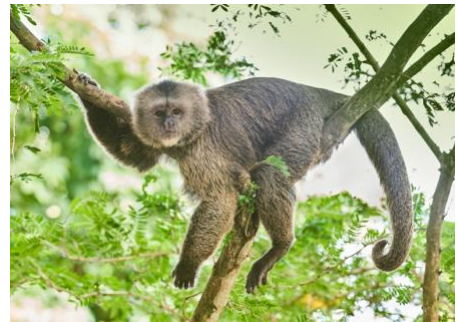


# Guyana: Unspoiled Wilderness | Oct. 13 – 25, 2022 | Trip Report | by Andrew Haffenden



**With guide, Andrew Haffenden, and participants: Jerry, John, Molly, Richard, and Sheri**



Guyana is one of the last frontiers of natural history touring, with fewer ecotourists than almost any other country. On this tour, although we stayed at all but one of the best-located and most popular ecolodges, we saw just two birders in our city hotel, two general tourists at one lodge, and three at a second, each just for one night. We had virtually all of the nature and birding sites in the country to ourselves! Guyana boasts a remarkable 87 percent of its territory as undisturbed rainforest, with another 10 percent comprised of savanna, wetlands and mangrove forest. No species are known to have gone extinct in Guyana, and only a few are on the IUCN Endangered Species list, mostly due to their very restricted ranges, such as the Golden Rocket Frog in the Kaieteur area. In short, visiting Guyana is like going back in time two centuries from a naturalist's viewpoint -- but with better accommodations and transportation! Our tour took us from the capital, Georgetown, on the coast, where the Mahaica River provides one of the best opportunities to see Hoatzin anywhere in South America; to the lush Iwokrama Rainforest and the dry Rupununi Savanna in the south, along the border with Brazil. By the end of the tour, we had tallied over a third of Guyana's bird species, plus many mammals, reptiles and insects. A highlight of the tour was meeting with, and learning about, the Macushi, one of the main indigenous groups. We stayed in a



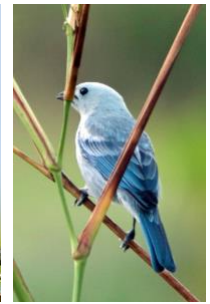


Macushi village that has built a very nice ecolodge for birders and is also the home of our expert birding guide, Gary. Coincidentally, I learned that Gary was in a few of my photos taken there in 2010 when he was a young man!

## **Thurs., Oct. 13                      Arrivals | Georgetown**

Flights arrive late into Georgetown and we had a very early start the next day. Molly, John, Jerry and I arrived in the evening, but Sheri and Rich had arrived earlier, giving them time to take in more of Georgetown. The historic Cara Inn would be our home for the first two nights. This all-wooden hotel was built in the 1840s and has housed many celebrities including King Edward VII in 1923, and Mick Jagger in 2005. We all felt refreshed after sleeping in and enjoyed a traditional breakfast of Guianan “bakes” (fried dough of various kinds) and fresh pawpaw (papaya). Then we ventured to the nearby Promenade Gardens to see what birds we could find. Our first good birds were in a vacant lot on the way, including, of all things, Limpkin! Apparently the drainage canals that run through Georgetown are very popular with Limpkins. We also saw White-chested Emerald, Gray and, of course, Tropical Kingbirds, Yellow-headed Caracara and Carib Grackle, a relatively recent arrival. Although the park was officially closed, we were allowed in at no charge provided we agreed not to take photos so, cameras duly stowed, in we went. A pleasant hour was spent here, and even though it is essentially a manicured park, there still was a good range of birds such as White-chested Emerald, Bat Falcon, White-bellied Piculet and a cooperative Barred Antshrike. We tackled our first of many identifications involving yellow-bellied, white head-striped flycatchers with Great Kiskadee and Rusty-margined Flycatcher. It was then time to return to the hotel for lunch and to meet Gary who would be our guide Gary for the tour.

Lunch was excellent, and since we didn’t have too much luggage, we decided it would be easier to travel with our suitcases rather than transport it to Surama as planned. This simplified logistics and gave us a little extra time, and Gary suggested we visit the Botanic Gardens. After a break to avoid the heat of the day, we set out on our first guided birding. The Botanic Garden is a well-known birding site, and rightfully so with a nice mixture of small lakes, dry and wet fields and mature trees providing a variety of habitats for birds. We found seven species of parrots ranging from the tiny Green-rumped Parrotlet to the very large Red-and-Green Macaw. The other five included Orange-winged Parrot, Mealy Parrot, Yellow-crowned Parrot, Brown-throated Parakeet and the small, Red-shouldered Macaw, not bad for a central downtown park! Both Greater and Smooth-billed Anis were seen, plus another of that family, Little Cuckoo. Wattled Jacanas were raising chicks among the lily pads, and no one could resist taking multiple pictures of these photogenic birds. A surprise sighting was a Magnificent Frigatebird



flying overhead, reminding us that Georgetown is only a mile and a half from the ocean. A Black-collared Hawk, with its smart, black bow tie, posed in a palm tree, and we found our first Snail Kite, a bird that is widespread in Guyana. Blood-colored Woodpecker was a nice find, an endemic that is range restricted to a 20-mile-wide strip of the coasts of Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana. We saw a total of nine flycatchers including the tiny and always grumpy-looking Common Tody-flycatcher, Spotted Tody-flycatcher and Cinnamon Attila. For me, the best bird of the day was a Black-capped Donacobius, one of my favorite birds of South America (it has recently pushed about 75 miles into Central America, in Panama's very far eastern Darien). Several tanagers, including of course Blue-gray and Palm, but also the stunning Yellow Oriole and a Violaceous Euphonia building a nest, were among the 60 species of birds we saw in our three hours here. And this was just our first afternoon, and within the city! We then returned for dinner and an early night as our next morning was very early, with a longish drive to an upstream stretch of the Mahaica River to search for what is perhaps South America's oddest bird, the Hoatzin.

## Fri., Oct. 14

## Mahaica River & Ogle seawall

We had a bleary-eyed start this morning with coffee and cookies prior to our 4:45 a.m. departure for the Mahaica River. but generally became more human as we rode through the outskirts and nearby countryside of Georgetown. As it got light, we caught tantalizing glimpses of bird activity from the bus, but there would be no stopping for now – we would have the chance to bird here on our return. Even so we added Black-bellied Whistling Duck (often semi-domesticated), Amazon Kingfisher, Crested Caracara, Great Black Hawk, Pied Water-tyrant, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, White-winged Swallow and Blue-black Grassquit to our list as we drove! Gary's plan was to arrive at before the heat of the day drove the Hoatzins deep into the Moco moco plants where they are difficult to see. On arrival at the river our boatman, Narish, and his assistant brought our boats, one with a motor and a second tethered to it – an interesting way to make room for everyone. As we waited to board, we could see several Hoatzin in the distance along with a very nice Yellow Oriole, Great Kiskadee, Green Kingfisher, (Southern) House Wren and others. After settling into our small craft, we headed up the Mahaica River and quickly came upon several Hoatzins, as strange looking in life as they are in photos. All were in the Moco moco (*Montichardia arborescens*), part of the Arum family, offering both food and protective habitat for the Hoatzin in Guyana. The plant produces an edible fruit that is used by local indigenous and other people, but Hoatzins feed on the leaves.





Hoatzin is the only bird that feeds exclusively on leaves. Its crop has become a rumen-like fermentation chamber, unique among birds, which produces a protein-rich bacteria that sustains the birds. The “rumen” has led to a local name in some areas – stinkbird – due to the methane produced. The precise taxonomic placement of the Hoatzin is still in flux; it is the only species in its order, and its relationship to other orders remains undetermined. After enjoying and photographing these delightful stinkbirds, we continued birding along the river. Several Little Cuckoos were seen, with one coming out and posing for us. A Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture flew over, giving us good looks to help differentiate from the very similar-looking Greater Yellow-headed Vulture and Turkey Vulture. The underwing pattern is virtually the same as a Turkey Vulture’s but lighter, more silvery-gray, and has a much smaller head than Greater, and the open habitat is another good indication.

Smooth-billed Anis were common in the vegetation, and a skulking Striated Heron was a good find among the many egrets. Raptors other than vultures included Short-tailed Hawk, Great Black Hawk and Long-winged Harrier. Surprisingly we didn’t see Roadside Hawk, but a pair of Green-tailed Jacamars allowed us great views. Red-shouldered Macaws flew across the river, and four Yellow-bellied Elaenia started us off on the “small tropical flycatcher” slippery slide, which would continue throughout the tour. We eventually returned to our starting point and enjoyed a very local breakfast at Narish’s house, with fresh fruit, curry and roti. John found an active Ruddy Ground Dove nest, and a pair of Brown-throated Parakeets roosted in a dead tree. On the return to Georgetown, we stopped to bird the fields we’d passed earlier. A stop at the bridge over the Mahaica River did not turn up the hoped-for Rufous Crab Hawk unfortunately, but a Gray-lined Hawk was nice, and some Large-billed Terns lived up to their name. Back at our hotel lunch and some down-time was in order.

Midafternoon we headed out to the seawall protecting the city from the Atlantic Ocean. Much of Georgetown is below sea level, built largely on swampland. A system of canals diverts water through gates in the seawalls, keeping the city relatively dry. There are extensive mudflats here, providing excellent forage for Scarlet Ibis, our target bird. However, the tide was low, and the 2,000+ shorebirds were quite distant and in silhouette. We were able to find two distant Scarlet Ibis along with 10 species of shorebirds including a Whimbrel. We also had great views of a Spotted Tody-flycatcher providing excellent photos. A squad of Black Skimmers patrolled the shoreline, and half a dozen Magnificent Frigatebirds wheeled about in the sky. With our day’s birding ended, we returned for dinner, checklist and reviewing plans for tomorrow’s flight to Kaieteur Falls and the interior rainforest.



**Sat., Oct. 15**

## **Georgetown, Kaieteur Falls, Surama**

Our 9 a.m. flight to Kaieteur Falls was postponed as we were told the plane would not be available until 1:30 – welcome to Guyana! Rather than sitting around, we improvised a visit to National Park and a return to the seawall for better looks at Scarlet Ibis. National Park is not a national park in the usual sense. It's a large, open city park with a few ponds and a border of trees, sports fields and a concert area. Despite this, it is very birdy, and if we didn't have to catch our flight, we easily could have stayed longer! A good variety of birds were seen, many of the same we had seen at the Botanic Gardens, but often with better views. We tallied some 46 species, very good considering the habitat, with close-up views of Limpkin, Southern Lapwing, Striated Heron and a Wattled Jacana family with two chicks feeding together, which a few of us we watched for some time. Even though we had all seen them before, the length of the Jacana's toes is always headshaking.

Magnificent Frigatebirds drifted overhead, and a Tricolored Heron was a surprise, though we had also seen a few in the city's canals. We saw four raptors here: Osprey, Snail Kite, Savanna Hawk and exceptional views of a Yellow-headed Caracara. Orange-winged Parrots put on a show, feeding in a flowering and seeding tree, and we noted a pair of Brown-throated Parakeets as well as nine Red-shouldered Macaws that flew over. A Common Tody-flycatcher was well seen and photographed, as was a Northern Mouse-colored Tyrannulet and a Barred Antshrike, who surveyed his kingdom from a shrubby lookout. Very informative was the presence of Great Kiskadee, Lesser Kiskadee and Rusty-margined Flycatcher, three very similar birds that we were able to study well. Tropical Mockingbird, Shiny Cowbird and Yellow Oriole were also feeding, providing longer and better views than we had previously. A surprise was a Blackpoll Warbler, and we had our first Turquoise Tanagers, a bird we would not see again until we returned to Georgetown.

Returning to the seawall to look for Scarlet Ibis, we got a call from Gary tipping us off that Ron, the tour organizer, had found one further along the wall. Sure enough, a Scarlet Ibis was in good view in a canal outlet, and as we watched, a second bird appeared. Our first bird decided a fishing boat was a good place to perch and gave us a 10-minute photo opportunity for which we were all grateful. A very pretty Pied Water Tyrant also gave us a close and confiding opportunity to admire him. We had a plane to catch, so a hastily arranged take-out lunch from the mall and we were off! Our aircraft was a Cessna Caravan with just 14 seats and a ceiling that only





a Hobbit could love. We quickly left Georgetown behind and then saw nothing but rainforest, some small waterways and three small goldmining areas for the remainder of our 150-mile flight.

We touched down at the gravel airstrip at Kaieteur Falls, which has no other access other than a two-day hike through rainforest on undeveloped tracks capped off with a 4-8 hour trek up from the valley floor to the plateau in hot and humid conditions. Kaieteur is the jewel in the 242-sq.-mi. Kaieteur National Park, Guyana's only true National Park. It is home to both the Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock and the endemic Golden Rocket Frog, only found within a small area of the park around the falls. It depends on a species of giant bromeliad found on the high plateaus of Guyana and Venezuela, where it spends its entire life, using the leaf wells to lay eggs and raise tadpoles.

Access to the park is controlled by the government to maintain the pristine natural habitat. In its busiest year, the park received 9,000 visitors – compare that with Yellowstone National Park, which had 950,000 visitors in July! We only saw seven other people during our visit, and it was a weekend! It's a 15-minute walk from the ranger station to the falls along a well-worn trail over the ancient sandstone and conglomerate rock that makes up the Guiana Shield, some two billion years old.

The giant bromeliads were juxtaposed with other odd-looking trees, many exhibiting the stunted, smaller size of cloud forest flora. Fascinating were the considerable areas of Red Sundews growing on the rock immediately adjacent to lichens -- two very different plants growing side by side. We tarried a bit along the path, searching for birds, frogs and of course the Golden Rocket Frog, duly found in their bromeliad homes. All the frogs we could see were females, the males may have been deeper in, tending their eggs or tadpoles. The falls themselves were truly spectacular, dropping some 740 ft. to the first step, then another 80 ft. to the Potaro River. The falls were about 300 ft. wide, and we could see White-tipped Swifts flying about, sometimes disappearing behind the waterfall to their protected roosts. We also saw a Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock deep in



the forest, a bird on everyone's target list, and Jerry got a stunning shot of it calling. Other nice birds were Glittering-throated Emerald, a male Pompadour Cotinga, also well-photographed by Jerry, Rufous-crowned Elaenia and Silver-beaked Tanagers. Eventually we headed back to our plane for the short, 45-minute flight to Surama. Approaching Surama, the forest gave way to a green valley, with the village buildings dotted around the very small airstrip. Our ecolodge was a few minutes away. The valley topography produced a pleasant cooling breeze, and the open-air second floor was a delightful place to relax during the midday heat. We were welcomed with refreshing drinks and settled into the four benabs (round cabins) before dinner. After an introduction to the lodge, dinner was served and, as would be the case for most of our stays, the meals were based on traditional Macushi styles with a few modern touches. The food was simple, but always tasty and filling, and was voted the best of any of our ecolodges. We then retired to our fans and mosquito nets for a good night's sleep, listening to the resident geckoes.

## **Sun., Oct. 16                      Surama**

Our usual early breakfast started the day, and by 6:15 we were out birding a trail that took us from the lodge, through semi-open habitat and into seasonally flooded forest and the Burro Burro River. High on a dead branch was a bird we would become very familiar with, Swallow-winged Puffbird, with several seen nearly every day of the tour. Both Pale-vented and Scaled Pigeons were seen, and Plumbeous heard. A Pearl Kite gave us a nice view as it shuffled its wings, and a Black-eared Fairy zipped around, just once briefly staying still. A variety of Antsomethings were noted, and while Rufous-bellied and White-browed Antbirds were only heard, White-flanked Antwren, Northern Slaty-Antshrike and Guianan Warbling-Antbird were seen well, with Jerry getting excellent photos of the latter two. It's never an easy task photographing this group, except for the ubiquitous and bold Barred Antshrike. We saw a few of the often-ubiquitous Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, and a Guianan Woodcreeper, recently split along with several other former subspecies, from the previously widespread Lineated Woodcreeper (Guianan Woodcreeper is now restricted to the Guyanas and adjacent parts of Brazil). Golden-headed and White-crowned Manakins were seen and photographed but didn't perform for us. Three cotingas were well seen including the stunning Guianan Red-Cotinga. High on every birder's list, and one of the oddest in this group, is the Capuchinbird, and we had a flock of six flying around and calling for 15 minutes. John





got recordings of many birds throughout our tour including the Capuchinbird's crazy call that sounds like a chainsaw slowly warming up, and Jerry got photos of one with its bill wide open, mid call. Screaming Piha, probably the plainest of the cotingas, was one of John's target birds, and though heard more often than seen, one eventually did put itself in full view.

We tallied three species of flycatchers and had a brief look at several fast-moving Cayenne Jays traveling together. The usual tanagers: Silver-beaked, Blue-gray and Palm were around in numbers, and we spotted Finsch's Euphonia and Grassland Sparrow, which would be our only sparrow for the trip. We took a short break for snacks and drinks at the bridge where a Green Kingfisher zipped by and we had distant but good scope views of a Black Nunbird, our first for the tour. A Spix's Guan was the first of several for the tour. Separating this from Marail's Guan in the gloom of the forest can be tricky. Four parrots got on our list, with two: Golden-winged Parakeet and Dusky Parrot only heard. But was had good looks at Blue-headed Parrot and fabulous views of a Red-and-green Macaw, perched obligingly in a tree. Another highlight was a Blackish Nightjar. Common and widespread throughout the southern neotropics, the very dark color combined with its habit of roosting on relatively exposed branches make this one of the more reliable nightjars seen during the day. Our long walk, over 4.5 hours, took us into the start of the hot part of the day, and we returned to the lodge a little tired but with 42 species on our morning list. Escaping the heat, we had time to explore the area around the lodge or relax in the hammocks and fans in our rooms. We reconvened for a very good lunch before beginning our next birding walk around 3:00.

We set out to explore an area of seasonally flooded forest. On the short drive there, a Red-throated Caracara flew across the road, and John, seated up front, saw a Lesser Nighthawk and a Savanna Hawk. Two large guans, probably Spix's, were seen, but not well enough for a positive ID. Once in the low forest, our Surama guides located a Great Potoo they had seen in the area before. Unlike Common Potoos, who prefer to roost on vertical stumps of broken branches, Great Potoo tend to roost on horizontal or slightly angled branches. This bird took no notice of our group as we took time to appreciate its camouflage and got the requisite photos. A Spotted Puffbird among the leaves was also a good find by our local guides, as was a Swallow-winged Puffbird, with its definitive white lower back, perched, as usual, high against the sky on a dead branch. Two Green-tailed Jacamars were found along with our first Blue Dacnis, which was admired by all. It wasn't clear if two White-crowned Manakins were warily getting interested in each other or trying to kick the other out of hoped-for territory. A Laughing Falcon was heard but we couldn't manage to get eyes on it. We heard a Forest Elaenia and managed to see two Rusty-margined Flycatchers. As we returned to the van, a Greater Yellow-headed Vulture flew over. We then drove to the other end of the community area to walk in an area of Savanna studded with small, straggly





trees, the preferred habitat for White-naped Xenopsaris. Eventually one was seen at a distance and after playing its call, it and a second came in for excellent views. Another nice find provided a wonderful viewing opportunity of a roosting Lesser Nighthawk. A few Fork-tailed Palm Swifts flew over, distinctive with its long, narrow tail. A Glittering-throated Emerald called constantly as Silver-beaked and Blue-gray Tanagers looked for late evening snacks, as did three Finsch's Euphonias. Some in our group got quick looks at a Red-breasted Meadowlark, then a familiar, high-pitched squeaking alerted us to the presence of a Tropical Gnatcatcher. Brown-throated Parakeets and Red-and-Green Macaws flew over, and as sunset approached, we waited by a bridge hoping that a White-winged Potoo might put in an appearance, but despite calling, the bird did not appear. On our way back to the lodge in the deepening dusk, a Capped Heron was spotted roosting in a roadside tree, and a consolation prize Common Potoo was found perched on a thin tree stump. By the time we returned dinner was nearly ready! After eating, we went upstairs where members of the village performed a ceremonial dance. I was really looking forward to this. About 12 years earlier, I had seen a similar performance here and had brought two photo albums from that event that I shared with the villagers who pored over the photos, looking for images of themselves or friends. It turned out that two of the photos were none other than our guide, Gary, a strapping young man playing a traditional drum. Now his son is part of the troupe! We also learned about the community's Wildlife Club, of which Gary was a leader, introducing the concept of ecotourism to village children. Our two local guides got their start through this effort, and today, apart from sporadic hunting and the use of some feathers in traditional ceremonial dress, there is almost no hunting, and they make an effort to protect the habitat. After an informative and fun evening, we retired for the night. Tomorrow we'll visit Atta Lodge in the Iwokrama protected area.

## **Mon., Oct. 17                      Surama, Atta**

Atta Rainforest Lodge is about 40 miles from Surama in the Iwokrama Reserve, and after thanking our Surama guides and lodge staff we headed out, birding along the way. Our first stop was a few miles along the road and added several new species to our growing list including Green-backed Trogon, the very elegant Paradise Jacamar, a brief flyby Caica Parrot (seen better the next day), Dusky Parrot, Guianan Woodcreeper, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, a fast-moving Guianan Tyrannulet and Blue-backed Tanager, notable for its very large and un-tanager-like bill that makes it look like a small, colorful crow. A Buff-cheeked Greenlet was heard by all, but seen only by Jerry; and Golden-bellied Euphonia and Yellow-backed Tanager rounded out the new birds for this stop. Leaving Surama, we turned onto the main (only) road from Georgetown to the Brazilian border at Lethem.



Most of the road is unpaved, just mile after mile of red dirt with numerous one-lane, wooden bridges. It was in good condition when we were there, but it can become treacherous during the wet season. A few miles further we stopped to bird along a trail that goes into the forest. Though still early, there weren't many birds here, and of the 10 species we found, five were heard only, though the Trilling Gnatwren (formerly Long-billed Gnatwren) did shake a few leaves for us. However, Fork-tailed Woodnymph, Ferruginous-backed Antbird and Buff-throated Woodcreeper were all new. Next we entered the Iwokrama Forest, a 1,435 sq. mi. protected reserve that is home to the Iwokrama International Centre for Rainforest Conservation. This area is pristine rainforest with a few small areas of savanna on the western edge. There is a gated checkpoint to prevent the removal of wildlife or trees, a sign of the country's commitment to preserving its natural resources.

Once inside the reserve, we stopped at an unmarked trailhead. The location is purposefully difficult to find because the trail leads to a Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock lek, which the authorities want to keep reasonably undisturbed. The lek was centered around a rocky outcrop, typical for this bird as nests are made beneath rock overhangs. We did see a bird as we approached the outcrop, but Gary had this planned out! We continued our quiet procession, passing through a cave-like leaning rock where we saw several Common Short-tailed Fruit Bats (unrelated to the fruit bats of the Pacific region) on the ceiling. But Gary kept us moving to an area where we could sit with a view into the middle canopy. We made ourselves comfortable and after about 10 minutes a male Cock-of-the-Rock came closer, posing for very good views and photos. After 10 minutes or so it moved off and we did too, stopping to get a closer look at the bats. Gary pointed out a lump on the rock and with some effort, we were able to make out a female bat sitting on a mud and bark nest glued to the rock. Charcoal gray, with a nest decorated with lichen, she and her nest were well camouflaged. Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock was pretty much the number one bird for everyone on the tour, and by the end remained so for Molly and Sheri, beating out Capuchinbird (Jerry and Rich) and Capped Heron (John). We birded our way back along the trail and picked up Dusky-throated Antshrike, Brown-bellied Stipplethroat, Golden-collared Woodpecker, Guianan Trogon and Cinereous Antshrike (heard only) as new birds for our list. We then drove to Atta Lodge, very satisfied with our morning's birding, but a surprise awaited. Not far from the lodge, a cat ran across the road and disappeared into the forest, too quick to be identified. Gary thought it may have been a Margay, but to me it looked more





elongated and small-headed, like a Jaguarundi, which are mainly active in the day and terrestrial, unlike the primarily arboreal Margay. But we'll never know...

Atta Rainforest Lodge is a wonderful, small ecolodge set one mile from the main road in the rainforest. Nice rooms with fans, outdoor showers, comfortable beds and a relaxingly comfortable sitting area in the main building that is open to the lawn and forest (and therefore birds) on three sides. The lodge has been upgraded including 100% solar, which, batteries that allow power throughout the night. The main feature of the lodge though is the Iwokrama Canopy Walkway. Comprised of four platforms and three suspension bridges spanning 550 ft., and reaching heights between 60 and 100 ft., it offers unobstructed views of pristine old growth rainforest.

After settling in and enjoying a typical Guianan lunch prepared by the local Macushi staff, we did a little birding around the lodge until the day cooled off a little. A pair of Black Curassows call the lodge home, and they are often seen walking around, or cooling off in the shade of the forest. Activity was slow in the heat, but we did pick up three new birds in addition to the curassows: Waved Woodpecker, Green Honeycreeper and Black-necked Aracari. Once it cooled off, we took a short drive to a birdy location along the road where we heard three new birds: Amazonian Grosbeak, Great Tinamou and, surprisingly, Sungrebe! We all wished it would come closer but instead a large flock of Band-rumped swifts flew high overhead and then disappeared. A Greater Yellow-headed Vulture sat on a dead branch – literally sat on it like a bird on a nest. Odd. The usual Swallow-winged Puffbird was sitting high on a branch – we had got to the stage that if we saw a tall dead vertical tree or branch, we immediately looked for the puffbird, even calling them while driving along at speed. New for the trip was a Yellow-billed Jacamar that flew low across the road a few times, and though we were sure we had seen where it landed, we couldn't get eyes on it. We also found a pair of Channel-billed Toucans and a Dusky Purpletuft, both new for the trip, along with our second Guianan Woodcreeper and our third Pied Puffbird, and three Blue Dacnis were a sight to see. As dusk approached, we drove to the potoo bridge for snacks and cold drinks as we waited to see if the White-winged Potoo would show up. A large electric eel swam in the creek, but no potoo. Then as mosquitoes emerged, we decided to call it an evening. Interestingly, this was our first encounter with mosquitoes for the trip, despite having walked miles of rainforest trails.



## Tues., Oct. 18                      Atta

After some cookies and coffee, we headed up the trail in increasing light to the platform, a welcome sight after scaling the many steps on the final hill! Gary crossed the bridge first and we followed him one at a time on. This bridge was well built and not as bouncy as some I've used! We continued to the second platform where Gary had set up the scope. The views across the valley to the mountains a couple of miles away were spectacular. Taking off our backpacks, we settled in, waiting for the fog to lift, which took quite a while. We did see some nice birds, however, like Rufous-throated Sapphire, Marail Guan, Green and Black-necked Aracaris, Guianan Toucanet and both Channel-billed and White-throated Toucans. Gray-headed Kite was new for us, as was a Cream-colored Woodpecker, our third *Celeus* woodpecker in two days. A pair of Black-spotted Barbets gave us a show for 10-15 minutes, quite a pleasure. A pair of Pompadour Cotingas was seen, as were a Purple-throated Fruitcrow and two Screaming Pihas. We totaled six parrots including our first Golden-winged Parakeet and our only Black-headed Parrot. Rounding out the list were Ferruginous-backed Antbird, White-lored Tyrannulet and we finally got eyes on a Trilling Gnatwren. Around 9:45 we returned to the lodge for a very welcome breakfast.

After a nice meal we headed back out to walk a loop trail. Our target was Gray-winged Trumpeter, and we quickly heard several further up the trail, but we couldn't locate them. For the first time on the tour a clap of thunder sounded, a harbinger of rain that began to fall just as we arrived back at the lodge. But it passed on after only 15 minutes and we got back to birding. Over the next hour we saw an interesting mix of birds including the Gray-winged Trumpeter flock as well as a flock of Painted Parakeets, Dusky-throated Antshrike, Rufous-bellied Antwren, Brown-bellied Stipplethroat, White-flanked Antwren and two woodcreepers: Wedge-billed and Buff-throated. And, of course Screaming Pihas. John caught a look at a Whiskered Flycatcher, but the rest of us missed it. We were fascinated by a Helicopter Damselfly hovering and eventually landing. The head and thorax were standard damselfly, but the abdomen hung down at nearly a right angle and was about 10 times as long as the rest of the body. Our loop finished just as lunch was about to be served, after which we had the usual siesta before afternoon birding at 3:30.

One of the more interesting habitats of the Guianan Shield is white sand forest, a low, more open and drier forest than the rainforest that covers most of the Guyanas. These small patches have poorer soil supporting a





different mix of flora also several birds that rarely venture out of them, including Black Manakin and Bronzy Jacamar, two of our targets this afternoon. Driving the main road, the difference in the vegetation was immediately noticeable. We made a stop and heard two Cinereous Tinamous in the distance, then scored with both a Bronzy Jacamar and a two Black Manakins. Band-rumped Swifts flew over in a small group, and Yellow-crowned Parrots and Red-and-green Macaws also made passes. A very interesting bird was a Pelzelin's Tody-Tyrant, seen perched high in a tree, unfortunately backlit. First discovered on the Rio Negro in Brazil in 1831, that remained the only known record until it was re-found near Manaus in 1992, some 600 miles away. Since then, it's been seen on two tributaries of the Rio Negro. Four years ago, Pretam, our local Atta guide, discovered it in this area, making it one of just two places outside Brazil where Pelzelin's Tody-Tyrant is known to occur (the other is central Surinam). Even now there are just 10 records in eBird for Guyana, with a total of about 30 observers!

Other sightings included Black Caracara, a first for us, as was a Cinnamon Attila. A Bat Falcon was seen by some. In the evening we returned to the bridge for another White-winged Potoo vigil and at last we were rewarded when one flew in, perching in a dead tree. Spotlight and scope combined to give us decent views, and Molly even managed to get an identifiable photo, with the tell-tale white wing patch standing out. John recorded its call, as he'd done for many other species including the Pelzelin's Tody-Tyrant. As we drove back to Atta, those in the front saw a Short-tailed Nighthawk lifting off the road. As the weather continued to be rain-free, the lodge staff moved a table outside and we dined by candlelight, surrounded by pristine rainforest.

## **Wed., Oct. 19                      Atta, Rock View Lodge**

Once again early coffee and cookies presaged a visit to the walkway, this time without the fog. The lack of fruiting and flowering trees meant birding was slow, but three new birds were seen: a Long-tailed Hermit, great views and photos of a Back-faced Hawk and a Red-necked Woodpecker. We had a second Guianan Red Cotinga and three Purple-throated Fruitcrows were tallied up. Both Molly and John Saw a Spangled Cotinga, one of the four very similar blue cotingas, and a Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet. A Black-throated Trogon was calling but not seen by all. Back at the lodge the curassows were wandering around, looking for breakfast as we were.

Breakfast consumed we hit the trails again for one final walk in the Iwokrama forest. The forest had quietened down, except of course for the pihas, and only a few birds were seen, though one, a Reddish Hermit was new and provided excellent views. A second new bird, Green Oropendula, was heard but we never saw it. After an

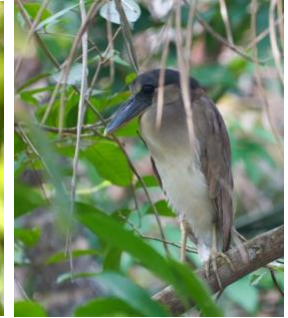


hour we returned to pack our bags and say goodbye to the staff, and to Pretam, before loading the van and heading south to Rock View Lodge, the oldest lodge in Guyana. Of course we birded along the way, stopping to see a Gray-lined Hawk. Gary spotted a Black Nunbird in the foliage, quite a feat, and while stopped, we also discovered a Yellow-throated Flycatcher. One of our planned stops was at Wowetta, a small town on the savanna with extensive wet fields at this time of the year. Several savanna species were high on our most-wanted list, but none more than the stately Jabiru. Another signature bird of the savanna is Fork-tailed Flycatcher, which were out in numbers. Other nice sightings on our way to the lodge included Crested Bobwhite, Gray-cowled Wood Rail, a colorful Buff-necked Ibis, Vermilion Flycatcher and a soaring King Vulture.

We turned onto a side road full of potholes, that made sense when we passed the broken-down grader, which we were told had been sitting there for months. We arrived at the lodge, a stunning sight that is surrounded by trees and even with a swimming pool. The owner, Colin, a somewhat eccentric and very proper Englishman, welcomed us with surprise, as he thought we weren't arriving until teatime (4 p.m., of course, and a daily event with tea, coffee, scones and other pastries). But not to worry he said as he rounded up the kitchen staff to pull a meal together. They served us cold drinks made with lodge-grown limes, and showed us to our rooms. Within 30 minutes, just the right amount of time for us to settle in and clean up, the bell rang for lunch, and very good it was. There was in fact a permanent, and somewhat needy, guest at the lodge. Picolo, an orphaned Wedge-capped capuchin, had adopted the lodge as his home. He talked to himself quite a bit and was particularly fond of the afternoon tea goodies. We then had some time to ourselves before one of Colin's sons took us on a tour of the grounds, including a lookout over the lodge's namesake rocky outcrop. We found several birds in an earthen water storage pool including a Solitary Sandpiper and a Striated Heron along with an Aparaima, a very large and endangered fish only found in the Amazon and Essequibo River basins. These fish can grow to 10 feet long and weigh upwards of 200 lbs! The one-hour walk produced 14 species in all including a Pale-breasted Thrush, the first we'd seen outside of Georgetown.

Before dinner we set out for some savanna birding, walking the nearby Annai airstrip. In the setting sun we tallied Pale-vented and White-tipped Pigeons, Southern Lapwing, Black and Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures





(Greater's prefer forest),

Crested Caracara, Gray-breasted Martin, Eastern Meadowlark, Yellow-crowned Parrot and Red-and-green Macaw among others. But our main targets here were nighthawks, and as the sun got lower the first appeared. We spent the next 30 or so minutes watching Nacunda, Least and Lesser Nighthawks hunt for flying insects. This was a great experience learning to identify each species based on size, wing shape and the placement and shape of the wing bar. Well satisfied with our evening, it was time for happy hour and the checklist. At the halfway point of the tour, we had logged 230 species seen and another 24 heard only, an average of 42 new birds each day so far. It was agreed this achievement deserved another round of rum punch!

## **Thurs., Oct. 20                      Rock View Lodge, Rupununi River and Savanna**

Today's highlight was a boat ride along the Rupununi River, just a short distance from the lodge. We set out 20 minutes before sunrise headed upriver. A few minutes into the ride we turned a bend and were greeted by the beautiful sight of the rising sun, reflecting gold on the water with the trees silhouetted behind. A very lovely start to a very birdy morning. Slowly hugging the bank, we were able to creep up to birds still on their night perches out over the water. Two Red-capped Cardinals gave us good views as they scurried through a tangle. White-winged Swallows flew low over the water, and four Short-tailed Swifts flew overhead. A Sungrebe flushed, but not before John got some quick photos. Another great find by Gary was an Agami Heron, a skulking, hard-to-find bird on most birders' wish lists. Despite its wariness, we managed several photos, and this became John's favorite sighting of the tour. Two Large-billed Terns, more often seen inland, were seen flying over us.

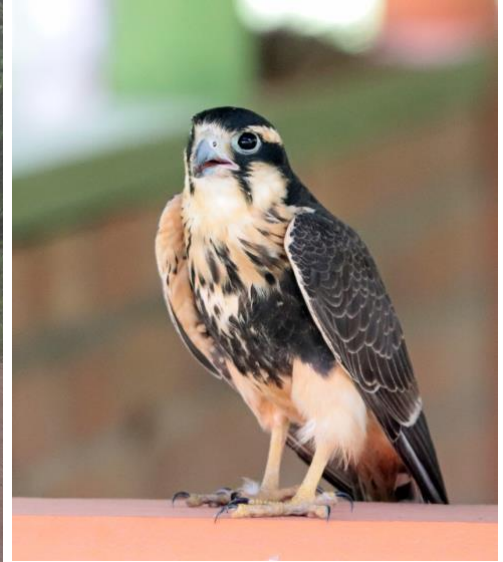


This was a magical trip and we found five heron species including Agami and Boat-billed, and all four of the expected kingfishers plus a Green-and-rufous! We even had the chance to photograph American Pygmy Kingfisher, typically the hardest to find. We made a stop in a small backwater, disembarking to walk to a forest pond to admire the many Giant Victoria Lilies, with their large pads that get as much as six feet across. Although a night-blooming plant, we were fortunate that a few still had open flowers. Other species for the trip included Muscovy Duck, Squirrel Cuckoo, Green Ibis, good views of Cream-colored Woodpecker, Chestnut-rumped Woodcreeper, Crested Oropendula and Yellow-rumped Cacique, the latter frequently flying back and forth across the river. We also noted two Antshrikes: Amazonian and Black-crested, and a Black-chinned Antbird. A Giant Otter family was seen by the guides, and we moved into position hoping to get a better view, but they never resurfaced. Disappointed we moved on, but suddenly one popped up in the middle of the river, giving us a toothy grin before it dove, but not before photos were taken.

We returned to the launch site with 51 species on John's eBird checklist and were welcomed by a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture perched on a sign. A long-tailed and strangely named Mop-headed Tree Lizard pattered along the bank between boats before disappearing into the brush. We headed back to our lodge well satisfied with what the Rupununi River had offered up.

After a delicious lunch we enjoyed some down time, relaxing, catching up on notes and doing some personal birding around the lodge. After tea, we headed back to the main road for open wet and dry savanna birding. In just two hours we logged 48 widely varied species. Purple Gallinules were out in force, in one area we counted 25, with more likely hidden in the vegetation. Jerry noticed some distant ducks that with some effort we were able to identify as White-faced Whistling-Ducks. There were plenty of Jacanas as well. A muddy farm pond added White-rumped Sandpiper to our list, and more Solitary Sandpipers. A great find was a distant Pinnated Bittern, a bird Gary was hoping we would see here. Great and Cattle Egrets, Limpkins and Buff-necked Ibis were on the prowl and a rather elegant Cocoi Heron was standing guard, waiting for some morsel to show itself, as was a Wood Stork. Several Fork-tailed Flycatchers preened in low shrubs, Smooth-billed Anis popped up and down and Vermillion Flycatchers sallied about. Other birds included Pied Water-Tyrant and White-headed Marsh Tyrant, Yellow-chinned Spinetail and White-naped Xenopsaris. Two Yellow-hooded Blackbirds were new





for us, as was one of two hummingbirds present, a White-tailed Goldenthrout. Our first Eared Dove was also new. A King Vulture flew in, settled in a tree with several Black Vultures to pose for photos. As evening closed in, both Lesser and Least Nighthawks cruised, giving us an opportunity to test our new-found ID skills. We then returned to the lodge for happy hour, checklist and dinner.

## **Fri., Oct. 21                      Surama, Rupununi Savanna**

This morning we returned to the Surama area for some more rainforest birding. On the way we stopped opportunistically when birds were seen, adding several new birds to our list: Golden-spangled Piculet, a pair of Black-crested Antshrikes, White-fringed Antwren, Gray Seedeater, Buff-breasted Wren and Variable Chachalaca. A Rufescent Tiger-Heron, hunting along a small creek, was another new bird for us. Nearby, a Gold Tegu was seen searching in the leaf litter for a meal. We then birded the road on foot, and Gary pointed out four White-collared Swifts, our fifth swift species for the tour, and Great Jacamar, concluding our sweep of the six jacamar species likely to be seen in the areas covered by our tour! A Cinereous Antshrike kindly allowed itself to be photographed and audio recorded, as did a Common Scale-backed Antbird. Chestnut-rumped Woodcreeper was new and a Dusky Purpletuft was just our second. Painted Tody-Flycatcher became a new heard-only, and Coraya Wren entered the seen column, previously being heard only once. We then visited our driver's house, the entry gate station, for lunch and a midday break. A considerable spread was produced by his wife, and we sat in a breezy open benab to enjoy it. Afterwards hammocks were strung up to relax or doze in until our afternoon walk. The family had rescued and raised an Aplomado Falcon, and even though they had released it back into the wild, it continued to hang around the area, providing great photo opportunities. We found a Bay-headed Tanager on our afternoon walk at Surama and got our best looks, and photos, of Crested Oropendula and Yellow-rumped Cacique. Five Variable Chachalacas also put on a show. Returning along the main road, a Black-tailed Tityra provided one more new species for trip.

## **Sat., Oct. 22                      Rupununi Savanna, Karasabai, Manari Ranch**

Another very early morning as we made our way to Manari Ranch where we would stay for the next two nights. Our route would take us first to Karasabai, a small village with its own Conservation Society charged with protecting a flock of globally endangered Sun Parakeets. These birds occupy small territories in Guyana and parts of Brazil, having been trapped for the pet trade and pushed to the brink of extinction. Once again timing was important as the birds usually leave their roost by 11 a.m., so we had to limit our stops. A Ruddy-breasted Seedeater forced a brief stop where two more White-naped Xenopsaris were also seen. A White-tailed Hawk



perching on a post was too stunning an opportunity to miss, and once we stopped, camera shutters fired away for some excellent shots. Arriving at the very small community we picked up our local guide, who has been involved with these parakeets for more than 10 years and knew the best places to look for them. We drove for a mile along the road, crossing one of the sketchiest bridges I've ever seen! It was slow going and after a while we turned around for a second pass. It was Gary who spotted four birds on a distant hillside. He was able to get them in the scope and we all saw this group of feeding Sun Parakeets. Although closer views would have been nice, we were very fortunate to see these endangered birds in the wild! We also found Brown-throated and Painted Parakeets, Brown-crested and Swainson's Flycatchers, Turkey, Black and Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures and two Red-and-green Macaws. Finally, we added Hooded Siskin to our list when a group of five were found feeding on berries. We then headed back to drop off our guide and have lunch in the village when two Sun Parakeets flew over. We braked quickly as one landed in a tree, giving us a much closer view and allowing for a few photos! Completely satisfied, we drove back to town grinning ear-to-ear. After lunch and a siesta, we continued birding our way to Manari Ranch. We were very fortunate to get a quick look at Orange-backed Troupial, and a Magouri Stork stood silently in the grass as we scanned unsuccessfully for Giant Anteater.

Manari Ranch was formerly a large working cattle ranch, but disease nearly wiped out the entire herd in the 1960s. The owner renovated the accommodations and opened as a guest house, and today the ranch now works closely with the South Rupununi Conservation Society and the Karasabai Conservation Society, supporting and hosting events. The dining area is part of the original farmhouse, and the ranch has been owned by the same family since its founding in 1927. Much of the original furniture is still in place, and one room functions like a museum, displaying nearly a hundred years of collected skulls, fossils and old tools. We relaxed on the large, covered porch to review our checklist before dinner, which both nights was expansive and very tasty.

## **Sun., Oct. 23                      Rupununi Savanna, Ireng River, Manari Ranch**

We rose early for our journey to the Ireng River, on the border with Brazil, to search for two near endemics: the Rio Branco Antbird and Hoary-throated Spinetail, both critically endangered. Most of their habitat has been converted to rice farms, and today the birds are only found along the Rio Branco and two of its tributaries. This area is usually accessed via a small road through the wetlands, however, recent heavy rains flooded the road forcing us to take a longer route to a different part of the river. However, that route afforded us a lot of birding

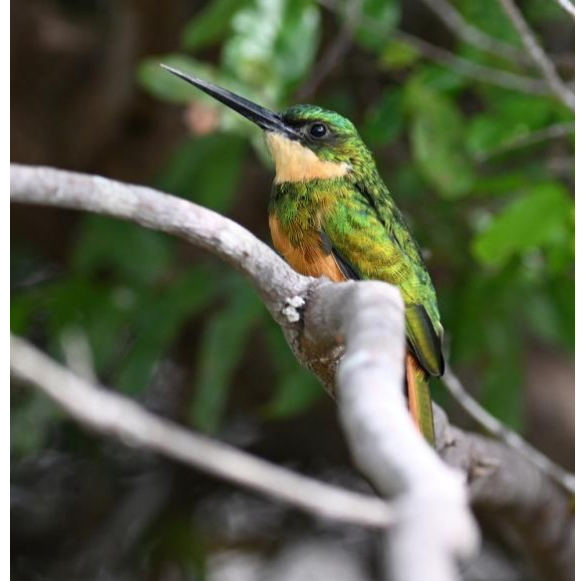




along the way, with some nice birds found including a truly wild Aplomado Falcon. We stopped for breakfast by a small roadside swamp where a Black Caiman was in residence, though mostly underwater. A hoped-for Azure Rail was briefly seen by Gary, but despite searching, we weren't able to see it – a regretful miss. Many of our familiar savannah species were seen, including Jabiru, Maguari Stork, Southern Lapwing, Buff-necked Ibis and several Red-breasted Meadowlarks. One new bird was a Burrowing Owl, always a crowd-pleaser! Arriving at the river, we took a 15-minute walk through the savanna to a thicket on the river's edge and searched for our target birds. Before long we located a Hoary-throated Spinetail that allowed decent views but no photos. With additional effort we eventually conjured a pair of Rio Branco Antbirds that obligingly foraged around us for 10 minutes. In addition to seeing both of our targets, we also saw two White-bellied Piculets and a third bird that, after much discussion and scrutiny was confirmed to be a White-barred Piculet. Our surprised guides said this was a species for the location!

A pair of Black-crested Antshrikes were also seen here along with two Hooded Tanagers, new for our list. Very satisfied with our river walk, we returned to the vans to bird our way back to Manari. Parrots flew over which were called as Red-bellied Macaws, but they quickly disappeared into a distant treeline. Gary searched with the scope, but the birds were too far. Not deterred, our drivers simply turned off the road into the savanna bringing us close enough to confirm that they were indeed Red-bellied Macaws! We returned to the road and walked the savanna, managing to bring up several Grassland Sparrows, two Yellowish Pipits and a Grassland Yellow Finch. Returning to the vans, Gary opted to ride on the roof to scan the savanna. He yelled out something I didn't understand, but the driver did, slamming on the brakes and yelling anteater! I looked just in time to see it disappear into the tall grass. Piling out of the vehicles, our guides searched the area and Gary set off tracking it thought the grass where he'd last seen it. The rest of us drove around to the other side, directed by Gary's voice in the vegetation, scanning the endless grasslands. Like with the macaw hunt, we once again felt as if we were on an African safari! But the anteater wasn't seen again, and we retreated to the ranch for lunch.

That afternoon we drove to Lethem, with its many shops selling food, clothing, hardware and household goods and signs in both Chinese and Brazilian. This was life in an outback border town, and a vivid example of the development efforts that China is undertaking in Guyana and Brazil. We turned onto a small road and headed to some greener hills a few miles distant, stopping to pick up some beer at what looked to us like an ordinary house. We stopped at a nice wetland where the Snail Kites had set up shop. Purple Gallinules probed the vegetation and both Roadside and Gray-lined Hawks perched at the edges. We found Amazon and Green



Kingfishers on the hunt, and Green-rumped Parrotlets flew over. A Sulphury Flycatcher, new for the tour, was seen by some, and another new bird, Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet, was seen by all. A small group of uncommon Lined Seedeaters were also new. Continuing up the hill, we found a small, broken-down hydroelectric station at a small waterfall that had been built by China some years before. A small park here was a popular place to escape the heat with a dip in the creek. We saw 500+ swifts high in the sky, and as the sun set we raised a beer to our last full day in the Rupununi. On the way back we flushed a White-tailed Nightjar on the road.

## Mon., Oct. 24 Manari Ranch, Georgetown

Our flight to Georgetown wasn't until 1 p.m. and with the airport just 20 minutes away, we went for a morning walk out on the Manari airstrip before breakfast. In addition to the usual suspects, we did see a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, which we'd only heard previously. Our last new bird for the trip was a Rufous-browed Peppershrike. We then packed our bags into the van, said goodbye to the caring staff and headed to the airport for our short flight to Georgetown. Back at the Cara Lodge, we said farewell to Gary who was returning to Surama. Our final dinner in Guyana was served on the porch outside the dining room and was, as usual, an excellent meal. Then to bed before an early rise for the 7a.m. flights for three of us; Rich and Shirley had opted for a later departure.

## Tues., Oct. 25 Georgetown, In Flight

We woke early only to learn that our flight was delayed. After several rounds of delays, we finally left early in the afternoon. But nothing could take away from such a memorable birding adventure with some wonderful people!

*Photo Credits: Group Photo (Sheri Larsen - SL), Hoatzin (SL), Wedge-capped Capuchin (Andrew Haffenden - AH), Cock-of-the-rock (AH), Black-capped Donacobius (SL), Yellow Oriole (AH), Mealy Parrot (AH), Spotted Tody-Flycatcher (Jerry Britten - JB), Jacana (AH), Hoatzin (AH), Red Howler Monkey (SL), Green-tailed Jacamar (AH), Blue-gray Tanager (SL), Mahaica River Boatma's House (John Trent - JT), Manatee (JT), Yellow-headed Caracara (JB), Limpkin (AH), Rusty-margined Flycatcher (Molly Herrmann - MH), Kaieteur Falls with rainbow (JT), Kaieteur Falls (SL), Surama Eco Lodge View (SL), Surama at Sunset (JT), Wedge-billed Woodcreeper (JB), Great Potoo (AH), Lesser Nighthawk (AH), White-naped Xenopsaris (AH), Surama Scenic (SL), Cock-of-the-rock (AH), Longing Butterfly (JT), A Very Big Tree (SL), Torch Ginger (SL), Owl Butterfly (JT), Black Curassow (SL), Birding Surama (MH), Birding the lodge (MH), Suspension Bridge (JT), Zenithoptera Dragonfly (JB), Guianan Toucanets (SL), Jungle Hike (SL), Jabiru Stork (SL), Amazon Kingfisher (AH), River Birding (SL), Lily Pads (JT), Swallow-winged Puffbird (JB), Boat-billed Heron (AH), King Vulture (SL), Sunset (SL), Wedge-capped Capuchin (AH), Fork-tailed Flycatcher (SL), Foggy Scope (JT), Aplomado Falcon (SL), In Search of Sun Parakeet (SL), Bridge to Lethem (SL), Savannah Scenic (SL), Flowering Tree (SL), Burrowing Owl (AH), Drew-Gary-Jerry Birding (JT), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (JB)*