



Sunrise Birding LLC
PANAMA Canopy Camp
September 4 - 9, 2016
TRIP REPORT
Report & Photos by Luke Tiller



Photos, top to bottom: Striped Cuckoo, Great Potoo, Harpy Eagle.
Our group was the first to see this Harpy Eagle at its nest site!



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Leaders: Carlos Bethancourt & Luke Tiller

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We started off our tour in Panama City; with the group meeting at the hotel for an evening meal and an outline of our plans for the next five days from Canopy Family guide extraordinaire Carlos Bethancourt. The hotel was nicely positioned a few minutes from the airport and the grounds provided enough habitat to attract a few of Panama City's common bird species: Barred Antshrike, Clay-colored Thrush and Blue-gray Tanager for those whose flights arrived early enough in the day for birding.

Day 1

We started our day heading out on the Pan American Highway, southbound towards the Darién. Our first stop along the road was a slight detour up into some habitat along the Caribbean slope at Nusagandi. Though a light drizzle had been falling in the morning (it was green season after all), as we pulled up the rain eased and we started into our first Panamanian birding proper with great scope views of a lovely adult Double-toothed Kite. After hearing a few more birds, we were suddenly presented with our first spectacular sighting of the trip: Keel-billed Toucan, its bill a rainbow of incredible beauty. Next up another toucan, this time in the shape of the no less impressive Yellow-throated Toucan. Yellow-throated Toucan seems to be in a world of shifting taxonomy and is probably better known to many in its previous incarnation: Chestnut-mandibled Toucan.



Other birds gave themselves up from the cover of the surrounding forest including Collared Aracari, Black-cheeked Woodpecker and a particularly showy **Gartered Trogon** (previously Violaceous).

As the skies cleared, raptors began to pick up from the forest around us including beautiful Plumbeous Kites. With the rising temperatures more raptors picked up and we soon found ourselves watching as first small and then larger groups of incredibly graceful migrating Swallow-tailed Kites floated up and out of sight as they made their way south. Before too long it was time to join the kites in their southward movements as we headed to Torti for our lunch stop.

The Avicar Hotel and Restaurant is a great roadside stop which promises both hummingbird feeders and some birds in the trees and flowering plants surrounding the covered deck. We arrived under sunny skies and a feeder setup being resolutely guarded by three **Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds** (a common but beautiful species). About ten minutes after we arrived however the skies blackened and it poured with rain. As the skies cleared the rain seemed to have invigorated the bird activity (as often happens in the tropics) and the feeders were suddenly alive. So much as to make concentrating on eating our lunch somewhat difficult. Between mouthfuls of delicious food, we enjoyed equally delicious birds: Long-billed Starthroat, Scaly-breasted and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds. Surrounding trees also provided a nice mix of passerines including Black-bellied Wren and both Yellow-crowned and Paltry Tyrannulet.



Post lunch, after eating up some miles on the rapidly improving Darién section of the Pan American Highway we arrived at the camp to be greeted by cool drinks and a feeder full of new hummingbird species including Pale-bellied Hermit, White-vented Plumeleteer and stunning Blue-chested Hummingbird. We then headed for our tents for a wash and brush up, finding the luxury 'safari camp' type tents and adjoining bathrooms to be all perfectly appointed and a shower that was to die for. The 'tents' give the feeling of being truly enveloped by the forest. The night's dinner as with all meals was delicious, not overly fancy, just simple good food done well.

Day 2

After a good night's sleep our morning started early as the forest came alive around us: the tremolo of Little Tinamou, hoots from a Mottled Owl, and soon after the roar of waking Howler Monkeys. The property itself provides plenty of entertainment with birds in constant motion through the camp and a dazzling array of butterflies that seemed to



be particularly drawn to the stands of flowering Verbena. Even before breakfast there was much to enjoy, with a Roadside Hawk patrolling the property and early morning both Savanna Hawk and Chestnut-fronted Macaws sailed over along with the ubiquitous Red-lored and Mealy Parrots that were leaving their overnight roosts.

Post breakfast a little stroll around the property turned up a number of beautiful species including two cooperative **Trogons**: White-tailed and **Black-tailed**, Golden-collared Manakin and the distinctive little Long-tailed Tyrant. As the morning warmed up, so did the raptor activity. Black and

Turkey Vultures are abundant almost everywhere in Panama, but it's foolish not to look at them closely as there are often other similarly colored raptors hiding among them. In among the clouds of mainly Black Vultures we soon had discovered Common Black Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk and both adult and juvenile King Vultures. King Vultures must be up there with the most beautiful species of the vulture family, with the black and white adults much easier to pick out in the soaring throng than the all black juveniles.

Plans were to have a midday break from the heat, some lunch and a siesta. However, a Boa in a tree right next to the Canopy Camp dining area had other plans, stirring up a whirlwind of mobbing behavior that when done probably constituted about 30 different species of birds. This mobbing included both local birds like Cocoa Woodcreeper and migrant species like Cerulean Warbler.

Later in the day we birded the very end of the Pan American Highway down in Yaviza. Again the birding was excellent, with roadside treats including flocks of Yellow-rumped Caciques and three species of Oropendola: Black, Crested and Chestnut-headed. Of course the local specialty Black Oropendola was the least co-operative of the three, leaving Carlos, our trusty guide, to set plans in motion to find some later in the trip. Another highlight along the road here was a wolf-whistling Barred Puffbird pair that showed well once we had tracked them down, complete with lizard prey item. We ended our day at the gas station at the end of the Pan American Highway, where incredibly some treetop chattering yielded great scope views of one of perhaps the tours cutest species: Spectacled Parrotlet! What a bizarre location for an incredibly memorable bird!

Day 3

Day three started with a short boat ride up the Chucunaque and Tuquesa Rivers courtesy of a couple of dugout canoes manned by boatmen from the local tribal communities. Here our target was the very localized Dusky-backed Jacamar. The Dusky-backed Jacamar is a small jacamar with an almost hummingbird like bill and a small range that includes pretty much solely the eastern tip of Panama and a small portion of western Colombia. However, before we even managed to get into our boats I had picked out another attractive and limited range target species on the far side of the river: Spot-breasted Woodpecker. There were also plenty of birds to enjoy on the way upstream to our first jacamar rendezvous point with both Amazon and Ringed Kingfisher and Mangrove Swallow all regularly perched on overhanging snags. Little Blue Herons were ubiquitous along the banks and both boats got somewhat brief views of a beautiful Capped Heron.

We disembarked at our jacamar stop and were immediately greeted by an overwhelming array of excellent bird species. These included species whose subtle clues to identity needed some deciphering: Forest Elaenia, Northern Scrub Flycatcher and Streaked Xenops and other glorious species that needed no deciphering at all, like Squirrel Cuckoo, Golden-green Woodpecker and the stunningly beautiful Blue Cotinga. The Dusky-backed Jacamar put on quite the show and we were also pleased to add the range restricted Streaked Xenops and Double-banded Graytail to our lists. The Graytail has a similar limited range to the jacamar and though the Xenops has a wider range in general, it is one that is very limited in Panama itself.

Late morning, we took our dugout canoes over to the village of the boatmen, where we took the chance to purchase some of the incredible intricate woven masks, plates and baskets the women there produced. It felt good to know that our dollars were going to support the community in two different ways (boat rides and artwork sales) and helping encourage them to see the potential value of ecotourism and forest conservation. Later in the day we again birded a couple of local roads where we managed to do something that would be pretty tough to do in the US: have a four kite species day. Adding Gray-headed Kite to the regular Double-toothed, Swallow-tailed and Plumbeous Kites. Probably the highlight though was Carlos spotting a White-headed Wren as it dashed across the road in front of us. Not only did we add this spectacular species to our trip list but we also picked up a bonus Striped Cuckoo which Carlos heard singing from some nearby shrubbery!

Day 4

Day four was one that will live long in my memory, an encounter with the near mythical Harpy Eagle. This individual bird had been recently discovered on a nest by a member of relatively nearby tribal community and had only been seen by Carlos thus far. It was a fair way away from where we were staying, was not too easy to get to but it was a Harpy Eagle, and was well within the realms of possibility for a day trip. We therefore started our day with a pre-dawn chorus but this time a little earlier than usual as we headed for a dawn rendezvous along the Chucunaque River.

Here along the river we met our Harpy Eagle guide for the day, Alejandro. Alejandro was a member of the local tribal community who had discovered the bird and had contacted Carlos with the report of a Harpy nest a few weeks ago. In the last few days Alejandro and his family had been working hard to clear an almost 1.5-mile trail to the nest just for our viewing pleasure. Our little group was the inaugural group to make this tour, which made it feel particularly special.

The sun began to rise as we embarked on our two hour ride out in another pair of dugout canoes. We soon ran into large and vocal groups of Howler Monkeys along the river and even picked up a new monkey species for the trip in the shape of a noisy troop of White-faced Capuchins. The birds were none too shabby either with Gray-lined Hawks (a recent split from the Gray Hawks we see on my Texas Tour) lining the river and a few other species that might be familiar to participants on that tour including Ringed Kingfisher, Anhinga and Neotropic Cormorant. Boat rides are a great way to see birds as they perch out along the river and our dugout canoe "cruise" netted us a bunch of nice sightings of previously encountered species as well as a bunch of exciting ones including White-fronted Nunbird, Green Ibis and Gray-cowled Wood-Rail (part of a recent split of Gray-necked).



To complete our Harpy adventure, we followed our car and boat portion of the trip with a long walk through a sauna-like jungle. The hike section of the quest started in a plantain plantation, where we disembarked from the canoes and where we soon encountered both **Laughing Falcon** and Crane Hawk. With temperatures hovering around 85 degrees and humidity right in that ballpark as well it wasn't long before the hike had us pretty hot, pretty sweaty and a little tired. Harpy Eagles, however, are a pretty strong motivator and our group shrugged off these minor inconveniences with good humor. Thankfully, as with current conditions generally in Eastern Panama it seemed, mosquitoes were few and far between on our walk and even those we did see seemed little inclined to bite.

Of course Harpy Eagle is an indicator species for a healthy forest and the place was alive with bird song. Soon we were running into birds that both waylaid us, but equally importantly gave us a chance to catch our breath on this hot and humid day. Antbirds are notoriously difficult to see as they skulk through dense forest cover but we did manage to unearth sightings of a few, including nice views of Dot-winged Antwren (the females are particularly pretty), White-flanked Antwren and Black Antshrike. Many more passed by heard but unseen however.

Carlos had made the hike to the Harpy nest in about 40 minutes on his scouting run, but the combination of interesting birds and hotter and more humid temperatures meant that it took us closer to two hours to undertake the same journey. When we arrived at the nest site there was initial disappointment when nothing was visible in the nest, though

that just made it all the sweeter when about fifteen minutes later there was some stirring of movement and one of the adult eagles stuck its head up above the parapet. The group all did our best to ooh and aaaah in a respectfully hushed tone and enjoyed our wonderful scoped views from a deferential distance.



After a wonderful encounter with this magnificent bird we all hiked back to the boats with a definite spring in our step.

On the return journey we managed to add another few nice species to the list including Gray-cheeked Nunlet, Bare-crowned Antbird and a beautiful Great Jacamar. The Great Jacamar completed our jacamar sweep of Panama - something that Carlos had only managed a couple of other times on his tours. We ended our day in the jungle with a

visit to Alejandro's village where we got a warm welcome and brief views of Black-capped Donacobius. This was the first visit to their community from a group of birders and they were keen to extend their gratitude to us. Again we bought some beautiful pieces of artwork and were treated to a traditional "agouti dance" from the little kids in the village and a "vulture dance" from the older women. It was a wonderful and moving experience shared with a group of kind and generous people.

The slightly longer than anticipated hike meant that the very end of our day's boat ride was undertaken at dusk, where thanks to some sharp eyes and a flashlight we were able to see a few slightly more crepuscular species including Neotropical River Otter, Spectacled Caiman, Common Pauraque and Greater Bulldog Bats (which fish along the river). We returned for a late dinner and a cold beverage well satiated with our day's birding.



Day 5

We had enjoyed incredible weather for our whole trip considering it was green season with rain only coming a night, but our last day did finally see some daytime rain catch up with us. That said it wasn't heavy enough to deter the birds or our group of hardy birders. We started by birding the grounds where the group finally managed to get great views of Buff-breasted Wren (a species that had been skulking around camp all week). Even more importantly perhaps we also managed to get some killer views of another local specialty Spot-crowned Barbet, last September they were apparently around the property all the time, but this year I had a brief view on the first day and then

nothing. After a final breakfast at Canopy Camp we took our birding show on the road as we worked our way back towards Panama City.

Our first stop of the day was initiated after Carlos spotted a Cocoli Heron dropping into a roadside field. This led to a rash of new sightings for the tour including Yellow-headed Caracara, a migrant Orchard Oriole and perhaps most excitingly our first Red-breasted Blackbirds of the trip.

After stopping in to order lunch at Hotel Avicar we scooted down the road to spend our late morning birding the wonderful San Francisco preserve. Here we encountered an active flock of passerines that included a number of nice species including the endemic Yellow-green Tyrannulet (a distinctly horizontally perched flycatcher), Dusky-capped Flycatcher and Shining Honeycreeper. Other highlights here included adding Puffbird species number four to our trip list: Black-breasted as well as some slightly elusive Choco Sirystes and Dusky-faced Tanagers.

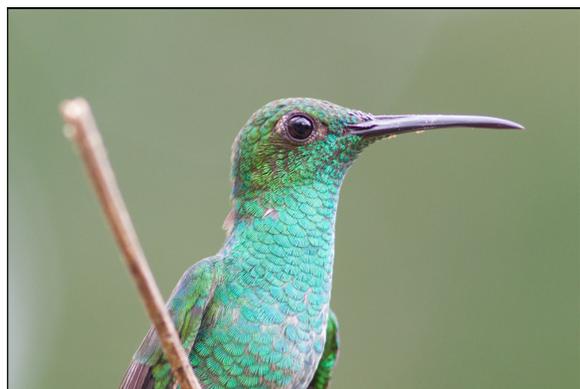
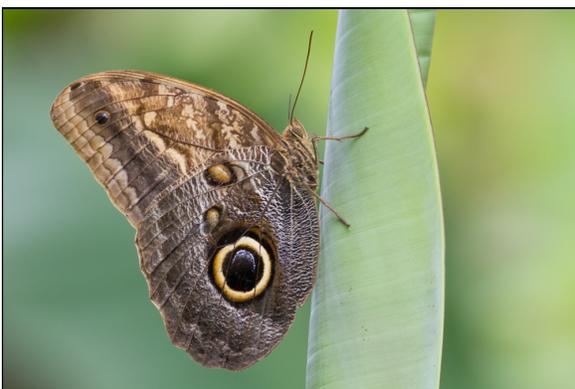
While drizzle doesn't really encourage soaring raptors it did encourage a beautiful juvenile **Bicolored Hawk** to grab a snag-top shower in our presence. This forest accipiter is quite rare in Panama and can be quite tricky to see anywhere, even more so

tricky to see well. It was in fact just the first juvenile Carlos had definitively encountered and probably the best views any of our group had ever had. Usual views of this species tend to be quick ones as they dash across a trail, but this bird sat with us for a full 20 minutes before we left him to his showering and preening.

After a good lunch at the Avicar we spent the rest of a pretty rainy day working our way back west to Panama City. That said even the drive was not completely uneventful as we managed to add White-tailed Kite and Forked-tailed Flycatchers to our species list. Our day ended as we all peeled off to our separate hotels for the night. Some to continue their adventures in Panama, others to settle in for a cocktail and evening meal before catching flights back to the US.

In all this was a wonderful tour that was short but incredibly sweet. The Canopy Camp is a wonderful location, well laid out, with good food and great staff. There is so much to see in the Darién including mind-blowing butterflies and a wealth of fabulous birds. I'm sure I'm not the only one who found myself finding it quite hard to leave! In total we tallied 240 bird species and are still working on our butterfly list from the trip!

Luke Tiller
Sunrise Birding LLC



Photos: Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Gilbert's Flasher, Fruhstorfer's Owl-Butterfly, White-vented Plumeletter.