Eagle-Eye Tours

Panama: Canal Zone & the Darien Itinerary

Link: Panama: Canal Zone & the Darien

Tour Overview

Panama, with its very rich avifauna, has quickly emerged as a top birding destination. Panama is the transition zone between Central and South America. It feels more “tropical” even than adjacent Costa Rica, with many representatives of typical Neotropical families – woodcreepers, toucans, jacamars, motmots, manakins, antbirds, cotingas, tinamous, plus a plethora of tanagers, flycatchers, honeycreepers and parrots and much more, and with always the chance of a mega-bird such as Harpy Eagle and scarce mammal such as Ocelot or Tapir.

Our Panama birding tour focuses on two main areas – the Canal zone, and east into the Darien at Torti. The hotel in Torti is in a world-class birding zone and many endemic species occur here. This is followed by several days investigating the superb and rich birdlife of the Canal Zone forests, including marvelous Pipeline Road which runs through wet forests in Soberanía National Park. The hummingbird feeders at Cerro Azul are often very productive, and Panama City’s Metropolitan Park supports Lance-tailed Manakin, Rosy Thrush-Tanager, even Red-naped Tamarin monkeys. With its short distances, excellent infrastructure and outstanding wildlife, Panama is superb, and our visit will be a truly unforgettable experience.

Itinerary

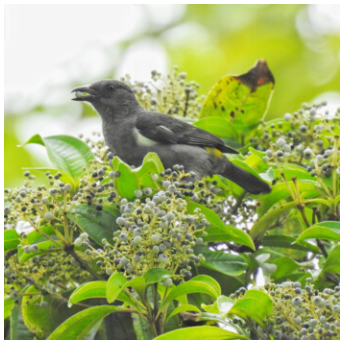
Day 1: Arrival in Panama City

Our Panama birding tour begins with arrival in Panama City, where you will meet your guide and fellow birders for dinner. During an evening orientation at our hotel, we’ll preview the exciting birding adventures ahead. Overnight in Panama City.

Day 2: Cerro Azul

We depart early for our first destination; Cerro Azul, where we take in an astounding array of feeders which are often highly productive and may include a couple of species we will not encounter elsewhere, such as Violet-capped Hummingbird. We will spend a full day birding the cloud forest here, including Chagres National Park. There are a number of species here that will not be found at the lower elevations during the rest of the tour. We return to our hotel near the Panama City airport.

Day 3: Travel to Tortí



Today we will have an early departure and make our way east towards the Darien province. The drive will take a few hours, but we will make birding stops along the way. Our first stop will be around the Chepo area, where we will bird the edges of open agricultural lands, grasslands and wetlands unlike other habitats we explore later in the tour. We might expect to find Savannah Hawk, Laughing Falcon, Pied Water-Tyrant, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, and Red-breasted Meadowlark among other open country species. Occasionally we encounter Capped or Cocoi Herons here, at the very northern edge of their range. If time allows, we may also make short birding stops along the nearby Llano-Carti Road before continuing east to the small rural town of Tortí. Night in Tortí. As we look for these rarities we will also be spotting species such as Golden-collared Manakin, Black-breasted Puffbird and Spot-crowned Barbets. After a picnic lunch we will continue our way east to the small rural town of Tortí. Night in Tortí.

Days 4 and 5: Torti

Torti lies in a world-class birdwatching zone and is becoming one of Panama's top birdwatching sites. The forest is part of a biological corridor linking species east and west, Pacific and the Caribbean, as well as being on a zone between lowland and piedmont regions. It is an Important Bird Area, with many endemic species of the Darien lowlands and highlands. Our hotel is located very close to some excellent birding with plenty of species not found further west such as Sooty-headed Tyrannulet, One-colored Becard, Sirystes, Barred Puffbird and Golden-headed Manakin, and other species that are rare elsewhere in Panama such as Speckled Mourner. On one day we will head further west into Darien Province - a popular birding destination at the border between Central and South America and with a unique mix of birds from both. We will bird along the famous El Salto Road in search of species such as ….Black-tailed Trogon, Gray-cheeked Nunlet, Ducky-backed Jacamar, Red-throated Caracara, Chestnut-fronted Macaw, Flame-rumped Tanager and rare and stunning species as Black-faced and Black-headed Antthrush, and Black-crowned and Streak-chested Antpittas. Nights in Torti.

Day 6: Transfer to Canal Zone

We will spend a final morning birding around Torti looking for any additional species we may not have already encountered. We will have an early lunch back at the hotel and then transfer to the Canal Zone (~4 hr drive), making stops along the way. Night Gamboa Rainforest Lodge.

Days 7 and 8: Summit Gardens and Pipeline Road

Nestled in the vast Soberania National Park Rainforest, on the banks of the Panama Canal, is our superb accommodation. This is an area rich in bird species, including 3 species of forest-falcons, 16 species of hummingbirds, Yellow-throated Toucan, Great Jacamar, Masked Tityra, Bright-rumped Attila, Broad-billed and Rufous Motmots, Blue Cotinga, Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher, Brownish Flycatcher (Twistwing), Plumbeous and Semiplumbeous Hawks, Great Black Hawk, Black Hawk-Eagle, Crested Eagle, Green Shrike-Vireo, Short-tailed Nighthawk, Spectacled Owl, Black-chested Jay and many antbirds, woodcreepers, puffbirds and trogons. Mammals include Three-toed and Two-toed Sloths, White-faced Capuchin and Agoutis. Old Gamboa Road passes through scrubby and secondary growth habitat as well as pastures and other open country areas. Possibilities include Red-naped (Geoffroy's) Tamarin monkeys and Central American Agoutis, along with Lance-tailed Manakin, Rosy Thrush-Tanager, Orange-billed Sparrow, Whooping Motmot, Rufous-and-white Wren (a fine singer), and Green Honeycreeper are some we look for as well as a Panamanian endemic, Yellow-green Tyrannulet. Both Jet and White-bellied Antbirds occur in brushy thickets, and other interesting birds in this area include Scrub Greenlet and White-necked Puffbird. We should do well for raptors; Gray-headed and Swallow-tailed Kites, Short-tailed and White Hawks and King Vulture are frequently seen. Pipeline Road starts out in scrubby mature secondary tropical moist forest with patches of primary forest, eventually merging into primary forest. This legendary place ranks as one of the finest birding areas in the neotropics, and daily tallies can be very impressive: tanagers, woodcreepers, antbirds, toucans, puffbirds including Black-breasted and Pied, and much more. We concentrate on those goodies that we haven't already found, and with luck we may find Rufous-fronted Wood Quail or Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo. If we find an army ant swarm, then attendant ant-followers could include Spotted, Bicolored, Ocellated and Chestnut-backed Antbirds. Manakins include Golden-collared, Blue-crowned and Red-capped, trogons include Slaty-tailed, Gartered and Black-throated, and woodpeckers include Cinnamon, Black-cheeked, Crimson-crested and Lineated Woodpecker. Nights at Gamboa Rainforest Resort. On the afternoon of Day 8, we will take a boat tour on Chagres River, where we will explore a series of small islands and inlets. Being on the water gives us a new perspective of the canal zone, and the chance to add some different species. Snail Kites are frequent here, and the diminutive American Pygmy Kingfisher hunts from the trees along the banks. Monkeys of various species are another common sight from the boat, lounging and foraging in the treetops.

Day 9: Gamboa and return to Panama City

We will do some early morning birding around the hotel. After breakfast, we will drive to Panama City and depending on timing, we will do some birding in Metropolitan Park and the tidal flats. Shorebirds like Willet, Whimbrel and even Collared Plover may be seen along the shoreline. Night in Panama City.

Day 10: Departure home

Our Panama birding tour ends this morning. The hotel will provide breakfast and transfer to the airport at the appropriate time, depending on each person's flights home. You can depart anytime today.

What to Expect

Overview

The Panama tour is a moderately-paced birding tour. We usually start the day early (5:30-6am), with a pre-breakfast walk. On some days we take a short siesta in the afternoon and may go birding again in the coolness of the late afternoon. Occasionally, we may go out after dusk to search for nightbirds. While the birding experience is incredible, it's important to note that long days in the field mixed with the heat may be physically demanding for some.

Food

We generally have breakfast back at the hotel after some early birding. We often take a picnic lunch in the field, but will occasionally stop at a restaurant for lunch. Dinner is usually at the lodge or a nearby restaurant. Each evening after dinner we compile the day's checklist, review the day's activities and plan the next day's activities.

Accommodation

Accommodations are variable, ranging from simple, but comfortable to very good. Good, modern accommodation in Panama City; excellent accommodations in the Canal Zone; basic hotel in Torti.

Walking

Walking conditions range from easy to moderate, with some steep and rocky sections. If there has been rain, trails will be muddy. The longest walk is 3 kms (1.9 miles) in total and takes approximately 3 hours. We recommend a reasonable level of physical fitness to ensure you can fully enjoy the experience, keeping in mind the humidity.

Driving

On a few days, we will have drives of 3 to 4 hours to reach our next destinations (e.g., Panama City to Tortí, and Tortí to the Canal area). These longer journeys will be broken up with stops for birding

and comfort. Roads are generally in good condition.

Climate

January through March is considered Panama’s dry season, bringing generally warm, sunny conditions with temperatures around 24–32 °C (75–90 °F). Rain is usually limited, though brief showers and some mist in the highlands are possible. Humidity remains moderate to high at this time of year, and March can be hotter.

Boat Trips

The boat trip will be on an open boat with a roof for shade. Conditions will be calm. Please note there is not a bathroom on board.

What's Included

Tour Price Includes
- All accommodations
- All meals and soft drinks
- Airport transfers
- Ground transportation
- Guides - 1 guide with 4 to 8 pax, 2 guides with 9 to 12 pax
- All park, conservation and entrance fees
- Gratuities to local guides and drivers

Tour Price Does Not Include
- Flights to and from Panama City
- Travel Insurance
- Items of a personal nature
- Alcoholic beverages