



## **Costa Rica Sampler 2023 Trip Report (Jan 24 - Feb 3, 2023)**

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Guides: Paz A. Irola & Joachim Bertrands (author) The Costa Rica sampler is a short tour specifically designed to provide a taste of the country's spectacular avifauna, and this tour succeeded in doing exactly that! Despite a challenging cold front that sent winds up the mountains, we were indulged in spectacular scenery, great birding and food. From the iridescent Emerald Tanagers, the bizarre Black-crested Coquette to - of course - multiple Resplendent Quetzals eating figs above our heads, the tour was a great success. Oh, and lest not forget the Coatis, shall we?

#### **Day 1. Hotel Bougainvillea**

We gathered at 4 PM to make ourselves acquainted with the local birds in the beautiful garden of the hotel. The signature Mottled Owls were present in the bamboo and produced the first 'Ooohs' and 'Aaahs' as we added Rufous-naped Wrens, Baltimore Orioles, Yellow-naped Parrots, Red-billed Pigeon among other of the more typical Central-American species. The evening was spent getting to know each other and enjoy some of the marvellous cuisine the hotel had to offer.



*Mottled Owls at Hotel Bougainvillea © Joachim-Bertrands*

## **Day 2. Hotel Bougainvillea, Caldera mangroves, Tárcoles.**

At 6AM we explored the gardens once again. This time, one of the highlights was seeing a Ferruginous Pygmy-owl getting mobbed by a rather determined Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. Cabanis's Wrens were singing their heart out while we enjoyed a fast-moving Chestnut-capped Warbler, a recent split from Rufous-capped, a species from farther north. Familiar birds for us northerners were Summer Tanager, Philadelphia Vireo, Baltimore Oriole, and Ruby-throated Hummingbird, all spending the winter down here. During breakfast we got to meet our lovely driver for the upcoming tour: Jorge León. Over the next little while, he would be able to drive us everywhere with his comfortable bus, quite a task given how windy some of Costa Rica's roads can be. We started making our way towards the Pacific Coast, and eventually started at a road in the dry forest, but with mangrove thickets on the south side. This combination proved to be excellent for us to encounter a wide set of species. We started off with Magnificent Frigatebirds soaring overhead, but soon encountered mixed flocks working low in the thickets. These included Prothonotary Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, White-throated Magpie-jay, Rose-throated Becard, Turquoise-browed Motmot, Blue-vented Hummingbirds,... Wood Storks flew by and a short glimpse of a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher wouldn't be the last of this species.



*White-throated Magpie-jays in the mangroves at Tarcoles © Joachim Bertrands*



*Birding along the road in Tarcoles © Joachim Bertrands*



*The omnipresent Rufous-naped Wren (at Tarcoles) © Joachim-Bertrands*

After lunch, the small fishing town of Tárcoles was our last stop for the day, and how productive it was! We got to see a nice variety of Pacific specialties, and our first Yellow-throated Toucan, albeit with a damaged upper mandible. During a few hours we looked from the road trying to find as much as we could, and we encountered species as Hoffman's Woodpecker, Orange-fronted Parakeet, Streaked Flycatcher, Stripe-headed Sparrow, Streak-backed Orioles, among other things. Our first Scarlet Macaws of the trip were a total blast, as they flew in and started chewing fruits from a nearby tree.



*Yellow-throated Toucan with a damaged bill at Tarcoles © Joachim Bertrands*



*A Scarlet Macaw at Tarcoles © Joachim Bertrands*

We settled in our hotel Villa Lapas the same evening, went over the list, enjoyed the great buffet, and enjoyed some well-deserved sleep.

**Day 3. Hotel Villa Lapas, Carara National Park, Tárcoles River boat tour.**

Villa Lapas is a perfect start of the morning, with great habitat and birds near the rooms. We just birded around the hotel property and got quite a list together of Pacific specialty birds: Slaty-tailed and Black-headed Trogons, Costa Rican Swifts flying overhead, the gorgeous Fiery-billed Aracari, Red-capped Manakin (aka - the 'Michael Jackson bird'), Red-legged Honeycreeper, etc. A pair of Pale-billed Woodpeckers showed us maybe a little too much of their private life right after breakfast when we got to witness some exquisite mating behaviour, vigorously calling.



*Birding along the road in Tarcoles © Joachim Bertrands*



*A Black Iguana kept a close eye on us while exploring Tarcoles © Joachim Bertrands*

Carara National Park was our next stop, and the dense lowland rainforest here had all that we could wish for as birders: lots of birds, lots of trees, and mostly – giving us a total warbler neck! Over the course of a few hours we walked through the woods, at an extremely slow pace, enjoying mixed flocks, occasional soaring raptors flying by (including 4 Plumbeous Kites) and with some great specialties again: Purple-crowned Fairy, Blue-throated Goldentail, Gartered Trogon, Black-hooded

Antshrike (great views!), Dusky and Chestnut-backed Antbird, Long-tailed Manakin, Orange-collared Manakin, Lesser Greenlet, White-browed Gnatcatcher, among a larger set of Neotropical migrants such as Tennessee and Prothonotary Warblers.



*A Long-tailed Manakin is a true specialty of the Pacific lowlands © Joachim Bertrands*

After lunch, the afternoon would consist of a marvellous boat ride on the Tarcoles River. This river is known for its large numbers of American Crocodiles, which all showed well while resting on the riverbank. It's also a great site to see good numbers of herons, which we did in the shape of Bare-throated Tiger-heron, Little Blue Heron, Great and Snowy Egret, and eventually also the bizarre Boat-billed Heron. A Scissor-tailed Flycatcher perched in a tree caused a bit of a stir, while Mangrove Swallows kept us company as we headed deeper into the mangroves. We were surprised to find high numbers of Spotted Sandpipers (up to 100!) roosting together in dead trees, a Roseate Spoonbill unsuccessfully tried to blend away in the green canopy while multiple Common Black-hawks gave away great looks. We enjoyed a gorgeous sunset, with Lesser Nighthawks hunting above our heads, as we ended our day.



*A Bare-throated Tiger-heron from the Tarcoles River © Joachim Bertrands*



*The boat trip on the Tarcoles River was a great success! © Joachim Bertrands*

**Day 4. Hotel Villa Lapas, Playa Linda, San Isidro, Savegre.**

A short session around our hotel provided great views on most birds once again, and especially the Slaty-tailed Trogons were showy. A Gray-capped Flycatcher fighting itself in the rear view mirror of a car had us chuckling while we geared up after breakfast for another travel day. We stopped at

Playa Linda, farther south and on our way to the highlands. The road here cuts through some fields and adjacent second growth forest, which was an interesting combination. We saw our only Red-crowned Woodpeckers here, the species replacing Hoffmann's farther south. The fields produced a variety of seed-eating species, such as Morelet's Seedeater, Thick-billed Seed-finch, Variable Seedeater and eventually also our Red-breasted Meadowlarks of the trip. They initially showed pretty distantly, yet after a few moments, some popped up from the grassy meadow at much closer range, and gave away great views. Not one but two Brown-throated Three-toed Sloths were our mammalian highlight of the day.



*A Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth was a welcome bonus for us at Playa Linda*

A great lunch had us recharged for an afternoon of travel, yet we didn't completely miss out on any birding. A stop in a rather unassuming street just outside San Isidro provided the perfect habitat for our next target: Turquoise Cotinga. A gorgeous looking bird, and after almost an hour we finally found one! Great scope views, while White-crowned and Blue-headed Parrots flew by, and a Snow-bellied Hummingbird gave away distant scope views. The remainder of the afternoon was spent travelling through the high ridges of the Talamanca mountains, on the way to Savegre Mountain Lodge, our hotel for the upcoming days.

### **Day 5. Savegre and Paraíso Quetzal.**

Our first morning around the Savegre Lodge was spectacular! Surely, we had arrived in the highlands, and the birds were different: Talamanca and Volcano Hummingbirds, White-throated Mountain-Gems, Sulphur-winged Parakeets and Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers all zipped by or visited the feeders. The Flame-coloured Tanager could have been the star of the morning, as it gave away some great photo opportunities as well.



*A Talamanca Hummingbird at the Paraiso Quetzal Lodge © Joachim Bertrands*



*Flame-colored Tanager - always a treat! © Joachim Bertrands*

After breakfast, one of the most anticipated moments was about to follow, as we had a meeting planned with a local guide named Jorge of the Paraiso Quetzal lodge to take us on a search for the Resplendent Quetzal. Upon arrival at the lodge, we first enjoyed the outside feeders before heading through the drizzle towards farms in the area that had recent sightings of the species. As a heavy forager on wild avocados, the birds tend to flock together in these trees, and can be encountered if

one knows where to find these trees. We left and first explored a particular farm close-by that had had some birds in recent days. We saw some great new species for the trip, including Ochraceous Pewee, Tufted Flycatcher, our first Collared Redstart and even a Black-throated Green Warbler which briefly showed. But alas, no luck with the quetzal. Jorge's phone went off and sure enough he had us back in the bus on our way to another farm, where birds had just been seen. Upon arrival, we first noticed some Black-capped Flycatchers before we were alerted a quetzal had been spotted in the woods behind the farm. Following a slippery trail, we headed deeper into the woods when suddenly a quetzal flew overhead and perched right above us. Great looks followed, especially after a second and third bird flew in. Our group had a blast as we gazed away at this bizarre creature, with enormous tail feathers and a bizarre facial disk. What a bird!



*The mighty Resplendent Quetzal! © Joachim Bertrands*

Upon departure, we were showing some of the beautiful quetzal feathers that had been found in the past and added the very localized Yellow-winged Vireo to the list, after which we headed back to the Paraiso Quetzal lodge, and enjoyed more great birds in the garden. The huge Large-footed Finch definitely made an impression and a cooperative Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush won't be forgotten either. Unfortunately, strong winds prevented us from finding Volcano Junco or Timberline Wren at the communication towers, yet after arriving again at the Savegre Lodge, we headed out for a short walk along the river, producing not only American Dipper, the Costa Rican race, but also our first Broad-winged Hawk and Louisiana Water-thrush were seen. A lovely dinner later, and we were putting our eyes to rest for the day.



*Doing the list in the highlands was pretty cosy with that open fire next to us! © Joachim Bertrands*

## **Day 6. Savegre Mountain Lodge, Finca Cristina, Hotel La Quinta.**

A travel day, as we were headed to the Caribbean foothills now, but not before we had done another search in the garden of the Savegre Lodge to try and find some additional birds. A Slate-throated Redstart was new for our lists, same for the Chestnut-capped Brushfinches foraging in the undergrowth, but those Black Guans might have created the biggest spectacle, as they took off from the canopy and disappeared in the distance again. We left and drove out of the Talamanca Range into the lowlands, and had a stop at the town's center of Paraiso as Paz was aware of some good 'owling' possibilities here. After staring at the trees for at least 40 minutes, it was Paz who suddenly noticed two roosting little owls: Tropical Screech-Owls. Even though they were only perched a mere 3 meters away, they blended right in and others of us had just been walking right underneath them. Crimson-fronted Parakeets were numerous and finally perched at close range, this time in the roof of the local church. Next stop was Finca Cristina, a local and organic, shade-grown coffee farm, owned by Paz's husband Ernesto's family, where we got submerged in the world of coffee production. After initially seeing the whole growth and harvest process, we learned about coffee burning and eventually were provided with cups of the dark gold, which tasted amazing after this busy morning. Lunch was at a local restaurant nearby, owned and managed by Paz's family, where we had a lovely traditional lunch served while birds were flying around our ears. A Green Ibis didn't wait for us to finish our lunches and perched cooperatively in a nearby tree. On our last stretch, we pulled over near a river crossing, and after a quick search, Paz spoke the excited words: "I see it!". A beautiful Fasciated Tiger-heron showed off sitting on one of the rocks in the river, a great addition to our list. At the end of the day, we checked into our hotel La Quinta and enjoyed birds around the lodge.



*The beautiful Fasciated Tiger-heron, one of two birds we saw this tour! © Joachim Bertrands*

**Day 7. Hotel La Quinta, La Selva Biological Station and La Flaminia.** The feeders around the hotel were splendid and some Gray-headed Chachalacas definitely made up for the Jurassic Park feeling we started the day with. Other good birds, more typical for the Caribbean lowlands, were Collared Aracari, Scarlet-rumped Tanagers, Mistletoe Tyrannulet and Buff-throated Saltators. We arrived at the famous 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. The morning started bright with clear blue skies and we soon found ourselves walking to the access gate, as the entrance road is known as supreme birding habitat: Rufous-tailed Jacamar, White-whiskered Puffbird, Rufous-winged Woodpecker and Chestnut-colored Woodpecker were great birds here, and we even scored on the non-birding front with a crossing Javelina as well as a Strawberry Poison-dart Frog. Deeper in the woods, birds got bigger and even more exciting, with Keel-billed Toucans, Pale-vented Thrush (an altitudinal migrant) and Black-throated Trogon as most notable birds. The river hosted some Black River Turtles, and the old moth tarp hosted some large Saturnids, which got the cameras out for sure.



*Keel-billed Toucan at La Selva Biological Station © Joachim Bertrands*



*A Black-throated Trogon at La Selva Biological Station © Joachim Bertrands*

We later searched a location for the Great Green Macaw but were unsuccessful in finding them. The supporting cast kept us busy, however, and more species kept coming in while we waited for the macaws to appear. Eventually, it turned out to be quite a productive birding jaunt, as we saw many other birds we hadn't seen so far: Black-cowled Oriole and Bat Falcon were new for the list. Eventually, we thought the day was almost done, but Paz still had one last trick up her sleeve, as she

asked Jorge to pull over at a rather unassuming grassland, which turned out to be a location for the near-endemic Nicaraguan Seedfinch. We waited and waited, and some people even saw a distant Great Green Macaw, but suddenly there was chaos, and the seedfinch showed. What an extraordinary bill, and so pink! Everybody enjoyed great looks of this species, and eventually also heard White-throated Crakes, to supplement our increasingly long bird-list. The buffet was great, and those who enjoyed the pool were right doing so!



*Record shot from the famous Nicaraguan Seedfinch - look at that bill! © Joachim Bertrands*

### **Day 8. Hotel La Quinta, Pueblo Nuevo, La Fortuna and Arenal Observatory Lodge.**

Our early morning walk around the hotel provided us with our first Long-tailed Tyrant of the tour, a great and special-looking bird that made our morning. We packed our bags and left for Arenal, but not before paying a visit to the Pueblo Nuevo. While walking this gravel road, numerous birds appeared, and it started with a perched King Vulture in a tree! Other species included Yellow Tyrannulet, Pied Puffbird, Black-faced Grosbeak, Long-billed Starthroat, Black-crowned and Masked Tityras, Black-cheeked Woodpecker and an actively displaying Short-tailed Hawk. The drive to Arenal took a while, and we had a chance to take some great photos of the volcano, as well as a group photo. Upon arrival at the lodge, we checked in and provided a moment of rest for the group, before all gathering at the dinner table to discuss the upcoming day. Those who visited the feeders, were soon provided with amazing looks of Emerald Tanager and Great Curassow.



*Great Curassows showed well at Arenal © Joachim Bertrands*



*We were lucky to encounter an ant swarm at Arenal with - among others - this very cooperative Spotted Antbird! © Joachim Bertrands*



*Our group after discovering an active ant swarm © Joachim Bertrands*



*Coati at Arenal © Joachim Bertrands*

### **Day 9. Arenal Observatory Lodge**

We met at the lodge by 6 and first started off by watching around the feeder. Numerous birds were visiting and we came eyes short to check them all: Great Curassow, Golden-hooded-, Emerald-, Carmiol's and Scarlet-rumped Tanagers were plentiful. Hummingbirds such as Violet-headed

Hummingbird and Green Thorntail were a great entourage and Montezuma Oropendolas were loud as usual. After breakfast, we first walked the trails down from the Observatory deck, before heading farther into the forest. The initially rather windy hike produced a few birds such as Black-striped Sparrow, Silver-throated Tanagers and Crested Guan, before we hit the jackpot as we bumped into an ant swarm on the trail. Lots of chipping came from the densest bits of the thicket, but we soon were able to get great looks on Bicoloured as well as Spotted Antbird. A few people got lucky to see the enigmatic Ocellated Antbird, Northern Barred Woodcreeper and eventually also a Black-headed Nightingale-thrush. Overhead, the flocks were passing as well, and the White-throated Shrike-tanager as well as the Broad-billed Motmot are birds that few will forget. The afternoon had us walking downhill as we birded the roadsides which produced Collared Trogon (orange-bellied) as well as the mighty Black-crested Coquette, which quickly visited one of the vervain bushes in the shoulder.



*The beautiful local orange-bellied race of Collared Trogon at Arenal © Joachim Bertrands*



*We had a great encounter with the Black-crested Coquette at Arenal © Joachim Bertrands*

**Day 10. Arenal Observatory Lodge, Peninsula Road, Cinchona, Hotel Robledal.** The morning started wet! It had been pouring rain all night and so we were limited in our birding. Luckily, the lodge provides numerous spaces where it's possible to view the feeders from, and so we did just that, hoping we could add a few more species to the list. We got great looks at the same birds before we departed Arenal towards the peninsula road. This road gives access to some lower elevation forest which had been productive on previous tours and didn't disappoint this time either. A singing Thicket Antpitta refused to show itself but other species such as Black-headed Saltator, Tropical Parula, Stripe-breasted Wren, Dusky-capped Flycatcher and Rufous Motmot did just that.



*Arenal provides the option to look at the feeders from beneath the shelter, which came in handy*

*on our second day © Joachim Bertrands*

Back on our way to San Jose, the feeders at Cinchona produced a marvellous afternoon as we enjoyed their great setup while enjoying some great food as well. We got up close with numerous otherwise hard-to-get-targets such as Prong-billed Barbet, Crimson-collared Tanager, Slaty-backed Nightingale-thrush, Wood Thrush, Buff-fronted Quail-dove as well as the gorgeous Northern Emerald-toucanet. What a way to end the tour!



*Prong-billed Barbet at Cinchona © Joachim Bertrands*



*Great looks at this Buff-fronted Quail-dove at Cinchona © Joachim © Bertrands*



*The Northern Emerald-toucanet was a great surprise at the Cinchona feeders © Joachim Bertrands*



*We had the luxury to get all up close and personal with the Black Guan at Cinchona © Joachim Bertrands*

Our last night together was a fun one, and we enjoyed a well-deserved glass of wine while reliving the tour. It was a blast, ¡Pura vida! Joachim Bertrands (author) & Paz A. Irola