

Costa Rica: Birding & Nature | Trip Report

January 5 – 12, 2020 | Written by James P. Smith



With Naturalist Journeys guide James P. Smith, local guide Johan Fernandez, and participants Fran, Larry, Sandra, Jim, Robin, Matt, Betsy, Thane, Mary Anne, Glenn, Becky, & Andrew





Sun., Jan. 5 Arrivals

A cool blustery afternoon greeted our group as we gathered at the acclaimed Hotel Bougainvillea located in Costa Rica's Central Valley. After a seamless thirty-minute transfer from Juan Santamaria International Airport, most of the group met in the hotel lobby not long after arrival. A few chose to relax after a tiring day of travel but for most an afternoon bird walk was high on the agenda. Andrew and Becky had arrived early the previous day and birded voraciously around the hotel's grounds a full day ahead of the main tour bagging some quality birds and building an impressive collection of photos. Johan Fernandez was our designated local Costa Rican guide and his exceptional leader skills would become increasingly apparent as we advanced deep into the tour.

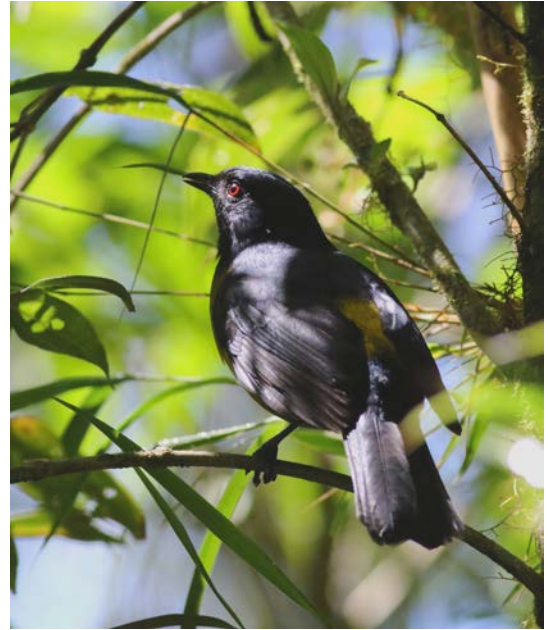
We explored ten sumptuous acres of beautifully landscaped gardens neatly walled in from the hustle and bustle of surrounding Santo Domingo. Surprisingly, cool windy conditions suppressed bird activity to some degree, but we still did incredibly well by finding two regional endemics right away: Hoffman's Woodpecker and Crimson-fronted Parakeet. The hotel gardens also provided a great opportunity to bring us up to speed on several common species that would be seen throughout the tour including Red-billed Pigeon, White-winged Dove, Blue-and-white Swallow, Great-tailed Grackle, Melodious Blackbird, Summer and Blue-gray Tanagers, Baltimore Oriole, Rufous-tailed and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Though common and widespread in Costa Rica, it was impossible to ignore the beauty of the local Rufous-collared Sparrows or the particularly bold pair of Rufous-naped Wrens working the tangled vines along the chain-link fence bordering sections of the gardens. Somehow our 90-minute bird walk passed like a breeze and as dusk approached Johan's field skills came into their own as he first heard and then showed us a splendid male, Blue-vented Hummingbird. The only, Blue-vented Hummingbird of the entire tour.

We next assembled in the lobby for a briefing and welcome drink except for two delayed in flight, Jim and Sandy. Johan joined us for dinner too, and there we exchanged stories of past trips, hopes for the trip ahead, and got to know each other around the dinner table. Dinner was quite superb, a three-course meal serviced by courteous wait staff, after which we retired with plans to meet at 6am for a morning bird walk. The tour was off to a fabulous start.

Mon., Jan. 6 Cerro de la Muerte | Cartago | Mirador Quetzales

The day dawned cool and blustery but with the wonderful news that Jim and Sandy had finally made it to the hotel around midnight. They were there in the hotel lobby at 6am, in good spirits and raring to go! The hotel staff, more than accustomed to birders routines, had provided coffee, tea and cakes in the lobby prior to setting out into the somewhat chilly Costa Rican dawn.

Birding was delightful as we enjoyed a mix of familiar North American migrants spending the winter in Costa Rica, and a range of Central American species, some of which would not be seen again during the rest of the



tour. Johan and the group worked especially hard to nail good views of the often aloof White-eared Ground-sparrow, very much a specialty of the Central Valley and a key species for our stay at the Hotel Bougainvillea. Though strikingly marked, this large, ground dwelling sparrow wasn't at all easy to see but was a major scoop for our group as we later learned that several tour groups staying at the same hotel had missed them. Close by, a pair of gaudy Lesson's Motmots put on quite the show and treated the photographers in our party to some wonderful shots. One leafless tree simultaneously attracted Tropical Kingbird, Summer and Blue-gray Tanagers, Baltimore Oriole and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak! The morning also provided an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the Variegated Squirrel, relatively common around the gardens and ultimately proving to be the most widespread mammal seen on the tour.

The hotel laid on the most fantastic buffet breakfast seemingly catering to every taste imaginable. We checked out, met our driver, Jorge, and loaded up the tour bus which was to be ours for the entire tour. Not wanting to waste a single minute, Andrew and Becky found a pair of Cabanis's Wrens in the hotel's front garden while the luggage was being loaded.

And so, our adventure toward the Savegre Valley began. We crossed urban San Jose heading south-east through Cartago before leaving the industrial areas behind, steadily climbing up the winding mountain roads and deep into the Talamanca Mountains. The elevation gain was significant as was the drop in temperature and it seemed like no time at all before, we'd climbed to well over 2000 meters. As we traveled, Johan (using the vehicle's speaker system) gave an extremely informative introduction to Costa Rica's history and lifestyle.

A small roadside gas station at Empalme provided a fine opportunity for a leg stretch and comfort break plus the adjoining market was full of local delights including cheeses, coffee, sauces, home-baked goods and more. Ever vigilant, Andrew had already spotted the first Acorn Woodpecker of the trip before we re-boarded the bus. The climbing continued on increasingly winding roads. Low, fast-moving clouds drifted across the montane forest suddenly peeling back to reveal patches of crisp blue sky and staggeringly beautiful mountain scenery. In no time at all we'd arrived in the cloud forest. This was quetzal country, not only indicated by the stunning cloud forest habitat but also by the numerous signs and cafes along the way often sporting hand-rendered quetzal-themed artwork! Suddenly, without warning, we left the comfort of the tarmac road and rumbled down a wet looking dirt track to Paraiso Quetzal Lodge where we were greeted with spectacular views overlooking the magnificent Cerro Las Vueltas Biological Reserve.



Costa Rica's mountains while in the tropics are always nice and cool. In fact, Johan gave the group ample time to bundle up while being simultaneously mesmerized by the hummingbird spectacular taking place just feet away on the lodge's balcony! In an instant we had Fiery-throated, Talamanca and Volcano Hummingbirds before us as well as a Slaty-flower Piercer 'free-loading' off the hummingbird feeders....and all of them were regional endemics!

Balcony viewing was clearly at a premium and we weren't the only group on site as a party of Brazilian photographers had already 'staked out' the best spots and didn't appear to be in any rush to share. No matter, we worked around them and their tripods and continued to enjoy the hummingbird show—it was simply sensational.

Orders for lunch were placed in advance after which we embarked on our first hike of the tour and descended into the cloud forest on a narrow, single-track trail. At times viewing was difficult, but spirits remained high as we rotated positions so that everyone had a chance at least to see. What a hike it was too, full of regional endemics; Black-billed Nightingale-thrush, Ochraceous Pewee, Black-capped Flycatcher, Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatcher, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus, Large-footed Finch, Yellow-thighed Finch, Collared Redstart, Black-thighed Grosbeak, Green-fronted Lancebill, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, Ruddy Treerunner and the bizarrely named 'Buffy Tuftedcheek'!

We finished off the Zeledon loop trail with a climb back up to Quetzal lodge which, given the elevation of 2650 meters, was a climb deserving of respect. Several of us paused to catch a breath in the rarified air. The reward was staggering views of the Talamanca hills and cloud forest, and a healthy Costa Rican lunch washed down with fresh squeezed local fruit juice and coffee. As we boarded the bus, low cloud swirled over the lodge and several White-collared Swifts appeared overhead just as a tight flock of screeching Barred Parakeets cannoned through like feathery missiles right over the bus and out of view in an instant. Had it not been for Johan's sharp ears and field skills we might have missed them altogether, or at least been blissfully unaware of the prize that had just passed over us. In conversation with Johan, he revealed that all his observations of Barred Parakeet had been identical to the sighting that we'd just had, and he'd only seen the species perched twice in all his years of field experience in Costa Rica!

A few minutes up the road along Route 2, our next destination was 'the Copey Road' a site well inside the Parc National Los Quetzales. Initially things seemed quiet, though we did have more views of Volcano and Fiery-throated Hummingbirds, Black-capped Flycatcher and a much better look at Ochraceous Pewee.... all of them being regional endemics. Walking down the gentle gradient, species and diversity began to improve with Tufted Flycatcher, Mountain Elaenia and Mistletoe Tyrannulet all seen well though the exceptionally difficult Timberline Wren proved much more aloof—we must have heard eight or more calling before finally clinching good, close views of a chuntering male low down in the roadside vegetation.



Resplendent Quetzal is very much a signature species of the cloud forest, and we were primed and ready to find one. Along the way, our search revealed the stunningly beautiful Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher and the exceptionally rare Peg-billed Finch, another endemic with a very narrow world distribution. Immersed in montane cloud forest and steep sided valleys, the fast-flowing Savegre River would be our next stop. If ever there was a place that encapsulated the home of the most beautiful, most sought-after ‘trogon’ in the world, the Savegre Valley would have to be it. Johan had a specific spot in mind where a Resplendent Quetzal had been seen in the morning hours, though by late afternoon it had clearly moved on. No matter, we found another Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher (regionally endemic) and enjoyed Blue-and-white Swallows, White-collared Swifts and the ubiquitous Rufous-collared Sparrows. Literally just down the road, the delights of the Savegre Hotel and Spa awaited us and after a prompt check-in we were shown our spacious, beautifully appointed rooms. Johan joined us at the bar for a lively checklist, followed by a fabulous buffet supper and a solid night’s rest. The first full field day had gone well, and it felt good to be in Costa Rica.

Tues., Jan. 7 Rio Savegre Valley | Montane Cloud Forests

An early start saw us meet outside the hotel lobby at 5:30 a.m. It was chilly and in the low 30s as we boarded the bus. As if Johan’s expertise wasn’t enough, we were also joined by Marino Chacon, one of the most respected authorities on Resplendent Quetzals in Costa Rica and co-founder of the Savegre Hotel. Marino knew of a fruiting Laurel tree that had been attracting quetzals higher up the valley and with that in mind we drove for 20 minutes or so before arriving at a steep sided wooded ravine—quetzal country and it looked idyllic. The only problem was that other birders/nature lovers and their guides had the same idea, and the narrow valley road soon became cramped with an assemblage of quetzal-hungry birders! Initially the crowds seemed slightly off putting but it wasn’t long at all before two splendid regional endemics vied for attention. Several Black Guans were ground feeding ‘pheasant-like’ in plain view in the meadows and a stunning Sooty Thrush was singing from a roadside utility pole seemingly oblivious to the commotion below. Spotted Wood-quails with their rhythmic calls serenaded us from the hillsides and Scintillant Hummingbirds perched by the roadside.

Over the next 90 minutes or so, we were all treated to excellent scope views of male and female Resplendent Quetzals in the ravine below the road. Sometimes they’d fly up and hover plucking berries from the fruiting laurel trees before disappearing deep into the forest. As the morning progressed, the male especially seemed to get higher and higher into the canopy until we eventually lost it. Sated with quetzals for the time being we then focused on the passerines closer to hand – Large-footed Finch and Black-cheeked Warbler, admittedly seen the previous day but still a thrill to enjoy close views of two rather special regional endemics. Marino was kind enough to show us the nest of a pair of Barred Becards and although the birds were not on view at the time, the nest site was noted for the following day.

By 8 a.m., it was time to remove a few layers as the montane chill dissipated and the warmth of the sun filtered into the hills and valleys. It was also time for a richly deserved buffet-breakfast back at the Savegre Hotel.



Afterwards, we were delighted to have Marino and his boundless enthusiasm join us once more. Our initial walk led us through the hotel grounds and cabanas as we continued to build on an ever-growing list of exceptionally good birds. We all had wonderful scope views of a 'charm' of Sulphur-winged Parakeets (regional endemic), as well as Ruddy Pigeon, Slaty Flowerpiercer, Mountain Elaenia, and more Flame-colored Tanagers than you could shake a stick at. A feeding flock behind the cabanas contained more familiar feathered friends from North America that had chosen to spend the winter in Costa Rica. Chief among these was the Philadelphia Vireo not only present in numbers but also offering wonderful views. With the vireos came Black-throated Green, Wilson's and Black-and-white Warblers and a fine Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Overhead, the alarm calls of Blue-and-white Swallows drew our attention skyward, and we soon found the swallows 'buzzing' a soaring Red-tailed Hawk, a relatively uncommon raptor in the country. But this was no ordinary Red-tail either and the crisp, well delineated markings clearly indicated that it was of the local Costa Rican subspecies (*Buteo jamaicensis costaricensis*)—nice!

The lodge gardens were not only beautifully maintained, but also supported an abundance of flowering plants and shrubs, and those correspondingly attracted a bevy of dazzling hummingbirds! The best tactic engaged was to simply 'wait and see' as the same individual hummers would often return to the individual food plants to feed. Over the next twenty minutes, we were treated to point blank views of multiple Lesser Violetears, Talamanca and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and, importantly, two rather rare regional endemics; White-throated Mountain-gem and Stripe-tailed Hummingbird. The gardens around the cabanas hosted several Red-tailed Squirrels, smaller and more rufous than the Variegated Squirrels seen the previous day, and there was an exceptionally beautiful lizard sunning itself in the open. Marino informed us that it was an Emerald Swift (*Sceloporus malachiticus*) but was also colloquially known as the Green Spiny Lizard.

From the gardens, we headed downstream and spent some time with more furtive forest species, some of them absolute skulkers and difficult to see in the sun-dappled understory. With patience we caught up Ruddy-capped Nightingale-thrush, Yellowish Flycatcher, Common Chlorospingus and Chestnut-capped Brushfinch. Shifting our gaze toward the canopy we found more Philadelphia Vireos and Johan managed to pick out a singing Brown-capped Vireo with them.

High above the Savegre Valley, the crystal-clear sky was filling up with raptors. Amid the many soaring Turkey and Black Vultures, we found Broad-winged and Short-tailed Hawks and a distant, vocalizing Ornate Hawk-eagle. A few minutes later we were back on the narrow forest trails when Johan suddenly became very animated. And there, only meters in front of him, was a stunning male Resplendent Quetzal!! This was our moment. No crowds, no roadside mayhem for us. There, right in front our group, a full male Resplendent Quetzal in total beauty.



Marino pointed out a female close by and it soon became clear that we'd found a pair excavating a nest cavity! We watched in awe and privilege, and at a respectful distance until Marino thought it was the right time to leave.

The euphoria of the ultimate Quetzal moment was always going to be difficult to follow but the walk back to the lodge was enlivened by great views of Mountain Thrush feeding close to the ubiquitous Clay-colored Thrushes, and there would be more Yellowish Flycatchers and Collared Redstarts. Andrew and Becky also managed to see a Northern Emerald Toucanet, the first of the trip.

Back at the lodge, lunch was a delight. A nice salad with house dressing and a more than adequate variety of delights offered on the menu. Post-lunch quiet time provided options for a siesta, while others chose to explore. Andrew and Becky came back having seen a pair of aptly named Torrent Tyrannulets on the Savegre River!

The afternoon adventure began outside the hotel lobby as we climbed aboard two open-sided jeeps for the relatively steep climb up the 4 x 4 route through the Los Santos Forest Reserve. Though the two jeeps set off together, the second vehicle disappeared halfway up the hillside! As they rolled up to join us some 15 minutes later, the array of broad beaming smiles could only mean one thing—they'd found yet another pair of Resplendent Quetzals on the ascent. To have seen just one Resplendent Quetzal would have been ample reward for our group, but to have collectively seen six in one day was simply too good to be true!

The drivable route reached its terminus and from there we had multiple options for walking trails through the forest. Since we were already at elevation, Johan decided to take us even higher along a narrow single-track trail through some of the most beautiful montane cloud forest that we'd seen on the tour. The Los Pioneros trail had been selected by Johan because another endemic, Silvery-throated Jay (rare even by Johan's standards) had been seen there recently. The jay, being restricted to high elevation forests above 2000 meters, would require some additional climbing on foot. The higher we went, Johan felt, the better our chances of seeing them. Along the trail Hairy Woodpeckers of the brown-washed Central American form were plentiful and looked radically different to those from home, especially the birds residing in the Eastern US. The climb continued producing a pair of Tufted Flycatchers and a pair of Ochraceous Wrens but there was to be no sign of the hoped-for Silvery-throated Jay and Johan turned around before things got a little too strenuous. By way of compensation, descending via the same route produced a couple of 'heard-only' Silvery-fronted Tapaculos close to the trail – they were very unwillingly to give themselves up for views.



By walking back down the Camino 4 x 4 route, we notched up a steady series of fine sightings: Spotted Barbtail, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, Ruddy Treerunner, and Yellow-winged Vireo, the latter being yet another regional endemic seen from the fabulous observation deck offering up views of the whole of the Savegre Valley. Continuing the Camino descent, we were shadowed for the much of the route by the haunting, ethereal song of multiple, Black-faced Solitaires not one of which could be coaxed into view. We did, however, have much better luck with a party of Yellow-thighed Brush-finch and a covey of Spotted Wood-quail close the track.

A special day in a staggeringly beautiful place was coming to an end and, overhead, hordes of White-collared Swifts and Blue-and-white Swallows brought the day's magic to a close. Most of the day had been covered on foot and all of it within just a few miles of our cabanas at the Savegre Hotel. In the evening we enjoyed another banter filled checklist and a superb buffet supper in the dining area. We retired to our cabanas at a civilized hour keenly anticipating another wonderful day ahead in Costa Rica.

Wed., Jan. 8 Turrialba | Rancho Naturalista

A cold northern wind greeted the group as we assembled near the hotel lobby at 6 a.m. Though early in the day for soaring raptors, Jim and Larry had already noted a Swallow-tailed Kite gliding down the valley riding on the northerly tail wind. Johan led the optional pre-breakfast walk and retraced his steps from the previous day, resulting in a similar range of species but with better views appreciated by most of the group. We soon arrived by the local trout pond on a neighboring property and were immediately rewarded with fine views of Northern Emerald Toucanets and one of the rarest birds of the whole trip, another Central American endemic and aptly named Dark Pewee. We crossed the Savegre River and walked back up the road towards the hotel, keeping a keen eye on the river eventually finding a couple of wintering Northern Waterthrushes and one very cooperative Torrent Tyrannulet. The roadside trees and shrubs hosted Silver-throated and Golden-hooded Tanagers while several flocks of Band-tailed Pigeons appeared upslope and overhead, the Savegre Valley being the only place on the entire tour where we would see them.

The breakfast buffet was fabulous, followed by the loading of the tour bus handled with supreme efficiency by Jorge. We drove out of the valley via the same route that we'd arrived but at a steadier pace finding time for a several roadside stops including Marino's nest site for Barred Becard. Unlike the previous morning, the pair were at home going back and forth with nest material and actively attending the nest right before us at eye level....



what a treat! The same area also provided fine views of Gray-breasted Wood-Wren and Mistletoe Tyrannulet as well as a noisy party of aggressive Black Guans!

By the time we reached Le Esperanza, it was clear that we were in for some locally turbulent weather and left the warmth and comfort of the Jorge's tour bus just as a cold front passed through, or at least that's how it seemed. It was cold, damp and very windy but undaunted, Johan led the way onto a narrow country lane where the more sheltered nooks hosted Tropical Kingbird, Mountain Elaenia, Black-and-white Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler and a staggeringly beautiful Flame-throated Warbler. Though the latter was not our first of the tour, this individual looked especially bright in the dull light inspiring audible gasps and "wows" among our party. It was also happened to be another Central American endemic, a specialist of the high montane forest.

We descended towards urban Cartago stopping first at a local gas station for a comfort break, and then onto a brief but rewarding visit to the rather spectacular Basilica de Cartago. Even here we found a few species, including a dark morph Short-tailed Hawk that could be seen cruising the surrounding neighborhood between the rain showers. Driving east along Route 10, a packed morning continued with a delightful break at Café Christina, an organic farm dedicated to shade grown coffee. We received a very warm welcome and the hosts (Johan's friends) shared free samples of delicious locally produced coffee! Being an entirely organic, the farm was especially rich in avian delights including Squirrel Cuckoo, Collared Aracari seen above the bathrooms, a surprise Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush and a broad selection of wintering migrants; Black-throated Green, Tennessee and Blackburnian Warblers, Philadelphia and Yellow-throated Vireos, and Baltimore Oriole. Johan also managed to spot a Brown-capped Vireo, again!

Squally rain showers accompanied the relatively short drive to Ujarras where lunch had already been prepared for us at the excellent Restaurante El Cas. We had a covered balcony to ourselves overlooking the host's feeders and enjoyed the first Lesson's Motmots since leaving the Hotel Bougainvillea, plus the first proper 'group' views of the endearing Cabanis's Wren. A family party of Common Tody-flycatchers lingered for long enough for most of the group to enjoy super views as did a fine male Mourning Warbler hopping around on the ground below the feeders.

After lunch we walked out from the restaurant and explored some of the local fields on foot. Flocks of screeching White-fronted Parrots and Crimson-fronted Parakeets flew over the local fields with some passing overhead. The fields at Ujarras are also home to the endemic Cabanis's Ground-sparrow, an even rarer cousin of the White-eared Ground-sparrow seen a few days earlier at the Hotel Bougainvillea. Cabanis's Ground-sparrow, however, is one of only a tiny handful of species endemic to Costa Rica. Pursing our field time between the showers we did our absolute best to find the ground-sparrow but ended up feeling a little crest-fallen as the quest came to an end with no sparrow to show. While disappointing at the time, scouring the Ujarras fields did yield a host of consolation species including Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Scarlet-



rumped Tanager, Buff-throated Saltator, Black-cowled Oriole, Red-eyed Vireo, Wilson's Warbler, Variable Seedeater, Blue-black Grassquit and especially good views of a Bright-rumped Attila feeding surprisingly low down among the vines.

We pressed on through the rain for one of the lengthier drives of the tour, skirting and winding our way along the volcanic slopes and valleys toward Turrialba. Herons began to feature on the drive with Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets, an astonishing Green Heron perched openly on roadside wires in Turrialba and a rather rare Fasciated Tiger-heron perched on gigantic boulders amid the white-water rapids of a fast-flowing river. Not wanting to be overlooked, brutish Amazon Kingfishers punctuated the drive as well, sometimes perching on wires and horizontal branches at the river crossings.

The world-renowned Rancho Naturalista was our destination for the day. The steep, narrow, approach road was not the faint hearted and we could only applaud Jorge's ability to negotiate the drive-in heavy rain which he did with ease and professionalism—not easy with a cumbersome 26-seater tour bus on a steep gradient! Lisa, our host, greeted us with warmth and enthusiasm at Rancho where we were escorted to our comfortable rooms followed by close-up views of hummingbirds on the lodge balcony during the final half hour of daylight. It was busy, very busy in fact, and the balcony feeders were alive with hummers including the stunning Violet Sabrewing, White-necked Jacobins, Green Hermit and Crowned Woodnymphs. Below the feeders, the gloom of the encroaching dusk might have prevented the identification of a couple of ground dwelling sparrows until we saw the bright orange bill literally glowing in the fading light—they were Orange-billed Sparrows! Soon afterwards, we settled down for a superb fish dinner followed by the daily run through the checklist. We weren't the only birders on site at Rancho and the lounge was alive with conversation of travels past and present!

Thurs., Jan. 9 Birding Mid-Montane Forests | Rancho Naturalista Grounds

Johan had plans for us this morning offering a pre-breakfast visit to the insect light located close to cabana #10. This demanded an early start, well before first light in fact, with the idea of finding some of the more difficult skulking species 'insect-gleaning' from an illuminated white sheet intentionally placed to attract moths and nocturnal insects. The plan was a fine one in theory and might have been a brilliant way to start the day except



that someone had forgotten to switch on the light! But, after a few minutes of waiting in the eerie dawn, the first birds started to appear. They were close and seemingly unconcerned by our presence. Soon we were enjoying Plain-brown and Spotted Woodcreepers, White-breasted Wood-wren, Acadian and Dusky-capped Flycatchers, Plain Ant-vireo and the rather difficult-to-see Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner. We lingered for a while with hopes of catching a glimpse of the fast moving and rather localized Tawny-chested flycatcher but came up empty.

After the previous day's rainfall, it was a real pleasure to see the morning fill up with warm sunshine revealing spectacular views from Rancho's balcony where a frenzy of hummingbird activity included lots of White-necked Jacobins and several stunning Violet Sabrewings. The balcony was also the site of a delicious traditional breakfast (fresh-squeezed juices, beans & rice, eggs and fruit), consumed with gusto whilst watching Montezuma and Chestnut-headed Oropendulas.

At 7 a.m., our party headed out from the lodge on foot. We'd barely left the parking area when two rather special hummingbirds appeared amid the flowering Purple Verbana. The first was a male Snowcap, much anticipated and a first for many on our trip, closely followed by an equally impressive Green Thorntail! Plain Xenops, Banaquit, Chestnut-sided Warbler and an American Redstart also graced this spot before we started the gentle descent of the lodge's approach road.

The day filled up with warm sunshine, blue skies and puffy-white cumulus clouds, perfect conditions for a long birding walk. Johan carefully pointed out the differences between closely related species such as Social and Gray-capped Flycatchers, as well as some species that can appear superficially similar such as Cinnamon Becard and the female of White-lined Tanager. Indeed, the tanager theme was very much to the fore with Summer, White-shouldered, Scarlet-rumped, Golden-hooded, Silver-throated and even a couple of Bay-headed Tanagers to keep us more than occupied on the way to the Erb family residence where we were warmly greeted by the property owners and ice-cold beverages—how lovely! The gardens were full of flowering Purple Verbana and some found themselves immersed with quality hummers including Garden Emerald and Stripe-throated Hermit, more Snowcaps and Green Thorntails. Others chose to relax and chat with our hosts sipping cold drinks.

After bidding farewell to the Erb family we began the steady, bird filled walk back up the hill towards the lodge with more views of some species that had entertained us on the walk down including Gartered Trogon and Bay-headed Tanager, as well as the trickier sub-canopy dwellers such as Black-headed Tody-flycatcher and Lesser Greenlet (a tiny member of the vireo family). Mid-morning saw sizeable kettles of Black and Turkey Vultures rising on warm air thermals in turn drawing in Broad-winged, Short-tailed and Roadside Hawks for perfect



comparisons. The high embankments and roadside understory gave us eye-level views of the scarce Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher and Golden-crowned Warbler. We arrived back at the lodge with lunch in mind but were surprised to learn that it was still only 10:40 a.m! After an incredibly rich morning, Johan's strategy was to simply 'chill' on the balcony and watch the well-stocked feeders until lunch time. And what a plan it was. We were soon visited a Tayra, a giant member of weasel family though clearly omnivorous as this one was snacking on bananas and melon! Moreover, it was a 'life mammal' for several in our group and especially timely since mammals, other than the Central American Agoutis foraging below the feeders at Rancho, had been notably scarce on the trip. Montezuma and Chestnut-headed Oropendulas also graced the feeders along with Orange-billed Sparrows, this time in much better light and we also had fine comparative views of Masked and Black-crowned Tityras.

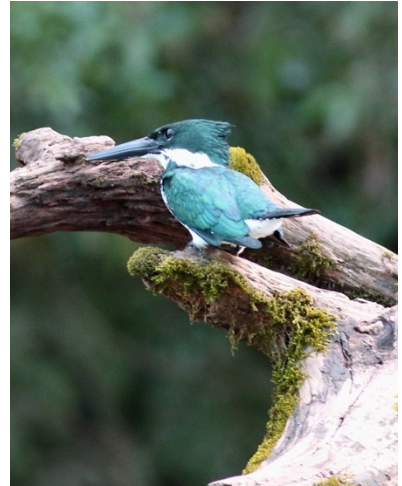
The midday break was a tad shorter than usual, and we boarded the bus and descended Rancho's approach road with Jorge at the wheel. Our destination was the Rio Tuis but after the previous day's deluge Jorge decided against driving down the usual dirt road and we explored the area on foot. What a fortuitous move this turned out to be, and it wasn't long before we discovered a couple of Sunbitterns, one of the most desired and sought-after species on the trip. One was foraging below in the fast-flowing river and we could hardly believe our luck when it flew up, idled along a moss covered branch and settled right onto its nest! For some in our group this was their first ever Sunbittern, a life bird, and to have it settle on a nest containing two eggs was out of this world! With shower clouds billowing and ever threatening, plus the fact that Sunbittern was almost the only species to be seen along the river, we headed on to Tayutic where we found sunshine and leisurely roadside birding including a fine study of Southern Rough-winged Swallows, Yellow-faced Grassquits, a rather brief White-ruffed Manakin and our first (singing) Thick-billed Seedfinch. Overhead, hordes of magnificent, White-collared Swifts shared the crisp blue skies with Black and Turkey Vultures, the swifts showing off their single best identification feature for which they are aptly named. We found a calling Boat-billed Flycatcher, another flycatcher species closely resembling a kiskadee look-alike but this one has a heavy swollen bill.

By Costa Rican standards the rest of the afternoon walk was quiet, and we headed back to the trails at Rancho dropping down a steep sided gorge (via a stairwell) to finish off the evening at Rancho's famous hummingbird pools. Over the next hour as the evening closed in, the pools were visited by Snowcap, Crowned Woodnymph, Slaty-crowned Flycatcher, Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner and several North American migrants such as Swainson's Thrush, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and a fine male Kentucky Warbler.

Dinner was quite superb, roast chicken with creamy mashed potatoes and greens. After another lively checklist some of the group joined a night walk through the forest which admittedly ended up being a little quiet with no owls or nightjars.

Fri., Jan. 10 Guayabo National Park

Another early start found most of the group back at the illuminated white sheets set up by Rancho Naturalista. The aim of the lighting was to attract moths and nocturnal insects, in turn attracting several rather shy, furtive



forest dwellers. We had much better views of White-breasted Woodwren this time around, and a/the Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner put on a much more satisfying show. Johan pointed out the call notes of a Tawny-chested Flycatcher, a regional endemic and one of the key species at Rancho but, alas, it never came close enough for views.

As the meagre dawn light filtered through the forest, we embarked upon a short walk during which we added a calling Spotted Antbird and a male Tropical Gnatcatcher, quickly followed by pretty good views of a calling Dull-mantled Antbird.

After breakfast we loaded the vehicle, bid farewell to the superb staff at Rancho and hit the road once more. It later transpired that Mary Anne had been in just the right place at just the right time when Harry Bernard was scoping a Bicolored Hawk from Rancho's balcony and invited her over for views—nice!

On the descent, a quick stop at 'Cotinga overlook' failed to yield the Lovely Cotinga reported to Johan a few days prior to our visit but the views overlooking Turrialba were spectacular, as were the views of White-fronted Parrots and Green Honeycreepers. From there we headed out across the rolling countryside for the (roughly) one hour drive to Guayabo National Monument. The drive was peppered by spiraling kettles of Black and Turkey Vultures and small numbers of other raptors including two Roadside Hawks, and a Broad-winged Hawk.

Arrival at Guayabo National Park was greeted by fine weather and a whole host of species foraging in the fruiting trees right in front of the restrooms. As Johan went off to find a guide to escort our sojourn around the park, we wasted no time in enjoying the avian spectacle before us. Tawny-capped Euphonia was new to the trip but it was arguably the tanagers that stole the show with White-shouldered, Blue-gray, Golden-hooded and Bay-headed Tanagers all on view before us.

On his return, Johan appeared to be impressed by the number of species that we'd managed to find without him! Jokes aside, we set off with our local National Park guide and Johan acting as interpreter. We walked along a labyrinth of cobblestone paths deep into this fascinating archaeological site amid building foundations, retaining walls, aqueducts, wells and burial sites. The Guayabo site had been home to up to 10,000 people at its peak around 800 AD but was later mysteriously abandoned for reasons that remain unknown to this day. Surrounded by lush, mature forest, the Guayabo archaeological site also had a few birds in store for us with especially good views of a party of Gray-headed Chachalacas and a charming Buff-rumped Warbler. An early picnic lunch was accompanied by a couple of Yellow-throated Euphonias and adequate time to visit the onsite gift shop before embarking on the long drive to Sarapiquí.



The early part of the drive traversed the picturesque south facing slopes of the Turrialba Volcano passing through rugged farmland and numerous small villages. The roads were narrow, winding and steep but with Jorge at the wheel our passage was easy and relaxed. Birds were few on the drive, but notables included singles of Crested Caracara and Laughing Falcon, both appearing rather fleetingly and not seen by everyone in the group. With Turrialba firmly behind us we dropped down to the lowlands heading west through a flatter, much more open landscape.

Correspondingly, the volume of traffic increased, and it was very slow going for a while. True to form, Jorge got us to the dock at Puerto Viejo on the Sarapiquí River in good time for a pre-booked boat tour and we were soon on board seeing our first Anhinga, Neotropic Cormorant, Snowy Egrets, & Amazon and Green Kingfishers of the tour.

Cruising upriver, we were especially thrilled to see and hear several troops of Black-mantled Howler Monkeys. Impressively large Green Iguanas could be seen basking on the tree limbs or dropping into the shallows but were positively upstaged by a huge Speckled Cayman hauled out on the muddy shore. Throughout much of the trip, beautiful Mangrove Swallows hawked for insects close to the boat occasionally perching on snags or other floating vegetation, and Spotted Sandpipers flitted along the shoreline every time we rounded a bend in the river. The rarest bird along the river would have to have been the Great Green Macaw seen all-too-briefly in flight screeching its way over the tree line, but we did rather better with beautiful views of a Bare-throated Tiger-heron. On reaching the dock it soon became clear that Jorge, while waiting for us at the tour bus, had discovered a Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth high in the canopy very close to the boat ramp! And then Johan pointed out a pair of White-ringed Flycatchers that he'd heard calling, one of a group of flycatchers exceptionally similar in appearance to the Social and Gray-capped Flycatchers already seen well on the trip.

Yet another packed day was ending as we checked into the rather dreamy Sarapiquí Rainforest Lodge. All our rooms were in the same thatched roofed unit, a design apparently inspired by indigenous pre-Columbian construction techniques. The rooms were swish, comfortable and air conditioned, a relief perhaps when birding in the humidity of the Caribbean lowlands.



Sat., Jan. 11 La Selva Biological Station | Sarapiquí River Boat Tour

We started the day at 6 a.m., with a pre-breakfast birding walk in the grounds of Sarapiquí Rainforest Lodge. Though the gardens were beautifully manicured and very birdy (including our first Pale-vented Pigeon and several wintering Wood Thrushes) the very best birding took place right outside the hotel's lobby and reception area. We spotted a Fasciated Antshrike at the beginning of our loop, the same spot later delivering Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts overhead, Green Honeycreepers and Olive-backed Euphonia in the fruiting shrubs and a Rufous-winged Woodpecker excavating a cavity in a rotting stump seemingly oblivious to the crowd of admirers gathered around.

Another fine Costa Rican breakfast ensued in preparation for a long morning at La Selva Biological Station. The drive was short, and we walked part of the entrance road, rewarded with good views of Tropical Gnatcatcher, a pair of Long-billed Gnatwrens, another male Golden-winged Warbler (our 3rd of the tour) and a calling Slaty-tailed Trogon teed up nicely in the spotting scopes. We also heard Great and Slaty-breasted Tinamous calling from the surrounding forest and he carefully explained the difference in calls between Yellow-throated and Keel-billed Trogons, both of which proved to be common in the area.

By the time we reached the entrance to the reserve new birds were coming thick and fast. An electrifying 20 minutes ensued as we simultaneously had close views of a Scaly-breasted Hummingbird while Becky spotted two Snowy Cotingas perched up high with a couple of Masked Tityras and, to top it all, a Double-toothed Kite flew in and perched in the open offering exceptional scope views of one of the more skulking of rainforest raptors—wow!

Once inside the Biological Station itself we had time to recalibrate finding shade, clean restrooms, and a mandatory guide that would accompany us throughout our walk along the forested trails. Overhead, Gray-rumped Swifts and Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts could be seen buzzing around the many soaring Black Vultures. We enjoyed nice comparisons between the superficially similar Boat-billed and Social Flycatchers and excellent views of the trip's sole Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer.



La Selva Biological Station is a massive reserve composed of nearly 1600 hectares on lowland rainforest and dedicated to the study of tropical rainforest ecosystems. Established in 1953, its reputation is such that it attracts scientists from all over the world. Indeed, Johan had his own story to tell as only a few months prior he was at La Selva with friends when he noticed a familiar face in the dining hall. Initially Johan couldn't quite place the face until the penny dropped a few moments after he'd said hello. It was Sir David Attenborough on location with a BBC film crew!

What had already been an incredibly full morning was about to get even busier as we entered the trail system but not before we said our goodbyes to Robin who, unfortunately for us, had to leave the tour mid-morning to make her flight back home.

The trail was full of birds, none more obvious than the giant Crested Guan, another *cracid* to compliment to the closely related Gray-headed Chachalacas and Black Guans seen earlier in the tour. Collard Aracari and Yellow-throated Toucans put on a nice show as did a Semi plumbeous Hawk brooding at the nest, neatly observed through the scope while turning its eggs, something of a rare treat to see in a generally uncommon secretive rainforest raptor.

Further exploration of the forest trails yielded a Lineated Woodpecker and an incredibly cryptic pair of Middle American Screech-owls roosting just off trail. Meanwhile, Becky skillfully picked out a magnificent King Vulture soaring over the forest with a several Black Vultures. It was close to enough to enjoy all the key features and proved to be the only King Vulture of the entire tour. Unbelievably, a mother Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth shielding its baby could be seen from the same spot on the trail, a perfect cameo in a trifecta of a wildlife sightings that would be difficult to match elsewhere.

The avian riches continued as we crossed a suspension bridge over the Sarapiquí River that led to the science labs and residential area. Collard Peccaries trotted across the manicured lawns quite unconcerned by our presence but drew little attention as more avian gems came our way, many of which were new to the tour; Short-billed Pigeon, Long-billed Hermit, Cinnamon Becard, Scarlet-rumped Tanager and Olive-backed and White-vented Euphonias. The walk back across the suspension bridge was further enlivened by a ridiculously tame Broad-winged Hawk perched sentinel-like right by the trail!

La Selva Biological Station doesn't really lack for anything including a gift shop offering cold beverages! Suitably sated we headed back to the bus, or at least that was the plan until Johan spotted a pair of Rufous Motmots and a Rufous-tailed Jacamar perched close together as several Great Green Macaws screeched overhead but never settled.



A long, full morning was neatly capped off by a fabulous buffet lunch back at Sarapiquí Rainforest Lodge and, afterwards, we enjoyed a little down time. Some chose to rest while others opted for a dip in the beautifully landscaped pool, apparently prime habitat for the stunning Green Basilisk photographed by Mary Anne and Glenn!

Our post lunch adventure took us out of the lodge grounds once more to another established birding site in the Sarapiquí area at Heliconia Island. We'd barely entered the property when a stunning Rufous-tailed Jacamar stopped us in our tracks. From that moment on we enjoyed a bevy of quality birds within the neatly landscaped tropical gardens. Chief among these were Bay Wren and the fabulously patterned Band-backed Wren as well Smokey-brown and Cinnamon Woodpeckers, fabulous views of a pair of Long-tailed Tyrants and several Black-faced Grosbeaks. And the only Ringed Kingfisher of the whole tour gave a gritty rattling call as it flew upriver.



Heliconia Island had lived up to its famed reputation, but we still had hopes of seeing Great Green Macaws and Johan had just the spot in mind. In the meantime, the drive would take us past a small, flooded meadow where Northern Jacana, Southern Lapwing and Little Blue Heron could be seen from our moving bus.



We finished the day at the unlikely spot of Puerto Viejo police station! Or rather we birded the approach road to it that eventually opened out into fields and plantations. Just as Johan had predicted, the magnificent Great Green Macaws could be seen flying around in twos and threes, along with Red-lored Parrots and Crimson-fronted Parakeets in the same area. We enjoyed good close views of a Thick-billed Seedfinch and an especially showy Tropical Pewee.



Sarapiquí Rainforest Lodge later did us proud with another superb buffet dinner after which we retired to the lounge area for a final group checklist and presentations for the tour. We had much to celebrate, not least of which was Glenn's presentation to Jorge, delivered entirely in Spanish! It had been a sensational bird and nature filled tour, greatly enhanced by magnificent lodges, spectacular scenery and largely cooperative weather. Above all, the tour had been blessed with wonderful group camaraderie and very capably led by a highly skilled local guide in Johan, and a safe, competent driver in Jorge.

Sun., Jan. 12 Departures

We awoke to a cooler morning and rather heavy rain showers. Just as well, perhaps, that Johan had elected to skip the morning bird



walk at the lodge in favor of a leisurely, relaxed breakfast; home baked bread, rice & beans (of course), sausage, eggs and fresh squeezed fruit juice among the delights on offer. We departed from Sarapiquí and climbed towards the Cordillera Volcánica Reserve in steady drizzle. Southern Rough-winged and Mangrove Swallows settled on roadside wires as we passed through San Miguel and a pair of Gray-breasted Martins vied for attention after somehow being AWOL until the final morning.

It didn't take long to leave the muggy Caribbean lowlands behind, and we found ourselves back amid the familiar steep gradients, high elevation, swirling clouds and mist synonymous with many elements of our trip in the days before. As the clouds parted just for a moment, Johan spotted a distant white speck in the forest way across the valley. Closer inspection was in order and the white speck soon morphed into the trip's first White Hawk, a spectacular denizen of humid broadleaf forest and every bit as white as its name suggests! As the rain came on hard and heavy, we quickly rotated scope views and then hurried back into the tour vehicle. From there it was a mere five minutes up the road to our destination of the main tour, the internationally renowned Colibri Café at Cinchona.

Despite being almost destroyed by a massive earthquake in 2009, the café has since been a 'must' stop for visiting birders for a dozen years. A balcony extended gazebo-like out into the forest overlooking a deep gorge and a distant yet spectacular waterfall. We found shelter from the rain, refreshment and a selection of well serviced bird feeders. Avian riches poured into the feeders, most of them close enough to simply observe with the naked eye, challenging the limits of even the closest focusing of binoculars.

The place was a riot of color as stunners such as Red-headed Barbet, Northern Emerald-Toucanet, Common Chlorospingus, Crimson-collared and Silver-throated Tanagers, and Grayish Saltator graced the feeders. Rarities were represented too with fabulous views of ground dwelling Buff-fronted Quail-doves and several Prong-billed Barbets at the feeders, both regional endemics. Coppery-headed Emeralds, endemic to Costa Rica, were plentiful spearheading the most incredible supporting cast of hummingbirds; Green Hermit, Green-breasted Mango, Green-crowned Brilliant, White-bellied and Purple-throated Mountain-gems (both regional endemics), Violet Sabrewing and Crowned Woodnymph all graced our cameras, binoculars and notebooks. Migrant warblers such as Tennessee and Mourning flicked around the willows close to a foraging Collared Redstart



(regional endemic) while a Chestnut-headed Brushfinch fed on the ground below, yet another cameo and stark reminder of just how diverse the birding can be in Costa Rica.

Our time at the Colibri Café was ending all too quickly. We all had somewhere to be and the journey to the airport would best be described as ‘steady’ as Sunday morning drivers and bike riders slowed our progress a little, but we arrived at the airport just before noon where said our goodbyes. Glenn and Mary Anne had elected to spend a night San Jose, and we all watched with envy as Jim and Sandy, Larry and Fran continued to the Pacific Coast extension with Johan. The rest of us dispersed into Juan Santamaria airport for the journey home. It had been a fabulous tour filled with wonderful birding, fantastic lodges and wonderful group spirit throughout....and how fortunate we were to have a World class guide in Johan, and a stoic, unflappable driver in Jorge. Costa Rica more than lived up to reputation and, in many respects, this tour provided the perfect introduction to an exceptional diverse country that has so much to offer.

Photo Credits:

Collared Aracari, Andrew & Rebecca Steinmann (AR); Silver-throated Tanager, AR; Scenic, AR; Fiery-throated Hummingbird, AR; Lesson’s Motmot, AR; Group images, AR; Trogon, Fran Armstrong (FA); Summer Tanager, James P. Smith (JS); White-eared Ground Dove, JS; Ruby-throated Hummingbird, JS; Lesser Violetear, JS; Volcano Hummingbird, JS; Black-thighed Grosbeak, JS; Black-and-yellow Silky-Flycatcher, JS; Black-capped Flycatcher, JS; White-throated Mountain-Gem, JS; Resplendent Quetzal, JS; Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush, JS; Female Quetzal, JS; Black Guan, JS; Mountain Elaenia, JS; Bright-rumped Attila, JS; Barred Becard, JS; Flame-throated Warbler, JS; Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush, JS; Sunbittern, JS; Snowcap, JS; White-necked Jacobin, JS; Tayra, JS; Crowned Woodnymph, JS; Green Thorntail, JS; Gray-headed Chachalaca, JS; Anhinga, JS; Amazon Kingfisher, JS; Hoffman’s Two-toed Sloth, JS; Long-billed Hermit, JS; Rufous-tailed Jacamar, JS; Green Honeycreeper, JS; Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, JS; Group, JS; Double-toothed Kite, JS; Blue-throated Toucanet, JS; Blue-throated Toucanet, JS; Red-headed Barbet, JS; Common Chlorospingus, JS; Green-crowned Brilliant, JS; Prong-billed Barbet, JS; Grayish Saltator, JS.