

Panama Birding & Mammals | Trip Report

February 8 – 16, 2020 | Written by Robert Gallardo



With Guide Robert Gallardo, and participants Martha, Janet, Sally, Patty, Tim, and Craig.



Keel-billed Toucan



Giant Anteros



Geoffroy's Tamarin

Preface

Since the opening of the Canal and the subsequent establishment of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, Panama has been a haven for biologists wishing to study the tropics for more than a century. Acting as a land bridge to the species-rich biodiversity of South America has given Panama the privilege of having the highest biodiversity in Central America.

The country harbors a diverse array of bird and mammal species, nearly 1,000 and 255 respectively. This trip highlights two distinct regions while exploring many sites in order to search for many of its spectacular birds and some of the more timid mammals. The tour is first based out of the Canopy Tower, then the Canopy Lodge. The Tower is located within Soberania N.P., literally just a stone's throw away from the Canal while the Lodge is located at a cool highland site west of Panama City. This year's tour included six clients and Robert Gallardo was brought down from Honduras as a host guide. It would end up being a very memorable trip with some incredible highlights and discoveries that would include nearly 245 species of birds and 25 mammals.

Sat., Feb. 8 Arrivals in Panama City

Patty, Tim, Martha and Janet arrived by mid afternoon and we had enough time to make a short visit to the coast before heading to the Canopy Tower. We stopped at a park in Old Panama and the tide was already quite high, but we did see some Southern Lapwings, gulls, pelicans, nesting Tropical Kingbirds and shorebirds off in the distance. We continued on and made our way into the nearby foothills until reaching the Tower. This hotel-in-the-sky would be our base of operations for the next five days. An old U.S. radar station now converted into a unique eco-lodge in the middle of the rainforest makes for a prime location to enjoy numerous sites around the Panama Canal area.

After being greeted by the Tower staff we did some viewing from the observation deck. Birds were already going to roost and saw the colorful Keel-billed Toucan and Red-lored Parrots. A small assortment of swifts also came by. A group of Geoffroy's Tamarins came in for their late afternoon banana snack. It was a nice way to end the day and start the trip. Later that evening Craig and Sally would join the group.

Sun., Feb. 9 Observation Deck

On the first morning we did some birding on the upper deck as we sipped some tasty coffee. As the birds started to wake we heard a chorus of Green Shrike-Vireos and toucans. Parrots began to fly by then some Blue Dacnis, Green Honeycreepers and manikins began to appear to feed on a fruiting melastome tree. It was a great way to start what would be an awesome day. Alex, our local guide and Tower staff, came and after breakfast we started our walk down the hill. The Tower sits atop a hill overlooking



part of the Panama Canal inside Soberania N.P. Right at the onset Robert spotted something just beyond the fence. It was a handsome Broad-billed Motmot posed perfectly on a vine and it made for a lot of excellent photo opportunities.

Just beyond the front gate we came across a confiding White-vented Plumeleteer. We continued down the road and found the dazzling Cinnamon Woodpecker, more honeycreepers, Black-crowned Antshrike, Dot-winged Antwrens, Acadian Flycatcher and the Speckled Mourner. This last bird is quite uncommon across most of its range and we got superb looks as it fed very low beside the road. Toward the end of the walk we were surprised to see a Collared Forest-Falcon perched quietly just inside the forest. Alex knew a spot that small mammals often use as a day roost so we checked it out. Sure enough, there was a Panamanian Night Monkey there with its head partially poking out. The sighting of this otherwise nocturnal mammal was a great way to end the first morning. The Tower's Bird Mobile arrived to pick us up and whisked us away up to the Tower for a delicious lunch.



After a siesta we hopped in a van and drove down the hill towards Gamboa. Our first stop was at some fruit feeders in a residential area that abutted the forest. Alex set out some bananas and as if he rang a dinner bell the birds began to come in. It was fun seeing a nice assortment of tanagers including the gorgeous Crimson-backed and Golden-hooded. A lone male Red-legged Honeycreeper and Orange-chinned Parakeet tried to steal the show. We continued on to the Ammo Dump ponds where we got a close look at a Yellow-headed Caracara, numerous resident flycatchers and seedeaters, and Mangrove Swallows. We shifted over to the roadside part of the marsh where a beautiful adult Rufescent Tiger-Heron was poised. Some young Wattled Jacanas drifted dangerously close to it until father called them away. This giant heron would easily take a jacana if presented the opportunity. A small group of Smooth-billed Anis also made a showing. In a nearby Coral Tree Alex spotted a nesting bird. It ended up being a cute, and very tiny, Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet sitting atop a precariously placed, hummingbird-sized nest. Not far from it was a nesting Black-throated Mango. It was a nice way to end the afternoon, but our day wasn't quite finished.

Back at the Tower we did our checklist and had dinner then some of the Tower staff drew our attention. The tamarin 'feeding station' recently began to attract a newcomer; the Allen's Olingo. This sleek arboreal mammal is a close relative to the kinkajou, but it much less common and much more difficult to observe. We then prepared for a night drive down the hill. One never knows what to expect on these nocturnal jaunts, but we always find something good. There were two roosting Great Tinamous to start off then a prowling Night Monkey. A bit further were two Central American Woolly Opossums high up in some balsa trees. There were also a couple of Two-Toed Sloths, the best of which was a mother that was hanging and scratching while a baby clutched her. We returned to the Tower and strolling across a metal beam on the first floor was another Woolly Opossum. It eventually disappeared under the steps and was a comical way to end a great first day.

Mon., Feb. 10 Pipeline Road | Old Gamboa Road

Today we got up for an early breakfast then out the door for another wonderful day. Today's destination was the famous Pipeline Road. We did, however, make a quick stop at the Ammo Dump ponds to see what was stirring. There were three adult tiger-herons, Purple Gallinules, jacanas and a lot of flycatcher activity. A Greater Ani also made a quick showing before we continued onward.

We arrived at Pipeline Road and parked to walk a bit. There was a troop of Mantled Howler Monkeys close to the road which is always a treat. Numerous species of trogons were calling, but another peculiar call caught our attention. It was a Great Jacamar which is a prized sighting



*Yellow-crowned
Tyrannulet*



*Allen's
Olingo*



*Rufous
Tree Rat*



*Great
Jacamar*

for much of Central America. Eventually the bird came close and it was a gorgeous male. Soon it perched on a Cecropia tree over the road, perhaps in search of a tasty blue Morpho. Little by little, the trogons began to appear, and we saw the Black-tailed and Black-throated. A pair of Collared Aracaris also made a couple of appearances in the subcanopy and a spectacular male Crimson-crested Woodpecker flew in.

A couple of small understory flocks were also observed, and we saw Dot-winged Antwrens, Checker-throated Antwrens and the striking White-shouldered Tanager. Tim spotted a bird high in the subcanopy and it ended up being the striking White-necked Puffbird. At one point something came zipping in and alit nearby. It was a handsome Black-striped Woodcreeper. Further up the road we found a brilliant Gartered Trogon and a cooperative Plain-brown Woodcreeper. Near the end of the turnaround point Alex had a spot for a day roosting mammal and it was right on cue. A giant Rufous Tree Rat poked its head out of a small hollow. As we were returning to the truck Alex spotted something just inside the forest. It turned out to be big Mussarana snake which is famous for preying on poisonous snakes such as the fer-de-lance. It climbed a tree right in front of us and we got excellent views.

And the action continued! Close to the truck was some bird action in a small gully and ended up being an army ant swarm. We were on the edge where they were actively hunting, and a nice assortment of birds was attending as they vied for position to catch fleeing arthropods. One of the joys of the tropics is seeing actually how these swarms work. A plethora of birds ranging from falcons to warblers and woodcreepers to nunbirds can often be seen at ant swarms and the more ants that are present the more bird species one can see. It can be likened to Nature's natural vacuum cleaner. Even though we were at a narrow edge of the ant swarm we had a



Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, Black-faced Antthrush, Gray-headed Tanager, Bay Wren, Spotted Antbird, Bicolored Antbird and Red-throated Ant-Tanager. It was an awesome way to end the morning.

We returned to the Tower and had lunch then some down time. We then visited the nearby Summit Gardens for a leisurely walk. Although it was warm and quiet, we soon found some seeding bamboo which had attracted a small assortment of birds including the rare Slate-colored Seedeater. Females, immature males and adult males were seen. Ground-doves, Shiny Cowbirds, Crimson-backed Tanagers, a Piratic Flycatcher and Scarlet-rumped Caciques were also seen. Adjacent to the Harpy Eagle exhibit there was a group of Jamaican Fruit-eating Bats and a lone Common Tent-making Bat under some palm fronds. Continuing on to the Old Gamboa road we found Fasciated Antshrike, Dusky Antbird, Plain Xenops and Plain-colored Tanager. A lone male Thick-billed Seed-Finch fed on grass seeds alongside the road. Suddenly, a bird appeared on a wire above us and it was a male Gartered Trogon that had caught a large katydid. We enjoyed watching and photographing the trogon as it devoured its late afternoon bite. At the ponds we found a skulking Gray-

cowled Wood-Rail, an Anhinga sunning and drying its wings, both a Green and Ringed Kingfishers and an adorable pair of nesting Boat-billed Herons. It was another great way to end the day.

Tues., Feb. 11 San Lorenzo National Park

This morning, after an early breakfast, we headed out toward the Caribbean side of Panama. We entered San Lorenzo N.P. and walked a side road. Although the birding was a bit slow, we enjoyed a nice variety of dragonflies and butterflies. A small flock of birds did appear and there was a male Fulvous-vented Euphonia and



*Broad-billed
Motmot*



*Red-
vented
Parrots*

numerous White-shouldered Tanagers. Toward the end of the walk a pair of Double-toothed Kites appeared and we got scope views of one. This is a bird that is rarely seen perched. We continued down the road and found a shady side trail. There we found a pair of the sleek Black-crowned Tityra. Deeper inside the forest Alex spotted a pair of Yellow-throated Toucans that were resting in the subcanopy. Then he heard something really interesting. It ended up being several White-headed Wrens which is a very stunning bird. Everyone got scope views of this striking canopy-dwelling endemic. Some resonant calls were originating from numerous Slaty-tailed Trogons and we saw both males and females. One final wonderful sighting for that spot was a pair of nesting Spot-crowned Barbets. We got scope views of them as well.

We returned to Fort Sherman where we had a nice lunch at a marina. While there Tim spotted a Fork-tailed Flycatcher before we departed. We continued toward the old Spanish Fort only to find that it had already closed. So, we drove down a side road and bumped into a bunch of Coatimundis. We took a short walk and found a large female Laughing Falcon and some Dusky-capped Flycatchers. We departed and as we were passing the Gatun Locks Robert spotted a Savannah Hawk atop a post. We got out of the van to view it in the scope then Robert spotted another beautiful bird far away. It was a handsome male Red-breasted Blackbird. We made the drive back to the Tower, had dinner and called it a day.

Wed., Feb. 12 Jungle Boat Tour

After a couple of super busy days, it was time for something at slower pace. Just down the road we boarded a covered boat and toured Gatun Lake. Many species of aquatic birds were present such as jacanas, gallinules, herons and egrets. We saw good numbers of the colorful Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks and huge green iguanas were draped in the trees. Up the river channel a perched Peregrine Falcon peered over the marsh and we also got a quick look at the giant Cocoi Heron. We entered the main Panama Canal channel where huge cargo ships were observed.

Cargo Ship-Panama Canal



*Rosy
Thrush-Tanager*



*Proboscis
Bats*



In the quieter backwaters we spotted some White-faced Capuchin monkeys and we were soon entertained when tourists came in boats to feed them bananas. Many Snail Kites graced the air and we were able to observe a couple as they plucked up apple snails just beneath the water's surface. A row of the tiny Proboscis Bat was also seen in a secluded cove. Back in the channel we spotted a couple American Crocodiles, one being quite large. It was another memorable outing.

Later that day we drove over to the Rainforest Discovery center for an afternoon adventure. Hummingbird feeders attracted a variety of species including Long-billed Hermit, White-throated Jacobin, Crowned Woodnymph and Violet-bellied and Blue-chested Hummingbirds. We climbed the nearby 120ft. tower that emerges above the forest canopy to see what was stirring. It didn't take long for Alex to spot our first male Blue Cotinga, albeit far away. Soon Scaled Pigeons appeared as well as Yellow-throated Toucans. Views over the



rainforest canopy provide an excellent opportunity to glimpse this otherwise unseen niche. A blooming balsa tree attracted White-faced Capuchins, honeycreepers, Dacnis and Yellow-backed Orioles. A lone Mealy Parrot flew by before we descended. We had a picnic dinner there then headed out on a night drive en route to the Tower. Several Common Opossums were spotted as well as four Kinkajous, the latter often seen feeding on the nectar of balsa trees. Alex spotted a large Two-toed Sloth that 'scurried' away at full speed. Many moths clung to its fur in their symbiotic relationship. One final mammal was a young Three-toed Sloth, now on its own. We finished yet another exciting day.

Thurs., Feb. 13 Metro Park | Punta Culebra

Our last full day in the Canal area would provide more memorable mammals and new birds. We departed after breakfast and arrived at the Metropolitan Park on the outskirts of Panama City. Right off the bat we were greeted by a pair of the Slaty-tailed Trogon while large numbers of Orange-chinned Parakeets fed on seeds in the trees above. Further up the trail some fluttering caught Robert's attention. Some vines must have been exuding sap as they were attracting a nice assortment of butterflies. We paused there a bit to get pictures of Two-eyed Eighty-eight, Tiger Beauty, Dirce Beauty and several One-spotted Preponas. Toward the end of the walk Alex showed us a Common Potoo on a day roost. Children came by with their parents and we shared the bird with them. As we started back to the van heard another familiar sound. It was a Rosy Thrush-Tanager. After several minutes the splendid, orange, bicolored female appeared and sang. What a stunning bird! A bit further down another tune caught our attention. It was originating from a Lance-tailed Manakin and we were soon rewarded with a spectacular adult male. We then continued to Punta Culebra; a museum operated by the Smithsonian that is located right on the beach at the edge of the city. While there we were able to observe several Crab-eating Racoons and some giant Green Iguanas. New birds for the trip included a Scrub Greenlet, Streaked Saltator, Yellow-crowned Euphonia, Sapphire-throated Hummingbird and Yellow-green Vireo. Both species of sloths were also seen. We returned to the Tower for lunch a little rest.

A visit to Panama has to include a tour of one of the locks and we did just that. We went to the Miraflores Museum and toured the museums and witnessed the coming and going of sailboats, ferries and huge cargo ships of various sorts. With this our visit to the canal area was now complete.

Fri., Feb. 14 Canopy Lodge

The morning before departing the Tower was dedicated to wildlife viewing from the observation deck. It paid off as a pair of the timid Green Shrike-Vireo came in and one sat in plain view at point-blank range. Many of us got wonderful photos. People can visit the Neotropics for many, many years and never get views like we did that



*Rufous
Motmot*



*Green
Shrike-Vireo*



*Two-toed
Sloth*



*Dusky-
faced
Tanager*



Barred Antshrike

day. We also saw an assortment of tanagers, euphonias, honeycreepers and Black-breasted Puffbirds. The tamarins also came to bid us farewell. We wrapped up a great visit to the Canopy Tower then continued on to our next destination.

We drove westward along the coast then north to Valle, a small town situated in the crater of an extinct volcano. Canopy Lodge was located on the outskirts of town and these cool, moist highlands would be our stay for the last two nights in Panama. Aiden, the GM, met us along with Tino who our local guide would be. We had lunch and started to enjoy our new surroundings. We did an afternoon walk on the grounds and found Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, flocks of Dusky-faced Tanagers, Gray-cowled Wood-Rails, Olive-striped Flycatcher and Flame-rumped Tanagers. Numerous fruit feeders attracted good numbers of the Gray-headed Chachalaca and an occasional Rufous Motmot. Back in the thickets we saw bits and pieces of a male and female Rosy Thrush-Tanager. Walking up the road a bit we encountered a beautiful Bay-headed Tanager and the spectacular Rufous-



*Golden-hooded
Tanager*



*Crimson-backed
Tanager*

crested Coquette. This coquette is adorned with an incredible, blonde mohawk. Our walk ended with a great view of a Two-toed Sloth. After dinner we took a little stroll to the nearby ponds and found a small assortment of toads and frogs. High winds likely had many of them hunkered down for the night.

Sat., Feb. 15 La Mesa

Our last full day in Panama was spent adding some new birds to our already great list. Many of us were also able to get some excellent photos at the Lodge's fruit feeders. Early that morning the high winds and sporadic showers continued so we watched birds at the main feeder adjacent to the dining area. Raining or not, the birds need to eat! It was bustling with many species of tanagers, oropendolas, Thick-billed Euphonia, chachalacas, motmots and wood-rail. The gorgeous Golden-hooded Tanagers were making a nest in a nearby bromeliad and were a pleasure to watch.

The skies lifted a bit and some of us went to a nearby forested residential area on the outskirts of town. There, we were able to see Yellow-bellied Elaenia, male Yellow-crowned Euphonias, Lesser Elaenia, White-bellied Antbird and Barred Antshrike. Another Rosy Thrush-Tanager called from deep within the forest. We found a small path and waited patiently as Tino whistled a call note. Far back in the understory we could see both the male and female tossing leaves. Out of nowhere a female came in and landed within a few feet of us then disappeared. Wow, what a treat that was! We returned to the Lodge for lunch and some down time.

The weather improved a bit so in the afternoon we ascended the mountain for the last outing of the trip. It was quiet inside a forest trail, but we did find a pair of Plain Antvireo and a lekking Stripe-throated Hermit. As we were about to return to the hotel, we came across a flock of birds that were moving fast. We were able to see the unique Tawny-crested Tanager and a splendid Silvery-throated Tanager.

We returned to the Lodge and wrapped up another fabulous trip to Panama. We would end up recording 245 species of birds and 25 mammals.

Favorite birds included: Rufous-crested Coquette, Black-chested Jay, Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, Keel-billed Toucan, White Hawk, Crimson-crested Woodpecker, Great Jacamar and Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant. Favorite mammals included: White-faced Capuchin, both species of sloth, Geoffroy's Tamarin and Tome's Spiny-rat. Some in the group also liked the giant iguanas and the large skink.

Thank you to Robert Gallardo for providing the photos for the trip report.