

Dave Cox in La Selva, Costa Rica, Wed. Nov. 21, 2012

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Hello everyone. I am on the road again, planning close to 6 weeks in Costa Rica, followed by about 7 weeks in Panama. The flight down from Tucson, via Houston, last Monday was thankfully uneventful, but for the fact we had some very slight turbulence for 2 or 3 minutes shortly after takeoff, during which the captain turned on the "fasten seat-belt sign." He then forgot to turn it off for the next 3 hours. The final 30 minutes, seat-belt sign or no, the back half of the plane was a solid standing line waiting for the restrooms. The San Jose international airport is about 11 miles NW of the city center, sitting along the major highway in the country. Of course, just before my arrival, a too-heavy and oversized crane tried to cross a bridge on the highway, and collapsed it. Now all airport traffic, along with all national traffic from the North, must take single lane local roads through heavily populated suburbs into San Jose. My taxi averaged 7 mph for the 90 minute trip into town, despite chilling and death-defying navigation through stopped traffic.

I stayed in a terrific little hotel in a quiet neighborhood, the Aranjuez, with the most amazing included breakfast buffet – juices, cereals, fresh fruits, assortments of cheeses and half a dozen cold items, several hot dishes, and an omelet bar. My only other meal was dinner each evening; I never was hungry at lunchtime. I did a fair amount of walking through the city's main centers; the weather was overcast and misting, and the city's average color seemed grey. I have heard it is surrounded by gorgeous volcanoes and mountains, but none were visible; I will return for a week next month and hope the weather is better. I did get a couple of super colorful photos in the center which I have included; one at a street-side flower stand, the other of me with some new-found friends.

I traveled by bus a week ago Thursday north to the little village of Puerto Viejo Sarapiquí, and from there by taxi to my first jungle stop at La Selva, the rain forest research station operated by the Organization

for Tropical Studies, an international coalition of universities and researchers. The station is spread out through the forest on both sides of the Puerto Viejo River, over which is a magnificent suspension bridge walking trail. Currently, along with some independent researchers, the University of Illinois and the University of Tulsa have professors with students here, and a large group of researchers from Germany is here studying the over 50 species of bats found around the center. The center sits at the northern edge of a large swath of primary and secondary rainforest along the river, with 28 kilometers of jungle trails, and is adjacent to the huge Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo. The elevation is just 30 meters above sea level. It is supposed to be at the end of the rainy season, but it has rained all night every night but one, and much of each day, though less hard than at night. Fortunately, many of the major trails are concrete, for the forest floor is perpetually mud and standing pools of water. The forest and fruiting trees around the station are home to about 550 species of birds; also commonly seen are the peccaries and, heard even more than seen, the mantled howler monkeys, whose roars fill the forest especially in the early morning and evening.

All the researchers, students and much of the staff stay in old family structures and dormitories on both sides of the river around the station entrance. I requested a private room with bath, and am in a lovely tiled double room, with very good bath, fans, a private back porch balcony over the forest, and high speed Wi-Fi right in the room. The downside is it is 1.3 kilometers northeast of the station along a jungle trail; and I have been the only occupant of these rooms. The always dark trail is certainly spooky enough at night (it gets dark here about 5:45), and no fun in the rain. However during the day it is excellent for birds.

All meals are included, and are served buffet style in the huge open dining hall, where I have met many of the researchers. Plenty of fresh fruit and juice and quite good and abundant food. One must observe the mealtimes of 6am, 11:30am and 6pm (thank God, finally a place that caters to my normal hours). I have made good friends with a retired professor of entomology, who still comes down every year, with a group of students from Illinois doing projects. We have birded together for a couple of days with a local friend of his from La Fortuna, where I am headed tomorrow. Today we birded under moderately heavy rain pretty much all day. Got good and soaked and still am trying to dry off my equipment.

Although I have yet to see any, everyone talks of the large numbers of snakes which share the jungle trails, including the relatively common Fer de Lance, perhaps the most dangerous snake in the New World. A jewel to behold, once one knows where and how to look, is the little "blue jeans" (aka "strawberry") poison dart frog; it would fit nicely on one's thumbnail. The entire head and body is a scintillating red-orange with small black spots, and the front "hands" and entire narrow waist and back legs are a rich dark indigo blue. As with all its related family of frogs, it secretes a deadly neuro-toxin, and probably should not be handled; rain forest hunter-gatherer groups, especially in the Amazon basin, have used the secretions to tip their blowgun darts for killing prey (as well as Indiana Jones' guides). Another seldom seen find is the Gollmer's rain frog. A still rarer find is the casque-headed lizard, a member of the basilisk lizard family, a crested, perfectly camouflaged ground dwelling lizard, along with the more common regular basilisk lizards. All are included among the pictures. Among the birds I have pictured are the barred woodcreeper, Passerini's tanager, chestnut-mandibled toucan, cinnamon woodpecker, green honeycreeper, white-collared manakin, rufous motmot, olive-backed euphoria, orange-chinned parrot, scarlet-thighed dacnis, slaty-tailed trogon, violaceous trogon and crested guan. Also pictured a young mantled howler monkey high in the upper story of the forest.

I will sign off for now, and get ready for my trip tomorrow to the base of the Arenal Volcano, perhaps the most active currently in Central America. Dave Cox





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Dave Cox around Volcan Arenal & Monteverde, Costa Rica, Dec. 2, 2012

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Hello everyone. It has been a couple of weeks since I last wrote from La Selva. I have been busy. My last few days at La Selva saw fairly constant rain. I did hear the mantled howler monkeys on my side of the river, which was the side at the edge of the forest, and wondered how they had crossed, because the river seemed wide enough that the trees did not reach across. My last day I found out, as three of the monkeys climbed the towers of the suspension walking bridge, and crossed on the cables, with little fear of the three of us on the bridge at the time. Got a nice shot of a large male taking a short break on the cable. The day I left was Thanksgiving (I had not realized it until the staff was decorating the dining room for a special evening feast –which of course I then missed).

I traveled by van from the steamy lowland rainforest of Sarapiquí to the verdant sides of Volcan Arenal, the most active volcano in Costa Rica, and, together with its hot springs and white water rafting, an area of huge tourist attraction. I stayed in a very nice hotel, the Monte Real in La Fortuna (the only town of any size), with a free upgraded room including a porch with volcano view. A lot of good that did; with the exception of one afternoon, when the volcano was almost clear to the top, one could not tell where it was – it was perpetually clouded down to the base. I did some birding around the surrounding forests and at a small wildlife reserve. I met a German couple who had rented a four wheel drive vehicle for a couple of weeks, and talked them into driving (with me) to the Arenal side of Bosque Eterno de los Niños, the largest private primary & secondary forested reserve in the country. It has little in the way of tourist amenities, and most areas cannot be reached. It was purchased over the years by contributions raised by school kids, started from Sweden, to protect large swaths of forest and with no desire to open it for tourism. As with every other day, it rained almost constantly, but we managed the stretches of terrible mountain dirt track, and one very narrow, slippery, suspension bridge for small cars over a chasm. Our trail walking at the reserve itself was considerably hampered by the constant rain, and very muddy conditions. We actually saw more from the car on the drive in and out, including my first good sighting of a beautiful White Hawk eating a very large crab.

From La Fortuna, to reach Monteverde by paved road, one must travel south and then back north, taking most of a day by regular transport. I traveled the short route, by what is now known as “jeep-boat-jeep”, although today they no longer actually use jeeps (though they still almost need to). A half hour drive by large minibus from La Fortuna takes one around the edge of the volcano to the large high Arenal Lake, where travelers must carry their own luggage down a steep short slippery trail (in the rain, of course) to the edge of the lake, where several large flat bottomed, covered, pontoon boats await. All is loaded on a boat, which then makes

the 50 minute crossing. Our boat listed very badly; obviously the pontoon on the left was half full of water. The crew seemed unconcerned. On the western side of the lake we were dropped off (in the light rain) on the muddy banks, where a couple of minibuses and vehicles awaited to pick us up. No facilities were available anywhere. A number of us, including women, needed to relieve ourselves of morning coffee, and headed far enough into the muddy surrounds, through the very thorny bushes, for only a partial modicum of privacy (it is these times which most make me appreciate being born male – I wince thinking of squatting in those very thorny thickets). A slippery 2 hour drive up the mountain brought us to Monteverde.

In the Monteverde area, the only real town, still very small, is Santa Elena. I am at a lovely hotel, the Arco Iris, in a private totally wood paneled cabin with a private balcony over the forest. The town is at about 4,000 feet elevation, and surrounded by a number of different private reserves protecting virgin cloud forest and rain forest at slightly lower elevations. The area was first opened up by Quaker settlers, all still here, and became famous in the 1960s when it was pronounced by National Geographic to be the best place in the world to spot the Resplendent Quetzal (a gorgeous, rarely seen, long tailed bird in the trogon general family), along with a huge number of other rare cloud forest species. I have spent the first three days here with a private guide, Adrian, very expert on the birdlife and where to locate it. Other than yesterday, the first mostly non-rain day of my trip, we have walked everywhere with rain gear. Here the rain has been so persistent that I have had great problems with my camera gear constantly steaming up. The forest is so perpetually dark, I use flash for some of my photography, along with the constant monopod for natural light shots. It never rains in downpours, but ranges from fine mist through heavy mist, and on to light rain with short periods of real rain. Nothing ever dries out, and the ground is perpetually muddy. At the higher elevations, the clouds descend routinely and it becomes quite foggy (thus called cloud forest). With Adrian I have had some luck, spotting my first resplendent quetzal, along with the rarely seen brown-billed scythbill (a woodcreeper), a family of spectacled owls, bare-shanked screech owls, and a number of new hummingbirds and flycatchers. We also were able to get the owner of a private night-walk reserve to take us to the known hole of a redknee tarantula so I could get my first pictures of a truly beautiful spider (a little creepy when first exiting its burrow, enticed out by a twig which it senses as prey). Today my guide left for a birding trip to the US, so I went alone up to the Santa Elena Reserve, the highest cloud forest around; it was constant rain, wind and fog. I gave up trying to get pictures after 2 hours, though I did get one lovely shot of a Collared Whitestart.

Yesterday, while out with Adrian, my guide, I was introduced to an acquaintance of his, who is an American coffee wholesaler, who buys the beans here and roasts them in Texas. He was in his “coffee lab”, and invited us in for a tasting of 2 differently aged and roasted beans he was considering. I was led through the process of brewing perfect coffee, and how to check the aroma at various time, including after settling a while when the “crust” of grounds is broken. I was then taught how to remove the crust, followed by sipping tablespoons of the coffee, comparing the different beans being sure to rinse the spoon and the palate between each

taste. This is repeated for 20 to 30 minutes as the coffee cools, as changes in flavor during cooling are indications of defects. I was supposed to describe the differences and observations. Fat chance. I was laughing with the manager of my hotel about it today, and she told me of someone who spent some time trying to learn the art of grading coffee, and at the end bragged that he could at least distinguish 4 different types; black, with cream, with sugar, and with both cream and sugar. That perfectly describes my palate.

Food has been pretty good here. I got all meals included at La Selva, and it generally was good and all one could eat. At La Fortuna and here in Santa Elena, I have located the most popular “soda” in town (in Costa Rica, sodas are what they call the local diners which serve local cuisine). In both, the best dishes tend to be the “casados”, where one orders the meat, and the rest is veggies, beans or salads of the day. My hotel has a terrific breakfast buffet, though I have tended to miss it because of 6am starts. The couple of mornings I have gone up to the breakfast room, a glass enclosed 2nd floor room, a group of Capuchin monkeys has shown up right outside in the tree, permitting some good photos.

In a couple of days I head back down to lowlands, to Tarcoles, near the Carara National Park, supposedly excellent for water birds and large American Crocodiles.

I have included photos of a blue-grey tanager, scarlet-thighed dacnis, yellow-throated euphonia, black-cheeked woodpecker, rufous-tailed jacamar, bare-shanked screech owls, violet sabrewing, brown-billed scythbill, the mantled howler, capuchin monkey, a blue morph butterfly and the redknee tarantula, along with one of myself beneath a massive strangler fig (the strangler fig is a vine which grows up and around massive forest trees, and eventually kills them by strangulation; the tree trunk over the years rots out, leaving the mature vine resembling a giant tree well over a 100 feet tall, with a trunk of many parts and usually hollow inside).

Regarding the photos, for those interested in gear, as my last set of gear was failing from heavy and hard use I had to purchase new equipment, including a new long lens. As the lens I have used for years has not been upgraded, and other longer lenses were simply too heavy for my daily use, I “down-graded” to a 300mm lens and a camera body with the smaller aps size sensor, but a much denser pixel set. At the end, I have a body and lens that cost half as much as I have previously been using, is close to half the size, and weighs only 2/3 as much. My studies led me to believe, for bird photography, I could still obtain over 90% of the critical resolution and quality I was accustomed to. My actual use has proven that true. Needless to say, I am pleased (I didn’t know how many more years I would tolerate trudging through the forests with 6 or more pounds around the neck and another 18 on the back. I also left home the wide angle and normal lens, and am using the pocketable new highly touted Sony RX100 for all non-wildlife

shots, again with pleasing results. With this new-found knowledge I should be able to keep pushing the photography for many happy years to come. Later, Dave





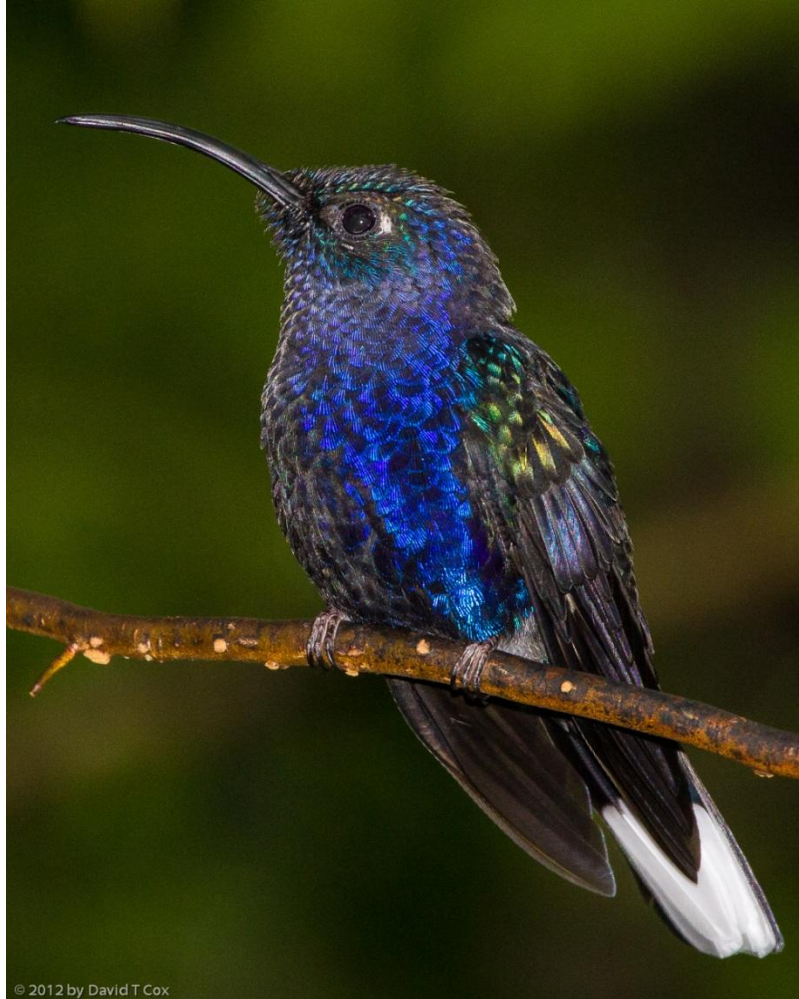
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- Dave Cox Reporting on Tarcoles River & Carara Park, from San Jose, Costa Rica, Dec. 10, 2012

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Hello everyone. I last wrote from Monteverde where the rain and clouds are persistent. Amazingly, the last day was partly sunny. I had continuing good luck with finding a few rare birds, but most did not pose well for pictures. One which did, only because I found its nest with young, and waited for its return for feeding, was the grey-throated leaftosser which returned with an ugly looking spider which it took into the hole in the clay where its two young waited. Another not quite rare was the orange-bellied trogon. Pics of both are attached, along with another of the ever interesting capuchin and ever beautiful blue-crowned motmot and slate-throated whitestart.

From Santa Elena I took a microbus down to the steamy lowlands along the Pacific to the tiny village of Tarcoles, which sits near the mouth of the Tarcoles River, and a couple of kilometers from the edge of the Carara National Park. There, in the only hotel in town, the Carara, which sits on the beach, I spent 3 nights following days of getting muddy walking the trails of Carara with a local guide, and twice taking a boat out onto the Tarcoles River for birds and the largest American Crocodiles in existence. Without having to do any searching, I found one of the largest and most beautiful of all parrots, and sadly, much less common than it should be – the scarlet macaw. The macaws overnight deep in the mangroves on the coast, where viewing is

practically impossible, and fly to certain fruiting trees during the day to feed. Between my hotel and the ocean were a group of giant almond trees, with the fruit just ripening. Every morning a number of scarlet macaws came directly out back of the hotel to feed.

The river runs by Carara, and is teeming with birdlife as it approaches the mangroves and Pacific Ocean. Among the more than 40 species I photographed, I have included pics of the crested caracara, yellow-headed caracara, tricolored heron, white ibis and American wood stork. For some reason the river also is teeming with Central American Crocodiles. The Tarcoles River American Crocs are reputed to be the largest in the Americas, the larger ones I photographed being easily over 5 meters (17ft) and the guides saying they go over 6 meters (20ft). This is as large as the big Nile Crocs which kill hundreds of people (and countless large animals) in Africa annually, and as big as most of the deadly large Estuarine Crocs in Australia and Asia (though those occasionally grow much larger). The Central American Crocs tend to have narrower snouts, and generally eat fish, and so do not have the reputation as man-eaters as do the other two species; nevertheless, one does not swim in any waters with these large beasts (I have swum with smaller ones in San Blas, Mx). Now the crazy part - the boatmen, globally aware of the antics of the great Steve Irwin (Australia's now deceased "crocodile hunter"), go a step further than one ever would with Estuarine Crocs (further than one would go more than once, anyway); they get out of the boats and hand feed chicken to the largest crocs, standing in the edge of the river. See my pictures to believe it. Further, I had a guide who rationalized this as eco-friendly, somehow, because it causes the largest crocs to eat fewer fish, which the locals need to survive, and makes them less likely to kill people. Anyway, it is a sight which overwhelms even the fantastic "jumping" crocs of the Adelaide River in Australia's Northern Territory (you will have to reprise my pics from Australia for a comparison).

Carara Park is a dense dark steamy rain forest, which contains many of the rarest and rarely photographed birds of the deep undergrowth and lowest stories. My guide had an impeccable knowledge of the bird's calls, coupled with recordings which he had painstakingly made, and so was able to entice several seldom seen beauties into viewing distance. For photos, I had to use flash (it was so dark, the biggest problem was the camera could not focus, and when it did, I could not see through the finder sufficient to know whether I was pointing at the bird or a leaf. Nevertheless, we had some remarkable good luck; After hours of trying, he located an orange-collared manakin, a tiny (2 ½ inch) fluff ball of extraordinary color— and we also scored my first royal flycatcher, a rare sight. Pics of both are included. Near the flycatcher we encountered a large Fer de Lance coiled up inside roots beside the trail. The Fer de Lance (aka Torciopelo) is reputedly the most deadly snake in the Americas, and one with an aggressive attitude. I have heard stories from a number of people, including some of the scientists at La Selva where I visited my first week in Costa Rica, about Fer de Lance chasing people for 20 or 30 feet. My guide told me he had studied Fer de Lance for his university work, and indeed found it to be highly dangerous as they do indeed, when molested, sometimes attack and chase the molester. We did not try to get the snake to come out for a photo op.

The forest was teeming with numerous species of antbirds (which include antthrushes, antshrikes, antwrens & antpitas), all of which are some of the least seen and photographed of rain forest birds as they stay in the very dark under-story in the very deep forest. At the start of our second day we had considerable luck by running into the front end of an army ant raid. Army ants (there are dozens of species on two continents), because they effectively kill all prey within range of their nest (destructive like slash & burn agriculture), need to move their location practically daily (except when the queen is egg laying), and so maintain no permanent residence. From their nightly bivouac, they forage by sending out first a swarm or horde of 100s of thousands of ants fanning through the forest like a moving carpet cover. When the front of the swarm reached our trail, it gradually covered it for as far as the eye could see, over 40 feet. The ants were so dense the best description would be that the floor of the forest itself appeared to be a living splotchy moving carpet. This frontal assault took over 7 minutes to pass, and then was followed by a number of thick orderly columns of ants, perhaps 3 inches wide, moving both directions. The swarm kills all insects and small vertebrates which cannot get out of its path (I have heard of large mammals and humans being killed where they were disabled and unable to get out of the path). I said this was remarkable good luck; the reason – this is what antbirds seek for feeding. They do not eat the army ants, but rather follow the raid and prey on all the insects jumping, flying or running from the swarm. In 40 minutes I had seen and photographed 5 new species of antbird, a couple which my guide insists are practically never seen and photographed. I have included pics of the black-faced antthrush, the rufous-backed antbird and the bicolored antbird. I think it would have been a funny scene to have had filmed my antics; as I jumped around and squatted trying to see under the bushes to get pictures, I was constantly stepping into outer pockets of army ants. Every 30 seconds or so I had to let go of the camera and whack my shoes and lower pant legs to beat off the ants. I have been stung several times, not really very painful, but itchy after a day.

Towards the end of the day we witnessed a sight even my guide had never seen. In a true giant of a forest tree, where we earlier had seen howler monkeys, now came both spider monkeys and capuchins. The howlers roared, but the spider monkeys and capuchins appeared to engage in an all-out war. The screeching was incredible, and I never before have seen the spider monkeys swinging in 10 to 20 foot leaps through the top branches. It was hard to tell what was happening at that great height, and after a few minutes, most of them disappeared.

On Friday I returned to San Jose, and am here for 5 days of rest and catch-up on photo work. On Saturday I spent several hours in the wonderful National Museum, which has the only archaeological collection of ceramics and stone pieces from the pre-Columbian cultures which existed here from 500BC forward. On Wednesday I fly down south to the only lodge inside Piedras Blancas National Park, and 7 of my most expensive days in Costa Rica. Later. Dave





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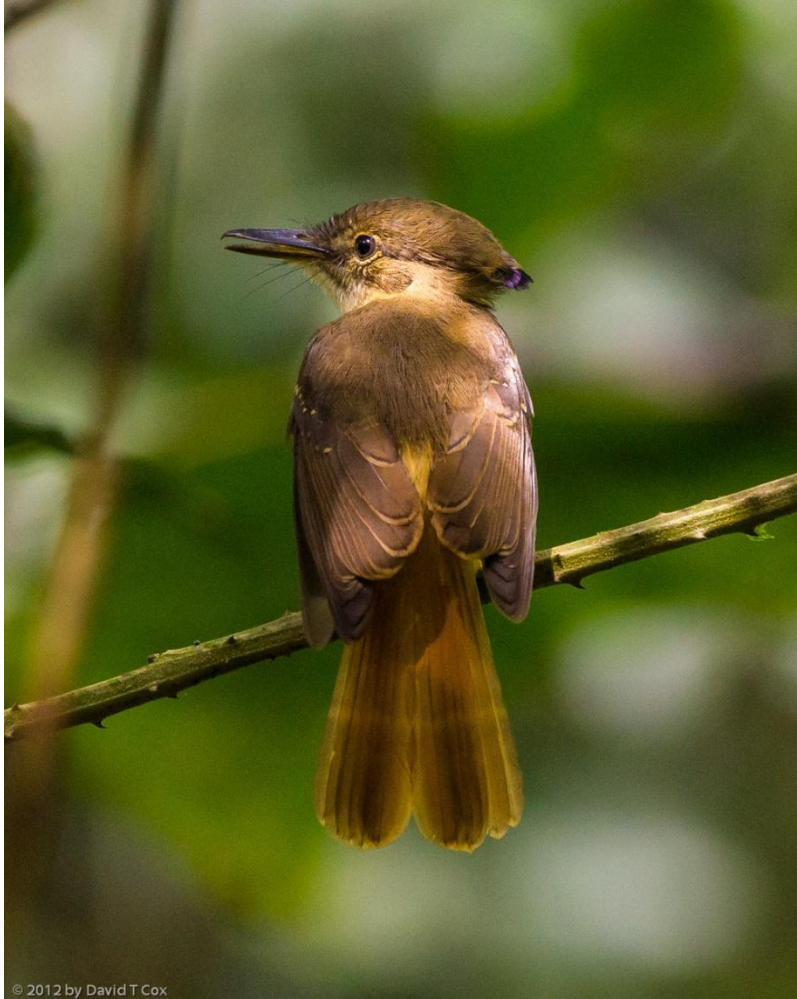


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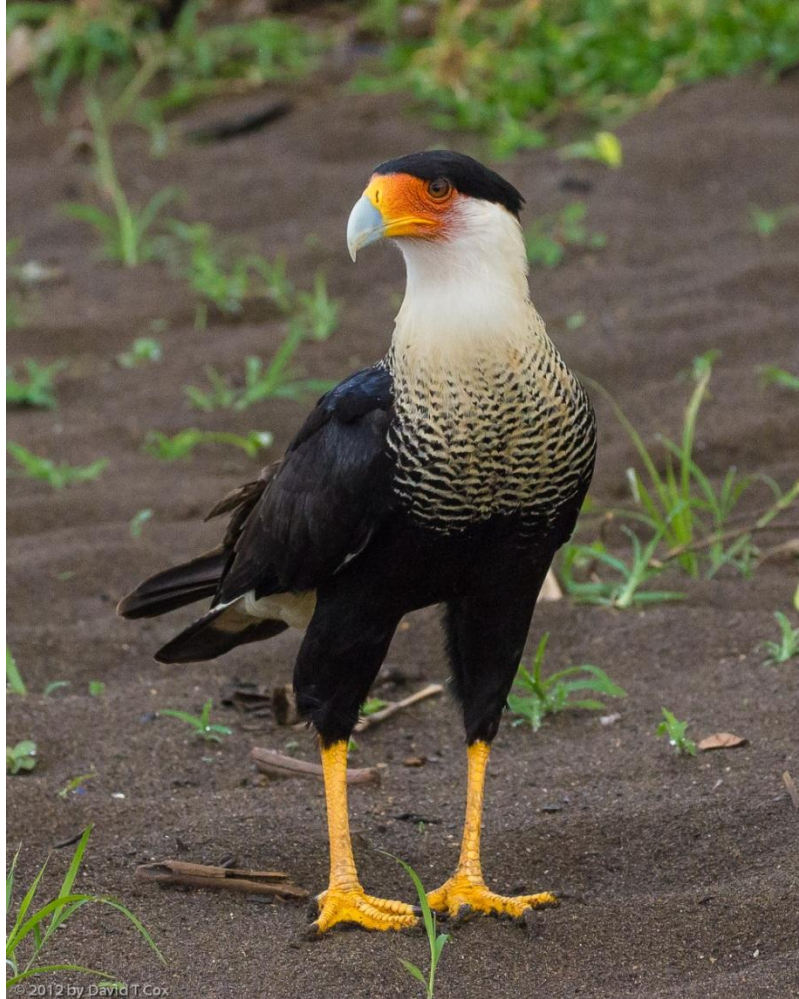


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Dave Cox reporting on Piedras Blancas Park from David, Panama, Dec. 19, 2012

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Sent: Wed 12/19/12 9:47 AM

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Hello all. I last wrote from San Jose, where I finished up several days of rest and computer photo catch-up work. Last Wednesday I took a flight on a small 14 seater Piper from the old “in-city” airport down south to Golfito. As the flight was full, Not only was our luggage weighed, but we each had to get on the scales with all our carryon so they could compute total weight. I was warned my bag might not make it with me as they expected the flight total to be overweight. Fortunately, at boarding I was informed the bag would come with me.

On its south Pacific coast Costa Rica has two large peninsulas enclosing two huge gulfs – the south-eastern one being Golfo Dulce. On the northern side of Golfo Dulce is a smaller peninsula enclosing a smaller gulf called Golfito. On the eastern shores of this gulf lies the small town of the same name, which was a company town built as the local headquarters for United Fruit Company, the international company which for decades controlled the Latin-American banana trade (it was because of the company’s concentration of wealth and therefore political influence that Costa Rica and many other Latin-American countries were called “banana republics”). In 1985 after a month-and-a-half-long worker strike, United Fruit simply ceased operations in Golfito and pulled out, leaving the town without employment. A few years later, the federal government, to aid the population, permitted the opening of a duty-free area within the old company headquarters, which now attracts Costa Ricans from all over the country to come buy high-value imported items without the almost 100% duty imposed elsewhere. Other than this activity, for which shoppers must get a permit 24 hours prior to being able to shop (the idea being to require overnight stays to support the town’s other businesses), Golfito is also the hopping off place for deep-sea fishing boats and ferries which cross the larger Golfo Dulce. But mostly, it and the gulf for which it is named is surrounded by the most beautiful rain-forested hills which come right to the black-sand beaches. Most of the stretches of coast around Golfito are accessible only by boat, with wet landings, and so encourage isolated homes and high-end lodges.

I, in fact, did not come to stay in Golfito itself, but rather half an hours drive over a muddy potted road north into the rain-forest to the Austrian run Esquinas Rainforest Lodge set inside a small canyon at the edge of what now is Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas. From here run the only trails which enter the Piedras Blancas Park, and it is known for its biodiversity of plant life and frogs, as well as birds. The first day I was alone, and spent time and meals with the owner, Michael Schnitzler, who over 20 years ago built a home on the coast of Golfito, and created the Lodge, along with an Austrian charitable organization which has purchased large tracts of land from which parts of Piedras Blancas were created, as well as forest corridors connecting Piedras Blancas to Corcovado Park; together these parks and corridors create the largest and least penetrable refuge for the big cats and other mammals of original Costa Rican forests. Michael himself only occasionally now comes to the Lodge, but was there to meet a small group of

Austrian “donors” who were visiting over the next several days. I enjoyed especially discussing music, as Michael, a violinist, was for a couple of decades concert master for the Vienna Symphony, was 1/3 of the Haydn Trio which performed worldwide, and taught violin at the Vienna University of Music. Unfortunately, he never brings his violin to Costa Rica.

I hired a private guide every day to try the muddy trails inside the reserve and park for birds. Unfortunately, although I saw a number of new species, I did not find this to be as bird-rich an area as those I previously had visited. The frogs, however, were everywhere, and in huge variety, as were reptiles and bugs. The heat and high rainfall (usually raining 12-14 hours daily) made the area especially steamy; even with no form of cooling, my camera equipment would fog up every morning and make it impossible to take pictures for a while.

Hiking with the camera hung on my body caused it to take great doses of sweat; not being waterproof, the body finally gave up its brief life (I just bought it 9 months ago) on Sunday. I just now checked my photo catalogue and realized this body also had already taken over 10,000 archived pictures (it accompanied me to Morocco and Spain), not counting the thousands deleted; this is actually well beyond what I normally expect of a non-professional camera body, and well beyond the point at which I retire most – so perhaps it wasn’t just the moisture that killed it. (I had debated prior to the trip buying the Canon 7D body for its APS size sensor (replacing my heavily used 5DII), as it is waterproof, but it already is over 3 years old (soon to be upgraded), would have been a huge expense for a single trip and, but for the weatherproofing, offered absolutely no photo advantage for my bird photography over the much cheaper, lighter non-professional body that died. The purpose of this trip basically is bird photography, so the absence of a camera body is fatal. I checked out of Esquinas a day early, on Monday, and made my way to cross into Panama which was my next destination anyway. David, the second largest city in Panama, is just an hour from the border, and was reputed to have plenty of large electronic stores, including photo equipment stores. I took a private car from Esquinas to the border, and joined the line of people waiting for Panamanian Immigration. It was excruciating; the line, which snaked out into the hot tropical sun, was no more than a couple of hundred people when I joined it, but I later discovered that, although those with passports took only 20 or 30 seconds of official time, the vast majority were locals with just some form of photo id and various paperwork, each of whom took 3 to 4 minutes of official time. There was just one window to process the line. Do the math– I reached the window 4 hours and 35 minutes after joining the line. After crossing dozens of different international borders on foot, this was the worst I have experienced (people arriving on an international bus had a separate window and seemed to make it through in under an hour). A short microbus ride later and I arrived in very hot David, and was delighted at my business oriented Hotel Castilla with shining tiled rooms and bath, and very cold AC and good Wi-Fi.

Yesterday I spent at the huge shopping plaza opened along the interAmerican highway, and found three different stores with Canon camera equipment; although they did not have some of the more expensive equipment on site, they could get it in one day from Panama City. After several hours of consideration, including over an hour of waiting for the manager to confirm a

significant discount, I wound up buying the successor model to the dead camera body, ie small, light, cheap and not weatherproof, but performing for my bird photography exactly as the much more expensive 7D. I realized I could go through still another new camera on this trip, and be cheaper than buying the outdated 7D. The discount I finally managed put the price equal to the current price online from B&H Photo, so I could not have done better. I now also have purchased 4 spanking new, flower printed, colorful, 25 cent ladies' shower caps, which I will use to cover the camera body as I walk through the steamy forests, hopefully protecting it from the bulk of the moisture from my soaking clothing. With a little luck this will get me through the next 7 weeks, and I hope to have more bird photos to share.

Tomorrow I plan to take a shuttle up into the Chiriquí Highlands to the coffee town of Boquete, situated beside Volcan Baru, the highest peak in Panama, and famous for its cloud forest birding. I intend to stay there through Christmas, after which I have bought a flight to Panama City. For attached pics, I have included one more of the feeding of the huge American Crocodiles on the Tarcoles River, as a number of people seemed impressed by these, and one of the Spectacled Caiman baby and its mother who daily challenged me at the pond in Esquinas as I came to see how her 12 little 8 inch babies were doing (a full grown adult, she was only about 5 feet long, but would follow me along the bank and hiss and lunge baring her mouth full of teeth). Also included are photos of a couple of tiny Glass Frogs (you can see the organs and eggs inside their bodies), the Olivaceous Piculet (a tiny 3 inch type of woodpecker), the female of the Great Curassow, the gorgeous Green-breasted Mango (a hummingbird), the impeccably colored Baird's Trogon, a couple of female Variable Seed eaters in a very unusual physical territorial battle (normally only the males do such battles), the very colorful female and male Cherry Tanagers which often came though our dining area, the Talamanca Poison Dart Frog (it would easily fit upon your index fingernail) and the Speckle-crowned Euphonia male singing outside my cabin.

A merry Christmas and cheerful holidays to all. Later. Dave



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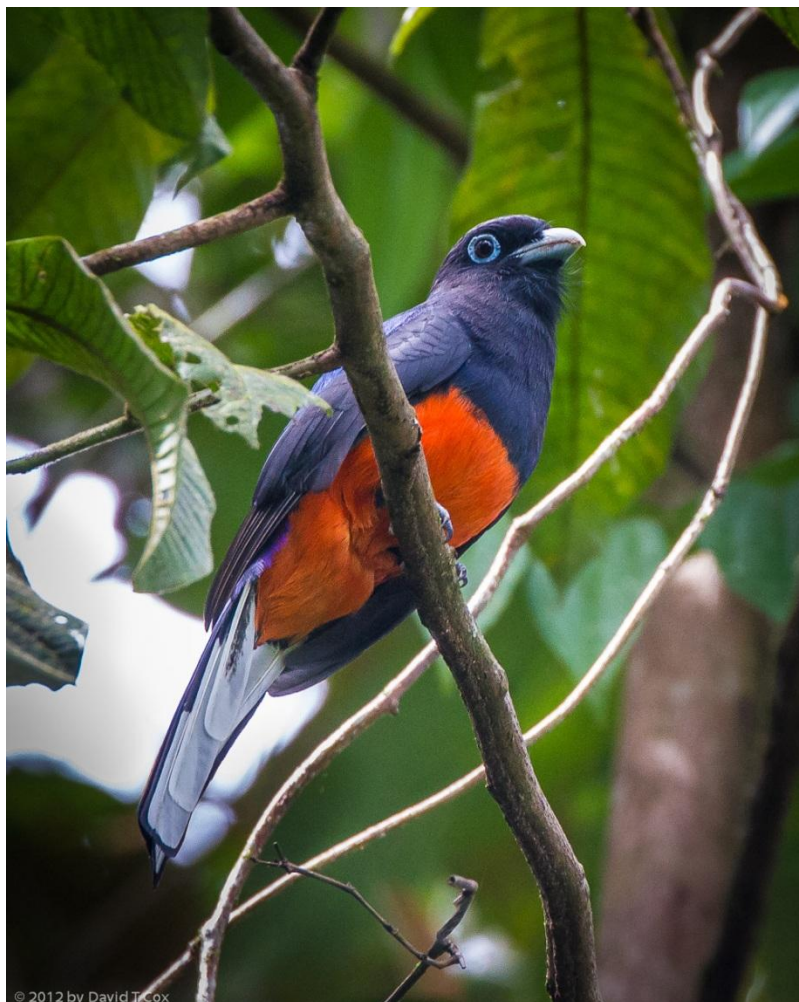












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Dave Cox reporting on Boquete & Panama City, Thurs. Jan. 3, 2013

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Hotmail

Hello everyone. Time for my first email of 2013. I last reported from David, where I bought a new camera body. From David I took the bus (it was a yellow US school bus with just the name of the school gone) up to the Chiriqui Highlands on the sides of Baru Volcano, the highest peak in Panama. The area is a coffee growing region, and is supposedly renowned for its birding. It also has a lot of US retirees, apparently having been named in several different magazines back around the turn of the millennium as one of the 5 best places in the world (outside the US) to retire.

I originally wrote 3 paragraphs concerning issues I had in Boquete, but realizing it was negative I have cut all and will rewrite trying to be briefer. I had booked one of two private rooms at a hostel in Boquete, each with a balcony over a creek, to spend time with other travelers over Christmas. The hostel screwed up the reservation (which was clear online even in their system) and the two desk employees (who obviously had made the error) got huffy about it; I finally got through the two desk people and to the owner, who kindly helped me find other hard to come-by accommodations for the week. The private bird guide I hired for the week, an employee of the same hostel, did not know a warbler from a swallow, and transported me with a car with almost no brakes and no way to shut off the engine other than pulling an ignition wire (I let him go after the first day). After a weeks search, I concluded the town had no private bird guides

except for a foreign couple who did groups. All reputed birding areas were miles from the town, requiring generally off-road capability to reach (other than Finca Lerida), and there existed no public transportation to reach most trail heads. Located on the leeward side of the mountains, the other side facing the Caribbean, Boquete was generally cloudy, the wind would howl on and off and a light rain (the locals call it “bajareque”) fell most of the week; an umbrella did no good as the swirling wind swept the rain horizontal and even upward. A poncho was as bad as the wind whipped it up around the body. Bottom line, despite a reputation for great birding, I would only recommend trying Boquete with a pre-arranged tour with full transportation and reputable guide brought in from outside; for decent weather one just needs luck. It does not compare well with birding in Costa Rica or Ecuador. I did get pictures of a few new species, mostly at the famous Finca Lerida, a coffee plantation and expensive lodge also known for its birds.

Christmas eve and day I spent much time listening to my mp3 Christmas music collection (I actually have over 20 hours of mostly classical and classics Christmas recordings which I dearly love once a year), re-read Dickens original “Christmas Carol” – wishing I had known old Scrooge, drank cheap red wine, and had a couple of decent meals at my favorite local cafeteria, the “Sazon de la Abuela”. Christmas eve the entire town turned out as several blocks of the main street were closed to vehicle traffic for a late parade of trucks with Christmas scenes and lights (reminiscent on a smaller scale of the all night affair in Oaxaca, but without the great Radish Festival).

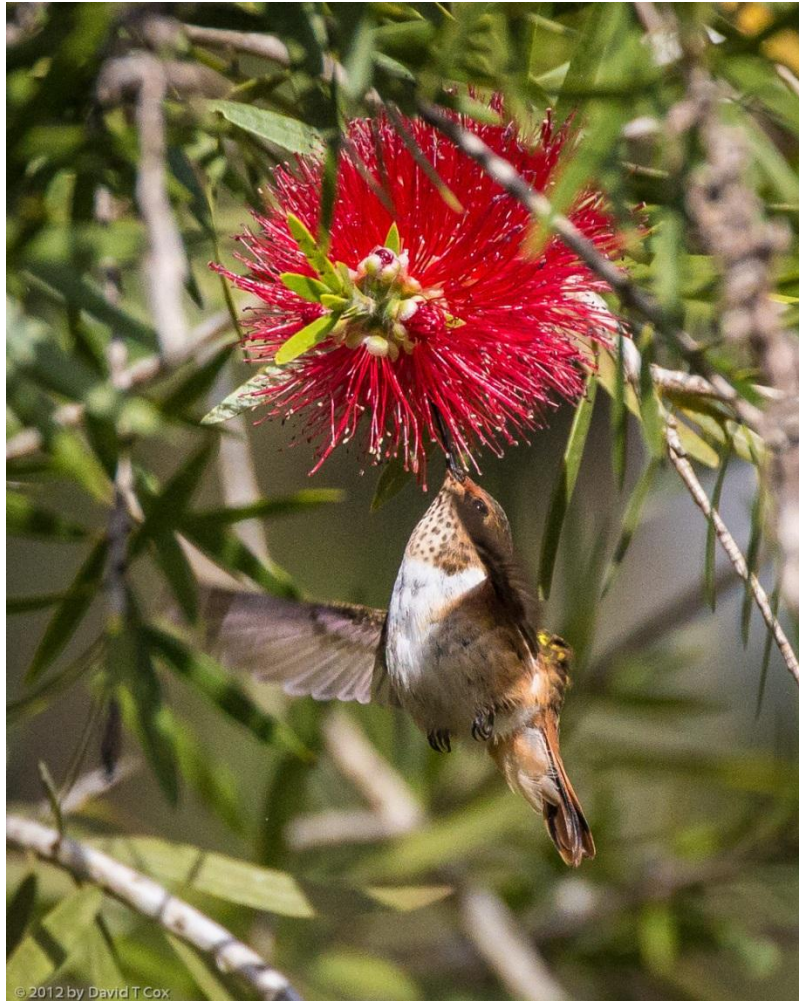
From Boquete, I traveled by “school” bus again down to David, and flew a large Air Panama jet from the spanking new international (with a flight to San Jose) airport (I and about 40 other passengers on my flight were the only ones there during 2 ½ hours) to Panama City. I am in a hotel (the Milan) in the middle of the business district (the safest place to stay in the city, surrounded by casinos, and the area with most of the restaurants), with a very nice room at a decent rate.

New Year’s eve I spent the day walking the trails of the Parque Metropolitano, the several square kilometer city park comprised of a rainforest covered hill in the west of the city. I was rewarded with several new bird sightings, including the Red-throated Ant Tanager and the Black-tailed Trogon. That night I went to bed at my normal early hour, but was awakened at midnight; I opened my window and looked out over the high-rise skyline where I watched parts of 4 different fireworks displays for 30 minutes. A nice touch to bring in the New Year. Yesterday I walked the long arc of land reclaimed from the Panama Bay called Cinta Costa, now a grassy strip with bike and running trail running from the high-rise district down to Casco Antiguo, the heart of the colonial city. Many of the oldest structures date from the late 1600s; some rainforest ruins remain of the even earlier Panama Viejo, the first colonial site, but it was completely destroyed in the sacking by the pirate/privateer Henry Morgan in 1671 (Panama City was then considered the wealthiest New World city, as the point where all South and Central American gold was sent by the Spanish, to be transported across the isthmus and then shipped to Spain from the Caribbean).

I will hold off at this time from saying too much about an attitude issue that seems to exist in Panama. With what I will describe as the middle class employees of establishments, like hotels and restaurants, I have often been sensing what best can be described as surliness. I felt this first at the hotel in David, clearly at the hostel in Boquete, and now some at my hotel and restaurants in Panama City. It has reminded me of twice hearing from people in Costa Rica, when I said I was next traveling to Panama, that I would not enjoy it so much because the people were not friendly. I also now recall having read at least twice in my guide book about places where the word "surly" was used to describe the service. I use the term "middle class employees" to differentiate from my experience with owners of businesses, however tiny, and with the indigenous population, all of whom have been friendly. I will take more time before I draw broad conclusions, but something seems amiss. That attitude, coupled with the poor experience in Boquete, got my spirit down a little over the past couple of weeks. I even briefly considered cutting the trip short and returning to the US. I think though, that things are now changing much for the better. Sorry that some of this report has been slightly less than upbeat, but as it is a form of travelogue, I write what I currently am experiencing.

I am going to the Sierra Llorona Lodge up by the Caribbean coast on Saturday for 5 days of birding in the hot humid rainforest and then, after a few days back in Panama City, will go to Gamboa along the Panama Canal for birding along the famous Pipeline Road and in Soberania National Park. I also am trying to find a tour to join to visit the Darien, the forest strip between Panama and Columbia through which pass no roads or trails. A few expensive private tours operate at jungle camp sites if enough people get together. The Darien is one of the last great places to see the Harpy Eagle. It also was the refuge for the Columbian FARC troops.

I have attached photos from Boquete of a flame-colored tanager, sulphur-winged parakeets, scintillant hummingbird, snowy-bellied hummingbird, slaty flowerpiercer, scarlet-backed tanager, summer tanager, yellow-bellied seedeater, orchard oriole, rose-breasted grosbeak, and the stream running through Boquete. From Panama City photos include my favorite skyscraper ever, what was called the "revolution tower" (now the less apt F&F tower), and the Red-throated Ant Tanager and Black-tailed Trogon from the Parque Metropolitano and, finally, the Panama City skyline from Casco Antiguo. Until later, and happy New Year. Dave







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- Dave Cox Reporting on Sierra Llorona, El Valle, Gamboa & Miraflores Locks, Panama, Jan.. 22, 2013

From: **David T. Cox** (cox david55@hotmail.com)

Sent: Tue 1/22/13 8:41 AM

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Hello everyone. It has been almost 3 weeks since my last report on Boquete and Panama City. In the interim I have visited Sierra Llorona, El Valle and Gamboa for bird photography with varying success. Sierra Llorona is a small forested reserve area on the Caribbean side with a small family owned lodge. I traveled by bus to Sabanita, from where I hired a taxi to take me into the hills to the lodge. The rooms were a little old, but the food was very good. I hiked extensively the heavily forested valleys and hills, which were surprisingly dry, with relatively little luck. The forest was dense and dark, and every little valley had running streams; one would have expected a wealth of wildlife. It is written up as a very good place for birding, but as with a number of other recommended birding areas, either I was unlucky or, more likely, the area simply is not as rich as described; this happens when country guide books too readily accept the local tourism talk for the area, and the guidebook authors are not themselves birders. I did encounter my first bedbugs of the trip. Around the Lodge was a weird type of insect, of which there were at least 5 different species, all living on the same species of a handful of plants. I do not know what they are, but have included a photo of one in hopes somebody may have some knowledge and be able to enlighten me.

At Sierra Llorona I met Sergio, an Italian owner of a sporting shoe wholesaler in Italy, who spends months at a time in Panama practicing his hobby of macro-photography. He forever had his face buried in thousands of dollars of equipment trying to capture the tiny world of bugs. Though he spoke no English, and his Spanish was really Italian-Spanish, we got along famously, and subsequently drove to El Valle together, a small town west of Panama City on the Pacific slopes, nestled within a 3 mile wide volcanic caldera. We hired a local guide (not a bird expert, unfortunately), and spent 3 days climbing the very rugged volcanic slopes of Cerro Gaital on the north side of the town. The hills were heavily forested, and produced much better birding than Sierra Llorona, as well as abundant grasshoppers, butterflies and dragonflies for Sergio. On the

last day I also climbed Cerro La India Dormida to visit some small cataracts and two different huge boulders heavily engraved with petroglyphs of unknown origin.

I traveled from El Valle immediately to Gamboa, which sits just off the continental divide on the Caribbean slopes of the Panama Canal, where the Rio Chagres feeds into Lake Gatun, providing the water which operates the canal and its locks. I took the bus up from Panama City, which was an old school bus painted green and pink. The town grew from 1936 when it became the dredging headquarters for the Canal, but has since been all but abandoned. On the forested slopes sit the wonderful 3 story wood houses the Americans built in the 1930s, many of which are abandoned, but a number of which now are occupied, and a couple used as B&Bs, where I stayed. The town has one lodge, the Gamboa Rainforest Lodge, which sits huge above the Rio Chagres, and is where almost all tourists stay (there are no other rooms except the two B&Bs). Unfortunately, the lodge is dreadfully expensive unless one is part of a large tour group where it provides all inclusive prices. Gamboa truly is world famous for its birding. For the first time since arriving in Panama, I was not disappointed. I spent the first 3 days hiking up and down the "Pipeline Road" (it was built through the forest that now is Soberania National Park, for the construction of a natural gas pipeline when the canal was built). In 1985 the world record was set on the Pipeline Road for a 24 hour bird count which hit 385 species (that is well over half of the number of species which exist in the US, seen in one 24 hour period, on a 5 or 6 kilometer stretch of jungle road). Just short walks from the 2 different B&Bs where I stayed brought me to numerous bird hot-spots daily. Additionally, on the Pipeline Road, daily I encountered 3 different large families of Mantled Howler Monkeys, which provided ample opportunities for photos, as well as providing constant roaring matches. Also encountered commonly were the Central American Agoutis, White-nosed Coatis, Three-toed Sloths and the tiny Geoffroy's Tamarins, very small white and chocolate colored monkeys. I met a number of interesting people, mostly other photographers, mostly professional, who are staying for months at a time to photograph the birds. Although Panama overall has not met my expectations, Gamboa more than made up for it. If ever returning, I would headquarter in Gamboa, where one is much more likely also to meet up with the best guides or other photographers for travel to other hotspots in Panama not easily otherwise accessible. Unfortunately, with the only affordable rooms in the small B&Bs, I was unable to get accommodations for more than the 6 nights I stayed (this is the high season for tourism, and for Gamboa birding) –if I return I would try to get some long-term break in the Gamboa Rainforest Lodge.

I returned to Panama City two days ago (this time in a white and pink school bus), and yesterday finally visited the Miraflores Locks on the Pacific side of the Panama Canal. There, from the upper observation deck I watched two large ships pass through two sets of locks on their way to the Gaillard Cut, which cuts through the continental divide and then passes into Lago Gatun at Gamboa. The visitor center contains an interesting museum which covers many details of the canal's construction and operation. The canal is a marvel of the modern world.

A little over a week ago, after my first 4 weeks in Panama, I became sufficiently bored so that I changed my return date to almost 3 weeks earlier than originally scheduled; I will fly back the US this Thursday, when I expect a very late arrival back in Tucson.

I have included photos of the Blue-chested Hummingbird, the unknown insect from Sierra Llorona, the Black-breasted Puffbird, Red-capped Manakin, a leaf frog, the Spot-crowned Antvireo, Mantled Howler Monkeys with young, the Violet-bellied Hummingbird, White-necked Jacobin, Mottled Owl, Violet-crowned Woodnymph, Slaty Antshrike, Geoffroy's Tamarin, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Green Honeycreeper, Central American Agouti and the Red-legged Honeycreeper. With the exception of the mammals, the owl, puffbird and fruitcrow, all the birds are tiny (2 to 4 inches) and will appear on a computer monitor much larger than in real life, so you should see detail that you could not see without a magnifying glass even if you handheld the birds.

I also threw in a picture of yours truly sitting at a brewpub in Panama City. I look happy in the picture, with my full 20 oz. glass of dark beer, but left the pub shortly after the picture was snapped, the beer half consumed, as it was horridly, and perhaps criminally, sour. I look forward to visiting Gentle Bens Brewpub in Tucson this Friday for my first decent beer in 11 weeks.

Later. Dave



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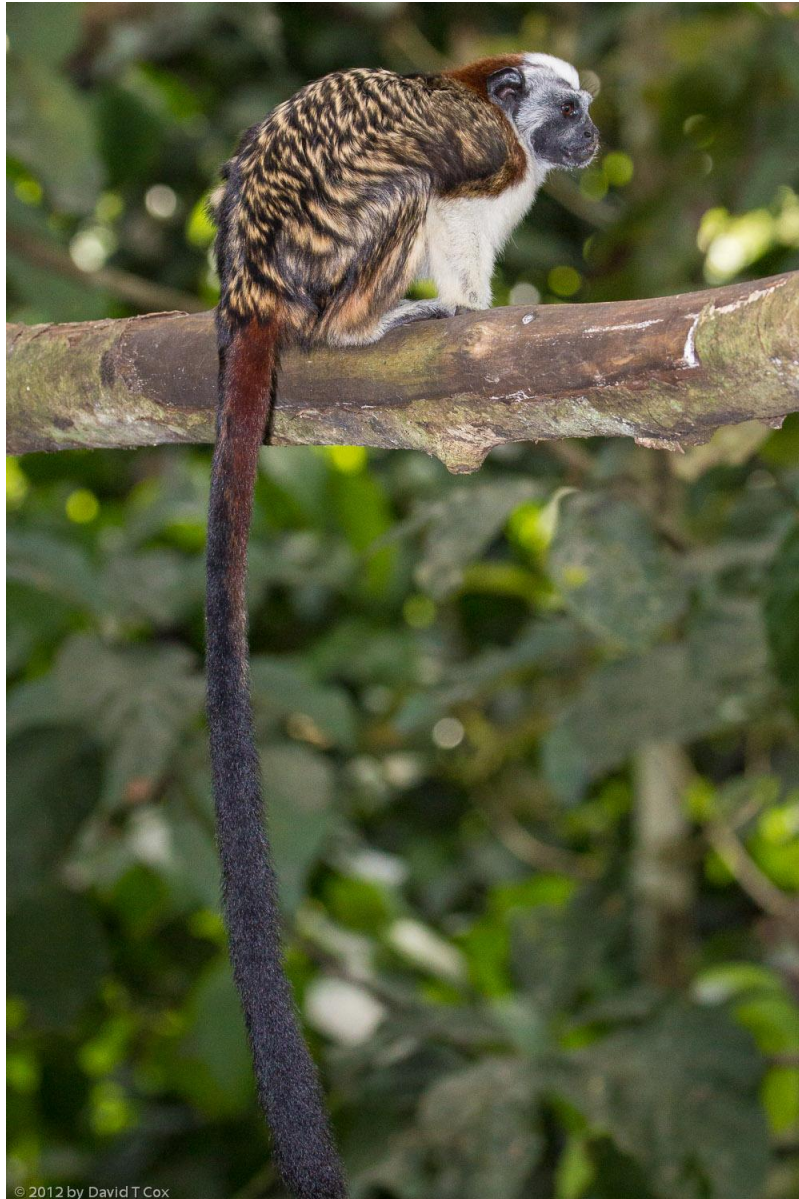








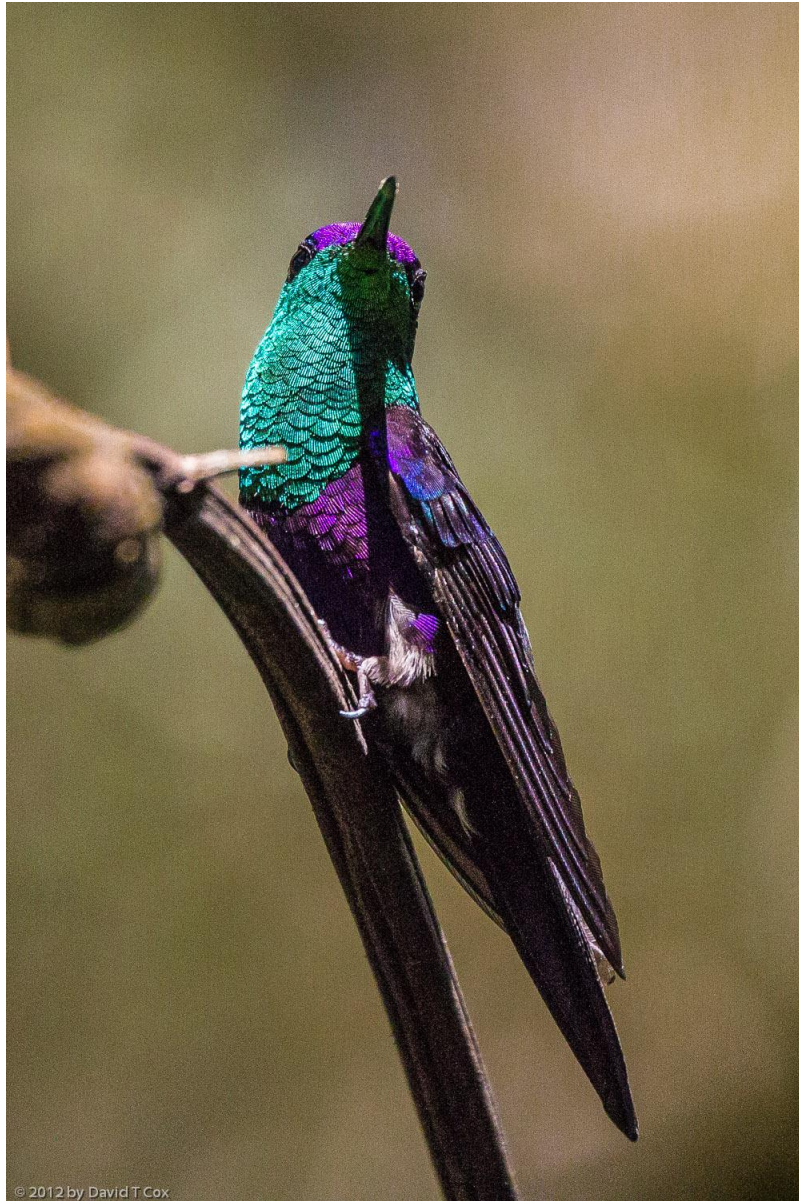
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