

## Trip Report: Los Andes (Estado Mérida), Venezuela

20<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> July 2007 (David Southall)

This report captures highlights from a trip that Emma and I made to the Andes of Mérida state in the company of Mikko Pyhälä, David McLachlan-Karr and his aunt and uncle, Heather and Geoff, who were visiting from Queensland. During four full days we visited a wide range of habitats on both the western (*Parque Nacional La Culata*) and eastern (*Parque Nacional Sierra de Nevada*) flanks of the Andes, at altitudes between 1000m and 4100m. The good company, generally good weather (despite being the middle of the rainy season), good accommodation and access to good habitat contributed to a very successful trip, with my personal highlight being finally seeing and photographing my most hoped for bird of the trip - the Bearded Helmetcrest - at Mifafí. A detailed listing of my personal bird sightings is included at the end of this report.



*Bearded Helmetcrest*

Our accommodation was excellent: Hacienda Santa Filomena (below Jají) is a wonderfully restored coffee plantation; Estancia La Bravera (between Jají and La Azulita) is a gorgeous *posada* with flowering gardens, trails through its own cloud forest leading to the Páramo El Tambor and the most amazing display of hummingbirds at feeders adjacent to the restaurant; Hotel Los Frailes (between Apartaderos and Santo Domingo) is a former monastery nestled in the *páramo* landscape and one of the most atmospheric hotels in Venezuela; and finally Hotel Belensate in Mérida is an excellent city option in a garden setting only minutes from the airport. Added to this was the wonderful hospitality that Mikko showed towards Emma and I during our pre- and post-trip stay at the Finnish Residence, during which time we enjoyed catching up with Caracas-based friends and former colleagues.



*Pre-trip preparations for David M-K and Mikko; David M-K, Emma, Heather, Mikko, Jorge & Ivon (our hosts at La Bravera) and Geoff*

After a late Friday afternoon flight from Caracas and a drizzly drive of about one-and-a-half hours to Jají, we enjoyed some hot showers (eventually!) at Hacienda Santa Filomena, our first trout of many for the holiday and sampled some of the Hacienda's own coffee in front of an open fire. Dawn arrived clear and cool as we leisurely birded the lanes and fields in the immediate vicinity of the Hacienda. Highlights included a Rufous-tailed hummingbird feeding two juveniles in a nest constructed low down in a coffee bush and the first endemic of our trip - a White-fronted Whitestart spotted from our breakfast table on the Hacienda's terrace.



*Lazuline Sabrewing; Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds (juv.)*

During our short 40 minute mid-morning drive to Estancia La Bravera, we made a brief stop at a roadside lake where Pied-billed Grebes and Bare-faced (Whispering) Ibis were scoped. La Bravera, set at 2360m, lived up to our high expectations - comfortable *cabañas* set in extensive, flower-filled grounds, excellent food, the most amazing array of hummingbirds buzzing around the numerous feeders, and walking access to good cloud forest. The midday hummingbird display was impressive - with some 20 or 30 individuals in the area, including numerous Green Violetears, Sparking Violetears and Orange-throated Sunangels, plus regular visits by Collared Incas, Lazuline Sabrewings, Buff-tailed Coronets and tiny, bee-like Gorgeted Woodstars. All seven species were seen within minutes of our arrival and Long-tailed Sylph was added later. The hummingbirds were completely unfazed by our presence: one landed on my camera lens and several landed



on the backs of our chairs whilst we were having lunch! Apparently several other species are also occasionally seen at these feeders which are certainly the most impressive I have seen in Venezuela.



*Orange-throated Sunangel; Buff-tailed Coronet*



*Sparkling Violetear; Green Violetear*

Our afternoon's birding though La Bravera's forest and up to the Páramo El Tambor (at ca. 2500m) was much slower: although the cloud forest habitat was impressive, we saw little of note beyond fleeting glimpses of Green-and-Black Fruiteaters, an Andean Guan in the upper levels of the forest and only a Sparkling Violetear was seen on the páramo itself.



*Lazuline Sabrewing (f); Emma getting acquainted with a thirsty Orange-throated Sunangel*

Our fortunes changed for the better early Sunday morning - whilst we were still enjoying our dawn coffees in the courtyard - when Rufous Spinetails, three different Brush-Finches (Moustached, Slaty and Chestnut-capped) and White-sided Flowerpiercers were all spotted in a mixed flock scouring the adjacent vegetation. A pre-breakfast walk along the main road under clear skies gave us wonderful close-up views of flocks of endemic Rose-crowned Parakeets, plus Pearled Treerunner, Emerald Toucanet and a host of tanagers including Blue-and-black, Beryl-spangled, Black-headed and Blue-necked. On a subsequent walk in La Bravera's cloud forest, Mikko's playback immediately attracted the attention of two male and one juvenile Green-and-black Fruiteaters, whilst Emerald Toucanets and a Bluish Flowerpiercer were busy feasting at a fruiting tree in the garden. During periods of sunshine I spent some time at the feeders attempting to get shots of the cooperative hummingbirds.



*Rufous Spinetail; Beryl-spangled Tanager*





*Slaty Brush-Finch; Moustached Brush-Finch (imm.)*



*Common Bush-Tanager; White-throated Tyrannulet*

Having recovered from a generous three course lunch at La Bravera, we headed off under cloudy skies towards La Azulita, less than one hour's drive down the mountainside. A persistent drizzle dampened activity on the upper sections of the road, although a bird calling loudly from roadside vegetation at ca. 1800m was enticed briefly into the open by Mikko's playback and subsequently identified as a Mérida Tapaculo - my first ever confirmed tapaculo species! Our stop at the Mirabel turn-off, just as the drizzle abated, was also successful, with gorgeous Blue-naped Chlorophonias showing first in a mixed flock that also included the uncommon Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher (see section 4 for more details).

As we continued down the road towards La Azulita, Emma and I were delighted to see several Black-mandibled Toucans yelping loudly from roadside trees. No opportunity to take any decent photographs though, due to the steady rain. La Azulita itself seemed to hold few attractions - beyond much improved weather at this lower altitude of ca. 1100m - but a couple of kilometers out of town, near to an *alcabala*, we found the turn-off to the parrot and macaw roosting area mentioned by Mary Lou. The sun was out and even though it was only 5pm we immediately spotted Bronze-winged parrots sitting in the highest tree tops and several Scarlet-fronted Parakeets, including a pair that entered a nest hole beside our car. It was, however, disturbing to see apparent bullet holes pock-marking the tree around the nest. We explored the roosting area until sunset and saw many Chestnut-fronted Macaws, Orange-chinned Parakeets and Green-rumped

Parrotlets, however none of the large macaws were seen or heard. Rufous-banded Owl was heard calling as we approached La Bravera after dark.



*Rose-crowned Parakeets; Orange-chinned Parakeets*

On Monday, whilst David M-K, Heather and Geoff headed off to Mérida in order to ascend the world's highest and longest cable-car, Mikko, Emma and I passed straight through Mérida on our way to the high *páramo* areas north of the city. Our first stop - at the Mifafí Condor Centre - was one of the best of the trip. After seeing Bar-winged Cinclodes and Plumbeous Sierra-Finch on the way up to the *Guardaparques* station we found the endemic Mérida Flowerpiercer feeding on flowers in their garden. Fifty metres down the hill we parked again and found Streak-throated Bush-Tyrants feeding nestlings near to the stream and Emma and Mikko spotted, amongst other species, a male Bearded Helmetcrest perched on a rock further up the hillside. Some rock scrambling and patience paid off as I was able to get some good close-ups of two of these curious hummingbirds as they variously jumped between and sang from a series of their favourite boulders - acting just as their Spanish name, *Chivito de los Páramos* (Páramo Goat), would suggest. Our subsequent picnic lunch under sunny skies tasted great!



*Andean Tit-Spinetail; Mérida Flowerpiercer*





*Bearded Helmetcrest; Streak-throated Bush-Tyrant*

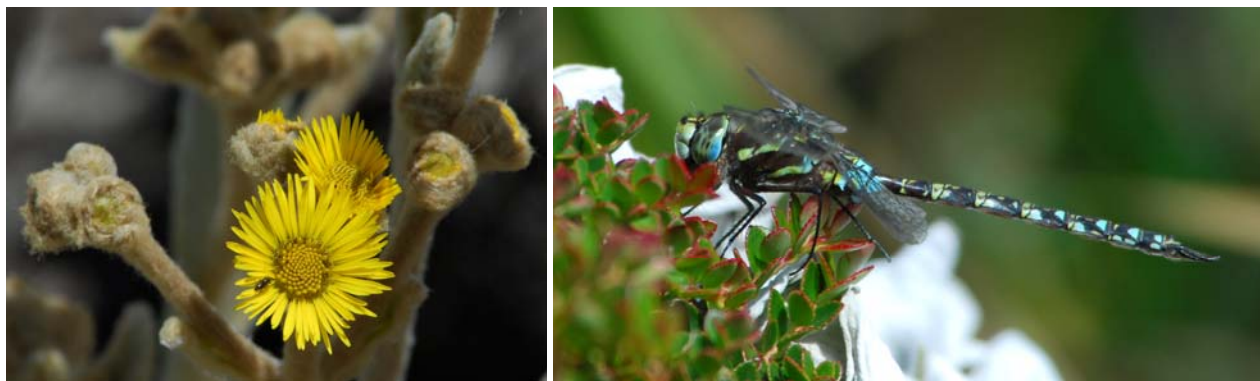
Our next stop at Paso del Aguila, on the road to Piñango, took us to over 4100m - our highest altitude of the trip - and we added Streak-backed Canastero (flitting between metre-high espeletia in response to playback) and Páramo Pipit (seen from the car as it wandered across open *páramo* close to the road) before the rain set in and we headed down towards better weather around Hotel Los Frailes, with a brief stop at Laguna Mucubají. At the hotel David M-K rejoined us for a late-afternoon's birding along Gustavo's Trail, a couple of kilometres down the valley. Although heavily cleared along some sections and with less activity than during our last visit in the 2004 dry season, the trail still proved worthwhile. Finds including Masked and Glossy Flowerpiecer (bringing our trip total to five flowerpiecer species), Blue-backed Conebills, Gray-capped Hemispingus and Lacrimose Mountain-Tanagers. Our final morning was also spent along this trail, although little new was added to our burgeoning trip list.



*David M-K, Emma and Mikko on Gustavo's Trail; David at Paso del Aguila*

On our final full day - Simon Bolivar's birthday and hence a public holiday - David M-K, Heather and Geoff headed back to Mérida whilst Mikko, Emma and I started an intensive, playback assisted search for the endemic Mérida Wren and Ochre-browed Thistletail. Although the wren is reported to be strongly territorial and highly responsive to playback, several stops by the roadside in the few pockets of suitable remaining shrubby habitat above Los Frailes elicited only two muted responses and one brief sighting. We had no response at all from the thistletail and wondered whether this, along with the general lack of vocalisations we had encountered elsewhere during the trip, could be related to our trip coinciding with the breeding season.

An hour long walk in a loop from Laguna Mucubají gave some wonderful views of the espeletia covered páramo landscape, but we saw few birds. This area is probably of more interest to hikers than birders unless one has sufficient time to head to more promising habitat around the Laguna Negra.



*Espeletia ('Frailejones') near Laguna Mucubají; Dragonfly on the Páramo at 3600m*

Accordingly, we decided to cut our losses and headed immediately down the valley (pausing for a final trout lunch at the Casa del Páramo) towards the attractive, if congested, village of El Tabay and the Humboldt Trail at La Mucuy. A heavy shower greeted our arrival, but was followed by a frantic hour of mid-afternoon birding as the largest and most diverse mixed flock of the trip kept us rooted to the spot in the main clearing right in front of the trail entrance: a continuous riot of tanagers, flycatchers, hummingbirds, woodcreepers and many more. I was also fortunate to see a Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush in a nearby gully. We only had time to venture a short distance up the trail (good views of Andean Guans and a Strong-billed Woodcreeper tossing beak loads of leaves out of a large bromeliad) before a further rain shower brought our birding to an end and drove us down towards shelter in Mérida. This taster of the Humboldt Trail - and especially the glaring absence of our much sought after Mérida Sunangel - suggests that it would certainly justify a more extended visit.



*Andean Guan; Sheltering from the rain at the start of the Humboldt Trail*

The trip concluded with a personal total of some 142 confirmed species, including 17 "first time ever" species to add to my Venezuelan list (the group's combined total exceeded 160 species).



## 1. Trip Bird List<sup>1,2</sup>

(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)

First location where species seen: In order of travel: S= Hacienda Santa Filamena (ca. 1600m alt.); B= Estancia La Bravera and environs (ca. 2300-2500m alt.); A= la Azulita (1050 - 1800m alt.); M= Mifafí (ca. 3700m alt.); P= Paso del Aguila (ca. 4100m alt.); L= Laguna de Mucubají (ca. 3600m alt.); F= Hotel Los Frailes and/or Gustavo's Trail (ca. 2800-3000m alt.); H= Humboldt Trail at la Mucuy (ca. 2300-2400m alt.).

Neotropic Cormorant (L)	Collared-Inca (B)
Bare-Faced (Whispering) Ibis (B) #	Long-tailed Sylph (B)
Andean Teal (L)	Bearded Helmetcrest (M) *
Pied-billed Grebe (B) #	Sooty-capped Hermit (S)
Great Egret (B) #	Emerald Toucanet (B) *
	Black-mandibled Toucan (A) *
Yellow-headed Caracara (S)	
Turkey Vulture (H)	Golden-Olive Woodpecker (S) *
American Kestrel (B)	Red-crowned Woodpecker (A)
Roadside Hawk (S)	Lineated Woodpecker (C)
Black Vulture (S)	Crimson-crested Woodpecker (A)
Northern Crested-Caracara (S)	
Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle (M)	Wedge-billed Woodcreeper (A)
Peregrine Falcon (L)	Montane Woodcreeper (H)
	Straight-billed Woodcreeper (A)
Andean Guan (H) *	Strong-billed Woodcreeper (H)
Pale-vented Pigeon (A)	Bar-winged Cinclodes (M)
Ruddy Pigeon (B)	Streak-backed Canastero (P)
Band-tailed Pigeon (B)	Andean Tit-Spinetail (M) *
Ruddy Ground-Dove (A)	Rufous Spinetail (B) *
White-tipped Dove (S)	Pearled Treerunner (B)
Chestnut-fronted Macaw (A) *	Plain Antvireo (A)
Bronze-winged Parrot (A)	Chestnut-crowned Antpitta (B - heard only)
Scarlet-fronted Parakeet (A) *	
Rose-crowned Parakeet (B) *	Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant (M) *
Orange-chinned Parakeet (A) *	Yellow-bellied Chat-Tyrant (F)
Green-rumped Parrotlet (A)	Yellow-bellied Elaenia (S)
	Common Tody-Flycatcher (S)
Stripped Cuckoo (A - heard only)	Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher (A) #
Smooth-billed Ani (S)	White-throated Tyrannulet (B) *
Inca Jay (S)	Venezuelan Tyrannulet (B)
	Olive-striped Flycatcher (H)
Rufous-banded Owl (B - heard only)	Cattle Tyrant (S)
	Streak-throated Bush-Tyrant (M) * #
Gorgeted Woodstar (B) *	Tropical Kingbird (S)
Speckled Hummingbird (H)	Social Flycatcher (A)
Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (S) *	Golden-crowned Flycatcher (S)
Orange-throated Sunangel (B) *	Great Kiskadee (S)
Tyrian Metaltail (F)	Smoke-colored Pewee (F)
Green Violetear (B) *	Black Phoebe (S)
Sparkling Violetear (B) *	Mountain Elaenia (B) *
Lazuline Sabrewing (B) *	Dusky-capped Flycatcher (A)
Buff-tailed Coronet (B) *	Tropical Mockingbird (S)

<sup>1</sup> First sighting ever for DJS; \* = photo available from trip; # = apparent range extension versus Hilty maps/altitude

<sup>2</sup> See Mary Lou Goodwin's "Birding in Venezuela" for location descriptions

Green-and-black Fruiteater (B)

Blue-and-white Swallow (S)

Brown-bellied Swallow (F)

Mérida Tapaculo (A)

Whiskered Wren (A)

Gray-breasted Wood-Wren (H)

House Wren (S) \*

Mérida Wren (F)

Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush (H)

Andean Solitaire (B - heard only)

Glossy-black Thrush (B) \*

Great Thrush (B) \*

Bare-eyed Thrush (A)

Brown-capped Vireo (A)

Scrub Greenlet (A)

Three-striped Warbler (A)

Black-crested Warbler (F)

Tropical Parula (S)

Slate-throated Whitestart (A)

White-fronted Whitestart (S)

Bluish Flowerpiercer (B)

Masked Flowerpiercer (F)

White-sided Flowerpiercer (B)

Glossy Flowerpiercer (F)

Mérida Flowerpiercer (M) \*

Blue-backed Conebill (F)

Gray-capped Hemispingus (F)

Superciliaried Hemispingus (F)

Oleaginous Hemispingus (B)

Common Bush-Tanager (B) \*

Blue-capped Tanager (B)

Lacrimose Mountain-Tanager (F)

Bananaquit (S)

Blue-naped Chlorophonia (A)

Saffron-crowned Tanager (H)

Blue-and-black Tanager (B)

Beryl-spangled Tanager (B) \*

Blue-necked Tanager (B)

Burnished-buff Tanager (S)

Black-headed Tanager (B)

Thick-billed Euphonia (B)

Golden-rumped Euphonia (H)

Palm Tanager (S)

Blue-gray Tanager (S)

Crimson-backed Tanager (A)

Magpie Tanager (A)

Southern Grayish Saltator (A)

Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch \*

Slaty Brush-Finch (B) \*

Moustached Brush-Finch (B) \*

Plain-colored Seedeater (M)

Plumbeous Sierra-Finch (M)

Gray Seedeater (S)

Ruddy-breasted Seedeater (A)

Black-and-white Seedeater (B)

Rufous-collared Sparrow (S)

Andean Siskin (F)

Lesser Goldfinch (S)

Paramo Pipit (P) \*

Saffron Finch (S)

Yellow-backed Oriole (S)

Carib Grackle (B) #

Shiny Cowbird (B) #

Crested Oropendola (A)

Combined total: 142 confirmed species for trip, including 17 “first time ever” species for DJS ...

## **2. Threatened Species<sup>3</sup>:**

- Rose-crowned Parakeet (*Pyrrhura rhodocephala*) - “Insufficiently Known”
- Lesser Goldfinch (*Carduelis psaltria*) - “Insufficiently Known”

## **3. Endemic Species:**

- Rose-crowned Parakeet
- Mérida Wren
- White-fronted Whitestart
- Mérida Flowerpiercer
- Gray-capped Hemispingus

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<sup>3</sup> Libro Rojo de la Fauna Venezolana, Rodríguez & Rojas-Suárez, 1999



#### **4. Notable Sightings and Range Extensions<sup>4</sup>:**

- Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher: Observed at ca. 16:00 on July 22<sup>nd</sup> in ca. 4m high, roadside vegetation at the Mirabel junction of the Jají to La Azulita road at an altitude of ca. 1700m, slightly below the range of 1800-2900m quoted in Hilty. Weather at the time was intermittent showers. Hilty quotes as previously known from three main locations, none in central or western Merida. The Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher was observed together with Three-stripped Warblers, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Whiskered Wren, Blue-necked Tanagers, Blue-naped Chlorophonia and Slate-throated Whitestart. Plain Antvireos were also heard and briefly seen nearby. No playback was attempted to attract the Rufous-crowned Tody-Flycatcher.
- Streak-throated Bush-Tyrant: On July 23<sup>rd</sup> a pair was observed taking food to a nest constructed in a ledge on a large stream-side boulder just below the Inparques office in Mifafí. The altitude was ca. 3700m whilst Hilty quotes “2100-3100m (probably higher)”.
- Rufous-tailed Hummingbird: On July 21<sup>st</sup> two juveniles were seen being fed in a nest constructed 1m above the ground in a coffee bush near to Santa Filomena at an altitude of ca. 1600m.
- Scarlet-fronted Parakeet: On July 22<sup>nd</sup> a pair were seen entering and then sitting at the entrance of a hole in an isolated tree some 15m above ground level at ca. 1100m altitude below La Azulita.
- Juvenile plumage and/or feeding by parent birds was observed for the following species: Golden-Olive Woodpecker (Santa Filomena); Green-and-black Fruiteater (La Bravera); Moustached Brush-Finch (La Bravera); Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch (La Bravera); Three-stripped Warbler (Gustavo’s Trail); Pied-billed Grebe (between Jají and La Bravera); Long-tailed Sylph (La Bravera).
- Bare-Faced (Whispering) Ibis and Pied-billed Grebes: On July 21<sup>st</sup> a flock of ca. 20 Ibis individuals was observed, together with two Pied-billed Grebes, on a small lagoon between Jají and Estancia La Bravera at ca. 2000m altitude. Hilty refers to 500m upper altitude limit, with “vagrants to 3600m” for the Ibis and a 500m altitude limit, with “once to 3600m” for the Grebe.
- Great Egret: On July 23<sup>rd</sup> one was observed on a small lagoon between Jají and Estancia La Bravera at ca. 2000m altitude. Hilty refers to a 300m upper altitude limit, with observations “occasionally to 3000m”.
- Carib Grackle: On July 21<sup>st</sup> several individuals were seen between Jají and La Bravera at altitudes of ca. 2000m. Hilty refers to this as a Llanos species with an upper range limit of 850m.
- Shiny Cowbird: On July 24<sup>th</sup> several individuals were observed in Apartaderos at an altitude of ca. 3200m. Hilty refers to an upper range limit of 1600m.
- The multiple sightings of common, low altitude species such as the Carib Grackle and Shiny Cowbird at higher than expected elevations in the Andes may point to an upward progression of their range in response to a combination of climate change, land use changes or other phenomena and may represent a threat to incumbent species due to *inter alia* increased competition for limited resources in these harsher upper elevations or nest parasitism.

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<sup>4</sup> W.r.t Hilty maps and altitude listings