

Panama - Mammals of the Canopy Tower

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 17 July 2019



Howler Monkey



Three-toed Sloth



Crab-eating Raccoon



Green Heron

Report kindly written & images supplied by clients Andrew and Pat Griffin



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Tour participants: Alexis Sanchez (leader) with nine Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Sunday 7th July

We all met at Panama City airport after our journey from various regional airports of the UK via Amsterdam. We were a group of nine and were met by our driver Eduard, after clearing customs and thankfully we all had our luggage.

We had about an hour's drive to our accommodation, the Canopy Tower, an old radar tower built by the American military, now surrounded by rainforest. Here we were met by our guide Alexis and shown to our rooms, where our luggage had already been delivered. We had dinner straight away, then a quick briefing from Alexis before being left to organise ourselves in our rooms.

Day 2

Monday 8th July

Climbing up to the viewing platform before breakfast for a hot drink, Alexis pointed out a Three-toed Sloth that was well camouflaged in a Cecropia tree. Being level with the tree tops was an amazing experience. A male Howler Monkey came up very close and there were lots of birds flying about. We saw Palm Tanagers, a couple



of Cinnamon Woodpeckers and a Tropical Gnatcatcher. We also saw a small Boa Constrictor on the tree as we came down to breakfast at 0730. We were introduced to our other guide Alberto, who will also be with us for the whole trip.

We left for a walk down Semaphore Hill, which connects the tower to the public road, at 0830. We saw the same sloth and there was a female a bit further away in another tree. On the walk we saw Slaty-tailed Trogon, Plain Brown Woodcreeper, Black Hawk Eagle and many others as well

as a Two-toed Sloth, also well hidden in a tree. The driver brought us a welcome cold drink halfway down and when we had got to the bottom he drove us back up again. It is a very steep hill so were glad not to have to walk back.

Had some down time before lunch. Whilst we were having lunch some Geoffroy's Tamarins arrived and then a large Iguana appeared and started to devour leaves. Later the Tamarins had a grooming session, quite magical to watch. Time for another visit to the viewing platform or a rest before our 3.00pm departure. Set off for Ammo Ponds near Gamboa, there was not a lot around, but we saw a couple of Keel-billed Toucans which were very colourful. We had heard some thunder and it started to rain. We saw Tiger Herons, Common Tody-flycatcher, some Anis and a pair of beautiful Yellow-tailed Orioles.

We then motored on to the Chagres River, the main river feeding the Panama Canal; but apart from a Yellow-headed Caracara, most wildlife was taking cover from the rain. There was a Two-toed Sloth but so high in the canopy it was just a brown patch. The decision was made to return to the tower early where we eventually did the usual check list at 1830.

Day 3

Tuesday 9th July

We had heard Howler Monkeys during the night and we had time to go up to the viewing platform before breakfast at 0600, where we saw some Collared Aracaris. Before we left, we looked at some Weaver Spiders outside the tower windows.

We were then driven to the Pipeline Road, it was overcast and very humid. The road covers a pipe line that the Americans had built during WW2 but it had never been used. We parked and started walking down the road through tropical rainforest. We saw a Great Potoo, a Black-striped Woodcreeper and a Mot Mot. There was a Three-toed Sloth up a tree a long way away, several different sorts of heliconia butterflies on some flowers. We saw several Agoutis and some Red-tailed Squirrels. There was a Scarlet-rumped Cacique nest, a Tungara Frog in a pool of water as well as an Owl Butterfly. We also saw several Howler Monkeys with babies but, once again, they were a long way off.

We set off back to base and stopped on our way up Semaphore Hill to scramble down a slippery slope to photograph two Night Monkeys peeping out of a hole in a tree; they were lovely with huge big eyes. We kept trying to take pictures of a Blue Morpho butterfly but with no success.

Back at base we were met by a Preying Mantis just outside the entrance to the tower. We had had a long morning and it was nice to get back for a very welcome shower before lunch. Then the heavens opened with a huge thunderstorm while we had lunch. We saw a couple of Red-crowned Woodpeckers from the restaurant level, the viewing platform gets closed when it rains and when it rains in this part of the world it certainly rains.

The rain had eased a bit by the time we set off for our afternoon activity and we went to the summit botanical gardens where we learnt all about the Harpy Eagle. There is an amazing film of one eagle taking a sloth. We had a walk round the grounds and saw some Agouti and some Tent-making Bats. We then drove to Summit Ponds but there was not a lot about, it was raining quite heavily again and I think everyone was taking cover. We saw a Green Kingfisher and a Least Grebe. The usual check list before dinner.

Day 4

Wednesday 10th July

On waking, the viewing platform beckoned and we were rewarded by some spectacular views of toucans and a Howler Monkey. After breakfast we are leaving for Lake Gatun for a boat trip. Before leaving, however, we found a Northern Tamandua climbing a tree close by. Then off to pick up the boat for our lake trip, which turned out to be very comfortable.



We started off in the Chagres River where we saw an Anhinga killing and eating a fish. There were a huge numbers of Snail Kites about; they just fly down and pluck the snails up as they float on the water. We saw Green and Striated Herons and a lovely pink alstroemeria tree. There were Common Basilisks, a pair of Whistling Ducks on a stick and a couple of Pied-billed Grebes. We saw an Amazon Kingfisher, an American Pygmy Kingfisher, many grackles and several crocodiles. We then motored out into the Panama Canal where there were one or two big ships. Then we got to Lake Gatun where we saw Limpkin, a Neotropic Cormorant, a Yellow headed Caracara and many more Snail Kites. We saw a Green Iguana, several Capuchin Monkeys and then found some Geoffroy's Mannikins. Two or three of them jumped on the boat so we were able to get a close view. Then it was time to go back to the marina. We thanked our driver and returned to base for lunch.

We were just about to eat lunch when a male and female sloth appeared out in the open. We stayed with them some time before it started to rain and the viewing platform was closed. The male disappeared under cover of trees but the female just hunkered down at the top of the tree as it really poured.

It had stopped raining as we set off at 1500 but it soon started to rain again. We got to the discovery centre and went to the hummingbird feeders which had some shelter and watched the activity for a while, it was quite dark but at least we were dry. Then we were off to climb an observation tower that is 32 metres tall and takes you into the canopy. On the way we saw a sloth not doing very much.

We did the climb and the view was fantastic. We saw Yellow-rumped Caciques, Blue Cotinga, toucans, parrots and Masked Tityra. Then we came down again and walked back to the feeders; the sloth was still there. The Tower had sent over a picnic for our supper, which was absolutely delicious and much appreciated. We then did a slow night drive back to base. On the way we saw a lot more sloths, both two and three toed. The three-toed are active during the day and the two toed at night. One two toed had a baby with her. We also saw a Scaly-throated Leaf Cutter, and then, apparently very rare in Panama, a Crab-eating Fox. Finally we saw some Night Monkeys that looked really cute; it was nice seeing them outside their tree hole.

Day 5

Thursday 11th July



This morning we woke up to lightning so no doubt we are in for some rain. Went up to the viewing platform for a cup of tea and we were in cloud. We saw Golden-hooded Tanagers as well as lots of other colourful birds. We also saw Mealie Parrots which, we were told, mate for life.

After breakfast we drove down Semaphore Hill and walked along Plantation Road, along a river valley. Thankfully it was dry but very humid. We saw a South American Lead Toad and a Salamanca Frog. Amazingly we also saw a Nine

Banded Armadillo out in the daytime. We saw a couple of sloths but both quite a distance up in the tree canopy.

There was a big band of coatis but across the other side of the valley from us; they had several babies with them. We saw an adult and a young Whip-tailed Lizard. Amazingly the young are brightly coloured and the adults a dull brown. Then surprisingly just before we got back to the bus we saw two more armadillos, which was a fantastic photographic opportunity.

Back to base for lunch. Went to see the sloth which had come down the tree a bit. She is pregnant and occasionally looked at us. After lunch we had a bit of down time before leaving at 1400 for the sloth sanctuary. I can't say we were very impressed with it or its organisation. Afterwards we went on a short walk. We saw a Crane Hawk, a Rufescent Tiger Heron, a sloth high in a tree, a Common Potoo, Ringed Kingfisher, a Milk Frog and a Yellow-headed Caracara. Then it was back to base for the check list.

Day 6

Friday 12th July

Up at 0430 for an early breakfast and then we were driven by Lorenzo, to Panama City railway station, to catch the tourist train to Colon, which runs alongside the canal. We boarded the train for an 0715 departure. The train was amazingly plush with wooden panelling, air conditioning and an open viewing platform. We were served coffee and snacks as we travelled.



When we arrived at Colon we were stopped by the police for the vehicle's papers which were missing. Whether money changed hands or not we were eventually allowed to proceed. Lorenzo, who had driven the bus to Colon while we were on the train, drove us towards San Lorenzo using a ferry to cross the canal as the Colon Bridge is not yet open. We got out for a walk and saw a Thick-billed Euphonia.

We got to the nature reserve and it started to rain quite hard, so the decision was made for us to have an early picnic lunch

before we did anything else.

We then went for a walk to the old Spanish fort, we saw some bats, Howler Monkeys, and a Panamanian Flycatcher. We drove a bit further back down the road and went for another walk. We saw a couple of sloths, one two and one three-toed.

We drove back to base, had a quick shower and went to look on the viewing platform after the checklist. Both the male and female sloths were there this time. After supper a few of us went off for an hour's night drive. We saw a roosting tinamou, a distant porcupine, a sloth, a Woolly Opossum up a tree and another sloth with a baby before getting back to the tower.

Day 7

Saturday 13th July



Up to the viewing platform, there was not much about, the female sloth had gone and the male was well hidden. Breakfast was at 0630 and we left for Panama City at seven.

Drove to the Metropolitan Park in the city. We went for a walk and got some very good shots of sloths. It was humid with not much sun and we climbed for quite a long time; we were all glowing by the end of it. We saw a couple more sloths, several tamarins, some with babies, and a Yellow-headed Caracara.

We then moved to Pinta Culebra. It is run by the Smithsonian institute and you can see the Pacific end of the canal. We saw Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigatebirds, sloths, a Crab-eating Raccoon in a tree, a Yellow-bellied Seedeater, a Four-lined Whipped-tailed Lizard and a Mangrove Warbler. It was a lovely spot.

Then we drove back to base for lunch. We decided not to go on the trip to the canal museum in the afternoon and stayed at the canopy tower having a restful time. We were rather glad we hadn't gone as it started to rain quite hard. I think most wildlife was staying hidden. Those that went said they enjoyed the museum and seeing the canal.

We did the check list before supper and afterwards went on a slightly damp night drive, not much about apart from a brief glimpse of some Capybara and a quick spot of a Night Monkey.

Day 8

Sunday 14th July

Went up on the viewing platform before breakfast at 0730. No sloth, but there was the usual howler, several tanagers and a beautiful Scarlet-rumped Cacique. We saw a few parrots. We had breakfast and paid our bills before leaving just after nine.

It was about a two-hour journey to the west of Canopy Tower across the Centennial Bridge to El Valle and our next stop, the Canopy Lodge. It is situated at 700 metres above sea level in the caldera of an extinct volcano. The temperature is cooler and we were shown to our luxurious rooms where we had time to sort ourselves out before lunch at 1230.

Lunch was excellent with a delicious local soup. We saw Yellow-crowned Euphonia at the feeding table. Then it started to pour so we sat in the covered communal area watching birds.

We are due to go on a walk at 1500. The rain seemed to ease so we started a walk up to the waterfall. We passed a Three-toed Sloth and then as we were looking at a Basilisk, a beautiful Sun Bittern arrived. We carried on to the waterfall seeing chachalacas, while the rain got heavier and heavier. We waited under shelter for the rain to ease again before braving the walk to the falls across several suspension bridges. When we got back to the start it was teeming down. One of the chaps took a motorbike back to the lodge and bought a vehicle up to drive us back,

which was very noble of him. Saw a Grey-cowled Wood Rail on the bird feeder. Had supper but it was still too wet for a night walk. Most of us had a wet wander around before retiring.

Day 9

Monday 15th July

Hearing the river running through the lodge grounds made it difficult to know whether it was raining or not, however it was fine as we got up. We saw a Red-tailed Squirrel and many colourful birds at the feeding station, which is very popular.



Had breakfast at 0630 before leaving just after seven for the top of the caldera. We saw a tree with lots of oropendola nests, the female does all the work building the hanging nests and the male looks on supervising what the female is doing. They make very odd noises. We saw a rare Wedge-tail Grass Finch in a field, then as we moved further up, we saw some Swallow-tailed Kites. We also spotted a large Cane Toad on the path. We saw a Hermit Hummingbird a Striped-throated Hermit and Crowned Wood Nymph. Further up there was a male and female Three-toed Sloth doing what sloths do - i.e. nothing. We got a quick look at a Rufous Tree Rat, he was just poking his nose out of a hole in a tree. There was a Red-crowned Woodpecker and a distant view of a White Kite.



We came back to base and wandered down the river to the pond, where we saw a Green Heron and took some photographs of lovely bark on a tree. We had some spare time before lunch to watch birds.

Afterwards we watched a Wood Rail below the bird table. It started to rain very hard but we saw a Buff-rumped Warbler by the river. We eventually decided to go off for the afternoon's activity and ignore the rain. We drove past some very expensive-looking houses and ended up in somebody's garden looking at Spectacled Owls, there were two and one of them looked at us while the other studiously ignored us. Then the guides found a nightjar under a tree, it seemed to be looking at us as well but how they spotted it I shall never know. Later we saw Yellow-faced Grassquit and a Roadside Hawk.

Then it was back to base for a very welcome shower before our last checklist. We said goodbye to Alberto who left us this evening; he had been a lovely guide and had looked after us very well. Had dinner and then went on a frog hunt and found quite a large one called a Smokey Jungle Frog, but that was all. A couple went off on a night walk with Alexis and found some opossums and sloths.

Day 10

Tuesday 16th July

Today is going home day but it will be leisurely one as we don't leave until 1300. Had breakfast at 0730. We then pottered about and saw an Agouti, a Wood Rail and lots of Tanagers at the feeders. At the pond we had quite a

close encounter with a juvenile Green Heron. He seemed quite content having us so close. We then went for a stroll towards the waterfall, we saw a male Three-toed Sloth nearly hidden in a tree. Everyone except me went for a trek by the waterfall, but I chose the safer route back down the road. The group obviously, had the odd difficult crossing of the river, but had a brief glimpse of the Sun Bittern.



Once back at base we had a coffee, then had time for a leisurely shower before packing and a last look at the feeders. We saw a Streaked Flycatcher, and a Red-legged Honeycreeper. We also saw a couple of Rocket Frogs on a dead leaf making a very loud noise. Then it was time for lunch and then we said our goodbyes to Alexis who had looked after us so well and was an excellent guide with extensive knowledge of wildlife and amazing eyesight.

We drove about three hours to the airport through the centre of Panama City which was spectacular to see. After getting our luggage checked in we cleared customs and security before waiting for our homeward overnight flight to Amsterdam and then onto our regional destinations in UK.

Day 11

Wednesday 17th July

Landed back in the UK

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