

# THE STATE OF RORAIMA

## Northern Brazil Scouting Trip



*Lavrados and buritis north of Boa Vista, RR*

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trip report by Bradley Davis

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**Introduction:** There is precious little information on the web regarding the northernmost Brazilian state of Roraima and its birds. In spite of the fact that it boasts a diverse and reasonably well-known avifauna in a relatively compact area with strong Amazonian and cerrado affinities, is served by daily flights from Manaus, and boasts a new and adequate infrastructure for birdwatching travel, the state of Roraima has been visited by very few foreign birders indeed.

The report that follows summarizes the results of a one week scouting trip to several locations in the state, some of which turned out to be excellent birding sites. Indeed, this trip laid the foundation for a second visit to Viruá National Park undertaken in October as part of an extensive custom tour of the central and northern Brazilian Amazon.

**Timing/Weather:** Given its location north of the Equator, Roraima's seasons are the opposite of the rest of the Brazilian Amazon. When rain is falling in the areas from Manaus southward

(November to March), Roraima is dry. The timing of our visit was chosen more by gaps in schedules more than anything else, but on the whole we didn't have too much trouble with rain. Nevertheless, a visit in the boreal winter – particularly in December or January – would likely be more productive as many birds undertake breeding activity with the onset of the rains. It is also important to note that water levels in the seasonally flooded *campinas* at Viruá National Park can make access to the habitat of specialties such as Yapacana Antbird, White-naped Seedeater, and Black Manakin difficult from the months of May to October. The fine selection of Amazonian and Guianan Shield species on offer in Roraima make it viable option for birders who want to visit the Brazilian Amazon but cannot get away in the popular July to October period. Furthermore, although the wet season is already underway around Manaus by January, water levels on the Negro and Solimões rivers are usually still quite low, making access to both white and blackwater river island habitat easier. A two or three week trip combining Roraima with these areas in the northern winter would be quite successful.

**Logistics:** Birders considering an independent trip to Roraima will probably want to hire a car as public transportation to birding spots is either infrequent or absent in many places. We used Makunaima Expeditions ([www.makunaima.com](http://www.makunaima.com), tel: +55 (95) 3624-6004) and the extremely competent Francisco Diniz, who proved to be an excellent and enthusiastic organizer and logistical wizard. I suggest that any birders considering a visit to Roraima contact Francisco at Makunaima. We were also accompanied by Thiago Orsi Laranjeiras, an ornithologist in the employ of IBAMA/ICMBio and the man on the scene at Viruá National Park.

Thanks to our experience with this scouting trip and a subsequent custom tour in October 2010, Birding Mato Grosso is pleased to offer Roraima as a destination for custom birding tours. Contact us at [bradley@birdingmatogrosso.com](mailto:bradley@birdingmatogrosso.com) or visit our website [www.birdingmatogrosso.com](http://www.birdingmatogrosso.com) for further details.

**Further information:** There are several very useful publications regarding the birds of Roraima. Provided below are details of a couple of useful articles and books to start with.

Naka, L.N., Cohn-Haft, M., Mallet-Rodrigues, F., Santos, M.P.D., and M.F. Torres. 2006. The avifauna of the Brazilian state of Roraima: bird distribution and biogeography in the Rio Branco basin. *Revista Brasileira de Ornitologia* 14(3): 197-238.

Naka, L.N., Cohn-Haft, M., Whittaker, A., Barnett, J.M., and M.F. Torres. 2007. Avian biogeography of Amazonian flooded forests in the Rio Branco basin, Brazil. *Wilson Journal of Ornithology* 119(3): 439-449.

Santos, M.P.D. and J.M.C. Silva. 2007. As aves das savanas de Roraima. *Revista Brasileira de Ornitologia* 15(2): 189-207.

Silveira, L.F., Macedo, L.S.M., Azevedo, R.B., and J.J.R. Quitiaquez. 2008. Guia das aves de Roraima / Guide to the birds of Roraima. Prefeitura Municipal de Boa Vista, Boa Vista, Roraima, Brazil.

## **Birding Sites:**

### Rio Branco at Boa Vista

*Key birds:* **Rio Branco Antbird, Pale-tipped Tyrannulet, White-bellied Piculet, Brown-throated Parakeet, Finsch's Euphonia**

An excellent way to start a trip to Roraima is with a boat trip on the Rio Branco. The state capital Boa Vista sits on the right bank of this fast-flowing “white-water” (high sediment load) river. On our first afternoon in the state we left in a covered motorized canoe from one of the marinas in Boa Vista (Makunaima can arrange this, but if you prefer to negotiate it directly the going rate was around R\$90 for an afternoon outing as of October 2010). Depending on the timing of your visit, you may be able to explore some riverine lagoons with grassy margins where many widespread duck, heron, egret and raptor species occur. Other birds which are common in scrubby riverine vegetation and low gallery forest and may be found anywhere along the river include Red-shouldered Macaw, Dark-billed Cuckoo, Black-crested Antshrike, Straight-billed Woodcreeper, Hooded Tanager, and Yellow Oriole. Pink River Dolphins occur in the slower moving water in the oxbows and lagoons directly across from Boa Vista.

A more productive outing is a trip to Agua Boa de Cima. To get here, take a boat from the marina and head upstream for approximately 45 minutes, looking for a small tributary on your left – this is Agua Boa. Enter here and bird the edges of the narrow river from the boat, looking and listening for Rio Branco Antbird, Green-rumped Parrotlet, White-bellied Piculet, Pale-tipped Tyrannulet and Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher. The *buritizal* (*Mauritia* palm grove) at the end of the creek should have plenty of Red-bellied Macaws and Orange-winged Amazons.

If for some reason one misses the antbird at Agua Boa, you can try heading slowly downstream from Agua Boa on the Rio Branco, listening or playing tape, particularly in areas with vine tangles or other impenetrable thickets. We heard several pairs in late morning this way.

### Lavrados around Boa Vista

*Key birds:* **Double-striped Thick-knee, Crested Bobwhite, Bicoloured Wren, Eastern Meadowlark.**

The savannas north of Boa Vista provide habitat for a number of species not seen easily elsewhere in Brazil (see list above). The seasonally flooded *lavrados* are rich in *Mauritia* palm groves where Point-tailed Palmcreeper can be found, and when water levels are receding one is bound to encounter Jabirus and other wading birds. A good birding road is the RR-319 north of Boa Vista. This paved road is fairly quiet and offers good views out onto the *lavrados*, though some areas along here are being converted for agriculture. Drive slowly along this road where possible, watching for thick-knees and listening for the bobwhite. A number of widespread open country species are easily encountered here as well.

The RR-319 leads eventually to Contão and Normandia, but we only went as far as Passarão at the Uraricoera during our visits. The *lavrados* north of Boa Vista offer excellent chances to see Giant Anteater, even during the day, particularly along the vast stretches of savannas lining the BR-174 northbound to Venezuela.

## Rio Uraricoera at Passarão

*Key birds:* **Rio Branco Antbird, Hoary-throated Spinetail, White-bellied Piculet, Streak-headed Woodcreeper**

Passarão is the name of the small village located on the west bank of the Uraricoera river along the RR-310 northeast of Boa Vista. It is also the local name for Jabiru. The gallery forest on the opposite bank of the river is good for the Rio Branco endemics, and seeing them there is straightforward. Cross the river on the ferry and drive or walk a very short distance until you see a gravel path/track on your right. Park here and cross the shallow stream (test its depth in June or July, though). An overgrown track in front of you here parallels the river, and the antbird and spinetail can both be found easily at this spot.

## Serra Grande

*Key birds:* **Red-fan Parrot, White-bellied Antbird, Ferruginous-backed Antbird, Pompadour Cotinga, Cayenne Jay.**

Serra Grande is one of a chain of isolated hills visible from Boa Vista along the left bank of the Rio Branco. The area is well known amongst local hikers, as the climb up the hill makes for a nice two or three day camping trip with great views of the river and the state capital. Birders need not worry about a camping trip however, as there is good birding here on the quiet, flat dirt road which marks the beginning of the trek up Serra Grande. The site is located just 1.5 hours from Boa Vista, and if the road weren't full of potholes, it would probably take just an hour or so. The habitat here is mostly undisturbed good secondary forest along the road, and there is very little traffic so good for birding and excellent for sound recordists. We birded here for the better part of a morning in good weather, and had Red-bellied Macaw, Red-fan Parrot, Dark-billed Cuckoo, Chestnut Woodpecker, White-bellied Antbird, Pompadour Cotinga, Red-legged Honeycreeper, amongst others. We also saw our first Cayenne Jays here, a noisy gang of them near some of the areas which have been cleared for small-scale family agriculture along the approach road.

The area is easiest to visit as a day trip from Boa Vista, but those interested in hiking the hill and camping would probably find some interesting birds – Francisco told me he has never missed Capuchinbird near the campsite. On our most recent visit to Roraima we heard rumour of a pousada located somewhere near Serra Grande, but nobody seemed to know if this actually existed or not.

## Serra do Tepequem

*Key birds:* **Little Chachalaca, Sooty-capped Hermit (only Brazilian locality), Streak-throated Hermit, White-chested Emerald, Green-bellied Hummingbird, White-plumed Antbird, Rufous-throated Antbird, Capuchinbird, Violaceous Jay, Finsch's Euphonia.**

The Serra do Tepequem is best described as a miniature tepui, a plateau topped by naturally stunted vegetation which has been heavily altered as a result of decades of diamond mining. The slopes of the Serra do Tepequem still have some forest cover, and the resident avifauna is Amazonian/Guianan in nature, with a few interesting outliers. The area is located roughly 200 km

north of Boa Vista, reached by taking the BR-174 north then heading west on the RR-203 roughly 20km north of the bridge over the Uraricoera river. There are signs indicating the way to Tepequem along the latter road. Be alert during the first section of this drive, as the grasslands north Boa Vista along the BR-174 are excellent for Giant Anteater, which is quite common here and often seen from (or even crossing) the road.

In the small village of Tepequem there are several inexpensive pousadas, the best of which may be the pleasant Pousada Tepequem. Otherwise one could stay at the SESC Tepequem ([www.rr.sesc.com.br/sesc-tepequem.htm](http://www.rr.sesc.com.br/sesc-tepequem.htm)), which would be more convenient as that is where you want to bird.

We birded only on the SESC Tepequem property, for an afternoon and a full morning. You cannot miss the SESC Tepequem as you ascend the serra coming from Boa Vista: look for a large building behind a wooden fence on your right at a hairpin left-hand turn. Flowering bushes around the pousada are the place to look for Sooty-capped Hermit and Green-bellied Hummingbird, and we also had a singing male White-chested Emerald in subcanopy at forest edge near the main building. The brushy slope near the last set of cabins (follow the path/driveway down the hill and to the right from the restaurant) was productive in the afternoon with several hummingbirds and Finsch's Euphonia. Following the track downhill from the last cabins, one passes through secondary forest (Guianan Slaty-Antshrike) for a short distance before reaching a football field where there is a Streak-throated Hermit lek.

From the football field, we followed an overgrown path from the far right hand corner, eventually crossing a fence into a brushy pasture. From the pasture you can see a nice forest patch down the hill; continue parallel to the fence for a while before crossing the pasture and entering the forest at an old logging track which peters out quickly. We were accompanied throughout all this by a local from Tepequem, who led us in a meandering circle through the forest (it was never quite clear if he knew where he was going). This forest patch would be quite nice if a proper trail were cut: in here we had Ruddy Quail-Dove, Pale-tailed Barbthroat, Black-spotted Barbet, Golden-collared Woodpecker, Spot-winged Antbird, White-plumed Antbird, Rufous-throated Antbird, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Riverside Warbler and Cinereous Mourner. Capuchinbird also occurs here.

The butterflies on the SESC Tepequem property were varied and excellent.

I also paid a short visit to the Cachoeira da Paiva located a short distance west of the village of Tepequem atop the plateau. We called here just after mid-day to look for a *Dendrobates* poison dart frog (which we did not find), so the time of day was not ideal for birding. We did however find our only Brown Jacamar of the trip here.

There are a number of other trails in the area, mostly to waterfalls and the like, but a birder with some time or a non-birding travel companion may want to spend a couple of days in the area to enjoy the walks and the scenery.

### Pacaraima

*Key birds:* **Golden-olive Woodpecker, Gilded Barbet.**

Pacaraima is the Brazilian border town on the frontier with Venezuela at the southern edge of the Gran Sabana. Our hope here was to find some forest which could possibly hold pan-tepui endemics. Unfortunately, if any forest existed on the Brazilian side near Pacaraima, it is either gone or we simply didn't find it. We ended up birding the property of a large organic farm on the edge of town called Fazenda Trigenros. After navigating the confusing farm tracks for a while, we finally found a bit of forest where we worked the edge for a while in mid-morning. A large flock here contained some nice birds including Golden-olive Woodpecker, Gilded Barbet, Slaty-capped Shrike-Vireo, Fulvous-crested, Paradise and Masked Tanagers, but none of the birds we really had in mind.

In Pacaraima we stayed at the Hotel Pacaraima located at the entrance to the town. The accommodations were fine, and the owners put up a nice spread for an early breakfast that they were under no obligation to do for us. Chalk this up to Francisco, who seems to know everyone in the state of Roraima.

Francisco and our driver Ramiro both seemed to think it would have been worth our while to visit forests on indigenous land south of Pacaraima, where access can be arranged (again, best to do this through Makunaima). Unfortunately, recent wet weather meant the dirt roads would be too slippery for our van – a visit in the dry season is advised. It is also worth noting that there have been recent reports of flocks of Sun Parakeets in the savannah – forest matrix to the south of Pacaraima.

### Viruá National Park

**Key birds: Yapacana Antbird, Cherrie's Antwren, Willis's Antbird, Rufous-crowned Elaenia, Black Manakin, White-naped Seedeater**

Viruá National Park is located in the municipality of Caracaraí in south-central Roraima. The park encompasses an area of just under 216 000 hectares and harbours an impressive variety of habitat types including open, seasonally-flooded *campinas*, *campinarana* forest, tall *terra firme* forest, and extensive *várzea* forest along the Rio Branco. Some areas of the park are easily accessed (IBAMA/ICMBio authorization is required) from the BR-174 south of Caracaraí where one can reach the Estrada Perdida (the Lost Road). This is an elevated causeway that was constructed as part of the main highway between Boa Vista and Manaus; it was abandoned during construction of the road when the engineers building it realized that they were building their way into an enormous swamp. The road is easily driven and extends many kilometres into excellent *campina* and *campinarana* habitat, but after a fairly short distance vehicles are impeded by the first of a couple of washed out culverts. In the dry season one can easily bypass these obstacles on foot, but when the roadside ditches are full in the wet season you should be prepared to wade in water that may reach chest height or higher. The drier way around is to arrange with the park staff (you need to be accompanied by a park employee during your visit) to bring a small inflatable boat to cross the culverts.

At the first culvert one can usually find Cherrie's Antwren, and playing tape along the road beyond that point should produce close views of Rufous-crowned Elaenia. The thicker *campinarana* before the first culvert is good for Pompadour Cotinga and Black Manakin, and in October 2010 we heard White-naped Seedeater about 150 metres before the first culvert. Flowering bushes along the roadside can have Green-tailed Goldenthrout (quite common), Ruby-topaz Hummingbird (downright abundant in June), Blue-chinned Sapphire, and Blue-tailed Emerald. Widespread species that one should expect along this stretch include Black-faced Tanager, Brown-throated Parakeet, and Russet-crowned Crane.

The first and second culverts are roughly two kilometres apart, and a fair number of the species mentioned above are also present along this stretch. From October onward one should be able to walk down off the causeway in several areas as the flood waters recede. This is essential to get into the habitat of the Yapacana Antbird. This poorly known white sand specialty lives in the small islands of stunted *campinarana* forest surrounded by *campinas* and brushy *campinaranas*. If you visit in the wet season while the *campina* is flooded, you may not be able to access this habitat, thus increasing your chances of dipping the antbird (as we did in June – we saw it in October). These areas also hold White-fringed Antwren and Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch amongst others. Look for White-tailed Nightjar along the causeway at dusk.

There is a narrow trail into *campina* / *campinarana* roughly 5 km past the second culvert. In October we reached this spot with a combination of walking and riding on a motorbike. The *campinarana* forest at the edge of the road where this trail begins hosts a Yapacana Antbird territory.

The access road to the park headquarters runs through decent taller *campinarana* and white sand forest, and the birding here should be good. We only ever birded the stretch between the gate and the HQ clearing – this stretch is good for Thrush-like Antpitta, Willis's Antbird (the first 100m as you leave the HQ area), Streak-throated Hermit (listen for leks, there is one near the bench closest to the HQ), and offers pretty good viewing conditions for mixed flocks. The headquarters clearing is home to a Crested Owl pair, and during the day one should look for Guianan Puffbird, Yellow-throated Flycatcher, Guianan Toucanet and others. You will probably hear both Black Curassow (sometimes seen along the access road in the early morning) and Little Chachalaca in the early morning.

Behind the HQ area there is an excellent grid of research trails, which we never fully explored during either of our 2010 visits. The grid covers tall *terra firme* forest and seasonally flooded *campinarana* forest. There is certainly potential here, though according to Thiago Orsi, the forest seems devoid of good mixed species flocks. We found plenty of reclusive territorial antbirds here, including Black-headed, Ferruginous-backed, Willis's (in vine-rich forest along the first 200m of the trail that accesses the grid) Guianan Warbling-Antbird, and Thrush-like Antpitta. There are records of Pelzeln's Tody-Tyrant from the park, and Thiago can direct you to an area in the *campinarana* where one could probably find this specialty – flooding in June prevented us from reaching said area. A typical birding visit to Viruá NP will probably focus on the difficult specialties along the Estrada Perdida, namely the Yapacana Antbird, Cherrie's Antwren, Rufous-crowned Elaenia and White-naped Seedeater. As such, one may find that a couple of days at the site would be inadequate to cover the forested area AND the Estrada Perdida. That said, the vast majority of the birds found on the park's trail grid can also be found elsewhere in northern Brazil.

While one could probably stay at a hotel in Caracaraí and drive to the park (1 hour, if I recall correctly), it makes more sense to arrange to stay in the park at the headquarters. While during our visits the park still wasn't officially accepting visitors, Makunaima and Thiago very ably accommodated us, along with the very pleasant park staff. One can sleep in hammocks (no insects) or tents with a mattress and sheets (Makunaima can arrange this), or possibly inside the park headquarters on a mattress on the floor. Washroom and shower facilities are shared between ay visitors and researchers that may be at the park, and meals are simple but tasty. Don't expect much luxury here, but the attentive service from the park employees and of course the birds easily make up for any slight discomfort.