

Tropical Birding Tours

Panama: Photo Tour



Tour Guide: Ben Knoot

The photos in this report were captured by both the guide and the guests. Please view the photo captions for details. Trip report written by **Ben Knoot**.

Tour Introduction

Panama is a very unique and wonderful country in its own right. The forests are pure and thick, the city parks are beacons of life in a hustling and bustling city and in general, the people, lodges, food and overall atmosphere of the country makes Panama a good stop for first time and regular Central America travelers.

Our tour was supposed to begin with a few of Panama Cities amazing metro parks. That all changed when my contact in Cerro Azul called to inform me that we had to go on the first day as they were leaving for a trip to Mexico that afternoon. No bother, I would simply switch the schedule, no harm no foul. We then made a short drive into the lowlands; Gamboa to be specific.

Located just about an hour from Panama City is the wonderful area of Gamboa. Here as it turns out we would spend the most amount of our time, even making drives there on the first afternoon, and on the “clean-up” day I had organized in order to pick up species we might’ve missed before the tour ended. Gamboa is famous for being next to the Panama Canal, having Pipeline Road (one of the best birding roads in the world) and hosting the beautiful Gamboa Rainforest Retreat where we spent three nights. Once our time in the lowlands was completed, we took a longer drive (about 2.5hrs) west to the mountainous city of El Valle de Anton.

El Valle de Anton is a beautiful city. Small, with no major “down-town” city vibe but instead more of a large pueblo or township. Typically we spend time walking the forest trails looking for higher elevation birds as well as taking a trip down to a coastal road to look for open country species. As our luck would have it, the weather decided we weren’t going to spend much time photographing around this part of our tour. Insane winds and constant rain kept us huddled up in the hotel. Of the two and a half days we had to play with here, we were only able to effectively use a day and a half. Missing out on a full day of shooting isn’t fun but weather is the weather and thankfully, the guests were more than understanding, more on them in a minute!

Lastly, we returned to Panama City for the final nights of the tour. Here the weather was just the opposite as we experienced in El Valle de Anton. Blazing sun and heat made our last few days difficult but again, the guests were great. And on that note, I want to say this...

I think it is important for trip reports to not only show off highlights of the trip and to show off the particular tour but also to be honest about touring, whether it is birding, photography or just touring in general. Let’s face it, not every trip is perfect, no matter how much any tour operator would like it to be, stuff happens. This year was tough. It was a drier rainy season that ended earlier than normal. Most of the birds were incredibly quiet and uncooperative. Most of the time, our walks were hot and we had very few results to show for our efforts. Why I am telling you this? Well, I want to praise the guests of this tour. Their attitudes during this whole tour was exceptional. It was clear I was starting to get frustrated with the birds and the weather but at the end of each day, I went to sleep knowing they at least had some good laughs, great company with each other and in the end, a good trip. I am not sure if they are going to end up reading this report but sincerely, thank you to my guests; Don, Randy and Jake, you guys were amazing...okay let’s get to it...I hope you enjoy the read and the photos!



Itinerary

January 10th.....Arrival in Panama City/Summit Hotspots

January 11th.....Cerro Azul/Gamboa Area

January 12th.....Gamboa Area

January 13th.....Gamboa Area

January 14th.....Gamboa Area to El Valle de Anton

January 15th.....Juan Hombron/El Valle de Anton Hotspots

January 16th.....El Valle de Anton/Panama City Metro Park

January 17th.....Panama City Metro Park/Gamboa

January 18th.....Cerro Azul

January 19th.....Guest Departures

Tour Summary

Day 1: January 10th - Arrival in Panama City and Summit Hotspots

After meeting the group and immediately knowing we'd hit it off, I was anxious to get started. Afternoons are always a bit slower in the tropics so I thought I'd take the group over to the **Summit** area to visit the ponds and forests near the hotel. There are generally some good opportunities around to fill a few hours. We started off in the hotel area and managed to photograph and stunning **Orange-chinned Parakeet** hanging from its nest and a beautiful **Red-crowned Woodpecker** hanging from a piece of Palm Tree. We also managed a few of the common birds of the tropics; **Social Flycatcher**, **Tropical Kingbird** and **Great Kiskadee**. We waited for the Panamanian Night Monkey to make an appearance but in the end, the monkey's patience was stronger than our own so we returned to the hotel for a nice dinner and some good rest.



Orange-chinned Parakeet - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Red-crowned Woodpecker - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

Day 2: January 11th - Cerro Azul to Gamboa

Today was our day to visit one of the three feeding stations on this tour. We arrived at our contacts house good and early to give us the best chance at the highest number of species and to see and photograph the Geoffroy's Tamarin that often frequent the feeders. We arrived at 7am and were immediately inundated with hummingbirds, honeycreepers and tanagers. During the next 5hrs we photographed; **White-necked Jacobin, Crowned Woodnymph, Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, Blue-chested Hummingbird, White-vented and Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Shining, Green and Red-legged Honeycreeper, Hepatic and Summer Tanager, Bay-headed Tanager, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Thick-billed and Fulvous-vented Euphonia** and I think everyone's favorite from this location, a beautiful **Rufous Motmot**. Unfortunately, though we put it in the time, the Geoffroy's Tamarin did not grace us with its presence and with our kind hosts leaving that afternoon for a few weeks, we would not be able to try again on one of our free days in Panama City. A real bummer but that's how the cookie crumbles as they say... Either way, we had a great morning. We packed up our gear and started our journey west towards the lowlands; Gamboa.



Fulvous-vented Euphonia - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Crowned Woodnymph - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Shining Honeycreeper - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Snowy-bellied Hummingbird - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Rufous Motmot - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Blue-chested Hummingbird - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

After a quick afternoon siesta, we had a look around the [Gamboa Rainforest Resort](#) for what we could photograph. In general, it was pretty quiet and hot. We didn't add much to our list of growing birds but I was able to show the guests the Panama Canal which is something they were eager to see. We had a good dinner and discussed the strategy for the next few days and then hit the hay.

***Note:** The next two full days were spent in the Gamboa area doing much of the same thing each day. So for this next section, I am just going to briefly go over each area we visited once and then all of the birds we managed to photograph in those areas to avoid being repetitive.

Days 3&4: January 12th & 13th - Gamboa Area/Pipeline Road/Rainforest Discovery Center

Our time in Gamboa is split between THREE (3) locations;

Gamboa Area: The “Gamboa Area” is a bit vague but it is that way on purpose. The lodge grounds, area behind the lodge, various trails, the marina, ammo dump ponds and the Chagres River system are all included in this category. It gives us a great mix of forest birds, common species you’d typically see around man-made areas and beautiful water birds. We spent the greatest amount of time in these areas and indeed this is where most of our photos were captured during our time in the Gamboa and in fact in Panama as a whole. One area in particular, [the Marina](#), was a big hit with the guests and indeed each time we visited we photographed something new. Nothing incredibly rare but some good solid imagery came out of our multiple visits there. In the Gamboa area we photographed; [Yellow-headed Caracara](#), [Ringed Kingfisher](#), [Rufescent Tiger-heron](#), [Smooth-billed Ani](#), [Wattled Jacana](#), [Southern Lapwing](#), [Snail Kite](#), [Crimson-backed Tanager](#), [Blue-gray Tanager](#), [Palm Tanager](#), [Common Tody-Flycatcher](#), [Blue Dacnis](#), [Lesser and Great Kiskadee](#), [Social Flycatcher](#), [Slaty-tailed Trogon](#), [Whooping Motmot](#), [Broad-billed Motmot](#), [Plain-colored Tanager](#), [Amazon Kingfisher](#), [Keel-billed Toucan](#), [Collared Aracari](#), [Variable Seedeater](#), [Tropical Kingbird](#), [Purple Gallinule](#), [Spotted Sandpiper](#) and [Barred Antshrike](#).



Blue Dacnis - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Yellow-headed Caracara - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Yellow-headed Caracara - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Bat Falcon - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Buff-breasted Wren - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Barred Antshrike - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Smooth-billed Ani - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Social Flycatcher - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Variable Seed-eater - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Snail Kite - Photo by Guide: Ben Knot



Whooping Motmot - Photo by Guide: Ben Knot



Plain-colored Tanager - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Social Flycatcher - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Crimson-backed Tanager - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Common Tody Flycatcher - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

Pipeline Road: This road was a struggle to say the least. I think the very dry wet season and earlier than usual end to that season played a big role in this. Typically when I visit this road there are a variety of antbirds, trogons, motmots, woodpeckers, raptors and loads of other species that are actively working the forests. On our morning visit here however it was almost dead silent. We walked a good mile before deciding to turn back simply due to the lack of activity. Because of this, the group also voted to only visit this place once. It occurred to me during this decision that it could've been an off day on the road but the weather was perfect so rather than risk that again, the group opted for multiple visits to the Rainforest Discovery Center. I believe we were only able to photograph two species on Pipeline Road; **Spotted Antbird** and **Black-crowned Antshrike**.



Black-crowned Antshrike - Photo by Guide: Ben Koot

Rainforest Discovery Center: This area is very cool. No matter how slow and quiet the forest might be, there is at least some hummingbird feeders here, making this the second of our three feeding stations to visit. It is however just hummingbird feeders so once we photographed the hummingbirds, we aimed our attention towards some of the trails. During our first visit we didn't hit the trails until about 11am so it was pretty quiet by that point but everyone got a great look at the canopy tower we were set to visit the next morning. The canopy tower sits at about 30m and as such, once you get up there you are immediately put into the presence of something that is only really describable if you've experienced one already, a dawn chorus in the tropics. We had loads of species singing but again, not much cooperating. We had a few species come close enough for some photos but for the most part, it was just a surreal experience being in the canopy. A combination of the trails, feeders and the tower gave us; **Brown-capped Tyrannulet, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, White-whiskered Puffbird, Golden-collared Manakin, Rufous Motmot, Black-tailed Trogon, Long-billed Hermit, Crowned Woodnymph, Violet-bellied Hummingbird, Blue-chested Hummingbird, White-necked Jacobin, Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, White-browed Gnatcatcher, and Crimson-crested Woodpecker.**



White-whiskered Puffbird - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Scarlet-rumped Cacique - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Brown-capped Tyrannulet - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Golden-collared Manakin - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher— Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Long-billed Hermit - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Violet-bellied Hummingbird - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Crimson-crested Woodpecker - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

Day 5: January 14th - Gamboa to El Valle de Anton

The morning was dedicated to trying to photograph more around the lodge before we drove off towards El Valle de Anton. This was one of our biggest drives, (the longest being El Valle back to Panama City) so we left around lunch time to get into El Valle with just enough time to rest for an hour or so before going out...or so we thought. We arrived in [El Valle de Anton](#) and the wind was absolutely horrendous. The guests unanimously agreed to wave the afternoon and just have a rest, catch up on editing and take it easy. To put the wind into perspective, I went out on my own to scout out locations for the next day (mainly making sure trails were okay and we still had access to the spots I knew) and I saw nothing...and I am not exaggerating...nothing! It was so windy that I couldn't hear myself talk let alone a bird sing. Incredible weather. To further the example, we went into town for a nice Italian dinner. Two minutes into sitting down at our table, the power went out and it would stay out for the entire night. We ended up eating in the restaurant by cell-phone light which actually was incredibly fun (again due to the amazing guests). But that is how crazy that weather was!

Days 6: January 15th - El Valle de Anton

Well, the weather didn't let up during the night. Massive on-and-off rain showers pelted the roof and kept us from going out early in the morning. We got a good breakfast and finally with a break in the weather, we went for [Juan Hombro road](#). We would not be hitting the road at a good time of day as it was now sunny but we had to try. We managed a few new good birds but the light was so harsh that photo opportunities weren't all that special. We managed; **Groove and Smooth-billed Ani, Squirrel Cuckoo, Pearl Kite, Wattled Jacana, Brown Pelican, Gray-lined Hawk, Southern Lapwing and Fork-tailed Flycatcher**. We then went for a local lunch and went back up the mountain. We had a few hour rest and wouldn't you know it, the weather turned again. This time, it was somewhat manageable but still far from ideal. So we went for it. I took the group up towards [La Mesa](#) and we were able to find and photograph a few new birds. **Yellow-faced Grassquit, Tawny-crested Tanager, Streaked Saltator** were pretty cooperative but the bird that stole the show this afternoon was a very cooperative **Chestnut-capped Warbler**. We really needed that bird to cooperate, it was great for our mental states!! We returned as the rain started to become heavy, had a nice dinner and went to bed crossing our fingers for better weather in the morning.



Chestnut-capped Warbler - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

Day 7: January 16th - El Valle de Anton to Panama City

Today we had one morning left to hit it big in El Valle. There was a slight drizzle, no wind and overcast...things were looking good. So we started off by visiting [Charro Macho](#). This waterfall and trail system is often really good for a few great species. I am happy to say we saw and photographed one of them really well. A stunning adult [Sunbittern](#) graced us with its presence for as long as well wanted. That was a huge win. And it was needed because as I came around the corner to go down my favorite bit of trail, I was met with caution tape. Not a good sign...A quick inquiry led to the sad reality that the trail had been completely wiped out from a landslide just weeks before our tour...I know right...Still determined to photograph a few more species before we packed up and left for Panama City, I quickly walked the group up [Las Minas Road](#) and boy oh boy was it quiet. We managed a few shots of [Thick-billed Seed Finch](#), [Black Guan](#) and a [Silver-throated Tanager](#) but that was it. A tough morning but we all agreed, we were just happy to be out and get that Sunbittern! We packed up and took the long drive towards Panama City.



Sunbittern - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

The afternoon was spent walking around [Parque Omar](#) where in the past I had seen a lot of great birds like woodpeckers, tanagers, woodcreepers and other tropical passerines. This time, we managed just a few shots of [Saffron Finch](#) and [Roadside Hawk](#). Not sure what was happening with the birds this year but I was crossing everything I had at this point that the Metro Park would be productive the next morning.



Roadside Hawk - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

Day 8: January 17th - Parque Metropolitano/Gamboa

Well...full sun, not a cloud in the sky and hot. That was our weather mix for the morning in [Parque Metropolitano](#). It shut the bird activity down fast. There were lots of birds calling but almost none were responsive. In fact, the only things were managed to get decent shots of on this morning was a [Common Basilisk](#) and a [Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth](#). I really was struggling to get anything in front of our cameras which really started to bother me so after a nice brunch, we made the decision to go back to the only place we were seeming to have any luck, the [Marina in Gamboa](#). I won't go over in too much more detail but we photographed a few of the same species I mentioned earlier but at a higher quality.

Day 9: January 18th - Cerro Azul

Today we met up with another one of my friends in [Cerro Azul](#) to photograph at their feeders. Unfortunately we couldn't meet them until 9am because of their schedule so I was hoping for a typically clouded morning on the "Blue Hill". But of course, the weather overlords were having none of it. We arrived to more full sun and heat. The bird activity was amazing but the light was just so tough. So we used it to practice flight shots and try out some fun technical aspects of our cameras. Talk about making the best out of the situation and all in all, the guests actually were reluctant to leave this place in the end. It was a good morning regardless of the light. The birds here were all the same as we had seen before with one new addition; [Golden-hooded Tanager](#) which came in briefly.

When it came time to decide what to do for the afternoon on this, our last day, the guests understandably chose to go out on the high note from the feeders that morning. We chose to skip the afternoon, make sure everything went smoothly with check-in, had a wonderful last dinner together and said our goodbyes. A tough tour to say the least but this is part of the game. As tour operators, we try exceptionally hard to make sure everything goes as perfectly as possible but on occasion, somethings just don't swing in your favor. Best to make the most of it, laugh, smile, be in good company and try again next time. Again, I can't thank the guests enough for their attitudes and camaraderie throughout the tour...THANK YOU GUYS!

Species Account

*Below is a list of species photographed.

Guests Top 5 Birds of the Trip

*The “Birds of Trip” for photographers is always fun because it isn’t necessarily the rarest, most colorful or out there bird...it is about the birds that they connected with and had a fun time photographing!

- 1) Yellow-headed Caracara
- 2) Rufous Motmot
- 3) Golden-collared Manakin
- 4) *Three-way Tie!!
 - i. White-necked Jacobin
 - ii. Shining Honeycreeper
 - iii. Rufescent Tiger-Heron
- 5) Crowned Woodnymph

<u>BIRDS Photographed</u>	
Pigeons and Doves	
Ruddy Ground Dove	
Pale-vented Pigeon	
Cuckoos	
Smooth-billed Ani	
Groove-billed Ani	
Squirrel Cuckoo	
Swifts	
White-collared Swift	
Vaux's Swift	
Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift	
Hummingbirds	
White-necked Jacobin	
Long-billed Hermit	
Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer	
White-vented Plumeleteer	
Crowned Woodnymph	
Snowy-bellied Hummingbird	
Rufous-tailed Hummingbird	
Blue-chested Hummingbird	
Violet-bellied Hummingbird	
Plovers and Lapwings	
Southern Lapwing	
Jacanas	



Wattled Jacana	
Pelicans	
Brown Pelican	
Hérons, Egrets and Bitterns	
Rufescent Tiger-Heron	
Green Heron	
Hawks, Eagles and Kites	
Pearl Kite	
Snail Kite	
Roadside Hawk	
Gray-lined Hawk	
Trogons	
Slaty-tailed Trogon	
Black-tailed Trogon	
Motmots	
Whooping Motmot	
Rufous Motmot	
Broad-billed Motmot	
Kingfishers	
Ringed Kingfisher	
Amazon Kingfisher	
Puffbirds	
White-whiskered Puffbird	
Toucans	
Collared Aracari	

Keel-billed Toucan	
Woodpeckers	
Black-cheeked Woodpecker	
Red-crowned Woodpecker	
Crimson-crested Woodpecker	
Falcons and Caracaras	
Yellow-headed Caracara	
Bat Falcon	
Sunbittern	
Sunbittern	
Rails, Coots and Gallinules	
Purple Gallinule	
New World and African Parrots	
Orange-chinned Parakeet	
Typical Antbirds	
Barred Antshrike	
Black-crowned Antshrike	
Spotted Antbird	
Ovenbirds and Woodcreepers	
Cocoa Woodcreeper	
Manakins	
Blue-crowned (Velvety) Manakin	
Golden-collared Manakin	
Sharpbill, Royal Flycatcher and Allies	
Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher	

Tyrant Flycatcher	
Common Tody-Flycatcher	
Brown-capped Tyrannulet	
Yellow-bellied Elaenia	
Black Phoebe	
Lesser Kiskadee	
Great Kiskadee	
Boat-billed Flycatcher	
Social Flycatcher	
Tropical Kingbird	
Fork-tailed Flycatcher	
Swallows	
Mangrove Swallow	
Gnatcatchers	
White-lored Gnatcatcher	
Wrens	
Buff-breasted Wren	
Mockingbirds	
Tropical Mockingbird	
Thrushes and Allies	
Clay-colored Thrush	
Finches, Euphonias and Allies	
Thick-billed Euphonia	
Fulvous-vented Euphonia	
Troupials and Allies	



Scarlet-rumped Cacique	
New World Warblers	
Yellow Warbler	
Chestnut-sided Warbler	
Chestnut-capped Warbler	
Cardinals and Allies	
Hepatic Tanager	
Summer Tanager	
Tanagers and Allies	
White-shouldered Tanager	
Tawny-crested Tanager	
Crimson-backed Tanager	
Blue-gray Tanager	
Palm Tanager	
Flame-rumped Tanager	
Golden-hooded Tanager	
Plain-colored Tanager	
Bay-headed Tanager	
Silver-throated Tanager	
Blue Dacnis	
Shining Honeycreeper	
Red-legged Honeycreeper	
Green Honeycreeper	
Variable Seedeater	
Thick-billed Seedfinch	



Yellow-faced Grassquit	
Streaked Saltator	
<u>MAMMALS Photographed</u>	
Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth	
Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth	
Mantled Howler Monkey	
Variiegated Squirrel	
Red-tailed Squirrel	
Central American Agouti	
White-nosed Coati	