

Panama - Canopy Tower (BB)

Naturetrek Tour Report

28 April - 6 May 2010



White-necked Jacobin



Bi-coloured Antbird



Chestnut-mandibled Toucan

Report & Images courtesy of Andy Bissitt



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Day 1

Wednesday 28th April

Travel from UK to Panama

Day 2

Thursday 29th April

After arriving around midnight to a little light rain and distant dramatic lightning, the stage was set for our first dawn and the much anticipated view over the rainforest from the Canopy Tower. However, dawn was reluctant to break due to heavy rain and low cloud, and any birdsong had to compete with the accompanying thunder. The first bird then was viewed from indoors with the accolade going to the drabish palm tanager. More inspiring fare was soon at hand with collared aracari and keel-billed toucan both visiting fruiting trees just outside the windows.

During breakfast, the rain eased, so soon afterwards we were able to step out on to the viewing deck, and it was then a question of where to look next. Green and red-legged honeycreepers vied with blue dacnis for attention, whilst the supposedly skulky green shrike-vireo was in the mood to mock its given image. Mealy and red-ored parrots gave perhaps the most vivid reminder of just where we had woken up, after our very long journey. Seeing a couple of them sat distantly in a leafless tree above the canopy, and in the same scope view have rush-hour traffic beyond, told us we were in no ordinary place. It was Panama, where city and rainforest almost meet!

Before leaving for a walk down Semaphore Hill Road (in reality the track up to the Tower itself), we had our first session at the hummingbird feeders just outside the Tower entrance. The sight and sound of the smart looking white-necked Jacobins chasing away all comers, as well as each other, was something hard to leave behind, but we had our first trip 'outside' to help tear us away. This was, I suppose, intended to be a gentle introduction to forest birding, which can be difficult and frustrating. However better views than I'd imagined were obtained of fasciated antshrike, red-capped manakin and black-breasted puffbird. We followed up with two species of motmot, the rufous being particularly impressive. Then it was antwrens, trogons and gnatwrens. As if that wasn't enough, we also spied tree rats and tamarins too, and all before lunch.

After lunch, a quick recce from the deck before we left turned up a stunning white hawk drifting about against the dark green of the forest background.

The 'Ammo Dump' ponds don't paint a mouth-watering picture. The truth was very different. In quite open, even partly degraded habitat, a sumptuous array of species was served up in a walk of no more than one hundred metres.

Such mind-blowing birds as rufescent tiger-heron (on its nest), white-throated crakes and a pair of incomparable barred antshrikes stole the show. Throw in chestnut-headed oropendolas, yellow rumped casiques, crimson backed tanager and black crowned tityra, as well as several flycatcher species, and it made for another-worldly experience. Even the less majestic things like the seedeaters and the scrub greenlet were appreciated as the 'top-of-the-bill' birds had not let us down. So 80 plus species for the day! It seemed like more, such had been the quality...

Day 3

Friday 30th April

So it was off to the famous Pipeline Road for a day which began at 6.00 a.m. and ended just before 5.00 p.m. It was hot, sweaty, and hard work but reaped many rewards in the shape of some hard to see birds. The first new birds though were not seen too well, like the red-throated ant tanager, or were a little uninspiring, as per rufous mourner. It took the appearance of a superb perched raptor like the slaty-backed forest falcon to give things a boost. This was to be the first in a trio of such sightings. Distant tapping was soon pinpointed and found to be the work of a gang of four lined woodpeckers who were certainly doing some damage with their massive bills. Squirrel cuckoos stepped up to the mark after inadequate views yesterday: bold birds in bright rustiness. But something much, much smaller was our next delight. Alexis played the song of the black-capped pygmy tyrant apparently without luck, but after we had moved a little way off and then returned, we found that a pair of the birds had appeared from nowhere. More than this, we had been standing close to what turned out to be their nest which was right next to the road! After they had decided that we were no threat, one of the birds flew into the flimsy hanging cup and proceeded to sit in the grassy hammock, staring out at us looking cute yet vulnerable. Some more birds with long or tongue-twisting names followed this, with good views had of ruddy-tailed flycatcher, olivaceous flatbill, and checker-throated antwren.

As the heat rose, the first beautiful blue morpho butterflies began to appear. It was also lunchtime, which we ate being overlooked by purple-throated fruitcrows and, as we were trying to relax, what better idea than to bring the birds to us? Judicious use of the i-pod brought in a stunning semi-plumbeous hawk, and no half-second flypast either as it sat in clear view inspecting us. Then it was trogon time. It is hard to think of a more amenable bird, so witnessing a squabble between the diminutive white-tailed and the more robust slaty-tailed was not easy to grasp. It was over a nest hole though, and so worthwhile staking a claim on. Once the bigger pair had won, they called triumphantly whilst our cameras blazed away. A pair of violaceous trogons was also nearby in what was a productive area for this most colourful species.

If bagging trogons was suddenly a cinch, the next attempt at an altogether different species was the hardest part yet. We had to go off onto a side trail thick with undergrowth, but it was certainly worth it for the truly glowing golden-collared manakin. I've never come across a bird that called in response to handclaps before, so this was indeed a unique animal! Throw in the sleeping hole from which three Western Night Monkeys peered out, and a ruddy quail-dove flushed from cover, and it was well worth leaving the beaten path for. But hot-spots just kept on coming, and Alexis found the next one by detecting an army ant swarm from the crazy calls of the bicoloured antbird. Then, as the birds picked off the fleeing insects, so we picked off the birds, perhaps none better than the dazzling ocellated and the spotted antbirds. Three species of woodcreeper left the guide illustrations for dead, looking much more distinctive in the flesh, especially the northern barred. Nearby, song wren lived up to its name with the best tune we had heard yet, as well as being a nice looking bird.

The birds weren't running out of steam, but we were, so after a woodpecker-like pied puffbird showed high in a tree, it was appropriate that the last of our raptor trio should be seen in more relaxing circumstances. As we drove down the road, a double-toothed kite rose from a puddle it had been drinking from and sat in a low branch just a few metres away. We therefore had a perfect view of it from our elevated seated position in the back of our open vehicle. So ended the second day... tough going, but with so many pick-me-ups you just had to round the next bend for what might be there.

Day 4

Saturday 1st May

An excellent start to the day was had as a bat falcon was hunting around the Tower during the first few minutes of daylight, its display ending with a power dive into the canopy. Other pre-breakfast highlights were a distant but distinct male blue cotinga (we had seen the female closer to on the first day), and a neat little tropical gnatcatcher.

Soon we were on the road to the nearby Summit ponds with their promise of waterbirds. First there was a short walk to the ponds, which was of course filled with birds, such as smart yellow common tody flycatcher, boat-billed flycatcher and lovely yellow-backed orioles feeding a not so lovely shiny cowbird chick. And for those that had not been up quite early enough, another bat falcon was at hand. At first look the waters edge did not seem to hold much, aside from two greater anis, but closer scrutiny found the extraordinary boat-billed heron, the much more handsome capped heron and 'super-rail', the grey necked wood rail on the far side. A small flock of black-bellied whistling ducks sunned themselves on the drowned tree branches. On the second pond, green kingfisher showed little concern for our presence and gave us a lengthy close-up show.

Leaving the ponds, a large dark shape was disturbed in the trackside understorey. Further investigation revealed an impressive collared forest falcon intent on catching some prey. It therefore took no interest in us as it peered at the forest floor allowing us to watch it going about its life at our leisure. It was quite hot now and little brown or olive jobs were not holding the attention for long. But Alexis, our guide, was merely toying with us as he led us towards two absolute crackers. Firstly he presented the much-wanted spectacled owl, which sat almost unblinking a few metres away on an exposed limb as our cameras snapped away - an unforgettable encounter. Next, a little way down a side-track, we found ourselves staring in disbelief at a nesting rufous nightjar and chick, the tiny ball of fluff sitting tight under its parent's chin. What could we say? Another walk away 'lifer' of the highest quality: lunch was going to taste pretty good.

Thankfully, for the sake of my writing hand, the pace that new birds came at slowed in the afternoon. This was mainly due to the fact that Alexis took a call during lunch that alerted him to the presence of a must-see bird at the Discovery Centre near to Pipeline Rd. So \$15 dollars later, there we were closing in on a certain 'tick'. Wrong. All seemed lost when we had failed to locate the bird after more than half an hour despite finding the army ant swarm still marauding over the forest floor. Then the voice of one of the centre's wardens from the other side of the trail had us rushing round to where she was, and she directed us into the undergrowth to view this 'Holy Grail' bird - rufous-vented ground cuckoo. We watched it from about fifteen metres away as it stalked the gloom in pursuit of fleeing insects, somehow unbirdly, even out-of-time. Whatever, this was a moment when you felt you were watching nature at its most primeval.

We saw more new birds after this, but they were mere sideshows to what we had just witnessed so we wound down instead to the aerobatics of the hummingbirds of the centre feeders. There was still time, however, for views of a great potoo way above us at the entrance to Semaphore Hill Rd (definitely a telescope job). It was waiting for the night to fall, and so in a way were we. Our batteries were certainly in need of recharging.

Day 5

Sunday 2nd May

Re-energised, the early birds amongst us were soon adding to the many successes of the viewing platform by claiming blue-headed parrot and fulvous-vented euphonia up there. The green shrike-vireos again eschewed their reticence tag. However, the next bird chose to arrive during breakfast and caused pandemonium, and not everyone was lucky enough to see the great jacamar too well.

On the Semaphore Hill track, we got our first views of a small troop of howler monkeys above the road. Hanging by ones tail and scratching a lot was ones idea of passing the morning, but we had more exciting prospects in mind at the nearby Plantation Trail. Here we found dense and close-in forest, surely making for difficult birding? Our first encounter with black-faced anthrush bore this out, as it was very difficult to obtain an unobscured view of a shy bird. As if riding (or flying to be exact) to the rescue, a grey-headed kite came in overhead and settled on a branch, its very large eyes staring down in an attempt to pierce the dimness. But even this bird was at a neck-straining angle. What was really needed was an easy, sitting target. Picture this scene then if you can. Alexis suddenly puts down his telescope, adjusts it slightly and announces calmly 'sunbittern on the nest!' My natural reaction was to ask 'really?' as if this was a good time for a little joke. Of course it wasn't and we were all able to enjoy another 'this can't be happening' moment with yet another bird that had that mythical appeal of something from prehistory. We had barely digested this when yet another of my own personal 'most-wanted' turned up directly behind the sunbittern, the outstanding crimson-crested woodpecker, a pair in fact, and they gave us a prolonged eye-popping display at ground level in an open well lit area. This had been a magical few minutes.

Next question; "would we like to go on a bit further to where Choco screech owl had been roosting in recent days?" We did, and a pair and their youngster were expertly found amongst the dense understorey. The juvenile proceeded to 'stare us out'; two huge yellow eyes illuminating its grey-brown face, a mixture of fascination and trepidation. That should have been the turn around point, but Alexis got news from a couple of guys who put us onto an army ant swarm with attendant ruddy woodcreeper. This eventually sat out very nicely on a streamside log for all to admire its smart plumage. Cocoa woodcreeper was also well seen here. The return walk was meant to be a little more brisk, but a bit of a commotion had us scanning the trees above the path for the source of the bird's displeasure, and eventually Alexis homed in on an enormous bird-eating snake slinking through the mid level branches. It must have been at least six feet in length, and a male white-shouldered tanager, amongst others, did not like it one bit.

If I was not to run out of ink, the post lunch session had to be much less noteworthy, and in truth it was, at least in terms of quality. By the Chagres River, limpkin stood out amongst other typical waterside birds of the area like wattled jacana and American purple gallinule. A stroll through the Gamboa Resort however was more in keeping with recent events with two new tanagers, rosy thrush and flame rumped, plus our first good look at a blue-grey tanager. Amongst other new birds, white-bellied antbird and cinnamon becard were certainly worthy of scrutiny, whilst chachalacas abounded.

But pride of place went to the diminutive and very tame common tody flycatcher, which showed not a care for our presence, and the much more full-on chestnut oropendolas, which performed for us at their communal nest site. What a sound. What a display. Bringing down the curtain on another life affirming day...

Day 6

Monday 3rd May

Today we clocked up the most new species since the first day, and much of that was down to us leaving the lowland forest behind for the time being. It was quite a long drive to Cerro Azul, but worth every minute as we entered tanager heaven. They were virtually the first species we saw, with the classic bay-headed taking the accolade. That was followed by an array of dazzling colour forms ranging from the drab olive tanager, through hepatic, to the cosmic emerald and the speckled varieties. Perhaps the most pleasing was picking out a rufous-winged tanager due to its scarcity and closeness in plumage detail to the bay-headed, but the smallish yellow and black tanager came close, denied only by the brevity of the view it gave. What a family of birds – most of which were seen in or close to the garden of a local birdwatcher who allows use of their home as a temporary base.

Other representatives of the feathered community were certainly not to be outdone though, and the highlights they provided were very high indeed, perhaps none more so than the endemic stripe-cheeked woodpecker with its mossy green back and yellowy facial stripe. Any bird unique to a country is to be relished, but it doesn't mean that more widespread species are not as wanted, and the swallow-tailed kite was certainly in that bracket. It was pure joy to see four in flight at once, and even better when one perched in a dead branch for photographic opportunities. Another bird acting likewise was more unexpected - perhaps the encroaching thunder had awakened this lesser nighthawk which then proceeded to make a few passes before settling on a snag. How many more bizarre incidents could the trip have? And whilst mentioning bizarre things, take the bill of the toucan. Back in the garden after our trip to a higher elevation, we had a new one to marvel at – the chestnut mandibled, and it couldn't have been more obliging. It certainly knew how best to show off its splendid bill spending several minutes in the watery sunshine against a milky blue sky.

During lunch at the house, we were able to watch the hummingbird feeders, where beside the ever present white-necked jacobins, we could try and pick out violet-headed hummingbird, green hermit and bronze-tailed plumeteer. Scaled pigeon and shiny honeycreeper were also colourful additions to the scene. We were even more grateful for the spectacle we had been treated to when the threatening gloom closed in and a four-hour thunderstorm ensued. On the very wet return trip, Alexis still managed to pull another stunner from the hat when he spotted a fasciated tiger-heron on a boulder in the middle of a raging river which thankfully we were able to get onto from the dry interior of our vehicle.

What could have been a pleasant little exercise overlooking the beach at Costa del Este near to Panama City was aborted after about fifteen minute due to the continuing tropical storm. We did still manage to add the likes of yellow-crowned night heron, brown pelican and willet before beating a hasty retreat. It was a pity really as the area was packed with waders, gulls and terns. We may have got rather wet, but our enthusiasm had not been dampened. How could it be when we had already passed 200 species with still more than half the holiday to run! What could possibly raise the pulse further?

Day 7

Tuesday 4th May

The observation deck was pretty quiet with only a female summer tanager that was new. Our first port of call was the Summit Gardens, which appeared a bit tame after some of the places we had visited but the well-scattered trees allowed us to see the birds that were there very well. Our first perched orange-chinned parakeets came into that category, as did the thick-billed euphonia. Fly over short-tailed hawk and swallow-tailed swift were harder to appreciate, but an impressive grey hawk compensated by sitting low in a nearby tree. And to prove that lightning can strike twice, we had another daytime flying nighthawk, this time a common, which also proceeded to roost on an exposed branch. Mention should also be made of the two tent-making bats in their tree roost that we were able to marvel at just a few feet overhead. We knew that we were due to visit the canal locks in the afternoon and so hoped that we would be using the morning as profitably as possible in the pursuit of birds. What was needed now was a 'stick-in-the-mind' bird to stamp its mark on the day, and we were lucky enough to get two. Firstly, near to the mouth of the Chagres River, we had an amazon kingfisher using the riverside bushes to scan the water. Then the size scale dropped considerably as we next had an american pygmy kingfisher hunting a stagnant pool at the Ammo Dump. The latter bird was particularly obliging, allowing us to watch it for over fifteen minutes. The only other bird to catch the eye in between these two sightings was a blue-crowned motmot, another splendid member of its family.

After lunch it was off to watch the ships at the locks and to marvel at some of the insect exhibits on display at the visitor centre as well as take in the history of the canal. We could afford to do this in the safe knowledge that the birds would be waiting for us again tomorrow.

El Valle Extension

Day 8

Wednesday 5th May

We were due to leave for the Canopy Lodge today, but there was enough time to have a longer scan from the 'deck' first, and it came up with the goods. A fairly distant brown-hooded parrot was fine and, at last, a troop of howler monkeys came in very close to the Tower, which was a nice bonus. But best was seeing a bit of raptor action from up there. First a lazy-flapping, massive shape was found amongst the turkey and black vultures that turned out to be a black hawk-eagle. Our final memory from here was provided by the white hawk as one soared by before dropping into the treetops. Soon afterwards, two rose from the same spot and spiralled upwards before drifting off over the Canal. A fitting climax to what had been an impressive six and a bit days in the heart of the forest.

Then we were off west, almost to begin again in the different terrain of the higher ground of the interior. Arriving in a downpour, the first birds had to be viewed from under the covered area that formed part of the outdoor dining room at the Canopy Lodge at El Valle, and the rosette for first new bird of this second phase went (not surprisingly) to a tanager, the rather sombre dusky-faced. Before we left the lodge grounds on a birding jaunt, there was chance to acquaint ourselves with some of the new stars on show, first from the balcony of the rooms, where a rufous-capped warbler was the best addition to my list, and then at the feeders where the well stocked tables of bananas were an obvious attraction to many euphonias and tanagers.

Soon, we were literally off down the road on foot, which was appreciated after the longish drive we had had that morning. Traffic was fairly frequent but did not hinder the appearance of some great birds in the roadside vegetation. A tawny-crested tanager, although subtle in colouration, was still worthy in its own way, whilst a few contortions on our part brought restricted views of lance-tailed Manakin. Fasciated Antshrike was also back on the menu after our encounter on the first day of the holiday, this time in much better light and confirmed it as nearly, but not quite, as superb an animal as its barred cousin.

We then took a turn off the road and plunged back into humid woodland, and without much ado were soon party to yet another fantastic species of owl – this one even less expected, an awesome crested owl, and our closest encounter yet. This was fast becoming an extravaganza of birding riches, and all the better for us being utterly unprepared for some of the contents. Yet still there was another moment of pure fantasy to come. We had waited a while around some heliconia flowers that had previously been attractive to the white-tipped sicklebill on recent days, but it seemed that they were not visiting today so we walked on. We descended the valley down to the river, disturbing a buff-rumped warbler, ostensibly to view the waterfall. Having done so, a few of us wandered off to read some information boards only to be called back to the waterfall viewing platform. There in the semi-light, less than five meters in front of where we had been standing, was a resting sicklebill, quiet and motionless just a couple of metres above the rushing river. It was confident that we could not see it and so allowed walk-away views, which, as you might expect with such a prized bird, did not occur for some time! The return walk had the dapper scarlet-thighed dacnis showing well, just to round things off. As we had heard other new birds, and had glimpses of one or two other debutants in the woods, any suggestion that there might be a slowing of the pace on this second stage had already been well and truly dispelled!

Day 9

Thursday 6th May

A short ride to an area known as La Mesa meant we were out hunting for birds again very early in the day. Here, with a cool feel to the morning and heavy hill mist, seeing a jay seemed most appropriate, even if it was a black-chested one. We saw more later on and they made a nice addition to the list. Much smaller, a tawny-faced gnatwren was another bird that grabbed you more ‘in the flesh’ than the illustration in the fieldguide had given promise of. Before we plunged back into the woods, three more species gained our attention, the bold and obvious black-faced grosbeak, spanking silver-throated tanager, and the neat rufous and white wren. Things were a lot harder to see back in the forest amongst the abundant leaf-cutter ants, and it was quite a while until an orange-bellied trogon more than made up for the wait. If any bird can lift the mood it has to be one of the trogons. They generally show well, they are colourful and they stick around, usually uttering low, barking calls, and this one was no exception. What’s not to like? This was an interesting diversion which came while we were trying to pin down a thrush-like schifornis which sang its quaint little ditty from thick cover. With persistence one or two of us managed to pick it out deep within the tangle, not much to look at, but at least you could witness it squeezing the notes from its little body. A couple more woodcreepers were, well, woodcreepers, but in the dim lit conditions the impression left by the wedge-billed and the spotted was not a long lasting one. Back near the minibus we picked up a second new euphonia for the morning, adding yellow-crowned to the earlier tawny-capped. A few swallow-tailed kites brought a tough pre-lunch session to a close.

The afternoon at another spot local to the Lodge, namely Cariguana, was at first a bit short of new stuff, but you would have to be ultra critical not to enjoy seeing barred antshrike and rufous breasted wren once more. A pale-eyed pygmy tyrant was the first debutant for the holiday, but being small and sprightly was not easy to get onto.

It was left to Dani, our new guide, and his i-pod to conjure up something special, and a striped cuckoo most definitely fitted the bill. It certainly scored highly by showing clearly and at length (great 'scope views'), but it gave perhaps the worst rendition of a 'cuckoo' type call I'd ever heard. A lovely garden emerald proved to be no more than a stepping-stone to our next major highlight. At the fourth time of asking spread over two days, Dani's whistled 'impersonation' of a tody motmot at last paid off. This was a really prized 'must-see' bird, and we watched in near reverence as it perched low and unobtrusively in cover, swinging its tail from side to side in mock threat. On the walk back, a couple of blue-crowned motmots reminded us of their splendour, but there was only going to be one winner of the 'motmot of the day' title on this occasion.

Day 10

Friday 7th May

Was this the day that the superlatives ran out? It was another tough one, but Dani was unrelenting in his quest to bring new birds into view and we were left with the feeling that it couldn't really be this good. The cloud forest of the foothills of Altos Del Maria looked a bit worse for wear in places due to ongoing development. Yet from this apparently degraded habitat we managed eighteen fascinating and extraordinary new ticks including three 'write-ins'. The first half dozen could probably best be described as subtle, either in colouration – tufted flycatcher, pale-vented thrush, scale-crested pygmy tyrant, or demeanour, like the band-tailed barbtthroat hiding in the swirling mist. Grey-breasted wood wren probably stood out with its white spots on black throat combination. Then things really cranked up. Even though views of brown-billed scythebill were not cracking ones, the tell tale bill was clearly seen, and as we left the site where that had been we ran into a real gem, a purple-throated mountain gem to be exact. Barely visible on a cloud-shrouded branch at first, it dropped out of the murk to sit a couple of meters away at eye-level. Gem was certainly an apt description with its sky blue cap and the throat of its given name.

Returning to the four-wheeler for elevenses, we kept up our record of a new tanager on each day in the form of a common bush tanager. Red-faced spinetail opened the next phase, but was not seen satisfactorily seemingly due to us now being inside the clouds! A few minutes later and the brightness of the clearing sky actually hampered the view from some angles as we thrilled to the unexpected arrival of the emerald toucanet. Dani had tried to lure one in with the i-pod at several spots, and I for one thought that he was being very optimistic due to the disturbance that the forest had undergone in places. Yet here they were, a pair at a nest hole, and we all saw them in all their glory, unlike some of the birds of the forest interior that were to follow. It was not actually thronging with birds, but it did provide possibly the biggest upset of all, a black guan, a bird with a probability rating of below 1%. Only plain ant-vireo and white-throated spadebill were otherwise prized from this difficult habitat, one tiny reason to be thankful for some of the area being opened up I guess.

And it was back on one of those roads that we ran into a small roving flock that gave up russet antshrike and a more obliging red-faced spinetail. Surely that would be the end of the excitement? Not so. Dani thought he had detected the song of a bird he had been trying to call in, but stepping a few metres back into the forest we found something else instead, an even better looking toucanet, a female yellow-eared. This was fast becoming indescribable: a wonderfully coloured bird in full view going about its feeding habits, pulling at fruits to test their readiness – it was just like on television, only we were there! As it finally melted back into the canopy, we still had the small matter of the antpitta that Dani had originally heard. However despite this black-crowned antpitta sounding as if it was really close at times, only some brief unsatisfactory views were had. Recompense was gained whilst we waited as a tiny snowcap made a couple of sorties at some flowers right at our side.

We had only been at this place for about six hours, but such a carnival of colour and sound had been planted in our minds that they would surely play across our memories for the rest of our lives.

Day 11

Saturday 8th May

There was no carnival of colour today, at least not for the first few hours, as a dank morning in the foothills along the Rio Indio y Jordanal did not just subdue the plumages of the birds, it squashed them flat. The light was so poor that as good a bird as spot-crowned barbet was, it was rendered null and almost void. Being closer to the ground helped, and in that respect a lovely long-tailed tyrant put on a welcome display. A pair of plumbeous kites tried to lighten things up, but their name kind of said it all, and as for jet antbird! Still, we saw these birds and that was what mattered. We did begin to wonder, though, where any colour was to be found. Thankfully, red-throated ant tanager was on hand to glow in the gloom, a fine species that had not shown this well previously. Then came the bird of the day, another that I did not think was on the shortlist. It was knife's edge stuff as they came in closer and closer in response to Dani's i-pod but stayed well hidden. Then, there they were, the menacing looking barred puffbird. Being quite unlike the other members of their family that we had encountered, they were a must to see, and once they had arrived they stayed on show for some time, calling to the unseen intruder. A green kingfisher turned up near the bus as we prepared to retreat, and a black-headed tody flycatcher was a lucky addition for those looking in the right direction.

We had a lazy post lunch around the lodge, the grounds of which had already given great views of the smart bay wren that morning. A session at the banana feeders had crimson-backed, blue-grey, dusky-faced and flame-rumped tanagers, which were all occasionally muscled off by a clay-coloured robin. However, back at Cara Iguana, where we had quite a successful time a couple of days back, we had our first relative disappointment. Both common potoo and tropical screech owl had left the roosting sites on a private 'reserve' that they had been using until just the day before, and little tinamou gave only the briefest of views to some of the party. But you are never without reward for long in this special country, and the quietly impressive white-winged becard and long-billed starthroat soon took our minds off the missing trio. Best by far would have been a lance-tailed manakin lek, but the birds were buried deep in the tangle of the understorey. However we were just able to see and hear enough to know that something very strange was going on in there. So in conditions that were not always ideal, we had pushed ourselves to within ten or so of the magic 300 species for the trip. But numbers were certainly not at the forefront of our minds as the last full day approached, it was more a case of how privileged we were to be witnessing so many fantastic birds in some awe inspiring scenery.

Day 12

Sunday 9th May

Yet there was still one more type of habitat to visit, and today it was the lowland grassland at El Chrru where a new cast of characters awaited us. Straight from alighting the bus, we were watching red-breasted blackbirds, whilst a few paces distant we had a part-hidden ferruginous pygmy owl and a Veraguas mango in a tree above the roadside. On an already quite hot morning, our strategy was to walk a little then Dani would return for the bus and we would rest up and await his arrival. There were two areas to concentrate on, the trees and bushes lining the road, and the cattle pasture. It was the latter that held the next action when a white-tailed kite clashed with a peregrine falcon. Not bad, but this was soon bettered by an Aplomado falcon which popped up on a low vantage point nearby and proceeded to sit there for over thirty minutes. This meant that as we worked our way round the edge of the field, we were able to get improved vision as the angle of the sun changed.

The same also went for a more distant savannah hawk that was certainly a job for the telescope. Not everything was at eye-straining point though, the bushes turning up trumps with a rather coy rufous-browed peppershrike, and a more obliging male sapphire-throated hummingbird. There were many small seed eating birds in the field margins, with the blue-black grassquit perhaps done most justice by the bright sunshine, its pleasing metallic sheen showing nicely. A couple of groove-billed anis were not quite in that class.

After the usual mid-morning drink and snack break watching a soaring aplomado falcon and the flycatchers doing just that, we were soon on the trail of what we were warned might be a tricky bird to see. Dani's i-pod would be the all important tool in us trying to snatch a glimpse of a crested bobwhite which we could now hear calling about us. If we just watched a piece of bare ground between two patches of cover, he said, we might be lucky enough to see one run into the open. Dani duly played the call, but the bird had obviously not read the script and instead flew up into a nearby tree where our guide skilfully picked it out from the foliage, and it was a cracking bird. It then sat for an age calling relentlessly; probably thinking it had outwitted us with its cunning move. As a distraction to this, nearby trees held golden-fronted greenlet and mouse-coloured tyrannulet, but they did not truly serve the role of scene-stealers. More likely candidates were a marvellous fork-tailed flycatcher which posed well at length and a crested caracara on the track ahead as we moved onto the next leg of the trip and a chance to really relax.

We took lunch at a beachside apartment at Santa Clara overlooking the Pacific Ocean with its loafing boatloads of brown pelicans, and under a blue sky filled with hundreds of vultures and frigatebirds. This indeed was the life, with a drink in one hand and binoculars in the other scanning the distant island for brown or blue-footed boobies. And for those who had missed the adult male earlier, an immature male sapphire-throated hummingbird buzzed the garden flowers. I don't suppose it would have been too surprising if there had been grumbles at having to leave this magnificent scene, but in fact we were all keen to see what the last place on the agenda had to offer. Quite a lot as it turned out. The rice fields of Juan Hombron were busy with egrets, ibises, wood storks and the odd wader. They also held hunting cinnamon coloured savannah hawk, much more pleasing at this distance, and the hard to separate (from 'common' turkey vulture) lesser yellow-headed vulture. This was certainly a bird for the purist although we might have got a more conclusive look at them had a brisk wing not kept snatching them away. At the end of the road, in more respect than one, fleeting views of a straight-billed woodcreeper closed our account. If we had been in a casino, they would have thrown us out before now, however we had kept on winning to the very end. How could we lose in a country like Panama?

Day 13/14

Monday 10th/ Tuesday 11th May

Journey back to London

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