

Guyana: There at the Beginning

RICK WRIGHT

I shouldn't admit it, but I've always found painful and a little silly the game that tour leaders play at the end of a trip. The end-of-tour "best of" poll leaves me nervous and confused, like I should be waiting in Letterman's green room instead of relishing my last day in the field; it reduces to mere entertainment what should have been a rich texture of experiences and discoveries, and the declaration of a "winner," it seems to me, makes all the other birds of the tour into *de facto* losers. And so I sit and fidget, and then it's my turn, and suddenly I can't remember anything but the last bird we saw on the way in to our final festive dinner, and I finally blurt out the name of some common and undistinguished bird most of us didn't bother to see all that well anyway—and my bird is duly added to the list, where it joins the quetzals and cotingas and improbably colored kingfishers nominated by my more self-possessed companions.

A recent trip to the wonderful wilds of Guyana ended just that way. Black Curassow and White Hawk, Blue Ground-Dove and Crimson Fruitcrow, Striped Cuckoo and Plain Xenops. Why couldn't I have come up with one of those? Instead, when it was obvious that not even cringing in the darkest corner of the dining room would let the bitter cup pass me by, I lit on perhaps the commonest, most widespread, and by many birders' standards least thrilling of the many, many birds we'd seen over the past two weeks.

(Raised eyebrows.)

(Cocked heads.)

(Even, I think, just a little half-concealed laughter.)

Blue-gray Tanager.

It was our first morning in Georgetown, and our gang of con-

genial, if sleepy, birders was stumbling around the city's botanical gardens in search of that famous locality's most famous avian resident, the endemic Blood-colored Woodpecker. This odd little *Veniornis*, finely black-barred below with angry scab-colored upperparts, is more easily seen here than anywhere else in its limited range in the lowlands of the Guianas.

The woodpecker is, understandably, every birder's priority on a visit to the gardens, but as we found on our successful search, there are birds aplenty there even without the lure of a scarce tropical endemic. The weedy ditches were filled with cute little Yellow-chinned Spinetails, and a handsome Black-capped Donacobius perched up for all to admire. Several species of parrots and macaws—some native, some likely the descendants of released birds—croaked and trumpeted from the planted pines, while Snail Kites balanced in the tips of the palms. A Black-crested Antshrike ratcheted from the brush, and everywhere were big, ruddy Silver-beaked Tanagers, out-blood-coloring even the woodpecker.

The first morning in a new country is often most useful in teaching the visiting birder what to ignore. Sure enough, it took just a few glances for most of us to start letting those powder-blue puffs pass us by: who hadn't seen Blue-gray Tanager before, and why bother looking when there was so much new to see?

I hasten to add—as no doubt would they—that I am no more virtuous than my fellows, but that morning, at least, I was luckier. I happened to be looking at a small branch just vacated by a smaller bird when a bit of feathered sky landed on it: a Blue-gray, with a couple of inches of some kind of plant fiber in its bill. And as I watched, the bird wound that bit of string carefully around the branch and then went off for more.

I was dumbstruck.



Map of Guyana and neighboring countries. © Virginia Maynard

The view from a boat plying Guyana's Essequibo River beats birding from a car any day. © Rick Wright.





Kaieteur Falls is five times higher than Niagara—and boasts nesting Orange-footed Falcon and Guyanan Cock-of-the-rock, too. © Rick Wright

Like every birder, I've discovered plenty of nests in these past 30-odd years; it's just inevitable that wandering around looking for birds should lead you to stumble across their homes. Usually I find eggs, sometimes chicks; sometimes, and most exciting, I get to watch the birds add material to a nest still a-building. Until that morning in Georgetown, though, I had never seen the unequivocal foundation of a new avian hearth; I'd never witnessed that moment of decision and determination.

I'd never been there at the beginning.

Guyana perches on the northeastern edge of South America, bounded to the west by Venezuela, to the east by Suriname, and to the south by Brazil. This rough rectangle of some 83,000 square miles, just slightly larger than Kansas, is inhabited by about 800,000 people, fully 90 percent of whom live within 40 miles of the coast; a quarter of the populace resides in one of Guyana's cities, with the capital, Georgetown, accounting for more than half of the country's urban population.

The lopsided distribution of human settlement in Guyana has left nature free to work its wonders of neglect. Much of the country remains true wilderness, accessible by plane, by boat, or by a very long and occasionally disagreeable walk. Vast stretches of rainforest remain, and the *tepui* forests of the west reach unbroken into Venezuela. The plant diversity of this part of the world can still only be guessed at, but what is clear is that Guyana preserves an intact vertebrate fauna essentially unmatched even by the more famous, more often visited destinations on the great bird continent. Tapirs, at least to judge by their tracks, are commonplace, and jaguars are regularly, if not frequently, encountered in the forests at Iwokrama, where on my latest visit one of the great cats—its pugmarks still crisp on the road and its scent still

thick in the air—had left a recently killed giant armadillo.

And then, of course, there are the birds. Just why international ornithotourism should for so long have passed Guyana by is a mystery. Not only does the country offer a tremendous range of habitats—from coastal lagoons to savanna, from tree-clad foothills to rainforest—but historical accident has made Guyana the only English-speaking land in South America. The extensive wilderness, visually so impenetrable, is in fact crisscrossed by placid, readily navigable rivers, giving access to many otherwise remote settlements and to such fine range-restricted specialties as Hoary-throated Spinetail and Rio Branco Antbird, both found only in the gallery forests lining the Rio Branco.

Even deep in the country's interior, Guyana's tourist infrastructure is good and getting better. Private lodges such as Rock View are reached by short, safe flights from Georgetown, and offer superlative birding right on the grounds; a veritable oasis in the middle of the savanna, Rock View combines comfortable rooms with Amethyst Woodstars, good locally produced food with Amazonian Scrub Flycatchers, and some of the finest sunsets on earth with Rufous-browed Peppershrikes.

Visiting birders are also welcomed at a number of research-oriented facilities. Karanambu, renowned for Diane Turk's work there with giant otters, offers both riparian birding and access to extensive savanna, where Jabirus stalk and Double-striped Thick-knees pace; among the goatsuckers that hunt the short airstrip at dusk there can be good numbers of Least Nighthawks.

Every bit as exciting is the canopy walk at Atta Lodge, where the star of the evening is the rare and little-known White-winged Potoo; thin whistles announce the arrival of this odd, stick-like creature, which sometimes perches in plain view near the observation platform. An early morning visit to this privileged vantage point, 100 feet up looking out over the dense canopy, can produce eye-



Baby caimans loaf on Victoria lilies. © Rick Wright

level looks at Plumbeous Pigeon, Caica Parrot, Painted Parakeet, Guianan Toucanet, Pompadour Cotinga, or the newly split Guianan Puffbird. The half mile of gentle trail from the lodge to the walkway is particularly good for watching such tropical passerines as White-plumed, Spot-winged, and Ferruginous-backed Antbirds and Ash-winged and Long-billed Antwrens.

The one destination in Guyana every birder has heard of is the Iwokrama Field Station. The comfortable, almost luxurious cabins and welcoming common spaces of the field station almost tempt the visitor to linger on the porches, enjoying the Pied Lapwings on the lawn and the sunset views over the Essequibo. But only almost; no birder can resist

the chainsaw growls of Capuchinbirds emanating from the forest, or the chance of an encounter with five tinamou species, Marbled Wood-Quail, or Guianan Streaked-Antwren along the broad river.

Guyana is a secret no more. Faced with the stark choice between oil development and ecotourism, Guyana has begun to market itself as the tropical paradise it is, in the hopes that its natural beauty, its abundant wildlife, and its welcoming people prove to be resources more profitable and more lasting than mere petroleum ever could be. The most remarkable component of these new efforts is their careful and conscious involvement of local indigenous communities in the country's wild interior.

With the support of Guyana's tourism authorities, the Macushi village of Surama has created a peaceful and inviting ec lodge where forest and savanna meet. Within just a couple of miles of the thatched sleeping cabins, Surama's expert bird guides—fluent English-speakers, many of them with formal training and certifications—keep careful track of specialties ranging from Great Potoo to Harpy Eagle. White-throated Toucan, Pearl Kite, and White-tailed and Savannah Hawks can be seen along the entrance way, and Surama is one of the best sites anywhere to look for the stunning and extremely elusive Rufous-winged Ground-Cuckoo. Thriving under

the protection of the local community, Black Curassow and Gray-winged Trumpeter are possible—but secretive—along the Burro Burro River, where a short canoe ride can turn up giant otter, Brazilian tapir, and black spider-monkey, along with the wealth of birds that is everywhere a feature of this magical landscape.

Guyana is an experiment in true conservation, the start of a concerted effort to preserve both the natural and cultural patrimony of a land rich in both and increasingly aware of how precious its resources are. The country's focus on ecotourism is, inevitably, economically motivated, but no less welcome and no less farsighted for it. Those of us who have the opportunity to visit Guyana in these early stages are doubly fortunate: we can enjoy the country's wealth of birds, even as we can admire Guyana's first steps in creating a new and enlightened model of whole-landscape conservation. For once, we can be there at the beginning, and we can be happy in the knowledge that our visit to this beautiful country affirms the rightness of its approach to nature, culture, and their preservation.

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Cousins

Sparrow
With the blood-red eye
We are cousins,
You and I—
As you're borne by feathered sails
I am by dream-woven veils
Through the blue ethereal breath (of)
Earth and sky and life and death
Coaxed from our imprisonings
Each on our respective wings

Resting then
Upon your nest,
Summoned from your snowy breast
One after another note
Tumbles from your tiny throat
So I, cousin,
Ache to be
Maker of a melody
Laced with every noble theme
And each new, delightful dream
And when storms have ended to
Toss my head and sing like you

~ Carrie Alexander Hartley ~
August 22, 2003



"The Hummingbird" by Caroline Parker Hills is from her 1895 book, *Nantucket Hermitage*, reproduced here by permission of Caroline's granddaughter, Mary Hills Munroe, from Patagonia, Arizona, who also writes poetry and included this poem in her book of the same name, published in April, 2003.

The Hummingbird

Tell me, bright bird, with diamond crest,
Where weavest thou thine airy nest?
'Mid what enchanted solitude
Repose thy little fairy brood?
Thy coat of mail, all flecked with gold,
No richer graced brave knight of old.

Thou hovering spark of living light,
Quick flashing past our wondering sight,
Thy crown, now with the emerald gleams,
Now kindles with the ruby's beams;
Thou roamest through the scented bowers,
A star amid adoring flowers.

What far off region gave thee birth?
Thou waif, too fragile for our earth!
And where, 'mid blossoms hung away,
Hide all thy nestlings, at their play?
Titania, in her woodland sport,
Ne'er held, than thee, more regal court.

One dazzling instant thou art here,
To vanish like a smile or tear;
A hint of worlds beyond our gaze,
A glance of Eden's mystic days;
To thy beloved, supremely true,
Speed thee away! fair bird, adieu!

