



Birding COSTA RICA! (Part 2)

PAT BINGHAM, PHOTOS BY JOHN BARKLA

Keel-billed Toucan, Laguna del Lagarto, Costa Rica, March 2010

John Barkla, with Pat Bingham, Mary Burbridge, Alison Street, Dave Torr and Glen White, visited Costa Rica in March 2010. Led by Frédéric Vanhove of Amazilia Tours, we had experienced the steamy Caribbean lowlands and the northern mountain ranges. It was time to visit the hotter, drier Pacific coast and we headed to Palo Verde National Park on the Rio Tempisque estuary. This is an area of deciduous woodland (still leafless after the dry season) with an understorey of spiny shrubs and woody lianas, plaited like giant hawsers and strung from tree to tree. Most of the swamps were dry but there were some irrigated rice paddies with their attendant waterbirds. We were met at the entrance to the Park by a pair of Double-striped Thick-knees with two half-grown young sheltering, like our stone-curlews, in the half-shade of a bush. Frédéric soon found us a Lesser Ground-Cuckoo. With its bare yellow and blue skin around the eye and its head raised inquisitively as it strutted over the forest floor, it reminded me vividly of a Madagascan coua in miniature. We also found other north-western species, limited to this dry habitat, including Streak-backed Oriole, Black-headed and Elegant Trogons and the gorgeous Turquoise-browed Motmot with its enormously-elongated racquet-tipped tail.

Heading further south along the Pacific coast, we had wonderful views of the Magnificent Frigatebirds gracefully soaring on the cliff-side thermals but turning into quarrelsome bullies as they chased other birds carrying any scrap of food they thought they could steal. At Carara National Park, we came to the junction of the drier north-west woodlands and the wetter lowland rainforest of south-western Costa Rica. Here we found yet another Trogon, Baird's, striking in its black, crimson and white plumage, and we also started to see local (western) birds replacing species we had previously seen in the east. So, we now had Orange-Collared Manakins instead of White-collared; Fiery-billed Aracari instead of Collared; red

and black Cherrie's Tanager instead of Passerini's. We finally found the Boat-billed Heron (the 17th bird on my "specials list" of 22 species that I really wanted to see) – a squat, hunched bird roosting by day and hunting by night. It has an enormously broad, scoop-shaped bill quite unlike the dagger-sharp, pointed bills of most other herons. Appropriately so – most other herons are visual feeders, spearing their prey, while boat-bills, hunting in the dark, feel for their prey and then shovel it in. Carara is the local indigenous word for 'crocodile' and there were plenty of those toothy monsters on the Rio Tarcoles estuary adjacent to the Park. We also found Roseate Spoonbills (so much more decorative than our Royal or Yellow-billed), Willets (rather reminiscent of Black-tailed Godwits with broad black and white wing bars in flight) and plenty of 'peep', the generalised American term for small waders including Semipalmated and Wilson's Plovers, and Western and Least Sandpipers. In the fringing mangroves we found Mangrove Hummingbirds (a second, truly-endemic bird of Costa Rica), Panama Flycatchers and the resident, chestnut-headed form of the Yellow Warbler (as distinct from the yellow-headed form that migrates to North America).

From Carara, we went south again to the Rio Sierpe, another broad, tidal estuary with mats of water hyacinth being rapidly swept upstream on the rising tide. We could only reach our next accommodation, Rio Sierpe Lodge, by boat and I hate small boats. I gritted my teeth and held on tightly as we breasted the tide and rolled in the wake of other boats as they passed. Suddenly our helmsman turned the boat directly into the vegetation fringing the bank, stopped, and said "Look up". A Common Potoo (18/22), cousin of our frogmouths, sat just above us, as tawny-brown as the stump of which he purported to be part. Even Frédéric was thrilled – it was his first of this species in Costa Rica. John, on the other hand, was rather disappointed – we were too close for him to use his giant



Roseate Spoonbill, Rio Tarcoles.

camera lens to advantage! The Rio Sierpe area is becoming famous as a locality for finding good numbers of the rare Yellow-billed Cotinga (19/22). We saw about 30 of these Olive Whistler-sized fruit-eaters sitting high in the canopy – the males pure white with bright yellow bills, the females ashy grey. It was another highlight of the trip and well worth the boat trip.

From the Pacific lowlands, we climbed back into the mountains – this time in the south of the country – and spent a very productive morning at Talari Mountain Lodge. Here we found Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds feeding half-grown young, the Olivaceous Piculet – the smallest Costa Rican woodpecker – feeding upside down like a *Sittella* and the Fork-tailed Flycatcher with its enormously-elongated outer tail feathers (longer than the body of the bird itself) seemingly moving independently, left from right, as the bird twisted and turned in the air on its feeding and display flights. We then went higher still, to the Cerro de la Muerte, the ‘mountain of death’ so called because of the numbers of early travelers who succumbed to the cold and fog of this open, treeless country above 3,500 ms. Its vegetation consists of heaths (*Erica* species – I felt I was in mountain Tasmania), broom-like miniature bamboos and giant thistles. It has its own grey-brown bird species adapted to this grey-brown habitat; we found Volcano Hummingbirds, Volcano Juncos, Sooty Robins and Timberline Wrens. We then headed into the Dota Valley, still high country with its own special

moss-hung oak forest complete with Acorn Woodpeckers which I had last seen hammering acorns into telegraph posts in California, 25 years ago. On that same North American holiday, I had seen the *Phainopepla*, one of the very small family of silky-flycatchers, which are not true flycatchers but some look very similar with upright posture and crests. Here in the Dota



Yellow-billed Cotinga, Rio Sierpe



Left: Turquoise-browed Motmot, Palo Verde National Park. Right: Baird's Trogon, Carara National Park

Valley we had two more, the Long-tailed (20/22) and the Black-and-yellow Silky-Flycatchers. As we walked down the road to our next accommodation, Trogon Lodge, John heard an owl call; mimicked it and thought the bird flew into a tree adjacent to the road but it was too dark to see it clearly. Frédéric brought a torch and picked up the bird – a Bare-shanked Screech-Owl. He then heard a different call, shone the torch on the road beside us and there was a Dusky Nightjar less than 3ms away. Magical!

The weather finally turned against us in the Dota Valley so we took ourselves through the fog and rain over the ranges again to the eastern side and arrived at one of the most famous birding lodges in Costa Rica, Rancho Naturalista. Over 400 species have been recorded in the immediate area, many in the gardens and at the bird feeders. Frédéric, who had once been on the staff at the lodge, was welcomed back with open arms and we were all invited to a special dinner with the owner of the property, a real Grande-Dame, in her beautiful home built in the old Costa Rican style, all wooden with high ceilings and deep verandahs. Frédéric had promised us a Snowcap – the male of which, with its snowy-white crest and dark body, is one of the smallest and most spectacular hummingbirds – but, sadly, we only saw a much duller female. However, we did see other hummingbirds, the Red-footed Plumeleeters and Purple-crowned Fairies bathing in a woodland pool late in the afternoon. This unusual

behavior, possibly designed to clean their plumage after a day of vigorous nectar-feeding, is often seen at Rancho but not elsewhere. In the same area we saw a Tawny-throated Leaf-tosser – doing just that – which really pleased John as it was his first sighting of a leaf-tosser. We were shown a Crested Owl with splendid, pale ‘fly-away eyebrows’ and John found us a Brown-billed Scythebill with an enormously-long decurved bill designed to probe deep into epiphytes while using its stiffened tail feathers to brace itself against a branch or trunk. We had yet another marvelous sighting the next morning, our last in Costa Rica. We were walking beside a fast-flowing mountain river near Rancho, and saw not one, but two, Sunbitterns (21/22) making their way around and over the boulders along the water’s edge. The leading bird bent forward and we thought it might be about to display to the second bird by spreading its wings to show the big black and gold roundels like a pair of enormous eyes. No such luck, but then the lead bird flew across the river and there were the roundels for us to gloat on in all their glory.

So, 18 days had flown by. I had seen, and enjoyed seeing, so many new birds, so many new flowers; I’d had such wonderful experiences with a great group of like-minded enthusiasts – but something was still missing – the 22nd bird on my ‘specials’ list, a Sungrebe. What a splendid excuse I have to go back to Costa Rica.