



Costa Rica Sampler (Jan 18 - 28, 2024) Trip Report

[Link: Costa Rica Sampler \(Jan 18 - 28, 2024\) Trip Report](#)

Day 1. Hotel Bougainvillea

We met in the afternoon for our first group birding and began spotting some of the common yard birds of the Central Valley such as Crimson-fronted Parakeet, Blue-gray and Palm Tanager, White-tailed Kite, Crested and Yellow-headed Caracara and Rufous-collared Sparrow.



Blue-gray Tanager © Ron Buckstein

We walked down a side street to a small coffee farm to look for one of Costa Rica's threatened endemics, the Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow, which we found amidst a flock of Rufous-collared Sparrows! In the gardens of the hotel we searched for the resident Mottled Owls that roost in the cluster of bamboo and at first they were very difficult to see, but as the sun began setting one individual hopped out of cover and allowed for amazing views!



White-tailed Kite © Richard Lee



Yellow-headed Caracara © Richard Lee

Day 2. Caldera Mangroves, Tivives and Tárcoles.

Early in the morning we met our driver Ricardo Gómez, loaded the bus and off we went down to the Pacific coast to take advantage of the cooler hours of the day birding near Caldera on a side road between tropical dry forest and mangroves. After a quick picnic we immediately began enjoying views of some phenomenal birds such as White-throated Magpie-Jay, Masked Tityra, Streak-backed Oriole, Hoffman's Woodpecker, Panama Flycatcher, Scrub Euphonia, Black-headed Trogon and White-lored Gnatcatcher.



Masked Tityra © Richard Lee

In a flowering Jocote tree (*Spondias purpurea*) we saw several Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and Tennessee Warblers, as well as one of our main targets of this stop, the Mangrove Hummingbird! As it warmed up we moved on to another side road where Paz spotted a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl sticking its head out of a cavity in a dry palm stump! A bit further on we also had Great views of two large relatives of the plovers, Southern Lapwing and Double-striped Thickknee.



Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl in cavity © Richard Lee

After a very filling lunch we made one more stop before arriving at our hotel and we picked-up Gartered Trogon, White-browed Gnatcatcher, Rufous-naped Wren, Barred Antshrike, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Common Black-Hawk and the first of many Scarlet Macaws! We also had scope views of a Black-and-white Owl which has been using this day roost for many years.



Scarlet Macaw

Day 3. Punta Leona, Carara National Park and Tárcoles Boat Tour

We began our day with a bit of pre-breakfast birding around the rooms and saw both Cocoa and Northern Barred Woodcreepers, Streaked Flycatcher, Lesson's Motmot and White-whiskered Puffbird. After breakfast we visited Carara National Park for the rest of the morning and we very quickly got busy with birds. While we watched a Blue-throated Goldentail singing in the scope a mixed species flock began forming overhead and we had Lesser Greenlet, White-winged and Rose-throated Becards, Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, Dot-winged Antwren, Black-hooded Antshrike, Dusky Antbird and Eye-ringed Flatbill. We also found a very obliging Rufous-tailed Jacamar, as White-faced Capuchin monkeys scanned all the surroundings for food. We finished our morning in the park with a bang as we patiently waited at an Orange-collared Manakin lek for the males to show themselves, and in the end we all had splendid views of this fiery little bird!



Orange-collared Manakin © Richard Lee

After lunch we went to the Tárcoles River to board a boat that would take us birding along the river and in the mangroves. The next three hours proved to be some of the birdiest ever as we encountered species after species including a great number of egrets and herons, sandpipers and plovers, Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, Brown Pelicans, Anhinga and a group of terns and gulls with a couple Black Skimmers mixed in.



Mangrove boat tour © Marita Kohl



Roseate Spoonbill © Richard Lee

Prothonotary Warblers really put on a show for us as they foraged in the mangroves, the golden plumage contrasting with the dark foliage, and not to mention the five species of kingfishers we saw! As we got mind-blowing views of the American Pygmy-Kingfisher a Rufous-necked Wood-Rail flew across the river just in front of the boat, giving us brief, but good views of this rare species.



American Pygmy Kingfisher © Richard Lee

After such an amazing day with more than 130 species of birds seen, we enjoyed our dinner and went for a short night walk and saw two more mammals, the Central American Woolly Opossum and

Kinkajou.

Day 4. Punta Leona, Bijagual, Verdesana Lodge and Irazú Volcano.

Our pre-breakfast birding was again quite productive with our usual macaws and Rufous-naped Wrens, as well as Orange-chinned Parakeet, Montezuma Oropendola, Yellow-throated Toucan and Fiery-billed Aracari. After breakfast we loaded the bus and left Punta Leona, but made a stop along the Bijagual road which overlooks the Pacific Ocean and we did a bit of raptor watching. We had splendid views of Zone-tailed Hawk, Gray Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk and our main target, a King Vulture! From here we drove our way back to the Central Valley and had lunch at our next hotel, Verdesana Lodge, before heading up the slopes of Irazú Volcano. We made our way up Irazú, which is Costa Rica's highest volcano and the weather was not that great when we arrived to our birding spot near Nochebuena, with strong wind and dense fog, but within minutes of arriving the fog cleared and the wind stopped. As we waited at a fruiting wild avocado tree, the Quetzal's main food, we watched Acorn Woodpeckers, Volcano Hummingbirds, Band-tailed Pigeons and Wilson's Warblers foraging in the bushes around us, and one Quetzal flew over head but went to deep in the forest for us to see it. However, within minutes we spotted another male which gave us walk-away views in the scope!



Resplendent Quetzal © Richard Lee

We saw several more males and females, and pleased with our fantastic views we drove to the top of the mountain to say we did and to enjoy the view of Turrialba Volcano. During our drive back to the lodge we had many Common Pauragues perching in the gravel road as well as a Mottled Owl.

Day 5. Verdesana and Cerro de la Muerte

Early morning birding was much different today as it was much cooler and a totally different suite of birds were present including Scarlet-rumped, Crimson-collared, Silver-throated and Summer Tanagers, Common Chlorospingus and White-naped and Chestnut-capped Brush-Finches at the feeder. What really knocked our socks off though were the fourteen species of hummingbirds we saw BEFORE breakfast! From the smallest species, Scintillant Hummingbird, Coppery-headed

Emerald and Magenta-throated Woodstar, to the gigantic Violet Sabrewing, we had great views of an amazing selection of hummingbirds, most feeding from the Purple Vervaine flowers.



Rufous-tailed Hummingbird at flower © Ron Buckstein



Violet Sabrewing © Ron Buckstein



Green Thorntail © Richard Lee

After breakfast we drove to Cerro de la Muerte and found Volcano Juncos and Volcano Hummingbirds in the alpine-like habitat and though the day was very sunny and dry we managed to find Yellow-thighed Brush-Finch, Large-footed Finch, Mountain Thrush, Black Guan, Talamanca Hummingbird, Timberline Wren, Barred Becard, and the elegant Long-tailed Silky-Flycatchers.



Birding in Verdesana, Costa Rica © Marita Kohl

Day 6. Verdesana, Ujarrás, Café Cristina, Gran Gavilán Lodge

After our usual hummingbird and tanager frenzy during breakfast we packed our bags and headed out soon making a stop on a bridge where we got great views of a pair of American Dippers. We then drove through the city of Cartago and saw some important landmarks such as the ruins of the Catedral de Santiago Apostol and the Basilica de Los Angeles. We made a stop in the town square of Paraíso to see the resident pair of Tropical Screech-Owls and the sculpture of the Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow which adorns the park. Our next stop was in the chayote fields of Ujarrás where we were successful finding nine Hook-billed Kites of all different plumages, males, females, immatures and even the scarce black morph. We then visited Café Cristina where we learned all about how the Carman family grows and produces organic, shade-grown coffee while providing habitat for as many species as possible. As we did the coffee tour we saw many birds foraging in the coffee including Golden-hooded Tanager, Social Flycatcher, Mistletoe Tyrannulet, Brown Jay and Tropical Parula. After filling our bags with coffee and having lunch we began our drive to the Caribbean lowlands stopping on the way to see Fasciated Tiger-Heron and Sunbittern.

Day 7. Gran Gavilán and La Selva Biological Station

Our pre-breakfast birding was probably the busiest ever with fifty species of birds seen in just half an hour! Both tityras, Cinnamon and Rufous-winged Woodpeckers, Gray-rumped Swifts, Yellow Tyrannulet, Red-lore and Mealy Parrots, Muscovy Duck, Crested Guan, Gartered Trogon and Bright-rumped Attila were just a few of the species we saw without leaving the gardens.



Birding in La Selva © Nancy Osborne

After breakfast we went to La Selva Biological Station and it did not disappoint as we saw a good selection of tropical families including many flycatchers, trogons, Black-faced Grosbeak, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Shinning and Green Honeycreeper, Blue-chested Hummingbird, Gray-headed Kite, Black-crowned Antshrike, Slaty-tailed Trogon and towards the end of our walk we encountered an army ant swarm where we were able to see Spotted, Bicolored and Ocellated Antbirds following the ants to catch the fleeing prey. And just to top off the morning a Great

Tinamou silently walked in below us to drink from the tiny creek!



Green Honeycreeper © Richard Lee



Slaty-tailed Trogon © Richard Lee

After lunch, once the sun was a bit lower and temperatures more comfortable, we went to a small swampy field and saw our first target, the Nicaraguan Seed-Finch.



Nicaraguan Seed-Finch © Richard Lee

At another spot we stopped for the endangered Great Green Macaws and it was not long before we saw four fly in to perch in the trees above us and we had excellent views. We also had fantastic views of the elusive Canebrake Wren, Variable and Morelet's Seedeater, Blue-black Grassquit, Yellow-crowned and Olive-backed Euphonia, White-lined Tanager and Bat Falcon.



Great Green Macaws © Richard Lee

Day 8. Gran Gavilán, Costa Rica's Best Chocolate Tour, Cinchona

The early birding in the gardens of the hotel were once again quite impressive with incessant singing and birds perching up on exposed branches to preen, providing for fantastic views. After breakfast we visited Costa Rica's Best Chocolate Tour where Rodolfo Alvarado and his daughter Tayra gave us an amazing explanation about the origins of chocolate, its process, and the best tasting ever! We left the chocolate tour having learned a lot and on a choco-buzz and made our way up to Cinchona, a roadside restaurant with amazing feeders. With a spectacular waterfall in the background we saw Violet Sabrewing, Green-crowned Brilliant, Green Hermit, White-bellied Mountain-Gem, Black-bellied Hummingbird and Coppery-headed Emerald at the hummingbird feeders, and on the fruit feeders we saw a mix of tanagers as well as Red-headed and Prong-billed Barbets, Yellow-winged Tanager and Northern Emerald Toucanet. From here we worked our way to Arenal Observatory Lodge which is located at the base of Arenal Volcano, however we could not even see the base due to the dense cloud covering the mountains.



Green Hermit © Richard Lee



Northern Emerald Toucanet © Ron Buckstein

Day 9. Arenal Observatory Lodge

It rained on and off all night and this continued on into the morning. However it did not stop us from birding! We began watching the feeders from the cover of a roof and watched as the pecking order played out on the feeder. First the Great Curassows, then the Crested Guans, Gray-headed Chachalacas followed by the Montezuma Oropendolas and little by little the smaller birds began coming in such as Emerald Tanager, Yellow-throated and Olive-backed Euphonias, Golden-hooded Tanager and Green Honeycreeper.



Emerald Tanager © Richard Lee



Birding at Arenal Observatory Lodge © Ron Buckstein

After breakfast we went birding in the gardens but had to seek shelter from the rain and while we continued birding from the covered patio we spotted Golden-winged Warbler, Russet Antshrike, Tawny-capped Euphonia, Yellow-olive Flatbill, Black-crested Coquette and a large flock of Bay-headed Tanagers feeding in a fruiting fig tree. The rain finally stopped and the sun came out so we walked the waterfall trail and saw many species of flowering orchids as well as Smoky-brown Woodpecker, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Black-striped Sparrow and Yellow-faced Grassquit. During lunch the volcano cleared completely and changed the scenery drastically! After lunch we picked up some new birds such as Cinnamon Becard, Spotted Woodcreeper and Buff-rumped Warbler, but the highlight was certainly a Green-fronted Lancebill catching insects over the rushing water of a river! After dinner we did a night walk and had great fun at the frog pond with fantastic views of a Northern Cat-eyed Snake, Loquacious Tree-Frog, Brilliant Forest-Frog, Savage's Slender-toed Frog and a mating pair of the emblematic Red-eyed Leaf-Frog.



Red-eyed Leaf-Frogs © Richard Lee

Day 10. Arenal Observatory Lodge, Canopy San Luis and Hotel Robledal

Today we started at six in the hotel gardens and, without rain, we had phenomenal activity with Golden-olive, Lineated, Pale-billed and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, Broad-billed and Rufous Motmot, Slaty-tailed Trogon, Red-lored Parrots and the usual feeder suspects.



Lineated Woodpecker © Richard Lee

After breakfast we packed up and began making our way out and a Broad-billed Motmot bid us

farewell from the wires on the side of the road. Our next stop was in the mountains at a lunch stop that has feeders, and it could not have been better. The sheer numbers of Silver-throated Tanagers was amazing, but add to that the rainbow of colors of Bay-headed, Emerald, Crimson-collared, Scarlet-rumped and Speckled Tanagers.



Silver-throated Tanager © Richard Lee



Blue-gray, Crimson-collared and Passerini's Tanager © Richard Lee

Last but not least a Blue-and-gold Tanager made a brief entrance and gave us amazing views of this near endemic which has a very restricted range. We also added a few new hummingbirds including Brown Violetear, Green-crowned Brilliant, and the dazzling Crowned Woodnymph.



Blue-and-gold Tanager © Richard Lee



Crowned Woodnymph © Richard Lee

From here we dropped down to the dry Central Valley once again and had some daylight to do a

little more birding and saw Rufous-naped Wrens, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and a Squirrel Cuckoo foraging within a flowering Pink Tabebuia tree. [List of bird from Costa Rica Sampler tour](#)