



FAR AFIELD
BY BILL THOMPSON, III

Birding a Bit of Brazil!

The land of the Bossa Nova

In July of last year, I was invited on a weeklong birding trip to Brazil under the auspices of an optics company with the goal of trying out that company's fantastic new spotting scope.

Unfortunately there were production delays and the scope was not finished on time, so the trip became just a regular old birding adventure. Regular, except for the fact that I'd never been to Brazil and I was going to see a boatload of new and exciting birds. This was just my second time on the South American continent.

We had a grand time. My companions were all keen birders, and our Brazilian guide was perhaps the best in his entire, huge country. I knew I wanted to write an article about the trip for *Bird Watcher's Digest*, so I took notes and kept a journal in a small, black notebook that I always carry along with me. As a way of demonstrating how important my notes are (to me at least), I'm

going to build this article directly from them. For a bit more information about my special birding-trip notebook, see this issue's "Well-Equipped Birder" on page 104.

Brazil is gigantic—more than 3 million square miles. Looking at a map of Brazil prior to our departure, I could see from the trip itinerary that we were going to see just a small part of it in the southeastern portion of the country. When I asked him how long it would take to do a thorough bird-watching tour of his country, our guide, Paulo Boute of Boute Expeditions, told me, "Not less than seven weeks!" He explained it like this: one week in Mato Grosso, and two weeks each in the Amazon basin, in the northeast of Brazil, and in the south of

Brazil. Since Brazil is home to more than 1,700 bird species, I tend to agree with Paulo. Our week in the Atlantic forest and Minas Gerais was just a small taste of what one might see given a trip of nearly two-months duration. The very thought of that makes me dizzy!

After an all-night flight from Atlanta, we touched down in São Paulo to begin our journey. We left the city in the pre-dawn hours, speeding along in a van, all of us still bleary from the flight. We stopped for coffee at a residence in the São Paulo suburbs—the first of many places where Paulo was greeted as an old friend and we were invited to enjoy the birds. The fruiting trees along the quiet residential street were full of tanagers and other small birds.

I happily snapped photos of species I could not yet identify.

Stopping along the road to Itatiaia (pronounced *EAT-A-CHY-AH*) we scored a few target species: Brazilian teal, black hawk-eagle, and bran-colored flycatcher.

Our hotel for the next several nights would be the Hotel do Ypê in the middle of the mountains inside Itatiaia National Park. The hotel's setting is wonderful for bird watchers—surrounded by forested mountains, with a spectacular view of the valley below. As we checked in at the front desk we were drawn to the balcony where well-stocked bird feeders were attracting birds of every color in the rainbow.

My journal entry from the end of Day One gives my first impressions.

Green-headed
tanager.

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Day One: São Paulo to Itatiaia National Park

I finally got a roaring fire going with the damp wood provided by the innkeeper. Practically had to burn pages out of my passport to get it going. By “roaring,” of course, I mean sizzling and hissing and smoking. The Hotel do Ypê is rustic but charming. We each have a small suite with grand views off our balconies of the last valley and mountain range before the Atlantic Ocean.

It's cold here in Itatiaia National Park—in the high 40s F tonight I'd guess. But it was an amazing birding day—37 lifers for me and a mess of decent (I hope) bird photographs. Our Brazilian guide is Paulo Boute. He's smart, funny, and very much in control. But he's good at finding the good birds, which is why we're here. My favorite bird of the day was the frilled coquette we saw at a feeding station at a home not far from the hotel. We also saw a large number of tanager species.

The hotel maintains fruit and nectar feeders which are mobbed by up to 10 hummingbird species as well as tanagers, euphonias, chlorophonias, woodpeckers, toucans, and other species. I hope we have more time here tomorrow when the light is good. The birds are really acclimated to humans!

Tomorrow we go up into the mountains (up to 8,000 feet!) on the Black Needles (Agulhas Negras) Road.

At the hotel's feeders we enjoyed naked-eye looks at Brazilian ruby, white-throated hummingbird, violet-capped woodnymph, black Jacobin, and black-eared fairy. And those were just the hummingbirds.

We ended the field portion of the first day at the home of some park residents, an elderly couple whose garden flowers and feeders attract the frilled coquette, a tiny, shy, forest-dwelling hummingbird. While we waited for the coquette to appear, we enjoyed a parade of euphonias, chlorophonias, and tanagers.

Our tally for Day One, just within two bird families: seven life hummingbird species, nine life tanager species.

During our entire time in southeastern Brazil, most of the best birding sites involved homes or hotels with established bird-feeding stations. Our route strung these sites together like a necklace. As a would-be bird photographer, I loved these stops for their cooperative birds. I found myself automatically grabbing for extra camera batteries and memory cards as we dismount-

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The balcony feeders at Hotel do Ypê.

ed the van for a feeding-station site.

Forest birding in Brazil was similar to the forest birding I'd experienced in other parts of the tropics. Early and late in the day saw the most activity, though there always seemed to be plenty of noise from birds, insects, and mammals. There would be patches or flurries of bird activity that we'd try our best to find and enjoy: blue manakin leks, or feeding flocks of tanagers. Otherwise we often heard more than we saw in the forest. It helped that Paulo, with his decades of trip leading, knows most of the bird sounds he hears. And he was handy with the digital recorder and laser pointer, used for luring forest birds into view and then getting each of us on the birds.

Terry, the trip organizer, had been birding in Brazil a number of times, so he had specific target species—mainly the region's endemics. This was fine with the rest of us since it was our first time in this part of the world and nearly every bird was

new to us. I was just as happy seeing the dusky-legged guans around the hotel grounds as I was to find the Itatiaia spinetail or the tawny-browed owl.

The second major habitat we experienced were the mountain forests and the arid highlands of Agulhas Negras (Black Needles) Road, so named for the dark, pointy peaks. It was here that we racked up several special birds on Day Two, including the aforementioned endemic Itatiaia spinetail, the great pampa-finch, black-breasted plovercrest, and my favorite of the day, the diademed tanager.

We drove up a dirt road through the forest, our driver letting us out to walk for a mile or so, then pulling the vehicle up to meet us. It was relaxed birding and the weather was cool but sunny. In fact, I should mention here that you might expect (as I did) that Brazil would be hot, humid, and rainy. It was cool early and late in the day and warm but pleasantly so in the afternoons our entire time in Itatiaia. It rained a few times, but this disturbed our bird watching very little. Some of the forest trails we hiked were rocky and root-strewn, so I was glad to have sturdy hiking boots for ankle protection. Insects were almost no problem, except for a few chiggers, and the entire trip, spending most of each day in the forest, we encountered just one small, non-poisonous snake. Granted we were not visiting during the wet season, which can be more challenging in this regard.



Male blue dacnis. Yellow-fronted woodpecker. Frilled coquette.

At the end of the Alguhas Negras Road, while we enjoyed views of the namesake peaks, we stalked the great pampa-finch. I spotted the bird, singing from atop a sagebrush-type bush. The finch looked like a cross between a green-tailed towhee and a female evening grosbeak. A few minutes later, while we were eating our lunch in the shade of the military police building at the end of the road, we spotted the gorgeous diademed tanager. How this bird is a tanager I don't know — let's leave that to the taxonomists. It is a striking, solid blue chunk of a bird, with a red crown and a finchlike bill. This particular bird was eating tiny seeds from the grass along the road. I approached to get a photo, then sat down in the road to steady myself. I'd snap a few images, then scoot closer and snap some more. By the time I was done, I was six feet from the bird, which was still happily focused on eating grass seeds.

We spent our remaining two days in Itatiaia walking forest trails where we encountered several large feeding flocks of fruit-eating birds. Among the highlights were brassy-breasted tanager, green-headed tanager, and saffron toucanet.

Day Four: Driving to Ubatuba

A long drive today, starting in the rain at Hotel do Ypê. We missed a few target birds due to the weather, but chanced upon or scored many others. In between birding stops we talked about a variety of things: the state of birding in the U.S. and Brazil, hunting versus birding, and, of course, optics.

Arriving in Ubatuba, we dropped off our things at the hotel and immediately split for a birding spot. Getting there was another significant drive with the pleasant benefit of driving along the coast where we caught our first views of the South Atlantic Ocean. Evening birding at Folha Seca, the remote forest home of one of Paulo's friends. Wow! Got about 20 lifers today — mostly at Folha.

The second half of our southeastern Brazil trip was spent in Ubatuba, along the Atlantic coast. It took us an entire day of mostly driving, with a bit of birding thrown in, to get there, over a mountain highway that

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was as straight as a bag of snakes. Ubatuba is lowland Atlantic forest with a different mixture of plant and bird life. The forest was lush from the more humid ocean air, and the days and nights were also warmer and more humid.

We stayed in a hotel in the city of Ubatuba, so our birding was done by excursions in all directions from town. Driving south of town along the coast we took in the view of the blue Atlantic and beaches full of sun seekers. This is where we got our first glimpses of distant brown boobies — yes, the actual bird — along with kelp gull.

The highlight of our birding

time in Ubatuba was a visit to the farm of one of Paulo's friends. The farm, called Folha Seca (dry leaves) is owned by a man named Jonas, and has some of the most active bird feeders I've ever seen. There are hummingbirds galore coming into Jonas' homemade hummer feeders — basically soda bottles with small rivets in the bottom for feeding ports. Among the nine new hummingbird species for our list that were frequenting Folha Seca and the nearby forest were saw-billed hermit, Planalto hermit, white-vented violet-ear, festive coquette, and glittering-bellied emerald.

BWD MAP BY CLAIRE MULLEN

Day Five: Ubatuba

Another day of birding in Ubatuba's forest and farmland. The morning and early afternoon were spent at Jonas' finca south of town, birding along forest roads and trails where we found rufous-capped ant thrush and a very cagey rufous-capped motmot, plus a few more spectacular tanagers: flame-crested, fawn-breasted, and red-necked (with which I felt strangely comfortable).

I heard the trip's first bellbird, but we got only a distant look made hazy by the heat of the afternoon. Later, along a more open road that rolled by farm fields and scattered houses, we found burnished-buff tanager and another spinetail whose name I have already forgotten.

Lunch was late in the day at a churrascaria in Ubatuba where we ate our faces off and enjoyed a cold *cerveja* (beer).

Before we knew it we were in the field for our last full day of bird watching in Brazil, starting in Angelim, a private reserve near Ubatuba. Bertoni's antbird was the most special species found there, plus more blue manakins and a decent look at a white-bearded manakin.

We were in for one more nice experience—this time at the beach. We had lunch at Senzala, a beachside restaurant in Almada along the Atlantic. Lunch was steaming

bowls of caldeirada, a fish and mussel stew in a yellow palm-oil broth with rice. Even though the sun was hot, the warm stew really hit the spot. After lunch I drank small cups of strong coffee while standing in the ocean, the cold water quite a contrast to the heat of the sun and brew. Out beyond the whispering waves breaking just offshore were a dozen or more brown boobies wheeling and diving, plus magnificent frigatebirds and kelp gulls.

Day Six: Almada

Sitting on the beach après lunch soaking up the sun like a colony of bull seals, everyone fell asleep, including Paulo. This was a welcome respite from the go-go-go pace of the last week. I took several photos of this tropical paradise—a cliché, but totally appropriate for this spot on this very day. As I burrowed my toes deeper into the brown-sugar sand, the lapping bay waves, the light rattle of palm fronds, and some barely audible bossa nova gave me no alternative but to surrender to slumber once more.

Afterword

Our week-long trip tallied about 226 species—I missed a few that others got and vice-versa—of which 166 were life birds for me.

Birding in Brazil can require different gear and preparation depending on where and when you visit. Only twice were we on extremely rugged trails, and at those times I was happy to have sturdy hiking boots with ankle support. Rain gear or an umbrella is always a good idea when forest birding in the tropics. At the higher altitudes, nights and early mornings can be surprisingly cool.

Due to the language difference—being semi-fluent in Spanish, I found, helped only a little in a Portuguese-speaking country—and the relative lack of English spoken in the areas we visited, I'd recommend hiring a guide for your Brazil birding adventure. Our trip was designed and led by Paulo Boute of Boute Expeditions

(boute-expeditions.com), and I was happy with the experience. No matter what tour company or guide you choose, they should provide ample information before your trip to help you maximize your comfort and enjoyment.

A good field guide to consider for the area is *A Field Guide to the Birds of Brazil* by author Ber Van Perlo, published by Oxford University Press.

For a complete listing of

hotels we used as well as direct links to several of my *Bill of the Birds* blog posts from during and after my Brazil trip, go to the *BWD* website at birdwatchersdigest.com and click on the link on the home page or search our site for “Birding in Brazil.”

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Diademed tanager.

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