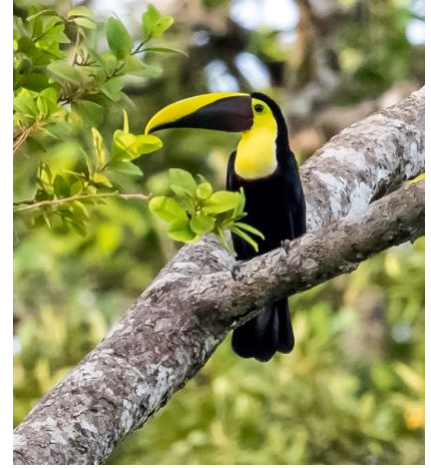


# Western Panama: Tranquilo Bay | Oct. 13-20, 2023

## Trip Report | by Robert Gallardo



With Naturalist Journeys guide Robert Gallardo, local guide Roger, and participants Deb, Lou, Martha, Lenore and Harold



Panama is well known for its incredible biodiversity as it links two continents. Flora and fauna have been using this land bridge for millions of years and some of its high, isolated mountain ranges have allowed for endemism to take place. It is the only country in Central America to boast 1,000 species of birds. Tucked away in the extreme northwestern corner of the country is a very special place called Bocas del Toro, riddled with islands of many sizes. On one of those islands, just a short boat trip from the airstrip, is Tranquilo Bay (TB) lodge. This trip was designed for one to come and unpack just once, being able to enjoy the varied activities offered in the area. This includes two trips to the mountains in the lower highlands to look for many regional endemic species. This year, five guests from across the U.S. and Canada, went to enjoy the sunsets, flocks of parrots, delightful cuisine, and good company.



## Fri., Oct. 13 Arrivals | Tranquilo Bay

Today our adventure started. Everyone stayed at the Radisson that night and we all met each other at their restaurant. In the early a.m., Martha was the only one to appear for a pre-breakfast bird walk nearby. There are many species of birds that find their northern range limit around the Canal area, so we were hoping to see a few of them before heading out to the Caribbean. Right outside the front door, a pair of Rusty-margined Flycatchers were screaming at us, followed by the similar Social Flycatcher. A pair of Tropical Mockingbird adorned the tallest part of the hotel roof. Near the front gate, a male Ruddy Ground-Dove foraged and not far away were several of the stunning Crimson-backed Tanagers. A couple Red-crowned Woodpeckers were busy tapping in the Guanacaste trees, but we would also catch up to one later on. The trees in a nearby empty lot were filled with at least 150+ Orange-chinned Parakeets and their combined raucous was almost overwhelming. Heard above the noise, were two Red-lored Parrots and we were able to see one perched. A male Blue-black Grassquit's jumping action caught Martha's attention. On the way back to reception, a screaming Yellow-headed Caracara came soaring by and landed on a room balcony. It was a fun way to start the trip.

Lou, Deb, Lenore, and Harold were at the reception desk, so we all climbed aboard our ride and headed to the nearby Albroom airport. Just as we approached the back end of the airstrip, a large female American Kestrel came flying toward us. It would be the only sighting for the trip. In no time at all we were checked in and boarded the plane. The short 45-minute flight took us over some high mountains then over to the Caribbean lowlands. In no time we landed in Bocas del Toro, were met by Tranquilo Bay staff, and then off on a boat to the lodge.

We arrived at TB and were greeted by Jay at the dock. We had our first tasty lunch, then Renee gave an introduction to the lodge. Roger, our expert local, guide was also there. 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 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 the infamous Empidonax flycatchers were also present to round out the set of migrants. Short-billed Pigeons were common and were busy filling up on *Miconia* 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. Also in the garden was a flurry of hummingbird activity with numerous species sallying above Hibiscus flowers catching gnats and others feeding on Porterweed. These included the dazzling White-necked Jacobin, Crowned Woodnymph, and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. Other species nectaring on various flowers were Bronzy Hermit, Blue-chested Hummingbird, and the tiny Stripe-throated Hermit. Also present was the stunning Blue-throated Goldentail; a really good sighting.

The sun had gone down far enough for us to climb the canopy tower and enjoy the remainder of the day. In the distance we spotted a Common Black-Hawk and Peregrine Falcon perched in snags. Small flocks of parrots began to come by, heading toward their nocturnal roosts. They passed in pairs and consisted mostly of Red-lored’s, but also Blue-headeds. Some action was brewing closer by in the tree canopy and included the Masked and Black-crowned Tityras. Other species that came in were White-vented Euphonia, Palm Tanager, Plain-colored Tanager, female Shining Honeycreeper, and a dazzling male Blue Dacnis. A male Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth was literally ‘hanging around’ in a nearby Cecropia tree to add to the show. It was a great way to end our



*Snowcap*



*Blue-throated  
Goldentail*



*Heraldica  
Clearwing*



*Strawberry  
Poison Dart Frog*



*Green Palm Pit Viper  
photo by Roger M.*

first day in paradise. That evening, A Derby's Woolly Opossum came to the restaurant deck to eat bananas and we were afforded great views of this otherwise timid forest denizen.

## **Sat., Oct. 14                      Popa Island**

After an early breakfast we boarded our boat and got ready to head over to the nearby Popa Island. Near the boat dock we found a perched Green-breasted Mango and not far away were several Green Ibis. It was already bright and warm, without any cloud cover. Under these conditions, it can be tough to find a Snowy Cotinga and we dipped on it this first try. We did, however, have some other nice sightings. A Gray-headed Kite soared over the mangroves while both the Keel-billed and Yellow-throated Toucans squawked in the treetops. A Plain Xenops also came into view before we returned to the lodge. Upon arriving at the dock, we heard the faint whistling-cry of the Black Hawk-Eagle and found it soaring high in the clouds.

After some lunch and downtime, we returned to Popa Island once again. Upon arriving at a favorite spot, we got a brief glimpse of a Snowy Cotinga before it disappeared into the mangroves. They were playing 'hard to get' this year. We rounded a bend to find an Osprey feeding on a freshly caught fish while a Yellow-headed Caracara thought it deserved a piece of it. In the brush below them a handsome male Scarlet-rumped Tanager appeared. On the way back we heard a Great Tinamou calling from deep inside the forest. Several Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts were also spotted foraging amongst an assortment of migrant swallows. To end the boat ride, a pair of the giant Pale-billed Woodpecker made an appearance and posed for photos.

## **Sun., Oct. 15                      Punta Raton | Trema Trees | Palo Seco Road**

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 to the mainland on the boat. 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. Just down the road, Roger spotted some friends who were seeing something in the distance so we stopped. It was a pair of Jabiru which apparently hadn't been seen since we saw them there last year. We also saw a pair of Wood Stork and a nearby Black-striped Sparrow before continuing on.

We began our ascent up the mountain until we came to a nice spot to pull off of the road. Our first encounter was a pair of White Hawk that had just begun to lift up on the rising air currents. A side road that led into the forest looked inviting so we walked it a bit. A pair of Olive-backed Euphonias and a Squirrel Cuckoo were all the birds we saw. A giant blue Menelaus Morpho came bouncing by which thrilled everyone. Roger spotted a great bird down on the river. It was a Torrent Tyrannulet. Unfortunately, a pair of Black Phoebe didn't like it being near them and they chased it upriver and out of sight.

We made our way up the road to another pull off. Year after year, this spot usually has fruiting *Trema* and fig trees that often bring in a lot of good birds. It didn't take long for us to notice several adult King Vultures that were gaining altitude. Some movement in the *Trema* trees caught our focus and we saw numerous male Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, Green Honeycreepers, a Bay-headed Tanager and Tawny-capped Euphonia. In a protected corner where cars don't tread, Robert spotted a patch of blooming *Ageratum* that was filled with butterflies. This year, there was a great assortment of glasswings and tigerwings that provided for great photos and an interpretive moment. In a nearby ditch, some Bitter Vine was blooming, and Robert spotted the iridescent Long-tailed Metalmark. Across the road, a female Slaty-tailed Trogon was spotted, as well as a Gray-headed Kite and Scarlet-rumped Cacique perched in distant trees.



We continued up the road and made a short visit along the Palo Seco ridgeline road. We found that the same red flowers as last year were blooming and were attracting hummingbirds. Then the rain started to set in, so we continued on to the Fortuna Dam to have lunch and rest. We then returned to the Palo Seco road to continue our search. A Collared Trogon came into view and we got great looks before it disappeared. Roger's keen hearing detected a Green-fronted Lancebill which had a perch just inside the confines of the forest. We got scope views of this unique hummingbird. Not far away, there was a bit of commotion in the underbrush. A male Zeledon's Antbird made a brief appearance near the forest floor while a Costa Rican Warbler foraged for insects. We returned to the flowering area to catch up to the hummingbird action. There was a male and female Snowcap that popped in and out of view. At one point, the male perched in the open, allowing for some photos. The regionally endemic White-bellied Mountain-gem made numerous appearances as well. Showing up briefly, in a lone tree alongside the road, was an Ochraceous Wren; the equivalent of a highland house wren. We had been hearing a Laughing Falcon in the distance and all of a sudden it appeared in front of us. It was being chased by a Bat Falcon!!

It was getting late, so started heading down the mountain. We encountered some migrating raptors that were searching for the last masses of warm air in order to squeeze in a few more miles before it got dark. There were small numbers of Swainson's Hawks, but most were Broad-winged. A small group of Mississippi Kites was also spotted. As we were approaching Punto Robalo Roger spotted a great bird. It was a Pinnated Bittern. Although it skulked away and hid, we were able to relocate it as it peered at us through the reeds. We boarded our boat and made our way back to the lodge to end another great day.





**Mon., Oct. 16**

## **Chocolate Farm Tour**

We had our early breakfast and no sooner than we were ready to head out, it started to rain. So, we hung out around the restaurant deck and watched a few birds that fed in the rain. The wet weather didn't stop an Eastern Wood-Pewee from finding bugs. The rain let up a while later and both the Dusky-capped and Boat-billed Flycatchers appeared. The White-throated Capuchins also came in for their daily banana snack.

In the afternoon we resumed to our scheduled activity; a visit to the Chocolate farm on a nearby island. As we reached the island, we were greeted by several Common Bottlenose Dolphins. We decided to do a short walk before getting our chocolate tour by Gary. We walked up into the shaded cacao farm to see what was stirring. It was pretty quiet, but we did run into our brightly colored amphibian friends. We spotted several Green-and-black Poison Dart Frogs that were hopping about in the understory. One was actually being devoured by a Red-bellied Litter Snake which is apparently immune to the frog's toxins. We heard some Black-chested Jays in the distance, but they would not come into view. However, a pair of Purple-throated Fruitcrow was cooperative and we got scope views of the handsome male.

We returned to Gary's and he gave us a short talk about the farm and related projects. Everyone was anxiously awaiting the samples. We could see that the sky was turning black to the south of us, so we had to buy our supply of chocolate and get moving. We barely made it back, just staying ahead of the thunderstorm.



**Tues., Oct. 17**

## **Bird Island | Birding by Boat**

We set out early this morning for an unforgettable day trip. Our final destination was Bird Island, but the route to get there would be half the fun. We headed out in the boat and reached the entrance of Snyder Canal; a historic landmark. At the onset of the canal, we spotted a Lineated Woodpecker, another giant in that family. Roger had a good spot to look for some birds, so we made landfall. Across a field was a male Nicaraguan Seed-Finch which is always a good species to pick up. A female was spotted close by and Lou got some great photos. A pair of Canebrake Wren were duetting in a nearby thicket, and we got brief, but good, glimpses of this regional endemic.

We continued on our way and came across a couple of Common Black-Hawk and a skulking Long-billed Gnatwren. As we cruised along, something tiny darted out in front of the boat. It was an American Pygmy Kingfisher. It dove into the thick aquatic vegetation, but with some patience we were able to track it down. We also saw the Amazon, Green and Ringed Kingfishers. A bit further and we made another stop. This time it was to look for an amphibian. Here lived a dark red form of the Strawberry Poison Dart Frog and we got to see quite a few individuals. A referee-type whistle originating high up caught our attention. It belonged to the Streak-headed Woodcreeper and it came into view. The Bay Wren is usually a skulker and heard far more often than seen, but one just happened to come into full view for us to enjoy.

We reached some lagoons and Roger was on the lookout for a great bird. High up in a large tree on a day roost was a Great Potoo. The camouflage of this giant stick-like bird is canning. To top that off, he also knew where to find a pair of roosting Short-tailed Nighthawks, also perched high up in a tree.





We reached the Changuinola River and on the far bank were some Black-necked Stilts, Southern Lapwing, and Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks. We spotted our first Mangrove Swallows of the trip as well. The other day,

around Punto Robalo, we saw a few Red-breasted Meadowlarks in a field, but today a bright male perched on a nearby fence for some great looks. We stopped for lunch at a shady spot under some big fig trees. Most everyone appeared as if they were ready for a nap, including a sloth that slept above our heads. We continued on and found a couple of Limpkin and Martha spotted the only Anhinga of the trip. A couple plain shorebirds standing in shallow water caught Roger's attention. They ended up being Wilson's Phalaropes, which is an uncommon migrant along the Caribbean waters. We approached the river's mouth and saw numerous shorebirds including Collared and Semipalmated Plovers, Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Willet, and Spotted Sandpiper.

Our freshwater experience was over and now it was time to switch over to the sea. We slowly went across the river's mouth into the calm ocean waters and headed east. We could see Bird Island in the distance and made our way there. 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, while others were just resting on the ocean's surface. What a fantastic bird. There were also adult and young Brown Boobies all over the rocks. Several Brown Noddy also appeared and landed on the rocky shore. We hung out a bit while Lou and Lenore photographed these graceful birds. Once we had our fill, we departed and made our way back to the lodge to end another fabulous day.



### **Wed., Oct. 18                      Popa Island**

After breakfast we climbed the tower to see what was stirring. We weren't up there long when we noticed that a big squall was about to bear down on us. So, we went scrambling back to shelter to wait it out. After it dissipated, everyone got back to some birding in the gardens. The activity around the fruiting *Miconia* bushes was hopping and the manakins were busy. In the afternoon, we would give Popa Island (and the cotingas) one last shot. This time it paid off, as several were seen well and photographed. It's always a treat to see this enigmatic, snowy white bird.

### **Thurs., Oct. 19                      Birding the Mainland**

The last full day would be spent with a return trip to the mainland. There were so many species we did not pick up the other day so a second trip is always worth the effort. The Palo Seco ridgeline road was revisited where the hummingbirds put on another show. This time, several male Snowcap were present. Also seen there were Broad-billed Motmot, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, and Silver-throated Tanager. The motmot soon disappeared into the mist that rolled in. Further up the road, past the Fortuna dam, Ruddy Pigeon and several Green Hermits were seen. A pair of regionally endemic hummingbirds were spotted, including the Scintillant and the White-tailed Emerald. Garden Emerald and Snowy-bellied Hummingbird were also seen. Today would prove to be quite the hummingbird day. A Lesser Goldfinch and White-naped Brushfinch would top off the bird list for the day. But perhaps one of the best sightings of the day would not be a bird, but a reptile. Roger's keen eyes spotted a Green Palm Pit Viper amidst the vegetation. What a splendid creature!

We had our last dinner at Tranquilo Bay and did a recap of our favorite moments and fauna of the trip. Highlights included: Lenore-Snowy Cotinga; Harold-Snowy Cotinga; Lou-Yellow-throated Toucan & Snowy Cotinga; Deb-Blue-gray Tanager & going up the canopy tower; Martha-Broad-billed Motmot; Roger-Snowcap; Robert-Zeledon's Antbird & butterfly spectacle on flowers

### **Fri., Oct. 20                      Departures**



This morning we said our 'good-byes' to Tranquilo Bay. Lou and Deb would continue on to new adventures and more birds at the Totumas lodge in the highlands. Everyone else would make the return flight to Panama City and make their way home. We would leave this beautiful part of the world with fond memories, new friends, and great photos.

*Photo Credits: Group Birding (Robert Gallardo - RG), Yellow-throated Toucan (Lou Taylor - LT), Long-tailed Metalmark (RG), Red-capped Manakin (RG), Yellow Warbler (LT), Sunset at Tranquilo Bay (RG), Panama Map, Red-billed Tropicbird (RG), Derby's Woolly Opossum (RG), Bronzy Hermit (RG), Crimson-backed Tanager (RG), Blue Dacnis (RG), Three-toed Sloth (RG), Snowcap (RG), Blue-throated Goldentail (RG), Heraldica Clearwing (RG), Strawberry Poison Dart Frog (RG), Green Palm Pit Viper (Roger M.), Summer Tanager (LT), White-throated Capuchin (LT), Brown Pelican (LT), Female Summer Tanager (LT), White-collared Manakin (RG), Scarlet-thighed Dacnis (LT), Montezuma Oropendola (LT), Squirrel Cuckoo (LT), Red-lored Parrot (LT), Blackburnian Warbler (LT), Great Potoo (RG), Red-breasted Meadowlark (RG), Green & Black Poison Dart Frog (LT), Bottlenose Dolphins (LT), Green Iguana (LT), Dickcissel (LT), Yellow-crowned Night Heron (LT), Green Kingfisher (LT), Swamplilies (LT), Snowy Cotinga (RG), Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (LT), Yellow-throated Toucan (LT)*