



American Birding[®]
ASSOCIATION

C E N T U R Y C L U B

29 March-6 April 2008

PANAMA IS MORE THAN A CANAL
An ABA Century Club Introduction to Neotropical Birding

From the journal of Bill Maynard

Bill Maynard, ABA Host



Fifteen members of the American Birding Association's Century Club and I have returned from our 29 March–6 April adventure to the tropical lowlands and foothills of central Panama. Five talented young bilingual Panamanian guides enthusiastically took turns sharing the wonders of their small, but incredibly bird-rich and beautiful country with the ABA donor group (right). The guides, all employees of either Canopy Tower or Canopy Lodge, spotted and showed us brilliantly hued birds and orchids, lizards that ran across the water, two species of sloth, a kinkajou, three species of monkeys, and for the fortunate, not one, but two jaguarundies.



Situated on a hill overlooking the Panama Canal, Canopy Tower, a USAF radar installation converted to a justly famous birding destination, was our home for four nights. After a late arrival, deep-sleeping participants were awakened by the combined chorus of a Pheasant Cuckoo and Great Tinamous, along with the loud raucous roars of the locally common mantled howler monkeys. Tea and coffee were served each morning on the observation deck, and shortly after 6:00 A.M., participants had the pleasure of watching sunrise, while scanning canopy trees in all compass directions for perched birds, flying parrots and parakeets, wintering warblers and flycatchers. The top deck allowed us to peer into treetops for specialty birds such as Green Shrike-Vireo. Distinct wing beats and vocalizations helped us separate screeching parrot species flying out to forage, while teed-up metallic, blue-and-purple Blue Cotingas were ogled, along with a Tiny Hawk and Scaled Pigeons perched atop towering emergent trees. Both Chestnut-mandibled and Keel-billed Toucans competed with perched Mealy and Red-lored Parrots for our attention, while Collared Aracaris snuck in below. Abundant flowering jacarandas added the perfect amount of purple to the sea of green below.



It was our first morning and we were transported on the elevated bench seats of the Rainfomobile, (left) enabling us views of two flocks of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks as we crossed the Chagres River Bridge. We were heading for the internationally known Pipeline Road. Although we didn't find the antic-



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ipated big ant swarm there, we sauntered along the first two miles of Pipeline Road, with great opportunities to study many Pacific lowland forest species. Guide Carlos Bethancourt had a staked-out Common Potoo (left) perched on an exposed limb, while a variety of trogons and toucans appeared to be common. The flying banana, Keel-billed Toucan, was a favorite. Guides, José Soto and Josécito Pérez, showed the group how to identify and sex the region's different trogon species in our protected natural laboratory, Soberania National Park.

Migration was in full swing. In

less than one hour, during a mid-day break at Canopy Tower, a few die-hards, on their backs on the observation deck, counted over 500 individual raptors and as many Turkey Vultures, most birds using convective air currents to aid their movements north. Swainson's and Broad-winged Hawks were the most numerous high fliers, but the common Short-tailed Hawk also was spotted.



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An afternoon visit to Summit Ponds was a highlight. The entire group enjoyed scope views of a rare (in Panama) long-billed Agami Heron, (above) foraging near a small colony of Boat-billed Herons. We learned where the favorite perch of Amazon Kingfisher was located, while large Greater Anis cavorted nearby (left). Another stakeout and lifer for all, a beautiful, cryptically colored Rufous Nightjar (below) sat on eggs just a few meters off a side trail. Spectacled Owls have been using the Summit Ponds area for the past six years and our guides eventually found a branchling, black mask on a white body, a young-of-the-year Spectacled Owl that we had a chance to study

from a distance. A few of us had brief looks at a White-bellied Antbird skulking in a monotypic stand of cane, while unseen chiggers waited hungrily for those who wandered off the trail.

The second morning, we had an early departure with a long bus ride taking us to the Caribbean side of Panama where we hoped to find a new set of birds. It was hot and humid,



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especially as our visit coincided with the end of the dry season—cloud cover was only a memory. At the first bathroom stop, our first Wattled Jacana used huge broad toes to walk on aquatic vegetation (thus the alternate name Lily Trotter), while Purple Gallinules were more secretive. Momentarily stopped by the passage of two huge cruise ships or floating hotels, we watched as the ships were pushed or pulled by eight mechanical “mules” through one of the Gatun Locks. We encountered a number of species that are confined to the grasslands of the area, including Eastern Meadowlark, Red-breasted Blackbird, and Saffron Finch. Flycatchers were common and most of us had good looks at Panama Flycatcher, alongside wintering Great Cresteds, and resident Streaked Flycatchers (left).

After driving across a floating bridge, we made our way towards the small town of Achiote on a road that shares its name. The first planned stop produced a lot of activity, including the uncommon Montezuma Oropendola, a blitz of raptors—Crane, Gray, Zone-tailed and White Hawks, Double-toothed and Swallow-tailed Kites, and an Osprey. All of us had looks at both species of the beautiful resident orioles, Yellow-tailed and Yellow-backed, as well as wintering Baltimores. A stop for breakfast at a restaurant in Achiote was productive for birds and good for the local economy. A nesting Plain Wren was seen well, along with great looks at the diminutive Pied Puffbird (below), and nearby our first Plain Xenops and Cocoa Woodcreeper hitched up the trunks and larger branches of small trees. In Achiote, we sampled the fruit of pond apple (*Annona glabra*) and had close looks at the seeds of achiote fruits (right) used for flavoring and coloring of flavorful Panamanian foods, as well as for a red-colored hair and body paint used by local indigenous groups.



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Later, we made a stop at a large lek of Golden-colored Manakins (left), where wing-snapping males gave away their locations, each one trying to attract a female with their unusual acrobatics. An additional treat was a rare daytime view of a sleepy kinkajou, a nocturnal member of the Raccoon Family (below).



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A lunch stop was made at historic Fort San Lorenzo, a Spanish fort built in the 1570s, overlooking the turquoise waters of the Atlantic Ocean and the entrance to the Chagres River. The fort was ransacked by Welsh pirate, Henry Morgan. The area is also where gold-seekers crossed the Isthmus of Panama before finding passage north to the California gold fields. Here we had good looks at Crested Oropendolas, a nest-building Yellow-bellied Elaenia, begging dogs, and a pitiful white cat with spray-painted purple streaks.



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The day was finalized by a relaxing train ride from Colón to Panama City. More than a few of the men snuck glances at a host of attractive Panamanian beverage-servers. While we waited patiently to board the train's one elevated tourist car, a French tour group attempted an end-around line cut, but classic counter maneuvers, executed to perfection by Carlos and José, prevented them from doing so. Ironically, the failed first attempt to build the Canal, the French Canal, came into view on our approach into Colón.

Day 3, we shre up early looking for elusive Green Shrike-Vireos (above) on the observation deck. An all-green one, impossible to see from the ground, was perched at head height, singing its repetitive three-note song. Following breakfast, we spent a few minutes viewing the local hummingbird feeders where we watched the recently renamed Long-billed Hermit, Snowy-bellied (right) Blue-chested, and



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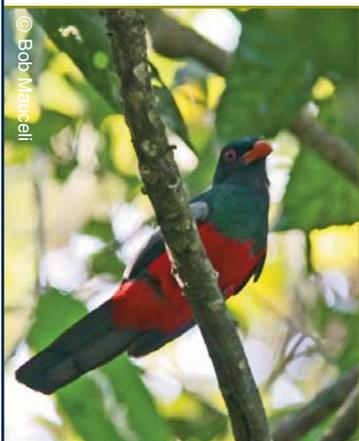
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Violet-bellied Hummingbirds (left), the abundant White-necked Jacobin, the uncommon White-vented Plumeleeter, and the large and fancy Purple-crowned Fairy. Next, we headed out on foot down Semaphore Hill Road. During early Canal years, semaphores were placed here and on other nearby hills, aiding the passage of vessels through Gaillard Cut.

Semaphore Hill is always a place to look for both antbirds and motmots, and today we had good looks at Broad-billed Motmot (right), but we would have to wait until afternoon for four Rufous Motmots to appear down near the Viagra Tree. Still, no ant swarms to attract antbirds, but we did find a very close male and female Spotted Antbird, along with Dusky and Dot-winged Antbirds, plus the small Checker-throated Antwren, and the more confiding Western Slaty-Antshrike, whose bouncing ball call alerted us to its song perch. We also had a chance to compare Black-tailed with the more numerous Slaty-tailed Trogon (left). Separating the common tanagers proved difficult at times, but we soon learned to identify drab female tanagers, along with the bright, often dazzling, males. The Rainfomobile picked us up at the end of the morning, thus avoiding what would have been a long, steep hike back up to lunch.



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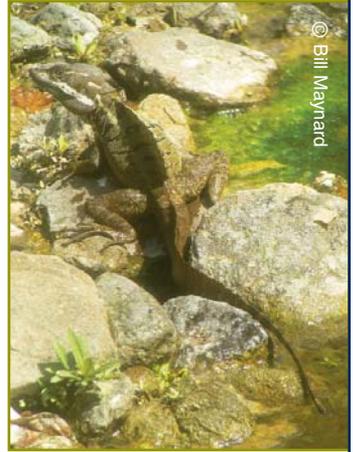
After the appreciated afternoon break, we headed out to Gamboa Rainforest Resort, preceded by a quick stop at neighborhood feeders where Africanized bees convinced us to retreat, but not before we saw a Black-breasted Mango. One of the vehicles stopped for our first *Megarynchus*, the well-named Boat-billed Flycatcher, and then after a short talk with two Harpy Eagle researchers, whose job it

is to track 10 radio-tagged Harpies, we stopped to watch a juvenile Rufescent Tiger-Heron feeding at the edge of a field. While waiting for a threatening shower to pass, we watched a few of “our” warblers coming to a water point near the orchidarium, along with the nesting local House Wrens that some call Southern House Wren. We then headed past the serpentarium looking for birds. Both Cinnamon and White-winged Becards were seen well, along with Masked Tityra, all now placed in the recently created family, Tityridae.



Sadly, we only had a morning left to bird the Canopy Tower area and participants chose Summit (Botanic Gardens) Nature Park for our morning birding. Besides a quick stop to view a caged Harpy Eagle (left), the national bird of Panama, we added our first Tropical Pewee and a beautiful Black-bellied Wren. Our guides, Carlos and José, encouraged two basilisk lizards (right) to run

across the surface of a pond, showing us why they are also called *Jesus Cristo* lizards in some Latin American countries. These dinosaur-like reptiles, with long toes and flattened skin flaps, perhaps need a special sign erected where they occur, inscribed with "Run, don't walk." Edwin, the second best bus driver in Panama, picked us up and stowed our luggage. Off we went in our 22-passenger Coaster. After viewing the modern architecture of *Puente Centenario*, only the second bridge spanning the Panama Canal, this one at the Gaillard Cut and close to the Pedro Miguel Locks, we scanned the skies for raptors. The two-hour ride was punctuated by a phone call from Raúl Arias de Para, owner of both Canopy Tower and Canopy Lodge, informing us that his guides had found an uncommonly encountered specialty, Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo. After talking to Raúl, followed by a group vote, we decided to postpone lunch and try for the ground-cuckoo. Edwin, trying to become *Numero Uno*, coaxed his bus to a higher speed. We chose wisely, as all sixteen of us, walking quietly in groups of four, watched two ground-cuckoos, on two visits for all, while the huge cuckoos loafed close to us and to unseen ant swarm. This was a new bird for everyone in the group and a trip favorite (below).





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Honeycreeper, and a large Rufous Motmot, all came to feed on the numbered lodge fruit feeders, a place where bananas are always on the menu (above).

Sensing that this might be our lucky day, having just encountered two ground-cuckoos, our new local guides, Faustino (Tino) Sanchez and Domiciano (Domi) Alveo, led us up a short, but steep and rocky trail, where the large, trap-line feeding, White-tipped Sicklebill (right) had been seen recently. We waited for about 20 minutes when this monster hummer came zipping in to the flowering *Heliconia* sp., where it was viewed by only half of the group, as it clung to floral bracts. On the way back to the



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Lodge, we watched dominant Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds chase away smaller metallic-green Garden Emeralds, gorgeous Violet-crowned Woodnymphs (left), and other previously seen species that preferred to forage at lower levels in the shrubs.



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For our first full day at Canopy Lodge, our driver, Oscar, drove us to Las Minas Trail at La Mesa. In the distance

we could hear the cacophony of thousands of big-breasted chickens, *pollos pachicones*, proclaimed by the large lettering painted on chicken-hauling trucks that passed by. Las Minas didn't disappoint, as Ginny, Bill, and Domi saw the first of the two jaguarundies crossing this trail. The birding was good too, with a perched Orange-bellied Trogon (right) being one of the stars, but the skulking Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch was seen



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by only half the group. Higher up the trail, the highlight was two Blue-throated Toucanets, the new species, the result of a 5-way split of Emerald Toucanet. On the way back down the trail, we found a nest with the bills of two young Blue-chested Hummingbirds sticking straight up. A mixed-species tanager flock contained a handsome Silver-throated Tanager, and the common wintering warbler, Bay-breasted.

After lunch, the diminutive, but fantastically colored, Rufous-crested Coquette male visited abundant *Verbena* flowers surrounding a stone wall keeping our creek confined to its banks. Large Dusky-faced Tanagers came to the feeders for bananas just before we departed for nearby Cari Iguana Trail, with only two-thirds of the group, a guarantee that we would see good birds. The target, Rosy Thrush-Tanager, was heard singing, but it took over 30 minutes before we all had crippling views of a truly stupendous bird, one of the trip favorites. Perhaps the behavioral highlight of the afternoon was watching a group of Blue-crowned Motmots (right). One male waved a dead leaf in its bill, while at the same time it moved its racket-tail in a pendulum motion, a noticeable courtship display. By now, we were becoming experts on the subtleties of elaeinia identification, sorting through look-alike small flycatchers, which up until then were just “flycatchers” amongst the many members of the largest



bird family in the world. All members of the Tyrant

Flycatcher Family are exclusively New World species. Two of the houses below us were strong candidates for *Home Beautiful* covers, both with spectacular views of nearby Cerro Pílon, Cerro Pelado, Cerro Valle Chiquito, and the other mountains surrounding El Valle.

During the next day of birding, we first stopped to look at Long-billed Starthroat (above), hawking small insects. An early start was necessary in order to reach our destination near the Pacific Ocean, El Chiru. Here, we found remaining patches of dry forest, a habitat mostly converted to agriculture, ranching, and home sites. After a slow beginning, we saw a perched and loud-singing Rufous-browed Peppershrike (right). Next up was a



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bird that won the hearts of most, a small Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (above, left), a trip favorite for some. In a plantation, we found our only *Aratinga* parakeets, Brown-throateds (above, right) with long graduated tails, and a loud-calling Striped Cuckoo perched nearby (left). We added a distant Savannah Hawk and all had good looks at a Common Black-Hawk overhead. News spread that we had been invited to Raúl's beach house for lunch. We looked forward to sitting in the shade with the Pacific Ocean only a stone's throw away. Some of us elected to scan the ocean and a

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large sea stack for seabirds before eating. A flock of terns, using a

boat for a perch, included the common Sandwich, a few uncommon Royals, and three unexpected Elegants (right). Farther offshore, careful spotters found

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plunge-diving Brown Boobies, while all of us watched the incredible effortless flights of Magnificent Frigatebirds, some pirating food from the boobies and from other frigatebirds.

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After our tuna-stuffed pitas and *crudités*, we headed west to the seasonally dry rice fields of Juan Hombron, where we had stunning views of a male Lance-tailed Manakin (left). Trying to outclass the

manakin, a few long-trained Fork-tailed Flycatchers zipped around before perching on nearby wires (right). A small pond held a migrant Solitary Sandpiper and our first-and-only small group of House Sparrows. We eventually found low-flying Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures, while a Peregrine Falcon flew overhead. The recently split Veraguan Mango was viewed on a couple occasions, after Tino explained how to separate them from their congeners. Another hummingbird, Sapphire-throated Hummingbird, was new for the group and fairly common here.



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On our final full day of birding the Canopy Lodge area, the last few people to board the bus briefly watched two flocks of the large aerial acrobat, White-collared Swift, as they soared up the valley on stiff wings, flying towards our morning's destination, El Gaital Trail. The first bird that we heard at the trailhead was a Barred Forest-Falcon, one that was reluctant to show itself until it rocketed from its forest patch, gliding across the road, before disappearing into the adjoining forest. Moving up the trail, Tino worked hard, fishing for birds that we hadn't seen in the area. A fruiting bush overhead attracted a male Golden-collared Manakin and we found many hummingbirds in the flame bushes' red tubular flowers near the top of the first hill. New for the trip was the uncommon White-tailed Emerald, often chased out-of-view by aggressive Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds.

While we were in the shade, two loud-calling Barred Hawks passed overhead, soaring on enormous broad-based wings. A singing Spot-crowned Antwren was seen well (above), unlike the secretive Long-billed and Tawny-faced Gnatwrens that skulked in the thick undergrowth just beyond view. We finally caught up to a Slaty Antwren and an Olive-striped Flycatcher, both just above the trail. On the drive back to lunch, we stopped and whistled in a very cooperative Bright-rumped Attila, usually a difficult to see species (right). Perched and unidentified, a silent flycatcher may have been Greater Pewee, a species unrecorded in the area, but in the correct habitat type and elevation. Those in our group familiar with Olive-sided Flycatchers, ruled out that species.



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Afternoon birding was on La Zamia Trail, near the edge of town. We first stopped for Blue-and-white Swallows, common Gray-breasted Martins, and what may have been the President of Panama and his entourage. Before the first hard rain of the trip

marked the end of the dry season, we added a cooperative Ochre-bellied Flycatcher to our list.



Those of us not totally exhausted from previous long days of birding went in search of Tody Motmot, but instead we found a fantastic Sunbittern casually sauntering a short distance upstream from the lodge. Although we tried, we didn't see the motmot and only heard a nearby Black-faced Antthrush, just out-of-sight on the Lodge Trail.

Proving that ex-New York Yankee catcher and Hall-of-Famer Yogi Berra's mantra, "it ain't over until it's over" to be true, a loud-calling Gray-necked Wood-Rail was a natural alarm, signaling all to get out of bed for our final morning. A few lucky folks saw this bird cross our stream before we all sat down for our last breakfast together. After packing, securing final autographs from Tino (a talented bird artist),

and saying goodbye to our guides and host, we drove towards Tocumen International Airport, passing over the Panama Canal on the Bridge of the Americas. The second best driver in Panama, Edwin, spotted a Pearl Kite (above) on a powerline next to the road. Edwin pulled onto the road shoulder so that we all could view what we thought was the last new bird of the trip. We were wrong, but Yogi was not. After dropping off Jenny and John, lucky to have an extra half-day in Panama at the Country Inn and Suites, we drove past expansive tidal mud flats teeming with shore-birds, and the large, distinctively marked birds that some were able to identify included: Willet, Black-bellied Plover, and for some, a small group of Black Skimmers. Then it really was over, the group split into two—those flying on to Miami and those flying to Houston.

I would like to extend a huge thank you to all of the great people who support ABA by being members of the ABA Century Club. Likewise, a huge thank you is extended from the ABA to our Panamanian friends, Raúl, and his excellent staff who were responsible for making our short visit so enjoyable. It was a great pleasure to meet and to bird with all of you. I enjoyed your senses of curiosity and humor. Hopefully, I will be able to join this group in another Latin America adventure, at another future great birding destination. *Hasta luego*, until we meet again.

