

# Birding Uakari Lodge in Brazil's Mamirauá reserve

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Birding at Uakari Lodge in the Mamirauá reserve of Amazonas, Brazil, is an exciting way to experience Amazonian flooded forest.

**T**he Reserva de Desenvolvimento Sustentável de Mamirauá (Mamirauá Sustainable Development Reserve), near Tefé in the Brazilian state of Amazonas, was established following efforts by a group of researchers, including José Márcio Corrêa Ayres, seeking to protect the (White) Bald-headed Uakari *Cacajao calvus calvus* (Fig. 2), an endemic and globally Vulnerable monkey of the middle Rio Solimões region. Aware of the intense connection between nature and humans, the researchers realised that effectively protecting this part of the Amazon (and its star primate) would require new community-based models of natural-resource management that combined the sustainable use of resources, with the needs of biodiversity and local

populations. Their awareness led to the creation of Brazil's first 'Sustainable Development Reserve'.

Located in the heart of the Amazon and covering 1.124 million hectares, primarily comprises *várzea* (seasonally inundated floodplain forest); no protected area holds more *várzea*. At Mamirauá the water level varies by ten metres across the year: the entire reserve gets flooded between May and July (Figs. 3–4), while the driest months are from September to November. An estimated 11,000 people live in Mamirauá. Many riverine communities use resources in a sustainable manner and operate within resource-management programmes such as fishing, forest management, agriculture and community-based tourism.

All photographs are taken in the Reserva de Desenvolvimento Sustentável de Mamirauá, Amazonas, Brazil. Unless otherwise specified, all are taken by the author.

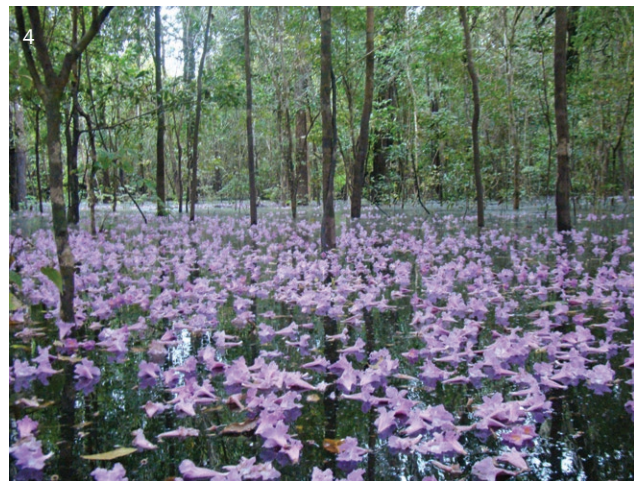
**1** Aerial view of Uakari Lodge (João Paulo Borges Pedro).





**2** (White) Bald-headed Uakari *Cacajao calvus calvus*, October 2009. The primate that prompted the conservation of Mamirauá.

**3-4** Várzea forest during the flood.



## Ecotourism at Mamirauá

The main and longest-running tourism enterprise in Mamirauá is Uakari Lodge, described by Lonely Planet as “one of the Amazon’s best ecotourism operations”. Founded in 1998, the lodge has become a reference point in community-based tourism for its sustainable practices, generation of benefit for local residents and abundance of fauna. Locals are the main beneficiaries of tourism: the vast majority of workers are residents of ten riverine communities and an indigenous village. In addition to providing income, tourism allows the participation of young people and the elderly, supports female empowerment and helps train people, among other advantages. Innovatively, Uakari Lodge also levies a social and environmental support fee, a collective benefit that is divided among participating communities.

## Mamirauá’s fauna

Mamirauá is home to about 50 species of mammals, 105 reptiles and amphibians and 580 fish. Studies are still being carried out and the numbers will certainly increase. Species that stand out include Arapaima *Arapaima gigas* (the world’s largest freshwater scaled fish), Black Caiman *Melanosuchus niger* (Fig. 5), White Bald-headed Uakari, the endemic and globally Vulnerable Black Squirrel Monkey *Saimiri vanzolinii*, and Jaguar *Panthera onca* (Near Threatened; here at the Amazon’s highest-known density). The 370 species of birds so far recorded are a special attraction for anyone visiting Mamirauá. During the annual drought, fish are concentrated near the water courses, a feast for piscivorous birds. In the wet season the water floods the forest, which raises boat-borne birders towards the canopy and its birds.

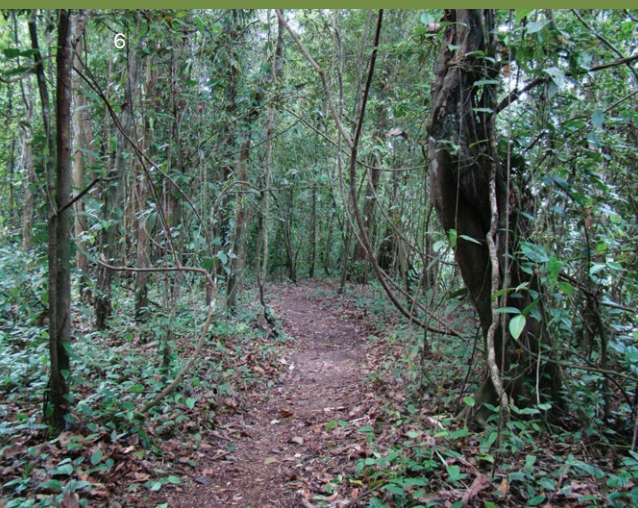




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5 During the drought, thousands of Black Caiman *Melanosuchus niger* are attracted by concentrations of fish – and so too waterbirds such as Great Egret *Ardea alba* and Snowy Egret *Egretta thula* (November 2012).

6 The Iuri trail, one of 14 forest trails at Uakari Lodge.



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Different ecosystems make for a varied experience. Forest and *chavascal* lie close to the lodge. The former has greater plant diversity, with tall and leafy trees; the latter, lying in lower, readily flooded areas, harbours a dense understorey. Further from the lodge, accessible by motorised canoes along the Solimões and Japurá rivers are fluvial islands. The following sections summarise the birding highlights of different habitat types.

## Birding the forest

Most of the 14 trails at Uakari Lodge (Fig. 6) are found in forested areas, known as 'high' and 'low'

*várzea*, which are each markedly species-rich. High *várzea* establishes above a mean flood level of 3.0 m; the inundation height in low *várzea* is up to 4.5 m. Streams and creeks riddle the forest. Flooding does not affect the distribution of bird forest species. What changes is the way visitors bird the forest (on foot during the drought and by canoe during the flood).

Woodcreepers and woodpeckers are two abundant groups within the forest. Long-billed Woodcreeper *Nasica longirostris* (Fig. 7) is one of the most common species, but you can also find Strong-billed Woodcreeper *Xiphocolaptes promeropirhynchus* and Zimmer's Woodcreeper *Dendroplex kienerii* (Near Threatened; a *várzea* specialist). Among woodpeckers, Cream-coloured *Celeus flavus*, Ringed *C. torquatus*, Scale-breasted *C. grammicus* and Yellow-tufted *Melanerpes cruentatus* are common.

White-chinned Jacamar *Galbula tombacea* and Scarlet-crowned Barbet *Capito aurovirens* are relatively common on all trails. The former is usually close to water bodies and the second in both high and low *várzea*. Velvet-fronted Grackle *Lamprosar tanagrinus* is found frequently. With a little luck (there are few records), it may be possible to find Rufous-capped Nunlet *Nonnula ruficapilla* and the beautiful Pavonine Quetzal *Pharomachrus pavoninus*. Easier to see are Black-tailed Trogon *melanurus* and Collared *T. collaris* trogons. In the canopy, look for Purple-throated





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**7** Long-billed Woodcreeper *Nascia longirostris*, July 2014. One of the most common furnariids in the forest at Uakari Lodge.

**8–9** The edge of creeks, particularly Cano do Rato and Cano da Guariba, are good for nesting Zigzag Heron *Zebrilus undulatus* (Near Threatened). **7** March 2015 (Aline Alegria); **8** April 2014.



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Cotinga *Porphyrolaema porphyrolaema*. Within the forest, sharp eyes may spot a motionless Spotted *Bucco tamatia* or Chestnut-capped *B. macrodactylus* puffbird. In slightly lower forested areas, crisscrossed with thorns and vines, Black-chinned Antbird *Hypocnemoides melanopogon* can be found. In yet lower-lying areas, but inhabiting

the canopy, are groups of Purple-throated Fruitcrow *Querula purpurata*.

Almost every year during the flooding, nests of Zigzag Heron *Zebrilus undulatus* (Near Threatened; Figs. 8–9) can be found along the edge of creeks, particularly Cano do Rato and Cano da Guariba. The latter, together with Paraná





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**10** Agami Heron *Agamia agami*, October 2017. The best chance of this sensational and globally Vulnerable waterbird is along either the Cano da Guariba or Paraná do Apra.

**11** Wattled Curassow *Crax globulosa*, July 2019 (Miguel Monteiro). Look for Uakari's star bird along the edge of main channels, particularly during the dry season. A bird of the middle and upper strata of the forest, this Endangered species requires patience to see.

**12** Patiently birding the *chavascal* understorey should produce Plumbeous Antbird *Myrmelastes hyperythrus* (August 2017).



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do Apra, is good for Agami Heron *Agamia agami* (Vulnerable; Fig. 10) during the dry season. Without a doubt, Mamirauá's main avian attraction is Wattled Curassow *Crax globulosa* (Endangered; Fig. 11). Also found at the edge of the main channels, especially during the drought, it can be observed within the forest, where it frequents the middle and upper strata. It is shy and wary, however, so patience is necessary to see it.

## Birding the *chavascal*

The dense understorey can make birding the *chavascal* problematic, with some areas practically impassable. This is, however, an excellent environment for *Thamnophilidae*. With patience, it is possible to observe White-browed Antbird *Myrmoborus leucophrys*, Plumbeous Antbird *Myrmelastes hyperythrus* (Fig. 12), Amazonian Streaked-Antwren *Myrmotherula multistriata*,





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## LOGISTICS

**Getting there** The starting point for Uakari Lodge (▲ 3°3'45.6"S, 64°50'56.6"W) is the town of Tefé, 600 km west of Manaus, the capital of Amazonas state. There are three options to get to Tefé from Manaus: regional boats (cheaper but take c.48 hours); speedboats (12–14 hours); and air (1 hour). From Tefé, it takes another 1h30 on Uakari Lodge speedboats.

**Accommodation** Uakari Lodge is a floating structure that rises and falls with water levels. Ten rooms offer capacity for 24 people. Electricity is provided by solar energy. Prices (double or triple) start at US\$606 for a 4-night package.



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**13** Amazonian Umbrellabird *Cephalopterus ornatus*, July 2015. Best looked for in *Cecropia* trees on islands at the mouth of the Rio Japurá, particularly during the flood (Aline Alegria).

**14** White-bellied Spinetail *Mazaria propinqua*, August 2018. Look for this and other interesting furnariids in the grassy vegetation that fringes river islands.

**15** Castelnau's Antshrike *Thamnophilus cryptoleucus*, November 2018. Another island species, this Near Threatened antbird often occurs close to human communities.





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**16** Bicoloured Conebill *Conirostrum bicolor*, November 2018. This Near Threatened species is easily found on river islands near Uakari Lodge.

**17** Great Egrets *Ardea alba* and Snowy Egrets *Egretta thula* gathering to feed in a shrinking waterbody (November 2009).



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Leaden Antwren *Myrmotherula assimilis* and Black-crested Antshrike *Sakesphorus canadensis*. Johannes's Tody-Tyrant *Hemitriccus iohannis* and Orange-fronted Plushcrown *Metopothrix aurantiaca* also occur in this habitat.

## Birding river islands

Fluvial islands are common along the Japurá and Solimões rivers. They vary in terms of ecological succession, with some more recent, others with more undergrowth and yet others at a more

advanced stage, with *Cecropia*, *Ceiba* and other tall trees.

Amazonian Umbrellabird *Cephalopterus ornatus* (Fig. 13) is found on the islands at the mouth of the Rio Japurá, amid the *Cecropia*. The best time to find it is during the flood. Encounters with Plum-throated Cotinga *Cotinga maynana* are uncommon but checking the top of *Cecropia* is a good strategy. At the edge of the islands, in the lower vegetation of grasses and the grass-like *Gynerium sagittatum* (locally known as *tacanaís*,





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When birding by boat, key species to look out for include **18** Hoatzin *Opisthocomus hoazin* (October 2017) and **19** Horned Screamer *Anhima cornuta* (September 2017).

Amazonian Black-Tyrant *Knipolegus poecilocercus* and several furnarids can be found. These include Red-and-white *Certhiaxis mustelinus*, Dark-breasted Spinetail *Synallaxis albigularis*, White-bellied Spinetail *Mazaria propinqua* (Fig. 14) and Parker's Spinetail *Cranioleuca vulpecula*.

The Near Threatened Castelnau's Antshrike *Thamnophilus cryptoleucus* (Fig. 15) also occurs on islands, often close to human communities. Easily found are Black-and-white Antbird *Myrmochanes hemileucus*, a species exclusive to the floodplain islands, and Bicoloured Conebill *Conirostrum bicolor* (Near Threatened; Fig. 16). There is also the possibility of encountering Ash-breasted Antbird *Myrmoborus lugubris* (Vulnerable), a *várzea*

## FUTURE BIRDWATCHING POSSIBILITIES

In addition to Mamirauá, there are other reserves close to Tefé, two of which are initiating tourism activities (albeit with less infrastructure): Floresta Nacional de Tefé National Forest and Reserva de Desenvolvimento Sustentável de Amanã. This suite of conservation units provides an excellent opportunity to observe a large number of birds in a few days, within a relatively small distance. Like Mamirauá, Amanã is located north of the Rio Solimões, but it occupies an area of transition between *várzea*, *terra firme* (non-flooding forest), and *igapó* forests. Tefé is a reserve south of Solimões, located on *terra firme*. In addition to birds, these three areas together have about 20 species of primates.





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20 White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis* (left) and Pectoral Sandpiper *C. melanotos*, October 2015. From August onwards, look for these and other shorebirds along the river beaches and riverbanks.

specialist threatened by accelerating deforestation in the Amazon region.

## Birding by water

Boats and canoes are the main transportation around the várzea, making it easy to observe birds along riverbanks. Some species are mobile, not favouring any one particular environment but following resources. This is true of psittacids, of which 19 species are known from Mamirauá. Festive *Amazona festiva* and Short-tailed *Graydidascalus brachyurus* parrots are abundant. Each evening hundreds of each gather to roost at Cano do Apará, a creek. In the flood season, when there are more fruits in the várzea, other species of parrots appear. These include Mealy Parrot *Amazona farinosa* and Scarlet Macaw *Ara macao*. This is also a good time to encounter fly-past Bare-necked Fruitcrow *Gymnoderus foetidus*.

During the drought, the concentration of fish makes for impressive spectacles. Along with thousands of Black Caiman, you can expect to see a profusion of Great *Ardea alba* and Snowy *Egretta thula* egrets (Fig. 17), Neotropic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus* and Large-billed Tern *Phaetusa simplex*. Several species of kingfishers, Black-collared Hawk *Busarellus nigricollis*, Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga* and Cocoi Heron *Ardea cocoi* also gather in search of fish.

At the edges of watercourses and lakes, Hoatzin *Opisthocomus hoazin* (Fig. 18) is abundant at any time of the year. Along Cano do Apará,

look for White-eared Jacamar *Galbalcyrrhynchus leucotis* perching in lower branches. Lago Mamirauá hosts pairs of Horned Screamer *Anhima cornuta* (Fig. 19) plus Yellow-hooded Blackbird *Chrysomus icterocephalus*.

## Migration birding

Mamirauá also lies on the migration route for species from far-flung regions in both the Northern and Southern hemispheres. From August, shorebirds begin to be observed on the river beaches and along dessicating riverbanks. These include Pectoral *Calidris melanotos*, White-rumped *C. fuscicollis* and Least *C. minutilla* sandpipers (Fig. 20). In some years thousands of Purple Martins *Progne subis* are observed in the region of Lago Mamirauá (with the odd Southern Martin *P. elegans* perhaps passing unnoticed), while Lesson's Seedeater *Sporophila bouvronides* also appears on low and floating vegetation in the dry months. From the south hails the odd Rufous-tailed Atilla *Attila phoenicurus*.

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