

WildWings Limosa

BRAZIL: REMOTE AMAZON

Trip Report 2023



Black-tailed (Dwarf) Porcupine was the undoubted mammal highlight of the cruise © Chris Collins

BRAZIL: REMOTE AMAZON BIRDS AND WILDLIFE CRUISE

30 August – 17 September 2023

Leaders: Chris Collins and Regina Ribeiro

Text by Chris Collins with assistance from Regina Ribeiro

Introduction

This was the fifth “Remote Amazon” birds and wildlife cruise which Chris Collins and Regina Ribeiro had jointly led in recent years and the tour was a great success with a spectacular range of wildlife being seen. We spent much of the trip exploring along the Rio Negro and some of its tributaries, including the Jaú and Branco Rivers, but also spent a day and a half on the Rio Solimoes as well as visiting the ‘meeting of the waters’ where the black water Negro and white water Solimoes join to form the mighty Amazon River.

For almost our entire tour, however, we enjoyed passing mile-after-mile of pristine rainforest seeing very few other people or boats.

On a trip such as this, everyone inevitably has their own highlights but the special experiences we shared included the opportunity to get in the water with a wild Amazon River (or Pink) Dolphin. We also found a good selection of monkeys on our daytime excursions and some interesting species on our night canoe rides with the undoubted highlight being a Black-tailed (Dwarf) Porcupine, a species which our highly experienced local guide ‘Junior’ had only seen on a handful of previous occasions despite leading tours in this region for over twenty years.

Inevitably birds were the most recorded group with a great range being seen including desirable species such as Hoatzin, Spectacled Owl, Agami Heron, Sunbittern, Sungrebe, Blue-and-yellow Macaw, Bronzy Jacamar, Wire-tailed Manakin and Capuchinbird. We also spent a percentage of our time looking for some of the range and habitat-restricted species which can be found in this region and those found included Cherrie’s and Klages’s Antwrens as well as Parker’s Spinetail and Black-and-White Antbird.

The trip was, however, not just about birds and we also made a special effort to look for mammals. Ten species of monkeys were seen (extension plus the main tour), as well as some phenomenal views of Giant River Otter, Southern Tamandua and a range of forest rats, however, the rarest species was undoubtedly the aforementioned porcupine.

Arguably the primate highlight was the Spix’s Night Monkeys we saw at the tree where they sleep which included the unexpected bonus of a recently born youngster, but we also saw

Golden-faced Saki, Humboldt's, Golden-backed and Guianan Squirrel Monkeys, Pied Tamarins and Guianan Brown Capuchins.

As well as Amazon River Dolphin, we also saw Tucuxi on a more or less daily basis and our reptile tally included both Black and Spectacled Caimans, Green Iguana and a selection of lizards and frogs.

It was definitely an extremely memorable trip and this introduction must also pay tribute to our fantastic crew who were led by the brilliant 'Junior'. He not only knew the areas we visited intimately but also had a seemingly unquenchable desire to share his knowledge of this remote region with us.

The following text lists the species we encountered and will hopefully bring back many happy memories for those who joined us.

Chris Collins and Regina Ribeiro

September 2023

Itinerary including pre-cruise extension

30 August 2023

Arrive Manaus. Explore forest patches near our riverside hotel.

31 August-1 September 2023

Pre-tour extension to lodge near Presidente Figuerdo. Visit Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock lek.

2 September 2023

Return to Manaus. Meet up with the rest of the group. Explore forest patches near our riverside hotel.

3 September 2023

Morning: Musa Tower.

Lunchtime: Board *Iracema*

Afternoon and Evening: Xiboraninha, Rio Solimoes

4 September 2023

Morning: Anra, Rio Solimoes

Afternoon: Miuá, Rio Solimoes

5 September 2023

Morning: Marchantaria and 'Meeting of the Waters'

Afternoon and evening: cruising on Rio Negro and Pagodão

6 September 2023

Morning: Tres Bocas in Anavilhanas archipelago

Afternoon: Novo Airão.

7 September 2023

Morning: Baependi

Afternoon: cruising on Rio Negro. Brief stop at Jaú National Park HQ/entrance. Cruise Jaú River.

8 September 2023

Morning: Cachoeira, Jaú National Park

Afternoon: Nazare, Jaú National Park

9 September 2023

Morning: Nazare followed by cruising downstream on the Jaú River, Jaú National Park

Afternoon: Meduini Channel, Rio Negro

10 September 2023

Morning: Lago da Boneca, Rio Negro

Afternoon: Agua Boa, Rio Negro

11 September 2023

Morning: Cota, Rio Branco

Afternoon: Maquari, Rio Branco

12 September 2023

Morning: Paraná do Breu, Rio Branco

Afternoon: Paraná da Gaivota, Rio Negro

13 September 2023

Morning: Cururi Lake, Rio Negro

Afternoon: Fazenda do Jauaperi, Rio Negro

14 September 2023

Morning: Maracacá, Rio Negro

Afternoon: Cruising on Rio Negro

15 September 2023

Morning: Pagodão, Rio Negro

Afternoon: 'Dolphin Swim' near mouth of Acajatuba River on Rio Negro and cruise on Acajatuba River

16 September 2023

Disembark in Manaus

17 September 2023

Arrive UK

Daily Diary

31 August

Having arrived on various flights over the previous couple of days, the group assembled at 06:00am at our hotel which overlooked the mighty Rio Negro and as we were enjoying breakfast, our local guide "Junior" arrived and Chris and Regina introduced him to everyone.

A little later we set off and whilst our main goal for the next couple of days was to see Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock, before we left Manaus, we wanted to look for two special primates, Pied Tamarin and Golden-faced Saki.

There were a number of forest patches not far from the hotel and whilst initially we drew a blank, we persevered and were delighted when Junior found a small family party of sakis. There were two males and three females and we spent around half an hour with these fantastic primates as they kept returning to a fruiting palm tree to feed.



Although we were close to a road and there was a regular passage of Manaus citizens walking by, the monkeys were almost oblivious to the noise and disturbance and we enjoyed some great views and were able to see the difference between the adult male (which had a rich golden face) and what was presumably his son, where the colouration was more subdued.

Golden-faced Saki (male) © Chris Collins

Moving only a few hundred metres further, Junior heard some tamarins, so we all jumped out of the bus once again. There were two very young monkeys and at least a couple of adults, and they had seemingly just crossed a quiet road between two forest patches, however, the youngsters were unable to join their parents as they could not climb a brick wall.

As we viewed from a safe distance, we watched with trepidation as one of the youngsters climbed an electricity pylon and reaching the top, it was electrocuted and fell at least 20 feet

to the ground below. It was difficult to watch, as we presumed it had been killed, but after a few moments, it began to move and staggered off to join the rest of the troupe. It was a poignant example of the challenges these critically endangered monkeys face on a daily basis when they lived so close to people.....

With the youngster seemingly recovered, we got back on the bus and set off for the town of Presidente Figueiredo making a brief stop at an area of moriche palms where Chris, Regina and Junior had seen a Point-tailed Palmcreeper the year before. Unfortunately, there had been some forest burning immediately adjacent to the palms and it seemed likely that the birds were no longer present.

Continuing onwards, we bypassed the town and were soon on the dirt road to our home for the next couple of nights, a modest little lodge sitting on a knoll surrounded by forest not far from Presidente Figueiredo. Having settled into our rooms, we headed to the open-air restaurant for the first of what would be a series of tasty meals.

After an opportunity for a short siesta, everyone gathered for our visit to the Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock lek, and we had only gone a few hundred metres into the forest when the first male bird was spotted. The views of this stunning bird were stupendous but having lingered for a short, while we continued along the trail and were soon at the lek itself.



Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock © Chris Collins

There were at least six males almost permanently on view and these glowed an iridescent orange in the forest. Most of the time, they sat almost motionless but occasionally they would change position or drop onto the ground to display.

With some of the birds coming within a matter of metres of us, the photographic opportunities were brilliant, and time flew by as we marvelled at what is surely one of the most impressive birds on the planet.

All too soon, our allotted time at the lek was up and we followed the trail back the way we had come. Another couple of fine males were spotted along the way and whilst the forest was uncharacteristically quiet, we did find a Bronzy Jacamar which sat nicely giving us some decent views.

With only an hour or so of daylight left, many of the group congregated on the knoll near the cabins as the sun sank in the sky where we had great views across miles of beautiful forest.

1 September



After the opportunity for a good sleep, many awoke shortly before dawn to a group of Speckled Chachalacas calling noisily from vegetation close to our cabins.

With breakfast scheduled for 08:00, we had time for a gentle wander along the entrance road to the lodge and then around the grounds with the undoubted highlight being some fantastic views of two perched Blue-and-Yellow Macaws not far from the cabins. Along the road, we found some Guianan Warbling Antbirds and whilst most people saw something of the birds, they remained firmly hidden in the vegetation for most of the time.

Blue-and-Yellow Macaw © Chris Collins

After breakfast, we boarded the bus and headed for the Iracema Waterfall where, on arrival, local guide Raphael took us to a patch of red flowers where he had recently seen Crimson Topaz. Almost immediately, we spotted a female and then a few moments later, the male. It was the first time we had seen this species on our Remote Amazon trips and many of the group spent a fair time enjoying this impressive hummingbird.

Crimson Topaz © Chris Collins

Whilst the birds would disappear for a period, the pair were very faithful to the flowers, although at one point the male flew off to nearby tree where he had what appeared to be a territorial fight with another male.



Breaking into three groups, some went to the waterfall with Regina where there were dozens of roosting bats, whilst others joined Junior and had some nice views of Midas Tamarins, as well as Double-toothed Kite, Pied Puffbird and Pelzel's Tody-Tyrant.

Those with Chris stayed for a little longer to enjoy the Crimson Topaz and were fortunate to find the male perched. The views through the telescope were brilliant and although the bird was sat in a somewhat gloomy spot, nevertheless, the photographic opportunities were excellent.

Walking further along the road, Chris's group found an Amazonian Pygmy Owl which unhelpfully disappeared just as everyone reconvened but, fortunately, it didn't take too long to relocate it.

After lunch back at the lodge, there were two options for the afternoon with some of the group choosing to join Regina for a return visit to the lek where upwards of fifteen Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock were seen. Unlike the previous day, the birds were more subdued but despite this, there was some interesting behaviour with several seen bill snapping.



Dusky Jacamar © Chris Collins

This group also saw Saffron-crested Manakin, Brown-winged Schiffornis, Red-bellied Macaw and Plain-brown Woodcreeper which were all new for the trip.

The other group went in the bus with Junior and Chris to the Eden Waterfall Road where the highlight was a Capuchinbird. Initially, this was heard making its unique calls and after a few blasts of playback, it flew in. Although it rarely sat in one place for more than a few seconds, most people saw it perched - surely one of the most bizarre looking birds in the world !!

Other species recorded along the road included Paradise Jacamar, Black Nunbird, Green Aracari, Golden-winged Parakeet, Blue-and-Yellow Macaw, White-thighed Swallow, Blue Dacnis and a small troupe of Golden-faced Sakis, however, calling Black-faced Antthrush and

Screaming Piha were too far into the undergrowth for there to be any chance of seeing either species.

2 September 2023

It was the earliest breakfast of the extension (05:30am) and as soon as everyone had eaten, we set off in the bus for Cachoeira de Manancial where initially we explored an area of somewhat degraded white sand forest.

Here, the trees were very stunted compared with those on other soil types and although the birding was initially rather slow, we gradually found a number of different species including an adult male Rufous-throated Sapphire which briefly perched up, allowing some to see not only its throat but also the red base to the bill and glossy coppery coloured tail.



Swallow-winged Puffbird © Chris Collins

Standing out of the sun at the edge of the clearing, Junior spotted a male antwren in the canopy which it was quickly established was a Spot-backed Antwren. It proved a little tricky to see this well, as the bird remained in the tops of the trees but eventually most people got satisfactory views.

With Fulvous-crested Tanager and White-necked Jacobin also seen, our strategy of 'sit and wait' proved pretty productive before we took the decision to head for the taller forest. We had barely reached the edge of this, when some Midas Tamarins were heard calling and standing on the edge of rough field of manioc, we had some reasonable views of these small primates with their distinctive golden paws.

We then explored a side trail which went into a patch of nice primary forest where the highlights included a Grey-capped Shrike Vireo. This stayed high in the canopy of an emergent tree but even though the bird was at least 20 metres above us, its distinctive yellow breast could be clearly seen.

Another new species along the trail was a Guianan Trogon, a species we were highly unlikely to encounter during our time on *Iracema*, but all too soon it was time to head back to the lodge to pack, have an early lunch and say our farewells to the fantastic staff, before we boarded the bus to head back to Manaus.

Returning to our riverside hotel, we met up with those who had not been on the extension. A little later, we set off to do some further exploring of the forest patches with the new members of the group seeing their first toucans and other species such as Roadside Hawk.

3 September 2022

The day began extremely early with almost the entire group assembling in the lobby of the hotel at 04:30am for our visit to the Musa Tower on the edge of Manaus. Arriving at the entrance to the protected area in the dark, it was an 800m or so torchlight walk to the bottom of the tower where 242 steps took us to the top platform at a height of 42 metres.

Musa Tower, Manaus © Chris Collins

Our timing was nigh on perfect, and we reached the top just as dawn broke. In one direction, we could distantly see Manaus, whereas looking to the north, it was mile-after-mile of unbroken forest.

As soon as there was enough light to see, we began to see wildlife with an almost constant variety of species to look at. On previous visits, we had found a number of perched raptors and today was no exception, however, we were very fortunate today as one of these was an Orange-breasted Falcon. Although superficially similar to the smaller Bat Falcon that many of the group had seen a few days before at the beginning of the extension, Orange-breasted Falcon is larger and much chunkier. It is, however, also a lot rarer and Chris, Regina and Junior explained that this was a species which all of them only saw very occasionally.

As well as the Orange-breasted Falcon, a Slaty-backed Forest Falcon was also found and as with the Orange-breasted Falcon, we were able to watch this through the telescopes.



Another highlight of the morning was the number of White-throated Toucans which were perched on snags above the top of the canopy allowing us to see them very well. A lot smaller

and significantly less common was a small group of Guianan Toucanets which were spotted and with Green and Black-necked Aracaris also seen, it was a fantastic morning for toucans.



The view from the top of the Musa Tower © Chris Collins

As well as Black-bellied Cuckoo, Green-backed Trogon, Golden-collared Woodpecker, Red-necked Woodpecker and Red-bellied Macaw, we also found a couple of troupes of Guianan Howler Monkeys and our two hours were soon up and all too soon it was time to head back to the hotel. It had, however, been a very successful start to the main tour.

Once breakfast was eaten, we reassembled in the Hotel Reception with our bags which were loaded onto a pickup truck driven by Junior's mother whilst we boarded our bus for the short drive to where our home for the next 13 nights, the comfortable riverboat *Iracema*, was berthed.

The crew had already brought the luggage onto the boat, and we were soon settling into our cabins and acquainting ourselves with our new home.

An introductory and safety briefing was held in the restaurant as we supped on delicious caipirinhas (Brazil's national drink) and once this was complete, we set off. Large-billed Terns were flying by as the vessel departed the wharf, and we soon left the city behind and took a channel towards our afternoon destination at Xiboraninha adding a number of new species to our list including Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Southern Lapwing, Neotropical Cormorant and Yellow-hooded Blackbird.

Having enjoyed our first lunch aboard and rested up during the heat of the day, we set off in the late afternoon on our first of what would be many canoe rides.

Xiboraninha is notable for the good numbers and variety of parrots that can be found in the late afternoon, and we were soon enjoying a number of species including Tui Parakeet which has a distinctive yellow forecrown. Festive Amazon was rather numerous, and we also saw

several appropriately named Short-tailed Parrots. Whilst the views were somewhat backlit, several pairs of Chestnut-fronted Macaws flew over which meant we had seen four species of macaws in the day !!

Other species found included Versicoloured and Glittering-throated Emeralds, Snail Kite, Slate-coloured Hawk, Spotted Tody-flycatcher, Little Woodpecker, Chestnut-crowned Becard and Red-breasted Blackbird. Another new bird was Black-fronted Nunbird; whilst we were only a matter of miles from Manaus, we had crossed towards the south bank so the nunbirds were different to those on the northern side.



Snail Kite © Chris Collins

We also had our first introduction to woodcreepers, a family of birds which can be extremely tricky to tell apart. Indeed, our first species was one of the trickiest of the family to identify on sight as it was a Zimmer's Woodcreeper which is almost identical to the much better known Straight-billed Woodcreeper. Chris and Junior explained that it was only relatively recently that it was realised that there were actually two species with voice being the best way to tell them apart.

With several small groups of Humboldt's Squirrel Monkeys also seen, it was a fantastic first cruise in the motorised canoes and as the light began to fade, we returned to *Iracema* for our first night aboard.

4 September

During the night, the crew repositioned *Iracema* and the day began with a morning wakeup call a few minutes before 05:30am. After a hot drink and early morning snack, we set off to explore a channel at a place called Anra. This was narrower than where we had been the previous evening and we were soon adding plenty of new species to our rapidly growing list.

Amongst the first birds to be found was a pair of Glossy Antshrikes which is a relatively localised species which is primarily found south of the Amazon. Both sexes have a spiky crest

and whilst the male was uniform black with a small white wing-bar, we also got to see the female with her chestnut crest.

A new bird for some was Hoatzin and there were multiple individuals of this extraordinary looking bird which almost seems like a 'missing link' between flying dinosaurs and birds.



Hoatzin © Chris Collins

As we slowly cruised further up the creek, other new species included Cream-coloured Woodpecker and the 'ultimate' woodcreeper, the extraordinary Long-billed, however, the latter did not show as well as we would have liked. We would have to find another one.....

A little further along, we came to a muddy edge on a more open area and here we found four species of North American waders with single Baird's, Solitary and Pectoral Sandpipers, as well as a lone Lesser Yellowlegs with all feeding busily along the shoreline.

Reaching what would prove to be the furthest point we would reach on this particular excursion, Chris speculatively played a recording of Sunbittern at a likely looking spot and whilst two birds responded and most of the group saw them, unfortunately, they quickly disappeared. As with the woodcreeper, we would have to find another one.....

After what had been a highly productive morning, we returned to *Iracema* for a well-deserved breakfast and after this, there were two options, piranha fishing with Junior or further exploring with Chris and Regina.

Those who went fishing had a highly successful time catching over fifty fish with the majority being Red-bellied Piranhas which would be served up as a meal option later in the trip.

The bird excursion went up another creek and with only limited shade, it was certainly a hot canoe ride, however, despite this, it was very productive with highlights including Red-and-White Spinetail, Green-and-Rufous Kingfisher and a troupe of Golden-backed Squirrel Monkeys, all of which were new for our ever-growing list.



Green Iguana © Chris Collins

By late morning, it was getting extremely hot, and everyone returned to *Iracema* for lunch, with some taking a siesta as the crew repositioned the vessel to the vast seasonal lake of Janauacá. It took a couple of hours to reach this location but it was still very warm at 16:00, so we delayed our departure until 16:30 to allow the temperature to drop a little more.

We explored along a wide channel, however, unlike all the other places we had visited so far, there was no visible land and the bases of the trees emerged out of the water and with the canopy being much lower than in many other places, it was a pleasant place to explore.

Cruising along the edge of the vegetation, we found two, not dissimilar looking but equally handsome blackbirds – Oriole Blackbird and the somewhat smaller Yellow-hooded Blackbird, two species we were unlikely to see elsewhere on our trip.

Great Potoo © Chris Collins

Having enjoyed these, we squeezed the canoes in through a gap into the flooded forest with various quizzical looks questioning why Junior was taking us here. There was, of course, a very good reason and he was soon pointing up into the canopy showing us where a Great Potoo was quietly sleeping. Some initially struggled to pick out the bird, as its plumage blended in so perfectly with the colour of the tree branch it was sat on, but we were soon all enjoying views of this largest member of the potoo family.



A few moments later, Junior's laser pointer was out again and this time it was to point out a flycatcher that he had found on a previous recent visit, an Amazonian Black-Tyrant. He explained that for reasons nobody really understood, this species was very rare, and it was a definite bonus for our trip list.



Brown-throated Sloth © Chris Collins

Emerging out from under the trees, we continued onwards with highlights including a Brown-throated Sloth and a pair of Rusty-backed Spinetails before we reached the end of the channel and were able to appreciate the huge size of this seasonal lake which stretched for miles in all directions.

With the sun slipping below the horizon, it was time to return to *Iracema* for dinner and as we headed back across the lake, there was a spectacular sunset and then as the light began to fade, good number of Greater Bulldog Bats could be seen flying around us in the gathering gloom.

After another tasty dinner, we set off on our first nocturnal canoe ride of the trip exploring along the same channel we had visited earlier. We had not been out on the water for long when a Ladder-tailed Nightjar was spotted which had landed in a very convenient position and we were able to watch it in the spotlights. A little further along, we found another Brown-throated Sloth which looked round at us with a sleepy expression on its face.

5 September

The plan for the morning was to explore some of the river islands a few miles from where the Solimoes River meets the Rio Negro to form the Amazon and as *Iracema* arrived in the pre-dawn light, somewhat unexpectedly, the air was full of the smell of smoke. There was clearly a huge fire somewhere but, fortunately, it was not long before a gentle breeze blew the unpleasant smog away.

Setting off in the three canoes, we cruised along the edge of a large recently formed river island where initially there was no vegetation whatsoever. The habitat was, however, perfect for Black Skimmers and terns with dozens of both. Indeed, it seemed that some of the Large-billed Terns were nesting.

Being a huge sandbar, the edge adjacent to the water was perfect for shorebirds and as we slowly motored along, a good range of species were seen. The North American migratory species included Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, as well as good numbers of White-rumped Sandpipers and both Baird's and Pectoral Sandpipers, whilst the resident waders were represented by some Collared Plovers, and the ducks included the appropriately named Brazilian Teal.

As we slowly travelled upstream alongside the river island, it gradually became more vegetated and reaching a spot where there seemed to be good amounts of greenery, we beached the canoes and went ashore.

One of our goals was to find the relatively recently described Parker's Spinetail which is named in memory of the eminent American ornithologist Ted Parker who was tragically killed in a plane crash in Ecuador in 1993. Junior explained that this species is only known from younger river islands, and we had only gone a matter of metres when a spinetail was heard calling. It was soon confirmed this was indeed our target species and we got some decent views of this speciality before realising there was a second species of spinetail nearby. This proved to be the somewhat inappropriately named White-bellied Spinetail, where the dark throat was a much more prominent feature than the muddy off-white belly.....

Returning to the boat, we realised the crew had been busy whilst we had been away as they had cut a staircase up the sandy bank where *Iracema* was tied up and had also added a rope handrail to make the climb even easier.

Those who wished to do so were, therefore, able to join Junior and Chris on a short walk to look for some more birds and after skirting around a field of cucumbers, we reached the edge of the trees.

We had a number of targets here including River Tyrannulet and Streaked Flycatcher, as there have been suggestions that the form of the latter which occurs on river islands should be regarded as a separate species. Whilst both birds were soon found, the tyrannulet soon moved off and we turned our attention to searching for another island speciality, Pearly-breasted Conebill. Whilst at least one bird responded to a recording, it was initially rather uncooperative, but we persevered and soon everyone had seen it more than satisfactorily.

A big surprise, however, was when an Amazonian Black-Tyrant was spotted; whilst we had seen one the day before, to see it on consecutive days was very unexpected given how uncommon this species usually is.

Another species we were keen to find was Lesser Wagtail-Tyrant but despite playing a recording on several occasions, there was no sign (despite Junior seeing one at this spot a few days before), so we moved on a little way under the trees whilst he set off to find a Black-and-white Antbird for us.

Black-and-white Antbird © Chris Collins

Whilst we waited for an update from him, we continued to check the trees and surrounding vegetation and after our lack of success with the Lesser Wagtail-Tyrant a little earlier, Chris was very pleased when he spotted one of these riverine specialities in the trees above us. As we enjoyed this, news came through over the radio that Junior had found the antbird, so we joined him and had some fantastic views of what is another river island specialist.



Returning to the boat, we were very satisfied with our morning, and learnt that those who had stayed aboard had enjoyed some good views of a Striped Cuckoo.

It was then only a short distance to the “meeting of the waters”, the point where the Rio Negro and Solimoes River meet to form the Amazon. With one being a ‘black water’ river and the other having ‘white water’, it was extraordinary to see the two basically flowing adjacent to each other and, at this point, not mixing.



“Meeting of the waters” © Chris Collins

Junior gave us a helpful introduction to the phenomenon and explained that it was tens of kilometres before the two rivers completely mixed and that they actually flowed at different speeds and, for example, had very different pH values.

With the journey to our next destination expected to take about six hours, it was a leisurely afternoon aboard *Iracema*. Initially, we sailed back passing Manaus, seeing the famous Opera House and under the huge 2.7 km long bridge that links the city with the south bank of the river.

It was not long, however, before we left the city behind us and initially there were still the occasional scattered house along the riverside, these became less and less frequent as we continued upstream.

Whilst many took the opportunity to relax, review photos and catch up on notes, there was still wildlife to see with a Black Caracara being a new bird for the trip.

As the sun began to set, we reached our intended destination for the evening, the community at Pagodão and after another tasty dinner, we set off in the canoes to see what we could find. Exploring a network of channels where the terra firme (never flooded) forest came down to the water level, we found several different species of amphibians including Cane Toad, Smoky Jungle Frog and Giant Gladiator Tree Frog, all of which were much larger than any of the species which occur in the UK.

A number of roosting birds were also spotted and whilst we only put the light on these very briefly, we had nice looks at Green Ibis, Sungrebe and best of all, an American Pygmy Kingfisher.

Whilst a number of perched Sharp-nosed Bats were seen nicely, unfortunately, the only other mammal of the excursion, a Grey Four-eyed Opossum was not so cooperative and quickly disappeared out of sight before any of us had had a good look. Equally uncooperative was a Crested Owl, which replied several times to a recording but refused to move to a spot where we could see it. Nevertheless, it had been a great day and we returned to *Iracema* well satisfied with what we had seen.

6 September

During the night, the crew navigated *Iracema* into the southern part of the Anavilhanas Islands archipelago and we awoke to our trusty vessel tied to a tree within the maze of channels of what is the second largest river archipelago in the world.

After a 05:30am breakfast, we had planned to set off in the canoes at 06:00am, however, just as we were about to depart, it began to rain and we delayed setting off for 20 minutes which, fortunately, was all it took for the rain to clear.

This area was the only place on our trip where we were likely to find the localised Klages's Antwren and it was not long before we succeeded in tapping in this small black-and-white speciality and were rewarded with some nice views of this special bird.

We knew this area was very rich in birds and over the next couple of hours added many new birds to our list. There were several other antbirds to look for with Leaden Antwren, Blackish-grey Antshrike, Black-crested Antshrike and Black-chinned Antbird all recorded.

There were, however, plenty of other species to see and a Varzea Schiffornis showed very nicely and a little later, we found a Green-tailed Jacamar which made repeated sallies from a couple of perches, catching dragonflies in a manner very similar to a European Bee-eater.



Green-tailed Jacamar © Chris Collins

Rusty-backed Spinetail, Southern Beardless Tyrannulet and Tropical Gnatcatcher all put in appearances before we reached a spot where once again the crew had been busy whilst we had been in the canoes and had made another set of stairs up the bank which once again had a handrail to assist us on the climb.

Our goal was to find Wire-tailed Manakin and Junior told us that whilst they had been building the staircase, the crew had seen a male but despite searching we could not relocate this. As a result, we set off through the forest to another spot where he knew the males might be lekking, but this too was quiet, although several other species were seen with Reddish Hermit and Ash-breasted Antbird being nice additions to our list.

Retracing our steps towards where the canoes were tied up, it seemed that we might have missed the manakin, however, one of our excellent crew had set off on his own, seemingly determined to see if he could find one somewhere else. Just as it was looking like we might have to concede defeat, word came through on the radio that he had found one. It was only

a short walk through the forest to the spot where he was stood and whilst the bird had disappeared by the time we got there, fortunately, it was soon relocated.

The red, yellow and black plumage was absolutely stunning and although the light was not the greatest, we were able to get some great views through the telescope of this simply stunning bird.

Returning to *Iracema* well satisfied with our morning, we set off for the small town of Novo Airao where Junior's family had a small hotel which we wanted to visit for a couple of specialities we were unlikely to see anywhere else on the trip.

After an hour or so in the town, we took three taxis for the 10-minute drive to the property where our goal was to see the Spix's Night Monkeys which lived in the grounds. As their name suggests, these monkeys are nocturnal so we waited until 17:30 and then made the short walk to the tree hole where they lived.

As the light began to fade, movement was seen in the base of the tree and it was quickly realised that this was a Southern Tamandua, a species that we had only occasionally seen on previous Remote Amazon cruises.

Due to its size, it appeared that this was a younger animal, and it spent the next 20 minutes or so moving slowly around the tree feeding on the termites which also had a colony in the tree. Occasionally, Junior would illuminate it with his spotlight and we could see the distinctive snout of this arboreal anteater.

Looking up at the hole, we were delighted when one of the adult night monkeys poked its head out and we could see that this was presumably the female as there was a very small baby with her.

Pink-toed Tarantula © Chris Collins

A little later, the female, her youngster and the male emerged out of another hole and quickly disappeared out of sight. They had clearly set off for their night of foraging in the forest, so we headed back to the grounds of the hotel from where Junior led a nocturnal walk to look for Pink-toed Tarantulas. Although there was a small one in a bush close to the buildings, he was determined to find some adults and it did not take long for the first to be found.



Junior explained that despite their reputation, this species was actually very placid, and he carefully manoeuvred the spider onto his arm so we could see it up close. Various members of the group then had their photo taken with the spider on their arms or shoulders before it was returned to the area where we had found it.

Several more tarantulas were seen over the next half hour or so, but all too soon it was time to return to *Iracema* where the galley team had prepared another tasty dinner.

7 September

It was another comfortable night aboard *Iracema* and after breakfast, we set off to explore the waterways around Baependi, a series of forested channels on the northern side of the Rio Negro.

As well as finding birds we were now becoming increasingly familiar with such as Greater Ani and Pale-vented Pigeon, plenty of new species were also found including Ruddy Pigeon, Yellow-throated Woodpecker and our first Boat-billed Heron, a bird that is generally seen more frequently after dark than on daytime canoe rides.

Also new was a Cinnamon Attila which responded well to a recording and gave us some decent views when it finally perched up in a reasonable open position.

Whilst our attempts at seeing Grey Antbird (there were several calling) proved unsuccessful, we had better luck with Black-chinned Antbird, a species we had first seen the day before.

After a couple of hours or so in the canoes, we reached a spot where everyone donned their boots, and we went ashore. The land sloped gently upwards with large trees towering above us and we walked only a short distance before Junior began playing a recording of our target bird, Capuchinbird.

Capuchinbird © Chris Collins

Almost immediately, there was a response and we repositioned slightly before trying the recording once again. Almost immediately a dark shape flew overhead, and it was soon apparent that this was what we were looking for. Over the next 20 minutes or so, we had some



great views as it perched for prolonged periods in the trees high above, even allowing everyone to see it through the telescope.

The views were much better than the individual we had seen on the extension, and we returned to the canoes very happy with the encounter.

As we were approaching *Iracema*, a falcon was spotted on the far side of one of the channels. The jizz looked wrong for Bat Falcon so we went over for a closer look and it soon became apparent that this was our second Orange-breasted Falcon in five days; with two more Amazonian Black-Tyrants (plus the Capuchinbird), it had certainly been a great canoe ride for rare and tricky species !!



Orange-breasted Falcon © Chris Collins

Returning to *Iracema*, it only took a few moments before we were underway and with the falcon still perched on its favoured tree, we sailed over to have another look and were able to watch it from the top deck with some even getting telescopes on it.

Leaving Baependi, we set off upstream for the 30+ mile transit to our next destination, the entrance to the Jaú National Park. It was mile after mile of untouched primary forest along both banks and with dolphins in the river and no other river traffic, it was easy to forget how privileged we were to be in a such remote and beautiful place.

Arriving at the official entrance to the park in the late afternoon, we had to disembark and fill in the visitor book, logging our nationality and passport details. With no one checking the information and Junior's office team having already submitted it to the park authorities when applying for the permit (to allow us to visit), it did feel a tad pointless and bureaucratic but

we all had soon done what we needed to do and after 30 minutes or so we were underway and could begin our exploration of the Jaú River and National Park.

8 September

The plan for the day was a slightly later start with breakfast scheduled for 06:00am and we awoke with *Iracema* tied to a tree close to the small community of Cachoeira. Our departure was, however, delayed as for second time on our trip, there was some morning rain but, on this occasion, it went on for longer than a couple of days ago and it was a little after 08:00 before we set off in the canoes.

We cruised slowly upstream and had not got far when a Sunbittern was spotted. This was slowly walking along just under the trees and many of the group had a reasonable look before it disappeared away from the bank and out of sight, however, an unlucky few missed it so we knew we would have to find another one.....

Although we had seen several Greater Yellow-headed Vultures the previous day, we next spotted a perched one and could see its distinctive yellow face before it decided that the approaching canoes were too close and flew off out of sight with then followed by a distant group of Giant Otters.

Crossing to the opposite bank, we explored a side channel off the main river where a Blue-crowned Trogon was heard calling and after playing a recording, this was coaxed into view and then we realised that there were actually several individuals. With their red bellies, these were quite different from the Green-back Trogons we had seen previously and we had some great views of one bird which sat up nicely on a bare branch.

After a bit of further exploring, we headed downstream stopping briefly to say hello to one of the villagers who Junior, Regina and Chris knew. There was a White-tipped Dove walking around in front of his house and we watched this before returning to *Iracema*.

As soon as the canoes were secured, the plan was to continue further upstream, however, there was a very shallow rocky area we had to cross to be able to do this and as the vessel edged forward, we felt a gentle judder when *Iracema* hit a rock. Fortunately, our low speed meant this was not a problem, however, with the water levels in the river dropping on a daily basis, it was decided that it was not sensible to continue upstream, so we turned around and, fortunately, got back over the shallows without hitting any other rocks.

With the plan to head further into the park no longer possible, Junior, Chris and Regina decided the best option was to head downstream and explore some other areas they knew. As we headed down the river, we passed some areas where there had been a huge (natural) forest fire which had destroyed several square miles of habitat and Junior told us this had burnt for several months before the rainy season had eventually extinguished the flames.

After arriving at our intended destination for the afternoon, we set off in the relative cool of the late afternoon to explore, initially heading for an area of flooded forest on the opposite side of the river from where *Iracema* was tied up. This was an area that the guides knew was a regular stakeout for another localised species, Cherrie's Antwren, and we soon found a family party. Superficially, these looked very similar to the Klages's Antwrens we had seen in the Anavilhanas Archipelago, but the song was very different.

Continuing onwards, a lucky few had brief views of a Neotropical River Otter, a smaller cousin of the Giant Otters we had already seen, however, despite getting it to respond to a recording, sadly, we were unable to relocate this tricky species.

Crossing to the opposite bank, we explored another side channel and there was initially a degree of frustration when the first canoe flushed what appeared to be a large owl. We quietly repositioned the canoes into a suitable position and Junior then played a recording of what he anticipated the species was. Almost immediately, a large shape flew in but remained hidden, but we soon found it and it was indeed what we had expected, an adult Spectacled Owl.

With only a small window to view the bird from the canoes, it took a few moments for everyone to see it but, fortunately, it obliged us and continued to sit in the same position. Indeed, more than ten minutes later and well satisfied with our views we left the owl and continued our exploration of the area.



Spectacled Owl © Chris Collins

A little later, we entered another side channel off the Jaú River and heard a Chestnut Woodpecker call. Playing a recording, two birds appeared and whilst initially they perched up in places where they were tricky to see, eventually, one of them obliged us and we had some nice views of this fine species.

Returning to the main river, both Variegated and Undulated Tinamous could be heard calling and as the light began to fade, at least a dozen nighthawks began hawking over the river. Junior explained that although these birds were currently treated as Band-tailed Nighthawks, it had become apparent in recent years that there were birds with two completely different song types in this part of Amazonia and a scientific paper was in preparation to split these as separate species. He played a recording of the 'undescribed' species and immediately the birds reacted, whereas when he played the regular call of Band-tailed Nighthawk, there was no change in their behaviour.

Returning to *Iracema*, there was a short canoe ride after dinner during which we had great views of a young Spectacled Caiman as well as both Smoky Jungle Frog and Cane Toad. Several forest rats were also seen and whilst one was considered to be a Red-nosed Armoured Tree-rat, the others disappeared before their identities could be confirmed.

9 September

Having spent the night tied up at Nazare, breakfast was served at the slightly later time of 06:00 with two options then offered, a walk along a trail through the high ground forest with Junior and Regina or a canoe ride with Chris.

The canoe ride initially headed upstream and we explored some flooded forest navigating our way between the trees. Several Muscovy Ducks were seen but these were very wary and soon flew off, however, a Scaly-breasted Woodpecker was more obliging and sat nicely on a tree a few metres above us.

Whilst Black-crested Antshrike had become a reasonably familiar bird for us, a Snethlage's Tody-Tyrant was new and then to our considerable surprise, the sixth Amazonian Black-Tyrant of the tour was found. It was utterly inexplicable the number of individuals of this species we were finding !!

Returning towards *Iracema*, our driver João spotted some monkeys, Brown Capuchins, but these quickly disappeared into the vegetation without anyone getting a particularly satisfactory look.

Whilst Chris and those who had opted for a canoe ride were out on the river, Regina and Junior led a walk along a forest trail which headed through some fantastic terra firme forest. The group had only got about 20 metres from the boat when a Bronzy Jacamar was spotted. Whilst this species had been seen on the extension, it was the first one for the main tour so a new and welcome bird for some of the group.

Another new bird was Mouse-coloured Antshrike, a species which usually lives high in the canopy but this individual was more obliging than usual and was only a few metres above the group on a dead palm leaf.

Continuing along the trail, Junior played a recording of Pavonine Quetzal and quickly got a response, however, it was a long way off so the group walked another seventy metres or so along the path, at which point the bird came in giving nice views for about five minutes; indeed, it was even possible to enjoy it through the telescope!!

Another of the specialities in this area is Amazonian Motmot and whilst one also responded to a recording, it flew back and forth and was very difficult to see so after a while, the decision was made to turn around and slowly walk back to *Iracema*. With some nice views of perched Dusky Parrots and a troupe of about forty Humboldt's Squirrel Monkeys along the way, it was certainly a very successful walk.

Once everyone was back onboard, Chris announced over the PA system that the plan was to leave the national park and explore elsewhere, so as soon as the canoes were secured, we set off down the river, making a brief stop at the Ranger Station to officially notify them of our departure.

Having crossed to the east bank of the Rio Negro and then navigated upstream for about an hour and a half or so, we arrived at Meduini Channel a little after 16:00. The canoes were soon readied and we set off to explore a place which Chris had described as one of his favourite sites along the Rio Negro.

There was forest on both sides with some relatively steep banks in places and we had a nice selection of birds as we cruised along the channel. There were plenty of Hoatzins, a bird which by now we were all very familiar with, however, a Rufescent Tiger Heron was new for the trip and a new bird for some of the group. It was an adult and had a bright rufous head and neck and showed nicely for a few moments before flying off into nearby undergrowth.



Rufescent Tiger Heron © Chris Collins

Another new species was a Crowned Slaty Flycatcher which sat high above us on an exposed snag. Looking up at this we could not see the crown, but the uniform slaty-grey plumage was distinctive enough.

With the Rio Negro being over 3.5 miles wide at this point and us now on the eastern/northern side of the river, we had a change in nunbirds since leaving the Jaú National Park as we were now back in the zone for Black Nunbird with several calling noisily from the trees as we proceeded up the creek.

With White-throated Toucan, Bare-necked Fruitcrow and Cream-coloured Woodpecker all seen, there were some great birds, and we also found a Brown-throated Sloth, our first for several days.

Eventually, the channel ended and we were about to head back to *Iracema* when Chris spotted a Speckled Chachalaca. He called the other canoes over and after playing a recording for a few moments, we realised that there was not one but probably half a dozen individuals. We saw them flying between the trees and, from time to time, perched in the vegetation above us, as they responded to the recording by calling back loudly.

As the light began to fade, we headed back to *Iracema*, with some having some close-up views of a large Black Caiman. There was then an optional night excursion to explore the same channel after dinner.

This terra firme (never flooded) forest clearly had plenty of small mammals as multiple rats and mice were picked up in the thermal imagers, however, most disappeared before we could see and identify them. A notable exception, however, was a Grey Four-eyed Opossum which showed fantastically well allowing everyone to see it with plenty of photos also taken before it wandered away up a vine.

A good selection of birds were also roosting along the river and whilst the lights were only put on these briefly, these included Boat-billed Heron and two Grey-cowled Wood Rails, the latter being a new bird for the trip.

10 September

The day began with a canoe ride at a place known as Lago da Boneca and amongst the highlights was a good encounter with a small family group of Giant Otters. These were spotted a fair way off seemingly heading in our direction, so we switched off the engines of the canoes and waited patiently, hoping they would continue to swim towards us.

When they appeared to enter the far end of a patch of vegetation adjacent to the bank, we continued to wait quietly and attentively and then suddenly the otters appeared directly opposite us on the other side of the channel. They were clearly somewhat nervous at our presence and after some 'telescoping' to get a better look of us, they dived and continued onwards.

The morning was another one where, once again, some got lucky with Sunbittern whilst others were less fortunate. When a Sunbittern was heard calling, the canoes entered a

narrow side channel and some got to see the bird before it flew out and across the main channel. Whilst one canoe lingered in the side channel, as it was thought there was a second bird somewhere nearby, the other two canoes headed out and were rewarded with some brief but good views. Once again, 'Lady Luck' meant some were still missing this important bird.....



Giant Otter © Chris Collins

As we cruised back towards *Iracema*, another noteworthy sighting of the morning was a very obliging Black Caracara which was sat on a branch overhanging the water. Whilst we had seen a handful of individuals of this species over the preceding days, none had been particularly close, however, this bird was a definite exception, as it stood on a tree limb pecking at something it had in its talons. Having seemingly decided that a meal was more important than any threat we presented, the canoes were able to get incredible views before the caracara eventually flew off.



Black Caracara © Chris Collins

Back aboard *Iracema*, we continued onwards reaching a spot where Junior knew there was a Harpy Eagle nest on a large river island, however, neither he nor any of the crew had been there for several months and since then, the water levels had changed markedly. As a result,

it took them a while to find the huge emergent tree where the nest was located and when we got there, it was soon apparent that, unfortunately, there were no eagles present.

We tried playing a recording of an adult eagle to see if this would get any form of response but knowing the vast size of a Harpy Eagle territory, it was no great surprise when there was no reply. Although this was disappointing, we had good success when some Red-throated Caracaras were heard, as these soon responded and flew in, perching high above us in the canopy.

Finding a spot where we could actually see them through the vegetation was initially a little challenging, but we eventually succeeded and enjoyed some great views through the telescope of these raucous birds with their distinctive white bellies and red faces.

Returning to *Iracema*, we continued onwards with the afternoon excursion at Agua Boa which was yet another network of channels which Junior and his team knew on the northern/eastern bank of the Rio Negro. This was a spot that Chris and Regina had also been to on multiple previous occasions and once again, the site delivered our main objective with some fantastic views of Agami Heron.



Agami Heron © Chris Collins

Although this species occurs throughout Amazonia, as far south as Bolivia and north to Mexico, it is rarely common but we enjoyed several sightings during the canoe ride with one bird in particular showing especially well as it hunted for fish through the muddy shallows under the trees.

With its striking plumage and disproportionately long dagger-like bill, it was fantastic to be able to spend time enjoying this special bird.

11 September

The day began early as the plan had been to go out at 05:00 to listen to the howlers before dawn, however, when most people awoke, there was heavy rain and the lightening made for an impressive light show!!

As a result, we stayed aboard hoping to depart in the canoes at 06:00. However, the dawn revealed leaden skies and with the rain still falling, Junior and Chris decided to move on and head further up the Rio Negro so we could spend the day exploring on the Rio Branco, a large tributary of the Negro which flows south from Guyana.

The journey took a while and we had more heavy rain from time to time but by the time we reached the confluence of the Branco and Negro, whilst the skies remained cloudy, the threat of more rain had clearly gone.

Unlike the Rio Negro, which can be tens of metres deep, the Branco was a much shallower brown water river and the crew had to keep a close watch on the sonar and follow a somewhat zigzagging course as we headed north.

There was good forest on both sides and the steep clay banks were perfect for Drab Water Tyrant with several seen as we headed upstream.

We eventually reached a river island where a local villager had suggested we might find Orinoco Geese, however, before heading off to look for these, we explored a channel adjacent to where *Iracema* had been tied up.

We had gone little more than one hundred metres or so when a large shape was spotted in a tree close to the bank and after trying the calls of various species, a Blue-throated Piping Guan responded and appeared high above us. For a few seconds, it remained fully visible, and we had some great views of the bird, a species which had not been recorded on any previous Remote Amazon trips.



Spectacled Caiman © Chris Collins

Leaving the channel, we headed back down the Rio Branco in the canoes seeing several Pied Plovers (Lapwings) on some sandbanks and a little later, found our main goal – two Orinoco Geese, which as with the piping guan, were a new species for the tour.

Well satisfied with the excursion, we returned to *Iracema* and continued further up the Rio Branco with fantastic forest on both banks.

Shortly after lunch, we arrived at our intended destination for the afternoon but with a couple of hours to spare some of the group went fishing, catching some good-sized fish. More supplies for lunch or dinner.....

At 15:30, the three canoes departed up a relatively narrow channel where we really appreciated the skill of the drivers as they safely got the boats over fallen trees and branches which were lying in the river. As we continued up the creek, the number of herons and kingfishers was extraordinary, with good numbers of Striated Herons and Great Egrets, as well as several more Agamis.



Large-billed and Yellow-billed Terns © Chris Collins

Eventually, we arrived at a large lake where there were more fish-eating birds with even more herons and cormorants than in the creek. There were upwards of 250 Neotropical Cormorants, 60+ Great Egrets plus Cooi and Striated Herons – it was clearly a highly productive area for these species!!!

After dinner, one canoe set off up the same creek for a nocturnal excursion and as we navigated up the channel, we passed plenty of roosting birds. Arriving at the lake, we heard both Tropical Screech and Spectacled Owls and after playing a recording of the latter, the bird flew in and perched up nicely allowing us to have some great views. It was fantastic to have a second opportunity to enjoy this fine species of owl.

As the canoe continued onwards, we flushed vast numbers of small fish with many of these jumping at least a couple of feet into the air, with hundreds ending up in the bottom of the

canoe. It was a bizarrely and totally unique experience being, quite literally, slapped by dozens of fish as we drove along!!

Returning back down the channel, Chris picked up a mammal on the ground in his thermal imager and this was quickly picked up in the lights, although it was initially a little tricky to see.

In an attempt to see if he could improve the lighting, Junior clambered out of the canoe, and we could then see that it was a Northern Black-eared (or Common) Opossum. It soon clambered up the tree where it has been sheltering and headed up into the canopy, but we all enjoyed some decent looks before it disappeared into the foliage.

12 September

As the Rio Branco is very shallow in this region (and thus not good for navigating in the dark), we spent a comfortable night tied to a tree and shortly after dawn, set off continuing upstream.

After an hour and a half or so, we reached a point where we were only 120 kms from the Equator and at the entrance to a small channel which the local guide we had picked up the previous day had recommended to Junior.

With the cloud which had kept the temperature down the previous day having almost completely cleared, it was certainly hotter in the canoes than the previous day but despite this, there was still wildlife to enjoy with two Limpkins found shortly after we set off. Several Orange-winged Amazons also flew over which were the first we had seen for several days.

Turning into a wider channel which ran parallel with the main river, we headed south finding a lone Brown Capuchin and a group of waders feeding on a sandy edge. These comprised three Solitary Sandpipers and a White-rumped Sandpiper, however, the undoubted highlight of the canoe ride was when a party of three Giant Otters were spotted. Unlike all the other groups we had seen, these seemed much less concerned by our presence, and they spent several minutes with us giving some absolutely stunning views and fantastic photo opportunities.

As well as 'telescoping' out of the water to get a better look at us, behaviour we had seen previously, one of the otters climbed onto a log allowing us to even see its webbed paws!! They were certainly curious, especially when Junior and some of the other canoe drivers imitated otter calls.

It was incredible to have a group which were not nervous in our presence and when they eventually swam off, the beaming smiles in the canoes said it all – it had been a very special experience and undoubtedly one of the major highlights of the entire trip!!



Giant Otters © Chris Collins

Returning to *Iracema*, we continued downstream bidding farewell to our local guide, however, as we passed his small community, we noticed that there were dozens, if not hundreds, of colourful butterflies which were presumably taking on nutrients close to the water's edge.

With plenty of time to reach our afternoon destination, a couple of the canoes set off to enjoy the spectacle and when one of the local inhabitants disturbed the butterflies, the cloud of yellow, white and orange which fluttered around was spectacular.

Back aboard *Iracema*, we headed down to the mouth of the Rio Branco passing some impressive emergent trees which were covered in bromeliads and lianas before turning southeast and beginning our journey back down the Negro.

Our intended destination for the afternoon was only an hour or so from the confluence of the two rivers and unable to find a suitable tree to tie up to, the crew decided to anchor *Iracema* a short distance from a sandbar at the end of a large river island.

Gull-billed Tern © Chris Collins

Having arrived whilst the temperature was still rather high, some of the group checked out the



birds sitting on the sand and were somewhat surprised when, as well the familiar Black

Skimmers and Large-billed and Yellow-billed Terns, a Gull-billed Tern was spotted. Although this species had been seen very occasionally on previous tours close to Manaus, this was our first record on the Rio Negro.

A little later, the canoes set off to explore and after some close views of the terns, we headed for an area of flooded forest. With dark clouds overhead and thunder rumbling in the distance, the birding was somewhat slower than some of our previous excursions but despite this, we still found species which were either new for the trip or we had only recorded a handful of times so far, with sightings including both Amazonian (Tyrannulet) Inezia and Lineated Woodpecker.

Another noteworthy find was a couple of trees where dozens of martins were roosting and whilst the majority were Brown-chested, there were also a number of Purple Martins, a long-distance migrant from the United States. Quietly paddling towards them, we enjoyed some great views before leaving them and continuing our exploration.

Although no otters were seen, we did find what was clearly the holt of a family group with a substantial hole high up in the bank.

As we returned to *Iracema*, the thunderstorm which remained close by continued and there was an impressive lightshow as the lightening flashed away in the distance.

13 September

Having been thwarted in our attempts to go out before dawn a couple of days before due to the rain, we awoke at 04:30 to the good news that the sky was reasonably clear and when the three canoes set off half an hour later, there was only a smattering of cloud, and the Milky Way was clearly visible in the sky above us.

The objective of departing in the dark was to listen to the wildlife of the forest as night turned to day, and as the canoes slowly made their way down a channel, two groups of Guianan Howlers could be heard making their distinctive calls.

As the sky began to brighten, other species could be heard including Long-billed Woodcreeper and the now very familiar rattling call of the ever-present Ringed Kingfisher.

With enough light to see, we turned into a side channel and whilst initially this appeared blocked by a fallen tree, some determined hacking with a machete by the crew soon cleared a passage and we continued onwards.

The area looked perfect for Sunbittern, a bird some of the group had not seen satisfactorily, and initially there was no sign when a recording was played, until suddenly the bird appeared on a vine maybe 30 feet away. The position it selected was perfect, as it landed precisely by the one canoe whose occupants included those who had not seen this species before. Whilst

the views were a little brief, the bird was so close that when it flew off, there were beaming smiles of satisfaction from those who had just ticked this stunning species!!

The Sunbittern had, however, not flown far, so the three canoes quietly repositioned and soon everyone was watching the bird as it stood on a fallen branch.

With the channel now totally blocked by fallen vegetation that even Junior's determined team would struggle to clear, we turned around, although Chris's boat stayed a little longer when a canopy flock was spotted. With the birds high above us, it was difficult to identify everything, but two Grey-headed Tanagers were well seen and much appreciated.



Green Kingfisher © Chris Collins

Whilst Chris's canoe lingered, Regina and Junior's boats continued out to the main channel where they had some brief but good views of another party of Giant Otters before everyone returned to *Iracema* for a well-deserved breakfast.

Unlike previous mornings, however, this was served on the top deck. As we enjoyed the tasty

fare, *Iracema* slowly cruised along a different channel where one of our goals was to hopefully find some monkeys and it was not long before Regina spotted some movement which was quickly confirmed as Guianan Bearded Sakis.

There were at least two individuals, and we were very fortunate as both moved along some open branches showing us their distinctive beards, bushy tails and two-tone black and brown fur. All too soon they disappeared out of sight, but it had been a fantastic encounter with this impressive looking primate.

We continued to cruise the channels for a little longer but with the temperature rising, the decision was taken to head off towards our intended destination for the afternoon and shortly before getting back onto the Rio Negro, we passed the small community of Remanso. It seemed that Junior knew everyone in the area, as he had a shouted conversation with a couple of the inhabitants but the goal of buying some bananas was unsuccessful as nobody had any available.

Cruising down the Rio Negro, we had pristine forest on both sides, and, once again, it became all too easy to be almost blasé after ten days or so of exploring such a vast area of intact habitat.

Turning into yet another side channel, we could only marvel at the intimate knowledge that Junior and his team had of the area and after another hour or so of cruising, we arrived at an area known as Fazenda do Jauaperi. As usual, the crew found a convenient tree to tie up to and after lunch, some of the group went fishing whilst everyone else rested up waiting for the cooler part of the afternoon to arrive.

At 15:30, the canoes set off to explore an area of flooded forest where Junior hoped the river levels would be right for looking for Electric Eels. It took thirty minutes to cross a large area of open water and we then entered a channel which wound its way through the trees.

Reaching the right area, it was apparent that the water was fractionally too high which meant the eels were still able to swim inside the forest. Despite this, a few people got lucky and had a brief view of one of these unique creatures which are able to generate a significant electric charge to stun their prey.

The water at this spot was incredibly clear, so we spent another quarter of an hour searching for more eels and whilst it was possible to see shoals of small fish swimming below us, sadly there were no more eels....

Setting off back along the channel, the forest was unusually silent despite it being after 16:00 but when Junior speculatively played a recording of Amazonian Black-Tyrant, a female appeared!! This was our seventh sighting of this rare species – a truly incredible total.

With the sun beginning to set, we explore along the edge of an open area in front of a small farm where there was a selection of waders including migrant Lesser Yellowlegs and Spotted, Solitary and White-rumped Sandpipers, plus Collared Plover and Pied and Southern Lapwings.



Pied Lapwing © Chris Collins

A three metre long Black Caiman was also found and one of Junior's team made a series of weird noises which was clearly attractive to this apex predator which turned and swam towards us before sinking below the water.

Following dinner, a night excursion was offered, and we set off towards the area where on the 2022 trip a Black Jaguar had been spotted. Whilst there was little hope of refinding this, nevertheless, it was a highly successful trip, as shortly after finding a very cooperative arboreal rat, Junior called Chris on the radio to tell him that he had found a porcupine.



Black-tailed Porcupine © Chris Collins

Initially, it was presumed that this would be a Brazilian Porcupine, by far the most regularly encountered species in the region, however, it didn't look right, and it was soon realised that it was actually the much rarer Black-tailed (Dwarf) Porcupine.

It was a very distinctive animal with a large pink nose and yellow fur running from its head down its flanks and when it moved slightly, we were able to get some nice views of a creature which Junior had seen less than half a dozen times, despite more than two decades of guiding trips in the Amazon.

Brown-throated Sloth © Chris Collins

With a Brown-throated Sloth also seen, it was certainly a highly successful nocturnal excursion and we returned to *Iracema* very pleased with our sightings.

14 September

It was a morning for some genuine exploring because although Junior had been to a huge number of places along the Rio Negro over the previous 20+ years, there were still some sites he had not explored. One of these was a river system a little to the east of where we had been the



previous day and with Captain Mico saying there was some good forest and this view supported by Google Earth, the decision was taken to give it a go.....

As a result, the day started with *Iracema* near the small community of Maracacá on the lower reaches of the Jauaperi River and as soon as there was enough light to see, *Iracema* began cruising upstream with everyone on the top deck – once again we had the advantage of what amounted to our own floating canopy tower!!

Turning into a small channel which in places was barely wider than *Iracema* was long, we were delighted when a male Pompadour Cotinga was spotted on the top of a bare snag. On most previous visits, this species had been seen without too much difficulty, but apart from an exceptionally distant bird on the extension, we had not seen it so far. Although this individual was also not particularly close, the views through the telescopes were more than adequate and the bird obligingly stayed on its perch for long enough so everyone could see it. With its purple feathers and white wing panels, it was certainly an impressive beast!!

Returning to the main river, we continued upstream for a little further, however, it wasn't long before we reached a point where the crew were unclear where the main channel was, so we turned around and headed back downstream.

A little later, we weren't too far from the spot where the Harpy Eagle nest was located so Junior and Chris went ashore for a quick check. Once again, there was no sign of any eagles, so they were soon back aboard *Iracema* and for the rest of the day we continued our journey down the Rio Negro.

It was all too easy to have become complacent about the remoteness of the amazing area we were fortunate to be exploring and, once again, it was mile upon mile of pristine forest. Very occasionally, there would be another vessel but there was no evidence of any people living along the riverside.

Whilst for some of the day we sailed a fair distance away from the banks (to avoid rocks and shallows), for the majority of the time, we were close to either the north/east bank of the Negro or one of the substantial river islands and whilst no new species were seen, nevertheless, it was an opportunity to enjoy some of the wildlife we had become familiar with over the preceding couple of weeks with White-throated Toucan, Bat Falcon, Golden-winged Parakeet, Festive Amazon, White-winged Swallow, Crested Oropendola and Yellow-rumped Cacique, plus both species of river dolphins, all seen.

As the sun became lower in the sky, what would prove to be our last Scarlet Macaws of the tour were also spotted, giving us a fitting end to the day.

After dinner, the final nocturnal canoe ride of the cruise was offered and whilst the forest rats once again disappeared too quickly to be confidently identified, it was a highly successful

evening for Grey Four-eyed Opossums with up to seven being seen. Whilst most of these joined the arboreal rats in making a quick get-away when illuminated in our spotlights, one showed very well giving us some decent views.

15 September

We awoke with *Iracema* anchored not far from the small community of Pagodão and after breakfast, we set off to explore. This was a place we had visited on one of our nocturnal excursions in the early days of the cruise, but the area was very different in daylight.

We had barely gone more than a few hundred metres when the first new species was found, a Rufous-browed Peppershrike. This had a territory in an area of flooded forest and was singing and responded well to a recording, regularly popping into view for us to see it.

Continuing onwards, we entered a series of channels with forest on either side and soon began to find a number of further species we had not previously encountered. One of our main targets was Yellow-billed Jacamar and Chris's persistence with playing a recording paid off when we got a response. Initially, the bird flitted about and was somewhat tricky to see but we were eventually rewarded with some decent views, with another pairs of jacamars found a little later.



Channel-billed Toucan © Chris Collins

A bigger surprise for the guides, however, was the number of Amazon Pygmy Squirrels with multiple individuals seen during the morning. Despite their small size, these diminutive squirrels can move incredibly quickly and whilst we all enjoyed some great views, getting decent photos was a much bigger challenge.

Returning to *Iracema*, we then headed to the mouth of the Acajatuba River which was the destination for our “dolphin swim” and over lunch Junior gave a short briefing on how to behave in the water. He told us that about 25 years ago, a couple of girls in the nearby

community of Novo Airão had befriended a pod of dolphins and there were now several places not far from Manaus where it was possible to get in the water with completely wild dolphins.

Once we arrived at the spot, it was only a 2-minute shuttle ride in the canoes to the beach where most of the group stripped down to their swimming gear and got in the water. The water temperature was extraordinary, and it was like being in a hot bath of black tea!!

The local guide had a small bucket of fish and a dolphin soon arrived. It was a truly unique and very special experience being so close to this animal as it swam around us as it was occasionally given one of the fish.



Amazon River Dolphin © Chris Collins

Eventually, it had cleared had enough to eat and swam off, so we returned to *Iracema* and the crew repositioned the vessel for a late afternoon canoe ride on the Acajatuba River.

We had not got far up the channel when Chris played a recording of Long-billed Woodcreeper and almost immediately a bird responded and flew across the river. Initially, it disappeared from sight, but after another short blast of the song, it reappeared and settled on a branch giving us some brilliant looks. Although we had seen this species earlier in the trip, the views this afternoon were the best we had experienced, and the bird sat in full view for several minutes allowing us to fully appreciate this very distinctive woodcreeper.

Further along, we came upon the remnants of an abandoned hotel. Many of the buildings and walkways had long collapsed and nature was clearly reclaiming the area, however, a troupe of Humboldt's Squirrel Monkeys that had been habituated when the business had operated still lived in the area. When the bow of one of canoes beached on the muddy shore, one of the monkeys ran over and climbed aboard, presumably in the hope we had something for it to eat. It soon realised that we did not, so after some incredible views, it soon left us returning to the trees.



Humboldt's Squirrel Monkey © Chris Collins

Continuing onwards, we found another troupe of monkeys, but these were Colombian Red Howlers and being in a large rather sparsely vegetated tree, the views were pretty good albeit they were somewhat backlit in their chosen temporary home. A couple of the monkeys were certainly 'taking it easy' as they were lying with their bellies on the branches and their limbs and tails dangling down.

Leaving the monkeys, we cruised further upstream and a little later, Junior heard a Dull-capped Attila calling. This was clearly deep in the riverside vegetation, but we persevered with a recording and the bird gradually moved closer to the water and eventually moved into a position where we could all see it. It seemed the name was a little harsh, but the pale eye was clearly visible which had given the bird its previous name, White-eyed Attila.

Returning to *Iracema*, we had time to freshen up before we loaded up in the canoes for a farewell dinner on a sandy beach not far from where we had had our "dolphin swim" earlier in the day. The crew had been hard at work whilst we had been in the canoes and not only

had they brought tables and chairs ashore but also a not insubstantial barbeque plus lights and a car battery so we could see as we ate.

It was a fantastic final dinner with steak, fish and a selection of other tasty fare on offer and it was a very special experience having this ashore under a starlit sky.

16 September

It was the final morning of our cruise, and the plan was to visit an area for giant water lilies not far from Manaus. With grey skies and the threat of rain, some of the group decided to opt out of the excursion and as a result, only two canoes were needed. However, as soon as these left the channel where *Iracema* was tied up, we reached a large area of open water and with the wind blowing strongly, the waves immediately soaked everyone. It was quickly agreed that the conditions were not suitable to continue and less than 10 minutes after departing we were back aboard.

Whilst it was unfortunate to have to cancel our last outing, we had been extremely fortunate across the trip with rain only interrupting our planned programme on a handful of occasions.

A little later, the crew untied *Iracema* and we set off for the wharf in Manaus but there was still birds to look at and whilst most of these were familiar species such as Neotropical Cormorant and Great Egret, we also found several American Golden Plovers, a bird we had not seen since the beginning of the trip, plus a number of Red-breasted Blackbirds.

All too soon, we reached the wharf where our Remote Amazon wildlife cruise had begun and after an early lunch, we disembarked at 12:20 for the 45-minute ride to the airport. It had been a magnificent trip with many highlights and special memories and fittingly some saw eight Blue-and-Yellow Macaws fly overhead as we boarded the plane for the flight to Sao Paulo.



Iracema © Chris Collins