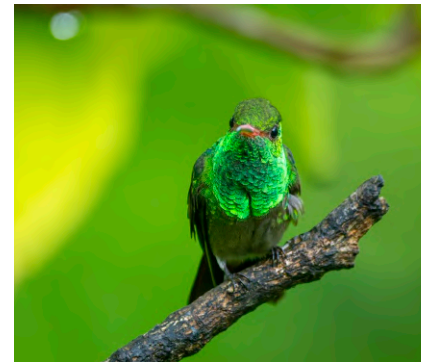


Western Panama: Tranquilo Bay | April 7-14, 2026 | Trip Report by Bryan Calk



Local guide Brenda Sanchez and Naturalist Journeys guide Bryan Calk with Marjorie, Dave, Thomas, Adrienne, Jane, Rebecca, Steve, Karen, and Janet



Tuesday, April 7

Arrival to Bocas del Toro | Tranquilo Bay

An early start in Panama City had the group gathering before dawn for the transfer to the domestic airport. Soon we were airborne, leaving the Pacific side behind and crossing the mountainous spine of the country before descending toward the Caribbean lowlands. Our destination was Bocas del Toro, a chain of islands off Panama's northwestern coast near the Costa Rica border. These islands sit on a submerged extension of the Central American mountain arc, shaped by tectonic uplift, coral growth, and sediment deposition. Over time, mangroves



colonized the shallow edges, coral reefs built upward in the clear Caribbean water, and low rainforest-covered islands formed the mosaic that defines the region today.

We landed on Colón Island and transferred by boat across calm Caribbean water to Bastimentos Island. Tranquilo Bay Eco Lodge sits tucked along a protected bay, surrounded by forest and mangroves that meet coral reefs right at the shoreline. Elevated wooden structures and open-air spaces blend into the environment, with forest trails and marine habitat immediately accessible.

After settling in, some headed out for snorkeling. Corals and sponges rose right up to the mangrove roots, where large schools of fry hovered in shelter. Nudibranchs crept along sponges, Sea Cucumbers rested on the substrate, and fish ranged from Angelfish and Butterflyfish to Parrotfish. Feather Duster Worms, Fireworms, and Gobies added to the diversity. The mangroves function as a nursery for countless marine species, and the close view into that system was remarkable.

Lunch followed, and the afternoon siesta was interrupted by news of a Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth with a baby low in a Cacao Tree. The pair offered incredibly intimate views at eye level, moving slowly, resting, and feeding.

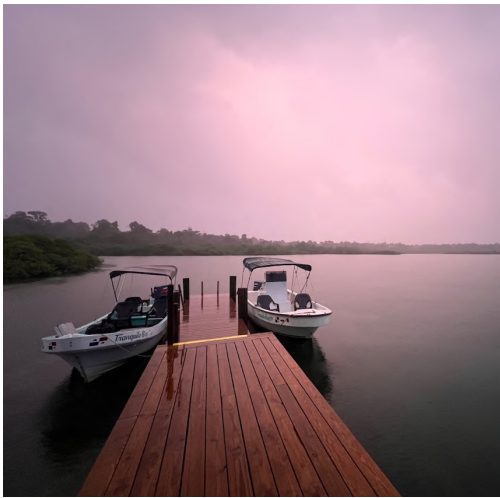
A late afternoon bird walk around the property produced Tawny-crested Tanagers, Red-lored Amazons, a Spectacled Caiman in a pond, Lesser Greenlets, Red-capped Manakins, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Green Honeycreeper, Roadside Hawk, Bronzy Hermit, and White-crowned and Short-billed Pigeons.

Dinner, drinks, and the evening checklist wrapped up the first day before turning in early.

Wednesday, April 8

Punta Robalo | Continental Divide

Breakfast came early, and a light drizzle hung in the air as boats pulled away from the lodge. Overcast skies softened the light, the muted glow of an obscured sunrise filtering across the bay. On the boat ride toward Punta Robalo, feeding activity drew attention. Sandwich Terns dove repeatedly into a tight baitfish ball just below the surface, while the water erupted from beneath as larger unseen fish slashed upward from below.



We reached Punta Robalo and began birding the wetlands and open areas along the main road. A loose gang of Groove-billed and Smooth-billed Anis perched atop brambles, their silhouettes sharp against the gray sky. Yellow-headed Caracaras moved between treetops, occasionally dropping to the ground, one even landing on a Water Buffalo to eat flying insects harassing the buffalo, and pick at the buffalo's wounds to drink its blood. The buffalo themselves moved slowly through deep mud-filled ravines, wading as if swimming across the pasture.

Another stop produced Red-breasted Meadowlarks singing from fence posts, while Muscovy Ducks and Northern Jacanas waded through wet grassy fields. The landscape gradually shifted as the road climbed toward the foothills, with forest thickening and humidity building. Howler Monkeys roared in the distance.

A break at the forest reserve ranger station made for a memorable roadside lunch. Warm sandwiches, fresh pico de gallo, fruit, and fresh-squeezed juices were welcome after the morning's birding. Around the buildings, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, Blue-chested Hummingbird, and Violet-headed Hummingbird fed in flowering shrubs and chased each other through the canopy. Orange-billed Sparrow worked the edges of the lawn, and Buff-rumped Warbler moved actively near the ground. A Central American Agouti made a surprise appearance.

Continuing upward, another roadside stop revealed an impressive showing of toucans. Three species appeared in quick succession, Yellow-throated Toucan, Keel-billed Toucan, and Collared Aracari, all offering excellent scope views as they moved through fruiting trees. At a river crossing, Dusky-faced Tanagers and Cinnamon Becards hopped through the vegetation.

By late afternoon we reached the cloud forest near the continental divide. Vegetation changed noticeably, trees draped in moss and epiphytes, moisture hanging low enough that clouds drifted through the forest. Here, some of the most magical birds of the day appeared. A Spotted Barbtail crept down mossy branches to nearly eye level along the forest edge. A Golden-browed Chlorophonia dropped into nearby trees, glowing electric green against the mist. A Silvery-fronted Tapaculo darted across a small opening in the understory, offering a surprisingly good look for such a secretive species. The walk also revealed impressive plant and insect life, orchids and other epiphytes clinging to limbs, thick mosses carpeting branches, and a variety of invertebrates ranging from Leafhoppers to large multicolored Weevils.

By late day we descended back toward the coast, retraced the road to Punta Robalo, and boarded boats for the return ride across calm water to the lodge. Dinner followed, along with the evening checklist and a review of plans for the following day, before settling in for the night.



Thursday, April 9

Isla Popa | Tranquilo Bay

The morning began with breakfast on the patio under a light drizzle. The rain gradually eased, and as the skies began to brighten we made our way to the boats for a visit to Isla Popa. This large island sits close to the mainland and is only a short ride from Tranquilo Bay, its shoreline carved into a maze of mangroves, small inlets, and low forested ridges. We cruised slowly along the mangrove edges, scanning carefully for species tied to this unique habitat.

Mangrove Yellow Warblers chased each other through the tangled roots and low branches. A Mangrove Cuckoo crept deliberately through the branches, eventually offering incredibly open views as it moved along the exposed limbs. Toucans flew across the distant treetops, and a Yellow-headed Caracara perched high in a tree, giving a regal look over the mangrove fringe. Then the highlight appeared, a male Snowy Cotinga flying back and forth between two exposed perches in a display-like pattern. The bird's stark white plumage stood out dramatically against the deep green forest backdrop, an unforgettable sight.

Cruising by boat proved to be a relaxing and effective way to explore this habitat, but soon we landed on Isla Popa and stepped ashore on property belonging to a local resident, Diego, who maintains trails leading into a wet lowland area. Brown-capped Tyrannulet and Dusky-capped Flycatcher moved through the canopy. Meanwhile, a small search nearby turned up three color morphs of Strawberry Poison Dart Frog. One individual was bright orange, another greenish gray, and a third more bluish green. Seeing such variation within a small area was remarkable and highlighted the diversity of this region. Along the walk back, we admired the Pineapples and Bananas growing beside the trail.

The ride back to the lodge was followed by some downtime. Afterward, some headed out again for snorkeling while others rested. A Queen Angelfish just below the deck became the highlight, joined by a wide assortment of other marine life moving among corals, seagrass, and sponges along the mangrove edges.

Later in the afternoon we gathered for another walk around the lodge grounds. Montezuma Oropendolas sang their wild, bubbling display songs high in the canopy, and several parrots passed overhead. A female Dot-winged Antwren appeared briefly at close range, showing her rich chestnut belly before slipping back into cover. We checked again on the sloth and her baby, still resting in the same area, then we climbed the canopy tower. From the tower, the view opened dramatically across the forest and bay. Plain-colored Tanagers fed at eye-level, and a brilliant Blackburnian Warbler passed through, on its way north. Green Honeycreepers moved through fruiting trees, and below us the complex shoreline of mangroves, coral patches, and calm Caribbean water stretched across the bay, a fitting end to another full day.



Friday, April 10

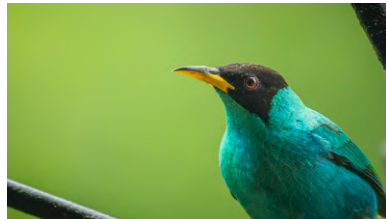
Changuinola Canal | San San-Pond Sak Wetlands

The morning began under calm, partly cloudy skies, and soon we were back in the boats heading toward the mainland northwest of Tranquilo Bay. Today's destination was the Changuinola, or Snyder, Canal. Built for the banana trade at the turn of the twentieth century, it is widely described as Panama's first man-made canal, begun after permission was granted in 1899 and completed in 1903 after United Fruit acquired the Snyder operation. It was dug to connect the Changuinola banana zone with Caribbean shipping routes and was used not only for fruit but also for supplies, workers, and equipment moving inland. By the end of that decade, new rail and port infrastructure had largely made it obsolete, and the canal gradually shifted from industrial artery to the quiet, wildlife-rich waterway it feels like today.

We spent the day birding along the canal, cruising slowly and making a few landings to explore the surrounding habitat more thoroughly and to enjoy a picnic lunch. The clouds and overhanging vegetation kept conditions comfortable for much of the day, and the sea breeze drifting in acted like natural air conditioning. Gray-headed Chachalacas hopped through a Cecropia, Montezuma Oropendolas moved up and down the canal, and Aracaris perched in treetops above us. Both a Great Potoo and a Short-tailed Nighthawk were found on day roosts, each so still and perfectly placed that they seemed part of the branch until scopes were trained on them. Mixed flocks of swifts streamed overhead as we drifted along.

At the mouth of the Changuinola River the habitat opened up to the San San-Pond Sak wetlands that produced a different cast of birds. Black-necked Stilts worked the shallows, a Wood Stork stood among the wetlands, and a Pinnated Bittern skulked through tall grass in a way that made it seem to appear and disappear at will. On the beach were Collared Plovers, a tropical species that breeds locally. Limpkins and Snail Kites were seen repeatedly, both tied to the abundance of Apple Snails in these wetlands, and a variety of Herons and Egrets were scattered through the area. One especially memorable sighting was a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron sneaking through the grass, its heavy neck and deliberate movements giving it an almost prehistoric look.

By late afternoon we turned back toward the lodge, but one more stop along the way provided a fitting finale. In an unassuming corner of mangroves, Magnificent Frigatebirds were packed into the trees at a roost site in their gorgeous glossy black plumage. It was a spectacular sight before we finally continued on to Tranquilo Bay for the evening.



Saturday, April 11

Tierra Oscura | Tranquilo Bay Hike

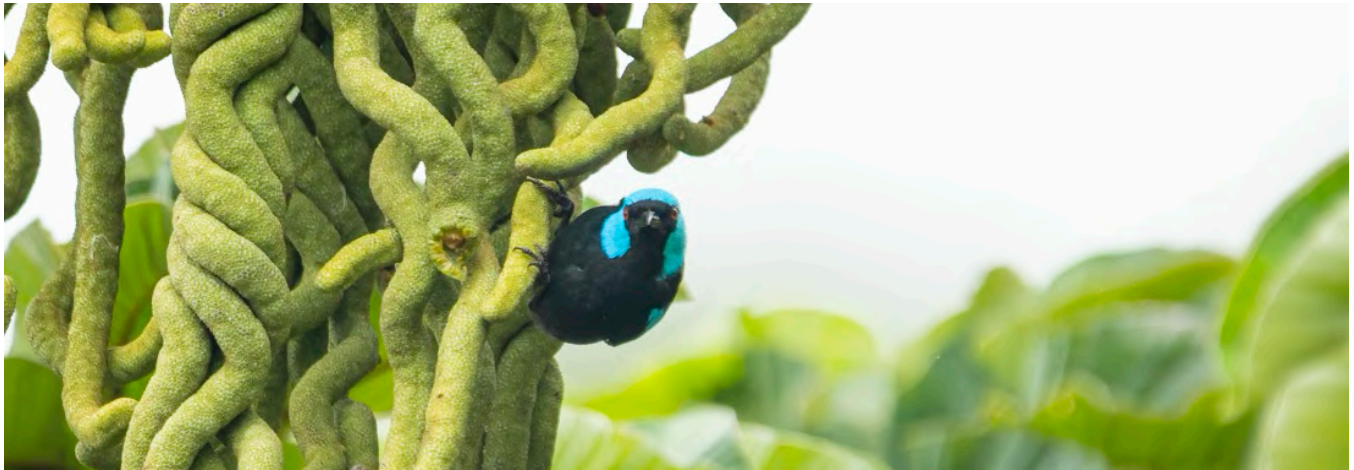
The morning began with steady rain during breakfast, giving a slower start to the day. While waiting it out on the deck, activity came to us. White-faced Capuchin Monkeys moved in, confidently working the bananas and putting on an entertaining show just a few feet away. Around them, birds cycled through the feeders, adding to the morning's energy, despite the weather.

As the rain eased, we boarded boats and headed toward a different stretch of mainland known as Tierra Oscura, literally "dark earth," a name that reflects the rich, fertile soils of the region. This area supports a slightly different foothill forest, and once we arrived and began birding along the road, the activity quickly picked up.

Mixed flocks were a constant feature, moving through in waves of Warblers, Vireos, Tanagers, Flycatchers, and Woodcreepers. Among them were several standout species. A Rufous Motmot provided a major highlight, its bold colors and long tail instantly drawing attention. Black-crowned Antshrike worked the understory, while a Lineated Woodpecker gave nice views. Masked Tityras lingered in one area near a nest site, and a Long-tailed Tyrant was also a star. A brief but exciting sighting of Purple-throated Fruitcrow added to the list, with two species of Oropendolas moving nearby. Once the rain had fully cleared, the forest seemed to come alive, and nearly every stop produced something new.

Mammals and amphibians added another dimension to the morning. A Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth with a baby was seen actively climbing down a tree, giving an unusually dynamic look at a species more often encountered at rest. Along the road we also examined local frogs, including Striped Rocket Frog, Green-and-black Poison Dart Frog, and yet another color variation of Strawberry Poison Dart Frog.

By late morning we made our way back to the boats and returned to the lodge for lunch. After a short break, some gathered again for an afternoon walk on the property, heading toward a freshwater creek. Here, a Striped-throated Hermit repeatedly came in to bathe in a small pool, offering a fascinating look at hummingbird behavior. While waiting quietly, Tawny-crested Tanagers moved through, once again showing off their distinctive crests. The walk also became an opportunity to learn more about the forest itself. Cycad plants were a focus, with discussion of their ancient evolutionary history and their relationships with fungi in the soil. These fungal associations, including mycorrhizae, play roles in nutrient exchange and may even influence how some birds interact with the forest floor, potentially offering indirect benefits like pest deterrence in nesting materials.



The afternoon blended birds, natural history, and quiet observation before we returned once again to the lodge. Dinner, drinks, and the evening checklist wrapped up the day, with another full set of experiences from both mainland forest and island habitats.

Sunday, April 12 **Palo Seco Forest Reserve | Fortuna Forest Reserve**

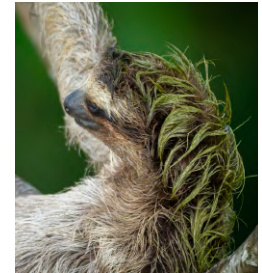
Some decided to hang back at the lodge today, while others returned to the mainland via Punta Robalo, this time skipping the lowland stops and heading straight for the Palo Seco Forest Reserve, the continental divide, and the Fortuna Forest Reserve. This region is one of the most important conservation landscapes in western Panama, forming a vast protected corridor tied to the greater La Amistad system.

The Fortuna area in particular is known for its persistent cloud cover, among the wettest and most moisture-laden forests in the region. That constant interaction between rain, mist, and elevation creates an incredible diversity of plant life, with trees, orchids, mosses, and epiphytes layering over one another in dense, dripping forest. Woven into this landscape is the Fortuna Dam, a major hydroelectric project that draws power from the same watersheds these forests protect. The reserve itself was established in part to better understand and manage the impacts of that development, and today the area stands as a balance between conservation and infrastructure. It is a place where intact cloud forest, scientific research, and national energy needs all intersect.

As we drove upslope, the first stop came quickly when a young Gray-lined Hawk was perched right along the roadside. While trying to improve views of the hawk, attention shifted to movement in the canopy, where a mixed flock was pushing through with Palm Tanagers and other species filtering past overhead.

From there, we made a series of productive roadside stops as we climbed higher into the foothills and cloud forest. An Isthmian Wren popped up in bromeliad tangles, while a Black-thighed Grosbeak sat out in the open preening after a rain shower. Northern Emerald-Toucanets called from the canopy and gave brief glimpses as they slipped between trees. Silver-throated Tanagers moved through in small groups, and a Cocoa Woodcreeper worked methodically up tree trunks. A White-throated Thrush fed on berries within a mixed flock, while a Flame-colored Tanager sang overhead. At one stop, a Bay-breasted Warbler foraged at eye-level among moss-covered branches, and Elegant Euphonias fed quietly in mistletoe.

Mammal activity added to the morning as well, with a Central American Dwarf Squirrel darting through the mossy branches. Overhead, a small kettle of Mississippi Kites circled through the mist, hinting at ongoing migration even in these cloud-wrapped mountains. Around flowering trees, White-tailed Emeralds chased Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds, each defending patches of nectar with quick bursts of movement.



We paused for lunch at a local roadside restaurant, sampling fresh empanadas before continuing upslope. Not long after, one of the more memorable stops of the day produced a cluster of Collared Trogons, four or five individuals calling from a small area, their soft vocalizations echoing through the forest as they shifted between perches. Near the dam and visitor center area, bird activity continued. Scarlet-thighed Dacnis showed exceptionally well, their bright colors standing out even in the subdued light, and a White-tailed Emerald fed at close range, offering extended views.

We then made our way back down and returned by boat to the lodge, arriving in time for dinner, drinks, and the evening checklist to wrap up another full day.

Monday, April 13 **Canopy Tower | Snorkeling “The Garden” | Manakin Lek | Night Walk**

The day began early with a walk out to the canopy tower, a roughly four-story observation platform rising above the forest on the property. As we made our way out in the dim morning light, the clouds began to part just enough to reveal a soft sunrise spreading across the bay.

But even before reaching the tower, there were fun finds left and right. Three Brown-throated Three-toed Sloths were found along the way, one with a large baby, all positioned to catch the early sun as they dried out from the night’s moisture. Red-lore Amazons and White-crowned Pigeons perched at eye level in the treetops, unusually close and well-lit in the early light. On the climb up the tower, a small Central American Boa was discovered curled in the top of a bush, an unexpected and excellent spot by Brenda. From the tower and surrounding trees, activity built as the morning warmed. Honeycreepers, warblers, dacnis, and other small birds moved through fruiting trees, feeding actively and offering great views against the open canopy backdrop.

We returned for breakfast, then regrouped for a boat ride out to a snorkeling site known as The Garden. This area lived up to its name, with colorful sponges and corals spread across the shallow reef. Fish were abundant, along with Brittle Stars and a wide variety of other marine life. The group drifted slowly with the current, floating and observing as the reef passed beneath.

Back at the lodge, lunch was followed by a period of downtime before heading out again in the afternoon to a known manakin lek on the property. These birds represent a fascinating hybrid zone between White-collared



and Golden-collared Manakins. The males resemble Golden-collared in appearance, but their lek structure is more similar to White-collared, and genetic work has shown this to be a relatively recent hybrid population. As we approached, the sharp snapping sounds of wing sonations carried through the forest. The lek sites were small cleared patches on the forest floor, and we watched males performing rapid display movements between perches, producing loud snaps and bursts of motion. It was completely mesmerizing - something right out of a David Attenborough documentary. Other highlights along the trail included White-tipped Cycadian Butterfly, Green Climbing Toads, and Striped Rocket Frog.

After dinner and checklist, a night walk brought a completely different set of experiences. Vaillant's Frogs called around the pond, and an Isla Bonita Robber Frog was found along the path. A Red-eyed Tree Frog showed well, and an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher was found roosting. Invertebrates were abundant, Walkingsticks, Grasshoppers, Katydid, and other orthopterans blending into the vegetation. A Common Potoo called from the mangroves, and a Mottled Owl was heard deeper in the forest. A large Savage's Bullfrog was seen near the pond, and Fireflies flickered through the darkness.

In the mangroves, bioluminescent organisms lit up the water as we walked along the boardwalk under a new moon, each step triggering flashes of light. At the dock, UV lights revealed biofluorescent anemones glowing beneath the surface. A Raccoon moved through the mangrove roots, and the forest floor was alive with massive columns of Leafcutter Ants carrying fragments of vegetation through the night.

Tuesday, April 14

Departures | Onward to Mt. Totumas

The final morning came quickly. We gathered for breakfast, taking in one last look at the bay and the surrounding forest.

From here, the group split. Some continued on to the extension at Mount Totumas, heading back across the mainland toward the highlands, while others began their journey home.

It was a quiet close to a full and immersive trip, spanning mangroves, reefs, rainforest, foothills, and cloud forest, and a reminder of just how much diversity this region holds.

Photos: Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (BC), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (BC), Hybrid White-collared x Golden-collared Manakin (BC), Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth (BC), Roadside Hawk (BC), Panamanian White-faced Capuchin (BC), Red-capped Manakin (BC), Tranquilo Bay (BC), Yellow-headed Caracara (BC), Collared Aracari (BC), Coral (Jane Hartman - JH), Gartered Violaceous Trogon (BC), Birding by Boat (BC), Magnificent Frigatebird (BC), Green-and-black Poison Dart Frog (BC), Collared Trogon (BC), Green Honeycreeper (BC), Scarlet-thighed Dacnis (BC), Central American Boa (BC), Strawberry Poison Dart Frog (BC), Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (BC), Bay-breasted Warbler (BC)