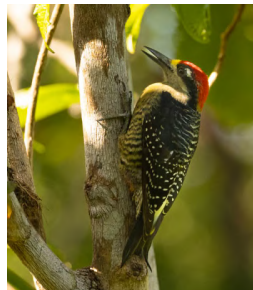


# Western Panama: Tranquilo Bay | February 8-15, 2025 | Trip Report | by Rick Weiman



**With host Rick Weiman and local guide Brenda Sanchez, and participants: Linda, Don, Cassandra, Donna, Keith, Julie, Lorna, Brett, Debbie, Bill and Pauline**



## **Saturday, February 8: Welcome to Tranquilo Bay**

The group met for the first time in the lobby after breakfast at the Radisson Panama Canal hotel, directly across the street from the Panama Canal. The 45-minute flight from Panama City to Boca del Toro on Air Panama was on time and provided us beautiful views of the Caribbean Sea and the many islands off the Panama shore. Once at the docks, we then boarded 2 small boats for our half-hour ride to the Tranquilo Bay Eco Adventure Lodge on the island of Bastimentos, our one-stop home for the next 7 days. The water was calm and the boats were swift as they effortlessly glided through the aquamarine-colored waters. Along the way, we spotted several soaring magnificent Frigatebirds and a few Brown Pelicans.



Upon our arrival at Tranquilo Bay, we were met by Jay, one of the owners, who led us along the boardwalk trail through the mangroves to the main lodge. Upon our arrival we met Brenda Sanchez, our local guide for the week, and before we even had time to absorb our surroundings, Brenda heard a calling and then spotted a Black Hawk-eagle soaring over the mangroves. We then birded on the veranda deck of the lodge for a bit until lunch was ready. The lodge has banana feeders and hummingbird feeders to attract the birds from the surrounding forest. Tennessee and Prothonotary Warblers and Bananaquits were the most common birds feeding on the bananas. A male Shining Honeycreeper flew in as did a Blue-gray Tanager and some of us saw a Black-cheeked Woodpecker. Brenda identified a Crab-eating Raccoon eating a large jagua fruit high in a tree in front of the deck. We had a brief orientation by Renee, one of the lodge co-owners, and then we enjoyed some homemade pizza and a garden salad in the lodge's dining room. After lunch, we were led to our spacious cabins and had time to rest, swim, shower, or bird on our own before our scheduled late afternoon walk around the garden trails.

Around 3:00, we met up again with Brenda and she led us on a walk on the property. At Rick's cabin, she pointed out several small Lesser Sac-winged Bats roosting on the stucco and under the wooden eaves. Our next exciting find was another mammal, our first Brown-throated Sloth of the trip. We then approached a large Miconia bush with purple berries and had nice looks at several Golden-collared Manakins and a small flock of Tawny-crested Tanagers, with the orange crests of several of the males simply glowing in the late afternoon sunshine. We then climbed the 100-foot tower that overlooks the bay and the garden and witnessed Blue-headed Parrots and Red-lored Amazons flying by us to roost for the night. Other birds spotted were several Montezuma Oropendolas, and a pair of Masked and Black-crowned Tityras.

Around 6:15 we met at the lodge dining area and bar for welcome drinks, group introductions, and a deliciously prepared fresh ceviche appetizer tray with dried plantain chips. Afterwards, we completed our first species checklist of the trip; a nightly pattern we would follow throughout the tour. Dinner was then served with black-bean soup, fresh pork ribs and chicken with local vegetables. Prior to heading off to the cabins, we were visited on the veranda by two Derby's Woolly Opossums and some fruit bats who were also fond of the free bananas. Some of us were lucky enough to hear the calls of a Mottled Owl and a Black-and-white Owl as we walked on the paved trails through the forest by flashlight back to our cabins.





## Sunday, February 9: Punta Róbal Road | Palo Seco Protection Forest | Continental Divide

We had an early breakfast today before we boarded the boats by 6:15 to depart for the mainland at Punta Róbal. As we walked the boardwalk trail to the dock in the early morning light, a Grey-cowled Wood-Rail could be heard calling from the mangroves. During the boat ride, several flocks of approximately forty Whimbrel passed us, streaming by low over the water. We added a Belted Kingfisher, a pair of Crested Caracaras, and Spotted Sandpipers to our list before reaching the mainland dock. At the dock, we counted a dozen Royal Terns on the piers along with a few Laughing Gulls.

There was a single bathroom owned by a generous local that we were allowed to use before boarding our spacious bus, and as we waited our turn, many birds showed up to keep us busy. We added Summer Tanager, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern Tropical Pewee, and Red-legged Honeycreeper, to name just a few. We later dubbed this spot the “magic bathroom” and were in favor of supporting it to be an eBird hotspot. After our productive bathroom break, we climbed into our coaster bus to explore the road from Punta Róbal inland, which winds through coastal wetland and low elevation forest habitats. Our birding method was to drive and stop intermittently and then walk the road for several hundred yards and then get back in the vehicles and drive to our next stop. In a few hours of birding, we’d tallied a Gray-headed Chachalaca, a Buff-throated Saltator, several Yellow-headed Caracaras, an Olive-crowned Yellowthroat, and nice frontal looks at some Red-breasted Meadowlarks. As we approached some wet areas filled with Water Buffalo and Western Cattle-egrets, we added Common and Purple Gallinule, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, several herons and egrets, Groove-billed Anis, and a bathing Solitary Sandpiper.

From sea level we then headed to higher elevations with our first stop being a bridge named after a local naturalist, Willy Mazu. Here, we had distant looks at a Torrent Tyrannulet feeding in the stream below as well as a flycatching Black Phoebe. We continued our elevation climb, finally reaching 3800 feet in the Palo Seco Protection Forest at the continental divide. Our driver and Joel from Tranquilo Bay spread out chairs for us to enjoy lunch on the shoulder of the road in the preserve and in the 45 minutes we were there only one other car went by. A cloudy mist started to filter through the forest, so the birding was slow, but we did spot a flock of Common Chlorospingus, a Slaty-capped Flycatcher, and we heard a singing Slate-throated Redstart. We made a bathroom stop at the Fortuna Dam and Reservoir and, as was becoming typical in our morning bathroom breaks, it was very productive. We had really nice views of a brilliant orange Flame-colored Tanager as well as Scarlet-rumped, Blue-gray, and Palm Tanagers. Also observed were several Thick-billed Euphonias, Blue-and-white



Swallows flying alongside Gray-breasted Martins, and a Tropical Parula. Brenda heard the call of an Isthmian Wren as it answered her recording, but stubbornly refused to show itself. Then, it was back to the boats for our trip back to the lodge followed by a rest, our checklist over fresh vegetable and salmon appetizers and of course some cocktails. Dinner was a delicious shrimp and lemon pasta with freshly steamed broccoli and chocolate pecan pie for dessert. It was Super Bowl Sunday, so Bill was able to connect his laptop to the TV in the dining hall so a few of us could watch his Philadelphia Eagles demolish the Kansas City Chiefs 40-22 in a one-sided contest. Fly Eagles Fly!

## **Monday, February 10: Isla Popa | Tranquilo Bay**

After our breakfast buffet, we marched on down to the dock and boarded the lodge's brand-new pontoon boat for a 10-minute boat trip to nearby Isla Popa. Along the way, we spotted a perched Green Ibis and heard others calling nearby. The pontoon boat has an upper and lower deck for optimum viewing opportunities. Isla Popa is much closer to the mainland than Bastimentos Island, so birds not present on Tranquilo Bay can be found here, such as toucans, woodcreepers, and trogons. One of our first birds of the morning was a Yellow-throated Toucan perched high in the tallest tree in the forest behind the mangroves. It was soon joined by three more and then several Keel-billed Toucans flew in. Not a bad start to our birding morning. We passed a perched Merlin as two Ringed Kingfishers burst out of the mangroves with their loud-rattle call. A Pale-billed Woodpecker called and was then exposed on a large dead tree as it searched for grubs and beetles. Most of the morning was spent leisurely birding by boat on the calm waters of the Popa Canal around the island and the surrounding forest of Red Mangroves. We had distant looks at a male Snowy Cotinga and a very cooperative male Yellow Warbler (Mangrove race), with its bright reddish-brown head. Brenda played a Mangrove Cuckoo call and soon our captain, Joel, had one in sight. With some expert maneuvering of the boat by Joel, we all got good looks of this striking bird hidden among the mangrove leaves. A Bright-rumped Attila called and quickly responded to our playback and perched into view for most of us to see. We then took a walk on the island up to an overlook owned by a local named Diego and birded for a bit, finding a Slaty-tailed Trogon, two Common Black Hawks, a Collared Aracari, and had better looks through the scope of a male Snowy Cotinga. Brenda and Joel climbed down a ravine that was a bit too slippery for the group and returned with several Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs with different coloration patterns and a small Striped Rocket Frog. We reluctantly had to return to the boat and head back to the lodge, but not before a Green Kingfisher, a Double-toothed Kite, and a dark morph Short-Tailed Hawk were added to our list.





We had lunch at the lodge and had the afternoon free to relax and explore the island. Cassandra, Linda, Don, Brett, Debbie and Donna opted for the inviting, warm and clear Tranquilo Bay water and spent several hours with Rick and Brenda snorkeling and kayaking near the dock area and the surrounding mangroves. The rest of the group relaxed at the bird feeders or in their air-conditioned cabins catching up on picture downloading or taking a siesta. Around 4:30 most of the group met up with Rick and Brenda with the plan to climb the tower for the daily parrot and oropendola roost fly-in. That plan never happened because we never got past the large miconia bush near the cabins; also called the magic tree by the local guides due to its high level of bird activity as they feed on its small purple berries. We enjoyed wonderful views of displaying and feeding male and female Golden-collared and Red-capped Manakins, several Blue Dacnis, a pair of White-browed Gnatcatchers, and a Blue-throated Goldentail feeding on the garden flowers. We were also able to watch the parrots and oropendolas as they flew over our heads in a constant stream heading towards their jungle roost.

After our successful afternoon garden birding, we met at the dining area for appetizers, cocktails, completing our growing checklist, and another delicious dinner. We had been hearing a Mottled Owl call every night as we walked back to our cabins, so we took a short night walk with Brenda to try and find it. It answered her playback call but never came close enough to view it. During the walk we found a sleeping Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and a dozing Crowned Woodnymph, and heard the somewhat amusing call of a distant Common Potoo.

## **Tuesday, February 11: Snyder Canal | Changuinola River | Bird Island**

Another early breakfast, then we departed for excursion by boat to the Changuinola Canal (known locally as the Snyder Canal). After loading everyone into our two boats, we headed towards Isla Colón during a beautiful sunrise and about 40 minutes later, entered the Snyder Canal. We then docked next to the lodge's new double-decker pontoon boat which had been piloted out to the canal the evening before, and we climbed aboard. The canal was constructed in the late 1800's for local banana and fruit exporters as it provided a shortcut for boats between the Changuinola River and the old port of Almirante. The 7-mile canal is fairly narrow with jungle and fields on both sides, and now remains open due to natural tidal flow. As we entered the canal, a Belted Kingfisher flew by; the first of five different kingfishers we would see today. The others were Ringed, Green, American Pygmy, and Amazon Kingfisher. After a short ride up the canal, we grounded the boat and scanned a



field for the regionally endemic Nicaraguan Seed-finch and we all were rewarded with good looks at the thick bill of a cooperative perched male through the scopes. Other birds out of the 49 species seen or heard in the canal were Scarlet-rumped, Golden-hooded, and Blue-Gray Tanagers, a Squirrel Cuckoo, a large flock of Olive-throated Parakeets, and a tiny Brown-capped Tyrannulet. As Rick spotted a colorful Gray-cowled Wood-Rail on a log, those on the top deck almost had to duck as we passed under a hanging Brown-throated Sloth in a Cecropia tree. We soon entered the main channel of the Changuinola River and began our slow journey upriver, scanning the mudflats. We spotted some Blue-winged Teals and 40 Black-bellied Whistling Ducks along the shore next to some Black-necked Stilts, and a Greater Yellowlegs. Common and Purple Gallinules were seen, as was a secretive Pinnated Bittern, and we all got good looks at his neck and head as he slinked through the tall grass. Other birds observed were several Limpkins and Snail Kites, many Northern Jacanas and Neotropic Cormorants, several Osprey, and a multitude of different herons and egrets. Around noon, we tied up the boats and a filling picnic lunch was set up for us as we dined on the lower deck of the boat in the shade of an enormous Ficus tree along the riverbank. After lunch, we walked the beach by the river's mouth to the sea and spotted a Collared Plover, a Spotted Sandpiper, and a dozen Snowy Egrets hunting by the tide line.

We then returned to the canal to get back on the smaller boats, but not before stopping to find several Three-wattled Bellbirds and making Brett's day, as this was a target bird for him and also a lifer. Once we transferred back to the two smaller boats, we headed out into the sea towards Swan's Caye, otherwise known as Bird Island. There were large swells in the sea and the ride was a bit rough, but once we were close to the island it was well worth it. Like a scene from Jurassic Park, the island was lush and green with massive rock outcroppings spiraling upward and cave-like openings in the rock walls. Here, at least fifty Red-billed Tropicbirds flew in circles around the island; their only nesting site in all of Panama. They were joined by Brown Boobies and Magnificent Frigatebirds that also nested on the island. We watched in awe as the birds circled overhead and landed occasionally on their island roosts and nests. Despite the rough seas, Bill was able to capture some nice photos of the tropicbirds that hopefully make it into this report.

After our long but rewarding day on the water, we returned back to the lodge to relax with a few pitchers of freshly made red sangria, followed by our species checklist and another wonderful dinner.





## **Wednesday, February 12: Tierra Oscura | Buena Esperanza | Tranquilo Bay | Snorkel Trip**

After another delicious buffet style breakfast, the group met at the dock for a short 15-minute boat ride to the mainland to get in a comfortable large van that would take us roadside birding in the Tierra Oscura (Dark Forest) area. Our first location near a forested wetland was non-stop bird action starting with a woodcreeper show. We quickly added four woodcreeper species including Plain-brown, Northern Barred, Cocoa, and Streak-headed. We also had nice looks at perched Blue-headed Parrots and Mealy Amazons, a Lineated Woodpecker, Black-chested Jay, our first Chestnut-headed Oropendolas, a Cinnamon Becard, and one of Lorna's target birds, a Pied Puffbird. In total we observed 24 species here.

Our next two stops in the Tierra Oscura and Buena Esperanza areas were also fruitful as we added White-tailed and Gartered Trogons thanks to the tireless searching efforts of Joel and Brenda. We also had great looks at a pair of Dot-winged Antwrens. In just one large tree along the route, we had 8 toucans of both species, and also spotted a Piratic Flycatcher and Golden-hooded and Dusky-faced Tanagers. During our final stop, we heard Mantled Howler Monkeys calling and then were able to get scope views of the troop climbing through the forest. We had lunch back at the lodge and then had the afternoon off. Six of us went on a snorkel trip with Joel and Brenda to a reef about a 10-minute boat ride away. Colorful fish were everywhere, including wrasses, small snappers, butterfly and angel fish, including a pair of large Gray Angelfish. A 5-foot-long nurse shark swam under us, giving us a thrill, and there were also many healthy brain corals, sea fans, anemones, sponges, and different species of small jellyfish. In the late afternoon, several of the group joined Rick and Brenda and birded the gardens again and climbed up the viewing tower and platform that overlooked the bay to end another exciting day at Tranquilo Bay. We added a Northern Waterthrush and a perched Purple-crowned Fairy to our list along with 14 other previously seen species of birds. During the garden walk to the tower, we also found six Brown-throated Sloths in various trees, munching on Cecropia leaves.

It was back to the lodge around 6:00 for some cocktails and appetizers, our checklist and another enjoyable dinner. Brett reported he had come across a large Nine-banded Armadillo on the trail on the way to the lodge, one more to add to the mammal list!



## **Thursday, February 13: Punta Róbalo Road | Fortuna Forest Reserve | Palo Seco Protection Forest**

We enjoyed another early buffet-style breakfast today with lots of fresh local fruit and freshly squeezed juice selections. Our plan was to depart once again by boat for the mainland at Punta Róbalo and this time continue up in elevation until we reached the Fortuna Forest Reserve on the Pacific side of the continental divide. Of course, we had to stop on Punta Róbalo Road and visit the “magic” bathroom again. We added Black-striped Sparrow to our bird list and saw several Morelet’s and Variable Seedeaters, as well as another Red-legged Honeycreeper and a Southern House Wren. As we drove, we scanned the fields and wetlands and had more nice looks at several Red-breasted Meadowlarks and a Yellow-headed Caracara in the middle of the road that the bus almost had to stop for.

As we drove higher in elevation, we stopped along the road in the Palo Seco Protection Forest and focused on a mixed flock in a large tree. We found another Cinnamon Becard, a Clay-colored Thrush, some Sulphur-winged Parakeets and another of Brett’s target birds, a beautiful Speckled Tanager. We added more Dusky-faced, Blue-gray, Golden-hooded, and Palm Tanagers as well. A stop further down the road to scan the skies for a large raptor seen through the bus window rewarded us with a pair of Barred Hawks that circled over us and then actually perched in separate trees close enough for us to get fantastic scope looks. We then visited the Caribbean side of the continental divide in the same area we had had lunch on day two. This time we had clear skies and better bird luck as we found a pair of Ruddy Pigeons, a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, a Golden-bellied Flycatcher, a singing Black-faced Solitaire, a Blackburnian Warbler, and several others, including good looks this time at a Slate-throated Redstart.

Once we crossed the divide, we stopped in an area where several bushes had red trumpet shaped flowers favored by the local hummingbirds. We added three new species on the flowers which included a female Snowcap, a White-bellied Mountain-gem, and a Green-crowned Brilliant, with a few Crowned Woodnymphs as well.

We made a lunch stop at a restaurant in the Hornito area which overlooked a pine forest valley. As most of us ate our lunch, luckily for us Cassandra was busy spotting birds and found a small mixed flock consisting of a Black-and-White, Black-throated Green, Wilson’s, and Chestnut-capped Warblers, doubling our warbler count for the





tour. We also added several Lesser Goldfinches, two Short-tailed Hawks, and a pair of nest-building Acorn Woodpeckers. After lunch, a nice man and shade-grown coffee producer named Don Kune arrived and we sampled his medium roast coffee, took some pictures with him, and of course purchased some bags of his delicious product whose label had his picture on it.

We made one last stop a short distance from the restaurant and as we got out of the bus, Brenda excitedly set up the scope so we could all get a fantastic view of a perched White Hawk. Wow, what a stunning bird. As the hawk called from its perch, we had a pair of Flame-colored Tanagers and added two other new birds that included a pair of Red-crowned Woodpeckers and a White-throated Thrush.

After a bathroom stop at the Fortuna Dam, we added Barn and Southern Rough-winged Swallows to our list, then it was back to the lodge by boat. We had time for showers and a short rest before enjoying cocktails accompanied by a mushroom and caramelized onion toast appetizer as we went over our checklist. We enjoyed a baked chicken dinner and homemade chocolate ice cream for dessert before heading back to our cabins for the night as our Mottled Owl friend called to us along the trails.

## Friday, February 14: Tranquilo Bay Trails

Today we had the whole day to relax on the island and explore the trail system at Tranquilo Bay. Most of the group met at the tower before breakfast at 6:30 and spent an hour enjoying the over 75 mixed Red-lored and Mealy Amazons, and Blue-headed Parrots flew past us at eye-level towards the surrounding forest to forage for the day. From the tower we also had good views of a male Blue Dacnis and Shining Honeycreeper that were both also at eye-level, a pair of Common Black Hawks, and at least a dozen Montezuma Oropendolas. It was early enough that nightjars were still active and Brenda was able to call in a Short-tailed Nighthawk that then circled the tower below us. After breakfast, the group took a walk on the lodge trails with Rick and Brenda. At our first stop, we found a Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth taking a siesta in a bush about five feet off the ground. Cassandra found a Chestnut-backed Antbird and we watched a Band-tailed Barbthroat gathering nesting material. We then filtered down to an area by a creek that formed a bathing pool at the creek's bend. There were logs and chairs to sit on and we soon had close looks of a Crowned Woodnymph and a Stripe-throated Hermit dipping their bodies into the pool while hovering in flight multiple times. On the way up the trail to the lodge, a Black-crowned Antshrike popped into view.



After lunch we had time to ourselves to enjoy the water, relax, or pack as tomorrow was departure day. Brett and Debbie went kayaking and saw an American Bottlenose Dolphin and several herons and egrets. In the late afternoon, a group did some more garden birding and revisited the hummingbird water hole and saw the hermit bathing again and also a Bay Wren and a Buff-throated Saltator.

The final bird count was 221 and we went around the room sharing our favorite birds and adventures from our memorable days in Panama. There was a tie for favorite birds between the Red-capped and Golden-collared Manakins in the garden and the American Pygmy Kingfisher that our local guides worked so hard to find on the Snyder Canal trip. Speaking of the canal, that was voted the favorite adventure of the tour, with the visit to Bird Island after lunch making it a truly memorable day. We thanked Brenda for her excellent guiding skills and for making our trip so enjoyable. We enjoyed our final dinner and dessert, but we weren't done yet! Most of us took a short night walk with Brenda trying to find those elusive Mottled Owls that were calling every night. We got a response to our playback call and it flew closer but then it started raining so most of the group called it a night, including the owl. A few hardy souls pressed on and were rewarded with views of a large scorpion above us in a tree glowing a bright green under Brenda's UV light. With a little research, we discovered that a scorpion's exoskeleton has a thin layer called the "hyaline layer." This layer is what reacts to ultraviolet (UV) light, such as black light or moonlight, and causes the scorpion's body to glow. Apparently, the hyaline layer is so strong that scientists have found that even fossilized and formaldehyde preserved scorpions still glow under UV light.

## Saturday, February 15: Departure Day

It was hard to say goodbye to this remarkable island lodge. All of the Tranquilo Bay staff, our wonderful local guides, and the owners Jim, Renee, and Jay and their children, treated us like old friends, and new friendships had been developed as well. After breakfast and some final veranda birding, we said goodbye to Linda and Don who were continuing on the post-tour extension to Mount Totumas. The rest of us boarded the boats an hour later and headed to the mainland for our short flight from Boca del Toro back to Panama City.

Once there, a van transported us to our hotels or to the airport. A small remaining group of us had dinner together at our hotel and then breakfast the next day before heading to the airport and our flights home.

*Photos: Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (Rick Weiman - RW), Blue-gray Tanager (RW), Black-cheeked Woodpecker (RW), Golden-collared Manakin (RW), Shoreline (Keith Horder - KH), Black Hawk-Eagle (KH), Black-cheeked Woodpecker (RW), Linda*



*& Don (RW), Derby's Woolly Opossum (RW), Immature Red-legged Honeycreeper (KH), White-throated Capuchins (RW), Yellow Warbler (male-mangrove race) (RW), Strawberry Poison Dart Frog (Lorna Hochstein - LH), Red-billed Tropicbird (Bill Trachtenber), Sunrise birding trip (RW), Prothonotary Warbler (RW), Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (RW), Shining Honeycreeper (RW), Slaty-tailed Trogon (RW), American Pygmy Kingfisher (RW), Snail Kite (RW), Black Vulture (RW) Group (RW)*