



Colombia's Undiscovered Amazon: Mitu

January 18 -25, 2021



Guianan Cock-of-the-rock

The Guianan Shield stretches from eastern Colombia through much of southern Venezuela to Suriname. It is characterized by sparse forests and sandy soils known as “white sand forests.” Though the forests are sparse, the region is an area of high endemism with a great diversity of plants and animals found nowhere else on earth. With the current political turmoil in Venezuela and the limited infrastructure in Guyana and Suriname, eastern Colombia provides birders with the best access to this unique and relatively unexplored ecosystem. However even in Colombia, few birders have had the opportunity to visit the white sand forests and its avian treasures are still largely undiscovered. However thanks to a developing network of contacts in Colombia, I am pleased to announce that Otus Asio Tours has been invited to bring a group to this unique Amazonian region. In conjunction with a tour to the region around Inírida, this tour will explore the white sand forests near the town of Mitu which is located several hundred miles to the southwest and is very near Colombia’s border with Brazil.

The regional list of birds that have been recorded around Mitu is nearly 400 species, many of which can be realistically seen only in eastern Colombia. This is another of Colombia’s best kept birding secrets and we are privileged to have the opportunity to visit.



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Mitu is very distant from Colombia's large population centers and is relatively undeveloped, so it is reachable only by small planes. Recently a domestic carrier has begun offering several flights per week from Bogota to Mitu making visits to the area possible. Several small hotels have opened in the area providing birders with basic but comfortable accommodations. We will base in Mitu which is located on the banks of the Rio Vaupes and the primary birding areas are all relatively close to the hotel, so there will be no lengthy and arduous drives that are often characteristic of birding trips to South America.

The landscape is quite fascinating. Due to the poor, sandy soils, the vegetation is sparse; quite different than the dense forests found in most of Amazonia. The area is dotted with many dome shaped hills, some rising as high as 1000 feet and the habitats include sandy savanna, seasonally flooded forest, ponds and lakes and humid lowland forest. Of course the birds will be the primary draw for our tour and we will be sure to encounter many with extremely restricted ranges that are essentially unavailable to birders anywhere else in the world. Many of the birds in the Mitu area will also be available around Inírida, however because of the extremely small ranges of many Amazonian birds there will be many different species present. Of particular interest will be species like Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock, Fiery Topaz and White-plumed Antbird. Furthermore, though species numbers in Amazonia are high, the number of individuals is low and many are often very difficult to find especially on a single visit. In Mitu we will not only have a chance to see new species, but also to make more attempts to see any we may have missed around Inírida.

Despite the remote location, the tour will be relatively civilized as we will base at a single air-conditioned hotel in Mitu, have short travel distances to the birding sites and walk primarily on level trails. The tour will take place during the dry season so mud and mosquitos should be minimal, at least relative to what one generally experiences in Amazonia.

Those who participated in the Inírida tour January 10-17 will overnight in Bogota on January 17.





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Daily Itinerary

Day 1: Monday, Jan. 18

Participants can arrive in Bogota today at any time although it is suggested that they avoid late night arrivals to limit the possibility of missing our flight to Mitu the following morning. Upon arrival at the Bogota International Airport, participants will be met by a driver and transferred to a nearby airport hotel. Bogota is a large city of over 7 million inhabitants and there are many activities available in the city to occupy a visitor for several days. A tram that ascends to Cerro de Monserrat provides a glorious view of the city as well as a chance to see a few high elevation species that won't be available during the tour. The city also has many interesting museums and cultural activities available, so arriving a day or two early is a good idea. For those choosing to come early, we will help arrange a variety of sightseeing tours and day birding excursions as well as help arranging transfers between the airport and the hotel. Night in Bogota.

Day 2: Tuesday, Jan. 19

After breakfast at our hotel we will transfer to the Bogota airport for our flight to Mitu. Flight service to the eastern part of Colombia is limited and the schedules vary, but we hope to be able to take a morning flight and arrive at our hotel by early afternoon. Despite the uncertainty of the schedule, we should surely arrive in Mitu in time to allow us some afternoon birding at the Senda Bocatoma trail. Night in Mitu.

Senda Bocatoma Trail. <https://ebird.org/hotspot/L1451781?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec>

Day 3-6: Wednesday-Saturday, Jan. 20-23

We will have 4 full days plus our first afternoon and final morning to delve into the birding riches around Mitu. As of this writing nearly 400 birds have been recorded in the region and there are probably 100 more that are likely but have yet to be found. Much of this area is comprised of seasonally flooded forests and has been designated as internationally important wetland areas, known as RAMSAR sites. Fortunately we will visit during the dry season so we will have access to all of the best birding sites.



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The region in which the tour will be conducted is a transition area between the wet and humid Amazonian basin and the drier Guianan Shield. Guianan habitat is much drier and more sparsely vegetated, with poor soils that support much less plant diversity than that found in Amazonia. The important thing from a birding standpoint is that the Guianan habitat, though drier, supports a rich but substantially different composition of birds than most of Amazonia. Since eastern Colombia is essentially the only easy entry point into this ecosystem, the tour will give participants a chance to see many birds that are unavailable anywhere else. Some examples off these birds include Blackish Nightjar, Green-tailed Goldenthroat, Orinoco Piculet, Green-tailed Jacamar, Bronzy Jacamar, Orinoco Softail, Blackish-gray Antshrike, Cherrie's Antwren, Imeri Warbling-Antbird, Yapacana Antbird, Crested Eagle, Rufous-crowned Elaenia, Chestnut-winged Hookbill, Golden-crowned Spadebill, Pompadour Cotinga, Yellow-crowned Manakin, Black Manakin, Lemon-chested Greenlet, Rose-breasted Chat, Yellow-green Grosbeak and Plumbeous Euphonia. Two species that are particular specialties around Mitu are Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock and Fiery Topaz. Both of these are lekking species and our visit will coincide with some of their highest levels of activity. Visits to these two lekking sites to see these spectacularly colorful species will surely be a memorable experience for everyone.

In addition to the specialties found in the white sand forests of the Guiana, there are also more widespread Amazonian species that occur in the area and some these would include Capped Heron, Greater Yellow-headed Vulture, Little Cuckoo, Hook-billed Kite, Black-eared Fairy, Reddish Hermit, Spotted Puffbird, Swallow-winged Puffbird, Gilded Barbet, Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlet, Cobalt-winged Parakeet, Black-headed Parrot, Lafresnaye's Piculet, Scale-breasted Woodpecker, Red-necked Woodpecker, Fasciated Antshrike, White-cheeked Antbird, Striated Antthrush, Long-billed Woodcreeper, Point-tailed Palmcreeper, Yellow Tyrannulet, Citron-bellied Attila, Spangled Cotinga, Screaming Piha, Amazonian Umbrellabird, Grayish Mourner, Wire-tailed Manakin, Golden-headed Manakin, Violaceous Jay, Black-faced Tanager, Flame-crested Tanager, Fulvous-crested Tanager, Short-billed Honeycreeper, Pectoral Sparrow, Velvet-fronted Grackle and Green Oropendola.



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By the end of our time in and around Mitu we should tally a bird list of at least 350 species and many of these will be new even for very seasoned and well-traveled birders. Links to several of the eBird hotspots we will visit are below. Clicking on these links will allow you to see what has been reported from these sites. This will give you a truer and more thorough representation of what to expect than the short list of possible species included above.

Comunidad Sabanitas.	https://ebird.org/hotspot/L4168469?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec
Sendero Sabanitas.	https://ebird.org/hotspot/L5112018?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec
Matracá Trail.	https://ebird.org/hotspot/L2613326?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec
Caño la Rompida.	https://ebird.org/hotspot/L7561897
Inírida River.	https://ebird.org/hotspot/L2613195
Cerro de Mavecure.	https://ebird.org/hotspot/L3170836?yr=all&m=&rank=mrec
Caño Vitina.	https://ebird.org/hotspot/L4151651

Day 7: Sunday, Jan. 24:

After a final morning of birding around Mitu we will return to the airport and fly back to Bogota. We will transfer to our hotel where we will have a final farewell dinner and tally our final bird list. Participants may choose to return home this evening on late night flights from Bogota. Night in Bogota.

Day 8: Monday, Jan. 25:

Participants can depart
Bogota anytime today.



Chestnut-crested Antbird



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Tour Information

Tour Size

This maximum number of participants for this tour will be 8.

Tour Cost

The fee for the tour is \$3695 per person in double occupancy from Bogota. This includes all meals from breakfast on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 8, all accommodations and ground transportation including 4X4 vehicles when necessary, airport transfers in Bogota, entrance fees and guide services provided by the tour leaders, snacks and potable water on tour vehicles and round trip domestic airfare between Bogota and Mitu. It does not include airfare from your home to Bogota, airport departure taxes (usually included in airline ticket), alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. The single supplement for this tour is \$250. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

Tour Registration

To register for this tour, please send a signed and completed registration form to Otus asio Tours at 900 Hillsborough Road in Chapel Hill NC 27516. The deposit for this tour is \$500 per person. The deposit is payable by check; credit cards are not accepted. The balance of the tour fee is due 90 days prior to the tour departure date and final invoices will be sent in September 2020.

Cancellation Policy

Cancellation penalties and refunds are based on the following schedule: if cancellation is made 90 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less \$250 per person is refundable. If cancellation is made fewer than 90 days before departure date and after final payment is received the refunded amount will be limited to the amount that can be recouped from merchants and booking agents. This could be as little as 25% of the tour price. We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.

Refund Schedule Before October 19, 2020: Your deposit minus \$250. Cancellation on or after October 19, 2020: Refund amount dependent upon amounts that can be recouped and may be as little as 25% of the tour price.



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Tour Information

Baggage

Everyone on the tour must limit their luggage to a single bag weighing no more than 15 kilos (32 pounds). The domestic carrier servicing Mitu is small and they are very strict on their baggage limits. Any bags that weigh in excess of the allowed weight will be charged an overweight fee. Soft-sided suitcases and duffels will save weight. In general this is not a trip that requires heavy packing. Cold weather clothing is not necessary due to the warm temperatures and those people doing both the Mitu and Inírida tours can do laundry in Bogota on the day between the two tours.

Climate, Altitude and Trip Difficulty

The tour will be conducted at a leisurely pace, with most walks covering short distances on level roads or trails. Altitude will vary from sea level to 2,000 feet elevation. In order to take advantage of the prime birding activity, we will begin our days at dawn. Early mornings will be cool, but expect hot temperatures and relatively high humidity by mid-day. We will plan to try and take a mid-day break on several days. Depending upon road conditions we may use boats on the Rio Vaupes to reach some of the birding trails. If necessary these will be flatwater trips and motion sickness will not be an issue.

Clothing

Light weight field clothing and casual attire are appropriate for this tour. A couple of pairs of quick dry lightweight pants and shirts that can be washed in the evening will help minimize your packing. We recommend long-sleeved shirts and long pants for protection from biting insects and the sun. Please refrain from wearing brightly colored or white clothing as it tends to frighten the birds. Military camouflage is not appropriate for this trip given the recent civil conflicts in the country. Mosquitoes should not be much of an issue, but biting no-see-ums can be problematic in places, so be sure to pack a good supply of insect repellent as well as plenty of sunscreen. Rubber boots will not be necessary, however a pair of water resistant hiking boots will be useful. A comfortable pair of tennis shoes or tevas may be desirable for areas around the hotel.



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Documents

To enter Colombia you will need a passport valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure date. Visas are not required for U.S. citizens entering Colombia.

Health

Please remember to bring any prescription medicine you are taking and to pack it in your carry-on baggage. We recommend that you be up to date with tetanus, typhoid and polio vaccinations, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B. None of these are required but prudent travelers should be current on these things regardless of their destination. Malaria is present in this part of Colombia, so please consult with a physician about appropriate medication. Yellow fever vaccination is not necessary for entry into Colombia, but participants should consider the pros and cons of receiving the vaccine. Again consulting with a travel physician is recommended. There are a few other mosquito and fly borne diseases present in eastern Colombia including Dengue Fever and Zika. There is no vaccine available to protect against this, but contraction rates are very low and the best protection is wearing long-sleeved shirts and long pants and using insect repellent. We suggest that you check the CDC website for current recommendations regarding malaria. The web address is www.cdc.gov/travel. Drinking the tap water is not recommended. Bottled or purified water will be available for purchase throughout the tour.

Currency

The currency in Colombia is the Colombia Peso. The current exchange rate is 1 USD = 3495 pesos. Changing money at the airport or using an ATM there is recommended. There will not be ATM's in Puerto Inírida. You won't need a large amount of cash for this tour. Alcoholic drinks and any small personal items would be all you will need it for.

Other Trip Essentials

Other important items will be sunglasses, sunscreen, lip balm, toilet paper and an alarm clock. You should also bring a refillable water bottle that you can refill from a large container that will be on our vehicles. A day pack in which to carry things you will need during our birding excursions is always a good idea.



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Tour Information

Miscellaneous

There is no departure tax due at the airport. This fee is included in the cost of your air ticket.
Electricity – 110 volts and the outlets are the same as those in the U.S.

Language – Spanish is the official language

Time – Central Standard Time.

Internet

Wi-fi will not be available at our hotel in Mitu and cell coverage will be limited during this tour.

Field Guides

McMullan and Donegan. 2014 2nd edition of Field Guide to the Birds of Colombia. This is generally the preferred guide to carry in the field as it is light. Pictures are not great, but it does have range maps and its taxonomy is the most current of any Colombian guide.

Hilty and Brown. Guide to the Birds of Colombia published by Princeton University Press in 1986. This book is large and cumbersome and very old. It has good drawings but the taxonomy is woefully out of date.

Questions

For further information
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