

## Trip Report: Puerto Ayacucho and Junglaven, Estado Amazonas

December 2005 (David Southall)

July's excellent trip to El Pauji in Bolivar state gave me a taste for the forests, savannas, tepuis and birds of southern Venezuela and since then I had been intrigued by the allure of visiting adjacent Amazonas state in the far south west of the country. This was one of only 4 Venezuelan states that I had yet to visit and is probably the remotest part of the country, with limited locations for tourists to stay in the huge expanse away from the state capital, Puerto Ayacucho. Mary Lou's book - and various trip reports available on the web - report extensively on the attractions of the Junglaven camp, a 45 minute light aircraft flight east-south-east from Puerto Ayacucho. This was where I decided to go for a five night visit. Chris Sharpe and his travel company (see [www.birdvenezuela.com](http://www.birdvenezuela.com)) made the arrangements accordingly. Chris also provided me with various pre-reading materials and web links, which proved to be very helpful in preparing me to make the most of the sites around the Junglaven location.

Fully loaded with camera gear and little else (there is a weight limit of ca. 10-15kg total on the flight from Puerto Ayacucho), I left Caracas on December 16<sup>th</sup>. Fortunately the bridge on the way down to the airport was still intact and traffic flowing freely. [This bridge provides the only significant link between Caracas and the coastal airport and has been slowly buckling for decades as the hillsides move. Of course, no remedial action has been taken and suddenly a crisis had been declared, with rumours circulating for a few weeks that the bridge had reached its critical limit and was about to fall down or be closed. Alternative roads or bridges are now "urgently" being considered (only a decade late!)]. The 1½ hour flight to Puerto Ayacucho on the ca. 20 seater plane was smooth, including impressive views of the still wet looking Llanos and then the Río Orinoco as we approached Puerto Ayacucho.

My mid-afternoon arrival gave me sufficient time to visit Puerto Ayacucho and its small indigenous museum. Apparently the museum is soon to be significantly expanded to include computerised information displays and a larger collection, but even the current modest displays are worth a quick visit. It was particularly interesting to see the different artefacts from the various indigenous communities that inhabit parts of Amazonas state and their contrasting hut construction styles. From the museum my guide and I headed towards Campamento Orinoquia, with a brief detour to see (hard, in the late afternoon light) some large rock carvings on the side of a large, black hillside.



*Sunset over Colombia from Orinoquia; Christmas and cultural contrasts at Puerto Ayacucho airport*

Orinoquia has a spectacular setting on the banks of the Río Orinoco, with Colombia only a few hundred meters away on the western bank. (Note that although the state is Amazonas, almost all the rivers there flow into the Orinoco river, with only some of the extreme south of the state actually forming part of the Amazon's watershed). Although the camp was devastated by a fire earlier in the year, the reconstruction of the main building and several small huts (where guests sleep) is impressive, with the results more luxurious than I was anticipating. A brief stroll along the river before night fall gave me my first taste of Amazonas and even a few birds (see list on last page). Dinner included the first of many pineapples. These jungle pineapples, some long-and-thin, some short-and-fat, taste far better than commercial crops. Apparently they must be picked almost ripe and eaten within days, so are not available away from the remote locations where they are grown.

By 6am on Saturday morning I was again at Puerto Ayacucho airport, where I was greeted by Capitan Lorenzo Rodriguez, majority owner of Junglaven and my host for the week. (On the way we had a pre-dawn encounter with Double-striped Thick-knees on the Orinoquia access road). Lorenzo is 78 years old, a former pilot and Chief Operations officer for the largest Venezuelan airline and intimately familiar with Amazonas state. He knew everyone at the airport and eased my progress through customs and the other military checks. (Amazonas, being both remote and on the Colombian border, is considered sensitive and everyone needs official permission to be able to fly into the interior from Puerto Ayacucho). Lorenzo also casually informed me that this was his first visit to Junglaven since the last tourist left in March – i.e. he had not visited at all during the rainy season – and that he was interested to see what state the camp was in. After that news, so was I! Not another tourist was to be seen at the tiny airport, just a few indigenous families awaiting a light aircraft flight to one of the few villages in the interior served by air. The cultural contrast of these villagers and the indigenous art on the walls with the Christmas decorations in the airport enhanced my feeling of being on the threshold between the known and unknown.



*Early morning views from the Cessna of misty tepuis and valleys*

It turned out that we had a special charter flight direct to Camani on the banks of the Río Ventuari - some 16 km from Junglaven – just the pilot, Lorenzo and myself in a 4 seater Cessna. The morning light and mist filled valleys were spectacular as we flew past distant tepuis, over jungle and bare, black rock formations of the Guyana shield and, eventually, descended across a mixture of savannah, low-lying jungle and rivers to our destination.



*Aerial view of typical rock formations within the jungle; Hills, savannah and jungle approaching Junglaven*

At the Camani dirt strip on the edge of the savannah, we unloaded the *cava* (esky) full of food and the rest our luggage before the plane sped off, leaving us alone in the middle of nowhere. With no one to meet us, we set off on foot across ca. 1 km of savannah to the Camani camp (which Lorenzo used to own before selling up to build the Junglaven camp in the late-1980s on an even remoter tributary of the Río Ventuari). There we waited for a boat to arrive to take us down the Río Ventuari and then up a tributary caño to the “Big Lagoon” and Junglaven itself. Whilst waiting for the boat, I headed off to explore the savannah and adjacent forests. Things got off to an excellent start. In addition to views of King Vultures, Swallow-winged Puffbirds and Green-tailed Jacamars, I stumbled across a Green-tailed Goldenthrroat nesting in a tiny bush on the edge of the savannah. The hummingbird was quite cooperative in letting me take some photographs, then when she flew off to feed I was able to see the white egg shell and two very small chicks inside the nest!



*Cashew fruit and nut; Children at Camani village on the Río Ventuari; Victor, my machete wielding “guide”*

Once the boat arrived we headed to Junglaven via Camani village, where we collected additional supplies and two cooks and I got good views and shots of a Little Cuckoo in adjacent undergrowth. The trip along the Río Ventuari gave good views of many bird species – Ringed, Amazon and Green Kingfishers, Ospreys, Black Caracara, Sungebe - plus, in the narrow caño, we also encountered Great Black Hawk.

On arrival at Junglaven there was good and bad news: The bad news was that the caretaker had mysteriously abandoned his post (leaving post-rainy season maintenance behind schedule); the generator would not start – meaning no lights or power to pump water to the elevated tanks; the road to the Camani camp had not yet been cleared of trees that had fallen in recent months (in any case, the engine of the camp truck appeared to be having problems with its clutch plates and a temporary fuel tank was providing a gravity feed from its roof); the radio was not working due to a missing antenna; and the runway adjacent to Junglaven was 6ft deep in grass! The good news was that we had food for a week (and someone to cook it); LPG gas cylinders to power the cookers and fridge; clean beds in the main *churuata* (hut); a river to swim in; a spectacular setting with trees, water and birds all around; *Pavon* (Peacock Bass) jumping in the adjacent lagoon; and no one to disturb the peaceful setting for five days. One benefit of the camp having been so “quiet” for 9 months was that the wildlife was literally taking over the camp: In addition to termites having eaten the walls or roofs of several of the *churuatas*, the trees in the camp were now harbouring nesting Black-headed Parrots, nesting Green Araçaries, nesting Yellow-rumped Caciques, roosting Long-billed Woodcreepers, noisy flocks of Swallow Tanagers, plus Yellow-tufted and Lineated Woodpeckers hard at work and Mealy Parrots and Black-crowned Tityras making passing visits. The birds hardly seemed to notice my presence. All this within 50m of my bed! As I had a sunset swim to wash in the river I definitely felt like I had arrived in a virgin part of Amazonas ...



*Junglaven Camp; The famous road from the camp to the savannah through terra firme forest*



*On the “Big Lagoon” adjacent to Junglaven; Aerial view of the “Big Lagoon”*

Sunday morning I was up before dawn to start my exploration away from the camp. Since the car was out of action and the road supposedly impassable with fallen logs I decided to start by taking a morning hike to the savannah along the famous road cutting through the jungle. Juan (the boat driver) had informed me that it was about an hours walk to reach the savannah, so after a hearty breakfast Victor (Juan’s son) and I headed off along the road, carrying a tripod and backpack laden with camera gear and drinks (me) and a machete (Victor). Within meters of starting along the road we had seen Cherrie’s Antwren and Green-tailed Jacamars sunning themselves in the early morning light and we made slow progress as we enjoyed all the sights and sounds that the jungle offered. Mysterious animals (deer and others?) crashed through the undergrowth, Red Howler and Capuchin monkeys shook the trees and bird life was everywhere. Since the road had not been used for some 9 months (and even then there are only 2 vehicles that can ever use it – one at Campamento Camani and one at Junglaven) it is really nothing more than an excellent walking trail some 3 or 4 meters wide. We found a Variegated Tinamou nesting on the road, Common Piping Guan and Black Curassows sitting in trees over the road and flocks of Gray-winged Trumpeters walking through the bush and along the road. All these are examples of why Junglaven is such a great place to visit. To date, the absence of passing river traffic and somewhat surprising restraint by the nearby communities have meant that these dinner table friendly species have not been hunted from the area. There are, sadly, all too other few accessible places left in the Amazon/Orinoco basins where species like these can be seen with such ease.



*Gray-winged Trumpeters; Green-tailed Goldenthrout (f); Two Green-tailed Goldenthrout chicks*

In the end our “1 hour walk” to the savannah took us over 4 hours, which at the time we largely put down to the frequent stops that we had been making along the way and the multiple log falls that we had to negotiate our way around (ranging from small saplings to one huge tree almost 1m in diameter). The difference in vegetation between the thick forest on the richer soils and the scrub and natural savannah on the white-sand areas was amazing. It was almost as through one walked from rainforest to desert over a 200m transition zone – and it was all to do with the type of drainage and nutrition available because they are all very wet areas during the rainy season!

By now it was midday and we were running low on water so we spent only 30 minutes in the savannah (enough to spot Pale-bellied Mourner, Moriche Oriole and Paradise Jacamar) before heading back for lunch. That is when we started to realise just how far we had actually walked from Junglaven. It took us another hour and three-quarters to get back at a solid pace, with stoppages only when we absolutely could not resist a bird or animal clearly in our view (such as the Amazonian White-tailed Trogons sitting meters from us at eye level in a roadside tree). There was no discernable slowing down in the bird activity along the road during the midday hours (every day seemed to confirm that, with patience, it was worthwhile being out at any and all hours), although we ourselves were definitely slowing down! When we finally staggered into Junglaven at 2:30 pm we were tired, hungry and very thirsty. I certainly learnt a few lessons: 1) Junglaven has great walks – but take extra water; 2) Never ask the locals how long it takes to get somewhere, ask how far it is (later that evening Juan confirmed the walk to the Savannah was ca. 10 km from Junglaven, meaning a 20 km round trip); and 3) A 9 year old boy, even an indigenous guide, has no idea of distance – when he says “we are near” to somewhere what he really means is that “we are nearer than the last time you asked”!



*The new detour (left) around the massive fallen tree blocking the original road (right)*

Our epic hike not only gave us great exercise and a good flavour of the terrain and fauna, but it also provided clear information for Lorenzo on the state of the road. Based on our description of the tree falls he arranged for Juan to collect four workers from Camani village the next day and start clearing the road for vehicle access through to the savannah. In the end it took them 1 ½ days to clear the road using machetes and axes. They did not attempt to cut the largest tree – that was too much of a task even for them. Instead they abandoned the old road and created a fresh, 15m detour around the fallen tree’s base.



*Butterflies on the river banks; Colourful bug from the road*

In the late-afternoon Juan took me for a short paddle in his *curiara* (log canoe) along the northern end of the Big Lagoon. Highlights were Crested Curassows, with bright red beaks, noisy setting up their roosts in lagoon-side trees, a Gray-necked Wood-Rail quietly feeding in leaf litter under *várzea* forest along the water’s edge, a pair of Blue Dacnis on a tree in the middle of the lagoon, Amazonian Umbrellabirds flying across the lagoon and Band-tailed Nighthawks gracefully swooping over the water as the light failed.

By nightfall the generator was running (so I could relax under a fresh shower) and a new cook had arrived to up the ante w.r.t. food preparation. The generator failed (this time for good) just before bed time. Candles and head torches henceforth for the rest of the week ...

Victor and I started the second morning with a walk along the overgrown runway at the back of the camp. This delivered excellent views of Maroon-tailed Parakeets in adjacent trees and several hummingbirds feeding on flowering bushes. It was also interesting to see that many birds build their nest right next to a wasp nest. Presumably the birds consider the wasp nest a deterrent to predators. On the shorter walks we made before and after lunch along the road, my highlights were a pair of Rusty-breasted Nunlets sitting next to each other - they eventually let us approach to within a couple of meters - and a variety of hummingbirds (White-chinned and Rufous-throated Sapphires, plus several Hermit species). I was delighted also to be having some success identifying the different Antbirds/shrikes/wrens (usually I take one look at plate 41 of Hilty's book showing a couple of dozen near identical birds and am lost as to what I have just seen), since they were rather cooperative and the relatively sparse undergrowth allowed for prolonged views. With patience I also learned that the females, with varying rufous, brown and black colourations, are often more diagnostic than the males - which generally seem to be largely black with only subtly different patterns of white dots on their wings!



*Lineated Woodpecker (f); Black-headed Parrot; Golden-spangled Piculet*

In the late-afternoon I relaxed around the general camp area, adding attractive Crimson-crested Woodpecker and a variety of Antbirds and Antshrikes in the várzea forest at the very start of the road. In that same stretch of low brush forest along the road I also found and successfully photographed a tiny and spectacular Golden-spangled Piculet that was tapping away on a small twig. I also heard and saw a variety of ground birds walking through the adjacent undergrowth as I watched quietly from the road. Whether they were the elusive Rufous-winged Ground-Cuckoo, Tinamous or something entirely different I cannot be certain.



*Savannah, with scrub vegetation, white sandy-soil forest and terra firme forest in the distance*

With the generator looking sick (later diagnosed as a broken cylinder) I needed to rationalise my camera batteries and use my multi-AA battery grip as much as possible. Definitely a worthwhile backup measure that I would recommend for any trips to remote locations - things can always go wrong if you are relying on a generator for charging. Fortunately, with the road now partially cleared and the vehicle running, we were able to head off early in the morning in the truck with the workers to a point about three-quarters of the way along the road to the savannah. Whilst we left them to clear the remaining logs, Victor and I walked onwards to the savannah, then across the savannah for a further ca. 5km to the Camani camp. It was hot and sunny and we saw fewer birds than I had expected. Highlights were however excellent – Ivory-billed Araçari in tall trees adjacent to the savannah and a South American Snipe we disturbed as we walked across the sand and grass plains. At Campamento Camani I took the chance to photograph the Green-tailed Goldenthrout and her chicks again – the chicks had grown significantly over the previous three days. We met Lorenzo and the workers at Camani (they had used the radio there to check in with Puerto Ayacucho) and enjoyed a lift back with them in the truck to Junglaven.

In the afternoon Juan, Victor and I headed out in the *curiara* to search for manakins along the lagoon edge. Unfortunately we did not find them, but we did get spectacular views of the tiny American Pygmy Kingfisher (by nudging the *curiara* into gaps between the overhanging trees, such that we could see them fishing in the dark corners out of sight from the main lagoon) and a Red-throated Caracara calling “*co-me cacao*”.



Amazonian Antshrike; Green Araçari (f); Black Manakin

The final day commenced with the eerie, pre-dawn calls of Long-billed Woodcreepers that had been roosting in the trees around the camp, followed by excellent views of Amazonian Umbrellabirds in the treetops on the far side of the lagoon. After breakfast we again made use of the truck. Lorenzo drove us to the savannah early in the morning and Victor and I then spent the morning slowly walking back to Junglaven over a 6 hour period. More hummingbirds were seen, plus another flock of Gray-winged trumpeters, a pair of Common Piping-Guan, two silent Golden-green Woodpeckers just below the canopy, White-throated and Channel-billed Toucans and a Spotted Puffbird (in the várzea scrub just before Junglaven). In the afternoon I successfully tracked down two Black Manakins on the first part of trail just before it enters the forest and my patience in the hot sun was rewarded with some excellent close-up photographs. At dusk, all of the staff enjoyed watching the family of Green Araçaries return to their nest in an old woodpecker hole next to the main *churuata*.

As we had done each evening, Lorenzo and I enjoyed an excellent dinner together (candle lit!), discussed the days events and Lorenzo shared more of his stories of his time as a pilot, his experiences in Amazonas and his plans for Junglaven. He was great company and – along with the team running the camp - made me feel very well looked after and privileged to have spent time in Amazonas at Junglaven.

Dawn saw us in truck heading along the road to the Camani airstrip to await the flight for Lorenzo and I back to Puerto Ayacucho and then onward to Caracas. After dropping our gear on the landing strip, I passed the time walking along the road across the savannah between the runway and Campamento Camani and was treated to views of Amazonian Umbrellabirds, two gorgeous Red-and-green Macaws flying past at low level and a lek of white-bearded Manakins. The manakins were my 117<sup>th</sup> and final species for the trip, including 40 new species for me.

Overall, Junglaven exceeded my expectations. The camp itself is simple but clean and the food was good (large servings, well cooked and some exotic things thrown in like *Caribe* [Piranha] and *Pavon* [Peacock Bass] caught in the waters in front) and the drinks were cold. Once the generator is repaired and there is light and power to refill the tanks for a reliable water supply and showers and work the ice-maker, the set up will be excellent again. Visitors later in the year will benefit from the now fully open road to the savannah and the repaired truck (the clutch plates were to be replaced the day after I left), allowing for trips to *Laguna Galapagos* which I did not visit (apparently *Galapagos* and the surrounding forest holds many other different and attractive species). Along the road the split tyres which Lorenzo fills with water to provide an attraction for the birds have been cleaned and filled, so should start bringing in more birds and mammals as the dry season progresses, aided by the scattering of rice and seed nearby that Lorenzo will re-start once he is visiting regularly again. Best of all once you are there Junglaven, the lagoon, road and savannah are entirely at your disposal and you are the only thing that is not native wildlife!



*Little Cuckoo; Rusty-breasted Nunlet; Spotted Puffbird*

The number of birds I confirmed seeing (117) was not very large and it was admittedly sometimes hard work on my own to identify things in the upper levels of the tall forest sections. A small group that knows the calls of each species and is out to get the maximum numbers of species from their trip would likely do far, far better than I did in terms of numbers. Before going on the trip I identified ten categories of new species I would realistically like to see - and I got nine of those ten (2 new Puffbirds, 2 new Jacamars, a new Parrot, a new Araçari, a new Manakin, a new Cotinga and a new bird of prey – I missed out on a second new Manakin species). My focus really was on trying to be patient and get good views and photographs of those species that I did see and I definitely feel that my patience paid off in that respect.

I'm hoping that Emma and I can make a return trip later in this dry season, when the savannah bushes are laden with fruit and apparently attract much birdlife and we can make hikes along the road and visit *Galapagos* together.



*Cherrie's Antwren (f); Amazon Kingfisher (f); White-throated Toucan; White-chinned Emerald*



## **Bird List: Puerto Ayacucho and Junglaven, Estado Amazonas**<sup>1, 2</sup>

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

(In order of appearance in Hilty plates)

**Variegated Tinamou** \* (nest & egg only)

Neotropic Cormorant  
Anhinga  
Rufescent Tiger-Heron \*  
Cocoi Heron  
Great Egret  
Little Blue Heron  
Striated Heron  
Capped Heron

King Vulture  
Black Vulture [P&J]  
Turkey Vulture  
**Greater Yellow-headed Vulture** \*  
Osprey  
Great Black Hawk \*  
Roadside Hawk \*  
Black Caracara \*  
**Red-throated Caracara**  
Yellow-headed Caracara [P]

**Little Chachalaca**  
**Common Piping-Guan**

**Black Currasow**  
**Gray-winged Trumpeter** \*

Pied Plover  
**Gray-necked Wood-Rail**  
**Sungrebe**

Double-striped Thick-knee [P]

**Solitary Sandpiper**

**South American Snipe**

**Yellow-billed Tern**  
Large-billed Tern [P]  
Black Skimmer

Ruddy Pigeon [P&J]  
Scaled Dove [P]  
Ruddy Ground-Dove  
White-tipped Dove

Scarlet Macaw  
Red-and-green Macaw  
Brown-throated Parakeet \*

**Maroon-tailed Parakeet** \*  
Black-headed Parrot \*  
Yellow-crowned Parrot  
**Mealy Parrot** \*

Squirrel Cuckoo  
Black-bellied Cuckoo  
**Little Cuckoo** \*

Smooth-billed Ani

Violaceous Jay \*

Band-tailed Nighthawk

White-chested Emerald \*  
Versicoloured Emerald  
**Rufous-throated Sapphire** \*  
**White-chinned Sapphire** \*  
**Green-tailed Goldenthrout** \*  
White-necked Jacobin \*  
Black-throated Mango  
Eastern Long-tailed Hermit  
**Rupurumi Hermit**  
Reddish Hermit

Swallow-winged Puffbird [P&J] \*  
**Rusty-breasted Nunlet** \*  
**Spotted Puffbird** \*

**Green-tailed Jacamar** \*  
**Paradise Jacamar** \*

Amazon Kingfisher \*  
Green Kingfisher  
**American Pygmy Kingfisher**  
Ringed Kingfisher

Black Nunbird

White-throated Toucan \*  
Channel-billed Toucan \*  
Green Araçari \*  
**Ivory-billed Araçari**

**Golden-green Woodpecker** \*  
Yellow-tufted Woodpecker \*  
Lineated Woodpecker \*  
Crimson-crested Woodpecker  
**Golden-spangled Piculet** \*

<sup>1</sup> **First sighting ever for DJS**; \* photo available from trip

<sup>2</sup> Unmarked = seen at Junglaven only; [P] = Puerto Ayacucho only; [P&J]= both Puerto Ayacucho and Junglaven

Wedge-billed Woodcreeper

Long-billed Woodcreeper \*

Rusty-backed Spinetail

White-flanked Antwren \*

Amazonian Antshrike \*

White-shouldered Antshrike

Scale-backed Antbird

Black-throated Antbird

Cherrie's Antwren \*

White-bearded Manakin \*

Black Manakin \*

Forest Elaenia\*

Tropical Kingbird [P&J]

Rusty-Margined Flycatcher

Piratic Flycatcher

Pale-bellied Mourner

Short-crested Flycatcher\*

Tropical Mockingbird [P]

Black-crowned Tityra

Amazonian Umbrellabird \*

Black-collared Swallow [P]

White-banded Swallow

White-winged Swallow \*

Southern Rough-winged Swallow

Tropical Gnatcatcher

Dusky-capped Greenlet

Short-billed Honeycreeper

Blue Dacnis

Bananaquit [P&J]

Swallow Tanager \*

Palm Tanager [P&J]

Blue-gray Tanager [P&J]

Silver-beaked Tanager [P&J]

Lesser Seed-Finch

Moriche Oriole

Giant Cowbird

Olive Oropendola

Yellow-rumped Cacique [P&J] \*

Oriole Blackbird [P]

Total 117 confirmed species for trip, of which 40 new for me...



*Swallow-winged Puffbird; Ghostly, Long-billed Woodcreepers*