

Trip Report: Río Caura and La Escalera, Estado Bolívar

March-April 2006 (David Southall)

In March 2006, Emma and I made a 10-day trip to Bolívar state in which we retraced familiar steps in the Río Caura area (western Bolívar) and made our first visit to the Escalera Road and northern parts of the Gran Sabana (eastern Bolívar). The first part of the trip was work for Emma – visiting the embassy’s environmental cooperation project there and bringing a group of British, Venezuelan and Canadian sport fisherman to meet the local community and evaluate opportunities for the locals to develop sustainable, sport-fishing based tourism. The second part of the trip was vacation, combining bird watching, hiking and mountain biking. The trip was also a chance for me to try out my new D200 camera and lenses in the field for the first time.

When we left Caracas on Friday 24th at 05:40, we were part of a 3-vehicle convoy of Caracas-based sport fishermen and women, including some present and former colleagues of Emma’s from the embassy. Our goal was to make the 13:00 *chalana* from Cabruta to Caicara – and we just made it despite traffic hold ups on the outskirts of Caracas, an extended roadside breakfast stop and the poor condition of the road across the Llanos through Guarico state. Fortunately – and not without some near-misses - all three of the 4WDs made it past the craters (not potholes) that regularly and alarmingly appeared as we barrelled across the hot, dry landscape. Being the lead car we felt rather like a sacrificial lamb on the deserted road, as our swerves and braking warned the others behind of what we were avoiding. A co-pilot/navigator with her eyes glued to the road was an invaluable resource!

We arrived at the *chalana* (ferry) terminal at 13:05, convinced that we had missed it – an assertion confirmed by some locals as we drove towards the ramp. Fortunately we did not take their word for it, but drove up onto the ramp and saw the *chalana* below - with two-and-a-half car spaces left. We squeezed the three 4WDs onboard, heaved a sigh of relief and set sail immediately for Caicara in Bolívar state! Two hours were saved, by the skin of our teeth.

The road from Caicara to Maripa was in far better condition than the roads in Guarico. Barely having seen another pothole, we were in Maripa by 16:15. Emma had again arranged for us to stay at Campamento Caurama, which is now almost exclusively a buffalo farm rather than a camp. There we met up with the Canadian part of our group who had driven from Anaco - making for 9 fishermen/women, plus Emma and myself - and Mireiza, from the embassy’s cooperation project.



Scenes at Campamento Caurama

For the next two days Emma and the fisherman were active from well before dawn until late at night, making various fishing trips up and down river from Maripa, holding a workshop with the local fisherman about the river, its fish and options for sport-fishing and resource conservation, and also making a broadcast on the regional radio station about their visit and their impressions/suggestions for potential sport-fishing development. Meanwhile I was joined by one of the members of the local environmental brigade as I visited the Las Trincheras road and various *Morichales* (wet zones with concentrations of *Moriche* palms) in search of birds and photo opportunities.

My impression is that the forested areas along the Las Trincheras road are being removed at an alarming rate – there are certainly more communities living along the road now than on my last visit 18 months ago, and the previously existing villages seem to have also expanded. Locals say that many of these new arrivals are Colombians who have moved across the border and, being from savanna tribes, they are progressively removing the forest along the access road. Whatever the truth of their origin, it is clear that the population pressure is having a major, negative impact along the forest lined parts of the first ca. 40 km of this road. I suspect that at the southern end, closer to Las Trincheras itself, the forest is less disturbed, but we did not make it that far since we preferred to invest the good birding hours before 10:00 in the earlier road sections. By 11:00 the heat was intense and there really was nothing flying at all, even in the forest fragments. To bird the likely more forested southern end would mean a ca. 2 hour drive from Campamento Caurama and is probably best done instead by staying in the Cacao lodge at Las Trincheras. Something I would plan to do next time.



Buffalo (with Cattle Egret) at Campamento Caurama; Locals and a butterfly on the Las Trincheras Road

What did we see on the Las Trincheras road? As on previous trips, the Toucans, Araçaries and Black Nunbirds were reliable and gave good views along the forested sections. We also saw a stunning, green “lora” snake that gave us a fantastic display as we watched it from a safe distance. The savanna sections were also quite productive for good views of various birds of prey and ground birds as we drove by around dawn.



Feeding time: Eastern Meadowlark; Amazonian White-tailed Trogon; Black Nunbird

Despite the heat, birding around Campamento Caurama itself each lunch-time proved enjoyable, with lots of birds to watch near to the various water holes and large flocks of red-shouldered Macaws, White-eyed Parakeets and various tanagers and woodpeckers devouring the ripening mangoes on the trees around the camp. I was also treated to a great display by a Tropical Mockingbird as it attempted, over a period of more than 10 minutes, to dislodge a Savanna Hawk from its perch. I was able to get a nice sequence of photos as

the mockingbird eyeballed the hawk from a nearby perch, then dive-bombed the hawk and on many occasions physically hit its back. Eventually the mockingbird's persistence paid off and the hawk moved off to a new perch a couple of hundred metres away.



Tropical Mockingbird mobbing a Savanna Hawk

Each evening I visited the nearby *El Pozito Morichal* and had wonderful close up views of a pair of Amazonian White-tailed Trogons working their way through the lush waterside palms and trees, then catching and eating worms.

By all accounts the catch-and-release fishing trips also went well, with both the fishermen and the community seeming to have enjoyed and benefited from their two days together. Project manager Felix had now arrived back in Maripa from an environmental congress in Santa Elena and the evening workshop he hosted the first night with the community was a full house. The radio broadcast with Mireiza on the second evening was also a great success – including a landmark (translated) interview with Canadian master fisherman “Radio Ray”. With *Pavon* (Peacock Bass) hard to come by - an apparent result of arteserial and commercial fishing pressures - the visitors' consensus was that the upstream fishing for *Payara* (*Hydrolycus armatus*) – a spectacular sport fish with two huge teeth on its lower jaw (see photos) - offers the best opportunity for the community in its efforts to develop as a sport-fishing destination. Guest fisherwoman Emma did land one fish – a *Caribe* (Piranha)!



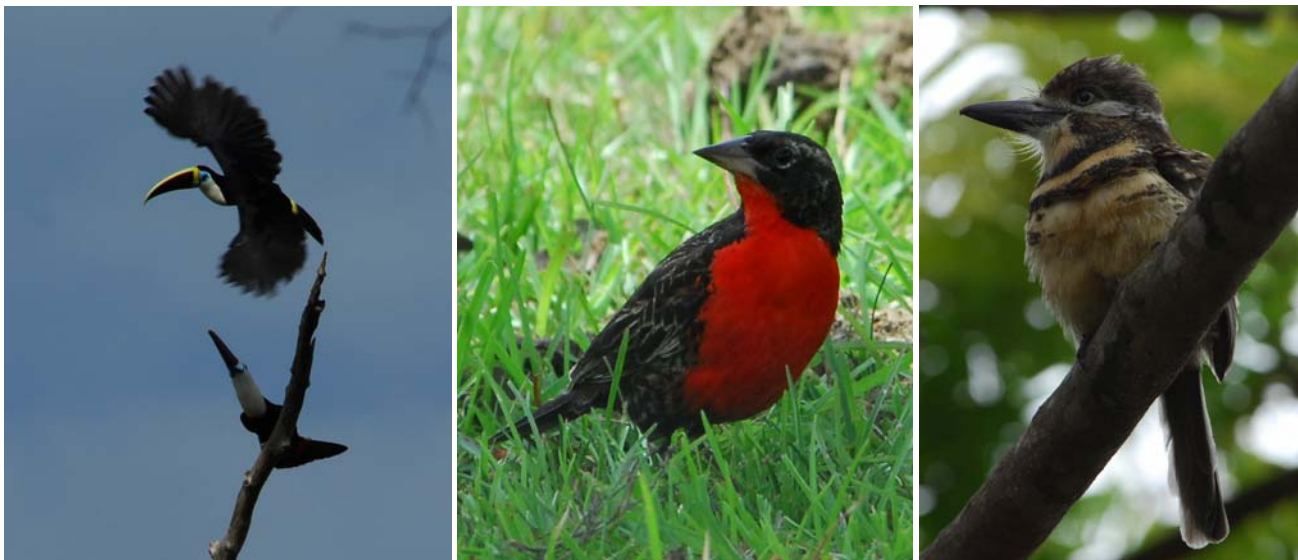
Emma and her *Caribe* (Piranha); Brennan with a *Payara*; *Payara* teeth!

After two days fishing on the main Río Caura, Monday saw a pre-dawn detour for an hour of *Pavon* fishing on a large riverside lagoon near Maripa. Despite the close attention of inquisitive river dolphins some fish were caught, including a very nice *Pavon* that Brennan duly released. With the fisherman having departed for Caracas and Anaco, Emma then returned to work in Maripa, visiting the local school, delivering some donations on behalf of the embassy and holding meetings with various local officials. Late afternoon we headed off along the much improved road to Ciudad Bolivar and, eventually, Puerto Ordaz.



Turkey Vulture; Black-crested Antshrike (f)

Tuesday we visited La Llovizna Park on the banks of the Río Caroni – just across the river from our hotel. The park is wonderfully designed, with walkways and bridges around, over and alongside various streams and waterfalls – all done without actually changing the water flow. La Llovizna is a highly recommended stop-over. In addition to the spectacular scenery we also saw our first poison dart frog as it hopped across a path from one stream to another.



White-throated Toucans; Red-breasted Blackbird; Russet-throated Puffbird

From Puerto Ordaz we enjoyed a leisurely afternoon drive to our home for the rest of the week – the Barquilla de Fresa near Las Claritas at the foot of the Escalera road up on to the Gran Sabana. On arrival, our host Henry Cleve opened the gates and let us into the little paradise that is his home and *posada*. The garden was full of flowering trees and shrubs, the lawns were immaculately manicured, bird feeders hanging from the trees were alive with hummingbirds and the surrounding 33 hectares of forest on his property were cool and shady. Quite a contrast to the adjacent towns of Las Claritas (at km 85)¹ and km 88 (that’s the town’s name – at, yes, km 88) which host the transient populations of miners – legal and illegal – that work this gold and

¹ Note: In this part of Bolivar, km 0 is set at El Dorado. From there southwards to the Brazilian border, everywhere is referred to by its km distance from that last major town.

diamond rich area, severely impacting the environment as they do so. Our room in a *cabaña* in the garden was perfect – and included an enormous monkey spider living on the outside wall! Henry and Magaly made us feel right at home and we ended up spending 4 excellent nights at the Barquilla.



“Lora” snake (Las Trincheras Road) and Poison Dart frog (Parque Llovizna)

On our arrival afternoon we were just early enough to head off – armed with Henry’s direction - to the Capuchinbird lek, where we met his two other guests and their guide staring up into the tall trees. Although we heard Capuchinbirds calling all around us from near the treetops (a mixture of a chain saw buzzing or a cow mooing?), the thick vegetation prevented us from locating one. The others had already seen a Capuchinbird when it initially flew in, but we had to leave “empty handed”.

Wednesday we spent a full day touring up and down the Escalera Road, from its base just south of the last town (km 88 – @ ca. 200 mASL) up on to the start of the Gran Sabana plateau (at km 135 – but no town - @ ca. 1400 mASL). The road was excellent for birding and with much less traffic than we had feared (most of the traffic consisted of occasional semi-trailers or buses heading down to the Brazilian border). To guide our stop-offs as we drove slowly up the escarpment we used a combination of information from Mary Lou’s book and Henry’s suggestions based on what he and his guests had been seeing recently.



Yellow-bellied Tanager, Black-headed Tanager and Masked Trogon

Just as advertised, km 111.5 gave us Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock, those large and freakishly coloured, orange fireballs, White Bellbird – with its worm-like nose piece and *eeee-aaaw* electronic synthesiser call echoing loudly over the trees – and more Masked Trogons than we have ever seen. At one point Emma saw seven or eight Masked Trogons at the same time, all perched in trees next to her by the road! An open section on the

outside of a bend at km 117.5 had fruiting Carey trees – with three different types of Honeycreeper feeding from them – and red flowering bushes that were magnets for Yellow-bellied and Black-headed tanagers and hummingbirds such as Fork-tailed Woodnymph, Brown Violetear, Amethyst Woodstar and Velvet-browed Brilliant.



Fork-tailed Woodnymph; Crimson Topaz; Longbilled Starthroat

We also tried all the spots listed for the various manakin leks, but to no avail. By early afternoon we were at km 134 and running out of hope of finding manakins. Emma decided to investigate a new sound and entered a faint forest trail next to the car. Moments after a noisy pair of Red-throated Caracaras had flown in, Emma excitedly called me along the trail – she had found a male Scarlet-horned Manakin performing his dance on a sapling branch. Before long we realised that several males were performing in the trees and saplings around us and we spent the next hour enjoying their routines as they clicked and buzzed, danced along the branches, flew back and forth to their display perches and generally entertained us and their female admirers. My new camera proved its worth, with the focus options and VR lens performing outstandingly in the gloomy forest interior. From this point on we became adept at parking next to Scarlet-horned Manakin leks, walking up and down the road searching for them and eventually realising that they were right next to the car door!



Scarlet-horned Manakin; Golden-headed Manakin; Guianan Cock-of-the-rock

In the late-afternoon we returned to admire the end of the Barquilla’s hummingbird display and the Red-necked Woodpecker nesting at the edge of the garden, before enjoying another excellent dinner at the Barquilla (the pre-departure morning coffee and juice, packed breakfasts and packed lunches each day were also wonderful – especially the *arepas* with *perico* that we devoured).

Thursday was scheduled as a day of mountain biking across the Gran Sabana. We again birded our way up the Escalera, reaching the Gran Sabana at km 135 by about 10:00 (encountering White Bellbird and endemic Tepui Brush-Finch on the way).



Tepui Brush-Finch; White Bellbird; Red-necked Woodpecker

From there we drove the few km to the army checkpoint at Luepa and received permission to park our car within the soldiers view. Under their close inspection we then prepared our bikes, changed into our biking gear and set off on the 45 km ride to the waterfall known in the Pemon language as Chinak Meru (Salto Aponwao). After a few km on the main highway we turned off past the Luepa military airstrip and then onto a series of dry dirt roads and sandy trails. The weather was hot and sunny and we hardly saw a car or even a person as we cycled across the gently undulating savanna, with a backdrop of the northern Tepuis. In places the trails were severely eroded (reminiscent for Emma of the race to El Pauji last year), sometimes they were deep with sand and sometimes hard packed and easy riding. The final 10 km were across what must be quite wet ground in the rainy season as the 4WDs using the track have in several places made a mess of the savanna as they avoid the muddy trails of others. At one point this single track trail had expanded to a 50m wide swath through the savanna (“onion skin effect”) - in a world heritage listed National Park.



Riding across the Gran Sabana, past tepuis, towards Chinak Meru (Salto Aponwao)

After 2 hours 40 minutes we arrived at our destination, only to find that the waterfall was on the other side of the river from the village and that no one was willing to take our bikes across in their boat. Having come this far we weren't going to miss out on the waterfall, so agreed that rather than walk from the far bank, we would save time by going further along the river by boat to a spot adjacent to the falls. Having paid generously for the boat trip ("was that the price per person or for the boat?") we left our bikes in the care of some villagers and sped off to the falls. Despite having a relatively low, dry season water flow (only one side of the river over the falls was flowing), Chinak Meru was indeed spectacular. It was surprising to see such a big waterfall falling out of what was essentially a flat landscape – rather than Salto Angel where the water falls from a mountain to the plains this is a waterfall that falls from the plains into an unexpected gorge.

With the sun beating down and our water running low, the return trip took slightly longer, but we got back to the car in good shape (Emma's self diagnosed "muscle meltdown" proved temporary, with a cold Gatorade from the esky producing a miraculous recovery in the air conditioned car!). In fact we felt fresh enough to park and enjoy sunset at km 135, watching flocks of Golden-tufted Mountain-Grackles gathering in the tree tops and listening to manakins in the surrounding forest.



Crimson Topaz (male and female) in Barquilla de Fresa garden

Friday morning we tried some low land birding. Rather than head south to the Escalera, we headed north for 3 km from the Barquilla and then turned west down a mine access road. The first part of the road is the local rubbish dump, with burning piles of rubbish all along the sides of the road and a thousand Black Vultures, but after ca. 1 km it becomes very nice indeed, cutting through tall forest at ca. 200 mASL, with lots of Yagrumo trees and the rising sun behind. We saw lots of Toucans, Parrots, Araçaries and other large birds. In fact we enjoyed it so much we returned on our final morning, taking Henry with us to show him the Screaming Piha lek and the Yagrumo trees that the Pihas were feeding in. Highlights, all well seen in the good morning light, included: Purple-throated Fruitcrows; Black-faced Hawk; Paradise Jacamar; Blue-headed, Caica, Black-headed and Mealy Parrots; Golden-winged Parakeets; Cayenne Jays; White-necked Puffbird; Amazonian Violaceous Trogons; Pompadour Cotinga; Purple-breasted Cotinga (Henry only – it flew just as he spotted it and before we got a chance to see it); and the Screaming Piha lek. For the first time Emma and I were able to

actually see these elusive birds, rather than just hear them, and I got reasonable photos by working my way into the forest (forgot my flash though, so missed the chance for better ones). Emma had excellent views as the Pihas occasionally flew from the forest, plucked fruit from a Yagrumo and returned to their forest perch.



Often heard - but less easily seen - Screaming Piha (screaming); Black-faced Hawk; Black-necked Araçaries

The afternoon was invested in searching for more manakins. Complete with Henry's suggested location sketches in hand we headed up to the km 131.5 area and spent several hours searching in vain for Orange-bellied Manakins. We did, however, encounter several Golden-headed Manakins performing their routines and had good, if distant, views of Bearded Bellbirds as they gradually worked their way up to the tree tops before heading back down into the forest. In the evening we returned to the Capuchinbird lek. This time it was much quieter (fewer chainsaws/cows) and, although we saw one bird fly towards the lek, we again failed to get a good look at one on its perch.

Saturday morning on the lowland road marked the end of our stay at the Barquilla, so after dropping Henry back home mid-morning - and dashing back to km 111.5 for a last fix of Cock-of-the-Rocks, Trogons, Orange-bellied Euphonia (the yellow, rather than orange - Tepui version) and prolonged close-up views of a family of Marbled Wood-Quail - we headed towards home. We split the trip, over-nighting in El Tigre (which proved to be a great choice as we were then already well over half way home by Saturday night). Below are a few sights spotted during different parts of the road trip – politics is never far away (if only as much energy and money were spent on maintaining the roads or on conservation, rather than advertising who the President and State Governor are). We still don't know what the mystery road sign below refers to. They only appear in Bolivar state and we thought that the first one we saw was some kind of half finished sign. By the end of the trip we had seen the sign more than a dozen times – but never worked out what it meant.



Roadside politics and a confusing road sign (any suggestions?)...

Bird List: Río Caura and La Escalera, Estado Bolívar^{2,3}

(Confirmed personal sightings only – excludes birds heard only)

(In order of appearance in Hilty plates)

Crested Bobwhite © *	Scaled Dove © *
Marbled Wood-Quail *	Ruddy Ground-Dove ©
Neotropic Cormorant © *	Red-and-green Macaw ©
Buff-necked Ibis ©	Red-shouldered Macaw © *
Bare-faced (Whispering) Ibis ©	Blue-headed Parrot *
Brazilian Teal © *	Orange-winged Parrot
Cocoi Heron © *	Yellow-crowned Parrot ©
Great Egret © *	Mealy Parrot
Cattle Egret © *	Brown-throated Parakeet © *
Snowy Egret © *	White-eyed Parakeet © *
Roseate Spoonbill © *	Golden-winged Parakeet *
Woodstork © *	Caica Parrot *
Striated Heron ©	Black-headed Parrot *
Yellow-headed Caracara © *	Squirrel Cuckoo ©
Plumbeous Kite © *	Smooth-billed Ani © *
Savanna Hawk © *	Violaceous Jay ©
Bat Falcon *	Cayenne Jay
American Kestrel ©	Amethyst Woodstar *
Pearl Kite ©	Velvet-browed Brilliant *
King Vulture ©	Brown Violetear *
Black Vulture ©	Black-throated Mango *
Turkey Vulture © *	Long-billed Starthroat *
Roadside Hawk ©	Gray-breasted Sabrewing
Osprey ©	Crimson Topaz *
Black Caracara ©	White-necked Jacobin *
Red-throated Caracara *	Black-eared Fairy *
Northern Crested-Caracara © *	Eastern Long-tailed Hermit
White-tailed Hawk ©	Rufous-breasted Hermit *
Black-faced Hawk *	Amazonian White-tailed Trogon © *
Gray-headed Kite *	Amazonian Violaceous Trogon
Swallow-tailed Kite © *	Masked Trogon *
Little Chachalaca	Swallow-winged Puffbird ©
Pied Plover ©	Russet-throated Puffbird © *
Southern Lapwing © *	White-necked Puffbird *
Wattled Jacana ©	Paradise Jacamar
Double-striped Thick-knee ©	Amazon Kingfisher ©
Solitary Sandpiper © *	Ringed Kingfisher ©
Spotted Sandpiper © *	Black Nunbird © *
Black-necked Stilt © *	White-throated Toucan © *
Large-billed Tern © *	
Ruddy Pigeon ©	
Pale-vented Pigeon © *	

² **First sighting ever for DJS**; * photo available from trip

³ © = Seen in Río Caura/Río Orinoco area; unmarked = ADDITIONS only from Escalera area

Channel-billed Toucan © *
Green Araçari © *
Black-necked Araçari © *

Red-crowned Woodpecker © *
Yellow-tufted Woodpecker
Lineated Woodpecker © *
Red-necked Woodpecker *

Wedge-billed Woodcreeper *
Plain-brown Woodcreeper

Black-crested Antshrike © *
Northern White-fringed Antwren ©

Golden-headed Manakin *
Scarlet-horned Manakin *

Helmeted Pygmy-Tyrant *
Tropical Kingbird © *
Rusty-Margined Flycatcher ©
Streaked Flycatcher ©
Great Kiskadee © *
White-headed Marsh Tyrant © *
Short-crested (or Brown-crested) Flycatcher © *
Fork-tailed Flycatcher ©
Tropical Mockingbird ©

Pompadour Cotinga
Screaming Piha (well seen!) *
Bearded Bellbird *
Guianan Cock-of-the-rock *
White Bellbird *
Capuchinbird
Purple-throated Fruitcrow *

Blue-and-white Swallow
White-winged Swallow ©

Bicolored Wren © *
House Wren ©

Rufous-brown Solitaire *

Rufous-browed Peppershrike © *
Blackpoll Warbler © *

Red-legged Honeycreeper *
Purple Honeycreeper *
Green Honeycreeper
Bananaquit © *
Burnished-buff Tanager ©
Black-headed Tanager *
Bay-headed Tanager
Turquoise Tanager ©
Spotted Tanager
Yellow-bellied Tanager *
Paradise Tanager *
Orange-bellied Euphonia *
Palm Tanager © *
Blue-gray Tanager ©
Silver-beaked Tanager © *
White-lined Tanager ©
Flame-crested Tanager © *
White-shouldered Tanager © *
Olive-backed Tanager *
Magpie Tanager ©

Buff-throated Saltator
Tepui Brush-Finch *

Ruddy-breasted Seedeater © *
Red-capped Cardinal © *
Saffron Finch © *

Yellow Oriole ©
Golden-tufted Mountain-Grackle *
Carib Grackle
Green Oropendola © *
Crested Oropendola ©
Red-rumped Cacique © *
Red-breasted Blackbird © *
Eastern Meadowlark © *
Yellow-hooded Blackbird ©

Total 151 confirmed species for trip, of which 27 new for me...



Map of Venezuela highlighting Río Caura, Puerto Ordaz and Escalera Road