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### Panama Green Season Trip Report July 18-27, 2012

Guide Bob Behrstock
with local expert guides
from the Canopy Tower and Lodge,
and five participants:
Pat, Rebecca, Joe,
Marj and Dwayne.

Report by Bob Behrstock



#### Wed., July 18 Arrivals in Panama City / Canopy Tower / Plantation Trail

All participants had arrived one or several days early so the Canopy Tower's drivers made a hotel sweep through Panama City and picked up everyone during the latter part of the morning.

Before noon, we were assembled on the roof of the Canopy Tower, surrounded by verdant tropical forest, and looking down on a number of treetop butterflies we would not see from the ground. Some of the more colorful eye-poppers were Shining and Red-and-Black leafwings, Dexamenus Prepona, Shining Purplewing, and several long-tailed, orange and blue Costa-spotted Beautymarks. During the next several days, scanning from the roof or from the windows of the restaurant and lounge one flight down would produce some of our most sensational butterflies. Birds from the roof included a close light morph Short-tailed Hawk and a flock of 14 Swallow-tailed Kites that circled not far over our heads. We broke for lunch, after which some people returned to the roof. At 3:30 we departed via the lodge's open Birdmobile with Canopy Tower guide Michael. We drove to the foot of

Semaphore Hill (atop which sits the Canopy Tower) and walked Plantation Trail. In the forest, we saw Dusky Antbird, Broad-billed and Rufous motmots, Black-tailed and Black-throated trogons, Plain-brown Woodcreeper, and several more butterflies including the beautiful, transparent Pink-tipped Satyr.

Dinner was at the Canopy Tower and later, we fell asleep to the sounds of tree frogs.

Cramer's Leafwing (Zaretis Isidora)



#### Thurs., July 19 Canopy Tower / Pipeline Road / Discovery Tower

The day began on the roof of the Canopy Tower with a misty sunrise, coffee, Keel-billed Toucans, Green Honeycreepers, a close Three-toed Sloth, and views of the Panama Canal, the Centennial Bridge, and in the distance, Panama City and the Pacific Ocean.



At 7:15 we departed in an open vehicle for Pipeline Road. En route, Marj spotted a White-necked Puffbird and Dwayne found a Pied Puffbird — two birds that demonstrate how attractive black and white can be.

A short stop in a sunny open area produced a number of heliconian (long-wing) butterflies including Isabella's, Sara, Erato, and Heart-spotted. While we were looking at a Rufous Motmot from the vehicle, I spotted a nearby Great Jacamar, one of the low-density species we always hope to see in the forest. Other birds of interest included both Gartered and Black-throated trogons, a noisy band of Red-rumped Caciques,

a reasonably cooperative Chestnut-backed Antbird, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, a displaying Red-capped Manakin with his female, Black-faced Antthrush, Masked Tityra, and Rufous Mourner; but the three highlights of the morning (for me, anyway) were a couple of beautiful orange, black, and blue Ocellated Antbirds, a roosting Common Potoo, and a Pheasant Cuckoo that was easily seen as it sang near the side of the road. Prolonged looks at Pheasant Cuckoo, often just a muffled voice in the distance, made it the morning's prize.



Tiny Lizard near Pipeline Road

> Pheasant Cuckoo



Forest butterflies included an orange- and black-striped Parthenis Metalmark, Common Ur-Satyr, Little Banner, Whitened Bluewing, and a subtly beautiful Godart Rubyeye. For the "things that can really hurt you" list, we saw a huge, flannel moth caterpillar (family Megalopygidae) —a silky white beast with a violent sting. At a glance, it could have been mistaken for a fuzzy seed that had drifted down from the canopy. Two kinds of colorful lubber grasshoppers and a couple of nice dragonflies rounded out the critter list.



Godart Rubyeye (Lycas godart)

Megalopygidae Caterpillar



As rain threatened, we backtracked, taking refuge on the covered porch of the Panama Rainforest Discovery Center near the foot of Pipeline Road. We had a fine picnic lunch (provided by the Canopy Tower), but competing with the food were the Center's hummingbird feeders that were alive with both Long-billed and Stripe-throated



hermits, White-vented Plumeleteer, Violet-crowned Woodnymph, Violet-bellied Hummingbird (photo, NJ), and several other species. Amidst all this commotion, Pat managed to spot a bright, male White-whiskered Puffbird sitting quietly not far from where we were eating. It had certainly turned into a good day for puffbirds.

After the rain stopped, most of us climbed the Center's 40 meter-tall canopy observation tower. From our elevated perch, we could scan the surrounding forest of Soberania National Park. For most people, the target bird from atop the tower is Blue Cotinga—a species that's frustratingly difficult to view from ground level. We were treated to at

least six of them including several

glowing males. Worth the climb! Other species seen from our elevated perch were Chestnut-mandibled Toucan, Blue Dacnis, Lineated, Black-cheeked, and Cinnamon woodpeckers, Rusty-margined Flycatcher, and Alert Greatstreak, a rather nice hairstreak butterfly and the only individual of this species we encountered during the tour.

At 4:30, we descended to the ground (photo, birding Pipeline by Bob Behrstock) and got back on the vehicle for the short drive back to the Canopy Tower, stopping briefly so that our guide could move a snake (Bird-eating Snake?) off the road.





Returning to the Canopy Tower, we had another fine dinner—as always, the food there was predictably tasty, with good variety and a special dish or two for the vegetarians (typically pilfered by the rest of us).

Fri., July 20 Ponds Near Gamboa / Summit Gardens
We started the day with a nice sunrise (photo, Bob Behrstock),
birding and butterflying off the roof from 6:00-7:30. Breakfast
was at 8:15 as we would stay fairly close to the lodge.

A short drive took us to the Ammo Dump Ponds in Gamboa. We investigated three sites around the perimeter of the

ponds, working woodland edge and the ponds themselves. Birds included such species as Plain Wren, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Greater Ani, both Streaked and Buff-throated saltators, Yellow-breasted Seedeater, Fork-tailed and Streaked flycatchers, Barred Antshrike, Yellow-backed Oriole, Whooping Motmot, and a stately Rufescent Tiger-Heron. Butterflies were numerous in this sunny habitat, and included many Banded Peacocks, Blue-and-yellow Beautymark (drew gasps), several satyrs, both Pale-banded and Leucodesma crescents, Luda Skipper, and Mimosa Yellow. We saw several colorful grasshoppers including a spectacular red-eyed species with a green, blue, and yellow body (*Coscineuta coxalis*), and Central American Redskimmer, perhaps the reddest of Panama's dragonflies. Along the road leading up the hill to the lodge, we had close looks at a Northern Tamandua (Collared Anteater), one of the area's weirder and more desirable mammals.



Banded Peacock (Anartia fatima)

Imperial Sunstreak (Arcas imperialis)



After our 12:30 lunch, those who elected to spent a bit of time on the roof while other napped. This round of butterflying from the roof produced some of the trip highlights including Imperial Sunstreak with its long, curly tails, and a raspberry red and peppermint green Regal Greatstreak, a couple species of sisters, and a gaudy Dotcollared Firetip—one of the strikingly patterned blue and white spreadwing skippers that look like a small stained glass window.



Our afternoon departure was delayed somewhat by rain but we visited the zoo grounds at Summit Gardens from 4:25-5:25, seeing a few new birds such as Chestnut-headed Oropendola (feeding a parasitic Giant Cowbird fledgling), Yellow-backed Oriole, Yellow-crowned Euphonia, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Redcrowned Woodpecker (photo), and several Central American Agoutis—slender guinea pig-like rodents that are common where not hunted for food. We returned in a light mist—which continued to fall for the next several hours. *Red-crowned Woodpecker, NJ* 

## Sat., July 21 Metropolitan Park / Panama City / Summit Ponds / Night Drive

People who went to the roof before breakfast were treated to a perched Crane Hawk—not a common bird and a nice way to begin the day. Breakfast was a bit earlier at 6:00, after which we departed with our guide Carlos Bethancourt for Metropolitan Park in Panama City (photo, NJ). Because we were entering the city we were in a van, not the open birding vehicle. The park, popular with local hikers and birders, protects a fine patch of forest, perhaps the largest within a Latin American city, and every visit produces some interesting sightings. Today, we enjoyed nice looks at Lance-tailed Manakins,



Crimson-crested Woodpecker, an easily seen Double-toothed Kite, Laughing Falcon, Dot-winged Antwrens traveling with a flock of White-shouldered Tanagers, and a troop of Geoffroy's Tamarins, among many other things. Less cooperative were Rosy Thrush-Tanagers and White-bellied Antbirds which made their presence known by their songs only.

When we returned to the van, several butterflies awaited us in the sunny clearing including a striking cherry-red, black, and white Stigma Skipper, and a glowing *Mesosemia* eye-mark. Less gaudy but interesting nonetheless were a couple of large owl butterfly caterpillars that were nicely camouflaged on the stems of some Heliconia leaves.



Eyemark (Mesosemia lamachus) Lizard at Summit

**Ponds** 

Purplewashed



From the park, we made a fairly quick visit to the mudflats at Panama Viejo. Summer is not the best time to view shorebirds and large waders at this famous waterbird venue; however, we added a number of species including



Whimbrel, Willet, Southern Lapwing, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, and White Ibis. After seeing the birds, most of the group ducked into the adjacent native market to look at or buy applique fabric *molas* and other crafts made by the Kuna Indians.

From there, we continued a short distance to Casco Viejo where several blocks of historic Panama City were being restored and repaved. Trapped among construction vehicles and tourists in

a slow to clear traffic jam, we bailed out of the van and stepped into a convenient restaurant for lunch. After we ate, Carlos mentioned that a couple doors from the restaurant was one of Panama City's best artisanal ice cream shops, so we made the obligatory pilgrimage (I highly recommend the ginger ice cream).

Leaving Panama City (photos), we had a couple of errand stops then continued to Summit Ponds where we birded and butterflied until five PM. Here, we took a short stroll that produced roosting Boat-billed Herons—one of Middle America's most unusual wading birds—as well as both Green and Ringed kingfishers and a few other birds. A pretty black and orange Lucianus



Metalmark was the only one encountered during the tour, and some people saw a sure sign of the rainy season—gelatinous masses of frog eggs plastered to leaves overhanging a roadside puddle.

After dinner it wasn't raining, so we took the opportunity to have a night drive on the road that descends Semaphore Hill from the Canopy Tower. Before we were underway, we saw an Allen's Olingo over the parking lot. Olingos are slender raccoon relatives that forage high in the canopy on nectar and insects. Typically, they are only encountered at night. On the drive, we heard Mottled Owl, and Choco Screech Owl, and saw Hoffmann's Twotoed Sloth, and Rothschild's Porcupine—a decidedly local species and the prize of the night.

#### Sun., July 22 Small Boat Safari on Gatun Lake of the Panama Canal / Gamboa

Coffee and birds were available on the roof at six AM and we ate breakfast at 6:30. A short drive took us to the small marina in Gamboa but en route, we stopped for a Semiplumbeous Hawk that was perched along the road. This forest species usually goes unrecorded and was certainly one of the best birds of the trip. Fortuitously, another vehicle full of Canopy Tower guests passed by and we were able to flag it down and share the hawk with its grateful occupants.







The Titan Crane (NJ) Above, Canal area road (NJ)

At the marina, we boarded a motorboat for a ride on Gatun Lake and the Panama Canal. Our craft provided an unusual water-level perspective of over a hundred years of Canal history, as well as the massive tankers, freighters, and smaller pleasure craft gliding by us as they headed for the open ocean. We also had close looks at the dredging boats that maintain the channel depth of the Canal, and the massive Titan Crane, built in World War II Germany and now used to maintain the huge doors of the canal's locks.

Not surprisingly, the trip also produced a host of birds—including many waterbirds. These included Mangrove Swallow, Striated and Green herons, Anhinga, Wattled Jacana, numerous close looks at Snail Kites, five or six Limpkins, many Greater Anis, Little Blue Heron, and Zone-tailed Hawk. Other critters included White-faced Capuchin Monkey, Green Iguana, Spectacled Caiman, and many Banded Orange Heliconian butterflies.



White-faced Capuchin (NJ)



**Snail Kite** 



We returned to the Canopy Tower for lunch, finding some very nice butterflies in the parking lot garden including Chalco Longtail, Golden Sombermark (one of many metalmarks that look like a hairstreak), and a somewhat cooperative Heartspotted Heliconian.

Heart-spotted Heliconian (Heliconius hecale)

After lunch, our 2:30 departure was delayed by rain until about 4:30, at which point we commandeered a van we weren't supposed to use, and went to Gamboa. First, we made a quick visit to the Canopy Lodge's B&B, where we

saw Gray-headed Chachalacas. Then we drove a short distance to the area behind the Gamboa Rainforest Lodge, seeing about 15 Central American Agoutis in the process. There, we encountered a number of birds including Redlegged Honeycreeper, Plain-colored Tanager, White-tipped Dove, and another Rufescent Tiger-Heron. A highlight was a herd of 10 Lesser Capybaras loafing on the lawn. These huge aquatic rodents are at the very edge of their range in Panama and are very difficult to see away from protected areas. It was a bonus for me—a mammal I hadn't seen previously. As we were leaving, I heard a Gray-necked Wood-Rail calling in the woods nearby. I gave it a few notes from my iPod and soon, three of these colorful (if not sort of goofy looking) birds were vocalizing excitedly and walking right by us on the lakeshore. A great way to end the afternoon.



Canopy Tower Observation Deck, photo courtesy of Canopy Tower

#### Mon., July 23 Canopy Tower Final Morning / Canopy Lodge

Today was the day to change lodges and breakfast was a bit later at 7:30. It was densely misty on the roof and most people elected to stay inside and tidy up their luggage before moving. Just before breakfast, we went up on the roof and saw a couple of Green Shrike-Vireos—often an exceptionally difficult bird to see as they look pretty much like the bright green leaves among which they forage. Also present were Band-rumped Swifts and a close Green Honeycreeper feeding on Cecropia fruits.

After breakfast, we spent a short time in the garden—which was teeming with butterflies—photographing White-spotted, both Two-barred, and Yellow-tipped flashers, Belt's Myscelus (a huge, orange spreadwing skipper), and a dapper tricolored Gentius Skipper, as well as a spectacular dead leaf mimic praying mantis that was dismantling its breakfast.







Common Ghost-Skipper (Phanus marshallii)



Two-barred Flasher (Astrapes fulgerator)



Belt's Myscelus (Myscelus belti)



Gentius Skipper (Entheus gentius)

**Walking Stick** 



We departed at 10:00 AM, crossing the Panama Canal via the newer, futuristic looking Centennial Bridge. There was a quick bathroom and drink stop at Coronado and at 12:10, we arrived at the Canopy Lodge (photo, NJ) in El Valle del Anton, where we were met by our guide Eliecer.

Lunch was at 12:30 followed by some frantic running around the garden and stream edge photographing butterflies—OR by some peaceful feeder watching.

At 3:00 PM, we assembled briefly on the stairs outside the guest rooms and got looks at part of a sleeping Mottled Owl perched nearby, then took a stroll along the road outside the Lodge. This walk proved especially good for roadside plants (who wouldn't like the 14 inch-long pink blossoms of Angel's Trumpet— Datura arborea) and insects (walking stick, butterflies, about five species of grasshoppers), the highlight being an orange, blue, green, and yellow monkey grasshopper—the only one we'd see on the trip. As I found out later, this was a poorly known species, perhaps never before photographed, and the location turned out to be a bit of a range extension. Birds along the road included both Crimson-backed and Flame-rumped tanagers, Bananaquits, Rufous-capped Warblers, Chestnut-headed Oropendolas, and Keel-billed Toucans.





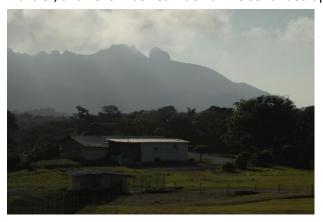
Chestnutheaded Oropendola

Monkey Grasshopper



After dinner, everyone enjoyed the cool evening—strikingly different than the warm and humid nights at the Canopy Tower.

# Tues., July 24 Mountains near La Mesa / Local Markets / El Valle Amphibian Conservation Center We began with a 6:30 breakfast. At 7:30 we departed uphill a bit to a farm pond below the chicken farms at La Mesa (photo, NJ). There, we saw a number of birds including Black-chested Jay, Shiny Cowbird, Chestnut-headed Oropendola, Black-headed Saltator, White-lined, Bay-headed and Silver-throated tanagers, Rufous-capped Warbler, and Yellow-bellied Elaenia. We continued uphill a bit to the Las Minas road where we had time to walk



about 200 feet from the van before the deluge struck. We sat in the van for a while willing the rain to stop but it wasn't going to happen.

Plan B. We drove downhill to the market in El Valle. There was some craft shopping available, but my thought was to give everyone an opportunity to look at the tropical fruits and vegetables they weren't likely to see at home, and perhaps had been eating all week without knowing it. There were huge avocados, perfect eggplants, all kinds of peppers, yucca and other root vegetables, passion fruit, annatto and other spices and herbs. I bought a bag of fresh lychee fruits

to pass out to the group. The canned lychees on the dessert buffet at the Chinese restaurants look like balls of white gelatin. The fresh ones you to peel to reveal the crisp and juicy velvety white flesh look like red sea creatures with soft tentacles all over them. Food 101.

Back up the hill, we had lunch at 12:30 then at 1:45 departed for the El Nispero Zoo and Garden in El Valle. There, noted Panamanian conservationist Edgardo Griffith of the El Valle Amphibian Conservation Center gave us a tour of the zoo's amphibian display and showed us some of the facility where Panama's critically endangered Golden Frog and many other endangered amphibians are being cultured. Edgardo and his wife Heidi Ross Griffith have been featured on numerous videos and television specials, discussing their efforts along with the Houston Zoo and the Smithsonian Institution to save Panamanian amphibians threatened by development and fungal infections. The El Valle Amphibian Conservation Center is one of the projects supported financially by Naturalist Journeys as well as the Canopy Tower and Lodge. After talking with Edgardo, we continued through the zoo, seeing some of the birds and mammals that are found in Panama.



**Golden Frog** 

We left the zoo at 4:00 PM, swung by the Canopy Lodge for a moment, then continued up the road a short distance to the waterfall trail at Canopy Adventure. There, we saw two very nice birds. The first was a Mottled Owl roosting alongside the trail. This was our third encounter with a Mottled Owl, but the first time we were actually able to see the entire bird. Next, we walked to the foot of the nearby waterfall and waited a bit for a White-tipped Sicklebill to come to its evening roost. The sicklebill, an uncommon specialist of Heliconia blossoms, has a deeply bowed bill, and is one of Middle America's most specialized and bizarre hummingbirds. We had excellent views of the perched bird, eventually walking away from it as it settled in for the evening. The sicklebill was toasted at Happy Hour before dinner.



## Wed., July 25 Pacific Coast / Juan Hambron / Rice Fields / the Beach / El El Chirú

We began with an early breakfast at 5:30, and departed for the coast at 6:10 with guide Eliecer and our driver Rodrigo. By about 7:30, we were on a quiet, wooded lane through ranchland near Juan Hambron—very different habitat than that inland and at higher elevation near the lodge. We saw a number of elegant Savanna Hawks, a White-tailed Kite, had good looks at a Striped Cuckoo, played hide and seek with a Pale-breasted Spinetail, and saw other birds typical of this open country such as Plain-breasted Ground-Dove, Yellow-crowned Parrot, and Mouse-colored Tyrannulet. One nice

surprise was a cooperative Crested Bobwhite that we were able to see in the 'scope on several occasions. Roadside dragonflies included a Blue-faced Darner, Great Pondhawks that investigated insects we stirred up as we walked, and several Band-winged Dragonlets.

Photo: Guide Bob Behrstock, NJ

After getting permission to enter a farm, we drove to the edge of rice fields that were being plowed. There were hundreds of herons and egrets of four or five species, Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, Wood Storks, Southern Lapwings, Wattled Jacanas with newly hatched chicks, a large flock of Glossy Ibis, and a few kinds of shorebirds including Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitchers, and a Solitary Sandpiper. In open woodland nearby, we saw Sapphire-throated and Scaly-breasted hummingbirds and pulled the van up to a perched Roadside Hawk.



Before having lunch at the beach house (photo, NJ), we drove to scrubby woodland near the beach, adding Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Boat-billed Flycatcher, and some butterflies such as Veined White-Skipper, Large Orange Sulphur, Gulf Fritillary, Great Southern White, and a crescent-like Albinus Metalmark that had us scratching our heads for a few days. On the beach, we had flocks of Blue-footed Boobies flying by offshore, Royal and Sandwich Terns feeding just beyond the surf, and a few shorebirds on the sand.



Great Southern White (Ascia monuste) laying eggs



Albinus Metalmark (Ariconias albinus)

Backtracking a bit, we drove to the coast at Santa Clara where we had a picnic lunch at the beach house of our host Raúl Arias, owner of the Canopy Lodge and Tower. It was a pleasant place to eat—watching the Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds flying by. Additionally, the sparse plantings in the sandy yard provided us with the trip's only Green Flasher—a stunning large, iridescent green skipper.

After lunch, we returned westward a bit to an agricultural area (photo, NJ) known as El Chirú, and investigated a couple of small roads just a few blocks off the highway where we hoped to see Brown-throated Parakeets. Instead, we encountered two cooperative Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls, Red-breasted Blackbirds, more Plain-breasted



Ground-Doves, Yellow-green Vireo, and two Bat Falcons roosting right next to the road. We birded El Chirú until 4:10 and were back at the lodge at 5:15.

## Thurs., July 26 Mountains at Las Minas / A New Species! / El Valle

Our 6:00 breakfast was lightly attended as a couple people had tummy ailments—apparently something brought in by other guests. We decided to change the day's planned activity and not stay out all day partly in difference to those who stayed behind, and partly in case some of us wanted to be back earlier.

At 7:15 AM, we returned to the Las Minas road, hoping for less precipitation than we'd experienced a couple days earlier. It was on and off misty but we saw several interesting things including a Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch seen by Joe and Eliecer, Common Bush-Tanager, Plain Xenops, numbers of blue and yellow stick insects, a bizarre tarantula-like hag moth caterpillar (family Limacodidae, perhaps in the genus *Phobetron*), and a few butterflies including our only Lagora Eyemark, a Golden-banded Sister, Sara and Cydno heliconians, several satyrs, and a couple of clearwings. I photographed a brown grass skipper with white antennae which has, thus far, defied identification, as well as a grasshopper that turned out to be a "new" species that a friend of mine is just now in the process of describing.



Phasmid Stick Insect

Cydno Heliconian (Heliconius cydno)



After lunch, some of us went to El Valle where we walked the Cariguana road. Cariguana passes by woodland and some large residences and the mixed habitat produced a number of birds including Lesser Elaenias, Panama Flycatchers, Barred Antshrikes, Yellow-crowned Euphonias, and Lance-tailed Manakins. We took a detour into the forest to look for a roosting owl that had been seen the previous day. We missed the owl but found a few woodland butterflies and it was nice being in habitat. Our last dinner together was better attended as peoples' stomachs were on the mend.

#### Fri., July 27 Departures

Our final day began with a 6:30 breakfast. After finishing the last bit of packing, we departed for the 2 ½ hour drive to the airport. Joe, Rebecca, Pat, and Bob got on flights to the U.S., while Dwayne and Marj picked up a car for a week in western Panama. This was Naturalist Journey's first trip during the "Green Season" and with such a fine array of species, it will not be the last! Many thanks to the Canopy staff at both locations, who worked hard to make our trip a great success.

Thanks to participant Joe Schelling for sharing most of the photos in this report. Find more of Joe's great photos and text on his blog and website.

BLOG <a href="http://joeschelling.wordpress.com/2012/08/04/panama-nature-trip/">http://joeschelling.wordpress.com/2012/08/04/panama-nature-trip/</a> WEBSITE <a href="http://sandianet.com/canopy/index.htm">http://sandianet.com/canopy/index.htm</a>



Joe Schelling, atop the Tower



Agriacris tricristata (Lodge)



Chalco Longtail (Tower)

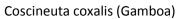


Walking Stick (Lodge)

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Dead leaf Mantid (Tower)





Green Flasher (Astraptes talus) at the beach



Eumastacid (Lodge)



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