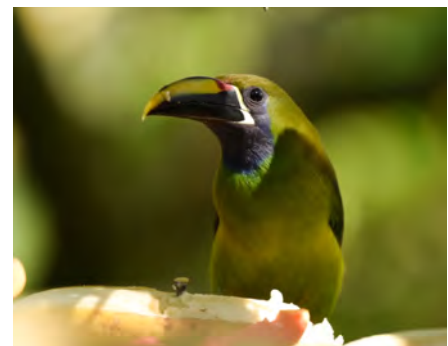


Christmas in Costa Rica | Dec. 22-29, 2023 | Trip Report | by Lizzy Martinez & Steve Shunk

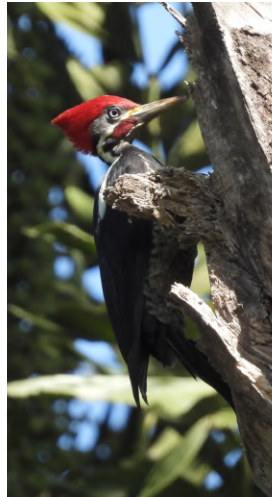


With guides Johan Fernandez and Steve Shunk, and participants: Gail, Jack, James, Jeannine, Kenneth, Pamela, Phoenix, Taylor, Tina, and Tricia



What better way is there to spend the holidays than birding? Christmas Bird Counts bring birders out in droves, but is there an even better way to celebrate? How about Christmas in the Tropics?! In 2023, for the third year running, Naturalist Journeys invited travelers to share their holiday revelry with us in the Central American hotspot of Costa Rica. With nearly 1,000 bird species in an area smaller than West Virginia, Costa Rica ranks high in biodiversity—and high on many birders' bucket lists. Over eight days, we ventured from the mountains to the rainforest, experiencing wild nature and local culture.

On a casual afternoon, we enjoyed our coffee—Costa Rican coffee, of course—while watching Large-footed finch and Sooty-capped Chlorospingus so close that it was hard to focus our cameras. We woke up at dawn one morning to view one of the world's most elegant bird, the Resplendant Quetzal (we saw three of them, and two more later). On another day, we tootled down the Sarapiquí river to see Sungrebe and Southern Lapwing. We



found 25 different hummingbirds and 25 flycatchers, plus 16 raptors and 16 warblers. We found over 250 bird species in all, plus tapirs and tent-making bats. Grab your own cup of coffee (or tea or adult beverage of choice), sit back, and relax, as we share some tales from our adventure.

Fri., Dec 22 The Beginning—Hotel Bougainvillea

And so the trip began, at the lovely Hotel Bougainvillea in Santo Domingo—just outside of San Jose—on the afternoon of December 22. We start our Costa Rica tours here, not just for the comfortable lodging, delicious food, and friendly staff, but for the superb introduction to the birds of this diverse country. After a pleasant orientation by Steve, we went out to enjoy the beautiful gardens of the hotel, with its namesake pink bougainvillea and some impressive giant bromeliads (*Alcantarea imperialis*). Under the leaves of the philodendrons, we found the nests of small wasps, and each corner of the garden showed us a variety of butterflies, spiders, and mushrooms. Among the most common birds we saw was the national symbol of Costa Rica, the Clay-colored Thrush, in search of worms and fallen fruits. We also found pairs of Rufous-collared Sparrows showing that reddish tone on their neck that contrasts with the black lines on their face, a very elegant plumage for a common bird. We enjoyed the curious Rufous-naped Wren searching for food by removing the bark of trees, and we found a Summer Tanager hunting for insects among the floripondio flowers. Green-breasted Mango and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird repeatedly captured our attention, visiting the brightly colored heliconias. Perhaps the highlight of the afternoon was our great experience with the resident Lesson's Motmot.

Before dinner, we met our local guide, Johan, who gave us his own presentation on Costa Rica and the trip ahead. Later that evening, a few folks ventured outside for the nighttime chorus of the Mottled Owls, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls, and Common Pauragues; a fitting end to the inaugural day of the tour. On our first morning, we enjoyed another tour of the gardens, first hearing the commotion of a large flock of Crimson-fronted Parakeets that flew over the treetops. We heard a Hoffmann's Woodpecker tapping in a giant Guanacaste tree, and a strange metallic 'song' surprised us from the top of the canopy—a Montezuma Oropendola! This bird has an amazing variety of calls, compounded by its imposing size and behavior; one of the group called it the "R2D2 bird" for its almost robotic sound. We watched a pair of Lesson's Motmots carrying material for their nest, and we found a sleeping pair of Mottled Owls buried in the stand of giant bamboo. Each participant was able to capture that moment of the owls' daytime relaxation.

Several more songbirds searched among the leaves for insects, including Philadelphia Vireo, Tennessee and Yellow Warblers, Baltimore Oriole, Summer Tanager and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Overhead, we watched a large flock of Blue-and-White Swallows. Just an hour of touring the gardens gave us great satisfaction, and it was time for breakfast and departure from the hotel.



Sat., Dec 23

San Jose to Savegre

As we passed through the urban maze, Johan shared historical and cultural information about the city until we reached the temple of “La Morenita” or the Virgin of the Angels. Here we enjoyed both the spectacular architecture of the church and the antics of Tropical Mockingbirds in the square. Later, from the bus, we were able to catch glimpses of Yellow-headed Caracara and Short-tailed Hawk flying over the city.

As we headed south, we appreciated the wonderful views of lush vegetation and bridges over impressive rivers. Our first stop was Palo Verde del Guarco. This site featured long banks of flowering verbena (*Stachytarpheta*), among other flowers, that attracted many butterflies and hummingbirds. Rufous-tailed and Stripe-tailed hummers were the most common, fighting throughout the shrubs for their territories. We also found a few of Costa Rica’s endemic Coppery-headed Emerald. The coppery head was a little hard to distinguish in the flat light, so the first thing that allowed us to recognize it was its characteristic small curved beak. Among this wealth of tiny gems, Palo Verde also showed us a single Scintillant Hummingbird and one Purple-throated Mountain-Gem, along with fleeting glimpse of a beautiful Blue-vented Hummingbird. Both the Coppery-headed and Blue-vented were our only ones of the trip. Although the fascination was with the hummingbirds, we also enjoyed the presence of Lesser Goldfinch, Black-throated Green Warbler, Bananaquit, and Yellow-faced Grassquit. Overhead we watched small groups of Band-tailed Pigeon. A few vocally conspicuous birds eluded visuals, including Grey-breasted Wood-Wren and Black-faced Solitaire, and our only Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush of the tour.

On our way to lunch, we experienced an interesting diversion. As we came around a curve on the circuitous mountain road, we ‘ran into’ a cycling race! Authorities had closed the road while we were on the side trip to Palo Verde, and we were caught in the race. Thankfully there was another side road, so we quickly escaped the cyclists and exploited the opportunity to do a some more birding while the racers passed. Among a flock of Black and Turkey Vultures we found the Costa Rican subspecies of Red-tailed Hawk. Nearby, the scandalous noise of a group of Acorn Woodpeckers delighted us among the tops of the pine trees, and we discovered a pair of Masked Tityras from their cranky calls. Lower in the canopy we identified Slaty Flowerpiercer and Common Chlorospingus. The bike racers finally passed, and as we headed back to the truck, driver Mike found a Hoffman’s Two-toed Sloth resting peacefully among the branches of a tree, a very pleasant surprise for everyone.

Finally, we reached Paraíso Quetzales Lodge, a local restaurant with a spectacular view across the mountains. We enjoyed a delicious lunch accompanied by local coffee. When we came out to the lookout, there was a constant dance of hummingbirds clamoring for the feeders: Volcano, Talamanca, and Fiery-throated



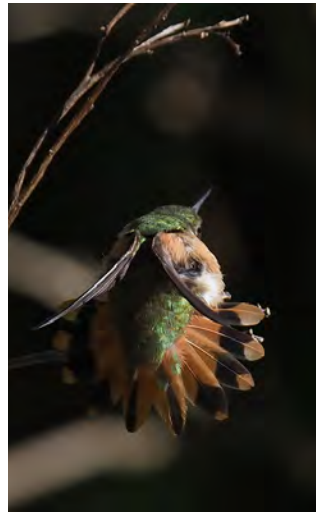
Hummingbirds and Lesser Violetear showed quite close to us. Among the vegetation we could see Mountain Elaenia, Black-capped Flycatcher, and Mountain Thrush. There was a moment when Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatcher—a restricted range species that only occurs in the mountains of Costa Rica and western Panama—gave us beautiful poses for photos. Our only Barred Parakeets of the trip flew over in a big flock of more than 40 birds.

Sun., Dec. 24 Savegre Canyon

Our time at Paraíso Quetzales had concluded, and we continued on our way to Savegre Lodge, a splendid place in the mountains at 2,400 meters (7,874 feet) above sea level. Nestled in Savegre Canyon, the lodge would be our base for the next few days. We would work our way up and down the canyon, high on the slopes above and along the river itself searching for a host of montane specialty birds we would not see in the Caribbean lowlands later in the trip.

It was fantastic to admire so much greenery and the river rushing along the property. In the shrubs outside the cabins, we could see hummingbirds perched, fluttering, and fighting; Lesser Violetear was the most common. We were also pleased to find White-throated Mountain-gem; between binoculars and cameras, this ‘gem’ allowed an extended time for admiration. The restless movement of Sooty-capped Chlorospingus gave it away among the leaves, while Slaty Flowerpiercer was conspicuous among the flowers. As it began to get dark, we noticed a small covey of Spotted Wood-Quail nervously settling down on a branch, packed tightly together for the night. After a delicious dinner everyone commented on the highlights of our first full day, but the anticipation was definitely building for the next morning’s adventure.

Very early on the morning of the 24th, we drove upstream to Los Lagos Quetzal—‘the spot’ for the amazing Resplendent Quetzal. It was 4:30 a.m. when we arrived and there were already people there waiting for this precious jewel of Savegre. We settled down and silently waited. Almost 40 minutes had passed when suddenly a green flash passed by, and there it was, right in front of us! The quetzal—a male—showing his splendid long tail in every elegant movement. During our quiet celebration of the star of the show, the female arrived, with her own particular charm. They moved among the branches taking small fruits from the aguacatillo tree, a protected plant that is their main food source. And just when we thought the adventure was over, another pair appeared. In those thrilling moments, we completely forgot about the morning chill, and we rejoiced in the presence of such a majestic winged beauty. The quetzals flew into the forest, and we returned to the truck with huge smiles. What a beautiful Christmas gift!



After the lodge's amazing buffet breakfast, we continued our adventure, starting with a drive up to the trailhead for "The Pioneers" trail, where in beautiful vegetation we found a flock of Sulfur-winged Parakeets making a fuss. Right in front of us—in the middle of the road—was an unwary Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush. This very plain bird is nearly endemic to Costa Rica, found almost exclusively in the Talamanca Cordillera. The canopy over the road also gave us nice looks at Yellow-winged Vireo and Flame-colored Tanager. Searching for food among the lichens we found several Ruddy Treerunners, along with the Streak-breasted Treehunter, another species with a range limited to Costa Rica and Western Panama. Cousins of these two birds included the Buffy Tuftedcheek and Lineated Foliage-gleaner, both of which deserve prizes for their names!

Flycatchers were well represented, with Mountain Elaenia, Tufted Flycatcher, Ochraceous Pewee, and Yellowish Flycatcher seen well. Among the dense vegetation, the orange beak and legs of Black-faced Solitaire stood out. And farther down the trail we watched a Collared Redstart bathing in the stream.

After lunch, we headed back up the road to Miriam's Restaurant to enjoy a delicious coffee while we watched the busy feeding station from their terrace. One of the most abundant birds there was the handsome Flame-colored Tanager. We also enjoyed two more montane near-endemic birds: Large-footed Finch and Sooty-capped Chlorospingus. On one of the trunks rested a female Hairy Woodpecker, and on the ground below we could see Yellow-bellied Siskin, Yellow-thighed Brushfinch, a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and a male Hairy Woodpecker. Ever-present hummingbirds included the Talamanca and one each of the congeneric Scintillant and Volcano hummers. Our stay ended, but we were very grateful for the opportunity to see so many special birds up so close. We retired to the hotel to prepare for Christmas Eve dinner and a chance to share our experiences.

Mon., Dec. 25 Christmas Day: Last Day in the Talamancas

Merry Christmas! We started the morning with a delightful holiday breakfast—complete with a couple of tasty treats from Santa Claus (from Mexico, actually, since that's where Lizzy and Steve live :). Fulfilled with another Savegre meal, some folks took a brief walk through the hotel gardens. Among the vines that adorned the arches we enjoyed the active nest of a Lesser Violetear. Another hummingbird that surprised us was the Brown Violetear. As we watched a Scintillant Hummingbird perched among the verbenas, a beautiful flash of yellow caught our attention; it was a stunning Silver-throated Tanager. Just outside the restaurant a couple of Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers—beautiful and elegant yellowish birds—fed on small fruits.

After our short break, we gathered again for a nice morning hike downstream on the Savegre River. As we left the lodge property, we found Northern Waterthrush on the riverbank hopping from rock to rock. A bit farther



down the road—and in the middle of the road—Lizzy found a tiny gray puffball practically walking between her feet. She had discovered a rarely encountered Talamanca Small-eared Shrew! This small, helpless, adorable creature got “oohs” and “ahhs” from the whole group. Apparently, this was a very rare encounter; our photos were even requested for a forthcoming book series on mammals of the world! We all had excellent looks at the critter before we made sure it was safely on its way.

Most of the group headed down the Sendero de Catarata, or the Waterfall Trail; one mile out, one mile back. Along the route, we found a couple of busy mixed flocks. Highlights of these ‘bird waves’ included three ovenbirds: Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, Streaked Xenops, and Ruddy Treerunner. Among these flitted Yellow-winged and Philadelphia Vireos; Black-throated Green and Black-cheeked Warblers; and Spangle-cheeked and Silver-throated Tanagers. Green-crowned Brilliant was our only one of the trip. Range-restricted specialties included Black Guan and Black-thighed Grosbeak. A handsome male Collared Trogon topped it off just as we returned to the trailhead.

While the others walked the waterfall trail, a couple members of the group chose to explore the Lauraceas Gardens near the catarata trailhead. They watched a Gray-breasted Wood-Wren carrying nesting material while a Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush skulked through the leaf litter. They also hit it big with warblers, finding Golden-winged, Blackburnian, Townsend’s, and Wilson’s, among others. They, too, saw the Yellow-winged Vireo, as well as four hummingbird species.

We headed back to the lodge, and during a short break we found a flock of 44 White-collared Swifts feeding high over the canyon. After lunch, we had Christmas afternoon to ourselves. Some folks rested and some wandered various directions around the lodge property. Several of us spent some time birding at the Feathers Garden, right on the lodge property. The garden features several hummingbird feeders and a two-story viewing deck, with excellent photo opportunities on the upper platform. Talamanca Hummingbirds proved to be the stars of the show, but we saw several other birds feeding among these unique trough-like banana feeders. Small logs were mounted horizontally, with the feeding troughs tilted away from the viewing deck. This allowed us to get photos without the images looking too much like we were shooting birds at a feeding station. Anyway, just a few of the birds we enjoyed included at least four Flame-colored Tanagers, four Baltimore Orioles, and a couple of Silver-throated Tanagers. It was also one of our last chances to see the montane—and near-endemic—Sooty-capped Chlorospingus.

After a short break and dinner, we drove up to the top of Savegre Canyon in search of owls and nightjars. This night drive took us to the highest elevation of the trip, at over 3,000 m (9,842 ft.). We used playback to coax any



owls into responding, to no avail. However, we did get to hear the Dusky Nightjar, another Costa Rican near-endemic. It was a nice end to a perfect Christmas Day.

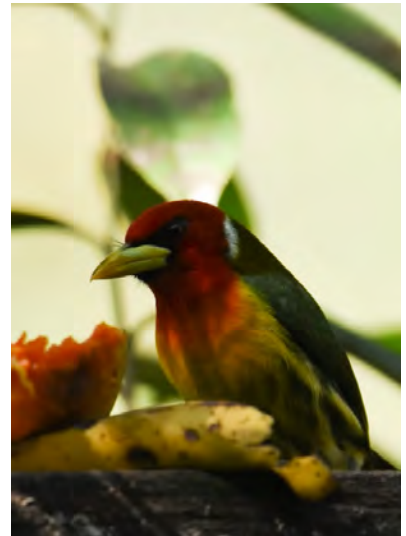
Tues., Dec. 26 Cordillera to Caribbean

We awoke to the now familiar calls of the abundant Lesser Violetears, followed by our final breakfast in the mountains. After breakfast and packing the bus, we descended the driveway and two Resplendent Quetzals literally stopped us in our tracks! We quickly piled out of the bus and spent some bonus time with these magical birds. What a lucky group! We returned to the Pan-American Highway and headed north toward San Jose. We had a busy day ahead.

Before heading back through the city, we made one more stop in the mountains in search of one more montane specialty bird. The near-endemic Timberline Wren occurs in only the highest mountains of Costa Rica and extreme western Panama. We headed down the Camino Chevo Gomez on a quest for the wren. We heard Ochraceous Wren—at the narrow overlap zone between these two species—while we enjoyed an abundance of Fiery-throated Hummingbirds. We also found a flock of Sooty-capped Chlorospingus and got decent looks at Black-and-yellow Silky Flycatcher. We weren't there long before we heard the call of the Timberline Wren, and we ended up getting good looks at a pair of these spicy little characters.

We rejoined the highway and headed north and east, over the Continental Divide, down the eastern slope, and into the Caribbean lowlands. Our next destination was Guarumo Lodge, known for both its delicious regional food and its amazing feeding stations. Before we ate, while we ate, and after we ate, we were entertained by a steady procession of new birds for the trip.

Hummingbirds were abundant, and we enjoyed several beautiful White-necked Jacobins and a few Long-billed Hermits, plus Scaly-breasted and Blue-chested Hummingbirds. Away from the hummer feeders, Shining and Red-legged Honeycreepers showed off their brightly colored legs. A Russet-naped Wood-Rail appeared very elegant and nonchalant in the small bog. Among the woodpeckers, we saw our first Black-cheeked and Rufous-winged Woodpeckers, along with a couple of Hoffman's, which has only recently expanded its range to the Caribbean flats. A Streak-headed Woodcreeper was a highlight, and it was awesome watching Yellow-throated Toucan jumping from branch to branch spying these strange tourists in front of him. We saw several species of tanagers including Palm, Scarlet-rumped, and Summer. Topping off the Guarumo highlights were our only Black-striped Sparrow and Black-cowled Oriole of the trip.



Moving on, and after a hearty lunch, we headed to Pierella Ecological Garden, where the whole family welcomed us with beautiful smiles and great cordiality, showing so much passion for their land. They showed us the trails and every wonder we could find, including stick insects, beautiful morpho butterflies, spiders, mushrooms, flowers, and tiny brightly colored poison-dart frogs. A beautiful red-eyed frog balanced on the stem of a large banana leaf. Everywhere we turned we found something to photograph and admire: a pair of Rufous-tailed Jacamars; a beautiful Chestnut-colored Woodpecker; and a Common Pauraque sleeping in the leaf litter. A beautiful surprise was seeing small ‘tent-making’ bats under the banana leaves. Definitely the most spectacular were the Honduran white bats—puffy cotton balls with yellow ears and noses, one of those great whims of nature. We concluded our pleasant visit with a demonstration of the chocolate-making process. We enjoyed a delicious cup of local coffee, with fresh fruit and freshly-made chocolate. Our Pierella visit took us into the dark, and we arrived at our next accommodation, Selva Verde Lodge on the Rio Sarapiquí.

Wed., Dec. 27 Selva Verde & the Sarapiquí

After a well-deserved restful night, we met very early for a pre-breakfast walk on the trails of Selva Verde. From the rocky riverbank, we found both Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers, plus a Spotted Sandpiper and a couple of Little Blue Herons. We continued on the Terciopelo Trail and had decent looks at a pair of handsome Rufous Motmots. The calls of the Keel-billed and Yellow-throated Toucans could be heard overhead, and we ended up with great looks at both species. Other highlights of the walk included Lineated Woodpeckers and a White-collared Manakin.

We arrived at the restaurant for breakfast and the birding just didn’t stop! At Selva Verde, you can sit on a bench at the edge of the balcony—enjoying your hot breakfast—while you watch the feeding station below. A few of the visitors this particular morning included Olive-backed Euphonia, Green Honeycreeper, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, and the striking Crimson-collared Tanager.

Every time the Chestnut-headed Oropendola arrived, the other birds flew away, but they seemed to stay when the larger Montezuma Oropendola made its appearance. A group of Collared Aracaris joined the scene, and we saw our first Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer feeding in the heliconias. Before we left the balcony, we noticed a White-nosed Coati higher among the branches busily grooming its fur.

After a short break, we met back at the bus for our quick drive to the La Selva Biological Station. La Selva is one of the most productive birding spots in Costa Rica, and—at 501 species—it boasts the fourth longest eBird list in the country. That bird list owes itself to the protection of 1,600 hectares of rainforest between the Caribbean



and Braulio Carillo National Park, ranging from 35 m (115 ft.) elevation to nearly 3,000 m (9,843 ft.) at the Barva Volcano—one of the best-preserved elevational gradients in the Tropics, worldwide. Beyond the bird list, La Selva has recorded over 2,000 plant species, 132 herptiles, and 125 mammals. Needless to say, we barely scratched the surface in our 2+ hours at the station. That said, we still tallied 79 bird species on a short hike of just over a mile!

We arrived at the station, and the first thing we saw was a family of Mantled Howler Monkeys. Howlers are often *heard* in the Neotropics, but it was a treat to see them, especially with babies! We had too many bird highlights to list here, but we'll share a few.

To begin with, we found 20 bird species at La Selva that we saw nowhere else on the tour. Some of these included: Northern Barred and Cocoa Woodcreepers; the immaculate Snowy Cotinga; six flycatchers, including Yellow-olive and Yellow-winged Flatbills; both the Blue and Scarlet-thighed Dacnises; two Cinnamon Woodpeckers; and a Cinnamon Becard. We also had a few great raptors here. Gray-headed and Double-toothed Kites flew overhead, but it will be hard to forget the moment when we were standing in a clearing and Johan called "White Hawk"! As if Snowy Cotinga wasn't enough whiteness for the outing, the nearly solid-white White Hawk circled very low over our heads. What a treat!

We returned to the lodge in time for lunch, once again enjoying the activity at the feeders, as it was time for Scarlet-rumped Cacique and Scarlet-rumped Tanager to share the stage.

Another break got us back on the adventure track as we headed for a boat ride on the Sarapiquí River. The Sarapiquí is a National Monument in Costa Rica for its service transporting supplies and armies during the Filibuster War of 1856 (you'll have to look that one up if you want to know more!). Of course, we were there for the wildlife.

As we cruised along, the quiet river gave us beautiful images and several new bird records for the trip. The massive Great Curassow made an appearance, as it tried to hide among the vegetation. Anhingas spread their wings to dry their feathers, and we saw four Bare-throated Tiger-Herons. A small and very active Sungrebe swam back and forth at the edge of the river. We had good comparisons of perched Southern Rough-winged and Mangrove Swallows. Among the greenery of the trees the raucous vocalizations of a pair of Great Green Macaws gave them away.



Just as we passed the macaws, we found a Green Ibis at water level with its iridescence glowing in the afternoon sun. Wow! A spectacled caiman was barely detectable resting on a log, and a family of howler monkeys curiously watched us as we watched them. Green and Amazon Kingfishers also made a showing. To conclude the tour, we saw our only Southern Lapwings of the trip preening on a gravel bank while we delighted in their elegance. It was a relaxing and very productive boat ride and the perfect way to end the afternoon. It was almost an overwhelming day, with 109 bird species, but nobody was complaining! We celebrated the highlights of the day before dinner and spent our last night at Selva Verde.

Thurs., Dec. 28

Up the Caribbean Slope

The last full day of the trip had arrived. Before breakfast, we enjoyed one more hike on Selva Verde's Terciopelo Trail to make the most of this diverse place and enrich our already amazing memories. Between the trail and the feeders, we found 37 species! We had our first and only Broad-billed Motmot as well as Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits. Flycatchers continued their representation as the world's largest bird family, with Black Pheobe and Eye-ringed Flatbill just two of the five species we found for the morning. As we departed the hotel grounds, we enjoyed watching a colony of Montezuma Oropendolas with their large pendulum-shaped nests. We had a couple of stops to make before leaving the flats. Comandancia Road proved to be quite productive, with nearly as many species as we had earlier that morning. In addition to Great Green Macaws, we also found a Squirrel Cuckoo. Besides our only Roadside Hawk of the trip, we had a Bat Falcon that stayed for admiration and photographs. We were also able to appreciate the breeding behavior of Orange-chinned Parakeets watching their nest in a standing snag. We found our only Long-billed Starthroat of the trip, and warblers on the roadside included Black-and-white, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, and Olive-crowned Yellowthroat.

One more brief backroad stop brought us a handful of new bird species. Two more flycatchers included our only Yellow Tyrannulet and Yellow-bellied Elaenia of the trip, and we found our first and only Blue-black Grassquit. We arrived hungry at our next destination, a unique palm plantation. But before enjoying our special lunch, Mrs. María Luz Jiménez very proudly told us about her sustainable family project, Palmitour. She showed us the entire process of producing palm hearts, better known as 'hearts of palm'. After she whetted our appetites, we had the good fortune of tasting an entire menu made with products from their land. Long live this family project. That afternoon, we arrived at the last stay of our wonderful trip: Tapirus Lodge at Braulio Carrillo National Park. Inside this beautiful jungle, we rode on cable cars across the private reserve owned by the tour company Rainforest Adventures. Aboard these basket-like cars we ventured into the reserve viewing all levels of the canopy, appreciating the majestic trees and lush vegetation, including impressive tree ferns. The rain could not be avoided—we were, after all, in the rainforest—but we enjoyed this unique adventure nonetheless. We typically hear lots of birds from the tram, and only a few are seen, but we still found a couple of new species for the trip. A tiny Snowcap hummingbird buzzed past one of the cars. This rainforest/cloud-forest specialist ranges



from eastern Honduras to northwestern Panama. One of the groups also saw our only Lattice-tailed Trogon, the range of which is restricted to Caribbean Costa Rica and northwestern coastal Panama.

After checking into our rooms, several folks ventured out for some additional late afternoon exploring. We found a female Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth moving slowly through the lower part of the canopy. Quickly we discovered that she was carrying a baby on her chest. A vigorous photo session ensued to capture the adorable moment. Birding down the entrance road, we flushed a Broad-winged Hawk from the forest edge. A flock of Mealy Parrots flew over, and we found our first Violet-headed Hummingbird of the trip. After an evening break, we convened in the open-air restaurant for our final dinner. As we relaxed with our cold beverages, one of the staff called the group over to the edge of the railing to see a Common Cat-eyed Snake. It was the only snake of the trip, which is a little surprising for Costa Rica. Just as we were attempting nighttime photos of the snake, we heard loud footsteps among the vegetation. We saw the shrubs moving around the corner, and our flashlights exposed the culprits: a female Baird's tapir with her baby feeding very close to balcony! Without any apparent disturbance we admired them as they fed in the understory just a few feet below us. As the tapirs wandered off, we tried our best to sit for dinner, but we soon heard an owl. Johan recognized the call as coming from the spectacular Back-and-white Owl, and we immediately vacated the restaurant. We easily found the bird perched on the streetlight in the middle of the driveway. What a great opportunity to (attempt to) capture on our cameras. We got a few good shots off, and then we really tried to return to the restaurant. But at the edge of the driveway, one of the staff had found an amazing Niepelt's eyed silkmoth. We got a couple of nice photos and then released the moth.

It flew to the ground on the other side of the driveway, and within seconds, the Black-and-white Owl pounced on the moth, took it to the lamppost, and devoured its prey right before us!

We took advantage of the dinner to celebrate the trip, as well as Phoenix's birthday; she was taking this trip as a birthday gift. After reviewing everyone's highlights of the trip, we gave an official farewell and gratitude to all the participants, thanking them for celebrating the holiday and the end of 2023 with Naturalist Journeys in such a fantastic place as Costa Rica, with its rich culture, natural beauty and wonderful wildlife.

Fri., Dec 29 Departures

To close with a flourish, we started our final morning with a casual early walk, and we found 30 species in just an hour on the trail, including a pair of Green Hermits showing off their spectacular bills and a handsome Tawny-capped Euphonia, both new species for the trip. Just outside the cabins we found a Gartered Trogon, and we



saw three more hummer species among the flowers: Violet-headed Hummingbird, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, and Crowned Woodnymph. A tiny Long-billed Gnatwren moved among the branches, and a Bay Wren fanned its tail from side-to-side. Tanagers of the morning included a flock of gregarious Tawny-crested Tanagers, plus Bay-headed and an amazing six Silver-throated Tanagers.

And then, in what seemed like a common theme for the trip, we were just about ready to depart when the local guide alerted us to a commotion across the road. We walked toward the staff residence building to find a band of scurrying coatis running around the bushes. Aww, “how adorable” we thought, when from out of the dense jungle walked a giant tapir! We were a bit startled by how close the animal was to us, and then it started walking *closer* and seemed to be sniffing around the side of the building, near the compost pile. It didn’t eat any of the compost;

it just sniffed around a bit watching the captive audience of two-legged mammals who were watching it in awe. The tapir’s apparently complete lack of fear did seem a bit disconcerting. This bizarre creature was massive, after all—it is the largest native land mammal in Central and South Americas, and this individual ranked on the large end of the species size range from 150-300 kg (330-660 lbs.), far larger than any of us. But it also seemed almost peacefully docile, which made us feel surprisingly at ease—excited, but not in fear for our safety. With our mouths agape and camera shutters clicking, we frankly had a hard time believing the scene that had unfolded before us. We forgot about the coatis and nearly forgot that we were supposed to be boarding our bus.

A second smaller tapir hid in the vegetation farther back, and we surmised that this was the same mother and offspring we had seen the night before. We eventually realized that we could only take so many photos and videos and that we had a bus to catch. What a great way to rejoice in the adventurous spirit of nature. We did board our bus and quietly drove back to Hotel Bougainvillea, with a plethora of amazing memories from our holiday week in Costa Rica. Thanks to Johan and Mike for showing us with such passion the corners and wonders of their land. We will surely return to enjoy these and new experiences, where the motto of the country—and our trip—was *Pura Vida!*

Photos: Scenic (Beth Bruckheimer - BB), Northern Emerald Toucanet (Michael Woodward - MW), Talamanca Hummingbird (Stephen Shunk - SS), Collared Aracari (Yvonne Butorac - YB), Green Honeycreeper (YB), Lineated Woodpecker (BB), Fiery-throated Hummingbird (SS), Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher (BB), Bomarea hirsuta (SS), Resplendent Quetzal (BB), Northern Emerald Toucanet (SS), Silver-throated Tanager (BB),

Group Birding (BB), Sulfur-winged Parakeet (SS), Red-tailed Hawk (SS), Scintillant Hummingbird (SS), Lesser Violetear (SS), Scenic (BB), Emerald Swift (SS), Lodge (BB), Crimson-collared Tanager (YB), Red-headed Barbet (MW), Black-throated Trogon (SS), Montezuma Oropendola (MW), Mantled Howler Monkey (BB), White-collared Manakin (Jacque Woodward - JW), Basilisk (SS), Broad-winged Hawk (SS), Rufous-necked Wood-Rail (SS), Eyelash Viper (SS), Red-legged Honeycreeper, Golden-hooded Tanager