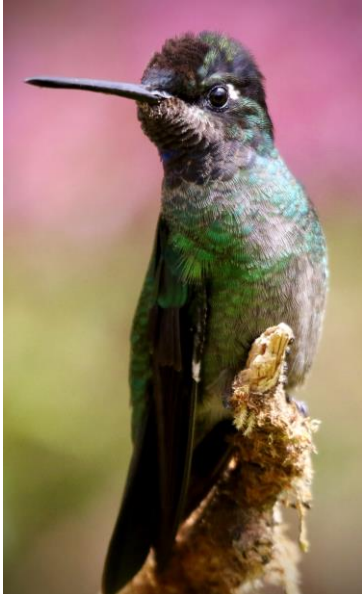


Christmas in Costa Rica | Trip Report

December 22-29, 2021 | Written by Bob Meinke



With guides Bob Meinke and Johan Fernandez, and tour participants Kathleen, John, Kathy, Karen, Nino, Sheila, Jeff, Dondi, Dana, Cindy, and Kelly



Thursday and Friday, December 20-21: Early Arrivals | Lodging at Bougainvillea Hotel, Santo Domingo

Several of our group decided to arrive early, ahead of the scheduled tour start date on December 22nd, with most arranging for an early day or two at the Bougainvillea Hotel, located in the outskirts of Costa Rica's capital city, San José. Situated in a suburban neighborhood, the hotel is surrounded by several acres of fenced, immaculate gardens and water features, with a wide array of trees and other flowering plants that include a number of native species.

Words really can't do justice to the lush landscaping here, it is simply an outstanding spot to start a birding tour in Costa Rica. It's remarkable how many birds (and even reptiles and amphibians) call these gardens home, making this a perfect place to jumpstart your species list before a tour even begins.

The Hotel Bougainvillea not only provides wonderful opportunities for on-site birding, it also offers first-rate accommodations, with a pleasant restaurant (featuring local cuisine) and a small, quiet bar, and very comfortable rooms and suites. The climate here in the Central Valley is so consistently mild that the rooms have neither air conditioning or heating, just a ceiling fan and large, screened windows. Nothing else is needed. Rooms also have a private, outside balcony overlooking the gardens, a perfect place to sit at daybreak with a cup of coffee and your binoculars!

The precise number of species our early arrivals saw at the Bougainvillea Hotel varies by birder, since we weren't formally coordinating our sightings here ahead of the main tour, but Bob (NJ tour leader) and Kelly totaled 58 species on December 21st and 22nd. Other may have seen fewer species, or even more, depending on when they arrived and how much time they spent out and about.

Common resident species we saw here included Lesson's Motmot, Hoffmann's Woodpecker, Social Flycatcher, hordes of Crimson-fronted Parakeet, Squirrel Cuckoo, Red-billed Pigeon, Inca Dove, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Chestnut-capped Warbler (a recent split from Rufous-



capped Warbler), Cabanis's and Rufous-naped Wrens, White-tipped Dove, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Clay-colored Thrush (Costa Rica's national bird), our first of many Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, and a White-eared Ground Sparrow (a very nice pick-up by Dondi and Jeff!). And Kelly spotted a rare (and endangered) Yellow-naped Parrot in the treetops our first afternoon at the hotel, a species that is expanding its range east from the Pacific Coast.



We also had raptors overhead (some were migrants and some residents), including Short-tailed and Broad-winged Hawks, Turkey and Black Vultures, and Yellow-headed Caracara, and we also saw a number of migratory songbirds recently arrived from North America, including Baltimore Oriole, Philadelphia Vireo, Summer Tanager, Vaux's Swift, Tennessee Warbler, Gray Catbird, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak, among others.

And for those with their windows open at night, Common Pauraque and Tropical Screech Owl were heard on our first



evening, with a pair of the screech owls later being discovered roosting in a large bamboo thicket on the hotel grounds, offering us great looks.

We enjoyed pre-tour dinners on December 20th and 21st, with some of us getting together informally ahead of the official welcome dinner for the trip on the 22nd.

Sunday, December 22: Start of Main Tour | Birding and First Night at Bougainvillea Hotel | Group Meeting and Dinner

Those who arrived early continued birding with Bob today (great views of Lesson's Motmot!), as we waited for our Costa Rican birding guide and



driver to arrive at the hotel around dinner time. Lunch was on our own today, and by mid-afternoon some of the group had birded enough, and had retired to the lobby of the hotel to chat and indulge in our first happy hour. The hotel staff went out of their way to be helpful and accommodating, and were very serious about masking (and calling out anyone who forgot to wear one!) as well as related health safety issues, with doors typically left open around the spacious lobby to facilitate fresh air flow.



The tour officially started when we assembled as a group before dinner, beginning with formal introductions and our first chance to meet Johan Fernandez, our birding guide who would be traveling with us for the duration of the trip. The hotel provided a private meeting room, where Bob and Johan covered important aspects of the tour, including Covid protocols (everyone, including our Costa Rican guides and drivers, were fully vaccinated), and then handed out spiral-bound species checklists. Johan concluded with a brief and informative PowerPoint presentation, covering the areas we would be visiting along our route, as well as overall tour objectives from his perspective.

Tomorrow would be the first in an upcoming string of early mornings, so most of us left for our rooms immediately after a delicious dinner in the well-ventilated hotel dining room (remembering to keep our windows open in case the owls called!).

Monday, December 23: Early Morning Birding at Bougainvillea Hotel | Departure for Talamanca Mountains and Rio Savegre Valley | Birding at Paraiso de Quetzales | Check-in at Savegre Hotel

We started today with a pre-breakfast bird walk through the Hotel Bougainvillea gardens with Johan, getting to know his style of guiding, and providing an opportunity for the group as a whole to see many of the birds our early arriving guests had already tallied (but were happy to see again!).

We had particularly good views of the Tropical Screech-Owls, and picked up Cinnamon-bellied and Buff-throated Saltators, Green-breasted Mango, and our first Montezuma Oropendola, among others. We also had looks at Forrer's Leopard Frogs in a small pond, a rare, endemic species introduced to the garden as part of a conservation effort.

After breakfast we met Drew, the amiable driver of our spacious 25-person van (there was *plenty* of room to spread out), and we loaded up for our trip to the mountains. Bob knew Drew from a visit to Costa Rica several years earlier, and it was fun to reconnect—he was an outstanding driver on that tour, and he more than duplicated his efforts on this one (Drew's skill at coolly maneuvering our van along some rather challenging montane tracks during our stay was much appreciated by the group!).



Although it was pretty gloomy on our drive up to the Cerro de la Muerte and the Talamanca Mountains (we were headed to a cloud forest, after all), the overcast conveniently broke when we arrived at Paraiso de Quetzales, a family-run eco-resort and small restaurant (with some fabulous views). This was our first birding stop of the tour. Well-known for its hummingbird feeders and wildlife plantings, and the possibility of seeing the Resplendent Quetzal in the nearby forest, this site also offers an excellent introduction to the general avifauna of mid- to upper-elevation cloud forest habitats in Costa Rica.



Six hummingbirds were quickly spotted (i.e., Lesser Violetear and White-throated Mountain-Gem, as well as Volcano, Scintillant, Talamanca, and Fiery-throated Hummingbirds), with all but Lesser Violetear being localized, regional endemics. Seeing these hummers up close was a treat for all of us, with those of us who hadn't experienced neotropical hummingbirds before especially entranced by the amazing plumages.





we were fortunate to see so many fascinating species in a relatively short time.

After a great lunch at Paraiso de Quetzales (locally farmed trout was a highlight on the menu), we loaded up to head to the nearby Rio Savegre Valley, where we would be based for the next three nights. On our way, we stopped for coffee (or a spot of hot chocolate) at Miriam's Restaurant, a tiny establishment (and an eBird Hotspot) at the head of the Savegre Valley with some feeders and a nice observation deck. We had about 30 minutes here, but managed to add some good species



to our list, including Large-footed Finch and the oddly plumaged Yellow-thighed Brushfinch (both endemics), as well as the first of many Flame-colored Tanagers and a flock of Barred Parakeets. We also saw Hairy and Acorn Woodpeckers, species known to many of us from home in the U.S., but which have resident populations in Central America, as well.



and Sulphur-winged Parakeets and Black-faced Solitaire (both regional endemics) were spotted by a few of us. But the sunlight faded quickly in the valley, and we were soon off to review our species list in the airy lounge of the main lodge building.

Arriving at the Savegre Hotel at about 4:00 PM, we checked in and our luggage was soon delivered to our cabin doors. The rooms were very nice, and (importantly) the heaters were functioning! At over 7,000 feet, the days were comfortable here, but the evenings could be quite cool. There was still enough light before dinner to reconnoiter the grounds a bit,

After a fine dinner, we retired early—we had a special treat planned for tomorrow, and we would be heading out before dawn (and before breakfast!). It was interesting to hear coyotes howling in the night as we fell asleep, reminding some of us of evenings spent in Arizona.

Tuesday, December 24: Resplendent Quetzal Observations | Mid-Morning Bird Trek Above Rio Savegre Valley | Afternoon Birding on Lodge Grounds

During the previous day at Paraiso de Quetzales, Johan quietly asked Bob if it would be OK to forego our planned hike there to look for the Resplendent Quetzal, and instead try a different location in the Savegre Valley, on the 24th. Paraiso de Quetzales is a traditional stop for this species, but occasionally you can miss seeing it there if it's rainy or foggy (and a drizzle was starting up). As an alternative, Johan had just heard about sightings not far from the Savegre Hotel, so we decided we would go for the quetzals there.

With this new strategy in mind, we were up and out at 5:00 AM(!) today, grabbing a quick cup of coffee (it was waiting for us outside on the lodge deck, and critically important for many in the group!) before piling into the van to head a few miles away to San Gerardo de Dota, a private farm that was offering birders access to watch for quetzals at a stakeout on their property. We were on the site before dawn, and quickly walked to a knoll overlooking the clearing where the birds had been feeding. But as we settled in to wait, we couldn't help but wonder, should we have just stayed with the original plan, and looked for the species the day before at Paraiso de Quetzales? Taking a chance on a new spot for a sighting as critical as the Resplendent Quetzal is always a little nerve-wracking for the guides—what if it doesn't show?



We had our answer 20 minutes later, when the quetzals appeared (as if on cue) in the forest below, to start feeding on the tiny, wild avocados that they're known to favor. We counted five birds (including males and females), and watched for an hour or



more as they swirled gracefully around the canopy and sat exposed in the trees, the long tail plumes of the male birds fascinating to see. It's easy to understand why many birders consider this one of the most beautiful species in the world. Before leaving to head back for breakfast, we also managed good looks at the endemic Sooty Thrush, Black Guan, and Golden-browed Chlorophonia, as well as a wayward Torrent Tyrannulet hanging out by a cement pond down near the river. But the quetzals stole the show, no doubt about it.

After breakfast, we organized ourselves for a hike on the east side of valley, on trails high above the Savegre

Hotel in mixed secondary- and primary-forest habitat. We loaded into two 4x4 trucks, and switch-backed a couple miles up the steep hillside, where we embarked on a 3-mile trek through the forest. Thanks to getting a ride up, the walk had relatively little elevation gain or loss. And much of the trail was not well-traveled, giving us a chance to get into some deep, relatively undisturbed forest habitat, and look for some hard-to-

find understory species. We heard or saw Ruddy Pigeons and Sulphur-winged Parakeets overhead as we started out, and quickly had good looks at Yellowish and Olive-striped Flycatchers, Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush, and Rufous-browed Peppershrike, as well as Yellow-winged Vireo, Spangle-cheeked Tanager, Flame-throated Warbler, and Ochraceous Wren, the last four all local, montane endemics.

As we ventured deeper into the forest, some of us lagged behind on the narrow trail, and ended up (to our good fortune) stumbling across a marvelous mixed flock of Furnarid species (included Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, a rare Buffy Tuftedcheek, the skulking Lineated Foliage-Gleaner, Streak-breasted Treehunter, and the locally endemic Ruddy Treerunner), as well as Tufted Flycatcher, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus, Yellow-thighed Brushfinch, and the endemic Black-cheeked Warbler. The forest was dead silent except for the twittering of the mixed flock, which was with us for maybe 10 minutes, and then vanished.



Those of the group hiking ahead of the aforementioned laggards had their own amazing encounters, and were the first of our birding group to locate a Wrenthrush, a poorly known, taxonomic anomaly among birds, and the sole member of its own enigmatic family (the Zeledoniidae) that may (or may not, depending on the source) be most closely related to certain species in the Caribbean. A major target for any birding trip to the mountains of Costa Rica and Panama, most of the group eventually saw a Wrenthrush (at least a glimpse, anyway) before the hike ended.

This ended up being a very productive trek, as we also recorded White-collared Swift, White-throated Mountain-Gem, Barred Becard, Mistletoe Tyrannulet, Collared Redstart, Brown-capped Vireo, Mountain Thrush, and Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, as well as migratory Golden-winged, Townsend's, Black-and-white, Wilson's, and Black-throated Green Warblers. All in all, a very good outing.

Our attempt at an afternoon walk with Johan after lunch (during which we made our initial acquaintance with the soon-to-be-infamous, enormous double-troutburger) was rained out, and instead the group relaxed or birded around the lodge, when weather permitted. After a late afternoon happy hour and our pre-dinner



species list review, we retired to the restaurant for another excellent evening meal. It was a special night in the mountains (the sequined Karaoke Guy who entertained us in the dining hall notwithstanding), and the otherwise quiet Savegre Valley seemed a fitting place to spend Christmas Eve.

Wednesday, December 25: Morning River Birding | Waterfall Trail Bird Hike | Batsu Garden Feeders | Evening Owl Drive | Christmas Dinner, Savegre Hotel



Merry Christmas! The Naturalist Journeys tour schedule sent out for this trip indicated that “a leisurely day” was in store for us today at Savegre, being the holiday and all. Johan, whose command of English is quite impeccable, nonetheless asked Bob (before we left the Bougainvillea Hotel) what exactly was meant by a “leisurely day.” He snorted when he was told it means relaxing, a day where you didn’t do much. He clearly had other ideas. And as it turned out, everyone loved it.

First up on Johan’s agenda was an early, pre-breakfast hike along the main road from the hotel that followed the river downstream. It was a tranquil walk, and we picked up 37 species before we knew what hit us. We sadly only heard the elusive Spotted Wood-Quail, but it was a new addition to our list nonetheless, as were Silver-throated Tanager, Stripe-tailed Hummingbird (a near-endemic), Band-tailed Pigeon, Osprey, American Dipper, Louisiana Waterthrush, Lesser Goldfinch, and (*hold your breath*) a Great Blue Heron. OK, not everything we saw was a sought-after endemic, but it’s good to see old friends, too. And we finally had clear looks at a Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, peering suspiciously from a nasty tangle of vines. We finished the walk with a very close encounter with an apparently young Broad-tailed Hawk, sitting contentedly on a railing on the lower grounds of the Savegre Hotel (near a trout-rearing pond), all but ignoring us.



We then returned for Christmas breakfast, but there was no lingering over coffee today. We were soon heading back down the same road as earlier this morning, this time to a trailhead that led to what we called (on our eBird checklist) the “Waterfall Trail,” which wound its way in rather wobbly fashion along the Rio Savegre, through a lovely riparian forest. Once again, new birds were in the offing, including the squeaky Red-faced Spinetail, as well as two additional endemics, i.e., Dark Pewee and the canopy-dwelling (and hence difficult to spot) Black-thighed Grosbeak. We also saw many of the mountainside species we’d found on our hike the previous morning, when we birded the forest trail above the valley floor.

We made it back just in time to once again peruse the lunch menu (people were getting wise now to the troutburger), and then enjoyed a brief respite. But not for long, as we were soon boarding our 4x4 trucks once again, this time for a ride up the opposite side of the valley to Batsu Gardens, a stylish feeder array

maintained by Savegre Hotel staff for the enjoyment of visiting birders and photographers. The valley view here is fantastic, and we weren't disappointed by the number of species we found.



The only new birds for our list here were three Northern Emerald-Toucanets and a Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, but both species were excellent additions, and very photogenic. There was a light rain falling while we birded here for a couple hours, but we were largely sheltered by canopies that covered the viewing platforms. We saw six species of hummers, with better views than we had before of the endemic Scintillant Hummingbird.

We also had a crazy, close-up experience with several Long-tailed Silky-Flycatchers, who, despite being photographed at close range, were decidedly disinterested in us (birders be damned) while gorging themselves on purple berries. We also had an unexpected close look at Yellow-bellied Siskin.

By late afternoon we were ready to go, and we headed back down the steep track that returned us to the Savegre Hotel. Just in time to brush ourselves off, wander over (as the sun set) for a little Christmas cheer in a glass, and then on to an anticipated holiday dinner in the brightly decorated dining room. Right?



Not so fast! Tonight was owl night, and it was now or never for the Bare-shanked Screech-Owl, the Unspotted Saw-whet Owl, and the Dusky Nightjar. So off we went in the van, with Drew at the wheel. And we weren't just on a short jaunt up the valley this time, we were going to the top! We made it up to where Johan wanted to take us by around 6:00 PM, and after a short while, managed to hear both the nightjar and the screech-owl in the pitch black. But despite considerable effort, the Unspotted Saw-whet was not to be found. In fact, none of our target species were actually seen, but sometimes you just have to be content with what you get when it comes to night birds.

We made it back for our holiday feast by around 7:30, and despite the whirlwind pace set by Johan, we still had energy to spare to enjoy dinner and a special dessert, before wandering back to our rooms. And so ended our leisurely Christmas Day. Whew! But no one complained!

Thursday, December 26: Drive to Caribbean Slope | Alpine Birding and Wildflowers | Galeria de Colibri Feeders | Arrival at La Quinta Sarapiquí Lodge

This morning we had the longest drive of the tour ahead of us. We finished packing up and headed to breakfast early, and were on the road well before 8:00 AM. We proceeded back up the same road we had looked for owls along just 12 hours earlier. But there was no stopping here this time—we were on a mission

to find the Timberline Wren, a rare species whose world-wide distribution consists of only a few locations in the mountains of southern Costa Rica and adjacent Panama.



Drew soon pulled off on a dirt road (Calle Las Vueltas), and we walked with Johan in search of the wren. Although finding this species can often require long waits at even higher elevations than here (we were already at about 9,300 feet), it miraculously only took a few minutes before we heard Timberline Wrens calling from some nearby shrubs. (Johan clearly had the inside scoop on the right place to find them!) We counted five wrens during the hour or so that we birded the site, and everyone had good views of what is often a difficult bird to track down.

We then heard another Resplendent Quetzal downslope, and ended up with some nice photo ops for Slaty Flowerpiercer, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus, Yellow-winged Vireo, Black-capped Flycatcher, and (of course) Timberline Wren. We then heard a Silvery-fronted Tapaculo (another regional endemic), and although a couple of us thought we may have glimpsed this secretive songbird deep in the wet undergrowth, the species was ultimately a “heard only” check-off for most of the group.



During our walk we were also treated to a profusion of colorful wildflowers, including native begonias, alpine wintergreens, melastomes, and other species too numerous to mention, many of which are endemic to the Talamanca range. The native flora of these mountains is extremely diverse and highly developed, though not well-studied, and there are without a doubt many unknown plant species here yet to be discovered and described.



We then continued northeast towards the Caribbean slope, eventually stopping in for lunch at a roadside establishment (Galeria de Colibri, Mirador San Fernando) with an amazing feeder set-up, which Johan wanted us to see. We quickly picked up a number of new species for the trip here, including three stunning hummingbirds (i.e., Green Hermit, Green-crowned Brilliant, and the striking Violet Sabrewing), as well as the colorful Red-headed Barbet, three new tanagers (Scarlet-rumped, Crimson-collared, and Palm), and the unique (and regionally endemic) Prong-billed Barbet.

Despite the urge to remain here and keep shooting photos, we soon came to a consensus that, despite this being our scheduled lunch stop, this place just seemed too risky from a

Covid standpoint. Although anyone who approached us while we watched the birds was polite and wearing a mask, and we were outdoors, it was the day after Christmas and many Costa Ricans had the day off. Consequently, the immensely popular restaurant was jammed with families and exuberant children. Bob consulted with Johan about a better choice for lunch, and although Johan didn't have any alternatives in mind for this area, we tore ourselves away from the feeders and headed off to explore our options. We agreed this would have been a fabulous place to stop and enjoy lunch, if it hadn't been a holiday in the middle of a pandemic!

After about 30 minutes we came across a small BBQ restaurant (Los Gallitos), which seemed pretty much devoid of patrons. Under normal circumstances, an empty restaurant right at lunch time might not have seemed the best recommendation, yet the aroma from the smoking barrel-cookers out front was mouth-watering, and in any case, we were ecstatic that we appeared to have the open-air dining area all to ourselves!

It turned out to be a fabulous choice. We soon had heaps of smoky BBQ and delicious sides piled family-style on our tables, along with plenty of strawberry juice and ice-cold cerveza. And to top it off, we were treated to a large, screened porch just behind our tables, from where the group could bird the farm fields below the restaurant. What a bonus! We spied a Russet-naped Wood-Rail, a Crested Caracara (our only one of the tour), Masked Tityras, Yellow-bellied Elaenias, Red-lored Parrots, several tanagers, and a number of other species, all while waiting for lunch!

It was well into afternoon by the time the last morsel of BBQ disappeared, but the extra time spent here was a small price to pay for a delicious lunch without the crowds of the restaurant



we'd initially stopped at. The group loved it, and it was a great example of how a little flexibility on tour can pay dividends. We arrived at our next destination (La Quinta Sarapiquí Lodge) at about 4:30 PM, still in plenty of time to gather our keys and transfer our luggage to our rooms before sunset.

The lodge had a very nice set of feeders not far from check-in (complete with benches), and most of the

group was drawn in that direction after settling in. We sighted our first Golden-hooded Tanagers of the tour (gorgeous birds!), Clay-colored Thrush, and Melodious Blackbird, as well as all three of Costa Rica's honeycreeper species (i.e., Green, Shining, and Red-legged) sitting together side-by-side on a branch!

Dinner was served buffet-style, but not before we finished our species list review, and enjoyed some well-deserved refreshment while sitting near the pool (yes, it was piña colada night for some of us...).

Friday, December 27: Birding at La Selva | Nature Cruise, Rio Sarapiquí | Comandancia de Sarapiquí Road (Macaws)

We were up early for our buffet breakfast and some coffee, and a quick stop by the Sarapiquí Lodge feeders, before we boarded our van and headed for the nearby La Selva Biological Station. One of the premier



research stations in the world, La Selva is associated with the Organization for Tropical Studies, which includes as members many prestigious universities in the U.S and elsewhere.

We arrived not long after sunrise, and as we left the van were surprised by a flyover of a single Great Green Macaw, a critically endangered species and one of the largest parrots in the Neotropics. A nice way to start the day.

We then headed in to the headquarters complex and were introduced to our guides from the biological station, who would escort us on a morning hike along some of the many paths and trails that crisscross La Selva. Before starting our walk, we listened to a brief overview of the station and its mission, including information about its history and current projects and activities, and were then introduced to an intern studying at a nearby university who would also be joining us.

We spent most of the morning today at La Selva, starting when it was cool and breezy, and ending our walk just before lunch, when it was noticeably warmer and sultrier than it had been in the mountains at Savegre! It was a very productive visit, and we recorded nearly 60 species of birds, as well as an Eyelash Viper, a Collared Peccary, and a couple of three-toed sloths. And there were Howler Monkeys heard in the distance, as well.

Birding highlights here included a pair of Great Tinamou, engaged in some sort of squabble (or perhaps a prelude to courtship) just off the path, a group of Gray-rumped Swifts, Long-billed Hermit, King Vulture, Slaty-tailed and Black-throated Trogons, Yellow-throated Toucan, Broad-billed Motmot, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Spotted and Chestnut-backed Antbirds, White-ruffed and White-collared Manakins, Pale-billed Woodpecker, Bright-rumped Atilla, Stripe-breasted Wren, Blue-gray Tanager, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, and Plain-colored Tanager, as well as a Euphonia trifecta (i.e., Yellow-crowned, Olive-backed, and Yellow-throated), to name just a few.



We made it back to Sarapiquí Lodge in time for lunch and then a bit of free time, during which some of the group parked themselves by the feeders to see what might come by. The lighting was good for photos, and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, Crimson-collared and Golden-hooded Tanagers, Gray-headed Chachalacas, Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, Clay-colored Thrushes, Green and Shining Honeycreepers, Buff-throated Saltators, and dainty Bananaquits all put in appearances. By mid-afternoon we were ready for another outing, this time in a slow boat on the Rio Sarapiquí. The dock was maybe 20 minutes from the lodge, and we were there and boarded in no time.

We recorded about 30 bird species on the river in two hours, as well as a beautiful Emerald Basilisk, Spectacled Caimans, a couple groups of basking Black River Turtles,

and several enormous Green Iguanas lounging motionless in the canopy. Birding highlights included flocks of Spotted Sandpipers (only because how often do you see Spotted Sandpipers in a flock?), Black-faced Grosbeak, Little Blue Heron, Green Heron, Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers, Great Green Macaw, Long-tailed Tyrant, Southern Rough-winged and Mangrove Swallows, and Neotropic Cormorant.



After leaving the river, we ended the day with a quick birding stop at Comandancia de Sarapiquí Road, an unpaved, rural track known for its huge trees that often harbor roosting macaws. We found two Scarlet Macaws, as well as Crimson-fronted Parakeets, Red-lore Parrots, a Gray Hawk, Montezuma Oropendolas, and a Variable Seedeater that was new to our list. Also seen was an Olive-crowned Yellowthroat that was a life bird for everyone (except Johan, of course!).

We would return to this spot in the morning, but for now it was back to the lodge for something cold, and another stroll through the buffet line.

Saturday, December 28: Morning Birding at Sarapiquí Lodge | Paraiso de Ranas | Rainforest Adventures and Braulio National Park | Canopy Tram

After breakfast this morning, we left early for a more in-depth visit to the Comandancia de Sarapiquí Road area where we had briefly stopped late yesterday. Drew drove the van ahead of us down the road and we followed, birding as we went. A couple more Scarlet Macaws came by, and some of us briefly encountered a White-throated Crake with Johan's help. A pair of Long-tailed Tyrants was silhouetted nicely against the morning sky, and we also had prolonged looks at the regionally endemic Nicaraguan Seed-Finch, a bird not easy to find at this location according to Johan. Even for a seed-finch, this species has an amazing bill.

We then picked up several very active Slaty Spinetails singing in the adjacent coffee plantation, another new bird for our checklist. As we moved forward and walked along the grassy margin of a secondary forest, we also spotted Black-striped Sparrow, Blue-black Grassquit, Morelet's Seedeaters, a Short-tailed Hawk overhead, and several Ruddy Ground-Doves.

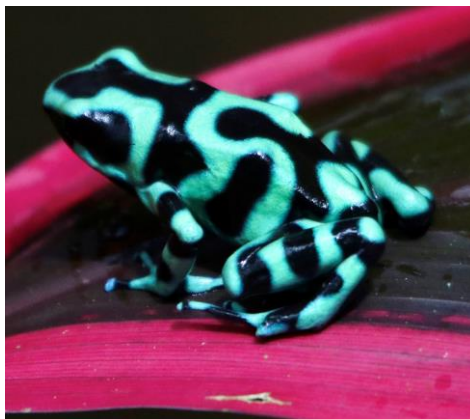


Our stop here was not long, however, as we needed to get back and vacate our rooms at Sarapiquí Lodge, before making a stop at Paraiso de Ranas (Frog's Heaven), a family-run conservation site located on the way to Tapirus Lodge (our last overnight stay before the tour concluded tomorrow).

We pulled into Paraiso de Ranas mid-morning, and met our local guide for a 2-hour visit. The property consisted of several lush acres of reclaimed forest, with numerous native plant species and a remarkable number of birds, not to mention the several species of colorful frogs that occur on site.

Were we soon wandering the paths with our guide, spotting a range of now familiar birds, but also several that were new to the tour, including Green Ibis (including a bird sitting high in the canopy—rather strange), Cinnamon Woodpecker, Rufous-winged Woodpecker (a regional endemic), Cocoa Woodcreeper, and a female Scaly-breasted Hummingbird (sitting on a tiny, woven nest sheltered by an overhanging leaf!). Old favorites that we were happy to see again were Palm Tanager, Bananaquit, Montezuma Oropendola, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Collared Aracari, Buff-throated Saltator, and Hoffman's Woodpecker.

While the birding here was great, we also had easy views of a Hoffman's Toe-toed Sloth leering at us from high in the canopy, a tip-toeing Central American Agouti, and several Variegated Squirrels.



And then there were the frogs. Of course, our local guide knew just where to find them, and how to carefully handle them while assuring that (1) we had a reasonable chance of getting photos, and (2) they would sit still long enough for everyone to have a good look. The three species he found for us were Red-eyed Tree Frog, Green-and-black Poison-dart Frog, and Strawberry Poison-dart Frog. Tropical frogs with

shocking colors, such as these, are often believed to be aposematic (meaning their coloration is a warning to predators that the frog may be toxic). In the case of the Red-eyed Tree Frog, this is a ruse, however, since this species isn't actually poisonous. But the Poison-dart frogs we saw are indeed venomous!



Our next destination found us back in the mountains, at Tapirus Lodge (adjacent to Braulio Carrillo National Park), with its well-known rainforest tram. We had a quick buffet lunch upon arrival, and then, since check-in for our rooms at the lodge was a bit delayed, we went ahead and boarded our tram cars, which would transport us through and above the forest canopy and into the reserve area.

Being mid-week, there were relatively few visitors here when we arrived, and we had the tram largely to ourselves. The unhurried trip up and back through the forest approached nearly 2 hours, and although the birding was slow on the way up, by the time we returned (in late afternoon) it had picked up considerably. Between the two tram cars (the group had to split up) we saw or heard 19 species, including several birds new to the tour, including Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Northern Schiffornis, Bay Wren, Violet-headed hummingbird, and Crowned Woodnymph. And perhaps the most interesting was Lattice-tailed Trogon, which Johan said he had rarely seen before. With a distinctive pale iris, it's an endemic, and unique among Costa Rican trogons.

Almost as soon as we exited the tram, we had word that a Sunbittern was being seen on a nearby forested stream, and we managed to get there in time to see it. It's an amazing bird, with recent research suggesting it's most closely related to the Kagu, an odd species that's endemic to New Caledonia in the far South Pacific! And finally, just before we assembled for our last checklist review, Sheila and Kelly (off on a quick walk) ran into a local guide, who generously led them into the forest at dusk to see a roost for Olive-backed Quail-Doves, one of the best birds of the trip!

Although we were here only one night, the staff was anxious to ensure we had a memorable final evening for the tour. It was really beautiful out, an ideal

temperature and mosquito-free! The open-air dinner was delicious, and we enjoyed recounting our many experiences of the past week. Most of us would be heading to the airport tomorrow for our flights home.

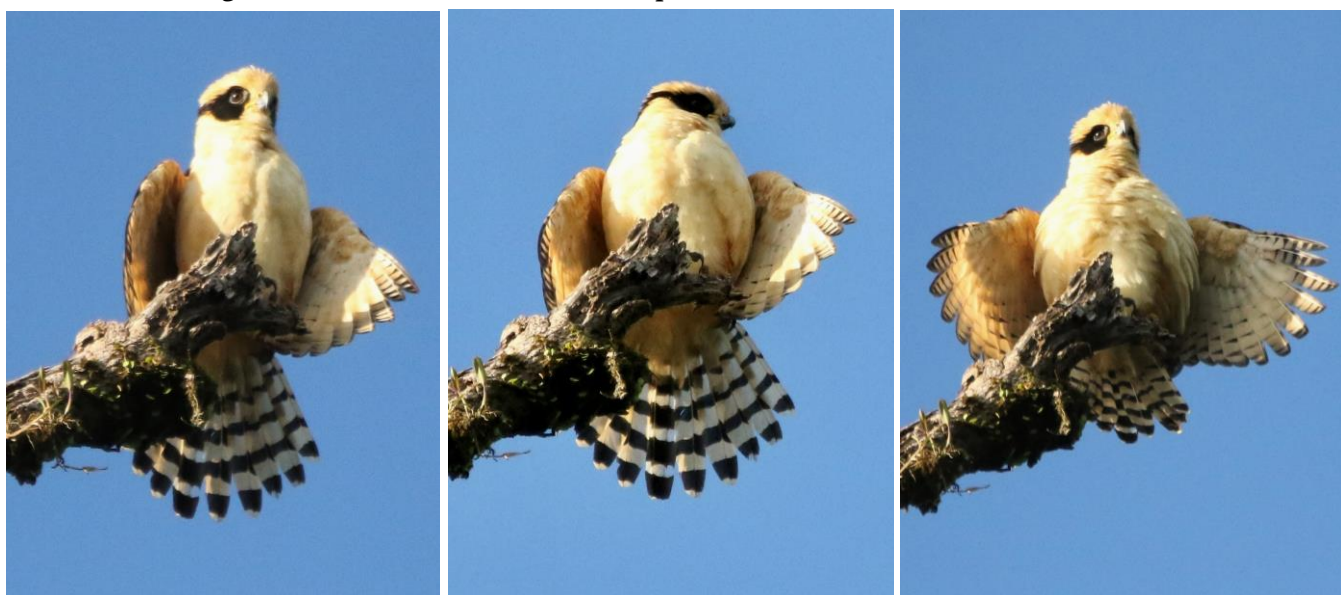
Sunday, December 29: Last Minute Birding at Tapirus Lodge | Depart for San Jose Airport or Hotel

The final day of an international tour is often focused on heading straight to the airport, to make sure we're there in time to complete the necessary formalities before boarding our flights for home. However, being just an hour away from San José, and with our flights in the afternoon or later, we had the chance today to

bird for a couple more hours at Tapirus Lodge, before packing up and heading down the mountain. So some of the group met Johan very early, to take advantage of a gorgeous final morning in the forest, hoping to perhaps see one or two of the target species we'd missed during the trip.

There were no expectations, of course, and if nothing exceptional was seen, no problem. The tour had gone very well so far, and you can only ask for so much. But that said, after having gone just a short distance as the group headed out, Kelly casually asked Johan if he knew there was an umbrellabird overhead. What!?! Sure enough, a Bare-necked Umbrellabird was indeed hovering in the canopy right above them, in full view. The umbrellabird is a very rare species in Central America (and highly threatened by deforestation). And seeing one—especially close-up—is really exceptional, and definitely a highlight for any tour! Wow.

Next up was the Laughing Falcon, which had so far eluded us. Not being a particularly rare species, we were surprised we hadn't had a good look yet. And what's more, this was the bird that John had especially hoped to find. Though he seemed resigned at this point to missing it, as we approached the end of the tour, he was nonetheless disappointed. But then, just down the road from the umbrellabird, there it was. The Laughing Falcon! Right in the open! And not just in the open, but shamelessly cavorting on the end of a bare snag, in full view, looking this way and then that way, spreading its wings, literally dancing at the end of its perch. It seemed to have no intention of leaving. We didn't just get a good look, we could have spent the entire morning with this bird. John ended the trip a contented man.



Elsewhere, Bob, who had (very regrettably) not initially accompanied the early morning group with Johan, due to other pressing matters (so he missed the umbrellabird!), was just leaving his front porch to catch up when he looked down at a clump of Heliconia. Something odd was creeping on it. But what? It was a White-tipped Sicklebill! Sicklebills (there are only two species) are perhaps the strangest of hummingbirds. They don't hover when feeding, but mostly cling to the inflorescences like tiny squirrels, probing for nectar. Their remarkable bills are specifically adapted to the bent floral tubes of the Heliconia and related flowers, and so extraordinarily decurved that hovering and probing in typical hummingbird fashion would be impossible. So they crawl around instead. This was the first time Bob had seen a sicklebill feeding.

As the morning wound down, we also picked up Tawny-capped Euphonia (another endemic!), Orange-billed Sparrow, Carmiol's Tanager, Blue-black Grosbeak, Red-capped Manakin, and Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, the final additions to our species list before heading back to pack up. But what a great final morning of birding! If only every tour could end like this one.

We had a wonderful group of seasoned travelers on this trip, with a superb birding guide in Johan, and were rewarded with some amazing birds and breathtaking scenery (which continued up through the very last morning!). Without exception, everyone showed respect for each other, the guides, and our driver Drew

(who actually had the toughest job of all). The group knew when to be patient, when to listen and learn, and definitely when to have fun, and we left looking forward to another adventure.

Until next time.

Photos (by Bob Meinke)

Front Cover (clockwise from upper left): Zebra Longwing butterfly; Green Heron in flight; Northern Emerald-Toucanet; displaying Rufous-collared Sparrow; John, perusing the forest below; Lesser Violetear in flight; Flame-colored Tanager; Talamanca Hummingbird (female); Red-eyed Tree Frog (center photo)

Text photos, from the beginning: Birding the gardens at the Bougainvillea Hotel; Social Flycatcher; Squirrel Cuckoo; White-tipped Dove; Rufous-naped Wren; Lesson's Motmot; Johan Fernandez and his scope; Buff-throated Saltator; Lesser Violetear (upper left); Talamanca Hummingbird (upper right); Fiery-throated hummingbird (lower left); Volcano Hummingbird (female, lower right); Mountain Thrush; high altitude lunch at Paraiso de Quetzales; Collared Redstart; Resplendent Quetzal (both photos males); Torrent Tyrannulet; rare Buffy Tuftedcheek (upper three photos); White-throated Mountain-Gem; Silver-throated Tanager; Broad-winged Hawk; Northern Emerald-Toucanet; Long-tailed Silky-Flycatcher (female); wild Begonia species (possibly *Begonia incarnata*); endemic melastome species (*Monochaetum vulcanicum*); shrubby wintergreen species (*Gaultheria myrsinoides*); Green-crowned Brilliant (female); birding on the porch at the Los Gallitos BBQ joint; White-collared Manakin (upper left); Crimson-collared Tanager (center); Red-throated Ant-Tanager (female, lower left); Blue-gray Tanager; Black-cheeked Woodpecker; smiling Black River Turtles; Cinnamon Woodpecker; Collared Aracari; Red-eyed Tree Frog; Green-and-black Poison-dart Frog; Strawberry Poison-dart Frog; Dondi and Jeff, fun on the tram; Lattice-tailed Trogon (female); Laughing Falcon showing off; Braulio Carrillo National Park

