

PANAMA: EL VALLE PRE-TRIP

JANUARY 31 – FEBRUARY 3, 2006

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EL VALLE DE SAN ANTON

31 January-3 February 2006

Leader: Marshall J. Iliff

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This was the first time I had seen the new Canopy Lodge at El Valle, and all I had heard was born to bear. The location is lovely, set along a clear, rushing stream (with Green Kingfishers, waterthrushes, and even the occasional Sunbittern, Raul tells us), and looking out on the hills of El Valle. The rooms are well-appointed and comfortable, with spacious bathrooms and an excellent view. An open-air veranda is a great place to have our meals since temperatures are always comfortable, and the food is as flavorful and delicious as it is at the Canopy Tower. I was impressed.

The birds around the lodge are no less impressive. Not only do a variety of tanagers (including Dusky-faced, Tawny-crested, White-lined, Red-crowned Ant-, Crimson-backed, Flame-rumped, and Golden-hooded), and euphonias battle the common Clay-colored Robins, Buff-throated Saltators, and Tennessee Warblers for space on the feeding tray, but some other specialties do so as well. Furtive Orange-billed Sparrows are more easily seen on the feeding trays than at any other location I've visited— this is a striking sparrow that deserves to be seen out in the open, but rarely is, since it favors dense cover in the forest. Occasional clumsy Chestnut-headed Oropendolas glide in for their share, with their yellow tail feathers flaring and their crests erect. But the Rufous Motmots have to be the best of the bunch—I have never thought of motmots as feeder birds. Now if only the Tody Motmot could be trained to come to the feeder.

I actually do not hope that all birds end up habituated to feeders, since it adds to the experience to seek out special birds in the deep forest. We sought the Tody Motmot throughout our trip, and were finally rewarded on our last morning when we spotted a pair sitting stock-still deep in the brush. We had “walk away” looks at these cooperative birds. But the motmots were far from the only highlight. My favorite day was the day we visited the recently explored Altas del María location. Our day began deep within a dense cloud near the top of this high elevation locale. The clouds made the birding challenging, but we managed looks at Silver-throated Tanager, Common Bush-Tanager, Keel-billed Toucan, and Spotted Woodcreeper. Snowcaps were zipping around in good numbers, but seemingly never stopping. Finally a male perched for quick scope views, but he only stayed long enough for a couple of people to cycle through. As the morning progressed we had a number of other highlights: several different cooperative, perched Orange-bellied Trogons; a screeching flock of Orange-chinned Parakeets pausing in a treetop; a rare Brown Violet-ear singing from his display perch; a responsive Thrush-like Schiffornis singing his loud advertisement before giving us point-blank looks; and multiple mixed flocks with their own unique blends of species—Ochraceous Wrens, Tawny-capped Euphonias, striking Black-and-yellow Tanagers, Tufted Flycatchers, Spotted Barbtails, Green Honeycreepers, and Scarlet-thighed Dacnis were but a few of the highlights.

On other days we explored the forest trails of El Chorro. The dark, narrow trails produced nicely for us; first a roosting Mottled Owl was seen, followed by a pair of Black-faced Antthrushes that responded to our tape by walking across the trail in front of us. Hummingbird feeders within the forest are a great way to see Violet-crowned Woodnymph, two species of plumeleteers, and other hummingbirds. But the best hummingbird show was outside the forest. Banks of purplish flowers growing in several trees were watched throughout our stay for two special species: the Green Thorntail and the Rufous-crested Coquette. Strangely, most patches had little hummingbird activity. But on our last morning we found a patch that must have been in the perfect nectar cycle. As our last morning's bird walk concluded, we paused to watch those flowers. Almost immediately a male Rufous-crested Coquette came into view. We had seen females on two occasions, but it was even better to see a male with his wild reddish crest and little white rump band. Other hummingbirds were swarming around, including Violet-headed, Blue-chested, Violet-capped Woodnymph, and White-necked Jacobin. Then a tiny greenish one was spotted: a female Green Thorntail. This active little bird usurped our attention until, just minutes later, an elegant male thorntail appeared, with long outer tail feathers flaring as he fed. This was only the second adult male that some of the veteran local guides had seen in the area. Fortunately even those who had gone back early were able to share in this special sighting, since the thorntails continued to feed in this flower patch for 30 minutes more. The

hummingbird show, highlighted by the two specialties, made for a great conclusion to a wonderful four days of El Valle birding.

Day 1, 30 January: Arrival in Panama City. Night at Country Inn and Suites, Canal.

Day 2, 31 January: Morning departure for El Valle with opportunistic birding en route (Pearl Kite!). Feeder watching and late morning walk around El Valle trails. Afternoon walk along interior forest trails at El Chorro (79 species).

Day 3, 1 February: Morning on La Mesa, where persistent drizzle (and sometimes rain!) slowed our birding pace somewhat. We abandoned the Mesa for drier climes below and birded the Cariguana Trail in late morning. After lunch, we visited the lowland area of El Chiru (hot, windy), adding substantially to our bird list. (77 species, 109 total)

Day 4, 2 February: Very special morning at the only recently accessible area of Altas del María. This higher elevation area has only been recently explored (with the building of new roads into the area) and has yielded a wealth of species previously unknown from the area. We spent a full day afield in this area. (67 species, 137 total)

Day 5, 3 February: We greeted dawn on Raul's porch where we continued to find new birds. Final birdwalks around the El Valle/El Chorro trails yielded some additional new species, before we departed for the Canopy Tower (75 species, 153 total)

The below list includes all species seen by our group during the tour 2-9 Feb 2006. Locations are listed for as many species as was practical, and I give some general comments on the abundance of each species on the tour. Dates are listed only when the date seen is not clear from the location (e.g., all Altas del María sightings will be from 2 Feb). Special highlights are in ALL CAPS; rare or unusual species are underlined. References to the APanama book@ are of course Robert S. Ridgely and John A. Gwynn's 1989 A Guide to the Birds of Panama, 2nd edition. Nomenclature follows the J.F. Clements' 2000 Birds of the World: A Checklist, 5th edition and where the names differ from those used in Ridgely & Gwynn (1989), the name used in the latter is given in parentheses.

AM=Altas del María; EC=El Chiru; EV=El Valle; M=Mesa; *=not seen/heard on Canopy Tower trip

Brown Pelican - Panama City

Great Egret - one seen while en route from Panama City

Cattle Egret - EC, EV

Black Vulture - EV, EC, AM; abundant; seen daily

Turkey Vulture - EV, EC, AM; the subspecies here, *ruficollis*, looks quite different from those in the United States

Pearl Kite - one seen well on wires while en route from Panama City

White Hawk - AM; fantastic look at a perched bird. The subspecies here (*costaricensis*) has more black on its upper parts than birds of Mexico and northern Central America.

Roadside Hawk - EC

Broad-winged Hawk - AM, EV

Short-tailed Hawk - AM, lowlands

Crested Caracara - near EV

Yellow-headed Caracara - EC, near EV, near AM

BAT FALCON - EV, AM; long perched looks at a pair at AM

Gray-headed Chachalaca - M

Gray-necked Wood-Rail - EV; two seen on our first evening

Laughing Gull - Panama City

Rock Pigeon - EC, EV; in towns

Scaled Pigeon - EC; scope views

Pale-vented Pigeon - EV, M

Ruddy Ground-Dove - EV, M

White-tipped Dove - EV, M

***BROWN-THROATED PARAKEET**- EC; numerous flyovers, but our El Chiru visit concluded with a couple parakeets feeding in weeds at eye level! This form, *ocularis*, has sometimes been treated as a separate species (Veraguan Parakeet) according to the Panama book

Orange-chinned Parakeet - AM, EV

Blue-headed Parrot - AM, M

Squirrel Cuckoo - AM, EV

Smooth-billed Ani - M

***Groove-billed Ani** - EC; these were my first in Panama B this species is oddly localized in Panama although it is widespread through much of the rest of Middle America. It is absent from the Canal Zone but present here on the Pacific side in Coclé province just 100 km west.

MOTTLED OWL- EV; one seen on its day roost at El Chorro, thanks to Jose

Rufous-breasted Hermit - M

White-necked Jacobin - EV

Violet-headed Hummingbird - EV; five at magic hummingbird tree near lodge 3 Feb

RUFOS-CRESTED COQUETTE - EV; male and female seen in short order at magic hummingbird tree near lodge 3 Feb

***GREEN THORNTAIL** - EV; a female, an immature male, and two amazing **adult males** at magic hummingbird tree near lodge 3 Feb. The highlight of the tour for me, these were my first adult males.

***Garden Emerald** - EC, EV

Violet-crowned (Crowned) Woodnymph - EV

Sapphire-throated Hummingbird - EC

Rufous-tailed Hummingbird - AM, EV

Blue-chested Hummingbird - EV; one female at magic tree 3 Feb

Snowy-bellied Hummingbird - EC, EV

***SNOWCAP** - AM; this is one of the Altas del María specialties. Unfortunately, the morning fog made it difficult to see one perched. A few people got a quick look at a nice male.

***White-vented Plumeleteer** - EV

Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer - EV

Purple-crowned Fairy - EV

***ORANGE-BELLIED TROGON**- AM; numerous excellent looks

Green Kingfisher - EV; along stream at lodge

***TODY MOTMOT** - EV; one of our final successes, we had a nice pair of these along one of the El Valle trails.

Rufous Motmot - EV; visiting the feeder (!) at the lodge

***BLUE-THROATED (Emerald) TOUCANET** - M; amazing looks at close range

Collared Aracari - EV

Keel-billed Toucan - M, AM

Red-crowned Woodpecker - AM, EV

Lineated Woodpecker - EV

***Spotted Barbtail** - AM; another AM specialty, most of us had a look at this interesting woodcreeper-like member of the Ovenbird family

Plain Xenops - EV; Amy spotted and identified the first of our two Xenops

***Spotted Woodcreeper** - AM

Fascinated Antshrike - EV; one female on our first walk

(h) **Western Slaty-Antshrike (Slaty Antshrike)** - EV; one heard on our last walk

***Plain Antvireo** - AM; another AM specialty, we had a nice pair

Chestnut-backed Antbird - EV

BLACK-FACED ANTTHRUSH - EV; we had excellent looks at a pair of these shy birds as they walked rail-like across the trail in front of us

(h) ***Black-crowned Antpitta** - AM; one heard whacking very close to us, the other singing at some distance. Neither was to show itself, unfortunately.

Golden-collared Manakin - EV; nice males seen

Lance-tailed Manakin - EC, EV; this showy little manakin was seen well by Judy and a few others

***Thrush-like Schiffornis** - AM; we had a great tape response from this nondescript bird with an amazing song. I think it was within arm's reach at one point!

Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet - EV

Yellow-bellied Elaenia - EC ,EV

***Lesser Elaenia** - EC, EV
***Olive-striped Flycatcher** - EV; Amy saw one of these with Tino
Paltry Tyrannulet - AM
Pale-eyed Pygmy-Tyrant – EV; brief look at this little flycatcher on the Cariguana Trail
***Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant** - AM; several people eventually got a look at this little bird, which we heard often
Common Tody-Flycatcher - EV
***Tufted Flycatcher** - AM; another species only recently discovered in the area, we had a couple great looks at these cute little flycatchers. Interestingly, the piping song of birds from Costa Rica south is totally unlike the song in Mexico and probably represents a species-level difference. The subspecies we saw was presumably *viduus* of central Panama.
Dusky-capped Flycatcher - AM, EV; this is subspecies *nigricapillus*, different from the subspecies *olivaceous* which reaches the U.S.A. in Arizona
Panama Flycatcher - EC; great looks
Great Kiskadee - several around the hotel at the Panama Canal
Boat-billed Flycatcher - EV
Social Flycatcher - EV, EC
Streaked Flycatcher - EC; one seen
Tropical Kingbird - EC, AM, EV; abundant; seen daily
Fork-tailed Flycatcher - EC, also Panama Canal hotel
Masked Tityra - EV
Gray-breasted Martin - EC, EV, Panama Canal hotel
***White-thighed Swallow** - EV; a lifer for Marshall, this species is not at all common in Panama
Southern Rough-winged Swallow - EV
Rufous-breasted Wren - EV
Bay Wren - EV
Rufous-and-white Wren - EV, AM
(h) Plain Wren – EV (h)
House Wren - EV; seen most days; this subspecies *inquietus* is somewhat different from U.S.A. House Wrens, both in song and appearance. Some authors split birds south of southern Mexico as Southern House Wren (*T. musculus*), though the AOU has not adopted this.
***Ochraceous Wren** - AM; another of the recent discoveries in the area, this species was previously only known from the extreme east and west of the country. We saw and heard about a dozen.
White-breasted Wood-Wren - EV
***Gray-breasted Wood-Wren** - AM
(h) Scaly-breasted (Nightingale) Wren - EV (h)
Tropical Mockingbird - Panama Canal hotel; interestingly, the Panama population of this species was introduced
(h) *Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush - EV (h)
Clay-colored Robin (Thrush) - EV, AM; common; seen daily
(h) Long-billed Gnatwren - EV; El Chorro trails
Black-chested Jay - EV, AM
Yellow-throated Vireo - AM
***Yellow-green Vireo** - AM, EV
Scrub Greenlet - EV; from Raul's porch
***Lesser Goldfinch** - EV; these black-backed goldfinches look unlike those on the West Coast. The subspecies in Panama is *columbianus* and ranges north to southern Mexico
Tennessee Warbler - EV; common
(h) Yellow Warbler - EV (h)
***Blackburnian Warbler** - AM; Ed spotted and identified a fantastic male at AM
Yellow-rumped Warbler - AM; one (Myrtle subspecies) at Altas del María was one of our rarer birds of the tour.
Black-and-white Warbler - AM, EV
Louisiana Waterthrush - EV
***Mourning Warbler** - EV
***Canada Warbler** - EV
***Rufous-capped Warbler** - EV
***Buff-rumped Warbler** - EV; Amy and Bev saw a pair of this distinctive, stream-loving warbler
Bananaquit - AM, EV

***Common Bush-Tanager** - AM

***BLACK-AND-YELLOW TANAGER** - AM; six of these birds at AM was a highlight, especially since several stunning males were along with the group

(h) **Rosy Thrush-Tanager** - EV (h)

***Dusky-faced Tanager** - EV; coming to the feeders

***Tawny-crested Tanager** - EV, AM

***White-lined Tanager** - EV; coming to the feeders

***Red-crowned Ant-Tanager** - EV; a female that some saw people saw at the feeders in Marshall's absence was correctly identified from the book and confirmed by Jay Vander Gaast.

***Hepatic Tanager** - EV, AM; Panamanian birds are of the subspecies *testacea*, which is allied with the *lutea* group of South America rather than the *hepatica* group of the U.S.A. and northern Central America. This is a very likely future split. Panamanian birds differ from USA birds in having a different multi-noted call and lacking the grayish ear patch. If split, these may be known as Highland Hepatic-Tanager.

Summer Tanager - AM, EV

Crimson-backed Tanager - EV

Flame-rumped Tanager - EV; at feeders; this subspecies (*icteronotus*) differs from the nominate (*flammigerus*) in having a yellow, instead of flame scarlet rump

Blue-gray Tanager - EV; common; seen daily, mostly in lowlands, not seen from Tower

Palm Tanager - EV

Yellow-crowned Euphonia - EC, also Panama Canal hotel

Thick-billed Euphonia - EV

***Tawny-capped Euphonia** - EV, AM

***Silver-throated Tanager** - AM, EV

Bay-headed Tanager - EV, AM

Golden-hooded Tanager - EV

***SCARLET-THIGHED DACNIS** - AM; Amy spotted this one at AM, a stunning little bird

Green Honeycreeper - AM, EV

Shining Honeycreeper - EV; one male on our first walk at EV 31 Jan was apparently the first ever seen in El Valle itself. One had recently been seen by another VENT group on La Mesa, which was the first for the general area.

Red-legged Honeycreeper - EC, EV

Variable Seedeater - EC; this subspecies is *hicksii*

Thick-billed (Lesser) Seed-Finch - AM; seen by the second vehicle

Yellow-faced Grassquit - AM, EV

Orange-billed Sparrow - EV; coming to the feeders at the lodge. What a sparrow!

Black-striped Sparrow - AM, EV

Streaked Saltator - EV

Buff-throated Saltator - EV

Blue-black Grosbeak - MP

(h) ***Slate-colored Grosbeak** - AM (h)

***Eastern Meadowlark** - EC

Great-tailed Grackle - EC, EV; abundant; seen daily

Giant Cowbird - EV; one flying over Raul's porch was a lifer for Jose (who only started birding 6 months ago)

Baltimore Oriole - EC, EV

Scarlet-rumped Cacique - AM

Chestnut-headed Oropendola - EM, EV

***Saffron Finch** - several at hotel in Panama City on our first day

LEADER-ONLY BIRDS

(h) **Southern Lapwing** - M (h); **swift sp.** - AM; **Brown-hooded Parrot** - AM; ***White-tipped Sicklebill** - AM
Green Hermit - EV, M, AM; **Stripe-throated (Little) Hermit** - EV; **Cocoa Woodcreeper** - EV; **Great Antshrike** - EV; (h) **White-bellied Antbird** - EV; ***Rufous-browed Tyrannulet** - AM; this uncooperative bird did not reappear for the group. It is one of the special birds recently discovered in the Altas del María area.

(h) **Lesser Greenlet** - EV; (h) **Green Shrike-Vireo** - AM (h); **Plain-colored Tanager** - EV

Total - 150 (+ 12 leader only)

MAMMALS (3 species)

Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth - EV

Red-tailed Squirrel (*Sciurus granatensis*) - EV

WESTERN PYGMY-SQUIRREL (*Microsciurus mimulus*) - AM; Peggy found this interesting miniature squirrel, which we separated from Alfaro's Pygmy-Squirrel (*M. alfari*) by underparts coloration and the lack of pale spots around the ears.

HERPS etc.

Green Iguana - G

Striped Basilisk - A; several seen along creeks at Achioté

Black Racer (*Chironius grandisquamis*) - AM; This was the interesting snake from Altas del María (the one that scared the breath out of Peggy). I contacted some Central American herpetologists and received a response from Alejandro Solorzano who gave me the identification. Note that this is very different from the Black Racer (*Coluber constrictor*) of the United States.

Anolis lizard sp. - several anoles seen, may have involved several species

amphibians - tadpoles seen in stream 3 Feb

butterflies - Blue Morphos (two species), Malachites, Fatimas, White Peacocks, swallowtails, and many others.
Also a very cool walking stick 3 Feb.