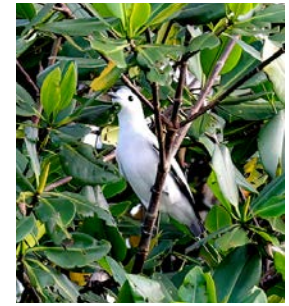


Western Panama: Tranquilo Bay | Oct. 29 – Nov. 4, 2023 | Trip Report | by Rick Weiman



With host Rick Weiman and local guides Roger Morales and Brenda Sanchez, and participants: Doug, Laurie, Dave, Cindy, Linda, Steve, Tom, Carol, Matt and Robin.



Sun., Oct. 29

Welcome to Tranquilo Bay

After meeting everyone at breakfast at the Radisson Panama Canal Hotel, our shuttle bus to the airport was uneventful until we stopped at an ATM on the way. As we waited, a Keel-billed Toucan and a Yellow-headed Caracara flew past the van – signs of good things to come! The 45-minute flight from Panama City to Boca del Toro on Air Panama was on time and provided us with beautiful views of the Caribbean Sea and the many islands off Panama's coast. As we waited for our ride to the docks, we were surprised by a flock of 17 migrating Wood Storks streaming overhead in a "V" formation. We arrived at the docks and boarded two small boats for our half-hour ride to Tranquilo Bay. Along the way on the calm sea, we saw several Magnificent Frigatebirds, a Brown Pelican and over a dozen Brown Noddies and Black Terns.



We were greeted in Tranquilo Bay by one of the owners, Jay, who led us along the boardwalk trail to the main lodge. We stopped as Jay pointed out our first Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth in the mangroves. After a brief orientation by husband-and-wife co-owners, Jim and Renee, we enjoyed a tropical lunch. After lunch, we birded on the veranda with our local guides for the week, Roger Morales, Brenda Sanchez and guide-in-training, Christian Munoz. The lodge has banana and hummingbird feeders to attract the birds from the surrounding forest. It was wonderful watching wintering Bay-breasted, Prothonotary and Tennessee Warblers feed on bananas so close to us along with the local Bananaquits and honeycreepers. White-throated Capuchin Monkeys were also there to greet us, as was a perched Double-toothed Kite. We then were led to our spacious cabins and had time to rest, shower or snorkel before our scheduled late afternoon walk around the garden trails.

The garden trails yielded 35 species of birds including Crowned Woodnymph, Blue-chested Hummingbird, Bronzy Hermit, over 30 Red-lored Parrots, several Golden-collared and Red-capped Manakins and three tanagers: Scarlet, Palm and Plain-colored. Around 6:00 we met at the bar for happy hour and our first species checklist of the trip, followed by a delicious dinner of local shrimp. This would be our evening schedule for the remainder of the tour. Just before we headed off to the cabins, a Derby's Woolly Opossum came to check on the free bananas. Rick was the last to leave so he was the only one who saw the family of three Panama Night Monkeys who came in for the last of the bananas.

Mon., Oct. 30 **Isla Popa**

An early buffet breakfast was followed by a 10-minute boat ride to nearby Isla Popa. This island is quite close to the mainland, so some birds not found on Tranquilo Bay are seen here such as toucans, woodcreepers and trogons. Most of the morning was spent leisurely birding by boat on the calm waters of the Popa Canal and around the island's red mangrove forest. We had terrific looks at a Mangrove Cuckoo and a Ringed Kingfisher that flew in early in the day. Blue-headed Parrot, Green Ibis, Band-tailed Barbthroat, Pale-billed Woodpecker, Laughing and Peregrine Falcons, and Shining and Green Honeycreepers were among the 48 species seen or heard.

We returned to the lodge for lunch and then had a few hours to relax. Quite a few of us snorkeled in the clear waters near the dock, exploring the coral reef and mangrove roots. Snapper, parrot fish, sea fans, and sea



cucumbers, and a barracuda under the dock were all observed. The lodge had kayaks and paddleboards for our use, and Rick did a little paddleboarding while Doug kayaked and fished. We decided to take another late afternoon boat ride around Isla Popa and had great looks at one of our targets for the trip: Snowy Cotinga. We saw three males and a female in fact, along with a second Mangrove Cuckoo, singing “Mangrove” Yellow Warbler, a Common Black Hawk, and both Yellow-throated and Keel-billed Toucans. Dinner at the lodge that night was fresh snapper.

Tues., Oct. 31 Snyder Canal | Changuinola River | Bird Island

Our planned early departure was thwarted by some heavy rain, but after an hour the storm moved on and our boat excursion to the Schneider Canal began. During the delay, owner Jay described how he and his longtime friend, Jim, conceived of and built the lodge. After loading into our boats, we headed towards Isla Colón and entered the Snyder Canal. The canal was constructed in the late 1800s to provide a shortcut for local banana and fruit exporters traveling between the Changuinola River and the old port of Almirante. The canal is narrow, with jungle and fields on both sides, and now remains open due to natural tidal flows. We tied the boats together and slowly drifted down the seven-mile canal.

Soon we found Purple Gallinules, Northern Jacanas, three Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and several Little Blue and Green Herons. A Ringed Kingfisher flew across the canal and perched right next to a smaller Amazon Kingfisher for a nice comparison and moment for the photographers. We grounded the boats to scan a field for Nicaraguan Seed-Finches, and we all had good looks at several of these regionally endemic birds. Other notable birds of the 48 species spotted in the canal were Summer, Scarlet-rumped and Golden-hooded Tanagers; a Black-throated and Canebrake Wren and Cocoa and Streak-headed Woodcreepers. We found a pair of Short-tailed Nighthawks roosting on a branch and brilliantly emerald-colored male and female Green Basilisk Lizards. We soon entered the main channel of the Changuinola River and began our slow journey upriver, scanning the mudflats. Our first ducks of the tour included 25 Blue-winged Teal and two Muscovy Ducks. American Coots, Common and Purple Gallinules, a Yellow-breasted Crake that only a few quickly saw (but all of us heard), a Least Bittern, and eight Limpkin were added to the list. We saw a large raptor perched on a fence which turned out to be a Snail Kite, and then soon after a low-flying White-tailed Kite was seen as well as several Osprey. The boats startled a Spectacled Caiman that made a loud splash, and we photographed the head of another visible in the



pond weeds. Around 12:30 we tied up the boats and enjoyed a wonderful picnic lunch set up for us with a row of chairs under the shade trees along the river. After lunch, we searched the area finding a Squirrel Cuckoo, Baltimore Oriole, several Anhingas, Western Cattle Egrets and Neotropic Cormorants. Shorebirds were working the beach where the river empties into the sea including Short-billed Dowitchers, Spotted and Western Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilts and a Willet. On the way back to Tranquilo Bay, we passed Bird Island that is like a scene out of Jurassic Park. Dozens of Magnificent Frigate Birds, Red-billed Tropicbirds and Brown Boobies were seen on nests or flying around the island. We noticed a Belted Kingfisher, an Osprey and a Peregrine Falcon perched on trees as well. Quite an amazing site and a highlight of the trip for sure. After our long day on the water, we returned to the lodge to relax before another wonderful dinner.

Wed., Nov. 1 Green Acres Chocolate Farm | Tranquilo Bay Trails

After another delicious buffet breakfast, the group met at the boat dock for a 15-minute ride to the Green Acres Chocolate Farm on the nearby mainland. As we crossed the bay, a school of Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins rode the wake of one of the boats and Roger captured a great video of them. The other boat witnessed several Flying Fish gliding over the water, no doubt escaping predatory fish in hot pursuit. The owner, Gary, greeted us at the dock, and we spent a few hours birding the trails around the farm.

Birding in the forest was challenging but we came away with 27 species including several new ones such as Pied Puffbird, Chestnut-backed Antbird, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant and two small flocks of Black-chested Jays and Purple-throated Fruitcrows. Several in our group were amateur herpetologists who were happy to find Green-and-black Poison Dart Frogs and vocalizing Talamanca Rocket Frogs. After our walk, we were treated to refreshing, chocolate-infused iced tea by Gary who gave a short presentation about his chocolate production and reforestation work in the area. Of course, we took the opportunity to buy some of the Farm's chocolate products before sailing back to Tranquilo Bay.

We had lunch at the lodge and then some time to ourselves in the early afternoon. Six of the group decided to go snorkeling with Rick and Roger, so Yoel piloted us to a nice coral reef not far from the lodge. Colorful fish were everywhere including a unique looking Longhorn Cowfish. There were many healthy brain corals, sea fans,



sponges and different species of small jellyfish. The rest of the group relaxed or birded near the cabins. In the late afternoon several of us birded the gardens again, climbing up the 90-foot viewing tower that overlooked the bay. From this vantage point we could look down on the Miconia shrubs that were loaded with berries that attracted honeycreepers, manakins and migrant warblers, the most numerous being Bay-breasted Warblers. During our week at Tranquilo Bay, we observed hundreds of these birds on the property and the surrounding islands. Other birds spotted were a large flock of Montezuma Oropendolas, beautiful male and female Blue Dacnis and both Masked and Black-crowned Tityras. Then it was back to the lodge for our checklist and some cold Balboa beers and rum drinks, followed by a dinner of freshly sautéed pork chops.

Thurs., Nov. 2 Punta Róbal Road | Robalo River | Tranquilo Bay Trails

Another early breakfast today before sailing to the mainland at Punta Róbal. During the boat ride, three Whimbrels flew by as well as 25 Black Terns and 10 Brown Pelicans. At the dock we found Royal and Sandwich Terns perched alongside Neotropic Cormorants. We met Rocky, our bus driver for the mainland-based parts of the tour and set out to explore the road from Punta Róbal inland, which winds through coastal wetland and low elevation forest habitats. After a few hours making frequent stops to bird along the road, we reached 50 species with highlights that included six Southern Lapwings, 10 Green Ibises, many egrets and herons. A pair of Blue Ground Doves was a nice find, and we saw Gray-headed Chachalacas, a Buff-throated Saltator, Variable and Morelet's Seedeaters, Yellow-headed and Crested Caracaras and an Olive-crowned Yellowthroat. Further inland it became more forested, and we encountered a mixed flock that contained White-lined, Scarlet-rumped, Blue-gray and Palm Tanagers along with several Giant Cowbirds. We noticed a kettle of Turkey Vultures building and soon over 3,000 were streaming by mixed in with at least 1,000 Swainson's Hawks and smaller numbers of Broad-winged Hawks. Truly a river of raptors! We stopped by the Robalo River and found a feeding flock that included a Chestnut-sided Warbler, more Bay-breasted Warblers, a Yellow-throated Vireo, Bananaquits and two White-browed Gnatcatchers. Also spotted here were a pair of Collared Aracaris and a King Vulture that soared over us.

We unpacked our picnic lunch and birded while we ate, adding four more King Vultures, a Cinnamon Becard, great views of a raucous family of Band-backed Wrens, several Melodious Blackbirds and a Thick-billed Seed-Finch. We also had excellent views of a pair of Golden-hooded Tanagers and several Mantled Howler Monkeys.



Then it was back to the boats for our return to Tranquilo Bay. Most of us did some late afternoon birding around the garden trails, getting nice looks at Stripe-throated Hermit, 30+ Short-billed Pigeons that were there for the Miconia berries and some White-vented Euphonias. There were at least a dozen Prothonotary and Tennessee Warblers and 50+ Bay-breasted Warblers with a Northern Waterthrush as well. We also found a very photogenic Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth who had crawled down to a Miconia bush nearly at eye-level. Dinner that night was chicken with rice and vegetables followed by coconut ice cream and a well-deserved rest.

Fri., Nov. 3 Tranquilo Bay Trails | Snorkeling

Today our plan was to hike the forest trails on the property. After a later breakfast, most of us hiked a loop trail through the thick forest. Roger pointed out Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs, and we found a pair of Dot-winged Antwrens, several Chestnut-backed Antbirds, an Indigo Bunting and an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher. We stopped by a pool of water where hummingbirds sometimes bathe but instead had great looks at several Tawny-crested Tanagers. We also witnessed four Golden-collared Manakins displaying and a male White-necked Jacobin zoomed by. After lunch we had some free time and many of us accompanied Brenda on a snorkeling trip to visit a nearby coral reef. The clear, warm water was the perfect temperature, so no need for wetsuits, and we found at least eight Spiny Lobsters hiding among the coral formations.

Before dinner we decided to bird in the gardens and climb the observation tower. We tallied 26 species in our 45-minute walk. Many were by now familiar, but we did see several Mealy Parrots, two Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, a displaying male Red-capped Manakin performing his Michael Jackson backwards slide dance on a branch, and several Great Kiskadees. Several hummingbirds and a large, shiny Green Orchid Bee were sampling flowers in the garden, and Roger pointed out the calls of a Gray-cowled Wood-Rail as the flocks of Red-ored Parrots started filtering in to roost for the night. After our happy hour and species checklist, dinner that night was seared local snapper followed by a delicious passion fruit pie.

Sat., Nov 4 Buena Esperanza Road | Tierra Oscura | Tranquilo Bay Gardens

Our final full day at the wonderful Tranquilo Bay began with an early buffet breakfast followed by a boat trip to the mainland to bird Buena Esperanza Road. We learned that there were peaceful protests occurring on the



mainland due to a contested government mining project, and this meant we would need to change our planned route. Jay and Jim suggested we bird along the newly paved Buena Esperanza Road, which is surrounded by lowland forest dotted with open fields. On the boat ride over, Brenda's sharp ears helped us identify a calling Collared Forest-Falcon. We made lots of stops along the road, bumping into several families with small children who were curious about what we were doing. We shared some of our snacks with them and pointed out birds as well. Highlights included a calling Little Tinamou, a pair of Long-billed Hermits, Slaty-tailed and Gartered Trogons, two Rufous Motmots, Dusky Antbird and Trilling Gnatwren. We also had one of our favorite sightings of the trip: a pair of perched Long-tailed Tyrants with their tails at least 1.5 times their body length.

After lunch, we enjoyed a last evening birding in the garden then gathered for one more happy hour, checklist and dinner at the lodge. We each shared our favorite birds and memories of the trip. Rick & Dave voted for the Long-tailed Tyrant as their favorite bird, with Blue Dacnis, Red-billed Tropicbird, Snowy Cotinga and Prothonotary Warbler receiving votes from others. Favorite memories included the unforgettable day in Snyder Canal and on Bird Island, snorkeling the coral reefs, the large numbers of Bay-breasted Warblers foraging daily around us, watching the Red-capped Manakins dance, and the many thousands of migrating raptors and vultures.

Sun., Nov. 5 Departure Day

The Tranquilo Bay staff and the owners Jim, Renee and Jay treated us like old friends as we bid them farewell. After breakfast and some final veranda birding, we boarded the boats one last time and headed to the mainland for our short flight to Panama City. Once there a van transported us to our Radisson Panama Canal hotel near the airport where the whole group spent the night before departing the following day for home.

Group (Rick Weiman - RW), Blue Dacnis (RW), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (Tom Rooney - TR), "Papaya Sunrise" (Douglas Moore - DM), Prothonotary Warbler (RW), Snowy Cotinga (TR), Mangrove Cuckoo (DM), Blue-winged Eurybia (Brenda Sánchez - BS), Rain Frog (DM), Tranquilo Bay Dock (RW), Derby's Woolly Opossum (DM), Red-lore Parrot (DM), Magnificent Frigatebird (DM), Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (DM), Bottle-nosed Dolphin (DM), Spectacled Caiman (RW), Tennessee Warbler (DM), Crab-eating Raccoon (DM), Black-crowned Tityra (RW), Hibiscus Flower (DM), Strawberry Poison Dart Frog (DM), Southern Lapwings (RW), Long-tailed Tyrant (TR), Panoramic (DM), Red-capped Manakin (RW), White-faced Capuchin (TR), Green Honeycreeper (TR), Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (TR), Group (RW)