

Naturalist Journeys, LLC
PANAMA: Canopy Lodge and Tower Adventure
March 13-21, 2011 Trip Report

*Peg Abbott, Carlos Bethancourt, Alexis Sanchez, and Faustino “Tino”
Sanches as guides, with 9 participants.*



Early Arrivals

Several members of our group arrived early since Peg had timed the journey to facilitate taking a half- or full-day transit of the Panama Canal. Three did so and enjoyed learning a lot from both the commentary and the passage itself. Peg joined them after the cruise to explore Casco Viejo, an historic area of the city, with its many fun shops and restaurants. Janine’s idea, passion fruit margaritas in an open-air café, was definitely a highlight!

Sunday, March 13 Arrival in Panama

Bob and Karen also came in a day early and headed straight to the Canopy Lodge; in time to take in El Valle’s rural market as agricultural vendors were setting up early Sunday morning. Those arriving at mid-day still got to enjoy some of the market with its stalls adorned

with brightly-colored fruits and vegetables, orchids, crafts, gingers, bromeliads, and ornamental plants for local gardens. As Marcyes commented, the market is both social time and time together for families tending their booths.



Peg arrived to a memorable welcome amid much excitement, created by Raul’s brother’s dog – appropriately named Chaos. The author of the new Panama field guide, George Angehr, was also visiting, and while Peg asked him to sign her book, Chaos grabbed her much-loved and annotated copy of Robert Ridgely’s Panama field guide and ran off with it in glee. He made several wild circles, and then disappeared down towards the creek; book in mouth, chased by several people. Raul returned triumphantly, with the book (only slightly chewed), which adds to its character. Peg jokingly accused George of hiring Chaos to reward the replacement!

After this wild start, we took a walk with our guide, Tino. Hummingbirds were the highlight, as we got great looks at Rufous-tailed, Snowy-bellied, and Rufous-crested



Coquettes. Up the road we saw our first parrots and toucans, a noisy flock of Black-chested Jays, a Rufous-capped Warbler, and a Three-toed Sloth, which was tucked firmly up on a far tree, a vertical branch between his “cheeks” to hold him firmly in place – a rather strange sight in scope view. This was a good first day for mammals, as we also watched a White-nosed Coati cross the road. The lodge feeders were busy on our return, with a mix of tanagers and the ever-present Thick-billed Euphonias, Red-

legged Honeycreepers, and the occasional Chestnut-headed Oropendola.

Dinner was scrumptious: chicken with orange sauce, lentils and rice, and a delicious chayote and cheese soufflé, followed by carrot cake. Yum!

Monday, March 14 Canopy Lodge / El Valle

Dawn in the tropics brings lots of beautiful bird sounds, and the transition from dark to light comes quickly, all happening within about 10 minutes. What a joy to be at this beautiful lodge, watching daybreak from our own private porch, or better yet, from our rooms, with doors open and still in bed! Dining is open-air here, and each day we particularly enjoyed having breakfast with the birds as pink-tinged clouds hung above the creek.



By 7:15, Tino was ready to take us on a walk, and right from the start, we heard Golden-crowned Manakins clicking. Feeding Rufous-crested Coquettes came very close. This was our first try to see the Tody Motmot – a bird we were destined to work hard for! A few of the group wandered back to the lodge mid-morning and were rewarded with the sighting of an Amazon Kingfisher by the pool. The rest of us found a mixed flock, with at least four Canada Warblers, a Cocoa Woodcreeper, and Orange-billed Sparrows.



We returned for lunch, savoring an oh-so-rich-and-wonderful Lasagna Bolognese and fresh greens. Yum (again)! A few retired to their porches, some lingered by the feeders, others photographed various subjects: posing Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds, the huge and photographically obliging Basiliscus lizard, Morpho Butterflies flitting through, and

a 2-inch Rhinoceros Beetle.

In the afternoon, we visited a conservation program set up to breed and display Panama’s native frogs and toads, housed at the local zoo in El Valle. Many frog species are rare and now declining, and it was excellent to see them close up! In the frog facility, a partnership with the Houston Zoo, we saw some of Earth’s rare creatures – including the highly local



Panama Golden Toad, which seemed to glow as it rested on the rocks in its special terrarium.

We experienced some great birding right on the zoo grounds, finding flocks of Yellow-green Vireos, Yellow-crowned Euphonias, a Black and White Warbler, and Lesser



Elaenias. Outside, in zoo exhibits, we enjoyed close



views of Three-toed Sloths, a Rufescent Tiger Heron, a variety of macaws and two sound-asleep Tapirs. We then birded down a residential road, where the highlight was absolutely CRACKING views of a singing Rosy Thrush Tanager. Earlier, both Peg and Bob had shared their tales of previous encounters, noting their special fondness for this bird. We got photographs of our first Variegated Squirrels, and at closing, met the manager, a highly competent veterinarian dedicated to the zoo

enough to man the entrance and sell us Cokes as needed. We left a contribution, and hope they will prosper.

Views of the surrounding mountains could be seen from every place we visited in El Valle, and we grew fond of the outlines of Cara Iguana, El Gaital, and other volcanic peaks.



Dinner this night was an herb-encrusted sea bass, au-gratin potatoes, broccoli in peanut sauce, and walnut cake. We went to bed on full bellies as the Tropical Screech Owl started up its chorus.

Tuesday, March 15 Las Minas Road / El Valle

We woke to an absolutely drop-dead gorgeous day to go up into the mountains. After an early start, we arrived to the sound of chickens – to be more precise, the sound of MANY chickens, that of thousands of roosters! Chicken farming is a way of life in the valley, and this farm had large airy cages perched on the mesa under the peaks and ridges that surround El Gaital. Each held several thousand songsters.



Leaving agriculture behind for scattered woodland, we ambled up the road where one of our first bird sightings in a huge tree was a Blue-throated Toucanet, which posed long enough for us to all get great views.

Underneath it was a Broad-billed Motmot, and skulking along in roadside shrubbery was a Black-faced Antthrush, strutting with its tail upright, a signature posture of this species.

Tino had a nearby spot in mind to try for one of the rarer species we'd see on our journey. We walked a narrow trail, and then crouched low in a dense forest of palms with a thick moist understory of shrubs and trees. We waited with "screaming hamstrings" (Bob's expression), until Martha said, "It's here, straight ahead, 30 feet." Several caught a good look of this spectacular bird's checkered breast as it paused on the path. Others got an ample side view, noting the dark crown – a Black-crowned Antpitta – WOW!

We were all grinning as we stepped back onto the sunny road toward the next treat: great views of the Orange-collared Trogon. Butterflies we saw in the hedgerow included Veined White Skippers, Crimson (Giant) Patches, and Banded Peacocks in profusion. Bob called out “Swallow-tailed Kite” right there from the trogon spot, and 100 yards away at a particularly scenic spot where we could see all the way to the Pacific, he found another gem, calling out “White Hawk!” This sighting started us on a roll toward an impressive list of raptors this trip.



We passed a few photogenic local houses, and were disturbed by the stark contrast of these primitive homes to the \$2 million mansions in the distance, noting the steep road cut out of the forest landscape especially built for their construction. Someday the chicken farms and local residences may all be consumed by real estate ventures. But today the area was ours to explore, and quiet, aside from the sounds of nature (and roosters). One sound we were thrilled to hear was that of the Wedge-tailed Grassbird, a singing male in plain view on a fence wire, new for many of the group. Eastern Meadowlarks, a mix of Swallows, Band-rumped Swifts, good views of Short-tailed Hawks, and sightings of some lovely orchids rounded out the day.



Tino had snacks and cold drinks waiting for us at the van, and, after a bit more birding, we headed back to lunch and some rest time at the lodge. Jim had a swim in the natural pool of the lodge the day before. Today he and Marcyes, with Karen along as photographer, ventured off to via swinging bridge to the Canopy Adventure to try a tropical zipline. Jim says it should be mandatory so that everyone could experience what it feels like to be a

bird! They especially loved pausing right over the waterfall.



Those of us who rested during the break picked up our adventurers en route to our afternoon outing, a walk in a lovely residential area where bougainvillea in six or more colors lined our pathway. A Green Kingfisher awaited us, perched over a small stream. A pair of male and female Barred Antshrike put on a quite a show, and we nearly broke the patience record (was it really an hour?) as we heard, but did NOT see a Tody Motmot, attempt No. 2 for this species. We had Plain Wrens, Lesser Elaenias, and a female



Hepatic Tanager. The views were lovely, the homes spectacular, and we headed back contented after another fine day.

As usual, wine and appetizers awaited us after our showers, as all the lodge guests gathered for dinner. Tonight the wind was strong enough to pick up our placemats and to hurl stunned Wynn's wineglass across the table! Such are the hazards of our marvelous open-air dining where we could watch the lights of click-beetles and see stars peeking out from these lush forests.



Tonight's feast was beef filet, gazpacho salad, beets, a spinach casserole followed by banana cake, wow!



Wednesday, March 16 Santa Clara / Pacific beaches /

The lure of Canopy Lodge's comforts was too strong for some who chose to stay and relax, so just a small group of us headed out for lowland birding at dawn. These troupers were richly

rewarded with excellent birding, starting out with Veraguan Mangos (a type of hummingbird) feeding on red blooms of *Erithryna* trees. These little gems were joined by deep blue Sapphire-throated (male and female) Hummingbirds, Yellow-crowned Euphonias, and other species. In the fields were even brighter Red-breasted Blackbirds.



Peg called out "Brown-hooded Parakeets!" – an unnecessary alert since within a few minutes they perched before our eyes, feeding on ripe red, abundant cashew fruits. Jim and Janine said they'd never look at a cashew in the same way again, once they'd seen how complex a structure encased what we find in the store as roasted nuts.



Other bird highlights from this area included close views of a Squirrel Cuckoo, which ignored us in favor of finding juicy yellow caterpillars among the foliage.



We moved to an area of rice fields and, while these were not flooded enough to attract Whistling Ducks or shorebirds, we did find numerous Yellow-headed Vultures, Crested Caracaras, and a stunning Savannah Hawk in flight. We also had scope views of Plain-breasted Ground Doves and heard several Blue Ground Doves calling.



We celebrated our good fortunes by enjoying lunch at Raul's beach house, a lovely and relaxing spot where we

could swim in the ocean as chevrons of Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds passed overhead. We returned to enjoy the rest of the afternoon at the lodge. Peg, Jim, and Janine fit in a 3-mile loop hike up and around the waterfall for views and exercise.

Our final dinner for our four-night stay here was a winner: chicken with oregano, a corn soufflé, and chocolate cake to write home about. (Yum, one more time!)

Thursday, March 17 Success with Tody Motmot / On to Canopy Tower

Making the most of our time at the Lodge, we ventured out with Tino for a third and SUCCESSFUL attempt to find the elusive Tody Motmot – hooray! While it tried to hide among dense vegetation, all of us got a good view. Another highlight of the morning was watching the feeding behaviors of a Lineated Woodpecker. New for our list was an Eye-ringed Flatbill. Mist swirled about the peaks at the start of the



morning, but the light was still bright enough to illuminate the jewel-tones of a White-necked Jacobin as it fed on tiny violet flowers of a row of the verbena, *Stachytarpheta*. By 10 AM we were packed up and off for our next adventure: On to Canopy Tower!

A quick 15-minute stop to scan the mudflats of Panama City proved productive, giving us several shorebirds, gulls, terns, and waders.

We reached the Tower in time for a late lunch, then an outing to the Ammo Dump Ponds, where a host of new species awaited in the lowlands. Highlights of this birding venture

included Lyn and Martha spotting a nesting Rufescent Tiger Heron, Wattled Jacanas, Lesser Kiskadees, our first Greater Anis, two Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, and more. We passed through lush forests coming and going, as our route over to Gamboa let us see ships passing on the Canal – so much LIFE to see and absorb!

We returned to wine and appetizers, sunset viewed from the Tower, and a delicious dinner. The night sounds were intriguing, but we left seeing the species for another night...



Photo: Bob Behrstock www.naturewideimages.com

Fri., March 18 Revised Plans / Fort San Lorenzo / Historic Train

Our group decided against a super-early start considering the long day ahead and the train ride back from Colon. So we re-designed the plan to include dawn viewing from the Tower, a walk down Semaphore Hill, and a post-lunch departure to see historic Fort San Lorenzo with a chance to pick up a few Caribbean species. We found a Red-capped Manakin dancing from perch to perch as we greeted the day on the Tower's observation deck, but two Green Shrike Vireos taunted us and stayed in the "heard-only" column.



One of our first finds on the walk was a really good one, a pair of Black-breasted Puffbirds excavating a nest in a termite mound, about half-way up to the canopy. After a Rufous Motmot seemed to pose for us, we encountered a mixed flock with Plain Xenops, Checker-throated and Dot-winged Antwrens, Dusky Antbirds, and more. Lyn and our guide Carlos did some terrific digiscoping, and when Karen and Bob lingered on this morning outing, they hit a mother lode of additional species – Great Jacamars, White-necked Puffbirds, Plain-brown Woodcreepers – fun!

After lunch, we headed north to the other side of the isthmus. Lush forests line the way to Fort San Lorenzo, where a beautiful harbor sits far below a fort dating back several centuries. We gazed at the wide mouth of the Chagras River and wandered among the brick and rock ruins, reading interpretive signs about various periods of Spanish, British, and pirates' rule. We then

walked back down the road from the Fort, where Karen (ahead and scouting with Bob) waved us on to a Broad-billed Motmot that stayed close to the road for our inspection. What a great bird!



Next we found a Mangrove Black Hawk and a few other species, and then hustled to pass across the Gatun Locks in time to make our 5 PM Panama Railway train. We JUST made it, and literally hopped aboard to relax on leather seats under polished wood trim on this refurbished historic train across the isthmus. At one point, passing over Gatun Lake, we saw water on both sides. Peg treated us to snacks and beer as we watched Snail Kites and Ospreys, along with Mangrove

Swallows in profusion, stunning scenery, the Titan and Hercules cranes, and very BIG ships.

**Sat. March 19 Discovery
Tower / a Peek at Pipeline Road /
Night Drive**

Today we voted to be up in the Discovery Tower as close to dawn as possible. To get there, we enjoyed a ride in the Canopy Tower's special "rainfomobile," an open-air coach that



allowed us to find a Black-tailed Trogon en route. We were soon walking the trail, then climbing stairs that wound within arms' reach of palms and tree limbs to a platform above it all. What a thrill to arrive to a "surround sound" of birds – a tropical symphony! For some of our group, the calls were familiar, and they could quickly sort what to pursue with binoculars. Others were just happy to take in the sea of the green canopy below, hone in close on beauty, and respond to the leader's calls of "Blue Cotinga," "Purple-throated Fruitcrow," and others. Marcyes remarked that it was a relatively quiet day atop the Tower, but we picked up species steadily, if not in profusion. We found Blue Dacnis and Golden-hooded Tanagers at close range, and

with some encouragement, drew in a dashing pair of Cinnamon Woodpeckers.



Down below on the porch of the Discovery Center, the feeders were active with Violet-crowned Woodnymphs, Long-billed Hermits, White-necked Jacobins, and other hummingbirds. Then, just as we slung the scopes over our shoulders in preparation to walk the nearby Pipeline Trail, we heard a call we had longed for – and IN flies a Pheasant Cuckoo, right into a small tree above the feeders! We all dropped our belongings, raised our glasses, and saw its facial markings, its wild tail. Wow – this place really is magical!

... And, for the next hours the magic continued. Along Pipeline Road, we found more fruit crows, a displaying pair of Dot-winged Antwrens, and a very stubborn Brown Twistwing, seemingly only feet away but still hidden in dense shrubbery. Luckily for us, slight cloud cover kept us cool, but the cold

drinks waiting in the vehicle were still welcome. An additional bonus was the super-snazzy dragonfly Bob found us en route.

We returned to the lodge just in time for another grand event: The resident troupe of Howler Monkeys was RIGHT outside the dining room windows. Up several stories in the Canopy Tower, we



could watch as they stuffed themselves with *Cecropia* leaves, hanging in wild positions to reach new tender leaves. One mother had a baby just a few days old, and we gasped as she stretched, dangling, to snatch the outermost branches. It's up to the young ones to hang on, and at times it dangled with its arms flailing, then found and grabbed its mother's fur. Other youngsters appeared on this stage, playing like puppies between

feedings. Two males seemed to take turns guarding the group, facing directly toward the dining room. From this perch, they could still feed, while baring their teeth and

reminding us with guttural sounds that they are Howler Monkeys. Finally they moved off, and we moved in for our own feed.



After lunch, we ventured out to the nearby Summit Pond. This area has produced some rarities of late, not so today, but we were content to scope in species such as Green Kingfisher, Panama and Streaked flycatchers, Yellow-backed Orioles, and a few migrants, such as Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Bay-breasted Warblers and Eastern Kingbirds. Two Boat-billed Herons were tucked up on nests, and a REAL treat was a bird our guides have followed for some five years or more, a nesting Rufous Nightjar. Ken remarked on the outstanding quality of their camouflage.



After dinner, Alexis took us on a night drive in which we hit the jackpot! Perhaps first and foremost was the cracking view we got, going out and returning, of a Spectacled Owl consuming a native rat about a third of its size. Lynn captured some photos in quick flashes of our spotlight – wow! We also had Common Potoos, along with several Woolly Opossums, Night Monkeys, and two very shy Olingos. The *Bombax* flowers were beckoning them forth, and we found both Two-toed and Three-toed Sloths continuing their daytime feed on these delicacies. After an hour, we returned to our tree-top roost after a full and eventful day.

**Sun., March 20 Happy Spring!
Celebrate with a Boat Ride...**

What a great place to be to celebrate the Spring Equinox! We met on the observation deck at dawn, listening to Howler Monkeys, flights of parrots, Great Tinamous, two species of forest falcons, and more. Time on this deck always satisfying: A sea of greenery separates viewers from Panama City, remote and quite lovely on the horizon. Ships pass through the Canal, and for all directions, there are precious few lights other than these.



is

Today, once again, the clouds cleared, and we had good conditions for our Jungle Boat Trip on the Panama Canal. Peg has done this trip several times before and gave a presentation on what to anticipate. But words don't describe the sheer FUN of zipping alongside a huge cargo ship from the Orient, bound for Europe or the eastern USA. We waved at the crew standing on decks that tower above us and sped past to turn into yet a new cove of Gatun Lake, complete with its own set of islands.



Birds of the marshy habitats are intriguing, and we found Limpkins, Greater Anis, Snail Kites, Ospreys, and other species. Spoiled by our close encounters with Howler Monkeys yesterday, the close-up view at "Monkey Island" shared with other tourist boats left us even more appreciative of the authentic nature travel we're enjoying on this trip.

On a small island where we paused, we found an

active colony of Yellow-rumped Caciques, a pair of Yellow-headed Caracaras, lots of cast-off apple snails from Snail Kite feeding, and a mating pair of Caribbean Yellow-face dragonflies. In one cove, we encountered a group of over 100 Black-bellied Whistling Ducks alongside a few Blue-winged Teals. Peg spotted one Fulvous Whistling Duck in the mob, an unusual sighting, which Bob confirmed, noting the black bill. Above us we saw repeated groups of migrating Turkey Vultures,



Swainson's Hawks, and Broad-winged Hawks. Martha had read about Gamboa, and told us a bit more as we passed through the historic town. The morning passes quickly, and soon we zoomed back to be fed once again, high in our tree-top dining room.



This last afternoon we elected to learn more about the Canal, leaving Bob to wander the Plantation Trail, where he happily pursued birds and bugs at his leisure. The rest of the group went to Miraflores Locks to watch the mechanics of just how a Panamax ship squeezes through, rising in intervals to reach the next series of locks and eventually the level of Gatun Lake. After enjoying the interactive exhibits about the Canal at the museum right there at the locks, Carlos suggested a return to the Summit Pond area as best use of the remaining daylight hours. We got leisurely views of a cooperative Boat-billed Heron, which showed off its bill long enough for some digiscoping. Marcyes remarked on how relaxing this visit was, as we viewed each bird with pleasure and congratulated ourselves at how familiar the more common species had become.



Dinner was delicious once again: the national dish of chicken with olives, capers and saffron. Several of us drifted up to the deck, first with wine in hand for sunset, and then to check on the full moon, which cast its beauty at us in glimpses between gathering clouds. This birding trip was a real vacation!

Mon., March 21, 2011

Last Walk on Semaphore Hill



Wynn and Ken had to leave on an earlier flight, but those of us on the 1:45 PM to Houston enjoyed one more walk with ever-enthusiastic Carlos. With his expertise, we found

several new species for our list. First off, we had terrific views of a Black-throated Trogon, which accomplished our goal of seeing all the trogons possible in the area. This bird came in to his whistle and sat long enough for us to enjoy learning more of the art of digiscoping. Just above the trogon, we heard repeated calls of a Bright-rumped Attila and, with a little encouragement it came in to give us quick but adequate scope views. We wandered down the road, a veritable tunnel of green, with palms and



blooming trees, vines, and huge towering trees creating a closed canopy.



Up in this canopy movement – yes! A new primate for our group to see – a very active troop of Geoffrey’s Tamarins scurried through the trees making bird-like chirping calls. Several jumped across a gap, limbs and claws stretched wide to grab on to whatever they encountered and continue on. Following the monkeys was a Double-tooted Kite, which Carlos got into the scope in seconds. A Crimson-crested Woodpecker was another treat to see, and we ended with

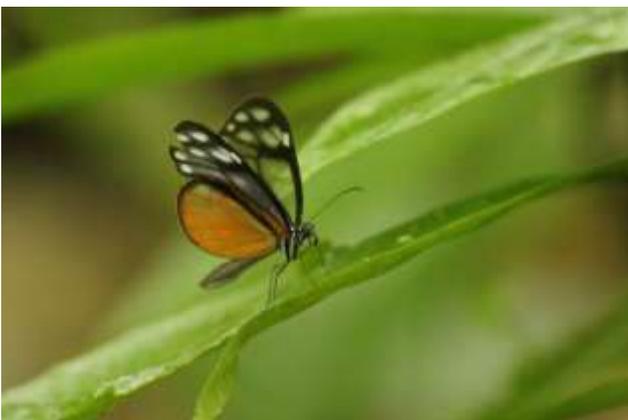
a bang, our final sighting being that of a roosting Great Potoo! We returned to watch the dedicated staff hauling laundry down the stairs, fixing up “our” rooms for the next guests. Time to go....

En route to the airport Bob spotted one more species for us – a Tricolored Heron in the mudflats of Panama City.

A great trip was had by all!
www.naturalistjourneys.com



Photo Credits:



Bob Behrstock (Naturewide Images): Harbor at Fort San Lorenzo, Snail Kite
Karen LeMay: Bob at El Valle Market, Red-legged Honeycreeper
Lynn Diana: Orange-bellied Trogon, Spectacled Owl
All others by Peg Abbott, Naturalist Journeys, LLC

Naturalist Journeys, LLC P.O. Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 (866) 900 1146
info@naturalistjourneys.com www.naturalistjourneys.com