

BRAZIL

OCTOBER 2011



14th October - DAY 1: Arrival/Serra Dos Tucanos Lodge.

We touched down in Rio around dawn after a sleepless flight from Frankfurt, so there was little time to gear yourself up for the first day, it was straight into it. There was time however for a little gentle 'breaking-in' around the airport entrance whilst we awaited our transport (Masked Water-tyrant, Tropical Kingbird) before we hit the 'deep-end' that was to be our home for the next eight days – The Serra Dos Tucanos Lodge.

In fact, the birding at the Lodge was perhaps too easy, as expected I suppose. Only the fact that it was gloomy with a gusty wind made viewing less than straightforward. Tanagers vied with hummingbirds as the main scene-stealers, and as there were more types of the former, I'd say they came out on top. Best of the tanagers were Green-headed, Brazilian, Red-necked and Burnished-buff; dazzlers all, it was hard not to take them for granted as they were almost guaranteed here. If anything though, their colours were even brighter in 'real life' than I'd thought possible, especially the deep cherry-red of the Brazilian.

Away from the bananas with their Euphonias, the Chestnut-bellied being particularly striking, parakeets and thrushes, the sugar feeders held another competition, only the hummingbirds did not leave it to the humans to sort out who was best amongst them. The main protagonists of these non-stop skirmishes were the fabulous Black Jacobins and the plain looking Sombre Hummingbird, with Saw-billed Hermit occasionally entering the fray. Anyway, this armchair birding could not last, so come mid afternoon, it was time to head out on one of the trails of the Lodge grounds. If you think that an unhindered, well-lit view of a bird is de-rigueur, then this was not for you. Of the seven species that I wrote in my notebook, only one showed outstandingly well, the lovely Surucua Trogon with its smart yellow eye-ring. The view we had of Blue Manakin was not bad, I guess, as it blasted out its song at a volume surely too 'big' for a bird of such small stature. A female Rufous-crowned Gnateater was gracious enough to appear well enough, if not quite free from gloom, but the male which is what you really want to see remained tantalisingly just out of shot. The arrival of a White-eyed Foliage Gleaner summed up our difficulties. The gloom had really set in now and the bird stuck resolutely one foot from the forest floor deep within the tangle. As we were at the trail end, that put us out of our misery anyway, but it was clear that there was obviously a lot more going on in the forest than met the eye. Several other birds responded to the iPod, but stayed well away, so it was a good job that we had eight more days to try and drag them from the dark interior.



Above: Chestnut-bellied Euphonia

15th October – DAY 2: Duas Barras/Nova Fubrigo/Rio Gradina/Sumidouro

The windows of the dining area allowed us to keep a look out for anything special that might come into view and that is just what happened during breakfast when the much wanted Blond-crested Woodpecker arrived on the scene. Certainly something to make you forget the cornflakes! During its second visit to the fruiting trees, another bird with a high 'wow' factor flew in to move it on – a Spot-billed Toucanet. Not seen in unobscured fashion, the bill of its given name was however clearly seen. But there was no hanging around now as we had a long days' 200 kms to put in, with a barrel-load of birds promised. It was a bit slow to start with as we took the chance to familiarise ourselves with commoner stuff like the swallows and martins around the petrol station, but we were soon at the first stop in 'proper' open country. Unfortunately, this was curtailed by light rain, with only a close fly-by from a White-tailed Hawk staying in the mind. Next we were at the fire station (not sure why) where White-eyed Parakeets were perhaps best bird, but this was far from nature 'in the raw'.

Soon however, we took a small side-track off the main road and it was like going through a portal to another world as the day took off in spectacular fashion. There was the big and obvious Dusky-legged Guan, the nifty Ochre-faced Tody-flycatcher and all sorts of spinetails, tyrannulets, thornbirds and foliage-gleaners! But I will always remember the place for two birds in particular, both with names which likened them to other species. The Swallow Tanager is perhaps misnamed – surely it is nothing to do with its colour, a beautiful turquoise blue, unlike any swallow I've ever seen. We did not see it fly though, which could have helped answer the riddle. Whatever, it was a stunning bird. The arrival of a party of Magpie Tanagers immediately lit the scene and allowed us to witness a prime example of convergent evolution. How a bird of this family could end up 'copying' the blueprint of a member of the crow family to such a degree is beyond my understanding. What I could grasp was that they were simply superb. Now we were into a phase that resembled a 'last day of holiday clean-up' with stops every so often for special birds. None were perhaps going to be more special than the Three-toed Jacamar, after which the whole days excursion was named. To be truthful, they (a pair I presume) were seen too easily, so lost a little of the mystique that usually surrounds such a rare bird. Still, it was one definitely to see and being unmistakable and very visible, well worth it. It was at the next stop-off that the frequency at which new birds arrived rendered my notebook inoperative. Two or three in particular stood out, with White-eared Puffbird just pipping the likes of Yellow-lored Tody-flycatcher and the unexpected Curl-crested Jay. Being attacked by ants, thankfully small ones, also diverted my attention somewhat, but not before my senses had been assailed by Black-capped Donacobius, Black-necked Aracari, Tail-banded Hornero, Blackish Rail and others. It seemed somewhat at odds with the image many might have of birding in Brazil that this open, mainly treeless area was presenting us with such a glut of species. The truth is of course that just as many birds thrive in the forest, it is just so dammed difficult to see them as we came to appreciate more and more.

Further on, another open area that might be described as damp pasture had nice looking Tawny-headed Swallows, Jacanas, a Whistling Heron and lots of supporting activity from masses of cowbirds, blackbirds, including the particularly brilliant White-browed, and Southern Lapwings. To conclude, we managed to cram in one last side-track where close perched views of Yellow-headed Caracara stood out, but a Red Arrows (Blue Arrows, surely?) style fly past by three pairs of Blue-winged Macaws excited everyone. Good timing prevailed as the gathering gloom turned into a mini flash flood, much as my mind had been flooded by a tidal wave of birds.



Above: Yellow-lored Tody-flycatcher

16th October – DAY 3: Serra Dos Tucanos Lodge.

The revs most definitely dropped today, but at least it allowed time to draw breath. One of the trails around the lodge grounds was the only guided sortie of the day and was terribly hard work. Poor light and a cool temperature reduced bird activity to a few short bursts. A female Pin-tailed Manakin showed first; snatched glimpses of a male later on made this seem more worthwhile. A couple of species of ant vireo (Spot-breasted and Plain) were unremarkable and summed up the rather subdued birding atmosphere. A review of the male Black-cheeked Gnateater scored highly and things just about ticked over care of Black-throated Grosbeak and a very obliging Planalto Woodcreeper. Then came the only real rush of birds moving through the canopy in a loose feeding flock. This involved Yellow-eared Woodpecker, Streaked Xenops and a couple of tanager species. Because most views of everything were neck-breaking, the Rufous-headed Tanager won out over the Flame-crested as it came closer to eye-level! Mention should also be made of the bland Eye-ringed Tody-tyrant as it is an endemic and had useful identification features that we could all see.

Back at base, a better full-length, unobscured view of Blond-crested Woodpecker was appreciated and the brilliant Blue-naped Chlorophonia made its debut on the feeders. Closer scrutiny of the Sayaca Tanagers brought forth the subtly different Azure-shouldered variety. Thereafter it was hummingbird-watching time, followed by a short, birdless walk in the woods before the heaviest rain of the day set in. This even put paid to much moth activity, which had been very productive and had helped stretch the wildlife-watching day beyond sunset. In some ways, the dazzling parade of these night-flyers came to make up for a few birding disappointments that were to follow.

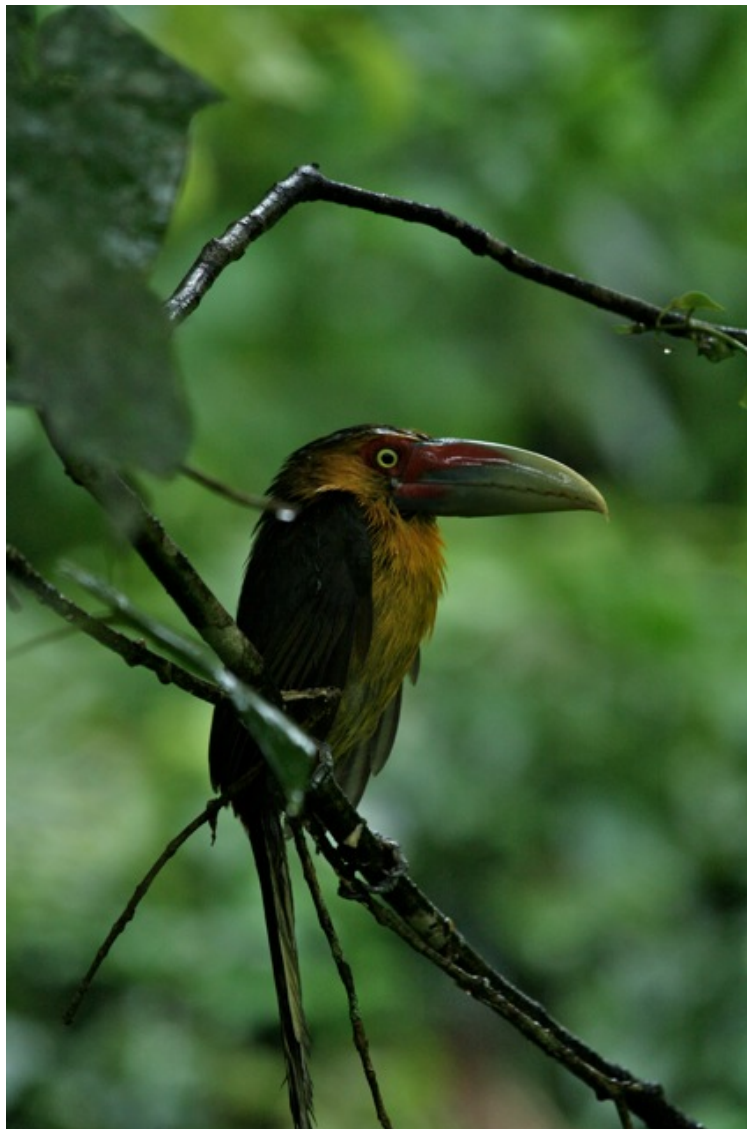


Above: Blue-naped Chlorophonia

17th October – DAY 4: Rio Gradina/Serra Dos Tucanos Lodge.

A Long-billed Wren singing a fluty little ditty in the lodge grounds gave promise of a fine day ahead. Think again! Rain fell as we disembarked at newly named 'Magpie Tanager Valley', but nothing too serious. Thunder a few minutes later heralded much worse. With only a few short lulls in the persistent rain, prising anything from the morning was an achievement. Chicli (Spix's) Spinetail and Brassy-breasted Tanager were the only birds colourful enough to be seen well through misted and rain-spattered binoculars. A more open area at least put more birds on display, even if most were things that we'd seen before. Green-backed Becard was a notable exception. An indication of what we were enduring came with the sight of a Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper creeping by the path we were on as it fast turned into a stream! Another success for the iPod was scored in the arrival of a real 'want' bird – the Giant Antshrike. It took many 'plays' to entice it into the open and thankfully the bins were demisted enough to see one of the pair of this mighty beast (in birdy terms of course). Soon though, the rain made any more serious searching out of the question and a return to the minibus for lunch was very welcome. Obviously, the skies chose this period to lighten a little and the rain eased off. So a little saunter up a small side track to try and see whatever the guide was trying to tell us he had found brought us not that bird (which had just slipped away), but a Drab-breasted Bamboo Tyrant (not my description, I would add – even though it was) which only I was lucky enough to see well. It was a close call as to whether it was more non-descript than the Serra Tyrant-manakin we had squeezed from the soaking scrub earlier. Exiting the valley, one last stop near the entrance meant at least we did not finish on a colourless note as we eeked out a pair of smart Variable Antshrikes.

Part two of what should have been a full day out was scrubbed, with an enforced return to the lodge. What a good move this turned out to be in the conditions, as almost all the star players turned out. The almost ever-present Slaty-breasted Wood Rail was overshadowed by the show-stopping Saffron and Spot-billed Toucanets, both scoped in full, blinding technicolour. Blond-crested Woodpecker was almost as popular, and a White-chinned Thrush brought the number of that family to have graced the feeders to four. Proper scrutiny of everything visiting the sugar feeders brought forth two species which we had not pinned down previously amongst the dozens of Black Jacobins, namely Versicoloured Emerald and Reddish Hermit. This birding masterclass made the wet afternoon seem like a small inconvenience. But we were now close to 'cleaning up' at the lodge. What we needed next was the chance to see as many new species as possible on the remaining excursions, and for that to happen, and for it to be a pleasant experience, the rain needed to stop.



Above: Saffron Toucanet

18th October – DAY 5: REGUA reserve/Serra Dos Tucanos.

As miserable a couple of hours as it is possible to have birding abroad courtesy of another spell of moderate rain. At least the first viewable birds could be watched from the shelter of the minibus as it pulled up alongside a field wherein a pair of Burrowing Owls stood by their burrow, as is their wont. A nearby Savannah Hawk was not quite as bedraggled as the owls. Despite the elements, I'd have to have been under sedation not to have ventured forth for a cute pair of Tropical Screech Owls. These birds were obviously used to being ogled at almost zero distance, as they remained unmoved just a few feet above us in a sheltering tree. After viewing a couple of snazzy Capped Herons, we were into a painstaking shuffle through dripping undergrowth, the discomfort compounded by the fact that the first few birds on the agenda, like Red-legged Honeycreeper, were ones which I had seen in the warm sunshine of Panama only the year before. It was once again difficult to get a decent look at things, even new ones to me like Moustached Wren and White-barred Piculet could not be enjoyed in the semi-light through steamed up optics. Eventually, the rain began to relent and a nice scope view of a Channel-billed Toucan across the valley heralded better times. Then, as we overlooked a stunning vista, the appearance of three angel-like Swallow-tailed Kites amidst the parting clouds almost gave the impression that they were a sign of appeasement sent by the birding Gods. To be honest, nothing else really showed at this point – or so we thought. Cirilo was using the iPod to try and tempt out various things, without apparent success. It was only later when completing the daily bird checklist that we discovered David and Oona, who had been engaged in some photography and were thus some way behind, had seen the endemic Sooretama Slaty Antshrike. They had thought, quite reasonably, that these were the Variable Antshrike that we had seen the previous day, but they are not found in the area we had been in. Shucks! We were all in agreement though, that no one had seen the calling Rufous-capped Motmot that remained frustratingly hidden. There was no missing the garrulous Red-rumped Caciques and their constant chatter. They had a colony overlooking the marsh area which itself was alive with stuff. Of the non-birding kind, both Caiman and Capybara were welcome distractions from the ducks, grebes and crakes. A Roadside Hawk sailed over assessing this tasty menu. Skulky Rufous-sided Crake and Brazilian Teal (a colourful revelation when they took flight) probably caught the human eye most, but a close, perched Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture was also a contender. This was now much more like it. The sun was blazing down, dragonflies were making their presence felt for the first time and we could laugh at the sight of about a dozen Rufous and Tail-banded Horneros daring to mob a pretty hefty Caiman on the far bank. However, we were running behind time now and reluctantly had to leave. Good move, as within five minutes of boarding the minibus a serious downpour hit us. So once more we were stuck at 'home' again for the afternoon, something that was rescued by just a couple of notable events. Firstly, a pair of 'forever flyovers' Scaly-headed Parrots actually perched up distantly for 'scoping' which showed them well. Secondly, we set off up one of the trails and were soon on to the surprisingly brilliant Grey-hooded Attilas, shining bright amber-orange in the interior dimness. Then, it was just a case of wallowing in the atmosphere of the rainforest as another heavy shower poured in to it. Time to ponder on the miracle that was needed in the next three and a half days if we were to pull the holiday out of the fire, or more pertinently, flood.

19th October – DAY 6: Serra Dos Orgoas.

What ought to have been a highlight of the trip was reduced to a near non-event by a desperately slow birding pace and, guess what? The weather! There was a clear slot when we arrived which allowed us to view legions of White-collared Swifts scything the air against the backdrop of the rugged mountain cliffs. Thereafter, some decent new birds were picked up, but there was no back-up surprise element as witnessed by the general lack of animation exhibited by our guide. Of course had the sun shone, the likes of Streak-headed Antwren, Yellow-throated Woodpecker and Lesser Woodcreeper would have looked more impressive: Yellow-ochre Flycatcher and Buff-throated Saltator, maybe not. A couple of Scaly-headed Parrots showed much closer than the previous day as they fed on a nearby fruiting bush, whilst the Grey-hooded Attilas did not seem as glowing when seen outside of the forest twilight. The good news was that we were now moving on after a flat morning. The bad news was that we were going to a higher elevation, further into the mist and cloud. Up there it was even cooler (if you had gloves, this was the time for them), but we set off along the boardwalk suspended above the forest floor hoping for the best. A quick flash of a Brazilian Ruby gave hope of better things, but the skies had other ideas. As we tried to warm to views of Giant Antshrike, White-throated Treerunner and Scale-throated Hermit, first the mist and then moderate rain crept over the hillside above us. As the visibility further dropped with the temperature, the sound of Bellbirds calling rang the death-knell for the afternoon. A Ferruginous Pygmy Owl and a super-tame Black-throated Trogon at least allowed for some more pleasant memories to be taken from the visit as we drove away from the national park that we never really saw.



Above: Green-headed Tanager

20th October – DAY 7: Pico de Caledonia.

Today was everything yesterday wasn't and it was no coincidence that it stayed dry for the first time. It was to be a two-tier experience in the Pico de Caledonia National Park, so we alighted in the foothills, a gentle introduction as we knew that we had a hard climb later on. A Hooded Siskin departed as we arrived possibly spooked by a Roadside Hawk that proceeded to perch close-by allowing for stunning 'scope views as it called tetchily. In the low branches of a pathside tree, a quite fierce looking female Blue-billed Black Tyrant was a nice new addition. Two other birds tantalised us from afar, way up on the hillside. One, a Cinnamon Tanager, did not improve upon its poor showing. The other was one of the must-see birds of the whole trip for me, and it was to become part of a very special array of birds we were to see in phase two. We were driven higher up the hillside and left to walk up a steep slope. This we hardly noticed, or cared about: you just had to keep climbing for fear that you would miss something. Anyway, we were right into new stuff right by the minibus with the lovely Bay-breasted Warbling Finch in a travelling band with the likes of Brassy-breasted Tanager. But eyes and ears were on alert for the calling Black and Gold Cotingas which toyed with us at first before settling down to give moderately good views. At the same time, Swallow-tailed Cotinga gave us the next stage of better revealing itself, for this was the other bird that had been on the horizon earlier. However it was now to face a serious challenge even to be bird of the day and here were three reasons why:- The simple but pleasing combination of jet black and white spotting of the Large-tailed Antshrike, looking for all the world like it had been wrapped in a map of the night sky. Next, what might be described as the Rolls-Royce of the tanagers – the Diademed, with the 'is it blue, or black, or both?' conundrum of its mantle, topped by the diadems of its name. And for those who reached the top of the mountain first, the reward of a male Plovercrest feeding on the flowering bushes. Looking a bit samey with regard to other hummingbirds from behind, it was in a different league seen front-on with its deep purple throat/chest and a quiff as a final flourish. Some of the stragglers in the group had to make do with a female that had replaced the male by the time they caught up.

Plenty of other quality birds came and went, but did not quite capture the imagination as the three aforementioned had. Perhaps snappier names might have helped: Shear-tailed Grey Tyrant and Velvety-black Tyrant come to mind on that point, whereas a much closer and longer view of Grey-winged Cotinga would have elevated its status somewhat. As it was, I could hardly bring myself to tick it given the fleeting, distant view achieved. Obviously elaeenias (like Highland) and tyrannulets (like White-crowned) were never going to thrill, although the latter had some merit. A Thick-billed Saltator used something other than plumage by which to remember it - it munched on bamboo leaves! Skulkers such as Rufous-tailed Antbird were not too welcome on a day when nearly everything else was on clear show (O.K., I'm allowing Serra-do-mar Tapaculo a bit of licence here), but its time might still come as previously reluctant showers Rufous-backed Antwren and Variable Antshrike came into the limelight. In the end though, the day itself was the winner. Fair weather, remarkable scenery (despite the flood and fire damage from earlier in the year), a good walk and with everyone relaxed, the enjoyment factor of the holiday was cranked way up.

21st October – DAY 8: Theodoro Trail/Macae de Cima.

Never can so many bird calls have been played on an iPod for so little result. True the trail we were on was a devilish place to try to see birds clearly and with a narrow track, a chilly start and too many bodies in too small a space, it spelled a lot of frustration. Personally, I managed to claw back Ruddy Ground Dove, Yellow-legged Thrush and Sepia-capped Flycatcher, all of which I'd missed before, but a load of prized stuff went begging. Only Bertoni's Antbird was anything like obliging and it became a question of just enjoying the wonderful sounds of the forest. The source of one such 'noise' at least showed to the naked eye briefly, but this just demonstrated why the Slaty Bristlefront had such a gorgeous song, it being a rather plain, black bird scuttling along the ground. For some, a Shrike-like Cotinga showed distantly and a Sharpbill had us contorting every which way for any sort of view as

it called fairly close by. Most saw nothing. In the end, the forest gave up few of its occupants once again, not a satisfactory state of affairs, but one you grudgingly had to accept.

The afternoon session began in complete contrast to the morning's birdwatching experience. From not being able to see birds at close range, we were now able to view them, but at a considerable distance! This was our visual introduction to a bird we had been hearing for three or four days – the Bare-faced Bellbird. At first, we were literally staring at a white dot on the horizon seemingly miles away. Thankfully, we had progressively better views until it could be called satisfactory, although the bird did not look as impressive as the wonderful call it makes. Next, a prolonged attempt to bring another non-compliant ant-something into the open had me slipping away from the gathering to find a place to sit down. Bird activity was very subdued, but the one bird that I was lucky enough to see was the easily identifiable White-rimmed Warbler. Sadly for the rest of the party it flew into the dense woods behind me as they approached. Just as we thought that we were meandering towards a rather flat conclusion after the splendid bellbirds, we came upon a couple of flowering bushes that delivered birds big style and banished much of the frustration that had gone before. There were two completely new 'hummers', plus two we had seen before but perhaps not in such pleasant circumstances. Now the sun shone bright and warm, and naturally this brought out the best in these fabulous birds. On top of this, they were in full, clear view, and they were going nowhere – everything you could ask for in a birding context. The Sapphire-spangled Emerald was alright, but paled alongside the Amethyst Woodstar which was a little corker. Both sexes were seen, each with a lovely peachy wash on their underside. Their most endearing feature though, was the way that they seemed to float around as if on wires: no mad dash from flower to flower for them. On the other hand, the Plovercrest is a bit of a darter, but occasionally lingered long enough for the photographers to snap away: again a pair, plus another male, were present. Perhaps best was the male Brazilian Ruby. A different animal altogether: big, bulky, solid looking, such a mixture of colour on the back with a 'medallion' that appeared to be fashioned from a fragment of a disco mirrorball. It flashed three different beacons of iridescence depending on the angle it was seen at. The whole scene made for a mood-lifting finale to our final full day. If only the calling Hooded Berryeater had shown!



Above: Maroon-bellied Parakeet

22nd October – DAY 9: Cedae Trail.

Due to the rainy episodes earlier in the holiday (which I might have mentioned!), we still had a half-day excursion to fit in. This was a welcome chance to boost the final tally for the trip instead of falling back on the old stand-bys at the lodge. But before some of us left (some stayed behind at the lodge), we had chance to review the Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper on the river which runs through the lodge grounds reminding us of one of those earlier rainy days. Cirilo had tried to describe the Cedae Trail the evening before, but he hadn't done it too successfully. I expected something a little more open plan, but found it was not too dissimilar to the Theodoro Trail. The problem of seeing birds was sadly all too similar, again no doubt due in part to the return of cool, cloudy, damp conditions. A Ferruginous Antbird danced around us in response to the iPod showing off its bold white spotted tail and Star-throated Antwren gave salvation to those who had missed it the previous day with a much better showing here. Other forest dwellers called from deep cover, but were mostly impervious to the lure of the iPod. However, whilst down on one knee, I had the extreme good fortune to spot a Red-crowned Ant Tanager, well back in the woods, through a small window in the

tangle. The pity was, in such circumstances, there was no way I could put anyone else onto it. Such is forest birding. And that was it for new birds: a pair of Spot-billed Toucanets together and an out-in-the open Plain-winged Woodcreeper etched some images more deeply into the memory. But as the drizzle turned to light rain, it was almost a relief to make our retreat from the murk, beat a path through the frigatebird hoards to Rio and let time do its healing. We had not seen Brazil at its best, but when you thought about it, we had just visited an area where hundreds of people had lost their lives earlier in the year. All we had to worry about was a bit of rain spoiling our birdwatching. Suddenly, that all seems very insignificant.

For the record, I saw 237 species. Some saw more; others less. I'd say I saw what the average birder might have seen.

Andy Bissitt, December 2011

www.manchesterbirding.com