



Panama Birding and Wildlife Tour with Wild About Travel
20th March – 2nd April 2011

Tour participants: Alison Elphinstone, Mick and Sylvia O'Dell, Caroline and Robin Simpson and Jo Thomas

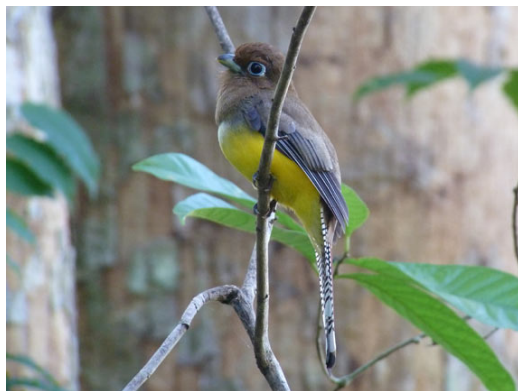
For all of us, it was our first birding tour to Panama and we hoped there would be a chance of some good mammals and other wildlife too. Alison had been to Panama before, but her previous trip had been more cultural, so she was as keen as the rest of us to explore tracts of fabulous tropical rainforest along the famous Pipeline Road, other habitats close to the Panama Canal and then experience different birds in the Highlands with a day exploring the Pacific Coastal grasslands and paddy fields.

Our appetite to visit Panama had been whetted by attending a slide show at the British Birdwatching Fair and from recommendations of others. We knew we were going to have a fabulous time and the trip exceeded all expectations, both on the birding and the mammal front. We managed to see some fabulous butterflies and other insects too. Our first night was spent at a very pleasant B&B on the outskirts of Panama City. For the remainder of our nights we were based from two centres – Canopy Tower in the Soberania National Park and Canopy Lodge at El Valle in the Highlands. The guides were equipped with Leica Apo-Televid 65 telescopes and several of us were introduced to digiscoping, with some very pleasing results. There was always plenty to see – literally on the doorstep of each lodge and most birding was within 15 - 30 minutes drive. On two or three days there was a little more driving involved, but the very most was just 1 hour and 15 minutes away. Therefore we felt we had much more time to explore 'wild habitat' rather than being on the road all the time.

With the help of our guides we thoroughly enjoyed every day. It is quite difficult to pick out our most memorable moments, but a few of them include: -

Every male Manakin sighting – there were five species of Manakin we might encounter in the areas we visited and we saw them all (Red-capped, Golden-collared, Blue-crowned, Lance-tailed and White-ruffed)

The feeling of being in Trogon heaven – six species possible (White-tailed, Violaceous, Orange-bellied, Black-throated, Black-tailed and Slaty-tailed) and all of them seen extremely



Red-capped Manakin (top) © C Simpson
Black-throated Trogon ♀ (bottom) © C Simpson

well. We had seven Trogon-watching days with nine seen on one day alone! Several of them were next to the track.

Catching up with the '**Greenshank**' of the tropical forest – **Green Shrike-Vireo**. Well it sounds similar to a Greenshank, but is a fine example of a passerine, often heard but much more difficult to see.

Watching a **Blue-throated (Emerald) Toucanet** calling away, then just half an hour later, four **Swallow-tailed Kites** gracing the skies with their effortless flying aerobatics and unique silhouettes.

Treasured moments watching a **Purplish-backed Quail-Dove** through the scope. The book doesn't do justice to this beautiful little dove with such an exquisite face pattern – made all the more special due to the patience needed to see it and perseverance of our guide to even find it in the dense undergrowth.

A pair of **Tody Motmots at Valle Chiquito** with tails swinging from side to side, like a pendulum. Then a little later, a fine **Bay-headed Tanager in the scope** and perhaps the bird of the afternoon – **Masked Tityra** of which we saw three. Watching a **Little Tinamou** was a special moment, too.

Seeing several **species with rather wacky names**: **Southern Bentbill** and a **Brownish Twistwing** along the Rainforest Centre trail; an **Olivaceous Flatbill** and **Golden-crowned Spadebill** along Plantation Trail and a **White-throated Spadebill** at Cerro Gaital in the Highlands. When our guide mentioned 'Spadebill' there was a strong desire to see one!

An account of each day follows with what we considered to be some of the special birds and mammals highlighted in bold, some because they are uncommon or rare in Panama, but many because they are so charismatic and a pleasure to watch.

We hope you enjoy reading it.

Sun 20th March 2011: London to Panama City via Madrid

Our Iberia flight from London via Madrid departed at 06.20 hrs. We had roughly three hours in Madrid before the final leg of the flight – 10 ½ hrs to cover the 5230 miles (according to in-flight information) to Tocumen International Airport, Panama City. Our flight arrived a little late, but we were quick to collect our luggage and we duly headed to meet our driver Rodolfo who took us the 30 minute drive to La Estancia. By now it was dark so we couldn't see anything and our adventure really began the next morning. La Estancia was a pleasant place to spend the night and the staff were very friendly and helpful.

Mon 21st March 2011: Early morning at La Estancia and afternoon at Canopy Tower and Plantation Trail. Too keen to sleep, we were up at 05:00 hrs. It was still dark, but dawn broke quickly and the light was good by 06:00 hrs.

Two adjacent balconies close to reception provide a great place to start birding. You can have your breakfast here (on a first come, first served basis), or there are other tables inside.

Our first few Panamanian species included close-up views of rather pretty Blue-grey and **Crimson-backed Tanagers**, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Clay-coloured Thrush and, would you believe it, a Panama Flycatcher, all of which proved to be very common and widespread. We also added **Keel-billed Toucan**, **Barred Antshrike**, several **Thick-billed Euphonias**, Variable Seedeaters (their plumage really is variable), Ruddy Ground-Dove, House Wren and a Common Tody-Flycatcher – again all widespread species seen on most days of the trip. Mick and Caroline saw the first Chestnut-mandibled Toucan of the holiday. Also Shiny Cowbird and Streaked Flycatcher put in an appearance.



Keel-billed Toucan © M O'Dell

A Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth with youngster had been seen the week before we arrived and you can regularly see Geoffroy's Tamarin locally too. We didn't see either, but to be fair we didn't have a great deal of time to look. We had planned to walk out of La Estancia and head to the right and up the hill to some view points, but before we knew it, it was 09.45 hrs and our driver had arrived to take us to Canopy Tower, our base for seven nights. The journey just took 30 minutes and **Magnificent Frigatebird**, Anhinga and Great-tailed Grackle were some of the species added to the holiday list.



Magnificent Frigatebird © M O'Dell

Arriving at **Canopy Tower** we were met by Zelesny, and some very obliging White-necked Jacobins, Violet-bellied and Blue-chested Hummingbirds visiting the feeders by the front door. A pair of Scarlet-rumped Cacique were nesting close-by. This is such a unique place to stay and very recognisable – built in 1965 by the United States Air Force, this tower which dominates the landscape initially housed a powerful radar until it became surplus to requirements in 1995. In 1999 after a transformation, it has proved the perfect base for birders.



Canopy Tower © C Simpson

Zelesny showed us around the Tower. Our twin and double rooms were on the second floor, the lounge and dining area is on the third level and we very quickly convened up on the observation platform, right at the very top. What a view – the Panama Canal to the west and the sky scrapers of Panama City to the south-east. Carlos Bethancourt joined us shortly afterwards and our birding here

began in earnest with Black and Turkey Vultures, Scaled Pigeon and Mealy Parrot putting in an appearance.

Plantation Trail (5 mins. down the road from Canopy Tower)

After a fine lunch we convened by the entrance and with Carlos as our guide we drove down Semaphore Hill to the bottom where Plantation Trail begins with a stop on the way at a bridge to see roosting Lesser White-lined Bats and we heard an Orange-billed Sparrow here.

Plantation Trail, so called due to it being an access route to a long-overgrown Cacao plantation, is home to many interesting species. The calls of **Red-capped Manakin** from the undergrowth were tantalizingly close, as was the call of Violaceous Trogon and Dot-winged Antwren. We heard and then saw a male Black-tailed Trogon and other species included **Blue-black Grosbeak**, **Broad-billed Motmot** (with the greeny-blue chin) and a pair of distinctive looking **Spotted Antbirds**. Seeing a **Great Tinamou** was a real treat too.

Walking past huge Ceiba or Kapok trees, giants of the forest, also locally known as the elephant foot tree, we learned this species of tree is often used by Harpy Eagles for nesting. Occasionally introduced birds can be seen in the Canal Zone area, but this mighty bird of prey is best looked for in Eastern Panama.

A troop of **Mantled Howler monkeys** provided much entertainment along with an introduced Black Spider Monkey which seemed to be a hanger-on to the edge of the group.

The forest birding this afternoon wasn't easy, but we still enjoyed ourselves – we heard many species without seeing them, including three species of parrot – Brown-hooded, Blue-headed and the larger Red-lored. However, we finished on a high with views of Great Potoo as the light started to fade, then a glimpse of a **Crane Hawk**, with views so fleeting that we couldn't count it – what a shame that one got away. On the drive back up the hill we had close-up views of a male **White-nosed Coati** walking by the roadside.



White-nosed Coati © M O'Dell

Tues 22nd March: Morning at Canopy Tower observation deck and Semaphore Hill, then afternoon at the Ammo Dump ponds.

Our day started at 06.00hrs on the **Canopy Tower observation deck**. Our first few species of the day included Short-tailed Swift, Grey-breasted Martin and we heard a Bright-rumped Attila. A Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift flew past and Green Honeycreepers and **Golden-hooded, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers** all gorged on the small fruits of an adjacent tree – all were quite stunning. Our guide pointed out the calls of Great Tinamou and an Olivaceous Woodcreeper. A female **Blue Dacnis** added colour to the leafy canopy and we caught up with a couple of Mealy and one Red-lored Parrot, a Scaled Pigeon, Mangrove Cuckoo and White-shouldered Tanager. Several species proved to be easier to hear than to

see including Black-faced Antthrush and Green Shrike-Vireo which sounds like a Greenshank in the forest! Also calling were Lesser Greenlet and a Brown-capped Tyrannulet. We added a couple of warblers to the 'seen' list with a single **Black and White** and three **Bay-breasted Warblers**. Other species included a Barn Swallow, Great Crested Flycatcher and Palm Tanager. And all this before breakfast!

After a hearty breakfast we headed out on foot down the densely forested **Semaphore Hill** – it was around 08.35 hrs by then. Just outside the compound some of us saw our first **Green Shrike-Vireo** as a **Blue Morpho butterfly** flew by. Overhead we had about 10 Swainson's Hawk, two Broad-winged Hawk and several Turkey Vultures.

Back to forest birding and good views of two Long-billed Gnatwrens, a male **Dusky Antbird**, Long-billed Hermit and two stunning Rufous Motmots. An added bonus was two **Black-breasted Puffbirds**, which we managed to photograph (badly) followed by a Broad-billed Motmot. White-faced Capuchin monkeys were heard calling from deeper inside the forest but didn't show themselves. Although the Capuchins didn't show, we found **Geoffroy's Tamarin** to be more obliging, with great views from the roadside. A Red-tailed Squirrel appeared and our first of the Sloths – this one was a **Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth**.

Some more new species followed. A single Purple-crowned Fairy was the only one for the trip. A female White-whiskered Puffbird, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher and the ubiquitous Cocoa Woodcreeper were all seen well. Carlos pointed out the distinctive Gumbo Limbo tree, which the locals call the Tourist Tree due to its brown peeling bark.

A Bi-coloured Antbird was very obliging by the edge of the road around an ant swarm on the ground. Triangular structures hanging underneath tree branches were the nests of Azteca Ants.

Then another flurry of birds with Chestnut-sided, Bay-breasted and Golden-winged Warblers, Plain Xenops, Western Slaty Antshrike and Blue Dacnis. Species heard included Cinnamon Woodpecker, Black-throated Trogon, Black Hawk-Eagle, Golden-crowned Spadebill, Slate-coloured Grosbeak and a White-tailed Trogon.



Bi-coloured Antbird © C Siimpson

At the end of the morning we returned to Canopy Tower for lunch and experienced an early afternoon heavy downpour, perfectly timed while we were indoors.

Around 3pm we headed off to the **Ammo Dump Ponds**, a 15 minute drive from Canopy Tower over the rickety Chagres River bridge. It's rather an industrialised-sounding name for a lovely little wetland oasis, which on this afternoon, proved to be a magnet for new species. The bird of the afternoon for some of us was an adult **Rufescent Tiger-Heron** with a chick on the nest, while a Northern Waterthrush potted about the waters' edge nearby. Scanning across the marshy vegetation we spotted a **Tricoloured Heron** and a **Black-bellied Whistling-Duck**; a distant **White-throated Crake** could be heard, which a little later on we saw very well from the other side of the marsh. We saw Great and Lesser Kiskadees – two of several similar looking species of Flycatcher with striped head patterns, brown upperparts and various shades of lemon underparts.



Rufescent Tiger-Heron © M O'Dell

In the roadside trees and close shrubbery we watched a female **Black-throated Mango** and three more of those stripy headed brown and lemon flycatchers – Social, Boat-billed and Rusty-margined Flycatchers and a streaky Piratic Flycatcher checking for a suitable nest. Flying overhead we had approximately 35 migrating Mississippi Kites and one Short-tailed Hawk.

After two Brown Pelicans graced the skies we watched three birds of prey – a Grey Hawk, a Bat Falcon and a much more familiar Peregrine. We had our second species of Sloth – a Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth – but this time the views were very distant.

More new species appeared: Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Golden-fronted and Scrub Greenlets, Buff-throated Saltator and the wide-spread Pale-vented Pigeon. Southern Rough-winged and Mangrove Swallows flew by and we had good views of a Squirrel Cuckoo. Back in the roadside trees we had a stunning Red-legged Honeycreeper, Yellow-rumped Cacique and a little further away were two Greater Ani, a Black-striped Sparrow and two Eastern Kingbirds. We were then distracted by memorable views of a huge **Ringed Kingfisher**, a splendid **Fork-tailed Flycatcher** and a distant Chestnut-mandibled Toucan.

After a good two to three hours we returned to Canopy Tower extremely satisfied with our day birding, adding a Yellow-headed Caracara and two Central American Agouti on the way back.

Other species seen that afternoon: more good views of Red-crowned Woodpecker which we saw almost every day. Also Tropical Kingbird (or TK as the guides refer to them), White-tipped Dove, Grey-breasted Martin, Panama Flycatcher, Crimson-backed Tanager, Clay-coloured Thrush, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Blue-grey Tanager, Magnificent Frigatebird, Osprey and Variable Seedeater.

Additional species heard: Cocoa Woodcreeper, Buff-breasted Wren, Streaked Saltator and Wattled Jacana.

Wed 23rd March: Morning visit to the entrance to Pipeline Road, afternoon in Summit Gardens and evening night-drive along Semaphore Hill Road

Mantled Howler monkeys and a Great Tinamou proved to be the perfect alarm clock! We watched Mealy Parrot from the dining area windows over breakfast (06.00 hrs) and were all ready to leave at 06.45 hrs for some birding at the **entrance to Pipeline Road**. Carlos was our guide for the day.

The entrance to Pipeline road was a short drive away, about 20 minutes (past the Ammo Dump ponds). Just beyond these ponds Carlos suggested we check an area of fruiting trees in strips of forest dissected by wide grassland rides which held navigational aids for tankers and ships turning in the Panama Canal.

New birds were immediate – we saw Black-bellied Wren (heard the previous day) and Plain Wren as well as hearing Buff-breasted – we heard it for several days before seeing a couple. Other new species for the holiday included two **Black-cheeked Woodpeckers**, Plain-coloured Tanager and three very gaudy **Purple-throated Fruitcrows**, our first of two species of Cotinga to look for. Then for some more Trogons; a male **Violaceous** and both male and female **Black-throated Trogon**. Tropical Pewee also put in an appearance.



An interesting insect posing for a photo © M O'Dell

During the whole trip we saw several interesting insects. This one was easy to see! Our group used the fabulous Leica Apo-Televid 65 for some digiscoping, with some excellent results.

It was good to see Grey-headed Chachalaca – a species we would see many times – even visiting a fruit feeder in a garden! Little Tinamou was a lot more tricky – we heard it this morning.

We drove on closer to the very start of Pipeline Road and followed Carlos along a narrow forest path where we had great views of a pair of **Song Wrens**, shortly followed by three very cute **Western Night Monkeys** and two fabulous **Golden-collared Manakins**. This track really turned up some stunning species. Back to Pipeline Road itself and more new species for the holiday followed: Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Yellow Tyrannulet and White-winged Becard. There were a couple of new birds which were heard only: Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant (which we believe shares the title of the smallest passerine in the world with Short-tailed Pygmy Tyrant, though we might be wrong) and Black-tailed Flycatcher.



Western Night Monkeys © C Simpson

After seeing another Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth it was time to head back to Canopy Tower for lunch around 12 noon. On the return journey we had a Capybara.

It turned out we experienced three record breaking species this day. We heard the smallest passerine in the world, a Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant; saw the fastest flying bird in the world, a Peregrine Falcon; and the largest rodent in the world, a Capybara. Not bad for a mornings work!

Additional species heard: Blue-crowned (Whooping) Motmot, Slaty-tailed Trogon, Brown-capped Tyrannulet, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Great Tinamou and regular calls from Mantled Howlers echoing across the forest.

Species seen on previous days included: Spotted Antbird (a female), Yellow-headed Caracara, Crimson-backed Tanager, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Osprey, Mangrove Swallow, Short-tailed Swift, Clay-coloured Thrush, Squirrel Cuckoo, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Yellow-rumped Cacique, Buff-throated Saltator, Summer Tanager, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Great and Lesser Kiskadees, Eastern and Tropical Kingbirds, Palm and White-shouldered Tanagers, Blue Dacnis, Streaked Saltator, Pale-vented Pigeon, Swainson's and Broad-winged Hawks, Peregrine, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Great Crested Flycatcher, Bay-breasted Warbler and Bright-rumped Attila.

After lunch we watched a Swainson's Hawk and a Lineated Woodpecker before leaving at 15.00 to explore the grounds of **Summit Gardens** and the **Harpy Eagle Exhibit** (10 minutes from Canopy Tower). Summit Gardens or Nature Park is a small botanical garden and zoo located close to the southern end of Soberania National Park.

Additions this afternoon included our first Cinnamon Woodpecker, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet, Paltry Tyrannulet and two very attractive Black-chested Jays.

We took the opportunity to visit the Harpy Eagle exhibition, in celebration of Panama's national bird. One captive Harpy Eagle resides here with a missing talon. Previously released captive-bred birds can occasionally be seen around the Canal Zone, but most of Panama's 300 or so nesting pairs are found to the east in the Darien region.

Panama couldn't have chosen a more impressive species as its national bird. In Costa Rica their national bird is the Clay-coloured Thrush; quite strange really, considering the 'bran' colouring of Clay-coloured Thrush compared to say, the Resplendent Quetzal!

A further walk around Summit Gardens accrued a Giant Cowbird, a species which, like our Cuckoo, lays its eggs in other birds' nests (usually Caciques or Oropendulas), but unlike the Cuckoo the hosts eggs are not destroyed. We admired a male and female Black-tailed Trogon and repeat sightings of Thick-billed Euphonia, Blue-headed Parrot and Short-tailed Swift.

Other species seen previously included: Plain-coloured Tanager, Blue-grey Tanager, Social Flycatcher, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Tropical Kingbird, House Wren, Shiny Cowbird, Clay-coloured Thrush, Rusty-margined Flycatcher, Piratic Flycatcher, Violet-bellied Hummingbird and Orange-chinned Parrot.

In the evening Alexis took us for a night drive along Semaphore Hill Road. He was incredibly good at spotting things in the beam of the high-powered torch. The experience lasted I guess about 1-1½ hours and we were not to be disappointed. Whilst we didn't see any Owls or Nightjars which we were all hoping for, we did see the very tiny **Central American Woolly Opossum** feeding in a late-flowering Balsa tree. Apparently the flowering Balsa is good for attracting mammals. However, the mammal which stole the show had to be the arboreal **Rothschild's Porcupine**, considered to be endemic to Panama. For anyone not appreciating that some Porcupines climb trees and are comfortable doing so with their prehensile tails, this is rather a peculiar sight! Views couldn't have been better as it perched on a branch right above the road! This was a lucky encounter and as you can imagine we were all very happy and satisfied with our night out.



Rothschild's Porcupine © M O'Dell

Thurs 24th March: Morning boat trip on Lake Gatun and afternoon exploring the grounds of Gamboa Rainforest Resort

Breakfast today was at 06.30 hrs and by 07.30 we were boarding the small boat for a trip on the **Chagres River and Lake Gatun** with Alexis as our guide. One of the first birds we saw was a Ringed Kingfisher, then close-up views of a very obliging Wattled Jacana. Whilst watching the Jacana Alexis heard a male **Lance-tailed Manakin**. We managed to get glimpses of it several times. A little later three Collared Aracari were a welcome sight along with a Snail Kite. Spotted Sandpiper, Northern Waterthrush, three Green Herons and several Purple Gallinules fed around the lake margin. Further out were American Coot and we enjoyed good views of Royal Tern. Our boat trip took us to some of the more sheltered creeks as well as directly into the main shipping channel of the Panama Canal. Here you could appreciate even more the immense size of some of the container ships.

On crossing the main shipping channel we headed back in to the sheltered creeks of Lake Gatun with forested edges. Here we experienced one or two extra special moments. It was fun to watch a family of about **12 White-nosed Coatis** showing excellent agility as they chased each other along the branches of a tree; quite different behavior from the single male we'd seen, previously on the ground. We had close up views of a Great Blue Heron and shortly after a wonderful sight of approximately **500+ Black-bellied Whistling Ducks** accompanied by 12+ Blue-winged Teal relaxing in a sheltered bay along with Common Slider



Sheltered creeks of Lake Gatun © M O'Dell

Turtles, two Southern Lapwing and a Little Blue Heron nearby.

Alexis picked up the calls of White-bellied Antbird, Western Slaty-Antshrike and a Red-capped Manakin, the latter of which we saw very well. Sadly for us, it was a rather dull immature female and whilst we were still grateful of the views it left us wanting to see the rather splendid male. Thankfully for us we didn't have to wait for long – we had views of two stunning males on one of the small islands where we disembarked for a loo stop and to stretch our legs. On this same small island we encountered a Green Iguana and had a wonderful time watching Trogons, estimating **at least five Slaty-tailed and one male Black-tailed Trogon**. This really was Trogon heaven as we had so many fabulous views.



Slaty-tailed Trogon ♂ © M O'Dell

Our boat also pulled up by the edge of another wooded island where we had close encounters with at least six **White-faced Capuchin monkeys**. Several of them were tame enough to board the front of the boat to grab a banana.



White-faced Capuchins © M O'Dell

Species seen on previous days included: Greater Ani, Lesser Kiskadee, Blue-headed Parrot, Tropical Kingbird, Panama Flycatcher, White-tipped Dove, Black-tailed Flycatcher, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Yellow-rumped Cacique, Great-tailed Grackle, Mangrove Swallow, Anhinga, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Social Flycatcher, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Yellow-headed Caracara, Brown Pelican and we heard a Buff-breasted Wren.

We arrived back at Canopy Tower at 12.45 hrs just in time for lunch.

At 15.15 hrs our afternoon adventure began in the grounds of **Gamboa Rainforest Resort**, a short drive down the road from Canopy Tower. We parked near the Orchid nursery and walked along the road.

In scrub habitat down the side of the Orchid Nursery the bright pink breast of a beautiful male Rosy Thrush-Tanager showed through dense undergrowth. Despite the tangle we had excellent views of this stunning bird and another Dusky Antbird. At least 50 Swainson's Hawks migrated overhead. Both Blue-crowned (Whooping) Motmot and Southern Beardless Tyrannulet showed themselves (previously heard only). We also saw four Smooth-billed Anis, a Red-throated Ant-Tanager and a Yellow-bellied Seedeater for the first time along with three Tennessee Warblers, five Yellow-tailed Orioles and the first of what would be quite a few sightings of the characterful **Chestnut-headed Oropendula**. Close-up views of a Violaceous and two Slaty-tailed Trogons added to our pleasure. We really were spoilt for Trogons on this trip and it was hard to believe how many we saw and how close the views were. Two good ant-following species were male and female **White-bellied Antbird** and, perhaps the bird of the day, a male

Great Antshrike – the only time we saw these two species on the trip. Another bird not to feature again was a Black-headed Saltator. We returned to Canopy Tower at 18.30 hrs.

Species seen on previous days included: Keel-billed Toucan, Common Tody-flycatcher (nesting), Clay-coloured Thrush, Blue-grey Tanager, Flame-rumped (Lemon-rumped) Tanager, Buff-throated Saltator, Variable Seedeater, Green Honeycreeper, Thick-billed Euphonia, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Golden-fronted Greenlet, Pale-vented Pigeon, Short-tailed Swift, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, Social Flycatcher, Chestnut-sided and Golden-winged Warblers.

Additional species heard: Black-bellied Wren

Fri 25th March: All day along Pipeline Road (with packed lunch)

Breakfast was at 06.00 hrs and we left promptly at 06.30 hrs for the 25 minute drive to Pipeline Road with Alexis as our guide.

The breeding pair of Scarlet-rumped Caciques and four White-shouldered Tanagers were there in the compound to see us off and we had good views of the very vocal, but always difficult to see Green Shrike-Vireo.

On the journey we had two Southern Lapwings and while waiting to cross the rickety bridge over the Chagres River we had the regular Fork-tailed Flycatcher. We didn't realise they were nesting in a void in a telegraph pole until we saw two chicks. The Mantled Howlers were exceptionally vocal as we drove closer to Pipeline Road – sounding like the calls of a pack of hounds on a windy day. We came across a few of the Howlers, three White-faced Capuchin Monkeys and a Central American Agouti on the journey.

Our Pipeline Road adventure started with hearing Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Dusky Antbird, Western Slaty-Antshrike and Red-lored Parrot. Our first new sighting was a Moustached (Pygmy) Antwren (our only record for the trip) and the first of four Dot-winged Antwrens. We heard our first Yellow-margined Flycatcher. A Semiplumbeous Hawk sat high in a tree above Pipeline Road as we walked underneath. We left it still sitting there. Three **male Red-capped Manakins** performed exceptionally well and we saw our first Yellow-crowned Euphonia, Violet-crowned Woodnymph, Ruddy-tailed and Sulphur-rumped



Semiplumbeous Hawk © M O'Dell

Flycatchers, Plain-brown Woodcreeper (six in total) and then two lovely Great Jacamars and an Acadian Flycatcher. And another Manakin to add to our list – Blue-crowned, along with four White-flanked Antwren, two White-breasted Wood-Wren and four Northern Barred-Woodcreeper, one Black-striped Woodcreeper and another Trogon for the trip – a White-tailed. One bird which we all wanted to see was an **Ocellated Antbird** and two were seen in deep undergrowth by most of the group. After hearing

a Checker-throated Antwren a few days earlier, we had good views of two. Then for a species with a memorable name - Southern Bentbill (Flycatcher) - also Speckled Mourner and Slate-coloured Grosbeak.

We witnessed a female Spotted Antbird nest-building, saw a male too, and you couldn't miss the highly colourful Scarlet Tanager. We couldn't spot the Pied Puffbird which was calling a bit too deep in the forest. On the contrary, a White-whiskered Puffbird sat there long enough for photos and camcorder footage. We had around 12 Bi-coloured Antbirds in total this morning and our first Thrush-Like Schiffornis, a Yellow-bellied Seedeater and another Purple-throated Fruitcrow.

An impressive orb-web spider was one of only a few impressive spiders, most of which you would have walked past had it not been for Mick and Caroline looking purposefully for them to take photographs.

Birds seen on previous days: Squirrel Cuckoo, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Rufous Motmot, Green Honeycreeper, Bay-breasted Warbler, Violet-bellied Hummingbird, Blue-chested Hummingbird, Summer Tanager, Great Crested Flycatcher, Black-breasted Puffbird, Thick-billed Euphonia, Great Tinamou and Southern Rough-winged Swallow. And more Trogons – another male Violaceous.

Additional species heard: Plain Xenops, Lesser Greenlet, Cinnamon Woodpecker, Forest Elaenia, Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, Long-billed Gnatwren, Golden-collared Manakin, Brown-hooded Parrot, Black-tailed Trogon

Sat 26th March: Morning at Canopy Tower Observation Deck, Summit Ponds/Old Gamboa Road and afternoon visit to Carmen's feeders and the Chagres River/marina area, North Gamboa

With Alexis as our guide in the morning our day started on the observation deck at 06.30 hrs and after breakfast we left for Summit Ponds and Old Gamboa Road, just 10 minutes from Canopy Tower.

At the start of our day on the observation deck we heard Collared Forest Falcon and saw Red-lored Parrot and Scaled Pigeon.

Species previously seen included: Chestnut-sided Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Blue Dacnis, Golden-hooded Tanager and Palm Tanager, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Violet-bellied and Blue-chested Hummingbirds, Yellow-rumped Cacique, White-necked Jacobin, Barn Swallow, Green Honeycreeper, Plain-coloured and White-shouldered Tanagers, Lesser Greenlet, three Collared Aracari, one Keel-billed Toucan, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers.

Then it was on to **Summit Ponds** and the **Old Gamboa Road**. Stepping out of the minibus we immediately spotted an Eastern Kingbird and it wasn't long before we saw a new bird for the holiday – a Yellow-green Vireo, followed by a Snowy-bellied Hummingbird and four Indigo Buntings. A Grey Hawk showed well and two Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Then another new one – a single Greenish Elaenia, followed by a Swainson's Thrush and then a previously seen Yellow-bellied Elaenia. Another Variegated Squirrel was a distraction before adding another Kingfisher to our trip list, a Green Kingfisher, dwarfed

by the much larger Ringed Kingfisher which also graced the scene. A Boat-billed Heron on the nest was a first - later we spotted a few more hidden in leafy trees overhanging the water's edge. Then, at the far side of the ponds a **Grey-necked Wood-Rail** put in an appearance. Close-up we had a female American Redstart as well as two Rufous and White Wrens; a Common Black-Hawk called, but we couldn't see it. The next two species were definitely ones that you would not see without an expert guide who knows where to search for them – a **Rufous Nightjar** sat tight with two small chicks and we gazed into the eyes of a fabulous **Spectacled Owl** at its roost while a little later a Grey-headed Kite flew over.



Rufous Nightjar with two chicks © M O'Dell

Species seen previously included: A single Swainson's Hawk, 12+ Broad-winged Hawk, Magnificent Frigatebird, Short-tailed Swift, Pale-vented Pigeon, Clay-coloured Thrush, Variable Seedeater, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Great Crested, Boat-billed and Panama Flycatchers, Blue-grey and Crimson-backed Tanagers, Grey-breasted Martin, Rusty-margined Flycatcher, Tropical Kingbird, Red-crowned Woodpecker, about four Orange-chinned Parrots, a female Blue-black Grosbeak and female Red-throated Ant-Tanager, one Long-billed Gnatwren and a single Black-faced Antthrush, two Dot-winged Antwrens and a Piratic Flycatcher.

Additional species heard: Lance-tailed Manakin.

After lunch we visited **Carmen's feeders** with Domi before heading to Chagres River and North Gamboa area near the Marina.

We didn't see any new species in Carmen's garden, but there was another Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift and very close views of two Central American Agoutis.

Other species seen previously included: White-rumped Swift, Clay-coloured Thrush, Blue-grey Tanager, Palm Tanager, Rufous Ground-Dove, Barn Swallow, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Thick-billed Euphonia, Blue-crowned Motmot and Grey-headed Chachalaca visiting the fruit feeder!

Onto the **Chagres River and Marina, North Gamboa** where birding was rather slow but pleasant enough. Here we heard a Streak-headed Woodcreeper, but didn't see it. On the reptile front we had a lovely Green Iguana.

Species seen previously included: Wattled Jacana, Royal Tern, Tropical Kingbird, Mangrove Swallow, Common Moorhen, Social Flycatcher, Great-tailed Grackle, Pale-vented Pigeon, Great Kiskadee, Streaked Flycatcher, Piratic Flycatcher, Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, Yellow Warbler, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Blue-grey Tanager, House Wren, Thick-billed Euphonia, Yellow-headed Caracara, Keel-billed Toucan, Green Heron and Rusty-margined Flycatcher.

If you do the boat trip on the Lake Gatun, and depending on what you've seen already, it might be worth missing out the feeders and Marina to revisit a more productive habitat – say the Ammo Dump Ponds or to spend more time along the Pipeline Road.

Sun 27th March: Morning visit to the Rainforest Discovery Centre and afternoon visit to Miraflores Locks and Visitor Centre with a fleeting stop at the Amo Dump ponds.

Early start with breakfast at 05.30 hrs with Domi as our guide so we could visit the observation tower accessed via the **Rainforest Discovery Centre** forest trail network. It is good to be there nice and early before it gets busy. We left at 06.00 hrs for the short drive, seeing one new species on the way – a Ruddy-breasted Seedeater. The journey also revealed Collared Aracari, Great-tailed Grackle, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Pale-vented Pigeon, Rufous Tiger-Heron and White-tipped Dove.

The Rainforest Discovery Centre is well worth a visit, with its network of nature trails and, you've guessed it, a small centre with toilets, many hummingbird feeders and a tiny shop selling useful information, t-shirts and souvenirs. First we headed off along the trails in the direction of the observation tower. Culminating at a height of 32 meters it's an impressive structure which offers commanding views across the rainforest canopy. Birdwatching proved surprisingly slow, but patience paid off with Blue Cotingas and great views of its relative, the Purple-throated Fruitcrow, as well as the elusive Green Shrike-Vireo and the more accommodating Blue Dacnis – all are species you can never tire of seeing. We saw another Semiplumbeous Hawk and White-winged Becard. Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher was a new species for our list. On our way down from the tower we had prolonged views of another White-whiskered Puffbird and more new species followed: a Southern Bentbill, a **Brownish Twistwing** and a **Common Pauraque on a nest with two eggs**.

The trail we followed culminates at a view point on the edge of Lake Calamito. Here we had our first sighting of two Pied-billed Grebes as well as Wattled Jacana which we had seen before. An American Crocodile patrolled the lake centre. The trails were a pleasure to walk, hearing then seeing Western Slaty-Antshrike at the nest as well as another Spotted Antbird. After a successful morning we returned to Canopy Tower for lunch.

Additional species heard: Brown-capped Tyrannulet.

Species seen previously included: Eastern Kingbird, Red-lored Parrot, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and distant but good views of a Cinnamon Woodpecker in the scope. Also Blue-headed Parrot and a distant male Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth, Bright-rumped Attila, Blue-chested and Violet-bellied Hummingbirds, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, four Dot-winged Antwrens, two Checker-throated Antwrens, two Dusky Antbirds, two Barred Antshrikes, our second Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, Black-throated Trogon, Common Moorhen, Tropical Kingbird, Black Vulture, Greater Ani and Plain Xenops.

Additional species heard: Cocoa Woodcreeper and Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet.

In the afternoon we left Canopy Tower at 14.00 hrs to visit **Miraflores Locks and Visitor Centre**.

If you are interested in the history of the Panama Canal, then you should allow plenty of time to read the displays located on several floors ending at the top level (open to the elements so you need a sun hat and cream) where you can view the locks themselves. A running commentary takes you through the locks' vital statistics – for example the annual maintenance budget for the Panama Canal is approximately \$250 million and the Panama Canal is one of the only places in the world where a captain has to hand over the command of his ship to one of the ship lock pilots who are trained for a



Miraflores Locks © M O'Dell

minimum of 10 years. The lock chambers are 1000m long x 110m wide and worst case scenario, there is a gap of only 24" (2') between a huge tanker and the lock sides! The locks deal with a significant difference in the sea levels of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Larger vessels take about 12 hours to navigate through the Panama Canal. An average of 39 vessels a day transit through, with an average charge, if remembered correctly, of \$104,000 and the highest toll of around \$240,000 per vessel.

The French started construction in 1888 and after 10 years they were overcome by the enormity of the task. Work recommenced again with 75,000 employed from 1904–1914, with many workers (over 20,000) coming from the island of Barbados. The Canal was, for 85 years, under the administration of the USA and in 1999 Panama recovered sovereignty.

In April 2006 came a decision to expand the canal by including a set of extra locks. These new locks will carry larger vessels which will be pulled by tugs instead of the current system which uses two locomotives on tracks at each side of the lock chamber.

Everyone found the visit fascinating and well worth an additional £8 entrance fee to the museum, which included a short audio visual presentation. It is free to view the locks themselves. Including the short journey to get there, our excursion lasted about 2 ¾ hrs.

Birds seen near Miraflores Locks that afternoon included: Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Sandwich Tern, Laughing Gull, Great Blue Heron, Brown Pelican, Magnificent Frigatebird, Royal Tern, Great-tailed Grackle and Tropical Kingbird.

A fleeting visit to the **Ammo Dump Ponds** added a Buff-breasted Wren to our 'seen' list (previously heard on several occasions) and a few species seen before: Yellow-headed Caracara, Black-throated Mango, Boat-billed and Rusty-margined Flycatchers, Buff-throated Saltator, Lesser Kiskadee, Yellow-bellied Seedeater and a Green Iguana before heading back for our final night's stay at Canopy Tower. Our final treat for the day was a **Nine-banded Armadillo** snuffling in leaf-litter by Semaphore Hill Road.

Mon 28th March: Early morning at Plantation Trail (from about 06. 50 hrs till about 09.10 hrs), then afternoon exploring the environs around Canopy Lodge, El Valle, the Highlands. Our final morning at Canopy Tower was spent revisiting Plantation Trail with Domi. We added a few new species to the wonderful calls of many Mantled Howlers. We wanted to see a Flatbill, and an **Olivaceous Flatbill** performed very well for us and was the only one of the trip. Added to that, we saw a Golden-crowned Spadebill too, our first Chestnut-backed Antbird and we caught up with Brown-capped Tyrannulet (previously heard). Another male **Blue-crowned Manakin** showed well. Then it was back to Canopy Tower to collect our luggage and board our minibus for Canopy Lodge. While waiting, Robin watched Double-toothed Kite.

Species seen before included: Dusky Antbird, Black-bellied Wren (only seen twice on the trip), Red-lored Parrot, Rufous Motmot and Dot-winged Antwren.

Additional species heard: Long-billed Gnatwren, Lesser Greenlet, Yellow-margined Flycatcher, Cocoa Woodcreeper and Black-throated Trogon.

We waved goodbye to the staff and guides at Canopy Tower after a truly amazing seven nights in this unique and comfortable lodge – well, tower! Probably the same Nine-banded Armadillo we spotted the day before was again snuffling in the leaf-litter on the side of Semaphore Hill road – a lovely parting sighting for sure.

The drive to Canopy Lodge was a pleasant one, taking less than two hours. We crossed the Panama Canal via the Centennial Bridge, opened in 2004 to supplement the overcrowded Bridge of the Americas. At least half the journey was on major roads through flat countryside, occasionally passing some new and modern housing estates of very small and compact single storey properties and the odd larger town, like La Chorrera on the way. Then as we reached the Highlands the roads started to narrow and wind through smaller settlements and villages. As we gained altitude, the scenery became more spectacular – not dissimilar to parts of the Lake District or Scotland.

We reached the cooler environs of El Valle at around 12 noon. Located at a higher altitude El Valle sits in the crater of a long extinct volcano that erupted millions of years ago. The walls of the crater are now picturesque mountains that surround the small village. Canopy Lodge is a modern and purpose-built lodge in beautifully-tended grounds. The rooms in the main part of the building are very spacious and our twin room had two queen-sized beds, a new fitted wardrobe each and a good sized bathroom with walk-in shower. Each of the rooms in the new block has a balcony with seats. In the grounds beyond are some small cottages. The communal area and dining area are combined under the cover of a massive verandah, with two areas of large parallel sofas and a line of canvas director chairs overlooking four large bird feeding tables. Nestled by a small brook,



Twin room at Canopy Lodge © J Thomas

you constantly hear the sound of running water – very relaxing. In between excursions you can explore the grounds, where sometimes it is possible to see the stunning Rufous-crested Coquette.

Afternoon exploring the Canopy Lodge area

We settled in immediately and watched the bird feeders for a while before lunch. These were visited by some charismatic and colourful species: Red-legged Honeycreeper, the impressive and very vocal Chestnut-headed Oropendula, Bananaquit, Streaked and Buff-throated Saltators, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Flame-rumped (Lemon-rumped) Tanager, Palm, Blue-grey, White-lined and Crimson-backed Tanagers. Tennessee Warbler was also a regular bird table visitor with Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds flitted around. The other star visitor to the area underneath the feeders was a Uniform Crake, a rare visitor which we saw, along with everything else, on the first afternoon!



Red-legged Honeycreeper © C Simpson

After a wonderful lunch we added a few more species in the grounds – the very common Red-crowned Woodpecker put in an appearance, Panama Flycatcher, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, **Rufous-crested Coquette** and we heard a Fasciated Antshrike. Then it was off up the road to explore with Tino as our guide. Our walk added several new species: Garden Emerald, Bay Wren (previously only heard the once), two Rufous-breasted Wrens, a stunning Bay-headed Tanager, a single migrant Mourning Warbler, Rufous-capped Warbler, our first Red-crowned Ant-Tanager (a female) and Dusky-faced Tanager. Other migrant warblers included our first Canada Warbler and Chestnut-sided Warbler (previously seen around Canopy Tower). As well as being an expert of birds and being able to imitate the calls of many species, it was clear that Tino knew a lot about butterflies too. With a flood of new bird species to contend with, it was rather difficult to take in the identification of butterflies as well, but good to know some of their names and something to focus on for another trip!

Our first afternoon in the Highlands was a very enjoyable one and we looked forward to what lay ahead over the next few days. The other eventful thing that happened that evening was a rather large Katydid crash-land by my ear. It quickly took off again and landed near the bookcase - definitely something best appreciated on a static surface!

Species seen previously included: Scrub Greenlet, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Golden-hooded and White-shouldered Tanagers, Black-chested Jay, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Black-faced Antthrush, Blue-headed Parrot, Keel-billed Toucan and Scaled Pigeon. We heard a Golden-collared Manakin (but didn't see it here) and the widespread Coca Woodcreeper is in the Highlands too!

Additional species heard: Striped Cuckoo (uncommon), Orange-billed Sparrow and our last Brown-hooded Parakeet of the trip.

Tues 29th March: Morning at Las Minas Trail, just a short drive up the hill from Canopy Lodge and afternoon at Cara Iguana (from 3 – 6pm).

As it was cooler up here, breakfast was at 06.30 hrs. Birds around the lodge this morning included Bay Wren, House Wren, Thick-billed Euphonia, Buff-throated Saltator, Blue-black Grosbeak (heard) and Southern Rough-winged Swallow.

We were ready to leave around 07.00 hrs with Tino as our guide and before we knew it we had arrived at **Las Minas Trail** and quickly started to add species: Another Bay-headed Tanager, then two firsts for the trip - a female Hepatic Tanager and a Green Hermit. A Spotted Woodcreeper was also new (and a refreshing change from Cocoa). Our excitement levels rose even further as we listened to Chestnut-crowned Antpitta calling, but this elusive bird gradually

moved further into the undergrowth, not wishing to show itself. Another new Hummingbird – Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, then a new Tanager – the beautiful Silver-throated and Common Bush-Tanager were also firsts for us. The flurry of new species continued: Yellow-throated Vireo, Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch, a lovely Eastern Meadowlark and a very impressive **Blue-throated (Emerald) Toucanet** calling away. More new ones followed: Thick-billed (Lesser) Seed-Finch, Pale-vented Thrush and the sadly named Bran-coloured Flycatcher were on the more drab side with a **Tawny-capped Euphonia** and at least six dapper **Tawny-crested Tanagers** brightening the scene. The latter was one of my favourite birds of the day, but it proved pretty much impossible to get a photo of one, as they were constantly on the move. Great birding continued with a Spotted Barbtail (uncommon here), Tufted Flycatcher and four impressive **Swallow-tailed Kites** – another highlight for me. I missed a Barred Hawk and in the distance we heard a Grey-breasted Wood-Wren. What an amazing morning it had been in lovely landscape with excellent company.



Views from Las Minas Trail, near El Valle © C Simpson

Species seen previously included: Flame-rumped (Lemon-rumped) Tanager, Scaled Pigeon, Yellow-headed Caracara, Tropical Kingbird, Streaked Saltator, Black-faced Antthrush, Shiny Cowbird, Clay-coloured Thrush, Rufous-capped Warbler, Bananaquit, Black-striped Sparrow, Variable Seedeater, House Wren, Lineated Woodpecker, Black Vulture and Broad-winged Hawk.

Additional species heard: White-breasted Wood-Wren, Chestnut-backed Antbird, White-tipped Sicklebill and Bright-rumped Attila.

We returned to Canopy Lodge for lunch and a few hours of rest and relaxation with time to enjoy the grounds.

At 15.00 we left for **Cara Iguana**, a quiet road in an affluent area on the edge of El Valle. We spent a fruitful 2½ hours birding here where finding things seemed easier in more open habitat, part of which formed peoples' extensive gardens. We saw Yellow-crowned Euphonia (for the second time on the trip) and could compare Lesser Elaenia (a new one for us), with Yellow-bellied, which we had seen a few

times before. Whilst we had seen **Barred Antshrike** many times, but here we watched a male and female displaying to one another. Then a few more species new for the trip followed: memorable views of two **Tropical Screech-Owl** (heard and seen later outside our rooms back at Canopy Lodge) and a **Tody Motmot** from the grounds of a private house) where we also saw **Rufous** and **White and Rufous-breasted Wrens** very well. Our only Blue and White Swallows were seen here and we caught up with Yellow-margined Flycatcher (a species only heard before). We returned to Canopy Lodge very pleased with our day.

Species seen previously included: Blue-headed Parrot, Grey-breasted Martin, Tropical Kingbird, Orange-chinned Parakeet, House Wren, Plain-coloured Tanager, Streaked Saltator, Piratic Flycatcher, Blue-crowned Motmot, Tennessee Warbler, Panama Flycatcher, Dusky-capped Flycatcher and the call of a Lance-tailed Manakin gave away its presence.

Wed 30th March: La Mesa in the morning and Watercress Trail in the afternoon with Tino

Initially we struggled in thick low mist which lingered into at least 1½ hrs of birding time. At one point you could hardly see people walking slightly ahead! This photo of **Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth** shows how bad it was! A little later the mist cleared and we managed to see a Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth and a Red-tailed Squirrel, followed by two Blue-throated (Emerald) Toucanets and our first male **Red-crowned Ant-Tanager** and later a female too. Chestnut-capped Brush-Finches were very vocal for three days but never showed themselves. On this morning we saw our only Dull-mantled Antbird of the holiday along with our first two Slaty Antwrens, a Tawny-faced Gnatwren, an Olive-striped Flycatcher, two Spot-crowned Antvireo, three Plain Antvireo, a vividly coloured pair of Scarlet-thighed Dacnis and our sixth and final species of Trogon for the trip – an **Orange-bellied**. We had now seen all the Trogon species likely to be encountered in the areas we had visited. We also saw another male **Rosy Thrush-Tanager** and many other great species we'd seen the day before or earlier on in the holiday before returning to Canopy Lodge for lunch and a short time around the grounds.



Hoffmann's Toe-toed Sloth © J Thomas

Species seen previously included: Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, Rufous Motmot, Thick-billed Euphonia, Clay-coloured Thrush, Tennessee Warbler, Dusky-faced Tanager, House Wren, Tawny-crested Tanager, Baltimore Oriole, Silver-throated Tanager, Lesser Elaenia, Chestnut-headed Oropendula, another single Tawny-capped Euphonia; Rufous-capped, Golden-winged and Chestnut-sided Warblers, Bright-rumped Attila, Yellow-throated Vireo, Rufous-breasted Wren, Plain-coloured Tanager, Black-tailed Flycatcher, Spotted Woodcreeper, Pale-vented Thrush, Plain Wren, Lesser Elaenia, Keel-billed Toucan, Swainson's Thrush, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Tennessee Warbler, Hepatic Tanager, Chestnut-headed Oropendula, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, Thick-billed Euphonia, Shiny Cowbird, Cattle Egret, Social Flycatcher and Stripe-throated (Little) Hermit (Tino only),

Additional species heard: White-breasted Wood-Wren.

At 3pm we headed out again; this time to the **Watercress Trail**, a short drive out of El Valle. As with several afternoons the birding proved quite slow, though in this excellent looking habitat there is no denying the potential as a great birding destination. Undoubtedly the bird of the afternoon was **Long-tailed Tyrant**, two of them. Seeing another male Black-throated Trogon was a bonus and we heard our only Scaly-breasted Wren and Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush of the holiday. We heard a new species of Hummingbird too – Violet-headed and Tino briefly saw a Grey-chested Dove, which the rest of us didn't manage to get on to in time. We checked for the rare White-thighed Swallow which can be seen here, but it is difficult and on this occasion we were not lucky.

Species seen previously included: Plain-coloured Tanager, Black Vulture, Social Flycatcher, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Great Kiskadee, White-vented Plumeleteer, one male and two female Dusky Antbirds, Rufous-capped Warbler, Flame-rumped (Lemon-rumped) Tanager, Black-striped Sparrow, Squirrel Cuckoo, Keel-billed Toucan, Black-chested Jay, Chestnut-headed Oropendula, Crimson-backed Tanager, Green Heron, Broad-winged Hawk,

Additional species heard: White-breasted Wood-Wren and Bay Wren.

We returned to Canopy Lodge as light was fading. The last bird of the day was a Tropical Screech-Owl heard from our room.

Thurs 31st March: Morning at Cerro Gaital and afternoon visit to Valle Chiquito, both a short drive from Canopy Lodge.

Again breakfast was at 06.30 hrs. In the garden we had views of Summer Tanager by the tables and also Rufous-capped Warbler, Garden Emerald, Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, Flame-rumped, Dusky-faced and Crimson-backed Tanagers, Buff-throated Saltator, and a very obliging couple of Orange-billed Sparrows. We left at 07.15 with Danilo as our guide. On the short drive (which takes you past La Mesa) we had good views of a Green Kingfisher by a small road-side pool, drove past a colony of Chestnut-headed Oropendula nests and saw our third Grey-necked Wood-Rail; this one was right by the roadside. We also had our first views of Violet-headed Hummingbird. It wasn't long into the trail heading for Cerro Gaital that we saw another Orange-bellied Trogon and heard a new species – Black-faced Grosbeak and we managed to see two. Birding along the start of the trail was much easier as it was more open. As we started to climb the steps it proved more difficult to spot things in the closed canopy. A **Thrush-Like Schiffornis** eventually showed itself after we'd listened to it calling for a quite a while. Then we all had good, but fleeting views of a **White-**



Orange-bellied Trogon (bottom) © C Simpson

tipped Sicklebill and more prolonged good views of a **White-throated Spadebill**. One of the star species of the morning was **White-ruffed Manakin** – we had views of two males and a female flitting through lower branches of the trees. The second had to be **Purplish-backed Quail-Dove**, listed as rare in the checklist. Danilo had to work really hard for this one, asking us to wait on the trail while he disappeared into the thicket in the direction of its call. Being honest, we didn't think we stood a chance of seeing it, as we had all patiently scanned from the trail for at least half an hour. 10 out of 10 for perseverance and thanks to the incredibly good eyesight of Danilo, he beckoned us to follow him to where the telescope was set up, and there it was, through the narrowest of gaps in the foliage. One by one we took our turn and we all saw this pretty little dove with a most exquisite face pattern. Two new Hummingbirds for the trip darted in and out – never to be seen again. These were White-tailed Emerald and Green-crowned Brilliant – both uncommon and only Danilo managed to get a good view of them. We looked for, but even Danilo didn't see Black Guan, Ochraceous Wren, Blue Seed eater, Scaled and Black-crowned Antpittas – again all are rare or uncommon and can't be guaranteed. Back at the vehicle we had another two Swallow-tailed Kites and two Broad-winged Hawks before returning to Canopy Lodge for lunch.

Species seen previously included: Thick-billed Euphonia, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Mourning Warbler, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Keel-billed Toucan, Grey-headed Chachalaca, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, House Wren, three Smooth-billed Ani, Pale vented Thrush, Tropical Kingbird, Cattle Egret, Blue-crowned Motmot, Lineated Woodpecker, Rufous-breasted Wren, Violet-crowned Woodnymph, Green Hermit, two Stripe-throated (Little) Hermits, Tawny-crested Tanager, Olive-striped Flycatcher, male and female Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers, Plain Antvireo, Bananaquit, Silver-throated Tanager, Rufous-breasted Wren, a poor view of a Chestnut-backed Antbird, Common Bush-Tanager and Black Vulture.



Blue-crowned Motmot © M O'Dell

Additional species heard: Lesser Greenlet, Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch again but didn't see it. Also heard were White-breasted and Grey-breasted Wood-Wrens, Tawny-faced Gnatwren, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Spot-crowned Antvireo and Barred Hawk.

At 14.30 we left for Valle Chiquito, a 25 minute drive.

One of our first birds was a Bat Falcon, perched high and distant followed quickly by two very obliging Tody Motmots with tails swinging from side to side like a pendulum. In the drain by the side of the road Robin spotted what turned out to be Louisiana Waterthrush, our first for the trip. Yellow-backed Oriole added a splash of colour as we made our way to a large fruiting tree. This tree proved a magnet for Palm and Blue-grey Tanagers, several Swainson's Thrush and one **White-throated Thrush** (uncommon). Further along the road everyone got superb views of Bay-headed Tanager in the scope and perhaps the bird of the afternoon – **Masked Tityra** of which we saw three. Watching a **Little Tinamou** provided us with another special moment and we found a pair of Thick-billed Euphonias nesting in a bank.

Species seen on previous days included: Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Grey-breasted Martin, Garden Emerald, Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, Black-chested Jay, our final view of a Swallow-tailed Kite, Rufous Motmot, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Chestnut-headed Oropendula, Buff-throated Saltator, Plain Wren, Tennessee Warbler, Blue-headed Parrot, Rufous and White Wren, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Squirrel Cuckoo, female American Redstart, Panama Flycatcher, Paltry Tyrannulet and Red-legged Honeycreeper.

Additional species heard: Rufous-breasted Wren, Lance-tailed Manakin which again proved difficult to see and Dusky Antbird,

Fri 1st April: El Chiru, Playa Santa Clara and Juan Hombron by the Pacific Coast for the full day

Breakfast this day was earlier – 05.30 hrs and we left at 06.10 hrs for the 1 hour 15 minutes drive to El Chiru. On the journey Danilo mentioned a few of the species we would be looking for. For the morning these included Crested Bobwhite, Aplomado Falcon, Savanna Hawk, Brown-throated Parakeet, Red-breasted Blackbird, Veraguan Mango (endemic), Sapphire-throated Hummingbird, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and in the afternoon we could expect Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture and Crested Caracara. Yellow-crowned Amazon and Pale-breasted Spinetail were also possible. Which of these would we see?



Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl © C Simpson

Arriving at **El Chiru** we were all keen to get out of the minibus and start looking for some of these species. Our first new species was the uncommon **Rufous-browed Peppershrike** – two of them. Others followed with Groove-billed Ani, at least 6 Red-breasted Blackbirds and the sought-after endemic **Veraguan Mango**, Sapphire-throated Hummingbird, many Brown-throated Parakeets and a Savanna Hawk perched at the top of its nesting tree. We digressed slightly to look at Cashew fruit which looked half like a pepper and half like a pear and then Danilo spotted a Long-billed Starthroat, so it was back to birding. We also watched some more lovely Rose-breasted Grosbeaks – seen numerous times but the adult males are always worth seeing again and again. Then Crested Bobwhite showed along a fence line trying to take advantage of the shade. Blue-Black Grassquit was also new along with Mouse-coloured Tyrannulet and our first Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture. After the brief playing of the tape a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl responded and it wasn't long before we had excellent views.

Species seen previously included: Yellow-crowned Euphonia, Yellow-green Vireo, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Variable Seedeater, Magnificent Frigatebird, Garden Emerald, Barred Antshrike, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Common Tody-Flycatcher, White-tipped Dove, Eastern Meadowlark, Lesser Elaenia, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Scrub Greenlet and Panama Flycatcher.

Additional species heard: Golden-fronted Greenlet.

Before we knew it, late morning was approaching. It was baking hot and the sun was strong, so Danilo took us to relax for a while and have our packed lunch by the Pacific Ocean at **Playa Santa Clara**. Wow – what a lovely spot to have a picnic. On the beach we added a Willet to the list.

Other species at the beach: Magnificent Frigatebird, Brown Pelican, Laughing Gull and Sandwich Tern.

After a prolonged lunch it was a short drive to the area of dry rice paddyfields known as **Juan Hombron**. By this time it was really hot – sweltering – and there was a lot of ground to cover along a very pot-holed dusty track, so our journey was stop-start, get out of the vehicle to scan and see the birds, then jump back in the minibus to take advantage of the aircon. A Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture and several **Crested Caracara** were seen right by the vehicle. From a distance one Crested Caracara strutting by the road-side looked remarkably like a domestic chicken – so was christened the term ‘Chicken Caracara’. Other new species included Glossy Ibis, Straight-billed Woodcreeper, Whimbrel, Brown Booby, two White-tailed Kite and we must have checked over 100 Ruddy-breasted Ground-Doves to be rewarded with two Plain-breasted Ground-Doves on the drive back to the main road.



Crested Caracara © M O'Dell

Species at Juan Hombron seen previously: Peregrine Falcon, Great Egret, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Great-tailed Grackle, Wattled Jacana, Southern Lapwing, Yellow-headed Caracara, Baltimore Oriole, Great Blue Heron and Boat-billed Flycatcher.

Then we drove back to Canopy Lodge after what felt like a very long day – mostly due to the heat and lack of shade in the afternoon.

Sat 2nd April: La Mesa Trail on our last morning with Danilo

Breakfast was at 06.30 today and we left around 07.20 hours to visit La Mesa again. We wanted to try and see Snowcap – an attractive little Hummingbird which is less common and seems to have quite specific feeding preferences.

In the car park at Canopy Lodge we heard a Rufous-breasted Hermit, but it was too quick to identify in the field – we would have to leave this species until next time! We encountered our first Wedge-billed Woodcreeper and lots of lovely species seen before including Tawny-capped Euphonia. In addition we caught up with Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant (heard only once before). Sadly the closest we could get to Snowcap was hearing one. With more time and the temperature warming up we are sure we would have seen this stunning hummer – well worth a journey back to the area some time. As we left the area of flowering shrubs deep within the forest where it is often seen, we heard a White-tipped Sicklebill.

Then Danilo picked out the call of a Spot-crowned Barbet; not so common this close to Canopy Lodge and seen more on the Caribbean slope. Everyone loves Barbets and we wanted to see this one as our finale species. We emerged from the dense forest track on to the more open road still hearing its calls and to our excitement there it was, calling away high up in a tall tree in full view. This was the perfect end to a perfect holiday. This photo isn't the best photo in the world, but such a lovely bird deserves to have its photo included.



Spot-crowned Barbet © J Thomas

Species seen previously included: Chestnut-sided Warbler, two Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, Rufous Motmot, Dusky-faced Tanager, Keel-billed Toucan, Bananaquit, Clay-coloured Thrush, House Wren, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Flame-rumped Tanager, Southern Lapwing, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Variable Seedeater, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, another male Rosy Thrush-Tanager, Tennessee Warbler, Social Flycatcher, Palm Tanager, Spotted Woodcreeper, Stripe-throated (Little) Hermit, two Green Hermit, two Bicoloured Antbird and Black-faced Antthrush.

Additional species heard: Bay Wren, Spot-crowned Antwreio, Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch, Chestnut-backed Antbird and Checker-throated Antwren.

Everyone had a delightful time, thanks to the guides and hospitality of Canopy Tower and Canopy Lodge staff. The birding was superb, with wonderful views of many species and more mammal sightings than we were expecting. So if you are looking for a wonderful wildlife experience with minimal driving, great comfort levels and good food, then do consider Panama as a future holiday destination. Can't wait to go back!

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