



Trip Report: North-East Venezuela (Estados Sucre and Monagas)

18th-27th July, 2008

This report covers highlights from a trip Emma and I made to Caracas (to visit friends) and then a one week road trip to Sucre and Monagas in the north-east of the country for a combination of birding, beaches and tourism. We travelled with David McLachlan-Karr for the whole road trip and were joined, from Maturín, by Paula Sifontes and Mathías González for the birding around the Golfo de Paría (Finca Vuelta Larga and Caño Ajíes) and Caripe. The wet season weather was incredibly cooperative and the minimal rain we experienced did not interfere at all with our birding or beach activities. Three full days were devoted to dawn-to-dusk birding (a full day hiking the trails at Cerro Humo in the PN Peninsula de Paría; a full day near the Golfo de Paría (Finca Vuelta Larga and the Caño Ajíes road); and a full day on Cerro Negro and at Cerro el Perú near to Caripe). We complemented this with a couple of relaxed late-afternoons of birding in the dry scrub along the northern Paría coast; an afternoon of birding along a creek close to the Caño Ajíes road; a morning boat trip to explore the mangroves and tall forest of Caño Ajíes and Parque Nacional Turuépano; and a final morning of birding at Cerro el Perú. We were fortunate to encounter almost all of the endemic species and sub-species that we had been targeting, including Cerro Humo endemics Scissor-tailed Hummingbird, Paría Whitestart, White-throated Barbtail and specialities Slate-crowned Antpitta and White-tailed Sabrewing, Golfo de Paría endemic Black-spotted Piculet and speciality Crimson-hooded Manakin and Caripe endemics Gray-headed Warbler and Venezuelan Sylph. Although we had previously visited both Cerro Humo and Vuelta Larga (but not the Caripe area) I still managed to add 23 new species from a personal trip list of some 205 species. In addition the others also saw a few species, such as Stripe-headed Brush-Finch, that I missed.



Blue-capped Tanager (Cerro Humo); Scissor-tailed Hummingbird (Cerro Humo)

Non-birding highlights on the Paría Peninsula included relaxed swims at a selection of the region's gorgeous beaches, seeing baby leatherback turtles released from nests protected by local environmental NGO CICTMAR and enjoying a cacao plantation tour and chocolate tasting at the new *Museo de Cacao* (cacao museum) near Río Caribe.

Given that dawn in the east of the country is at about 05:15, our long day on Cerro Humo required a 04:30 departure from the very comfortable Hacienda Paría, resulting in our arrival at the Las Melenas trail head of the Parque Nacional Peninsula de Paría at 06:15. Future visitors should note that the 8km 4WD track up the hill to the Inparques hut at 750m altitude (unattended during our Sunday visit) has deteriorated significantly and - although just passable in David's Nissan X-Trail under the prevailing dry conditions - it is no longer advisable for anything but serious 4WD vehicles. We were blessed by a perfect blue sky and birds were already very active, although we did not find our first restricted range Cerro Humo endemics until we had walked up the hill past the water tanks and taken the left hand trail that meanders between 800m and 700m altitude through a series of *conucos* inside the national park (worryingly including a large, freshly logged clearing not far from the Inparques building). Within an hour we had been treated to great views of the Paría Whitestart and Scissor-tailed hummingbird (both endemic to this single national park) plus the only slightly more widely distributed White-tailed Sabrewing and White-throated Barbtail (which we were somewhat surprised to find foraging in the undergrowth along his lower trail).



Paría Whitestart (Cerro Humo); Golden-faced Tyrannulet (Cerro Humo)



White-tailed Sabrewing (Cerro Humo); Black-throated Mango (f) (Caño Ajés)

Handsome Fruiteaters (Paría race with a dark red sunburst on the chest), Slate-crowned Antpittas (Paría race with white belly), Tepui Parrotlets, Stripe-breasted Spinetails, Golden-headed Manakins and many more were all found during our best ever day of Cerro Humo birding, on this our fourth visit. Weather conditions remained surprisingly comfortable with low humidity and broken cloud cover, although the cloud and mist did gradually build above us on Cerro Humo. A large and ferocious-looking snake lying stubbornly on the trail in wait for Emma marked the end of our walk (this was our first snake encounter in this notorious park although it was subsequently identified as non-venomous) and we returned for lunch at the car. After lunch we spent the afternoon hiking up the main ridge trail to ca. 1000m altitude and found few birds, so with the weather holding we decided to abandon attempts to find the Venezuelan Flowerpiercer and instead returned down to the lower, left-hand trail. Again we found several good mixed flocks on this trail before finally departing for Hacienda Paría at 17:00.



Northern Paría Peninsula coast near Querepare; Leatherback hatchling (Querepare)

Having had such a successful day on Cerro Humo we celebrated with a day of swimming at beaches such as Playa Medina and Playa Puy Puy, topped off by some casual birding along the roadsides. Our visit to the north of the peninsula concluded with a visit to CICTMAR's turtle conservation project at Querepare where we saw baby turtles and swam in perfect surf on a pristine 1 km long beach (for info see www.tortuadopcion.com)



American Flamingos (near Carúpano)



Street scenes around historical Río Caribe

We continued to the Vuelta Larga *posada*, which is only an hour's drive south from Hacienda Paría, and on arrival Paula and Mathías guided us for an evening walk along a quiet creek, wetting our appetite for the following morning at Finca Vuelta Larga 15 minutes further south. Arriving at the *finca* at dawn, our first bird was the endemic Black-dotted Piculet (although it proved difficult to photograph) and walking the trails around the lagoon quickly added some other attractive species. Highlights were the Cream-colored Woodpeckers, Silvered Antbirds (that we finally tracked down and which I eventually managed to coax into a clear view) and the Crimson-hooded Manakin lek (where I spent a fair while with the tripod trying to latch on to the males as they leaped on and off their favourite perches).



Black-dotted Piculet (Vuelta Larga); White-winged Swallow (Vuelta Larga)



Peninsula de Paría backdrop at Finca Vuelta Larga



Black-capped Donacobius (Vuelta Larga); Silvered Antbird (Vuelta Larga)



Crimson-hooded Manakins (Vuelta Larga)

An afternoon trip to the Balneario Sabacual gave us only a very friendly White-necked Puffbird, so we spent the remaining daylight on various side roads off the main Caño Ajíes road where we finally tracked down our first Jet Antbird. Dawn on our final morning in the area saw us at the Caño Ajíes wharf, awaiting our guide. Despite the ongoing long-weekend festivities and our uncertainty as to whether the boat really would materialise, Sr. Del Valle arrived in good time and we enjoyed a morning trip through the mangrove-clad Caño Ajíes as it widened and eventually arrived at the main Parque Nacional Turuépano in the Golfo de Paría on the northern edge of the Orinoco delta. David M-K set a record for response to playback when a pair of Black-chinned Antbirds almost landed on him in the boat within seconds of his playing their calls in front of some likely looking vegetation, whilst a *conuco* at the mouth of the *caño* gave us good views of a male Bicolored Conebill and a variety of confusing hummingbirds. On our return upstream against the outflowing current, a Helmeted Pygmy-Tyrant responded well to playback and Sr. Del Valle found two *Corallus ruschenbergerii* snakes coiled in the mangroves. As the snakes hung over the boat we were relieved to hear that they are not as deadly as their mountain cousins!



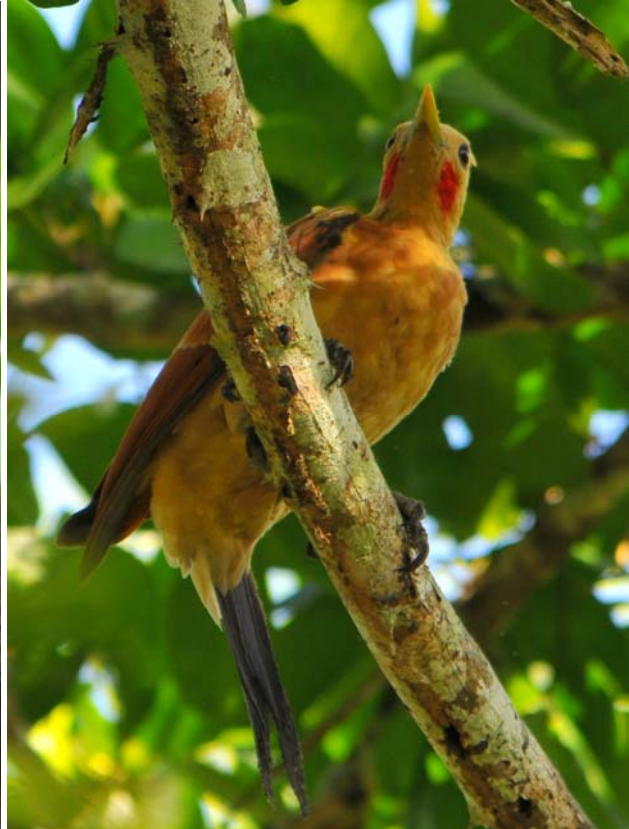
Mathías, Paula, David M-K, Emma and David S 'One Step from Paradise' at Caño Ajés



Bicolored Conebill (Caño Ajés); Scarlet Ibis (Caño Ajés)



Unspecified Hermit nest (Vuelta Larga); Green Hermit (Cerro El Perú)



Amazonian White-tailed Trogons (Vuelta Larga); Cream-colored Woodpecker (Vuelta Larga)



Black-chinned Antbird (f) (Caño Ajíes); Green Kingfisher (f) (Vuelta Larga)

Our trip concluded with new territory for Emma and I: Caripe and the Turimiquire mountain range, with a first stop at the world famous *Cueva del Guacharo* where we watched and listened to the dusk departure of thousands of Oilbirds. This was a unique experience, with the acoustic clicking building to a crescendo and then the large, bat-like Oilbirds streaming out of the cave and into the night sky in search of fruiting palms.



Scorpion (Cerro El Peru); Butterfly (Vuelta Larga)

Next morning the five of us started a dawn trek up Cerro Negro, accompanied by the son of an Inparques guard, in search of the enigmatic Gray-headed Warbler. Starting from ca. 1200m altitude we made steady progress up reasonable, if steep, trails before reaching a water tank at ca. 1350m where the trails disappeared into seemingly impenetrable undergrowth. After much bush-bashing we eventually found something approximating to a trail and continued up an ever steeper and more slippery path through coffee plantations and mature trees in search of primary forest at higher elevations. Eventually, by 08:00, we had reached a tree fall at ca. 1450m and were rewarded by close views of a single Gray-headed Warbler as it foraged amongst the upturned roots. The 'trail' became even worse as we progressed upwards and after reaching ca. 1550m at 11:00 we agreed that it was impractical to continue up to the target altitudes for the Venezuelan Flowerpiercer, so instead - and without seeing the flowerpiercer or the Venezuelan Sylph - we turned back towards Sabana de Piedra for a late, hard-earned lunch.

Fortunately, Paula and Mathías knew of an alternative site for the Venezuelan Sylph on Cerro El Perú de Caripe and introduced us to a local farmer, Miguel Lopez (+58-416-090.5817), who spent the late afternoon guiding us around some of the local trails. Although the forest at 1350m to 1400m altitude looked very promising - and we saw several mixed flocks - the Venezuelan Sylph eluded us, so we resolved to return at

dawn the next morning. On this final morning, Miguel guided us along a new trail that had apparently never been birded before. We had an absolutely fantastic morning: At 07:00 at about 1350m altitude we saw our first of two perched male Venezuelan Sylphs and over the next hour this section of trail was a riot of activity including two male Handsome Fruiteaters, two White-tipped Quetzals feeding from wild avocado trees, Amazonian White-tailed Trogons, White-throated Barbtails and mixed flock species. Black-faced Anthrushes and Little Tinamous called in the background and Lined Quail-Doves called from hiding spots only metres away behind the huge *heliconia* plants. Truly a fantastic morning's birding, culminating in a 10:00 trailside encounter with a pair of Gray-headed Warblers feeding a fledgling. We observed and photographed their acrobatic antics for some 10 minutes as we attempted to confirm the identification to our satisfaction. To our delight, the photographic evidence and a subsequent visit to the Phelps Ornithological Collection by Emma and David M-K confirmed our ID of these endangered birds.



Bromeliads (Cerro El Perú); Emma and David M-K at the Gray-headed Warbler site (Cerro El Perú)



Gray-headed Warbler (Cerro El Perú) - probably first ever photographs in the field!



Detail of Corallus ruschenbergerii snake (Caño Ajés); Chironius carinatus snake (Cerro Humo)



Golfo de Cariaco and Araya Peninsula; Fresh veggies in temperate Caripe

A final note about logistics: Hacienda Paría is high quality and all inclusive. Given the rapidly increasing cost of eating out in Venezuela this means that it actually represents reasonable value. Vuelta Larga's simpler accommodation is more moderately priced but additional charges for meals and access to the *finca* result in a not much lower cost on days when visiting the *finca*.



Looking towards Querepare beach; Caño Ajés and PN Turuépano

1. Trip Bird List^{1,2}

Confirmed personal sightings only for DJS – excludes birds heard only unless otherwise indicated [those confirmed on site by comparison with playback]; in order of appearance on the plates of Hilty's 'Birds of Venezuela'.

Location where species seen: In order of travel: C=Caracas city and environs; R=Coastal road trip from Caracas to Sucre including PN Mochima; CH=Cerro Humo in PN Peninsula de Paría; PM=Playa Medina, Hacienda Paría and coastal environs; VL=Vuelta Larga Finca and Caño Ajfes road; CA=Caño Ajfes boat trip and PN Turuépano; CN= Caripe environs incl. Cerro Negro; EP=Cerro El Perú, Caripe

Little Tinamou (VL; CN; EP) (heard only)
Red-legged Tinamou (PM) (heard only)
Crested Bobwhite (CN)

Magnificent Frigatebird (PM; CA)
Brown Pelican (R; PM) *
Neotropic Cormorant (R)

Limpkin (VL)
Green Ibis (VL) *
White-cheeked Pintail (R)
American Flamingo (R) *
Black-crowned Night-Heron (VL)
Great Egret (VL)
Cattle Egret (VL)
Scarlet Ibis (VL; CA)
Striated Heron (VL)

Yellow-headed Caracara (PM; VL)
Plumbeous Kite (PM; VL)
Turkey Vulture (PM; CA)
Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture (CA)
Slender-billed Kite (VL)
Bat Falcon (CA)
Roadside Hawk (PM; VL)
Osprey (PM)
Black Vulture (C; PM; VL; CN)
Common Black-Hawk (CA)
Great Back-Hawk (C)
Black Hawk-Eagle (VL)

Hoatzin (VL) *
Rufous-vented Chachalaca (C; VL)
Horned Screamer (VL)

Gray-necked Wood-Rail (VL)
Caribbean Coot (R)
Wattled Jacana (VL)

Spotted Sandpiper (CA) *

Black Skimmer (R)

Pale-vented Pigeon (VL)
Ruddy Ground-Dove (C)
Lined Wood-Quail (EP) (heard only)

Chestnut-fronted Macaw (C)
Red-shouldered Macaw (CA)
Blue-headed Parrot (CN)
Orange-winged Parrot (VL)
Yellow-crowned Parrot (CA)
Brown-throated Parakeet (VL; CN)
Scarlet-fronted Parakeet (CN)
Venezuelan Parakeet (CN; EP)
Tepui Parrotlet (CH)
Golden-winged Parakeet (CH)

Striped Cuckoo (VL) *
Little Cuckoo (VL)
Squirrel Cuckoo (CH; EP)
Smooth-billed Ani (CH; VL; CN)
Greater Ani (VL)
Inca Jay (CN; EP)

Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (EP) (heard only)

Oilbird (CN)

Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift (VL)
Neotropical Palm-Swift (VL)

Rufous-shafted Woodstar (CN)
White-chested Emerald (CA)
Copper-rumped Hummingbird (PM; CN)
Fork-tailed Woodnymph (CH)
Glittering-throated Emerald (VL; CA) *
Green Violetear (CN)
Black-throated Mango (CH; CA; CN) *
White-tailed Sabrewing (CH; CN) *
Scissor-tailed Hummingbird (CH) *
Venezuelan Sylph (EP) *
Green Hermit (CH; EP) *
Sooty-capped Hermit (CH; CN; EP)
Rufous-breasted Hermit (CA; EP)

White-tipped Quetzal (EP)

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

² See Mary Lou Goodwin's "Birding in Venezuela" for location descriptions

Amazonian White-tailed Trogon (VL; EP) *
 Collared Trogon (CH; EP)

White-necked Puffbird (VL) *
 Russet-throated Puffbird (PM; CA)
 Rufous-tailed Jacamar (PM; CA) *

Amazon Kingfisher (VL)
 Green Kingfisher (VL) *
Green-and-rufous Kingfisher (CA)
 Ringed Kingfisher (VL)

Groove-billed Toucanet (CH; CN)
 White-throated Toucan (CH; CA)
 Black-necked Araçari (CA)

Cream-colored Woodpecker (VL) *
 Spot-breasted Woodpecker (VL)
 Golden-olive Woodpecker (CH; EP)
 Smoky-brown Woodpecker (EP)
 Red-crowned Woodpecker (PM; VL; EP)
 Lineated Woodpecker (VL)
 Crimson-crested Woodpecker (VL)
Black-dotted Piculet (VL) *

Olivaceous Woodcreeper (EP)
 Plain-brown Woodcreeper (CH; VL; EP)
 Streak-headed Woodcreeper (VL)
 Cocoa Woodcreeper (EP)
 Straight-billed Woodcreeper (VL)
 Red-billed Scythebill (CH)

Stripe-breasted Spinetail (CH; EP)
 Pale-breasted Spinetail (C)
 Plain Thornbird
 Yellow-chinned Spinetail (VL) *
 Plain Xenops (EP)

Great Antshrike (VL) (heard only)
 Barred Antshrike (C; PM)
 Black-crested Antshrike (PM; CA)
 Plain Antvireo (CH) *
 Long-tailed Antbird (CH)
Jet Antbird (VL) *
 Black-chinned Antbird (CA) *
Silvered Antbird (VL; CA) *

Slate-crowned Antpitta (CH) *
 Black-faced Anthrush (CH, VL, EP) (heard only)

White-throated Barbtail (CH; EP)

Lance-tailed Manakin (PM)
 Golden-headed Manakin (CH)
Crimson-hooded Manakin (VL) *

Cinnamon Flycatcher (CH; CN) *
 Ochre-ored Flatbill (CA)
 Yellow-bellied Elaenia (C; VL)
 Common Tody-Flycatcher (C; VL)

Helmeted Pygmy-Tyrant (CA) *
 Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet (PM)
 Golden-faced Tyrannulet (CH) *
 Sooty-headed Tyrannulet (VL)
 Slaty-capped Flycatcher (CH; CN; EP)
 Cattle Tyrant (C)
 Tropical Kingbird (C; VL; CN)
 Social Flycatcher (PM; VL)
 Rusty-Margined Flycatcher (VL)
 Streaked Flycatcher (CH; VL)
 Boat-billed Flycatcher (PM; VL; EP)
 Great Kiskadee (C; VL)
 Piratic Flycatcher (CH)
 Variegated Flycatcher (CH)
Tropical Pewee (CH)

Pied Water-Tyrant (VL) *
 Fork-tailed Flycatcher (R; VL)
Swainson's Flycatcher (CA) *
 Short-crested Flycatcher (VL)
 Dusky-capped Flycatcher (CA; EP)
 Tropical Mockingbird (C; VL; CN)
 Black-capped Donacobius (VL) *

Black-crowned Tityra (VL)
 Chestnut-crowned Becard (CH; EP)

Handsome Fruiteater (CH; EP) *

Southern Rough-winged Swallow (CH)
 White-winged Swallow (VL) *
 Gray-breasted Martin (VL)

Bicolored Wren (VL; CN)
 Stripe-backed Wren (VL)
 Rufous-breasted Wren (CH)
Rufous-and-white Wren (PM)
 House Wren
 Tropical Gnatcatcher (R; PM)

Yellow-legged Thrush (EP)
 Glossy-black Thrush (EP)
 White-necked Thrush (CH)
 Bare-eyed Thrush (C)

Rufous-browed Peppershrike (CH; CA; EP)
 Brown-capped Vireo (CH)
 Red-eyed Vireo (PM)
 Scrub Greenlet (PM; CA)

Golden-crowned Warbler (CH)
Gray-headed Warbler (CN; EP) *
 Three-striped Warbler (CH; PM)
 Slate-throated Whitestart (CN; EP)
 Paría Whitestart (CH) *

Capped Conebill (C)
 White-winged Tanager (CH; EP)
 Blue-capped Tanager (CH; CN) *
 Fulvous-headed Tanager (CN)

Bicolored Conebill (CA) *
 Bananaquit (C; CH; PM; VL; CA; CN; EP)
 Guira Tanager (CH)
 Blue-naped Chlorophonia (CH; EP)
 Swallow Tanager (CH)
 Black-headed Tanager (C)
 Bay-headed Tanager (CH; EP)
 Turquoise Tanager (VL; EP)
 Speckled Tanager (CH; EP)
 Thick-billed Euphonia (CH)
 Trinidad Euphonia (CA)
 Palm Tanager (PM; CH; CN)
 Blue-gray Tanager (C; PM; VL; EP)
 Glaucous Tanager (CH; PM)
 White-lined Tanager (CH)
 Silver-beaked Tanager (C; CH; PM; VL; CN; EP)

Grayish Saltator (CH; PM; VL; EP)
 Streaked Saltator (PM)
 Ochre-breasted Brush-Finch (EP)
 Blue-black Grosbeak (CH)
 Blue-black Grassquit (PM; VL)
 Gray Seedeater (VL)
 Yellow-bellied Seedeater (C)
 Rufous-collared Sparrow (EP)
 Orange-crowned Oriole (CN)
 Yellow Oriole (C; R)
 Venezuelan Troupial (R)
 Velvet-fronted Grackle (VL)
 Carib Grackle (C; CA; CN)
 Shiny Cowbird (VL)
 Crested Oropendola (CH; VL; EP)
 Yellow-rumped Cacique (VL; CA; CN)
 Yellow-headed Blackbird (VL)

Combined total: 205 confirmed species, including 23 “first time ever” species for DJS.



Corallus ruschenbergerii snake in the Caño Ajíes mangroves