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## CLASSIC COSTA RICA TRIP REPORT



*The stunning Golden-browed Chlorophonia was seen exceptionally well on our 2024 tour © Colin Bushell*

# CLASSIC COSTA RICA

**1-14 February 2024**

**Leaders: Herman Venegas and Colin Bushell**

## Introduction

This tour can be divided into three sections: Highlands, the Caribbean and Pacific slopes. This year we started on the Pacific coast with some first-class birding in the Carara National Park area where Scarlet Macaws, Turquoise-browed Motmots, White-whiskered Puffbird, Yellow-throated Toucans and Fiery-billed Araracaris featured. Before leaving the coast for the highlands, we took a boat trip through the Tarcoles mangroves, always a favourite with the Limosa groups, and a chance to see five species of kingfisher, including the diminutive American Pygmy Kingfisher.

Into the highlands and we were able to see up to six Resplendent Quetzals in a day, point blank views of Golden-browed Chlorospingus, Fiery-throated Hummingbirds, Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers in the forests and Volcano Junco in the Paramo.

The final chapter of the tour commenced at the famous Rancho Naturalista with its Snowcaps, Sunbitterns and so much more, before we descended the Caribbean slope to our final destination in the lowlands. From here, we were able to search the renowned forests of the legendary La Selva Biological Station, but perhaps the highlight for many was the close views of nesting Great Green Macaws nearby. We returned to San Jose by way of Cinchona where we sipped coffee and watched Blue-throated Toucanets and the endemic Coppery-headed Hummingbird at leisure.

Having led more than a dozen tours to Costa Rica, I would pick out a few other sightings as less than expected. Special mention must go to the nine species of owl seen (eight of them at daytime roosts), Great and Common Potoos, lengthy views of two Scaled Antpittas, a Lesser Ground Cuckoo dustbathing in the middle of the road and one of the final birds of the tour, a Yellow-winged Tanager which is a rarity in Costa Rica.

## Trip Diary

### 1 February

Most of the group met at London Gatwick, self-checking-in at the bag drop and meeting 'airside' for our direct flight to San Jose, Costa Rica. We made good progress across the Atlantic, arriving on time, but the large queues at Immigration delayed us a little longer than

expected. Our guide Herman and driver Alex were delayed in heavy traffic anyway, so there was no need to worry.

Eventually, we made our way through the Arrivals area and Herman had arrived. All loaded up, we made our way through the busy Heredia evening rush hour to our hotel, the comfortable Bougainvillea, where after a meal and a very short briefing, we made for our rooms and a good night's sleep.

## **2 February**

As is customary for this tour, we met early in the hotel lobby for fresh coffee prior to a leisurely walk around the hotel gardens. As usual, Costa Rica's national bird, Clay-coloured Thrush, was one of the first to appear, closely followed by Rufous-collared Sparrow, Great Kiskadee, Boat-billed and Social Flycatchers, White-winged Dove and Hoffmann's Woodpeckers. A pair of Ferruginous Pygmy Owls caused excitement and our first Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds were seen. More new birds quickly followed, with Red-billed Pigeons, Lineated Woodpecker, Finsch's Parakeets, Philadelphia Vireos, Blue-and-white Swallows and Rufous-backed Wrens all noted.

After a while, we took a short stroll (as we had hardly moved away from the hotel doors) to a large bamboo stand, where we could see a roosting Mottled Owl. Momentarily distracted by Cabanis's Wren, we watched the owl through the 'scope for a while, before attempting to return to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. This is easier said than done in Costa Rica and we were delayed further from sustenance by the incredible looking Montezuma Oropendola, Tennessee and American Yellow Warblers, Cinnamon-bellied Saltators and Blue-grey Tanagers.

Buffet-style breakfast followed and then bags packed, we boarded the bus for the journey down to the Pacific coast, stopping only for comfort stops along the way. By mid-morning, we were birding along the Guacimo Road, an area of arid forest and scrub. It was already quite hot when we arrived, but birds were still active. Before too long, we had picked out our first Southern Lapwings and Double-striped Thick-knees in the fields, Roadside Hawk in the shade of large trees, Grey Hawks and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. More dry country species such as Stripe-headed Sparrows, White-throated Magpie-jays and Crested Caracaras were logged before we decided to check some lagoons and mangroves further down the road. This small area added a bit of variety to our growing bird list, with Willet, Black-necked Stilts, Tricoloured and Little Blue Herons and Snowy Egrets all seen, as Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds flew overhead.



*Pacific Screech Owl © Colin Bushell*

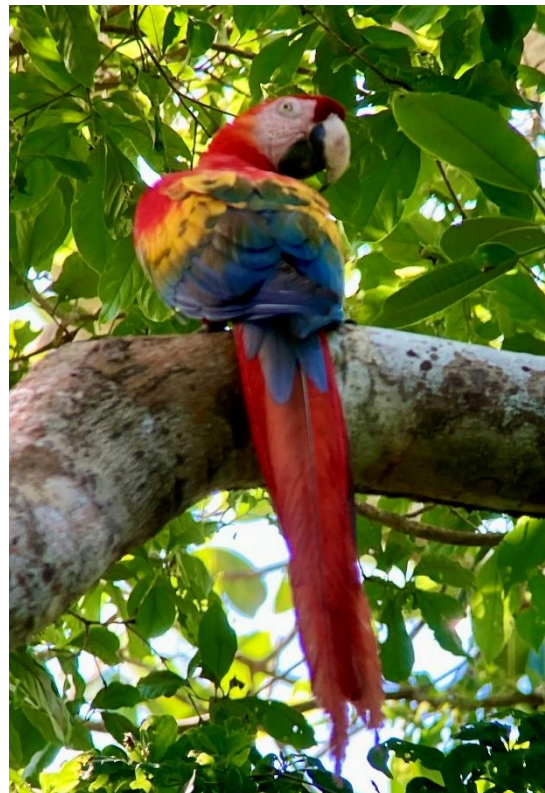
Lunch at a roadside restaurant followed, with our first Ruby-throated Hummingbird of the tour on view. We decided on a short diversion to the Cerro Lodge entrance road before heading to Villa Lapas. We quickly located our target bird – an incredibly well camouflaged roosting Pacific Screech Owl (our third owl of the day) and, of course, other birds began to appear, delaying our departure somewhat. Cinnamon Hummingbird, Green-breasted Mango, Gartered Trogon, Turquoise-browed Motmot, Yellow-throated Vireo, White-lored Gnatcatcher and Streak-backed Orioles were the main culprits for our tardiness, but that’s the way birding goes!

Arriving at Villa Lapas, our home for the following three nights, we added Scarlet Macaws, Laughing Falcon, American White Ibis, Sulphur-rumped Myiobius and Piratic Flycatcher to the day’s tally before taking dinner at the lodge. With our first big bird list completed and the following day’s plans explained, we headed to our rooms for a well-deserved rest.

*Scarlet Macaw is one of the more impressive parrots which can be found on our “Classic Costa Rica” holiday and was seen well at Villa Lapas and Carara National Park © Colin Bushell*

### **3 February**

On this day we planned to visit Carara National Park after breakfast at Villa Lapas. We started with a pre-breakfast walk around the hotel grounds and along the trail. Bare-throated Tiger Heron, Long-billed Hermit and Orange-billed Sparrows showed as we finished our early morning coffee, before departing for the extensive grounds.



The clearings around the bungalows are good for birds with some tall trees and their canopy easily viewable with the 'scopes. Blue-vented Hummingbirds and Blue-throated Sapphires were buzzing around the flowering trees, while Golden-hooded and Bay-headed Tanagers, Fiery-billed Aracaris, Northern Black-throated Trogons and Yellow-throated Toucans were found in the fruiting trees. More 'subtle' new birds included Mistletoe Tyrannulet, Grey-capped Flycatcher, a female Rose-throated Becard and a rather more colourful (but no less confusing) array of Euphonias. There were a few gaudy Baltimore Orioles, Red-legged Dacnis and Green Honeycreepers on show and we all knew Herman had something special when he alerted us, in a rather animated fashion, to a White-throated Shrike Tanager!

Strolling along the riverside trail, we picked up Buff-rumped Warblers, Louisiana Waterthrush and Ringed Kingfisher. Returning to the clearings on our way for breakfast, we were delayed by yet more Chestnut-sided Warblers, single Black-and-white Warbler and a stunning male Painted Bunting, along with a real bonus, a pair of Neotropical Otters.



*Black-hooded Antshrike © Colin Bushell*

Another buffet-style breakfast was followed by copious amounts of coffee and then off to our rooms to prepare for the rest of the morning at Carara. Only a short journey away, we were soon in the 'thick of it' with White-whiskered Puffbird the pick of the first batch of Neotropical species seen not far from the car park. Walking the paved trails was easy, even in the rather warm conditions and we added Squirrel Cuckoos, Dot-winged Antwrens, Black-hooded Antshrike, Streaked Flycatcher, Rufous Piha, Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, White-lined Tanager and Lesser Greenlet to the day list. A few also saw Trilling Gnatwren, Tawny-crowned Greenlet and a rather furtive Wood Thrush. It was nice to see Northern Waterthrush so soon after the Louisiana at Villa Lapas. Mammals also featured on our walk through the forest and included Central American Agouti, White-tailed Deer and some very tame Collared Peccaries.

Completing the circuit, we met Alex in the car park just after midday, returning to Villa Lapas for lunch and seeing some Costa Rican Swifts on the way.

A siesta was followed by revisiting the trail near the bungalows in the late afternoon; this time we vowed to get further along it, although we knew this depended on the bird activity. Predictably, bird activity was a little stifled compared to the morning excursion but, nevertheless, we still picked up some good birds. These included nice views of Chestnut-backed Antbirds, Rufous-tailed Jacamar and Tropical Royal Flycatcher, but the previous day's Laughing Falcon remained elusive if very audible. After a lot of hard work, we had decent views of Bright-rumped Attila.

We made our way back to the bungalows to freshen up for dinner, but our day wasn't over yet. Herman offered an optional post-dinner excursion to Jaco (about 20 kms away) for a spot of owling. A well-subscribed late evening excursion to this patch of scrub and forest saw us finding Striped Owl almost immediately on arrival. Herman spotlighted a bird on cables for a short while allowing us all to see it in the 'scopes. Shortly afterwards we were watching Spectacled Owl in forest edge near the road ending a very successful trip indeed!

#### **4 February**

Another pre-breakfast coffee rendezvous gave us great views of Stripe-throated Hermit on the flowers around the restaurant. Once again, the clearings in the early morning paid dividends with Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Turquoise-browed Motmots, four Fiery-billed Ararcaris, Pale-billed and Lineated Woodpeckers in the same tree and Common Tody-flycatchers. Mantled Howler Monkeys could be heard in the distance as we walked the trail towards the river. Watching the river was rewarding once again with Amazon and Green Kingfishers and, a little later, our first White-necked Jacobin was seen from the dining area as we ate breakfast.

After eating, we headed back out to the Guacimo Road for a second crack at some dry country species. We were lucky to hear a Lesser Ground Cuckoo just after we arrived and with a bit of patience, we managed to locate this rather elusive species in one of the large grass tussocks. We were enjoying good 'scope views when it disappeared, only to relocate in a nearby tree where it was duly photographed and filmed. Incredibly, the show didn't end here, as it hopped into the road and began to dustbathe close to the admiring group of birders!

Eventually, it retreated into cover as a vehicle approached, allowing us to appreciate a few other birds like Plain-capped Starthroat, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Grey-headed Kite, Crane Hawk, White-fronted Amazons and a few tricky flycatchers like Yellow-olive Flatbill and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. As the heat increased, we called for the bus, but we made time to watch Banded Wren before leaving for lunch and a break from the sunshine.

The Tarcoles boat trip is always a favourite with Limosa groups and this year, we took a short detour prior to boarding as there was a pair of Black-and-white Owls roosting nearby. These made a fine start to our afternoon, sitting high in the trees in the shade of the canopy and looking splendid through the 'scopes.

On board, we delayed our trip into the mangroves a little by watching the waders and other birds gathered on the exposed mudflats. Small flocks of Least Sandpipers held Semipalmated and at least one Western Sandpiper – all good revision for finding one in the UK one day!

Other shorebirds included Wilson's and Semipalmated Plovers, Hudsonian Whimbrels, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, Willets and Spotted Sandpipers. There were also huge Brown Pelicans, Laughing Gulls and Royal Terns dotted about the mudflats with a good selection of larger wading birds such as American White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills, Tricoloured, Great Blue and Little Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets and Yellow-crowned Night Herons in the mangroves. Quite a spectacular gathering indeed!!

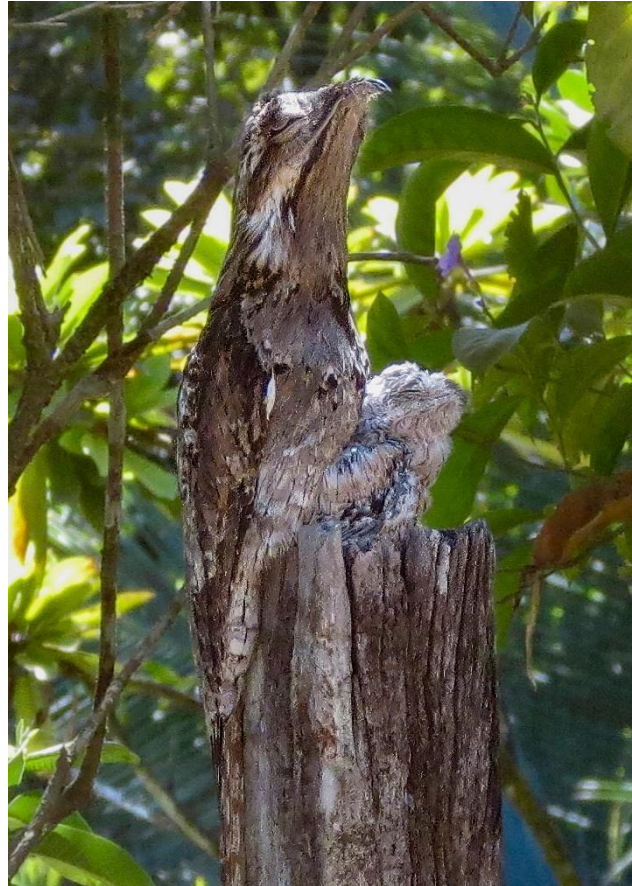
Venturing into the channels, we were accompanied by Ospreys and Common Black Hawks, but we had trouble locating some of the mangrove specialities. Mangrove Hummingbird and Mangrove Warbler showed reasonably well and, of course, the stunning Prothonotary Warblers are always a delight to see, but it was rather slow going. The kingfishers put in a good show though with Belted, Green, Ringed, Amazon and the diminutive American Pygmy Kingfisher all appearing and a perched Plumbeous Kite was our only record of this attractive species for the tour.

A couple of hours on the boat seemed to pass in a flash and we were soon heading back to dock, picking up Black-bellied Whistling Duck and Muscovy Duck enroute. Our final notable bird of the afternoon came in the form of a couple of Lesser Nighthawks appearing as dusk approached.

## **5 February**

With the first chapter of the Classic Costa Rica tour coming to an end, it was time to leave the Pacific lowlands and head for the cool mountain air. We took one last look around the Villa Lapas area for our pre-breakfast outing, taking a ten-minute bus ride uphill above the lodge. The view along the coast and the extent of Carara National Park was impressive to say the least, but as birds began to appear, our attention was diverted to the tall trees along the road. Grey-headed Chachalaca and Crested Guans clambered around the tall trunks. Gartered Trogon and Pale-billed Woodpecker gave great 'scope views, but it was two parrot species – White-crowned and Mealy, that showed well for a change, allowing close scrutiny with the 'scopes. Dusky-capped Flycatcher and Yellow-faced Grassquit both made their first appearances of the tour, before we returned to Villa Lapas for breakfast and free time to gather our things prior to departure.

A short break in our journey allowed us to see our first King Vulture of the tour at extreme range plus brief views of a few Costa Rican Swifts. Short-tailed Hawk was another 'from the bus' bird, before stopping at Londres de Quepos, a couple of hours into our journey. Herman explained that he hoped to show us a Common Potoo here and told us not to look too high. We were expecting to see this bird up a tree, mimicking a branch, but no, it was on a post at eye-level! There was also a chick, nestled into the belly feathers of the adult potoo, both birds staring skywards. Incredible camouflage, even if it appeared somewhat over-confident at such a low level.



*Common Potoo plus chick © Colin Bushell*

A short stop at Playalita yielded a few new trip birds that wouldn't be seen again –

Red-crowned Woodpecker, Collared Plover in the intense heat shimmer and Smooth-billed Ani. Our first Swallow-tailed Kites and lunch soon followed, and then we made a stop near San Isidro, first at some water purification works where we saw our first Least Grebes of the tour plus some handsome Blue-winged Teals, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and Northern Jacanas. However, it was the next stop that everybody was most excited about, as the search for Turquoise Cotinga began.

This is now a regular break in our travel day, well established in the Classic Costa Rica itinerary and when you see the exquisite cotinga you can see why! Resplendent in oily blues and maroons, the Turquoise Cotinga stood out well against the dark canopy just above its perch. What a bird!

Arriving at Savegre in the cool mountain air was a real pleasure and there were a few Lesser Violetears and Spotted Wood Quails calling as we arrived. We settled into our accommodation with anticipation high for the following few days in the highlands.

## **6 February**

As usual, we enjoyed early coffee before our pre-breakfast walk, but we were soon amongst the birds once the sun came up. A selection of hummingbirds awaited us on the flowers



outside the restaurant and along the road with Scintillant, Talamanca and Stripe-tailed all being new.

It didn't take long to find our target bird for the morning, as Resplendent Quetzals were relatively prolific in the sunshine. Needless to say, there were quite a few people at one of the Quetzal's favourite fruiting trees, but we managed to see them very well indeed, seeing up to six birds during the day.

We were soon acquainting ourselves with a new avifauna here in the highlands: Acorn Woodpeckers, Band-tailed Pigeons, Mountain Elaenias, Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers, Mountain Thrushes, Sooty-capped Bush Tanagers and Wilson's Warblers were now our 'bread and butter' birds.

Flushed with success of seeing our first Resplendent Quetzals, we returned to the lodge for breakfast, a meal that was to be interrupted by three Spotted Wood Quails on the hotel patio! This little gang had quite a few photos taken of them as they scuttled around outside the doors of reception before we could return to our meals.

Post-breakfast involved a walk to the neighbouring hotel to take 4x4s uphill to Los Robles. It is not easy getting anywhere around La Savegre, but that's nothing to do with crowds, traffic or any other inconvenience: there are just so many birds. Torrent Tyrannulet appeared, typically along the clear rushing river below our hotel, there were yet more quetzals, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper at a nest, Sulphur-winged Parakeets overhead and 'hummers' buzzing around.

Finally, we made it to the hotel, loaded up the trucks and made our way through the pine forests to a convenient turning point at the viewpoint with facilities. Making good use of the 'loo with a view' first, we walked a little further uphill towards a trail where we passed a few groups of birders exiting the trail. Their quarry had been the same as ours – a roosting Bare-shanked Screech Owl. Perched high in some bamboo tangles, it was quite tricky to see, but the 'scopes did a fine job once again. Black-faced Solitaire appeared for a lucky few along the trail while our first mid-level flock contained Black-throated Green Warblers, Collared Whitestart, Flame-throated Warbler and Ruddy Treerunners. As if this wasn't enough, an understory flock passed below us shortly afterwards with Yellow-thighed Brushfinch, Grey-breasted Wood Wren, Black-cheeked Warbler and a few of the aforementioned species. Regrouping at the trailhead, we all saw Silver-throated Tanagers, a few saw Spangle-cheeked Tanagers, we watched a Ruddy-capped Nightingale-thrush on the path below us and Ochraceous Wren around the trunks in the sunlight.

Our descent was eventful at times too. Taking our time to walk the trail, we encountered a fine selection of montane species including Collared Trogons, Yellowish Flycatchers, Brown-capped Vireos, Yellow-winged Vireos and Slaty Flowerpiercers. Nearing the foot of the hill, we found the usual Lesser Goldfinches and Yellow-bellied Siskins in the open scrubby areas

and our final bird, as we boarded the bus, was a magnificent King Vulture. A few folks added their first Blue-throated Toucanet just before lunch, but we knew there was more of those to come.

We deserved a bit of a break after all the excitement of the morning, but everyone was keen for more after the early afternoon siesta, so we headed uphill to the upper valley. Miriam's Café was our destination and her feeders were stacked with birds. We were greeted by Sooty Thrushes and Flame-coloured Tanagers and watched Yellow-thighed Brushfinches, Large-footed Finches, Hairy and Acorn Woodpeckers as we sipped fresh Costa Rican coffee. Volcano Hummingbirds and Grey-tailed Mountaingems attended the feeders, both of which were new 'hummers' for us.

With dusk approaching, we headed back to the bus and further up the valley for a bit of night birding. Dusky Nightjar was very cooperative indeed and appeared promptly. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for the shy Unspotted Saw-whet Owl that only called back a couple of notes and failed to appear. Regardless, we returned to our lodgings well satisfied with our day's haul and looking forward to more the following day.

## **7 February**

Our last morning at Savegre began with the now usual pre-breakfast coffee and stroll. Black Guan was one of the highlights of the walk along the river and we repeated many sightings of the previous day prior to breakfast. Spotted Wood Quails were again around the bungalows on our return, but today was a travel day so we didn't dawdle.

With bills settled and the bus loaded, we headed high into the Paramo of Cerro de la Muerte to our highest point of the tour. Birds are few and far between in the Paramo and Volcano Junco took a bit of finding, although a Peg-billed Finch showed for the lucky few at one point. There were plenty of Volcano Hummingbirds to keep us busy and we checked every Slaty Flowerpiercer in case it was the Peg-billed Finch.

Leaving the Paramo, we tried a couple of spots for Zeledonia and Timberline Wren but failed on both counts, so the next best thing was to have lunch! Paraiso de los Quetzales was a fine choice, with the viewing platforms outside the restaurant providing ample opportunity for new birds. Fiery-throated Hummingbirds and Grey-tailed Mountaingems attended the hummingbird feeders, alongside many Talamanca Hummingbirds, with Swallow-tailed Kite and Broad-winged Hawk adding variety over the canopy.

Although we saw no quetzals, we could hear one in the distant forest below, as well as a Golden-browed Chlorophonia. As good as the platform birding was, it seemed there was quite a bit of bird activity below us and although this involved a lot of steps, everyone was happy to descend and what a good decision it turned out to be!

Up to three Black-capped Flycatchers were flitting around the tall vegetated bank, a Black-and-yellow Phainoptila appeared briefly, a Black-billed Nightingale-thrush hopped around on the path in front of us and best of all three Golden-browed Chlorophonias were attending the fruiting tree, including a stunning male posing for photos. A real purple patch indeed!

*Tropical Screech Owls © Colin Bushell*

Being a travel day, we still had ground to make up but stopping in the town of Paraiso, we made a short stroll across the plaza and we were soon watching a pair of Tropical Screech Owls roosting



above us. Reacquainting ourselves with Finsch's Parakeets for the first time since day one in the field, we moved on, arriving at our hotel in Orosi in time for dinner.

## **8 February**

Rio Macho is a nice forested slope not far from our base and during the morning, we birded two sections of the road, before and after breakfast. Once again, we were introduced to a new suite of birds right from the start as Black-breasted Wood Quails could be heard calling in the distance, as we watched Rufous Mourner only minutes after leaving the bus.

Our first Brown Violetears and Purple-throated Mountaingems hovered around flowers, while Red-headed and Prong-billed Barbet were both seen nearby on mossy branches above the road. It was nice to get good views of Blue-throated Toucanets throughout the morning and another chance to see Black Guan, as a few had missed it at Savegre. Checking the understory we found a male Dot-winged Antwren, Chestnut-capped Brushfinch and Grey-breasted Wood Wrens, Olive-striped Flycatchers and Ochraceous Wrens in the middle levels and Golden-bellied Flycatchers just below the canopy.

Our first Golden-winged Warblers (always a thrill), Black-and-white Warblers, Tropical Parula, Blackburnian Warblers and Slate-throated Whitestarts graced the forest edge this morning and a nice selection of tanagers included Silver-throated and Golden-hooded.

As the morning heated up after breakfast, we were treated to some raptor action when a Black Hawk-eagle started calling, appearing through gaps in the nearby canopy from time to time. Broad-winged Hawks joined it and a Bat Falcon was discovered on a lofty perch above the forest. Predictably, the post-breakfast session was quieter than earlier, but a Silvery-fronted Tapaculo was unusually showy for this species in the late morning.

The forest near Hotel Quelitales was our venue for the afternoon birding. The weather had changed quite significantly from the morning, with overcast conditions and heavy rain starting as we approached the hotel. However, we would be under shelters this afternoon, checking a feeding station at the edge of the forest. New 'hummers' included Green Hermit, White-bellied Mountaingem, Violet Sabrewing and Black-bellied Hummingbird which were all at the feeders. Nearby, a Green-fronted Lancebill posed for photos by the river. Flocks passing through the forested edge held Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, a White-throated Thrush and a female White-ruffed Manakin, as well as many of the cloud forest species we had seen previously that morning.

However, Quelitales has recently become better known for a celebrity species haunting the forest floor and Alex beckoned us over to another viewing platform as the Scaled Antpitta had appeared briefly. We waited patiently until it reappeared, only to be joined by another (adult and juvenile were present) and we were able to watch (even 'scope) and photograph these special forest skulkers to our heart's content!

After a thrilling, but rather soggy afternoon, we retired to the restaurant where we enjoyed some of the best food of the tour before heading back to our hotel for the night.

## **9 February**

Vaux's Swifts were the first notable bird as we loaded the bus this morning. No pre-breakfast birding today as we departed for Ujarras in search of Cabanis's Ground Sparrow. Always a little tough to see, we knew this species would take a little finding as we set off around the lanes surrounding the coffee plantations. Yellow-faced Grassquits, Variable Seed eaters, Scarlet-rumped Tanagers and Brown Jays made themselves very obvious indeed and it was nice to get perched views of Brown-hooded and White-crowned Parrots. A swarm of White-collared Swifts wheeled across the hillsides and a Hook-billed Kite gave tantalising views as it dipped below a distant ridge canopy. Finally, we located a Ground Sparrow and it was virtually back where we had started our search near the bus, but never mind!

Moving on (as it was another travel day), we stopped at a small reservoir to look at some Lesser Scaups and a handful of Killdeers and Southern Lapwings before driving on to our

destination – Rancho Naturalista. Nearby we stopped at CATIE, a site I had visited many times on previous Limosa tours, but this time we didn't enter, as there was a Great Potoo roosting outside by the road. We 'scoped this beast for a while before moving on, having enjoyed our second potoo species of the tour.

Arriving at Rancho, we were welcomed by the staff, shown to our rooms and then had an al fresco lunch, overlooking the lodge clearing. Rancho is such a great place for birders – Grey-headed Chachalacas, Black-striped Sparrows, Collared Aracaris, Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, Chestnut-sided and Blackburnian Warblers and Red-throated Ant Tanagers were all seen in the clearing as we dined. Mammal interest was provided by White-nosed Coatis and Dusky Rice Rats. What a place!

After lunch, we joined Mercedes, one of Rancho's resident guides, for some birding from the veranda and then along the road below the lodge. The feeders were busy with Green Hermits, White-necked Jacobins, Green-breasted Mangos, Green-crowned Brilliants, Bronze-tailed Plumleteers and Crowned Woodnymphs, whilst Stripe-throated Hermits and Violet-headed Hummingbirds preferred the flowering bushes at the edge of the clearing.

In the trees above us, there were Squirrel Cuckoos, Gartered Trogons, Streak-headed Woodcreepers, Ochre-bellied Flycatchers and Philadelphia Vireos. Taking a slow walk downhill produced our first views of White-collared Manakins, Olive-backed Euphonias and vivid Summer Tanagers. The highlight of the afternoon for many, however, was the Keel-billed Toucan which was perched at the edge of the forest as we turned back to return to the lodge for dinner.

## **10 February**

As is tradition, we began our day at Rancho by gathering on the balcony for early morning coffee. Lesson's Motmot joined the large number of species already seen from the balcony the previous day before the breakfast bell rang.

Soon after breakfast, we headed for our rooms to gather our things, ready for a morning out at a nearby valley. Rio Tuis is a superb site for group birding, with wide tracks and good viewing over the rushing river, forest edge and canopy. New hummingbirds on this morning included Purple-crowned Fairy and Green Thorntail and a Laughing Falcon was a good bird to see as so few saw the first at Villa Lapas early in the tour. Rufous Motmot appeared in the depths of the forest up a slope, Black Phoebes flushed from the roadside and Olivaceous Woodcreeper was located in a mixed species flock.

The star bird here is the Sunbittern and we located a couple without too much trouble, one bird giving us a great display of its intense rufous wing pattern. Russet Antshrike and Slaty-capped Flycatcher teased for a while, before showing well as White-ruffed and White-collared

Manakins flitted around a fruiting tree. Southern Nightingale-wren was yet another skulker Herman managed to persuade into view with limited playback use.

Last stop before lunch was Rancho Bajo, just below the lodge. Green Thorntail gave us a second viewing of the morning, a Black-crested Coquette appeared briefly, and a Garden Emerald showed (which was our sole record of this hummingbird for the tour). However, it is the Snowcap that birders come to Rancho to see and we were fortunate enough to see several this morning, including adult males in their vinous best!

We had a busy post-lunch schedule starting at Lago Angostura where Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Muscovy Ducks, Blue-winged Teals and Lesser Scaups were easy to see, with American Coots, Purple Gallinules and Limpkins amongst the sedgy borders and secluded pools. A Pied-billed Grebe was elusive as it dived in and out of channels and a Snail Kite quartered the edges of the lake. Red-winged Blackbirds and Groove-billed Anis showed intermittently as they flew over the floating vegetation; 'scopes were very handy here indeed!

Our final port of call for the afternoon was a return visit to CATIE for Boat-billed Heron where we located a few after a while. They were more difficult to see than on some of my previous visits, but we returned to Rancho Naturalista after a very busy and bird-filled day indeed!

## **11 February**

Another early start found us gathering on the Rancho balcony, coffee in hand and taking in the ambiance for one last time. There was a slight change to our schedule this morning, with a visit to the moth trap at the edge of the forest beyond the last bungalows. Birds gather here in the early morning and we were treated to great views of Red-throated Ant Tanagers, Golden-crowned Warblers, Orange-billed Sparrows, White-breasted Wood Wrens and Fawn-throated Foliage-gleaner as we sat on nearby benches overlooking the 'feeding arena'.

After breakfast, we headed out to an area of pasture overlooking forest above the lodge. Unfortunately, this was quiet, and we failed to find any significant bird flocks or many birds perched up in the canopy, so we cut our losses and headed back to Rancho, gathered our belongings before setting off towards the Caribbean lowlands.

Now well into the final phase of the tour, we still had many new birds and experiences in store. We also had some 'sloth moments' too, with Alex finding several Brown-throated Sloths near the road.

One of the most recent additions to the Limosa Classic Costa Rica itinerary is a visit to Cope and his garden near La Union. Nestled at the edge of a small settlement, Cope has created a refuge in his property, with a small pool surrounded by trees and many feeders to attract hummingbirds and frugivores. Welcoming as always, he directed us to the blind where we ate lunch watching the comings and goings of many Neotropical species at close range. Russet-naped Wood Rail crept around the edge of the pool, our first Pale-vented Pigeons

perched on branches overhanging the pool alongside Channel-billed and Yellow-throated Toucans, whilst American Pygmy Kingfisher lurked in the darker recesses. We also had great views of Red-winged Blackbird and Red-legged Honeycreepers dazzled on the fruit feeders close by and the hummingbirds at the feeders included Scaly-breasted (our best views yet) and Long-billed Hermit. It was certainly hard to concentrate on the lunch and coffee.....

After a while, we were asked to try on some rubber boots and take the short bus ride to a block of tall forest. Cope took us along the trails to a pair of roosting Crested Owls, Green Ibis and then a pair of Spectacled Owls. He also showed us a little gathering of Honduran White Bats. Just incredible!

After this quite extraordinary few hours, it was time to say goodbye to Cope and his family and head to the lowlands. We arrived at our final destination for the tour – La Quinta – in time for dinner, beers and bird list (not necessarily in that order!).

## **12 February**

This morning's pre-breakfast gathering was at the feeding station near the rooms. Many of the expected species were present including the stunning Crimson-collared Tanager. With Chestnut-headed and Montezuma Oropendola, Yellow-throated Toucans and Collared Aracaris in the surrounding trees, it was hard to drag ourselves away. A walk around the La Quinta forest patch was a little quiet, but Stripe-breasted Wren was new for the tour and an Ovenbird seen by a lucky few was certainly a highlight.

After breakfast, we headed towards the famous La Selva Biological Station, a site that needs no introduction. However, we delayed our arrival a little by stopping along the main road where a pair of Great Green Macaws were nesting. At the time of our arrival, they weren't at the nest site, but we enjoyed good flight views. On our return visit after lunch, we were treated to incredible views of the birds, attending their nest. This species can be tricky to find some years, with the only sightings being birds calling raucously as they fly over the canopy, so we could count ourselves very fortunate indeed!! A Red-lore Amazon was also seen in the distant trees here during our morning stint.

Entering La Selva and meeting Joel, our local guide for the day, we were met by Black-cowled Oriole nest-building near the car park, numerous flycatchers already seen on the tour and Pied Puffbird and Masked Tityras in the tall trees surrounding the clearing. Stripe-throated and Long-billed Hermits fed on the Heliconias and flowering bushes.

At the edge of the clearing near our first trail, an Osprey flew overhead, but Joel's attention was drawn to some vocalisations at the forest edge and we were soon watching Trilling Gnatwren, as well as some visitors from the north like Chestnut-sided, Black-and-white and Golden-winged Warblers. These were splendid indeed, but it was another migrant that caught our attention a little later, when a Kentucky Warbler was heard calling and eventually

seen in the forest undergrowth. A Great Tinamou was a great sighting of this normally shy and retiring species, although La Selva does seem to be one of the best places to get good views of one.

Crested Guans perched as we made our way to a side trail which led back towards the entrance gate. This was very productive with various canopy species including Long-tailed Tyrant and Great Crested and White-ringed Flycatchers, with flashes of white across the trail and whirry wing beats being the tell-tale signs of White-collared Manakins. A Black-throated Wren took a little bit of work to see, although a Blue-black Grosbeak was a little more cooperative. We also saw both Brown-throated and Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloths along this trail.

Returning to the clearing, we chanced upon a few small flocks with White-browed Gnatcatcher, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper and Plain Xenops present. A White-whiskered Puffbird posed for the 'scope and Squirrel Cuckoos clambered around the trunks as we returned to the bus.

Our return visit to La Selva in the afternoon was a little quieter for bird activity. We concentrated on the few 'missing' species such as Blue-chested Hummingbird and the clearing near the bridge was good for a while with Cinnamon Woodpeckers, Black-crowned Tityras, Cinnamon Becard, Shining Honeycreeper, Black-faced Grosbeak and Yellow-crowned Euphonias perched in the emergent trees.

Birding in the forest was very difficult this afternoon with the overcast conditions making viewing very tricky. We scanned and scanned for Snowy Cotinga in the clearings, all sadly to no avail and the afternoon finished on a bit of a 'low' when a singing Middle American Screech Owl failed to show. Despite this, La Selva had produced an incredible range of birds and we returned to La Quinta well satisfied.

### **13 February**

Our final day in Costa Rica started with 'feeder watching' at dawn with a few of the group managing to see the Ovenbird before breakfast.

Rain set in as we left La Quinta and climbing the Caribbean slope, the prospects did not look too good for our final hours in the field. However, just as we approached Cinchona, there was a break in the clouds, the rain stopped, and the sun shone through. The feeding station at Cinchona was very busy when we arrived, so Herman took the order for coffee and we settled in.

There were many species we had seen before giving absolutely brilliant views including Black Guan, Green-crowned Brilliants, Violet Sabrewings and a new bird – the endemic Copper-headed Emerald. Prong-billed Barbets, Blue-throated Toucanets, Baltimore Orioles, Golden-



hooded and Silver-throated Tanager all came to the fruit regularly, giving ample photo opportunities.



*Baltimore Oriole © Colin Bushell*

One species that was attending less frequently, although still showed very well, was a Yellow-winged Tanager. This is a real rarity in Costa Rica (and more at home in Nicaragua) and may even have been the same individual I saw on my last tour to Costa Rica in 2020 at La Paz Waterfall Gardens (our next, and final venue).

Entering the waterfall gardens Green Thorntails, Black-bellied Hummingbirds and Green Hermits were the most interesting hummingbirds at the feeders. Sooty-faced Finch was present around the ornamental waterfalls in the hummingbird gardens, but it was soon time for lunch.

A few said their goodbyes after the buffet meal, most returning to the airport for our direct flight back to the UK with British Airways. Despite reservations concerning traffic issues near the airport, we arrived at the terminal in good time to check-in and relax before our transatlantic flight home.

### **14 February**

We arrived in Gatwick late morning, collected our bags and said our goodbyes after a wonderful Central American adventure. My thanks go to all the group for a most enjoyable tour and I hope to see you all again in the near future.

### ***Colin Bushell March 2024***