

Panama: Tranquilo Bay | Trip Report

October 15-22, 2022 | Written by Robert Gallardo



With Naturalist Journeys guide Robert Gallardo, local guides Roger and Brenda, and participants Deb, Eric, Hugh, Sally, Cynthia, Virginia, Regina, Elizabeth, Karl, and Willie





Tucked away in extreme northwestern corner of Panama is a very special place called Bocas del Toro, riddled with islands of many sizes. On one of those islands is Tranquilo Bay (TB) lodge. This trip was designed for one to come and unpack just once, and enjoy the varied activities offered in the area, including two trips to the mountains in the highlands. This year, ten guests from across the U.S. went to enjoy the sunsets, flocks of parrots, delightful cuisine, and good company.

Oct. 15-Today our adventure started. Those who stayed at the Radisson were taken to the nearby airport where we rendezvoused with the other guests. After a bit of delay we were finally on our way to Bocas del Toro. Upon arrival, we were met at the Bocas airport by TB staff and before we knew it, we were boarded two boats and were on our way. We cruised along the mangrove-lined islands, enjoying the tropical scenery and some brightly colored houses that were seen here and there. We arrived at TB and were greeted by Renee and Jay; two of the owners. We had lunch then met Roger and Brenda, two new guides at TB. Afterwards, everyone was shown to their rooms and had some down time.

After it cooled down a bit we all met up in the gardens to begin our seven days of wildlife viewing. Starting in the gardens was an excellent way to 'ease' into the bird watching. Migrants from North America were moving





*White-necked
Jacobin*

through and some were already there to remain for many months. We found *Veery*, *Swainson's Thrush*, and numerous wood-warblers including *Prothonotary*, *Blackburnian*, *Bay-breasted* and *Northern Waterthrush*. Some *Summer* and *Scarlet Tanagers*, *Red-eyed Vireos*, and some of the infamous *Empidonax* flycatchers were also present to round out the set of migrants. *Short-billed Pigeons* were common this year and were busy filling up on melastome fruits. Also eating the fruits was the orange-colored form of the *White-collared Manakin* and a few *Red-capped Manakins*. *Bananaquits* would be a constant companion nearly everywhere we went. In another part of the garden there was a flurry of hummingbird activity with numerous species sallying above Hibiscus flowers catching gnats. These included *White-necked Jacobin*, *Green-breasted Mango*, *Crowned Woodnymph*, and *Rufous-tailed Hummingbird*. Other

species nectaring on various flowers were *Bronzy Hermit*, *Stripe-throated Hermit*, and the dazzling *Purple-crowned Fairy*.

The sun had gone down far enough for us to climb the canopy tower and enjoy the remainder of the day. *Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift* and various swallows zipped by as they preyed on bugs that were invisible to our eyes. A pair of *Black-cheeked Woodpeckers* perched nearby to investigate a small snag. A few of the uncommon *White-vented Euphonias* also perched in a nearby tree. Then, dozens of parrots started coming by. Mostly *Red-lored* and some *Mealys*, as they were heading to their night roost. We were losing light so we called it a day.

We met at the restaurant for some cocktails then our first dinner together. Afterwards, Robert led an Inspiration in Nature sharing session which brought the group together well and we were off to a great start.



Northern Green Longwing



*Chestnut-backed
Antbird*

Oct. 16-Today was our second day of 'easing' into the tropics. We had an early breakfast then boated over to the nearby Popa Island. On the way to the morning's destination we saw three distant *Snowy Cotingas*; one male and two females. We were hoping that we would get a closer look at some point. Not far away we arrived at the Kozenda Gardens; a place we did not visit last year. It was a small in holding nestled between the mangroves and the

forest. There were places to sit down and watch hummingbird feeders and overlook into the mangroves. *Crowned Woodnymphs* dominated the feeders, but a lovely *Band-tailed Barbthroat* did make an appearance and everyone got great looks at it. A *Chestnut-backed Antbird* also made a nice showing at the edge of the forest and some got to see the *Rufous Motmot* which would be the only sighting on the trip. Down closer to the mangroves a few *Gray-headed Chachalacas* moved stealthily through the forest understory. Some nice butterflies also flitted into the garden and we got great views of the Northern Green Longwing that fed on Lantanas.

We returned to the lodge, had lunch, then enjoyed a bit of down time. In the afternoon a few stayed at the lodge with Roger and Brenda while Robert took the majority back on a boat ride. We really wanted to see a cotinga at closer range. And it paid off. Close to where we saw the three birds that morning was a male perched low atop some mangroves. It kept flying back and forth to numerous low perches and we enjoyed the display or whatever it was up to. Satisfied, we returned to the lodge and wrapped up another great day.



*Red-breasted
Blackbird*



*Green
Honeycreeper*

Oct. 17-Today marked our first trip to the mainland which meant we were going to see many different birds and other wildlife. We got an early start and headed out on two boats southward toward the mainland. Near the dock at Punta Raton there was a lone *Yellow-crowned Night-Heron* as well as *Royal Tern*, *Sandwich Tern*, and *Neotropic Cormorant* perched on pilings. We hopped into our large Coaster bus and started down the road. In some pastures

there were *Green Ibis* and we stopped to admire numerous *Red-breasted Blackbirds*. Sitting on the road itself were several *Crested Caracaras*. Up the road we made a 'pit stop' and also visited a pond behind some buildings. There was one roosting *Boat-billed Heron* hidden deep within a large coral tree. Hunting for fish was also a small Spectacled Caiman as well as a pair of the giant *Ringed Kingfishers* and one *Green Kingfisher*. We spotted a pair of the cute *Common Tody-Flycatchers* before moving on.

We continued up the road and it was overcast and drizzling. This meant that, at least for today, there would not likely be large numbers of migrating raptors. We continued with high spirits that we would find other wonderful birds, and we did. We made our first stop part way up the mountain where a bridge crossed a small crystalline river that came down the mountainside.

There was a great deal of activity most of the time we were there. One of the first species we saw (barely) was the diminutive *Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant*; one of the smallest flycatchers anywhere. In



*Crimson-collared
Tanager*



Broad-billed
Motmot

one small flock there was a bright male *Green Honeycreeper*, *Silver-throated Tanager*, *Palm Tanager*, *Blue-gray Tanager* and several of the exquisite *Scarlet-thighed Dacnis*. By the bridge there was a small flock of both the *Crimson-collared* and *Scarlet-rumped Tanagers*. What a great stop!

We continued up the road a bit at a stop that was productive last year. It wasn't so this year, but we did see a pair of the prized *Yellow-throated Chlorospingus* and brief looks at a *White-breasted Wood-Wren*.

Looking for better hunting grounds, we drove up a bit more. It was a big turnout that was spectacular last year and this year would also be productive. A pair of *Ruddy Pigeon* was perched in plain sight. Some sleek jet fighter-like birds came zooming by low enough for us to see they were *Gray-rumped Swifts*. At the edge of a drop off someone spotted something crawling up a tree and turned out to be the large *Northern Barred Woodcreeper*. The tell-tale nasal honking sound came from the same forested embankment and turned out to be a *Broad-billed Motmot*. Everyone got scope views this stunning bird. Roger heard the high-pitched screeches of a prized regional endemic; the *Sulphur-winged Parakeets*. Several landed nearby, but literally disappeared amidst the thick foliage and then some fog rolled in. Just as the fog was lifting the initial birds were found then another small flock flew in. This time we got excellent scope views as they fed on wild figs. A *Tropical Parula* came into view in a *Cecropia* tree just as a few *Black-and-yellow Tanagers*, a regional endemic. Just as we were about ready to depart that spot, someone spotted some *White-throated Capuchins* that were feeding on an unknown fruit.

We climbed further up the mountain into the Palo Seco reserve until we reached a turn off road that led up a ridgeline. We stopped for lunch and enjoyed the cool mountain air. A female *Purple-throated Mountain-gem* popped in and out as she nectared on a flowering shrub. A tiny Alfaro's Pygmy-Squirrel was spotted nearby as it foraged in the canopy. We walked around a bit and eventually ran into a nice mixed flock that hung around the road. Some wonderful birds were seen including the *Red-faced Spinetail*, *Slaty-capped*



Sulphur-winged
Parakeet

Flycatcher, *Tawny-capped Euphonia*, *Common Chlorospingus*, *Slate-throated Redstart*, and the regionally endemic *Costa Rican Warbler*. Along a steep embankment Roger knew where there was a *Silvery-fronted Tapaculo* and it made a few brief appearances before disappearing into the



*Purple-throated
Mountain-gem*

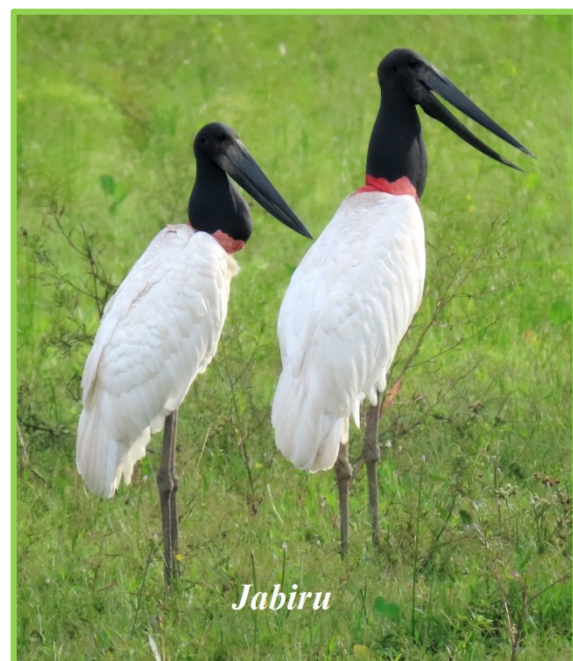
thick, moss-covered roots. We got a brief view of a *Golden-browed Chlorophonia* and *Black-striped Sparrow* to end today's trip to the mountain.

We made our way back to the coast and to Punta Robalo where

we got one last great bird. Brenda spotted two of the giant *Jabiru* storks in a flooded pasture and apparently are rare in that part of Panama. We boarded the boats and made the return trip to our lodge in time for happy hour.

Oct. 18-Today's morning visit was to the Green Acres Chocolate Farm. Gary was there to greet everyone, but then had to leave shortly after. The chocolate was as good as last year. A short walk into the nearby forested cacao plantation revealed some of the lovely Green-and-black Poison Dart frogs, *Black Hawk-Eagle*, *White Hawk*, *Slaty-tailed Trogon*, *Streak-headed Woodcreeper*, and more.

Everyone returned to Tranquilo Bay for lunch and some downtime. In the afternoon we did a short walk in the gardens then climbed the tower again to watch the parrot spectacle. In the garden we saw a nice assortment of hummingbirds including *Bronzy Hermit*, *White-necked Jacobin*, *Purple-crowned Fairy*, and *Green-breasted Mango*. Several *Blue-headed Parrots* were feeding on *Inga* tree seed pods and we got our only scope views of them for the trip. Toward the backside of the garden, at the edge of the forest, we came across a very cooperative *Double-toothed Kite* and we were afforded scope views. We also encountered a mixed flock of small birds that were moving fast. We got quick looks at *Worm-eating Warbler*, *Yellow-throated Vireo*,



Jabiru

Dot-winged Antwren, and *White-flanked Antwren*. We heard a *White-winged Becard*, but it remained elusive. From the tower, many *Common Nighthawks* were seen as it got darker. It was a nice way to end another great day.



*Boat trip on
Snyder Canal*

Oct. 19-Today was one of those ‘unforgettable’ days and is always a highlight for most of those who go to Tranquilo Bay. We headed out early in both boats and made our way to the entrance of Snyder Canal; an old man-made ‘venture’ that was dug out a long time ago to move bananas from one place to another. Before arriving there, however, we encountered literally hundreds of *Magnificent Frigatebirds* that were soaring over Colón Island

and was a phenomenon none of us had ever seen before.

We reached the entrance and Jay tied both boats together. Just a couple minutes later we found the first prize of the day; a male *Nicaraguan Seed-Finch*. Although it has a fairly large range that extends from eastern Guatemala to western Panama, it is nonetheless a great sighting. As we slowly cruised along we saw a nice assortment of kingfishers, a pair of *Black-cowled Orioles*, numerous *Prothonotary Warblers*, several stunning *Golden-hooded Tanagers*, and even a pair of *Short-tailed Nighthawks* on a day roost. Go figure! Those nighthawks are difficult enough to see away from a roost. A pair each of the diminutive *Brown-capped Tyrannulet* and *Black-headed Tody-Flycatchers* also made an appearance. Roger heard some faint squeaking sound and from our right side appeared a small flock of parrot-like birds fairly low. We couldn’t see any details on them, but he said they were *Red-fronted Parrotlets* that apparently undergo altitudinal migration within their restricted range. Near the end of the canal another special bird sang from the nearby grass and flew into a low shrub for great views: the *Olive-crowned Yellowthroat*.



*Strawberry
Poison Dart
Frog*

We stopped along the wooded bank to see something else. Roger had a good spot for another color morph of the Strawberry Poison Dart Frog. And there they were. A whole bunch of deep red ones were seen hopping all over and climbing trees.



We reached the Changuinola River and headed up for a ways. We spotted *Neotropic Cormorant*, *Northern Jacana*, *Common Black-Hawk*, *Roadside Hawk*, *Mangrove Swallows*, and so much more. Just about every plausible species of waders were along the river, including *Roseate Spoonbill* and a small flock of *Green Ibis*. There were a few *Black-necked Stilts* and *Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks* to boot. Off in the distance there was something on a log in the middle of the river. It was a River Otter and we got great views as we approached closer.

At a debris-strewn stretch of the beach we saw numerous plovers including *Collared*, *Wilson's*, and *Semipalmated*. Near the mouth of the river there was a nice assortment of shorebirds including *Sanderling*, *Ruddy Turnstone*, *Willet*, *Short-billed Dowitcher*, *Spotted Sandpiper*, and *Solitary Sandpiper*. The stunning colors of a few *Black Skimmers* also lit up the beach.

Our freshwater experience was over and now it was time to switch over to salt water. We slowly went across the river's mouth into the calmer ocean waters and headed east. Destination: Bird Island. We got there before we knew it and started seeing the showcase bird of the day; the eloquent *Red-billed Tropicbird*. A few were coming and going, surely after foraging at sea. We noticed a couple on active nests as well. What a fantastic bird. And there were adult and young *Brown Boobies* all over the rocks. Someone then noticed that there was a tiny bird huddled under a ledge just above the water line. It was a poor male *Hooded Warbler* that must have migrated and landed on the island. The future didn't look good for it. We departed and made our way back to the lodge to end another fabulous day.

Oct. 20-Tranquilo Bay not only offers mangroves and gentle sea breezes, but has some rainforest as well. Today we would stay on the island to explore another corner of the property. After a relaxing breakfast we began our walk along a trail inside the rainforest. These shady realms are



full of wildlife, but often require more careful scrutiny to find something. As we came up to a small stream crossing Roger spotted something large that flew into a nearby tree. It was an adult *Rufescent Tiger-Heron* that had recently taken up residency there. Everyone got scope views and wonderful photos. Next to a small clearing made by leafcutter ants was a patch of Hot Lip flowers being visited by a lovely *Blue-throated Goldentail*. Some of the guests also saw this prized hummer feeding on the porterweed

in the gardens. At the same spot there was a small flock of *Red-throated Ant-Tanager* that skulked in the understory. At a low, boggy wash Roger found a small population the orange-colored Strawberry Poison Dart Frog. Along another point in the trail Robert spotted something flying around which eventually landed under a leaf. It was a Great Eurybia; a large member of the metalmark family. At a fork in the trail a couple more interesting things showed up. A Stoll's Scarlet-eye (skipper) landed on the underside of a large *Calathea* leaf and sitting on top of the same plant was an Evergreen Toad. This toad has the canny ability to climb vegetation.

As we were exiting the forest an *Ochre-bellied Flycatcher* was spotted and another Double-toothed Kite. It appeared to be the same kite we saw two days ago. Along a stretch of forest by the tower Roger heard the soft calls of a wonderful member of the flycatcher family; the *Stub-tailed Spadebill*. With a bit of patience one came close enough for everyone to get good views.



We stopped for our lunch and siesta. Later on a few people went for a stroll in kayaks and found a roosting *Common Potoo*. At the end of the day we reconvened atop the tower and found a really good bird; several *Black-crowned Tityras*, including the females adorned with brown-



colored faces. A lone pair of *Olive-throated Parakeet* also made an appearance and seemed to be the only ones around. The parade of parrots came by right on schedule as they have likely been doing long before man set foot on these islands. We ended another nice day in Bocas del Toro. Later on, as we were enjoying cocktails and doing our checklist, Roger informed us that we had some special visitors just outside on the deck. Four Panama Night-Monkeys came in to dine on bananas set out by the staff.

Oct. 21-Our last full day was already upon us and the trip would end a big note. We set out early to do our second trip to the mainland to look for species we missed during the first visit. As we were approaching Punta Robalo we got our first signs that today we would witness migrating birds. The sky was clear and made for perfect conditions for birds to catch thermals and continue their journey southward. At first, there were hundreds upon hundreds of *Turkey Vultures* that were lifting up out of a nearby forest. They were soon joined by hundreds of immature *Mississippi Kites* with only a few adults in with them. None of us knew that young birds would migrate together. We hopped into the bus and stopped partway down the road. There was a pair

of *Southern Lapwing* and *Wood Stork* in a field. The sun was triggering a lot of butterfly action as well and there were some stunning Sara Longwings flitting about.



We continued up the road and could see that the sky was starting to fill with migrating vultures and hawks. We found a safe place to turn off the road to enjoy this natural spectacle. We could not even count how many *Swainson's Hawks* and *Broad-winged Hawks* were taking to the heights. Some were already migrating southward as high as the human eye could see. We estimated that there were probably a couple hundred-thousand birds, maybe more, but we really weren't sure. This spectacle alone made the day trip worthwhile, but the day was just beginning. A raspy sound caught our attention and it turned out to be some

Band-backed Wrens which were nice to see.

We continued up the road and made a stop to see what was stirring. It was quiet, but a stunning Cypris Morpho glided slowly over the bus and caught our eyes. Elsewhere in its range this neon blue morpho inhabits lowland forests.

We continued further up the road until we reached the Lake Fortuna area. It was a nice high elevation site and a great place to get out and have lunch. One of the guests spotted the widespread *Black Phoebe* and *Rufous-collared Sparrow* near the spillway. While we were eating a couple of hummingbirds showed up to feed on flowering shrubs just across the street. One turned out to be the regionally endemic *White-tailed Emerald*, known only from Costa Rica and Panama. The other was the lovely *Snowy-bellied Hummingbird*. A nice surprise came literally to us as a *Great Black-Hawk* landed in a tree on the other side of the road. It lifted off and was soon joined by another one. One dove into the spillway and grabbed a large lizard off the side of a wall. What a show!

After that productive lunch stop we backtracked a bit and turned off the Palo Seco ridgeline road to see what else we could find. A mixed flock was moving fast in a small stand of trees adjacent to the road. Some guests 'spotted' a *Spotted Barbtail*; a wonderful highland woodcreeper-like bird. Feeding amongst the flock was a stunning *Silver-throated Tanager* that was seen before the flock disappeared down the hill. We walked up the road a bit and encountered a skulking *White-naped Brushfinch* and a *Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush*. The diminutive *Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant* called from the nearby forest and taunted us and we searched in vain, but it never

appeared. We drove up the road a bit to see if we could locate some blue-and-white swallowtails near some repeating towers, but got sidetracked by other birds. In a ravine we could see a large flock that was on the move as fog rolled in and out. A couple *Golden-browed Chlorophonias* were spotted as well as male and female *Hepatic Tanagers*. In a distant tree we got scope views of the regionally endemic *Golden-bellied Flycatcher*; a Kiskadee look-alike. It was getting late and we were just about to leave when something caught our attention behind us. Some shrubs with small, red flowers were attracting some hummingbirds and we were about to get a show. There were several *Snowcaps* (males and females) and two *Green Thorntails* feeding, and sparring, around the shrubs. It was a wonderful performance and a fantastic way to end the last full day of the trip. Now it was really getting late so we departed. We got to Punta Raton, hopped on our boats, and rolled into the lodge just as the sun was setting.

We had our last dinner at Tranquilo Bay and did a recap of our favorite moments and fauna of the trip. Highlights for everyone included: Karl-Montezuma Oropendola, Hugh-Red-billed Tropicbird, Ginny-the group dynamics and Long-tailed Hermit, Sally-Snowcap, Deb-Red-capped Manakin and snorkeling, Gina-Kayaking to the Potoo, Eric-Green-and-black Poison Dart Frog and the raptor migration, Willy-Snowcap, Cynthia-Bay-breasted Warblers and Jabiru, Betsy-Veiled Stinkhorn, Roger-Snowcap, Brenda-Jabiru, Robert-Green Thorntail sparring with Snowcaps.

Oct. 22-This morning we said our ‘good-byes’ to this special part of the world and left with wondrous impressions and new friends. After a short boat ride we arrived at the local airport then made the short trip back to Panama City. Once there, we went our separate ways and will be sure to reflect on the trip.