



## TREASURES OF MINAS GERAIS

### THE BEST OF MINAS – 13 DAYS BLUE-EYED GROUND-DOVE EXTENSION – 6 DAYS

This is one of our favourite tours. The spectacular state of Minas Gerais offers some of the country's best birding and top mammals, against a backdrop of stunning scenery, amiable people, and excellent food (the famed country cooking of Minas Gerais – *comida mineira* – is well-known throughout Brazil). The Treasures of Minas Gerais tour is comprised of two parts: first, our two week Best of Minas itinerary, which spends multiple nights in each of the three most famous birding sites in the state: the fabulous Serra da Canastra and Serra do Cipó national parks, which between them protect some of the best upland cerrado in the country; and the truly charming Caraça monastery, where rocky *campo rupestre* cerrado meets Atlantic rainforest. Unlike most trips to the region, we also include a couple of lesser-known sites to target rarities not easily found elsewhere. These spots include the Pompeu area where we should see a couple of secretive grassland rails, the Rufous-faced and Ocellated Crakes; and forest patches near Catas Altas where we target Rio de Janeiro Antbird, Southern Bristle-Tyrant, Vinaceous-breasted Parrot, and Three-toed Jacamar. Iconic birds such as the Critically Endangered Brazilian Merganser, Greater Rheas, Red-legged Seriema, Toco Toucan, Hyacinth Visorbearer, Horned Sungem, Collared Crescentchest, Brasilia Tapaculo, a suite of fantastic flycatchers of open country such as Cock-tailed Tyrant, Sharp-tailed Grass-Tyrant, Streamer-tailed Tyrant, and Gray-backed Tachuri, the amazing Swallow-tailed Cotinga, Helmeted Manakin, and Black-masked Finch are amongst the birds we expect to see. We have great chances to find two unique mammals: we'll look for the bizarre Giant Anteater as it stalks across the vast savannas on the upper plateau of the Serra da Canastra; our efforts for the elegant Maned Wolf are likely to be less strenuous, as we will sit an evening vigil at the Caraça monastery where the wolves come to feed atop the steps to the nave!

The 5-day Blue-eyed Ground-Dove extension takes us to the northern reaches of the state, where we bird in the dry forests and *caatinga* at the Lapa Grande and Cavernas do Peruaçu parks looking to track down a number of scarce endemics including Moustached Woodcreeper, Bahian Nighthawk, Great Xensops, White-browed Antpitta, Minas Gerais Tyrannulet, Reiser's Tyrannulet, São Francisco Sparrow and Scarlet-throated Tanager. We then continue on to the northern terminus of the Espinhaço mountain range, site of the recent re-discovery of the charming Blue-eyed Ground-Dove. With fewer than 25 individuals known to exist in the world, this is one of Brazil's most threatened species -- our visits contribute directly to the conservation of the species in the form of contributions we make to support the private reserve established to protect the birds, and indirectly through the tourism dollars we leave behind in the humble corner of the state where the doves have been found. The Botumirim area has a strong supporting cast of birds including Horned Sungem, Silvery-cheeked Antshrike, Stripe-backed Antbird, Narrow-billed Antwren, Russet-mantled Foliage-gleaner, Cinereous Warbling-Finch and Blue Finch.

## TREASURES OF MINAS GERAIS: THE BEST OF MINAS (13 DAYS)

### **Day 1: Arrival in Belo Horizonte.**

Arrival in Belo Horizonte, the capital city of the state of Minas Gerais. Belo Horizonte is reached by multiple daily connections from São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia, and internationally from Orlando, Panama City and Lisbon. You will be picked up from the airport and transferred to a hotel in the upscale Pampulha district of the city. In the evening we meet for a welcome dinner at the hotel.

*Night in Belo Horizonte.*

### **Day 2: Lagoa Pampulha and travel to Serra da Canastra.**

We start the morning with a short birding visit to the Pampulha lake in Belo Horizonte, where amongst more widespread water birds such as Brazilian Teal, Cooi Heron and Black-necked Stilt we shall be searching for the rare Southern Pochard. The rest of the morning and part of the afternoon will be spent driving west across Minas Gerais. The drive to the Serra da Canastra will take about six hours, longer if we make a stop or two along the way. We should arrive to our hotel in the small town of São Roque de Minas by early to mid-afternoon, meaning we will have the rest of the day to bird along the road to the national park, searching for specialties such as Golden-capped Parakeet, Cinnamon Tanager, Tawny-headed Swallow, Cinereous Warbling-Finch and Rufous-winged Antshrike.

*Night in São Roque de Minas.*

### **Day 3: Serra da Canastra, lower range.**

This morning we begin our exploration of the Serra da Canastra in earnest, starting off birding the lower section of the national park and the gallery forests flanking the São Francisco river, in search of the most elusive of area's residents, the Critically Endangered Brazilian Merganser. Our strategy here is fairly straightforward: we drive up and down the length of the river, stopping and scanning wherever the river itself is visible, and focusing on certain areas we know that the mergansers prefer. The mergansers prefer undisturbed stretches of shallow, crystal-clear rivers; in planning for our time at Canastra, we avoid busy holidays and try to avoid the rainiest times of year when the river is muddy. While not searching for mergansers, we'll be looking for some of the other specialties of the lower park, including Curl-crested Jays, Toco Toucans, Golden-capped Parakeet, White-striped Warbler and Helmeted Manakin.

*Night in São Roque de Minas.*

### **Day 4 & 5: Serra da Canastra, upper range.**

With two full days at our disposal to explore the upper plateau of the Serra da Canastra National Park, we'll get a chance to visit most of the park's major habitat zones. The principal draw is the existence of some of the best preserved *cerrado* in all of Brazil, home to many charismatic bird species including Cock-tailed Tyrant, Sharp-tailed Tyrant, Gray-backed Tachuri, Campo Miner, Collared Crescentchest, Ochre-breasted Pipit, Black-masked and Coal-crested Finches, along with larger targets such as Greater Rhea, Red-legged Seriema, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle and Red-winged Tinamou. Some of the more common, but equally delightful, species in the park include Peach-fronted Parakeet, Campo Flicker, White-eared Puffbird, Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, Rufous-winged Antshrike, Streamer-tailed Tyrant, Crested Black-Tyrant, White-rumped Monjita, Plumbeous Seedeater and Yellow-rumped Marshbird. We have an excellent chance for Giant Anteater here, and on past trips we have even been privileged enough to watch Maned Wolves hunting in broad daylight in the tall grasses of the *cerrado*. If necessary, we may also return to the lower section of the park, or perhaps visit an interesting private reserve near the town of São Roque de Minas to bird the dense *cerradão* forests there.

*Nights in São Roque de Minas.*

### **Day 6: Travel to Pompéu.**

Today we drive north-east for about 300 kilometres (approx. 5 hours drive) to the town of Pompéu, a small agricultural town in an area mostly known for its cattle ranching, sugar cane plantations, and charcoal production. In the past few years, a pair of young birding brothers have put Pompéu on the map with their discovery of some key rarities. We should arrive in Pompéu in the early afternoon, meaning we'll have time for some afternoon birding around the town, perhaps in search of Coal-crested Finch, Chestnut-capped Foliage-gleaner or Red-bellied Macaw.

*Night in Pompéu.*

### **Day 7: Pompéu and travel to Catas Altas.**

This morning we'll team up with local guides who will take us out in search of two grassland phantoms. The first is the secretive and little-known Rufous-faced Crake, a bird which until quite recently was practically unknown in life. Fast forward a few years, though, and now the species is coming in to be fed at a couple of localities in Brazil, including here at Pompéu. Our next target is another fabulous little crake, the striking Ocellated Crake, which the locals have also been feeding now for a couple of years. In the afternoon we drive another 300 kilometres to the town of Catas Altas.

*Night in Catas Altas.*

### **Day 8: Piracicaba Valley.**

We have a full day to bird in the remnant forest patches east of Catas Altas in the Piracicaba river valley. While the area has suffered badly from deforestation over the years, the local mining and forestry product industries are required by law to maintain a few forest reserves. We shall bird in one or two of these reserves in search of a handful of rare endemics that unfortunately find themselves on the Red List for Threatened Species. Our targets today include Three-toed Jacamar, Rio de Janeiro Antbird, Southern Bristle-Tyrant and Vinaceous-breasted Amazon. We should also find a nice supporting cast of Atlantic Forest birds such as Blue and Pin-tailed Manakins, Red-ruffed Fruitcrow, and Gilt-edged Tanager.

*Night in Catas Altas.*

### **Day 9: Piracicaba Valley and Caraça.**

There will be time in the morning to search for anything we might have missed on Day 8 before we drive a short distance up into the Espinhaço mountains to Caraça. The Santuário do Caraça is an 18<sup>th</sup> century monastery situated in a beautiful forested valley surrounded by high rocky ridges, a stunning setting and a truly peaceful place. We'll arrive in time for an afternoon session birding the trails at Caraça, or perhaps a stroll through the monastery garden in search of Swallow-tailed Cotingas. One of the major attractions at Caraça is the presence of a family of habituated Maned Wolves which come nearly every night to feed at the main monastery staircase. The timing of their visits varies from night to night, so we'll pull up a chair to wait in the hope that one of these spectacular creatures puts in an appearance. There is nowhere else in the world where one can see these animals at such close quarters!

*Night at Caraça Monastery.*

### **Day 10: Caraça monastery.**

Caraça is surrounded by some lovely Atlantic rainforest and rocky *cerrado*, and we'll visit some of the reserve's best trails to search for the area's specialty birds, which include Serra Antwren, Rock Tapaculo, the spectacular Hyacinth Visorbearer and Swallow-tailed Cotinga, in addition to Dusky-tailed and Ochre-rumped Antbirds, Variable Antshrike, White-shouldered Fire-eye, Rufous Gnatcatcher, Pallid Spinetail, White-breasted Tapaculo, Velvety Black-Tyrant, Hangnest Tody-Tyrant, and stunners such as Blue Manakin, Gilt-edged Tanager, Brassy-breasted Tanager, and Blue-naped Chlorophonia. In the evening we can try another Maned Wolf vigil if the animals didn't show the previous evening. Owling on the monastery grounds can be productive, with Tawny-browed and Rusty-barred Owl amongst the possibilities.

*Night at Caraça Monastery.*

**Day 11: Caraça and travel to Serra do Cipó.**

We can have a bit of a later breakfast this morning if the wolves kept us late the night before. We depart Caraça by mid-morning to make the drive to the Serra do Cipó, a scenic area dominated by the low rocky peaks of the Espinhaço mountain range where the rocky *cerrado* holds an interesting range of specialties including a couple of highly localized endemics. We should arrive in time to check in to our hotel and leave our bags before heading out to a nearby birding area where Hyacinth Visorbearer, Horned Sungem, Blue Finch, and Checkered Woodpecker are all possible.

*Night in Serra do Cipó.*

**Day 12: Lapinha da Serra and Serra do Cipó.**

In the morning we bird the beautiful Lapinha da Serra area, where the breathtaking backdrop vies with the birds for our attention. At Lapinha we search for two tricky endemics of the Espinhaço range, the Cipó Canastero and Cipó Cinclodes. The windswept *campo rupestre* cerrado also holds Hyacinth Visorbearers, the endemic Pale-throated Serra-Finch, and Gray-backed Tachuri. In the afternoon we can bird north from our hotel to try humid grasslands for the skulking Marsh Tapaculo, one of Brazil's most difficult birds to actually see.

*Night in Serra do Cipó.*

**Day 13: Serra do Cipó and return to Belo Horizonte.**

There will be a bit of time in the morning for some birding in the Serra do Cipó. We can return for any local specialties we have missed up to now, or perhaps try a road through a mix of gallery and semi-deciduous forest where we can look for Silvery-cheeked Antshrike, Southern Antpipit, Saffron-billed Sparrow or perhaps even Rusty-breasted Nunlet. We leave the Serra do Cipó after lunch to drive back to international airport in Belo Horizonte.

*End of main tour.*

**NORTHERN MINAS GERAIS: BLUE-EYED GROUND-DOVE EXTENSION (6 DAYS)**

**Day 1: Arrival in Belo Horizonte and flight to Montes Claros.**

If combining our "The Best of Minas" itinerary (see above) with the Blue-eyed Ground-Dove Extension, we will arrive to the Belo Horizonte airport from the Serra do Cipó by 3 PM. Our flight to northern Minas Gerais departs at 5:45 PM and takes an hour to reach the hot industrial city of Montes Claros. Upon arrival we transfer to our comfortable hotel in the city.

*Night in Montes Claros.*

**Day 2: Lapa Grande State Park and travel to Itacarambi.**

Lapa Grande State Park is located on the outskirts of Montes Claros. The dry and semi-deciduous forests here are home to a handful of interesting specialties, including São Francisco Sparrow, Minas Gerais Tyrannulet, Caatinga (São Francisco) Black-Tyrant, Reiser's Tyrannulet, Wagler's Woodcreeper and the recently described Dry-Forest Sabrewing. Now that we are in the north of Minas Gerais, we will feel the influence of the arid *caatinga* biome which predominates in north-eastern Brazil, meaning we should see our first Cactus Parakeets and Scarlet-throated Tanagers of the trip. After a full morning birding at Lapa Grande, we have lunch at a

traditional *churrascaria* in Montes Claros before driving about four hours to the small town of Itacarambi on the banks of the São Francisco river. A late afternoon vigil overlooking the river will target the localized endemic Bahian Nighthawk, a bird restricted to the middle reaches of the São Francisco and its tributaries.

*Night in Itacarambi.*

### **Day 3: Cavernas do Peruaçu National Park.**

We'll have a full day to bird the Cavernas do Peruaçu National Park and surrounding area. This little-known national park protects some spectacular caverns and indigenous rock paintings, but it is also home to some great birds. In the semi-deciduous forests of the valley bottoms we'll look for the hulking endemic Moustached Woodcreeper, Golden-capped Parakeet, an as-yet undescribed form of *Tolmomyias* flycatcher, Ash-throated Casiornis, White-naped Jay, and the *bahiae* race of Long-billed Wren. We shall also search the thorny *caatinga* atop the plateau for specialties of that habitat, foremost amongst which will hopefully include Great Xenops, White-browed Antpitta, Stripe-backed Antbird, Caatinga Antwren, Spotted Piculet, and Red-shouldered Spinetail. Open country in and around Itacarambi can be productive, with chances for White-bellied Nothura, Red-winged Tinamou, and White Monjita, amongst others. If there is time in the afternoon, we can return to the São Francisco river again to look for Black-collared Swallow and Giant Wood-Rail.

*Night in Itacarambi.*

### **Day 4: Peruaçu and drive to Botumirim.**

We'll have time in the morning for a couple of hours of birding before we hit the road to drive back to Montes Claros, where we break up our travel day with a hearty lunch at a traditional *churrascaria*. From Montes Claros it is another three hours drive to Botumirim, a sleepy little town nestled into a scenic corner of the spectacular Espinhaço mountain chain.

*Night in Botumirim.*

### **Day 5: Blue-eyed Ground-Dove.**

The discovery of a small population of Blue-eyed Ground-Doves in the north of Minas Gerais state must surely rank as the most exciting ornithological news to come out of Brazil so far this century. Thanks to rapid work by SAVE Brasil and Rainforest Trust, a 1,606-acre reserve to protect the small population of the doves has been established. The known population of the species currently numbers fewer than 25 individuals, but our guides and the reserve employees know the habits of these petite, truly charming doves, and we stand an excellent chance of seeing them. While we are searching for the doves, we are likely to encounter Cinereous Warbling-Finch, Hyacinth Visorbearer, Horned Sungem, Black-bellied Antwren, Silvery-cheeked Antshrike, and Peach-fronted Parakeet. We will also visit one or two other sites in the Botumirim area, which has turned out to be a surprisingly rich avian crossroads with cerrado, caatinga, and Atlantic forest influences. In caatinga-like forest we will look for Narrow-billed Antwren, Russet-mantled Foliage-gleaner, Pale-bellied Tyrant-Manakin, Flavescent Warbler and Ochre-cheeked Spinetail. If we dipped on it at Serra do Cipó, we can walk up to a mountain top above Botumirim to look for Cipó Canastero.

*Night in Botumirim.*

### **Day 6: Botumirim and return to Montes Claros.**

We have a full morning around Botumirim for birding. We can return to the Ground-dove reserve to enjoy those blue-eyed beauties once more, or we can head farther afield to track down any other *cerrado* specialties we might be missing at this point. In the afternoon we return to Montes Claros for the final night of the trip.

*Night in Montes Claros.*

### **Day 7: Departure.**

After breakfast at our hotel, we head to the airport. There are several direct flights daily from Montes Claros to Belo Horizonte, where the tour ends.

*End of tour.*