Christmas in Costa Rica | Dec. 22 – 29, 2025
Trip Report by Stephen Grace

Naturalist Journeys Tour Leader Stephen Grace with Amy, Deb, Ron, Beth, Ann R, Anne H, Frank, Zita, Balint, Elena and Dave

Mon., Dec. 22 Arrival in San José | Hotel Bougainvillea

Our journey began at Hotel Bougainvillea in Costa Rica's Central Valley near San José, where Deb and Ron arrived early and settled into what is far more than a convenient first-night stop. The hotel's ten-acre botanical garden—often cited as one of the finest in the country—is a terrific introduction to Costa Rica's biodiversity: a carefully curated refuge where native and ornamental plants merge into a tropical tapestry, alive with butterflies and birds.

We had the great fortune to meet Rodrigo, one of the hotel's gardeners, a warm and generous presence. He pointed out botanical wonders tucked into the garden's corners and led us to places where remarkable birds could be found. His familiarity with both plants and wildlife turned the garden into a shared classroom and set the tone for the days ahead—learning shaped not only by expertise, but by kindness and pride of place.

Amy and I spent the morning birding with Deb and Ron as the garden revealed its layers. Namesake bougainvillea spilled across walls and trellises in shades of magenta, pink, red, and white. Though they appear to be flowers, the color comes from bracts—modified leaves that act as visual signals for pollinators—while the true flowers remain small and pale, tucked subtly within.

Silk-cotton trees rose overhead, their massive trunks armored with sharp, conical thorns. Young silk-cotton trees invest heavily in physical defenses while they are still vulnerable to herbivores. As the trees grow taller, develop thick bark, and rise beyond reach, those defenses are no longer necessary, and mature trunks often become smooth. In the tropics, even giants begin life armored.

Bromeliads—a favorite of Deb who has a passion for plants—clung to branches, collecting rainwater and life in their leaf tanks; some giant species stood taller than we did. Bamboo orchids bloomed with quiet precision, while jade vine flowers, native to the Philippines, hung in turquoise cascades. Their otherworldly color and leguminous structure—banner, wings, and keel, classic pea-family architecture—hinted at bat-pollinated origins.

A coral tree stood thickly draped in epiphytes—plants that grow on other plants without harming them. Orchids, bromeliads, mosses, and ferns used its branches as living scaffolding, drawing moisture and nutrients from rain and air. It was an early preview of the plant-on-plant abundance we would soon encounter in rainforest and cloud forest beyond the Central Valley.

Garden ponds formed small oases amid the surrounding urban development, supporting Forrer's Leopard Frogs and endangered Golden-eyed Tree Frogs, both of which breed successfully on the property. In a country where amphibians are sentinels of environmental health, their presence here spoke volumes about water quality, habitat care, and long-term stewardship.

Nearby, the garden delivered one of its most unforgettable lessons. The Pelican Flower—the largest flower in Costa Rica and among the largest in the world—hung low and unmistakable. Its strategy is fascinating: the flower releases a powerful odor of decay, irresistible to flies. Drawn inside by scent and shape, insects are briefly trapped, dusted with pollen, and later released to carry it onward.

Heliconias added flashes of red, their true flowers hidden within sturdy bracts. Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds dominated the Purple Vervain, aggressively defending feeding territories and chasing rivals from flower to flower. Bold and ubiquitous, with a long red bill and rusty tail, this species would soon be recognized by our group as Costa Rica's default lowland hummingbird. Near a small fountain, a Ruby-throated Hummingbird perched quietly on what looked like a miniature bonsai tree. Familiar to guests from the eastern United States, where it breeds, this species was a special treat for those of us from the western half of the country, where it is rarely encountered.

Nearby, like nature's oversized umbrella, stood a Guanacaste—Costa Rica's national tree—its thick trunk and wide-spreading limbs forming a broad, rounded crown long regarded as a symbol of shelter and abundance. At its base, a Clay-colored Thrush appeared, unassuming at first glance yet deeply woven into the nation's identity. Known locally as the *yigüirro*, it is Costa Rica's national bird, celebrated not for flamboyant color but for its song, which traditionally heralds the onset of the rainy season and symbolizes renewal.

We also encountered a Variegated Squirrel, one of Costa Rica's most charismatic mammals. Larger and more colorful than its North American relatives, it moved deliberately through the trees, its bold patterning and confident demeanor making it impossible to overlook—a small but memorable reminder that tropical biodiversity extends well beyond birds.

Birds accumulated steadily, offering myriad opportunities for Ron to indulge his passion for bird photography—sparked years ago by a single, formative moment: a raptor making a kill in his backyard. That encounter sent him crisscrossing the United States in search of birds to photograph, and here in Costa Rica his enthusiasm found fresh fuel. Less than a dozen feet from his camera lens, Lesson's Motmots flashed their improbable colors and pendulum tails, while nearby Mottled Owls were discovered day-roosting in the cool shade of a bamboo thicket.

The Giant Bamboo—native to Asia but widely planted throughout the American tropics—sparked conversation. Though it towers like a forest of trees, bamboo is a grass, one of the most extreme and successful expressions of the grass family's potential. Grasses are among the most recent flowering plants in evolutionary terms, yet among the most innovative: their hollow, jointed stems grow rapidly from the base rather than the tip, allowing them to rebound from grazing, fire, and storms. Just as importantly, grasses produce grains—wheat, rice, corn, and others—that can be stored, traded, and relied upon, making settled agriculture and the rise of cities possible. In this way, grasses underpin not only ecosystems, but human civilization itself.

Amy quipped that standing at the base of the Giant Bamboo grove, dwarfed by towering stalks that creaked in the breeze, must be what it feels like to be a cricket in a windblown field. The Mottled Owls seemed perfectly at

ease, roosting comfortably amid this skyscraping grass from Asia, oblivious to the humans gathered below—and to the civilizations grasses helped make possible.

Baltimore Orioles and Summer Tanagers glowed like embers amid the wind-stirred greenery of the Bougainvillea garden. Blue-gray Tanagers offered soft washes of sky-blue, while Palm Tanagers—subtle in olive-gray tones—reminded us that tropical birds need not shout to belong. Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, and Rufous-collared Sparrow appeared as well—species that would soon feel like old friends, much like Deb and Ron themselves after so many shared moments immersed in Costa Rica's biological abundance.

As other Naturalist Journeys guests arrived in waves, Amy and I welcomed them into the garden's unfolding story. Butterflies drifted through the scene, their diversity rivaling that of the birds. Long-winged Julias and Banded Peacocks were favorites, along with Monarchs—including one that clung to my shirt—an early hint of the butterfly encounters that would later delight the entire group.

Late that afternoon, we gathered as an almost complete group, with one traveler still en route. I spoke about Costa Rica's remarkable human history and its extraordinary natural history—two stories that are deeply intertwined. Costa Rica has no standing army, having abolished it in 1948, and instead invested heavily in education, public health, and environmental protection. More than a quarter of the country's land is permanently protected, nearly all of its electricity is generated from renewable sources, and literacy rates are exceptionally high.

The country's name, Costa Rica—"Rich Coast"—traces back to Christopher Columbus, who reported seeing Indigenous people wearing gold ornaments along the Caribbean shoreline. The conquistadors who followed were disappointed when the country failed to yield the El Dorado of their dreams. Yet the name has proven apt in a different way. Costa Rica's true wealth lies not in precious metals, but in life.

Despite covering just 0.03 percent of the world's land area, Costa Rica—a country smaller than West Virginia—harbors roughly 5 percent of the planet's species. It supports nearly 950 bird species, over 230 mammals (including about 109 species of bats), more than 200 reptiles and a similar number of amphibians, and over 12,000 plant species. Insects are even more abundant and diverse, with tens of thousands of species documented and many more—likely numbering in the hundreds of thousands—still undescribed by science.

We met Johan Fernandez, our local guide, whose calm competence and deep knowledge immediately set the tone as he briefed us on the days ahead. He would guide us not only through the birds and biodiversity of his country, but also through its *pura vida*—a phrase heard everywhere in Costa Rica, meaning far more than "pure

life." *Pura vida* is a cultural shorthand for gratitude, resilience, optimism, and an unhurried appreciation of the present moment, reflecting a national outlook shaped by close ties to nature and a deep sense of well-being.

Over drinks and an opening dinner in the elegant dining room, conversation flowed easily. Our group was diverse in age, background, and birding experience, yet something essential was already happening. Birds were doing what they so often do—building bridges. Not only beautiful in themselves, the birds of Costa Rica gave us a shared language, a reason to look outward together, and a way to belong to one another almost instantly.

Tues., Dec. 23 Hotel Bougainvillea | Paraíso de Quetzales | Trogon Lodge

Ann R. joined us in the morning, bringing our group to twelve. Before departing Hotel Bougainvillea, we birded the grounds with Johan. A Lineated Woodpecker hitched up a tree trunk, its flaming red crest unmistakable, while Philadelphia Vireos, Tennessee Warblers, and Chestnut-sided Warblers—some showing the namesake chestnut flanks—kept us craning our necks into the canopy. A Crested Caracara perched atop a Monkey Puzzle tree, regal and watchful.

Caracaras may resemble hawks or eagles and often behave like scavenging vultures, but they are, in fact, tropical falcons—intelligent, opportunistic, and remarkably adaptable. Charles Darwin, writing of the caracaras he encountered in the Falkland Islands, called them among the most remarkable birds he had ever observed, struck by their curiosity, boldness, and versatility.

Orange-chinned Parakeets lingered obligingly in good light, the subtle wash of orange at their throats finally revealing itself. White-eared Ground-Sparrows flicked through the undergrowth, their yellow neck patches flashing as they kicked leaf litter in a way that reminded many of towhees back home—the familiar towhee two-step translated into the tropics.

We again encountered Lesson's Motmot, prompting a discussion of its name and status—now recognized as distinct from the former Blue-crowned Motmot complex after taxonomic work clarified consistent differences in voice, range, and plumage, and named for the French naturalist René Lesson. While some of our group watched two Mottled Owls day-roosting, their eyes half open and drowsy, others were drawn to a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker—a familiar woodpecker to many—methodically working the bark of a nearby tree.

Nearby, Masked Tityras showed well as both males and females perched in open view: males striking in clean, silvery-gray plumage accented by a bold black facial mask with pinkish tones around the eyes, females softer

and more muted. The heavy bills and unhurried, watchful posture of these birds hinted at a lifestyle centered on fruit, supplemented by large insects taken in deliberate sallies from the mid-canopy.

The moment captured one of the quiet marvels of birding in Costa Rica—the juxtaposition of unmistakably tropical birds like motmots and tityras alongside familiar North American migrants such as Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Tennessee Warbler, sharing the same habitat, if only for a season.

After steaming cups of Costa Rica's excellent coffee and a satisfying breakfast buffet at Bougainvillea, we loaded the van and met Olman, who would be our driver for the entire journey. Supremely competent and unfailingly kind, he embodied the warmth and generosity that define Costa Rican hospitality.

We left the Central Valley, navigating the traffic and sprawl of the greater San José metropolitan area—part of a region that is home to roughly three million of Costa Rica's five million people—before beginning a steady climb into the mountains. We were entering one of the youngest and most dynamic landscapes on Earth.

Costa Rica sits atop the boundary where the Cocos Plate is being forced beneath the Caribbean Plate, a process known as subduction. This ongoing collision fuels volcanoes along the Pacific Ring of Fire and has uplifted the country from the sea over the past few million years, creating steep mountains, fertile volcanic soils, and an extraordinary diversity of habitats compressed into a remarkably small space.

Recently, on a geological timescale, Central America rose from the ocean, transforming what had long been an island continent—South America—into a landmass newly connected to North America. This geological bridge became a biological one. When the Isthmus of Panama emerged, it triggered the Great American Biotic Interchange (GABI)—a massive, two-way flow of life between the continents that captivated several members of our group and sent us into lively discussion.

During GABI, southern lineages moved northward, including armadillos, opossums, and New World porcupines. Even formidable predators joined the exchange: giant, flightless "terror birds" reached into North America before eventually disappearing. At the same time, northern lineages moved south, including cats, dogs, bears, and deer.

Birds followed broader and more complex patterns. Many Neotropical groups—antbirds, manakins, and ovenbirds—expanded northward into Central America, though most remained tied to tropical habitats. Hummingbirds evolved earlier in the Neotropics and later spread north into Central and North America, independent of the mammal-driven interchange.

Meanwhile, northern bird lineages such as warblers, vireos, thrushes, and flycatchers now migrate seasonally between the Nearctic and the Neotropics, linking the continents in a different way. Costa Rica sits squarely at this crossroads, where evolutionary lineages from two continents continue to overlap, interact, and coexist.Layered onto this intricate biogeographic history is complex topography. Elevation rises from sea level to alpine páramo in just a few hours' drive, stacking radically different life zones one atop another. As Johan remarked, if Costa Rica's terrain were flattened, its surface area would rival that of Canada—a vivid way of conveying how much ecological space is folded into this narrow land bridge between continents.

Warm temperatures year-round, abundant rainfall across most regions, and continuous plant growth provide the energetic foundation for the country's biological richness. Unlike temperate North America, Costa Rica was never scraped clean by continental ice sheets during the Ice Ages, allowing ecosystems to persist, diversify, and accumulate over deep evolutionary time.

The result—shaped by geological upheaval, biological exchange, steep elevational gradients, and climatic stability—is a country that functions as a living crossroads: a biological wonderland where diversity is not spread thin, as it is at higher latitudes, but concentrated in tropical profusion.

We stopped briefly near the Basílica de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles, an elegant structure whose architecture rivals European cathedrals—and which also provided one of the best restroom stops of the trip, sparing us from relying on the "facilitrees" later. Rock Pigeons around the cathedral joined our growing species list.

Climbing higher into the Talamanca Mountains, we approached Cerro de la Muerte, a high pass near the continental divide separating the Central Valley from Costa Rica's southern watersheds. The name—"Mountain of Death"—dates to an earlier era, when travelers crossed this cold, fog-bound stretch on foot or horseback and exposure often proved fatal. Today the route is paved and far easier to travel, though landslides, washouts, and sudden weather shifts still hint at the challenges that earned its reputation. Despite the ominous name, the mountain is very much alive, and we began searching in earnest for upper-elevation birds.

Broad-winged Hawks, soggy from recent rain, perched along roadside wires. Along a hedge of Purple Vervain—a hummingbird magnet—we found Stripe-tailed Hummingbirds, flashing white tail corners in flight and showing crisp white edges when perched. A tiny Green Thorntail appeared, its white rump band and spiky tail unmistakable, along with a Scintillant Hummingbird, a male catching the light with his vivid orange gorget. Coppery-headed Emeralds glowed green and copper, their presence carrying special weight: this was the only bird species endemic solely to Costa Rica recorded on the tour.

Many of the other highland birds we encountered are regional endemics, restricted to the connected mountains of southern Costa Rica and western Panama. These shared highlands form a continuous ecological unit—the Talamanca Cordillera—divided by a human-drawn boundary that has no meaning to the birds themselves. Together, these species underscore the conservation importance of the Talamanca highlands as a biologically unified landscape spanning two nations.

Bananaquits flitted through the scene, prompting a pause to reflect on how easily common birds are overlooked. With dozens of recognized subspecies and possible future splits, the Bananaquit is among the most variable birds in the Neotropics. Their curved bills allow them to probe flowers for nectar like hummingbirds, but they also pierce flower bases to steal nectar directly—a reminder that even familiar species reward close attention.

We lunched at Paraíso de Quetzales, a family-run cloud forest reserve where the feeders delivered immediately—even before we sat down to eat. Fiery-throated Hummingbirds and Lesser Violetears dominated the scene, joined by White-throated Mountain-gems and Talamanca Hummingbirds. The latter was recently split from the former Magnificent Hummingbird after genetic and vocal studies clarified distinct evolutionary lineages—Rivoli's Hummingbird in the southwestern United States and Mexico, and Talamanca Hummingbird in the highlands of Costa Rica and western Panama. Volcano Hummingbirds—among the smallest birds in Costa Rica—zipped among the flowers, another hallmark of these high-elevation habitats.

Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers appeared next—sleek, social, and closely tied to cloud forests of Costa Rica and western Panama. We talked about their small family, which includes Phainopepla, familiar to birders in the American Southwest, and their strong ecological association with mistletoe berries.

After a delicious lunch, we walked the trails. A Large-footed Finch emerged first, a sparrow-like species with outsized feet adapted for vigorous scratching in leaf litter. A Sooty-capped Chlorospingus followed—another sparrow family member that was long grouped with tanagers, a reminder of how scientific understanding continues to evolve as genetics reshapes avian family trees.

Then Golden-browed Chlorophonias appeared, glowing improbably green and gold. Despite the similarity in name to *Chlorospingus*, these birds are finch relatives and rank among the most colorful species in the country. Our group reacted in collective awe as we watched them feed. As if on cue, several Buffy-crowned Wood-Partridge stepped quietly into view—a welcome bonus from the forest floor.

Between rain showers, mixed flocks swept through, and the Ruddy Treerunner—another regional endemic of the Talamanca Cordillera, clinging upside down to mossy, epiphyte-laden limbs—became an instant favorite.

We loaded back into the van and drove into the Savegre Valley, entering cloud forest. Here, moisture arrives not only as rain but also as horizontal precipitation—mist and clouds condensing directly onto leaves and epiphytes before dripping to the forest floor below. Trees held living gardens of mosses, bromeliads, and orchids, and endemism increased with elevation.

Along the road, we found Yellow-winged Vireos, a Talamanca highlands endemic, their presence a reminder of how isolation in these mountains has shaped distinct lineages. Another standout roadside bird was the Green-fronted Lancebill, its long, straight bill perfectly suited for extracting nectar from the deep corollas of flowers. Wilson's Warblers appeared as well, bright yellow with crisp black caps—familiar migrants reminding us that this forest serves as a winter refuge, linking birds and continents.

At one stop, Johan pointed out a tree heavy with fruit. "Suspicious," he said, and we climbed out of the van to investigate. Avocados are a key food source for Resplendent Quetzals—but not the large, cultivated fruits familiar from grocery stores. The quetzals feed instead on wild relatives in the laurel family, the Lauraceae, producing small, plum-sized fruits with a single oversized seed.

Quetzals swallow these fruits whole. The flesh is digested quickly, while the large seed passes through the bird intact and is deposited far from the parent tree. In this way, quetzals act as seed dispersers for the trees that sustain them, helping regenerate the cloud forest canopy. It is a tight evolutionary partnership: trees that rely on birds to spread their seeds, and birds that depend on intact forest to feed, nest, and survive.

None appeared, but anticipation grew as we spoke of this iconic bird, among the most celebrated in the world. Male Resplendent Quetzals wear elongated upper tail coverts that stream behind them in flight or ripple in the wind when perched, along with spiky crests and luminous green plumage; females are subtler but no less elegant. This species nests in decaying trees and depends entirely on intact cloud forest—a bird inseparable from its habitat.

We arrived at Trogon Lodge, tucked into the valley like a place time forgot. Streams, waterfalls, trout ponds, and lush grounds filled with flowering plants boasting absurdly large leaves create an atmosphere that feels almost mythical—as if any creature conjured by imagination might appear, even a quetzal.

Dinner was memorable: tables fashioned from massive slabs of Guanacaste wood, trout fresh from the ponds, locally sourced veggies and chicken, and desserts featuring local berries worthy of celebration. We completed our first full-day checklist—already impressive—and turned in early, knowing Christmas Eve would begin before sunrise.

Wednesday, December 24 Christmas Eve at Trogon Lodge | Savegre Valley

Before breakfast, bundled against the morning chill, we headed out in search of quetzals. They often feed early, retreating deeper into the forest once the sun climbs. Spirits were high as we walked the road scanning fruiting avocado trees. A Black Guan appeared on a limb heavy with epiphytes, its dark bulk forming a striking silhouette against the cloud forest canopy. Dave—ever watchful behind the camera as he explored on his own—photographed a Northern Emerald-Toucanet, a smaller, more compact relative of the larger toucans, built for agility within dense forest rather than for long flights across open gaps.

Soon after, the entire group enjoyed excellent looks at two Collared Trogons—red below, green above, impossibly festive and perfectly timed for Christmas Eve. Quetzals belong to the trogon family, a lineage with an ancient, fragmented distribution. Trogons occur in tropical forests of the Americas, Africa, and Southeast Asia, but their greatest diversity is found in the Neotropics. This region is the global center not only of trogon diversity but of bird diversity in general—and Costa Rica sits squarely within it.

Reports of quetzals nearby sent us scrambling, but luck remained elusive. Then word came. We rushed back to the van, drove a short distance, and set up scopes. Far off, a male Resplendent Quetzal came into view—iridescent green upper tail coverts streaming behind him, a faint glow of crimson visible on his belly. Closer to us, Sulphur-winged Parakeets chattered noisily, and then a Flame-colored Tanager ignited the morning light, incandescent and unforgettable. As the sun crested the valley and burned away the cold, the quetzal slipped back into foliage. We returned to the lodge encouraged, but still hungry for a closer look.

After breakfast, we loaded into four-wheel-drive vehicles and rode up a nearby mountain, then hiked down through forest alive with birds. A mixed flock greeted us immediately: Acorn Woodpeckers, Hoffmann's Woodpeckers, and Spot-crowned Woodcreepers moving through the canopy.

Collared Redstarts—bright residents of the cloud forest—flashed canary-yellow and slate-gray bodies, fiery orange crowns, and crisp white tail patches as they fanned and flicked through the understory. Though members of the New World warbler family (Parulidae), these birds reflect a tropical, year-round lifestyle—one that favors bold coloration, conspicuous displays, and permanent territorial behavior, rather than the brief, cautious presence of their migratory relatives that pass through backyards in the United States.

We heard the Rufous-browed Peppershrike, its rich, flute-like song among the most beautiful in the Neotropics, even if the bird itself remained hidden. Balint, who delights deeply in listening to birds, later declared it his favorite bird of the entire tour—despite never seeing it. His partner Zita, equally engaged, seemed delighted by every encounter, whether by eye or ear, and together they brought an infectious enthusiasm to the group.

Emerging into open country after our cloud forest hike, White-collared Swifts boomeranged across a blue sky, while Red-tailed Hawks soared overhead—here represented by a resident Costa Rican subspecies adapted to tropical highlands. A Hairy Woodpecker appeared as well, the plumage of this subspecies noticeably darker than birds from farther north—another reminder that evolution rarely draws sharp boundaries, and that future taxonomic changes often wait quietly in such differences.

After lunch at Savegre Mountain Lodge, we explored the upper valley. Though a café was closed for Christmas Eve, when we peered in from across a fence the feeders still delivered. Fiery-throated Hummingbirds swarmed, Lesser Violetears flared their violet ear patches in territorial display, and just before we left, a male Volcano Hummingbird flashed his gorget in perfect light at arm's length. We drove higher still, then walked a quiet road where Sooty Thrush—another endemic of the highlands of Costa Rica and western Panama—was added to the day's list. Its yellow bill and legs stood out clearly, even in the deep shadows of the cloud forest, lending definition to a bird otherwise cloaked in charcoal tones.

Johan surprised us with hot chocolate at a friend's café—an ideal Christmas Eve gift. And an even better one followed: we met Johan's family—his wife Lauren and children, Cori and Noah—who shared stories of travel in the United States and their enthusiasm for Disneyland and birds. Noah's favorite bird, unsurprisingly, was the Resplendent Quetzal, though Lauren quipped that it can be a challenging favorite for parents, given how early one must rise to see it.

That night, after dinner and the checklist, we went to bed dreaming of early-morning presents wrapped in feathers.

Thursday, December 25 Christmas Day at Trogon Lodge | Savegre Valley | Páramo

Apparently, everyone had been very good.

Santa delivered two quetzals.

First came a male, perched in clear view and much closer than the day before. His elongated upper tail coverts—exceeding two feet in length—trailed well beyond his body, catching light even when he remained still. A green crest crowned his head. When he finally took flight, he looked like an iridescent dragon, his tail streaming behind him like a green comet. In that moment, it was easy to understand why the Maya considered this bird sacred. Quetzal feathers, especially the long upper tail coverts of males, were reserved for royalty and high priests and were woven into the regalia of god-kings. The birds were not killed; the feathers were plucked, and the quetzal released—an early expression of reverence and restraint woven into cultural tradition.

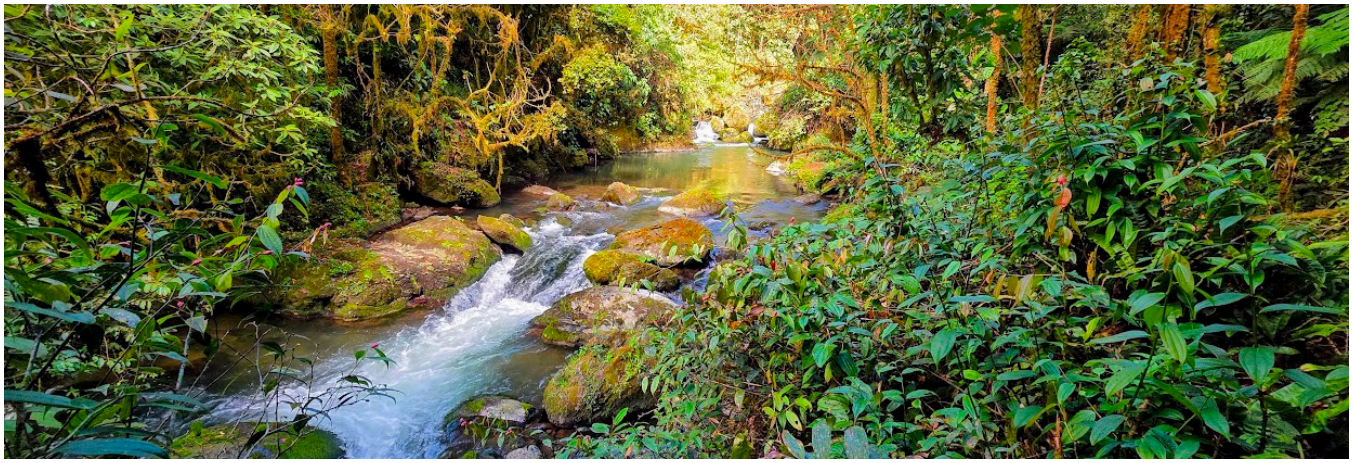
Then a female quetzal appeared, initially in shadow, her beauty quieter but no less resplendent. When she moved into sunlight, her plumage revealed itself: rich green above, grayish below, with a warm reddish wash on the belly. She lacked the male's crest and extravagant tail streamers, but her elegance was unmistakable. We watched as she flew to an avocado tree, snatched a fruit, and carried it off in classic grab-and-go fashion—purposeful, efficient, and entirely at home in the cloud forest.

As if that were not gift enough, directly below the tree where the female perched, several Spotted Wood-Quail stepped into the open. Usually secretive and highly sought after, they walked calmly into view, transforming an already unforgettable moment into an even more remarkable Christmas morning.

After breakfast, we walked along the Savegre River. American Dippers eluded us, but Louisiana Waterthrushes worked the banks, their constant tail-bobbing unmistakable. This warbler is a Neotropical migrant—breeding in temperate North America and wintering in the tropics—linking continents through its annual journey. In the nearby forest, a Common Chlorospingus appeared, a new species for the trip and distinct from the Sooty-capped Chlorospingus we had been seeing. At last, we laid eyes on a Bay Wren, a bird whose rich, cascading song had followed us through the cloud forest like a companion we finally met face to face; its bold patterns and warm colors proved as striking as its voice.

Before lunch, we birded the grounds of Savegre Hotel. Silver-throated Tanagers dazzled at the feeders, a male Baltimore Oriole glowed improbably bright, and a Black-thighed Grosbeak flashed yellow. Acorn Woodpeckers busied themselves on power poles, excavating and maintaining granaries. Males were identified by a red cap that reached forward to meet the white forehead, while females showed a black band separating the white forehead from the red—subtle distinctions that, once learned, become instantly clear.

An accipiter sliced overhead with a rapid flap-flap-glide flight pattern, all long tail and short wings—a Sharp-shinned Hawk recognized by Ann R.'s sharp eye—a reminder that even fleeting silhouettes can tell rich stories when you know how to read them.



We also watched Slaty Flowerpiercers at work, slicing into flowers from the side to steal nectar. The short, strongly curved bills of these tanager family members are specially adapted for this behavior, allowing them to bypass the usual pollination route and access nectar directly. This practice—known as “nectar robbing”—does not reward the plant with pollination, and over evolutionary time it exerts pressure on flowers to respond: by thickening corollas, shifting nectar deeper, altering bloom shape, or favoring pollinators capable of defending or rapidly exploiting the resource. In this way, even a small bird like a flowerpiercer helps shape the ecology of the forest, illustrating how plant and animal coevolution proceeds through constant negotiation rather than simple cooperation.

After lunch, Olman expertly piloted our van high above the Savegre Valley and into the páramo—a world above the forest where cold, wind, and rain shape a landscape of low shrubs, bunch grasses, and scattered, stunted trees. In the tropics, this alpine environment exists not because of latitude, but because of elevation. Perched above the cloud forest, it supports a small, highly specialized community of species adapted to exposure and extremes. Despite the weather, our targets appeared. Volcano Juncos materialized, compact and dark-faced, their piercing yellow eyes seeming oversized against the gray landscape. A Peg-billed Finch was heard calling from dense cover, and tiny Volcano Hummingbirds—delicate yet remarkably resilient—zipped through the cold mist between blooming flowers, very much at home at the roof of the country.

Dropping back down out of the alpine zone, we reentered forest and turned our attention to one of the highlands’ most elusive residents: the Timberline Wren. Its song rang out clearly, threading through the damp understory, and a fleeting glimpse or two rewarded our patience—just enough to confirm its presence and promise another search.

As the sun sank quickly—as it does in the tropics—and a scarlet sky faded to dark, we turned our attention to night birds. A Dusky Nightjar called, and we soon found one perched briefly before lifting off, offering fleeting views. As we returned to the van, another called. We climbed a gravel road, and there it was, flying low overhead, illuminated in our flashlight beams against a star-filled sky—silent, ethereal.

It was a perfect close to a Christmas Day that had begun with a Resplendent Quetzal dragging his flowing feathers across the morning sky—green fire, alive, and unforgettable—and ended with this emissary of the night world.

Fri., Dec. 26 Trogon Lodge | Pierella Ecological Garden | Selva Verde Lodge

Today we had to leave Trogon Lodge, a place that felt like a Shangri-La of Central America—an enchanted valley where mountain air, bounteous plants, and beautiful birds blended into something intoxicating. It was hard to say goodbye to this cloud forest paradise, but anticipation ran high as we prepared to descend into the Caribbean lowland rainforest and experience an entirely different face of Costa Rica's biodiversity.

Just before departure, a Black Guan appeared along the river, standing on wet rocks amid the rush of whitewater. Large and prehistoric-looking, this forest-dwelling cracid—kin to curassows and chachalacas—cut a striking figure against the torrent. Moments later, as if to offer a final farewell, a male White-throated Mountain-gem appeared on the very same perch where we had first encountered him upon arrival. Over several days, we had watched this bird leave his perch to trapline flowers—following a regular feeding circuit—and then return to the same branch. Elena, an accomplished birder whose enthusiasm never dimmed even for species she knew well, remarked how rare and satisfying it was to stay long enough in one place to recognize individual birds and begin to understand their routines.

Before descending from the mountains, we made one last birding stop. The air was cold and clean, epiphyte-laden trees glowing softly in the morning light. Bromeliads clung to branches in abundance—a botanist's delight. Our goal was a bird that had eluded many of us the previous day: the Timberline Wren. After diligent searching by Johan, everyone finally got a look. We also encountered Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatchers—first a female in muted, sooty tones, then a male jet black with bold yellow. Someone remarked that the pattern recalled a Yellow-rumped Warbler, a familiar point of reference, but this silky-flycatcher was something altogether different, strange and wonderful, from a lineage far removed from warblers.

Then came the descent. As we dropped from mountain heights into the Caribbean lowlands, the temperature rose dramatically. Cool air gave way to heat and humidity as cloud forest transitioned into steamy tropical rainforest. We arrived at Pierella Ecological Garden for lunch, enjoying classic Costa Rican fare—rice and beans, baked chicken, fried plantains, fresh vegetables and fruit, delicious juice—while the feeders bustled with activity. A Red-legged Honeycreeper appeared, its electric-blue male plumage accented by a turquoise crown, an eye-catching new species for the trip. Woodcreepers spiraled up trunks in their characteristic fashion, a Chestnut-colored Woodpecker showed well, and Gray-headed Chachalacas worked the fruit feeders. Rufous-naped Wood-Rails scurried boldly across open ground—remarkable behavior for a member of a family more often associated with skulking in dense cover. A Yellow-throated Toucan arrived to feast on bananas, its oversized bill glowing in the filtered light, and was soon joined by two Collared Aracaris.

Pierella is far more than a lunch stop with bird feeders—it is a conservation success story. Once degraded cattle pasture, the land has been transformed into a vibrant rainforest reserve. What began as a passion for butterflies and their host plants grew into a protected mosaic supporting birds, mammals, and intact forest. We met William and Cristelle, whose vision and persistence made this recovery possible. Led by expert local guide Greymer, a member of the Cabécar—an Indigenous people of the Talamanca region—we explored deeper into the forest.

Among the beneficiaries of the rewilding at Pierella were sloths, and we soon encountered both species found here. A Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth hung upside down at eye level just a few feet away, its blunt snout visibly twitching as it sampled scents in the air—two-toed sloths rely heavily on smell and are far more alert and active than their three-toed relatives. Nearby, a Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth clung motionless to a branch, a master of stillness wearing a green-tinged cloak, its survival strategy built on extreme energy conservation and near invisibility, aided by algae growing in its fur.

That stillness supports an entire living community. The three-toed sloth's fur hosts green algae, giving the animal a mossy cast that enhances camouflage in the canopy. Within that fur live specialized moths whose life cycle is intimately tied to the sloth's behavior. About once a week, three-toed sloths descend to the ground to defecate—an unusually risky habit for an arboreal mammal. The moths lay their eggs in the dung, larvae develop there, and adult moths return to the sloth, fertilizing the algae in its fur when they die and are broken down by fungi and microbes. The algae, in turn, provide nutritional benefits when sloths groom, creating a tightly linked mini-ecosystem carried on a single animal's back.

We paused to marvel at how this unlikely web—sloth, algae, moths, fungi, and microbes—embodies the complexity of tropical systems, where even a slow-moving mammal becomes a living habitat, and survival is built on relationships refined over millions of years.

Mammal highlights continued with Honduran White Bats, tiny tent-making bats that roost beneath large leaves they modify into shelters. Their pure white fur and yellow ears give them an almost unreal, fairy-like appearance—likely functioning as camouflage when dappled light filters through their green leaf tents.

Lesser Sac-winged Bats (also known as Lesser White-lined Bats) were also found roosting openly on a wall, a typical daytime behavior for this species, which relies on cryptic coloration and stillness rather than concealment in leaf tents.

Amphibian and reptile highlights followed. Red-eyed Tree Frogs—Costa Rica's most iconic amphibian and a staple of nature imagery—were admired up close. Their brilliant scarlet eyes and hidden flashes of blue, yellow, and orange along the flanks, thighs, and toes are classic examples of a startle display: when disturbed, these sudden bursts of color can momentarily confuse predators, buying precious seconds to escape.

A Green Basilisk was found perched on a palm leaf—the famous "Jesus Christ lizard," so named for its ability to sprint across water using specialized, fringed toes that trap air with each rapid step, allowing it to stay above the surface for short distances.

A bird highlight followed close behind: a Long-tailed Tyrant, its improbably long tail feathers streaming behind it in flight. "The resplendent tyrant," Balint quipped, as one crossed the sky trailing its tail like a miniature quetzal.

As if the afternoon needed more gifts, a day-roosting Common Pauraque was discovered on the forest floor, perfectly camouflaged. Then Scarlet Macaws tore across the sky in flashes of red, blue, and yellow—breathtaking in motion. Even rarer, Great Green Macaws followed in a fast flyby, heard by all and seen by a lucky few, leaving our group determined to seek this iconic species again. Everyone, however, enjoyed prolonged views of a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron as we crept slowly across a bridge, followed by an American Pygmy Kingfisher perched obligingly over a wetland. It remained in view for an extraordinarily long time—tiny, beautifully patterned in green, rufous, and white, and deeply satisfying to watch as it hunted low over the water.

By late afternoon we reached Selva Verde Lodge, a renowned center for birding and nature exploration. The lodge borders La Selva Biological Station, part of an uninterrupted conservation corridor that rises from Caribbean lowlands into foothills and distant mountains. This continuity allows species to move freely along elevational gradients, sustaining ecological processes that have disappeared across much of the tropics.

As evening settled in, anticipation grew for what lay ahead. Tomorrow we would begin exploring this landscape in earnest— a place where river meets rainforest in one of the crown jewels of Costa Rica's natural riches.

Sat, Dec. 27. Selva Verde Lodge | La Selva Biological Station | Sarapiquí River Boat Tour

A morning optional birding session on the grounds of Selva Verde was attended by everyone. As we gathered in the early light, a Band-tailed Barbthroat probed ginger flowers for nectar, this small hummingbird's rapid wingbeats barely audible. Montezuma Oropendolas added a soundtrack—bizarre, bubbling, almost extraterrestrial vocalizations that sounded less like birds than transmissions from another dimension.

We walked down to the river's edge and scoped the far bank, finding a Snowy Egret and a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron standing motionless along the water. Then, suddenly, a Neotropical River Otter surfaced, hauled a fish onto the bank, and dispatched it with practiced efficiency—a visceral glimpse of predator and prey along the river's edge. Continuing into the forest, we found a Broad-billed Motmot holding still in the understory, its rufous head a small, steady flame among the shadows.

Breakfast followed in the elevated dining room, with sweeping views of feeders alive with color. Scarlet-rumped, Blue-gray, and Palm Tanagers swirled in and out, joined by Red-legged and Green Honeycreepers. New birds appeared as well: Yellow-throated and Yellow-crowned Euphonias, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, and a Ruddy Quail-Dove walking quietly on the ground below, elegant and unhurried.

We then headed to La Selva Biological Station, one of the most important tropical research sites in the world. For decades, La Selva has been a cornerstone of tropical ecology, helping shape our understanding of rainforest complexity and species interactions. E. O. Wilson and many other scientists conducted formative work here, revealing a level of biodiversity in the American tropics almost beyond comprehension—more species of trees in a single hectare than in the entirety of Europe, and more ant species in one tree than in all of Great Britain.

La Selva is also closely tied to one of the most influential frameworks for understanding biodiversity: the Holdridge Life Zone system. Developed by Leslie Holdridge while working in Costa Rica, this climate-based model links vegetation to three variables—temperature, rainfall, and moisture loss to the air. When these factors align, they reliably produce a particular kind of forest and the wildlife associated with it.

Costa Rica proved to be an ideal natural laboratory for this idea. Despite its small size, the country contains 12 Holdridge life zones, compressed into a narrow, mountainous landscape. Over the course of our journey, we moved through several of them—from the Premontane forests of the Central Valley into Lower Montane Wet

Forest, or cloud forest, and then down into the Tropical Wet Forest of La Selva, one of the most biologically productive life zones on Earth.

Seen through the Holdridge lens, Costa Rica's dramatic changes over short distances make sense: each climb or descent shifts climate first, and vegetation and wildlife follow. The result is not a single tropical forest, but a finely layered climatic mosaic—one that helps explain both the country's extraordinary biodiversity and the feeling that, in just a few hours, we have traveled across entirely different worlds.

Local expert guide Octavio joined us at La Selva, and birds appeared quickly. A Short-billed Pigeon perched obligingly, giving us scope views of a new member of the Columbidae family for the trip. A Boat-billed Flycatcher followed, allowing close study and direct comparison with Great Kiskadee. Though superficially similar, the differences were clear: the Boat-billed lacks the extensive rufous of the kiskadee, shows bold black crown bands separated by a pale stripe, and carries an outsized bill shaped like the keel of a boat. When it called, the distinction was unmistakable—nothing like the familiar "kis-ka-dee."

More kiskadee look-alikes appeared nearby—Social Flycatchers and Gray-capped Flycatchers—reinforcing an essential lesson of tropical birding. In a forest crowded with life, evolution has produced multiple solutions to the same problem. These birds share a general shape and style, but differences in diet, foraging height, aggression, voice, and habitat allow them to coexist. What looks redundant at first glance is, on closer inspection, a finely partitioned community.

Two hummingbirds added a touch of science and whimsy. A Long-billed Hermit appeared, its long, decurved bill perfectly matched to deep, curved flowers like heliconias—fitting like a key in a lock, a classic example of coevolution. In this evolutionary partnership, flowers benefit from precise pollen transfer by reliable visitors, while hermits gain efficient access to nectar unavailable to most other birds.

This hermit was followed by a Purple-crowned Fairy, perched calmly and gleaming with gemlike tones. Someone remarked that in the rainforest, hermits and fairies are not metaphors, but real beings.

Deeper in the forest, Crested Guans loomed in the shadows—large, dark shapes that felt lifted from a Jurassic jungle. Then came our first Keel-billed Toucan, its enormous, multicolored bill appearing impossibly heavy but in fact remarkably light. Built from a honeycombed framework of keratin, the bill allows the bird to reach fruit on slender branches and occasionally raid nests, while also serving as an efficient thermal radiator, shedding excess heat in the steamy rainforest.

We crossed an exhilarating footbridge high above the river, spotting a massive Green Iguana stretched out in the canopy overhead—a modern-day dragon. On the far side, the forest seemed to erupt with activity. A male Shining Honeycreeper dazzled in deep purple, its bright yellow legs flashing as it moved through the foliage. A Common Squirrel Cuckoo—long-tailed and chestnut-colored—bounded through the branches with the agility that gives it its name. Rufous and Broad-billed Motmots appeared together, a classic Neotropical pairing, their saturated colors emblematic of rainforest birding at its best. Nearby, an army ant column streamed across the forest floor, drawing attendants such as Spotted Antbird and Russet Antshrike, which capitalized on insects flushed by the advancing swarm.

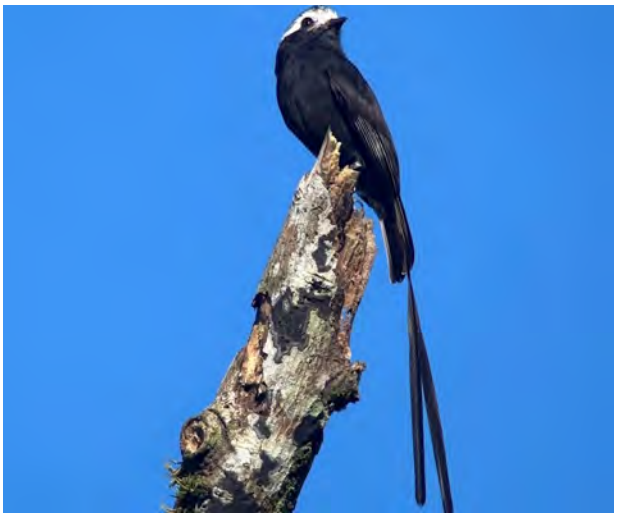
Mantled Howler Monkeys lounged overhead, sluggish and unhurried. As folivores—leaf eaters—their slow movements reflect a low-energy diet that requires long periods of rest and microbial fermentation rather than speed or strength. We enjoyed contrasting that apparent lethargy with their extraordinary vocal power and talked about research showing a striking evolutionary trade-off: in male howlers, the louder the roar, the smaller the testes. Energy and anatomy are invested either in vocal dominance—advertising strength and deterring rivals at a distance—or in sperm competition, but rarely both. In howler monkeys, sound has largely replaced physical confrontation, allowing males to compete acoustically rather than through constant aggression.

We paused beneath a colossal, buttressed tree, its trunk forming a passageway through living architecture. Wrapped in vines, upholstered with velvety moss, and perfumed by blooming flowers, it offered a full sensory immersion into tropical ecology—and a perfect backdrop for a group photo.

Johan and Octavio then tracked down a Graceful Black-throated Trogon by voice. Frank spotted it first—as he so often did with his sharp eyes—and moments later the bird flew to an open perch, offering prolonged views of the male. He glowed yellow and green against the dark forest, his pale blue eye-rings visible even in the dim light as a storm gathered overhead.

When wind whipped the trees and rain began to sheet down, we hurried for cover, pausing to admire Collared Aracaris—smaller, social relatives of toucans—feeding busily in a fruiting tree. We took shelter beneath a broad canopy that proved to be a natural umbrella, and to our delight it was alive with birds. Highlights of the mixed flock included a striking male White-ruffed Manakin, joined by a female Red-capped Manakin and several Olive-backed Euphonias, turning an abrupt downpour into yet another memorable moment.

Back at Selva Verde, we enjoyed lunch and free time. Some rested, others explored the grounds, while several lingered at the feeders as fresh fruit was put out. The replenishment brought a surge of activity: Keel-billed Toucan, Crimson-collared Tanager, and a Chestnut-headed Oropendola joining a noisy mob of Montezuma



Oropendolas devouring bananas. Ann R. spotted a Wood Thrush on the forest floor, a quiet reminder of the migratory threads tying these forests to North America.

Later, just before we boarded a boat for a Sarapiquí River trip, Mantled Howler Monkeys roared from one side of the road while Variable Seedeaters flitted on the other, a new species fleetingly seen that teased us into wanting better looks. Mangrove Swallows skimmed the river as we pushed off.

Once underway, a Green Heron offered unusually open views, far less secretive here than this species often is farther north. Bare-throated Tiger-Herons appeared again, and our boatman skillfully maneuvered us for exceptional looks. Anhingas spread their wings to dry, and at last a male Variable Seedeater perched in full view. Southern Rough-winged Swallows perched along the river, their rusty throats distinguishing them from their northern counterparts. Amy spotted a Buff-rumped Warbler flicking its bright rump along a shadowed bank. Little Blue Herons added elegance, and Russet-naped Wood-Rails—two of them—stood openly on the riverbank, their long red legs making them appear at once elegant and delightfully Dr. Seuss–like.

Green Ibises perched in riverside trees, their plumage flashing iridescent green as the angle of light shifted—a perfect example of structural color, in which microscopic feather structures reflect and refract light rather than relying on pigment. Earlier in the day, Johan had found a Green Ibis feather at La Selva, and we passed it around, examining how its color changed with every tilt and turn. Now, watching the birds themselves wear those same feathers in life, the structural color lesson came full circle, the science suddenly vivid and alive along the riverbank.

Kingfishers may have stolen the show. The Sarapiquí River supports all six kingfisher species found in the Americas, and we saw three. Green Kingfishers perched repeatedly before plunging for fish. A larger Amazon Kingfisher appeared next, and then the giant of them all—the Ringed Kingfisher—flew past, crow-sized, white-collared, and purposeful, a feathered fish missile streaking along the river's edge.

After leaving the river, as dusk approached, we stopped at a traditional roost for Great Green Macaws. This species came perilously close to extinction, once reduced to perhaps two hundred individuals. Thanks to habitat protection, legal safeguards for key nesting trees, and payments to landowners who preserve macaw nesting sites, the population has climbed to roughly four hundred and continues to grow—one of Costa Rica's most hopeful conservation stories.

While waiting, we spotted a Common Tody-Flycatcher and a Northern Tropical Pewee perched on roadside wires, followed by a Bat Falcon atop a nearby tree, silhouetted against the darkening sky. This sleek, crepuscular predator specializes in hunting birds and bats at dusk.

Then we heard it—the screams of macaws. Two Scarlet Macaws exploded into view, rainbow flames tearing across the sky. A Bat Falcon launched in pursuit, wings slicing the air, and then a second falcon joined. What followed was an aerial melee—color, speed, and sound colliding above us. The macaws eventually landed in a massive tree draped with epiphytes, one crawling into a cavity while the other perched nearby. Through scopes, we watched and speculated. Were the macaws raiding nests? Competing with these small falcons for scarce nesting cavities? Both species depend on old trees, a resource increasingly rare in fragmented forests.

Though the Great Green Macaws never appeared, witnessing Scarlet Macaws locked in aerial combat with Bat Falcons was unforgettable. Most of us had so far only heard the deep calls of Great Green Macaws, with just a few fleeting flight views. Tomorrow would bring one more chance to search for one of the rarest parrots on Earth—and to see firsthand how Costa Rica, once burdened with one of the world's highest deforestation rates, chose a different path, protecting more than a quarter of its land and embracing biodiversity, education, and human well-being as national priorities, to the benefit of Great Green Macaws and countless other species.

Sun., Dec 28 Selva Verde Lodge | La Selva Biological Station | Tapirus Lodge

We began the final full day of the tour with the same expectation that had carried us all week: that this spectacular country would have something new to offer.

We started with another morning birding walk on the grounds of Selva Verde Lodge. Red-lored Amazons made a ruckus as they flew overhead, their harsh, nasal calls carrying through the forest. Black Phoebes worked the river's edge, and deeper in the trees we found two Broad-billed Motmots perched side by side. One bird's racqueted tail hung motionless in full view, the paired feathers ending in racquet-shaped tips shaped by wear and deliberate pruning.

When motmots swing their racquet tails side to side like pendulums, the movement likely serves multiple purposes—communication during courtship and territorial display, and possibly a pursuit-deterrent signal to predators. Like the stotting of antelope on the African savanna, the exaggerated motion may advertise alertness: *I see you; chasing would be futile.* It is a hallmark of the family and one of the rainforest's quiet marvels.

When I explained this to the group, Anne H. remarked that every bird has a story. Over the course of the tour, she had appreciated birds not simply as beautiful objects to admire, but as living narratives—each shaped by behavior, ecology, and evolutionary history—stories that reward attention and inspire awe. That is my kind of birding.

When we stepped out of the forest, Montezuma Oropendolas swayed in their pendulous nests, and as we watched, two Scarlet Macaws burst into view—impossibly bright in the early morning light, a sudden blaze of red, blue, and gold against the green trees.

After packing up, we stopped near La Selva Biological Station to bird once more. As we walked a road in the cool morning mist, an unmistakable scream split the air: Great Green Macaws. They powered past in flight, immense and commanding, but did not perch—another exhilarating close brush with one of the forest's rarest giants, leaving us thrilled but still wanting more.

As if in consolation, the sky delivered King Vultures. Soaring high above the forest, they revealed bold white wing panels visible even at great distance, their immense wings cutting slow, deliberate arcs through the air. When Black Vultures circled nearby, the contrast in size was striking, and Beth's camera captured the extraordinary facial colors of the kings—orange, purple, pink—bare skin as vivid as any tropical flower. Majestic and unmistakable, they felt like emissaries from another age.

Although vultures share a scavenging lifestyle, they locate food using very different strategies. Turkey Vultures are exceptional smellers, equipped with a highly developed olfactory sense that allows them to detect the gases released during the earliest stages of decay, even beneath dense forest canopy. Their low, rocking flight reflects this invisible work, following scent rather than sight. Black Vultures, by contrast, have a much weaker sense of smell and rely primarily on vision and social behavior—watching other scavengers and rapidly converging once food is located.

King Vultures operate differently still. They rely chiefly on vision and altitude, soaring high above intact rainforest where scent is less reliable and carcasses are harder to detect. They may notice activity below, including other vultures gathered at a site, but they are not dependent on Turkey Vultures to find food. Often arriving later, their massive bill allows them to tear open thick hides that smaller vultures cannot breach, effectively opening a carcass and making it accessible to others.

Watching these three species together reveals a layered system rather than a competition—smell, sight, and strength working in sequence. Even among birds often dismissed as simple scavengers, evolution has produced

multiple solutions to the same problem: different senses, different tools, and distinct roles, all keeping the forest clean.

Johan then heard a Slaty-tailed Trogon and led us to this spectacular quetzal cousin. A brilliant male appeared first, followed by a richly colored female. As we admired them, movement caught our attention—a second male slipped into view, creating a trogon trifecta that held us spellbound.

Then, once again, came the scream of Great Green Macaws. This time, when we tracked two birds, they did not vanish over the canopy. They perched. We scrambled, repositioned with the sun at our backs, and there it was—one magnificent macaw glowing in full light atop a tall tree, a moment of pure, collective awe.

We were still buzzing from that encounter when the day shifted—from canopy drama to roadside revelation. Continuing along a rural route toward lunch, we paused to watch Southern Lapwings at close range in a nearby field, scanning for the sharp wing spurs that make them such formidable defenders. Movement in a roadside bush drew us from the van. A Common Tody-Flycatcher offered excellent views, and Johan soon picked up the voice of a Nicaraguan Seed-Finch. Moments later, we were studying a glossy black male—an outsized member of the tanager family—his comically large, pink, wedge-shaped bill perfectly built for cracking hard seeds.

Nearby, a male Morelet's Seedeater appeared—the only member of the true tanager family, Thraupidae, that breeds in the United States, in south Texas. Ron, who had chased the species there with only fleeting views, was delighted to see one so well. A Variable Seedeater followed, and Gray-breasted Martins perched on roadside wires, their size and shape recalling female Purple Martins.

A few miles down the road, we paused for a look at a Groove-billed Ani, then stopped where Northern Jacanas patrolled floating vegetation. The contrast between adults and juveniles was striking. One adult grew visibly agitated as a water buffalo waded nearby, and then three chicks appeared—tiny fuzzballs under vigilant care. Not by a mother, as many might assume, but by the father.

Jacanas are polyandrous: females mate with multiple males, while males incubate the eggs and raise the young—a reversal of familiar parental roles.

Eventually, we pulled ourselves away and headed to lunch, where we enjoyed traditional Costa Rican fare such as *casado*—a classic midday plate built around rice and beans, served with salad, plantains, and a choice of protein. Simple, hearty, and deeply familiar to everyday life in Costa Rica, it offered a grounding pause after the morning's excitement.

From there we continued a short distance to Tapirus Lodge—named for the elusive Baird's Tapir and set within rich montane rainforest—our final base and gateway to another layer of Costa Rica's biological abundance.

We split into two canopy tram cars, half with Johan and half with local guide Marvin. The tram ride deepened our understanding of the rainforest in ways walking never could. Marvin explained that the preserve was designed to reveal the forest at all levels, especially the canopy—home to bromeliads, orchids, and other epiphytes rarely seen from the ground. It was a botanist's dream.

From our comfortable tram car that rose far above the forest floor, we spotted nutrient-rich berries of açaí relatives and so-called "marshmallow" plants, whose puffy pink fruits appear inviting but offer little nutritional reward; by the time a bird realizes the deception, the plant's tiny seeds have already adhered to its feathers and will be dispersed. Marvin explained how to distinguish lianas—woody vines rooted in the ground and climbing toward light—from aerial roots sent down by trees in search of water and nutrients. Tree ferns arched gracefully below us as he spoke of his work cultivating native fruits—sweet, tart, antioxidant-rich—part of a rainforest bounty still largely unexplored. His enthusiasm was infectious. Plants here are not merely a backdrop for birds and wildlife; they are stories in themselves.

As the tram moved from second-growth forest into primary rainforest, the structure changed dramatically. Towering old trees rose above us, their immense trunks supporting multiple forest layers. Some of these giants are nicknamed "broccoli trees" for their broad, rounded crowns—a visual shorthand for the massive canopy architecture of mature rainforest.

In the canopy through which we traveled, a mixed flock materialized, including a new species for the trip: White-shouldered Tanager. A Crowned Woodnymph perched nearby, glowing in the filtered light. At the tram's turnaround point, Purple Vervain hummed with activity as Blue-chested Hummingbirds zipped among the blooms. From deeper in the forest came the low, resonant call of a Great Tinamou—like the voice of the rainforest itself. A Yellow-throated Toucan announced its presence repeatedly before finally appearing in the late-day light, tossing its bright bill skyward.

Moments later, White-faced Capuchin Monkeys moved through the canopy, sharpening the sense that the forest was fully awake around us. Among the most intelligent primates in the Neotropics, capuchins are known for tool use, social learning, and complex group dynamics. They even practice a form of self-medication: during certain seasons, individuals crush millipedes and rub the secretions through their fur, using the chemicals as insect repellent and possibly as antimicrobial protection. The behavior spreads socially within groups, a striking example of cultural transmission in a wild mammal.

As the tram ride ended, a troop of White-nosed Coatis burst into view at the forest edge—appearing and disappearing in a flurry of motion as they ran back and forth between understory and open ground. Long-tailed and animated, these charismatic relatives of raccoons moved with restless curiosity, snouts probing, tails held high like signals as they kept constant contact with one another. Social and highly intelligent, coatis often travel in large family bands, their sudden eruptions of activity giving the forest edge a lively, almost playful feel.

A sudden downpour sent us scrambling for shelter, but when the rain eased, the forest again delivered. Mixed flocks produced new species such as Carmiol's Tanager and White-browed Gnatcatcher. Mealy Amazons flew past, the harsh, nasal screeches of these parrots grating to human ears but perfectly effective contact calls for parrots moving through dense forest; one eventually perched, offering prolonged views. Around the vervain, new hummingbirds appeared—Violet-headed Hummingbird and Snowcap, the latter represented by a female of this highland species, whose males famously wear a white crown. Scope views of Blue Dacnis were excellent, and nearby a Scarlet-thighed Dacnis completed the picture—an elegant pairing to close the afternoon.

Then came a coda worthy of the day. A Golden-hooded Tanager—one of the birds Beth had been hoping to photograph since before the tour began—suddenly materialized in good light. A glimpse a few days earlier had been fleeting, gone before a camera could rise, but now the bird lingered with a soft golden hood, blue wings folded neatly at its sides. Beth captured the image she had been waiting for—the kind of moment birding offers when patience is finally rewarded. We were still riding that quiet high when someone asked the obvious question: what could possibly top that?

The forest answered.

Out of the shadows stepped the largest native land mammal in Central America: Baird's Tapir.

Tapirus Lodge has become one of the best places in the country to encounter this endangered species, and our sighting felt almost unreal. A survivor from the Ice Age, the tapir moved with prehistoric calm, its barrel-shaped body slipping through vegetation with surprising ease. Its flexible, prehensile snout—part nose, part grasping tool—tests leaves and fruit, selecting, browsing, moving on. In doing so, it shapes the forest itself, dispersing seeds over long distances and quietly engineering the understory.

Shy, mostly nocturnal, and utterly dependent on intact rainforest and river corridors, Baird's Tapir is a living measure of ecological health—a reminder that when landscapes remain whole, ancient lives still persist.

Watching it disappear back into the forest, it was impossible not to feel that we had been granted something rare.

After a closing dinner and final checklist, we headed out on a night walk. Astonishingly, two more tapir encounters followed. One enormous adult browsed quietly along the forest edge; we admired it briefly, then left it in peace as we turned our attention to owls and frogs.

Insects dominated the night—moths with red eyes glowing like embers, a cricket with shockingly long antennae, and a golden silk orb-weaver whose web, stronger than steel by weight, has inspired human engineering. A Crested Owl called nearby but remained unseen. Frogs were everywhere. Several Red-eyed Tree Frogs appeared, and Amy found a tiny tink frog, scarcely larger than a thumbnail yet responsible for the sharp, metallic calls ringing through the forest.

The contrast between a giant tapir and a minute frog felt like a perfect encapsulation of the night's many wonders.

Mon., Dec. 29 Tapirus Lodge | Departures

Morning dawned bright and clear. A moth sheet and light had drawn in dazzling nocturnal species, captivating part of the group, while others watched nearly a dozen toucans—both Yellow-throated and Keel-billed—gathered in treetops near the lodge, their oversized bills glowing against the fresh morning sky.

Johan then led us on a final birding walk, one of the most productive of the tour. A mixed flock materialized almost immediately. Emerald Tanager, seen the day before only by Johan, now showed beautifully for everyone. A male Gartered Violaceous Trogon gleamed violet and gold in the forest light, but a Laughing Falcon stole the moment—its manic, echoing call rolling through the trees as we enjoyed prolonged scope views of its bold black-and-white mask while it gave a parting laugh, as if reminding us to savor Costa Rica's natural wealth with a generous dose of humor.

At breakfast we paused to share our gratitude—to Olman, for fixing two flats without slowing the tour, for keeping us safe and comfortable with his superb driving, and for embodying Costa Rican *pura vida*; to Johan, for world-class birding expertise and for sharing both his family and his country with us; and to one another. Ours was a large group, yet everyone remained punctual and organized, good-humored and—most important—endlessly curious.

I guide for Naturalist Journeys because I love educating and inspiring people who share my sense of wonder. I don't keep a life list; that kind of birding has never held much appeal for me. Instead, I keep a different inventory—a mental ledger of the people I've birded with and the joy those moments have brought to them and to me. Those memories are my life list.

I can't imagine a better Christmas gift than sharing this journey in Costa Rica with my wife, Amy—traveling together again in the way that first drew us both into birding—and with new friends who are now part of that continuing story.

Photos: Group Photo at La Selva Biological Station (Stephen Grace - SG), Orange-chinned Parakeet (SG), Blue Morpho (SG), Mottled Owl (SG), Lesson's Motmot (SG), Fiery-throated Hummingbird (SG), Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher (Balint Toth - BT), Golden-browed Chlorophonia (Johan Fernandez - JF), Talamanca Hummingbird (SG), Collared Redstart (BT), Hummingbirds (Ann Rilling - AR), Cloud Forest at Savegre Valley (SG), Black-throated Green Warbler (BT), Volcano Hummingbird Nest at Trogon Lodge (SG), Group Birding (Beth Rogers - BR), Wilson's Warbler (BT), Resplendent Quetzal (SG), Spotted Wood-Quail (SG), Yellowish Flycatcher (BT), Savegre River (SG), Acorn Woodpecker and Flame-colored Tanager (SG), Lesser Violetear (SG), Upper Savegre Valley (SG), Black Guan (SG), Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth (SG), Red-legged Honeycreeper (SG), Yellow-throated Toucan (SG), Collared Aracari (SG), Green Basilisk (SG), White-collared Manakin (SG), Chestnut-colored Woodpecker (BT), Red-eyed Tree Frog (BT), Long-tailed Tyrant (JF), Boat-billed Flycatcher (SG), Crested Guan (SG), Graceful Black-throated Trogon (SG), Blue-gray Tanager (BT), Keel-billed Toucan (BT), Slaty-tailed Trogon (SG), Baird's Tapir (SG), Tram at Tapirus Lodge (SG), Laughing Falcon (SG), Johan Fernandez Birding at Tapirus Lodge (SG), Summer Tanager (Dave Keeling - DK), Great Kiskadee (DK), Red-legged Honeycreeper (DK)