

Summer in Costa Rica | July 17 – 24, 2024 | Trip Report | by James P. Smith



With local guide Johan Fernandez and eleven awesome tour participants; Pete, Lucas, Max, Kent, Maryann, Lorna, Liz, Betsy, Victor, Donna and Roger.



A mid-summer trip to one of the most popular naturalist destinations in the world, justly renowned for its rich biodiversity and outstanding approach to eco-tourism. We visited during the ‘rainy season’ and in many respects this relatively short trip was a fine way to sample the abundance of natural habitats found within Costa Rica ranging from the cool, mid-elevation comfort of Santa Domingo to the balmy, humid rainforest of the Caribbean lowlands and the mist-enshrouded forests of the upper Pacific slope. We visited numerous nature reserves, all of them in immaculate condition with excellent trail systems in place. As memorable as the bird and wildlife sightings were on the trip, this tour stood out for its humor and group camaraderie and was a joy to be a part of.



Wed., July 17 Arrivals | Hotel Bougainvillia

The tour began in earnest with an afternoon bird walk in the stunning tropical gardens of the hotel Bougainvillea, a remarkable location right in the heart of Santa Domingo and replete with ten acres of lush, tree-filled gardens providing a rich haven for an impressive number of bird and butterfly species. Several members of our party arrived a day or two early to enjoy the gardens while others flew in on the same day but still arrived at the hotel in time for a couple of hours birding.

Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds proved to be common place in the gardens, a key species for familiarity since it would prove to be present in most areas we visited. Liz, who'd traveled all the way from Australia to be on the tour, was kind enough to lead us to a flowering bush favored by a Blue-vented Hummingbird and sure enough, after a little wait time, a beautiful Blue-vented hummingbird duly appeared! The same area hosted several Hoffmann's Woodpeckers (regional endemic) and a surprise Crested Caracara flew low over the garden complementing the Yellow-headed Caracara seen earlier by some of our group just outside the hotel...things were off to an excellent start! The vociferous calls of Rufous-naped and Cabanas's Wrens were heard several times, usually emanating from vines and tangles that covered the garden walls, and noisy flocks of screeching Crimson-fronted Parakeets (regional endemic) flew around and even settled on the neighboring condos to offer great views. A glorious stand of Golden Bamboo was home to an adult and a juvenile Mottled Owl, the hotel gardeners being very keen to show us exactly where they were roosting! And, a Cinnamon-bellied Saltator sang close by while Blue-and-white Swallows hawked for insects for over the gardens of the nearby neighborhood.

For those just arriving from the Eastern US the evening temperatures around Santa Domingo (in the low 70s) felt extremely comfortable. Butterflies were plentiful amid the abundance of flowering plants in the gardens; Crimson Patch, Julia Longwing, Rusty-tipped Paige, Monarch, and Mexican Fritillary being just a few of the species that came into view, and a Variegated Squirrel checked off the first mammal of the trip!

Around six in the evening we gathered in the bar to meet Johan Fernandez, our local guide for the entire tour. Johan gave us an excellent orientation not only explaining how he expected the trip to go, but also how he expected us to respect each other during the tour. Afterwards we settled down to an excellent evening meal in the hotel's restaurant; Capri salad or asparagus soup for starters, beef tenderloin or chicken for the main dish, and chocolate mousse for dessert before retiring to our comfortable rooms in keen anticipation of the trip that lay ahead!



Thurs., July 18 Hotel Bougainvillia | La Selva Biological Station | La Fortuna | Arenal

The day began with coffee and muffins in the hotel lobby just before heading out at 6am for a pre-breakfast walk in the hotel gardens, and our first outing with Johan. The day dawned comfortably cool, somewhat cloudy and a little breezy. No sooner had we entered the gardens then we were enjoying close views of Rufous-collared Sparrows, Great Kiskadees, and the very similar Boat-billed Flycatcher, as well as the continued noisy groups of Crimson-fronted Parakeets! Johan did well to coax in a small feeding flock that contained some notably exciting species including a couple of Yellow-green Vireos, a pair of Chestnut-capped Warblers, Blue-gray Tanagers, Yellow-throated Euphonias, and a pair of White-eared Ground-Sparrows! Meanwhile, back at the stands of Golden Bamboo, an adult Mottled Owl was sitting out in the open offering wonderful views, a nice treat for Lucas who hadn't been able to make it in time for the afternoon bird walk the previous day.

The hotel provided a wonderful buffet breakfast which was quickly consumed, after which we checked-out and met to our driver Heraldo and his luxury, air-conditioned, 26 seater tour bus. In no time at all we were heading north along Route 32 leaving the city and suburbs behind and climbing up the winding, heavily forested roads through the central range and descending through Braulio Carrillo National Park which brought us down to the humid Caribbean slope. After a brief stop at a roadside rest area, itself producing great a Northern Tropical Pewee and Common Blue Morpho, we headed to the humid rainforest of the Sarapiquí lowlands, home to the internationally renowned La Selva Biological Station.

After a couple of hours in the comfort of Heraldo's air conditioned bus, stepping out into the warmth and humidity of La Selva was like stepping into a sauna, quite literally. But after a brief orientation from our onsite biologist and guide Joel, we set off walking along on the paved forested trails. The rainforest held much interest for us as a pair of Pale-billed Woodpeckers and a Squirrel Cuckoo got things off to a fine start while in the damp leaf litter we had our first looks at Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs, aka 'Blue Jeans'. Deeper inside the forest a Crowned Woodnymph darted across the path and on reaching an intersection in the trails we were soon immersed in the resonant sounds of Rufous and Broad-billed Motmots ringing throughout the forest, eventually having good views of a Rufous Motmot! A Slaty-tailed Trogon was foraging close by and Joel showed of us one of the highlights of the trip in the form of three Honduran White Bats clinging to the underside of a large, broad (banana-like) leaf. The bats could only be seen from below using a flashlight - how on earth did Joel locate them in the first place?!



Walking back towards the center Max and Kent photographed a White-tipped Dove foraging on the ground around the edge of the soccer field and further highlights came in the form of a Hoffman's Tw-toed Sloth hanging from trees by the suspension bridge. Indeed, crossing the suspension bridge was an adventure in itself which brought us into the research and residential area, and it was absolutely 'chock-full' of birds; Olive-backed and Yellow-throated Euphonias, Black-cowled Oriole, Montezuma Oropendula, Scarlet-rumped Tanager, Yellow-throated Toucan, and great views of Long-tailed Tyrant and Piratic Flycatcher. Towards the higher canopy we had more surprises with White-browed Gnatcatchers, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper, and a Masked Tityra. The humidity was pretty intense by mid-morning although we weren't quite ready to leave and embarked on another forested trail we were shown a colony of Bullet Ants and a stunning orange Eyelash Pit-Viper coiled around a thin sapling right next to the trail. On the way back we saw more Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs and several Green-and-Black Poisoned Dart Frogs as well as a Brown Wood Turtle. An exceptional morning in the verdant rainforest of La Selva was drawing to a close and after a brief look around the gift shop we were back Heraldo's bus and on the road. Lunch was taken at a sweet little roadside café, La Casita Tipica, and was not without its birds as Max spotted a dark morph Short-tailed Hawk amongst a flock of soaring Black Vultures and towards the back of the building several Tropical Kingbirds and Gray-capped Flycatchers could be found.

From Sarapiquí it was fairly steady drive towards the Arena Volcano region where we paused at the rather touristy town of La Fortuna for a coffee and a leg-stretch around the local park. We were already close to Arenal Observatory Lodge when we stopped along the gravel access road to observe several Gray-headed Chachalacas perched in dead trees while overhead huge flocks of White-collared Swifts cruised in the heavily overcast skies. Smaller numbers of Gray-rumped Swifts passed overhead too, and Heraldo spotted a Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth resting high up in a spindly Cecropia. There was also a Crested Guan high in the canopy and, much to the delight of Max and Kent, a Rufous-tailed Jacamar cooperated well perching and calling on wires over the road.

Arrivals at Arenal Observatory Lodge were met with typical Costa Rican efficiency, some of our group being assigned to the main lodge building and the rest downslope in the Casona cabins overlooking Lake Arenal. An incredibly full first field day came to close with the bird list in the lounge followed by a delicious three course meal in the restaurant.

Fri., July 19 Arenal Observatory Lodge | Arenal 1968 (private reserve)

The rain came down hard and heavy overnight, so much so that it seemed like our 6:00 AM meet-up time might be in jeopardy. Thankfully the rain cleared to a cacophony of bird sounds; Crested Guans, Yellow-throated Toucans and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers being among the most vocal at first light. We met outside the main



lodge building against the spectacular backdrop of the Arenal Volcano where a fruiting tree attracted many species in a somewhat overwhelming display with Scarlet-thighed Tanager, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Emerald Tanager, Golden-hooded Tanager and more, all on view in the same tree. A family of about six Central American Spider Monkeys vied for attention directly over the lodge building and would be seen at the lodge each day.

From there we enjoyed a pre-breakfast walk around the wonderfully landscaped gardens of the lodge. Large beds of Purple Verbena attracted dozens hummingbirds creating the opportunity for close range study and enjoyment. Green and Striped-throated Hermits, Violet-headed Hummingbirds, a Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer, Crowned Woodnymph, Blue-vented Hummingbird and, of course, the ever present Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds were all present. A large group of White-nosed Coatis fed at close range on the lawns and Johan pointed out they were all females and young as the adult males tend to travel alone. Broad-billed Motmots called from the forest and we had great views of another Rufous-tailed Jacamar, as well as Yellow-throated and Keel-billed Toucans, and a calling Golden-olive Woodpecker flew over. Even at breakfast the feeders below the balcony became a major distraction with Great Curassows, Crested Guans and a whole range of tanagers and honeycreepers!

After breakfast we drove down the mountain towards 'Arenal 1968' a private reserve with numerous trails and outstanding views of the Arenal Volcano. There was mild drama at the entrance gate as a couple of White-throated Magpie-Jays generated a lot of excitement and a raptor soaring with Black Vultures ultimately proved to be a White-tailed Kite. We explored the lower trails of the park finding Black-headed Tody-Flycatcher, House Wren plus our first Spectacled Cayman of the trip residing in a small pond. A Gartered Trogon gave good views close by. Along the trails we found Black-striped Sparrows, Variable Seedeaters and several Blue-black Grassquits in the adjacent meadow and Pete's sharp eyes picked out a Lesson's Motmot which never moved at all! A Long-billed Gnatwren gleaning insects from some dry leaves in the vines right over the trail was a nice find too. By late morning the volume of tourists visiting the park increased significantly and it was time to think about leaving but not before we'd had nice views of the Southern Rough-winged Swallows feeding over the pond and several Morelet's Seedeaters and Yellow-faced Grassquits in the grasses close by. On the drive back to the lodge a remarkably cooperative Green Kingfisher was noted by a fast flowing river before we drove up the hill for lunch.

Arenal was proving to be a special place and after another superb lunch and a little downtime we got together again at 2:30pm for an afternoon walk. Overhead, a pair of soaring Swallow-tailed Kites got things off to a great start and the hummingbirds featured once again but try as we might we simply couldn't find the much sought-after Black-crested Coquette. Johan felt that the forest could be productive and soon after starting the trails we found Stripe-breasted Wrens and a White-breasted Wood-wren. Deeper inside the forest we had



reasonable looks at of a pair of ultra-skulking Dull-mantled Antbirds, impressive to say the least as they blended in perfectly with the damp leaf litter of the forest floor. At the same time Johan pointed out the sharp 'pic-pic' calls of a Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant although it couldn't be coaxed into view. A Gray-chested Dove walked along the forest floor while large flocks of White-collared Swifts passed overhead perhaps anticipating the rain storm that was about to come our way and a Rufous-winged Woodpecker put on a nice show by the Coffee & Smoothie Bar just as the rain started in earnest effectively closing out the day in late afternoon.

In the evening we switched things around and had dinner first before doing the bird list in the lounge area as another brilliant day in Costa Rica came to an end.

Sat., July 20 Arenal Observatory Lodge and trails | Sendero Bogarín

We began the day with a pre-breakfast walk taking us back towards the pool and spa area, and the beds of flowering Purple Verbena. Once again hummingbirds put on a fantastic show, especially Violet-headed and Blue-vented Hummingbirds with several Banaquits feeding in the verbena as well. A Buff-rumped Warbler feeding around the spa building was a nice surprise, and a perched Sulfur-bellied Flycatcher inspired comparisons with the very similar Streaked Flycatcher before we slipped into the forest for a short loop that would ultimately produce amazing views of a ground feeding flock of Crested Guans.

After breakfast we tackled the Danta Waterfalls trail through pristine primary rainforest. Thicket Anpittas, Slaty-backed and Black-headed Nightingale-Thrushes could be heard singing from the forested hillside and it wasn't too long before we came across a major feeding flock. Many species were close, the activity exciting and intense. A Broad-billed Motmot gave the best views yet of that species, as did Dusky and Spotted Antbirds, and there was fast moving Plain Xenops, plus a couple of 'heard' White-ruffed Manakins. A delightful pair of Sulphur-rumped Flycatchers appeared to be feeding fledged young and a few of us had pretty good views of a family of Tawny-crowned Greenlets. The incredibly dull (and scarce) Carmiol's Tanager, a specialist of humid mid-elevation rainforest put in appearance and we were just about to enjoy it when Pete suddenly called out "umbrellabird!". Fortunately, Pete's sharp eyes stayed on the bird perched quite high on a long horizontal beam and we were all treated to excellent though rather brief views of one of the most enigmatic species of the rainforest, a male Bare-necked Umbrellabird!

A somewhat euphoric walk followed as we headed down to the waterfalls and then moved on to the Danta suspension bridge which led to an open meadow. The clearing was a pretty good spot for raptors and our sightings included a Short-tailed Hawk and several Swallow-tailed Kites.



Rather than do a loop we retraced our steps back to the waterfalls trail finding yet more new species including a pair of Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrants. Further up the trail several Orange-billed Sparrows appeared agitated and luckily for us Donna's sharp eyes skillfully picked out a Central American Jumping Pit-Viper resting on a log! It remained motionless, seemingly totally confident in its camouflage but always keeping a careful eye on the group. The pit-viper cooperated wonderfully well for photos though, of course, we kept a safe distance and enjoyed one of the best finds of the tour. As we came out of the forest more Yellow-throated Toucans were on view and Swallow-tailed Kites cruised overhead rounding off an absolutely perfect morning in the field. A property of some 800 acres, much of it primary rainforest, Arenal was proving to be a very special place.

Johan had plans for us in the afternoon so from Arenal we drove downslope to La Fortuna for a lunch reservation at The Silver Rustica Restaurant. Truth be told it was a rather touristy spot though clearly catered well for larger groups and after a delicious lunch Johan escorted us over to the local duck pond where he'd mentioned Boat-billed Herons could be seen. Sure enough we found two of the herons snoozing in the waterside vegetation as well as a Black-bellied Whistling Duck, and a few in our party even spotted an Emerald Basilisk.

As we walked over to the local nature reserve at Sendero Bogarín, flocks of Orange-chinned Parakeets flew along the road and landed in the trees by the parking area although we'd soon discover the parakeets were invading the fruit feeders inside the nature reserve giving fantastic views at point blank range! The feeders were actually pretty lively and, in addition to the parakeets, other species visiting including marauding Gray-headed Chachalacas, Scarlet-rumped and Blue-gray Tanagers as well as Olive-backed and Yellow-throated Euphonias. With thunder undeniably rumbling in the distance we set off for a walk around the Bogarín Forest Reserve. Johan spotted a Russet-naped Wood-Rail lurking in the shadows and put in a huge effort to get the bird in the scope but it proved too difficult and, for once, he gave up. We'd only walked a few more paces when Lorna suddenly said "look, look!" and there, right next to the footpath was a Russet-naped Wood-Rail! The bird was so tame it literally walked between our legs and across the footpath. Delighted with success we continued on the forest loop spotting a Rufous-tailed Jacamar, and a Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth high in the canopy. At that point the rain started heavily and continued for the next 45 minutes. Undeterred, Johan quite brilliantly spotted a Black-and-white Owl roosting in the canopy and even managed to scope it from two different angles in the pouring rain... what a guide we had!

And from there it was back to the visitor center to dry off as best we could before boarding Herlado's bus. A very similar range of species to those seen earlier appeared at the feeders but with the addition of a couple more



Russet-naped Wood-Rails. The drive back towards the lodge featured clouds atmospherically shrouding the Arenal Volcano, and with some nice species spotted along the way including Southern Lapwing, Crested Caracara, and Great Egret. Another sumptuous evening meal was followed by the checklist and preparations for departures the following day.

Sun., July 21

Laguna de Arenal | El Trapiche | Monteverde | Children's Eternal Forest

Instinctively Johan predicted birding opportunities before breakfast would be few and how right he was as the rain came down heavily during breakfast. The rain didn't deter Kent and Max, however, who'd been out early and found some very good birds off the restaurant balcony including Emerald Tanager and more views of the Purplish-backed Quail-Dove they saw a couple of mornings earlier.

The time spent at Arenal Observatory Lodge had been truly special but after breakfast it was time to check out and drive the bumpy dirt road toward Lake Arenal. Along the way quite a few interesting species were seen before we crossed the dam wall including a Buff-rumped Warbler and a nice Gray Hawk looking somewhat bedraggled as it perched in a roadside Cecropia. Several more short stops along the lake access road found the only Keel-billed Motmot (heard) of the trip as well as a couple of Rufous Motmots while two Yellow Tyrannulets were new to the trip.

The boat trip across Lake Arenal was a joy. The boat was stable, comfortable and the seating covered from the rain which had just about stopped by the time we boarded. Fortunately the heavily overcast skies created good viewing conditions and there was no glare over the lake to speak of. In many respects this was our first proper wetland birding of the trip and the lake produced some exceptional sightings including a kingfisher extravaganza with Ringed, Amazon and Green Kingfishers all on view and close looks at lots of Green Herons and Great Egrets. A Great Blue Heron looked a little out of place as it should have been somewhere in North America but may have been non-breeder spending the summer in Costa Rica. We had eyes looking in all directions with Maryann and Johan near the bow and Roger guarding the stern. From the middle of the boat Liz managed to pick out a fast moving Bat Falcon low over the water which did a 'U' turn and came straight back over the boat. A large gathering of Neotropic Cormorants decorated the dead trees on a small island and waterfowl were represented by Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and genuinely wild Muscovy Ducks. Once we'd crossed the lake we boarded a (temporary) bus that would carry us all the way up to El Trapiche crossing the continental divide and onto the



Pacific Slope. We climbed significantly in elevation too with rain and mist atmospherically cloaking the hillsides across the Cordillera De Tilaran. A welcome pit stop at El Trapiche found Heraldo and his trusty tour bus there to greet us. The area wasn't without birds either with Crested Guan, Hoffmann's Woodpecker, White-throated Magpie-Jay and several Blue-and-white Swallows hawking around the buildings. We arrived at Monteverde Country Lodge around 1 PM just in time for a delicious lunch which Johan organized to coincide with our arrival in new, rather rustic surroundings. Incredibly, even as we went to our rooms, the bizarre, mechanical songs of Three-wattled Bellbirds could be heard from the lodge grounds as well as the remarkable song of Rufous-and-white Wrens.

After settling in Johan took us to the enchanting 'Children's Eternal Rainforest' and in no time at all we heard the strange songs of Long-tailed Manakins though they were far from easy to see. Eventually, by carefully working along the narrow forest trails, we had pretty good views of the male manakins. Rufous-and-white Wrens appeared to be common place and the bizarre songs of Three-wattled Bellbirds could be heard ringing throughout the forest with perhaps as many as five or six individual calling. For such a large species the bellbirds were surprisingly difficult to see but with patience we did have pretty good views of an immature male. A pair of Red-crowned Ant-Tanagers on the bell bird loop caused some initial confusion until it was realized that the habitat and elevation were totally appropriate for the species. And, one of the highlights of the walk was close views of several Black Guans presumably getting ready to roost close to the visiting center, one of several regional endemics to be found in Monteverde. We also had great views of Brown-hooded Parrots, a pair of Northern Barred Woodcreepers, and a couple of Golden-olive Woodpeckers. Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Mountain Thrush and Mountain Elaenia all graced our bird lists too. In the distance the unearthly growling of Mantled Howler Monkeys was constant, and one or two Central American Agoutis crossed the trail in front of us. Butterflies, while not abundant, did include Tiger Heliconian, Mexican Fritillary and Thick-tipped Greta. And from there it was back to the lodge, or at least it should have been except a Northern Emerald Toucanet perched on utility pole right in front of the bus stalled our departure for just a few more minutes! We eventually made it back to the lodge for another glorious supper, the food on the trip being consistently excellent.

Mon., July 22 Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve | Curi-Cancha Reserve

This morning we climbed in elevation to about 4500 feet where the riches the Mvonteerde Cloud Forest Reserve awaited. It was clearly a popular spot as, despite our early arrival, it was already quite busy with tourists but in common with many of the reserves that we'd visited in Costa Rica, it was immaculately preserved sporting a superb trail system. A large feeding flock in the canopy right over the entrance area got things off to an exciting start with good numbers of Common Chloropsingus, Golden-browed Chlorophonia and several Silver-throated Tanagers. A little farther into the reserve Johan picked out a Ruddy Treerunner and a Red-faced Spinetail, and



we had some good luck with Spotted Woodcreeper and a couple of Spotted Barbtails. Several Gray-breasted Wood-wrens sang from the low understory on the hillsides though they were difficult to see against the dark leaf litter.

The atmosphere was magical as mist drifted in and out of the forest somehow drawing even more attention to the majestic, ancient tree ferns right by the trail. The haunting, ethereal song of Black-faced Solitaires could be heard along with the distant growls and groans of Mantled Howlers. Johan's sharp eyes picked out several Mistletoe Tyrannulets in the canopy but amongst the highlights several Spangle-cheeked Tanagers showed well and we had remarkably good views of Costa Rican Warblers which appeared to be traveling in post-breeding family groups. The forest floor and trails offered good views of Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush, and Yellowish Flycatchers were not too difficult to see though another flycatcher, an Eye-ringed Flatbill, was little more challenging as were several fast moving Slate-throated Redstarts. Amongst the scarcer species was a Lineated Foliage-gleaner which stayed high foraging on the moss-covered tree limbs, and a pair of Zeledon's Antbirds that 'bolted' across the trail plus Prong-billed Barbet and Ruddy Pigeon heard calling. Pete spotted a rather smart Alfaro's Pygmy Squirrel, a new species of mammal for the trip.

After a brilliant rainforest loop along the Nuboso Loop Trail we were treated to the Colibri Café and giftshop where the most sensational display of hummingbirds was taking place. We could literally walk amongst the hummingbirds and feeders to the point that most images were taken with smart phones....the hummers being almost too close to focus with a standard camera. The whole area was graced with Coppery-headed Emeralds (endemic to Costa Rica), Green Hermits, Lesser Violetears, Green-crowned Brilliants, our first Violet Sabrewings, lots of Purple-throated Mountain-gems, Striped-tailed Hummingbirds, and even Bananaquits - what a fitting finale to an amazing morning!

Lunch was taken back at the lodge and after a very short break we headed out to Curi-Cancha Reserve. Heavy cloud shrouded the rainforest soon after arrival with visibility down to just ten meters or so. Bird activity seemed subdued although Johan did pick out an Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush 'singing in the rain'. Mist and heavy drizzle swirled through the trees and meadows as we scanned the beds of Purple Verbena for hummingbirds finding more Lesser Violetears, Striped-tailed Hummingbirds, and a Coppery-headed Emerald. A couple of Olive-streaked Flycatchers appeared through the gloom, and as we rounded a misty corner Johan stared longingly into the largest tree in front of us becoming quite animated! He found a Resplendent Quetzal but it was difficult to see and, as the thunder rumbled nearby, there was some pressure to make sure that everyone had good views of the quetzal before the rain started. Walking over to a different viewing point to



change the angle did the trick and we all had great views of not one but up to four quetzals, two males and two females. One of the males was still in full breeding condition with long tail streamers drifting in the breeze, and looking resplendent indeed. Lorna was beside herself as Resplendent Quetzal was one of the main reasons she and Maryann had joined this particular trip. As if that wasn't enough a couple of Keel-billed Toucans perched in the same tree and several Band-tailed Pigeons perched out in the open but received little attention. A sudden giant clap of thunder signaled it was time to move on and the heavens opened ferociously with the rain coming down so heavily the best strategy was to simply wait it out under the shelter of the closest restrooms. Eventually we headed back to the bus feeling deeply satisfied with the afternoon and the quetzal quest. Costa Rica and Johan's local knowledge had delivered once again - we were having an amazing tour!

Tues., July 23 Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve | Stella's Bakery | Green Paradise Ecological Reserve | Monteverde Butterfly Garden

This morning a scheduled a visit was on the cards to another cloud forest reserve at Santa Elena, apparently run by a local school and like many of the reserves we'd visited, very professionally maintained. Along the entrance road a couple of Coyotes caught Johan totally off-guard when he proclaimed "that one looks like my dog". For once the weather was not in our favor and it was raining heavily when we arrived, too heavily in fact to consider a walk along the trails. We gambled and began birding off the balcony from the café, a decision which proved remarkably productive; Black-faced Solitaire's could be seen along with three Black Guans (two adults and a juvenile) perched high up in the Cecropias, a Yellowish Flycatcher performed at eye level right off the balcony, and we had immaculate views of a Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush hopping around on the pavement below. Feeding flocks moving through included Common Chlorospingus, Slate-throated Redstarts, several Costa Rican Warblers, Silver-throated Tanager, and more Golden-browed Chlorophonias.

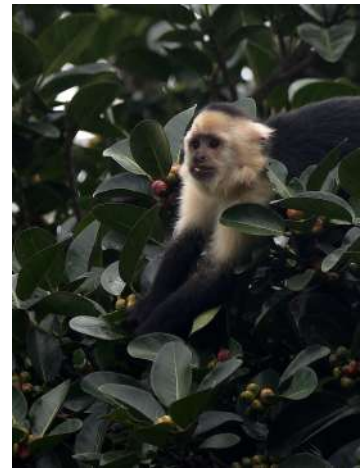
A slight pause in the rain enticed us out onto the trails where we found a Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush, and a couple of Ochraceous Wrens though they were quite difficult to see high above the trail as was as a Lineated Foliage-gleaner. But all too soon stronger pulses rain sent us scurrying back to the shelter of the café. We hadn't been there long when Max suddenly called out "quail!!". And there, scuttling across the paved trail was not one, but eventually five Black-breasted Wood-Quails! The quails spent some minutes scurrying around the cafe and visitor center before bolting back into the darkness of the rainforest from whence they came, but how fortunate it was to time our return to the cafe just when the quails were visiting....wow!



We casually birded out of the Santa Elena Rainforest dropping a few hundred meters in elevation to Monteverde. Johan knew of a fruiting *ficus* tree attracting a number of 'stellar' species behind Stella's Bakery. Among them Red-legged Honeycreeper, Scarlet-rumped, Palm and Blue-gray Tanagers and it soon became evident that more than songbirds were interested in the *ficus* fruits. Suddenly several small monkeys were working through the canopy. Eventually they settled and gave themselves up for really good views. They were White-faced Capuchins which, according to Johan, are actually quite scarce in the Monteverde area but they put on quite the show for us behind the bakery! In the neighboring lane, a Lesson's Motmot was foraging in the leafy shadows along with several thrushes including a rather spiffy White-throated Thrush spotted by Pete.

Monteverde had been good to us once again and we headed back to the country lodge for another wholesome lunch and a little downtime. In the afternoon we descended the short distance to the Monteverde Butterfly Garden where we were given an exceptional tour by Miguel, a personable young naturalist with a delightful manner who walked us the butterfly houses illustrating the life cycle and the habitat preferences of multiple species of Costa Rican butterflies. Miguel really knew his subject and also gave a wonderful talk on other invertebrates native to Costa Rica. The balcony of the visitor center gardens offered exceptional views over the Gulf of Nicoya, along with Swallow-tailed Kites cruising over the horizon.

Back in the parking lot things were getting busy. Johan scoped out a song post used by an immature Three-wattled Bellbird, actually one of about three bellbirds delivering their weird mechanical song across the forest. Despite having the scope trained on its favorite post the bellbird chose to perch lower down than anticipated so only the head and bill could be seen! But the parking lot ended up being a hive of activity and we went on to have wonderful views of Squirrel Cuckoo, Lesson's Motmots, Keel-billed Toucans, Clay-colored thrush, and our first really good views of a Rufous-and-white Wren. Large groups of White-collared Swifts could be seen cruising in the overcast skies, and the fruiting *ficus* trees supported a large group of Golden-browed Chloroponias, as well as a White-throated Thrush and a Northern Barred Woodcreeper. It was just about time to leave when Johan spotted an Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush though it soon dropped out of sight. Those that clambered out of the bus to see it were rewarded with nice views of a White-eared Ground-Sparrow carrying food in its bill, clearly on its way to feed some youngsters. It was a wonderful way to end the day and we drove back up the steep gradient to Monteverde Country Lodge with plenty of time for showers before dinner and the final evening checklist. It was also time to say our goodbyes to Victor and Betsy as they had an early morning start the next day. They'd been wonderful travel companions and Victor left his mark on the trip with some exceptional photographs which can be viewed in the Google photo share folder from the tour.



Wed., July 24 Departures

This morning Johan arranged an early breakfast at 6:00 with a view to departing from the lodge somewhere between 6:45 and 7am. Monteverde Country Lodge had provided a wonderful setting to spend three days at high elevation on the Pacific Slope and we descended via winding country roads and steep gradients down towards the Gulf of Nicoya before picking up the Pan American Highway heading South-east. A few interesting birds seen during the drive included Swallow-tailed Kites, a couple of Streaked Flycatchers and a White-throated Magpie-Jay. Johan had more plans for us and this was not going to be a straight forward drive back to the airport. After a couple of hours driving we took a side road along the coast to an area of mangroves at Caldera. Having just enjoyed the comfortable climate of Monteverde, the warmth and humidity at Caldera was something of a surprise. It was quite birdy however, and did produce a number of species new to the tour including a singing Banded Wren, very good views of a Panama Flycatcher, several Scrub Euphonias, a pair of Mangrove Yellow Warblers, and a pair of White-lored Gnatcatchers. There was some discussion over a large hummingbird which Johan thought might have been a Mangrove Hummingbird but ultimately the photos showed it to be a Scaly-breasted. We also made a brief stop at the estuary overlooking Caldera Bay and came across a large group of Brown Pelicans, a Whimbrel, a Southern Lapwing and a Royal Tern while overhead high flying Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised on the ocean breezes.

We continued towards the airport along some fairly busy roads when Johan suddenly called out “hawk!!”, followed by “I think that’s a Crane Hawk” as the bird drifted away over the highway. It was yet another new species to the tour. Our final birding stop was in the neighborhood of Calle Loros and highlighted by our first actual views of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls, plus White-browed and White-lored Gnatcatchers, and a strikingly marked Stripe-headed Sparrow. Hoffman’s Woodpeckers, Orange-chinned Parakeets, and another Streaked Flycatcher were all present while overhead a high flying raptor with a falcon-like wing shape proved to be a molting Plumbeous Kite, again new to the trip. Even in the fading embers of the tour we continued to add new birds.

A final comfort stop at a local gas station was notable for the presence of several Black spiny-tailed Iguanas and with that we sped along towards San Jose. Heraldo and Johan delivered us exactly on time at 11 AM to Juan Santamaría International Airport where we said our goodbyes to those staying over one more night. It had been a wonderful tour full of great memories and wildlife experiences, and in keeping things fun and lighthearted we achieved fantastic success in the field.

Group Photo (James P. Smith - JPS), Mottled Owl (JPS), Keel-billed Toucan (JPS), Eyelash Pit-Viper (JPS), Blue Grey Tanager (Victor Ramos - VR), Violet-headed Hummingbird (JPS), Crested Guan (JPS), Bare-necked Umbrellabird (JPS), Broad-billed Motmot (JPS), Central American Jumping Pit-Viper (JPS), Golden-olive Woodpecker (JPS), Black Guan (JPS), Resplendent Quetzal (JPS), Ruddy-capped Nightingale Thrush (JPS), Masked Tityra (JPS), White-faced Capuchin (JPS), Lesson’s Motmot (JPS), Lake Arenal from the

lodge (JPS), Group Birding (Roger Griffis - RG), Scenic (RG), Group Birding (JPS), Turquoise Emperor (JPS), Quetzal country! (JPS), Waterfall (VR), Leaf Cutters (VR), Yellow-throated Euphonia (JPS), Red-legged Honeycreeper (VR), White-faced Capuchin (VR)