

# Brazil

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**Participants:**

**John and Denise Allen**

**Luis Arce Velasco**

**John Armitage**

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**Leaders:**

**Andy Foster, Peter Forrest**

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**Spot-billed Toucanet**

Brazil is one of those mouth-watering destinations that you feel you really ought to see at some point in your life. However, along with most of the rest of South America, I always felt it was way out of my reach financially. So, when this trip came along, I don't think I've ever made a quicker decision about a holiday – or anything else for that matter!

**Day 1:** Overnight departure from the UK via Washington D.C.

**Day 2:** Arrived in Rio de Janeiro and made the two-hour transfer to Serra dos Tucanos lodge to arrive in a downpour! However, it didn't stop us from ticking our first hummer of the trip – Black Jacobin – from the veranda while waiting to be taken to our rooms. After unpacking and freshening up, we spent the rest of the afternoon catching up with the common garden species – Green-headed, Golden-chevroned, Palm, Sayaca and Ruby-crowned Tanagers, Sombre Hummingbird, Versicoloured Emerald, Violet-capped Woodnymph, Saw-billed Hermit, Bananaquit, Great Kiskadee, Maroon-bellied Parakeet, Blue Dacnis and Violaceous and Chestnut-bellied Euphonias. We were also treated to our first sighting of the emblematic bird of the lodge - Spot-billed Toucanet – sitting quietly in a small tree just a few yards from the front door. With a clutch of lifers already under our belts, we headed to the dining room for the first of many really good evening meals (anybody with a sweet tooth will be in their element here!) accompanied by a glass of the local drink – a pretty potent cocktail made from lime juice and sugar liqueur. In our exhausted state, it nearly blew our heads off – or maybe it just does that anyway!

**Day 3:** We awoke to the dreaded sound of water and feared that the rain just hadn't stopped from the day before. It took a while for the penny to drop that we were listening to the sound of the river running through the grounds! With a sunny day beckoning, we set off at 7 am for our first half-day excursion to Funchal and the Regua wetlands. Our first stop was a small lake surrounded on most sides by trees but on the fourth side by a grassy hillside. It was here that we had our first new bird of the day – a Burrowing Owl sitting on a patch of bare soil under a small tree. Unfortunately, the water was quite difficult to bird as we were looking straight into the sun, but we did manage to pick out White-headed Marsh-tyrant, Wattled Jacana, Southern Lapwing, Picazuro Pigeon and numerous

silhouetted Chestnut-capped Blackbirds before moving on. The next stop was at the roadside on the way to the reserve. Here we saw two Capped Herons, our first Blue-black Grassquit, several Saffron Finches and a White-browed Blackbird. Sue was in good form here, picking out most of our raptors – a Savannah Hawk on a tall post, a Southern Caracara and a couple of flyover Yellow-headed Caracaras.

As we reached our main stop and decamped from the van, we had stunning views of a Rufous-tailed Jacamar sitting right out on a branch above our heads. We watched it for some time before setting off on a trail towards the pools. Suddenly, we were surrounded by Blue-black Grassquits, making their tish-oo calls and jumping a few inches into the air in the process. We also ticked our first Double-collared Seedeaters here. With nothing else of note en route, we arrived at the edge of the water to find more Chestnut-capped Blackbirds (this time showing the chestnut colour), Common Moorhens, American Purple Gallinules, a Social Flycatcher, a Ringed Kingfisher, a perched Black-crowned Night-heron, a couple of White-headed Marsh-tyrants, several Wattled Jacanas and a Striated Heron. We also heard a Striped Cuckoo but we never did track him down.

Having exhausted the water birds, we then went for a very productive walk through the woods at the back. Here, we very quickly had White-barred Piculet, pretty good views of Chestnut-backed Antshrike, White-bearded Manakin and Long-billed Wren. A little further along the track, Andy heard White-flanked Antwren and managed to tape-lure it in, right above our heads. Unfortunately, we didn't have any luck with the Unicoloured Antwren, but we did have good views of Eye-ringed Tody-tyrant and a reasonable look at a calling Rufous-capped Motmot. On the way back we connected with Yellow-lored Tody-flycatcher, Grassland Sparrow, Brown-chested Martins, a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture and a Masked Water-tyrant running along the track in front of us and looking for all the world like a wheatear.

We returned to the lodge for lunch and then spent the afternoon wandering around the grounds picking up yet more new species. Five Plain Parakeets came in to the bananas, John Allen's 'wow bird', a stunning male Brazilian Tanager, made us all gasp and a party of Red-necked Tanagers eating apples at the front of the lodge added to the colour-fest. A walk up the trails (beware, there are some steep and uneven steps here) by some of us produced very little of note and we fell into bed that night with the list standing at 98.

**Day 4:** Today turned out to be one of the most enjoyable days of the trip, and one of the most productive for birds. We set off in the direction of Sumidouro for the Three-toed Jacamar, via the incredible town of Nova Friburgo, which must be the lingerie capital of Brazil! I have never seen such a concentration of underwear shops in one place, nor so many men's eyes glued to the windows of the van! It was left to John Armitage to have the last word: 'As they say in Yorkshire, there's always been money in knickers!'

Our first birding stop of the day was incredible. We stood at the side of the road near the entrance to someone's house and the birds came thick and fast. A small party of stunning Gilt-edged Tanagers was our first treat, quickly followed by three gorgeous Rufous-crowned Greenlets, Streaked Xenops, Surucua Trogon, Rusty-margined Flycatcher, a distant Squirrel Cuckoo, Planalto Tyrannulet, Variable Antshrike, Rufous-capped Spinetail, a Rufous-collared Sparrow sitting on a low wall in the driveway of the house and a distant Long-tailed Tyrant (minus his long tail) spotted by John Armitage. To cap it all off, just as we were returning to the van, our driver, Maurine (strange name; great guy) pointed, and we turned back to see a Dusky-legged Guan walking across the road, closely followed by three others in flight. We ticked White-tailed Hawk (sitting on a post) and Amazon Kingfisher (on a wire) from the van on the way to our next brief stop, which was for a party of White Woodpeckers. We scoped a couple of the birds in a tree and watched them fly across the road one at a time before we set off again. Having been on the go for a few hours, we decided to stop at a garage for a comfort stop. This proved a great idea, as not only were the loos extremely smart but we also had great views of Swallow-tailed Hummingbird and a stunning Sapphire-spangled Emerald feeding on the flowers when we came out!

The next stop was for our main target bird of the day – Three-toed Jacamar. This proved much easier than I had expected; we got out of the van and Andy said, 'There's one.' This was quickly followed by several others, all giving great views through bins. We also added Streaked

Flycatcher and White-winged Becard to the list before tucking into our packed lunches. Two more brief stops produced great views of Crested Black-tyrant and a very obliging Streamer-tailed Tyrant, who sat on a telegraph wire seemingly oblivious to his audience. Also at the latter stop we had our only Firewood Gatherer of the trip, complete with large, twiggy nest, good views of Tail-banded Hornero feeding on a patch of soil, Common Thornbird and a distant view of White-rumped Monjita.

And so to our final official stop of the day – except that we rounded a corner to be met by a gang of workmen repairing the road surface after the recent mudslides. There was nothing for it but to get out and walk. We emerged in a scrubby, wettish area with a few trees that looked rather uninspiring but turned out to be a bit of a treasure trove. On one side of the road we had Chicli Spinetail, Burnished-buff Tanager, another Dusky-legged Guan and a Ferruginous Antbird, who, despite calling persistently, refused to come out. On the other side of the road things got really interesting, with wonderful views of Half-collared Sparrow, a Bran-coloured Flycatcher, a lovely Ochre-faced Tody-flycatcher and a pair of Red-eyed Thornbirds. Wow! As we got back into the van, our minds were awash with memories of new birds, but the day hadn't quite finished yet. One more surprise awaited us on a bend in the road, when Maurine stopped the van and we all bent double to try and see the Saffron Toucanet sitting in a tree on the right. With the people on the left still unable to see, we piled out and watched three birds slipping away through the trees. With all that under our belts, we still arrived back at the lodge at 5.15, which left enough time for a few people to bird the grounds and add Buff-throated Saltator to the list before dinner.

**Day 5:** The Theodoro Trail was drizzly, windy and very quiet when we first arrived. We managed to coax out Rufous-capped and Chicli Spinetails at the beginning, but nothing else stirred for some time. The first bird of note was a lovely little Star-throated Antwren, who popped up right in front of us, giving good views. In a clearing a little further on, some of the group were lucky enough to see a Sharpbill before it flew, and we also added Golden-crowned Warbler and Olivaceous Woodcreeper to the day list. We then hit a frustrating section where the birding got tough for the group. Four or five people at the front saw a couple of Tawny-throated Leaf-tossers, but they didn't hang around, nor did a female Black-goggled Tanager, seen by about half of the group. As we reached the end and started to retrace our steps, however, our luck seemed to change. We finally connected with the Blue Manakin, who'd been calling persistently all the way along the trail but had, until now, stubbornly refused to come out. Then, in a final flurry of activity, we had great views of a perched Scale-throated Hermit, stunning looks at a couple of Sharp-tailed Streamcreepers together with a White-throated Spadebill and an overhead Greenish Schiffornis. In the afternoon we ventured up the trails in the grounds with Pete, hoping that the birds would be more forthcoming than on our last attempt. We were in luck! First up were a family of Ferruginous Antbirds, which flashed in front of us at eye level, giving really good views. Then we connected with a flock that yielded Grey-hooded Attila, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, a couple of Red-eyed (Chivi) Vireos, a Black-capped Foliage-gleaner, two Red-crowned Ant-tanagers, a Lesser Woodcreeper, two Streak-capped Antwrens and a Sepia-capped Flycatcher. Trying to ignore the threatening clouds overhead, we pressed on, pulling in a stunning Black-cheeked Gnateater that shot between Pete B and John Armitage, almost taking their ears with it! Sadly, our attempts to call in Blond-crested Woodpecker and to see the calling Scaled Antbird failed, and at that point it started to rain. As we were about as far from the lodge as we could get, we decided to make a run for it - or at least as close to a run as is possible on an uneven, downhill trail peppered with steps! We made it back to the lodge absolutely soaked, but with significantly longer lists - if only the weather had held a bit longer!

**Day 6:** And so began the trials of Tony! We emerged for breakfast this morning to find Tony sporting a bandana across one eye in a pretty good Johnny Depp impression. Having walked into a leaf the day before, he had come away with a cut just above one eye that had become infected and swollen overnight. With sympathy and all kinds of medication handed over, he soldiered on. The lower section of Serra dos Orgaos is a lovely little walk through an avenue of trees, and our visit started well. The first bird of the morning was a Yellow-throated Woodpecker, called by Pete B almost as soon as we left the van. Soon afterwards, a male Blue Manakin perched right in front of

us momentarily, making a mockery of our frantic searching on the Theodoro Trail the day before! A pair of White-winged Becards was our next spot before we headed down to the more enclosed section beneath the trees. Here, amongst some Red-necked and Green-headed Tanagers and various other birds we'd seen before, we added good views of Whiskered Flycatcher, Flame-crested Tanager and Pale-browed Treehunter before Andy and Pete decided it might be worth hitting the upper section a bit early. We had been warned that this was a Grade D walk and it did not disappoint! From the gate at the start of the trail to the place where we stopped for lunch, it was uphill all the way on uneven, jagged and sometimes slippery cobbles, interspersed with muddy sections and tree roots. We found it impossible to look for birds while moving, as we had to keep our eyes down at all times. However, we did have some successes while stationary. The first new bird for the trip was Uniform Finch, which led us a merry dance, singing all around us but only showing relatively poorly to two or three of the group at a time. Finally, we all had a view of sorts and, not long afterwards, a lovely male Black-goggled Tanager gave good views to make up for the partially missed female the day before. The trail also yielded White-browed, Black-capped and Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaners, our only Rufous-backed Antwreos of the trip, a stunning Pin-tailed Manakin and, for some, their first Brassy-breasted Tanagers. Unfortunately, there was no sign of Mouse-coloured Tapaculo or Brazilian Antthrush, and no amount of coaxing with the iPod could pull either out. As we reached the waterfall where we stopped for lunch, we could hear both Sharpbill and Black-and-gold Cotinga, but we never did find either of the birds. After replenishing our energy reserves, we began the hair-raising descent – we thought going up was bad but this was definitely worse! At various points along the way, at least four or five of the group, including me, fell. Thank goodness I'd packed the camera away at the top! We did have some compensatory species though, including Bertoni's Antbird, Ochre-rumped Antbird (which some of us never did manage to spot) and a lovely Hooded Berryeater. It had been a tough climb (it looks so insignificant on the map!) and it was with some relief that we set off back to the lodge to rest our weary limbs, aching bottoms and swollen eye!

While sitting on the veranda with our cups of coffee, our own little avian medical drama played out. Two Violet-capped Woodnymphs collided with the window and crashed to the ground. One took off again fairly quickly but the other was obviously stunned and spent at least fifteen minutes sitting on Pete B's finger until it had recovered enough to fly. It was a real privilege to be able to view this tiny bird at such close quarters, even if the circumstances were unfortunate.

**Day 7:** Poor Tony arrived for breakfast this morning with a swollen upper lip to match his eye – this time from a bite. After much hilarity and handing out of anti-histamine tablets, we were ready to hit the road again. Our journey today would take us to the coast via a couple of stops at a lake for other species. It seemed strange to climb out of the van at the first stop and see water instead of woodland, but it was a welcome change, bringing with it a host of new birds for the trip. We quickly ticked Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, a nice Amazon Kingfisher sitting atop a dead tree, Spotted Sandpiper, Neotropic Cormorant and overhead Magnificent Frigatebird. A little further along the track, we added relatively distant views of Grey-headed Gulls, skimming Black Skimmers and a handful of Kelp Gulls.

The second stop, at a different part of the same lake, proved slightly more productive and our first scan yielded several Cattle Tyrants, a couple of White-faced Whistling-ducks, numerous White-cheeked Pintail and a Little Blue Heron sitting on a distant fence post. On the other side of the track, we added Grey Plover (or should that be Black-bellied Plover as we're in the Americas?), Sanderling and Semipalmated Plover before we hit the slightly juicier stuff – a couple of Yellowish Pipits and two separate Collared Plovers, one of which stood next to its semipalmated cousin for comparison. The end of the trail gave us better views of Kelp Gull and an incredibly distant Cooi Heron scoped by Luis. As John Armitage said, he really ought to leave his eyes to science!

Our last stop of the morning was at the coast, where we spent a few minutes scanning a very flat sea and ticking only a reasonably close Brown Booby before heading into the restinga. This was undoubtedly the most frustrating walk of the entire trip. Despite hearing Restinga Antwren and Sooretama Slaty-antshrike repeatedly, no amount of taping could pull either bird out, nor did it work on the Hangnest Tody-tyrant - the other specialist bird of this habitat. It was little compensation that we were the first group not to see at least two of the specialities! Having seen

nothing but kiskadees and vultures, we trudged disconsolately back to the van, picking up two Guira Cuckoos and a handful of House Sparrows for our troubles. There was nothing for it but to retire to a local restaurant for a good lunch and a beer. The lunch included a pile of ground manioc root, which looked like sawdust but tasted a bit like bacon, and the beer took the form of the biggest bottles of Skol I've ever seen (they must have known we were drowning our sorrows!) Suitably refreshed, we headed back to the lodge, where our fortunes improved somewhat - it's amazing how many new species turned up in the grounds during our time there. First up was a Variegated Flycatcher, spotted by Pete B, which divided its time between the top of a tree and the wires near the swimming pool. The next addition to the list was Scaly-headed Parrot, a flock of which flew high over the garden. Completing our hat trick of new species was a Blue-winged Parrotlet, which arrived with a flock of Plain Parakeets and took a little while to make itself known. A little later, we also managed to see our first Boat-billed Flycatcher for a few days and a House Wren, so the day finished on a slightly more positive note.

**Day 8:** It's amazing how often on birding trips a frustrating day is followed by a really good one, and this was no exception. The lower section of the High Altitude trail is a lovely undulating walk through open country with patches of trees, some very expensive-looking houses, lovely views and lots of birds! We had decided en route that today was, at last, going to be our raptor day, and as soon as we stepped out of the van, our bogey bird – Roadside Hawk – finally gave itself up (not so much at the roadside, more in a tree on a grassy hillside! Perhaps that's where we'd been going wrong!) It was a really encouraging start and seemed to set us up for the day. Next up was a beautiful Glittering-bellied Emerald, found by John Allen while scoping something else! The raptor count increased by one as we added a circling Rufous-thighed Hawk to the list, and our numbers were further increased by good views of Planalto Tyrannulet and Ruddy Ground-dove in a tree. As we ambled along, the birds just kept coming. Our first attempt to connect with Dusky-tailed Antbird failed (we did succeed later), but we did see great views of two Yellow-browed Woodpeckers in the process! The next flock had us wondering where on earth to look for the best! We had a juvenile, then adult Bay-chested Warbling-finch, a Rufous-browed Peppershrike at the back, a female Variable Antshrike and Luis was lucky enough to get onto a Chestnut-headed Tanager – and they all seemed to appear at once, which meant that most people missed at least one bird. Still, a little further on, we found another flock of Brassy-breasted Tanagers (which I eventually managed to get on with bins!) and while having a quick drink stop, we had a female Glittering-bellied Emerald closely followed by a lovely White-throated Hummingbird. Things were going well, and it didn't stop there. On the next corner we had what can best be described as 'quick flash' views of a Saffron-crested Tyrant-manakin as it flew over our heads, first one way and then back again.

Then, as we reached a more open area with stunning views, we stopped at the fence to scan the wooded hillside opposite for cotingas. Our first find was a small group of Shear-tailed Grey-tyrants, which are much smarter birds than their black and grey plumage would suggest. And then, as we were still admiring them, Pete found the first star bird of the day – two Swallow-tailed Cotingas sitting in a tree on the top of the hill. They were distant, but gave great views through scopes. We set off again in high spirits and passed a pretty, grassy slope littered with tree stumps, which gave us good views of Campo Flicker, Chalk-browed Mockingbird and several Rufous-collared Sparrows. After sitting down to lunch, at the end of which we had a perched White-throated Hummingbird, we started to retrace our steps. And if we thought we'd seen everything on the way up, we were mistaken! The first new bird was a White-browed Warbler, which, again, is a much prettier bird in reality than the field guides would have you believe. This was quickly followed by a lovely female Brazilian Ruby, spotted by Alvin, and, back at the tree stumps, a perched Aplomado Falcon – this really was a pretty good raptor day! Back at the cotinga site, the Shear-tailed Grey-tyrants were still around but the cotingas had vanished. However, we were treated to a whole flock of junglefowl (or should that be rainforest fowl?) as John fed the remains of his sandwiches to the local chickens! A little further on, we tried to call in a Black-billed Scythebill, without success, but we did run into our only Shiny Cowbird of the trip – never has so much effort gone into describing the location of a cowbird! The last stop before we got back to the van yielded a White-crested Tyrannulet, a large flock of White-collared Swifts (our first) and two Black Hawk-eagles, which flew over as we were trying to pick out any swifts with square tails (sadly an

impossible task). All in all, it had been a fantastic day's birding, and, again, it wasn't over yet! Not long after setting off, Maurine stopped the van and pointed – there, walking serenely through a field, was a Red-legged Seriema! We jumped out and watched in awe as this magnificent bird slowly walked away. It was a glorious finale.

**Day 9:** The excitement began even before we set off today. As we were waiting for the doors to open to breakfast, we heard an owl calling. It was obviously distant, and we stood no chance of seeing the bird, but we resolved to play all the owls on the iPod later to work out which one it was. (It turned out to be Stygian Owl.) With breakfast out of the way, we set off to a place called Macae de cima to look for the mysterious 'Mr Black' and 'Mr White'. The first birds up proved to be neither, as we added to yesterday's views of Dusky-tailed Antbird. Prolonged scanning of the treetops did yield an unexpected couple of howler monkeys, but it wasn't for some time that our first target, 'Mr Black' – aka Black-and-gold Cotinga – gave himself up. Most of the group managed to see it through scopes before it flew, but I only got a bins view and poor John Allen missed out altogether. We hurried up the hill a little way and, after a bit of frantic scanning, thankfully Andy re-found the bird. Phew! The next bird can probably best be described as 'elusive'. There were two or three White-shouldered Fire-eyes calling, but they were constantly on the move and it took us ages before we finally had clear views. Some of the group also had an Olivaceous Elaenia as an added bonus. Sadly, although we heard 'Mr White' – aka Bare-throated Bellbird – we never did find one.

Our next birding stop today was the Cedae Trail, a lovely wooded trail not far from the lodge. As the van pulled up, Denise, who'd been sitting in the back next to the coolbox, had us all in stitches by asking, 'Do you want me to pass water?' After deciding that it might be better if she left the van first (!) we set off through the most wonderful padlocked metal gate frames – which were completely open in the centre – and onto the track. The birding began well, with a flock containing all kinds of gems – Scaled Woodcreeper, Rufous-headed Tanager, Golden-crowned Warbler, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, Streaked Xenops, Olivaceous Woodcreeper and Streak-capped Antwren. A little further on, we had good views of our first Spot-breasted Antvireo, to complete our antvireo collection. We also picked up White-eyed Foliage-gleaner, another Rufous-browed Peppershrike and three Red-crowned Ant-tanagers. As we passed a very impressive water release valve, probably better described as a large vertical pipe with copious amounts of water spurting from the top, we hit another good little spot. Our haul here included Star-throated Antwren, Thrush-like Woodcreeper and an overhead Mantled Hawk, which was circling with a couple of Black Vultures and masses of White-collared Swifts. Frustratingly, we also heard Bare-throated Bellbird here, but we were destined not to see one. The walk back produced one new species – Olive-green Tanager, of which we had six or seven darting between the secropia trees – but the Black-throated Grosbeak we heard refused to show himself. In the afternoon we set off up the lodge trails again with Pete, hoping to pick up where we'd been rained off a few days ago. Sadly, this time we were out of luck – it was completely dead! We managed a female White-shouldered Fire-eye, a Ferruginous Antbird and a calling Blue Manakin for our troubles! We spent ages trying for Blond-crested Woodpecker and Scaled Antbird, but to no avail. Somewhat crestfallen, we headed back, and in the process encountered the one thing of note on the trails that day – a pretty impressive black and yellow snake. We decided he looked a bit full and must have eaten all the birds!

**Day 10:** With half a day to kill before the afternoon departure to the airport, five of us decided to revisit the Cedae Trail this morning with Pete B's iPod. John Armitage, Luis, Tony (now looking normal again!), Pete B and myself were dropped off by Maurine and set off to see what we could add to yesterday's list. Almost as soon as we left the van, we could hear a motmot calling, but it was on the opposite side of the road to the trail and we weren't sure we could get across to find it. The first birds on the trail were a pair of Surucua Trogons, which showed well for some time. Then came the real excitement. While scanning the hillside for bellbirds, Tony found a parrot, which we all scrutinised for several minutes. It was distant but we tried to look at as many features as possible. The general consensus was that the only possibility was Yellow-faced Amazon. With one good bird under our belts, Tony went back to scanning the trees, and this time found ... a Channel-billed Toucan! We took it in turns to marvel at this gorgeous bird as it threw its head back, opened

its huge bill and called. It had been worth coming back here for this bird alone. Much of our list was, predictably, similar to yesterday, although we did have some of the best views of the trip of White-throated Woodcreeper and Black-capped Foliage-gleaner – one of which sat, for a second or so, in full view (without having to piece together a head, bit of wing and a tail!). As we passed the release valve again, we decided to consult Tony's list of possible species for the site and see what we could pull in with the iPod. The Blond-crested Woodpecker (tried in several places) and most other things failed miserably, but the Oustalet's Tyrannulet worked a treat! Heading back, we had great views of Ferruginous Antbird and, while playing the tape for Black-throated Grosbeak (which never did show), a nice little haul, including Golden-crowned Warbler, Rufous-crowned Greenlet and good views of Plain Xenops. Thoroughly satisfied with our morning's efforts, we returned to the lodge to spread the word and to prepare for the afternoon departure. It had been a fantastic trip filled with many happy and colourful memories. The lodge is a lovely place with great food, great birds and a great staff, and I would dearly love to go back again some day – it took many days after my return home to get used to breakfast without seeing the Black Jacobins! The group was also fantastic, and I'd like to thank everyone for their good company and for the many laughs we shared. I really hope we meet again in the not-too-distant future.

Helen Heyes