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Trip report to Roraima-tepui

Venezuela

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May 18: Caracas to Puerto Ordaz to Paraitepui del Roraima

Having traveled with David Ascanio on two previous Victor Emanuel Nature Tours and on a scouting trip to Suriname as just the two of us, I jumped at the offer to accompany him and a small group to hike to Roraima tepui in southeastern Venezuela. This account may be a bit lengthy, but I wanted to impart both the exertion of the trip and the beauty of it.

Having arrived the night before and being whisked away to a motel near the airport, about all I had to do the next morning was get dressed and slap the baggage shut, so I was downstairs within fifteen minutes to meet Desiree whom David had sent to get me to the airport. Originally, two others were to accompany David and myself on this trip, but both had to cancel at the last minute. We were whisked away down the narrow streets that were just coming to life in the early morning light. The buildings were generally only a story or two tall, dusty, well-worn looking, and there was a fair amount of early morning activity along the streets. Even the driver didn't seem to know the streets as Desiree had to call out to have him go another way at several intersections. The streets were bumpy and potholed with a number of the ubiquitous speed bumps that would become regular in every town during the trip. We were to the airport within ten minutes. It now being just before sunrise, I got a quick look at the sea between the buildings before it was blocked by the length of the airport, which was quite busy with traffic.

The airport is on a stretch of land on the sea side of the mountain (Avila) that blocks Caracas from the sea near Catia la Mar, so I was not formally in Caracas. The sea front in this area of Venezuela is very narrow with little in the way of beach before the mountain rises to the south and before dropping off into deep sea on the north. This is something of a resort area for the Caracans, but does not attract much foreign interest. The mountain is an undeveloped national park (Parque Nacional de Avila) and, except for the building that seems to occupy every available inch of space as far up the mountain as it can go, the park appears to be left in a wild state. Though Venezuela has numerous large area parks, there is little governmental money for such parks, nor is there much of a culture among Venezuelans to visit the wild.

Desiree and I met David in the domestic flights area of the airport. He was already well ahead in the line. It seemed half the population of Caracas was going somewhere by plane as there was little available room left in the domestic check-in area. It turned out for this trip that two of the other travelers had to drop out at the last minute leaving David and me with Desiree.

Desiree is 21, a recent graduate from Simon Bolivar University with a degree in tourism management. She had been hired by David for her organizational skills to help him with the office part of his tour company. She was along on this trip in place of one of the other missing participants so that she could see first hand what it took to handle

the logistics of this sort of tour. Desiree is an energetic little sprite of a gal who said she was 160 cm tall (5'4"), and couldn't have weighed 100 pounds with her backpack. We made our way through security, then had a quick breakfast of toast, ham and cheese omelet, and a pineapple smoothie (what's the big deal with smoothies?), which came surprisingly rapidly for my previous South American food experiences. We ate this quickly as boarding was announced shortly after the food arrived.

The day was already hot and muggy by 7:10AM as we boarded. Sunrise in the tropics is about 6:15-6:30 year-round, sunset twelve hours later. We boarded a reasonably new Aereopostal DC9-80, which was a full flight, and left on time for Puerto Ordaz. As we passed along the coast, Desiree pointed out a number of landmarks and talked about Avila National Park as noted earlier.

Caracas sits in the valley behind the coastal mountain range. This is not part of the Andes, but is a separate range of coastal mountains that extends a number of miles eastward. The coastal strip is well built up with resort buildings close to the coast and shanty-type dwellings occupying about every usable square inch up the mountain sides until it looks like if one started to slide down it would take everything else in its wake like a house of cards collapsing.

Farther along, the mountains give way to a flat to rolling landscape, variously forested and with much agriculture, rice and corn according to Desiree (but looked too dry for rice), and ranching. Cacao and coffee is grown closer to the coast. Some towns of small to modest size could be seen. There is also much oil development and storage, particularly toward Puerto La Cruz.

The Orinoco River appeared and then the Caroni River which join at Puerto Ordaz (P. O.) on our approach to Puerto Ordaz at the end of our one hour flight. The Orinoco flows north into the Atlantic and its watershed is wholly within Venezuela, but connects in one of those strange coincidences of geography to the Amazon by way of the Rio Negro. This is one of those rare instances where two large rivers use the same watershed but flow in nearly opposite directions. The Orinoco is a lowland river carrying a great deal of sediment. The Caroni, however, is a shorter river that flows through higher elevations and picks up much tannin, making it what is called a black water river. The Caroni is dammed by five hydroelectric dams that provide 67% of the electricity for Venezuela. A large, and still filling lake, Lake Guri, is behind the largest dam.

The airport at P. O. is very modern, clean, and attractive, though somewhat institutional and sterile. On arrival, David made a few cell-phone calls to find out where our driver was. The firm David was using had the dates wrong and was expecting us tomorrow, but would get a driver over to us quickly. About fifteen minutes later we had a driver to take us to the company that would provide vehicle and driver on the trip south.

Puerto Ordaz is a government-developed town only about 60 years old. It was designed at Harvard and begun in the 1940s as a city for the mining interests for bauxite (aluminum ore, read Alcoa) and iron ore development (we got much of our aluminum during WWII from Venezuela and Suriname. Its sister city of San Felix across the Caroni is about three hundred years old. Together, they are called Ciudad Guyana. P. O. is very modern and up to date. There is a modern open-air shopping mall, and yes, you can shop The Gap in P. O. if you need.

David needed a few medical supplies and rehydration packets before we left for the tepui area. This we got in a large modern pharmacy called Farmatodo (think Rite-Aid and Walgreen's, only cleaner and with nothing falling all over the place) of which both Desiree and David despaired that this chain was forcing many smaller individually-owned pharmacies out of business (yea for globalization). Most any American HBA product was available plus Venezuelan and European. Not far away was a T G I Friday's and we had passed McDonald's on the way.

After taking care of these necessities, our driver took us up some side streets to the house of Julio and Caesar who run a small expedition company that provides drivers and vehicles for that part of Venezuela. Julio would be our driver for the leg of the trip down to Paraitepui del Roraima, a small Pemon Amerindian community that was the starting point for the hike into Roraima. Our vehicle was a Toyota Land Cruiser that actually looked like it knew what a "gravel" road was. SUVs make up a small part of the vehicle market in Venezuela. Most people have compact and sub-compact cars as the streets are narrow for the most part (in Caracas anyway).

Julio was probably in his mid thirties, quite an affable sort who spoke good English, while Caesar was more reserved and spoke little English, but seemed to understand it reasonably well. Our bags and all the other camping gear that had accompanied us from Caracas were loaded into the Land Cruiser and we were off by about 10:30 for what was said to be a ten hour drive.

We wound through the wide and bustling streets of P. O, passing numerous familiar US firms like BF Goodrich, Firestone, Wendy's, another McDonald's and many small local businesses. At a Texaco gas station, we stopped to fill up. The price read 70 Bolivars per liter. There are about 2100 Bolivars to the dollar, making gas about \$.03 per liter and at 3.8 liters to the gallon, gas is about \$.11 a gallon in Venezuela, if you can find it as I'll explain later. Venezuela is swimming in oil and despite the ongoing animosity between Hugo Chavez's government and ours, US companies are very well represented and doing most of the development. Citgo is a wholly owned by Venezuela.

San Felix, on the east side of the Caroni (after crossing the river over one of the hydro dams), on the other hand is the worker's town with no buildings over a few stories and having a well worn, dusty appearance. The streets are wide (at least the section we covered through town) with many makeshift stands along the shoulder selling any sort of anything you can imagine. Stop lights in Venezuela are sort of advisory. Initially, everyone stops at the red light, but as soon as the traffic clears (maybe), the red light ceases to exist and pity the poor driver who waits out the red (or pedestrian in the way).

We moved along fairly rapidly for the amount of traffic on a two-lane divided highway, Venezuela 10, all the way to Upata some sixty-seven kilometers (42 miles) south. The road became nearly deserted after San Felix, paved (all the way to Brazil) with good asphalt, and only a few potholes.

In Upata, a modest-sized crossroads town, we stopped to get something to drink and some Caribas or plantain chips (think potato chips, but from plantains, quite good but salty and greasy). We all used the toilet, which David called the last decent toilet for the next week, and he wasn't wrong. We also picked up some bottled water. Though Caracas has treated water, most everyone uses bottled water or trucked-in water from

a tanker. Outside Caracas, bottled water is available most everywhere and tanker trucks are common in towns. In the tiny villages, most people rely on streams. After Upata, the road became two-lane, two-way and wound its way through a series of small "mountains" which were not difficult to pass as long as we were not behind a tanker or other large vehicle making way at maybe five to ten mph and gushing diesel fumes enough to create a one-vehicle ozone-alert day.

The land on both sides is degraded dry-tropical forest, rangeland, and with some small scale farming. The vegetation is of short trees and scrubland with a good deal of open land with short grass and many weeds. The roadside was not heavily populated after Upata (actually after San Felix) but there were a number of homes and hamlets along the way that were barely bigger than their dot on the map. There were also a number of small restaurants and fruit stands (quite typical throughout Central and the northern part of SA, and one does have to wonder how any of them have enough business to stay open). In the little hamlet of Santa Rosa, Julio pulled off at a small fruit-stand restaurant for some "cambur manzano", or bananas (Venezuela, David says, is the only country in SA that does not call them bananas). These are the little stubby bananas, about 1/2 to 1/3 the size of the commercial banana we get here and almost worth the trip to the tropics solely to eat some. They are wonderfully sweet and flavorful, though these were a bit riper than I like them.

In Tumeremo, 229 km (143 miles) from P. O., we stopped along the street for some oranges, tomatoes, bottled water, and cheese from one of the small markets. Desiree and Julio washed up the tomatoes with bottled water, David sliced up some of the buns and we had cheese and tomato sandwiches. Tumeremo is another of the modest-sized crossroad towns along the way on the Venezuela 10 highway, or the Trans Amazonian Highway as it goes eventually all the way to Manaus, Brazil. Julio stopped for gas at a Texaco station, but was only able to get a small amount. This seemed rather strange for an oil-rich country like Venezuela. David explained that on this side of the country, any tanker truck driving the highway already has half his load set aside for the "fuel Mafia". With the price of gas about 11 cents a gallon in Venezuela and over four dollars a gallon in Guyana, guess where most of it ends up, leaving the gas stations along the highway perpetually in want of gas.

Leaving Tumeremo, we passed into the tropical-moist forest which is more treed and more thickly vegetated. The forest often crowded the road as shoulders are pretty much unheard of in Venezuela.

At the fork between the road to El Dorado and the road to Brazil - 377 km (235 mi) from P. O., the kilometer markings start all over again from zero and we are now formally on the Trans Amazonian Highway.

Here to the town to Km 88 (San Isidro), the vegetation is tropical-humid forest with taller trees and more thick vegetation that is quite impenetrable. From here, it is another 174 km (110 mi) to our turning-off point at San Francisco de Yuruani. We are also gradually climbing in elevation as we travel south. We also leave the stifling heat of the lowlands for a slightly cooler air in the Gran Sabana. Highway 10 remains in overall good condition but requires slowing occasionally for potholes and rough road patching. The road is a better road than I was expecting. Julio is flying along much of the way at between 120 and 140 kph (75-87 mph, glad I didn't work that out while in the vehicle), and occasionally hitting 150 kph in a rarely-posted 60 kph zone.

Butterflies were everywhere along the roadside and determined to commit suicide after El Dorado to KM88, apparently recently emerged from the grasses along the road. Most were pierids (like our sulfurs and cabbage butterfly). There were a few danaiids (like the Monarch) and some heleconias (a tropical family) and equally as willing to become windshield paste as are ours. Many of these pierids were quite a bit larger than ours and made a pretty good smack as well as streak when they hit. There were thousands of them for many kilometers. The roadside is much disturbed vegetationally with much of the near road crowded with what appeared to be the invasive Vietnamese grass, open areas of grass and brush, and slash and burn openings along with the occasional bit of forest that came right to the edge of the road.

Las Claritas/KM88 (San Isidro) is the last outpost of civilization for many miles as shortly thereafter one enters the huge Canaima National Park and the Gran Sabana. David and I went into a small shop and bought an ice cream bar and some beer for celebration upon reaching Paraitepui del Roraima. Beer in Venezuela seems to be uniformly industrial beer, like Bud or Busch, and is nearly flavorless. The big names are Polar and Regional and they are advertised to annoying excess. More so than Tumeremo, Las Claritas really has the frontier town atmosphere. It was dusty and dirty and I half expected Clint Eastwood to come walking down the street wrapped in his poncho and Enio Moriconi music to start playing for a showdown with Lee VanCleaf. (For those unfamiliar with this, I am playing on the Spaghetti Westerns of the 1960s, like *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*, that made Clint a big star.)

Hot, sticky, dusty, and stinky, we climbed into our vehicle and made one more stop for gas at the PDV (Petroleos de Venezuela) station in KM88 (San Isidro, separated from las Claritas by only three kilometers). From here, it was only a short distance to the beginning of the climb through the cloud forest.

The Land Cruiser ground its way up the several hundred meters rise in altitude over approximately 20 miles through the cloud forest, sounding like it would rather be doing something much less strenuous. Over-topping the escarpment (La Escalera), the vegetation changed abruptly from the lush, damp cloud forest to the dry and open Gran Sabana within a few hundred feet. Our climb had been through a steady rain which changed to very gloomy low overcast and intermittent rain after reaching the savannah. There was even a little sleet, which I had to explain the term to David who was sorry he had been asleep as he'd never seen it.

The Gran Sabana has a mean elevation of about 1200 meters (about 3640 feet) and is part of what remains of the mountain range that once rose here like the Rockies, or maybe the Andes, but is now so worn away as to be a relatively level plateau known as the Guyanan Shield. This plateau separates eastern Venezuela and the three Guyanas from the Amazon basin. The tepuis (teh-poo-ees), to which we are venturing, remain as outcrops jutting above the savannah. They are characteristic of southeastern Venezuela and parts of Guyana. Because of their size and isolation over time, many plant and animal species have become distinct from their neighbors in the lowlands, making the tepuis great places to look for endemics. To picture a tepui, think of a massive butte or mesa in the American west and put it in a tropical setting with lots of forest surrounding the base.

The Gran Sabana is an open rangeland-like landscape of sedges and grasses, interspersed with numerous river courses and riverine woodlands with some sizable trees. Some spectacular waterfalls trickle or roar down the sides of the tepuis. The world's longest single drop waterfall (Angel Falls over 3000 feet) descends Auyan-tepui

a few hundred kilometers west of our destination and the sixth longest drop waterfall is off Kukenan Tepui visible from the tepui we will climb. There are no megaherbivores, like deer, and not even cattle here as the grass is so loaded with silica that nothing can eat it, probably the Gran Sabana's saving grace from development.

Julio flew along at 120-140 kph through intermittent rain on a good two-lane road. The sky was very gloomy. Several times, David and Julio pointed out where such and such tepui was in the clouds. Another stop was made for gas, this time at the PDV station in Rapidos de Kamoiran (where we would stay a night a week later). This was just a small hotel with a gas station by a rapids. There was some gas available.

At about 6PM we rolled into the little Amerindian town of San Francisco de Yuruaní (more about this town on the way out). As traveling the final stretch of road that would take us into Paraitepui del Roraima was often dicey, David and Julio stopped to check with the locals about road conditions. Just to be sure, we went around-the-block and asked another person who said it was OK to travel.

The road to Paraitepui del Roraima was an experience not to be forgotten. At the entry to the road, Julio got out and set the four-wheel locks on the front wheels. Now the Land Cruiser really did sound like it had better things to do than carry four human fools up a mountain road. It started out as a fairly nice clay-based two-track with a crushed laterite rock overlay. As soon as we began to climb in elevation things changed rapidly. There was no guard rail to catch us if we drove off into the savannah on the left and an erosional gully so deep and narrow on the right (and about a half km long) that if we had gone off we'd have been locked inside by the walls and never heard from again. For the early part of the twenty-two km (13.75 miles), the road was reasonable after the gully but there were several sizable mud holes to skirt. Julio pointed out a giant anteater in the grasses a few hundred meters away. A light rain added to the experience with Julio doing some very fancy steering-wheel work to keep one end or the other on the road.

Continuing on, the road became heavily rutted with runoff channels. Julio again handled the vehicle well, though progress was quite slow as he had to carefully move from one side to the other to negotiate the ruts as darkness fell. At several fords, both David and Julio had to get out and, using flashlights, check each for how best to cross. One side or the other would be very steep and rutted, while enough speed had to be maintained to shoot up the other side or slow enough on the downward side not to slide off into the stream. We reached the final hurdle in the dark and the rain on a wholly clay-based road (the laterite covering having been abandoned some kilometers back). While David guided with a flashlight, Julio roared up a very slick slope, sashaying to and fro and flinging copious amounts of mud into the night.

At about 7:15PM, even Julio gave up a few hundred meters short of the end. David climbed the last hill to Paraitepui del Roraima village to get some of the porters to come down and help carry our baggage up.

We were taken in the darkness to a small "adobe" hut with a corrugated roof under which we pitched our tents (mercifully, the clay floor was soft enough to accept tent stakes), thankful we didn't have to setup outside in the rain. After some words about the next day between David and the porters, Julio said good-bye and went back to the vehicle to drive back to P. O. the next day (at least we hoped he didn't plan to drive back that night). David and Desiree set up the new single-burner Coleman cook stove and figured out how to use it by flashlight. When the water boiled, we tried out some dried soup and a meal pack of freeze-dried chicken tetrazini I'd brought from the

states (too long a story there). After some final baggage checks in preparation for tomorrow and stomping on a few sizable cockroaches, we cashed in for the day about 10:30PM.

May 19: Camp at Paraitepui del Roraima (N05° 03.225 W60° 56.037) at 1259 meters (4129 feet) to Kukenan Camp (N05° 06.292 W60° 49.478) at 1120 meters (3673 feet, drop of 456 feet).

Senior rooster provided the wake-up call. Breakfast was of bread, peanut butter (David said I had to eat the entire jar during the trip as Venezuelans aren't big on peanut butter, his kids won't eat it), marmalade, granola cereal, and powdered milk. Several emaciated dogs hung around the shelter hoping for a hand out. They were quite a sight of sorry lives.

Our little shelter was just enough to hold our three tents, the "picnic table" and benches under one roof. The sides were about three feet high and of a bound stick lattice packed with mud. From there to the roof was open, each end being closed for a small office on one end and a *baños* (toilet) on the other. As the toilet was locked, David hoisted Desiree up to the window to see if she could get it open from the inside. Seeing that she could, she was sent the rest of the way in and we were saved from having to do our duties in the open.

We washed up ourselves and the dishes by way of an outside water faucet that was connected by plastic hose to "the stream" somewhere well above us. It provided a trickle of water, but was enough to get the jobs done.

First Kukenan and then Roraima (our destination) tepuis slowly came out of the clouds. Roraima is the model for the mountain used in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*.

Our porters came down from the town above and, after weighing all our duffle bags, packed up their "back pack" frames. The porters are paid by how much they carry and are also limited to the total weight, about 60 pounds, which they seem to carry as though it isn't there. Their pack frames are hand woven out of palm strips (probably Moriche palm) and appear to be very sturdy. The full pack may stick well above their heads. The load is bound by nylon twine.

The three of us started out at about 7:40 AM, loaded with our own packs, mine being about twenty pounds as I'd been carrying that in practice for a month before leaving. It readily became apparent that twenty pounds carried across mostly level ground in the cool of April and May in Michigan is greatly different than twenty pounds on slippery clay in 80 degree heat on hilly Gran Sabana terrain.

The walk began across level ground on well-worn paths through the grass, then downhill to a small stream, which by arrival there, I was already gulping water. Continuing downhill, we crossed another small stream and then passed through a small, thickly-vegetated riverine woodland. Out the other side, the climb began up a long slope. Already I felt like Katz in Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*, and I had to stop frequently to catch my breath.

Once at the top, we rested as Desiree was doing only marginally better than I. I already had a blister. David gave me a roll of adhesive tape to cover it and other potentially blister-able places on my feet. After that, I wore double socks to keep my

feet from slipping in my hiking boots, though they did not seem to be doing so. Adding to the backpack weight was the pound or so of mud clinging to each foot.

From here, the trail was still hilly and over a slick hard-packed clay, but much more manageable walking. We stopped several times to look at such birds as the grassland and wedge-tailed sparrows that were relatively common in the grass as well as the resident subspecies of the eastern meadowlark. Both tepuis came and went through the shroud of slow moving clouds that added a real sense of mystery to the scene. At times the tepuis were completely covered, at others only the top was covered or just belted by clouds around the middle. Light rain fell about a third of the time but never enough to put on our personal saunas (rain ponchos). It was enough to keep us damp, but our sweat was doing that anyway.

The general topography away from the slopes of the tepuis is rocky, covered by a layer of clay and wide eroded valleys through which at least a small creek to a moderately sized river ran. The clay is thick, and for the most part along this section of the hike, covers most of the rock. The general impression might be that of western North Dakota or eastern Montana. The grasses and sedges (as much of it is) are separated plants with bare soil between, almost as though individually planted, not like the mass of interlaced grass characteristic of our fields. The sky opened to partly cloudy by afternoon. There were few flowers along the way, most of which were not easily identifiable to a familiar family, but there were a few *Sisyrinchium*-like irises and a sedge with a large showy inflorescence.

Along the way some of the items of interest from the trail were numerous bullet ants, tawny-headed swallows and tepui swifts wove back and forth in the air, a few meager lines of leaf-cutter ants with very large-headed soldier ants attending them, and several very cooperative grass wrens. The wrens were in a small broad gully that was lined with a bog-like bottom. From the small stream trickling through the grass, I drew my first bottle of stream water after David assured me it was safe. In one place only, there was an acre or so of an odd sedge or grass that grew like miniature Joshua trees only a few inches high out of the clay.

One of the great advantages to this hike was that we did not need to carry water beyond a liter bottle for immediate use as the water is so naturally acid, none of the "bugs" can survive. The water was utterly tasteless and crystal clear throughout the hike and could be taken up anywhere along the way and at camp sites (as long as you drew it upstream from the herd). I added powdered Gatorade to mine throughout the trip to keep from having a bout of labyrinthitis due to dehydration. I might as well have had it administered IV as I continually needed water. Our lunches were mostly trail mix of David's concoction, power bars, raisins, and candy bars along the trail. All along the trail, we needed to cross numerous small streams that ranged from a hop to cross to several that were crossed on a log. This is a lot of fun with a pound of clay on the bottom of each boot on a wet log.

Just before the Tek River, a good twelve to thirteen plus kilometers of walking from the start, there was another "adobe" shelter (at which we stayed on the way back). The Tek River is a small rock-bottomed river about thirty-feet wide and, on this day in moderate flow. We needed to press on to get across both the Tek and Kukenan rivers. Anyone hiking this trail wants to be beyond the two larger rivers that must be waded across, before camping for the day. Both rivers may receive rain on the tepuis during daylight, but the flood crest may not reach the camping area until the night. During the rainy season, as it presently is, it can be several hours to a day before the water

recedes enough to cross again. Therefore, we took off our hiking boots and socks and crossed barefoot. David led the way telling us each which rock to put our foot on and which to grab with our hands. This was repeated at the Kukenan River about 1.5 to two kilometers farther along. David and Desiree made the trip across the Tek several times to retrieve our packs.

As we weren't sure about crossing the Kukenan, David had us wait on a bluff above the river about twenty minutes for a couple of the porters to arrive who knew the river situation better. Fortunately at the Kukenan, which was down a steep embankment and was about twice the width of the Tek and full of large boulders, several of the Pemon Amerindians also needed to cross in the opposite direction. They had a small dugout canoe and gave both Desiree and I passage when they went back to pickup another of their compatriots.

Not much beyond the river was an inviting grove of trees with a large shelter. David paid the approximately ten dollar fee for the night to keep us dry, a good idea as there was a steady rain part of the night and at dawn. We arrived by about 2:30PM after a straight line distance of 13 km according to the GPS and an estimated walk of 15-16 km (9-10 miles). While waiting for the rest of the porters to arrive with the food and stove, we treated ourselves to a reasonable bath in the pleasantly cool river, as we all were quite funky by now.

Lunch at about 3PM was Lipton cream of asparagus soup along with cheese, candy bars, raisins, and some granola. The day was hot and muggy with barely a breath of breeze. A hungry horde of small black flies (what we might call no-see-ems or punkies) were also in mood for a meal and made fast work of any exposed skin. This was the only location we needed bug spray (and the Tek River site on the way back). They were rather sneaky too, as the bite didn't hurt until afterward. Desiree, who was still in shorts, soon looked like she had a severe case of chicken pox. Two weeks later I still had a few of the small blood blisters on my hands that they caused. All in all, though, they were not intolerable and the stay was pleasant enough.

Our shelter for the night was similar to the one at Paraitepui del Roraima (P T), being an adobe-like structure just big enough again for our three tents after we removed the table and benches. We soon made it look quite lived in. It was open to the air like at P. T, but also had a closed storage area attached to it. The toilet facilities turned out to be a thatched hut some short distance from the adobe structure and in sad need of repair. The palm-leaf roof had holes in it and the surrounding plastic sheeting left it quite open to see if the facility was in use or not. It was a two holer, meaning two holes in a lattice of cross pieces of wooden branches mudded over with clay. There was no seat or means to grab hold of some steadying factor while balancing to do one's business.

Until dark, we spent time around the camp, investigating the area for birds and exploring the river edge. Birds seen in the scrubby growth near the shelter were the rufous-collared sparrow, sort of the house sparrow equivalent in the tropics but much more attractive, plain-crested elaenia, burnished-buff tanager, fork-tailed flycatcher, and bran-colored flycatcher. After dark, we did a bit of hiking up the trail to see if we could come up with any nightjars, but found none.

Dinner was another of our stash of Mountain House dried trail dinners. One has only to boil water, open the pack, remove the desiccation pack, add the boiling water, and let it sit ten minutes (though 12-15 was better). All our selections were quite acceptable.

Along with this, we had cheese, nuts, dried fruit and numerous other goodies David kept surprising us with each day.

We turned in about 9PM. My tent was a Cabela's Bivy tent, one of the long tube-like tents. It was quite functional and easy to set up each night, but over all was only big enough to change one's mind in. David had provided me with a foam sleeping mat and with my light-weight down sleeping bag each night was reasonably comfortable. Even with a section of our old Martha Stewart shower curtain beneath the tent to help prevent punctures, I could feel every bump in the ground, so had to be quite careful where to place the tent at each site. David and Desiree both had larger dome tents that provided more room for their belongings. Our larger duffle bags that the porters carried were left outside and the duffle with the food had to be hung from the rafter by twine any place there were dogs around camp.

May 20: Kukenan Camp (N05° 06.292 W60° 49.478) to Roraima Base Camp (05° 08.517 W60° 46.527) at 1900 meters (6232 feet, rise of 2560 feet).

We awakened to a steady rain. This diminished gradually to sprinkles and quit by the time we were ready to leave at about 8AM. The rains over the tepuis during the night have brought the river up by several inches turning the stream into a whitewater river covering most all of the rocks and boulders that were visible yesterday. This brought obvious truth to David's assertion yesterday that we needed to be on the far side of the Kukenan River by the end of that walk.

Breakfast was of buns, pb&j, granola with powdered milk. After bandaging up yesterday's blisters and putting more tape on potential blister spots, we got into our boots and packed up the camp. David, wisely, got me to part with about five pounds of my backpack and put it into the porter's packs. That certainly made the day's hike noticeably easier. We each partook of the pleasures of the "outhouse" before leaving. I found out after my turn that Desiree had brought a small camp toilet seat with her.

The trail out of the Kukenan camp is initially a gradual incline through open shrubby and grassy countryside on a clay-based path. It was much like yesterday but with a few stunted trees. Soon after, the incline rises a bit more sharply and the scenery opens up revealing bits and pieces of the cloud shrouded Kukenan and Roraima tepuis ahead of us. Both are large enough to create their own weather. Clouds swirl about giving the whole scene an eerie appearance. As we walked the gap mentioned in *The Lost World* came and went from view until we walked far enough toward the west that it disappeared behind the tepui proper.

Soon the trail became fairly rocky, steeper, as well as slippery, requiring frequent stops for water and brief rests. Water came down the trail, often as part of it, from numerous rivulets coming out of the vegetation. Today, as well as yesterday, there were numerous examples of fire damaged landscape, often deliberately set, sometimes by lightning. One large area of many hundreds of acres could be seen along the lower front of Kukenan where David said there had been a large fire in the 1920s. In a testament of the harshness of the Gran Sabana's environment, the line between burned and unburned grasses was readily visible after all the intervening years. David

remarked that within historical times the whole area through which we were walking had been forest.

As we continued to gain in altitude, the trail passed through a number of “boggy” areas of acid environments that were their own separate habitats within the larger grassy landscape. While the overall view of the grassland remained the same, these habitats were easily recognizable as separate within. These probably are more accurately called acid fens as the water does move through the system rather than being bound up within. Various species of *Carex*-, *Eleocharis*-, *Scirpus*-, and *Xyris*-like plants were among the more easily recognizable vegetation in these environments. At least one species of *Utricularia* (bladderworts) with very tiny flowers could be found among the vegetation.

Toward the end of the climb, the trail became quite rocky and difficult to walk through as there was enough space between the rocks that slipping off or potentially twisting the ankle became annoyingly commonplace. This was rather exhausting (and was even more annoying and taxing on the way back in the rain).

As we reached the end of the trail to the base camp, at a guessed altitude of maybe 1800 to 1850 meters, the terrain became a bit more level but rockier and there was a rather abrupt change to a more fen-like base and more shrubbery appeared. Bromeliads began to dot the landscape as well as several species of orchids, the strange *Stegolepis* plants, an endemic genus of the tepuis, and flowers that looked like our *Rhexias*. Many others were coming into bloom. This is the belt of vegetation called the pre-mountain forest between the Gran Sabana and the mountain forest that is just a bit farther up the trail above the camp.

The sky remained gloomy, but highly variable throughout, the tepuis playing cat and mouse with the clouds, but occasionally affording spectacular views, as was the view back toward where we had come. It was difficult to tell which was wetter, our sweat or the constant mist. David remarked that we should be thankful for the clouds and humidity as the walk is much worse during the dry season when most people do the hike as there is constant sunlight.

Base camp was reached at about 12:10PM, a walk of about 4.5 hours. Our camp was in the open this time as the shelter here was a small divided building fully enclosed and quite dark inside. David and I set up outside and Desiree took one half of the shelter where we also stored all our packs. In the other half we set up our kitchen. I set up at the far end of the opening serving as the camping area, David about the middle. Just before the camp was a small stream we had to ford on a branch over it. This noisy little stream served as our water supply. We would stay here two nights. Lunch was soup, cheese, and jerky, a bag of which I brought along from the states. Neither David nor Desiree had ever had any of this and couldn't seem to get enough of it. We had a brief bit of sunlight and so hung up wet clothing and washed up in the stream.

About 2:30PM, we took a walk from the camp into the tepui forest, or mountain forest, above the camp. This was slightly downhill at first to another small but roaring stream. David immediately spotted a sharp-tailed streamcreeper working the mossy rocks, a dipper-like bird that is often very difficult to see. The bird put on a good show, allowing us to watch it for several minutes before it disappeared into the vegetation.

Crossing the stream by hopping the rocks, we began a steep climb that must have approached 60 degrees. This was a sort of step-by-step, toe-and-knees climb up sandstone and clay stairs. It was arduous and quite taxing. This climb ended on a small shrubby plateau (before another similar climb). A good selection of tepui endemics and specialists came into view in the thick rain-forest like vegetation. The forest was impenetrably thick, full of orchids of several species, mostly endemics, mosses, ferns, reindeer-like lichens, short trees, huge bromeliads, *Stegolepis*, and numerous other higher plants. Some of the birds were black-headed tanagers, tepui wren, Serrian elanea, great flower piercer, white-throated tyrannulet, paramo seedeater and the striking tepui brushfinch. Little chachalaca and tepui antpitta were heard. Rain put a damper on our staying much longer. The views back down toward camp and across the trail we had walked up during the day were spectacular.

We, of course, had to backtrack down the same steep trail, this time heal-and-butt. The rest of the afternoon was spent around the camp in and out of the rain.

Between 4PM and 6PM, the light on the tepuis was awesome against the backdrop of floating clouds. The wall of Roraima was yellowish and turned deeper toned as the sun went down. Over the valley, the clouds were stunning cumulous with one large thunderhead. After dark, David and I went back down the trail toward the Kukenan River to look for nightjars. This is one of David's research projects and part of the reason for coming to this location. He is trying to determine if the band-winged nightjar from the coastal cordillera and the andes of Venezuela is separate from the band-wing of the tepuis. We had luck finding one fairly quickly in the grasses off the trail, but could not get any calls or a particularly good look.

May 21: Base Camp and hike up to the wall of Roraima Tepui.

There was a steady, but not hard, rain after about 4AM. Breakfast was a bit delayed due to the early rain. There was no further rain until about 2:30PM when we got quite a downpour as we finished lunch.

At about 8:30, we left for a hike up to the tepui wall. This took about three and a half hours and repeated the steep hike of yesterday, adding in another just as steep section farther on as well as a number of shorter slightly more gradual rises. We could not get a GPS reading at the wall due to the dense vegetation.

The vegetation in the mountain forest was truly awe inspiring. It was impenetrably lush, seemingly every square inch of space was coated with some form of plant life. Tree trunks sported lichens, mosses, and liverworts in profusion, from which often grew bromeliads or orchids. The ground cover was a mattress of mosses and reindeer-like lichens that often looked like dozens of whiffle balls piled one on the other. Large bromeliads lined the trails, their leaves holding many pools of water which Desiree and I often checked for frogs, but we found none. Some seven to ten species of orchids were abundant. Everything was soaking wet and shrouded in the cloudy mist as we hiked upward. Huge tree roots, though few of the trees reached more than ten to twelve feet in height, snaked across the path and little rivulets and pools of condensed water filled every depression.

The streams we crossed on the way up were not much more than a foot or so wide, but made quite a roar as they cascaded over the rocks. The largest stream was

reached at the wall where it burst forth directly out of the rock some 400 meters below the top of the tepui. A lush matt of mosses and liverworts clung to the splash zone around the outlet.

Birds along the way were several of the tepui endemics: Tepui wren, tepui foliage-gleaner, Roraiman barbtail, and the common tepui brushfinch, a beautiful bird with a chestnut head, yellow under parts and dark gray back; black hooded thrushes, black-faced tanagers and greater elaenia. Tepui parrotlets were common in the air overhead, but a good look was difficult through all the mist. David was able to coax one of the many tepui antpittas in close with taped playback of its song. I was unable to see it due to a mossy tree ranch in the way, though David could easily see it.

We returned to our camp by early afternoon and found we had our only company during the trip. This was a foursome of three Spaniards and a Venezuelan who were doing a documentary on the tepui. Apparently, they had taken the cheap route to outfitting their "expedition". David related a few days later that they had spent only one of their scheduled two nights on the top of Roraima because they had not prepared for the temperatures in the low 60s at night and their guide did not know even the basic locations on top of the tepui. Their driver was also inexperienced with the P. T. road as we passed their flipped over vehicle on the road on our way out.

We had a brief lunch of hot soup to warm up after being damp all day, then took a nap for awhile, lying around in our tents waiting for the rain to let up. When we rolled out of our tents to the first real sunlight we had seen since P. O. on the 18th, the tepuis were spectacular in the sunlight. The large waterfall on Kukenan had increased in flow by several factors overnight. Several new waterfalls had appeared on Kukenan as well as on Roraima. One cascaded only halfway down Kukenan before disappearing into mists while another made it to the bottom only as mist. Another had a nice rainbow near its base.

One of the hazards at this camp is the fact that there is no toilet facility at all, thus any short path one takes off the camping area is likely to present the walker with an undesired sight along with a wad of toilet paper. There wasn't much one could do to avoid adding to the mess. We made use of Desiree's portable and got as far off the path as we could and tired as best we could to dig a small hole with our heels first, no easy feat in the heavy clay and thick vegetation.

Our patch of sunlight lasted only half an hour before the clouds crept up from the valley between the tepuis as well as from the east and enclosed us in mist again. There was another brief spell with no rain between 5 and 6PM that afforded a chance to explore a bit on my own. I headed back across the small stream and down the path toward the Kukenan River. One of the acid fen ecosystems had caught my attention on the way up. This seep area spread out over the path and broadened out farther downhill. Hidden among the grasses and sedges were a number of lycopods, a curious plant with a paddle-shaped leaf at the end of a stalk, and a beautiful blue flower scattered among the rank vegetation. Here, the grasses and sedges were very thick rather than sparsely separated as on the Gran Sabana. Everything was quite damp as well as the ground being rather squishy. As it was beginning to get toward dark and the rain began again, I headed back.

Though very humid at the base camp, the daytime temperature is moderated at this altitude. In the evening, both David and Desiree bundled up in fleece pullovers while I sat comfortably in a T-shirt. Dinner was beef stroganoff, again quite filling and tasty

after a day of hiking. The “kitchen” was quite dark due to the building as well as the night outside, so we had our headlights on (as we did every night) and a candle by which to cook and eat, then vacated for the other group.

22 May: Base Camp: 08.517 W60° 46.527) at 1900 meters to the top of Roraima Tepui, Basilio Hotel (N05° 09.533 W60° 47.103) at 2700 meters (8856 feet), a rise of 2624 feet over about 2 km straight distance by GPS.

We covered the same knee-and-toe path up to the wall from Base Camp that we had covered yesterday in a determined hike of an 1:45. There was a light overcast when we started and as we hiked to the wall, the clouds built and rose out of the valley shrouding us in perpetual mist the rest of the day. Being acrophobic at times, I rather welcomed the mist so I could not see the valley below as we walked, though would have liked to see it. On top of Roraima is a rock formation called the Maverick as it looks with no imagination like an automobile. David had told me on the walk from Kukenan camp we would come up under the Maverick. At the time, I interpreted this to mean we would climb what appeared to be a straight up ascent of the wall. Fortunately, the hike took us under the Maverick on a long gradual, but by no means easy climb. Even following the wall very closely, and at points close enough to touch it, the mist was enough that we could not view more than a few tens of feet of it.

At the wall, the band of the mountain forest gives way to tepui scrub as we climbed upward. Here the landscape (more vertical than horizontal) gives way to stunted trees more shrubby in nature and then more to bromeliads. Numerous highly acid wet areas were along the trail that abounded in orchids, stunted shrubs, bromeliads, a few bladderworts, two species of endemic pitcher plants (one highly sought after by collectors of such), and a few sundews amid the carpet of mosses and rocks. All the rocks, except recent slides, are black made so by a coating of algae.

Perhaps the most disheartening part of this section of the hike to the top was having to descend about 150 meters down a talus slope of a rock fall from many years ago that had obliterated the original trail. It was the going downhill that was so difficult spiritually as I knew it had to be re climbed.

Another bolder field had to be crossed on more rocks that slipped and slid underfoot with the misty lubrication. Here, the fine mist of a waterfall above was enough that we had to put on our personal saunas so as not to thoroughly soak our backpacks. This veil of water was nearly invisible to look at, but was a moderate rain to walk under. From there, it was steadily upward again across more slippery and shifting rock.

About this time we got to kidding around about making cell phone calls. Desiree pulled out her cell phone and tired and got through to her mother. This was really annoying to me because I can't even make a call from Rodney to Big Rapids on mine, and here is Desiree about 40 miles from the nearest tower on the fog shrouded side of a semi-remote mountain making a legible phone call. David tried from the top and could not get through.

After this, the walk was still heavily upward through the tepui scrub but over more solid footing between large boulders. The trail isn't too difficult to follow as the black

lichen is worn away by the many hundreds of feet using the path, but it did separate enough that I got modestly off trail and had to have David and Desiree talk me back onto the trail from above. Our porters caught up to us just as we crested the lip of the tepui and sat to rest and high-five for making it to the top in four hours; a straight distance climb of two kilometers from the base camp but probably 3.5 to four on foot.

The top of Roraima is sandstone, as is the whole formation. All of the rock is black due to a very thin layer of algae, except where foot worn by various paths across the rock. The scenery on the summit is something like a miniaturized version of the American southwest, the rock being sculptured by wind and water into an array of formations as though someone had gone crazy with a variable depth router. Elevation on the surface might range about 150 feet or more. What is most fascinating botanically is the large number of acid pools and "fens" dotting the landscape that makes for a uniquely strange ecosystem of stunted plants adapted to those environments. Many of the plants were in bloom. The carpeting plants are largely mosses providing beds for the great profusion of higher plants in such an otherwise stark and forbidding landscape. The top of Roraima is about fifteen to eighteen kilometers long and maybe seven at its widest. We have only been approaching and climbing the front of the tepui and even from the top, its immensity is not apparent and approaching from the Gran Sabana one sees only a small fraction of the tepui. The communal border between Guyana, Brazil, and Venezuela is on top of Roraima, but David said it was a good three hours walk from where we were camping.

From our position at the prow of Roraima, we still had another thirty to forty-five minutes to reach our campsite. The three of us followed the porters across this utterly fascinating "moonscape," walking along rock ridges to avoid pools and rock hopping across streams and rivulets coursing between. Several soft white sand flats had to be gingerly skirted or splashed through on our way to our "hotel".

Our residence for the next two nights was Basilio Hotel, named after one of the first modern-day porters when the route became popular. By hotel I mean a good sized dent in the heavily eroded and pock-marked sandstone cliff overhung by a thin strip of level ground before falling away into dense shrubbery below. This made for quite a cozy place to stay, the strip of land being just wide enough to set up our three tents and still have a passage between the rock and the shrubbery of about the width of a foot to get by. The overhanging rock nicely protected us from the rain (and hopefully was going to remain in place for another two days) and allowed us easy access to "running" water to fill our camp pot on several occasions. Otherwise, our water source was at a small pool at the top of a waterfall several hundred feet away that fell about six feet into a pool sunken in the rocks below.

The indentations into the sandstone along the ledge allowed us to conveniently stow all our gear and provided a nice cooking location. There are about ten "hotels" in the area and keep each camp site well separated from the next. Sergio and his crew stayed at the Indio hotel, within yelling distance, so it was easy to get hold of them.

It, of course, rained in mid afternoon and we were safely dry except for a bit of splash from the half dozen or so waterfalls off the cliff above. Several rufous-collared sparrows came begging and we amused ourselves flipping them bits of bread. (The rufous-crowned up here on the tepui is a possible split into the McConnell race from the rufous-crowns in the lowlands.) One can easily get lost up here when the fog descends (or ascends from the valley floor) and David cautioned Desiree and I both to just stay put and wait our any fog that might envelope us if we went hiking on our

own. The weather can change in a matter of minutes continually throughout the day. Several people have not heeded this warning and have never been found.

After a late lunch of dried mushroom soup, we made ornithological history! David called out a tepui wren as it flew into camp. Shortly there after it worked its way along the rock wall of the camp above our tents and popped into a nest in one of the many pock-mark holes twelve to fifteen feet above us – the first ever record for this species nest.

We tried to take a walk, but got rained out quickly, so returned to camp to watch the waterfalls cascade in front of us. Before dinner, though, we got in about a forty-five minute walk of about three quarter mile before heading back as the clouds again began closing in on us. Much of what we walked through was rather flat terrain with sandy bottoms and a laminar flow of water over it. It is truly captivating how the array of plants have adapted to this environment, many of them found nowhere else in the world but the tops of the tepuis of Venezuela and western Guyana, and some only to Roraima. We found several stands of the *Heliamphora* pitcher plants that have beautiful unpitcher plant-like flowers. There were also several stands of a plant with paddle shaped leaves at the end of a stalk (sort of lolli-pop like in appearance).

Another fascinating creature of the tepui top is the black *Oreophinella roraimae* frog, a small (think spring peeper size) frog endemic to the tepui. Though they could be made to hop if prodded, their main form of locomotion is to walk.

In the evening, the temperature dropped to the low 60s and I sat in my t shirt quite comfortably while David and Desiree shivered in fleece pullovers. I invited them up to Michigan in January to see what cold really was. Our dinner was again one of the Mountain House selections, jerky, cheese, bread and whatever else we could find. David pulled out a celebratory bottle of wine and with some effort I worked the cork out by digging away at the cork with my pocket knife (they remembered their cell phones, but not a cork screw). We sat around by candle light and our head-lamps talking until too tired to do anything else but go to bed.

May 23: Exploring the top of Roaraima tepui

During the night of May 22-23, David made more ornithological history. One of his goals was to try to get recordings of the Roraiman subspecies of the band-wing nightjar which he hopes to split form the races of northern Venezuela. Shortly after turning in for the night I heard a weird bird call. With his equipment ready, David was able to get several good recordings of the call he already knew to be the Roraiman race of this nightjar. Unable to get more responses close by, he wandered around in the night for several hours, and finally caught up with two males defending territory below the "Indio Hotel". Hearing the call makes David, Desiree, myself, and one other person the only people in the world at that time to knowingly have heard this bird. It is David's belief that the subspecies is significantly different from the nearest relative, on the coastal cordillera, north of the Orinoco delta, to be a distinct species in a pan-tepui group based on its calls, wing chord, and other differences. I later looked at specimens in the Phelps Museum collection in Caracas and it was easy to see why David believed this.

Beginning around 6:30AM, we began a walk to an area of the tepui referred to as the "window" by way of the back side of the prominence where we were camped. This walk was across the face of the area of the tepui where we were camping to an opening that afforded spectacular views of the Guyanan and Venezuelan border area and Kukenan tepui.

Our walk was like yesterday, over, around, and through small wetlands, streams, rocks, and ridges. While I wouldn't have tried the path myself, it was fairly straightforward as it amounted to a white line of foot wear in the black algae-coated rock. Many of the pools held large balls of floating algae while others were crystal clear, while still other wet areas held balls of algae about the size of large marbles or a thick scum. The algae-filled pools are more likely to be the ones that are permanent, or if they do dry up, do not remain so for long periods. Many chunks of quartz about the size of a small finger littered the washes followed by a fan of white sand. The vegetation along the path was less than that around the campsite, probably because it was more open terrain with faster drainage and more wind exposure. There were also numerous fissures in the rock that ran from a few feet to tens of feet deep. The shallower ones often held an array of bromeliads. Except for formations in the distance, the relief here is only ten to fifteen feet with much of the terrain being level to undulating.

The trail led us down a "gully" for lack of a better word that followed a small stream. The stream cascaded down a small waterfall and continued through a series of modest sized pools before disappearing into a fissure. This area is called the Jacuzzi and is quite aptly named as the pools are shaped much like hot tubs and the water quite warm.

As the day began to heat up, we reached the edge of the cliff referred to as the "window". From here, we got a commanding view of the northeastern side of Kukenan tepui to our left, a broad view of the Guyanan (Venezuelan disputed territory) rain forest side (the Gran Sabana is on the rain shadow side of the string of tepuis, eight all together in this area) and the western side of Roraima to our right.

The views were spectacular and Roraima had blessed us with a bright sunny morning with which to do our viewing, the stretch of sunlight lasting more than a half hour since we climbed the escarpment onto the Gran Sabana. Tropical rainforest spread out below as far as we could see into the swirling clouds creeping up the valley. A pair of orange-breasted falcons gave us quite a show, swooping before us and calling loudly. These falcons are about the size of Peregrines so this was quite a display to watch.

The "window" is something of a bow in the cliff front, but the back side of the prow which we climbed. Sergio led us to the western prominence of the cliff where we were as close to Kukenan as we could get. Here the whole length of Kukenan was visible along with three of its waterfalls and numerous other cascades that never reached the base.

Heading back, we had about a half an hour to explore the Jacuzzi area mentioned earlier while David pursued a small bird that was singing from the rocks. In the Jacuzzi pools, numerous large dark Aeshnid larvae (darker type dragonflies when adult) could be seen against the cream colored rocks in the pools. These pools were crystal clear all the way to the bottom and two to six feet deep. The jet black larvae were obvious against the cream-colored sand and rocks, which didn't seem too adaptive but there were likely few if any predators on them up here.

We returned by a different route to our hotel for lunch and by 11:45AM were on our way across another portion of the tepui, with Sergio in the lead again, to view Roraima's oilbird colony. Oilbirds are large Caprimulgiformes, somehow related with members of the nightjars and potoos (the common nighthawk and whip-poor-will are in the nightjar family) which have adapted to feeding on tropical forest fruits instead of insects. Like bats, these birds nest in large caves throughout much of the tropical rainforest, so are often limited to tropical forests in cave areas. Roraima's colony may be the only oilbird colony known that is not in a cave. This colony is in a huge fissure in the rock that drops perhaps thousands of feet, thus providing a cave-like atmosphere. Our walk took about an hour and a half in a direction nearly opposite to the walk to the "window" so you get an idea of about how large an area the top of Roraima covers.

The plant life was similar to previous walks, small to large algae filled pools, edging emergents, pitcher plants, sundews, bromeliads, mosses, *Stegolepis*, and the stunted tree of the tepui top, *Bonnettia roraima*. Though we kept up a good pace, I did get to stop a few places and peer into the pools for dragonfly larvae, of which there were a number of the large Aeshnids as well as several other families of aquatic insects.

The sun was still out, though it was not particularly hot and a fairly strong wind was blowing across the tepui. Nearing the oilbird colony, we had to divert to the upper end of the chasm in which they nested. This chasm was maybe a hundred feet across and narrowed as we approached the end, but it had numerous peaks and ridges within it. The stream flowing through it could be heard roaring below.

At the site, we had to hang over the edge to get a view of the colony. Being quite dark that deep into the crevice, it took some time for the eyes to adjust. According to David, about there could be up to 2000 pairs nesting in the crevasse, although he reminded me that every number is a speculation. Below the plants overhanging the opening, we could see only about twenty pairs on the ledges far below. Peering down on the birds was much like hanging over a seabird colony for a look. There were several pairs we could see completely with a few of their large grayish chicks. There were no nests per se, just beds of regurgitated nuts from the fruits they eat. Their diet is mostly fruits from the Moraceae family (mulberries are in this family).

Back at camp we rested in the cubby holes in the sandstone to get out of the sun as we watched a thunderstorm build over Kukenan. After a shower over us, I did some exploring below the campsite before sunset. I had been alerted to look for a small dragonfly in the *Sympetrum* genus that is endemic to Roraima, *Sympetrum roraimi*. Checking the numerous pools revealed only a few of the large Aeshnids until one pool hidden among the rocks produced a few small *Sympetrum*-like larvae. Amid and around all these pools and in the cracks were a bewildering array of plants clinging to about every possible place to eek out a living. Being the rainy season most were in flower.

Light rain sent me back to camp as the light was failing near sunset anyway. From the campsite, we watched several thunderstorms appear over the Gran Sabana with much lightning (as happened every night). After a brief rain over us the sky began to clear up again, with Kukenan still going in and out of the clouds until dark.

May 24: Roraima Tepui to the Tek River.

I was up at around 5:45, after lying awake for about an hour listening to Roraiman liquid sunshine cascade off the cliff above. A deep foggy mist made seeing beyond a hundred meters or so impossible. Our trio of chestnut-collared sparrows was waiting to greet us and expecting their hand out. A scorpion about an inch long crawled out from beneath Desiree's tent. It was probably an endemic, according to David.

By the time we left, there was a modest but steady rain. In our personal saunas, we trekked across the top of Roraima to the trail down the mountain. As the rain remained steady all the way down, we made no stops save short ones to rest. Needless to say, at points it was rather precarious over the wet stones and roots. Stopping at one point, we waited for Desiree to catch up, not aware that she had slipped farther back and slid several body lengths along the cliff edge before catching herself. Needless to say, she was quite shaken for awhile.

Going down the nearly vertical descent nearing the base camp was quite taxing on the knees and I was beginning to get the feeling I might have shin-splints developing.

At base camp, which was under a sheet of water and inch or so thick, we stopped for a ten minute break in the shelter. Still under a steady light to moderate rain, we continued on toward Kukenan camp. We had not planned to stay at the base camp on the way out as the hike was not that taxing or long downhill (or was it?) and saved us a day. I couldn't decide during this part of the hike which was worse, hiking in a rain poncho and getting soaked with sweat or just walking in the rain like the porters and getting soaked that way. The only thing that the ponchos accomplished was to keep our back packs semi dry.

Of the three parts of the full hike, this middle section from the base camp to Kukenan camp seemed more difficult than the long first section or the climb to Roraima as it was over wet rocks spaced just right as to catch the foot, slick clay between, and wet grassy-edged clay paths where there weren't rocks, along which also flowed the day's runoff. Though five layers of spray silicone on my hiking boots had held up well, by now it had failed and my feet were soaked along with everything else. My shins were quite sore by now which added to the annoyance of each step's jolt.

Kukenan became visible and the rain let up for the most part by the time we reached Kukenan camp. I watched as one of the Kukenan waterfalls was actually being blown back upward in a J like loop before disappearing into thin air. The sixth largest waterfall of the world was now several times larger than a few days ago.

At the Kukenan camp we tried to cross the river, this time in our shoes as we were already fully soaked, but found it dangerously too high and backed off to wait for the porters. This punctuated David's earlier assertion that you want to be on the far side of the Kukenan or Tek rivers to camp. When the porters arrived about twenty minutes later, Sergio and another crossed in waist deep water, getting wet to their chests gripping stones for balance. They found the small dugout hidden in the bushes and ferried us across.

We continued on to the Tek River and crossed it easily as it was barely higher than previously. Here we set up our camp in the shelter and hung everything that we had that was wet over the railings and from lines strung through the rafters. As it was now partially sunny, the three of us went off to the Tek River to remove several days of

sweat, odor and dirt and wash our hair for the first time since leaving Paraitepui del Roraima.

The “black flies” were as pesky as they were the first time, but now in dry clothes we could cover up better and still be comfortable. Some impressive roaches were dispatched and the several malnourished tick laden dogs and puppies from the caretaker’s home nearby set up camp outside the shelter. Sergio pointed out a giant anteater in the distance. We observed it feeding and rummaging around on the other side of the Tek for about five minutes before it disappeared. Several ruddy-breasted seedeaters were working the weeds beyond the clay perimeter of the shelter, one with a tick big enough to give it the appearance of having another head.

Before dinner, I had a chance to walk the edge of the river for some distance and found several *Argia*-like and rubyspot-like (*Hetaerina*) damselflies but no dragonflies. Dinner was more of our Mountain House freeze-dried meals with soup, cheese and whatever else we had left. Before getting in our tents, we clubbed a few more of the roaches. Using the toilet during the night was, as always, an adventure. (About half way through the trip, I’d have given my kingdom for a pair of flip-flops so I didn’t have to squeeze into damp shoes every time I had to get up during the night.) This time because it was raining lightly, which helps bring out snakes, and it was in the open, no bushes around within any sensible walking distance, Desiree’s handy portable toilet seat got some more use somewhere around 1:00AM.

May 25: Tek River Camp to Paraitepui del Roraima.

We were on our way by 7:30AM to complete the longest stretch of the trip. The entire thirteen or so kilometers was covered with only a few stops along the way, having spectacular views of all the six eastern tepuis as they went in and out of the clouds. My knees and shins continued to be quite sore and this slowed me down quite a bit. Though the rain had let up and the sky had cleared considerably, the path was still slick adding to the difficulty of walking, particularly the down slopes.

Desiree and David arrived at camp in Paraitepui del Roraima well before I did. Not knowing which of the three paths to take, entering the town by the central path I ended up seeing considerably more of Paraitepui del Roraima than intended. The town is comprised of a number of well-spaced mud and stick huts with galvanized corrugated sheet metal roofs. Electrical wires run every which way over head from a town generator and less so a trail of half buried plastic water piping. Rather lost in the town, I used what little Spanish I knew and asked one of the porters whose house I passed where my “amigos” were and got pointed in the correct direction.

We all had a celebratory beer that David had somehow come up with, had a short lunch, and took naps. The walk had taken us a bit more than four hours to cover the thirteen km.

After resting, I walked the kilometer back to the first small stream to look for dragonflies. On the way, I found several *Orthemis* dragonflies and a few that looked like our blue dashers working a rain puddle along the path. At the stream, several species of *Argia* were active on the flat rocks in the stream and four species of dragonflies working the edges. Having carried the butterfly net (thank you to the porters for carrying it part of the way) all the way to Roraima and back with barely a

swing, I put it to good use catching the species I couldn't get to hold still for pictures and posed what I caught.

Returning to camp, this time on the correct path, a pair of white-tailed hawks were working the hillside grasses for insects. As it was quite windy, I found a pair of aplomado falcons and a yellow-headed caracara resting on rocks in the grasses. These allowed a reasonably close approach.

David had been hoping that we could get out early and not have to spend the night Paraitepui del Roraima so as not to lose a day. By luck, Caesar arrived with a young couple. We quickly packed up the tents we had set up and all the remaining gear, paid what was due to the porters, said good bys, and were on our way in about twenty minutes.

On our way out, we were just able to squeeze by the vehicle the Spanish film crew's inexperienced driver had flipped over two days before without falling off the edge down the steep slope on our right. Their jeep was on its side with the top popped off and no attempt had been made to push it off the road. No one had been hurt, but we'd heard the crew lost a \$3000 camera in the accident.

It took an hour and ten minutes to go the twenty-two kilometers on this miserably rutted road. The only eventful item was an indigo snake so large that its length was as wide as the road.

At the end of the road and back on the main highway is the small town of San Francisco de Yuruaní. This is one of the governmental towns set up to bring the people of the widely separated villages to one location to provide easier and "better" governmental services. After building a number of small western-style houses to house the people, they rejected the houses and built their own preferred style of housing outside the government buildings. One street was set aside with rows of cabañas for selling native crafts and goods. Many of these were still unoccupied. David stopped us at one of the small food stores to pick up a few provisions. I wanted some hot pepper seasoning to bring back home. On a series of shelves in a case was an array of local delicacies, all in unlabeled bottles ranging from Hienz ketchup bottles to peanut butter jars. The proprietor was quite happy to let us sample right from the bottle spiced ants and termites in manioc sauce. David pointed out that both were the endemic species. I declined a sample but Desiree and David tried the ants. After our samples, the same bottles were put right back on the shelf. The man had an array of pepper based spice which I bought a bottle of. Trying it at home, it was definitely hot, enough so that a pinch was enough to make a bowl of soup nearly intolerably hot.

The manioc sauce was of interest also. Manioc root, from the root of the same plant from which tapioca and cassava come, is full of cyanide so the juice has to be extracted from the root before the dry extract is used as a flour for bread. The juice is extracted by putting cut up roots into large sock-like woven basket about four feet long, which the wife showed us. The basket is then twisted and the juice is collected in a bucket. The juice is then boiled for hours to boil away the cyanide until a soy sauce like fluid is left.

Adding eggs to our purchases for the next morning breakfast, we sped along at 130 kph to our small hotel for the night, the Rápidos de Kamoiram. This was the same hotel-gas station we had visited a week earlier. There was no gas this time, though we did get some very early in the morning before leaving. The hotel was a clean but

modest affair with a restaurant, a small Amerindian run truck stop. All the businesses within Canaima National Park must be Amerindian run as part of the agreement for the park. Our dinner was slow in coming, but very good. I showered after dinner in the trickle of cold and cold running water from the gravity feed from the cistern at the end of the strip of rooms. I did wonder a bit, though, about the type of activities that might have gone on in room on other nights. There was no air conditioning which made for a stuffy room and the power was cut at 10PM.

This ends the tepui portion of the trip. We spend two extra days getting back doing other bird watching along the way. I stayed two extra days to see Caracas, with the expert help and guidance of Desiree.