

Panama – Mammals of the Canopy Tower

Naturetrek Tour Report

8th – 17th May 2022



Geoffroy's Tamarin Monkey



Three-toed Sloth



Woolly Opossum



Crab-eating Raccoon

Tour report by Trudy Jones, images by Mike Jones



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Tour participants - Alexis "Alex" Sanchez & Harmodio "Moyo" Roderiguez (Naturalists) with nine Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Sunday 8th May

A day of travel to Panama via Amsterdam. We were met at the airport and transported to the Canopy Tower, arriving as the light was fading. We were welcomed by Alex and encouraged to find our rooms quickly, freshen up, and meet in the social area as dinner was ready. It was good to unwind, have food and begin to get to know our fellow travellers; a party of nine. Alex gave us a quick briefing about the Tower and our activity for the following morning. As the lodge puts out fruit to tempt wildlife it was exciting to see a Kinkajou and a Northern Olingo on our first evening. After that it was back to our rooms to unpack and sleep.

Day 2

Monday 9th May

As it was getting light we climbed up to the Observation platform to look over the misty rainforest canopy, with a glimpse of the famous canal. Coffee and tea were available and we got to see our first Three-toed Sloth feeding in a nearby tree. Birds began to appear; Keel-billed Toucan, Palm Tanager, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Southern Mealy Parrot to name but a few. The sounds of distant Howler Monkeys added to the atmosphere. Breakfast followed and we met our second naturalist, Moyo. Around the base of the Tower were feeders with different humming birds using them, including the Blue-chested and White-vented Plumeleteer.

Our first outing was a walk down Semaphore Hill, the very steep, winding hill upon which the Tower stands. We viewed various birds and a Two-toed Sloth. Derek noticed a hole in the bank beside the road, it had an occupant, he called to Alex and Moyo, who examined it closely and were pleased to discover the rear end of a Rothschild's Porcupine. On our many journeys up and down the track we always stopped to see if the occupant was still in residence, which it was during the daytime. The transport arrived with cold drinks, which were very welcome and we were very glad of a lift back up to our base. As there was time before lunch we climbed up to the platform until rain started. Our next excursion to the Ammo Road was at 3'o clock so we had time to ourselves., Geoffrey's Tamarins came to feed and groom and we were able to observe them closely.

At three we were off on the truck to the Ammo Road and had our first proper view of the canal. At the ponds by the Ammo Dump, some of the birds we viewed were: Wattled Jacana, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Rufescent Tiger Heron, Cattle Egret, Southern Lapwing, Anis, Black Vultures and Turkey Vultures. Mike caused quite a stir and amusement when he found that he was standing on an ant's nest and realised that he was being bitten. He then proceeded to take off his boot, sock and finally his trousers to get rid of the ants. This was quite an ice breaker; fortunately there was no lasting damage to him. That evening, after dinner and the bird list, we boarded the truck for a night ride down the hill using our torches and Colombian Night Monkeys, Kinkajou, Sloths, and a Black-and-white Owl were some of the things spotted. It had been a long, busy day and bed was very welcome.

Day 3

Tuesday 10th May

We began with a 6am breakfast, then off to the Pipeline Road by the truck (which we nicknamed the Birdmobile). We had a long, slow walk looking for wildlife and were well rewarded with a troop of Capuchin Monkeys crossing the track above our heads, Leaf and Jungle frogs, a Hawk-eagle, Scaled Pigeon, Squirrel Cuckoo, Great Potoo, White-whiskered Puff Bird and a Scarlet-rumped Cacique. We would have missed many sightings if it wasn't for Alex and Moyo who quickly got their scopes trained on the wildlife hidden among the leaves. Moyo fetched our transport, bringing much needed cold drinks. We were picked up when we had reached the Discovery Centre. Our journey back to the Tower was in rain, not ordinary rain but a deluge, rain that hurts your head, needless to say we were all well and truly soaked by the time we got back.

We had lunch after we had changed, but our afternoon outing to the Summit Park Botanical Gardens was postponed as the rain continued with a storm rumbling overhead and no one wanted a second soaking. As the rain eased some of us watched a young male Sloth moving through the trees just below us. The rest of the afternoon was spent on the platform in sunshine. The bird list was at 6pm and dinner at 6:30 then we were off for a night walk down the hill. Just by the gate a Cane Toad was spotted and a snake. The snake caused our guides some consternation as it was a Fer-de-Lance - very venomous. We saw a Sloth, Armadillo, Night Monkeys, Tapeti, Woolly Opposum, and a Little Mastiff Bat. The Birdmobile collected us and by then we were all ready for our beds.

Day 4

Wednesday 11th May

Another early 6am breakfast with a 7am departure to go to the Metropolitan Natural Park. We headed to Panama City in the rush hour traffic. Just inside the park gates, we saw a Coati ambling around foraging for food, a large millipede crossing the path and a Red-crowned Woodpecker in nearby trees. Slowly we made our way to the top, spotting an Agouti, Sloth and the Common Potoo. Alex told us that the previous month he had found a baby Sloth abandoned by its mother and had handed it to the park keeper; he wondered if it had survived. At the top we had panoramic views over the city and entrance to the canal. There were clouds of beautiful butterflies enjoying the sunshine. Our descent was by a different path where the shade of the trees was very welcome. After a refreshing drink and cake we stopped off at the Park Rescue Centre to inquire about the baby Sloth. Amazingly it had survived and its nurse brought it out for us to see; cuddled up on a soft, sloth shaped toy, still very small and vulnerable. It was being fed every three hours and the hope was that if it survived for a few more months then they would try to rehabilitate it. Needless to say Alex was delighted.

Back to base for a lively, chatty lunch. We were free until 2:30 when it was time to head for Summit Park; a lovely, well-tended area. with lots of different trees and bamboo. It was easier to spot birds here, various woodpeckers, Blue Dacnis and Tanagers. We also viewed the captive Harpy Eagle, a magnificent bird. We were fascinated by the Common Tent-making Bats. It had been a hot humid afternoon so we were pleased to shower on our return ready for the bird list and dinner with a free evening. A chance to relax and socialise with our friendly group.

Day 5

Thursday 12th May

The day started as usual up on the platform before a 6:30 breakfast. By 7:30 we were in the minibus and heading for the Chagres river, where we boarded a boat and explored the banks of the river in glorious sunshine. We had good views of Jacanas, Green Heron, Striated Heron and Tricoloured Heron, Anhinga and Purple Gallinule. Our boat then carefully motored under two low bridges and out onto the canal, being dwarfed by a large container ship and tugs. We sped past them and down to Lake Gatun where we again explored the banks, and enjoyed a leisurely time watching Howler Monkeys, Snail Kites, Limpkins, Capuchin Monkeys, Proboscis Bats, Great Ani and a white Osprey. Finally the boat headed back and we disembarked and returned to the Canopy Tower for lunch.

Our next excursion wasn't until 4pm, so we had plenty of time to observe the wildlife from the platform. We were driven to the Pipeline Road and down to the Discovery Centre, and once there we walked to the 32ft Observation Tower and climbed the steps to the top. Here we were greeted by spectacular views over the canopy; amongst the many birds that we saw that evening was the iconic Blue Cotinga, which was to be the only sighting we had during the whole trip. When the light faded we returned to the Centre to find that our evening meal had arrived from the Tower; a night picnic of hot food, bread, salad, beer, wine and soft drinks, which was very welcome. We then returned slowly back to base looking for night time wildlife. A Lesser Capybara wandered across the road ahead of us. We stopped as usual to view the hole of the Rothschild Porcupine to see if it was there. Alas it wasn't. I nodded off and so missed any other sightings!

Day 6

Friday 13th May

Another early breakfast and off at 6:45 for the Discovery Centre and a walk along the second part of the Pipeline Road. It had rained heavily in the night so it was overcast and humid and everything was wet. At first we didn't see much but as the sun came out we were able to view an Agouti, a Tree Rat, Red-tailed Squirrel, Variegated Squirrel, a family group of Capuchins, Hook-billed Kite, Semi-plumbeous Hawk, Spotted Ant Shrike and a Spectacled Cayman among other things.

After a quick shower and lunch at the Canopy Tower we did the previous day's Bird List before leaving to visit the Sloth Sanctuary at Gamboa. It is here that orphaned Sloths are cared for and we closely observed them moving along branches and eating flowers. In the grounds was a butterfly house and frog enclosure that we could enter; interesting to see these creatures close at hand. Black-striped Sparrows, a Crane Hawk and a Great-tailed Grackle were also seen. On our return to base we did the Bird List and when it was dark, an attempt was made to visit the hole of the elusive Porcupine, in the hope of watching it emerge from its hole. Sadly it wasn't there. Dinner, a sociable chat and bed ended yet another busy day,

Day 7

Saturday 14th May

There had been heavy rain and thunder during the night but as usual we were up on the platform to see Aracari Toucans and a Golden-hooded Tanager. After breakfast, as we gathered at the base of the Tower, there was a

cacophony of noise in the trees above. Alex and Moyo quickly spotted the reason; high above our heads was a Boa, well camouflaged lying in wait for some prey, possibly a monkey. After observing it for a while we set off for Punta Culebra Smithsonian Park on the coast, hoping to see a Crab-eating Raccoon, which we did, as well as Brown Pelican, Magnificent Frigatebird and an Egret. On our journey back we visited the Summit Ponds which seemed quiet at first with little activity but as we watched we saw our first kingfishers, the Amazonian and the Green Kingfisher catching fish. We spied a Sloth with a baby, then another small female Sloth, a Howler Monkey and a Boat-billed Heron before it was time to leave for lunch.

That afternoon we boarded the minibus again but this time to the Panama Canal Centre, where we arrived just in time to watch a massive cruise liner going through one lock and a cargo ship in the other - an amazing sight. Apparently the liner would have paid 350,000 American Dollars to use the canal!

Back at the Tower, a troop of about thirty Howlers moved through the bordering trees, a lovely experience to watch. It was time to pack, do the Bird List and have our last dinner in the Tower, as our stay there was nearly over.

Day 8

Sunday 15th May

An overcast morning but up on the deck, a Golden-hooded Tanager made another appearance, Tamarins came to feed and we watched a Sloth waking up. After breakfast and thanking the staff, we were away on our journey to El Valle and Canopy Lodge. It was interesting to see the countryside change and become more hilly. What a delightful place to be; the Lodge is in an extinct caldera and has its own micro-climate. We were now in a cloud forest. On foot we crossed a Monet style bridge over a rushing mountain stream. Our rooms were large and more luxurious than the Tower with a balcony with seats. We quickly gathered for lunch which started with a local soup. On the feeding table below the seated area we were fascinated to watch, a Grey-necked Wood Rail, Rufous Motmot, Green Shrike Vireo, Thick-billed Euphonia a Common Basilisk and a female Agouti with young eating morsels that had dropped onto the ground.

The heavens opened and it rained and rained so the organised walk didn't take place, though some of the group braved the elements to visit the waterfall, or explore the grounds. The temperature had dropped and fleeces were worn to do the Bird List and during dinner. Everyone turned in for an early night.

Day 9

Monday 16th May

An early start to watch the comings and goings on the feeding table. After breakfast we were driven up to Las Minas then onto Cerro Gaital, 1,185m above sea level where we did three walks. The Variegated and the Red-tailed Squirrel, a Grey-headed Chachalaca, a Swallow-tailed Kite and a Blue-throated Toucanet were all seen.

After lunch and a relax we were out again to try and find a Spectacled Owl. Alex and Moyo knew where it's usual haunt was, but of course it had moved. Moyo tracked it down and we had a slippery bank to scramble up, a tramp through some undergrowth and there it was, so worth the effort.

After the Bird List and dinner we were out in the grounds in the dark. A Cane Toad, Opossum and a Fer-de-Lance snake were found before we turned in for the night.

Day 10 & 11 May

Tuesday 17th & Wednesday 18th

We were aware of heavy rain in the night and it was still wet first thing in the morning. An early start to pack as most of us were due to leave for the airport after lunch. The baby Agoutis were sheltering under large leaves, using them as umbrellas; the Motmots, Euphonia, Wood Rail and Clay-coloured Thrush were about as we came down for breakfast. Alex and Moyo decided to take us out in the minibus to try and find the Tody Motmot. Up and up we went and parked by a forested area, another slippery bank to negotiate then a patient wait for the bird to appear, and our patience was rewarded. We drove higher up to look out over a valley and saw a flock of Blue-faced Parrots and twelve White-tailed Kites perched in one tree.

On our return, we showered, changed and finished packing before having lunch. It was then time to say our farewells and thank Alex and Moyo who had both made this trip so successful. Off we went for a speedy journey to the airport. We all checked in, got through security and waited for our overnight flight, with an onward journey to UK the following day. It had been a memorable experience.

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