

Costa Rica Birding with Canadian Geographic Itinerary

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Tour Overview

A small country that packs a giant biodiversity punch, Costa Rica is considered one of the most—if not *the* most—diverse country on the planet by land area! Owing to its tropical latitude, varied topography and microclimates, and an enviable amount of protected areas, there is no better place to enjoy a good day's worth of birding for the level of effort involved. And within this magnificent country, there is nowhere more diverse than the Caribbean slope and lowlands.

From the highlands to the sandy shores of the Caribbean coast, to the slopes of the Arenal Volcano, we take in some of the most exciting birdwatching sites this country has to offer. At this time of year, raptor and passerine migration is in full swing and is an underestimated natural phenomenon that can provide hours of entertainment with the restless birds doing all the work! We combine seeing these alongside less familiar tropical resident birds such as the Resplendent Quetzal, macaws, toucans, owls and antbirds to name a few. We will soak in the vistas of the pyramidal Arenal Volcano and stay on the grounds of a top birding site, Arenal Observatory Lodge, where Great Curasows can be seen from the breakfast table. Along our relatively short route (we only cover one side of the country, after all!), we will have a special opportunity to visit a local farm and explore a wonderful array of tropical orchids.

On top of its astonishing diversity, Costa Rica offers a first-class health care system, comfortable accommodation, solid infrastructure and peaceful policies. This, in combination with the untapped naturalist's dream that is the Caribbean side, prompts us to offer this exciting new Costa Rica Caribbean birding tour!

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival in San José

Our Costa Rica Caribbean birding tour begins with dinner and an orientation at our hotel near the airport in Heredia. Participants arriving early can enjoy the beautiful hotel grounds, welcomed by motmots, parakeets and Costa Rica's national bird, the Clay-colored Thrush. The hotel has a list of nearly 300 species just from the grounds alone! Night in San José.

Day 2: Transfer to the Talamanca Highlands

After an early walk around the hotel gardens, we head off to the cloud forest and páramo of the Cordillera de Talamanca. Along the way we stop at locations for White-tailed Emerald, Fiery-throated Hummingbird and Red-headed Barbet, and visit the high paramo of Cerro de la Muerte for Volcano Junco and Timberline Wren. Then it is off our hotel in the highlands. Night in San Gerardo de Dota.

Day 3: Cordillera de Talamanca

Here, along dirt roads and forest trails passing among trees draped in epiphytes, we find a new suite of birds such as Ruddy Treerunner, Buffy Tuftedcheek, Black-capped Flycatcher, Long-tailed Silky-Flycatcher, Collared Redstart, Large-footed Finch, with luck Silvery-throated Jay. Our primary target is the magnificent Resplendent Quetzal, certainly one of the most beautiful birds in the world. Night in San Gerardo de Dota.

Days 4-5: Irazú Volcano and Tapantí National Park

Today we depart for Irazú Volcano. Working our way up the slopes of Irazú Volcano we will look for several highland endemics such as Flame-throated Warbler, Long-tailed Silky-Flycatcher, Volcano Junco and with a little luck we might find the spectacular Resplendent Quetzal. Later in the afternoon we will descend back down into the valley to spend our first night near Orosi. The next morning we head to Costa Rica's second largest national park: Tapantí. This reserve is a great example of middle elevation Caribbean forest with every branch and trunk absolutely covered in moss, bromeliads and orchids. Incidentally, Costa Rica hosts over 1500 species of orchids and we will take some time to look at some up close. Back to birds: some target species include: Black Guan, Brown-billed Scythebill, Streak-breasted Treehunter, Wrenthrush, Black-bellied Hummingbird, Green-fronted Lancebill and even the elusive Sharpbill. More common but no less wonderful sightings may include: Chestnut-headed Oropendola, Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Collared Trogon, Common Chlorospingus, Spangle-cheeked Tanager, Slate-throated Redstart and the all-around weird Prong-billed Barbet. We will also be looking closely for any other raptors such as Ornate Hawk-Eagle that may be soaring in the valley below us. After lunch we will visit our lead guide Ernesto's family coffee farm to see how organic coffee goes from the plant to your cup! A large part of what happens on the farm revolves around producing top quality coffee and providing habitat to as many species possible, making for fantastic birding as well. Collared Aracari, Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, Yellow-throated Euphonia and the handsome White-eared Ground-Sparrow are generally part of the tour. Nights near Orosi.

Days 6-8: Caribbean Coast

A paradise frequented by beachgoers, surfers, and snowbirds alike, the Puerto Viejo area also happens to be an untapped and underrated birding destination. From the white sands, turquoise waters and intact forest of Cahuita National Park to the indigenous reserves higher in the Talamanca Mountains, we'll explore a variety of terrain. One of our objectives will be to observe the spectacular raptor migration that occurs here at this time of year, and the natural bottleneck created as the mountains push closer to the coast make the region a prime site for this. We will visit different forested roads and walk at a relaxed pace to enjoy the forest birding where we may find Spotted and Bicolored Antbirds, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Snowy Cotinga, Black-chested Jay and maybe even a Slaty-breasted Tinamou. Below our feet we'll hope to spot two brilliant species of Poison-Arrow frogs! The majority of migrating raptors are Swainson's Hawks, Turkey Vultures and Broad-winged Hawks, but there are also Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Osprey, Mississippi Kite, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks. Hundreds may pass by in a minute. There may also be thousands of migrating swallows and swifts present, in a spectacle that will surely capture our attention, but we cannot forget the forests around us. Looking around, we can find resident species such as Collared Aracari, Blue Dacnis, Shining Honeycreeper, Red-capped Manakin and Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher. Here and elsewhere several other raptors are possible including: King Vulture, Double-toothed Kite, Hook-billed Kite, White-tailed Kite, Common Black Hawk, Roadside Hawk, Short-tailed Hawk, White Hawk, Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle, Bat Falcon and Laughing Falcon. In and around Cahuita National Park we will encounter migrants such as Bay-breasted Warbler, Swainson's Thrush and Summer Tanager, and more parrots, tinamous, owls, antshrikes, woodcreepers, and trogons. Wetland birds could include Green Ibis and Green-and-rufous Kingfisher. We look for Sulphur-rumped Tanager, which is a near-endemic found only in this corner of Costa Rica. Nights in Puerto Viejo de Talamanca.

Days 9 - 10: Caribbean Lowlands

We make our way northwest towards Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, birding along the way. Here we make the lodge our central point for birding several diverse locations in some of the richest areas in Costa Rica. During our stay, we visit La Selva, a wonderful tract of wet lowland rainforest where some 400 species of birds have been reported. We'll see a fine array of neotropical fauna—tinamous, motmots, puffbirds, cotingas, trogons, toucans, chachalacas, maybe ant-followers at an ant swarm or a Great Curassow walking stealthily on the forest floor, lots of tanagers, as well as monkeys and who knows what else! We will also keep an eye and ear out for the endangered Great Green Macaw. Both its size and brilliant plumage make it a very impressive bird. Nights at La Quinta Sarapiquí Lodge.

Days 11-12: Arenal Observatory Lodge

Today we make our way to La Fortuna, a tourism hub at the foot of Arenal Volcano. After some leg-stretching we arrive at Arenal Observatory Lodge on the other side of the volcano. This location at the northern fringe of the Caribbean slope offers the most species diversity of any site in Costa Rica and it is a fun place to end a trip. The outdoor jacuzzi, canopy lookout tower and a busy feeder setup are all nice touches, too. Around the lodge grounds we have the potential for some good birds. Yellow-eared Toucanet, Lovely Cotinga and Semiplumbeous Hawk require some luck. Army ant swarms are common and can offer exciting viewing of Spotted, Ocellated and Bicolored Antbirds, among many other species. Rufous-tailed Jacamars sally out to catch butterflies and odd grunting noises come from Masked and Black-tailed Tityras. Mammals include Three-toed Sloth, Spider Monkey, Tamandua and Coatimundi. If it is clear, the view of the volcano is breathtaking! We spend our time here exploring trails and roads through excellent forest, looking for more Caribbean-slope specialties. This is a great place to find Keel-billed Motmot, Ornate Hawk-Eagle and Black-crested Coquette. Conspicuous species like White-necked Puffbirds and Long-tailed Tyrants perch on exposed dead snags, and manakins will be displaying at their leks on the forest floor. Mixed-species flocks pass by with a dozen or more species: foliage-gleaners, flycatchers, dacnis, euphonias, warblers, woodpeckers and more. The birding is nothing short of exceptional in this area! Nights at Arenal Observatory Lodge.

Day 13: Arenal to San José

We spend a final morning enjoying the feeders and grounds of the lodge, we travel from Arenal down the Caribbean slope, across the lowlands and over the mountains to the Central Valley. There will be several key stops along the way depending on what we have seen so far. We may stop in at more hummingbird feeders for scarcer hummingbirds such as Coppery-headed Emerald, a Costa Rican endemic, and Purple-throated and White-bellied Mountain-Gems. We arrive at our charming hotel for a final dinner to celebrate a rewarding and productive journey through this beautiful country. Night near the San José airport.

Day 14: Departure

Our tour concludes today and you can take the short transfer to the airport anytime today for flights home.

What to Expect

The daily travel schedule on our Costa Rica Caribbean birding tour will vary to account for weather and our activities and objectives for the day. We have at least two nights in each birding zone so there is some opportunity to relax between outings. Some days we offer optional walks before breakfast and after dinner; on other days we'll all pack up early for departure. In the tropics it is best to get out at dawn when bird activity is the highest. Often things slow down by noon when we may return to our hotel for lunch and a short siesta. We may have a picnic lunch or stop at a roadside feeder set-up (for both birds and people!). Some days have drives of up to 4 hours, but we break those up with a number of stops.

Temperatures will range from warm to hot, with an often daily mixture of sun, cloud, showers and rain. In general, the Caribbean is a wetter area but showers are often at night. The Central Valley where the tour starts and ends can be cool, but pleasant. Walking conditions range from easy to moderate; trails can be muddy if there has been rain. Rubber boots make for dry feet but they are not necessary—most folks often get away with Gore-tex hiking shoes. Comfortable footwear is important while at the hotel or on the bus and though sandals or flipflops are not appropriate as jungle footwear, they are great for poolside. A light rain jacket is important but an umbrella will really keep you dry. There will be opportunities for photography, as many birds and other wildlife allow close approach. The maximum elevation on this tour is approximately 3000 m (10,000 ft) during our day on the Irazú Volcano. Our accommodations in the highlands are at 2,200 m (7,200 ft), but other accommodations are at less than 1,500 m (5,000 ft). Mosquitoes are not usually a problem but can be active in the evenings or in certain areas. For dinner we eat at the hotel or lodge where we're staying. This is when we go over our bird and other wildlife sightings list and discuss the next day's activities, and perhaps enjoy a cool drink. The tour begins and ends at a different hotel.

What's Included

Tour Price Includes

- All accommodation and meals
- Ground transportation (air conditioned bus with driver)
- 6 - 8 Participants will be guided by one guide and an ambassador. 9 - 12 participants will be guided by two guides and an ambassador
- All park, conservation and entrance fees
- Gratuities to local drivers

Tour Price Does Not Include

- Flights to and from San José
 - Travel Insurance
 - Items of a personal nature
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