

## PANAMA'S REMOTE DARIEN

Tuesday 22nd January – Saturday 2nd February 2013 (12 days)

Leader: Matt Denton

Group Size Limit: 8

Tour Category: *Easy for the most part, occasionally Moderate (and a long, partly steep, hike up Cerro Pirre)*



Nik Borrow

Harpy Eagle (Nik Borrow)

The S-shaped isthmus of Panama, barely more than 50 miles across at its narrowest and no more than 130 miles at its widest, is one of the great crossroads of the world. In Spanish times it was the base for conquering expeditions northwards and southwards along the Pacific Coasts, and since the early days of the 20th century the impressive Panama canal has saved countless ships from having to make the long and hazardous voyage around Cape Horn.

What fewer people realize is that this narrow strip of land has played a key role as a faunal exchange route between the North and South American continents. The land that was to become southern Central America first emerged as a chain of volcanic islands some 50

million years ago, serving as faunal stepping stones for more mobile groups of creatures. Only within the last 3-4 million years a continuous land bridge was formed, allowing for even more life forms to pass between continents. Typical Neotropic bird families such as tinamous, jacamars, toucans, woodcreepers, antbirds, manakins and cotingas, began to move into Central America where today they diminish in numbers of species from south to north. Other groups including owls, swallows, wrens and thrushes, spread in the other direction and conquered South America. Meanwhile speciation in both areas continued unabated, and today Panama holds a diverse and fascinating mixture of Central and South American

elements, in addition to a number of birds that are endemic or are only shared with adjacent Columbia, giving it the richest avifauna (an amazing 900 or so species occur in this small but bird-rich country) in Central America.

This fantastic tour concentrates on the remote remote Darien region of Panama, which is to this day largely roadless and a place where nature still thrives. One of the classic Neotropical wilderness birding destinations, for those who have experienced a visit to the Darien, it is surely one of their most cherished birding memories.

In 1513, Vasco Nunez de Balboa led an expedition on a 25-day trek through the jungle to the western coast of what later became know as Darien, proving that the land in this area was a narrow isthmus between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The Spaniards called the trail that developed after Balboa's pioneering efforts El Camino Real (The Royal Road).

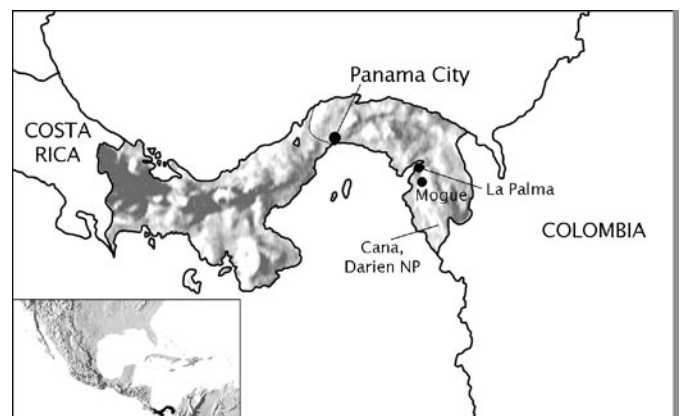
The remote mountain from which Balboa first sighted the Pacific Ocean lies deep within the vast wilderness of the superb Darien National Park, where the isolated mountain tops have witnessed the evolution of a number of endemic and little known birds in the cool cloud and elfin forests that cloak their slopes. Furthermore, an interesting range of primarily South

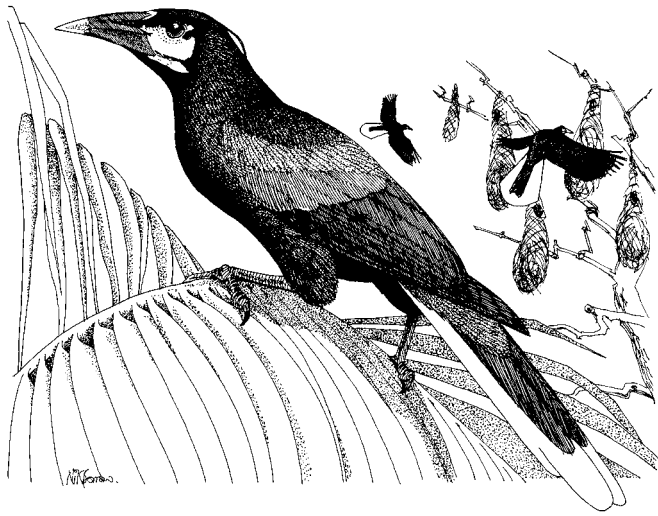
American species 'spill over' into the park's verdant lowland jungles, including Harpy Eagle, three species of colourful macaws and a host of smaller but equally captivating birds.

Forming a natural boundary between Central and South America, the vast wilderness of the Darien harbours some 60 species of Panamanian birds found nowhere else in the country, quite a few of which are endemic or are only shared with a tiny fraction of neighbouring Columbia.

Our journey begins in the coastal lowlands where a narrow tributary takes us to a remote yet hospitable native village. On the rocky slopes above the village stand large emergent Cuipo trees, ideal for nesting Harpy Eagles, whilst the surrounding forest holds good numbers of arboreal sloths that provide plentiful food for a growing Harpy. The handsome Black Oropendola, occurring only in Panama and neighbouring Columbia, is also to be found here. A recently developed ecotourism project with the Emberá nation allows us to visit a very traditional community and experience a remote and little-visited corner of the Darien.

This short but fascinating experience in the lowlands will be followed by a much more comprehensive exploration of the forests surrounding Cana and Cerro Pirre, which are renowned for their rich bird life. The





*Black Oropendolas (Nik Borrow)*

park boasts a galaxy of species, several of which have been extirpated from most areas in the rest of the country but which are still common here, such as the awesome Crested Guan, the emerald Great Green Macaw and the gorgeous Red-throated Caracara, whose raucous and far-carrying calls seem unbelievable until heard for oneself. Of particular note are such sought-after Darien endemics, near-endemics and very restricted-range specialities as Russet-crowned Quail-Dove, Rufous-cheeked Hummingbird, Black-breasted Puffbird, Pirre Warbler, Green-naped Tanager, Pirre Bush-Tanager and Beautiful Treerunner. We will also be on the lookout for the extremely wary Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo, though we shall think ourselves lucky if we manage to see this reclusive forest floor dweller.

Birdquest has operated tours to Panama's Darien since 1998.

### Itinerary

**Day 1** The tour starts in the evening at Panama City

where we will stay overnight.

**Day 2** This morning a short flight will take us into the wilderness area of Darien province and to its capital, the small town of La Palma, located near the mouth of the Tuira river. Boarding our specially equipped boat, we will begin our journey to the Embera village of Mogue (the Embera are one of two indigenous peoples in the roadless Darien jungle). The passage up the Mogue river will be dependant on the tides and will take us through rich mangrove forests where we should see Striated, Little Blue and Cocoi Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets, Roseate Spoonbill, Common Black-Hawk, Black-collared Hawk, Osprey, Ringed, Amazon and Green Kingfishers, and Greater Ani. Upon arriving at the village, where we will stay for two nights, we will partake in the necessary formalities and presentations with members of the community. After that we can commence our exploration of the area.

**Day 3** Our birding schedule at Mogue will be largely dictated by the current location of a nesting Harpy

Eagle. Getting views of this magnificent creature will obviously be our highest priority, and sometimes it can take some time to see an adult as well as the young bird at the nest. Birds abound in this area and other local specialities include Orange-crowned Oriole and the restricted-range Double-banded Greytail and Black Oropendola. Humboldt's Sapphire (split from Blue-headed) has recently been recorded here, but we would be very fortunate to see this rarely observed species.

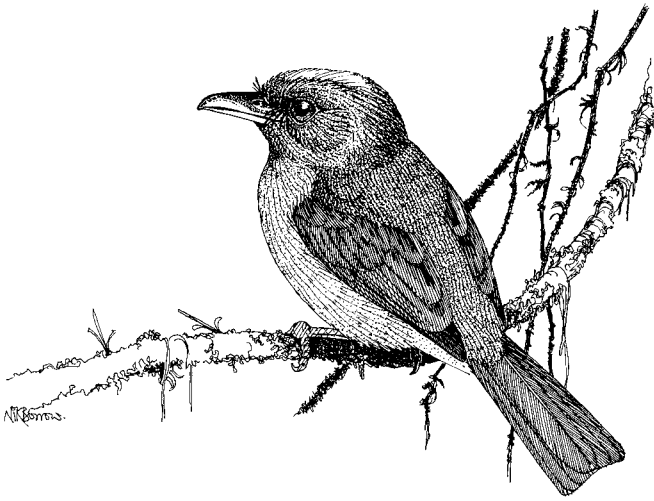
More widespread species we are likely to see during our stay at Mogue include Black and Turkey Vultures, Double-toothed and Grey-headed Kites, Short-tailed Hawk, Scaled Pigeon, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Squirrel and Striped Cuckoos, Black-tailed Trogon, Collared Aracari, Spot-breasted Woodpecker, Band-rumped Swift, Double-banded Greytail, Plain Xenops, Brown-capped Tyrannulet, Black-capped Tody-Flycatcher, Black-tailed and Yellow-breasted Flycatchers, Tropical Kingbird, One-coloured Becard, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Grey-breasted Martin, Southern Rough-winged Swallows, White-eared Conebill, Tropical Parula, Variable Seedeater, and Crested and Chestnut-headed Oropendolas.

**Day 4** Bidding goodbye to our Emberá hosts, we will retrace our route downriver before taking a short charter flight to Cana. The flight will take us to the 'last frontier' of Central America, the immense Darien National Park. As way below us the Pan-American Highway ends some 30 miles (50 kilometres) short of the Columbian border, we enter a seemingly endless wilderness of rainforest-clad valleys and hills stretching as far as the eye can see. The looming slopes of the

5168ft (1575m) Cerro Pirre will soon appear in front of us, and a tiny speck near the foot of this isolated mountain will gradually grow into the small airstrip of the old Cana gold-mining camp. In the afternoon we shall begin our exploration of this fabulous area, where we will stay for seven nights, spending a total of five nights at a simple but comfortable lodge at the largely abandoned settlement and two nights camping high on the slopes of Cerro Pirre.

We shall start our explorations at the Cana clearing, where flowering *Erythrina* trees attract a colourful slice of tropical birdlife and industrious caciques and oropendolas build their colonial nests. Many hummingbirds feed on the showy red flowers, and possibilities include White-necked Jacobin, Black-throated Mango, Blue-throated Goldentail, Violet-bellied, Blue-chested and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, Green Thorntail, Rufous-crested Coquette, Purple-crowned Fairy and Purple-throated Woodstar.

**Days 5-10** Once the site of a thriving gold-mine – some 20,000 people reputedly lived here in the 17th century, and off-and-on mining activities continued until some hundred years ago – the mining area around Cana has through time been subject to localized human disturbance and forest clearing, now resulting in a complex mosaic of forest in various stages of regeneration, all adding to its avian diversity. A chaotic proliferation of weedy shrubs and tangled vines at the edge of the airstrip houses Little Cuckoo, Slaty Spinetail, Pacific Antwren (split from Streaked), an endemic race of Yellow-bellied Elaenia and Black-bellied Wren, while from an emergent perch a spritely Long-tailed Tyrant often pops up and down like a yo-yo. Tiny or Bicoloured



*Broad-billed Sapayoa (Nik Borrow)*

Hawks, adept predators, may occasionally be seen hunting small passerines that frequent the forest border. Such edge species include Smooth-billed Ani, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Lineated Woodpecker, Dusky Antbird, Yellow-crowned and Paltry Tyrannulets, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Rusty-margined and Streaked Flycatchers, Clay-coloured Thrush, Thick-billed and Fulvous-vented Euphonias, Plain-coloured, Golden-hooded, Blue-grey, Palm, White-shouldered, Summer and Crimson-backed Tanagers, Scarlet-thighed and Blue Dacnises, Green, Shining, Purple and Red-legged Honeycreepers, Tennessee, Chestnut-sided, Bay-breasted and Black-and-white Warblers, Slate-throated Redstart, Lesser Greenlet, Buff-throated Saltator, Black-striped Sparrow, and Yellow-backed and Baltimore Orioles, whilst the grassy edges hold ambulatory species like Little Tinamou, White-throated Crake, and White-tipped Dove.

As the thermals start rising we shall be looking out for such magnificent raptors as King Vulture, White Hawk and Black and Ornate Hawk-Eagles. In the late afternoon

we may see the immaculate Black-tipped Cotinga flying into a fruiting tree or we may find a party of Grey-headed Chachalacas cackling in the treetops. The airstrip is also an excellent look-out for seeing magnificent flights of Chestnut-fronted, Red-and-green and Blue-and-yellow Macaws against a lush backdrop of forested hills.

Entering tall second growth forest along the endless Boca de Cupe trail, we shall examine exposed snags for the localized Dusky-backed Jacamar and dense understorey for the rarely seen Black-billed Flycatcher. Near shady creeks, loud and emphatic calls may draw our attention to the odd Brownish Twistwing, and where the terror of an army ant swarm stalks the forest floor we shall be on the alert for the striking Bare-crowned Antbird. With a modicum of luck we may even find Panama's most beautiful antbird, the dazzling Black-crowned Antpitta, attending these raiding columns along with Plain-brown Woodcreeper, and Spotted, Bicoloured and Ocellated Antbirds. We will also be on the lookout for the extremely wary Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo, though we shall be

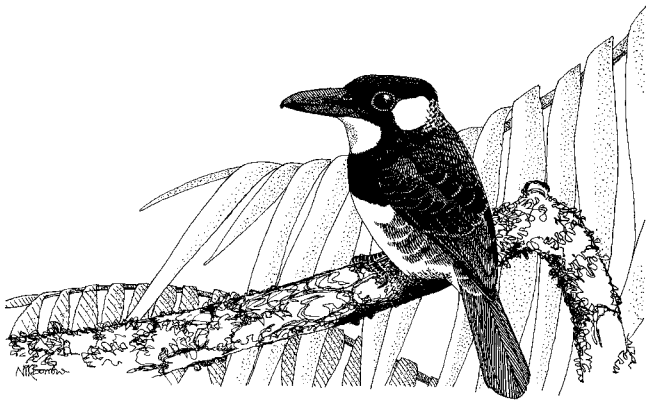
very fortunate if we manage to see this reclusive forest floor dweller.

Penetrating deeper along the trail, the forest becomes taller and massive trees flourish amongst a wonderland of vines and woody lianas. High above us, mixed canopy flocks regularly make their rounds and we shall diligently search these for such restricted-range species as Double-banded Greytail, Moustached Antwren and Slate-throated Gnatcatcher, in addition to more widespread ones such as Rufous-winged Antwren, Forest and Grey Elaenias, and Yellow-backed Tanager. In the darkness of the understorey roving flocks of small insectivorous birds are drably cloaked in shades of brown, grey and olive, and amongst these we will look for Checker-throated Antwren, Olivaceous Flatbill, Stripe-throated Wren, Tawny-faced and Long-billed Gnatwrens, and the sluggish Grey-cheeked Nunlet.

Listening for its characteristic call note, we shall also seek the Broad-billed Sapayoa accompanying one of these mixed flocks. Spectacled Antpitta and Black-faced Antthrush lurk in the more open understorey of primary forest whilst overhead Semiplumbeous Hawk hunts from the subcanopy. Where the death plunge of a giant tree has created a canyon of light, large gaps quickly sprout an impenetrable tangle of light-thirsty vines and weedy ferns, favoured by the vocal but hard to see Fulvous-bellied Antpitta. This habitat is also used for lekking sites by male Golden-collared Manakins as they noisily display in order to attract a mate.

Other birds that are primarily found at lower elevations include Plumbeous Kite, Bicoloured Hawk, Bat Falcon, the noisy Red-throated Caracara, the

impressive Crested Guan, Marbled Wood-Quail, the superb Great Green Macaw, Red-lored and Mealy Amazons, Blue-headed and Brown-hooded Parrots, Green-crowned Woodnymph, Northern Violaceous, Western White-tailed and Black-throated Trogons, Rufous and Broad-billed Motmots, Barred, Pied, Black-breasted and White-whiskered Puffbirds, White-fronted Nunbird, the splendid Great Jacamar, the gaudy Spot-crowned Barbet, Keel-billed and Chestnut-mandibled Toucans, Olivaceous Piculet, Red-rumped, Black-cheeked, Cinnamon and Crimson-crested Woodpeckers, Buff-throated, Ruddy and Slaty-winged Foliage-gleaners, Scaly-throated Leaf-tosser, Streaked Xenops (of the sparsely-streaked Darien race), Cocoa, Black-striped and Northern Barred Woodcreepers, Red-billed Scythebill, Great Antshrike, Fasciated and Western Slaty Antshrikes, White-flanked and Dot-winged Antwrens, Dull-mantled Antbird, Sooty-headed Tyrannulet, Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, Southern Bentbill, Golden-crowned Spadebill, Northern Royal-Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Ochre-bellied, Ruddy-tailed, Sulphur-rumped, Acadian, Dusky-capped, Yellow-margined, Grey-capped and Piratic Flycatchers, Flammulated Attila (split from Bright-rumped), Rufous and Speckled Mourners, Cinnamon and White-winged Becards, Blue-crowned Manakin, the garrulous Black-chested Jay, White-headed and Bay Wrens, Southern Nightingale-Wren, White-breasted Wood-Wren, Dagua Thrush (split from White-throated), Yellow-browed Shrike-Vireo, Golden-winged, Mourning and Buff-rumped Warblers, Dusky-faced, Flame-rumped and Scarlet-browed Tanagers, Swallow-Tanager, Slate-coloured and Blue-black



*Black-breasted Puffbird (Nik Borrow)*

Grosbeaks, Orange-billed Sparrow, Shiny and Giant Cowbirds, Yellow-tailed Oriole and Yellow-rumped, Scarlet-rumped and Yellow-billed Caciques.

These forests are also home to the delightful Geoffrey's Tamarin, one of the most beautiful of the New World monkeys. When night falls, heralded by swelling choruses of frogs and crickets, nocturnal birds awaken and as our torches play over the vegetation we may find the eyeshine of a Pauraque, a fierce-looking Chocó Screech-Owl or a well-camouflaged Common Potoo or Great Potoo.

The 5-mile (8-kilometre) trail leading up the slopes of Cerro Pirre for a gain of 2600ft (800m) in altitude gives an excellent illustration of how flora and fauna change with altitude. Along the lower ridges, tall palms dominate the forest, and this is where we will soon learn to recognize the frequently heard whistles of the Thrush-like Schiffornis. Gently walking up through fairly open understorey, we shall listen for any rustling of leaves coming from the forest floor, as such sound may indicate the presence of quietly foraging terrestrial birds, such as Black-eared Wood-Quail, Tawny-faced Quail or Ruddy Quail-Dove.

These shy birds often seek shelter upon the first sign of danger, and we shall be lucky if one or more of them grant us good views.

Gradually climbing higher, arboreal epiphytes such as bromeliads become more numerous and soon we will hear the first shrill whistles of the Sharpbill, a very patchily distributed bird of still debatable taxonomic position. In mid-storey flamboyant male Golden-headed Manakins advertise their fitness to the coy and cryptically-coloured females and their fascinating displays are a delight to watch. Eventually we shall reach our campsite where we will stay for two nights to enable us to sample the rich birding on Cerro Pirre's middle and upper slopes.

As darkness settles in, the solemn silhouettes of the tall trees looming all around us and the deep voices of frogs create a profound feeling of unity with nature. Later in the evening, the eerie cries of Mottled Owls, notorious for sending chills down the spines of lovers in the night, can sometimes be heard.

At dawn the magnificent duets of Tody Motmots reverberate through the forest, but these lethargic birds are more easily seen as they unobtrusively perch

at eye-level in dense trail-side vegetation. Another characteristic early morning sound is the sharp bark of the Barred Forest-Falcon, a hard to see but subtly beautiful understorey raptor. As the first flecks of sunlight start dappling the forest interior, we may find a pair of Wing-banded Antbirds noisily flipping over dead leaves on the forest floor or a Rufous-breasted Antthrush revealing its presence by its characteristic double whistle, whilst above us we may see a flashy Collared Trogon hungrily plucking away on protein-packed fruit. At the red-flowering *Cephaelis* bushes that line the trail we shall look for the Rufous-cheeked Hummingbird, only found here and on a few neighbouring peaks. Higher up we shall enter the realm of the Varied Solitaire, certainly the best songster on the mountain and filling the air with its captivating phrases. In dense bamboo tangles lurk the dark shapes of Chocó Tapaculos and another interesting forest-floor denizen we hope to find here is the near-endemic Russet-crowned Quail-Dove. Mixed feeding parties at these elevations can include Red-faced Spinetail, Lineated Foliage-gleaner, Long-tailed Woodcreeper, Brown-billed Scythebill, Plain Antwren, Slaty Antwren, Blackburnian and Canada Warblers, Grey-and-gold Tanager, Orange-bellied Euphonia, Speckled Tanager and the isolated local race of Yellow-green Grosbeak.

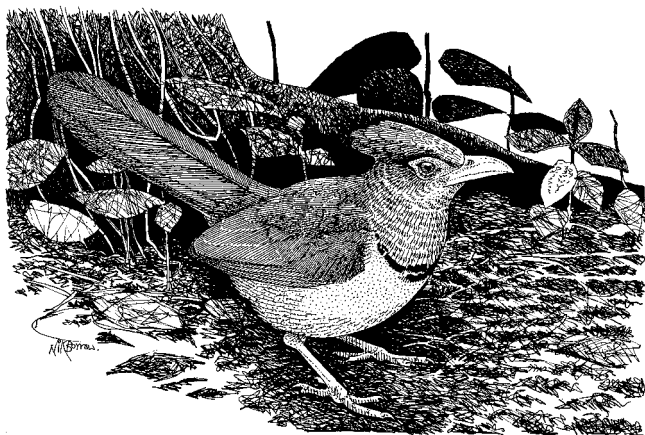
When approaching the Cerro Pirre summit we enter a strange world of elfin forest, where rain and wind have contorted moss-draped trees into gnarled shapes. Here live some of the Darien's most localized endemics: Pirre Warbler, Green-naped Tanager, Pirre Bush-Tanager and the eloquent but more difficult to find Beautiful Treerunner. Understorey flowers are defended by the

abundant and very territorial Greenish Puffleg, otherwise only known in the Andes of South America, and sooner or later we are likely to encounter a group of Brown-headed Spider Monkeys crashing through the canopy.

Other birds we may encounter while exploring the pristine slopes of this mountain are Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon, Great Curassow, Ruddy and Plumbeous Pigeons, Central American Pygmy-Owl (split from Least), Green Hermit, Tooth-billed Hummingbird, Green-crowned Brilliant, Blue-fronted Parrotlet, Yellow-eared Toucanet, Stripe-cheeked and Crimson-bellied Woodpeckers, Tawny-throated Leaf-tosser, Olivaceous and Spotted Woodcreepers, Russet Antshrike, Immaculate Antbird, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Olive-striped, Slaty-capped and White-ringed Flycatchers, Eye-ringed Flatbill, White-throated Spadebill, Western Wood-Pewee, Western Sirystes, Rufous Piha, White-ruffed Manakin, Sooty-headed and Ochraceous Wrens, Grey-breasted Wood-Wren, Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush, Pale-vented Thrush, Yellow-collared Chlorophonia, Lemon-spectacled Tanager and Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch.

Harder to see birds include the tiny Ochre-breasted Antpitta, but the most elusive prey of all for the Darien birder is the poorly known Chocó Tinamou. Though we may well hear its haunting whistles we shall be extremely lucky if we manage to glimpse this very shy forest floor denizen. Its much more common and more widespread relative, the sizeable Great Tinamou, is less wary and may well cross our path.

**Day 11** After some final birding in Darien we shall



*Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo (Nik Borrow)*

reluctantly leave this unique area and return to Panama City for an overnight stay. A comforting consolation will be the prospect of a real bed,

hot showers and a dip in the swimming pool.

**Day 12** The tour will end this morning at Panama City.

**Accommodation & Road**

**Transport:** The hotel in Panama City is of normal Birdquest standard. At the Emberá village of Mogue we will stay for two nights in a simple but reasonably comfortable tented camp (with tents available for twin or single occupancy) set up by our local agents under the thatched-roof of a well-ventilated house on stilts (showers will be available). At Cana we shall be staying for five nights at a simple lodge with shared bathroom facilities and for two nights in a simple but reasonably comfortable tented camp (with tents available for twin or single occupancy) set up by our local agents on Cerro Pirre. Road transport (what

little there is) is by small coach or minibus/passenger van.

**Walking:** The walking effort is mostly easy to moderate, but there is a long ascent to reach the camp on Cerro Pirre, which can be taken at a slow pace, and some sections are steep (and slippery after rain).

**Climate:** At this season it should be mostly dry and often sunny. It can be quite hot and humid in the lowlands, whilst at higher elevations it can be quite cool, especially at night. There may be some rain.

**Bird Photography:** Opportunities are worthwhile.