

INDEPENDENT BIRDING IN DARIEN, PANAMA APRIL 26- MAY 6

Apr 26 – May 6, 2019

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Guide: Isaac Pizarro, world's best guide. speaks and writes English tolerably well. \$150/day for our group. pizarro.3003@hotmail.com

Birders: Line Klausen (DK), Cedar Stanistreet (USA), Frank Clayton (USA)

Our aim: to see as many of the Cerro Pirre endemics as inexpensively feasible along with as many other local specialties as we could find in a week.

Logistics: Air service and accommodations at the camp and air strip at Cana is still not available. The only practical way currently to see Darien endemics is to hire a guide and hike from El Real to the northern end of the Pirre ridge, three half-day hikes away. Gear and even less active hikers can be taken on the easy stretch by horseback or 4-wheeler to the first camp at Rancho Frio, which is the main national park camp, with bunkhouses and communal kitchen and WCs. Bare bunkbeds with mattresses is all that is provided for sleeping. The required national park daily fee includes free use of Rancho Frio. You have to carry your own gear beyond Rancho Frio or hire porters, usually US\$ 30/day, and one porter for each participant. Rancho Plastico is the second camp and consists of only a plastic tarp strung over a cooking area on top of a ridge, water a half hour's round trip down into a ravine. Most people evidently make a third camp at the Pirre summit, where there is only a clearing and no water, but we elected to just day hike to the summit and return after lunch and birding there, as a day trip. Rather steep climb to this summit camp and worse when wet and muddy. There is a nice stream at Rancho Frio for rustic bathing and another (probably actually the same stream) uphill not far from the trail, about half way between Rancho Plastico and Pirre Summit.

Isaac says he can also take people to Cerro Tacarcuna on the Colombia border to see the endemics there, a four to five day hike one way, but shorter during the rainy season, when boats can go farther upriver. To go there, there is the added expense of paying off the local dissident groups for safe passage through their forest turf. This can all be arranged safely by Isaac, says he, but not without a knowledgeable local guide like himself.

Since we were on a severe budget and energetic, we elected to hire no porters, but to carry our own light-weight gear. Isaac hired himself one porter/cook, who carried food and water from Rancho Frio to Rancho Plastico, and did our cooking. We had brought homemade food bars and other ready-to-eat backpacking food, which we carried, and supplemented this with the chicken and lentil stew on rice, that the cook served twice a day. Also tea and coffee were offered.

Isaac explained to us that the local native tribe has the concession of scouting the nesting sites each year of special target birds like, DUSKY- BACKED-JACAMAR, HARPY

EAGLE, CRESTED EAGLE, and ORNATE HAWK EAGLE. Large eagles only nest every four years or so, so it is a job finding which pairs are nesting each year and creating connecting trails to viewing areas from the existing national forest trails and local bush roads. We were charged \$100 for DUSKY-BACKED JACAMAR, \$150 for CRESTED EAGLE, and \$200 for HARPY EAGLE. These were per group rates. Isaac says there is a sliding scale of fees for larger groups. ORNATE HAWK EAGLE did not have a known nest this year, but we saw one very well sitting perched close by later.

Timing: The rainy season had just started as we arrived, a little earlier than usual, which is when there are less visiting birders. Luckily for us, it only rained when we weren't birding, like some tropical downpours afternoon and night. Isaac says this is what one expects, so visiting in the rainy season is not so bad. He claims that you can see the same birds, with playback, all year, and the viewing of desired species doesn't vary much during the year, except for northern migrants. There are two bigger advantages going to the Darien during the dry season, normally December through April. One is that there are many more bugs during the rainy season. It is also rather cooler during the northern winter. While we were there, the biggest pest were biting pattern-winged flies, which were not deterred by mosquito repellent. We also had lots of tiny ticks. Isaac said there is no malaria, so we stopped taking our malaria prophylactics.

APRIL 28

Getting to El Real: We flew into Panama City and caught a taxi from the bus stop outside the airport (cheaper than an airport taxi by half: just follow the signs to the right as you leave the airport on foot to the local bus stop). We asked the taxi driver to take us to 25 de Diciembre bus stop, where the buses make a stop on their way from downtown Panama City to Yaviza at the abrupt end of the Interamericana highway. Actually the last bus that goes all the way to Yaviza evidently leaves at 3 p.m. from 25 de Diciembre, so our 4 p.m. bus (hourly, supposedly) only went as far as Meteti. We found a hotel there and took the 5 a.m. bus from Meteti to Yaviza the next morning, which worked as well.

APRIL 29

Isaac lives in El Real. He had instructed us to meet him at a certain hotel in Yaviza, where he evidently usually spends the night before and connects with clients for early morning departures. We did some grocery shopping together, supermarket for processed foods and produce shop for local fruit and vegetables, since there is little food to buy beyond Yaviza, except for bananas and coconuts. Then we took a motor canoe, which he had arranged, along the river to El Real. Our afternoon outing near El Real also included a river boat trip. More interesting birds seen along the river were: BLACK-COLLARED HAWK, SLENDER-BILLED KITE, BLACK OROPENDULA, GRAY-HEADED KITE, and SEMI-PLUMBEOUS HAWK. Since we were a small informal group, we were invited to meals at Isaac's house in El Real and stayed our first night there. Our afternoon stroll included going to Isaac's DUSKY-BACKED JACAMAR site with views in the tree tops. We also saw SEMI-PLUMBEOUS HAWK, GRAY-CHEEKED NUNLET, GRAY-HEADED TANAGER, CHESTNUT-BACKED ANTBIRD, and COCOA WOODCREEPER. Isaac also showed us SPECTACLED PARROTTLET in the trees behind his house near sundown.

APRIL 30

Isaac took us on a daybreak stroll on the outskirts of El Real this morning and showed us ORANGE-CROWNED ORIOLE. Then he had arranged for a pack horse to take our backpacks to Rancho Frio, while a pick-up took us part way. Then we walked birding with

him the rest of the way from where the forest begins. Besides visiting the CRESTED EAGLE nest, the more notable birds seen were PALE-BELLIED HERMIT, WESTERN SLATY-ANTSHRIKE, SIRYSTES, CINNAMON WOODPECKER, and STRIPE-THROATED WREN. He called in and spotlighted CHOCO SCREECH OWL that night at Rancho Frio.

MAY 1

We spent a second night at Rancho Frio and spent the day birding the local forest. Notable birds seen were CRIMSON-BELLIED WOODPECKER, DOUBLE-BANDED GRAYTAIL, WHITE-HEADED WREN, OLIVACEOUS FLATBILL, WHITE-FLANKED ANTWREN, and CHESTNUT-FRONTED MACAW. We actually spent most of the day from 10 a.m. on, waiting at the HARPY EAGLE nest site, hoping for an adult to visit the nearly-grown juvenile that was perched at the nest. It never came, but we got a brief view of the female adult visiting the juvenile, when we went back to the nest as we were leaving the forest a few days later. Isaac explained to us that CRESTED EAGLE tends to nest later in the season, so that is why we were seeing the female on that nest, whereas HARPY EAGLE tends to nest earlier, so we were seeing mostly only a juvenile, nearly ready to leave the nest. Thus we hit the overlap period when you could see both species nesting on the same trip. I don't know whether this is a general rule or not.

MAY 2

We backpacked from Rancho Frio to Rancho Plastico. Hot and muggy. Notable birds were: LEMON-SPECTACLED TANAGER, BLACK-BREASTED PUFFBIRD, GOLDEN-CROWNED SPADEBILL, GREAT GREEN MACAW, YELLOW-BROWED SHRIKE-VIREO, YELLOW-EARED TOUCANET, CRESTED GUAN, and heard RUSSET-CROWNED QUAIL DOVE.

MAY 3

Hiked to Cerro Pirre and back, ready for rain, but no rain. Tough uphill hike even with only day packs. Birds on the way were: BLACK-CROWNED ANTPITTA, PIRRE CHLOROSPINGUS, GREENISH PUFFLEG, STRIPE-CHEEKED WOODPECKER, BLACK HAWK EAGLE, BARRED HAWK, RUFOUS-WINGED ANTWREN, and VARIED SOLITAIRE. Heard birds were: TAWNY-FACED QUAIL, BLACK-EARED WOOD QUAIL, CHOCO TAPACULO, and RUFOUS-VENTED GROUND CUCKOO. On the summit we saw PIRRE HUMMINGBIRD and SOOTY-HEADED WREN. The dip in the stream on the way back to Rancho Plastico was the highlight of the day. Besides the great birds.

MAY 4

We hiked back to Rancho Frio. Along the way we saw CENTRAL AMERICAN PYGMY OWL, BLACK-TIPPED COTINGA, PLUMBEOUS HAWK, BLUE-CROWNED MANAKIN, and WHITE-FACED NUNBIRD. CHOCO TINAMOU was heard. In the afternoon we walked back to the Harpy Eagle nest and saw the mother with the juvenile very briefly, and an ORNATE HAWK EAGLE perched low in the forest and quite close to the trail.

MAY 5

We hiked back to El Real in the morning with a 4-wheeler carrying our gear, seeing nothing much new. Then took a boat back to Yaviza, getting on the bus back to Panama City in the early afternoon.