

Trip Report: Parque Nacional Yacambú, Estado Lara

May 2006 (David Southall)

In May 2006, two weeks after my first visit (see separate report) I returned to Sanare and Yacambú national park in Lara state. This latest report gives brief highlights of my activities in the area, plus an updated bird list that includes a merged listing of birds seen in the Yacambú area during the two trips.



Map of Venezuela highlighting Sanare

Once again I stayed at the Tierra Blanca *posada* and made day trips into the national park, where I met up with members of the University of Montana's bird research team that are living at the El Blanquito ranger station and working in the park (see previous trip report for more details). This time I met not just Alina and Petu, but the entire team that includes biologists from the US, Argentina, Australia, Colombia, England, New Zealand, Poland, Spain and Venezuela! Some team members are responsible for finding and monitoring nests, others for mist netting and banding and finally graduate students were carrying out research involving taking samples for analysis. I was able to join several members of the team at work on their plots in the forest, where they shared suggestions about good birding sites and showed me several interesting nests they were monitoring. The terrain, vegetation and weather conditions I sampled on many of their plots really helped me appreciate how physically demanding the work is that they are doing from dawn each day for four months - hiking for miles through wet forest in search of nests, sometimes lugging tripods and video cameras along trails that they have to make for themselves and surviving regular - sometimes prolonged - heavy rain. I was exhausted after only 5 days - but certainly had a great time! I also learned to appreciate my rubber boots (gum or Wellington - depending on your country of origin). They proved to be perfect for the conditions and - although I have never previously considered using them for day hikes - I would definitely do so in future if faced with similarly wet and sometimes muddy conditions.



Urban and rural life in Sanare

It's worth noting that the wet season had arrived in Caracas about two weeks before this trip, causing the usual chaos: Landslides and road closures, with the extra complication of the detour to the airport - *la trocha* - being closed due to landslides from the ill-prepared slopes along its sides. Much of the Andes had also experienced considerable rainfall and Yacambú was no exception. In the end I was probably quite lucky that, despite all but the last day being largely overcast and partly rainy, I did not lose a single day to continuous rainfall - although at times, as I sheltered damply in the car or the El Blanquito huts with rain pelting down outside, I did have my doubts as to whether this would be the case! I managed the weather as best I could by driving up and down the park, birding lower altitudes around the *laguna* when the rain and *neblina* were heaviest at the top of the road, then heading back up again once they lifted. Amazingly, every evening as I returned to Sanare the town was dry (and often very windy - especially at the exposed hilltop location of Tierra Blanca). Descending from the park there was a sharp transition zone at ca. 1700m on the Sanare side, with *neblina* (mist) and rain above that and dry roads below. Guaranteed.



Dawn looking from Yacambú towards Quibor and south across the park, respectively

Will (the Aussie) has a plot around the *laguna* at El Blanquito that includes the nest of the glamorous Red-headed Barbets that I saw on my first trip. The adults were now hard at work feeding the nestlings that were becoming more vocal down in their nest hole as they approach fledging. Will was also able to put me out of my misery w.r.t finding the manakins that are reported to be lekking around the *laguna*. Within minutes of entering the forest between the access road and the *laguna* we had found the first of several displaying White-fronted Manakins. Easy, when you know where! Apparently this is the only spot that the team have so far seen White-crowned Manakins in Yacambú.



Red-headed Barbet cleaning out the nest and checking out the visitor



White-crowned Manakin; Golden-faced Tyrannulet

New Zealander James' plot is a few kilometres up the road from El Blanquito (and hence also considerably wetter!). There he showed me some of his prize finds including great views of nesting Golden-breasted Fruiteaters, Masked Trogons and Violet-chested Hummingbirds. The Golden-breasted Fruiteater nest lay immaculately hidden in a mossy branch overhanging the road and - despite being very close to an active Russet-backed Oropendola colony - it has so far avoided depredation. The two nestlings were at, or around, pin-break during my visit. I spent several enjoyable hours watching the fruiteaters in their parenting tasks and attempting to secure reasonable photos of the distant birds. During this period the female attentively sat on the nest, with the male adhering remarkably closely to a once-every-thirty-minutes feeding schedule as he shuttled back and forth to bring food to the nestlings, making predicting photo opportunities during these visits reasonably straightforward!



Golden-breasted Fruiteater feeding time; Male after delivering the meal



Violet-chested Hummingbirds (f) [endemic to Venezuela]

We also discovered a large and very vocal Lazuline Sabrewing in a relatively open patch of forest. Despite working with such a cooperative model, we jointly suffered in our attempts to get decent, naturally lit photos in the modest forest light. As the below examples show, using my external flash indeed delivers enough power to capture him in action - even at some considerable distance - but it also results in degradation of the stunning and subtly varying colours of his reflective feathers. I imagine this common hummingbird problem could be solved with multiple, off-camera flash heads giving more dispersed light sources? Amongst the many dozens of natural light shots that I took and then deleted (isn't digital great!) I did get a couple of decent ones, including a gorgeous tail fan during one stretching session.



Lazuline Sabrewing - with (extreme left) and without flash

It was not all birds, birds, birds. I saw several mammals (for a change) - including prolonged views of a mouse (could it be a marsupial?) that was sitting in moss part way up a tree trunk by the *laguna* - lots of butterflies and many different mushrooms and fungi that were thriving in the damp conditions.



A mouse (marsupial?); Morpho butterfly; Mushrooms



Band-tailed Guan; Band-tailed Pigeon



Plain Antvireo (male and female)

Around the El Blanquito site it was good to see the progress made by the Collared Trogon family whose nest is so precariously located adjacent to the recreation facilities. The two eggs had hatched and the parents were on feeding duty. Maybe the presence of so many people will actually prove to be a bonus by reducing the risk of predation by more wary species? Although the Cascada Trail was relatively quiet whenever I walked it during this trip (previously I had seen many Speckled Hummingbirds amongst multiple other species at almost every corner, this time almost none), I did find a Variegated Bristle-Tyrant pair building their nest in moss on a tree trunk. That was my sole contribution to the team's nest portfolio (albeit an interesting one, since it was the first seen for this species by the team) in return for all their helpfulness in showing me a few of the hundreds of other nests that they had already found!



Males on guard: Collared and Masked Trogons

Although the supposedly common Golden-winged Manakin remained elusive (to me at least), I did get to see some other interesting or unusual birds typical of the park such as: Northern Helmeted-Curassow (brief glimpses as I was walking along the road a few hundred meters below the blue shrine, with the Curassow furtively checking me out from a few meters inside the forest before heading back down the slope and out of sight amongst the trees); Highland Tinamou (found beside a stream in an area recommended to me by Carolina, the Colombian team member); and Band-tailed Guans (found by the *laguna* on several occasions).



Variegated Bristle-Tyrant; Blue-naped Chlorophonia

The team have so far found at least three nests of the uncommon Red-ruffed Fruitcrow. All of these nests are located in the upper levels of the park, built in trees in the base of gullies containing fast flowing streams and hard to access. It seems that they chose to nest only in the least disturbed parts of the forest. Although this is not a target species for the team's primary research, it is of interest because of the apparently limited scientific information available about the fruitcrow's breeding habits. James and I spent one morning hiking into one of the nest sites (it had been depredated some weeks previously) in the hope of finding some fruitcrows in that general area. Unfortunately the weather was miserable - continuous heavy rain - and we saw almost no birdlife for our trouble during the relatively strenuous two hour trip as we bush-bashed our way along faint and sometimes non-existent trails. The following day's weather was much better, so Andrea (whose plot the nests are on) and her sister Melissa took me back to this site for a second attempt. The twins are very fit - the previous day they had run the 17 km to Sanare (including a 600m altitude gain and then similar decent along the way!) in about 1 hour 20 minutes - and I just about kept pace as they shot down the ridges, across and along streams and over, under and through trees, palms and bushes! Failing to find signs of the fruitcrows at either of the previously depredated nest sites we took advantage of the good weather to head further downstream to the latest nest site that was considered to be possibly in pre-lay. The hike was great fun as we clambered down the stream bed (past many hummingbird, thrush and barbtail nests) with hope - but no great expectations - as to what we would find. To the girls' evident surprise - and our collective delight - a female (I think) was indeed on this third nest. We patiently watched from the river bed as she left, then returned to the nest - her orange-red throat shining brightly despite the overcast conditions. This nest appears better hidden from predators than their previous attempts, complicating the possibilities for photos but, more importantly, hopefully increasing the chances for a successful nest - third time lucky? Fortunately it is a big bird (Hilty says about 43cm from tip to tail) and, thanks to the tripod, I managed to get some decent shots. We did not see any other fruitcrows in the vicinity.

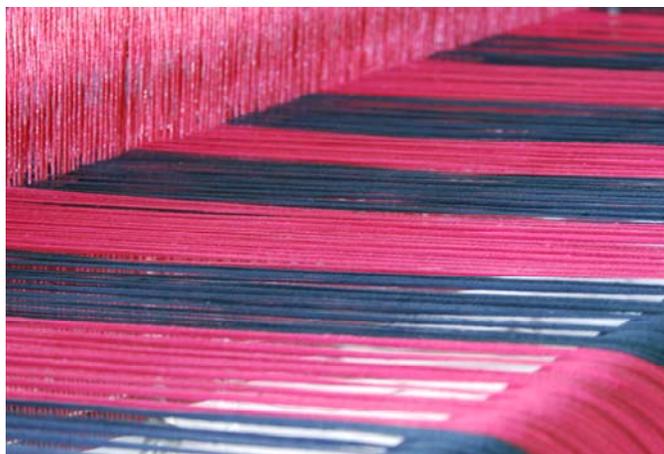


Hiking trail along stream en-route to Red-ruffed Fruitcrow site



Red-ruffed Fruitcrow (f)

On the way home I passed through Tintorero, where I bought a couple of extra *hamacas* and spent a few minutes admiring the craftsmanship and colours of the weaving machines (see photos below).



Details from weaving workshop in Tintorero

Bird List: PN Yacambú and Sanare, Estado Lara^{1, 2}

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

Highland Tinamou #

Neotropic Cormorant #

Least Grebe

Great Egret
Cattle Egret *

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

White-rumped Hawk

Rufous-vented Chachalaca
Band-tailed Guan # *
Northern Helmeted-Curassow #

Common Gallinule *
Caribbean Coot
Wattled Jacana

Ruddy Pigeon
Band-tailed Pigeon # *
Scaled Dove
Ruddy Ground-Dove
White-tipped Dove

Blood-eared Parakeet *

Smooth-billed Ani *
Inca Jay

Speckled Hummingbird *
Violet-crowned Woodnymph # *
Golden-tailed Sapphire *
Lazuline Sabrewing # *
Violet-chested Hummingbird *
Bronzy Inca #
Booted Racket-tail
Long-tailed Sylph *

Amazon Kingfisher #

Masked Trogon *
Collared Trogon *

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

Golden-Olive Woodpecker #

Plain-brown Woodcreeper #
Montane Woodcreeper
Red-billed Scythebill #

Crested Spinetail *
Montane Foliage-gleaner *

Slaty Antwren *
Plain Antvireo # *
Chestnut-crowned Antpitta
Rusty-breasted Antpitta *

White-crowned Manakin # *

Cinnamon Flycatcher #
Common Tody-Flycatcher
Golden-faced Tyrannulet *
Variegated Bristle-Tyrant # *
Cattle Tyrant *
Tropical Kingbird
Rusty-margined Flycatcher
Streaked Flycatcher
Golden-crowned Flycatcher *
Great Kiskadee
Smoke-colored Pewee *
Tropical Mockingbird

Golden-breasted Fruiteater # *
Red-ruffed Fruitcrow # *

Blue-and-white Swallow

Bicoloured Wren
Gray-breasted Wood-Wren #
Housewren

Orange-billed Nightingale Thrush #
Slaty-backed Nightingale Thrush #
Andean Solitaire *
Yellow-legged Thrush *
Black-hooded Thrush

Rufous-browed Peppershrike #
Brown-capped Vireo *
Tennessee Warbler *
Three-striped Warbler *
Tropical Parula
Slate-throated Whitestart

Rusty Flowerpiercer *
Common Bush-Tanager
Fawn-breasted Tanager
Fulvous-headed Tanager # *
Guira Tanager # *
Bananaquit
Blue-naped Chlorophonia *
Golden Tanager
Saffron-crowned Tanager *
Black-capped Tanager *
Beryl-spangled Tanager
Blue-necked Tanager *
Burnished-buff Tanager

¹ **First sighting ever for DJS**; * = photo available from trip

² Combined list from visits of April and May 2006 to PN Yacambú. (# = second trip additions)

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

Total 113 confirmed species for trip, of which 21 new for me ...

Yellow-bellied Seedeater *

Rufous-collared Sparrow
Lesser Goldfinch
Yellow-bellied Siskin # *
Saffron Finch *

Yellow Oriole
Shiny Cowbird
Russet-backed Oropendola
Crested Oropendola



Blood-eared Parakeets