

## Trip Report – Half Day Birding Pipeline Road

*Bill Maynard, Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA*

We had already seen over 200 butterfly species on **Panama's Brilliant Butterflies** tour with Jenn and Tino, so now it was time to go birding. In the back of Canopy Tower's 4x4, Jan, Richard, and I sat on bench seats, hands gripped tightly on seat backs as the pickups' left back tire dug deep into the thick mud at a juncture where most vehicles are forced to stop. We were miles down the World famous Pipeline Road which during the green (rainy) season is sometimes a muddy track. The pipeline was constructed, but never used, during WWII to insure a supply of oil would always be available for transport from the Caribbean to the Pacific Ocean in case the Panama Canal was destroyed. However, the service road is used daily. Small, but colorful tropical butterflies fluttered in the understory but few bird calls had been detected until Canopy Tower's bird guide/driver, Domi, slowed to a stop, then jumped to the ground. He was keenly listening to all the calls, many now suddenly close. Domi heard a **Bicolored Antbird's** loud contact note, an indicator an army ant swarm was nearby. Only one antbird and no ants were viewable from the rutted road, a very large, brown, and very cool **Northern Barred Woodcreeper**, a professional army ant follower. I wanted to walk into the lianas, the true tropical rain forest where subdued green twilight is the rule; we all did, so Domi instructed us to tuck our pant legs into our socks, telling us to let the ants walk over our boots and ankles, easier said than done for gringos living in a temperate climate. Once inside the forest, we became believers in magic. Five **Bicolored Antbirds** foraged very close to the ant columns when suddenly a rare (here) **Ruddy Woodcreeper** flew in above the spectacle. Next up was a large, obligate army ant follower and one of our most wanted birds, an **Ocellated Antbird**, one of the most spectacular and highly sought after antbirds with a bright blue bare eye patch and dark scalloping above and below, a sight now etched into our retinas. We focused on this large antbird's movements in the darkest recesses of the humid forest understory while we tried to ignore the scores of other visual stimuli awaiting our inspection. The buffy wingbars of a female **Spotted Antbird** were soon detected as the bird called, then moved towards the insects fleeing from the ant raid, and the first of two **Plain Woodcreepers** appeared on the trunks of tall, mostly nameless tropical trees in front of us. All binoculars now focused on these recent arrivals. We were instructed to listen for loud, bill-snapping of a **Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo** but we settled instead on watching the swarming ants, now moving in wide columns up two large *Ficus* trunks. Sweat-covered and back on the road, now grinning with childish delight, we shifted our attention to an electrifying blue morpho butterfly fluttering seemingly drunkenly past us, followed by an even larger, brownish, owl butterfly and another rarity for this location, a **Speckled Mourners**; the bird was seen perched above. We were now on a roll, a **Blue-crowned Manakin** was suddenly in view and a **Slaty-tailed Trogon** and a **Rufous Motmot** both were seen as they perched on a horizontal limb not far above us. A **Crimson-crested Woodpecker** hammered on a tree trunk. We realized luck was with us as Domi searched and searched for a calling **Thrush-like Antpitta**. We could hear it but that was all when Domi waved us to a spot where we could leisurely view this awesome "egg on legs." On the way out of this tropical paradise, perhaps a green Hell to a non-birder, we stopped again at the tree where a nesting **Great Potoo** had been seen in prior weeks. After angling back-and-forth to find the only spot with a view, Domi came through once again, this time with a scope-filling view of the recently fledged potoo, a cryptically colored jumble of feathers

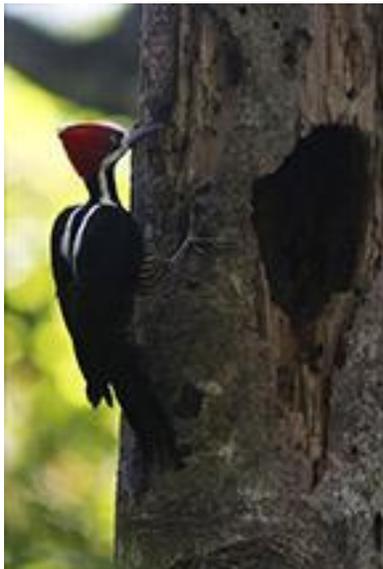
perched on a stub, looking more like a vertical lichen-covered branch than a bird. We missed the two **Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoos** having crossed the road five minutes before our exit. Had we seen them we may never have left. We may, or may not return again, but we will certainly not soon forget the incredible wonders of Panama's Pipeline Road and the excellent Panamanian bird, butterfly, and natural history guides from Panama's Canopy Family.



Rufous Woodcreeper and...



Bicolored Antbird – Pipeline Road ©Bill Maynard



Crimson-crested Woodpecker



...and Spotted Antbird – Pipeline Road ©Bill Maynard