Full Detailed Itinerary - Panama: The Best of Tropical America

Day 1: Arrival in Panama City

The tour begins this evening. Our hotel is very close to the airport and has a free shuttle bus. We'll spend the first three nights of the tour in this hotel.

Day 2: Metropolitan Park (Panama City) and the coast

In the morning we shall start our birding of Panama in earnest at one of the country's best birding sites, right within Panama City, the Metropolitan Park or Parque Natural Metropolitano. This park is alive with birds in the mornings, and the list of possibilities is daunting, including three species of trogon, the striking Keel-billed Toucan, Lance-tailed and Golden-collared Manakins, Lineated, Crimson-crested and Red-crowned Woodpeckers, Whooping Motmot, as assortment of parrots, like Red-lored Parrot and Orange-chinned Parakeet, and a variety of hummingbirds like Violet-bellied and Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds and White-vented Plumeleteer. However, our principal targets will be the Rosy Thrush-Tanager, a key monotypic family, and the less flashy Yellow-green Tyrannulet, a Panamanian endemic. After lunch in the city, we will explore the coast for throngs of shorebirds lining the beaches (Panama is a major wintering haunt for many North American species), as well as other coastal birds like egrets, frigatebirds and ibis. In the nearby the mangroves we may find Straight-billed Woodcreeper, the mangrove form of Yellow Warbler, in addition to glowing wintering Prothonotary Warblers.

Day 3: Cerro Azul

Today we will swap the steamy lowlands for the hills just to the northeast of Panama City, easily accessible by way of a day trip from our comfortable hotel (minimizing the amount of time we need to change hotels too!). Some of the possibilities at Cerro Azul and Cerro Jefe, two low hills east of the city, include the scarce Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker, shockingly bright Black-and-yellow Tanager, as well a horde of other interesting foothill species, like White-ruffed Manakin, Tawny-capped Euphonia, and Plain-colored, Speckled and Rufous-winged Tanagers. We intend to visit some excellent private feeders in the area, which can attract a variety of hummingbirds, fruit-eating birds, and sometimes monkeys too (these feeders are at a private residence, and visiting them is contingent on the owners being home). The potential species list there could include the much-wanted Rufous-crested Coquette, the scarce and local Violet-capped Hummingbird, as well as more widespread hummers, like White-vented and Bronze-tailed Plumeleteers, Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, and White-necked Jacobin. The other birds that may be there during this visit, are Bay-headed Tanager, Shining Honeycreeper, and perhaps even Geoffroy's Tamarin, a small monkey species.

Day 4: Panama City to the Chiriqui Highlands

We will take a short morning flight to the city of David, in the westernmost province of Chiriqui, where the highlands of Panama are located, home to numerous endemic species only shared with neighboring Costa Rica. Depending on flight schedules, it may be worthwhile spending some time near the airport for birds like Lance-tailed Manakin, Scrub Greenlet, Olivaceous Piculet, Panama Flycatcher, Brown-throated Parakeet,

Fork-tailed Flycatcher, and others. After some time there, we will drive up into the mountains, and the town of Volcán, which lies in full view of the dramatic 11,400ft-high (3475m) Volcan Barú. Three nights will be spent in the cool, highland town of Volcán. In the afternoon, we will have our first visit to one of the sites in the mountains (see days 5-6).

Days 5-6: Volcán area

We will have two full days to explore the western highlands of Panama, visiting several different sites in the region. At Volcán Barú National Park, Resplendent Quetzal will be a priority on our long target list for the area. Other species of note in this national park include Yellow-winged Vireo, Flame-throated Warbler, Collared Redstart, Black-faced Solitaire, Long-tailed Silky-Flycatcher, Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Fiery-throated, Talamanca, Volcano, and Scintillant Hummingbirds, Silvery-fronted Tapaculo and the enigmatic Wrenthrush (a monotypic family). We'll also visit La Amistad National Park, sometimes referred to as “PILA”. We’ll have a second shot at the quetzal here, but also chances at more highland birds like Prong-billed Barbet, Ruddy Treerunner, Black-cheeked Warbler, Buffy Tuftedcheek, Tufted Flycatcher, Northern Emerald-Toucanet, and Sulphur-winged Parakeet. Hummingbird feeders in the area give us a chance to see and photograph species like White-throated Mountain-Gem, Stripe-tailed Hummingbird, and the striking Violet Sabrewing. On one of our days here, we will drive down into the foothills to a small, private reserve called Birding Paradise. This is a wonderful birding area, with feeders, that holds a lot of species and therefore promise for the day – hummingbirds are well represented there with Long-billed Starthroat, Scaly-breasted, Snowy-bellied, and Charming Hummingbirds all possible. Other forest birds, which occur at this mid-elevation site include Gray-cowled Wood-Rail, Costa Rican Brushfinch, Lesson’s Motmot, Crimson-fronted and Brown-throated Parakeets, Black-hooded Antshrike, Orange-collared Manakin, Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, and Spot-crowned Euphonia all possible, among many other species. Time permitting, we visit other sites in the area, such as a reed-fringed lake that is home to "Chiriqui Yellowthroat", a distinctive subspecies of Olive-crowned Yellowthroat which is split by many.

Day 7:Volcánto David; fly to Panama City and transfer to Gamboa

Today we head back to the city of David, fly back to the capital, and then drive the short distance to Gamboa, a great base for exploring the legendary Pipeline Road in the coming days. Three nights will be spent at a hotel in Gamboa. Our birding plans will depend on flight schedules.

Days 8-9: Gamboa and Pipeline Road area (Soberania National Park)

This is one of the most revered areas in all Tropical American birding, as diversity hits the roof, and there are numerous close sites centered around Gamboa and the Pipeline Road, in which to bird. On one of these days, we will climb the 100ft/32m-high observation tower (at the Panama Rainforest Discovery Center), to get a bird's-eye view of the treetops, and to watch for canopy species like Blue Cotinga, Black-breasted Puffbird, multiple toucan species, Scaled Pigeon, Red-lored and Mealy Parrots, Cinnamon and Crimson-crested Woodpeckers, Masked Tityra, Blue Dacnis, Green Shrike-Vireo, and Moustached Antwren. At other times, we will bird at ground level, at a number of famous local birding sites, like the Pipeline Road, Ammo Dump Ponds, and Summit Ponds. Where exactly we shall visit will depend on local news and how our bird list is growing. For sure, we will visit the Pipeline Road at least twice. Just a few of the birds on offer include Ocellated, Bicolored and Spotted Antbirds; Great Tinamou, Slaty-tailed, Gartered, and Black-tailed Trogons, Broad-billed and Rufous Motmots, White-whiskered Puffbird, Black-faced Antthrush, Streak-chested Antpitta, Golden-collared and Red-capped Manakins, Black-bellied and Song Wrens, Yellow-tailed and Yellow-backed Orioles, Chestnut-headed Oropendola.

Day 10: Gamboa to Nusagandi

Even after two full days already spent in the Gamboa area, there will still be plenty to look for in this area of mega diversity. Therefore, part of the day will be spent at several of the local Gamboa sites before we head eastward to Nusagandi, where we spend one night in a simple but comfortble lodge in the foothills.

Day 11: Nusagandi to Torti

The morning will be spent at this important forest site in the foothills, famous as being one of the most reliable sites to see the odd Sapayoa, which is in a family of its own. Local guides usually know good stakeouts for it, and we should see some other great species while we look for it. Possibilities include Yellow-eared Toucanet, Black-crowned Antpitta, Black-throated and White-tailed Trogons, Pied Puffbird, Brown-hooded Parrot, Spot-crowned Antvireo, Black-striped Woodcreeper, Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, Rufous Mourner, Sulhpur-rumped, Tawny-crested, Black-and-yellow, and Dusky-faced Tanagers, and Scarlet-thighed Dacnis. In the afternoon, we shall continue our journey east, to the town of Torti, just a short distance from the fabled Darien region of Panama, where we spend two nights.

Day 12: El Salto

We will start the day by heading out very early into the Darien with a packed breakfast. We'll bird the forest road to El Salto, where a rich list of birds is on offer, including Gray-cheeked Nunlet, White-headed Wren, Pale-bellied and Rufous-breasted Hermits, Red-rumped and Spot-breasted Woodpeckers, Black Antshrike, Rusty-margined Antwren, Bare-crowned Antbird, Choco Sirystes, White-eared Conebill, Spot-crowned Barbet, Blue Cotinga, the rare Double-banded Graytail, and hopefully some raptors too. Depending on activity, we may have lunch in a town nearby or head back to Torti for a late lunch.

Day 13: San Francisco Reserve to Panama City

The morning will be spent in this forest reserve managed by a local priest. Many of the birds are rare and occur at low density, so picking what will be seen on any two visits is tricky, but the list of birds that occur in and around the reserve include the endemic Yellow-green Tyrannulet, Barred Puffbird, Golden-headed Manakin, Speckled Mourner, Royal Flycatcher, Blue-throated Goldentail, Golden-crowned Spadebill, Scaly-breasted Wren, and Sooty-headed Tyrannulet. After lunch, we shall head back for another night in Panama City.

Day 14: Departure from Panama City

The hotel provides a free shuttle to the airport for international departures. There is no birding planned for today.

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