

Guyana: Unspoiled Wilderness | Trip Report

Jan. 30 – Feb. 11, 2020 | Written by Dave Mehlman



With Guides Ron Allicock and Dave Mehlman, and David, Joan, Judy, Livia, Nate, Robert, Robin, and Steve.





“Photo, photo, photo” was the cry for our Guyana adventure as we explored this wonderful country on the northeastern corner of South America. All went well on our travels with only one deviation from the

planned itinerary which, in many ways, worked in our favor. Ron and his capable staff and all those working at the lodges (Surama Ecolodge, Atta Rainforest Lodge, Caiman House, Manari Ranch) made our trip smooth and enjoyable and one that we will treasure for a long time.

Thurs., Jan. 30 Arrivals in Guyana | Georgetown

Several early arrivals (Livia, Robert, Steve, Dave) went to the Georgetown Botanical Garden in the afternoon for a start on birding and photography (and to start the list). In addition, there were a few things at the comfy Cara Lodge Hotel (e.g., Plain-bellied Hummingbird) that were seldom seen on the rest of the trip. Dave hosted the group for a welcoming drink and orientation in the early evening.

Fri., Jan. 31 Mahaica River | Georgetown Botanical Gardens

Today was the first of many early starts with in-room coffee and snacks provided by Ron. A small bus took us to the Mahaica River with a stop at the Mahaica Bridge for a pair of Rufous Crab Hawk. Then, we continued to Narish’s house on the Mahaica River for a boat trip upriver (starting with a pit stop). The boat trip was fabulous, and we saw our primary target, the Hoatzin (Guyana’s national bird). Other fun things included Black-capped Donacobius, Green-rumped Parrotlet, Green-tailed Jacamar, Blood-colored Woodpecker, Long-winged Harrier, and several Guianan Red Howler monkeys (with a small one). Returning from the boat trip quite famished, we enjoyed a home-cooked breakfast at the house, with roti, curry, and other delicious treats.

On the way back to town for lunch, we stopped briefly at the Hope Canal outlet. Despite the heat at mid-day, we found our only American Pygmy-Kingfisher of the trip along with a Pied Water-Tyrant and a Spotted Sandpiper (a wintering migrant from North America).



We returned to our Georgetown abode, the Cara Lodge Hotel, for lunch and a rest. Reconvening in the late afternoon, the full group went to the Georgetown Botanical Garden for some wonderful birding and bird viewing (with a quick stop to see the manatees in the ponds). We saw many species well there, some common, but others that we did not find elsewhere, such as Festive Parrot, Gray Kingbird, Common and Spotted Tody-Flycatcher, Toco Toucan, and Cinnamon Attila. We returned to the Cara for dinner and wisely closed out our bills, ahead of our departure the next day.

Sat., Feb. 1 Kaieteur Falls | Surama Eco Lodge

A bit of a normal wake-up hour today, as we did not leave for the Eugene F. Correia (Ogle) airport until 8:15am, after breakfast. We stopped briefly at the Ogle Seawall before arriving at the airport and, fortunately for us, the tide was very good for bird viewing. In addition to many Scarlet Ibis roosting on the flats, we found several wintering migrant shorebirds there that we would not encounter again, including Willet, Whimbrel, and Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. Dave found some White-cheeked Pintail far out on a flat, which turned out to be a lifer for Ron! Arriving at the airport, we all checked (and were weighed) in for our charter flight to Kaieteur Falls and on to Surama Village. Unfortunately, the flight to the falls is weather dependent and, indeed, we had to wait about 1.5 hours until the weather at the Falls cleared and we took off.

We arrived at the Falls airstrip about 12:30pm and, due to our shortened ground time, headed straight over to look for one of the Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock leks. Good views of this bird were not to be had (only glimpses of heads, wings, and various other body parts), so we walked over to admire the falls, the highest free-falling waterfall in the world. Stopping at both Rainbow and Boyscout Views, we managed to avert our eyes long enough to see some interesting things, including Cliff Flycatcher, Sulphury and Short-crested Flycatchers, Greater Yellow-headed Vulture, and White-tipped Swift (latter only glimpsed by Ron and Dave). Non-birds seen included the endemic Golden Rocket Frog in the tanks of the endemic Giant Tank Bromeliad.

Pushing our departure as late as possible, we made one last try at another cock-of-the-rock lek, but again had unsatisfying views. We were out of time at that point and left for the 40-minute flight to the Surama airstrip.



Picked up there by Rensford, driving the trusty minivan, we went to the Surama Ecolodge, our home for the next few days, and then had a (very) late lunch.

After getting things in our rooms, we made a short field trip to a potoo roost. Sure enough, after a short search by Ron and local guide Karlon, a roosting Great Potoo was located, affording great views, photo ops, and more than a few lifers for the group. We ended the day at a nearby marsh (which turns into Itch Pond during the rainy season) at dusk, enjoying Lesser Nighthawks and calling Variable Chachalacas and Common Pauraques, as Ron hosted the first of many sundowners with the famous El Dorado rum and the mixer of one's choice. We closed this first great day of our Guyana Wilderness adventure with dinner, the briefing for the next day, and the daily checklist. And, of course, collapsing into bed.



Sun., Feb. 2 Surama Eco Lodge area | Harpy Eagle Trail

The day started with a "normal" breakfast at 5:00am. We then headed out to the main Georgetown-Lethem highway for our first stop at the MYC Camp clearing. Good birds started right away with both Spix's and Marail Guans (the latter one of the many Guianan Shield Endemics pointed out to us during the trip), Red-necked, Lineated, and Cream-colored Woodpeckers, Red-fan Parrot, Black-necked Aracari, a flock of Painted Parakeets, the fabulous Spangled Cotinga, and a surprisingly cooperative Buff-breasted Wren.

We continued up the road to the Harpy Eagle Trail in search of its namesake. Starting the short hike through the forest, we promptly saw interesting things, including Golden-headed Manakin, Olivaceous Schiffornis, and our first Screaming Piha (which, much to Dave's amazement, was seen rather than heard). Other distractions on the way to the Harpy nest included a male White-throated Manakin and an armadillo wasp nest. Arriving at the nest tree, a huge Brazilian Cedar, we began our vigil while Ron and Karlon searched nearby trees. Alas, the Harpy never showed, but we were serenaded by a chorus of pihás.



We went back to Surama Junction for a home-cooked meal from Auntie Madonna (and learned about the soursop fruit). We then returned to the Ecolodge for siesta. For the afternoon, we drove back on the entrance road to bird the beautiful "heaven" savanna around Surama. Many new species were seen, including Hooded Tanager, Finsch's Euphonia, Long-billed Starthroat, the Elaenia trifacta (Yellow-bellied, Lesser, Plain-crested), and the oddly-named White-naped Xenopsaris. We concluded yet another marvelous day with sundowners by the road while enjoying a nighthawk display which included a fierce Least Nighthawk doggedly



pursuing a larger Lesser Nighthawk (go figure). During and after dinner at the Ecolodge that night, we heard the mournful song of a Common Potoo.

Mon., Feb. 3 Surama Eco Lodge | Burro Burro River

After the usual early breakfast, we took a short ride in the van and then began our morning hike along the Burro-Burro River Trail (an old road). The birding was great the whole way; specialties encountered included the Capuchinbird (which was first heard making its unusual growling call), 2 Blackish Nightjars perched on a branch, Cayenne Jay, Great Jacamar, Guianan Warbling-Antbird, Golden-winged Parakeet, a female Fiery-tailed Aowlbill, a large group of rather noisy Gray-winged Trumpeters, an immature Black Hawk-Eagle perched, male and female Green-backed Trogon, and a Blue-headed Parrot looking out of its nest hole in a very spiny palm.

We returned for lunch at the civilized hour of 12:30 and then took our daily siesta. Reconvening for the afternoon, we started birding on the Surama entrance road, quickly spotting an immature Rufescent Tiger-Heron, both sexes of Golden-collared Woodpecker, the aptly named Boat-billed Flycatcher, and a Guianan Puffbird. Continuing on to the main road, we added things such as Long-tailed Tyrant, White-chinned Sapphire, Green Oropendola, and Crimson-crested Woodpecker. We returned at dark, for another tasty (and well-earned) dinner.

Tues., Feb. 4 Atta Rainforest Lodge | Canopy Walkway

Unfortunately, it was time to depart our new friends at Surama and head off in search of new adventures. After breakfast, we loaded up and headed out up the highway to the Iwokrama Forest. But, time for birding was built in, and we made several stops on the way. New and interesting things encountered included Pied Puffbird, Blackpoll Warbler (the only North American migrant landbird species on the trip), Sulphury Flycatcher, a Jabiru perched in a tree, a spectacular male Pompadour Cotinga, and some Yellow-tufted Woodpeckers (spotted by Nate).

We arrived at our next destination, Atta Rainforest Lodge, around noon, were shown to our comfy rooms, and began to admire all the wildlife in the clearing around the dining area, such as a pair of Pink-throated Becards building a nest, numerous Green Ameiva lizards gamboling about, and hummers at the feeders (Long-tailed Hermit, Fork-tailed Woodnymph, Gray-breasted Sabrewing, Versicolored Emerald). Then lunch and a siesta.

Meeting again in the late afternoon, we headed to the main road, drove a short while, then parked and walked a short way into the woods. After some searching, local guide (and birder/digiscoper extraordinaire Delon) got everyone on to one of the hardest birds to find and see in the Neotropics: Rufous Potoo! It was roosting, so all got to see, photograph, and digiscope to their heart's content. As a bonus, the bird frequently showed its camouflage behavior of rocking back and forth, as if a dead leaf in the wind—amazing. We then walked a bit



along the highway in the gathering dusk, observing and listening along the way. Sightings included Variable Chachalaca, Dusky Purpletuft, and Black-tailed Tityra; a Tawny-bellied Screech-Owl was heard singing. After sundowners and dark, Ron and Delon called in a White-winged Potoo, the second of two really hard to see potoos seen by the group in a single day! Though perched high in a snag, everyone saw it well with the help of flashlights. We then returned to the lodge for the checklist, dinner, and sleep.

Wed., Feb. 5 Atta Rainforest Lodge | Canopy Walkway | White Sand Forest

After early morning coffee and cookies, we hiked to visit the famed canopy walkway, scaring a feeding Black Curassow along the way. While one of the walkway's platforms was closed due to minor tree-fall damage, we visited the other two. The walkway was pretty quiet, though after a while we found some interesting things, including Yellow-green Grosbeak, Guianan Trogon, and Red-fan Parrot. On the walk back, we found and photographed an Owl Eye butterfly and heard the song of the Spotted Antpitta. Returning to the lodge, we had a proper breakfast.

After sating our morning hunger, off we went to a nearby cock-of-the-rock lek, with hopes of better luck. Hiking in quietly, we spotted a Guianan Trogon and a Spider Monkey. After clambering through some very large boulders (and admiring a few bats attached to an overhang), we arrived at the lek site and quietly sat on the rocks to wait. Sure enough, up to 3 males intermittently came and went and displayed a bit—enough for everyone to get great looks and photos. The birders in the group were distracted by a small mixed species flock that passed by, digging out a Spot-tailed Antwren, Buff-throated Woodcreeper, and Flame-crested Tanager. Satisfied, we hiked out to the road, admiring an old cock-of-the-rock nest on the side of one of the boulders.

On the drive back to Atta for lunch, Ron noticed a lot of swifts flying under a bridge over the highway, skimming water to drink out of the creek below. We stopped to watch and had the extraordinary experience of looking DOWN at swifts passing constantly underneath. This let us see clearly their rumps, which are impossible to see from below when they are flying high over the forest canopy. Carefully watching, we could positively identify Band-rumped (narrow, white rump) and Chapman's (brownish rump) Swifts. Extremely satisfied, we returned to the lodge for another wonderful lunch, followed by early afternoon siesta.

We headed out again in late afternoon, first to a nearby patch of white sand forest. Although pretty quiet bird-wise, our guides found a Bronzy Jacamar (a white sand forest specialty) and both male and female White-crowned Manakin. We continued on in the van and stopped to bird at a bridge over a creek. Some of the most interesting finds there were not birds: some Spectacled Caimans resting on the bank and an Electric Eel swimming lazily around. Birds were found as well, such as a great view of a Green-tailed Jacamar, Black-headed Parrots, and both Scarlet and Red-and-green Macaws squabbling over a nest cavity. Alas, no intervention was required on our part, so we continued on the road to Ron's favorite owling spot. We enjoyed sundowners as dusk fell and Ron and Delon were able to call in a Black-banded Owl, which was well seen by all with the aid of flashlights. Tired, but happy, we returned to the lodge for dinner and sleep.



During dinner, Dave told the group that he and Ron had conferred and that we were going to have to make a change to the itinerary since Rock View Lodge was no longer available to us for the following day, as planned. Instead, we would be staying at Atta one additional night, skipping Rock View Lodge, and going directly from Atta to Caiman House. In Dave's humble opinion, this was a reasonable trade that we would actually benefit from (and, as it turned out, he was correct!).

Thurs., Feb. 6 Atta Rainforest Lodge

We began the day with our usual early morning coffee and cookies. As we enjoyed these, we watched a Black Curassow family (2 adults, 2 chicks) stroll around the clearing. Today, we concentrated our birding on the trails around Atta Lodge. First, we headed a short way back on the entrance road and made a big loop hike through the forest. Although too many species were seen to list completely, some specialties included Golden-headed Manakins feeding on fruits, Brown-bellied Stipplethroat, Paradise Jacamar (perched high in a canopy snag), and Black-eared Fairy.

After our usual "proper" breakfast, we explored the forest on trails closer to the canopy walkway, partly in search of army ant swarms. Interesting non-birds seen included Spider Monkey, an Owl Eye butterfly, and a bridal-veil stinkhorn mushroom. Finding an army ant swarm, we saw a few woodcreepers foraging nearby (Amazonian Barred, Wedge-billed, Buff-throated). Then, we returned for lunch and our normal early afternoon siesta.

Reconvening in late afternoon, we headed out in the van for some more birding along the highway. We mostly had continued (or better) looks at species seen already, such as Red-fan Parrot, Black-spotted Barbet, 3 species of manakins in a single tree (White-crowned, White-throated, Golden-headed), and a female Pompadour Cotinga. Then, after sundowners, we returned for dinner, the daily checklist, and our final night at Atta.

Fri., Feb. 7 Atta Rainforest Lodge | Northern Rupununi Savannah | Caiman House Lodge

Yes, early coffee and cookies again followed by a walk in the forest. Mostly by now familiar species, but a Cream-colored Woodpecker put in an appearance in the clearing at the start. Returning for full breakfast, we also got our gear organized and packed to leave right after lunch. After breakfast, we headed out for our last trail walk at Atta. While observing some new things (male and female Guianan Trogon, Grayish Mourner, Fasciated Antshrike, Long-billed Gnatwren) some Scarlet Macaws began flying around above us, screeching constantly. Suspecting a nearby large predator, Ron suspected something was up and he began searching the trees. Sure enough, he spotted, high in a large tree, a young male Harpy Eagle! After getting everyone on the bird, Ron ran back to get those who had stayed behind while Dave got it in the scope. At first, the angle and lighting made for challenging viewing, but Delon found a better location for lighting and viewing. As this happened, the others



arrived, and most got at least a brief glimpse before the commotion became too much and it flew off. Wow—what a lucky break our schedule change proved to have made!

Happy, we returned for an early final lunch at Atta and said our goodbyes to this lovely place. Now, we piled into 3 SUV's for the rest of the trip and headed out on our journey to Caiman House, birding along the way, with a stop in Aranaputa to get gas, use the facilities, and buy cold drinks and local cashews.

Along the way, we stopped at some roadside wetlands Ron wanted to check out. His instincts were good, as we briefly saw a Crested Doradito, this being apparently a new locality for this hard to find species in Guyana. Even better, we soon found at least one Bearded Tachuri (another sought-after flycatcher) and chased it long enough for everyone to get a decent look and some photos. Other species in the wetland included Striated Heron and Pied Water-Tyrant.

We turned off the highway onto the long road in to Yupukari (the community where Caiman House is located) about 5:15pm and stopped along the savanna for sundowners. While enjoying these, several Nacunda Nighthawks flew by, the largest and most distinctive nighthawk, along with some Least Nighthawks. We rolled into Caiman House about 7:15pm, got settled into our rooms, then had a late dinner. It was a long, but very, very rewarding day.

Sat., Feb. 8 Northern Rupununi Savannah | Rupununi River

There being no rest for the weary on this trip, we were up early for breakfast, followed by a driving trip across the nearby savannas in search of the elusive Giant Anteater. Although the anteater remained elusive and was not found, while driving through the grasslands and visiting several wetlands, we spotted many new species for the trip, including Eastern and Red-breasted Meadowlark, Maguari Stork, Buff-necked Ibis, White-faced Whistling-Duck, Yellowish Pipit (doing its display flight) another Crested Doradito, Double-striped Thick-knee, and 2 Burrowing Owls.

After lunch and a siesta, we drove to the nearby Rupununi River for our second boat trip of the tour. Using 2 boats, we headed out in the late afternoon. Nice birds seen from the boat included Large-billed Tern, a pair of Jabiru, Pied Plover, and Blue Ground-Dove on the bank. We went ashore at one point and took a short walk to Dari Pond. While the principal attraction there were many blooming Queen Victoria's water lilies (the national flower of Guyana), fun animals there included Purple Gallinule, Green Ibis, Hooded Tanager, Pale-tipped Tyrannulet, and several enormous Black Caimans (anyone for a swim? Piranhas were also rumored to be present).

Returning to the boats after sundowners and negotiating the riverbank, we turned back, enjoying a nice show of foraging Band-tailed Nighthawks over the River. As dark fell, Ron got out the spotlight and found some of these nighthawks sitting on a branch for a better look and, best of all, picked up a Common Potoo sitting in a tree stump. We arrived at the lodge after dark, had a late dinner and checklist review, and went to bed.

Sun., Feb. 9 Caiman House Lodge | Karasabai | Manari Ranch

A very early start today, since we had places to visit and kilometers to go before we slept again. After early coffee and listening to a nearby calling Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, we hit the road, heading toward the Amerindian community of Karasabai. A breakfast stop of sandwiches yielded an actual sighting of a pygmy-owl. Stopping in town, we attempted to find our local guide. However, he was in church, so we headed over to our birding area anyway in search of our target for the day: Sun Parakeet.



As luck would have it, we encountered a flock of at least 15 of these stunning parakeets almost right away after entering the valley where they live, and all had ample looks through binoculars, scope, and cameras. Other good birds were found there, too, including Mouse-colored Tyrannulet, 4 White-bellied Piculets, Burnished-buff Tanager, Glittering-throated Emerald, and Brown-crested Flycatcher. After this super morning birding, we returned to a delicious lunch in the Karasabai community center. Rolling out, we arrived at our destination for our final night in the Rupununi: Manari Ranch. Cool drinks awaited and, while some unloaded their gear in their rooms, others explored the nearby huge mango trees or the inviting hammocks in the breezeway. A few who spent time birding spotted the charismatic Bicolored Wren, a large wren found in this arid country. This was a free afternoon for relaxing, followed by Brazilian beer (for those so inclined) and dinner.

Mon., Feb. 10 Takatu River | Manari Ranch | Fly to Georgetown

Dave made Ron give us a “break” and we delayed breakfast until all of 5:00am, then we piled into the vehicles and drove to the Takatu River, the border between Guyana and Brazil. We spent a fair bit of time exploring the river itself and the adjacent gallery forest. Along the river itself were things such as Collared Plover, Spotted Sandpiper, and Neotropical Cormorant. In the trees, we found Pale-legged Hornero, Red-bellied Macaw, Red-capped Cardinal, Barred Antshrike, and the very range-restricted (and rare) Hoary-throated Spinetail; Robin and Steve also glimpsed the equally rare Rio Branco Antbird.

On our way back to the ranch, we stopped at the beautiful Mussu Lake. Present were the largest concentration of Snail Kites any of us had ever seen (at least 38 by Dave’s count), Least and Pied-billed Grebe, Brown-chested Martin, and several White-headed Marsh-Tyrants. After this great final morning, we headed back to Manari for lunch and to get our gear ready to head back to the big city.

We went to the Lethem airport mid-afternoon where we checked in for our Trans Guyana Airways flight. Due to a mechanical problem, the flight was late, so we fully got to know the small waiting area, partaking of the Brazilian cable TV playing constantly. The plane eventually arrived, and we departed about 5:30pm for the one-hour flight to Georgetown.

Upon arrival at Ogle airport, we claimed our bags and reconnected with Francis, transportation arranger extraordinaire, and returned to the Cara Lodge Hotel. A bit later than we would have liked, but everyone leaving that evening had a chance to shower, change clothes, and have dinner before leaving for Cheddi Jagan international at 9:30pm for their return flights to the U.S.

Tues., Feb. 11 Departures

Most actually left at zero-dark-thirty this morning to return to the U.S. Robin, Steve, and Dave left in mid-morning today for Trinidad. So ended our most excellent adventure into the wilderness of wonderful Guyana.

Photo Credits:

Toco Toucan, David Welch (DW); Atta forest clearing, DW; Rupununi savannah, DW; forest trail, DW; group at Kaieteur Falls, DW; Surama school children, DW; Sun Parakeet, DW; Jabiru, DW; Guianan Red Howler, Nate Welch (NW); Kaieteur Falls, NW; birders, David Mehlman (DM); Black-necked Aracari, DM; birder, NW; Spectacled Caiman, NW; birders, NW; Jaguar pawprint, NW; Ron Allicock, NW; vehicles in savannah, NW; Cara Lodge Hotel, NW; Rufous Crab Hawk, NW; Bronzy Jacamar, NW; Trans Guyana Airways at Kaieteur strip, NW; lunch, NW; Crested Doradito, NW; Striated Heron, NW; Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock, NW; bathroom frog, NW; room frog, NW; group in boat, DM.