

NATURETREK “MAMMALS OF THE CANOPY TOWER”

4th – 13th August 2017.

Since retiring, I have been on several bird & wildlife watching holidays with a variety of Companies, but I had never been with Naturetrek. I sent for their brochure and when I read about the Canopy Tower, I really had to go. Birds are my primary interest but I am interested in all wildlife and as the accommodation was at tree-top height, there was obviously going to be lots of birds as well as mammals in the canopy. The brochure promised the chance of seeing a Sloth from the windows, but that seemed pretty optimistic to me.

I and most my friends knew nothing about Panama other than it had a canal that went from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. This holiday proved that there is much more to Panama than just a canal. There is a huge area of tropical rainforest, which covers 40% of the land area and is home to an abundance of tropical plants, birds and wildlife. The latest lists show just over 1,000 species of birds and 230 mammals. It also has 31 species of snake, including the deadly Serpent X and the Fer de Lance. In 2014 there were 2800 reported snake bites and 90% of these were from those two-snake species. Only 16 people died though! And if that wasn't enough, Panama also has a whole host of other dangerous things such as scorpions, tarantulas and poisonous tree frogs!

I usually purchase a book on the birds of any area that I am about to visit, so that I can at least get an idea of what I am likely to see, but I discovered that Panama has 52 species of Hummingbirds alone, so I had little hope of learning most of them before I went.

There were nine of us in the group, although one member who started at Manchester Airport, arrived some 26 hours after us due to flight delays along the way. In spite of us all sporting Naturetrek labels on our bags, I did not meet the other seven from Heathrow until we arrived at Panama Tocumen Airport. It was dark on arrival so we had no idea of the terrain apart from leaving a road and going up a very narrow and winding track up to the Tower.

The Tower was originally a US Airforce radar tower. It is in the middle of what is now the Soberania National Park. It was converted into holiday accommodation in 1999 by a local birdwatcher and entrepreneur, Raul Arias de Para. Inside, the Tower is huge, with a large lounge and dining area on the top floor. Our accommodation was on a level with the tree tops and the rooms were a quirky wedge shape but comfortable with on-suite facilities. On the top is an observation platform around the huge radome.

The following morning, we awoke to the loud call of the Great Tinamou and then the roar of distant Howler Monkeys. We heard the Tinamou early every morning but failed to see this very secretive chicken-sized bird. I was first up to the observation platform before it got light and as the sun rose, there was a wonderful layer of mist in the valleys below. Once the birds started singing, it was even more magical. Then the assistant Guide arrived and when I asked his name, he said that is was what sounded to me like “Horhay”. I gave him a quizzical look and he repeated it. Then he said “Oh just call me George”. I found out that his name was actually Jorge, which is the Spanish equivalent of George. Jorge asked if I had seen the 3-toed Sloth. Of course, I hadn't, and he pointed it out under the leaves at the top of the nearby canopy of the Cecropia tree. The 3-toed Sloths live almost entirely on the leaves of the Cecropia but the 2-toed's diet is more varied. Well, they promised a Sloth outside the windows and there he was! Several birds came every morning around the same time and some even visited the same branch.

We then met Alexis, who was to be our Guide for the holiday. The Guides I have had in the past have been excellent but Alexis was in a different class.

He could imitate most of the bird calls, calling them down from the canopy, and he had an uncanny knack of spotting birds and animals that to us, were almost invisible. I was first on the platform every morning, where tea and coffee were served at 6am, just as the sun was rising. Outside the main entrance to the Tower were Hummingbird feeders which were visited by several species. Hummingbirds are particularly difficult to photograph because they are so active. Nevertheless, every time we passed the feeders, we were all trying to get that perfect Hummingbird picture.

On the first morning, we had a couple of hours on the observation platform with Alex pointing out the various birds that appeared at eye-level. Early birds each morning were Red-rumped Caciques, Golden-crowned Tanager and Green Honeycreeper. Overhead were Turkey Vultures and there were the constant roars from distant Mantled Howler Monkeys. Then, after an excellent breakfast we had a walk down Semaphore Hill. Most of the names are a result of the American Army occupation. The vegetation was dense and most of the trees were incredibly tall, including the enormous Royal Palm which had ten-foot fronds. Alexis heard an Ornate Hawk Eagle calling, high above the canopy. He found a gap in the canopy and imitated its call. Immediately, the bird came down to tree-top height to investigate the intruders call. It was very hot once the sun was up and extremely humid every day. There were lots of birds close to the road and we also saw more Sloths, Agoutis and White-nosed Coatis.

During lunch, a troupe of Geoffroy's Tamarins were in the trees just outside the windows. These, along with several other mammals, were completely new for me. The food at the Tower was excellent and after lunch, we took a ten-minute ride to the Summit Botanical Gardens. Our transport was an open-topped vehicle with two rows of seats. This proved to be an excellent observation platform, especially when we went out at night, with a huge lamp looking for nocturnal arboreal mammals and owls. On arrival at the Gardens, we were shown a roosting colony of Tent-making Bats. They roost in the Royal Palms and chew halfway through the spines of each leaf of a palm frond, causing them to collapse, producing a tent-like structure for them to safely roost under. There were a host of bird species around the Gardens. Agoutis roamed around under the trees and as we passed a toilet block, a rather alarmed lady came out carrying a tree frog which had landed on her back whilst she was in there! Alex amazed us with the way he spotted hidden birds. He pointed out two roosting Common Nighthawks on a horizontal branch, which none of us would have spotted. As we reached an open area at the top of the Gardens, there was suddenly, without warning, the biggest flash of lightning and the loudest crash of thunder that I have ever experienced, frightening the life out of all of us! It was only as we returned to the vehicle that it started to rain and the thunder storm rolled around the nearby hills.

On the way back, Alex stopped and walked into the trees beside Semaphore Hill. He knew of a site where there was another animal that I had never heard of before, the Grey-bellied Night Monkey. He took us down to a tree with a long hole high up on the trunk. There, looking out were tiny monkeys and Alex pointed out, right at the top of the hole, the face of a Rufous Tree Rat. The monkeys are nocturnal and have enormous eyes, resembling those of a Bush Baby. We once again wondered how Alex had found them as they were not easy to see, even when he pointed them out to us.

Each evening, before dinner, we completed our days bird and mammal lists. As we were about to eat, Alex shone a lamp into the trees outside the windows.

There was a Kinkajou, which was another strange animal that I had never heard of and later, a Woolly Opossum. What a first day in Panama! We had seen 64 bird species and 9 mammals.

The next day, we spent the morning walking down Pipeline Road, which was a road that the US Engineers had cut through virgin jungle. They then laid an oil pipeline alongside the road to service those building the Canal. The road was still navigable but the jungle was slowly encroaching back onto it.

It did give us a chance to see jungle birds and animals at close quarters, including a foraging Nine-banded Armadillo. Everywhere we went, there were thousands of Leaf-cutter Ants carrying large sections of leaves back to their nest. After a wonderful morning full of more bird species, we returned to the Tower for lunch. As we came out in the afternoon, a White-nosed Coati was gingerly walking along the top of the boundary fence, inside the coil of razor wire. Then we drove to the Ammo Ponds, the site of the old US ammunition store. There was a disused railway yard with marshy wet areas on either side. These proved to be yet another wonderful site for unusual birds and iguanas. There were Rufescent Tiger-Herons, Striated Herons, Southern Lapwings, Wattled Jacanas, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and many more. We found a couple of huge Green Iguanas beside the water, and on the old railway track was a Black Spiny-tailed Iguana. On the telephone wires were Great Kiskadees and a beautiful Fork-tailed Flycatcher and in a nearby tree was a Red-crowned Woodpecker, busily digging out a nest hole. We had a brief sighting of a Least Bittern as it flew low over the reedbed and Alex even spotted a distant Tiger Rat Snake, coiled up on the reeds. We all had difficulty seeing it, even with the aid of a telescope, and wondered just how he had spotted it. On the way back to the Tower we stopped to watch a beautiful small Bat Falcon on the telephone wires beside the road.

The next day, we visited the Metropolitan National Park, a 25-minute drive from the Tower and close to the Pacific coast. Earlier, we had been warned about "Chiggers". I had come across them before in Trinidad. They are minute mites that can only be seen under a microscope. They get onto warm-blooded mammals, bury themselves under the skin and feed on their blood. This results in a severe skin rash and an intense soreness. They eventually drop off, lay their eggs and die. When we were to visit a grassy area, we were given an old woollen sock full of sulphur powder. We were told to bang the sock around our ankles and socks, and this would deter the Chiggers. It must work because I don't think any of us suffered. As soon as we arrived we spotted three Two-toed Sloths. So far, the Sloths we had seen had been Three-toed. This species was much hairier than the Three-toed and have a much more varied diet. They also seem to live in drier, more open environments.

We had a long, uphill walk, spotting many species of birds, butterflies and a variety of large Spiders. There were Sand Box Trees in this forest. Their trunks are covered in extremely sharp thorns and their sap is highly toxic. It used to be used on the tips of local arrows. The fruit is unusual too. They are segmented and when they ripen, explode to disperse their seeds as far as 300 yards. I read that they leave the fruit at up to 160mph.

Later in the morning, we moved through Panama City to the Amador Causeway and on to Punta Culebra, a public nature facility run by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. There were many Two-toed Sloths there. One gave us amazing photographic opportunities as it was on a branch only a few feet above a pathway. On the beach was an enormous Green Iguana and just offshore were a flock of Brown Pelicans. There was an exhibition of native tree frog. Some of them were minute and an amazing variety of colours.

As we walked around the area, Alex pointed out a female Crab-eating Raccoon climbing a large tree. It went to a hole in a branch and the heads of three tiny babies appeared. The Mother then led the three youngsters down the branch, giving us more wonderful photographic opportunities. This is a very shy animal and we were apparently very lucky to see one in the open, especially with its young.

After lunch, we visited the famous Panama Canal. The public facilities were amazing. There were exhibition halls, a museum, and a cinema, all showing the history of the Canal. Outside was a huge observation platform looking out over the locks. They have installed newly expanded locks recently to accommodate the largest of modern ships. There was a constant commentary telling visitors about the ships passing through the locks, where they were going and what they were carrying. I was staggered to learn that the biggest ships now carry up to 21,000 containers. The Canal is 48 miles long and it takes about ten hours for ships to travel from the Atlantic to the Pacific. We were told that the average-sized ships pay up to \$150,000 to use the Canal and the largest ships have to pay as much as \$400,000. The alternative round trip would be 7,800 miles!

When the French initially started to dig the Canal 22,000 workers died during construction, mainly from yellow fever. Eventually, they gave up and later, the USA continued to build the modern Canal.

From the platform, we could see a pond behind the locks, where there was a flock of Black Vultures loafing and a small group of Capybara, the largest rodent in the World.

Each day turned out to be special but the next day was my favourite of the holiday. We drove to the Chagres River, where we boarded a boat. Most of the Panama Canal is an artificially formed lake, Lake Gatun. We spent the morning visiting the creeks around the edge of the lake, finding more birds including Ringed Kingfisher, Snail Kites, Limpkins, Striated and Little Blue Herons and Snowy Egrets. As we sailed into one small creek, Alex pointed out a dark line high up on a tree trunk. On closer inspection, it was a row of six Proboscis Bats. They were small, with two white zigzag lines on their backs and a long nose. There were small American Crocodiles sunning themselves all along the shore, along with Striped Basilisk Lizards, which are commonly known as the "Jesus Lizard", as they can "walk on water" by dashing across the surface. As we approached the shore in one creek, White-faced Capuchins came down to investigate us and there were several very large Green Iguanas. There were also enormous Cricket-type insects, about five or six inches long.

As we emerged from the creeks, onto the main lake, we were confronted by giant container ships. The shipping channel follows the centre of the lake until it reaches the locks at the far end of the Canal. We were dwarfed by the enormous ships and amazed at the number of containers on board.

After lunch, we had a relaxed early afternoon. We did not leave the Tower until 4pm, and headed a long way down Pipeline Road, to the Rainforest Discovery Centre. On arrival, we headed for an observation tower. At the bottom, there was a warning to visitors that the tower was about 70ft tall, and did sway a little, which can affect those of a nervous disposition. A couple of our group were not good with heights but bravely made it to the top. From there, there were wonderful views over the canopy top. We saw Crimson-crested Woodpecker, Keel-billed Toucan and many other species. We then went down to the Centre, where a picnic meal was waiting for us on the veranda. Along the veranda were a number of Hummingbird feeders with a variety of Hummingbirds visiting.

Again, the cameras were clicking vigorously. Alex found us a nearby roosting Great Potoo, which are extremely difficult to find as they look like a piece of dead wood and hardly every move when perched.

It was dark when we left the Centre to return to the Tower and Alex produced a large lamp, which found a Forest Rabbit before reaching the road and then he scanned the trees as we drove back to the Tower, looking for nocturnal mammals and owls. As the road came close to the lake, we spotted a Capybara and then Alex turned into a built-up residential area, which looked an unlikely place to look for wildlife. Almost immediately, he found Crested Owl, Spectacled Owl and then a Barn Owl sitting on a satellite dish on the roof of a bungalow. I wondered what the locals thought of Alex driving by and shining a lamp onto their roofs but he said they were used to him doing it!

As we turned off the road onto Semaphore Hill, the lamp found a Three-toed Sloth hanging upside-down above the road and just before we reached the Tower, a Woolly Opossum and an elusive Olinga, another animal I had never heard of.

It was an early breakfast the next day because we were driving about an hour and a half to Fort Sherman. On the way down Semaphore Hill, we caught a brief glimpse of our first Northern Tamandua. We all jumped out of the truck to get a photograph, but I only managed a rather out of focus picture as it disappeared into the jungle. After that, I kept telling Alex I wanted to see one properly and he promised that we would.

Fort Sherman used to be the home of the US Jungle Training School, on Toro Point, at the Caribbean end of the Panama Canal. We crossed over the Canal locks and nearby was the San Lorenzo Forest Preserve, which is known for the abundance of Mantled Howlers, White-faced Capuchins and both species of Sloth. Everywhere we went, we could hear Howlers calling and we had seen several but here, we saw a troupe of them right alongside the track we were on, giving us excellent opportunities for photographing them. There were also Red-tailed Squirrels in the same area. Just outside the office at the entrance to the Park was a huge Black Spiny-tailed Iguana and there was an abundance of birds on our walk up to the old ruined Spanish fortress of Castillo de San Lorenzo. This was the last bastion of the Spanish Empire in mainland America. It was seized from the Spanish by Sir Francis Drake in 1596 and destroyed in 1671 by the famous English pirate, Sir Henry Morgan and was totally abandoned in 1821. In the dark rooms where the Spanish stored their gunpowder, Alex pointed out roosting Greater White-lined Bats and there were Central American Whip-tailed Lizards running around the walls of the fort.

We had an excellent picnic lunch under some trees that had several pendulous nests of the Chestnut-headed Oropendola, before travelling back to Fort Sherman, where we caught a ferry across the mouth of the River Chagres to the city of Colon. There were enormous container ships passing on their way to the locks into the Canal. In Colon, we boarded the Panama Canal Railway, which runs parallel to the Canal. We were in an observation car, and there was a running commentary on what we could see from the train. We passed a large building on the left and the commentator told us we could stay there for 15 years, rent and tax free – it was the State Penitentiary! When we left the train in Panama City, the minibus was waiting to take us up to the Tower. This should have been about a twenty-minute journey but it was the teatime rush hour. I thought I had seen traffic problems in places like Hong Kong and Delhi but Panama City beats them all. It took us two hours to get back for dinner!

There was heavy overnight rain resulting in it being a little cooler and less humid the following day.

We were returning to Pipeline Road and venturing even further down it looking for more birds and wildlife. As we parked the vehicle, a squad of heavily armed Police in jungle combat gear arrived and marched off into the jungle. Alex explained that they were looking for poachers. I had badgered Alex about not getting a good view of the Northern Tamandua and the highlight of the morning was one he found in a tree, just beside the track. They are arboreal anteaters. The local Fire-Ants make their nests high up in the trees. They look like termite mounds hanging from a branch. The Tamanduas have long front claws for tearing open these nests to access the ant's grubs. This animal satisfied my request for a good view and it watched us for a while before climbing higher into the canopy. We also came across a White-nosed Coati and a female Howler Monkey with a very tiny baby in her arms. We also added more birds, including Squirrel Cuckoo, Ruddy Quail Dove, Bicoloured Antbird and Purple-throated Fruitcrow. My favourite birds of the holiday were the Trogons, and we saw four of the six Trogons on this one trip. We managed to see all six by the end of the holiday. In the afternoon we had a treat of a different kind. We visited the Gamboa Wildlife Rescue Centre, run by the Pan-American Association for Conservation. They rescue wounded and abandoned animals, treat them and try to return them to the wild. If they are not fit enough to release, the staff use them as "Ambassador" animals, and take them around schools to encourage youngsters to take an interest in wildlife conservation. As we parked the vehicle, there was a juvenile Black Hawk in the garden. We found out later that it was picked up abandoned, reared by the Manager of the Centre, and although it had been released, it regularly returned to the Centre to be fed. Inside, the staff introduced us to a young Northern Tamandua, a young Rothchild's Porcupine, which are unique to Panama, and there were Sloths hanging from ropes and branches around the room. Then the Manager took us to a room which contained a whole collection of baby Two and Three-toed Sloths. I doubt if there is a more endearing baby animal in the World! They were climbing ropes and sleeping in washing baskets all around the room. When we left the room, the Manager said that he always has to check visitors as they left to make sure they were not taking a baby home with them! In the paddock at the rear of the building, there was a large Central American Tapir. Again, it had been brought into the Centre as a baby and the Manager raised it but it was not possible to return it to the wild. It now lives at the Centre and the Manager told us that he has always played with it but now that it fully grown, it gets a bit too boisterous. I kept well clear of it! It had been a wonderful experience, especially to see the animals at close quarters. We all made a donation towards the Centre's funds and as we left, storm clouds were forming. We hadn't travelled far before the heavens opened and there was a terrific thunder storm. Fortunately, Alex knew of a thatched shelter in the area and quickly drove us to it, where we took shelter for quite some time. Usually, tropical storms do not last long but this one would not move on. We were with the open-topped vehicle, so Alex phoned Jorge, who eventually turned up with the mini-bus so that we could return to the Tower in the dry. This was our last night at the Tower and we were to spend the last two days at the Canopy Lodge, in El Valle de Anton, in the foothills of Central Panama. After breakfast, we said our goodbyes to the Tower staff, who had been brilliant. We then drove down to Plantation Road, where there was a military-looking guard on the entrance to a wooded area. The guard was a member of the Canal Company's security force. He allowed us in and we drove down to a small lake surrounded by forest. There were Striated, Green and Black-crowned Night Herons, Muscovy Ducks, Greater Ani, Rufous Motmot and a beautiful little American Dwarf Kingfisher. Overhead were Turkey and Black Vultures.

Then there was a journey of over two hours to the El Valle de Anton area, which is in the middle of an enormous volcanic caldera. We were told it was the largest inhabited caldera in the World. Canopy Lodge, is a beautiful building beside a fast-flowing stream, with a large covered lounge/dining area and below the veranda were several bird feeders. We were shown to our extremely comfortable rooms, which looked out over a garden leading down to the stream. Of course, we immediately returned to watch the feeders, which were constantly visited by a whole host of colourful birds, including several new species for our growing list. After an excellent lunch, we had a walk up the El Macho road above the Lodge. More birds, butterflies and flowers. We climbed up a slope and across a rope bridge to watch the Choro El Macho waterfall, where they had a zip-wire ride down and across it but none of took advantage of it! It started to rain on the way back so we settled for watching the birds on the feeders from the comfort of the covered veranda.

I was first up the following morning. It was still dark but already birds were on the feeders. I was amazed to see a Grey-necked Wood Rail stroll up the path and onto one of the feeders. I didn't recognise this bird and had to find it in the Field Guide to identify it. By the time most of the others arrived, it had wandered back into the undergrowth. Everywhere we had been, there had been several Hummingbirds but they are really difficult to photograph as they are so active and hardly ever still. Several species were coming to the liquid feeders. I did manage to photograph the Snowy-bellied Hummingbird. There are a huge number of Tanagers in the Americas. I had come across some of them in Trinidad & Tobago but there were new ones constantly coming to the feeders, including Dusky-faced, White-shouldered, Tawny-crested, Blue-grey and probably the most spectacular, the Crimson-backed. There were also Rufous Motmot, Chestnut-headed Oropendola and Green Honeycreeper. The Thick-billed Euphonia was probably the most frequent visitor to the feeders. Red-tailed Squirrels also took advantage of the food provided.

We drove up the road, almost to the top rim of the caldera. Although Alex was driving the vehicle, he was still looking out for animals and birds of interest. He suddenly pulled over, took us back a short distance and pointed into the forest. He had spotted an Emerald, or Blue-throated Toucanet. We all had difficulty seeing it initially as we were looking for a green bird in a dense, green canopy. Eventually, we all located it at eye-level and everyone ended up with some excellent photos of this beautiful bird. A little further up the road were a pair of Spot-crowned Barbets. At the top of the road was an agricultural area with open fields. We walked up a track and found a small flock of Yellow-faced Grassquits, a Black-striped Sparrow and Smooth-billed Anis. In an open field were a pair of Southern Lapwings with a chick. We also added the Orange-bellied Trogon to our list. We spotted a Two-toed Sloth in a tree in an open field, which seemed an unlikely place to find it. It's back was covered in green algae.

On the drive back down to the Lodge, a Sloth was on a branch immediately above the road. Everyone took lots of photographs of a very obliging, smiling animal.

Back at the Lodge, the Grey-necked Wood Rail came back to the feeders in broad daylight, giving everyone else a good chance to photograph it. I then had a walk along the stream and found a Buff-rumped Warbler. This is a bird that stays close to fast-flowing streams, picking off the insects on the rocks. It must have had a nest nearby because it objected strongly to my presence. A little further along the stream was a female Green Kingfisher, sitting on a boulder in the middle of the stream.

After lunch, we drove through the nearby town and up into a wooded area. As we left the vehicle, a pair of beautiful Swallow-tailed Kites soared overhead and in the bushes beside the road were a pair of Barred Antshrikes. The male has striking black and white stripes but the female is a plain russet colour. We then had a walk in the forest and we immediately found a Blue-crowned Motmot. Alex then told us that could see a Pauraque on the ground. We had been constantly amazed at his uncanny knack of spotting birds and animals that were virtually invisible but this too the biscuit! It is a highly camouflaged bird, lying flat among the leaf litter. When we asked how on earth he had spotted it, he said that it moved its head! It took all of us some time to actually locate it and I did manage to get a photo which just about shows its head.

We then returned for dinner and some brave members had a night-time walk in the rain but I declined. The find a couple of Sloths with the lamp but did not stay out too long. My final bird of the holiday an Orange-billed Sparrow which came onto the patio briefly.

The following morning, we had a three-hour drive to the airport for our return journey home. It had been a wonderful holiday. Naturetrek's organisation had been excellent, the Tower and Lodge had also been first class. All of the staff we met were so helpful and friendly and our Guides, Alex and his assistant Jorge had been in a different class! They both told us that they loved their jobs and that was very obvious.

I was not impressed with United Airlines on the way out, via Newark, but we flew with Lufthansa back via Frankfurt and then onto Heathrow, and they were much more efficient. The group got on very well and we would all no doubt exchange photos and information later. For me, the holiday exceeded all expectations and I look forward to travelling with Naturetrek again.

We had seen 223 Species of birds and heard a few we did not actually see, and 25 species of mammals, most of which I had never heard of before this holiday. We had 47 Sloth sightings, which was impressive. The Butterflies and wild flowers were all beautiful too, but I was not able to identify them. Obviously, we are never too old to learn something new!

Arthur Ball.

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