

Panama & the Wild Darien | Trip Report

July 27 – August 3, 2019 | Written by James P. Smith



With Guide James P. Smith and local expert guides Igua and Oscar from the Canopy family, and participants Carol, Chris, Dick, Eileen, Jerry, Joe, June, Kate, Larry, Tracy





Saturday, July 27 Panama City | Riande Airport Hotel

Members of our party wandered the generously vegetated hotel grounds in search of birds and wildlife well before our formal meeting time of 6:30 pm in the hotel lobby. Birders do what birders do and sure enough, a decent selection of species had been seen before supper including Magnificent Frigatebird, White-tailed Kite, White-tipped Dove, Ruddy Ground-dove, Clay-colored Thrush, the delightful Common Tody-flycatcher, Tropical Mockingbird, and the tiniest of hummingbirds, Garden Emerald. The hotel gardens even produced the first mammal of the trip—Variegated Squirrel.

The tour began in earnest at the welcome dinner as we got know each other over a delicious buffet. The fun started early when our local guides, Igua and Oscar, showed up unexpectedly at dinner well ahead of their anticipated arrival the following morning. Their presence was welcomed with questions about the trip, not least of which was the trek to see Harpy Eagle, one of the main targets of the tour. One member of our party was notably absent as Dick's airline had cancelled on him at the last minute leaving him high and dry, and having to find his own way to Panama City. Not wanting to miss out on a cache of life birds, Dick successfully made it to the Riande in the small hours of Sunday morning and was there at breakfast raring to go—fantastic!

Sunday, July 28 Panama City | Icandi Road | Rio Torti | Avicar Restaurant | Canopy Camp Darien

After a substantial hotel breakfast, Igua and Oscar brought the tour vehicles around to the front of the hotel and loaded the luggage while members of the group enjoyed views of a perched Pale-vented Pigeon. A long drive lay ahead and Igua quite sensibly suggested that making a short stop at the local supermarket before heading out of the big city to stock up on toiletries, snacks and school supplies, the latter for a planned visit to an Embera-Wounan village later in the week. Even in this somewhat industrial setting we found birds in the form of Gray-breasted Martins, Southern Rough-winged Swallows, and the last Rock Pigeons that we would see until we returned to the city.

From there we headed east along Route 1, the Pan American Highway. Urban Panama City gave way to suburbs, industrial parks, and eventually rural countryside. The road was smooth and gently undulating, apparently perfect for Sunday morning cyclists of which we passed many. We passed plenty of birds along the drive too, all of which we knew would be seen throughout the tour including Turkey and Black Vultures, Yellow-headed Caracara, Ringed Kingfisher and Smooth-billed Ani. On the other hand, a single Crested Caracara that flew across the highway was taken a little too much for granted and proved to be only one of the tour.

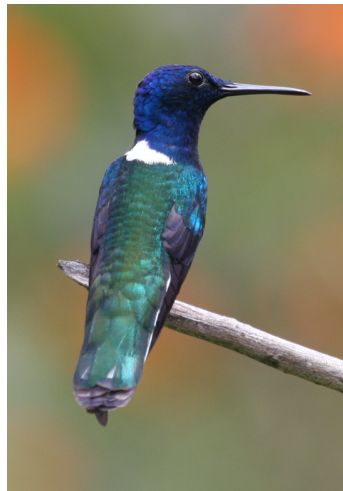
Igua explained that he wanted to skip a traditional stop at Lake Bayano in favor of trying something new, and how right he was. We pulled up at a gated forest track (the Icandi Road) with binoculars and camera lenses fogging up for a short time as we stepped out of the vehicles into a wall of humidity. We walked a few paces



along the Icandi Road and the birds came thick and fast; Barred Puffbird, Black-crowned and Masked Tityras, Lineated and Red-rumped Woodpeckers, Black Antshrike, and sensational views of Black-bellied Wren. June's sharp eyes and equally sharp call drew our attention to a Plain Xenops, a tiny brown woodland species, pretty innocuous and easy to overlook. A few more xenops might have been expected during the week but this ended up being the only one of the entire trip. Overhead, the skies were full of excitement with Plumbeous Kites, King Vultures, Zone-tailed Hawk, a soaring Anhinga (spotted by Dick) and a mixed flock of White-collared and Band-rumped Swifts. The short walk back along the track to the vehicles was accompanied by the unearthly growls of Mantled Howlers and giant, dancing Blue Morpho butterflies—a fabulous start to our first full day in the field!

We pressed on eastbound along the Pan American Highway. Ipeti Kuna provided us with the most beautiful of roadside raptors, a tiny Pearl Kite teed up on wires for all to enjoy. Ipeti Kuna also happened to be the village where Igua had grown up, and his sister miraculously appeared at the roadside with clean laundry at the ready for his next venture into the Darien! We pushed on east until we reached the Rio Torti and went for a short walk along a forest track beside the river. Somehow, Igua and Oscar managed to spot a perched Whooping Motmot in the leafy mid-story on the riverbank. From there we had a steady succession of exciting birds; Red-legged Honeycreeper, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Brown-capped Tyrannulet, Variable Seedeater, Streaked Flycatcher, Long-billed Hermit, Golden-collared Manakin, Cinnamon Becard, and Golden-hooded Tanager (wow!). Jerry's sharp eyes spotted a Buff-rumped Warbler behaving just like a Louisiana Waterthrush on the boulders in the river. And yet, in many respects, the most remarkable bird at this spot was a familiar one. We found a Spotted Sandpiper on the river, a purely migratory species in Panama and a complete surprise for our guides who weren't expecting to see one quite so early in the fall.

Lunch at the Avicar Café was an assortment of riches—tasty, refreshing, and rounded off by a bevy of dazzling hummingbirds at the feeders; White-necked Jacobin, Black-throated Mango, Long-billed Starthroat, Scaly-





breasted Hummingbird, White-vented Plumeleteer, and Blue-chested, Snowy-bellied, Rufous-tailed, and Sapphire-throated Hummingbirds all in one sitting—phew! After lunch we continued east stopping only for the border control checkpoint at Agua Fria into Darien Province and seamlessly handled by Igua.

Arrival at Canopy Camp Darien was warmly greeted by Cody, formerly of the Peace Corps and the current on-site manager. After Cody's orientation, we settled into our well-appointed luxury tents and then met up with our guides for a much-anticipated walk around the campgrounds. Birds came thick and fast as they had done at all our stops throughout the day. Some of these would become daily fare such as Keel-billed Toucan, Blue-headed and Red-lore Parrots, Cocoa and Streak-headed Woodcreepers, Rusty-margined Flycatcher, Yellow-crowned and Thick-billed Euphonias, Blue-gray, Palm, and Golden-hooded Tanagers but with scarcer species including Spot-crowned Barbet, White-tailed Trogon, Red-rumped and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers. Overhead, Swallow-tailed Kites, Short-tailed Hawks, and a Zone-tailed Hawk reminded us to have eyes on the skies at all times. Mammals included the always cute Geoffroy's Tamarins, personable and active around the communal area as they would prove to be on most days of the trip.

At nightfall we gathered for the daily checklist, serenaded by a calling Black-and-white Owl as Igua went through the bird and mammal list for the day. After a delicious beef and potato supper we retired to our tents and fell to sleep amid the sounds of the tropics.

Monday, July 29 Canopy Camp Darien | El Salto | El Mamey | Yaviza

We strolled to breakfast amid the calls of Whooping Motmots, White-tailed Trogon, parrots and Mantled Howlers. After a sumptuous buffet we headed out on the relatively short drive to the El Salto road where our guides had selected several 'sweet spots'. The air was thick and heavy with humidity, drizzle and rain showers looming. However, it mattered little as the very first spot we tried filled up with birds; Squirrel Cuckoo, Black-chested Jay, Chestnut-headed, Black and Crested Oropendolas, Orange-crowned Oriole, Blue-headed, Red-lore and Mealy Parrots (wonderful comparison in the scopes), and an extremely tricky Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher. We pressed on but interruptions were many as we found Lineated and Cinnamon Woodpeckers, wrestled with a 'heard-only' White-headed Wren, heard and then saw Purple-throated Fruitcrows, and there was near pandemonium when Oscar spotted a male Blue Cotinga perched high atop a magnificent Ceiba Tree. Both scopes were quickly trained on the male though we needn't have panicked, as the most co-operative of cotingas sat there for minutes, even being joined by a female in the same field of view. At that moment, Oscar's talent for phone-scoping came to the fore and he generously added Blue Cotinga images to many a smart phone within our group. Still reeling from our ridiculous luck with the Blue Cotingas, Igua thought he heard a Gray-cheeked Nunlet and gallantly tried to coax it out of the dense roadside vegetation. Having missed the nunlet at Canopy Camp the previous day, expectations were not high as we and the bird fell silent. Silent that is until Chris made eye-to-eye contact with a beautiful Gray-cheeked Nunlet right in front of her just a matter of feet away!



Unbelievably, the beauty just sat there on a horizontal limb giving breathtaking views for minutes, surely one of those “did that really just happen?” moments!

Afterwards, some of the group had brief views of the only Yellow-backed Oriole of the whole tour, and then the emphasis unexpectedly shifted to raptors including an uncomfortably close encounter with two or three bizarre, raucous Red-throated Caracaras. They were quickly followed a solitary Crane Hawk, a perched Plumbeous Kite and the only Savanna Hawk for the entire trip which Igua thought unusual for Darien Province. Two black hawks seen pretty well (and even displaying and copulating!) were initially taken to be the ‘expected’ Common Black Hawks, but review of the photos would ultimately reveal them to be Great Black Hawks, a major surprise for our guides and a life bird for Oscar! By noon, the extreme heat and humidity saw us climbing back into the comfort of an air conditioning vehicle and back to Canopy Camp for a delicious lunch and a little ‘quiet time’. The Rufous-tailed Jacamar that Igua had heard calling at El Salto boat ramp would have to wait for another day—it was simply too hot to give it a try.



The midday heat was neatly broken up by much anticipated thunderstorms bringing welcome relief and, by the time that we reconvened, an even more welcome drop in temperature. It felt relatively comfortable after the morning’s heat and Igua promised us an afternoon of easy roadside birding along the Pan American Highway. Not a good idea in the tropics! Indeed, we found ourselves leaving the pavement almost as soon as we stepped out of the vehicles, trudging down a mosquito-ridden dirt road. Igua called this “the dump road” at El Mamey, and kudos to him and Oscar, it was well worth the gripes and groans because this spot was one of the best on the trip. Being there just after a thunderstorm only furthered our cause.



Smooth-billed and Greater Anis looked comical as they perched on any bare limbs they could find to dry out their wings. Species closely associated with



open terrain, fields and wetlands provided a welcome change from the challenges of the morning's forest birding. Tiny, fast moving finches flitted amid the rank grasses with Blue-black Grassquit and Variable Seedeater fairly common and well seen, while the Ruddy-breasted Seedeater right at the bus station where we parked was rather less accommodating but confirmed by photos. The only Wattled Jacanas of the entire tour wandered about the meadows with Southern Lapwings for company. Striated and Green Herons provided great comparisons, and Ringed and Green Kingfishers busily worked the cattle ponds. We scoped several dazzling male Yellow-hooded Blackbirds, numerous Fork-tailed Flycatchers, multiple Purple Gallinules and a stunning male Blue Ground Dove that stood out beacon-like among the rank grasses. The leafless Ceiba Trees at the back of the meadows hosted huge numbers of Pale-vented Pigeons which garnered interest for a short while until a pair of Spot-breasted Woodpeckers flew right across 'the dump road' landing in close shrubs. Fabulous scope views were had, and another regional specialty graced our checklists.

Just when we thought it might be safe to climb back into the vehicles, our guides got very animated. Clearly something great had been found. A pair of Cattle Tyrants was 'dancing' around a huge log pile in the middle of the meadow, a little distant perhaps, but well within comfortable scope range. Initially looking similar to the other 'tyrant flycatchers' present including several Tropical Kingbirds, the yellow-bellied Cattle Tyrants proved distinctive behaving much more like bluebirds, certainly more so than any kingbird present. Cattle Tyrant is a rare newcomer to the region with a patchy distribution and another major scoop for our group. Truth be told, Igua and Oscar appeared even more thrilled than us—always a good sign when the guides get excited!

As if to keep the element of surprise at a constant, Igua then drove us all the way into downtown Yaviza to the very end of the Pan American Highway. As might be expected on a weekday afternoon, Yaviza was full of hustle and bustle. Short on parking options, our guides dropped the vehicles in what looked like the local bottle bank, minus the cage. Could we really be going birding here? But Igua had a target in mind and it was a good one—Bicolored Wren. As we climbed the stairwell of Yaviza Cemetery Igua spotted one, then two, then three wrens! Of course, the birds had to be right at the top of the hill, but it was definitely worth effort. This giant wren was indeed bi-colored being stark white below, and rich brown above with a strikingly white supercilium. We had all three of them on view inside the tangles around tree limbs, and again we were spoiled for wonderful views of yet another regionally special species. Moments later a calling Spectacled Parrolet flew in and landed in the tallest tree in the cemetery affording excellent scope views. It was the smallest *psittacid* of the trip by some margin and yet another regional specialty, decidedly upstaging the Crested Oropendula perched close-by.

It had been an afternoon of extraordinary quality and we cruised back to camp heady with success making only the briefest of roadside stops for Collared Acari, Chestnut-headed and Black Oropendulas, and Roadside Hawk. An exceptionally busy field day drew to a close with the evening checklist, essential for keeping up with the trip's daily observations. Igua gave us the briefing on what was going to be an epic day in pursuit of Harpy Eagle and then we settled down to enjoy another delightfully tasty supper with our hosts at Canopy Camp.



Tuesday, July 30 Canopy Camp
Darien | Yaviza | Rio Chucunaque |
Ekun Road | Parque Nacional Darien

Up at 3:30 am, breakfast at 4:00am and on the road by 4:45 am. That was our departure plan for the day's big adventure. The early morning start and descriptions of long boat rides and long walks on slick, muddy trails were enough to put off four of our party from trying the Harpy Eagle trek. Instead, they planned to stay behind and enjoy the grounds, birds and wildlife at camp. Our group was down to six for the day and only required the one vehicle. On the way to Yaviza a Gray Fox casually walked across the highway just in front of our vehicle. We boarded two pirogues and headed down the Rio Chucunaque marveling at the Captain's skill to negotiate flotsam and debris in the fast-flowing chocolate brown water. For much of the boat ride, mature forest met the water's edge rather abruptly and careful scanning produced Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-herons, Little Blue Heron, White Ibis, and plenty of Cocoi Herons. Two glorious Capped Herons perched up high were evidently still at roost. It was pretty good for raptors too, including our first Laughing and Bat Falcons, and numerous Roadside Hawks. Southern Rough-winged Swallow skipped over the water and we had our first views of Mangrove Swallows both perched and in flight.



We docked at El Real De Santa Maria and began the next stage of our adventure loading up supplies and group members alike into three different pick-ups waiting dockside. We noted Great Kiskadee, Tropical Mockingbird, American Kestrel and House Wren as we passed through the village. It turned out the driver of the lead pick-up just happened to be the local schoolteacher and wanted to give the kids a ride to school—it was very cute! We drove as far as we could into the forest, roughly three miles on slick muddy roads, parked up and prepared for the hike into the forest. Although not inside Darien National Park proper, Igua described the area as the “buffer zone” to the park. We set off, the air heavy with moisture. Not only did we have Igua and Oscar with us but also picked up about four local guides from the surrounding villages ensuring that we’d be well looked after throughout the hike. A Limpkin put in a surprise appearance on the forest trail but was gone in an instant.

A pair of Long-tailed Tyrants further up the trail were a lot more co-operative, teed up and flycatching despite the heavy rain. With a mile completed we successfully negotiated a major river crossing and embarked on a much narrower, slippery and undulating trail toward the Harpy Eagle nest site. We made few stops along the way but did enjoy a pair of Crimson-crested Woodpeckers and a brief male Golden-headed Manakin. After negotiating the remainder of the trail, we finally reached the Harpy Eagle nest site. Having not seen anyone at all on the trails, it was somewhat underwhelming to find the Harpy Eagle observation site relatively crowded. There was an on-site biologist, a film crew, photographers plus local guides escorting the photographers, and all of us struggling to stay upright on the sloping, steep sided trails. It was a little surreal for some of us, but the distractions soon paled into insignificance once we claimed our quarry, a magnificent juvenile Harpy Eagle. It stayed high in the Ceiba trees seemingly unfazed by the commotion going on below, and even moved into a better position for viewing where Oscar was able work some more phone-scope magic producing awesome images for several members of our group. We lingered for a while, drinking in as much as we could, and simply feeling privileged.

All of the key features were there for all to enjoy—a massive, over-sized raptor, creamy to sandy white overall but with a huge black bill, dark lores and eyes, and massive legs and feet. At rest the folded wings appeared blackish brown, contrasting with the rest of the creamy white plumage but most importantly of all, we had clear views of the double crest plumes, unique to Harpy Eagle. While, of course, the identification was never in doubt, it was so much more gratifying to see these features properly in a scope, especially with a view toward the planned Crested Eagle venture later in the week. Though smaller, immature Crested Eagles can look confusingly



similar to immature Harpy Eagles and it was especially rewarding to see some of the differences up close. Juvenile Harpy Eagles apparently linger around the nest site area for up to seven months after fledging and for us, on this trip, the timing couldn't have been better.

The hike back through the forest was a much more relaxed affair. The weather brightened and we had much better views of the Golden-headed Manakins. Igua worked hard to get us views of Russet-winged Schiffornis, Chestnut-backed Antbird and Gartered Trogon. In addition, we clearly heard a singing Black-crowned Antpitta shortly after leaving the Harpy Eagle site, but it was left singing and unseen, euphoria still gripping us after amazing views of the eagle.

We finally reached the waiting pick-up trucks at the end of the forested trail. The weather had improved a lot by that point but with 88% humidity it had been a difficult, challenging hike despite the guides' efforts to make it as comfortable as possible. Carol had kindly

measured the walking distance on her phone, more or less, exactly four miles. We said our goodbyes to the local guides and retraced our route heading back toward the dock at El Real. Not wanting to rest for a minute, Igua was perched atop a cooler in the back of a pick-up somehow managing to stay seated. From that incredibly uncomfortable situation he managed to spot two new birds for the trip—Striped Cuckoo and Pied Puffbird, both of which we scoped from the vehicles before pushing on. In the meantime, the second Gray Fox of the day wandered down the track in front of us just as casually as one of the local village dogs. The return upstream along the Rio Chucunaque was highlighted by the only Roseate Spoonbill of the entire trip, small numbers of Swallow-tailed Kites majestically cruising over the riverside woodland, and good views of Short-tailed Swifts low over the water and around the docking area in Yaviza.

We reached Canopy Camp at 4 p.m., having already logged a 12-hour day and an epic adventure, we relaxed for a little while before the evening checklist. The four folks who'd spent the day at the camp reported massive thunderstorms that morning but ultimately had a productive day seeing a pair of White-headed Wrens, as well as Red-throated Caracaras, Thick-billed Euphonia, Rusty-margined Flycatchers, Palm Tanagers, Cinnamon Woodpeckers, and mammals including Geoffroy's Tamarin, Red-tailed Squirrel and Forest Rabbit. As the evening drew to a close, any remnant thunder clouds disappeared revealing the most extraordinarily clear night sky, the constellations seemingly so close if felt you could reach out and touch them.

Wednesday, July 31 Canopy Camp Darien | Filo Del Tallo | Alignadi Road

The day dawned beautifully clear with not a hint of rain in sight. It was a green season trip and we'd be accustomed to the prospect of at least some rain every day, but this particular morning was as clear as any day in the tropics could be. Breakfast was delicious as always and served with freshly squeezed local fruit juices. We shared views of Swallow-tailed Kite and Crimson-crested Woodpecker from the breakfast table and a flock of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks flew over the camp as we headed out for the morning.



The chosen site for the morning was Filo Del Tallo, an area of preserved woodland on the outskirts of Metiti. Initially, the woods seemed pretty quiet and ascending the wide forest trail felt particularly strenuous for some unknown reason as the gradient wasn't particularly severe. The clear dawn had quickly warmed up into an especially hot morning. Igua and Oscar made short work of the trails, skipping along like gazelles. Mantled Howlers growled from the forest, but we needed a little more to distract us from the heat and Igua duly obliged with soaring King Vultures, perched Gray-lined Hawks, Purple-throated Fruitcrows, Yellow-throated Toucans, and fabulous studies of Slaty-tailed and Black-tailed Trogons. He and Oscar also gave a demonstration in finding the most skulking of forest-dwellers with both Black and Black-crowned Antshrikes, Bright-rumped Attila, Chestnut-backed and Spotted Antbirds, 'bizarre' Song Wrens, and Plain-brown and Wedge-billed Woodcreepers all seen as we descended back down the forest trail. We also had the most exceptional scope views of two Laughing Falcons actually 'laughing' at us, and as if determined to gate-crash the party, more of the paranoid, screaming Red-throated Caracaras!



Lunch was taken back at Canopy Camp and was every bit as scrumptious as it had been on previous days. Some chose to rest during the midday break while other folks had another sighting of White-headed Wren as well as Golden-hooded and White-shouldered Tanagers, Blue Dacnis, and Bananaquit.

The afternoon location was selected on the basis of the group's suggestion combined with the continued clear skies. With no rain or storms on the horizon, and the fact that some of our party requested a change from forest birding, Igua

picked out the Aligandi Road as a suitable destination for the afternoon hours. The heat of the afternoon was unrelenting when we first arrived, but we stuck with the plan of literally birding from the roadside, actually a gently undulating dirt road. The site was more open than previous locations, a mix of grassland and rough pasture with field edges, and some open woodland and more or less completely lacking in shade. It became 'affectionately' known as "the road from hell". Whilst there was no question that the Aligandi Road came with its own suite of challenges, the birding was quite superb giving us our first Plain-breasted Ground Doves and really breathtaking views of a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture. Grassland finches not only included Blue-black Grassquit and Variable Seedeater, but also another regional specialty—Large-billed Seed-Finch. We shared scope



views of a male singing atop a grassy hillside. The Aligandi Road was all about quality with Orange-crowned Oriole, Yellow-crowned Euphonia, Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Elaenia and a Tropical Pewee. Raptors were highlighted by more fabulous views of Gray-lined Hawk, several American Kestrels and a nice study of a hunting White-tailed Kite. And we had our best views yet of Mantled Howler. During the checklist we mused over Igua's comments on preparations for the next day. Another eagle quest was on the agenda and that would mean another boat trip and another early morning start.

Thursday, August 1 Canopy Camp Darien | Yaviza | Rio Chucunaque | Lajas Blancas

Up at 4:30 a.m., breakfast at 5:15 a.m., and departure from camp in the rain at 6:00 a.m. The goal for the morning was to try and see the Crested Eagle which, like the Harpy Eagle two days prior, is a large, range-restricted species in which the juvenile tends to linger in the vicinity of the nest long after fledging. Our guides knew of a nest site, logistically it was a little complicated to get to but certainly not as difficult as the Harpy Eagle trek had been. Fortunately, the entire group elected to make this particular trip and that required two full sized vehicles. As we waited in line to use the bathroom facilities, Carib Grackles poked around the garage forecourt giving us our best looks yet at this regional specialty and recent addition to the regularly occurring avifauna of Panama.

It was still raining quite heavily when we boarded the two boats but eased off as we headed down on the Rio Chucunaque. Distractions were plentiful, almost too plentiful in fact, fueling an overwhelming temptation to stop and enjoy every good bird. On the other hand, we had a schedule to meet and it was important to stick to it. Even so, we still managed good views of a wild Muscovy Duck teed-up high, two roosting Wood Storks, several Common Black Hawks and the first of half-a-dozen Black-collared Hawks that curiously made their first and only appearance of the trip on this specific day!

About 90 minutes in the journey, Oscar motioned to the Captain of his boat to slow down. Oscar's fixed glaze of concentration gave the distinct impression that he'd got something of great interest. Quite sensibly he didn't want to take his eyes off the spot, no easy task in the fast-moving current as we drifted downstream. And then Oscar almost calmly announced, "I've got a Crested Eagle". What?! Panic ensued. We were really going to see a Crested Eagle without having to do the anticipated mosquito-rich march through the forest?! Oscar remained ice cool, signaled to Igua in the other boat, and both boats moved in for closer looks. The bird was exceptionally difficult to see being a dark morph adult in a dark forest, on a dark morning. However, our boatmen showed exceptional dexterity in maneuvering against the current and then drifting downstream to make sure that every



single person in both boats had close views of the eagle, and the photographers had their day. The bird itself sat motionless on a horizontal beam about two thirds the way up toward the canopy often obscured by giant palm fronds. Indeed, the photos actually revealed that the eagle, probably an adult female, was mantling a prey item at the time perhaps explaining why it was so reluctant to fly. Oscar instantly became a hero, as if he hadn't achieved that status already! He'd somehow managed to spot one of the most difficult birds of the trip from a fast-moving boat and pinned the bird's position in the forest for everyone else to see it. Although we didn't need to, we stopped at the intended dock in any case and made a quick 'pit stop'. Iguana could hear a singing Rufous-winged Antwren but couldn't coax it into view. A shame because it looked like a really nice bird in the field guides and would remain a 'heard-only' for the rest of the tour.

The boat ride back to Yaviza was enlivened by Mangrove Swallows loafing over the river, Swallow-tailed Kites over the forest, and a beautiful study of Black-crowned and Masked Tityras perched together in dead limbs above the river. Once docked at Yaviza, Piratic Flycatchers and a surprise migrant Barn Swallow were seen before we headed back to Canopy Camp for another fabulous lunch. It rained heavily during the midday break but there was a nice show of butterflies around our tents between the showers.



Lajas Blancas provided the destination for the afternoon, a mere 15-minute drive from Canopy Camp. Fresh, warm and steamy from the showers earlier in the afternoon, it was very birdy indeed. We added Buff-throated Saltator, White-eared Conebill, Yellow-bellied Seedeater, and Gray-headed Chachalaca to our ever-growing bird list. We also had second or third helpings of some species seen earlier in the trip including Lineated, Spot-breasted, Black-cheeked and Red-crowned Woodpeckers, Keel-billed Toucan, Orange-crowned Oriole, Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher, Long-tailed Tyrant, and Greater and Smooth-billed Anis. As the evening drew to a close, Yellow-headed Caracaras started to fly in from all points forming a nice pre-roost gathering of at least six. Non avian creatures in the canopy included Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth and an incredibly adventurous Green Iguana that seemed uncharacteristically high, but Oscar casually said "yeah, he sits there every day". Spaghetti Bolognese, both meat and vegetarian options, were on the menu at supper along with house salad and the incredibly tasty in-house dressing, and homemade banana cake for dessert.



Friday, August 2 Canopy Camp Darien | Rio Chucunaque | La Penita | Tuquesa River | Nuevo Vigia

Another early morning start; breakfast at 5:15 a.m. and departing at 6:00 a.m. in the rain. In the murk of a wet dawn, a small gallinaceous bird caught in the headlights on the camp road proved to be a Little Tinamou but it casually walked off the road before the message could be relayed to both vehicles. The drive out to La Penita was overcast with heavy rain. Prospects didn't look great for a pirogue ride up the Rio Chucunaque, and this time the vessels would be dugout canoes. There was a short stop for credentials at La Penita boat ramp and then we waited patiently as our pirogues were loaded up for the day. It was a sobering wait at that, as we shared the dock area with about 1000 or so African migrants staging at the side of the river waiting for the paperwork to continue their journey towards North America. Tracy's comments resonated at that point "so much depends on where you are born".

We continued our own journey and headed upriver in heavy rain. In fact, it was too wet to have cameras at the ready, a real shame because this was the best stretch of river that we'd experienced for kingfishers. Several each of the monstrous Amazon and Ringed Kingfishers and the smaller, rather perky Green Kingfisher. Cruising further upriver we did see a large mixed flock containing all three expected Oropendula species and large numbers of Yellow-rumped Caciques, a perched Gray-lined Hawk, and an Anhinga.

We were greeted at the river's edge by the head of tourism (Phillipe) for Nuevo Vigia, a village within the Embera-Wounan indigenous region. The sight of Phillipe effortlessly gliding across the mud in bare feet as he came out to greet us was a joy to behold. His feet looked broad, deep and leathery like he'd been shoeless all his life and he spanned the mud with ease as we flailed around in fancy hiking boots and trekking shoes. Phillipe gave us a very warm welcome and casually escorted us to the village 'casa communal', taking the extremely slick



conditions in his stride. In view of the continued heavy rain, a decision was made for a slight change of plan and we settled back under the dry sheltered surrounds of the casa communal to enjoy three entrancing dance performances from the local villagers, and marveling at a display of locally hand-woven baskets and crafts. Luckily for us, many of the items were for sale!

Igua thought that the time was right to make a move into the forest. Miraculously, no sooner had we gathered our gear, the sun broke through the clouds, the rain showers tapered, and disappeared for the rest of the day. Igua announced that a fairly short walk of twenty minutes or so lay ahead with our ultimate destination being what he described as a “pond”. It was some two hours and forty-five minutes later that we finally returned to the casa communal in the middle of the village. In truth, although the terrain was flat, the early morning thunderstorms brought challenging conditions to the pathways that we needed to reach the pond. Thoughts of speeding up the hike to “the pond” quickly dispelled as there was simply so much to see. Every few meters, or so it seemed, we’d stop to view or listen to some skulking species in the scrub or in the canopy. Kudos to Igua, he managed to keep on top of the birding under the dark, difficult, conditions and delivered a wonderful selection of species, many of which were new to the trip; Stripe-throated Hermit, Green Ibis (regional specialty), Black Hawk-Eagle, American Pygmy-Kingfisher, White-necked Puffbird, Olivaceous Piculet, White-bellied Antbird, Northern Barred-Woodcreeper, Red-billed Scythebill (regional specialty), Royal, Black-tailed and Yellow-breasted Flycatchers, and Tropical Gnatcatcher to mention just a small portion of our sightings. It had been a difficult out-and-back walk and the return to the village was bathed in hot, tropical sunshine and a riot of color as a plethora of butterflies danced around us—they were simply everywhere!

The casa communal served as a conveniently welcome shaded spot for snacks that could have, and perhaps should have, been lunch (freshly made sandwiches and cold drinks from Canopy Camp) and then it was time to load up the dugouts once more, and continue upriver to a spot that Igua had in mind for jacamars. Although it was a relatively short ride to the jacamar ‘hotspot’, conditions at the docking area were not to everyone’s liking and several folks elected to stay under the shade in the comfort of the dugouts. For the those that scrambled up the sketchiest of stairwells, a shade-grown coffee plantation lay at the top of the embankment—prime habitat for jacamars and a number of other key species. Time was limited here and instinctively Igua went into overdrive simultaneously finding Dusky-backed and Rufous-tailed Jacamars in the same tree, for scope views of both. Amid the excitement, a male Great Antshrike slipped away almost unnoticed in the scrub below but was neatly captured in images for the records. There was even a Spectacled Parrotlet, as well as a Long-tailed Tyrant and a couple of Cinnamon Becards. For a relatively short stop with two regional specialties in mind, the coffee plantation hotspot had been a complete triumph. We headed downstream back to Le Penita enjoying close views of Neotropic Cormorants and Mangrove Swallows along the way though for some weird reason, most of the kingfishers seen earlier had disappeared.



We closed the day at camp with an optional afternoon walk around Nando's Trail and a fabulous barbeque supper, something of a final evening tradition at Canopy Camp.

Saturday, August 3 Canopy Camp | Torti | San Francisco Reserve | Panama City

Sadly, our last morning at Canopy Camp had come around. Breakfast was at 6 a.m. and by 6:50 a.m. the vehicles were fully loaded ready to go. We said our goodbyes to the camp staff who'd been superb throughout. Site manager Cody decided to hitch a ride with us and spend a few days relaxing in Panama City. The 90-minute drive west to Torti passed quickly. We made a quick pit stop at the Avicar Café and a few members of the group decided to just hang out and relax there until lunch time. The rest of us headed for the hills into a privately owned 600-acre woodland plot named San Francisco Preserve. The lower slopes consisted of a nice mix of open meadows, a pond and woodland fringe. Driving up, the folks in Oscar's vehicle got lucky with the only Brown-chested Martins of the trip, and farther up the same road we encountered Ringed Kingfisher, Blue Ground Dove, an absurdly approachable Long-tailed Tyrant, and decent scope views of a Black-breasted Puffbird, the fourth species of puffbird for the trip. As we approached the mature, wooded hillsides, the track became steep and involved a river crossing. As far as our vehicle-type was concerned, it was the end of the road. Luckily for us the forest edge was hopping with quality birds; Bay Wren, Purple-crowned Fairy, and several Dusky-faced Tanagers.

As Igua worked hard to make sure that we were seeing all the birds present, we barely noticed that Moyo, another guide from the Canopy Family had showed up with two of his own customers, Kurt and Vince. True to form, Moyo picked out a regional specialty almost straight away in the form of a Sulphur-rumped Tanager. Like many birds we'd seen on the trip, it was incredibly co-operative and Oscar, once more, turned his hand to phone-scoping as did Moyo who was more than happy to provide images for members of our party as well as his own clients.

Oscar decided to stay with the vehicles, as both were fully loaded with luggage and while we'd never had an issue on the trip, the journey to the airport didn't seem like the best time to leave the vehicles unattended. Joe stayed with him and together they found the only Lesser Elaenia of the tour right by the vehicles!

In the meantime, the remaining core of the group crossed the river and followed Igua up a short, but especially steep, gradient into the forest. Again, we watched Igua skip up the hillside like a mountain goat, tripod over his shoulder, not even blowing or sweating and making the moderately difficult ascent look easy. For us, the trudge upslope in chronic humidity hardly seemed like an ideal exercise for the final day but Igua came through with the goods, as he had done throughout the trip. His chosen spot offered wonderful eye-level views into the mid-forest canopy and across the valley. After a brief “why are we doing this?!” moment, our fortune turned around in an instant when a White-fronted Nunbird appeared at eye-level just off the track. The trail just kept on giving and over the next 30 minutes or so we’d amassed a stunning list; Broad-billed Motmot (new for the trip), Black-throated Trogon (new for the trip), Slaty-tailed Trogons, Rufous Mourner (new for the trip), White-flanked Antwren (new for the trip), Common Tody-Flycatcher, Black-tailed and Ruddy-tailed Flycatchers, Black Antshrike, and fabulous views of Buff-rumped Warbler on the track itself. If there had to be a niggle, and it was only a slight niggle, it was the Great Jacamar clearly heard calling from across the valley. Try as we might, this spectacular jacamar couldn’t be coaxed in any closer and appeared to be entirely comfortable calling unseen from song posts across the way. Still, Great Jacamar would be just one of many fine reasons to return to Panama.

With a lunch appointment calling at the Avicar Café, we exited San Fransico Reserve, but not before we enjoyed views of the slightly weird *Ictericid*, Red-breasted Meadowlark, which were present in numbers in the meadows on the lower slopes of the reserve.

We enjoyed another fabulous lunch with the hummingbirds at the Avicar Café soaking up close views of favorites such as Scaly-breasted and Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds. Sadly though, there was no further sign of the female Barred Antshrike so beautifully photographed by Larry in the café gardens whilst we’d been busy in the forest.

After lunch we spent the rest of the afternoon on the road. Igua again made a brief stop at his home village to drop off his laundry after a week of intense guiding and sure enough, the Pearl Kite was perched on the exact same roadside wires as it had been on the inbound journey a week earlier! The peace and serenity of Canopy Camp already seemed like a distant haze as we entered the congestion of Panama City. We said our goodbyes to Kate at the airport and then parted company with Igua and Oscar at the Riande Airport Hotel, where it had all begun just over a week earlier. Our guides had been impeccable throughout the trip. They were kind, well natured, and supreme field birders with a fine sense of humor. As a group were parted company at the Riande Hotel and moved on to our respective destinations. It had been a wonderful trip, full of so many highlights in a beautiful environment made all the more enjoyable by the easy-going friendly people of Panama.

Photo Credits:

Birding by dugout canoe, James P. Smith (JPS); Striped Cuckoo, JPS; Cinnamon Becard, JPS; returning from Harpy Eagle, JPS; Urania Swallowtail Moth, JPS; Common Tody-Flycatcher, JPS; Plumbeous Kite, JPS; White-collared Swift, JPS; Spot-crowned Barbet, JPS; Golden-hooded Tanager, Robert Gallardo (ROGA); Long-billed Starthroat, JPS; Golden-collared Manikin, JPS; White-necked Jacobin, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, JPS; Snow-bellied Hummingbird, JPS; Gray-cheeked Nunlet, JPS; Southern Lapwing, JPS; Black Ororpendola, Peg Abbott (PEAB); Mantled Howler Monkey, JPS; Starry Night Cracker Butterfly, JPS; The Harpy Eagle crew, JPS; Capped Heron, Greg Smith (GRSM); Harpy Eagle, JPS; Geoffroy’s Tamarin, JPS; Black-crowned Antshrike, JPS; Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, JPS; Crested Eagle, JPS; Brown-throated Three toed Sloth, JPS; Long-tailed Tyrant, JPS; American Pygmy Kingfisher, JPS; Red-billed Scythebill, JPS; Royal Flycatcher, JPS; Tropical Gnatcatcher, NJS; Black-breasted Puffbird, JPS; Black-throated Trogon, JPS;