

Panama and the Wild Darién | July 22 – 28, 2023

Trip Report | by Andrew Haffenden



With guide Andrew Haffenden and participants: Amy, Dave, Dick, Jane, Kathleen, Leah, Pat, Rory, Sally and Sharon



The Darién is one of the world's most evocative place names, conjuring up mystery and deep unexplored jungle where few have traveled. And with no roads in most of its area the reality is close to the legend. The Darién in the wet season is even less visited, and reflecting the low visitation, during our six days at Canopy Camp and the various birding areas we visited we saw no other birders, or tourists of any kind. We had both Canopy Camp and the entire Darién for our birding alone! Leah, Sharon, Pat, Dave, Jane, Amy, Kathy, Rory, Dick and Sally and me enjoyed excellent weather with just a couple of showers in daytime and while it was hot in the open in the middle part of the day it was not excessively hot or humid. We saw 213 bird species and 7 species of mammals.

Sat., July 22 Panama City

The Riande Hotel, conveniently located a few minutes from the airport, was our meeting point and first night for our group of ten – Leah, Sharon, Pat, Dave, Jane, Amy, Dick, Sally, Kathy and Rory, plus me, prior to heading south to the Darién. Despite being surrounded on two of three sides by major highways, including the Pan-



American which we would come to know well, the well vegetated grounds provided some nice birding. In short time we picked up our first Panama birds, nineteen in all; not bad for a couple of hours at a city hotel. Favorites included the stunning Crimson-backed Tanager, Blue-gray Tanager, Thick-billed Euphonia, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Lesser Goldfinch, the black and white morph of Variable Seedeater and Garden Emerald. An early dinner was voted on, as most of us arose before 4am, so after a round of welcome drinks and some good food we hit the sack for our 6.30 breakfast in the morning.

Sun., July 23

Panama City | Canopy Camp, Darién Province

After breakfast our Canopy Camp van turned up on time. The luggage and three people were loaded into a separate pickup and we were ready to go. Our local Indigenous guide Igua, my guide during my 2022 tour, introduced himself and our driver and told us our first stop would be lake Bayano, about 90 minutes away. A Bat Falcon liked to use the bridge structure as a hunting perch, and sure enough he was there when we arrived. Other birds here were Striated Heron, quite cryptic on a rock and behind grass, a Cocoli Heron on a distant spit, Ringed Kingfisher, the rank-grass-loving Blue-black Grassquit, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird and Gray-breasted Martin. However the best sighting here was not a bird but a family of Mantled Howler Monkeys moving around in a close tree; brilliant views and photos were had in the ten minutes or so we watched them for just yards away. That they were so unafraid is a credit to the attitude of the Indigenous tribe that owns this land, in protecting the land and its wildlife. Heading west east we continued see birds along the way including Greater and Smooth-billed Anis, more Tropical Kingbirds of course, and the resident form of American Kestrel. Lunch was to be at the Avicar restaurant in Tortí which has close vegetation and hummingbird feeders. There was plenty of action at the feeders which made it hard to read the menu and order, and harder to sit and eat our meal! Hummingbirds seen here were Snowy-bellied, Rufous-tailed and Violet-bellied Hummingbirds, White-naped Jacobin, Black-throated Mango, and Garden Emerald. Blue-gray and Palm Tanagers, Yellow-crowned Euphonias and Red-legged Honeycreepers fed in a flowering tree making this quite the lunch stop. While in Tortí we birded the river for about an hour, adding Cocoa Woodcreeper, Golden-collared Manakin, Tropical Royal Flycatcher (a target for a couple of the group), Black-headed Tody-flycatcher, Streaked Flycatcher, Bay Wren, the water-loving Buff-rumped Warbler and White-shouldered and Plain-colored Tanagers. The list was now very respectable and we were still two hours away from the Darién camp. It is compulsory to stop at the checkpoint at the provincial border to be cleared to travel further, and we made a stop at Metetí to buy rubber boots if desired - the \$12 to buy a pair to be left behind was a much better option than trying to carry them from home and back - and snacks for the tour. Shortly after that stop we turned off the road and drove up the rainforest track to Canopy Camp Darién, our home for the next five nights. We arrived at Canopy Camp is the same sunshine that had accompanied us for the most part for our journey from Panama City (referred to by



Panamanians, including official government signs etc, just as Panama). We received information about the camp and then a short break to settle in to our large and very comfortable tents, each with their own deck, elevated and facing the jungle.

Mon., July 24

Canopy Camp | Camino El Salto | Camino a Nuevo Vigía

We woke up this morning to numerous bird calls, including Little Tinamou and Whooping Motmot. Quickly demolishing breakfast we headed out for our first birding outing in the Darién. Camino El Salto, or Salto Road, is one of the most famous birding roads in Panama, uttered in the same breath as Pipeline Road at Gamboa, and was our destination this morning. For outings on the various side roads Canopy Camp uses 4WD pickups with central bench seats in the back that let birders face outward at the forest. So up the ladder we clambered and took our sets. As is standard, if we saw something we banged on the roof, the heavier and faster the banging the quicker the brakes were applied. We still made stops and walked the road, but this gave us great bird finding opportunities between stops. We birded this way for about four hours, racking up species at the rate of a different species every eight minutes! Just seven of the species had already been seen, and there were several specialty birds looked for, including Gray-cheeked Nunlet which we were successful with. Other birds seen included Pale-bellied Hermit, Sapphire-throated Hummingbird, Scaled Pigeon, Gray-headed and Plumbeous Kites, Great jacamar, Spot-crowned Barbet, Double-banded Graytail, Russet-winged Schiffornis, Choco Sirystes, both Yellow-backed and Orange-crowned Orioles, the small Ochre-billed Flatbill and the stunning White-headed Wren. Even Black-bellied Whistling Ducks flew over, as did a flock of Red-lored Parrots. Mid-morning we took a short break for cold drinks and snacks, very welcome in the growing heat. Around 11.30 we started off back for the camp, making a short stop near the highway when a Gartered Trogon was seen. Looking around we added Greater Ani, Pied Puffbird and Dusky-capped, Panama and Streaked Flycatchers to our morning's birds. The air conditioning that met us when we got into our bus was very welcome.

When we got back to the camp cold juice was waiting, and lunch was served. It was very good, fresh and healthy. As is usual with tropical birding the first half of the afternoon was break time to allow the heat to ease of and birds get active again. With our beautiful tents, fans and close views of the forest trees a break was not hard to take, though it was interrupted when a family group of Geoffroy's Tamarins feasted on some bananas that been hung in a tree, then Panamanian White-faced Capuchins descended on a different bunch in the fruit feeding area. Then about 3pm we drove out to another road near the Chucunaque River, the largest in Panama.



This road led to a village we would be visiting in a couple of days by boat, as the road was only passable at the driest time, which July is not. Along the way we stopped and counted a flock of about sixty Black-bellied Whistling-ducks and six Southern lapwings. We saw two Squirrel Cuckoos; we had only heard one yesterday. A handsome bird. We added two new Puffbird species, White-necked and Barred. Two beautiful Crimson-crested Woodpeckers were seen, and as the Pale-billed does not occur here the ID was easier than further west; a Spot-breasted was also found. Yellow-headed Caracaras entered our list, SD cards and memories, and in an agricultural an Aplomado Falcon was hoped for and found, just a distant spot on the ground seen by our driver at first, but it took off hunting and eventually flew past allowing Dave’s photography skills to establish that its hunt had been successful. A surprise was the overfly of a Magnificent Frigatebird, but we were only about 60 miles from the Pacific Ocean and the Chucunaque is very wide for much of that. In addition to Orange-chinned, Red-lored and Mealy parrots a pair of diminutive Spectacled Parrotlets allowed time for photos. A pair of Barred Antshrikes was quite cooperative and flycatchers were represented by Ochre-bellied, Yellow-crowned and Tropical Kingbird. A Blue Dacnis provided some color while duller Ruddy-breasted Seedeater and Variable Seedeater – this time the black morph rather than the black and white morph seen in Panama City. All in all a very good afternoon’s birding, and a great day overall, but we were all hoping it would be outdone tomorrow. Less birds but a bird in the top ten Americas wide for most birders was our target – Harpy Eagle. We were making an early start, so after an excellent dinner it was off to bed.

Tues., July 25 Chucunaque River | El Real | Unnamed Road

The travel to the Harpy nest tree was going to be long and in parts difficult – Harpy Eagle treks seem to always be this way, though ours was going to be easier than some. We first drove to Yaviza, the last town on the Panamerican Highway in North America, where we boarded our boats for the trip up river to the village of El Real. We birded as we went and managed 19 species during the 25 minute trip. The best bird, or birds, of the trip were two Collared Forest-falcons. Forest-falcons are never easy to see and are more often just heard calling in mornings or evenings, so the sighting was a highlight. Yellow-headed Caracara, Two Common Black hawks and a Black-collared Hawk (which would be better named Black-bow-tied Hawk) added to the raptor list. Being a river with shoals and beaches different species of herons and other waders were seen, two Wood Storks being the least expected and two Roseate Spoonbills were nice. An always popular Keel-billed Toucan was also seen. Several 4WD vehicles had been arranged at the village – as there is no road these were originally brought by barge. While they weren’t in the best of shape it would have been a long hike without them as it took over an



hour with them. We then walked a 4WD track that eventually led to the Darién National Park but was built by the community for agricultural and local logging purposes. Along the way we saw Fasciated Tiger-heron, Black-tailed Trogon, Golden-headed Manakin, Crimson-crested Woodpecker, Black-chested Jay and Black Oropendula. Like Black-capped Donacobius and several other birds the Oropendula is a South American bird that just sneaks across into North America here in the Darién. Also seen along the trail was a family of Panamanian Night Monkeys peering out of a tree hollow.

After about 30 minutes of walking we reached a creek which needed crossing by either getting wet feet or balancing on flattish river rocks. Fortunately we had our drivers and a couple of others from the village, and we were all helped across. The men were extremely caring and careful about getting us over and back safely. Then it was an uphill trek for about three quarters of a mile, quite challenging for some of us but with a bit of help everyone made it. After some searching the chick was seen, fully fledged and well developed by now but still being attended and fed by the parents. We did not see them, but the chick gave us ample viewing and photos time, although the place to stand to see through the branches was tight. We didn't complain. After 30 or 40 minutes we bid adieu to Harpy and started down the trail back to the creek; it was definitely easier going this way. Once again most of us were helped across the creek. There were a couple of benches and a table bench where we crossed, and the men had brought coolers with drinks and food for our lunch. We ate happily, the lifer for most Harpy Eagle under our belts. Eventually lunch was finished – we took a bit longer than necessary as no one was particularly looking forward to the walk back, it had become hot and very humid. We birded more on the way back than coming in, and were rewarded with some nice birds, including our fourth Puffbird, White Whiskered, both Dot-winged and Chestnut-backed Antbirds, another Golden-headed Manakin, new to the tour Purple-throated Fruitcrow and Bright-rumped Attila, and another Black Oropendula. In a shed near the start of the trail a colony of Tent-making Bats had decided human construction was better than leaves and were hanging from the rafters. Then it was the slow and bumpy ride – again we weren't complaining - to the village, into the boats and motored back to Yaviza. Our vehicles were brought around and we slumped inside, cooling off at last on the way back to the camp, arriving midafternoon. On the drive back time was spent in a couple of places along the highway trying to entice a Bicolored Wren to appear – another South American bird – but only White-headed Wren was seen, which is not a bad second prize at all. In Yaviza we stopped briefly to look at the highway road striping where we saw the most southern mid-road stripe in North America. Just a bit of fun trivia.

After a break we did some birding on the grounds, admired a colorful Giant Ameiva lizard that called the lounge area home, and went to see a Great Potoo that one of the camp staff had found on the grounds. Then came the checklist and dinner. Quite the cheer went up at the checklist when we got to the Harpy Eagle line!



Wed., July 26

Panamerican Highway | Yaviza

Our birding today concentrated on different locations along the Panamerican Highway to and including Yaviza. Our first stop was a wetland area which was quite productive. The usual Pale-vented Pigeons were seen – they are the common open country pigeon of the Darién – along with expected Smooth-billed Ani and Whistling Ducks. Limpkin, Southern Lapwing, Wattled Jacana and a well camouflaged Striated Heron joined the list, as did Roadside Hawk, Ringed Kingfisher and Cattle Egrets. Small flocks of Orange-chinned Parakeets and Red-tailed Parrots flew over. A pair of Pied Water-tyrants, a very pretty bird, claimed the pond and surrounds as their territory. We saw our first Yellow-hooded Blackbird here, a lookalike for our northern Yellow-headed. A nice find was a Large-billed Seed-finch, another South American Bird that sneaks into eastern Panama. Although widespread its numbers are being depleted, severely in some places, due to trapping for the pet trade due to being admired for its song. In many places in South America competitions are held with songbirds for the best singer; it's not just bragging rights, money changes hands as well. Moving further along the road the next stop added Striped Cuckoo, Pearl Kite, Red-crowned Woodpecker and Black-capped Donacobious, among others, to the list. The Donacobious was a pair, which at first stayed hidden but eventually came out and proceeded to sing and display in full view for fifteen minutes. A wonderful birding experience.

We then headed for a track into fields which we walked. Although open with just trees lining the track and dotted through the fields we got our best look at a Gray-headed Chachalaca here. Other birds of the 22 species seen included Greater Ani, Anhinga, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, a stunning Black-and-white Hawk-eagle, Short-tailed Hawk, Bat Falcon and a nesting Lesser Elaenia. The Elaenia has an interesting distribution, widespread in South America and southern Panama into Costa Rica, but mostly missing in Darién Province, with less than twenty eBird records including this sighting. Blue-black Grassquit, Ruddy-breasted Seedeater and Olive-gray Saltator rounded out the more interesting birds seen here. A quick rainforest roadside stop got us Rufous-tailed Jacamar and a pair of Cinnamon Becards. Black Antshrike and a Yellow-rumped Cacique were also heard only here. At this point it was after 11am and the day had become hot, so we called it a morning and returned to the lodge for lunch and a break. Mid afternoon we return to the highway to bird two small roads a little way apart. At the first we saw mostly birds we had seen before, but just our second Blue-headed parrot was seen, and we good views of Black-crowned Antshrike and White-bellied Antbird, we had only heard both birds the day before. Iguá spotted a Brown-throated Three-fingered Sloth from the road and we had great views of it actually moving. A Red-billed Scythebill called which got us excited, but it never came out and showed itself. On the other track a flock of 7 Blue-headed Parrots gave us our best looks at the colorful parrot, and a Cocoa



Woodcreeper was the second of the tour and well seen. A search for As things started to quieten down we called it a day and returned to the camp.

Thurs., July 27 Chucunaque River | Tuquesa River | Nueva Vigía

I was woken this morning by the Little Tinamou calling and a distant Howler. After breakfast we headed back to the Chucunaque River for a longer boat ride on the Chucunaque River, heading for the Tuquesa. We birded the river on the way, noting typical river birds such as Neotropic Cormorant, Anhinga and stately Coci Herons and Little Blue Herons. Gray-chested Doves were new for the tour, and a single White-tipped Dove flew over. A Gray-headed Kite perched in a tree, which took a bit to identify at first, but the Roadside Hawk did not! Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers were regulars along the way. A large flock of forty Orange-chinned Parakeets flew over, as did a smaller one of Red-lored Parrots. Along the shore we had Masked Tityra, Great Antshrike heard only, a nice Boat-billed Flycatcher and of course TKs. Mangrove Swallows were dotted along, either flying on perched on overwater dead branches, often joined by southern Rough-winged Swallows. A Crimson-backed brought some bright color to the ride, and Black Oropendula and Yellow-rumped Caciques visual reminders that we were in the rainforested tropics. Two Muscovy Ducks flew ahead of us and another Gray-cowled Woodrail was seen.

After about 2.5 hours we came to a fork in the river where the Tuquesa River entered. We took it. We had a target further along, the Dusky-backed Jacamar. This jacamar has a very limited distribution centered in the Darien and extending about 100 miles over the border of Colombia and just a few records as far west as Tortí. We made our way directly to a known area for it, pulled over to the bank which gave us a challenging climb to get up, slippery and steep. But up we got and headed along an overgrown footpad to a cleared area, an old treefall. We got onto a pair of the jacamars straight away and had extended views and got photos of this especially long-billed rarity. Just to be greedy we had Rufous-tailed Jacamar in the same place. We had now got all of Panama's jacamars, in fact all of Central America's. Other birds in the immediate area and along the path were Olivaceous Piculet, Black Antshrike, Streaked Xenops, One-colored and Cinnamon Becards, two Long-tailed Tyrants, Bright-rumped Attila, Gray-capped Flycatcher, Blue Dacnis and both White-shouldered and Plain-colored Tanagers. Add in the Black-crowned Tityra, Ruddy Ground-doves and heard only Spectacled Parakeets and it was quite a busy 30 minutes of birding. When we got back to the bank our boatman had fashioned a sturdy hand rail out of forest wood and getting down was much easier and safer. We loaded back into the boats and headed back along the Tuquesa then further along the Chucunaque to our nest destination, the Emberá village of Nueva Vigía. We birded along the way, and the best bird was a Black-and-White Hawk-eagle soaring



over. The Nueva Vigía community saw the potential of ecotourism some years ago and helped by Igua a couple of villagers have been training as local bird guides and birding locations scouted and monitored including some large natural ponds along a creek which provide habitat for waterbirds as well as the forest birds. These ponds and surrounding forest were our first stop for this morning. On arrival we met our local guide and headed out along a looping trail which went out to a small river then back through an open area then back into forest and past two ponds. Our walk took two hours. An interesting sight was forty-one Wood Storks flying over, a large number to see in the Darién. Birds seen on along the trail included Pale-bellied Hermit, Black-tailed Trogon, Spot-breasted and Red-crowned Woodpeckers, Pied Puffbird, American Pygmy Kingfisher, Plain-brown Woodcreeper and a Plain Xenops was seen and photographed by Sally and Dave. A flock of ten Orange-chinned Parakeets clambered about in a tree and four Red-lored Parrots flew over. Some movement caught our eyes in a tree and the call went out – Red-billed Scythebill! This was a bird on everyone’s list and we spent time as it moved from tree to tree for everyone to get decent views, though it continual moved around so not good for photos. Another target bird was Royal Flycatcher, and one was calling in a known area by the river. Try as we might we could not coax it out, though it came in close. We finally got to see a Buff-breasted Wren, which we had heard several times during the tour but not seen. The loop brought us back to the sometimes road, just two tire tracks through the grass, but water didn’t allow us to follow it into the village. A very iffy one log bridge was used by villagers over a ditch, but it was too risky for us with our optics gear so we backtracked for a bit and returned to the village where we were having lunch. The villagers had set up a table which was covered with objects - textiles, bowls and plates woven from local reeds, masks and jewelry, all intricate work which could take up to a week to make. As lunch was being set out we made our purchases.

Three of us wanted to go back to try for a bird they had missed, so we relaxed at the village until they returned. On the way back a Capped Heron and Green and Amazon Kingfishers were seen, and a Spectacled Caiman among others. Our Kingfisher tally had risen to five, all the kingfishers in Panama except Belted, a migrant which had not yet return. We were lucky to see an American Crocodile in addition to the expected caimans. We got back to the lodge at about 4pm and birded around the grounds until checklist and dinner. Tomorrow we were returning to Panama City for the night, then either returning home or continuing on to the extension.

Fri., July 28

Canopy Camp | San Francisco | Avicar | Panama City

We started the drive back to Panama City so we made our farewells to those not in our same vehicle, and to our new friends at the camp. Our vehicle stopped at a farm and reserve near Avicar where after passing through agricultural fields rose up a rainforested hill. This turned out to be a good stop, with three trogons – Slaty-tailed, Black-tailed and Gartered – seen, a perched Gray-lined Hawk and a Short-tailed Hawk flying over the field, a

Broad-billed Motmot and a Rufous Motmot, the latter only seen by me before it flew off. Buff-rumped Warbler was seen again, and a new bird was Black-tailed Flycatcher, strangely similar to the warbler in both appearance and habits. Western Olivaceous Flatbill was also new. Keel-billed Toucan and two Golden-collared Manakins put in appearances as well. We then drove on to Panama City for the night. Everyone agreed it had been a great tour, with a lot of birds seen including many lifers for everyone. Including, of course, Harpy Eagle.

Mammals, Reptiles and other Animals

Throughout the tour we looked for other animals in addition to birds. Butterflies were common, especially Heliconiids such as Red Postman and Sara Longwing, moths were at a light sheet each night and day flying *Urania leilus* was seen, as were dragonflies. Giant Ameiva was around the camp daily; other lizards included Central American Whiptail, Slender Anole, Yellow-headed Skink and Common Basilisk and the introduced Mediterranean Gecko. Crocodylians were American Crocodile and Spectacled Caiman. Brown-throated Three-fingered Sloth was seen on three days, Geoffroy's Tamarin daily at the camp and Panamanian White-faced Capuchin also at the camp and once along a trail. Mantled Howler was heard daily and seen three times. Panamanian Night Monkey was seen on the trail to the Harpy Eagle. Red-tailed Squirrel was seen most days and White-nosed Coati twice.

Photos: Mantled Howler Monkey (Dave Beebe - DB), White-necked Jacobin (DB), Harpy Eagle (DB), Orange-chinned Parakeets (Leah Moffatt - LM), Red-legged Honeycreeper (DB), Golden-collared Manakin (DB), Blue-gray Tanager (Sally Avery - SA), Female Black-throated Mango (DB), Royal Flycatcher (DB), Bananaquit (DB), Red-lored Parrot (DB), Sara Longwing Butterfly (LM), Geoffroy's Tamarin (DB), Violet-bellied Hummingbird (DB), Barred Antshrike (DB), Spot-crowned Barbet (DB), Gray-cheeked Nunlet (DB), Laughing Falcon (DB), Black-collared Hawk (DB), Panamanian Night Monkeys (DB), Harpy Eagle (DB), Great Potoo (DB), Striped Cuckoo (DB), Black-capped Donacobius (DB), Pearl Kite (DB), Wattled Jacana (DB), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (DB), Capped Heron (SA), Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (DB), Tropical Checkered Skipper (DB), Amazon Kingfisher (SA), Spectacled Caiman (SA)