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
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‘Atlantic Royal Flycatcher’
Onychorhynchus swainsoni, Tapiraí–Trilha dos Tucanos Lodge, São Paulo, Brazil, September 2021 (Pablo Andrés Ortega:  birdingpablo.com). This taxon is deeply genetically divergent, geographically disjunct and vocally distinct from other taxa in the Royal Flycatcher complex *O. coronatus*, which—as Tom Schulenberg explains on p49—is now proposed to comprise six distinct species.



Reflections on Guyana – and Red Siskins revisited

Lynn Houghton

It has been nearly 15 years since *Neotropical Birding* featured Guyana, which is far too long for a country that hosts great opportunities to see globally threatened species such as Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis*, West Indian Manatee *Trichechus manatus* and Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus*. Here are some reflections on a recent visit to this fabulous country.

As I fly over rainforest on route to Lethem, located on Guyana's south-western border with Brazil, the scene unfolding below me looks remarkably similar to clips from the BBC *Zoo Quest* series, filmed in the early 1950s, the series introduced young naturalist and broadcaster David Attenborough to a new audience. But I am primarily here to explore the vast savanna of interior Guyana, which lies on the Guiana Shield. This 1.7-billion-year-old Precambrian geological formation also encompasses parts of eastern Venezuela and Colombia, Suriname, French Guiana and northern Brazil. Elevated parts of the Shield—the Guiana Highlands—include table-like mountains called *tepui*s and several of the world's best-known waterfalls: Angel Falls, Kaieteur Falls and Kukenan Falls.

As covered in this magazine quite a few years previously (Collins 2007, Collins & Walker 2010), the Guianan Shield offers outstanding birding alongside stunning scenery, with an excellent group of biogeographical endemics including Guianan Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola rupicola*. In the Rupununi River catchment alone, there are thought to be 400 species of bird. Throw in charismatic, often rare, animals such as Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* (Endangered), Giant Anteater *Myrmecophaga tridactyla* (Vulnerable), the mythical Giant Armadillo *Priodontes maximus* (Vulnerable), Goliath Birdeater *Theraphosa blondi* (the world's heaviest spider) and the largest scaled fish in the world—Arapaima *Arapaima gigas* (Data Deficient)—and you have ample ingredients for thrilling ecotourism offerings.

1 Male Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus*, Venezuela, undated (Jhonathan Miranda/Red Siskin Initiative: redsiskin.org). This globally Endangered finch is a star attraction of any visit to Guyana.



Saving Red Siskin

I was visiting Guyana's Rupununi savannas to hopefully see one very important bird, Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus*, and to learn about conservation efforts helping this globally Endangered species. The male of this predominantly bright red finch has a black head, throat, flight feathers and tail. In the early 20th century, it was common and widespread throughout its then known range of north Venezuela, but there have been recent observations in only four states (Sharpe 2016, Clement & Sharpe 2020). In north Colombia, the last record was in 2000—and that was the first since 1978—while there have been no records from Trinidad since 1960, and even that population may have been introduced (Clement & Sharpe 2020).

Exploitation of the species typifies the evolving tale of humans and their desire to manipulate nature for their own benefit. The global millinery industry was reportedly an early threat to this attractive finch in the early 20th century, with feathers apparently used to adorn fashionable hats (see biogenomics.si.edu/research/research-action/back-brinksaving-red-siskin). This was the start of the species' downturn. As a gregarious species known for its pleasing song, Red Siskin was always likely to be targeted for the cagebird trade. Similar in size to a domestic canary, Red Siskin became the focus of 1940s German bird-breeders seeking to create a new 'red-factor' variant canary via hybridisation. For this experiment, thousands of birds were presumably caught and removed from their natural environment. Extraction continued for decades: in 1975 at least 3,000 birds were recorded in trade, with trade volumes persisting above 1,000 in 1982 (Clement & Sharpe 2020).

Only in Guyana has there been positive news. In 2000, Robbins *et al.* (2003) found a population of perhaps 675 birds in the Rupununi savannas of Upper Takutu–Upper Essequibo. The location was an amazing 950 km from the nearest Venezuelan population, prompting Sharpe (2016) to suggest that this was “surely one of the most remarkable ornithological discoveries of recent times”. It is possible that Guyana's Red Siskin population could number in the low thousands (Clement & Sharpe 2020, BirdLife International 2023).

The South Rupununi Conservation Society (f @southrupununiconservationsociety) was set up by a group of friends in 1998 to serve as the guardians of the Red Siskin (E. Earls pers. comm.). Since, then the SRCS has been instrumental in protecting Red Siskin habitat and assisting its conservation. Today, more than 100 SRCS indigenous rangers and teachers work



2 Male Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus* being fitted with colour rings, Rupununi savanna, Upper Takutu–Upper Essequibo, Guyana, May 2014 (South Rupununi Conservation Society:

f @southrupununiconservationsociety). Part of South Rupununi Conservation Society's study of this species involves colour-marking to enable individual identification in the field.



3 Our group trekking out to the Red Siskin site, near Sand Creek, Upper Takutu–Upper Essequibo, Guyana, November 2023 (Lynn Houghton).



4 Male Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus*, Rupununi savanna, Upper Takutu–Upper Essequibo, Guyana, undated (South Rupununi Conservation Society:

f @southrupununiconservationsociety). A population of the species was discovered in Guyana as recently as 2000.



5–7 Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus*, Venezuela (Jhonathan Miranda/Red Siskin Initiative: redsiskin.org). 5 Male, July 2017. 6 Female, July 2017. 7 Female, undated.

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in communities throughout the Rupununi to teach environmental education programmes and traditional skills, conduct research and manage community-run conservation programmes in threatened habitats and to benefit species including Red Siskin, Giant Anteater and the globally Vulnerable Yellow-spotted River Turtle *Podocnemis unifilis* (E. Earls pers. comm). The society is going from strength to strength, winning the 2023 Field Museum Parker/Gentry International Award in honour of its conservation work.

Scouting for Red Siskin

Established in 2016 (and thus too recently to be covered in Collins 2007 or Collins & Walker 2010), Wichibai Ranch has become an attractive destination for ecotourism, including for seeing Red Siskin close to the Wapishana village of Sand Creek. Our group, which included well-known British bird artist Darren Rees, joined inspiring conservation rangers from SRCS to drive an hour north, with 4WDs necessary to ford the Rupununi River. At Sand Creek, we picked up an additional local ranger and set about searching for Red Siskin.

For a while, we enjoyed common and widespread but attractive birds such as Fork-tailed Palm Swift *Tachornis squamata*, Vermilion Flycatcher *Pyrocephalus rubinus*, Fork-tailed Flycatcher *Tyrannus savana*, Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*, Bananaquit *Coereba flaveola*, Orange-bellied Euphonia *Euphonia xanthogaster* and Palm Tanager *Thraupis palmarum*. Eventually, a male Red Siskin was spotted taking a bath on a rocky hillside with a small creek running through it, causing quite a bit of excitement. Our return to Wichibai enabled us to see Jabiru *Jabiru mycteria* and Buff-necked Ibis *Theristictus caudatus* in marshy areas, with Black Caracara *Daptrius ater*, Crested Caracara *Polyborus plancus* and Pearl Kite *Gampsonyx swainsonii* making an appearance in the grasslands.

Wildlife and conservation at Rewa Eco-lodge

When our time on the Rupununi savanna ended, we headed north to lush rainforest at the community-built and operated Rewa Eco-lodge, which lies at the confluence of the Rupununi and Rewa Rivers, and is accessible only by boat. The enterprise provides local people with invaluable employment opportunities and gives outsiders a

taste of rainforest life. Rewa's local guides have intimate knowledge of their surroundings, and its flora and fauna, which makes for unforgettable experiences—such as the Goliath Birdeater shown to us by our guide Vivian on one outing; he knew exactly where to find this enormous spider.

Each evening Rewa was visited by spectacular Blue-and-yellow Macaws *Ara arauana*, while other visitors to our compound included Lineated Woodpecker *Dryocopus lineatus* and Brown Capuchin *Sapajus apella* monkeys. Common birds along the river were eclipsed by fabulous Giant Otters. Easy trails gave access to forest, where birds encountered included Black-throated Trogon *Trogon rufus*. We also learnt about parrot conservation from a local villager, Lorakim. Setting the context of millennia of sustainable local use of forest resources, she explained that macaws were still killed for their feathers for use in headdresses. The only way to curb this behaviour, in her view, is to educate youngsters via the immensely popular wildlife clubs. "It is only by changing the behaviour of the young that progress can be made in any conservation project."

Final days, final thoughts

As our exploration of Guyana came to a close, we headed to Georgetown. Despite being busy and developed, this sprawling capital city has wildlife everywhere (something lauded by Collins 2007 and Collins & Walker 2010). Even so, I was quite surprised to see West Indian Manatees *Trichechus manatus* (Vulnerable) in a canal alongside Guyana National Park (which is actually more the size of a city park). Apparently, these manatees are a permanent fixture, presumably thanks to abundant eelgrass.

Meanwhile, an evening sunset cruise along the Demerara River threw up one of the best spectacles of the trip. As the coastline is fairly undeveloped and saturated with growth, there was an enormous number of Scarlet Ibis *Eudocimus ruber*, Cattle Egret *Bubulchus ibis* and Great Egret *Ardea alba* roosting there, in fact too many to count. And they continued to fly over towards us, from across the river: a fine finale to an enthralling visit.

The generosity, humour, and good will of everyone we met in Guyana could not have been surpassed. Local people and ranch owners alike have embraced the ethos of conservation with great enthusiasm. Hopefully, the Red Siskin and many more species will thrive because of this.



On the way back from the Red Siskin site near Sand Creek village to Wichibai Ranch, birds seen included:

8 Jabiru *Jabiru mycteria* (near Karanambu, Upper Takutu–Upper Essequibo, Guyana, November 2019; Philip Precey/Wildlife Travel: wildlife-travel.co.uk) and **9** Crested Caracara *Polyborus plancus* (near Sand Creek, Upper Takutu–Upper Essequibo, Guyana, November 2023; Lynn Houghton).





Staying at Wichibai Ranch offers plenty of birding attractions, such as: **10** Sunbittern *Eurypyga helias* (May 2019) and **11** Sharp-tailed Ibis *Cercibis oxycerca* (March 2017). Both photographs taken at Wichibai Ranch, Upper Takutu–Upper Essequibo, Guyana by Duane Defreitas/Wichibai Ranch (✉ wichibai.com).



THE RED SISKIN INITIATIVE

Sharpe (2016) gave a synopsis of the Red Siskin Initiative, created in 2015 by a consortium of organisations from three countries, including Guyana's South Rupununi Conservation Society. Drawing on the website redsiskin.org, this box summarizes how impressively the Venezuela-based Initiative has developed since then. The Initiative's mission is 'to restore self-sustaining populations of Red Siskins across their historical distribution'. Partnership members collaborate on a range of measures to conserve Red Siskins both in the wild and in captivity. Scientists use fieldwork, labwork, and in-depth analyses to study the threats to, and the ecology and genetics of, the species. Surveys have included bioacoustic monitoring, using automated recording units, in South Rupununi, Guyana. The Initiative rescues Red Siskins confiscated from the illegal trade, and is developing strategies and methods to reintroduce them into the wild. In 2023, the Initiative successfully bred Red Siskins in its ex-situ aviary, with 16 eggs hatched. Captive and rescued birds are being

fed on nutrition derived from a new nursery of native plants. The Initiative has also been instrumental in building a regional network of conservationists seeking to combat cagebird trafficking in South America and has been working to reduce demand within Venezuela for Red Siskins. It has safeguarded more than 600 hectares of Red Siskin habitat (forests and agroforestry) in northern Venezuela. The Initiative has helped more than 40 coffee producers commit to using best practices in organic and bird-friendly coffee production, who have formed an agroforestry co-operative, ACAFLO (acaflo.com). The combination of these targeted conservation interventions—among many others led by the Initiative — suggests a more positive future for Red Siskins in both Guyana and Venezuela.



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12 Yellow-spotted River Turtle *Podocnemis unifilis*. Caiman House, Upper Takutu–Upper Essequibo, Guyana, December 2019 (Philip Precey/Wildlife Travel: wildlife-travel.co.uk). As well as helping Red Siskins *Spinus cucullatus*, South Rupununi Conservation Society is leading a new project to restore populations of this globally Vulnerable reptile.

13 Black Curassow *Crax allector*, Iwokrama River Lodge, Upper Demerara-Berbice, Guyana, November 2023 (Lynn Houghton). This impressive species also occurs at Rewa Eco-lodge.

14 Lineated Woodpecker *Dryocopus lineatus* was a regular visitor to the accommodation compound at Rewa Eco-lodge, Upper Takutu–Upper Essequibo, Guyana, November 2023 (Lynn Houghton).

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15 Lorakim, a villager and conservationist who lives near Rewa Eco-lodge, believes that Guyana's wildlife clubs—here at Yupukari, near Caiman House, Upper Takutu—Upper Essequibo, Guyana (Philip Precey/Wildlife Travel: ✉ wildlife-travel.co.uk)—offer great potential to change the behaviour of the young, and thereby help wildlife conservation.

16 West Indian Manatee *Trichechus manatus*, near Georgetown, Demerara-Mahaica, Guyana, November 2019 (Philip Precey/Wildlife Travel: ✉ wildlife-travel.co.uk). A canal next to Guyana National Park is a good site for this globally Vulnerable mammal.

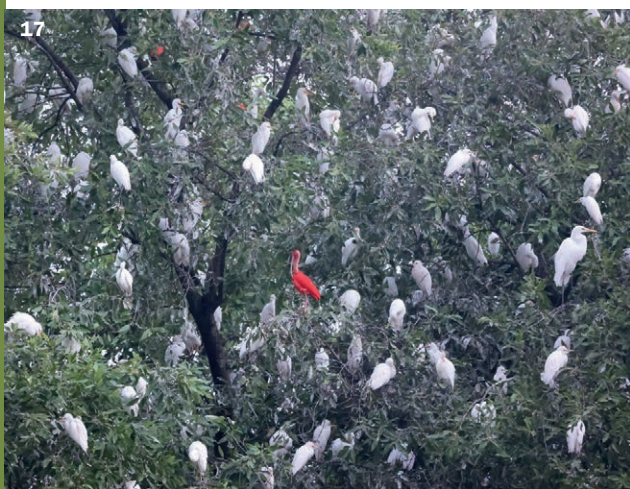
17 Scarlet Ibis *Eudocimus ruber*, Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* and Great Egret *Ardea alba* roosting along the Demerara River, near Georgetown, Demerara-Mahaica, Guyana, December 2023 (Lynn Houghton).



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