

Rio is for the birds

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Rio is for the birds. Definitely. The state of Rio de Janeiro alone sports almost 700 species, and you wouldn't believe the number of birds that can be sighted around town. Well, I didn't believe it until I started looking, and I do mean around town.

You would be forgiven for assuming the Jardim Botânico guided bird-watching tour was for a handful of zoology teachers giving their students field assignments, but having been a lone watcher for about 10 years - carrying my binoculars (almost) everywhere I went, jotting down features of a particular sighting for researching and identifying later in my field guide - last Saturday (March 31st 2007) I went down to the Jardim Botânico at 8am sharp to meet with what turned out to be a pleasant surprise.

I paid my entrance fee (the tour is free, but you must pay for admittance to the gardens) and went to the Cafe Botânico, a pleasant place to begin the tour. I arrived at the meeting point and greeted our guide, ornithologist Henrique Rajão, and some of the group who were already there. From their animated discussion, the superb binoculars they carried and the occasional scientific name here and there I could tell they were regulars and serious watchers. I also learned that this project is in its seventh year, with monthly editions, and if you call and book early enough you can reserve a pair of binoculars for the tour - free of charge!

The group gathered, the latecomers arrived, and in the end there must have been more than 20 people in the group. Here was my pleasant surprise - though I didn't yet know it. The group ranged from a couple of 9 -11 year-old boys to their grandfather, male participants and female, carrying photographic equipment in various degrees of sophistication, some regulars, some first-timers... So I began to think, what with all these people, it would be too noisy, I wasn't going to see much and as we set off I tried not to get my hopes up.

I needn't have worried.

Our guide Henrique and the regulars in the group know their way around the place very well and therefore know the bird's seasonal hotspots. I had been to the Jardim Botânico many times before with my binoculars and was never disappointed at my sightings - (1) *Ramphastos vitellinus*, the Channel-billed Toucan (Tucano-de-bico-preto) a spectacular favourite - but this experience was really enhanced by the interactions between all the participants. At times the group actually split up and went different ways, led off by different sightings, meeting up soon after with different news to exchange.

I for one was both grateful and excited to be able to exchange information and experiences with these people I had just met but who shared my excitement at sighting (2) *Tachyphonus cristatus*, the Flame-Crested Tanager (Tiê-Galo) and (3) *Euphonia violacea*, Violaceous Euphonia (Gaturamo-verdadeiro).

And boy was I surprised as we gathered round a *Richeria*, chock-a-



Toucan
Tom McHugh



Flame Tanager
João Quental



VEuphoria
Arthur Grosset



Woodpecker
Arthur Macarrão

block full of berries. On this tree alone we saw at least 10 species, from colourful tanagers to the 10-cm White-barred Piculet (4) *Picumnus cirratus* from the woodpecker family. At any one time there were 10 of us round the tree, Oh-ing and Ah-ing, calling to each other to point out a new arrival but do you think the birds flew off at this enthusiastic display? No sir, they did not, so we stood round that tree peering through our binocs, cameras clicking, grilling the more experienced with all sorts of questions, for at least 20 minutes. These were the last 20 minutes of the tour, lasting a grand total of just over 3 hours. I bid my farewell and went home, thinking about the morning's events and looking forward to the next tour.

Though I still enjoy trekking with nothing but my binocs for company around Rio's many green areas, especially as they are so easily accessible (some are just 20 minutes off a main road!), I thoroughly enjoyed and recommend the Jardim Botânico guided bird-watching tour as a life-enriching experience. Most of all it was fun, and the more experienced members of the group were very patient, humorous and not at all stuffy, eager to share their experiences and enthusiasm.

Of course places like Teresópolis, Petrópolis, Friburgo and so many others in the interior of the state have a wide range of birds to be seen, they are smaller towns and there is more greenery in between, but what fascinates me is that in this city with a population of 6 million people, there is still so much to be seen - we need only turn our eyes skyward.

For more information on the guided bird watching tours from the AAJB website, [click here](#).