



# PANAMA:

## Darien Lowlands at Canopy Camp

August 31 – September 5, 2015

### TRIP REPORT & SPECIES LIST





Sunrise Birding LLC

[www.sunrisebirding.com](http://www.sunrisebirding.com)

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**HIGHLIGHTS** (Either for rarity value, excellent views or simply a group favorite.)

- Black-and-white Hawk-eagle
- Cerulean Warbler
- Orange-collared Manakin
- Orange-crowned Manakin
- Red-billed Scythebill
- Black Oropendola
- Red-billed Scythebill
- Great Green Macaw
- Double-banded Graytail
- Dusky-backed Jacamar
- Agami Heron
- Green-and-rufous Kingfisher
- Capped Heron
- Visit to the Embera village

**Leaders:** Carlos Bethancourt, Steve Bird and Gina Nichol

### SUMMARY:

The Darién Province in eastern Panama has long been regarded as one of the most diverse and species-rich regions in all of Central America playing host to both Central American birds as well as South American species at the northern limit of their range. Renowned for rare and endemics species, access to this area has been limited but now with the fantastic new Canopy Camp opened in 2013, birders can experience and enjoy what the Darien lowlands have to offer. Built in a shaded clearing adjacent to the tall forests and hills of La Reserva Natural Filo del Tallo the “camp” is positioned right on the doorstep of fabulous avian offerings of the Darién lowlands.

This was Sunrise Birding’s inaugural tour to the Darien lowlands and it was a resounding success. With our friend, guide extraordinaire Carlos Bethancourt, we enjoyed wonderful hospitality that is the hallmark of the Canopy Family in comfortable accommodation with excellent food and great birds. With this fabulous group of people interested in all aspects of nature, we had many excellent sightings of resident birds, local specialties, a few migrants, butterflies, and interesting plants. We designed this tour for good value during Panama’s “green season” and found it to be just as successful as other tours costing nearly twice as much!



## Monday, August 31, 2015

Several people arrived a day or so early and went on tours of the Panama Canal or visited birding spots not on the itinerary for this tour. In the evening, we gathered for our welcome dinner at our hotel in Panama City.

## Tuesday, September 1, 2015

We were up bright and early and ready to head east toward the Darien. After breakfast we met our guide and good friend, Carlos Bethancourt and set off on our adventure. It was raining lightly when we made our first stop at the Rio Mono bridge but that didn't deter us or the Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth that was hanging upside down in a tree eating leaves just above eye level from the bridge. We birded from the bridge for a while and had views of Dusky Antbird, Plain-colored Tanager, Sooty-headed Tyrannulet, Plumbeous Kites flying over and Red-lored Parrots (scope views later), and Red-legged Honeycreeper. Some Mantled Howler Monkeys were spotted in a distant tree and a Ringed Kingfisher flew under the bridge. On the other side of the road, a Cocoli Heron flew off up the river. A few Masked Tityras came into some bare sticks and a Black-crowned Tityra joined them. Olive-sided and Streaked Flycatchers perched on the bare sticks of dead trees offering decent views.

Our next stop was at the beginning of a forest trail along the road. Here we had Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Streaked Xenops, a female One-colored Becard, male and female White-shouldered Tanagers, and a Gartered Trogon perched on an open branch. A Black-cheeked Woodpecker was flying back and forth over the road sometimes with food and we guessed it was feeding young. A White-eared Conebill showed briefly but became frustratingly elusive so went on the "better views desired" list for some. On the other hand, a Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet very obliging as it flew nearby and perched not too far above our heads.

Our next stop was San Francisco Nature Reserve, a private forest reserve owned and managed by the St. Francis Foundation, covering 1,300 acres in eastern Panama Province. The San Francisco Reserve was established in 2001 by Father Pablo Kasuboski, an American priest from Wisconsin who came to Panama in 1988. The reserve serves as a wildlife refuge and protects the headwaters of the main rivers of the area. The foundation created by Padre Pablo, as Father Kasuboski is called, also works on infrastructure development in the area by building and maintaining aqueducts, roads, schools and churches and maintains the largest private rural aqueduct in all of Panama and Central America. The reserve has a variety of habitats including primary, secondary and riparian forests, forest edge, fields, farmland, ponds and wetlands.

Carlos checked us in and we continued up a dirt road noting White-tipped Doves on the road and Tropical Kingbirds around. We stopped to check the area just as a male Lineated Woodpecker flew in and showed well. We scanned and found several Red-breasted Blackbirds in the pasture on our left. There were also Ruddy Ground Doves, a few Eastern Meadowlarks, Thick-billed Seed Finch and Tropical Mockingbirds seen here and some **Pied Puffbirds** (Photo: Gina Nichol) gave a show in the bare tree behind us. A Yellow-headed Caracara flew over and Yvonne's passion for butterflies was revealed with nice views of Banded Peacock and a few others.



A little ahead of us, Carlos spotted a Rufescent Tiger Heron in a tree at the edge of the pasture where there was some standing water. We edged closer and got better views while Steve scoped a raptor perched on a tree up the hill. It was none other than a Black-and-white Hawk-eagle! Though a little distant, it was amazing to see this bird perched and it remained in the tree for the rest of the time we were there. As we moved closer, we bettered our scope views and also saw Variable Seedeater, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, Tropical Pewee, Blue-gray Tanagers, Bananaquits, and a tree full of Brown-chested Martins (56 in all). A Black-bellied Wren was heard and with patience, Carlos got it to eventually show well for us.

We moved a little further and found a pair of Barred Antshrikes, male and female White-winged Becards, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, and Yellow Tyrannulets. An open area offered our first Geoffroy's Tamarins, Black-tailed Trogon, and a colorful Orange-crowned Oriole and our last views of the Hawk-eagle.

We enjoyed a nice lunch at Torti while watching the hummingbird feeders that played host to Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Long-billed Starthroat, and **Snowy-bellied Hummingbird** (Photo: Gina Nichol). on we stopped for a pair of Pearl Kites perched on a power line and noted the female was noticeably larger than the male. We turned around for this pair, got out and were able to view the birds in the scope at close range. Here we also noted Swallow-tailed Kites and Mississippi Kites migrating over.



We made an afternoon comfort stop at a cantina playing loud music and looked at a few birds in the surrounding trees including Orange-chinned Parakeets, Thick-billed Euphonia, Red-crowned Woodpecker and Piratic Flycatcher. Later in the afternoon, we arrived at Canopy Lodge and settled in, quickly returning to the main area where there was Pale-bellied Hermit at feeders as well as White-vented Plumeleteer and Sapphire-throated Hummingbird. Black-faced Antthrush and Little Tinamou were calling and we got used to the sounds of the forest. We met for our first of many delicious dinners and the wine flowed as we reminisced about our first day of birding in Panama.

### **Wednesday, September 2, 2015**

As soon as the sun was up we were enjoying an early coffee and birding from the Camp veranda. Blue-chested Hummingbird visited the feeder which it later shared with Long-billed Starthroat and White-vented Plumeleteer. In tall trees of the garden, we had Black-cheeked Woodpecker, White-winged Becard, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Cerulean Warbler, Sooty-headed Tyrannulet, Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet, and Orange-chinned Parakeets. A **White-headed Wren** (Photo: Gina Nichol) eventually showed well on some bare sticks at the



top of a tree that we later named the “tree of life”. As our stomachs told us it was time for breakfast, a few Swallow-tailed Kites flew over.

After breakfast we spent some more time birding in the garden starting with a Collared Aracari perched and preening in a large tree. As we watched that, Steve and Carlos heard the call of Great Green Macaw and soon a pair of these gorgeous green birds flew right over us much to everyone’s delight. A Great Black Hawk soared above the trees and a pair of Long-tailed Tyrants sallied from the top of the bare sticks of the tree of life which eventually hosted several good birds during the course of the morning and in the days to follow.



A pair of Spot-crowned Barbets worked the trees above the dining room and 17 Swallow-tailed Kites were counted as they kettled above the forest with a Turkey Vulture. Added to our morning list were Blue Dacnis, Plain-colored Tanager, and Fulvous-vented Euphonia. We finally tore ourselves away from the tree of life and walked down the Camp entrance road to an area of garden with large patches of blooming Vervain. Here we found Violet-bellied Hummingbird and Blue-chested Hummingbird foraging on the flowers. A **Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher** was (Photo: Gina Nichol) perched in a bare tree offering prolonged views and Gray-breasted Martins flying high with some Barn Swallows. The day was heating up and with that raptors were on the move. A Black-and-white Hawk-eagle was seen flying high with the vultures and we had good views of White Hawk and Short-tailed Hawk.

Steve heard a Barred Puffbird so we walked a little further down the road and found it perched above the road. We enjoyed scope views of the Puffbird and found Squirrel Cuckoo panting on top of a tree across the field which drew gasps of delight as it flew off. A Double-banded Graytail came in and proved to be challenging to see. As we turned back to the lodge, a Stoplight Caton butterfly caught our attention and was well photographed.

After a short drink break, we walked into the forest on Nando’s Trail crossing a small stream and then climbing up a trail past some very large Cuipo trees. At least one Keel-billed Toucan flew through the canopy and a Moustached Antwren was seen perched on some high branches. The **Golden-collared Manakin** (Photo: Gina Nichol) was elusive at first but showed well on our way back down the trail. There were several Golden-crowned Manakins moving quickly just under the canopy and everyone eventually got on them. We returned to the lodge for a delicious lunch and siesta to rest up for our afternoon excursion.



In the afternoon we birded along the road to Yaviza making several stops. An area of pastureland with a small wetland near the road offered the chance for Dicksissel, Variable Seedeater, a female Orchard Oriole, American Kestrel, Savannah Hawk, Yellow-hooded

Blackbird, and Purple Gallinule. Some Black-bellied Whistling Ducks flew over as did Pale-vented Pigeons, Shiny Cowbirds, and Blue-headed Parrots. A small tree was visited by Crimson-backed Tanagers as we were loading up to move on.

Our target this afternoon was Black Oropendola so we watched the roadside trees for large, black birds. We stopped at one spot to scope a bird that turned out to be a Crested Oropendola but we had nice views of its crest. Moving on we stopped for a group of three Whooping Motmots moving in some brush beside the road. During the afternoon we added several species to our list including, Blue-chested Jay, Collared Aracari, and Gray-capped Flycatcher and we once again had views of Orange-crowned Oriole and Red-rumped Woodpecker.

A fruiting tree held both Orange-crowned Euphonia and Thick-billed Euphonia allowing the chance to study their differences. Plain-colored Tanagers were there as well and this one particular tree offered some good birding for a while.

We walked the road searching and at one point Carlos heard a Black Oropendola calling from way inside the forest. We walked down the road to try and get a view but this bird was buried beyond the first wall of vegetation. We moved back the other way and finally Bart spotted the bird on a distant branch and we set up the scopes to view it. All of us got good views as we waited for it to display and as it tilted forward it showed its bill colors. We achieved this victory thanks to the patience and persistence of Carlos and the sharp eye of Bart.

Back at the lodge, we enjoyed another delicious dinner and reviewed our list for the day. A few of us walked the beginning of Nando's trail in the hopes of seeing an owl but luck was not with us tonight.

### **Thursday, September 3, 2015**

This morning after breakfast we drove to the El Salto Road. It was already warm and very noisy with lots of Red-ored Parrots and a few Mealy Parrots flying around the tree tops. We walked slowly and listened and eventually heard a Red-billed Scythebill which Nando spotted in some thick brush. The bird flew across the road and landed on a large tree trunk and over the next several minutes we got varying and finally good views of the bird.

Some Marbled Wood Quail were singing in the forest but try as we might we could not lure them into view. While we were focusing on the Quail, a Crane Hawk appeared and disappeared in less than 4 seconds but we caught up with in later in the morning. A troupe of Keel-billed Toucans flew across the road behind us following on by one as they do and continued into the forest. A couple of them perched in the open for a few moments allowing great scope views.

We birded slowly along the road and at one point, Gina spotted a female Blue Cotinga landed on a large tree where it was joined by a couple of Piratic Flycatchers. A Pale-bellied Hermit rocketed down the road making us appreciate the views at the feeders! A pair of Syristes flycatchers entertained us in the trees at the edge of the forest and obligingly posed for scope views. While we were watching those a Black-headed Tody Flycatcher appeared in the same bare tree offering a nice view. In the area we also saw Golden-green Woodpecker, Cocoa Woodcreeper, and Blue Dacnis. A Double-banded Graytail arrived and everyone caught up with this specialty bird. And, a White-eared Conebill came in and did the same. Moustached

Antwren put in an appearance just before a gorgeous pair of Blue-and-yellow Macaws flew over offering fantastic views in the morning light.

We arrived at the end of the road where we found Golden-green Woodpecker and Black-crowned Tityra and then birded a forest trail along the river. Bare-crowned Antbird was seen here as well as Southern Bentbill, Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, Gray-cheeked Nunlet, Dot-ringed Antwren, Plain Xenops, Black Antshrike. This feeding flock was frenetic but eventually we all got reasonable views of most of these birds as well as White-flanked Antwren, Red-billed Scythebill, and Black-tailed Flycatcher. A Gray-headed Tanager called but remained elusive but we were all pretty pleased with this birding bonanza.

The afternoon excursion proved to be another adventure as we drove out to Aguas Caliente Road and then got into the open truck and birded along a road. Along the road we had a female Plain-breasted Ground Dove and a couple of **White-necked Puffbirds** (Photo: Gina Nichol) which caused us to reposition the truck a few times so all could see it well. Further on we saw a six foot long Bird-eating Snake heading toward a chicken coop and beyond that there were open fields that held Fork-tailed Flycatchers without tails, several Gray-breasted Martins, and a number of Cattle Egrets mixed in with some white Little Blue Herons. Southern Lapwings looked great in this setting and a couple of Pied Puffbirds were seen.



We turned off the dirt road into some farm fields and this is where the real adventure began. We drove off road and through several muddy fields and gates to a wetland area called Las Lagunas. How this spot was ever discovered was amazing to us, but it was worth the visit for sure! On arrival we had a pair of **Spot-breasted Woodpeckers** (Photo: Gina Nichol) on the tree tops and later tending to a nest hole in a dead snag right next to where we were parked. We scanned the marsh and found Black-capped Donacobius, Black-crowned Night Herons, Pied Water Tyrants, Lesser Kiskadee, an immature Orchard Oriole, Wattled Jacana and Striated Heron. There were trees full of Cattle Egrets and White Ibis and a strange perhaps hybrid egret. Out on the edge of the grasses we found a Rufescent Tiger Heron and behind us we found and scoped an Aplomado Falcon and a Savannah Hawk. Nando found a very distant Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture and a dark morph Short-tailed Hawk flew over. It was starting to rain and Nando suggested that we

head back to the main road before the fields got too muddy. We retraced our steps stopping at all of the various gates and while the first one was being opened we found a Solitary Sandpiper and a couple of Least Sandpipers in a muddy patch. The rain was getting heavier so we huddled under our rain gear while mud and water splattered up from the fields. By the time we reached the main road, the rain was subsiding and we worked our way back to the van and had a civilized ride back to the lodge. It was getting dark and when we reached the main gate for the camp there were four Forest Rabbits in the grass nearby.

### **Friday, September 4, 2015**

Breakfast was early on this very special day and soon we were on our way to the small village of Puerto Peñita on the Rio Chucunaque. There were two long, dugout canoes waiting for us and we boarded the boats and travelled up the Rio Chucunaque to the Rio Tuquesa River.



It was a peaceful ride with Neotropic Cormorants, Mangrove Swallows and Southern Rough-winged Swallows in attendance as we cruised. In the Cecropia trees, there were Yellow-rumped Caciques, Black, Crested, and Chestnut-headed Oropendolas and we spotted a Gray-lined Hawk eating something on a bare branch. We landed on the muddy shore and positioned ourselves to scan the treeline across the river for our target, Dusky-backed Jacamar. Our guides watched vigilantly and as we waited we saw Pacific Antwren, Cinnamon Becard, Masked Tityra, Red-rumped Woodpecker, and Buff-breasted Wren. The Greater Anis





perched across the river were spreading wings making nice photo opps and a small group of Spectacled Parrotlets flew in and perched for scope views.

While scanning, Gina spotted a gorgeous male Blue Cotinga that glowed in the mid-morning light. A Green Ibis called loudly and flew off behind us and just then Carlos heard the Jacamar calling and it appeared on top of a Cecropia tree across the river. Another victory! We quickly got the bird in the scopes, tried to take photos and revelled in the sound of its call. Patience and persistence had once again rewarded us this a very special species.



**Dusky-backed Jacamar.** Photo by Gina Nichol

After watching the Jacamar for a while, it flew off. We waited but it did not return so we took a walk through the forest. Not far in, we found a Chestnut-backed Antbird (the eastern Darien race with spots on the wings), Black-tailed Trogon and a Bicolored Antbird that showed very well. As we neared the wetland area, a Black-collared Hawk flew away. We heard a



Black-faced Anthrush calling in the forest and with a little coaxing, it crossed the path in front of us twice allowing good views. The Spotted Antbird that was moving nearby was seen by a few.

We walked to an area where there was a small pond in the forest. Nando was pleased to find an Agami Heron in full breeding regalia and there was also a very obliging **Green-and-rufous Kingfisher** (Photo: Gina Nichol) and an American Pygmy Kingfisher. A small Spectacled Caiman drifted by perhaps eyeing the excited birders on the bank. What a morning we were having!

We continued walking to an Emberá community called Nuevo Vigía where the locals had gathered to show us their crafts. We admired the beautiful handwork and made several purchases to take as souvenirs. We also had photos taken with the creators of our crafts and showed the children of the village the Spot-breasted Woodpeckers that were nesting in a post on the bank of the river. The whole morning had been incredible with traveling on the dugout canoes to finding the Jacamar to meeting the villagers. We enjoyed the boat trip back and added Amazon Kingfisher to our list as well as Anhinga and the ever-present Mangrove Swallows.



**Embera Crafts.** Photo by Gina Nichol.

We had a late lunch at the camp and check on the Spot-crowned Barbets from the deck at Tent 8 who were still working on their nest excavation. Tent 5 had a Blackburnian Warbler seen from the deck during our siesta and soon again we were assembled in the Camp gardens for our afternoon birding excursion. In the Vervain area, we had White-winged Becard, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, a Cinnamon Woodpecker showing lovely scalloped plumage, a female Blue Dacnis, Bay-breasted Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Thick-billed Euphonia, and Barred Puffbird. Ben was delighted to catch up with the Yellow-throated Toucans before heading back for dinner and a check of the list for the day.

### **Saturday, September 5, 2015**

This was our last morning at the Camp so after breakfast we birded from the veranda for the last time. The usual suspects were in attendance and we saw Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Brown-capped Tyrannulet, Sooty-headed Tyrannulet, American Redstart, Long-billed Starthroat, and Sapphire-throated and Violet-bellied Hummingbirds. Gina spotted a dot on the tree of life which turned out to be a female Rufous-crested Coquette much to Bart's delight as it was one of his main targets!

We drove in the open top trucks out to a ranch called Quebrada Felix and birded along the road for an hour or so. There were Roadside and Gray-lined Hawks, Pied Puffbird, a flyover

Capped Heron, a perched Ruddy-breasted Seedeater and Blue-black Grassquit in the grasses. In the trees we had Yellow-olive Flycatcher and Yellow-breasted Flycatcher, White-headed Wren, Yellow Warbler and an Eastern Kingbird found by Yvonne. A Southern Rough-winged Swallow perched offering good views and there was a Scaly-breasted Hummingbird seen. We had nice views of Blue-headed Parrots and there was a troupe of Gray-headed Chachalacas that quickly disappeared into the vegetation as they do.



On the way back we had a pair of Olivaceous Piculets nesting near the gate and enjoyed close, eyelevel views of these little cuties. Back at the lodge, we were packed up and getting ready to leave when some **White-faced Capuchins** (Photo: Gina Nichol) showed up at the banana feeders and entertained us. They jumped and looked suspiciously at us as they pilfered the bananas always making sure they had an eye on us. We said goodbye to the wonderful staff

at Canopy Camp and set off for Panama City. Our lunch was once again at the restaurant at Torti with the feeders and we saw Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and Blue-chested Hummingbird very well. A Rufous-breasted Hermit made a brief visit as did a female Black-throated Mango. A torrential rain shower came through just before a flat tire was discovered but Nando and Carlos had it fixed in no time and we were on our way.

Back in Panama City we said our good byes to each other and went away with fond memories of our fantastic trip to Panama!



**Heart-spotted Heliconian**



**Yellow-fronted Owl Butterfly**



**Split-banded Owlet**

Thanks to Yvonne Homeyer for help with butterfly identification. These are just a few!