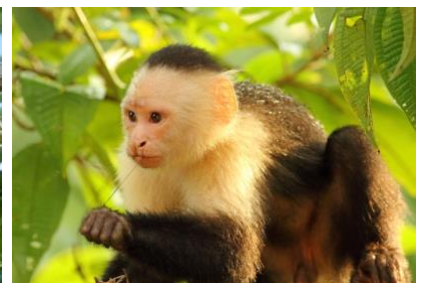


Panama: Tranquilo Bay | Trip Report

April 3 –14, 2022 | by James P. Smith



Guided by James P. Smith and local guides: Stacy and Roger at Tranquilo Bay, and Reinaldo and Jeffrey at Mount Totumas and tour participants, Kathy, Lee, Sandy, Karen, Dawn & Mike, Ruth, Nancy & Mike, and Bobbie.



Sun., Apr. 3

Radisson Panama Canal | Bocas Del Toro | Tranquilo Bay

Our Panama adventure began in earnest as we rendezvoused in the lobby of the Radisson Hotel at 8 a.m. Some group members had been on site for a couple of days while others had arrived quite late the evening before. After an excellent hotel breakfast we loaded up two full-sized taxis for the short journey to Albrook Airport where we met Bobbie who'd just transferred from the Crowne Plaza in Panama City. The streets of Panama City were flush with locals jogging, biking and rollerblading, taking advantage of the relatively light Sunday morning traffic. Our passage through the small airport was smooth, as was the short flight to Bocas Del Toro. We met Tranquilo Bay regulars Stacy, Roger and Gus who would be our local guides throughout the week and in no time we'd loaded up two boats with luggage and we were on our way to Tranquilo Bay!



It was a classic Caribbean scene as we motored over turquoise waters passing scattered settlements and bright dwellings sheltered within extensive mangrove forest. We had Magnificent Frigatebirds, Brown Pelicans, Laughing Gulls and Royal Terns for company as we arrived at Tranquilo Bay Adventure Lodge where we were greeted by Jim, Renée and Jay, the property owners and original founders of the lodge. A boardwalk merged into a paved walkway as we passed through an enchanting mangrove forest and a Northern Waterthrush greeted us with metallic “chip” notes just as we climbed up the stairs to the lodge. It was already hot so Renée gave a brief orientation inside the lodge after which lunch was served: tuna, salad and delicious freshly baked bread. The lodge would become our “home away from home” over the next week, not only for our meals, but also to muse over the daily bird list while enjoying a drink from the bar and taking in the non-stop action at the balcony feeders! After lunch we were escorted to our beautifully appointed cabanas and given time to settle in, relax and enjoy a short siesta. At 3:30 p.m. we met up at the T-intersection overlooking the main garden and our island adventure began with gusto. The avian action outside cabanas #2 and #3 was something to behold as many species seemed to be focused on just one fruiting *Melastoma* bush. Thoughts of having a gentle introduction to the island’s birds were blown away in just a few moments as migrants bound for North America were moving through, some staging on the island and others literally dropping out of the sky. Swainson’s Thrushes and several species of wood warbler including Prothonotary (10+), Tennessee (20+) and Chestnut-sided were all on show as well as Rose-breasted Grosbeak (male), Summer and Scarlet Tanagers (male) and more. But it was really the gaudy, resident land birds that stole the show. The energy-laced *Melastoma* fruits attracted spectacular Golden-collared and Red-capped Manakins, Bananaquits and White-vented Euphonias aplenty. A Green Honeycreeper dazzled and Shining Honeycreepers, perhaps half-a-dozen or more, simply “appeared,” and a foraging gnatcatcher proved to be a White-browed (formerly Tropical Gnatcatcher). Mammals caught our attention too, as the tall Cecropia Trees hosted a couple of Brown-throated Three-toed Sloths, wonderful to see on the first afternoon of the trip! Numerous pigeons shared the larger fruiting trees including Pale-vented and Short-billed, and we did especially well to find a White-crowned Pigeon (uncommon) on the first afternoon. Hummingbird activity had been slightly overshadowed by the action around the “magic” *Melastoma* bush, but we still found numerous Rufous-tailed and Blue-chested Hummingbirds, a Stripe-throated Hermit and a sensational Purple-crowned Fairy near the Canopy Tower where a pair of Black-cheeked Woodpeckers foraged at eye-level.

As the sun began to fade the island’s famed canopy tower beckoned and we enjoyed magnificent views of the bay and surroundings, and many a selfie was taken! A Common Black Hawk perched near its nest and could just be made out with a spotting scope as flock after flock of migrating Barn Swallows swept through, closely



shadowed by a couple of northbound Merlins as well as a Peregrine Falcon. And we chanced upon on a large flock of Montezuma Oropendolas moving in on the *Melastoma* bushes while we were atop the tower. Almost on cue, flights of parrots started passing by the tower, some of them very close, landing and perching for us at eye-level – Wow! Most were Red-lored, but we had good numbers of Blue-headed and a pair of Mealy Parrots. All were headed in the same direction to roost. Even without the parrots the evening ambience from the tower was dreamlike and we paused to take in the scene before drifting back to our cabanas, basking in the warmth of a magical tropical evening. Before dinner we met up with Stacy and Roger at the lodge to review the day's bird list while enjoying drinks from the bar, a pleasant routine that we'd repeat each evening at Tranquilo Bay. Stacy also joined us for our first dinner as a group and we got to know each other over delicious beef skewers, zucchini and roast potatoes followed by carrot cake for dessert. Between the fabulous meals and the cozy atmosphere at the lodge we were destined for a wonderful week!

Mon., Apr. 4 Isla Popa Island & Creek | Tranquilo Bay gardens & trails

The day dawned sunny and warm. Mike Freeman had been out early and already made two fabulous wildlife observations: a Gray-cowled Wood-Rail and a Paca (one of the largest rodents in Central America). After a fabulous buffet breakfast we headed down to the dock and loaded up two boats for a morning cruise to Isla Popa. We crossed the open water and then tied the boats together to ensure that all members of our party had the best chance of seeing all the birds called out by the guides. The weather was very much in our favor as scattered clouds helped to keep the temperature and direct sunlight at bay. Cruising through the mangrove-filled channels was just wonderful. Ringed, Belted and Green Kingfishers were all noted and Roger picked out a distant Scaled Pigeon, a scarce species and far less frequent than the more common Pale-vented and Short-billed Pigeons. Raptors included Common Black Hawks and a couple of Short-tailed Hawks in kettles of Black and Turkey Vultures. Approaching the mangroves by boat was a huge advantage and we quickly came across two denizens of this pristine habitat: Mangrove Cuckoo and "Mangrove" Yellow Warbler, the latter a chestnut-headed subspecies of the more familiar and highly migratory (northern) Yellow Warbler. The Isla Popa Channel continued to deliver as we cruised along watching and listening to Keel-billed and Yellow-throated Toucans but the real prize was still to come after Roger spotted a distant, all-white passerine teed-up just below the canopy. Sure enough, with some skilled maneuvering from our captains, we all enjoyed views of a Snowy Cotinga! Later that morning we had even better views of a pair of these dapper birds. The tour was off to a wonderful start! Cruising back down the channel, we heard Slaty-tailed Trogons, Tropical Kingbirds and the first of many migrant



Eastern Wood-Pewees. Over the open water Magnificent Frigatebirds, Brown Pelicans, Royal Terns and scads of migrating Barn and Cliff Swallows enlivened the crossing back to Tranquilo Bay. Following a short break we had enough time to bird the gardens before lunch. Although lively, it was notably quieter than the previous afternoon and attention ultimately turned towards the sky which was filling up with raptors; Black and Turkey Vultures were joined by a pair of Common Black Hawks, three Double-tooted Kites (together) and a party of five Plumbeous Kites! Another Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth posed for photos, and a roost of about 10 Greater Sac-winged Bats was discovered under the eaves of one of the cabanas before we headed off for a lovely lunch featuring beef stew and salad with house-made dressing. A little downtime was well received and we began the afternoon back at 'the T' between cabanas #2 and #3. Once again the place was hopping with activity! Many of the same species were feeding around the fruiting *Melastoma* bush, but new were Masked Tityra, Black-crowned Antshrike (heard), Blue Dacnis, Lesser Greenlet, Blue-black Grosbeak and Variable Seedeater. Far more unusual was a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher that dropped in all too briefly, landing in a spindly *Cecropia* before moving on. Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher is an uncommon migrant in Panama and a very good bird for the tour. The general excellence of garden birding delayed our scheduled walk along one of the jungle trails, but such distractions are a nice problem to have and testament to the fantastic onsite wildlife viewing right outside our cabanas. Stacy's knowledge as an outstanding naturalist was on full display as we began our walk and she pointed out two very interesting reptiles: Helmeted Basilisk and Canopy Anole, both heavily camouflaged canopy dwellers that offered outstanding views and photos. The narrow jungle trails were a bit of a challenge for our large and quite keen group. We did see a family of White-flanked Antwrens and a group of Tawny-crested Tanagers, though other species such as Red-throated Ant-tanager, Stub-tailed Spadebill and Chestnut-backed Antbird would be logged as 'heard-only' on this visit. A Crowned Woodnymph bathing at the hummingbird pools was the last notable bird of the day before we headed back to the lodge to freshen up for the bird list and supper.

Tues., Apr. 5

Tranquilo Bay | Punta Robalo | Cañazas Road

The weather had taken a turn for the worse overnight as Tranquilo Bay was rocked by heavy rain and thunderstorms that delayed our planned 6 a.m. departure. So, after breakfast at 5:30, we relaxed for a while at the lodge until we simply couldn't delay any longer. We loaded the boats and set out for Punta Róbalo in torrential rain. The 50- minute crossing admittedly seemed longer than it should have in those conditions but was punctuated by a handful of frigatebirds and a lone Whimbrel migrating low over Chiriqui Lagoon. It was still raining hard as we reached the mainland where four Sandwich Terns joined the local Royal Terns on the pilings



by the docking area. Thankfully Amado was waiting at the dock with his 26-seat coaster bus which looked especially inviting in those moments! After drying off we drove along the Punta Róbal road, a rural dirt track flanked by wet meadows on either side and bordered by wild, tangled hedgerows and rank vegetation. Still the rain fell heavily as we drove along, stopping at any signs of activity. Dazzling Scarlet-rumped Tanagers were plentiful, Cinnamon-bellied Saltators were singing, a large flock of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks dropped in and there was a noisy group of Gray-headed Chachalacas. We drove on a little further and found our first Green Ibis, Northern Jacanas and Southern Lapwings! Amado, our driver, suddenly became very animated when he noticed something pushing through the sedges relatively close to the bus. It was a Pinnated Bittern!! This skulking heron with fantastically cryptic plumage and fine barring on the crown and neck was remarkably bold allowing everyone in the group to have fabulous views and photos. Roger, our young local guide, was beside himself with excitement! When asked about the status of Pinnated Bittern in the Bocas area, Stacy simply replied, “we just don’t get them!” Pinnated Bittern is an uncommon species throughout its range, and we were exceedingly fortunate to find one in Western Panama – no wonder Roger was thrilled! The rain began to ease off but the birding mayhem continued unabated. Improved weather conditions saw most of our party spending time outside of the bus, and the fields and hedgerows were alive with activity. Common Tody-Flycatchers called close to the bus, Red-breasted Meadowlarks perched in the fields and on overhead wires, and both Ruddy and Blue Ground-doves surveyed the road. A variety of northbound migrant warblers passed including Magnolia, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Mourning and there was even a stunning male Golden-winged Warbler for some lucky folks in our group! Groove-billed Anis proved to be one of the more conspicuous resident species, and Roger got quite excited when we saw four Brown Jays, apparently quite a scarce species in Western Panama. Other fabulous residents included Cinnamon Becard, Buff-throated Saltator and a pair of Slaty Spinetails....it was all happening! The open fields too were full of seed-eating species: Thick-billed Seedfinch, Blue-black and Yellow-faced Grassquits, Morelet’s Seedeater and the black form of Variable Seedeater as well as several migrating Indigo Buntings. Somehow an entire morning had vaporized along the Punta Róbal road. For such an unassuming location the birding had been out of this world and, in need of a breather, we headed to Chiriqui Grande gas station for coffee and restrooms in ever improving weather conditions. On the drive we noted Laughing Falcon, Roadside Hawk and Yellow-headed Caracara perched out in the open drying their wings after the heavy rain.

The afternoon was spent out on the Cañazas Road in Ngäbe-Buglé province amid the rolling foothills situated below the Fortuna Forest Reserve. The habitat was lush and green, a mix of rural farmland and woodlands including several indigenous settlements along the route. Montezuma Oropedulas and a calling Cocoa Woodcreeper were notable at the first roadside stop, and a little farther on we found migrating Broad-winged



Hawks and Gray-rumped Swifts plus Keel-billed Toucans and a couple of Black-chested Jays calling. A further stop in open terrain yielded a surprise flock of migrant Blue-winged Teals, Masked and Black-crowned Tityras and a pair of Shiny Cowbirds, the latter being rare but apparently expanding in Western Panama. We pressed on having fabulous views of a Laughing Falcon perched by the road. Then we climbed the winding road until we reached a high viewing point overlooking the Rio Man Valley, a spot that Roger simply called “La Mesa.” Within minutes Stacy had spotted our main target, a stunning male Blue Cotinga, and a few seconds later Roger spotted another! Cotingas are special birds, often solitary and usually seen perched high in the canopy. With the Snowy Cotingas the previous day and the Blue Cotingas today, Dawn’s trip was almost complete as she’d pre-ordered the cotingas well before the trip began! The Blue Cotingas triggered conversation about the Lovely Cotinga, a species often talked about in Panama, and yet only a few records have ever been confirmed. Indeed, most historical reports are now believed to have referred to misidentified Blue Cotingas. Comparing these two species in the field guide, they do look remarkably similar and the confusion is perhaps easily understood. By mid-afternoon the sun was out and warm-air thermals rising. As we returned to Punta Rábalo, great columns of migrating raptors rose on the thermals in overwhelming numbers. Turkey Vultures, Broad-winged and Swainson’s Hawks were most numerous, and we watched in awe as we drove along Route 11 with huge numbers of raptors visible on either side of the road. The floodgates had opened! Thousands, maybe tens of thousands of northbound raptors were streaming by at an incredible rate. It was a remarkable conclusion to our first full day of mainland birding, and a real privilege to experience large scale raptor migration, surely one of nature’s most impressive spectacles. A brilliant day closed with the traditional gathering for the bird list followed by supper, an evening made particularly special with a Derby’s Woolley Opossum and some Crab-eating Raccoons investigating the balcony feeders as we dined.

Wed., Apr. 6

Green Acres Chocolate Farm | Tranquilo Bay

A fairly casual start to the day began with warm tropical sunshine and a relaxed 30-minute boat ride across azure waters to Green Acres Chocolate Farm located on the south shore of Dolphin Bay. This beautiful site boasts 30 acres of lush tropical rainforest, botanical gardens and of course, an impressive cacao plantation. Part of the morning was dedicated to learning about how cacao is grown, dried and processed in an ecological and sustainable manner. But first we focused on birds and wildlife before the heat of the day really kicked in! The botanical gardens around the main farm building got things off to a great start with a Green-breasted Mango sitting on a nest, safely scoped from a distance. In the surrounding trees Lesser Greenlets and Olive-backed Euphonias called and small flocks of Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts passed overheard. Being an expert gardener herself, Dawn was in her element in the richly landscaped gardens, but as we climbed the trail into the forest attention focused on the forest floor and the tiny creatures inhabiting the leaf litter. In a matter of minutes Stacy showed us Talamanca Rocket Frogs, Green-and-Black Poison Dart-frogs and several Golden-headed Geckos. A



relatively short trail followed a ridge through mature, tropical rainforest, and we enjoyed a steady series of quality sightings: Keel-billed Toucan, Gartered Trogon, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Long-billed Hermit and a pair of Plain Xenops that put on quite a show. High in the canopy, three or four calling Purple-throated Fruit Crows gave the most fabulous display, the males flaring their magenta-purple throats in spectacular fashion! Moreover, despite its name, Purple-throated Fruit Crow belongs to the cotinga family, making it our third species of cotinga in as many days! A perched juvenile Double-toothed Kite was yet another avian treat while Stacy's herpetological skills continued to shine as she picked out a Slender Anole and several Coastal Plain Litter Frogs in the leaf litter. We later had our first views of a Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth, apparently a nocturnal feeder versus the three-toed sloth which is largely diurnal. Our loop finished with a Stacy-led tour of the cacao bean drying process, though it wasn't without distraction as a pair of White Hawks displayed overhead and a White-breasted Crake called from a nearby creek. Back at the farmhouse, samples of homemade chocolate were duly and graciously consumed, and many in the group purchased gifts for friends and family back home. The Green-breasted Mango was still on her nest and House Wrens sang from the gardens as streams of migrant raptors glided overhead. A casual cruise through the mangroves brought us back to Tranquilo Bay for a lunch of Chicken Fried Rice and salad with house-made dressing, and then the relaxed mode continued into the afternoon. Stacy led a kayak tour through the mangroves while Roger led a birding walk through the lodge gardens and staff quarters. The birding around the lodge was outstanding once again, especially for hummingbirds, with Crowned Woodnymph, Stripe-throated and Bronzy Hermits and Blue-chested Hummingbirds being among the highlights. Migrants were evident too with over a dozen Tennessee Warblers and some Red-eyed Vireos plus a Northern Waterthrush and several Scarlet Tanagers. Alas, Roger was the only person to see a male Canada Warbler, one of the scarcer migrants along this route.

Thurs., Apr. 7 Changuinola Canal | Tranquilo Bay

A big adventure lay ahead that would prove to be a day like no other on this tour. We started at 5:30 a.m. with breakfast and about 40 minutes later, Roger rustled up a couple of calling Short-tailed Nighthawks offering great flyby views in the pre-dawn light just off the lodge balcony! These nightjars have an extremely localized range within Central America and, as the name suggests, are quite "short tailed." Several Green Ibis were calling simultaneously in the background and the day was off to a wonderful start as we headed down to the dock for a full day on the water. Our destination was the Changuinola Canal, also known as the Synder Canal, a waterway



carved out at around 1900 to facilitate the transport of bananas, fruit and other trade items from Isla Colon to Changuinola. The canal parallels the Caribbean shoreline and on arrival we could hear the roar of the ocean, a sound that would remain in the background for much of the day while we cruised the canal's tranquil waters. Several Parasitic Jaegers were seen along the way, but the birding really began in earnest as soon as we entered the canal. A couple of American Pygmy Kingfishers appeared just as Jay tied the boats together. Once everyone was comfortable we were on our way. It was busy, very busy in fact, with a fabulous mix of recently arrived migrants; Eastern Kingbirds, Eastern Wood Pewees, Tennessee Warblers, Red-eyed Vireos, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and both Scarlet and Summer Tanagers all showed in numbers, giving the distinct impression of a fall-out. There was even an adult male Mourning Warbler, our second sighting of the species for the tour. A few Gray Catbirds were also present, but we then turned our attention to the resident tropical species. Nicaraguan Seed-finch, a regional endemic and a real brute of a passerine with a disproportionately large flesh-pink bill, showed quite well in the rank vegetation. Scarlet-rumped Tanagers were everywhere and other local species favoring the same habitat included Cinnamon-bellied Saltators, Black-throated and Canebrake Wrens (heard) and views of Bay Wren, all three wren species being relatively close together. Olive-crowned Yellowthroat, Golden-hooded Tanagers and a flock of Olive-throated Parakeets were new to the trip. Overhead a migrating Peregrine Falcon joined a soaring Common Black Hawk, and more Cliff Swallows could be found among the flocks of migrant Barn Swallows. We pressed on, pausing every few minutes for what seemed like an endless sequence of impressive wildlife sightings. Not one but three Squirrel Cuckoos appeared, closely followed by a Mangrove Cuckoo! Huge Green Iguanas basked on thick limbs, and Mantled Howlers loafed about in the trees, and a Black River Turtle sunned itself on the bank. Such an embarrassment of riches made it difficult to know where to look next! Thankfully our guides knew exactly where to look, straight up into the canopy in fact, and we were rewarded with a great view of perhaps the strangest bird of the trip – the Great Potoo. This large nightjar-like creature, nearly as large as a Roadside Hawk, was cryptically hidden perched in vertical posture on a horizontal branch right over the canal. During our January trip, Jay had mentioned that April was *THE* time to see Great Potoo along the canal and how right he was! It's a rare and localized species in Central America, favoring humid Caribbean lowlands. To have seen one in the day would have been a treat, but we went on to find two more and had even better views!

The intensity of the birding had slowed a bit as we passed a gentleman gently cruising along the canal in a dug-out canoe. He knew our crew and they stopped for a chat. Stacy mentioned that the man lived locally and took it upon himself to keep the canal clean and the waterway open. The man said he was glad to see some tourists coming back to the canal and had wondered why they'd disappeared a few months prior? Apparently his lifestyle was so remote he'd had no idea the outside world had been gripped by a pandemic! After a second pit stop, this time at an actual dock, we chugged on enjoying the calm waters until we reached the confluence with



the Changuinola River where the landscape changed to open woodland, open meadows and rough pasture. The river here was wide and fairly shallow, and we headed upstream for a few kilometers birding the riverbanks and islands. This was a keen-eyed group and few birds were missed. Ruth picked out a Roseate Spoonbill in flight that was later relocated upstream, a Solitary Sandpiper landed by a cattle pond, and Southern Lapwings graced the meadows, as did several Green Ibis. In the marshy islands we found Limpkins, our first of the tour, and at the rear was a roosting Anhinga, also new. Meanwhile, Karen's gaze was firmly locked on another heron-like bird in the reeds. This was no Limpkin, or any of the herons for that matter, it was our second Pinnated Bittern of the tour! "We just don't get them," Stacy said again, and Roger was beside himself with happiness. Pinnated Bittern is more or less unprecedented in Panama, with a very patchy distribution throughout Central America. To have seen two in one tour was simply too good to be true! Large flocks of Blue-winged Teal with some Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and Muscovy Ducks as well as Common and Purple Gallinules were among the water birds seen before we enjoyed a lovely lunch break moored in the shade along the tranquil banks of the Changuinola River. It was a remarkable day with crisp blue skies and warm sunshine and, aside from our group, not a single boat or person in sight - it was just heaven. After lunch we cruised back down river, making landfall at a debris-strewn beach full of marram grass, driftwood and charcoal-colored sand. This was the domain of Collared Plover and it wasn't long before we found one of these beauties scurrying around on the gray sand giving the group stunning views. Its behavior was somewhat agitated and most likely the bird had a nest close by. Other shorebirds on the beach were all migrants in non-breeding (basic) plumage including Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers, Sanderling and several Spotted Sandpipers. Snowy Egrets foraged along the shore in numbers and it was great to finally have views of the raging surf we'd heard pounding all morning. Back on the Changuinola River, Roger upstaged all the guides when he spotted a perched White-necked Puffbird high in the canopy and partially hidden by overhanging leaves. How he managed to spot it from a moving boat we'll never know, but it proved to be a cooperative subject and obliged the whole group with decent views as we maneuvered the boats for the best angles. As if that wasn't enough, a well-timed comfort stop led to ridiculously good views of a White-breasted Crake, a species that we'd only heard trilling from the reeds up until that point. We were already deep into the afternoon and after safely negotiating the shallows at the eastern end of the canal, we promptly sped out to the open ocean, heading for a distant rocky outcrop. A fairly choppy three-mile crossing brought us ever closer to our next stop, Swan Caye also known as Bird Island, and the only known breeding site in the Southern Caribbean for Red-billed Tropicbirds. Sure enough, it wasn't long before we encountered several of these majestic ocean wanderers resting on the water, their long, curved tail streamers blowing in the wind. As we approached the island, its true majesty became apparent with steep-sided cliffs and low lying, rocky outcrops all surprisingly heavily vegetated. The place was home to hundreds of pairs of pelagic birds nesting amid the rocks



and crevices. Magnificent Frigatebirds kiting overhead, crisply plumaged adult Brown Boobies passing close to the boats and groups of three or four Red-billed Tropicbirds buzzing by with rapid-fire wingbeats, their long, graceful retrices drifting in the breeze. In truth it was difficult to know where to look but all three species had nests on the island. In particular, Brown Booby nestlings at varying stages of development could be seen from the boats. It wasn't easy to use binoculars with the boats rocking back and forth on the swells, but the experience was truly worthwhile. Jay sensed that the sea conditions would be suitable for his rarely used route back to Tranquilo Bay. As we rounded the north side of the island, a migrant Peregrine Falcon surveyed the scene high overhead. James then noticed a dark, tern-like bird quartering low over the rugged wave-cut rocks. The bird looked interesting, but as the two boats weren't close together it was quite the struggle to getting the message across that the bird in question was in fact a Brown Noddy!! As it happened, we needn't have worried. Almost on cue, the Noddy left the island, literally flying right between both boats for all to see! Brown Noddy is an exceedingly rare bird anywhere in Panama, and once again, Roger's broad smile beamed! From there we motored back through the Bocas archipelago. Jay pushed on at speed, barely slowing for the Parasitic and Pomarine Jaegers seen along the way. We arrived back at Tranquilo Bay in the early evening and were greeted by three or four Bottlenose Dolphins close to the dock.



Fri., Apr. 8

**Tranquilo Bay | Punta Róbalo | Chiriquí Grande Road
Cañazas Road, Ngäbe-Buglé**

Another 5:30 breakfast was met with rain, delaying our departure for Punta Róbalo and the second full day of mainland birding. We arrived at the dock just as the skies cleared, Amado's trusty coaster bus awaiting. Clouds shrouded the highest mountains to the south, our destination for the first part of the day. Gently cruising along the Punta Róbalo road produced a similar range of species to our previous visit with Northern Jacana, Green Ibis, Wood Stork and Yellow-headed Caracara, but we didn't linger as we had other habitats to explore and hopefully some higher elevation species waiting. As we approached Chiriqui Grande and the now familiar gas station stop, great columns of raptors rose on the thermals as the day warmed up. The first wave was mostly Turkey Vultures but then Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks joined the kettles. We continued toward the mountains soon noticing increased police presence at every junction, and then helicopters buzzing around. Roger informed us that the President of Panama was due to visit the area that day! Not only had his visit initiated heightened security, but it also sparked a protest from the Ngäbe-Buglé indigenous people who succeeded in completely blocking Route 10, the sole route across the mountains to the Pacific side of the continental divide - our gateway to the high elevation species. We lingered amid the chaos for a little while before recognizing that the road would be closed for some time, perhaps the whole day, and simply turned around to focus on mid-elevation species in the Chiriquí Grande foothills. Keel-billed Toucans called from Cecropia Trees, Green Hermit, Black-striped Sparrow and Dusky-faced Tanagers were found in the scrub and we had great views of a Bay Wren. A pair of Crimson-fronted Parakeets was nesting close to the road offering great views of yet another regional endemic. Buff-throated Saltator and the only Bay-breasted Warbler of the tour were also found in the same area. Overhead a fabulous pair of Swallow-tailed Kites and a pair of White Hawks soared on the thermals! The Cañazas Road was next, the same destination that offered us so much success three days earlier. Stacy explained that the Ngäbe-Buglé were protesting over atrocious conditions as the local children returned to school after the Covid pandemic. Though frustrating as it was to be denied access to the higher elevations, the protest inadvertently provided an unexpected opportunity to experience yet more magic along the Cañazas Road. We found a couple of White-crowned Parrots (rare) and Blue-gray Tanagers perched in a Cecropia by the road, and another stop produced swifts low over the road including several Gray-rumped, with the higher birds being majestic White-collared Swifts. A pair of Lineated Woodpeckers called and drummed, and the monotonous, frog-like calls of Keel-billed Toucans carried far across the valley. And then suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, it all happened! Half of the group had already climbed back onto the bus when Roger and James noticed raptors



gliding *en masse* low overhead. In no time at all hundreds, and then thousands of raptors were cruising over the bus and rising on thermals right in front of us. All were Mississippi Kites migrating in dense flocks, many of them at eye-level. We watched in awe from the roadside as the kites poured through, silently drifting with the breeze – 3,000 Mississippi Kites and yet not a sound was heard! From that moment on our time along the Cañazas Road belonged to raptors of all types. We found Laughing Falcon and Double-toothed Kite extremely close to the road. Several Plumbeous Kites somehow managed to avoid mixing with thousands of Mississippi Kites, a lone Bat Falcon teed-up like it really wanted to be seen, and Roger’s brilliant eye picked out a perched Gray-headed Kite (uncommon) which turned to be the only sighting of the whole tour. La Mesa overlook seemed like an ideal spot for lunch, though there would be no repeat of our cotinga experience from three days prior. On the other hand, a perched Long-billed Starthroat was a hit, and in the distance, the great raptor migration continued with dense flocks of Turkey Vultures, Broad-winged and Swainson’s Hawks and more Mississippi Kites...it was certainly a “big day” for raptors. Closer to Samboa, we paused to observe a Long-tailed Tyrant perched high and offering great views. Our last stop was by no means random. One week earlier, Stacy and Roger had located a pair of Central American Pygmy-Owls nesting close to the road. Central American Pygmy-Owl is uncommon to rare throughout much of its range, and there’s just one historical record in Western Panama from the Changuinola Canal way back in 1980. This nesting pair constituted the first documented proof of attempted breeding on the Caribbean slope in Panama and was no small event. The owls were active and we could hear them tooting and observed them perched on both sides of the road as well as at the nest hole itself. As if that wasn’t enough, a Black Hawk-Eagle called and displayed overhead, rounding out an absolutely spectacular day for raptors. We made one last stop at Chiriqui Grande junction on the way home. Little did we know of the hidden gem that awaited us behind the gas station known locally as “Supermarket Lagoon.” The wetland was full of birds including a wonderful colony of Cattle Egrets, lots of Northern Jacanas and a roosting Boat-billed Heron. Roger was excited to find a Red-crowned Woodpecker feeding close to us, common on the Pacific slope but quite rare, though increasing, on the Caribbean side. Needless to say, Roger was thrilled with his find. The day had been rich and rewarding and an air of quiet contentment accompanied the boat ride back to Tranquilo Bay. Dawn and Mike had opted for an easy day around the lodge and produced some great sightings (and photos) of Green and Shining Honeycreepers, Blue Dacnis, several hummingbirds, White-vented Euphonia and great pics of the ever-mischievous White-faced Capuchins! The evening bird list was understandably lengthy after such an awesome day and was neatly followed by a fine dinner of Pork Loin with Quinoa, Green Beans and Cupcakes for dessert.

Sat., Apr. 9

Tranquilo Bay

The rain came hard and heavy overnight, extending deep into the morning hours. Any hopes of climbing the canopy tower at first light were literally washed away so we settled for a late breakfast and a casual start to the day. Jim and Jay, two of the lodge owners, mentioned that the Bocas archipelago more or less had its own weather system and we were in the middle of a prime example! It was the tropics after all, right at the beginning of the rainy season. The mood around the lodge was good, and the group decided to divide forces with most opting for an easy day before the travel home the following day. A slight break in the weather inspired Stacy to offer a jungle walk in search of Strawberry Poison-Dart Frogs, the rain actually inducing their appearance in the leaf litter. Karen and Mike took the invite and duly succeeded in finding multiple poison-dart frogs as well as an array of flowering plants and fungi. By late morning the rain was back in earnest, if anything coming in harder. Even so, it was impressive to see hundreds of Barn Swallows migrating past the lodge throughout the day and a surprise Peregrine Falcon flew past with them. The balcony feeders attracted birds throughout the day, mostly Tennessee Warblers and Shining Honeycreepers but just before noon, a stunning Blackburnian Warbler dazzled the group and lingered just off the balcony for a while. The balcony also became something of a tattoo parlor! Boty Kimball, Jim and Renee's daughter, hand-rendered some beautiful tattoos upon a steady stream of keen participants using the paint made from the fruits of a Jagua Tree (*Genipa Americana*)! The evening checklist was short and sweet, but as it was our last evening together it was also time to express genuine appreciation for Stacy and Roger who'd been terrific guides from start to finish.

Sun., Apr. 10

Tranquilo Bay | Departures | Post tour extension

Goodbyes are never easy at this remarkable island lodge. The staff and owners had all been extremely social, and new friendships formed along the way. Most of our party would take a short boat ride to Bocas Del Toro and fly onto Panama City for flights home. A smaller group composed of Dawn, Mike, Ruth, Kathy and James, would leave Tranquilo Bay early to continue their Panama adventures in a completely different environment - the cloud forest reserve at Mount Totumas close to the border with Costa Rica. Remarkably, the huge rain event had continued overnight and well into the morning. The travelers doing the extension were once more greeted by Amado and his trusty 26-seat coaster in Punta Robalo! Two Brown Boobies and many Cliff Swallows were noted on the crossing and once there, the true extent of 36 hours of solid rain became ever more apparent. The meadows where we'd enjoyed Green Ibis, Wood Storks and Red-breasted Meadowlarks the previous day were now awash with raging flood water! Despite the weather, short pauses in the rain did allow some large flocks of raptors to push north, including impressive numbers of Mississippi Kites, and there was a Yellow-headed Caracara resting in the middle of the road. Leaving Punta Robalo, a huge flight of Mississippi Kites continued to our east. Naturally, we pulled over to enjoy them especially since Dawn and Mike had missed the big raptor migrations of the previous day. As we pushed on towards Chiriqui Grande, impressive streams of Turkey Vultures, Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks moved west, right over the road. A long day of travel lay ahead, and as we drove up Route 10 through the Reserva Forestal de Fortuna, torrential rain effectively crushed any hopes for higher elevation birding. Roadside streams were now raging torrents and a small landslide at Alto del Valle would have certainly blocked our passage had it not been for the locals who set out to clear the road using hand tools. Amado gave them a generous gratuity for keeping the road open - a classy touch from our driver! Passing through the continental divide was somewhat anticlimactic. With near-horizontal rain it was impossible to leave the bus to enjoy the views. But as we descended on the Pacific side, the weather turned clear and bright, and the humidity of the Caribbean slope vaporized. Amado took us to a quaint little cafe where we paused for 30 minutes or so to enjoy homemade empanadas and fabulous espresso. The café gardens held House Wrens and a couple of Flame-colored Tanagers, the latter being a new species for the tour. Then we were heading west on the Pan-American Highway towards David and the Sunday traffic was thankfully light. Amado chose a great family restaurant where we had a traditional lunch of rice n' beans, grilled Chicken and potato salad. Dawn managed to make an impression on the staff as she accidentally wandered into the kitchen while



looking for the restrooms! Turning off the Pan-American Highway we drove north, climbing towards Volcan. Swallow-tailed Kites and a few unidentified parakeets flew over the road and a Tropical Mockingbird popped into view in the suburbs of Volcan. It was here we said good-bye to Amado, our stoic driver, and the comfort of his coaster! Jeffrey had arranged high clearance vehicles for the next, rather difficult portion of the drive, which would take us over 10 kilometers of gnarly dirt roads before reaching Mount Totumas Lodge. The last three kilometers included some fairly steep, rugged gradients as well as crossing the Rio Colorado, still heavily swollen from the storms of the previous two days. We arrived in late afternoon and were greeted by lodge owners Jeffrey and Alma, and soon settled into our rooms at Bellbird Lodge, the larger of the two main lodge buildings at Mount Totumas. Bellbird Lodge is also the site's restaurant, bar and kitchen, nice and close to the food!

Breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains were on display from the lodge as atmospheric clouds swirled in and out of the valleys, shrouding the mountains. We were literally inside the cloud forest. The day's journey had gone like clockwork with seamless connections and transfers so that we arrived with enough daylight to have an hour or so by the Colibri feeding station close to the coffee house. Jeffrey was free that afternoon and escorted us down to the feeders where we had our first taste of the riches to come. Since a cold front had just passed through, it was decidedly chilly at this elevation (6,200 ft.) but the feeders were literally heaving with hummingbirds. The Colibri feeding station is a work of art, a moss-covered trellis festooned with flowering bromeliads and a variety of hummingbird feeders. The late afternoon buzz of activity was something to behold, even more beautiful with the crisp afternoon sunlight beautifully illuminating the hummers and other visitors such as Slaty Flowerpiercer. In just one hour over 10 species of hummingbird graced our notebooks (and cameras) ranging from giants like the Violet Saberwing and Talamanca Hummingbird to the tiny Scintillant Hummingbird. The latter two are regional endemics as was Magenta-throated Woodstar and White-throated Mountain-gem. Having Jeffery on site was a huge bonus as he was able to sort through the frenzy of activity with the calm demeanor of someone who's experienced these tricky birds on a regular basis. A singing White-throated Thrush serenaded us as we walked back to the lodge, and later we caught up on the bird notes of the day before enjoying the first of many farm-to-table meals created Jeffery's wife Alma. On the menu this evening, Beef Bourguignon, homemade bread and salad with house-made dressing.



Mon., April 11

Mount Totumas Lodge | Upper Forest Loops | Mount Totumas access road

Mount Totumas Lodge is situated deep in the cloud forest on the border of La Amistad National Park in Western Panama, some 6,200 feet above sea level. The lodge boasts a 400-acre private reserve and over 30 kilometers of trails, many of which start right outside the Lodge. A cacophony of sound emanated from the surrounding forest with Lesser Violetear, White-throated Thrush, Black-faced Solitaires and flocks of Sulphur-winged Parakeets screeching past and moving too quickly to be seen through binoculars! Moreover, a dazzling array of large, beautiful moths were attracted to the moth trap overnight. The following morning hours saw Rufous-collared Sparrows, Mountain Elaenias and Common Chlorospingus hopping around on the grass feeding on the moths that had succumbed to the light. The lodge's balcony feeders attracted stunning Flame-colored Tanagers and a single Red-headed Barbet which proved to be the only one of the trip. Slaty Flowerpiercers visited the hummingbird feeders, joining Green-crowned Brilliant, Long-billed Starthroat, Stripe-tailed and Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds -- all before breakfast! We met up with Reinaldo, a local Chiricano of indigenous descent and our guide for the next three days. Reinaldo escorted us on a loop trail through the magnificent cloud forest. We soon found a singing Three-wattled Bellbird neatly teed-up in the scope. Acorn Woodpeckers proved plentiful around a giant Mexican Elm, and Northern Emerald Toucanets showed nicely. Swainson's Thrushes flitted across the trails before us, fattening up before their next stage of migration to the boreal forests of North America. Jeffery mentioned they were prolific at this time of year and how right he was! The mature cloud forest was also home to several troops of Mantled Howlers and Central American Spider Monkeys. Reinaldo had mastered the calls of Resplendent Quetzal and it wasn't too long before he whistled in a stunning male that perched long enough to be thoroughly enjoyed in the scope. The beautiful, ethereal song of Black-faced Solitaire was a near constant in the forest, and several Brown-capped Vireos sang overhead, but were difficult to view. We also found Golden-bellied and Yellowish Flycatchers, Barred Becard, Red-faced Spinetail, Slaty Antwren, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper and even a singing Streaked Saltator, species usually associated with the higher elevations and the Talamanca mountain range. The bellbirds sang throughout the morning, their odd, metallic "bonk" calls ringing through the forest.



Lunch was well received after our long trek and after some down time we met up with Reinaldo at 3 p.m. for a walk down the main access road. It was warm and the scenery was absolutely majestic as we gently strolled down the track and again, the area was full of birds with White-naped Brushfinch, Yellow-bellied Siskin and a much sought-after regional endemic, Golden-browed Chlorophonia. Another regional endemic, the aptly named Dark Pewee, and far less gaudy than the chlorophonia, did show extremely well. Like many pewees, it preferred to perch in the open sallying out over the valley from the top of a high snag. Farther down the track we found more Acorn Woodpeckers and two fabulous Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, our first of the tour. Bellbirds were calling from across the valley as Reinaldo once again used his vocal skills to call in another male Resplendent Quetzal right by the road! It was our second quetzal of the day and, if anything, slightly better views than the first. We finished off the walk with a pair of soaring Red-tailed Hawks of the Central American subspecies *costaricensis* followed by another visit to the magical Colibri feeders by the coffee house. Later that evening Jeffrey gave one of his legendary slide shows, sharing footage from his trail cameras, with Puma, Jaguar, Marguay, Ocelot and Mountain Tapir among the highlights, many filmed in daylight.

Tues., Apr. 12 Mount Totumas Lodge | Rio Colorado and Mount Totumas access road at mid-elevations

The dawn was spectacular as thunderheads and lightening filled the eastern sky. It was chilly too, barely reaching 50 degrees F. Despite this, White-collared Swifts were foraging overhead and again, Common Chlorospingus and Rufous-collared Sparrows could be found scavenging around the moth light. The dawn chorus was especially lively with numerous thrushes contributing including White-throated, Mountain, Swainson's and Clay-colored as well as many Flame-colored Tanagers. After breakfast we met Reinaldo and drove downslope to the Rio Colorado, a fast moving, boulder-strewn river that looked ideal for American Dipper and it wasn't long before one duly appeared! It's an uncommon species in Panama which is the southern limit of its range. A Black Phoebe was found along the river too, and we had an interesting time learning to identify tyrant flycatchers, finding the regionally endemic Dark Pewee, several migrant Western Wood-Pewees and later, an Olive-sided Flycatcher. A little further downstream, a bold Tropical Parula put on a fabulous show and we noted a Roadside Hawk and Yellow-headed Caracara as they flew overhead. We searched in vain for Torrent Tyrannulet, but a Lesson's Motmot was a great find. We also observed a pair of nest-building Elegant Euphonias and sorted through more tanagers than you could shake a stick at, with Summer, Scarlet, Flame-colored, White-winged



(male), Blue-gray, Speckled, Golden-hooded, Plain-colored and Silver-throated Tanagers all seen, most of them from just one spot. Green Hermit, Slaty Antwren and another highlight, a pair of White-tailed Emeralds put on quite the show. Several Swallow-tailed Kites focused our attention on the sky as a small but impressive migration of 25 Broad-winged and 3 Swainson's Hawks passed over. Raptor migration is less concentrated on the Pacific slope and it was certainly enough to bring a beaming smile to Reinaldo's face. The middle and lower elevations of Mount Totumas had been really good, and it was time to head back to the lodge for another delicious lunch prepared by Alma with chicken tacos on the menu ...it was "Taco Tuesday" after all. The afternoon had warmed up nicely and as we waited for Reinaldo to arrive, four or five Swallow-tailed Kites rode on the breezes below the lodge, White-collared Swifts screamed overhead and flock after flock of Band-tailed Pigeons passed through the valley. Descending on the Roble trail, a male Green-crowned Brilliant gave great views and we inadvertently found a Black-faced Solitaire's nest as the female flushed from a moss-covered bank but stayed close giving us nice views. The forest interior was quieter, but activity increased as the trail opened towards the extensive shade-grown coffee plantations. Aside from running the lodge, Jeffrey and Alma's shade-grown coffee is internationally acclaimed, and their plantation just happened to harbor some excellent birding as well! A Rufous-browed Peppershrike sang from the canopy. Fortunately for us we were high enough to look down on the peppershrike, quite a rare event since they tend to stay well hidden. Several Golden-browed Chlorophonias brought a great deal of pleasure as they showed reasonably well, and the staging Swainson's Thrushes were simply everywhere... Wow! The mood of the afternoon was relaxed as we simply enjoyed the sights and sounds of the montane forest. Dawn and Ruth wandered back towards the lodge just as the Swallow-tailed Kites gave stunning views rising on the thermals. For those that lingered with Reinaldo, a Golden-olive Woodpecker gave the most glorious views, pretty remarkable for a species that has a reputation for being difficult to observe. Dinner, as usual, was a complete triumph with a choice of lasagna, eggplant parmesan or grilled fish, and homemade apple strudel for dessert. Afterwards, there were more visits to the moth light, and Jeffery shared his knowledge of the constellations.

Wed., Apr. 13

Mount Totumas Lodge | Finca Del Sr. Vega | Quetzal Trail

Our final field day dawned cool and cloudy with light drizzle. After an early breakfast we boarded Jeffrey's flatbed truck and began a rugged drive to the higher elevations some 6,700 feet above sea level and the highest point on the tour. With Jeffery along, we had access to many acres of private farmland and we were soon passing giant, moss-laden trees blanketed in swirling mist, true cloud forest birding! A number of regional



endemics call the high elevation forest home, and these were our targets this morning. One by one the birds revealed themselves with Prong-billed Barbet providing great views and then Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Golden-bellied Flycatcher and a male White-throated Mountain-gem! We located yet another Black-faced Solitaire nest in the embankment along the track and then spotted Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner and Yellow-thighed Brushfinch. The day began to brighten as we explored the more open terrain of Senior Vega's farmland. A young male Resplendent Quetzal, lacking the elongated tail plumes of the adult males, performed especially well and was a joy to behold. The clear mountain air was full of bird song including the goldfinch-like tinkling of Yellow-bellied Siskins, and a pair of Slate-throated Redstarts set about building a nest on the ground. Soon we found more Golden-bellied Flycatchers when Kathy drew our attention to the valley below where she'd noticed a dark bird about the size of a pheasant perched a few feet off the ground in the scrub that turned out to be a beautiful Black Guan, locally rare and endemic to the region. Kudos to Kathy for a great find! While there was no sign of the hoped-for Flame-throated Warblers, compensation came in the form of a pair of Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers, surely one of the most beautiful and elegant species to be found in the high mountains. A sizeable flock of Vaux's Swifts cruised overhead as we made our way back to the lodge to enjoy the dazzling array of hummingbirds at the balcony feeders as Alma served a fine, hearty lunch of Chili, home-made corn fritters and banana bread for dessert.

One final birding walk with Reinaldo took us to a new part of the reserve where we made a short, half-mile loop on the Quetzal trail. We didn't find quetzals, but there was still plenty to see, notably Northern Emerald Toucanets, Slate-throated Redstarts, Red-faced Spinetail and a migrant Canada Warbler. True to form, a White-throated Spadebill played hide and seek with us, bouncing back and forth over the trail and flatly refusing to settle for just one good view. In contrast, a Dark Pewee behaved just the opposite, giving excellent views as it teed-up on bare limbs by the forest edge. Our farewell supper was simply delicious with a unique Asian soup followed by pork chops, potatoes and green beans. Alma's mastery in the kitchen would be missed!

Thurs., Apr. 14 Departures | Mount Totumas Lodge | David International Airport

An early breakfast was followed by an equally early departure from Mount Totumas and we left the remote tranquility of the cloud forest to rejoin the hustle and bustle of the Pan-American Highway, heading east to David Airport. The Caribbean and Pacific elements of the tour had produced over 300 bird species, 12 mammals

and 13 reptiles and amphibians. We said our goodbyes at Tocuman International Airport in Panama City. Dawn and Mike would continue their adventures with several nights at the famed Canopy Tower in Soberanía National Park. It had been a wonderful tour, not only for the incredible biodiversity found in Western Panama, but also to be part of such a cordial, well-natured group of travelers. Special thanks go to all participants as well as our gifted local guides, Stacy Hollis and Roger Morales from Tanquilo Bay Adventure Lodge, and Reinaldo Rodriguez and Jeffrey Dietrich from Mount Totumas Cloud Forest Lodge.

Group Photo (James P. Smith - JS), Shining Honeycreeper (Nancy Thomas - NT), Green-and-black Poison Dart Frogs (NT), Long-billed Starthroat (Michael Freeman -MF), White-throated Capuchin (NT), Resplendent Quetzal (MF), Scarlet-rumped Tanager (Mike Samuel - MS), Tropical Kingbird (MS), Prothonotary Warbler (MS), Boatride! (MF), Birding (JS), Back on the boat (JS), Mangrove Cuckoo (MS), Ringed Kingfisher (MS), Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (MF), Canopy Anole (MS), Great Egret (NT), Groove-billed Ani (MS), Water Buffalo (MS), Scenic (JS), Dockside (JS), Cocoa Pods (MS), Butterfly (MS), Gorgeous Day of Boating (JS), Shining Honeycreeper Female (MF), River Scenic (JS), Magnificent Frigatebird (MS), Red-billed Tropicbirds (JS), Crimson-fronted Parakeet (MS), Green Honeycreeper (MF), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (MF), White-throated Capuchins (MF), Laughing Falcon (MS), Scenic (JS), Blue Dacnis (MF), White-collared Seedeater (MF), Punta Robalo (JS), Balcony and feeders at Tranquilo Bay Eco Lodge (JS), Violet Sabrewing (MF), Magenta-throated Woodstar (MF), Resplendent Quetzal (MF), Mike having a chat with Jackie - Bellbird Lodge (JS), Group Birding (MF), Talamanca Hummingbird (MF), Scarlet-thighed Dances (MF), Rainbow over Mount Totumas (JS), Mount Totumas (JS)