

# Reflections on Guyana – and Red Siskins revisited

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It has been nearly 15 years since *Neotropical Birding* featured Guyana, which is far too long for a country that hosts great opportunities to see globally threatened species such as Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis*, West Indian Manatee *Trichechus manatus* and Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus*. Here are some reflections on a recent visit to this fabulous country.

As I fly over rainforest on route to Lethem, located on Guyana's south-western border with Brazil, the scene unfolding below me looks remarkably similar to clips from the BBC *Zoo Quest* series, filmed in the early 1950s, the series introduced young naturalist and broadcaster David Attenborough to a new audience. But I am primarily here to explore the vast savanna of interior Guyana, which lies on the Guiana Shield. This 1.7-billion-year-old Precambrian geological formation also encompasses parts of eastern Venezuela and Colombia, Suriname, French Guiana and northern Brazil. Elevated parts of the Shield—the Guiana Highlands—include table-like mountains called *tepuis* and several of the world's best-known waterfalls: Angel Falls, Kaieteur Falls and Kukenan Falls.

As covered in this magazine quite a few years previously (Collins 2007, Collins & Walker 2010), the Guianan Shield offers outstanding birding alongside stunning scenery, with an excellent group of biogeographical endemics including Guianan Cock-of-the-rock *Rupicola rupicola*. In the Rupununi River catchment alone, there are thought to be 400 species of bird. Throw in charismatic, often rare, animals such as Giant Otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* (Endangered), Giant Anteater *Myrmecophaga tridactyla* (Vulnerable), the mythical Giant Armadillo *Priodontes maximus* (Vulnerable), Goliath Birdeater *Theraphosa blondi* (the world's heaviest spider) and the largest scaled fish in the world—Arapaima *Arapaima gigas* (Data Deficient)—and you have ample ingredients for thrilling ecotourism offerings.



1 Male Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus*, Venezuela, undated (Jhonathan Miranda/Red Siskin Initiative: [redsiskin.org](https://redsiskin.org)). This globally Endangered finch is a star attraction of any visit to Guyana.