



By Steven Hilty

When you hear the phrase "llanos"

roll off the tongue of a native Spanish speaker, there is likely to be an almost romantic aura associated with it. The word means plains or grasslands in Spanish, but there is more to it than a simple textbook translation. Mention the llanos to a Venezuelan or Colombian and you are certain to evoke an affectionate, almost reverent response. So powerful is the mystique of these prairies that even if the per-

son has not seen them, he or she is likely to speak with pride of their vastness, their beauty and their wildlife.

They spread across a vast region that stretches from the mouth of the Orinoco River westward through central Venezuela to the Andes and southward across neighboring Colombia to the Amazon basin. All in all, the llanos cover an area more than nine times the size of Switzerland.

North Americans may lament the loss of our own great spectacles of wildlife—the Bison of the great plains,

the Passenger Pigeons and Carolina Parakeets of the eastern deciduous forests, the great throngs of waterfowl which are largely a memory—but the birder and naturalist that yearns for a glimpse of what these spectacles must have been like should turn to the llanos.

Birds seem to be abundant almost everywhere here—in the pastures, marshes, lagoons, gallery forests along streams, and even in brushy waste areas. During the dry season (April-October), birders can

run up lists in excess of 200 species in a few days, and by visiting various parts of the llanos, their lists can go considerably higher.

Raptors are particularly numerous and observers may occasionally spot more than 20 species in one day. Scarlet Macaws, chattering parrotlets and parakeets as well as pigeons, doves, flycatchers, orioles, saltators and finches are all numerous. Patches of tall streamside forests harbor jacamars, puffbirds, antbirds, manakins, woodcreepers, and many flycatchers. Patient

Birding

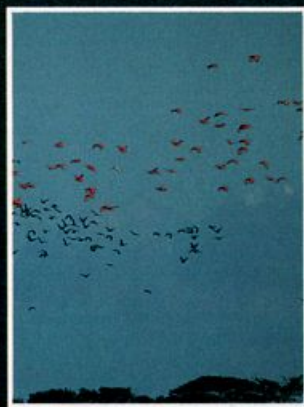
the **VENEZUELAN LLANOS**

observers may be rewarded with views of stately Yellow-knobbed Curassows.

Quiet boat trips on slow-moving streams are likely to add sungrebes, sunbitterns, wood-rails, kingfishers, and perhaps a glimpse of a shy Agami Heron with its sleek plumage illuminated by flecks of sunlight filtering into its shady, creekside lair. On one such trip, I sat in a small flat-bottomed boat in the midst of a vast flat marsh in southwestern Venezuela, resting my elbows on my knees, gazing through binoculars at a spectacle of wildlife

almost beyond comprehension. For a few precious minutes I was part of a 360-degree panorama of waterfowl—herons, egrets, ducks, shorebirds, caiman and other marsh dwellers—that stretched as far as I could see in every direction.

Perhaps something similar could have been seen in North America two centuries ago, though of course the species would have been different. But now it seemed I was gazing at something that might have been seen by humans walking here a thousand years ago. If just



for a moment, this was about as close to a time machine as anything I am ever likely to experience.

After the sun sets, a new cast of wildlife ventures forth to claim the grasslands and

woodlands. Great and Common potoos, their eyes reflecting fiery orange in spotlights, watch for moths from bare stubs. Thick-knees wail and clatter from dark pastures and half a dozen kinds of owls, as well as Pauraque, White-tailed and Little nightjars, Nacunda, Lesser and Band-tailed nighthawks venture forth to take over the night. Spotlights pick out many kinds of mammals: crab-eating foxes are particularly numerous and most visitors will see these confiding and lovely little animals, as well

as many white-tailed deer. Giant Anteaters (abroad by day too), crab-eating raccoons, peccaries, and ocelots can all be seen with time and a little luck. And don't forget to switch off the spotlights and look up at the stars. Today, few urban dwellers are able to see the skies as our ancestors did. But you will here.

Visitors should recognize two important physiographic regions in the llanos because birdlife of the two is somewhat different. The llanos is drained by several rivers flowing eastward in parallel lines toward the mighty Orinoco. These rivers flow across hundreds of miles of land so flat that the gradient is measured in mere inches-per-mile.

During the rainy season, the "low" llanos flood almost completely, turning thousands of square miles into shallow, grass-choked lagoons and sluggishly flowing rivers. Cattle are trucked out to higher ground and overland communication ceases except where roads are diked above high water level. This is a land of wide-open horizons, dominated by grass, where trees grow mainly along streams and in widely

During the rainy season, November through March, the plains in the low llanos flood, but this may be when they are most spectacular. Photo/Kevin Schafer & Martha Hill.



This Rufous-tailed Jacamar is just one of the hundreds of birds you may see in the llanos. Photo/Kevin Schafer & Martha Hill.

scattered forest islands of varying sizes. This is the place to see waterfowl and waders of all kinds. Llanos specialties include White-naped Xenopsaris, Amazonian Black-Tyrant, and Orange-fronted Yellow-Finch.

Flooding is less extensive in the slightly elevated "high" llanos, which are located around the perimeter of the region, particularly in the north, where occasional lines of low hills, composed of very ancient rock strata, provide visual relief from the grasslands. In the high llanos there is an uneasy tug-of-war between grassy plains and dry woodlands, but ranching favors grass over forest and now parts of the high llanos once covered by trees have been converted to grass. The high llanos are best for dry-forest birds including forest raptors, hummingbirds, flycatchers, and Yellow-knobbed Curassows.

ON THE ROAD

There is fine birding along the main highway that leads from Calabozo to San Fernando in the heart of the llanos. There aren't many opportunities to get off the highway, because it is surrounded by privately-owned land, but a great many birds can be seen right from the shoulder of the road.

The best area to see avian wildlife begins near the rice fields around Calabozo, and most of your effort should be concentrated on the long stretch of road between there and San Fernando. Wet lowlands, which are particularly good for waterbirds and raptors, stretch 15-20 kilometers just



north of San Fernando.

From San Fernando you can continue west to Mantecal and then northwestward to Barinas, at the base of the Andes. Driving from San Fernando to Barinas takes about seven to eight hours. On this stretch of the road, the most productive llanos birding is around San Fernando and then between Mantecal and Bruzual. During the December to May dry season large groups of waterbirds gather at drying pools and borrow pits excavated during the construction of this road. Groups of more than 100 Jabiru, as well as hundreds of Maguari and Wood storks occasionally may be seen from the roadside. Sunbitterns and wood-rails frequent the shores of virtually every body of water and a parade of hawks and scavengers patrol by air as well as on foot.

An immense set of dikes, called *módulos*, which were built to hold water for cattle in the dry season, are located along the highway just north of the La Yé junction. Among the thousands of whistling-ducks that frequent the marshes here, watch for Brazilian, Muscovy and Comb ducks. Occasionally Orinoco Geese and Pied Lapwings can be seen between here and Bruzual.



A Great Potoo camouflaging as a tree.
Photo/Nevin Schafer & Martha Hill.

Off The Beaten Track: In addition to llanos grasslands and gallery forests, you'll see the new Cinaruco-Capanaparo National Park, an hour south of San Fernando, contains large Moriche Palm groves, a few sand dunes, and some very ancient rocky hills. The list of birds reported for the million-and-a-half-acre park is well in excess of 300 species and includes species like Lesser Razor-billed Curassow, Festive Parrot and Yellow-crowned Manakin, which are typical of the white sandy soil forests that lie to the south, rather than of the llanos.



The drawback for visitors is that there are no overnight facilities inside the park. However, a new lodge, the Adventure Camp Los Indios, which began operating in 1990 on a large cattle ranch, is close to the park border. I have not visited this lodge, but information about it is available in *Birding in Venezuela* (by Mary Lou Goodwin, published by the Sociedad Conservacionista, Audubon de Venezuela; available from the Caracas Audubon Bookshop in Las Mercedes Shopping Mall, tel: 92-28-12). Both the ranch and the park can only be visited from about December to early May because the entire region floods during the rainy season.

WHERE TO STAY

A Place In Town Caracas and environs: There is a wide variety of hotels in the capital—from the Eurobuilding (\$80+ per night; Calle Amazonas in Chuao District; 02-923-470), Hilton (\$150+ per night; Avenida Libertador Y Sur 25, Apartado 6380; 02-574-1122); and Tamanco, which has the nicest grounds (\$80+ per night; Av. Principal de Las



The Orinoco Goose (*Neochen jubata*) is best found in forested rivers and wet savannahs. Photo/Kevin Schafer & Martha Hill.

Mercedes; 02-208-7000). The Avila could use a facelift but it has nice grounds with trees, birds, and a relaxed atmosphere. And the price is right (\$40+; Av. Jorge Washington in San Bernardino District; 02-515128). In the Sabana Grande area, the Hotel Karibik offers good value (\$40+; Av. Las Delicias Entre; 02-729961). On the coast—but not on the beach—are the Macuto Sheraton (\$80+; Caraballeda in Caribe District; 31-575-1432) and the Melia-Caribe (\$80+; Caraballeda, La Guaira; 31-924-0109).

Maracay: On the edge of Henry Pittier National Park, with its famous Rancho Grande Biological Station, the city is a convenient gateway to the llanos. The best choice of hotels is the Hotel Pipo, a modern high-rise (\$50+; Av. Ppal El Castano; 043-416109). Despite its spacious grounds, the once-top-of-the-line Hotel Maracay is not recommended; its reputation has been tarnished by security problems. Here is a caveat, visitor: Avoid Henry Ritter Park on weekends; it fills up with locals *en route* to the nearby beach.

Barinas: This is a hard-working town, the agricultural hub of the western llanos and a good base for exploring nearby areas in the Andes. There are not many hotel choices; The Hotel Turistico Varina Barinas is probably the best (\$35+; Av 23 De Enero; 73-22033).

San Fernando de Apure: A frontier town, this is the only convenient place to stay if you don't want to mortgage your house to afford rooms at one of the luxury ranches. The Hotel Plaza is probably the best (\$23+; Calle Bolivar Frente a la Plaza Bolivar; 47-21255); you can also try the Boulevard (\$12+; Paseo Libertador Boulevard; 47-23122), La Torraca (\$15+; Calle 12; 47-22777), and La Fuente (\$13+; Gerente Juan Gonzalez; 47-23233). All have air conditioning, which you'll need. But water and other conveniences are less reliable. Don't count on getting an early breakfast.

Home On The Range: A Ranch Of One's Own

Hato Piñero: Located in the high llanos, the vast Piñero Ranch, spreads over more than 170,000 acres in the north central llanos. Although the old ranch house—which you can tour—is a treasure trove of Spanish antiques, this is a working cattle ranch that serves up a splendid fare of luxury accommodation (\$110 per night), personal attention and spectacular birding.

Birds are abundant and very easy to see; experienced birders may spot more than 175 species in a day, and even novice birders may be able to identify nearly 100.

Visitors can start birding right at their doorstep. As you walk over the lovely Precambrian rocks with wave-washed surfaces that have been quarried from nearby hills and laid in elegant patterns around the old ranch house, look up into the giant Samán and fig trees that shade the courtyard and patio. They provide refuge and food for a fascinating array of birds including Scarlet Macaws, Yellow-crowned Parrots, Plain-fronted Thornbirds, a variety of flycatchers, Bare-eyed Thrushes, Burnished-buff Tanagers, Gray Seedeaters, Yellow Orioles and colorful Red-capped Cardinals. A nearby watertank is likely to attract an assortment of doves and finches. Flowering trees will host many hummingbirds and tanagers including an occasional Hooded and Sayaca tanager.

To make the most of this ranch, birders should visit as many far-flung reaches of the property as possible, though this may be impossible in the rainy season when a number of roads are flooded. Good trails border both sides of Caño San Jerónimo (Geronimo Creek), and a boat trip on the creek itself can be marvelous.

Because hunting has been prohibited for 40 years, and many roads wind among vast dry forests, it is one of the

A BIRDER'S BAEDEKER

Getting There To enter Venezuela you'll need a valid passport and a 90-day tourist card, issued by the airline at your point of departure.

The major air carriers are Viasa (the national airline of Venezuela), and American, with daily flights to Caracas from cities such as New York, Miami, Dallas and Los Angeles.

Cities within Venezuela are served primarily by two national airlines, Avensa and AeroPostal. Small towns, including many in the llanos, are served by Aerotuy which operates single- and twin-engine prop planes.

Money A strong dollar makes Venezuela a good bet for foreign travelers at the present, though the exchange rate has varied somewhat in past years. At press time, the exchange rate was 69,550 to the dollar.

Climate It is said that there are only two seasons in the llanos, a season of dust, and a season of mud and there is a grain of truth to this axiom. The plains of the llanos are almost table-top flat. A fractionally small gradient drains water eastward toward the Orinoco River, but at a pace far too slow to handle the volume of rain during the wet months. Consequently, when the rains begin in May or June, most of the region floods. Rivers quickly overflow their banks and water seeps across the land from horizon to horizon.

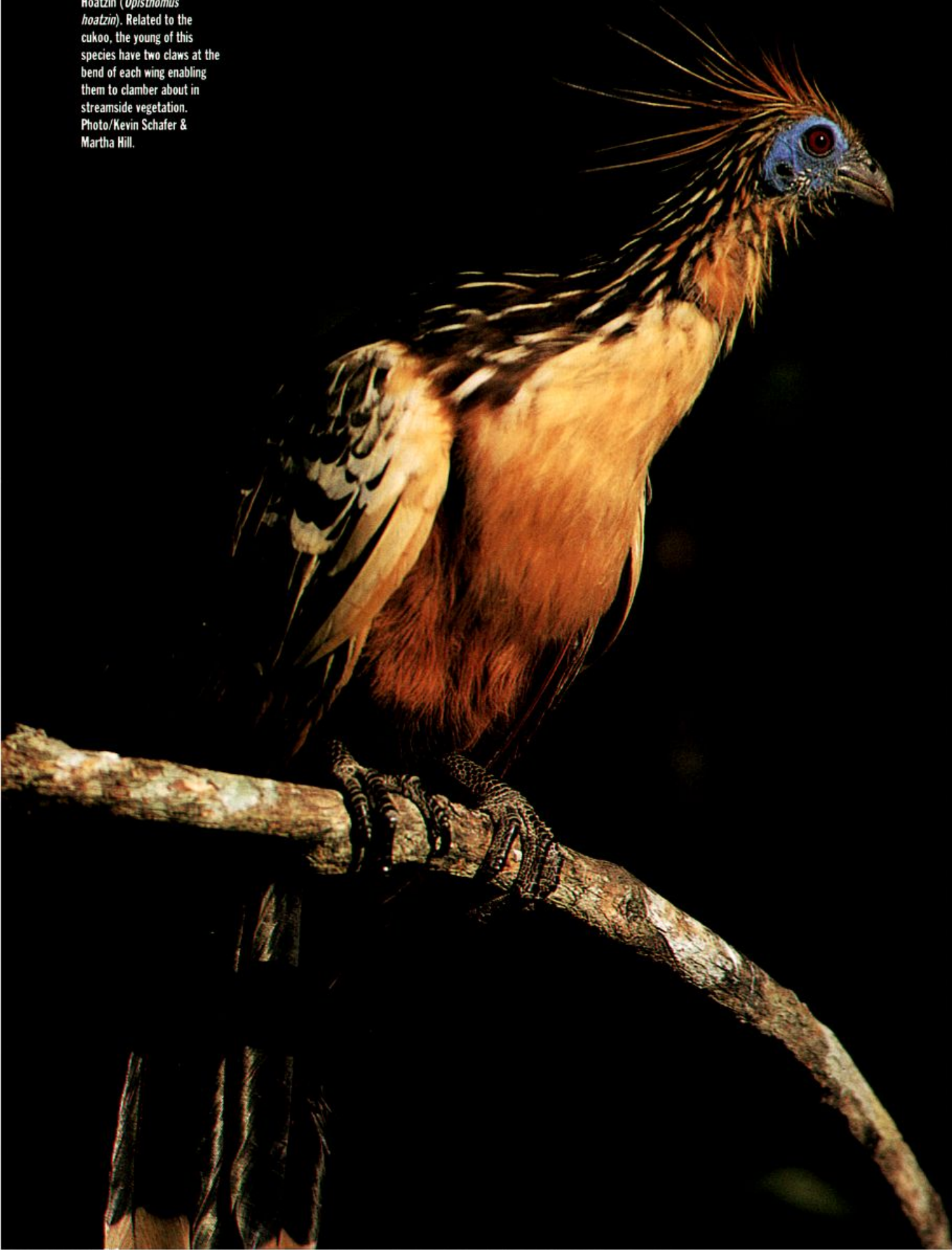
But this is a time of plenty, when grass turns green, waterfowl and other birds breed, and the woodlands are flush with new leaves. The rains cease in late October or November, almost as suddenly as they begin, trees drop their leaves and the grass dries brown under searing tropical skies. By late December wildlife will begin gathering at water holes once more, patiently waiting for

the rains to return.

The llanos are most accessible to birders during the dry season between late November and late April. At this time there are no floods, and even low-lying areas along rivers can be easily explored on foot. Because many trees lose their leaves, and waders are concentrated around permanent waterholes, most birds are particularly easy to see then.

This should not deter you from visiting during the wet season however, for this is certainly when the llanos are most beautiful. After the rains begin the land turns from brown to brilliant emerald green in a transformation so rapid and magical it has to be seen to be believed. Breeding activity for a variety of birds is at a peak early in the rainy season and there are enough diked roads in most areas to enable you to visit many kinds of habitats.

One of the most interesting birds in the llanos is the Hoatzin (*Opisthocomus hoatzin*). Related to the cuckoo, the young of this species have two claws at the bend of each wing enabling them to clamber about in streamside vegetation. Photo/Kevin Schafer & Martha Hill.



easiest places of all to see the rare Yellow-knobbed Curassow. The tallest forests are on the eastern part of the ranch and here is likely to be your best area for harder-to-find species like hawk-eagles, forest-falcons, Spectacled Owl and Golden-green Woodpecker. Because the forest is accessible, night drives for wildlife are better at Piñero than at Hato Cedral (below). The ranch truck, which ferries visitors, is equipped with a powerful spotlight; you may also bring one of your own that clips to a car battery. This is the best way to search for the show of nightlife.

Piñero can be reached by air and by land. Simplest, and costliest, is a charter flight from Caracas, which whisks you to the ranch in under an hour. Flights can be coordinated with Paradise Tours (tel: 951-7741; 951-6226) or Biotours (tel: 916-965; 916-854). Both are travel agencies in Caracas that cater to eco-tourism. For visitors who want maximum birding and minimum hassles, an organized birding tour is probably your best bet.

The alternative to flying is to drive overland from Caracas. It is a long drive from Caracas and most visitors will probably stay a few days in Maracay *en route*, visiting the famous Rancho Grande Biological Station in Henry Pittier National Park. Again, you must make advance reservations with Paradise Tours or Biotours before arriving; they will provide details on how to reach the ranch overland. Be prepared for a few sections of bad road and lots of dust. From Maracay through Valencia and southward toward El Baúl and Piñero, allow about five to six hours. Near El Baúl, and before the turn off to the ranch, waterbirds, hawks and caracaras along the roadside will provide lots of distractions. You'll also see giant stick-nests of Plain-fronted Thornbirds hanging from many large trees.

Hato Cedral: Like Piñero, Hato Cedral offers birders luxury accommodations (\$100 per night), personal attention and superb birding opportunities. Once part of the Texas-based King Ranch enterprises, Cedral continues to be operated as a working cattle ranch and visitors here rub shoulders comfortably with cowboys.

With approximately 125,000 acres, Cedral is a bit smaller than Piñero, but there is plenty of open space. While Piñero is backed up against picturesque low hills, Cedral lies amid the vast plains and wide-open skies of the low llanos.

The overall bird lists for the two ranches are not overly different, and there are plenty of birds that are easily seen at

both places. But there the similarities end: Several water-birds common at Cedral are rare or do not occur at Piñero; the reverse may be true for forest birds. While roads at Piñero wind lazily around brushy hillsides, and through dry forest and pastures, those at Cedral lead off ruler-straight to distant horizons.

Low, diked roads form catchment basins that fill during the rainy season and sustain lush marshes as far as the eye can see. Because the marshes remain green all through the long dry season they are like magnets, drawing birds from far and wide. Amidst the hundreds of thousands of whistling-ducks, ibises, egrets and herons, you will find smaller numbers of Brazilian, Comb, and Muscovy ducks, migrant teal, migrant shorebirds and a sprinkling of rarities such as the Masked Duck, Orinoco Goose, Pinnated Bittern and even Giant Snipe.

Trees around the rather extensive ranch headquarters host large numbers of roosting ibises, egrets, herons, macaws and parakeets. They all leave in the cool freshness of dawn, making a tremendous racket as they go—hundreds if not thousands of them forming silhouettes across a fiery red sun still flattened as it hangs momentarily on the morning horizon. Later in the day, when the scorching mid-day sun makes little mirage lakes of quicksilver across the flat plains, you can retire to the shade of the big trees around the ranch buildings and swimming pool. Relax and let a soft llanos breeze caress you, and watch the hubbub of activity among the various flycatchers, tanagers, seedeaters,

finches and occasional White-naped Xenopsaris that seem scarcely to notice the heat.

Barn Owls and Orinoco Geese have nested in tree cavities within a stone's throw of the cabins. Orange-fronted Yellow-Finches inspect dusty little places around the corals, and Yellowish Pipits call from distant pastures. Capybara, billed as the largest rodents in the world and weighing in at 90 pounds or more, are common at Piñero but positively abundant in Cedral's marshes. Many seem to wile away their daytime hours resting on the diked roadbeds and only grudgingly give way to passing vehicles.

It is only the woodlands that seem hard to get to, for Cedral lacks the easy access to them that characterizes Piñero. Excellent riverside woodland exists along the

northern and southern boundaries of Cedral but a bit more effort is required to bird it effectively. However, walking the diked road that parallels the Rio Caicara, along the north-



Visitors enjoy a tour of Hato Piñero with guide Victor Emanuel.
Photo/ Kevin Schafer & Martha Hill.

ern ranch border, will yield a great many riverine and woodland birds including such specialities as Green Ibis, Hoatzin, Sunbittern, Russet-throated Puffbird, Orinoco Saltator, xenopsaris, and Pileated Finch. On the south side of the ranch and accessible by boat are a couple of fine dry-season trails that traverse sections of low-lying forest. Here scythebills and many flycatchers, including the rare Amazonian Black-Tyrant, nest. One hopes that more trails will be developed.

Cedral is served by the tiny airstrip at Mantecal about 30 minutes away. Alternatively it can be reached in about four hours by paved road from Barinas at the eastern base of the Andes, or in about three-and-a-half hours from San Fernando de Apure to the east.

Commercial flights and auto rental agencies serve both towns, and visits to Hato Cedral can be arranged directly through Paradise Tours or Biotours. Like Piñero, Hato Cedral has a truck, fitted with padded seats, which is used to show visitors around the ranch, and both ranches usually have an English-speaking biologist/guide available. Many birders, however, will probably be happier visiting the ranch as part of an organized birding tour. Dusty roads plague both ranches, especially late in the dry season, and visitors carrying either photographic or sound-recording equipment with them should take special precautions.

Hato El Frio Biological Station: The sprawling El Frio cattle ranch and biological station is even larger than Cedral or Piñero and has for a number of years accepted visitors and students. Located about an hour east of Hato Cedral, it lies in the low llanos. The wildlife here is quite similar to that at Cedral. Accommodations are decidedly spartan though, with hammocks and no private bathrooms. Somehow though, prices for a day visit or an extended stay have gone up considerably, making nearby Cedral the better choice if space is available. Nevertheless, El Frio's bird list is long and it is an excellent place to see the rare Orinoco Goose, as well as the Giant Anteater, and other llanos birds and mammals. Arrangements to visit should be made through the La Salle Society in Caracas, tel. 02-782-8711, ext. 232; ask in Spanish for Senor Alvaro Diego.

STAYING HEALTHY

A little caution and common sense should see you through Venezuela without problems. While drinking-water supplies are usually safe in large cities such as Caracas, Maracay, and Mérida, it's best to exercise a little caution away from major cities in regards to water, unpeeled fruits, and leafy vegetables.

If you are ever in doubt, order bottled water (it comes with or without carbonation) or use iodine tablets.

No immunizations are required in order to enter the country of Venezuela. However, as a health precaution getting them for typhoid, cholera and gamma globulin (the latter for hepatitis) would be helpful. There is very little risk of malaria in the llanos, or in most other parts of Venezuela, though it plagues some eastern and southern frontier regions. For current health and vaccination information, call the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, at 404-639-2572.

Eating and Drinking: Meals in Venezuela are relatively inexpensive; even at the capital's finest hotels, dinner—including a drink—is unlikely to cost more than \$50 to \$60 (U.S.) for two. For the most part, meals at other hotels and restaurants are considerably less than this, especially outside of the Caracas area, and are likely to average no more than \$10 to \$20 (U.S.) per couple.

The llanos are cattle country, and generous portions of beef, served in a variety of ways, are a staple. One favorite llanero breakfast is called huevos a caballero (eggs on horseback)—a thick, juicy steak served with a couple of fried eggs on top.

Food is simple but good throughout the llanos, and whether at the ranches with guest facilities, or at restaurants in towns, you can count on ample portions of rice, beans, yucca (also known as cassava or manioc), and delicious arepas—served hot at breakfast. Be sure to sample the variety of exotic, fresh juices available as most are never seen in northern supermarkets. For coffee-lovers, strong black espresso coffee (cafe negro), half-coffee/half milk (cafe con leche) or coffee with a little bit of milk (cafe marron) are all served in stand-up roadside restaurants everywhere, and all are delicious. Otherwise, you'll find coffee is

generally served after the meals.

A ten-percent service charge is added to meals, though including a little extra will be most appreciated. If you're a repeat customer, the extra tip helps insure prompt service and attention.

Venezuela imports most of its liquor, but its beer industry is one of the biggest businesses in the country. Polar and Cardinal (pronounce by accenting the last syllable of both brands) are the biggest sellers, and both are excellent. After a hot, dusty day in the llanos it's certain you'll appreciate them even more. ■

Although this particular King Vulture (*Sarcophagus papa*) was seen in the Maracay Zoo, they may be easily spotted in open habitats like the llanos. This is the only vulture in the Western Hemisphere which is not primarily dark. Photo/Frank Mantik.



Rufous Tiger-Heron, often seen at Hatos Cedral and Piñero. Photo/Kevin Schafer & Martha Hill.

