

# Costa Rica: Monteverde & Sarapiquí Extension | March 13-22, 2021 | Trip Report | by Carlos Sanchez



**With guides Carlos Sanchez & Johann Fernandez and participants Charles, Chris, Deanna, Diane, Judy, Mike, Mimi, Nancy, Nat, Rebecca, Sheila, and Tony**



A fantastic route through northern Costa Rica, designed to sample several of the major habitat types and elevations that the country has to offer: Carara NP/Tarcoles (transitional tropical dry forest and mangroves), Monteverde (highland cloud forest), Celeste Mountain Lodge (mid-elevation rainforest), and Cano Negro (lowland wetlands and gallery forest). Over the course of our journey, we saw many of the classic bird families of the Neotropics from trogons to toucans and puffbirds to potoos.

With over 65 regional endemics and dozens of other specialties, Costa Rica offers well-seasoned birders a chance to see many special species – and we did! These included Resplendent Quetzal, Three-wattled Bellbird, Buff-fronted Quail-Dove, Jabiru, Yellow-breasted Crake, Great Potoo, Keel-billed Motmot, Costa Rican Pygmy-Owl, Thicket Antpitta, Rufous-winged Tanager, Long-tailed Manakin, and Pinnated Bittern. We did this all while enjoying some of the best ecotourism infrastructure in the world with comfortable lodges, delicious (and nutritious) meals, and an excellent road system.





### **Sat. Mar., 13      Arrival in San Jose | Hotel Bougainvillea**

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 10-acre garden with hidden ponds, flowerbeds, and mature trees featuring orchids, bromeliads, heliconias, and trees that attract butterflies and birds. Several of us quickly left the hotel room to explore these award-winning grounds, familiarizing ourselves with many of Costa Rica's classic species: Lesson's Motmot, Blue-gray Tanager, Hoffmann's Woodpecker, and Clay-colored Thrush (the national bird!) The entire group enjoyed dinner together later in the evening. 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.

### **Sun. Mar., 14      Pacific Coast | Tarcoles River**

After a fantastic breakfast at the lodge restaurant, we explored the grounds of Hotel Bougainvillea further with our local guide (and personal friend) Johann Fernandez. The garden does a fantastic job of creating habitat for wintering songbirds from the USA and Canada, and we soon came across quite a wide sampling of migrants: Baltimore Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Tennessee Warbler, Philadelphia Vireo, and Yellow-throated Vireo. Residents included the boisterous Rufous-naped Wren and perky Chestnut-capped Warbler (a recent split from Rufous-capped).

We soon had to pack our luggage into the vans, and we were on our way westward to the Pacific Coast. It wasn't long before we made a brief stop at Alajuela's Walmart for supplies and for some light birding on the edges of the parking lot. These brushy thickets provide habitat for one of Costa Rica's endemic birds, the attractively marked Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow. Although we never connected with the sparrow, we did see quite a few birds here including a male Golden-winged Warbler.



The journey from San Jose to Tarcoles on the Pacific Coast is a short one, and we were there after only a couple of hours thanks to the relatively new highway. We soon settled into our lodge, Villa Lapas, and enjoyed an al fresco lunch on their terrace. In the afternoon, we headed out to the Tarcoles River for one of their famous boat tours. In just a couple of hours, we recorded over fifty bird species! Sandbars and muddy banks along the river hosted Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Collared Plover, Double-striped Thick-knee, and migratory shorebirds, while Scarlet Macaw, Yellow-naped Parrot, and Common Black-Hawk flew overhead. A pair of stunning Turquoise-browed Motmot perched on open branches right at the edge of the river, posing for photos for our group. What a great first full day of birding!

## **Mon. Mar., 15 Carara National Park**

We did an optional pre-breakfast walk around Villa Lapas, seeing our first Yellow-throated Toucan, Rose-throated Becard, and Rufous-tailed Jacamar of the trip. After a nice breakfast at the lodge, we boarded the bus and reached the entrance to Carara National Park in less than thirty minutes. This transitional habitat features a combination of seasonally dry and wet forest species. The trails here are relatively flat and well-marked, providing easy access. Although the forest was relatively quiet today, we still managed to run across a small feeding flock that included Plain Xenops, Cocoa Woodcreeper, and Chestnut-backed Antbird. We also saw Black-hooded Antshrike, one of about sixteen species endemic to the humid Pacific slope of Costa Rica. We enjoyed lunch at a local casita in the town of Tarcoles, enjoying the warm sea breeze as we enjoyed our meal. Most of the group peeked at the beach after lunch, where Scarlet Macaws were waiting in the tropical almendro trees.





Afterwards, we continued our journey up the coast with birding and restroom stops along the way adding Streak-backed Oriole, Panama Flycatcher, White-lored Gnatcatcher, Painted Bunting, and more. By the late afternoon, we arrived at Hotel Montana Monteverde for the next three nights.

## **Tues. Mar., 16    Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve | Curi-Cancha Reserve**

The morning started at the restaurant balcony, overlooking a vast expanse of cloud forest. These early mornings tend to be very active, and birds were busily going about the new day. Glistening white Masked Tityra perched on bare branches above the garden. Golden-olive Woodpecker pecked industriously at mossy branches, while White-eared Ground-Sparrows were more cautious as they zipped from bush to bush. After breakfast, we headed over to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve.

Black-faced Solitaire caroled steadily throughout our walk, while a Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush bounced along in front of us on the trail. A group of birders alerted us to a Costa Rican Pygmy-Owl. After a bit of a wait, we had great views of this tiny but fierce regional endemic. The feeders at the Hummingbird Gallery at the entrance provided us with close studies of several highland hummingbirds such as Coppery-headed Emerald, Magenta-throated Woodstar, and Violet Sabrewing. In the afternoon, we visited the Curi-Cancha Reserve. By this time, it was quite warm but actively fruiting trees provided us with great activity regardless: Elegant Euphonia, Golden-browed Chlorophonia, and Scarlet-thighed Dacnis decorated the fruiting trees with their neon colors. We also managed to scope a calling Three-wattled Bellbird on the hillside, a highland for many on this tour!

## **Wed. Mar., 17    Santa Elena Cloud Forest | Bajo del Tigre**

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 looks 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 Costa Rican Warbler, Ruddy Treerunner, Spotted Barbtail, and Yellowish Flycatcher.

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 Bajo del Tigre sector of the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. This forest is much drier than any other forest we visit in Monteverde, attracting several species from the dry Guanacaste region in the lower elevations to the west. One of these species is the Long-tailed Manakin, Johann's favorite bird, and most of the group got nice views of a displaying male in the dim understory.

## **Thurs. Mar., 18                      Return to Curi-Cancha | Caribbean Foothill Forest | Celeste Mountain Lodge**

At this point, Johann and I were understandably getting a bit nervous as we missed Resplendent Quetzal at every site. After some last minute reorganization, we returned to the Curi-Cancha Reserve in the early morning hours. It wasn't long before we heard quetzals calling and saw a male sitting quietly in an aguacatillo tree, shimmering in iridescent greens, blues, and reds. We also saw some other new species in the crescendo of bird activity of the early morning hours, such as White-naped Brushfinch and Gray-crowned Yellowthroat.

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 this 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, Crimson-collared, and Golden-hooded Tanager; Red-legged and Green Honeycreeper; 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!

## **Fri. Mar., 19      Tenorio National Park**

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, the scarce Rufous-winged Tanager – this tanager is quite uncommon throughout its long and narrow range. We also saw Keel-billed Toucan, Cinnamon Becard, and Bay Wren. We also paid a visit to the Bijagua Bird Song Gardens. By just standing on the outside of the property, we recorded twenty species, including Blue-throated Goldentail, Crested Guan, and Shining Honeycreeper. Showers began to move into the area, and we had to reorganize our plans for the afternoon to accommodate for the precipitation.

After another amazing French cuisine-meets-Costa Rican ingredients style meal, 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 also had nice views of cute Buff-rumped Warbler, raucous Red-shouldered Parrot, and the canopy-dwelling Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet. We also saw a specimen of *Philodendron verrucosum*, a stunning aroid with fluorescent lime-green veins. The heavens opened up above us, and we retreated to our lodging for the rest of the evening.

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



## **Sat. Mar., 20      Tilajari Hotel Resort**

Our last morning at Celeste Mountain Lodge had us on a morning birding walk on a quiet forest trail. Although quick showers dampened a lot of the birding activity, we still saw quite a few wonderful species such as Squirrel Cuckoo, Black-throated Trogon, Streak-crowned Antwren, and Blue-black Grosbeak. A Dull-mantled Antbird worked its way up towards and beyond us, showing how 'dull' is such a poor descriptor of this species – a fiery red eye and brilliant white feathers on its back.

After a picnic lunch in a town plaza, we continued to Tilajari Hotel Resort. Although this resort caters to Costa Ricans trying to have a vacation away from the big city, the mature trees, scrubby edges, and open fields provide habitat for a wide variety of non-forest species that we had not seen elsewhere on the trip – and all were easy to see and enjoy. During our relatively short birding walk, we recorded sixty species on the property, including Green-breasted Mango, Collared Aracari, Bat Falcon, White-winged Becard, Black-cowled Oriole, Golden-hooded Tanager, and Red-legged Honeycreeper.

## **Sun. Mar., 21      Rio Negro | Medio Queso Wetlands**

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 from 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. 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. As our boat trip came to an end, our local guide showed us a roost of Pacific Screech-Owl to wrap up our morning.





After a pleasant lunch, Johan and I decided to take the group to the Medio Queso Wetland (the half cheese wetlands) for some afternoon birding. However, just before making the turn to these wetlands, our local guide pointed out a Great Potoo roosting in a tree in the traffic median. Wow! The Medio Queso Wetland itself is perhaps one of the best places in Central America to see both Pinnated Bittern and Yellow-breasted Crake, and we managed to see both. The tiny crake fed nervously in low wetland vegetation, allowing everyone excellent and lengthy views.

## **Mon. Mar., 22    Arenal Observatory Lodge | La Fortuna | Departures**

Today was to be our last full day of birding, and we saved perhaps the best for last – Arenal Observatory Lodge. The carefully maintained trails, excellent feeders, and stunning biodiversity of the area all added up an incredible experience. The rows of flowering *Verbena* bushes attracted Black-crested Coquette, Green Thorntail, and Violet-headed Hummingbird. A small mixed feeding flock along one of the easy forest trails held such jewels as Emerald, Bay-headed, and Golden-hooded Tanager. Thicket Antpitta called from the dense understory, and with some careful positioning, everyone eventually got views of this shy species. As we wrapped up our walk, a Pale-billed Woodpecker was working on a nest hollow at close range. As we drove to the town of La Fortuna, we took a scenic detour along a rainforest road where we saw White-fronted Nunbird, Keel-billed Motmot, and Slaty-tailed Trogon.





La Fortuna holds many nice shops, including a chocolate shop with excellent coffee and dessert items. Most of the group partook in trying some of these quality homemade treats. Afterwards, the group split into two parts. Part 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. We arrived rather late to the mirador feeders, but we still managed to see Green-crowned Brilliant, Green Hermit, and Silver-throated Tanager. 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 scrumptious three-course meal at Hotel Bougainvillea, I offered 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: Group Photo (Carlos Sanchez - CS), Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth (CS), Hotel Bougainvillea Stained Glass (CS), Group Photo 2 (CS), Montezuma Oropendola (CS), Turquoise-browed Motmot (CS), Northern Emerald Toucanet (CS), Celeste Mountain Lodge Trail (CS), Coatimundi (CS), Crimson-collared Tanager (CS), Broad-billed Motmot (CS), Celeste Mountain Lodge (courtesy of CML), Gray Crowned Yellowthroat, Red-eyed Tree Frog (CS), Great Curassow (CS), Red-lored Parrot (Bob Hill - BH), Red-legged Honeycreeper (CS), Yellow-breasted Crake (CS), Emerald Swift (CS), Pale-billed Woodpecker (CS), Arenal Observatory Lodge (CS), Pinnated Bittern (CS), Slaty-tailed Trogon (BH), Hotel Bougainvillea Gardens (courtesy of HB)*