



Winging It

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Panama La Verde: Between the Seas

BY RICK WRIGHT

Numbers lie. Sure, Panama is small, covering only 30,000 square miles at the narrow waist of Central America; and sure, its bird list is huge, approaching 1,000 species in an area slightly smaller than the state of Indiana. That's a new bird every 3 square miles, and first-time visitors can be forgiven their air-castle dreams of dropping in on this small and beautiful country to pick up a few hundred lifers.

Reality is harsher, and the birding somewhat harder, than Panama's startlingly high birds-to-landmass ratio might suggest. A nice flat rectangle of 30,000 square miles, crisscrossed by a regular network of roads, might be convenient, but Panama's blessing is simultaneously its challenge: a startling diversity of habitats and topography, from beaches to jungle, from savannah to steep mountains—all stretched out over nearly 500 slender miles, from the trackless Darien in the east to the lushly forested mountains of the Chiriqui in the west. The birds are out there, but getting to them, and getting to them efficiently, is another matter.

Panama La Verde is a consortium of local businesses providing the expertise and services that visiting birders, individuals and groups alike, need to take advantage of the country's overwhelming avian riches. Incorporating comfortable off-the-beaten-track accommodations

and state and private preserves, the Panama La Verde circuits offer both birders and their non-birding companions a memorable experience among the birds of the American tropics.

Panama City

Panama's capital and largest city is a rapidly growing metropolis at the southern (Pacific) end of the Panama Canal. In spite of the bustle of commerce and tourism, this modern city still preserves several impressively productive birding sites, most notably the Metropolitan Nature Park. Just a few minutes' drive from the La Verde consortium's gracious and comfortable Albrook Inn, these 550 forested acres set among the rambling houses of the former Canal Zone serve as an urban oasis, a prime birding site, and an outdoor laboratory for a number of research projects conducted by scientific and conservation institutions from Panama and abroad.

The Metropolitan is crossed by several well-maintained, level paths. There is one somewhat steeper trail, but those undertaking the short climb are rewarded with spectacular views of the city, the canal, and raptors rising on the late-morning sun; a May visit produced close looks at a pair of Short-tailed Hawks among the abundant Turkey Vultures.

Wandering the quiet trails and roads through the Metropolitan can be a study in surprise. Long-legged waders, including the breathtaking little Capped Heron, pass over on their way to and from local roosts, and Pale-vented Pigeons hoot their simple but pleasing songs. Surprising

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breeders in this fine urban enclave include Gray-headed Chachalaca, Crane Hawk, and Blue-crowned Motmot; we're in the tropics now! A fine assortment of tyrannids and tanagers are also present, making a morning in the Metropolitan an ideal introduction to any Panama trip—and an excellent destination in itself for layover birders with limited time.

Cerro Azul

Just a short drive from Panama City are the gentle forested hills of Cerro Azul. The Hostal Casa de Campo is the lodging of choice here; its wide verandas and luxuriant gardens (and leisurely breakfasts) have tempted at least one guest to linger well past the scheduled departure. Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds join battle with Bananaquits over the abundant flowers, and Streaked Saltators sing from the twigs of dead trees left standing for the birds. Streaked Flycatchers are common nesters under the neighbors' eaves; an even more dramatic predator, White Hawks are occasionally seen circling over the lodge property in the afternoon. The real stars, though, are the Black-striped Sparrows, adults of which park their gawky fledglings on the sidewalks while they feed and bathe in the garden, oblivious to the admiration of their human observers.

Cerro Jefe is easily reached from the Casa de Campo. The target species here is Black-and-yellow Tanager, a handsomely clad bird that more than lives up to its name and is relatively easy to find in the windswept trees of this hill's wild slopes.

Panama La Verde can arrange a guide and transportation for business travelers and others with only a day or two to devote to birding the Panama City area; combining the two Cerros with the Metropolitan Nature Park should produce a good cross-section of the specialties of the area—and will leave any but the most jaded birder wishing for more—much more—time.

Los Quetzales

Elegant and comfortable, and endowed with what is perhaps the finest kitchen in all of Panama, Los Quetzales Ecolodge and Spa nestles into the rugged hills of extreme western Panama's Chiriqui. A fast hour's flight to the provincial city of David is followed by a pleasant hour's drive to the lodge, which features both free-standing rooms around a central garden and, a short distance farther uphill, wonderfully remote and wonderfully birdy cabins for the solitude-seeking birder.

When the uphill cabins are unoccupied, visiting



Yellow-thighed Finch, endemic to Costa Rica and western Panama.
Photo © Rick Wright, wingsbirds.com.

birders can sit in the shade of their porches to watch such specialties as Slaty Finch, the improbably beautiful Large-footed Finch, and a good variety of hummingbirds including Violet Sabrewing, Stripe-tailed Hummingbird, and White-throated and Purple-throated Mountain-Gems; Green-fronted Lancebill was nesting on the wall of one of the cabins in May.

And yes, there are quetzals. The guides employed by Los Quetzales keep careful track of the Ecolodge's resplendent eponyms, and know from day to day which individuals are

showing well and which are at too sensitive a stage in the breeding process to be disturbed by birders.

Such concern for the birds is characteristic of every one of the La Verde circuit's guides, and it does the heart good to see them weighing the bird's welfare against the visiting birder's "need" for a closer look. Dusky Nightjars, a highly desirable species known only from the mountains of Costa Rica and western Panama, sing every evening from the steep cliffs across from the ecolodge, and though the guides do use spotlights to show visitors the birds, their caution is exemplary, and the persistence of this highly localized species here is due largely to the restraint they exercise.

Sierra Llorona

One thing shared by all of the localities on the La Verde circuits is the birdiness on the hotel grounds themselves; birders with physical limitations, or birders who have simply had enough of walking and hiking, will find more than a sufficient plenitude of birds in the garden of their lodge to occupy a leisurely morning.

Nowhere is this more true than at Sierra Llorona on Panama's Caribbean slope, where carefully preserved snags attract everything from Chestnut-mandibled Toucan to Black-breasted Puffbird, and the well-stocked feeders are swarmed by Western Long-tailed Hermits, White-necked Jacobins, and Violet-crowned Woodnymphs. Mottled Owls sing drowsy birders to sleep, and early walks on the trails are likely to be interrupted by such wonders as Double-toothed Kite, Stripe-throated Hermit, and Tawny-crested Tanager. On a May visit, an hour's stroll along the lodge driveway became a morning's excursion, each sighting more excit-



Pearl Kite, a beautiful small raptor that is increasing in the Panamanian lowlands.
Photo © Rick Wright, wingsbirds.com.

ing than the last, and each calling for “just a few more yards,” until the hands of our watches had sped way beyond the appointed hour and our vehicles threatened to speed beyond us on their way to our next birding destination.

El Valle

All but the flattest countries claim their “Little Switzerland,” it seems, but the soft green hills and charming architecture of Panama’s El Valle de Anton make that region’s claim more plausible than most. The beautifully landscaped and aptly named Park Eden B&B is the perfect place to enjoy the valley’s avifauna. Rufous-capped Warblers bathe happily in the water features, and mid-May found a busy pair of Common Tody-Flycatchers constructing a nest just above the bench where I drowsed. A neighborhood stroll was good for Social and Panama Flycatchers, while the expansive gardens harbored good numbers of noisy and conspicuous Western Slaty-Antshrikes.

Lodging at the Park Eden is scattered across a number of comfortable and imaginatively decorated small houses, all of them with full kitchens and inviting front porches for leisurely afternoons in the rain. It is well worth-while to rise from the veranda,



Map © CIA Factbook.

however. El Gaital Nature Preserve is just a short drive away, and the gentle walk up the preserve trails can produce such dramatic species as Swallow-tailed Kite and Tawny-crested Tanager, the latter one of those many birds far more impressive in life than in the field guides.

The Panama La Verde birding circuits are an unparalleled way to gain access, efficiently and economically, to the varied habitats and diverse bird species of a fascinating tropical country.

More importantly, though, taking advantage of the services offered by La Verde demonstrates to consortium members and area residents the direct connection between ecotourism and the well-being of local economies—a demonstration that will be vital to conservation efforts in the American tropics in years to come.

Rick Wright is the former Editor of Winging It and the Managing Director of WINGS (wingsbirds.com), offering birding tours to Panama and around the world. He can be reached at rick@wingsbirds.com. For more information about the accommodations mentioned here and about group and custom tours on the Panama La Verde circuits, visit panamalaverde.com and www.recenturpanama.com.

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tance and back with little effort. And because the Epoch is the first binocular to focus as close as 36 inches, you can see amazing detail in butterflies just three feet away.

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