

BIRDING NORTH-EAST BRAZIL

(The “Ant-things & More” Tour)

19 January – 1 February 2020

Tour organized by Serra dos Tucanos Birding Tours

Local Leader

Leo Patrial

Tour Convener

Peter Roberts

Participants

Chuck Bragg, Bill & Marsha Hendrickson, Tom & Patsy Inglet, John Prentice & Linda Gindler, Scott Reich.

TOUR NOTES

January 19. Fortaleza to Icapui: Scott, Tom & Patsy & John & Linda arrived on a direct flight from Miami into Fortaleza early this morning, despite threatened delays. Sadly Scott was minus his luggage. The other four of us (Peter, Chuck, Bill & Marsha) were already in situ and arrived to join them and our local bird guide Leo at about 6.30am – myself being the last to show.

We met Reginaldo our driver, packed the large minibus with our bags and set off for the drive southeastwards to Icapuí (about 140 miles) for our overnight stay. Along the way we made a stop for toilets, coffee and a snack for those of us who had missed breakfast. Then, further down the way made a few stops in open caatinga habitats as and when Leo thought fit, or saw an interesting bird. First of these was a Spot-backed (Caatinga) Puffbird giving great looks on the roadside wires. Cactus (Caatinga) Parakeets flew over on several occasions and White-throated Seedeaters made it a trio of endemics for virtually our first 3 species of the trip. Short walks later on produced further interesting, more widespread species along with further more special birds: Variable Orioles, Chalk-browed & Tropical Mockingbirds, Red-cowled Cardinals, Sharp-shinned (split as Rufous-thighed by IOC) Hawk, Yellow-breasted Flycatcher (Flatbill) right through to Turkey Vultures, Southern Caracaras, Bananaquits and Great Kiskadees. The weather was, as expected, wonderfully warm with no rain.

By late morning we were on the coast and after another short walk found a lovely beachside seafood restaurant where they served a platter of fish, prawns and lobsters – all well-received. The coast here is a flat plain with muddy creeks and mangroves. We took a short peek after lunch and notched up a few shorebirds:

Black-bellied & Semipalmated Plovers, Greater Yellowlegs, Spotted & Semipalmated Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilts and a lone Ruddy Turnstone.

From here it was a short run to our pleasant beach-side Casa Do Mar Hotel at Icapui. We checked in and took a bit of a break before setting out again at 3.15pm. We headed back along the coast finding White-bellied Nothura in the grounds – little did we know at the time that this would be virtually the only species of Tinamou that wasn't "heard only"! We arrived at some remnant mangroves with a well-constructed boardwalk in search of Little Wood-Rail, Mangrove Rail and Bicolored Conebill. The saying "two out of three ain't bad" was never more appropriate. We had stunning views of the Mangrove Rail before entering the mangroves; called out and slowly strutting past us on some old salt pans where we found a few more shorebirds – (Hudsonian) Whimbrel, Stilt Sandpiper and Short-billed Dowitchers being new. Once in the mangroves the Bicolored Conebills were quite common in short flurries and gave some very nice views. Here too were some great looks in good light over the extensive sand and mudflats out to the sea's edge on a quite low tide. Many more shorebirds here included Little Blue Herons, Lesser Yellowlegs, Sanderlings, Least Sandpipers and a pretty little Collared Plover. We tried in several locations for the Little Wood Rail, but it was a "no-show".

Back at the hotel in the dark by 6.15pm, with an hour to clean up before supper in the hotel. Supper was very good, but very slow in arriving.

January 20. Icapui to Guaramiranga and Baturite: We were in the bus at 5am this morning to return to the mangroves of Icapui for a final look at this coastal habitat. We tried again for the Wood Rail but again had no luck. New for us were Caatinga Cachalote – a fine nesting pair complete with their huge stick nest – and a Willet amongst the other shorebirds on the mudflats of the low tide. There were also both species of Night-Heron in the mangroves.

Back to the hotel by 7am, we went in for breakfast, loaded up and set off for the drive of 150 miles inland to Guaramiranga and on to Baturite up in the sierras and massifs holding isolated moist Atlantic rainforest habitats. Along the way there were only 1-2 stops – for Campo Flicker as we exited our hotel, for coffee and toilet breaks, a lovely Pearl Kite by the roadside and a quick buffet lunch in the town of Baturite. We then drove a further 15 miles or so, higher into the thickly forested hills to our accommodation for the night at Alto Serra Lodge.

After checking in it was evident that, despite it being the heat of the middle of the day, there was still a fair bit of activity, so an hour or more of downtime was lost as we stood outside our chalets in the forest and began finding a whole litany of great birds. Burnished-Buff Tanagers started us off, but these were soon eclipsed by the absolutely stunning Red-necked Tanagers seen closely, sporting so many bright colours that sunglasses were required to look at them. Amidst the common and widespread flycatchers were Planalto & Slender-footed Tyrannulets. By the Reception and Restaurant area were Wing-banded Horneros. High in the trees bright Purple-throated Euphonias came and went.

After ordering our evening meal, Leo took us off in the bus to some local hotspots for the chance of starting to find some of the really sought-after and scarce species we'd only find here. Top of the list was Grey-breasted Parakeet and we ended up with many excellent looks at this very smart and colourful bird during

the afternoon. More commonplace, yet still lovely to see, were Yellow-chevroned Parakeets. We had a trio of good Spinetails this afternoon, all called in and showing well: the localised Grey-headed, more widespread through Brazil Smoky-throated and the common Yellow-chinned. Great Antshrike put on a splendid performance too, but surely the top bird of the afternoon was Yellow-faced Siskin that was a lifer for Leo who had been searching for it in this area several times before.

We checked out a little wetland area in the hills, with its lush forest, secondary growth and scattering of swish private houses (one of them with its own private zoo!). A few extras for the list popped up here – Limpkin, White-faced Whistling Duck and Purple Gallinule included. As light began to fade, a final walk produced the bright little Pectoral Sparrow before we set off back to our lodge by 6pm.

The bird list at 7pm was followed by supper at 7.30pm, giving us the chance to get to our beds early in preparation for another early start tomorrow. While having supper Scott was delighted to be reunited with his luggage that arrived from Fortaleza by taxi.

January 21. Baturite to Quixada: Early morning coffee, cookies and bananas at 5am set us up for a pre-breakfast walk along a decent trail into the forest a short bus ride from the Lodge. We managed to find some of the special birds of the area, though Leo thought it was a bit "slow" this morning. Gould's Toucanet was called in and seen fleetingly. The highly localised Buff-breasted Tody-Tyrant called often but took a while to show properly, but gave some good views in the end. In between were Black-capped Antwrens, the Ceara split of Lesser Woodcreeper, Great Antshrike, Flavescent Warbler and Euler's Flycatcher. It was a pleasant walk in comparatively cool conditions.

We were back by about 9.30am for a good breakfast at the Lodge, followed by a short break. With a fairly relaxed schedule today, and only 50 miles to the next location, we were able to go out again locally for a final bit of birding until lunchtime. Although it was heating up, with the clouds cleared and a bright sun beating down, we did manage to find a few more birds to make the venture worthwhile. Rufous-tailed Jacamar was one of the more widespread species new for the list along with Orange-headed Tanager and Straight-billed Woodcreeper.

Back into the nearby town of Baturite for a somewhat unnecessary buffet lunch, we were packing up and loading the bus for our journey to the next birding locality by about 2.15pm. The journey took us down from the forested hills at over 2000' above sea level into very different habitats of flat, much drier land. Closer to our destination at Hotel Pedro dos Ventos we began to get into much more fascinating territory of flat, dry, desert-like areas with great granite outcroppings popping up at random. We arrived at our accommodation at about 4.30pm and had barely exited the vehicle when virtually all of the target species we'd come to see showed up, slam-dunk, right in front of us. The place was a centre for paragliding built by an enthusiast who also owned the large area of mountain range around him, so that he could launch himself and his clients off the tops of the hills. He was also interested in wildlife, had the area as a private reserve and was feeding the very scarce White-browed Guans. These showed up shortly after the other special bird – Pygmy Nightjar – was found silently crouched on the rock and desert floor by the pool! So after full scope views of that we wandered to the other side of the establishment and scoped several feeding guans accompanied by 5-6 fine-looking White-naped Jays. Not a bad result in the first 15 minutes. As we watched these, Leo spotted a pair of enormous Black-chested Buzzard-Eagles sitting high on the hillside scrub. We did a little circuit around a

small lake – looking a little out of place in this dry landscape – and produced a few more interesting birds before calling it a day just after 5.15pm. Little Woodpecker and Cactus (Caatinga) Parakeets all perched up to give brilliant views for all.

The hotel was very pleasant – more so again, for seemingly having only us to stay tonight. We reconvened at 7pm for the bird list with a pre-ordered supper at 7.30pm. The list was interrupted by one of the staff and our driver finding a Tropical Screech-Owl in the trees just outside. While taking a quick look at that the driver found a False Coral Snake in the grass to join the “other stuff” list for today along with more of the cute White-tufted-Ear Marmosets, a Black-and-Gold Tegu Lizard and various frogs and toads.

January 22. To Crato and Chapada do Araripe: Coffee was a bit slow coming at 5am, but eventually it did and still gave us enough time for a very easy, pleasant meander from the lodge in bright morning light down the track birding until about 7am. We saw the special guan, nightjar and jay again along with White-tipped Doves taking advantage of the free corn. We added a decent selection of other birds, kicking off with Crested Becard by the lodge and Boat-billed Flycatcher and Long-billed Wren shortly after. Black-bellied Antwren was another fine little bird, whilst we also did well for woodpeckers, finding good looks at further Ochraceous Piculets, Ochre-backed & Green-barred Woodpeckers with Golden-Green new for the list. Better looks at Cactus Parakeets plus Ultramarine Grosbeak, Tropical Gnatcatcher, Rufous-browed Peppershrike and Chivi Vireo all added interest, as did great looks at cute little Rock Cavies. We heard Tataupa Tinamou close by but couldn't coax it into the open – fairly typical of tinamous!

After a good breakfast we were away at 8am on the long drive to Crato (220 miles). As we left the lodge track we came across a dandy little Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and thereafter made various short stops along the way for toilets, coffee and birds throughout the morning before arriving at Iguatu for lunch. A small lake along the way produced Southern Pochards, single Fulvous Whistling Duck and White-headed Marsh Tyrant, many Pied-billed Grebes and a mass of Common Gallinules.

We continued on our long journey to reach the Arajara Water Park outside the small, but sprawling city of Crato by mid-afternoon. This was high up at over 2,000' again, in the Araripe Mountains – another area of very different caatinga habitat of dry forests, but with clear springs of water providing the basis for a “Water Park” amusement area. Happily today the place was closed, but obviously Leo had contacts and connections, so we went in and had a lovely quiet stroll with the place all to ourselves. The main target here was the gorgeous, distinctive Araripe Manakin, remarkably only discovered in 1996. There are possibly only 2,000 of these super birds, but they seem to be easily found. We hadn't gone far before the distinctive song was heard and a male was found sat up on a favourite song perches, conveniently at eye-level. It was watched, photographed and generally admired and gloated over for ages before moving on and finding another pair further up the pleasant trail. With this major target “in the bag” we didn't spend too much more time here as we'd still further to go – but we did add Swallow-tailed Hummingbird, Reddish Hermit and Moustached Wren for some of us.

Final birding stop of the day was half an hour or more watching a quite extensive marsh and wetland where we added Brazilian Teal to our list along with Snail Kite and White-browed Meadowlark. By now it was late afternoon and we had our final drive to get us to our accommodation at Sitio Pau Preto Lodge. This turned out to be way out in the sticks, driving the bus deeper into farm tracks, by now in the dark. It was a pleasant

surprise on arrival, with a simple but clean and friendly hacienda-style lodge awaiting us. The place is clearly very much geared up to visiting birders and we were made very welcome. After supper and bird list we were all ready for bed by 8pm and looking forward to a day with virtually no driving tomorrow. I was greeted in my room by a medium-sized tarantula under my pillow.

January 23. Based at Sitio Pau Preto Lodge: Overnight there was substantial rain accompanied by thunder and lightning, all of which gave way to a cool, damp, cloudy, but dry morning. Breakfast at 5am allowed us to get out for the whole morning by 5.45am, returning to the lodge for lunch at midday. Our trusty driver Reginaldo and Leo, our guide, navigated their way on slippery red dirt tracks through 45 minutes or more of flattish, rolling caatinga variously messed up, over-grazed, felled and generally looking in a sorry or non-existent state before arriving at a small intact patch many miles away. How they knew of it, how to find it or what its status was we will never know.

Being cloudy, the light was quite flat but good all round. Temperatures remained tolerable and we were able to comfortably continue birding until 11am with plenty of activity. Leo had certain targets for us and was constantly on the look-out and listening, pointing out many species in quick succession. The “Ant-things” were better represented this morning, with several Antshrikes, Antbirds and Antwrens all giving nice views once called in. Their calls all sounded closely similar and when they appeared their plumages were all “variations on a theme” of stripy black, grey, brown and white. However, they were all given due attention and noted with interest – Planalto Slaty, Caatinga (Barred) & Silvery-cheeked Antshrikes, Stripe-backed Antbird, Caatinga & Black-bellied Antwrens. Various not too brightly coloured, but localised caatinga specialist Tyrant Flycatchers were added, such as Tawny-crowned Pygmy-Tyrant, Pearl-vented Tody-Tyrant, Greenish Elaenia and Ash-throated Casiornis. Early on we called in a splendid Red-billed Scythebill; a widespread species, but always a treat to see with its monster of a beak. Leo had a stake out here for the very range-restricted White-browed Antpitta which was heard calling in the undergrowth of the quite dense scrubby, low forest. We crept in and crouched quietly playing its call and waited. For a long time nothing happened and we began our return to the road. Then one replied close by. Some of the group saw it cross the track and we returned to get most of the group on another doing the same thing. But, as with most of this family, unless they are coaxed into the open with regular feeding, they are tricky birds and a couple of us (myself included) manage to miss it. “Such is Life - it is just a bird”! Other good stuff during the morning included White Monjita (very easy to see!) plus Grey-eyed Greenlet, Orange-headed Tanager and White-winged Becard. It was a great morning's birding, but sad to be in such a tiny remnant of habitat surrounded by many miles of messed up, sandy, rocky wasteland with the tractors actively ripping more up next to where we stood.

Back at the lodge we enjoyed a good cooked lunch and had down time until 3pm. The veranda looking on to some flowering bushes provided a focal point where Swallow-tailed Hummingbird and Glittering Bellied Emerald fed and a bright orange and black Campo Troupial came in to a make-shift feeding station.

The afternoon allowed us time away from the vehicle, with a gentle stroll along the road from the lodge in a continuing quite cool climate, with cloud, but very “close”, humid and “muggy”. Again, Leo had certain hoped-for target birds in mind, and produced the goods effortlessly. Best finds were White-naped Xenopsaris, which is apparently a partial migrant within South America and only just arriving back here to breed. That was called in to give brilliant views as was a Green-backed Becard hanging around an immense

Rufous-fronted Thornbird's nest complete with the rightful owner. Other interesting new species kept coming fast – Black-backed Water Tyrants on the little lake by the lodge where our first Cocoi Heron showed up; Grassland Sparrows on the roadside, close looks at Black-bellied Antwren male, Campo Troupials and singing Cream-bellied Thrushes and a couple of Pale Baywings as we neared the lodge at the end of our ramble at a little after 5pm. Some went to their rooms for a longer break while others of us had our first cold beer of the evening, finding the last new bird of the day – a lone Solitary Cacique, living up to its name.

At some time this morning I had seen sufficient new birds to go past the milestone of 7,000 species on my IOC World List. This was cause for celebration in the evening with a dram or two of my own Islay Single Malt whisky. I went to bed to find a small lizard under my pillow this evening – preferable to tarantulas!

January 24. To Canudos: A long drive to Canudos Biological Station of about 225 miles necessitated a 5am breakfast and a 6am departure this morning. It had been lightly raining steadily overnight and the morning started out cool and cloudy, but soon turned to bright, sunny and hot along the way. Our main stop en route was at a small piece of fairly lush, tall caatinga forest where Leo hoped to show us Tawny Piculet. We wandered through for about half an hour or more finding a few birds of interest such as Flavescent Warbler, but it wasn't until our return that Marsha spotted a suspiciously small bird in some dead trees – the Tawny Piculet! It stayed in one place long enough to get everyone a scope view of it: job done.

We raced on all the way to the town of Canudos with just short stops for fuel, toilets and refreshments, passing through huge areas of gently undulating semi-desert looking caatinga apparently in fairly natural shape. It seemed perhaps too dry and rocky to farm or develop much, so for the time being seems intact and safe. At Canudos by 12.30pm it was time for a buffet lunch in town followed by the short drive up to the Raso da Catarina Ecological Station/Canudos Biological Station. The scenery began to change here in this protected zone with its special caatinga and gallery forest habitats and imposing rock massifs. The Ecological Station looked nice, was in a lovely setting, but fairly “rustic”. We had some down time, but ended up watching from the veranda and our hammocks, finding passing and distantly perched Laughing Falcon, King Vulture and Crane Hawk plus regular groups of Cactus & Blue-crowned Parakeets.

We took a walk through the dry, scrubby caatinga from about 3.30pm until 5.30pm in unusually cloudy skies, though still rather hot temperatures. Birds were a bit slow, but eventually a few species of interest popped up. All 3 of the usual hummingbirds showed well, and various flycatchers were added – Southern Scrub Flycatcher and Tawny-crowned Pygmy-Tyrant seen very well as were Narrow-billed Woodcreeper and Black-throated Saltator.

In the evening, with this the lodge all to ourselves in this lovely location, Leo and Reginaldo drove into town to pick up take-away pizza and brought it back to the lodge while we had cooling cold showers and did the bird list. With a very early start tomorrow, we were all to our beds by 8pm.

January 25. Canudos: A quick coffee at 4.30am and we were away in a couple of old 4WD pick-up trucks over bumpy tracks in the dark to the site where we were told we'd see Indigo (Lear's) Macaws at dawn. After about 15 minutes of bumping and jolting we were close and stopped for a couple of Scissor-tailed Nightjars flying around and calling in the early morning light. We had driven across to the edge of one of the magnificent, highly picturesque sandstone ravines with dense green tree cover on the floor and craggy wind-

sculpted pinnacles on the skyline. The scenery alone had already made the journey worthwhile. A little later and the first pair of Indigo Macaws came by and perched up quite close on a tall candelabra cactus – a classic pose, though most of us really associated macaws with more lush habitats. We admired these for an age as the daylight increased and other macaws began to fly past calling raucously. After a while here we wandered the short distance to peer over another canyon where they actually breed deep in holes in the sheer sandstone cliffs. Before we had a chance to admire these we were bewitched by an amazingly close, perched Bat Falcon – quite tiny, brightly marked and watching the world from the cliff top vantage point we all shared. The Indigo Macaws here were nothing short of “World-Class Memorable”. They squabbled opposite us on the cliff ledges, were watched mating, flew past, often in pairs at head-height in ever more beautiful morning sunlight and generally put on a stunning show – utterly mesmerizing in such a gorgeous setting. The world population is reckoned to be just perhaps 2000, with about 45 pairs in the vicinity we were watching. We must have seen a good 50+ of them in our visit. They are habitually a cliff-nesting species which of course ties them to certain locations and it is thought they never were particularly numerous because of this natural restriction. To feed, they may travel long distances (60 miles or more) to find suitable palms and other fruits to feed on, but can stock up and spend days here at their nest site when breeding, without having to feed at all.

We returned from this wonderful early morning excursion to a good breakfast at the Station provided by two ladies who had come in from Canudos and prepared everything for us. Unlike yesterday, today was much less cloudy and by now it was already quite fiercely hot. However, we ventured out again at 9.15am to bird along the sandy track through the caatinga until about 11am, by which time both ourselves and the birds were wilting fast. We picked up a few birds of interest and managed renewed and better looks at others – Spotted Piculet, Silvery-cheeked Antshrike, Mouse-coloured Tyrannulets, Barred Antshrike, Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant, Pileated Finch, White-lined Tanager and a new hummer – Stripe-breasted Starthroat.

A break back at the lodge was welcome until a drive into town for a light lunch at 12.30pm. A further break in the heat of the day (now well in excess of 90 degrees) ensued until coffee at 3pm. Leo had a slightly more shaded location by a seasonal lake awaiting us for the afternoon excursion, about 40 minutes or so drive along the sandy dirt roads from the Station. It was a pleasant afternoon's birding with several additions for us. Pride of place went to several fine Blue-winged Macaws hanging about where they were presumably nesting in some large dead trees in the lake. The other major find was a group of Scarlet-throated Tanagers. These large, odd sort of tanagers were, until the very last sighting of the afternoon, all females, which were solidly black. A decent male with red throat appeared just as we were leaving for home. Further birds of interest here included some new water-birds – Masked Duck, Wood Stork and Rufescent Tiger-Heron. Other good stuff included Green-barred Woodpecker, Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, Caatinga Cachalote, Lesser Wagtail-Tyrant, White Monjita, Campo Troupial and Brown-chested Martin.

We arrived back at the Station with time for a cold shower and the bird-list before heading back into Canudos for an al fresco burger – “Downtown on a Saturday Nite” – finished off with a visit to the local ice-cream parlour – quite a culinary and cultural experience and a chance to curry favour with the local dogs. On our return we saw a total of 4 Burrowing Owls in the headlights.

January 26. Canudos to Estancia and Crasto Forest: A 5.30am breakfast then directly packed and away on the drive of 200 miles to Estancia, arriving in time for lunch. Along the way there was a brief stop at one of

Leo's stake-outs for Pectoral Antwren. We had left the very dry, stony, cactus and scrub caatinga and had entered slightly more fertile, affluent land, much of it given over to farming. But here were remnants of a slightly greener, lusher, low woodland where this apparently uncommon species resides. Amazingly, within a few minutes Leo had us on a pair of these bright little "ant-things" looking more the size and shape of a small antshrike – the male all black, white and grey streaks with a black splotch on its breast (hence the name), while the female was a rufous/pale chestnut brown. He makes it seem all too easy to know where in this vast country to locate these special birds and to find them once in place.

A stop or two for diesel, toilets and ice-creams broke up the long drive on a road with far too many speed-bumps. Few other birds were seen, though a Comb Duck male flying past the bus was seen quite well and is apparently unusual here. Once checked in to the Freedom Hotel in town, we had an hour and a half break before venturing out into the heat again. Leo took us a short distance out of town to a protected area of the Crasto Forest where we wandered along the roadside in humid, cloudy conditions. Leo had a long list of hoped-for species here in this quite tall, lush forest with thick undergrowth. Unfortunately most of the birds were being very uncooperative. Leo heard plenty, but very little showed itself. Happily, the one special target – Fringe-backed Fire-eye did pop up quite quickly and he was obviously excited at the chance to show us a pair of this scarce and difficult bird. After that it was a lot of standing about, with 1-2 folks glimpsing shadows in a very few split-second views: that is the nature of birding. We eventually gave up here and continued down the road to some open areas of mature palms where we finished with a fine flurry of parrots that Leo hoped to find for us. Chunky Orange-winged Parrots passed over periodically as did the smaller Peach-fronted Parakeets – both perching to give decent looks at times. Best were the prolonged great looks at Jandaya (Jambalaya!) Parakeets in nest holes and perched in cute groups on the palms close to several pairs of Red-shouldered Macaws. Here too were Lineated & White Woodpeckers taking advantage of the many rotten palm trunks, and across the road the first Capybaras of our trip.

Back to the hotel and the comfort of a cool air-conditioned room for a while before supper in the hotel and the marching orders for tomorrow's marathon drive to our next destination.

January 27. To Chapada Diamantina and Lencois: Today was primarily a travel day to Chapada Diamantina, about 350 miles away. Reginaldo did remarkably well in getting us there by about 2.30pm from a 6am start and 1-2 short stops and a good lunch stop along the way. The major birding stop en route was a fine gathering of 35 or so Wood Storks – a migratory species in this region.

After arrival Leo stopped for a stroll down a wide track that Reginaldo could drive the bus down, through the natural forest with dense undergrowth, but surprisingly spindly, not too tall forest trees that comprise this part of the local National Park. Sadly, despite great habitat, it was extremely quiet for birds. Leo heard a few birds of interest and tried calling in various species, but nothing much worked and very little showed itself. Yellow-legged Tinamou called mournfully from the deep forest but wasn't moved by playback. Black-capped Antwren put in a brief appearance as did Grey Elaenia. Best by far were 3 Surucua Trogons; one stopping in full view in the scope for ages. We tried another spot by the river just outside of Lencois as a final attempt to bring in some new birds, but again with little luck. The weather had been fine – cloudy at times, not too hot, but the birds were just not calling or active.

We called it a day just before 6pm and drove the short distance into what appears to be quite an interesting and historic town with a lot of tourism. The Hotel de Lençóis was a pleasant surprise with decent rooms and a good evening meal. Everyone seemed relieved to have got that long journey over with and the prospect of a two night stay here.

January 28. Lencois and Chapada Diamantina National Park: Today we had the usual 5am breakfast then headed out the short distance to Chapada Diamantina National Park – an area of fragmented, low, dry, short scrubby forest and caatinga amidst some fairly spectacular sandstone cliffs and massifs. Leo of course had specific places targeted for particular birds amongst the vast areas of this habitat to choose from. The drive took us through Palmeira, an interesting old colonial town with some fine architecture. This and other similar settlements in the area burgeoned during the discovery of diamonds in the 19th century.

Leo's first couple of stops were for the highly range-restricted Sao Francisco Sparrow, but without any luck and precious little else happening, other than occasional sprinkles of rain from a fairly cloudy sky. We found a few species, but all those that were quite common and that we'd seen previously. Leo was stressing! His third attempt along another trail into this really quite dense, low and lush caatinga scrub finally worked – though only just. We all managed brief (or very brief) glimpses of this extra shy bird as it skulked in thick cover. However, despite an initially slow start, things picked up and we ended the morning with quite a good representative selection of what was here and that Leo hoped we might find. After a final walk out into more open grassy/shrubby sandstone, rocky caatinga with further magnificent views across valleys to steep sandstone cliffs and outcrops we'd notched up some good birds: Caatinga, Black-bellied & Sincora Antwrens (the latter a recent split/discovery confined to this area); Stripe-backed Antbird; very brief looks for some of an extremely close, calling, but highly skulking Collared Crescentchest, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Pale-breasted Spinetail, Planalto & Mouse-coloured Tyrannulets, Tawny-crowned Pygmy-Tyrant, Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant, Bran-coloured Flycatcher, Grey-eyed Greenlet, Cinnamon Tanager, Tropical Parula, Dubois's & Yellow-bellied Seedeaters, Green-winged Saltator and more.

By now it was gone 1pm and time for a buffet lunch close-by at a place selling lots of rock specimens and other souvenirs/knick-knacks. We took a break here until 3pm rather than drive all the way back to Lencois and our hotel. But at 3pm we were off again to scale the sandstone massif of Pai Inacio Mountain with its cross on the top – not to admire the cross but to seek out another special bird of the area – Hooded Visorbearer. Before we started driving up to the car parking area we popped in to the orchid garden area. This didn't look anything special with lots of alien conifers, but a bit of Pygmy-owl playback had a glorious selection of birds coming to see what the problem was and giving us great views. Brightly coloured Gilt-edged Tanagers were a dazzling presence along with Burnished-Buff, White-lined, Cinnamon & Sayaca Tanagers. Plain-crested Elaenia put in its first appearance and several hummingbirds showed up too: Brown & White-vented Violetears both being new for the tour. Up at the start of the quite steep, rocky hike up to the flat summit of the massif we began our ascent in continuing moderate temperatures (or perhaps we were just getting used to the heat by now?). Halfway up Leo took us off the main climb onto the first little plateau with its lovely variety of flowering shrubs and immediately found our target. We had a single Hooded Visorbearer in the scope as it came and went from its favourite perch for about 15 minutes – a delightful little hummer new for us all. Thereafter, 1-2 folks went back down, but most of us continued to the top – an ascent of several hundred feet – just to admire the view. The view was, as Leo had promised, stunning, looking out across the shrubby valleys below of the Chapada Diamantina National Park and the huge cliff faces across

some of the valleys. We found Velvety-Black Tyrant up here for our efforts. Of course there were quite a few Brazilian tourists admiring the views but it didn't detract too much from the experience.

We were back down and heading to the hotel by 5.30pm, reaching “home” by 6.15pm and reconvening by 7pm for bird list and supper. Leo treated us to an extra hour in bed tomorrow, so we all went to our rooms extra happy with the day – even though we'd heard at least 3 species of tinamous that would have been lifers!

January 29. Chapada Diamantina National Park, Sincora Mountains and on to Mucuge' We were at the bus by 6am to drive the short distance back to the thick, tall riverine forest just outside of town. Here Leo hoped to produce a Manakin or two – and he did. We first heard the bizarre buzzing, snapping noises of White-bearded Manakin males displaying deep in the undergrowth. Eventually we found females higher up watching the proceedings that were out of view to us. Then a male popped up and gave us brief looks. Meanwhile we also found White-naped Jays, Sepia-capped Flycatchers and Golden-crowned Warblers amongst other interesting birds before it was time to make a quick return for breakfast. And what a breakfast! A lovely spread of all sorts available when having breakfast at a sensible time!

The journey to Mucugê was “only” about 75 miles, much of it through or edging the Chapada Diamantina National Park and the superb sandstone ridges of the Sincora Mountains– a hop-and-a-skip for us after some of the travelling we've done. However it took all day and there were all sorts of bits and pieces/starts and stops driving along bumpy dirt roads in the middle of nowhere. At least it was “nowhere” for us, but Leo and Reginaldo knew exactly where they were going and why they were going there. Thus the whole, bright and sunny day was punctuated by staked out, researched stops where, in most cases, Leo produced the targets “adeptly and with aplomb”.

First stops duplicated some of the places we'd been yesterday, close to Lencois. Here we stopped and saw little. But the two birds we did see were good ones – both recent splits – a pair of Small-headed Elaenias on a nest (split from Highland) and East Brazilian Chachalaca (split from Speckled). A later stop in subtly different caatinga, but still open and low scrub, produced brief, fairly distant looks at Blue Finch and another ultra-secretive Collared Crescentchest. Passing a wetland area we called a halt to admire roadside Chestnut-capped Blackbirds. At yet another halt we were treated to great looks at Tawny-crowned & Rufous-sided Pygmy-Tyrants. Towards lunch we came into the seemingly remote and quiet little town of Guinea where Leo arranged a good lunch made from local organic produce. While waiting for this we popped out of town into some, by now very hot, low scrubby caatinga with lots of flowers in the hope of finding Horned Sunangel. No luck with that but two species of Violetear compensated.

After the large and tasty lunch we made several other scheduled and unscheduled halts along the way. Another little wetland held good numbers of seedeaters: Yellow-bellied, Plumbeous & Dubois's, but also the much smarter Capped (Copper) Seedeater. Here too was Wedge-tailed Grassfinch. A stop in white sand caatinga later in the day held further slightly new mixes of species. Narrow-billed Antwren and Great Xenops were excellent sightings here. Our last walk out onto further sandy caatinga, finishing at about 6pm, gave us superb light to watch exciting finds such as Grey-backed Tachuri and White-banded Tanager (also known as Shrike-like Tanager and looking very much like a Loggerhead or Lesser Grey Shrike).

We finally reached Mucuge' by about 6.45pm. It seems another of these quiet, out of the way, colonial towns with not much going on. However, it had a simple, spacious hotel and hot showers for the night – which was pretty much all anyone wanted. After the large lunch, the long day and the heat, most of us skipped the evening meal, settling for cold beers and early to bed.

January 30. Mucuge' to Boa Nova: Despite it being another drive day of nearly 200 miles through the last of the Chapadas Diamantina to Boa Nova, we managed to squeeze in a fair bit of birding. We did a short pre-breakfast trip back to the flat caatinga scrub just out of town, but didn't find too much there, though we had catch up Great Xenops, tried for White-browed Antpitta but saw lovely Silvery-cheeked Antshrikes instead. Then after breakfast we loaded up and headed out, calling in at various of Leo's stake-outs for specific special birds, typically with a high success rate. Tapaculos are always horribly skulking and horribly difficult to see, even if only feet away. This morning everyone managed “acceptable” looks at the ridiculously localised Diamantina Tapaculo (split from Mouse-coloured). Further along and another brief stop finally produced great sunny views of a perched up Pale-throated Pampa (Serra) Finch that Leo had been trying so hard to find for us in previous days.

Thereafter, the middle of the day was taken up, as usual, with travel, this time along some appallingly badly potholed roads jolting us and the bus for ages. Lunch en route, then arrival into the town of Boa Nova by about 3.30pm allowed us to get in some first birding here in this taller caatinga woodland high above the town. Leo was calling out birds left, right and centre, some previously seen, others new for us. Yellow-legged Tinamous called mournfully from the depths of the forest and we made no attempt at the impossible and to call them out. It was the “Ant-things” that were centre-stage again here. Top of the wish list was another very local species – Slender Antbird. We saw it well and added Planalto Slaty Antshrike, and Narrow-billed Antwren along with various species “heard only”. Lesser Woodcreeper was found too – this being now different from the split Ceara Woodcreeper seen earlier in the trip. Scarlet-throated & Hooded Tanagers showed up and there were a few raptors overhead including Short-tailed & Crane Hawks. We finished our time up here watching some flowering barrel cacti where hummers come to feed on the flowers that only open at dusk. Some managed glimpses of Sapphire-Spangled Emerald amongst other species seen before, but they were moving at high speed!

To the hotel by 6.30pm, bird list, supper and info for tomorrow, with a full day in this area that Leo obviously rates highly.

January 31. Boa Nova: We were away in the bus shortly after a 5am breakfast, going only 20 minutes down the road to one of the remnants of what was once extensive wet, Atlantic rainforest. The other, inland side of the mountain slopes are kept dry being sheltered from the wet winds coming in from the ocean, but on the east facing side there was extensive luxuriant forest cover, now sadly almost entirely lost to development and agriculture. However, the small fragment we spent from about 6.30am until midday in this morning was absolutely full of birds and activity. Leo was picking out calling birds at a great rate of knots and calling many of them in for us too. It was just a decently wide, muddy forest track that we spent the entire morning on, with a short break back to the bus to get umbrellas when it rained lightly for a while. There was so much seen that it is difficult to pick out the highlights. The various “Ant-things” were abundant today – Spot-breasted Antwren, Rio de Janeiro Antbird and Tufted Antshrike all showing well. Various furnarids performed for us – undoubtedly the best was Striated Softtail as it gave numerous excellent looks and was such a delicate

bird with its almost see-through, soft, pale buff, fantail. Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper was another quite snazzy little specimen with its brightly streaked head and shoulders. Some species seen were widespread, but nonetheless lovely to see. Others were very localised, adding an extra excitement: Black-billed Scythebill and Pallid Spinetail being just a couple. Tanagers were good value this morning, with numerous sightings of the brilliantly coloured Gilt-edged along with more subtle species such as Golden-chevroned. A Rufous-tailed Jacamar put on a fine show as we scoped it slowly subduing a huge cicada and swallowing it whole. Blackish Rails popped out in a wet stream area on the forest edge and high above, various parakeets raced by – Golden-capped never giving proper views, but Maroon-bellied perching up for a while. We had long scope views of a new Piculet – Golden-spangled - as it hammered insects out of a dead cecropia stem and for contrast in size and flamboyancy, a little later had great looks at Yellow-fronted Woodpecker – a dazzlingly bright bird. Sombre Hummingbird was seen – as its name implies, it was not dazzlingly bright. High in hilltop trees we found Black-necked Aracaris and a fly-by Channel-billed Toucan. There was a varied selection of Tyrant Flycatchers, with Fork-tailed Pygmy-Tyrant and Grey-headed Tody-Flycatcher on the small end of the size scale, working up through Yellow-olive Flycatcher and White-throated Spadebill to Long-tailed Tyrants at the other. The activity never really stopped or slowed throughout our time in the field. The rain shower and light cloud kept temperatures pleasant and the birds active. Even as we left new species were popping up – Yellow-Green Grosbeak and lovely male Pin-tailed Manakin just before we got back to the bus: quite a memorable morning of first class birding.

Back at our Pousada in Boa Nova, we had lunch and a short break until 2pm before setting out again. The afternoon was split into three parts. Firstly we returned to the forest trail we'd covered in the morning. With so many species present in such a rich environment we were sure to find a few additional species to those of the longer morning session. As soon as we arrived we gained lovely perched views of the Golden-capped Parakeets that were only fly-bys in the morning. After that we came across extras such as Planalto Woodcreeper. Our second stop was close to where we'd been on the first afternoon of arrival – in the drier caatinga area – specifically in a particularly good, private area for the pretty barrel cacti and other specialist rock-dwelling plants. This site we were told was graced by Sir David Attenborough when he was making films about hummingbirds – and that is what we'd mainly come to see. Best here was a ridiculously closely perched Sapphire-spangled Emerald, photographed from every angle and full frame in the scope allowing detail of every delicate feather. Our third and last stop was at dusk back at our first afternoon location, where we wandered a few hundred metres along the road into the forest zone and managed to call out a brief fly-by look at a large Tawny-browed Owl.

Back at the hotel in Boa Nova by 7.15pm we had a quick shower and went for the bird list and evening meal on our last full day of the tour, which had turned out to be one of the best.

February 01. Boa Nova to Vitoria de Conquista and Rio: There was time this morning for a final bit of birding back in the forest we'd birded yesterday. With so many species present here it was assured we'd find a few additional to our list. The weather was again very pleasant at this time of day (in the field by about 6.15am and at an altitude of 2,500 – 2,900' with clear skies. We walked the main trail for a while, then went off on a gentle uphill side-track deeper into the forest until our return to the hotel at 10.30am. Birds of note this morning in no particular order (they seemed as before, to come so quickly that it is difficult after the event to remember which came first!) were: Rufous-headed, Flame-crested & Red-crowned Ant Tanagers – often in mixed feeding parties. Leo tried hard to call out White-collared Foliage-gleaner, but we left with it still

being elusively “heard only”. Bird parties were quite regular today, but many of them at neck-breaking heights in the canopy. But we managed to see well several star birds such as Sharpbill, Bahia Tyrannulet, Black-throated Grosbeak, Violet-capped Woodnymph, Black-throated Trogon, Swallow-winged Puffbird (perched high on a dead tree on the horizon), Spot-backed Antshrike, Rufous-winged Antwren, more White-shouldered Fire-eyes, a cute little Rufous Gnateater sitting quietly in the undergrowth, a lovely Striated Softtail again, the localised Bahia Spinetail, Greyish Mourner (very greyish), a couple of sightings of Whiskered Flycatcher (no longer in the flycatcher family!), Swallow-tailed & Pin-tailed Manakins; several gorgeous Chestnut-bellied Euphonias; many Yellow-green Grosbeaks – all in just a few brief hours, and just some of the highlights amongst many other great species. The last good bird was on return to the bus, where Leo heard and called out a diminutive bird with a humungous name: Drab-breasted Pygmy-Tyrant (aka Bamboo-Tyrant).

Back at the hotel by 11am, we had an hour to shower and pack before lunch, then pay bills, pack the bus and start the transfer of about 55 miles to the airport at Vitoria da Conquista. We arrived in good time and bade farewell to Reginaldo who was visiting his mother in Brasilia before driving the vast distance back to Fortaleza. Leo was coming with us to Rio, so we were delighted to have his good company for longer. Check-in at a very pleasant, new, clean airport was quick and easy, though the journey to Rio, already unavoidably awkward, (with no direct flight to Rio, instead connecting via Sao Paulo) was made worse by a delayed departure. We were convinced that we'd not make the quite tight connection, but on arrival into Sao Paulo were told that this flight was also delayed. This at least meant we'd make the connection (along with our luggage) but in the end we arrived into Rio 2 hours late and got to our pleasant airport hotel by a little after midnight.

February 02 Start of the Itororo Lodge Tour: Breakfast this morning at 7am allowed us to say goodbye to Leo flying home this morning. It also allowed us to meet up with Karen and Ken who had arrived at the hotel earlier yesterday, and finally Cary who was met at the airport on arrival early this morning. We were now at the end of our NE Brazil epic and ready to set off on the week to Itororo Lodge.

Trip Summary: I believe the tour to have been a success! We recorded 378 species of birds in our 14 day tour; 18 of them “heard only”. There were numerous other species briefly seen and heard by the ever-sharp eyes and ears of Leo that are not recorded here. Considering the huge amount of traveling required for this trip (we covered several thousands of miles) it is a very substantial list of birds. We took advantage of early morning and late afternoon birding on travel days, leaving the hot middle-day periods for our long drives. The good numbers of species includes many of the very special, endangered, range-restricted species that inspired the tour in the first place. We found a heck of a lot of the special birds, but didn't see everything. Leo assured us another week travelling to yet more isolated habitat pockets in this vast region of Brazil would have yielded ever-more endemic birds – there is always something left for a return trip.

The success of the tour was largely down to a great group of participants – thank you all for joining me and making it all possible. Another important element of this type of tour is an amenable driver – Reginaldo was almost daily “above and beyond the call of duty” in where he managed to get us in his bus and his long hours of excellent driving – always with a smile on his face. But it is of course our fantastic bird guide Leo Patrial that was the absolute lynch-pin in the success and pleasure of the tour. His knowledge of the region and the birds was second to none. He was constantly pointing out birds heard and seen that most of us were oblivious

were there at all. His ability to know every remote little local spot to find special birds in this huge area – and his success rate in finding them for us was little short of miraculous. He was enthusiastic and untiring throughout the two weeks of fairly full-on birding starting early every day and often continuing for 12 hours. But he was no slave-driver and always sensitive to our abilities, preferences and needs. Best of all, he was darned good company and fun to travel with – a sharp wit and a better command of the English language than most of us! Thank you Leo – it was brilliant!

The accompanying tour notes and checklist will no doubt have a few (hopefully minor) typos and errors in it – but should be a moderately accurate account of what we did. The checklist follows current Clements/Cornell World bird names. Names in () are alternatives used by IOC. The numbers given are estimates and an “x” indicates seen but not counted. “h” = heard only. The main taxonomic notes I am aware of are:

- Whimbrel has just since I arrived home, been split by IOC (but not yet by Clements) into Eurasian and Hudsonian.
- Cattle Egret is split by IOC (but not Clements) into Western and Eastern.
- The race of Sharp-shinned Hawk we saw is split as Rufous-thighed Hawk by IOC.
- Spot-backed Puffbird is split by IOC (but not Clements) into Chaco (*striatipectus*) and Caatinga (*maculatus*). We saw the Caatinga split.
- Lesser Woodcreeper is split by Clements into Lesser and Ceara Woodcreepers – but not split by IOC. We apparently saw both according to their distribution.
- Having checked further on returning home, it would appear that the Orioles we saw were all Variable. This is a fairly recent split and from the locations we saw this bird, they do appear to be Variable and not Epaulet.