

Reserva Ecologica de Guapi Assu - REGUA,  
Atlantic Rainforest, SE Brazil.

29 June to 11 July 2013



29 June

The group meet at Heathrow and catch the direct flight to Rio de Janeiro where we arrive after dark. Alcenir is here waiting to pick us up and we soon set off in the reserve's new mini bus. The trip up to the lodge now takes about an hour and a quarter. It is late by the time we reach the lodge but there are sandwiches and fruit waiting for us. We are soon off to bed.

30 June

I think that the six of us are all awake early but at this time of year it does not get light until about 06.00. For me, back for my eleventh visit, it has been great to watch the stunning REGUA transformation from a barren farmland of open pastures with populations of pipits and lapwings to forests covering the entire mountain sides from the rocky summits to virtually the veranda at the lodge with now over 460 species of birds recorded. The forested Serra do Mar mountain range behind the lodge look spectacular in the early morning light.

We start by birding around the garden after wishing Sandy a happy birthday. There is a pair of Masked Water Tyrant by the pool and the surrounding trees hold Violaceous Euphonia, Yellow-lored Tody-Flycatcher, Swallow Tanager, Tropical Pewee and Blue Dacnis. Breakfast is the usual mixture of

fruit, cereal, yoghurt, toast and eggs. With the side doors wide open breakfast is interrupted by a magnificent Blond-crested Woodpecker feeding on the bananas on a nearby bird table. The hummingbird feeders in the garden are being visited by Swallow-tailed Hummingbird, Glittering-throated Emerald and Violet-capped Woodnymph.

After breakfast we climb the observation platform in the garden named "The Belvedere". The view from the highest level is fantastic as it looks over the wetland which was only created six years ago to the mountains beyond. We immediately find a group of six Capybara and also several Broad-snouted Caiman. The trees around the platform hold Chestnut-backed Antshrike, Sayaca Tanager, Picazuro Pigeon and a Scaly-headed Parrot flying in front of the forested mountains. A Crane Hawk and a Savannah Hawk also fly by. We can see many of the waterbirds but will see these again at closer quarters later in the morning. A moth trap is regularly set up for guests interested to see Neotropical species and last night produced four species of hawk-moth amongst hundreds of other insects. REGUA bird guide Adilei finds three Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth, all at a great distance though looking good through the reserve's scope.

After breakfast we drop down to the wetlands via the volunteer's accommodation, many of the volunteers being students on their gap years who stay to help REGUA with the various conservation activities. Here at the football pitch we see Roadside Hawk, Cattle Tyrant, Saffron Finch and Guira Cuckoo. The photographers are soon taking pictures of Wattled Jacana, Muscovy Duck, Capped Heron and many more. There are many butterflies here and also some dragonflies. We walk as far as the old tower hide, stopping for several Rufous-sided Crake that are calling beside the path. Other birds seen include Striped Cuckoo, White-barred Piculet, White-bearded Manakin and Lemon-chested Greenlet.

By now the morning is flying by and we start our return to the lodge. It has clouded over and is not too hot. A Squirrel Cuckoo shows well and a female Brazilian Teal tries a very impressive distraction display and has presumably got a nest nearby. We arrive back in time for a cup of tea before a great lunch.

The afternoon is at leisure and both Chris and Sue have a dip in the pool. The birding activity drops away as the day cools. The bird tables are visited by White-tufted Marmosets and later at dusk by Rusty-margined Guan. We enjoy our first caipirinhas (a Brazilian rum based drink) of the tour and then enjoy a good dinner which finishes with a chocolate cake to celebrate Sandy's birthday. Paul picks up at least four species of bat on his bat detector and Nigel photos one coming to feed at the hummingbird feeders. Our first full day finishes with an early night.

01 July

We awake to cloud over the mountain peaks and a cool morning. We should not be too surprised by the temperature as it is mid-winter here, and daytime temperatures are very comfortable. The usual birds are at the feeders. After breakfast we set out at 07.30 and make our way towards the Waterfall

Trail. The first part of the journey is through mixed farmland that is predominantly cattle pasture, orchards and fields of cassava. There is a different suite of birds in this open area and we make a number of stops for species such as White-rumped Mojita, Giant Cowbird, Chopi Blackbird and Burrowing Owl. The track takes us parallel to the mountains although the views are slightly spoiled by low cloud.

At the end of the track, the Brazilian University student accommodation centre, Casa Pesquisa, Paul and I jump out of the vehicle and all of us have brief views of a Saw-billed Hummingbird feeding on track-side heliconias. The others continue upwards into the forest in the vehicle. Paul and I walk slowly up to the start of the Waterfall Trail but find the forest very quiet. We see a few birds including Greyish Mourner, Scaled Antwren, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and Rufous-tailed Jacamar.

The second group has an amazing walk with Leonardo as the birding guide. His quiet, professional manner was really appreciated as were his eagle eyes. The number of species seen was really impressive and starts really well with Elegant Mourner, or Shrike like Cotinga, a reserve speciality and a species probably easier to see on the reserve than anywhere else in the world. Other species come quickly and include Chestnut-bellied Euphonia, Star-throated and Unicoloured Antwrens, Black-cheeked Gnateater, Eye-ringed Tody-Tyrant and Sharpbill. A couple of tanager flocks are seen and these include Golden-chevrons, Yellow-backed, Black-goggled, Green-headed, Red-necked and Olive-green Tanagers. Birds continue to be spotted and Lesser and Olivaceous Woodcreepers, Streak-capped Antwren and White-eyed Foliage-gleaner are added.

We all meet up and return to the lodge for a delicious lunch and an afternoon at leisure. The feeders attract many species that are now becoming familiar but new ones such as Pale-breasted Thrush and Buff-throated Saltator are also seen. Chris, Sandy and Sue all manage a refreshing swim in the lodge pool. A light rain shower, an essential climatic phenomenon related to the Atlantic Rainforest's winter season that contributes to the exuberance of the natural world, arrives late afternoon.

Before dinner Leonardo takes some of us to a nearby pasture. Here, despite the attention of a herd of cows, we try for Giant Snipe. Whilst waiting we hear Collared Forest-Falcon and Common Pauraque. We initially hear the snipe calling and Leonardo then gets one in the beam of his light which we all see as it flies away. The snipe is another REGUA speciality and relatively easy to see in the evening. Both guides regularly drive the lodge's guests to the grassland site and are able to show this superb grassland specialist.

02 July

Though the rain continued this morning as a result of the Antarctic cold front we have an early breakfast and set off towards Teresópolis and beyond, REGUA's Sumidouro excursion and to pick up the other REGUA guide, Leonardo. As we reach the pickup point the weather begins to clear and we start a number of stops beside the road. The scenery here is one of hills denuded of their trees and now mostly covered by cattle pasture. REGUA is able to skirt localized rain restricted to the lowlands by visiting the rain shadow side of the immense mountains range that makes up its

reserve offering not only a number of set different species but a chance to avoid unproductive weather.

Our first stop is for a pair of Toco Toucan. At the same stop we find our first Rufous-bellied Thrush. These are quickly followed by some close Dusky-legged Guan. We then enjoy fabulous views of a pair of Blue-winged Macaw. These are watched for probably twenty minutes as they sit on a dead snag. Several times the pair flies in a display flight but keep returning to the same perch allowing great photographic opportunities. A stop at a small dead tree and a play of the tape of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl results in a really exciting ten minutes as the call pulls out many birds to mob the owl. We enjoy great views of Squirrel Cuckoo, Gilt-edged, Magpie, Rufous-headed and Fawn-breasted Tanagers, Southern Bearded Tyrannulet, Rufous Hornero, Golden-crowned Warbler and Purple-throated Euphonia. On the hillside behind there is a group of Crested Oropendola.

We arrive at the small town of Carmo and make our way to a track above the town. The rain continues to hold off and we walk down a track along the side of the hill. Leonardo continues to find us new birds and we find Rufous-capped Spinetail, Sapphire-spangled Emerald, Serra Antwren and a number of Three-toed Jacamar. The Sumidouro (the town that dominates the region) excursion hinges around this jacamar, a very important species because of its reduced range. There are also the paw prints of a Crab-eating Raccoon in the red coloured mud. This is followed by a picnic lunch which is interrupted as the rain starts again.

As we make our way back towards REGUA, Leonardo directs Alcenir up a side track. We have fantastic views of a Streamer-tailed Tyrant that sits at the top of a tree just above our heads. This bird is soon joined by a pair of Firewood-gatherer which are high on Paul's wish list. A mixed flock of swallows includes Brown-chested Martin and Tawny-headed Swallow. A final stop produces eight Curl-crested Jay posing for excellent photographs and two White-eared Puffbird.

We arrive back at 16.45 for a welcome cup of tea. Dinner is a delicious fish dish which we follow with a checklist and discover that we have seen a hundred species today. The rain finally stops and the hummingbird feeders are taken over by the nectar feeding Long leaf nosed Bats feeding on the sugar water left in the humming bird feeders.

03 July

Today is Chris's birthday, our second birthday of the week. The rain has gone although there is some cloud near the mountain tops. After breakfast the group splits with the majority of us going around the wetland and up into the forest to the new tower hide. Although the tower is reasonably near the lodge, the walk takes about four hours. Adilei is on top form and finds us many new birds. As we walk down the road from the lodge he whistles in White-flanked Antwren and Sooretama Slaty Antshrike. The football pitch holds a singing Temminck's Seedeater and a Great Black Hawk sails by. A White-chinned Sapphire only gives a fleeting glimpse, whilst a Black-capped Donacobius sits up and sings. The weather is cool but with no wind it makes good birding conditions. Despite the rain yesterday, it is dry underfoot.

We pass through forested areas only planted about four years ago where the trees are already twenty or thirty feet tall. The reserve has a very active tree planting programme and one of the joys of re-visiting the reserve for me, is to see the speedy growth in these newly planted areas. With Adilei's help we add many more species including Southern Antpipit, Eared Pygmy-Tyrant, Yellow-breasted, Short-crested and Euler's Flycatchers, Green-winged Saltator and Grey-hooded Atilla. Sandy finds a very fresh pug mark of a Puma and we find several further Puma scuff marks on the track. This is amazing as before protection of the area, the Puma was unknown but evidence of this top predator has become more common as the patrolling by the local rangers, and therefore the protection, increases.

Our walk back continues to add birds including White-bellied Seedeater and Streaked Flycatcher. Paul and Chris who pottered locally with their cameras added Black-crowned Night-Heron and Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture. Lunch was at 13.15 followed by an afternoon at leisure. Some go down to the wetland, others watch the Cattle Egret come in to roost from the tower near the lodge. We think that 600+ egrets roost in the trees at the wetland. Sandy and Nigel spot a White-necked Heron.

Our evening is enlivened by a great birthday cake prepared by the cooks.

04 July

It is a beautiful morning with sun and the mountain tops all showing. The little cloud present soon dissipates. We have decided to walk down the road looking at the more open species.

As the day warms up we walk down the road past orchards of guava and fields where the farmers are planting cassava. Five Orange-winged Parrot get the day off to a good start and these are soon followed by a flock of Blue-black Grassquit and Double-collared Seedeater. We find a Red-cowled Cardinal but unfortunately it is a youngster with a brown rather than a red head. Many birds that are now familiar to us are also seen included a group of nearly twenty Guira Cuckoo. We hear a Laughing Falcon and displaying Yellowish Pipit but cannot find them. The group splits with some electing to return to the lodgewise whilst others continue to look for Burrowing Owl to photograph.

The returning group soon add Yellowish Pipit which includes a bird that Paul sees song flighting. The pastures here hold inquisitive cattle that impassively watch us as we walk past. We have to keep an ear and eye out for motorcyclists that pass us at regular intervals; these far outnumber the few cars that go by. We stop at a small shelter where the locals are packing fruit for the Rio market. We are invited in and each given a guava to eat. After taking time to remove all the small pips from our teeth, we agree that they are better in fruitjuice! Here they are also packing chillies of several different types. The cardinal area now has three birds of which two are very smart adults. The Saffron Finch here are also prepared to pose for photos.

Both groups arrive back within ten minutes of each other. By now it is very warm and four go for a swim. The pool is a great bonus for the lodge but the water is quite cold at this time of year. After lunch we enjoy another afternoon of relaxation followed by another excellent meal and we all retire early to bed.

05 July

We leave early and make our way northwards via Cachoeiras de Macacu and Nova Friburgo on the REGUA excursion known as Mount Caledonia. This is well known as the most reliable site for the recently discovered Grey-winged Cotinga, a species only known from Rio de Janeiro state and its most inaccessible mountain summits. On the way we stop at a roadside store, a great experience as the owner feeds the local birds with a large contribution of bananas. His bird table is covered with Green-headed, Ruby-crowned and Golden-chevrons Tanagers, Chestnut-bellied, Violaceous and Orange-bellied Euphonias, and Blue-naped Chlorophonia. The views are incredible as the birds are so close and the photographers are soon content snapping away.

We carry on up the hill and reach our destination at Pico da Caledonia where the temperature is rather cool. It however soon warms up and we can dispense with the extra layers. We swap vehicles as the track gets very steep and REGUA driver Jossue drives us further up the track in the 4 x 4 REGUA vehicle purchased specifically for these roads. We are now up high with great views of the town below and a clear blue sky above. The actual peak above us is at 2,219m and is one of the highest peaks in the Serra dos Órgãos Mountains.

The high level birding starts straight away with Diademed Tanager and Bay-chested Warbling-Finch beside the track. Leonardo shows his experience with call back and brings in Variable and Long-tailed Antshrikes, Pallid Spinetail, Highland Elaenia, Serra do Mar and Mottle-cheeked Tyrannulets. We walk very slowly downwards as the track is hard on our knees. The birds continue to be found and later we find Planalto Woodcreeper, Orange-eyed Thornbird and a Blue-billed Black-Tyrant, the last species spotted by Chris whilst we eat our packed lunch. After another half hour of walking, we climb back on to the truck and make for a second walk at a slightly lower altitude of the same mountain.

On the short journey we stop for Velvety Black Tyrant, spotted by Paul and also Aplomado Falcon, White Woodpecker and a small group of flyby Plain Parakeet. The afternoon walk is much gentler on the legs as it is almost flat. We are now amongst spectacular rocky outcrops, many devoid of vegetation apart from what look like terrestrial bromeliads. Above them are many Black Vulture and we also find an immature White-tailed Hawk. This is probably my favourite walk due to the combination of scenery, birds and vegetation. There are bushes of purple salvia that here are growing about five foot tall; the gardeners amongst us tell me that it gets nowhere near this height in the UK. There are also many begonia and also fuchsia plants. Birds include White-browed Woodpecker, Scaled Woodcreeper, Dusky-tailed Antbird, and White-shouldered White-eye. We struggle to find the calling Black-and-gold Cotinga but persistence pays off as the bird flies over us and briefly perches in one of the tall trees. The last bird of the walk is an Amethyst Woodstar spotted by Sue.

The journey home is relatively quick and we arrive back with the sun sinking over the high mountain peaks. It is early to bed for all of us as it has been a long tiring day.

06 July

Breakfast is at our usual time of 06.30. The group has elected to visit Rio with Nicholas and Raquel so I have a quiet day at the wetland. It is a beautiful sunny day which bodes well for all of us.

I enjoy a lovely walk on the yellow trail. Most of the trails here are colour coded and very well marked and therefore easy to do on one's own. To me, it is a source of wonderment as to how quickly new habitat becomes established here. The wetland restoration was only completed in 2010 and I was in fact here a couple of years earlier when the first water flooded the cattle pasture. The lodge used to be on a little hill surrounded by pasturelands but there are now planted corridors of forest joining the lodge to the main forest. The newly planted trees here grow at an incredible rate and the planted areas soon attract many species of bird and insect.

My walk leads to a total of forty Capybara being seen, several with Yellow-headed Caracara perching on their backs. To think that only a few years ago the Capybara did not exist here and that the mammals here have self-colonised the wetland, as have the many Broad-snouted Caiman. My only new birds for the trip are Pearly-breasted Cuckoo and Moustached Wren.

The rest of the group have a great day trip to Rio. The tour included the beaches where Sandy and Chris had a paddle, Sugarloaf Mountain, lunch in the old quarter and the Museum of Modern Art. A visit to the Botanical Gardens led to good views of Channel-billed Toucan, Golden-capped Parakeet, Rusty-margined Guan and Slaty-breasted Wood-Rail.

We meet as usual for dinner and the checklist. This is followed by an early night.

07 July

It is another bright and sunny morning and most of us meet for a 06.30 breakfast.

Nigel and I join Adilei and take a thirty minute drive up to some different REGUALand, the Waldenoor Trail. We walk up to a height of about 350m. The forest is very quiet partly due to the strong wind that is blowing. Birds are hard to find but include Spot-billed Toucanet, Yellow-fronted Woodpecker, Surucua Trogon and two Chestnut-crowned Becard. At the top there is a deserted farmstead that allows views of the distant peaks. Here is a good place to see Mantled Hawk and we have glorious views of this forest endemic bird of prey. Adilei picks some oranges which are very ripe but not too juicy.

The return trip takes us along a forest trail where we hear a Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper but cannot see it. Once back on the main track we see Spot-billed Toucanet, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, Eye-ringed Tody-Flycatcher and Whiskered Flycatcher. Back at the bus we find a Crescent-chested Puffbird and four White-bellied Tanager, a recent nomenclature change from the Turquoise Tanager.

Sue and Sandy join Nicholas and visit some of the newly planted areas. In the last twelve years the reserve has now planted 170,000 trees with a further 180,000 to be planted in the next two years. Nigel and Sandy's company, Ornitholidays have been supporting the tree planting initiative for the last three years.

Paul and Chris spend the morning walking around the wetland. The birdlife here can keep a birder going for ages particularly if also photographing.

Some of the volunteers join us for lunch. Nicholas has arranged a barbeque and about 14 of us sit down for the meal. Mid-afternoon Nicholas shows his REGUA's presentation that charts the history of the reserve and its future aspirations.

A short drive and a walk after dark for owls is not too successful but that's "Owling" for you. The compensation is the fantastic night sky with the thousands of stars. The group also see four shooting stars.

#### 08 July

We decide to spend the day around the lodge and split in to three groups for walks around the wetland. Nigel and Sandy decide on the longer brown/yellow trail while the rest of us do the yellow trail. The reserve has many other forest trails to explore but we have come partly to refresh our batteries and are therefore happy to take it easy.

As expected we all see a different suite of birds. Sue and I have a male White-bellied Seedeater and Paul and Chris watch a perched Collared Forest-Falcon. Nigel and Sandy add a Lineated Woodpecker. The forest and wetlands are certainly quieter than usual.

Today is a day of relaxation. Rain has been forecast but in the end does not arrive until after dark. One of the other guests goes down to the Giant Snipe site and has great views including some photo opportunities.

#### 09 July

Today we decide to visit the Macae de Cima reserve, but it is raining hard when we get up and the mountains are obscured by low cloud. So much for it being the dry season! The area of Macae de Cima is located on the crest of the mountain range consequently the surrounding forests are very well preserved. The orchid specialist David Miller, lived here but sadly he is no longer with us and it's not so easy to see the orchids he found on the forest floor and relocated in his garden. We arrive to find it is still raining as we make our first stop beside the road. There is Mottle-cheeked Tyrannulet and Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaner here and also a perched Plovercrest. Several expected

species are missing and ignore Leonardo's attempts to coax them out from deep cover. A flock of Brassy-breasted Tanager brighten up a very dull period of birding.

At the entrance to the Miller's property we decamp from the minibus and walk up the long drive to his house. Paul goes up by vehicle and meets us at the top. Quite quickly we find a small mixed flock that includes Bertoni's Antbird, Sepia-capped Flycatcher, White-collared Foliage-gleaner and Lesser Woodcreeper. It is nearly the top before more birds show themselves. The most difficult is Slaty Bristlefront which is a real skulker and though its insistent musical call shows him to be very close to us, we have difficulty locating it. At the same spot we find Rufous-backed Antwren and Rufous-capped Motmot. A single terrestrial orchid is in flower and looks spectacular.

On reaching the house we are met by Paul and also the resident black Labrador who is pleased to have some company. The hummingbird feeders are full and Paul has already taken lots of photos. There are four species coming in regularly, these being Brazilian Ruby, White-throated Hummingbird, Violet-capped Woodnymph and Scale-throated Hermit. A male Plovercrest occasionally comes to feed. We are missing the Amethyst Woodstar which is sometimes a regular here. Despite the low cloud and light, the photographers are soon busy snapping a multitude of images. Our best sighting is a Buffy-fronted Seedeater that dwarfs the commoner Rufous-collared Sparrow.

We eat our picnic lunch under the shelter of the roof of the house. As we finish our lunch, a bird party appears and we gain great views of Scaled Woodcreeper, Pale-browed Treehunter and Rufous-backed Antwren. It is a shame to leave this lovely place but it is obvious that the rain does not intend to stop anytime soon so we make our way back to the lodge.

On arrival back at REGUA there is a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl sitting in one of the trees in the lodge garden. The rest of the afternoon is spent at leisure and at least the rain stops. Nigel slips down for a quick look at the wetland and counts nine different Rufous-sided Crake. These are always much easier to see at dusk. With the arrival of new visitors, there are eleven for dinner tonight.

## 10 July

There is some cloud over the mountains at daybreak but the day remains cool and calm. We have a 06.30 breakfast before meeting Alcenir and the bus.

We initially make our way up the main track in the direction of Casa Pesquisato look for Yellowish Pipit and also hoping to get some better pictures of Burrowing Owl. We are in luck as the pipit appears immediately and the pair of owls are on their favourite rock. There are bellbirds calling in the distance and Leonardo finds us a tree with about ten Channel-billed Toucan on it. The distant hillside also produces two perched Laughing Falcon and finally, after much scanning, two Bare-throated Bellbird, yet another conspicuous Cotinga from the Atlantic Rainforest, with a call to be remembered.

Having retraced our steps, we head towards the main road before taking a side turning through an area of pasture and farmsteads. Our first stop soon has us watching Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch, Grassland Sparrow and a pair of Wing-banded Hornero building their mud nest. Leonardo tries a number of crane calls and an Ash-throated Crane flies across the damp grassland in front of us. In the distance there is a Streamer-tailed Tyrant and a little further along the road there are two American Kestrel.

Many familiar species are seen although the hoped for Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper is not at home. On our return journey Nigel spots a White-eared Puffbird sitting on a fence post right beside the road. Only Paul gets a picture before the bird flies a little further away.

We are back at the lodge at the end of the morning, and Sandy, Chris, Nigel and I return for one last visit to the wetland. We walk parts of both the yellow and the brown trails with our target bird being Masked Duck. Several small flocks hold many species including Streaked Xenops, Rufous-tailed Jacamar and Unicoloured Antwren. The Least Grebe is showing and just as we are about to leave the open water Nigel spots a female Masked Duck. What a great end to our wetland birdwatching.

The afternoon is spent packing and relaxing. The Blond-crested Woodpecker visits the bird table as does a Red-rumped Cacique. The photographers try for their last show-stealing shots of male Swallow-tailed Hummingbirds before we make our way to the airport.

I should at this point mention the REGUA team. From Nicholas and Raquel who always give guests a warm welcome, to the friendly staff, including the five ladies who produce high quality food and look after the lodge guests. The lodge is amazingly comfortable and feels like my second home. It is sad to be saying goodbye to everyone again but I am sure that I will return.

Phil Jones