

In search of the Nocturnal and Wattled Curassows - Explorama and Muyuna Lodges, Loreto Peru

Peter G. Kaestner

With the second largest bird list of any country in the world, Peru is an essential destination for any world birder. My first trip to Peru was in 1987, when I visited the U.S. Embassy in Lima to install an automated visa processing system. After working for two weeks, I took five days off and visited the Explorers Inn near Puerto Maldonado. The visit was wonderful, though birding without a guide in the tropical rainforest was a challenge.

In the intervening thirty years, a lot of birds have been added to my life list, and remarkable advances have occurred in the Peruvian birding community. There are now excellent bird guides all over the country, fabulous lodges that have uncovered many rare species, and local experts who know the birds like the backs of their hands.

In April, 2019 I traveled to the Amazon River in Peru to search out two super rarities that had been seen at two lodges near Iquitos: Nocturnal and Wattled Curassows. The Nocturnal Curassow is an enigmatic species that is fairly widespread in the western Amazon basin. As its name implies, it was until recently thought to be nocturnal – as its low, moaning call is often given from the canopy on low-moon nights. Now it is known to feed on the forest floor in the mornings and afternoons. It has only been in the last few years that anyone has actually seen a Nocturnal Curassow. It is a small bird, as far as curassows go, mostly warm brown, with an odd eye-ring that is a pale yellowish green on the top and dark blue-grey below. Now, there are a couple of places where this fabulous bird can be seen. One of the best places is the Explornapo Lodge, on the north side of the Amazon, downstream from Iquitos.

The other bird that I was looking for was another cracid, the Wattled Curassow. While the Nocturnal Curassow is a mythical bird because it is so hard to see, the Wattled Curassow is easy to observe. And that is the catch. They are large, tasty, and easy to spot. As a group, the family Cracidae is one of the most persecuted in the world. One species is already extinct in the wild, and five others are critically endangered. The Wattled Curassow is one of seven species that is considered 'just' endangered. This rare Amazonian species has found a refuge near the Muyuna Lodge, on the south bank of the Amazon, upriver from Iquitos where it is protected and valued for its part in attracting eco-tourists.

I arrived in Iquitos in the early morning of April 5, after a long flight from Baltimore and a several-hour layover in Lima. We were met at the airport by Ari, a representative of the Explornapo Lodge and taken to the Amazon River where we boarded a boat for the ride to the lodge. Situated on the north bank of the Amazon, Explorama consists of four lodges. We were headed to the Amazon Conservatory of Tropical Studies (ACTS) field station which is a bit more focused on scientific research than tourism. The highlight of ACTS is its canopy walkway. Suspended up to 35 meters (115 feet) in the top of the forest, the 500m long walkway is a wonderful window into the life on the canopy – a place that cannot be experienced from the

surface of the earth. The Amazonian forest is stratified, with plants and animals tending to remain in one level, be it the forest floor, the mid-level, sub-canopy, or canopy. The Nocturnal Curassow is one of the exceptions, as it spends much of its life in the sub-canopy and canopy, but also appears to descend to the forest floor every day. (Where it is almost never, ever, seen!) Dugand's Antwren, another bird on my wants list, is exclusively a denizen of the canopy.

In addition to the canopy walkway, which will give me access to the world of the treetops, each locale in the Amazon basin has a subtly different avifauna. On the other hand, the horizontal mosaic of habitats, including river side, sand islands, young scrubby islands, mature islands, riverside, flooded lowland forest (Varzea), and never flooded (terra-firme) forest all harbor unique birds.

We arrived at ACTS in the afternoon, after having spotted a troupe of Black-mantled Tamarin monkeys along the quebrada that leads to the field station. Even though the mid-afternoon forest tends to be quiet, my local guide Luis and I made a walk into the forest to get a feel for the place. It was hot and muggy, and the mosquitos were particularly aggressive. The excursion yielded a booming Sungrebe in the distance, and a lifer Black Bushbird. One of the characteristics of the Amazonian lowland forest are antbird parties. We encountered one with a couple of dozen birds, including my lifer Slate-colored Antbird.

After a delicious dinner, we set off into the dark forest in search of the bird that drew me to ACTS – the Nocturnal Curassow. We walked for about a mile into the forest, which was absolutely dark, as there was no moon. After about a half hour, we stopped and listened, as frogs croaked into the night and an occasional Tawny-bellied Screech Owl impatiently tooted. After about another 30 minutes, we heard the rhythmic moaning of the Nocturnal Curassow! We headed off towards the sound, but after a few minutes, it stopped. After another hour of waiting in the absolute darkness of the forest interior, we gave up and went home to a refreshing cool shower and comfortable bed.

April 6: We started on the wonderful canopy walkway that is one of the highlights of any visit to the Explorama Lodges. Once we arrived in the canopy, there were birds everywhere – handsome Black-headed Parrots perched in the open, as Bare-necked Fruitcrows flew past. After a little playback, we had a couple of Dugand's Antwrens answering and approaching for excellent views. A singing Yellow-breasted Flycatcher took a bit of work, but we were eventually able to ID it. Spectacular Spangled Cotingas and numerous tanagers kept us busy through the morning. While I was mostly concentrating on the 30 or so species of birds that we saw in about an hour, I could not stop and marvel at the beautiful view across the miles of pristine forest that surrounds the area.

After a hearty breakfast, we did another walk in the forest, and added several birds to the burgeoning list. Some birds, that are especially difficult to see, were left heard only (Thrush-like Antpitta, Screaming Piha, Scaly-breasted Wren, and Dwarf Tyrant Manakin) but we were able to get good looks of many others, including Cinnamon-throated Woodcreeper, Chestnut-shouldered Antwren, and White-tufted Antbird. Luis knew a good place for a Chestnut-belted Gnateater, and we were able to instantly tape one up. (Gnateaters are special to me because

the Rufous Gnateater was the last of the 159 families of birds of the world that I saw in 1986.) Along we way, we saw several interesting frogs, a band of Yellow-handed Titi Monkeys, and a cute Amazonian Bamboo Rat peering from his tree-hole.

In the afternoon, we took a boat and explored areas near the Napo River. There we saw some excellent birds, such as Velvet-fronted Grackle, Orange-fronted Plushcrown, Amazonian Umbrellabird, and a lifer Dot-back Antbird. Sadly, we did not find the Plain-breasted Piculet, a bird I needed for my list.

After another excellent dinner, we went off in search of the elusive Nocturnal Curassow. We walked about a half hour into the pitch-black forest and then stopped to listen. Because of the 100% humidity in the forest interior, I was sweating like a pig, and used a micro-fiber towel to try to keep my face dry. After 30 minutes of standing, I decided to try sitting on the towel, which worked well. (The biggest concern I have about sitting in the forest is chiggers – which were around, but we never encountered.) After an hour, at about 9:30, we heard a curassow far off. We immediately started walking towards our quarry. About a half-hour later, we arrived at a place that, we calculated, was where the calling birds were perched. (They had only called for a few minutes.)

We again sat down in the forest, ready to wait until the curassow started calling again. We sat and sat. Once my eyes were night-adapted (it takes 20 to 30 minutes), I noticed that the ground was covered in luminescent fungi! They were living under the top layer of dry leaves, in the moister layer. Their ghostly glow was so feint that if I looked directly at them, they disappeared, as I could only see them using the ultra-light sensitive cones in the periphery of my retina.

While sitting, there was a Tawny-bellied Screech Owl calling overhead, so I made a recording of the call for eBird. Then, all of a sudden, the forest erupted with calls of the Nocturnal Curassow! There were three birds calling from the canopy just south of our location. Like a shot, our guide leapt up and started hustling up the trail and then into the forest. Luis and I followed a bit more deliberately, assiduously snapping small plants to mark our trail once we entered the forest. Again, after a few minutes, the calling ceased, but by this time our guide was under the spot, and Luis and I were catching up quickly. Three flashlight beams pierced the blackness as we searched the dense vegetation that makes up the sub-canopy and canopy of a humid tropical forest. After about a half-hour of searching for a chicken-sized bird sitting in the canopy, we gave up and sat down again in the middle of the forest. (Up to now, we had always been sitting in a trail – which gave some small sense that you were not just putting your body at the mercy of the millions of tiny creatures that inhabit the forest.)

At this time, it was 11:30pm, and we expected that they would call in about a half-hour. When midnight passed and the birds did not call (they had called twice at one-hour intervals), we were concerned that maybe the birds had called it a night. By 12:30am, we finally gave up and got up. We spent another 20 minutes scouring the trees above us, but to no avail. It was 1:00am by the time I got back to the field station, ready for a cold shower, a quick wash of my shirt and underclothes, and 3.5 hours projected sleep before the alarm would wake me for our next adventure.

April 7: It is hard to remember what day of the week it is when you are in the bush, but I do try to remember Sundays. Our strategy was to bird some of the islands in the Rio Napo, for birds that specialize in this dynamic and ephemeral habitat. Our first stop was for an Ash-breasted Antbird, a handsome island species. It was very responsive, and after hacking our way inside the streamside thicket, we got good views of a pair. When we returned to the boat, we saw that it has started to rain, so we took off to a school a half-kilometer across the river. By the time we arrived, it was pouring, and we took shelter in a raised, covered walkway that lead from the river some 400 meters to the school itself. For the next four hours we were confined to the walkway, as the rain waxed and waned, but never stopped. In periods of light rain some birds began singing, with Luis' keen ear picking up several more island specialties. I got good looks at Orange-fronted Plushcrown, Riparian Antbird, and Plain-crowned Spinetail (whose NE Peruvian riverside population has a very distinct call).

After dinner, we set out for our last chance for the Nocturnal Curassow. As we walked through the now-familiar pitch-black forest, we realized that we would have to stay out all night if necessary to get the bird. We hiked about half a kilometer, past the canopy walkway, towards the area where we heard the curassows the night before. Again, we sat down on the ground, and waited. Within an hour, the birds started calling! And this time they were close!! I started to record the call for eBird, but the guides immediately started bush-whacking in the direction of the source of the calls. I hurried after into the forest, completely oblivious to the possible snakes, centipedes, spiders, or other poisonous animals or plants.

We could hear three different birds calling, and amazingly, we arrived at the place where they were sitting while they were still vocalizing. Even more amazingly, the spot was the site of a tree-fall, which had cleared out the sub-canopy and allowed us clear views of the tallest trees. It only took my guides a few minutes to find a curassow perched high above us! I was able to get great views and some poor photos, and good recordings of one of the most sought-after birds in the Western Hemisphere!



Early on the morning of April 8, we left Explornapo and the excellent staff. This time, since we were headed against the mighty current of the world's most massive river, it took us three hours to reach Iquitos, including a quick stop at Cieba Tops, the luxury lodge of the Explornapo group. The manager, Pam, called the Muyuna office in Iquitos to confirm the arrangements for our transfer. Once we reached town, we were met by the staff of the Muyuna Lodge, who transferred us and our luggage to their boat. After a few minutes on dry land to stretch our legs and pick up boots, we continued our river voyage.

The Muyuna Lodge is located on the south bank of the Amazon, which is a natural barrier for many species of birds. For example, the handsome Yellow-billed Jacamar is replaced by the even prettier Blue-cheeked Jacamar, and the distinctive Black-headed Parrot is replaced by the White-bellied Parrot on the southern shore.

Arriving at about 3:00pm, we met our guide, Moises, and got a quick orientation to the lodge. Set in Varzea forest, the lodge was situated over several feet of water, due to the annual flooding. Apart from a series of elevated walkways linking the rooms with the main lodge, we went everywhere by boat, canoe, or kayak. In sharp contrast to ACTS, which is a biological Field Station, and we were the only guests, Muyuna was full of tourists, each assigned a series of activities from bird and mammal watching to fishing, to cultural exchange with the local village. The management of the staff kept the complex structure humming along with enviable efficiency.

Moises was eager to get working on my wants list, so we piled into a boat and took off towards the south about one kilometer from the lodge. We passed the village, which was similarly inundated by the annual floods. Indeed, we saw a dog swimming about 100 meters from its home as there was simply no dry land around. Villagers kept their chickens suspended over the water in wire cages.

We found a small area of unflooded ground and began our first foray into the forest. While we did not get any targets, we heard a couple of pairs of too-shy Black-banded Crakes and saw a nice Great Jacamar. Moises showed us a paw print in the mud of a young Jaguar, evidence of the unusual abundance of mammals in the area. On the way back, we explored a short quebrada and found a pair of Black-tailed Antbirds, one of the special birds in this part of Peru, bathing in a small cavity in a tree that was standing in two meters of water! One of the highlights of the afternoon excursion was our first encounter with the wonderful Horned Screamer. These prehistoric-looking creatures are quite common on the rivers and numerous oxbow lakes in the area. Related the waterfowl, these huge birds do not have either webbed feet or duck-bills. They do have sturdy, tree-trunk legs and serious claws on the leading edge of their wings. There are three screamers in the family, and this one – confined largely to the Amazon basin – is characterized by a weird, curved horn, almost a foot long.

At dusk, back at the lodge, we heard both Tropical Screech Owl and Common Pauraque, two birds that I usually associate with more open habitats. As it turned dark, dinner was ready. Whereas in ACTS we were served plates of food, there was a buffet in Muyuna, so we could pick

and choose what we wanted to eat. The food was tasty, and the dining hall had a fruit bar, where we could try out local treats.

After dinner we went out again in a boat spotlighting for nocturnal animals. We called up an amorous pair of Spectacled Owls and got good looks at a Garden Tree Boa and a Common Pauraque.

April 9: Our first full day we dedicated to find the curassow, to get the most important bird under the belt. To get to the area when this bird is still lives, we are up for a 4:30am breakfast and off in another canoe at five sharp. As the sun rose, we approached a large oxbow lake filled with expectation of finding one of the rarest and spectacular birds in the Amazon basin. But, though we searched through hundreds of trees along two lakes, there was no sign of the enigmatic curassow. The morning was a huge success, notwithstanding the absence of the star performer, as we saw 73 species of birds, including Muscovy Duck, Bluish-fronted Jacamar, Plain-breasted Piculet, Ringed Woodpecker, Long-billed Woodcreeper, Black-capped Donacobius, and the Black-tailed Antbird, a specialty species at Muyuna.

A bit discouraged, we returned to the lodge for lunch. There, several of the clients were talking about having seen the Wattled Curassow! They had seen it in another oxbow lake, quite close to the lodge. We had our work cut out for us! But, since it was highly unlikely to see the bird during the middle of the day, we made plans for looking for it in the evening. In the afternoon, Moises and I went out in a canoe, paddling through the flooded Varzea forest looking for Varzea Thrush and Blue-cheeked Jacamar, two birds I needed for my list. The thrush was particularly poignant, as I had thought I had seen it in 2018, but with the help of an eBird reviewer, I realized that the bird was a similar species, Hauxwell's Thrush. In 90 minutes behind the lodge, we had several tantalizing glimpses of a thrush flying through the forest, but nothing concrete.

At about 5:00pm, we went by boat (remember, you have to go everywhere by boat) to the nearby oxbow lake. The sun was setting, and we had to look to the west towards the trees where we hoped to find our quarry. We slowly motored along the edge of the lake, as dozens of birds of several species, flew overhead to roost. We saw both Amazonian terns, the dainty Yellow-billed and gaudy Large-billed, two species of swifts, and five species of parrots. After about an hour of looking, our boatman shouted out that he saw the bird! We all looked in the direction, and saw nothing, until the boatman Kevin explained exactly where it was. Even knowing where to look, it was almost invisible, some 1000 meters away, silhouetted against the setting sun. It was one of the most remarkable feats of bird spotting that I have witnessed in my life. I was so impressed I immediately gave the boatman a \$20 tip to show my appreciation. The only down side was that it was almost impossible to see the colors of the bird because of the bad light. As the impossibly distant bird took off to find its roosting place, we returned to the lodge.

The next morning, we returned to the same place to catch the bird as it came off its roost. This time, the rising sun was at our backs, and in a few minutes, we were enjoying nice, though still distant, views of the bird we had come for.



With the curassow under our belts, we spent the next two days cleaning up my wants lists. The most memorable was a boat trip to the north side of the Amazon where we finally saw a Varzea Thrush and caught up with the shy Bay Hornero. On the way back to the lodge we found both pink and grey river dolphins, a nice counterpoint to the excellent birds.

These two lodges are well set up for birders, whether on a tour or independently. I made my arrangements directly with each using their informative websites. I planned on three nights at each place. It was definitely a good idea for the Nocturnal Curassow, but you could probably do the Wattled Curassow in two nights. All in all, I recorded 260 species in a week, not too bad for someone who is not that current on all the calls of the amazon forest birds. (I do not count birds that my guides record, only those I can ID.)

All my sightings are in eBird.

<https://www.explorama.com/explornapo-lodge.html>

The Muyuna website is under construction:

<https://muyuna.com>