

# Western Panama: Tranquilo Bay | Jan. 31 – Feb. 8, 2024 | Trip Report | by Greg Butcher



At Tranquilo Bay with guide Roger Morales, and participants Carla, Carol, Cassie, Chris, Marlene, Nissa, Pam, Peter, and Susan



## Wed., Jan. 31 Arrival | Panama Canal

Most of us arrived at our hotel (Radisson Panama Canal) in the afternoon and joined a 5 pm birdwalk on the hotel grounds and on a path along the Panama Canal. When we flew in, we could see a lot of boats in the Pacific Ocean, waiting to get into the Canal, and it was fun to get close to some in back of our hotel. The canal was pretty quiet for birds, but the hotel grounds were hopping. We found our first hummingbird – Rufous-tailed – parakeet – Orange-chinned – and parrot – Yellow-crowned (and Red-lored). Probably the prettiest bird we saw was Crimson-backed Tanager. Surprisingly, the only migrant we found from North America was a female Yellow Warbler. After our first taste of Neotropical birding, we headed down the causeway to Mi Ranchito – seafood (mostly corvino [sea bass]) Panama style, served overlooking the canal. It was a great beginning!

## **Thurs., Feb. 1**                      **Panama City to Tranquilo Bay**

We took a commercial flight from Panama City's Albrit domestic airport to the small Bocas del Toro airport on Isla Colon near the Caribbean coast, where we met several of the Tranquilo Bay staff members. We zipped through town, but at the dock we were treated to a dramatic encounter: a Parasitic Jaeger was chasing a Laughing Gull, followed by a Brown Booby. The jaeger forced the gull to cough up its fish, but the booby got the fish! The boat ride to Tranquilo Bay added Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds to our marine bird list. The boat landed at the dock in the mangroves, and we climbed the steps to the lodge, where we were greeted by a couple of North American migrants – Prothonotary and Tennessee Warblers – and the friendly staff at the lodge – and lunch! The garden was especially birdy every afternoon. Our rarest birds today were Black-crowned Antshrike and Chestnut-backed Antbird at the edge of the forest. Resident hummingbirds included Rufous-tailed, Crowned Woodnymph, and Stripe-throated and Bronzy Hermits. Our first Tanagers were Blue-gray, Palm, and Plain-colored. We saw Green Honeycreeper almost every afternoon. We counted 8 Brown-throated Three-toed Sloths on our first afternoon. Visiting the tower at dusk is a classic Tranquilo Bay experience. All the tower birds could be seen from the garden, but it was great to be at eye level with a sloth, to watch Red-ored and Blue-headed Parrots and Montezuma Oropendolas fly close by, and to look down on tiny garden birds.

## **Fri., Feb. 2**                      **Punta Robalo | Palo Seco (Mainland)**

We hopped in the boat after an early breakfast and headed to Punta Robalo on the mainland. It pays to pay attention on the boat rides because today we had Common Bottlenose Dolphins swimming along beside us and Whimbrels flying beside us. The area around the mainland dock produced Royal and Sandwich Terns, herons and egrets, and swallows and martins. The Punta Robalo Road is only four miles long, but it is a very wet and productive area. We added Golden-hooded and Scarlet-rumped to our Tanager list. Our best birds were Green Ibis and Wood Stork; we saw one of each. For most of the morning, we drove through wet brushy grassland, picking up Gray-capped Flycatcher, Red-breasted Meadowlark, Olive-crowned Yellowthroat, and Thick-billed Seed-Finch. It was interesting to see several species today that live on the mainland, but not on Bastimentos Island, where the Tranquilo Bay ecolodge is located. In the afternoon, we climbed in elevation to Palo Seco, still on the Caribbean side of the continental divide. After lunch in the van because of rain, we had some great birds: White Hawk, Northern Black-throated Trogon, Philadelphia Vireo, Golden-winged and four other warbler species, and five new tanagers: Dusky-faced, White-shouldered, Speckled, Emerald, and Silver-throated. Our guide Roger got a life bird – Ashy-throated Chlorospingus. Willy Mazu is a great name for a stream; today it hosted a perched Laughing Falcon and flying Sulphur-winged Parakeets and White-collared Swifts. Our bathroom stop is at the Supermarket lagoon where we found a huge flock of perhaps 500 Crimson-fronted Parrots. We tried to hurry back through Punta Robalo Road, but were interrupted by doves on the road, Muscovy Ducks in the wetlands, and a super-surprise Collared Forest-Falcon flying across the road.

## **Sat., Feb. 3**                      **Tranquilo Bay**

Breakfasts here are tasty – this morning we had very cinnamon-y buns. We have some kind of eggs every morning – and excellent bacon some mornings. Everyone seems to like the coffee. After breakfast, we went looking for birds on our host island, Bastimento. We found Masked and Black-crowned Tityras, White-vented Euphonias, Tawny-crested Tanagers, and a Blue Dacnis. Several of us enjoyed snorkeling at “the garden” in the afternoon. We had many species of fish, including surgeonfish, parrotfish, needlefish, grunts, wrasses, damselfly fishes, butterfly fishes, snappers, and barracudas. They were swimming among several types of corals, sponges (purple and green!), feather-duster worms, sea urchins, and sea cucumbers. The mangroves below the lodge hosted Common Black-Hawk, Mangrove Cuckoo, Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, and Northern Waterthrush – and a nocturnal treat – a close-by perched Common Potoo in full flashlight!

**Sun., Feb. 4**

## **Changuinola Canal and River | Bird Island**

After a day without the boat, we spent all day in the boat today. We saw one of our rarest birds early in the morning – Nicaraguan Seed-Finch. It is found in 5 Central American countries, but it is rarely seen – despite its huge pink bill and black body (male) – and it barely gets into Guatemala or Panama. The boat let us get close! At almost the same spot, I got a life bird – Canebrake Wren – with long, close looks. There was a known roost of Short-tailed Nighthawk, so we got to see two side-by-side. We had a five-kingfisher day: Belted, Ringed, Amazon, Green, American Pygmy! The canal ends at the Changuinola River, where we added Limpkin and Snail Kite. At the mouth of the river, we found a flock of migratory shorebirds, including Black-bellied, Semipalmated, and Collared Plovers, Ruddy Turnstone, and Spotted Sandpiper. Then we were off to Bird Island, where we were treated to a nesting colony of Brown Boobies, Red-billed Tropicbirds, and Magnificent Frigatebirds. A special treat was a single nest of a Red-footed Booby and a Peregrine Falcon hanging out near a plethora of food sources.

**Mon., Feb. 5**

## **Isla Popa & Canal | Tranquilo Bay grounds**

If there were only one species of bird on Isla Popa, we would still go there, as long as the species is Snowy Cotinga. The cotingas put on quite a show for us: We saw them from well from the boat, but when we landed on the island, two pairs cavorted in a leafless tree above us. But of course, Snowy Cotinga isn't the only species on the island: It was a three toucan day, with Keel-billed, Yellow-throated, and Collared Aracari. We had good looks at a pair of White-crowned Pigeons and a pair of Slaty-tailed Trogons. We had a Short-tailed Hawk and a couple of Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts overhead. We had a total of four Pale-billed Woodpeckers and a Cocoa Woodcreeper! We also got to see the odd-looking Long-billed Gnatwren. Did I mention that the meals at Tranquilo Bay are really good? And the porch has an amazing parade of mammalian visitors: Derby's Woolly Opossums, Crab-eating Raccoons, Night Monkeys, and a whole family of White-throated Capuchins. One of the cabins had a group of roosting White-lined Bats – luckily on the outside, not the inside, of the cabin.

**Tues., Feb. 6**

## **Fortuna Reserve and Continental Divide**

We saved the longest drive and the highest elevation for the next-to-the-last day. Again, we took the boat to Punto Robalo and drove off in the van, trying desperately to get by the low wetlands without stopping. But – there are too many good birds, and we stopped for a pair of Slaty Spinetails! We were successful after that and made it all the way to Fortuna Reservoir, on the other side of the continental divide. As usual, there were three species of swallows there, plus a Lesser Elaenia and a Tropical Mockingbird. From there, we birded along the road in the Fortuna Forest Reserve with seven species of hummingbirds, including Purple-throated Mountain-gem, Magenta-throated Woodstar, and Snowy-bellied Hummingbird. We had a group of five Northern Emerald-Toucanets. The Trogons here were Collared. Not all good birds are big, as demonstrated by Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Mistletoe Tyrannulet, and Elegant Euphonia. A couple other special birds were Flame-colored Tanager and Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush. The open road along the continental divide was disappointing because it was buried in fog. We barely saw a few interesting species – White-bellied Mountain-gem, Black-and-yellow Silky-Flycatcher, and Carmiol's Tanager, and, as usual, we only heard the secretive Silvery-fronted Tapaculos, hiding the fog AND the low, dense vegetation.

**Wed., Feb. 7**

## **Green Acres Chocolate Farm | Tranquilo Bay**

A farm sounds like a cultural destination, but this site has a lot of great habitat on a mainland peninsula. It had been raining all night, and the birds were surprisingly scarce. We enjoyed a Gartered Trogon, a Northern Barred-Woodcreeper, and an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher. I'm not sure if I mentioned it, but I love colorful birds, so I was very happy to see Black-chested Jay and Scarlet-rumped Tanager. Not all good birds come in big packages, so here's a shout-out to Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, a candidate for smallest songbird in the world. Speaking of

small packages, we had two species of poison-dart frogs here: Strawberry and Green-and-black. We saw our only Hoffman's Two-Toed Sloth here. And the chocolate samples were pretty good too!

## **Thurs., Feb. 8                      Return Home or Begin Extension**

We got a quick bit of birding in the mangroves before leaving Tranquilo Bay. A Mangrove Cuckoo showed well, as did a Bay Wren. We heard Gray-cowled Wood-Rails close by, but never coaxed them into the open. The resident Common Black-Hawk and winter resident Northern Waterthrush both caught our attention. We boated back to Bocas del Toro and hopped an 11:15 Air Panama flight to Albright Airport. One van took five of us to Tocumen International Airport and return flights to the states. Another van took five of us off to start the extension. It was a great trip, and I hope to return next year!

*Group photos by Pamela Larsen, All other photos NJ Stock*