

VILA BELA DA SANTÍSSIMA TRINDADE, Mato Grosso – Brazil

12 to 22 June 2009



Parque Estadual da Serra de Ricardo Franco, Vila Bela de Santíssima Trindade

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Introduction: The pantanal-cerrados of Vila Bela de Santíssima Trindade in western Mato Grosso have long been on my list of areas to bird in Mato Grosso. We nearly managed to put together an expedition to the area in May of this year, but a last-minute emergency kept one of the principals of the trip out, and we scrapped the plans as a result. With a couple of weeks free in June, Jessica and I decided to trade the dusty streets of Alta Floresta for the even dustier highways of the vast Mato Grosso interior to make a ‘quick dash’ for Vila Bela in search of seedeaters, also hoping to stop en route to visit some of the state’s magnificent waterfalls.

We managed to connect on our top target in Vila Bela, the globally threatened **Black-and-tawny Seedeater**, but missed our second important bird, the Rusty-necked Piculet. We also missed out on Jaguar, an animal Jessica has still not seen – though one can never really count on finding this magnificent predator. A terrific consolation prize was a new primate for us both, the striking Rio Tapajos Saki Monkey, which we saw along the rio Guaporé near the Bolivian border. Brief searches for Cone-billed Tanager in the area around Campo Novo do Parecis came up empty, but I see no reason to believe the species isn't there.

The waterfalls were excellent: top marks go to the Cachoeira dos Namorados in Vila Bela, Cachoeira do Tombador in Nobres, and the impressive Salto das Nuvens in Tangará da Serra. Disappointingly, we were unable to schedule a visit to the Sacre and Utiariti waterfalls north of Campo Novo. We'll simply have to go back.

The following trip report is meant to be useful to the birder or mammal watcher interested in visited western Mato Grosso. A short discussion of the sites visited, including directions to these sites, is followed by an annotated list of mammals we observed on the trip. A complete bird list can be made available to interested parties who contact me privately at the e-mail provided before the introduction.

Itinerary:

June 12: Drive from Alta Floresta to Tangará da Serra.

June 13: Visit to Salto das Nuvens. Drive to Campo Novo do Parecis.

June 14: Birding the Rio do Sangue and Rio Verde. Drive to Vila Bela de Santíssima Trindade.

June 15: Birding *cerrado* around Vila Bela de Santíssima Trindade.

June 16: Birding Vila Bela de Santíssima Trindade and Parque Estadual da Serra de Ricardo Franco.

June 17: Birding *cerrado* around Vila Bela de Santíssima Trindade.

June 18: Drive to Pousada Paço das Onças near the Bolivian border. PM on the Rio Guaporé.

June 19: Birding the Rio Guaporé and Rio Verde.

June 20: Birding the Rio Verde. PM drive to Cáceres.

June 21: Drive from Cáceres to Nobres.

June 22: Drive from Nobres to Alta Floresta.

Total distance driven: **4 008 km.**



Salto das Nuvens, Tangará da Serra



Cachoeira do Tombador, Nobres

Sites visited:

Salto das Nuvens – Tangará da Serra, Mato Grosso (240 km from Cuiabá)

Not a birding location, but a site not to be missed if you happen to be anywhere near it. We detoured to Tangará da Serra just to visit this impressive waterfall and were not disappointed. There is an on-site pousada and restaurant, justly popular with locals, so this isn't a site for xenophobic tourists who are keen on 'untouched' locations. The infrastructure here is excellent and most importantly, very tasteful and appropriate in scale. Access from Tangará is simple enough, and there is a R\$10 entrance fee per person. In Tangará da Serra we stayed at the good Serras Hotel in the city centre, which was a bit pricey (R\$120 for a couple).



Blue-and-yellow Macaws nest in a palm snag in the midst of the waterfall. We had some common *cerrado* species along the entrance road, including **Gray Monjita** and **Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch**. There was also a pair of **Southern Screamers** on a pond on the way in. Tangará da Serra lies in the ecotone between the *cerrado* and Amazon biomes, and its location on the Chapada dos Parecis places it on the division between Tapajós and Paraguay river drainages. A mix of species from the *cerrado*, Pantanal, and Amazonia should be expected.

Campo Novo do Parecis, Mato Grosso (385 km from Cuiabá)

Campo Novo was founded in 1988, and the town is surprisingly large (25 000 inhabitants) for its tender age. The local economy is dominated by large-scale agriculture, and during our visit we noted vast cotton, corn, sunflower, sorghum and sugar cane monocultures. There is no doubt that soybeans are also an important crop. That said, 32% of the municipality of Campo Novo is made up of indigenous lands which still host large areas of *cerrado* and gallery forests. Given the recent discovery of a population of Cone-billed Tanager on the upper Juruena and Papagaio rivers, it seems possible if not likely that the species also occurs in Campo Novo, the smart money being along the Papagaio, Sacre and Verde rivers. Intrepid birders may want to seek access and permission to bird the Papagaio river using the bridge 40 km east of Sapezal as a starting point.

We visited Campo Novo hoping to arrange access to a pair of spectacular waterfalls, Salto Utariti and Salto Belo. Both of these sites lie in indigenous areas, and we were unable to arrange access for any of the dates we could possibly be in the area. The person to contact to arrange a visit is Augusto, who runs an agency specializing in white-water rafting – phone: (65)9613-7921. Prior arrangements are certainly necessary, as one needs to use a small ferry to cross a river, where a guide from the indigenous settlement will meet you. We were disappointed to not be able to reach this site, but it just gives us a very good reason to return in the future.

Vila Bela da Santíssima Trindade, Mato Grosso (525 km from Cuiabá)

Vila Bela is an historic town situated in western Mato Grosso near the Bolivian border. Founded in 1752 as the capital for the new province of Mato Grosso, Vila Bela played an important role on the frontier between the Portuguese and Spanish territories of the South American interior for several decades before being abandoned when the capital was moved to Cuiabá in 1835. Thereafter, the village was settled by *quilombos*, slaves of African origin who managed to escape from nearby mines. Today the descendents of the *quilombos* make up a large proportion of the local population, and the locals stand by their beliefs and traditions to this very day.

Tourism to Vila Bela is under-developed, and the region deserves better given the many attractions for the eco-tourist, wildlife lover, and birder. The Guaporé river divides the municipality: to the west lies the Serra de Ricardo Franco State Park; to the south, the upper Guaporé valley holds habitat and birds characteristic of the Pantanal; and to the east one finds the Campos do Encanto, *campo cerrado* with scattered fragments of semi-deciduous and gallery forests along the BR-174 between Vila Bela and Pontes e Lacerda.

Most of our birding time was spent in the Campos do Encanto between KMs 66 and 40 of the BR-174 between Vila Bela and Pontes e Lacerda. There is excellent *cerrado* along this stretch of highway; a number of public and private roads lead into the *cerrado* on both sides of the road. We found a couple of spots particularly productive:

- 1) road to **Fazenda Toca do Coelho**: a private ranch road on the south side of the BR-174 near KM 60, the road is marked with a faded white sign made from a large table saw blade. There is good *cerrado* here and one can bird the first kilometre or so of this road before reaching the ranch itself. Birds of note here included many **Coal-crested Finches**, **Collared Crescentchest** and **White-rumped Tanager**.
- 2) a road on the north side of the BR-174, opposite the entrance to Fazenda Toca do Coelho: flooded fields along the first few hundred metres of the road, then drier *cerrado* after a kilometre or so. **Collared Crescentchest** was dirt common in the *cerrado*, also **Rusty-backed Antwren**, **Horned Sungem**, **Long-tailed Ground-Dove** (common) and flocks of seedeaters (**Plumbeous**, **White-bellied**, **Tawny-bellied** and **Dark-throated Seedeater**) in the brushy edges.
- 3) road to **Fazenda Planície**: a private ranch road on the north side of the BR-174 at about KM 45.5. The road passes through brushy *cerrado* and secondary scrub before reaching a small patch of remnant forest where we had good birding. In the brushy edges near the beginning of the road we had flocks of *Sporophila* spp. including **Dark-throated**, **Plumbeous** and **Double-collared Seedeaters**. In the forest patch we found **Brown Jacamar**, **Toco Toucan**, **Purple-throated Fruitcrow**, **White-tailed Goldenthrout**, **Dusky-headed Parakeet** and **Blue-necked Tanager**.
- 4) flooded edges of the BR-174: there was still plenty of water in the roadside ditches and flooded fields along the BR-174, particularly near the town of Vila Bela. We saw many herons, storks and egrets including a handful of **Jabiru** beside the road itself. It was also beside the road that we eventually found a flock of more than 30 **Black-and-tawny Seedeaters**, just east of the *trevo* near Vila Bela by a flooded field on the south side of the highway. After approaching many very skittish flocks of seedeaters in the mornings, we found this particular flock extremely confiding in the early afternoon hour as they fed quietly on grass seeds in the roadside verge.

We also spent most of one afternoon in the Parque Estadual da Serra de Ricardo Franco. We went to visit the Cachoeira dos Namorados (beautiful; more water earlier in the year), and only saw a few birds including a handsome **Blue-crowned Trogon** in the parking lot, some **Golden-crowned Warblers** on the trail to the waterfall, and an adult **White Hawk** seen along a rocky streambed as we returned to the car park. A strong afternoon rain prevented us from doing much birding. The park is worth visiting if you have even the slightest interest in non-volant attractions; it's also a nice place for a picnic. To reach the park from Vila Bela, drive west across the bridge over the Guaporé and turn right at the Posto Vale do Guapore (gas station). Follow this dirt road around the perimeter of the village to a T-intersection. Turn right on the wide dirt road and drive roughly 12 kilometres; the entrance block is on the left hand side of the road immediately before the 4th wooden bridge.

I also drove south from Vila Bela one afternoon on the dirt road to Casalvasco. Birding wasn't great, thanks to a torrential downpour. The habitat is mostly uninteresting for the first 25 kilometres or so, passing through extensive cattle ranches before finally reaching wetter Pantanal habitat. Didn't see much in the 5 km of this habitat I drove, but for a couple of **Greater Rheas**, **Maguari Stork**, **White-lored Spinetail** and **White-headed Marsh-Tyrant**. This area may be worth exploring further, but I suspect that it doesn't have much that can't also be found closer to town.

We also spent two nights at the Pousada Paço das Onças, a fishing lodge located 120 km north of Vila Bela on the west bank of the rio Guaporé. The lodge is nothing special in and of itself – stuffy stucco cabins at the edge of pastures overlooking the Guaporé. It does however have a privileged location, being situated near the border with Bolivia and its vast wilderness refuge, Noel Kempff Mercado National Park. In our first afternoon at the pousada we saw a **Brazilian Tapir** swimming in the river in front of the lodge with a single offspring. Judging by the number of tapir tracks we saw around the pousada and along the riverbanks both up and downstream from the lodge, the area must have plenty of tapirs. Mammal watching on the whole was quite good here, and in our two days in the area we saw **Tufted (Brown) Capuchin**, **Red Howler Monkey**, the charming **Rio Tapajos Saki Monkey**, **Neotropical Otter**, **Giant Otter** (several sightings on the rio Verde, probably relating to two small family groups, or one larger but separated group), **White-lipped Peccary** (50+) and both **Gray** and **Pink River Dolphins**. Jaguar is said to be fairly common, particularly on the rio Verde and in the cattle pasture matrix around the lodge itself – according to our guide, August is a good month on the rio Verde as the local Jaguars prey on river turtle species when they come ashore to lay their eggs on exposed sandbars. According to the lodge management, October-November is best for Jaguar around the lodge when the animals are coupling.

I suspect that we didn't scratch the surface of the birding potential in this area. Since our strategy over the two days was mostly dictated by a large spotted cat and Jessica's more-than-passing interest in fishing, we spent most of our time on the rio Verde. This should have been OK for birding since the river is quite narrow and the forest canopy not particularly high. Nevertheless, we didn't find much at all; common species included **Pied Lapwing** on the beaches, **Hoatzin** (abundant on the Guaporé), **Blue-and-yellow** and **Red-shouldered Macaw**, **White-chinned Sapphire** (many singing males), **Brown Jacamar**, **Straight-billed Woodcreeper**, **Rusty-backed Spinetail**, **Amazonian Antshrike**, **Pygmy Antwren**, **Band-tailed** and **Silvered Antbirds**, **Plain Tyrannulet** (the most common passerine in river-edge habitat on the rio Verde), **Amazonian Tyrannulet**, **Rose-breasted Chat** and **Purple-throated Euphonia**. Our guide didn't know any trails in the area, and the lodge has not cut any either, so our forays into the forest were limited to: a late morning walk on an old track in semi-deciduous forest just below the first rapids of the Verde (**Undulated Tinamou**, **Marbled Wood-Quail**, **Rufous-throated Sapphire**, **Golden-green Woodpecker**, **Natterer's Slaty-Antshrike**, **Plain-winged Antshrike**, **Chestnut-tailed Antbird**, **Olivaceous Woodcreeper**, **White-lored Tyrannulet**, **White-bearded Manakin** and **Tropical Parula**); and an hour or so I spent alone on the Bolivian side of the rio Verde while Jessica went fishing (an odd mixed flock with **White-tailed Trogon**, **Black-fronted Nunbird**, **Bar-breasted Piculet**, **Spot-winged Antshrike**, **Amazonian Antwren**, **Yellow-margined** and **Gray-crowned Flycatcher**, **Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher**, **Amazonian Royal Flycatcher**, **Rufous Casiornis**, **Gray-chested Greenlet** and **Swallow Tanager**. The Casiornis seemed oddly out-of-place, but the forest would best be defined as 'transitional', and if the bird had been seen upriver closer to the rocky *serra* near the rapids it wouldn't have been a surprise).

We birded on the Guaporé only en route to the rio Verde, and during our first afternoon upstream from the lodge. Varzea forest downstream from the lodge had **Bare-faced Curassow**, **Dusky-headed Parakeet**, **Sunbittern** and **Flame-crested Manakin**. I expect Rusty-necked Piculet to occur as well, but we didn't really have an opportunity to search for it. Around the lodge and upstream, the river has a number of quiet oxbows and *lagoas* where **Hoatzin** is abundant. Other birds here included **Rufescent Tiger-Heron** and roosts of **Cattle Egret**, **Black-crowned Night-Heron**, and **Snail Kite**.

Pousada Paço das Onças lies roughly 120 km on a good dirt road from Vila Bela. Follow the directions provided above for the Parque Estadual da Serra de Ricardo Franco, but continue straight on instead of (or after) stopping at the park. The road is straight as an arrow, and runs through uninteresting ranchland, passing some impressive *fazendas* en route. After the village of Ricardo Franco, the lodge is another 40 km or so and not difficult to find. The ranch roads nearest the lodge hosted the most impressive concentrations of **Gray Monjita** that I have seen anywhere in Brazil.

Mammals:

Six-banded Armadillo (*Euphractus sexcinctus*) – Seen twice in the Campos do Encanto near Vila Bela. A very common road-killed animal around Vila Bela.

Nine-banded Armadillo (*Dasybus novemcinctus*) – Several road-killed individuals seen during the drive from Alta Floresta to Tangará da Serra on the 12th.

Southern Tamandua (*Tamandua tetradactyla*) – Road-killed individuals seen along highway between Alta Floresta and Colider, between Sapezal and Comodoro, and also around Vila Bela.

Tufted (Brown) Capuchin (*Cebus apella*) – Seen around Vila Bela, on the Guaporé upstream from Pousada Paço das Onças, and along the Rio Verde in PN Noel Kempff Mercado.

Rio Tapajós Saki Monkey (*Pithecia irrorata*) – 3 of these charming primates were seen at the edge of the Guaporé downstream from Pousada Paço das Onças on the 19th.

Red Howler Monkey (*Alouatta seniculus*) – Seen along the Rio Guaporé on the 19th and 20th, sightings comprising three family groups of 4-6 individuals each.

Peruvian Spider Monkey (*Ateles chamek*) – Heard only, in a forest fragment between Vila Bela and Pontes e Lacerda. The identification is not 100% in consideration of the fact that the animals were not seen and identified only by range.

Brazilian Porcupine (*Coendou prehensilis*) – A carcass found on the entrance road to Pousada Paço das Onças was probably road-killed.

Azara's Agouti (*Dasyprocta azarae*) – A couple of individuals seen around the parking lot at Parque Estadual da Serra de Ricardo Franco on the 16th.

Bulldog Bat species (*Noctilio* sp.) – Large bats with a strong musky odour seen flying low over the Guaporé on the evening of the 18th were either *N. albiventris* or *N. leporinus*.

Crab-eating Fox (*Cerdocyon thous*) – Several seen during the drive from Alta Floresta to Tangará da Serra on the 12th. Also the most common road-killed species throughout most of Mato Grosso.

Maned Wolf (*Chrysocyon brachyurus*) – Surprisingly, a road-killed individual was found along the MT-235/BR-364 between Campos do Julio and Comodoro. There is no doubt in the identification, but the observation is most surprising due to its location: amidst vast cotton and corn fields with little to no native habitat to be seen for kilometres. Apparently Maned Wolves are known to follow mechanical harvesters in the style of a caracara.

Neotropical Otter (*Lontra longicaudis*) – A single individual seen on the Guaporé upstream from the Pousada Paço das Onças on the 18th.

Giant Otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) – 3 individuals seen on the lower Rio Verde on the 19th.

South American Coati (*Nasua nasua*) – Seen twice (but probably the same individual) on the 15th along the entrance road to Fazenda Planície between Vila Bela and Pontes e Lacerda.

Brazilian Tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*) – An adult and dependent young seen swimming together in the Rio Guaporé just upstream from the Pousada Paço das Onças on the afternoon of the 18th.

White-lipped Peccary (*Tayassu pecari*) – A herd of 50+ individuals (and possibly many more) watched at close range on the Bolivian side of the Rio Guaporé downstream from Pousada Paço das Onças (inside Noel Kempff Mercado National Park, truth be told) on the 19th.

Tucuxi (Gray River Dolphin) (*Sotalia fluviatilis*) – Glimpsed a few times on the Guaporé downstream from Pousada Paço das Onças.

Amazon (Pink) River Dolphin (*Inia geoffrensis*) – Fairly common on the Guaporé and the lower Rio Verde.