

Costa Rica Trip Report – Naturalist Journeys March 9th-18th, 2012

Guide: Willy Alfaro; host: Woody Wheeler

With twelve participants: Judy, June, Bud and Giny, Lawrence, Sara, and Matthew, Sylvia, Marlene, John and Judy, and Lori



Blue Crested Motmot

Day 1 – Hotel Bouganvillia

A breezy, sunny day with comfortable temperatures welcomed us to Costa Rica. Trip participants had ample time to explore the beautifully-kept ten-acre jardin on the hotel grounds that provided a great introduction to Costa Rica's plants and birds. Four bird species with Rufous in their names frequented this garden: Rufous-collared Sparrow, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Rufous-capped Warbler and Rufous-naped Wren. A Summer Tanager matched perfectly the red blossoms of one of the gardens floral shrubs. Flocks of noisy Crimson-faced Parakeets flew overhead along with the occasional Black Vultures and a Zone-tailed Hawk. The show-stoppers were Blue-crowned Mot Mot that perched conspicuously with long racquet-tipped tail feathers.

At dinner we all became acquainted with one-another and met our guide, Willy Alfaro. Following an excellent dinner, we retired to our rooms eagerly anticipating the natural wonders yet to come.

Day 2 – Savegre Mountain Lodge

Today we left the San Jose area and drove south through Cartago into the Talamanca Mountain region. Willy regaled us in the bus with a historical, social and political overview of Costa Rica. He emphasized that happiness is an important index of well-being in his country. Soon after stopping at a bustling café and market to obtain cups of Quetzal brand coffee, we went looking for the coffee's namesake.



Here we followed a local guide on trails through a private reserve in search of quetzals and other delights. The visitor center at the trail head had four species of hummingbirds on feeders, including: Fiery-throated, Magnificent, Green Violet-ear, and Volcano.



Magnificent Hummingbird



White-throated Mountain Gem



Violet Sabrewing

Spurred on by our local guide who reported that quetzals were currently active in the area, we started hiking up the steep, muddy trails. On the way upslope, a Sooty Robin greeted us, along with a Black and Yellow Silky Flycatcher and a Wilson's Warbler. Soon afterward, the first Resplendent Quetzal soared overhead, its oversized tail feathers clearly visible. We hiked a short distance farther hoping to get a better look when Gingy spotted a perched male. No matter how many photos you have seen in advance, this bird definitely lives up to its resplendent moniker. Awe-inspiring? Absolutely! And then we saw three more. We lingered after they left, peering into one of their nest holes and examining the wild avocado fruits that comprise 80% of their diet. Quetzals are a spectacular bird that inhabits a spectacular place, the mountainous tropical rainforests of Central America.

On our return loop we encountered a mixed flock of birds at close range including Ruddy Tree Runner, Hairy Woodpecker (which looks different down here), Slaty Flowerpiercer spotted by Sylvia, and a Large-footed Finch. As if all of this weren't enough, a Silver-throated Jay and several Azure-hooded Jays flew and perched in the canopy. Toward the end of our walk, a Sooty-crested Bush Tanager flew into a bush within ten feet of us. You know that it has been a good day when your guide sees a Life Bird. So it was when Willy spotted his first ever Silver-throated Jay.

After a nice buffet lunch, we drove deep into a pristine tropical canyon along the Savegre River and settled into the incredibly picturesque and birdy Savegre Lodge. Pura Vida!

In the late afternoon, most of the group walked with Willy above the lodge for a chance at different species. We were rewarded with two new ones: Streaked Xenops and Black-faced Solitaire. We hiked back down hill as the sun set over Savegre Valley to enjoy happy hour on a very happy day.

Day 3 – Savegre River and vicinity

On a clear, sunny morning with a light breeze and temperatures in the 70s, we set out for an easy hike into the tropical rainforest. On the way, we had many distractions: a Green Emerald Hummingbird nest with two nestlings in it; two Silver-throated Tanagers; and two Chestnut-capped Brush Finches. We also had a close encounter with one of our previously elusive birds, the Black-faced Solitaire. Its resonant, haunting song was well-described by June as “the sound of a swinging gate.” John found a Green Spiny Lizard patiently perched on a rock affording everyone a chance to see and photograph it. We searched again for the Resplendent Quetzal near a nesting area. By waiting patiently for an hour or so, we were rewarded when the female first emerged from her nest hole, flew off for a while, and then returned in plain site.



Resplendent Quetzal



Green Spiny Lizard

Our most dedicated photographers, Bud, Matthew and Sylvia were challenged but delighted to photograph these and most other birds on our tour. Following a stream into the deeper rainforest, we encountered a Mountain Robin, a flock of Sulfur-winged Parakeets, both Black-cheeked and Three-striped Warblers, and a Black-thighed Grosbeak, a regional endemic. This incredibly scenic trail led us to a water fall and pool where we took a group photo.

After lunch, the group took a drive up-river to one of the most scenic coffee shops ever. Situated on a hillside overlooking Cerro de la Muerte and acres of tropical rainforest, we watched birds at and around the feeders, including a Yellow-bellied Siskin, Large-footed Finch and Long-tailed Silky Flycatcher.



Large-footed Finch

Day 4 – Savegre to Rancho Naturalista

Today we departed the lovely Savegre Hotel to head toward the Caribbean side of the Costa Rican mountain divide. Our lunch stop was at an open air restaurant with extremely generous proportions. Sarah, Sylvia and Lori ordered soup, thinking they would get a moderate lunch. Much to their surprise, the enormous bowls of soup they received were family-sized, and filled to the brim with fresh potatoes, corn, plantains, pumpkin, yucca and more. Shortly after this fulfilling lunch, Judi spotted our first Cattle Egrets; some of them perched atop cattle. Near Santa Cruz, Lori spotted a soaring Swallow-tailed Kite that was soon accompanied by eight more soaring low over the valley searching for insects and lizards. We pulled over to watch this spectacle. Some of the kites had lizards that they ingested in flight.

Our next stop was at Guayabo National Monument, site of a former village of Indigenous people who vanished mysteriously prior to the coming of the Spaniards more than 600 years ago. After viewing a scale model exhibit of this former village, we set out for a hike to a viewpoint above and then through the actual ruins. As we entered the lush rainforest, we first heard then saw Montezuma Oropendula and Collared Aracari.



Guayabo National Monument ruins of lost civilization

After this enchanting experience, we took the long and windy road to Rancho Naturalista where we settled in at dusk to the sounds of hooting owls, howling coyotes and legions of frogs and crickets. An excellent home cooked meal awaited as we retired to our cozy quarters with jungle sounds all around.

Day 5 – Rancho Naturalista and Vicinity

At Rancho Naturalista, you are always “there” as far as birds and wildlife are concerned. Soon after breakfast, Judith photographed a rare Tawny-breasted Flycatcher that the local guide assured us was a fortunate sighting. Rancho’s array of hummingbird feeders are hyper-active with Green breasted Mango, Green Hermit, Violet-crowned Woodnymph, White-necked Jacobin and Brown Violet-ear Hummingbirds. Meanwhile, Rancho’s banana feeders attract the likes of Gray-headed Chacalaca, Palm, White Line, Passerini, Golden-hooded and Blue-gray Tanagers. Every once in a while, the Chacalacas shriek and then the birds all go silent and vacate the feeders when a Bi-colored Hawk soars through hoping to ambush birds on the feeders.

Since the feeders were so enthralling, some opted to take it easy and watch the ongoing show. The rest followed our guide Willy, and local guide, Harry on a short hike on the Rancho grounds where we found birds practically every step of the way, starting with Cocoa Woodcreeper, Green Honeycreeper and Band-backed Wren. As the clouds lifted, we stopped by a flowering hedge row where several stunning Snowcap Hummingbirds were rapidly flitting from one blossom to the next. Farther downhill, we encountered White-crowned Parrots, a Masked Tityra bringing nesting materials into her nest hole, and a Long-tailed Tyrant flycatcher alternately fly-catching and perching atop a long slender snag. Higher in the canopy was a Black-headed Tody Flycatcher, which Harry said, was another hard-to-spot bird.

In the mid-afternoon, the group joined Willy and Harry for a short drive to a scenic river gorge leading to a Sunbittern nest. Harry found a baby Sunbittern on the nest, constantly swaying its rear end from side to side in rhythmic fashion. Soon after, Matthew spotted the adult fishing at the outlet of a tributary stream. Downstream, we found a Louisiana Waterthrush and a Torrent Tyrannulet -- both feeding their young. How remarkable to find two different species of water birds feeding their young in the same stretch of stream!



Sunbittern

Ever been to a hummingbird bathing area? None of us had either, until we accompanied Harry on a short hike to a series of small and beautiful natural pools deep in a woodland canyon. In the waning hours of afternoon light we witnessed an amazing spectacle here. Three species of hummingbirds took turns hovering above then plunging repeatedly into these pools to bathe. Woodnymph, Green Hermit and Snowcap comprised the hummingbirds. Later a Nightingale Thrush, several Tawny-throated Leaftossers and a Swainson's Thrush came to bathe. Unbelievable!

To put a cap on this phenomenal day, local guide Harry took some of us on an owl prowl after a delicious Moroccan chicken dinner. Our first encounter was not with owls; it was with fruit bats. Their large wings fluttered inches away from our heads. Then Harry pointed out several nests with his flash light, including a pendulous moss-draped Common Tody Flycatcher nest and a Scaly Wren nest burrow. A half-mile or so up the trail, we heard our first hooting. Harry engaged in a hooting conversation with this, a Mottled Owl for some time, but we were unable to get a look at it through the dense forest canopy. While searching, Woody heard a strange rhythmical scratching sound, which Harry said was a Kinkajou.

Day 6 – Rancho Naturalista to Saraquipi

At first light, a few hearty souls came out to see the bug screen unveiling. The screen resembles a large white mounted piece of fly paper fastened to a frame with a light trained on it. Insects of many kinds get stuck to it providing a banquet for a wide variety of birds, including today a pair of Red-throated Ant Tanagers, a White-throated Wood Wren with its clear, ear-piercing call, and a second great look at the rare Tawny-chested Flycatcher that vibrates its tail up and down when it sings. What an impressive bird parade!

Enroute to Saraquipi, we stopped at a horse pasture to search for mockingbirds. As often happens with birding, you find something else instead: in this case, the ever-alert Matthew spotted a Southern Lapwing with young, and our first Red-winged Blackbird of the trip. Then Sylvia found an Amazon Kingfisher, and Lori a Little Blue Heron.

Next stop was Heliconium Island, a blend of attractive landscaping with native habitat surrounded by water and riparian vegetation. Howler Monkeys welcomed us with their loud barking/hooting vocalizations. While hiking the island loop, we encountered Green Ibis, Ringed Kingfisher, Mangrove Swallow, and a Rufescent Tiger Heron. Sarah spotted the one and only shorebird seen on the trip: Spotted Sandpiper. Sylvia found a Neotropical Cormorant, our first cormorant of the trip. A Basilisk Lizard posed in a tree and Matt spotted our first Poison Dart Frog. As we departed the island, two Rufous Jacamars perched on the footbridge railing just 30 feet ahead of us.



Blue-gray Tanager



Basilisk



Summer Tanager

On the way to our next hotel, we stopped briefly to look at a pair of Three-toed Sloths high in a tree top. One was scratching itself at a pace which seemed rapid compared to its normal sloth-like movements. At dusk we arrived at the Saraquipi Hotel, home for the next two nights.

Day 7 – Exploring La Selva by foot and boat

Today we awoke to the deep husky tones of Howler Monkeys. Just walking to breakfast was an adventure. Matt, Lori and I saw a Howler Monkey seemingly performing for us with his acrobatic tree-climbing skills. A Chestnut-mandibled Toucan made a brief appearance, as did a White-tipped Dove.

Shortly after breakfast we boarded our bus for the quick trip to La Selva research station. Once there, we began walking with Willy and a guide from this internationally famous field station for tropical studies surrounded by thousands of acres of tropical rainforest. It did not take long to find birds, monkeys and reptiles. Just a few paces from the field station buildings, we found an Olive-backed Euphonia and a Cinnamon Becard. Then on the edge of the Futbol field for staff and students, we were treated to a spectacle courtesy of a family of Crested Guan. We watched for 10 minutes as a pair of adults took turns caretaking their three young by ushering them under their tail feathers, all the while fanning their feathers up and down. Willy said he had never seen this before, and captured it in still photos (below left) and on video.



Great crested Guan with young

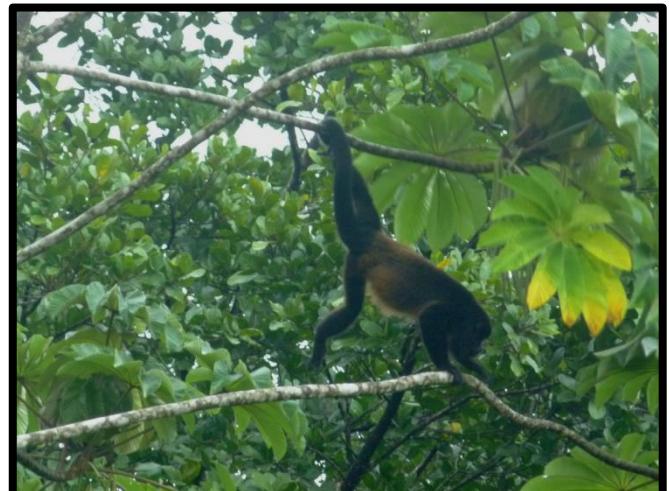


Slaty-backed Trogon

Further into the lushest of all tropical rainforests experienced so far, we found five Green Iguanas perched high in the tree canopy, along with several Howler Monkeys that occasionally let forth with a fearsome growl. Fluorescent red and black Poison Dart frogs hopped through the leaf litter beneath giant trees with enormous buttressed roots and multiple long vines hanging from them. Collared Peccaries scurried about, and a venomous, fluorescent Eye-lash Viper struck a “look but definitely don’t touch” pose. A Two-toed Sloth clasped its baby tightly as it hung to a tree limb. The natural wonders in this, one of the world’s most biologically-diverse places, are literally everywhere.



Eyelash Viper with Matt behind
Photo by Willy Alfaro



Mantled Howler Monkey

Birds, of course were a major component of this diversity, and with the help of our capable guides, we found quite a few new species here, including: Purple-crowned Fairy (Hummingbird), Black-faced Grosbeak, Lesser Greenlet, a Northern Barred Woodcreeper, and a Rufous Motmot. Larry quipped after seeing our second

species of this bird, that we had seen Mot Mot Mot Mot! Willy then heard, and soon after pointed to two birds that are on the endangered species list. These were Great Green Macaws that flew directly overhead, giving everyone a chance to see and hear them. Willy said there are only about 60 pairs of these birds left in Costa Rica. This sobering statistic reinforced the importance of Costa Rica's impressive conservation efforts that have led to the protection of 25% of the entire country's land mass.

In the mid-afternoon, we boarded a small riverboat for a cruise up the Saraquipi and Puerto Viejo Rivers. As our craft plied the cool green waters, we had excellent looks at Bare-faced Tiger Heron, Sungrebe, Amazon and Green kingfishers, and a Great Cassoway. We crossed underneath the suspension bridge at La Selva that we walked across just a few hours ago. Then we flowed downstream, enjoying close-up views of Green Heron, Green Iguanas and Caiman. Our day in La Selva showcased the incredible diversity of this place, and why it is such an appropriate place to study tropical rainforests.



Poison Dart Frog



Caiman



Bare-throated Tiger Heron

Day 8 – Saraquipi to the Airport

Willy kindly took a few early risers on a birding walk on the hotel grounds prior to our 8 AM departure to the airport. Like every other outing on this trip, this one proved to be rewarding. Chestnut -mandibled Toucans moved through the canopy, one stopping to feed on fruits with its massive bill. It was soon joined by a Keel-billed Toucan, with its flashy, multi-colored bill. A mixed flock of warblers comprised of Bay-breasted, Chestnut-backed, and Yellow passed through the dense foliage. Several parakeets called raucously from nearby trees. Among them were Olive-throated, Orange-chinned and Brown-hooded.

Sadly, half of our group had to depart today. Willy set up a self-timed group photo, utilizing his skills as a professional photographer. We then boarded the bus for a scenic drive through the highlands on the shoulder of Poas Volcano, stopping to gaze at a spectacular waterfall along the way. As Willy dropped some of us off at the airport, we reflected upon the incredible experience we just had. At 232 species, Willy said we had seen about 25% of Costa Rica's total species of birds. While this was remarkable, so was the sheer variety of flora and fauna and the habitat that distinguishes this country, one of the most beautiful and naturally diverse

places on earth. We thank Willy Alfaro, an amazingly, knowledgeable guide, for his superb interpretive and photography skills, not to mention his great sense of humor.

