

# Western Panama: Tranquilo Bay | March 2 – 13, 2024

## Trip Report by Mason Flint



**Naturalist Journeys Tour Leader:** Mason Flint

**Guides:** Roger Morales (Tranquilo Bay) and Reinaldo Rodriguez (Mount Totumas)

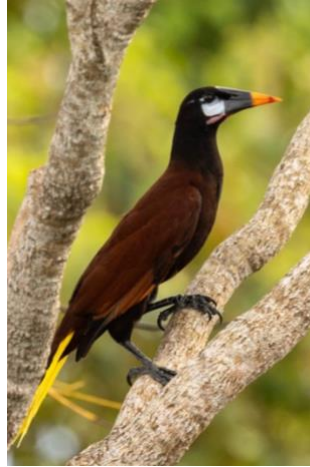
**Participants:** DJ, Henry, Lori, David, Dick, Kate, Jane, Laura, Robert, and Jim



**Sat., Mar. 2**

### **Arrivals in Panama City, Tranquilo Bay**

Meeting fellow travelers at the beginning of a trip involves finding the birders mixed in with the regular civilians at the hotel. Often there are clear giveaways – binoculars hanging around necks – but at breakfast it often involves more subtle clues. Is that person wearing jungle clothing or just regular travel wear? What kind of shoes is she wearing? Or even less obvious, does he have the “look” of a birder? At breakfast, the first few people I introduced myself to were birders, but not traveling with Naturalist Journeys. Eventually some of us found each other and enjoyed a nice breakfast before collecting luggage and meeting the whole group in the hotel lobby. After a bit of stress due to late arrival for our transport to the nearby Albrook domestic airport, we all get checked in and were soon on our way to Bocas del Toro, about an hour east of Panama City. The crew from Tranquilo Bay was there waiting for us and, after a short drive, we reached boarded two boats and were on our way to our home for the next week.



The boat ride from Bocas del Toro to Tranquilo takes about 40 minutes, through the middle of the archipelago before curling around the south end of Isla Bastimentos to the lodge. We enjoyed flat water and blue water and picked up our first birds of the trip – several Brown Booby and Magnificent Frigatebird. After arriving, we enjoyed the first of many tasty meals and received an orientation from our hosts, Renee and Jim Kimball. After unpacking in our cabanas, we spent the last 90 minutes of the day birding the lovely lodge grounds. Roger, our talented local guide, pointed out several Lesser White-lined Bat roosting under the eaves of Dick’s cabana and then introduced us to the “magic tree” on the edge of a clearing by our cabanas. Within a minute or two, we saw what makes the tree magical – first a beautiful male Red-capped Manakin popped up and then, a few minutes later, male and female Golden-collared Manakin. Identification of the males was easy, but the females were a bit trickier – reddish-orange legs on the female Golden-collared and dusky-pinkish legs on the Red-capped. The magic tree also had Pale-vented and Short-billed Pigeon perched on top. We saw several other species in nearby trees and shrubs including White-browed Gnatcatcher, White-vented Euphonia, Blue Dacnis, and Shining Honeycreeper. A nearby Cecropia tree held Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth. When we made our way over toward the tower we added Common Black Hawk, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Blue-headed and Red-colored Parrot, Montezuma Oropendola, and Plain-colored Tanager. Laura and Dick enjoyed the birds but also spent a lot of time pointing out butterflies and other non-avian creatures.

After freshening up in our cabanas, we returned to the main lodge for dinner. The food at Tranquilo Bay was a hit with the group throughout the trip. Dinner was briefly interrupted when Jay, one of the partners at Tranquilo Bay, called everyone outside to see a troop of Panamanian Night Monkey and a Derby’s Woolly Opossum arrived at the deck to eat bananas. On their way back to their cabana, Lori and David saw a Paca!

### **Sun., Mar. 3                      Punta Robalo, Palo Seco, Chiriqui Grande Road**

Our time at Tranquilo Bay alternated between longer “away” days where we visited the mainland and shorter days where we stayed close to the lodge. Our destination today was Bosque Protector Palo Seco and other spots in the highlands near the continental divide. We started with an early breakfast before making the short walk through the mangroves to board the boats. In the pre-sunrise darkness, we heard Green Ibis and Blue-black Grosbeak. With the help of Roger and the friendly boatmen, we boarded the two boats and took what would become a familiar route south, following the east side of Isla Popa through a narrow pass and across the Chiriqui Lagoon to the small village of Punta Robalo. On the way we saw several Royal Tern, Magnificent Frigatebird, and Barn Swallows. While the crew loaded coolers into the bus, we spent about 30 minutes birding near the dock. Royal and Sandwich Terns and a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron perched on pilings, a pair of Gray-headed



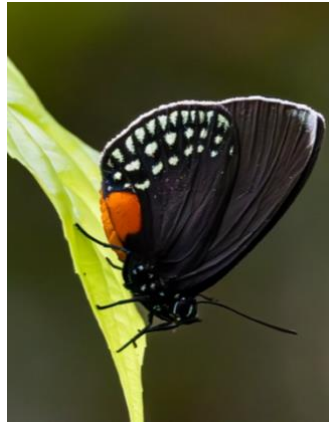
Chachalaca perched up in nearby tree, Great Kiskadee and Social Flycatcher called from another, and a Tropical Mockingbird made a brief appearance.

After leaving the dock, we spent about two hours slowly birding four miles of Camino Punta Robalo which passes through agricultural fields and wetlands. We picked up nearly 40 species of birds including Smooth-billed and Groove-billed Ani, Northern Jacana, Wood Stork, Green Ibis, Roadside and Short-tailed Hawk, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Gray-capped Flycatcher, Black-striped Sparrow, Red-breasted Meadowlark, Olive-crowned Yellowthroat, and several Thraupidae including the abundant Scarlet-rumped, Blue-gray, and Palm Tanagers, Blue-black Grassquit, and Variable and Morelet's Seedeater.

After getting on the main road, we headed south and stopped at the Super Centro Economico for a short bio and birding break. Although not particularly scenic, we had good luck at this spot a handful of times during the trip. On this stop we counted at least 1000 Black and Turkey vultures streaming over as they migrate north. After climbing up toward the continental divide, we made a few stops at Bosque Protector Palo Seco. This approximately 400-acre reserve was created in 1983 to protect a rainforest corridor linking Fortuna Forest Reserve and La Amistad International Park. At our first stop we saw a Crowned Woodnymph, had good looks at an Orange Hawk-Eagle soaring above, Lesser Greenlet, Common Chlorospingus, and Bay-headed Tanager. At another stop further up we added several species including Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Tawny-capped Euphonia, and a Mourning Warbler that was probably getting ready to head to North America.

After a picnic lunch, we started our drive back to Punta Robalo. We stopped briefly at an old abandoned house we'd visit again where we saw a Swallow-tailed Kite soar over and again at the Super Centro Economico. This time we stayed for about 30 minutes, with fantastic birding in the tall trees and pond behind the dumpster. We saw two Red-crowned Woodpecker, Lineated Woodpecker, Crimston-fronted Woodpecker, Streak-hooded Woodcreeper, Yellow-crowned Euphonia, Baltimore Oriole, and Thick-billed Seedfinch. After tearing ourselves away from the dumpster birding, we detoured briefly to ponds along the Chirique Grande Road where we saw Least Grebe, at least 25 Southern Lapwing, and Ringed Kingfisher. After getting back to Camino Punta Robalo, we made a few quick stops to see a Jabiru surrounded by several Great Egret, as well as a Blue-headed Parrot, and glimpses at a skulking Bay Wren.

During the boat trip back to Tranquilo Bay, many of us enjoyed photographing the homes built on pilings on the edge of the channel between the mainland and Isla Popa. After freshening up in our cabanas and a quick visit to the magic tree, we enjoyed a nice dinner and evening checklist before heading to bed.



## **Mon., Mar. 4                      Tranquilo Bay**

We took a slower pace today after a long away day yesterday. Some in the group arrived at the lodge early to listen to the dawn chorus and wait for birds to arrive at the feeders. Prothonotary and Tennessee Warbler were the first to arrive, followed shortly by Rufous-tailed hummingbird. After breakfast, we spent the rest of the morning walking the trails around Tranquilo Bay. Some of our sightings were non-avian including Brown and Helmeted Basilisk, Green Climbing Toad near the lodge water storage area and the first of many Strawberry Poison Dart Frog seen during the trip. After entering the forest, Roger took us to a spot where we saw a Stripe-throated Hermit on a lek. During our walk we saw birds including Black-crowned Antshrike, White-flanked and Dot-winged Antwren, Masked Tityra, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, and Lesser Greenlet. On the way back to the lodge for lunch we stopped to watch the White-necked Jacobin tending a nest holding tiny chicks. Some of the group relaxed on the deck outside the dining room after lunch while others took a siesta.

Later in the afternoon we took another leisurely walk around the clearing by our cabanas. As usual, we spent a lot of time by the magic tree where we again saw Golden-collared and Red-capped Manakin. We enjoyed watching and photographing an adult Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth holding a baby. Roger pointed out a Rufous-tailed Hummingbird nest in a small bush by the tower. In nearby trees we saw Black-cheeked Woodpecker, White-browed Gnatcatcher, Plain-colored Tanager, Blue Dacnis, Green Honeycreeper, and Buff-throated Saltator. Those that climbed the tower watched a steady stream of Red-lored Parrot flying by.

After another tasty dinner, some in the group headed to bed while others relaxed on the deck hoping for another Night Monkey appearance. The monkey didn't show up, but Lori, David, and Mason lucked out with another Paca near their cabana.

## **Tues., Mar. 5                      Changuinola Canal, Rio Changuinola, Isla Pajaros**

Today was an "away" day, spent cruising through the Changuinola Canal to the Rio Changuinola, followed by an "exciting" trip out to Isla Pajaros. We were joined by Jay, one of the owners of Tranquilo Bay, who piloted one of the boats. This was one of the birdiest days of the trip with 98 species recorded. On the way from Tranquilo Bay, we spotted two Parasitic Jaeger before crossing a sandbar at high tide at the canal entrance. Shortly after entering the canal, we stopped to see a Nicaraguan Seed-Finch and great looks at a Canebrake Wren. As we slowly cruised up the narrow canal, we spotted dozens of species of birds including Squirrel Cuckoo, a day roosting Short-tailed Nighthawk, Bronzy Hermit, Little Blue and Tricolored Heron, at least seven Common Black Hawk, Ringed, Amazon, and Green Kingfisher, Keel-billed Toucan, and Bright-rumped Attila. After entering the Rio Changuinola estuary, we saw dozens of Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Common and Purple Gallinule, Limpkin, White-tailed and Snail Kite, Mangrove Swallow, Eastern and Red-breasted Meadowlark, and Yellow-tailed Oriole.



After lunch, we needed to re-trace our route, hoping to cross the sandbar at the exit before the tide got too low. On the way, we stopped at the mouth of the Rio Changuinola to see a pair of Collared Plover. Then we got distracted by yet another Common Black Hawk and made stops for a bio-break and to look at a Blue-black Grosbeak. When we arrived at the canal exit, one of the two vessels in our flotilla was able to cross the sandbar but getting the second vessel across required a bit of creativity. Dick, Robert, and Mason hopped out to lighten the load. The Tranquilo Bay crew pulled out a very handy section of plastic pipe to use as a roller under the boat and attached a tow line to the other vessel. Robert and Mason helped hold the stranded vessel steady during this process

until the stranded vessel was pulled across the sandbar. Success!

The excitement didn't stop there. The last stop before returning to Tranquilo Bay was to cruise to Isla Pajaros (Bird Island), a tiny islet about ½-mile offshore from Isla Colon. The short trip turned out to be bouncy and occasionally wet due to medium-sized waves rolling in from the open ocean. Everyone did their best to hold tight until we got to the leeward side of the island and calmer seas. Despite the rougher than expected trip, many in the group thought the visit was one of the best parts of the tour. The scenery was spectacular with waves crashing on rocky shoals between two islands covered with vegetation and dotted with palms. Dozens of Red-billed Tropicbird and Magnificent Frigatebird zipped by and soared overhead. Many Brown Booby and one pair of Red-footed Booby nested on the rocks.

### **Wed., Mar. 6                      Isla Popa, Tranquilo Bay**

Following our pattern of staying closer to home after an "away" day, we took an easy morning excursion to Isla Popa and spent the afternoon around Tranquilo B

Isla Popa is the second largest island in the Bocas del Toro Archipelago, covering about 20 square miles, second to Isla Bastimentos, home of Tranquilo Bay, which covers 81 square miles. We cruised past the west side of Isla Popa several times during the trip but this was our first visit to land on the roadless island. After a quick crossing of the channel from Tranquilo Bay we entered a narrow passage between a tiny neighboring island. We enjoyed watching a local paddling a small dugout canoe, pausing regularly to bail it out as he headed down the same passage. Further down the "canal," Mason took photos of a "For Sale" sign posted in front of a modest waterfront house, imagining telling his wife Suzy about a new vacation home he bought for her impending



retirement. After reaching our destination, a small hill with another house perched on top, we unloaded and spent about two hours enjoying the birds, animals, and views. We soon found more Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs (different color morphs from others we'd seen). When the birding picked up, we had great looks at many species including a pair of Pale-billed Woodpecker, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Snowy Cotinga, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, and Golden-hooded Tanager – all new for the trip.

After returning to Tranquilo Bay for lunch, the group spent the relaxing and walking the lodge grounds, visiting the magic tree, checking on the sloths, and visiting the tower before dinner and bed.

## **Thurs., Mar. 7                      Punta Robalo, Fortuna Forest Reserve**

Laura and Dick chose to stay home and enjoy the peace and quiet at Tranquilo Bay and photograph birds, amphibians, and butterflies while the rest of us returned to the mainland for another trip up the continental divide. After the fast cruise to Punga Robalo, we made just a few quick stops on our way to the Super Centro Economico for a bio-break and saw birds including Ringed and Green Kingfisher, Baltimore Oriole, and Plain-colored Tanager.

Our next stop was the reservoir at Fortuna Forest Reserve where we spent about 45 minutes birding and enjoying the scenery. A Swallow-tailed Kite soared very low over the group, providing great photo opportunities and Blue-and-white Swallow zipped around and tended nests. We also got looks at three new birds for the trip including White-throated Thrush, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, and great looks at a Flame-colored Tanager.

We stopped again a few miles up and spent an hour birding along the road, adding new birds for the trip including Purple-throated Mountain-gem, Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, Mountain Elaenia, Mistletoe Tyrannulet, and Silver-throated Tanager, and Elegant Euphonia. We heard a Prong-billed Barbet. From there, it was just a few minutes up the roadside to a roadside restaurant where we ate lunch and added two birds common at home but new for the trip – Acorn Woodpecker and Lesser Goldfinch.

After lunch, we started to work our way back down. We stopped near where we saw the Elegant Euphonia on the way up. A Golden-olive Woodpecker made an appearance and, after a lot of work and a bit of playback, we eventually got nice looks at Northern Emerald Toucanet. Further down, we stopped again at the abandoned roadside house where at least 100 White-collared Swift zoomed high above. During a very short stop at the now familiar Super Centro Economico, thousands of vultures – a mix of Turkey and Black – streamed by. Eager to get home, we planned to zip down Camino Punta Robalo to the boats but got distracted by more birds including two new for the trip – Cinnamon Becard and Brown Jay.



After returning to Tranquilo Bay freshening up, we reunited with Laura and Dick for dinner and headed to bed early after a fun day.

## **Fri., Mar. 8**

### **Green Acres Chocolate Farm, Tranquilo Bay**

We spent our last full day before the extension closes to home. That decision turned out to be fortuitous. The weather was great for most of the trip but today we woke to cloudy skies and then rain that made the excursion to the nearby Green Acres Chocolate Farm distinctly damp. We covered up as much as possible for the boat trip across the channel and then huddled under cover hoping the rain would subside. From cover, we spotted a pair of Pied Puffbird waiting out the rain. While we waited, the owner of the chocolate farm shared the history of the place (including a project underway to build a moat to keep fire ants away from the main building) and shared tastes of various cacao treats. Eventually, some of the group ventured out in search of birds but didn't find much in the falling rain. By the time we returned to the main building the rain had abated but everyone was ready to head back toward Tranquilo Bay but not before we saw a Long-billed Hermit, our first and only for the trip.

On the way back to Tranquilo Bay, we made a stop at Johnson Cay and lucked out with great looks at Mangrove Cuckoo. There were at least four perched low above the water in their namesake trees. After lunch, some in the group saw a Gray-cowled Wood-Rail from the lodge deck while others rested up in their cabanas.

Late in the afternoon we walked the beautiful Tranquilo Bay grounds for the last time (by daylight), enjoying the now familiar birds. After dinner, we took a night walk around the grounds. Along the boardwalk on our way to the dock we saw a large scorpion – possibly a member of the Arrowbreasted family. From the dock we heard a pair of distant Mottled Owl calling from across the water. On the trails close to our cabanas we saw a Helmeted Iguana, Vaillant's Frog, Red-eyed Tree-frog, Savage's Thin-toed Frog, and a Spectacled Caiman. Nearby we saw roosting Wood Thrush, Boat-billed Flycatcher, and a Bronzy Hermit sleeping with its bill pointed skyward. With some of the group departing early for the extension to Mount Totumas and the rest heading to Panama City and home, we said quick goodbyes in the darkness before heading to bed.

## **Sat., Mar. 9**

### **Departures, Mount Totumas Cloud Forest Reserve**

Laura, Lori, David, Mason, and Roger had an early breakfast before catching a boat ride to Punta Robalo and a drive to Mount Totumas. The others slept in a bit before catching a boat back to Bocas del Toro and the short flight back to Panama City.



The first part of the drive to Mount Totumas was familiar – Camino Punta Robalo, up the Continental Divide past Palo Seco and Fortuna Forest Reserve. From there we descended toward the Pacific side before turning north and then back up into the mountains. Roger hopped off mid-way for a well-earned break and the rest of us switched the 4WD vehicle necessary to get us up to Mount Totumas. As we climbed steadily higher up steep, primitive roads, the landscape became increasingly green and treed and cool. When we reached the Mount Totumas entrance, the road was improved with parallel lines of poured concrete the width of truck tires, an impressive feat given the remote location and topography. When we reached the lodge, it was a bit like arriving at a high-altitude Eden. The lodge sits above a wide valley with mountains above. Ten species of hummingbirds zoomed around including Brown and Lesser Violetear, Magenta-throated Woodstar, Violet Sabrewing, and Talamanca, Scintillant, and Stripe-tailed Hummingbird. We could hear the sharp, metallic calls of distant Three-wattled Bellbird and the roar of Mantled Howler Monkey. After catching our breath, we sat down to a fantastic meal and slept soundly in cool mountain temperatures.

## **Sun., Mar. 10                      Mount Totumas**

Mount Totumas was founded in 2008 when two brothers purchased the land that makes up the reserve that spans 400 acres covered by old-growth cloud forest and a sustainable coffee plantation. Situated above 6000 feet, the reserve borders La Amistad International Park and is just a few miles from the border with Costa Rica. 335 species of birds, three species of monkey, Jaguar, Mountain Lion, and many other mammals, reptiles, and amphibians have been recorded there.

On our first full day we walked a small part of the 30 kilometers of trails around the property. Led by Reinaldo, the lodge guide, we started with a loop up from the lodge that passes through thick cloud forest. Soon we found Resplendent Quetzal perched up in a tree close to the trail. A few minutes later we heard several eventually got





good looks at one Three-wattled Bellbird. Other seen on the loop included Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaner, Olive-streaked Flycatcher, Eye-ringed Flatbill, Mountain Elaenia, Brow-capped Vireo, Black-faced Solitaire, Slate-throated Redstart, and Flame-colored and Silver-throated Tanager.

After lunch down to the bird blind where we watched a pair of Resplendent taking turns to carefully inspect a nest box recently placed by the lodge staff. From there we birded our way down the entrance road, adding new species for the trip including White-throated Mountain-gem, Sulphur-winged Parakeet, Dark Pewee, and Yellow-bellied Siskin.

Before heading into the lodge to relax before dinner we heard the sounds of Central American Spider Monkey across the valley.

## **Mon., Mar. 11                      Mount Totumas**

Before breakfast, a flock of Sulphur-winged Parakeet zipped over just outside the door to the dining room, a good start for the day. After breakfast, Reinaldo and Jeff, the Mount Totumas owner, drove us down the entrance road to Los Pozos Hot Springs. We birded along the streamside road where we saw nearly 50 species of birds. Highlights included White-tailed Emerald, Ruddy Woodcreeper, Torrent and Mistletoe Tyrannulet, Mountain and White-throated Thrush, amazing looks at Elegant Euphonia, several warblers including Black-and-white, Kentucky, Blackburnian, and Tropical Parula, and tanagers including Summer, Flame-colored, Gray-headed, Speckled, Golden-hooded, Bay-headed, and Silver-throated. All before lunch!

After lunch, some in our small group relaxed by the hummingbird feeders or at the bird blind. Laura came back to us with great photos of birds as well as butterflies and lizards. Later in the afternoon, Reinaldo took us out for a hike on a lovely forest loop trail. Among many other birds, we saw Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Rudy-capped Nightingale-Thrush, and Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher. Those who loitered by the blind saw others including Spotted Wood-Quail, and Chestnut-capped Brushfinch. Just before we headed back to the lodge to relax before dinner, we finally saw a Green Hermit, an elusive hummingbird that rarely visits feeders.

## **Tues., Mar. 12                      Mount Totumas**

On the last day together, we started with a visit to the blind where we saw the ever-present Common Chlorospingus, Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, and a lovely Red-tailed Squirrel looking feeding on birdseed. From there we walked a loop trail down into the valley below the lodge. The well-maintained trail passed through cloud forest mixed with plots of coffee. We walked a typical birders pace, covering a bit more than 4 miles over

almost four hours. One of the highlights of the trip was watching and listening to the beautiful call of a Black-faced Solitaire that sang for several minutes. Finding birds in the thick forest was challenging at times but we eventually saw many including Northern Emerald-Toucanet, Slaty Antwren, Red-faced Spinetail, Golden-crowned Warbler, and Yellow-faced Grassquit. Another short stop at the blind before lunch turned up a Yellow-thighed Brushfinch.

After lunch relaxed or birded on our own before returning to the loop trail that we visited the prior day. We got great looks White-throated Mountain-gem perched up in the forest, Spotted Barbtail, Ochraceous Wren, Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher, and Yellow-bellied Siskin. Just before we headed into the lodge for dinner, we paused for looks at a Bat Falcon perched high in a snag across the valley, finishing the tour on a high note.

*Photo Credits: Group, TB Lodge Staff; Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth, Laura Jelemensky; Montezuma Oropendola, Lori Miyasato; Red-capped Manakin, Mason Flint; Houses by Isla Copa, Mason Flint; Golden-collared Manakin, Lori Miyasato; White-tipped Cycadian, Mason Flint; Brown Basilisk, Mason Flint; Red-billed Tropicbird, Mason Flint; Blue Dacnis, Laura Jelemensky; Green Honeycreeper, Laura Jelemensky; Northern Emerald Toucanet, Henry Johnson; White-faced Capuchin, Kate Jackman; Tityus pachyurus Scorpion, Mason Flint; Mangrove Cuckoo, Lori Miyasato; Resplendent Quetzal, Mason Flint; Afternoon Rainbow at Mount Totumas, Mason Flint; Mexican Silverspot, Laura Jelemensky; Julia Heliconian, Laura Jelemensky; Long-tailed Silky Flycatcher, Mason Flint; Black-faced Solitaire, Mason Flint.*