

Guyana: Unspoiled Wilderness | Trip Report

Oct. 17-29, 2021 | By Carlos Sanchez



With Guide, Carlos Sanchez and participants Cynthia, Doug, Jan, Martha, Sally, Susan, Terry, and Vince.



Sun., Oct. 17

Arrivals | Exploring Georgetown

After meeting in the lobby of historic Cara Lodge in the afternoon, our intrepid group made its way to the National Park in Georgetown. Despite its name of 'national park,' it is not a natural reserve but a repurposed former golf club. It was a great venue for enjoying people watching as much as the birdwatching, as many locals were having a pleasant late afternoon there. Georgetown is a culturally diverse city, with the Caribbean and Indian communities especially notable in the local music, cuisine, and architecture. We took a slow walk around the circular outer loop, familiarizing ourselves with several common species that would be regulars throughout our itinerary: Pale-vented Pigeon, Wattled Jacana, Yellow-headed Caracara, Rusty-margined Flycatcher, Yellow Oriole, Blue-gray Tanager, and others. The park is also home to a few coastal specialties, such as Blood-colored



Woodpecker and Plain-bellied Emerald. We also got to feed some captive West Indian Manatees in one of the ponds, much to Sally's delight! We enjoyed a nice dinner at Cara Lodge, which offers some traditional Guyanese dishes such as curried lamb as well as more familiar fare like hamburgers.

Mon., Oct. 18 The Mahica River | Search for Hoatzin

We left our hotel early this morning with coffee in hand to head eastward along the Atlantic coast to our boat trip on the Mahaica River. The Mahaica River is a small river well known among visiting birders for being a reliable site for Guyana's iconic national bird, the primitive Hoatzin. We made a couple stops along the way in the early morning hours as we made our way, including one for a pair of cooperative Rufous Crab Hawk. This range restricted species replaces Common Black Hawk in this part of the world as a crustacean hunting specialist. We enjoyed fantastic views of this richly colored raptor in a coconut palm right by the highway. Once we boarded our boat on the Mahaica River, it did not take long for us to start seeing the Hoatzin. This bird species is so unique that it belongs in its own order, distantly related to all other bird species. They forage in trees along major waterways in northern South America, eating leaves and fruit which are later fermented in an enlarged crop in a manner broadly similar to the digestive system of mammalian ruminants like deer and cattle. Other notable bird species on our river cruise included Silvered Antbird, White-bellied Piculet, Black-capped Donacobius, Green-tailed Jacamar, and Red-capped Cardinal. On our way back, we stopped at the Ogle Seawall where we came across several stunning Scarlet Ibis, as well as the very odd Large-scaled Four-eyed Fish (distant relatives of the aquarium guppy and molly!). We had a relatively easy late afternoon at the hotel in preparation for another early start the following day.

Tues., Oct. 19 Bird's-eye View | Kaieteur Falls

Part of the allure of Guyana is the vast, unspoiled rainforest that still blankets much of the country. After boarding our small charter plane and taking off, we were soon past the narrow belt of urbanization and farmland along the coast and flying over a verdant landscape as far as the eye can see. Kaieteur Falls is the



world's largest single drop waterfall by volume – it was truly a magnificent sight! We landed on the rudimentary landing strip after a couple passes by the waterfall and took a short loop walk to the edge of an escarpment with more views of the waterfall. This whole area is on the eastern edge of the tepui region of Venezuela and Guyana, a raised area of ancient table-top mesas home to a unique array of endemic plants and animals. We saw quite a few on our walk, including Golden Rocket Frog (*Anomaloglossus beebei*) and the (giant) bromeliad *Brocchinia micrantha*. We also had our first (and best) encounter with Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock at a lek, a species far more spectacular than what a field guide would suggest. Imagine a glowing orange football with an orange slice attached to its bill. We also saw Plumbeous Euphonia, Rufous-crowned Elaenia, and Cliff Flycatcher. Our visit was all too brief, and we boarded our plane onwards to Surama – home to our lodging for the next three nights.

Wed., Oct. 20 Rupununi Savannah | Amazonian Rainforest

Surama Ecolodge sits in a transitional area between Amazonian Rainforest and the Rupununi Savannah. This makes for an especially rich area, as species from both habitats occur here. On our first morning, we visited the Harpy Eagle Trail which features Amazonian Rainforest. The calls of Screaming Piha belted throughout the forest. A very smartly patterned Ferruginous-backed Antbird allowed for nice views through the rainforest gloom, as it called from the rainforest floor. We also saw a rather rare primate in the form of a White-faced Saki, which looked back at us rather nervously. Back on the main national north-south highway, the abundance of fast-growing fruiting trees and open views of the canopy allowed us to see quite a few stunners: Spangled and Pompadour Cotingas! After lunch and a mid-day break, most of the group visited Surama village and learned about the culture of the local Macushi tribe. Cassava or manioc takes a central position as a staple food source for the local people, and we got to observe the processing of this important tuber. There was a bit of an interlude when our local guide found a Bat Falcon perched in the distance with a hapless parrot in its talons.

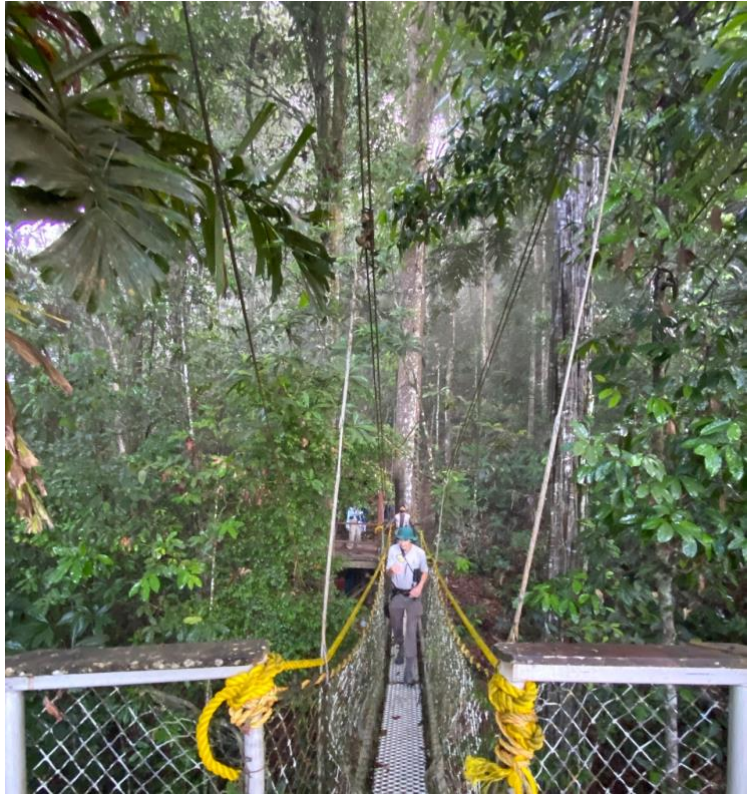


Thurs., Oct. 21 Borro Borro Trail

On our second day, we enjoyed a nice breakfast at the lodge before walking towards the Borro Borro Trail. The trail starts as a mixture of grassland and woodland but transitions to terra firme rainforest. The day kicked off with amazing views of a pair of perched Red-and-green Macaw. Due to the poor nature of the soils here, the forest does not get anywhere near as tall as it does elsewhere in the Amazon Basin. It is great for viewing canopy species! On our walk this morning, we noted quite a few: Black-spotted Barbet, Red-fan Parrot, Capuchinbird, and more. Down by the Borro Borro River (a forest stream this time of year), the group found a nesting Black-eared Fairy, as well as both American Pygmy Kingfisher and Buff-breasted Wren. As we started to loop back to the lodge, we came across a mixed flock of woodcreepers (Plain-brown, Wedge-billed, Red-billed, and Buff-throated) and heard the diagnostic bill snapping of a Rufous-winged Ground-Cuckoo. Although we did not see the cuckoo, it was still very exciting to hear this elusive bird.

Fri., Oct. 22 Rupununi Highway

Today, we left Surama Ecolodge and headed deeper into the rainforest via the Rupununi Highway. As we headed north, we noted the many elegant Acai Palms (*Euterpe oleracea*) growing naturally along the roadside. We made several birding stops along the way, whenever there was anything perched near the road. In this manner, we saw Black Curassow, Double-toothed Kite, Green Aracari, Red-necked Woodpecker, Pink-throated Becard, and more. By the time we rolled into Atta Lodge, it was lunch time. It was hard not to notice all the Giant Ameiva, a large and widespread tropical lizard, running around the lodge grounds.



After lunch and an early afternoon siesta to wait out the heat, we headed back along the highway. By carefully checking the various blackwater streams that cross the road, we came across one of the world's largest and most beautiful hummingbirds – Crimson Topaz. Only a handful of species are larger but no hummingbird features such a unique expanse of iridescent crimson and gold. Other very special birds in the afternoon included Tiny Hawk and Bronzy Jacamar. The time around sunset is always magical in these forests, with the large number of parrots commuting back to their roosts. A White-winged Potoo, a very scarce and local nocturnal bird species, treated us once it got dark.

Sat., Oct. 23 Iwokrama Canopy Walkway

After an early breakfast today, we headed to the famous Iwokrama Canopy Walkway. Canopy towers in the Amazon Rainforest are always a special birding experience, one that every birder that visits South America should plan to have at some point on their journeys. Rainforests layer both horizontally and vertically. The canopy is the highest vertical layer, a totally different ecosystem from the forest floor. Today's visit to the canopy did not disappoint. There was a light fog in the air as we steadily made our way up. Highly social and noisy Red-throated Caracara were among the first birds we saw, followed by Guianan Toucanet, Tufted Coquette, Green Aracari, and Black-spotted Barbet. We also spotted a Common Green Racer (*Chlorosoma viridissimum*) slithering through the larger branches of a tree below. However, the absolute highlight of our time on the canopy tower (and voted bird of the trip) was the massive Harpy Eagle that flew into the trees at close range – the apex predator of the trees and sky of the Amazon. What an incredible sighting to see so well! In the evening, we did some owling along the Rupununi Road and enjoyed views of Black-banded Owl and Long-tailed Potoo in the spotlight.



Sun., Oct. 24 **Rock View Lodge**

The following day after breakfast, we explored the forests along the Rupununi Road further. We focused our efforts in the white sand forests, a nutrient poor ecosystem with its own unique set of plants and animals. The forest here is much shorter in stature, with a generally less diverse understory that floods periodically. It did not take long for us to see Black Manakin, one of the denizens of this ecosystem. We also saw a family of shy Gray-winged Trumpeter, a bird that seems to belong more in the Alice in Wonderland novel than an Amazonian Rainforest. They quietly walked within several feet of us, foraging cautiously among the leaf litter. For some, this was the highlight of their entire experience in Guyana. Later in the morning, we also walked the Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock trail. This short trail meanders around a large rock outcropping with some overhangs that harbor roosting bats, as well as both lekking and nesting cock-of-the-rocks. During our time there, we also observed Great Jacamar, arguably the most spectacular species in its family. Then, it was onwards to Rock View Lodge on the edge of the Rupununi Savannah. The owner here is beyond colorful, and we had a grand tour of the grounds by one of his sons. Sally immediately fell in love with the local capuchin monkey named Piccolo.

Mon., Oct. 25 **Moura**

After early morning coffee, we headed out across the savannah to an area called 'Moura' by the locals. This area features a patchwork of woodland, grassland, and wetlands that harbor a wide variety of birds. On our first stop at a roadside network of muddy ponds, we observed White-faced Whistling-Duck, Muscovy Duck, White-headed



Marsh-Tyrant, Paraguayan Snipe, and more. We also stopped for gigantic Jabiru, the tallest flying bird in the Americas, as well as Maguari Stork, Limpkin, Bat Falcon, and White-tailed Hawk. Further on, we stopped at another productive patch of habitat. We noted King Vulture and Zone-tailed Hawk soaring overhead with the usual Black and Turkey Vultures as the morning thermals began to kick-in. Scrubby thickets harbored many smaller passerines, including Finsch's Euphonia, Olivaceous Saltator, Yellow-hooded Blackbird, Orange-backed Troupial, and Blue-tailed Emerald. A Tayra crossed the road later in the morning, and we got quick but good views of this tropical mustelid. After a productive morning of birding, we headed back to the lodge for lunch and an afternoon siesta. We had an interesting checklist this evening for sure, as even the owner of the lodge got involved.

Tues., Oct. 26 Manari Ranch | Lethem

Today was mostly a travel day, as we drove across the vast Rupununi Savannah on our way to Manari Ranch near Lethem. Roadside wetlands held a variety of wetland birds such as Limpkin, Snail Kite, Purple Gallinule, and Jabiru. An Aplomado Falcon was a fantastic find along the way, a streamlined hunter of South America's grassland habitats. We also had a Short-eared Owl fly in front of the vehicle in the middle of the day, a bird rarely seen anywhere in the Guianas at any time of year – and a life bird for our local guide! Around lunch time, we arrived at the village of Karasabai where we quickly found a flock of Critically Endangered Sun Parakeet. These birds suffered massive declines due to trapping for the cagebird trade but have since rebounded somewhat. We had lunch in the village, a simple but delicious meal of fried chicken, rice, farofa, and beans – classic fare for the region. By the late afternoon, we finally arrived at Manari Guest House Ranch for the evening. Dinner here was varied and delicious with a number of vegetable and meat dishes, arguably the best meal of the tour.



Wed., Oct 27

Upper Takutu River | River Dolphins!

It is always a great day when birding along a river in the Amazon Basin! We had an early start this morning to get to the Upper Takutu River, a tributary of the Rio Branco (white river). A flock of Red-bellied Macaws commuting across the river into from Guyana into Brazil gave us silhouette views. This mini-macaw is a Buriti Palm swamp specialist, a locally important palm species we drove by the previous day. After boarding our motorized canoes, we headed north along the river at a good clip. Our goal today was to see Rio Branco Antbird and Hoary-throated Spinetail, two very range-restricted species that occur only in the Rio Branco drainage. However, there was so much to see along the way: Collared Plover, Pied Lapwing, Crane Hawk, Greater Ani, Large-billed Tern, Black Skimmer, and more. Once we arrived at the correct site, it did not take long for us to see both Rio Branco Antbird and Hoary-throated Spinetail. The spinetail, oddly enough, looks very similar to the White-whiskered Spinetail of the arid Guajira Peninsula and northern Venezuela. We also saw many other bird species in the gallery forest here, and we had some really good birding once we saw the two main targets: Flavescent Warbler, Pale-tipped Tyrannulet, Yellow-breasted Flycatcher, Hooded Tanager, White-fringed Antwren, and Green-rumped Parrotlet just to name a few. On the way back, we encountered a small family group of Amazon River Dolphin (Boto) – truly a special sighting. These beautiful animals have tiny eyes due to the very murky nature of the rivers they live in, but they have excellent echolocation. We saw them several times as they skimmed the surface of the water for a few seconds to take a breath of air – wow!

Thurs., Oct 28

Last-minute Birding | Departures

Unfortunately, our time in Guyana came to an end today. As we left Manari Guest Ranch, we came across a Double-striped Thick-knee – a highly terrestrial, mostly nocturnal shorebird – for the first time. We boarded our charter flight at Lethem, flying across the length of the country back to Georgetown. We had our COVID tests this afternoon at a clinic in Georgetown, so that we could return home to the United States the following morning. The group convened at the lobby of Cara Lodge in Georgetown for dinner, where we had a long but

pleasant meal in the al fresco dining area. We laughed and reminisced of our trip together. Guyana lived up to its expectations of an unspoiled wilderness.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Terry Master – TM), Yellow Oriole (TM), Manatee (TM), Blood-colored Woodpecker (Carlos Sanchez – CS), Rufous Crab Hawk (TM), Co-pilot (TM), Green-Tailed Jacamar (TM), Black-capped Donacobius (TM), Hoatzin (TM), Kaieteur Falls (TM), Little Blue Heron (TM), Golden Rocket Frog (TM), White-faced Saki (CS), Scarlet Ibis (TM), Makushi Dancers (TM), Scarlet Macaw (TM), Lesser Nighthawk (TM), Black Curassow (TM), Birding Surama (TM), Giant Ameiva (TM), Crimson Topaz (TM), Canopy Platform (TM), Fun at the lodge (TM), Long-tailed Potoo (TM), Owl Butterfly (TM), Guanian Cock-of-the-rock (CS), Piccolo the Brown Capuchin (TM), View at Kamudi Bash (TM), Sally and Piccolo (TM), Glittering-throated Hummingbird (TM), White-tailed Hawk (TM), Paraguayan Snipe (TM), Frangipani (TM), Savanna Hawk (TM), Giant Anteater (TM), Birding by boat (TM)