

# Nicaragua: Land of Lakes & Volcanos | Trip Report

## February 17 – 25, 2018 | Written by Robert Gallardo



**With guide Robert Gallardo & participants Ted, Chuck, Tim & Patty**



This year marked Naturalist Journeys' inaugural trip to Nicaragua with a group of four friends from Oregon and Idaho. The country's rich combination of natural history, culture, geology, and political history are melded together to offer this unique itinerary that is virtually unmatched in the region. The route takes us from the cloud forests of the northern highlands down to the monsoon forests of the Pacific lowlands and ends on the island of Ometepe in Lake Cocibolca with the Maderas Volcano as a backdrop. Together with the tour of a pottery workshop, an up-close encounter with a living and breathing volcano, a visit to a volcano covered in cloud forest, and delightful cuisine, it's no wonder that this is sure to become a popular trip in the future.

### **Fri., Feb 16 & Sat., Feb. 17**

On the first day everyone arrived into Managua where we settled in to a nearby hotel for the night. On the following morning we had breakfast at the hotel and did some birding on the grounds until a local guide arrived. We saw Spot-breasted Oriole, Russet-naped Wren, Cinnamon Hummingbird, and Orange-fronted Parakeet. Pablo showed up and we embarked on a two-hour city tour of Managua to learn about its recent historical and political past. First, we visited a nearby plaza where numerous historical

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buildings and landmarks were located, as well as statues of political leaders and historical figures. Pablo's intimate knowledge and interpretation of events that took place within the last fifty years helped to give insight on how Nicaragua has been shaped into what it is today. A follow-up visit to another plaza along the lakeshore highlighted the First Lady's fancy for towering, light-studded, metallic trees.

We returned to the hotel and had lunch, then started our journey toward the north-central highlands. Our drive took us from the dry Pacific lowlands into the humid mountains where coffee farms, vegetable crops of various sorts, and evergreen broadleaf forest covered the hills. Upon arriving at El Jaguar reserve we were greeted by a pair of Crimson-collared Tanagers and alluring Golden-hooded Tanagers. We checked in to our rooms and had our first tasty meal up in the cloud forest.

### Sun., Feb. 18

Right before breakfast this morning we strolled to a spot nearby where El Jaguar's coffee beans get depulped. There was a place where some fresh dirt was piled up and had attracted three Russet-naped Wood-Rails. Quite often this large, colorful rail can be difficult to see well, but these almost seemed tame and we were afforded very close views and great photo opportunities. Close by was a kitchen that prepared meals for the local plantation workers and their long standing habit of throwing out ground corn husks started to attract Highland Guans. For numerous months of the year there can be as many as 50 or more feeding alongside chickens and we enjoyed very close views of this otherwise timid cloud



forest species. A pair of the adorable White-naped Brush-Finches popped in and out of the bushes and a cooperative male Collared Trogon made a fine showing.

We had breakfast and it didn't take long before some rain started to set in. So, we hunkered down and

enjoyed the birds that came in to the banana racemes that were hung out near the reception. Many species of birds came to feed, including oropendolas, chlorospingus, Passerini's Tanager, euphonias, saltators, and others. By mid-afternoon the weather lightened up and we were able to take a short walk through the coffee plantation that led to some nearby forest. There wasn't much action there, but the banana feeders continued to attract a lot of birds and a pair of the otherwise skulking Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush bathed in the bird bath in plain view. Bushy-crested Jays were always prowling about as well.



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### Mon., Feb. 19

This morning we woke up to windy and wet weather so had to postpone our boat trip for the time being. By mid-morning it had lightened up enough to allow us to go see the bird banding station. El Jaguar reserve has one of the longest standing stations for a MoSi site in Central America and the two owners (George and Liliana) were there leading the efforts. A few of us went up a wet trail to see a set of nets and got to see one of the prized birds; a male Golden-winged Warbler. This same male had been banded there some years

before so it was an extra special bird. As we were leaving the banding station we bumped into an understory mixed flock that was moving fast. We were, however, able to see the tiny Tawny-crowned Greenlet, Plain Antvireo, and the very scarce Eye-ringed Flatbill. Along the road we spied a Long-billed Hermit that called from its perch well inside the forest and then a White-breasted Wood-Wren that poked along the side of a road cut.

We had lunch and by then the weather was a bit more cooperative. We rolled down the road a ways and got to Lake Apanás for a boat ride. As we trolled along the shore it was fairly quiet until we found a spot where there was a field and a tree line. It was literally crawling with birds, including a pair of Roadside Hawks, Indigo Buntings, the graceful Fork-tailed Flycatcher, and some seedeaters. Down a ways further on a little island we found Tropical Mockingbird, Barred Antshrike, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Green-breasted Mango. By the time we got back to the landing it was too late to go see the black pottery shop so we headed back to El Jaguar.

### Tues., Feb. 20

After breakfast we departed El Jaguar and drove to the Selva Negra private reserve, which was also located in the highlands. Although it wasn't raining here, it was quite windy and cool so the bird activity was very slow. We went on a hike nonetheless and enjoyed the montane forest. At one point a female Collared Forest-Falcon went gliding behind us low above the ground and disappeared into the forest. While scanning for it we spotted a very cooperative Northern Barred Woodcreeper that sat on the side of a large tree and allowed for photos. We had a great lunch (and dessert), then continued south back into the Pacific lowlands.



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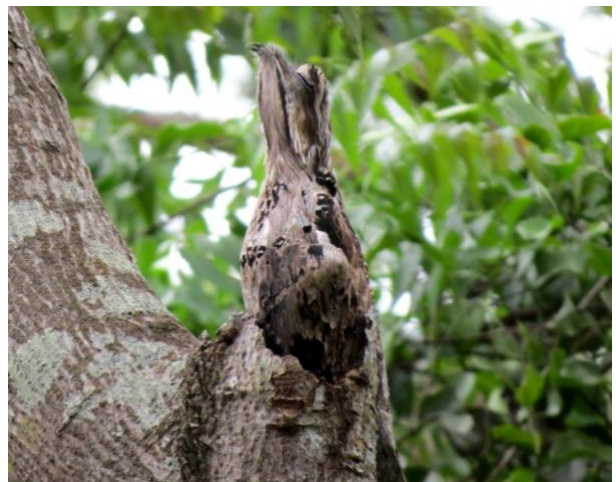
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We reached the Montibelli Reserve by late afternoon and were greeted by some raucous White-throated Magpie-Jays as well as a Gray-headed Tanager that popped out of the bushes near the cabins. Some blooming *Inga* trees above the parking lot attracted a nice array of hummingbirds including Salvin's Emerald, Blue-tailed Hummingbird, Cinnamon Hummingbird, and Ruby-throated Hummingbird. A bit later we had our first scrumptious dinner.

### Wed., Feb. 21

This morning we woke to the roaring sounds of some Mantled Howler monkeys across the ravine from our cabins. We had a delicious breakfast then went on a walk into the monsoon forest on the property. One of the reserve's guides (Luis) led the way and we saw a nice variety of fauna. At the trailhead was a lovely Turquoise-browed Motmot (the country's national bird) and Rufous-naped Wrens that were seemingly everywhere. We caught up to the monkeys and the troop included a female with a newborn atop her back. A Blue-throated Goldentail was found perched alongside the trail; this is a prized species that is often difficult to locate in the region. Luis also spied a couple of Lesser Nighthawks on day roosts high up in the Guanacaste trees. A bit further down the trail we accidentally flushed up a Common Pauraque on a day roost and were afforded great photo opportunities. The last prized sighting of the morning was a Northern Potoo on a day roost, which may have actually been a nesting female.

However, the day was just beginning! After lunch and a little siesta we departed for the nearby Masaya Volcano. There aren't too many places in the Western Hemisphere where you can drive right up to a living, breathing caldera. The infrastructure was actually built before the caldera became active in 2015 and since then has become a major destination when visiting Nicaragua. We first stopped by a vista point to admire the national park from a distance and see a lava spill that occurred nearly 300 years ago. Upon entering the park we





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went straight up to see the living caldera in the daylight hours and could appreciate the layers of rock and ash. From there we descended a bit to enjoy a well-designed museum that exhibited a wide array of displays on local flora and fauna and geology. But we weren't done yet. We went back to the main gate and waited for the night tour. We were able to get lined up to enter with the first group as there were already hundreds of people waiting.

As darkness descended upon us we were able to peer deep into the crater where steam and gases rose. Now and again as the steam lifted we could see molten lava that boiled to the surface. What a way to end the day. At a nearby restaurant we enjoyed a delicious dinner.



### Thurs., Feb. 22

Today we would enjoy yet another set of experiences including another volcano, but with a different twist. In Nicaragua there are only two volcanoes that are old enough and high enough to harbor cloud forest; Mombacho is one of them. Upon arriving at the park entrance we were shuttled up the steep mountain road to the visitor's center atop the mountain. It was sunny down below, but our destination was mist-shrouded and windy. We walked the mile-long trail that encircled one of the extinct craters and saw an assortment of blooming



bromeliads and a lovely lavender *Sobralia* orchid. Our local guide was also able to find the endemic salamander named after the mountain. For the most part the birds were hunkered down and quiet, but we did manage to find a female Purple-throated Mountain-gem.

We descended the mountain a ways and had a nice outdoor lunch before continuing on to our next destination. In the small town of San Juan de Oriente we were given a detailed explanation of the



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pottery making process by the owner himself. This Pre-Colombian tradition has been revived by the town and has become well known across the region. The final stop at the end of the day was a visit to the Masaya artisan center which covers an entire city block.

### Fri., Feb. 23



We departed Montibelli after breakfast for our final destination: the island of Ometepe. This freshwater island actually consists of two ancient volcanoes that connected each other long before humans arrived. Concepcion Volcano is still active and the extinct Maderas Volcano is covered with monsoon forest on the lower slopes and cloud forest higher up. We reached the port just in time and took a large ferry across this giant lake. Upon arriving we made the short drive to the Totoco Lodge nestled amidst the monsoon forest on the lower slope of Maderas. We spent the remainder of the day around the lodge enjoying the serenity and the scenery as well as the array of sounds given by the White-throated Magpie-Jays.

### Sat., Feb. 24

After breakfast we headed down the hill to a nearby village where we would embark on our last activity for the trip. Before reaching the village, however, we were obliged to stop alongside the road to admire a very large group of Pacific Parakeets that were feeding on the seeds of the West Indian Elm (*Guazuma ulmifolia*-fam. Malvaceae). This recently split parakeet has a fairly small range extending from the Pacific slope of southwestern Mexico to southern Nicaragua.



We continued down the road and hopped into a covered boat to do some bird watching along the lakeshore. We encountered numerous species of kingfishers, herons and egrets, cormorants, more parakeets, and even a meandering Magnificent Frigatebird. The morning's highlight, however, was being able to maneuver into the Istiam River itself.



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This is actually not a “river,” but rather an extended wetland that nearly traverses the island at its lowest point between both volcanoes. Regardless of its denomination, we encountered a nice assortment of aquatic birds not observed along the lakeshore, including White Ibis, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, a pair of Snail Kites, Northern Jacana, Purple Gallinule, and Limpkin.



After our boat ride we headed over to a local hangout and saw more monkeys and Yellow-naped Amazon along the walk. We were treated with some carefully crafted, mouth-watering, fruit-and-chocolate smoothies. A small on-site chocolate factory produced some scrumptious morsels.



We headed back to the lodge for a little more bird watching then witnessed a grand finale to a great tour. To our surprise a small flock of Brown-hooded Parrots came in to a seeding Spanish Cedar tree (*Cedrela odorata*) and began to feed. Although they were a bit far we were able to get some decent photos.





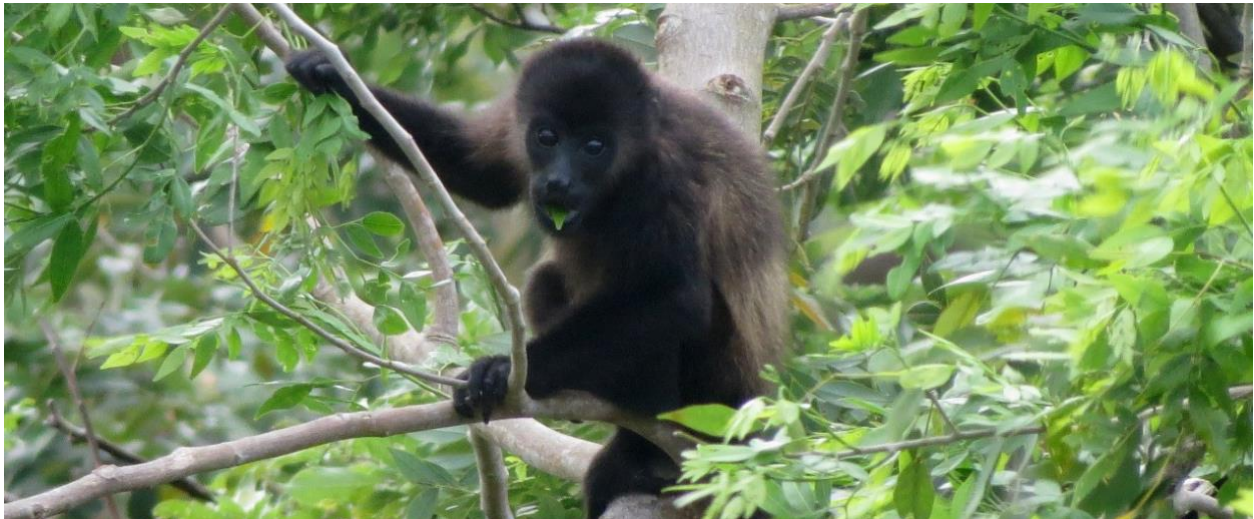
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One final surprise was a visit by several young howler monkeys that strolled into the lodge's garden near the dining area. It was nice to see such trusting creatures beginning to reinhabit former foraging grounds. Our trip ended with a spectacular sunset with the Concepcion Volcano as a backdrop. Bird highlights of the trip included the Violet Sabrewing, Highland Guan, Golden-hooded Tanager, and Gray-necked Wood-Rail.

As we left the island we were treated with yet another spectacular view of the Concepcion Volcano and look forward to another visit there in 2019.





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## Photo Credits

All photos by guide Robert Gallardo: Sculptures in Managua; Male and female Highland Guans; Liliana Chavarria-Durieux examining Golden-winged Warbler; Northern Barred Woodcreeper; Blue-throated Goldentail; Common Pauraque; Northern Potoo; Group at Masaya Volcano; Endemic salamander — *Bolitoglossa mombachoae*; Group atop Mombacho Volcano; Group at pottery workshop; White-throated Magpie-Jay; Pacific Parakeet; Group on boat tour; Amazon Kingfisher; Smoothie; Brown-hooded Parrot; Howler Monkey; Concepcion Volcano at sunset; Concepcion Volcano on Ometepe Island.