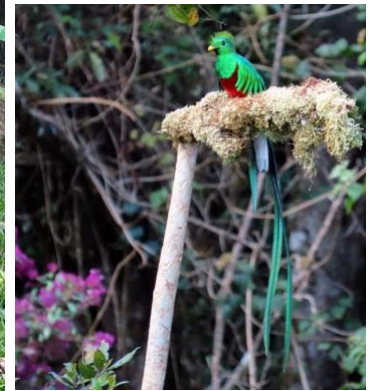


# Southern Costa Rica: Birds & Nature Trip Report | Feb. 14 - 24, 2023 | by Kent Skaggs



With guides Johan Fernandez and Kent Skaggs, and participants: Mary & Jerry,  
Sharon & Bob and Yolanda & Bob



**Tues., Feb. 14**

**Arrival in San Jose | Hotel Bougainvillea Gardens**

This tour of Southern Costa Rica highlights areas on the Pacific side of the country during the dry season, mid-November-April, the Costa Rican summer. Guests arrived at the Juan Santamaria International Airport in San Jose and transferred to Hotel Bougainvillea. All members of the group arrived early and were able to explore the 10 acres of botanical gardens on the premises prior to the official start of the tour. With an array of tropical trees, shrubs and other flowering plants, the gardens provide excellent habitat for several species of birds and pollinators. Among the species seen were Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Lesson's Motmot, Hoffmann's Woodpecker, Yellow-headed Caracara, Crested Caracara, Rufous-naped Wren, Montezuma Oropendola, a pair





of Mottled Owls roosting in a stand of bamboo, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, White-eared Ground-Sparrow and Cinnamon-bellied Saltator. We were off to a good start! The group gathered in the bar at 6:00 PM for a welcome drink and a chance to get to know each other a bit. We were then joined by our local guide, Johan Fernandez, who gave the group an overview of the tour. We then moved to the restaurant for a very nice meal before returning to our rooms to prepare for the following day.

## **Wed., Feb. 15                      Travel to Paraiso Quetzales | Savegre Valley**

Travel day! The group met at 6:00 AM to take one last walk through the gardens. A couple of notable additions to our bird list were Blue-vented Hummingbird and Cabanis's Wren. After the walk it was breakfast, pack the van and hit the road. On our way to our next destination, we made a few stops, primarily looking for hummingbirds. The first stop was at Palo Verde del Guarco where a vervain hedge yielded a female Coppery-headed Emerald, which is endemic to Costa Rica. There were also a few Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds and a Blue-vented Hummingbird, along with several new species for the trip: Bananaquit, Yellow-faced Grassquit and a calling Ruddy Pigeon. Back in the van and back on the road. Our next birding stop was also our lunch stop for this day, Paraiso Quetzal Lodge, which sits at nearly 8,700 feet above sea level. The views of the area were great with partly cloudy skies and the group took advantage of a viewing platform while our lunch was being prepared. We were greeted with several new hummingbird species providing great views at feeders including Lesser Violetear, Talamanca Hummingbird, Volcano Hummingbird, Fiery-throated Hummingbird and White-throated Mountain-Gem, all buzzing about, oblivious to our presence.

We retreated into the restaurant for a wonderful lunch then back to the platform to look for more birds. The area below the platform was covered with fruit bearing shrubs that attracted several other species. Mountain Thrush, Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatcher, Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus and Spangled-cheeked Tanager were all observed from the platform. From here we took a short walk on a trail near the restaurant. By this time the clouds had rolled in, but new birds kept showing up. We had close-up views of a pair of Costa Rican Hairy Woodpeckers excavating a cavity in a dead tree, numerous Rufous-collared Sparrows hopping about, Large-footed Finches doing the double scratch and a pair of Golden-browed Chlorophonias feeding on berries in some shrubs. Absolutely beautiful!



Just a short drive down the road we turned off the Pan-American Highway and headed into the beautiful Savegre Valley. Lush, green vegetation covered the rather steep hillsides everywhere one looked, with the occasional opening in the landscape where farming of some type was taking place. Soon we were at our next stop, a feeding station at Miriam's Restaurant (English translation). The sign on the outside of the establishment had a Resplendent Quetzal on it, our main target in the Savegre Valley. Maybe we'd find it here? This was a brief stop, but we enjoyed a refreshing beverage while adding some new species to our growing bird list. Band-tailed Pigeons were seen flying nearby as well as a soaring Red-tailed Hawk, along with great views of a Sooty Thrush and Flame-colored Tanagers. Then it was back in the van and down the road for the bird that most birders want to see when they visit Costa Rica: Resplendent Quetzal.

Our next stop was at Cabinas El Quetzal where, for a modest fee, visitors were almost assured of seeing these awesome and iconic birds, with the optimum times being early morning and late afternoon. A viewing area had been cleared for birdwatchers near a favorite feeding site, which is where we headed. Shortly after arriving, a female quetzal was seen moving about low in some smaller trees. Decent views of the bird were seen through spotting scopes, and everyone was pleased. But it's the showy male Resplendent Quetzal with its extravagantly long uppertail coverts who tends to steal the show. The female eventually moved on, but not long after Johan indicated via birder sign language that he could hear a male calling. Mary was standing by a small stream and saw the first male at very close range. The rest of the group quickly joined and were rewarded with great, long looks as the bird was very accommodating. Another male came into view a short time after, perched in the open with the sun illuminating his beautiful colors. Simply gorgeous! With everyone sporting big smiles, we drove the short distance to our home for the next two nights: Savegre Mountain Lodge. We arrived at the lodge, got unpacked and enjoyed a wonderful dinner. It had been a great day and I would imagine most of us, if not all, were reliving the spectacular views of the quetzal as we dozed off in our beds.

## **Thurs., Feb. 16                      Savegre Mountain Lodge & Trails**

Part of the group was up early for a bird walk at 6:00 AM. This would become our regular routine each day for those who wanted to participate. New birds seen included Stripe-tailed Hummingbird, Northern Emerald-Toucanet, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Silver-throated Tanager. After a hearty breakfast, the group was hauled up the steep hillside above the lodge to walk on one of the forest trails. The walk lasted a little over two hours with several species being heard only, as is often the case in dense forest. Having said this, we did get good looks



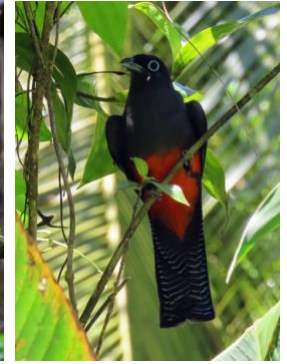


at some new birds for the trip including Streak-breasted Treehunter, Tufted Flycatcher, Ochraceous Pewee, Yellowish Flycatcher, Yellow-winged Vireo, Black-faced Solitaire, Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush and Collared Redstart. Another species new for the trip was an Emerald Swift Lizard, which posed nicely for the entire group, allowing us to snap a few photos. After returning to the lodge for lunch, the group enjoyed a little down time before a mid-afternoon hike along the Savegre River. Target species here were Torrent Tyrannulet and American Dipper. We were successful with the tyrannulet as the group got good views of a pair perched on rocks along the river, but we dipped on the dipper! Oh well, can't see them all. No small consolation, we did see a female quetzal along with a few new species: Louisiana Waterthrush and Black-thighed Grosbeak. Upon returning to our accommodations and freshening up a bit, the group gathered at the restaurant on site for another fabulous meal. Then it was back to our rooms to pack as we were hitting the road again in the morning. The Savegre Valley certainly made some lifelong memories for the group!

## **Fri., Feb. 17                      Cerro de la Muerte | Esquinas Rainforest Lodge**

Travel day! Some of the group went for a short, early morning walk, then the entire group ate breakfast and then loaded into the van for our next destination. We slowly climbed back up the road out of the Savegre Valley and back onto the Pan-American Highway. In less than an hour we pulled onto a dirt road that led to some communication towers situated on a ridge of the Talamanca Mountain range. We were there to look for a couple of regional endemic bird species: Timberline Wren and Volcano Junco. Both species live above timberline in the paramo, high elevation scrub providing plenty of hiding places for the birds that live here.

We exited the van and proceeded to walk along the road looking and listening for bird life. Johan finally heard a Timberline Wren and tried to call it in closer. Vegetation would move, but the bird stayed hidden. Eventually the bird stopped calling so we kept on moving up the road. We saw a couple of Volcano Hummingbirds, a Sooty-capped Chlorospingus and Johan got a brief glimpse of a Peg-billed Finch before we finally happened upon a couple of Volcano Juncos. Both were very accommodating, allowing us extended views before finally flying out of sight. We tried a few more times for the Timberline Wren to no avail. It was time to get back in the van and head on down the road.



We stopped for lunch at Soda La Vuelta near San Isidro. The food was a big hit with the group and there were a few birds to see there as well, including our first Red-legged Honeycreeper. We made one stop on our way to Esquinas Rainforest Lodge and discovered that there was lots of bird activity right on the road. There were Blue-headed and White-crowned Parrots, eight different species of flycatchers, several tanager species, grassquits, seed-finches, seedeaters and more. In 45 minutes, we had tallied 41 species! Then it was on to the lodge, which was just down the road. After checking in, we were treated to a close-up view of a Yellow-throated Toucan, a nice introduction to our new surroundings. After taking some time to get settled in, part of the group went for a short walk in a light rain to see what was around. Crested Guan, Great Curassow, Black-striped Sparrow and Orange-billed Sparrow were new for the trip. We then gathered for a very nice dinner, tallied our sightings for the day and headed to bed. All looking forward to what tomorrow would bring.

## **Sat., Feb. 18**

## **Esquinas Rainforest Lodge & Trails | Wild Bird Chase**

Pre-breakfast walk, breakfast, then an extended walk down the entrance road, which was alive with birds. Shortly into our walk, Johan heard a Slaty-tailed Trogon calling, which the group eventually got good looks at. Not long after we came across a Baird's Trogon as well. The birds kept coming. Bay-headed Tanager, Dot-winged Antwren, Rose-throated Becard, Double-toothed Kite, Laughing Falcon, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Blue-black Grosbeak and many more - 66 species in total. A very good start to the day. We returned for lunch and had a little down time before loading up in the van mid-afternoon and heading east to do some car birding. We did have a particular destination in mind as there had been recent reports of a rarity from South America, a Dark-billed Cuckoo, near Ciudad Neily. The bird had been seen along a dirt road south of town that intersected several farm fields. While looking for the cuckoo, we encountered several other species that were new for the trip including Veraguan Mango, Long-billed Starthroat, Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Fork-tailed Flycatcher and Giant Cowbird. Try as we might, we couldn't conjure the cuckoo, so we started working our way back to the lodge, birding along the way. We encountered more birds, most of which had been seen earlier in the day, but upon arriving back at the lodge we came across a Common Pauraque, a nice finish to our birding for the day. Another great dinner, then pack our gear and off to bed for a good night's rest as we would be leaving in the morning.





**Sun., Feb. 19**

## **Golfito Boat Tour | Talari Mountain Lodge**

Another travel day! But first, we headed further east along the coast to Golfito for a boat tour of Golfito Bay and the Rio Coto estuary and mangroves. The weather was beautiful and shortly after launching we encountered a pair of Bottlenose Dolphins in the bay. We slowed down for a closer look and then continued towards the estuary only to come across more dolphins at the mouth of Rio Coto, with one holding onto a large fish. Magnificent Frigatebirds circled overhead, hoping for some scraps, but the dolphins eventually disappeared.

Moving further into the estuary, we encountered birds along the shoreline. With the tide out, shorebirds and terns were seen feeding and resting near the water's edge. Twelve different species of shorebirds were seen including Wilson's Plovers and Marbled Godwits. We continued to see frigatebirds and an occasional Osprey as we journeyed on. Then we pulled into shore near some mangroves to see if we could see some of our target birds: "Mangrove" Yellow Warbler and Mangrove Hummingbird. Johan played the call of a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl to see what would show up, and it wasn't long before a pair of Mangrove Yellow Warblers appeared. Not knowing if there was a predator, they stayed well hidden, but we were able to get brief views of the male and his chestnut-colored head. To our good fortune, a female Mangrove Hummingbird appeared briefly and perched in the open. Two for two! Continuing deeper into the estuary, Johan heard a Three-wattled Bellbird calling, which brought us back to shore where we dropped anchor and shut the motor off to see if we could zero in on the bellbird. Eventually Johan located the bird in the upper canopy, and everyone was able to see the bird and watch as it called. An impressive set of lungs for sure! Bellbirds are known for their extremely loud calls, and we could hear several in the area. Johan determined there were a total of five males calling in the immediate vicinity. We ended up having lunch at this spot in the shade of the mangroves before heading back.

With the tide coming in, we were able to take a small channel through the mangroves where we found an American Pygmy Kingfisher. We continued this narrow channel until it merged with Rio Coto itself. Once out in the open, we came across some roosting White Ibis and a lone Roseate Spoonbill on what was now a small mangrove island. With the mudflats now submerged, we discovered where the shorebirds roost during high



tide! Black-bellied Plover, Whimbrel, Marbled Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, Short-billed Dowitcher and Willet were all represented in fairly large numbers roosting in the mangroves. We spent nearly five hours on the water seeing and hearing lots of interesting wildlife. After a great day, we pointed the van northwest motoring to Talari Mountain Lodge near San Isidro. Arriving shortly after sundown, Johan immediately spotted a Fiery-billed Aracari perched near the top of a tree. We bailed out of the van for a quick look and then checked in, unpacked and gathered for another very good dinner.

## **Mon., Feb. 20                      Los Cusingos Bird Sanctuary | Talari Mountain Lodge**

Part of the group did the early morning walk where 38 species were seen on the grounds of Talari Mountain Lodge. We then fueled up for the morning with breakfast before driving a short distance to Alexander Skutch's Farm in Los Cusingos. But just after finishing breakfast, one of the Talari staff informed Johan of a Common Potoo on the property and asked if our group would like to see it. Yes please! After a very short walk into the forest next to the lodge, we were looking at the potoo. Ever vigilant, Johan heard Red-capped Manakins vocalizing close by and quickly located a male in the upper canopy. We then headed back to grab our gear and load up for the short drive to Los Cusingos Bird Sanctuary. Upon arriving at the bird sanctuary, one of the staff informed us of the location of a nesting Olivaceous Piculet, a small woodpecker, but we didn't see any activity near the nest cavity. We eventually headed out on a forest trail to see what we could find.

One of the first things we encountered was a very large Leafcutter Ant mound that measured on the surface approximately 12 feet long by six feet wide and was probably 10-12 feet deep. Continuing into the forest, the vegetation was lush and thick making it difficult to see birds high in the canopy, but Johan was able to get us on birds nonetheless. Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Lesser Greenlet and Speckled Tanager were seen along with a few other species that we had already encountered. Further down the trail we came across a couple of birds that were below eye level and extremely close. A Bicolored Antbird posed just off the trail, literally feet away from Johan, giving the group extended looks. The other bird was a Golden-crowned Spadebill, a small flycatcher that remained perched on a low branch long enough for Johan to get it in his scope for everyone to take a look at it. We eventually came to a stream where we turned around and headed back to check out the museum that used to be Alexander Skutch's home.





Back at the visitor center, we tried again for the piculet without luck before returning to the lodge for lunch and some hard-earned rest time. Some hiked the trails on the property while others viewed birds at the feeding stations at the restaurant. We gathered for our last dinner at Talari and updated our bird checklist before returning to our rooms to pack for our departure in the morning.

## **Tues., Feb. 21                      The Pacific Coast | Hotel Cerro Lodge**

No early bird walk this morning, just breakfast then back on the road, headed towards the lowlands. While we waited in construction traffic, Yolanda spotted a new bird for the trip: a King Vulture soaring above us. This would be the only one we would see, so the group was fortunate that Yolanda had her eyes to the sky. When we arrived in the lowlands, we hung a right and proceeded northwest along the coast, making a few brief stops along the way. We had good looks at Cinnamon Becard, a pair of Gray Hawks and a perched Double-toothed Kite. The second stop provided close looks at White Ibis, Great Egret and Southern Lapwing. We paused for lunch at La Langosta Feliz, just a few miles from where Johan lives. We had the great privilege of meeting his family as they were able to join us for lunch. We were very appreciative of the family's willingness to share their husband/father and his exceptional knowledge of Costa Rica and its birds with us. We were soon back on the road continuing up the coast. We took a brief detour near Quepos to scan along the winding roads for monkeys and sloths. We first came across a troop of White-throated Capuchins that were utilizing a "monkey bridge," a thick, blue rope that allows the monkeys to safely cross the street above traffic. Soon we found a Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth relaxing on a branch in a densely foliated tree, well concealed from the eyes of peering tourists, but we were able to get good looks anyway.

Then it was back on the road and to our ultimate destination for the day, Hotel Cerro Lodge. We arrived a little after 3:00 PM, checked in, got settled into our rooms and relaxed a bit before gathering for supper. During our travels this day, you could see that we were gradually entering into a dryer region of the country, but there was also something different about the sounds we were now hearing near the lodge. As it was late afternoon, we were hearing the distinctive vocalizations of Mantled Howler Monkeys. In fact, several were easily seen as they moved through the trees on the grounds. We again enjoyed excellent food for dinner before retiring to our lodging to rest up for our last full day of birding.

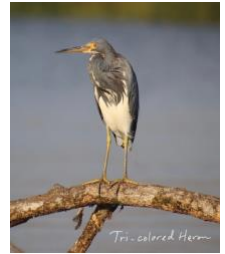




## Wed., Feb. 22 Carara National Park | Tarcoles River Boat Tour

Our early bird walk yielded 38 species including some new birds for our trip: Cinnamon Hummingbird, Black-headed Trogon, Turquoise-browed Motmot, Yellow-naped Parrot, White-throated Magpie-Jay, White-lored Gnatcatcher and Olive Sparrow. Following breakfast, we got back into the van for a short drive to Carara National Park. Upon arriving at the park, we didn't waste any time getting onto a trail. The forest here contained some truly massive trees. As we moved along the trail, Johan heard a Streak-chested Antpitta, but the understory was thick and the bird remained hidden. In fact, we were hearing lots of birds, but getting good looks was a bit challenging. We did get very good looks, however, at a pair of White-whiskered Puffbirds and three Pale-billed Woodpeckers. Other birds seen included Ruddy Quail-Dove, Plain Xenops, White-winged Becard and White-shouldered Tanager. We wrapped up our outing at Carara and headed back to the lodge for lunch and a little downtime before visiting the nearby Tarcoles River for a boat tour.

We arrived for our tour on the Tarcoles shortly before 3:00 PM, and the weather couldn't have been nicer. The boat was spacious, so everyone had plenty of room to spread out and move around. We started slowly heading upstream, escorted by Mangrove S wallows. Birds seemed to be everywhere along the shoreline with close ups of a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron and a Ringed Kingfisher. Continuing upstream, a group of Least Sandpipers also included three Collared Plovers, both species new for the trip. We had close views of Neotropic Cormorant and several waders before finding another new shorebird, Double-striped Thick-knee. Shortly after that, Captain Juan Carlos spotted a Peregrine Falcon perched in a tree on the riverbank. We continued a bit further upstream before the captain pulled the boat in towards the bank. As we looked around, we noticed an American Crocodile swimming towards us. As it got closer, it was clear that this was a rather large croc, and it was quite at ease being near the boat. We learned that this crocodile used to be fed chicken to entertain tourists. Even though that practice ended six or seven years ago, it was obvious that this crocodile had a long memory!



Turning downstream, we navigated through a narrow channel and were again surrounded by birds. Black-necked Stilts and Southern Lapwings gave us great views as well as Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and more Bare-throated Tiger-Herons. Turquoise-browed Motmots were perched along the riverbank along with an Amazon Kingfisher.

With the tide coming in, we headed towards the mouth of the river. Shorebirds and waders perched on downed trees that had been swept out into the river channel. Getting closer to the ocean, Magnificent Frigatebirds were aloft, Brown Pelicans roosted in trees and Royal Terns rested on logs. Our captain then guided us into a gap in the mangroves and cut the motor, allowing the boat to drift silently on the rising tide. The setting was extremely peaceful and was an excellent way to conclude the tour. As we neared the dock, we took a last look around and soaked in the scenery, trying to recall the many wonderful birds we had seen, 78 species in all. But we weren't quite finished. We took a slight detour to a beach where Johan pointed out Lesser Nighthawks in the distance. We could see a few Brown Pelicans still flying over the ocean as the sun set. An outstanding end to a very enjoyable day. We returned to the lodge for dinner and to recount the sights and sounds of the day as well as from the entire trip. Then it was off to our rooms to pack and get a good night's rest as we would be hitting the road in the morning.

## **Thurs., Feb. 23                      Morning Birding | Return to San Jose**

There wasn't an early bird walk this morning. Instead, the group enjoyed a late breakfast and more leisurely departure. The plan was to try for a few more species we had not seen yet near the coast before heading back to San Jose. Our first stop didn't produce anything new, but we did get great looks at a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. A little further down the road, we added a Common Ground-Dove, Plain-capped Starthroat, Banded Wren, Stripe-headed Sparrow and Streak-backed Oriole. We eventually came to a little estuary that held lots of waders: Wood Storks, Great and Snowy Egrets, White Ibis and a couple of Tricolored Herons. Since we were near the beach, we took a short stroll to get one last look at the Pacific Ocean. Blue sky and blue water. Beautiful! Back in the van, we stopped at a place where the group could do some shopping and grab a bite for lunch. Then it was back to San Jose and Hotel Bougainvillea for one last night before flying home (or in one case to another birding destination). We gathered for our farewell dinner and enjoyed each other's company one last time. It had been a wonderful trip and the great company made the experience even better.





## Fri., Feb. 24 Departures

Departures for the group were spread out from early morning to early afternoon. Although the trip was over, new friends had been made and memories were created that will last a lifetime. Here's hoping we meet again on another adventure with Naturalist Journeys!

**MANY THANKS TO JOHAN FOR ANOTHER GREAT BIRDING EXPERIENCE AND TO ORLANDO FOR GETTING US TO ALL OF OUR DESTINATIONS SAFELY!!**

*Group Photo (Kent Skaggs - KS), Yellow-throated Toucan (KS), Resplendent Quetzal (KS), White-throated Capuchin (KS), Scarlet Macaw (MC), Pink Flower (Mary Coy - MC), Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (KS), Hummingbird Garden (KS), Fiery-throated Hummingbird (KS), Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher (KS), Golden-browed Chlorophonia (KS), Flame-colored Tanager (KS), Savegre Mountain Lodge (KS), Lesser Violetear (KS), Acorn Woodpecker (KS), Fiery-throated Hummingbird (MC), Group Hike (KS), Emerald Swift (KS), Red Flower (MC), Savegre River (KS), Scenic (MC), Torrent Tyrannulet (KS), Yellow-throated Toucan (KS), Baird's Trogon (KS), Dock Scenic (MC), Boarding the Boat (KS), Laughing Falcon (KS), Roseate Spoonbill (MC), Whimbrel (KS), Snowy Egret (KS), Rio General (KS), Red-capped Manakin (KS), Los Cusingos (KS), Lesson's Motmot (MC), Scarlet Passion Flower (KS), Birding the beach (MC), Double-toothed Kite (KS), Black Howler Monkey (KS), Scarlet Macaws (MC), Tarcoles River Boat Tour (KS), White-throated Capuchin (MC), Papaya Tree (KS), Crocodile (MC), Pale-billed woodpecker (KS), Turquoise-browed Motmot (KS), Brown Pelicans (MC), Neotropic Cormorant (KS), Southern Lapwing (KS), Tri-colored Heron (MC), River Tour Scenic (KS), Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (KS)*