Trip Report: Canopy Tower and Canopy Lodge, Panama
March 7-14, 2014

March 7: Arrive at Canopy Tower
March 8: Morning on Tower; Semaphore Hill Rd; PM Rainforest Discovery Center
March 9: Cerro Azul; Maipo Calle; Panama Viejo mudflats
March 10: Pipeline Road; Ammo Ponds; Summit Park and Ponds
March 11: Tower birding; Transfer to Canopy Lodge
March 12: Las Minas; La Mesa; Carl Iguana
March 13: Altos del Maria
March 14: Anton; Juan Hombron Rd; El Chiru
March 15: Departure

We arrived at the Canopy Tower in the afternoon after finishing up our pre-trip at the Canopy Camp in Darien and met with those who opted out of the pre-trip and were just starting their Panama adventure. For the rest of us, our adventure continued! After the long travel day we rewarded ourselves with wine and snacks and spent our birding from the top of the tower while we waited for dinner to be ready. The view from the top is spectacular but the birding is arguably even better! Here we watched Shining, Green and Red-legged Honeycreepers foraging with Tennessee and Bay-breasted Warblers. Band-rumped and Short-tailed Swifts circled the tower hunting for insects. As night fell the fantastic, eerie tremolo of the Great Tinamou emanated from the undergrowth around the base of the tower.

We arose to watch the sunrise and have our coffee first thing next morning – a tradition we maintained during our stay at the Tower. We began the morning with brief looks at a Broad-billed Motmot, perched in the trees below the top of the tower. Green Shrike-Vireos called from all around and we spotted a few Slate-colored Grosbeaks with their massive, bright orange beaks catching the morning sun. White-necked Jacobins buzzed in droves around the feeders near the tower’s base and also the flowers in the canopy. The surprise of the morning certainly was a female Rufous-crested Coquette, apparently only the 2nd record for the tower. After breakfast we walked down Semaphore Hill and enjoyed a bird-filled morning. We found both White-whiskered and Black-breasted Puffbirds, Cinnamon and Crimson-crested Woodpeckers, and a Squirrel Cuckoo literally running up branches and hopping from perch to perch. Here also were
good numbers of Black-crowned Antshrike and Spotted Antbird. We got great looks at White-breasted Wood-Wren as it sang from the tops of downed logs and then flew to its next perch, singing again. Other trip birds included Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, Speckled Mourner and Southern Bentbill. For the afternoon we went looking for a previously reported antswarm near the Rainforest Discovery Center near Pipeline Road. On the drive in we inadvertently flushed a gorgeous White Hawk from its perch. We watched as it flew over the road and back into the forest out of sight. After a bit of trying we located an antswarm, and although it wasn’t as big as we expected we had loads of good birds. Song Wrens hopped around literally at our feet while Spotted Antbirds walked across logs right in front of us. A Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo, one of the birds of the trip, furtively walked along the ground away from us. We got decent looks through the foliage for a few minutes before it walked up a slope and out of sight.

The next morning we headed up Cruz Azul for some higher elevation birding. This is one of the better places for finding Yellow-eared Toucanets, and sure enough, after about 45 minutes of watching Rufous-winged, Bay-headed, Golden-hooded, Plain-colored and Crimson-backed Tanagers a flock of 5 birds flew up and landed in a bare tree. Needless to say we got incredible although quick views before they flew on. We had lunch at the house of an American Ex-pat couple and had a wonderful time watching the hummingbird hordes feeding on their many feeders. We found a vast array of hummingbirds here: White-necked Jacobin, Green Hermit, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, Crowned Woodnymph, and Blue-chested, Snowy-bellied, Rufous-tailed, and Violet-capped Hummingbirds all made an appearance. Also thoroughly satisfying was watching a pair of Rufous Motmots eating bananas alongside Crimson-backed Tanagers and Green Honeycreepers. Right as we were packing up to leave, we heard the call of the Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker, a species endemic to Panama. Within a few minutes we had located the bird working the trunk high up in a tree – we got fantastic looks and watched for several minutes before profusely thanking our hosts for their hospitality and heading down the mountain. The mudflats at Panama Viejo was our last stop of the afternoon en route back to the tower and expectedly held a few different species we had yet to see on this trip. Here we satisfied our coastal birding fix with huge flocks of Magnificent Frigatebird, Neotropic Cormorant, Brown Pelican and Marbled Godwit and a smattering of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, White Ibis, Black-bellied Plover, Whimbrel and Royal Tern. Another highlight was seeing a beautiful Mangrove Yellow Warbler in the tree branches right above us.

The famous Pipeline Road was our destination the next morning and certainly lived up to its reputation. Gartered, Black-throated, and Black-tailed Trogons all made an appearance along with Boat-billed and Social Flycatchers, a pair of Blue Ground Doves and a few gorgeous Moustached Antwrens. Obligate antbirds are always a highlight and our excitement was no surprise when we found a great little flock of Ocellated and Bicolored Antbirds. We also managed unbelievable views of a Streak-chested Antpitta as it mercilessly thrashed a caterpillar on the ground – what a show! On our way out we saw a lovely male Blue-crowned Manakin and as we got out for one last stop to scan through a mixed flock of foraging birds we immediately heard the 3-note song of a Pheasant Cuckoo! This apparently had been the first one encountered this year on Pipeline Road, and we eventually found the bird and got it in the scope. We watched for the next quarter of an hour and marveled at the absurdity of its tail and enjoyed watching it vocalize. Afterwards, a quick stop at Summit Park to scan the ponds yielded Boat-billed Heron and Ringed, Amazon, and Green Kingfishers. We followed our local guide Carlos as he took us
right to a spot where a Rufous Nightjar has been for the last few years. Carlos located the bird almost instantly, perfectly camouflaged in some leaves on the ground. As if that wasn’t good enough, Carlos led us not 5 minutes from the Nightjar spot and found a Spectacled Owl. There aren’t many better ways to end a great day of birding than by seeing 2 nocturnal birds extremely well during the day.

After breakfast the following morning we departed the Canopy Tower and began the last chapter of our Panama trip, heading to the wonderful Canopy Lodge in El Valle. We arrived around lunchtime and had plenty of time to observe the banana feeders and the almost steady traffic of birds. Rufous Motmot, Crimson-backed and Blue-gray Tanagers and several species of Euphonia were all seen on the feeders. We even noticed a few Prothonotary and Tennessee Warblers nibbling the edges of banana chunks, a sight that most of us USA birders aren’t familiar with seeing! After a brief afternoon exploration of the grounds and the waterfall trail up the road at nearby Canopy Adventure, we called it an evening.

We had left the drier forest of the Canal Zone behind for the higher elevation, lush forests near El Valle, so we expected to see quite a few new trip birds on this section of our trip. We were not disappointed, and at La Mesa we loaded up with new birds including Orange-bellied Trogon, Plain and Spot-crowned Antvireos, Slaty Antwren, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, Sepia-capped Flycatcher, Rufous-capped Warbler, Tawny-faced Gnatwren and other beauties such as Silver-throated Tanager, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis and Chesnut-capped Brushfinch. Another highlight was finding a pair of Snowcaps, another higher elevation specialty. Later in the day we explored different parts of El Valle, and with LOTS of hard work we eventually saw a pair of Tody Motmots, presumably with a nest nearby, as they were incredibly secretive. We also got great looks at Lance-tailed Manakin, a bird we had only heard earlier in the trip.

At Altos del Maria we continued the lush forest theme and at our first stop we bagged Whittailed Emerald, Green Thorntail, and several more Snowcaps as well as a Brown-billed Scythebill. Spotted Barbtails were relatively common up here, as were Red-faced Spinetails – we watched as one worked on its nest, flying back and forth with nesting material in its mouth. We had a few Emerald (Blue-throated) Toucanets fly over and several perched where we could see them. We eventually found a Black-crowned Antpitta as well as a Black-headed Antthrush and got fleeting glimpses of both, which were anything but cooperative. The next day was our last in Panama and we opted to head towards the Pacific coast for some more lowland birding. The day grew hot quickly, but we didn’t mind as we continued picking up trip birds left and right. Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures cruised low over cattle pastures and Roadside, Savannah and Short-tailed Hawks were seen as well. One of our main target birds for the day was the Veraguan Mango, and it wasn’t long before we spotted a brilliant male. The open country interspersed with patches of trees and scrub are attractive to many species of flycatcher, from Mouse-colored Tyrannulet to Northern Scrub and Fork-tailed Flycatchers. This habitat is also where one would expect to find Aplomado Falcon and it was no surprise when we eventually found one perched atop an isolated tree in the middle of a field. As the day wore on we began heading back to the Lodge for our last evening. We made a pit stop along the way at a known roost for Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and after about 20 minutes of searching we found one perched in full sunlight! What a fantastic way to end our last full day in Panama!
After a relaxing evening we arose early the next morning to say ‘Adios’ to the Canopy Lodge and Panama. Some of us got to watch the feeders one last time before catching a ride to Tocumen Airport. We finished our Canopy Tower and Lodge trip with 330 species (or, if combined with Darien pre-trip, 412 species). The fantastic selection of birds, the incredible diversity of wildlife, not to mention the great food, lodging and our wonderful group of participants all made this an unforgettable trip!

Aaron Steed

We were the first group to stay at Canopy Camp, Tower and Lodge all in the same trip!