

Trip Report: Río Orinoco (Amazonas State), Venezuela

17th - 22nd December 2006 (David Southall)



Wire-tailed Manakins

This report captures highlights from a trip, at the invitation of David Ascanio and the Phelps Ornithological Collection, to Amazonas State. Objectives of the trip were to: 1) “Rediscover” the Orinoco Softtail (known only from one very specific site at Capuana along the Río Orinoco) - gathering data on its abundance, habitat, morphology, calls etc; 2) Carry out a rapid assessment of the various species encountered in the surrounding Río Orinoco and island habitats of the Reserva Forestal Sipapo; and 3) Take samples as part of a programme monitoring avian viruses across the country. Logistics and scientific permits had been arranged accordingly.



Caño Capuana and Río Orinoco

My three days in Caracas before and after the Amazonas trip presented a perfect opportunity to visit old haunts, enjoy tropical pre-Christmas meals with friends and former colleagues and pick up a few last-minute Venezuelan Christmas presents for Emma. I was hosted by David Mclachlan-Karr and together with Miguel Reabold we spent a day visiting Parque Nacional Guatopo, east of Caracas. An excellent morning’s birding included White-necked Puffbirds, Collared Trogons, Venezuelan Parakeets, Golden-headed Manakins and wonderful views of an endangered Northern Spider Monkey (*Mono Araña del Norte*).



White-necked Puffbird; Collared Trogon (both in Guatopo National Park)



Northern Spider Monkey (Guatopo National Park)

On the 17th I met the five other members of the team - Miguel Lentino and Alejandro Nagi from Phelps; Prof. Jorge Perez from UCV; and David Ascanio and José-Gustavo León from Ascanio Birding - and together we flew out to Puerto Ayacucho. Once established in the urban Hotel Apure, José-Gustavo and I escaped for some late-afternoon birding in the dry chaparral landscape near Campamento Orinoquia (“La Garza”), 20 minutes drive south of the city. Highlights included Flame-crested Tanagers and three White-browed Purpletufts that had us confused for quite some time.

Next morning we drove for one hour to the small and less than salubrious port of Samariapo, where we sweltered in the heat amidst the boats, dust and pre-Christmas bustle as our gear was loaded onto the *bongo* (large dug-out canoe with shady roof) that would take us up the Río Orinoco some five hours to Capuana. On

the way upstream we caught our only glimpses of Bare-necked Fruitcrows, but generally things were quiet and the riverside forests much more heavily populated by local communities and degraded than e.g. Río Caura. A different kind of highlight for me was stopping off at the small riverside village of Puerto Nariño in Colombia, although as we headed further upstream we stayed closer to the Venezuelan side of the river avoiding any unnecessary risks!

On arrival in Capuana we met the community's *Capitán*, set up camp, took a brief hike in the nearby forest, birded the savannah fringes and forest near to the river and strategised plans for the next day's activities. My highlights included several new flycatchers/tyrannulets, Ivory-billed Araçari and two species of Euphonia. Hot and tired I flopped into my *hamaca*, although sleep was not aided by the bats flying around in the roof!



Black-chinned Antbird; White-flanked Antwren (imm.)

Next morning whilst the others headed into Caño Capuana in search of the signs of the Orinoco Softtail, David, Jorge and I headed a couple of kilometres down river to a landing spot where we were able to scramble up the river bank and into the adjacent varzea forest. We then made our way through the forest, periodically projecting recordings of the softtail's calls and within 30 minutes we heard a response from tangled vegetation in a flooded area of forest. There followed a tense period whilst David called them in and we peered through the thick vegetation for glimpses. Eventually we had obtained good views and some photographs (first ever?) of three individuals and we were ecstatic! Subsequently I enjoyed watching the joint foraging habits of the softtails and a group of Black-chinned Antbirds.



Orinoco Softtail (presumed immature and adult)

Later in the day the rest of the team joined us to see the softtails and search for other territories in similar habitat. By the end of the day we had identified at least 14 individual softtails - not bad for a virtually

unknown species - both in the varzea forest along the main Río Orinoco and along Caño Capuana. In addition we had enjoyed sightings of Wire-tailed Manakins, Cobalt-winged Parakeets, Pygmy Antwren, White-flanked Antwren, Dusky Antbird, Yellow-bellied Dacnis and Rufous-bellied Euphonia.



First in-situ photos of Orinoco Softtail (presumed immature and adult)

We celebrated our success by swimming and doing laundry in the river, before a glorious sunset bade farewell to the day.



Sunset over Río Orinoco

Our second full day was invested in further searches for softtail populations and taking digital recordings of the calls of various species encountered. In Caño Guacharaca we found more softtails, plus Channel-billed Toucans, Rusty-backed Spinetail, Amazonian Inezia and Drab Water-Tyrant. In Caño Grulla we again found more softtails, plus Black-tailed Trogons (very large and dramatic).



Miguel Lentino and David Ascanio admire the Orinoco Softtail; Recording calls on a Río Orinoco island



Working along the Río Orinoco; Typical Orinoco Softtail habitat along Caño Guacharaca



Black-crested Antshrike (f); Great Antshrike (imm. f)

In the afternoon, with the Softtail mission accomplished, we found a gorgeous Tiny Hawk and some antshrikes with some apparently different characteristics from the northern forms of these species, plus a series of Rusty-backed Spinetail nests. Finally we spent the late-afternoon on a chain of sand islands in the middle of the Orinoco. There we found both Riverside Tyrant and River Tyrannulet, plus four different species of Nightjar and Nighthawk feeding over the river and island as the sun set. A night-time paddle with spotlights along Caño Capuana revealed a silent Great Potoo and a calling pair of Spectacled Owls.



Tiny Hawk; Wire-tailed Manakin



Wire-tailed Manakin (f); Amazonian Inezia



Riverside Tyrant; Río Orinoco islands

After our third and final night in Capuana we spent our final morning en route to Samariapo doing an inventory of species on a series of Orinoco islands (personal highlights included Orange-headed Tanager and Chestnut-bellied Seedeater), then checking Caños Macúa and Merey for softtails (no response to playback, but good views of Yellow-throated Woodpecker and Long-billed Woodcreeper). We did, however, encounter a hectic mixed-flock in Caño Merey that included great views of a female Amazonian Black-Tyrant. In a nearby tree we found three amazing cicadas, complete with tail “feathers”.



Amazonian Black-Tyrant (f)



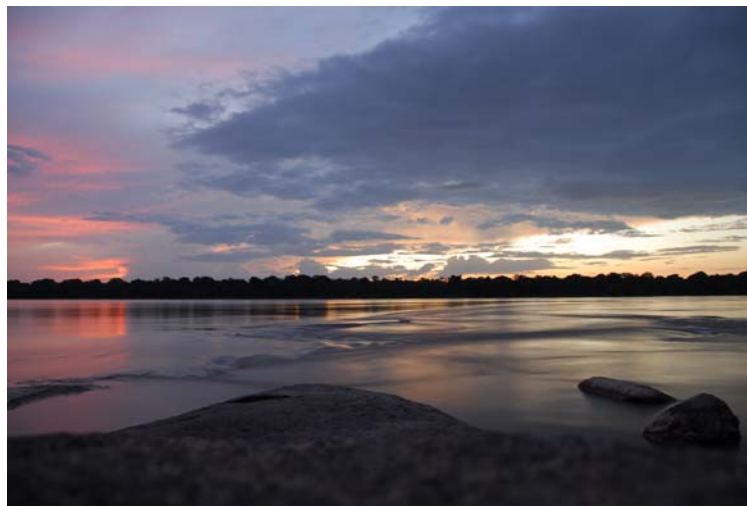
Unknown bird of prey (juvenile); Exotic Cicada

After another night in Hotel Apure, Alejandro and José-Gustavo joined me for a few hours early morning birding along the well known Gavilán Road. We were quite disappointed to see the degree of deforestation (the air was full of the scent of fire), although we did see some nice birds including Crimson-crested Woodpecker, Bat Falcon, Golden-headed Manakin and Lesser Seed-Finch.



Lesser Seed-Finch (Gavilán Road); Frog (Capuana)

Overall this was an amazing trip for me alongside such an expert team, made even more special by the successful completion of our goals - especially locating more of the Orinoco Softtails and generating lots of new data on their habits, habitat and range. In addition I saw some 149 species, of which 38 were new to me.



Scenes at Capuana

Bird List: Río Orinoco, Estado Amazonas¹

(Confirmed personal sightings only – 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: C= Capuana area and Reserva Forestal Sipapo (including caños Guacharaca, Grulla, Macúa and Merey; riverine forest; savannah; Orinoco river islands; and Orinoco river around these sites); G = Gavilán Road (near Puerto Ayacucho); O = Orinoco River (northern sections); S = Chaparral Savannah (near Puerto Ayacucho).

Crested Bobwhite (S)	Spectacled Owl (C)
Anhinga (C)	Great Potoo (C)
Olivaceous Cormorant (C)	Sand-colored Nighthawk (C) #
Glossy Ibis (O)	Lesser Nighthawk (C)
Green Ibis (C)	Band-tailed Nighthawk (C) *
Cocoi Heron (O)	Ladder-tailed Nightjar (C) #
Great Egret (O)	Pauraque Nightjar (C)
Striated Heron (C)	Short-tailed Swift (C)
Yellow-headed Caracara (S)	Fork-tailed Woodnymph (C)
Roadside Hawk (C)	Glittering-throated Emerald (S)
Tiny Hawk (C) *	White-chested Emerald (S)
Bat Falcon (G) *	Black-throated Mango (C)
Osprey (O)	Black-eared Fairy (C)
Black Vulture (C)	White-bearded Hermit (G)
Turkey Vulture (C)	Reddish Hermit (C)
Greater Yellow-headed Caracara (O)	Amazonian White-tailed Trogon (G)
Northern Crested-Caracara (S)	Black-tailed Trogon (C)
Black Caracara (C) *	Swallow-winged Puffbird (O)
Crane Hawk (C)	White-necked Puffbird (G)
Great Black-Hawk (C)	Green-tailed Jacamar (C)
Gray-headed Kite (G)	Amazon Kingfisher (O)
Wattled Jacana (C)	Green Kingfisher (C)
Pied Plover (O)	American Pygmy Kingfisher (C)
Southern Lapwing (O)	Ringed Kingfisher (C)
Collared Plover (C)	Black Nunbird (C)
Spotted Sandpiper (C)	Gilded Barbet (C) *
Large-billed Tern (O)	White-throated Toucan (G)
Yellow-billed Tern (O)	Channel-billed Toucan (C)
Black Skimmer (O)	Green Araçari (O)
Pale-vented Pigeon (S)	Ivory-billed Araçari (C)
Ruddy Pigeon (S)	Yellow-throated Woodpecker (C)
Ruddy Ground-Dove (C)	Red-crowned Woodpecker (S)
Chestnut-fronted Macaw (C) *	Yellow-tufted Woodpecker (C)
Blue-headed Parrot (C) *	Lineated Woodpecker (G) *
Yellow-crowned Parrot (G)	Crimson-crested Woodpecker (G) *
Mealy Parrot (C)	Golden-spangled Piculet (C) *
Cobalt-winged Parakeet (C) *	Olivaceous Woodcreeper (G)
Little Cuckoo (C)	Wedge-billed Woodcreeper (C)
Squirrel Cuckoo (C) *	Striped Woodcreeper (C) *
Smooth-billed Ani (C)	Long-billed Woodcreeper (C)
Violaceous Jay (C)	

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

Orinoco Softtail (C) * # (multiple sites)
Rusty-backed Spinetail (C)
Undescribed Spinetail sp. (C) (on river island)
Plain Xenops (C)

Great Antshrike (C) *
Black-crested Antshrike (C) *
Pygmy Antwren (C)
White-flanked Antwren (C) *
Dusky Antbird (C) *
Black-chinned Antbird (C) *

Drab Water-Tyrant (C) *
Gray-crowned Flatbill (C)
Common Tody-Flycatcher (C)
Mouse-colored Tyrannulet (C) *
Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet (C)
Amazonian Inezia (C) *
River Tyrannulet (C) * #
Yellow Tyrannulet (C)
Tropical Kingbird (O)
Yellow-throated Flycatcher (S) #
Social Flycatcher (C)
Rusty-margined Flycatcher (C)
Boat-billed Flycatcher (S)
Great Kiskadee (C)
Lesser Kiskadee (C)
Riverside Tyrant (C) * #

Wire-tailed Manakin (C) *
Golden-headed Manakin (G)

Black-tailed Tityra (G)
Black-crowned Tityra (S) *
White-browed Purpleuft (S) *

Screaming Piha (G) [heard only]

Amazonian Umbrellabird (C)
Bare-necked Fruitcrow (O)

Black-collared Swallow (O)
White-banded Swallow (O)

White-winged Swallow (O)
Southern Rough-winged Swallow (O)

Buff-breasted Wren (C)
Long-billed Gnatwren (C)
Cocoa Thrush (C) *

Scrub Greenlet (C) #
Blackpoll Warbler (C)
Yellow Warbler (S)

Summer Tanager (S)
Orange-headed Tanager (C) #
Blue Dacnis (S)
Yellow-bellied Dacnis (C) #
Bananaquit (S)
Masked Tanager (C)
Violaceous Euphonia (C)
White-vented Euphonia (C)
Rufous-bellied Euphonia (C)
Palm Tanager (C)
Blue-gray Tanager (C) (white shoulder=*mediana* race)
Silver-beaked Tanager (S)
White-lined Tanager (G)
Flame-crested Tanager (S)
Gray-headed Tanager (C) #
Southern Grayish Saltator (C) (Amazon calls)

Lesser Seed-Finch (G) *
Yellow-bellied Seedeater (C)
Chestnut-bellied Seedeater (C) * #
Lesson's Seedeater (C)

Red-capped Cardinal (C)
Yellow-browed Sparrow (C) #

Crested Oropendola (C)
Yellow-rumped Cacique (C)

Amazonas trip total = 149 confirmed species for trip, of which 38 new for me...



End-points of our Río Orinoco trip: Puerto Ayacucho and Capuana