

COSTA RICA



275 BIRD SPECIES OBSERVED



10 HAPPY GUESTS
3 ENTHUSIASTIC GUIDES



15 SPECIES OF MAMMAL SPOTTED

TRAVEL JOURNAL



PURA VIDA! Though relatively small in size, Costa Rica is home to one of the highest levels of biodiversity in the world. With Birding by Bus's Marc & Eliana Kramer as trip leaders and Fabian Torres as our main local guide, this 9-day birding tour sampled some of the country's most representative habitats. Ten eager trip participants focused on the best of Costa Rica birding in a compact package. Targeting the most charismatic bird species, we first traversed through lowland Caribbean rainforest in the Sarapiquí province and explored the foothills of the Central Volcanic Cordillera. From there, we ascended into the rich oak forests and scrubby paramo of the Talamanca Highlands before dropping back down in elevation to the transitional humid-to-dry forest and mangroves of the Central Pacific lowlands.

TRIP IN REVIEW



DAY 1 | SAN JOSE

Disembarking in the capital city of San José (even though the international airport in fact lies in Alajuela), our ten enthusiastic tour participants arrived from points across the USA — Texas, Maryland, Florida, New Jersey, and Georgia. Leaving the cold of the North American winter behind, our intrepid travelers stepped off their planes into the comforting warmth of the Central American Neotropics — a welcome relief from their harsh realities of snowstorms and icy cold in early January. Speaking of early January — Happy New Year 2023 and what a better way to kick off the new year than with Birding by Bus’s inaugural “Quintessential Costa Rica” tour!

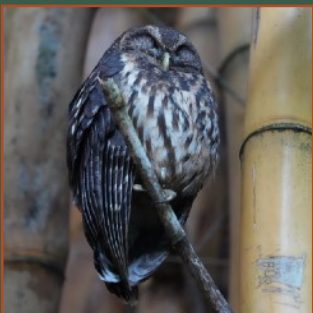
Our first stop was Hotel Bouganvillea in Heredia. With its lush manicured tropical gardens brimming with flowers and birds, this was a superb place to start the journey and get a first taste of the birds to come. Hoffman’s Woodpeckers creeping up tree trunks, Melodious Blackbirds belting out a sweet tune, and Brown Jays traveling noisily in troupes were easy to spot here and joined by migrants from the north such as Tennessee Warblers and Philadelphia Vireos. At dinner time, we convened for the first time as a group for Eliana’s warm welcoming orientation, which she gave with her characteristic passion, smiles, and precise sense of organization. Little did everyone know, there was a surprise waiting for them — the motherload of presents in their Birding by Bus curated gift bags of handcrafted and useful items that are perfect to have on tour!

After a delectable first dinner together, we couldn’t wait to delve into Costa Rica’s wildlife. Despite the darkness of the evening, we tracked down Golden-eyed Tree frogs around a small garden pond, along with bromeliad spiders, walking sticks, beetles, and other mysterious creatures of the night.



DAY 2 | SELVA VERDE

Quote of the day: “Owls and Motmots - what a morning!” Indeed, Hotel Bouganvillea produced some excitement in the first few hours of the day. The suburban hotel made for an exciting introduction to Costa Rica’s pulchritudinous bird life. At 3,900 feet above sea level and with a gentle wind in the air, the morning started out pleasantly cool. In a giant stand of bamboo that creaked loudly as it swayed in the breeze, two Mottled Owls roosted motionlessly and wowed the group! Red-billed Pigeons were perched high in the tree tops, Cabanis’s and Rufous-naped Wrens made their presence known with vociferous song, and charismatic Lesson’s Motmots gave us a show and dance with their flashy racket-tails. Can a bird be cute and ferocious at the same time? If you would’ve seen today’s Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, you’d know what we’re talking about. Rawr!



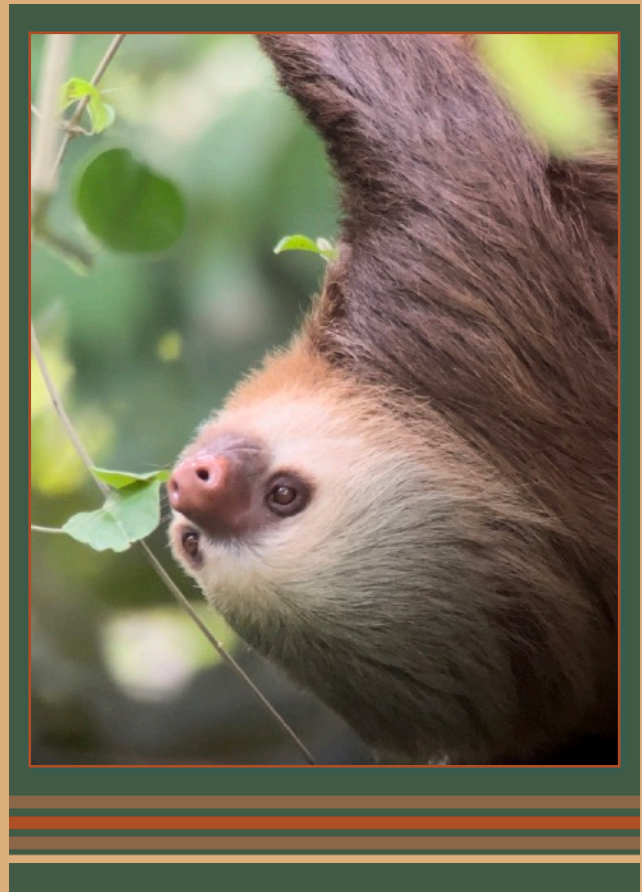
Desayuno (breakfast) at Bouganvillea was divine and we birders indulged our palates. A heaping plate of “Platano maduro” (sweet plantain) was relished by the group, and so was the gallo pinto, huevos revueltos (scrambled eggs), tortillas, fresh white cheese, coffee and fresh tropical fruit juices. Estaba riquísimo!

In the afternoon, we set our sights on the Sarapiquí province in the Caribbean lowlands. Driving north out of San José, our coaster (Costa Rican bus with giant clear windows great for touring!) made its way up through the luxuriant rainforests of Braulio Carillo National Park, and then descended through the foothills and into the lowlands. Along the way, we made a stop at some roadside ponds (El Tigre Wet Fields) where we observed a multitude of wetland birds including Northern Jacana, Mangrove Swallow, various egrets and herons, Gray Hawk, and Gray-breasted Martin.



Arriving at the Selva Verde Reserve in time for lunch at the lodge, we filled our barrigas (stomachs) from the delicious buffet. As it was the middle of the day, the lodge feeders were a little slow on the bird action. However, despite the mid day doldrums, we had our first epically-close looks at the enchanting Montezuma Oropendola that not only sports an ornate face and bill pattern, but also sings a fascinating water-gurgling sound while simultaneously performing an elegant head-bowing display. Wow!

Later in the afternoon as the heat dissipated, we birded around the reserve grounds, yielding good looks at Golden-hooded Tanager and a soaring but distant King Vulture where we ran out onto a lofty suspension bridge over the Sarapiquí River to chase down better looks. Although the vulture eluded us, not far from the bridge we spotted a sunning Bare-throated Tiger-Heron (pointing with one wing!) on the river bank. In an open patch of forest, while ticking Shining Honeycreeper, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, and Squirrel Cuckoo, we heard some deafeningly loud guttural squawks — a rare target bird we were all hoping for.... it was a flyover of two majestic Great Green Macaws!! Then, while the group was resting along the river, Eliana ran ahead and headed back toward the lodge — it wasn't even 5 minutes before she came back running to summon everyone quickly back. There was our first sloth of the trip which was on everyone's wish list — a very cooperative Two-toed Sloth at close range! In the evening, far-carrying high-pitched yelps led us to a group of Yellow-throated Toucans gorging on fruit high up in a tree. To consummate an already packed day, a Semiplumbeous Hawk — normally a pretty difficult bird to see, also gave us good looks!



DAY 3 |

COPE'S PLACE & CINCHONA



Morning feeders at Selva Verde were pleasantly lively for the first hour of daylight, with Red-throated Ant-Tanagers, Scarlet-rumped Tanagers, and Orange-billed Sparrows, oh my! After breakfast we made our way to Cope's Place and en route we scooped up Diego Ramirez, an additional local guide and logistics team member that would join us for the remainder of the trip. The more eyes, the better! "Donde Cope" is the private residence of José "Cope" Perez, a warm and passionate nature lover and photographer, as well as a keen birder. He has set up a fantastic backyard garden filled with fruit and hummingbird feeders as well as a natural pond to attract a variety of birds. Everyone enjoyed the antics of Red-legged Honeycreeper, Bronze-tailed Plumeleater, Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermit, Collared Aracari, and Russet-naped Wood-Rail. A short drive from Cope's home, we trudged on a muddy trail (muddy thanks to recent rains) through a patch of tropical forest and were rewarded with a spectacular view of a normally difficult bird to see. But with Cope's in-depth local knowledge, he led us right to a roosting Crested Owl, what a breathtaking bird! Additionally, he also used his sixth sense to get our eyes on a pair of Spectacled Owls. A small group of Honduran White Bats (that look something like a cluster of cotton balls with ears) perched on the underside of a leaf was a really great find as well.

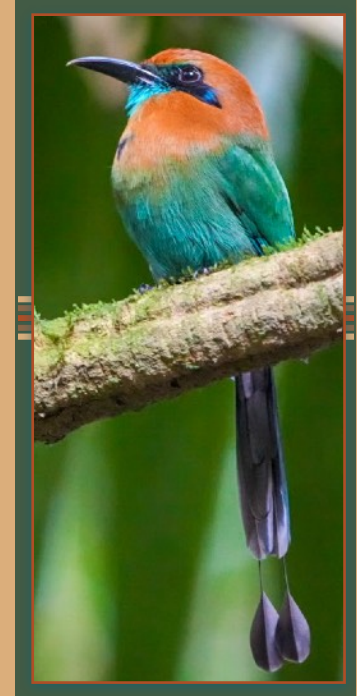
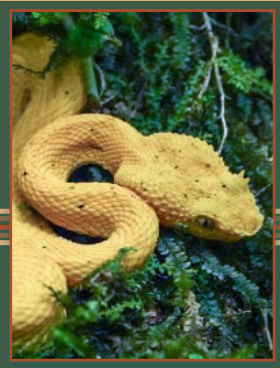
In the afternoon, under the sprinkle of some rain (which turned from sprinkle to downpour at times), we traveled up into the foothills of the Central Volcanic Cordillera and visited Cinchona at 4,000 feet. Here, there was a lovely hummingbird cafe and mirador (lookout) that offered some easy and rewarding birding, not to mention warm and toasty hot chocolate made from locally harvested cacao. As the thick mist rolled in and out of the canyon, between bouts of rain we caught views of not only the majestic San

Fernando waterfall, but also great birds including Violet Sabrewing, Prong-billed Barbet, Black Guan, Crimson-collared Tanager, and the very difficult Yellow-winged Tanager which has a very limited range in Costa Rica (and was even a lifer for one of our guides, Diego!).

DAY 4 | LA SELVA BIOLOGICAL STATION & SARAPIQUI RIVER

The La Selva Biological Station (run by the Organization for Tropical Studies) is not only a critical tropical rainforest reserve for field research, but also a place that welcomes birders to its trails. With easily traversed paved paths, a dramatic suspension bridge over the Sarapiquí River, excellent avifauna, and pristine forest, it was a must stop. This morning we were joined by La Selva resident guide, Joel, who led us on two trails through the

reserve, turning up thrills such as Crested Guan, Gartered Trogon, Broad-billed Motmot, a female Snowy Cotinga, and Chestnut-backed Antbird. Everyone loved watching the fly-catching antics of the Long-tailed Tyrant, which the group dubbed the “Poor Man’s Quetzal”! Birds weren’t the only thing that captured our attention; an Eyelash Viper motionlessly perched at the base of a tree made for super-close eye candy.



Having walked a few miles on the La Selva trails in the morning, everyone was craving “chill” birding in the afternoon, and their wish was delivered: birding by boat! We set out by watercraft on the Sarapiquí River, scanning the river banks for denizens of riverine habitat. Mangrove and Southern Rough-winged Swallows skimmed the water’s surface for invertebrates, an endless source of entertainment as their fast and furious flight provided an ample photographic challenge. We spotted three species of kingfisher (Green, Amazon, and Ringed), a wide variety of herons and egrets, Green Ibis, Buff-rumped Warbler, Southern Lapwing, and one species that had us laughing at how they just kept coming and coming at what seemed like every tenth of a mile ... wintering Spotted Sandpiper (we counted 45 of them along 4 miles of river!). River boating wasn’t just about the birds though... there were some exceptional mammals, too.





Mantled Howler Monkeys roared above the river banks in the tall trees draped over the river, and we made a few 180°s to track down an elusive Neotropical River Otter. Less conspicuous but thanks to our boat driver's sharp eyes, we pinpointed a group of well-camouflaged Proboscis Bats perched on a fallen log over the river, as well as a tucked-away and sleeping Mexican Hairy Porcupine in a tree trunk. Back at Selva Verde for dinner, the camarones (shrimp) and mashed potatoes were divine... que sabor! The food there is always good, and served buffet style with a garden-fresh salad bar, so you can eat as

much or as little as you like. And there's always room for their dessert!

DAY 5 | CASA DOWII & PARAISO QUETZAL

Four days in the lowlands was enough to garner well over a hundred and fifty bird species and get a great feel for the Caribbean lowlands of Sarapiquí. But, as John Muir would say, "the mountains are calling and I (well, we) must go"! It was time to move up in the world, in altitude that is. We worked our way east of San Jose into the cloud forest outside of Cartago, breaking our road journey at the Casa Tangara dowii at 6,650' (headquarters for Birdwatching Central America and the home of Serge Arias). Serge has a terrific feeding station on his property that attracts a variety of brilliant birds, some of which are otherwise very onerous to find. Fortunately, Casa dowii has attracted these difficult species, including Buffy-crowned Wood-Partridge, Buff-fronted Quail-Dove, and Spangle-cheeked Tanager, among others. We were not only dazzled by the birds and the rustic charm of the cloud forest cabin, but Serge is also a masterful chef and coffee connoisseur as well!



He cooked us an authentic gourmet Costa Rican lunch that was a top contender for best meal of the trip and blows gallo pinto out of the water! (Hey, we still love our gallo pinto.) Picture this: an explosion-of-flavor appetizer of Mushroom Ceviche in mandarin juice, Pollo Sudado (“Sweaty Chicken” - a seasoned chicken stew with local spices and achiote) and Stuffed Eggplant for the vegans and vegetarians, served with a side of grilled palm hearts, coconut taro and creole potatoes. Que rico! All that edible goodness was accompanied by a beverage of fresh Blackberry Toad Water (blackberry juice with lemon with ginger) along with melt-in-your-mouth Caramelized Baked Pears for dessert. The meal was magically delicious! And how can you have a Costa Rican lunch and not finish it with some local organic hot Costa Rican coffee?

Onward and upward to 8,900’ into the Talamanca Highlands, the next leg of the journey brought us to Paraiso Quetzal which was an absolute hummingbird extravaganza. Feeders were buzzing with what seemed like an organized chaos of hummingbirds. From our perspective, we feasted our eyes on the likes of 5 “Colibri” species including the mind-blowing Fiery-throated, Talamanca, and Volcano Hummingbird, the breathtaking White-throated Mountain-Gem, as well as the lovely Lesser Violetear. To add to the brilliantly-colored hummingbird procession on the balcony patio, just off the deck we caught glimpses of both Black-and-yellow as well as Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers, Buffy Tuftedcheek, and more special birds of the montane forest.

At this elevation, we all felt a significant temperature drop and it was time to throw on sweaters and jackets. The lodge accommodations were cozy with spectacular views, and for dinner the restaurant was reminiscent of a rustic ski chalet with a toasty wood stove and a log cabin feel. We relished a delicious local trucha (trout) fillet in shrimp sauce where we were all satisfyingly full but cogitating on having seconds. It was *that* good! Everyone was happy to crawl into bed with multiple layers of wool blankets (and long underwear for some) as it does get a bit chilly at this elevation.



DAY 6 | LA ESPERANZA FARM & LOS QUETZALES NATIONAL PARK

We were joined at the crack of dawn by local bird guide, Oscar, who accompanied our group to the La Esperanza farm. Here, our primary target was a bird species legendary in Costa Rica: the mystical Resplendent Quetzal. At this location, wild avocado trees bear a small green fruit that is a highly sought-after food source for the quetzals. They normally swallow the fruit whole, essentially a big seed with a small creamy layer of flesh. We watched and patiently waited for the quetzals to make their appearance. An hour passed and while sipping coffee and conversing with photographers wielding massive lenses, we spotted a fly-by Merlin, Ruddy Treehunter, Flame-throated Warbler, and Spot-crowned Woodcreeper. Another hour and a half passed... by 8:30am, our stomachs growling for breakfast, we decided to call it quits with no quetzal to show for our efforts. Rats! Back at Paraiso Quetzal, as we were downing our gallo pinto, pancakes and eggs, we got an urgent call from William the farm owner that the quetzals were

back! We leaped back into the bus at lightning speed and hurried back to the avocado trees. Boom! Three male and three female Resplendent Quetzals feeding and posing on the avocado tree! Initially they were tucked inside the tree, but eventually made some delightful flights and a few even posed. That seemingly endless long-flowing tail... those rich red and emerald green colors. Just wow wow wow a hundred times over. (That would be three hundred wows to be exact.)



Having gotten our quetzal fix and riding high on birding endorphins, we moved even further up in elevation to our highest point of the trip at 11,360' in the paramo habitat of Los Quetzales National Park. Here in the montane moist grassland-and-scrubland ecosystem, there is a high level of biological endemism and extreme specialization for high altitude survival. As the cloudy mists rolled in and out, we sought out and succeeded finding the devilish-eyed Volcano Junco as well as the unusual Peg-billed Finch. We dipped on Timberline Wren, but were short on time having spent extra hours on quetzal-seeking this morning.

Speaking of Quetzals, we retreated from our highest altitude to make our way lower to a restaurant and bird feeding station aptly named Miriam's Quetzals. Here in the San Gerardo de Dota Valley at 8800', the

climate was refreshing and the views from the balcony were spectacular. At the balcony feeders, we laid eyes on some new species for the trip, such as Acorn Woodpecker and Sooty Thrush, while getting much better looks at Flame-colored Tanager and Large-footed Finch. Down the steep canyon even further, we followed the rushing river and made a quick riverside stop for American Dipper and Torrent Tyrannulet.

DAY 7 | TARCOLES RIVER

Following a final morning at Paraiso Quetzal where just a few from our group spotted Golden-browed Chlorophonia (the rest will have to come back!), it was time to leave the cool climate of the highlands and make the morning drive back through San José to the lowlands — but this time to the Pacific Lowlands in the Puntarenas province. Following lunch on the Pacific coast, the Tarcoles River was calling our names and we set out on our second boat tour for the trip down the Tarcoles which flows southwesterly into the Gulf of Nicoya. The river is prime habitat for American Crocodile, while the mangroves and marshes near the river mouth are great for birds including herons and egrets, waterfowl, kingfishers, shorebirds, and passerines. Highlights included 65 species with a 5-kingfisher slam (including the diminutive American Pygmy Kingfisher), Double-striped Thick-Knee, wild Muscovy Duck, a pair of Peregrine Falcons, and a lifer for our Costa Rican guide Fabian — Northern Scrub-Flycatcher! The endemic Mangrove Hummingbird eluded us, which gives everyone a reason to come back to Costa Rica another time, right?

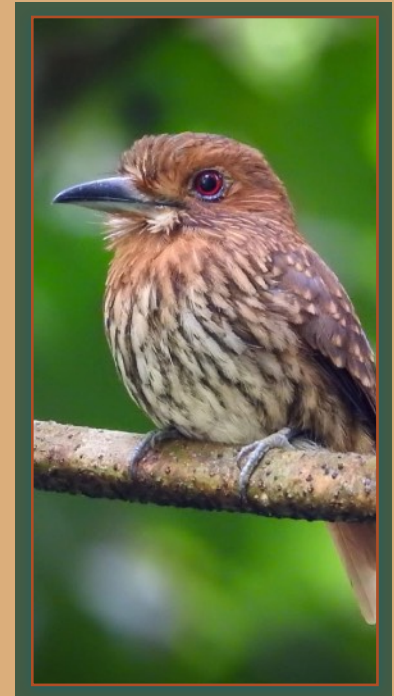


DAY 8 | CARARA NATIONAL PARK

Pre-breakfast, we strolled the grounds of Hotel Villa Lapas Jungle Village, a large eco-lodge set into the rainforest. Early birds such as Streaked Flycatcher, Common Tody-Flycatcher, and Costa Rican Swifts got our morning warmed up, but our hearts really started pumping when Scarlet Macaws flew overhead like a flash of ROY.G.BIV in the sky!

But the main event of the day was exploring the biological bounty of Carara National Park. A world-renowned birding destination with a wonderful diversity of wildlife, the park is geographically positioned in a transition zone. Here, tropical dry forest typical of Costa Rica's North Pacific region meets the moist forest of the South Pacific, resulting in a melding of the two ecosystems and hosting wildlife from both, making it especially diverse. Straight out of the gate, we landed upon a Turquoise-browed Motmot cocking its tail from side to side like a pendulum, and a White-whiskered Puffbird tossing and gobbling up a huge cicada! Skulking in the understory, an ant swarm chock full of Black-hooded Antshrike, Chestnut-backed Antbird, Dot-winged Antwren, and Rufous-and-white Wren was a real treat. Plus there was a Woodcreeper

jamboree with 6 different species including Tawny-winged, Wedge-billed, Northern Barred, Cocoa, Streak-headed, and Plain Xenops! The far-carrying deep squawks of the skittles-colored Scarlet Macaw yielded a bonded pair inspecting a nest cavity as well as several flyovers throughout the day. The loud 'toots' of the Green Shrike-Vireo led us to this tough cryptic green bird way up in the canopy — a challenge but a major trip highlight! Other special moments included a Purple-crowned Fairy regurgitating to a fledgling, Slaty-tailed and Black-throated Trogons, and some new flycatchers like Sulphur-rumped and Ochre-bellied along with Eye-ringed Flatbill and Bright-rumped Attila were welcomed additions. Central American Spider Monkey as well as White-faced Capuchin and Agouti added some mammalian flavor to the day, and for reptiles we had a major score with a rare and super-cool Casque-headed Lizard. Carara was an absolute blast and it was so good, that after lunch, half the group decided to return to the park for more!



DAY 9 | TARCOLES RIVER BRIDGE & DRIVE BACK TO SAN JOSE



Our final morning bird excursion at Hotel Villa Lapas continued to yield more new species — Costa Rica really produces! In the gardens outside the rooms, a mixed flock of many individual birds fetched us Black-headed Trogon, Golden-naped Woodpecker, Rose-throated Becard, and Blue-throated Goldentail, amongst several different migrants

and resident birds. Departing the Pacific, it was time to begin the journey back to San José, stopping first for a bouncy stroll on the Tarcoles River bridge. Predators ruled the roost here, with not only an impressive gathering of crocodiles but also some new raptors for the trip: Bat Falcon and Zone-tailed Hawk! A seaside stop for a scrumptious fish lunch at Caldera gave us the opportunity to add a few seabirds such as Royal Tern and Laughing Gull, and also it was time for a heartwarming farewell speech by Eliana. She really wished we had “Two More Days” together with everyone on tour. It was a wonderful trip with 272 species — but wait, 272? We needed to finish the tour with a better milestone number, right? So off we went on a detour to a grassy dry forest patch to try and tick a few more. Eastern Meadowlark - check. Common Ground Dove - tick. And finally, an American Kestrel gave us bird number 275 for the trip!

But hey, it's not about the numbers, right? Everyone on the trip had a sensational customized and detailed premiere travel experience with memories made to last a lifetime. There was an abundance of biological diversity, from birds to reptiles to amphibians to mammals to tropical plants — in a country that has set aside more than 25% of its land mass for conservation. There was delicious cuisine, a comfortable touring bus, friendly people, marvelous eco-lodge accommodations, and warm camaraderie between guides, guests, and all the locals that touched the tour. Costa Rica, we will meet again. Pura vida!

KNOW

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF THE BIRDS, FLORA, AND FAUNA SEEN DURING THIS TRIP, PLEASE VISIT:

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