

## PANAMA

### Including Darien

#### *The richest avifauna in Central America*

**Saturday 14th January – Saturday 4th February 2012 (22 days)**

**Leader: Matt Denton**

**Group Size Limit: 8**

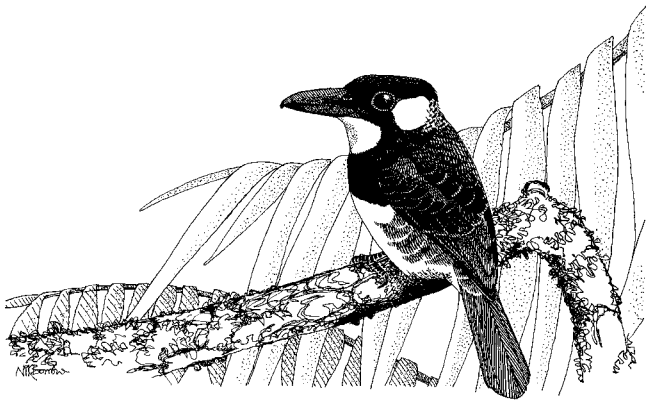
**Tour Category: Easy to Moderate for the most part (one fairly demanding hike up Cerro Pirre in Darien)**

#### **Part I: Central & Western Panama**

**Saturday 14th January – Tuesday 24th January (11 days)**

#### **Part II: Darien**

**Tuesday 24th January – Saturday 4th February (12 days)**



*Black-breasted Puffbird (Nik Borrow)*

The S-shaped isthmus of Panama, barely more than 50 miles across at its narrowest and no more than 130 miles at its widest, is one of the great crossroads of the world. In Spanish times it was the base for conquering expeditions northwards and southwards along the Pacific Coasts, and since the early days of the 20th century the impressive Panama canal has saved countless ships from having to make the long and hazardous voyage around Cape Horn.

What fewer people realize is that this narrow strip of land has played a key role as a faunal exchange route between the North and South American continents. The land that was to become southern Central America first emerged as a chain of volcanic islands some 50 million years ago, serving as faunal stepping stones for more mobile groups of creatures. Only within

the last 3-4 million years a continuous land bridge was formed, allowing for even more life forms to pass between continents. Typical Neotropical bird families such as tinamous, jacamars, toucans, woodcreepers, antbirds, manakins and cotingas, began to move into Central America where today they diminish in numbers of species from south to north. Other groups including owls, swallows, wrens and thrushes, spread in the other direction and conquered South America. Meanwhile speciation in both areas continued unabated, and today Panama holds a diverse and fascinating mixture of Central and South American elements, in addition to a number of birds that are endemic or are only shared with adjacent Columbia, giving it the richest avifauna (an amazing 900 or so species

occur in this small but bird-rich country) in Central America.

This remarkable itinerary makes for the most comprehensive tour of Panama available, producing more of the country's many specialities than any other. Easy birding with good accommodation and roads in central and western Panama contrast with a wilderness experience in Darien.

The tour can either be taken as a whole or as either of two parts (Central & Western Panama or Darien).

We shall begin our journey through Panama by sampling the rich forests of the Canal Area. Here the overwhelming diversity of Pipeline Road will keep us busy for a long time. We are likely to amass a very large birdlist here, but amongst these the highlights are likely to include such colourful denizens of the forest as the stunning Blue Cotinga and the lethargic Green Shrike-Vireo, as well as antswarm professionals like Spotted, Bicoloured and Ocellated Antbirds, and restricted-range specialities such as Garden Emerald, Black-breasted Puffbird, Cinnamon Woodpecker, the awkward Southern Bentbill and Spectacled Antpitta.

Next we travel to western Panama where a visit to the David area will allow us to see a number of species endemic to western Panama and Costa Rica, including such mega-specialities as

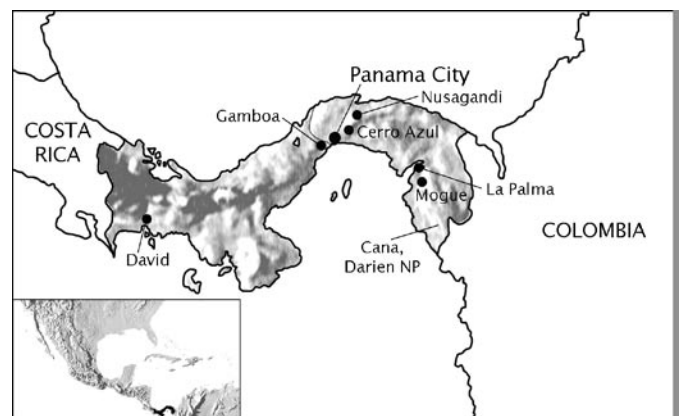
Veraguas Mango and Yellow-green Finch (two of Panama's few true endemics), Chiriqui Yellowthroat and White-throated Mountain-gem.

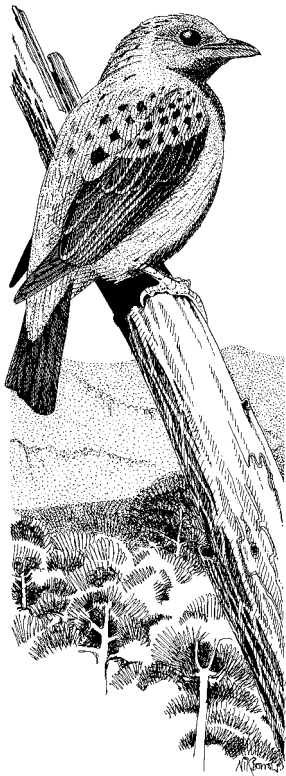
After returning to Panama City we will explore a variety of habitats within easy reach of the city, where new birds should include the endemic Yellow-green Tyrannulet and the lovely Rosy Thrush-Tanager, and then head into the hills to the east of the Canal Zone, bound for Nusagandi. This area holds some great birds, including Black Antshrike, the very localized Speckled Antshrike, the near-endemic Sulphur-rumped Tanager and the enigmatic Broad-billed Sapayoa, a suboscine of uncertain affinities that may represent a distinct family.

The cool heights of Cerro Jefe and Cerro Azul support a totally different set of submontane birds, including such special birds as Violet-capped Hummingbird, Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker and Tacarcuna Bush-Tanager. By the time we return to Panama City we will have seen an extraordinary variety of birds, including many specialities.

The second part of this fantastic tour concentrates on remote Darien. One of the classic Neotropical wilderness birding destinations, for those who have experienced a visit to the Darien, it is surely one of their most cherished birding memories.

In 1513, Vasco Nunez de Balboa led an expedition on a 25-day trek through the jungle





*Blue Cotinga (Nik Borrow)*

to the western coast of what later became known as Darien, proving that the land in this area was a narrow isthmus between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The Spaniards called the trail that developed after Balboa's pioneering efforts El Camino Real (The Royal Road).

The remote mountain from which Balboa first sighted the Pacific Ocean lies deep within the vast wilderness of the superb Darien National Park, where the isolated mountain tops have witnessed the evolution of a number of endemic and little known birds in the cool cloud and elfin forests that cloak their slopes. Furthermore, an interesting range of primarily South American species 'spill over' into the park's verdant lowland jungles, including Harpy Eagle, three species of colourful macaws and a host of smaller but equally captivating birds.

Forming a natural boundary between Central and South America, the vast wilderness of the Darien harbours some 60 species of Panamanian birds found nowhere else in the country, quite a few of which are endemic or are only shared with a tiny fraction of neighbouring Colombia.

Our journey begins in the coastal lowlands where a narrow tributary takes us to a remote yet hospitable native village. On the rocky slopes above the village stand large emergent Cuipo trees, ideal for nesting Harpy Eagles, whilst the surrounding forest holds good numbers of arboreal sloths that provide plentiful food for a growing Harpy. The handsome Black Oropendola, occurring only in Panama and neighbouring Colombia, is also to be found here. A recently developed ecotourism project with the Emberá nation allows us to visit a very traditional community and experience a remote and little-visited corner of the Darien.

This short but fascinating experience in the lowlands will be followed by a much more comprehensive exploration of the forests surrounding Cana and Cerro Pirre, which are renowned for their rich bird life. The park boasts a galaxy of species, several of which have been extirpated from most areas in the rest of the country but which are still common here, such as the awesome Crested Guan, the emerald Great Green Macaw and the gorgeous Red-throated Caracara, whose raucous and far-carrying calls seem unbelievable until heard for oneself. Of particular note are such sought-after Darien endemics and near-endemics as Russet-crowned Quail-Dove, Rufous-cheeked Hummingbird, Pirre Warbler, Green-naped Tanager, Pirre Bush-Tanager and Beautiful Treerunner. We will also be on the lookout for the extremely wary Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo, though we shall think

ourselves lucky if we manage to see this reclusive forest floor dweller.

Birdquest has operated tours to Panama, including Darien, since 1998.

### Itinerary

**Day 1** Morning flight from London bound for Panama City, arriving in the evening. From here we will drive the short distance to the Gamboa section of the Canal Area for a three nights stay.

**Days 2-3** In the morning we will wake up to the jungle sounds surrounding our lodge. Fabulous male Blue Cotingas perch atop tall trees showing off their resplendent plumage in the early morning sunlight, and we shall also hope to have good views of the relentlessly vocal but sluggish Green Shrike-Vireo. Red-lore and Mealy Amazons noisily depart from their roosts, while much smaller Orange-chinned Parakeets often congregate in fruiting trees. The tiny Brown-capped Tyrannulet and equally tiny Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher deliver their monotonous songs from the thick foliage and we shall scan the treetops for Northern Violaceous Trogon, the sluggish Black-breasted Puffbird, gaudy Keel-billed and Chestnut-mandibled Toucans, and Masked and Black-crowned Tityras. Mixed canopy flocks regularly come through, often containing Yellow-throated Vireo, Lesser Greenlet, Tennessee, Chestnut-sided, Golden-winged and Bay-breasted Warblers, Plain-coloured, Golden-hooded, Blue-grey and Palm Tanagers, Blue Dacnis, Red-legged Honeycreeper and Thick-billed Euphonia. As the air warms up we will scan the skies for such raptors as Black and Turkey Vultures, Double-toothed and Grey-headed Kites, Short-tailed Hawk and Black Hawk-Eagle, as well as foraging Short-tailed and Band-rumped Swifts. The local hummingbird feeders are also of interest. Dominated

by pugnacious White-necked Jacobins, they are also visited by Black-throated Mangos, Violet-bellied and Blue-chested Hummingbirds, and White-vented Plumbeleteers.

As one travels across Panama from the Pacific coast towards the low Continental Divide, the forests gradually become more humid and we shall be concentrating our efforts on the large Parque Nacional Soberanía, which was created to safeguard the Panama Canal from the danger of silting up as a result of deforestation and subsequent erosion. Perhaps the most fabled of the Central Panama birding locales is the old Pipeline Road, a scenic and little travelled pathway through superb forest in the heart of the park. Nearly 400 species of birds have been recorded here, a richness that rivals that of the entire European continent. In addition to an endless variety of more widespread birds, there are a good number of species with a rather more restricted distribution, such as Garden Emerald, Cinnamon Woodpecker, the awkward Southern Bentbill and the endearing Spectacled Antpitta. We shall enjoy sampling the Canal Area's astounding variety, and we will rise early to be able to witness the burst of bird activity that follows the breaking of day. As the sky lightens Cocoa Woodcreepers (split from Buff-throated) loudly proclaim their possession of a territory, and while the sun still struggles with the horizon the resonant hoots of the Blue-crowned Motmot resound through the forest and Bay Wrens give away their presence with their deafening duets. At this time of day we may even hear the characteristic tune of the splendid Pheasant Cuckoo, one of the ultimate Neotropic prizes. In many other Latin countries rare and only known from a handful of specimens, this exquisite brood parasite is more easily found here than anywhere else. Even so this vocal but shy bird can be



*Black-breasted Puffbird (Nik Borrow)*

very hard to see, though with a dose of luck and through the judicious use of a tape it may be lured into view. Venturing farther into the forest, an incessant squeaking may betray the presence of a singing assembly of Long-billed Hermits. Constantly wagging their white-tipped tails, the indefatigable males spend a large part of their day vying for the female's attention. Another lek-forming species is the electrifying Golden-collared Manakin, whose spectacular displays include loud snaps remarkably resembling the noise made by breaking a dry twig. All of a sudden, the sound of desperate leaps and frantic scuffling may herald the arrival of an army ant swarm. Columns of soldiers and hunters advance across the forest floor, attacking any grasshopper, beetle or other small creature they may find along the way. Inevitably they are accompanied by a set of professional ant-following birds, who noisily partake in the carnage and swallow up those beasts that depend on flight for escaping the raiding ants. The typical gang of 'professionals' in these forests consists of Plain-brown Woodcreeper and the faithful trio of Spotted, Bicoloured and Ocellated Antbirds.

Sometimes they are joined by a sluggish Broad-billed Motmot, a hungry Northern Barred Woodcreeper, the rail-like Black-faced Antthrush or the fierce-looking Grey-headed Tanager. As we quietly stand by near the head of the antswarm, these bizarre birds can be surprisingly tame and confiding, allowing us to witness one of the most amazing phenomena in the life of the rain forest.

A wealth of other exciting birds can be found in this densely vegetated world, including Great and Little Tinamous, Tiny Hawk, Plumbeous Kite, Grey-headed Chachalaca, Pale-vented and Short-billed Pigeons, Grey-chested Dove, Brown-hooded and Blue-headed Parrots, Pauraque, Band-tailed Barbthroat, Stripe-throated Hermit, Violet-crowned Woodnymph, Blue-chested, Snowy-bellied and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, Purple-crowned Fairy, Western White-tailed, Black-throated, Slaty-tailed and Black-tailed Trogons, White-necked and White-whiskered Puffbirds, Great Jacamar, Collared Aracari, Black-cheeked, Cinnamon and Crimson-crested Woodpeckers, Plain Xenops, Ruddy, Wedge-billed and Black-striped

Woodcreepers, Fasciated and Western Slaty Antshrikes, Moustached, Checker-throated, White-flanked and Dot-winged Antwrens, Chestnut-backed Antbird, Paltry Tyrannulet, Forest and Grey Elaenias, Rufous Mourner, Ochre-bellied, Ruddy-tailed, Sulphur-rumped, Acadian and Dusky-capped Flycatchers, Golden-crowned Spadebill, Flammulated Attila (split from Bright-rumped), Speckled Mourner, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Rufous Piha, Blue-crowned and Red-capped Manakins, Buff-breasted and Song Wrens, Fulvous-vented Euphonia, White-shouldered and Summer Tanagers, Slate-coloured and Blue-black Grosbeaks, Scarlet-rumped and Yellow-rumped Caciques, and Crested and Chestnut-headed Oropendolas. Among the mammals we may encounter are Central American Agouti, White-nosed Coati and Mantled Howler Monkey. We will also stop at a small marsh where we will look for such aquatic birds as Anhinga, Rufescent Tiger-Heron, White-throated Crane, Purple Gallinule and Green Kingfisher, while nearby open areas often hold Yellow-headed Caracara, Ruddy Ground-Dove, White-tipped Dove, Smooth-billed Ani, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Great Kiskadee, Social and Rusty-margined Flycatchers, Tropical Kingbird, Grey-breasted Martin, Mangrove and Southern Rough-winged Swallows, Variable Seedeater and the ubiquitous Great-tailed Grackle. A nocturnal foray near our lodge may yield Crested and Spectacled Owls, Chocó Screech-Owl, Common and Great Potoos, or even the arboreal Kinkajou.

**Day 4** After spending the morning in the Canal Area we will take an afternoon flight from Panama City to David in western Panama's Chiriqui province for a three nights stay. The drier lowlands in the vicinity of David airport

offer an interesting selection of more open country birds, and here we may well find Brown-throated Parakeet, the endemic Veraguas Mango (split from Green-breasted), Barred Antshrike, Fork-tailed Flycatcher and Blue-black Grassquit.

**Days 5-6** East of David, the windy slopes of Cerro Colorado are home to two more of Panama's few true endemics, the spritely Yellow-green Finch and the uncommon Glow-throated Hummingbird. The former is fairly straightforward to find but we will need real luck to come across the hummingbird, as adult males are scarce and females and immature males are very hard to distinguish from the closely-related and much commoner Scintillant Hummingbird. The cool cloudforests here are also home to some higher elevation specialities shared only with adjacent Costa Rica, such as the noisy Prong-billed Barbet, Ruddy Treerunner, Buffy Tuftedcheek, Streak-breasted Treehunter, the retiring Silvery-fronted Tapaculo, Black-faced Solitaire, Mountain Thrush, Black-and-yellow Silky-Flycatcher, Collared Redstart, Spangle-cheeked Tanager, Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Sooty-capped Bush-Tanager and Slaty Flowerpiercer, in addition to some more widespread species such as Mountain Elaenia, Yellowish Flycatcher and Blue-hooded (or Elegant) Euphonia. We will also visit the scenic Fortuna road that winds up the lower mountains of Chiriqui and which offers some of the country's best birding. Constructed along a trans-Panama pipeline, the road gives access to the Continental Divide and the forests on the adjacent Caribbean slope of Bocas del Toro province. The lush forests and cooler weather near the divide make for pleasant birding, and here we will primarily be looking for the tantalizing Three-



*Spectacled Owl (Nik Borrow)*

wattled Bellbird and a number of other specialities such as Red-fronted Parrotlet, White-bellied and Purple-throated Mountain-gems, Magenta-throated Woodstar, Lattice-tailed Trogon, Violet-throated Toucanet (split from Emerald), Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Blue-and-gold Tanager, Black-thighed Grosbeak and the secretive Sooty-faced Finch. On a clear day the views of the Bocas del Toro Archipelago, the Chiriqui Grande Lagoon and the forested mountains and lowlands must rank among some of Central America's most superb scenery. Other more widespread species we may well encounter in this area include Barred Hawk, White-collared Swift, Red-headed Barbet, Common Tufted-Flycatcher, Blue-and-white Swallow, Azure-hooded Jay, Ochraceous and Stripe-breasted Wrens, Pale-vented Thrush, Tropical Parula, Chestnut-capped and Three-striped Warblers, Emerald, Silver-throated, Flame-coloured and Passerini's Tanagers, Common Bush-Tanager, the endemic *hypophaeus* race of the Yellow-throated Bush-Tanager (perhaps deserving of specific status as Drab-breasted Bush-Tanager), Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Yellow-throated Brush-Finch and Eastern Meadowlark. Road and weather conditions permitting, we will have a

pre-dawn search for the shy Bare-shanked Screech-Owl. We should have time for a short visit to the Caribbean lowlands where we might find Crimson-fronted Parakeet, Groove-billed Ani, Tropical Pewee, Brown Jay, Olive-backed Euphonia, Red-breasted Blackbird and Montezuma Oropendola.

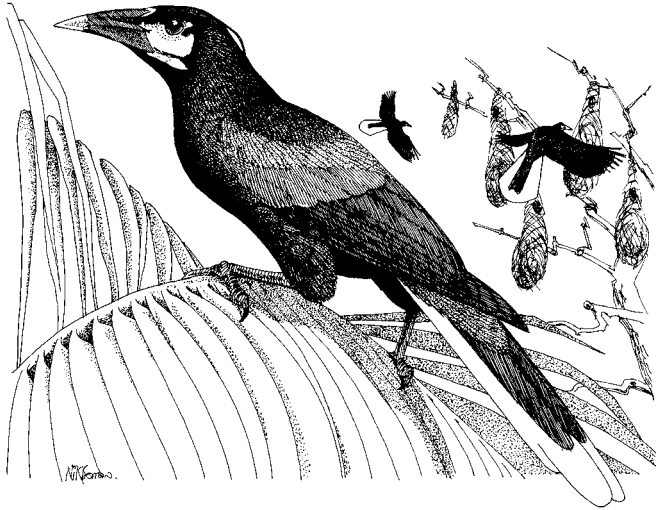
**Day 7** Early this morning we will visit an area of wet pastureland in the David area where Chiriqui Yellowthroat (restricted to western Panama and easternmost Costa Rica) can regularly be found. Subject to permission being granted, we will also visit a nearby private garden in search of the endemic White-throated Mountain-gem. Afterwards we will take a flight back to Panama City for an overnight stay. With the northwest trade winds dropping their moisture chiefly on the Atlantic side of the Continental Divide, the Pacific lowlands surrounding Panama City are characterized by a pronounced dry season during this time of year. Here semi-deciduous woodland prevails, and we shall concentrate on some of the best remaining patches of this habitat. In the cool morning hours the flashy but secretive Rosy Thrush-Tanager delivers its liquid song from dense thickets, whilst White-bellied Antbirds announce themselves with their accelerating crescendos.

Lance-tailed Manakins display in well concealed leks, and as mixed canopy flocks start assembling, we shall thoroughly scan these for uncommon Yellow-green Tyrannulet, a Panama endemic. Other birds we can expect to see here are Roadside and Grey Hawks, Squirrel Cuckoo, Lineated Woodpecker, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Dusky Antbird, Southern Beardless, Yellow-crowned and Yellow Tyrannulets, Slate-headed and Common Tody-Flycatchers, Yellow-olive, Great Crested, Boat-billed and Streaked Flycatchers, Rufous-breasted, Rufous-and-white, Plain and House Wrens, Tropical Gnatcatcher, Clay-coloured Thrush, Tropical Mockingbird, Yellow-green Vireo, Scrub and Golden-fronted Greenlets, Crimson-backed Tanager, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Streaked and Buff-throated Saltators, Ruddy-breasted Seedeater and Yellow-backed and Baltimore Orioles. At Summit Ponds we will look for the crepuscular Boat-billed Heron and Lesser Kiskadee, while nearby flowering hedgerows and scrub may hold the restricted-range Sapphire-throated Hummingbird and Northern Scrub-Flycatcher. Along the Pacific coastline, myriads of wintering shorebirds line the mudflats of Panama Bay. After setting up our telescopes we shall scan these hordes for Wilson's and Semipalmated Plovers, Black-necked Stilt, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Hudsonian Whimbrel (split from Eurasian), Marbled Godwit, Surf-bird, Short-billed Dowitcher and Solitary, Spotted, Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers. Great Blue, Little Blue and Tricoloured Herons grace the scene as they wade in the shallows, whilst overhead the elegant silhouettes of Magnificent Frigatebirds give a tropical touch to it all. Also often found here are Brown Pelican, Neotropic Cormorant, Great and Snowy Egrets, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, White Ibis, Osprey, Laughing

and Herring Gulls, and Royal and Gull-billed Terns. In a patch of nearby mangroves Straight-billed Woodcreepers and Panama Flycatchers make their home, and some 'pishing' here may also stir up a flurry of wintering warblers, including American Redstart, Northern Waterthrush, and Black-and-white, Prothonotary and Yellow Warblers, whilst the resident Mangrove Warbler should also be present. With a modicum of luck we will also encounter Common Black-Hawk and we will scan nearby open areas for Southern Lapwing.

**Day 8** This morning we will make an early start for Nusagandi for a two nights stay at Burbayar Lodge, set amidst the green hills of the Serranía San Blas, situated to the east of Panama City. We will be able to spend most of the day at Nusagandi.

**Day 9** The tall foothill forests of Nusagandi are home to some of Panama's most prized birds. Along a narrow mountain trail we shall enter the realm of perhaps the most primitive of all antbirds, the very localized Speckled Antshrike. Another elusive bird inhabiting these solemn forests is the Broad-billed Sapayoa, a subspecies of uncertain affinities that may represent a distinct family. Among flocks of noisy Carmiol's Tanagers and other understorey birds, we shall diligently check out all drab-olive-coloured candidates in case they are this enigmatic species. Other species found in this bird-rich habitat are American Swallow-tailed Kite, Semiplumbeous and Broad-winged Hawks, Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon, Red-throated Caracara, Olivaceous and Spotted Woodcreepers, Russet Antshrike, Spot-crowned Antvireo, Dull-mantled Antbird, Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, Long-tailed Tyrant, Thrush-like Schiffornis (the form here possibly representing a separate species, Brownish Schiffornis),



*Black Oropendolas (Nik Borrow)*

Stripe-throated Wren, Tawny-faced Gnatwren, Bananaquit, Green and Shining Honeycreepers, Tawny-crested and Dusky-faced Tanagers, and the near-endemic Sulphur-rumped Tanager. More elusive denizens of these foothill forests but within the realm of possibility include Plumbeous Hawk, the very shy Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo, Purplish-backed Quail-Dove, Black-headed Antthrush and Black-crowned Antpitta.

**Day 10** After some final birding at Nusagandi and after reluctantly parting from our hosts at Burbayar Lodge, we shall visit a patch of woodland in the upper Bayano Valley where we should find the restricted-range Black Antshrike in addition to some more widespread species such as Jet Antshrike. We may also come across the elegant White-tailed Kite during the journey to Cerro Azul where we will overnight.

**Day 11** The cool windy heights of Cerro Jefe and Cerro Azul are home to an interesting set of foothill species, some of which are only shared with the inaccessible summits of Cerro Brewster and Cerro Tacarcuna in Eastern Panama. The top of this isolated mountain is clad

in a fascinating elfin forest dominated by *Colpothrinax cooki*, a unique species of palm. Here our primary targets are Violet-capped Hummingbird, Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker and Tacarcuna Bush-Tanager, but in addition we may see Scaled Pigeon, Violet-headed Hummingbird, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Grey-breasted Wood-Wren, Long-billed Gnatwren, Slate-throated Redstart, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, White-vented and Tawny-capped Euphonias, Highland Hepatic and Black-and-yellow Tanagers, Black-striped Sparrow, Lesser Seed-Finch and Yellow-faced Grassquit. In more sheltered forest patches downslope we may find mixed flocks containing Speckled and Bay-headed Tanagers, and we even have a chance of finding the elusive Rufous-winged Tanager amongst them. If we are particularly fortunate we will even encounter a small flock of the elusive Blue-fronted Parrotlet. Later we will return to Panama City for an overnight stay.

For those taking Part I of the tour, the tour ends at Panama City on the evening of Day 11. For those joining Part II of the tour, the tour begins at Panama City on the evening of Day 11.

**Day 12** This morning a short flight will take us into the lowland wilderness area of Darien province and to its capital, the small town of La Palma, located near the mouth of the Tuira river. Boarding our specially equipped boat, we will begin our journey to the Emberá village of Mogue (the Emberá are one of two indigenous peoples in the roadless Darien jungle). The passage up the Mogue river will be dependant on the tides and will take us through rich mangrove forests where we should see Striated and Cocoi Herons, Roseate Spoonbill, Common Black-Hawk, Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers, and Greater Ani. Upon arriving at the village, where we will stay for two nights, we will partake in the necessary formalities and presentations with members of the community. After that we can commence our exploration of the area.

**Day 13** Our birding schedule at Mogue will be largely dictated by the current location of a nesting Harpy Eagle. Getting views of this magnificent creature will obviously be our highest priority, and sometimes it can take some time to see an adult as well as the young bird at the nest. Birds abound in this area and other local specialities include Orange-crowned Oriole and the restricted-range Double-banded Greytail and Black Oropendola. Other more widespread species we are likely to see during our stay at Mogue include Striped Cuckoo, Black-tailed Trogon, Spot-breasted Woodpecker, Black-tailed Flycatcher, One-coloured Becard and White-eared Conebill. Humboldt's Sapphire (split from Blue-headed) has recently been recorded here, but we would be very fortunate to see this rarely observed species.

**Day 14** Bidding goodbye to our Emberá hosts, we will retrace our route downriver before taking a short charter flight to Cana. The flight will

take us to the 'last frontier' of Central America, the immense Darien National Park. As way below us the Pan-American Highway ends some 30 miles (50 kilometres) short of the Colombian border, we enter a seemingly endless wilderness of rainforest-clad valleys and hills stretching as far as the eye can see. The looming slopes of the 5168ft (1575m) Cerro Pirre will soon appear in front of us, and a tiny speck near the foot of this isolated mountain will gradually grow into the small airstrip of the old Cana gold-mining camp. In the afternoon we shall begin our exploration of this fabulous area, where we will stay for seven nights, spending a total of five nights at a simple but comfortable lodge at the largely abandoned settlement and two nights camping high on the slopes of Cerro Pirre. We shall start our explorations at the Cana clearing, where flowering *Erythrina* trees attract a colourful slice of tropical birdlife and industrious caciques and oropendolas build their colonial nests. Many hummingbirds feed on the showy red flowers, and possibilities include White-necked Jacobin, Black-throated Mango, Blue-throated Goldentail, Violet-bellied, Blue-chested and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, Green Thorntail, Rufous-crested Coquette, Purple-crowned Fairy and Purple-throated Woodstar.

**Days 15-20** Once the site of a thriving gold-mine – some 20,000 people reputedly lived here in the 17th century, and off-and-on mining activities continued until some hundred years ago – the mining area around Cana has through time been subject to localized human disturbance and forest clearing, now resulting in a complex mosaic of forest in various stages of regeneration, all adding to its avian diversity. A chaotic proliferation of weedy shrubs and tangled vines at the edge of the airstrip houses Little

*Harpy Eagle (Nik Borrow)*

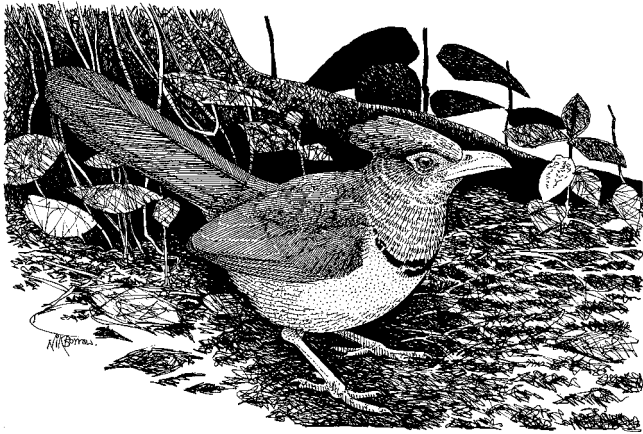
Cuckoo, Slaty Spinetail, Pacific Antwren (split from Streaked), an endemic race of Yellow-bellied Elaenia and Black-bellied Wren, while from an emergent perch a spritely Long-tailed Tyrant often pops up and down like a yo-yo. Tiny or Bicoloured Hawks, adept predators, may occasionally be seen hunting small passerines that frequent the forest border. Such edge species include Smooth-billed Ani, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Lineated Woodpecker, Dusky Antbird, Yellow-crowned and Paltry Tyrannulets, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Rusty-margined and Streaked Flycatchers, Clay-coloured Thrush, Thick-billed and Fulvous-vented Euphonias, Plain-coloured, Golden-hooded, Blue-grey, Palm, White-shouldered, Summer and Crimson-backed Tanagers, Scarlet-thighed and Blue Dacnises, Green, Shining, Purple and Red-legged Honeycreepers, Tennessee, Chestnut-sided, Bay-breasted and Black-and-white Warblers, Slate-throated Redstart, Lesser Greenlet, Buff-throated Saltator, Black-striped Sparrow, and Yellow-

backed and Baltimore Orioles, whilst the grassy edges hold ambulatory species like Little Tinamou, White-throated Crane, and White-tipped Dove. As the thermals start rising we shall be looking out for such magnificent raptors as King Vulture, White Hawk and Black and Ornate Hawk-Eagles. In the late afternoon we may see the immaculate Black-tipped Cotinga flying into a fruiting tree or we may find a party of Grey-headed Chachalacas cackling in the treetops. The airstrip is also an excellent look-out for seeing magnificent flights of Chestnut-fronted, Red-and-green and Blue-and-yellow Macaws against a lush backdrop of forested hills.

Entering tall second growth forest along the endless Boca de Cupe trail, we shall examine exposed snags for the localized Dusky-backed Jacamar and dense understorey for the rarely seen Black-billed Flycatcher. Near shady creeks, loud and emphatic calls may draw our attention to the odd Brownish Twistwing, and where the terror of an army ant swarm

stalks the forest floor we shall be on the alert for the striking Bare-crowned Antbird. With a modicum of luck we may even find Panama's most beautiful antbird, the dazzling Black-crowned Antpitta, attending these raiding columns along with Plain-brown Woodcreeper, and Spotted, Bicoloured and Ocellated Antbirds. We will also be on the lookout for the extremely wary Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo, though we shall be very fortunate if we manage to see this reclusive forest floor dweller. Penetrating deeper along the trail, the forest becomes taller and massive trees flourish amongst a wonderland of vines and woody lianas. High above us, mixed canopy flocks regularly make their rounds and we shall diligently search these for such restricted-range species as Double-banded Greytail, Moustached Antwren and Slate-throated Gnatcatcher, in addition to more widespread ones such as Rufous-winged Antwren, Forest and Grey Elaenias, and Yellow-backed Tanager. In the darkness of the understorey roving flocks of small insectivorous birds are drably cloaked in shades of brown, grey and olive, and amongst these we will look for Checker-throated Antwren, Olivaceous Flatbill, Stripe-throated Wren, Tawny-faced and Long-billed Gnatwrens, and the sluggish Grey-cheeked Nunlet. Listening for its characteristic call note, we shall also seek the Broad-billed Sapayoa accompanying one of these mixed flocks. Spectacled Antpitta and Black-faced Anthrush lurk in the more open understorey of primary forest whilst overhead Semiplumbeous Hawk hunts from the subcanopy. Where the death plunge of a giant tree has created a canyon of light, large gaps quickly sprout an impenetrable tangle of light-thirsty vines and weedy ferns, favoured by the vocal but hard to see Fulvous-bellied Antpitta. This habitat is also used for lekking sites by male Golden-collared Manakins as

they noisily display in order to attract a mate. Other birds that are primarily found at lower elevations include Plumbeous Kite, Bicoloured Hawk, Bat Falcon, the noisy Red-throated Caracara, the impressive Crested Guan, Marbled Wood-Quail, the superb Great Green Macaw, Red-lored and Mealy Amazons, Blue-headed and Brown-hooded Parrots, Green-crowned Woodnymph, Northern Violaceous, Western White-tailed and Black-throated Trogons, Rufous and Broad-billed Motmots, Barred, Pied and White-whiskered Puffbirds, White-fronted Nunbird, the splendid Great Jacamar, the gaudy Spot-crowned Barbet, Keel-billed and Chestnut-mandibled Toucans, Olivaceous Piculet, Red-rumped, Black-cheeked, Cinnamon and Crimson-crested Woodpeckers, Buff-throated, Ruddy and Slaty-winged Foliage-gleaners, Scaly-throated Leaf-tosser, Streaked Xenops (of the sparsely-streaked Darien race), Cocoa, Black-striped and Northern Barred Woodcreepers, Red-billed Scythebill, Great Antshrike, Fasciated and Western Slaty Antshrikes, White-flanked and Dot-winged Antwrens, Dull-mantled Antbird, Sooty-headed Tyrannulet, Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, Southern Bentbill, Golden-crowned Spadebill, Northern Royal-Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Ochre-bellied, Ruddy-tailed, Sulphur-rumped, Acadian, Dusky-capped, Yellow-margined, Grey-capped and Piratic Flycatchers, Flammulated Attila (split from Bright-rumped), Rufous and Speckled Mourners, Cinnamon and White-winged Becards, Blue-crowned Manakin, the garrulous Black-chested Jay, White-headed and Bay Wrens, Southern Nightingale-Wren, White-breasted Wood-Wren, Dagua Thrush (split from White-throated), Yellow-browed Shrike-Vireo, Golden-winged, Mourning and Buff-rumped Warblers, Dusky-faced, Flame-rumped



*Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo (Nik Borrow)*

and Scarlet-browed Tanagers, Swallow-Tanager, Slate-coloured and Blue-black Grosbeaks, Orange-billed Sparrow, Shiny and Giant Cowbirds, Yellow-tailed Oriole and Yellow-rumped, Scarlet-rumped and Yellow-billed Caciques. These forests are also home to the delightful Geoffrey's Tamarin, one of the most beautiful of the New World monkeys. When night falls, heralded by swelling choruses of frogs and crickets, nocturnal birds awaken and as our torches play over the vegetation we may find the eyeshine of a Pauraque, a fierce-looking Chocó Screech-Owl or a well-camouflaged Common Potoo or Great Potoo.

The 5-mile (8-kilometre) trail leading up the slopes of Cerro Pirre for a gain of 800 metres in altitude gives an excellent illustration of how flora and fauna change with altitude. Along the lower ridges, tall palms dominate the forest, and this is where we will soon learn to recognize the frequently heard whistles of the Thrush-like Schiffornis. Gently walking up through fairly open understorey, we shall listen for any rustling of leaves coming from the forest floor, as such sound may indicate the presence of quietly foraging terrestrial birds, such as Black-eared Wood-Quail, Tawny-faced

Quail or Ruddy Quail-Dove. These shy birds often seek shelter upon the first sign of danger, and we shall be lucky if one or more of them grant us good views. Gradually climbing higher, arboreal epiphytes such as bromeliads become more numerous and soon we will hear the first shrill whistles of the Sharpbill, a very patchily distributed bird of still debatable taxonomic position. In mid-storey flamboyant male Golden-headed Manakins advertise their fitness to the coy and cryptically-coloured females and their fascinating displays are a delight to watch. Eventually we shall reach our campsite where we will stay for two nights to enable us to sample the rich birding on Cerro Pirre's middle and upper slopes. As darkness settles in, the solemn silhouettes of the tall trees looming all around us and the deep voices of frogs create a profound feeling of unity with nature. Later in the evening, the eerie cries of Mottled Owls, notorious for sending chills down the spines of lovers in the night, can sometimes be heard. At dawn the magnificent duets of Tody Motmots reverberate through the forest, but these lethargic birds are more easily seen as they unobtrusively perch at eye-level in dense trail-side vegetation. Another characteristic early morning

sound is the sharp bark of the Barred Forest-Falcon, a hard to see but subtly beautiful understorey raptor. As the first flecks of sunlight start dappling the forest interior, we may find a pair of Wing-banded Antbirds noisily flipping over dead leaves on the forest floor or a Rufous-breasted Antthrush revealing its presence by its characteristic double whistle, whilst above us we may see a flashy Collared Trogon hungrily plucking away on protein-packed fruit. At the red-flowering *Cephaelis* bushes that line the trail we shall look for the Rufous-cheeked Hummingbird, only found here and on a few neighbouring peaks. Higher up we shall enter the realm of the Varied Solitaire, certainly the best songster on the mountain and filling the air with its captivating phrases. In dense bamboo tangles lurk the dark shapes of Chocó Tapaculos and another interesting forest-floor denizen we hope to find here is the near-endemic Russet-crowned Quail-Dove. Mixed feeding parties at these elevations can include Red-faced Spinetail, Lineated Foliage-gleaner, Long-tailed Woodcreeper, Brown-billed Scythebill, Plain Antwren, Slaty Antwren, Blackburnian and Canada Warblers, Grey-and-gold Tanager, Orange-bellied Euphonia, Speckled Tanager and the isolated local race of Yellow-green Grosbeak. When approaching the Cerro Pirre summit we enter a strange world of elfin forest, where rain and wind have contorted moss-draped trees into gnarled shapes. Here live some of the Darien's most localized endemics: Pirre Warbler, Green-naped Tanager, Pirre Bush-Tanager and the eloquent but more difficult to find Beautiful Treerunner. Understorey flowers are defended by the abundant and very territorial Greenish Puffleg, otherwise only known in the Andes of South America, and sooner or later

we are likely to encounter a group of Brown-headed Spider Monkeys crashing through the canopy. Other birds we may encounter while exploring the pristine slopes of this mountain are Slaty-backed Forest-Falcon, Great Curassow, Ruddy and Plumbeous Pigeons, Central American Pygmy-Owl (split from Least), Green Hermit, Tooth-billed Hummingbird, Green-crowned Brilliant, Blue-fronted Parrotlet, Yellow-eared Toucanet, Stripe-cheeked and Crimson-bellied Woodpeckers, Tawny-throated Leafosser, Olivaceous and Spotted Woodcreepers, Russet Antshrike, Immaculate Antbird, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Olive-striped, Slaty-capped and White-ringed Flycatchers, Eye-ringed Flatbill, White-throated Spadebill, Western Wood-Pewee, Western Sirystes, Rufous Piha, White-ruffed Manakin, Sooty-headed and Ochraceous Wrens, Grey-breasted Wood-Wren, Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush, Pale-vented Thrush, Yellow-collared Chlorophonia, Lemon-spectacled Tanager and Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch. Harder to see birds include the tiny Ochre-breasted Antpitta, but the most elusive prey of all for the Darien birder is the poorly known Chocó Tinamou. Though we may well hear its haunting whistles we shall be extremely lucky if we manage to glimpse this very shy forest floor denizen. Its much more common and more widespread relative, the sizeable Great Tinamou, is less wary and may well cross our path.

**Day 21** Today we shall reluctantly leave this unique area and return to Panama City for an overnight stay. In the late afternoon we shall go out birding in the vicinity of Panama City.

**Day 22** After a final morning birding around Panama City, the tour will end in the afternoon.

**Accommodation & Road**

**Transport:** The hotels in Gamboa, Panama City and David are of normal Birdquest standard. At Nusagandi we shall be staying at Burbayar Lodge, a simple but comfortable lodge where excellent food is served in a lovely, open-air dining room and where the chalets have private bathrooms. During the second part of the tour, at the Emberá village of Mogue we will stay for two nights

in a simple but reasonably comfortable tented camp (with tents available for twin or single occupancy) set up by our local agents under the thatched-roof of a well-ventilated house on stilts (showers will be available). At Cana we shall be staying for five nights at a simple lodge with shared bathroom facilities and for two nights in a simple but reasonably comfortable tented camp (with tents available for twin

or single occupancy) set up by our local agents on Cerro Pirre. Road transport is by small coach or minibus and 4x4 vehicles. Roads are mostly good but there are a few rough unsurfaced roads to traverse (and the road up Cerro Colorado is very rough).

**Walking:** The walking effort is mostly easy to moderate, but during the second part of the tour there is a long ascent

to reach the camp on Cerro Pirre and some sections are steep (and slippery after rain).

**Climate:** At this season it should be mostly dry and often sunny. It can be quite hot and humid in the lowlands, whilst at higher elevations it can be quite cool, especially at night. There may be some rain.

**Bird Photography:** Opportunities are worthwhile.