



## **BRAZIL: CUSTOM EASTERN BRAZIL**

**10 – 25 June 2023**



**São Francisco river and Serra da Canastra**

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**Trip report by Bruno Rennó**  
[www.agaminature.com](http://www.agaminature.com)

## **Itinerary:**

**10 June:** Arrival in São Paulo. Travel to Gália and afternoon birding Caetetus Ecological Station.  
*Night at Ibis Hotel, Marília.*

**11 June:** Birding at Caetetus Ecological Station. Rest of day traveling to Serra da Canastra.  
*Night at Pousada Barcelos, São Roque de Minas.*

**12 June:** Full day birding Serra da Canastra National Park.  
*Night at Pousada Barcelos, São Roque de Minas.*

**13 June:** Full day birding Serra da Canastra National Park.  
*Night at Pousada Barcelos, São Roque de Minas.*

**14 June:** Travel to Serra do Cipó. Afternoon birding upland marsh at Serra do Cipó.  
*Night at Pousada Chão da Serra, Serra do Cipó.*

**15 June:** Lapinha da Serra area.  
*Night at Pousada Chão da Serra, Serra do Cipó.*

**16 June:** Curvelo area.  
*Night at Linx Hotel, Confins.*

**17 June:** Fly Belo Horizonte – Porto Seguro. Estação Veracel near Porto Seguro.  
*Night at Quinta do Sol Hotel, Porto Seguro.*

**18 June:** Travel to Poções and birding the Poções area.  
*Night at Poções Palace Hotel, Poções.*

**19 June:** Poções area.  
*Night at Poções Palace Hotel, Poções.*

**20 June:** Boa Nova and travel to Camacã.  
*Night at Pousada da Família, Camacã.*

**21 June:** Fazenda Paris and travel to Itacaré.  
*Night at Vila dos Pássaros, Itacaré.*

**22 June:** Itacaré and Maraú area.  
*Night at Vila dos Pássaros, Itacaré.*

**23 June:** Serra do Conduru State Park. Fly Ilhéus – Rio de Janeiro.  
*Night at Ibis Hotel, Rio de Janeiro.*

**24 June:** Arraial do Cabo and travel to REGUA.  
*Night at REGUA.*

**25 June:** REGUA and late return to Rio.  
*End of tour.*

## Daily Log:

### 10 June:

#### *The beginning...*

Yet another private custom tour for Agami Nature Tours with Kent, an experienced American birder who arrived having observed 3,073 bird species in South America. Kent had been to Brazil more than a dozen times, and this was his third tour with us. Once again, we were searching for a short list of target birds for Kent's South America list. The trip will be a total of 17 days covering 4 States, with a very restricted list of 23 target species on our itinerary. A very challenging trip with a high level of difficulty!

We left São Paulo later than expected due to a delay in the arrival of Kent's flight. We traveled about 500 km from Guarulhos airport to Caetetus Ecological Station near the small town of Gália. We drove for about 6 hours, making only two stops on the road, one for lunch and another to refuel the vehicle.

We arrived in Caetetus at 2:14 PM and immediately hit the trails. The main target here is the Violaceous Quail-Dove, a shy forest dove that eluded us on a prior visit 2 years earlier. During the afternoon we managed to locate one specimen on the Quail-Dove Trail, in an area dominated by bamboo. The individual was perched and hidden, almost at eye level; it was shy and flushed when we moved to try to see it. Unfortunately, when I tried to indicate the location to Kent, the bird flew and disappeared into the forest, slipping away. We resolved to try again the following morning. We recorded 59 species recorded on our first afternoon, and some highlights of the day included **Robust Woodpecker**, **Spot-backed Antshrike**, **White-eyed Foliage-gleaner**, **Eye-ringed Tody-Tyrant**, and **Saffron-billed Sparrow**.

### 11 June:

#### *The saga of the Violaceous Quail-Dove continues...*

We had breakfast at 5 a.m. and left Marília at 5:30 a.m., heading once again to Caetetus Ecological Station. We arrived at the reserve at 6:30 in the morning; it took a while for the day to lighten up, and we had good light by about 7 a.m. We headed to the Lake Trail and from there took the Quail-Dove Trail. We spent some time in the flooded little grove of palms. Around 8:30, we heard a Violaceous Quail-Dove near the road and spent about 40 minutes trying to see it. We entered the forest carefully following the sound and got very close. When I located and spotted the bird, I alerted Kent, but as he approached, the quail-dove got startled and disappeared into the forest.

We retraced our steps on the Quail-Dove Trail and came across a family of **Collared Peccaries**, which came very close to us; they had their young ones with them. We reached the main road and made a loop towards the Quail-Dove Trail once again. We spent over an hour, quietly, at the little palm grove hoping for a quail-dove to come down for water. During this wait by the water's edge, we caught sight of a **Scaled Dove** coming to refresh itself, almost giving us a heart attack until we realized this wasn't the dove we were looking for.

By early afternoon we resigned ourselves to starting the trip with a miss, and began our long journey to Serra da Canastra and spent the rest of the day covering the 600 km to São Roque de Minas. A tough trip to swallow, with endless stretches of sugarcane fields where once stood a mighty inland forest, reduced today to tiny forest fragments.

As long as our journey was today, so is our anticipation to find the merganser tomorrow, one of Kent's main targets in the Serra. Tomorrow, we'll reach the Canastra plateau. May luck be on our side!

68 bird species in our morning at Caetetus, some highlights of the day: **Tataupa Tinamou** seen, **Surucua Trogon**, **Rufous-capped Motmot**, **Short-tailed Antthrush**, **Pale-legged Hornero**, **Ochre-breasted Foliage-gleaner**, **Rufous-capped Spinetail**, **Sooty Grassquit** and **Black-throated Grosbeak**.

**12 June:**

*Life as a guide isn't easy.*

Breakfast scheduled for 5 a.m., and as I left the room, a pair of Grey-cowled Wood-Rails cackled away in an animated duet.

At 5:40, we met Tico, an excellent local guide and longtime partner for our tours in the region. We started our journey towards the plateau; the ascent is slow as the road is precarious, but the view is mind-blowing.

Kent had previously visited Canastra with us, during which we checked off many local specialties but we had missed the region's main target, the Brazilian Merganser. The merganser is one of the rarest and most threatened aquatic birds on the planet, and while we had spared no effort in our search last time around, we hadn't managed to find it. This species was one of the absolute top targets for this trip, particularly given the sting of missing it the first time around.

With the merganser firmly in mind, we decided to head straight for the top of the Casca D'Anta waterfall where a pair of mergansers can sometimes be found. However, it's hard not to stop to appreciate the beauty of the upper plateau of the Serra da Canastra and enjoy its wildlife, like a beautiful female **Pampas Deer** grazing by the roadside or a charming pair of **Cock-tailed Tyrants**.

At 7:25, we reached the upper part of Casca D'Anta and began our vigil for the merganser. These moments are usually a bit tense, filled with high expectations, anxiety, nervousness, and a lot of pressure on the guide. But it's crucial to convey calmness and confidence, although that's quite difficult at times. Despite being in the right place and having knowledge, birdwatching is something where unpredictability is a strong factor in most cases.

We waited for about 5 hours, but no mergansers showed. We decided to descend and try at the lower reaches of the park. After lunch, we dedicated time to search for the merganser in the best stretches of the São Francisco River where they're commonly seen. We checked about five spots, and nothing! 🤔

We ended the day with a huge sense of frustration, the kind that's really hard for a guide to swallow. But what can we do? It's part of it. No choice but to just try again tomorrow!





**View of the São Francisco river at the top of the Casca d'Anta waterfall**

### **13 June:**

*Patience is a virtue...*

We had breakfast at the same time, 5 a.m. At 5:30, we started the bumpy ascent to the Canastra plateau, once again heading towards the top of Casca D'Anta waterfall.

We arrived at 6:50 and positioned ourselves by the river's edge. We were all psychologically prepared and determined to spend the entire day waiting, anticipating that at some point, the merganser would cross our path.

This was our last day scheduled for the Serra da Canastra, and considering Kent had already missed seeing the merganser with me on another trip, the waiting period was agonizing. Any different movement in the river made our hearts nearly leap out of our chests.

Around 7:30, two Brazilian birdwatchers also arrived at the site and joined us in the stakeout for the elusive merganser. A bit of chatting, a bird here and there, and a lot of patience. Despite all the pressure being up there at the top of Casca D'Anta waiting for a long time, it's not all bad; what a stunning place. This merganser knows how to pick its home!

Certainly, this is the bird species I've spent the most hours waiting to see in my entire birdwatching life. 1, 2, 3, 4 hours passed, and we were still there, planted! But there's no other way; sitting, waiting, and exercising patience seems to be the best strategy.

It was past noon, the sun was strong, and suddenly, up the river's bend, two little 'sticks' were floating in the water. Our hearts raced; we looked closely, and there they were, a pair of the extremely rare **Brazilian Merganser**, FINALLY, right there in front of us. We positioned ourselves, grabbed our binoculars; I set up the scope for Kent, and there they were, slowly coming down the river, searching the waters for fish. They'd dunk their heads into the water to search for fish, leaving only their backs exposed, resembling two pieces of wood floating in the water. When they spotted their prey, they'd dive in pursuit, sometimes staying submerged for up to 1 minute. And that's how they continued, descending the river and getting closer and closer. They really put on a show! What an incredible, indescribable sensation - not only were they rare and beautiful, but I also felt like a ton of weight had been lifted off my shoulders!



**Brazilian Merganser**

As wonderful as observing a rare bird is, being able to provide this moment to someone who has long awaited it is priceless. Seeing the smile and satisfaction on the client's face is truly invaluable. Phew, we did it; we all breathed a sigh of relief!

The mergansers stayed there for quite some time, and we admired our prize until the last minute. Afterwards, satisfied, we celebrated, and it was a true party. Those 6 hours of waiting were worth it!

On the way back, we saw a **Giant Anteater** and a jararaca snake. We recorded 91 bird species during these two days in the Canastra mountains, and some highlights include: **Dwarf Tinamou** (heard), **Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle**, **Sharp-tailed Tyrant**, **Sooty Tyrannulet**, **Crested Black-Tyrant**, **Cock-tailed Tyrant**, **Grass Wren**, and **Blue Finch**.

**14 June:**

*The guide's joy is fleeting...*

We did well at Canastra, though it was nerve-wracking up to the moment the Brazilian Merganser finally showed. On this trip we retraced routes Kent had covered on past tours, working to clean up the few leftover species, making for a short list of really difficult target birds. Today we were heading for the next stop and the next challenge.

Breakfast at 5:30. It was the last day to taste the delicious Canastra cheeses that our lodge offers to its guests. Endemic cheese to go with endemic birds! At 6 in the morning we hit the road and headed straight to another important birding hotspot in Minas Gerais. After 444 km on the road, we arrived at the stunning Serra do Cipó, home to numerous endemics and rarities. Things around here won't be easy; in my opinion, Cipó is one of the more challenging sites for birding in Minas Gerais state because many of the local specialties are quite hard to come by. We had essentially just two targets at the Serra do Cipó: the Marsh Tapaculo, and the Diamantina Sabrewing. The first, an endangered tapaculo endemic to Brazil, inhabits extremely dense marshy fields, one of the most challenging birds to see and is usually heard more than seen. In fact, that's what happened two years ago when we were together in São José dos Pinhais, Paraná. We made several attempts to see it, but we only got audio recordings.

And our second target, the Diamantina Sabrewing, an endemic hummingbird found only in the Espinhaço Range in Minas Gerais, inhabits forest enclaves along small watercourses in the region, occurring above a thousand meters in altitude. Two creatures that'll make you tear your hair out!

We agreed that this afternoon we would focus on the Marsh Tapaculo. At 3:30 p.m., we reached the spot, a small marsh dominated by extremely dense grasses and sedges. We walked a bit into the area, where I played the species' sound, hoping for an individual to respond so we could locate its position and devise a strategy. After about 5 minutes, an individual started singing deeper into the marsh. I aimed towards its position, and we went in its direction, realizing it was close to the stream that cuts through the area, its bed now dry. We went up snaking along the tiny river, and a few meters later, we were there.

I made a small hole in the vegetation and set up the speaker. I played the tape and waited. After a moment, the tapaculo responded. I let it sing for about 2 minutes, very close to the little hole I had opened. We were thrilled! When it finished the long performance, I played a short blast, and the bird went silent. Some time passed, then it sang from the opposite side, having circled behind us without us noticing a thing. The vegetation was extremely dense, though – there was no way we'd see it there.

So we changed strategy, took a chance, and positioned the speaker in the middle of the stream, and played another sequence of sounds. It flew across to the other side and disappeared into the vegetation, and then the UNBELIEVABLE happened. The **Marsh Tapaculo** hopped back onto a rock in the middle of the dry little stream, and I couldn't believe it. It stayed there for about three seconds – we had a full view through the binoculars, and either of us had had a camera, we would have walked away with full frame photos.

Kent and I were both thrilled, unable to believe our good fortune. I found myself smiling again, at least until tomorrow!



**15 June:**

*Onward and upward!*

Today we're going after the last specialty missing in the Serra do Cipó region, the Diamantina Sabrewing. Well, finding a hummingbird in nature isn't always an easy mission. These birds have a very rapid metabolism; they need to feed constantly to maintain their accelerated body rhythm and naturally, they don't stay still, always flitting from one side to another. When we're lucky and have the time to locate a patch of favoured flowers they're regularly visiting, it makes the task a lot easier. But finding a hummingbird "at random" can be a big challenge, especially if this hummingbird lives in a very specific and scattered environment, in small patches across the landscape, as is the case with the Diamantina Sabrewing. Endemic to the Espinhaço mountain range in Minas Gerais, it inhabits small patches of riparian forest, which are like islands amidst the vastness of the upland rocky cerrado. Aaaaand there's one more detail: they only occur above 1000 meters in altitude. Anyone willing to see this bird usually needs to walk quite a bit and uphill.

That said, after a hearty breakfast at 5 in the morning, we packed field snacks in the backpack and set off. We started with an hour's drive along the winding road to the bucolic village of Lapinha da Serra. At 6:40 in the morning we began our mountain pilgrimage. We took the trail to Pico da Lapinha, planning to check all the little patches of forest until we reached the support house for climbers at the base of the peak. It's a strenuous hike, about 3 kilometers uphill, with an elevation gain of approximately 400 meters. Kent showed he's in great shape as the bird really made us work today.

During our hike we encountered other hummingbirds in the area: **Planalto Hermit**, **Hyacinth Visorbearer**, **White-vented Violetear**, and **Glittering-bellied Emerald**, but their standoffish cousin was still missing.

By 10 a.m. we had reached the base of Pico da Lapinha, our endpoint. From there, it was all downhill! We met a group of friendly climbers who were starting a 3-day trek through the mountains, and at that moment I realized there are people even 'crazier' than us birders!

We had a snack, rested a bit, caught our breath, and resumed our search. We checked various spots in the two forest patches near the base camp, but nothing! On the way back down the mountain, though, we managed to locate an elusive **Diamantina Sabrewing** amid the treetops. There were a couple of agonizing moments before Kent got onto the bird, but soon enough we had nailed it. Another rarity in the trophy case and another sigh of relief.

During the long descent back to the village of Lapinha da Serra, we recorded two more Espinhaço endemics, the **Cipó Canastero** and the **Cipó Cinclodes**, both difficult species, but we had 'bagged' them on our previous trip.





**Lapinha da Serra**



**Hyacinth Visorbearer**



**Cipo Cinclodes**

## 16 June:

### *An impromptu nothura hunt*

Luck was on our side in Serra do Cipó, giving us an extra day since we had made some changes on the fly already, deciding to skip a visit to Pompéu as the Rufous-faced Crake was no longer being seen there. My initial idea for today was to go birdwatching in Cipó to enjoy some of the area's creatures without much pressure.

However, there was a target species on the client's list that wasn't quite on our route, but not far enough away that it would be entirely impossible – the White-bellied Nothura.

I mentioned to Kent the night before that I knew a place nearby where we'd have more possibilities and could give it a try, considering we had gained an extra day. Intrigued, Kent agreed we should go for it. After exchanging messages with some friends and local experts, we concocted a plan for the following morning.

By 5:30 in the morning we were on the road, driving 200 kilometres to the town of Curvelo, where the nothura is recorded with some regularity in rural areas. We arrived at the location at 8:15 a.m. As soon as we got out of the car, we heard one individual singing in nearby fields. I played the tape but the bird wasn't very close and didn't seem to approach. Shortly after, a tractor crossed the pasture area and the nothura went silent. We hung around the pastures for a while and saw a nice variety of birds: **Picui Ground-Dove, Black-throated Mango, Greater Thornbird, Chotoy Spinetail, White-rumped Swallow, White-browed Meadowlark, Campo Troupial and Rufous-bellied Thrush**, amongst others.

We opted for a change of scenery and headed to another spot: soon enough we had two White-bellied Nothuras singing, one on each side of the road. I swear I thought one of them would cross. We positioned ourselves; they were singing a lot, and our chances looked good until – a car! It zipped past us, kicking up a cloud of dust, with the birds and my hopes vanishing as the air cleared. To my surprise, though, one of them started singing again. Wow, it was so close to the road! I positioned the playback on the opposite side and played its vocalization. We waited there anxiously, before our hopes were dashed again by yet another car! Score a point for the cars and for the Nothuras, which managed to remain heard only. We would have another chance for them in Bahia on the second leg of our trip, though, so all was not lost.

From Curvelo we headed straight to Belo Horizonte, taking the rest of the afternoon off to rest up for the 2<sup>nd</sup> leg of the trip, which promised to be intense.

## 17 June:

### *Most trip reports gloss over bitter defeats and forgettable days...*

Today we started the second stage of our trip, flying in the morning from Belo Horizonte to the resort city of Porto Seguro in southern Bahia state, landing at 7:30.

The plan for the next couple of days will be to work the lowland forests found in the Veracel Private Natural Heritage Reserve (RPPN Estação Veracel) near Porto Seguro, once again searching for just a few much-desired rarities. My client has been here before with none other than the renowned international birding guide, Bret Whitney. And what was left for me? Just the squeezed-out orange!

We picked up the vehicle and headed straight to Veracel, where we arrived at 9, and after presenting ourselves at the reserve headquarters to sign in and go over the usual formalities, we started right in after the birds.

Our main objective here would be the multicolored, endemic, and threatened Banded Cotinga (*Cotinga maculata*), a very rare and beautiful bird that is coveted by all visitors to the region. Unfortunately, while it is the star bird at Veracel, it is certainly one of the most difficult species to find there, too.

We had agreed that, initially, we would drive along the entire length of the road cutting through the reserve, checking fruiting trees that could attract the cotinga. We started moving forward, made a few brief stops; the forest was notably quiet.

We continued and crossed a muddy section, but it wasn't anything serious. The road improved, it was firm and dry again. Then, at a certain curve, the surprise: suddenly, a colossal mud hole right in front of us. I didn't even have time to react; the car got stuck, I tried reversing, but it didn't budge. I engaged forward gear again, and with a lot of effort, the car got out, *phew*. There was no way I could turn around or stop there. Further ahead, another mud hole, I went through it quickly. I was already anxious, needing to find a spot to turn around and go back.

We drove a good stretch; I managed to turn the car and left it there—enough stress, let's go birding!

We found a fruiting tree with some **White-winged Cotingas** feeding on the fruits – a very good sign. The White-winged and Banded Cotingas are often found together when visiting fruiting trees, but this time it seemed the White-winged Cotingas were alone. There were some nice birds around though, including **White-bellied Tanagers**, **Band-tailed Antwren** with a little mixed flock, and flyover **Red-browed Amazons**.

It was past mid-day now, and we were getting a bit hungry so we decided to head back for lunch. I could only think about that quagmire. We successfully negotiated the first mud hole; in the second, the car got stuck in the same spot but managed to get out again with a lot of effort. Further ahead, on the last stretch of mud, my fears became reality – the car slipped into the deep rut alongside the narrow, elevated strip we were driving along, and was grounded with a resounding *thud*. Getting a vehicle stuck in the middle of the forest is not one of life's most enjoyable experiences, but the one sure thing is that somehow, eventually, you will manage to extract yourself from the muck and the mire. It took hours, though. We tried with the jack, lifting the wheels to put branches underneath for more traction, to no avail. We ended up walking back to reserve headquarters, but unfortunately they had no cell reception and no internet. A park employee who did have cell service loaned me his phone, and we requested a tow, only to receive word an hour later that the tow truck had decided to cancel the call! Finally, I managed to get in touch with a tractor operator who could come and pull us out, but it was past dusk when we finally returned to Porto Seguro, covered in mud and still one cotinga short. In a short pow-wow over dinner we decided to strike Veracel from the itinerary and re-arrange our route to look for the Banded Cotinga elsewhere.

## 18 June:

### *Change of plans*

Due to our muddy experience on our first day at Veracel, it would have been madness to try going back there again with the road in such precarious conditions. We elected unanimously to abort Veracel, adjusting our plans to head directly for Poçoês.

Poçoês is located in central-south Bahia, surrounded on all sides by areas with very irregular terrain in a region nestled in a mountainous complex called the Serra da Ouricana. Alongside Boa Nova and neighboring municipalities, it sits in an interesting transition area where the Atlantic Forest and the Caatinga biomes merge, presenting extremely complex and varied vegetation, resulting in a rich avifauna. The coast-facing slope is covered by fragments of humid forest, where in the past extensive areas were covered by mountainous Atlantic Forest. Beyond these mountains, the humid forest gives way to drier inland woodland, heavily influenced by the Caatinga. Dozens of endemic and threatened bird species can be found in this contact zone. It's a truly special region!

We arrived in Poçoês close to lunchtime, where we met our excellent local guide, Mateus Gonçalves. Mateus began birdwatching influenced by his grandfather, who always enjoyed nature. Recently, Mateus completed his biology degree (congrats, my friend), and he is a naturalist by heart, currently working in academic research and





**Three-toed Jacamar**

as a birdwatching guide. He knows the precise whereabouts of all the region's birds, and we'll be working together in the coming days. It's going to be awesome!

At 11:30 in the morning, we dropped our things at the hotel and headed for lunch. We didn't want to waste time because at 1:00 PM, we planned to head to the nearby mountains.

As usual, we planned to work on an ambitious list of target species. This afternoon we visited an area where our efforts would focus on the Bahia Tyrannulet (*Phylloscartes beckeri*), Bahia Treehunter (an as-yet-undescribed species), and the Brown-backed Parrotlet (*Touit melanonotus*).

Mateus guided us to one to a hilly area outside the city. A steep climb via a narrow road led us to a beautiful montane forest brimming with bromeliads and covered in lichen.

Our first attempt was with the **Bahia Tyrannulet**. It took a bit, but when it showed up, it put on a show. Over there, we heard the “**Bahia Treehunter**”, an endemic *Heliobletus* species from the Bahia mountains, still without a formal name. It was foraging amid dense

undergrowth, challenging to see, so we ventured in and after much effort, had good views of this as-yet-unnamed species.

From there, we moved to a viewpoint overlooking the valley and a beautiful forest remnant. Mateus mentioned that the Brown-backed Parrotlets occasionally flew over the area. While we waited, some nice birds popped up around us: **Three-toed Jacamar**, **Blue-winged Macaw**, **Striated Softtail**, and **Gilt-edged Tanager**, amongst others. And remarkably, we soon heard the parrotlets calling from across behind the hills; and then there they were, a flock of 22 **Brown-backed Parrotlets** flying over our heads.

Thrilled with our successful afternoon, much needed after the washout in Porto Seguro, we returned to town thinking just maybe we left all our bad luck in those mud puddles.

## **19 June:**

### *Shivering in Bahia!*

Today we dedicated the day to pursue the remaining targets in Poçoões. We planned to search for Reiser's Tyrannulet and the White-bellied Nothura that we had narrowly missed in Minas Gerais. Our destination this morning was the Serra do Arrepio (Goosebump Hill, roughly translated), and it doesn't earn its name for nothing, hinting at the low temperatures in the region that can eventually reach close to 10°C. I'd never expect to feel cold in Bahia, but it was freezing here this morning!

Chilled to the bone, we started to climb the Serra do Arrepio at 6:30 AM. It's very interesting to see the transition in vegetation between the humid slope and the inland side. One of our first birds was a spectacular endemic species of the inland hills, the **Slender Antbird**, typical of these interior forests known as 'liana forests' due to the abundance of vines within. A notable feature of this environment is the presence of large terrestrial bromeliads from the *Ananas* and *Aechmea* genera, called 'gravatás', which actually gave rise to the popular name of the bird, the *gravatazeiro*. What a spectacular antbird, with a very strong and distinctive song. We had a memorable sighting of a pair right in front of us!





Terrestrial bromeliad



Forest remnants near Poções

We continued our walk, creeping along the narrow trail up the Serra. The walk chased away the cold, but it was a bit windy. After covering about 2 km, we reached a plateau at over 1000 meters above sea level; this is where Mateus usually finds the tyrannulet. The anticipation was high: Kent, our client, really wanted to see this rarity. Some playback attempts received no response, but we decided to wait. A **Bahia Spinetail** appeared, a nice endemic with a very restricted range. We waited a bit more and tried again. Soon enough a **Reiser's Tyrannulet** was responding. Incredibly, it descended from the treetops and before we knew it, it was right at eye level. We had amazing views of this bird that usually inhabits the highest canopies. We breathed a sigh of relief – another key bird was 'in the bag'.

From there, we headed back to the car and set off for an area to try our hand at finding the nothura. And would you believe it was easier than expected?! On the way to the spot, a **White-bellied Nothura** popped up right in the middle of the dirt road, in front of our car, and we got to enjoy observing this shy bird out in the open.

As we had gained time, in the afternoon we decided to try another target, one that would certainly prove to be the most challenging species of our entire trip – the Boa Nova Tapaculo, a species described only in 2014, probably critically endangered and restricted to a few mountains in Bahia.

Mateus hadn't found it in the region yet, but we had clues about where to look. The geographic coordinates available in the species description article led us to a remaining forest fragment near Poções. It was a steep climb leading to the top of the hill; we drove as far as possible. From there, we continued on foot, and from the top, we could see all the devastation that had struck the region. We swallowed hard and continued walking. We reached the fragment, a forest nestled in one of the deepest grottos one can imagine; we had no other option but to 'plunge' downhill. It was a difficult descent without a trail: Mateus led the way, cutting through the foliage, and I followed, clearing the path with a machete.

We descended into a truly deep valley, very difficult to walk through. We reached a promising spot and attempted without success. Time ran out, and it was time to begin the steep ascent back. We had given this extreme rarity a valiant effort.

## 20 June:

### *Bahian mysteries...*

Our morning would be extremely challenging; we would try to find a species without documented records in the Boa Nova region since 2008, with the last photo taken by our friend Ciro Albano. We were going again in search of the rare and enigmatic Boa Nova Tapaculo (*Scytalopus gonzagai*); it would be a very difficult mission. This species was formally described in 2014 and was named in honor of our highly competent friend and ornithologist Luís Antônio Pedreira Gonzaga. Due to his remarkable achievements in national ornithology, Gonzaga deserved this fitting tribute! Despite the low expectations of finding the species, we had to go there and search. It's better to have a failed attempt than to live with the doubts of not having tried! But it's been 15 years since the last record in the region, and that was not good news, definitely. We left Poções at 5:00 a.m. and had breakfast at a gas station by the roadside. By 6:30 a.m., we were already in Boa Nova, where we crossed the road that cuts through the Mata do Charme, a famous and important birdwatching hotspot. As our main target enjoys the deep ravines between high mountains, there we were, climbing uphill again. Birdwatching is often also a great physical exercise. We took a narrow and somewhat messy trail, and in some parts, it was difficult to walk. We were hopping over fallen logs, dodging obstacles, but gradually gaining elevation. As we ascended, we made strategic stops at points where Mateus knew there were previous records. We made several playback attempts—one, two, three, about five times in total, at different points, but unfortunately, all were unsuccessful. At 9:05 a.m., we reached a point where the trail started to disappear, swallowed up by the forest regrowth, and once again disappointed, we decided to turn back. During our descent, we talked a bit about the biography and conservation of Bahian birds and concluded that the Stresemann's Bristlefront (*Merulaxis stresemanni*) and the Boa Nova Tapaculo (*Scytalopus gonzagai*) are probably the two most threatened and difficult-to-find bird species in the state. Sadly, often searching for rare and endangered birds is like searching for lost souls. We had heard news that the Banded Cotinga (*Cotinga maculata*) was showing up around Camacã. So we decided to expedite our journey because we had 236 km to the next destination. Some say that Time is Money, others that Time is Lifers – onward!

## 21 June:

### *Paris is colorful!*

We had arrived in Camacã late yesterday afternoon and stopped in to visit the cocoa plantation where the Banded Cotinga regularly visits to feed on the *açaí* fruits and also on nearby *Cecropia* trees.

We went there to inform them of our visit and to learn of any recent sightings. The locals informed us that the cotingas had been coming down pretty regularly to feed around the headquarters between 9:00 and 11:00 in the morning. We were excited and a bit anxious as we arrived on site the next morning.

Our morning activity focused on Fazenda Paris, an active cocoa plantation located within the RPPN Serra Bonita area, managed by the Uiraçu Institute. In addition to preserving many hectares of forest and having several research and conservation projects within the reserve, the institute also manages farms dedicated to the organic cultivation of cocoa and *açaí*; these areas attract numerous species of frugivorous birds, including the beautiful and threatened Banded Cotinga.

We had breakfast later than usual to rest a little more. Breakfast at 6:30 and around 7:15, we were already around the headquarters of Fazenda Paris. As soon as we got out of the car, we started inspecting the treetops around the edge of the clearing carefully, looking for a flash of shocking cobalt blue and bright purple. There was plenty to see right around the headquarters: a flock of **Brown-backed Parrotlets** in flight; three different species of



*Pyrrhura* parakeets together, **Maroon-bellied Parakeet**, **White-eared Parakeet**, and **Ochre-marked Parakeet**. The parade of colors continued with **Green-backed Trogon**, **Channel-billed Toucan**, **Brazilian Tanager**, the east Brazilian form of **Opal-rumped Tanager** (oft-split and known as Silver-breasted Tanager), **Green-headed**



I don't know if the Paris in France is colorful, but I can say that Bahian Paris is a true Brazilian watercolor. But the big star of the day was still missing to complete our color palette. Kent, our client, seemed unable to contain his excitement, I even tried to disguise it, but I was very excited too. He had told me that the Banded Cotinga and the Brazilian Merganser were the two bird species he most wanted to see throughout our trip!

Mateus and I decided to split up and intensify our efforts, as there were many açai palms fruiting, and we went to inspect the surroundings.

We left Kent monitoring the headquarters, it was already around 9:00 a.m., and after a few minutes, a shout: COTINGA! Mateus and I arrived breathless, one on each side, and Kent pointed to a tall Cecropia tree. OH MY GOD, what a beautiful creature! There was a stunning male **Banded Cotinga** shining in the sun. All the effort we went through to try to see this bird was totally worth it. A true wonder of nature!

It slowly descended to the açai fruits, collected one, swallowed it, and disappeared into the forest. After a while,

two females also arrived to feed in the same area. After the celebrations and taking a few minutes to recover our collective composure, we hit the road again, as we still had 200 km to our final destination in Bahia.

## 22 June:

### *Bold Bahians!*

This trip was definitely proving to be a huge challenge, and speaking of which, we ended up waving the white flag on one of the potential targets. Since we had been in Camacã and relatively close to the Serra das Lontras National Park, Mateus and I had been planning our last attempt to locate the mega-rare Boa Nova Tapaculo. We were excited because a foreign birdwatcher had photographed the species there at the end of last year. I had also recorded the species in the Serra das Lontras many years ago when I was there assisting my great friend Andre de Luca in ornithological inventories in the region. Our hopes were high, especially compared to our fruitless attempts in Poçoões and Boa Nova. But when I explained to the client that we were in for yet another strenuous uphill (and downhill) hike under very difficult conditions, it ended up being a tough sell. In the end, we elected to pass on the Serra dos Lontras. Onward and upward!

Yesterday evening, we had arrived in the cozy seaside town of Itacaré, the setting for our last stop in Bahia. Here wouldn't be any different; we had just three target species in the region, none of them particularly easy. Chatting over breakfast, we concluded that all species with "Bahia" or "Bahian" in their names are tough nuts to crack. And this morning, we would go after another spirited little Bahian. We spent the morning in the difficult mission of trying to observe another endemic and threatened Tapaculo, the Bahia Tapaculo (*Eleoscytalopus psychopompus*). What our client didn't expect was that we would have another uphill-downhill event because this species inhabits the valley bottoms, nestled between steep hillsides, usually near water. And so it was that we

spent the entire morning scouring the valley bottoms that Mateus knew, but to no avail! It was a tough hike, with no trail, trying to overcome dense vegetation, as well as up-and-downs aplenty. But we already knew it wouldn't be easy; we had only one day and a bit of the last morning to locate our objectives. We took a lunch break, and it's times like these that it's good to have friends and rely on a good support network. Our friend Leo Patrial, who knows Itacaré like no one else, kindly shared with us a spot of his last sighting of the species in the region. This was the last card we had to play! We wolfed down our lunch and immediately headed to Leo's spot, which was very close to where we tried earlier but in a different gully. We descended steeply until we reached the valley floor and made some attempts with no response. The pace of the trip and the tiring morning was taking its toll, and Kent was visibly tired. We left him resting in the car and went down to search the opposite valley. We played the playback, waited for some time, and nothing. As we started to make our way back, the reassuring response came. We went back, called to Kent, and once again descended the slope. We got into position and started to work our quarry. After a few minutes, like a mouse, it walked across the flooded ground, and we had two incredible views of the endemic **Bahia Tapaculo**. Leo, you're a lifesaver. Thank you very much, brother; you saved the day! As a passionate birdwatcher, I know very well what this moment represents for a person, how much they hope and plan for that genuinely special moment. Being able to be the cog in making it happen, materializing dreams in birds, and seeing the smile on a client's face leaves me extremely fulfilled and makes it all worthwhile! We still had some time, so we decided to pursue our other goal of the day, the enigmatic Pheasant Cuckoo (*Dromococcyx phasianellus*), another species difficult to see and usually heard more than seen. We arrived in the tree-lined sandbanks of Maraú late in the afternoon; we barely got out of the car when we heard the grumbles in response to the playback. It was easier than we had imagined... wait a minute, hold on, we still had to see it, and that's where the challenge lies! Imagine a stealthy bird?! We played the playback, and all we saw was a shadow flying and disappearing out of nowhere; like glimpsing a ghost! After about five attempts and a lot of attention, we managed to locate it, very well camouflaged, but luckily a "window" allowed excellent observations of a striking **Pheasant Cuckoo**, another rarity added to the trip tally. HOORAY! Throughout today, despite being super focused, we recorded almost a hundred species and several notable sightings, including observations of both **Brown-backed** and **Golden-tailed Parrotlets**, practically side by side. Today deserves to be celebrated with an ice-cold beer!

## 23 June:

### *A long day, and a short night*

Our last day in Bahia was basically to be a day devoted to long travels and waiting. Our flight was departing from Ilhéus at 4:30 p.m., so we had some time to bird along our way back and bid farewell to the birds of Bahia. Our destination in the morning was the fantastic Serra do Conduru State Park, located in the areas of Ilhéus, Itacaré, and Uruçuca municipalities, covering an area of 9,275 hectares. Besides its importance for birdlife, with the presence of various endemics and threatened species, the park stands out for harboring a very high biological diversity, with about 458 different tree species per hectare. This is one of the highest indices in the world, and all these attributes make this place a priority area for conservation.

Our main target this morning would be the Margaretta's Hermit (*Phaethornis margarettae*), an endemic hummingbird of the forests near the Northeastern coast. My dear friend Caio Brito had kindly shared a spot where, during the breeding season, some males gather to sing in a communal lek. But since we weren't in the right season for this hummingbird, my expectations were low to find it in such a short time.

The park has beautiful forest. We took a trail near the headquarters and went to the spot for the hermit, but as I expected, since it wasn't the appropriate time, we didn't find it in its community territory. During our walk, we were attentive to see if we could locate any floral resources that the species could be feeding on, but no flowers either. Despite not finding this important endemic, we came across several cool species along the way. We had fantastic observations of the tiny **Racket-tipped Thorntail**, which spent some time hovering around the beautiful



red flowers of the boarwood tree (*Symphonia globulifera*). We spent some time watching it through the scope while it fed on this plant, along with other hummingbirds; it was an incredible moment! Another fantastic observation with the help of the scope was a wonderful male **White-winged Cotinga**, another endemic and threatened species.

The Conduru Park deserves more attention, but unfortunately our time was short. We continued our journey to Ilhéus. We stopped by the bus station to drop off Mateus, who would be heading back to Poções. We thanked him for the great days together in Bahia, and for his knowledge, dedication and professionalism.

From then on, we would face a true saga to get to Rio de Janeiro. In the airports, nothing much different from the usual, delayed flights, rescheduled, and our arrival, which was planned for 10 p.m., happened at 1 a.m., but we made it, phew! It was a long day and would be a very short night! Now, let's try to rest a bit because tomorrow we will start the final stretch of our expedition. The last stage now will be in the lands of Rio de Janeiro.

## 24 June:

### *Brazil's Caribbean*

Yesterday had been a long day, and our night was truly short. But we were into the final stretch of the trip with the final couple of days in Rio de Janeiro state. I awoke feeling a bit groggy and took some time to get going, but nothing that a cold shower and a good dose of coffee couldn't fix. On the road! Our first stop would be in the beautiful Lakes Region, more precisely in the municipality of Arraial do Cabo, with its crystal-clear sea in wonderful shades of blue and white sandy beaches, a place many call the Brazilian Caribbean. It's in this paradisiacal setting that we'll try to spot another target of this great journey through the rarities of Eastern Brazil. Our goal is to try to observe the Restinga Antwren (*Formicivora littoralis*), a restricted range inhabitant of the coastal scrublands of the Lakes Region, found only in this part of the state of Rio de Janeiro. Due to its specific habitat and small distribution area, combined with strong pressure and destruction of its habitat, it is a critically endangered species. The good news is that it recently became a symbol of the newly created Costa do Sol State Park, which aims to conserve the population of this species and the fragile biodiversity in the unique coastal scrublands, lagoon complexes, and coastal marshes of the Fluminense Lakes region. Despite its degree of threat, this target species didn't worry me because it is abundant in well-preserved scrublands of the region. We headed to Pontal do Atalaia, a famous tourist spot in Arraial do Cabo, with a stunning landscape and full of Restinga Antwrens. As soon as we got out of the car, we could hear some pairs calling nearby. Now it was just a matter of staying calm and waiting for a good sighting. Often it can be difficult to observe this species as it prefers dense scrub, but it occasionally exposes itself during its movements. We stayed there, following a pair until both surrendered and perched on an open branch, giving us a fantastic view of the male and female **Restinga Antwren** side by side. Another success and another species for the client's list and another tally for the overall trip list. We celebrated Kent's lifer and spent some time contemplating that beautiful landscape and some birds. Highlights included hundreds of **Brown Boobies**, **Magnificent Frigatebirds**, and **Kelp Gulls** in a communal nesting on the small French Island, which we spotted from Pontal viewpoint. After lunch in Cabo Frio, another stretch of road until our final destination, where we would try to spot the last target of the trip.

## 25 June:

### *The Last Target!*

The final day of our great journey in search of the rarities of Eastern Brazil had arrived. We arrived late yesterday afternoon at the spectacular Guapiaçu Ecological Reserve, located in the municipality of Cachoeiras de Macacu, in the central portion of the large forest corridor of the Serra do Mar in Rio de Janeiro. REGUA aims to preserve the forest remnants of the region, besides being one of the largest restorers of forest ecosystems in the state of Rio de Janeiro, with hundreds of hectares restored. They carry out important scientific research, environmental education, and local ecotourism. Currently, it has 5 registered private natural heritage reserves (RPPNs), totaling

730 hectares of areas destined for nature conservation and biodiversity maintenance. It is a renowned birdwatching hotspot, with nearly 500 recorded species, attracting people from all over the world interested in observing the hundreds of species in the region, especially many endemics and threatened species. Following the footsteps of previous missions, we will face another great challenge here, with the main objective of trying to observe the rare and inconspicuous Brazilian Laniisoma (*Laniisoma elegans*). The Laniisoma, which occurs exclusively in the Atlantic Forest, is rare and has quite demanding habits, occurring only in intact and well-preserved forests. In addition, it performs seasonal movements which are still not well understood, apparently undergoing altitudinal migrations, appearing at higher altitudes or in lowlands depending on the time of year. For this endeavor, we had the important support of the experienced local guide Adilei Cunha. Adilei has been working at REGUA for many years, knows the local birdlife very well, and knows exactly where to find our main target. So, let's head into the woods! By 7 a.m., we were already traversing the network of trails in the lower part of REGUA; the idea was to cover all the points where the Brazilian Laniisoma is usually found. Adilei had informed us that he had observed the species two days ago, so our hopes were alive. But it wasn't an easy task! We walked about 6 km, and no sign of our quarry. We decided to redo a stretch that we had covered in the early hours of the morning, and it was a wise choice. After a playback call, there was a response. We scanned the treetops, and there it was, a beautiful male **Brazilian Laniisoma**, hunting caterpillars (its favorite food) in the sub-canopy. We observed the specimen foraging for a while; it caught about four caterpillars and allowed us excellent observations. What a brilliant way to end a trip!



**The complete list of species recorded during this tour can be found in the eBird Trip Report posted at the following link: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/142064>**

On behalf of Agami Nature Tours, I'd like to thank Kent for once again trusting us with his select list of South American targets, and for yet another opportunity to travel together with him in Brazil in search of some of our rarest birds.











