

DARIEN, PANAMA TOUR

February 14-23, 2006

LEADERS: Hernan Arauz & David Wolf

Compiled By: David Wolf

As the charter plane began its descent from high over the Bay of Panama, and turned inland over the remote Darien jungles, I gazed, awestruck, at the terrain below. We passed vast marshes ringed by mangrove swamps, unbroken forest dominated by bare cuipo trees, and dark hill forest blanketing the ridges—all of it largely unexplored ornithologically. We were headed right into the heart of this region, to the old gold-mining community of Cana, nestled at the head of a narrow valley at the base of remote Cerro Pirre.

This was my first trip here in 20 years and, as we got off the plane, the memories came flooding back. I was pleased to see that things remained much as I remembered them, with one major exception: the run-down old houses with vegetation choking them were gone, and in their place sat a beautiful new lodge and dining hall on a neatly-manicured knoll with a commanding view. As we adjusted our senses and walked the short distance to the lodge, we couldn't help but begin birding right away. To one side was a large tree with a huge nesting colony of Chestnut-headed Oropendolas in full swing, with dozens of birds coming and going. To the other side were several brilliant *Erythrina* trees in full bloom; before we had even settled into our rooms we realized that they were attracting a constant parade of birds, from tiny hummingbirds to parakeets, tanagers, and flycatchers. This was to be a constant theme throughout our stay, and each time that we found a flowering *Erythrina* within viewing range it produced sightings of note, from feeding macaws to Spot-crowned Barbets, Emerald and Scarlet-browed tanagers, and even magnificent brown-headed spider monkeys.

Each day we ranged a bit further afield and explored more habitats. At the more open forest edge we laughed at a comical Barred Puffbird peering down at us, carefully studied a perched Bicolored Hawk, watched a zippy Dusky-backed Jacamar capture a fast-flying butterfly, and thrilled to near-daily sightings of a male Black-tipped Cotinga sitting prominently atop the canopy for all the world to see. The famous Boca del Cupe Trail served up a bit of everything for us, including mixed-flocks from the understory to the high canopy, glittering Great Jacamars and unobtrusive Gray-cheeked Nunlets perched right over the trail, noisy Red-throated Caracaras that flew in to check us out, and scope views of a fierce Great Antshrike and a Slaty-winged Foliage-gleaner at eye level (“I never knew a brown bird could be so pretty.”).

Army ant swarms are a special feature of this region, and we were lucky to find three different swarms with birds actively feeding at them. Each was dominated by the Bicolored Antbird, the classic “obligate” ant-follower, but also seen were the shy and beautiful Ocellated Antbirds; Spotted, Bare-crowned, and Immaculate antbirds; and several

woodcreepers. The ultimate ant-follower, though, was the incredible Black-crowned Antpitta at the large swarm as we descended Cerro Pirre. It was enough to make us forget our sore knees.

In many ways the most special part of our week was the camping trip up Cerro Pirre. This ridge, barely reaching 5,500 feet at its high point, is so isolated that a surprising number of endemic species are found only here. To reach them we ascended from dry tropical forest on the lower slopes to the lush cloud forests of the subtropical zone, encountering the enigmatic Sharpbill along the way, and then finding a stunning pair of rare Yellow-collared Chlorophonias in the trees right above camp, interrupting the tranquil view from the camp lookout.

Noisy Crested Guans awoke us at dawn the next morning, and soon we were working our way to the top of the ridge. Here the forest was noticeably wetter, shorter in stature, and covered in epiphytes. Birds were scarce in this zone, but everything seen was special, from the Tooth-billed Hummingbird feeding at the pink flowers to that incredible mixed-flock as the light fog rolled in. It was dominated by the chunky Pirre Bush-Tanagers, but also tagging along were all three of the upper-elevation endemics: the aptly-named Beautiful Treerunner, rather drab Pirre Warbler, and subtly beautiful Green-naped Tanager. Patience and persistence had paid off again!

A final day and morning back down below continued to produce great surprises including Marbled Wood-Quail, Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker, Lemon-spectacled Tanager, and a mantled howler monkey tenderly nursing her baby as she kept her eye on us. All too soon the plane came to whisk us away from this peaceful wilderness and back to “civilization.”

Itinerary:

February 14, 2006: the group gathers at the Country Inn & Suites in Panama City.

February 15, 2006: morning charter flight to Cana airstrip in the Darien, arriving about 12 noon. Afternoon settling into the lodge and birding around the clearing and airstrip at Cana.

February 16, 2006: morning birding around the edge of the clearing at Cana and the first part of the Boca del Cupe Trail. Afternoon birding around the lodge and then the Holy Ghost/Old Mine Loop just up the Rio Cana onto the hillside.

February 17, 2006: morning birding along the Boca del Cupe Trail. Afternoon birding from the lodge porch and then in the woodland along the Rio Seteganti Trail.

February 18, 2006: prompt dawn departure for the hike up to the Mountain Camp on Cerro Pirre at 4400 ft, arriving there before 3 p.m., leaving time to bird from the lookout there and a short distance up the mountain trail.

February 19, 2006: 7:30 morning departure for a day hike up to the elfin cloud forest along the rim of Cerro Pirre at 5250+ ft. Return to camp by 4 p.m., with time for afternoon birding there.

February 20, 2006: prompt departure for the hike back down the mountain to Cana, descending via the steep Paleton Trail in the early afternoon. After watching the birds at a fantastic army ant swarm, we continued the short distance on to the lodge, everyone arriving by 4 p.m.

February 21, 2006: all day birding along the Boca del Cupe Trail out as far as the Escucha del Ruido stream, some of us lingering along the airstrip in the late afternoon.

February 22, 2006: a great final morning of birding, on the Old Mine Trail around to the Holy Ghost Trail, before lunch and the flight back to Panama City.

February 23, 2006: departure for home or on-going travel adventures.

Bird List:

Great Tinamou - mostly heard (glimpsed by a few when flushed); the “6 o’clock bird” that called from the hillsides each day at Cana in a wonderful evening chorus from 6 - 6:30 p.m.

Little Tinamou - heard only

Neotropic Cormorant - Panama City

Great Egret - Panama City

Little Blue Heron - Panama City

Rufescent Tiger-Heron - gorgeous adult at start of the Boca del Cupe Trail one morning.

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

King Vulture - especially great looks at one low overhead on the Boca del Cupe Trail.

Swallow-tailed Kite

White-tailed Kite - Panama City

Plumbeous Kite

Bicolored Hawk - long scope study of a perched immature as we emerged from the forest.

Barred Hawk

White Hawk - the last great bird of the trip seen from the lodge porch.

Great Black-Hawk - seen by Tom from the mountain camp lookout.

Short-tailed Hawk

Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle - distant adult soaring over the low ridges our first afternoon.

Red-throated Caracara - this declining species was noisy and conspicuous here, several times landing right overhead to vociferously “check us out.”

Barred Forest-Falcon - heard only (by a few from the mountain camp).

Bat Falcon

Gray-headed Chachalaca

Crested Guan - a daily sight and wonderfully numerous and calm here.

Great Curassow - fast look at a male moving away through the canopy; also heard booming.

Marbled Wood-Quail - a trio working up a bank inside the forest our last morning.

White-throated Crake - heard only

Plumbeous Pigeon - though not widely known from Panama, this would seem to be the species of pigeon common at upper elevations on the mountain; tape-recorded and photographed.

Ruddy Pigeon - seen well and heard in the lower forests around the Cana valley.

Darien Wilderness Tour 2006 (cont):

White-tipped Dove

Gray-chested Dove

Blue-and-yellow Macaw - including spectacular looks at birds feeding in the flowering *Erythrina* trees.

Great Green Macaw - beautiful in flight and long looks at a preening pair; the Darien may well be the world headquarters for this declining and threatened species.

Red-and-green Macaw - the least-frequently seen of the macaws here.

Chestnut-fronted Macaw - common and conspicuous around the valley at Cana.

Orange-chinned Parakeet

Blue-fronted Parrotlet - heard only; from the lookout at the mountain camp.

Brown-hooded Parrot

Saffron-headed Parrot - heard only; high up on the mountain.

Blue-headed Parrot

Red-lored Parrot

Mealy Parrot

Squirrel Cuckoo

Little Cuckoo - great look at this secretive bird in the swampy vine tangles.

Smooth-billed Ani

Choco Screech-Owl (*Megascops chocoensis*) - heard only (but close!); this is a split from Vermiculated Screech-Owl (formerly *Otus vermiculatus*, now *Megascops vermiculatus*)

Mottled Owl - heard only

Spectacled Owl - heard only

Great Potoo - heard only

Common Potoo - heard only

Pauraque - mostly heard; seen near the lodge by some.

White-collared Swift

Band-rumped Swift

Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift - seen by a few our first afternoon.

Green Hermit

Western Long-billed Hermit

Stripe-throated Hermit

Tooth-billed Hummingbird - great looks as one fed at a flowering epiphyte high up on Cerro Pirre.

White-necked Jacobin

Black-throated Mango - including one in Panama City.

Violet-headed Hummingbird - great looks at the “firecracker bushes” in Cana.

Rufous-crested Coquette

Green Thorntail

Garden Emerald

Rufous-cheeked (Pirre) Hummingbird - seen best at the flowering “hot lips” bush right on the edge of the mountain camp; this distinctive species is endemic to this small area of Panama and immediately adjacent Colombia.

Green-crowned Woodnymph

Darien Wilderness Tour 2006 (cont):

Violet-bellied Hummingbird
Rufous-tailed Hummingbird
Blue-chested Hummingbird
Snowy-bellied Hummingbird
White-vented Plumeleteer
Greenish Puffleg - common in the damp elfin forest along the Pirre ridge.
Purple-crowned Fairy
Long-billed Starthroat
Purple-throated Woodstar - a perched male from the lookout at the mountain camp our final morning; a real rarity.
White-tailed Trogon
Violaceous Trogon
Collared Trogon
Black-throated Trogon
Black-tailed Trogon - great looks at all of the trogons; this was the last species to be seen.
Golden-headed Quetzal - heard only
Tody Motmot - heard only
Rufous Motmot
Broad-billed Motmot
Dusky-backed Jacamar - a distinctive species endemic to this small area of eastern Panama and northwestern Colombia; seen regularly in the open woodland and second-growth around Cana.
Great Jacamar - several fabulous studies of this glittering forest bird.
Black-breasted Puffbird - heard only
Pied Puffbird
Barred Puffbird - this comical bird with the “wolf whistle” call was a group favorite.
White-whiskered Puffbird
Gray-cheeked Nunlet - this unobtrusive bird was seen really well several times.
White-fronted Nunbird
Spot-crowned Barbet - colorful trio in a flowering *Erythrina*; a regional specialty.
Blue-throated Toucanet - recently split from the Emerald Toucanet.
Collared Aracari
Yellow-eared Toucanet - great looks at this foothill specialty on the mountain hikes.
Keel-billed Toucan
Black-mandibled Toucan - the “Chesnut-mandibled” Toucan (*Ramphastos swainsonii*) that we saw has now been lumped with the “Black-mandibled” (*Ramphastos ambiguus*).
Olivaceous Piculet
Black-cheeked Woodpecker
Red-rumped Woodpecker
Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker - this Panama endemic was a nice surprise our final morning.

Darien Wilderness Tour 2006 (cont):

Cinnamon Woodpecker - seen more often here than anywhere else that I've been.
Lineated Woodpecker
Crimson-crested Woodpecker - a real "ooh-aah" bird and group favorite.
Slaty Spinetail
Beautiful Treerunner - incredible close looks at a pair of this very uncommon species that is endemic to the highest ridges in this small region of far eastern Panama.
Plain Xenops
Streaked Xenops
Lineated Foliage-gleaner
Slaty-winged Foliage-gleaner - seen often and well, and very attractive for a small brown forest bird!
Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner
Plain-brown Woodcreeper
Long-tailed Woodcreeper
Wedge-billed Woodcreeper
Northern Barred-Woodcreeper
Cocoa Woodcreeper
Black-striped Woodcreeper - by far the most beautiful of the woodcreepers seen.
Spotted Woodcreeper
Streak-headed Woodcreeper
Red-billed Scythebill - remarkable beak!
Brown-billed Scythebill
Fasciated Antshrike
Great Antshrike - scope looks!
Western Slaty-Antshrike
Russet Antshrike
Plain Antwren
Moustached Antwren - a recent split from Pygmy Antwren.
Pacific Antwren - a recent split from Streaked Antwren.
Checker-throated Antwren
White-flanked Antwren
Slaty Antwren
Rufous-winged Antwren - fairly common and seen quite well for this canopy species.
Dot-winged Antwren
Rufous-rumped Antwren
Dusky Antbird
Jet Antbird - great looks at this uncommon and secretive antbird of thick second-growth.
Bare-crowned Antbird
Chestnut-backed Antbird
Immaculate Antbird
Bicolored Antbird
Spotted Antbird

Darien Wilderness Tour 2006 (cont):

Ocellated Antbird - this obligate ant-follower is one of the most beautiful of all of the antbirds; from 3-5 were present at the two larger ant swarms that we watched.

Black-faced Antthrush

Rufous-breasted Antthrush

Black-crowned Antpitta - the big prize at the large ant swarm found after the steep descent down Cerro Pirre.

Streak-chested Antpitta - this “egg with legs” was called up beautifully by Hernan.

Thicket (Fulvous-bellied) Antpitta - heard only

Choco Tapaculo - heard only

Sharpbill - several great looks at this enigmatic species of the hill forest canopy.

Rufous Piha

Black-tipped Cotinga - a magnificent male displaying (by perching prominently on the canopy) almost daily at Cana.

Purple-throated Fruitcrow

Golden-collared Manakin

White-ruffed Manakin

Golden-headed Manakin - fascinating to watch several males in full display.

Thrush-like Manakin

Brown-capped Tyrannulet

Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet

Forest Elaenia

Gray Elaenia

Greenish Elaenia

Yellow-bellied Elaenia

Olive-striped Flycatcher

Yellow-green Tyrannulet - this obscure Panama endemic was identified in the canopy mixed-flocks several times, the best above the Old Mine our final morning.

Sooty-headed Tyrannulet - great looks at a pair in a canopy flock on the Boca del Cupe; this is the only site in Central America from which it is known.

Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant - this truly “cute” little bird eventually came down low from the canopy, giving us great looks at the smallest passerine in the New World.

Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant - heard only

Southern Bentbill

Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher - this one is colorful as well as cute.

Common Tody-Flycatcher

Brownish Flycatcher

Olivaceous Flatbill

Yellow-margined Flycatcher

Northern Royal Flycatcher - Jerry’s bird.

Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher

Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher

Black-tailed Flycatcher

Olive-sided Flycatcher

Darien Wilderness Tour 2006 (cont):

Acadian Flycatcher
Long-tailed Tyrant - easier to see and identify than most flycatchers, and a group favorite.

Bright-rumped Attila
Speckled Mourner - long close looks at this rarity as it foraged in the open midstory along the Boca del Cupe Trail.

Rufous Mourner
Dusky-capped Flycatcher
Rusty-margined Flycatcher
Gray-capped Flycatcher
White-ringed Flycatcher
Streaked Flycatcher
Piratic Flycatcher
Tropical Kingbird
Cinnamon Becard
White-winged Becard
One-colored Becard
Masked Tityra
Black-crowned Tityra
White-thighed Swallow
Southern Rough-winged Swallow
White-headed Wren - a noisy and un-wrenlike regional specialty.
Sooty-headed Wren
Black-bellied Wren
Bay Wren
Stripe-throated Wren - great study of a pair our final morning.
Ochraceous Wren
White-breasted Wood-Wren
Gray-breasted Wood-Wren
Scaly-breasted (Southern Nightingale) Wren
Varied Solitaire - the beautiful song was heard throughout the cloud forest, but the birds seen best were quietly foraging along the ridgetop; endemic to these ridges.
Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush - Ted's bird.
Swainson's Thrush
Clay-colored Robin - a rarity only recently recorded here.
White-throated Robin - seen by a few; this form is sometimes split as "Dagua" Thrush.
gnatcatcher sp? - heard only; always very high up in the canopy.
Black-chested Jay - readily seen in the more open woodlands around Cana.
Yellow-throated Vireo
Lesser Greenlet
Yellow-browed Shrike-Vireo - heard only by group
Golden-winged Warbler
Tennessee Warbler

Darien Wilderness Tour 2006 (cont):

Tropical Parula
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Blackburnian Warbler
Bay-breasted Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Prothonotary Warbler
Mourning Warbler
Slate-throated Redstart
Pirre Warbler - finally, great looks at this rather drab little warbler that is endemic to this small ridge system.
Buff-rumped Warbler
Bananaquit
White-eared Conebill
Pirre Bush-Tanager - this endemic was common in the elfin cloud forest on the ridgetop.
Yellow-backed Tanager
Black-and-yellow Tanager
Dusky-faced Tanager
Lemon-spectacled Tanager - superb looks in the humid forest near Cana.
Scarlet-browed Tanager - a male of this uncommon species was a nice surprise in a flowering *Erythrina* tree.
White-shouldered Tanager
Hepatic Tanager
Scarlet Tanager
Summer Tanager
Crimson-backed Tanager
Flame-rumped Tanager
Blue-gray Tanager
Palm Tanager
Thick-billed Euphonia
Fulvous-vented Euphonia
Orange-bellied Euphonia
Yellow-collared Chlorophonia - a pair of these stunningly beautiful little birds visited a fruiting epiphyte in the mountain camp in the late afternoon; rare and irregular here.
Plain-colored Tanager
Emerald Tanager
Silver-throated Tanager
Speckled Tanager
Bay-headed Tanager
Golden-hooded Tanager
Green-naped Tanager - not the most beautiful of the *Tangara* seen, but endemic to the

Darien Wilderness Tour 2006 (cont):

cloud forest high on Cerro Pirre.

Blue Dacnis

Green Honeycreeper

Shining Honeycreeper

Swallow-Tanager - this colorful favorite that was quite common and conspicuous around the lodge clearing, and always a delight to see.

Variable Seedeater

Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch

Orange-billed Sparrow

Black-striped Sparrow

Buff-throated Saltator

Slate-colored Grosbeak

Yellow-green Grosbeak - this specialty of the mid-elevation hill forest was seen feeding in a melostome shrub down low and close.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Blue-black Grosbeak

Great-tailed Grackle - Panama City

Shiny Cowbird

Giant Cowbird

Yellow-tailed Oriole

Baltimore Oriole

Yellow-billed Cacique

Yellow-rumped Cacique

Scarlet-rumped Cacique

Chestnut-headed Oropendola - there were so many of these interesting birds around that you've got to love them; large nesting colony in full swing in the Cana clearing.

Mammal List:

Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (*Bradypus variegatus*)

bats (of several sizes)

Geoffroy's (Red-naped) Tamarin (*Saguinus geoffroyi*)

White-faced Capuchin (*Cebus capucinus*)

Mantled Howler (*Alouatta palliata*)

Brown-headed Spider Monkey (*Ateles fusciceps*)

Red-tailed Squirrel (*Sciurus granatensis*)

Central American Agouti (*Dasyprocta punctata*)

Forest Rabbit (*Sylvilagus brasiliensis*)

Crab-eating Fox - a South American species just recently found at Cana.

And other "neat stuff": to mention just a few of our other sightings.

leaf toad

"big gray snake" at the ant swarm

small lizards

Darien Wilderness Tour 2006 (cont):

helicopter damselfly

giant grasshopper

***Morpho* butterfly**

army ants (of several species)