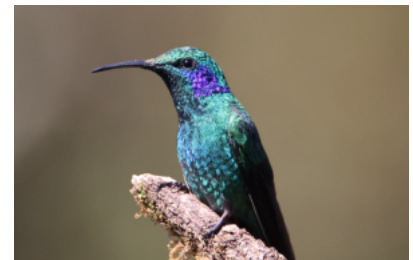


# Costa Rica: Birds & Nature | Jan. 16 – 24, 2024

## Trip Report | by Rick Weiman



With hosts Rick Weiman and Emily Renkey, local guide Jose Armando Obando Sanchez and participants Bob, Steve, Laura, Ken, Rick, Anita, Ken, Barb and Rebecca.



### Tues., Jan. 16 Arrivals in Costa Rica

Today was arrival day but unfortunately winter storms raging across the U.S. had delayed most of the group so three of us met in the lobby around 3:00 and walked the beautiful 10-acre garden trails of our Hotel Bougainvillea. One of the highlights was a pair of sleepy Mottled Owls partially hidden in a large stand of bamboo. A Lesson's Motmot soon made an appearance as did a pair of Squirrel Cuckoos. Some other birds seen or heard on the walk were several vacationing Baltimore Orioles, Tennessee Warblers and Summer Tanagers. Some of the garden's common residents led us to declare rufous as the color of the day as Rufous-naped Wrens, Rufous-collared Sparrows and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds all gave us great looks. After a rest, our group, now five strong, met in the bar for a celebratory drink to kick off the tour and to meet our local guide, Armando. After dinner in the hotel restaurant, we retired to our rooms as we had an optional 6:00 a.m. bird walk in the garden to rest up for.



**Wed., Jan. 17**

## **Hotel Bougainvillea | Talamanca Mountains | Quetzales National Park**

Our group had grown to seven travelers overnight. We met Armando and explored the gardens, pointing out the Mottled Owl roost to the late arrivers and finding several new birds including a Hoffman's Woodpecker and some Crimson-fronted Parakeets. The Lesson's Motmot appeared again just before breakfast and several Montezuma Oropendolas landed in the bare branches of a large tree, producing their unique song. After a delicious buffet breakfast, we loaded into our spacious Coaster bus and met our driver Alfonzo who would be with us for the entire week. The day was sunny and cool as we made our drive up the Cerro de la Muerte and the Talamanca Mountains cloud forest. Before long we had passed through San Jose and reached a peak of 9,800 feet elevation. Our first stop, known to locals as Kilometer 70, was where we searched for the petit, regionally endemic Timberline Wren. We heard one calling but had no luck seeing it. Instead, we had excellent views of a group of Sooty-capped Chlorospingus and several Volcano Hummingbirds.

We then traveled to the rural community of Providencia in the Los Santos region of Costa Rica. Located about three hours south from San Jose, Providencia borders Parque Nacional Los Quetzales, one of the newest additions to Costa Rica's expansive park system. Armando guided the bus down a dirt road surrounded by immaculate forest on either side. We were in the realm of the Resplendent Quetzal, a target bird for everyone on this tour. Alfonzo turned off the bus engine and we slowly and quietly walked the deserted dirt road. Before long, there it was, a beautiful male quetzal perched out in the open at the edge of the road. Quiet oohs and aahs were audible, joined by the clicking of cameras as we took turns at the scope admiring this gorgeous bird that posed for us for over 10 minutes. We also spotted a large Black Guan perched in a tree while driving, and at another stop we found several Ruddy Tree Runners, a spectacular Flame-throated Warbler and a Mountain Elaenia.

Lunch was at Donde Miriam (aka Comidas Tipicas Miriam) in the Savegre River Valley. The local food was delicious, but the action at the fruit and hummingbird feeders was even better. We saw our first of several Lesser Violetears, Talamanca Hummingbirds and White-throated Mountain-gems of the tour. Two other amazing birds were a Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher and a male Flame-colored Tanager feeding on berries in a nearby bush off the deck, both lingering long enough for pictures. After this stop we drove a few more miles to



the Trogon Lodge, our home for the next two nights. The lodge is made up of cabins spread across beautiful gardens, trout ponds and windy trails along a downward descending stretch of the Savegre River. We met at the bar for happy hour and completed our first species checklist of the trip followed by a delicious dinner in the lodge's restaurant. Our first full day of the tour was indeed a memorable one!

## **Thurs., Jan. 18                      Trogon Lodge | Savegre Reserve**

Most of our group met at 6:00 a.m. for a pre-breakfast walk outside the lodge along the Savegre River, a fast-moving, crystal-clear stream cascading over rocks and boulders with small waterfalls every hundred feet. It's the perfect habitat for Torrent Tyrannulets and American Dippers and we were soon rewarded with a pair of tyrannulets feeding on the wet rocks and algae searching for insects. We added Sooty and Mountain Thrushes and Large-footed Finch to our list and found a Volcano Hummingbird nest in a large hydrangea constructed with lichens and spider webs and containing a single chick. By the nestling's size we could tell it was close to fledging, and sure enough later in the day it was gone, exploring the beautiful flower gardens on the property.

After breakfast and some badly needed fresh coffee, we visited the nearby Savegre Reserve to hike some trails high above the Savegre Lodge. It was difficult leaving the lodge's feeders behind as a Green-crowned Brilliant and a pair of Silver-throated Tanagers were visiting. We hopped into two 4x4 vehicles that drove us up the steep hillside a few miles for our hike down. We started birding immediately after exiting the vehicles as we were deposited right in the midst of a mixed flock that included a pair of Barred Becards, a Tufted Flycatcher, and Wilson's and Black-cheeked Warblers. Then a surprisingly large wave of striking, locally endemic Flame-throated Warblers passed through, we counted at least 20! We started the three-mile hike downhill, passing through pristine montane forest on winding, well groomed trails. We crossed several small bridges and admired the waterfalls and the remains of a small plane crash from the 1970's.

There were birds to be seen as well. Several Yellowish and Tufted Flycatchers posed for our cameras as did an Ochraceous Pewee. Acorn Woodpeckers were spotted frequently, and their calls followed us as we hiked. We caught glimpses of Black-billed and Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrushes and heard the beautiful songs of a



Black-faced Solitaire and Gray-breasted Wood-Wrens. A vista overlooking the valley was filled with 35+ White-collared Swifts strafing the airways in search of insects, as many Black and Turkey Vultures soared above us. We returned in time for lunch in the dining hall and were joined by our storm-delayed clients, Barb and Rebecca, along with Emily from our Client Services Team. Introductions were made and after a relaxing lunch with orange cake for dessert we returned to the lodge.

In the afternoon we had time to ourselves to hike the beautiful trails on the lodge property along the Savegre River or just relax in the gardens and soak up the sun. Rebecca, Barb, Armando and both Ricks wanted to find an American Dipper and guide Rick soon found one on the deck overlooking the river, thereafter dubbed the dipper deck. He called the group over and as they watched the dipper a female and male Resplendent Quetzal flew across the river from the cabin area, and we soon had our scope zeroed in on the perched male. Rebecca and Barb had missed the quetzal the previous day, so it was a nice end to the birding day.

We repeated our happy hour in the bar followed by the species checklist and a delicious dinner at the lodge, ending another very full and rewarding day.

## **Fri., Jan. 19                      Rio Savegre Valley | Paradiso de Quetzales | La Quinta Sarapiquí Lodge**

Those who wanted to joined Rick and Armando at the dipper deck at 6:00 a.m. for one last walk on the grounds of Trogon Lodge. We saw at least three Torrent Tyrannulets including one catching and eating a large moth. A pair of American Dippers arrived together, vocalizing and feeding, and we had good looks at Lesser Violetears and Volcano and Talamanca Hummingbirds in the flower gardens.

After breakfast we departed for Paradiso de Quetzal, a family-run eco-resort with a nice restaurant, lovely gardens and a gift shop. As we arrived, one of the workers pointed out a male Resplendent Quetzal feeding in a nearby tree. Now it was Emily's turn to get her first look at a quetzal! The hummingbird feeders were bustling with Lesser Violetear, Talamanca and Volcano Hummingbirds and White-throated Mountain-gems. We searched without luck for Fiery-throated Hummingbirds, then hiked the windy, mountain trails and flower-laden gardens finding several Collared Redstarts, Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatchers, Barred Parakeets in flight and a Mistletoe



Tyrannulet. We also found a Fiery-throated Hummingbird feeding on flower nectar. We were fortunate to have seen several quetzals in the high-elevation portion as we would soon journey to the Caribbean lowlands. After lunch we had a long drive back over the Cerro de Muerte Mountains to our next lodge, the La Quinta Sarapiquí in the Caribbean lowlands. During the drive, Armando gave a lecture on the hummingbirds of Costa Rica and their amazing morphology. Upon arrival, we had time to familiarize ourselves with the lodge grounds, 20 acres that was once an orange plantation that includes an area reforested with native trees, an old-growth forest on the riverside and tropical gardens and ponds. After check-in, we freshened up and then met for a well-supplied buffet dinner filled with local dishes and fresh fruits and vegetables.

Following dinner and our species checklist, a few of us had the energy for a night walk with Armando and Rick. We saw several small spectacled caimans, detected by their eye-shine, and two red-eyed tree frogs. Using the eye-shine method, Ken E. somehow spotted a snake high in a tree over hanging one of the ponds, later identified by his pictures as an annulated tree boa.

## **Sat., Jan. 20 Sarapiquí River Boat Tour | La Selva Biological Station**

We met at 6:00 a.m. to visit the two feeding stations operated by the lodge, one close to the dining area and the other by the pool, surrounded by forest. Both were active this morning with the brilliantly colored Costa Rican birds putting on a show. The Red-legged and Green Honeycreepers with their brilliant blue, turquoise and green colors were followed by several stunning tanagers: Crimson-collared, Scarlet-rumped and Golden-hooded. Several visiting Baltimore Orioles and a resident Black-cowled Oriole added orange to the morning's canvas. We saw 16 species at or around the feeders in the hour prior to our delicious buffet style breakfast.

Our next big adventure was a boat trip on the Sarapiquí River with a young Captain Daniel. The skies were cloudy as we arrived, but the rain stayed away, and no sooner had we pulled out than we started seeing new birds including Mangrove and Southern Rough-winged Swallows that were gliding over the river. Under the dock were around a dozen roosting proboscis bats. Spectacled caimans, a Meso-American slider turtle and Black River Turtles rested on the riverbanks and logs, and soon we found a Spotted Sandpiper and a Louisiana Waterthrush



bobbing their tails along the shoreline. We had our first looks at a troop of Mantled Howler Monkeys foraging in the treetops, previously only heard. More new birds appeared as we made our way downstream including Amazon and Green Kingfishers and several Bare-throated Tiger-Herons. Snowy and Western Cattle Egrets and Anhingas were familiar birds that also called the river home, as did Little Blue and Tri-colored Herons. Armando spotted a male Gartered Trogon and then a Keel-billed Toucan perched high in a tree for us. On the ride back, six Green Ibis were joined on a mudflat by several Southern Lapwings. In all we saw 28 species on this rewarding river trip. It was then back to the lodge for lunch and more feeder watching before we departed for a 20-minute ride to the La Selva Biological Station where we would spend the afternoon. La Selva is operated by The Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS), working on education, conservation, ecotourism and research. Scientists and students from all over the world visit La Selva to work on projects related to biodiversity, forest dynamics, nutrient cycling, native species reforestation and carbon sequestering. It is considered one of the world's most important sites for tropical ecosystem research, holding over 450 bird species and 70 species of bats.

We were excited to explore its 1,600 acres of tropical forest, and upon our arrival we met Octavio, one of the local reserve guides and immediately began birding in the open garden trails. New birds were everywhere and before long we were looking at a male and female Shining Honeycreeper, a pair of beautiful Blue Dacnis and a Cinnamon Becard. Just then Octavio got very animated when he spotted a female Snowy Cotinga. Experience tells you that when the local guides show that kind of excitement you know you're seeing a "good" bird. We had nice looks through the scope as it perched high in a leafless tree. We saw many Chestnut-sided Warblers, and Laura spotted what turned out to be a Scarlet-rumped Cacique, our only one of the tour.

We crossed the Sarapiquí River on a long and swaying (but safe) footbridge and soon found a Squirrel Cuckoo, Yellow-throated Toucan and a pair of Northern Black-throated Trogons. We watched several Central American agoutis cross the trail in front of us and observed them eating seeds in the forest. Octavio said he had a surprise for us and after a bit of searching he showed us a Crested Owl found earlier by another La Selva guide. As we trekked back across the footbridge, two endangered Great Green Macaws squawked as they flew over us. Probably the biggest surprise was when we were heading to the gift shop, three Great Curassows strolled by the parking lot. There were two brown females and an all-black male, all within 30 feet of the group! To celebrate our great day and to cool off a bit, Rick bought ice cream. As we were getting on the bus, a pair of Short-tailed Nighthawks circled above us. Magical!



We made a quick stop on our way back to the lodge to view a colony of nesting Montezuma Oropendolas and a roost tree for Neotropic Cormorants and vultures. Back at the lodge, we enjoyed dinner and reviewed our checklist. Afterwards, part of the group went for a night walk, finding a brown leaf litter toad, and more red-eyed tree frogs, including an egg mass under a leaf beside a small pond. As the tadpoles develop, they wriggle out of the eggs and drop into the pond. At another small pond we found a very large brown and black frog that turned out to be called a Savage's thin-toed frog. On the way back to our rooms, we passed a tireless and seemingly endless column of leaf cutter ants and heard a Common Pauraque calling.

## Sun., Jan. 21 **La Quinta Sarapiquí Lodge | Caño Negro Natural Lodge**

We were back by the fruit feeder at 6:00 a.m. scanning for birds before breakfast. A rowdy gang of Collared Aracaris, a few Gray-headed Chachalacas, the regionally endemic Black-cheeked Woodpecker, a Buff-throated Saltator and all three honeycreeper species. After breakfast we had time for a two-hour walk on the lodge trails that we had only partially explored at night. Hummingbirds were active this morning including White-necked Jacobin, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird and a Stripe-throated Hermit. We also found a Fasciated Tiger-Heron, a pair of Broad-billed Motmots, a Ringed Kingfisher and two elusive Rufous-tailed Jacamars. Voted cutest bird of the trip was the Common Tody-Flycatcher that popped into view, and the Red-throated Ant Tanagers and a calling Black-headed Saltator were nice additions to our list. Armando found several tiny strawberry poison dart frogs hopping through the leaf litter.

We had our final meal at the lodge, a comforting buffet lunch prepared early for our group, then we packed up the bus and headed north towards the Nicaragua border where the Caño Negro Natural Lodge awaited. The lodge is located near the Caño Negro National Wildlife Refuge, one of the most important biological areas of the country and among the most important wetland areas in the world. It is an official Ramsar site, nearly 25,000 acres with freshwater lagoons and extensive river habitat. On our way there, Armando discussed the different macaw populations in Costa Rica, focusing on the endangered Scarlet and Great Green Macaws that have the lowest (but growing) population numbers due to various local conservation efforts he was personally involved in. We made several stops along the way, finding Wood Storks, Roseate Spoonbills, a White-tailed Kite in flight and perched American Kestrel and Harris's Hawk.



Once settled into our cabins, we met at the bar for cocktails, which conveniently overlooked the fruit feeders at the lodge where Red-legged Honeycreepers, Bananaquits and Scarlet-rumped, Palm and Blue-gray Tanagers were darting about. A quick walk on the property yielded a pair of Yellow-throated Euphonias, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, a fly-by Roseate Spoonbill and the local House Wren. Next to one of the cabins a group of Central American spider monkeys were foraging in the trees, using their long, prehensile tails to hang from the limbs. We had just enough time before the sun set to visit the local park near the lodge that where an American Pygmy Kingfisher flew in and perched for us. In the surrounding marsh, we could see Northern Jacanas, a Great Egret and a wild Muscovy Duck. Back at the lodge we reviewed our growing species checklist and were greeted by Pablo, one of the owners of the property, before dinner.

## **Mon., Jan. 22                      Caño Negro Natural Lodge | Caño Negro National Wildlife Refuge Boat Tours**

After breakfast we walked to the dock for the first of our two boat trips that day through the expansive wildlife refuge. On the trail we found a perched Black-collared Hawk, scanning the marsh for its breakfast. We met Captain Roberto and set off on our adventure. A male Nicaraguan Grackle, smaller than it's Great-tailed cousin, perched and sang loudly while a Russet-naped Wood-Rail walked along the river's edge. Several Groove-billed Ani's posed for photos and Anhinga's, Neotropic Cormorants (did you know a cormorant flock is called a Gulp?), and Green Herons were plentiful.

One of the highlights was finding several Boat-billed Herons and a shy Sungrebe. You can never get enough sightings of Bare-throated Tiger-Herons, as we saw several. We were happy the boat had a roof to shelter us from the burst of rain that thankfully only lasted 15 minutes or so. Kingfishers and herons were seemingly everywhere, and some wintering Prothonotary Warblers and a Yellow Warbler were nice additions. We soon added Black-headed Trogon, White-collared Manakin, Bay Wren and Black-striped Sparrow, among others, to our list. In addition to 48 bird species, we saw some herps such as spectacled caiman, green iguana and at least three emerald basilisks, including one that raced across the water.





Back at the lodge we had a nice lunch and then some downtime to visit the lovely pool, enjoy a pina colada or just relax. We regrouped at the dock for our afternoon boat tour, visiting a different part of the refuge. Before getting too far, Captain Roberto pointed out two sleepy Pacific Screech-Owls roosting in a bush close to the river. We cruised to a large, open area with wide marshlands to explore. The river was shallower here, so the boat proceeded slowly as our captain expertly avoided hidden logs and sand bars. The sun was bright now helping the photographers capture excellent images of Wood Storks, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, several Limpkins, many Black-necked Stilts, Semipalmated Plovers and a Lesser Yellowlegs. There was some excitement when a large white bird in the distance took wing that may have been a Jabiru, but it was too far for pictures and left us wanting a better look. After returning to land, the captain showed us a roosting Black-and-white Owl that would've remained hidden to us without his assistance.

The bar with its cold beer and rum drinks was a welcome treat when we returned from our day on the water. Dinner was delicious with multiple choices like chicken, tilapia or beef followed by a pineapple flambe for dessert. A few of us decided to join Armando for a night excursion, driving the local roads with our flashlights shining out of the windows. We found another Black-and-white Owl perched near a telephone pole and several Common Pauraques on posts in cattle fields. Several large cane toads hopped on the road in front of the bus as we headed back to the lodge.

## **Tues., Jan. 23**                      **Caño Negro Natural Lodge | Soda Cinchona Mirador | Hotel Bougainvillea**

Today was check out day but we had time before breakfast for an early walk around the property. It was a productive morning with 33 species tallied before breakfast. New birds included Cinnamon and Golden-olive Woodpeckers, and a White-crowned Parrot perched close enough for us to snap a few pictures. At the feeder station, many of the birds we'd grown accustomed to were joined by some new additions like Collared Aracari, Summer Tanager and Buff-throated Saltator. A Russet-naped Wood-Rail that walked right under the feeder was a surprise. Over near the cabins a group of Central American spider monkeys went by, including a mother and her baby who peered back at us in time for a picture. In the distance a Royal Flycatcher, the tropical subspecies, called from the surrounding forest.



We then said goodbye to the lovely staff and made our way back toward San Jose. Drove through farm fields and wetlands, we met another local tour guide who gave Armando a tip that made him smile knowingly. Soon thereafter we stopped the bus alongside a canal loaded with Great and Snowy Egrets, Roseate Spoonbills and Wood Storks as well as a pair of Solitary Sandpipers that Emily discovered. At the far end of the canal were two tall, white birds larger than all the rest – Jabirus! We watched them through the scope, and they then took flight giving us wonderful views (and pictures) of them soaring. Wow, what a special memory from the Caño Negro area! And we weren't done yet. We stopped at Soda Cinchona Miradora, a local restaurant, for lunch. They had a small feeding station and several hummingbird feeders overlooking a picturesque valley and the distant San Fernando waterfall. The feeders were extremely active, and we could barely pull ourselves away to order lunch. We added several new birds for the tour including Northern Emerald-Toucanet, Common Chlorospingus, Green Hermit and Violet Sabrewing, Costa Rica's largest Hummingbird. Three more new birds that zoomed in and out of the restaurant were Coppery-headed and Black-bellied Hummingbirds and a White-bellied Mountain-gem. We drove up the road for a group photo at the La Paz waterfall before returning to the Hotel Bougainvillea for our final night in Costa Rica together.

We had our farewell dinner and final species checklist of the tour (218 species of birds!) and then went around the room recounting everyone's favorite birds and memories of the trip. The Resplendent Quetzal won in a landslide for favorite bird, with American Dipper, Jabiru, Sungrebe, Snowy Cotinga, Great Curassow and Crimson-collared Tanager all getting second place votes. Seeing the proboscis bats up close, the boat tours, close-up views of monkeys and sloths and the many colorful birds at the various feeders were some of the favorite memories shared. We then thanked Armando and Alfonzo for their excellent guidance and driving. Even though Alfonzo doesn't speak much English, he joined us on almost every hike and excursion during the tour. Armando's wife was pregnant, and we learned that she gave birth (unexpectedly early) to their first child during the tour, a beautiful, healthy girl named Aietana. We wished him and his new family well with warm hugs and heartfelt goodbyes.

## **Wed., Jan. 24**                      **Departures**

The next morning a few of us walked through the now familiar gardens at the hotel. Emily, Barb and Rebecca saw the roosting Mottled Owls and the Lesson's Motmot they had missed earlier in the tour. Ken E. really wanted to see a Brown Jay and, right on schedule, a pair arrived just as he and Rick were heading to their rooms to pack up. After breakfast, we said our goodbyes and left at various times for the airport. This was a delightful tour and I hope to see you again in the future!

*Photos: Group (Emily Renkey - ER), Northern Emerald Toucanet (Rick Weiman - RW), Silver-throated Tanager (RW), Lesser Violetear (Ken Howard - KH), Lesson's Motmot (KH), Squirrel Cuckoo (RW), Mottled Owl (KH), Talamanca Hummingbird (KH), Ochraceous Pewee (RW), Flame-colored Tanager (RW), Long-tailed Silky Flycatcher (RW), Resplendent Quetzal (KH), Emily, Armando & Rick (ER), Lodge Scenic (ER), Barb & Rebecca (ER), Group (ER), Group on La Selva bridge over the Sarapiquí River (ER), Tree trunk (ER), Turtles (KH), Gray-headed Chachalaca (KH), Red-eyed Tree Frog (KH), Montezuma Oropendola (RW), Central American Spider Monkey (RW), Group boat tour (ER), Boat-billed Heron (RW), Keel-billed Toucan (RW), Bare-throated Tiger Heron (RW), White-throated Capuchin (KH), Anita & Ken (ER), Red-legged Honeycreeper (RW), Pacific Screech Owl (RW), Final dinner at Trogon Lodge (KH), Jabiru (KH), Violet Sabrewing (RW), Russet-naped Woodrail (KH), Crimson-collared Tanager (RW)*

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