

# Costa Rica: Monteverde & More | Trip Report

March 21 – 31, 2019 | Written by Carlos Sanchez



**With Guides Carlos Sanchez and Johann Fernandez, and participants Mary Ann, Lee, Viggo, James, Donna, Steve, Molly, Ruth, Ken, Jennie, Edith, and Wayne.**



## Thursday, March 21

Nearly the entire group arrived at different times throughout the day (or the previous day), but all were picked up comfortably from the Juan Santamaria International Airport in San Jose to Hotel Bougainvillea – about thirty minutes away. The hotel itself features a gorgeous 4-hectare garden with hidden ponds, flowerbeds, and mature trees. Many of the group began wandering through the gardens, getting their first taste of Costa Rican birds such as Lesson's Motmot, Blue-gray Tanager, and Clay-colored Thrush (the national bird!).

The entire group enjoyed dinner together later in the evening, including our local guide Johann Fernandez. We began to share stories and hopes for the journey that laid ahead. The food service at Hotel Bougainvillea, of course, is impeccable – a three course meal, including dessert.

## Friday, March 22

We had an optional pre-breakfast walk in the gardens of the hotel. The sun wasn't quite up, but we were already enjoying a bountiful variety of birds. The green oasis is especially good at attracting migrants from the USA and Canada during our winter, and it did not take long before we saw Philadelphia Vireo, Tennessee Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, Summer Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak on the limbs of a bare tree. A Piratic Flycatcher was a nice addition to our little morning list, a recent migrant coming from South America that breeds in Central America. Why is it called a Piratic Flycatcher, you ask? It steals the nests of other bird species to use as its own!

After a lovely buffet breakfast, we boarded the bus and headed west into the progressively drier terrain of the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica. Johann Fernandez instructed the driver to stop at several places along the way to break up the drive. La Ceiba de Orotina was our first one. As soon as we exited the van, we saw a raptor soaring overhead – a Broad-winged Hawk rather low in the clear blue sky. Although it was hot and breezy, we still managed to see some nice birds including a Double-striped Thick-knee hanging low in a field. Yellow-green Vireos were actively singing in the trees, and a few pygmy owl toots attracted their attention so that the group could observe them. Boarding the bus again, we drove further north up the coast – Magnificent Frigatebird, Laughing Gull, Royal Tern, Brown Pelican, and other common seabirds made cameo appearances before we veered inland and began to gain elevation.







We made it into Monteverde by early afternoon just in time for lunch. Resting at roughly four thousand six hundred feet above sea level, Monteverde was originally founded by Quakers from the United States whose pacific values led them to defy the American draft before the Korean War. Although they farmed large tracts of land, they eventually set aside a large portion for conservation – what would be today's Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Reserve and a world-renowned ecotourism hub.

The hummingbird feeders set on the restaurant balcony of the hotel were abuzz with activity in the late afternoon, and we had fun going through all these beauties – from the large Violet Sabrewing to the endemic Coppery-headed Emerald.



### **Saturday, March 23**

The morning started at the restaurant balcony, overlooking a vast expanse of cloud forest. Early mornings tend to be very active, and birds were busily going about the new day. Spectacular White-throated Magpie-Jays flew from tree to tree quite gracefully, their long tails streaming behind them. Brown Jays were around too, and both were equally noisy with their harsh calls! A flock of Yellow-faced Grassquit were feeding on the lawn below, while White-eared Ground-Sparrows were more cautious as they zipped from bush to bush. As we headed out the front of the hotel after breakfast, we spied a Mountain Elaenia and a Piratic Flycatcher in the bamboo.



After a short bus ride, we arrived at the Curi-Cancha Reserve, a relatively new reserve that protects eighty-three hectares of cloud forest. Since it is not as well-known as other reserves in the area and thus draws smaller crowds, it has become an increasingly popular site among birders – and with good reason! Despite the bright sun and unusual warm temperatures for the area, we had spectacular views of Three-wattled Bellbird calling from a snag,

Mottled Owls on a day roost, a sociable group of Azure-hooded Jay, and a more obscure Streak-breasted Treehunter.

After lunch at Hotel Montana Monteverde, we had a more relaxed afternoon. I invited everyone to some coffee and cake at Stella's Bakery, a now famous institution in Monteverde offering fantastic homemade sweet treats.

Afterwards, we had an optional pre-dinner walk at the nearby Monteverde Ecological Sanctuary – a small plot of land that includes some light vegetable farming and cloud forest. It also happens to be a good place to see Long-tailed Manakin, Johann's favorite bird, and most of the group got nice views of a displaying male in the dim understory.

## Sunday, March 24

Today we drove up Santa Elena Cloud Forest on the Caribbean side of the continental divide. Covering approximately three-hundred and ten hectares, it is run by the School Board of the Santa Elena Technical Professional High School – one of the first communities to maintain its own private reserve in Costa Rica. Despite the unseasonably dry and sunny weather at Hotel Montana Monteverde, we were greeted with persistent mist, drizzle, and cool temperatures at Santa Elena – a true cloud forest. The forest here is so lush that it looks almost unreal, and verdant mosses cover everything. One of our first birds on the trail was a Collared Redstart, a brightly colored forest sprite that lives only in the high mountains of Costa Rica and Panama.



As we walked our way along the steadily rolling hiking trail, we came across a steady variety of birds that included Black Guan, Zeledon's Antbird, Red-faced Spinetail, Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush, and Chestnut-capped Brushfinch. Despite the reserve's beauty, it was nice to be in the warm and dry van by the end!

After a sumptuous lunch and some down time in the afternoon, most of the group came along for the afternoon walk. Johann decided it was best to cover the entrance road to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve in the afternoon as an easy way to see a nice variety of birds. One fig tree along the entrance road had two electrically colored visitors that dazzled our tour participants – Scarlet-thighed Dacnis and Golden-browed Chlorophonia. We also saw our only White-throated Thrush of the trip!

## Monday, March 25

Our pre-breakfast walk today included a visit to Hotel Fonda Vela, a site known for its covey of near-endemic Black-breasted Wood-Quail. Unfortunately, we didn't get to see these rascals. However, when birding, time is never wasted out in the field – we got nice views of the musical Rufous-and-white Wren and a pair of Northern Emerald-Toucanets! However, the star of the show would occur later in the morning as we gathered at the entrance of Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. As expected, the place was bustling with activity but that did not seem to hinder the quality of the birding. We managed to see both a male and female Resplendent Quetzal to within fifteen feet right from the main trail. A male Resplendent Quetzal is a sight to behold as perhaps one of the most beautiful birds in the world. While we warmed up back at the Hummingbird Gallery, an Olingo came in and began stealing sugar water from the feeders!





It was time to pull ourselves away from Monteverde and continue our journey, dropping in elevation from the misty and verdant highlands, to the equally verdant but considerably warmer Caribbean foothill forest. It is in a narrow elevational range where colorful tanagers reach their peak of diversity in Costa Rica. Owned by a Frenchman, Celeste Mountain Lodge features a beautiful balcony that looks onto a French garden complete with fruit feeders. In the late afternoon, these fruit feeders were humming with activity – Scarlet-rumped, Blue-gray, Hepatic, and Golden-hooded Tanager; Red-legged and Green Honeycreeper; Black-striped Sparrow; Black-cowled Oriole; Black-cheeked Woodpecker, and more! Down by the road, several in the group got to see a brilliant Broad-billed Motmot.

In the evening, we got to experience the incredible dining at Celeste Mountain Lodge – three course meals prepared with local ingredients but with French techniques and sensibility. Every meal we had here was special and unique, and we talked often about which meal we liked more!

## Tuesday, March 26

Celeste Mountain Lodge owns a nice trail of moderate length on the opposite side of the road, making for a convenient place to start our birding in the area. By birding along the roadside before breakfast, we saw Broad-billed Motmot again, while a pair of Rufous-winged Tanagers offered prolonged scope views – this tanager is quite uncommon throughout its long and narrow range. On the forest trail itself, we came across Slaty-tailed Trogon, Dull-mantled Antbird, White-ruffed Manakin, and Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer. The big target on this trail is Tody Motmot, and we finally managed to see one calling in a deep and dark ravine – and everyone got to see it in the scope! Phew. As we headed our way out of the trail system, several in the group spotted a pair of Buff-rumped Warbler. It is a bit of an unfair name, as their buff rumps glowed orange in the dim forest interior.

After another amazing French cuisine-meets-Costa Rican ingredients style meal, we paid a visit to the tiny but very birdy Bijagua Bird Songs Garden. This tiny reserve has no permanent attendants, just a nice donation box that functions on an honor system. The extensive plantings of porterweed attract a nice variety of smaller hummingbirds, and we had great views of Violet-headed Hummingbird and Stripe-throated Hermit. Two Yellow-throated Toucans and a Keel-billed Toucan were our first big toucans of the tour, and we rushed to set the scopes on them. A fruiting tree near the pavilion stayed active through the length of the stay, attracting a bevy of euphonias: Yellow-throated, Yellow-crowned, and Olive-backed. A Streak-headed Woodcreeper and Cinnamon Becard added to our excitement and evergrowing list of avian sightings. What a wonderful end to the day!

## Wednesday, March 27

The Bijagua Bird Song Gardens were so good yesterday afternoon, that we had to visit again in the early morning before breakfast. By just standing near the wooden pavilion, we recorded thirty species in just over thirty minutes, including several new ones for our trip: Blue-throated Goldentail, Black-crowned Tityra, Montezuma Oropendola, and Black-faced Grosbeak. The Blue-throated Goldentail was busily feeding from the purple porterweed, avoiding the feeder and the larger hummingbirds. The Black-faced Grosbeaks were calling noisily deep in the foliage, trying to gather other birds to form a feeding flock.



After breakfast and due to the not ideal weather, we decided to take a stroll along a gravel road leading away from the main road to Tenorio National Park. Although the habitat was mostly secondary growth and fields, the open habitat guaranteed views of a nice variety of species. We did well with raptors, including King Vulture, Gray and Broad-winged Hawk, and Swallow-tailed Kite. However, the best sighting was of a distant White Hawk in the scope. We also had nice views of cute Olivaceous Piculet, elegant Crimson-collared Tanager, and richly hued Bay Wren. A Long-tailed Tyrant flycatching from a distant, exposed stump was a nice surprise.



After lunch, most of the group decided to hang back and soak up the beauty of the gardens, bustling activity at the fruit feeders, or just take a nap! Nine of the group went out in the late afternoon to explore the Celeste Mountain Lodge trail, once again in search of birds we may have missed the previous morning. We managed really good views of Northern Schiffornis, an unusual name for a thrush-sized, green bird related to the becards. Jennie managed views of Spotted Antbird skipping along in the undergrowth, but it remained unseen by everyone else.

After another wonderful dinner, we went out looking for frogs in the garden and scored great views of Red-eyed Tree Frog, Masked Tree Frog, and Wet Forest Toad.

## Thursday, March 28

Our last morning at Celeste Mountain Lodge saw us loading up after breakfast and on our way to the Rio Celeste Trail. Most of the group went hiking on the Rio Celeste Trail, while Ruth, Donna, and I went to the pharmacy in town for some supplies. By the time we returned to the national park, Mary Ann was the only one who had to

turn back. I treated everyone to fresh fruit drinks while we watched a vivacious family group of House Wren parade around the entrance lawn. It was not long before the rest of the group showed up from the trail, and just in time, as a pair of Smoky-brown Woodpecker flew in to work on the trunk of a Cecropia.

We arrived at Cano Negro Lodge by the afternoon just in time for lunch, a buffet style assortment of local foods ranging from fish to black beans to plantains. This lodge is set on the edge of a small agricultural town on the banks of the Cano Negro River quite close to the Nicaraguan border. We met with our local guides in town, and they excitedly directed us to a drying pond with a single magnificent Jabiru towering over all the other wading birds. It turned out to be a very relaxing and birdy afternoon stroll, as we came across a pair of Lineated Woodpecker, a flock of Olive-throated Parakeet, and Spot-breasted Wren among others. Our local guides had another surprise in store for us in the form of a Common Potoo sitting on a day roost. After dinner, we had a casual stroll down to the river and saw Common Pauraque, Pacific Screech-Owl, and Black-and-white Owl. What a great introduction to the birding in Cano Negro in just one afternoon!

## Friday, March 29

After breakfast, we took our first of two excellent boat trips out onto the Rio Negro (Black River). The covered boat motored smoothly across the river. Water levels were really low, so the boat couldn't access all areas, but the areas we did access were alive with all manner of water birds. Bizarre Boat-billed Heron to colorful Roseate Spoonbill, to clown-like Black-bellied Whistling-Duck to noisy Limpkin. It almost felt like birding in Florida but with so many more species! A trio of Southern Lapwing were on one of the riverbanks together with some cattle, a species which has undergone an explosive range expansion northward. It is now a locally common species in Costa Rica after the first records in the early 2000s. I believe that they will one day colonize the southern USA (they already nest in southern Mexico and Belize). Other special sightings included a Black-collared Hawk, a raptor specialized in the catching of fish much like an Osprey, as well as the near endemic Nicaraguan Grackle and Canebrake Wren. As our boat trip came to an end, a tree in full bloom greeted us at the dock that was full of hummingbirds – closer inspection revealed about a dozen Green-breasted Mango feeding among the bright red flowers!

The birding continued right through lunch time! As we finished eating, several of us began watching the banana feeders a few feet outside the lodge restaurant. With camera in hand, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Blue-gray Tanager, Scarlet-rumped Tanager, Red-legged Honeycreeper, and Orange-chinned Parakeet all offered incredible photo opportunities!

In the evening, Johan and I decided to take the group to the Medio Queso Wetland (the half cheese wetlands) for some afternoon birding. This sprawling expanse of grassy wetland is perhaps the best place in Central America to see Pinnated Bittern, and we ended up seeing two! One posed for us right on the side of the road, offering point blank views. In the trees, a Fork-tailed Flycatcher made an appearance, showing off its long tail



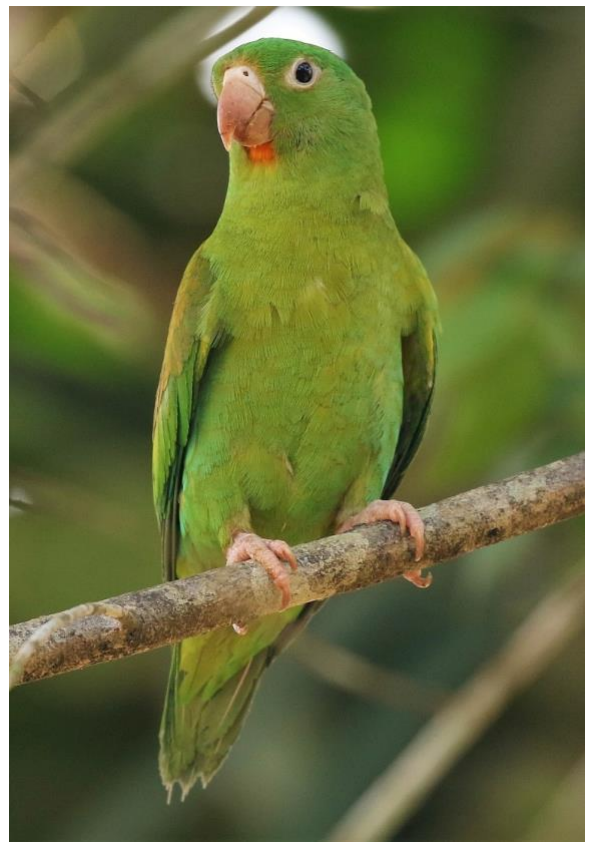




streamers and wowing members of our group with its flycatching antics. As the sun began to set over the marsh, a steady stream of herons and egrets began making their early evening commutes as they flew across the sky. It was a beautiful scene. There was one last surprise for the day though before dinner. As we began the drive back to the lodge, Johan spotted a Great Potoo hunting for moths from a stump on the side of the road. Although it is an amazing bird to see during the day, it was even more amazing to see it flying and catching food at night! Amazing!

## Saturday, March 30

The Cano Negro region has quickly gained some level of notoriety for being one of the best places in the world to see Yellow-breasted Crake. In fact, it is the emblematic bird on many local guide's shirts and a big focal point of their Christmas Bird Count. We set out early by boat and headed further up the river than the previous day. As we reached the shore where we would start the walk, an Amazon Kingfisher posed beautifully on an isolated branch for excellent photographs. Costa Rica was in the grips of a severe dry spell due to El Nino, so vast stretches of usually flooded land were bone dry. We walked about half a mile before stopping at a few marshy puddles. A Yellow-breasted Crake made a brief appearance, running along the edges of the marsh vegetation before disappearing. A Sora was much more obliging, delicately picking tasty morsels from the mud. Two Red-breasted Meadowlarks gave us excellent scope views, showing off their brilliant red breasts.



However, the most amazing experience of the day occurred on our way back. A Sungrebe, usually a shy and retiring species, floated mere feet from the boat. It was an excellent opportunity to really study this bird in close



detail. The whole group watched with glee as I sat there dumbfounded. It was a one of a kind experience with this grebe-like relative of cranes and rails!

In the afternoon, we offered an optional walk around the suburbs of Cano Negro to stretch our legs and review some of the more common species in the area.

## **Sunday, March 31**

After breakfast today, the group split into two parts. Two-thirds of the group continued onwards to Sarapiquí Rainforest Lodge in the Caribbean lowlands with Johan. The rest of the group boarded another bus to Hotel Bougainvillea for the night – the lovely hotel where the journey started. It was a pleasant ride as we climbed higher into the Caribbean foothill forests, and we made a couple stops along the way – once at Mirador La Cascada and another at a popular coffee house. The fruit feeders were busy at the former spot, and we got our best views of the trip of Prong-billed Barbet coming to the bananas. A Buff-fronted Quail-Dove was a real treat as it carefully walked along below the mirador, showing off its delicate pastel colors. The coffee shop gave us a well-earned rest and a refueling with quality coffee and a sweet treat. Before long, we were back at Hotel Bougainvillea, and we bid farewell to our wonderful driver.

After a sumptuous three-course meal at Hotel Bougainvillea, we took a short walk around the garden to look for screech-owls. Everyone was more than excited to come along, and we were admiring a Tropical Screech-Owl in the garden of Hotel Bougainvillea within twenty minutes. Success! What a wonderful way to end the tour with such a great group – and what lovely memories we made. As they say in Costa Rica, it was Pura Vida!

## **Photo Credits:**

Flame-rumped Tanager, Carlos Sanchez (CS); Black-necked Stilt, CS; Blue-gray Tanager, CS; Clay-colored Thrush, CS; Common Potoo, CS; Yellow-green Vireo, Sandy Sorkin, (SS); Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Doug Greenberg (DG); Tennessee Warbler, CS; White-eared Ground-Sparrow, CS; White-tipped Dove, CS; Black Guan, Peg Abbott (PA); Resplendent Quetzal, Greg Smith (GS); Yellow-throated Euphonia, CS; Red-legged Honeycreeper, PA; Red-eyed Tree Frog, CS; Common Tody-Flycatcher, CS; Sungrebe, CS; Amazon Kingfisher, CS; Pinnated Bittern, CS; Orange-chinned Parakeet, CS;