



# Salsa

## birding

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Venezuela may not be named after its liberator, Simon Bolivar (Bolivia got that one), but the man has certainly left his mark. From the Venezuelan currency (the Boliveriano) to its town squares (plazas), his name is everywhere. In fact, every single city, town and village in the country has a Plaza Bolivar at its centre. Why these snippets of information? Because in Venezuela, even the ubiquitous Plaza Bolivars boast impressive bird lists! Venezuela is bursting with colourful, fantastic birds – a fact that strikes you literally the minute you arrive: Caracas Airport is renowned for some majestic species, such as Magnificent Frigatebirds, Black and Turkey vultures and Brown Pelicans. ▶

**Above** *A shy and retiring species, the diminutive Zigzag Heron prefers the dark recesses of well-vegetated banks and is seldom seen fishing out in the open.*

**Left** *The Scarlet Ibis provides a surrealistic splash of crimson colour in the sometimes drab world of waterbirds, which has helped to make it a favourite with birders and non-birders alike.*

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Somewhat proud and haughty in demeanour, the Crested Caracara is a common resident in much of the New World. It feeds on carrion more often than it catches its own prey.

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Besides being one of Latin America's hottest birding destinations, Venezuela is generally an amazing place to visit. Its culture is infused with a Caribbean *la vida loca*, a fast and friendly, bustling yet laid-back way of life. Its economy is kept afloat largely as a result of its lucrative oil industry, and by South American standards Venezuelans in general enjoy a high standard of living. Tourism is a growing industry, with good reason. But be warned: like the rest of Latin America, as a rule Venezuelans do not speak English, so if you're travelling outside of an organised tour, be prepared.

Venezuela boasts a stunning diversity of habitats, perhaps the first clue to its astounding avian diversity: more than 1 300 species, or around 10 per cent of the world's birds. The country stretches from the relatively dry Caribbean coast in the north to the impossibly lush and verdant Amazon basin in the south. In between the Amazon jungles and the acacia and cactus scrub lie more habitats than either I care to describe or you would care to read about (with altitudinal variations adding yet more diversity). The mighty Andes, the longest mountain range in the world, curves around the northern part of South America, with a single side-branch running across Venezuela and ultimately terminating in Trinidad. The presence of the Andes, including substantial areas of cloud forest and sub-alpine scrub, adds a whole suite of High Andes specialist species.

From a birding perspective, there are four major habitats to visit:

- The Caribbean coast, with its associated wetlands, seabirds and adjacent dry scrub-forests
- The Andes' cloud forests
- Los Llanos, a vast, seasonally flooded savanna
- The Tepuis, with a taste of Amazonian diversity and a disproportionate number of Venezuela's endemics crowded into the most ancient and amazing landscape on earth.

### The Caribbean coast

As a broad generalisation, birding in the tropics tends to yield many species, but few individuals. Huge flocks of anything are somewhat of a rarity. But around large water-bodies, all of that changes. Morrocoy is a startlingly diverse birding destination, thanks to its shorebirds and seabirds,



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which feed and breed in massive flocks. This vast estuary and lagoon is probably the best destination for the coastal region, for birding and absorbing Caribbean pleasures. The estuary of the Cuare Faunal Refuge is teeming with waterbirds, including massive Brown Pelicans, half a dozen species of statuesque herons, hundreds of flocking flamingos, and what has to be the biggest all-bright-crimson bird in the world, the Scarlet Ibis.

The little town of Chichivirichi is well geared for tourists, and there is no shortage of tour operators offering boat trips to the islet-dotted coast and the mangrove-fringed estuary. The very lucky may see the extremely rare southern tamandua, a close relative of the antbear, sleeping in the branches of the mangroves, but it will probably require professional assistance to find the endemic Plain-flanked Rail. Besides the ever-present caracara (a diverse group of quasi-raptorial birds), New World vultures and the Common Black Hawk, good raptors for the area include the Crane Hawk and the Black-and-white Eagle.

Birders should not get too caught-up in the coastal birding, because in the adjacent scrub and forests, like the rest of the country, there are always more birds to see than there is time.



Top The extensive mangroves, mudflats and islet-dotted lagoon of Cuare Faunal Reserve in Morrocoy ensure that, besides great scenic beauty, the place offers an impressive diversity of birds.

Above In a world of odd animals, the Hoatzin is in a league of its own. Besides admirably pre-empting the punk fashions of the 1980s, it subsists exclusively on leaves, a very heavy yet low-calorie diet that requires two stomachs for fermentation, and results in it being unable to fly more than about 50 metres without collapsing in exhaustion.

## Cloud forest

Probably some of the best cloud forest birding is to be had in the under-utilised Yacambu National Park. This sizeable but largely overlooked reserve, lying above the quaint little town of Sanare, is well worth a visit, as is the dry scrub around the town. However, unlike the in-your-face flocks of Morrocoy, Yacambu offers genuine forest birding to test your abilities – and your nerves. You can spend ages searching or waiting for the makers of fantastic whistles to be revealed. Knowing their calls and

*Venezuela boasts more than 1 300 species, or around 10 per cent of the world's birds*



**Top** Beautifully captured in a daring display, the Double-striped Thick-knee is principally nocturnal and frequently overlooked.

**Above** The Large-billed Tern is a freshwater species. With its huge, yellow bill, it is another hot favourite of birders in Los Llanos.

using playback is probably the best way to see any of these highly elusive and secretive species. They are there, but finding a Spotted Nightingale Thrush, Andean Solitaire, Chestnut-capped Brush-finch, Golden-breasted Fruiteater, Black-faced Antthrush or Great Antpitta will take all your birding skills. Delayed gratification is said to be the height of pleasure, and there is sure to be plenty of that in these forests!

However, to liven things up a little, mixed feeding flocks will suddenly wash past you, and in less than a minute you'll be identifying up to 20 species, with the multi-coloured tanagers making the most noise, and the woodcreepers and warblers, wrens, flycatchers and antbirds making for some ID challenges (and sometimes misery).

Big and beautifuls include the Green Jay, Emerald Toucanet, Crested Quetzal and Collared Trogon. Yacambu is the best place to see the endemic Blood-eared Parakeet, as well as the Bronzy Inca (a large hummingbird) and the rare Helmeted Curassow. Here too are many bird species that specialise in following the huge swarms of predatory ants that march across the forest floor, snapping up the insects that flee the advancing columns of ants. Besides birds, this is as good a place as any to see howler monkeys, white-faced capuchins, tayras (an otter-like terrestrial carnivore), sloths, coatis and other more elusive mammals.

Probably the single biggest birding destination in Venezuela is the impressive Henri Pittier National Park. It stretches from the coast to the highlands, is accessed by a dizzyingly fast bus ride up (and down!) a very narrow pass, and encompasses the most northerly patch of cloud forest in Venezuela. The park has a phenomenal bird list and what it lacks in endemics, it more than compensates for in dazzling diversity. From dry coastal scrub to the high cloud forests loaded with bizarre New World groups such as tinamous, jacamars, puffbirds, guans and tanagers, every moment will be a knee-shaking, breath-taking feast of birds. Go there!

## Los Llanos

This area is a vast tropical savanna. It has mostly been turned over to ranching, but that does not seem to have affected all the bird species. Sanctuaries are undoubtedly important, as some species are very intolerant of disturbance. Famous ranches ('hatos' in local parlance) cater for the top end of

the birding and nature market and if you can afford them, there's no question about their value. However, there is more than enough to satisfy even the most avid lister just along the roadsides. It is highly recommended that you have someone with you who is familiar with New World groups, because you will see so many new birds that burying your head in a field guide while trying to sort out an ID can be counter-productive.

It is in the Llanos that you stand the best chance of seeing the continent's number one species, the Sunbittern. It is an odd bird, vaguely reminiscent of a cross between a heron and a bustard. It haunts the banks of sluggish rivers and oxbow lakes, and belongs to its own family (which basically means taxonomists really don't know what to do with it or what its closest relatives are). There are several other monospecific families in Latin America (for example, Limpkin, Bananaquit and Boat-billed Heron), so what makes the Sunbittern so special? It has the most outrageously beautiful wing patterning that, when spread, makes it look like a fierce monster or a gigantic butterfly, depending on your point of view. This is also an excellent site for raptors, several parrots and their allies, including the Red-and-green Macaw, the Large-billed Tern, the American Skimmer and the crazy punk bird better known as the Hoatzin.

## The Tepuis

This is a landscape like no other on earth. It is one of the most ancient geological formations on dry land, but facts like that will be forgotten the moment the Tepuis reveal themselves. For the Tepuis are tabletop mountains (or inselbergs) that rise sheer from the Gran Sabana plains, and keep going as almost vertical cliffs for 3 000 metres. (For some local perspective, that's three times the height of Cape Town's Table Mountain.) It is here that the legendary Angel Falls are found. On the steep, forest-clad slopes and bizarrely sculpted tops are hundreds of endemic plants and animals, including more than a dozen endemic birds. In fact, to be honest, the Tepuis reach into Guyana and northern Brazil, and thus so do many of the Tepui endemics, but they are essentially Venezuelan species. This is, for good reason, Venezuela's priority tourist and birding destination. It is also one of the few



South America's most sought-after species, the enigmatic Sunbittern.

## Photographing in Hato El Cedral

In January 2002 I spent a two-week holiday in Venezuela, visiting and photographing in national parks and private game reserves. There are many wonderful places to visit in Venezuela and I was amazed by the richness and diversity of the birdlife and, in some places, by the huge number of birds compared to what I had seen in most areas of East and southern Africa. The birds were also confident and easy to approach and photograph.

Many of the photographs in these pages were taken in what is often described as 'the best bird sanctuary in the world', Hato El Cedral, a private ecotourism ranch of 53 000 hectares located in Los Llanos, a neotropical seasonal savanna. Hato El Cedral is a constant source of delight. More than 340 different species have been recorded here, among them the Agami Heron, the rare and elusive Zigzag Heron (a mere 31 centimetres long), Hoatzin, Sunbittern, Grey-necked Wood-rail, Maguari Stork, and huge flocks of ducks. The estate also supports some 20 000 head of cattle, 12 000 caimans and 20 000 capybaras.

I recommend taking both boat and overland trips through the reserve; your chances of seeing anaconda, the very rare Orinoco crocodile and even a red howler monkey in the middle of the Matiyure Camp are very good. I would suggest you stay at least four days at this camp – you won't regret it.

Best season to visit: During the dry season, from mid-January to April.

Useful contact

Hato El Cedral office

e-mail [hatocedral@cantv.net](mailto:hatocedral@cantv.net); tel. (+58-2) 781 8995/793 6082; fax (+58-2) 793 6082

<http://www.hatocedral.com>

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places left on the planet to see the magnificent Harpy Eagle, and a great place for another of the continent's mega-birds, the Cock-of-the-Rock. The forests are crammed full of Amazonian specials, like the White Bellbird and more kinds of hummingbirds and tyrant-flycatchers than you could imagine.

There is an overworked phrase used by real estate marketers – 'So-and-so's best-kept secret'. However clichéd, as a birding

destination Venezuela probably justifies the appellation. It is a country overflowing with incredible birds. From city centres to national parks, along farmland roadsides and in pristine forests, this country is the perfect introduction to Latino culture and breathtaking neotropical birding.

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**Left** *The Agami Heron stands poised and ready to strike, with its lavishly long, lance-like bill.*



**Left** *Yacambu National Park, an hour's drive into the Andes from Barquisimeto, is an accessible destination for Andean cloud forest specials, with plenty of roadside birding opportunities that include toucanets, trogons and tinamous.*

### SPECIES MENTIONED IN TEXT, LISTED IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

- Antpitta, Great *Grallaria excelsa*
- Antthrush, Black-faced *Formicarius analis*
- Bananaquit *Coereba flaveola*
- Bellbird, White *Procnias alba*
- Brush-finch, Chestnut-capped *Atlapetes* sp.
- Caracara, Crested *Caracara plancus*
- Cock-of-the-Rock *Rupicola peruviana*
- Currasow, Helmeted *Crax crax*
- Eagle, Black-and-white *Spizastur melanoleucus*
- Eagle, Harpy *Harpia harpyja*
- Frigatebird, Magnificent *Fregata magnificens*
- Fruiteater, Golden-breasted *Pipreola aureopectus*
- Hawk, Common Black *Buteogallus anthracinus*
- Hawk, Crane *Geranospiza caerulescens*
- Heron, Agami *Agamia agami*
- Heron, Boat-billed *Cochlearius cochlearius*
- Heron, Zigzag *Garza zebra*
- Hoatzin *Opisthocomus hoatzin*
- Ibis, Scarlet *Eudocimus ruber*
- Inca, Bronzy *Coeligena coeligena*
- Jay, Green *Cyanocorax yncas*
- Limpkin *Aramus guarauna*
- Macaw, Red-and-green *Ara chloroptera*
- Nightingale Thrush, Spotted *Catharus dryas*
- Owl, Burrowing *Athene cucularia*
- Parakeet, Blood-eared *Pyrrhua hoematotis*
- Pelican, Brown *Pelecanus occidentalis*
- Quetzal, Crested *Pharomachus antisianus*
- Rail, Plain-flanked *Rallus wetmorei*
- Skimmer, American *Rynchops niger*
- Solitaire, Andean *Myadestes ralloides*
- Stork, Maguari *Ciconia maguari*
- Sunbittern *Eurypyga helias*
- Tern, Large-billed *Phaetusa simplex*
- Thick-knee, Double-striped *Burhinus bistriatus*
- Toucanet, Emerald *Aulacorhynchus prasinus*
- Trogon, Collared *Trogon collaris*
- Vulture, Black *Coragyps atratus*
- Vulture, Turkey *Cathartes aura*
- Wood-rail, Grey-necked *Eulabeornis cajaneus*

### BOOKS & FIELD GUIDES

Latin America is quite unlike the First World or much of Africa. You cannot simply arrive at the local bookstore and have your pick of field guides. It's best to go well prepared!

Arguably the best is *A Guide to the Birds of Venezuela*, by R.M. De Schauensee and W.H. Phelps (Princeton University Press, ISBN 0-691-08205-7).

However, a recent update of this book is by Steve Hilty, simply titled *Birds of Venezuela*, which looks smashing. Both of these publications are available online from Princeton University Press ([www.pup.princeton.edu](http://www.pup.princeton.edu)). An excellent alternative, available from the same site, is the *Guide to the Birds of Colombia* by Hilty & Brown. It includes everything the Venezuela guides have, except for a few of the eastern species, and offers a whole lot more.

The acclaimed Audubon Guide, *Birding in Venezuela* by Mary Lou Goodwin (Lynx Edicions), has recently been revised and is a useful 'where to watch' guide.

An Internet search will also deliver a wealth of commercial guiding websites, book reviews and trip reports.

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