

Trip Report: Santa Elena and El Pauji, Estado Bolivar, July 2005 (David Southall)

Clemencia Rodner and Mary Lou Goodwin invited Emma and I to join a trip to visit Tony and Rita Crease in El Pauji, Estado Bolivar. Unfortunately Emma's work commitments (having already taken time off to ride her mountain bike from Santa Elena to El Pauji during the "Reto a la Frontera" race) prevented her from traveling, and mine meant that I could not join for the entire trip. Instead of joining the others for the three days of driving from Caracas, I would have to fly to/from Santa Elena and then join them for the Santa Elena/El Pauji part of the trip only. The Escalera Road and Barquilla de Fresa would have to for wait for another trip when Emma and I can go together. Since the second half of my trip involved a flight in a 5 seater Cessna with a 10kg luggage limit (i.e. my camera gear and a change of clothes only), Clemencia was kind enough to carry a second bag of clothes/spare camera gear etc. down for me in her car. In the end the logistics worked out perfectly.

Thursday 14th July, after work, I flew on a scheduled Rutaca flight to Ciudad Bolivar, via Puerto Ordaz, and spent the night in Posada "Don Carlos", only a hundred meters from Plaza Bolivar. The posada has been impressively restored and offers an excellent ambiance in the ancient courtyard and communal spaces, combined with simple but comfortable bedrooms. Their staff were very friendly and whipped up a late night *crema de apia* for me on my arrival. Definitely recommendable for future visits to Ciudad Bolivar (the location next to Plaza Bolivar, atop the hill, was very convenient for a morning walk through the historic parts of town). An early-morning taxi took me back to the airport to check in with Rutaca – this time for the Cessna flight to Santa Elena. Apparently the route changes daily – depending on which villages in the Gran Sabana area they have bookings for, so instead of 2+ hours flying directly to Santa Elena, I ended up on a two stop, 3.5+ hour milk run visiting first Uriman on the edge of the Rio Caroni (between Auyan-Tepui and the Chimanta group of Tepuis), then on to Icabaru before finally reaching Santa Elena. The great benefit of this flight (beyond the time saved vs. driving) was that I saw so much of the jungle (*selva*), waterfalls, rivers, villages and tepuis in Canaima National Park for "free"! The views of the "lost world" were amazing, although it was rather concerning whenever we flew into a rain storm or dense cloud (there was always one rain storm visible, somewhere) – knowing that our cruising height was below the top of the surrounding tepuis and that navigation was by a combination of visual and a GPS velcroed to the instrument panel! It was all worthwhile once we landed safely in Santa Elena. (See aerial photo below of El Abismo, which we flew alongside on the final leg from Icabaru).



Tony and Rita met me at the airport - having left El Pauji early that morning – and after a Brazilian lunch in Santa Elena (meat, salads and vegetables, paid by the weight of your laden plate) we headed north across the Gran Sabana to meet the three cars heading south from the Barquilla de Fresa. This was fantastic for me

First sighting ever for DJS: * photo available from trip

as I then had a bonus, unexpected chance to see the lower part of the Gran Sabana, including the waterfalls at Yuruani and distant glimpses of Kukenan and Roraima Tepuis. We failed to find much bird life at the waterfalls, but the biting insects were impressive (See photo below of caterpillar).

After our rendezvous with the others we headed back towards Santa Elena, but not before a quick stop to check out late-afternoon bird activity on a bridge adjacent to the main highway (Brown Jacamar, Tufted Coquette). After filling the gas tanks and buying a few essential supplies we each headed to our respective posadas for the night. Tony and Rita also stayed at Campamento Yakoo, which I had previously arranged for myself based on Emma's visit there the previous month, and we had an excellent evening meal there before retiring early, with alarm clocks set ready for a 05:10 departure the next morning.

Saturday morning, good time keeping all round saw us traveling past the airfield and along the El Pauji road for our first scheduled stop at 6am. The first 30+ km was a sealed road in good shape and we stopped first towards the end of that section. Highlights in the first clearing alongside the road included toucans, Moriche Orioles and a hummingbird laden tree that included a distant – but well seen in the scope – male Tufted Coquette.

Throughout the remainder of the morning we made our way slowly on the unsealed, hilly – and heavily eroded – road to El Pauji (a further 45km from the first stop), stopping at a multitude of sites and getting an ever increasing respect for the mountain bikers who had raced along this road a few weeks earlier. Emma's 4 hours 20 minutes started to look faster and faster as the day wore on and the road deteriorated. The collapsing bridge at Cinco Ranchos was particularly impressive and was well handled by all of our drivers (see photo below). Highlights along the way included a Gilded Barbet followed by Fiery-shouldered Parakeets feeding in fruit trees next to the road. The very infrequent traffic made for easy and relaxed birding/photography.



In El Pauji we were each assigned to our accommodation: Pierre and Henry in the guest house adjacent to Tony and Rita's main house, the girls in the guest house on the property of their son Marco, and myself in a *cabaña* at Maripak – a *posada* a further 400m down the road. All very convenient, very comfortable and surrounded by nature (generators were activated each evening for the key hours from 6 to 9pm and torches were fine the rest of the time). In no time the eight girls had settled into their rooms and turned the kitchen and dining room into the communal restaurant that it was to remain for the rest of our stay. Every morning and evening we all ate and drank there like kings. Their efforts were fantastic, with the quality and quantity of the dinners - after long days starting at between 4 and 5 am – leaving us all very impressed.

In the late afternoon we met up at Rita and Tony's terrace for Malva tea (very tasty) and to watch the hummingbirds feasting on their flowering Inga tree. Apparently Rita planted the tree 28 years previously (hard to believe the Inga is so young, given its huge size) and every time it flowers it attracts birds from all around. (See photos of Black-throated Mango, Sooty-capped Hermit and Copper-tailed Hummingbird, below).

I arrived for dinner ten minutes late, to find that all 12 of the Venezuelans were already eating and about to polish off my meal as well as theirs – my fault for failing to arrive *a la hora inglesa* in a remote Venezuelan village!



Sunday we had a relatively gentle start – not leaving until after 05:30 – since we were visiting the *conucos* and forest at La Independencia, only 10 minutes drive away. We saw amazing cobwebs, laden with morning dew, Red-fan Parrots, Many-banded Aracaries, Crimson-crested and Yellow-tufted Woodpeckers (the latter of which indeed eventually lived up to Rita’s nickname for it of the “Normal” woodpecker – but were still exciting for us in these early stages of the trip), McConnell’s and Ochre-bellied Flycatchers, Eastern-Long-tailed Hermit, Golden-headed and White-throated Manakins, Pompadour and Spangled Cotingas and the somewhat cartoon-like Paradise Tanager. A flock of Yellow-green Grosbeaks, high in the canopy, were a very noisy and colourful highlight. In addition to Tony and Rita’s excellent guiding and identification skills, Tony’s high quality scope proved invaluable for many of the long-distance sightings and really gave us some spectacular views, even in poor light conditions.

We returned to the cars at 12:00 and it started raining heavily about 1 minute later. This was real rain and it kept up for over two hours. We sheltered back in El Pauji and had lunch whilst counting our good fortune with the timing of the rain. By 4pm the sun was out again and we made an excursion a few km down the road to visit a nice trail on the RHS (traveling from El Pauji) that rises up a hill through low and dry scrub and flowering bushes. We had great views of a Fork-tailed Woodnymph, plus a family of Brown Jacamars (see photo below). Dinner this evening was a special affair – celebrating Mary Lou’s birthday – and was preceded by fantastic renditions of Venezuelan songs, accompanied variously by Rita or Rosaelena on the *cuatro*. The men struggled to compete - Tony and I made a game attempt at singing Auld Lang Syne (to the music of which there is, it appears, a traditional Venezuelan song also). Unfortunately it was late to bed and very early to rise – a 04:30 departure on Monday as we were driving to Uaiparu.



Monday was the longest day of the trip – off at 04:30 in the three 4WDs, birding from 06:00 on the Uaiparu road and, for the most persistent (and as it turned out luckiest) car load - only returning to El Pauji at dusk ... The day got off to a great start as our first stop, on the crest of a hill with extensive views, gave us superb views of Channel-billed (“Fruit Loop”) Toucans, Red-fan Parrots, Plumbeous Kite, Slate-coloured Grosbeak and Pied Puffbirds (see photo below). Whilst bush-bashing for some closer photos I missed apparently excellent close-up views of a family of Black-headed Parrots and later some Aracaries that alighted in a tree next to the cars!

Gradually we made our way on foot and by car down the road. At one point Tony stopped to show us the Hook-billed Kite tree – and within seconds had found the Hook-billed Kite exactly where he had promised. We were treated to great views as it also circled over us a few times (see photo below). At the same spot I had luck with some photos of a Plumbeous Kite that was in excellent light and then had the good fortune to get a

First sighting ever for DJS: * photo available from trip

sequence of shots as a second bird flew in and mated with it for 20 or so seconds - giving a great view of its rufous wings (see photo below). It was all becoming too much ... without even moving we then found a series of fruiting trees that were attracting mixed flocks of tanagers, honeycreepers and dacnises!



Later we picnicked on fresh eggs from Rita's hen (complete with date stamp), visited an indigenous farmer's house to buy excellent mandarins and other fruit before finally reaching the village of Uaiparu on the Rio Uaiparu. Both spots were full of photogenic children (see photos below) and Uaiparu gave us a Sunbittern and close-ups of Yellow-tufted Woodpeckers (see photo below). By 12:00 the heat had well and truly risen and we turned to start the trip homewards. At this stage we had not yet encountered a single car along the road – perfect conditions for walking and setting tripods wherever we liked! In the end the five of us in Rita and Tony's car kept encountering so many good spots that we did not make it back until dusk. The highlight was next to the Cinco Ranchos bridge where we encountered a series of mixed feeding flocks containing multitudes of new and colourful tanagers. I hardly got any photos at all – there were so many new species for me that I largely stuck to using my binoculars for fear of missing something new whilst “wasting” time taking a photo of something we had already seen! It was a riot of colour with Paradise Tanagers, Green-and-gold Tanagers and Yellow-bellied Tanagers being my personal favourites. To top things off an initially suspected Swallow-winged Puffbird was confirmed in the scope to be a far more unusual Dusky Purpletuff and Rita found us a Blackish Nightjar resting quietly on the edge of a clearing.

All up we identified some 25 Tanager and allied species that day and Tony recorded a personal grand total for the day of 125 species – apparently his best day ever in the El Pauji area in terms of species count. As the sun set on the road back to El Pauji, an Aplomado Falcon sat by the side of the road begging to be photographed. I obliged (see photo below).



Tuesday was a day of exercise ... with a climb up to the Abismo ridge and the view across to Brazil. Of course, we still started early – only a 05:30 departure this time – so we could spend the early hours in a *conuco* at the base of the Abismo before starting our ascent. In reality the *conuco* was rather quiet, but did deliver Pompadour Cotinga, Black-eared Fairy (good views, but tough to photograph) and our best views of a Brown Jacamar. The ascent was relatively easy and thoroughly enjoyable. The climb must have taken only 1.5 hours and was largely through beautiful wooded and forest terrain filled with orchids (not in flower at this time of year). When the orchids are in flower it must be quite a spectacle. On the way up Tony again pulled his magic trick by locating a Stygian owl (that inhabits some clearings near the summit) not once, but twice. Unfortunately the second perch was in a dark spot with light behind, so my photos were not what I had hoped for despite a bit of bush bashing to get a better angle (see photo below). In the end my efforts to get

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better/closer shots were confounded by the combination of terrain, light conditions and a twig/leaf that seemed to be permanently between me and the owl's eyes - whichever direction I moved in! The highlight was probably watching many, many hummingbirds buzzing around the owl – presumably trying to encourage it to move to a more photogenic spot!

On reaching the Abismo the view was fantastic – steeping cliff faces, *selva* and hills and the Brazilian Amazon beyond. A pair of King Vultures and a White Hawk circled far below us, scouring the jungle.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent relaxing in El Pauji, doing laundry at Maripak and taking photos of birds around the village – including an uncommon Red-and-black Grosbeak (identified by Tony from my photo and confirmed by Robin Restall) – and hummingbirds feeding on the Inga tree.



Wednesday I was scheduled to leave El Pauji for Santa Elena in order to be ready for the next morning's flight back to Ciudad Bolivar. My ticket said the flight would leave at 11:00, but on my arrival in Santa Elena on Friday the Rutaca rep had warned that it could leave as early as 08:00 if a plane happened to have spent the previous night in Santa Elena. Either way, I needed to be in Santa Elena that night to be sure of getting the flight, whenever it actually would depart. That still left me with a full morning to spend with the rest of the group and 06:00 found us at Cinco Ranchos. The area was relatively quiet, although we did see a party of 11 White-throated Toucans glide across the road in single file shortly after our arrival. A highlight was again finding a Dusky Purpletuft – and this time photographing it (see below). Mary Lou was delighted to finally get her birthday present as this was one that she had been particularly keen to add to her list. Rita again found the Blackish Nightjars and we were able to identify and photograph the male and female from close range whilst they dozed (see photo of male, above).

As the morning wore on I found a good spot off the side of the road and coaxed a White-bearded Manakin to the edge of the forest. The light was so poor and, with my remote cable having failed, I was shooting blurry tripod mounted photos at $\frac{1}{4}$ second. I ended up resorting to using the time delay once I had set up the shot with my tripod and then hoping that 10 seconds later the manakin would be 1) in the same spot and 2) completely still! Amazingly one great shot resulted (see below) and I also got a decent shot in a similar manner of a Blue-capped Manakin that I managed to almost thread a clear line of sight to as it lurked somewhat deeper in the forest (see below). After that success there was just time to squeeze in a noon swim at the *Salto Catedral*, say goodbye to Rita, Tony and the Caracas team (they would be leaving the next morning for the three day drive home) and then join Marieli in her 4WD for the journey back to Santa Elena.



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Back at Yakoo I spent the late afternoon sorting out my gear, charging batteries (they have 24 hour electricity!) and taking photos around the gardens (my only shots of Paradise Tanagers - see below - come from the surrounding gardens) and next morning I saw some lovely White-throated Toucans (see below), tanagers, hummingbirds and an unusual parrot that was likely introduced as a pet of Yakoo's owners but was flying freely around the gardens. Its identity (see below) remains to be confirmed, but it may be a sub-species of Festive Parrot.

Thursday morning my flight finally left at ... 11:30. Although at various times in the morning it seemed that maybe there wasn't a flight at all or maybe it would leave at 09:00, it eventually left essentially as per my ticketed time – although the destination was different (I had to go to Canaima to catch a different connection from there). The weather was clearer than on the way down and we were treated to excellent views of the Tepuis as we flew north. The plane was somewhat older feeling than the Cessna I'd flown in on the way down and, to my alarm, was minus any navigation aids (no GPS velcroed to the dashboard this time). More reassuringly the pilot was 60 if he was a day old. I thought of the “there are old pilots and bold pilots, but no old, bold pilots” mantra and took this as a good sign. Once we were safely in Canaima I asked him about the lack of navigation aids: he said too many pilots die flying in bad conditions in the Gran Sabana/Canaima region, so if he cannot fly on visual then he lands at the first available landing strip and waits. I did not probe as to how he finds the landing strips under those circumstances without visibility if the weather closes in as it had at times during my flight on the way down to Santa Elena ...

A one hour taxi ride from Ciudad Bolivar to Puerto Ordaz – where I met a mountain biking friend of ours Marcela who was also on the same flight back to Caracas after spending the day working in Puerto Ordaz – and a smooth evening flight in a real plane (with navigation aids, I assume) saw me home by 9pm, some 12 hours after leaving Yakoo.

All in all a great trip, excellent company, guides, food, scenery, nature and birds. Some good photos, but not as many as I had hoped for since I was always on the move and did less patient waiting for opportunities than is usually required to generate more quality close-ups. I personally saw some 137 species on the trip of which 63 were new for me. However, much more impressive than the number of species was that they were almost all visually spectacular - like the tanagers (27 species, including honeycreepers etc.), hummingbirds (14 species), parrots/macaws (10 species), manakins, cotingas, woodpeckers and the owl. Tony's combined list for the group over the 4+ days was some 200 species. El Pauji is definitely worth the effort to visit!!



Our guide checking out a Black-eared Fairy...



Bird List:

(confirmed personal sightings only – excludes sightings by others in group, or birds heard only)

(In order of appearance in Hilty plates)

Yellow Headed Caracara	<u>Stygian Owl</u> *
Plumbeous Kite*	<u>Blackish Nightjar</u> *
Turkey Vulture	White-collared Swift
<u>Hook-billed Kite</u> *	<u>Tepui Swift</u>
Bat Falcon	<u>Neotropical Palm-Swift</u>
<u>Aplomado Falcon</u> *	Tufted Coquette*
American Kestrel	Blue-tailed Emerald
Pearl Kite	<u>Versicoloured Emerald</u> *
Roadside Hawk	Glittering-throated Emerald
Black Vulture	<u>Copper-tailed Hummingbird</u> *
<u>King Vulture</u>	Fork-tailed Woodnymph*
Northern Crested Caracara	White-chinned Sapphire*
Black Caracara	Brown Violetear
White Hawk	Black-throated Mango*
Swallow-tailed Kite	<u>Long-billed Starthroat</u> *
Sunbittern	<u>Black-eared Fairy</u> *
Ruddy Pigeon	Sooty-capped Hermit*
Ruddy Ground-Dove	<u>Eastern Long-tailed Hermit</u>
Red-and-green Macaw*	<u>Reddish Hermit</u>
<u>Red-shouldered Macaw</u>	Amazonian White-tailed Trogon*
Blue-headed Parrot*	Swallow-winged Puffbird*
<u>Red-fan Parrot</u> *	<u>Pied Puffbird</u> *
Orange-winged Parrot*	<u>Brown Jacamar</u> *
Yellow-crowned Parrot*	Amazon Kingfisher
Brown-throated Parakeet*	Gilded Barbet
<u>Fiery-shouldered Parakeet</u> *	White-throated Toucan*
<u>Tepui Parrotlet</u>	Channel-billed Toucan
Black-headed Parrot*	<u>Many-banded Aracari</u> *
Striped Cuckoo	
Squirrel Cuckoo	
Smooth-billed Ani	

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Scale-breasted Woodpecker
Yellow-tufted Woodpecker*
Crimson-crested Woodpecker*

White-bearded Manakin*
Golden-headed Manakin
White-throated Manakin
Blue-crowned Manakin*

Yellow-olive Flatbill
Common Tody-Flycatcher
Painted Tody-Flycatcher
Helmeted Pygmy-Tyrant
Ochre-bellied Flycatcher*
Tropical Kingbird*
Rusty-Margined Flycatcher
Streaked Flycatcher
Boat-billed Flycatcher
Great Kiskadee
Piratic Flycatcher
Variegated Flycatcher*
Long-tailed Tyrant*
McConnell's Flycatcher
Fork-tailed Flycatcher*
Tropical Mockingbird

Chestnut-crowned Becard
Dusky Purpletuft*

Pompadour Cotinga
Spangled Cotinga

White-thighed Swallow
Blue-and-white Swallow
Gray-breasted Martin
Southern Rough-winged Swallow

Buff-breasted Wren
House Wren
Black-billed Thrush
Rufous-browed Peppershrike

Hooded Tanager
Purple Honeycreeper

Short-billed Honeycreeper
Green Honeycreeper*
Blue Dacnis
Black-faced Dacnis*
Bananaquit
Guira Tanager
Yellow-backed Tanager
Swallow Tanager
Burnished-buff Tanager*
Turquoise Tanager*
Spotted Tanager
Green-and-gold Tanager*
Masked Tanager*
Yellow-bellied Tanager*
Paradise Tanager*
Opal-rumped Tanager
Plumbeous Euphonia
Palm Tanager
Blue-gray Tanager
Silver-beaked Tanager*
Red-shouldered Tanager
Fulvous-crested Tanager
Flame-crested Tanager*
Magpie Tanager
Black-faced Tanager*

Buff-throated Saltator
Slate-coloured Grosbeak
Yellow-green Grosbeak
Red-and-black Grosbeak*
Lesser Seedfinch
Blue-black Grassquit
Yellow-bellied Seedeater*
Ruddy-breasted Seedeater
Lined Seedeater
Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch*

Moriche Oriole*
Giant Cowbird
Olive Oropendola
Green Oropendola
Crested Oropendola
Red-breasted Blackbird

Total 137 visually confirmed species for trip, of which 63 new for me ...