes wide in the early light. Both Garey and Rensford were astonished—they'd never seen so many gathered in one place. A flock of Maguari Storks lifted into the air, a stunning spectacle unlike anything Garey had witnessed before. Everywhere we looked: White-tailed Hawks perched on fence posts, Crested Caracaras scavenging, and Savannah Hawks with rust-colored wings catching the sun as they wheeled after prey. Though we'd seen them many times, Savannah Hawks never failed to impress. Then came a final thrill—an Aplomado Falcon stretched its wings wide as it pinned prey to the ground, a portrait of poise and power in the morning light.

In Karasabai, we picked up Allie, a local ranger who has spent years protecting endangered Sun Parakeets in the wild. Not long after he joined us, the birds appeared. They flew into a thicket, then burst out again, flashing their fiery plumage. It was as if all the beauty of sunrise and sunset had been gathered into the wings of this feathered wonder.

On the way back, we stopped at a swamp we'd passed earlier, now teeming with life. Towering Jabirus waded among the reeds, and Wattled Jacanas tiptoed across lily pads, flashing lemon-yellow wings as they flushed. A Purple Gallinule made a brief appearance in the aquatic vegetation, and a Pied Water-Tyrant darted into view, showing off the crisp black-and-white contrast of its plumage.

We made a stop on the way to Manari Ranch to search for the elusive Bearded Tachuri—no luck there, but we stumbled into a blizzard of Ruddy-breasted Seedeaters. Then, unexpectedly, another Giant Anteater emerged. This one appeared in the broiling heat of midday, when they're usually asleep beneath shrubs, tails curled over their bodies like blankets. But this one ambled through the open grass, sniffing the wind and pausing at termite mounds, giving us extraordinary, close-up views.



After some well-earned rest at Manari, we explored the grounds at a relaxed pace. A Ringed Kingfisher offered excellent views of its crow-sized frame as Southern Lapwings punctuated the air with their strident calls. A Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl appeared, quickly drawing a mob of smaller birds, including an Ochre-lored Flatbill. Orange-backed Troupials blazed against the greenery, their vibrancy outshining even the striking Yellow Orioles. Brown-throated Parakeets perched in treetops, their name underselling the vibrant subtleties of their plumage.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, we set out on foot for some night birding across the savannah. Lesser Nighthawks floated low over the grasses, accompanied by the smaller Least Nighthawks—distinguished by the white on the trailing edge of their wings—and a few larger Nacunda Nighthawks, their white bellies flashing in the fading light. The sky turned dramatic with towering cumulus clouds, silent lightning flashing behind them, stars twinkling above, and a half-moon rising. Just when we thought the day had offered all its wonders, a Giant Anteater appeared, crossing our path. We scurried into position and watched in silent awe, its shaggy coat rippling as it moved through the grass.

On our walk back, enveloped in darkness, we listened to the night: frogs chorusing, insects buzzing and stridulating. We marveled at how few human-made sounds we'd encountered on our journey—few trucks, almost no planes—mostly just the music of the wild. At the ranch, we gathered around a dinner of locally caught fish, fresh greens, and crisp, golden fried plantains.

Sun., Apr. 6 Ireng River | JR Ranch Lake

In the morning, we set out on an adventure with Jeremy Melville, a dedicated local bird researcher and conservationist. We loaded into two 4x4s to navigate the rugged roads stretching across the savannah, bouncing past scattered trees and golden grasses. Birds greeted us—Jabirus rising over the landscape as they stood in distant wetlands, and a delightful group of four Burrowing Owls right next to the road. They bobbed and blinked their big yellow eyes, swiveling their heads in tandem like curious sentries near their burrows.

We hiked through a riparian forest along the Ireng River, rich with birdsong and the rustle of leaves. Our two main target species were range-restricted specialties that Jeremy has spent years working to protect: the Rio Branco Antbird and the Hoary-throated Spinetail. We were in good hands. Jeremy shared how he works with local landowners to protect and restore the dwindling patches of habitat these endangered birds need. He's also planting native vegetation to reconnect fragmented forests—rewilding a landscape one tree at a time.

As we moved quietly through the forest, eyes and ears attuned to every nuance of sound, we found not just our targets but rarely seen surprises too: a Spot-breasted Woodpecker and a Little Woodpecker, both offering good views as they hitched up the trunks. A Buff-breasted Wren burst into a complex, bubbling song near us, then hopped into view, tail cocked. A male Barred Antshrike, the “jailbird” of the forest, proudly displayed his bold black-and-white stripes, and we caught glimpses of both male and female Black-crested Antbirds skulking low in the understory.



The forest floor offered its own performers. Pale-legged Horneros, members of the ovenbird family, relatives of leaftossers, spinetails, and woodcreepers, flipped leaves aside with their beaks in search of hidden insects. Two new tanager-family additions joined our list: the understated Olive-gray Saltator and the elegant Chestnut-vented Conebill.

Every turn in the trail brought new excitement. A Rufous-tailed Jacamar, iridescent as a gemstone, sat motionless in a shaft of light. Back on the savannah, Yellowish Pipits blended seamlessly into the tawny grasses, invisible until they lifted into flight, revealing themselves with song and flutter.

The morning flew by, full of discovery and inspiration—fueled by the birds and by Jeremy’s dedication to protecting their future. This corner of the Rupununi pulsed with life, and we felt fortunate to walk its trails.

Following our afternoon siesta, we drove to a nearby lake. The rain had stopped, and a rainbow arched above the savannah, stretching across the storm-swirled sky—an ideal moment for a group photo, all of us grinning beneath its vibrant colors. Birding highlights came quickly: more Jabirus—never a sight that gets old. Two Pantanal Snipes made a brief but striking appearance, their long, arrow-straight bills unmistakable. A Collared Plover parent tended its fuzzy chicks, tiny and cotton-ball cute. White-winged Swallows flashed their gleaming white wing patches and rumps in the fading light. Buff-necked Ibises stood radiant, their necks glowing gold in the rich sunset, their eyes as red as coals. And Red-bellied Macaws winged overhead, their vibrant plumage lit like fire by the last rays of sun.

Dinner was a special version of lasagna with a Manari twist. Ranch owner Lissa Orella, whose family has owned the ranch for generations, explained that the dish included plantain mixed into the layers—adding a delicious local flavor to the familiar comfort food.

Mon., Apr. 7 Moco-Moco | Flight to Georgetown

Because our earlier flight to Kaieteur Falls had been scrubbed due to weather, we had hoped to make the journey today—but once again, low clouds and rain put the kibosh on our plans. So we pivoted to Plan B: an unscheduled bonus adventure to Moco-Moco, where we left the open savannah behind and stepped into rainforest-cloaked mountains for one final birding adventure.



The trail was alive. An Amazonian Motmot glowed in the shadows, and an Amazonian Grosbeak delivered its rich, sweet song from the nearby brush. Every group member finally got satisfying views of the elusive Ochre-lored Flatbill, which had teased us earlier in the tour. A Red-rumped Agouti scurried across the path, vanishing into the undergrowth.

Then—monkey business! A troop of Brown Capuchins erupted into view, cavorting in the trees and feasting on cecropia fruits. The younger monkeys stayed low, practicing short hops between branches, while the adults bounded through the treetops in athletic, gravity-defying leaps.

One of the most memorable moments had nothing to do with feathers or fur. We passed a dead cane toad—a big lump on the path. When we returned an hour later, it had vanished, completely dismantled by ants, beetles, and an army of other decomposers. Its body had been transformed into nutrients and energy, already flowing back into the ecosystem. It was a vivid, tangible example of rapid nutrient cycling, a key concept in rainforest ecology. In lay terms: nothing goes to waste. In this warm, wet, and biodiverse environment, organic matter is broken down and reused with astonishing speed, feeding plants, insects, and animals in an elegant, ever-churning loop.

Not far along, something bright caught our eyes: a metallic-blue tarantula hawk—a wasp nearly as large as a hummingbird, cruising over the trail. The Goliath Spider, the largest spider in the world, hunts birds in Guyana's wilds; in turn, it is hunted by the tarantula hawk. The eerie beauty and size of this ferocious wasp captivated us, reminding us of one of our guiding themes: to pause, look closely, and appreciate not just the birds, but all the inhabitants of this wild and wonder-filled world.

After a short drive, we embarked on another rainforest hike. There, at last, we saw a Buff-throated Woodcreeper—a bird we had only heard until now. A Little Hermit moved among the vivid red ginger flowers. A boldly patterned Pectoral Sparrow disabused us of the idea that sparrows are dull birds. More Brown Capuchins appeared, and a Common Squirrel Monkey drew our attention, its diminutive body lit by a shaft of sun.

We ended the trail at a high lookout point, mist trailing through the valley below. From this stunning perch, we spotted a male Blue-backed Manakin, his brilliant red cap gleaming among the forest shadows. This species is famous for its lekking behavior—males gather in small groups and perform synchronized dance routines to impress females, flipping, hopping, and buzzing with energy. This rainforest hike made for a satisfying finale to our birding in Guyana.

But the day wasn't done. With time on our side thanks to the canceled Kaieteur flight, we crossed the border into Brazil for lunch at a buffet and some spontaneous bonus birding. At a nearby lake, we found Roseate Spoonbills and a host of other waterbirds. Two Hepatic Tanagers perched in a nearby tree, their bright plumage belying their curious name (from the Greek *hepatikos*, meaning "liver-colored"). A White-winged Swallow zipped through the



air, snagging one of the hundreds of butterflies fluttering above the water. Out in the grass, a Great Egret caught a mouse and carried it to the water's edge—only to have two Yellow-headed Caracaras swoop in, trying to steal its prize.

We lingered on a sandy beach, savoring our final moments in the bird-rich wilds of South America—a fitting close to an epic journey.

Eventually, we flew from Lethem back to Georgetown, gathering at the lovely Cara Lodge for a farewell dinner. We toasted an unforgettable journey through one of the wildest and most fascinating regions on Earth. The warmth of the people, the beauty of the birds, and the sights, sounds, and scents of the vast Guyanese wilderness would stay with us for many years to come.

Tues., Apr. 8 Departures from Georgetown

Late-night and early-morning flights sent us on our way, each of us carrying something intangible yet lasting—memories swirling in rainforest mist, the echo of birdsong, and the profound thrill of having ventured to a place where nature still reigns. Guyana had given us its wonders. Now, with hearts full and passports stamped, we carried its story home.

Photos: Guianan Cock-of-the-rock (Steve Grace - SG), Giant Anteater (SG), Group Photo on the Rupununi Savannah (SG), Violet-bellied Hummingbird (Ann Rilling - AR), Hibiscus Flower (Taryn Anderson - TA), Masked Yellowthroat (SG), Orange-winged Amazon (SG), Guianan Red Howler (AR), Great Egret (SG), Blood-colored Woodpecker (SG), View from Airplane (SG), Iwokrama Rainforest (SG), Fork-tailed Woodnymph (SG), Mushroom in Iwokrama Rainforest (SG), Lizard (AR), Black Currasow (Leslie Drake - LD), Group birding (TA), Birding Near Atta Rainforest Lodge (SG), Guianan Cock-of-the-rock (LD), Lesser Nighthawk (SG), Scenic (TA), Dwarf Caiman (SG), Harpy Eagle (SG), Group Photo on the Burro-Burro River (SG), Cream-colored Woodpecker (SG), Oropendola nests (AR), Scenic (AR), Black Skimmers (AR), Giant Anteater (AR), Jabiru (SG), Sun Parakeet (SG), Double-striped Thick-knee (SG), Rupununi Savannah (SG), Brown Capuchin (LD, Plane (AR), Steve Grace and Garey Sway (AR)