

FLIGHTS OF FANCY ADVENTURES, INC.

SOUTHEAST BRAZIL

SERRA DOS TUCANOS LODGE
CACHOEIRAS DE MACACU, RIO DE JANEIRO STATE

OCTOBER 31 - NOVEMBER 10, 2008

TRIP REPORT

FOFA's second tour to the *Mata Atlantica*, the Atlantic Coastal Rainforest of Southeast Brazil, proved just as exciting and packed with birds as our first venture two years ago. Nine participants made the overnight flight to Rio de Janeiro and started collecting life birds before we even left the airport! A two-hour drive brought us to our destination and home for the next week -- *Serra dos Tucanos* (Mountain of the Toucans) Lodge. Although we were sleepy from our travels, the trip across Rio's 12-mile harbor bridge kept us awake with views of Kelp Gull, Cocoli Heron and thousands of Magnificent Frigatebirds. From Rio, we crossed through the mainly agricultural lowlands of the coastal mountains and headed northeast toward the small town of *Cachoeiras de Macacu* (Monkey Waterfalls). The lodge was just beyond, inside the boundaries of the newly created and enormous *Tres Picos* (Three Peaks) State Park.

The attraction for visiting this area of the world is not only its remoteness, but also its unique character. Eons ago, when Brazil was geologically formed, the same forces that created the rise of the Andes Mountains in the west also probably created the coastal range of mountains that extends from the easternmost "point" of Brazil all the way to its southern border, well over 1000 miles. These mountains, known as the *Serra do Mar* (Mountains of the Sea), developed vast rain and cloud forests that were isolated from other ecological zones, resulting in "sky islands" harboring unique life forms that developed only within this area. As a result, these mountain forests have one of the highest rates of avian endemism in the world, with over 170 bird species that cannot be found elsewhere, mixed in with about 300 other species that are more widely distributed. Unfortunately, after hundreds of years of agriculture and development, only about 7% of the original forests remain, much like the east coast of North America. Nonetheless, what does this mean? Fascinating and fantastic birding! For world listers, it is a "must visit" location.

Any birder, no matter how tired, instantly comes wide awake upon entry to the beautifully landscaped grounds of *Serra dos Tucanos* Lodge. Hordes of hummingbirds zealously guard the lodge's multiple feeders, while tornadoes of tanagers whirl about the bananas put out for their dining pleasure. Greeted by Spot-billed and Saffron Toucanets, wildly colored Green-headed

and Brazilian Tanagers, it was amazing the group could even adjourn for lunch before camping out on the veranda for the afternoon to watch all the activity. An amazing 200 species of birds have been seen just on the grounds of the lodge, with over half of them endemic to the *Mata Atlantica*. You just can't see most of these species anywhere else.

During our week we would spend all nights at the lodge, taking day trips to a wide variety of locations to take advantage of the vast array of habitats within one hour's drive of the lodge, ranging from near sea level up to 6000 feet altitude. Comfort and convenience were exceptional, always returning to our same rooms each night, with an excellent meal of Brazilian fare prepared by the lodge's staff. In fact, we had the entire lodge to ourselves during our stay! Our guide for the week, Pete Forrest, is a Brit who has developed an exceptional ear for the birds of the region, seeming to know every nuance of each species' calls and songs. His skills and good company made the trip a total delight.

Day 1: Birding from the veranda. 60 species, including the Brazilian Tanager (above), a bird so crimson red (even its eyes!) you could drown in it, Violaceous, Orange-bellied and Chestnut-bellied Euphonias, six species of hummingbirds, including the endemic Black Jacobin, Plain and Maroon-bellied Parakeets, the fabulous Blond-crested Woodpecker, three species of thrush and a host of others. Over by the spring-fed swimming pool, no less than seven species' active nests were found, including becards, kiskadee, tanagers, Masked Water-tyrant and flycatchers. Not bad for mostly sitting on your butt!

Day 2: Awakening to the daily calls of Solitary Tinamou, breakfast was always at a very tolerable 6:15 AM, with a birding departure scheduled at 7:00. Very civilized. Today we birded the SDT property all day, accompanied by Pete in the morning and in the afternoon on our own. A Rufous-breasted Hermit graced us with close eye-level views. Most of the SDT birding outside the garden is on its hillsides, looking down the slope for birds or breaking your neck looking up. We did both. The advent of bright green laser pointers has made tropical birding incredibly easier, allowing the guides to simply point out the location of a skulking bird, even in daylight, by putting their light just to the side of it. Certainly a revolutionary advance. The furnarids, antbirds and woodcreepers are always a challenge, but we saw Black-capped Foliage-gleaner, Olivaceous and Buff-throated Woodcreepers, Plain and Spot-breasted Antwreos, Star-throated Antwren and Scaled Antbird. A female Black-cheeked Gnateater was about the same size, but lacked the pure pizzazz of the Blue Manakins that were abundant. We encountered a fair number of teeny-tiny flycatchers and tyrannulets, but with the aid of the laser pointer, were able to see them well. The Gray-hooded Attila was most entertaining, with a song of rising notes followed by a smoothly descending tone. The Flame-crested Tanager was a screamer, jet black with an orange and red crown. A tiny tanager, the Red-necked (or "cracker") was no slouch when it came to color, offering neon green, red, yellow, black and blue. In the afternoon, we found a few new species on our own, including a beautiful Crescent-chested Puffbird eating a bug.

Day 3: Our first major outing: The endemic Three-toed Jacamar Excursion. Actually, although it sounds like we were about to assault Everest, the Jacamars were the last stop, right next to the road and completely obliging.

We left at 7:00 AM and wound our way up through the mountains on a very nice wide road, eventually coming to the large city of *Nova Friburgo* (a/k/a Victoria's Secretville). Advance warning that we were approaching this "bustling" metropolis of 250,000 was a multitude of giant-sized billboards that hawked bras, panties, bustiers and other revealing ladies' undergarments by displaying them on scantily clad and suggestively posed models. I was appalled! The town's economy is apparently underwired by the lingerie business, with store after store offering it's wares in large windows filled with over-proportioned mannequins. My favorite was the mannequin store, with dummies standing on the street right outside. But then we were asked to leave. Back to birds.

Getting off the main roads, we traveled through some agricultural areas, surveying hillsides, wetlands, fence posts and all sorts of habitats. At one stop, a Striated Heron zoomed past, with a White-tailed Hawk in hot pursuit! Streamer-tailed Tyrants (my favorite trip bird) sat on farm fences, while a Grey-headed Kite perched in a tree across the valley. Chestnut-capped Blackbirds sat elegantly on waving stands of grass, while a flock of goofy-looking (and sounding) Guira Cuckoos surrounded us. At another overlook, we were able to pick out an Aplomado Falcon stretching its wings on a dead tree, while a brilliantly colored Toco Toucan preened on a distant branch. Sitting on a wire was the evil and dastardly-named Black-capped Donacobius. Sounds like a B-movie title. Both Southern and Yellow-headed Caracaras were our constant companions. We took a break and stopped at the charming and quaint town of *Duas Barras* for a cup of coffee and a snack. Some had cookies and other braver souls went for the local versions of corn dogs and knishes. Both were excellent. Here we first witnessed the somewhat odd, but common behavior of people taking their caged birds for a walk, carefully carrying the bamboo enclosures at eye level while they "aired" their pets.

We stopped at one wetland where a pair of Blackish Rails ran and flew all over the place, while a diminutive Blue-winged Parrotlet shared our attention with a Masked Yellowthroat. Just before lunch, we had fantastic looks at a Suracua Trogon. Not so brightly adorned, and often subject to ridicule by those less sensitive members of our group was a pair of Mouse-colored Tyrannulets. Little gray birds just don't get any respect! We were treated to side-by-side views of both Rufous and Tail-banded Horneros, the latter an endemic species. Getting everyone's attention were two small birds with huge ambitions: Common Thornbird and Firewood Gatherer. Each build nests of massive piles of sticks that would be enough to house a family of 12. Genetic OCD. They just can't stop building. Many were impressed by the pair White-headed Marsh-tyrants we found at a roadside wet area. Sharp-looking dressers, eh?

Day 4 (Election Day): We elected to split the day into two parts. In the morning, we hit the *Theodoro* Trail, a path at the top of the pass that is an overgrown old rail bed running from *Cachoeiras* to *Nova Friburgo*. Birding right in the parking area was excellent, with Frilled

Coquette, Spix's Spinetail, Yellow-browed Tyrant, a flock of Brassy-breasted Tanagers and White-throated Hummingbird. The trail produced many outstanding species, but none was more memorable than a group of Blue Manakins. This species was quite numerous and could be heard all along the trail, but in this lekking area, a lone female sat quietly on a horizontal branch, seemingly minding her own business. Meanwhile, three males, whose testosterone levels had obviously overpowered their brains, had fallen head over heels in love with her. These three "amore-adors", chose not to just display to attract the love of their lives, but rather formed this bizarre flying circle where they rapidly flew over and under and around her in tight close formation within a diameter of no more than one foot. Totally my favorite moment of the trip. We also found several calling Scale-throated Hermits, a large endemic hummingbird that likes to perch at eye level. If you can find one, you get great looks. The skies were low and a little wet, but a beautiful Mantled Hawk soared slowly just above us until disappearing into the mist. On the ground, followers of the local Macumba religion, a combination of Christian and African beliefs, left a generous offering of beer, sparkling wine, porridge, coins and mostly melted candles on a bright red tablecloth.

For our afternoon outing, we only had to travel about ten minutes up the mountain to the CEDAE Trail, a private roadway maintained by the local water company. We encountered several small flocks of feeding birds, at every level of the canopy. Golden-crowned Warblers made their debut and Rufous-browed Peppershrike (a great name if there ever was one) also appeared for everyone's enjoyment. Black-tailed Tityra stayed high, but if you were willing almost fall over backward looking up, you got a good view, assuming looking up a bird's butt is "good". Greenish Schiffornis taunted us endlessly, but wouldn't show its face. Bertoni's Antbird put on an excellent show in its resident bamboo thicket, as did Spot-backed Antshrike. White-browed Foliage-gleaner and Rufous-capped Spinetail also finally gave us good looks. Brazilian Ruby hummingbird presented her rusty breast for our inspection. We had heard and briefly seen a Rufous-capped Motmot fly across the road, but then we had the pleasure of seeing one flash from the forest and seemingly slam into the side of of the undercut road bank. Closer examination showed, however, a burrow about 4" in diameter into which the bird had directly flown. We returned to the lodge for late afternoon relaxation of fried manioc chips and local beer or the complimentary selection of local rums.

Day 5: A few minutes before breakfast, most of us gathered on the bridge over the lodge's *Rio Pedra Branca* and were able to watch a Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper flit from rock to rock finding insects and nesting material. After an exquisite typical Brazilian breakfast, we enjoyed an all-day trip to *Serra dos Orgaos* (Organ Pipe Mountains) National Park. We stopped along the way at a roadside fish farm and found several Ringed Kingfishers, Limpkin and Common Waxbills. Visiting the park is my favorite day of the trip, because the mountains are so beautiful and lush, the birding is excellent and you can never tell what you might run into. First we birded the lower section, walking on a broad cobble-stoned road. Uniform and Sooty Finches were OK, but nesting Chestnut-crowned and Black-capped Becards were much more fun. Yellow-browed and Yellow-eared Woodpeckers showed much more color. A rarely seen and soaking wet three-toed sloth "raced" up a tall tree above the road, but not too fast for us to watch. A quick mixed flock

of forest birds got us all worked up, trying to figure out everything we just seen, but Unicolored and Ferruginous Antbirds and Streak-capped Antwren definitely got the nod.

We then drove further up the mountain, winding through series of switchbacks and steep elevation gains on the major highway that traverses the mountains through the middle of the park. We had a wonderful coffee break at a cafe' that overlooks mountains and lowlands, where you can see all the way to Rio de Janeiro on a clear day (not). Nearby and clearly exposed, however, was a amazing rock formation called *Dado de Deus* (Finger of God), which can be interpreted any way you would like. It was quite beautiful on our day, with the low clouds swirling around a bright blue sky background. While we enjoyed local snacks (another type of knish for me), looking out the rear windows and the bird feeders below gave us great looks at Azure-shouldered Tanager, a high elevation cousin of the Sayaca Tanager found at the lodge, as well as Streaked Flycatcher.

The upper section of the park, near the town of Teresopolis, is even more striking, with rushing streams, waterfalls, giant tree ferns and a narrow, winding cobbled road that is perfect for group birding. We had barely started birding the road when Pete loudly called out, "Jesus Christ! Did you see that?" It's not often that your local guide gets so excited, so we knew it had to be great. He had heard one call and then quietly played a recording of a Giant Antshrike. The male flew in so fast it almost hit him in the head. This bird is ordinarily a skulker and very hard to see, despite being twice the size of other antshrikes. And there it was right in front of us! Then the beautiful brown striped female appeared. The male immediately went over to her and they copulated. Then they just hung around (smoking cigarettes). What a show! My theory of the event: the birds were running on high hormones and ready to mate. When the male heard the recording, it immediately flew in to challenge the intruder. When he couldn't find another bird, just to be sure he instantly grabbed the female and sealed the deal. Then they both smoked a cigarette and relaxed.

We continued up the road, finding more ant-species, Whiskered Flycatcher, Temminck's Seedeater (a newly split endemic) and others. At the upper parking area, there is a former aqueduct that has been converted into a very stable 1/2 mile canopy viewing trail. Not much activity, although we were photographed birding by camera-toting Lesser Woodcreeper. We returned to the van for our winding downhill drive back. The mountains were now obscured by clouds and even the God-given finger was hidden from view.

Day 6: We did a morning trip to REGUA (acronym for something), a large privately owned farm/ranch in area formerly covered by lowland forest. Brazil's history, especially along the Atlantic coast, is much like that of the USA. Settled by Europeans at about the same time, massively cleared for agriculture during the mid-19th century, 93% of the country's lowland rain forest has disappeared, leaving many species in fragmented habitats where it is difficult to sustain species diversity. The owner of REGUA started taking steps, many years ago, to reintroduce native trees and plants to large areas of his property and preserve the natural habitat that was there. He also created wetlands to replace those that had previously been drained for

agriculture. In the parking area, we had the pleasure of seeing, up close and personal, a pair of roosting Tropical Screech-owls. Then we wandered the well-maintained trails, finding such special endemics as Sooretama Slaty-Antshrike, Chestnut-backed Antshrike, Dusky-tailed Antbird and Long-billed Wren (as well as the more swashbuckling Moustached Wren). The forest and wetlands held more treasures, including, a colony of Red-rumped Caciques, Lemon-chested Greenlet, Yellow-breasted Flycatcher, White-flanked Antwren, Tufted Antshrike, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, Wattled Jacana, White-barred Piculet, Glittering-throated Emerald, Rufous-thighed Kite, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Masked Duck, White-faced Whistling Duck and Brazilian Teal. It was truly a morning to remember, especially when the sun came out and this almost sea level forest turned into a steambath. We were ready to pack it in when we left.

The afternoon was spent either relaxing on the veranda or walking the lodge's trails, but that night, the skies opened up and it rained in true tropical fashion.

Day 7: Our next full day adventure was a newly added part of the lodge's itinerary. Andy Foster, owner of SDT, had befriended another large landowner who believed in keeping much of his land in its natural state. He welcomed birding groups from SDT to visit the property, known as *Portao Azul* (Blue Gate). We were able to drive in, passing a Dusky-legged Guan, and then walk down a very nice dirt road, excellent for group birding. A large pond held several pairs of Least Grebes, with the booming voice of a tiny Variegated Antpitta calling in the distance. A magnificent Black Hawk-eagle soared overhead, providing wonderful views. Nestled into roadside vegetation, we found Red-eyed Thornbird,, Ochre-faced Tody-flycatcher, Dusky-tailed Antbird, Gray-capped Tyrannulet, Greenish Schiffornis (finally!), and incredible looks at the usually elusive Half-collared Sparrow.

After a picnic lunch, we motored back to *Nova Friburgo*, pausing along the way for a Crested Black Tyrant at a bus stop, totally confusing the young woman who was sitting there waiting for a ride. We also stopped for a pair of Magpie Tanagers which were totally elegant in their black and white feathery trappings. Next we ascended the *Macaes de Cima* Road, offering good medium altitude birding. There was a little more traffic on this broad dirt thoroughfare, but the excellent birding made it well worthwhile. First great sighting: Bare-throated Bellbird. Hearing these guys is one thing; finding one perched on the other side of the valley is quite another, especially if it's a white bird against a white sky! There were several calling, however, sounding like striking an anvil with a hammer. Pete knew where a usual perch was and Bingo, a bellbird! Next stop: a lek of. Quite an amazing little creature, singing away, its little crest waving in the breeze. A Pallid Spinetail, even on it's nest, paled in comparison. A pair of Variable Antshrikes followed us down one section of the road and we picked out a Drab-breasted Bamboo-tyrant, a bird much smaller than its name. You know, about the size of the Mottle-cheeked Tyrannulet sitting next to it. A Rufous-crowned Greenlet and White-winged Becard rounded out the scene.

We ended the day sitting on the Group W bench above the garden and were treated to a lengthy view of a Black-and-white Hawk-eagle soaring above the opposite ridge line.

Day 8: This was our long-postponed weather-delayed trip to the high altitude areas above *Nova Friburgo*. Unless it is dry, the van simply can't make it up the slippery cobblestone roads leading higher and higher, steeper and steeper and more and more switchbacked as you near the top. It was almost dry and we almost made it up the *Pico de Caledonia* Road without any trouble. Let it suffice to say we left an offering to the mountain gods of a fair amount of rubber on the road's stones, but we got high enough to be where we wanted to to start the day. From a level "landing" at the highest switchback we attained, we were immediately greeted by a group of Bay-chested Warbling-finches.

A flock of astonishingly green Brassy-breasted Tanagers flashed beneath us and then, in my opinion, the best bird of the high country showed -- the Diademed Tanager. Deep blue, with a black mask, it sports a white head band and a brilliant red crown. Quite attractive. We began walking down the steep road, seeing Rufous-capped Antshrike, Sapphire-spangled Emerald, Rufous-tailed Antbird, Planalto Tyrannulet, Blue-billed Black-tyrant (doing it's acrobatic straight up and down flycatching routine) and Shear-tailed Gray-tyrant.

We got back on the bus and drove down to the lower section of the High Altitude area, along the *San Lorenzo* Road. After getting reorganized at the end of the drivable road, while watching Olivaceous Elaenia, White Woodpecker and an incredibly beautiful Swallow-tailed Cotinga, we began walking another wide dirt road with no cars allowed on it, through high country farms. The road was quite easy, with a slight uphill grade, but we were tired after a hard week's birding. The birds kept coming at us, however. Swainson's Flycatcher, Gray Elaenia, a diving pair of Aplomado Falcons in a stoop that took your breath away, Green-winged Saltator, Burnished-buff Tanager, Yellow-legged Thrush, White-crested Tyrannulet (which was kind enough to dip its head and show the white crest) and Amethyst Woodstar. An entertaining family of Burrowing Owls was at the end of our road, with two adults and three young watching us carefully, while a Picazuro Pigeon sat nearby on its nest of sticks. We straggled back to the van and on the ride out, stopped for a nice look at a Green-barred Woodpecker.

On our final night, we enjoyed presenting our homework assignments: best three birds and best experience. The flashy birds won, of course: Blue Manakin, Blond-crested Woodpecker, Saffron Toucanet, followed closely by the Giant Antshrike show and 20 other favorites. Best experience: watching so many species from the comfort of the veranda.

On our final day and drive back to the airport, we added three more species: Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, American Kestrel and hundreds of South American Terns plunge-diving into the Rio harbor.

And that, my friends, is the end of the trip. 275 species in all. I'd love to do it again. Would you like to join me?

If you'd like a copy of the species list, let me know and I'll get one right off to you.

Best wishes,

Sam

Serra dos Tucanos Lodge