



## **Panama Canal and Darien Zone Trip Report March 2025**

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Panama's famed Canal and Darien regions offer opportunities to observe world class biodiversity, and the March edition of trip was no exception! The itinerary took us halfway across the country through many unique habitat zones, and was pleasantly accented by good weather, beautiful scenery, and of course great birding. We managed to document just over 300 bird species throughout the trip, as well as over a dozen mammal species including Howler, Capuchin, and Tamarin Monkeys.

### **Day 1: Roll Call - Arrival in Panamá**

We had our introductory Dinner together in the evening at the Riande Hotel, which was to be our base for the first 2 nights of the trip. A few flights arrived later than others, so not everyone made it in time for our introductory dinner, though the majority were able to sit down together for an inaugural meal. Everyone did manage to make it eventually, and all were in high spirits looking forward to what might be in store for the trip. The one exception was Alexander, who was delayed by a day and would be hot on our heels arriving the following evening.



*Riande Hotel © Daniel Giesbrecht*

## **Day 2: Hummers, Hummers, Hummers - Cerro Azúl**

After filling up on fresh tropical fruit at the hearty breakfast buffet, we were greeted by our wonderful chauffer Misael at the hotel for our 7am departure. Our first full day was to be spent exploring the highlands of Cerro Azúl, a community to the Northeast of Panama City, that also happens to be located within Chagres National Park. Our first notable birds of the day were a relatively cooperative pair of Bay-headed Tanagers, which we found at our brief stop in at the main office. They were a great appetizer and left everyone in anticipation of the birds to come. Our first official stop was up towards the top of the hillside, on a trail that took us along a ridge up to the viewpoint Mirador Vistamares. Not 50 meters up the trail we had a lovely Keel-billed Toucan fly low over the trail and perched just long enough for everyone to get a good peek before it took off again. The hike started out misty, as we were high enough to be within the clouds, but the breeze quickly took care of it and our visibility improved. Due to the wind, the way up to the viewing platform was rather quiet, but it was worth the hike! The clouds parted and we were gifted with a great panorama of the surrounding hills, with the full city skyline below. There were in total around a dozen Swallow-tailed Kites taking full advantage of the breezy morning, and a few of them flew in closer for some good views. On our hike back down, we had better success and saw a cooperative Hepatic Tanager male feeding along the trail, as well as a Slate-colored Grosbeak male that made a brief skulky appearance. Towards the end of the trail a pair of Golden-hooded Tanagers were directly overhead and offered some great viewing opportunities.



*Cerro Azul © Daniel Giesbrecht*



*Cerro Azul © Daniel Giesbrecht*

Back on the bus, with the first small tugs of hunger starting to make themselves known, we headed down to our main event of the morning with our lovely hosts Jerry and Linda, who opened their home to us and welcomed us with their spectacular setup of feeders. Upon entering their backyard, it was truly a feast for the eyes. We were greeted by dozens of hummingbirds, honeycreepers, and tanagers all buzzing about in their colorful splendor. In total we logged 7 species of hummingbirds,

including Snowy-bellied, Bronze-tailed and White-vented Plumeteer, and Crowned Woodnymphs to name a few. A Black-cheeked woodpecker briefly stopped by, as well as a cooperative Rufous Motmot, swinging its tail like a grandfather clock. The Shining and Red-legged Honeycreepers also stole the show, with more than a dozen of them flitting around at any given time. Towards the end of our stay as we were packed up and ready to head out, a cooperative Fulvous-vented Euphonia perched nice and low and allowed for everyone to get good looks, as well as a Variable Seedeater and Yellow-faced Grassquit pecking at seeds on the ground. As we loaded again back onto our bus, there were a few distant Chestnut-headed Oropendolas calling, with their nests above us swinging in the breeze.



*Red-legged Honeycreeper © Daniel Giesbrecht*



*White-necked Jacobin © Daniel Giesbrecht*

Jerry and Linda were gracious enough to lead us to one last birding stop on our way out, where we managed to pick up a few Bay-breasted Warblers, Plain-colored Tanagers and a lovely pair of Blue Dacnis that decided to hang around just long enough to get a look at them. Our final birding stop of the day was at Lago Cerro Azul, which compared to the fleury of activity during at our previous stop felt a lot quieter but still had a few surprises in store for us. The local restaurant on the corner was playing Salsa Music, and as our spirits were quite high from the productive day more than one pair of feet found themselves dancing along as we walked. A bit further ahead we could see a nice sized group of Grey-breasted Martins feeding over the lake, with some Southern Rough-winged Swallows mixed in. A couple of Orange-chinned Parakeets made their rounds flying overhead, and another Keel-billed Toucan was calling high off in the treetops. We found a good mix on Tanagers, including Crimson-backed, Golden-headed, Palm and Blue-grey, and we even managed to find 2 familiar migratory species: a Yellow Warbler and Baltimore Oriole. On the return trip back to the bus a bit more dancing was to be had, and almost as a farewell we found a kettle of several Swallow-tailed and Plumbeous Kites high overhead. This concluded our first day of birding, and we headed back to the Riande Hotel where we recapped our day and completed checklists over dinner. Alexander managed to make it just before the restaurant closed at 10 pm, and thus our group was now complete!

### **Day 3: Dusty Roads - Travel to Tortí**

Rising with the sunlight and the dawn chorus, we gathered for brunch at 6:30am where Alex was able to make his introductions to the group. Having packed up the night previous, we were ready for the first leg of our travels, which by the end of the day was to take us all the way down to the little town of Tortí. Our first stop of the day was along the Camino de Tanara, a relatively unique ecoregion of dry forest and open savanna. As one might expect, it was dry and dusty along the trail, with little respite from the sun above, but along this otherwise unsuspecting roadside we managed to find just over 40 species. We were pleasantly surprised to find a small flock of Brown-throated Parakeets feeding right along the roadside, which is a species that can be very hard to come across sitting still. Other highlights included a good mix of 8 flycatcher species, such as the aptly named

Panama Flycatcher, Great and Lesser Kiskadees, and one of my personal favorites the Fork-tailed Flycatcher. Toward the end of our walk we came across a marshy area, where we found a Purple Gallinule, several Little Blue and Green Herons, and along the water's edge a Pied-water Tyrant was quite cooperative and everyone got great views through the scopes.



*Brown-throated Parakeets © Daniel Giesbrecht*

After heading a bit further up the Pan-American Highway, we took a slight detour up to the hills of El Camino de San Blas. The weather turned a bit breezy, and while we were unable to find our endemic target, the ever elusive Spiny-faced Antshrike, we did have a good number of raptors flying overhead, including Black, Turkey, and the ever-regal King Vulture, as well as a group of 50 or so Swallow-tailed and Plumbeous kites. Along the roadside we were able to find our first Mistletoe Tyrannulet, and an ever feisty Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, in addition to some less than cooperative Tawny-crested Tanagers.



*Road to San Blas © Daniel Giesbrecht*

We stopped for a picnic lunch of sandwiches and fruit by the side of a stream, and were greeted by several vocal Black-crowned Antshrikes, nice views of a Cocoa Woodcreeper, a singing Bay Wren, and several more Tawny-crested Tanagers. Back out of the hills, we found our way back onto the highway and continued to head towards Torti. We made 2 stops along the way, which yielded several Black-tailed Trogons, a couple of Pied-puffbirds perched high overhead, some distant calling Purple-throated Fruitcrows, and a Red-rumped Woodpecker that despite being small and rather far up in the canopy, everyone managed to get their eyes on.



*Black-tailed Trogon along the Pan-American Highway © Daniel Giesbrecht*

After braving a bit more washboard than we had bargained for, we finally arrived to our new HQ in Torti at the lovely Hotel Avicar.

#### **Day 4: Welcome to the Jungle - San Francisco Natural Reserve**

Up at the crack of dawn, we headed out bright and early in the predawn for on our first day of birding in the Darien region. Our destination was the San Francisco Natural Reserve, though on our way our first stop was next to a nice roadside pond, where we had a group of Red-breasted Meadowlarks greet us right as we stepped off the bus. Off on the pond we spotted both a Pied and Least Grebe, with upwards of 70 Cattle Egrets scattered around. On the shore a nice group of roughly 50 Black-bellied Whistling Ducks were lounging about, in addition Neotropical Cormorants, several Wattle Jacanas, and couple of Southern Lapwings. A Crested Caracara made a flyby, and an Orchard Oriole was found hopping around one of the treetops. After our successful first pitstop, we continued along to our main event of the morning, the San Francisco Reserve. Tucked away past a monastery, the pathway to the reserve goes through some open tilled fields and eventually arrives to a reservoir tucked into the start of the forested foothills of the Darien. On our way through past the fields, we came across Yellow Headed Caracaras, a few small groups of Anis both Smooth-billed and Greater, and as a nice surprise heard a Laughing Falcon, which obliged us with a brief but close flyby before disappearing back out of sight. At the start of the tree cover, several Keel-billed Toucans made an appearance in the canopy, and a Zone-tailed Hawk came past lazily overhead. Arriving at the lagoon, we came across a nesting pair of Bright-rumped Atillas in one of the covered picnic tables, with a Ringed Kingfisher calling and flying about behind over the ponds. Further on out in the open, a very cooperative Barred Puffbird was found perched on an open branch basking in the early morning sunlight. Continuing along the path we headed into the forest where the trail started to wind uphill into the heart of the reserve. The first stream we came across was home to, a nice pair of Buff-rumped Warblers, who were singing and hopping around as if putting on a show. Along the trail we managed to see and photograph 3 Trogon species, Black-tailed, Slaty-tailed, and Black-throated, and a female Blue Cotinga was expertly spotted in a leafless tree atop the canopy. A Fasciated Antshrike cooperated for us and allowed for everyone to get a good look. At our turn around point along another stream, we came across one of the highlights of the morning, 3 Royal Flycatchers, which happened to be building a nest above the water. Around the same time a Band-tailed Barbthroat decided to stop by and hawk for insects. Our return trip yielded much of the same species, though as we broke out of the tree cover, we were surprised to find a pair of Long-tailed Tyrants waiting for us near the bus with Misael. We stopped by briefly at the reservoir to finish off the morning, where we found flycatchers in abundance. We managed to identify Great and Lesser Kiskadee, Rusty Marginated, Social, Piratic, Streaked and Boat-billed Flycatchers, all within the span of a few minutes!



*Barred Puffbird © Daniel Giesbrecht*



*Reserva San Fransisco © Daniel Giesbrecht*

After a hearty lunch at the Hotel, and a well-deserved siesta, we headed back to the Reserve for some lazy afternoon birding. We decided not to hike as much and instead focused on birding around the various clearings that were accessible via the tour bus. New species for the day included a Summer Tanager, White browed Gnatcatcher, a few White-shouldered Tanagers, and very nice views of a small group of Olivaceous Piculets. Back towards the entrance of the Reserve we headed slightly

off the road to a section of a dammed stream, where the Cattle Egrets were coming into roost by the dozens. There was also a hearty flock of 75 or so Black-bellied Whistling Ducks which decided to alight and give us a good show, passing by overhead repeatedly before all settling into a tree, which was a sight to behold. Also near the water was an Orchard Oriole, and a very cooperative Cinnamon Becard.



*Black-bellied Whistling Ducks in the tree © Daniel Giesbrecht*

A small group of us decided to head back to the reserve just after sunset to try our luck with the birds of the night. Though we only had just over an hour due to when the reserve closed, we were hopeful that our luck would hold out. There were quite a few Common Pauragues calling about, with a few bats flying about, but all was rather quiet. At the very end of the night lady luck smiled upon us again as we spotted a Common Potoo just as it was flying in, that ended up perching for some nice views. A flyover Barn Owl also decided to make an appearance just before we were to hop back on the bus.

## **Day 5 - To the End of the Road**

With a long road ahead of us early rising was the name of the game, and we managed to all make it for our 4 am wake up shake up. After loading up on coffee and grabbing our to go bags for breakfast, we hit the asphalt and started our journey to the end of the road. Our destination was the Camino a el Salto, a twisting dirt road in the lowlands of the Darien that ends at the Chucunaque River. We pulled in right on schedule as the first rays of dawn stretched out in the canopy before us and were greeted by the distant calls of both Great and Little Tinamous. Above us several groups of parrots flew by at various intervals, including Blue-headed, Red-lored and Mealy Amazons, as well as Orange-chinned Parakeets. Black-faced Anthrushes were also quite vocal, though none were so kind as to venture out of the foliage and make our acquaintance. The fresh morning dew was still suspended on the foliage, and a Blue-chested Hummingbird arrived alongside us, lapping up water droplets from a large broad-leafed plant. A pair of White-bellied Antbirds were a nice addition to the morning, feeding in the shrubbery just off the path, as well as a Dusky Antbird and several Black-crowned Antshrikes. Further up the trail we came across a pair of White-necked Puffbirds, sitting

stoically above our heads, and a White-tailed Trogon made itself known by calling nearby. As the birds began to quiet down in the mid morning, we hopped onto the bus and drove to the end of the road where it meets the Chucunaque River. Upon arriving we found a pair of Little Blue Herons hunting along the shoreline, and heard a Great Antshrike calling somewhat close by, though it quickly became more distant and moved on. The trail took us along the river, though still inland enough as to not be able to see the waters edge. We managed to lay eyes on one of 3 Rufous Tailed Jacamars that we had been hearing, and it paused long enough for everyone to get good looks and some photos to boot, and further along we encountered 3 Black Antshrikes. As tough as it was to follow them through the thick underbrush, we all managed to get a visual. A Plain Xenops was another welcome addition to our list, and it is always fun to watch their acrobatic feeding style. Back out in the open on the road, the morning was starting to warm up, and as such the first of the raptors were starting to trickle overhead. The first of the morning were the Black and Turkey Vultures, as with almost every day, though it would be our first morning with larger numbers of the latter starting to migrate. It was hard to keep a tally on the numbers, but in total over the morning several thousand made their way lazily in kettles overhead, with quite a few Broad-winged and a few Swainsons Hawks in the mix as well. A Double Toothed kite was another addition, as well as a Plumbeous Kite that obliged us by coming down out of the sky and perching in a tree! Continuing the theme of raptors, one of the highlights of the day came in the form of a pair of Red-throated Caracaras that came out of the thick of the forest to serenade us with their squawking. Later in the morning and further up the trail we would come across 4 more individuals! A pair of Gray-cheeked Nunlets made themselves know with their song and cooperatively perched for us on some open vines. Other notable species of the morning included a Black-breasted Puffbird, Ochre-lore Flatbill, Olivaceous Piculet, and finally the last of the 4 Trogon species, the Garter-tailed, finally made an appearance.



*Red-throated Caracara © Daniel Giesbrecht*

With the sun beating down quite relentlessly, and the sweat starting to accumulate on our brows, we called it a morning just before noon and headed into the town of Yavisa for a sit-down lunch. Yavisa marks the end of the Pan-American highway, and we felt it was appropriate to gather for a group photo in front of the sign marking the end of the road.



*End of Pan American Highway, Yavisa © Daniel Geisbrecht*

Back on the road, we started the trip Northwards towards the hotel. We stopped for one last birding pit stop along an open stretch of fields, which was bordered by a bit of sporadic marshland. In the marsh 2 Purple Gallinules were quite cooperative and popped out of the grass a few meters from the path, and behind several small groups of Cattle Egrets. 2 somewhat distant Pied Water-Tyrants were a nice addition to the daily tally, and a pair of Great Kiskadees sat high and proud singing away. Almost immediately along the trail we had a Striped Cuckoo calling to us from afar, and though it would take the better part of 40 minutes as we made our way further along, we finally managed to find it as it popped up out of the dense underbrush. The Greater Anis were much more obliging, as they slowly meandered the bushes. Ruddy Ground Doves seemed to run amok and were coming down to drink in small deposits of water along the path, along with a pair of Gian Cowbirds, both Carib and Great-tailed Grackles, and a healthy mixed flock of Ruddy-breasted, Variable, and Morelets Seedeaters. A King Vulture could be seen at a distance, and 2 Savannah Hawks flew low past us, with more Turkey Vultures kettling in the distance.

### **Day 6: Down by the Riverside - Birding near Tortí**

Not wanting to waste even a drop of precious sunlight, we made an effort to head out just shy of 6am, starting our final day of Darien birding in the pre-dawn. We headed in the direction of the Torti river and stopped first along the road near some open fields and mixed savanna. The Sunrise seemed made-to-order and was a gorgeous accompaniment to the dawn chorus of birds around us. Several Red-breasted and Eastern Meadowlarks were some of the first birds to greet us, along with a lone American Kestrel hunting over the fields. A pair of Boat-billed Flycatchers were quite vocal in the trees directly above us, accompanied also by a couple of Streaked Flycatchers and Great Kiskadees. When a Roadside Hawk flew in the flycatchers wasted no time in letting it know it was not welcome here!



*Sunrise in Torti © Daniel Geisbrecht*

The road we were on ended at the Torti River, which was to be our next destination. During dry periods of the year you can cross the river by foot as it is reduced to not much more than a trickle, but for our visit there was a hearty flow of water. Sprinkled along with the water was a healthy assortment of wading birds, including Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets, and a group of 6 White Ibis. Two Spotted Sandpipers and a lone Greater Yellowlegs were also part of the mix, with a Northern Waterthrush bobbing along side them rounding out the set of familiar migrants. Above us an Amazon Kingfisher arrived to perch on one of the overhead wires as it was looking for its next meal. Off on the opposite shore we could hear a Little Cuckoo, though it would appear it wasn't in the mood to play ball and continued on its way without popping out to say hi. The pleasant song of Wrens was in health supply, with Bay, Isthmian, Buff-breasted and Southern House Wrens all making an appearance. Along the banks in the shrubs a pair of Pacific Antwrens arrived and were kind enough to cooperate so that everyone could get a peek. Heading back inland between the farmyards, there was a healthy amount of activity with several small mixed flocks of birds about. Once such group had a pair of White-eared Conebills, Yellow-crowned Tyrannulets, Yellow and Bay Breasted warblers, and even a pair of Cinnamon Becards. A female Great Antshrike was finally cooperative and was feeding at eye level just off the path, while on the opposite side of the trail we had great views of our second Striped Cuckoo, along with a pair of Masked Tityras and a Rufous Motmot. After our successful first round of birding, we returned to our hotel for a well deserved breakfast and to pack our things. While dining a pair of Geoffroys Tamarin Monkeys appeared in the trees above as if saying farewell. We also had a small group of bats roosting in one of the palm trees in the poolside courtyard.



*Geoffroy's Tamarin © Daniel Giesbrecht*



*Bats roosting under leaves © Daniel Geisbrecht*

It was sadly time to say good bye to the Darien, as we boarded the bus and started our journey back towards Panama. Along the Pan American Highway we stopped to stretch our legs for a brief walk, and found a Barred Puffbird perched high overhead, with a Cinnamon Woodpecker hopping around below. A pair of Black Hawk-Eagles could be heard calling at a distance but sadly did not come within view. A nice pair of Rusty-winged Antwrens were a nice addition to the day, accompanied by a

pair of White-shouldered Tanagers. Upon taking a short survey, everyone in the group opted to postpone lunch and make one last late-morning stop, all on the promise of potentially seeing some Manakin action. We were not to be disappointed, and a beautiful male Lance-tailed Manakin was first heard calling in the understory but soon was found perched perfectly in a window of foliage that allowed for everyone to get a look through the scope. A few Golden-collared Manakins could also be heard displaying, but were more on the stubborn side were not able to be seen. After our later-than-usual lunch stop, we continued along past the City of Panama once again towards our final destination of Gamboa. We stopped just shy of our destination to do an encore stint of afternoon birding along the entrance to the local military base. The road that is accessible to the public is not overly extensive, but passes through some nice, forested habitat and ends at a pair of ponds. Upon arrival we spotted a Bat Falcon perched high up on a powerline, with a group of Short-tailed Swifts zipping by overhead. Along the road we found a female Red-throated Ant-Tanager foraging in the underbrush, with an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher flitting around above it. Towards the ponds was where the real action was at, and we ended up with 3 Kingfisher species, with the Amazon, American Pygmy and Green all making appearances. A Striated Heron was also spotted sitting out basking in the sun on the opposite shore, with a group of Mangrove Swallows feeding further out over the water. High above a small group of both Yellow and Scarlet-rumped Caciques were hopping around and feeding, and they eventually came down low enough to allow for some nice observation. On our way back towards the bus we came across a small group of ant-following birds, of which included a Bicolored Anbird, Dot-winged Antwren and Fasciated Anshrike. Just as we were boarding the bus a mixed flock appeared overhead, which contained no less than 6 Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, and a singular female Cerulean Warbler feeding at the crown of a tree. Our final destination was the ever-impressive Gamboa Rainforest Reserve, and a small group of us once again decided to embark on another short stint of nighttime birding on the trail that winds along the grounds directly behind the hotel. There were many Common Pauragues scattered about, with a few of the perched birds waiting until we were mere feet away from them before taking flight. As we continued along in silence, a Tropical Screech Owl call drifted its way towards us from near the water. It cooperated by materializing out of the darkness, allowing us to briefly appreciate its cute yet scruffy appearance before we headed on to leave it in peace. A Barn Owl was heard calling briefly but not seen, and we came across several sleeping birds, including a Tricolored Heron and a pair of Red-lored Amazons cuddling together on a perch.





*Red-lored Amazons © Daniel Giesbrecht*

## **Day 7: To the Pipeline - Soberanía National Park**

Our first day in Gamboa saw us arising once again just before sunrise, and we started our day on foot as we briefly birded the grounds around the hotel. The morning was coronated by a fleury of Toucans heading out for the day, with 7 Keel-billed, 4 Yellow-throated, and 2 Collared Aracaris taking up the rear flying across the road above us. They were joined by a small group of Grey-headed Chachalacas, who took turns scurrying up the same branch and flying across the clearing above us. A pair of Masked Tityras were seen entering a cavity on a dead palm tree, and a Lineated Woodpecker showed up to investigate the same tree for bug infestations, how thoughtful! After quickly wolfing down a hearty brunch at the Hotel, we boarded the bus to head to our main birding destination of the day, the famed Pipeline Road. On our way we stopped by the Ammo Dump Ponds, which acts as a transitional zone between the forested areas, the marsh and ultimately the Panama Canal. As such the unsuspecting ponds can be quite fruitful, as you never know what might show up. In our case this came in the form of a Collared Forrest-Falcon perched in a tree eating a lizard, allowing for great views through the scope before it finished and took to the skies once again. On the marsh we found both Green, Striated and Rufescent Tiger Herons, with a Wattled Jacana and several Purple Gallinules wading about as well. Having had our birding appetites sufficiently whetted, we were more than ready for the main course, and headed to the beginning of the Pipeline Road, which heads into Soberania National Park. Though we were starting a little later than usual, there was still a good amount of bird activity throughout the morning that didn't seem to slow down. Our first gem of the morning came in the form of a spectacular male Velvety Manakin, who stopped every so briefly directly under a ray of sunshine, which complimented his fancy plumage in all the right ways. A White-whiskered Puffbird was found perched at eye level just off the path, allowing for great views and photos. All 4 expected Trogon Species were heard, with good viewing opportunities of Slaty-

tailed and Black-tailed. We had a good mix of Ant-following birds throughout the morning, which included Moustached, White-flanked and Dot-winged Antwrens, and a pair of Checker-throated Stipplethroats. A Slate-colored Seedeater was found by Alex, who was ecstatic as he has only ever seen a handful. Our morning was finished off by a Pheasant Cuckoo perched overhead right above the trail.



*White-whiskered Puffbird © Daniel Giesbrecht*

In the afternoon we headed back to Pipeline to give it another run for its money, and we were not to be disappointed! Right off the bat we came across a mixed flock following some army ants and had nice views of several Chestnut-backed Antbirds, along with White-faced and Dot-winged Antwrens. Shortly after a Tawny-faced Gnatwren made its way out of the woodwork nice and close to the trail, and a cooperative pair of Checker-throated Stipplethroats were also cooperative. A female Red-capped Manakin was heard calling and popped out into view, but there were sadly no males to be found in pursuit. Further along we came across a pair of flycatchers, a Southern Bentbill joined by an Olivaceous Flatbill, and a Gartered Trogon was first heard then shortly located higher up in the canopy. The Trogon was a bit distant but made for a great view through the scope.



*Chestnut Antbird © Daniel Giesbrecht*



*Gartered Trogon © Daniel Giesbrecht*

On our way back out of the forest we made one more stop at the Ammo Dump Ponds. There were several White-throated Crakes calling sporadically, but try as we did, they were very hard to spy as they scurried mouselike through the reeds and grasses. We had great looks at a male Crimson-backed Tanager, and a group of Greater Anis were fun to watch as they slowly hopped around foraging. Several Red-lored Amazons took turns flying in to a fruiting tree to feed, as well as a group

of Yellow-rumped Caciques.

## **Day 8: River, Tower, and Trail - Gamboa**

Up at 5:30, we again headed back in the direction of Soberania National Park, though our final destination was to be the observation tower and trails at the Discovery Center, adjacent to the main parking area of the park. Upon arrival, we headed straight up to the observation tower, which is a 105ft structure that reaches just above the treetop canopy. Along the path to the tower we came across a Pauraque that was late in getting to bed, as well as a Southern Tamandua anteater that at the sight of us quickly scurried off the path into the forest. From the base of the tower the climb up the winding staircase seemed a bit daunting at first glance, but after a slow and steady climb the view from the top was well worth the effort. The pre-dawn light was accentuated by scattered cloud cover, and the bird activity slowly yet surely built up to a crescendo of activity in the first light. Toucans were in healthy supply, with many great viewing opportunities of Keel-billed, Yellow-throated, and Collared Aracaris. One of our main targets was the enigmatic Blue Cotinga, of which we ended up finding 5 different individuals perched on or near the crowns of surrounding trees. A species that surprised us was the Scaled Pigeon, which due to being a pigeon can often be overlooked but is rather quite stunning when you pay attention. Close by to the tower, we had great views of Blue Dacnis, Red-legged Honeycreepers, White-shouldered Tanagers, and a White-browed Gnatcatcher collecting insects for a nearby nest. Part of the magic of birding from on an observation tower is the ability to look down on birds that you usually have to crane your neck to spy far overhead. Back down the tower, we headed towards the Discovery center for breakfast and coffee, and also to take advantage of the hummingbird feeders they have set up around the center. On our way past the parking lot we noticed a pair of Bright-rumped Atilas carrying materials right above our bus. Once settled at the center for breakfast, we all grabbed seats to enjoy the sporadic visits of hummingbirds to the nearby feeders. We watched as White-necked Jacobin, White-vented Plumeleteer, and Violet-bellied Hummingbirds took turns flying past us as we slowly sipped at our coffee. Just off the railing, a couple of Long-billed Hermits were seen hovering and eventually stopped on perches to allow us a peek at their marvelous, curved bills. The staff graciously pointed out a nest of a White-browed Gnatcatcher, which was home to 3 chicks begging for food. Just as we were packing up and thanking the staff for the coffee and hospitality, a Gartered Trogon flew up and perched proudly singing on an open branch.



*Bright-rumped Atilla, Discovery Centre © Daniel Giesbrecht*

After taking a vote, everyone opted to once again trek to the top of the tower to try our luck with raptors. The morning was getting late, and with the heat building conditions were perfect for rising thermals. There were good numbers of vultures, with a few Magnificent Frigatebirds mixed in, and even an Anhinga was spotted circling on a thermal. We had flybys of both Grey-headed and Snail Kites, as well as good looks at several more Blue Cotingas. Back on the ground, we headed out on one of the trail loops that branch off from the base of the tower. The morning was almost behind us, and this was evident by the dwindling amount of bird activity. The stars that stole the show were to be a pair of Rufous and Whooping Motmots fighting amongst themselves, showing some very interesting shorter harsh calls and different behaviors. A cooperative Ochre-bellied Flycatcher accompanied by a Plain Xenops were welcome additions to our list, and one of the last birds of the morning was a small group of Purple-throated Fruitcrows. It was one of the species we had been hearing and had already added to quite a few checklists, but we had not had the pleasure of seeing any up until this point, and everyone managed to get good views of them through the spotting scopes.



*Rufous Motmot © Daniel Giesbrecht*

In the afternoon we were scheduled for our boat tour of the Canal and the Rio Chagres. After a short trip to the docks, we embarked on our water bound adventure. After a quick tour of the canal to spy on the large ships passing by, we looped around and headed back to the much more peaceful Chagres River, which stretches out behind the hotel and beyond. Egrets and Herons were in healthy supply, including a Tricolored Heron that crossed the river in front of us, and a juvenile Rufescent Tiger-Heron in a tree alongside a resting Grey-lined Hawk. Overhead we had a nice look at a Zone-tailed Hawk, and another stream of several thousand Turkey Vultures. Along the banks we came across a small mixed flock of warblers that included Tennessee, Yellow and Yellow-rumped. To end off the tour on our way back we were surprised with a group of Capuchin Monkeys moving through a grove of palms up to the higher canopy, including a mom toting her young on her back.



*Boating trip © Daniel Giesbrecht*



*Rio Chagres © Daniel Giesbrecht*

Late in the evening we headed back to the start of Pipeline Road for our last night of nocturnal birding. As was now tradition, our walk started out with several Pauraque individuals calling in the distance, with one perched on the pathway as we marched silently into the forest. About 20 minutes into our walk a Mottled Owl made itself known by calling from off in the trees but would surprise all of us by flying directly over our heads. On our way out we were less shy about using our flashlights

and happened upon both Streaked Flycatcher and Violet-bellied Hummingbird trying to get some shut eye.

## **Day 9: Around Town - Panama City**

For our last day of birding together, we packed up all of our worldly belongings, said farewell to the view of the Chagres River, and headed over to Panama City's Metropolitan Park. Just outside the parking lot we spied a group of Geoffry's Tamarin monkeys tussling in a tree which was fun to watch. We followed the main path that slowly winds up a hill that heads up to a nice viewpoint of the rest of the city. The bird activity was a bit quieter than we had gotten used to in Gamboa, but we came across our second Slate-colored Seedeater of the trip, who was out in the open next to the trail feeding on the bamboo. There was a healthy amount of mammal species in the park, as we would come across a pair of deer, several squirrels, a sleeping Two Toed Sloth tucked into the crook of a large tree, and a Southern Tamandua draped over a branch. Near the top of the trail there was a good amount of activity, with our first looks at a Roufus-breasted Wren, as well as a good mix of the Tanagers and local species that we had been getting used to seeing. On our way back down a small group of Black-chested Jays were a crowd favorite, and a Black-tailed Trogon flew out above the trail as if to bid us farewell.



*Two-toed Sloth © Daniel Giesbrecht*

Back in the city, we made a stop near the Antique Museum to take a look at the mud flats in the Bay of Panama. We were in luck as our stop coincided with low tide, and there were several thousand sandpipers out along the shoreline feeding. The majority of the group were Semipalmated, with a group of 40 or so Red-knots mixed with a good number of Black-necked Stilts. Scattered throughout the beach were Willets, Whimbrels, several White Ibis, and healthy numbers of most of the Egret and Heron species including almost 2 dozen Yellow-crowned Night Herons. There was a good number of Terns with a group of Laughing Gulls, and we managed to identify Gull-billed, Sandwich and Royal Terns in the mix. A nice surprise came in the form of a distant Cocoli Heron perched in the mangroves along the shore. A nice male Mangrove Warbler arrived as we were leaving, along with a pair of Tropical Mockingbirds touring the beach. Seeing as the morning was all but over and rain

was on the way, we tucked our binoculars away and headed to Panama Viejo for some brief sight-seeing and lunch. We walked through the colonial era buildings and businesses down to the central plaza, where we found a restaurant that offered more traditional Panamanian cuisine. The food was fantastic, and we managed to make it back to the bus just as the skies opened for a brief bout of hard rainfall. From there a few of us opted to stop by the Panama Canal for a tour of the facility and to watch their Imax presentation on the history of the canal. From there it was back to the Riande hotel. Once we were all safely offloaded for the last time we said our farewells to our fantastic driver Misael. Our farewell dinner came shortly after, where we swapped stories, ate heartily, and reminisced about the travels we had shared together.



*Panama Viejo © Daniel Giesbrecht*

[Panama Birding Tour eBird List \(March 2025\)](#)