

TRIP REPORT

Venezuela: Sierra de Lema & Gran Sabana

(with a bit of Roraima)

09-14 November 2023

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Dedicated to the memory of Francisco Diniz, who first showed us the Lost World of Mount Roraima and was to be with us in this new adventure.



Rose-collared Piha *Lipaugus streptophorus*, a sought-after Pantepui endemic

We first visited the Tepui region of southern Venezuela in February 2014 when hiking and birding up Mount Roraima, a trip long in the planning carried very successfully under the guiding of Francisco Diniz from www.makunaima.com. A series of three articles about this trip, with notes on birds, natural history and a bit of sociopolitical prophecy can be found here: <https://oeco.org.br/analises/28194-monte-roraima-caminhadas-observacao-de-aves-e-bolivarianos-em-crise/>.

Mount Roraima / Tepui Roraima is part of the Pantepui, The Pantepui region harbors one of the most distinctive endemic montane bird faunas in the Neotropics and includes the

mountains and highlands of southern Venezuela and nearby Brazil and Guyana. A recent review¹ shows at least 43 species and 167 subspecies of birds are endemic to these mountains, with many of the later likely to be split into full species.

Despite Mount Roraima being excellent for many species, a large number of endemics is not found along the hiking up the mountain. On the other hand, the endemics one can see at Mount Roraima but not found at Lema are just Tepui Nightjar *Stellura longirostris roraimae* (not a full species either for eBird or IOC but considered as so by the Brazilian committee, CBRO), Tepui Wren *Troglodytes rufulus* and Great Elaenia *Elaenia dayi*. So we felt another trip had to be in the plans.

This took a long time due to several reasons, including the political situation in Venezuela, the pandemic and other trips, but in early 2023 we felt it was time to organise a visit to Sierra de Lema, a classic area for the Pantepui endemics. News of easier access and improved security encouraged us to connect Francisco to organize a new trip there. Tragically, he passed away before we could have all organised and the task was taken over by Hélio Zanona, his partner at Makunaima (www.makunaima.com – Whatsapp +55 95 981117669), who did a great job.

We took advantage of the national holiday of 15th November to arrange for an extended weekend trip. The main task was to connect with 21 mostly Pantepui species we needed for our life-lists, while also looking for some local subspecies likely to be split in the future – like Roraiman Flycatcher *Myiophobus roraimae* – or when the Clements List adopted by eBird catches up with the rest of the world – like Roraiman Warbler *Myiothlypis roraimae*.



Roraima Antwren *Herpsilochmus roraimae* (left) and Tepui Redstart *Myioborus c. castaneocapilla*.

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326065233_Dissecting_bird_diversity_in_the_Pantepui_area_of_endemism_northern_South_America



The Troncal 10 road cuts through the forests of Sierra de Lema allowing for easy access and birding.

Logistics – this trip was an all-inclusive package organised by Hélio. We took the GOL flight from São Paulo to Boa Vista through Brasília, arriving at the ungodly time of 2am. For foreigners, the limited flights into Venezuela make Boa Vista (connected by flights to Brasília and Manaus) the best point of entry to the country anyway.

Hélio met us at the airport and took us to the Aipana hotel (probably the best in Boa Vista with gardens you can see Sun Parakeet when the trees are in fruit and you wake up with Bicolor Wrens dueting). After sleep, breakfast and some calls (work...) Hélio drove us 3 hours to Pacaraima, at the Brazil-Venezuela border.



At the Guarda Nacional Bolivariana control post after finding both Roraiman Nightjats and Roraiman/Fotthill Screech Owl next to it. A Guard was kind enough to take the pic. Right: Santo Kamá is one of many scenic spots at the Gran Sabana.

There we had lunch and met Ricardo Brassington (Whatsapp +58 414 8691122), who was to be in charge of driving and catering, and Iván Tepedino (Whatsapp +58 416 1146331), our birding guide. Our vehicle was a classic Toyota Landcruiser.

Both Ricardo and Iván are fluent in English and have worked with world birders before and we give the five stars for being great company and going beyond what was required to show us the target species.

Ricardo arranged us the permits ("permiso") to cross into Venezuela well in advance and we spent just seconds at the border crossing, with no passport stamp required. He informed us this can be arranged for visitors from the US and UK.

As this was all inclusive the only cash we took (Brazilian reais and US dollars) was to pay for a few beers, wifi access and tips. Venezuela has, in practice, adopted the US dollar as its currency while the Brazilian real is widely accepted throughout the southern part of the country. No one uses credit cards in the areas we visited, and no ATMs were detected so it is best to bring some cash if you plan to buy stuff not included in your package.



Speckled Tanager *Ixothraupis g. guttatus* (left) and Tepui Vireo *Vireo sclateri*.

Lodging – In Venezuela we first lodge at the nice Yakoo Lodge (<https://campamentoyakoo.com/>) in Santa Elena de Uairen for the night before departing to the Gran Sabana. Yakoo has nice huts with 24-hour power and hot water, plus a good restaurant with cold drinks.

From there it was a 3-hour drive in Ricardo's classic Land Cruiser to Campamento Rápidos de Kaimoran (check it in Trip Advisor), where we were to lodge. Kaimoran has power during a limited time of the day and no hot water but the managers were quite helpful in adjusting things – like breakfast time, dinner and power-off time - to our needs. The room had been recently renovated and was kept clean. Kaimoran has wifi and you can purchase a code giving you 5 hour access for R\$10. Connection was good enough for Whatsapp but not for a Teams call.

Kaimoran is in the Gran Sabana area, surrounded by anthropogenic grassland with riverine belts along the many fast flowing watercourses and more substantial forest over the areas where volcanic sills have punched through the sandstone dominating the area.

It was a 40-45 minute drive from Kaimoran to the border between the Gran Sabana and the Sierra de Lema forests.



Rufous-brown Solitaire *Myiadestes (or Cichlopsis) leucogenys gularis* and White-necked Thrush *Turdus albicollis phaeopygoides*, both are future splits.

Food – During our days birding Sierra de Lema we had breakfast and dinner at Kaimoran. Breakfast included arepas, eggs, fruit (papaya, melon), fruit juice, coffee and tea. Dinner was a choice between grilled chicken or beef with fries, rice and salad. Ricardo took olives and mushrooms that added variety and taste to dinner. The local sauce, the spicy Kumache con Bachaco, was very appreciated.

Ricardo also arranged for our picnic lunches, taken in convenient spots at Serra de Lema while we sat in field chairs around a field table. He made very nice salads with greens, avocado and tomatoes together with bread, Venezuelan fresh cheese (very nice) and ham together with fruits, tea and juice. The sort of light meal we like.

Security – There was absolutely no issue regarding security and we never felt threatened. Passing through the border was expedite and there was no hassle at the Guardia Nacional or Army checkpoints. Ricardo seems to know everyone and that makes things quite easy. We had to drive past one Army and one Guardia post every day when moving from Kaimoran to Sierra de Lema and it was basically a matter of saying “good morning”. We were told the Venezuelan government wants to resurrect tourism and the Guardia and Army were given orders to not hassle tourists and be friendly. That was our experience as we were even able to bird around a Guardia post at 3am and take pictures there, something impossible a while ago.

Birding - Most birding was done along the Troncal 10 road cutting through Sierra de Lema and was quite easy as most species were found right by the tarmac. Traffic is a lot slower compared to the past and passing cars and trucks were infrequent enough not to be a real disturbance.

Weather was good and sunny over most days, with rain in only one day but just for a short while. Temperatures were quite pleasant, especially compared to the oven in Boa

Vista. El Niño coupled with climate change resulted in a drier season than it should and the fires in the Sabana showed the situation could deteriorate as the rains were late.



Rufous-breasted Sabrewing *Campylopterus hyperythrus*

Details on the locations and birds we saw at each spot can be found in the eBird Trip Report we prepared (<https://ebird.org/tripreport/172341>). The main spots we focused on are hotspots marked in eBird:

1 - the first forest area at the Gran Sabana / Sierra de Lema ecotone - Troncal-10, Bolívar, VE (5.892, -61.449). This is right after the monument to the Pioneer Soldier (an eBird Hotspot).

2 – El Campamiento (5.9670342, -61.4203119), where we had most picnic lunches and visited several times to get goodies like Tepui Tinamou and try Roraiman Nightjar.

3 – Km 747 / Old 122 (5.96692,-61.41107), an area of soaked white sand soils with peculiar vegetation and a trail into mossy forest. This is actually in Guyanan territory.

4 – Km 111.5 / 950 m altura (5.99614,-61.39385), where birding along the road gave us goodies like Guianan Cock-of-the-rock, the Tepui subspecies of Rufous-brown Solitaire, Roraiman Antbird and Plain-winged Antwren.

5 – The Manakin Corner (5.9133033,-61.4352783), another spot for candy-store birding along the tarmac.



Golden-tufted Grackle *Macroagelaius imthurni*

Schedule – Our day-by-day was:

9 November – arrival in Boa Vista (2am), sleep, breakfast and drive to Pacaraima at the Brazil-Venezuela border. Lunch, meet and greet with Ricardo and Iván and drive to Santa Elena de Uraien. Late afternoon and evening at Yakoo lodge.

10 November – left Yakoo after breakfast, scenic drive across the Gran Sabana saying hello to old friend Roraima Tepui in the distance. Settling in Rapidos de Kaimoran lodge and then to Sierra de Lema, where birding at 1, 2 and 3 before returning late afternoon.

11 November – starting at 2, the 3, 4 and 5. Coming and going along the road.

12 November – morning at 2 then 3 and 4. A stop at Wari Waterfall for a few Gran Sabana birds before going back to Kaimoran.

13 November – early morning departure to try nightjars at the Monumento Soldado Pionero close to 1, then 2, 1, 3, 4, 5.

14 November – very early start to try nightjars at the Guardia Nacional Bolivariana post near 3. Then to 5 for Tepui Toucanet (with Guianan Musician Wren as a bonus) and 1. Drive back to Santa Elena with stops at Kamá Waterfall and Quebrada Jaspe (bloody amazing), having the places just for ourselves.

15 November – after breakfast, drive from Yakoo to the border where we met Hélio, who took us back to Boa Vista with stops on the way to investigate some ponds for waterbirds and lunch in town (a great Pirarucu with Orange Sauce). A very hot day approaching 40C

in Boa Vista, late afternoon in the touristy Orla de Taumanan by the (very low) Branco River for drinks and easy birds.



Velvet-browed Brilliant Heliodoxa xanthogonys

Species List – Pantepui endemics are marked with a *. The only target species we didn't connect was the Matauí Antpitta *Grallaricula nana kukenamensis*, a very probable split. By and large playback response was not great, what affected our results but getting 20 of our 21 primary targets was quite nice.

The list for this trip has 194 species. We likely missed a few because of concentrating in the targets. For details and a lot more pictures see the trip report in eBird (<https://ebird.org/tripreport/172341>):

Great Tinamou *Tinamus major*

*Tepui Tinamou *Crypturellus ptaritepui* – heard several times and seen for an extended time after playback (no pics, unfortunately) at the Campamiento.

Variable Chachalaca *Ortalis motmot*

Spix's Guan *Penelope jacquacu*

Pale-vented Pigeon *Patagioenas cayennensis*

Band-tailed Pigeon *Patagioenas fasciata*

Ruddy Pigeon *Patagioenas subvinacea*



Sharp-tailed Ibises *Cercibis oxycerca*

Common Ground Dove *Columbina passerina*

Ruddy Ground Dove *Columbina talpacoti*

White-tipped Dove *Leptotila verreauxi*

Smooth-billed Ani *Crotophaga ani*

Squirrel Cuckoo *Piaya cayana*

Common Pauraque *Nyctidromus albicollis*

*Roraiman Nightjar *Setopagis whitelyi* – searched for at Soldado Pionero (we found only White-tailed Nightjar) and El Campamiento (not there). One seen briefly at the Guardia Nacional post.

White-tailed Nightjar *Hydropsalis cayennensis*

White-collared Swift *Streptoprocne zonaris*

Fork-tailed Palm Swift *Tachornis squamata*

Straight-billed Hermit *Phaethornis bourcieri*

Sooty-capped Hermit *Phaethornis augusti*

Blue-fronted Lancebill *Doryfera johannae*

Brown Violetear *Colibri delphinae*

Black-eared Fairy *Heliotheryx auritus*

Black-throated Mango *Anthracothorax nigricollis*

*Peacock Coquette *Lophornis pavoninus duidae* – several females seen, only a couple of males

*Velvet-browed Brilliant *Heliodoxa xanthogonys* – seen several times but few photo opportunities.

Long-billed Starthroat *Heliomaster longirostris*

Amethyst Woodstar *Calliphlox amethystina*

Rufous-breasted Sabrewing *Campylopterus hyperythrus*

Fork-tailed Woodnymph *Thalurania furcata*

*Copper-tailed Hummingbird *Saucerottia cupreicauda pacaraimae* – best seen at Yakoo



A male Peacock Coquette *Lophornis pavoninus*. Females are far more common.

Glittering-throated Emerald *Chionomesa fimbriata*

Blue-chinned Sapphire *Chlorestes notata*

American Golden-Plover *Pluvialis dominica*

Southern Lapwing *Vanellus chilensis*

Wattled Jacana *Jacana jacana*

Yellow-billed Tern *Sternula superciliaris*

Large-billed Tern *Phaetusa simplex*
Maguari Stork *Ciconia maguari*
Jabiru Jabiru *Mycteria*
Wood Stork *Mycteria americana*
Great Egret *Ardea alba*
Cocoi Heron *Ardea cocoi*
Sharp-tailed Ibis *Cercibis oxycerca* – a pair on the way back to Boa Vista
Buff-necked Ibis *Theristicus caudatus*
King Vulture *Sarcoramphus papa*
Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus*
Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*
Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture *Cathartes burrovianus*
Black Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus tyrannus*
Savanna Hawk *Buteogallus meridionalis*
Solitary Eagle *Buteogallus solitarius*
Roadside Hawk *Rupornis magnirostris*
White-tailed Hawk *Geranoaetus albicaudatus*
Gray-lined Hawk *Buteo nitidus*
Broad-winged Hawk *Buteo platypterus*
Short-tailed Hawk *Buteo brachyurus*
Zone-tailed Hawk *Buteo albonotatus*
Tropical Screech-Owl *Megascops choliba*
*Foothill Screech-Owl *Megascops roraimae roraimae* – very responsive to pb at the Guardia Nacional checkpoint.
*Masked Trogon *Trogon personatus roraimae*
Ringed Kingfisher *Megaceryle torquata*
Swallow-winged Puffbird *Chelidoptera tenebrosa*
Brown Jacamar *Brachygalba lugubris*
Tepui Toucanet *Aulacorhynchus whitelianus*
White-throated Toucan *Ramphastos tucanus*

Golden-spangled Piculet *Picumnus [exilis] undulatus*

Yellow-tufted Woodpecker *Melanerpes cruentatus*

Red-necked Woodpecker *Campephilus rubricollis*



Roraiman Barbtail *Roraimia adusta*

*Golden-olive Woodpecker *Colaptes rubiginosus viridissimus*

Collared Forest-Falcon *Micrastur semitorquatus*

Crested Caracara *Caracara plancus*

Red-throated Caracara *Ibycter americanus*

Yellow-headed Caracara *Daptrius chimachima*

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*

Tepui Parrotlet *Nannopsittaca panychlora*

Blue-cheeked Parrot *Amazona dufresniana*

Orange-winged Parrot *Amazona amazonica*

*Fiery-shouldered Parakeet *Pyrrhura egregia* – flocks flying across the road at 1 on the first day. Great views, no pic

Brown-throated Parakeet *Eupsittula pertinax*

Red-and-green Macaw *Ara chloropterus*

Red-shouldered Macaw *Diopsittaca nobilis*

*Streak-backed Antshrike *Thamnophilus insignis nigrofrontalis* – a group of 4 males responding to pb. Like the Bee Gees.

*Plain Antwreos *Dysithamnus mentalis ptaritepui*

*Plain-winged Antwren *Myrmotherula behni inornate* – a male seen once with a mixed flock at 4



A pair of Roraiman Antbirds *Myrmelastes saturatus*

*Roraiman Antwren *Herpsilochmus roraimae* - widespread

Gray Antbird *Cercomacra cinerascens*

*Roraiman Antbird *Myrmelastes s. saturatus* – great views of a pair at 4

*Tepui Antpitta *Myrmothera simplex* – very vocal very close at the Manakin Corner

Olivaceous Woodcreeper *Sittasomus griseicapillus*

Plain-brown Woodcreeper *Dendrocincla fuliginosa*

*Wedge-billed Woodcreeper *Glyphorhynchus spirurus coronobscurus*

Chestnut-rumped Woodcreeper *Xiphorhynchus pardalotus*

*White-throated Foliage-gleaner *Syndactyla roraimae*

*Roraiman Barbtail *Roraimia adusta* – at the Campamiento cloud forest

*Tepui Spinetail *Cranioleuca demissa*



McConnell's Spinetail *Synallaxis macconnelli* (left) and Olive Manakin *Xenopipo uniformis*

*McConnell's Spinetail *Synallaxis macconnelli yavii*

*Olive Manakin *Xenopipo uniformis* – best views at the Campamiento

Black Manakin *Xenopipo atronitens*

*Orange-bellied Manakin *Lepidothrix suavisissima* - widespread

*Scarlet-horned Manakin *Ceratopipra cornuta* - widespread

Golden-headed Manakin *Ceratopipra erythrocephala*

*Red-banded Fruiteater *Pipreola whitelyi* - strangely, heard-only



Guianan Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola rupicola* (left) and Tepui Sharpbill *Oxyruncus cristatus phelpsi*

Guianan Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola rupicola*

*Rose-collared Piha *Lipaugus streptophorus*

Screaming Piha *Lipaugus vociferans*

White Bellbird *Procnias albus* – heard a few times

Bearded Bellbird *Procnias averano* – heard a few times

Olivaceous Schiffornis *Schiffornis olivacea*

*Sharpbill *Oxyruncus cristatus phelpsi*

Wing-barred Piprites *Piprites chloris*

*Sierra de Lema Flycatcher *Mionectes roraimae* – best views at the Campamiento

*Chapman's Bristle-Tyrant *Pogonotriccus chapmani* – seen at 1 and 4

*Black-fronted Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes nigrifrons* – heard several times, mostly at 1 but never came close

Ringed Antpipit *Corythopsis torquatus*



Sierra de Lema Flycatcher *Mionectes roraimae* (left) and Olive-backed Tanager *Mitrospingus oleagineus*

Helmeted Pygmy-Tyrant *Lophotriccus galeatus*

*Pearly-vented Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus margaritaceiventer ayuantepui*

Ruddy Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilatriccus russatus*

Spotted Tody-Flycatcher *Todirostrum maculatum*

Yellow-olive Flatbill *Tolmomyias sulphurescens*

Ochre-lored Flatbill *Tolmomyias flaviventris*

Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet *Tyrannulus elatus*

Plain-crested Elaenia *Elaenia cristata*

Yellow-bellied Elaenia *Elaenia flavogaster*

Tepui Elaenia *Elaenia olivina*

Sooty-headed Tyrannulet *Phyllomyias griseiceps*

*Roraiman Flycatcher *Myiophobus r. roraimae* – great views at the Campamiento

Bright-rumped Attila *Attila spadiceus*

Dusky-capped Flycatcher *Myiarchus tuberculifer*

Short-crested Flycatcher *Myiarchus ferox*

Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus*

Boat-billed Flycatcher *Megarynchus pitangua*

Rusty-margined Flycatcher *Myiozetetes cayanensis*

Tropical Kingbird *Tyrannus melancholicus*

Fork-tailed Flycatcher *Tyrannus savana*

Rufous-browed Peppershrike *Cyclarhis gujanensis*

*Tepui Vireo *Vireo sclateri* - widespread

White-winged Swallow *Tachycineta albiventer*



Scarlet-horned Manakin *Ceratopira cornuta* (left) and Orange-bellied Manakin *Lepidothrix suavissima*

Blue-and-white Swallow *Pygochelidon cyanoleuca*

Tropical Gnatcatcher *Polioptila [plumbea] innonata*

*Flutist Wren *Microcerculus ustulatus* – heard in several spots, seen at 3

Wing-banded Wren *Microcerculus bamba*

House Wren *Troglodytes aedon*

*Coraya Wren *Pheugopedius coraya barrowcloughianus*

White-breasted Wood-Wren *Henicorhina leucosticta*

Guianan Musician Wren *Cyphorhinus [a.] arada*

*Rufous-brown Solitaire *Cichlopsis leucogenys gularis*

Pale-breasted Thrush *Turdus leucomelas*

Yellow-legged Thrush *Turdus flavipes*

White-necked Thrush *Turdus albicollis*

Pale-eyed Thrush *Turdus leucops*



Tepui Brushfinch *Atlapetes personatus*

*Pantepui Thrush *Turdus murinus* - widespread

*Black-hooded Thrush *Turdus olivater duidae*

*Blue-naped Chlorophonia *Chlorophonia cyanea roraimae*

Purple-throated Euphonia *Euphonia chlorotica*

Finsch's Euphonia *Euphonia finschi*

Violaceous Euphonia *Euphonia violacea*

Orange-bellied Euphonia *Euphonia xanthogaster*

*Hooded Siskin *Spinus magellanicus longirostris*

*Rufous-collared Sparrow *Zonotrichia capensis perezchichillorum*

*Tepui Brushfinch *Atlapetes personatus*

Crested Oropendola *Psarocolius decumanus*

Olive Oropendola *Psarocolius bifasciatus*

Epaulet Oriole *Icterus cayanensis*

Yellow Oriole *Icterus nigrogularis*

*Golden-tufted Grackle *Macroagelaius imthurni* - widespread

American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla*

*Tropical Parula *Setophaga pitiayumi roraimae*

Blackpoll Warbler *Setophaga striata*



Tepui Toucanet (left) *Aulacorhynchus whitelianus* and Ruddy Tody-Flycatcher *Poecilotriccus russatus*

*Two-banded [Roraiman] Warbler *Myiothlypis [bivittata] roraimae* -at 1 in the first day

*Tepui Redstart *Myioborus castaneocapilla* - widespread

*Olive-backed Tanager *Mitrospingus oleagineus* - widespread

White-winged Tanager *Piranga leucoptera*

Yellow-green Grosbeak *Caryothraustes canadensis*

Red-shouldered Tanager *Tachyphonus phoenicius*

Fulvous Shrike-Tanager *Lanio fulvus*

Silver-beaked Tanager *Ramphocelus carbo*

Blue-gray Tanager *Thraupis episcopus*

Palm Tanager *Thraupis palmarum*

Speckled Tanager *Ixothraupis guttata*

Yellow-bellied Tanager *Ixothraupis xanthogastra*

Spotted Tanager *Ixothraupis punctata*

*Black-headed Tanager *Stilpnia cyanoptera whitelyi*

Burnished-buff Tanager *Stilpnia cayana*

Paradise Tanager *Tangara chilensis*

Opal-rumped Tanager *Tangara velia*

Bay-headed Tanager *Tangara gyrola*

Swallow Tanager *Tersina viridis*

Blue Dacnis *Dacnis cayana*

Purple Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes caeruleus*

Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus*

Green Honeycreeper *Chlorophanes spiza*



Tepui Redstart *Myioborus castaneocapilla* (left) and Greater Flowerpiercer *Diglossa major*

*Greater Flowerpiercer *Diglossa major*

Saffron Finch *Sicalis flaveola*

Yellow-bellied Seedeater *Sporophila nigricollis*

Bananaquit *Coereba flaveola*

Total – 194 spp