

Southern Costa Rica | Trip Report

January 20–29, 2019 | Written by Bob Meinke



Guide Bob Meinke, with expert local naturalist Carlos Umaña, and 13 participants:
Kelly, Therese, Dave, Roger, Chuck, Lola, Pierre, Danalee, Robert, Ellen, Jeanne, Ann, and Bonnie



Friday-Saturday, January 18-19: Pre-Trip Early Arrivals

Several of the group flew into Costa Rica on Friday or Saturday, before the start of the main tour on Sunday. We were picked up at the international airport and transferred to the lodging of our choice, some choosing the Presidente Hotel in downtown San José (where the entire group would ultimately link up, and the main tour would depart from), while others stayed at the Bougainvillea Hotel in the nearby suburb of Santo Domingo.

Keeping occupied was not a problem for the early arrivals, and we were soon out and about investigating what the San José area had to offer, as we visited the downtown museums, the zoo, botanical garden, parks, and the beautiful grounds of local hotels. It was nice to have so many options. Arriving a day or two early on a tour is always prudent if it can be managed, to relax a bit prior to heading out, get oriented, and see a few sights at one's leisure.

The weather was pleasant, and the gardens around San José were in fine form, with many types of flowers in full bloom, attracting insect pollinators and (of course)

birds! Investigating the landscaping at the zoo, nearby parks, and our hotel grounds gave us a head start on our species list for the trip, with Rufous-collared Sparrow, Inca Dove, Rufous-capped Warbler, White-eared Ground-Sparrow, Rufous-naped Wren, Blue-and-white Swallow, Lesson's Mot-Mot, Montezuma Oropendola, Hoffman's Woodpecker, Grayish Saltator, Cabanis's Wren, and Crimson-fronted Parakeet (among many others) quickly spotted. Some of these birds would not be seen again during the main tour. North American breeding species that overwinter in Costa Rica were also well-represented in San José, including Philadelphia Vireo, Tennessee and Chestnut-sided Warblers, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Summer Tanager, and Baltimore Oriole.

Sunday, January 20: Rendezvous at the Presidente Hotel

By Sunday morning, most of the group had arrived in San José, and those not already at the Presidente Hotel would soon be checking in. Located on the Central Avenue Pedestrian Boulevard in the heart of downtown, the Presidente is situated in the busy core of the city, within short walking distance of a wide range of cafés, parks,



museums, and shopping. The group was not scheduled to formally meet until that evening, so many of us took advantage of the warm afternoon and continued to explore the city. Some focused on birding (Gray and Roadside Hawks, Yellow-throated Euphonia, and Orange-chinned Parakeet were notable sightings), others stayed by the hotel, while a few (Kelly and Ann, in particular) combined their birding activities with lunch at a decidedly decadent local bakery.

Our lead local guide, Carlos Umaña, came by late afternoon to meet with Bob. Shortly afterwards, Carlos, Bob, and the rest of us gathered at Azotea Calle 7, the Presidente Hotel's upstairs restaurant and lounge, for a welcome dinner and the initial meeting of the group. And not unexpectedly, we were a geographically-diverse assemblage, with participants from Oregon to Tennessee, Michigan, Maryland, and New York.



After a round of introductions, Carlos shared details regarding the upcoming trip schedule, and discussed logistics. We enjoyed a delicious dinner (Azotea Calle 7 is one of the higher end restaurants in San José), exchanged travel stories, and got acquainted, all the while keeping an eye on the sky—the evening of January 20 featured a full lunar eclipse, and we were sitting in a prime spot, in a beautiful roof-top restaurant! But as luck would have it, clouds had finally rolled into the Central Valley, after a beautiful preceding weekend of largely sunny skies, and the eclipse was not for us. Disappointed yet not discouraged, we retired early, in anticipation of our early start tomorrow when we would leave for the cloud forests of the Cordillera de Talamanca.

Monday, January 21: San José to the Talamanca Range and the El General Valley

The group was up early this morning for a quick breakfast at the hotel. We then collected our luggage, loaded the bus, and after a quick stop at a local ATM, were on our way to the mountains a little after 7:00 AM.

As we headed out of the San José area, we continued straightaway towards our first stop of the day, at Paraiso Quetzales, a small lodge sitting at nearly 8,000 feet in the Talamanca Mountains. Our target bird here was the Resplendent Quetzal, a spectacular relative of the trogons in Central America. Regrettably, the quetzal did not put in an appearance during our visit, but fortunately there were numerous other montane species to distract us. The Talamanca are a spectacular mountain range, rising from sea level on the Caribbean to over 12,000 feet, then dropping back down to the sea on the Pacific side of the country. Paraiso Quetzales faces west, and although the day was overcast and a bit misty (it's a cloud forest, after all), our stop there was exciting.

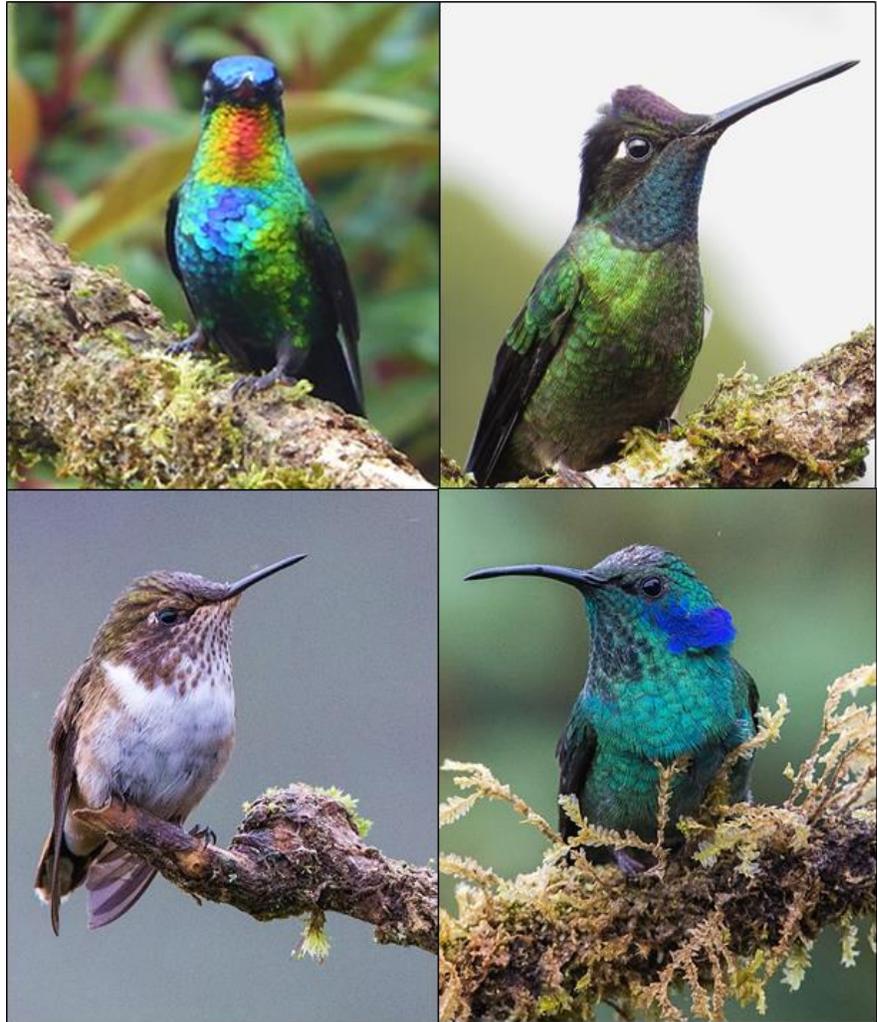
The first day of a birding trip in the Neotropics is always a bit overwhelming, since everything you see at that point is new for the trip, and on any given day you'll likely see a lot of species. Our first day was no exception. It was also a particularly important day, since it would be our only opportunity to bird in the higher mountains.

We arrived at Paraiso Quetzales mid-morning, and immediately headed for their recently renovated viewing platform, and the nearby hummingbird feeders. The central cordillera of Costa Rica is replete with endemics, and they were well-represented at this location. Among the regionally endemic hummingbird species we easily saw were Talamanca (a recent split from Magnificent), Volcano, Fiery-throated, and White-throated Mountain-Gem. Other hummers included Lesser Violetear and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird.

The mist notwithstanding, we continued birding around the lodge area—no one was ready for lunch! From the viewing platform we started scanning the mid-canopy and nearby forest understory, and quickly picked up additional endemics, including Ruddy Treerunner, Large-footed Finch, Slaty Flowerpiercer, Yellow-thighed Finch, Black-and-yellow Silky-Flycatcher, Long-tailed Silky-

Flycatcher, Flame-throated Warbler, Black-capped Flycatcher, Yellow-winged Vireo, Sooty Thrush, Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus, Collared Redstart, Ochraceous Wren, Golden-browed Chlorophonia (*absolutely stunning*), and the cryptic Wrenthrush (an unusual species, placed in a family by itself, and very hard to spot—only a few of us got a glimpse!). Quite a haul, and these were just the endemics!

Among the notable non-endemic species here were Tufted Flycatcher, Mountain Thrush, Yellow-bellied Siskin, Mountain Elaenia, and a local race of the Hairy Woodpecker (so common in North America). We finally tore ourselves away and headed to lunch at Paraiso Quetzales. After a nice meal (many of us had the local trout), we moved on towards our next planned stop at the Cerro Bella Vista area (also referred to as Cerro de la Muerte), to search for two additional endemics—the unique Timberline Wren and the Volcano Junco.



Heading south on Highway 2, we continued to gain altitude, and soon turned onto a gravel road built years ago to service a series of high-elevation communications towers. The hanging cloud cover intensified, and the wind as well, but we were at over 11,000 feet so it was hardly surprising. Carlos was undaunted, so we had to be as well, and soon we were walking and stalking the Timberline Wren.



It took some time, as the birds skittered through the subalpine brush, but eventually a lone wren revealed itself to the group. The Volcano Junco (also just a single bird seen) was considerably more cooperative, scarcely bothering to move out of the way as we parked and exited our van. The two endemic species couldn't have behaved more differently.

The vegetation here was fascinating, too, clearly reminiscent of the paramo in the Andes of South America, yet with

North American influences. While the species are different, many of the plant families at this elevation are also widespread in North America, with the Ericaceae (heath or blueberry family), Hypericaceae (St. John's-wort family), Asteraceae (aster or sunflower family), Gentianaceae (gentian family), Apiaceae (carrot family), and Rosaceae (Rose family) among the most common. And the endemics we encountered here weren't limited to birds! An Indian-paintbrush species (a common type of wildflower familiar to many of us in the U.S.) was seen here that turned out to be *Castilleja quirosii*, a rare and probably endangered species, with a global distribution limited to just this mountain-top and a couple of other nearby peaks. Now that's pretty cool!



Hard to believe at this point we were only part-way through our day, with a drive still ahead of us to the south. We hit the road, and soon were appreciating our descent to a warmer and more oxygen-rich environment. As we approached the El General Valley, we coerced Carlos and our driver (we didn't have to try very hard) to pull down a side road, and we got in a final hour of late afternoon birding. Best find (by Kelly) was a pair of beautiful endemic Black Guans, perched above us in some low trees. But we also picked up colorful Speckled and Spangle-cheeked Tanagers, Northern Emerald-Toucanet, Sulphur-winged Parakeet (here at the lowest ebb of its altitudinal range), Slate-throated Redstart, and Olive-striped Flycatcher. We finally pulled into Talari Lodge at 7:00 PM, in time for a quick (and tasty) dinner before settling into our rooms for the night. A long day, but a very productive one!

Tuesday, January 22: Birding at Talari Lodge | Day trip to Los Cusingos

Our rooms at Talari Lodge were quite comfortable, and we were all up early for breakfast in the dining area, which doubled as a birding deck. While perhaps not as polished and developed—in terms of facilities and staff—as the famous birding verandah at Trinidad’s Asa Wright Centre, it nonetheless had similarities, and we took full advantage of the wonderful views.

New birds this morning included Red-legged Honeycreeper, Palm Tanager, Green Honeycreeper, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird,



Piratic Flycatcher, Golden-hooded Tanager, Yellow-crowned Euphonia, and Gray-headed Chachalaca. After breakfast, we walked the grounds for a spell with Carlos, then packed up and headed to the bird reserve at Los Cusingos (former home of pioneering ornithologist Alexander Skutch).

Before we left the grounds at Talari Lodge, Therese pointed out (from the van) an immature Double-toothed Kite, perched low in the trees—great spot! It wasn’t a long drive to Los Cusingos, and Carlos took the liberty of pointing out a number of species as we drove through rural residential areas and farm country on the way. Bronzed Cowbird, Crested Caracara, Smooth-billed Ani, and Gray-capped Flycatcher were all

seen well. Arriving at the Los Cusingos reserve, there were so many birds as we stepped from the van, we spent our first half-hour of birding without walking more than 100 feet! The trees and brush near the visitor center were buzzing, with specialties such as Dot-winged Antbird, Long-billed Gnatwren, Black-hooded Antshrike, Plain Xenops, and Orange-billed Sparrow. We also had our first look at Fiery-billed Aracari (an anticipated regional endemic) and a Yellow-throated Toucan, while an elegant Swallow-tailed Kite was spotted overhead.



We eventually walked into the reserve and spent the morning on the trails and grounds surrounding the Skutch Estate. The forest was lush, and new species for the tour were everywhere—it was one of those days where the birding was simply superlative. Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, and Chestnut-backed Antbird were in the understory, Cocoa, Streak-headed, and Tawny-winged Woodcreepers were on the tree trunks (as well as Lineated Woodpecker), and in the canopy we saw Slaty-tailed Trogon, Spot-crowned Euphonia (males and females, both gorging on mistletoe berries), a beautiful Golden-winged Warbler, and Buff-throated Saltator.

As we returned to view the estate house, complete with its furnishings and lab equipment that once belonged to Dr. Skutch and his wife, we casually birded the nearby lawns and feeders, where Red-capped and Blue-crowned Manakins, Purple-crowned Fairy, Tropical Gnatcatcher, and Shining Honeycreeper were the highlights.

We returned to Talari for lunch and spent the rest of the day birding the lodge grounds, taking advantage of the pool, or just resting up. A Gray-cowled Wood-Rail was recorded, and Gray-breasted Martin and Southern Rough-winged Swallow were common overhead. Some of the group perched up on the dining deck (which provided a welcome shady vantage point), and Snowy-bellied Hummingbird (a regional endemic) was seen visiting nearby flowers. Boat-billed Flycatchers were hunting from the trees, a Blue Dacnis was observed in flight, and several migrating warblers were active in the brush (Black-and-white, Chestnut-sided, and American Redstart for the most part). Carlos spotted a Turquoise Cotinga, but just for an instant—no one else reacted in time to see it. But later the Turquoise Cotinga was back, behind the lodge this time, and some of the group finally ended up with excellent scope views of this exquisite (and very difficult to find) endemic species.

As dusk approached a few of us went out for a pre-dinner walk, along the steep bank above the Rio General (near the lodge swimming pool) and picked up some additional species. We were particularly fortunate to observe two Olivaceous Piculets, busy feeding their young. The smallest of woodpeckers, these cavity nesters excavate nest holes (in trees) with entrances the width of a bottle cap! Carlos then trained his scope on a nearby bare tree, and we located a perched Masked Tityra and an adult Double-toothed Kite. And in one of the most curious avian interactions of the trip, a male White-crested Coquette could be seen harassing the Double-toothed Kite, repeatedly diving at the nape of the baffled raptor from behind. Hard to imagine that the kite represented a threat to the tiny coquette—clearly, we still have much to learn about bird behavior. Fortunately, the coquette, among the smallest of hummingbirds, was easily recognized even at quite a distance, as its pale, unique crest was highlighted in our scope view by the rays of the setting sun. Shortly thereafter we headed to dinner—preceded by a review of our species list—and then it was time for a well-deserved rest. A brilliant day!

Wednesday, January 23: On to the Osa Peninsula | Visiting Wilson Botanical Gardens

After a quick farewell breakfast at Talari Lodge, we loaded up and left for Agua Dulce Resort on the Osa Peninsula. We all agreed that Talari and its environs was a bird-rich area that would be well worth visiting again. There was certainly much more to see there, and two days was simply not enough! Our drive south to the Osa Peninsula was scheduled for six hours total, and it would ultimately take that long and a bit more to get there. But the van was comfortable, and we had plans for stops along the way.



Heading out of Talari, we saw several Yellow-throated Toucans crossing the road, one after the other. We saw them again several times during the drive, one of those species that's unmistakable even at 50 mph. On one of our earlier stops, not far from Talari, we saw the unmistakable silhouette of a Long-billed Starthroat as it perched on a wire, while several Blue-headed Parrots were in nearby trees (stunning birds). But we needed to keep moving, so we settled in for the trip to Wilson Botanical Gardens, situated at the half-way point of our drive to Osa. Sitting at roughly 3,500 feet and covering 145 hectares, the gardens are located in the low mountains of extreme southwest Costa Rica, along the Panamanian border. The plan was to stretch our legs,

spend an hour or two birding there, and then have lunch before departing. While Kelly and Jeanne opted for a "botany hike" they'd been longing for (with a little birding tossed in!), the rest of us made a beeline for the canopy tower.

We had several species targeted here, and we hoped for the best. That said, it was mid-day. But while the canopy proved slow, the understory was less so—during a forest hike we quickly encountered an animated

mixed flock that included (among others) Spotted and Olivaceous Woodcreepers, White-breasted Wood-Wren, Golden-crowned Warbler, and Slaty-capped Flycatcher, as well as a White-throated Thrush in the mid-canopy. And Kelly and Jeanne spotted a Long-tailed Woodcreeper, a nice find considering their focus was botany! As we tramped back towards lunch, Carlos heard an Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush twittering in a dank ravine. The species was seen at Talari the day before, but not by everyone, so we stalked the bird until it finally revealed itself, lurking in some woody debris that had accumulated near the dimly lit creek bed. This is certainly what high-end binoculars are made for—we wouldn't have seen the colors and diagnostic field marks of this species in the deep shade without them! Moving on, we encountered a flurry of White-tailed Emeralds (a featured endemic for this area), hovering above us around some flowering bromeliads.

After a very nice lunch in the open-air dining hall that overlooked the gardens, we convinced Carlos to spend just a bit more time birding near the main buildings at Wilson before climbing back in the van. Ten minutes soon stretched into 45, but it was for a good cause! New species for the tour were quickly recorded, including Thick-billed Euphonia and Mistletoe Tyrannulet (a recent split from Paltry Tyrannulet). At the feeders and in the nearby trees we also saw colorful songbirds such as Bay-headed Tanager, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Scarlet-rumped



Tanager (also known as Cherrie's Tanager, depending on your point of view), Green Honeycreeper, Baltimore Oriole, and Spot-crowned Euphonia (in this case mostly females). Crowned Woodnymph and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds were likewise common. Overhead were Blue-and-white Swallows and Gray-breasted Martins, as well as swirling flocks of a challenging swift that we ultimately labeled as Vaux's.

Wilson Botanical Gardens was another stop we would have gladly explored further, if we could. Several in the group said they would love to stay and wake up there, considering how productive the birding was even during our afternoon visit. Another trip, perhaps! But we couldn't delay any longer and were soon back on our way south to the Osa Peninsula. The rest of the day was spent on the road. We added a Blue-black Grassquit during a gas and soda break, and a Lesser Nighthawk as the sun set, finally pulling into the Agua Dulce Resort about 7:30 PM with the staff waiting to greet us. Dinner was splendid, and considering our arrival time, we ended up postponing our species list review until the following evening. The drive today was lengthy, but we saw some fascinating countryside, great birds, and enjoyed a wonderful lunch stop.

Thursday, January 24: Birding at Agua Dulce Resort | Drive to Osa Conservation

Breakfast was at 7:00, and coffee was thankfully available earlier! With a view to the sea, the elevated dining area at Agua Dulce overlooked the resort compound, and in that sense was similar to Talari, though the grounds here were much more manicured. So with coffee in hand, we started our first birding day on the Osa Peninsula. Great Kiskadee, Social Flycatcher, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Tropical Flycatcher, and Tropical Mockingbird were all expected, and all were common—not surprisingly. But we knew we could do better! So several of us were soon walking the grounds, looking for habitat that might yield some novelties.

Walking the less-landscaped scrub near the entrance to the resort soon yielded Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Great-crested Flycatcher, and Black-striped Sparrow, and Red-



lored Parrots were very vocal in the trees. Sated for the moment, and realizing we would have more time here later, we quickly returned for breakfast, and then then loaded the van for the scenic drive to a remote forest restoration site operated by Osa Conservation. On the way Carlos (while driving) spotted a Mangrove Cuckoo, as it sat camouflaged in a low roadside tree—a sighting only a local guide can pull off! We watched the mangrove swamps along the roadside as we drove, picking up Snowy Egret, Common Black-Hawk, and Bare-throated Tiger-Heron (good spot, Kelly!). And Southern Lapwing was seen mingling with cows and Cattle Egrets in a heavily grazed pasture.

Upon reaching the Osa Conservation site, we quickly disembarked and, water bottles in tow, drifted off along one of the several forest trails available to us. We arrived a bit later than

optimal for birding, but we once again did better than might have been expected! White-collared Swifts were seen overhead (as well as a single Magnificent Frigatebird—we obviously weren't that far from the ocean), but soon we were walking under the forest canopy. Our best find was a small group of very noisy and active Riverside Wrens, a strikingly-patterned species that we all eventually had close looks at. Other noteworthy species here included Tawny-crowned Greenlet, Long-billed Hermit, White-shouldered Tanager, Chestnut-backed Antbird, and Blue-crowned Manakin. We eventually made our way back out to the

communal lodge building, where the Osa Conservation researchers and interns socialized and took their meals. Lunch was planned for us here, and we had the opportunity to interact with the staff and learn a bit about the projects they had underway. After a filling meal of salad, rice, beans, and chicken (our signature lunch throughout much of the trip!), we left for Agua Dulce.

We drove back through the mangroves again and picked up our first Green Kingfisher of the trip. It was mid-afternoon when we returned to Agua Dulce, and many of the group elected to relax at the pool, nap on their verandahs, or wander along the nearby beachfront. Chuck, Lola, and Bob kept birding, however, and meandered through the wooded residential areas not far from the resort. We found a Streaked Flycatcher, but not much else, as well as several young Howler Monkeys (hanging out in someone's yard—not where you might expect them!). We managed to review our species list this evening during our version of happy hour, and then settled in for a relaxing meal. Tomorrow would involve a search for dolphins and seabirds!



Friday, January 25: Boating on Golfo Dulce | Drive to Tiskita Jungle Lodge

Although we briefly saw Scarlet Macaw at the Agua Dulce Resort on the afternoon of January 24, as they quickly soared past the pool area, it wasn't until this morning that we really had some special looks. Two pairs of birds were noticed around the trees in the parking area, prior to our boarding the van for the dock at Puerto Jimenez. They were seen flying as well as clambering around the branches, maybe 75 feet above the ground. Both Roger and Therese had their cameras firing, with Roger getting a stunning shot of a bird in flight, and Therese ending up with a beautiful set of photos, starring two particularly passionate birds performing some astonishing joint acrobatics. I suspect this is something you just don't see very often. An amazing start to the day!

And just before boarding the van, a few other new and interesting species were found on or near the resort grounds, including Pale-vented Pigeon, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, and (most exciting) Bright-rumped Atilla. Jeanne also reported a Common Gallinule, which was slinking along hedges at the edge of the property.

We were soon heading out into the placid gulf to look for aquatic species, including shorebirds, maybe some pelagics, and, of course, dolphins. The boat was shaded and comfortable, and we



took turns sitting in an elevated chair that was situated out on the bow. Laughing Gull was the only gull in the area, but there were also Royal and Sandwich Terns, and Brown Pelican, and along the shoreline we saw Ruddy Turnstone, Whimbrel, Willet, Little Blue Heron, Roseate Spoonbill, Spotted Sandpiper, and Green Heron. Hordes of Mangrove Swallows were sighted near shore, as well.

That was all well and good, but today our eyes were also peeled for mammals. As we first headed into open water offshore, we encountered several Common Bottle-nose Dolphins, a familiar species to anyone who was around to see the popular TV show “Flipper” from the mid-1960’s. This is also a popular species kept in commercial aquaria. Less familiar was the Pantropical Spotted Dolphin, and we saw many more of these. Adults (beautifully spotted) and also juveniles followed the boat, and would swim under the front, directly below the observation seat! Although you could see them very well from just about anywhere onboard, the view from the bow chair was fantastic!

Before heading back, the boat pilot moved us to an isolated cove near shore, and those so inclined had the chance to jump in for a snorkel. The water was warm and there were a number of tropical fish species to see, but no effort was made to identify these as we only had limited time at the site—we’d spent so long with the dolphins, we couldn’t stay! We soon headed back to Agua Dulce for a quick lunch, before we would again board a boat to shuttle us across the gulf to Golfito, on the opposite shore.

After a memorable afternoon shuttle ride across Golfo Dulce to Golfito, we met our van, which had driven up and around the gulf earlier that day. Following a quick market visit, we headed to Tiskita Lodge. Hoping to arrive before dark, we planned limited stops along the way. But we made an exception as we drove through a farming area, when curiosity eventually got the better of us. A group of Wood Storks flew overhead as we exited the van, and several Yellow-throated Toucans came close as they crossed the road. A Pale-billed Woodpecker was seen, and Yellow-headed Caracara flew across the field as the sunlight waned. A Fork-tailed Flycatcher was spotted on a fencepost, and Great-tailed Grackles were everywhere. But we began to think that a species Carlos hoped we might see here (Red-breasted Meadowlark) would likely evade us, when Lola calmly pointed out a barely discernible bit of carmine visible on a far-off tree—no one else had noticed! Sure enough, once the scope was set up, the bird came into view. A gratifying end to an unplanned roadside stop!

We arrived at Tiskita Lodge in time for a quick check-in, and most of us were assigned rooms in a series of scattered triplex units set deep within the forest—we couldn't have asked for a more immersive experience. Looking forward to our first morning here, we retired after meeting the lodge manager and enjoying a delicious dinner in the open-air mess area.

Saturday, January 26: Birding the Trails at Tiskita Jungle Lodge

At Tiskita, simply walking to breakfast from your lodgings takes you through some magnificent forest stands, meaning you are already birding before you've even had your coffee, whether you'd planned it or not. And that's assuming you had not already been up for before 6:00 AM to sit on the deck outside your room, which overlooked the forest that was besieged with birdsong. On the road just below the main lodge building there was an Orange-collared Manakin lek, and you couldn't miss the electric "snap" of the male's calls as you walked by. Another beautiful regional endemic.

Tiskita largely disdains formal bird feeders. That said, there were fruit offerings each morning out front, plantings of flowering *Verbena* to attract hummingbirds, and several bird baths, which drew in species like Scarlet-rumped Tanager (Cherrie's subspecies), Blue-gray Tanager, Spot-crowned Euphonia, Bananaquit, Northern Waterthrush, Green Honeycreeper, Blue-throated Goldentail, Crowned Woodnymph, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Long-billed Hermit, Stripe-throated Hermit, White-necked Jacobin, and White-tipped Dove. So, there was constant activity and a lot to evaluate before breakfast!





Once we had finished with Tiskita's morning buffet, most of us returned to the field with Carlos, walking trails close to the lodge grounds. While birding with your guide has its obvious advantages, the trails at Tiskita were such that a number of the group felt comfortable striking out on their own to bird, or just explore—enjoying the peace and solitude of the forest by yourself has its rewards, as well. So, on any particular outing, some of the group would be tagging along with Carlos or Bob, and others (after keeping the guides apprised of their plans) might be off in another direction.

This morning's walk had some surprises, starting with a Ruddy Pigeon calling from a treetop near the main lodge. Very similar to Short-billed Pigeon (the expected species here at Tiskita), Ruddy Pigeon (common in South America) is generally restricted to higher elevations in Costa Rica. Carlos seemed bewildered to find it here. Then a few minutes later, as the group ventured down the road a bit, Bob noticed several bright red feathers wafting down from the canopy, and spotted a Laughing Falcon directly above, with a Summer Tanager in its talons! As Carlos noted, the prey of Laughing Falcons is typically snakes, and he had never seen one take a bird. Another unexpected twist! And soon after that we happened on an army ant swarm (what a break!) and picked up several birds that habitually follow the swarm (not to eat the ants, of course, but to prey on various arthropods the ant column flushes out as it moves forward). Gray-headed Tanager, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, and Bi-colored Antbird (a real prize) were all seen well. An eventful morning, to say the least!

This afternoon some of us did another local walk, this time into a forested riparian area. Eye-ringed Flatbill, the endemic Baird's Trogon, Black-throated Trogon, Golden-crowned Spadebill, and Buff-rumped Warbler (behaving much like an American Redstart) were all seen. Coming back, we picked up Black-bellied Wren near one of the lodge triplexes—a gorgeous bird, with an unforgettable song that we'd been hearing at daybreak. We topped off the day by walking to the local airstrip along the ocean, not far from Tiskita, searching for a Sapphire-throated Hummingbird reported by Ellen. This species was only very recently located in Costa Rica, and Carlos had not yet seen it (it would be a lifer for him!). But no luck, unfortunately. However, we did see Morelet's Seedeater, and White Hawk on our way back up (a possible breeding pair was flying high along the ridge behind the lodge). King Vulture was also observed. After quaffing some refreshments and finishing our species list review, another excellent dinner was served by Tiskita. Tomorrow would be our last full day at the lodge.

Sunday, January 27: Local birding | Primary forest hike | Turtle conservation

This morning started as always at Tiskita, with birding as soon as you stepped out your door (you just couldn't help it), followed by the trek up (or down, depending on your room) to the main lodge for coffee and the tasty breakfast buffet. The main objective today was to make it up to the ridgeline well behind and above the lodge grounds, an optional return hike of potentially several hours. This was the closest way to access a nearby tract of primary forest, where several bird species not really possible to see elsewhere were thought to reside.

But first things first. Carlos had unfinished business at the airstrip, and so down the hill we went. We waited good-naturedly by a large *Verbena* hedge, with its pink and purple flowers that many species of tropical hummingbirds find irresistible. Despite trying to be silent, our large group soon flushed a Thick-billed Seed-Finch, followed by a few Yellow-bellied Seedeaters making a flustered appearance.

Still we waited and watched. Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and White-necked Jacobin showed up at the *Verbena* patch, and we were suitably impressed—common species, yet very colorful. And several gorgeous butterflies dropped by, including a possible Tiger-striped Longwing. An Osprey drifted along the nearby beach, White-crowned Parrots whirled overhead, and Great Kiskadees called from adjacent forest. It was getting warmer as a Streaked Flycatcher slipped into the shelter of trees beyond the airfield, followed by a Fiery-billed Aracari. A Roadside Hawk perched nearby.



For the first time Carlos began to look edgy. He knew the hike to the ridge couldn't wait; the day was heating up. But just as resignation was beginning to take hold, there was a buzzing at the *Verbena* patch, and YES, the Sapphire-throated Hummingbird had arrived! Carlos had been a fabulous guide. And if it took our patiently waiting alongside an overgrown airstrip for an hour, in the full sun, to help him get one of his last Costa Rican life birds, that was fine with us. (Plus, it was a life bird for all of us, as well. But bummer if it hadn't showed.)

Now on to the primary forest hike. Not all the group was comfortable with this walk, considering it was mid-morning, would involve some serious elevation gain, and it was, well, getting hot (and humid). But the potential reward was great enough that 10 of the 13 elected to go. And they were not disappointed. While the group relocated many of the special species we had seen already—such as Baird's Trogon—the several deep forest specialties they added to our checklist were especially remarkable, including Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, Rufous Mourner, Rufous Piha, and the endemic Golden-naped Woodpecker. You can visit Central America many times and never see some of these taxa. So those of us who stayed behind regretted our decision just a bit. That said, Bob and Jeanne hiked the trail to the pools above the waterfall and saw (and heard) Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher

as well as Barred and Black-hooded Antshrikes. And Roger contented himself by staying near the lodge, adding photos to his already impressive portfolio for the trip. So to each his, or her, own!

After lunch we took a brisk walk down the beach to visit a non-profit group that was raising and then liberating to the sea endangered Olive Ridley Turtles. Baby turtles, hatched from wild-collected eggs, are kept in pens until they are deemed ready to release. The workers were releasing turtles when we were visiting, and it was intriguing to watch. The turtles, about the size of a lemon, raced to the waves when released. We wished them well on their hazardous journey!

By late afternoon several of the group were intent on one last walk, this time to the orchard area maintained by Tiskita, about a mile from the main lodge grounds. It was a



pleasant, largely shaded stroll, and we saw some interesting habitat. Perhaps most notable was the incredibly inquisitive troop of White-faced Capuchin Monkeys that followed us for quite some time, not at all shy. They had a preference for apple trees, one of many fruits (the others were largely tropical species) that were represented in the orchard.

We worked hard to pick up some final bird species that some of us hadn't seen. We had great views of male and female Golden-naped Woodpecker, first seen

during the primary forest hike. A Squirrel Cuckoo, which had for some reason managed to elude us previously, was finally seen. We also added our last species of hummingbird, i.e., Band-tailed Barbthroat, as it visited some streamside flowers in the waning afternoon light. This uncommon species is a relative of the hermits and was a good find. And just as we were stumbling back to the lodge, through heavy forest in low-light conditions (after an earlier spirited discussion among the walkers, regarding the correct interpretation of the trail maps we were using), Carlos quietly directed our view to a remarkably close, and very still, White-whiskered Puffbird, presumably on its evening roost. How did he find that? That's not an easy species to spot even in the daytime, much less in the gloom of the evening. Very impressive.

We completed our final species list update this evening, before dinner, assuming tomorrow we would not see much since it would largely be a travel day (a morning drive, followed by a noon flight from Golfito back to San José, then on to our airport hotel). As we shared our feelings about the trip, the group concurred that Tiskita Lodge lived up to its reputation. Tropical birding at its best.

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Just when we thought it was a wrap, Kelly and Chuck walked back down to the orchard at first light this morning, and picked up one last important species, Crested Guan. After that we found a few odds and ends we'd missed, most notably Eastern Meadowlark and Melodious Blackbird on our drive up to Golfito, and later Rufous-naped Wren and Hoffman's Woodpecker (for those who didn't see them at the start of the trip) along with Black-bellied Whistling Duck, during our lunch stop after returning to San José.

Our last evening was spent at the Doubletree Hotel in San José, not far from the airport. The hotel seemed particularly opulent (not a bad thing), and our catered dinner and final conversations there were excellent. The next morning, we all left for the airport for our individual flights home. We saw an amazing number of stunning birds, witnessed beautiful countryside and spectacular landscapes, and made friends that we hope to see again on a future trip. A grand adventure!



Photo credits: **Title Page:** Sunset (Kelly Amsberry-KA). Then clockwise, from upper left: Blue-gray Tanager (Roger Chenault-RC); Red passionflower (Bob Meinke-BM); Scarlet-rumped Tanager (Cherrie's subspecies) (RC); Red-legged Honeycreeper (Therese Best-TB); Fiery-throated Hummingbird and Lesser Violetear (RC); Great Kiskadee (RC). **Page 1:** Clockwise, from upper left: Terrestrial bromeliad (KA); Clock-vine (*Thunbergia mysorensis*) (KA); Jade-vine (*Strongylodon macrobotrys*) (KA); Unknown orchid (KA). **Page 2:** Roadside Hawk (TB). **Page 3:** Hummingbirds—clockwise, from upper left: Fiery-throated (Chuck Estes-CE), Talamanca (RC), Lesser Violetear

(RC), Volcano, female (RC). **Page 4:** Searching for the Timberline Wren (CE); Rare Indian-paintbrush, *Castilleja quirosii* (courtesy ID by Mark Egger, Research Associate, University of Washington) (BM). **Page 5:** Birding from the observation deck at Talari Lodge (KA); Red-legged Honeycreeper (female in foreground) (RC). **Page 6:** Spot-crowned Euphonia (female, with mistletoe berry on beak). **Page 7:** Yellow-throated Toucan (RC); Canopy tower at Wilson Bot. Gardens (BM). **Page 8:** Thick-billed Euphonia (TB). **Page 9:** Great Kiskadee (RC); Southern Lapwing (RC). **Page 10:** Scarlet Macaw in flight (RC). **Page 11:** Scarlet Macaws, mating (TB); Carlos Umaña, watching for dolphins (BM). **Page 12:** Scarlet-rumped Tanager, female (Cherrie's subspecies) (RC). **Page 13:** Green Honeycreeper (RC). **Page 14:** Tiger-striped Longwing (probable ID, courtesy Robert Behrstock, *Naturalist Journeys*) (RC). **Page 15:** Olive Ridley Sea Turtle, hatchling (BM); Panamanian White-faced Capuchin Monkey (RC). **Page 16:** Hibiscus (BM); Group photo (BM).