

Trip Report: Parque Nacional Yacambú, Estado Lara

April-May 2006 (David Southall)

In April 2006, I joined Emma and Jorge Padrón, head of Asociación Civil Chunikai, on a visit to Sanare in Lara state. Emma and Jorge's trip coincided with the May 1st long-weekend and was motivated by a visit by British Ambassador Donald Lamond and his wife Lynda to the region. My job was to drive Emma and Jorge to Sanare, a small town at the northern end of the Andes mountains, and then enjoy some free time whilst Emma worked during the Ambassador's visit - this I successfully achieved by spending two and a bit days in Yacambú national park.



Map of Venezuela highlighting Sanare; Quibor street scene

On Saturday 29th, a leisurely five hour drive brought us to the Lara state capital of Barquisimeto, about an hour's drive below Sanare in the Quibor valley. From Barquisimeto we made a detour to the renowned craft centres of Tintorero and Quibor. Tintorero is a small village consisting almost entirely of weaving workshops and associated sales outlets; it is *the* place in Venezuela to buy a *hamaca* (hammock). We bought two - prices are good, given the local competition! Quibor is a bustling town that is famous for its wood craftsmanship. We re-visited our two favourite workshops, one run by Edison Daza (a rustic workshop behind an unmarked blue door!), the other by Carlos Silva (a larger workshop on the road towards Guadalupe). I particularly like Edison's designs as he sticks to understated, high quality marquetry - no gaudy or excessively noisy inlaid panels to be found here! - and his picture frames are superb. We bought a few, admired one of his craftsmen at work with the multi-coloured woods, then added a large mirror frame from Carlos' workshop. Meanwhile Jorge took the opportunity to establish some new contacts interested in promoting the sustainable supply of raw materials for this artesanal industry. Having run out of car space - and almost out of money - we headed up from the xerophytic zone into the Andean foothills.



Various (undyed) woods and wood shavings in Quibor workshop

Sanare, situated at about 1300m ASL, lies between the desert-like conditions below and the cloud forest only a few kms further up the valley in PN Yacambú. Our *posada* - Tierra Blanca - is new since our last visit and adds an excellent alternative to El Encanto, the well established and high quality (but difficult to book, given its popularity) *posada* that is the favourite Venezuelan *posada* of several friends. Either establishment would make a great choice on future visits.

The small lake and surrounding fields of the Tierra Blanca property gave an enjoyable hour's pre-sunset birding followed by a dinner at the El Encanto restaurant (confusingly located several km from the El Encanto *posada*) that included excellent lamb, a pleasant - and in Venezuela uncommon - change from *pollo* (chicken) or *lomito* (beef). During the evening the embassy 4WD and driver arrived, ready to provide Emma and the others with transport for the coming days.



Dawn in PN Yacambú; Roadside shrine in the mist shrouded park

Emma spent Sunday working - visiting several community projects with Jorge, collecting Donald and Lynda from Barquisimeto and then participating in a dinner with local business and political representatives. I was therefore free (or dismissed?) and headed up to the National Park some 20 km and 20 minutes drive along a country lane.

Both Mary Lou's book and some extra notes that Chris Sharpe had sent me before the trip were useful in suggesting quality spots within the park and by 06:00 I was positioned at some 1900m ASL - the highest point on the road that transects the park - listening to the awakening wildlife. Immediately I heard the purring sound of a Great Antpitta penetrating the cloud forest pre-dawn gloom, but in the absence of playback I was unable to entice it out or see it. I did, however, find trogons and various other birdlife, some of it identifiable, but much of it small, skulking and hence not identifiable (to me, at least!).



Moss covered trees abound in the upper reaches of PN Yacambú ...

This road is excellent for birding, having only light traffic (more than in Guaramacal National Park, less than on the Escalera Road in the Gran Sabana). It offers access to a wide range of habitat, including very humid cloud forest at upper elevations which seem to be perpetually covered in *neblina* (mist) or rain clouds. Other birding access includes a couple of side roads and walking trails, a *laguna* and a semi-open recreation area.



Blue-necked Tanager; Blue-naped Chlorophonia

The sheer amount of moss on the trees and the way it was illuminated by the morning light made a strong impression as I worked my way gradually down the road, adding various tanagers and warblers to the “identified” list. I also encountered several members of a University of Montana team that is spending four months in Yacambú researching various aspects of bird life history as part of a global comparative study (see www.umt.edu/MCWRU)¹. They mentioned a few of the exciting discoveries they had made so far this year - including monitoring Red-ruffed Fruitcrow and Blood-eared Parakeet nests. Although the rest of the team members were about to take a three day break from work and visit Choroní, Argentineans Alina and Petu (two team leaders) kindly offered to show me some of the sites that they were monitoring. Over the next two days I spent some of my time accompanying them as they visited various sites, checking on nest status or carrying out their own research. It was a real privilege to be able to join them as they know the park very, very well and they were able to show me specific birds and suggest other sites for me to explore on my own.



Red-headed Barbet (female and male)

¹ I had previously read up on their studies and it was interesting to meet the multi-nationality team who have the challenging task of finding nests inside their individual, mountainous “plots” in the park and then monitoring details about nest, egg, hatchling and parental behaviour, as well as performing additional experiments as required within the study framework. So far their work has already confirmed some 50 more species to add to the official Audubon PN Yacambú bird list!



Rusty Flowerpiercer; Golden-crowned Flycatcher

With Alina's help I saw Rusty-breasted Antpittas, Three-striped warblers and Collared Trogons on their nests, whilst Petu showed me Red-headed Barbets - popping in and out of their nest hole; two Violet-chested Hummingbirds - about to fledge from their mossy cup nest over a stream; and an Andean Solitaire. In return I was able to offer Petu a "taxi service" up and down the road to visit various sites on her checklist one afternoon, plus a willing pair of hands with the remote video used for checking inside elevated nest holes. I learnt a lot about Yacambú and, with their help, captured a few good photos as well.



Long-tailed Sylph (f); Speckled Hummingbird

The Montana team is based at El Blanquito, a recreation area for park visitors adjacent to the Inparques office in the middle of the park. Despite the numerous and rather noisy Sunday visitors, this semi-open area - at about 1500m ASL - proved to be great for birding. Within its grounds I added, *inter alia*, spectacular blue-

naped chlorophonia, Red-headed Barbet, Blue-necked Tanager, Collared Trogon, Fawn-breasted Tanager and Long-tailed Sylph. The Collared Trogon nest at El Blanquito is a marvel of hope over logic - not only is it the most minimal of nest cavities (see photo of prospective male parent filling the nest), but it is also right next to a recreation area sometimes frequented by football playing children and music playing adults. So far, the Trogons seem to be prepared to put up with the ensuing disturbance!



Collared Trogon on its' minimal nest cavity at El Blanquito; Masked Trogon near the blue shrine

The short Cascada Trail made for an enjoyable walk and I added many hummingbirds (up to 4 species in one set of small purple flowered shrubs), Yellow-billed Toucanet and Slaty Antwren. When Emma and Jorge arrived at El Blanquito, as part of their tour of the area, they met up with Alina and shared reflections on experiences in the park. Jorge, a former Inparques Director, was able to make many suggestions w.r.t. useful contacts for her team.

Later in the afternoon I spent more time along the road above El Blanquito (male Booted Racket-tail, but no photo unfortunately) and then visited the *laguna* below El Blanquito. Both the side-road leading to the *laguna* and a walking trail at the far end of the *laguna* proved to be full of bird life. By dusk I had retraced my steps to the top of the park and ended on a high note with Emerald Toucanet in roadside trees. Since Emma was busy at a formal dinner, I enjoyed a tasty *crema de apia* at Tierra Blanca with *posada* owner Oscar and retired early in anticipation of another early start the next day.

On Monday, despite being at the same spot at the same pre-dawn time, there were no Great Antpittas to be heard in the cloud forest. The *neblina* was heavy, so I headed further down the road in the hope of clearer conditions. Although conditions did improve, this proved only temporary; by mid-morning an intermittent drizzle had set in. This hardly seemed to dampen the spirits of the birds, however, and I had good walks along the Cascada Trail and around El Blanquito. A blue, green, gold and reddish coloured Golden-tailed Sapphire

was spectacular even in the poor light. Unfortunately I found no sign of the Golden-winged Manakins that are reputedly common near to the Montana team's lodge, but I did add several new species, including a very closeby, eye level male Red-headed Barbet that took me by surprise to the extent that I failed to get a decent photo - despite its' best efforts to help me out! By early-afternoon a steady and occasionally heavy rain had set in, so rather than risk getting the camera gear too wet I spent some time helping Alina and Petu with their field activities. Again this proved to be enjoyable and educational - with the highlight definitely being when the male Red-headed Barbet confirmed his presence in a nest hole by popping his head out in order to check us out! Fortunately the rain and *neblina* abated temporarily, so I was able to get a nice shot of both the male and, later, the female. I ended the day with an unsuccessful search for manakins on the *laguna* access road and for fruiteaters (heard but not seen) near to the blue shrine².



Brown-capped Vireo; Rusty-breasted Antpitta

Alina and Petu joined us for drinks back at Tierra Blanca - and we had an enjoyable evening with Emma, Jorge and Oscar (Emma and Jorge had finished their official visit, with Donald and Lynda safely delivered back to Barquisimeto for their flight to Caracas).



Cattle Egret; Yellow-billed Toucanet

² In general I found the area near to the blue shrine to be less productive than I had expected. It gets rave reviews in other trips reports and guides, but although it makes for a great parking spot I had more success in other places.

On the final morning we made a more leisurely start. Emma accompanied me up to the park for one last visit in which we had excellent views of some hummingbirds, trogons and solitaires on the upper road sections and some tanagers and a fleeting manakin glimpse near to the *laguna*. As we drove back through the park one final time we added close-up views of Masked Trogons and a relatively uncommon White-rumped Hawk in roadside trees.

Following a late breakfast back at the posada, Emma, Jorge and I made our farewells and set off for San Felipe in the adjacent state of Yaracuy. There we visited the Biological Centre Hacienda La Guáquira that is coordinated by Carlos Rivero Blanco, spending the night in the Centre's bunk beds before returning to Caracas early on Wednesday morning. The Centre is set 5 km into a large farm and offers facilities for students and other visitors to carry out scientific investigations, conservation and training across a mix of arable land, partially cleared ranch and intact forest covering lowland and hills between 200m and 1500m ASL. Being set at the lowest part of the farm, the Centre was jarringly hot after the pleasant climate of Sanare and we had the fans working overtime keeping us cool! In the evening Emma and Carlos discussed projects whilst Jorge and I looked through photographs and watched the amazing insects being drawn in by the night lights and then gathering on the adjacent white collection screen.



Violet-chested Hummingbird (female and nestlings)

This trip has cemented Yacambú's position as one of my absolute favourite parks in Venezuela. It offers reasonable access from Caracas (<6 hours driving); excellent road and walking access to a variety of habitat across a good altitude range; species that combine much of the best from the Coastal Cordillera and Andes at this geographical crossroads; an apparent absence of a perceptible "dead period" during the middle of the day (the birding appeared good from dawn to dusk) and great posada accommodation on the park's doorstep. Having the chance to visit the park at the same time as the Montana research team was a bonus, as their friendly insights really helped me get more out of my limited time there. However, as can be seen from the below bird sightings list I have hardly scratched the surface of the bird life in the park (I saw a total of 88 species in 2 days) and have decent photographs of only a tiny proportion. Therefore I hope to return soon - preferably before the rainy season really kicks in and definitely whilst the Montana team are still present.

Bird List: PN Yacambú and Sanare, Estado Lara³

(Confirmed personal sightings only – excludes birds heard only except where indicated; In order of appearance in Hilty plates)

Least Grebe

Great Egret
Cattle Egret *

Yellow-headed Caracara
Turkey Vulture
American Kestrel
Roadside Hawk
Black Vulture

White-rumped Hawk

Rufous-vented Chachalaca

Common Gallinule *
Caribbean Coot
Wattled Jacana

Ruddy Pigeon
Scaled Dove
Ruddy Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove

Blood-eared Parakeet

Smooth-billed Ani *
Inca Jay

Speckled Hummingbird *
Golden-tailed Sapphire *
Violet-chested Hummingbird *
Booted Racket-tail
Long-tailed Sylph *

Masked Trogon *
Collared Trogon *

Red-headed Barbet *
Emerald Toucanet *
Yellow-billed Toucanet *

Montane Woodcreeper
Crested Spinetail *
Montane Foliage-gleaner *

Slaty Antwren *

Chestnut-crowned Antpitta
Great Antpitta (heard only)
Rusty-breasted Antpitta *

Common Tody-Flycatcher
Golden-faced Tyrannulet *
Cattle Tyrant *
Tropical Kingbird
Rusty-margined Flycatcher
Streaked Flycatcher

Golden-crowned Flycatcher *
Great Kiskadee
Smoke-colored Pewee *
Tropical Mockingbird

Blue-and-white Swallow

Bicoloured Wren
Housewren

Andean Solitaire *
Yellow-legged Thrush *
Black-hooded Thrush

Brown-capped Vireo *
Tennessee Warbler *
Three-striped Warbler *
Tropical Parula
Slate-throated Whitestart

Rusty Flowerpiercer *
Common Bush-Tanager
Fawn-breasted Tanager
Bananaquit
Blue-naped Chlorophonia *
Golden Tanager
Saffron-crowned Tanager *
Black-capped Tanager *
Beryl-spangled Tanager
Blue-necked Tanager *
Burnished-buff Tanager
Black-headed Tanager *
Bay-headed Tanager
Speckled Tanager
Thick-billed Euphonia
Palm Tanager
Blue-gray Tanager
Silver-beaked Tanager
White-lined Tanager

Streaked Saltator
Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch
Ochre-breasted Brush-Finch

Black-faced Grassquit
Yellow-bellied Seedeater *

Rufous-collared Sparrow
Lesser Goldfinch
Saffron Finch *

Yellow Oriole
Shiny Cowbird
Russet-backed Oropendola
Crested Oropendola

Total 89 confirmed species for trip, of which 12 new for me ...

³ First sighting ever for DJS; * photo available from trip