



Costa Rica 2024 Trip Report (Feb 28 - Mar 15, 2024)

[Link: Costa Rica 2024 Trip Report \(Feb 28 - Mar 15, 2024\)](#)

Written by Joachim Bertrands *Eagle-Eye's Costa Rica Long tour is an annual classic that covers large parts of the country in an effort to see as many species as possible while at the same time providing an in-depth experience visiting the various habitats the country is known for. Unlike our shorter Costa Rica Sampler concept, a 10-day tour contrary to this 17-day one, the long tours allow for more time to travel and include birding sites along the way, as well as the addition of a few stays of which the visit to Caño Negro is maybe the most anticipated by travellers. This was my first time leading the Costa Rica Long tour and it sure became a memorable edition. Great weather throughout most of the tour (despite a rain day at the very end, at Arenal), a rather small group of participants (6 people) and the flexibility that followed from this allowed us to travel efficiently throughout the country, include a few extra excursions that were requested or became possible due to luck with certain birds earlier on in the tour and in the end produced a total of 441 bird species seen. Avian highlights included getting amazing looks at species as Resplendent Quetzal, Chestnut-backed Antbird, Snowcap, Ocellated Crake, White-crested and Black-crested Coquette, Mangrove Hummingbird, Three-wattled Bellbird, Unspotted Saw-whet Owl, Flame-throated Warbler, Costa Rican Pygmy-owl, Buffy-crowned Wood-partridge, Buff-fronted Quail-dove, Black-bellied Hummingbird, Cabanis's Ground Sparrow, Gray-headed Kite, Jabiru (on the nest!), Great Potoo and the list goes on. It deserves a special mention that we managed to record all 14 of Costa Rica's regular occurring owls, of which only 1 species (!) remained heard only - the Central American Pygmy-owl. Besides all these feathered gems, we encountered a few Three-toed Sloths, Spectacled Cayman, White-nosed Coati, found footprints of Jaguar and the lucky few saw a Baird's Tapir as well! The report below highlights some of our destinations on this trip and aims to give a general feel of this rather intense birding tour throughout the country. Pura vida! **The Pacific Coast** Our tour kicked off at the famous Hotel Bougainvillea, where a first evening birding session produced the expected species, although the hotel's signature bird - the roosting Mottled Owls in the bamboo patch on the property - proved to be impossible to find. It was fairly windy, and so birding consisted*

of mainly getting to know the group we'd be birding with for the next two weeks and getting into the rhythm of birding Costa Rica. We left bright and early the next morning with hopes visit a great feeder setup on a farmer's property near San Ramon, a town at approximately 1000 meters altitude and our first chance to connect with one of Costa Rica's most known birds... Upon arrival, it became clear the birds were out, and we enjoyed some great first gems such as Coppery-headed Emerald, Violet Sabrewing, the immer present Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and ... RESPLENDENT QUETZAL! A male was found by our host Romain and could be observed for minutes by everyone on the group, while more birds sang at us from the forest. An amazing experience to have this 'everyone's target' already bagged within the first real hour of our birding, and how!



Coppery-headed Emerald © Joachim Bertrands

Despite the amazing start of the day, it was here we had to already say goodbye at two members of our group, now reduced to 6 people, due to an unfortunate medical emergency. They were severely missed throughout the rest of the tour, and the afternoon was therefore spent getting to the Pacific Coast, where we arrived in the evening. During our stay at Punta Leona we enjoyed various outings, of which the boat trip over the Tarcoles river was an obvious highlight, producing great looks and numerous photo opportunities at many waterbirds, including Common Black-hawk, Roseate Spoonbill, Collared Plover, Amazon- and Green Kingfisher, Peregrine Falcon, Double-striped Thick-knee, and so on.



Roseate Spoonbill © Joachim Bertrands



Amazon Kingfisher © Joachim Bertrands



Green Kingfisher © Joachim Bertrands

Furthermore, we enjoyed the dry forests of the Pacific coast, with especially the mangroves near Tarcoles being especially productive. Over the course of the two days spent here, interesting and various birds crossed our path: Yellow-green Vireo, Turquoise-browed Motmot, Ferruginous Pygmy-owl, Costa Rican Swift, Streak-backed Oriole and even a roosting Pacific Screech-owl that had been staked out for us.



Yellow-green Vireo © Joachim Bertrands



Turquoise-browed Motmot © Joachim Bertrands



Pacific Screech-owl © Joachim Bertrands

The more humid forests closer to the river, along the Meandrica Trail at Carara National Park, were a bit of an unexpected disappointment, as the good (i.e. cloudless) weather meant that temperatures rose too early in the morning. This, combined with the inexplicable late opening hours of the National Park (7 AM!) made for slower birding mornings here for sure. Despite this, we still managed to find Orange-collared and Long-tailed Manakin, Charming Hummingbird, Black-hooded

Antshrike, ... The road leading to our accommodation even produced a wonderful Spectacled Owl one evening while we were trying to find more birds during an otherwise quiet afternoon, spectacularly picked out by our driver Roy and one of our fellow adventurers. A short but wonderful sighting! **On our way to the mountains** The drive to the Talamanca range had been split up with a two-night stay at Hotel Zima, conveniently located at the foot of the Talamanca mountains. It was here we had a full day to spare and decided to change plans a bit and venture east of here, towards the border with Panama. We first enjoyed a morning at the Chirippo Oasis, a gorgeous little place in the mountains, maintained by Mr. Libhert who carefully feeds and monitors the hummingbirds here. It was here we connect with White-crested Coquette, a most-wanted for some on our group and one of the tougher hummers in the country. On our way east from here, we filled the afternoon with a visit to the altitudinal savanna near Buenos Aires. These grassy hills were home to one of the most elusive species in Costa Rica: Ocellated Crane. With the help of local guide Oscar, we managed to get crippling views of this localized species, an event not to forget. Add to that the Wedge-tailed Grass-finches that showed ridiculously well, the calling Rosy Thrush-tanager, Chiriqui Foliage-gleaner and Riverside Wrens that were found in the forest at the foot of these grassy hills, and you know we had ourselves a great afternoon.



Ocellated Crane © Joachim Bertrands



Wedge-tailed Grass-finch © Joachim Bertrands

Talamanca range The drive to the mountains was one that was highly anticipated in that many of our group - me included - were looking forward to milder temperatures for the next couple of days. And so, it happened! Clear skies in the mornings and throughout the rest of the day kept the temperatures very enjoyable, a stark contrast with the rainy and windy days we had here during our sampler last year! Birding was spread out over multiple areas and activities. On our way to the mountains, we stopped at Cerro de La Muerte, where Volcano Junco proved easy, yet other birds scarce. Birding around the famous Savegre Lodge, our luxurious stay for the next few nights, proved productive as well, with species such as Black-faced Solitaire, Yellow-winged Vireo, Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher and even Sulphur-winged Parakeets possible as soon as one ventured away a bit from the buildings. The Providencia Road produced most of our specialties, with Timberline Wren, Costa Rican Pygmy-owl, Flame-throated Warbler and Mountain Elaenia being one of the many highlights. An optional owling session produced crippling looks at Unspotted Saw-whet Owl, Bare-shanked Screech-owl and Dusky Nightjar, a night not to forget! The Baird's Tapir that showed well in the roadside that evening was considered an even more welcome surprise...



Unspotted Saw-whet Owl © Joachim Bertrands



Costa Rican Pygmy-Owl © Joachim Bertrands



Bare-shanked Screech-Owl © Joachim Bertrands



Talamanca Hummingbird © Joachim Bertrands

The foothills On our way to the Caribbean coast, we birded the foothills. These often consist of a unique set of species and so it was the case here as well. On our way out of the Talamanca range we enjoyed spectacular food prepared by Sergio at Casa Dowii, a local gastronomical paradise with two very rare birds: Buffy-crowned Wood-partridge and Buff-fronted Quail Dove coming to feeders, both which were seen readily with some patience. Purple-throated Mountain-gems were common in the

flowering tree just outside the deck, and it was hard to leave this place!



Purple-throated Mountain-gem © Joachim Bertrands

That evening we were welcomed by Hotel Quelitales, a spectacular accommodation, family-owned and with wonderful guidance by the owner. He took us to the waterfall behind his property where numerous hummingbird feeders were stilled out, and showed us some very special birds of which, White-bellied Mountain-gem, Green Thorntail, Green-fronted Lancebill and Black-bellied Hummingbird were the true stars. A Scaled Antpitta had been coming to a feeder but proved rather shy, although it showed briefly at dusk. We enjoyed wonderful local food while Short-tailed Nighthawks cleared the skies above us and the sun set. The roaring call of a Crested Owl could be heard later that night, but remained a guide-only observation, at least until that point in the tour...



White-bellied Mountain-gem © Joachim Bertrands



Black-bellied Hummingbird © Joachim Bertrands



Green Thorntail © Joachim Bertrands

The Caribbean Lowlands The drive to the Caribbean Lowlands took forever which could be explained by our improvised lunch we had at a local B&B that produced us great looks at a male and female Snowcap, another most sought-after hummingbird that occurs at various sites in Central-America. Another stop provided us with Sunbittern and Fasciated Tiger-heron, before we eventually made it to La Quinta de Sarapiquí, and would be exploring the famous Biological Station of La Selva the next morning.



Snowcap © Joachim Bertrands

The birding was excellent, and our local guide had serious stamina making sure we got to see many interesting birds, explained us about the station and how it welcomes tourists from all over the world, and at the same time remains an important study area for scientists from all over the world. Our walk lasted just one morning but easily provided us with Great Curassow, Middle-American Screech-owl, Snowy Cotinga, Cinnamon and Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, but most surprisingly: a Great Tinamou that just froze right next to the trail and let itself be photographed for a good 15 minutes, from not more than 2 meters away. Wow!



Great Tinamou © Joachim Bertrands

Caño Negro - the Pantanal of Central America Our visit to Caño Negro was memorable, despite the extremely hot weather we had to endure while here. The boat tour was one of the most successful excursions I have ever done, with over 120 species seen in just one morning. Many highlights were noted, but seeing all the kingfishers (including the shy American Pygmy- but also Rufous-and-green Kingfisher) was one of those, as well as no less than two Gray-headed Kites, Gray-headed Dove, Blue-winged Warbler, displaying herons in all shapes and sizes of which the Boat-billed Heron was likely the group's favorite, and even prints of Jaguar, among the many Spectacled Cayman that were basking on the shores.



Rufous-and-green Kingfisher © Joachim Bertrands



Gray-headed Kite © Joachim Bertrands



Jaguar print © Joachim Bertrands

An evening of owling was highly successful as we quietly drove the roads through Caño Negro's open meadow habitats, spotlighting and looking for eye shine. This was found in the shape of a Great Potoo (a bird that could be relocated the next morning as it hadn't moved a centimeter), no less than 3 different Barn Owls, a pair of Black-and-white Owl and a brief sighting of Striped Owl.



Great Potoo © Joachim Bertrands

On our drive out the next morning, tensions were high as the dry season had cause Jabiru to be difficult to find, and we hadn't seen one yet when suddenly a random guide drove by us and had to

mention that the usual pair of Jabiru had just occupied their annual nest again, and he had seen them just moments earlier. With this good news, we quickly made it down there, and were rewarded with great views and insights in the private life of a pair of Jabiru. An amazing opportunity.



Jabiru pair © Joachim Bertrands

Arenal Our last few days were spent at the famous Arenal Observatory Lodge. The volcano was hard to see this time, given that our visit here was plagued by rainy weather. On our first day we barely had a chance to explore the trails as it was pouring down so intensely, and mainly spent that day around the feeders at the lodge. Despite the rain, a roosting Crested Owl was a real treat, and was enjoyed by the group before we had to hide again for another approaching rain front. The next day we drove down to Lake Arenal and birded the forest on the shore, which produced not only the sought-after Keel-billed Motmot, Thicket Antpitta and Crimson-collared Tanager, but also had us run into an ant swarm, with Bare-crowned Antbirds, Great Antshrike, Bicolored Antbirds and Red-throated Ant-tanagers viciously snatching any insect that tried to get away. This was such a spectacle that we kept looking at it for more than an hour!



Bicolored Antbird © Joachim Bertrands



Red-throated Ant-tanager © Joachim Bertrands

Ending with a bang, or shall we say - bell? Our last day was spent mainly driving back to San Jose and prepare for departure the next morning, and after a short lunch at a famous feeder setup (which proved somewhat productive but was still a bit of a disappointment), we had one last trip scheduled: the search for the loudest bird in the world! We ended up in San Ramon again, where local guide Dani took us to a displaying ground of Three-wattled Bellbird, an incredibly strange

looking and sounding species. March is the first month these birds arrive back on the breeding grounds, and so we were able to include this one in the itinerary. Upon arrival it became clear the bad weather hadn't left Costa Rica just yet, and as we got closer to the display grounds, the densest fog imaginable started to engulf the car, it was almost impossible to see anything! We got out and started following our guide to the forest's edge, while the bizarre calls and whistles of the bellbirds could be heard coming from a very mystical looking forest. Suddenly, the fog cleared a wee bit, and I noticed a male Three-wattled Bellbird perched on a branch, displaying heavily. We were able to get great looks and photos, even with a foggy cast over it, which only added to the experience. An amazing way to have ended this tour, with a unique opportunity to see this species.



Three-wattled Bellbird © Joachim Bertrands

That night, we arrived at Robledal, enjoyed our final dinner and went straight to bed, given that for most of our group, departure the next morning would be at 3 AM already. All in all a very successful tour, challenging at times due to weather or accessibility issues, but birdwise very productive and with some amazing habitats seen. [Costa Rica Species List \(Feb 28 - Mar 15, 2024\)](#)