

FLIGHTS OF FANCY ADVENTURES

PANAMA

THE CANOPY TOWER & CHIRIQUI' HIGHLANDS

MARCH 28 – APRIL 8, 2009

TRIP REPORT

From New England, New York and New South Wales (Australia), participants converged on the epicenter of Western Hemisphere birding - Panama. Armed with little but binoculars, scopes, telephoto lenses, pants tucked into socks and some insect spray, we meandered through marshes, ambled up and down hills, made sure the canal was working properly and drank a middling amount of local beer and Chilean wine. Mostly, we looked for, saw and heard scads of birds, 374 species in all, from the lowlands of the canal zone, both Atlantic and Pacific sides, the extinct volcanic crater of *El Valle de Anton* and the western highlands of Chiriqui' Province. Here's how it all went down.

Late on March 28th, we arrived at the Canopy Tower, a completely refitted US radar installation originally designed to detect drug running planes from nearby Colombia. Now an elegant birding hotel perched atop Semaphore Hill in Soberania National Park, the Tower has become an internationally acclaimed birding destination. Panoramic windows surround its every side, but the main attraction lies in ascending to the outdoor upper deck, overlooking the forest canopy for 360 degrees, with a bonus view of passing ships in the Panama Canal. This is the ultimate BIG SIT! site, where hundreds of species have been recorded from a single spot.

As the dawn chorus erupted all around us, we marveled at the dazzling colors of Keel-billed and Chestnut-mandibled Toucans, Blue Dacnis, Collared Aracari, Violet-bellied and Blue-chested Hummingbirds, Blue Cotinga (batteries not necessary), tanagers, perfect looks at the

striking Green Shrike-vireo, uttering its “can’t see me” call, while several species of swifts, swallows, flycatchers and wintering warblers constantly entertained us. And this was all before a delicious breakfast! After eating, we again climbed the short set of stairs to the upper deck to witness one of nature’s most exciting marvels - the migration of tens of thousands of hawks on their paths from South and Central America toward their breeding grounds in the north. Multiple erupting geysers of Broad-winged Hawks rose from the forests, stretching from the treetops to the limits of vision, densely packed on thermals that would carry them so high they could then effortlessly soar north without flapping their wings. An endless stream of Swainson’s Hawks seemed to blow through, with literally thousands of birds in each “kettle”. A virtually uncountable river of Mississippi Kites stretched from one horizon to the other, astonishing everyone on the platform with the sheer majesty of migration and the forces that compelled these elegant raptors to band together for their annual northbound push. For icing on the cake, a White Hawk drew lazy circles below us, hunting in the unbroken forest and a Double-toothed Kite zipped by at eye level. Just to remind us that there were little migrants present, a spectacular Golden-winged Warbler fed on the fruits of a nearby cecropia tree.

We then enjoyed a VERY leisurely stroll down the Semaphore Hill Road, moving at even slower than the usual birder’s pace, since the birding was so good. At the Tower feeders, many species of hummingbirds zipped in and out, making it almost impossible to leave the grounds. Red-capped Manakin males performed their lekking displays just above us in the trees. A pair of Slaty-tailed Trogons picked away at a termite nest, having a little breakfast and perhaps excavating a home of their own. Rufous and Broad-billed Motmots sounded their bizarre calls, a White-whiskered Puffbird sat close by, abounded, woodpeckers, woodcreepers wrens and antbirds galore. Flycatchers were abundant, although the slight variations among many are highly enigmatic. Our guide, Carlos Bethancourt, was able to easily sort them out for us and explain the differences. Carlos is without any question, the finest birding guide I have ever encountered and a delightful person as well. His skill at identifying, calling, locating and imitating birds is absolutely astonishing!

After lunch, we rode the open-air “Rainfomobile” to Ammo Dump Ponds, where explosives are stored for use in maintaining the Canal. En route, at the bridge over the Chagres River, Fork-tailed Flycatchers were nesting on a light pole and zillions of Mangrove Swallows zipped over the water. The ponds form a large shallow marsh, with a patch of extremely birdy forest between them. So birdy, in fact, that we barely moved for over an hour, seeing one new species after another, with many excited utterances, to say the least! Several highlights: Rufescent Tiger-heron on the nest; a pair of White-throated Crakes feeding out in the open! This is so unusual that Carlos became very excited himself and made a video recording of the pair through the scope. Panama Flycatcher, Wattled Jacana, Capybara, Greater Ani, Black-throated Trogon, Crimson-crested, Black-cheeked and Red-crowned Woodpeckers, Olivaceous Piculet, Plain Xenops, Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, Streaked Flycatcher, Crimson-backed Tanager, seedeaters, saltators, Yellow-tailed Oriole and many more.

On March 30th, we tried to bird the near section of Pipeline Road, but never made it. The birding around the entrance was so good, it consumed the entire morning. A beautiful adult Gray Hawk sat high in a bare tree, Gray-headed Kite soared overhead and the first of many Yellow-headed Caracaras flapped by. A Gray-headed Chachalaca raucously called from a treetop, while a Violaceous Trogon gave us stunning views of its bright yellow belly and iridescent violet back. Blue-crowned Motmot put in an appearance, as well as White-necked, White-whiskered and Black-breasted Puffbirds. A Cinnamon Woodpecker flew from tree to tree and we had the best looks ever at a Northern Barred Woodcreeper. Fasciated, Western Slaty- (F) and Barred Antshrikes were also very active, plus good looks at Dot-winged Antwren, Dusky and White-bellied Antbirds. We renamed the Purple-throated Fruitcrow more aptly as the Burgundy-throated Cotinga, to help the AOU do a better job. Masked Tityra completed our sweep of the Big Three for the lodge. Swainson's Thrushes were abundant this year, soon to be found moving through our own backyards. A tiny Tropical Gnatcatcher pleased everyone's eye, but the show was stolen by a pair of the elusive Rosy Thrush-tanagers. The male is a study in crimson and black, while the female sports bright orange and black. With good looks at both, the day was made. Red-legged Honeycreeper, both Scarlet-rumped and Yellow-rumped Caciques didn't finish far behind in the morning's popularity contest. The endless roar of mantled howler monkeys was a constant and welcome distraction and it certainly seemed the monkeys were watching us as much as we them. All the while, looking overhead, endless streams of northbound raptors filled the sky.

We spent the afternoon at nearby Old Gamboa Road and the Summit Ponds. A pair of Squirrel Cuckoos warmly greeted us at the entrance by running around in the trees and floating overhead, trailing their long striped tails. Thick-billed Euphonia, Summer and Scarlet (numerous males) Tanagers, a mob of Black-chested Jays with their bright yellow eyes, all were along the tall grass-lined road to the ponds. We met the Three Kingfishers (Ringed, Amazon and Green) and a sleepy Boat-billed Heron and then an exquisite Capped Heron flew out through the far end of the larger pond. Lesser Kiskadee and Boat-billed Flycatcher caught flies as we learned to distinguish them from their common cousin, Great Kiskadee, which handily identifies itself with its call. Further along the road, we lucked into a Spectacled Owl at its daytime roost.

That night, we had an outstanding adventure, once again boarding the Rainfomobile for a spotlighting drive. Under perfectly clear starlit skies, we first saw a nine-banded armadillo waddling along the road edge, grubbing for - grubs. Then we struck gold - a Crested Owl sat just above the road on a cross branch. Even from the rear we could see its two white crests and from the front, we saw that they extended from an "X" pattern on its face. Truly a magnificent bird of prey! The magic continued as we found two three-toed sloths and three two-toed sloths. Then a slight rustling next to the truck alerted everyone to a mother northern tamandua (aka Mexican anteater) working her way through the brush, carrying her infant on her back. What a wonderful sight! We also saw an array of bats, which we very scientifically named: small, medium, large and extra large bat or "Louisville Slugger".

Next morning, March 31, we actually made it deep onto the Pipeline Road. There were many great birds, but no greater experience than seeing a wild Harpy Eagle! Not once, but twice. This bird was not technically “countable”, because it had been “hacked” from a breeding facility, but it had been released in 2006 and living on its own in the wild for almost three years. Good enough for me! Just seeing this bird in the wild, the largest and most powerful raptor in the world, made my pulse quicken and was an experience I had sought ever since I began birding in the tropics. Impressions: the sheer size of the Harpy was astonishing! Its talon spread is about the same if you spread your hand as wide as possible. The tarsi can be two inches (two inches!) in diameter. The bird stands over three feet in length, dwarfing a Bald Eagle. Despite its size, Harpies can be extremely difficult to spot, since they typically hunt from a perch below the canopy and only fly when changing positions or attacking prey, with monkeys and sloths preferred items. A Harpy can snatch a large monkey or sloth with one foot and carry it off! What a bird!

From the largest to the smallest, we worked with great effort to see the Black-capped Pygmy-tyrant, so small it can hide behind a twig. Red-lore, Mealy, Brown-hooded and Blue-headed Parrot flew over, all calling raucously. A Common Potoo sat motionless on a dead stick, its camouflage near perfect. Pied Puffbird gave us a sweep of that family. Great looks at a Black-striped Woodcreeper were perfectly complemented by scope views of Tiny Hawk and Slate-colored Grosbeak.

The afternoon had its amazing surprise as well, as we walked the Plantation Trail at the foot of Semaphore Hill. The usual suspects were present AND THEN we saw a pair of Sunbitterns beginning to build a nest on a large branch of a forest giant. The branch, fortunately, was at eye level and right above a stream where the sunbitterns hunted for food. Only about 50 feet away, the views were stunning and the pair mated right in front of us! How many people can say they have seen that? I believe somewhere around 4 or 5 million pictures were taken of these incredibly beautiful and very unique birds, usually extremely secretive and elusive. And we got the X-rated version! Despite the difficulty of following that act, Great Jacamar and Black-tailed Trogon (F) held their own.

Breakfast at 4:00 AM, rolling by 4:30, was the start of our next exciting day. We were headed for Achiote Road on the Caribbean side of the Isthmus. Dawn greeted us as we crossed the floating Gatun Lock, fortunate not to have to wait more than a few minutes for a ship to pass through. Despite the seeming lack of distance (about 50 miles, as the cotinga flies), and no particular physical barriers, the birding on the north coast of the Canal area is filled with surprisingly different species. Our first stop was an old stand of trees and brush, long known as a gathering place for birds early in the morning. Many tanagers were present, as well as local specialties like Spot-crowned Barbet, White-headed Wren, Bay Wren, Lesser Seed-finch, Red-breasted Blackbird, Common Black-hawk and abundant Montezuma Oropendolas. After outdoor coffee at a local cafe’, we quietly walked into the forest to find a Golden-collared Manakin lek and watched these little males wildly displaying their wares for quite some time, jumping from twig to twig, puffing up and snapping their wings like popcorn popping, all to impress the little

ladies. After a picnic lunch, we visited old Fort San Lorenzo, originally built by the Spanish in the 1500s to protect the Panama settlement from raids by marauding pirates. No luck. Henry Morgan sacked and burned the fort with a major naval attack on three occasions and even crossed the continent to plunder Panama City itself. A stop at the Gatun Dam spillway found some wading birds and a few shorebirds and then we quickly crossed back over the canal to find Saffron Finch near the canal offices. Then the fun really began as we made our way to the Colon terminus of the Panama Railroad Company. Boarding the train and sitting in the elevated, large-windowed club car, we began our hour-long transcontinental journey sipping beers and other more potent refreshments. This only helped the birding as the train followed the canal southward toward Panama City. You have to be quick, but the birding can be excellent. Green Ibis, many Snail Kites, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Gray-breasted Martin, Osprey, Toucan and Bat Falcon graced our RR list as the train pulled in to the Panama City station.

April 2 took us west along the Pan American Highway and then north into the foothills to visit the Canopy Lodge in *El Valle*, newer sister birding lodge to the Canopy Tower. The lodge is simply exquisite. Beautiful manicured gardens, all designed to attract birds, tray and hummingbird feeders, huge rooms all overlooking the gardens, delicious food served on the outdoor dining area combine to produce a fantastic location from which to base birding operations. My only regret was only having one day there. We saw many new species here, but the highlight was also the smallest - Rufous-crested Coquette, a tiny hummingbird whose bill is so short it can only feed on the smallest blossoms. It was surrounded by brilliant Lemon-rumped and Silvery-throated Tanagers, Rufous-tailed, Snowy-bellied and Violet-headed Hummingbirds, Violet-crowned Woodnymph, Little Hermit, Garden Emerald, Lineated Woodpecker, Yellow-green Vireo, Rufous-capped Warbler, Scale-crested Pygmy-tyrant, Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, White-winged Becard, Rufous-breasted and Plain Wren, Orange-billed Nightingale-thrush, Tawny-capped Euphonia, Silver-throated Tanager, Orange-billed Sparrow, Yellow-billed Cacique and Chestnut-headed Oropendola, to name just a few, including those seen on our morning outing.

April 3 was a much easier day, with a different emphasis. Culture. Well, some tourism anyway. Of course, we started by birding *Parque de Metropolitano*, the only national park in the world totally within city limits. Starting at the parking area and slowly walking up the paved road to the park's hill, we saw a ton of birds, including the somewhat bizarre Long-billed Gnatwren, Black-bellied Wren, with its loud and melodious song, and Yellow-green Tyrannulet, endemic to Panama. From the top, we could see the explosive growth that Panama City has experienced during the past four years, with the skyscrapers tripling in number. No recession there. Panama City is being called "the Dubai of the Americas". We made a brief stop at the Summit Gardens so we could see an impressive film about Harpy Eagles, and also made a quick tour of the grounds. Some little girls came up to me with what they thought was a dead or injured bird and handed a Western Long-tailed Hermit to me! Holding it in my hands was pretty magical, since hummingbirds weigh practically nothing, even a large one like this. When I opened my hands and the bird, apparently only stunned, flew away, the girls shrieked so loud I thought my hearing was damaged.

After a relaxing lunch at the Tower, we ventured forth once more to the Miraflores Locks and Museum. There we watched both a Panamax container ship and a huge cruise ship transit the locks, an extremely impressive experience. Especially watching the apparently self-unaware fat guys on deck wearing only speedos. Grim. The modern museum contains 4 floors of exhibits about the construction and operation of the canal. Fascinating stuff.

The next day, after a quick last visit to the Tower deck, we packed our gear and flew west up the Pacific coast to the city of David, where we were met by our new guide, Deibys (Davis), for a bus trip up into the Chiriqui' highlands. As soon as we arrived at our destination, Los Quetzales Hotel and Spa, we grabbed our birding gear and transferred by 4x4 vehicle up the rugged road to the mountain cloud forest in Amistad National Park (which straddles the Panama/Cost Rica border) and *Cabana Numero Dos* (Cabin #2), which I had rented for the overnight. Without much delay, we added several more hummingbird species, as these diminutive waifs zipped back and forth between the feeders and flowers around the cabin's landscaped terrace. Some weren't that diminutive after all - Violet Sabrewings (Violent Sabretooths, as they came to be known) and Magnificent Hummingbirds are about 6 inches each. Fiery-throated and Stripe-tailed Hummingbirds, White-throated Mountain-gem, Green Violet-ear, Green-crowned Brilliant all were present. Around the edges of the patio, if you kept a close watch, were ground-loving species, like Chestnut-capped Brush-finch, Large-footed, Yellow-thighed and Slaty Finches, Ruddy-capped and Black-billed Nightingale-thrushes. We saw a Slaty Flowerpiercer puncturing blossoms for its dinner and up in the moss-covered trees, Ruddy Treerunners and a Streak-breasted Treehunter were found. We thought we had seen the best when a trio of Golden-browed Chlorophonias decided to have a brawl right in front of us. All that paled by comparison, however, when the piece de resistance, the sine qua non bird of the trip appeared. One Resplendent Quetzal was spotted way up the hill. We all rushed with scopes and cameras to see this magnificent bird and got wonderful views. Of course, the way these things work, as soon as we returned to the comforts of the patio, three Quetzals followed suit, flying through the sunlight, flashing their iridescent green backs, crimson breasts and their impossibly long train feathers, waving two feet behind in their wake. What a magnificent sight! We could appreciate how a religion was built around these birds. Over the next two days, we saw about a dozen Quetzals and never grew tired of admiring them. When we returned to the hotel for dinner, a Dusky Nightjar sang from a nearby cliff face.

The next morning, April 5, we returned to Cabin #2, enjoying the chilly mountain air at about 7,000 feet elevation. With hot coffee and hot chocolate firmly in hand, we continued to study and enjoy these mountain birds. Prong-billed Barbet, with its strange call, a soaring Black-Hawk-eagle, backlit by the sun, flocks of Band-tailed Pigeons, Ruddy Pigeon, a Collared Trogon that perched just overhead, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper worked the trees just below us, while all around the cabin, Flame-throated Warblers amazed us with their brilliant colors. We went for a walk and found Tufted Flycatcher, Black-cheeked warbler, taunting Silvery-fronted Tapaculos that would not appear, Barred Becard, Collared Redstart, Gray-breasted Wood-wren, Mountain Robin, Yellow-winged and Brown-capped Vireos, and one of my favorite named birds, Rufous-

browed Peppershrike. The trees were always ringing with the wind-chime like notes of the Black-faced Solitaire. After a delicious lunch brought up the mountain for us, we returned to our rooms for a bit of siesta before heading over to the road to *Respingo*. Some couldn't resist watching the tiny Scintillant Hummingbirds feeding in the Hotel gardens or the Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers stuffing themselves in berry-laden trees. Last November, the area had experienced a 40-year flood, washing out many roads and buildings along the many mountain rivers and runoffs. The impossibly steep and rough road up the side of *Volcan Baru* had been totally wrecked by washouts and landslides and was now closed to the public. Unable to go to the top, we started from the bottom and found the birding to be excellent. A familiar Red-tailed Hawk soared over the hill tops, while clouds of huge White-collared Swifts spun around us. Streak-headed Woodcreepers worked their way around the trees, while Mountain Elaenias darted up and down catching insects. A pair of Slate-throated Redstarts responded to our calls. We walked as far up as we could before the road was closed and then returned for dinner.

The next day we experienced a sampler of other eco-zones the area has to offer. Descending about 4,000 feet to *Bajo Frio*, an agricultural area, we walked a wide dirt road down a gradual grade, seeing some wonderful birds along the way. Brown-throated Parakeets sat in nearby trees, but were almost impossible to find, due to the way they blend in with the foliage. A Long-billed Starthroat hummingbird worked a flowering tree, and we pulled out both Pale-breasted and Slaty Spinetails from the underbrush. Cherrie's Tanagers were everywhere, a bird so black and so red that we were transfixed every time we saw one. Bay-headed Tanagers, with their exquisite mix of rust, blue and green were equally engaging. North American breeding birds were also in evidence, as we found Philadelphia Vireo, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Mourning, Bay-breasted, Black-throated Green Warblers to complement the Tropical Parula we saw later in the day at *Macho de Monte*. This valley is unfortunately the site of new road construction and much excellent birding habitat has been lost. The canyon and gorge at the bottom, however, is still the same and we were able to find Riverside Wren right above the bridge. The birds sang so loudly that their beautiful voices carried over the roar of the river 75 feet below. We walked out to the very high (and unprotected) overlook to enjoy a magnificent view of the canyon below the gorge. After lunch at the hotel, we returned to somewhat lower elevation at *Lago Volcan*, driving along an unused runway to gain access to the site via a private shade coffee plantation. The walk of about one mile to the lakes proved very fruitful, with good looks at Slate-throated Redstart, Yellow-throated Brush-finch, Paltry (what an insulting name!) Tyrannulet, Bright-rumped Attila, Golden-crowned Warbler and a pair of Green Honeycreepers. The lakes themselves were a welcome treat and the shallow section we explored were filled with old friends: Pied-billed and Least Grebes, Solitary and Spotted Sandpipers, Green Heron, Common Moorhen and American Coot. While a giant Ringed Kingfisher crashed into the lake in search of prey, overhead a large swarm of Chestnut-collared Swifts circled, hawking insects. After we returned to the lodge, there was just enough light to find a Torrent Tyrannulet working the river behind the hotel. A good day overall, with many habitats and birds visited.

Our final day was spent on an all-day excursion to *Finca Hartmann*, a shade coffee plantation in Santa Clara, a town very near the Costa Rican border. This farm grows and

processes coffee, but has maintained most of its land in a natural state to provide excellent habitat for wildlife, especially birds. We arrived at dawn to greet the birds' awakening chorus and were aptly rewarded as the trees were alive with the sound of music. Our primary target was the Turquoise Cotinga, and it appeared right on schedule. These cotingas are so stunningly colorful that they don't even vocalize. The males just sit there, glowing, and demand that you look and admire their beauty. The main plaza of the finca was a great place to just hang around and watch the birds come and go - brilliant red Flame-colored and White-winged tanagers, Speckled Tanager, euphonias, hummingbirds, trogons, woodpeckers, aracarís and toucans. A White-crowned Parrot flew overhead toward the rising sun, with its broad crown glowing like a spotlight. Then we went for a walk along the "Stream Trail", a farm road that meanders up and down for about 1/2 mile. A Buff-rumped Warbler was tremendously entertaining, sashaying along the creek bed, waving its rear end back and forth like it was in a chorus line. It even jumped up on a bench to better perform for its enthralled audience. A Nightingale-wren called and wouldn't be seen, but a Green Hermit did appear while we searched. An excellent find was a Spotted Barbtail, a secretive furnarid that forages in the mossy forest understory. A lek of White-ruffed Manakins provided entertainment as these little B&W feather puffs zipped from tree to tree. A short walk up another trail got us great looks at a pair of Emerald (now Blue-throated) Toucanets. After a delicious lunch provided by the farm, we enjoyed a tour of the coffee processing plant and learned how the beans are graded, cleaned and roasted before being packed for shipment.

Our final jaunt was to the highest part of the farm, *Ojo de Agua*. Some of us rode in our 4x4 and others gamely jumped in the pack of the farm's pickup for a rock'n'roll ride up the hill, hanging on to the roll bar for dear life. On the way up the hill, our *guia numeros dos* (guide number two), Jonathon, who spoke no English but was an outstanding birder and spotter, picked out a Rufous Nightjar sitting just above the high road bank. He and I scrambled out and managed to get a brief look at the fleeing bird, which flies very clumsily. We couldn't relocate the bird, probably right nearby, but superbly camouflaged. But when the others also clambered up the bank, a nightjar chick fell down onto the road and started running for its life. Barely feathered, but with the extremely long wings of its species, it ran down the road and then tried to hide. I chased it down and eventually was able to grab it without harm, took it back up on the leaf covered ground above and carefully placed it in the shade of a coffee plant. Since it was vocalizing, we were sure the chick and its parent would soon be reunited and live happily ever after. Jonathan continued to amaze, picking out a White-throated Thrush and a Golden-olive Woodpecker from deep in the trees.

Before our final dinner, we sat in the comfortable lounge of the hotel, enjoying libations and doing our checklist for the last time. Each of us took turns reciting our favorite birds of the trip and our most memorable experiences, all explained in three part harmony. I'm always amazed at the diversity in the answers, showing how certain birds, usually not the "big name glamour species", are selected. The Sunbitterns and the Rufous-crested Coquette led the list. After that, there were so many great choices that no species got more than two votes! The same

was true for experiences - visiting *cabana numero dos* barely took the prize over the hawk migration. Catching the nightjar chick ranked right up there as well.

Overall, I would say the tour was a great success. We had a wonderful group, all pretty much in sync with each other, all in good spirits. Thanks to everyone who participated. We found 374 species of birds, which is pretty amazing, considering the territory we covered. The largest group was the warblers, with 22 species! I'm not sure if we'll do this exact tour again, but I would like to return to The Canopy Lodge in *El Valle* for a longer visit. The birding and the accommodations are excellent and day trips to a wide variety of habitats can be done. If you're interested.....

Best wishes and good birding!

Sam & Donna
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