

Panama - Mammals of the Canopy Tower

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 – 13 July 2015



Baby Armadillo



Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth



Snail Kite



Striated Heron

Report kindly compiled by tour participant Janice Hewitt
Images courtesy of Janice Hewitt & Linden Porter



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Tour Participants: Alexis Sanchez (leader) with five Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 4th July

Our group met for the first time, at the Canopy Tower, this evening. Steve and Jan had arrived three days earlier, Kate and Daphne arrived together (via Amsterdam) and Linden arrived a little later. We got to know one another over dinner and it was soon clear that we were going to get along. Alex, our tour leader, introduced himself and gave us the plan for our first morning - an early start on the observation deck of the Tower. So it was early to bed as we would be early to rise.

Day 2

Sunday 5th July

Observation deck, Semaphore Hill & Ammo Dump Ponds

At dawn, as the morning lightened, we met on the observation deck. Alex joined us, fresh coffee was served and we watched Geoffroy's Tamarin, Mantled Howler Monkeys and a variety of the colourful birds, such as Red-legged Honeycreeper, Palm Tanagers, Plain Tanagers and Keel-billed Toucans. After breakfast, we met at the hummingbird feeders, located just outside the Tower's entrance, where over half a dozen spectacular species visit, including White-necked Jacobin, Long-tailed Hermit and Black-throated Mango. Suddenly, Alex came out and excitedly showed us a Three-toed Sloth in a Cecropia tree beside the barbecue platform, it was a male that had unfortunately lost one of his front toes; we named him Solomon. After our exciting sloth encounter, Jan took the morning out, to photograph the hummingbirds. Steve and the other ladies went for a walk, with Alex, down Semaphore Road. They were rewarded with many birds, chirping cicadas, flowers & butterflies as well as Coati, Agouti, Lesser White-lined Bat, Geoffroy's Tamarin, another Three-toed Sloth and an armadillo's hole!

After lunch, we spent an hour up on the viewing platform and were thrilled to see Solomon, the Sloth, again! At 3pm, we congregated in the car park in readiness for another trip out - Solomon was most obliging and came down his tree to look at us - we could almost touch him! And ... higher in the tree was another Three-toed Sloth. As Solomon made his way back up his tree, we set off to the Ammo Dump Ponds, which are located in the small town of Gamboa, on the way to Pipeline Road. This was a great place to watch wildlife; we only had to walk a few steps from the 'Birdmobile' to see a Striated Heron successfully fishing, plus a family of Tiger Herons. An American Crocodile swam across the pond and a Spiny-tailed Iguana was on a log, desperately trying to shift a sticky morsel which was stuck in his mouth. Green Iguanas (yearlings, 2 year olds and an adult), were resting in the green foliage.

As we drove back to the Tower, over the (slightly rickety) Gamboa Bridge, a very long freight train crossed in the opposite direction - we were all amazed by the length of it! Back in the dining room, we met with Alex at 6.30, to do our "checklist". As we sat, enjoying our pre-meal drinks and nibbles, another species flew in through the window - a Little Mastiff Bat, and a House Gecko chirped from the wall. Just as we were about to retire, a dream came true! We were visited by a female Two-toed Sloth, making her way (very fast for a sloth) through the trees just outside the window, with a tiny baby clinging to her tummy!

Day 3

Monday 6th July

Boat Trip on Gatun Lake, Chagres River and Panama Canal, plus a True Rainforest Experience and a Night Drive.

After breakfast, we boarded the Birdmobile, with Alex at the wheel. As we travelled to the Chagres River huge Blue Morpho butterflies seemed to guide us along the way, and a Coati was on watch at the bottom of Semaphore Road. We had an amazing trip! Just as our Captain started the motor, a Neotropical River Otter popped his head up out of the water several times, then jumped onto the bank in a hurry, the cause - a Cayman, whose beady eye then watched us from the water, while a Grey-lined Hawk circled above. The Captain steered us, very gently, as close to the river bank as possible - giving us great views of the otter, plus Moorhens and Jacanas (both with babies), Basilisk Lizards, iguanas and several species of herons. Limpkins and Snail Kites were both fishing for the Apple Snails which were bobbing around on the surface of the river. As we sailed under the bridge, we were asked to put on our life jackets as we were entering the Panama Canal. Our small boat was dwarfed by the huge container ships. After a short burst of speed up the canal, we headed into creeks and circled small islands, in search of wildlife. A little Geoffroy's Tamarin came to look at us in our boat, a bittersweet experience, as we learned that he was the only resident on his small island.

Capuchin monkeys inhabited other islands and they were very keen to check us out for food - we didn't feed them but one cheeky individual jumped on our boat and made off with Steve's empty juice carton! One particular creek on the lake was home to many Snail Kites and they put on a show by catching, perching and eating their snails. A resident Osprey was perched on a tree above our heads, a frog was at the water's edge and an Agouti was eating on the shore. Another island had a large dead tree leaning over the creek, which served as a feeding post for the snail-eating kites and a roost for tiny little Proboscis Bats.

Once back on dry land, we thanked our Captain and journeyed back to the Tower for lunch. Our siesta was cut a little short today as we met Alex at 2.30pm, ready for a trip to the Discovery Centre, with the promise of a picnic tea, after we had climbed the Discovery Tower and surveyed the Canopy. However, this afternoon didn't quite go as planned. We were dropped off at the Centre Reception just as the rain began to fall. We happily waved goodbye to the driver, who was scheduled to return later with the picnic, and took shelter under the roofed decking at reception. The rains pelted down and showed no signs of stopping so, after an hour, during which Daphne pursued the resident reptiles and amphibians, the "group decision" was to return to base for an early dinner followed by a night drive. Alex phoned for a ride and, just as the rains were easing up, our driver arrived in one of the open-roofed Birdmobiles! The rains had weighed heavily on the branches that hung over the roadway as we left the centre, and we were in danger of being swiped around the head by them. At one point, Steve shouted "duck" as a large wet Palm threatened to hit us - next thing we knew, the Birdmobile screeched to a halt and Alex jumped out wanting to see the duck (quack quack)! We laughed all the way back to base, even though it started to rain again and the heavy raindrops stung our faces- a "true rainforest experience"! Back at the tower, after showers, we met at 6pm to do the "tick-list" over a drink and some nibbles. Out in the Cecropia trees we could see a small troop of Howler Monkeys and a very wet Three-toed Sloth! At 7.30pm we boarded the Birdmobile, with Domi (another Canopy Tower Guide) up front, driving, and Alex with a large searchlight. We drove down Semaphore Road, along the main road to Gamboa and up the driveway to the Gamboa Resort Hotel. Here a Lesser Capybara crossed the driveway in front of us and joined his family (including a baby) in the Water Hyacinths of the Chagres River. We then saw a very fat Cane Toad just about where the Capybara had crossed the driveway. On the way back along the road, Alex picked out a Two-toed Sloth, up in the top of a

Cecropia tree. The icing on the cake for all of us was seeing two large Nine-banded Armadillos as we drove up Semaphore Hill!

At 9.30pm, we all turned in for the night breakfast at 6am tomorrow!

Day 4

Tuesday 7th July

Barro Colorado Island

Today, the “Famous Five” became six. We were joined by Courtney, a very nice young girl from Colorado. After breakfast, we were driven to the town of Gamboa, where we boarded a boat that took us to Barro Colorado Island. This site has been administered by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute since 1923. BCI is home to more than 200 researchers from all round the world and the island is considered the most studied area in the whole of the Neotropics; it is only open to researchers and tourists with special permits.

Barro Colorado can offer a great opportunity to see many species of mammals in a short period of time, including Brown-headed Spider Monkey, Tayra, Central American Agouti, Northern Tamandua, howler monkeys, sloths, tamarins, and coatis among others. However, today we were not so lucky, mainly due to the unfortunately heavy rain! As we walked around the trails with Betzi, our designated guide from the Research Centre, we heard about some of the Research projects, past and present, some of which were very interesting and, despite the weather, we saw a Green Poison Dart Frog, Crested Guans, Tinamou eggs, Howler Monkeys, Red Spider Monkeys (interacting angrily with an encroaching Coati) and, as usual, Agoutis. At this point, it has to be said, that today made us very grateful to be staying in the Canopy Tower, as our views here were very limited of the monkeys which were right up in the top of the canopy. After lunch, we congregated in the Lecture Room for a “double bill”: the first half was a video of the Red-capped Manakins lekking (shot by one of the Researchers on the Island, with a slow-motion camera), and the second half was a 40min video which included an item about attaching hat-shaped tracking devices to the heads of Three-toed Sloths (which later became a running joke.) A ten-minute window of no rain gave us the opportunity to board the 3.40pm boat, back to Gamboa, without getting soaked again. Our spirits were very much lifted when we stopped in Gamboa to buy chocolate, on the way back to the Canopy Tower.

Back at base the rains began again No worries, we freshened up and “chilled” in the lounge over pre-meal drinks. Out of the windows, we could see a Three-toed Sloth, sheltering under her Cecropia leaf, and a pair of Mealy Parrots sat “chattering” in the rain. Dinner was served at 6.30pm (after a brief session of checking off today's species). After dinner, the kitchen staff who were always so kind and enthusiastic, showed us Night Monkeys and a Kinkajou by torchlight!

Day 5

Wednesday 8th July

The Rainforest Discovery Centre, Summit Gardens, Summit Ponds and a Night Drive

Our day started with a 5am breakfast as Alex was keen to take us to the Observation Platform at the Discovery Centre to see the early morning birds. However, things didn't go quite as planned - we were eating our breakfast when Domi dashed in and told us there was no rush as a large tree had fallen across the road during the night. We finished our breakfast and then wandered down the road to watch the action. Alex and Domi were busy with

machetes, removing the small branches and vines from the tree. Next on the scene was a guy with a chainsaw, then along came the Manageress of the Tower, who took charge of the situation! We stayed for the first cut with the chainsaw but then walked back up the hill to spend some time on the Canopy Tower. It was a fantastic sight from the top of the Tower - mist was rising up through the canopy. A little female Three-toed Sloth was resting in her Cecropia tree, at our eye-level.

Just after 8am, the road was clear and we went out with Alex to visit the Panama Rainforest Discovery Centre. This Centre is located in the tropical forests surrounding the Panama Canal, adjacent to Soberanía National Park. About 70% of all the materials used in the construction of this place were recycled. About 180 metres from the main building, there is a 30-metre-high observation tower with resting platforms every 7.5metres. We spent about an hour at the top at the platform and saw Yellow-headed Caracara, three species of pigeon (Pale-vented, Scaled and Short-billed), plus Grey-headed Kite, Blue Cotinga, and many more! After visiting the Centre, we parked up at the start of the Pipeline Road and, whilst having a cold drink, a Coati came out of the forest towards us! We then had a short walk, saw lots of bugs including some fantastic green and yellow ones. We also saw a Great Tinamou, skulking on the forest floor - some folks have trekked in search of this bird for three days, so we were very fortunate! On the way back, we stopped in Gamboa to photograph a beautiful tree and it turned out to be a very lucky tree - there were toucans sitting in there plus two Lesser Nighthawks.

This afternoon, we went to the Summit Gardens to visit the Harpy Eagle, Panama's National Bird. This one, named Panama, was bred in the USA and has lived at Summit Gardens for the last two years. The gardens are immaculate and are home to many birds and mammals that have been rescued from poachers or have been kept as illegal pets. Where possible, they are re-released but if they are not suitable for release, they spend the rest of their days at the Gardens. We were reminded that we were still in the Rainforest by all the visiting wild birds and mammals, including a beautiful Capped Heron and a roost of Tent-making Bats. After our trip to the Gardens, we paid a quick visit to Summit Ponds and saw a Boat-billed Heron, plenty of Leaf-cutter Ants and a Leaf-litter Toad. After dinner, another night drive revealed two Two-Toed Sloths and one Three-toed Sloth, plus a Nine-banded Armadillo and a Nightjar.

Day 6

Thursday 9th July

San Lorenzo National Park

Today we were up very early in the morning and took a drive to the Caribbean side of Panama, only 1.5 hours from Panama City, over a newly constructed four-lane highway. We went to look for mammals in the San Lorenzo Forest Preserve. This area was the site of the US Army Jungle Training School, also known as Fort Sherman.

San Lorenzo National Park is known for the abundance of Howler Monkeys and White-faced Capuchins. We saw both, but our highlight of the morning was a Northern Tamandua, climbing around in a tree. We walked several kilometres along a quiet road but were very lucky as we had our “support vehicle” following us with cold drinks and snacks, as we walked along the road towards the old Spanish fortress of San Lorenzo. We had a beautiful picnic lunch under the shade of a large tree, close to the entrance of the Fort. Upon exploring the Fort, we found a small colony of White-lined Bats, roosting under an archway. A short walk after lunch revealed a group of Mealy Parrots and a bright red, and several blue, crabs. We then boarded our “support vehicle” for our return journey via the mangrove swamps. We were hoping to see a Crab-eating Raccoon but, unfortunately, the

only one we found was dead on the roadside and somewhat smelly. We did, however, see a White-tailed Trogon, which completed our set of Trogons! Having crossed the Locks of the Panama Canal, we drove to an empty car park, just outside the embarking jetty for the cruise liners. What an amazing place! There was a mango tree, just hidden from our view; we only learned of its existence as a “Band” of 30 Coatis marched, (in single file with tails held high) across the car park, up a bank, and into the forest, each carrying a mango! We could not believe our eyes: there were three or four adults and the rest were babies. One little baby dropped his mango and it rolled back down the bank; before he could reclaim it, an opportunist Agouti helped himself! If all that wasn't enough, we then watched a baby Nine-banded Armadillo rooting around under the leaf litter for tasty morsels, and a huge Green Iguana came from the direction of the Mango tree - looking very pleased with himself. Who would ever dream that so much could be seen in a car park!

Just after 5pm, we boarded the Panama Canal Train, from the Canal Locks to Panama City. We sat in the observation carriage with a drink from the bar and admired the passing scenery. Alex and our driver met us in Panama City and drove us back (through rush hour traffic) to the Tower for dinner. A really long and exhausting day for all but a thoroughly enjoyable one!

Day 7

Friday 10th July

Metropolitan Natural Park, Panama Canal Visitor Centre & a Night Drive

After breakfast, Alex drove us to the Metropolitan Natural Park, only 25 minutes from the Canopy Tower; here the forests are much drier than those around Pipeline Road. There is a look-out at the summit of a hill which gave us incredible views of the whole Panama City and some of its closer islands. However, we didn't have to reach the summit before spotting the wildlife! A very well-camouflaged Common Potoo was perched at the top of a tree just at the entrance to the Park. A short distance into the Park, we found a Two-toed Sloth, trying to get comfortable for his daytime sleep. These sloths are mainly nocturnal and are more aggressive than their three-toed cousins. On the way up the path, we saw many birds, including a Rufous-and-white Wren. Butterflies floated alongside us and, at a rest point, we saw black, hairy caterpillars of the Banded Peacock Butterfly. At the summit, a gorgeous female Three-toed Sloth was hanging upside down in her tree, having a good scratch. We took a different route back down and were treated to four mammals at one stop! (They must have known we were on the mammal tour!). First to show up was a Variegated Squirrel, then a small group Geoffroy's Tamarins, followed by a Tamandua (of which we had really good views) and while all this was going on, a Two-toed Sloth was sleeping in a treetop.

We returned to the Tower for lunch, the thunder began to rumble all around and it wasn't long before the heavens opened! At 2.30pm, we set off to visit The Panama Canal Visitor Centre. We could have explored the four exhibition halls, which included historic artefacts used in the construction of the Canal; however, we chose to spend our time watching a huge Cargo Ship, AAL Gladstone, go through the locks. From our vantage point, at the top of the visitor centre we also did some bird-spotting: Brown Pelican, White Ibis, Great Egret, Franklin's Gull, Laughing Gull and Sandwich Tern. We were also entertained by the local Firemen, practising the art of extinguishing a controlled fire! Before leaving the Visitor Centre, we watched a 3D movie about the Canal, and then had a quick visit to the Gift Shop.

At 4.30pm we headed back to the Tower, hoping to miss rush hour and looking forward to Happy Hour. Unfortunately, due to the rain, our promised barbecue was served indoors. Whilst enjoying Happy Hour, we

researched the Cargo Ship that we'd watched go through the Lock. AAL Gladstone left Germany on 3/5/15, Finland 15/5/15, Denmark 20/05/15, Houston 4/07/15 was in Panama today and will be in Papua New Guinea on 3/08/15 – we shall all raise a glass to our ship on 3/08/15! After dinner, we took our last night drive from the Tower; it was still raining gently as we left in the open-top Birdmobile. The Forest was exceptionally noisy tonight, and the frogs were chirping like birds - obviously pleased that the rains have arrived! It was a successful drive: a Central American Woolly Opossum, a very wet Three-toed Sloth, Panamanian Night Monkey, a Forest Rabbit and a Kinkajou!

Day 8

Saturday 11th July

Canopy Lodge, El Valle de Anton

This morning, before and after breakfast, we took our last looks from the Observation Deck, seeing one of the Three-toed Sloths. Whilst being transferred to the Canopy Lodge, El Valle de Anton, Daphne was hard at work writing ditties about our travels to various tunes, such as 'I'd Love to go a-wandering' and 'Little Boxes on the Hillside'. Hilarity reigned as we all sang along! Poor Alex! Goodness knows what he thought of us! The Lodge is situated in the foothills of Central Panama, about two hours west of the Canopy Tower. It is owned by the same company that owns the Canopy Tower; however, the rooms are much larger and more luxurious. The lodge is situated next to a mountain stream and we saw stunning Sunbitterns (which are quite rare) and Basilisk Lizards sunbathing on the rocks. The "social area" of The Lodge is on the veranda, from where we watched an array of brightly coloured birds coming to the feeders: Crimson-backed, Blue-grey and Flame-rumped Tanagers, to name but a few. An added bonus here is the altitude – about 700 metres above sea level – resulting in very pleasant temperatures.

After lunch, just as it started to drizzle, we took a walk up the road to visit a 40-metre-high waterfall; however, it wasn't long before the drizzle turned to a downpour and the only waterfall we got to see was the rain rushing down the hill! After an hour or so, the local bus came along and, although it was already full, we all jumped on for a ride lasting less than five minutes - at a cost of 35 cents each! Good value for money! We arrived back at the lodge in time for Happy Hour.

Just before dinner, Alex left us to spend the night with his family in a neighbouring village. He told us to keep an eye on the bird-feeders as Grey Four-eyed Opossums are regular night-time visitors, and Orange Nectar Bats visit their own feeder under the light. On this occasion, a Common Opossum turned up and, sadly, no bats. However, Daphne left us in search of Amphibians and found a *Leptodactylus pentadactylus* (a massive cannibalistic frog). At 8.45 we declared Happy Hour over and retired.

Day 9

Sunday 12th July

Canopy Lodge, El Valle de Anton

After a 6.30am breakfast, Alex drove us approximately 8km up the hill to the start of a trail, winding up through the cloud forest - Cerro Gaital. At times, it was hard to determine whether it was raining or just the clouds passing through! Everywhere was wet, most of the branches had dripping moss hanging from them and bromeliads were growing almost anywhere they could take a hold. Half way up the track, there was a resting place; none of us chose to sit on the benches as they were extremely wet and hosts to all kinds of mosses, ferns

and bromeliads. At the top of the trail, we should have been able to appreciate the caldera of the volcano and have views to the Pacific Ocean - no chance today! It was so misty, we were lucky to see each other! Despite the mist, we did see new birds along the trail, including: Black Guan, Blue-throated Toucanets, White-ruffed Manakin, Black-faced Grosbeak and Chestnut-backed Antshrike. On our way back to the Lodge for lunch, Alex stopped at the entrance to the waterfall so we could walk down, over two suspension bridges, to admire the beautiful waterfall. A short walk from the entrance of the waterfall, we saw a Rufous Tree Rat, roosting in a hollow.

This afternoon we went out in the van to visit and shop in the local market. Afterwards, we walked La Zamia Trail, at the base of the Cerro Gaital Natural Monument. This, compared to this morning's walk, was a shorter and more easy-going trail and we were rewarded with three species of birds of prey – Swallow-tailed Kite, Roadside Hawk and a Barred Forest Falcon.

At dinner tonight, the owner of the Canopy family, Raúl Arias de Para, and his wife, joined us for dinner. Afterwards, Steve, Daphne and Linden joined Alex on a night walk and found another Common Opossum and more frogs. Kate and Jan opted out of the walk, and spent the rest of the evening chatting to Raúl and his wife.

Day 10

Monday 13th July

El Valle/In Flight

This morning, we visited the El Valle Amphibian Rescue Centre; it is devoted to the quarantine, treatment and captive breeding of the endemic Panamanian Golden Frog. It is also a zoo, but we all agreed that it could do with some extra funding to improve the cages in which the animals were housed. We arrived back at the Lodge with an hour to spare before lunch, and were very grateful to the staff who allowed us to have a late check-out, in order that we could freshen up before leaving for the airport.

In summary, we all had a fantastic trip, made new friends, saw **172** species of birds, **25** species of mammals and **18** species of amphibians/reptiles.

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