



## David Simpson Panama Birding Tour October 7-17,2009

### **The price includes;**

Lodging,  
All meals (wine with dinner)  
Snacks and beverages during outings  
Airport group transfers  
Transfer between lodges  
Transportation to all the birding spots,  
National parks entrance fee,  
Train ticket for Achiote road,  
Professional local bird guide service.



### **Day 1: Arrival Day**

Pick up at Panama's International Airport. It takes about 2 hour drive to the Canopy Lodge, located on the edge of a lovely village nestled in the crater of an extinct volcano that erupted 5 million years ago. The resultant scenery is quite unique a steep valley surrounded by jagged peaks and filled with flowers, streams and verdant forests. No wonder it is one of Panama's most popular getaways.

Our home for the next days will be Canopy Lodge, sister lodge of the Canopy Tower, a charming small hotel built next to a bubbling mountain stream and adjacent to the protected area of Cerro Gaital Natural Monument. In the gardens surrounding the lodge we can easily see species like the Crimson-backed, Blue-gray, Dusky-faced, Red-crowned and Plain-colored Tanagers, Social Flycatcher, Ruddy-ground Dove, Barred Antshrike, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Rufous-tailed, Violet-capped Hummingbirds, Rufous Motmot and Clay Colored Robin.

This evening we'll have an orientation meeting and will provide instructions on the use of the installation and birding at the lodge grounds which have fantastic bird's feeders.

### **Day 2: El Valle de Antón, Cerro Gaital Trail and Canopy Adventure Trail**

Today we will wake up early and go birding around the mountain trails surrounding the crater where it is possible to find one of the most sought after species in neo-tropical birding: the Rufous-vented Ground Cuckoo. If we find an army ant swarm the chances of seeing the "Holy Grail" of Neotropical birding are very good! This area also offers frequent sightings of Blue-throated Toucanets, Orange-bellied Trogon, Spotted Barbtail, Common Bush Tanager, Black-faced Grosbeak, Rufous-capped Warbler, Gray-headed Kite, Tawny-capped Euphonia, White-tailed Emerald, Violet-headed Hummingbird and if we are lucky we might see a Scaled Antpitta and a Black-headed Anthrush.

**The Canopy Adventure** is located in a private refuge in the foothills above El Valle. The main attraction of this refuge is a beautiful 150 feet high waterfall called Chorro Macho; the birdlife and the flora are especially rich and diverse because the area has been a wildlife refuge for several years. The principle purpose of this refuge, apart from the obvious task of

keeping the area free from poachers and loggers, has been to provide sustainable, nature-based employment to 10 young men who would otherwise be cutting down the forest through slash and burn agricultural methods in order to survive and raise their families. The refuge is a way to keep the forest ecosystem whole while providing much needed employment. Those who prefer not to do the **Canopy Adventure** can explore the trail around the waterfall where it is possible to see the Dull-mantled Antbird, Tawny-crested and Dusky-faced tanagers, Bananaquits, Green and Little Hermits as well as trogons and motmots.

### **Day 3: El Chiru forest and La Zamia Trail**

Today we will have an early breakfast and travel outside El Valle to visit a patch of dry forest just one hour away near the small village of El Chiru. The contrast with the lush and wet foothills of El Valle is dramatic. This habitat consists of relatively permanent growth of low and often straggly bushes and small trees with grass interspersed. It is a distinctive habitat of the Pacific lowlands and there is little of it left because most of the population in Panama has settled in the Pacific Coast. We will search for Pale-eyed Pygmy-Tyrant, Crested Bobwhite, Rufous-browed Pepper Shrike, Brown-throated Parakeet, Blue Ground Dove, Fork-tailed Flycatcher and Pearl Kite among other feathered residents of this scarce scrubby area, if we are lucky we an Endemic bird can be see around el chiru the Veraguan Mango. Bird activity is high during the first few hours then it gets hot and it will be time to return to the much cooler foothills. We will have lunch back in the Canopy Lodge and afterwards we will bird the La Zamia Trail at the base of the Cerro Gaital Natural Monument. This is an easy, level trail in which we have seen the rare Rufous-vented Ground Cuckoo. We will also look for the Blue-crowned Motmot, Common Potoo, Sepia-capped Flycatcher, Little Tinamou and Gray-headed Chachalaca.

For those interested in Botany, it is worth noting that La Zamia trail is named after the rare and primitive genus of palm-like plants called **Zamia** of the order **Cycadales**. Some of these unusual and ancient fern-like dioecious plants with aerial or subterranean stems are found in this trail.

### **Day 4: Altos Del Maria full day trip**

Set in the mountains on the continental divide east of El Valle, the Altos del Maria provides a spectacular addition to the Canopy Lodge birding package. Departing early in the morning from El Valle in comfortable 4x4 sport's utility vehicles, we will drive back along the Pan-American Highway and then up into the mountains. As the sun rises over the highlands ahead of us, spectacular mountains, vast valleys, and towering cliffs will be revealed. Ascending an excellent paved road, we will climb a ridge to our destination for the morning, an expansive area of cloud forest at 1100 meters above sea level. Early morning birding will take us along some of the wide, gravel roads in the area. Around mid-morning, we will stop at a nature center for a rest, bathrooms, and a check of the hummingbird feeders. Afterwards, we will search some trails through the woods for additional forest birds.

This area harbors an exciting variety of highland forest birds. Some of the characteristic species of this cloud forest include White Hawk, Orange-bellied Trogon, Spotted Woodcreeper, Red-faced Spinetail, Spotted Barbtail, Russet Antshrike, Tufted Flycatcher, Rufous-browed Tyrannulet, White-ruffed Manakin, Ochraceous Wren, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Pale-vented Thrush, Black-and yellow Tanager, Dusky-faced Tanager, Tawny-crested Tanager, and Slate-colored Grosbeak.

On the flowers, we may spot Band-tailed Barbthroat, the exquisite Snowcap, Purple-throated Mountain-Gem at the extreme eastern edge of its range, and Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer. Even the bizarre Brown-billed Scythebill has been seen here. After lunch, we will drop down into a valley and climb to the ridge on the opposite side via a smooth gravel road. Reaching some large swaths of mature humid forest along this ridge, we will explore some trails and roadside spots in search of more forest birds. Around mid-afternoon, we will head down the road on the far side of the ridge and back into El Valle for some relaxation time prior to dinner.

### **Day 5: Canopy Tower & Ammo Dump Ponds**

After a leisurely breakfast and some last-minute-birding in the gardens surrounding the Canopy lodge, we will head to the Canopy Tower, located in the heart of Soberanía National Park.

After lunch we will do some birding at the Ammo Dump Pond is located just north of Gamboa, on the way to Pipeline Road. It is the best place to see the elusive White-throated Crake, as well as a host of other waterbirds. Least Grebes, Common Moorhens and Purple Gallinules are common, and Rufescent Tiger-Heron and American Pygmy-Kingfishers are around, but are not as easy to find. Sometimes you get a Limpkin and maybe even a Least Bittern, and lately a couple of Olivaceous Piculet has been regularly observed by our guides.

### **Day 6: Canopy Tower Observation Deck and Semaphore Hill**

The Canopy Tower is a prime location from which to observe the birds and other wildlife of the forest canopy. Since they are right at eye level it is usual to get fantastic views of birds you would hardly see otherwise. You don't have to leave the Tower to find birds; you don't even have to leave your bedroom! Tanagers, Toucans and Tityras can be seen right from your window. The dining area and the roof of the tower are better for finding elusive canopy birds, as well as Howler Monkeys, Tamarins and other mammals. All this, without having to venture away from the Tower.

Some of the bird species that we are likely to see from the observation deck are: Green and Red legged Honeycreepers, Green-shrike Vireo, Blue Cotinga, Scaled Pigeon, Mealy and Red-lore Amazon, Keel-billed Toucan, Chestnut-mandibled Toucan, flycatchers and many others.

At mid morning we'll start exploring the forests of Central Panama and we'll walk down Semaphore Hill Road. This paved road is a little more than a mile long and passes through the forest of Soberanía National Park. Here you will get a chance to see birds and mammals that spend their lives closer to the forest floor, like antbirds and Agoutis.

The bird list of Semaphore Hill Road is extensive, and includes birds from the forest interior as well as edge dwellers. Olivaceous Flatbill and White-whiskered Puffbird are common, and Slate-colored Grossbeak, Bay-headed Tanager, and Great Jacamar are seen frequently. Great Tinamou and Marbled Wood-Quail are heard often, but to see them takes a little more work. This road is also great for raptors: White, Tiny and Bicolored Hawks have been seen, and during migration it's easy to see more than 10 species of warblers and migratory songbirds in one morning. Spring migration is especially striking, as birds will be wearing their breeding plumages.

### **PM: Plantation Trail**

Plantation Road, which starts right by the entrance to the road to the Tower, is a good, easy graded dirt road that passes through a mature forest for about four miles. The road follows a small creek, Río Chico Masambi, where sometimes a Louisiana Waterthrush spends the winter. We have also spotted Sunbitterns and Caimans in this creek. In most places the forest is clear of undergrowth, which makes it especially suited for observing shy, interior forest birds like Tinamous and Leaf-tossers. Golden-crowned Spadebills are regular around the creek, and White-breasted Wood-Wrens are very easy to find. When visiting Plantation Road you also have a good chance to find an army ant swarm and many of the birds that follow these swarms as they roam the forest floor. Spotted, Bicolored and Ocellated Antbirds, Gray-headed Tanagers, and Plain-brown, Northern Barred and (if you're lucky) Ruddy Woodcreepers. And if you're really lucky you may even find a Hook-billed Kite.

### **Day 7: Pipeline Road Full day**

Pipeline Road is the best place in Central Panama to find forest birds, and plenty of them. Eight species of wrens, five trogons, four puffbirds, three motmots, many antbirds and even more flycatchers have been reported from the road. And if its 17 Km are not enough, there's plenty of side trails plus eleven creeks and rivers that can be followed into the forest. Army antswarms are found frequently, attended sometimes by Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo, and there are many Manakin leks right beside the road. Pipeline Road is also a great place for raptors: all three Forest-Falcons are heard if not seen with ease, and Tiny and Plumbeous Hawks and Ornate Hawk-Eagles have been reported a few times. A Harpy Eagle was seen one time right beside the road!

We will be on the lookout for ant swarms, White-necked and Black-breasted Puffbirds, Antpittas, Great Jacamar, Black-tailed Trogon, Crane Hawk, Black Hawk-Eagle, Cinnamon Woodpecker, Black-striped Woodcreeper and even a Pheasant Cuckoo. We'll have picnic somewhere in the forest.

### **Day 8: Summit Pond & Old Gamboa Rd.**

Old Gamboa Road is, you guessed it, the old road to Gamboa. At the beginning of this bird-rich area, you'll find Summit Ponds, where Boat-billed Herons nest and Capped Herons are seen regularly. Both Kiskadees, and both Green and Striated Herons are seen often, as well as the more common egrets. Going straight through the two ponds you'll be on Old Gamboa Road South, one of the birdiest spots around. This road passes through a variety of habitats, and has plenty of specialties: Blue Ground-Dove, Great Antshrike, Jet Antbird, Black-tailed and Royal Flycatchers, Lance-tailed and Golden-collared Manakins and Rosy Thrush-Tanager are a few highlights. Going North of the pond we will find species like, White-bellied Antbird, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Yellow-backed Oriole, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Yellow-headed Caracara, plus more.

### **PM: Chagres River**

It is located at the east side of Gatun Lake, we'll be walking along the banks of the river to see other water birds, for example, Amazon Kingfisher, Green Kingfisher, American Pygmy-Kingfishers, as well as, Blue-Crowned Motmot and Cinnamon Woodpecker. We could also see species like Gray-Necked Wood-rail, Green Herons, and Anhinga. In this area we have also often spotted alligators, turtles and capybaras.

### **Day 9: Achote Road and San Lorenzo (2 hour drive from Canopy Tower, going North)**

This is the site of the famous Atlantic Christmas Bird Count held by the Panama Audubon Society every year. The number of species in this area consistently exceeds 340 in a 24-hour period, among the top spots worldwide. Habitats are a bit more open but the birding nonetheless can be wonderful. White Hawk, Mealy Parrot, Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift, Black-throated Trogon, Black-breasted and Pied Puffbirds, Spot-crowned Barbet, Montezuma Oropendula, Fasciated Antshrike, Bare-crowned and Bicolored Antbirds, White-headed Wren, Red-breasted Blackbird, Yellow-rumped Tanager and Black-headed Saltator are all regularly seen here. There is also the added benefit of visiting the old Spanish fortress of San Lorenzo, a World Heritage Site, built on a promontory at the entrance of the Chagres River. Fort San Lorenzo was the last bastion of the Spanish Empire in the mainland of the American Continent. In addition, to get to this area we have to cross the Panama Canal which gives us a unique view of the locks from below. We will come back by train along the Panama Canal. This is a historic journey as the Panama Railroad was the first transcontinental railroad in the Western Hemisphere when it opened in 1855.

**Day 10: Metropolitan Nature Park**

Located right next to Panama City, only 25 minutes from the Canopy Tower, the forests of the Metropolitan Natural Park are much drier than those around Pipeline or Plantation Roads. Therefore, you should expect to see some species of birds that are rare if not absent in those areas. The beautiful Rosy Thrush-Tanager is common, as is the striking Lance-tailed Manakin. It's also a good place to look for Sepia-capped Flycatcher and you have a shot at the endemic Yellow-green Tyrannulet as well. And if the resident birds are not enough, each September the birdlist of the park grows substantially with the arrival of two dozen species of warblers and other migratory birds. Finally, the lookout at the end of Mono Tití Road is one of the best places to witness the rivers of migrating Turkey Vultures and Swainson's and Broad-winged Hawks that fly right over downtown Panama City in October and November during the fall migration of raptors. The flow reverses direction in April and May when these birds return to their breeding grounds in North America.

**Miraflores Locks (optional)**

We'll visit the Visitor Center of the Panama Canal, one of the Eight Wonders of the Modern World. It is only 20 minutes from the Tower! Or you can stay in the tower observation deck or road and see more birds, it is up to you.

**Day 11: Departure**

After an early breakfast and a "good-bye" look of the forest from the Observation Deck, we'll take you to the International Airport for your flight home.

**Buen Viaje!**

**Come back soon with all your friends, the more the merrier!!**