

# Guyana: Unspoiled Wilderness | Feb. 4 – 16, 2022 | Trip Report | by Carlos Sanchez



With guide, Carlos Sanchez and participants Fiona, George, Kate, Laura, and Mark.



## Fri., Feb. 4

## Arrivals | Georgetown Botanical Gardens

After a late arrival after midnight from Miami for everyone, we convened in the late afternoon hours to visit the Georgetown Botanical Gardens under gray skies and occasional sprinkles. We had the botanic gardens all to ourselves, which seems to have been great for the local birds. It did not take long for us to see our first Great Kiskadee, Rusty-margined Flycatcher, Wattled Jacana, and Yellow-rumped Cacique. A rookery of herons was very active, with displaying Great Egrets showing off their elegant plumes. Later on our walk, we came across a nice feeding flock with Cinnamon Attila, White-bellied Piculet, Blood-colored Woodpecker, Yellow Oriole, and Turquoise Tanager. A pair of Zone-tailed Hawk mated right near us, a Toco Toucan flew by, and a pair of distant



Festive Parrots gave us nice scope views. We had a pleasant dinner at the lodge and discussed the itinerary for the days ahead.

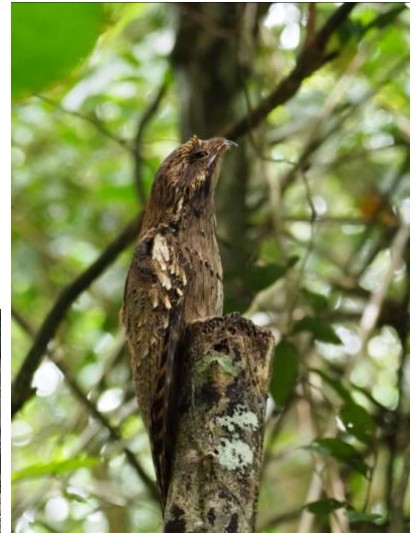
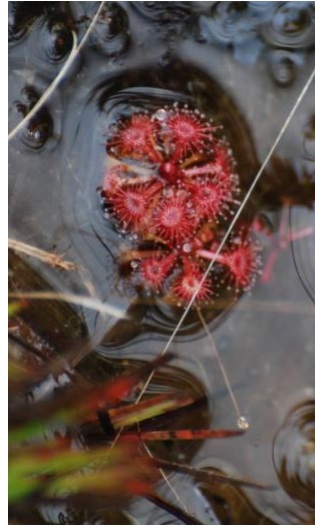


## **Sat., Feb. 5                      Mahaica River Boat Trip | Birding the Mangroves**

We left our hotel early this morning with coffee 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 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 right by the highway.

We birded our way along the entrance road to the boat dock, seeing an abundance of wetland birds along the way from Maguari Stork to Little Cuckoo to Long-winged Harrier. Once we boarded our boat on the Mahaica River, it did not take long for us to start seeing the Hoatzin (the national bird of Guyana). These fascinating birds 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. The heavens opened above us, and we sought shelter under the patio of our boatman. We had a beautiful late breakfast with chickpea curry and a soft flatbread kneaded with split peas, showcasing the heavy South Asian influence on this part of South America. On our way back, we stopped at a stretch of seawall with mangroves and mudflats. There were many Scarlet Ibis, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, and Snowy Egret, along with a diverse supporting cast of shorebirds: Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Willet, Greater Yellowlegs, and more. However, the absolute highlight here were several calling Mangrove Rail which we saw very well.

## **Sun., Feb. 6                      Kaieteur Falls | Surama**

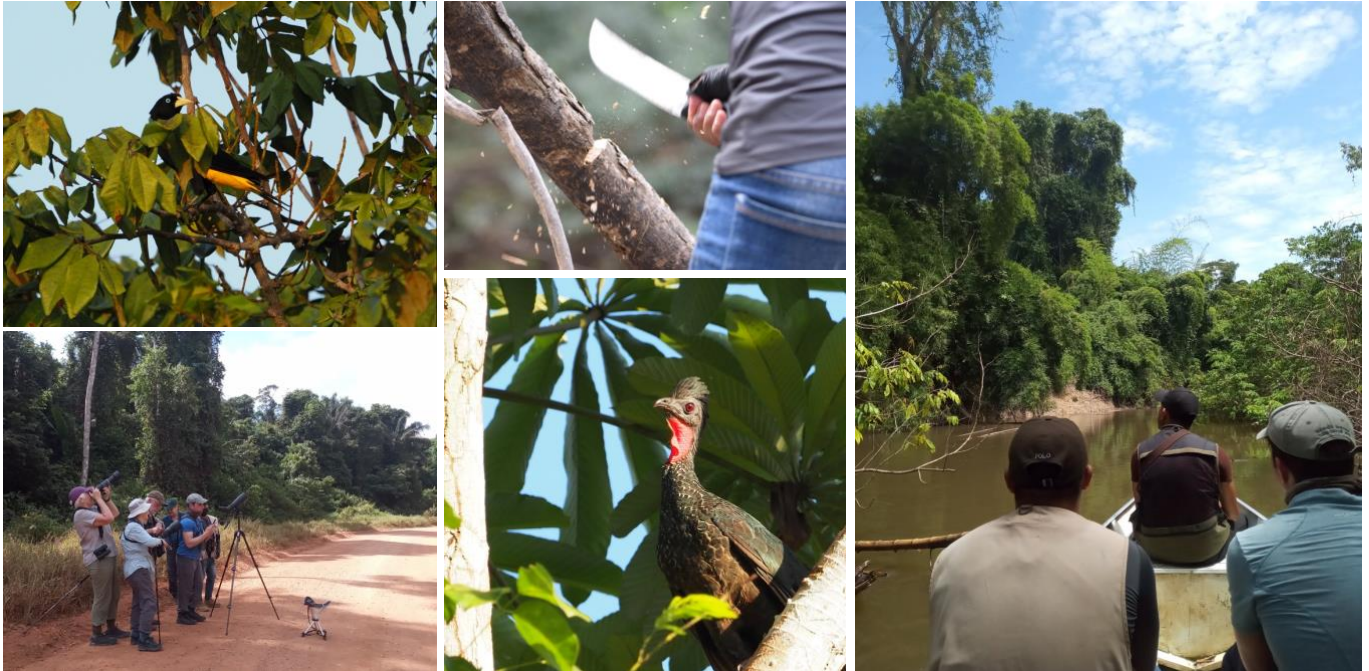


Part of the allure of Guyana is the vast, unspoiled rainforest that still blankets much of the country. Today, we had a charter flight from Georgetown to Surama, stopping along the way at Kaieteur Falls. While we waited for our delayed flight due to weather, we enjoyed sightings of two dozen species at the airport: White-headed Marsh Tyrant, Yellow-hooded Blackbird, Red-breasted Meadowlark, Snail Kite, Pied Water-Tyrant, and more. 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 that we could peak at between the clouds. Kaieteur Falls is the world's largest single drop waterfall by volume – it was truly a magnificent sight! We landed and walk to the edge of an escarpment with more views of the waterfall along a loop trail. 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*), giant bromeliads, and carnivorous sundew plants. We also had our first (and best) encounter with Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock at a lek. Imagine a glowing orange football with an orange slice attached to its bill. Our visit was all too brief, and we were soon off again on our flight to Surama. In the early evening hours, we did some very productive owling nearby and saw Spectacled Owl, Tawny-bellied Screech-Owl, and White-tailed Nightjar. What a fantastic start!

## Mon., Feb. 7 **Surama Ecolodge | Buriti Palm Swamp**

Life starts early in the rainforest, and we were soon listening to the calls of Variable Chachalaca and Guianan Howler-Monkey as we had breakfast. Surama Ecolodge sits in a transitional area between Amazonian Rainforest and the Rupununi Savannah, making for an especially rich area. On our first morning, we walked from Surama Ecolodge through both savannah and rainforest habitats, observing a variety of species along the way. One of our very first birds was a lovely White-tailed Goldenthrout, a hummingbird of open habitats in South America. The rainforest itself was rather slow going and times, but we steadily saw birds throughout the morning as we came across individuals (Green-backed Trogon and Guianan Trogon), feeding flocks (Wedge-billed and Buff-throated Woodcreeper, Cinereous and Dusky-throated Antshrike), or leks (Golden-headed Manakin). The shy





but sharply patterned Ferruginous-backed Antbird walked out onto the trail for us, while a flock of loud and energetic Capuchinbird wowed us soon after. We saw a total of three potoo species today on roosts: Great, Long-tailed, and Common. Will we get all five? After lunch and an afternoon break, we headed to a Buriti Palm swamp where we quickly saw both Red-bellied Macaw and Sulphury Flycatcher. These two species specialize in this Amazonian Rainforest sub-habitat. Intense specialization was a constant theme during our time in the rainforest. We enjoyed rum and coke as the sun sank. A Bat Falcon was hunting for bats with energetic swoops. As it got dark, we heard and then saw a Tropical Screech-Owl.

## **Tues., Feb. 8                      Borro Borro River**

On our second day, we enjoyed a nice breakfast at the lodge before heading to the Borro Borro River for our boat trip. Traveling by boat is one of the best ways to enjoy the rainforest. While we waited for our boatman, we birded in a clearing where we saw Yellow-throated Flycatcher, Golden-collared Woodpecker, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Dusky Purpletuft, and Black-spotted Barbet. The boat ride was long and glorious, with excellent weather, company, and a touch of adventure (some maneuvering and a game of limbo to get the boat under some fallen trees!). We motored past Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Green-and-rufous Kingfisher, Green Ibis, Painted Parakeet, Great Black Hawk, and more. Once we got to the Harpy Eagle nest, we enjoyed some picnic snacks and drink while we waited and waited. Screaming Piha were calling all around us, and we also saw a diminutive Helmeted Pygmy-Tyrant. Unfortunately, the eagle was not to be. We took our time birding our way back, seeing so many great birds along the way including Zigzag Heron and Spotted Antpitta.

Most of the group decided to take it easy in the afternoon except for Mark, who joined John and I to do some birding in the savannah. It was nice and easy birding – we just saw so much in such a short amount of time: Pearl Kite, Finsch's Euphonia, White-naped Xenopsaris, Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch, and Long-billed Starthroat just to name a few. We had a lovely last dinner at Surama of local fish with breadfruit, farofa (granulated cassava/manioc/yucca), and vegetables.

## **Wed., Feb. 9                      Rupununi Highway**



After a superb breakfast of eggs, local bread, and fruit, 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, coming across a large feeding flock that included Purple, Green, and Short-billed Honeycreeper, Paradise, Flame-crested, and Bay-headed Tanager, and both Lemon-chested and Buff-cheeked Greenlet. Further on, John Christian expertly lured a flock of Gray-winged Trumpeter to cross the road in front of us – wow! 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 included Great Jacamar, Guianan Toucanet, and Red-fan Parrot. After it got dark, we heard and then saw a Black-banded Owl, as well as a Boat-billed Heron.

## **Thurs., Feb 10                      Iwokrama Canopy Walkway**

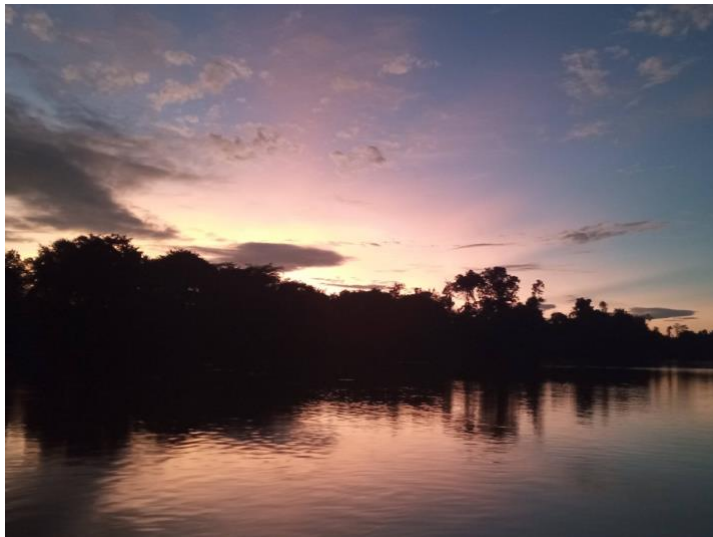
After an early breakfast today, we headed to the famous Iwokrama Canopy Walkway. Canopy towers in the Amazon Rainforest are always a special birding experience, one that every birder that visits South America should plan to have at some point on their journeys. Rainforests layer both horizontally and vertically. The canopy is the highest vertical layer, a totally different ecosystem from the forest floor. Although the forest canopy was quiet this morning (perhaps due to the overcast skies), we still encountered quite a few interesting species. A Golden-sided Euphonia came to the trees right by the walkway, while a Black-eared Fairy and a Tufted Coquette zipped in and out intermittently for a few minutes giving everyone good looks. A Guianan Puffbird sat lazily in the tree right above us, and a Black-faced Hawk made a close pass right by the tower (what a raptor!). On our way back to the lodge, we encountered Collared Puffbird, Rufous-throated Antbird, and Amazonian Barred-Woodcreeper. We had a long break in the heat of the day, although those that were enjoying coffee or just loafing around in the clearing had clear views of a couple White Hawk soaring overhead. In the afternoon, we hiked along a muddy trail to a known roost of the rare Rufous Potoo and darkness treated us to the equally rare White-winged Potoo. We saw all five potoo species in Guyana on this tour!

## **Fri., Feb. 11                      Birding Rupununi Road**

The following day after breakfast, we explored the forests along the Rupununi Road. 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 Saffron-crested Tyrant-Manakin, Olivaceous Schiffornis, and Guianan Red Cotinga.



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 nesting cock-of-the-rock, as well as an active lek site for the males. The mesmerizing display of Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock on this trail was the near universal highlight of the tour for the group! Then, it was onwards to Rock View Lodge on the edge of the Rupununi Savannah. The owner here is beyond colorful, and he treated us with great hospitality.

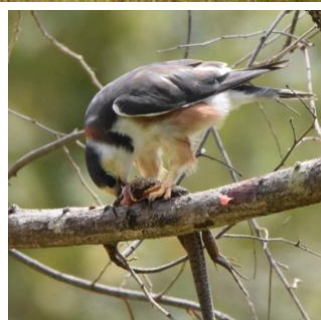
## **Sat., Feb. 12                      Moura**

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.

**Sun., Feb. 13**

## **To Manari Ranch!**



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 several vegetable and meat dishes, arguably the best meal of the tour.

**Mon., Feb. 14**

## **Amazon Basin | 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!

## **Tues., Feb. 15                      Back to Georgetown | 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. 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.

*Group Birding (Laura Bakken - LB), Yellow Oriole (Fiona McTavish - FM), Fork-tailed Woodnymph (FM), Cock-of-the-rock (FM), Red Mantled Howler Monkey & Hoatzin (FM), Black-capped Donacobius (FM), Smooth-billed Ani (George Bakken - GB), Pale-breasted Spinetail (GB), Group at plane (LB), Kaieteur Falls (LB), Macro shot (LB), Warning Sign (LB), Scenic (LB), Common Potoo (FM), Yellow-rumped Cacique(FM), Making chips fly (LB), River boat(LB), Birding the highway (LB), Spix's Guan (FM), Scarlet Macaw (FM), Woodcreeper (FM), Black-faced Hawk (FM), Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock (GB), Scenic (LB), Sunset (LB), Crab-eating Fox (FM), Scenic Birding (LB), Sun Parakeet (FM), White-tailed Hawk (FM), Pearl Kite with lizard (GB), Yellowish Pipit (FM), Savannah scenic (LB), Burrowing Owl (GB), Capybara Track (LB)*