

2013

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TRIP REPORT BRAZIL AND BOLIVIA JULY 2013

Brazil's Pantanal- when flooded the biggest wetland in the world, has always stirred the imagination. Combine that with two other widely differing habitats- Brazil's Amazonia and the dry cerrado plains of Emas NP and you have a trip of mouth watering proportions. Then finally add in a three week scouting trip to Bolivia and you have covered some of the great birding areas in South America.



We were offered a scouting trip to Bolivia by Birding Ecotours along with their guide Eduardo with whom we had birded Northern Peru in 2012. Brazil too was in many ways a scouting trip for Birding Ecotours but the Pantanal and Cerrado we did with a local guide –Paulo Boute of Boute Expeditions - with Eduardo coming along as backup.

Stephanie and I had not birded Amazonia before so it was with much anticipation that we met Eduardo off the plane in Cuiaba and flew the next day up to Alta Floresta, headed for the well-known Cristalino Lodge.

At Cristalino you can choose whether to use a non-dedicated guide, which means there can be other parties with you, or have a guide just for your party - which costs seriously more than the first alternative. We opted for the first option as we were a party of five and if another couple joined us it wouldn't be the end of the world. Next question- are the local guides good enough? Well we had had a young American professor who was guiding there for 2 months on his summer vacation, and he was nothing short of brilliant. We had another couple with us on the first morning and thereafter we had him to ourselves.

So for 5 days we birded the river, the islands, the forest trails, and the Canopy towers, seeing over 220 species of which 130 odd were new. The Lodge is set on the edge of the forest from where you



can start a couple of the trails- some trails you reach by boat and one canopy tower is also on the other side of the river. The lodge itself is very pleasant with upmarket cabins and the food was generally excellent. There was a major extension being built, which may affect the future prices, and will certainly increase occupancy capacity.

Between Alta Floresta and the lodge we had all five 5 American



Vulture species- King, Black, Turkey, Lesser and greater Yellow-headed. The river produced Capped Heron. Rufescent-Tiger and Boat-billed Heron, Sunbittern, Pied Plover, Yellow-billed Tern, Limpkin, Green Ibis, several Nighthawks and Nightjars, and the biggest prize of all. We had just returned for lunch when another boat coming upstream said they had spotted a Harpy Eagle a mile down the river. Pandemonium reigned as we rushed for our

boat and five minutes later we had the Harpy Eagle just twenty metres away in a tree overhanging the river.

The forest trails were slowgoing as we tried (and mainly succeeded) in calling out many antshrikes, antwrens, and antbirds along with the small flycatchers, manakins, wrens and spinetails. Our guide knew the trails well enough to say we are now entering the territory of whatever and made ready to play the call.

The canopy towers were just brilliant- amazing flybys of Blue and Yellow and Scarlet Macaws and canopy views of Toucans, ten species of Parrot and Parakeet, Cotingas, Aracaris, and Barbets.

Throw in 3 monkey species, 3 bat species, White-lipped Peccaries, Capybara, Red brocket Deer, Spectacled and dwarf Caiman, and we left Cristalinoa well-satisfied bunch of wildlife enthusiasts.

Back in Cuiaba, Paulo met us off the plane and we headed for the Cerrado – (the equivalent of Africa’s savannah plains), a day’s drive away in the south west of Goiás State, on a road with no respite from hundreds of huge articulated lorries thundering along on it ... not a journey for the faint-hearted driver!

Our main base was a poussada on a working farm located outside the park which focussed on huge mechanised farming. The fields of maize and sorghum seemed to stretch for miles, and yet the birding was still quite good even in this agricultural habitat. It was odd looking at greater Rhea and Red-legged Seriemas wandering through the maize, and watching Peach-fronted Parakeets, Grey and white-





rumped Monjitas sitting on the corn stalks. Birding around the farmhouse gave us Buff-necked Ibis, Aplomado Falcon, Yellow-headed and Crested Caracara, and Red-shouldered Macaws

Emas itself was dry and dusty (a bit like our acacia thornveld)but full of good birds- Red-legged Tinamou, Spotted Nothura, Whistling Heron, Gray Hawk, Savannah Hawk, loads of Blue and Yellow Macaws, Yellow-chevroned Parakeets, Orange-winged Amazon, hundreds of Burrowing Owls, Toco Toucans, Streamer-tailed Tyrants, Curl-

crested Jays, lots of Finches and Seed-eaters and even Helmeted Manakin. We tried the site of the Cone-billed Tanager with no luck. It hasn't been seen there for some time. Our guide's view was that the site had been over-taped.

You don't come to this part of South America without making a serious attempt for the South American Big 5 -namely Maned Wolf, Giant Anteater, Tapir, Jaguar and Giant River Otter. In Emas our targets were Maned Wolf and Giant Anteater but despite many hours of searching by day and at night on spotlighting drives we never managed to connect, apart from tantalising IDs of fresh wolf droppings.

We had to return almost to Cuiaba before heading south to the start of the Transpantaneiro. The only road through the Brazilian Pantanal, it runs for about 150 kilometres and crosses one hundred and twenty-six low levelrickety wooden bridges that cross the many creeks. In the wet season the Paraguay River breaks its banks and floods over 140,000 square kilometres In Brazil alone. It extends into Bolivia and Paraguay as well. We stayed two nights at the northern end of the road before heading south where the road meets the Cuiaba and Piquiri Rivers and goes no further. The habitat along the road changes dramatically from dry grassland and open scrub in the north to semi-deciduous forests and extensive swamps in the south. At Porto Jofre lodge on the river bank in the South you have your first opportunity to discover the delightful Hyacinth Macaw, a bird now recovering in numbers from the cage trade ravagesas the many localcattle farms actually help in their conservation. H M's eat the hard seeds within the fruits of the acuri and bocaiuva palms. Cows too eat the fruits but the hard seeds pass through their digestive systems and become available for the ground foraging Macaws.



Porto Jofre is also THE place to find the Jaguar. Their searches by boat are very organised. The boats



are in radio contact and when a Jaguar is spotted on the riverbank, the “cat call” comes through and the big 40 hp engines go into full throttle. We were 7 kilometres away and yet travelling at high speed we were down there in 10 minutes and relished our 3 separate Jaguar interactions, all at close quarters and with amazing views. Great photographs were had and we could return up river to find two different families of frolicking Giant River Otters and a Tapir swimming across our bows in mid-stream. The Cabbybara and Caiman are there in

prodigious numbers and it was simply great to find 3 of the big 5 in a morning. We were lucky with the Jaguars. The next day the boats searched the whole day with no luck.

We made boat trips from three of the lodges during our stay. From Piuval lodge to see the massive Stork and Heron roosts and see our first Jabiru. We quietly paddled the backwaters of the Rio Claro to find Sunbittern, Sungrebe and the retiring Agami Heron. This is also where you find the small Kingfishers Green, Green and Rufous and American Pygmy.

The many different habitats in the Pantanal make for wonderful birding. The marshes give you Black-capped Donacobius, Scarlet-headed Blackbird, Crested Doradito and Wattled Jacana. The seasonal flooded grasslands teem with Egrets, Storks, Cormorants and Herons while Snail Kites, Black-collared Hawks and Rufescent Tiger-Herons hunt along the margins. As they dry out the cattle return along with Rheas, Seriemas, and Whistling Herons.

Small forested Islands (capoes) provide nesting sites for the Hyacinth Macaw, Monk Parakeets and colonies of Woodstorks, Spoonbills and Anhingas. Woodpeckers are common here - Pale crested and Golden Green alongside Great Rufous Woodcreeper, Blue-crowned Motmot and Golden-collared Macaw

The gallery forest along the rivers holds Bare-faced Curassow, Blue-crowned Trogon and near endemics like Mato Grosso Antbird and White-lored Spinetail. The dry forest supports the endemic Chestnut-bellied Guan and Planalto





Slaty Antshrike alongside Rufous-tailed Jacamars and Rufous Cassiornis.

The Pantanal is just a must for keen birders and wildlife enthusiasts . We spent more hours here searching for the wolf and anteater with no luck. However we saw thousands of caiman - these creatures simply pile up around each other everywhere, without any apparent sense of personal space or territory! My only gripe in the Pantanal was the accommodation- it was expensive and definitely only two star in most

places.

As so it was time to move on to our final destinations in Brazil- More cerrado north of Cuiaba at Serra das Arras and Chapada Dos Guimaraes.

Serra das Arras is a famous Harpy Eagle nesting site – when we arrived the fledging had left the nest and there was no sign of the birds- whew- thank goodness for our Cristalino sighting! However it was here that our on-going Giant Anteater search was rewarded with a spotlight sighting in a roadside field as we drove back for dinner. By the time we had piled out of the vehicle, it was beating a hasty retreat but we had time to admire the small baby clinging onto its back. The Anteater’s claws are so long and sharp that the only safe way for the youngster to be carried is to climb up and piggy back ride on its mother’s back.



At Chapada Dos Guimaraes we enjoyed more good forest birding here but our final bird was a memorable one. Just as light was falling in the Chapada dos Guimaraes NP and the rays of the sinking sun were illuminating the wonderful red rocks along the canyons walls, the Red and Green Macaws came into roost closely followed by the Blue-winged Macaws, which diverted to perch obligingly close to us in response to our guide’s playing of its call. Our ninth Macaw in Brazil was a great way to end the first leg of our Eastern South American trip.



Our original plan for Bolivia was for Eduardo and his driver to drive through Bolivia and meet us in Brazil; use their vehicle through the Cerrado and Pantanal and then bird our way back through Bolivia to Santa Cruz and fly home from there. This all fell apart when the Peruvian authorities refused their vehicle



permission to leave Peru. Despite heroic efforts this situation could not be resolved in time and Eduardo was forced to make last minute alternative transport arrangements in Brazil and Bolivia.

So it was that Paulo lifted us to the Bolivian border where we hoped our hastily arranged new driver and vehicle would be at the border to meet us. Indeed he was, along with his brother to assist, but with one Landcruiser Prado into which we had to fit 7 people and all our baggage for the 1000

kilometre dusty dirt roadride back to Santa Cruz.

Luckily we weren't the ones trying to fit into the rear dickey seats, and on arrival in Santa, Cruz Eduardo managed to find a second vehicle and driver so the rest of trip was covered in relative comfort with four people per vehicle.

Bolivia is a little known birding destination generally ignored by the bigger tour companies. It has only 26 endemics so most of its birds can be found in neighbouring Brazil or Northern Argentina.

We enjoyed our birding there but were not sure whether that compensated for the lack of tourist infrastructure. The hotels were, with a couple of better exceptions, only just about ok. A hot water shower was a luxury that was few and far apart. The food was basic- it was difficult to buy provisions for our by- the- roadside lunches; and travelling was slow on the mainly dirt roads. Birding along the roads was difficult with much time spent avoiding huge clouds of dust kicked up by every passing vehicle.

We birded the Botanical gardens in Santa Cruz before heading southwest into the dry chaco country to look for the chaco specials. We spent two nights at Camiri at this oil company base town, staying at the "JR" hotel, (but nothing like Dallas at all!)

Our dry country bird list included Brushland Tinamou, Chaco Chacalaca, Ringed Teal, Crowned Eagle, (seen only in flight) Blue-crowned and Green-cheeked Parakeets, Turquoise-fronted Amazon, White and Checkered Woodpeckers, Larklike Brushrunner, Little and Rufous-fronted Thornbirds, Bolivian Slaty Antshrike, Chaco Suriri, Greater Wagtail-Tyrant, Crested Hornero and our best bird in this region- the scarce Black-legged Seriema.

We overnighed again in Santa Cruz before heading for Refugio Los Volcanes Lodge in the Amoro NP. Tucked away in a deep valley it offers spectacular views of sandstone rock cliffs and the surrounding tropical forests. Our 2





nightstay here was spoiled by continuous rain and we probably missed 30 species we would have expected to get. The Sunbittern did however wander past our door every morning. I was the only one to spot the Black and White Hawk-Eagle but other good birds included White-backed Fire-eye, Slaty Gnat-eater, Sclater's Tyrannulet, Yellow-Olive Flatbill, Andean and Yellow-browed Tyrant, Yungas Manakin, Purplish and Plush-

crested Jays, Crested and Dusky –green Oropendolas. We also enjoyed good views of Black-eared Hemisphingus, and Orange-headed, Black-Goggled and Blue-browed Tanagers.

The following day we left for Samaipata via the Lacuna Volcan resort and followed the dirt road to the Red-fronted Macaw Lodge- home to one of Bolivia's two endemic Macaws. En route we picked up Dusky-legged Guan, Blue-crowned and Mitred Parakeets, Spot-backed Puffbird, Ocellated Piculet, Dot-fronted Woodpecker, spot-breasted Thornbird, and Brown-capped Whitestart.

The Lodge is situated along side a riverbed overlooked by large red sandstone cliffs where the Macaws roost. Spending the night there gave us the opportunity of watching them come into roost in the evening and driving round to the top of the cliff in the morning to catch them before they left to feed for the day. I rate this fantastic-looking Macaw my number one bird in Bolivia.

We returned to the main Cochabamba Rd overnighting in Comarapa and birding the Siberia district the next day. This area and the road to Cochabamba were good for Darwin's Nothura, Black-winged Parrot, Andean Swift, some excellent hummers including Red-tailed Comet, White-sided Hillstar, Violet-throated Starfrontlet, Giant Hummingbird, and the endemic Black-hooded Sunbeam.

Cochabamba is pleasant town with a wonderful year round spring like climate and we planned to do some forest birding in Cochabamba surrounds. These plans were delayed a day as we were caught up in 18hr ban on any traffic movement from midnight to 6.00pm the following evening as part of a smog reduction plan throughout Bolivia. The most carefully laid plans.... !!!!!. Making the best of it we walked around Cochabamba heading for Lake Alalay where we found Ruddy Duck, White-tufted Grebe, White-cheeked



Pintail and even a lifer in the form a Rosy-billed Pochard.

We birded the high altitude forests early the next morning before heading on to Villa Tuneri ,
overnighting there before heading back to Santa Cruz.

Unfortunately we never got to Lake Titicaca to see the Flightless Grebe. Why? well none of the
SAtravel agents could find a way to get us back from La Paz to Santa Cruz for our home bound flight.
If I had only known the name of the local airline I would have quickly discovered there are three
flights a day between La Paz and Santa Cruz so our planning went sadly awry there. The lesson is to
do your own checks by internet for local airline alternatives to the major carriers.

Would I return to Bolivia- No I don't think so. It is seriously third world (but can you believe the local
Bolivar is worth more than Rand.) I am just sad about Lake Titicaca and the fact that we never got to
Trinidad for the endemic Blue-throated Macaw – this would have been an expensive 3 day diversion.

All good things eventually come to an end, and this was a 6 week trip, tricky in places, but well worth
all the time and effort it took to explore these special areas of the fascinating continent of South
America. The more you see, the more you know you want to go back again!



