



Birding COSTA RICA!

PAT BINGHAM, PHOTOS BY JOHN BARKLA

Keel-billed Toucan, Laguna del Lagarto.

“How about joining me in Costa Rica?” said John Barkla. “I’m taking a small group there early next year.” Mary Burbidge, Alison Street, Dave Torr, Glen White and I jumped at the opportunity as Costa Rica is a world-renowned paradise for birds and birders. Both Mary and John had been before but wanted to see more and John also wanted to expand his digital camera skills using his enormous metre-long lens.

Spanning Central America, just north of Panama, Costa Rica has lowland rainforest and mangrove forest on both eastern (Caribbean) and western (Pacific) coasts divided by mountains (including a chain of volcanoes) rising over 3,500 m. These ranges have montane rainforests, cloud forests (swathed in almost permanent mist) and paramo (cold open heathland above the tree line). In the north-west is an area of open, much drier, savannah-like country. In a country two thirds the size of Tasmania, over 850 bird species have been recorded. Closely-related species occur at different altitudes, in different habitats and, because there are few corridors across the mountain ranges, some birds that otherwise look and behave very similarly have evolved into different species on either side of the divide. Although 80% of the native forests have been cleared, some 27% of the country has some form of protection through a network of national parks, forest and wildlife reserves and private estates. 60% of Costa Rica’s national income is from tourism, so it is to be hoped that these reserved areas are retained and will continue to give significant protection to the country’s magnificent flora and fauna.

Our trip was set for March 2010 – the beginning of the dry season and spring in Costa Rica. The resident birds would be at their most active – courting, breeding, and feeding young, and the many passage migrants (making up about 25% of Costa Rica’s birds) would be coming into their best breeding plumage and heading north to the USA and Canada. Visiting Costa

Rica would enable me to renew my acquaintance with North American families of wrens, warblers, flycatchers and finches (somewhat similar to Australian families in appearance and behaviour but genetically quite distinct) and introduce me to representatives of unique Central and South American families of motmots, trogons, manakins, toucans and cotingas which I had not previously seen. Before I left, I picked out 22 species of birds I really wanted to see including the five ‘signature’ species of Costa Rica (Resplendent Quetzal, Bare-necked Umbrellabird, Three-wattled Bellbird, Scarlet and Great Green Macaws) and eagerly awaited the start of our expedition.

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We met our guide, Frédéric Vanhove of Amazilia Tours, at Costa Rica’s main international airport. Frédéric is Belgian with a wicked Gallic twinkle in his eye and a long experience of Costa Rica. He had a phenomenal ability to spot trogons and motmots sitting very quietly under dark canopy, hear the slightest rustle of an antbird or a brush-finch on the forest floor and endless patience with those of us who were a bit slow to pick up these species he found so easily. Together the group recorded 474 species in 18 days and John, manfully shouldering his great camera, took pictures of most of them.

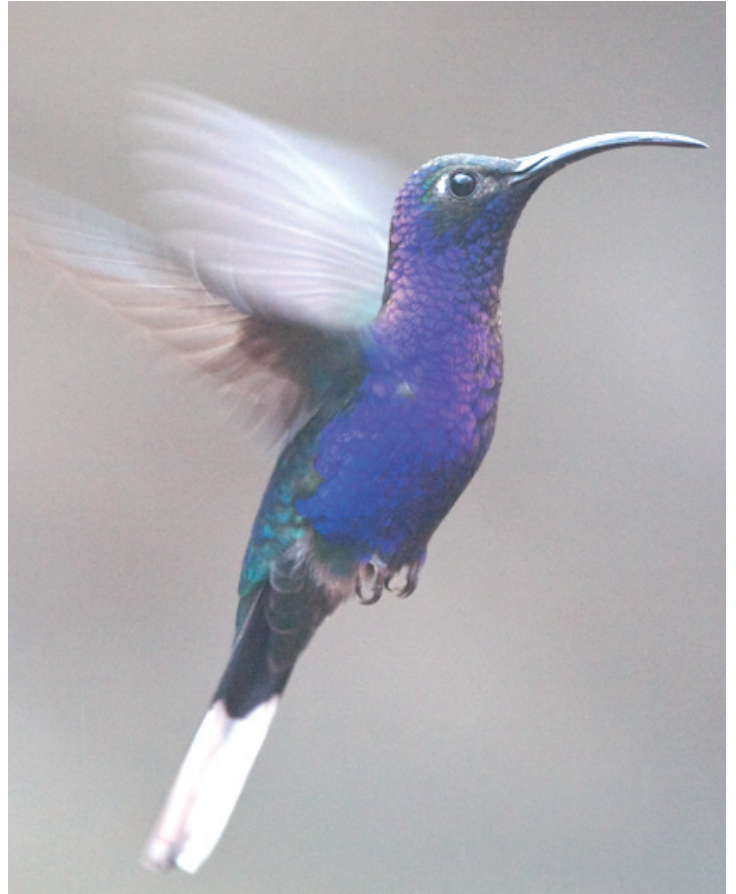
We started by visiting La Paz Waterfall Gardens at 1300 m on the slopes of Volcan Poas. This area was devastated by major earthquakes and landslides in January 2009. The road, still under construction, was packed red mud with an unfenced steep drop-



Top: Golden-hooded Tanager, Gavilan Lodge. Left: Agami Heron, Laguna del Lagarto. Right: Blue-gray Tanager, Gavilan Lodge. Photos: John Barkla

off to the valley below and swathed in fog. Nightmarish – but the birds were fantastic – especially the hummingbirds. (BOCA has a policy of not encouraging the feeding of native birds in Australia but everywhere in Costa Rica the hummingbird feeders are kept topped up and the bird tables in the Lodge gardens are laden, at least daily, with fresh fruit for tanagers, honeycreepers, parrots and toucans, providing unparalleled opportunities to view and photograph birds close up. Having these facilities certainly generates enormous tourist interest and provides jobs in the local community. I saw no evidence that it endangered the birds.) At La Paz we had ten different species of hummingbirds at the feeders including Violet Sabrewing (the first bird from my ‘specials’ list to be seen, 1/22), Black-bellied Hummingbird and Coppery-headed Emerald (one of three truly-endemic birds of Costa Rica).

Most of our first week was spent in the Caribbean lowlands at Gavilan Lodge and Laguna del Lagarto Lodge – both with excellent amenities, colourful gardens of Heliconias, Calatheas, ginger plants and palms attracting many birds, and private trails in adjacent wetland and forested areas. On the Gavilan bird table we saw Blue-gray, Golden-headed and Passerini’s (red and black) Tanagers and in the Gavilan gardens we found White-collared Manakins (2/22) displaying. These tiny black and white birds were repeatedly darting to and fro across a narrow gap between bushes, clicking their wings and sounding like a ping-pong match in progress. Quietly feeding on the ground in the shadows were the strikingly-marked Orange-billed and Black-striped Sparrows whilst we found an even more remarkable sparrow at the nearby El Tigre swamp, the Nicaraguan Seed-Finch. The shiny black males with huge, bright pink, triangular



Left: Black-bellied Hummingbird, La Paz Waterfall Garden. Right: Violet Sabrewing, La Paz Waterfall Garden. Photos: John Barkla

bills and females, much duller in plumage, are very rare in Costa Rica and occur in only one other country, Nicaragua. At the swamp we also had good views of the Groove-billed Ani (3/22). These black, heavy-billed, non-parasitic cuckoos are common in open country; largely ground-feeders, they go around in noisy, communicative groups rather reminiscent of Apostlebirds.

From Gavilan, we also visited La Selva Biological Reserve, set up in the 1950s as a research station and internationally known for its studies in physiological ecology, soil science, and forestry. “No matter when you come it will probably be raining” the guidebook said. We only had one, short, sharp shower which brought out metre-long iguanas to drape themselves over the foliage to cool off; the sloths continued to snooze and the Howler Monkeys to howl. We headed off into the rainforest – big buttressed trees draped with vines, an understory of palms and broad-leaved shrubs and an almost bare ground-layer; no mozzies and no leeches but very hot and humid, and, as in other rainforests the world over, few birds to see – but we did find a hummingbird’s nest. It was a small cup of cobweb and fine grasses hung from the underside of a palm frond (thus sheltered from rain) about one metre above the ground with a long tassel of plant material below it – rather reminiscent of a Grey Fantail’s nest. A walk up the more open entrance drive to La Selva produced our first Trogon (4/22), Black-throated, and our first Motmot (5/22), Broad-billed. We also found two

of the smallest birds in Costa Rica, the 10 cm Common Tody-Flycatcher (nest-building), and the 8 cm Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, as well as one of the largest, the turkey-sized Great Curassow, smart in his glossy black plumage, curled crest and swollen yellow cere. The real highlight of our day at La Selva was watching the hawk migration; 100s upon 1000s of Turkey Vultures heading north in a constant stream for hours on end so that when we looked up with our binoculars the sky was filled with black dots. We also saw a number of buteos (Swainson’s, Broad-winged and Red-tailed Hawks) going with them and, at one stage, we had over 30 Swallow-tailed Kites (6/22), also heading north, all in sight at the same time.

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At Laguna del Lagarto, while under the watchful eye of the local Caiman, we were lucky enough to find an Agami Heron. Supposedly very shy, the one we saw ignored us, moving very slowly along the edge of the forest-fringed lagoon. The bill was enormously elongated; the plumage rich maroon and dark turquoise with white plumes on the crown and neck, picture

perfect for John's ever-ready camera lens. Laguna also provided splendid views of the Scarlet (7/22) and Great Green (8/22) Macaws. Both species are endangered in Costa Rica as a result of poaching and loss of habitat. Their gorgeous colours and elegant flight contrasted with their raucous calls and clumsy wing-flapping as they disputed perching rights in the forest trees adjacent to the lagoon. More elegance was shown by the Keel-billed Toucan (9/22). Anyone who has seen one of these currawong-sized birds, whose bill looks as big as its body, pick a small ripe fruit from a palm with the tip of its bill, throw its head back and catch the fruit with aplomb, will marvel at the precision of its movements. On the other hand, its cousin, the Collared Aracari is a noisy swaggerer which we dubbed the 'flying rugby sock' for the garishness of its horizontally-striped red, yellow and black belly. Frédéric found another of my 'special' birds at Laguna – White-fronted Nunbird (10/22). It's a demure grey bird (as its name suggests), thrush-sized, with a fringe of white feathers at the base of its orange bill. It sat quietly at the forest edge on a horizontal vine – deep in contemplation?, – in prayer?, or just waiting for the next choice morsel to move on the ground below.

From the steamy lowlands, we climbed into the foothills. Ahead of us loomed the perfect cone of Costa Rica's most active volcano, Volcan Arenal, 1650 m. As we circled the volcano, Frédéric suddenly stopped our Urvan and said "I thought they'd be here!" We piled out to find ourselves surrounded by blue and white White-throated Magpie-Jays (11/22) with Leunig-like crests and beady-black eyes, the largest of the Costa Rican corvids. We stayed at the Arenal Observatory Lodge some two km away from the base of the volcano. While we were having dinner, we heard a great "whuumph" and saw a glowing red ash cloud erupt from the top of the cone and gleaming red boulders bounce down the sides – a truly spectacular addition to a birding trip! All night intermittent rumbling noises went on and, even during our bird walk next morning, ash clouds and boulders were still being ejected. The birdlife in the Arenal gardens was prolific; we saw two new Hummingbirds (Violet-headed Hummingbird and Purple-crowned Fairy) and had a fleeting look at a female Bare-necked Umbrellabird (12/22). I was also fascinated (and deafened) by the raucous calls of the Montezuma Oropendola (13/22), large magpie-sized relatives of North American blackbirds, with rich chestnut bodies and bright yellow outer tail feathers. They were busy nest-building – metre-tall conical grass pouches hanging in groups from the horizontal branches of tall trees some 10 to 20 m up. The Oropendolas were squabbling among themselves and also chasing off the Giant Cowbirds (another blackbird relative) that parasitise their nests. The forest trees at Arenal were heavily laden with epiphytes and the moist forest floor was alive with ants. We encountered our first army ants and their attendant birds, not feeding on the ants but rather on the insects and other small creatures disturbed by the ants in their headlong rush.



Alison Street, John Barkla, Frédéric Vanhove, Glen White, Dave Torr and Mary Burbidge at Carara National Park. Photo: Pat Bingham

Thus Arenal produced Chestnut-backed, Bicolored and Spotted Antbirds (14/22) together with the Buff-rumped Warbler we had previously seen at La Selva.

From Arenal we went further north-east to Bijagua and Celeste Mountain Lodge on the slopes of the now-dormant Volcan Tenorio. There, bigger trees, wetter understorey and even more epiphytes were associated with our first real rain of the trip. The Lodge staff had created a splendid new trail through the forest, but in the swirling mist birds were difficult to see, though their calls were magnificent, like the three-note whistle of the Thrushlike Schiffornis and the deep bell-like notes of the tiny Nightingale Wren sounding like a chorister echoing in a vast cathedral. We had expected more mist and rain in the famous cloud forests of Monteverde, one of the prime Eco-tourism centres of Costa Rica, where the warm, moisture-laden air from the Caribbean rises over the mountains. Luckily, we had sunshine and, in spite of the noisy tourist parties on the busy trails, we had some splendid birding. We soon found the Black-faced Solitaire and frequently heard its haunting call; we watched the jaunty little Slate-throated Redstarts flitting about like Grey Fantails and the tiny green and yellow Golden-browed Chlorophonias working their way up and down moss-covered branches looking for insects and, all of a sudden, in a flurry of blue-green and crimson and white, a male Resplendent Quetzal (15/22) flew over our heads and perched on a branch about three metres above us. No wonder this bird was venerated by the Mayans, with its glossy plumage, four enormously elongated tail coverts, perky crest and beady eyes – it truly earns the name 'resplendent'. The Quetzal started calling – a repeated, quiet but carrying toot like other trogons. We heard a response and soon found a second bird. Fantastic! Who could want for more – but, in birding Costa Rica, there is always more. We heard a different call – a peculiar, metallic 'boink' which, we all knew, was made by a Three-wattled Bellbird. Frédéric raced us back uphill along the twisting track and located the bird (16/22) – magpie-sized with the colour pattern of a Brahminy Kite and three black, worm-like tassels dangling around the base of the bill. Sadly, it didn't stay around for long and though we heard many more calls, we had no more sightings.

To be continued in the November Bird Observer...