Eagle-Eye Tours



Panama: The Canal Zone and Darien Trip Report March 2023

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Day 1: Group Introductions

Settled in at the Hotel Riande Aeropuerto, the group convened over supper at the hotel restaurant, and discussed the outline for the first full-day of Panama birding. Many of us glad to be away from the chilly northern climes, and the Ontario contingent in particular relieved to have made it out of Toronto despite the previous night's winter storm.

Day 2: Hummingbirds galore in the Chagre National Park

A relatively relaxed start: our driver, Misael, drove us for 45 minutes (Panama time!) up to the highlands overlooking the city, into the Chagres National Park, the first port of call being the administration office to purchase passes. Scanning from here, we were treated to our first views of migrating **Swallow-tailed Kites**. We had arranged a rendezvous with Linda and Jerry, an American couple who have maintained a busy bank of feeders at the forest edge for more than a decade. We stopped here for an hour, marvelling at the constant parade of hummingbirds: mainly **White-necked Jacobins**, and **Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds**, but with small numbers of **White-vented** and **Bronze-tailed Plumeleteers**, **Blue-chested Hummingbirds**, and even a **Green Hermit**.



Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer © Paul Prior

The hummers were joined at the feast by an equally dazzling array of **Honeycreepers** (**Green**, **Shining** and **Red-legged**), while the fruit trays brought in **Hepatic** and **Crimson-backed Tanagers**, and **Fulvous-vented Euphonias**. Beyond the feeders in the understory, we managed to get great looks at a **Chestnut-capped Warbler**, and meanwhile, our first Three-toed Sloth lounged in the canopy.



Three-toed Sloth © Paul Prior



Casa de los Colibris © Paul Prior

Jerry then offered to take us to a known location for **Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker**, and, although only a couple of the group managed to glimpse the rarity, the detour was worthwhile for the host of other birds on the show plus the first of several active nests we'd encounter over the next 10 days. This one was being visited by a **Mistletoe Tyrannulet** as he carried food to the incubating female. **Squirrel Cuckoo**, **Broad-billed Motmot**, **Black-striped Woodcreeper**, **Yellow-green Vireos**, and a selection of lingering Neotropical migrants (including a **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**), rounded out the morning before we returned to Casa de los Colibris for our first picnic lunch. Before leaving the highlands and returning to the Riande, we stopped in at a nearby creek where **Common Basilisks** basked on the rocks and **Black Phoebe** and **Green Kingfisher** foraged. Another stop got us brief looks at a **Yellow-green Tyrannulet** and an assortment of tanagers and honeycreepers.

Day 3: Transfer to Darien via the central highlands

Anticipating the long drive east to Torti, we opted for the boxed breakfast, and left the Riande at dawn. Stopping briefly for coffees – and several migrating Fork-tailed Flycatchers – we made it to our first proper birding stop near Chepo and walked the quiet road off the main highway, scanning farmland and riparian forest for various goodies. **Spot-breasted Woodpecker** was a pleasant surprise, and the relatively sparse cover allowed good looks at **Panama Flycatcher**, **Barred Antshrike**, **Lance-tailed Manakin**, **Common Tody-flycatcher**, **Buff-breasted Wren**, and lots of **Yellow-crowned Tyrannulets**. After a short drive, we turned left off the Pan-American Highway and onto the El Llano-Carti Road. At times it seemed the bus might not make it up the steep hills as we drove into the highlands. Unfortunately, our visit coincided with one of the only two rainy hours of the entire trip. The rain was not heavy but certainly seemed to dampen the bird-activity considerably, affording views of just a handful of common species: **White-browed Gnatcatcher**, **Buff-throated Saltator**, **Golden-hooded Tanager**, **Blue Dacnis**, **Louisiana Waterthrush** and the usual mix of honeycreepers. But even when weather is not conducive to birding there's always other beauty to marvel at in the tropics – a roadside Sobralia powellii brought us all to a halt.



Roadside orchid © Paul Prior

We broke for a picnic lunch in the shelter of an obliging, roadside eatery, closed for the day. The sun emerged and coaxed a few raptors – **Plumbeous Kite** and **Broad-winged Hawk** – into the skies. We then continued along the Pan-American Highway and after an hour or so, approaching Ipeti, we stopped along a conveniently intact stretch of blacktop where passing vehicles would not envelop us repeatedly in dust clouds. Here we found our first troupe of **Mantled Howler Monkeys** in the company of a mother and young **Three-toed Sloth**.



Mantled Howler © Paul Prior

Whatever had drawn the mammals here seemed to have attracted good numbers of birds, because the forest on either side of the road was alive: **Black-headed Tody-flycatcher**, **Slaty-tailed** and **Gartered Trogons**, **Plain-brown** and **Cocoa Woodcreepers**, gorgeous **Golden-collared Manakins**, **Great Crested Flycatcher**, **Tropical Parula**, **White-shouldered Tanagers** and many others.



Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher © Paul Prior

Another hour or so's drive and we reached Torti and our home for the next three nights, Portal Avicar.

Day4: The San Francisco Forest Reserve

After breakfast we headed out to the San Francisco Forest Reserve stopping en route to check a roadside farm-pond for **Black-bellied Whistling-ducks**. The surrounding fields held several **Red-breasted Meadowlark** territories and the resident males were easily drawn in by a broadcast of their song. Misael then drew our attention to the hedgerow trees on the other side of the highway where good numbers of passerines were feeding in the canopy; a mixture of migrants (**Orchard Orioles**, **Eastern Wood-pewee**, **Fork-tailed Flycatchers**) and residents (**Yellow-bellied Elaenias**, **Streaked Flycatcher**, **Thick-billed Euphonias**, and a lone **Scaly-breasted Hummingbird**).



Watching Red-breasted Meadowlarks © Paul Prior

Waylaid for long enough, we continued to the reserve for wear long walk along the main forest-tracks where we met some excellent species. First, we stopped at a small reservoir where a band of **Greater Anis** responded well to Alex's broadcast, and a **Green Heron** stalked along the far bank. The nearby trees hosted a pair of **Uni-colored Becards**, an **Olivaceous Piculet** and **Long-tailed Tyrant**, and we were briefly distracted by a small troupe of **Geoffroy's Tamarins** before we headed along the road into the forest proper past a **Blue-chested Hummingbird**, **Tropical Pewee** and **Acadian Flycatcher**, **Wedge-billed Woodcreeper** and **Grey-headed Tanager**, **Yellow-green Tyrannulet** and **Stripe-tailed Hummingbird**. As the heat of the day hit hard, half the group opted to retreat to the cool of the bus, while the remainder continued along the side-trail across the creek where a **Royal Flycatcher** was adding to her nest. Uphill we encountered a feeding flock with **Rusty-winged Antwrens**, **Scrub Greenlets**, and **White-shouldered Tanagers**. A raucous racket from the nearby ravine heralded the arrival of a pair of **Red-throated Caracaras**; a very excited Alex managed to find the handsome birds through the muddle of canopy leaf cover and set the scope up for excellent looks.



Rainforest Rocket Frog © Paul Prior

Before we turned back we were taunted by an unseen Buff-fronted Warbler singing from the creek. On the creek bank though there was one of very few frogs encountered on the trip, a **Rainforest Rocket Frog** (*Silverstoneia flotator*). We paused to pull in a **Bright-rumped Attila** but the **Southern Bentbill** remained out of sight. Finally, we were treated to incredible looks at a stunning adult **White Hawk** perched over the creek. As we drove back to the Reserve offices a shout for the bus to stop was heeded and sure enough a handsome **Crimson-crested Woodpecker** was foraging low on the trunks of roadside trees.



White Hawk © Paul Prior

Before heading home for lunch we made a brief stop at the **Cattle Egret** colony on the lagoon behind the Reserve's barn. Here, one lucky member of the group encountered the only snake of the trip which was subsequently identified as a **Puffer Snake** (*Phrynonax poecilonotus*), the rest of us had to make do with the Spectacled Caiman loitering with intent below the nesting egrets. After lunch and a well-earned siesta, the group met to head out to the nearby Rio Torti but we were briefly distracted by a very cooperative **Striped Cuckoo** in the hotel grounds. At the river, we hiked a short distance until dusk turned us back, but not before we found **Pale-bellied Hermit**, **Whooping Motmot** and more **Golden-collared Manakins**. Hiking back to the bus, we encountered **Boat-billed Flycatcher** and **Amazon Kingfisher** while the lollygags at the rear managed to hear **Tody Motmot** calling from the forest depths. After supper, most of the group still had enough energy to attempt some owling and so we headed back to the San Francisco Forest Reserve and parked at the barn adjacent to the wetland that we had visited earlier. A young **Barn Owl** hissed unseen from its nest in the barn as we walked past to the lagoon; **Common Pauraques** called from the fields around us; but we could elicit no response from any owls. So, we headed back to the reservoir where we'd encountered the Greater Anis earlier in the day. As we disembarked from the bus, Alex's spotlight caught a party of **Capybaras** scurrying up the far bank. A **Spectacled Owl** was calling from the far forest but sadly refused to come any closer and so we decided to walk further along the road, where again Common Pauraques called affording excellent looks. At the forest edge there was a pair of **Kinkajous** foraging in the canopy and then in the distance we could hear a **Great Potoo**, but again unresponsive to Alex's broadcast.



Common Pauraque © Paul Prior

Day 5: The Darien - El Salto Road.

An early departure from Portal Avicar (provided with an excellent packed breakfast) saw us arriving at the prime birding spot of El Salto Road before the heat began to build. Here we spent an extremely productive morning, walking the wide sandy road with Misael following along in his bus to provide the occasional water-break and welcome respite from the baking sun. Highlights of the walk would be the trio of **Blue Cotingas** that we encountered: a female at her nest in a tall, leafless, roadside tree; a stunning male feeding nearby; and a rather distant immature male.



Blue Cotinga, male © Paul Prior



Blue Cotinga female © Paul Prior

The **Grey-cheeked Nunlet** was perhaps the rarest bird found on the hike, but my personal favourite was the tiny, cute gecko – ***Lepidoblepharis sanctaemartae*** - that a couple of the participants found at the side of the road. Continuing drought conditions throughout much of Panama (though not along the Llano-Carti road apparently!) meant that herps and butterflies had been really difficult to find. At the start of the hike we encountered **Black-chested Jays** calling from the treetops, and

as we walked the trail, **Black Oropendolas** flew over back and forth, presumably visiting a nearby colony. Alex broadcast repeatedly for unresponsive Jacamars, but several feeding flocks provided ample birding opportunities. Residents such as **Spotted Barbtail**, **Cinnamon Woodpecker**, **Grey-headed** and **White-shouldered Tanagers**, **Yellow-backed Oriole**, **Black-bellied Wren**, **Ochre-lored Flycatchers**, **Forest Elaenias**, and **Brown-capped Tyrannulets** were joined by northbound migrants, such as **Prothonotary**, **Blue-winged**, **Bay-breasted**, and **Tennessee Warblers**, **Yellow-throated Vireo** and **Acadian Flycatcher**. Other goodies included **Choco Manakin**, **Choco Sirystes**, and **Purple-throated Fruitcrows**. All the while we scanned the skies and found **Wood Storks**, **King Vultures** and a **White-and-Black Hawk-Eagle**. By late morning, the relentless sun had got the better of us and so we embarked on the search for washrooms – which proved even more elusive than the Great Jacamar! At the very end of the road in the town of Yaviza, we persuaded a restaurant to at least allow the female contingent the opportunity to use their washrooms. A quick stop for photos at the end of the Pan-American Highway and then we backtracked to a likely looking roadside picnic spot. Conveniently, this was located right next to a tiny wetland, where while, Alex and Misael prepped the food, the rest of us were treated to views of **Pied Water-Tyrants**, **Purple Gallinules** and **Wattled Jacanas** (the calling **White-throated Crake** typically refused to show)

Day 6: Return to the Canal Zone

Pre-breakfast the group headed back to the Rio Torti just south of town and even in this somewhat brief visit we were able to find goodies hanging out at the riverside: **Amazon** and **Green Kingfishers**, of course, but also another **Royal Flycatcher**, a couple of **Black-tailed Trogons**, a pair of **Masked Tityras**, **Southern Bentbill**, and even a very obliging **Chestnut-backed Antbird**. But the best was the spectacle of 140 **Swallow-tailed Kites**, presumably having recently left roost at dawn, heading northwest.



Rio Torti walk © Paul Prior

And then for the two-hour drive back west and north to Gamboa. Despite a stop to support the local craft industry we arrived in good time, via an of unexpectedly satisfying parrilla-style meal at the mall that Misael suggested so as to avoid getting stuck in downtown Panama City. The mall was

extremely quiet but sadly one of the few visitors was a very distressed Prothonotary Warbler, which, though we rescued from between the grills at Burger King, will surely not survive, despite being released in neighbouring shrubland, because the poor thing had snapped its lower mandible in its collision with the mall windows.



stop at craft shop © Paul Prior

At the Gamboa Rainforest Lodge we all retired to our rooms for the early afternoon, but then reconvened in the lobby for a pleasant stroll by some nearby lagoons. Here we were treated to wonderful looks at an extremely tame **American Pygmy-Kingfisher**, and rather more obscure looks at a **Boat-billed Heron** on her nest.



American Pygmy-Kingfisher © Paul Prior

In the non-avian department the lagoon held Common Basilisk (*Basiliscus basiliscus*), Yellow-headed Gecko (*Gonatodes albogularis*), Spectacled Caiman and Mesoamerican Sliders (*Trachemys venusta*).



Common Basilisk © Paul Prior

Day 7: Pipeline Road.

The entire morning was spent strolling along the famous Pipeline Road. High expectations were somewhat tempered by the ongoing drought but right from the very start it appeared that some of the larger species hadn't been informed of these conditions. Within minutes we got great looks at **Black-breasted**, **White-necked** and **Pied Puffbirds**, and then the astonishing Alex pulled out a fourth species: **White-whiskered**! We encountered several small feeding flocks and each one elicited a rush of excited pointing and directing as people sorted through the foliage-obscured species: **Fasciated Antshrike**, **Checker-throated Stipplethroat**, **Dot-winged Antwren**, **Plain Xenops**, **Black-bellied Wren**, **Green Shrike-vireo** and **Yellow-rumped Caciques**. In the afternoon a smaller group of diehards headed back out into the heat, first to walk a short forest- trail where just about the only bird on the show (quality not quantity) was a leking **Velvety Manakin**. He seemed pretty excited so perhaps there was a female hidden nearby as well.



Near the lone manakin lek © Paul Prior

From here we headed to the Ammo Dump Pond by the canal, where we found a surprising variety of more-easily observed birds: **Solitary** and **Least Sandpipers**, **Willet**, **Black-bellied Whistling-ducks**, a pair of **Muscovy Ducks**, **Green** and **Striated Herons**, a **Yellow-tailed Oriole**, and a flock of 43 **Yellow-bellied Seedeaters**. After supper Alex persuaded some of us to go try again for owls, and again we had to be satisfied with just audio - although the nearby **Black-and-white Owl** certainly put on quite a performance!

Day 8: The Discovery Trail and Canopy Tower.



View of river from hotel lobby © Paul Prior

The pre-breakfast stroll produced the now familiar mob of **Grey-headed Chachalacas** and great looks at poorly named but stunning **Flame-rumped Tanager**. We headed back to the forest after breakfast with the main target being the canopy tower at the end of the discovery trail. En route we passed occasional mixed flocks of honeycreepers and tanagers, **White-necked** and **Black-breasted Puffbirds**, **Cocoa** and **Black-striped Woodcreepers**, a couple of **Red-capped Manakins**, and a very obliging group of **Purple-throated Fruitcrows**. One of the mixed flocks contained a particularly pleasant surprise in the form of a **Moustached Antwren**, and on the approach to the tower we stopped to check the several leks of **Long-billed Hermits** affording excellent views as they squeaked out their uncomplicated song.



Canopy tower © Paul Prior



Jacaranda © Paul Prior

The ascent off the tower was something to be done slowly, but once at the top the view was splendid with several ***Jacaranda copaia*** trees in full bloom. We were joined by not just one but two pairs of **Double-toothed Kites** who repeatedly flew past the tower, seemingly disputing a territorial boundary. Distant **Blue Cotingas** teased us, but closer by we got good looks at **White-browed Gnatcatchers** and **Piratic Flycatcher**, and then on the way back down we met the cutest **Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher** foraging, complete with nervous little wing-snaps, close to the spiral staircase. From here, we strolled onto the nearby Discovery Centre to take in the parade of **White-necked Jacobins** and **Crowned Woodnymphs** at the feeders, and to ogle the nearby **Broad-billed Motmot**.



Broad-billed Motmot © Paul Prior

Most people made the most of the early pm siesta time-slot the intention being to meet in the lobby at about 4pm ready for the planned boat-trip. Of course, now was the time for the drought to finally take a break and the heavens opened with a healthy downpour! For a while we discussed alternative plans but in the end Misael's friends at the marina indicated that in fact the rain was easing off and that the boat-trip would be "muy tranquilo". And so we found ourselves donning life-vests and sitting in the covered panga which then sped off into the main channel of the Panama Canal, passing a huge container ship on our way to a quieter backwater on the west side of the channel. It really was quite a beautiful evening after all, and we chugged slowly along close to the mangrove covered banks.



Canal mangrove scene © Paul Prior

From the vantage point of the boat, we were able to approach **Snail Kites** for great looks, the post-rain lighting was quite dazzling. A **Limpkin** probed along the muddy shoreline and a **Grey-headed Kite** was coaxed into presenting finally excellent views. Flocks of **Red-lored Parrots** collected pre-roost, and we passed close by a deserted oropendola colony with just a couple of **Chestnut-headed Oropendolas** hanging out with a **Giant Cowbird**. We got an all too brief look at another **Geoffroy's Tamarin** and then a nesting pair of **Fulvous-vented Euphonia**. Our captain turned the boat homewards and we left the quiet backwater for the main canal and headed back to meet Misael at the dock.

Day 9: After the rain.

The afternoon and overnight rain had left a pall of humidity steaming over the hotel grounds and the surrounding forest presenting challenging conditions for photographers in the group. But we headed out again for our now customary pre-breakfast stroll. This time we took a slightly different route and found ourselves checking the forest and trail to the west of the main hotel complex, and it was here that we heard the first **Black-faced Antthrush** of the tour. There is no doubt that this bird's new-found voice and then the subsequent bird activity along the lower trail was a direct result of the

recent rain. The antthrush showed himself very briefly for only a couple of people in the group, but around the next corner, a **Chestnut-backed Antbird** and a **Black-bellied Wren** foraged openly in a pile of forest debris. Fantastic views of both birds. We ducked into the now damp trail, taking care not to tread on the new emergence of dozens of tiny **Forest Toads** (Rhinella alata) – up till now we had seen just one frog on the entire trip! The trail was very productive: **Red-capped Manakin**; **Black-tailed Flycatcher**; nest-building **Red-rumped Caciques**; a very obliging **Scale-throated Leaftosser**, tossing leaves on the trail just a head of us; a **Rufous-and-white Wren** entertaining us with his lovely mellow song. it was difficult to tear ourselves away from all the action and head back for breakfast. By 9 o'clock Misael had us all aboard and on the road for Panama City. But we had one more birding destination to visit – the Metropolitano Park near downtown Panama City! It was Sunday and so the park was busy with locals both humans and avian. **Lance-tailed Manakins** called at trailside and foraging flocks presented us with both **Red-throated** and **Red-crowned Ant-tanagers**. A pair of **Rufous-breasted Wrens** responded nicely to a broadcast of their song, but unfortunately, we were just minutes too late to see the **Rosy Thrush-tanager** which another birder had just watched leave the trail-side. We could hear it still singing in the distance, but it preferred to stick to its own routine. Flycatchers were busy along much of a walk; a pair of Yellow-olive Flycatchers were building a nest right next to the trail hanging over the turtle pond where several **Mesoamerican Sliders** basked.



View from Met Park © Paul Prior

Lunch was a rather untidy affair – Misael's preferred choice was closed off due to a Sunday running event, and our mall food court alternative was more chaotic than our previous success, again due to Sunday family events. We left the mall in time for a quick visit to the famous Miraflores Museum, where the history of the Panama Canal was presented. A few people who gave this a miss walked to the nearby bridge to scan the low tide flats for **Yellow-crowned Night-heron**, **Tri-colored** and **Little Blue Herons**, **White Ibis**, and an assortment of shorebirds: **Willet**, **Whimbrel** and **Black-bellied Plover**. Finally, Misael took the long route back to the Riande Aeropuerto through the traffic-clogged streets of the old city for views of various historic colonial buildings and then along the shoreline highway for passing glimpses of hundreds of shorebirds, **Magnificent Frigatebirds, Laughing Gulls** and **Brown Pelicans**.

Day 10: Homeward bound …

Today was the day for most of the group to fly back home although several people had chosen to remain in the city for a couple more days of sunshine and historic sightseeing. Some down-time allowed a few of us with afternoon flights to continue some more relaxed birding in the hotel grounds where **Thick-billed Euphonias**, **Variable Seedeaters**, **Clay-coloured Thrushes and Tropical Kingbirds** busied themselves with nest-building. But thoughts were certainly turned more to winter birds and our return to slightly more chilly climates.



Thick-billed Euphonia female © Paul Prior

Over the course of the past 10 days, the group had amassed an impressive tally of over 300 species of birds. Alex Alvarado – an 11th hour, stand-in for our regular guide - had proved to be very much up to the task and beyond. His ability to pull birds out of nowhere and then set up his scope and capture smart phone photographs for every member of the team was frankly astonishing. I for one definitely look forward to travelling with Alex again in the future. The same can be said for this wonderful group of birders, people from all over North America, from all walks of life; the dynamics of this dozen was in the end a huge part of what made this trip such a success. But timing also is always an important factor - being in the right place at the right time. On a couple of occasions this had played against us (missing the Rosy Thrush-tanager by a mere minute at Metropolitano and arriving on the Llano-Carti road in the worst weather of the entire 10 days), but most of the time we had definitely lucked in pretty well! Watching the Blue Cotinga at her nest was a real highlight for me, but each participant will have their own star bird. The photographers in the group were blessed with the best of weather conditions; the hardcore birders managed some great additions to their life lists; and the more pedestrian among us were simply able to enjoy great company in some wonderful landscapes. I know I speak for Alex when I say that we really look forward to travelling with each and all of the group again in the near future.



Guide Alex

Safe travels!