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## COSTA RICA



*Resplendent Quetzal – one of the highlights of our trip to Costa Rica © Gary Elton*

# COSTA RICA

**2-15 February 2023**

**Leader: Gary Elton**

## Trip Diary

### Day 1: Thursday 2 February

After a relatively straight forward check-in at Gatwick, we set off on schedule, to begin our journey to Costa Rica and San Jose airport. We made good time, arriving slightly ahead of schedule and once we'd cleared passport control and collected our luggage, we were soon on the way to our first destination and accommodation for the night, the Hotel Bougainville. Our guide Herman and driver for the trip Alex ensured things ran smoothly, and we were soon sitting down to enjoy our first meal together, followed unsurprisingly by an early night.

### Day 2: Friday 3 February

Our first taste of Costa Rican birding started at dawn in the hotel gardens, the early start made slightly easier with the supply of freshly made coffee, cake and bananas on offer. As the light improved, birds started to appear at a pace that meant things were seen well, acting as a good 'grounding' for us especially of the more common species. Boat-billed Flycatcher and Great Kiskadee a good example, with the subtle differences between the two seen well and explained to the group. Clay-coloured Thrush, Costa Rica's national bird were seemingly common, followed closely by Red-billed Pigeon and White-winged Dove.

Other birds were soon added, such as Cinnamon-bellied Saltator, a pair of Hoffman's Woodpeckers, Blue-grey Tanagers, Social Flycatcher, Lineated Woodpecker and Lesson's Motmot.

Views of our first Parrots were rather brief, with overflying and vocal White-fronted Parrots and Crimson-fronted Parrakeets noted.

A roosting Mottled Owl was found, hidden in a clump of bamboo, though views of the bird improved as the bird was forced to move into the open by a foraging Common Opossum. Grey-headed Chachalaca and three species of Wren, Rufous-necked, Cabanis's and House were found nearby, with our final bird before heading for breakfast, a Yellow-headed Caracara which was being entertained (or annoyed) by its reflection on a section of reflective roof top ducting.

After breakfast we loaded the bus, handed in our keys (eventually!), our destination the Caribbean Lowlands and La Quinta Lodge, which was to be our base for the next two nights.



*Mottled Owl © Gary Elton*

We had plenty planned for the day on the way though, and our first stop was La Paz Waterfall Park positioned on the Caribbean slope.

As was to be the case there was some roadside birding along the way, which included sightings of Collared Trogon, Flame-throated Warbler and Collared Whitestarts.

Arriving at the park we went through the reception area, heading straight for the hummingbird feeders, the main draw for our visit here. A pair of Bat Falcons perched in the tall trees by the reception area were much appreciated, though thoughts of these quickly faded once we reached the feeders.

Activity around the feeders was constant, with hummingbirds coming and going the whole time and we set about identifying them all. Violet Sabrewing, Green-crowned Brilliant, Purple-throated and White-bellied Mountain Gems, Black-bellied Hummingbird and the endemic Copper-headed Emerald, were all seen well.

We walked down the path and steps that lead to the valley and waterfalls below, birding on the way. Highlights included Chestnut-capped Brush Finch, Slaty-throated Redstart, Costa Rican Warbler, Grey-breasted Wood-Wren and another endemic, Dark Pewee.

A bus ride later back to reception and we were queuing for lunch, with the added bonus of some birding at the same time. Sooty-faced Finch, Common Bush Tanager and Rufous-

collared Sparrow were all seen, though pride of place went to the aptly named Yellow-thighed Brushfinch, a black bird with dazzling yellow thighs!



*Yellow-thighed Brushfinch © Liz Ackroyd*

We spent a short while longer after lunch back at the feeders, enjoying the activities of the hummingbirds, noting several White-collared Swifts overhead, before boarding the bus to continue our journey.

Our next stop was only a short drive to a cafe and viewpoint at Cinchona. The feeders here are pieces of fruit impaled on the tables and branches around the balcony. We stood looking out over the valley and feeders with a staff member thoughtfully choosing the moment we arrived to restock them. The birds had already started appearing in the trees above him before he had even finished, initially Clay-coloured thrushes and Silver-throated Tanagers.

Within minutes more species were arriving, Crimson-collared, Scarlet-rumped and Palm Tanagers and Baltimore Orioles. More hoped for species soon started arriving, namely Blue-throated Toucanet and both Prong-billed and Red-headed Barbets. A Spangle-cheeked Tanager was a nice surprise and we also enjoyed nice views of Red-legged Honeycreeper, Wood Thrush and Blackburnian Warbler.

We continued our journey on, though only driving a short way before we found ourselves pulling in at the side of the road again. A Keel-billed Toucan the cause of the distraction, though as always once we had stopped more birds followed! These included another Toucan, Yellow-throated, a party of Chestnut-headed Oropendolas, and two more hummingbirds, White-necked Jacobin and Green Thorntail.

Our last stop of the today was at Virgen de Socorro, where we walked along the road for a short while, then down and across a bridge spanning the river. Several Variable Seedeaters were seen at the roadside and our first Broad-winged Hawk of the trip was found perched in one of the trees.

Other birds noted during our visit included Northern Tufted Flycatcher, Mistletoe Tyrannulet and Olivaceous Woodcreeper. The river was arguably the most productive spot though, with Black Phoebe, Northern Waterthrush, Buff-rumped Warbler and American Dipper all seen. Two Crested Guans, spotted by Alex our driver, was the only hold up for the rest of the journey and we arrived in the early evening at La Quinta, where we checked in, freshened up and then met for dinner after what had been a very successful day.

### **Day 3: Saturday 4 February**

As usual we made an early start, meeting for coffee and watching the bird feeders before heading out for a walk around the hotel grounds. Vocal Clay-coloured Thrushes and our first Howler Monkeys were both audible at dawn, and as the light improved, we started seeing species such as Collared Aracari in the treetops and Red-throated Ant-Tanager and Scarlet-rumped Tanager on the feeders. Grey, Social and Boat-billed Flycatchers were all seen nearby too, with the appearance of a female American Redstart a nice and appreciated bonus.

A distant Lineated Woodpecker called and was located on the trunk of a large tree and several long-tailed, wing fluttering Swifts proved to be Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts. We left the area around the feeders, heading off along one of the trails, with two vocal Dusky-capped Flycatchers being the first birds seen.

A nice selection of other birds followed, including Yellow Warbler, Blue-black Grosbeak, White-tipped Dove and Purple-crowned Fairy. The most appreciated bird, however, was a male Fasciated Antshrike, which had been calling throughout the later part of our walk and fortunately appeared, showing well for us all.

After breakfast, we headed off to the nearby Le Selva Biological Station, with 'birding from the bus' producing our first Green Ibis and Grey-breasted Martins. We arrived at the Station and disembarked just past the entrance, which was to be where we remained rooted for the next hour or so!

The first bird we saw was a diminutive Tiny Hawk perched high in a treetop, scope views followed, with it seemingly being an adult rufous morph bird, being joined a short while later by another adult, this bird being of the greyer form. A Laughing Falcon was our next addition, which was good enough to call at one stage, highlighting the reasoning behind its name.

Birds then followed thick and fast, the majority new for the trip, species such as Green and Shinning Honeycreepers, Yellow-crowned Euphonia, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Golden-headed and Plain-winged Tanagers, Black-faced Grosbeak, White-crowned Parrot and Orange-chinned Parrakeets. Our first Scarlet Macaw of the trip also flew over, seen by most of us, but the views weren't ideal as the bird quickly lost height and disappeared from view.

We dragged ourselves away, mainly due to a Chainsaw starting up alongside us, and headed on to check in prior to our walk around the station. A quick coffee followed whilst we filled in the registration forms, plus a chance to admire several brightly coloured large butterflies on the nearby bushes alongside us.

More new birds were also found nearby, such as Blue-chested Hummingbird, Black-cheeked Woodpecker and Scarlet -thighed Dacnis. We had by now met up with our local guide Joel, who was to accompany us on our walk, and we set off soon entering the forest and heading off along one of the forest trails.

We encountered a steady collection of birds over the next ninety minutes or so, which included a pair of Rufous Motmots, which sat quietly by the path on their perch seemingly unperturbed by our presence.

A female Fasciated Antshrike, equally as striking as the male seen earlier in the day, was found nearby along with a Rufous-tailed Jacamar, though the jacamar unfortunately didn't stay on view for long. A vocal Bright-rumped Atila stayed hidden from view, though a female White-ruffed Mannikin and two Orange-billed Sparrows were more obliging, though a nearby White-breasted Wood-wren made us work hard for the views.

Non avian highlights here were our first Central American Agouti, several vocal and at times showy Strawberry Poison-dart Frogs and a small non-venomous Striped-glass tailed Snake.

We returned to the centre and our bus, to head back to La Quinta for lunch. Several Mangrove Swallows were seen on the way and a pair of Long-tailed Tyrants on the wires across the bridge before the lodge were much appreciated.

We returned to La Selva after lunch and a short siesta, meeting Joel by the gate. Birding started as usual almost as we left the bus, with birds perched on the trees along the skyline quickly identified, Piratic Flycatcher, Masked Tityra and one bird we had hoped to find, a 'Daz white' Snowy Cotinga. A rather smart Black-cowled Oriole was found nearby, and both Scaly and Blue-breasted Hummingbirds were also seen.

We took a route out over the suspension bridge that spans the River Sarapiqui, getting halfway across before retracing our steps to view a Gartered Trogon that had landed on the wires at the start of the bridge. A Spotted Sandpiper was bopping around on a fallen tree trunk that was lying in the river, with a Spectacled Caiman in the water nearby.

Over the next hour so, we birded the area just over the bridge managing to see species such as Black-faced Grosbeak, Crested Guan, Bay-headed Tanager, Northern Barred Woodcreeper, Yellow-margined Flatbill and Scarlet-rumped Cacique. A Broad-billed Motmot was well received, as was a Pale-billed Woodpecker, which we watched for a while as it enthusiastically hacked away at the top of a tree above where we were standing.

At this point, Joel said goodbye and left us to our own devices for the last hour or so of daylight. This proved a magical sixty minutes with plenty of activity around us, especially on the toucan front, with all three of the local species found. The best bird though was a showy Slaty-tailed Trogon, which at one point sat on the branch next to the Broad-billed Motmot. Other new additions included a Northern Mealy Parrot, Cocoa Woodcreeper and Short-billed Pigeon.

We had stayed behind in the park it transpired for a reason, with a Vermiculated Screech-Owl roosting nearby that we hoped we would be able to see. The Owl is notoriously difficult to see, and the plan was to wait until it was nearly dark and look for movement in the nearby bushes. We waited patiently by the path and true to form the two birds started calling periodically alongside us. After an initial false alarm, Herman said he could see the bird sat in front of us. He readied us all and then switched his torch on; the bird was sat on a branch only six feet in front of us, something we certainly weren't expecting! A fantastic and memorable end to the day.

#### **Day 4: Sunday 5 February**

Coffee at dawn followed by a return drive to La Selva, was the prebreakfast plan for the morning. We pulled over and left the bus at the start of the entrance track walking ahead of the bus birding as we went. The walk started well with a calling Black-throated Trogon eventually tracked down and found to be in the company of a female, although a female White-collared Mannikin was, unfortunately, very brief and missed by most of the group.

We were more fortunate with other birds we saw, though all took a degree of work to see, and these included Bright-rumped Atilla, Buff-rumped Warbler (a catch-up species for a percentage of the group), Lesser Greenlet and Rufous Mourner.

We reboarded the bus and headed out of the park, driving along a somewhat muddy track (Alex clearly concerned as to the bus's continued traction) noting Variable Seedeaters and Grey-headed Chacalaca along the way.

We pulled over and climbed out, with almost the first bird seen being a Great Green Macaw which was unfortunately flying away from us. We spent the next half hour or so scanning the nearby countryside with a vocal Red-lored Parrot colony in the trees alongside us giving us some nice views. A Bat Falcon appeared above the trees and the nearby bushes revealed Yellow Warbler, Tropical Pewee, Lesser Greenlet, Yellow-bellied Elaenia and Dusky-capped Flycatcher.

Another brief Green Macaw appeared, again unfortunately flying away from us, although two perched Scarlet Macaws were more cooperative and very much appreciated. Time had slipped by, so it was time to head back for breakfast with a Three-toed Sloth, distracting us briefly, although unsurprisingly it wasn't doing a lot!

Roadside Hawk and Red-winged Blackbird joined the list on the way back and after breakfast we checked out and started our journey to the highlands. A perched Crested Caracara was nice to see, as were two more Scarlet Macaws, Groove-billed Ani and Ruddy Ground-dove as we returned to the site we had been at earlier.

We searched the area again for Green Macaws seemingly to no avail, until Herman found two perched in the top of a distant tree. The birds seemed quite content and stayed in situ until we had all seen them.

With a tight schedule ahead, we were soon on the road again, arriving as planned at Cope's, a small private garden that had been converted into a haven for birds and wildlife. We spent the first hour of our visit watching the hummingbird feeders and sitting in the 'hide' that overlooks the main feeding area and pool. The site was a photographer's delight, with birds coming down at times within feet of where we were sat; Oropendolas, Silver-throated and Scarlet-rumped Tanagers, Melodious and Red-winged Blackbirds to name a few!

The hummingbird feeders were also a hive of activity and whilst White-necked Jacobins were seemingly the most numerous species, plenty of others were seen including Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits, Green-breasted Mango, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird and Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, with both Red-legged Honeycreepers and Olive-backed Euphonias joining the melee too.

There was more to come, as we all donned wellington boots and made the short drive to the edge of the forest where we were guided along trails towards our target species. The first of these was a pair of roosting Spectacled Owls, and they were spectacular, although it was a tough call as which was best once we had visited the second site and seen Crested Owl as well!





*Crested Owls © Gary Elton*

After cleaning our boots in the river, we returned to Cope's, collecting our own footwear and said our goodbyes. The visit was not quite over though, as two King Vultures appeared soaring over the nearby treeline, never an easy species to see, so a real bonus from a trip perspective.

We finally got underway with thoughts now turning to lunch. This was quickly rectified with a roadside cafe seemingly fitting the bill. Fed and watered, we continued towards Rancho Naturalista which was a straightforward journey. We did make one unexpected stop, to view an adult Fasciated Tiger Heron that was feeding under the carriageway bridge. The heron had been spotted in the river as we went over the bridge, but not seen by everyone, so the bus was turned around and we headed back. After some creative driving and parking by Alex, we climbed out, walked across the bridge to find the heron still in situ below us.

### **Day 5: Monday 6 February**

Pre-breakfast activities this morning involved coffee (unsurprisingly), and a relaxed session on the balcony looking over the gardens and the 'eye level' hummingbird feeders. As dawn broke, the activity started with the hummingbird feeders attracting the first birds. White-necked Jacobins were, once again, seemingly the most numerous species, with several Green-breasted Mangos and Crowned Woodnymphs joining them.

Below us, the feeders and bushes all sprung into life as well, with a steady mix of species keeping us entertained. Under the edges of the bushes, Yellow-faced Grassquits and Orange-billed Sparrows hopped out from cover to feed on the seed spread on the ground for them,

whilst Grey-headed Chachalaca, Buff-throated Saltator and Summer Tanager visited the banana feeders.

Non avian additions included Central American Agouti, White-nosed Coati and several Tayras, the latter two doing their best to deplete the banana stock as rapidly as they could.

Golden-winged and Black and White Warblers were active in the nearby tree canopy and other species seen included Green Thorntail, Black-striped Sparrow, Black-headed Saltator, Ovenbird and Black-crowned Saltator.

When the breakfast bell rang, we tore ourselves away heading downstairs to enjoy a welcome and very tasty breakfast, to fuel us for the morning ahead. A pair of Golden-olive Woodpeckers were a nice addition, appearing on the trees in front of the breakfast area whilst we ate.

After breakfast, we assembled again to head off along some of the trails around the property. We set off initially through the forest, taking a trail up into the hills above us. Our first bird, a Rufous Motmot, was found perched in an expected manner, unperturbed on a branch below us, though a vocal Golden-crowned Warbler did little more than show briefly for several of the group.

Birding for the first part through the forest was slow, with birds clearly present and audible but reluctant to show with us only managing to successfully see a Spotted Woodcreeper and Black-and-white Warbler.

We entered the more open area of the hillside and our sightings rate improved. Two Crested Guans perched out in a small bush were hard to miss, as were the vocal flocks of White-crowned Parrots and Finsch's Parakeets flying overhead. A small flock of Brown-headed Parrots were heard calling and seen in flight, but soon disappeared back into the tree canopy.

We spent a while birding around the well scattered bushes and trees, enjoying great views of species such as Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, Green Honeycreeper, White-vented Euphonia, Blackburnian Warbler, Ochre-bellied and Dusky-capped Flycatcher. A pair of Black-cheeked Woodpeckers made life as challenging as they could for the photographers and several Chestnut-sided Warblers ensured we were now all familiar with the species.

We set off back along a forest trail, which again proved frustrating, with both Golden-crowned Warbler and White-throated Spadebill seen very briefly by a few at the head of the group.

Alex, our driver came out birding with us when the opportunity allowed and had been following up the rear of the group. He called out to us, saying he had found some roosting Owls! We returned along the path to find two Crested Owls in a tangle of vegetation above us. The birds were relatively exposed, but they were unfortunately back onto us, though that didn't detract from the magnitude of the find.

We returned to the Lodge to spend the last half hour of the morning viewing from the balcony again. A distant adult Grey Hawk was picked up soaring amongst some Black Vultures and a new hummingbird appeared, a Violet-headed, yet another vying for most impressive hummingbird of the trip!

After lunch, a short siesta followed with most of the group choosing to carry on birding from the balcony, managing to add Masked Tityra to the day list.

Next on the agenda was a visit to nearby Rancho Bajo, with a collection of Verbena bushes that are particularly attractive to a key species of the trip, Snowcap. To be honest we weren't expecting things to be quite so easy as we settled down in a line, make use of a line of chairs which had been positioned there. Almost immediately a 'female type' Snowcap appeared, it was on the list at least!

It transpired there were five, possibly six, different individuals around the bushes and after around ten minutes a male appeared, actively feeding, and interacting with at least one of the females.



*Snowcap © Gary Elton*

We watched them on and off for the next thirty minutes or so, also noting Violet-crowned and the expected Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds plus an Empidonax flycatcher, which by utilising a range of characteristics was identified as a Least.

We headed to back Rancho, with the destination for the remainder of the afternoon being the drinking pools there, which are a collection of shallow pools set at the base of the hill, with a set of steps leading down to a viewing platform above them. This created a different experience with us waiting for the birds to appear from our viewing position above them.

Hummingbirds were regular visitors, dipping themselves into the water in an amazingly vigorous fashion with Crowned Woodnymph, Bronze-tailed Plumeleeter, Green Hermit and

Violet Sabrewing all seen. Ochre-bellied and Dusky-capped Flycatchers also appeared, along with two Silver-throated Tanagers and a Swainson's Thrush.



*Silver-throated Tanager* © Gary Elton

Time had now slipped away so we headed back to our rooms to freshen up before dinner. A pleasant evening followed, enhanced by several bottles of Sparkling Wine and a cake, courtesy of John and Carol to celebrate their twentieth anniversary together.

#### **Day 6: Tuesday 7 February**

The day started as usual at dawn with us standing coffee in hand, waiting for the birds to start appearing on the feeders. As yesterday, the first birds on the balcony feeders were the hummingbirds, soon followed by species such as Orange-billed Sparrow and an Ovenbird around the base of the bushes, and Summer Tanager and Olive-backed Euphonia on the feeders below us.

The Lodge operates a light some evenings to attract insects, which invariably attracts the attention of the birds in the morning. As there had been a reasonable amount of rain during the night, we anticipated this would almost certainly affected activity but, nevertheless, we thought we would still visit it and see what birds were coming in to feed.

Red-throated Ant-Tanagers were vocal and active and were joined briefly by a Buff-throated Foliage Gleaner. Whilst the number of birds visiting was on the low side, in consolation we enjoyed nice views of several Orange-billed Sparrows, Golden-crowned Warblers and a White-breasted Wood-wren.

We returned to the balcony for the last fifteen minutes before breakfast, adding species such as Buff-throated and Black-headed Saltator, Philadelphia Vireo, Black-and-white Warbler, Green Thorntail and Violet-crowned Hummingbird to our list.

After breakfast, we made the long sloping drive back down to the main road, encountering an adult Roadside Hawk perched on an iron gate at the bottom. Our first planned stop was at a nearby river, though as usual our journey was broken, when another Russet-naped Wood Rail was found a short way from our destination. This was a welcome addition, as the whole group managed to see it well this time.

Our main quarry at the river was Sunbittern and could we repeat the same good fortune as with yesterday's Snowcaps, that was the question and in short, yes we could! We arrived, stood on the bridge, and looked along the river to see a Sunbittern standing in full view in front of us, with a second bird, the female, sat on a nest nearby! We watched the male as it worked its way across the river calling from the rocks and occasionally making short flights, showing its dazzling wing pattern.

A Torrent Tyrannulet appeared on the rocks the other side of the bridge and a very confiding Mistletoe Tyrannulet gave us almost 'touchable views' as it landed in a small bush just a few feet foot in front of us all. Both Southern Rough-winged and Blue-and-white Swallows were also noted perched on the power lines above us, giving a nice comparison.

Our next stop involved a short drive to look over an area of open pastureland, which we viewed from the roadside. This proved remarkably productive with the highlight arguably being a pair of Barred Antshrikes, though other new additions such as White-lined Tanager and Cinnamon bellied Saltator, were also gratefully received.

We moved on to our final stop of the morning a walk along the side of the Rio Twis, noting two Black Phoebes perched out along the roadside. Once we had disembarked from the bus, our attention was immediately drawn to the raptors that were circling over the nearby hillside. The majority were Black Vultures, but we managed to find Red-tailed, Short-winged and Broad winged Hawks in amongst them.

An Olive-sided Flycatcher was found perched high on the horizon on a dead tree and high-flying, White-collared Swifts were picked out as well.

The walk that followed was pleasant and productive with Slate-throated Whitestart, Yellow-throated Vireo, Plain Xenops, White-shouldered Tanager, Purple-crowned Fairy and Green Honeycreeper amongst the birds seen. A Thicket Antpitta called from the dense vegetation on the hillside, but unsurprisingly remained hidden from view. A flock of Sulphur-winged Parrots noisily fed in a large fruit tree on the hillside, and we enjoyed some nice scope views of them. A Tropical Parula appeared next, giving us all nice views, followed next by a Squirrel Cuckoo, initially skulking through the undergrowth as they do, then doing the decent thing and sitting out in the open for us.

As today was a transfer day, we made our way back to the lodge to finish packing, pay our drinks bills and importantly have lunch!

After lunch, we said our goodbyes to the staff and started our journey to Tapanti National Park and our next hotel. Our first stop of the afternoon was at Angostura Lake, with us stopping to look at the paddocks just before the entrance track. Both Red-bellied Blackbird and Eastern Meadowlark were seen almost immediately, with them both at one stage in the same binocular view. A flock of Ruddy Ground Doves feeding on the ground nearby gave nice views and a pair of Southern Lapwings, which at one point proved they were a pair, were seen along the entrance track.

We drove into the car park, parked, and then walked down to the lake. We viewed the lake from various spots as we walked along the edge, with the change of habitat bringing a nice selection of new trip birds. Lesser Scaup, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Jacana, Purple Gallinule, Anhinga, Least and Pied-billed Grebes were amongst the water birds seen.

Several Ospreys and a Snail Kite patrolled the open water and edges of the lake, and a solitary, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was discovered sat perched on a dead tree near the opposite bank.

Three species of Woodcreeper, Streak-headed being new, and a glaringly yellow Prothonotary Warbler were also seen. Reboarding the bus, we headed a short way down the road to another piece of pastureland. A hovering White-tailed Kite greeted us almost as soon as we arrived, and as we watched we noted species such as Laughing Falcon, Green Ibis, Tropical Mockingbird and Bronzed Cowbird nearby.

### **Day 7: Wednesday 8 February**

A new twist on the day today with us meeting us usual pre-dawn, but then boarding the bus and driving into town to the local bakers for coffee. Coffee (and cake) in hand, we crossed the road and walked into the nearby local park hoping to find some roosting Owls. Although there weren't many trees and we had a rough idea where to look, it quickly became apparent it wasn't going to be that easy!

Fortunately, the local street cleaner was close by, leaf blower in hand, and could see us looking into the trees. He came over spoke to Herman, then beckoned us to follow him. We all walked twenty yards at which point, he pointed his stick in towards a clump of lower branches, and there they were, a pair of Tropical Screech-Owls - what a great start to the day!

Our next destination was a coffee plantation with a local speciality our target here. The bird in question, Cabanis's Ground Sparrow. Once again, we had a degree of luck with a pair found close to where we had positioned ourselves, with one spending a reasonable amount of time in view. We did spend some time trying to improve the views but to little avail, so decided to make our way back towards the hotel.

Three roadside Green Ibis attracted our attention, so we decided to pull over to get a better view of them. This gave us an opportunity to check the general area, which as is often the case proved worthwhile with Yellow-throated Euphonia, Orchard Oriole and Morelet's Seedeater among the birds seen.

After breakfast, we headed into the Tapanti National Park to walk a section of road along the Rio Mancho, with a White-tailed Kite a good roadside sighting for John and Carol enroute.

We spent a couple of hours walking the road, with Alex and the bus trailing behind, reappearing periodically should it be needed, the walk was uphill after all! The walk was steady, and so was the birding, with Purple-crowned Fairy a welcome early sighting, followed by another hummingbird, a female Purple-throated Mountain Gem.

Male Golden-winged and Blackburnian warblers were also appreciated, both looking rather smart! Mountain Thrush, whilst a new addition, wasn't quite in the same league, and probably the same could be said for a Buff-throated Leaf-tosser, with the latter making us work hard for the views we did get.

Red-faced Spinetail, Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher and two long awaited Scaly-crested Pygmy-tyrants were all birds we saw well during the remainder of the walk. Three Blue-eared Toucanets appeared above us and several of the group gained views of a Black Guan as it flew across the road in front of us.



*Blue-throated Toucanet © Gary Elton*

Lunch was next, taken in a local café style establishment with a Bronzed Cowbird noted sat on a nearby TV ariel. As we left and drove out of town towards our next stop, a large cowbird

was immediately obvious in amongst a herd of cows, we pulled to a stop to find half a dozen or so Giant Cowbirds at the feet of the cows.

We continued our journey arriving a short while later at our destination for the afternoon, the Hotel Quelitales. We were met on arrival by Jose, the owner and as it turned out, the chef and resident birder who was to help us with our quest for several key birds of the site and area.

We walked along to a small viewing area, stopping along the way to enjoy views of the hummingbirds visiting the flowering bushes and plants along the way. Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds were kept busy trying to chase off other birds as they appeared. They didn't get their own way, however, with many of the larger species holding their own. Stipe-throated and Green Hermits, Violet Sabrewing, Black-bellied Hummingbird and White-throated Mountain Gem were all seen.

More photographic species such as Green-crowned Brilliant and Stripe-tailed Hummingbird posed and looked fantastic in the afternoon light.

Arriving at the viewing area, we were met by Sooty-faced Brush-finch, Chestnut-capped Finch and another new bird White-eared Ground Sparrow coming down to some seed that had been placed there. It seemed our attentions were to be torn two ways here, with the lure of a Green-fronted Lancebill that regularly comes into bathe late afternoon on one side, and a family of Scaled Antpittas that had learnt they would be fed by Jose at this time of day on the other!

The Lancebill appeared first, what a cracking little bird it turned out to be, perching for long periods and another bird seemingly unconcerned by our attention!

The first Antpitta, seemingly the juvenile bird, appeared having been called by Jose, which he did by calling the birds' names (Nano for the young bird and Lulu for the mother!), and rattling a plastic container with a stick, which seemed to totally go against all logic regarding seeing Antpittas! The bird worked its way down the slope eventually flying onto the bank in front of us, which was around ten feet away. The parent bird was more cautious, not showing itself until around thirty minutes later, then choosing to stay further back along the track.

As the light started faded, we headed to the hotel for dinner, and what a dinner it was, with some fantastic food and a calling Common Parakeet outside.

### **Day 8: Thursday 9 February**

Coffee and cake in town, was stop number one again today, after which we headed off to do some farmland roadside birding. We made several stops, adding new species such as Mourning Dove, Grey-crowned Yellowthroat and Lesser Goldfinch, and enjoyed more looks



at species such as Eastern Meadow Lark, Golden-olive Woodpecker and the inevitable Rufous-collared Sparrows!

We returned to the Town Square enroute to the hotel, finding the owls again in the same roosting spot as yesterday with Tennessee Warbler, Finch's Parakeets and Blue-Grey and Palm Tanagers all noted nearby.

A cracking adult Short-tailed Hawk flew over the valley as we ate breakfast, after which we loaded the bus, then started our journey into the highlands and a different suite of birds once again.

Our first taste of birding came after an hour or so on the road at Los Quetzales NP and adopting a similar approach to yesterday, we walked along the gravel road with Alex and the bus following behind.

Given the time of day and the denseness of the wooded habitat around us, we did wonder how easy it would be and for the first few hundred metres, it seemed virtually bird less other than a small flock of Barred Parakeets that flew noisily over us. Then several calls were heard, Ochraceous Pewee and Mountain Elaenia, and with a degree of luck, we managed to see them both well.

Things then started to improve with the addition of a species we were very much hoping to find with some nice views of two Timberline Wrens by the path. A steady stream of additions then followed, some we had seen before like Collared Whitestart and Flame-throated Warbler, but new additions included Volcano and Fiery-throated Hummingbirds, Hairy Woodpecker, Black-capped Flycatcher, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper and White-fronted Tyrannulet.

Our unbelievable luck with owls continued, with a Costa Rican Pygmy Owl calling from the trees high above us. Herman's tip was to look for hummingbirds (as they don't like the owl) and sure enough we found some active hummingbirds and soon after this, we were watching the owl through the scopes.

Alex had stopped nearby to pick us up and we climbed aboard with one last stop in mind before lunch, though there was a degree of secrecy surrounded it! We parked a short distance further down the track and Herman said he and Alex needed to check if the birds were there and they would be straight back. They were, and we all got our again, Herman set up his scope and we were soon watching owl species number seven for the trip, Bare-shanked Screech Owl!

Lunch was next, which was a tasty Costa Rican style meal at 'Miriams', which also has a set of feeders and a viewing platform. We spent time looking at the feeders, both before and after our meal, having great views of birds such as Flame-shouldered Tanager, Acorn Woodpecker,

Sooty-capped Brush-finch, Large-footed and Yellow-thighed Finch, Lesser Violetear and Talamanca Hummingbirds.

One of the main targets of the trip and time in the highland region, is the Resplendent Quetzal and we were well aware that if we wanted to see the bird in a more favourable environment, we would invariably have to invest some time in looking for it. With that in mind, several destinations had been factored in for the afternoon. The first of these was a stop by the road, and although the area is known to have regular visiting Quetzals, we drew a blank. We moved on to another stop, this time a small holiday park with a short trail up to a hillside overlooking some woodlands. Once again Lady Luck was smiling at us, with a male Quetzal found almost as soon as we arrived!

Then things just got better, as it transpired there were actually three males in the immediate area, two with complete tail streamers, seemingly involved in some sort of territorially dispute. This meant the birds were regularly moving through the trees, and at one point, two came into the open and flew right over us! The light was perfect, highlighting the emerald green and bright red combination of the birds. Another bonus here were three Spotted Wood-quail, which we watched scurrying around in the leaf litter below us.

#### **Day 9: Friday 10 February**

Back to a more traditional start today, with us meeting up for coffee outside the reception area of the hotel before taking a short local walk before breakfast. As the light improved, we could see birds flitting around in the tops of the trees nearby, and we soon found ourselves watching Black-throated Green Warblers and Brown-capped and Yellow-winged Vireos.

A hummingbird in a nearby flowering bush was identified as a female White-throated Mountain Gem and calls we could hear around us included two we were now very familiar with, Rufous-collared Sparrow and Lesser Violetear.

We walked down to the main entrance, crossing the bridge over the river where a Torrent Tyrannulet was sat on one of the large boulders on the riverbed.

We paused a short way further along the road, where a Spot-crowned Woodcreeper was feeding young in its nest, which was situated in a large split in a tree. We also saw Acorn Woodpecker, Slaty Flowerpiercer, Black Phoebe and Stripe-tailed Hummingbird plus another White-throated Mountain Gem, this time being a rather smart male.

With the temperature being markedly cooler this morning, we took the opportunity to return for breakfast as soon as we could, working on the assumption that the temperature would increase as the day went on.

After breakfast, we set off for a walk along one of the trails in the grounds of the hotel leading up onto the nearby hillside. One of the local dogs had also decided to tag along, impeccably well behaved and choosing to spend the whole morning with us!

Although a large percentage of the birds we saw over the next few hours we had seen before, we also added several new ones. Revisited species included Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher, Flame-throated Warbler, Collared Whitestart, Northern Tufted Flycatcher, Hairy Woodpecker and Mountain Elaenia. We also enjoyed fantastic views of male Scintillant Hummingbirds both feeding and bathing, a tiny bird and only a quarter of an inch bigger than the world's smallest bird, the Bee Hummingbird.

New birds seen included Spotted Barbtail, Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush and Ruddy Treerunner, with the latter entertaining us by hanging onto the underside of branches, looking and doing exactly as the name implies!

An Ochraceous Wren also showed well for us but, unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for Silver-fronted Tapaculo which acted in a typical skulking manner, which meant only half the group managed to see it.

After a short siesta after lunch, we set off heading higher into the Talamanca mountains in search of our next quarry, Volcano Junco. It was all uphill from our base and on the narrow roads a challenge for Alex, but he did an excellent job and we arrived and parked close to the summit of Cerro de la Muerte.

We spent the next half hour so wandering around the area looking for the bird, with us hearing and glimpsing one briefly, but then no further sign. Several Sooty-capped Bush-Tanagers were in the area, as was Sooty Thrush. We moved slightly further down, catching up with Alex. He then said he had seen a bird close to where he had parked but it had disappeared. A tense ten minutes followed then the bird was found feeding on a bare piece of ground, and as we watched it was joined by a second, success!

A Peccary then walked across the path, a brief view and certainly not expected at this altitude.

In an effort to boost our owl total still further, a later return for dinner had been planned, with an added bonus, we were to stop to look for Dusky Nightjars. We parked at the first site and stood by the road waiting for dusk to fall. A singing Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush eventually showed for us and other birds seen were Volcano Hummingbird (a smart male) and several Sooty Thrushes.

As it got darker, the nightjar started to call, eventually moving over the road and into a small section of wood behind us. We managed to locate where the bird was perched but as soon as a light was put on it, it flew off, although fortunately everyone had managed to see it.

We moved on to our next stop, a few kilometres further along the road which again involved birding from the roadside. At least two nightjars were heard calling low down in the valley, but clearly had no intention of moving up higher.

Disappointing as this was, we were quickly distracted when an Unspotted Saw-whet Owl started to call! These owls are tricky to find, let alone hear or see, so we were off to a good start!

The bird called on and off over the next ten-fifteen minutes and was glimpsed poorly in flight twice by members of the group, but frustratingly couldn't be pinned down, even though at times it was clearly in trees alongside where we were. That said we returned to the hotel happy, after another highly successful day.

### **Day 10: Saturday 11 February**

Our last morning in the highlands and after early coffee, we headed out over the entrance bridge and spent the next hour or so walking along the river. A seemingly slower start than the previous day, though the expected Torrent Tyrannulet, Black Phoebe, Mountain Thrush and Tennessee Warbler were all seen.

A male Flame-coloured Tanager then appeared, which was followed by a Ringed Kingfisher which, unfortunately, was largely a blur as it shot over the road. A new species for the trip, however, was a Louisiana Waterthrush with its main ID feature, a whiter and broader supercilium, clearly visible. Several Collared Whitestarts nearby injected some colour into the morning and a Chestnut-capped Brush-finch ferreted around in the leaf litter nearby.

With breakfast time approaching, we turned and retraced our steps, with for some reason far more birds seen on the way back with several Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrushes, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher, Mountain Elaenia, Northern Waterthrush and Acorn Woodpecker all seen. A Yellow-bellied Siskin was a welcome addition, a nice male, and an improvement on the heard only status of this bird up until now.

A nice remaining memory of the stay at Suenos del Bosque was in the last part of the walk, with a patch of roadside flowers drawing the attention of the four main hummingbird species we had seen there with the fifth, Scintillant, also seen nearby.

Luggage loading after breakfast gave us a chance to check birds out as they arrived in the nearby treetops, Spangled-cheeked Tanager, another Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher and a seemingly out of range Red-legged Honeycreeper were amongst the birds seen.

A Swallow-tailed Kite appeared briefly too, heading down the valley but, unfortunately, a 'one person bird'. We said our goodbyes and started our journey towards the Pacific coast.

The journey to our first planned stop was largely uninterrupted by our standards, with just three stops. The first for some Ruddy Pigeons drinking from a puddle at the side of the road, the second for a several peccaries and the third for a Swallow-tailed Kite spotted by Julie.

The third stop actually gave us three kites in total, two more distant birds presumably one of the original sightings, and another below us in the valley which was much closer allowing us to appreciate the bird even more.

Our next stop was the Police Station at Perez Celedon which we were told was a reasonably reliable site for Turquoise Cotinga. We pulled up and were starting to climb out of the bus, to hear Alex shouting that he had found one! There it was what a bird!

Unfortunately, the bird didn't stay still for too long and quickly disappeared and a tense few minutes followed. We need not have worried, however, as it or another appeared on the top of a dead tree and we then had several more sightings of perched birds, with two males together at one point.

The next stop was a short drive away, just over the Rio General, and this was for some roosting Boat-billed Herons with at least eight found perched in the tree canopy over a small lake. We made several attempts to move away from here, distracted by other birds including a pair of Red-crowned Woodpeckers at their nest hole, two Piratic Flycatchers and a Hook-billed Kite!

A roadside Smooth-billed Ani was a new addition enroute to our next stop, the municipal sewage works, well you have to visit one on a birding trip don't you!

We looked through the fencing having nice views of Green Herons, Blue-winged Teal, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Least Grebes and Spotted Sandpipers. Several Mangrove Swallows were over the water and yet another male Turquoise Cotinga was found perched in a typical manner at the top of a tall nearby tree.

Green Iguana and a Nicaraguan Slider were both seen here too. The Slider was massive, fully on view having hauled itself out onto the bund that ran across the water.

Lunch followed and then after a short 'twitch' to add Eurasian Collared Dove to Herman and Alex's lists, which was also a write in for us, we made straight for our destination, Villa Lapas, on the Pacific coast which was to be our base for the next three nights.

### **Day 11: Sunday 12 February**

A new area today so new birds, and after meeting for coffee at dawn, we set out for a walk around the extensive grounds of the lodge. Almost the first bird we found was a new one for the group, a young Bare-throated Tiger-Heron stood on its nest high in the top of a Monkey Pod tree by reception. A further four adult birds were seen a short distance further along the path with two of these undoubtedly being the parents of the juvenile.

Our first Scarlet Macaws flew over, a species we would encounter regularly over the next few days. Two Chestnut-backed Antbirds showed well for us by the path, being joined by a less cooperative Dusky Antbird. More cooperative, however, were two species of trogon, Gartered and Black-headed, as well as Lesson's Motmot and a White-whiskered Puffbird.

A Streaked Flycatcher was a new addition, which entertained us as it killed and attempted to eat a large cicada on a branch above us. New hummingbirds were seen too, Charming Hummingbird and Blue-throated Sapphire, the latter species particularly appreciated giving us nice views feeding from the flower heads of a Mimosa bush.

Our destination after breakfast was the nearby Carara National Park and after checking in, we headed off down one of the trails, being side tracked briefly by a Common Black Hawk perched in one of the trees.

The trail took us through the forest, so it was close canopy birding, with the result being 'birds or no birds', with quiet periods followed by intensive flurries. A Trilling Gnatwren was an exception, found at the beginning of the trail. We didn't go much further before a loose flock was found, containing a male Black-hooded Antshrike, White-winged and Rose-throated Becards and Ochre-bellied Flycatcher. A pair of Riverside Wrens were also nestbuilding, giving us some nice views.

A calling Streak-chested Antpitta kept us frustrated for twenty minutes or so, calling repeatedly and clearly getting closer. We did achieve a degree of success with a few of the group seeing it but, unfortunately, it eluded everyone else.

Our next flock of birds included White-shouldered and Bay Tanagers and some rather smart new additions, in the form of a Russet Antshrike and a pair of Dot-winged Antwrens.

Time had slipped by so we headed back to the bus, noting Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher and Northern Waterthrush along the way.

Following a short siesta after lunch, we headed back to the park, this time walking from the main road along one of the lesser used entrance tracks. After a short distance, we noticed some movement in the undergrowth and lifting our binoculars, we found ourselves looking at a Great Tinamou; always a hoped for species, but one which can be quite secretive so difficult to see.

A Chestnut-backed Antbird was seen close by and we continued walking to our destination, a small line of pools tucked away in the forest. We then spent the next hour or so waiting there to see what arrived to drink and bathe.

Our old friends, Chestnut-sided and Tennessee Warblers regularly came in, joined at one stage by a Black-and-white Warbler. A new one for us, Eye-ringed Flatbill, was also seen, along with Plain Xenops, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and several White-shouldered Tanagers.

A Blue-throated Sapphire was nice to see bathing and shortly after this, the mannikins started to arrive. A male Red-capped appearing first, working its way down to the water's edge and then proceeded to bathe in the water only six feet in front of us with this then joined by at least two females.

A dark bird flashed past, signalling the arrival of a male Velvety Mannikin, which slowly moved into the open, a really smart bird, with its powder blue cap.

With the park rules requiring us to leave when it closed, unfortunately, we had to make our way to the exit, however, the walk back did produce a soaring Wood Stork and a troupe of White-fronted Capuchin Monkeys.

After dinner, we made a short drive to the nearby town of Jaco, where we took various tracks and roads that ran across a large area of open grassland, interspersed with a few trees. Our first sighting was a Streaked Owl but, unfortunately, it was flying away. There was then a false alarm, when an 'owl' shape was found in a tree, but this turned out to be a tiger-heron with another found nearby. Finally, another Streaked Owl was seen on a post, flying onto some nearby telegraph wires where it stayed, giving us some great views.

### **Day 12: Monday 13 February**

Morning coffee was followed by a short bus ride which took us to the hillside just outside our accommodation. We then spent the next thirty minutes at the roadside, checking out the birds as they appeared in the bushes and scrub nearby. The expected raucous calling Scarlet Macaws flew lazily over, with their smaller cousins, Northern Mealy Amazons, regularly noted too.

With a regular flow of traffic, bird-wise things weren't as busy as we had hoped but sightings included Yellow-throated and Spot-crowned Euphonias, a pair of Dusky Antbirds, Blue-black Grosbeak and White-shouldered Tanager.

An early breakfast was planned, to make the most of the rest of the morning enabling us to get fed and away before the other residents had arrived. Our destination today was the drier forest habitat, which starts just after the River Tarcoles and as we crossed this, we could see several Black-necked Stilts plus a number of American Crocodiles.

We took a private road that eventually led to Cerro Lodge, stopping after a short while to..... yes, you've guessed it, look for another owl! This time a Pacific Screech Owl, well two to be precise, which gave us some very nice views as they sat half hidden in a nearby tree. Another owl, Ferruginous Pygmy, called close by and we were able to locate that too, meaning our owl species count had now risen to double figures!

Other new species seen included Inca Dove, Plumbeous Kite and White-throated Magpie-jay, a truly productive stop!

We continued past the lodge and then walked along the stony, dust road ahead of the bus, as we had done before, birding as we went. We walked for a couple of hours, having one short break, which basically involved getting in, then straight back out the bus, as more birds had been found!

Birding was steady for virtually the whole of the walk, with a reasonable number of birds we had seen before, but there were also plenty of new ones too. Scrub Euphonia, Turquoise-browed Motmot, Great and Brown-crested Flycatchers, Indigo Bunting, Zone-tailed Hawk and Double-striped Thick-knee, amongst those seen.



*Turquoise-browed Motmot © Liz Ackroyd*

One last stop before lunch saw us joining the highway and heading to the village of Orotina, where we entered a private compound to look up into a large bare tree. A broken stump in the canopy revealed our quarry, a Common Potoo, sat in the expected manner, motionless and blending in perfectly with its surroundings.

As usual, an afternoon siesta followed lunch, as we waited for the heat of the day to subside. Our plan for our last afternoon was to spend this in the dry forest type habitat again on the other side of the river.

We made two stops along the Guacimo Road, the first of these was to initially view a pair of Streaked-backed Orioles but as seemingly was always the case, this quickly turned into an opportunity to find other birds. White-throated Magpie-jays, White-lored Gnatcatchers, Common Ground Doves were seen and two hummingbirds, Cinnamon and Canivet's Emerald both showed really well for us.



Our second stop again produced another oriole, this time Spot-breasted, along with Stripe-headed Sparrow, Scissor-tailed and Nutting's Flycatchers and a soaring Hook-billed Kite. A Lesser Ground Cuckoo called several times nearby but, frustratingly, stayed hidden from view.

As we continued to look for the cuckoo, a small bird, thought to be an Owl, had flown by. Alex had walked back along the road towards the bus and had then found it perched in a small tree by the road. We walked to join him, enjoying views of another extremely confiding Pacific Screech Owl. This signalled the end of the afternoon as if we were starting to repeat our owls, it really was time to head home!

### **Day 13: Tuesday 14 February**

Our last morning saw us meeting for coffee, before boarding the bus and heading off for a long-awaited and eagerly anticipated boat trip along a section of the Tarcoles River. Conditions were fabulous with good light and, as it turned out, some great birds too.

Birding initially from the quay, revealed two of the five Kingfishers we were going to see, the early additions being Belted and Amazon, plus Spotted Sandpipers and Little Blue Herons. We headed towards the mouth of the river first noting more obvious species such as Royal Tern, Brown Pelican, Osprey and Magnificent Frigatebirds.

Yellow-crowned Night-herons, Wood Stork, White Ibis, Bare-throated Tiger-herons and Tricoloured Herons were also seen, along with Whimbrel, Least Sandpiper and a solitary Ruddy Turnstone.

We made our way into one of the smaller tributaries which enabled us to get closer to the edges and the overhanging mangroves. A calling Collared Forest Falcon refused to show itself but an added bonus was a Mississippi Kite, which was perched in the top of a tall tree enabling us all to get some nice views.

Flyover Yellow-naped Parrots were new for the trip, their distinct call helping confirm the identification. We moved along at a sedate pace enjoying regular views of Prothonotary Warblers plus the hoped-for Mangrove Warbler, a bird that was just starting to acquire its rusty head colouring.

Two hummingbird species were seen, Scaly-breasted and Mangrove, the latter being a hoped-for new addition. Nice views of American Pygmy Kingfisher and another Amazon Kingfisher were very much appreciated, as was a showy Mangrove Cuckoo and a Willet.

One last species we hoped to find was Collared Plover so we returned to the main river to search in a more open area. Being a small secretive bird, finding it wasn't easy but eventually we did and enjoyed some nice views of it scurrying along the shoreline.

We then headed back for a welcome late breakfast before meeting up again for a last hour of birding around the grounds of the hotel. A female Blue Dacnis and two Common Tody-flycatchers were amongst the first birds seen and, as always, new birds soon appeared, namely Golden-naped Woodpecker and Golden-crowned Spadebill, the latter being the last new bird of the trip.

Returning to our rooms to finish packing, we then met up again for lunch and then boarded the bus. There had been an accident on the way to the airport but Alex had been forewarned of this so we managed to avoid this and arrived in good time for our flight, though ironically it turned out our flight had been delayed anyway.

#### **Day 14: Wednesday 15 February**

We arrived back in the UK, collected our luggage, said our goodbyes and then started our individual journey's home after a spectacularly successful trip.