

Trip Report: Maripa and Rio Caura, Estado Bolivar: November 2004.

Emma and I made an all too short five-day trip from Caracas to the lower Rio Caura from 13th through 17th of November 2004. The purpose of the trip was for Emma to make a monitoring and support visit to an environmental education project in Maripa that the British Embassy in Caracas is supporting, and we welcomed the chance to see some more of the area that we first visited in October 2003.

Arranging accommodation in advance proved to be a challenge. It turned out that our preferred base, Campamento Caurama (CC), had been closed to guests for some time. Jean Posner had long since left the camp, so there was no guiding either. We were not keen to be all the way up at Las Trincheras in the Cacao Lodge camp, attractive as it is, since much of Emma's work would be in or near to Maripa. Persistence in pursuing CC eventually paid off, greatly helped by Emma's project managers – Felix Daza and Mireiza Figuera – who proved invaluable in arranging contacts with the CC Fundo manager – Nixon – and also accessed contact details for the owners in Caracas. Eventually for a modest fee (Bs. 190k for 4 nights) we were able to arrange for access to CC to be granted to us. A big relief.

Shortly before 7am on Saturday morning, with the CRV loaded with our *hamacas*, *mosquiteros*, a mega-esky containing food for 4 days, hiking and camera gear, we drove out of Caracas. We had decided to avoid the San Juan de Las Moros route that we find really drags, so headed instead to Estado Guarico via San Casimero. This proved a great success and we made great time and after less than 1.5 hours we were past San Casimero and on a new (to us) road through rolling hills and surrounded by rich vegetation. Our route led us through El Sombrero (joining up with the San Juan de las Moros alternative), Chaguaramos and Las Mercedes, and before long runs due south for almost 200km across the hot and dry Llanos alongside the Aguaro-Guariquito NP to Cabruta on the banks of the Orinoco. En route we kept an eye out for birds – whenever the state of the road permitted a glance away from the rapidly advancing potholes! The road had definitely deteriorated since late 2003. While the section down to Las Mercedes is either very good or acceptable, after that it deteriorates rapidly and we made much slower progress than the previous year. Some of the holes were substantial and we erred on the side of caution... although once you get past the maize silos in the Chaguaramos and Las Mercedes areas there is little traffic on the road, so it is a rather fun drive. Gas is not a problem – each of these towns has a big *bomba* and there is also a PDV in the middle of the long run south, at Santa Rosita/Manapire some 60km before reaching Cabruta. You need to fill there or in Caicara, because that's the last gas before Maripa and the Rio Caura.

Highlights of the drive south included seeing the usual cattle drovers - Llaneros on horseback moving hundreds of cattle south through Guarico along the same road you are trying to drive on (we passed some 4 groups on the way down). It's great to watch them work and they make for good photos. We made the day for one Llanero with a cold beer from the esky... he was last seen in our rear view mirror waving the precious beer at his mates further back amongst the cattle...



On the birding front we identified over 30 species during the drive (combining outwards and inward trips). Highlights were two very compliant American Kestrels near Las Mercedes (in the same tree on each leg of the trip, very close up, including returning with their prey to eat in front of us) and a large family of Bi-coloured Wrens at the Manapire PDV north of Cabruta. See list below for full details.

At Cabruta we found that our early start did not completely pay off. We were there shortly after 2pm, but the next *chalana* (ferry) would not leave until about 3 pm. It turns out the ferry leaves every 2 hours starting at

First time on trip: First time ever: * photo

5am. Hence to get the 1pm ferry you either need to leave Caracas very early, push hard with no breaks and take your chances with the potholes – or a combination of all three. Amazingly the timetable seems to be followed fairly punctually.

After the 45 min ferry ride (Bs. 12k for *gringos* from CCS in a 4WD) we arrived in Caicara, Estado Bolivar and set off on the lovely road due west to Maripa. This road is one of our favourites - a dream for a late afternoon drive with the sun setting behind and spectacular scenery (morichales full of palms, mountains, savannah ...) although it does have a few pot holes to be avoided! We also enjoyed returning on this road with the sun behind us at dawn four days later. The highlight of this leg was being in the middle of large whistling flocks of Fork-tailed Flycatchers as they leapt again and again in synchronisation out of the trees, flew for 10 seconds then came back to perch next to us.

We eventually made it to Maripa half an hour after dark, 12 hours after leaving Caracas and were shown by Felix and Mireiza to CC. Turns out the place had been opened especially for us and they even had a room with beds made up. Shower, toilet, ceiling fan and all night electricity! Far more than we expected. Nixon told us that they are planning to re-open in 2005. Based on our experience it would be a great place to stop for a couple of days.

Next morning we explored the grounds (R-T Puffbird) and nearby lakes at dawn, then went the ca. 10 minutes to Maripa to start work. This involved taking part in a day-long expedition for local school children to visit nearby morichale 'Posito' (more good birding, 5 minutes from the PDV at Maripa) and then up the Las Trincheras road to walk in the jungle and visit the Pemon village of Pawipa (captained by Izmael) some 4km south of the Cano Urbana. This trip was part of a programme that exposes local children to their local environment, teaching them about its value and how to care for it. The newly formed Maripa Environmental Youth Brigade ('Briamca'), consisting of recently trained teenagers, took a lead role in many of the activities with the school children. This left time for birding in the surroundings. In the Morichale we saw toucans, parakeets and tanagers. Near Pawipa we saw Spangled Cotinga, Black Nunbird and two types of Aracari and two types of Toucan. Returning to Maripa we saw Pearl Kite and White-tailed Hawk. Emma continued with meetings in Maripa whilst back at CC I had close-up views of a rather co-operative Vermilion Flycatcher.



The second morning we left before dawn to return to the Las Trincheras road and Caura Forest Reserve south of the Cano Urbano. This involved a 5 minute drive to the gate of CC, a five minute drive on to the PDV at Maripa and then a 15 minute drive to the turn-off for Las Trincheras. We reached the Cano Urbana about 45 minutes after leaving CC. We hardly saw a car all morning. In the 10km stretch south of the Cano Urbana we saw more aracaris, nunbirds, toucans, parakeets and birds of prey, plus experienced lots of anticipation and frustration peering into the undergrowth trying to spy the antwrens, spinetails or whatever was making the elusive sounds in all directions. Despite glimpses we could never agree and be definitive on any of the birds in there so they do not appear on our lists ! We certainly saw far more than we could positively identify, and heard far more than that ! All together we visually confirmed some 88 species in the Maripa/Rio Caura area. More experienced birders or those with a knowledgeable guide would probably have doubled that number based on the inconclusive sightings we could not determine.

Before 11am we headed back to Maripa to join Emma's project managers for a tour on the river, heading up to Yokore, an island some 2.5 hours up river. Our *motorista*, Jose, was great. He is a fish expert and really knows the water and what lives in/on it. He showed us a *nutria/perro de agua* (river otter) fishing and took us

into a side branch where a mother and baby fresh water dolphin entertained us. Further up the Caura proper we came across two separate groups of dolphins who really put on a show for us – much more so than we had seen last year with just tips of dolphin fins appearing out of the water. This time they were really active, especially when we started our motor to leave and they began leaping from the water as they followed us. Jose’s bird knowledge was more limited but he understood that we were after birds and did a good job of pointing out those he saw, and he did a great job of slowing down at photo opportunities. He was also happy to glide down river with the motor off to give us a chance to enjoy the surroundings from time to time.

Yokore was paradise. We were the only guests so had the choice of three *churuatas* (huts). We borrowed their luxury hamacas (ours are more light-weight *chinchoros* than hamacas), slipped over our *mosquiteros* and were set – 10m from the flowing river! We had great fun watching the Crestless Curassow and Grey-winged Trumpeters that live on the island. They were very curious and practically came for our evening swim with us! Needless to say the stars at night from Yokore far exceeded those we’re used to in Caracas.



Dawn was spectacular - misty, birds flying across the river and just the sound of the birds and the flowing river. We saw several new birds of prey then took a trip up the river to visit a *conuco* (burnt clearing to plant crops). Boy is it hot in those clearings! And what a shame to see 2 ha. of cleared jungle full of *platanos* and *yuca*, similar to the small number of clearings that we’d seen on our way up the river. We did see some birds of prey, toucans and violaceous jays, but the biggest impression on us was that if clearing for these *conucos* continues then the forest is doomed... a real tragedy. We heard lots of stories to the effect that, even though this is a forest reserve, the re-settled *Guajiba* indians (from Colombia) are burning large tracts of the Reserve whilst simultaneously over-hunting in the remainder, that the authorities are running illegal logging operations and that the other resident local groups are burning huge areas and creating ever more *conucos*. We can only hope that these will remain minor blemishes on an awesome river and jungle setting – according to WCS the best preserved tropical river basin in the world. We truly came to appreciate how important local environmental education efforts are and we take our hats off to Felix and Mireiza for their hard work in this regard.



From the depressing *conuco* we headed down river and entered a jungle trail a few km away. This led to a huge black rock (smooth, domed and maybe 100m in diameter) in the middle of the jungle that gave a natural 360 degree birding front. So much more fun than in the *conuco* and a natural clearing to boot! We would definitely go back to this spot and also follow the trail further to the next and supposedly larger rock (which we heard referred to as 'Pico El Tigre'). Our short visit to the rock revealed Violaceous Euphonias and Gilded Barbets and our guide saw a Blue-crowned Motmot. The trip back to Maripa included more dolphin highlights, lots of kingfishers and the regular Ospreys "toe dipping" as they flew along the river.

Late afternoon we made a school visit to Aripao, followed by a dusk visit to the nearby Morichale Ven where some of the project's educational activities will be based. Beautiful, but not much bird activity. Seems as though the morichales are very much dawn, rather than dusk venues. Wandering around the small town of Aripao while Emma, Felix and Mireiza worked, I came across a garden full of brown-throated parakeets. Delighted to have found these at such close range I started snapping photos, only to realise on closer inspection that this flock all had their wings severely clipped to keep them in their garden surrounds. Que locura! Why this in such a rich birding environment?

At dawn the next day we retraced our steps to Caicara, Cabruta and up to Caracas in another 12 hour stint ... Note that the ferries from Caicara also leave every 2 hours, starting at 5am. We left at 6am, made good time and at about 90km into the 150km drive from Maripa stopped for 30 minutes breakfast and birding by a morichale with a new roadside culvert. That avoided arriving too early in Caicara for our 9am ferry. In good weather in daylight the drive from Maripa to Caicara is easily possible in under 2 hours. Note that underway, the *chalana* from Caicara to Cabruta takes about double the journey time from Cabruta to Caicara due to heading slightly upstream on the return journey (90 min vs. 45 min.)!

As a side note, we feel compelled to express our disappointment that so many nature-oriented *hatos* and *posadas* have caged birds, in typically inadequate cages and poor conditions. We have seen this at Campamento Caurama, Hato La Fe and Posada Granja Momentos to name but a few. A bird feeding table would be a good solution to this – since the surroundings are full of birds anyway this would bring in the wealth of birdlife that surrounds these locations. Seems as though the operators prefer to offer their clients an "in your face" and guaranteed, i.e. caged, solution. Not to our taste, I'm afraid. Perhaps we could collaborate with Audubon to prepare a generic letter for such operators?

	km	elapsed time per leg (excl. breaks)	km	elapsed time per leg (excl. breaks)
CARACAS				
Home	0	0	645	45
Charallave turnoff	44	20	603	70
Split Camatagua/SJdLM	106	60	540	75
El Sombrero	201	80	451	60
Silos de Chaguaramos	282	60	369	15
Second silos	300	15	350	20
GN Las Mercedes	323	20	324	45
El Mejo PN Superintendencia	375	50	272	50
Manapire Rest/PDV Santa Rita	443	65	204	40
Alcabala Cabruta	499	50	147	0
Ferry crossing		45		90
Caicara	503	0	145	60
GN Santa Rosalita	576	70	69	50
Maripa PDV	638	50	4.5	0
MARIPA				
Total DRIVING	638	540	645	530

Bird List:

North of the Orinoco River:

Driving Caracas to/from Cabruta: Estados Miranda, Aragua and Guarico

Great Egret
Cattle Egret
Striated Heron*

Yellow-headed Caracara*
Turkey Vulture*
Savanna Hawk
American Kestrel*
Roadside Hawk
Black Vulture
Northern Crested-Caracara*
Gray-headed Kite

Scaled Dove
Ruddy Ground-Dove
Pigeons/Doves (unspec.)

Macaws (unspec.)
Parrots (unspec.)
Brown-throated Parakeet

Greater Ani

Hummingbirds (unspec.)

Ringed Kingfisher

Red-crowned Woodpecker*

Vermilion Flycatcher
Gray Kingbird
Tropical Kingbird
Rusty-margined Flycatcher*
Great Kiskadee
Fork-tailed Flycatcher
Tropical Mockingbird

Bi-coloured Wren*

Hooded Tanager
Blue-gray Tanager

Saffron Finch

Yellow Oriole
Carib Grackle
Shiny Cowbird
Oriole Blackbird
Yellow-hooded Blackbird

Total 33 species confirmed North of Orinoco.

South of the Orinoco River:

Orinoco River, Driving Caicara to/from Maripa and towards Las Trincheras, plus Lower Rio Caura trip: Estado Bolivar

Crested Bobwhite

Anhinga
Neotropic Cormorant
Cocoi Heron
Great Egret
Capped Heron*
Striated Heron*

Yellow Headed Caracara*
Savanna Hawk
American Kestrel*
Pearl Kite*
Gray Hawk*
Roadside Hawk*
Osprey
Black Vulture
Northern Crested Caracara
Black Caracara*
White-tailed Hawk

Crestless Curassow*
Grey-winged Trumpeter*

Pied Plover
Southern Lapwing
Sunbittern
Wattled Jacana
Double-striped Thick-knee

Large-billed Tern
Black Skimmer*

Scaled Pigeon*
Scaled Dove
Ruddy Ground-Dove
Pigeons/Doves (unspec.)

Scarlet Macaw
Macaws (unspec.)
Yellow-crowned Parrot
Parrots (unspec.)
Brown-throated Parakeet*
Green-rumped Parrotlet
Black-headed Parrot

First time on trip: First time ever: * photo

Squirrel Cuckoo
Black-bellied Cuckoo

Greater Ani*
Smooth-billed Ani

Violaceous Jay*

Nacunda Nighthawk
Band-tailed Nighthawk
Pauraque

White-chested Emerald
Glittering-throated Emerald*
Hummingbirds (unspec.)
Reddish Hermit

Swallow-wing Puffbird*
Russet-throated Puffbird*
Pied Puffbird*

Amazon Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher*
Ringed Kingfisher*

Blue-crowned Motmot (guide only)
Black Nunbird*
Gilded Barbett*

Red-crowned Woodpecker*
Little Woodpecker

White-throated Toucan
Channel-billed Toucan
Green Aracari
Black-necked Aracari*

Woodcreeper (Unspec. Large)
Woodcreeper (Unspec. Small)

Yellow-bellied Elaenia*
Cattle Tyrant
Tropical Kingbird
Rusty-Margined Flycatcher
Great Kiskadee
Fork-tailed Flycatcher*
Short-crested Flycatcher*
Tropical Mockingbird
Vermilion Flycatcher

White-headed Marsh Tyrant
Pied Water-Tyrant

Spangled Cotinga*

Black-collared Swallow
White-winged Swallow*
Swallows/swifts (unspec.)

Yellow Warbler

Green Honeycreeper
Blue Dacnis
Bananaquit
Burnished-buff Tanager
Violaceous Euphonia
Palm Tanager
Blue-gray Tanager
Silver-beaked Tanager

Eastern Meadowlark

Grassquit (unspec.)
Saffron Finch

Yellow Oriole
Crested Oropendula

Total 88 species confirmed South of Orinoco.

Combined total: 33 + 65 = 88 confirmed species for trip + multiple “not sure” antwrens, flycatchers, hummingbirds etc ...