

# **Birding Trip Report**

## **Panama – The Darien to the Chiriqui Highlands**

**October 14<sup>th</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup> 2024**





*Acorn Woodpecker*

## Introduction

The trip was organised through Birding Panama who did a fantastic job of sorting out the logistics and stepping in when one of our parties flight plans went wrong. Our party consisted of three UK birders and one Bulgarian:

- Steve Cale
- Tony Davison
- Dimiter Georgiev and
- Phil Dargue who wrote this report and took the photographs. Any errors are his!

Steve organised the logistics with Jose at Birding Panama, revising and adding to their Best of Panama itinerary including reversing the order to tackle the Darien first. We were fortunate indeed to get Euclides 'Kilo' Campos as our guide for the trip, not only the top eBird lister in Panama, but a great guy who worked unbelievably hard to make our trip a success. We covered the entire length of the country as shown on the map below and our travels are documented on eBird with detailed checklists available [here](#).



Panama actually lies on an east – west axis which comes as a surprise to many and it covers a hugely varied number of habitats from the dense forests in the east to the highlands near the western border with Costa Rica. This huge variety produces a truly impressive bird list of over 1,000 species with more being added seemingly every year.

The reason we decided to tackle the Darien first was because we knew accommodation was much more basic in the east and we expected some very challenging days in the field. Not being spring chickens we preferred to deal with any challenges first and enjoy a bit more luxury at the end of the trip! As it turned out, our time in the Darien wasn't as

challenging as we expected, although the hotel was definitely the least salubrious of the trip. In general the accommodation standards were very good and the food was in the main excellent. Specific notes on places we stayed are in the main report.

Our trip was in the so called Green Season, which means basically it is the wet season and we did see some unbelievably violent storms, but we only lost a couple of birding sessions to the weather and it didn't stop us racking up a truly impressive bird list in terms of both numbers and sheer quality. It also drops the cost considerably than going in peak season between January and April. Just be willing to be flexible and accept you will get wet days.

The birding highlights were many and we saw an amazing variety of species. Steve and I had both birded the neo-tropics previously including Costa Rica and Colombia (in my case) but for Dimiter and Tony this was their first time. The total list of birds seen (we didn't count heard only) was 420 species and notable highlights included:

- Harpy Eagle
- Black-crowned Antpitta
- Streak-chested Antpitta
- Blue Cotinga
- Bare-necked Umbrellabird
- Great Jacamar
- Six Trogons
- Five Motmots (the full Panama set)
- Four Toucans
- 32 Hummingbirds
- Ten Woodpeckers
- 11 Woodcreepers
- 24 Waders (or shorebirds for non-European birders)

We focussed on trying to get decent views and photographs of as many species as we could, with all four participants being keen photographers. Doubtless without this we could have clocked up more species, but that was never our goal.

There were a few misses, not least **Resplendent Quetzal** which Tony was particularly keen to see. We discovered that seeing this incredible species is far more challenging during the rainy season when the Avocado trees are not in fruit and they disperse to higher altitudes. If this is your main target this isn't the best time of year. We also missed a few other species such as **Snowcap** and both **Yellow-eared** and **Northern Emerald Toucanets** as well as **Dusky-backed Jacamar**. On the other hand, we also picked up species we didn't realistically expect to see.

The trip was hugely enjoyable and we wouldn't hesitate to recommend Panama as a fantastic birding destination and also a beautiful country to visit. We would also heartily recommend contacting Birding Panama to organise your trip.



*Long-tailed Silky Flycatcher*

## Travelling Out

Dimiter travelled out via Istanbul on Turkish Airlines to Panama City a day earlier than everyone else and had a day at Canopy Tower in advance of the UK parties arrival. Tony and Steve set off on the 14<sup>th</sup> October from Norwich Airport to connect at Schipol for the daily KLM flight to Panama. I was meant to fly from Durham Tees Valley to Schipol but my connecting flight was cancelled at the last minute so he had to return home and try to reorganise my flights which were eventually sorted for the following day.

Dimiter, Steve and Tony spent the night at the Airport Hotel where they met with Jose and Kilo before retiring to bed for the start of the birding adventure the following morning.

## Day One – October 15th

After another scare I managed to get to Amsterdam and board the KLM flight to Panama just as the other guys began their journey towards the Darien.

The rest of the guys birded various locations en-route from the airport to Torti but the weather was poor and curtailed their day.

I finally landed at Tocumen Airport during a heavy thunderstorm and was met in arrivals by Jose who then drove to Hotel Avicar in Torti to join the rest of the group. The combination of heavy rain and appalling road surface meant for an interesting drive but at least the whole group were together at last and I could get some sleep before an 0630 start in the morning.

## Day Two – October 16<sup>th</sup> - Torti Area and travel to Meteti



*Orange-chinned Parakeets*

The group met up for breakfast with some good birding as dawn broke. A large flock of around 40 **Orange-chinned Parakeets** flew in and the hotel feeders attracted **Blue-grey Tanagers**, **Blue Dacnis** and a **Red-legged Honeycreeper** (the only one of the tour) in to feed whilst we had our breakfast. The feeders also brought in **Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds** whilst a **Streaked Flycatcher** was

hanging around giving close views, as well as the ever present **Tropical Kingbirds** and **House Wrens**.

We left for the nearby Rio Torti after breakfast. The light was terrible with odd spots of rain but within minutes of getting out of the 4x4 we picked up two **Grey-Cheeked Nunlets**, a real local speciality, and a big target ticked off very quickly. The trees and hedgerows held a real mixture of species including a very mobile **Prothonotary Warbler** over our heads. We also found our first **Whooping Motmots** of the trip, part of a fabulous family of birds that we happily saw every possible species of by the end of the trip.



*Grey-cheeked Nunlet*

Walking the track brought us a number of other species including **Rusty-margined Flycatcher**, **White-winged Becard** and a **Capped Heron** in a roadside ditch, which left rapidly when it saw us. We drove down a lane to park up by a cattle shelter and whilst dodging a few showers were treated to fabulous views of a pair of **Pale-bellied Hermits**



*Forest Elaenia*

showier than the male.

Kilo set about calling in the target which proved a challenge but in the end we all managed views of the **Double-banded Greytail**, a real rarity. Whilst he was trying to



*Red-billed Scythebill*

locate the Greytail, Steve announced he had a woodcreeper, which he then realised had a long red bill, at which point we realised he had found a **Red-billed Scythebill**, a truly spectacular furnariid. After a bit of panic we eventually were treated to superb views of this fabulous bird.

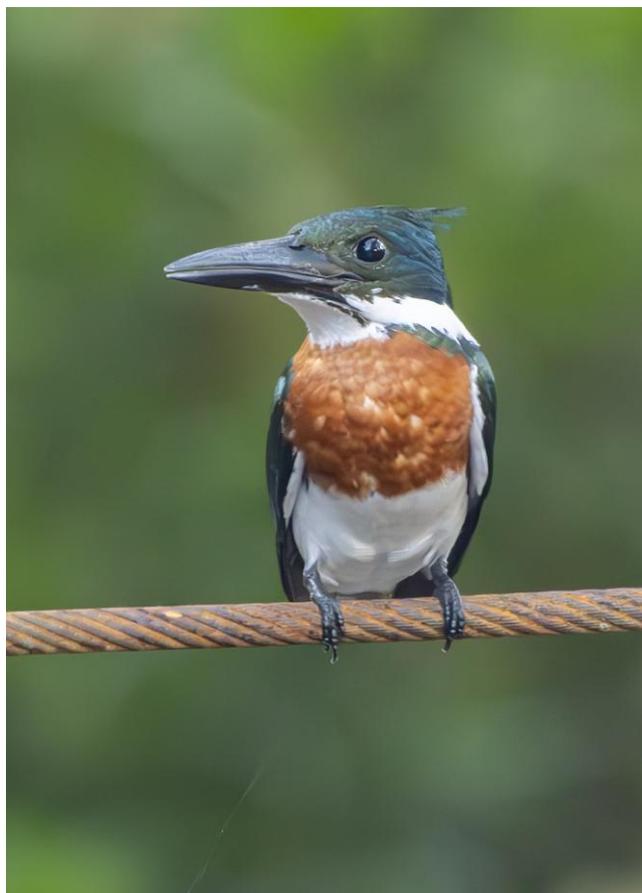
As we headed back towards the hotel for lunch we looked up to see our first sight of autumn raptor migration, with hundreds of **Swainson's** and **Broad-winged Hawks** passing overhead. Kilo told us this was nothing compared with some groups we could see, despite our excitement and we were indeed to see even more spectacular evidence later in the trip. As we walked back to the car we saw a couple of **Spectacled Parrotlets** and a single **White-eared Conebill**.

After lunch we set off on the drive to Meteti and entered the Darien province proper. The road quality continued to be poor, until we actually reached the Darien border. Once we had shown our permits to enter at the checkpoint the road improved significantly and the drive became much easier. Kilo spotted a **Pearl Kite** sitting in a roadside tree and a brief stop also yielded a **Savannah Hawk** and a pair of **Eastern Kingbirds**.

displaying to each other on the river bank. We moved into a nearby field and the quality of birding went up another notch.

We were treated to superb views of a **Forest Elaenia** and a **Lesser Kiskadee**, before Kilo heard a key target for the area and we headed off to the far side of the field. As we walked across we were treated to the sight of several **Social Flycatchers** and a pair of **Barred Antshrikes** although the female proved to be much

On arrival in Meteti we checked in to our hotel. It could hardly be described as luxurious but the air conditioning worked and it proved to have excellent showers. Still, there are



*Amazon Kingfisher*

very few options locally and it was just a place for sleep. Having ditched our belongings we headed out on the road south towards the coast, before turning off on a track to the Rio Iglesias. The forest and river looked superb, but it was initially very quiet, before an explosion of great birds. A very noisy **Amazon Kingfisher** flew up the river and perched close by before a pair of **Cinnamon Woodpeckers** flew in along with a **Cinnamon Becard**. These were quickly followed by a lively group of **White-headed Wrens** in the riverside trees which were joined two **White-necked Puffbirds** and a group of **Collared Aracaris**.

In the deep valley the light went very quickly so we headed back in to Meteti and headed straight to a local restaurant for a superb dinner and then back to our hotel for an early night before our big day tomorrow!

### **Day three – October 17<sup>th</sup> - Yaviza Area - Harpy Eagle Quest**

The following morning saw us up at 04:30 and heading for breakfast in a local café where Kilo had arranged an early fuel stop. By 05:30 we were on the road to Yaviza, which is the last stop on the Trans American Highway from Alaska, or at least for now. We had a brief stop to watch a troop of **Geoffroy's Tamarin** crossing the highway using the overhead wires. When we got to Yaviza we discovered they are building a new bridge over the Chuquanaque River to build a road down to the town of Real. The famous Darien Gap is about to shrink a little bit more and lets hope this isn't at the cost of more deforestation.

We initially stopped at a fuel station on the outskirts of town for a toilet stop, which some of us used as a chance to try and pick up some new birds. This proved successful with a fly by of three Black Orependolas, a local speciality.

We headed into Yaviza, which was bustling considering it was only 07:00 and the river was already busy with boats. The river is currently the only route east and south, so Yaviza is a busy port. We met our boatman, and quickly boarded our canoe that would take us towards a **Harpy Eagle** nest site. It turned out that the nest we were heading to was very close to Yaviza, so we were only on the boat for around 15 minutes. We had expected a much longer trip. We were met at the river and walked up to a local finca called La Buchua before mounting horses for the cross country trek to the nest site. This caused much hilarity, as I don't think any of us could claim to be natural riders! The area we passed through had been cleared at some point, but was beginning to regenerate and we later learned the family who's land we were on were planning to restore the landscape.

After around 20 minutes we alighted from the horses and suddenly, through a screened gap in the trees we were staring at a female **Harpy Eagle** standing proud in a nest in an enormous Quipo tree. Wow, just wow!



*Harpy Eagle*

We were able to spend the next three hours enjoying the sight of this enormous raptor and watched her feed the month old chick from a clearly well stocked larder in the nest. She often looked around and was clearly listening, so we believe the male was nearby but he never put in an appearance and there was certainly no shortage of food. The chick was fairly lively and could be seen moving around the nest.

Our boatman turned out to be the son of the landowners and he was very interested in understanding more about the wildlife on their land. Kilo introduced him to an app to help identify the huge variety of insects, particularly butterflies, in the area and the family desire to restore the habitat became clearer. He was particularly fascinated to watch Steve sketch the Harpy using the scope and his Dad was keen to digiscope the female on his phone.

We eventually decided to leave the nest, any disappointment in not seeing the male fly in tempered by the awesome sighting we did get which surpassed all of our expectations. Back at the finca they magicked up some beers from somewhere and we sat and chatted about their plans for the future and were entertained by their two pet Chacalacas! We eventually said our goodbyes and headed back to the river for the short trip back to Yaviza literally buzzing from the whole experience.

There is a very sad postscript to this event. We learnt on the day we left Panama that the chick had sadly fallen from the nest and perished. This was a disaster not just for the birds, given they are so rare that each one is precious, but also to the family who owned the land. Successful nests usually see the chicks in the nest for a year so they were looking forward to a considerable income. We can only hope this doesn't dampen their enthusiasm to develop their finca as a potential haven for nature.



*Spot-breasted Woodpecker*

We set off back towards Meteti and stopped off to eat our packed lunch by the Trans-American Highway at the entrance to El Salto road. Whilst sitting in the bus shelter (never say these trips are not glamorous!) Kilo spotted our first Trogon of the trip, **Gartered Trogon**, in the trees above us which gave great views. Back at Meteti we had an hour to rest from the sweltering humidity before heading back to Yaviza wetlands.

The site yielded an impressive variety of species including a superb pair of **Black-collared Hawks** and a **Great Potoo**, that Steve somehow found sitting in a tree doing an impression of a broken branch! Some of the group had brief views of a Piratic Flycatcher, but sadly it moved on before everyone got to see it. A fantastic **Spot-breasted Woodpecker** landed in a nearby tree just as the heavens opened and

lightening lit up the very dark skies. After a retreat to the car we waited for the storm to pass before heading to the reedbeds to look for **Ruby Topaz**. The mud yielded a **Solitary Sandpiper** as well as **Wattled Jacana** and a **Rufescent Tiger-Heron** sat in a nearby tree. **Pied Water Tyrants** were seemingly unconcerned by our presence before we



*Rufous-breasted Hermit*

caught sight of a hummer in the flowers by the road. However, it turned out to be a **Rufous-breasted Hermit**, which gave great views, whilst sadly the Ruby Topaz didn't show. Defeated by the light we headed back to Meteti and a quick shower before another fabulous meal in the restaurant across the road.

#### **Day 4 – October 18<sup>th</sup> - Visit to El Salto Road, Aligandi village, Yaviza Forest and Yaviza Wetlands**



*Collared Aracari*

Our final full day in the Darien province saw us start with an early breakfast again in the café in Meteti. We were serenaded at one point by the local border force cadets running through the town in formation, chanting as they went. The ambulance following them did seem a little over cautious!

We headed east to El Salto road and as soon as we left the main highway Kilo engaged four wheel drive for the rugged terrain ahead. The road holds a number of key specialties and whilst we didn't see them all we did get some great species. One very common species was **Swainson's Thrush** which seemed to be everywhere. As the trip progressed this was probably the commonest species we saw with them seemingly abundant everywhere we went. Our first stop yielded a fabulous **Semi-plumbeous Hawk** calling in a nearby tree as well as a **Mississippi Kite**, two **Red-lored Amazons**, a fabulous **Yellow-billed**

Cuckoo, a **Gartered Trogon**, a **Collared Aracari** and a very obliging **Brown-capped Tyrannulet**.



*Brown-capped Tyrannulet*



*Red-headed Caracara*

As we pushed on towards the river we suddenly heard a call that reminded all of us of gulls and then saw **Red-throated Caracara** cross the track right in front of our car. We were able to get out and enjoy superb views of this scarce member of the Caracara family. At the end of the road we parked up and headed down a trail into some fairly dense forest. We quickly picked up a pair of **Red-rumped Woodpeckers**, who always seemed to keep themselves the wrong side of the tree for photographs, before Kilo set about calling in both **Black-crowned Antshrike** and the numerous **White-bellied Antbirds** noisily proclaiming their presence. We eventually found the former but the latter wouldn't show, despite a lot of effort and clearly being very close to the path. The **White-bellied Antbird** proved to be the trickiest of all the Antbirds to

see, despite hearing them call in a number of places before the end of the trip.

We did however get excellent views of a **White-tailed Trogon**, our first **Purple-crowned Fairy** and close up views of **Black Oropendola** and their crazy calls. Emerging from the very humid track we spotted a group of raptors circling over the forest and Kilo quickly picked out a pair of **King Vultures** climbing quickly. We soon had great scope views of this sought after member of the American Vulture family, with the white wing patterns clearly visible. By now it was very hot so we headed back to the hotel for a break and to cool off in the air conditioned rooms.

The afternoon saw us back out heading back towards Yaviza once more to try and pick up a few more regional specialities. Our first stop was a small village beside the main road, where our appearance was rapidly a source of fascination to the local children. Our target species was **Bicoloured Wren**, a very recent addition to Panama's avifauna and missing from the field guides, having colonised from Colombia. We quickly located a calling male who sang from nearby trees and gave us good but brief views. By this point Tony had acquired an adoring fan club, as he let the children look through his binoculars and they all quickly proved very adept at pointing out birds in the tree whilst proving to be excellent mimics of their calls.



*Blue Cotinga*

A small flock of Tanagers flew into a nearby fruiting tree and we suddenly realised there was a male **Blue Cotinga** with them. We got permission from the owner to go into his garden and were treated to fabulous views of this stunning bird. Usually they are a treetop species, but here we had one happily feeding in front of us. We also had our first

**Southern-beardless Tyrannulet** of the trip and a pair of noisy **Boat-billed Flycatchers**. A quick stop had proved incredibly fruitful and I suspect left a memory of some strange guys, who turned up with big cameras with the local kids!



*White-tailed Trogon*

From Aligandi we headed on to an area known as Yaviza Forest, by the banks of the Chquaque River looking for the locally scarce **Dusky-backed Jacamar**. Despite trying two sites we sadly failed to see any, our first serious dip of the trip. We did though get great views of a **White-tailed Trogon** in the roadside trees. Slightly disappointed we headed back to Yaviza Wetlands for another chance to pick up **Ruby Topaz**. The light was really murky and the sky quite threatening and sadly the hummer failed to show, but we did get good views of both **Thick-billed Seedfinch** and its rarer cousin **Large-billed Seedfinch**. We also saw our only **Dickcissel** and **Willow Flycatcher** (identified by call) of the tour, as well as a close flying **Crane Hawk** which landed in nearby trees pursued by Steve!

## Day 5 – October 19<sup>th</sup> – Travelling Day - Meteti to Summit Hotel



*Upland Sandpiper*

We headed out of the Darien region after a reasonably early start heading towards the Summit Hotel close to the Panama Canal. After breakfast the plan was to bird en-route and call in to Nusagandi around lunchtime.

We hadn't travelled very far when Kilo suddenly stopped the vehicle, announcing he had seen a "Grass Piper" on the football field of the University of Panama's Darien campus. He turned around and sure enough there was an adult **Upland Sandpiper** running around on the grass. We parked up and managed to get fabulous views of this slightly odd looking wader, resting on its migration south. Quite some unexpected bonus!

As we continued west we dropped in at Hotel Avicar again for a coffee and comfort break and enjoyed the usual cast of tanagers and hummers on the feeders. By now the temperature was rising rapidly and large number of raptors were starting to take advantage rising up from their roosting spots. We pulled over at one point to watch truly astonishing numbers climbing above us. The flocks consisted in the main of **Broad-Winged Hawks**, **Swainson's Hawks** and thousands of **Turkey Vultures** and as we stood and watched wave after wave headed past us. A truly incredible sight.



*Migration in action!*

The road surface on this section of the Trans-American Highway is truly awful so progress was slow, but Kilo pulled over again by a river for a last try for a few local species. He quickly located our only **Barred Puffbird** of the trip in the strip of trees by the river, followed by a **Black-tailed Trogon** which gave fabulous views in the roadside



*Black-tailed Trogon*

trees. By now it was very hot and the raptor migration was still in full swing, taking advantage of the favourable conditions. In amongst the kettle of vultures Steve spotted

six **Wood Storks** climbing over a nearby hillside, before we then pressed on for our lunch spot near the turning for Nusagandi.

As we arrived at the restaurant, the dark clouds that had been gathering in the distance chose that moment to open. The rain was truly biblical in proportion and very soon the roadside ditches were raging torrents. Kilo was confident it wouldn't rain for too long, but it was likely to affect ground conditions later. We turned north on the road to Nusagandi, suddenly discovering pristine tarmac, the road having been recently resurfaced.

We arrived at a house on top of a hill in Nusagandi, where we met a friend of Kilo's with a plan to go looking for the unique **Sapayoa**, a real oddity being more closely related to African Broadbills than anything in the Americas. We started birding the garden of the house which proved very productive, with **Rufous-winged**, **Sulphur-rumped** and **Black-and-Yellow Tanagers** being the highlights. We then set off to walk the trail to find the **Sapayoa** and potentially **Black-crowned Antpitta**. However, the weather had turned the steep trail into an ice rink and given the risk to life and limb, never mind camera gear, we took the decision to abandon the quest. It didn't help that it was raining heavily again. So, whilst there was a slight air of disappointment, it was better than one of us getting injured. Kilo did say this was one of the easy trails, which would probably have been fine were it not for the very heavy rain.

We did bird the main road though and added **Crested Guan**, **Tawny-crested Tanager** and **Northern Black-throated Trogon** to the trip list. We also watched even larger flocks of **Turkey Vultures** pass over us heading east.



*Eastern Meadowlark*

Given the state of the weather we decided to head off towards Panama City and our hotel for the night. However, before we did Kilo pulled over alongside a Supermarket to see what was around. The bushes around the car park were full of birds and whilst we didn't find the hoped for **Striped Cuckoo**, we did get fabulous views of **Eastern Meadowlark, Panama Flycatcher, Red-eyed Vireo** and **Lesser Goldfinch** amongst others.

The final leg of our journey took us past the airport and onto the northern bypass around Panama City. It was very obvious that the rain here had been torrential and lots of roadside fields were underwater. We arrived at the Summit Resort hotel around 5:30pm and to say this was a contrast with our Meteti lodgings would be a slight understatement! The views from our rooms were fantastic and it was very obvious that the hotel grounds held some superb forest, which we were looking forward to exploring at some point.

Dinner and a very comfortable bed awaited after a long day on the road, although we had arrived to find the hotel packed out for a wedding. Despite being on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, some of us were kept awake until the early hours by the constant thump coming from the dance floor!

#### **Day 6 – October 20<sup>th</sup> - Cerro Azul**

Today was a Sunday so after our 06:30 breakfast we headed back across Panama City to visit Cerro Azul. This is a gated community to the north-east of Panama City, where the residents enjoy the benefits of living at higher altitudes where the climate is significantly cooler and far less humid.



*Summer Tanager*

We stopped off enroute to purchase bananas, which Kilo said we would use later without elaborating too much and then quickly started to climb up the mountain. We stopped by the roadside briefly to check out a mixed flock of tanagers including a striking male **Summer**

**Tanager** as well as **Red-eyed Vireos**.

On arrival at the gate, Kilo showed the day permit he had been issued with and we then climbed further passed a large number of chicken farms, which gave the lower slopes an interesting aroma! Cerro Azul is one of the most reliable places to see a number of species including the near endemic **Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker** and **Tody Motmot**.



*Three-toed Sloth*

Our first stop was on the roadside by some of the houses where good areas of forest were evident. We quickly found a **Broad-billed Motmot** which sat patiently for us by the roadside and a **White-whiskered Puffbird** put in an appearance, although we did inadvertently trigger a house infrared alarm whilst trying to take photos! Kilo then decided to try using a **Pygmy Owl** tape to see what species would be attracted. Suffice to say it caused pandemonium, as the roadside bushes were suddenly full of birds investigating the intruder. We were joined by **Fulvous-vented Euphonias**, **Red-eyed Vireos**, **Chestnut-capped Warbler**, **Purple-crowned Fairy** and a magnificent **Red-capped Manakin** amongst others. We had to move on as we had an appointment at 09:30, but stopped again for a pair of **Short-billed Pigeons** and once again when Kilo spotted a **Three-toed Sloth** in a Cecropia feeding happily on the oversized leaves above the road.

At 09:30 we arrived at a house owned by an American couple, who have been feeding the local avian population for a considerable time and welcome visiting birders to share

the spectacle, for a small contribution to what must be the not insignificant cost involved. The sheer number of birds in the garden is almost impossible to portray. The buzz of hummingbirds flying around the feeders was astonishing and for the first few minutes we were simply overwhelmed by the sheer spectacle.



*Violet-capped Hummingbird*

The hummers included **Snowy-bellied Hummingbird**, **Crowned Woodnymph**, **Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer**, **Long-billed Hermit** and the very range restricted **Violet-capped Hummingbird**. Not to be outdone, the fruit feeders attracted a fabulous cast where **Summer**, **Hepatic** and **Bay-headed Tanagers** gave gob-smacking views and the sugar feeders also brought in **Green** and **Shining Honeycreepers**. The numbers of the latter were amazing with at least thirty visible at one point. The cast was then joined by a stunning **Rufous Motmot**, but it was clearly a little uneasy with our presence and never quite made it to the feeders. Finally, we were joined by a family of **Geoffroy's Tamarin**, which fed happily on the bananas.



*Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer*



*Bay-headed Tanager*



*Green Honeycreeper*



*Cocoa Woodcreeper*

We arrived at the garden in the dry but just before we were due to leave the heavens opened and we witnessed once more the sheer power of a tropical storm. We hurriedly made our way back to the car and decided to go and find a coffee, whilst hoping the rain would stop so we could continue birding. We drove back through the gate and headed to a café which seemed a little surprised to see anyone given the weather. As we sat watching the rain a couple of thrushes kept us entertained including a **Grey-cheeked Thrush**. The rain showed no signs of abating when Kilo rather sheepishly told us we had a flat tyre! We had to go back out in the rain, still torrenting down and using umbrellas helped Kilo to change to the hire vehicle's spare tyre. When fitted it was clear this was very low on air so we decided that the best solution was for Kilo to head back to Panama City to get air in the tyre whilst we remained at the restaurant, much to

the bemusement of our hosts.

Fortunately by this point the rain was starting to ease so we were able to explore the restaurant grounds and very quickly, as is the case virtually anywhere in Panama, we found birds to keep us entertained. These included great views of a **Cocoa Woodcreeper**, a stunning male **White-vented Plumeleteer** and several **Tropical Mockingbirds**. A **Tawny-capped Warbler** then

decided to give us incredible views at point blank range as it took advantage of the respite from the rain to feed. We were also able to watch a **Streaked Saltator** feeding in the scrub and a **Barred Antshrike** was in the roadside vegetation. Kilo suddenly reappeared and said he had managed to get the original tyre fixed, so we were able to get back on the road.



*Tawny-capped Warbler*



*Geoffroy's Tamarin*

We had planned originally to head to Panama Bay to look for waders in the late afternoon, but this wouldn't now be possible so we decided to head back in to Cerro Azul and try our luck with the bananas and hopefully the hunt for **Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker**. However, as we headed back up the Cerro the rain restarted and simply didn't stop for the rest of the day scuppering any chance of visiting the best woodpecker site. Instead we spent the rest of the afternoon birding in the back garden of a photographer friend of Kilo's. Happily it had a covered terrace so we could sit undercover and watch the birds come to us.



*Golden-hooded Tanager*

As we sat down there were few birds in sight and we wondered whether this would be a bit of a let down. However, as Kilo put bananas on to the various tables the birds suddenly appeared, and kept appearing for the next three hours! The variety and sheer quality of birds was amazing and the photography was phenomenal, despite the light levels. First on the scene were **Hepatic Tanagers** quickly followed by gaudy **Black-cheeked Woodpeckers**. **Golden-hooded Tanagers** quickly followed along with **Crimson-backed, Plain-coloured, Speckled** and **Bay-headed Tanagers**. More surprising was the arrival of a **Red-throated Ant-Tanager** which eventually fed on the fruit, something Kilo said he had never seen before.

A number of warblers came in to investigate including another **Chestnut-capped**, our first **Bay-breasted** and a couple of **Tennessee Warblers**, but for us these were all overshadowed by a stunning male **Golden-winged Tanager** which put on an amazing



*Speckled Tanager*



*Golden-winged Warbler*



*Crimson-backed Tanager*

show. A **Baltimore Oriole** came and went very quickly whilst a **Rufous-breasted Wren** decided to join us and was much more obliging for the cameras. Hard as it was, we eventually needed to leave this little bit of birding heaven and even as we walked out we were treated to great views of **Brown-hooded Parrots** in the front garden trees. By now the light was fading quickly and we would be driving back to Summit in the dark. Sadly we had missed the **Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker**, but been treated to some amazing birds and the hopes of seeing **Tody Motmot** were very definitely not yet over.

When we arrived back at our hotel, thankfully it was much quieter and after an enjoyable dinner have a great nights sleep.

### **Day 7 – October 21<sup>st</sup> – Pipeline Road**

Pipeline Road, the name resonates for any birder who has any interest in neo-tropical birding, with its near mythical status for a long list of target species. We can confirm that status is well and truly deserved!

We left the Summit Hotel just after 07:00 and left for the short journey to the start of Pipeline Road. As we passed the Summit Zoological Parque we saw a raptor sitting on the fence, which turned out to be a **Great Black Hawk** which allowed very close views from the car whilst a **Lesser Kiskadee** hawked for insects on the grass nearby. Our first sighting of the Panama Canal quickly followed as we drove through Gamboa, passed the area known as Ammo Dump and on to the start of the road itself.



*Northern Black-throated Trogon*

We initially drove along with the windows open listening out for bird calls and made a number of stops to connect with their owners. Early sightings included **Plain-brown Woodcreeper**, **White-whiskered Puffbird**, **Broad-billed Motmot** and a pair of **Northern Black-throated Trogons**. As we went further down the road we came across a group of other birders and we were soon looking at a fantastic **Streak-chested Antpitta** that proved challenging, but eventually gave everyone superb views.

At this point the forest seemed to come alive and we remained on foot whilst we gorged on the feast of superb species. We started with a **Black-breasted Puffbird** calling high up, then spotting a **Slaty-tailed Trogon** on a low branch beside the road, but before we set off for better views



*Streak-chested Antpitta*



*Great Jacamar*

of it we were distracted by a pair of **Purple-Throated Fruitcrows**. After enjoying the Trogon we were then treated to great

views of **Velvety Manakin**, which showed down to two metres on occasions, **Fasciated Antshrike**, **White-flanked Antwren**, **Black-crowned Antshrike**, the wonderfully named **Checker-throated Stipplethroat**, with more fleeting views of **Chestnut-backed Antbird** and **Song Wren**. Best of all though, was after a patient wait we were treated to fantastic views of a female **Great Jacamar**, which positively radiated out from its perch. A real stunner.

The morning was rapidly disappearing, so Kilo suggested we walk back to the vehicle and then drive further down the road to search for other species. To do that we walked past the **Streak-chested Antpitta**, so we had another

look and this time treated to even better views than before. What a fabulous bird. Once reunited with the car we drove down to the Rainforest Discovery Centre, just as the heavens opened. We sat undercover and watched the rain hammer down so used the time to get a drink and cool off, given how humid it was before the rain started.

We were joined by the American birders we had met earlier at the Antpitta, but they had been in the open when the rain started so they were soaked. We exchanged notes on what we had each seen since parting and they showed us photographs they had taken at an antswarm not too far from the Discovery Centre, in turn we showed them photos of the Great Jacamar! Our respective guides had already exchanged site information, so we discussed tactics given the poor weather and it was now lunchtime. We were all desperate to hook up with the ant swarm, so Kilo suggested lunch in a café in Gamboa and then head back when the weather improved.

After a great lunch we quickly heading back to the Discovery Centre, all a little nervous in case we had missed the show. We needn't have worried. We parked up and Kilo headed to the site and soon announced there were antbirds calling. First on the scene was a single **Spotted Antbird** by the side of the track, a real stunner. As we stopped we suddenly had a number of **Bicoloured Antbirds** feeding in front of us at very close range and a pair of **Northern Barred Antshrikes** so close to us we struggled to get them in frame for photos.



*Spotted Antbird and Ocellated Antbird*

However, it just got better, other birds were calling ahead and suddenly we were looking at a number of **Ocellated Antbirds**, one of our most wanted targets for the whole trip. Wow! We could see the ant swarm itself moving through and the birds feeding on the various species diving out of the way of them. These were joined by **Grey-headed Tanagers** and both **Rufous** and **Whooping Motmots** as well as a **Golden-collared Manakin** watching from a respectable distance! We stayed with the ant swarm for a while, despite the humidity and heat levels getting to a point where the air was stifling under the dense canopy. It was as unforgettable an experience as we had hoped for and something none of us will forget in a hurry.



*Spot-crowned Antwren*

As we walked back to the car a small bird shot across at eye level and we were treated to superb views of a **Spot-crowned Antwren**, normally a bird seen in the canopy, but here giving tremendous views of its subtle, cryptic plumage. As we got back to the car the weather was looking threatening again, we headed back to the discovery centre where the rain once more decided to fall. Whilst some of us recovered from the heat and humidity of the ant swarm experience, others still looked out for more and we were all rewarded for this with a sighting of a **Band-tailed Barbthroat**, a diminutive member of the Hermit family.

We all decided that we had now had as much as we could take and headed back to the hotel, although not without point blank views of another **Broad-billed Motmot**. However, we hadn't quite finished for the day. A quick shower and then we met at 6 PM to drive to the hotel gate to watch a small family of Panamanian Night Monkey's emerge from their tree hole roost as dusk fell. This was followed by dinner and a few well earned beers on our last night for now at the Summit Hotel.

### **Day 8 – October 22<sup>nd</sup> – Panama Bay, Gorgona area, travel to El Valle de Anton**

After our usual 06:30 breakfast we headed across Panama City to an area called Panama Viejo on the edge of Panama Bay. This was where we were planning to go a couple of days earlier, before the flat tyre and heavy rain intervened. We arrived at the bay, after negotiating the nightmare traffic in downtown Panama City, just as the tide was starting to go out. As we got out of the car it was clear that there were large numbers of waders on the mud flats relatively close to us on the shore. The only issue was the light rain and the heavy cloud cover giving tricky photography conditions.



*Semi-palmated Sandpiper*

The wader list was impressive and included **Western** and **Semipalmated Sandpipers**, **Semipalmated** and **Grey (Black-bellied) Plovers**, **Willetts**, **Lesser Yellowlegs**, **Short-billed Dowitchers** (plus a few **Long-billed** as well when the photos were checked) and **Whimbrel**. There were a handful of **Ruddy Turnstones** on some distant rocks but sadly no **Surfbirds**. The bay also held a number of other species including **Blue-winged Teal**, **Northern Shoveler**, **White Ibis**, **Great Blue Heron**, both **Yellow-crowned** and **Black-**

**crowned Night Herons**, plus, distantly a single **Black Skimmer** and a couple of **Roseate Spoonbills**. A couple of **Northern Waterthrushes** teased us from the shoreline rocks, never quite allowing their photographs to be taken.



*Lesser Yellowlegs*

There were a few other species in the mangrove trees including the local variant of



*Yellow Warbler (Mangrove)*

**Yellow Warbler**, also called **Mangrove Warbler** (either a species or subspecies depending on your taxonomy of choice), showing well. By now the tide was moving well out of the bay and the waders were becoming more distant and we needed to go back to the Summit Hotel to check out and start our journey west to El Valle de Anton.

We headed out over the Panama Canal and onto the main Trans-American

highway. Unlike in the east, the road was a fully tarmacked dual carriageway so progress was a little smoother than the journey to the Darien. We stopped off for lunch at a restaurant near Gorgona before heading towards the nearby coastal area to look for a few lowland specialities, including **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl**. We stopped by the exotically sounding Laguna Mailibu to see if we could call the Pygmy-Owl in. Sadly we got no response, but we did get an impressive response from the other locals taking exception to the calls.

Many were by now familiar friends but we saw our first **Blackburnian Warblers**, numerous **Yellow** and **Tennessee Warblers**, **Garden Emerald** and **Sapphire-throated Hummingbird**, **Yellow-bellied Elaenia**, **Panama** and **Social Flycatchers**, and a couple of really special species, the tiny **Pale-eyed Pygmy-Tyrant** and a very smart **Golden-fronted Greenlet**. The sun was beating down at this point and the temperatures were very high, but given the proximity to the sea at least the humidity was lower.



*Golden-fronted Greenlet*

As we were watching the roadside trees a **Magnificent Frigatebird** flew by and we were excited to see what the beach would reveal. Sadly it wasn't quite as good as we expected, but we did see at least five **Ospreys** fishing offshore and a couple of **Brown Pelicans** flew by distantly as did a few more Frigatebirds. There were only a couple of waders on the shore but they did give super views in nice light. A single **Willet** and a **Whimbrel**, which from our photos we discovered only had one complete foot.



*Willet*

Given the time we had to move on, although we did call in at a local supermarket to pick up some cold drinks, where Steve and Tony made friends with a few of the locals! We arrived at El Valle as the light was starting to fade, but we did have a little time to watch a few tanagers coming to the feeders. After dinner in a lovely local restaurant we headed up into the surrounding hills to try for owls. El Valle sits in an extinct volcanic caldera and the surrounding hills rise steeply and contains a lot of excellent forests. We drove up the narrow tracks, grateful again for the 4x4 before leaving the vehicle well away from any habitation. We tried initially for **Spectacled Owl** without any joy before connecting with a **Tropical Screech Owl** which in the end gave us good views. We returned to our hotel and another early night before heading out early the following morning.

### **Day 9 – October 23<sup>rd</sup> – El Valle de Anton**

We had an early and very tasty breakfast at our hotel, the charming Casa Grimaldo, before heading out for the day. At this point the weather was on our side, so we headed up on one of the steep climbs away from El Valle and parked up on a hillside to try our luck for **Tody Motmot**. Whilst we drew a blank on this much wanted species, we did discover the hillside vegetation was dripping with Yank warblers. We were treated to decent views of **Blackburnian, Golden-winged, Black-and-white, Tennessee, Chestnut-sided, Bay-breasted** and **Mourning Warblers**, although they were all very active and keeping up was a challenge. These were joined by a pair of **Bay Wrens** and both **Tawny-capped Euphonia** and **Tawny-crested Tanagers** on the wires.



*Chestnut-sided Warbler*

Kilo dragged us away to try other locations and we headed higher up the hill to look for a



*White-tipped Sicklebill*

unique hummer which would be new for all of us. As we drove higher we once again found ourselves amongst chicken farms, who it seems own much of the land around El Valle as well. Kilo was clearly looking for something specific as he drove along and parked up having found his target. By the roadside was a newly flowering Heliconia so we settled down to await our quarry. Initially a **Green Hermit** and a **Stripe-throated Hermit** came to the flowers which proved that nectar was available. However, after a patient watch our target appeared, **White-tipped Sicklebill**. We knew the visit would be fleeting and as trapline feeders it may not return for an hour so we had to make the most of our brief opportunity.

Whilst we were waiting for the Sicklebill we did see a number of other species including a local sub-species of **Collared Trogon**,

**Orange-bellied Trogon**, which some still count as a separate species. It certainly looks very different. We also saw a **Rufous Mourner** in the roadside trees and **Swainson's Thrushes** seemed to be everywhere. After the Sicklebill had left us we headed to another nearby patch of woodland with a plan to look for **Snowcap**. We parked up on the roadside but the noise of strimmers betrayed the amount of 'tidying' taking place around the chicken farms and roadside verges.

Nevertheless, as we left the car we immediately saw a small flock of Tanagers, including **Emerald** and **Silver-throated Tanager**. Whilst we were to see plenty of the latter, these were the sadly the only Emerald Tanagers of the trip. The plan was to head into the forest area which was a reliable site for **Snowcap**, however Kilo immediately noticed that the forest area had been heavily cleared of the heliconias and other flowers that attracted the Snowcaps. Doubtless the work of the ever present strimmers in the area.

However, despite the lack of Snowcaps we did find a number of other goodies. First up were a group of **Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers**, a **White-ruffed Manakin** and an obliging **Wedge-billed Woodcreeper** all by the roadside. We decided to enter the forest on the track anyway to see what was around. We found a very obliging **White-breasted Wood-**



*White-breasted Woodwren*

**Wren**, proving once again what a fabulous group of birds the wrens are, both in looks and their tremendous songs. We found another small group of warblers including our first **Canada Warblers** of the trip. As we left the forest we found another male **Collared**

**Trogon**, a pair of **Tawny-faced Gnatwrens** and a **Song Wren** foraging in the remaining understorey.

It was now late morning, so we drove back towards the town with a plan to try one more site before lunch, and what a place it turned out to be. Kilo drove us up a very steep, rough track which really put the 4x4 through its paces. He turned around in the middle of a ford over a mountain stream and then dropped us at the top of a hill and he went back to park at the bottom. Whilst we waited for him to join us we had another **Stripe-faced Hermit** feeding on the roadside flowers before we started to look for a target we were all keen to see. Kilo played a call and instantly had a response but seeing the target proved much more challenging. After nearly 20 minutes of straining our eyes in the murky forest Kilo spotted one perched, the diminutive **Tody Motmot!** With a little more patience we were finally able to see two and capture passable photographs even though they never came too close. It was high on our target list and a real speciality of the El Valle area so we set off for the car feeling very satisfied.



*Tody Motmot*

The forest had other gifts to bestow on us though. As we walked down the hill we found a beautiful **Rufous-and-white Wren**. This was followed by a pair of **Rosy Thrush-Tanagers**, a truly stunning bird, particularly the male. Whilst we all managed good views taking photographs was a real challenge as the male in particular never quite came out into the open. The area had a number of water cress beds fed by a crystal clear mountain stream. We noticed a pair of Waterthrushes on the rocks and realised they were in fact **Louisiana Waterthrush** so a new species for the trip. Finally, as we

were about to leave Steve found a **Lesson's Motmot** in a track by the road. This completed a full set of Panama Motmots and it gave great views to make it even better!

After a great morning we headed to a self-service café in El Valle for lunch, with a plan to head to another **Snowcap** site in the afternoon. However, as was becoming almost the norm, the heavens opened up once again and we ate lunch to the sound of the rain pouring down. The weather had really closed in and the high peaks around us were completely lost in heavy clouds. We decided to head for the appropriately named Heaven's Cafe for coffee and see what the weather did. In a brief break we were fortunate to see a pair of **Crimson-crested Woodpeckers** fly past our table, although they didn't sit for long in view and then the rain came down again.

We were watching the local rain radar and when we did get a gap around 3pm, we



*Keel-billed Toucan*

realised we had about an hour's window to try for the **Snowcaps**. We drove up to the gates of another gated community at Altos Maria. We did get excellent views of **Keel-billed Toucan** on the way up but by the time we reached the peak the weather was already looking threatening. The only hummers we saw were **Green-crowned Brilliant** and a **White-tailed Emerald**, both excellent birds, but sadly no **Snowcaps**. The weather meant staying up there was pointless so we headed back to our hotel and the chance for a bit of a break and a drink. We did though try our luck in the lovely hotel gardens and as the light faded we did get super views of a **Keel-billed Toucan** sitting in one of the trees in the garden.

Before we went out for dinner we realised the hotel had a lovely world relief map in the reception and for each country where guests had come from the national flag was pinned to

it. Unsurprisingly the UK already had a flag but Dimiter was clearly their first ever Bulgarian visitor, so he was duly invited to plant his national flag! We headed again to the excellent Bruschetta Restaurant for another super meal and several bottles of cold Balboa, at least for the UK brigade!

## Day 10 – October 24<sup>th</sup> – Salinas de Aguadulce, Las Lajas and drive to Boquete

We left our hotel at 05:30 with a long journey ahead of us, the longest of the trip. We had breakfast in a very modern service station on the Trans American highway and then headed towards a large area of salt pans known as the Salinas de Aguadulce. The plan was to get there before the real heat of the day took over. We arrived around 08:00 and it was quickly evident why Kilo wanted to arrive early, as it was already warm. We got out of the car at our first stop and could immediately see that this really was wader paradise. This is one of those sites you find in the neo-tropics, where hardly anyone seems to visit yet in Europe would be regarded as a birding Mecca. We were here for only a couple of hours but produced an impressive list of 40 species from only 3 stops. We ran out of time to bird the beach unfortunately.



*Least Sandpiper*

Our first find was eight **Wilson's Phalaropes** on a distant pool showing their white rumps whilst flying to confirm the ID. These were quickly followed by both **Lesser** and **Greater Yellowlegs** and significant numbers of both **Western** and **Semipalmated Sandpipers**. There were also a pair of **Least Sandpipers** right by the road. This was clearly some place. But it wasn't just the water that held our attention. The adjacent lowland scrub also held a lot of new species.

At the beginning of the trip we had told Kilo that Steve was desperate to see a **Mouse-coloured Tyrannulet** and it became a running joke, particularly every time we dipped. Well today was the day Steve saw his dream bird! In reality it's a much nicer bird than the books suggest, although it definitely didn't make our front cover given the competition. As we were switching

attention between the salt pans and the scrub, a **Straight-billed Woodcreeper** landed right in front of us. It proceeded to put on a great show and confirmed for all of us what a fabulous family of birds they are.

The scrub really did produce quite a list including **Yellow-crowned Euphonia**, **Northern Scrub Flycatcher**, **Prothonotary Warbler** and as we got in the vehicle a pair of **Brown-Throated Parakeets**. We moved further in to the salt pans looking for other potential targets. A number of Ducks were present including **Blue-winged Teal**, **Northern Shoveler** and Steve later discovered **Cinnamon Teal** on his photos which we



*Straight-billed Woodcreeper*

all missed at the time given the distractions. We found a number of Tern species including **Gull-billed** and **Royal** as well as three **Yellow-billed Terns**, a relatively recent addition to the Panama list. These were in full breeding plumage, something the similar **Least Terns** would not be at this time of year.

To the wader tally we now added **Wilson's Plover** and **Black-necked Stilts** before finding **Collared Plovers** a little further along the road. As we drove along there were countless numbers of waders feeding and we eventually found a very active feeding flock of twenty **Stilt Sandpipers** in amongst their cousins.

By this point it was very hot amongst the glare of the salt pans and we still had a long way to go, so had to call it a day despite only birding a small fraction of the site. If waders and other

waterbirds interest you, give yourself time to really check this place out. Who knows what we missed. As we headed back towards the Trans American we saw a group of vultures lifting off, including a **Lesser Yellow-Headed Vulture**.

Once back on the main highway it was now a long drag although Kilo had a couple of stops planned to which he added a couple of unplanned ones. The latter were to watch a pair of **Bat Falcons** (we have no idea how he saw them) and a pair of **American Kestrels** that were using roadside wires. Whilst on the journey we were required to show our passports



*Wilson's Plover*



*White-tailed Kite*

by the police, which seemed to surprise Kilo but we were all aware of the need to have your passport on you at all times, so we were soon on our way again.

We stopped briefly at a small town called Las Lajas to look for a near endemic species, the **Veraguan Mango**. Kilo took us to a Tulip Tree in full flower and we quickly located a single male which occasionally fed on the flowers whilst resting most of the time. The Mango safely ticked off we headed for a quick lunch in an identical service station before continuing westwards. We finally turned off the Trans American and started to climb towards Boquete as the scenery became ever more attractive.

The land here was mainly open with fields and isolated trees. After passing over a dam, Kilo spotted a raptor in a tree and we were soon enjoying superb views of a **White-tailed Kite**. Looking around we also found the scrub contained other birds, not least good numbers of **Fork-tailed Flycatchers**, a really



*Fork-tailed Flycatcher*

impressive species, using the scrub and fences as launch pads. We also found **Red-crowned Woodpeckers** and a few **Eastern Meadowlarks** in the bushes. We were now only a few miles from Boquete and were soon checking in to our hotel, Buena Vista, which is apparently the tallest building in Boquete. The roof terrace certainly has an impressive view of the town as the hotel name would suggest.

After a long day we headed out for an early dinner and had our first experience of Boquete. It felt very different to everywhere else we had been. It is far more touristy and the presence of the large American expat community was obvious. This was clear when we ate at the wonderfully named Big Daddy restaurant (all Brits of a certain age will have an immediate picture of a wrestler in their minds!). The accents were definitely American and we were clearly an object of interest. Not that we were bothered, they had a special offer on local beers - \$5 for a bucket of six bottles of Balboa! The food was also fantastic, continuing a theme throughout the trip.

### Day 11 – October 25<sup>th</sup> – Boquete

We left the hotel at 06:00 and headed for breakfast in the town centre. Before we had even entered the restaurant, Dimiter noticed a small raptor sitting on a TV ariel which turned out to be a **Merlin**. To our European eyes this seemed a very odd sighting but it seems that in the Americas they are often birds of towns and cities doubtless preying on the numerous species that thrive in the urban environment.



*Scaly-throated Foliage-Gleaner*

Breakfast concluded we headed up the mountain roads, to a site where Kilo had seen **Resplendent Quetzals** at the beginning of October so our hopes were high. We arrived at the house of a friend of Kilo's and hopefully scanned the trees and listening for a response. At first all we saw were numerous **Mountain Thrushes**, which were very common as we were now above 2,500 metres.

The road here was incredibly steep, as we walked higher as the light began to improve so did the volume of birds. A noisy flock of **Sulphur-winged Parakeets** flew in and proceeded to feed in the fruiting trees in nearby gardens and these were joined by a small but active flock of **Long-tailed Silky Flycatcher**, a species closely related to Waxwings. The same trees were also host to a pair of **Golden-browed Chlorophonias**, a species we discovered is Kilo's favourite, as well as

**Silver-throated Tanagers** and **Buff-throated Saltator**. The nearby tree provided a very handsome **Scaly-throated Foliage-Gleaner**, which showed very well before spending a considerable amount of time trying to see an **Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush**, which never quite settled in the open. We tried a little higher up in our quest for Quetzals and Kilo checked in with one of the local farmers, but it seemed our luck was out. This felt like our best chance, so there was an understandable sense of disappointment as we drove back down the mountain.



*Laughing Falcon*

However, that was quickly dispelled as Kilo pulled over and invited us to look in front of the vehicle. There, perched in the open was a fantastic **Laughing Falcon** which sat very happily having its phot taken. As ever these sites always end up throwing up more birds and we added **Black-throated Green Warbler** and **Wilson's Warbler** to the trip list. Heading further down the mountain initially, we then turned back up the mountain towards the area around Sendero los Quetzales. Kilo had already warned us that **Resplendent Quetzals** were unlikely given the lack of Avocados so we were after other fare.

We drove up to an area of high forest and set off on foot, once again around 2,500 metres. The first sighting was a female **Black-and-Yellow Silky Flycatcher**. They are normally in pairs but we couldn't find a male sadly. This was quickly

followed by a mixed flock which made its way through the forest and that we were able to follow for a little while. Amongst the species in the flock were **Collared Redstarts**, **Flame-throated Warbler**, **White-naped Brushfinch**, **Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush**, **Common Chlorospingus**, **Yellowish** and **Olive-streaked Flycatcher** and several **Prong-billed Barbets**. None were easy to see, let alone photograph but with a little patience we got to see most of them. We also had a pair of **Black-cheeked Warblers** which, despite being very close always managed to stay hidden.

We continued to walk on until we reached a clearing, where we able to get great views of a **Spot-crowned Woodcreeper**, another one for the growing list of Furnariids, in a free standing tree which also had an adult male **Black-throated Green Warbler**. As we set off back to the car we were in for a couple more Furnariid treats. Firstly we spotted a **Ruddy Treerunner**, which showed nicely before Kilo got a response from a **Buffy**



*Spot-crowned Woodcreeper*



*Buffy-Tuftedcheek*

**Tuftedcheek.** It was fairly distant at first, but much to everyone's surprise it dropped onto the fence alongside the track and gave fabulous views at eyelevel only a few metres away. This was a real highlight of the trip and gave us a chance to appreciate just how stunning this species is.

As our walk back to the car continued, we found a **Golden-bellied Flycatcher** feeding above the track. We were able to enjoy great views of this attractive tyrant flycatcher as it used the open branches to launch itself in search of insects. Kilo also spotted the scarce **Dark Pewee** using the tree tops in a similar way. Back at the car we drove to the ranger station at the entrance to Sendero los Quetzales, where we instantly saw a tiny **Scintillant Hummingbird** feeding on a flowering bush along with a female **White-throated Mountain Gem**. By now it was lunchtime



*Tufted Flycatcher*



*Scintillant Hummingbird*

so Kilo decided we should drive down to a local restaurant and then return to the ranger station after lunch.

Our plan for a quiet afternoon waiting for the birds to find us in the ranger station was somewhat shattered, when we returned to find grass trimmers being used to tidy up the grounds of the ranger station but we decided to grin and bear it. The flowering bushes added **Stripe-tailed Hummingbird** to our tally and these were joined by a **Slaty Flowerpiercer**. The taller trees held a small group of **Elegant Euphonias**, a beautiful bird but sadly always very high. A noisy flock of **Prong-billed Barbets** joined the Euphonias and a pair of **Ochraceous Wrens** eventually allowed us a reasonable views. Much less skulking though was a **Tufted Flycatcher**, which happily sat in the open between feeding flights.

The afternoon was now pushing on and the light was beginning to fade and we wanted to try our luck on the fast flowing mountain stream that flowed alongside the road up the mountain. On the way down we stopped at a stunning bromeliad covered tree with several warblers including a lovely Black-and-White Warbler.



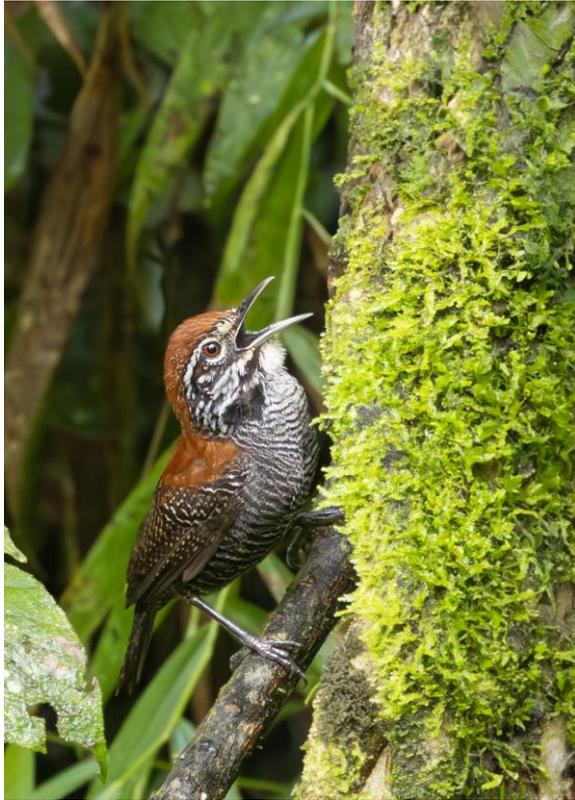
*Black-and-White Warbler*

Further on, we stopped near a bridge and almost immediately spotted a pair of **American Dippers** behaving in the same manner as Dippers everywhere. We also found a pair of **Torrent Tyrannulets** catching insects from the rocks over the water and a **Spotted Sandpiper** patrolling the waters edge. An **Acadian Flycatcher** and a family group of noisy **Acorn Woodpeckers** completed our days birding and it was dark by the time we arrived back at our hotel in Boquete. We dined at Big Daddies again, but sadly the beer had reverted to its usual cost of \$2 a bottle!

## **Day 12 – October 26<sup>th</sup> – Travel to Volcan, Laguna Volcan, Jardin Tamandua**

We left our hotel at 06:30, packing the vehicle once more and heading for breakfast in Boquete as soon as the café opened. Fortified by food and coffee we headed south on the main highway before cutting cross country to head towards Volcan.

We decided to try our luck by the side of a fast flowing river, which had substantial forest growing on the valley slopes. We checked the river for Tiger-Herons, but with no joy, though there were birds calling from the riverside scrub and after a bit of effort we had close up views of a **Black-Striped Sparrow**. The trees were populated with a



*Riverside Wren*

**Wood-Rail** in the hotel grounds, as well as a **Scaly-breasted Hummingbird**, before we headed out on the short drive to the laguna area. It also gave us time to appreciate the stunning hotel gardens with a stream running through and a pond which promised potentially more birds.

It was the forest around the lakes that really gave the main interest, with a succession of great birds meaning progress was at times snail paced! We got out of the car on the edge of the forest and quickly picked up a mixed flock of warblers and other local birds. We saw three different **Vireo** species feeding together, **Yellow-throated**, **Philadelphia** and **Brown-capped**. These were accompanied by **Black-and-white** and **Wilson's Warbler**, **Tropical Parula** and **Slate-throated Redstart** and **Slaty-capped** and **Dusky-capped Flycatchers**. Visits from **Olivaceous**

number of different tanagers, although no new species, whilst the bushes held a number of **Variable Seedeaters**. A pair of noisy **Boat-billed Flycatchers** were calling to each other across the river, before Kilo drew our attention to a **Long-billed Starthroat** feeding on flowers growing from the vertiginous slope. Whilst we were watching this stunning hummer, a wren was calling from the very wet vegetation on the same slope. After a little effort we were able to get superb views of a pair of **Riverside Wrens**, once again cementing their reputation as a stunning family. European birders are limited to just a single species of Wren, what a contrast!

The original plan had been to try a couple of other sites, but Kilo decided our best option would be to head to Volcan, less than 30 minutes away, and drop our bags off before heading at to the Volcan Lakes area. A quick pit stop at the hotel did yield **Grey-cowled**



*Streak-headed Woodcreeper*

**Woodcreeper** and an **Olivaceous Piculet**, a tiny woodpecker, were the icing on this particular slice of cake and we had only moved about 50 metres from the car!

Kilo was keen we explored other areas of the forest and the lakes themselves, so we drove on a little before parking up to walk the tracks to the waters edge. We were immediately treated to a pair of **Golden-crowned Warblers** and did try and tempt a **Kentucky Warbler** in, but sadly it carried on calling from deep scrub and failed to add to our tally. As we walked to the lakeside we were passed by a group of locals who apparently make YouTube videos, whose content seemed to consist of driving through the many puddles. When we arrived at the lake it became apparent that they had got themselves stuck in the lakeside mud, so our birding for the next half an hour was to the soundtrack of revving engines as they tried to extricate themselves from the mud!



*Olive-crowned Yellowthroat*

Despite the noisy distraction we still managed some excellent birds. The lake itself yielded **American Coot, Common Gallinule, Great White Egret, Green Heron** and **Northern Jacana**. The forest south of the lakes had some enormous trees and one held a number of **Crested Guans**, whilst a **Streak-headed Woodcreeper** came into the smaller trees just in front of us. Back on the lakeside we were on the lookout for a real local speciality and were rewarded with very close up views of **Olive-crowned Yellowthroat**. The birds here are a local sub-species, **Chirique**, and a likely candidate for full species level in the near future. A really stunning bird. As we watched the Yellowthroat, Kilo heard a **White-throated Crake** calling and after a little patience we were able to get great views of a male and female, as they ran rapidly across the open track in

front of us. A **Red-faced Spinetail** also put in a brief appearance alongside the same track.

To the continuing sound of the YouTube, stars we walked back down the track towards the car but could clearly see a lot of activity in front of us. A number of warblers were coming down to drink in the puddles and we quickly picked out a stunning male



*White-throated Crake*

**American Redstart** as well as other warblers. Steve thought he had seen a **Worm-eating Warbler** land very briefly and a quick check of our photos confirmed it. Kilo was able to call it back towards us and unbelievably this was the only bird that Kilo added to his year list during the entire trip. There were plenty of other birds around including a pair of **Spotted Barbthroats** which we got good views of but never really photographable ones.

By now we were very late for lunch so we set off back to Volcan, but were quickly delayed by the appearance of an **Isthmian Wren** by the car on the entrance road to the Laguna area. To this we added superb views of **Ruddy-breasted Seedeater** and **Yellow-faced Grassquit**, before trying again to get to our ever delayed lunch. The route back to town cuts across the local airstrip



*Ruddy-breasted Seedeater*



*American Golden Plover*

and as we were traversing the tarmac I shouted out stop. By the side of the car an **American Golden Plover** was about three metres away and it became apparent it was completely unphased by our presence, allowing ridiculous opportunities to photograph it.

After finally managing lunch, we set off for our final stop of the day in the small mountainside town of Guadalupe. The weather was closing in after a so far dry day and when we arrived the rain started to fall heavily. Thankfully though we had chosen to visit a feeder station operated by Tamandua Tours, so we could sit in the dry and watch the birds come in to feed. The cast of birds was very different to previous feeder stations, so despite the weather we were more than happy to sit and enjoy the superb photographic opportunities.

The hummer feeders brought in the familiar **Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds** but also being



*White-throated Mountain-Gem*

at high altitude they attracted **Lesser Violetears**, **White-throated Mountain-Gem** and the truly spectacular **Violet Sabrewing**.

The fruit feeders were also equally busy with the astonishing **Scarlet-rumped Tanager** being the probable standout but **Blue-grey**, **Silver-throated** and **Palm Tanagers** were much in evidence. Others on the feeders included **Common Chlorospingus**, **Clay-coloured Thrush**, **Buff-throated Saltator** and both **Red-crowned** and many **Acorn Woodpeckers** who noisily made their presence felt. **A Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush** fed in the scrub at the bottom of the garden and a **Melodious Blackbird** appeared briefly in the bushes.

The light was fading quickly in the poor weather so we headed back down the mountain towards our hotel, the delightful Dos Rios where we had dinner in the lovely restaurant that evening, which it turned out served excellent Italian food.



*Silver-throated Tanager*



*Lesser Violetear*



*Buff-throated Saltator*

### Day 13 – October 27<sup>th</sup> - Volcan area, L’Amistad NP and Volcan Baru

As we were up and about before the hotel served breakfast, we headed to the local café we had lunch yesterday and also picked up a packed lunch, so we could stay up in the mountains all day. The weather looked very threatening as we ate and started to rain as we drove higher. By the time we reached L’Amistad it was absolutely pouring down and unlike the storms we were used to, this felt like it was setting in for a long period. To no one’s surprise the gates to the park were locked and no sign of anyone, so we decided our only real option was to head back to the feeder station where we could at least stay dry whilst watching birds and manage to get a coffee.

The cast at the feeders was broadly similar but if anything gave even better views. In particular the **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks** were constantly feeding and provided fabulous photographic opportunities. A pair of **Baltimore Orioles** were in the garden, but seemed reluctant to land on the feeders themselves, whilst a **Mountain Elainia** fed from the bushes at the side of the torrenting river at the bottom of the garden. Kilo found a male **Flame-coloured Tanager** feeding on the fruit trees at the front of the property and we were treated to wonderful close up views of **Long-tailed Silky Flycatchers** feeding.



*Rose-breasted Grosbeak*



*Scarlet-rumped Tanager*



*Violet Sabrewing*

By mid-morning the rain started to ease off a little so we decided to give L'Amistad another go and were rewarded by finding the gates open and the ranger and security staff at the gate. We showed them our permit and drove up to the ranger station. Whilst the rain had stopped it didn't look very promising, but we knew the NP held a number of highly sought after target species. We tried our luck around the car park area first and whilst we didn't attract in any **Toucanets** or **Quetzals** we did get excellent views of a **Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush**. We also tracked down a **Talamanca Hummingbird**, which we had hoped for at the feeders but there was clearly lots of food out in the forests.



*Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush*

We decided to head up one of the trails, but the track was effectively a running stream in parts. The track was narrow and densely vegetated, so birding wasn't easy but we did come across a pair of **Large-footed Finches** although photographing them proved a much bigger challenge. Whilst trying to tempt them into the open, a group of **Black-cheeked Warblers** proved much happier to show themselves, although they were incredibly mobile. These were joined by a **Grey-breasted Wood-Wren** and a small group of **Prong-billed Barbets**. We could sense the rain was closing in again, but pushed higher up the trail and again tried for the **Toucanets**, suddenly the heavens opened and we were at risk of getting soaked despite wearing waterproofs – in truth we were more concerned about cameras than ourselves.



*Prong-billed Barbet*

whilst Kilo tried to tease it out. How Kilo heard such a quiet call over the car engine and us all talking is a complete mystery, but sure enough a **Wrenthrush** was skulking about in front of us. Whilst it never popped out into the open it did flare its orange crown a few times so the ID was unmistakable. That was one target we at least did manage to get, but there is no doubt that this was one location where the rain did cost us the chance for a number of species.

The decision to move on proved a sensible one as the weather on the slopes of Baru was much better than L'Amistad. We drove up another very steep track where the 4x4 came into its own and started to bird an area called Bajo Grande on the western entrance to the Los Quetzales trail. In particular we were on the look out for **Volcano Hummingbird** as well as our last chance for **Resplendent Quetzal** and

We headed back to the shelter of the ranger station and decided to eat lunch. At least from here we could bird in the dry and we were joined by a very obliging **Yellowish Flycatcher** (surely one of the nicest Empidonax group) whilst we ate. The rain continued to pour down, but the nearby forest at least continued to provide some interest. A mixed flock skirted around the edge of the ranger station included **Yellow-thighed Brushfinch, Flame-throated Warbler** and **Collared Redstarts**. The latter in particular came very close to us and offered the chance for fabulous photographs of this real stunner.

With no sign of the rain easing and the trails being waterlogged Kilo suggested we head towards Volcan Baru and try our luck at the other end of the Los Quetzales trail. With a lot of regrets we got back in the car and headed back towards the gate. As we drove Kilo suddenly stopped and said he had heard a **Wrenthrush** so we all got out again



*Yellowish Flycatcher*



*Collared Redstart*

**Emerald Toucanet.** Our first stop only yielded **White-throated Mountain-gem** on the flowering bushes so we headed up higher on very bumpy road. Kilo stopped to view a stunning **Flame-coloured Tanager** right over the road and we became aware that the roadside trees were full of warblers including **Flame-throated** as well as **Golden-browed Chlorophonia**. As we watched these a bird was calling from the deeper undergrowth which turned out to be a **Silvery-fronted Tapaculo**. After a little effort we did manage reasonable views, well reasonable for a Tapaculo!

We realised that the fields around us were also full of warblers feeding in the grass and on the roadside bushes. In the main these were **Wilson's Warblers**, at least thirty of them, but there were also **Black-throated Green Warblers** in amongst them. Kilo tried playing **Costa Rican Pygmy Owl** to see what else was around and actually succeeded in getting a response from the owl itself. As some of us walked on, a lot of patience displayed by Dimiter managed to attract the owl to a low branch, where it gave fabulous views for the whole group.

The weather was just about holding off, but with the thick cloud cover the light was starting to fade quickly and we started to head back towards Volcan. However, there were more flowering bushes to before we left the trail so we tried again for the **Volcano Hummingbird**. Kilo managed to spot one flying in very quickly but it didn't hang around and only Tony got a fleeting view. In contrast a male **Scintillant Hummingbird** did stay around and flashed its gaudy throat at us from the top of a nearby bush. Accepting defeat on finding a **Resplendent Quetzal**, we headed back down the mountain to Hotel



*Costa Rican Pygmy Owl*

Dos Rios before sampling their excellent Pizzas and packing again before heading back east the following morning.

#### **Day 14, October 28<sup>th</sup> – Birding Paradise and drive to Penonome**

We left the hotel this morning heading to a place called Birding Paradise for breakfast and the chance to catch up with some special species. As we drove away from the hotel it was apparent that this was the day to be in the high mountains and as we drove along the top of Volcan Baru was clear in the sunshine! It was only a 30 minute drive to Birding Paradise and we were met by Mishael, who has created a remarkable haven for birds in a mainly agricultural area in only eight years. The variety of birds visiting his feeders and using the regenerating forest on his land is remarkable and amply demonstrates the speed at which nature can make a comeback if given the chance.

His biggest challenge at the moment seems to be stopping the **Grey-headed Chacalacas** from stripping the food from the feeders! We sat down for breakfast cooked by Mishael's wife and we were just finishing as the undoubted stars of the show announced their presence. We quickly went on to the top terrace to find five stunning **Fiery-billed Aracarís** coming in for the bananas. It was a real privilege to see this range limited beauty up close and seemingly unconcerned by our presence. A **Lesson's Motmot** also came and seemed to want to compete with the Aracarís for giving us the best views. When the Aracarís melted away others came in for the fruit including **Thick-**



*Fiery-billed Aracari*

**billed** and **Spot-crowned Euphonias** as well **Scarlet-rumped Tanagers** and **Green Honeycreepers**. The hummingbird feeders were fairly busy with **White-necked Jacobins** and **Rufous-tailed** and **Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds**, but sadly no sign of Charming Hummingbird, a fairly regular visitor. We also had a very brief visit from an **Orange-collared Manakin** and a more obliging **White-ruffed Manakin**.

We headed for a walk around the grounds, although this was delayed by a very obliging **Buff-rumped Warbler** hopping around the house. The walk to the stream yielded a number of species including a lovely **Yellow-throated Vireo** and a number of other warblers, although no new species for the trip. There were a number of Swifts flying around from which we picked out **Vaux** and **White-collared** and Mishael did call **Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift** although



*Lesson's Motmot*



*White-ruffed Manakin*



*White-necked Jacobin*

none of us managed to see it. The area around the house actually proved more productive with **Yellow** and **Mistletoe Tyrannulet**, **Yellow-bellied Flycatcher** and **Scrub Greenlet** all showing well in the trees. We were also able to get great views of a **Crimson-fronted Parakeets** that we had seen flying earlier and with a bit of patience a **Bran-coloured Flycatcher**.



*Crimson-fronted Parakeet*

Sadly, we had a long drive ahead of us so we said our farewells and headed towards the Trans-American Highway and on to Penonome. We had planned a stop near Santiago to look for a few western lowland specialists, but the weather put paid to that. The rain was very heavy so we pushed on eastwards since birding would have been impossible. We did stop for a quick comfort break on a side road late in the afternoon when the rain had stopped. A nearby pond held a large **Cattle Egret** roost and Tony then spotted a **Ringed Kingfisher** sitting on a lamppost just before we spooked it. Fortunately, it didn't fly far and posed on the next lamppost along. As we watched the Kingfisher a fabulous **Grey-lined Hawk** flew by us and landed in a nearby tree. Sadly it flew before we could take photographs, but it was certainly a real stunner.

It was dark by the time we got to Hotel Cocle which was a very modern motel type establishment. We were all tired so planned a quick turn round for food. The dinner we had was superb and far exceeded our expectations. Panamanians know how to cook steak! Early night in preparation for our last days birding with Kilo tomorrow.

## Day 15 – October 29<sup>th</sup> – El Cope, drive back to Summit Hotel

We left Hotel Cocle around 06:00 and headed towards the Omar Torrijos National Park, otherwise known as El Cope. The park is named after a former President of Panama



*Smoky-brown Woodpecker*

who died in a plane crash within the park after being deposed. We stopped for breakfast then headed north from the Trans-American towards the park. The final few kilometres were on very bumpy tracks, which at times were very steep and made it very clear why few tours include it in their itineraries. We had a number of targets here including the chance to finally connect with **Snowcap**, **Yellow-eared Toucanet** and **Black-crowned Antpitta**.

Having checked in at the gate we drove up to park by what was advertised as an accommodation block, but there was no sign of any residents. The view from the top was stunning with forest clothing the hills in all directions. As we looked down on the forest from the viewpoint a flock of **Chestnut-headed Orependolas** were feeding below us, whilst swifts were flying around us including a small flock of **Chestnut-collared**. We went to check out some

of the flowers for **Snowcap** but sadly we failed to see any, though we did find a lovely **Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher**. This landed quite close to a **Streaked Flycatcher** which gave a useful comparison of the two similar species with the Sulphur-bellied having a more prominent maler stripe and overall being a brighter bird. Whilst admiring the flycatchers a pair of obliging **Smoky-brown Woodpeckers** flew into the same area, along with a flock of **Tawny-crested Tanagers**.

We headed down towards the first of the planned trails, which quickly descended down the valley deep into the rainforest. Unlike other sites the paths were inside the canopy and they were dark and very humid. We quickly came across a **Spotted Woodcreeper**, although it refused to settle on a tree despite our best efforts. We dropped further down the valley, before Kilo announced he had heard one of our targets. We had all come prepared with plastic bags to sit on, so as instructed we took up our position on the path steps and sat quietly trying not to move. Once he was satisfied we were all ready Kilo played a brief call. Within 20 seconds we were staring at a **Black-crowned Antpitta**, wow!! It put in several appearances and lived up to expectations. Talk about



*Black-crowned Antpitta*

last chance saloon, but well worth the wait. It was a very content, but hot, walk back up the valley to the car for water before setting off on our next trail.

Once again we headed down the valley on a different route, although a little more gradual this time around. As we negotiated the track we suddenly saw a large black bird in a gap in the trees and Kilo called out **Bare-necked Umbrellabird!** This was one bird we didn't expect to see and was a real bonus. With a bit of patience we all managed to see it, in this case we think a female, and managed reasonable photographs. After it moved on we headed down the slope which started to get narrower and steeper. Throughout Kilo was trying to call in a **Toucanet** and **Lattice-tailed Trogon**, but both eluded us.

However, we managed to find our second ant swarm of the trip, albeit very distant at first. The first signs we saw were **Bicoloured Antbirds**, before we picked up an **Ocellated Antbird**. **Chestnut-backed Antbirds** were much closer to us and a pair responded to us, very close to the path although they proved elusive. Steve then announced he had found a dove in amongst the flock and after a lot of patience we were able to refind it and confirm a **Chiriqui Quail-Dove**. The flock was gradually moving towards us and there were both **Plain-brown** and **Spotted Woodcreepers** feeding with the mixed flock before unbelievably we found a second **Black-crowned Antpitta** feeding alongside the Bicoloured and Chestnut-backed Antbirds. Talk about London buses!



*Arcadian Flycatcher*

An **Acadian Flycatcher** was constantly flying over the ant swarm and this was joined by a **Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher**, which despite its name is now in the Becard and Tityra family and a great addition to the trip list. At this point Kilo instructed us all to be very quiet as he had heard some bill snapping. This would top the day off as Kilo thought there was a **Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo** coming towards us. Sadly if there was we never saw it but boy did that get the adrenaline going! By now we had been watching the swarm for 90 minutes or so and we were running out of time to make the journey back to the Summit Hotel, so we reluctantly set off back to the car. However, on getting to the top I realised I had left my hat on the floor (removed to help Steve take photos!) so he went all the way back down. When I got there the mixed flock was all around the path and I faced the dilemma of watching the flock, or getting back for the drive. The latter won out but it was a tough decision!

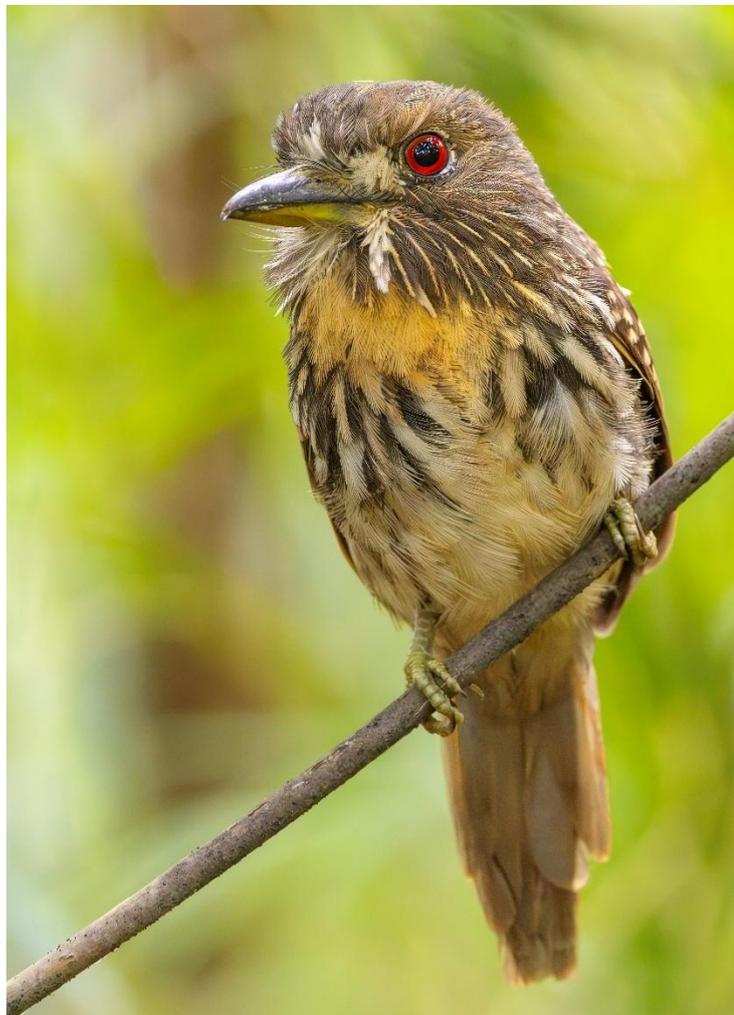
And that was effectively the end of our birding adventure with Kilo. The drive back to the Summit Hotel took around three hours and we then had to say our goodbyes to Kilo. We cannot praise him highly enough. His birding knowledge is incredible and his ability to see and hear birds is frankly superhuman. He is great fun to be with and enjoys a good joke! He also enjoyed the endless supply of British sweets (candy for our American readers) that we brought with us for the long journeys. Nothing was ever too much trouble for him and he went out of his way to ensure our trip was a success. Thank you Kilo.

## Day 16 – October 30<sup>th</sup> - Summit Hotel

After a long debate about how best to use our last free day we decided to simply bird the huge hotel grounds, rather than travel to another site. This was partly a desire to take it easy bit, but also that we hadn't actually birded the forest we could see from our hotel rooms. This proved to be a good choice.

After persuading the hotel staff at breakfast to let us take a couple of bananas we watched a good selection of birds come to the bird table before heading off for a walk in the grounds. Initially we saw several pretty familiar species including **Black-and-white Warbler** and **Eastern Wood-Pewee**, but nothing particularly notable. By this point we had lost Dimiter, but as the rest of us walked past the Sloth rehabilitation centre one of the team invited us in and we met an adult Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth which was due for release shortly. It was a fantastic experience to see one of these charismatic mammals up close and it happily polished off our last banana. Truly unforgettable and let's hope it is now happily back where it belongs.

After the thrill of the Sloth we walked in to the nearby Palm Trail with no great expectations, how wrong we were. We quickly found a **Whooping Motmot** and a small flock of **Dot-winged Antbirds**, before stumbling into a pair of **White-whiskered Puffbirds** who posed beautifully. We then realised we may have found something more significant when a **Spotted Antbird** popped up in front of us. We had another ant swarm (our third of the trip), which Tony quickly confirmed as they were climbing on his boots! Fortunately Dimiter found us again so the whole group were able to enjoy the spectacle.



*White-whiskered Puffbird*

As we watched the **Spotted Antbirds**, Steve thought he saw a **Black-faced Antthrush**, after a lot of effort we managed to call it in, but getting good views was really challenging. Eventually it gave itself up briefly with some managing

decent photos whilst other species fussed around us including the **Whooping Motmot** we saw earlier, **Black-bellied** and **Rufous-breasted Wrens** and **Dusky Antbirds**.

It was very hot and humid in the forest so after heading out to the golf course we found a kiosk where we managed a beer and a cool off in the shade. The strimmers were out in force and the grass cutting had brought in good numbers of flycatchers and swallows including **Barn** and **Mangrove Swallows** catching the disturbed insects. The nearby trees seem to be full of birds and we realised they were full of fruit. In amongst them were **Keel-billed Toucans**, **Collared Aracaris** and a pristine male **Blue Cotinga** as well as various Tanagers. As it was now midday the heat was very high so whilst some of us headed back to the hotel for a rest and a swim, Steve headed back into the forest for another go at the ant swarm. You can't fault his perseverance!

All of us enjoyed a chilled afternoon and recharged our batteries for the flight home tomorrow. Some of us went on walks in the late afternoon for some relaxed birding and we all managed to see a number of **Common Pauraques** after dinner.

### **Day 17 – October 31<sup>st</sup> – Summit Hotel and flights back to Europe**

So arrived our final day in Panama before leaving for the airport after lunch. With a lot of packing to do we planned a fairly easy morning, so some of us planned a last walk by the lakes at the hotel before breakfast. It was a pretty murky morning but as ever birds were much in evidence with **Fork-tailed Flycatchers** and a fall of **Eastern Kingbirds** seemingly on every low perch. We noticed a pair of ducks flying over us and realised that we had a genuinely wild pair of **Muscovy Ducks** as opposed to the dodgy domesticated variety we had seen elsewhere.

We saw a bird running alongside the fence beside the main road and realised we had found another **Upland Sandpiper**! This one was far more skittish than the Darien bird and was reluctant to be photographed but still a great surprise. At this point we were stopped by one of the hotel staff and asked to leave the golf course area due to the risk of being hit by a golf ball! After a quick check of the ponds we headed back towards the hotel. Steve and I decided to check out the trees that bordered the main drive whilst Tony headed back. There were **White-bellied Antbirds** calling deep in the bushes but resolutely refusing to show themselves yet again. However, we found a number of warblers feeding low down which we initially thought were only **Bay-breasted Warblers**, but on returning home the photographs showed the photographed bird was in fact a juvenile **Blackpoll Warbler**. Once on the main drive we heard the **White-bellied Antbirds** still calling and after a lot of effort one of them briefly popped out for Steve whilst I missed it!

As we walked back to the hotel up the drive a large group of **Chimney Swifts** came through when suddenly a **Bat Falcon** was in amongst them trying unsuccessfully to catch breakfast. We headed for our breakfast and then to pack and chill before the long



*Blackpoll Warbler*

journey home. Jose came to collect us after lunch and at the airport Dimiter headed to Terminal 1 for his flight to Istanbul whilst the UK contingent made their way to Terminal 2 for the KLM flight to Amsterdam. So ended a fabulous adventure in Panama, a real birding paradise.



*Steve, Tony, Phil, Dimiter & Kilo*

## Checklist

An eBird trip report including all sightings, locations and more photographs can be found [here](#).

