

## Costa Rica Sampler Trip Report (Jan 4 - 15, 2025)

[Link: Costa Rica Sampler Trip Report \(Jan 4 - 15, 2025\)](#)

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### Day 1. Cariari Doubletree

We began our tour walking the streets of the neighborhood surrounding our hotel and spotted some of the common Central Valley yard birds such as Rufous-backed Wren, White-winged Dove, Red-billed Pigeon, Inca Dove, Summer Tanager, Blue-gray Tanager, Green-breasted Mango and Hoffman's Woodpecker. We also picked-up a few raptors including Yellow-headed and Crested Caracaras as well as a Gray Hawk perched on a tower.

### Day 2. La Ceiba, Guácimo Road and Tárcoles

Bright and early we had breakfast and met our driver Ricardo Gómez with his spiffy new bus and began making our way west towards the tropical dry forest. We began our birding on the La Ceiba road and soon were seeing many new species including White-browed Gnatcatcher, Stripe-headed Sparrow, Rose-throated Becard, Western Kingbird, Philadelphia and Yellow-throated Vireo, Common Ground-Dove and an impressive orchid in bloom, Lueddemann's Schomburgkia (Schomburgkia lueddemanni). Of the various raptors we saw this morning, the highlight was certainly a very obliging Pearl Kite perched at fairly close range. We also had amazing views of Plain-capped Starthroat and Cinnamon Hummingbird feeding from a flowering Erythrina tree. After a substantial lunch we birded along another side road and found Turquoise-browed Motmot, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, White-lored Gnatcatcher, Lesser Greenlet and Orange-fronted Parakeet. We made one last stop before our hotel just outside the fishing village of Tárcoles and despite the heat and humidity we saw many birds including the minute Olivaceous Piculet, Scrub Euphonia, Black-headed and Gartered Trogon, Barred Antshrike, Yellow-throated Toucan, Scarlet Macaws and a troop of Mantled Howler Monkeys. We made it to our hotel in time for a little rest before doing our evening routine of list and dinner.



*Birding Tárcoles © Ernesto Carman*

### **Day 3. Carara National Park**

Early in the morning we gathered in front of our rooms to bird around the beautiful grounds of Hotel Villa Lapas which is set in the rainforest with large Guanacaste trees and their broad canopies covering the river valley. We found a small, fruiting strangler fig just outside our rooms and had eye-level views of Scarlet-rumped, Golden-hooded and Bay-headed Tanager, Red-capped and Velvety Manakin and Yellow-throated and Spot-crowned Euphonias, all while Scarlet Macaws flew overhead and perched in the trees around us!



*Bay-headed Tanager © Ernesto Carman*





*Scarlet Macaw © Ernesto Carman*

After breakfast we drove a short distance to Carara National Park where we would spend the morning exploring its spectacular forest. Right at the beginning of the trail we spotted a pair of Rufous-tailed Jacamars and the endemic Black-hooded Antshrike. We also found small-but-cute flycatchers, the Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher and Golden-crowned Spadebill, as well as Black-throated Trogon, Eye-ringed Flatbill, Chestnut-backed Antbird and Rufous Piha. As the temperature increased, bird activity decreased but we still found some excellent birds such as Red-capped Manakin bathing in the stream, Black-faced Antthrush walking on the ground, the larger Great Tinamou stealthily walking through the shadows and a White-whiskered Puffbird almost motionless a mere four meters from the trail.



*Birding at Carara © Paz A Irola*



*White-whiskered Puffbird © Ernesto Carman*

After lunch we drove to the small village of Playa Azul to look for a Black-and-white Owl which has been using the same mango tree to roost for the last several years and sure enough there it was! We also spotted a Crane Hawk, Common Black Hawk, Common Tody Flycatcher, Barred Antshrike and dozens of Scarlet Macaws heading to sleep in the mangroves.



*Black-and-white Owl © Ernesto Carman*

#### **Day 4. Caldera Mangroves and Tárcoles River Boat Tour**

Early in the morning we gathered again at the fig tree in front of our rooms and once again the multitude of colorful tanagers, euphonias and manakins had their breakfast right in front of us as Scarlet Macaws flew up and down the river valley. A walk through the forest produced Golden-crowned Spadebill, Dusky Antbird, Gray-headed Tanager, Buff-rumped Warbler and Blue-black Grosbeak. After breakfast we drove north to Caldera where we birded along a road where the tropical dry forest butts-up to a patch of mangroves and we saw several dry forest species such as Nutting's Flycatcher, Canivet's Emerald, Streak-backed Oriole and fantastic views of a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. We also saw Northern Scrub Flycatcher, Rose-throated Becard, Prothonotary Warbler, Painted Bunting, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds.





*Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl © Ernesto Carman*

After lunch and a quick siesta we drove a short distance to the Tárcoles River to board the boat for our mangrove boat tour with our captain Juan Carlos, who knows exactly where all the birds are! As soon as we began moving, with the entire boat to ourselves, we began seeing new birds left and right. We began birding the river banks and mudflats near the river mouth and saw dozens of egrets and herons, Double-striped Thick-Knee, Neotropic Cormorants, Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Wood Storks and dozens of shorebirds including Ruddy Turnstone, Least and Western Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Greater Yellowlegs and Wilson's, Semipalmated, Collared and the rare migrant Snowy Plover! As we entered the Guacalillo canal which drains the spectacular Tárcoles mangroves with massive Black Mangrove trees towering 30 meters overhead, we had a Roseate Spoonbill feeding alongside various egrets and herons and near an American Crocodile resting on the bank. A little further in we spotted one of the hardest birds to see in the mangroves, a Rufous-necked Wood-Rail walking calmly at the base of the mangrove roots until a Crab-eating Raccoon chased it back into hiding! We also had fantastic views of American Pygmy-Kingfisher and Boat-billed Heron, but one of the most iconic species of this boat tour was eluding us, the Mangrove Hummingbird. We spent a considerable amount of time waiting in front of several flowering Tea Mangrove trees - which the hummingbird depends on - until finally a female Mangrove Hummingbird zipped in and fed at several flowers. As dusk set in we began working our way back out as Lesser Nighthawks and bats left the mangroves to feed and Yellow-naped Parrots and Scarlet Macaws flew towards the same mangroves to roost, all with a colorful sunset in the background.



*Birding from boat © Ernesto Carman*



*American Crocodile © Ernesto Carman*





*A variety of waders © Ernesto Carman*



*Sunset at the beach © Paz A Irola*

## **Day 5. Bijagual Road, Río Loro Municipal Park, Paraíso**

It was time to move on and change habitats so we packed the bus and after breakfast we headed out, first making a stop on the ridge overlooking Villa Lapas and the Pacific Ocean to watch for raptors and we had a great vantage point to watch Green Honeycreeper, Blue Dacnis, Summer Tanager,



Western Tanager as well as Short-tailed and Broad-winged Hawk, Swallow-tailed Kite and close views of a Gray-headed Kite soaring just over our heads. It was not until we had decided to leave and began driving that Ricardo yelled out "KING VULTURE!" and sure enough an adult King Vulture soared overhead, making the Black and Turkey Vultures look small.



*Birding Bijagual Road © Ernesto Carman*

We made our way east across the Central Valley, crossing San José and heading towards Cartago. We stopped at Río Loro Municipal Park where we setup a lovely picnic lunch and used team work to keep the family of Northern Racoons away from the food. After lunch we spotted Violet Sabrewing, Green Ibis, Chestnut-capped Warbler, Cabanis's Wren and Black-and-white Warbler. Our next stop, though in an unlikely spot in the parking lot of a supermarket in downtown Cartago, produced close-up views of Scintillant Hummingbird! We drove a bit further east to Paraíso and despite the rain we found the two species of roosting owls, Barn Owl and a pair of Tropical Screech-Owls. We also took time to visit the 1.8m sculpture of Paraíso's symbol bird, the Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow and learned about the conservation efforts being done to conserve this endemic species. Later this afternoon we arrived at our next hotel, the lovely Rinconcito Verde, run by a mother and daughter team.

## **Day 6. Ujarrás Valley, Río Macho, Café Cristina**

After an early breakfast we drove five minutes to the Ujarrás Valley and it was only a matter of minutes before we found a pair of Cabanis's Ground-Sparrows calling nearby from a chayote field and giving us fantastic views! We also saw White-tailed Kite, White-crowned Parrot, Green Ibis, Roadside Hawk, Crimson-fronted Parakeet, Southern Lapwing and Giant Cowbird. We drove to another part of the valley and visited one of the study sites where Paz and Ernesto work with Hook-billed Kites and hoped to get views of these snail specialists. Sure enough, it was only a matter of minutes before we found one eating a snail in the chayote plantation, then another and another! We saw both females and a male, two of which were color banded.



*Hook-billed Kite © Ernesto Carman*

We also had fantastic views of Laughing Falcon and Scarlet-thighed Dacnis before we drove to the Río Macho Forest Reserve near the small town of Orosi. The weather remained cool and a light rain intermittently fell, keeping bird activity a bit low, but despite this we encountered a busy mixed species flock and saw Ochraceous Wren, Crimson-collared Tanager, Prong-billed Barbet, Brown-capped Vireo, Slate-throated Redstart, Red-faced Spinetail and Scaly-throated Foliage-Gleaner. After a delicious lunch and a visit to the colonial church in Orosi we visited Café Cristina where we learned how Ernesto's family has been producing organic, shadegrown coffee in an exemplary way and had a chance to stash-up on the best coffee!



*Scarlet-thighed Dacnis © Ernesto Carman*





*Coffee tour © Paz A Irola*



*Coffee mill © Paz*

## **Day 7. Irazú Volcano**

Fortunately the weather had drastically changed and the skies were clear as could be, as today we



were slated to visit Irazú Volcano, the highest volcano in Costa Rica. After an early breakfast we drove straight to Nochebuena where a remnant of Costa Rican oak forest remains and provides habitat to many of Costa Rica's highland endemics. It was only minutes after arriving that Paz got our attention as she had found one of our main targets for the day, and possibly the tour, the Resplendent Quetzal! A male perched high in a fruiting, wild avocado tree gave us decent scope views before flying through the forest with its long tail waving behind and giving meaning to the origins of its name, the "feathered snake". Excited with this encounter we continued birding along the roadside and had great views of Black-and-yellow Silky-Flycatcher, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus, Black-cheeked Warbler, Black-capped Flycatcher, Acorn Woodpecker, Lesser Violetear, Talamanca Hummingbird, Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush and to-die-for views of Flame-throated Warbler, with its fiery throat burning in the sun. We were certainly having great highland birding, but it was about to get much better as Ricardo called us over the radio to tell us the Quetzal had returned to the fruiting tree so we rushed back down the road and had the best views ever of both the male and female Resplendent Quetzal. We eventually walked away from the Quetzal and drove to the top of Irazú Volcano National Park where the views at 3400m were spectacular! The wind here was quite cold and strong though, so we drove to the visitor center and found the endemic Volcano Junco and male Volcano Hummingbirds displaying and showing off their pink gorget. We also walked out and looked down into the gigantic craters which last erupted in 1963. After a reviving cup of hot chocolate we drove back down to Nochebuena where we had lunch and one last view of another male Quetzal before driving back down the mountain. Taking advantage of the sunny weather we stopped again in Paraíso to get better (and drier) views of Tropical Screech-Owl and Barn Owl, then we drove down to the Ujarrás Valley near the Cachí Dam and we had eye-level views of a pair of Bat Falcon, Montezuma Oropendola and Collared Aracari.



*Bat Falcon © Ernesto Carman*



*Collared Aracari © Ernesto Carman*

## **Day 8. La Selva Biological Station, Cinchona, Arenal**

Today we packed the bus and left early to make the drive to a whole new habitat in the Caribbean lowlands and La Selva Biological Station. We arrived at the entrance road to La Selva and had great scope views of a Great Green Macaw, Double-toothed Kite, Collared Aracari and White-ringed Flycatcher. After a quick snack and some delicious hot coffee we met our guide, Jorge, who explained to us the research that has been going on at this research station since the 1960's. We had not walked more than 50 meters when we stopped to look at Keel-billed and Yellow-throated Toucans, Crested Guans, Broad-billed Motmot, a troop of Howler Monkeys, a couple of Hoffman's two-toed Sloths and a Mexican Hairy Porcupine!





*Birding La Selva © Ernesto Carman*



*Crested Guan © Ernesto Carman*





*Yellow-throated Toucan © Ernesto Carman*

A bit further down the trail we encountered a mixed species flock loaded with new birds for us including Pale-billed, Rufous-winged, Black-cheeked and Chestnut-colored Woodpeckers, Dusky-faced and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Squirrel Cuckoo and a family of Honduran White Bats sleeping in leaf they had modified to create a tent. From here we drove up the mountain to Cinchona for lunch at a roadside restaurant that has been maintaining bird feeders for many years and saw Northern Emerald Toucanet, Prong-billed Barbet, Common Chlorospingus, Silver-throated Tanager, Buff-fronted Quail-Dove, White-bellied Mountain-Gem, Coppery-headed Emerald, Black-bellied Hummingbird, Violet Sabrewing and Green Thorntail. After eating and watching the birds eat, we made our way to our next hotel, Arenal Springs near La Fortuna.





*Honduran White Bats sleeping in leaf © Ernesto Carman*



*Green Thorntail © Ernesto Carman*



## Day 9. Arenal Springs and Arenal Observatory Lodge

Before breakfast we birded the hotel grounds and had close-up views of Crested Guan, Yellow-throated Toucan, Buff-throated and Cinnamon-bellied Saltator, Melodious Blackbird and Masked Tityra. After breakfast we made our way towards Arenal Observatory Trails, but before we got there we stopped to look at White-throated Magpie-Jays and a massive mixed species flock which gave us fantastic views of Stripe-breasted, Black-throated and Song Wren, Plain and Streak-crowned Antvireo, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Slaty-capped and Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, Tawny-crowned and Lesser Greenlet, Spotted and Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, Western Woodhaunter foraging in the bromeliads, Fawn-throated Foliage-gleaner, Carmiol's Tanager, Black-and-yellow Tanager, Orange-billed Sparrow, Kentucky Warbler and White-necked Jacobin and Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer feeding from Marcgravia nectaries.



*White-throated Magpie Jay © Ernesto Carman*

After such a stunning show we finally made it to Arenal Observatory Trails where we had many tanagers feeding from fig trees, including Emerald, Bay-headed, Silver-throated and Golden-hooded, as well as Wood Thrush, White-throated Shrike-Tanager, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Rufous Mourner, Tawny-capped Euphonia and Scaly-breasted Hummingbird. While finishing our lunch they replenished the fruit on the bird feeder just off the deck and the birds went crazy! The pecking order was clear, first the Great Curassows, Crested Guans and Montezuma Oropendolas had their fill, then the smaller birds arrived such as Collared Aracari, Golden-hooded and Emerald Tanager, Green Honeycreeper, Palm Tanager, and an unexpected but exciting guest, a Blue-and-gold Tanager! After an extremely productive and exciting morning we returned to our hotel to relax and use the pools fed by natural hot springs.



*Birding Arenal Lodge feeders © Ernesto Carman*



*Arenal Feeders © Ernesto Carman*





*Emerald Tanager © Ernesto Carman*



*Blue-and-gold Tanager © Ernesto Carman*

## **Day 10. Arenal Springs and the Peninsula Road**

Today the weather was overcast with sporadic drizzles and apart from the usual yard birds we added a pair of Gray-crowned Yellowthroat and Morelet's Seedeater. After breakfast we visited the Peninsula Road, a rocky road which crosses part of Arenal National Park and, despite a couple rain

showers we saw several new birds for our tour including Rufous-winged Tanager, White-shouldered Tanager, Russet, Fasciated and Great Antshrike, Black-cowled Oriole, Dickcissel, Black-headed Saltator and a Keel-billed Motmot which provided walk-away views. Later in the afternoon we revisited the lakeside and had Amazon Kingfisher, Long-tailed Tyrant, the skulky Great Antshrike, Olive-crowned Yellowthroat, Northern Jacana, Least Grebe and even White-throated Crake! After the sun went down we found Black-and-white Owl on a power line and a Kinkajou and a Central American Woolly Opossum.



*Keel-billed Motmot © Ernesto Carman*

## **Day 11. Canopy San Luis and Bajos La Paz**

We packed the bus and had breakfast and were bid farewell by Keel-billed and Yellow-throated Toucans behind the parking lot as they fed from a wild nutmeg tree. As we drove through La Fortuna we stopped in a grassy, overgrown block and saw Morelet's and Variable Seedeaters and several Thick-billed Seed-Finches. We then drove into the mountains to the San Luis Adventure Park to watch their feeders which provided us with point-blank views of Silver-throated, Bay-headed, Crimson-collared, Scarlet-rumped and Speckled Tanagers, Tawny-capped Euphonia, Chestnut-capped Brushfinch, Crowned Woodnymph among various other species. From here we crossed over the continental divide to La Paz, San Ramón where we had lunch at Restaurante Flory and ate as we watched Buff-throated and Cinnamon-bellied Saltators, Clay-colored Thrushes, Gray-headed Chachalacas and a Lesson's Motmot feed on the bananas on the feeder. After lunch and a cup of coffee we drove a few minutes to the house of Román Arias who has a fantastic bird feeder setup in front of his house and provided the perfect closing to our birding. Many previously seen species dominated the feeders but we got much better views of Golden-olive Woodpecker, Black-headed Saltator, Cabanis's Wren, Mistletoe Tyrannulet, and probably most exciting of all, a male Long-tailed Manakin sitting right in front of us! It was finally time to drive to our last hotel near the airport and squeezed in a bit more birding before our final list and dinner together as a group.





*Long-tailed Manakin © Ernesto Carman*



*Our group in Carara © Paz A Irola*

[Costa Rica Sampler species list \(Jan 4 - 15, 2025\)](#)