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ECO-TOURISM

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ABOVE: The house where guests are lodged at Hato Piñero.

In Venezuela, A Refuge On A Ranch

Long before eco-travel, the owner of Hato Piñero banned hunting and fostered the study of wildlife

By FLORENCE FABRICANT

These days the environmentally friendly style of travel called eco-tourism is all the rage, especially in Venezuela. But long before it was fashionable it was the stock in trade of Hato Piñero, a ranch and wildlife refuge in northern Venezuela.

After our three-day visit to Hato Piñero in March, the flocks of scarlet ibis taking to the sky remain vivid in my mind. Nor can I forget the jaguar stalking slowly through the brush just after dusk and, minutes later, a terrified deer bounding past, screaming as it went. Countless caimans, a relative of the alligator, laze in the mud in another image.

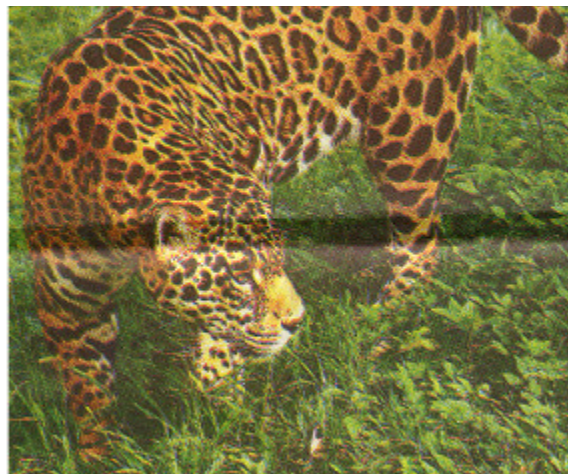
Comfortable accommodations, good food and experienced bilingual guides add to the naturalist's pleasures at the ranch. The atmosphere at Hato Piñero is serious but relaxed and thoroughly unpretentious. Hato Piñero also made me realize that my romantic notions of seeing dazzling birds and unusual mammals and reptiles deep in rich green rain forest were somewhat off-base. The ranch's 300 square miles are in the northern section of an open flood plain, an area called Los Llanos, or "the flats." The terrain may not have the allure of the rain forest, but the openness makes the concentration of wildlife here more visible. Had the Jaguar been in the forest, not in the grass, the chances of spotting it would have been greatly reduced. Also, when the wetlands and water holes shrink in the dry season from late December through April, the landscape may look less inviting, but birds and animals cluster around them.

Most important, because the owner of Hato Piñero, Antonio J. Branger, banned hunting on his property in 1950, the wildlife is not as shy or skittish as it



might be elsewhere. Hawks stayed on tree branches to have their pictures taken at fairly close to range. My husband, Richard, and I did not need binoculars to see the black skimmers open their pincerlike beaks as they fished for dinner on a palm-studded lagoon.

Late one morning after returning from bird watching, we had a conversation with Mr. Branger, who is now 72 and has a hacienda on the property. He said he started working on his family's ranch nearby when he was 15 and, like other young men, also hunted. By the time he was in his 20's he decided he did not like hunting, he said, and bought his own ranch and banned hunting.



ABOVE: The jaguar, an elusive animal; the author had the good luck to see one.

Jack Swenson/The wildlife collection

"It took three or four generations of these animals before they began to lose their fear," he said. About a third of the ranch (Hato means ranch) is used for breeding and raising about 15,000 head of cattle. The rest is wild, largely flat with some hills.

Naturalists and graduate students from universities in Venezuela, the United States and elsewhere, and from such organizations as the Smithsonian Institution and the World Wildlife Fund have been coming to Hato Piñero for more than a decade to study the birds, animals and plants. The Branger Foundation supports a biological station on the property and is trying to establish more stations.

Two biologists from the University of Florida at Gainesville, with funding from the National Geographic Society and the Wildlife Conservation Society, are heading a three-year program to study jaguars and pumas on the property to find a way for these predators to coexist with other ranchers and farmers in the region who would just as soon shoot any that attacked their livestock. "We lose about 100 of our cattle a year to predators, but we have to maintain the equilibrium of nature," he said. "I am also worried that Hato Piñero will become an island if there is too much development around it."

The number of jaguars on the ranch has been estimated at about 24, the pumas at 30. We were lucky to see a jaguar, a large, sleek and tawny spotted creature. Our guide, Orlando Diaz, a biologist who had been on the ranch for two years, had never seen one before. We also saw several ocelots, capuchin and howler monkeys, anteaters, bats, foxes, skunks and deer, and hundreds of fat brown capybaras, the world's largest rodent. But the anacondas we had hoped to see were nowhere to be found.



Venezuela is not Africa. The animals are smaller, more solitary and much more elusive. The resident and migrating birds are the principal source of wonder.

Of the more than 300 species of bird have been catalogued at Hato Piñero, during our



Researchers John and Anne Marie Smith recording birds at the ranch.

brief stay we saw more than 100, including seven kinds of ibis, several owls, a dozen different hawks, various finches and flycatchers, majestic jabirus and maguari storks, giant king vultures, colorful macaws and parrots in pairs, soaring flocks of egrets and herons, and strange hoatzins with their punkish tufts of feathers and peculiar cackles.

Hato Piñero has become a magnet for bird-watchers, especially from England.

Mr. Branger said he built the guest quarters 14 years ago, before eco-tourism was popular, to accommodate the nonprofessionals who heard about Hato Piñero from naturalist friends. The ranch has two special flat-topped trucks with seats for game viewing. There are also several places where viewing can be done in boats.

"We group the bird-watchers together," Mr. Diaz said. "We try not to take them out with general tourists because the tourists get impatient. If we have 18 tourists and two bird-watchers, the bird-watchers would go in a separate truck." Besides the guide, there was an excellent spotter, Gertrudus Gamarra, and a driver. The trucks have coolers with water, soft drinks and snacks.

Because we were there midweek just before the prime Easter vacation time, we were the only guests for part of our stay. We had the services of the guide and the truck to ourselves, but the ranch was fully booked for the 10 days after we left.

A TYPICAL day at Hato Piñero began between 6 and 8 A.M., with breakfast and a wildlife viewing drive along the dirt roads that crisscrossed the property. By around 11 A.M., when the temperature soared into the 90's and it was too hot to stay out, we returned to the hotel. Lunch was around 1 P.M. The meals are buffet style. Eggs, pancakes and arepas, the venezuelan white corn cakes, were usually served for breakfast, along with juice, toast, fruit, cheese ham and excellent coffee.

Lunches and dinners were good, abundant and wholesome. They usually started with hearty bean or vegetable soup followed by stewed chicken, a beef dish, spaghetti or lasagna with potatoes, vegetables and salad. Dessert was fruit, cake or pudding. Dry crackerlike cassava bread, made from manioc (yuca), was served with all the meals.

Beer and soft drinks were always available. The bar also stocked rum and gin for which there was no charge. 'We brought our own wine; the ranch has a limited supply. Purified water was poured in the dining room and provided in the guest rooms.

After lunch we relaxed in our room, reading or napping for a few hours, before setting out on another drive around 4 P.M. We usually returned after dark, around 8, when different animals appeared. When the sun went down, the guide and spotter raked the



Rufescent tiger heron.

landscape with spotlights. We began to learn to identify animals by the color of their eyes in the light, or, as the guide put it, their "nightshine." (A caiman's eyes are red.)

The hotel part of Hato Piñero is set in a courtyard shaded by large trees, including several mangoes. The building has a generous porch in front and is built around an interior courtyard. There are 11 guest rooms with private bathrooms, four of which are air-conditioned. Though we had an air-conditioned room, the ones that had only ceiling fans were airier and more attractive.

Like the rest of the place, all the rooms are done in colonial style, in white stucco with exposed beams, heavy woodwork and wrought-iron accessories. The beds are very comfortable.

There is no swimming pool, an amenity that would have been welcome at midday. Although we didn't try it, ranch guests can go out on horseback at no extra charge. Many of the ponds and waterholes where birds can be viewed are easily accessible on horseback, and guides are available to accompany riders.

There is also a large wing with accommodations for employees and their families, making staying at Hato Piñero a little like being in a village. It only added to the natural charm of this uncommonly inviting and fascinating place.

Sighting hawks and hoatzins

Getting There

Hato Piñero, in the Venezuelan state of Cojedes not far from the town of El Baúl, is about 225 miles from Caracas. In a small plane it takes about an hour, by car about five to six hours, mostly along good roads. (The State Department Consular Information Sheet says driving at night can be hazardous because of road work, unlighted vehicles and livestock.) The ranch's plane service is \$833 round trip for up to five passengers. A car and driver from Caracas costs around \$125 each way.

The Lodging

Hato Piñero is open year round, but the best time to see wildlife is the dry season, December to April. The hotel has 11 doubles with bath (showers, no tubs). Daily rates, including two excursions, meals and drinks, are \$150 a person in the dry season and \$120 in the rainy season, plus 16.5 percent tax. Rooms have electricity but no hot water or telephones. Four rooms have air-conditioning; rates are the same with or without it. One room accommodates three, another four, in twin beds.

Reservations:

Biotours, the company that runs Hato Piñero, in Caracas, (582) 918935, 911135 and 924531, fax (582) 916668; Mastercard Visa accepted. Information can also be obtained from Poba International No. 156, Box 52-1308, Miami, FL 33152. The Web site is <http://www.branger.com/pinero.html>

Packing

Visitors should take light clothing offering protection from the sun and insects, a hat, walking shoes., binoculars, a flashlight, sunscreen and insect repellent. (We found bugs a problem only on the lagoon at dusk, but in the rainy season there probably would be

more.) In the rainy season lightweight, waterproof gear is essential.

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