

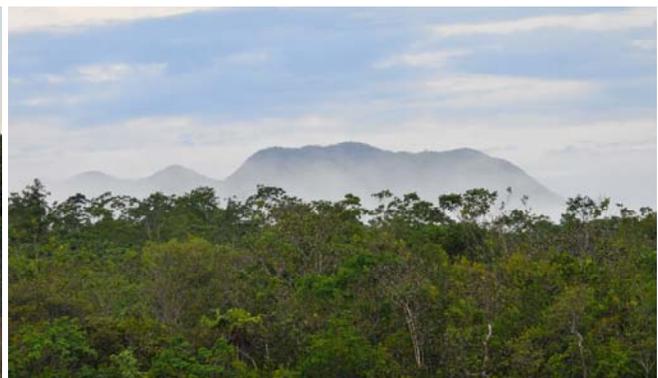


Trip Report: Junglaven (Estado Amazonas, Venezuela), December 2008

Three years to the day after my first visit to Junglaven, Emma and I joined David McLachlan-Karr, Tom Cullinan and Melissa Hamilton for a one week visit to this isolated camp on the Río Ventuari in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas. Over the intervening years, the logistical challenges of organising such a trip have increased and the facilities at Junglaven (camp, transport etc.) have continued to deteriorate, but the savannah, white sand, terra firme and varzea habitat, and the trails and rivers in the vicinity of Junglaven still offer a wonderful wilderness adventure and high quality birding for those willing to live with the occasional inconvenience and uncertainty that is now the Junglaven experience. The best part of the visit was the privileged access to pristine habitat, panoramic vistas and extensive hiking opportunities and although many of our plans had to be changed on the fly, we essentially accomplished all of the birding that we had planned. We probably hiked as much and certainly covered more locations and saw many more birds than I was able to do on my own back in 2005, leading to a personal trip list of 155 species (vs. 116 in 2005) with 18 lifers - including iconic Junglaven specialities such as Rufous-winged Ground-Cuckoo.



Golden-headed Manakins performing at their lek [lowland forest near to Camani]



Sunrise over the savannah and white-sand forest; Dawn view across the Junglaven lagoon

By flying directly from Caracas to Amazonas in our friend Francisco's Cessna, we saved considerable time (avoiding an overnight connection between the daily scheduled flight to Puerto Ayacucho and a local bush charter) and improved the trip's safety (being grateful for a reliable, well maintained and professionally piloted plane!). We also got to appreciate the Venezuelan landscape as it transitioned below us from the Coastal Cordillera via dry upper Llanos to the wet, flat, lower Llanos dissected by rivers and, finally, the mighty Río Orinoco and frontier town of Puerto Ayacucho some 2 hours 20 minutes later. Ever-increasing restrictions on foreign tourists in Amazonas prevented us from flying directly into the heart of the state so, despite having appropriate documentation in place, we were obliged to wait a short while in Puerto Ayacucho while local military authorities approved our onward journey. Even then we were not permitted to fly directly to either the Junglaven or Camani airstrips, and instead we flew to San Juan de Manapiare. This flight lasted just under one hour and provided absolutely spectacular views of endless, forest-cloaked hills and valleys, broken only by steep rock faces, narrow rivers cutting through the valleys and waterfalls cascading across sheets of black rock.



Flying from deforested Coastal Cordillera to the unbroken forested landscape of Amazonas

At San Juan de Manapiare we stocked up on food and drink supplies (there is no beer, rum or soft drinks at Junglaven) and we were met by boats which took us on a 2 ½ hour river trip, first south on the Río Manapiare and then west on the Río Ventuari. Both rivers were teeming with pink river dolphins - more than we have encountered anywhere before - and we stopped several times to enjoy close-up views of different pods. Flocks of Neotropic Cormorants skimming the silvery waters of the Ventuari at dusk were another memorable sight.



River travel; Pink River Dolphin exhaling [both on Río Manapiare]

On arrival at Camani, Junglaven's 82 year old owner Capitan Lorenzo Rodriguez greeted us and relayed the bad news that we would be unable to stay at Junglaven, due to a combination of rainy season storms and wood-eating termites having rendered the camp uninhabitable. We would therefore have to stay at Camani (a

well-equipped camp, complete with swimming pool) located on the edge of the hot savannah, rather than at our preferred Junglaven location (16km away) overlooking a lagoon and surrounded by the cool, terra firme forest that contained most of our target species. Compounding the logistical challenges, both the Junglaven and Camani trucks were out of service, so we would have to hike everywhere until these were fixed (but not to worry, ‘the mechanic will be arriving tomorrow to fix them’). All very reminiscent of 2005, when I was also the first tourist of the season!

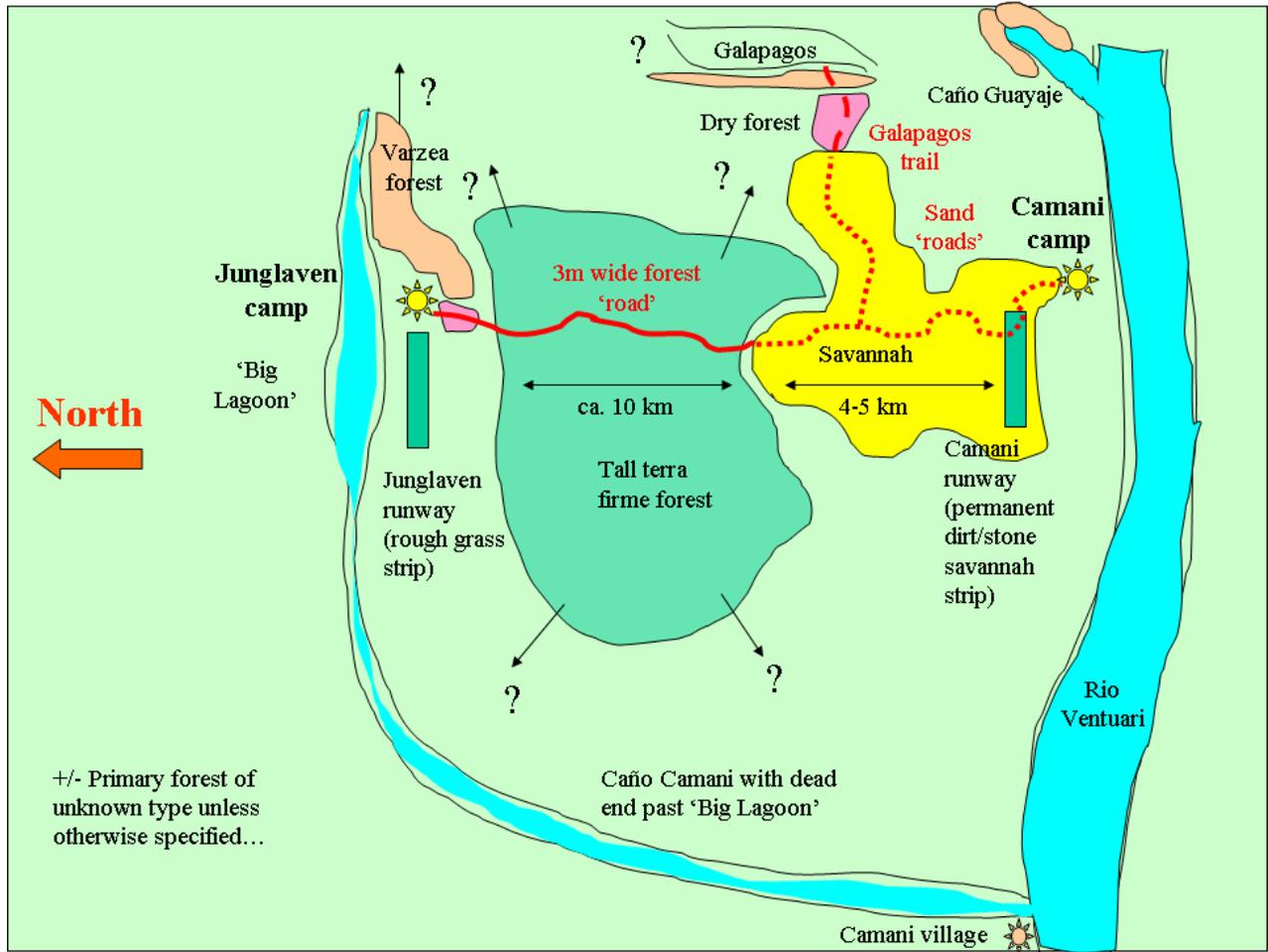


Jaguar prints; Flowers in evening light [both on savannah near Camani]

Our first day’s birding commenced with a hike across the savannah in pleasant early-morning temperatures as we searched for savannah and white-sand forest specialties. The light was wonderful (we had near perfect weather the whole trip, with only a couple of brief rain storms) and although the birding in this dry environment was slow, notable sightings included close-up views of a Green-tailed Goldenthrout on its nest in the savannah scrub, a Rufous-crowned Elaenia, pairs of red-and-green Macaws passing over and multiple cat prints, both large and small. After about 5km of flat, sandy trails we reached the entrance to the terra firme forest that grows on the more elevated lateritic soils, and we continued for a couple of kilometres along the undulating dirt road in the welcome cool of the forest. Highlights included Ringed Woodpeckers (the barred subspecies illustrated in Restall but not in Hilty), a flock of Gray-winged Trumpeters flushed from the road, successfully finding one of the many Dwarf Tyrant-Manakins calling from their mid-story perches and our first taste of Amazonian Antshrikes, White-flanked Antwrens and Imeri Warbling Antbirds - which proved to be three of the more common antshrike/wren/bird species found during the week.



Cherrie’s Antwren (female) [varzea scrub near to Junglaven]; Imeri Warbling Antbird [terra firme forest]



Map of Junglaven Region



Dramatic landscape between Puerto Ayacucho and San Juan de Manapiare



Amazonian Antshrike (male and female) [both in varzea scrub near to Junglaven]

To everyone's surprise, we were spared the long, hot hike back across the savannah by the arrival of the Camani truck, which had indeed been brought to life. Things were looking up! After lunch the truck dropped us back at the savannah/terra firme forest interface so that we could again walk the first sections of the forest, where the clear highlight of a slow afternoon was watching a Tiny Hawk methodically pluck the feathers from a small black and yellow bird (a Yellow-backed Tanager or a Yellow-rumped Cacique?) before flying off with its near naked prey.



Green-tailed Jacamar (female) [Galapagos trail]; Yellow-billed Jacamar [terra firme forest]

The following day we were determined to leave for Junglaven before dawn (05:30), intent on spending the whole day in the forest at the far end of the road. Unfortunately the truck took considerable coaxing to life and following our delayed departure it then failed to climb the first small hill we encountered in the forest. Thereafter we walked the road in the direction of Junglaven, receiving periodic lifts when the revived truck caught us up, then walking when it died again. In this way we made gradual progress through the forest, birding as we went. The best birds encountered were Ruddy Spinetails (that responded vigorously to playback) and Gray-winged Trumpeters, whilst Red-Howler Monkeys called distantly and a Southern Tamandua Anteater was spotted sleeping in a tall tree. By 08:00 we had reached the Junglaven camp, which was indeed in considerably worse shape than I remembered, and although Capitan Lorenzo expressed confidence that it would be habitable in time for his next visitors in January, there appeared no hope of it being sufficiently repaired for us to stay at during our trip.



Black-headed Parrots; Blue-headed Parrot [both near Junglaven camp]

We spent an hour birding around the camp and the runway (Green-tailed Jacamars glistening in the sunshine, Dusky-capped Greenlets by the lagoon, several parrots and larger birds in the tall trees). Just as in 2005, the varzea scrub habitat along the road at the camp entrance contained Golden-spangled Piculet, Amazonian Antshrike, Cherrie's Antwren and Black Manakin (the later three all responsive to playback) whilst the first section of the terra firme forest road contained one good antbird flock (adding Gray Antwren and Cinnerous Antshrike). Packed lunches were delivered by truck, which promptly broke down again and was abandoned on the forest road while one of the employees set off by river to bring another battery!

While Tom and Melissa took a break from the heat and headed back to the Junglaven camp, Emma, David M-K and I continued birding through the afternoon and - based on Capitan Lorenzo's advice as to where Rufous-winged Ground-Cuckoos have previously been seen - we set off in pursuit of this top-of-the-target-list bird. A long-abandoned plantation about 8 minutes walk along the forest road from the camp was supposedly the spot and we sat patiently by the side of the road, playing calls. Almost immediately we heard a distant 'woooo' response, but after persisting for about 15 minutes with no success (reports all indicate that this bird requires a lot of very quiet patience) we decided to venture a hundred metres or so off the road along a faint trail that Capitan Lorenzo had mentioned and try again. We were rewarded with more 'woooo' responses, followed by unmistakable bill-clacking. The bill-clacking grew more insistent - increasing in both speed and volume - until it sounded like Chinese firecrackers were going off in the forest about 30m away from us, by which point we were stuck between disbelief that this was actually happening and anticipation of what would follow! As the clacking reached its crescendo a large and fast moving dark shape ran along the ground to

within about 10m of us, stood on a log where we could clearly see its tail wagging violently as it challenged us (although its head was frustratingly hidden behind a tree and we didn't dare move our feet to get a better view) and then just as swiftly scurried away. Wow! Hoping to get better views of the distinctive facial pattern we repeated our 'woooo' calls and experienced a second bill-clacking assault, this time by two Rufous-winged Ground-Cuckoos that circled around us at about 10-15m distance and then crossed the trail, giving fleeting but conclusive views. Undoubtedly this was one of the most bizarre acoustic experiences I have ever encountered - right up there with any manakin lek that I have ever heard - and an amazing adrenaline rush. No photos, but nonetheless high fives all round!

Our long day concluded with a scenic but bird-wise largely unsuccessful late afternoon boat trip around the big lagoon (Emma saw an Agami Heron when quietly paddling a dug-out canoe earlier in the day, but the rest of us did not; on the positive side we did all see a male Pompadour Cotinga). We then had a jet-boat like one-hour trip down the Caño Camani and up the Río Ventuari back to the Camani camp.



Maroon-tailed Parakeet; Amazonian White-tailed Trogon [both terra firme forest]

Our third day was devoted to an early-morning walk along the Galapagos trail, a leisurely hour of after-lunch birding in the forest adjacent to the Camani camp and a late-afternoon boat trip on the Caño Guayaje. The approximately 2km long Galapagos trail from the savannah cuts through predominantly dry forest until reaching some varzea forest beside the Galapagos lagoon. Bird activity was low, but we did encounter a flock of Azure-napped Jays in trailside trees and our main target bird, the Yellow-crested Manakin, in a particularly moist and palm-rich section of the forest. A Golden-headed Manakin lek with several males buzzing and flicking their wings was the highlight of a forested trail just behind the Camani camp, whilst a Giant River Otter swimming in the Río Ventuari and many Pink River Dolphins were the highlights of our visit to the still flooded varzea forest along the Caño Guayaje. Although they are seen on almost all trips, we had no luck searching for either Agami or Zigzag Herons, although a quieter motor or a paddle would certainly have increased our chances!



Yellow-crested Manakin [Galapagos trail]; Golden-headed Manakins [lowland forest near to Camani]

With the trucks now running more reliably, our final two days were focused squarely on birding the terra firme forest, especially the damper, Junglaven side. A very early start from Camani and a trouble-free 45 minute drive saw us at the Junglaven camp around dawn and we were rewarded with eerie Long-billed Woodcreepers in trees near the camp and an Amazonian Umbrellabird perched and flying across the lagoon. Our morning's walk through the forest was also highly productive: 10 minutes into the forest I finally found my first ever Yellow-billed Jacamar, then Cinnerous Mourner, Grayish Mourner, a pair of Yellow-throated Woodpeckers, Black-bellied Cuckoo, Black Nunbird, Rusty-breasted Nunlet, Gilded Barbet and White-throated Manakin all followed. We continued birding through the early afternoon, including an unsuccessful attempt to find the Ground-Cuckoo with Tom and Melissa. This time we never heard any 'wooo' responses and although we did hear some distant bill-clacking it never reached anything like the frenetic pace or volume we had heard previously. David M-K made a brief fishing trip on the big lagoon, catching several *pavón* (Peacock Bass) for our dinner before storm clouds threatened and we retreated back towards Camani in the truck, on the way spotting a pair of Crestless Curassows walking along the road.



Tortoise [Galapagos trail]; Fungus [terra firme forest]

Our final day was a repeat of the previous day's successful formula and delivered the best morning's birding of the trip. During the dawn drive towards Junglaven we saw a pair of Black Curassows and both Undulated Tinamou and Variegated Tinamou, then on our walk back along the road from the Junglaven camp our sightings included more Yellow-billed Jacamars, a White-browed Purpletuft, White-bellied Antbird, a retiring pair of White-shouldered Antshrikes, a Scale-backed Antbird that flew in and spent several minutes watching David M-K from point-blank range whilst I photographed it, and a mixed flock including Slender-billed Xenops.



Scale-backed Antbird [terra firme forest]; Black Nunbird [lowland forest near to Camani]

A Thrush-like Schiffornis heard calling deep in the forest was eventually well seen after a tough scramble through thick vegetation. It was very rewarding to finally see this curious creature calling from a branch low down in the dark forest interior - very reminiscent of an antpitta - whilst the rufous crest and light cinnamon throat were a surprise, given the rather uniform brown illustrations on the plates of both Hilty and Restall.



Thrush-like Schiffornis calling [terra firme forest]



Tiny Hawk plucking its prey [terra firme forest]; Long-billed Woodcreeper [Junglaven camp]

We then encountered our only army ant swarm of the trip, although in truth it was a very modest swarm compared with the torrents of ants I have seen swarming in Imataca. Nonetheless we could hear some antbird calls in the distance and before long we had a pair of Rufous-throated Antbirds in clear sight. After a packed lunch near the 'Big Tree' we continued walking towards the savannah, securing good views of a Variegated Tinamou, Olive Oropendolas, Red-throated Caracaras and a mixed flock including a pair of Spot-winged Antshrikes. Although we were frustrated by several Spot-backed Antbirds that came close whilst ultimately remained largely hidden from view, we did reasonably well overall in finding a good number of our target antshrike/bird/wren skulkers.

Having reached the savannah by mid-afternoon we were excited to hear a Brown-banded Puffbird calling from the edge of the forest, but we never managed to locate it nor did we locate the Pale-bellied Mourners that frequent this habitat. A lift on the truck back to Camani from the savannah edge was gratefully accepted (although we did miss out on the Least Nighthawks feeding around the Camani airstrip at dusk - the final new birds of the trip seen by David M-K, Tom and Melissa).



Frog [Galapagos trail]; Grass and sand sculptures [savannah]

Our return to Caracas went smoothly: up the Río Ventuari and Río Manapiare to San Juan de Manapiare where Francisco was already waiting after having departed from Caracas at first light that morning, then a 2 ½ hour flight delivering us back to Caracas in time for a late lunch.

Reflecting on the trip I view Junglaven as a wonderful wilderness birding experience for those keen on seeing specialities such as the Rufous-winged Ground-Cuckoo, the curassows, trumpeters etc. One can only hope that the habitat and fauna will continue to survive under likely increased human pressures, especially given the prevailing uncertainty about Junglaven's future. Visitors should, however, be willing to be flexible and put up with the eccentricities and inevitable frustrations associated with visiting a remote location that receives insufficient flow of visitors to support reliable infrastructure. In fact, given the authorities' restrictions on tourism to the area, the current state of the Junglaven camp, uncertainty over Capitan Lorenzo's plans for the camp and with only two further groups scheduled to visit Junglaven during 2009 it may, regrettably, become a case of 'go now, before it becomes impossible to do so'!



Dusk at Camani camp; Emma and David M-K bidding farewell to Capitan Lorenzo



Río Manapiare

1. Trip Bird List¹

(Confirmed personal sightings only for DJS – excludes birds heard only unless otherwise indicated;
in order of appearance on the plates of Hilty's Birds of Venezuela)

Locations where species seen: In initial order of travel: M= San Juan de Manapiare (ca. 160m altitude); RM= Río Manapiare; S= Savannah and white-sand forest near to Camani camp (ca. 120m altitude); C= Camani camp and adjacent riverine forest (ca. 120m altitude); R= Road through terra firme forest from Junglaven to savannah (ca. 120-130m altitude); J= Junglaven camp, adjacent riverine & varzea forest and big lagoon (ca. 120m altitude); G=Galapagos trail from savannah to Galapagos lagoon (ca. 120m altitude); V= Río Ventuari and/or Cano Guayaje (ca. 120m altitude).

Undulated Tinamou [R]

Variiegated Tinamou [R]

Anhinga [RM; V]

Neotropic Cormorant [RM; V]

Black-crowned Night-Heron [RM]

Cocoi Heron [RM; J; V]

Great Egret [RM; V]

Cattle Egret [S]

Little Blue Heron [J]

Jabiru [M]

Capped Heron [V]

Rufescent Tiger-Heron [J]

Striated Heron [V]

Turkey Vulture [M; V]

Black Vulture [M; J; C]

Savanna Hawk [S]

Black-collared Hawk [V]

Roadside Hawk * [S; C; J]

Tiny Hawk * [R]

Osprey [RM; V]

King Vulture [M]

Northern Crested-Caracara [M]

Black Caracara [R; V]

Red-throated Caracara [R]

Great Black Hawk [V]

Little Chachalaca (heard only) [C; S]

Black Curassow [R]

Crestless Curassow [R]

Gray-winged Trumpeter [R]

Pied Plover [RM]

Sunbittern [J; V]

Wattled Jacana [S]

Large-billed Tern [RM]

Black Skimmer [RM]

Ruddy Pigeon [J; V; RM]

Plumbeous Pigeon [J]

Ruddy Ground-Dove [M; J]

Plain-breasted Ground-Dove [J]

Red-and-green Macaw [S; R; RM]

Blue-headed Parrot [S; J]

Orange-winged Parrot [S; J]

Yellow-crowned Parrot [S]

Mealy Parrot [J]

Maroon-tailed Parakeet * [S; R; J]

Black-headed Parrot * [S; J; R; G]

Black-bellied Cuckoo [R]

Rufous-winged Ground-Cuckoo [R]

Smooth-billed Ani [J]

Great Ani [J]

Violaceous Jay [S; J]

Azure-naped Jay [G]

Pauraque Nightjar [C]

Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift [S]

Band-rumped Swift [J]

White-chested Emerald [R]

Versicoloured Emerald [R; G]

White-chinned Sapphire [R]

Green-tailed Goldenthrout [S]

White-tailed Goldenthrout [S]

Black-throated Mango [J]

White-necked Jacobin [S]

Eastern Long-tailed Hermit [R]

Rupurumi Hermit [G; R]

Reddish Hermit [R]

Amazonian White-tailed Trogon [S]

Swallow-winged Puffbird [RM; S; J; V]

White-necked Puffbird [S; R]

Brown-banded Puffbird (heard only) [S]

Rusty-breasted Nunlet (heard only) [R]

Green-tailed Jacamar * [J; R; G]

Yellow-billed Jacamar * [R]

Paradise Jacamar * [R; S]

Amazon Kingfisher [RM; V; J]

Green Kingfisher [RM; V; J]

American Pygmy Kingfisher [J]

Ringed Kingfisher [RM; V; J]

¹ First sighting ever for DJS; * = photo available from trip

Blue-crowned Motmot (heard only) [R; C]
Black Nunbird * [R; J]
Gilded Barbet [R]

White-throated Toucan [J]
Channel-billed Toucan [S; J]
Green Araçari [J]
Ivory-billed Araçari [S]

Ringed Woodpecker * [R]
Golden-green Woodpecker [R]
Yellow-throated Woodpecker * [R]
Yellow-tufted Woodpecker * [J]
Lineated Woodpecker [S; J]

Golden-spangled Piculet [J; R]

Wedge-billed Woodcreeper [R]
Lineated Woodcreeper [R]
Straight-billed Woodcreeper [R]
Long-billed Woodcreeper * [J]

Ruddy Spinetail [R]

Slender-billed Xenops [R]

Black-crested Antshrike [J]
White-flanked Antwren * [R]
Gray Antwren * [R]
Imeri Warbling Antbird * [R]
Amazonian Antshrike * [J; R; G; C]
White-shouldered Antshrike [R]
Blackish-Gray Antshrike [J]
Spot-winged Antshrike [R]
Scale-backed Antbird * [R]
Cinnerous Antshrike * [R]
White-bellied Antbird [R]
Cherrie's Antwren * [J]
Rufous-throated Antbird [R]
Spot-backed Antbird (heard only) [R]

Golden-headed Manakin [C; R; G]
White-throated Manakin [R]
Black Manakin * [J; R; G]
Dwarf Tyrant-Manakin [R]
Thrush-like Schiffornis * [R]
Yellow-crested Manakin * [G]

Drab Water-Tyrant [RM; V]
Rufous-crowned Elaenia [S]
Helmeted Pygmy-Tyrant [R]

Tropical Kingbird [M; S; J]
Yellow-throated Flycatcher [J]
Rusty-Margined Flycatcher [M; V; J]
Lesser Kiskadee [J]
Piratic Flycatcher [J]
Amazonian Black-Tyrant [J]
Fork-tailed Flycatcher [M]
Swainson's Flycatcher [J]
Dusky-capped Flycatcher [J]

Black-tailed Tityra * [J]

White-browed Purpletuft [R]
Pompadour Cotinga [J]
Cinnerous Mourner * [R]
Grayish Mourner * [C; R]
Amazonian Umbrellabird [J; V]

White-banded Swallow [V]
White-winged Swallow * [RM; V; S]
Gray-breasted Martin [J]

Coraya Wren [J]
Buff-breasted Wren [G]

Tropical Gnatcatcher [S]

Dusky-capped Greenlet [J]

Purple Honeycreeper [R]
Bananaquit [S; J; G]
Swallow Tanager [J]
Palm Tanager [J]
Blue-gray Tanager [S]
Silver-beaked Tanager [J]

Lesser Seed-Finch [J]
Gray Seedeater [J]
Lesson's Seedeater [J]

Grassland Sparrow [S]
Wedge-tailed Grassfinch [S]

Giant Cowbird * [J]
Olive Oropendola [R]
Crested Oropendola [V]
Yellow-rumped Cacique * [S; R; J; V]

Combined total: 155 confirmed species for trip (150 seen; 5 heard only), including 18 "first time ever" species for DJS (17 seen; 1 heard only) ...