



GUYANA
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GUYANA BIRDING

PRESS RELEASE

August 27, 2007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Guyana Gets Deserved Recognition at the British Birdwatching Fair

Rutland Waters, England – The Travelling Naturalist is a UK-based tour operator that organizes birding and natural history trips to dozens of countries and continents – Europe, Africa, Asia, New Zealand, Antarctica, North, Central and South America – but only recently did they start offering Guyana as a destination to their clients.

Until this year, The Travelling Naturalist was fairly unfamiliar with Guyana’s tourism offerings, and felt that its relatively unknown status in the industry would make for a tough sell. But times have changed and at this year’s British Birdwatching Fair, The Travelling Naturalist was one of roughly 15 tour operators that were singing the praises of Guyana as a rapidly emerging birdwatching and wildlife-spotting destination in South America.

According to Jamie McMillan, Travelling Naturalist tour leader and company partner, “All the tour operators are saying Guyana is the place.” Neil Arnold, a tour leader with 37 years experience agrees, “We’re thrilled and confident that Guyana will be a great eco-tourism destination.”

The buzz about Guyana is spreading and interest is growing. Tour operator Ornitholidays sold out their first trip to Guyana in one week; they now have a list of four people waiting to see if a second tour can be arranged and have already taken bookings for 2009. Another company, Naturetrek, received four Guyana bookings at the fair and hopes to do three or four trips to Guyana next year. At the stand for Tropical Birding, six birdwatchers expressed strong interest in Guyana and two put down a deposit on a trip being offered in 2008.

And it’s not just the tour operators that are taking notice of Guyana. The most recent issue of the magazine *Neotropical Birding*, launched specifically for the Birdwatching Fair, had a feature on Guyana titled, “Guyana: South America’s Overlooked Birding Destination.” At the stand for the magazine *Birds Illustrated*, they were touting the fact that their next issue will also feature an article on Guyana.

A representative of New Holland Publishers, a publishing company with more than 800 titles, many of which are natural history related, stopped at the Guyana booth and expressed interest in possibly publishing a photo book on Guyana’s most popular species of birds. There were also whispers at the fair that A&C Black, the largest bird book publishers in the English language, are considering doing separate country books from their highly-regarded *Birds of Northern South America* identification guide, and that Guyana will be one of the first countries to receive its own book. Also, representatives at the booth for Bradt Travel Guides said that with all the recent talk about Guyana, they are very excited to be publishing the first guidebook dedicated solely to Guyana in December.

So where has this momentum come from? Part of the credit is surely due to the fact that Guyana’s time has come. Andy Tucker, Naturetrek General Manager, said that, “as a destination country, there’s a lot of interest in Guyana. Birdwatchers are very well traveled, and they look for new destinations.” But credit is also being given to the efforts of all those involved in the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA) – United States Agency for International Development (USAID) / Guyana Trade and Investment Support (GTIS) Birding Tourism Program.

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The Travelling Naturalist’s Jamie McMillan seems to believe that the market-led strategy and marketing efforts of the program are paying off. “You [the program] have made Guyana hot. You’re providing great support to tour operators, and that is making it happen.” McMillan also said he is telling other destinations to look at Guyana’s strategy for ways to boost their own recognition.

One of the most successful strategies has been the Birding Tourism Program product familiarization trips that have brought international tour operators and media to Guyana to experience firsthand the country’s bird, wildlife and cultural offerings. Ornitholidays began selling a trip after guide Mike Witherick returned from Guyana; guide Tim Earl came for the Travelling Naturalist; Chris Collins came for Neotropical Birding. There were more than 20 others that explored Guyana on a familiarization trip and they all returned to their respective companies raving about South America’s overlooked country.

As a result, many of the tour operators now advertise and sell Guyana trips on their websites and in their catalogues that are handed out at several trade shows like the British Birdwatching Fair. The media have published several positive articles on Guyana as an emerging tourism destination.

The product familiarization trips would not have been successful without the support of those within Guyana’s tourism sector, including resorts, lodges, hotels, guides and transportation providers. As a result of their participation, they have been receiving feedback on how they can be prepared for the niche birdwatching market. Besides small improvements that have been suggested to help make destinations more birder-friendly, many tour operators have commented on the importance of having knowledgeable and experienced local guides.

Andy Tucker of Naturetrek said that, “local guides are highly important.” Locals have a personal affection for, and knowledge about, their home that can’t be duplicated with international guides. “Times are changing.” Tucker said, “People and the market are keen on local guides.”

The birding tourism program is also helping to see that Guyana’s birdwatching guides get international training. Next year, Iwokrama Ranger Ron Allcock will be participating in a month-long guide internship program sponsored by the Audubon Society of Massachusetts. Many tour operators, such as Naturetrek, said they encourage local guides to join them on their tours so they can learn from seasoned guides and experience what those on international tours expect.

To help with the shortage of birdwatching equipment, the program has also managed to secure donations of more than two-dozen binoculars and several spotting scopes for both established and aspiring guides in Guyana. Just recently, Ron Allcock returned from the Birdwatching Fair with 12 pairs of binoculars and one spotting scope that were donated to Iwokrama by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

The Birding Tourism Program thus far has built a strong base and plenty of momentum, and Guyana can expect an influx of visitors donning binoculars in the coming years.

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