

Western Panama: Tranquilo Bay | March 8-14, 2026 | Trip Report | by Mason Flint



Guides: Mason Flint, Brenda & Alvaro (Tranquilo Bay)

Participants: Susan, Alan, Catherine, Christy, Neil, Gail and David



Sunday, March 8 Flight to Tranquilo Bay, Birding Lodge Grounds

Gail, David, Susan, and Alan met with Mason in the Radisson restaurant and enjoyed very slowly delivered drinks while we got acquainted – or re-acquainted in the case of Gail and David who joined a SE Arizona tour led by Mason the previous spring. Some of us ended up having dinner there before heading to bed early to prepare for a very early start Sunday morning.

We left the hotel before 5:00 am for the short drive to Albrook airport. We arrived with time to spare because the check-in desk didn't open until 6:00 and we were on our way to Bocas del Toro just before 7:00. The flight to Bocas is almost due west, following the north/Caribbean coast of Panama before landing in the small airport. The Tranquilo Bay team met us outside the arrival area and within minutes we were onboard Kingfisher, a new covered vessel that we became very familiar with over the next several days. We met Brenda, the very talented Tranquilo Bay guide, and the trusty boatmen who would take great care of us during our stay. Calm seas made the trip quick – about 30 minutes – and we were welcomed by Jay at the dock. While approaching the dock we saw a Green Ibis flying by and a Common Black Hawk in the mangroves as we walked the boardwalk toward the lodge.

Because of our early flight, the wonderful Tranquilo Bay kitchen staff had breakfast waiting for us when we arrived at the main lodge building. Renee gave us a quick orientation and then we enjoyed birding from the veranda outside the dining room where the feeders were active with Prothonotary warblers and a pair of Black-



cheeked Woodpeckers. We were eventually escorted to our comfortable cabins and had some time to unpack and relax before meeting at 11:30 for an hour of birding the garden just outside our cabins. We saw our first Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth – this one with a baby – and nearly 30 species of birds including White-crowned and Short-billed Pigeons, Blue-chested Hummingbird, Double-toothed Kite, Red-capped Manakins, and our first look at the White-collared x Golden-Collared Manakin hybrids that are found in this part of Panama. A few in the group started early and saw a Dog-winged Antbird.

After lunch and a siesta, we met for another few hours of birding. We added several new species including Stripe-throated Hermit, Crowned Woodnymph, Masked Tityra and Boat-billed Flycatcher, and White-browed Gnatcatcher. We also saw the first of many parrots for the trip – Blue-headed Parrot and Mealy and Red-lored Amazon. Neil expressed dismay that the Amazons were not called Parrots. While walking the boardwalk through the mangroves we saw an aptly named Mangrove Yellow Warbler and several White-lined Bats roosting on a shed. Non-bird sightings included a Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth, Spectacled Caiman, and a Green Iguana resting on a snag below the canopy tower.

After a great dinner including snapper and green salad and lively conversation, we headed to our cabins to rest before an early start the next morning.

Monday, March 9 Camino Punta Robalo, Palo Seco

During the trip we alternated between “away” days – meaning we depart early and don’t return to Tranquilo Bay until late afternoon – and days when we return for lunch or stay at the lodge for the day. Today was an “away” to the mainland and up to the continental divide.

We woke up and walked to the lodge for breakfast at 5:30 and departed as the sun started to rise at 6:30. While boarding Kingfisher we heard a Gray-cowled Wood-Rail and saw a few Green Ibis before zipping toward Punta Robalo where we were met by Angel, our trusty driver for mainland excursions. Punta Robalo is a very small village with a “rustic” dock, a few houses, and the ever important restroom! We spent about 30 minutes there, adding several new birds for the trip including Sandwich Tern, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Northern Tropical Pewee, Olive-backed Euphonia, Golden-hooded Tanager, and Red-legged Honeycreeper. After departing the village, we spent almost two hours birding along the quiet road which is lined by wetlands and agricultural fields. We added dozens to our trip list including Groove-billed Ani, Northern Jacana, Pied Puffbird, Roadside Hawk, Keel-billed Toucan, Red-breasted Meadowlark, Brown Jay, Black-striped Sparrow, White-lined and Scarlet-rumped Tanager, and Buff-throated Saltator.



After exiting Camino Punta Robalo, we left the swampy lowlands and wound our way up toward the continental divide where we entered highland evergreen forests. Our first stop was a small roadside guard station for Bosque Protector de Palo Seco. Palo Seco is an important conservation corridor connecting nearby Fortuna Forest Reserve and La Amistad International Park that is shared by Panama and Costa Rica. Most of Palo Seco is inaccessible with a few trails heading down the steep mountains. We stayed close to the guard station, birding while the team set up a nice picnic lunch. Yellow-throated Toucans called from hidden treetops, and we saw several birds including our first Pale-billed Woodpecker of the trip, Cinnamon Becard, and a pair of Bay-headed Tanagers. The picnic lunch was delicious with sandwiches, homemade empanadas brought by Angel, delicious pico de gallo, and fruit. A friendly red female dog politely kept us company while we ate, earning a few leftovers.

Our next stop a bit higher up toward the divide at a place called the *Abandoned Restaurant* where we saw White-collared Swifts zooming overhead, a Black-and-white Warbler, Neil spotted a Dusky-faced Tanager, and a few of us got glimpses of a Carmiol's Tanager. From there we headed higher to the Continental Divide where we found...fog. Yes, we saw a few birds including a Blue-chested Hummingbird, but the low clouds and light rain made birding very difficult. Brenda suggested we head back down and didn't get any objections. We made a few stops on the way down, including one at what Brenda called the Palo Seco Tanager Spot. This roadside spot had a small family-run fruit stand and trees on both sides of the road. We spotted several birds there including Crowned Woodnymph, a Barred Hawk soaring above, a Collared (Orange-bellied) Trogon, and a Pale-vented Thrush. After descending down to the lowlands and making a short stop along Camino Punta Robalo, we boarded Kingfisher and zipped back to Tranquilo Bay where we freshened up, met for the evening checklist, and enjoyed another delicious dinner.

Tuesday, March 10 Isla Popa and Tranquilo Bay

We had a more relaxing day today with a "late" breakfast at 6:00 AM. After breakfast, we gathered our gear needed for the morning excursion to nearby Isla Popa. A few in the group had already walked down to the dock when Neil appeared in the dining room with an excited look on his face and said he and Christy had found an owl perched by the path to our cabins. Everyone rushed the short distance away and got fantastic looks at a Black-and-white Owl. When the last members of the group arrived, the owl had flown down from the perch to capture prey. Wow!

When we arrived at the dock, we were met by another new Tranquilo Bay vessel – a two-level pontoon boat ideal for slow birding. The trip across the channel to Isla Popa took about 15 minutes. When we arrived, we stopped close to the shoreline and started listening and looking. A man paddled by in a Cayuco, the homemade



canoe common in Bocas del Toro. We soon spotted a Mangrove Yellow Warbler and shortly after a Mangrove Cuckoo, both very much at home in the mangroves that surround Isla Popa and other islands in Bocas. A bit later, someone in the group – probably Brenda – caught sight of one of the most sought-after birds for the trip – a Snow Cotinga. We cruised as close as we could to where the Cotinga was perched and got good, if somewhat distant, looks. Success.

From there we backtracked through the inlet to a rustic dock that provides access to a small plot of land owned by a Tranquilo Bay neighbor friendly to groups with permission. The property includes a partly cleared hilltop with great views and easy birding. Before climbing the small hill, we walked a short trail to a spot where Brenda pointed out a green morph Strawberry Poison Dart Frog. From the hilltop we saw several birds including pairs of Slaty-tailed Trogons and Lineated Woodpeckers, a flock of Olive-throated Parakeets, Cocoa Woodcreeper, and five species of tanagers but the real treat was seeing at least FIVE Snowy Cotingas up close and personal. Early in the morning we saw the cotinga perched in mangroves about 100 feet away. This time, two perched in a tree immediately above us, occasionally moving to another branch with equally great looks. Amazing.

Sated, we re-boarded the pontoon boat and headed back to Tranquilo Bay for lunch, pausing on the way to look at a pair of Hudsonian Whimbrels. After lunch, some in the group chose to relax in their cabins while some of us walked the grounds before dinner. One highlight was a Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth with a tiny baby close to the trail. We spent 30-40 minutes at a small freshwater streamlet where Purple-crowned Fairies, Crowned Woodnymphs a Red-capped and "hybrid" manakins bathed and we got glimpses of a pair of Red-throated Ant-Tanagers.

Wednesday, March 11 Changuinola Canal, Rio Changuinola, Isla Pajaros

Today was an "away" day, spent cruising through the Changuinola Canal to the Rio Changuinola. While we enjoyed dinner the previous night, a few of the Tranquilo Bay boatmen moved the pontoon boat and spent the night at the entrance to the Changuinola Canal so it was there waiting when we arrived this morning. Thank you!

In the late 1880s, a man named Jochen Ludwid Henrich Hein acquired land on the Bocas del Toro mainland and planted bananas, striking "green gold." His properties included land along the Changuinola River which was only accessible via the river mouth which was inaccessible to boats because of currents and sandbars. Hein was unable to exploit those lands. After he died, three Americans, the Snyder brothers, acquired his land and



radically modernized banana production. Before selling their land to the new United Fruit Company, Michael Snyder caved the Snyder (now Changuinola) Canal to connect the river to the calm ocean channel off the northwest tip of Isla Colon. The canal is no longer maintained but provides access to incredible birding and wildlife.

The slow cruise along the canal and the Changuinola River had many highlights including a roosting Great Potoo, Bronzy Hermit, glimpses at Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, at least two American Pygmy Kingfisher, Black-cowled Oriole, Nicaraguan Seed-finch, and a sloth swimming across the canal behind us. As we approached the river we spotted a Masked Duck (a life bird for Brenda!), and a Limpkin. The river hosted ducks (Black-bellied Whistling-Duck and Blue-winged Teal), shorebirds including Black-necked Stilt, Spotted Sandpiper, and Greater Yellowlegs, Wood Storks, Anhinga, Least Bittern, and others. After mooring on the shoreline and a delicious lunch, we birded the pasture and dispersed trees where we saw Gartered Violaceous Trogon, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, and many others. After a short stop at the river mouth where we saw a Collared Plover, we headed back into the canal pausing only for a Ringed Kingfisher and a visit to the unique outhouse built by the Tranquilo Bay team.

Exiting the canal involved a bit of work due to low tide. Everyone removed their shoes and rolled up their pant-legs to wade across the shallow sandbar and board Kingfisher. After boarding, we headed out into the open ocean to visit Isla Pajaros (aka Swan Cay, odd in this swan-less country). The trip to these tiny nearshore islands was bouncy manageable, taking about 15 minutes. Once there, we held on tight and enjoyed the spectacle of dozens of nesting Red-billed Tropicbirds, Magnificent Frigatebirds, and Brown Boobies before turning tail and heading back into calmer waters for the trip back to Tranquilo Bay.

We arrived back home before 5:00, giving everyone time to freshen up and relax before meeting for the checklist and dinner.

Thursday, March 12 Tierra Oscura and Tranquilo Bay

We met for breakfast again at 6:00 before heading out for a half-day excursion to Tierra Oscura, an isolated settlement on the mainland. Tierra Oscura roughly translates to “dark land” which presumably was named because of the dark, heavily forested land in the area. Until recently, the small village on the shoreline where we landed was very difficult to reach except by boat because of poor road conditions. The construction of a nice paved road certainly improved the lives of the villagers – who are predominantly from indigenous communities – and made it possible for our driver Angel drive to the village and take us birding. We drove a short distance up



the road before jumping out to walk slowly along the lower, more open, section of road. Birds in this area included several Gray-headed Chachalaca, fantastic looks at an American Pygmy Kingfisher, Pied Puffbird, Northern Barred and Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Cinnamon Becard, Long-tailed Tyrant, Black-chested Jay, and a brief flyby of a Chestnut-headed Oropendola.

A few miles up the road we birded along the road and walked a short distance into the forest. We heard but weren't able to see Purple-throated Fruitcrows that were calling from the forest. We saw a Double-toothed Kite and a lovely dark morph Short-tailed Hawk, and others but the diminutive stars of this stop were nice looks at an almost tailless Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant and a Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher. A bit further up the road we climbed off the bus and immediately heard 2 or 3 White-tailed Trogons vocalizing in relatively open forest. After scanning the trees for what seemed like an hour but was actually only 15 minutes, Brenda (as usual) finally spotted a pair perched in plain sight. Meanwhile, while scanning kettles of vultures overhead, Mason spotted a King Vulture, a new bird for some in the group. We also heard a Rufous Motmot calling that also proved difficult to find but we eventually found this beautiful bird perched low in the forest.

We turned around and wound our way down to the village for the short boat trip back to Tranquilo Bay for lunch and a well-deserved siesta. Many in the group decided to relax or snorkel while a few of us birded the grounds where we saw many of the now familiar resident birds and a few harder to see species including a Bronzy Hermit and Band-tailed Barbthroat. We all met for the checklist, drinks, and dinner before heading to bed early to rest for another trip to the mainland on Friday.

Friday, March 13

Back to Continental Divide

Today we retraced the route we took on Monday to the mainland and up to the continental divide. After breakfast at 5:30, we departed Tranquilo Bay before 6:30 and arrived at Punta Robalo just after 7:00 where Angel met us on his comfortable bus. While loading supplies onto the bus and taking a quick bathroom break, we spotted an Orchard Oriole and a Yellow-crowned Euphonia. Eager to get up high while, we didn't stop to bird along Camino Punta Robalo this time through. We stopped briefly at the Super Centro Economico for another bathroom break and snacks at the store before continuing up to the Palo Seco Tanager Spot. Our second visit to this roadside spot was even more productive than the first. We spotted almost 30 species including a Gray-headed Kite, Keel-billed Toucan, a pair of Sulphur-winged Parakeets, Mistletoe Tyrannulet, Long-tailed Tyrant, White-browed Gnatcatcher, a Dusky-faced Tanager, and Golden-hooded, Bay-headed, and Emerald Tanagers.

Heading higher, we reached Camino de la Divisoria Continental (aka Continental Divide Road) before 10:00 and were met by blue skies, a marked contrast from our first visit. We walked and drove through this beautiful road



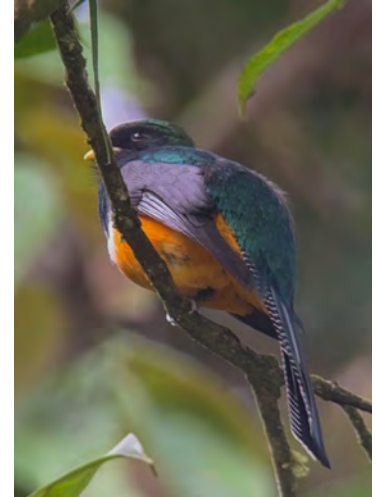
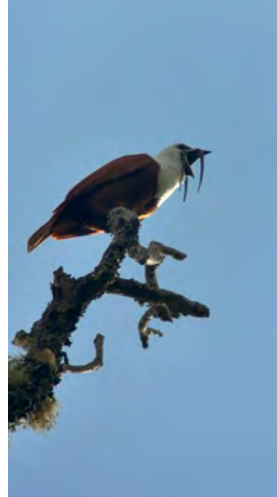
through high montane forests for a few hours, enjoying the birds as well as plants and wildflowers. Highlights included a White-bellied Mountain-gem (Mason's 150th hummingbird species!), Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Tawny-capped Euphonia, Golden-winged Warbler, Tropical Parula, Costa Rican Warbler, Slate-throated Redstart, and Crimson-collared, Silver-throated, and Black-and-yellow Tanagers.

From there we continued over the divide, passing Fortuna Reservoir, to the Nispero Restaurant where we enjoyed another delicious picnic lunch and beautiful views of the surrounding mountains. While the team set up lunch, we spotted a pair of Acorn Woodpeckers, a Black-throated Green Warbler and an uncommon Townsend's Warbler. After lunch, someone in the group spotted a bigger green bird perched low on one of the pines – Northern Emerald-Toucanet! We eventually saw that there were a pair, likely nesting nearby. Before leaving, some in the group bought coffee from a local grower.

On our way back toward the continental divide we made a short stop at Quijada del Diablo (Jaw of the Devil), a place named for strong winds passing through between the Pacific to the south and Caribbean to the north. While there we saw a Lesser Violetear and White-tailed Emerald. Next stop was Fortuna Reservoir which has nice restrooms. The best bird there was an Isthmian Wren and Brenda spotted a pair of Black Phoebe hundreds of yards below the dam. We made another short stop on the continental divide road hoping to pull out a Lattice-tailed Trogon. The trogon didn't show up but a calling Ornate Hawk-Eagle soaring overhead made up for that miss. We arrived back at Tranquilo Bay just after 6:00 and decided to skip the checklist before dinner after a long but productive day.

Saturday, March 14 Birding Tranquilo Bay Grounds

We spent our last full day at Tranquilo Bay relaxing and exploring the grounds. Everyone met outside the cabin area shortly after sunrise to enjoy birds, butterflies, and sloths before breakfast. The slow pace and familiarity with the birds made for a relaxing time. We were content to leave some of the birds heard only including Black-crowned Antshrikes, Bay Wren, and Tawny-crested Tanager. Most of the group got nice looks at a pair of Blue Dacnis and Blue-headed Parrots and Red-lored Amazon's squawked as they flew over us on the canopy tower. After breakfast, some in the group chose to snorkel while others relaxed. At lunch we visited with a couple who were visiting Tranquilo Bay to capture video for a public television program in Germany. We all gathered later in the afternoon for our birding before departure on Saturday. We revisited the small forest stream where we watched hummingbirds and manakins bathing. We saw Stripe-throated Hermit, Purple-crowned Fairy, and Crowned Woodnymph, and heard Blue-chested Emerald. We also saw an American Pygmy Kingfisher as well as White-flanked and Dot-winged Antwrens and a Stub-tailed Spadebill. As the group started to disperse, Alvaro,



the Tranquilo Bay boatman who is quickly becoming a great birder, spotted a Bronzy Hermit on a nest. On the trail to the bathing pond, we saw a Striped Rocket Frog.

After freshening up, we all met for our last checklist and dinner together. Some in the group took a short night walk with Brenda after dinner. On the boardwalk we spotted a scorpion – likely a species in the Thick-tailed genus *Tityus*. While down by the dock we heard the eerie call of a Common Potoo and a Uniform Crake. While walking trails above the main lodge building, we saw Green Climbing Toads, a Red-eyed Tree Frog, and the larger Valliant's and Savage's Thin-toed Frogs.

Sunday March 15 Departures – Some to Mount Totumas, Some to Home

After breakfast, Gail, Jeannie, David, and Mason along with the German filmmakers loaded up and boated to Bocas del Toro for flights to Panama City and connections back to the US on Sunday. Susan, Alan, Catherine, Christy, and Neil got to sleep in a bit before heading back to the mainland and their last trip across the continental divide on their way to Mount Totumas.

I think it's safe to say that this was a great group of curious travelers who enjoyed each other's company. Hopefully we'll meet again!

Photo Credits: Group (Mason Flint - MF), Resplendent Quetzal (Alan Hull - AH), Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (MF), Blue-headed Parrot (MF), Scenic (MF), Collared Aracari (AH), Black-and-white Owl (MF), Rufous Motmot (MF), Great Potoo (MF), Northern Emerald Toucanet (AH), Frog (MF), Group on boat (MF), Three-wattled Bellbird (AH)