

Western Panamá: Tranquilo Bay | Trip Report | October 16-23, 2021 | Written by Robert Gallardo

With Guides Robert Gallardo & Natalia Decastro, and participants Calvin, Debra, John, Karen, Nathaniel, Philip, Stewart, Rob, Robin, & Susan.



Panama represents much more than a man-made canal that connects continents with commerce and trade, but also unites two worlds rich in flora and fauna. It owes much of its rich biodiversity to its proximity to South America, having been formed nearly three million years ago through volcanic activity and erosion. This land bridge literally “opened the door” for a large array of organisms to begin to migrate northward from the continent to the south.

Saturday October 16: Arrival in Tranquillo Bay | Garden Birding

Today, most of the guests flew from Panama City one hour to Bocas del Toro. We were picked up by Tranquilo Bay (TB) staff and within a few minutes we boarded two boats and set off for the Lodge. We were able to see some birds including numerous swallows, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and terns. The group arrived at the lodge and was greeted by Jay, one of the owners. We went directly to lunch where we met Natalia (our local guide) and Renee, another owner. After lunch we received an orientation then everyone was shown their rooms to get settled in. It was early, and we wanted to ‘dive’ right in to the areas’ biodiversity, so we met at for some



afternoon birding. There was a nice assortment of hummingbirds in the garden that included Band-tailed Barbthroat, White-necked Jacobin, Stripe-throated Hermit and Purple-crowned Fairy. The latter species can often be difficult to see elsewhere, but the perch of this individual was found as we were afforded scope views. Small flocks of different swallows went by and as well as a few swifts. The beautiful Golden-collared Manakin male was also seen feeding on Melastome fruits along with many Red-eyed Vireos. Swainson's Thrush bounced around everywhere. A small assortment of migrant wood-warblers and Scarlet Tanagers were seen from the observation tower. From the tower, we also saw a Peregrine Falcon and two Common Black-Hawks. The day ended when hundreds of Red-lored Parrots and a few Mealys passed by en route to their roosting site nearby - what a great way to start the trip!

Sunday, October 17: Palo Seco Reserve

We had an early breakfast then were out the door for our first outing. Our destination was the species-rich mid-elevation forests of the Palo Seco reserve. We boarded two boats and went to Punta Robalo along the coast where a Coaster was waiting. There were species including the Green Ibis, White-lined Tanagers, Southern Lapwing and numerous flycatchers. A lone Yellow-headed Caracara was bounding down the road as well. Hundreds of Turkey Vultures were sitting in the trees and on the ground waiting for the air to warm so they could continue their migration southward. We continued up the road and began to see migrating Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks as they began to gather in thermals. There was one point in the road where the sky was literally filled with raptors and was an impressive sight to behold. For many this would be one of the most memorable parts of the trip. A fruiting Crabbo tree had attracted some Summer Tanagers, an Eastern Kingbird and a female Gartered Trogon. As we started to ascend the mountain and made a stop where there was some rich gallery forest. A few White-faced Capuchin monkeys were making their way up the hill. Numerous *Inga* trees were in bloom as well as *Calliandra* and shrimp plants (family). We would call this our "Inga" stop. These flowers were attracting a Crowned Woodnymph, Snowy-bellied and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds. More birds came in including the lovely and spectacular Emerald and Speckled Tanagers, the latter showing quite well at close range and at eye level. More birds continued to appear including the tiny Mistletoe Tyrannulet and the even tinier Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant which was a Lifer for most of us. It was an incredible array of birds, and the day was still really getting started.



We continued up the road a few more minutes and made another stop. There was a large fruiting fig and fruiting *Trema* trees so this would be coined the "fig" tree stop. Some blooming *Ageratum* flowers were attracting a small assortment of glasswings and another one related to the Monarch. Bird activity soon caught all our attention when Scarlet-thighed Dacnis appeared. More Blackburnian Warblers and some Bananaquits appeared. Some screeching sounds caught Natalia's attention and they turned out to be some large flocks of Sulphur-winged Parakeets that landed nearby. We got on them quickly and got scope views of this colorful highland species that is endemic to Costa Rica and Panama. We climbed up even further until reaching the end of the Palo Seco reserve and where the Fortuna Forest Reserve starts then turned off on a side road.

Along that road were some spectacular wildflower blossoms that were attracting hummingbirds that included the Talamanca (split from Magnificent), Green Hermit, White-bellied Mountain-Gem, Purple-throated Mountain-Gem and White-tailed Emerald. Someone spotted something high up in a far tree and it turned out to be the Blue-and-gold Tanager which would end up being the rarest species seen during the entire trip. Small flocks of Common Chlorospingus also made an appearance before the rain set in. We had a tasty calzone lunch on the bus to tide us over. A few of us then ventured out into the light rain and found a Double-toothed Kite that was hunting. We began to descend the mountain and made two more stops which were the same spots when we came up the hill. At the fig tree stop we were able to see many Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, more Speckled Tanagers and a few of the stunning Black-and-Yellow Tanagers. This latter species is another regional endemic. We made our way back to the coast as our action-packed day came to a close, boarded the boats and were back at the lodge just before dark. Our first full day afield was no less than wonderful as we witnessed a big variety of both lowland and highland species.



Monday, October 18: Popa Island | Forest Walks

Today was a bit more relaxing, and after yesterday's action-packed birding we felt as if we needed it. After breakfast we took a short boat ride to the Popa Island area in search of handsome Snowy Cotinga. There were no cotingas on this trip, but we did find a lovely male Mangrove Yellow Warbler, our first Keel-billed Toucan, Yellow-throated Toucan and a Bat Falcon. We returned to TB and did a late a.m. walk in gardens before taking a lunch break. A pair of Black-crowned Antshrikes were working the flowering bushes in the gardens and would prove to be a daily companion. Some guests were also able to observe a mother sloth with an ever-so-cute baby. Robert spotted a Chestnut-backed Antbird that was preening while returning to the cabin and some guests got to see it. We took an early afternoon walk along the forest trail at TB. It was quiet, but a pair of the tiny White-flanked Antwren did make an appearance. Natalia also spotted our first Strawberry Poison Dart Frog, and we were afforded great looks at this tiny species. A lek of Golden-collared Manakins was also found.

We then decided to do a late afternoon boat ride to return to the Popa Island area for a second chance at the Snowy Cotinga. Some guests stayed behind to relax while others went kayaking and/or snorkeling. It was a bit overcast which would aid tremendously in our search. It paid off and we were rewarded with not just one, but three lovely males. One was feeding and even dove to almost ground level in someone's front yard. This regional endemic ranges from eastern Honduras to northwestern Panama and we were extremely happy to see it. We did a short night walk on this day which produced some interesting herps. We found three of the giant Savage's Foam Frog, a Leaf Litter toad atop a shampoo ginger and a gigantic pale wolf spider.



Tuesday, October 19: Green Acres Chocolate Farm

After breakfast we departed for our next adventure. We made our way to the Green Acres Chocolate Farm that is connected to the mainland via a narrow strip of land. Before leaving TB, however, we were surprised to see a nurse shark at the dock which swam by lazily and there was also a cowfish. En route to Green Acres we found several bottlenose dolphins, Moon Jellyfish and Atlantic Sea Nettle (another jellyfish). We arrived at the Green Acres and were greeted by a couple of Mangrove Swallows and then Gary, the owner. We first went on a short walk into the cacao plantation which had large broadleaf trees overhead and patches of native forest. We found our first two species of woodcreepers which included Wedge-billed and Streak-headed. A Plain Xenops also made an appearance as well as a Double-toothed Kite that perched briefly for scope views. Then we had both the giant Pale-billed and Lineated Woodpeckers. Several Olive-backed Euphonias chattered away nearby, and we had a lone Black-chested Jay. We also found several of the spectacular Green-and-Black Poison Dart Frogs plus a Clown Frog that was perched alongside the trail. A small number of the whimsical lantern bugs were on the side of a large tree, each replete with long, waxy-like tails. After the natural history walk, we had a chocolate tasting feast with Gary. He served us samples of some exquisite homemade recipes that were to die for. After leaving Green Acres, we made our way back to TB. Along the way we saw some Cushion Stars (starfish) and more Magnificent Feather Dusters. Some schooling sardines were attracting some seabirds and we were treated with an elegant Brown Noddy. We did a short pre-dinner walk on the grounds to search for the large Short-tailed Nighthawk which proved a success.

Wednesday, October 20: Snyder Canal | Changuinola River | Bird Island

We had an early breakfast today so we could get started on our next adventure. We departed for Snyder Canal; a man-made ditch that runs for seven miles parallel to the beach was briefly used to transport bananas. Upon reaching the canal, Jay tied the boats together so we could cruise slowly down the channel. The birds were quite active toward beginning. A lot of migrant wood-warblers and different flycatchers zipped around to and fro. A far-off Nicaraguan Seed-Finch was spotted, but Stewart would spot a male later that was perched right next to our boats. We also got a full assortment of kingfishers, seeing 5 species in all. This included the adorable American Pygmy Kingfisher. A handsome adult Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was perched fairly low for a good view. An immature Common Black-Hawk was also seen well. As we were reaching the Changuinola River a light



rain set in, but that didn't deter us. A small island was full of gulls, terns and pelicans. A pair of Southern Lapwing were spotted along the shoreline. An area where there were cattle was bustling with birds including Crested Caracara, Yellow-headed Caracara, Limpkin and Giant Cowbird. A nice assortment of waders was seen along the way including Great and Snowy Egrets, Great Blue, Tricolored and Little Blue Herons. We had lunch under a large fig tree and fortunately, the rain stopped. A Neotropical River Otter paid us a quick visit before we continued.

We dropped back down to the river mouth and stopped along a sandy shore to look for shorebirds. We found Least Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Sanderling, Short-billed Dowitcher, the resident Collared Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Black-bellied Plover and Ruddy Turnstone. We then entered the open sea as it was calm and headed east along the coastline. Our destination was a set of rocky islets just off the coast where a special bird was awaiting us. As we approached Bird Island (Swan Cay) we found our first Red-billed Tropicbird sitting in the water. Its long tail was arched in the air as if it did not want to get it wet. Then another and another appeared sitting in the water then more appeared as they flew by. They use this island as a breeding site (the only one in Panama) and we even witnessed some birds sitting on nests. What a special bird to see with its bright red bill set against stark-white plumage speckled in black and with long, white tail streamers. There were also nesting Brown Boobies and many young were spotted. It was a great way to end this special day. We made our way back to TB along the coast and called it a day.

Thursday, October 21: Canopy Tower | Snorkeling

Today we spent the entire day at TB. Some guests decided to meet atop the canopy tower in the morning to see what was stirring while others slept in a bit longer. Atop the tower we saw many pairs of Red-lored Parrots that were off to their feeding grounds for the day. Some Green Ibis flew by, and migrant wood-warblers stirred in the trees all around us. It was the start of a more relaxing day. After breakfast we all headed down the trail with Natalia and ended up at her house not far away. Her vegetable garden and country lifestyle put a human touch to the story of a local guide - each chicken and rooster even had its own name. A few tanagers and hummingbirds were working the Porterweed in the flower garden. A small barracuda was seen at a nearby dock. Back inside the forest we searched for the Three-wattled Bellbird which remained elusive. A pair of White-flanked Antwren worked the forest understory as well as the Chestnut-backed Antbird. The forest and gardens



were still buzzing with many Swainson's Thrush and Bay-breasted Warbler. After lunch, some guests rested while others went snorkeling and/or kayaking in the nearby reefs. A couple went to check out what was stirring around the tower while a few of us went back to the forest to try our luck at the bellbird. We ended the day with another great meal and some good laughs.

Friday, October 22: Highlands | Punta Robalo

Today was our last full day at TB. We had an early breakfast then departed for the mainland to return to the Palo Seco area. We reached Punta Robalo and boarded the Coaster bus. We made a brief stop in the wetlands to admire two Purple Gallinule with a both an immature and a black, fluffy chick.

Our first stop was at the 'Inga' tree area. It was surprisingly quiet with virtually no bird activity, so we continued on to the 'fig' stop just up the road a few minutes. This spot, however, was hopping with birds and right off the bat Robert spotted a perched Rufous-crested Coquette male. It then took off and began to spar with a female Green Thorntail. Then the tanagers started moving in and included Palm, Speckled, Bay-headed, Blue-gray, Plain-colored, Scarlet-rumped, White-shouldered, Silver-throated, Crimson-collared and Emerald. It was virtually a psychedelic spectacle and almost unbelievable, but also included more Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, Green Honeycreeper and Olive-backed Euphonia as well as the Sulphur-winged Parakeet. Across the road there was more action and we saw a pair of the uncommon Yellow-throated Chlorospingus (Bush-Tanager). Then a Mourning Warbler showed up and a female MacGillivray's which ended up being a Lifer for Natalia. The fig tree also started to fill up with both the Keel-billed and Yellow-throated Toucans. A pair of Barred Forest-Falcons barked away in the distance. It was an incredible way to start the day.

We continued up the road and made a brief stop at a bridge that overlooked a small river that came cascading down the mountain. A Black Phoebe was the only thing stirring there. We continued further up the highway and came across a pair of Bat Falcons that were perched very close to the road and posed every so cooperatively for photos. We finally made our way to a Smithsonian research facility that sat above Fortuna Lake. As we were having lunch there a White-bellied Mountain-gem came into view as well as a handsome Tawny-capped Euphonia. Many of the giant White-collared Swifts came swooping in very low for good looks. Numerous species



of native orchids were also blooming that dotted the gardens. We started to head back down the hill and returned to the paved frontage road we visited on the previous trip. It was kind of slow, but we did get great views of the Green-fronted Lancebill which, as the name suggests, possesses a huge bill. We dropped down the mountain and made one last stop to see if anything was still moving at the fig tree site. And there was. Many species of tanagers were still feeding as well as Collared and Black-throated Trogons. And just as everyone had boarded the bus Robert heard the familiar call of the Black-faced Grosbeak so everyone unboarded to see this sharp-looking bird. Right before reaching Punta Robalo Natalia stopped the bus so we could admire a handsome male Red-breasted Meadowlark. What a great way to end an outing. We boarded the boats and made our way back to TB. Tonight, we would do our final list. In total we recorded 240 species of birds, 8 mammals, 10 reptiles and amphibians, 14 marine life organisms and 12 insects.

Favorite birds (including other organisms and experiences!) of the trip included: Toucans (Karen, Rob G.), Scarlet-thighed Dacnis (Phil), Speckled Tanager (Phil, Nathaniel, Stewart), Owl's-eye butterfly on hand (Susan), Rufous-crested Coquette (John), Snowy Cotinga (Robin), Lineated Woodpecker (Nathaniel), hawk migration (Stewart, Rob G.), Purple Gallinule chick (Debra), juvenile Northern Jacana (Debra), overall appreciation for the outdoors and birds (Calvin), jellyfish (Karen), cabins & friendly staff (Susan), mangrove habitat (John), Blue-and-gold Tanager (John), Amazon Kingfisher (Robin), Green Thorntail (Robert G.), Green-and-black Poison Dart Frog (Robert G.), River Otter (Natalia), MacGillivray's Warbler (Natalia).

Saturday, October 23: Departures

Today we left this island paradise and said 'goodbye' to all the friends we made here. But we wouldn't escape until we squeezed in one last trip bird. Natalia heard the familiar call of the Black Hawk-Eagle which appears now and again at TB. Some of the guests were able to climb the tower in time with Natalia where they caught it as it glided away over the forest canopy. It was a pleasant way to end the trip. We boarded the boats and made our way back to Bocas del Toro for our afternoon flight. Quite a few of the guests stayed on Panama to see other sites and so ended the journey.

Photo Credits: Group (Robert Gallardo - RG), Talamancan Rocket Frog (RG), Speckled Tanager (RG), Green Anole (RG), Tranquilo Bay (RG), Birding Group (RG), Panama Map (RG), Raptor flock (Karen Geiger - KG), Black-and-yellow Tanager (RG), Strawberry Poison Dart Frog (RG), Double-toothed Kite (James P. Smith), Leaf Litter Toad (RG), Savage's Foam Frog (RG), Chocolate Farm (RG), Chestnut-backed Antbird (RG), Clown Frog (RG), Group on Snyder Canal (RG), Tanagers (RG), Red-billed Tropicbird (RG), Brown Booby (RG), Snowy Contiga (RG), White-bellied Mountain-gem (RG), Swan Island (RG), Sulphur-winged Parakeet (RG), Lysimnia Clearwing (RG), Wildflower (RG)