

Costa Rica Sampler 2022 Birding Tour - Trip Report

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January 16 - Arrival Costa Rica

Day 1. Late afternoon we met in the lobby for our first group birding in the fantastic, manicured gardens of Hotel Bougainvillea. These gardens boast a marvelous number of birds despite being in the middle of an urban area and this was immediately apparent as we saw Rufous-collared Sparrow, Great Kiskadee, White-winged Dove, Red-billed Pigeon and our first motmot of the trip, a tail-less Lesson's Motmot.

January 17 - Pacific Coast, Caldera, Tárcoles

Day 2. At six a.m. we met for another walk in the hotel gardens with the early morning sun lighting-up the leafless Guanacaste tree that covers a great part of the garden and having no leaves worked much to our advantage to spot the multiple birds coming to perch in the tree. Hoffman's Woodpecker, Baltimore Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Philadelphia Vireo, Social Flycatcher and even a White-fronted Parrot glowing in the early morning sunlight. Another highlight of the morning walk was a Mottled Owl roosting in a giant clump of yellow bamboo. After breakfast we were met by our experienced driver Jorge León, we loaded the luggage on the bus and we set out to the Pacific coast where our first stop was at the Mata de Limón mangroves near the port of Caldera. These mangroves butt up against tropical dry forest which gives a great opportunity to see birds from two quite unique habitats. We had not even stepped out of the bus when we began spotting new birds foraging amongst the raised roots of the mangrove trees: Brown-crested and Northern Scrub Flycatchers, Northern Waterthrush, the mangrove subspecies of Yellow Warbler with a completely reddish-brown head, Turquoise-browed Motmot, White-lored Gnatcatcher and many Prothonotary Warblers.



Jorge, our driver © E Carman



Turquoise-browed Motmot © E Carman

Further down the road we found a flowering chameleon vine which provides an incredible supply of nectar, attracting a diversity of species including one of our important targets at the mangroves, the endangered Mangrove Hummingbird. This species is restricted to the remnants of mature mangroves on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica and is rapidly losing habitat due to clearing of mangroves and climate change, so seeing this species has become more and more challenging. We

also scoped a sandbar full of Laughing Gulls, Royal Terns, Brown Pelicans and a few Willets and Whimbrels before driving to our next spot along the Guácimo road where we enjoyed a picnic lunch while watching birds in a riparian forest.



Mangrove Hummingbird © E Carman

After lunch we made our way towards Hotel Punta Leona not before making the obligatory stop at the Tárcoles River bridge where we enjoyed our first close-ups of Scarlet Macaws – thanks to a successful recovery program – and American Crocodiles basking in the afternoon heat.



Scarlet Macaw © E Carman



American Crocodile © E Carman

After settling in at Punta Leona, a short walk around the grounds yielded Rufous-naped Wren, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Gray-headed Chachalaca and an active nesting colony of Montezuma Oropendolas.

January 18 - Carara National Park & Tárcoles Mangrove Boat Tour

Day 3. Our pre-breakfast walk, as usual, was productive. Both large woodpeckers were working in the large trees over the rooms, Lineated and Pale-billed, as male Blue-throated Goldentails incessantly called from low perches around the parking lot. A great deal of commotion caught our attention as a troop of roughly twenty White-faced Capuchin Monkeys moved through the treetops with agility, scanning every bit of vegetation for a bite to eat.

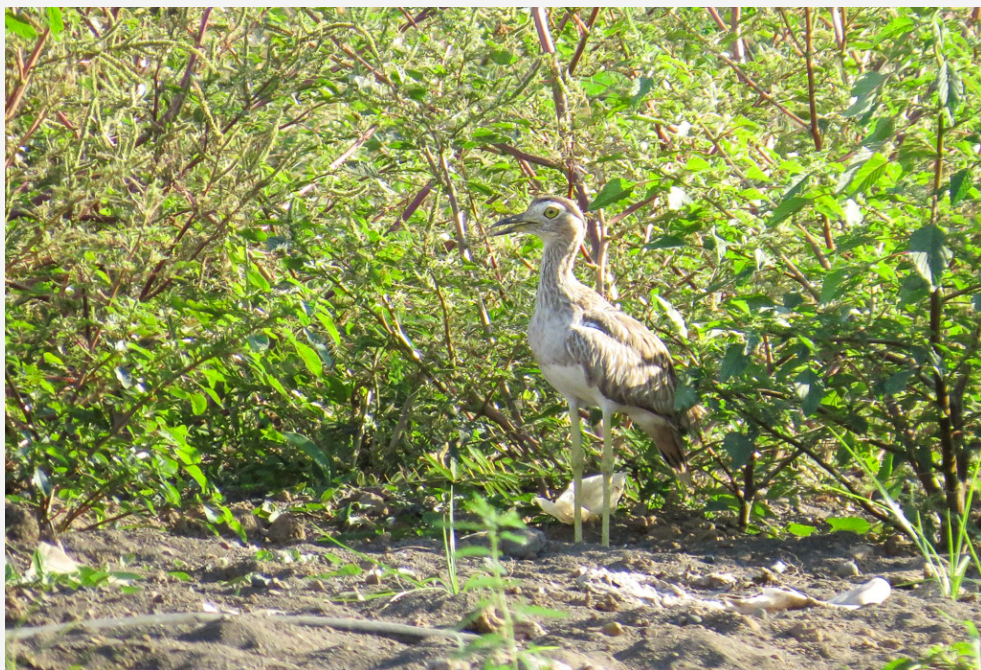


Linneated Woodpecker © E Carman

After we had our own breakfast we visited Carara National Park which boasts great diversity because it is located in a transition zone between the dry and wet forests, having a selection of representatives from each habitat. Our walk was never void of birds, from start to finish we encountered new species and found it hard to advance! We had an incredible selection of tropical families with antwrens, antshrikes, woodcreepers, shrike-vireos, flycatchers and manakins. On several occasions we encountered mixed species flocks with at least fifteen different species of birds all using different niches, with White-shouldered Tanagers checking the upper surface of leaves, Lesser Greenlets the underside, Plain Xenops chiseling away at dead twigs to reach ant larvae, Black-hooded Antshrikes ripping open dead, curled leaves to reach invertebrates hiding inside and Ruddy-tailed Flycatchers gleaning insects from the tips of the foliage. Carara certainly lived up to its name! After a hearty lunch and some down-time we drove to the dock on the Tárcoles River in time for our mangrove boat tour. Birding by boat is a very comfortable way to see and photograph wildlife and an excellent opportunity to explore an otherwise impenetrable habitat. Great and Little Blue Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets, Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, Boat-billed Heron, Anhinga, Cormorant, White Ibis and Roseate Spoonbills were scattered along the shores, stumps and trees along the river. After careful inspection of a gravel bar we were able to find the cryptic Collared Plover and Double-striped Thickknee, and living up to its name the Common Black Hawk was common throughout the ride. As the tide began to recede and the sun began to set Spotted Sandpipers flew out of the safety of the mangroves by the dozens to feed on the mudflats and Scarlet Macaws flocked into the mangroves to spend the night.



Collared Plover © E Carman



Double-striped Thickknee © E Carman



Mangrove boat ride © E Carman

Back at the hotel after dinner a short night walk proved to be productive as we spotted a Kinkajou, an arboreal relative of raccoons, and two species of owl on opposite sides of the size scale with Costa Rica's largest and smallest: Spectacled Owl and Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl.



Ferruginous Pygmy Owl © E Carman

January 19 - Pacific Coast to Talamanca highlands

Day 4. We started off with fantastic close-up views of a pair of Lesson's Motmots, Gray-cowled

Wood-Rails and Scarlet Macaws peering out of nest boxes. After breakfast some visited the spectacular beach to dip their toes in the Pacific waters and the rest did a little more birding and saw Greenish Elaenia, Rufous-breasted Wren, Southern Beardless Tyrannulet and Scaly-breasted Hummingbird among others. Mid-morning we packed our bags on the bus again and began working our way south along the coast before cutting back up into the mountains. As we began to climb we made a stop at a bed and breakfast that maintains fruit feeders and hummingbird feeders and we were soon dazzled by the numbers of colorful birds coming in for a bite to eat. Clad in bright yellow and black plumage, Silver-throated Tanagers are spectacular, but when you see 30 together on a feeder it is absolutely mind-blowing! Not only were the Silver-throated present, but also Speckled, Flame-colored and Scarlet-rumped Tanagers and everyone's favorite the pair of Red-headed Barbets.



Speckled Tanager and Silver-throated Tanager © E Carman



Red-headed Barbet © E Carman

At the feeders and flowers in the garden we got great views of Green-crowned Brilliant, Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, Violet Sabrewing, White-throated Mountain-Gem and White-tailed Emerald. As we were about to leave we had a farewell view of a cracking male Elegant Euphonia. The rest of our ride through the Talamanca highlands was uneventful and the scenery spectacular as we ascended in elevation first through elm forests, then the giant oak forests until we reached the *páramo*, an alpine-like habitat above timberline. This stretch of road is actually the highest point on the Pan-American Highway at over 3,300m above sea level. We reached Toucanet Lodge at dusk, settled in and enjoyed a delightful meal before going off to bed.



Elegant Euphonia © E Carman

January 20 - Talamanca highlands

Day 5. As we had climbed substantially in elevation our pre breakfast birding was composed of totally different species, and although there is less diversity in the highlands many of the species we find here are not found anywhere else. Lesser Violetear, Blue-vented Hummingbird, Mountain Thrush, White-winged Tanager, Slaty Flowerpiercer, Mountain Elaenia, Long-tailed Silky Flycatcher and the resident subspecies of Red-tailed Hawk. After breakfast we set off on a mission to see one of the most spectacular birds, the Resplendent Quetzal. For this we met a local guide, Erick Granados, who participates in a project called “Families ProQuetzal” which encourages conservation through ecotourism, having a positive economic impact on the local communities. We visited the property of a farmer called William and in his back yard was a wild avocado tree that was bearing fruit; one of the Quetzal’s favorite foods! As we arrived Erick immediately spotted a male Resplendent Quetzal, and then another one, and then a female! We even had the chance to move around for better lighting and views as the “feathered serpent” (as the Aztecs called this bird) flew past us as it plucked fruit from the wild avocado tree. This was truly a highlight and a spectacle, made even more important knowing we were supporting a community based conservation project.



Resplendent Quetzal © E Carman



Resplendent Quetzal © E Carman

Although you can never tire of seeing such a bird, we moved on to visit the *páramo* and look for another species of bird that is restricted to the mountaintops of Costa Rica and Panama, the Volcano Junco. We reached Cerro de la Muerte (Death Mountain) in time to take in the phenomenal view before the clouds rolled in and as we watched a Slaty Flowerpiercer piercing flowers to steal nectar we spotted a Volcano Junco perched atop a short heath!



Volcano Junco © E Carman

Mission accomplished, we drove back down the mountain to look for some more hummingbirds at a

feeding station maintained by Paraíso Quetzal Lodge. Here we saw Volcano and Talamanca Hummingbird, Lesser Violetear and one of the most astounding hummingbirds in Costa Rica, the Fiery-throated Hummingbird! After lunch and a break, we went for a walk on the road leading past our lodge and had great views at some highland specialties such as Collared Redstart, Yellow-thighed Brushfinch, Red-faced Spinetail, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper and the skulky Gray-breasted Wood-Wren. After dinner we took a short drive to look for Bare-shanked Screech-Owl and were successful.



Yellow-thighed Brushfinch © E Carman



January 21 - Paraíso, Café Cristina

Day 6. A couple highlights of our pre breakfast walk included Slate-throated Redstart, Black Phoebe and flocks of Sulphur-winged Parakeets flying through the valley while at the feeders at the lodge we had a female Magenta-throated Woodstar while we enjoyed a hot cup of coffee with breakfast. It was time to move on once again and our first stop was in the town of Paraíso where we saw not one, but TWO different species of owl, Tropical Screech-Owl and Barn Owl. We then visited Ernesto's family's coffee farm, Cafe Cristina, and learned all about their efforts (and struggles) in organic coffee production while keeping a healthy ecosystem, biodiversity being a key principle. After learning about the entire process and tasting some delicious organic coffee and bananas we had lunch at a local family style restaurant called El Cas where we were met by Paz Angulo, an Eagle-Eye Tours guide and independent researcher, who talked to us about her work with another Costa Rican endemic, the Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow.



Coffee © E Carman



Paz giving a presentation © E Carman

From here we made our way across the Central Volcanic Range and into the moist Caribbean lowlands where we made a couple specific stops before arriving at our lodge. First we drove along a side road that parallels the San José River and found a Fasciated Tiger-Heron perched on the stones in the middle of the stream. Then we stopped at another side road with hopes of finding the critically endangered Great Green Macaws. In the tall *Almendro* trees that stand about 40 meters over the open fields, we spotted Red-lored Parrots, Crimson-fronted and Olive-throated Parakeets and a lone Bat Falcon. After some time, our hopes were beginning to dwindle when all of a sudden we heard the unequivocal raucous call of a macaw, but not just one macaw. It was a pair of Great Green Macaws in hot pursuit of a pair of Scarlet Macaws, chasing them away in defense of a nest site! Once this bit of excitement and fantastic views of the macaws was over we reached La Quinta Lodge and settled in before dinner.



Fasciated Tiger-Heron © E Carman

After dinner we took a short walk along the covered paths and found some interesting species including Red-eyed Tree Frog, Smooth-skinned Toad, Black-lipped Frog, a Nine-banded Armadillo and a rarely seen snake, the Orange-bellied Swamp-Snake! Through the night the rain came and went in waves, reminding us we were actually in a rainforest!

January 22 - La Selva Biological Station

Day 7. Prior to breakfast we saw a few species visiting the feeders and in the surrounding vegetation including Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Buff-throated Saltator, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Slate-colored Grosbeak and Collared Aracari.



Collared Aracari © E Carman

After breakfast we spent the morning at La Selva Biological Station which is run by the Organization for Tropical Studies. The station has incredible infrastructure and resources for students and researchers, the most valuable of which is the more than 1,600 hectares of forest that serves as an outdoor classroom and laboratory for students and researchers from around the world. A large percentage of our knowledge about tropical rainforests has come out of this research station! We were greeted by our local guide, Cristhian, who explained to us how La Selva functions. Meanwhile in the background we could hear Collared Forest Falcons and Laughing Falcons with a foreground of Strawberry Poison-Dart Frogs. As we walked around the forest edges surrounding the laboratory buildings we encountered Mantled Howler Monkeys, Green Iguanas, Lesser White-lined Bats and a Three-toed Sloth, as well as a great deal of birds including Chestnut-headed Oropendola, Masked Tityra, Blue-chested Hummingbird, Golden-hooded Tanager, Yellow-throated and Keel-billed Toucans, Collared Aracari and Stripe-breasted Wren.



Three-toed Sloth © E Carman

Once we entered the forest it became more quiet on the bird front, but it gave us a chance to explore and learn about the rest of the components of the forest, such as how to tell a male from a female millipede (males have only one pair of legs on the sixth segment!) (. We did encounter a mixed species flock with Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, Black-crowned Antshrike, Rufous Mourner, Great-green Macaws and a King Vulture soaring low over the canopy. That afternoon we did some more birding on the hotel grounds and found a gold mine just behind the pool where there was a fruiting strangler fig and it seemed all the birds were there. As we indulged in pool-side birding from lawn chairs we spotted (39) Orange-chinned Parakeets (, a multitude of tanagers and Dacnis, flycatchers, chachalacas, toucans, aracarís, Black-cowled Oriole, Common Tody-Flycatcher and an American Redstart.



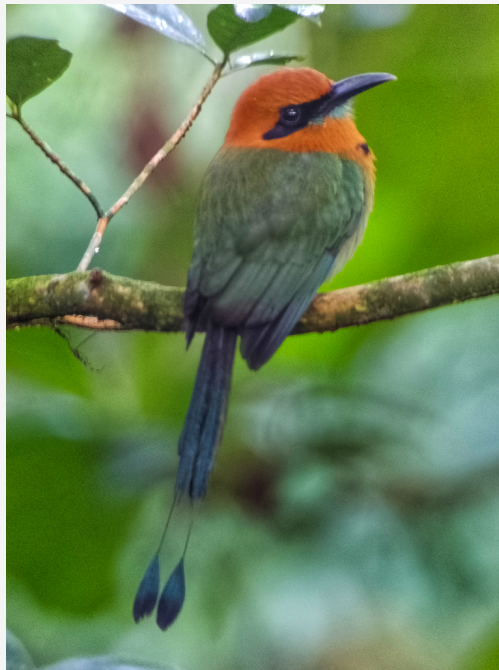
Orange-chinned Parakeet © E Carman

January 23 - La Fortuna

Day 8. Pre breakfast we went for a walk along a trail bordering the Sardinal River that washes through the hotel property and we had some very productive birding. Buff-rumped Warbler and Louisiana Waterthrush were feeding along the edge of the river under the Ringed, Amazon and Green Kingfishers, a Broad-billed Motmot scanned the vegetation from above as a pair of Chestnut-backed Antbirds scanned the vegetation near the ground.



Ringed Kingfisher © E Carman



Broad-billed Motmot © E Carman

After breakfast we loaded our bags back on the impeccably clean and sanitized bus and bid farewell to La Quinta. Our first stop was along a rural back-road near Pueblo Nuevo where we found Olive-backed Euphonia, Gray Hawk, Pied Puffbird, Long-tailed Tyrant, Yellow Tyrannulet, Morelet's and Variable Seedeaters and a pair of Rufous-tailed Jacamars excavating a cavity in a bank along the road. Before continuing on to our next site we made a quick stop at an artisanal chocolate shop just down the road where we loaded up on local chocolate.

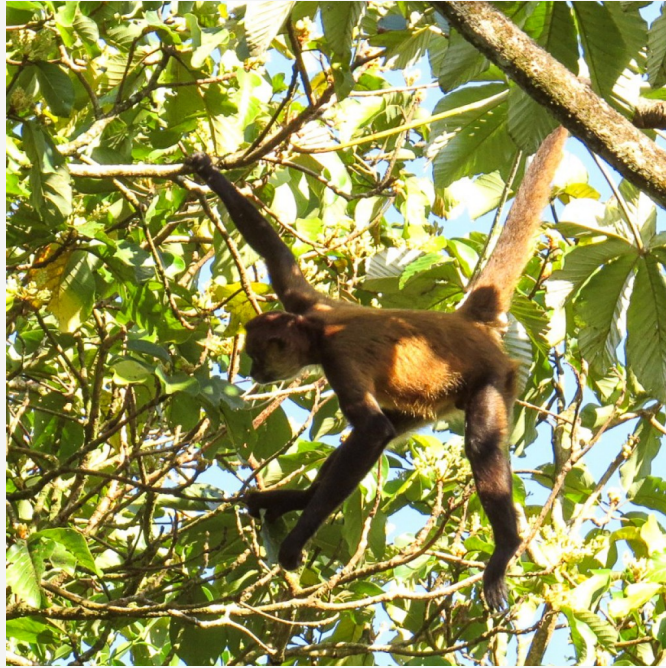


Pied Puffbird © E Carman



Long-tailed Tyrant © E Carman

After having a very filling lunch in the town of La Fortuna we visited a side road commonly known as the Old Dam Road (not “damn”...). We were able to get great views of Spotted Antbird, Golden-winged Warbler and a troop of Spider Monkeys before a heavy rain came down and ran us back on the bus. We made our way to Arenal Observatory Lodge and arrived in time to do some birding in the late afternoon and saw such species as Great Curassow, Violet-headed Hummingbird, Bananaquit, Green Honeycreeper, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Emerald Tanager and a Bay-headed Tanager glowing in the afternoon sunlight. That evening we saw the resident Black-and-white Owl that spends a great deal of time hunting at the street lights along the entrance road to the lodge.



Geoffroy's Spider Monkey © E Carman



Great Curassow © E Carman



Bay-headed Tanager © E Carman

January 24 - Arenal Observatory Lodge

Day 9. Early in the morning the feeders were fully stocked and it wasn't long before the birds were going into a feeding frenzy with a very clear pecking order. First, in a rather clumsy fashion, the Great Curassows took first picking at the watermelon, followed by the Montezuma Oropendolas and Brown Jays. Once the larger species were done, the smaller species began jumping in including Hepatic, Summer, Emerald, Palm, Blue-gray and Golden-hooded Tanagers, Olive-backed and Yellow-throated Euphonias, Green and Red-legged Honeycreepers and Black-cheeked Woodpecker, until the Oropendolas returned for more, chasing everyone from the feeder.





Red-legged Honeycreeper © E Carman

After breakfast we walked towards the waterfall trail. Some of the highlights were Keel-billed Motmot, Semiplumbeous Hawk, Slaty Antwren, Streak-crowned Antvireo, Cooper's Hawk and a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper who, together with a Red-tailed Squirrel, chipped away the external pieces of the bark of a tree, *Inga leiocalycina*, keeping it completely clean and getting food in return! After lunch we visited another trail and saw Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, Black-cowled Oriole, Rufous Motmot and up-close-and-personal views of Crested Guans.



Keel-billed Motmot © E Carman



Black-cowled Oriole © E Carman



Crested Guan © E Carman

January 25 - Arenal Observatory Lodge

Day 10. Our last full day of birding began with the usual busy feeding frenzy at the feeder and a completely clear Arenal Volcano in the background! We took some time to climb the 28m high tower that pokes up over the forest canopy, giving us a different perspective of the forest and the birds. The climb was well worth it as White-crowned Parrots, Golden-olive Woodpeckers, Keel-billed Toucans and a Gartered Trogon all perched in the trees around us providing eye-to-eye views in perfect lighting!



Birding At Arenal © E Carman



Keel-billed Toucan © E Carman



Gartered Trogon © E Carman

After breakfast we made a quick review of the birds visiting the feeder and watched the White-nosed Coatis picking up the pieces of fruit that fell to the ground. We left Arenal Observatory Lodge and visited the Old Dam Road once again on our way out and had great looks at Keel-billed Motmot,

Black-throated Trogon, Red-lored Parrot, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant and a flock of White-fronted Nunbirds showing off just over the bus. Our farewell bird from Arenal though was a Great Potoo on its day roost in a deciduous tree, allowing for fantastic scope views before moving on.



Black-throated Trogon © E Carman

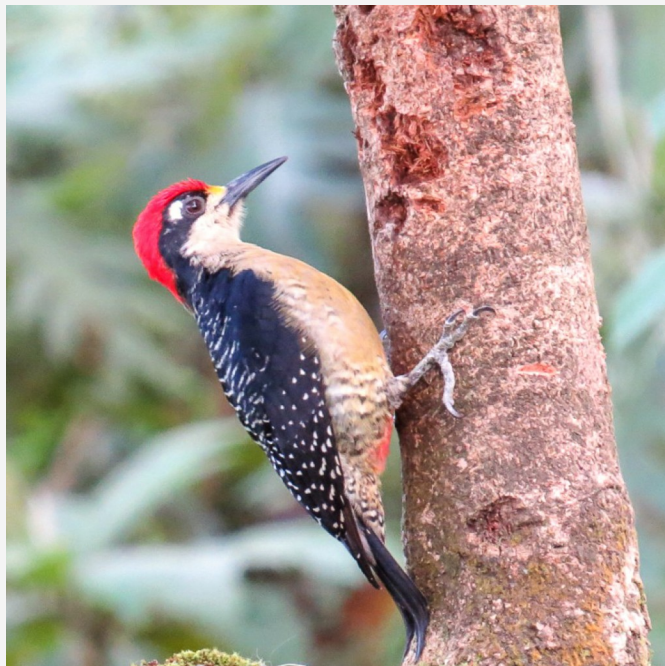


White-fronted Nunbird © E Carman



Great Potoo © E Carman

Before making our way to the Central Valley we made one more stop at a site specializing in adventure activities such as zip-lining called San Luis, but we came for the birds at their feeders which included Common Chlorospingus, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Emerald, Silver-throated, Speckled and Bay-headed Tanagers. We arrived in the late afternoon at Hotel Robledal for our final evening, reminiscing over the highlights of the birding tour while we had dinner and a glass of wine.



Black-cheeked Woodpecker © E Carman



Emerald Tanager © E Carman