A few days at Regua, South-east Brazil, 13-15th Oct

I had always been very nervous, rather intimidated, about the prospect of birding in South or Central America. So many new, unfamiliar families, let alone species to learn and such a vast area. But when my paper was accepted for the International Conference on Computer Vision to be held in the Rio de Janeiro, I just *had* to spend some time birding.

My initial pre-trip research all pointed to this actually being a very good place to start. A number of excellent birding areas exist within easy reach of Rio and the Atlantic rainforest near Rio and Sao Paolo is considered one of the world's most significant regions of endemism: some 170 species are endemic, including a number of vulnerable and endangered species, and this vulnerability stems from the fact that in particular of the lowland rainforest that stretched along the entire coast, only 5% of the original forested area remains forested.

A full-on trip to this area of a couple of weeks could conceivably produce a list of in excess of 400 species, but my opportunity would be limited to a couple of days before the conference started, so could only ever be a taster. I made a few enquiries to various places, birdingpals, and professional guides, and in the end booked two days at Guapi Assu lodge, part of REGUA, a 7000ha private rainforest conservation and reforestation project near the Serra dos Orgaos mountains about 2 hours from Rio. I had found a couple of positive trip reports about REGUA, in particular a detailed one by Lee Dingain, who stayed there as a volunteer in 2006. Having spent a few nights there, I can now only back up everything positive Lee (and others) have had to say. The price was very reasonable (esp since at the time the US dollar was so weak against the pound – if only it were still true), food fantastic, accommodation very comfortable, and the guides friendly and very knowledgeable (when I visited in 2007 the lodge was relatively new venture and guiding with Leonado and Adilei was effectively included in the price. I suspect this is no longer the case, but I am sure it remains good value for money).

I elected to be picked up by private transfer from Rio airport and dropped back at my hotel in Rio, which cost an additional \$160 but worked without a hitch and was so convenient. I was met on the very jovial Alcenir. A familiar song next to his van was my first South Amercian bird, **House Sparrow** (what an anticlimax)! Alcenir drove at breakneck speed up to the lodge, stopping at for a quick coffee en route, but the journey took not much more than a couple of hours. One or two Black Vultures were the first non-European birds of the trip, but it was dark by the time we arrived at Guapi Assu. An unidentified Owl flew up from a nearby barn as we arrived but we didn't stop. My first lifers – and there would be lots - would have to wait for the morning.

Nicholas Locke, the owner with whom I had corresponded prior to arrival was otherwise engaged, so I was met on arrival by Jo, a friendly intern working for the World Land Trust in Argentina but visiting REGUA (which is sponsored by the WLT) for a few days. After a quick shower to wash 13 hours of travel out of my system I joined Jo, and Dave and Juline a couple from Kent (the only other guests my first night) for dinner – very tasty, though I resisted the temptation to indulge in too many free ciaprihnas mindful of what I hoped would be an early start and full day ahead.

14th October

An early rise the next morning turned out to be easy because of the time difference and I walked the lodge gardens, scoped the wetland below, and fired off my first digiscoped

shots of the week: Yellow-headed Caracara and Short-crested Flycatcher.

From other trip reports I had expected the gardens to be much busier than they were, buzzing with tanagers and hummingbirds. Others commented during the couple of days I was here that the feeders were unusually slow, perhaps because of a lack of rain. As it was there were no tanagers to be seen, even though several sp. are normally common in the lodge garden, but I did see my first hummers of the trip: both **Swallow-tailed Hummingbird**, and the cracking endemic **Black Jacobin** were regular visitors during breakfast. **Campo Flicker** was a colourful addition.

Dave and Juline had spent the previous week at Andy Foster's lodge not far away. They were on their last couple of days in Brazil. I joined up with them for a day's birding which was a great benefit to me since they had their "eyes in" and were able to help with identification. Because it was Sunday, the reserve's usual guides Leonado and Adilei, were on their day off. Nevertheless, Nicholas had provided another couple of locals to drive and guide us. They were certainly helpful with finding the birds and pretty good at mimicking calls, but with limited English, and not great knowledge of the species, they were not a lot of help with identification.

The plan today was to walk the Waterfall Trail, a lowland (300-500m) trail that rises up through secondary and primary forest up to a picturesque waterfall. To get to the start of the trail, we set off in the landrover, stopping periodically for various birds, most of which were common, but all of which were new to me: Guira Cuckoo, Ruddy Ground Dove, Chestnut-capped Blackbird, Blue-black Grassquit, Saffron Finch, White Woodpecker, Fork-tailed Flyatcher, Ringed Kingfisher, Rufous Hornero, Roadside Hawk.

As we continued our ascent in the landy a largish brightly coloured bird flew across the track and landed in trees above us. I located it in my bins but it had flown to a concealed perch by the time I got my scope out. Though my view was brief it was enough to identify it as a **Black-throated Trogon**. We tried to relocate it but although it kept calling it would not give up its exact whereabouts. A bizarre periodic clonk from across the valley was an invisible **Bare-headed Bellbird**, and a **Sharpbill**'s falling bomb whistle was heard once, but it too remained hidden. A highlight of the day was the fantastic display we had here from several stonking **Blue Manakin**. We ascended quite high in the vehicle and then set out on foot. After a short walk through forest seeing various sp. incuding **Orange-bellied Euphonia** we came to an open area teeming with birds, many of which are common, but of course all new for me: **Golden-chevroned Tanager**, **Sayaca Tanager Chalk-browed Mockingbird**, **Boat-billed Flycatcher**, **Southern Rough-winged Swallow**, **Blue and White Swallow**, **White-tailed Hawk**, **Chestnut-crowned Becard**, **Greyish Mourner**.

Higher up the trail as I stopped for a quick waz, hanging back behind the others I picked up an exquisite looking bird that guessed correctly was a Manakin, and Dave identified as a **Pin-tailed Manakin**. We enjoyed great views of a couple males and a female, along with another **Blue Manakin**.

Nearing the waterfall we had great views of a pair of endemic **Yellow-eared Woodpecker.** At the waterfall itself we stopped to eat our packed lunch (provided by the lodge). A Chestnut-capped Becard was attending a nest hanging over our picnic spot, and various tanagers fltted about high above us, but the highlight here was a **Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper.** We encountered some of the same species again on the descent, and added **Maroonbellied Parakeet.** Another very interesting bird we encountered had a very distinctive almost upside-down bill. We enjoyed great of views of what we later identified as a **Plain Xenops.** The highlight for me of the return came as we approached the open area again. Dave, at the head of the group, was walking quickly, head down, perhaps dreaming of a cup of tea or something stronger waiting back a the lodge. I spotted something significant at the edge of the clearing in fornt of us and, and I grabbed his rucksack to slow his progress. Luckily I did, because the bird, a cracking Spot-billed Toucanet, did not flush and we enjoyed great, close-range views. Sadly, it had moved so that it's monster spotted bill was obscured by branches by the time I had my digiscoping equipment set up, but still this was one of the birds of the day.

Other birds noted on this walk were **Olivaceous Woodcreeper** and **Striated Flycatcher**. After reaching the vehicle we stopped briefly once for a squiz at an unidentified raptor, which I now believe was a **Rufous-thighed Hawk**, and then enjoyed a welcome cup of tea back and some cake back at the lodge.

I left Dave and Juline relaxing, while I headed down to the wetland on my own. On the approach trail I soon noticed a small bird on branch overhanging the trail and landed the bins on an exquisite little hummer with an orange bill, later identified as a **Glittering-bellied Emerald**.

There was plenty of avian activity at the wetland: dozens of **Wattled Jacana**, hundreds of **Cattle Egret**, a few **Snowy Egret** (one of the few non-lifers), **Capped Heron**, **Black-crowned Night Heron**, **Moorhen**, **Gallinule**, **Squirrel Cuckoo**, **Smooth-billed Ani**, **Social Flycatcher**, **Ringed Kingfisher**. A productive spot for me was towards the back near the tower hide: a whirring of wings attracted my attention to a fabulous **Whitebibbed Manakin**, and nearby a **Double-banded Seedeater** was singing. Also here a **Blackish Rail** made a rare sortie out into the open while thousands of **Chestnut-capped** and **Chopi Blackbirds** roosted in the reeds.

Band-tailed Hornero is a rare bird that is easily seen at the REGUA wetland, though my digiscoped shots low light were horribly blurred. **White-faced Whistling Duck**, likewise is a difficult bird in most places, but the REGUA wetland has become one of *the* places to see it. I picked a small group as I was returning to the lodge and, experimenting with my new digiscoping setup realised that using the camera in movie mode was much more effective in low light conditions: passable clips of a group of six duck, as well as **Least Grebe** and **White-headed Marsh Tyrant** were proof of the principle.

I returned to the lodge as it started to get darker where I met Lee and Rachel who had just arrived back at REGUA having spent a couple of days away. Another great meal – and this time I did indulge a couple of caipirinhas – and then generally chilling out, going through the day's birds, looking at my pics and planning the next day. It doesn't get much better than this.

15th October

Lee and Rachel had planned to walk the Elfin Trail, a higher altitude route that would be a whole day trek, since it involves walking first to the waterfall, and then beyond. Jo was also keen to do this as it would be her last chance, but though I was tempted to join them, I decided that staying around the lodge trails would ultimately be more productive for me: I would see more species this way, though most would be fairly common. Perhaps a crude

analysis would be weighing quality versus quantity, but in my position, with everything a lifer, the quality argument was much less persuasive.

As things turned out, they could not have been better for me. Dave and Juline opted for a quiet day, walking the wetland on their own, while Lee and Rachel, having taken a look at the early morning cloud cover on the mountains, decided that the Elfin Trail would be fogbound and that a walk on the nearby lodge trails would be the better option. Both Leonado and Adilei joined us and in consequence, it was almost like I had three guides.

The day's birding began before we had left the lodge, with a Black Jacobin posing beautifully on an exposed branch.

We began with a walk down to the wetland, joined by Nicholas. Immediately the various commoner wetland sp,. were evident: **Yellow-chinned Spinetail** my first lifer of the day. Leonado tried tape luring South American Snipe but without success. This wetland is good for both S.A. Snipe and Giant Snipe, though I saw neither. A perched **Plumbeous Kite** gave nice views, posing along with a couple of **Kiskadee**.

As we walked up away from the wetland and almost immediately we had great views of a gorgeous little **White-flanked Antwren**. Adilei disappeared for a time and when he reappeared, apparently from down the steep slope back towards the water, it was with some excitement that he beckoned us down the slope. A brief conflab with Lee and a field-guide and we realised he'd found a Sungrebe – only the second ever record for REGUA. Immediately we all scrambled down the bank to find a view to a narrow, dark, overgrown channel about 30m away. After patiently watching the same patch of still backwater for about 15 mins, all of a sudden, a **Sungrebe** drifted into view and then out again before I can get any kind of decent picture.

Throughout the walk this morning it seemed that, with apparently no particular clue, Adilei or Leonado would stop and within a minute or so they had whistled in yet another cracking lifer. Both **Black-capped** and **White-winged Becard,** and **Reddish Hermit**, were early examples, and later an **Orange-bellied Euphonia** followed by a flock of various passerines including **Flame-crested**, **Ruby-crowned** and **Brazilian Tanager** and **Chestnut-backed Antshrike**, getting excited by the presence of Ferruginous Pygmy Owl which remained hidden deep in the thicket. Sadly I couldn't get a decent digiscoped shot of the Antshrike, but Lee managed a cracker with his DSLR.

Soon after leaving the wetland after a short walk through disturbed forest we came to a more open area, one of Nicholas' recent replanting areas. **Black** and **Turkey Vultures** were common, though we failed to find a Yellow-headed amongst them. A **Laughing Falcon** called but we failed to locate it, but both **Grey-headed Kite** and **Crane Falcon** circled then landed in view. **Grassland Sparrow** posed nicely in the saplings.

Early afternoon we walked a distance up into an area of forest regrowth without seeing or even hearing much now that it had become quite hot and steamy. We had not brought a packed lunch with us today, because our plan had been to head back to the lodge, but this was now at least an hour's walk back. Adilei came to the rescue, cutting down and sharing out a bunch of bananas, a remnant of the old plantation that has since been restored to its more natural state. One of the few bird-free occasions, but still a truly memorable moment.

The walk back to the lodge took us via the wetland, connecting with a stunning

Violaceous Euphonia en route, and then spent some time in the tower hide, where we had great views of Stripe-backed Bittern, Squirrel Cuckoo, Striated Heron, and Blackish Rail. Nearby Leonado's tape of a bizarre squealing tempted a Rufous-sided Crake into the open briefly and Double-collared and White-bellied Seedeaters.

Adilei's amazing eyes came to the fore again at the wetland when he borrowed my scope and apparently set it on a distant patch of waterlillies. I looked through and all I could see was a patch of lilies, until I saw an eye blink and realised he'd found a Cayman, skulking with only its eyes above the waterline – and incredible spot by the converted hunter.

Back at the lodge we enjoyed a well deserved lunch and made plans for a trip to some higher elevation forest later in the afternoon. Some chill-out time in the pool helped refresh and mid afternoon I was ready for more birding.

As we got our stuff together for a trip in the landrover, Adilei arrived with news of yet another great find – this time he had located a **Ferruginous Pygmy Owl** in one of the garden trees. I arrived in time to see this charismatic little bird perched in the open and joined by another for brilliant views, making up for missing it this morning.

More good birds followed as we ascended to the Matumba Trail in the landrover, Adilei amazingly picking out stuff as we drove in spite of the motion and bumps: **Burrowing Owl**, on the ground as expected, **Cliff Flycatcher** on the roof of the stand at the local football ground (what a location, classic Brazil, a pitch in the middle of the rainforest), and three cracking finds, first an endemic **Crescent Chested Puffbird**, and then a most obliging **White-necked Puffbird**, and finally an even more obliging **Rufous-tailed Jacamar**.

Leaving the vehicle we walked up into some secondary forest with great views across the valley to some beautiful primary forest that Nicholas is keen to acquire to afford REGUA protection. I was hoping we would come across a Frilled Coquette, and this site is indeed good for them, but we were not lucky enough in the short time we had. Some very distant **Channel-billed Toucans** were heard first then seen in flight. I managed to scope one landed, but for such a great bird this was a disappointingly distant and unsatisfactory view. Also seen here was another endemic, **Saw-billed Hermit**, that yet again Adilei found, this time in a dense thicket, perched and resting. Also noted here was **Rufous-bellied Thrush.**

We drove back to the lodge with darkness closing in. In spite of the high I was on from two of my best ever days' birding, there was also a sinking feeling that I could have a quick meal but then it was off in the car with Alcenir again for my drive to Rio. Midway through another great meal Nicholas' son came in with the "bad" news that Alcenir had been delayed, and that he could only take me to Rio early the next morning. I would have to stay the night at no extra charge. What a huge relief! I immediately felt more relaxed, and aided this state with a couple of caipirinhas.

16th October

An early start the next day was not problematic, with the time difference still I my favour and I arrived in Rio in time to get settled in my hotel, register for the conference, and make the opening session.

The next couple of days were spent working, but a lunch-time outing for a meal at the fort on the southern tip of Copacobana Beach produced **Southern Lapwing** (incuding a surreptiously taken photo), **Brown Booby** off the point (lots of obvious jokes from my nonbirding colleagues about a plethora of these on Copacobana and Ipanema beaches...), **Kelp Gull**, and of course dozens of **Magnificent Frigatebirds** that patrol the beach continuously throughout the day.

17th October

Wednesday morning I teamed up with conference delegate Ryan Farrell, a PhD student at University of Maryland who had contacted me a week or two before the conference suggesting some joint birding. We decided to spend a couple of pre-conference hours in the botanic gardens. We took a taxi there, but had to wait until exactly opening time as the officious guard would not let us pass until exactly 9am. Thereafter we had a good couple of hours, connecting with most of our targets for the gardens, though few were photographed since we had both come with bins only, mindful of security. Even as we were paying the few R required for entry I had my first stunning **Green-headed Tanagers**. Two birds which are tough to see elsewhere, but regularly encountered in the botanical gardens are **Slaty-breasted Woodrail** and **Rusty-margined Guan**. While we only had limited glimpses of the latter, the former was obliging enough to pose for some digi-binned shots. Decent views of **Channel-billed Toucan** rounded off our visit.

In the end we felt quite at ease in the gardens, and I would return on Saturday morning before my flight home with scope to try for a few digiscoped pics.

18th October

Thursday, Ryan had secured the services of Ricardo Gagliardi, a semi-pro bird guide from Rio. He had invited me along and we discussed various options. I was keen for a crack at higher altitudes, but Itataia was really just beyond reach for a one day excursion, and though the exact reason escapes me, we ruled the Serra dos Orgaos out as well. Ricardo had suggested REGUA to Ryan, who was keen since he had not had the weekend before the conf like I had, and so everything was new. While this was not my ideal, it was Ryan's gig and a return to REGUA should still yield some fantastic birding. After all, I had seen barely a quarter of the reserve list and there were several trails I had not gone near!

Ricardo picked us up early outside my hotel and drove to REGUA, arriving around 8am. Somewhat to my disappointment he headed straight for the waterfall trail, and it was apparent that this was the route he knew best from previous trips here. As we parked up, we noted **Rufous-fronted Thornbill** and **Streaked Flycatcher**. Soon after we passed on foot Sunday's Trogon site, this time yielding decent views of **Rufous-crowned Motmot**, great to see having only heard it on the weekend. Also near here was an endemic **Crescent-chested Puffbird**, which posed long enough for a record shot, but no more. The star bird here, though, Ricardo identified on call, and enticed out from its thick bamboo hiding place, was **Scaled Antbird**. Ricardo proved to be consistently spot-on with his identification by voice, and this was a huge bonus in the forest.

This trail is the site of a research and reintroduction programme for the endangered, endemic **Red-billed Curassow**. We stopped briefly to look at an untickable one in a compound, but a bonus here was **Grey-hooded Atilla**.

The climb to the waterfall took a couple of hours and I was keeping a sharp eye out for Shrike-like Cotinga (Elegant Mourner). Sadly I was never to see this species which adorns the REGUA logo and which seems to be a real specialty of REGUA; it turned out that

Adilei had located a territory only a few hundred metres beyond the waterfall, where Lee got some excellent photos of an obliging bird, but I did not find this out until we returned to the lodge and met Nicholas and Lee, by which time it was far too late.

Rain had been threatening and came down once or twice on the way up, and this slowed the birding somewhat, and even more so on the return journey. It also managed to worm its way into my camera which started to malfunction, hence I got virtually no digiscoped shots. There were few new birds for me, but **Yellow-backed Tanager** put in an appearance. The highlight should have been a Blond-crested Woodpecker, a bird that had surprisingly evaded me to this point. However when Ricardo located one high up on a trunk I took ages to get onto it and then managed to be standing in a position where its head was obscured, so though I saw the bird, for they were basically untickable views – and even if it was identifiable, there is something about seeing the eponymous feature of a bird that is important to me.

After a very late lunch and a chat with Nicholas we headed to the wetland for some afternoon birding before the trip back to Rio. The weather had cleared somewhat and this was now pleasant, easy-paced birding. We had mostly the same species as on my previous days, though we had views from near the tower hide of a female **Rufescent Tiger Heron**, and then later a male as we looked down to the wetland from the path to the Nursery Trail.

We returned to Rio after dark and Ricardo dropped us off at our hotels. In comparison to my previous days it had been a bit of a let-down, but this was not Ricardo's fault. He proved to be a nice guy and an excellent, knowledgeable guide.

20th October

My final day in Rio was a Saturday, after the main conference had finished. I had most of the morning at my disposal so I decided to head back to the Botanical Gardens, this time with my scope and my camera, which I had managed to dry out sufficiently that it was temporarily it turned out) working again. I ended the trip with an excellent few hours, scoring the same species I'd had with Ryan as well as a few others.

I headed straight for the pond in the middle where almost immediately I had a **Rufouscollared Sparrow** on the ground. On Wednesday Ryan and I had several parrots flying over but we never had them land. I was luckier this time and with armed with scope and camera I was about get some great views and record shots of both **Plain Parakeet** and **Red-shouldered Macaw** (introduced in Rio). Wandering further west into the park I had great views of a Violet Wood-Nymph, a couple of Green-headed Tanagers, a Rustymargined Guan walked out in front of me, then I located a small group of Channel-billed Toucans. Back near the corner of R. Pacheco Leao and R. Jardim Botanico I located another flurry of avian activity including a **Sayaca Tanager**, a **Buff-throated Saltator** that posed beautifully but took off between me pressing the shutter and the 2 second self-timer expiring, and a small very interesting looking bird that didn't stay still for long, but put in sufficient appearances for me to identify as a cracking **Rufous-winged Ant-wren**. This was a bird we had heard in the canopy on the Waterfall Trail on Thursday but refused to show itself. Ricardo confirmed for me by email a week or so later that they are not common, but certainly not unknown in the gardens.

Final bird of the trip was a nicely posed **Ringed Kingfisher** before I returned to the hotel to pack my bags. I had really enjoyed my time in the botanical gardens, in the end my

favourite place in Rio. The birding at REGUA, even as just a taster of what Brazil has to offer, was some of the best I have ever enjoyed and I hope to return to the Atlantic Forests, and REGUA in particular some day.

Systematic list:

Burrowing Owl White-collared Swift Grey-rumped Swift Saw-billed Hermit Rufous-breasted Hermit Swallow-tailed Hummingbird Black Jacobin Glittering-bellied Emerald Violet-capped Wood-nymph White-chinned Sapphire Surucua Trogon Black-throated Trogon Amazon Kingfihser Ringed Kingfisher Rufous-capped Motmot Spot-billed Toucanet Channel-billed Toucan White-barred Piculet	R R R R R R R R R R R R R R R R R R R	En
White Woodpecker Yellow-eared Woodpecker	R R	En
Campo Flicker Blond-crested Woodpecker Rufous-tailed Jacamar White-necked Puffbird	R R R R	
Crescent-Chested Puffbird	R	En
Pin-tailed Manakin White-bearded Manakin	R R	En
Blue (Swallow-tailed) Manakin	R	
Chestnut-crowned Becard	R	
White-winged Becard Black-capped Becard	R R	
[Sharpbill]	R	
[Bare-throated Bellbird]	R	
Yellow-bellied Elaenia	R	
Southern Beardless Tyrannulet	R	
Yellow Tyrannulet	R	
Bran-coloured Flycatcher	R	
Eye-ringer Tody-Tyrant	R	En
Yellow-lored Tody-Flycatcher	R	En
Common Tody-Flycatcher	R	
Cliff Flycatcher	R	
Yellow-browed Tyrant Masked Water-Tyrant	R R	
White-headed Marsh-Tyrant	R	
Cattle Tyrant	R	
Social Flycatcher	R	
Great Kiskadee	R,B	
Streaked Flycatcher		R
Boat-billed Flycatcher	R	
Variegated Flycatcher	R	
Tropical Kingbird	R	
Fork-tailed Flycatcher	R	

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Sayaca TanagerRGolden-chevroned TanagerRPalm TanagerRGreen-headed TanagerBBlue DacnisRRufous-headed TanagerB
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Yellow-backed Tanager	R
Chestnet-vented Conebill	R
Red-crowned Ant-Tanager	R
Violaceous Euphonia	R
Orange-bellied Euphonia	R
Buff-throated Saltator	R,B

152 seen 4 heard only