

Birding in Brazil – 16th Jun – 2nd July 2007 PART ONE

Trip participants: Mike Brimson, Peter Dean, Jim Law, Brian Short, Brian Summerfield, Simon Warry and, of course, our intrepid leader John van der Dol.

Sat 16th June Our bus left the observatory car park at 01.30! John provided everyone with a comprehensive list of all the birds that we might encounter on the trip, so we could use the flights to Madrid and on to Rio de Janeiro to do some homework with the field guide. We arrived at Rio airport in the dark, to be greeted by the high humidity and relatively low temperatures of a southern hemisphere winter. It was also raining and it was supposed to be the dry season, but we needn't have worried as I didn't use my waterproof for the rest of the trip, meanwhile monsoon conditions were being reported from E. Kent. We were taken by minibus to Serra dos Tucanos Lodge, which sits in its own little patch of Atlantic Rain Forest in SE Brazil. We were introduced to Andy and Cristina who owned the lodge. Most of us retired early to catch up on missed sleep and in anticipation of an early start the next day.

Sun 17th June We were up and outside at dawn in anticipation of breakfast at 06.00. But first there was the sharp-tailed streamcreeper to tick off on the stream that ran under the front drive and then a selection of humming birds to identify on the sugar-water feeders on the veranda. The bird tables were stocked with bananas and these were attracting a variety of birds that was quite bewildering if, like me, you were a S American "virgin" and don't know your euphonies from your tanagers.

At 07.00, we were led into the forest around the lodge by Pete Forrest, who was in charge of the Pegwell Country Park and was a regular visitor to the Observatory; he now works in Brazil and is becoming fluent in Portuguese and Brazilian bird calls. In the forest, it can be very quiet until a mixed, feeding flock moves through and then there is a risk of serious neck damage as squirrel cuckoo, ferruginous antbird and eye-ringed tody-tyrant all appear at once and the novices attempt to see them all.

In the afternoon, we were left to our own devices and most people spent at least some time armchair bird watching in the lodge garden. A chance to sort out the "hummers" as Brazilian ruby, violet-capped woodnymph, saw-billed hermit and the striking black Jacobin competed for space at the feeders. Also, with the bananas replenished a chance to sort out the bird table birds: plain parakeets, spot-billed toucanet, bananaquit, etc. etc. There were also forays along the forest trails to spot new birds or get better views of those seen in the morning. As dusk fell soon after 17.00, bats emerged from the lodge gable.

We ticked off the group list before an excellent dinner and had a beer or two afterwards, but it was early to bed again in preparation for another early start.

Mon 18th June We were off on the Jacamar Trail (by minibus), stopping at the prime locations most likely to produce good birds. The 3-toed jacamar was perhaps the target bird of the day and Pete duly produced a pair, in their favourite bamboo clump just across the road from an earth cliff suitable for nest burrows. All the sites could be viewed from within 50 metres of the bus and included forest edge, farmland, wetter patches. We saw roosting barn owls at the road side, burrowing owls in dry grassland, good views of bat falcon, white-tailed hawk and American kestrel, stately red-legged seriemas pacing through the grassland and blue-winged macaws. Our route took us through Nuevo Friburgo, which is the exotic (or erotic!) underwear capital of the world, or so I am reliably informed; every shop seemed to sell the same things. Where do the residents buy their groceries?

Tue 19th June We walked all day along the Sa Lorenzo trail, otherwise known as the high altitude trail – lower section. One highlight of the day was a large flowering cherry tree which was alive with nectar-feeding birds, especially humming birds; some were familiar but the plovercrest, white-throated humming bird and bay-breasted warbling finch were new. A pair of aplomado falcons gave us excellent views while the half-collared sparrow, a recent discovery for this area, proved to be extremely elusive and rarely showed its whole body, but most people got at least a glimpse. When the birding was quiet, the plants provided some diversions: massive Bromeliads colonising huge areas of very smooth rock, wild fuchsias and begonias.

Wed 20th June In the morning, we walked the Cedae trail, through water company land. There were some extremely tall trees along the trail, each supporting its own ecosystem of ferns and bromeliads. The weather was dry but very windy and several times trees were heard crashing down in the forest. The wind made the birds hard to see initially but we were able to see the star-throated antwren and the ultra-elusive rufous-breasted leaf-tosser. These are cumbersome names but at least they are descriptive, unlike the black-throated grosbeak, which is entirely black with a striking, large, red beak. Despite its useless name, we all had good views of this impressive bird. On the way back to the bus we encountered a large mixed feeding flock in some of the tallest trees, this severely tested our ID skills, our neck muscles and nearly made us late for lunch back at the lodge.

Wed 20th June - After lunch, the bird tables were watched or photographed and more forays along the forest rails were made.

Highlights were a short-tailed hawk (a rarity for the lodge), white-necked thrushes (first seen in the area the previous week), surucua trogon, lekking blue manakins and leaf-cutter ants (for those who hadn't seen them before!).

Thur 21st June A trip to Serra dos Orguas National Park. In the morning, on the lower part of the trail, we were on tarmac paths through a rain forest version of a public park, but the birds were much better than house sparrows and feral pigeons in a British park! Several yellow-green grosbeaks gave good views as did a white-throated spadebill and a yellow-throated woodpecker. Black hawk-eagles circled very low overhead, giving great views, as we were surrounded by a group of school children on a school outing; they and their teachers seemed less excited by their surroundings than we were. Back on the road, our coffee break was taken in a café with fruit laden bird tables that attracted azure-shouldered tanagers and the stars of the show: a pair of yellow-fronted woodpeckers that were so close that binoculars were almost redundant. A view-point further up the mountain revealed a view of a smog-shrouded Rio de Janeiro and some blue-winged macaws that shouldn't have been that high up, but they probably hadn't read the books!

Late morning and the afternoon were spent on the aptly named Upper Trail. The steep, stony paths were more of a physical challenge. The feeding flocks of birds were obviously elsewhere in the forest, so those of us with botanical interests had time to look at the tree ferns and the numerous, wild begonia species. The paths were lined with non-native busy lizzies in many different colours, seeing themselves like bittercress. When we stopped to rest and eat our packed lunch, we were delighted by good views of S American coati nosing through the leaf litter. Other mammals encountered included some soldiers on exercise and some ecology students using the trail as their study area. The rocky trail aggravated Brian Summerfield's sciatica, so he and John wisely decided to make their way slowly back. After their departure, we saw sharpbill, pale-browed treehunter and a Brazilian endemic, the white-collared foliage-gleaner, which was finding food by very nosily ripping apart the dry sheaths on the bamboo stems. They claimed to have seen variegated pitta really well; a claim we were reluctant to believe. Their claim of a black-throated trogon near the car park had to be conceded, as it was still there when we returned. It and Jim Law were exchanging calls for quite a while, so it was suggested that this might have been one of his more successful chat-up lines, but he hasn't heard from it since!

Fri 22nd June In the morning, we walked the Macae de Cima road in cool, windy conditions, which kept the birds undercover initially. We had distant views of a short-tailed hawk with black vultures over the ridge and a bare-throated bell bird posed on the ridge, long enough to be seen with binoculars, but, as it was already late starting its migration, it wasn't going to hang around for the scopes to be focussed. An aplomado falcon impressed us by gliding at very high speed into a strong wind. After seeing quite a lot of flying scaly-headed parrots, it was rewarding to get good views of them perched; similarly we also got good views of red-eyed thornbirds. Another flowering cherry yielded a good selection of hummers et al. Three pin-tailed manakins were also seen, but unfortunately they were all female and somewhat non-descript.

After a packed lunch, we set off on the Theodora Trail, which is a disused railway line and therefore nice and flat. However the encroaching jungle makes the trail very narrow and seepage makes some sections very wet underfoot. Everyone had good views of a spot-breasted antvireo, but with a big group on a narrow trail other birds were only seen by some people. It was resolved that we needed better group discipline, with more rotation of individuals to the front of the group for better opportunities of seeing the birds and hearing the leader calling them. White-rimmed warblers and yellow-olive flycatchers were well seen but the elusive spot-winged wood-quails were seen by only 3 people.

Sat 23rd June The Bamboo Forest Trail has a reputation for being narrow and not really suited to groups as large as ours and it sounds as if it might be wall to wall bamboo. In fact, while the vegetation did contain a lot of bamboo, it was very varied. In the improved climate of group discipline and co-operation, the disadvantages of the narrow sections were largely overcome and some people voted it the best day in the area. It was another slow start and we never had massive numbers of species, but Pete used his local knowledge to great effect to winkle out the habitat-specific birds. The black-billed scythebill was really elusive, but eventually we all got good views of the improbably long and curved bill. A greenish schiffornis only ever sat still for a few seconds before hurtling back and forth, at breakneck speed, through densely packed young trees; it was some time before everyone got good views. A lot of time was spent looking for the slaty bristlefront (a dark grey bird in deep shade!!), just when it seemed a hopeless cause, it strolled out from cover and into full view for all of us. A splendid male pin-tailed manakin also provided good views and a marked contrast with the females seen the previous day.

Sun 24th June No rest on the Sabbath for us, but leave at 07.00 for a morning visit to Reserva Ecologica Guapuacu (or REGUA to its friends). The shallow lakes featured the blue lotus water lilies and wattled jacanas (lily trotters) using their long toes to "walk on water". The purple gallinules were much smaller than their European and Australasian counterparts. The moorhens are the same species as ours, but so different that most of us would have voted for a split (and another tick). The Brazilian teal, on the water, was a very dull little duck, until it flew and showed off its white wing patches. Masked duck was also seen, the S American equivalent of the ruddy and white-headed ducks. Blackish rails flew off as we arrived and least grebes were also seen. The striped cuckoo is "often heard but rarely seen", we were lucky enough to have 2 of them, together, in the open. Back to the lodge for lunch, siesta, packing (for the transfer to the Pantanal) and short walks around the lodge.

Mon 25th June Up at 04.30 to catch the 06.30 flight to Brazilia and then on to Cuiaba by 13.00. We were met by our guide Braulio Carlos and our driver for the week Pedro. A restaurant lunch was followed by a 165 km drive south to our accommodation at the Santa Theresa Lodge on the bank of the River Pizaim. We stopped for birding as we went along and took in the complete contrast of habitats and the completely new range of fauna that confronted us. The pen savannah type habitats made the birds more easily seen and as the wet season floods were receding the remaining patches of open water were a real magnet to wildlife of all sorts. There seemed to be birds everywhere: macaws, parrots, parakeets, herons, egrets, toco toucans (the original "Guinness is good for you" ones!), the endemic chestnut-breasted guan, the improbably named chaco chachalaca and snail kites everywhere. Mammals also featured: capybara (the largest rodent in the world), caveys (guinea pigs), grey brocket deer and several crab-eating foxes. The wet areas also contained caiman, part of the greatest concentration of crocodilians in the world. Later on we saw rhea (S American ostrich) and a pair of the iconic hyacinth macaws. As dusk fell, lamping from the vehicle revealed 1 nightjar and 3 nighthawk species. Compiling the tick list in the evening certainly ticked lots of new boxes.

Tue 26th June Up at 05.00, breakfast at 05.30 and out by 06.00, this as to be the regime for the rest of the trip. In the early morning fog, a family of 2 adults and 2 juvenile capybara strolled past unconcerned and a rufescent tiger heron (photographed, below) allowed observation and photography from 10 metres away. The off for a short walk in the riverside forest, we didn't cover many miles but it took ages as there were so many birds to see. Some turned up spontaneously and some were lured out of cover as they responded to song recordings or to the sound of the ferruginous pygmy owl, which elicits mobbing behaviour. Some responded to real owls, some to recordings and some to Braulio's imitations of the call. The birds included 2 wren species and 2 antshrikes and others too numerous to mention. Back to the lodge for lunch, as plumbeous ibis and wattled jacanas stalked the grounds, a jabiru looked down from its nest in a dead tree and caiman lounged on the river bank right beside the jetty and the outboard-powered canoe we were to use in the afternoon. The trip up river was very atmospheric, dead calm water, no other boats, no other people just masses of birds: 4 species of kingfisher and 11 (yes eleven!) species of heron and egret. Grey-necked wood-rails became almost commonplace and we even got good views of the sun bittern, which perversely spends most of its time in deep shade. Some anhingas (darters) opted to hurl themselves into the water, rather than staying in the tree or flying away. One target species almost eluded us, but most of us caught a tantalising glimpse of the charismatic giant otter as it looked at us and decided all too quickly that it didn't like what it saw. As we returned at dusk, 2 black skimmers passed the boat and then numerous band-tailed nighthawks flew low over the water. As the canoe slid alongside the jetty, 1 caiman had to move but 2 of his mates remained right beside the boat as we disembarked (carefully!). After dinner, a lamping session from the minibus revealed more capybara, a common potoo, paraques scissor-tailed and little nightjars. Finally we glimpsed the considerable rump of a tapir disappearing into the roadside forest.

Wed 27th June The morning was spent motoring and walking along the dirt roads, looking for birds or, rather, deciding which of the many types on offer to look at first. We were spoilt for choice with peach-fronted and monk parakeets, flocks of turquoise-fronted and orange-winged amazons flying out from their roost site, plumbeous ibises nest building and 'dayglo orange' troupials (orioles) checking out a thornbird nest. A marsh deer distracted us, as we waited for it to leap dramatically over a stock fence; instead it gave an elegant demonstration of how to step neatly through the fence. We were back to the lodge before lunch for some really 'hardcore' birding; sitting in rocking chairs on the veranda watching the feeding stations for 3 different species of cowbirds, yellow-billed cardinals, saffron finches and the occasional 'hummer'.

Wed 27th June That afternoon was possibly the most memorable session of the whole trip. We headed 80 km south to a wetland area, which is only grazed at the height of the dry season and we were on the only road which didn't penetrate much further into this vast flooded savannah. It was teeming with birds, caiman and capybara and there was really magical quality to the place. Whether it was the light, the lack of people, the quiet remoteness or being in close proximity to dozens of capybara, we weren't sure but we agreed with John that, just on its own, it would almost justify another trip to the Pantanal. There were individual birds that were special: laughing falcon, hook-billed kite, scarlet-headed blackbird, yellow-billed and large-billed terns, southern screamers living up to their name and maguari stork at the nest. There were also species that impressed by the sheer numbers present: snail kites everywhere, massive flocks of egrets going to roost, vultures fighting over a dead capybara and, as the light faded, the sky filled with hundreds of nacunda nighthawks. The drive back was enlivened with lamping sessions for other nightjar relative and a great potoo on a dead stump.

Thur 28th June This as our last day at Fazenda Santa Theresa and we took an early morning trip down the river. The outboard motor was switched off at intervals so that we drifted without vibration or noise, the silence broken only by bird calls and the distant calls of black howler monkeys. Our progress was watched by numerous caiman. There were all the usual kingfishers, herons and egrets plus a green and rufous kingfisher – a 1st for many of us. Red-billed scythebills gave us a lot of 'target indication' practice before they allowed us some decent views. Our first disembarkation was thwarted by a flooded section of path, at our second attempt we set off to walk through the forest back to the lodge. Almost immediately, we came across the eaten remains of a caiman; the hole in its skull matching the canine tooth of a jaguar. Further on, a mud patch revealed the footprints of tapir, ocelot and jaguar. We never got to see the jaguar but then, when you are on foot, without a rifle, that may not be a bad thing, especially if you happened to be the last in the line!

The walk back did produce some nice birds: among them: 11 helmeted manakin, blue-crowned trogon, grey-headed tanager and Matto Grosso antbird. After lunch, packing the van was delayed by the arrival of 4 white woodpeckers. We were greeted at Piuval Lodge, near Pocone, with a fresh lemon juice before heading off to a forest patch that becomes an island in the wet season. Among the trees were plenty of oil palms that were an important food source for the roosting and breeding flock of 15 hyacinth macaws. These massive, iconic birds allowed close views and held our attention for at least half an hour. The walk also yielded good views of white-backed stilt, great black hawk and buff-throated wood creeper. The undulated tinamou lived up to its elusive reputation for a long time before finally emerging briefly from cover. The afternoon also produced some good mammal sightings: marsh and grey brocket deer, brown capuchin and black howler monkeys and several agoutis.

Fri 29th June Just as day was dawning, we were treated to the spectacle of around 750 bare-faced ibis passing overhead as they commuted between their roost and the feeding grounds. A tree in the garden produced a pair of blue-fronted parakeets and a white-tailed goldenthrout was added to the hummingbird list – and all before breakfast. After breakfast it was off to an area of open forest, where we had excellent views of a lineated woodpecker drumming and saw golden-green woodpecker. Two russet-crowned crakes were eventually lured from thick cover and proved to be worth the wait. The spot-backed puffbird and a pair black-bellied antwrens were also good finds. We saw more agoutis and added crab-eating foxes and collared peccary (S American wild pig) to our mammal list. A lined snake was found and Braulio captured it for a closer look and photo opportunities. After lunch we said farewell to Piuval Lodge and drove through Cuiaba and up to a spectacular range of reddish sandstone cliffs with waterfalls. Up on the plateau above the cliffs we saw red and green macaws, white-eyed parakeets, swallow tanagers and the masked tityra. Our accommodation for the night was the Poussada Laura Vicuna – a motel type establishment that has seen better days. Our evening meal was taken in a restaurant in town and the pizzas, beer and atmosphere more than made up for what the motel lacked.

Sat 30th June We started the morning in some very unimpressive looking dry scrub called Cerrado, the growth of this into forest is limited by fire and it certainly turned out to be a real hot spot for birds! We already had 4 'lifters' within minutes of leaving the minibus: black-faced, white-rumped and white-banded tanagers plus coal-crested finch. Braulio was able to show us the minute differences between campo and Chapada flycatchers because the 2 species were flying around together and he was one of the people involved in solving the classification problem that these birds pose. The collared crescent-chest is a very smart little bird, but it normally skulks around within the low bushes, out of sight, but it was lured out of cover to sing from an exposed perch. From the Cerrado, we moved into mature forest where tataupa tinamou were heard close by, but even a long session of tape-luring failed to encourage them into the open. We did see long-billed starthroat, white-backed fire-eye and fiery-capped manakins. A new mammal species here was a lively group of black-tailed marmosets. Lunch was at the same venue as last night's dinner, before packing our bags and a brief siesta. Before departing for Cuiaba the motel did yield: an epiphytic orchid on the trunk of a tree, a pearl kite on the wires at the entrance and ana plumbeus falcon swooping overhead. En route, we stopped for more

birding and added wedge-tailed grassbird to the list but the finale of the trip was the stop by a small lake, (where a dead, upturned bush was hastily identified as a bittern! – it had been a long trip!), but in the adjacent dry scrub Braulio pointed us towards another 'lifer'; roosting least nighthawks of which about 10 were soon swooping around against the sunset. We arrived at our hotel in Cuiaba, dropped off the luggage and 'dressed' for dinner. CNN news told us of bomb attacks in Britain, along with some airport closures and delays for security at others – great news on our eve of departure. The dinner owed a lot to Brazil's Portuguese past, there was an extensive buffet but the meat was served at the table direct from long metal skewers. Each skewer had a different type of meat or fish they just kept on coming and the quality was so good that it was tempting to try everything, including the chicken hearts. Eventually caution or stomach capacity intervened, prompting reluctant withdrawal from the unending supply.

Sun 1st July Up at 04.30, ready to leave at 05.00, 5 minute trip to airport, 06.15 take off from Cuiaba to Brasilia and then on to Rio. We expected a long wait in Rio but didn't expect to spend 3 hours of it in queues for check in and security. There was, however, time to get distant views of magnificent frigatebirds soaring over Rio harbour. Eventually we boarded our flight to Madrid.

Mon 2nd July Another wait in Madrid before we got onto a plane with the most cramped seating of any of our flights and we shared it with a huge party of rather ill-disciplined, Spanish schoolchildren. We arrived in Heathrow at 14.35, but the extra security delayed us getting on to the minibus and the driver caused further delays by opting to drive through London rather than round it. We had spent 33 hours travelling, but it seemed a small price to pay for 4 full days of great birding and a group total of 438 species seen and a further 7 species heard. I must conclude by thanking the people who made the trip such a success. Thanks primarily to John van der Dol for all the organising, the comprehensive bird lists and the trip report. Thanks are also due to: Andy and Christina Foster for making us so welcome at Serra dos Turcanos, Peter Forrest for guiding us around the Atlantic rainforest and Braulio Carlos of the Pantanal Bird Club for introducing us all to the delights of the Pantanal region.

Peter Dean

Trip participants: Mike Brimson, Peter Dean, Jim Law, Brian Short, Brian Summerfield, Simon Warry and, of course, our intrepid leader John van der Dol.

Birding in Brazil – 16th Jun – 2nd July 2007