

French Guiana

Nov 25 - Dec 8, 2023

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French Guiana isn't too well known on the birding circuit but perhaps it deserves to be. With easy access to **White-throated Pewee, Band-tailed Antshrike, Black-throated Antshrike, Red-billed Woodcreeper, Guianan Red-Cotinga, Dusky Purpletuff, Guianan Gnatcatcher, White-winged Potoo**, a large chunk of the widespread Guianan Shield endemics, and genuine chances for the very rarely seen **Sooty Barbthroat** and **Rusty Tinamou**, it's a pretty appealing place! Additionally there is an excellent local guide (who is admittedly a friend and helped me a lot with my trip but he really is a nice guy and highly recommended): Hugo Foxonet (Manikup Birding Tours: custom birding trips in the Guianas, on request -> hugofox66@gmail.com). Everywhere you go in Fr Guiana can be done 100% independently but if desired Hugo can organize everything and is a crack birder / guide.

There are only 3 options for flights (Martinique, Paris, or Belem) or you could arrive by land from Suriname or Brazil. Once there all you need is a rental car. There is forest everywhere and absolutely no permissions / entry fees / guides / anything are necessary. It's quite safe and logistically easy.

Public transit really doesn't exist so a rental car is pretty mandatory. Roads for birding are almost all dirt but in good enough shape that the cheapest 2wd rental car is perfectly fine. Despite it being a safe and sleepy place, there is just not enough traffic to make hitchhiking viable for the dirt roads where you'll be birding. For where to stay you have a few options: At many/most sites you could easily and safely camp. Alternatively, there are carbets in many locations. A carbet is like a campground that is designed for hammocks. You could camp there, or do what the locals do which is sleep in a hammock with a mosquito net under a big roof. Most carbets will rent you a hammock if you don't have one. Some of the carbets also function as gites which is to say they rent small cabañas / rooms. Whether at a carbet or a gite you will probably have a bit of a small outdoor kitchen, perhaps a fridge, and a bathroom and shower. There are hotels in Cayenne, Kourou, St Laurent, and St George (the four towns/cities) but they are largely too far from the birding sites (except for St Laurent). For my trip car rental was about 30EU/day, carbets about 15-20EU/night, gites about 50-70EU/night, and a hotel in St Laurent was 75EU/night. I stocked up on food from the big Carrefour supermarket not far from the airport in Cayenne and would recommend doing the same. You won't be able to get early breakfasts anywhere, lunches are thin on the ground near the birding sites, and only some of the carbets / gites offer dinners. As mentioned, most carbets/ gites have kitchens so you can cook for dinner. I only ate out a few times. Eating out in Cayenne went pretty well but in the rest of Fr Guiana I found the food a bit underwhelming (particularly after spending time in Brazil) and quite preferred to cook.

Some of the birding information for French Guiana is a bit out of date (ie, the article from a few years back in Neotropical Birding) and the local birders (all 10 or so of them) do

not use eBird much but rather a website called Faune Guyane (<https://www.faune-guyane.fr/>). If you are trying to grab data out of eBird beware it's not only woefully incomplete, but for some sites (ie, Sentier du Baigne des Annamites) it includes a lot of banding data and you're not likely to see a lot of those species on a single visit. So I will try to give an overview of where to look for the important birds and most of the easier birds you can just fill in as they will be at most sites.

I highly recommend using Organic Maps (the BS-free / non-commercial version of Maps.Me) as most of the tracks you'll be birding on are present but not in Google. It's also worth noting that Google has mildly inaccurate maps in a lot of the towns. Again Organic Maps, or your other preferred application to use the Open Street Maps (OSM) dataset, is highly recommended. There are some side roads and newly opened dirt tracks in the birding areas that are not yet in OSM / Organic Maps / but it's easy enough to make sense of once you're there and have most of the tracks visible.

With no further ado, the sites I visited, starting near to Cayenne:

Route de Saut Leodate / Piste de Risquetout

This site is basically a network of dirt roads through selectively logged forest (like many of the sites actually). The main turn to get to the site is at about 4.9165, -52.5143. Head W and then follow the left turn at 4.9179, -52.5576. You're ultimately aiming to get to a road junction at about 4.8849, -52.6187. Birding is good from this junction onwards in both directions and along some newly opened tracks if you follow the right fork. I birded an afternoon and night, then the next morning until mid-day. Key birds to look for here are **Dusky Purpletuft** and **Guianan Gnatcatcher**. As well it's probably the best site for **Guianan Puffbird**. The Purpletuft has been seen all over the area, I found mine at 4.8564, -52.6401. The Gnatcatcher can be in any canopy flock and is fairly difficult. I eventually managed to get onto one in a fairly quick moving flock just as it was starting to rain. I didn't get exact GPS but it was in the vicinity of 4.8817, -52.6396. For this area I would suggest the best strategy is to just walk a bunch looking for the Purpletuft, Cotingas, Puffbirds, and canopy flocks. I found a fruiting tree with 2 **Guianan Red-Cotinga** (generally common at most sites actually, at least by voice), at least 5 **Purple-breasted Cotinga**, and at least 4 **Pompadour Cotinga** in addition to a pair of **Black-spotted Barbets**. I ended up seeing all three Cotingas again later, as well as Spangled, which gave me the impression that Fr Guiana is pretty good for all of them in general and that it wasn't a freak occurrence. I saw three **Guianan Puffbird** in total - a vocal pair the first evening and a solo individual in another spot the next morning. **White-winged Potoo** and **Roraiman (Foothill) Screech-Owl** both occur all over these tracks. After some effort I finally connected with a White-winged Potoo at about 4.8953, -52.6310 which was very welcome, one of my longstanding neotropical bogey-birds.

Roche Corail

Another network of dirt roads, this one is a bit closer to Kourou. The main turn into the network of dirt roads is at 5.1025, -52.7735 despite what any map will show you. After

turning onto the dirt, make an immediate left and it will connect you with what is in Organic Maps and from there be easy to navigate. Drive to 5.0896, -52.7682. Birding is good from here in all directions on a maze of dirt roads, but I never got further than about 1km straight-line distance from that initial point. I birded a full day and another morning. This site is also good for **Guianan Gnatcatcher** though I didn't look for it or see it again. It's good for many nice species, and I found **Red-billed Woodcreeper** (troll for it early morning), **Red-and-black Grosbeak**, **Caica Parrot** (know the voice and be prepared to just see them flyby below the canopy), **Lilac-tailed Parrotlet** (mostly just flyovers), **Sapphire-rumped Parrotlet** (mostly just flyovers; the call is quite distinct from other Touits), **Blue-and-yellow Tanager** (listen for the bisyllabic contact calls, I found mine by hearing them out the window while driving), and I also found **Painted Tody-Flycatcher**, another **Purple-breasted Cotinga**, more **Pompadour Cotingas**, **Black-faced Hawk**, and **Roraima (Foothill) Screech-Owl** (5.0909, -52.7727). Beware that Tawny-bellied Screech-Owl occurs as well and is more common. Roraima SO's song is shorter and faster, and the irises are yellower. This site should also be good for **Blue-cheeked Parrot** (listen for the double-honk calls like the first recording in Merlin) and **Racket-tipped Thorntail** is possible, though I didn't see either.

Kaw Rd / Tresor / Sentier de Coq-de-Roche / Malou et son Vergers

This is a bit of a collection of sites along the road leading to Kaw. I stayed at (and recommend doing the same) Malou et son Vergers (in Google Maps, easy to reserve via WhatsApp at +594 694210712), which is a gite / carbet and has a nice garden that notably is usually reliable for **Tufted Coquette** (only a female on my visit but still nice). Of note there isn't a real kitchen here unlike other gites though there is a fridge and microwave and they can prepare dinners. RNR Tresor (parking 4.6103, -52.2791) has two loop trails. The smaller/upper loop is good for **White-fronted** and **White-throated Manakins** (I struggled to see White-throated here, they apparently typically are lekking low to the ground near a prominent fallen log but I barely heard them and they were high and uncooperative, apparently my experience is atypical), and **(Amazonian) Wing-banded Antbird**, and the lower/longer loop offers a perhaps small chance for **Black Curassow**, though I did not see or hear it there. I heard another **Roraima (Foothill) Screech-Owl** here; near the parking lot is meant to be reliable for them. After birding Tresor, parking for the Cock-of-the-Rock lek is at 4.5507, -52.1746. I found **White-throated Manakin** much easier to see here in the first 200-300m of the trail, as the forest is a bit lower and more open. It's about a 800m walk to the lek which is visible from a blind. It's apparently seasonal and I don't know fully what the season is but it was apparently early in the season in late Nov/early Dec. I saw at least 4 male and 2 female **Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock** which are always absolutely mega, one of the best birds in the world without a doubt and makes the Andean CotR look like a feral pigeon in comparison. You should be able to do Tresor + the CotR trail in a half day though early morning will be much better for the Wing-banded Antbird at Tresor.

Piste du Mataroni

This is another network of dirt roads in a logging concession but the difference is the area is massive and there is still active (selective) logging occurring so you will have to put up with some vehicle traffic on the roads. Birding is excellent however. There are not amazing options for staying near to this site. There is a carbet / gite near to Regina called Auberge de l'Approuague (located correctly in Google Maps), though it was closed when I attempted to stay there. A reservation would have been a better idea but I was sort of winging it. I eventually secured a dumpy but serviceable room in Regina, above the library basically, by asking around and eventually renting it from / paying at the Municipal building. 25 EU/night, no towel or A/C but a bed and a shower were better than sleeping in the car, as I didn't have a tent along. For Piste Mataroni camping would be a really great option, particularly considering how large the site is.

To bird Piste du Mataroni, turn from the highway at 4.1131,-52.0744 and I would suggest aiming for 4.0637, -52.1678 to start birding. **White-throated Pewee** is the key bird here (this could be the best site anywhere for this species) and occurs around the small clearings that result from the logging activity and/or naturally. Near to the suggested starting point I heard the bird (sounds remarkably like an insect, the pip-pip calls are a bit burrier than a lot of other Pewees) and likely saw it in flight. I later found a cooperative pair near to 4.0012,-52.1135. I would suggest just doing a lot of driving to the little clearings, exploring, walking stretches, and taping / listening to try to find it. This site is also good for most of the harder Parrots, ie I saw a couple groups of **Lilac-tailed Parrotlets** fly-over and saw another pair of **Caica Parrots** in flight. I saw a good number of **Pompadour** and **Spangled Cotingas**. This site is one of the better for **Glossy-backed Becard** and **Todd's Sirystes** which apparently are frequently together in the same canopy flock which is exactly how I found them. **Olive-green Tyrannulet** is possible here in canopy flocks though rare and I didn't find it. **Curve-billed Scythebill** is possible in flocks here though I didn't find it. **White-winged Potoo** and **Roraiman Screech-Owl** apparently occur pretty widely here, and **Rufous Potoo** has been found as well, though I didn't do any night birding. I spent only a long morning until mid day here. Overall it's a terrific site and would merit more time if you have time to spare.

Camp Bonaventure

This is seemingly the best site in French Guiana, especially with Saül inaccessible at the moment (the company offering flights folded, there are rumors flights will resume with another operator). Camp Bonaventure is itself a carbet, so you'll need to sleep in a hammock (which I did) or camp - there are no gites/beds available. It gets chilly enough at night that a sheet or sleeping bag liner is desirable/necessary. I reserved via email at acds-guyane@outlook.fr. You can get breakfasts (not inspiring and not well timed for birding) and dinners (decent but ultimately I only had one and preferred to cook for flexibility and because the dinner wasn't particularly better than I could prepare). If you book a private carbet you'll get a fridge, in the shared carbet you'll get an ice chest and they'll swap you out frozen ice packs daily so you can bring cold beer and groceries, cook for yourself, sleep in your tent or hammock, have showers, and have access to great trails and terrific birds. Really a great place. I planned 3 days but stayed 4 as I liked it so much. Key birds here are **Sooty Barbthroat**, **Band-tailed Antshrike**, **Black-**

throated Antshrike, and **McConnell's Spinetail**, **Black Guan**, **Long-tailed Potoo**, and **Capuchinbird**, though those occur more widely. I very strongly focused on Sooty Barbthroat and Long-tailed Antshrike until I saw them and picked up most everything else along the way.

A couple useful GPS points for Camp Bonaventure to get you oriented: The key trail for the Sooty Barbthroat is the Marais (Swamp) trail. Top entrance to Marais trail is about 4.3255, -52.3393 off the main track after it continues past the camp clearing. Bottom entrance to Marais Trail (and the entrance to the short trail system across from it) is along the entrance road before the camp at about 4.3267, -52.3410.

The Barbthroat is very very difficult to see. Researchers working there have netted it a handful of times, mostly on the Marais Trail and once in the "labyrinth" that is in the back of the camp clearing (pretty obvious when you find it and the guys working there can point you at it if you need). In terms of the few people that have seen it, it seems that the middle of the Marais Trail, in and around the heliconia thickets and the old mining pools, is best. It has likewise been seen once or twice in the labyrinth as well apparently. I visited the Marais trail 6 times for a total of 12-15 hours before seeing a **Sooty Barbthroat** briefly visit a smaller Heliconia blossom then perch for a few seconds. It wouldn't have likely been possible to get a picture but I had a nice view, watched it pump its tail, saw the body and bill structure well, and was super stoked that my effort paid off. I don't think many people have seen this bird, and most of them live in French Guiana I would guess. As an aside, if struggling to see a really difficult Hummingbird is your cup of tea, check out the *loehkeni* subspecies of Sooty Barbthroat from neighboring Amapá (BR) which is far less known, has only been photographed twice, is far harder to see, and almost certainly another good species.

There are several pairs of **Band-tailed Antshrikes** to look for. One pair is frequently in / near the labyrinth at dusk and dawn. I tried for them a few times and they were not very responsive, calling only once or twice, and not coming to playback at all. Birds at Bonaventure are not getting taped much so I chalked this up to just poor luck. There is another pair in the heliconia swamp area of the Marais Trail. I taped for them some but never got a response. There is meant to be a pair along the road but I'm not sure where. I found a responsive pair that I saw well on the short trail across from the Marais trail. Take what is really a road cut into the forest opposite the lower entrance to the Marais trail along the entrance road, and follow it a few hundred meters to a stream crossing. Just at the edge of the water I found a responsive pair. This area is meant to be good for **McConnell's Spinetail** as well but I didn't find it there. After seeing the pair at the stream crossing, I later stumbled into a male in the heliconias in the middle of the Marais trail, and another at a part of the Marais trail that is close to the entrance road, so they're definitely there if not particularly vocal.

I struggled to find **McConnell's Spinetail** as none of the areas I had been told were typically good resulted in any response to playback. I tried for it a lot and eventually found a pair not far from the camp (heard from the small trail system opposite the Marais Trail) but they were across the river and it required some adventurous bush-

whacking and river crossing to get to. I get the impression my experience was atypical and this species can usually be found around the edge of the camp clearing or along the entrance road or in the other disturbed areas.

Other nice birds found included **Sapphire-rumped** and **Lilac-tailed Parrotlets**, **Black-throated Antshrike** (along the one ascent/descent on the Marais trail near to the “upper” entrance to the trail), **White-plumed** and **Rufous-throated Antbirds** and **White-chinned Woodcreeper** (those three with an antswarm of course), **Spotted** and **Thrushlike Antpittas** (easier to see here than other sites due to the trail system), and I heard **Black Curassow** once or twice. **Trumpeters** are present and apparently not too hard but I didn’t find them on my visit. **Lined Forest-Falcon** seems to be the common Micrastur. **Short-billed Leaf-tosser** and the Guianan Shield form of **Musician Wren** are quite common on the Marais Trail and along the trail opposite the Marais Trail (they call this the “short trail” sometimes) though not surprisingly the Wren is far easier to see than the Leaf-tosser. I heard more **Caica Parrots**, and saw **Capuchinbird** a couple times, notably from the road just at the lower entrance to the Marais trail. There are a lot more nice birds present but I won’t list everything. A bit of common sense + a look at eBird will fill in the details here well enough.

Night birding along the entrance road turned up **Black-banded Owl**, **Amazonian Mottled Owl** (finally seen well, this has not been a common nor easy to see bird in my experience), **Tawny-bellied Screech-Owl**, and finally another long-awaited nemesis bird, **Long-tailed Potoo**. While looking for the Potoo I heard and then managed to find a perched and singing **Black Curassow** as well. **Rufous Potoo** apparently occurs near where the entrance road joins the main dirt road but I didn’t try for it.

There are also the two longer trails - the Cascade Trail and the Mountain Trail. The start of the Cascade Trail is mostly 2nd growth and not super interesting then later it apparently turns into tall forest but tall forest is more easily accessible on the “short trail” across from the Marais trail, particularly if you cross the creek and continue on the road cut for a km or so. The Mountain Trail is an all day outing and I’ve been told it’s better to do it by starting in reverse (that would be anticlockwise) and return the same way instead of doing the whole loop. This gives you a less steep hill and yet also gets to the good birds that are up higher faster. The good birds that are possible once you get up higher include **White-throated Pewee**, **Boat-billed Tody-Flycatcher**, a **Capuchinbird** lek somewhere up there, **Wing-banded Wren** and more.

Crique Naï / Piste Cormoran

These two sites are near to St Laurent (the Suriname border). The main reason to come here is for **Rusty Tinamou** though both sites are also good for parrots and parrotlets. I stayed in St Laurent though it is possible to stay at a Gite/Carbet called Auberge d’Angouleme (correctly located in Google and Organic Maps). The Auberge is meant to be nice, though not really any closer to the birding sites, but I was unable to stay there as the owners were at the hospital with a sick baby, I hope it was not too bad on experience for them. It was no problem for me to just get a hotel in St Laurent.

Crique Nai (alternately called Crique Naille it seems) is again a dirt track with a few branches. The entrance is at 5.4490, -53.8449. There is a closed metal gate a short ways in but it can be driven around. The first few kms are meant to be good for **Rusty Tinamou** and there are records of **Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon** and **Black-throated Antshrike** here but I had a lot of rain and little activity on my visit, the best bird was another flyover of **Sapphire-rumped Parrotlet**. This site is also meant to be good for **Blue-cheeked Parrot**.

Piste Cormoran is another dirt track, entrance is at 5.4405,-53.7469. After passing an antenna you get into forest and this is another site to look for **Rusty Tinamou**. The road is not great in a low 2WD car and is gated after a ways, so you'll want to or have to park and just walk at some point. I had more rain here but did see **Rusty Tinamou** with a good bit of luck and some patience. Essentially I was walking very slowly and occasionally playing tape and it began to rain heavily. I spent 40 minutes under my umbrella in pissing rain. As soon as the rain began to let up, the tinamou sang quite close. I went into the forest and luckily found a perfect large log to sit behind that let me get really great views as it walked not far from me on the other side of the log. The only other bird of note amid a fair bit of rain there was **Rufous-tailed Flatbill** which is apparently quite common at this site.

Of note for St Laurent - it is not hard to make a quick (2 days perhaps) excursion to **Suriname** to try for **Arrowhead Piculet** and **Blood-colored Woodpecker**, and perhaps some Campina birds. To do this, leave your car in St Laurent, get stamped out, take a water taxi across the river, stamp in, and take a shared taxi to Paramaribo. Once there you can get the two woodpeckers at **Peperpot** which is almost in Paramaribo and accessible by taxi. The Campina birds (**Cayenne Jay**, **Red-legged Tinamou**, **Pale-bellied Mourner**, etc) are closer to the airport and would require a rental car. It's about 2hrs from the border to Paramaribo and the border offices for passport control are not open early or late, so it would be hard to do in one day but easy in 2-3. I decided to leave it for another time and pick up a few stragglers I was missing and try more for Racket-tipped Thorntail.

Awala-Yalimapo / Digue de Panato

This is a community near to the mouth of the Maroni River, about 45 minutes drive from St Laurent. The birding site is a dirt track called Digue de Panato that starts at 5.7434, -53.9298. Just after turning in, there are some water treatment ponds on the right that are good for crakes and rails (I heard **Ash-throated Crake**), **Seedeaters**, **Masked Yellowthroat**, etc. The key area for birding starts a bit further on, from 5.7273, -53.9166 to the end of the track. The gallery swampy strip of forest bordering the track has a lot of species that are not found further inland. I found **Little Hermit**, **Green-breasted Mango**, **Plain-bellied Emerald**, **Little Cuckoo**, **Gray-breasted Crake**, **Yellow-crowned Elaenia**, and the somewhat distinctive local form of what is at least currently considered **White-barred Piculet**. **White-chested Emerald** occurs but is far less common than **Plain-bellied Emerald** and should be identified with care (bill structure

and base of the bill coloration are best as I understand it). **Crimson-hooded Manakin** is here and is meant to usually be easy/reliable but wasn't very vocal for me and despite it apparently being easy to see I only heard it distantly.

Piste du Trou Caiman

This is a newly accessible site. You can turn into the track from the highway at 5.4603, -53.1592. After a few kms you get into good forest. This site is good for **Blue-cheeked Parrot** which I finally saw, and is meant to be good for **Racket-tipped Thorntail** which I did not find. I saw another **Dusky Purpleuft** (5.3790, -53.2056) and thought the site had a lot of potential but only had part of a morning so didn't get very far into the track. Quite a ways in there are more records of **Rufous Potoo** (ie, within 1-2 kms before/after 5.2993, -53.3040 and there is a **Crested Eagle** nest at 5.2404, -53.3579. The nest at the time of writing apparently has a fledged chick that is not returning frequently but one could surmise that in a year or two it will again be a good/reliable place for this species. This site looks great and the road is very long, camping could be a good option. I stayed at the only gite in Iracoubo, creatively named Le Gite d'Iracoubo. It ended up being a nice place to stop actually as I could do laundry and they have a good kitchen and good internet.

My last morning I did some birding around Cayenne with Hugo. There are a lot of great mudflats and mangroves with a good show of waders. You can easily find **Mangrove Rail** for instance, and get **Little Egret** for your South America list if you fancy. The Coastal forests also have more spots for **Crimson-hooded Manakin** which I caught up with. Around Cayenne there is more data in eBird so it's easier to figure out where to go.

One bird I ran out of time to look for was **Crimson Fruitcrow**, which is apparently overall not easy in Fr Guiana. The best areas are meant to be near to the Brazilian border, which is also a bit of a stakeout for **Boat-billed Tody-Tyrant**. Both species are meant to occur around 3.8589, -51.8718 though I didn't get to this area. I've seen Crimson Fruitcrow once poorly and heard it a few times, so I'd love to get better views, but it has a larger range so I didn't prioritize it. There is another spot that is meant to give you a possibility for **Crimson Fruitcrow** and **Racket-tipped Thorntail** closer to Cayenne. Apparently you park at about 4.7125, -52.3924 and walk to about 4.7126, -52.4020 but I didn't get a chance to check this out either.

In any case, just to repeat birding was terrific, the roads really good, the logistics easy, the prices reasonable, and outside of Cayenne the food pretty meh but that wasn't an issue as I mostly cooked for myself. Other than not being well connected flight wise, it's really well setup for independent birding if you don't need/want to have a hotel every night. It is possible to bird all sites from hotels/gites, but would be a bit more driving, particularly for Piste Mataroni and Camp Bonaventure. And if you prefer to be guided and not have to fuss around with the logistics and language barrier (very little English spoken) Hugo Foxonet is the man to talk to.

Any comments / questions feel free to contact me - pbjosh@gmail.com.