

Panama Birding & Nature | Trip Report

January 22 – 29, 2019 | Written by Pat Lueders



With Guides Pat Lueders, and participants: Eleanor, Tim, Joe, Ellen, Jeanne, Jo, Ted, Susan, and Marianne



Tues., January 22 | Panama City to Canopy Tower, Gamboa Resort

We arrived early in Panama City which meant most of us had spent a day or more enjoying the delightful Panama weather and scenery. After becoming acquainted at our welcome dinner at the Riande Hotel the previous evening, this morning we traveled to the Canopy Tower to begin our birding tour. The city was filled with excitement as thousands of young people arrived to join Roman Catholic Pope Francis, who was attending the annual World Youth Day. We passed many of the locations for the celebration as we traveled to our first lodge, the iconic Canopy Tower. After settling into our rooms and enjoying a delicious lunch, we took our first ride in the “birdmobile” to the Gamboa Resort, along the Chargres River, and had our first views of the Panama Canal. What an exciting start to our visit! Wattled Jacana, Common Gallinule, and Purple Gallinule were close to shore with Southern Lapwings. A Red-legged Honeycreeper was seen at eye level, and we spotted our first of many Hoffmann’s Two-toed Sloths low in a close tree. Our first toucans of the trip vocalized at the top of trees filled with colorful tanagers, dacnis, and honeycreepers. The excitement of the afternoon came when a large number of species were spotted near a tree top, mobbing a boa constrictor that had an Orange-chinned



Parakeet in its grasp, a true Geographic moment to begin our tour. We returned to the tower and enjoyed our delicious dinner, discussing the day at length during our first checklist session, wondering what adventure tomorrow would bring.

Wed., January 23 | Lower Pipeline Road, Ammo Dump Ponds

What a treat to begin the morning with coffee at sunrise at the top of the Canopy Tower! We chased the vocalizations of Green shrike-Vireos hoping to get good looks at this strikingly beautiful bird. We enjoyed scoped views of perched Red-crowned Parrots, Keel-billed Toucans, and Scaled Pigeons as we viewed tanker ships traveling the canal and the skyline of Panama City. Today we enjoyed our first trip to the historical Pipeline Road, the most famous birding location in Panama. A Squirrel Cuckoo was spotted as soon as we arrived and posed for photos. As we walked the trail, a Great Tinamou crossed in front of us, a great look at an extremely secretive species! We began seeing our first antbirds, and learned about mixed feeding flocks that follow army ant swarms. Purple-throated Fruitcrows, Masked Tityra, and Bright-rumped Attila joined the Woodcreepers in the flocks, and the first Gartered Trogon was spotted to the delight of the group.

In the afternoon, we returned to the canal area but to a different habitat, the Ammo Dump Ponds. Rufescent Tiger-Herons were wading in the marsh, and a juvenile was spotted sitting on flimsy nest sticks. Two Lesser Capybara juveniles were found hidden in the grasses near a sunning Speckled Cayman, Green Iguanas, and Tropical Sliders. Greater and Smooth-billed Anis perched up on grasses for comparisons, and hidden White-throated Crakes could be heard but not seen. One bare tree held 8 Baltimore Orioles, Blue Dacnis, and a variety of tanagers for great and colorful looks. Wow!



Thursday, January 24 |
Chargres River, Boat Tour on Canal, Summit Ponds
Night Drive on Semaphore Hill Road

Today we enjoyed a boat tour of the Chargres River and traveled west on the canal to the islands in Gatun Lake. Traveling in a boat, we could get close to many of the birds wading along the shore including Little Blue, Tricolored, and Green Herons. Ringed Kingfishers, Greater Ani, and Yellow-rumped Cacique are spotted well from the boat. When traveling the canal, we paralleled the huge tanker ships carrying their cargo. The islands in Gatun Lake are home to three monkey species, Mantled Howler, White-faced Capuchin, and Geoffroy's Tamarin, and all came to our boat for photo opportunities. We marveled at the large number of Snail Kites that feed on the introduced apple snails and watched and heard their interactions. Anhingas were seen drying their wings near a Limpkin feeding on the shore.

As we returned to the Tower, our guide Alex stopped the birdmobile on the road. He had sighted a Yellow-headed Caracara disabled on the road. We wrapped it in a t-shirt and carried it until it struggled to be released. Alex pulled over, and the caracara was released successfully in a field to the cheers of the group. What a successful morning we had enjoyed!

After lunch and a short siesta, we traveled a short distance to Summit Park to look for and successfully find the magnificent Blue Cotinga, the bird featured on the Canopy Family checklist. We then walked the trail at Summit Ponds, happily finding three new kingfisher species, the Green, Amazon, and delightful American Pygmy. A Boat-billed Heron was hidden in the trees, and a Gray-lined Hawk looked down at the group from a bare branch. Some saw the first Broad-billed Motmot for the trip. As we returned to the tower, we stopped for a Great Tinamou walking along the road, another unbelievable sighting.

After dinner, we took a night drive along Semaphore Hill Road, finding a Rothchild's Porcupine eating some fruit, a life mammal for many and voted "mammal" of the trip.

Fri., January 25 | Plantation Trail, Semaphore Hill Road

We were awakened this morning by the howling of the Mantled Howler monkeys, a family was roosting very close to the Tower. We took an early walk on the nearby Plantation Trail and found an elusive Streak-chested Antpitta deep in the dark understory. Luckily, we found a mixed feeding flock and identified Plain Xenops, Olivaceous Flatbill, Blue-crowned Manakin, a Black-throated Trogon, and our first Black-cheeked Woodpecker at a nest hole. However, the rarest bird sighting was a Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon, seen low along the trail as we departed.

Our afternoon walk on Semaphore Hill Road was very productive with our first Gray-headed Tanagers, Red-capped Manakins, Fasciated Antshrikes, and a good look at a Green Shrike Vireo.



Sat., January 26 | Rainforest Discovery Tower, Pipeline Road Journey to Canopy Lodge

We left before sunrise this morning to climb the Discovery Tower to find new species, and we were rewarded; seeing perched Semiplumbeous Hawk, Collared Forest-Falcon, and Bat Falcon all at the top of the canopy with Keel-billed and Yellow-throated Toucans, and Scaled Pigeons. Two male Brown-throated Three-toed Sloths were spotted also near the treetops. After coffee with the hummingbirds at the center, we walked the Pipeline Road and found a Double-toothed Kite, Golden-collared Manakin, new antbird species, White-whiskered Puffbird, and a White-tailed Trogon. Sadly, we had to leave the tower after lunch to move to the Canopy Lodge but anticipated even more adventures in our future!

After we settled into our beautiful rooms and watched the birds coming to the fruit feeder at the lodge, including Gray-headed Chachalacas, Red-crowned Woodpeckers, Flame-rumped Tanagers, and Thick-billed Euphonias, we took a short walk and saw our first Rufous Motmot, Rufous-capped and Buff-rumped Warblers. A delicious dinner was enjoyed at the lodge's outside dining room, ending another magical day in Panama.

Sun., January 27 | La Mesa, Las Minas, Niserio Zoo

We birded this morning at two of the best locations in the El Valle area. We stopped across from a small local store near La Mesa, where a large number of species can be seen. Alex heard a Slaty-tailed Trogon, and we got great looks at a pair close to the road. Beautiful Black-chested Jays, Crested and Chestnut-headed Oropendolas, Panama Flycatcher and an uncommon Gray-capped Flycatcher were some of the new species seen. We had a saltator grand slam, seeing three species here, Buff-throated, Black-headed and Streaked. A great start to the day!



We walked Las Minas road and enjoyed good looks at a Green Thorntail, White-vented Plumeteer, Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, and Tawny-crested Tanager. One target species, the Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch, finally called for us, and we got good scope looks at this unusual bird.

After lunch, we visited the El Valle farmer's market, displaying an unbelievable array of fruits, vegetables, plants, and souvenirs to purchase. Nearby is the El Nispero Zoo featuring the endangered Golden Frog display and also a good place to find birds. We found a Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet perched in a leafless tree next to a Boat-billed Flycatcher. Four Yellow-crowned Euphonias were calling and interacting, as well as our first look at a Rufous-breasted Warbler. Fun to see local families enjoying the beautiful weather and visiting their zoo!

Mon., January 28 | Cerro Gaital, Cara Iguana Trail

This morning we hoped to find additional Panama species when we visited Cerro Gaital. This beautiful trail provided us with a nice collection of our U.S. migrant warblers, including Golden-winged, Bay-breasted, Chestnut-sided, Black-and-White, and Canada. They mingled with a mixed feeding flock including Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers, Long-billed Gnatwren, Tawny-capped Euphonia, White-ruffed Manakin, White-throated Spadebill, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, Plain Antvireo, and more. Our heads were spinning! Nearby, we staked out a group of flowering heliconia, the favorite of the White-tipped Sicklebill. We had a quick look at one, and our best look at the Strip-throated Hermit. Another Three-toed Sloth, our 14th sloth of the trip, was spotted hanging from his toes and scratching his head, lots of activity for a sloth!

In the afternoon, the best sighting was saved for last. We drove through the town of El Valle, to Cara Iguana Trail. A short walk from the road produced a family of Spectacled Owls to the delight of the group, later voted "Bird of the Trip." What spectacular looks we had, as all three owls, two adults and a juvenile, looked down on us from their perch. We returned to the road and walked to a low, heavily forested area with a stream. With great skill, Alex quickly spotted a perched Tody Motmot to the thrill of the group, wow! As we returned to the lodge, we spotted a cooperative Roadside Hawk, sitting on the lawn of a private home for a good photo opportunity. What an ending to a great day!





Tues., January 29 | Return to Panama City, Panama Viejo

After breakfast, the reality set in that our trip was ending as we returned to busy Panama City. We had one last stop, the mud flats of Panama Viejo on the Pacific Ocean. Gasps could be heard as thousands of birds appeared before us. Thousands of Sandwich Terns, hundreds of Laughing Gulls, too many Willets to count, Whimbrel, Short-billed Dowitchers, Southern Lapwings, hundreds of Black-bellied Plovers, feeding White Ibis, where to look next? Above us! A Mangrove Warbler, subspecies of the Yellow Warbler, and a Yellow-bellied Elaenia, were easy to see in the low trees. As we all returned to the U.S., or to our next destination, we marveled at the successful trip we had enjoyed together in this beautiful and friendly country of Panama!

Photo Credits

Black-throated Mango, Pat Lueders (PL); Variable Seedeater, PL; Crimson-backed Tanager, PL; Canopy Tower birdmobile, PL; Top of Canopy Tower, PL; Gamboa, PL; Squirrel Cuckoo, PL; Gartered Trogon, PL; Iguana, PL; Three-toed Sloth, PL; Tamarin Monkey, PL; Mantled Howler, PL; Caracara rescue, PL; Snail Kite, PL; Royal Terns, PL; Juvenile Green Heron, PL; Blue-chested Hummingbird, PL; Broad-billed Motmot, PL; Plantation Trail, PL; Discovery Tower, PL; Discovery Center, PL; Golden Frog, PL; Male Three-toed Sloth, PL; Las Minas Road, PL; Gray-headed Tanager, PL; Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, PL; Group Picture, PL; Viewing Tody Motmot, PL; Lodge Feeders, PL; Blue-gray Tanager, PL; Three-toed Sloth, PL.