

Trip Report: Parque Nacional Guaramacal, Estado Trujillo

November 2005 (David Southall)

During 2005/6, the British Embassy's cooperation fund is supporting local NGO Bioparques to assess the status of some of Venezuela's national parks, including Parque Nacional Guaramacal (Estado Trujillo). In order to see Bioparques' activities during a field visit to Guaramacal and also engage with some local stakeholders, Emma arranged to join them during part of their visit. Once again, my role as unofficial Embassy driver was called for ... not that it was hard to convince me, given the very positive comments by Mary Lou and others about this Andean national park and how much we had enjoyed last year's trip to the Andes in Estado Merida. Our trip was confirmed for November 12th through 15th, travelling out on Saturday and back on Tuesday - giving two full days on site.

Departing around dawn, we made good progress via Valencia and San Carlos to Guanare, arriving late-morning at the foothills of the Andes. From Guanare our pace slowed as the roads crept their way up through coffee plantations and small rural villages, skirting east and north of Parque Nacional Guaramacal until we eventually arrived mid-afternoon (some 8 hours after leaving Caracas) in Boconó, the town nearest to the park's entrance. Since the Bioparques team (Rodolfo and Daniel) were off on an exploratory day trip to another Monumento Natural adjacent to a different part of the park, we decided to head into the park on our own for a quick reconnaissance.



Approaching Laguna de los Cedros in PN Guaramacal, with the Paramo Obscured in Cloud

Driving up from Boconó – which lies at between 1200 and 1600m - the park has a single access road that rises up to the park entrance at 1800m and then continues through humid and wet montane forest, elfin forest and eventually to a unique paramo (at over 3100m) that contains many endemic plants given its isolated geography. The road then continues up very steeply towards a series of TV antennae located on the very summit, or descends to the village of Guaramacal, located on the far side of the park. The good news is that the dirt road, which starts at ca. 2100m, is in generally very good shape. Although steep in parts it was fine for the light 4WD capabilities of 'MAX', our CRV and would probably be fine even for a 2WD car, with the notable exception of the final detour up to the antennae. There are some occasional passing jeeps (a couple per hour?) but not enough to disturb us (or the birds, so it appeared).

Practically as soon as we entered the park it started to rain (something one needs to get used to in Guaramacal - it apparently averages over 3200mm of rainfall a year) so despite a few glimpses of high altitude tanagers in a couple of feeding flocks, efforts to see much of the wildlife were thwarted. We did however spot some very attractive Saffron-crowned Tanagers (a first for us). Somewhat frustrated we returned to Boconó, checked into our Posada (Jardín Boconés: Highly recommended, being simple but attractive, clean and at Bs. 25,000 - or USD 10 - a night per couple, an absolute bargain) and headed off for a dinner appointment with Rodolfo, Daniel and a traditional Andean *trucha* (trout). La Casa Vieja proved to be a top recommendation, serving excellent *trucha* and was even a source of insights for Rodolfo and Daniel as one of the regulars explained his role in Inparques and the challenges that the park faces.



Wet Montane Forest ascending through PN Guaramacal

Sunday saw an early start as the day included both a trip right up through the park to the antennae with Rodolfo and Daniel, followed by an afternoon of interviewing park visitors. Given the fine morning weather, the drive up was spectacular as we wound ever higher through the changing vegetation. Regular stops revealed a variety of plant and bird life, plus beautiful views across various valleys. The final climb up to the antennae was exceedingly steep, but MAX coped admirably. The paramo was cool, maybe 15°C, but certainly not cold and the views revealed surrounding valleys full of white clouds and distant peaks. Given that Guaramacal is only just high enough to enter into the paramo altitudes it was rather disappointing to see such a large proportion of the paramo blighted by chaotic TV antennae structures and surrounding buildings. Even worse was the apparent lack of bathroom facilities for the workers, which seems to be having a negative impact on this small, unique and presumably fragile environment. It seems rather unacceptable that permits to construct these facilities are not linked by the authorities to requirements for the companies involved to install septic or other facilities designed to minimise the associated impacts.



View Northwest from the Paramo towards the Boconó valley.

Up on the paramo, bird life was quite sparse (Slaty Brush-Finch, Tyrian Metaltail, Glossy Flowerpiercer) but as we returned slowly down the mountain there was a perceptible increase in activity. It was also apparent that at the higher elevations within the park, many of the birds were later risers than at the lower elevations encountered on our usual trips closer to Caracas. Highlights for the descent included Orange-throated Sunangels defending their flowering-filled territories as well as multiple bright and noisy mixed tanager and flowerpiercer flocks.

On returning to the Laguna de los Cedros at ca. 1800m the heavens opened and we ate lunch sheltering in one of the park's covered picnic kiosks. For Rodolfo, Daniel and Emma the next few hours were spent interviewing other park visitors, whilst I headed back up the road in search of more birds and photographic opportunities. More feeding flocks and a *Guamo* tree full of a variety of attractive, duelling hummingbirds were encountered, but still some of our hoped for targets – most obviously the fruiteaters that Emma was half convinced (based on Mary Lou's experience) would be waving at her from almost every branch - proved elusive. The damp conditions undoubtedly were not helping.



Slaty Brush-Finch, moss (everywhere in the moist mid elevations of the park) and a Prothonotary Warbler

By late afternoon the interviews were completed and – given the lack of bird activity, despite the cessation of the rain - Emma and I decided to enjoy the park from the quiet of our mountain bikes. In the short time available we climbed ca. 700m vertically from the laguna to 2500m and hardly saw any other traffic on the road. Unfortunately the failing light did not leave enough time to head all the way up to the Paramo or tackle the rougher road sections at the upper elevations. The long decent as darkness closed around us was enjoyable but just a little tense. The bike ride showed us how great it was to move through the forest without the noise of the car and we decided that the next day we would try to walk as much as possible in our search for the birds and avoid spending too much time inside the car. The hot water showers in the posada were very welcome after the ride (cold water in Los Roques is OK, but in the Andes we have definitely decided that bracing cold water showers are an acquired taste). Another trout with Rodolfo and Daniel at La Casa Vieja rounded off the day (its not very often that we get the chance to eat *trucha!*).

Monday was spent very slowly making our way up to the edge of the Paramo and then back down again. We were determined to find the fruiteaters today! Things got off to a good start around 8am with some interesting feeding flocks around 2000m (ever present Common Bush-Tanagers, plus other more colourful tanagers and flowerpiercers). One contained Yellow-bellied Siskin, which - according to Hilty's book - has not previously been recorded in Trujillo. We all agreed that was a Yellow-bellied Siskin, given the visible yellow wing patch and distinctive black/yellow head/body division. Shortly afterwards, at ca. 2340m, we hit our jackpot – a group of green-and-black fruiteaters, including both males and females. Supposedly, this is near to the upper limit of their altitude range, so we had begun to think that we may have missed them again. The fruiteaters were clustered in a series of trees around a large hairpin bend and seemed oblivious to our presence, so we had great views as they jumped and fluttered around in their search for berries.

The same corner also offered a wall of red tubular flowers that was being vigorously defended from other hummingbirds by a male Orange-throated Sunangel. Apart from the crescent across his chest this often looked like a surprisingly drab hummingbird – until the sunlight fell directly on his chin and upper chest,

delivering a fireburst of golden-orange. The Sunangel seemed unable to prevent flowerpiercers from sharing his territory.

Moving upwards we encountered many mixed flocks. All seemed to consistently contain Lacrimose Tanagers, plus any one of a variety of flowerpiercers and warblers. One, at about 2500m, was accompanied by an interesting hummingbird with a golden wing patch that looked suspiciously like a Golden-bellied Starfrontlet. My blurred photo is probably not definitive, but suggests to us that this may indeed be the Golden-bellied Starfrontlet rather than Golden-tailed Starfrontlet that Hilty's book suggest is found in this area.

Our next highlight was a noisy flock of Rose-crowned Parakeets. We were treated to spectacular views of their bright heads and white wing-patches as they noisily flew between the trees and then settled nearby for us to admire. We saw two groups moving near to each other – one containing 6 birds and the other about 10. Descending once again we encountered a flock containing many woodcreepers and both Pearled Treerunner and Streaked Tuftedcheek. Great views, but no photos. I did manage to photograph a Gray-capped Hemispingus foraging, as is its habit, amongst some high altitude bamboo.



Orange-throated Sunangel, Flock of Rose-crowned Parakeets and Green-and-black Fruiteater

We descended to eat lunch at “Fruiteater Corner” where the fruiteaters were again (or still?) active, but this time lower in the trees. Mary Lou’s description of the ease of encountering fruiteaters along this road was indeed a reality. I was able to get a couple of decent photographs before clouds of mist moved in to surround us and then the rain started to pour down. We retreated to the car, venturing out in breaks between the rain to try and secure shots of the sunangel on his flowers. The rain and cold literally put a damper on our good intentions for another mountain bike ride, so instead we gradually made our way downwards by car. At dusk we found a spot that gave us both a Collared Inca (new for us) feeding from a flower by the roadside and a pair of Emerald Toucanets (again new for us) chattering noisily and then flying across the road as they made their way home for the night.

Tuesday morning Emma had an appointment to join Rodolfo and Daniel at a meeting with the Boconó Environmental Brigade, so I had a few hours free for a last trip through the park. Over an early morning coffee in the garden of the Posada I found and photographed a Prothonotary Warbler amongst several tanagers and euphonias.

Upon arriving at the Puesto de Guardaparques, I found Daniel and one of the Inparques staff already admiring a Broad-winged Hawk sitting in clear view. I must say that I was quite impressed by the Guardaparques in Guaramacal - they seemed to be genuinely interested in the park and its flora and fauna. We often saw them using binoculars to look at interesting birds and they were happy to exchange feedback about what they and we had seen in the area.



Black Phoebe and Tyrian Metaltail (female)

“Fruiteater corner” was populated as usual (Fruiteaters and diligent Sunangel) but also delivered two bonuses. First a pair of intensely coloured blue-and-black Tanagers feeding just above my head and then - just before I was reluctantly leaving - a Masked Trogon flew into a roadside tree only meters above my head, made a close inspection of me, moved a couple of meters for a different perspective and then threw itself headlong down the road and into another set of trees. Having been stunned to turn and find the trogon landing in a tree so close – and although I had perfect views – I managed only a silhouette photo! On that high note I turned back to Boconó, picked Emma up from her meeting and we started what, with lots of rain on the highway between Valencia and Caracas became our 9-hour trip home.

Overall, visiting Guaramacal was a fantastic experience. We would love to return, do some more birding and photographing, plus make more use of our bikes to do longer rides. A ride from the *laguna*, through the park, down to the village of Guaramacal on the other side and then back up through the park and down to the *laguna* would provide a great day of some 2,500m+ climbing and the same descending over a total of ca. 50km. As for birding, the car was useful for access and for when it rained, but definitely the ideal would be to be dropped off so as to enjoy the benefits of quietly walking down the road.

A list of birds we saw in the Boconó and PN Guaramacal areas is given at the end of this report. It includes a total of some 76 species, of which 14 were new for us. We definitely saw and heard many other species, but were unable to positively identify them, hence they are not listed.



Emma climbing on the good road typical of lower elevations (ca. 2300m)

The following table lists some landmarks on the way up to “Fruiteater Corner”:

Location	Km from Posada	Altitude, m TVASL
Posada in Boconó	0	1220
<i>La Laguna Los Cedros</i>	7.8	1830
Mirador	8.5	1894
<i>Puesto de Guardaparques</i>	9.4	1980
Start of dirt road	10.7	2095
Productive dusk spot	12.5	2265
“Fruiteater Corner”	13.4	2340

Bird List: Boconó and PN Guaramacal:

(Confirmed personal sightings only – excludes most birds heard only)

(In order of appearance in Hilty plates)

Broad-winged Hawk*	House Wren
Black Vulture	Pale-eyed Thrush*
	Glossy-black Thrush
Ruddy Ground-Dove	Great Thrush
	Pale-breasted Thrush
Rose-crowned Parakeet*	
Squirrel Cuckoo	Black-and-white Warbler
Inca Jay (heard only)	Blackburnian Warbler
	Three-striped Warbler
	Black-crested Warbler
White-vented Plumeleteer	Prothonotary Warbler*
Orange-throated Sunangel*	Slate-throated Whitestart
Tyrian Metaltail*	White-fronted Whitestart
Sparkling Violetear	
Collared Inca	Bluish Flowerpiercer*
Golden-bellied or –tailed Starfrontlet* (CHECK)	Masked Flowerpiercer
Long-tailed Sylph*	White-sided Flowerpiercer
Sooty-capped Hermit	Glossy Flowerpiercer
Masked Trogon*	Gray-capped Hemispingus*
	Superciliaried Hemispingus
Emerald Toucanet	Oleaginous Hemispingus
	Common Bush-Tanager
Red-crowned Woodpecker	White-winger Tanager
	Blue-capped Tanager
Montane Woodcreeper	Lacrimose Tanager*
Olive-backed Woodcreeper*	Bananaquit
Pearled Treerunner	Golden Tanager
Streaked Tuftedcheek	Saffron-crowned Tanager
	Blue-and-black Tanager
Chestnut-crowned Antpitta (heard only)	Beryl-spangled Tanager
Yellow-bellied Chat-Tyrant*	Blue-necked Tanager
White-throated Tyrannulet	Burnished-buff Tanager
Black-capped Tyrannulet	Black-headed Tanager
Tropical Kingbird	Speckled Tanager
Social Flycatcher	Thick-billed Euphonia*
Golden-crowned Flycatcher	Palm Tanager
Great Kiskadee	Blue-gray Tanager
Black Phoebe*	White-lined Tanager*
Tropical Mockingbird	Magpie Tanager
Green-and-Black Fruiteater*	Slaty Brush-Finch*
	Ochre-breasted Brush-Finch
Blue-and-white Swallow	Rufous-collared Sparrow
	Yellow-bellied Siskin (Hilty: No Trujillo records)
Gray-breasted Wood-Wren	Crested Oropendola

Total 76 confirmed species for trip, of which 14 new for me...