

Costa Rica Birding and Nature Jan. 22-29, 2025 w/ Pacific Coast Extension Trip Report by Dan Donaldson



Naturalist Journeys guide Dan Donaldson, local guide Johan and participants Dave, Linda, Sharon, Robert, Grant, Jan, Mary Ann, Bill, Kerry, Susan, and Richard



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, high elevation (over 7000 ft.) cloud forests. On the extension we added dry coastal forest and mangrove habitats and species to the trip.

Our locations included Hotel Bougainvillea (first night) in San Jose, a wonderful birding destination, itself famous for its garden residents such as Lesson's Motmots and Mottled Owls, Social Flycatchers and Brown Jays. Our high-mountain/cloud forest birding was done from the Savegre Hotel (2 nights) where we searched for Costa Rica's most famous bird, the Resplendent Quetzal. We encountered ours at a nearby farm that works with local conservation organizations like the Paraiso de Quetzals sanctuary. Rancho Naturalista (2 nights) was our mid-level forest location known as a reliable location for elusive Snow-capped Hummingbird and a special visit from

a Tayra (large wolverine-like weasel). Selva Verde (2 nights) in the lowland Caribbean rain forest provided us with 2 days of birding at the La Selva Biological Station and an amazing boat tour on the Sarapiquí River.

Those that participated in the extension stayed one evening at Cerro Lodge, (Scarlet Macaws and White-throated Magpie Jays) and 2 additional nights at La Ensenada Lodge on the Pacific Coast.

Wed., Jan. 22: Arrivals in San Jose | Garden Birding

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. Hoffman'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 Johan, our local guide, at 6:00pm and did our formal orientation for our week ahead. Afterward, we had a very fine dinner in the hotel restaurant.

Thurs., Jan. 23: Quetzal Day! | Paraiso de Quetzales | Savegre Valley

We started our day with a pre-breakfast birding walk around the gardens of Hotel Bougainvillea, had breakfast, then departed to Cerro de la Muerte (mountain of death) and the Savegre Valley in search of Resplendent Quetzals.

We arrived at Paraiso Quetzal Lodge in time to spend an hour or so on their amazing hummingbird deck before lunch. Here Fiery-throated, White-throated Mountain-gems, Lesser Violetears, 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. After Lunch we birded the grounds and gardens in search of forest birds. Long-tailed Silky and Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatchers were here and we were thrilled to get great looks and photos of Golden-browed Chlorophonias.

We arrived at the Savegre River valley and descended down the switchback road deep into the valley. We're in Quetzal territory here and we checked the avocado trees as we made our way to the Savegre Lodge. We settled into the Savegre Hotel just in time for dinner and our checklist review.

Fri., Jan. 24: Resplendent Quetzal Day! | Paraiso de Quetzales

We started our day with an early morning quetzal quest with a 6:00am departure to walk the roads in known feeding areas. It was a crisp, cool morning and though checking several locations along the road, the quetzals managed to elude us for the time being, even though we were able to locate a known nesting cavity.

After breakfast we explored the extensive trail system through the cloud forests high above the hotel. Thankfully, there were jeeps to take us to the top so we could take our time birding along the La Quebrada Trail that takes us through towering cloud forests, steep stream valleys and stunning valley overlooks. The jeeps dropped us off at the trailhead. As the jeeps got further away, the sights and sounds of the forest took over our senses. In the quiet, the birds started appearing – Spot-crowned Woodcreepers, then Tufted Flycatchers, Flame-throated Warblers went about feeding, a Collared Redstart must have been nesting nearby because he

remained close by, keeping an eye on us and calling. A warbler feeding flock came through with Wilson's, Black-throated Greens, and Tennessees, all feeding low along the trail. Deeper in the forest amongst the Yellow-thighed Brushfinches, Sooty-capped Chlorospinguses, Ruddy Treerunners, and Collared Trogons, we came across a bonus warbler, a pair of Black-cheeked Warblers.

After lunch we drove back up the valley road to the top of the ridgeline where we spent the afternoon at Miriam's Quetzals Restaurant and enjoyed refreshments on the amazing deck with its feeding stations and perfect views of the Savegre River Valley below. The tiny Scintillant Hummingbird was a new species for us here that held its own at the feeders very well against the larger Talamancas and Fiery-throateds. The elevated fruit feeders stayed busy with Flame-colored and Blue-gray Tanagers and Acorn Woodpeckers. Large-footed Finches, Sooty and Clay-colored, and Mountain Thrushes worked the bushes and grounds under the feeding station.

We took time on the journey back to our hotel to check the known feeding locations (avocado trees) of the quetzals, but after several stops and a darkening sky, we accept that we have gone the day without seeing our quest bird for the region. But we have a plan for the morning.

Sat., Jan. 25: Paraiso Quetzal Lodge | Txfr to Turrialba and Rancho Naturalista

This morning, we have arranged for a special trip back to Paraiso Quetzal Lodge to experience a little-known local program that the lodge has started with local farmers to protect quetzal habitat. The lodge has formed a sort of co-op of farmers that still have prime quetzal breeding habitat to stop pasturing, and protect and enhance those prime forested stream valleys. Then there's a revenue sharing program to bring birding groups and visitors to those remote farming locations. It's a wonderful program and we were fortunate to witness the transition of the land and the local population. We visited a dairy farm and were greeted by a young man that grew up here. We learned about his family and the farm as we walked back to the protected woodlot. It wasn't long before we found a female Resplendent Quetzal nearby and, of course, there was a beautiful male nearby as well. We had amazing looks at this breeding pair, as well as looks at a not-quite-breeding-age male that couldn't seem to stay away from the bonded pair that was nesting there. It was a wonderful morning.

With happy hearts we boarded the bus to make our way to Rancho Naturalista. Our lunch stop was at the wonderful La Casona del Cafetal, just outside of Cartago. It's a beautiful restaurant perched above a reservoir and is surrounded by gardens and forest. The birding here is very good. One of our first sightings was White-crowned Parrots feeding high in the nearby trees. We glassed seven Yellow-crowned Night Herons and Least Grebes below along the lake. Overhead, we had Turkey Vultures, a Hook-billed Kite, Broad-winged Hawk, many Montezuma Oropendolas and a Crested Caracara. The trees along the forest edge and in the gardens produced Brown Jays, Chestnut-sided and Chestnut-capped Warblers, Buff and Black-headed Saltators, Scarlett-rumped and White-line Tanagers. This was definitely one of our favorite lunch stops.

As we approached Rancho Naturalista, we stopped at the bridge at Rio (river) Platanillo. The river in this area is known for the spectacular Sun Bittern. After a short walk along the river, we found two cooperative Sun Bitterns fishing in the rapid areas of the river. One stayed perched quite a while on a river boulder, giving us great looks and photographs.

We arrived at Rancho Naturalista late in the afternoon, giving us time for some wonderful veranda viewing before dinner. The veranda was amazing (as it usually is) with us quickly seeing six hummingbird species, including the coveted Snowcap Hummingbird and Black-crested Coquette. Black-cheeked Woodpeckers are here along with White-ruffed Manakins and Bay-headed Tanagers, all right at eye-level viewing for us. On the

ground below the feeders, Yellow-faced Grassquits, and Black-chinned and Orange-billed Sparrows gleaned seeds and fallen fruit scraps off the ground. We spent most of the available downtime today relaxing on the veranda.

The food and dining experience here at Rancho Naturalista is amazing as we dine family-style on the open patio with everyone at the lodge. After dinner, we reviewed our checklist in the lounge and planned our next day to explore the grounds of Rancho.

Sun., Jan. 26: Rancho Naturalista exploration | Lake Angostura

Coffee is ready on the veranda at 5:30am at Rancho and this is where we'll spend our optional pre-breakfast birding time. What a treat to sit on the deck and watch and listen to the forest wake up. Hummingbirds were up and about first with White-necked Jacobins hitting the feeders hard. As it got lighter, groups of Gray-headed Chachalacas and Brown Jays descended from the forest above to completely takeover the fruit feeders, causing quite a ruckus. The bell rang right at 7:00am and we were off to our breakfast.

We spent the rest of the morning exploring the trails and roads throughout Rancho Naturalista. Within just a couple of hours we had nine species of hummingbirds - Green Hermit, Stripe-throated Hermit, Purple-crowned Fairy, Green Thorntail, Garden Emerald, Violet-headed, Crowned Woodnymph, and the coveted Snowcap Hummingbird.

A walk through a small pasture gave us great looks at the surrounding forest edge. Here we could see flocks of Collared Aracari working though the treetops, and Black-crowned Tityras, Mistletoe Tyrannulets, and Northern Tropical Peewees all flycatching near the pasture. Walking the driveway down through the valley, we had a warbler feeding-flock with Golden-winged, Black-and-white, Tennessee, Mourning, and many Chestnut-sided Warblers. We returned in time to freshen up a bit before lunch.

In this mountainous area, the weather is quite variable (rain on the windward side of the mountain – dry and sunny on the other). We had a drizzling rain today at Rancho, so we opted to get in the van and drive to Lake Angostura. Sure enough, no rain. The birding here was spectacular. Purple Gallinules, Limpkins, Northern Jacanas and Least Grebes were found immediately. Wood Storks, Bare-throated Tiger-Herons, Cattle Egrets, Great and Great Blues were either working the shallows along with the Olive-crowned Yellowthroats or roosting in nearby trees. We had Osprey and Snail Kites hunting nearby and a cooperative Roadside Hawk. Looping back to our bus, we walked a forest road where we found a Great Potoo giving his best broken branch impression. We returned to the lodge for some downtime, but for most of us it was veranda time, before another wonderful dinner.

Mon., Jan. 27: Guayabo National Monument | Pierella Ecological Gardens

Today we transitioned to the lower Caribbean area of the country. After a morning on the veranda and another great breakfast, we boarded our bus to make our way to our next lodge – Selva Verde. We made two birding stops on the way. First was Guayabo National Monument, an archaeological site near the Turrialba Volcano that dates back to 1000 BC and was abandoned just before the new world was discovered. 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, Smokey-brown Woodpeckers, Russet Antshrike, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, and great looks at a Barred Hawk. We had a picnic lunch here on site before moving to our next stop, Pierella Ecological Gardens.

Pierella Gardens is a relatively small farm that was slowly converted to forest by the owner to participate in the butterfly trade. 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. We were fortunate as we were greeted by a very young Brown-throated Sloth that had come down out of the treetops to spend some time on the ground. It stayed about ten feet off the ground, right near the trail, for most of the time we were there. 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 Long-tailed Tyrant, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Orange-chinned Parrots, Scarlet-rumped Caciques, Keel-billed Toucans, and Rufous-tailed Jacamars. We ended our time here with a chocolate demonstration where we ground cocoa beans to make a chocolate dessert. An hour later we arrived at our next lodge- Selva Verde Lodge, settled into our rooms before dinner and checklist.

Tues., Jan. 28: La Selva Biological Station | Sarapiquí River Boat Tour

This morning, we woke to the boisterousness of Mantled Howler Monkeys and had a wonderful pre-breakfast walk around the grounds of Selva Verde. Great Green Macaws were definitely the bird of the morning, but Scarlett Macaws go good with morning coffee too. Walking around in the misty morning sun, we enjoyed great looks at Masked Tityra, Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, Shining Honeycreepers, Gray-capped Flycatcher, and Long-billed Hermit.

After breakfast we headed to La Selva Biological Research Station. Here we walked just a portion of the trails and had a wonderful birding experience. They don't have feeding stations here so we watched the flowering bushes for hummingbirds and picked up Violet-headed, Blue-chested, and Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer Hummingbirds. We had quick looks at King Vulture and Plumbeous Kite overhead. Along the forest trails, we had wonderful looks and photographs of Slaty and Northern Black-throated Trogon, as well as White-necked Puffbirds. There is much more variety of woodpeckers and creepers here too. Cinnamon and Chestnut-collared Woodpeckers were added to our list as were Plain-brown, Wedge-billed, and Northern-barred woodcreepers.

Our afternoon was spent on the Sarapiquí River birding by boat. Green Ibis was the showstopper here. Everything about this bird is some shade of iridescent green - head, neck, legs, feathers. They just seemed to glow green as they worked the riverbanks. White-fronted Nunbirds were a wonderful sighting here as well. Red-lore Amazon Parrots, Rufous Pihás, and Buff-rumped Warblers were all additions to the trip. Groups of Mantled Howler Monkeys were much more viewable from the water.

Wed., Jan. 29: Main Tour Departures | Pacific Coast Extension | Tarcoles River

Today is departure day for the main tour, and after another pre-breakfast walk we boarded and headed towards the airport to drop off those that are not going on the extension. However, on the way we did 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 and Crimson-collared Tanagers, Common Chlorospingus, and had 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.

After the airport drop, we stopped for a local lunch before heading toward the Pacific coast. We were back on a riverboat this afternoon, but it was a vastly different river. The Tarcoles River is coastal and tidal. American

Crocodiles patrol the river here and we had amazing looks at some very large individuals. The birding was amazing here with up-close looks at Double-striped Thick-knees, Black-necked Stilts, Southern Lapwings, Collared Plovers, Willets and Whimbrels. Boat-billed Herons were a special treat and lifer for most of us. Common Blackhawk, Peregrine Falcon, and Yellow-headed Caracaras gave us great looks as they rested in the afternoon sun with American Crocodiles resting below.

Back on the bus, we headed to Cerro Lodge for dinner and rest.

Thurs., Jan. 30: Carara National Park | La Ensenada Ranch

This morning, we had a very special pre-breakfast birding on the deck at Cerro Lodge. Two Scarlett Macaws are regulars here and it wasn't long before they showed up at one of the nearby feeders. Beautiful White-throated Magpie-Jays, Cinnamon Hummingbirds, and Turquoise-browed Motmots made their appearances as well. All viewed with binoculars in one hand and a mug of fresh coffee in the other

After breakfast, we were off to Carara National Park for a full morning of birding. There were many new species of birds for us here. It wasn't long before we had Blue-throated Goldentail in the shrubs near the parking lot. Costa Rican Swifts remained overhead most of our walk. We noticed a commotion in a small clearing in the forest canopy that turned out to be a Laughing Falcon harassing, and eventually driving off, a Collared Forest Falcon. Deep in the forest we had Red-capped Manakin, Golden-crowned Spadebill, Rufous-breasted, Rufous-and-white, and Riverside Wrens. Black-hooded Antshrike and Chestnut-backed Antbirds and Northern Black-throated Trogons were all found trailside for great views.

On our way to La Ensenada Lodge, we made a quick stop in Playa Caldera, a small beach town, for a quick look at the Pacific Ocean and to hit a couple birding patches. We are officially in the Central Pacific. Comfortable breezes keep Magnificent Frigatebirds overhead. Colorful fishing boats line the beach much to the delight of the many brown pelicans that use them for roosts. A visit to a nearby mangrove patch gave us great looks at Rose-throated Becard, Mangrove Vireos, Yellow (mangrove) Warblers and a Streak-backed Oriole.

Forty minutes down the road we arrived at La Ensenada Ranch, a large cattle operation and ocean-side lodge. Our individual cabins are up on a knoll overlooking the Gulf of Nicoya. The pastures and woodlots throughout are great birding spots and we'll explore them in the days ahead. For today, we had time before dinner for a quick bird walk around the cabins and beach. Sandwich and Royal Terns were busy along the shoreline, while Brown Pelicans streaked by, inches off the water. A Pacific Screech Owl was calling from around the lodge and we were all able to get good looks at it before we settled in for dinner.

Fri., Jan. 31: Mangrove Boat Tour | Tractor Tour of Ranch

It was a beautiful morning with little wind, and we were up and out early with the fisherman this morning as we boarded our boat to take us out into the bay and to a large mangrove swamp. On the way, we passed a small mangrove island with a large flock of Black Skimmers and Royal Terns, and quite a few shorebirds - Spotted, Black-bellied and Semi-palmated Plovers. Magnificent Frigatebirds were roosting in trees near the creek entrance of the mangroves. The water was flat and quiet here and we spent the next couple hours slowly motoring through the canals and tunnels of the mangrove forest. Willets were here in large numbers as were Short-billed Dowitchers. Boat-billed Herons seem to prefer the thickest tangles to roost in, but we found and photographed a few.

We spent some time looking for mangrove specialists, getting much better views of the Yellow (mangrove) Warbler, and found a very cooperative Mangrove Vireo and a Mangrove Cuckoo. Mangrove and Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds were a great addition. Lesser Nighthawks roost in mangroves too and our boat guide was especially adept at finding them. We made our way back to the ranch for a late breakfast and had two Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls calling right near the dock. We later found several on the property around the cabins and lodge.

We spent the rest of the day exploring this amazing property. A walk down the long entrance road produced more Turquoise-browed Motmots, Lineated and Hoffman's Woodpeckers, White-throated Magpie-Jays, Black-headed Trogons, and Spot-breasted Orioles. Looping around the shoreline, Brown Pelicans and Royal Terns were a constant presence. Scoping from the shoreline (the tide was lower now, exposing the beach) we picked up Surfbirds, Ruddy Turnstones, and Tri-colored Herons.

There's a salt production facility here too with many evaporation ponds. Our visit here and the surrounding woods was pretty awesome birding with the salt ponds holding many new shorebirds, 17 species in all, including Red Knots, Surfbirds, Western Sandpipers, Lesser Yellowlegs, Northern Jacanas, Black-necked Stilts, and Stilt Sandpipers.

La Ensenada is known for its sunset tractor tour. We boarded the wagon at 3:00 in the afternoon for our guided tour through the pastures in woodlots of the ranch. Getting out in the more remote areas of the ranch was a real treat and the birding was great. The pastures were great spots for Great-tailed Grackles, Eastern Meadowlarks, Melodious Blackbirds and Flycatchers – Rose-throated Becards, Yellow-olive Flatbills, Nutting's Flycatchers, as well as Great Crested, and Socials. White-lored Gnatcatchers, Scrub Euphonias, Orange-fronted Parakeets and White-fronted Amazons were here as well. A Bat Falcon made a nice appearance and perched on a nearby branch, staying until we were finished looking at it. The evening culminated with a winding drive up to the highest point on the ranch. This bluff overlook is the perfect spot to watch the sunset as we sipped local wines and picked through the large cheese plate. As the pink and purple skies washed over us, the calls of Pacific Screech-Owls and nighthawks grew louder and louder. Our drive back to the lodge in the dark was highlighted by Common Pauras sitting in the road. One flew up and sat 6 feet from the wagon for terrific flashlight views. We arrived back at the lodge for a late dinner.

Sat., Feb. 1: Morning birding | Return to San Jose

This morning, we walked the higher pasture areas of the ranch. We walked the tractor paths from pasture to pasture, passing through woodlots and stream valleys as we went along. It was a great mixed birding habitat. Western Cattle-Egrets were always around, and Crested and Yellow-headed Caracaras both hunt these areas. Yellow-naped Amazons (rare) flew through and landed in the top of distant trees, giving us good scope views. White-necked Puffbird was also seen along the same tree line. Trogons are always a treat and we found both Black-headed and Collared Trogons this morning.

After a little downtime it was time to load up and start making our way back to San Jose. Our lunch stop was in Calle El Castillo where our guide Johan has a favorite local birding patch that we birded after lunch. It was a nice chunk of forest on the outskirts of town where the road had been abandoned. We were able to easily walk the road, picking up several new birds for the trip. Plain-capped Starthroat and Cavinet's Emerald Hummingbirds as well as really good looks at Blue-vented and Cinnamon Hummingbirds that we'd seen earlier. Long-tailed Manakins, White-browed Gnatcatchers, Olive Sparrows and a Painted Bunting were all exciting additions to our checklist (and life lists).

We returned to the amazing Hotel Bougainvillea for our last night in Costa Rica. Of course we birded the gardens again before dinner. We met one last time to review our amazing week together, complete our checklists and make sure we had shared all our photos. We said our goodbyes to those of us that had early flights while others would be able to enjoy another morning at Bougainvillea before departing.

Sun., Feb. 2: Departures

Photos by Bryan Calk: Blue-gray Tanager, Keel-billed Toucan, Violet Sabrewing, Red-eyed Tree Frog