



# Birding in Panama – from forest floor to canopy

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**E**laenia, euphonia, mango, piha, plumeleeter, Eriopendola, saltator, schiffornis, sirystes, tityra... They do not ring a bell? Well, all these, for many readers, unfamiliar bird names represent species or groups of species that can all be found in Panama – together with many more! Panama forms the land bridge connecting North and South America. Due to this position, it also connects the avifaunas of both continents and this is reflected by an impressive list of over 970 species, a list higher than those of Canada and the USA combined. With a total surface of c 75 000 km<sup>2</sup> Panama is about twice the size of the Netherlands and slightly larger than Ireland. It lies between 7° and 10° N, measures c 650 km from west to east and varies from 50 to 150 km in width. It is bordered by the Caribbean Sea in the north and Pacific Ocean in the south, and flanked by Colombia in the east and Costa Rica in the west. With 3-3.5 million inhabitants, it is relatively thinly populated; 37% of its land area is protected as nature reserves. Large parts of the country are mountainous and forested, with higher mountains especially in the west (Chiriquí highlands) and east (Darién). The highest point, 3477 m above sea level, is the Volcan Baru in Chiriquí.

The country is best known for the Panama Canal, opened in 1914, which is of enormous importance for global shipping transport. Panama had been a province of Spain from 1502 to 1821 and then part of Greater Colombia, until, in 1903, with help from the USA, it became independent. In return for this help, the USA was granted authority over the canal and a 16-km wide canal zone. On 31 December 1999, both the canal and the Canal Zone were returned to the Panamanian authorities. The American influence in the country has been strong and is still notable in many aspects. For instance, the US dollar is the standard currency and English is widely spoken (Spanish being the official language).

Panama has 12 endemic bird species (see table 1), a number that has reached double figures in recent years because of a number of ‘upgrades’ (former subspecies elevated to species level). Some are confined to offshore islands; in central Panama only two to three endemic species are

found. Of all species on the Panamanian list, 95 are ‘restricted-range species’ (as defined by BirdLife International, ie, with a global historical range of less than 50 000 km<sup>2</sup>). Five of the 221 Endemic Bird Areas (EBA) identified by BirdLife International throughout the world reach into Panama and cover c 70% of the total surface (Central American Caribbean slope, Costa Rica and Panama highlands, South Central American Pacific slope, Darién highlands and Darién lowlands; BirdLife International 2009). The first three EBAs are shared with Costa Rica, and the last two with Colombia. The number of species in central Panama (here defined as the area covered by the checklist of Carlos Bethancourt (2007)), is almost 600 and, during a trip of 10-15 days, 300-350 species can be seen in summer and 350-400 in winter, when the resident species are accompa-

**339** Canopy Tower, Soberanía National Park, Panama, 15 June 2009 (*Enno B Ebels*)



TABLE 1 Endemic bird species in Panama / endemische vogelsoorten in Panama (cf [www.panamaudubon.org](http://www.panamaudubon.org))

Brown-backed Dove <i>Leptotila battyi</i>	Beautiful Treerunner <i>Margarornis bellulus</i>
Azuero Parrakeet <i>Pyrrhura eisenmanni</i>	Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker <i>Piculus collopterus</i>
Veraguan Mango <i>Anthracothorax veraguensis</i>	Yellow-green Tyrannulet <i>Phylloscartes flavovirens</i>
Escudo Hummingbird <i>Amazilia handleyi</i>	Green-naped Tanager <i>Tangara fucosa</i>
Glow-throated Hummingbird <i>Selasphorus ardens</i>	Pirre Bush-Tanager <i>Chlorospingus inornatus</i>
Coiba Spinetail <i>Cranioleuca dissita</i>	Yellow-green Finch <i>Pseliophorus luteoviridis</i>

nied by a substantial number of wintering North American species (including many New World warblers). Christmas Bird Counts show that, in winter, it is possible to record 300 or more species on a single day. In addition to central Panama, the Chiriquí highlands are a well-known birding destination offering many species not found further east due to its higher elevation (c 2000 m above sea level and higher). The Darién is the least accessible part of Panama and rarely visited by ‘ordinary’ birders but some tour operators organize birding trips to this region (see [www.canopyreport.com](http://www.canopyreport.com) for useful links).

Panama offers excellent birding, due to its rich avifauna, relatively small size, decent infrastructure and a number of specialized accommodations, catering for all types of birders or budgets (see, eg, Cocker 2006, Mitchell 2007ab). For birders from the Old World, Panama offers relatively easy access to Neotropical birding. This paper introduces Panama as a birding destination and focuses on the central part around Panama City, where most of the foreign visitors will start their tour, with the emphasis on forest birding. It is based on three visits by Roef Mulder (in January 2007, March 2009 and June 2009, the last one together with Enno Ebels) and study of literature (eg, Angher 2006, Angher et al 2006), trip reports and relevant websites, as well as information by contacts in Panama (see Acknowledgements). In June 2009, EE and RM observed almost 300 species during nine days of birding. The best field guides to use in Panama are Ridgely & Gwynne (1989; somewhat outdated when it comes to distribution and taxonomy) and van Perlo (2006; with distribution maps and up-to-date taxonomy but with only very short texts accompanying the plates; this guide covers all Central American countries and, as a result, the distribution maps for Panama are not very accurate). Field guides for adjacent countries (eg, Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico) are useful as well.

### When to go and where to stay?

The climate in Panama is mainly tropical. It has a distinct rainy season (aptly renamed the ‘green

season’) which lasts from May to mid-December. The other half of the year is therefore better for birdwatching, especially since in winter the avifauna is even more diverse thanks to the many wintering northerly species. This said, the rainy season still offers very good birding opportunities and, although the showers can be very heavy, they are mostly confined to a few hours a day and are rather predictable, making it possible to plan your day’s birding ‘around the showers’.

With direct (almost) daily flights by KLM from Amsterdam to Panama City (10-11 h flying time), the country is relatively easy to reach from the Netherlands and other European countries. Travelling to Panama is easy: most foreign visitors do not need visa, for central Panama health precautions are generally not necessary (but check the latest status with your medical advisor), and, generally, the safety level is high. English is widely spoken, especially in tourist areas or birding accommodations.

In central Panama, there are several hotels and lodges that are ideal bases for birders and wildlife enthusiasts. Best known are the Canopy Tower in Soberanía National Park and the Canopy Lodge in El Valle. During our visit in June 2009, we (EE and RM) stayed at both sites for four to five days. The Canopy Tower, at c 300 m above sea level, is a former US army radar tower that was transformed into a birding hotel in 1999. It has a small number of guest rooms, a dining and living room on the upper level and, on top, a 360° viewing platform that looks out over the surrounding forest. The viewing deck is just high enough to look down on the canopies of the largest trees. In the distance, the skyline of boomtown Panama City (45-min drive by car) and the Panama Canal can be seen. The tower literally takes the birders up to the birds: the bird life in the canopy is very rich and many species can not or at least not easily be seen from the ground, or only viewing up against the light and in the distance – not ideal viewing conditions. The forest around the Canopy Tower looks and feels like primary forest but is, in fact, secondary forest, regrown after the canal zone was cleared in the early 20th century. Farming and logging were



**340** Spotted Antbird / Vlekborstmiervogel *Hylophylax naevioides*, Forest Discovery Center, Panama, 13 June 2009  
(Roef Mulder)

**341** Dull-mantled Antbird / Grijskruinmiervogel *Myrmeciza laemosticta*, male, El Valle, Panama, 18 June 2009  
(Roef Mulder)





**342** Western Slaty Antshrike / Westelijke Gevlekte Mierklauwier *Thamnophilus atrinucha*, female, Pipeline Road, Panama, 4 March 2009 (Roef Mulder)

**343** Spot-crowned Antvireo / Vlekkapmiervireo *Dysithamnus puncticeps*, male, El Valle, 8 March 2009 (Roef Mulder)





**344** Black-crowned Antpitta / Zwartkruinmierpitta *Pittasoma michleri*, male, El Valle, Panama, 18 June 2009  
(Roef Mulder)

**345** Black-headed Antthrush / Zwartkopmierlijster *Formicarius nigricapillus*, male, El Valle, Panama, 19 June 2009  
(Roef Mulder)



permitted on the edges of the Canal for the first couple of decades after the opening but serious erosion problems evoked the urgency to preserve the forest. This recovery proves that – if given enough time – tropical forest can re-establish itself (provided that ecological corridors are still intact). The surroundings of the tower hold some excellent birding sites, including the entry road (Semaphore Hill Road) through the forest itself, Old Plantation Road, the ponds near Gamboa Ammo Dump, Old Gamboa Road and the famous Pipeline Road with the recently established Forest Discovery Center (with another tower overlooking the forest). This road of c 18 km length is famous because along it more than 400 (!) bird species have been recorded (Angher 2006) and, along the Caribbean part of the road, an impressive 357 species were recorded within 24 hours during the 1990 Christmas Bird Count (Raúl Arias de Para in litt). The first part can be explored on foot or by car (access by car after the first 2 km is limited to permit holders); the final kilometers are now off limits because of the Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpiya* breeding center that has been established here, aiming to reintroduce this raptor in central Panama.

The Canopy Tower itself is an excellent spot to observe raptor migration in spring and, especially, autumn, when as many as 150 000 raptors have been counted. The skies above the forest can also be full of hirundines and swifts and even the odd Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens* may be spotted; they regularly follow the canal to cross overland from one ocean to the other.

The Canopy Lodge (2 h drive from Panama City)

**346** Ocellated Antbird / McCleannans Miervogel  
*Phaenostictus mcleannani*, Pipeline Road, Panama,  
13 June 2009 (Roef Mulder)



is a more conventional but delicately designed lodge next to a small stream on the outskirts of El Valle, at c 650 m above sea level. With a series of feeders in the garden, this place is just the opposite of the tower: it brings the birds down to the birders and many hours can be spent just watching the birds feeding on the bananas. El Valle is situated in the caldera of a long extinct volcano. In the surrounding hills, largely covered by cloud-forest, several (half-)day excursions can be made, including to Cerro Gaital Natural Monument and the cloud forest of Altos del Maria, with altitudes reaching 1600 m above sea level. For the higher unpaved roads, a four-wheel drive car is necessary.

Both the tower and the lodge employ several excellent guides who help to find, identify and sometimes lure the birds by imitating their sounds and this strongly boosts the efficiency of your birding hours in the field. The tower and lodge have both been realized by Raúl Arias de Para; through these accommodations, he aims to increase environmental awareness and stimulate ecotourism in the country. Although Panama is ahead of many countries in some respects (eg, hunting is forbidden in the entire country), there are serious environmental problems, especially regarding the pace of deforestation.

Several other lodges and hotels also cater more or less exclusively for birders; for addresses and information, see the list of useful websites and addresses below.

Panama Bay offers shorebirds and seabirds and a half-day visit to the coast can strongly boost the trip-list, although many of the species present

**347** Streak-chested Antpitta / Brilmierpitta *Hylopezus*  
*perspicillatus*, male, Pipeline Road, Panama,  
12 June 2009 (Roef Mulder)



along the coast are easily seen in large parts of the Americas.

### Birds on different levels

It is impossible to discuss all bird habitats and interesting species in one single paper and some focus is necessary. The chapters below give an impression of the bird life in the forests of central Panama, mainly in the areas around the Canopy Tower and Canopy Lodge. It is interesting to see the stratification of species along the vertical column of the forest. Of course, not all species are strictly confined to a certain level but generally speaking, there is a distinctive avifauna of the forest floor and undergrowth (0-5 m above the ground), many birds are confined to mid-level (5-20 m) and some are most at home – or most easily observed – at canopy level (20+ m). This division roughly follows Ridgely & Gwynne (1989), who divide the forest in five components, of which the lower three are combined here.

#### Forest floor

The lowest level of the forest is dominated by species that have a relationship with ants. Several groups are named after them (combined in the family Formicariidae): antbirds, antpitta's, antthrushes, antvireos, antwrens and ant-tanagers. Most birds of these families are dull coloured, with brown, black and grey being the dominant colours, sometimes admixed with some white or a patch of bare blue skin. The forest floor is a very damp and dark world, where strong plumage colours have little visual impact and where song plays a very important role in display and mate finding. Good sites for forest floor birding are the entrance road to the Canopy Tower, Old Plantation Road, Pipeline Road and the Forest Discovery Center, the Metropolitan Park in Panama City and the surroundings of El Valle, including Cerro Gaital. Finding these secretive species depends partly on the chances to encounter swarms of army ants; these ants are known for their aggressive predatory groups ('raids'), in which huge numbers of ants forage simultaneously over a certain area, attacking prey. These swarms disturb all insects (and other small animals) on the forest floor and thereby attract many bird species. Sound imitation may help to bring the birds in view for some time. The prize bird of the forest floor is Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo *Neomorphus geoffroyi*, a very rare large cuckoo that is almost exclusively found near ant swarms. In June 2009, we observed, with some directed effort, seven species of antbirds (*Dusky Cercomacra tyrannina*, White-

bellied *Myrmeciza longipes*, Chestnut-backed *Mexsul*, Dull-mantled *Maemosticta*, Spotted *Hylophylax naevioides*, Bicolored *Gymnopithys leucaspis* and Ocellated Antbird *Phaenostictus mcleannani*), four species of antshrikes (Fasciated *Cymbilaimus lineatus*, Banded *Thamnophilus dohertyi*, Western Slaty *Tatrinucha* and Russet Antshrike *Thamnistes anabatinus*), three species of antwrens (Checker-throated *Myrmotherula fulviventris*, White-flanked *Maxillaris* and Dot-winged Antwren *Microrhopias quixensis*), two species of antthrushes (Black-faced Antthrush *Formicarius analis* and Black-headed Antthrush *F. nigricapillus*), two species of antvireos (Plain Antvireo *Dysithamnus mentalis* and Spot-crowned Antvireo *D. puncticeps*) and two species of antpittas (Black-crowned Antpitta *Pittasoma michleri* and Streak-chested Antpitta *Hyllopezus perspicillatus*). Spot-crowned Antvireo is a species to pay special attention to, because it regularly operates as flock leader. In addition to most of the antbirds, most species of wrens Troglodytidae are also confined to the lower part of the forest; in central Panama, 13 species can be found.

The forest floor is also home to Great Tinamou *Tinamus major* and Little Tinamou *Crypturellus soui*; the calls of Great are a familiar wake-up call in the forest around the Canopy Tower and when you are lucky, one may be seen crossing the road or track. Little is (even) more difficult to see but several were heard around El Valle in June 2009. Along streams in the forest, eg, those crossing Pipeline Road, with luck Agami Heron *Agamia agami*, Green Ibis *Mesembrinibis cayennensis* and Sunbittern *Eurypyga helias* can be found (all three were observed in March 2009 but not in June 2009); Sunbitterns sometimes take up temporary residence along the stream near the Canopy Lodge. Forest streams and rivers are also home to one of the very few warbler species breeding in central Panama, Buff-rumped Warbler *Phaeothlypis fulvicauda* – this species moves from rock to rock in a fashion most reminiscent of a dipper *Cinclus*.

#### Mid-level

Many bird species occur in the lower trees up to c 20 m in the forest but are rarely seen in the canopies. As a rule of thumb, many species occurring at this level are more colourful than the ground-dwelling species discussed above but still dark or dull colours dominate. Many species are predominantly dark with some contrastingly colourful accents on head or belly, such as the manakins Pipridae, trogons *Trogon* and hummingbirds Trochilidae (in the latter group, the iridescent



348 Rufous-crested Coquette / Vuurkuifkoketkolibrie *Lophornis delattrei*, male, El Valle, Panama, 9 March 2009 (Roef Mulder)

349 Blue-chested Hummingbird / Blauwborstamazilia *Amazilia amabilis*, Canopy Tower, Soberanía National Park, Panama, 11 June 2009 (Roef Mulder)





**350** Rufous-tailed Hummingbird / Roodstaartamazilia *Amazilia tzacatl*, Forest Discovery Center, Panama, 13 June 2009 (Roef Mulder)

**351** Snowy-bellied Hummingbird / Edwards Amazilia *Amazilia edward*, Canopy Lodge, El Valle, Panama, 17 June 2009 (Roef Mulder)





352 Long-billed Hermit / Grote Heremietkolibrie *Phaethornis longirostris*, Forest Discovery Center, Panama, 6 March 2009 (Roef Mulder)

353 Stripe-throated Hermit / Kleine Streepkeelheremietkolibrie *Phaethornis striigularis*, El Valle, Panama, 16 June 2009 (Roef Mulder)





**354** Green-crowned Brilliant / Groenkruinbriljantkolibrie *Heliodoxa jacula*, Los Quetzales, Chiriquí, Panama, 11 March 2009 (Roef Mulder) **355** White-vented Plumeteer / Buffons Pluimkolibrie *Chalybura buffoni*, Forest Discovery Center, Panama, 13 June 2009 (Roef Mulder) **356** Violet-crowned Woodnymph / Paarskroonbosninf *Thalurania colombica*, female, Forest Discovery Center, Panama, 13 June 2009 (Roef Mulder)





**357** White-tipped Sickletail / Haaksnavelkolibrie *Eutoxeres aquila*, El Valle, Panama, 16 June 2009 (Roef Mulder) **358** Violet-headed Hummingbird / Paarskopkolibrie *Klais guimeti*, female, Canopy Lodge, El Valle, Panama, 15 June 2009 (Roef Mulder) **359** White-necked Jacobin / Witnekkolibrie *Florisuga mellivora*, Forest Discovery Center, Panama, 6 March 2009 (Roef Mulder) **360** Violet-bellied Hummingbird / Paarsbuikkolibrie *Damophila julie*, Forest Discovery Center, Panama, 13 June 2009 (Roef Mulder) **361** Red-capped Manakin / Geelbroekmanakin *Pipra mentalis*, male, Canopy Tower, Soberanía National Park, Panama, 2 March 2009 (Roef Mulder) **362** Orange-bellied Trogon / Oranjebuiktrogon *Trogon aurantiiventris*, male, Cerro Gaital, Panama, 9 March 2009 (Roef Mulder)

colours are often concealed and only become visible in bright sunlight). Good sites to find these species are the entrance road to the Canopy Tower, Pipeline Road, the Forest Discovery Center (with many feeders on the terrace of the visitors center), the Metropolitan Park and the surroundings of El Valle, including Cerro Gaital, but also forest edges or more open woodlands, eg, Old Gamboa Road and Gamboa Rainforest Experience. Hummingbirds are typical birds of this level, although sometimes they may feed close to the ground or rise high up to the flowers in the canopies. 34 species have been recorded in the area covered by Bethancourt (2007), including one endemic (Veraguan Mango *Anthracothorax veraguensis*). In June 2009, we managed to see 27 of them and RM made special efforts to photograph as many as possible. Several species occur in the gardens of the Canopy Lodge. Some of the most spectacular ‘hummers’ are White-tipped Sicklebill *Eutoxeres aquila* with its strongly decurved bill (which feeds almost exclusively on *Heliconia* flowers), the tiny Rufous-crested Coquette *Lophornis delattrei* (more easily observed in winter when birds descend from the mountains), the even smaller Snowcap *Microchera albocoronata*, White-necked Jacobin *Florisuga mellivora* and the aptly named Long-billed Starthroat *Heliomaster longirostris*. Species with a restricted range (ie, occurring in Central America and limited parts of adjacent South America) and therefore of special interest to visiting birders are, eg, Rufous-tailed *Amazilia tzacatl*, Blue-chested *A amabilis* and Snowy-bellied *A edward*, Violet-headed *Klais guimeti* and Violet-bellied Hummingbird *Damophila julie*, Stripe-throated Hermit *Phaethornis striigularis*, Long-billed Hermit *P longirostris*, Violet-crowned Woodnymph *Thalurania colombica*, White-vented Plumeleater *Chalybura buffoni* and Green-crowned Brilliant *Heliodoxa jacula*.

Six species of trogons occur in central Panama (White-tailed *T viridis*, Violaceous *T violaceus*, Orange-bellied *T aurantiiventris*, Black-throated *T rufus*, Black-tailed *T melanurus* and Slaty-tailed Trogon *T massena*) and all six were seen during our visit in June 2009. All are predominantly dark-looking but with bright colours on the underparts and undertail and strong shining on the upperparts and wings. They normally stay above eye-level and up to the higher branches of the trees and often sit motionless for quite some time, making them difficult to find (when they are not calling or singing). Once found, however, they can often stay in view for quite some time. Motmots Momotidae show rather similar behaviour and

can often be found sitting motionless – apart from their swinging tail – on a branch; three species occur commonly in central Panama: Blue-crowned *Momotus momota*, Rufous *Baryphthengus martii* and Broad-billed Motmot *Electron platyrhynchum*. The much smaller Tody Motmot *Hylomanes momotula* is a very different bird and harder to find, although, in June 2009, we heard several birds calling around El Valle, some even close to the Canopy Lodge.

Manakins are small birds that compensate their small size by spectacular display behaviour involving peculiar clicking sounds made by the wings and funny ‘walks’; the males of most species in Panama are black with strongly contrasting plumage parts (blue, red, white or yellow on head or back), whereas the females are all dull green-yellow. During our visit in June 2009, we observed all five species occurring in central Panama (Golden-collared *Manacus vitellinus*, White-ruffed *Corapipo altera*, Lance-tailed *Chiroxiphia lanceolata*, Blue-crowned *Lepidothrix coronata* and Red-capped Manakin *Pipra mentalis*).

The most numerous family on the checklist of central Panama are the tyrant-flycatchers Tyrannidae, with 70 species. This group ranges from the tiny and delicate Southern Bentbill *Oncostoma olivaceum* to the fierce-looking large Boat-billed Flycatcher *Megarynchus pitangua* and the common Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus*. It includes one of the three endemics that occur in central Panama, Yellow-green Tyrannulet *Phylloscartes superciliaris*; one of the best places to look for this species is probably the Metropolitan Park in Panama City. Some tyrant-flycatchers can be found rather low in the dark forest (eg, Brownish Twistwing *Cnipodectes subbrunneus* and Olivaceous Flatbill *Rhynchocyclus olivaceus*) but many are more confined to forest edges, road sides and open areas with scattered trees with convenient outposts to perch and perform fly-catching flights.

### Canopy

The canopy is a very rich bird habitat and many species spend most of their life high up in the trees of the tropical forests. Some species may rarely or never be seen if one lacks the opportunity to get a view on the canopies of the trees, as offered by the Canopy Tower and the Forest Discovery Center. Although again not a fixed rule, it is noteworthy that many of the species occurring in the canopies are the most colourful of the whole forest. Apparently, birds here have no intention to hide themselves and, in addition to their gaudy



**363** Blue Dacnis / Blauwe Pitpit *Dacnis cayana*, male, Forest Discovery Center, Panama, 13 June 2009  
(Enno B Ebels)

**364** Golden-hooded Tanager / Purpermaskertangare *Tangara larvata*, Canopy Tower, Soberanía National Park,  
Panama, 11 June 2009 (Roef Mulder)





**365** Green Honeycreeper / Groene Suikervogel *Chlorophanes spiza*, male, Canopy Tower, Soberanía National Park, Panama, 11 June 2009 (Roef Mulder)

**366** Red-legged Honeycreeper / Blauwe Suikervogel *Cyanerpes cyaneus*, male, Canopy Lodge, El Valle, Panama, 10 March 2009 (Roef Mulder)



plumages or bare parts, many are quite vocal as well. The colourful families encountered in the tree tops are, for instance, two species of dacnises, the larger toucans, many species of tanagers, the honey-eaters and several species of parrots Psittacidae. Collared Aracari *Pteroglossus torquatus* and Keel-billed Toucan *Rhamphastos sulfuratus*, with its huge multicoloured bill, are common birds of the canopies, whereas Chestnut-mandibled Toucan *R swainsonii* may be somewhat less conspicuous. The two large species of parrots, Red-lored Parrot *Amazona autumnalis* and Mealy Parrot *A farinosa*, often fly in groups over the forest or can be seen (and heard) perching in dead trees. The smaller species (eg, Orange-chinned Parakeet *Brotogeris jugularis*, Blue-headed Parrot *Pionus menstruus* and Brown-hooded Parrot *Pionopsitta haematotis*) are less conspicuous and are mainly seen in flight. Some of the smaller species seen at canopy level are amongst the most colourful of the region: these include Blue Cotinga *Cotinga nattererii*, Blue Dacnis *Dacnis cayana*, Green Honeycreeper *Chlorophanes spiza*, Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus* and Crimson-backed Ramphocelus *dimidiatus*, Blue-gray *Thraupis episcopus* and Golden-hooded Tanager *Tangara larvata*. The tanagers are difficult to assign to a certain level in the forest. Although some occur mainly in the tree tops, they can be found much lower as well and several species come to the feeders at the Canopy Lodge regularly. Most tanagers are not true forest birds and are more often seen at forest edges, in gardens and in open areas with scattered trees. During our visit in June 2009, we saw 20 species of tanagers (24 if the closely related dacnises and honeycreepers are counted), including less common species such as the small Black-and-yellow Tanager *Chrysothlypis chrysomelas* (endemic to Costa Rica and Panama) and the beautiful Emerald Tanager *T florida*.

Euphonias are small brightly coloured finch-like birds (males being mainly bluish black and yellow) that are often seen high in the trees but that also regularly come down to feed. Thick-billed Euphonia *Euphonia laniirostris* was, at least in June 2009, the most common species on the feeders at the Canopy Lodge. Yellow-crowned Euphonia *E luteicapilla* is also common but we were lucky to see three other species as well that are less common and more difficult to see: Fulvous-vented *E fulvocrissa*, White-vented *E minuta* and Tawny-capped Euphonia *E anaeae*.

Not every bird of the canopy is brightly plumaged and one of the largest but dullest must be the rare Black Guan *Chamaepetes unicolor*, a large

chicken-like species that slowly moves through the tree tops. We were lucky to spot one of these secretive birds at Cerro Gaital. This species only occurs in Costa Rica and western Panama and is listed as 'Near Threatened' by Stattersfield & Capper (2000).

Mixed feeding flocks of passerines can often be found in the tree tops and challenge birders to identify all the species in the flock. These flocks are more common in the dry season (northern winter) and, at that time of the year, will contain both resident species as well as wintering passerines from North America. No less than 28 New World warblers Parulidae can then be encountered in central Panama; in sharp contrast, the number of breeding warblers is very small (apart from Buff-rumped Warbler, see above), only Tropical Parula *Parula pitiayumi* and Rufous-capped Warbler *Basileuterus rufifrons* breed in the area.

### Photography

With so many species around, bird photographers can find enough challenges in Panama. Bird photography is not easy, at least not in the forest and certainly not in the rainy season. Light conditions are generally poor, the air can be very humid, rain may be pouring down, birds are hard to find among the leaves and branches, birds higher up in the trees are often strongly backlit and many species move about rather quickly. The inevitable combination of long shutter speeds and large diaphragms easily results in unsharp images or images without a decent field of depth. Photographing with a relatively slow 500 or 600 mm lens in the forest is very difficult because of the low light levels; at the same time, the use of a tripod (or monopod) helps little because birds move too fast and quick reactions are impossible. Exceptions are fixed places where birds often return and where the light conditions are better, such as the feeders at the Canopy Lodge. Thanks to the rapid developments in photographic equipment, new possibilities have been offered by hand-held stabilized cameras with medium-length lenses (200-400 mm). This combination makes it possible to work without a tripod and to react quickly when birds are moving around ('point and shoot') and still get sharp images, even with low shutter speeds. Given the fact that many forest birds are not shy, they often are close enough for these medium-length lenses to do the job. Nearly all photographs accompanying this paper were taken by RM using a stabilized Nikon 300 mm lens. For some of the forest floor images, eg, the Ocellated Antbird photographed just after heavy



367 Black Guan / Zwarte Goean *Chamaepetes unicolor*, Cerro Gaital, Panama, 18 June 2009  
(Roef Mulder)

368 Brown-hooded Parrots / Roodoorpapegaaien *Pionopsitta haematotis*, El Valle, Panama, 18 June 2009  
(Roef Mulder)





369 Keel-billed Toucan / Zwartborsttoekan *Rhamphastos sulfuratus*, Pipeline Road, Panama, 15 March 2009  
(Roef Mulder)

370 Collared Aracari / Halsbandarassari *Pteroglossus torquatus*, Canopy Tower, Soberanía National Park, Panama,  
11 June 2009 (Roef Mulder)



rain showers (plate 346), a shutter speed of 1/20 (!) of a second had to be used to capture enough light, on ISO setting 2200... Use of flashlight in the forest may help to get sharper images but the effect is often a less natural 'feel' because of the strong shadows and overexposed pale areas – and flash may scare the bird away.

Digiscoping is even more difficult than normal photography, because of the low light levels and narrow field of view when using a telescope. Many birds are gone before you can find them with your telescope, let alone before you can photograph them. However, from the Canopy Tower and Forest Discovery Center or near the feeders at the Canopy Lodge, where the light conditions are much better, some nice results can be obtained (eg, plate 363). Also, some hummingbirds tend to have favourite perches which, with some luck, may be out in the open and they can then be digiscoped at close range. In addition, with so many new birds for many visitors, digiscoping can be useful to take record shots of many birds seen, to hold track of the observations and to be able to (re)identify birds later.

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### **Useful websites and addresses**

#### *Accommodation and travelling*

[www.visitpanama.com](http://www.visitpanama.com); [www.canopytower.com](http://www.canopytower.com) (Canopy Tower); [www.canopylodge.com](http://www.canopylodge.com) (Canopy Lodge); [www.gamboaresort.com](http://www.gamboaresort.com) (Gamboa Rainforest Resort); [www.panamalaverde.com](http://www.panamalaverde.com)

#### *Birding information*

[www.canopyreport.com](http://www.canopyreport.com) (includes links to many other useful sites); [www.geocities.com/xenornis](http://www.geocities.com/xenornis); [www.birdingpanama.com](http://www.birdingpanama.com); [www.birdinginpanama.com](http://www.birdinginpanama.com); [www.panamabirding.com](http://www.panamabirding.com); [www.xeno-canto.org](http://www.xeno-canto.org) (sound-recordings); [www.panamaaudubon.org](http://www.panamaaudubon.org).

#### *Addresses*

Canopy Tower/Canopy Lodge, c/o Apartado 0832-2701, World Trade Center, Panama, Republic of Panama, telephone +507-2645720 or +507-2149724, fax +507-2632784, e-mail [birding@canopytower.com](mailto:birding@canopytower.com)

### **Samenvatting**

VOGELN IN PANAMA – VAN BOSBODEM TOT BOOMKRUIJN In dit artikel wordt Panama als bestemming voor vogelreizen geïntroduceerd. Dit relatief kleine Midden-Amerikaanse land vormt de landbrug tussen de Amerikaanse continenten en heeft een oppervlakte van ongeveer twee keer Nederland; het land heeft een indrukwekkende lijst van meer dan 970 vogelsoorten. Door de beperkte reisafstanden, de goede infrastructuur, de grote soortenrijkdom en de adequate voorzieningen is Panama een zeer geschikt land om kennis te maken met de rijke avifauna van Midden- en Zuid-Amerika, vooral als het gaat om de soorten van het tropische regenwoud. In het centrale deel van Panama, aan weerszijden van het Panamakanaal, bevinden zich diverse goede vogellocaties, daarnaast zijn bergen in het westen (Chiriquí) en oosten (Darién) een goede bestemming, hoewel Darién door de afgelegen ligging moeilijker toegankelijk is. In Panama komen 12 endemische vogelsoorten voor (zie tabel 1), waarvan slechts een beperkt aantal in het centrale deel van het land te vinden is. Tijdens een vogelreis van 10-15 dagen kunnen met goede voorbereiding en/of gidsen ter plaatse in de zomerperiode c 300-350 vogelsoorten worden waargenomen en in de winter, wanneer de standvogels worden aangevuld met overwinterende (zang)vogels uit Noord-Amerika, 350-400. De beroemdste vogelplek in Panama is Pipeline Road bij Gamboa; langs deze 18 km lange onverharde weg door het regenwoud zijn meer dan 400 soorten vastgesteld. De nabijgelegen Canopy Tower, een tot 'ecolodge' omgebouwde oude radartoren, biedt vogelaars de mogelijkheid om vanaf het bovenste dek op de boomkruinen van het oerwoud te kijken. Het artikel bespreekt nog een aantal andere goede plekken, zoals het Forest Discovery Center bij Gamboa en de omgeving van El Valle met de Canopy Lodge.

Om inzicht te geven in de ornithologische 'bevolkingsopbouw' van het regenwoud worden aan de hand van drie zones in het bos de meest karakteristieke vogelsoorten en families besproken. In de donkere en vochtige onderste regionen (0-5 m vanaf de bosbodem) komen vooral overwegend 'kleurloze' soorten (zwart, grijs, bruin en wit) voor met een vaak verborgen levenswijze, zoals verschillende miervogels; deze soorten zijn vaak te vinden in de nabijheid van door het bos trekkende zwermen van soldaatmieren. Het middenniveau (5-20 m boven de grond) kent een grote soortenrijkdom. Vaak gaat het om overwegend donker gekleurde soorten met een beperkt aantal kleurige accenten (geel, rood, oranje, paars, blauw) in het verenkleed. De vele soorten kolibries die in Panama voorkomen zijn vaak in deze zone te vinden, hoewel ze soms (vooral bij 'feeders') ook lager komen en bij rustig weer ook in de boomkruinen foerageren. De boomkruinen (20+ m boven de grond) vormen een aparte wereld die vanaf het maaiveld vaak moeilijk te observeren is ('stijve-nek-vogelen'); locaties die de mogelijkheid bieden om op boomkruinhoogte te vogelen hebben daarom een toegevoegde waarde. Hoog in het regenwoud leven vooral grote, felgekleurde en vaak luidruchtige soorten en ook de kleinere soorten zijn vaak fel en bont gekleurd.

Als afsluiting van het artikel wordt ingegaan op de



**371** Red-lore Parrots / Geelwangamazones *Amazona autumnalis*, Canopy Tower, Soberanía National Park, Panama, 15 June 2009 (Roef Mulder). Forest view from Canopy Tower, with Panama City in background.

mogelijkheden voor vogelfotografie. Door de grote verscheidenheid en de spectaculair getekend soorten is het een aantrekkelijke bestemming voor vogelfotografen maar in het regenwoud zijn de omstandigheden vaak erg lastig (weinig licht, vochtig, slecht zicht) en vraagt het goed fotograferen veel geduld en inzet. In deze omstandigheden is het fotograferen uit de hand met een gestabiliseerde lens met niet al te grote vergroting (200-400 mm) het meest geschikt, omdat met dergelijke apparatuur snel gereageerd kan worden op wendbare vogels in het bos. ‘Digiscopen’ is in het regenwoud en eigenlijk alleen geschikt om bewijsplaatjes te maken, behalve als aan de bosrand of op een uitkijkpunt boven de bomen de lichtomstandigheden beter zijn.

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