



**PRESS RELEASE**

**March 16, 2010**

### **Professional Birdwatchers Land in Guyana Once Again**

**GEORGETOWN, GUYANA** – Hopping back into the truck – covered with a fine red dust from the Iwokrama roadway – Steve Banner is positively giddy. The Iwokrama Forest towers above him on both sides and he is sweating generously. The sweat is partially due to the jarring difference between England’s late-winter chill and Guyana’s tropical heat, but it is also a result of running up and down a jungle road with seven other grown adults carrying 35 pounds of cameras, scopes, and binoculars on their backs. “This is amazing,” Mr. Banner exclaims. “You can stop randomly and pick up a half-dozen new [bird] species without even trying.”

The group is not part of some rainforest endurance race, but is the seventh tourism product familiarization (fam) trip organized by the Guyana Sustainable Tourism Initiative (GSTI), a joint project of the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA) and the United States Agency for International Development / Guyana Trade and Investment Support (USAID/GTIS) project. From March 12-23, the group of eight birding and natural history tour operators, journalists, and photographers from the US, the UK, and South America will be chasing Guyana’s 815 species of birds around the country.

Perhaps if the group dwelled a bit on the nonstop itinerary that lies ahead, they wouldn’t be requesting their drivers to stop every 500 yards so they can clamber out and go for another jungle run. But if it’s not a Rufescent Tiger Heron or Painted Parakeet then it is a Purple-breasted Cotinga or Marail Guan that makes them stop. The trip, which has been co-planned, organized and logistically handled with the GSTI tour operator partner, Wilderness Explorers, visits some of Guyana’s top birding destinations. The trip includes birding around Georgetown, Iwokrama River Lodge, Atta Rainforest Lodge and Iwokrama Canopy Walkway, Surama Village and Eco-Lodge, Rewa Village, Rock View Lodge, Karanambu Ranch, Lethem and Kaieteur Falls. They rely on birds such as the Harpy Eagle, Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock, Rio Branco Antbird, Tiny Tyrant Manakin, Scarlet Macaw, Blood-colored Woodpecker, and Toco Toucan to fuel their stamina.

Fam trips such as this one are an integral part of the GSTI marketing strategy, and have provided an incredible boost to Guyana’s level of recognition within the international tourism industry. Over the past four years, the number of tour operators from around the globe that are actively promoting, designing and selling birding and natural history trips to Guyana has jumped to more than 40. In 2009, Guyana saw an influx of tour groups and visitors and lodge owners are reporting that occupancy rates for 2010 are looking to be better than any previous years.

Media coverage of Guyana’s tourism products has also greatly increased as a result of journalists that have written about their experiences on the fam trips. Last year Guyana was featured in the *New York Times*, *Bird Watching* magazine, *American Express Departures* magazine, *Audubon Magazine* Online, and *Wanderlust* magazine, among others. The current fam trip group plans to further increase Guyana’s exposure as a tourism destination.

The birding-focused fam trip includes special guest leader, Tim Appleton, originator and co-founder of British Birdwatching Fair. Tim Appleton is returning to Guyana after being on a GSTI fam trip in 2007. Mr. Appleton’s repeat visit to Guyana is important to note, as he is one of the most in-demand birding personalities in the business. In addition to being the originator and co-organizer of the British Birdwatching Fair – the world’s largest and first Birdfair – Mr. Appleton is Reserve Manager of the wildfowl refuge at Rutland Water. He is also past Vice President of the British Ornithological Union, is a Recipient of MBE, Member of the British Empire, for services to conservation, and he organizes and leads birding tours around the globe.

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Also on the trip is a prominent figure from the North American birding world, Bill Thompson, III. Mr. Thompson is the editor of *Bird Watcher's Digest*, a publication whose 50,000 readers make it North America's top read for birdwatchers of all levels. Mr. Thompson is also the author of many books about birds and nature, a frequent speaker at birding and nature festivals, and has led birding trips throughout North America. He also maintains an immensely popular blog, "Bill of the Birds," and a podcast, "This Birding Life." All will be featuring Guyana in the near future.

Tour operators on the trip include Andrew Haffenden, owner and founder of Nature Travel Specialists, a U.S.-based tour operator that creates specialty itineraries focusing on responsible nature travel. Nature Travel Specialists markets tours to clients that are looking for active experiential travel, including birding, wildlife, and cultural activities. Steve Banner is the founder of Wildlife & Wilderness, a UK-based operator that sells tailor-made wildlife holidays around the world. Wildlife & Wilderness is expanding to include more specialized birdwatching holidays using local guides and is assessing Guyana as a possible destination to add to his roster.

Representing the tour operator Holbrook Travel is Pelin Karaca from their Product Development and Operations department. For more than 35 years, Holbrook Travel has been offering trips that create true connections between their travelers and the nature and people of the destinations they sell. Holbrook currently offers educational tourism in more than 36 countries, and will hopefully be adding Guyana to their list soon.

Scouting Guyana for his company Andean Birding, Charlie Vogt is an expert on the birds of Ecuador, where he has conducted bird surveys and prepared bird lists for many foundations and protected areas in Ecuador. Andean Birding provides customized itineraries for Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Mexico, but if the birds of Guyana behave as expected, look for a new country on their list in the future.

Karen Strauss is a journalist and photographer deeply involved in the North American birding scene. She edits the San Diego Audubon Society newsletter, SKETCHES, coordinates the San Diego Bird Festival and Birding & Optics Expo, and is a trip leader for Avian Adventures. Also on the trip, freelance travel writer and photographer, Eric Lindberg specializes in culture, nature, and adventure and he plans to write several stories on his journey through Guyana.

In just the first few days of the fam trip, the group has identified nearly 200 unique species, an incredible number even for keen birdwatchers such as those on this trip. Additional updates will be reported from the field as the group continues to move through Guyana.

The GSTI familiarization tours would not be possible if local tourism suppliers were not pledging their full support. For this program, GTA-USAID/GTIS is grateful for the generous contributions from Wilderness Explorers, Cara Lodge, Guyana Pegasus, Surama Eco-Lodge, Iwokrama International Centre, Atta Rainforest Lodge, Rock View Lodge, Karanambu Ranch, Community and Tourism Services (CATS), Rewa village, Guyana Feather Friends, and Savannah Inn.

The Guyana Sustainable Tourism Initiative (GSTI) is receiving support from Guyana Trade and Investment Support (GTIS), a joint project of the Government of Guyana and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). More information on the GSTI and tourism in Guyana can be found at [www.guyanabirding.com](http://www.guyanabirding.com).

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