

Western Panama - Chiriquí Highlands & Tranquilo Bay

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** In flight, arrive Panama City
- Day 2/4** Mount Totumas
- Day 5/6** Boquete
- Day 7/8** Tranquilo Bay & Bastimentos Island
- Day 9** Palo Seco Forest
- Day 10** San San Pond Sak wetlands & beach
- Day 11** Tierra Oscura road
- Day 12** Tranquilo Bay & transfer to Panama City; in flight
- Day 13** Arrive UK



Departs

March (see website for details)

Focus

Mainly birds, plus mammals, reptiles and butterflies

Grading

Grade A (easy). A traditional birding tour with no strenuous walking; some trails might be slippery.

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code PAN09) or brochure

Possible Highlights:

- Resplendent Quetzal and Three-wattled Bellbird, plus cotingas, trogons and many hummingbirds
- Sloths, spider monkeys, howlers & Kinkajou among mammals possible
- Spectacular spring migration of raptors & songbirds



NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Panama forms the narrowest part of the Meso-American Isthmus, which is not only of huge historical importance, linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by rail and canal, but also of considerable biogeographical importance as the land bridge between North and South America. Panama offers some of the best birdwatching in Central America, harboring nearly one thousand bird species in only 80,000 square kilometers (slightly larger than Ireland) and offering prime locations to witness spectacular spring and autumn migrations.

This 13-day holiday takes in the very best birding of western Panama, close to the border with Costa Rica. We shall cover the montane forests of the continental divide (the Chiriquí highlands) and the Caribbean slope, as well as the spectacular coastal habitats of Bastimentos Island and the Bocas del Toro Archipelago. We can expect to see a wonderful range of tropical resident species, including several near-endemics and the stunning Resplendent Quetzal and Three-wattled Bellbird.

We shall also encounter a good selection of Nearctic migrants, as well as the spectacle of the great northward raptor migration through the isthmus of Panama. Mammal diversity, while not as high as in South America, includes sloths, monkeys and other denizens of the wonderful forests of western Panama.

Our accommodation will be in three contrasting but equally-delightful locations: a cloud-forest ecolodge on Mount Totumas, a coffee estate hotel in Boquete, and a wonderful eco-lodge set in forest at the edge of the Caribbean Sea in Bocas del Toro (plus a necessary overnight in Panama City).

Day 1

In flight, arrive Panama City

Today we depart the UK by a scheduled flight, arriving in the evening in Panama City, where we will transfer to our hotel for the night. We usually fly with KLM to Panama, via Amsterdam. Regional departures from around the UK are available – please state your preference upon booking.

Day 2

Transfer to Mount Totumas

Early this morning we transfer to the domestic airport and take an internal flight to David in western Panama, and then drive a couple of hours or so north to the flanks of the mighty Barú volcano, part of the Chiriquí highlands. We climb to almost 2,000m on the flanks of Mount Totumas, which will be our base for the next two nights. En route, we will make several stops for birding, seeking out both forest birds and open-country species such as Swallow-tailed Kite, Great Kiskadee, various hirundines, finches and grassquits. Planning to arrive for lunch, we will have some relaxed birding this afternoon on the Quetzal trail and on the hummingbird deck.

Day 3

Mount Totumas – Big Tree Loop and Hot Springs forest

During our time at Mount Totumas we will explore the numerous hiking/birding trails through the pristine, humid cloud forest here, finding a sometimes-bewildering variety of tropical birds, plus northbound Nearctic migrants. This morning we plan to walk the 5km Big Tree Loop where the main highlights are Three-wattled Bellbird, Flame-throated Warbler and Resplendent Quetzal. Other interesting birds include Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher, Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Silvery-fronted Tapaculo, Buffy Tuftedcheek, Collared Trogon, Slaty Flowerpiercer and Red-headed Barbet. Collared Forest-Falcon might be heard calling through the forest at dawn and, if we are very fortunate, we may spot an Ornate Hawk-Eagle flying over the canopy.

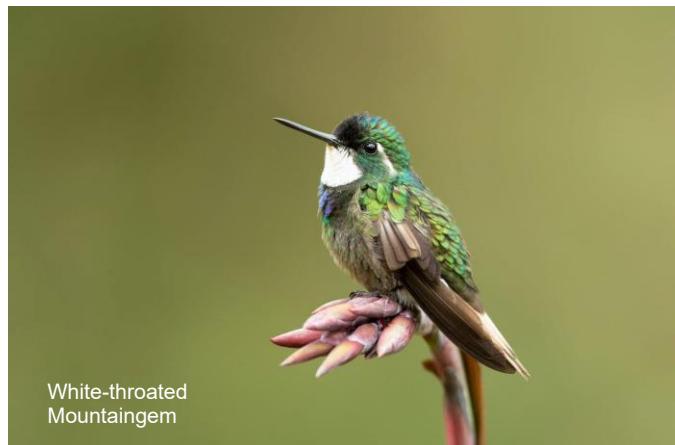
After lunch we will visit the middle-elevation forests which harbour White-winged and Bay-headed Tanagers, Elegant Euphonia and Fiery-billed Aracari.

The Chiriquí highlands harbour several near-endemic birds. High on our target list along with the species named above will be Black Guan, Sulphur-winged Parakeet, Prong-billed Barbet, Yellow-winged Vireo, Yellow-thighed Brushfinch, Fiery-throated Hummingbird and Chiriquí Quail-Dove, although we would be very fortunate to see them all!

Day 4

Mount Totumas – Bajareque and Riverside Trails; Hot Springs

Today's walks near Mount Totumas will include a visit to riverside habitats, giving us a chance to see the difficult Spotted Barbtail. We will have further chances of Resplendent Quetzal here too, and our hummingbird list will grow rapidly: over 25 species have been recorded (including many regional endemics), such as Brown Vireo, Talamanca Hummingbird (a very localised near-endemic), White-throated Mountaingem, Green-crowned Brilliant, Magenta Woodstar and both Stripe-tailed and Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds. At slightly higher altitude, we will have further chances for the Chiriquí endemic species we might have missed yesterday.



Migrant birds should also be in evidence: species to look out for will include Golden-winged, Prothonotary, Mourning, Blackburnian and Wilson's Warblers, plus Summer Tanager, Philadelphia Vireo and many more. We shall also enjoy stunning sunrises and sunsets, dark night skies, and a chance of mammals, such as Mantled Howler, Central American Spider Monkeys and the diminutive Bangs' Mountain Squirrel.

Day 5

Boquete

This morning we transfer an hour or two south-west to Boquete, which nestles on the eastern flank of Barú volcano. En route, we'll call in at Birding Paradise in Paraíso. This is a family home and we will be warmly

welcomed by Mishael, the owner and resident bird guide. It is set in open farmland with a relatively small area of forest, but with its feeders, it certainly lived up to its name. Painted Buntings, Red-legged Honeycreepers and Scarlet-rumped, Blue-grey, Palm, Golden-hooded and Bay-headed Tanagers, Orange-billed and Black-striped Sparrows, Yellow-crowned and Spot-crowned Euphonias, Crested Oropendolas and Grey-headed Chachalacas are regulars in and around the feeders. At the hummingbird feeders, we'll look for Long-billed Starthroats and Scaly-breasted, Snowy-bellied and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds.

In the gardens there are Scaled and Pale-vented Pigeons, Fiery-billed Araçari, Olivaceous Piculet, Orange-chinned, Crimson-fronted and Brown-throated Parakeets, Orange-billed Nightingale-thrush, Rufous-breasted Wren, White-lined Tanagers, Giant, Bronzed and Shiny Cowbirds, Morelet's Seedeaters and Thick-billed Seedfinches. The small stream running nearby can produce Fasciated Tiger Heron and Sunbittern.

On to our lovely hotel on a coffee estate (finca) just outside Boquete, we will begin our birding in earnest, exploring various trails in the vicinity. We will quickly become familiar with the common birds of the region, such as various flycatchers, wrens, thrushes, euphonias, honeycreepers and hummingbirds.

In addition, we can expect to find Nearctic wood warblers still on their wintering grounds or heading north on migration (such as Chestnut-sided, Blackburnian and Black-and-white). Furthermore, today will be our first chance to enjoy overhead passage of migrating raptors: Panama is one of the world's great raptor migration "bottlenecks". Broad-winged, Swainson's and Short-tailed Hawks are especially common, but other scarcer species will test our ID skills too.

Day 6

Boquete – Pipeline Trail

As we explore different forest trails around Boquete today, one of our prime targets will be the extraordinary Resplendent Quetzal, here at the very southern and eastern end of its range. At this time of year, just ahead of the breeding season, the birds should be quite vocal and relatively easy to find. Other targets will include Silver-throated and Scarlet-rumped Tanagers (among many other tanagers), White-throated Thrush, Grey-headed Chachalaca, Grey-cowled Wood Rail, Elegant Euphonia and Scarlet-thighed Dacnis.



We may also encounter Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Blue-throated Toucanet, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Thick-billed Euphonia, Clay-coloured Thrush and various wintering North American migrants, such as Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Baltimore Oriole and Tennessee Warbler. Further tanagers for our list may include Blue-grey, Palm, Flame-coloured and White-lined. Hummingbirds will also feature: Rufous-tailed and Scintillant Hummingbirds are likely, among others such as Violet Sabrewing.

We will look for American Dipper and Torrent Tyrannulet on fast-flowing streams, and also hope to experience the "bajareque", a local phenomenon where a light breeze and mist combine to produce stunning rainbows over the wildlife-filled forests.

Day 7

Transfer to Tranquilo Bay

Today we will sadly say goodbye to the Chiriquí highlands and move to the warmer, more sultry coastal lowlands. It's a long drive today to Bocas del Toro, 6 hours + (130 miles), but we will be stopping for birding and leg stretches en route. Once at Bocas we will take a 1-hour boat crossing to Bastimentos Island, part of an extensive National Park comprising lowland coastal forest, mangroves, beaches and reefs. Here, we will enjoy five nights in very comfortable surroundings at Tranquilo Bay, sampling the wildlife delights of a completely different set of habitats. We will explore both the island itself, and several sites further afield, to maximise our chances of seeing the most diverse range of species possible.



Tranquilo Lodge

Day 8

Bastimentos and Popa Islands

Today we will be birding on Bastimentos itself, and on neighbouring Popa Island. On Bastimentos, several kilometers of hiking trails, in addition to the lodge's grounds, give us a chance of finding Chestnut-backed Antbird, Black-crowned Antshrike, Red-throated Ant Tanager, Tawny-crested Tanager, Rufescent Tiger Heron, and even Stub-tailed Spadebill. We will seek Golden-collared and Red-capped Manakins, three species of honeycreepers, Scarlet, White-lined and Summer Tanagers, and more hummingbirds such as Green-breasted Mango, White-necked Jacobin, Bronzy Hermit and Purple-crowned Fairy. We might be lucky and find either Hoffmann's Two-toed or Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth, Panamanian White-faced Capuchin or Panamanian Night Monkey, Nine-banded Armadillo, or Spectacled Caiman. A 35m observation tower will also give us a chance to watch migrating raptors, parrots, and fly-by Montezuma's Oropendolas.

A leisurely boat ride of about two kilometers will bring us to a dense gallery forest surrounded by the rich mangrove lagoons of nearby Isla Popa. We will bird this tranquil area by boat, peacefully enjoying possible Keel-billed and Yellow-throated Toucans, Finsch's Parakeet, Brown-hooded Parrot, Slaty-tailed Tropicbird, Golden-hooded Tanager, Plumbeous and Swallow-tailed Kites, Pale-billed and Lineated Woodpeckers, Mangrove Cuckoo, American Pygmy Kingfisher and Crested Guan, and hopefully see a stunning male Snowy Cotinga perched out in the open.

Day 9

Palo Seco Protection Forest

We will make an early start and cross back to the mainland by boat to begin an exploration of the Caribbean slope of north-western Panama, in the Palo Seco Protection Forest. New species will await us in a variety of forest habitats as we climb to 600m: Chestnut-coloured and Cinnamon Woodpeckers, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush, Crimson-collared, Speckled, Emerald and Silver-throated

Tanagers, Lattice-tailed Tropicbird, and Band-backed and Black-throated Wrens, and that's just for starters! Hummingbirds might include Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, Green Hermit, White-bellied and Purple-throated Mountaingems, Green-fronted Lancebill, and the lovely Snowcap. We will also make every effort to see the elusive Lanceolated Monklet.

Other lowland specialities might include Brown Jay, White-crowned Parrot, Morelet's Seedeater, Olive-crowned Yellowthroat, White-winged Becard, Trilling Gnatwren, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, Black-and-yellow Tanager, Buff-rumped Warbler, Torrent Tyrannulet, and both Finsch's and Sulphur-winged Parakeets. In the late afternoon we will work our way back through the lowland foothills, scanning for kettles of raptors, and finally some marsh birds such as various migrant waders, Green Ibis, Southern Lapwing, Blue-winged Teal and Black-bellied Whistling Duck.



Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth

Day 10

San San Pond Sak wetlands & Soropto beach

The destination for today will be the San San Pond Sak wetlands, where we will spend a full day birding by boat once more.

Access to this verdant wildlife area will be via boat through the historic Snyder Canal, as birds conveniently fly through the gallery forest back and forth across the waterway. After the Snyder Brothers finished construction in the late 1890s, the canal was used to transport bananas from the Changuinola River Valley to the protected waters of Almirante Bay at Boca del Drago, where they were loaded onto transport ships. Panama's first canal was vital in establishing The United Fruit Company, and the very beginnings of what would become, "The Banana Republic". This is an excellent place to find many lowland bird species, northern and altitudinal migrants, raptors and shorebirds.

The area is rich in varied habitats, including wet Atlantic lowland forest, *Raphia* palm swamp, freshwater river courses, high-energy beaches and mangrove forests. All six species of kingfishers known to the Americas can be found here, and we will be watching closely for regional endemics like the diminutive Nicaraguan Seed Finch, White-collared Manakin, Olive-backed Euphonia, Black-cowled Oriole, Canebrake Wren and Black-throated Wren. Also possible are Masked Duck, Least Bittern, Pied-billed Grebe and Great Potoo.

Raptor sightings might include Yellow-headed Caracara and Bat, Laughing or Peregrine Falcons. Waterside vegetation and secondary forest may hold Scarlet-rumped and Golden-hooded Tanagers, Olive-crowned Yellowthroat, Red-breasted Meadowlark, Squirrel Cuckoo, Olive-throated Parakeet and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. With luck, mammal sightings might include Mantled Howler, Crab-eating Racoons, White-nosed Coati, Neotropical River Otter, West Indian Manatee or Bottlenose Dolphin. Soropto Beach is a nesting ground for Leatherback and Hawksbill Turtles, in addition to being home to Green Iguanas, basilisks, Common Boa Constrictor, Spectacled Caiman and American Crocodile.

Here on the beach, we will enjoy a fresh sea breeze and shorebirds. We could see almost any of the migrant American waders (e.g. Semipalmated Plovers, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Least, Pectoral and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Willet), plus numerous terns and gulls, Roseate Spoonbill and numerous herons and egrets. In the afternoon, after lunch in a shady spot and with sea conditions permitting, we will sail three kilometers offshore to a reserve known as Swan's Cay, for close-up views of Panama's only breeding colony of Red-billed Tropicbirds, as well as Brown Boobies and Magnificent Frigatebirds.



Montezuma Oropendola

Day 11

Tierra Oscura Road

Another excursion to the mainland today, this time crossing to Buena Esperanza, will see us exploring a new road that cuts through an area known as Tierra Oscura. This road gives access to many birds because it runs along the edge of old-growth, primary forest. The potential bird list is long indeed, and includes Pied Puffbird, Yellow-throated and Keel-billed Toucans, Wedge-billed and Cocoa Woodcreepers, the stunning Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Masked and Black-crowned Tityras, Cinnamon and White-winged Becards, Black-capped Pygmy Tyrant, Long-tailed Tyrant, Black-chested Jay, Montezuma and Chestnut-headed Oropendolas, Giant Cowbird, Scarlet-rumped Tanager and Thick-billed Seed Finch. We'll also watch out for Green-and-black Poison Dart Frogs and various butterflies, and we might even spot some sloths!

The afternoon will include optional activities, including further walks on the bird trails near the lodge, snorkelling, kayaking among the mangroves and reefs, or simply rest and relaxation on this, our final full day in Panama.

Day 12

Tranquilo Bay and transfer to Panama City

Today we will take our leave of the amazing Tranquilo Bay, and transfer by land and air back to Panama City. We connect with an evening flight back to the UK, via Amsterdam.

Day 13

UK

Today we will arrive back in the UK.

Tour Grading

Grade A. This is a traditional lodge-based birding tour with no really strenuous walking involved, although it does involve more than a few early starts and plenty of time spent on foot! It is suitable for active people of all ages; just a love of birds is required! Some of the trails are a little steep and can be slippery, but these are optional.

Group size & guide

This birding tour will be limited to 8 participants and will be led by expert ornithological guides, who are enthusiastic and very knowledgeable birders, and speak excellent English.

Transportation

On terra firma we will be using a comfortable air-conditioned van. There is one long transfer from Boquete to Bocas on day 7. While at Tranquilo Bay we'll be using boats, including a comfortable floating, powered pontoon with a canopy and viewing deck.

Food & accommodation included in the price

This tour price is inclusive of all food and accommodation except the dinner in Panama City. Delicious meals at our accommodation feature local produce, Creole and other cuisines, and cater for all tastes. For our all-day excursions we will take packed lunches to eat in the field.

This is a three-centre holiday (plus a night in Panama), and all the hotels are very comfortable and distinctive, featuring en-suite accommodation and easy access to great birding right outside our rooms. At Mount Totumas, we stay in an "off-grid" but very comfortable ecolodge, in a remote location in excellent habitat. Our hotel at Boquete is a converted coffee estate house, built in 1908, featuring lovely wood-panelled and -floored rooms. At Tranquilo Bay, we stay in a delightful lodge with well-appointed *cabana* style rooms in the shade of lowland coastal forest. All three hotels are extremely comfortable and characterful, as well as being ideally-located for great birding.

Extra expenses

Drinks, tips, laundry, and all items of a personal nature are not included in the cost of the holiday. During your time in Panama you will be very well cared for by local guides. It would be wise to allow around US \$100 - \$200 per person for tips to your local guides and \$50 per person for the staff of the lodges.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or

connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking. Please note that as all our Bargain Selection tours are carefully costed on maximum group sizes to maximise value for money, it may be necessary to impose a small group surcharge of up to 10% on groups falling short of 8.

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