



## Costa Rica: Caribbean Mountains to Coast October 2021

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### Day 1 - San José

Set in the outskirts of the Grand Metropolitan Area, where the urban sprawl is rapidly overtaking the remnant agricultural fields, Hotel Bougainvillea's gardens are an amazing oasis for birds, especially for Neotropical migrants. October is also a time of peak migration through Central America and this was quickly evident as we walked around the neighborhood of the hotel as Barn, Bank and Cliff Swallows and Purple Martins passed overhead as Yellow Warblers and the first of many Red-eyed Vireos worked the fence rows. We also saw several wrens, Rufous-naped, House and even the extremely skulky Cabanis's Wren hopping in and out of view along a hedge.



*Bank Swallow*

**October 02 - Irazú**



*Blue-crowned Motmot*

Revisiting the hotel gardens early in the morning we encountered another load of Neotropical migrants including brilliant Blackburnian Warblers and Baltimore Orioles, Red-eyed and Yellow-green Vireos, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, a Summer Tanager ripping apart a wasp nest and a flock of

Dickcissels flying overhead. Some of the common resident species showed well including Rufous-collared Sparrow, Inca Dove, Melodious Blackbird, Crimson-fronted Parakeet, Hoffmann's Woodpecker and certainly one of the highlights was Mottled Owl roosting in a dense stand of exotic bamboo. After breakfast we met our driver Jorge and made our way to Costa Rica's highest volcano, Irazú, a massive shield volcano towering 3,400m over the Central Valley and Caribbean Sea. These highlands are home to many of Costa Rica's endemic species which we were hoping to find, so we put on our fleeces and began birding the high elevation roadside. Very quickly we had found Talamanca, Fiery-throated and Volcano Hummingbird, Lesser Violetear, Sooty and Mountain Thrush, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus, Slaty Flowerpiercer and Black-and-yellow Silky-Flycatcher. Several warblers gave fantastic views such as Wilson's, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian and Black-and-white, but probably the most stunning was Flame-throated Warbler when a pair began foraging at close range and gave us views of every different angle possible. After a filling lunch we drove near the top of the mountain and found several of our targets before the dense cloud set in, Volcano Junco, Timberline Wren and Black-cheeked Warbler. After a successful day in the highlands we drove down towards the Reventazón River valley and Hotel Quelitales for the next two nights. We made one more stop near lake Cachí and had eye-level views of a pair of Bat Falcons, Mourning Warbler and a cooperative Tropical Parula.



*Volcano Junco*

### **October 03**

Hotel Quelitales is owned by an avid birdwatcher and it shows! Set in the middle elevations with a backdrop of stunning mountains and fantastic oak-elm forest the birding is superb. In the gardens around the hotel we quickly spotted several new hummingbirds, Violet Sabrewing, Green Hermit, Green-crowned Brilliant, Lesser Violetear and two endemics, White-bellied Mountain-Gem and Coppery-headed Emerald. Incredible mixed species flocks constantly moved through all levels of the forest with Silver-throated, Bay-headed and Golden-hooded Tanagers, White-ruffed Manakins, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, Common Chlorospingus, Rufous Mourner, Tawny-capped Euphonia, Slate-throated Redstart, Golden-winged Warbler, Collared Trogon, Spotted Barbtail, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper and striking views of both male and female Red-headed Barbets. One of the

specialties of Quelitales is Sooty-faced Finch which comes out to eat cracked corn at a feeding station, providing great views of an otherwise difficult bird to see! After lunch we visited a coffee farm in Ujarrás to search for one of Costa Rica's most threatened endemic, Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow, of which we found several pairs and had good views. Our next stop was another coffee farm, this one owned by Ernesto's family. Cafe Cristina is a model organic, shade-grown coffee farm pioneering in producing coffee in the most environmentally friendly ways possible. We learned how this is not only beneficial for the wildlife, but also for the coffee as an important pest control.



*Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow*

#### **October 04 - Las Brisas Nature Reserve**

After breakfast we began our drive along the Reventazón river valley down towards the Caribbean. Along the way we stopped at a couple streams and found a specialty of this habitat, the fascinating Sunbittern which blends in perfectly with the boulders in the stream until it opens its wings and you get a burst of yellow, orange and red! Our next stop was Las Brisas Nature Reserve which is the main study site for Proyecto Cerúlea ([www.cerulea.org](http://www.cerulea.org)), a research and conservation project led by Ernesto. It is also one of the most important stopover sites for the threatened Cerulean Warbler.



*Cerulean Warbler*

We had the opportunity to see the banding process in action explained by head bird bander and Eagle-eye Tours guide, Paz A. Irola who showed us an Emerald Tanager in the hand! Being late in the morning bird activity was fairly low, but we did find a mixed species flock with Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Carmiol's Tanager, Emerald Tanager, Speckled Tanager and an adult male Cerulean Warbler! After a picnic lunch at the banding station we drove south-east along the coast and reached the town of Cocles in the late afternoon and checked-in to our beach-front hotel.



*King Vulture*

## October 05 - Cahuita National Park

Early in the morning we walked along the beach and quickly found Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Belted and Ringed Kingfisher, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Whimbrel and Spotted Sandpiper. After breakfast we visited Cahuita National Park which offers an amazing opportunity to explore the flooded, tropical lowland forests from the dry comfort of a boardwalk! Just off the bus we spotted a Pied Puffbird high in a dead tree and soon we encountered several mixed species flocks and the birds allowed great views and photo opportunities. Dot-winged Antwren, Chestnut-backed Antbird, Black-crowned Antshrike, Bay Wren, Blue-black Grosbeak and even a Bare-crowned Antbird all gave us great views. In one of the forested puddles we heard a low ticking noise and after meticulously searching the overhanging vegetation we found an American Pygmy-Kingfisher! We reached the ranger station at the end of the boardwalk and the rangers showed us our first snake of the trip, two different color morphs of the Eyelash Pit-Viper!



*Olive-backed Euphonia*



*American Pygmy Kingfisher*

After a tasty lunch and much desired cold drink in the small town of Cahuita we birded the side roads leading out of the town and found Cocoa Woodcreeper, Bright-rumped Attila, Baltimore Oriole, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Olive-backed Euphonia, Groove-billed Ani, Squirrel Cuckoo and one of our main targets in this region, Black-chested Jay!



*Squirrel Cuckoo*

## October 06

At dawn the flow of migratory birds was astonishing with a non-stop stream of Barn, Bank and Cliff Swallows, Eastern Kingbirds and Dickcissels flying overhead, a good omen for the rest of the day. Before breakfast we drove a few kilometers south-east along the coast and did some roadside birding near a small creek. Red-lore, Mealy, White-crowned and Blue-headed Parrots were squeaking and squawking in the treetops, Blue-chested Hummingbirds were visiting a flowering Fire Bush, a Green Kingfisher on a log below the bridge; birds everywhere! At this stop we also saw Great-crested, Dusky-capped, Yellow-olive and Olive-sided Flycatchers, Black-striped Sparrow, Yellow-throated Toucan, Cinnamon Becard and a Fasciated Antshrike singing in the top of a Sandbox Tree, but gave us good views in the scope. After breakfast we drove towards Cahuita again but this time headed up a side road that crosses over a small ridge called Fila Carbón. On our way we encountered a few kettles composed mainly of Broad-winged Hawks and Turkey Vultures with a few Swainson's Hawks, Peregrine Falcons, Osprey and even one Northern Harrier! We found several mixed species flocks along the forested, gravel road with species such as American Redstart, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Lesser Greenlet, White-winged Becard, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Variable Seedeater and large flocks of Tawny-crested Tanagers moving through the undergrowth. As we neared the top of Fila Carbón it was as if the gates broke open as thousands of Broad-winged Hawks and Turkey Vultures began pouring through overhead. The sky was filled with raptors, literally, and after 45 minutes of watching in awe we had estimated about ten thousand birds had gone by! At the end of the day we inquired at the Kekoldi Hawk Watch about that day's count and they had tallied a whopping 35,000! After lunch in Cahuita we drove north to bird several river mouths and found a variety of shorebirds including Sanderling, Least Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, Willet, Whimbrel, Greater Yellowlegs, Semipalmated, Wilson's and Black-bellied Plover, Royal Tern, Laughing Gull and Costa Rican rarity, a Brown Noddy!



*Watching thousands of Broad-winged Hawks and Turkey Vultures*

## October 07 - Río La Suerte to Tortuguero

After an early breakfast we packed-up and drove north to the town of Guápiles where we were to

take a boat down Río La Suerte to reach the small village of Tortuguero. The weather was cool, which can be seen as a very comfortable situation in the tropical rainforest, but what can be comfortable for humans can certainly affect bird activity. That afternoon we walked the hotel grounds and enjoyed views of Russet-naped Wood-Rail, White-shouldered Tanager, Northern Waterthrush, White-collared Manakin, Collared Aracari and Purple-throated Fruitcrow.

### **October 08 - Tortuguero National Park**

Early in the morning we boarded a small boat and set-off to explore the forested canals in Tortuguero National Park. Though it was rather quiet we did find Snowy and Great Egret, Little-blue Heron, Boat-billed Heron, Mangrove Swallow, Common Black-Hawk, Northern Jacana and a Semiplumbeous Hawk. After breakfast we visited the strip of land where the village of Tortuguero is located on the Caribbean Sea. Here we picked-up Pale-vented Pigeon, Tropical Mockingbird, Willow Flycatcher, Canada Warbler, Pale-billed Woodpecker, Tropical Gnatcatcher and up close views of the raucous, but spectacular Great Green Macaws!



*Great Green Macaws*

We walked out to the beach and encountered the tracks left by turtles the previous night as they emerged from the sea to lay their eggs on shore! After lunch we went out for a second boat ride and the cool afternoon kept activity very low. We did get good views of a treetop dwelling flycatcher, the Brown-capped Tyrannulet. After dinner we went for a night walk and heard several Crested Owls and a Black-and-white Owl singing from the tall rainforest canopy. In the still of the night one could also hear dozens of Swainson's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes migrating overhead.

### **October 09 - Fortuna to Arenal**

After breakfast the next morning we packed our bags and awaited the boat back out to Guápiles, not before admiring a pair of Slaty-tailed Trogons and the resident troop of Geoffrey's Spider Monkeys bidding us farewell and setting us on our way to the next destination. Jorge was awaiting us at the dock and off we went to the town of Fortuna where we snacked on ice cream before birding the forested road that borders Lake Arenal. Only minutes into birding, a heavy downpour made us rush

back on the bus, but as quickly as it came it was also gone and birding was amazing! Broad-billed and Keel-billed Motmot, Buff-throated Foliage-Gleaner, Collared Aracaris, Scarlet and Summer Tanagers, Crested Guan, Keel-billed Toucan and a flock of White-fronted Nunbirds were just a small portion of the species we encountered on our short walk. We made our way to Arenal Observatory Lodge which has the young, conical Arenal Volcano in the background.



*Crested Guan*

### **October 10 - Arenal Observatory Lodge**

Early in the morning we met on the deck in front of the restaurant to watch the feeding frenzy at the fruit feeder. The Montezuma Oropendolas were boss, but whenever possible the smaller species would come in for a bite including Tennessee Warblers, Yellow-throated Euphonias, Green Honeycreepers, Red-legged Honeycreepers, Crimson-collared Tanager and Brown Jays. Down below, the Great Curassows were picking up the bits and pieces that fell to the ground. Foraging in the fruiting trees and bushes around the lodge were Hepatic, Bay-headed and Black-and-yellow Tanagers, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, Swainson's Thrushes and a Veery. After breakfast we set-out to the trails and quickly ran into an amazing mixed species flock which we were able to follow for about 200 meters along a forest edge, discovering new species as it progressed. We had fantastic and repeated views of species such as White-throated Shrike-Tanager, Russet Antshrike, Slaty-capped Flycatcher, Striped Woodhaunter and Rufous-tailed Jacamar.



*Broad-billed Motmot*



*White-throated Shrike-Tanager*



*Thicket Antpitta*

Another highlight entailed as we heard a Thicket Antpitta singing from the undergrowth and we decided to try and call it out to maybe catch a glimpse. This species is heard often, but rarely does it show itself, so our hopes were not high. We positioned ourselves in front of the thicket and low and behold, after about a minute of whistling, the antpitta perched in clear view and even allowed for point-blank scope views! Although we thought we could not make the day any better, we topped off the morning with some outstanding hummingbirds including Green Thorntail, Blue-throated Goldentail, Violet-headed Hummingbird, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, White-necked Jacobin and killer views of a male Black-crested Coquette. After lunch we walked down a different trail and found Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, Long-tailed Tyrant, Southern rough-winged Swallow, Masked Tityra and Orange-chinned Parakeet. That night we went to the parking lot to look for the resident pair of Black-and-white Owls and sure enough there they were, catching the large insects attracted to the lights.

### **October 11 - Arenal to the Central Valley**

We began our last day of birding climbing up the 15 meter observation tower that sticks up above the canopy giving us a different point of view of the birds we had been seeing, looking down at them for a change! Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, tanagers, Spider Monkeys and Howler Monkeys and some extremely close Orange-chinned Parakeets and Yellow-throated Toucans put on quite a show in the early morning light. After breakfast we loaded the bus and began working our way back to the Central Valley, making a few strategic stops along the way. Our first stop was at a fast flowing stream where we found Black Phoebe and a pair of Torrent Tyrannulets. A bit further along, down a gravel side road, we had fantastic views of the stunning White Hawk which stands out like a sore thumb against the dark forest. Another highlight of this road, just prior to the heavy rain, was a flock of Great Green Macaws flying eye level in the valley below, awe-inspiring. Next stop was lunch at Cinchona, a small roadside restaurant that has bird feeders and makes for an entertaining meal to say the least. Green-crowned Brilliants, Violet Sabrewings, Green Hermits and white-bellied Mountain-Gems were frequenting the hummingbird feeders. On the fruit feeders were Silver-throated, Blue-gray, Palm and Summer Tanagers, Baltimore Orioles and even a Black Guan.

Hopping below the feeders we caught glimpses of the skulky Chestnut-capped Brush-Finch, and most importantly, our lunch promptly came out. From this site we made our way through the heavy rain to Hotel Robledal where we would bid farewell to each other and spend our last night of the tour.



*Yellow-throated Toucan*