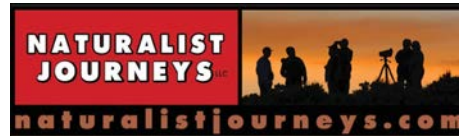


Costa Rica Birding and Nature | March 5 - 12, 2025

Trip Report by Dan Donaldson



Guide Dan Donaldson, local guide Armando, along with fellow travelers: Kerry, Robert, Susan, Richard, Jan, Grant, Susan, Dave, Sharon, Mary and Bill



Costa Rica - The most bird-rich country in the new world, with nearly half (900 out of 2,000) of all bird species in North America, utilizing its critical geography and habitat diversity at some point of their lives. This trip sampled as many of these habitats as possible with multi-day explorations in Caribbean lowland rainforests, mid-elevation mountain valleys, and high elevation (over 7000 ft.) cloud forests.

Our locations included Hotel Bougainvillea (first night) in San Jose, Suria Lodge and Hotel (2 nights), Rancho Naturalista (2 nights), and Selva Verde (2 nights). Those that participated on the extension stayed one evening at Cerro Lodge, and 2 additional nights at La Ensenada Lodge on the Pacific Coast.

Wed., Mar. 5: Arrival Day | Hotel Bougainvillea

Welcome to Costa Rica - Today was the official arrival day for this tour, but many of us arrived the day before and enjoyed the wonderful gardens of Hotel Bougainvillea.

At 4:00pm we officially gathered up those that were here and did a casual bird walk through the gardens, visiting the resident Mottled Owls, and the dashing Lesson's Motmots. Hoffmann's Woodpeckers are plentiful here, as are Social Flycatchers, that we'll spend the rest of the trip differentiating from the similar-looking resident flycatchers.

We met up with Armando, our local guide, at 6:00pm and had a formal orientation for our week ahead. Afterward, we had a very fine dinner in the hotel restaurant.

Thurs., Mar. 6: Hotel Bougainvillea | Paraiso Quetzal Lodge | Suria Lodge

It's the first official day of our tour and we started with a pre-breakfast birding walk around the extensive gardens of Hotel Bougainvillea (a great birding destination in its own right). As soon as we walked out of the door, we spotted a Yellow-naped Amazon sitting atop the first tree in the gardens. Yellow-napes are a critically endangered species and generally rare in this area. A great bird to start our trip. We also had Orange-chinned and Crimson-fronted Parakeets. Great Kiskadees are here too and their calls were heard throughout our walk. The Mottled Owls were in the large bamboo stand allowing for great views and pictures. We spotted a beautiful Blue-vented Hummingbird but Rufous-tailed hummingbirds are most numerous here, and were the most common hummer of the trip. Golden-hooded Tanagers, Brown Jays, and Rufous-backed Wrens rounded out our morning.

After breakfast we loaded into our bus and headed to Paraiso de Quetzal Lodge for lunch and to search for Resplendent Quetzals. We arrived at Paraiso Quetzal Lodge in time to spend an hour walking the grounds and on their amazing hummingbird deck before lunch. Here Fiery-throated Hummingbirds, White-throated Mountain-gems, Lesser Violetears, and Talamanca Hummingbirds dominate the feeders, much to the delight of everyone. The tiny Volcano Hummingbird (a high elevation specialist) is here as well, and that's one we needed to get while we were in this region. On our walk we found Long-tailed Silky- and Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatchers and we were thrilled to get great looks and photos of Golden-browed Chlorophonias. The forest edge held Buffy Tuftedcheeks and Ruddy Treerunner. A Barred Becard made a short appearance. After lunch we walked the grounds and gardens in search of forest birds. It's great birding here, but we now had to move on and boarded our bus to head to the Savegre Valley.

Not far from Paraiso Quetzal, Armando had the driver pull off onto a dirt road and drive a couple miles until we were on the side of a forested mountain ravine - Quetzal habitat! This was Armando's go-to spot for quetzals. We exited the bus and walked down the valley a bit and it wasn't long before we heard the cooing call of a Resplendent Quetzal high in the forest above us. We then located the long topaz-colored tail hanging from behind a tree. Luckily, a female flew in behind us and lower in the ravine and the beautiful male soon followed, crossing the road right in front of us and landing not far down the slope where we could get wonderful views and photographs. It was an amazing experience to be out on this remote road - no people, no signs, no anything except our group, quetzals, and forest. We happily boarded the bus and headed to our next lodge.

We arrived above the Savegre River valley then descended down the switchback road deep into the valley. We're in Quetzal territory here and we scanned the many avocado trees along the roads as we made our way to the bottom of the valley. We settled into the Suria Lodge just in time for dinner and our checklist review. We would be out searching for more Quetzals and high elevation birds early tomorrow.

Fri., Mar. 7: Suria Grounds | Savegre Lodge Trails | Trogon Lodge Creek

After a fine breakfast at the lodge, we boarded our bus and headed to nearby Savegre Mountain Lodge to spend the first half of our day hiking the forest trails high above the hotel. Thankfully, we were loaded into safari jeeps and hauled up to the top, so our hiking for the day was generally downhill. The jeeps dropped us off at the trail head and headed back down to the lodge. It wasn't long before the forest came alive with birds. A beautiful Collared Redstart appeared very close to where we were standing; watching us so intently that we thought perhaps it had a nest nearby, so we moved on. Still in the trailhead turnaround, a feeding flock of birds moved through - Spangled Tanagers, Flame-throated Warblers, Yellowish Flycatchers, and Barred Becards fed in the trees on the forest edge while Spot-crowned Woodcreepers and Ruddy Treerunners worked lower on the trunks and branches. One bird we specifically searched for here was the ground-nesting Black-cheeked Warbler, which we found within our first mile of hiking. A highlight of our hike was locating a Costa Rican Pygmy-Owl, a high elevation specialist and distinct from the more common Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls we saw later in the trip.

After lunch at Savegre Lodge, we drove to Miriam's Quetzals restaurant for some downtime sipping sodas and relaxing on the deck overlooking the Savegre Valley. There are a couple of fruit feeding stations here along with very active hummingbird feeders. The hummingbirds here were amazing with Lesser Violetear, Talamanca, Fiery-throated, and Volcano hummingbirds constantly flying through and around the deck. The feeding stations attracted Acorn and Hairy woodpeckers, Flame-colored Tanagers, Yellow-thighed Brushfinch and Baltimore Orioles. Rufous-collared Sparrows, Clay-colored and Sooty Thrushes were all active on the ground below us.

After this relaxing spot we headed out for more birding. We ended up walking the long driveway of Trogon Lodge. The Savegre River flows right along the drive here and we found Torrent Tyrannulets busily feeding in the boulders of the river. Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush and Belted Kingfishers were seen here along the creek as well. We also had good looks at Stripe-tailed and White-throated Mountain-gem Hummingbirds in the flowerbeds along the driveway. It gets dark early down in this valley and we were back at Suria Lodge by 5:30pm to get ready for dinner.

Sat., Mar. 8: Transfer to Rancho Naturalista | Lago de Cachi | Hydro Dam | Paraiso Park

We woke to a pretty chilly morning in this high mountain valley and had a wonderful pre-breakfast walk around the Suria Lodge and gardens. On the hillside across the road from the lodge, 20 Black Vultures roosted in a lone pasture tree. We watched them sun themselves in the morning sun and depart when they were warm enough to start their day. The gardens closest to the road and driveway were our most productive areas. We watched Green-crowned Brilliants and Stripe-tailed Hummingbirds feeding throughout the flowering bushes. The more open lawn areas were visited by Mountain Thrushes and Chestnut-capped Brushfinches. Suddenly, a male Resplendent Quetzal flew down from a hillside behind the hotel, crossed a small pasture, and disappeared into a clump of trees. It was never relocated but what a way to start our day!

It was a transfer day, so after breakfast we loaded back onto our bus to bird our way to Rancho Naturalista, located in Turrialba. Our first stop was at Cafe Christina; this small coffee farm and roasting operation has wonderful shade-grown coffee fields that still provide great bird habitat. As we sipped the freshest of coffee while walking the grounds, we had great looks at Buff-throated Saltators feeding in the mature trees and Eye-ringed Flatbills hawking for insects from atop the coffee plants.

Lunch was at La Casona del Cafetal - a regular stop for our Naturalist Journeys trips. This large restaurant/event center sits above Lago de Cachi (Lake Cachi). We ate under a pavilion overlooking the lake with the calls of Montezuma Oropendolas above us. Once finished with lunch we walked the grounds, picking up 20 species including Common Squirrel-Cuckoo, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Giant Cowbirds, Melodious Blackbirds, Scarlet-

thighed Dacnis, and Black-headed Saltators. Scoping the lake, we found Least Grebes, Ringed Flycatchers, Black and Turkey vultures and Tropical Kingbirds.

Once again on our way to Rancho Naturalista, we made a quick stop at the hydro-electric dam that forms Lake Cachi. The area is along a busy section of highway so we had to park our bus and walk down to the dam. We stayed on the sidewalk and checked out the spillway area for birds. It wasn't long before we were joined by a Bat Falcon that was patrolling the nearby trees. Black Phoebe's nest here in the many concrete structures and Northern Rough-winged Swallows work the water above the spillway. Back on the road, we stopped again at a small town square in the town of Paraiso where a Tropical Screech-Owl has been reported. The locals, seeing us with binoculars, pointed it out to us right away along with a Barn Owl that was roosting in a tree near the town church. Today is Saturday and the square was active with a market, so of course, we had to check that out for a while before loading back on the bus. Next stop - Rancho Naturalista.

We arrived at 4:00pm which gave us time to settle into our rooms and check out the grounds a bit before dinner. The family style dinners on the veranda here are one of the highlights of the trip. The food is always delicious, locally sourced and varied. After dinner, we met in the small library/lounge to do our checklist for the day and to review the plan for the next two days here at Rancho Naturalista.

Sun., Mar. 9: Rancho Naturalista

Coffee is available on the veranda at 6:00am and we're all there to take in the sunrise, watch and listen to the forest wake up and take in the amazing birds that show up here at fruit, seed and hummingbird feeders. The large White-tailed Hummingbirds show up first, then Green Thorntails and Rufous-tailed hummers. And this morning we were treated to one of the target birds here at Rancho - Snowcap Hummingbird! These tiny, amazingly fast hummers with their maroon body and brilliant white cap on their head often appear as white spots zipping through the vegetation. It's easy to think at first that it's some kind of moth. We had males and the more traditional green-and-white females here. It's not long before Brown Jays show up and head for the bigger fruit at the stations. That is until the Gray-headed Chachalacas showed up in force, flying in from high in the trees and noisily settling in the feeding area. These turkey-like birds can climb all through the branches and ropes at the feeder stations, knocking fruit to the ground. Most birds just stay out of the way and wait them out. They only stayed 30 minutes until they'd eaten the larger fruits like plantains. Now that the sun is higher and the valley below is in sunshine, the Chestnut-headed and Montezuma Oropendolas are active in the treetops below. They eventually make their way to the feeding stations throughout the day and can be heard all day long here.

After a wonderful family style breakfast, we headed out for our AM trail hike. We started out walking the trails and roads around the lodge; Keel-billed Toucans overhead feeding and calling in the trees above us. We take a trail down into a steep valley to the famous bathing pools, a series of natural pools in a small creek where hummingbirds like to bathe. It started to mist on us as we walked down the steps to the pools and there was no hummingbird activity this morning. Luckily, just a short walk down the trail we heard the call of the Dull-mantled Antbird. Staying on the ground and deep in vegetation, this bird is challenging to see and often (like the snowcap) all you notice is the small white patch on its nape zipping about. Lucky for us, there was a female here and two males competing for her attention. We had great looks at the birds and the breeding behavior of this elusive species.

We continued our walk to the pasture areas of the property. The mist has quit and the skies opened up a bit and the birds took advantage of the break in the weather as well. We found nesting pairs of Gartered Violaceous and Collared Trogons along the wood line, and a host of flycatchers hunting from the pasture trees:

Ochre-bellied, Gray-capped, Social, Mistletoe Tyrannulet and both Black-crowned and Masked Tityras. In the openness of the pastures, we could also see flocks of parrots flying overhead or in the forest with White-crowned Parrots and Crimson-fronted Parakeets being most notable. A quick stop at a nearby home gave us great looks at Common Tody and Black-headed Tody-Flycatchers. We made it back to the lodge in time to freshen up before lunch.

After lunch we decided to wait out the weather and birded from the veranda. It was a wonderful, relaxing time sipping coffee and cokes as we watched eight species of hummingbirds visit the feeders, adding Green-breasted Mangos and Black-crested Coquettes to our trip list. Parrots and Oropendolas relaxed in the trees as Collared Aracaris dropped in to check out the remaining fruit. The rains lightened a bit later in the afternoon, so we decided to board the bus and head down the mountain a bit to get out of the rain. It worked! We made our way to the Rio Platanillo Bridge to search for Sun Bitterns, which we soon found nesting in branches that overhang the creek. Golden-olive Woodpeckers put on terrific courtship displays for us and a Streak-headed Woodcreeper stopped in to see what the commotion was about. We walked the nearby park along the creek getting good looks at Black Phoebes, Blue-and-White Swallows, Scarlet-rumped Tanagers, Variable Seedeaters and Buff-throated Saltators. We made our way back up the mountain to Rancho and spent a bit more time on the veranda before dinner, drinks, and checklists.

Mon., Mar. 10: Rancho Naturalista | Txfr to Selva Verde | Pierella Gardens

The coffee was on at 6:00am and we gathered in darkness on the veranda, warm mugs in hand, to watch the skies lighten and the valley come alive. Bronze-tailed Plumeleaters were the bird of the morning watch as well as Collared Aracari. It's not officially morning until the Montezuma Oropendolas start calling and when they did, we left the veranda to meet up for our morning bird walk. We spent the two hours before breakfast walking the grounds, trails, and roadways, not wanting to go off trail because we were leaving after breakfast. We found a feeding flock of warblers not far down the entrance road. Tropical Parulas, Black and White, and Blackburnian Warblers methodically worked the trees along the road. We watched them until a Red-throated Ant-Tanager distracted us, first with its call, then with great looks as it too worked the tree along the road. White-crowned Parrots made an appearance high in the trees above the lodge (great scope views) and Keel-billed Toucans flew in behind us. We added Violet-headed Hummingbird in the flowerbeds in front of the lodge as we headed in for breakfast.

It's a transfer day, so after breakfast we loaded up our bus and headed off to Selva Verde Lodge in the lowland areas to the north. Our first stop was La Angostura Lake, not far down the valley from Rancho. This large, shallow lake is great for waterbirds and fowl. We were light on ducks - Black-bellied Whistling and Blue-winged Teal - but the waders were fantastic. Purple Gallinules, Least Grebe, Limpkin, Northern Jacana, Wood Stork, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron along with Green, Little Blue, and Great Blue. We also had great looks at Neotropic Cormorant, Yellow-headed Caracara, and a Roadside Hawk made a quick stop in a dead tree not too far from us. We took a road that cut through young forest, disturbing a large group of Chestnut-headed Oropendolas. After they settled down, we located a Black-crowned Tityra pair.

Our next stop was the Guayabo National Monument, an archaeological site near the Turrialba Volcano that dates back to 1000 BC. The complex was abandoned just before the new world was discovered. Interestingly, the aqueduct that was constructed here still delivers water to the site from the mountain's adobe. We birded the forest trails surrounding the site and walked through the foundations of the town center that once housed as many as 10,000 people. Our two-hour walk through the forest and grounds produced Crested Guans, Olivaceous Woodpeckers, Streak-headed Woodcreepers, Golden-winged and Costa Rican Warblers and a White-

whiskered Puffbird. We had a picnic lunch here on site before moving to our next stop, Pierella Ecological Gardens.

Pierella Gardens is a relatively small family farm that started out as a commercial butterfly rearing operation, providing butterflies around the world. The traditional pastures and agricultural fields were slowly converted to forest by the owner. As the forest matured and more and more species of birds started showing up, it has now turned into one of the must-see stops for birding in the area. Here we had our first looks at lowland species of birds and mammals. Honduran White Bats in their tent made from a modified heliconia leaf was a special treat. Our two hours here produced Common Pauraque, Gray Hawk, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, White-collared Manakins, Green Honeycreepers, White-crowned Parrots, Scarlet-rumped Tanagers, and Rufous-tailed Jacamars. We ended our time here with a chocolate demonstration where we ground cocoa beans to make a chocolate dessert.

We arrived at Selva Verde Lodge in time to get into our rooms and freshen up before dinner and checklist.

Tues., Mar. 11: Selva Verde | La Selva Biological Station | Sarapiquí River Boat

Sunrise was at 6:00am and we were gathered for our morning walk, Montezuma Oropendolas overhead, to meet the sun. The region is hotter and more humid than the mountainous areas we came from and we adjusted quickly to this new climate. Our morning walk was pretty spectacular birding with several new species for us. Heading down our first trail, our first birds were a pair of Red-lored Amazons sitting in the open. We scoped and photographed these two quite a while. Olive-throated Parakeets made a quick and noisy appearance as well. We made our way along the forest trails spotting Chestnut-sided Warblers, Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, Bay Wren, Yellow-throated Toucans and a Slaty-tailed Trogon. Making a big loop, we made our way to the Sarapiquí River that divides the property, where we found Spotted Sandpipers, Amazon Kingfishers, Masked Tityra, and Great Kiskadees. Turning away from the river to head back for breakfast, we came upon a pair of Mealy Amazons that were attracting a crowd of morning birders. A great morning walk.

After breakfast we headed to La Selva Biological Research Station. The research station is an amazing place; a 4000-acre preserve dedicated to tropical biological studies. It is a destination for college students from around the world. Like many special preserves, it started as a farm and one caring person, Dr. Leslie Holdridge, who pioneered sustainable forest management in Costa Rica. Today it is run by the Organization for Tropical Studies as a living lab and research station for education. There were many students here today, both college and high school. We met our guide for the morning and walked down a short path by some of the research buildings - all with wonderful landscaping and birding habitat. One of our first birds here was a King Vulture that made a quick appearance soaring overhead. Broad-winged Hawk and Gray-headed Kite were also seen on the wing here. Blue-backed Grosbeaks, Golden-hooded Tanagers and Blue Dacnis preferred the open garden areas.

Along the forest trails, we had wonderful looks and photographs of a Semiplumbeous Hawk, Fasciated Antshrike and Red-capped Manakin. Cinnamon Becard, White-ringed and Piratic Flycatchers used the trails as openings to hunt in. As we exited the forest and walked back to the main campus, we heard, then located a pair of Rufous Motmots in the trees around the soccer field. Gray-breasted Martins were feeding low to the ground over the soccer field as well. Back at the main building, we had a very cooperative Cocoa Woodcreeper working a small fruit tree near the giftshop.

Our afternoon was spent on the Sarapiquí River, birding by boat. The river here is deep and calm and much wider than back at Selva Verde. We boarded our riverboat and made our way upstream. Howler monkeys are much easier to see by boat and we came across several groups on this trip. The luminescent Green Ibises are

amazing to see here. Everything about this bird is some shade of iridescent green - head, neck, legs, feathers. They just seem to glow green as they work the riverbanks. As we motored along, we got close to Bare-throated Tiger, Little Blue, and Tri-colored Herons. We had a trifecta of Ringed, Amazon, and Green Kingfishers. Then, we added another warbler - the Buff-rumped Warbler - a ground nester that keeps low and quiet, acting much like a waterthrush, which we did see here as well - A Northern Waterthrush that fed along the water's edge as we motored by. Beautiful Mangrove Swallows were here in good numbers, often circling our boat and skimming the water along the ripples we created. A herd of cattle came down to the river's edge to drink, and spooked a bit by our boat, they headed back up to a pasture, kicking up some Cattle Egrets for us to add to the trip. Making our way back to the dock, we spotted a group of River Otters (Neotropical River Otters), super cute! They were very skittish and hid behind a log as long as they could before making a dash to the water. What a treat!!

Back at Selva Verde we had time to relax, shower and meet for drinks before dinner and checklist.

Wed., Mar. 12: Departures | Soda Y Mirador | Extension

Today is departure day and after another pre-breakfast walk, we boarded and headed towards the airport to drop off those that were not going on the extension. We did however, make one stop at Soda Y Mirador Cinchona with its wonderful birding veranda overlooking a broad, forested valley and the San Fernando Waterfall in the distance. Here we viewed Buff-fronted Quail-Dove, Green-crowned Brilliants and Violet Sabrewing Hummingbirds. Northern Emerald-Toucanets were here today feeding from a nearby fruit feeder along with Silver-throated, Crimson-collared Tanagers, and Common Chlorospingus, with best looks at a trip favorite, the Crimson-collared Tanager. From here we were off to the airport for drop-offs, hugs and goodbyes for those that were leaving this afternoon. Those that were staying on for the extension headed off to lunch and their next adventure on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica.

Photos by Bryan Calk: Red-eyed Tree Frog, Scarlet Macaw, Black Howler Money, Green Honeycreeper