

# Costa Rica

18 March–3 April 2008

## Participants:

**Mary and Dudley Baines**

**Sue and Wayne Emerson**

**Mike Jeeves**

**Keith Pritchard**

**Bob and Jenny Sandy**

**Brian and Chris Shaw**

**Terry and Celia Taylor**



**Bicoloured Antbird**

**Leaders: Steven Easley  
and Vaughan Ashby**

Birdfinders recent Costa Rica tour was once again a huge success with a record number of 536 species being recorded.

**Day 1** Flight from London to San Jose via Miami arriving mid evening and transfer to an excellent hotel on the outskirts of the city.

**Day 2** Before breakfast we got our lists off to an excellent start in the hotel grounds with a number of common species including Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Blue-crowned Motmot, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, Clay-coloured Robin, Rufous-capped Warbler, Blue-gray Tanager, Grayish Saltator, Baltimore Oriole and Rufous-collared Sparrow. Less common species included Tropical Screech-owl, Melodious Blackbird and White-eared Ground-sparrow. Leaving the hotel, we drove across to the Pacific coast and after turning off the main road, made several stops recording species such as Yellow-headed Caracara, Rufous-naped and Plain Wrens and Gray-crowned Yellowthroat. Eventually we could drive no further so we walked the remaining kilometer to the coast enjoying excellent views of Wood Stork, Laughing Falcon, Lesser Ground-cuckoo, Turquoise-browed Motmot, Southern Scrub-flycatcher, Indigo Bunting, Blue Grosbeak and Blue-black Grassquit. On reaching the shrimp ponds, we found good number of waders including a rarity for Costa Rica, Dunlin! Marbled Godwits were also an uncommon species amongst the numerous Short-billed Dowitchers, Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers, Least and Western Sandpipers and lesser numbers of Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and Pectoral Sandpipers. Continuing on to the actual coast, we found another couple of rare species for Costa Rica, Bonaparte's and Ring-billed Gulls amongst the more numerous Laughing Gulls, and a few Elegant Terns amongst the more common Caspian and Royal Terns. Egrets and herons were well represented with a couple of Reddish Egrets being the highlight and both Amazon and Belted Kingfishers were 'ticked off'. As by now it was late afternoon, we moved onto our hotel for the night, conveniently located close to Palo Verde.

**Day 3** The morning was spent in the dry Guanacaste country, firstly checking the scrub and forests before eventually arriving in the marshes. Highlights in the scrub and forests included Northern Caracara, Spot-bellied Bobwhite, Orange-fronted Parakeet, White-fronted and Yellow-naped Parrots, Cinnamon Hummingbird, Plain-capped Starthroat, Black-headed Trogon, Brown-crested, Nutting's, Scissor-tailed and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers, White-throated Magpie-jay, White-lored Gnatcatcher and Streak-backed Oriole. Arriving at the marshes, we enjoyed the spectacle of huge flocks of Black-bellied Whistling-

ducks with lesser numbers of Blue-winged Teal and a few Muscovy Ducks. Specialities here included Snail Kite and Limpkin before we moved up into the cloudforests of Monteverde for a two-night stay. There was still enough time on arrival to stop for a group of superb Blue-throated Toucanets and visit some hummingbird feeders where fabulous views of Green Hermit, Violet Sabrewing, Stripe-tailed Hummingbird, Green Violetear, Coppery-headed Emerald, Purple-throated Mountain-gem and Green-crowned Brilliant stole the show!

**Day 4** A pre-breakfast walk gave us excellent views of Black Guan, perched views of Band-tailed Pigeons, Red-faced Spinetail, Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Mountain Elaenia, White-throated Thrush, Mountain Robin, and Black-faced Solitaire. The rest of the day was spent making morning and afternoon visits to the excellent Santa Elena reserve and quite successfully managing to dodge the rain most of the time! Highlights from both visits included repeated views of an excitable group of Black-breasted Wood-quail, a daytime Bare-shanked Screech-owl, awesome views of Orange-bellied Trogons, Prong-billed Barbet, Spotted Woodcreeper, two Gray-throated Leaf-tossers displaying on the path in front of us, Spotted Barbtail, Ruddy Treerunner, Silvery-fronted Tapaculo, two inquisitive Azure-hooded Jays, Ruddy-capped and Slaty-backed Nightingale-thrushes at point blank range whilst sheltering from a shower, Slate-throated Redstart, Silver-throated and Spangle-cheeked Tanagers, Yellow-thighed Finch and Chestnut-capped Brush-finch. Overall, an extremely successful day and quite lucky with the weather.

**Day 5** Before breakfast, we visited Finca Ecologica to look for a very special bird: Three-wattled Bellbird. Immediately, we heard one calling and within minutes were watching this fabulous bird. With the pressure off, we walked various trails playing 'hide and seek' with a pair of Chiriqui Quail-doves, Golden-crowned Warbler and Ovenbird with greater or lesser degrees of success. Some birds were more co-operative however, with Violet-crowned Woodnymph, Steely-vented Hummingbird, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Rufous-and-white and Rufous-breasted Wrens and Rufous-browed Peppershrike all added to the list. After breakfast, we returned to the hummingbird feeders where a fabulous Magenta-throated Woodstar soon put in an appearance. Packing up and moving on, we put some miles behind us before stopping en-route for lunch. It was a particular feature of this tour that rather than taking packed lunches with us, most days we stopped at excellent local restaurants. Continuing towards Arenal, we made occasional stops to add new species including Fasciated Tiger-heron. A more prolonged roadside stop yielded Keel-billed Toucan, Streak-headed Woodcreeper and both Black-cheeked and Rufous-winged Woodpeckers. Our final stop of the day was extremely successful as in the gathering dusk we first found a Broad-billed Motmot and then tempted a Dull-mantled Antbird into view. As we headed to our hotel for a two-night stay, Pauraques flushed from the road to end the day on a perfect note.

**Day 6** Early in the morning a small volcanic eruption surprised everyone and for those who looked, lava and some red-hot boulders could be seen rolling down the slopes! In fact, during our stay, we were able to enjoy spectacular views of minor volcanic eruptions and see the smoke and lava and boulders flowing down the side of the volcano in the darkness. Before breakfast, we headed out to do some roadside birding close to the slopes of the volcano. In what initially looked a rather nondescript spot, we found enough to keep us interested for over an hour. Firstly, an Olive-crowned Yellowthroat showed exceptionally well and then Yellow-billed Caciques were eventually seen well by all skulking in the reeds. A Pale-vented Pigeon was 'sit up and easy' on the telephone wires with Short-billed Pigeons sitting on nearby treetops. A Smoky-brown Woodpecker was a nice find as were our first Masked Tityras and a Black Phoebe was seen in typical habitat on rocks in the river. Other flycatchers included our first Boat-billed, Gray-capped, Piratic and Olive-sided Flycatchers whilst Black-cowled Oriole was a nice addition. Black-headed Saltators passed in a flock but were tempted to return by playback! After breakfast (the only Band-tailed Barbthroat of the tour was seen in the car park before we left), we visited the trails at Arenal Observatory Lodge. A brief stop was made on the road up to the lodge to look at a pair of Rufous-tailed Jacamars before we headed down to the trails seeing our first Chestnut-mandibled Toucans on the way. Forest birding is always tough in the tropics but with perseverance we managed to get great views of a Black-headed Antthrush and slightly less than satisfactory views of a Fulvous-bellied (Thicket) Antpitta. We then concentrated on wrens getting fabulous views of a pair of Song Wrens followed by the equally impressive Black-throated and Stripe-breasted Wrens. Black-headed Nightingale-

thrush proved rather skulking but Scale-crested Pygmy-tyrant was the complete opposite. A group of Olive Tanagers were somewhat drab to say the least but Bay-headed and Golden-hooded Tanagers showed what their genus should really be like! A Slate-coloured Grosbeak was heard and eventually we found a hole in the foliage sufficiently large to view the bird. Although we were due to return to our hotel for lunch, we decided to take lunch at Arenal Observatory Lodge instead and enjoyed an excellent relaxed two hours stuffed with birds! Montezuma Oropendolas were visiting the bird table together with Hepatic Tanagers and fabulous Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, whilst overhead flocks of swifts included Chestnut-collared, Gray-rumped and White-collared Swifts. In the afternoon, we revisited the trails although bird activity was much lower. A White-necked Jacobin showed well in the parking area before Steve heard Great Currawong. We stalked the bird and whilst some were rewarded with views of a female running across the trail and a male in flight, sadly most missed them. Next, we headed back to Arenal Lake to successfully look for Pied-billed Grebes and in the process added Gray-headed Chachalacas. After returning to the hotel for dinner, we went out night birding and were rewarded with memorable views of Great Potoo both perched and in flight and inquisitive Mottled Owls watching us from roadside trees. The journey back to the hotel was punctuated by Pauraques on the road again.

**Day 7** Pre breakfast, we visited a roadside 'stakeout' for White-fronted Nunbird and were rewarded well for our efforts! Next we spent time at the Arenal bridges, walking a trail along the hillside connected by very well made and maintained bridges. One of our main goals here was the highly-localised Keel-billed Motmot and we managed to locate two of these beautiful birds. Canada Warbler was a nice addition to the list as was an Emerald Tanager. Heading back to the car park, Steve found what was possibly the highlight of the trip for some, a Margay (*Leopardus wiedii*) sleeping in the fork of a trailside tree. Finally, as we arrived back in the parking area we enjoyed excellent views of a very difficult bird, Rufous-winged Tanager. On our way back to the hotel for breakfast a Dusky-capped Flycatcher showed well. For those who missed the pre-breakfast walk and the Margay, we made a return visit after breakfast and whilst those who wanted to looked for the Margay, the rest of us successfully staked out a Black-crested Coquette resting perch. Leaving Arenal, we headed towards another new location, Cano Negro, close to the Nicaraguan border. We stopped for lunch en-route but still had time to bird on arrival finding Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures on the entrance road. With a couple of hours of daylight left we located roosting Northern Potoo, and whilst directly under its tree, both Northern Beardless-tyrannulet and Spot-breasted Wren were found. A Lineated Woodpecker showed well but briefly in a tall tree and a diminutive Olivaceous Piculet was a great find. Solitary Sandpipers fed in the drainage ditches whilst Gray-breasted Martins hawked insects overhead. Finally, at dusk, Lesser Nighthawks gave wonderful views.

**Day 8** This morning we took a boat trip on the river. It was pretty misty to start with and Green Herons, Roseate Spoonbills and other waterbirds were barely more than silhouettes. There was no mistaking the menacing shape of numerous Spectacled Caiman however! Eventually the sun broke through just in time for us to see confiding Gray-necked Wood-rails and enjoying stunning views of an American Pygmy Kingfisher amongst the common Amazon and Green Kingfishers. A Prothonotary Warbler literally glowed in the sun but the real prize was the somewhat less spectacular but nevertheless highly-localised and globally-endangered Nicaraguan Grackles. Numerous other waterbirds kept us entertained but the real star however, was prolonged views of a female Sungrebe. On the return journey we went ashore to look at a lagoon covered in waders including a good sized flock of Stilt Sandpipers. After returning to the hotel for a late breakfast and packing our bags we witnessed a huge hawk migration, with around 20,000 Broad-winged Hawks and lesser numbers of Swainson's Hawks being a conservative estimate! A stop a couple of kilometers out of town gave us Pied Puffbird, Pale-billed and Rufous-winged Woodpecker and Cocoa Woodcreeper before we drove to Selva Verde Lodge for a two-night stay.

**Day 9** In the early morning we visited a nearby hotel to look for the magnificent Spectacled Owl. After some initial frustration (including the gate of the hotel being locked!), we successfully located a pair coming into roost. Next, we moved on to the entrance road at La Selva seeing a pair of Scaled Pigeons perched on a dead tree en-route. The entrance road actually is always more productive than the reserve itself and this year was no exception. As this was Caribbean-slope birding, numerous new birds were seen and the first hour on the entrance road will long be remembered for 'red hot' pencils! Highlights included

Semiplumbeous Hawk, White-crowned Parrot, Spot-fronted Swift, White-necked Puffbird, White-ringed Flycatcher, Yellow-green Vireo and Plain-coloured Tanager. Returning for breakfast, we checked an area for Sunbittern and were rewarded for our efforts with prolonged views. Other birds included Louisiana Waterthrush and Buff-rumped Warblers. After breakfast, we returned to the La Selva entrance road and spent some time looking for the highly-localized Yellow-tailed Oriole. A Chestnut-coloured Woodpecker was a great find and a fruiting tree contained many birds. Eventually, we reached the main gate of the reserve and watched a Gray-chested Dove walking under some trees before heading back for lunch. During the lunch break various species were seen including Western Long-tailed Hermit, Plain-brown Woodcreeper, Red-throated Ant-tanager and Orange-billed Sparrow. After lunch, we returned to enter the reserve proper and immediately were rewarded with incredible views of a male Great Curassow walking across the lawn! Walking across the suspension bridge a King Vulture soared overhead and Blue-chested Emerald was found. The trails were fairly quiet (as expected!) but a confiding Double-toothed Kite, a ridiculously confiding Black-throated Trogon, a Rufous Motmot, Western Slaty-antshrike, Yellow-margined Flycatcher and an uncharacteristically-low Black-capped Pygmy-tyrant kept the adrenalin going! At the end of the day we watched a Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer returning regularly to a rest perch whilst Steve tried to track down a very elusive Vermiculated Screech-owl. Despite crawling through the bushes in the dark, unfortunately, the owl won this battle!

**Day 10** Before breakfast we revisited the La Selva entrance road where a pair of Cinnamon Woodpeckers were found; a female Snowy Cotinga was a nice find; Blackburnian Warbler, Specked Tanager, Shining Honeycreeper and Chestnut-headed Oropendola fed in the fruiting tree and we finally 'nailed' the Yellow-tailed Oriole! A pair of Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts hawked very low before we returned for breakfast. Next, we visited Virgen del Socorro where, by the bridge, American Dipper and Torrent Tyrannulet graced the rocks, a Sunbittern fed in the open totally unconcerned by all the attention and a Sooty-faced Finch was seen briefly. At the hummingbird feeders of a local café, Green Thorntail and Tropical Paula were new for the list and it was also nice to see other species of hummingbirds at point blank range. The nearby waterfall centre feeders gave wonderful views of Tennessee Warblers and Baltimore Orioles, whilst Scarlet Tanager and Rose-breasted Grosbeak were both new for the tour. Heading back towards Selva Verde Lodge to check out, we stopped at an overlook to watch Barred Hawks and another King Vulture. Fortunately the rain waited until just after our successful stop for the huge-billed Nicaraguan Seed-finch and at our hummingbird site we were able to watch Snowcap from the shelter of the canopy of a building before checking into our next hotel in torrential rain!

**Day 11** Whilst some took the canopy chairlift at Braulio, the rest of us birded the trails finding an antswarm where Bicoloured and Spotted Antbirds gave remarkable views alongside Northern Barred-woodcreepers. Checker-throated Antwren, Streak-crowned Antvireo, Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, Bay-breasted and Cerulean Warblers, Tawny-capped Euphonia and Black-and-yellow Tanager. A Slaty-breasted Tinamou was, unfortunately, the only tinamou seen on the tour. En-route to Savegre, we stopped off at a small pond where Least Grebe, American Coot, Common Gallinule and Eastern Meadowlark were all new. Our final stop of the day before checking into Savegre Mountain Lodge was for Dusky Nightjar and we were not disappointed with 'crippling' views of a perched bird.

**Day 12** Our full day at Savegre was extremely productive with once more new birds coming thick and fast. The highlight here, of course, is always Resplendent Quetzal, but new hummingbirds such as Magnificent, Scintillant and Volcano Hummingbirds and Gray-tailed Mountain-gems are always welcome! Plenty of other colour was present with Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher, Black-cheeked, Flame-throated and Townsend's Warblers, Collared Redstart, Flame-coloured Tanager, Sooty-capped Brush-tanager and Yellow-bellied Siskin whilst more difficult species included Slaty Flowerpiercer and Large-footed Finches. A pair of Spot-crowned Woodcreepers was breeding in a roadside tree and gave exceptional views but, later in the day, the Costa Rican Pygmy-owl wasn't so co-operative with only brief views.

**Day 13** Leaving Savegre, we stopped off first at a different lodge where the normally difficult Fiery-throated Hummingbird was abundant! Other species included large numbers of the also difficult Black-

and-yellow Silky-flycatcher as well as spectacular prolonged views of a flock of Golden-browed Chlorophonias. Next, we headed to the highest point of the tour, Cerro de la Morte (mountain of death!). A Bat Falcon was a surprise at this altitude but Barred Becard, Black-billed Nightingale-thrush and Sooty Robin were more expected in the cloud forest. Our attempts at Zeledonia were, unfortunately, unrewarded. In the Paramo zone we were delighted to find the highly-localised and rare Peg-billed Finch together with Volcano Juncos. On the long, windy drive down the mountain we encountered rain and fog before suddenly dropping back into the sunshine again. A White-tailed Emerald and several Fiery-billed Aracaris told us that we were in a different biozone and as we checked into our lodge, we were able to add out last new bird of the day, a singing Orange-billed Nightingale-thrush.

**Day 14** In the morning we birded the grounds for a while adding Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, White-winged Becard, Streaked Flycatcher, Riverside Wren and Yellow-crowned Euphonia but the undoubted highlight was a stunning male Turquoise Cotinga. With quite a long drive ahead, we checked some nearby habitat first and were rewarded with no less than four new species: Smooth-billed Ani, Pale-billed Spinetail, Fork-tailed Flycatcher and Lesser Elaenia but unfortunately no Pearl Kite. Stopping at a local supermarket to stock up with drinks and snacks, we were about to re-board the bus when the cry went up 'Pearl Kite' and there it was flying over the car park in the town. As they say, 'it ain't all over till the fat lady sings'! The journey on a corrugated road was broken by a lunch stop and we arrived at the Tarcoles River in time for a short boat road. Unfortunately the tide was lower than anticipated so we had to go to another landing stage. New birds in the form of Mangrove Black-hawk, Yellow-crowned Night-heron, Boat-billed Heron, Scarlet Macaws and Panama Flycatcher were added on the tranquil journey but what may have possibly been the highlight of the whole tour was saved until last. Just as dusk was gathering and we were about to turn back through the mangroves to the landing stage, Steve spotted a Rufous-necked Wood-rail out in the open. It slowly walked back into the mangroves but was seen for almost two minutes in total and the entire group was able to enjoy this rarely-seen bird. In fact, it was only the third time that Steve had seen one! Sometimes it pays to be late! After checking into our hotel, and enjoying an excellent dinner, we decided to go owling rather than chance rain on our last night. This was an extremely good move as after a short search we found an extremely photogenic Striped Owl on the telephone wires followed by a Barn Owl.

**Day 15** Early the next morning saw us on the slopes above Carara where several more new species were seen: Great-crested Flycatcher, Northern Bentbill, Southern Beardless-tyrannulet, Red-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos, Western Tanager and Painted Bunting. After breakfast we headed into Carara, doing the riverside trail in the morning. Despite having been in Costa Rica for nearly two weeks, new birds continued to come thick and fast with firstly a Northern Royal-flycatcher at the nest, followed by Slate-headed Tody-flycatcher. As we headed in to look at the Orange-collared Manakin lek, we were distracted by another small antswarm where both Tawny-winged Woodcreeper and Gray-headed Tanager were new for us. We did see the Orange-collared Manakins well before continuing along the track where Chestnut-backed Antbird proved the easiest of the genus to see! We thought that Black-bellied Wren would be difficult when Steve heard one singing but it proved to be an exhibitionist for all see! White-whiskered Puffbird was heard calling and eventually we tracked down three of them, all giving good views. Similarly, whilst Baird's Trogon initially proved problematical, hiding in the foliage, eventually we found a second bird that was intent on showing itself! Boat-billed Herons gave much better views than the previous evening, before we retraced our steps as it was getting pretty hot and time for lunch! On the way back, however, we firstly found several White-shouldered Tanagers followed by an even better Yellow-billed Cotinga! The non-avian highlight was provided by a highly poisonous vine snake species, which was photographed from a discrete distance! After lunch, we returned to Carara to walk the 'figure of eight' trail. Afternoons are often quieter than mornings and, after so many new birds in the morning and at this stage of the tour, expectations were for a pleasant walk with maybe one or two new birds. Steve had other idea however, and soon we were watching a Dusky Antbird, several Black-hooded Antshrikes and both Dot-winged and Slaty Antwrens. We were not yet finished with ant-things! Next out of the hat was an amazingly showy Streak-chested Antpitta – wow! Next, Tawny-crowned Greenlet was tracked down, followed by a Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher; could it get any better? The answer was a definite yes soon we were watching a Golden-crowned Spadebill shortly followed by its much rarer cousin, a Stub-

tailed Spadebill. With all these birds we needed a rest so we sat down to watch a bathing pool. Initially it was rather quiet with just male Blue-crowned and Red-capped Manakins seen (call that quiet I hear you say!) but things soon livened up with an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher. We were then called away by Steve to look at a superb Black-striped Woodcreeper before another amazing bird flew into the bathing pool, a Scaly-throated Leaf-tosser. By now we had to head back to the road before it got dark but not before we had tracked down a Black-faced Antthrush. Several Great Tinamous called but none would come close to the track but we left the forest already with a new tour record!

**Day 16** Although our flight was at midday, the airport was our side of the city so we had time to take another short boat trip. This time we headed upriver and were rewarded with views of several Double-striped Thick-knees and Collared Plovers. Heading back to the boat dock, Steve coaxed both Scrub Greenlet and Scrub Euphonia into view before we set off on our journey home. But we were still not done as we stopped briefly in a park in a local town to look at two roosting Black-and-white Owls, our last new birds of the tour. Unfortunately, our flights home were cancelled due to problems with the US Federal Aviation Authorities and we had to overnight in San Jose and arrived back in the UK one day late.