



Costa Rica Caribbean Trip Report (Oct 17 - 29, 2026)

[Link: Costa Rica Caribbean Trip Report \(Oct 17 - 29, 2026\)](#)

Costa Rica packs an astonishing range of habitats into a country smaller than West Virginia, and this tour is designed to sample as many of them as possible. Over twelve days we moved from misty paramo and highland oak forest at 3,400 m to steamy Caribbean lowland rainforest, from one of the planet's great raptor migration bottlenecks to the slopes of a (blessedly clear) volcano. The result was a trip list packed with endemics, regional specialties, rare finds and plenty of memorable moments.

Days 1 & 2: Cartago, Cerro de la Muerte, Paraíso Quetzal Lodge and Paraíso

Our adventure began in the western Central Valley at our hotel. A little typical afternoon rain turned out to be perfect for finding the endemic Golden-eyed Leaf-Frog in the gardens, a fine way to start a trip that would be about much more than birds.



Golden-eyed Leaf-Frog © E Carman

The next morning we set out early for the Talamanca Highlands, a region full of species found nowhere else and home to one of the world's most spectacular birds, the Resplendent Quetzal. At 2,500 m we met Jorge Serrano. Jorge and his family started a project with a network of local landowners who protect quetzal habitat on their farms. Birdwatchers and photographers pay an entrance fee to visit, which directly supports these families and gives them a real, lasting reason to keep the forest standing. Today we visited William's property, and the quetzals were already there, feeding in a wild avocado tree when we arrived! The bird was partly hidden by foliage at first, so we waited patiently until it moved to a more open perch, and were rewarded with long views and photos to fill our cards and hearts.



Watching Quetzals © E Carman



Resplendent Quetzal © E Carman

We continued to the top of Cerro de la Muerte, at 3,400 m (11,000 ft), where the windswept flora is reminiscent of alpine habitats. Here we had another specific target, the Volcano Junco, and it took us only 30 seconds to find one feeding along the edge of the bamboo!



Birding the highlands © E Carman

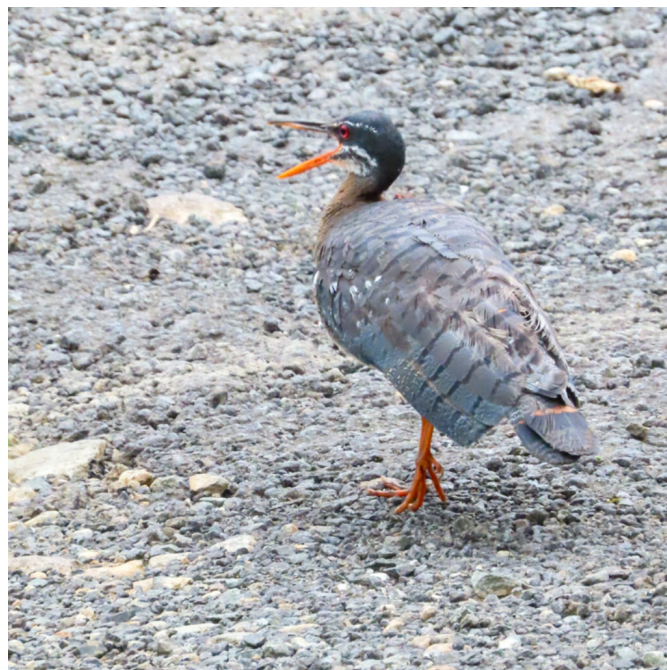


Volcano Junco © E Carman

For lunch we visited Paraíso Quetzal Lodge, where the hummingbird feeders are truly astonishing, providing great views of Volcano and Talamanca Hummingbirds, Lesser Violetear and the incredible Fiery-throated Hummingbird. The grounds also produced a long list of other highland specialties, including Black-and-yellow Silky-Flycatcher, Long-tailed Silky-Flycatcher, Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush, Flame-throated Warbler, Ochraceous Wren, Wilson's Warbler, Black-capped Flycatcher, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus and Ruddy Treerunner. On our way down to our hotel we made one more stop, in the town square of Paraíso, to see some of the most popular owls in the country: the resident Tropical Screech-Owls, along with Barn Owls! Upon arrival at our hotel we went birding by the splendid waterfall and found a whole new selection of hummingbirds, including Violet Sabrewing, Green Hermit, White-bellied Mountain-Gem, Green-crowned Brilliant, Stripe-tailed and Black-bellied Hummingbirds, and Green-fronted Lancebill catching gnats over the pristine creek. One of the resident Sunbitterns rounded out a superb first full day.



Tropical Screech-Owl © E Carman



Sunbittern © E Carman

Day 3: El Copal Reserve

We were off again at dawn, heading for El Copal Reserve, one of the most diverse areas in Costa

Rica, in the foothills of the Talamanca mountains. We had barely stepped off the bus when the birds started coming. The first was the tiny Snowcap, which was high on many participants' wish lists!



Birding El Copal © E Carman



Snowcap © E Carman

We birded from a balcony surrounded by forest, and the activity never stopped. A parade of spectacular tanagers visited the feeder: Speckled, Silver-throated, Bay-headed, Golden-hooded and

Emerald Tanagers. The Snowcaps stole the show, but they were far from the only hummingbirds present. We also enjoyed great views of Violet-headed Hummingbird, Magenta-throated Woodstar, Green Thorntail, White-necked Jacobin, Brown Violetear, Coppery-headed and White-tailed Emeralds.



Speckled Tanager © E Carman



Bay-headed Tanager © E Carman



Emerald Tanager © E Carman

Raptors and other forest birds added to the day, including Double-toothed Kite, Short-tailed Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, a pair of Black Hawk-Eagles and Carmiol's Tanager, plus a flock of low-flying White-collared Swifts that gave us unusually good views of a species usually seen high overhead. During our drive back to the lodge we added Green Ibis and Fasciated Tiger-Heron.



Black Hawk-Eagle © E Carman

Day 4: Ujarrás Valley, Paraíso and Finca Cristina

After some early birding and breakfast, which came with a Brown-billed Scythebill, Sunbittern and Sooty-faced Finch, we packed our bags and headed to the nearby Ujarrás Valley. There we saw several Hook-billed Kites and learned all about their relationship with the snails in the chayote plantations. We also found Zone-tailed Hawk, White-tailed Kite and Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow in this agricultural area.



Brown-billed Scythebill © E Carman



Looking for Hook-billed Kites © E Carman



Hook-billed Kite © E Carman

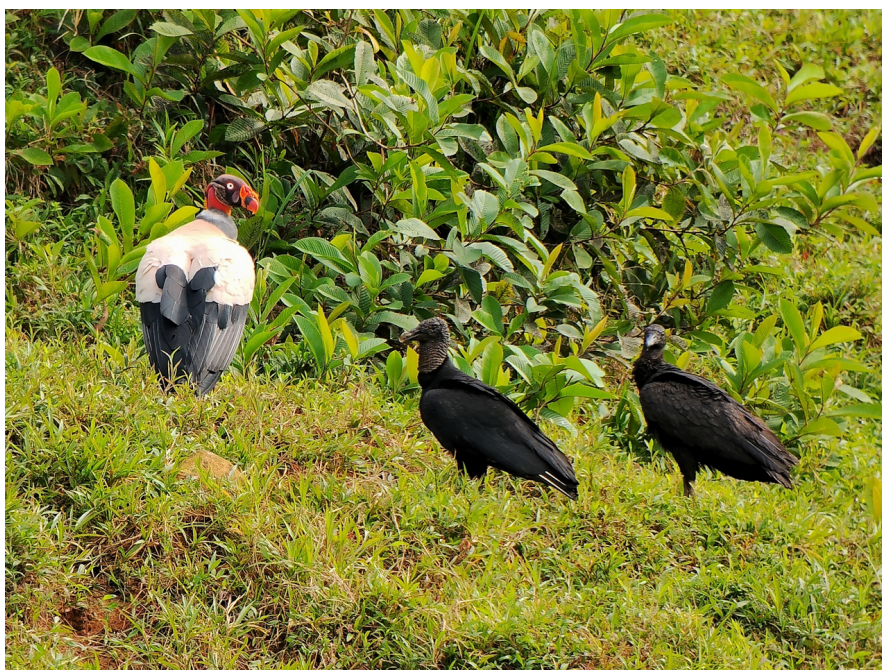
Before heading to the far south Caribbean, we made a special stop at Café Cristina, an organic, shade-grown coffee farm owned by Ernesto's family. We followed the whole coffee process, from plant to cup! By late afternoon we arrived at our hotel in Cocles, ready for a change of scenery and all the new birds that came with it.

Days 5-7: Cocles and Cahuita National Park

One of the biggest attractions of the south Caribbean is raptor migration. This region sits in a narrow bottleneck between the Talamanca mountains and the Caribbean Sea, which funnels millions of raptors through during migration, and we were here to see it. We went to a spot where our chances were high, and the weather cooperated: hot and sunny. As soon as we stepped out of the vehicle we saw the first mixed kettles of Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks and Turkey Vultures. The numbers kept growing, and during the morning we estimated that more than 25,000 raptors had passed over our heads! Among the migrants we also spotted resident species soaring, including the majestic King Vulture, one individual of which came remarkably low overhead.



Raptor Migration © E Carman



King Vulture and Black Vultures © E Carman



King Vulture © Paz Angulo

The side roads and Cahuita National Park were productive too, despite the extreme heat. Highlights included Black-crowned Antshrikes, White-flanked and Dot-winged Antwrens, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Chestnut-backed Antbird, Black-chested Jay and a very cooperative American Pygmy-Kingfisher. Every day, wherever we looked, the sky was dotted with migrating swallows (Cliff, Barn and Bank) and thousands of Chimney Swifts as well. Cahuita also gave us a taste of lowland swamp forest, with a fantastic boardwalk winding through the understory beneath massive trees whose impressive buttress roots help hold them up. Mantled Howler Monkeys and Central American White-faced Capuchins gave excellent views.



Birding Cahuita National Park © E Carman



Black-crowned Antshrike © E Carman



Black-chested Jay © E Carman

As we left the south Caribbean and headed north toward Sarapiquí, we made a couple of stops along the shore. Shorebirds included Semipalmated and Black-bellied Plovers, Sanderling, Western, Least and Spotted Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Whimbrel and Willet, along with a flock of Royal Terns with one each of Sandwich, Caspian and Gull-billed in the mix. Looking closely at the terns, we noticed that one was banded and had legible band numbers. We reported it to the North

American Bird Banding Lab and learned that it had been banded as a chick in Virginia earlier this same year, a wonderful reminder of just how far these birds travel!



Royal and Gull-billed Terns © E Carman

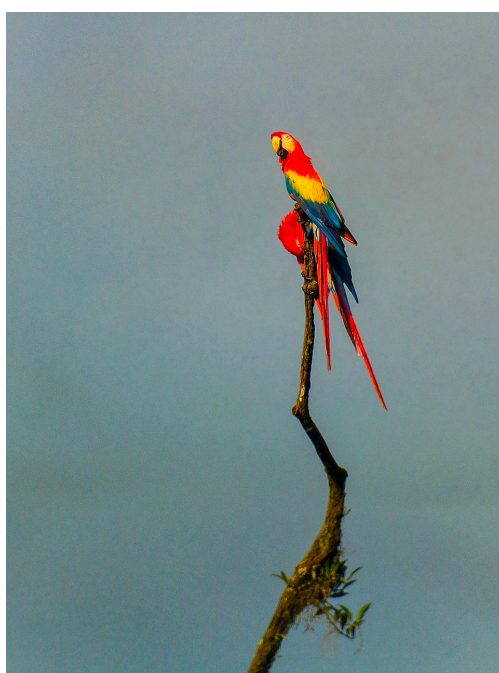
Our next stop was La Hoja Garden for lunch and some feeder-watching, and it was very busy. We saw Russet-naped Wood-Rail, all three honeycreepers (Green, Shining and Red-legged), Collared Aracari, Yellow-throated and Keel-billed Toucans, and Baltimore and Black-cowled Orioles, as well as White-necked Jacobin, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Stripe-throated and Long-billed Hermits and Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer.

Days 8-9: Lowland Tropical Rainforest and La Selva Biological Station

From the south Caribbean we headed northwest to Sarapiquí, in the north Caribbean lowlands and the heart of Costa Rica's tropical rainforest. Although the days were humid and very hot, we saw an incredible number of birds in many habitats, from old-growth forest with trees towering over 40 m to open grassy meadows and wetlands, and the value of early morning birding became ever more obvious! At the famous La Selva Biological Station we saw three trogons (Black-throated, Gartered and Slaty-tailed), Scarlet and Great Green Macaws, Rufous and Broad-billed Motmots, Black-faced Grosbeak and White-collared Manakin, and a Great Tinamou walking in the middle of the road as we arrived! Other highlights in the area included White-fronted Nunbird, Pied Puffbird, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Yellow Tyrannulet and Cinnamon Woodpecker.



Birding La Selva © Paz Angulo



Scarlet Macaws © Paz Angulo



Broad-billed Motmot © E Carman

We then left the North Caribbean lowlands and climbed to Cinchona, where the feeders were very productive and we added Prong-billed Barbet, Red-headed Barbet and their close cousin the Northern Emerald-Toucanet.



Red-headed Barbet © E Carman



Northern Emerald Toucanet © E Carman

Days 10-11: Arenal Observatory Lodge

As we neared La Fortuna, the impressive outline of Arenal Volcano dominated the horizon and was completely clear by the time we reached Arenal Observatory Lodge. We had great weather overall, with sunny mornings and a bit of refreshing rain in the afternoons, and we saw an astounding number of birds on the lodge's extensive grounds and nearby areas.



Arenal Volcano © E Carman

They ranged from large Crested Guans and Great Curassows to the small, sneaky residents of the forest understory, such as Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Golden-crowned Warbler, Slaty Antwren,

Streak-crowned Antvireo, Stripe-breasted Wren, Long-billed and Tawny-faced Gnatwrens, Rufous-tailed Jacamar and Slaty-capped Flycatcher. We even found a flock of the rare Yellow-eared Toucanets, which treated us to as many views as we wanted from all possible angles, and a roosting Boat-billed Heron.



Yellow-eared Toucanet © E Carman



Boat-billed Heron © E Carman



Rufous-tailed Jacamar © E Carman

Hummingbirds were very active in the vervain hedges and flowering trees, where we saw Black-crested Coquette, Green Thorntail, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, Violet-headed Hummingbird and Blue-throated Goldentail, and the list of tanagers, woodpeckers and warblers kept growing. After dark, the resident Black-and-white Owl gave us great views as it hunted insects attracted to the parking-lot lights, and by day the resident Geoffroy's Spider Monkeys treated us to aerial acrobatics through the treetops.



Black-crested Coquette © E Carman

Birding along the Peninsula Road we had the good fortune to encounter an army ant swarm, which is like hitting the jackpot! Viewing was challenging in the dense undergrowth, but we managed to see Spotted, Bicolored, Ocellated and even the eccentric Bare-crowned Antbirds. Best of all, Arenal Volcano remained clear during our entire stay.

Day 12: Canopy San Luis and La Paz de San Ramón

We drove back up into the foothills to San Luis Adventure Park, where we expected to watch the usually amazing bird feeders, but something was off. No birds were on the feeder; they were all hiding deep in the bushes and making alarm calls, and it was evident that a predator was nearby. After several minutes of scanning the surrounding trees and trying to interpret where the birds were “pointing,” we spotted the culprit: a spectacular adult Tiny Hawk perched below eye level! It was no wonder the birds were so afraid.



Tiny Hawk © E Carman

Our next stop was another feeding station, at the home of Romain and Ignacio Arias, two brothers who have turned their property into an incredible bird habitat. Highlights included the endemic Coppery-headed Emerald, Canivet's Emerald, Blue-vented Hummingbird, White-eared Ground-Sparrow and the best views ever of Plain-capped Starthroat.



Plain-capped Starthroat © E Carman

After such a rush of birds, we drove the last stretch to our hotel near the airport, but our birding wasn't quite finished. On a short walk around the grounds we saw Lineated Woodpecker, Rufous-backed Wren, Eastern Meadowlark and the star of the grounds, the resident Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl! Then it was time for our farewell dinner. Hasta pronto!



Group Photo

Non-bird Sightings

Mammals

- Mantled Howler Monkey (*Alouatta palliata*)
- Geoffroy's Spider Monkey (*Ateles geoffroyi*)
- Central American White-faced Capuchin Monkey (*Cebus imitator*)
- Central American Agouti (*Dasyprocta punctata*)
- Variegated Squirrel (*Sciurus variegatoides*)
- Red-tailed Squirrel (*Sciurus granatensis*)
- White-nosed Coati (*Nasua narica*)
- Proboscis Bat (*Rhynchonycteris naso*)
- Greater White-lined Bat (*Saccopteryx bilineata*)
- Collared Peccary (*Pecari tajacu*)

Amphibians

- Strawberry Poison Frog (*Oophaga pumilio*)
- Green-and-black Poison Frog (*Dendrobates auratus*)
- Golden-eyed Leaf-Frog (*Agalychnis annae*)
- Red-eyed Leaf-Frog (*Agalychnis callidryas*)
- Savage's Slender-toed Frog (*Lithobates savagei*)
- Masked Treefrog (*Smilisca phaeota*)
- Harlequin Frog (*Dendropsophus ebraccatus*)
- Pygmy Rain Frog (*Pristimantis ridens*)
- Common Rain Frog (*Craugastor fitzingeri*)
- Brilliant Forest Frog (*Lithobates warszewitschii*)
- Cane Toad (*Rhinella horribilis*)

Reptiles

- Central American Eyelash Pitviper (*Bothriechis nigroadspersus*)
- Cope's Parrot-Snake (*Leptophis depressirostris*)
- Central American Boa (*Boa imperator*)
- Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*)
- Common Basilisk (*Basiliscus basiliscus*)
- Emerald Basilisk (*Basiliscus plumifrons*)
- Slender Anole (*Norops limifrons*)
- Central American Whiptail (*Holcosus festivus*)
- Crested Anole (*Anolis cristatellus*)
- Copper Anole (*Norops cupreus*)
- House Gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*)

Arthropods

- Common Morpho (*Morpho helenor*)
- Short-tailed Morpho (*Morpho theseus*)
- Amathonte Morpho (*Morpho amathonte*)
- Hairy-headed Leafcutter Ants (*Atta cephalotes*)
- Army Ants (*Eciton burchelli*)
- Rhinoceros Katydid (*Copiphora rhinoceros*)
- Golden Silk Orb-Weaver (*Trichonephila clavipes*)
- Bromeliad Helicopter Damselfly (*Mecistogaster modesta*)
- Rusted Clearwing Satyr (*Cithaerias menander*)

