



Costa Rica Sampler Trip Report (Mar 1 - 11, 2024)

[Link: Costa Rica Sampler Trip Report \(Mar 1 - 11, 2024\)](#)

Report written by Héctor Gómez de Silva. Costa Rica crams more than 800 species of birds together with hordes of other wildlife in a tiny land area; the country's infrastructure is designed around ecotourism. This combination makes Costa Rica a magical destination for birders. This tour is designed to sample a selection of the birdiest habitats in the country. On this Costa Rica Sampler tour, the number of species recorded in just 10 days of birding was spectacular. A total of 330 bird species seen by the participants plus 27 additional ones heard; this included the species considered by many the most beautiful bird in the world, the Resplendent Quetzal, as well as some species nearly endemic to Costa Rica, including Coppery-headed Emerald, Mangrove Hummingbird, Black-hooded Antshrike, and Volcano Junco. All in all we saw 28 species of hummingbirds, 4 species of owls in their day roosts (seeing an owl by day is for some more special than seeing them at night), 6 species of trogons, 5 species of motmots, 11 woodpeckers, and 16 warblers (plus 1 heard-only)! There were also 13 species of mammals seen and interesting reptiles and insects. Highlights included a variety of habitats and scenery, including a steaming volcano at close quarters. We birded in cloud forest, tropical lowland forest, tropical dry forest, mangroves... The trip starts near the San José airport at a hotel with a beautiful garden full of birds including a pair of Mottled Owls that roost in a bamboo thicket. After meeting in our hotel in the mid afternoon of Day 1 and birding briefly across the road as well as in the hotel garden, on Day 2 we headed to the Pacific lowlands, seeing White-browed Gnatcatcher, Turquoise-browed Motmots, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Mangrove Hummingbird, our first Scarlet Macaws, our first Double-striped Thick-knees, a pair of Black-and-white Owls roosting in a mango tree and many others, including a productive couple of hours birding from Crocodile Bridge.



Black-and-white Owl © Jody Allair



White-throated Magpie Jay © Stacie Cantu



Birding from Crocodile Bridge © Jody Allair



Scarlet Macaws © Jody Allair

We started the next morning before breakfast with Scarlet Macaws and many other birds right outside our rooms, and after breakfast we spent 3 hours in a trail through rainforest in Carara National Park, seeing one bird after another and also White-faced Capuchin monkeys -the temperature was very hot but we were in the shade of the trees at all times. At lunch we watched and were watched by a troop of White-faced Capuchin Monkeys. After lunch we had the choice of

taking a siesta, visiting the nearby beach or using the swimming-pool. In the afternoon, we took a nearly 3 hour boatripe in an estuary/river/mangrove channel, racking up a very long list of species, including Boat-billed Heron, American Pygmy-Kingfisher, Collared Plover and more Double-striped Thick-knees.



Tárcoles boatripe © Jody Allair

On Day 4 we drove to the cloud forest near Cerro de la Muerte for lunch and afternoon birding, taking the “scenic” route via Quepos. We made a washroom stop, a stop to look at some roadside Southern Lapwings (a fairly recent invader from South America), then a juice stop at a restaurant with hummingbird feeders; here we saw the trip’s only Snowy-bellied Hummingbird and our first Violet Sabrewing, and other birds included the trip’s only Gray-cowled Wood-Rails. Once we got to our lunch destination, Paraíso Quetzal Lodge, we couldn’t go straight to lunch because of the wonderful hummingbirds visiting feeders just outside the restaurant: Fiery-bellied, Talamanca, Volcano, Scintillant, White-throated Mountain-gem and Lesser Violetear kept us busy and delighted.



Talamanca Hummingbird © Stacie Cantu



Fiery-throated Hummingbird © Stacie Cantu



White-throated Mountaingem © Stacie Cantu

After the great lunch we walked the garden and then a forest trail at this site, seeing a good number of cloud forest species, though not the lodge's namesake. A pair of gorgeous Golden-browed Chlorophonias were busy eating fruit at a melastome bush and a pair of Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers were attending a nest with chicks right next to the garden footpath. Large-footed Finches, Flame-colored Tanagers, Slaty Flower-piercers and Sooty-headed Chlorospinguses added to the joy. In the forest trail, the birding was more difficult but included a different selection of species, such as Ochraceous Wren and Black-cheeked Warbler. Afterwards, it was a relatively short drive to our next hotel, Toucanet Lodge, where we got settled into our rooms.



Golden-browed Chlorophonia © Stacie Cantu



Slaty Flowerpiercer © Stacie Cantu

Prebreakfast and during-breakfast birding at Toucanet Lodge yielded more goodies including an Emerald Toucanet. There were some repeat hummingbirds at the hummingbird feeders but the new one was a starthroat, but which species we are not sure despite excellent views and photographs, there are two species possible. There were two individuals at the lodge feeders. The one that showed up most often had the white postocular spot diagnostic of Long-billed Starthroat but also the black smudges in the white tail corners diagnostic of Plain-capped Starthroat! A hybrid or an aberrant individual of one or the other? The second individual did have the postocular stripe of Plain-capped. A little mystery. After breakfast we hooked up with a local guide who was going to take us to see Resplendent Quetzal. There is an interesting new program in Costa Rica in which ranchers report when they find an active Quetzal nest or Quetzals visiting a fruiting tree in their land so that at any time tourists can be taken directly to the most convenient site to look for them. The landowners receive income from the tourist visit, as does the local guide and the organization pooling the reports, and the tourists are taken directly to the best place to look for the Quetzal. In our case, we were taken to a person's house who had a Resplendent Quetzal pair nesting in a stump in his farm, requiring only a 50 meter walk from the road. This happened to be the first nest reported this season. The male was in the nest as we arrived, its longest upper tail covert feathers sticking out of the nest hole, enough to count it in our lifelists. But we wanted a better view, and at any time the female would arrive and the male would leave the nest so that she could take over, and the two would allow brief but whole-body looks. So we waited... and waited... and waited. After an hour and a half, the female never showed up but the male poked his head out of the nesthole (wow!) and then flew out and perched on an eye-level branch nearby, for several minutes in full view, and then took off into the forest, presumably to get a bite to eat. After that the local guide took us back to the bus by the scenic route, which passed next to some fruiting wild avocados -and we were able to have incredible views of another male and glimpses of a female Quetzal eating the wild avocados. I have seen hundreds of Resplendent Quetzals over the years, but the eye-level views of this second male in the fruiting tree were the best ever!



Resplendent Quetzal © Jody Allair

Then we drove further down the Savegre Valley and had lunch a little bit of birding, before driving back up and to the páramo (stunted vegetation above treeline) at the top of Cerro de la Muerte. Our main targets here were Timberline Wren and Volcano Junco and after a little searching we found both.



Páramo © Jody Allair



Volcano Junco © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Finally, we drove down to walk a road that goes through superb cloud forest and saw surprisingly few birds but these included the tour's only Black Guan and we heard the beautiful song of Black-faced Solitaire.



Birding Providencia Road © Jody Allair

The next morning, after one more pre-breakfast birding at Toucanet Lodge in which we saw, among others, a fourth Resplendent Quetzal (an immature male), following breakfast we loaded our luggage onto the bus and drove toward the Caribbean Slope of Costa Rica, with several planned birding stops

and a visit to an organic coffee farm on the way. First we visited a chayote plantation in Ujarrás where we had been given information that the normally rare Hook-billed Kite is common. Upon arriving to the spot, we had a black morph Hook billed Kite perched on a post. Next we visited Finca Cristina, a very forward-looking organic coffee farm, where we had a fascinating description of the process of growing and producing coffee by the owners -and we also saw a few birds including two additions to our growing list, White-eared Ground-Sparrow and Chestnut-capped Warbler.



Visiting Finca Cristina © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Then after lunch nearby we visited a city park which had a roosting Tropical Screech-Owl and some Crimson-fronted Parakeets. Our next stop was already in the lowlands, where we stopped for 45 minutes at the Pejibaye River and saw our first Fasciated Tiger-Heron and a nice selection of other birds. Finally, a washroom and supermarket stop at a gas station and then an hour's drive to our next lodge, the Gran Gavilán Hotel.



Fasciated Tiger-Heron © Jody Allair

The next day we had a 6 am breakfast followed by a fabulous hour of birding right in the hotel grounds, with parrots, toucans, woodpeckers, flycatchers and a multitude of birds, perhaps the most memorable being a surprise Snowy Cotinga and a Green Ibis! Then we drove the very short distance to the famous La Selva Biological Research Station where there are always dozens of research projects being carried out on ecology of the rainforest and its denizens. Even before reaching the station, we were seeing a family group of Great Curassows. At the station we were led by a local guide for 3 ½ hours, and he showed us a large number of birds, including a second Snowy Cotinga and a flyby by a pair of Great Green Macaws, sloths of two species and an eyelash viper. Back at the hotel we had lunch and a siesta, and in the afternoon we went out to 2 sites to look for Nicaraguan Seed-Finch (unsuccessfully, but we did see a number of new species for the list) and more Great Green Macaws.



Celebrating sighting of Great Green Macaw © Jody Allair



Great Green Macaw © Jody Allair

The following day we birded the hotel grounds again, seeing more Great Green Macaws and other goodies. After breakfast we visited the hummingbird and fruit feeders at a roadside restaurant in Cinchona and were entertained non-stop for 2 hours with one bird after another visiting the feeders, including a Yellow-winged Tanager (accidental in Costa Rica from northern Central America), Buff-fronted Quail-Doves, Northern Emerald-Toucanets, Red-headed and Prong-billed Barbets, and

Coppery-headed Emeralds.



Yellow-winged Tanager © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Baltimore Oriole © Jody Allair



Prong-billed Barbet © Jody Allair

We had lunch at Cinchona and then drove 2 hours to our next hotel, the Arenal Observatory Lodge, where we checked in and watched birds (and the steaming volcano!) from the deck behind the restaurant and in the lodge gardens.



Birding group at Arenal Observatory Lodge © Jody Allair

Most of the following morning was birding the garden and forest at Arenal Observatory Lodge again, where we bumped into several new birds including a Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, and in the afternoon we birded for a couple of hours at the nearby Peninsula Road, where we bumped into a troop of

Central American Spider Monkeys and some more neat birds such as Thicket Antpitta (heard only), a Laughing Falcon and a pair of Keel-billed Motmots only meters away from a pair of its sister species Broad-billed Motmot (this site is the only one in the world where both species occur together, Keel-billed being found in northern Central America and Broad-billed in southern Central America and South America).



Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Laughing Falcon © Jody Allair



Keel-billed Motmot © Héctor Gómez de Silva

The next day after birding the deck and forest trails at the lodge we said good-bye to the volcano and drove 2 hours to yet another roadside restaurant where the main attraction was the fruit feeders. There was bird activity all the time, including a cooperative pair of Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, but here we had 2 main target birds, Speckled Tanager and the rarely encountered Blue-and-gold Tanager a pair of which, thankfully, started showing up daily at this one restaurant only a few weeks before our tour! We waited and waited and waited for nearly 3 hours, entertained first by other birds and then by our lunch which we asked to be set up within view of the fruit feeders. We had just said that we were unfortunately going to have to leave in 5 minutes when the Blue-and-gold Tanagers showed up for a couple of minutes and then were leaving when amazingly a Speckled Tanager showed up, beautifully completing our goal!



Black-cheeked Woodpecker © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Blue-and-gold Tanager and Silver-throated Tanager © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Speckled Tanager © Héctor Gómez de Silva

The rest of the day was going to be driving to our final hotel of the tour, Hotel Robledal near the San José airport, but we heard of an amazing bird stakeout that required a small detour and so we drove to a spot where a Sunbittern was sitting on a nest, right in the roadside (!).



Sunbittern on nest © Jody Allair

At the hotel we saw a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and a few other birds and the following day was departure day. All in all, it was a very memorable and productive 10-day tour.



[Costa Rica Sampler \(March](#)

[2024\) species list](#)