

PANAMA: THE DARIEN WILDERNESS

FEBRUARY 15 – 24, 2008



Ornate Hawk-Eagle

Photo: David Wolf

LEADER: DAVID WOLF

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To visit the Darien at Cana is to visit a true wilderness, far from the noise and trappings of our familiar modern world. It wasn't always like this, for at one time there were thousands of gold miners living in this region, but they are long gone and the forest has returned. It rules now, stretching unbroken in every direction except for the airstrip and small clearing. For one wonderful week this area was "ours," as we explored trails into this melange of secondary and primary forest habitats, spotting new surprises at every bend.

After arriving midday, our first afternoon around the clearing and airstrip quickly demonstrated that the flowering *Erythrina* trees were attracting a steady procession of birds. This would be a theme all week, as we watched huge Blue-and-yellow Macaws nibbling the flowers (to get the nectar?); studied nine species of hummingbirds spotted in one afternoon, including tiny Rufous-crested Coquettes and Green Thorntails; and puzzled over the many confusing flycatchers. A misty morning the next day kept us confined to the field station, from which we spotted birds the entire time, providing a solid introduction to the area and some real bonuses such as the comical Barred Puffbird, Dusky-backed Jacamars, and a troop of raucous Red-throated Caracaras.

As we explored further afield from Cana, our quality sightings grew. There were multiple looks at Gray-cheeked Nunlets; an ethereal male Black-tipped Cotinga; scope studies of Black-crowned Antpitta and Great Jacamar on the same morning; a shy Stripe-throated Wren; brilliant colors, like those of the Scarlet-thighed Tanager; the "opera" of the Blue-black Grosbeak song; the trio of Spot-crowned Barbets our final morning; and yes, those canopy mixed-flocks—so frustrating, but sometimes yielding views of specialties like the Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker and Slate-throated Gnatcatcher.

In many ways the most special part of the week was the hike up Cerro Pirre and our time on the mountain. This ridge, barely reaching 5,500 feet at its highest point, is so isolated that a number of endemic species are found only here and nearby. Our hike up was highlighted by a brief encounter with a small herd of white-lipped peccaries in the trail, while in camp we found the endemic Pirre Bush-Tanager to be common, moving with a flock of gorgeous Black-and-yellow Tanagers. A morning hike up to the stunted and misty forest along the ridge top produced the endemic Pirre Warbler and Green-naped Tanager, plus spectacular plants and lots of frogs.

The area around camp was good to us this year, and during our stay here we watched a pair of Yellow-eared Toucanets in a fruiting tree for an hour; several times observed a mixed-flock racing through (a favorite vignette was watching a male Red-headed Barbet displace a pair of Yellow-collared Chlorophonias); came running out of the forest to see

a young Ornate Hawk-Eagle perched nearby, its golden eyes intently watching the clearing; and thrilled to an almost unreal male Blue Cotinga ("fine porcelain on a branch") before starting the hike down. Just above Cana we found a nice ant swarm and had a chance to enjoy the distinctive Ocellated Antbird, one of the most beautiful of its entire family.

All too soon the plane came to whisk us away from this peaceful wilderness and back to "civilization."

Itinerary:

February 15, 2008: the group gathers at the Country Inn & Suites in Amador (Panama City).

February 16, 2008: morning charter flight to Cana airstrip in the Darien, arriving about 12 p.m. Afternoon settling into the lodge and birding around the clearing and airstrip at Cana.

February 17, 2008: a rainy morning birding around the Cana clearing from the shelter of the field station; afternoon to the Old Mine.

February 18, 2008: a sunny morning on the Boca de Cupe trail. Rain after lunch, and then a walk down to the Rio Seteganti.

February 19, 2008: a prompt departure for the hike up to the Mountain Camp on Cerro Pirre at 3800 ft, arriving there by 2:30 p.m, before a rain set in.

February 20, 2008: 7:30 a.m. departure for a day hike up to the elfin cloud forest along the top of Cerro Pirre at ca 4800 ft, returning to camp for a late lunch and afternoon birding there.

February 21, 2008: birding from the Mountain Camp clearing and lookout before hiking back down the mountain to Cana, everyone arriving by 3:30 p.m.

February 22, 2008: all day birding along the Boca del Cupe Trail out as far as the Escucha del Ruido stream, some of us lingering along the trail and airstrip in the late afternoon.

February 23, 2008: a misty morning again, but some of us hiked up to the Old Mine, before we birded from the clearing while waiting for our flight back to Panama City.

February 24, 2008: departure day.

Bird List: A few highlights, regional specialties and rarities are underscored, while birds noted by group members around the Country Inn & Suites Amador (Panama City) on February 15 & 23 are listed separately at the end.

Great Tinamou - heard only (almost daily).

Little Tinamou - heard only (in young second-growth around the clearing and airstrip).

Gray-headed Chachalaca

Crested Guan - seen often and well; wonderfully numerous and tame here.

Great Curassow - leader only

Marbled Wood-Quail - heard only

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Black-eared Wood-Quail - heard only

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

King Vulture - only from the plane.

Swallow-tailed Kite

Plumbeous Kite

Bicolored Hawk

Semiplumbeous Hawk

Broad-winged Hawk

Ornate Hawk-Eagle - perched sub-adult over the Mountain Camp and then a perched adult on the hike down the mountain.

Barred Forest-Falcon - heard only

Collared Forest-Falcon - heard only

Red-throated Caracara - this declining species was noisy and conspicuous, several times landing nearby to vociferously protest our presence.

Laughing Falcon

Gray-necked Wood-Rail - heard only

Solitary Sandpiper

Scaled Pigeon

Plumbeous Pigeon - at mid and upper elevations on the mountain.

Ruddy Pigeon - in the lower elevation forests around the Cana valley.

White-tipped Dove

Russet-crowned Quail-Dove - heard only; possibly flushed on the mountain several times.

Chestnut-fronted Macaw

Great Green Macaw

Red-and-green Macaw - seen only in flight along the ridge by a some of the group.

Blue-and-yellow Macaw - including close studies of birds feeding in the flowering *Erythrina* trees around Cana.

Orange-chinned Parakeet

Blue-headed Parrot - abundant!

Red-ored Parrot

Mealy Parrot

Squirrel Cuckoo

Smooth-billed Ani

Crested Owl - called up from the edge of the Cana clearing,.

Spectacled Owl - heard only

Central American Pygmy-Owl - heard only

Mottled Owl

Great Potoo

Common Pauraque - mostly heard; the "least favorite" bird of the trip as they were calling all night long with the full moon.

White-collared Swift

Band-rumped Swift

Rufous-breasted Hermit

Band-tailed Barbthroat

Green Hermit

Long-billed (Western Long-tailed) Hermit - split from the Long-tailed Hermit.

Stripe-throated Hermit - split from the Little Hermit.

White-necked Jacobin

Rufous-crested Coquette - both males and females seen; silly hair-do!

Green Thorntail

Green-crowned Woodnymph

Violet-bellied Hummingbird

Blue-throated Goldentail

Rufous-cheeked (Pirre) Hummingbird - this endemic was seen best in the Mountain Camp.

Blue-chested Hummingbird

Snowy-bellied Hummingbird

Rufous-tailed Hummingbird

White-vented Plumeleteer

Green-crowned Brilliant - seen by a few at the Old Mine our final morning.

Greenish Puffleg - the commonest hummer at upper elevations on Cerro Pirre.

Purple-crowned Fairy

Long-billed Starthroat

Purple-throated Woodstar - perched males from the lookout at the mountain camp our final morning; a real rarity in Central America.

White-tailed Trogon

Violaceous Trogon

Collared Trogon

Black-throated Trogon - seen only at tropical elevations on the mountain.

Black-tailed Trogon

Slaty-tailed Trogon - only once, in mid-elevation forest on the mountain.

Tody Motmot - heard only

Rufous Motmot

Ringed Kingfisher

Green Kingfisher

Barred Puffbird - scope studies of one at the edge of the Cana clearing.

White-necked Puffbird

Pied Puffbird - seen several times at the Old Mine.

White-whiskered Puffbird - a forest interior species, perched low for great looks.

Gray-cheeked Nunlet - multiple looks at this rarity.

Dusky-backed Jacamar - a distinctive species endemic to this small area of eastern Panama and northwestern Colombia; seen regularly in the open second-growth and forest edge around Cana.

Great Jacamar - great study of this glittering forest bird.

Spot-crowned Barbet - wonderful trio of this regional specialty our final morning.

Red-headed Barbet

Violet-throated Toucanet - the Violet-throated is a recent split from Emerald Toucanet (not accepted by all authorities).

Collared Aracari

Yellow-eared Toucanet - great look at a pair in the Mountain Camp clearing.

Keel-billed Toucan

Black-mandibled Toucan - "Chestnut-mandibled" Toucan (*Ramphastos swainsonii*), the form that we saw, has now been lumped with the "Black-mandibled" (*Ramphastos ambiguus*).

Olivaceous Piculet

Black-cheeked Woodpecker

Red-rumped Woodpecker

Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker - a Panama endemic seen twice at the Old Mine.

Cinnamon Woodpecker

Lineated Woodpecker

Crimson-bellied Woodpecker

Crimson-crested Woodpecker

Slaty Spinetail

Red-faced Spinetail

Lineated Foliage-gleaner

Slaty-winged Foliage-gleaner - seen often and well.

Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner

Plain Xenops

Streaked Xenops

Tawny-throated Leaftosser - great looks at a very responsive bird.

Plain-brown Woodcreeper

Olivaceous Woodcreeper

Long-tailed Woodcreeper

Northern Barred-Woodcreeper

Cocoa Woodcreeper - a recent split from Buff-throated Woodcreeper.

Spotted Woodcreeper

Streak-headed Woodcreeper

Brown-billed Scythebill - a nice surprise in the mixed-flock in the elfin forest.

Fasciated Antshrike

Great Antshrike

Western Slaty-Antshrike

Russet Antshrike - with mixed-flocks at mid-elevations on the mountain.

Plain Antwren

Moustached Antwren - a recent split from Pygmy Antwren.

Pacific Antwren - a recent split from Streaked Antwren.

Checker-throated Antwren - a "dead-leaf" specialist.

White-flanked Antwren

Slaty Antwren

Rufous-winged Antwren - fairly common and seen quite well, rapidly vibrating its

tail while singing.

Dot-winged Antwren

Dusky Antbird

Jet Antbird - great looks at this uncommon and secretive antbird of rank second-growth.

Chestnut-backed Antbird - the *cassini* race, with 2 rows of small white spots on wing coverts.

Immaculate Antbird

Bicolored Antbird

Spotted Antbird

Ocellated Antbird - this obligate ant-follower is one of the most beautiful of all of the antbirds; several were present at the ant swarm that we watched.

Black-faced Antthrush - mostly heard only; Dave H. saw one.

Black-crowned Antpitta - what a thrill, to see this beautiful forest bird in the scopes.

Streak-chested Antpitta - heard only

Thicket (Fulvous-bellied) Antpitta - a real challenge to see this one, but some of us did.

Choco Tapaculo (*Scytalopus chocoensis*) - heard only; note that this is the species present here, not the Narino (*Scytalopus viciniior*).

Brown-capped Tyrannulet

Forest Elaenia

Gray Elaenia - difficult to identify, always up very high in the canopy in the mixed-flocks.

Yellow-bellied Elaenia

Olive-striped Flycatcher

Ochre-bellied Flycatcher

Slaty-capped Flycatcher

Yellow-green Tyrannulet - this obscure Panama endemic was identified in the canopy mixed-flocks on the ridge several times.

Paltry Tyrannulet

Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant

Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant

Southern Bentbill

Common Tody-Flycatcher

Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher

Brownish Flycatcher

Olivaceous Flatbill

Yellow-margined Flycatcher

White-throated Spadebill

Golden-crowned Spadebill - point-blank looks at a very responsive bird in the early morning, including the orange-gold crest.

Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher

Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher

Black-tailed Flycatcher
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
Acadian Flycatcher
Long-tailed Tyrant
Bright-rumped Attila
Rufous Mourner
Dusky-capped Flycatcher
Great Crested Flycatcher
Rusty-margined Flycatcher
Gray-capped Flycatcher
White-ringed Flycatcher
Streaked Flycatcher
Piratic Flycatcher
Tropical Kingbird
Thrush-like Schiffornis - the lowland/foothill *panamensis* race
Rufous Piha
Cinereous Becard - a rarity; pair with a nest in an *Erythrina* observed several times.
Cinnamon Becard
One-colored Becard
Masked Tityra
Black-crowned Tityra
Blue Cotinga - stunning male and several females in fruiting trees around Mountain
Camp.
Black-tipped Cotinga. - ethereal against the dark hillsides.
Purple-throated Fruitcrow
Golden-collared Manakin
White-ruffed Manakin
Blue-crowned Manakin
Golden-headed Manakin - very vocal and seen often this trip; heard even more
often.
Sharpbill - several looks at this enigmatic species of the hill forest canopy.
Yellow-throated Vireo
Yellow-green Vireo
Tawny-crowned Greenlet
Lesser Greenlet
Black-chested Jay - readily seen in the more open woodlands around Cana.
White-thighed Swallow
Southern Rough-winged Swallow
White-headed Wren - a noisy and un-wrenlike regional specialty.
Sooty-headed Wren - elusive songster in the bamboo around the Mountain Camp.
Black-bellied Wren
Bay Wren - of the *nigricapillus* type, mostly white below boldly barred with black.
Stripe-throated Wren

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Ochraceous Wren - heard only
White-breasted Wood-Wren
Gray-breasted Wood-Wren - heard only, in the elfin forest along the damp ridgetop.
Scaly-breasted (Southern Nightingale) Wren
Long-billed Gnatwren
Slate-throated Gnatcatcher
Varied Solitaire - multiple good looks at this endemic this year, but not singing much.
Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush
White-throated Robin - this form is sometimes split as "Dagua" Thrush.
Tennessee Warbler - abundant in the flowering *Erythrina* trees.
Tropical Parula
Black-throated Green Warbler - two singles at the southern end of their winter range.
Blackburnian Warbler
Bay-breasted Warbler - inconspicuous, but common in the canopy flocks around Cana.
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Prothonotary Warbler - seen regularly at the flowering *Erythrina* trees.
Northern Waterthrush - one along the Rio Cana.
Mourning Warbler - hard to see, but surprisingly frequent in rank growth around the valley.
Slate-throated Redstart
Pirre Warbler - great looks at this scarce and secretive endemic of the elfin forest.
Buff-rumped Warbler
Bananaquit
White-eared Conebill - one pair high in the crown of a tall tree near the dining hall our first morning, after the drizzle.
Pirre Bush-Tanager - this endemic was found from the Mountain Camp to the ridgetop, where we watched a pair nest-building.
Yellow-backed Tanager - seen only in the canopy flocks on the lower slopes.
Black-and-yellow Tanager - a dominant in the mixed-flock around the Mountain Camp.
Dusky-faced Tanager - leader only
Lemon-spectacled Tanager - noisy "leaders" of a forest interior mixed-flock on the mountain.
Scarlet-browed Tanager - seen once in a flowering *Erythrina*.
White-shouldered Tanager
Hepatic Tanager
Summer Tanager
Scarlet Tanager
Crimson-backed Tanager - a real splash of color.
Flame-rumped Tanager

Blue-gray Tanager
Palm Tanager
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 cloud forest high on Cerro Pirre.

Scarlet-thighed Dacnis - brilliant

Blue Dacnis - drinks anyone?

Green Honeycreeper

Shining Honeycreeper - seen for sure only in a tall flowering *Erythrina* near the lodge.

Purple Honeycreeper - more widespread than the preceding and numerous in the palm zone.

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

Variable Seedeater

Thick-billed Seed-Finch

Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch

Orange-billed Sparrow

Black-striped Sparrow

Buff-throated Saltator

Slate-colored Grosbeak

Yellow-green Grosbeak - a specialty of the mid-elevation hill forest.

Blue-black Grosbeak

Giant Cowbird

Yellow-tailed Oriole

Baltimore Oriole

Yellow-billed Cacique

Yellow-rumped Cacique

Crested Oropendola

Chestnut-headed Oropendola

Fulvous-vented Euphonia

Orange-bellied Euphonia

Yellow-collared Chlorophonia - a pair of these stunningly beautiful little birds visited fruiting epiphytes in the mountain camp several times; rare and irregular here.

Mammal List:

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*)

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

White-lipped Peccary (*Dicotyles pecari*) - the highlight of our hike up the mountain was meeting a herd of these coming down the trail – they quickly dashed away into the forest downslope, clacking their teeth as they went. This species is extirpated or disappearing in many areas due to hunting pressure and habitat clearance.

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

"frogs" (quite a variety, and perhaps a toad or two also)

small lizards (especially anoles and geckos)

eyelash viper (*Bothriechis sp?*)

helicopter damselfly

Morpho butterfly

many other butterflies

army ants (of several species)

Birds noted by group members at the Country Inn & Suites, Amador (Feb 16 & 23):

Brown Pelican

Neotropic Cormorant

Magnificent Frigatebird

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

White Ibis

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture

Osprey

Broad-winged Hawk

Yellow-headed Caracara

Spotted Sandpiper

Whimbrel

Ruddy Turnstone

Laughing Gull

Royal Tern

Sandwich Tern

Pale-vented Pigeon

Ruddy Ground-Dove

White-tipped Dove

Orange-chinned Parakeet

Sapphire-throated Hummingbird

Short-tailed Swift

Rufous-tailed Hummingbird

Ringed Kingfisher
Red-crowned Woodpecker
Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet
Yellow-bellied Elaenia
Common Tody-Flycatcher
Great Kiskadee
Social Flycatcher
Tropical Kingbird
Gray-breasted Martin
Mangrove Swallow
House Wren
Clay-colored Robin
Tropical Mockingbird
Yellow Warbler
Northern Waterthrush
Crimson-backed Tanager
Blue-gray Tanager
Palm Tanager
Variable Seedeater
Saffron Finch (introduced)
Great-tailed Grackle
Orchard Oriole
Lesser Goldfinch