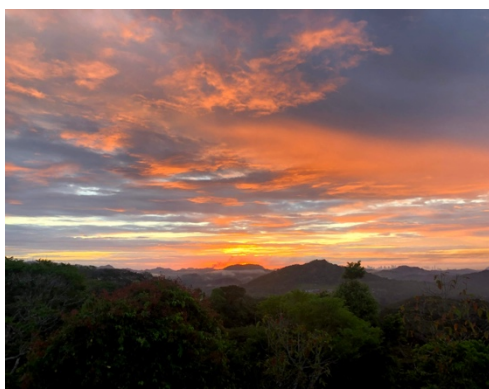


Panama Birding & Nature | Trip Report

January 20 – 28, 2020 | Written by James P. Smith



With Naturalist Journeys guide James P. Smith, local guides Alex & Tino and participants Ron, Marlene, Jerry, Hallie, Kathe, Larry, Judy, Rick, Vivienne, Kathy, Anne, & Patrick





Mon., Jan. 20 Arrivals | Panama City

The Riande Airport Hotel, a mere five minutes from Tocuman International Airport, provided an ideal venue as our Naturalist Journeys group gathered in the hotel for welcome drinks and dinner in preparation for the Panama adventure that lay ahead. We enjoyed our meal, exchanged stories of past travels and shared hopes for the trip ahead.

Indeed, it was at dinner that we learned that some of the group, having arrived the day before, had booked a private half-day tour of the Panama Canal and City finding many birds in the process; Magnificent Frigatebird, shorebirds, Tropical Kingbird, Clay-colored Thrush, Blue-gray and Palm Tanagers, Rusty-margined and Streaked Flycatchers, Barred Antshrike, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and Tennessee Warbler were just a few of the species mentioned as being seen before the tour had officially started.

At dinner the wait staff were courteous and helpful, and the meal was delicious. Afterwards we retired at a civilized hour in preparation for an exciting day ahead – “that was a good start” commented Rick as we headed off to our comfortable rooms.

Tues., Jan. 21 Panama Veijo | Panama City | Canopy Tower | Ammo Dump area and ponds

Breakfast was at leisure this morning, followed by check-out in the lobby and the loading up of the tour bus. Our first destination was the vast mudflats at Panama Veijo, the ‘Old Panama’ historical site on the Pacific Ocean. Getting there involved crossing Panama City at rush hour, something which our young driver accomplished with ease in a rather comfortable air-conditioned 30-seater tour bus.

Arrival at the mudflats was greeted with audible gasps as we gazed out looking towards thousands of birds resting and feeding. By far the most abundant were Sandwich Terns. Indeed, you’d be hard pressed to find a larger concentration of Sandwich Terns anywhere in North or Central America! Laughing Gulls were almost as abundant and in no time at all we were picking out shorebirds especially Short-billed Dowitchers, Willets, and Whimbrels. Spotted Sandpiper proved to be the only smaller shorebird on the flats but by carefully sifting and sorting through the thousands of birds present we found a few key species that would appear nowhere else on the trip including a Yellow-crowned Night-heron, two Royal Terns and a Lesser Black-backed Gull. The latter proved to be of the North-west European/British race (*Larus fuscus graellsii*), an exceptionally rare bird in



Panama. Rarities aside, it was really the resident birds of Panama that stole the show and we marveled at the beautiful Southern Lapwings present in numbers and the remarkable appearance of chestnut-hooded Mangrove (Yellow) Warblers in the shade trees behind us. Overhead and over the flats, Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds majestically cruised on the ocean breeze.

From there we enjoyed a walk through the Panama Viejo historical site having received instruction to do so from our driver who was planning to meet us at the northern entrance. We encountered plenty of distraction along the way and the beautifully maintained park produced fine views of Common Black-hawk, Yellow-headed Caracara and Orange-chinned Parakeets. As noon approached, the heat, humidity and an anxious finger-wagging driver indicated that it was perhaps time to return the comfort of the air-conditioned bus! In the meantime, Kathe had focused on a small flock of ground feeding finches. Some were quite dull and might have been tricky to identify had it not been for a few bright yellow, gaudy males leaping out from the rest—they were Saffron Finches! Ultimately, these proved to be the only Saffron Finches seen on the entire tour!

Our driver passed through Panama City with the same degree of professionalism that he'd shown on the inbound journey leaving us to enjoy the giant kettles of Black and Turkey Vultures, and the hordes of Great-tailed Grackles along the way. In no time at all we reached the World-famous Canopy Tower atop Semaphore Hill where we received a very warm welcome from our host Tatiana and guide Alexis who gave us a brief orientation. Lunch quickly followed, the first of many excellent meals freshly prepared onsite by the tower staff. Around the tower we enjoyed White-necked Jacobins and Long-billed Hermits at the feeders and the delightful Geoffroy's Tamarins waiting for handouts just outside the dining room windows! In keeping with tradition in the tropics, we enjoyed some "down time" after lunch before heading out in late afternoon.

At 3pm, Alex introduced us to the delights of the birdmobile, an open-sided truck offering maximum visibility to all seated onboard. As if to boast the virtues of the birdmobile right away, we saw several White-faced Capucins and a pair of Double-toothed Kites on our first descent of Semaphore Hill!

On reaching the Canal Zone we began birding the wetlands close to the entrance of the 'Ammo Dump'. Alex was on great form keeping us abreast of a very birdy area with the species coming thick and fast. Non-avian sightings also came to the fore with a pair of Black Spiny-tailed Iguanas (rare) basking on the railroad bed and a Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth hanging in the shrubs over the ponds. Key birds were many, a foraging Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, quite rare for the area and a fantastic study being so close to the group. Superficially looking for all the world like a Turkey Vulture, closer inspection revealed its smaller size, slightly blacker coloration, yellow facial skin and blue crown. And, as Alex pointed out, it was also foraging much closer to the ground than the surrounding Turkey Vultures thus providing another clue to its identification. A pair of Yellow-tailed Orioles, another rarity for the area, suddenly appeared in the chain link fence by the Ammo Dump entrance and again provided a lengthy study alongside several other species including several overwintering Baltimore Orioles and a Panama Flycatcher!



Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans cruised overhead while the wetland in front of us was full of life including numerous Wattled Jacanas, Rufescent Tiger-herons and several 'heard-only' White-throated Crakes. One of the tiger-herons caught an uncomfortably large fish and spent the next twenty minutes or so trying to swallow it whole right in front of us!



With expert guidance, we became acquainted with a number of species that would feature over the next few days including several species pairs that could potentially look confusingly similar; Great and Lesser Kiskadees, Social and Rusty-margined Flycatchers, Variable Seedeater and Blue-black Grassquit to mention just a few examples. A dozen or more Smooth-billed Anis frequented the marsh in family groups and several Tropical Mockingbirds made themselves obvious by perching on wires and utility poles. Yellow-headed Caracara, Orange-chinned Parakeets, Keel-billed Toucans, Violet-bellied Hummingbird and a flock of Yellow-rumped Caciques were all added to our growing list before we headed back up Semaphore Hill to the Canopy Tower. A lively checklist followed a delicious supper courtesy of the tower's impeccable kitchen, and it felt good to close the day at one of the most iconic birding spots in Panama!



Wed., Jan. 22 Canopy Tower | Lower Pipeline Road | Canal Zone | Old Gamboa Road

At 2:15 am most of the group were awakened by the unearthly growls of Mantled Howler Monkeys. Seemingly stimulated by on the onset of rain and thunderstorms, their deep groans and 'howls' could be heard up close n' personal right outside our room windows. After all, we too were sleeping in the forest canopy...



Alex was keen to make a start on the day and requested breakfast at 6am leaving little time to explore Canopy Tower's upper deck but those that did venture out found the remnants of overnight thunderstorms and a damp mist shrouding the rain forest. A Green Shrike-vireo was the most notable bird heard singing and would become something of a nemesis for the group. After a delicious breakfast we descended Semaphore Hill and crossed the Panama Canal initially retracing our steps from the previous afternoon. The Wattled Jacanas and Rufescent Tiger-herons were still on view at Lake Atum near the Ammo Dump and a few minutes later we pulled over and parked. The choice of location was the beginning of the Pipeline Road, one of the most famous birding spots in Panama and perhaps Central America. The start was gentle and we enjoyed a nice range of species/families close to the birdmobile; a Roadside Hawk teed up nicely in the scopes, there was a calling Whopping Motmot, a pair Ringed Kingfishers excavating a nest hole in a sandy embankment, Long-billed Gnatwren, wintering Bay-breasted and Yellow Warblers and a Stripe-throated Hummingbird, the latter surely qualifying for the fastest



bird in the rainforest and almost impossible to see through binoculars, perhaps better left to the naked eye!

We pressed on, the showers turning into steady rain as we drove deeper into the forest along the Pipeline Road and parking by the kiosk at the Rainforest Discovery Center. From there we explored on foot, and it wasn't long before we first heard, and then called in a Great Jacamar, a large, long-billed denizen of humid lowland forest uncommon in most of its range but especially rare in the Canal Zone. True to its nature, the jacamar perch motionless for minutes calling softly and allowing for spectacular views and even some video to be taken! With the Great Jacamar still on view, a pair of Cinnamon Woodpeckers vied for attention excavating a nest hole in a rotting trunk only feet away! Walking deeper into the forest, the magic of the Pipeline Road really came into its own with a non-stop sequence of fabulous rain forest specialties including Black-chested and Pied Puffbirds, Black-capped Pygmy-tyrant and some delightfully melodic Purple-throated Fruitcrows building a nest! And, we even had close up views of the often heard, but far less frequently seen, Great Tinamou!

The flow of new species was seemingly endless and in rapid succession we enjoyed point blank views of a huge Mealy Parrot, a beautiful Black-throated Trogon, the bizarre Southern Bentbill and a pair of skulking Streak-chested Antpittas—surely one of the most attractive of the 'antbird' group? In those moments, it was easy to take our guide for granted but to have a local Panamanian who'd grown up around these birds and their habitat was making a massive difference to our time in the forest. Little wonder when Alex suggested going deeper into the forest to chase an ant swarm there was no hesitation!

Giant Blue Morpho butterflies, Central American Agoutis and Mantled Howlers accompanied the walk, and it wasn't long before a crescendo of tropical bird sounds and the buzzing mass of hundreds of thousands of army ants pushing through the undergrowth could be heard from the track. The birding was electrifying as 'antbird' after 'antbird' moved in to prey on invertebrates attempting to flee the nomadic ant swarm; multiple Spotted and Bicolored Antbirds, and Gray-headed Tanagers gave fabulous views and we were even treated to pair of Ocellated Antbirds! The latter is a large antbird with scalloped brown plumage and bizarre blue facial skin, uncommon anywhere in its range and a much-sought after prize of the humid, broadleaf rainforest.

The morning had been exceptional and host Lori graciously held lunch for us at the Canopy Tower after we arrived later than expected. "That's the Pipeline" said Lori, giving the distinct impression that she knew exactly how exciting the birding could be and didn't appear at all surprised that we might be late!

In the afternoon, we were back aboard the bird-mobile for the relatively short five-minute drive downhill to Summit Municipal Park and Botanical Garden. Alex had a specific target in mind as he'd heard of several Slate-colored Seedeaters visiting the bamboo stands within the park. The bamboo was exceptionally tall and, of



course, the seedeaters chose to feed close to the very top! Moreover, as we scanned it soon became clear that most of the seedeaters present were actually Variable Seedeaters and sorting through them in the canopy was going to be no easy task. However, after a little while we were soon rewarded with scope views of several yellow-billed male Slate-colored Seedeaters, something of a rarity in the area and a life bird for many in the group. Heady with success we explored more of Summit Park with Short-tailed and Band-rumped Swifts foraging overhead, Gartered and Slaty-tailed Trogons, Keel-billed Toucans and Clay-colored Thrushes aplenty, and the comical rasping display of Golden-collared Manikins. We also soaked up rewarding studies of Yellow-green and Yellow-throated Vireos, Panama and Streaked Flycatchers, a loose flock of 25 or so Shiny Cowbirds and a pair of foraging Lineated Woodpeckers. Non-avian highlights included a menacing Specked Caiman in one of the ornamental ponds and a fantastic roost of about 35 Common Tent-making Bats that Alex neatly spotlighted for us inside the folds of a giant palm leaf—so cool!

Dinner was up to its usual excellence at the tower and, after going through the day's checklist, we were primed for the riches to come the following day.

Thurs., Jan. 23 Canopy Tower | Chagres River Boat Tour | Summit Ponds | Old Gamboa Road.

The day dawned muggy and partly overcast resulting a spectacular sunrise from the top of Canopy Tower. Binoculars and coffee in hand, could there be any better start to the day? Once again, we scheduled an early breakfast, this time with the aim of being at the Gamboa Public Boat Ramp for 7:30am. As usual in Panama, distractions abound, and we had little choice but to stop for the superb Rothschild's Porcupine right by the road on Semaphore Hill—a super start to the day!

An especially bold Tricolored Heron greeted the group at the boat dock as we boarded and we set off up the Chagres River with more herons and other large wading birds in mind. Traveling by boat was really an ideal way to get close to many species that might otherwise be difficult to observe from shore. Wattled Jacanas, Common and Purple Gallinules foraged around the lily pads and matted vegetation as flights of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Cattle Egrets and White Ibises passed over the boat. Little Blue, Tricolored and Green Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets were scattered about the shore and farther up river we had exceptional views of several impressively large, pale Cocoi Herons as well a single Great Blue Heron that was evidently spending the winter in the warmth of Panama. Farther upriver we enjoyed a super cameo with a Greater Ani perched up alongside Green and Striated Herons, the latter two being very closely related species and not always easy to tell apart - the side-by-side comparison was most welcome! Raptors rising up over the river included Osprey, Broad-winged and Gray-lined Hawks and we got incredibly lucky when a pair of Gray-headed Kites (rare) flew right over the boat calling as they went.

The Chagres River had been quite superb and it would certainly have been fun to keep going upriver exploring but it was time to turn the boat around and head for the Gatun Lake area, timely perhaps because as we turned rather ominous dark gray clouds could be seen forming to the north-west over Gamboa Resort. Our journey



would take us along the Panama Canal and we shared the channel with gargantuan container ships chugging along at speed. The increasingly choppy waters hardly seemed like an ideal place for dabbling ducks but even there, in the middle of the Panama Canal, we found a resting Blue-winged Teal!

Soon we'd entered the more sheltered waters surrounding the many islands within Gatun Lake and cruised straight into marvelous views of foraging Snail Kites dropping down to the water and plucking apple snails from the marshes. Closer inspection of the same habitat found Limpkins in the shallows along with several perched Anhingas. It was also there that we ran into several other tour boats searching for monkeys which duly obliged being well accustomed to routine and even came to the boat for a hand-outs! Mantled Howlers, White-faced Capuchins and Geoffroy's Tamarins all came in to visit before increasing cloud and threatening skies indicated that it was time to leave. As we headed back out onto the Panama Canal the rain came hard and heavy and stayed with us all the way back to the Canopy Tower. There was no more welcome sight than Tatiana at the ready with a stack of warm, dry towels and black laundry bags ready for our soaking-wet clothes. She promised to have all our laundry dry by the afternoon session...and she delivered!

After another delicious lunch we rested a little before heading out at 3pm. It had rained heavily throughout 'siesta time' and the open topped bird-mobile didn't look like an especially enticing proposition. But Alex was unflappable and by some uncanny twist the last of the showers dispersed just as we climbed aboard the bird-mobile and the remainder of the day was free of rain. A short drive found us on the Old Gamboa Road beginning in the vicinity of the Summit Ponds. It was extremely rich in birdlife and Alex found something new for the group every time we advanced by just a few steps. Chestnut-headed Oropendulas, Masked and Black-crowned Tityras, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Lance-tailed and Golden-collared Manikins (heard displaying), and unbelievable views of a pair of White-necked Puffbirds, the largest of the puffbirds to be found in the region.

As we approached the Summit Ponds a flock of Turkey Vultures began to soar overhead, and a lone Zone-tailed Hawk glided right in to join them—nice! Careful scanning around the fringes of the ponds revealed good views of a Striated Heron and about five roosting Boat-billed Herons, as well as an Anhinga and a Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, the latter being a surprising miss on the Chagres River earlier in the day.

On entering the heavily forested section of the Old Gamboa Road Alex worked hard to show us a calling Rosy Thrush-tanager but, alas, despite being only a few feet away from the track only a handful of the group managed to get a fleeting glimpse. On the other hand, focusing on one spot did produce a nice selection of forest dwellers including several Black-chested Jays, Red-legged Honeycreepers, Orange-chinned Parakeets, winterers such as Bay-breasted and Chestnut-sided Warblers.

Another hundred yards down the same track produced a remarkable cameo of species with a Slaty-backed Forest-falcon (rare), a Broad-billed Motmot, a roosting Spectacled Owl and a pair of Bat Falcons overhead – wow! A phenomenal day drew to a close and Alex was quite naturally keen to leave the forest before dusk closed in. On the other hand, the walk back to the birdmobile wasn't short of distraction as Alex first heard and



then whistled in a calling Collared Forest-falcon towards the back of the Summit Ponds. It might have been recorded as a 'heard-only' had it not been skillfully picked out by Kathe perched amid a handful of exposed branches in the canopy. To have good views of two rarely seen forest-falcons in just one afternoon was verging on greedy but they were happily added to the impressive list of raptors tallied earlier in the day! We rounded off the evening back at the Canopy Tower with the daily checklist and another delightful supper anticipating much to look forward to for the following day.

Fri., Jan. 24 Canopy Tower | Rainforest Discovery Center and Tower | Gamboa Resort | Night safari

We scheduled breakfast for 5:30 a.m., aiming for a 6:15 departure and we boarded the bird-mobile with the goal of reaching the Rainforest Discovery Center nice and early. We arrived to find a White-tailed Trogon and a Black-striped Woodcreeper in the parking area, just the start needed to face the long climb up the spiral staircase to the top of the Discovery Tower. The views were truly magnificent as we reached the top and scanned scanned over the rainforest canopy. Small portions of the Panama Canal could be seen in the distance replete with cruising Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans! The forest appeared to be full of Mantled Howlers some of which allowed a very close approach and, for the next two hours or so, it was rainforest birding at its very best; Red-legged, Green and Shining Honeycreepers, Blue Dacnis, Yellow-backed Orioles aplenty, hefty Scaled Pigeons, mighty Mealy Parrots, and the best prize of all, prolonged scope views of a perched Blue Cotinga!

Once back down at ground level, Alex did his upmost to show us a Pheasant Cuckoo that called for a solid 20 minutes. It was pretty close to the track but simply refused to come into view. We did rather better with fantastic views of a tiny Moustached Antwren, the smallest if it's genus in the region, a furtive Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher and a very cooperative Acadian Flycatcher. The non-stop action continued as we settled down to watch the hummingbird feeders on the balcony of the discovery center; White-necked Jacobin, Long-billed Hermit, Crowned Woodnymph, Blue-chested and Violet-bellied Hummingbirds were among a plethora of beauties coming into the feeders. Gartered Trogons and Broad-billed Motmots could also be seen from this spot, the seating, shade and refreshments appreciated as the heat of the day began to kick in.

By late morning we were back by the Discovery Center's kiosk right alongside the Pipeline Road. Any thoughts of a swift departure were suddenly curtailed by an abundance of avian action, a feeding flock right by the kiosk. Black-striped and Cocoa Woodcreepers, Cinnamon Woodpecker, Rufous Mourner, Gray Elaena, Blue-crowned Manikin, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Black-throated Trogon all vied for attention as a displaying Ornate Hawk-eagle called overhead—Wow!



At the same time, we learned of a feeding Rufous-vented Ground-cuckoo feeding just off the track about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile deeper into the forest along the Pipeline Road. The ground-cuckoo is a much sought-after rainforest species as well as being locally rare and, as a group, it was felt that we should at least give it a try. By the time we reached the favored area it was 12 noon and the heat of the day was really starting to make a difference. After 20 minutes or so of waiting, the ground-cuckoo did not make an appearance but the walk along the Pipeline Road hadn't been in vain and we still managed to have great views of Song Wren, Southern Bentbill, Checker-throated Antwren and a female Red-capped Manakin along the way.

After a fabulous morning, the delicious lunch and cooling breezes atop the Canopy Tower were most welcome and we later embarked on an afternoon venture to Gamboa Resort, a new destination for us though it had been spied from the water during the Chagres River cruise a few days prior. The birding was busy from the outset with Southern Lapwings, Ruddy Ground-doves and a pair of Southern Beardless Tyrannulets around the gravel parking lot and no less than three species of trogon as we explored the trail system, including stunning views of a very obliging Gartered Trogon. White-bellied Antbird, Masked Tityra, Tennessee, Chestnut-sided and Kentucky Warblers were also noted along with a stunning Golden-collared Manakin. Towards the end of the walk a White-nosed Coati ambled across the lawns and footpaths, providing excellent views of another new mammal for the trip.

Tatiana, Lori and the tower staff put on a fabulous alfresco supper by the pool, shortly after which we were back aboard the bird-mobile for an Alex-led night safari on Semaphore Hill. And what a safari it turned out to be with Rothschild's Porcupine, Nine-banded Armadillo and the day's second White-nosed Coati being mammalian highlights, plus a stunning Spectacled Owl and a roosting Great Tinamou all brilliantly spotlighted. It was a little frustrating however, to hear a Black-and-white Owl calling for a solid ten minutes and not be able to find it in the spotlight....sigh

Sat., Jan. 25 Canopy Tower | Semaphore Hill | Journey to Canopy Lodge.

A final morning at Canopy Tower found most of our group on the upper deck sipping coffee and gazing across the rainforest canopy. Red-lore Parrots flew across the horizon vocalizing as they had done most mornings, but a flock of Brown-hooded Parrots was a new addition to the trip. Tropical Gnatcatcher and Lesser Greenlet were also noted and, finally of after several days of hearing them, we secured great views of a Green Shrike-vireo, surely something that could only be achieved from the upper deck of the Canopy Tower?!

The final breakfast at Canopy Tower was up to its usual excellence! After which, we headed out to Semaphore Hill for a short but very productive visit. 'Antbirds' were very much to the fore, with Black-crowned Antshrike,



Dot-winged Antwren, and Dusky Antbird all seen well. We also enjoyed good views of Black-cheeked and Cinnamon Woodpeckers, a perched Black-chested Puffbird and the remarkable, almost comical, ‘moonwalking’ display of a male Red-capped Manakin.

We departed Canopy Tower in mid-morning in an air-conditioned tour bus that would take us all the way west to Canopy Lodge. As we crossed the spectacular Centennial Bridge high over the Panama Canal, a large dark raptor came into view. This was no Turkey or Black Vulture but had broad rounded wings, a heavily banded tail and flight feathers and a dark, blackish body. Alex turned to face us with a broad grin and casually announced “that was a Black Hawk-Eagle”. Our stellar trip for raptors just got even better!

Alex jumped off the bus at the next exit and it was a shame to him go. He’d brought a wealth of experience to the tour as well good-natured humor and razor sharp field skills.

The journey west along the Pan-American Highway featured more traffic than we’d seen for days. It soon became apparent that east and west-bound lanes had become snarled up after a serious road accident straddled both sides of the median. Aside from rather fine views overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the slow-moving traffic did offer more chances to view raptors from the vehicle and Kathe managed to spot a superb adult Common Black Hawk, as well as both light and dark morph Short-tailed Hawks from the bus—not bad at all for a travel day!

Arrival at Canopy Lodge was later than anticipated due to the slow-moving traffic, but the kitchen staff held lunch for us, and we soon checked in to our beautifully appointed rooms in equally beautiful surroundings. After a brief orientation from Aiden the onsite manager, Tino was introduced as one of Canopy Family’s senior guides and an expert in the Cocle region. Birding started right at the open air dining and lounge area, and there were feeders right off the main balcony. It was busy, very busy in fact as Rufous Motmots, Thick-billed Euphonia, Tennessee and Bay-breasted Warblers, Crimson-backed Tanager, Snowy-bellied, and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds all appeared before us with a sensational Green Thorntail also close by.

Tino escorted the group around the fabulous gardens downstream from the lodge where we found a nice mix of wetland birds such as Green Heron, Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, and our first Green Kingfishers. A fabulous field day came to a close with a flock of Dusky-faced Tanagers, plus Blue-headed Parrots and a Brown-throated Three-



toed Sloth being buffeted back and forth on the wind in the high branches right over the lodge entrance! Checklist and supper were enjoyed in the comfortably cool mountain air at the lodge's outdoor dining facility, notable different from the humid lowlands of Panama's Canal region.

Sun., Jan. 26 Canopy Lodge | La Mesa | Las Minas | El Valle | Cara Iguana Trail

The day began with a 6:30 a.m. breakfast, but not before Louisiana Waterthrush, Buff-rumped Warbler, Green Thorntail and a flock of Dusky-faced Tanagers had all been seen close to the feeders. As we boarded the vehicle for the morning adventure, the Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth was still hanging close to the lodge entrance, clinging to the same branches from the previous evening!



Our first stop at La Mesa was only a mile or so up the road and overlooked rural farmland with terraced landscape on the steeper slopes. Initially, the roadside birding didn't seem particularly promising but the sudden spectacular views of a pair of Spot-crowned Barbets soon changed the mood and from there we enjoyed a whole host of new species to the tour; a Giant Cowbird parasitizing the nesting Chestnut-headed Oropendulas, Blue-black Grosbeaks, Isthmian Wren, Bananaquit, Paltry Tyrannulet, and Flame-rumped Tanager were among the highlights.

We continued up the steep gradient until the road crested at Las Minas and from there we embarked on a wonderfully atmospheric walk along the Las Minas Road. It was the highest point that we'd seen on the tour, offering majestic views of both the Pacific and the Caribbean slopes and we were literally walking along the spine of the Continental Divide! Changes in habitat and elevation would also point toward a whole selection of new species as we soon found out and included the peculiar Wedge-tailed Grassfinch, very much a ground-dwelling grassland species and uncommon in most of its patchy Central American range. Orange-bellied Trogons were another highlight from the Las Minas Road as Tino worked incredibly hard to call in a pair that had vocalized for a while. Just when it seemed that all was lost, there they were in full view for the whole group to see and photograph!



The Las Minas Road was full of quality and by the end of the walk we'd tallied many new additions to the trip though not all of them were seen by all members of the group; Kathy and Vivienne spotted a wonderful Silver-throated Tanager, and Anne skillfully photographed a wintering Swainson's Thrush which just happened to be the only one of the entire tour. Emerald Tanager, Golden-winged Warbler, White-ruffed Manakin, Northern Emerald-Toucanet, and Tawny-capped Euphonia all made cameo appearances. We did have excellent group views of Rufous-breasted Wrens



and perhaps as many as six Bay-headed Tanagers, a fast-moving flock of around 20 Tawny-crested Tanagers, and a tiny Scale-crested Pygmy-tyrant. As we walked back to the vehicle a Magnificent Frigatebird cruised overhead passing from the Caribbean slope toward the Pacific Ocean without flapping its wings once!

Lunch was again enjoyed amid the pleasant ambience of Canopy Lodge's outdoor dining area and, as the warmth of the day increased, we settled down for an hour or two of quiet time.

In the afternoon we descended from the lodge, passing through the suburbs El Valle until we reached a neighborhood that Tino nicknamed "the Millionaires Quarter". It was certainly very birdy as we spied White-tipped Doves, Yellow-throated Vireo, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Barred Antshrike, and Yellow-bellied Seedeater all quite easily seen from the roadside. A few moments later Tino led us off the road into a private yard while being escorted by the property's caretaker. There he aligned the spotting scopes from a safe distance straight onto a roosting Spectacled Owl, our third of the trip! The rest of the afternoon was spent on the Cara Iguana Trail with Lesser and Yellow-bellied Elaenias, Yellow-crowned and Thick-billed Euphonias, Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, another Barred Antshrike and brief, but good views of a Streaked Saltator, the only one of the whole tour.

The day was pleasant and breezy, and several raptors were utilizing the updrafts rising from Cerro Cara Iguana including Broad-winged and Short-tailed Hawks, and many Black and Turkey Vultures. Far less anticipated was a long winged, long tailed falcon first noticed by Kathe. The falcon was traveling at speed and looked interesting from the outset. Tino's raised his binoculars and instantly announced an identification of Aplomado Falcon! It turned out be Tino's first in the El Valle region despite having some 30 years of birding experience in the region. A lively checklist and supper at Canopy Lodge closed another fantastic day in Panama but not before we learned that Kathy, Pat and others in the group had spotted a Red-crowned Ant-tanager by the feeders!

Mon., Jan. 27 Canopy Lodge | Canopy Adventure | Cerro Gaital, El Valle.

The day dawned clear and comfortably cool with temps in the low 60s. A Buff-rumped Warbler again graced the stream by the lodge with Blue-chested Hummingbird and Bay Wren also on view.

After breakfast, we began birding the neighboring property of Canopy Adventure, searching for a handful of select species. Tino did very well in finding most of them, including a wonderful pair of roosting Mottled Owls, several Orange-billed Sparrows and a very well-hidden Tody Motmot. After a pleasant walk around Canopy Adventure, we drove the steeper gradients in the tour bus eventually arriving at the forest reserve of Cerro Gaital. We had the trail to ourselves and soon became immersed in classic forest birding. Skulking understory dwellers included White-ruffed Manakin, Rufous-capped Warbler, and several Chesnut-capped Brushfinch. In



the canopy, we found a flock of Black-faced Grosbeaks as well as a Silver-throated Tanager, a female Hepatic Tanager, a perched Green Hermit, and a Rufous Mourner. Tino was on top form and staked out a flowering Heliconia anticipating a visit from a White-tipped Sicklebill, a large hummingbird with a bold, black staring eye, heavily streaked underparts, a dramatically decurved bill, and bold white tips to the tail feathers—unique among Central American hummers! The sicklebill came into the Heliconia flowers right on cue, but the event happened so quickly that some weren't quite sure what had been seen while others missed it altogether! So we waited patiently and some ten minutes later the feisty sicklebill came in for another feed this time perching and clinging to the flowers in true sicklebill fashion, well worth the wait and a deserving reward for our hard working group!

Pleased with the sicklebill success, we continued up the fairly steep, cobblestone trail as Tino continued to tease out a whole host of uncommon forest species—Tawny-faced Gnatwren, Speckle-crested Pygmy-tyrant, and White-throated Spadebill to mention just a few. The distinctive, mournful calls of Spot-crowned Ant-vireo and Northern Schiffornis were heard throughout our descent, but those particular vocalists refused to give themselves up for views though there's always something worth returning for in the future!

The morning remained crisp and clear, and was certainly warming up. Raptors began to take advantage of the warm air thermals and we were treated to a displaying pair Double-tooted Kites and a calling, displaying Barred Hawk right overhead, the latter being yet another extremely uncommon raptor to add to our stellar list of birds of prey.

We returned to Canopy Lodge, not only enjoying lunch outdoors but also the fine collection of species to be seen right off the balcony; Bay-headed, Dusky-faced, Crimson-backed, Blue-gray and Summer Tanagers were all noted with Hallie also finding a Green Heron and Green Kingfisher, and Rick spotting a Gray-cowled Wood-Rail. Central American Agoutis could often be found freeloading under the feeders, seemingly habituated to the friendly surroundings.

In the afternoon, we enjoyed a fascinating visit to the Golden Frog Conservation project followed by a visit to El Valle's farmer's and crafts market. The final evening was spent back at Canopy Lodge wrapping up the checklist and group tally, followed by a wonderful dinner and the celebration of Vivienne's birthday!

Tues., January 28 Canopy Lodge | Return to Panama City

The hard-working team at Canopy Lodge had organized two separate shuttles for us to Tocuman International Airport graciously accommodating half of the group who'd booked earlier flights. The first shuttle departed at 6am and fortunately we'd been able to say our goodbyes the previous evening. The rest of the group had a relaxing morning around the lodge with breakfast at leisure and a last chance to watch the feeders or add a few late additions to the bird list which included Tropical Screech-owl, Gray-chested Dove and a wintering Mourning Warbler.



As we drove to the airport, huge kettles of Black Vultures could be seen along the route with the odd Short-tailed Hawk soaring with them. Great-tailed Grackles worked the roadsides and gas stations, Tropical Kingbirds perched up on roadside wires and Tropical Mockingbirds teed up on the fence posts. The journey to Tocuman International Airport had been a smooth one and we arrived in good time for the afternoon flights except for Jerry and Hallie who decided to stay in Panama City for one more evening. It had been a marvelous tour full of rich wildlife experiences in some of the most accessible tropical rainforest in the world, greatly enhanced by the easy-going, friendly people of Panama.

Photo Credits:

Mangrove Yellow Warbler, James P. Smith (JPS); Snail Kite, JPS; Mantled Howler Monkey, JPS; Cocoi Heron, JPS; Group birding, JPS; Sunset, JPS; Slaty-tailed Trogon, JPS; White-necked Puffbird, JPS; Scarlet-rumped Tanager, JPS; Wattled Jacana, JPS; Olivaceous Flatbill, JPS; Black Spiny-tailed Iguana, JPS; Rufescent Tiger-Heron, JPS; Black-crowned Antshrike, JPS; Ocellated Antbird, JPS; Crimson-backed Tanager, JPS; Gartered Trogon, JPS; Great Jacamar, JPS; Slate-colored Seeteater, JPS; Bicolored Antbird, JPS; Wattled Jacana, JPS; Purple-throated Fruitcrow, JPS; Blue Dacnis, JPS; Black-striped Woodcreeper, JPS; Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, JPS; Green Kingfisher, JPS; Mourning Warbler, JPS; Rufous Mourner, JPS; White-tipped Sicklebill, JPS; White-throated Spadebill, JPS; Rufous-capped Warbler, JPS; Barred Hawk, JPS; Group image w/ guide Alex Sanchez, Tatina Perez.