

## **Panamá Canopy Tower Family Birding Trip: June/July 2012**

by Josh and Kathi Beck

This trip completely blew us away. We birded seriously about 24 of the 30 days and had a couple of days relaxing at the beach and a couple of travel days. We had very little rain and had no days that were truly spoiled by weather. All told, with 15 guided days and the rest on our own, we saw 446 species and tallied 355 new birds for Kathi and 400 for myself. Crazy!

We spent the first two weeks at the Canopy Tower and Canopy Lodge. Then, on our last leg of the trip, we explored the lowlands of Darién. For our last couple of days we had fortuitously made arrangements with Raúl Arias de Para, founder/owner of the Canopy Tower and Lodge, to spend a couple of days with Nando, his guide who is managing the construction of the new Canopy Camp Darién. That ended up working out brilliantly (thank you, Raúl and Nando) and as a result we had a wonderful last 2 ½ days of our trip birding several areas between and around Metetí and Yaviza, including a preview of the coming Canopy Camp Darién with Nando.

### ***6/19 – Mexico City airport, Panamá City, Canopy Tower***

During a long morning layover in Mexico City we wandered out of the airport and were quite surprised to find some really good birds in some not so great habitat. We came across Inca Dove, Curve-billed Thrasher, Canyon Towhee and Loggerhead Shrike (!) in the traffic circle and surrounding medians / edges immediately outside the airport. Notably, the shrikes appeared to be tending a nest in this inhospitable urban environment!

Arriving in Panamá City our first bird was **Magnificent Frigatebird** from the plane window on approach, and we saw **Red-breasted Blackbird** out the window while taxiing! We arrived at the Canopy Tower mid-afternoon and had some beers while watching Geoffrey's Tamarins and about 25 of the more common species from the observation deck. It was pretty amazing to have just arrived and have **Gartered Trogons, Blue Dacnis, Keel-billed Toucan** and more greeting us. Particularly exciting were a pair of **Black-breasted Puffbirds** that flew in and perched a few meters from us, and we had the trio of **Band-rumped Swifts, Short-tailed Swifts** and **Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts** whirling overhead.

### ***6/20 – Semaphore Hill Rd, Ammo Dump Ponds***

Our first morning at the Tower was as authentic as they come with Howler Monkeys' deafening roar for an alarm clock. Watching the sun rise from the observation deck is a wonderful way to start the day, and is something I would do every day if I could! Exciting new birds of the morning included **Slaty-tailed Trogon, Collared Araçari, Lesser Greenlet, Scaled Pigeon** and much more from the deck before breakfast! After breakfast we had a terrific morning on Semaphore Hill Rd with a ton of activity. Immediately upon leaving the Tower we found an ant swarm and in just minutes had great looks at **Ocellated Antbird, Bicolored Antbird, Gray-headed Tanager** and **White-breasted Wood-Wren**. Other highlights of the morning were **Shining Honeycreeper, Green Shrike-Vireo, Broad-billed Motmot, Olivaceous Flatbill, Cinnamon Woodpecker, Black Hawk-Eagle, Hook-billed Kite** and **Golden-crowned-Spadebill**. A bit of rain delayed the start of the afternoon but also gave us a good opportunity to watch a pair of **Crimson-crested Woodpeckers** out the front door of the Tower. The ammo ponds were terrific, providing ample opportunity to study the differences between the Kiskadees and Rusty-margined and Social flycatchers, as well as our first **Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Gray-necked Wood-Rail, Green Kingfisher, and Yellow-rumped Cacique** among many. The highlight, though, was a **Least Bittern** in flight and on the fringe of the pond that afforded

terrific looks.

### *6/21 – Plantation Road, Chagres River*

Plantation Road was one of our favorite destinations for sheer beauty and the feeling of immersion beneath the canopy. A brief morning rain at first had us worried but it soon relented and we had a quite birdy morning, again, with **Song Wren, Spotted Antbird, Boat-billed Heron** (odd location and masterful spotting and scoping by Alex), **White-whiskered Puffbird, Blue-crowned Manakin, Gray-headed Kite, Red-capped Manakin, Black-throated Trogon,** and **Purple-throated Fruitcrow** as the highlights. This morning also provided one of our absolute best experiences of the trip when a **Streak-chested Antpitta** perched in clear view within about 5 meters and sang for several minutes puffing its chest up and down and hopping along the forest floor. Amazing!

The afternoon at Chagres River was a little slower but we were again able to get a lot of experience with some of the confusing flycatchers. We also had better looks at **Rufescent Tiger-Heron** and we were lucky to see the only **American Pygmy Kingfisher** of the trip.

### *6/22 – Pipeline Rd*

This was a day we had been looking forward to and it really didn't disappoint. We were happy for a day with more walking and less driving, beautiful scenery, great weather in a peaceful place, and some of the best birds of the trip. We tallied around 80-90 species for the day including **Dusky Antbird, White-tailed Trogon, Black-tailed Trogon, Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo, Spot-crowned Antvireo, Moustached Antwren, Pied Puffbird, Tawny-faced Gnatwren, Carmiol's Tanager, Northern Barred-Woodcreeper, Semiplumbeous Hawk** and **Royal Flycatcher**. The Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo crossed the trail just a few meters behind us and we almost missed it, but it luckily perched and sang back in the forest, allowing us to go in after it. Some stealthy sneaking into the woods brought us within view and we were able to watch it singing from its perch for several minutes. Already one of the highlight birds of the trip, little did we know we'd have an even better sighting while at the lodge, incredible! The day was quite busy throughout and was capped by a pair of Royal Flycatchers on the drive out. Hats off to Alex for keen ears! Fairly non-stop with amazing birds all day long, this was definitely one of our favorite days!

### *6/23 – Metro Park and Old Gamboa Rd*

The Metro Park held a lot of good birds, even if not as idyllic as locations like Pipeline Rd and Plantation Rd, due to its metropolitan setting. Still, though, we had a good bevy of new birds and an impressive total, including **Golden-collared Manakin**, a terrific mixed species flock with numerous **Red-throated Ant-Tanagers** and numerous **Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers** allowing comparison, **Greenish Elaenia, Lance-tailed Manakin, Rosy Thrush-Tanager, Golden-fronted Greenlet** and **Forest Elaenia**.

Heading down from the Tower en route to Old Gamboa Rd, we had a great sighting of **Great Tinamou** with two chicks just a few meters into the forest. The afternoon was excellent and quite active again, with amazing looks and photo opportunities of **Capped Heron**, more looks at another hidden **Boat-billed Heron**, one of only two sightings in a month of **Yellow-billed Cacique**, and a definite highlight in the form of a roosting **Spectacled Owl**. We found the setting peaceful and enjoyable. Old Gamboa Road was one of our favorite destinations in the Canal area.

Returning to the tower, we got there just in time to have good looks in the fading light of **Bat Falcon** hunting from a perch just a couple of meters from the observation deck.

### *6/24 – Cerro Azul*

Ultimately this would be one of the best days of the trip and despite a light rain at the start, we saw several of our best and rarest birds of the entire month here. We started things off with a bang in the form of a **Fasciated Tiger-Heron**, a bird Alex hadn't seen in 3 years! The Cerro Jefe trail started a bit slow but we were still happy to see **Long-billed Gnatwren**, **Violet-capped Hummingbird**, **Stripe-throated Hermit** and **Little Tinamou**. Moving to Birder's View Lodge, we had lunch amid a whirlwind of hummingbirds and had a couple of invaluable hours studying and learning not just males but females as well of at least 15 hummingbird species, with the highlights being a **Green-crowned Brilliant** and terrific looks at a gorgeous male **Rufous-crested Coquette**. Things got even better from there with a mixed species flock that included **Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker**, **Scarlet-thighed Dacnis**, **Speckled Tanager**, **Emerald Tanager** and **White-ruffed Manakin**. Add in the terrific **Yellow-eared Toucanet** and it was an amazing day. We even had three flyovers of Blue-fronted Parrotlet but none that provided good enough views to satisfy.

### *6/25 – Achiote Road*

Although quite a hot day, we were not bothered and we were excited to get to the Caribbean side of the canal and to see a new set of birds. Unfortunately, the beginning of Achiote road is really quite busy with traffic which was a bit of a bummer. Traffic aside, we did find a lot of good birds, including **Spot-crowned Barbet**, **Yellow-backed Oriole**, **Black-headed Saltator**, **Dusky-faced Tanager**, **Gray-capped Flycatcher**, **Savannah Hawk** and a surprise **Scaly-breasted Hummingbird**. Cold beers on the train ride back were a terrific way to finish a week at the tower and we had brief looks at numerous blurry **Snail Kites** as we sped by.

### *6/26 – Afternoon at Canopy Lodge*

After a last morning on the observation deck and a morning ride to El Valle (thankfully our rain for the day fell during the drive), we had a great lunch at the Lodge then went out for the afternoon on the trails near the waterfall. An **Eye-ringed Flatbill** was a highlight for certain, though Sepia-capped Flycatcher and Scaly-breasted Wren (aka Southern Nightingale-Wren) were ones that got away, sadly. A perched **Mottled Owl** was a nice surprise! The real cap to the day, especially after missing it at Cerro Azul, was our successful evening stakeout of a **White-tipped Sicklebill**. The little guy (or girl) came in to roost for the evening, allowing us to watch him pump his tail and get settled for a good 20 minutes in fading light.

### *6/27 – La Mesa and Cara Iguana*

La Mesa, above El Valle, was a gorgeous morning and perhaps our favorite destination in the immediate El Valle area. We had our first **Silver-throated Tanagers** which, while not rare, were still one of the most beautiful birds of the trip and, among Tanagers, second only to the Speckled Tanager for us. We had our only **Plain Antvireo**, **Orange-bellied Trogon** and **Barred Hawk** of the trip, along with **Tawny-crested Tanager**, **Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant**, and **Black Hawk-Eagle**.

Our afternoon at Cara Iguana was a little slower and was a bit of a residential neighborhood, perhaps not as scenic as other destinations, though a **Rufous-and-white Wren** was beautiful and the highlight was certainly a pair of **Tody Motmots** that we were able to watch for an extended period as they sat and wagged their tails side to side (tic-tock, tick-tock). A terrific experience and another highlight of the trip for certain.

### *6/28 – Juan Hombron and Santa Clara*

While there was a bit of driving and birding from the car involved on this day, it accessed totally new habitat on the dry Pacific lowlands and we saw a spate of new birds, many that we would see only once. While the highlight was certainly an **Aplomado Falcon** that we observed as it stole a small mammal in-flight from an Egret, we had a large number of species overall including **Crested Caracara, Scrub Greenlet, Pale-eyed Pygmy-Tyrant, Mouse-colored Tyrannulet, Brown-throated Parakeet, Yellow-crowned Parrot, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Striped Cuckoo** and **Crested Bobwhite**. A post lunch swim at Playa Santa Clara and a belly full of ripe mangoes made for a pretty stellar afternoon that was capped with some more really great birds – **Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Pale-breasted Spinetail, Straight-billed Woodcreeper** and **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl**. Hats off to Danilo for his persistence in looking for the Woodcreeper and Spinetail!

### *6/29 – La Mesa and Valle Chiquita*

Visiting a different area of La Mesa on a slightly rainy morning had some nice surprises for us including **Buff-rumped Warbler, Barred Forest-Falcon, White-lined Tanager** and **Bran-colored Flycatcher**.

After lunch, nice sunny weather provided the perfect setting for our first match with the rope swing, something not to be missed!

The afternoon in Valle Chiquito, a gorgeous little valley was again a fairly similar line up of birds, but **White-bellied Antbird** was good and unfortunately the **Sepia-capped Flycatcher** I had fleeting looks at didn't hang around long enough for anyone else to see it!

### *6/30 – Altos del Maria*

Another terrific day and, despite a lot of fog and drizzle and couple bits of heavy rain, quite birdy and very fun. We had our firsts of many birds that would be common in Chiriqui, but some highlights were definitely **Blue-throated Toucanet, Black-and-yellow Tanager, Red-faced Spinetail, Thrush-like Schiffornis, Snowcap, White-tailed Emerald, Black-faced Grosbeak, Long-tailed Tyrant** and in a real bit of luck, a **Black-eared Woodquail** that we managed to finally see after an hour's persistence stalking it through the forest. Not as colorful or easy as others but definitely one of our rarest and most difficult birds of the trip.

### *7/1 – La Mesa, Cerro Gaital*

For our penultimate day in El Valle, we had a treat. First, we revisited the waterfall area and were treated to a solid half an hour of viewing a Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo in early dawn light, even getting some decent pictures considering the very low light. Next, we chose to invest some time chasing the Black-crowned Antpitta, which Danilo was kind enough to agree to. Danilo knew where to go looking and this time we were rewarded as a **Black-crowned Antpitta** came in and circled us and serenaded us for several minutes. Another one of our favorite birds and best experiences of the trip. Thank you Danilo! While the morning was not super busy after the Black-crowned Antpitta chase we did see a **Green Thorntail** which was a nice surprise.

An afternoon hike of Cerro Gaital was a bit wet in spots and very slow, but it didn't bother us as it was quite beautiful, snaking our way through some very tranquil woods. Kathi managed to get barely good enough looks at the master skulker **Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush**, we tracked down our only **Blue Seedeater** of the trip, and we found a **Gray-breasted Dove** sitting on her nest.

## *7/2 – Rio Indio, Jordanal*

With a gorgeous remote mountain setting, numerous really good mixed flocks, and another day of birding in a whole new habitat on the Caribbean slope, this was another terrific outing. Danilo graciously agreed to a very early start to spend some time looking for the Sunbittern near the waterfall. 30-40 minutes of prowling the dark trails along the stream paid off and we had really nice looks at a **Sunbittern** just around dawn for few minutes before it disappeared down the stream and we piled back in the truck for the drive to Rio Indio. Rio Indio is just a brief stop on the way down the slope, but it really paid off with **Pacific Antwren**, **Great Antshrike** and **Rufous-breasted Hermit**. A bit further down we stopped for some activity and were lucky to have two **Barred Puffbirds** and the noisy flock of mobbers they attracted. Our first **Crested Oropendolas** were about (they would be quite scarce until the Darién). We had our first **Cinnamon Becard** (also scarce until the Darién) followed by our only **Short-billed Pigeon**, **Sulfur-rumped Tanagers** and **Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner** of the trip. We started back a touch early to ensure a pre-rain return for the stream crossings, which left time to chase and finally find **Wedge-tailed Grass-Finch** as we drove back through La Mesa. A surprise **Black Guan** on the drive out capped a terrific last day at the Lodge!

## *7/15 – Metetí and future site of Canopy Camp Darién*

Returning from Patiño we had Ancon drop us at Hotel Felicidad in Metetí, where we stayed for the next couple of nights. Not deluxe but it was clean and we slept well and it set us back all of \$14 / night. Killing a few minutes behind the hotel we found **Olivaceous Piculet** and **Streak-headed Woodcreeper** again. We soon met up with Nando, who carted us around the Darién for the next 2 ½ days. Our first stop was the future site of Canopy Camp Darien. It sits on prior ranch land at the foot of primary forest in the Filo del Tallo reserve. It's quite a scenic spot and from what we were told will host a tent camp and a sustainable farm to grow the produce for the camp as well. It looks like it should be quite a gorgeous spot when completed, and it is well situated for birds! We arrived in the dead middle of a HOT day and still saw some amazing birds. On one little trail into the forest and just around the grounds we found **Golden-headed Manakin**, **White Hawk**, **Long-tailed Tyrant**, **Black-cheeked Woodpecker**, **White-headed Wren**, **Long-billed Starthroat**, **Rufous-tailed Jacamar**, **Pied Puffbird**, **Little Tinamou**, **Red-rumped Woodpecker**, **Gray-cheeked Nunlet** and **Red-throated Caracara!** The Jacamar, Nunlet and Caracara were definitely highlight birds for us and we had amazing looks at the first two. After this Nando took us to an area he knew and we found **Spot-breasted Woodpecker**, an absolutely gorgeous bird and one we had really hoped to find.

## *7/16 – Filo del Tallo, Fundacion Tierra Nueva, Yaviza, El Salto*

In the morning we hiked in Filo del Tallo from the Puerto Quimba Rd entrance. It was a bit slow but very pretty, and we found some good birds including **Black Antshrike**, **Pale-bellied Hermit**, **Pied Puffbird**, **Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher**, **Wedge-billed Woodcreeper**, **Golden-headed Manakin** and **Scaly-throated Leaf-tosser**. Driving south from here we found a **Pearl Kite** again. Our next stop was at a place called Fundacion Tierra Nueva, to look for Golden-green Woodpecker, which we unfortunately did not turn up. We headed on farther to Yaviza and on the way found both **Yellow-hooded Blackbird** and **Black-capped Donacobius** at roadside locations! In the Yaviza area it took a bit of patience but we did find the **Black Oropendola** as well as **Yellow-breasted Flycatcher**, more **Spot-breasted Woodpeckers** and **Rufous-tailed Jacamars**. Our last stop of the day was the El Salto Road, which was quite nice, providing some good forest habitat edge. We found **White-eared Conebill**, **Crimson-crested Woodpecker**, **White-necked Puffbird**, **Olivaceous Piculet**, **White-headed Wren**, **Blue Ground-Dove** and **Bare-crowned Antbird** among quite a long list of other birds.

*7/17 – El Salto, Fundacion Tierra Nueva, Aruza Abajo*

In the morning we briefly returned to the El Salto as I had missed the **Bare-crowned Antbird** and it paid off as we saw it again handily. We added **Crane Hawk** and **King Vulture** before leaving El Salto. El Salto is a really nice spot. We tried again for the Golden-green Woodpecker at Fundacion Tierra Nueva, taking a bit longer and doing some more hiking, but didn't find it again. Nonetheless this is another nice spot and we saw **Orange-crowned Oriole, Black Hawk-Eagle, Short-tailed Hawk, Cinnamon and White-winged Becards** and **Olivaceous Piculet** again. After lunch we headed a good ways out into cattle ranching land to a wetland area called **Aruza Abajo**. It's a bit of work to get there but it's a great spot. On the way out there we had a **Capped Heron** in a pond beside the road, and at Aruza Abajo we found **Cocoi Heron, Limpkin, Rufescent Tiger Heron, Purple Gallinule, Pied Water-Tyrant, Striated Heron, Black-capped Donacobius, Spot-breasted Woodpecker, Pied-billed Grebe, and Amazon Kingfisher**. On the way out we stopped in a couple of spots and found **White-eared Conebill, Lineated, Red-rumped and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, Gray Hawk, Green-crowned Woodnymph and Golden-collared Manakin**.

And that finished our trip. What a spectacular adventure we had, and what a wonderful country to visit and bird in!