

Birdfinders' Costa Rica 2024



Costa Rica - March 2024

Alistair Gibbs

This trip was a present to myself for my 60th Birthday and was only my second ever trip to Central / South America so was destined to provide me with a large number of new birds and experiences. The itinerary looked packed and covered the majority of the country and its variety of very differing eco systems.

Day 1 : There were 11 of us on the trip, plus our superb guide, Kevin Easley and the knowledgeable and friendly driver Alex. We met at San Jose airport following an uneventful direct flight from London and made our way through the busy city streets to the haven of Hotel Robledal in San Jose for dinner, introductions and an early night.



Day 2 : I awoke before dawn (due as much to the jet lag as excitement) but it meant that I was in the gardens of the hotel, birding as the sun came up. I wasn't alone, as a small group of us watched numerous early morning birds. The highlights were Hoffman's Woodpecker, Red Billed Pigeon, Cinnamon Hummingbird, a colourful Spot Breasted Oriole and Ferruginous Pygmy Owl. After this brilliant start to the first day we had breakfast and got on the road to our first stop at La Paz Waterfall Gardens. This is a popular destination with excellent trails and a busy set of feeders. We were greeted outside the entrance by a resident Bat Falcon which gave us all superb views before we made our way to the feeders where amongst other hummers were Green Thorntail, Coppery Headed Emerald and Green Hermit. Once we took to the trails, we saw our first spectacular Swallow Tailed Kites soaring across the valley plus Red Headed and Prong Billed Barbets, Smoky Brown Woodpecker, Brown Hooded Parrot, Olivaceous and Spot Crowned Woodcreeper, Slaty Backed Nightingale Thrush, Spangle Cheeked and Yellow Winged Tanagers and many many more. We ate lunch in the spacious restaurant before setting off on the short journey to Arenal Observatory Lodge for a 2 night stay. On the way, we stopped at a supermarket as the driver had heard that there was an American Barn Owl nesting there inside the store!! It was found in it's usual roosting place, perched above the entrance on a ledge. Without doubt the best visit to supermarket I have ever experienced.



Coppery Headed Emerald (female)



Silver Throated Tanager

Day 3 : We awoke at Arenal to heavy rain but that didn't seem to prevent the birds using the huge feeder set up. The noise was incredible as I left my room with around 20 Montezuma's Oropendola feasting on the fruit alongside Brown Jays, Crested Guan, Yellow Throated Toucan, Collared Aracari and Great Curassow. Amongst these larger birds were a variety of Tanagers and Warblers including Emerald

Tanager, Silver Throated Tanager, Rufous Winged Tanager, Blackburnian Warbler, Mourning Warbler and many more. We spent the day walking the Observatory Trails as it was convenient to be able to return to the Lodge a couple of times to dry off and change clothes if necessary. Here we saw many more new species for the trip including Black Cowled, Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, Barred and Russet Antshrike, Rufous, Keel Billed and Broad Billed Motmot, Silver Throated Magpie Jay and several Flycatcher and Woodcreeper species. Weather aside, this was a wonderful day which also included great sightings of a family of Coati, Howler Monkeys, Central American Agouti and several reptiles.



Arenal Observatory Lodge

Day 4 : The day started spectacularly again at Arenal feeders before we got onto the road towards Cano Negro. The day was superb for the variety of birds that we saw as we birded several different eco systems from rain forest to arable land to wetlands and riverside areas. The journey started with a drive (and several stops) through farm land where we caught up with Pale Vented and Short Billed Pigeon as well as numerous raptors including Great Black, Roadside, Harris's, Grey, White and Broad Winged Hawks. The Great Black Hawk gave especially good views at close range perched on a dead tree before it flew.

I was particularly looking forward to the first of 3 boat trips for the tour which was a late afternoon ride at Mevio Queso near the Nicaraguan border. We boarded the flat bottomed boat that took us out across shallow marshland which was fantastic for a huge variety of water birds. Highlights for me were the full range of herons and egrets from Bare Throated Tiger, Little Blue, Boat Billed, Tricoloured, Green and

Black Crowned Night Herons to White and Green Ibis's and Roseate Spoonbills that were everywhere. We also saw Ringed, Amazon, American Pygmy and Green Kingfishers plus Pinneated Bittern, White Throated and Yellow Breasted Crake, Nicaraguan Grackle, Nicaraguan Seedfinch and a lovely Sungrebe. This truly was a memorable experience with the sun going down over the Water Hyacinths as we arrived back to shore.



Mevio Queso



Pinneated Bittern.

Day 5 : This morning was another boat trip, this time on the deeper and wider Cano Negro river but not before a side stop at a local lake where we found the massive Jabiru stork feeding in the lakeside foliage. Once on the boat we drove up the river, chaperoned by Mangrove Swallows, and saw more water birds and reptiles including some very large American Crocodiles. We also stopped at a couple of spots and went ashore to look for birds where we saw Striped Cuckoo, Pacific Screech Owl, Bare Crowned Antbird, a Yellow Headed Vulture and hundreds of migrating Swainson's Hawks.

The afternoon was spent driving leisurely towards La Quinta where we would spend the next 2 nights but we stopped several times where Kevin (our incredibly knowledgeable guide) found Grey Headed and Blue Ground Doves, a Great Potoo snoozing on the top of a tree stump, a pair of Double Striped Thick Knee, the only Pied Puffbird of the trip, Greenish and Yellow Bellied Elena, Slate Headed Tody, Common Tody, Yellow Olive, Dusky Capped, Social and Grey Capped Flycatchers and a White Winged Becard.



American Crocodile



Pacific Screech Owl

Day 6 : We spent day 6 at the La Selva Reserve (having stopped for a nesting Great Green Macaw on the way) and it was another great day, our 5th day in a row seeing over 100 species! We started on the first walk with decent views of a Great Tinamou in the undergrowth followed throughout the morning by Gartered and Black Throated Trogon, White Necked Puffbird, Cinnamon Woodpecker, Mealy Parrot, Fasciated and Black Crowned Antshrike and Cocoa, Streak Headed and Wedge Billed Woodcreepers. After lunch we continued to walk the trails and saw Ochre Bellied Flycatcher, Long Tailed Tyrant, Rufous Mourner, Bright Rumped Attila, White Ringed , Sulphur Bellied and Piratic Flycatchers, Purple Throated Fruitcrow, Snowy Cotinga, Black Crowned and Masked Tityra, Yellow Crowned Euphonia, Dusky Faced and Grey Headed Tanager, Black Faced Grosbeak and Red Throated Ant Tanager.



Snowy Cotinga



Semiplumbeous Hawk.

Day 7 : Today we made our way to Braulio Carrillo, stopping on the way at the home of a local naturalist called Cope. He has turned his garden into a natural wonder with a natural pond and surrounding flora. Here we saw Russet Naped Wood-Rail, Collared Aracari, American Pygmy Kingfisher, Chestnut Headed Oropendola, Scarlet Rumped, Blue Grey, Palm and Golden Hooded Tanagers and Red Legged and Green Honey Creepers. After spending a couple of hours at Cope's house he took us to a local woodland where we saw a nesting Black Throated Trogon, Crested and Spectacled Owls at roost, Rufous Winged Woodpecker and a lovely nest of sleeping Honduran White Bats.

We continued our journey to Tapirus Lodge where, along with a couple of stops on the way, we saw Fasciated Tiger Heron, Louisiana Water Thrush, another White Hawk, Streak Crowned Ant Vireo, Spotted Antbird, Buff Throated Foliage Gleaner, Black Capped Pygmy Tyrant, Ruddy Tailed Flycatcher, White Collared Manakin, Wood Thrush and in the evening a family of Baird's Tapir at close quarters.



Collared Aracari



Baird's Tapir.

Day 8 : We spent the morning birding the Tapirus Lodge Trails where we were successful at finding a Uniform Crake at dawn. This was followed by Lattice Tailed Trogon, White Crowned Parrot, Olive Streaked and Ruddy Tailed Flycatchers, Tawny Faced Gnatwren, Slaty Backed Nightingale Thrush, Black and White and Golden Winged Warblers, Blue Black and Slate Coloured Grosbeak, White Shouldered and Tawny Crested and Speckled and Black and Yellow Tanagers.

We moved on towards Hotel Quelitilas Lodge but not before stopping at the very busy municipal park in Paraiso where our Driver Alex found a roosting Tropical Screech Owl to add to our ever growing owl tally. At the Lodge, as Grey Rumped Swifts flew over, there were a new set of birds at the feeders which included White Bellied Mountain-Gem, Violet Sabrewing and a Crowned Woodnymph. The evening

was topped off by a lovely Scaled Antpitta that the hotel owner managed to tempt into the open for us all to see.



Golden Browed Chlorophonia



Great Potoo

Day 9 : We awoke to a beautiful mountain morning and made our way towards Ujarras and Rio Macho. On the drive we see Roadside and Red Tailed Hawks and Kevin finds us a pair of the rare Cabanis's Ground Sparrows, before we stop and walk a deserted mountain road, birding as we go. We come across a huge ant swarm which is spectacular as all the insects and reptiles are fleeing before it and the birds are picking off the ants and insects. Believe me, until you see the natural wonder of an ant swarm, you cannot envisage the size, fluidity and menace of it. We saw Zeledon's Antbird, Streaked Xenops, Olive Sided Flycatcher, Ochraceous Wren, Black Billed Nightingale Thrush, Elegant Euphonia, Western Wood Pewee and Slate Throated Redstart.

Moving on towards even higher elevations, we reach the highest point of the trip and bird along a mountain trail, seeing Volcano Junco, Volcano Hummingbird, a beautiful Wrenthrush, Black and Yellow Silky Flycatcher, Sooty Thrush and Mountain Thrush.

We then moved on again towards the Savage Valley and stop at Miriam's Cafe where there are feeders set up which attract some wonderful birds. Here we saw Brown and Lesser Violetear, Talamanca, Fiery Throated and Volcano Hummingbird, Acorn Woodpecker, a fantastic Golden Browed Chlorophonia, Large Footed Finch and Summer, Flame Coloured, Golden Hooded and Plain Coloured Tanagers.

Our final stop was at the Lodge in the valley where we saw Torrent Tyranulet and Spotted Wood Quail to finish the day.



Volcano Hummingbird



Talamanca Hummingbird

Day 10 : We spent today in the Savage Valley and birding along the Providencia Road. We started the day pre-breakfast, wandering through the Lodge Grounds where we had great views of Spotted Wood Quail, Highland Tinamou, our first Black Guan, Collared Trogon, Hairy Woodpecker, Sulphur Winged Parakeet, Spot Crowned Woodcreeper, Ruddy Treerunner and Buffy Tuftedcheek amongst others.

We then drove to a well known (and busy) Resplendent Quetzal nest to make sure we got this bird. It was crowded but successful and we need not have worried as we saw lots more of these fabulous birds over the next few days.

We spent the rest of the day birding the high cloud forest, where we picked up Wilsons, Black Cheeked, Black Throated Green and Flame Throated Warblers, Yellow Thighed Finch, Sooty Capped Chlorospingus, Timberline and Band Backed Wren, Ruddy Capped Nightingale Thrush, Yellow Winged Vireo, Rufous Browed Peppershrike, Dark Pewee, Black and Yellow Silky Flycatcher and Mountain Elenia. We also heard Bare Shankled Screech Owl (we would return for another go at that tomorrow!).

The day ended while we waited at sun down for the rare and very localised Dusky Nightjar that came very close to us and landed for excellent views.





Black and Yellow Silky Flycatcher and there is a Quetzal in there somewhere!!

Day 11 : This morning we initially birded Suria Lodge before making our way back to altitude on the Providencia Road. At the lodge we picked up Scaley Breasted and Stripe Tailed Hummingbirds before we left and resumed our cloud forest birding.

This mornings new birds included Lesson's Motmot, Red Crowned, Lineated and Acorn Woodpeckers, Lesser and Mountain Elenia, Black Capped Flycatcher, Crested Oropendula and a heard only Costa Rica Pygmy Owl.

The highlight of the morning, however, was the brilliant job done by Kevin to locate the roost site of the Bare Shanked Screech Owls that we had heard yesterday. It was in a dense stand of bamboo which took a little bit of navigating but well worth the effort to see this bird.



Searching for and finding Bare Shanked Screech Owls

The rest of the day was spent en route to the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge but the journey was broken up by some great birding in various places along the road.

The first stop was in San Isidro where we were successful in finding a Turquoise Cotinga in a fairly urban area of the city. We then stopped at a pond on the outskirts of the city which gave us Least Grebe, Blue Winged Teal, Spotted Sandpiper and Ruddy Ground Dove.

The next stop was at a pineapple farm where we were met by a local naturalist who wanted to show us a special bird. On our walk to the site we saw a Short Tailed Hawk fly over and heard Orange Collared Manakin and Rufous Piha. We then walked very quietly and in single file through dense bush where we were incredibly fortunate to sit and watch a Rosy Thrush Tanager calling and displaying in all its pink and black glory. This was one of my most unlikely 'wants' before the trip so I was over the moon to have seen it.

After dinner that evening, we drove the roads around the Lodge where we had great views of a Striped Owl sitting on a telephone wire and several Common Parakeet.



Rosy Thrush Tanager



Turquoise Cotinga

Day 12 : Today we spent the day birding the Esquinas Rain Forest and the La Gamba Road areas. We started by birding the trails around the lodge itself and immediately began seeing signs of life. We picked up Baird's Trogon, Charming Hummingbird, Grey Cowled Woodrail, Rufous Tailed Jacamar, Red Rumped and Rufous Winged Woodpeckers, Black Hooded Antshrike, Pale Breasted Spinetail, Yellow Bellied and Yellow Crowned Tyrannulet, Scarlet Rumped Cacique and 3 King Vultures soared slowly over (which made my day).

We then spent the day touring around the area, stopping to find specific birds and successfully added Blue Black Grassquit, Thick Billed Seedfinch, Black Cheeked Ant Tanager, Orange Billed and Black Striped Sparrow, Spot Crowned and Yellow Crowned Euphoria, Isthmian, Riverside and Black Bellied Wren, Philadelphia Vireo,

Scrub Greenlet, Fork Tailed Flycatcher, Orange Collared Manakin, Grey Chested Dove, Stripe Throated, Long Billed and Bronzy Hermit and a Band Tailed Barbthroat. After dinner, we made a trip out at dusk where we sat and watched several Lesser Nighthawks hunting in the gloom and picked out Costa Rican and Lesser Swallow Tailed Swifts picking off insects in the air.

Mammals for the day included excellent views of Central American Spider Monkeys, Common Tent Making Bats and the secretive Tira. Another great day.



Tent Making Bats



Long Billed Hermit

Day 13 : An extremely early start today ensured that a bleary eyed but excited group were at the Rincon Bridge at dawn waiting for a rarity. It took a little while to show but eventually we were all able to get good views of the beautiful Yellow Billed Cotinga. Whilst at the bridge we also saw Turquoise Cotinga and Masked and Black Crowned Tityra. Flying below us were Green Heron, Mangrove Swallows and a very obliging Yellow Headed Caracara was seen striding purposefully across the road.

From here we birded our way gently back to the Tarcoles River, where we were booked onto a boat trip in the afternoon, seeing Groove Billed Ani, Inca Dove, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Double Toothed Kite, Bat Falcon and Giant and Bronzed Cowbirds. We also stopped for a Black and White Owl that was very obliging and photogenic in a roadside field.

The boat trip on the Tarcoles River through mangrove infested waterways was fabulous and threw up huge numbers of birds (many we saw only here). The list is long but some of the more memorable are colonies of Brown Pelican and Herons, a

Mangrove Cuckoo, the endemic Mangrove Hummingbird, Hudsonian Whimbrel, Black Necked Stilt, Least and Spotted Sandpiper, Willet (which may one day be split to Western Willet), Royal Tern, Tricoloured and Little Blue Heron, Roseate Spoonbill, Plumbeous Kite, Common Black Hawk, Ringed and Belted Kingfisher, Mealy, Yellow Naped, White Crowned and Brown Hooded Parrot, Greenish Elaenia, Northern Scrub, Dusky Capped, Panama, Brown Crested, Streaked and Scissor Tailed Flycatchers, Philadelphia Vireo, Tropical Gnatcatcher, American Redstart, Prothonotary Warbler and the Yellow (Mangrove) Warbler with its diagnostic Chestnut Head.



Scissor tailed Flycatcher



Tarcoles River

Day 14 : Today we birded around the grounds of the Hotel Villa Tapas and the Carara National Park in search of the many woodland species that can be found in this area. The humid and warm conditions made for pleasant walks and the day threw up an amazing 80 species from the single unique environment of Costa Rica's only transition forest. We had good views of another Great Tinamou as well as other ground dwelling birds such as Great Curassow and Marbled Wood Quail. In the trees we picked out Pale Billed Woodpecker and the colourful Slaty Tailed, Black Headed and Black Throated Trogons whilst hearing Baird's and Gartered. There was a fabulous selection of insect eaters with Black Hooded Antshrike, Slaty and Dot Winged Antwren, Dusky and Chestnut Backed Antbird, a Black Faced Ant-Thrush and superb views of the very secretive Streak Chested Antpitta. In the trees were Long Tailed, Tawny Winged, Wedge Billed and Black Striped Woodcreepers as well as a Chiriqui Foliage Gleaner, Ochre Bellied Flycatcher, Eye Ringed Flatbill, Stub Tailed and Golden Crowned Spadebill, Royal, Ruddy Tailed and Yellow Bellied

Flycatchers, a Rufous Piha, Rose Throated Beard, Tawny Crowned and Lesser Greenlet, Long Billed Gnatwren, Red Crowned Ant Tanager. One of my highlights of the trip were the Manakins that we saw today. The group waited patiently and in silence at a small water hole and had incredible views of a drinking male Red Capped Manakin in full plumage. We also saw Long Tailed, Velvety and Orange Collared Manakins during the day all in spectacular breeding plumage.



Red Capped Manakin



Streaked Chested Antpitta

Day 15 : This morning was spent exploring the unique dry Guanacaste eco system in the North West of Costa Rica. This involved driving slowly and stopping at a variety of roadside birding spots. It proved to be a very effective method of birding and throughout the morning we found Common and Ruddy Ground Doves, Groove Billed Ani, Mangrove and Squirrel Cuckoos, Turquoise Browed Motmot and a displaying Lesser Ground Cuckoo. A hunting Ferruginous Pygmy Owl was found in the dry bushes as was a Blue Grossbeak, Painted Bunting, Yellow and Chestnut Sided Warblers, Streak Backed and Baltimore Orioles, Stripe Headed and Olive Sparrows and Scrub Euponia. We then stopped at a small wooded area where we were watching some lovely displaying Long Tailed Manakins when Kevin heard what he thought was a rare forest bird. The chase was on and we eventually had several excellent flypast views of a Collared Forest Falcon.

After enjoying the dry Guanacaste scrubland we drove on to arrive at the Coco Roca Salt Pans at high tide. This was the best wader watching site on the holiday and it didn't disappoint. There were several salt ponds and we were able to set up telescopes very close to the them which gave us good views and excellent identification. We saw Black Bellied (Grey), Wilson's and Semipalmated Plovers, Marbled Godwit, Stilt, Least, Pectoral, Semipalmated, Western and Spotted

Sandpipers, Laughing and Franklin's Gulls and Royal Terns. All the while, Magnificent Frigatebirds were flying over the top.

At dusk, we arrived in a busy and bustling Monteverde where we would be staying for the final two nights of our trip, where we picked up Canivet's Emerald, Plain Capped Starthroat, Cinnamon Hummingbird and a Rose Breasted Grosbeak before the light went and we went out for a lovely restaurant dinner.



Lesser Ground Cuckoo.



Long Tailed Manakin

Day 16 : Today was spent with an early morning walk around the lodge and then a full day at the wonderful Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve near Monteverde.

The walk around the lodge provided us with excellent views of Lesson's Motmot on the feeders as a couple of White Eared Ground Sparrows fed below. We also saw Rose Breasted Grosbeak, Yellow Faced Grassquit and Rufous and White, Cabana's and Rufous Breasted Wrens before we set off for the Reserve.

At the Reserve we entered through the visitor centre and then walked several trails in both the morning and afternoon stopping for lunch in the Reserve restaurant at midday. We saw some fantastic birds and general wildlife today with some of the highlights being Purple Throated Mountain Gem, Violet Sabrewing, Blue Vented Hummingbird, Common Black and Grey Hawks, several superb views of Resplendent Quetzal, Plain Antvireo, a lovely Silvery Fronted Tapaculo, Lineated Foliage Gleaner, Spotted Barbit, Scale Crested Pygmy Tyrant, White Throated Spadebill and Boat Billed Flycatcher.

Shortly after lunch we heard the very distinctive call of the Three Wattled Bellbird and after a tense chase through the undergrowth we all eventually had excellent views of the bird performing its characteristic 'bell' call. Other birds seen on the walk were

Orange Billed and Slaty Backed Nightingale Thrushes, Mountain and White Throated Thrush, White Naped Brushfinch, Tropical Parula, Costa Rican Warbler and Wilsons Warbler.

The day ended after dinner with us staking out and successfully watching a Mottled Owl at very close quarters.



Lesson's Motmot



Three Wattled Bellbird

Day 17 : Our final day in Costa Rica came around far too quickly but we had time for some last minute birding this morning around Cala Lodge and on the road back to San Jose. The morning walk was targeted at a couple of species that we were yet to see and the first of those was a very obliging Ovenbird seen bouncing along the path ahead of us in the gardens.

A short drive took us to a set of feeders where we saw our last new hummingbird with the diminutive Magenta Throated Woodstar. We then began the two hour trip back towards the airport, seeing a zone tailed hawk gliding over shortly after setting off. We also made a final stop at a know site where we picked up our last bird of the trip, a Crested Bobwhite.

The journey became slightly more tense than expected when the road was closed due to an accident which added 4 hours to the drive but our superb driver Alex, really did demonstrate his depth of knowledge of the back roads and tracks and got us to the airport in the nick of time for the overnight flight back to the UK.

The whole trip was far better than I thought it could be. The accommodation, transport and food was excellent throughout. Kevin, our guide, was a supreme expert on the flora and fauna of the country. The organisation was first class, even on the days that required a long drive, we stopped often and always found new birds and experiences along the way. I will not name the other members of the group but

all were great company and enhanced the trip immensely. A special mention to Bob Longhorn who has allowed me to use some of his photographs (as he is far more well equipped and talented than I in that area).

The grand total was over 530 species of bird for the trip plus a huge variety of mammals including both species of Sloth, Tapir, all of the species of Monkey found in Costa Rica and a good number of other forest species, reptiles and insects.

If you are considering travelling to Costa Rica, please do not hesitate as you will see and experience things that you will remember for the rest of your life.



Black Crested Coquette