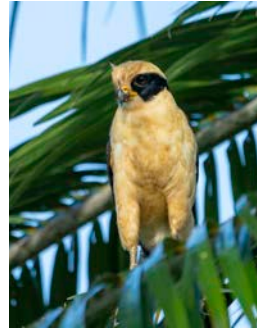
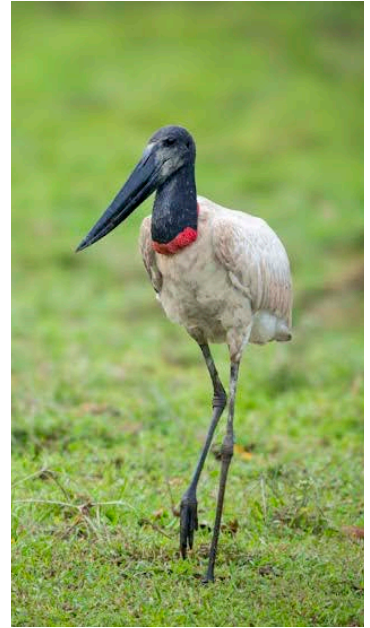


Panama: Tranquilo Bay & Mount Totumas Extension

March 1 - 12, 2025 | Trip Report | by Bryan Calk



Bryan Calk and local guides Brenda and Reinaldo, with Mary, Gay, Ann, Karen, Regina, Paul, Michael, Maleyne, Sandy, and Chauncey



Saturday, March 1 Travel to Tranquilo Bay

The day began in the hotel lobby in Panama City, where everyone gathered to catch a shuttle to Albrook Gelabert Airport. From there, a short flight led to Bocas del Toro, the capital of the province sharing its name, situated on Colón Island. A scenic and peaceful boat ride followed, carrying the group to Bastimentos Island and Tranquilo Bay— home for the next seven nights, a true luxury.

After lunch and settling into the rooms, the afternoon was spent exploring the property on a bird walk. Local guide Brenda had a keen eye, pointing out one incredible sight after another—Lesser White-lined Bats, a Spectacled Caiman, and an impressive variety of birds. Some highlights included a Band-tailed Barbthroat tending to its nest, a Purple-crowned Fairy, Tawny -crested Tanagers, Blue Dacnis, Montezuma Oropendolas soaring past at eye level from the canopy tower, and the striking Golden-collared Manakin.



Dinner provided a chance to review the day's checklist and discuss plans for tomorrow, though the conversation was delightfully interrupted. A pair of White-faced Capuchins appeared on the porch, drawn in by the promise of bananas. Later, as darkness settled over the bay, an adorable Woolly Opossum made a surprise appearance, bringing the evening to a perfect close.

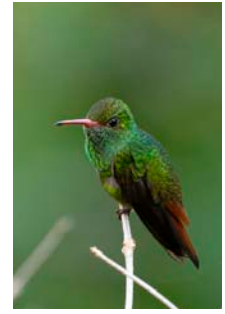
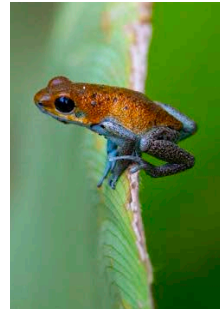
Sunday, March 2 Palo Seco | Fortuna Forest Reserve | Talamanca Mountains

The day began early with breakfast before heading to the boat dock just before sunrise. As the boat crossed Chiriquí Lagoon, the sky transformed into shades of pastel orange, pink, and powder blue. Along the way, a few coastal villages on the surrounding islands came into view. Upon landing at Punta Robalo on the mainland, the birding began almost immediately, with new species appearing left and right—flycatchers, tanagers, parrots, and pigeons among them.

Moving inland, the route passed through agricultural and wetland areas outside the village. Farmers here keep water buffalo, well-adapted to the wet conditions, wading through the muddy pastures as if swimming. Among them, Red-breasted Meadowlarks, Yellow-headed Caracaras, Pied Puffbirds, Green Ibises, and Northern Jacanas were spotted. Continuing higher into the Palo Seco and Fortuna Forest Reserve, the climb reached about 3,500 feet into the Talamanca Mountains, where the cloud forest began. Overcast skies and a cool breeze set the scene for an exciting shift in birdlife. Emerald and Speckled Tanagers, Green Thorntail, and Isthmian Wren were among the highlights, with non-avian wonders such as glass-wing butterflies feeding on mistflower and vibrant scarlet orchids along the roadside.

Descending back down, a breathtaking migration event unfolded—thousands of Turkey Vultures and several hundred Mississippi Kites swirled in a massive kettle above, journeying north from their wintering grounds in South America. Additional migrating species, including Blackburnian Warblers, Baltimore Orioles, Barn Swallows, and the elegant Swallow-tailed Kites, added to the spectacle.

By evening, the lodge came back into view, just in time for the species checklist and dinner. A long, rewarding day in the field!



Monday March 3 Isla Popa | Tranquilo Bay

After breakfast, the day's adventure began aboard a two-level pontoon boat, cruising toward Isla Popa while birding along the way. Each island in this archipelago separated from the mainland at different times, creating unique species distributions. This became immediately apparent at the first stop, where Pale-billed Woodpeckers and Purple-throated Fruitcrows—species absent from Bastimentos Island—were observed.

The waters below held their own treasures: starfish, jellies, and even dolphins appeared alongside an incredible array of birds. The highly anticipated Snowy Cotinga made a dazzling appearance, alongside a delightfully visible Mangrove Cuckoo, Mangrove Yellow Warblers, and an American Pygmy Kingfisher.

A boardwalk landing led onto the island, where shoes were disinfected before stepping onto the forest trail. Along the path, pineapples grew, and small mixed flocks included Brown-capped Tyrannulet. While exploring a nearby ravine, Brenda and Alvaro carefully returned with folded leaves, each cradling a Strawberry Poison Dart Frog. The island's diversity of color morphs was remarkable—greens, blues, browns, and reds all present. Other frog and toad species added to the excitement.

The afternoon was spent at leisure back at the lodge. Some snorkeled along the reef near the dock, discovering a vibrant underwater world of fish, corals, sea cucumbers, and marine worms. Others kayaked through the mangroves, uncovering their own discoveries. As evening approached, a short walk through the gardens revealed Lineated Woodpecker, White-crowned Pigeons, and dazzling Green Honeycreepers.

Dinner brought another delicious meal and the nightly species checklist—plus another visit from the endearing Woolly Opossum!

Tuesday, March 4 Snyder Canal | Changuinola River | Bird Island

Before dawn, breakfast fueled a long day of exploration. The boats departed northward as the sun rose over the water, setting the scene for a journey into the historic Snyder Canal. Originally dug in the late 1800s as a trade route for bananas, the canal was later abandoned in favor of railroads. Today, it serves as a peaceful corridor for wildlife and wildlife watchers alike.



The first stop, a small open area at the canal's edge, immediately yielded exciting finds—Nicaraguan Seed-Finch, Black-cowled Oriole, and Olive-crowned Yellowthroat. As the boat continued, additional sightings included Bright-rumped Attila, Streak-headed Woodcreepers, roosting Short-tailed Nighthawks, and even an Emerald Basilisk. Another landing provided a closer look at more Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs, this time in striking red with bluish legs. The double-decker boat offered excellent viewing opportunities, with shaded seating on the lower deck making for a comfortable ride.

At the canal's end, the journey continued up the Changuinola River, scanning the exposed mudflats and riverbanks. Pinnated Bit tern played hide-and-seek, while Snail Kites, Limpkins, and Gallinules actively foraged. Local families fished from traditional cayuco boats, some using goggles and spears. A break onshore for lunch under towering trees brought additional birding rewards—multiple Gartered Trogons, Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher, and a mix of neotropical migrant s.

Retracing the route, a distant Three-wattled Bellbird called before the journey shifted toward the open sea. Smaller boats carried the group toward Bird Island, home to Panama's only nesting colony of Red-billed Tropicbirds. These graceful birds floated effortlessly around the dramatic cliffs, occasionally disappearing into rocky crevices where their nests lay hidden. Brown Boobies and Magnificent Frigatebirds added to the spectacle, with comical, fluffy baby boobies and a male Frigatebird inflating his scarlet throat pouch in a dramatic display.

As the trip wound to a close, the return journey to the lodge brought time to reflect on an extraordinary day. Our checklist session was followed by another wonderful meal, marking the end of an unforgettable adventure.

Wednesday, March 5 Tierra Oscura | Buena Esperanza | Tranquilo Bay

Does sunrise on a boat ever get old? Not yet! The journey led back to the mainland today, exploring coastal foothills along two quiet roads, Tierra Oscura and Buena Esperanza. Winding through lush, steep jungle, the route initially seemed familiar but soon revealed the remarkable diversity hidden in even the slightest environmental changes.



Several well-chosen stops along the road provided excellent sightings. A Long-tailed Tyrant appeared early on, only almost upstaged by a pair of Masked Tityras investigating a nest hole across the street. The tiny Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, one of the smallest songbirds in the world, flitted from branch to branch, its insect-like call adding to the morning chorus. Overhead, Purple-throated Fruitcrows displayed their impressive ruffs while Black-chested Jays darted back and forth. Meanwhile, Brenda and Alvaro wandered into the jungle and returned once again with folded leaves cradling two stunning treasures: a cobalt-blue variant of the Strawberry Poison Dart Frog and the psychedelically patterned Green-and-Black Poison Dart Frog.

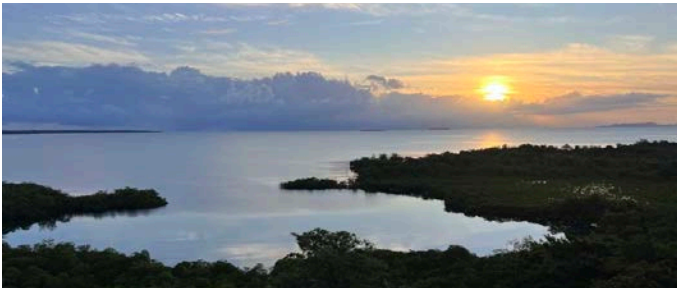
After a quick snack and cold drinks in the van, the adventure continued. Chestnut-headed and Montezuma Oropendolas, along with Keel-billed Toucans, zipped through the canopy. A Bat Falcon surveyed its domain from a distant snag, while a White-tailed Trogon offered perfect scope views from the canopy. Overhead, a King Vulture circled gracefully among a kettle of Turkey and Black Vultures, offering exceptional views. Eventually, the group returned to the dock for a boat ride back to the lodge for lunch.

The afternoon offered free time to choose activities. Some opted for snorkeling at a different reef we visited by boat, where Brenda pointed out the dazzling marine life—corals, sponges, sea cucumbers, and a kaleidoscope of fish. Others spent time kayaking or photographing manakins and butterflies in the gardens.

After dinner, a night walk provided glimpses of nocturnal creatures. A Mottled Owl called in the darkness, a Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth snoozed in the trees, and a massive Savage's Bullfrog lurked nearby. An Ochre-bellied Flycatcher was found roosting, adding to the list of remarkable nighttime discoveries.

Thursday, March 6 Continental Divide | Fortuna Forest Reserve | Palo Seco | Valle de la Mina

The day began at Punta Robalo before dawn, followed by a drive up the mountain to bird the cloud forests of Palo Seco and Fortuna during the prime morning hours. Early highlights included a beautifully perched White Hawk, a Bay-headed Tanager, and a Squirrel Cuckoo. Revisiting a few previous stops at a different time of day revealed new species, including the uncommon Azure-hooded Jays, along with Golden-bellied Flycatchers, Black-thighed Grosbeak, and Slate-throated Redstarts. The trees dripped with bromeliads and lichens, adding to the enchanted cloud forest atmosphere.



Lunch featured a local restaurant with homemade desserts and a sweeping view of the Pacific slope of the Talamanca Mountains. A local coffee grower shared his bird-friendly beans, available for sampling and purchase. Meanwhile, Acorn and Red-crowned Woodpeckers moved through the trees, and further up the road, a Lesson's Motmot and a pair of Hepatic Tanagers made an appearance.

At one final roadside stop, an incredible mixed flock provided a spectacle of color. Northern Emerald Toucanets moved energetically through the canopy, competing with Elegant Euphonias for attention. Observing the euphonia's unique method of seed dispersal—mistletoe berries passed through their digestive system, emerging as a string of pearls hanging from branches—was an unexpected highlight. Scarlet-thighed Dacnises flashed their turquoise e-and-black plumage, and a stunning orange-bellied Collared Trogon rounded out the experience.

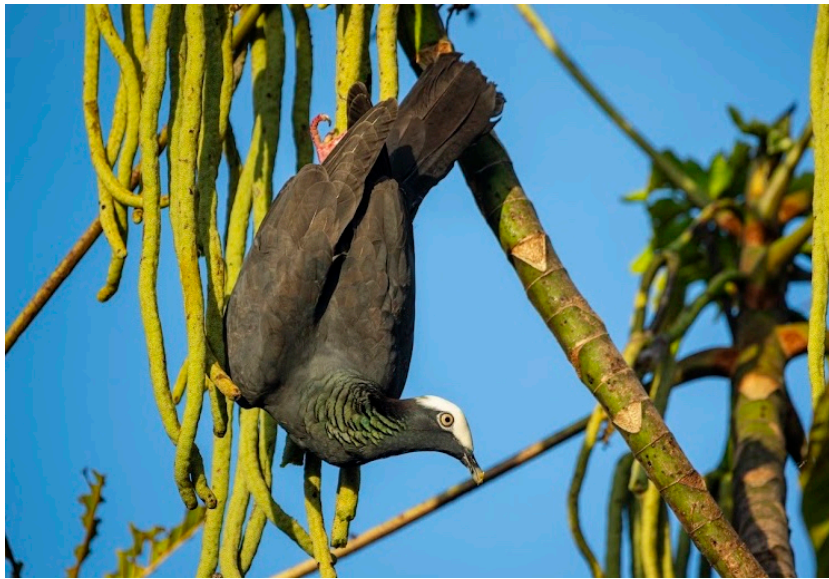
Heading back down the Caribbean slope, a quick visit to a local supermarket provided an opportunity to pick up a few goods before returning to the boats and making the journey back to the lodge.

Friday, March 7 Tranquilo Bay | Hummingbird Pools | Kayaking Jellyfish Lagoon | Night Walk

The morning started atop the canopy tower just before sunrise, the tranquil waters below reflecting the changing hues of the sky. Montezuma Oropendolas passed in waves, while small flocks of parrots flew overhead. White-crowned Pigeons fed in a nearby cecropia tree, and a Black-crowned Antshrike made a dramatic appearance, its entire body trembling as it called.

After breakfast, a short walk led to a freshwater creek where various birds bathe. Along the way, Chestnut-backed Antbirds skulked in the undergrowth, and Brenda shared fascinating insights into White-tipped Cycadian's life cycle, and the antbirds' use of mycelium as a natural pesticide in their nests. At the pools, patience paid off with visits from Crowned Woodnymphs, Stripe-throated Hermits, a Band-tailed Barbthroat, and a Golden-collared Manakin. Between bird sightings, two anole species kept things entertaining.

Following lunch and a midday break, some chose to kayak through the mangroves to Jellyfish Lagoon, learning about the two species of upside-down jellies that inhabit the area. The peaceful paddle also offered sightings of a southern stingray and a quick swim-by of a spotted eagle ray.



After another delicious dinner, a final night walk provided an unforgettable night walk experience. Under a UV black light, scorpions, harvestmen, sea anemones, and brain corals glowed neon. A Common Blunt-headed Vine Snake rested impossibly still, draped over a twig. Along the mangrove boardwalk, bioluminescent aquatic worms flashed like tiny stars in response to our footsteps. Red-eyed Treefrogs and a Vaillant's Frog allowed for close study, while a Bananaquit slept soundly in its nest. The Mottled Owl called from the canopy, marking the end of our final night at Tranquilo Bay.

Saturday, March 8 Departures from Tranquilo Bay | Extension to Mt. Totumas Begins

With the week at Tranquilo Bay coming to an end, heartfelt goodbyes were exchanged with the incredible staff and guides who had made the experience so special. One last boat ride to Bocas del Toro, followed by a short flight to Panama City, marked the transition to the next adventure or the journey home.

For those continuing on the Mt. Totumas extension, an early departure from the lodge by boat led back to Punta Robalo, where the ascent into the mountains began. A late lunch at the lodge was followed by an afternoon spent watching feeders bustling with activity. Hummingbirds of all sizes and colors zipped between flowers, while tanagers, grosbeaks, and sparrows hopped from bush to banana. The evening wrapped up with a cool mountain breeze and a warm dinner and the anticipation of new discoveries ahead.

Sunday, March 9 Mount Totumas

The entire day was spent exploring the grounds surrounding the lodge. Right after breakfast, local guide Reinaldo led a birding session from the deck, where Violet Sabrewings and Talamanca Hummingbirds fiercely defended the feeders. Flame-colored Tanagers, Chestnut-capped Brushfinches, and Buff-throated Saltators feasted on bananas. In the distance, a troop of Mantled Howler Monkeys lounged in the treetops while Central American Spider Monkeys moved through the same canopy.

A short walk down the trail revealed areas soon to be planted with coffee, currently occupied by nitrogen-fixing red beans. Among the young geisha coffee plants—renowned for their top-shelf quality—Brown Jays flew up the valley, a rare sight at this elevation. The garden pathways yielded an ever-growing list of species.



Near one of the lodging buildings, beautifully crafted nest boxes had been installed to attract Resplendent Quetzals. For tune smiled as a pair chose the box closest to the building, perfectly visible. The male and female perched nearby, seemingly indifferent to observers standing just 15 yards away. While waiting under an awning, mist from the cloud forest set the mood while the female entered the nest box, lingered, then re-emerged. The male followed, his long, streaming tail rippling like ribbons. Rather than retreating, the quetzals edged even closer to us for, frankly, just stupidly exceptional views. Eventually, attention shifted to other highlights, including Yellow-bellied Siskins and regional endemic Golden-browed Chlorophonia and Slaty Flowerpiercers.

After a break for lunch and rest, an afternoon walk led to a mixed flock at the forest's edge. Migratory warblers such as Blackburnian and Tennessee mingled with tropical residents like the Red-faced Spinetail. From a distant ridge, a Three-wattled Bellbird's resonant call echoed as Broad-winged Hawks soared overhead. A Scintillant Hummingbird had built a nest on a gravel bank beside the road, while Northern Emerald Toucanets made a striking appearance. Over dinner, the extensive checklist was reviewed, packed with highlights from a day spent exploring on foot and watching the feeders.

Monday, March 10 Mount Totumas | Lower Elevations | Big Tree Loop

The morning was spent birding along the main road, descending several hundred meters in elevation. Almost immediately, a remarkable sighting of three Chiriqui Quail-Doves along the roadside set the tone for an exciting day. At a river crossing, an American Dipper and a Torrent Tyrannulet preened on sunlit rocks. The lower elevations, shaded by the hillside, provided an ideal habitat for diverse species and pleasant birding conditions. A pair of Barred Becards busily built a nest, but further down the road lay the true hotspot—a mixed flock swarming around fruiting trees and mistletoe. Heart-stopping views of Elegant Euphonias kept coming, Red-headed Barbets dazzled with their colors, but an unexpected cattle drive of dairy cows briefly interrupted the action before the birding resumed. Warblers moved from tree to tree, while White-winged, Speckled, and Bay-headed Tanagers made appearances. Rufous-breasted Wrens called from the tangles, eventually emerging for a clear view.

Back at the lodge for lunch—traditional Panamanian chicken guisado with rice and beans—an afternoon break provided a chance to recharge. The search then resumed for the lodge's mascot, the Three-wattled Bellbird. Along the trail, their impossibly loud and mechanical calls reverberated through the forest canopy as they formed their "exploded lek." Females moved about, assessing which male had the most impressive wattles and



song. Reinaldo's sharp eye located several males and a female, offering excellent scope views. Other sightings included a Spot-crowned Woodcreeper bringing its young a cicada, a red-bellied Collared Trogon calling from the canopy, and an ancient 400-year-old oak towering over the secondary forest. The evening concluded with a delicious Italian dinner and another rewarding checklist review.

Tuesday, March 11 Mount Totumas | Roble Trail

The morning began with another visit to the Quetzal nest site—an irresistible sight—followed by breakfast and a scope view of a Bat Falcon. The next destination was higher elevation birding along the Roble Trail. The leisurely ascent was filled with the calls of bellbirds, mixed flocks, and the lush greenery of ferns and towering oaks. Along the way, workers harvested coffee and red beans. The dense cloud forest revealed more regional endemics, including a cooperative Streak-breasted Treehunter, a high-canopy Flame-throated Warbler, and a pair of Black-faced Solitaires. Upon returning to the lodge, the male Quetzal made one final, stunning appearance as a Red-tailed Squirrel enjoyed a snack at the feeding station—an apt reminder that it was time for our own lunch.

The afternoon walk led up a narrow hillside path, culminating in a breathtaking panoramic view of the valley, framed by rolling clouds and golden sunlight. From this vantage point, the sheer scale of Mount Totumas and the Continental Divide came into perspective. Continuing down the trail, a narrow corridor of dense forest provided shelter and a highway for diverse birdlife. A Lesson's Motmot sang its characteristic "mot mot" call while offering excellent views. A productive mixed flock yielded Reinaldo's second-ever Ovenbird, along with Golden-crowned and Wilson's Warblers. A Ruddy Woodcreeper moved deftly from trunk to trunk, and a Scintillant Hummingbird nest blended seamlessly into the dirt bank. The coffee drying process in a large greenhouse was a fascinating sight, as were the sacks of beans undergoing natural cold fermentation in the flow of mountain streams.

The final evening at the lodge was spent reminiscing over dinner, sharing favorite moments, and reluctantly acknowledging that departure was imminent.



Wednesday, March 12 Departures

Before dawn, the journey down the mountain began, leading to David for the flight back to Panama City. Goodbyes were exchanged as we set off on our separate ways, leaving behind the breathtaking landscapes and unforgettable encounters with Panama's extraordinary wildlife, scenery, and people.

Photos: Group (BC), Jabiru (BC), Resplendent Quetzal (BC), Violet Sabrewing (BC), Laughing Falcon (BC), Emerald Basilisk (BC), Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (BC), Derby's Woolly Opossum (BC), Boat (BC), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (BC), Strawberry Poison Dart Frog (BC), Montezuma Oropendola (BC), White-faced Capuchin (BC), Red-billed Tropicbird (BC), Red-capped Manakin (BC), Green-and-Black Poison Dart Frog (BC), Boat ride (BC), Golden-collared Manakin (BC), Swallow-tailed Kite (BC), Northern Emerald Toucanet (BC), Northern Emerald Toucanet (BC), White-crowned Pigeon (BC), Black-cheeked Woodpecker (BC), Red-eyed Treefrog (BC), Group boat ride (BC), Jabiru (BC), Summer Tanager (BC), Silver-throated Tanager (BC), Resplendent Quetzal (BC), Flame-colored Tanager (BC), Talamanca Hummingbird (BC), Scarlet-thighed Dacnis (BC), Sunset (BC)