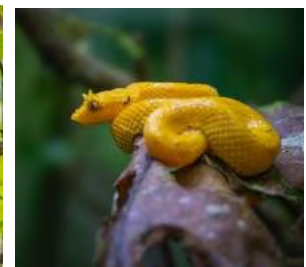


# Costa Rica Birding and Nature | Jan. 16 – 27, 2024 | Trip Report | by Bryan Calk



Compiled by guide Bryan Calk with local guide Johan Fernandez. Our clients included Bill, Sharon, Sandy, Sue, Gordon, Virginia, Steve, Wendy, Lloyd, Antonela, and Dragos



Tues., Jan. 16

Arrivals | Hotel Bougainvillea

Despite some intense winter weather in the US, everyone in our group managed to make it down to San José on time for our tour! Those of us who got in by the early afternoon got together for a walk around the gardens of the Hotel Bougainvillea. These gardens are not like most hotel gardens that you might expect at a hotel in such a large city; they were extensive with lots of corners and edges, a variety of ornamental flowering plants, big fruiting trees, water features, and even a wall of bromeliads designed to form a heart, all adding up to a lovely



walk with lots of birds. Our walk around the property was low-key as we chatted and got to know each other while spotting highlight birds here and there like the Crimson-fronted Parakeets that came down to eat at the top of a coral tree with blooms vibrant orange. Some of the other more common birds we got to see were Redbilled Pigeons, Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, and Great Kiskadees. After a little down time to clean up, we were then joined by our local guide Johan Fernandez. We ordered some cocktails from the bar and listened attentively as Johan gave us a brief presentation walking us through what to expect throughout the journey. We had a delicious dinner, discussed our plans for an early morning walk, and a little travel weary, we all finally headed for bed.

Wed., Jan. 17

Paraiso Quetzales | Mirador Miriam | Savegre

This morning most of us joined guide Johan in the gardens of the hotel for another birding walk as the sun rose. Blue-gray Tanagers and Baltimore Orioles flitted in the treetops, Rufous-naped Wrens partied in the undergrowth and Montezuma Oropendolas flew low overhead. Even as the proverbial breakfast bell was ringing, we had to keep dragging ourselves out of the garden as Cinnamon-bellied Saltator and Yellow-headed Caracara made last-minute appearances. After a yummy hot breakfast, we packed our bags and headed out to the Talamanca highlands and Cerro del Muerte.

Our first stop was Verdesana Lodge where their extensive flower gardens were buzzing with hummingbird action. The main target of our stop here also happened to be the most common of the hummingbird species we saw, the Costa Rican endemic Coppery-headed Emerald. Further up the road and after lunch, we gained more elevation and the habitat became closer to the cloud forest, and we stopped in at the Paraiso Quetzal Lodge for more hummingbirds and our first chance at the Resplendent Quetzal. While the location's namesake eluded us, we did get some more great hummingbird action with the prismatic Fiery-throated Hummingbirds definitely stealing the show, but Volcano, Talamanca, and White-throated Mountain-gems also capturing our attention! Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers twittered and flitted from tree to tree, and we got our first looks at other highelevation specialists like Yellow-thighed Brushfinch.

We had one more stop in store along the way to the lodge, this time at Miriam's Restaurant and Mirador, where the feeders were bustling with activity. Acorn Woodpeckers played very close to the observation deck, Sooty-





capped Chlorospingus hopped through the bushes, and Flame-colored Tanagers absolutely glowed vibrant oranges and yellows.

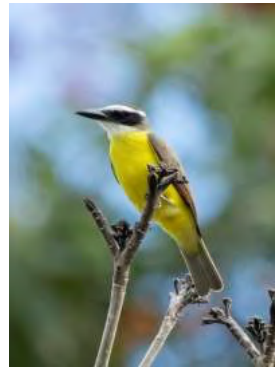
Finally we checked into the Savegre Hotel where we settled into our cabins set in a beautiful cloud forest valley. We ran through our first official group checklist of the tour and had a fresh cooked dinner in the spacious dining room. We then made plans for the next day - a 5:15 am meetup time to make an attempt to see the elusive Resplendent Quetzal...

Thurs., Jan. 18

Savegre Hotel | Savegre Valley

The hunt was on this morning for the iconic Resplendent Quetzal. We loaded up in the vans and headed to one of their favorite foraging grounds before the sun rose. We were greeted early by a few Black Guans flying through the treetops and eventually foraging on the ground, and a variety of other birds sounding off their morning chorus. After waiting a while at this spot, it became clear that this particular Quetzal was going to give us the slip, so we headed down to another spot that was supposed to be a popular foraging and nesting area for them. When we arrived, several other birders were already on the scene, and immediately we found a beautiful adult male quetzal and his female hanging out near their nest cavity. It wasn't long before they flew off, but in no time were back, this time two males together giving exceptionally great views as they flew just meters in front of us back-and-forth across the valley, foraging and perch on branches covered in lichen and mosses. After soaking in these unbelievable birds, we then headed back to, the lodge for a breakfast buffet. Several of us were treated to some amazing views of Spotted Wood-Quail rummaging around the edge of the parking lot as we made our way to get ready for a great morning of birding ahead.

We loaded up in some four-wheel-drive vehicles that took us up to the top of the mountain at the Savegre Hotel property. This higher elevation was dominated by beautiful old cloud forest which started delivering right away with bucket loads of Flame-throated Warblers, Spot-crowned Woodcreepers, and Collared Redstarts. From the top, we walked down a gorgeous winding trail that took us past large trees just dripping in epiphytes like mosses, orchids, and bromeliads. At one point we crossed and followed a small rushing stream, and the birds along the way were just excellent. From Spangle-cheeked Tanagers to Tufted Flycatchers and swarms of Whitecollared Swifts, we were pretty constantly entertained and amazed by these gems of the cloud forest. Back of the bottom of the hill, we headed back into the restaurant for lunch, and a little downtime for the afternoon,



much needed after our exhilarating morning. By early afternoon, though, we were ready for more birds, so we gathered together (where a Swallow-tailed Kite flew overhead!) and walked down to the bottom of the lodge where the Savegre River tumbles downhill over mossy rocks and boulders - perfect habitat for the top two highlight birds of our outing: American Dipper and Torrent Tyrannulet. Along the walk we also enjoyed our first Boat-billed Flycatchers of the trip, Brown-capped Vireo, and Stripe-tailed Hummingbirds.

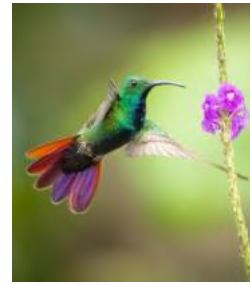
Finally, we gathered together for dinner where we got to celebrate the lovely Virginia's birthday with a delicious cake and camaraderie.

## Fri., Jan. 19      Savegre Valley | Ujarras | La Casona del Cafetal | Rancho Naturalista

After breakfast and some wandering through the hotel gardens this morning, we loaded our van and headed back up the Savegre Valley to a spot called Kilometer 71 - a high elevation spot where we had a chance to target some very special birds. Top of the list and one we worked the hardest for was the regionally endemic Timberline Wren. We caught glimpses here and there of this skulker, all adding up to about as good of views as you can hope for. Along the path we also saw a beautiful Barred Becard, Gray-breasted Wood-wren, Blackcapped Flycatchers, and we got to hear the extremely elusive Silvery-fronted Tapaculo. Oh, and another female Resplendent Quetzal for good measure.

Next, we continued on our drive out of the valley to Ruins de Ujarras - the site of an old Catholic Church, the facade and walls of which still stood tall. Along the perimeter wall of the church were a couple of Emerald Swifts - a type of spiny lizard with the male being a beautiful golden-green color. The bird action here was great, with a mixed flock containing Mistletoe Tyrannulet, Golden-hooded Tanagers, and a handful of warblers. As we walked around the park, some Crimson-fronted Parakeets came down to chow down on some sour guavas giving us excellent views - nice since we'd mostly seen them distantly or just flying over before.





Onwards to lunch at La Casona del Cafetal, we hit the jackpot of bird activity right in the parking lot! It was total chaos as dozens of birds were swarming around at eye level just a few meters away from us. Bananaquits, Yellow-throated Euphonias, Variable Seedeaters, and more tanagers, warblers, and flycatchers than you could shake a stick at! We finally had to pull ourselves away to actually go eat, but not before picking our jaws off the floor at how stunning the setting of this restaurant was. With a lake lined with beautiful blooming and fruiting trees and nicely landscaped grounds, we dined outside under the large, shaded patio. Muscovy and egrets moved through the water, and yet another mixed flock moved through the garden here.

We made one final stop before our hotel, at a place called Tayutic where we searched a small rushing stream for the elusive Sunbittern. As we searched and scanned we found many other beautiful birds like Scarlet-rumped Tanagers and a Russet-naped Wood-rail, until finally Johan spotted the Sunbittern slowly working its way through the rocks upstream! What a unique and fascinating bird. Just around the corner we made it to Rancho Naturalista where we checked in, had dinner and ran through our exciting daily checklist!

Sat., Jan. 20

## Rancho Naturalista | La Angostura Florencia

This morning some of our group woke early to stake out a moth light (a light shining on a white sheet) hung at Rancho Naturalista in the hopes of seeing birds coming in to snatch the insects that were attracted during the night for a quick meal. Highlights included a Golden-crowned Warbler and a Cocoa Woodcreeper. Next, we all gathered up on the upper veranda of the main lodge building where we sipped coffee and watched as the Grayheaded Chachalacas descended upon the banana feeders and a Central American Agouti vacuumed up some cracked corn. On a very short walk around the grounds, we started by finding a beautiful Pale-billed Woodpecker (a tropical cousin to the Pileated), Keel-billed Toucans, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, and Green Honeycreepers.

At breakfast we sampled and learned about Pejibayes or Peach Palm - a starchy fruit traditionally eaten by native people that was brought from South America on ancient trade routes. After breakfast we ventured out on a walk along the upper trails of the property, winding through the tall trees and standing in the sour guava grove at the top of the hill. Along the walk we encountered a number of birds, starting with a star of the day the Lovely Cotinga. Along the way we also saw Black-cheeked Woodpecker, White-collared Manakin, and Red-throated Ant-tanager. At the bottom of the hill we came to Ranch Bajo, the home of the property owner. Here we staked out a luscious patch of Porterweed, a purple verbena-like flower, where several hummingbirds were coming to



feed. After some patience, we scored big with fabulous views of Snowcap, a stunning regional endemic, along with Green Thorntail and Garden Emerald. As we watched the hummingbirds, a Gartered Trogon flew into the trees above us for a brief but excellent view, and a Common Tody-flycatcher played in the bushes just off the ground.

We took a midday rest and continued in the mid-afternoon with a trip out to La Angostura Florencia, a wetland near the property. Here we saw many familiar wading birds from the US with some tropical highlights like Snail Kite, Northern Jacana, Groove-billed Ani, and Amazon and Ringed Kingfishers working the water's edges. In the sky, White-tailed Kite, Wood Stork, and a Peregrine Falcon gave us nice views.

Back at the lodge, a couple of us ventured down a trail to a deck overlooking some small pools of water in the forest. Here we saw some hummingbirds bathing before their bedtime, and a Fawn-throated Foliage-gleaner was a nice find along the way.

After dinner, we completed our checklist and discussed our route for our moving day the next day.

## Sun., Jan. 21 Guayabo National Monument | Guarumo Lodge y Soda | Donde Cope | Selva Verde

Today was a big moving day for us, but first we repeated our morning as we did it yesterday with an early morning vigil on the moth light which scored a few fantastic heard-only birds like Barred Forest-Falcon and Rufous Motmots, and some of the same visitors as yesterday morning came to snack on the bugs. We then headed to the veranda where things were slow, but a Dusky Rice Mouse made several appearances to sneak some cracked corn off the ground, and we got to see some Brown-hooded Parrots preening and resting in a distant coral tree.

After breakfast we packed our bags and headed on the road for a long day of driving with some interesting stops along the way. First was Guayabo National Monument. Here our tour guide Elizabeth taught us about the Chibcha tribe who lived here for 2400 years, beginning around 1000 years BCE. They are now famous for their extensive aqueduct systems that are still functional to this day, as well as their cumulative 35+ km stone roads leading to Guayabo and other populations, earning them the status as Civil Engineering World Heritage site. We



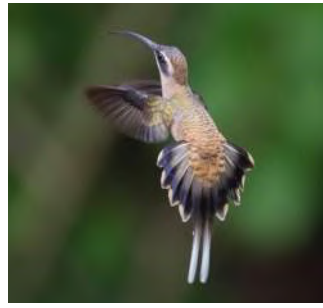


could see tombs made for the people who died of natural causes, as those who died a premature death were given sky burials, where scavenging raptors would consume the bodies so their souls could ascend to the afterlife. Along this fascinating walk, we also encountered a few new bird species for the trip including Bay Wren and Scale-crested Pygmy-tyrant, and we also got to watch as a bold Roadside Hawk attempted to snatch a Brown Jay, which the Jay deftly avoided and didn't seem too concerned about!

Next we stopped for lunch at Guarumo Lodge. Here we were immediately gobsmacked by an incredibly active feeder setup where honeycreepers, toucans, tanagers, and more were going absolutely bananas for bananas! It was a photographer and birders delight as they posed just feet away from us, ready for their closeups. Soon, Johan announced he had found a very cooperative White-collared Manakin for us, and as if it couldn't get any better, he then spotted a Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth!! As we were watching the sloth, we got word that the food was ready for us and we ate another great meal with local cuisine.

Back on the road, we stopped in at Johan's friend Cope's place - a prolific artist, photographer, and master of the jungle. We visited his home where he has his own private (and incredible!!) feeder set up with a pond, and the activity was just as good as it was at lunch with hummingbirds swarming all around, and even an American Pygmy Kingfisher that briefly visited the pond - wow! We all picked out some mud boots he had available for us, and then he hopped in the van with us and took us to what appeared to be a random side road off the main drag, leading us to an inconspicuous trailhead into the jungle. He led us through streams and muddy trails with the still, hot, and muggy air being a bit oppressive, but we soon learned why as he showed us two Spectacled Owls on their day roost! These large owls peered down at us without too much concern as we looked up in amazement. Down another muddy trail we went, this time to look up into the highest reaches of the canopy for a day roosting Great Potoo, another nocturnal species that is extremely difficult to track down, and finally he showed us a pair of roosting Crested Owls! Just incredible to see these nocturnal birds on their roosts. But one more surprise was in store as he led us one by one to look under an inconspicuously folded leaf, concealing a small cluster of Honduran White Bats – just totally adorable little white fluffballs.

After we bought a few of Cope's art prints, we headed on to our new home at Selva Verde Lodge where we ate dinner and got checked into our rooms.



Mon., Jan. 22

## La Selva Biological Station | Sarapiquí River Boat

A few of us joined Johan this morning for a walk around the grounds of Selva Verde. Along our walk, we found our first monkeys of the trip, White-faced Capuchins, and got some nice scope views of Yellow-throated Toucan at the treetops. Along the banks of the Sarapiquí River which borders the property, we found another Sunbittern which this time gave us great views of its wings, the feature that makes this bird so famous. It started to rain on us at this point, so we headed back in for breakfast. The upper story of the dining building had a great viewing deck where the bird feeders were alive with action all morning.

Our main outing of the day was to La Selva Biological Station, a place made famous by researchers over the past half century as they've relentlessly researched and documented everything from ants to climate to plants and fungi, and everything in between. We even encountered several people out conducting studies along the trails as this is still an active campus. We started by crossing a large suspension bridge over the river filled with fish and turtles below us giving us a unique perspective. On our walk, we found Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs, a gorgeous lemon-yellow Eyelash Viper, Broad-billed Motmot, a Mealy Parrot having a snack right over the trail, and right at the end of our walk we found a Hoffmann Two-toed Sloth hanging out right over the suspension bridge. Back in the parking lot, perhaps the best bird of the outing revealed itself as Great Green Macaws were sitting in the distant treetops. These large parrots are globally very rare and considered critically endangered with fewer than 1500 individuals believed to be alive in the wild today.

We took a midday break for lunch and some free time at the hotel before heading back out into the field, this time to a boat trip along the Sarapiquí River. Our young but experienced captain expertly navigated us along the rivers swift currents, first showing us a mother Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth with a baby on board, then both Green and Amazon Kingfishers in short order, and along the cruise we found a variety of other great birds like Cinnamon Becard, Buff-rumped Warbler, and a Green Ibis hanging out with a decently sized American Crocodile resting on the banks.

We headed back to the hotel for a little evening down time before running through our daily checklist, enjoying some cocktails from the bar, dining on some delicious dinner, and checking out some Red-eyed Tree-frogs in the hotel gardens between the rain drops.





Tues., Jan. 23

## Selva Verde | Mirador Cincocha | Soda Las Lapas | Cerro Lodge

After going to bed to the sound of gentle rain last night, we woke up to find that it was still drizzling, but that did not deter us from heading out for a morning walk around the grounds of Selva Verde. Highlights along the way included a Bare-throated Tiger-heron with a freshly caught fish along the river with this time two Sunbitterns flying upstream - just gorgeous. While standing here on the banks of the river, Antonela found an absolutely stunning Green-and-Black Poison Dart Frog - wow!! Back at the dining area, the birds were also catching their breakfast with a couple new faces showing up including Crimson-collared Tanagers and a Blue Dacnis.

After chowing down and loading up our bags, we hit the road towards San José. Along the way, we stopped in at Mirador Cincocha, a small “soda” or restaurant with a back deck lined with bird feeders and a spectacular view of the Cinchona waterfall. The as we drank some hot coffee and tea and snacked on some local fare, we were dazzled by the birds, including Violet Sabrewings, Northern Emerald-Toucanets, Prong-billed Barbets, a variety of tanagers, and even a Buff-fronted Quail-dove that made an appearance below the deck. Too soon we had to pull ourselves away and headed on to lunch at Soda Las Lapas, right at the mouth of the Rio Tárcoles where it dumps into the Pacific Ocean. The food was delicious and homemade, and walking the neighborhood we saw Magnificent Frigatebirds cruising by overhead, but the highlight for sure had to be the brilliant Scarlet Macaws that ate beach almonds and played in the trees above us.

Finally, we drove just a short way up the road to board a boat to tour the Rio Tárcoles. This fabulous outing took us up and down the fresh to brackish waters of the river near its mouth, lined with mangroves with many sand bars and grassy areas providing habitats for a great diversity of species. In about two and a half hours of cruising around we were able to pick up over seventy species of birds and had some shockingly close views of large American Crocodiles just doing their thing, and one even going after a big Green Iguana! Some of our favorite birds were the Common Black Hawk, Roseate Spoonbills, Turquoise-browed Motmot, four species of Kingfisher, a roost of hundreds of Brown Pelicans, and so many shorebirds and wading birds. We ended the boat ride with a view of the setting sun over the ocean and then made our way to the Cerro Lodge to check in and have dinner.



Wed., Jan. 24

## Carara National Park | La Ensenada Tractor Tour

Today we woke at Cerro lodge in time for breakfast and some nature watching from the deck, which was definitely highlighted by more Scarlet Macaws and White-faced Capuchin monkeys coming right in to the railing for a free snack. After a yummy but efficient breakfast we headed on to Carara National Park where we walked the narrow trails through the unique forest here. This place is where the dry forest of the northern pacific coast blends with the wet forests to the south, leading to some impressive biodiversity. The temperature was warm and the tall dense forest kept us from getting much of a breeze, but the birding was good with Chestnut-backed Antbirds, Northern Black-throated Trogon, Riverside Wrens, and a troop of White-nosed Coatis being especially fun sights along the way.

Afterwards we walked across Crocodile Bridge just north of the park entrance to get another look at some massive American Crocodiles loafing around a sand bar in the middle of the Río Tárcoles, always an impressive sight worth stopping for! Next, we headed to lunch at El Jardín as it had gotten pretty hot out. This cafeteriastyle meal filled us up and we spent some time shopping in the massive gift shop here where just about all of us found something worth grabbing. Back in the vans we continued our journey to La Ensenada.

La Ensenada is an active cattle ranch with a beautiful setting and a lodge with rustic charm situated right along the coast of the Gulf of Nicoya with sweeping views of the water and distant mountains. After quickly getting into our rooms, we boarded a large, covered trailer with rows of seats pulled by a ranch tractor to tour the property and see some great birds along the way. In the pastures lined with trees, many of which had dropped their leaves for the dry season, we found an abundance of fantastic birds like Cinnamon Hummingbird, Rosethroated Becard, White-lored Gnatcatcher, and Double-striped Thick-knees. In the salinas (salt production ponds), we scanned through the shorebirds finding plovers, sandpipers, storks, etc., and a Hook-billed Kite even gave us a close fly-over. But we had to press on as our tractor driver Abuelo had a vision for us, as we climbed a large hill up a winding switchback road until we came upon a wonderful surprise – a picnic table lined with a red table cloth and on it chilled wine, beer, and hors d'oeuvres, with a world-class sunset happening over the gulf beyond it. We savored the moment, taking in this beautiful property sprawled out below us bathed in the warm fading light. On the drive down, Abuelo stopped the tractor and mentioned that there is often a pair of Spectacled Owls that hang out in the area and after just a brief moment of waiting, the pair greeted us with spectacular views in the spotlight, calling to each other in the night!! WOW!





Finally we had a delicious dinner, went through our checklist routine, and talked over the plan for the next day at La Ensenada.

Thurs., Jan. 25

### La Ensenada | Mangrove Boat Tour | Salinas

We spent today exploring around La Ensenada starting with a morning bird walk around the main complex. The tide was out, so large mud flats were exposed along the shore, with a few shorebirds and waders wandering about. Back in the trees, we spent our time tracking down the ventriloquist Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, finally getting great looks at this diurnal species, and Black-headed Trogons and Rose-throated Becards showed themselves well in the meantime. We headed back to the dining patio for breakfast before heading out on our final boat trip, this time right into the Gulf of Nicoya to find some mangrove-specialist species. On the ride out, a sandbar was loaded with birds, mostly Brown Pelicans and Royal and Sandwich Terns. In the mangroves, our boat captain maneuvered us through the mangrove forest to find a roosting Boat-billed Heron, Mangrove Yellow Warbler, and a few of us even caught a glimpse of the retiring Mangrove Cuckoo. But perhaps best of all was just being out on the water with the cool breeze through our hair and the light spray of the salt water as we cruised back to home base. We went straight for lunch followed by some down time when some enjoyed the pool, some napped, and some swung in their hammocks on their front porch with not a care to be had.

A few of us gathered in the afternoon to visit the salinas again to see if there were any new shorebirds around, and to our fortune there were indeed! Surfbirds and Ruddy Turnstones were interesting to see lining the edges of these small pools, but the rarest find was about thirty Red Knots, when just one would be rare for this area! For the photographers with us though, the highlight was definitely a Ringed Kingfisher posing exceptionally beautifully in the warming evening light.

Finally we had dinner and started reminiscing on the week we just had, as this was our last dinner with our local guide Johan.



Fri., Jan. 26

## La Ensenada | Travel to San José

We had our final bird walk this morning before breakfast where we spent over an hour walking trails through the wooded areas of La Ensenada. Immediately we were greeted by White-throated Magpie-Jays feeding on the blooms of the pochote trees, and along the path we encountered a pair of Crane Hawks resting in the treetops as the sun warmed the air. A tucked away pond with a deck overlook gave us great views of a congregation of Northern Jacanas, and Purple Gallinules were scattered along the edges by the cattails. Spot-breasted Orioles sang and preened in the morning light, and a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron popped up for a great view. After we finished the trail, we headed back to the lodge for a bite to eat and some time to take a last look at the Pacific Coast and its deciduous forest before packing our bags and heading back towards San José.

Along the way, we stopped for lunch for an ice cream and walked along the edge of a mangrove forest to give some of those specialist species one more try. A beautiful male Rose-breasted Grosbeak stole our attention at first, and Mangrove Warblers made a good appearance. Northern Scrub-Flycatcher was new for the list, and just as we were getting back in the van, we spotted what would be our last new trip bird, a distant but beautiful Gray Hawk.

Finally, we made it back to San José where we checked in to our accommodations at the Double Tree, said goodbye to Johan and Gabriel, and had our farewell dinner sharing stories and reminiscing on a great tour.

Sat., Jan. 27

## San José, Departures

This morning we all caught our transfer shuttles out to the San José International Airport to begin our journeys back home. Pura Vida!

*Photos: Sooty-capped Chlorospingus, Resplendent Quetzal, Collared Aracari, Central American Eyelash-Pitviper, Crested Owl, Blue-gray Tanager, Scarlet Macaw, Lesson's Motmot, Mottled Owl, Talamanca Hummingbird, Rufous-naped Wren, Collared Redstart, Spotted Woodquail, Resplendent Quetzal, Flame-colored Tanager, Stripe-tailed Hummingbird, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, Long-tailed Silky Flycatcher, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Green-breasted Mango, Collared Trogon, Green Thorntail, Snowcap, Keel-billed Toucan,*



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