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Costa Rica Trip Report

By Wynne Brown

Naturalist Journeys, Jan. 23-Feb. 5, 2013

Guide: Willy Alfaro

With nine participants: Julie, John, Phil, Barbara, Kate, Bill, Claudia, Carol, and Wynne

Wed., Jan 23 - Arrival in San Jose, Hotel Bougainvillea

Welcome to Costa Rica! More than half the group arrived in time to explore Hotel Bougainvillea's grounds that feature 10 manicured acres with 500 species of plants and 50 species of birds. What an ideal introduction to some of plants and birds we'll be seeing!

Due to timing of their flight, we missed Julie, John, and Carol at the get-acquainted dinner, but the rest of us had a lively time getting to know Willy and one another. Once the other three arrived soon after dinner, and we all retired to rest up for tomorrow – until 1:15 when the whole hotel shook with a 5.4 quake! No damage even though it was centered not far away in Cartago.



Thurs., Jan 24 San Jose to Trogon Lodge

Everyone gathered for a casual relaxed breakfast, exchanged introductions with the late arrivals, and compared earthquake reactions and – who had gotten to see the Blue-crowned Motmot outside the dining room window. Gradually, we moved toward our van and met the delightful Jimmy who'll be driving us for both the main tour and the extension.



Not only is Jimmy a superb driver with a keen sloth-spotting eye, but having a driver frees Willy up to patiently answer our many questions and provide some information about Costa Rica, including these tidbits:

- 50 percent of CR's mammals are bats, 85 percent of the fauna are in the treetops
- Costa Rica has five active volcanoes: The most recent eruption, Irazu, blew the day John F Kennedy came in 1962 and rained ash for two years.
- The top income-earning business is manufacturing: amazon, LL Bean, and Intel are all here.
- Second-highest income generator is pineapples/bananas. Coffee held this slot (*grano del oro* = grain of gold) until 1960 when bananas took over; 1990s tourism took top spot.

Willy also gave us a brief history:

- 1502-1551 - Spanish ran Costa Rica
- 1563 - Cartago settled by Franciscan church, which abolished slavery

- 1779 - The capital moved from Cartago to San Jose
- 1821 - CR became independent from Spain. Willy: "The key to Costa Rican history is that it's a very old democracy: Everyone was poor, there were no landlords, and everyone wanted to be involved. All were given 2 hectares - if they farmed it for 5 years, it was theirs to keep."



Soon we arrived in Cartago, passing the old basilica that remains as it was when the 1910 earthquake halted construction, and pausing to visit the new basilica, built in 1912, awed by the service inside and lovely tile columns.

Our next stop was a supermarket where we all participated in serious snack research before heading on to Mirador de Quetzal, high in the cloud forest. There we spent some time reveling in the hummingbirds at the feeders (Violet-eared, Magnificent, Volcano, Fiery-throated) and Blue and White Swallows before setting off for a steep hike in search of the elusive Resplendent Quetzal. Jason, our local guide, found two females and a male, but at a distance.



Other sightings included a Black Guan, Ruddy Treerunner, Brown Jay, as well as Sooty Robins (aka Thrushes), Yellow-winged Vireo, Black-cheeked Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Spangle-cheeked Tanager, and the enchanting Collared Redstart. We also heard an Ochraceous Wren and a Gray-breasted Wood Wren. We were able to see Costa Rica's entire range of silky flycatchers: Black and Yellow, as well as Long-tailed, and caught a great view of a handsome pair of Chlorophonias. And of course we saw a Clay-colored Robin, CR's national bird.



A lively lunch set the stage for what Carol would later name our group: The Laughing and Eating Tour! We ate in the upstairs dining room with a choice of trout, chicken, or beef with copious amounts of salad, frijoles, squash, and rice – with an astonishing view of the valley below.

Afterwards, we did more hummer-watching with ample chances to photograph a more than cooperative Rufous-collared Sparrow as he sang in response to another not too far away.

After lunch we moved on to Miriam's Quetzals for coffee and homemade bread and a terrific set of feeders, where we added Flame-colored Tanagers, Acorn Woodpeckers, Yellow-thigh Finch, Large-footed Finch, Sooty Thrush, and White-throated Mountain Gems.

Even guides get to see something new or unusual occasionally: the big excitement for Willy? Having Phil find an Ochraceous Pewee!

After passing over more steep, narrow, twisty roads that wound through lovely wooded and agricultural land highlighted by brilliant flowering Poro trees, we plunged down a ravine to the Trogon Lodge where we were greeted by a Black Phoebe dashing about the creek.

Each rustic but well-appointed cabin perches on the steep hillside overlooking the grounds, shining trout ponds, and shimmering water falls of this lovely lodge. After a buffet dinner of pork or trout, cream of *ayote* (squash) soup, salad, and ice cream for dessert, we convened to go over the day's list of birds and headed to bed. A lovely touch: At this time of year, the cloud forest is COLD, so the staff adds a hot water bottle in its own little sock to each bed.

And at 3:20 a.m.? Another earthquake! This one a measly 3.4...



Fri., Jan. 25

Savegre River Valley

What a start to the day! We'd no sooner had breakfast (including the traditional *gallo pinto* preferably with Lizano sauce) and headed out when, within less than a mile – was a female Resplendent Quetzal! Another guide told Willy that the male was in the nearby stump, digging it out for the couple's nest. Sure enough, as we all watched, the male suddenly flew into sight, giving us a great view of the pair. Wow – Resplendent



indeed! The female soon flew away, but the male remained for 30 or 40 minutes, giving all of us plenty of opportunity for pictures as Willy helped each of us record photos through the spotting scope with our cell phones ... Isn't technology amazing!

We moved on down the road to Savegre Hotel Natural Reserve and Spa where we ambled and birded around their gardens and trails, seeing a Red-tailed Hawk, both Band-tailed and Ruddy pigeons, Green Violetears hummingbird, Slaty Flowerpiercers, White-throated Mountain Gems, Volcano Hummingbirds, Stripe-tailed Hummingbirds – and a Mountain Squirrel, our first mammal. And of course our daily dose of vultures: both Black and Turkey.

Our timing was perfect as it began to pour just as we returned to the Savegre Lodge. After a delicious buffet lunch of salad, trout, vegetables, and assorted desserts, we relaxed on the covered porch and were rewarded with an extended sighting of an Emerald Toucanet. Others included Blue-Gray Tanagers, Acorn Woodpeckers, and many hummingbirds.

We returned to Trogon Lodge for happy hour (and wi-fi) in the bar, bird list conferral, downloading photos, dinner, for some the Arizona Wildcats basketball game via iPhone (the Cats won!), and bed.

What? A night without earthquakes? Yes – which was to be the pattern for the rest of the trip, which was fine with us.

Sat., Jan 26 Cerro de la Muerte

After breakfast, we wandered around the gardens, along the edges of the trout ponds and then down the road, seeing Black-faced Solitaires, Sooty-capped Bush Tanagers, Ruddy Treerunners, Mountain Elainias – and the prize of the day, spotted by Kate: two baby Volcano Hummingbirds in a nest within inches of the roadway!



We returned to Miriam's for what we decided was the best lunch yet: fresh trout, salad, vegetables, plantains, steamed peaches, homemade bread, and fresh-squeezed blackberry (*moro*) juice – between photographing Flame-colored Tanagers, Acorn Woodpeckers, Yellow-thigh Finches, Large-footed Finches, Sooty Thrushes, Clay colored Robins, White-throated Mountain Gems, and we added Tropical Kingbird to our list.



Willy is not only a talented and experienced photographer, but a gifted and patient teacher, able to help with any photo issue with any camera from cell phone to intermediate to professional level equipment. When not guiding, he also teaches photo tours for National Geographic, so we felt doubly lucky to be on the receiving end of both his birding and photography knowledge!

Next we headed up on through the cloud forest to the 11,400 peak of Cerro de la Muerte in the Talamanca range along the mist-shrouded road, with the van's windshield wipers flap-flapping in the rain. At the top, the rain stopped

and the air was warmer than we all expected as we stepped out of the bus into the paramo ecosystem – an environment similar to heath. The plants here tend to be low-growing with protective adaptations against both cold and extreme sun: Often leaves aren't shed to protect the plant's trunk, as well as being silver to reflect high altitude light; other adaptations include rosette shape and small leathery leaves. Plants in this area include snapdragon flower, *Calciolaria*, and an Indian Paintbrush. Another reptilian gem today was the Green Spiny Lizard (*Sceloporus malachiticus*). We picked up a new bird as well: a Volcano Junco.



Some people felt like walking, so 2 miles from our Trogon Lodge home, we left the bus, paused to shop at Dantica Gallery, and ambled down the mountain for an evening of updating our bird list, dinner of lasagna, salad (watercress as optional green), and homemade dressings. What a great day!



Sun., Jan 27 Trogon Lodge to Rancho Naturalista via Guayabo Nat'l Monument

Gradually, we packed up and hit the road, pausing at a roadside market to sample the fruit *granadilla*, and buy coffee to take home as gifts. We drove on through the Turrialba mountain range, past small towns where everyone seemed to be outside enjoying a sunny cool Sunday. After stopping at El Sapito ("the little toad"), an open-air restaurant with gigantic portions, Jimmy drove us skillfully through prosperous STEEP farming country, past cows, tidy houses, and *poro* trees in brilliant flower.

We stopped at Guayabo National Monument, an archeological site and former home of indigenous people who vanished 600 years ago. Research continues today, and we watched as a staff member oh-so-carefully unearthed a pot – to the soundtrack of Montezuma Oropendulas. We also found a Slender Anole, *Norops limifrons*, who posed, cooperatively

extending his dewlap until every one of us had a chance to photograph him – and then hiked on, up to a viewpoint overlooking the river valley below.

We arrived at Rancho Naturalista with its numerous fruit and sugar water feeders that provide a constant show of birds. Cisco, the young son of the owner and well on his way to being a guide, took several of us to see the Common Potoo resting, almost invisibly, in a nearby tree. After settling in, we enjoyed an elegant and delicious dinner on the verandah before heading off on a night walk led by Lev.



Walking in the jungle at night is unforgettable: the sparkle of wolf spider eyes, the parades of Leafcutter Ants – and stepping even more carefully over the column of Army Ants, pausing to turn off the lights to feel the rush of bat wings. We saw and heard both Orange Nectar Bats with their 1-foot wingspan, and Spear-nosed Bats. We were hoping for owls, but no luck. Instead we saw a juvenile Pugnose Lizard (*Norops capito*), a Common Rain Frog (*Craugaster* sp.) , a Green Climbing Toad (*Cranopsis coniferous*), and a tailless whip scorpion. It was a cool evening, and the much-hoped-for 8-foot female fer-de-lance didn't appear.

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| Mon., Jan. 28 | Rancho Naturalista |
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A few dedicated souls who'd been on the night walk also rose early to check out the "moth cloth" where they were rewarded with Rufous Motmots, Plain Ant Wrens, Red-throated Ant-tanagers, White-Breasted Wood Wrens, and Tawny-chested Flycatchers.

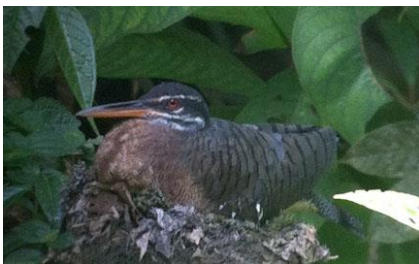
We breakfasted on the verandah, table littered with cameras and binoculars, diners quickly losing interest in our scrambled eggs with the arrival of a Collared Aracari.



During the morning, some stayed to hang out on the verandah with the



feeders while others joined Willy and Calli, a local guide, to amble over to Lisa and Mario's house to watch hummingbirds (Rufous-sided most common, Garden Emerald like a gaudy Christmas decoration, White-necked, Snowcap Hummingbird, Black-crested Coquette, Green-breasted Mango, Green and Long-billed hermits). We also stopped to visit John and Kathy Erv, owners of Rancho Naturalista, who generously gave us a tour of their magnificent house.



After lunch, we drove to a nearby river gorge and walked down the road above the water, where we saw a Spotted Sandpiper and, farther along, a Sunbittern on a nest. We all got great looks through the scope, and Calli helped each of us photograph it with our cell phones.

Next we stopped along the way back first to explore a local cemetery and then to hike into the jungle to investigate a cistern where Calli showed us a Crowned Tree Frog (*Anotheca spinosa*).



Another fine dinner, followed by another night walk. Still no owls nor the fer-de-lance, but we were able to photograph more spiders and other invertebrates.

Tues., Jan. 29

To La Selva

It's hard to leave a natural history wonderland like Rancho Naturalista, but we tore ourselves away, knowing Costa Rica has even more to offer us. We stopped in a fruit orchard with macadamia nut and breadfruit trees, where we saw Tropical Mockingbirds, Great Kiskadees, Social Flycatchers, Eastern Meadowlarks, Groove-billed Anis, and Melodious Blackbirds.

Today was Sloth Day! with a great sighting by Jimmy of a Three-toed Sloth right above side of the road in a Cecropia tree. It was so close we could see the algae in its fur – but not the 600 species of insects and arachnids that apparently have at least one life stage there.

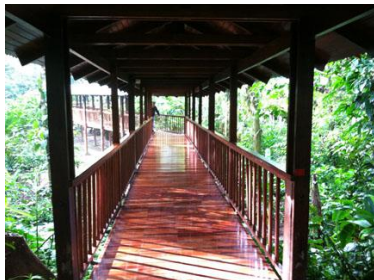


Our next stop was Heliconia Island, which isn't really an island, but a private preserve on a peninsula with the river on one side and a creek with hanging bridge on the other, purchased six years ago by a Dutch couple. The owner showed us five sloths, a Spectacled Owl, and a Blue Jeans (Strawberry) Poison Dart Frog (*Oophaga pulmilio*), whose story is fascinating: They care for their babies by placing the individual froglets in bromeliads. In this species, the territorial male leads the female to a nesting site in the ground litter. He deposits sperm on a leaf, and she deposits 2-5 eggs. He guards the fertilized eggs and keeps them moist for about seven days until they hatch.



After hatching, the mother carries them to a bromeliad. Each tadpole gets its own cavity, and the mother returns periodically during the next fifty days providing the tadpoles with unfertilized eggs to eat. Extraordinary!

Claudia got the prize of the day by spotting the Emerald Basilisk (*Basiliscus plumifrons*)!



Birds included Olive-backed Euphonias, Summer Tanagers, Orange-billed Sparrows, Green Honeycreepers, Buff-throated Saltators, Squirrel Cuckoos, Broad-billed Motmots, Gray-headed Kites, and Blue-backed Grassquits.

Fueled by the results of our snack research (excellent Costa Rican chocolate and plantain chips), we soon arrived at the Selva Verde

Lodge – thick rain forest right up to the edge of the roaring Sarapique River. Our lodgings were in cabins accessed by long wooden covered walkways on stilts, with a long, pleasant hike to the restaurant passing the occasional chachalaca or Green Iguanas, accompanied by the roar of Howler Monkeys and intermittent tropical rain showers.

After dinner most of us did a night walk with Alejandro that started with a Red-Eyed Frog, then went on to include an other-worldly river crossing by walking on a swaying 300-yard suspension bridge – in the dark

But what a gift! We were lucky enough to happen on a bridge of army ants invading wasp nest, as well as more frogs, and a handsome Owl Butterfly.



Wed., Jan. 30 La Selva Research Station



After breakfast and watching a Summer Tanager and Chestnut-mandibled Toucans around the lodge, we set out to spend a fascinating morning at the La Selva Biological Station, part of the Organization of Tropical Studies, a consortium of 63 universities from around the world.

The 4,000-acre reserve includes 40 miles of trails and hosts 300 scientists and 3,000 students each year. Fifty percent of the scientific publications each year are based on research done at La Selva.

Our guide Christian showed us Green Iguanas, Howler Monkeys (how many places can you get both these animals in the same picture?!), Swainson's Hawks, Long-billed Hermits, Cinnamon Hummingbirds, Inca Doves, a Great Curassow, Orange-fronted Parakeets, Sackwing bats, Golden Orb Weaver spider (*Nephila* sp.), and a Striped Basilisk.

After pausing for the group photo, lunch in the La Selva cafeteria and a shop-ortunity in the gift store, we headed to the edge of the Sarapique River where Carlos and his boat awaited us. We boarded and quietly hummed up to the junction of the Sarapique and Rio Puerto Viejo rivers, passing swimming kids, and stopping to view a Spectacled Caiman, some bats (in Spanish the lovely musical name of *murcielagos*) well-camouflaged in a tree trunk, Howler Monkeys, a Sunbittern, Mangrove Swallows, and Bare-throated Tiger-Herons, along with Great Blue Herons, Tricolored Herons, and Great and Snowy egrets.

And even another sloth! But hard to see in the foliage and resembling an old tire wearing a wig.

A perfect day ... and, sadly, the last day for those who won't be going on to the extension. We gathered for dinner, went over our species lists, and re-visited all the good times this Laughing and Eating Tour has shared!

Thurs., Jan. 31 End of Main Tour, On to La Ensenada

Today was mostly a travel day: Our route took us from from Selva Verde to San Jose to bid farewell to three of our friends who were leaving after the Main Tour.

The remaining six climbed back into the bus to head toward the coast for a fresh seafood lunch. *Ceviche mixto* – yum! Then, just in case we hadn't eaten enough, we stopped for Pops ice cream for dessert.

We arrived at La Ensenada to find a 1,000-acre ranch surrounding the comfortable, family-run ranch. Willy led us across the grounds on a birding walk and saw Hoffman's Woodpecker, White-fronted Parrots, Orange-Browed Parrots, Laughing Gulls, and Royal Terns on a the bay on a pier.



After a photo lesson on how to shoot sunsets, we moved into the lovely outdoor, thatched-roof dining area for a buffet meal before retiring to our cabins with the sound of geckos barking at night.

Fri., Feb. 1 La Ensenada

Knowing it would be hot later in the morning and needing to work with the tide, we gathered sleepily at 5:30 a.m. for coffee before heading to the pier for a boat tour of the mangroves: We saw 5' salt water croc, pelicans following fisherman, Great Frigatebirds up close,

White Ibises, cormorants, and more.

At our late post-boat breakfast (no such thing as too much fresh papaya!), we were joined by the resident pair of White-throated Magpie Jays, then enjoyed a leisurely half-day to download photos, eat lunch, catch up on notes, postcards, reading, more photos, swim in the sparkling pool with a view over the Nicoya Gulf.



In late afternoon we gathered for a tractor tour through the ranch, past the salt ponds for Whistling Ducks, Black-necked Stilts, then a marshland for Wood Storks, Roseate Spoonbills, and a Great Blue Heron.

How to wrap up a delicious Costa Rica day? Wine and cheese at sunset overlooking the Gulf, the sun's path reflected in the Gulf against a backdrop of pale blue mountains.



Another satisfying homestyle buffet meal and bed.

Sat., Feb 2 La Ensenada / Travel to Villa Lapas

After coffee and agreeing we could get used to a Howler Monkey ringtone as an alarm, we headed out for birding (a Rose-throated Becard, Streak-backed Oriole, Ruby-throated Hummingbird) – and boa constricting, as we found one, our first and only snake of the trip, on a cement fence post, while one curious variegated squirrel watched.



We then headed to Hacienda de Solimar, a 4,000-hectare ranch with 30 percent set aside as Forest Reserve land for conservation. There we met Demetrios, who took us on a short hike through virgin forest to see a pair of Spectacled Owls. Once back in the bus, we moved slowly through the wetland area seeing and photographing Black-crowned Night-Herons, Northern Jacanas, Jabirus, Wood Storks, caracaras, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, a Ringed Kingfisher, and, then in a higher area just before lunch, a snoozing Pacific Screech Owl.

Next, we enjoyed a sumptuous lunch of steak, salad, bread, and a squash dessert on the porch of the Hacienda Lodge with a view of the ranch. Back on the bus to make our way to our next lodge with a stop for Monteverde ice cream made by Quakers who settled in the area in the early '50s.

Just before the turn into Villa Lapas, our next home away from home, we crossed the River and stopped for what seemed to be a traffic jam. Peering over the guard rail and maneuvering their way along the bridge with masses of vehicles were dozens of people – and almost as many dozens of crocodiles below. We counted 44 with the biggest being 16-17 feet long!



After plenty of crocodile pictures, we checked into our next lodge in time for Happy Hour, an opulent buffet and salad bar, and the ritual recording of the day's species. What an amazing trip this is!



Sun., Feb 3 Villa Lapas and Carrara National Park

This is a group passionate about caffeine – and this morning we decided we need to open a coffee shop for birders. What to name it? MasCafe Duck of course!

An early morning birding expedition added Baltimore Orioles, Rufous-naped Wrens, Gray-capped Flycatchers, Rufous-capped Warblers and a Variable Seedeater to our collection of species. Once we'd had breakfast and were about to head out, keen-eyed Kate spotted the Black and Green Poison Dart frog in the driveway.



Again we loaded up and headed to Carrara National Park where before even getting into the park, we got a good view of a toucan. Once on the trail, we saw Thick-billed Euphonias, Chestnut-sided Warblers, Coco Woodcreepers, a White-shouldered Tanager, a Lesser Greenlet – and a drab-looking Green Hermit who demonstrated how perfectly its curved bill fits into the curved flower of the Heliconia. Willy reminded us that dull-colored birds are less likely to have a territory and more likely to invade the territory of other birds.

Soon afterward, we rounded a corner to a commotion: the White-faced Capuchins many of us had hoped to see! We spent an hour watching the family – and particularly the youngster – grooming, checking out each bunch of bananas, chasing one another... and sometimes seeming as curious about us as we were about them.

After lunch and some afternoon down-time, we again headed out, this time for a canopy walk where we traversed the treetops on swinging suspension bridges – remembering that the animals that use this space have to remember their routes in three dimensions, not two. The canopy was quiet, almost completely silent and peaceful, but we still saw Rufous-capped Warblers, a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Tropical Gnatcatchers, and a Great-crested Flycatcher. One more stop as we cruised along the river, catching a Common Black Hawk and a glimpse of a Scarlet Macaw pair in the distance.



Mon., Feb 4 Villa Lapas and San Jose

Not quite ready to let the Costa Rica magic go, we met early once more for coffee and a last birding expedition around the grounds of Villa Lapas. We watched as a pair of Thick-billed Euphonias

built their nest, and added Philadelphia Vireos, Blue-black Grosbeaks, Yellow-olive Flycatchers, and Piratic Flycatchers to our already considerable list of around 250 species of birds. Reluctantly, we packed up and headed to a nearby town where, astonishingly, a pair of Black-and-White Owls hang out in the trees above a busy city square.

Once back at the lovely Hotel Bougainvillea, we bid farewell to Jimmy, our wonderful driver, and some walked the grounds and even found a Morpho butterfly. Willy's wife, Katya, joined us for the farewell dinner where the Laughing and Eating Tour once again lived up to its name! What a group, what a trip – and what memories we all have ... Pura Vida indeed!



Credits: Resplendent Quetzal, Volcano Hummingbirds, Three-toed Sloth by Phil Gooding; group photo, Willy Alfaro; all other photos and text by Wynne Brown