

## Costa Rica Sampler 2023 Trip Report (Jan 15 - 25, 2023)

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The Costa Rica Sampler tour is intended to provide a taste of this country's diverse habitats and birds and this year it could not have been any better as all the birding stars aligned: great weather, lots of really good views of amazing birds and a fantastic group. Everything from five different kingfishers during our boat ride on the Tárcoles River, half a dozen Resplendent Quetzals feeding right in front of us in the high mountains and Great Green Macaws only meters away, every place we went seemed to bless us with amazing experiences. **Day 1. Hotel Bougainvillea** At 4pm we gathered for our first birding of this tour in the amazing gardens of Hotel Bougainvillea. The afternoon was sunny, but cool and breezy which kept activity low however, we had great views of Red-billed Pigeon, Rufous-naped Wren, Chestnut-capped Warbler, Clay-colored Thrush and a pair of **Mottled Owls** roosting in a dense cluster of bamboo.



*Mottled Owl © Ernesto Carman*

**Day 2. Hotel Bougainvillea, Caldera mangroves, Tárcoles.** At 6am we gathered for some early morning birding in nearby coffee farms, hoping to find the endemic Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow which we only heard. We did see Brown Jay, Hoffman's Woodpecker, Common Ground-Dove, **Lesson's Motmot**, Gray-cowled Wood-Rail and Baltimore Orioles. After breakfast we met our driver, Jorge León, packed the bus and began making our way down to the Pacific coast. Our first stop was the mangrove forest of Caldera where the tropical dry forest is on one side of the road and the mangroves on the other. As soon as we stepped out of the bus we started seeing new birds with Magnificent Frigatebirds soaring overhead with Black and Turkey Vultures, and down low, a mixed species flock moved within the mangroves. Here we got great views of some of the mangrove specialties such as the resident race of Yellow Warbler which has a completely reddish-brown head, Northern Scrub-Flycatcher, Prothonotary Warbler, **Panama**, Great-crested and Brown-crested Flycatchers, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, Cinnamon and Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds and a skulky Banded wren working a vine-tangle.



*Panama Flycatcher © Ernesto Carman*

After lunch we stopped near the small fishing town of Tárcoles and saw Streak-backed Oriole, **Turquoise-browed Motmot**, Northern Beardless-tyrannulet, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, **Gartered Trogon**, Inca Dove.



*Birding in Tárcoles © Ernesto Carman*



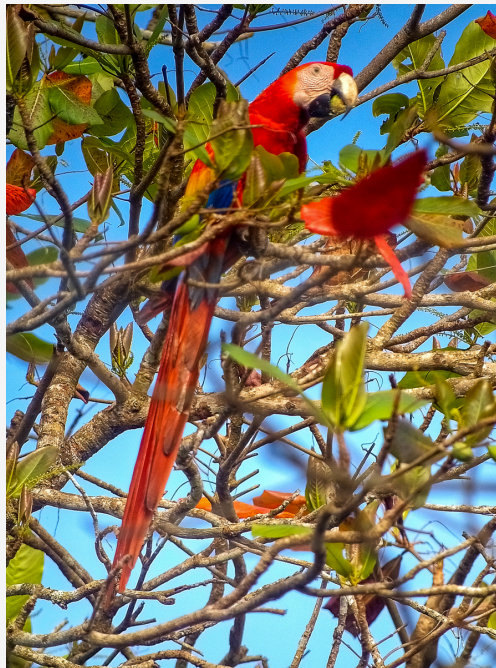
*Turquoise-browed Motmot © Ernesto Carman*





*Gartered Trogon © Ernesto Carman*

We then had a jaw-dropping moment when several **Scarlet Macaws** came in and landed at very close range to feed on Beach Almond seeds, at times flying just meters over our heads! After this excitement we drove the short distance to our next hotel, Villa Lapas, settled in, went over our daily list, had dinner, then off to get some rest.



*Scarlet Macaw © Ernesto Carman*

**Day 3. Hotel Villa Lapas, Carara National Park, Tárcoles River boat tour.** We gathered for our pre-breakfast birding at Villa Lapas which is in a fantastic location set within the tropical



rainforest and next to a stream and the birds were very active. Flycatchers, including Streaked, Gray-capped, Social, Great Kiskadee and Greenish Elaenia, Lesson's Motmot, Blue-gray, Palm and Golden-hooded Tanagers, Costa Rican Swift, Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift and Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, and during this whole time Scarlet Macaws were flying and squawking overhead! After breakfast we drove the short distance to Carara National Park for the rest of the morning. It was not long before we started seeing new birds with Lesser Greenlets, Yellow-throated Vireo and White-shouldered Tanager moving in the canopy (giving "Warbler Neck" a whole new meaning) and lower down we had great views of Black-hooded Antshrike and Dot-winged Antwren. A little further down the trail we found several Blue-throated Goldentails singing from their perches and we waited at a known lekking site (courtship assembly) for **Orange-collared Manakins**, and it was not long before a spectacular male came into view and gave us amazing views! We also ran into a troop of **White-faced Capuchin Monkeys** that were breaking and dropping branches from the trees as they moved through the canopy. We also had great views of Prothonotary Warbler, the tiny Northern Bentbill and a pair of **Rufous-tailed Jacamars**.



*Rufous-tailed Jacamar © Ernesto Carman*

As we worked our way back out, another guide told us they had just seen a Puma resting in a tree, so, of course, we walked quickly back to the site, but it had already left. It was certainly worth the try, and as a consolation prize we had a male **Slaty-tailed Trogon** perching in clear view. After lunch, we drove ten minutes to the dock where we were going to do our boat tour on the Tárcoles River, which is a fantastic way to watch and photograph birds and certainly a highlight of the trip. We were immediately seeing birds left and right, many species of **egrets and herons**, Anhinga, Neotropic Cormorant, wild Muscovy Ducks, Southern Lapwing, Crested Caracara, Common Black Hawk and a Collared Plover, all feeding on the muddy banks alongside fifteen foot-long **American Crocodiles**. We also saw several shorebirds including Spotted and Least Sandpiper, Whimbrel, Willet, Black-necked Stilt and Semipalmated Plover, many Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Royal Terns and in a flowering Tea Mangrove we caught glimpses of Mangrove Hummingbird, but the much larger Scaly-breasted Hummingbird kept bullying it away. One of the exciting highlights of the boat tour was the fact we saw all five possible kingfishers, from the largest, Ringed, to the smallest, the five inch **American Pygmy-Kingfisher**.



*American Pygmy Kingfisher © Ernesto Carman*

**Day 4. Hotel Villa Lapas, Playa Linda, San Isidro, Savegre.** Before breakfast we had a review of species we had seen the previous day, but saw some new ones such as Orange-billed Sparrow and Buff-rumped Warbler. After breakfast we packed and began making our way south along the Pacific coast making a stop on the gravel entrance to Playa Linda. Here we found some birds that are characteristic to the south Pacific of Costa Rica including Smooth-billed Ani, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Scarlet-rumped Tanager, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Mistletoe Tyrannulet, **Southern Lapwing** and a close ball of hair curled up in a small tree which turned out to be a Three-toed Sloth!



*Southern Lapwing © Ernesto Carman*



After a delicious lunch with plenty of tropical fruit juices, we made a stop on the outskirts of San Isidro and after a little while of scanning treetops we spotted our target: a brilliant male **Turquoise Cotinga** which led to much ooohing and aaawing! After this successful stop we began making our way up into the massive Talamanca mountains, specifically Cerro de la Muerte or Death Mountain to reach our next hotel, Savegre Mountain Lodge. **Day 5. Savegre and Paraíso Quetzal.** Before breakfast there was not a cloud in the sky and the high mountain air was nice and crisp as Sulphur-winged Parakeets began flying overhead on route to their feeding grounds and the Lesser Violetears began their repetitive and incessant singing. At the hummingbird feeders we saw Talamanca and **Volcano Hummingbirds**, White-throated Mountain-Gem and Lesser Violetears and in the gardens we had great views of Silver-throated Tanager, Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush, **Acorn Woodpecker** and Long-tailed Silky-Flycatcher.



*Volcano Hummingbird © Ernesto Carman*

After breakfast we drove back out the valley and headed to Paraíso Quetzal Lodge to meet our local guide, Oscar Zuñiga, who was going to take us to look for one of the showiest birds in the world, the Resplendent Quetzal. Paraíso Quetzal Lodge has developed a system with members of the community through which they take birdwatchers to see the Quetzal on their farms and pay them an entrance fee, encouraging conservation of this species. We drove to the small village of La Esperanza to visit William Solano's farm. As we approached the fruiting wild avocado tree in his backyard Oscar immediately pointed out a male **Resplendent Quetzal** perching in the tree right in front of us! We walked to the other side of the tree for better lighting and we never would have guessed what was about to happen. Not only did we see one male Quetzal, we ended up seeing four adult males, one immature male and two females, flying in and out and all about the fruiting tree!!! Our views could not have been improved in any way, it was difficult to walk away from such an incredible spectacle.





*Resplendent Quetzal © Ernesto Carman*



*Resplendent Quetzal (female) © Paz A Irola*

Before we left, William, the owner of the farm where we had been, showed us several long, iridescent quetzal feathers he had found. After such an amazing experience we went to a side road nearby to look for some more highland endemics and saw Black-throated Green Warbler, Black-cheeked Warbler, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus, Black-thighed Grosbeak, Black-capped Flycatcher and fantastic views of **Ruddy Tree-runners** as they moved along the undersides of mossy branches looking for invertebrates. We had lunch at Paraíso Quetzal and spent some time watching the hummingbirds at the feeders, especially the **Fiery-throated Hummingbirds** with their

unbelievable colors and as a final touch we had point blank views of a male **Golden-browed Chlorophonia!**



*Fiery-throated Hummingbirds © Ernesto Carman*



*Golden-browed Chlorophonia © Ernesto Carman*

From here we drove to the top of Cerro de la Muerte to look for the **Volcano Junco** in the bamboo-dominated landscape and it was not long before we spotted one, and after a few minutes of watching



it skulk around in the vegetation, it hopped up on top of a bush in plain sight.



*Volcano Junco © Paz A Irola*

Back at Savegre Mountain Lodge some of us took advantage of the gorgeous afternoon to go for a short walk along the Savegre River and saw Black-faced Solitaire, **Torrent Tyrannulet**, **Spot-crowned Woodcreeper**, **Louisiana Waterthrush** and a **Black Guan** to wrap up an amazing day of highland birding.



*Torrent Tyrannulet © Ernesto Carman*





*Spot-crowned Woodcreeper © Ernesto Carman*



*Black Guan © Paz A Irola*

**Day 6. Savegre Mountain Lodge, Finca Cristina, Hotel La Quinta.** Before breakfast we once again enjoyed the early morning flight of the Sulphur-winged Parakeets and the hummingbirds, including a Stripe-tailed Hummingbird, as well as Slate-throated Redstart, Lesser Goldfinch,

Mountain Thrush and Elegant Euphonia. After breakfast we packed the bus and drove out of the Talamanca Mountains and into the eastern Central Valley where we made a brief stop in the town square of Paraíso to see a family of **Tropical Screech-Owls** that have been roosting here for many years and **Crimson-fronted Parakeets** perched in the rafters of the church.



*Tropical Screech Owl © Ernesto Carman*



*Crimson-fronted Parakeets © Ernesto Carman*



Our next stop was at Finca Cristina, an organic, shade-grown coffee farm owned by Ernesto's family where we learned the whole coffee process from farm to cup, what makes a good cup of coffee and, more importantly what makes coffee good habitat for many species if done correctly.



*Coffee Tour with Ernesto*



*Finca Cristina © Paz A Irola*

After purchasing our stash of coffee we drove to the restaurant run by Paz's grandmother, aunt and



mother and we sat down for a delicious family style lunch cooked on a wood burning stove. After lunch, we made our way to our next lodge, Hotel La Quinta, located in the north Caribbean lowlands, crossing part of the Central Valley and the Central Volcanic Range. We arrived at our hotel in time to watch some birds at the feeders and saw Green, Red-legged and Shinning Honeycreepers! After dinner we saw a **Peanut-headed Lantern Bug** before going to bed. **Day 7. Hotel La Quinta, La Selva Biological Station and La Flaminia.** Having drastically changed habitats, our pre-breakfast walk was full of new birds, including Gray-headed Chachalaca, Crimson-collared Tanager, Green Honeycreeper, Bananaquit, **Collared Araçari and Long-tailed Tyrant.**



*Long-tailed Tyrant and orchids © Ernesto Carman*

After breakfast, we drove to La Selva Biological Station, the oldest research station in the tropics which is run by the Tropical Science Center and has been in operation since the 1960s. Despite the light rain when we arrived, we birded from the cover of the parking lot roof and had an incredible display of tropical birds! One by one birds perched up in leafless trees, granting clear scope views: **Red-lored**, Mealy and White-crowned Parrots, **Olive-throated Parakeet**, Montezuma and Chestnut-headed Oropendolas, **Crested Guan**, Short-billed Pigeon, **Keel-billed** and Yellow-throated Toucans, Collared Araçari and, just to top it off, both male and female Snowy Cotingas! The rain suddenly stopped and the sky cleared completely as we headed down the Arriera-Zompopa trail where we found one mixed species flock which took up almost all of our time. **Chestnut-colored** and Cinnamon Woodpeckers, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Northern-barred Woodcreeper, Fasciated Antshrike, Black-crowned and Masked Tityra, Golden-winged Warbler and a **Great Tinamou** walking in the middle of the trail were just some of the species we saw along this trail. We also saw Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs and a Two-toed Sloth. Just as we were getting back on the bus we spotted a King Vulture soaring up in the sky! After lunch and some feeder watching with Red-throated Ant-tanagers, Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, Honeycreepers and even Collared Araçarís making an appearance, we drove to a site near the entrance to La Selva to look for the critically endangered Great Green Macaws. We did spot the macaws, although a bit backlit and watched them until they flew and disappeared into the nesting cavity. We also had a pair of **Bat Falcons**, Barred Antshrike, Variable Seedeaters and Long-tailed Tyrant. We then drove to another nearby road by the village of La Flaminia to look for Nicaraguan Seedfinch and all of the sudden Jorge

stopped the bus as we drove by the soccer field and yelled "Macaws!". Sure enough, there were several **Great Green Macaws** feeding very low in the Beach Almonds around the playing field, not minding us at all, nor the kids playing in the field! The views in the afternoon sun were unbeatable. We finally pulled ourselves away from these endangered beauties and stopped at a swampy, open field with taller grasses and it wasn't long before we found a pair of the range-restricted and threatened **Nicaraguan Seedfinches** with their massive, seed-crushing beaks. **Day 8. Hotel La Quinta, Pueblo Nuevo, La Fortuna and Arenal Observatory Lodge.** Our early morning walk added a few new birds such as Green-breasted Mango and Green Ibis and had better views of Fasciated Antshrike and Amazon and Green Kingfishers. After breakfast, we loaded the bus and drove a short distance to Pueblo Nuevo where we saw both **Black-crowned** and Masked Tityra, Yellow Tyrannulet, Lineated and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers and **Long-tailed Tyrant**, but the stars of the morning were definitely three adult **King Vultures** perched across a field and a **Pinnated Bittern** lurking in the wetland below us!!!



*Pinnated Bittern*

After these two surprises, we made a brief stop at a chocolate shop to purchase locally grown and made chocolate bars and then made our way to La Fortuna for lunch and had a Harris's Hawk on the way. After lunch we did the last bit of driving to Arenal Observatory Lodge, stopping briefly to photograph a group of White-nosed Coatis. We had the rest of the afternoon to ourselves and after a delicious dinner we saw the resident **Black-and-white Owl** in the parking lot before going to bed.



*Black-and-white Owl © Ernesto Carman*

**Day 9. Arenal Observatory Lodge** We gathered at the front deck at 6am and the birds were already hitting the feeder hard! **Crested Guan**, Great Curassow and Montezuma Oropendolas were hogging the feeder, but every time they went away the smaller birds would sneak in to grab a bite of watermelon or papaya, including Golden-hooded, Emerald, Palm and Blue-gray Tanagers, Yellow-throated Euphonias and Collared Araçaris. In the flowering vervaine hedge below, we saw Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, Crowned Woodnymph and Violet-headed Hummingbird, while the Central American Spider Monkeys fed in the trees behind. After breakfast, we walked through the marvelous gardens and found a couple fruiting fig trees that were just hopping with birds including Silver-throated, Golden-hooded, **Bay-headed** and Emerald Tanagers as well as toucans and araçaris, White-collared Manakin and two birds from higher elevations, **Golden-browed Chlorophonia** and **Black-faced Solitaire**. Although the forest was rather quiet we did have great views of Black-and-yellow Tanager and **Broad-billed Motmot**.





*Broad-billed Motmot © Ernesto Carman*

After lunch we walked down the entrance road and our first surprise came when we spotted a Northern Tamandua walking through the underbrush on the opposite side of the roadside! As far as birds went we saw several new hummingbirds just outside of the rooms such as Stripe-throated Hermit, Green Thorntail and the elegant Black-crested Coquette as well as Cinnamon Becard, Tropical Parula, Buff-throated Foliage-Gleaner and a female **Green-fronted Lancebill** catching insects over the stream at the bottom of the hill.



*Green-fronted Lancebill © Ernesto Carman*

**Day 10. Arenal Observatory Lodge, Peninsula Road, Cinchona, Hotel Robledal.** Before breakfast we birded the gardens and had some of the usual suspects we had become acquainted with on the previous day such as **Crested Guan**, Great Curassow, toucans, Araçaris, Lineated and Pale-billed Woodpeckers and the variety of tanagers visiting the fruiting fig trees. After breakfast we packed the bus one last time and began driving out of Arenal Observatory Lodge, but it was only minutes before we stopped to see Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner, Plain Xenops, **White Hawk** and a troop of **Mantled Howler Monkeys** along the road. We made it to the Peninsula Road which cuts through Arenal National Park and began walking a stretch of this little traveled, gravel road. We soon had a lot of bird activity including Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet, Shining, Red-legged and Green Honeycreepers, Russet Antshrike and two new woodpeckers for the tour, Smoky-brown and Rufous-winged. However, the star of the morning was an **Ornate Hawk-Eagle** perched fairly close to the road and gave us walk-away views!!!



*Ornate Hawk-Eagle © Ernesto Carman*

We began our climb up the slopes of the Poás Volcano and stopped for lunch at Mirador Cinchona where we ate as we watched birds at the feeder including Black Guan, Yellow-billed Cacique, **Prong-billed Barbets**, Common Chlorospingus, Wood Thrush, **Northern Emerald Toucanet**, Green-crowned Brilliant and Violet Sabre wing.





*Northern Emerald Toucanet © Paz A Irola*

We arrived at Hotel Robledal in the late afternoon and as a last sighting for the tour, part of the group saw a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl that nests in a nest box on the grounds! We did our final list and dinner and bid farewell, hoping our paths will cross again in the future. ¡Pura vida!

