



Sunrise Birding LLC
**Bocas del Toro &
 Tranquilo Bay**
 March 4 – 11, 2017
TRIP REPORT



Snowy Cotinga, Red-capped Manakin, Golden-collared Manakin by Steve Bird. Group photo by Gina Nichol.



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Local Guides: Natalia DeCastro Gonzalez & Jim Kimball

Sunrise Birding Leaders: Gina Nichol & Steve Bird

The islands of the Bocas del Toro archipelago owe their uniqueness to the species variation in this stunning area of Western Panama. In addition to the many idyllic islands, the heavily forested slopes that rise from the Caribbean Sea to continental divide of the Talamanca range serve as a lifeline for an array of regionally endemic Neotropical species. Panama's famed Western Caribbean Slope boasts nearly 500 species of birds. Our inaugural tour to the Bocas del Toro archipelago was based at a very comfortable new lodge on the island of Bastimentos in the Isla Bastimentos Marine Park. Tranquilo Bay Eco Adventure Lodge overlooks the Caribbean Sea and its central location within the archipelago allows exploration of the varied habitats of the Western Caribbean Slope while staying in comfortable, well-appointed accommodations. Our itinerary included several boat trips to explore the archipelago as well as some mainland visits for a comprehensive exploration of the region.

The tour was by all accounts a resounding success combining a warm winter getaway with great birding.

Highlights included:

- Snowy Cotinga
- Boat-billed Heron
- Double-toothed Kite from the tower
- Black Swift from the tower
- Pair of Black-and-White Owls at the Chocolate Farm
- Checker-throated Antwren
- Olive-backed Euphonia
- Golden-collared Manakins at the lek
- Hummingbirds bathing
- Migration of thousands of raptors
- 500 Swallow-tailed Kites migrating
- Crimson-collared Tanagers copulating
- Sloths
- Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs (*Oophaga pumilio*) of all colors



Finsch's Parakeets, Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth, Masked Tityra by Gina Nichol.

Day 1:

By later afternoon everyone had arrived today and we met for our welcome dinner and to discuss plans for our trip up to Bocas in the morning.

Day 2:

Early this morning, we flew from Panama City to historic Bocas Town on Isla Colon, the first headquarters of the United Fruit Company, also known as Chiquita Brands. Flying into the airport we had our first views of the many islands of the archipelago. We opted to walk through town to meet our transit boat to the island and this gave us a glimpse of the town's quirky Caribbean architecture and melting pot of cultures as well as close views of Pale-vented Pigeons. We boarded two boats and were soon on our way from Isla Colon toward Tranquilo Bay. The 30-minute boat ride passed through the marine portion of Bastimentos Island National Marine Park and on our way we had our first looks at Magnificent Frigatebird.

On arrival we were immediately treated to a delicious breakfast and then settled into our lovely cabanas for the next 6 nights. We regrouped later in the morning and birded the grounds with local guide, Natalia and one of the lodge owners, Jim. We had our first views of Prothonotary Warbler from the deck of the main lodge, and from there we also had Masked Tityra and a female Blue Dacnis. On the grounds we had good views of Red-lored Parrot, a pair of Shining Honeycreepers, and a species new for the lodge, Black-throated Mango.



We spent the afternoon exploring some of the trails of the lodge with Natalia. We walked through the stunning forest and hiked up Pineapple Hill, a small elevated clearing at the forest's edge and at one point, went off trail to a spot where some birds were bathing in a small secluded pool. First into the pool was a gorgeous male Red-capped Manakin, then Crowned Woodnymph but the Purple-crowned Fairy with its fluttering flight above the pool stole the show. A Stripe-throated Hermit made a brief appearance and we fully enjoyed our glimpse of the private lives of hummingbirds! Further on Natalia showed us where she was growing vegetables and herbs to make her legendary hot sauce. While she was explaining a White-throated Crake called and despite our best efforts, we could not see it. Rain ensued and we returned to our cabins to get ready for dinner.

Day 3:

After a delicious Panamanian breakfast, we headed to the dock for 6:00 AM hoping that the rain relentless overnight rains would subside. As daylight came up we boarded the

boat and traveled across the bay to the town of Punto Robalo on the mainland. We worked our way up toward the continental divide of the Talamanca Range, between the provinces of Bocas del Toro and Chiriquí making several birding stops along the way. Rain showers plagued us throughout the day but we made the best of it. Highlights of



our first stop included a group of **Green Ibis** (Photo: Gina Nichol) foraging in the open, a noisy pair of Southern Lapwings and great views of Red-breasted Blackbird. A rest stop offered excellent views of Boat-billed Heron including several on nests. Continuing on, another stop in the cloud forest saw us Emerald Tanager, Silver-throated Tanager; Black-and-Yellow Tanager, Yellow-throated Chlorospingus, Bat Falcon, and Scarlet-thighed Dacnis. Near Fortuna Reservoir we had two Great Black Hawks above the dam and noted some Magnificent Frigatebirds flying over (noted a little far from the ocean but we mused that this may be where they cross the land mass). There were a few Swallow-tailed Kites with the may Black Vultures and we had a few large flocks of White-collared Swifts passing over. On the way down, highlights included a pair of Crimson-collared Tanagers copulating, good views of Collared Aracari and Yellow-throated Toucans and a few Keel-billed Toucans. Back down for the boat crossing we had close Royal Terns, Cabot's Tern perched on a half floating dock and during the crossing we had both Parasitic and Pomarine Jaeger.

DAY 4:

This morning after breakfast we took a short boat ride through Dolphin Bay to Buena Esperanza and Green Acres Chocolate Farm, an artisanal chocolate farm. We were greeted by Robert the owner who welcomed us and showed us the first of several frogs on the grounds of this beautiful piece of mainland forest. We admired the beautiful gardens and then



birded around the Cacao trees that were being grown to produce organic chocolate. Highlights here included several psychedelic Green-and-black Poison Dart Frogs, *Dendrobates auratus*, a pair of Double-toothed Kites that looked to be gathering nest building material, a pair of **Black-and-White Owls** (Photo:

Gina Nichol) roosting together under the canopy, a pair of Gartered Trogons, Black-chested Jays, Pied Puffbird; Black-capped Pygmy Tyrant, and Olive-backed Euphonia.



Back at the main house, Julie, Robert's wife, showed us a selection of products made at the farm and we tasted delicious chocolate covered coffee beans and chocolate liquor. We returned to our island for another delicious lunch and a mid-day siesta and then headed into the forest trails to visit the Golden-collared Manakin lek. The lek was moderately busy and offered great views of this charming little bird.

DAY 5:

After an early breakfast we were once again off on the boat to the mainland to explore the lowland forest and open habitats. As we crossed the bay, we had four Pomarine Skuas sitting on the water. We docked in Almirante and then boarded our minibus and set off for the day. We birded a few areas in Valle Risco where we had good views of Crimson-fronted (Finsch's) Parakeets and Blue-headed Parrots. On a quiet road (La Gloria), we found **Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs** (Photo: Gina Nichol), Checker-throated Antwren, Lineated Woodpecker, and on the way back down we had nice views of a Long-tailed Tyrant. We stopped at the parrot field again and noted a raptor migration occurring with mainly Swallow-tailed Kites (400-500) and a few Plumbeous Kites. There was a Swainson's Hawk or two, Broad-winged Hawk, 3 Osprey, and a few Double-toothed Kites. In the midst of all of this, Steven spotted a Snowy Cotinga which allowed excellent views from fairly close range. Bob needed White-collared Seedeater so we walked down the hill to see it. Meantime, Natalia heard Black Hawk Eagle so we scanned the skies to find another migration going on. This one contained hundreds of Turkey Vultures and closer to us there were two nice White Hawks glowing in the mid-day sun. Gray-rumped Swifts were close overhead as well.



We made a lunch stop at small roadside café and as we were mid-taco, Jim reported a migration along the ridge behind. There were kettles of Turkey Vultures and Swainson's Hawks moving through numbering in the thousands. Following the raptor trail in the sky you could see birds from horizon to horizon. We tried to count but mostly enjoyed and marveled at the spectacle. We estimated perhaps 100,000 Turkey Vultures and at least 30+ Swainson's Hawks in this river of raptors.

We finished up the day on a quiet road with two male Brown-throated Three-toed Sloths in close trees and a variety of butterflies feeding on some sap high in a tree.

DAY 6:

We wanted to spend more time exploring the grounds of the lodge today so we met for coffee on the verandah at 6:30 AM and were off into the forest. Natalia heard and then found one of the Red Strawberry Dart Frogs (*Oophaga pumilio*) and proceeded to tell us about the color variation in these creatures resulting in 20-30 color morphs of this species.

Heavy rain drove us out of the forest and we sat on Christine and Steven's deck for a while watching White-crowned Pigeons on some tree tops and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird bathing in the rain. Today it seemed like every time we went out it rained but even so we managed: White-flanked and Dot-winged Antwren, Golden-collared Manakin, good views of Masked Tityra, Tropical Gnatcatcher, Tawny-crested Tanager, Red-throated Ant Tanager, and Blue-black Grosbeak.

Later in the afternoon we went to the tower and had great views of a **Double-toothed Kite** (Photo: Gina Nichol) that sat on a dead balsa nearby the whole time we were there. We enjoyed the antics of Black-cheeked Woodpeckers and close flying Red-lored Parrots and a few Blue-headed Parrots. Later on we took an evening boat cruise to Isla Popa, the second largest island in the Bocas del Toro archipelago, and had good views of Keel-billed Toucan, Eastern Kingbird, and noted several Montezuma Oropendolas with nesting material flying around.



Day 7:

Today after breakfast we headed toward "the canal" more commonly known as San San Pond Sak Wetlands is a designated Ramsar site and part of the La Amistad UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. As the sun rose, we were crossing the bay and reached the entrance to the Snyder Canal and navigated over the

sandbar with the help of some of the boatman who pushed us over the last bit. We cruised the entire length of the historic Snyder Canal, which was constructed in the 1890s to transport bananas from the Changuinola River Valley to the protected waters of Almirante Bay at Boca del Drago, where they were loaded onto transport ships. The canal was vital in establishing The United Fruit Company, and the very beginnings of what would become, “The Banana Republic”.



We cruised slowly and birded from the boat finding an assortment of herons and kingfishers as well as Nicaraguan Seed-Finch, Black-cowled Oriole, Northern Jacana, and Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and a few Common Tody-flycatchers. Some swifts were flying over and photos later revealed that they were **Spot-fronted Swifts** (Photo: Steve Bird), an excellent record for this area.

The other side of the canal at the mouth of the Changuinola River was blocked by a sandbar so we transferred over to another boat and cruised up the river. Here we encountered large flocks of Blue-winged Teal and American Wigeon and saw several Common and Purple Gallinules, Neotropic Cormorant, Anhinga, Greater Yellowlegs, and Mangrove Swallows. While we were cruising our crew had set up lunch on the sandbar but Jay thought better of it when he noticed about 1000



no-see-um bites on his legs. We moved back up the canal stopping at the place where Natalia had spent 5 years doing sea turtle research. We had lunch on the raised walkway and then walked to Soroopta Beach, a nesting ground for Leatherback and Hawksbill Sea turtles. There were no nests nearby but there were a few Collared and Semi-palmated Plovers on the beach as well as a small flock of Sanderlings. On the way back we checked the forest and had quick glimpses of White-collared Manakin (Almirante race with the yellow collar). We cruised back out the canal and crossed the sandbar again and then headed out to look at the sea and access to Bird Island. We started off and found the swell to be too much so headed back to the sheltered waters of the bay. Cruising back we had good views of Brown Booby, Parasitic Jaeger, Royal Tern, Sandwich (Cabot's) Tern, and a Black Tern. Back at Tranquilo Bay, we got packed and cleaned up for our final dinner of the trip.

Day 8:

Today we relished the veranda on last time and departed after breakfast. Some of us continued into the highlands for the extension while Gina and Steve headed back to Panama City.

It was an enjoyable week filled with fond memories and the great birds of Tranquilo Bay and its environs. Thanks to all who participated in this tour and special thanks for the wonderful people at Tranquilo Bay for making our time there so enjoyable.

Gina & Steve

