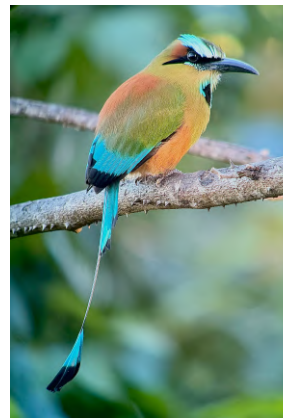


# Costa Rica: Birds & Nature | Mar. 3-10, 2026 with Pacific Coast Ext. | Mar. 10-14, 2026 Trip Report by Robert Petty



**Guides NJ host Robert Petty, local guide Armando and driver Michael**  
**Participants: Ted, Ellen, Mary, Carolyn, Craig, Barbara, Ruth Ann, Doug,**  
**Rick, and Marty**



## Introduction

Costa Rica packs an astonishing amount of biodiversity into a country smaller than West Virginia. Positioned between two oceans, crossed by major mountain ranges, and sitting squarely in the tropics, it is a crossroads of North and South American flora and fauna. Dramatic elevation gradients—from sea level to over 12,000 feet—create an array of habitats in a remarkably compact space.

For birders, that means more than 900 species in a country that can be crossed in half a day. Caribbean lowland rainforest, Pacific dry forest, foothill slopes, and high-elevation cloud forest each host their own avian communities. Over the course of twelve days, our group experienced that ecological richness firsthand.



## **Tues., Mar. 3      Arrival in San José | Hotel Bougainvillea Gardens**

Our tour began in the Central Valley near San José, where we gathered at the beautiful Hotel Bougainvillea, our base for the first evening. Most participants had arrived the day before the official start of the tour, though two travelers experienced flight delays and did not arrive until later in the evening. Fortunately, all were safely in Costa Rica by nightfall.

At 4:00 p.m., the group assembled in the hotel lobby, where we met our outstanding local guide, Jose Armando Obando Sanchez—known to everyone simply as Armando—a superb birder with deep knowledge of Costa Rica’s birds and natural history. Following introductions and a brief overview of the days ahead, we headed outside to explore the extensive gardens surrounding the hotel. These beautifully landscaped grounds, filled with flowering plants, mature trees, and open lawns, are well known among birders as a surprisingly productive introduction to the country’s avifauna.

Even in a short walk around the property, we recorded 18 species, providing an excellent first taste of Costa Rica’s birdlife. Among the highlights were a pair of Lesson’s Motmots perched in the trees, several Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds visiting flowering shrubs, and familiar tropical species such as Great Kiskadee, Social Flycatcher, and Blue-gray Tanager. A Crested Caracara perched atop a lamp post, while a Golden-crowned Tanager added a splash of color in the canopy. Perhaps the most memorable sighting came when we located a Mottled Owl roosting on the hotel grounds in a thick stand of bamboo—an exciting way to begin the trip.

Following our walk, we gathered for a welcome drink and dinner at the hotel restaurant. Over a relaxed meal we became better acquainted and discussed the plan for the coming days as we prepared to explore Costa Rica’s remarkable diversity of habitats and birds.

## **Wed., Mar. 4      Talamanca Mountains | Paraiso Quetzal Lodge | Savegre Valley**

After breakfast at Hotel Bougainvillea, we met our driver for the tour, Michael, who quickly proved not only to be an exceptionally skilled driver on Costa Rica’s steep and winding mountain roads but also a warm and engaging companion throughout the journey. With luggage loaded and anticipation high, we set off for our first full day in the field.

Leaving the Central Valley, we began climbing steadily into the Talamanca Mountains, one of the most biologically rich mountain systems in Central America. As we gained elevation, the landscape transformed before



our eyes. The coffee farms and agricultural lands of the valley gradually gave way to cooler, mist-shrouded slopes where dense cloud forest cloaks the mountainsides. Moss-draped trees, epiphytes, and lush vegetation thrive in this perpetually moist environment, creating ideal habitat for many high-elevation bird specialties—including the legendary Resplendent Quetzal, the species many in our group were most eager to see.

Our first stop was Paraiso Quetzal Lodge, perched at roughly 8,800 feet in the highlands. The lodge’s restaurant features a beautiful observation deck overlooking the valley below and a row of hummingbird feeders that were alive with activity. In a short time we observed an impressive array of highland hummingbirds, including Lesser Violetear, Talamanca Hummingbird, Fiery-throated Hummingbird, White-throated Mountain-gem, and Volcano Hummingbird—many of them lifers for members of the group.

After placing our early lunch orders, we set out on a short walk along a nearby trail through the cloud forest. Almost immediately, Armando spotted a Resplendent Quetzal perched in an oak tree within easy view near the parking area. Unfortunately, only a few members of the group managed to glimpse the bird before it slipped away into the forest, offering just a tantalizing introduction to the species we would continue to pursue over the next several days.

Even without the quetzal lingering, the walk produced several wonderful birds characteristic of these cool, high-elevation forests. Among them were Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush, Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatcher, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus, and Flame-colored Tanager, all closely associated with the oak-dominated cloud forest of the Talamancas.

Following lunch, we made another attempt to track down the elusive quetzal along a nearby road appropriately named Calle Los Quetzales—“Road of the Quetzals.” The road lies near Parque Nacional Los Quetzales, an area protected in 2006 for this iconic species. After walking quietly along the road for about half an hour, we heard the unmistakable call of a male Resplendent Quetzal from across the valley. One member of our group managed to locate the distant bird, and Armando quickly set up the spotting scope, allowing several of us to see the quetzal through gaps in the dense foliage. Unfortunately, the bird flew before everyone could get a good look, leaving us once again with only partial views—but with growing excitement for the days ahead.

By late afternoon it was time to continue onward to our destination for the next two nights, the beautiful Savegre Valley. Descending into the valley, we arrived at Savegre Lodge, nestled along the clear mountain river that gives the valley its name. After settling into our cabins, we gathered for an excellent dinner at the lodge



restaurant, followed by our evening tradition of reviewing the day's bird sightings and preparing for the adventures that awaited us the following morning.

## **Thurs., Mar. 5 Savegre Valley | Highland Oak Forest | Miriam's Quetzal Restaurant**

One of the most sought-after birds of the trip was the Resplendent Quetzal, and our second morning in the Savegre Valley began with another attempt to find this iconic species. While a few members of the group had managed distant views the previous day, the birds had been far away and partially obscured by foliage, leaving several participants still hoping for better looks. Armando knew of a location in the valley where quetzals are sometimes seen at dawn, so we departed early—leaving the lodge at 5:20 a.m. to arrive just as first light touched the ridges above the valley.

The Savegre Valley lies high in the Talamanca Mountains, within a band of montane oak forest and cloud forest that supports a distinctive community of birds found nowhere else in Central America. The early morning was cold and breezy as we scanned the trees, adding several new species for the trip, including Black Guan and Sulphur-winged Parakeet, while the distant calls of Spotted Wood-Quail were heard through the forest. Despite the promising habitat, however, no quetzals appeared, and we began the drive back toward the lodge.

Partway down the winding valley road, we encountered a classic "Quetzal jam." Several buses and cars were pulled over along the roadside, with dozens of birders clustered around spotting scopes and cameras—always a good sign in quetzal country. Our driver quickly pulled over, and we joined the crowd. A male quetzal had been located high in the trees. Several members of our group managed good looks before the bird suddenly lifted off and disappeared into the forest canopy.

Back at Savegre Lodge, we had scarcely sat down for lunch when word spread that another quetzal had been spotted right outside the main building. This time the views were excellent, and everyone in the group was able to see the bird clearly—an exciting moment and a satisfying success after our early morning effort.



In the afternoon we ventured higher into the mountains above the lodge, climbing steep roads by jeep to reach the upper reaches of the cloud forest. These forests, often draped in mosses and epiphytes and nourished by constant moisture from passing clouds, harbor a rich assemblage of highland bird species. Birding in such tall forest can be challenging, requiring patience as we followed movements and calls high in the canopy. Nevertheless, we added a number of beautiful species to our growing list, including Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush, Black-faced Solitaire, Flame-throated Warbler, Collared Redstart, Yellow-thighed Brushfinch, and Spangle-cheeked Tanager. At one point we heard the distant calls of Central American Spider Monkeys, though they remained hidden in the dense forest.

Later in the afternoon we drove a short distance up the valley to Miriam's Restaurant, whose deck overlooks lush gardens filled with flowering plants and hummingbird feeders. Here we enjoyed close views of several highland hummingbird species, including Lesser Violetear, Fiery-throated Hummingbird, White-throated Mountain-gem, and the tiny Volcano Hummingbird.

On the drive back toward the lodge we encountered yet another quetzal sighting. Once again we joined the roadside gathering, and this time we were rewarded with perhaps the best views of the day. At first the birds were difficult to locate in distant trees, but soon we realized there was a pair—a male and female together. When the female flew, the male followed immediately, his long emerald tail streamers trailing behind him.

As is our routine, we gathered before dinner in the lodge bar to review the day's bird checklist followed by another excellent meal.

## **Fri., Mar. 6      Savegre Valley | Rancho Naturalista | Highlands to Caribbean Foothills**

Our final morning in the Savegre Valley began with a brief birding stop along the stream that winds through the valley below the lodge. Here we found one of the river's most characteristic species, the American Dipper, actively foraging along the rushing water. Many members of the group were already familiar with this species from North America, but we noted that the birds here appeared somewhat different—longer-legged and slimmer, with a paler gray back. These subtle differences distinguish these dippers as a separate subspecies.



Nearby we also found a Northern Waterthrush, a migrant from North America that spends the winter months in Central America’s wetlands and streams.

After this final stop, we began our journey out of the highlands, climbing briefly back through the cloud forest before descending toward the Central Valley. This region, surrounded by volcanoes and mountains, forms the agricultural and population center of Costa Rica.

Our route took us through the historic city of Cartago, after which we made a stop at Parque de Paraíso, where Armando quickly located a Tropical Screech-Owl roosting quietly in the trees. From there we continued to our lunch stop at Restaurante La Casona del Cafetal, beautifully situated above the reservoir Embalse de Cachí.

The surrounding landscape here represents a transition between agricultural lands, wetlands, and remnant forest patches. With time before lunch, we explored the area and quickly accumulated an impressive list of birds—37 species in just under an hour. One of the highlights was our first Collared Aracari, a colorful member of the toucan family. A family group of six birds moved through the trees together, providing excellent views and plenty of excitement for the group.

Following lunch, we continued our drive eastward toward Rancho Naturalista, leaving the Central Valley behind and entering the lush Caribbean foothills, a region known for its rich birdlife and humid tropical forests.

## **Sat., Mar. 7      Rancho Naturalista | Caribbean Foothill Rainforest**

Rancho Naturalista is one of Costa Rica’s most celebrated birding lodges, perched on a ridge overlooking the forests of the Caribbean foothills. These mid-elevation rainforests, typically between 600 and 1,000 meters in elevation, form a biological crossroads where species from both the Caribbean lowlands and the mountains can be found.

Our morning began early on the lodge’s famous second-floor balcony, which offers a remarkable vantage point into the mid-canopy of the surrounding forest. Below the deck, feeders stocked with bananas and seeds attracted a lively gathering of mammals and birds. A White-nosed Coati and a Central American Agouti appeared regularly beneath the feeders, joined by Variegated and Red-tailed Squirrels.



Hummingbird feeders along the balcony drew a constant stream of activity, allowing close views of several species, including White-necked Jacobin, Green-breasted Mango, Violet-headed Hummingbird, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, and Crowned Woodnymph.

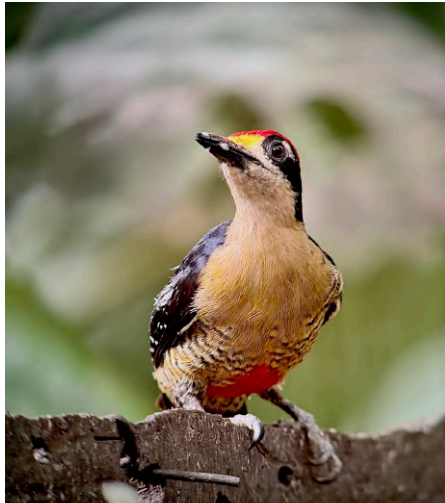
Larger birds were also plentiful around the lodge grounds. Gray-headed Chachalacas, Brown Jays, and Red-billed Pigeons were frequently seen, along with the distinctive Montezuma Oropendola. In the far distance we could see Western Cattle Egrets and a Great Egrets flying over the valley.

High in the canopy we spotted several migrant warblers from North America, including Tropical Parula, Chestnut-sided Warbler, and Summer Tanager, reminders of the strong migratory connection between Central America and the temperate forests of North America.

After breakfast we set out on the lodge's forest trails, walking through dense foothill rainforest where towering trees, vines, and epiphytes create a complex vertical structure. Along the trail we enjoyed our first views of a Crested Guan and several Keel-billed Toucans, whose bright bills stood out against the green canopy. Deep within the forest we could hear the distinctive calls of a Dull-mantled Antbird, though the bird remained hidden in the undergrowth.

The trail eventually climbed toward an open clearing with sweeping views of the surrounding mountains. From a viewing platform we were able to watch birds moving along the ecotone—the transition zone between forest and open meadow. These edge habitats often support especially diverse birdlife, and here we observed both familiar migrants such as Baltimore Oriole, Tennessee Warbler, and Blackburnian Warbler, along with colorful tropical residents including Golden-hooded Tanager, Scarlet-thighed Tanager, and the brilliantly turquoise Green Honeycreeper.

In the afternoon we set out in search of one of the region's most sought-after hummingbirds—the tiny Snowcap. Armando led us to several hedgerows of flowering shrubs known to attract the species. At the first location we saw several juvenile Snowcaps, but the spectacular adult male—with its dazzling white crown—remained elusive. We moved to a second site and waited patiently, scanning the surrounding vegetation. While searching we enjoyed excellent looks at a Common Squirrel-Cuckoo and several familiar hummingbirds, including Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and Crowned Woodnymph. Just as we were preparing to leave, Armando suddenly spotted the bird we had hoped for—the brilliant adult Snowcap.



Our final stop of the afternoon took us to several nearby streams where we searched for riparian specialists. Here we found both Torrent Tyrannulet and the beautiful Sunbittern. The Sunbittern provided particularly memorable views, twice spreading its wings in a defensive display that revealed striking orange and yellow eye-like patterns. This dramatic wing display is believed to function as a startle mechanism to deter potential predators.

We returned to Rancho Naturalista in the evening for another excellent dinner before gathering, as usual, to review the day's bird checklist and reflect on a full and rewarding day of birding in the Caribbean foothills.

## **Sun., Mar. 8      Guayabo National Monument | Sarapiquí | Caribbean Lowlands**

Our final morning at Rancho Naturalista began, as several mornings had, with early morning birding fand coffee from the observation deck. The feeders and surrounding forest canopy were already active, offering close views of several hummingbird species, including White-necked Jacobin, Violet-headed Hummingbird, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, Crowned Woodnymph, and the ever-present Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. Mixed flocks moving through the canopy included Tropical Parula, Summer Tanager, Scarlet-rumped Tanager, and Bay-headed Tanager, providing a colorful farewell to the foothill forests around the lodge.

After breakfast we departed Rancho Naturalista and began our descent from the mid-elevation foothill forests toward the Caribbean lowlands, one of the most biologically rich regions in Costa Rica. These lowland rainforests, nourished by warm temperatures and abundant rainfall throughout the year, support towering evergreen forests and an immense diversity of birds, mammals, reptiles, and insects.

Our first stop along the way was Guayabo National Monument, the most significant archaeological site in Costa Rica. This ancient city, occupied from roughly 1000 BCE until around 1400 CE, preserves stone causeways, aqueducts, foundations of circular dwellings, and petroglyphs that hint at a once-thriving pre-Columbian civilization. Although much about the culture that built Guayabo remains unknown, the site offers a fascinating glimpse into the region's deep human history and its connection to the surrounding landscape.

Continuing north toward the Caribbean lowlands, we next visited the Pierella Ecological Garden, a small but remarkably productive reserve known for its lush tropical vegetation and excellent opportunities to observe both birds and insects. The highlight here was the White-collared Manakin, a small, energetic bird famous for its elaborate courtship displays. Males gather at traditional display courts on the forest floor, where they produce a sharp snapping or "clicking" sound with their wings while performing rapid hopping displays to attract females.



Despite their brilliant white collars and dark plumage, these birds can be surprisingly difficult to see in the dense understory, making our views especially rewarding.

Another memorable discovery came when we found a cluster of tiny Honduran White Bats (*Ectophylla alba*) roosting beneath the underside of a broad leaf. These remarkable bats construct “tents” by chewing along the veins of large leaves, causing them to fold downward and form a sheltered roost. Their pure white fur and bright yellow noses make them one of the most distinctive mammals of Central America.

By late afternoon we arrived at Sarapiquí Lodge, located in the heart of Costa Rica’s Caribbean lowlands along the Sarapiquí River. This region is characterized by humid tropical rainforest, fertile floodplains, and a rich mosaic of forest, wetlands, and agricultural lands. The combination of abundant water and warm temperatures supports an extraordinary variety of birds, and the area is widely regarded as one of the country’s premier birding destinations. After settling into our rooms, we gathered for dinner at the lodge and reviewed the day’s growing bird list.

## **Mon., Mar. 9 La Selva Biological Station | Sarapiquí River Boat Tour**

Our day began early with a 6:00 a.m. bird walk around the grounds of Sarapiquí Lodge, where the surrounding gardens and forest edges quickly produced several new species for the trip. Among the highlights were Slaty-tailed Trogon, Rufous Motmot, Yellow-throated Toucan, Cinnamon Woodpecker, and Bright-rumped Attila, all characteristic species of the Caribbean lowland rainforest.

After breakfast we traveled a short distance to one of the most important tropical research sites in the world—La Selva Biological Station. Established in 1954 and now operated by the Organization for Tropical Studies, La Selva protects over 1,500 hectares of lowland rainforest and has served as a hub for ecological research for decades. Scientists from around the world come here to study tropical forest ecology, climate change, and biodiversity.

The forest at La Selva is immense and complex, with towering trees, thick understory vegetation, and a remarkable diversity of wildlife. As we walked the trails, the deep, resonant calls of Mantled Howler Monkeys echoed through the forest canopy. Birdlife here was equally impressive, and we added several new species to the trip list, including Blue-chested Hummingbird, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, King Vulture, Blue Dacnis, and Black-cowled Oriole.



The property is bisected by the Río Sarapiquí, and we crossed the river on a long suspension bridge that provided sweeping views of the forest canopy and river below. In addition to the birds, the rich wildlife of the forest revealed itself in other ways. We encountered a group of Collared Peccaries moving through the understory and spotted a beautiful bright yellow juvenile Eyelash Viper, a small but striking pit viper.

After lunch back at the lodge, we experienced the region from a different perspective with a guided boat trip along the Sarapiquí River. Traveling in a small river boat placed us right at water level, offering close views of birds and wildlife along the riverbanks and overhanging vegetation. Among the highlights were Mangrove Swallow, Southern Lapwing, Neotropic Cormorant, and Anhinga, along with several Green Kingfishers darting along the shoreline. Two migrant warblers—Louisiana Waterthrush and Buff-rumped Warbler—were also seen along the riverbanks.

Following the boat excursion, we made a couple of short roadside stops on the way back to the lodge. At one location where Armando had previously encountered a Bat Falcon, we were pleased to locate the bird perched high in a large tree, offering excellent scope views. A final stop produced another memorable sighting—a Hoffmann’s Two-toed Sloth, whose gentle expression and shaggy fur gave it a somewhat Chewbacca-like appearance as it moved quietly in the branches.

After dinner we gathered once again to review the day’s checklist and reflect on another full and rewarding day in the tropical lowlands.

## **Tues., Mar. 10 Caribbean Slope to Pacific Lowlands | Río Grand Tárcoles Mangrove Boat Tour**

Today marked a major geographic transition in our journey as we departed the humid Caribbean lowlands and crossed the mountains toward the Pacific slope. These two regions experience very different climatic patterns. While the Caribbean side receives abundant rainfall year-round and supports lush rainforest, the Pacific lowlands lie in a pronounced rain shadow and are typically hotter and much drier.

Our first stop of the morning came along Route 126 at a well-known roadside birding location—Galería de Colibrí (Hummingbird Gallery). Perched along the steep middle elevations of the Caribbean slope, this small café overlooks a dramatic valley with a distant waterfall cascading down the opposite hillside. The deck is lined with hummingbird feeders and fruit stations that attract an impressive variety of birds.



While enjoying fresh fruit juice on the deck, we quickly added several striking species to our trip list. Among the hummingbirds visiting the feeders were Green Hermit, Green-crowned Brilliant, and the large and spectacular Violet Sabrewing. Perhaps the most colorful bird of the morning, however, was the Red-headed Barbet, whose vivid red, yellow, and blue plumage made it one of the most memorable sightings of the stop.

Shortly after leaving Galería de Colibrí, we paused briefly at the nearby La Paz Waterfall, one of the most famous waterfalls in Costa Rica. Although our stop was short, the powerful cascade plunging through lush forest made for a spectacular photo opportunity before we continued our journey across the mountains.

By afternoon we had descended toward the Pacific coastal plain and arrived at one of the most productive birding locations in the country—the Río Grande de Tárcoles. This broad river flows through extensive mangrove forests before emptying into the Pacific Ocean, creating a rich mosaic of tidal channels, mudflats, and mangrove-lined waterways that support a remarkable diversity of birds.

Our guided boat excursion took us slowly along the river and into smaller tributaries, allowing us to observe the birds and wildlife of the mangrove ecosystem at close range. Wading birds were abundant along the riverbanks, including White Ibis, Great Egret, and the impressive Bare-throated Tiger-Heron. Shorebirds such as Collared Plover, Semipalmated Plover, and Black-bellied Plover fed along the muddy edges.

As we navigated into a smaller tributary—Estero Guacalillo—kingfishers became a major highlight. We observed Ringed, Amazon, and Green Kingfishers, and many in the group were thrilled to see the tiny American Pygmy Kingfisher, a lifer for several participants. Among the mangrove roots we also spotted Mangrove Yellow Warblers, a recently recognized species split from the Northern Yellow Warbler, while a Plumbeous Kite perched high in a dead tree overlooking the river.

At one point we heard the unmistakable calls of Scarlet Macaws coming from the distant forest—one of Costa Rica's most iconic birds. A few members of the group managed brief, distant glimpses of the birds as they flew overhead, though the views were fleeting.

The river was equally rich in non-avian wildlife. Numerous large American Crocodiles were seen resting along the muddy banks, sometimes only a short distance from our boat.



The climate here felt noticeably different from the cooler, wetter environments we had visited earlier in the trip. The Pacific lowlands were significantly hotter and drier, reflecting the seasonal dry forests that dominate this side of the country.

By late afternoon we arrived at Cerro Lodge, our home for the night, located in the dry forest habitat near the mouth of the Tárcoles River. As the sun set over the Pacific lowlands, we gathered for dinner and reflected on another remarkable chapter in our journey across Costa Rica's diverse landscapes.

## **Wed., Mar. 11 Carara National Park | Pacific Transition Forest to Gulf of Nicoya**

Yesterday's brief and unsatisfying distant flyover views of Scarlet Macaws during our boat trip along the Tárcoles River were quickly forgotten the following morning. During our pre-breakfast birdwatching on the deck at Cerro Lodge, we first heard the unmistakable harsh calls of macaws in the distance. Moments later several birds appeared in the nearby trees, gradually flying closer until they eventually landed right in front of us on the deck railing—offering spectacular, close views of one of Costa Rica's most iconic birds.

The macaws were not the only highlights of the morning. We also observed a Rose-throated Becard, a pair of White-throated Magpie-Jays, and a new hummingbird for the trip—the warm-toned Cinnamon Hummingbird. Just as we were preparing to depart the lodge, Armando spotted a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl perched in a tree above the parking area. As we gathered to observe it, we soon realized there were actually two birds present. The owls moved about among the branches before eventually settling side-by-side, giving everyone excellent views.

From Cerro Lodge we traveled a short distance to Carara National Park, one of Costa Rica's most important protected areas. Carara lies within a biological transition zone where the wetter forests of the southern Pacific slope meet the drier tropical forests of northwestern Costa Rica. This convergence of ecosystems creates an exceptionally rich habitat supporting a diverse mix of species from both regions.

Birding within Carara's dense tropical forest presented its usual challenges. The tall canopy and thick vegetation often make it difficult to locate birds visually, particularly in the heat and humidity of the Pacific lowlands. Fortunately, Armando's ability to track birds by their calls proved invaluable. As we moved along the trails, we located several specialties of this habitat, including Banded Antshrike, the regional endemic Black-hooded Antshrike, and Dot-winged Antwren. One of the most delightful sightings of the morning came when we found a



pair of Orange-collared Manakins, small birds known for their energetic courtship displays in the forest understory.

Leaving Carara, we continued westward toward our final destination of the tour—La Ensenada Lodge, located near the western edge of the Gulf of Nicoya. Along the way we made a brief detour through rural agricultural areas northwest of the park. These open landscapes and pasturelands produced several new species for the trip, including Orange-fronted Parakeet, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, and a Gray Hawk. We also encountered a few birds familiar from North America, including Northern Harrier and Eastern Meadowlark.

As we neared La Ensenada, we added one more memorable species to the list when a pair of Double-striped Thick-knees was spotted standing quietly in a roadside field.

By late afternoon we arrived at La Ensenada Lodge, a working ranch and nature reserve overlooking the broad waters of the Gulf of Nicoya. From the lodge grounds we enjoyed expansive views across the gulf—an inviting preview of the coastal habitats we would explore the following morning by boat.

## **Thurs., Mar. 12 La Ensenada and Sanctuary | Mangrove Delta and Dry Forest Ranchland**

The western end of the Gulf of Nicoya lies within Costa Rica’s northwestern Pacific lowlands, a region shaped by a pronounced dry season and characterized by tropical dry forest, mangrove estuaries, and expansive coastal wetlands. These habitats differ dramatically from the rainforests we visited earlier in the trip. Here the forests are more open, many trees shed their leaves during the dry season, and mangrove systems line the tidal rivers that empty into the gulf.

Our first morning at La Ensenada Lodge began at sunrise with an early boat excursion into the mangrove delta of the Río Abangares. Traveling by boat is one of the few ways to explore this intricate network of tidal channels, and our boat captain skillfully guided us deep into narrow waterways shaded by dense mangrove roots and overhanging branches. These mangrove forests support a number of highly specialized bird species, and we were rewarded with sightings of Mangrove Cuckoo, Mangrove Hummingbird, and Mangrove Yellow Warbler, all species closely tied to this unique coastal habitat.



Starting early proved fortunate, as the day would soon become very warm and humid. The cool morning air and calm water made for a pleasant and productive start to one of our final full days of birding.

Out in the more open waters of the gulf we encountered several coastal seabirds—our first true marine birds of the trip. Royal Terns, Elegant Terns, and a few Sandwich Terns moved along the shoreline while Magnificent Frigatebirds soared overhead. Large flocks of Brown Pelicans and Neotropical Cormorants were also present, along with a few Anhingas perched along the mangrove edges.

One of the most dramatic moments of the morning occurred as we returned toward the dock, when we encountered an enormous flock of Semipalmated Sandpipers—perhaps a thousand birds moving together in a tight, swirling formation. The flock shifted direction repeatedly in synchronized waves before finally settling along the muddy shoreline beneath the protective cover of overhanging mangroves.

After returning to the lodge for breakfast, we spent time exploring the grounds surrounding the property. La Ensenada is both a working ranch and a nature reserve, encompassing a diverse mixture of habitats including tropical dry forest, pasturelands, wetlands, and coastal mangroves. This mosaic of habitats supports a wide variety of bird species.

During our walk Armando quickly located a Pacific Screech-Owl roosting quietly within the fronds of a palm tree. Continuing along a fence line behind the lodge cabins, we added several additional species, including Inca Dove, Hoffmann's Woodpecker, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Orange-fronted Parakeet, Streaked Flycatcher, and Rufous-backed Wren.

As the heat of the late morning and early afternoon intensified, we took time to relax at the lodge before resuming our exploration later in the day.

At 3:00 p.m. we boarded a wagon for a tractor tour of the ranch, allowing us to reach some of the more remote portions of the property. The route passed salt production ponds, cattle pastures, and shallow lakes that proved extremely productive for waterbirds. Large numbers of Wood Storks, White Ibis, Snowy Egrets, and Black-necked Stilts were gathered around the wetlands.



One of the most memorable sightings of the afternoon came when we heard the distinctive call of a Laughing Falcon while we were observing birds at one of the lakes. We followed the sound toward a large Guanacaste tree. After a short search we located the falcon as it flew to a nearby tree, where it perched in full view and delivered the unmistakable laughing call that gives the species its name.

Our tractor tour concluded atop a small hill overlooking the ranch and the waters of the Gulf of Nicoya beyond. As the sun we enjoyed wine, beer, and hors d'oeuvres the lodge staff and brought creating a perfect setting to reflect on our time together in Costa Rica. With sweeping views across the landscape and the warm evening light settling over the gulf, it was a memorable way to conclude our final full day of birding before returning to San José the following morning.

### **Fri., Mar. 13      La Ensenada and Sanctuary | Return to San José**

Our final morning in Costa Rica began with one last early bird walk before beginning the journey back to San José. Just after sunrise we set out from La Ensenada Lodge for a short walk east of the property, passing through open pastures populated with Brahman cattle, and along fencerows bordered by scattered trees and shrubs. These ranchlands and dry forest edges support a suite of bird species well adapted to the warmer, drier Pacific lowlands.

During this final hour of birding we observed several characteristic species of the region, including Groove-billed Ani, Black Vulture, White-winged Dove, and the ever-present Great Kiskadee. Despite this being our last morning in the field, the area still managed to produce several species we had not yet encountered during the trip. Among these new additions were Crane Hawk, Yellow-naped Amazon, White-lored Gnatcatcher, Banded Wren, and a migrating Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

As we walked back toward the lodge, we were treated to one more memorable moment when we encountered two species of trogons—Black-headed Trogon and Gartered (Violaceous) Trogon. These brilliantly colored birds are among the most iconic of tropical forests, and one member of the group remarked that seeing two trogon species on our final bird walk felt like a fitting way to conclude our birding adventure.

By the end of the trip we had recorded an impressive 313 species of birds during our journey across Costa Rica's varied landscapes—from highland cloud forests to Caribbean rainforests, river systems, mangroves, and the tropical dry forests of the Pacific slope. One species curiously absent from our list, however, was the ubiquitous House Sparrow. Since its introduction to North America in the mid-1800s, this non-native bird has spread across much of the continent and into many parts of Central America as well. During the four-hour bus ride back to San

José, we jokingly kept watch for a sparrow to add to the list. At one point Armando called out that he had spotted one, but unfortunately no one else was able to see the bird—so the humble House Sparrow never officially made it onto our trip list.

Back in the Central Valley, we returned to Hotel Bougainvillea, where our journey had begun nearly two weeks earlier. That evening we gathered for a farewell dinner at the hotel restaurant, sharing stories and reflecting on the many memorable moments of the trip. After dinner we said goodbye to Armando before conducting one final review of our bird checklist.

Throughout the tour we had also been keeping track of which species appeared every single day of the trip. By the end of the journey, three birds had earned that distinction: Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture, and Clay-colored Thrush. A vote was held to determine which of the three would be crowned the iconic “bird of the tour,” and the decision was unanimous. Appropriately, the honor went to the Clay-colored Thrush, Costa Rica’s national bird—a fitting symbol of the country whose remarkable landscapes and biodiversity had provided such a memorable experience for our group.

The following morning, a few members of the group took one final walk through the hotel gardens. A Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl was calling from high in one of the trees, and the Mottled Owl we had seen on our arrival was still roosting in the dense stand of bamboo, this time offering even better, nearly eye-level views.

After breakfast, we had staggered departures for the airport. Many participants commented on what a genuinely congenial group this had been, and several remarked that it ranked among the very best tours they had experienced.

*Photos: Group (Robert Petty - RP), Two-toed Sloth (Mary Matus - MM), Turquoise-browed Motmot (RP), Resplendent Quetzal (RP), Great Kiskadee (MM), Lesson's Motmot (MM), Lesser Violetear (Marty Herde - MH), Large-footed Finch (MH), Group Birding (RP), Volcano Hummingbird (MM), Baltimore Oriole (MM), Resplendent Quetzal (MM), Tropical Screech-Owl (RP), Scenic (MM), Collared Aracari (MM), White-necked Jacobin (MM), Rancho Naturalista (RP), Orange-chinned Parakeet (RP), Green Honeycreeper (MM), Scarlet-thighed Dacnis (MM), Black-cheeked Woodpecker (SP), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (RP), Keel-billed Toucan (MM), Slaty-tailed Trogon (MM), Boat tour (RP), Green-crowned Brilliant (MM), La Paz Waterfall (RP), Silver-throated Tanager (MM), Crimson-collared Tanager (MM), American Crocodile (RP), Ferruginous Pygmy Owl (RP), Brown Pelicans (RP), Laughing Falcon (RP), American Pygmy Flycatcher (MM)*