

PEREGRINE BIRD TOURS

PANAMA

28th March – 17th April 2009

TOUR REPORT

LEADERS: CHRIS DOUGHTY, JOHNATHAN, MICHAEL, TINO and ALEXSIS.

Our Peregrine Bird Tour to the narrow isthmus of Panama was a great success and at the same time, was also very enjoyable. This Central Americana country is very rich in colourful tropical birds. Although Panama was the first part of mainland America to be discovered by Europeans, much of it still remains undeveloped and covered in rainforest. Our species total for the trip of 388, included many range restricted and threatened birds. Just some of the many memorable birds observed during the tour included the following resident birds, Tiny and Plumbeous Hawks, Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon, Sunbittern, Pheasant Cuckoo, Choco Screech-Owl, Spectacled Owl, Rufous-crested Coquette, Resplendent Quetzal, Tody and Blue-crowned Motmots, Black-breasted Puffbird, Yellow-eared Toucanet, Keel-billed Toucan, Striped Woodhaunter, Brown-billed Scythebill, Black Antshrike, Ocellated Antbird, Black-faced Antthrush, Streak-chested Antpitta, Brownish Twistwing, Speckled Mourner, Blue Cotinga, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Broad-billed Sapayoa, Thrush-like Schiffornis and Sulphur-rumped Tanager. We also saw a fine selection of North American migrants, the many species of wood-warblers, in their newly acquired breeding plumage, were particularly attractive. Mammalian highlights included, Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth, Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth, Western night Monkey, Geoffroy's Tamarin, Nine-banded Armadillo and best of all a splendid Kinkajou, just meters away, for a prolonged period of time. The following long list of birds seen on the tour would not have been possible without the exceptional talent and skill of our four outstanding local guides, Jonathan, Michael, Tino and Alexis.

From Panama City, we flew to David, in the western highlands. Here, we were met by our taxi drivers who drove us to the very comfortable Los Quetzales Lodge, nestled in the Chiriqui Highlands, not far from the border with Costa Rica. During our time in the Chiriqui Highlands we concentrated our efforts on finding those birds which only occur in the highlands of Costa Rica and western Panama. This we managed to do very successfully, finding the following highland specialities, Buff-fronted Quail-Dove, Fiery-throated Hummingbird, White-throated Mountain-gem, Volcano and Scintillant Hummingbirds, Prong-billed Barbet, Blue-throated Toucanet, Ruddy Treerunner, Black-faced Solitaire, Black-and-yellow and Long-tailed Silky-Flycatchers, Yellow-winged Vireo, Flame-throated Warbler, Collared Redstart, Black-cheeked Warbler, Spangle-cheeked Tanager, Sooty-capped Bush-Tanager, Yellow-thighed and Large-footed Finches and Slaty Flowerpiercer. These highland specialities added quality to an ever growing trip list.

However, for ever highland speciality we saw, we saw five other, more wide ranging, but still very enjoyable species. Of these, the ones that readily spring to mind include the stunning Swallow-tailed Kite, a Green-fronted Lancebill at the nest, Buffy Tuftedcheek, Barred Becard, Mourning Warbler, Slaty Finch and best of all, very close eyeball to eyeball looks at both male and female Resplendent Quetzals, which without a doubt, must be one of the most beautiful birds in the world. Mammalian highlights here included very close looks at both Variegated and Red-tailed Squirrels and unparalleled and prolonged looks at the rarely seen and nocturnal Kinkajou. We watched a large adult descend from the trees, walk along the balcony of one of the cabins and using it's prehensile tail it deftly lowered itself onto a bird feeding table, stole a banana, walked back across the balcony and up into the trees. He then removed the banana skin and ate the contents. This episode was repeated on a few occasions, allowing us excellent looks in the spotlight, of this very seldom seen mammal.



Kinkajou

On one of the days we decided to do some birding at a lower altitude. So we birded an isolated patch of rainforest, surrounding Volcan Lakes, on the Pacific slope of the continental divide. New birds came thick and fast, too many to name them all. The most memorable birds were a large kettle of migrating Broad-winged Hawks, a splendid Collared Trogon, a small flock of Black-chested Jays, several very range restricted Cherrie's Tanagers and best of all, a very cooperative Blue-crowned Motmot.

Bidding as sad farewell to the very comfortable Los Quetzales Lodge, we drove back to David and took a flight back to Panama City. Here we met up with Michael our wonderful bird-guide from Burbayer Lodge, we then drove to the lodge in the Nusagandi Highlands. To protect their lands from an invasion of settlers, subsistence farmers and loggers, the local Kuna Indians established the Nusagandi Nature Reserve, a 60,000 hectare mountainous rainforest wilderness reserve, within the autonomous Comarca Kuna Yala.

The lodge itself, is fairly simple, made of local materials found within the surrounding forest, has no electricity, but did have a generator, which generated electricity for a few hours each evening. The cold shower proved refreshing, but somewhat `mucho freeo`!

This is one of the most outstanding birding lodges, in the whole of the Americas and we saw a multitude of beautiful tropical birds. Each day, followed roughly the same pattern; breakfast and birding around the lodge, up until roughly 8.30am, when it became too hot and all the birds took refuge inside the much cooler forest. We then enjoyed a morning trail walk inside the forest, which was followed by an afternoon trail walk inside the forest. On a couple of occasions after dinner, we did a little spotlighting.

In the first half of the morning around the lodge, we were treated to mixed-feeding flocks of multi-hued tanagers, wood warblers and the like, which all vied for our attention. On most mornings, we enjoyed breakfast with a particularly tame pair of Western Slaty Antshrikes. We saw interesting birds such as Blue-headed Parrot, White-necked Jacobin, Keel-billed Toucan, Paltry Tyrannulet, Cinnamon Becard, Swainson's Thrush, Black-and-white Warbler, Plain-colored, Golden-hooded, Flame-rumped and Black-and-yellow Tanagers, Tawny-capped Euphonia and best of all, the near-endemic Sulphur-rumped Tanager.

However, most of our time was spent deep inside the forested hills, looking for the somewhat shy denizens of the forest. We were richly rewarded for our efforts; some of the more memorable sightings were as follows. The very rare Plumbeous Hawk was seen at very close quarters on two separate occasions and the second time; it was carrying a snake in its talons. Another rare raptor was also observed deep inside the forest; it was a sub-adult Slaty-backed Forest Falcon, which is very infrequently observed. We very much enjoyed watching the diminutive Pied Puffbird, the uncommon Cinnamon Woodpecker and the rarely observed Striped Woodhaunter. We saw the uncommon Spot-crowned Antwren from just meters away but this was eclipsed by the prolonged sighting of the stunning Streak-chested Antpitta, almost at our feet, which our local bird guide called in by imitating its call! We stumbled across a small swarm of army ants and were able to enjoy very good looks at two professional ant-followers; the very beautiful Ocellated Antbird and the smaller Bicolored Antbird. We watched a pair of tiny Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrants mating, high in the canopy of the forest. The skulking Song Wren finally gave up and reluctantly showed itself to us. We watched an unusually obliging Stripe-throated Wren and a very attractive Tawny-faced Gnatwren. On one occasion, we saw four species of male manakins in the same bush, Golden-collared, White-ruffed, Blue-crowned and Red-capped. A couple of spotlighting sessions produced Mottled Owl, Pauraque and Common Potoo.

On one of the afternoons we were walking along one of the forested hill trails when our local guides heard the enigma of the forest, the little-known Broad-billed Sapayoa *Sapayoa aenigma*. A pair was calling far below us in a rocky ravine, with a crystal-clear forest stream flowing through it. In no time at all we were down the slope standing along the edge of the stream. Our Kuna Indian guide called the birds in by imitating their call. They responded quickly flying down and perching on hanging vines, just metres away from us. We enjoyed a super close, prolonged look, at one of the least-known birds in the world.

Mammal highlights included super sightings of family parties of delightful Geoffroy's



Geoffroy's Tamarin

Tamarin's, three distant Mantled Howlers and a quick look at a fast moving Western Pygmy Squirrel. A Tropical Bird Snake, allowed itself to be picked up, tickled and photographed, adding even more variety, to our every growing trip list. I had a less than welcome, close-encounter, with a Common Vampire Bat, during the last night at Burbayer Lodge. I awoke to find one on my pillow, which was just about to bite me. Needless to say, I shot out of bed and the rest of the night, was somewhat restless!

On the way to the Canopy Lodge we spent some time birding around Lake Bayano, which was constructed as part of a huge hydro-electric power project. Highlights here included Cocoi and Striated Herons, Gray Hawk, Purple Gallinule, Straight-billed Woodcreeper, Black Antshrike, Rufous-winged Antwren, Jet Antbird, Pale-eyed Pygmy-Tyrant, Boat-billed Flycatcher and Red-breasted Blackbird.

The Canopy Lodge was quite a contrast to Burbayer Lodge; this was a purpose-built, first class tourist lodge, of the highest quality, with many bird feeding tables, literally dripping with birds. We began by getting familiar with a whole host of colourful birds which frequented the bird feeding tables, where they gorged themselves on over-ripe bananas. Brilliantly coloured Flame-rumped and Crimson-backed Tanagers flew to and from the bird feeding tables, mirages of brightly coloured Thick-billed Euphonias crowded onto the feeding tables, even the Red-crowned Woodpecker, fed on the bananas. Somewhat surprisingly, the beautiful Rufous Motmot came to have a look at what all the fuss was about, a particularly sneaky Mourning Warbler crept silently through the undergrowth and a few White-tipped Doves walked around on the lawn, below the feeding tables, looking for leftovers which had spilled onto the ground. There was also a large selection of hummingbirds which were attracted to the many hummingbird feeders and a variety of flowering plants. The least common of these included the stunning Green Thorntail, the range-restricted White-tailed Emerald, the gorgeous Long-billed Starthroat and best of all, the breathtaking Rufous-crested Coquette.