

Brazil

15–25 January 2011

Participants

John and Ros Matthews

Julia Mayne

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Judyth Swift

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Led by Andy Foster

Green Kingfisher

Day 1: Overnight flight from London Heathrow to Rio de Janeiro, via Paris Charles de Gaulle.

Day 2: On arrival in Rio, we were met by Cirilo, the guide from our Lodge, Serra dos Tucanos. Cirilo however, had suffered a broken rib while birding a few days earlier and would remain in Rio to recover. We were left in the care of our capable Portuguese-speaking driver and transported swiftly to the Lodge. On the relatively quiet roads with few traffic jams it was difficult to identify some birds as we sped along. A few of the group had been to South America but none to south-east Brazil, so we were keen to start our lists. On the journey we managed to tick many Black Vultures with a few Turkey Vultures, Neotropic Cormorants, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Cocoli Heron, Great Egret, Black-crowned Night-heron, Savanna Hawk, Southern Lapwing, Ruddy Ground-dove, Smooth-billed Ani, Guira Cuckoo, Burrowing Owl, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Tropical Kingbird, Blue-and-white Swallow, the familiar House Sparrow and on roadside wires, a female Amazon Kingfisher, the only record of the trip for this species. On arrival at the Lodge, we were met by Andy and Cristina Foster and some of the staff. Our bags were taken from us to be transferred to our rooms and we were led straight out the back door to the veranda which looked out onto a lovely garden complete with swimming pool, photography hide, banana feeding tables and many hummingbird feeders. Beyond the garden lay steep hills covered with dense rainforest. Andy was to be our guide for the whole trip and he pointed out most of the common garden birds in the first half hour or so. These birds were lifers for most of the group.

After being dragged away from the birds to be shown our rooms and to eat lunch together in the cool dining room, Andy took us for a short walk along the Extension Trail, one of several trails around the grounds. Species of note in the garden and grounds included Black Hawk-eagle, Maroon-bellied Parakeet, Plain Parakeet, Rufous-breasted Hermit, Black Jacobin, Violet-capped Woodnymph, Sombre Hummingbird, Spot-billed Toucanet, Yellow-eared Woodpecker, Lesser Woodcreeper, Plain Xenops, Ferruginous Antbird, Scaled Antbird, Chestnut-crowned and Crested Becards, Blue (Swallow-tailed) and Pin-tailed Manakins, Masked Water-tyrant, Social Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, Variegated Flycatcher, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, Long-billed and Southern House Wrens, Rufous-bellied Thrush, Pale-breasted Thrush, White-necked Thrush (first record for the Lodge feeders), Bananaquit, Green Honeycreeper, Blue Dacnis, Orange-bellied, Violaceous and Chestnut-bellied Euphonias, Green-headed, Sayaca, Golden-chevrons, Palm, Brazilian, Ruby-crowned and Olive-green Tanagers, Red-crowned Ant-tanager, Shiny Cowbird, Double-collared Seedeater and Saffron Finch. On the trail was a poisonous Jararaca Viper. The checklist was done just before dinner with plenty of new birds for the entire group. Even though we were tired after traveling through the night, some of us

enjoyed samples of several types of local rum whilst sitting in the garden listening to calling frogs and toads. Several of these were found with our torches including the Cane Toad. Many huge bugs of all descriptions were also admired. Most of us slept well, the only noises were the stream in the grounds and the insects and amphibians calling.

Day 3: This was our first excursion in the Lodge minibus with our driver Aldo. Breakfast was at 06.15 every day and excursions started at 07.00. It was only 15 minutes to the Theodora Trail, an interesting, fairly level walk. Formerly a railway, then a road before landslides forced its closure, nature had taken over and only a single-track trail remained although we did find small areas of tarmac complete with cat's eyes. There were muddy sections but we were happy to get wet feet with the promise of new birds ahead. Surprisingly, this was the only mud we walked through all week given the heavy rain Brazil had suffered the previous week. We then returned along the trail to the van to have our picnic lunch. Species of note on the Theodora Trail were Grey-fronted Dove, Squirrel Cuckoo, Ferruginous Pygmy-owl, Saw-billed and Scale-throated Hermits, White-throated Hummingbird, White-barred Piculet, Yellow-browed and Olivaceous Woodpeckers, Rufous-capped Spinetail, White-browed and Buff-browed Foliage-gleaners, Variable Antshrike, Plain Antvireo, Star-throated Antwren, Bertoni's Antbird, White-shouldered Fire-eye, Slaty Bristlefront, Brown-crested and Streaked Flycatchers, Grey-headed Attila, Ochre-faced Tody-flycatcher, Mottle-cheeked Tyrannulet, Golden-crowned and White-browed Warblers and Brassy-breasted and Burnished-buff Tanagers. We then drove a short distance to a section of the Macae de Cima road where we piled out of the minibus several times at slightly different altitudes to look for new birds. Species of note at Macae de Cima included Roadside and Short-tailed Hawks, Red-eyed Thornbird, Giant Antshrike, Bare-throated Bellbird, Serra do Mar Tyrant-manakin, Yellow-billed Elaenia, Planalto and, Grey-capped Tyrannulets, Yellow-legged Thrush, Black-goggled Tanager and Rufous-collared Sparrow. We also saw several birds observed the previous day. Species heard but not seen included Solitary and Brown Tinamous, Dusky-legged Guan, Blue-bellied Parrot, Surucua Trogon, Brazilian and Such's Antthrushes, Rufous Gnateater, Black-and-gold Cotinga, Green Sciffornis, Drab-breasted Bamboo-tyrant, Sharpbill and Rufous-browed Peppershrike. We returned to the Lodge for dinner after a bird-filled day and had some rum while we relaxed in the garden. There was a tarantula outside the guest rooms and I spotted an Orange-spined Hairy Dwarf Porcupine in a tree from my balcony. It was seen again a couple of days later taking bananas from the feeding tables.

Day 4: Today we descended to a lower altitude today to visit the Reserva Ecologica de Guapi Acu, an area of wetlands and lowland Atlantic Forest, a habitat that has mostly disappeared. Andy helped to set up the reserve back in 2002. It was noticeably hotter at this altitude. En route, we stopped at a small lake and at an area of open fields complete with gauchos on horseback. In these different habitats we rapidly built up a good list. Species of note included Striated and Whistling Herons, Muscovy and Masked Ducks, Black-bellied and White-faced Whistling-ducks, Brazilian Teal, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Rufous-thighed Hawk, Yellow-headed and Southern Caracaras, Purple Gallinule, Wattled Jacana, Pale-vented and Picazuro Pigeons, Greater Ani, White-collared and Grey-rumped Swifts, Ringed Kingfisher, Campo Flicker, Blond-crested Woodpecker, Tailed-banded Hornero, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, Sooretama Slaty-antshrike, Chestnut-backed Antshrike, Unicoloured and White-flanked Antwrens, White-bearded Manakin, White-headed Marsh-tyrant, Cattle Tyrant, Yellow Tyrannulet, Grey-breasted Martin, White-browed and Chestnut-capped Blackbirds and Red-rumped Cacique. We returned to the Lodge for lunch and a free afternoon in the grounds. In addition to the usual birds in the garden, we saw Yellow-lored Tody-flycatcher and a Purple-throated Euphonia as well as a large black and yellow Tegu Lizard and a Guianan Squirrel.

Day 5: Today was a full day excursion to the Serra dos Orgaos National Park near Teresopolis. We started in the lower section and walked downhill through the forest on a wide tarmac road. In addition to many species already seen, species of note included Plain Woodcreeper, Long-tailed Tyrant, Piratic Flycatcher, Sepia-capped Flycatcher and Red-necked and Azure-shouldered Tanagers. After walking back to the minibus, we drove further up the mountain road. We made a brief tourist stop in a lay-by to take some group photographs with Dedo-de Deus (God's finger) in the background, a huge rock pinnacle 1692 metres above sea level. The scenery here is superb, miles of virgin rainforest broken by sheer faces of rock. We then drove to the upper section of the National Park and up to the top car park about 1100 metres above sea level. We stopped on the way up and assembled to admire two Uniform Finches. Arriving at the car park, we enjoyed our lunch on picnic tables near a beautiful waterfall. Three policemen, who were helping with the flood disaster in the area, also admired the scenery and took photos of each other on their mobile phones. We were ready for more birds and didn't have long to wait. It was straight out of the car park and onto the Suspension Trail, a wide boardwalk high above the forest floor, teeming with new birds. We also saw a Brown Capuchin Monkey, which after having a good look at us, disappeared into the canopy. Species of note included Plovercrest, White-throated Woodcreeper, Pallid Spinetail, White-collared and Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaners, Sharp-billed Treehunter, Streaked

Xenops, a pair of Giant Antshrikes, Tufted Antshrike, Ochre-rumped and White-bibbed Antbirds, Brazilian Antthrush, Rufous Gnateater, Rufous-browed Peppershrike and Rufous-crowned Greenlet. After the exciting birds of the Suspension Trail we descended to the road and walked downhill where Aldo was waiting with the minibus. On our return to the Lodge we added Versicoloured Emerald, Green Kingfisher and Channel-billed Toucan in the grounds.

Day 6: We headed north today to Portao Azul, passing through the town of Nova Friburgo. Progress was slow owing to the massive recovery operation here. Nova Friburgo was the epi-centre of the previous week's terrible floods and landslides, many lives were lost and homes and livelihoods destroyed. One side of the main road into the town had disappeared down the mountainside. We realised that we were lucky to have been able to continue our trip to Brazil; the Lodge some 20 miles away being safe from destruction and major damage. Many people in the area depend upon tourism and it was felt important that the trip went ahead. Arriving at Portao Azul, we walked up a wide track through a thickly wooded area, then into a more open area complete with a small lake. The lake was birdless; Andy said the only likely species was Least Grebe but these were absent today. However, all the activity in the trees was compensation. As well as further views of now familiar birds, species of note included Rufous-thighed Kite, Glittering-bellied and Sapphire-spangled Emerald, Scaled Woodcreeper, Spix's Spinetail, Dusky-tailed Antbird, Green-backed Becard, Grey-hooded, Short-crested and Cliff Flycatchers, Saw-billed Elaenia, Drab-breasted Bamboo-tyrant, Magpie and Gilt-edged Tanagers, Green-winged Saltator, Half-collared Sparrow and Hooded Siskin. Aldo drove up the track to pick us up near the lake and we returned to the Lodge for lunch and a free afternoon. We enjoyed further views of the usual garden birds, a few of us tried some photography, some had a swim in the pool while others walked one of the trails. A Black-cheeked Gnateater was seen on the Extension Trail and the garden held a Swallow-tailed Hummingbird. We were still waiting for Blondie (Blond-crested Woodpecker) to visit the feeders as Andy had bravely promised.

Day 7: Breakfast had just finished when Andy came to round us up, saying that a Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper was calling from the stream at the front of the Lodge. We lined up quickly on the bridge to enjoy great views of this unique bird. It soon moved away downstream, walking, hopping and flying from boulder to boulder. Moments later we loaded ourselves into the minibus and returned to the upper section of the Serra dos Orgaos National Park. We were to walk the high altitude Pedra do Sino trail, as an alternative to the usual high altitude trail, inaccessible due to landslides. Andy warned us that it was a tough walk, climbing from the car park at 1100 metres to around 1900 metres. However, we had all day, packed lunches in our bags – and the option to return to the mini-bus that Aldo was guarding as usual, if the climb was too much. In the event the whole group completed the walk quite easily. We saw several new species on the trek up the mountainside, which wasn't as tough as we expected. A horned frog species was found on the path, totally camouflaged on the dead leaves. We only saw it when it jumped to another leaf, so it was lucky to avoid the twenty-two boots coming up the path. Our lunch stop in a small clearing produced one of the birds of the trip, Crowned Eagle, soaring high around the sheer cliffs above us. Other species of note included Barred Forest-falcon, Brazilian Ruby, Rufous-breasted Leaf-tosser, Rufous-backed Antwren, Rufous-tailed Antbird, Black-and-gold Cotinga, Hooded Berryeater, Serra do Mar Tyrannulet and Thick-billed Saltator. Sharpbill was heard calling on the lower section of the walk but would not show.

Day 8: The Blond-crested Woodpecker put in a brief appearance in the trees above the feeders at breakfast today but was only glimpsed by a few of us. Then it flew away, high into the forest. We would have to try again tomorrow, our last full day at the Lodge. Today was a full day out with packed lunches, so Blondie would have to wait. The first site was a repeat visit to Macae de Cima, this time going much further along the rough road, making several stops for birding and a couple of short walks. We ate our lunch by a small, slow-flowing river where we saw a Ringed Kingfisher. As well as many birds already on the list, species of note included Spot-backed and White-bearded Antshrikes, Spot-breasted Antwren, Streak-capped Antwren, Shear-tailed Grey-tyrant, Whiskered and Euler's Flycatchers, White-throated Spadebill, Blue-naped Chlorophonia and Yellow-backed Tanager. On the way back to the Lodge, we stopped to walk down the Cedae Trail. A pleasant, wide track curved down through the rainforest to cross a stream at the bottom in a fairly open area. This was a good place to scan the sky and the distant canopy. Andy showed us the nest of a Sepia-capped Flycatcher, built next to a wasps' nest as protection from predators. As well as many birds already seen species of note included Mantled Hawk, Surucua Trogon, Planalto Woodcreeper and Ochre-breasted Foliage-gleaner.

Day 9: For most of the group, this was the last full day at the Lodge. We were sad that this trip was nearly over but were still eager to find more new species. At breakfast we had superb views of at least half a dozen Channel-billed Toucans in the canopy up the slope beyond the garden. We left at 07.00 as usual, this time on foot, to explore the

Extension Trail and Water Box Trail within the Lodge grounds. We enjoyed many birds that we had already seen whilst new species included Black-throated Trogon, Rufous-capped Antthrush, Black-cheeked Gnateater (seen by the whole group this time) and Ochre-bellied Flycatcher. Our final afternoon was spent at leisure in the Lodge grounds. Some of group used the photography hide, while others took advantage of the swimming pool or just relaxed with a drink to watch the birds on the feeders. The Blond-crested Woodpecker finally put in a prolonged appearance at the feeders, much to the delight of the photographers. A Slaty-breasted Wood-rail was seen briefly in the undergrowth near the hide by two of the group. After dinner, we sat in the garden enjoying Caipirinha cocktails or samples of Brazilian rum discussing all the new birds and many other forms of wildlife we had seen.

Day 10: We managed a return trip to the Cedae Trail, only a short distance from the Lodge before returning for last minute packing, our final lunch and departure at 13.00 for the airport in Rio. As well as many birds already seen species of note included Dusky-throated Hermit, White-eyed Foliage-gleaner, Black-tailed Tityra, Eared Pygmy-tyrant, Tropical Parula and Rufous-headed Tanager. I also had a brief view of a Black-billed Scythebill, which, unfortunately, flew away before anybody else could get on to it. We said our final goodbyes to Andy, Cristina and their staff, then set off for Rio, tired but happy with what we had seen. From the minibus, we managed to identify a Least Grebe, two Kelp Gulls and had much closer views of many Magnificent Frigatebirds. We shopped for souvenirs in the airport and then took an overnight flight to London via Paris.

Day 11: We arrived in London mid-morning where we said our goodbyes to each other and the tour ended. The group worked well together and this contributed to our species total. Hopefully we may all meet again on our future travels.

As mentioned earlier in the report, a few days before the start of the trip, the communities of Nova Friburgo, Teresopolis and Petropolis, a relatively short distance north of Serra dos Tucanos Lodge were hit by Brazil's worst ever natural disaster. Hundreds of people died and thousands were made homeless by flooding and landslides. Amazingly our Lodge, at the other side of several large mountains was unaffected. We observed huge efforts being made to help the inhabitants of these towns and we wish the people well. We felt very privileged and grateful that our travel to this wonderful part of Brazil was allowed to continue after such a major disaster. The only – very minor in the circumstances – change to our itinerary was that two of the usual trips from the Lodge could not go ahead because of damaged roads. A few potential species such as Three-toed Jacamar and Red-legged Seriema were out of bounds. At the time of writing this report, all excursions are now available again. I would recommend this trip to anybody who enjoys watching birds, either beginners or even experienced South American birders. There are plenty of species to find here, many of which are endemic to the Atlantic Rainforest. Andy, Cristina and their staff were excellent as was the food and accommodation. This is an ideal trip for birders who like to relax a bit or equally for those who are more active. Andy, our guide was very good at finding the birds and more importantly tried to get views for the entire group. We would have seen far fewer birds without Andy. There were many species that we didn't see but nobody ever sees everything. It would take several visits to see most of the avifauna but this is a good indication of the very rich biodiversity of the area. Anyway, it's a good excuse to go back again.

Trip totals were as follows:

Total group list seen = 224

Atlantic Rainforest endemics = 80 (a Birdfinders record)

Species heard only = 18

Neil Westwater