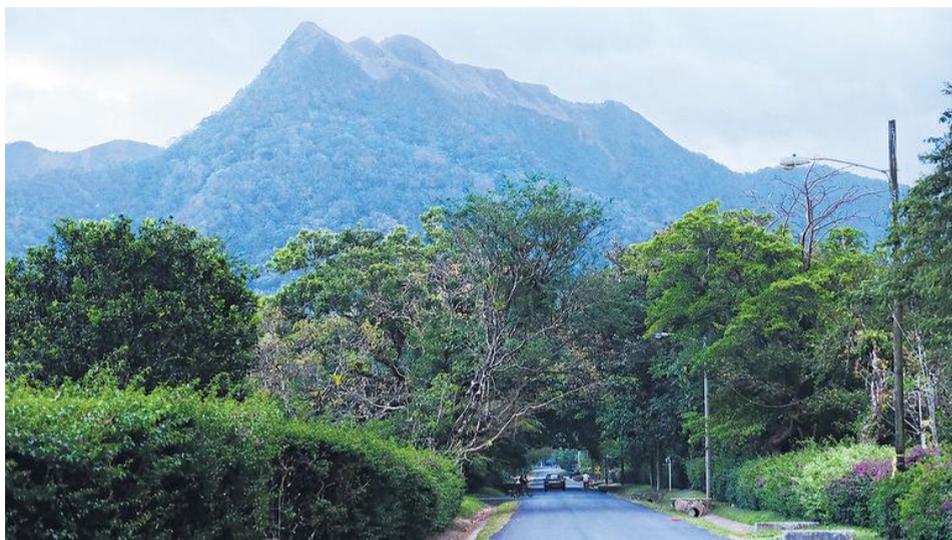


PANAMA



El Valle de Anton is in the crater of a dormant volcano. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

FROM P19

Indian Girl at the top of the caldera? We have and we will. We've been admiring the way one section of the volcano's walls resembles a person lying on his or her back. We're also looking forward to the views from the top.

That evening a couple of the birders back at the lodge share photos on their phones over dinner. Richard, from Washington State, shows us a brilliant green and red Cuban tody. Tony, who's from Pennsylvania, flashes a hummingbird before us, one he spotted in Trinidad. When I ask Tony's wife Pat how they got into birding I learn it was as innocuous as buying a bird feeder after someone gave them a gift certificate to Home Depot 20 years ago. "Now" she says, "95 per cent of our holidays are related to birding."

After dinner Tino asks Julie and I if we'd like to go birding the next morning. It feels like we're on a slippery slope but, yes, we would. We're up at dawn, finish breakfast by 6.30am and we're on the road by 7.15am. We don't go far, a few kilometres or so to the other side of the caldera. Now, the sun is up and birds are calling from the treetops. At first, Julie and I see nothing but dense greenery while Tino pulls birds into his scope like a magician pulling rabbits from a hat.

fact file

- Canopy Lodge is two hours west of Panama City in the town of El Valle de Anton.
- Most people who visit Canopy Lodge and/or its three sister lodges are birders, but anyone interested in nature will enjoy the lodges and surroundings.
- The company offers a variety of packages. These include five to seven-night stays at one lodge starting at US\$1999 (\$2658) per person in high season and US\$1299 per person in low season. Packages of 14 and 20 nights include stays at various lodges and include transportation, meals and expert guides.
- It's also possible to book rooms without a package. Rates at Canopy Lodge start at US\$267 per person, per night in high season (US\$184 in low season) and include all meals. If you stay for three nights or longer you'll receive a complimentary birding tour with one of their naturalists.
- High season is January through to March when the weather is mostly sunny and dry.



A hummingbird sits on her nest.

Look, a social flycatcher. Quick, there's a tropical kingbird. Look now, a keel-billed toucan. But when Tino spots a hummingbird in her nest just a few yards away and almost at eye level with us, we're truly awed. Her camouflage is perfect, but he found her anyway.

At lunch that day I "get it" when Feliz, a doctor from San Antonio, Texas, tells me watching birds takes her to a magical place. She describes a green hermit hummingbird she saw that morning. "Oh my God, it was glorious, like a jewel." I tell her about a female barred antshrike we saw that was orange and frilly and far more beautiful than its name suggests. Feliz is here with another doctor who is a long-time birder. "I was partial to Costa Rica," the woman says, "but I'm impressed."

For the rest of our stay, Julie and I do more typical tourist activities, including riding the zip lines through the cloud forest at Canopy Adventure, just up the road from our lodge. Seeing a sloth hanging from a tree branch in full view on our last morning is another highlight.

But I'll always associate Panama with birding. Near the end of our stay a few of us are watching birds near the lodge one morning when a brilliant blue and yellow one flies past. "That's a . . . a . . ." I pause, trying to recall the name. ". . . a thick-billed euphorbia," I finally blurt out.

The birders clap and cheer, even though I realise seconds later that I called the bird by the name of a plant. What I meant to say was thick-billed euphonia, not euphorbia. No matter. Panama has hooked me on birding and they know it.

WA: RETURN TO COUNTRY

# Back to the land

STEPHEN SCOURFIELD finds Boyagin Nature Reserve is the bedrock of our State's ecology

**T**he pleasure of gravel under rubber. After covering the pleasant 96km from Armadale on Brookton

Highway's bitumen, I have turned right on to the unsealed York-Williams Road.

The sign says it's 17km to Boyagin Rock but I'm not heading to the rock itself. There's more to Boyagin Nature Reserve than that.

At the main rock site, the day use area's a bit desperate — concrete "tables", barbecues and that hardened-off feel that places have when visitors swing in, take a look and swing out again.

But the nature reserve is the Wheatbelt as it was before it was cleared. It is widely seen as one of the few areas of original fauna and flora remaining in the Wheatbelt, with powderbark wandoo, marri and jarrah. There are tammar wallabies and numbats. Conservation projects have seen quenda and woylies translocated here.

Captive-bred numbats have been released.

Birds WA records tawny frogmouth and painted button-quail, elegant parrots and even black honeyeaters.

Last Sunday, the woodland was alive with birds.

There are tracks to drive through the nature reserve (Owl, Wren), spots to pull off and picnic, smaller granites to wander and laterite ridges to follow on foot through the powderbark wandoo. These trees grow up to 15m, with their smooth, pink-white bark, loving those lateritic, gravelly soils — loving the breakaways and stony ridges.

Granite outcrops are volcanic bubble, rising up to 50m above the surrounding countryside, and there are wildflowers in spring. The granite kunzea will be showing red flowers.

Geologically, this is The Great Plateau of Western Australia (often called the Darling Plateau); the surface expression of the Yilgarn Block.



Autumn vegetation at Boyagin.

These Archaean rocks have been a relatively stable section of the Earth's crust for 2400 million years.

Then, during the Pleistocene period, from 2 million years ago until just about 10,000 years ago, there was geological uplift in the south-west of WA.

Big drainage systems formed and a cycle of erosion began, stripping the lateritic surface of the Darling Plateau.

Boyagin is among the most valued Wheatbelt granite nature reserves, along with the likes of Mt Caroline, Tarin Rock and Dragon Rocks.

The Shire of Brookton has 12 reserves of significance including the 6700ha of Boyagin Nature Reserve, which is partly in Brookton and partly in Pingelly.

Some 420 plant species have so far been recorded, including two declared rare flora species.

There are seven nature reserves of significance in the Shire of Beverley, including Dale Conservation Park, Wandoo Conservation Park and Yenyening Lakes.

Boyagin Rock is a good "target" . . . a good objective for getting right out of town for the day.

It is a significant site for Ballardong Noongars, and for me.

It is estimated that, in the Wheatbelt, only 2 per cent of original vegetation remains uncleared.

This is the country as it was.



Following a laterite ridge in Boyagin Nature Reserve.