

## Costa Rica: Birding and Nature 2025

### TRIP REPORT

#### DAY 1: 21 April, 2025

The trip began with various members of the group trickling into San Jose over a couple of days. Unfortunately, a few flights were delayed by thunderstorms in Houston causing some unwelcome lengthy travel times. Everyone made it by 4pm and we headed out into Hotel Bougainvillea's spectacular gardens to get our first taste of Costa Rica's avifauna. A number of species that we quickly became familiar with were **Clay-colored Thrush** – Costa Rica's national bird, **Great Kiskadee**, **Blue-gray Tanager**, **Lesson's Motmot** with its pendulum-like tail, **Red-billed Pigeon**, and **White-winged Dove**. A few other less-common birds also said "Hola" – **Chestnut-sided Warbler**, a group of three **Baltimore Orioles**, a flyover **Gray Hawk**, and both **Turkey** and **Black Vultures**. The highlight, as always at this location, is the **Mottled Owl** that is quite reliable in the Bamboo stand; but also, the quirky-looking juvenile **Lineated Woodpecker** in its nest hole waiting patiently for dinner.

After a brief break, we met at the map at the front of the hotel and Jose Pablo (JP) gave us a short lesson on the geography of the country. We also shared some trip announcements, group norms, and reviewed the itinerary. Afterwards, we headed to the restaurant for a great dinner which concluded with giant pieces of chocolate cake, and coconut flan – yum! We finished the day with a short nighttime foray to one of the ponds in the hotel grounds where we soon found **Blue-sided Treefrog** and **Leopard Frog**.

#### DAY 2: 22 April, 2025

Our first early morning of the trip had us meeting at 5:30am for coffee and bananas, and departure for a nearby coffee plantation. Our focus at this location was the **Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow**, classified by the IUCN (the International Union for the Conservation of Nature) as Near Threatened, and our first country endemic species of the trip. It didn't take long for our first sighting of an individual scratching around in the dead grass



Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow © Toby Ross

underneath a coffee bush. It wasn't an easy bird to see clearly, but the glimpses it gave us showed the rich brown head coloration, and black heart-shaped patch on the white breast. Other birds that made an appearance included a pair of **Cabanis's Wren**, **Squirrel Cuckoo**, scads of **Crimson-fronted Parakeets**, an **Eastern Kingbird**, **Brown Jay**, gorgeous **Baltimore Oriole**, a noisy pair of **Rufous-backed Wrens**, and an elusive **Rufous-browed Peppershrike**.

After breakfast back at the hotel we received a fascinating presentation by Ernesto Carman from [Cerulea.org](http://Cerulea.org) on the Conservation of the Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow. Ernesto explained some of the life history, issues facing the species, and the conservation tools they are using to expand public opinion of the bird.

After this great learning opportunity, we set off for the Caribbean side of the country. We meandered through the busy city traffic and made our way up towards, and past, the lower reaches of Vulcan Poas. It had recently been misbehaving, but the top was obscured by low cloud so we couldn't make out the activity. The first stop en route was to try the local strawberries with chocolate and condensed milk dips – yummy! There was not much bird action in the back yard of the fruit stand, but we did find **Mountain Elaenia**, **Brown Jay**, and **Boat-billed Flycatcher**. The next stop was to check out a patch



Volcano Hummingbird © Toby Ross

of Verbena for a regionally endemic species restricted to the Costa Rica and Panama Highlands Endemic Bird Area – **Volcano Hummingbird**. This tiny bird is among the smallest birds in the world at 2-3g and just over 3", and known locally as *chispita* meaning "little spark", which seemed apt. For comparison for those in the Pacific NW, Anna's Hummingbirds are around 4" and 5g. We also had **Scintillant Hummingbird** and **Mountain Thrush** at this location too. We then made our way

to Mirador Cinchona for lunch. This small restaurant has fruit and nectar feeders, with views over the valley. There were so many new and exciting birds on and around the feeders that everyone found it hard to focus on ordering food. We had some great birds – **Black-chested Hummingbird**, **Green Hermit**, and our second true Costa Rican country endemic - **Coppery-headed Emerald**, **Silver-throated Palm**, and **Blue-gray Tanagers**, **Red-legged Honeycreeper**, **Buff-throated Saltator**, Jerry's (**Baltimore**) **Oriole**, among others. After we filled our bellies, and took a thousand photos, we headed out again.



Silver-throated Tanager © Toby Ross

The last stop before heading to our final destination was a short road called Virgen del Socorro. Starting at the top of the road we slowly made our way down to the bottom of the valley and the Rio Ángel. Our first bird was a **Green Kingfisher** perched on a rock in the river,

next were a couple of **Yellow-faced Grassquits**, while being serenaded by **Black-headed Nightingale-Thrushes** with their squeaky gate-like calls. A little further down the road we found a couple of trees that produced a whole host of species – a couple of **Lesser Greenlets**, both **Philadelphia** and **Red-eyed Vireos**, **Brown Violetear**, some wrens chattering in the undergrowth – **Bay Wren** and both **White-breasted** and **Gray-breasted Wood-Wrens**, and a brief sighting of a **Yellow-billed Cacique**, a species that’s often hard to see. We had a number of great warblers including **Tropical Parula**, **Blackburnian**, **Canada**, and **Slate-throated Redstart**, as well as a great number of tanagers – **Crimson Collared** (as seen on the cover of the trip’s bird checklist), **Scarlet-rumped**, **Blue-gray**, the gorgeous **Bay-headed**, and a couple of **Emerald Tanagers** needing to “get a room”. A **Scarlet-thighed Dacnis** and **Shining Honeycreeper** were definite highlights also. Once we reached the river at the bottom of the road, we disturbed a **Fasciated Tiger-Heron** and soon found our two main targets for the location – **Torrent Tyrannulet** and **American Dipper** with their giant white feet. Amazingly, we saw that the Dippers had a nest and although we didn’t have a clear view, it looked like they might have been feeding chicks.

After a successful stop with some great birds, we headed to Selva Verde Lodge where we’d be staying for a couple of nights. We checked-in, reviewed our checklists, and had some great Italian food.

### **DAY 3: 23 April, 2025**

Today we had a full day of birding at the [La Selva Biological Research Station](#). After breakfast and a few birds at the Selva Verde Lodge’s fruit feeders, we piled into the bus and made the short journey to La Selva. Unfortunately, Margaret was feeling under the weather this morning, but we promised to save lots of birds for later. We began the morning with a quick stop just outside the reserve where we saw one of the stars of the day – **Great Green Macaws** flying over. There are only about 250-500 breeding pairs of this Critically Endangered species remaining in the world, and so it’s a big deal for us to see them. We also had some **Red-lored Amazons** perched at the top of a tree, along with **Yellow-throated Toucan** and a small group of **Collared Aracari**. We then carried on to the reserve proper and started by walking the entrance road to the research station. Along this stretch we picked up a couple of great woodpecker sp. – a pair of **Black-cheeked** were actively hammering out a new nest hole, and **Chestnut Colored** gave us some good looks.

Some other birds included **Black-crowned Antshrike**, **Northern Black-throated Trogon**, a fabulous **Semiplumbeous Hawk** perched up in a tree with its bright orange legs and lores, and both **Great** and **Little Tinamous** that were ‘heard only’. Some non-avian wildlife included a **Forest Giant Owl Moth**, **Mantled Howler Monkeys**, and **Peacock Butterfly**. Once we arrived at the station, we met Joel, our La Selva guide for the day, and set off along the trail that leads past the soccer field. Before we got too far, we had our third species of **Woodpecker** for the day – **Cinnamon** and shortly after, our fourth – **Pale-billed Woodpecker** heard drumming.



Forest Giant Owl Moth © Toby Ross

We had a couple of ant specialists, namely **Spotted Antbird** and a heard **Red-throated Ant-Tanager**. As we returned to the main building, Jeremy spotted a couple of **Slaty-tailed Trogons** actively building a nest in a termite mound high up in a tree. The last noteworthy sighting for the morning was a pair of **White-whiskered Puffbirds** who were clearly collecting food for chicks. Joel ended the morning with a short presentation on the history of La Selva and some of the research studies that have taken place over the years.



Spotted Antbird © Toby Ross

We were happily reunited with Margaret back at the lodge just before lunch, and after ice cream (and a siesta for some), we headed out along another of the research station's trails. Our first species of interest was a couple of **Long-tailed Tyrants**, and then a mixed flock was found and the action suddenly really heated up – **Scarlet Tanagers**, **Golden-hooded Tanagers**, **Red-eyed Vireo**, **Yellow-green Vireo**, **White-browed Gnatcatcher**, **Olive-backed Euphonia**, **Tennessee Warbler**, **Chestnut-sided Warbler**, female **Blue Dacnis**, **Plain-colored Tanager**, **Green** and **Shining Honeyeaters**. During this activity we were also visited by a troop of **White-faced Capuchin monkeys** passing through. Lastly, a **White-ringed Flycatcher** was spied at the top of the tallest tree nearby. This species has a relatively restricted distribution in Costa Rica, and this was the only location on our tour where we saw it.



Shimmering Golden Sugar Ant, Strawberry Poison Dart Frog, Bullet Ant, Assassin Bug © Toby Ross

We continued along the trail and began entering deeper forest habitat. Some highlights were a **Yellow-billed Cuckoo**, a passage migrant on its way north; great views of a **Spotted Antbird**, a **Purple-throated Fruitcrow** on a nest, and a very close calling **Ocellated Antbird**, but no sightings. Herps were also a highlight this afternoon with **Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs** calling all around and some posing for photos. Another herp surprise awaited us on the path – an **Oliver's Parrot Snake** fell from the trees above us with a **Masked Treefrog** still alive in its mouth about to be consumed. Both

are purely arboreal species and so very rarely seen on the ground. It's likely that the strike-force of the snake unbalanced them both and down they fell.

On our way back to the main building we saw a **Keel-billed Toucan**, **Collared Aracari**, and a couple of **Crested Guan**. After we thanked Joel, we headed out of the station and had really great views of a pair of **Masked Tityra** making a nest in a well-used snag; and then in the distance, a small troop of **Spider Monkeys**, our third species of primate for the day (well, 4 if you include us!).

Back at Selva Verde Lodge we had a little time to recuperate, then dinner (with multiple deserts for some – hmmm flan!) and checklist review. A couple of the group stuck around after dinner to find and photograph **Red-eyed Treefrogs**, along with a couple of sleeping **Green Basilisk** lizards.

#### **DAY 4:** 24 April, 2025

It was time to leave Selva Verde and make our way to Arenal, but not before a little time at the feeders next to the restaurant. Some highlights included **Orange-billed Sparrow**, **Streak-headed Woodcreeper**, and **Keel-billed Toucan**. Along the river we saw **Little Blue Heron** and **Ringed Kingfisher**. A couple of **White-tailed Deer** also made an appearance.

We then took a short drive to Refugio Lapa Verde, a private reserve that harbors 1,365ha of rainforest. We met Kenneth, one of the wardens, who gave us a tour of the property which culminated in a steep climb to a 12m-high observation tower. Despite the heat, we encountered a great selection of birds – **Grey-headed Chachalaca**, an **Anhinga** family on the edge of the lake, a few soaring **King Vultures** and a **Broad-winged Hawk** surfing thermals overhead. We spent a good amount of time with a **White-collared Manakin** lek, listening to the male's popcorn-like snaps made with its wings. Tricky to photograph, but Margaret got a good shot and even saw it slide backwards along the branch

(Michael Jackson style) – all part of its breeding display. Another highlight was an incredible camouflage expert – **Common Pauraque**, sitting on a nest. Despite it being no more than 6ft away, some of us still couldn't see it at first. A true master of disguise. Kenneth shared a short presentation with us on the importance of the location and the work of the foundation.



Common Pauraque © Toby Ross

After this great experience we hit the road heading for Arenal. We stopped en route for a delicious lunch and then paid a quick visit to a grocery store called Muelle Supermercado for an unusual resident – **American Barn Owl**. Amazing! What a crazy place to roost. Our next birding stop was La Peninsula Road, just before arriving at Arenal Observatory Lodge. This very bumpy road produced some great roadside birding, including a first for the trip **Rufous-tailed Jacamar** perched on a wire, **Smoky-brown Woodpecker** (our sixth woodpecker of the trip so far), also new, a couple of **Gartered Trogon** (our third trogon of the trip), two pairs of **Broad-billed Motmot**, **Black-cowled Oriole**, a female **Black-crested Coquette**, and an **Osprey** off in the distance close to Lake Arenal. One last stop along the road gave us three of the larger bird species – **Gray-headed Chachalaca**, **Crested Guan**, and **Great Curassow**. We also saw our first **Yellow-bellied Flycatcher** and **White-shouldered Tanager** of the trip. Before finally heading to the lodge, we stopped one last time for three **Southern Lapwing** in a grassy field.

We were welcomed at the lodge with delightfully cool and minty cold flannels which were eagerly utilized. Check-in was painless and after settling in we all met for a sumptuous dinner. After reviewing the checklist, a couple of us headed out for a night walk which included visiting the moth trap and the frog pond. Both provided lots to see – **Peruvian Dobsonfly**, **Duponchel's Sphinx Moth**, and a **Black Witch**, and then by the pond **Brilliant Forest Frog** with their super cool contact calls, **Mahogany Tree Frog**, **Red-eyed Frog**, **Central American Bullfrog**, and a **Stejneger's Snail Sucker** snake completed the herp tally.

#### **DAY 5: 25 April, 2025**

Today was a full day of birding within the extensive Arenal Observatory Lodge grounds. We started out with a little time on the deck watching the feeders and then headed out along the paths that run through the resort. The feeders brought in a few **Crested Guans** and they gave us quite the show as they sparred in clear view. A new hummingbird species made an appearance also – **Crowned Woodnymph**. On the trail we had some great views of **White-crowned Parrots** and **Red-shouldered Amazons**, and along with some jet-black **Melodious Blackbirds** and **Variable Seed-eaters** saw more colorful species like, **Hepatic Summer**, **Scarlet-rumped**, **Blue-gray**, **Golden-hooded**, and **Emerald Tanagers**. The star of the morning was a male **Black-crested Coquette** that hovered in front of us while feeding on Verbena, perching perfectly for photos. It seemed quite satisfied with everyone fawning over it.



Black-crested Coquette © Toby Ross

After this foray, we headed back to the lodge for breakfast, and then straight back out again, this time for the Los Monos trail (Monkey Trail). During this outing we racked up even more hummers – **White-necked Jacobin**, **Stripe-throated Hermit**, **Brown Violetear**, **Violet-headed Hummingbird**, **Bronze-**

**tailed Plumeteer, Crowned Woodnymph, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird.** We also saw a few woodpeckers which included **Golden-Olive** and a pair of courting **Black-cheeked Woodpeckers.** Some other birds of note included a **Northern Plain-Xenops** working its way up a tree searching for bugs, a **Swallow-tailed Kite,** good views of a couple of **Orange-chinned Parakeets,** a **Scarlet-thighed Dacnis,** and the lovely song of a **Nightingale Wren.**

After another delicious lunch and time to digest, we were out again mid-afternoon, this time to the Waterfall Trail. It was generally a quiet afternoon, but what we lacked in quantity we certainly made up for in quality. We had great views of a **Spotted Antbird, Wedge-billed Woodcreeper,** and **Common Tody-flycatcher.** Heard the beautiful song of the **Black-headed Nightingale-thrush,** and clear views of **Gray-capped Flycatchers.** New birds included **Golden-crowned Warblers** (with no Gold coloration in sight!), soaring **Barred Hawk** and **Sharp-shinned Hawk.** The highlight of the afternoon, by a long way, was a **Black-headed Antthrush.** This is one of those birds that is heard from time to time but rarely seen. Initially JP thought it was a Thicket Antpitta and started calling to it but then realized it was an **Antthrush.** The calling back and forth continued with lots of peering into the darkness for an equally dark bird. The task seemed futile, but then suddenly JP grabbed for his scope and within seconds he was gesticulating for folks to get to the eyepiece. JP was elated and we were equally energized by his excitement. Most of these birds are special to us because many of them are new, but it's not until you see your guide so excited do you know that you have a very special bird in view. High fives all round and it was back to the lodge for sunset over Lake Arenal, dinner, checklist, and a well-earned night's sleep.

#### **DAY 6: 26 April, 2025**

Today was a travel day with interesting stops along the way. Some of the group started the day on the deck of the restaurant checking the feeders and surroundings. There were no new birds, but some fun things were a **Southern House Wren** devouring a giant moth, and a **Great Currawong** mum with two chicks. After breakfast we boarded the bus and headed to our first birding stop of the day – Bogorin Trails. Before the journey really got going however, just outside the main gate of the lodge Jose Pablo spotted the lanky form of a **Fasciated Tiger-Heron.** This species prefers fast running water and is not always easy to see, so we hopped out of the bus to get a better look. However, as we did, we flushed a **Sunbittern!** This is a species that can be really difficult to see and so we rapidly switched our attention to this gorgeous bird. We watched as it collected nesting material. It flew a couple of times into some low vegetation at the edge of the river, its likely nesting spot.



Sunbittern © Toby Ross

After this great spectacle we headed to Bogarin Trails, a private reserve that provides good opportunities for some specific species. As soon as we arrived, our first target unexpectedly appeared completely out in the open – **White-throated Crake**. A couple of other species were good additions to our trip – **Russet-naped Wood-Rail**, **Black-and-White Owl**, **Long-billed Hermit**, and **Long-billed Gnatwren**, as well as some we'd already seen like, **Green Kingfisher**, **Rufous-tailed Jacamar**, **Olive-backed Euphonia**, **Orange-billed Sparrow**, and **White-collared Manakin**. A highlight for everyone was our first (in the flesh) **Hoffman's Three-toed Sloth**! It gave us fantastic views and was awake and eating, behavior not often observed seeing as they spend 50% of the day sleeping. Finally, before we left, we walked to a couple of nearby ponds where we found 4 roosting **Boat-billed Herons** with their giant bills tucked under their wings. We clambered back onto the bus for the drive to Monteverde.

We drove around Lake Arenal, methodically making our way uphill towards Monteverde. We pulled into Cala Lodge as evening was nearing, checked-in, reviewed the checklist, and had a great dinner in town.

#### **DAY 7: 27 April, 2025**

Our targets today were a trio of incredible birds - **Three-wattled Bellbird**, **Resplendent Quetzal**, and **Long-tailed Manakin** - and boy were we lucky! A great breakfast was provided by the lodge as we sat on the veranda birding while we ate. A few new species made an appearance including crowd-favorites **Northern Emerald Toucanet**, tiny **Canivet's Emerald**, **Blue-vented Hummingbird**, **Rufous-and-White Wren**, and a very bold **Chestnut-capped Warbler** hunting crumbs.

Our first proper birding destination today was Bajo del Tigre Reserve, part of the Children's Eternal Rainforest complex of Protected Areas. This location is officially on the Pacific side of the Tilarán range and is noticeably drier than other reserves in Monteverde that are on the Caribbean side. The well-maintained trails provided access to some great birds. Some new species included **Purple-throated Mountain Gem**, **Stripe-tailed Hummingbird**, and **Bright-rumped Attila**. But the highlight was one of the best birds of the trip – **Three-wattled Bellbird**! As we made our way along the trails we started to hear their amazing, other-worldly calls. As the calls got louder, it wasn't long before JP

had us on an adult male with those amazing wattles and incredible vocalizations. The views were good, but we knew we could do better. We continued along the path looking for other birds when we heard another Bellbird call coming from very nearby. This time we were serenaded, if you can call it that, by a younger male. He had shorter wattles and provided fantastic looks, photos, and video. We spent a lot of time enjoying the bird and everyone knew they were witnessing a real treat.



Three-wattled Bellbird © Toby Ross

With the Bellbird “in the bag” we searched around for other birds. We chanced upon a calling **Long-tailed Manakin** in bushes near the trail, and then out of nowhere he showed up, right in front of us. We weren’t really ready for him to appear so close, but Richard was able to get a superb photo. Other than that, it wasn’t a massively birdy morning, but again quality over quantity.

After a great lunch at Stella’s in Santa Elena we headed to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve. Our entrance fee was paid, and we made our way along one of the excellent trails. We hadn’t walked more than about 100m from the entrance when Jose Pablo pointed out the nest hole of a **Resplendent Quetzal**. We knew our patience would be rewarded, so we waited and tried to ignore the other noisy park users. It wasn’t long before a male alighted onto a nearby perch. He was holding something in his mouth and so we knew he would be making his way into the nest to deliver the meal to a waiting chick. A few moments later the female popped her head out of the nest hole. She cautiously surveyed the surroundings hoping not to draw attention to the nest. Once she decided the coast was clear she flew out and within a few moments the male flew in and perched on the outside of the hole ready to deliver his meal, allowing us to get amazing photos. After getting our fill we moved on, but later, as we passed by, we knew the male was on the nest because you could see his two long upper tail covert feathers protruding out of the hole.



Resplendent Quetzal © Toby Ross

We then took a different trail in the hopes of getting away from the crowds. Although not a ton of birds, it was great to do some forest bathing. Some birds we picked up here included a heard **Prong-billed Barbet**, a **Yellowish Flycatcher** likely near to a nest, **Common Chlorospingus** and a very busy **Costa Rican Warbler**. We were also serenaded beautifully by **Black-faced Solitaire** and **Slaty-backed Nightingale-Thrush**, and rewarded with sightings of a **Gray-breasted Wood-Wren**.

We eventually returned to the park entrance and headed across the street to the Colibri Café where Hummers of 3 kinds awaited us – **Violet Sabrewing**, **Green-crowned Brilliant**, and **Purple-throated Mountain-gem**. This place is always busy with human visitors and hectic hummers, but a Cloud Forest Hot Chocolate helped calm things down a little. We returned to the lodge, had a bit of a break, then checklist, and dinner at a local restaurant. What a great day!

#### **DAY 8: 28 April, 2025**

After a very wet and windy night, we woke up to a surprisingly dry morning. Birding around the lodge, we picked up a couple of **Collared Trogons** and had great views of **Lesson’s Motmot**, **Swainson’s Thrush**, and **White-eared Ground-Sparrows**. We had breakfast, loaded up the bus and set off for

our next destination – the Caribbean coast. Our first stop, once at sea level, was a side road off the main highway. Our quarry was **Mangrove Hummingbird**. We drove along the road, peering out the bus at potential locations, but the nectar-bearing flowers JP was expecting had already progressed to seed pods, and so the Hummingbirds were nowhere to be seen. Despite this, we jumped out the bus to see what we could find. There’s always something and it actually turned out to be a very active spot, although very hot. We had **Cinnamon Hummingbird**, a tree full of **Great Egrets**, a pair of **Black-headed Trogons**, **White-throated Magpie-Jay**, a pair of **Black-crowned Tityra**, and a **Panama Flycatcher** which JP was super excited about due to its limited, very coastal, distribution in Costa Rica. While all this was going on, we could hear a **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl** incessantly hooting in the late morning heat. This is not uncommon as it is a species that is often active during the day, but they can be tricky to locate. We searched for a while, focusing our attention on the thickets across the road, until our amazing driver, Rodrigo, called out and pointed to the top of the massive Rain Tree we were seeking shade under. There it was, peering down at us from the crown of the tree. Such a cool bird.



Pacific Screech Owl © Toby Ross

The next location was on another quiet road off the highway which provided good views of **Inca Dove**, **Common Ground Dove**, **Groove-billed Ani**, a couple of **Stripe-headed Sparrows**, and another **White-throated Magpie-Jay**. We were feeling in need of some refreshment by this time and so we headed to a nearby restaurant. After lunch, the final stop before heading to our lodge was another side road. At one point, the bus stopped, and Jose Pablo jumped out, returning moments later to invite us to see what he had found. We didn’t know what we were looking for but managed to eventually get on the birds that had the most amazing Camouflage – a pair of **Pacific Screech-Owls**. They were nearly impossible to see despite sitting completely out in the open, amazing!

We continued on foot and found a field with a pair of **Double-striped Thick-knees** (although they should really be named Thick-ankles, but it doesn’t quite sound right). There was also a **Rufous-backed Wren** and a heard **Striped Cuckoo**. Continuing in the bus a little further, we hopped out for what were some of the best birds of the day, and possibly the trip – **Common Potoo** with a fluffy chick standing half concealed in the parent’s belly feathers. Again, like the owls, they were almost impossible to see



Common Potoo © Toby Ross

if not pointed out by our amazing guide. The chick was gaping to regulate its temperature in the mid-day heat and looked incredibly cute. Wow! Two masters of disguise within minutes of each other!

It was time to move on and we drove to Villa Lapas to check-in and were greeted by quite the downpour. We abandoned any further birding and met for checklist and dinner. A little time was also spent searching the ponds for herps and we were rewarded with Harlequin, Yellow, and Masked Treefrogs, Sabinal Frog, Copper Anole (lizard), and Rhombic Cat-eyed Snake.

### **DAY 9: 29 April, 2025**

We woke up to heat and very high humidity and started the day birding the trail leading from the lodge up the valley. It had rained a lot overnight, and we needed to be careful of the mud. It was quite a birdy morning that included a couple of battling **Long-billed Hermits**, a **White Ibis**, and **Bare-throated Tiger-Heron** on the river, both **Dusky** and **Chestnut-backed Antbirds**, we heard a **Long-tailed Manakin** and saw a juvenile male **Red-capped Manakin**, a couple of **Orange-billed Sparrows** were exploring the undergrowth on the side of the trail, and a **Northern Waterthrush** bobbed its way along the path in front of us.

After refueling at the breakfast buffet, we headed out to Carara National Park. It was already pretty hot and steamy, but we were prepared with lots of water and excitement for what we might find. We set off along the Universal Trail, trying to get ahead of some of the crowds that were already arriving. Highlights from the morning included a swarm of army ants that attracted a whole host of species.

Army ants are carnivorous and nomadic, not creating a homebase nest, and when they hunt, they fan out and form a blanket that spreads across the forest floor. They search for prey – things like large insects, small reptiles, even chicks in nests – and overwhelm them as they try to escape. As the insects and reptiles flee the marauding hordes, other wildlife, including birds, take advantage and enjoy the bounty. Certain species of bird rely heavily on this method of finding food and usually have names that start with “Ant”, like Ant-shrike, Ant-pitta, Ant-bird, Ant-wren, Ant-thrush etc. Finding a swarm of army ants in the forest is like winning the jackpot for birders searching for these highly affiliated birds. The swarm ahead of us was attracting many different species – **Chestnut-baked Antbird**, **Bicolored Antbird**, **Northern Black-throated Trogon**, **Grey-headed Tanagers**, **Tawny-winged Woodcreeper**, **Northern Barred-Woodcreeper**, **Cocoa Woodcreeper** – it was a riot of movement and tough to keep track of all the action, but most of the group saw the diversity of birds.

Another highlight of the morning was a nest-building pair of **Tropical Royal Flycatchers**. These are magnificent birds. Although they're mostly shades of drab brown, the males have a long bright-red crest that he flashes when displaying, while the female has a smaller



Tropical Royal Flycatcher female © Toby Ross

orange version. This pair were busy building a hanging nest over the river - although it looked like the female was truly doing all the work (go figure!). JP thinks that the male might be showing the female where to find good nesting materials and patrolling the area to make sure there were no intruders. At one point, both male and female flew into the nest site, and the male displayed his full crest for the female. It was such a treat seeing this species interact, display, and nest build.

Lastly, as we headed back to the bus, Jose Pablo suddenly stopped, and we backtracked along the trail. He had heard a **Streak-chested Antpitta** close by and wanted to see if we could get a look. It took no time at all for our amazing guide to spot it and set up the scope. It was close to the trail and calling very loudly. JP described the bird as “an egg with legs”, which was actually pretty spot on! We soon saw a second individual, and all had great looks at what’s usually a very difficult species to see. We were all pretty exhausted after this birding session and so we were glad for the air-conditioned bus and promise of lunch.



Streak-chested Antpitta © Toby Ross

After a short break, we headed out birding again, but as we set off the heavens opened, so we adjusted the plan. We drove to the town of Jaco and took a road inland that had tall grass on either side. As we drove, we spotted a few new species that relied heavily on this habitat type – **Blue-black Grassquit**, **Morelet’s Seedeater**, **Blue Grosbeak**, and **Groove-billed Ani**. At one point, a **Gray Hawk** flew past the bus and landed in a nearby tree giving us excellent looks. We also stopped by a river and found a few **Muscovy Ducks** perched in a tree on the bank.

I think we all needed a slightly easier afternoon, and this more bus-centric excursion was a welcome break. We returned to the lodge, relaxed for a bit, met for the checklist, and then dinner.

#### **DAY 10:** 30 April, 2025

This morning, we had a boat trip scheduled for the Rio Tarcoles, so after loading our bags and filling up with breakfast, we headed out for the short drive to the river. On the dock we boarded our boat with Captain Carlos who was not only an adept boat driver but also an amazing spotter. During the nearly 2 ½ hour cruise we tallied 62 species with some of the highlights being the unique-looking **Roseate Spoonbills** swiping their bills side to side in the water feeding on invertebrates; a gorgeous **Tri-colored Heron** creating shade with its wings while it fished in the shallows; a mixed flock of tiny seed eaters that included **Variable Seedeater**, **Blue-black Grassquit**, **Morelet’s Seedeater**, **Tricolored Munia**, and **Ruddy-breasted Seedeater**, the latter, the rarest of them all. We had a **Bat Falcon** fly rapidly over the river; a very range-restricted **Mangrove Vireo**; and a couple of **Common Black Hawks** displaying overhead. Shorebirds were well represented too – **Whimbrel**, **Willet**, **Black-bellied Plover**, **Wilson’s Plover**, **Spotted Sandpiper**, **Least Sandpiper**, and **Ruddy Turnstone**, and finally a couple of **Kingfishers** made an appearance – **Amazon** and **Green**.

After wandering around the dock's giftshop we headed off to Savegre. We drove via Alajuela and San Jose and stopped for lunch at a great Mexican Restaurant. Bellies full once again, we continued our journey. It didn't seem long before we stopped at a MegaSuper (grocery store) and JP started peering through his binoculars at a scruffy lot with a couple of cows, scrub and trash. He saw what he was looking for and we all exited the bus at this very unsuspecting location. This is the exact reason why we always use local guides on Alight Tours trips; there is no way a foreign guide is going to know these random little places to pick up fun birds. There were 4 species JP hoped for at this spot, and they all appeared one-by-one – a couple of **Killdeer** (or really they should be called Killcow in this spot), **Mourning Dove**, **Eastern Meadowlark**, and a pair of **White-tailed Kites**. Crazy! This time we really were on our way to Savegre. Once we topped out at 10,000ft/3000m we began descending into the highland Savegre Valley, following the twisty-turny road down to the river and our lodge at 7,100ft/2,200m. The temperature was a stark difference to the heat and humidity we woke up to that morning and demonstrates why there is so much diversity in this small country – you can travel from coastal lowland humid rainforest to highland wet near-alpine habitat in a single day.

### **DAY 11: 1 May, 2025**

We woke up to a chilly morning, eager to head out and see what the highlands could provide. After sipping coffee like hummingbirds at a feeder, we jumped in the bus and headed off. First stop, Quetzals! As we drove, we soon saw a crowd of people standing on the side of the road peering into some trees. Knowing what was about to happen, JP instructed us to “hold our ground” once we found a good vantage point in the lineup of people – it sounded like we were about to enter a rugby scrum! While waiting, we first saw a couple of Flame-colored Tanagers brightening up the morning gloom. But we didn't have to wait long before our target flew up to a nearby branch where everyone rushed to get a glimpse – a female Quetzal! We each found a good vantage point in line with the nest hole, and soon the male arrived and perched nearby. With the great views this morning, and those we'd had previously in Monteverde, it felt only right that we left the scrum to the birds.

We continued birding down the road on foot and soon picked up a few new species for the trip – **Acorn Woodpecker** with its clown-like face, **Mountain Elaenia**, **Fiery-throated Hummingbird**, **Dark Pewee** on a nest, **Yellow-bellied Siskin**, and **Sooty-capped Chlorospingus** (although JP also saw a **Golden-bellied Flycatcher**). We then continued in the bus to a trail that led to a trout fishery. Trout is an important source of protein in the highlands, and the hatchery provides young fish for the locals to introduce to their ponds to grow on for food. We enjoyed a number of great birds here, including our first views of the fabulous **Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher**, a **Collared Trogon** gave us nice looks, as well as a couple of stocky **Chestnut-capped Brushfinches**. Other new birds included **Sulphur-winged Parakeets** flying overhead, **Spot-crowned Woodcreeper**, **Spotted Barbtail**, **Sooty Thrush**, and “Sparkle-headed dudes”, AKA **Spangle-cheeked Tanagers**. After a great early-morning of birding session, hungry bellies had us returning to the lodge for a great breakfast.

After breakfast, we took one of the trails that led into the forest away from the lodge's main building. Forest birding is always difficult and with the trail following a busy stream, hearing bird calls wasn't easy. Despite that, we had some great species. A small mixed flock provided good views of busy

**Ruddy Treerunners** who were accompanied by a couple of **Common Chlorospingus** and a **Sooty-capped Chlorospingus**. Jose Pablo shared some great fruits with us and educated us on the uses of numerous native plants. Other birds included a **Barred Becard** which are always hard to see, a likely pair of **Tufted Flycatchers**, a heard **Brown-capped Vireo** and **Gray-breasted Wood-Wren**, **Black-cheeked Warbler**, and a few more “**Sparkle-headed Dudes**”. We turned around at the waterfall and headed back to the lodge where we were greeted by a stunning **Silver-throated Tanager**, and **Talamanca Hummingbird**, **White-throated Mountain-gem**, a pair of **Flame-colored Tanagers**, and a small group of **Sulphur-winged Parakeets** feeding in nearby trees.

After a short break we headed out for lunch at a local restaurant up the road. Miriam’s Restaurant has great food, but even better hummingbird feeders, and the outside deck was a riot of humming and buzzing! It was nearly impossible for JP to get us to focus on lunch with so many great hummers around, but we finally did as we were told. The family-style food was fantastic, and we could eat as much or as little as we liked – the trout was a hit.

NOW for the hummers! There were 5 species whizzing around – **Talamanca Hummingbird** with its blue throat and purple crown, **Lesser Violetear** with its occasional sticky-outy “ears”, teensy **Volcano Hummingbird**, the very dapper **White-throated Mountain-gem**, and the spectacular **Fiery-throated Hummingbird**. Other great birds were also using the feeders including **Acorn Woodpeckers**, a **Hairy Woodpecker** (different looking than we’re used to in the Pacific NW), **Large-footed Finch**, **Buff-fronted Quail-Dove**, and a **Slaty Flowerpiercer** among other old, feathered friends.



Fiery-throated Hummingbird © Toby Ross

We then headed to Los Quetzales National Park where the rain began to dampen our enthusiasm, as well as the birds. We had a bunch of **Band-tailed Pigeons** which JP said used to be hunted in the park, **Ruddy Pigeons** were heard in the background, a **Silvery-fronted Tapaculo** was heard, but just like JP described, they’re the bird version of mice and really difficult to see. We had good looks at **Buffy Tuftedcheek** and **Ruddy Treerunners**, some saw a **Black-and-Yellow Silky-flycatcher** and heard a **Flame-throated Warbler**, we also saw a **Black-cheeked Warbler** and heard a **Black-thighed Grosbeak** – most of these, new birds for the trip. With the rain starting to get heavier we ducked into the bus and headed back to the lodge. However, our birding was not yet finished. As we passed the Quetzal spot, we slowed down to let a car pass, and to our great surprise, we saw an **American Dipper** fly downstream. Luckily, we all managed good looks of this funny wren with its massive feet. Then, further down the

road JP spied two **Black Guans** on rocks in the middle of the river! A great find. It turns out he'd been searching for them all day!

We had a bit of a break before meeting up for Part I of the checklist review. We were interrupted by dinner with discussion turning to accents and pronunciation of English words – collared vs colored, and the interesting New Zealand accent! Part II of checklist review followed, before heading to bed. Such a great day!

## DAY 12: 2 May, 2025

Today was a long travel day with new birds along the way.

Up early again with a small group doing some early birding. The only new birds were a couple of groups of **Spotted Wood-Quail** that could be heard calling to each other. Other birds included **Slate-throated Redstart**, **Slaty Flowerpiercer**, poor looks at **Golden-browed Chlorophonia**, **Mountain Elaenia**, and a heard **Resplendent Quetzal**.



"Jerry, the Junco's are on the ground!" © Toby Ross

Our lunch stop was our meeting location for our new friends – Paula and Art - joining the trip for the extension. We arrived at Paraiso Quetzal in really good time giving us good opportunities to enjoy the amazing birds visiting the feeders. It was a riot of activity with hummingbirds zooming around everywhere. The most predominant sp. was **Fiery-throated Hummingbird**,

After a tasty breakfast we loaded our luggage, boarded the bus, and headed to higher elevation. It was interesting to see the habitat and flora change as we ascended, until we finally hit what is called Paramo – a high-altitude, tropical grassland ecosystem located above the treeline in Central America and the Andes in South America. After passing someone using the “wild banos” we saw what we were searching for and pulled over. We all jumped out of the bus, and all had great looks at a **Volcano Junco** hopping around with its menacing-looking eyes. We also had good views of **Black-billed Mountain-Thrush** and **Sooty Thrush**. Because we found the Junco so quickly, we headed to another birding spot near Los Quetzales NP. But before long, we were rained out. We did pick up a couple of interesting birds here though – **Hairy Woodpecker**, **Mountain Thrush**, and a heard **Black-thighed Grosbeak**.



Sooty Thrush © Toby Ross

then **Talamanca Hummingbird**, **Lesser Violetear**, the occasional **White-throated Mountain-gem**, and the tiniest of all, **Volcano Hummingbird**. The photographers in the group were very happy and got great photos. The hummers even took a ride on our phones as we photographed them! Other great birds here were **Long-tailed Silky-Flycatchers**, **Slaty Flowerpiercer**, **Acorn Woodpecker**, and **Mountain Thrush**.

After a tasty lunch, we tore ourselves away from the balcony and boarded the bus again for the long journey ahead. We took a rest break at a grocery store and shopped for school supplies to donate later. We then hit the road again, first gaining altitude to over 11,000ft and then going down, eventually to sea level. Our adventure for the day hadn't finished yet. Driving into a small town called Palmar Norte one of the tires on the bus blew out with a very loud bang. Uh oh! Rodrigo quickly pulled into a supermarket parking lot to see how bad the damage was, and we all offloaded. Thankfully we were in a decent sized town and Rodrigo was quickly off to get the tire fixed. The rest of us stayed at the grocery store and, of course, started birding! We actually picked up a few new trip birds including **Gray-breasted Martin**, **Costa Rican Swift**, and **Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift**. We were also able to introduce Paula and Art to some of the birds we'd already been seeing – **White-collared Swift**, **Scarlet Macaw**, **Tropical Kingbird**, **Great-tailed Grackle**, and **Variable Seedeater** – not bad for a grocery store parking lot. We obviously took a break for ice cream (hielo-crema!) and used the baños. Then before we knew it, Rodrigo was back with the bus, so quick! We all jumped in and we were back on the road. We had gotten a good half mile down the road when suddenly a chorus went up of “Where’s Vicki and Laura!!!!”. Somehow, when Rodrigo arrived, our friends had wandered off and didn’t notice the bus had arrived. We were too eager to set off to do a head count, GAH!! We quickly turned round and there they were waiting eagerly for our return. Sheepishly, we set off again. After these mishaps we were definitely a little off schedule, and we didn’t make it to the next lodge until after dark. Our dinner was waiting for us in the spectacular lodge restaurant, and we enjoyed not being on the road as we ate. After dinner we were escorted to each of our unique and funky rooms but unfortunately, as we made our way in the pitch-black night, Margaret took a fall on the bridge leading over the creek and seriously hurt her knee – so sorry Margaret 😞. Once safely in our rooms, we fell into bed with the sound of the rainforest all around. Zzzzzzzzzzz!

### **DAY 13: 3 May, 2025**

The morning broke full of bird song – **Little Tinamou** with its solemn call, **Chestnut-backed Antbird**, **Gray-cowled Wood-Rail**, and **Marbled Wood-Quail**. We took a short bus ride to the Rio Rincon bridge where we spent the next hour tallying 35 species. The highlights were three **Yellow-billed Cotinga**, a couple of **Fiery-billed Aracari**, and a **Double-toothed Kite**, but we also enjoyed **Roseate Spoonbill**, **Bare-throated Tiger-Heron**, **Tricolored Heron**, a **Green Heron**, **Common Black Hawk**, **Roadside Hawk**, **Rufous-winged Woodpecker**, both **Crested** and **Yellow-headed Caracaras**, **Brown-hooded Parrots**, **Rufous-winged Woodpecker**, **Mangrove Swallow**, and **Black-striped Sparrow**.

Driving back to the lodge we stopped next to a cattle field where we saw our first **Smooth-billed Ani** of the trip, a true signal that we were in southern Costa Rica, a couple of **Gray-cowled Wood-Rails**, **Northern Jacana**, more **Scarlet Macaws**, and new for the trip, **Red-breasted Meadowlark**.

After yet another fantastic breakfast, we set out for the canopy tower. By this time of the day, it was very hot and humid and moving around was slow, but the birds that called all around encouraged us to keep birding. Due to the dense forest, we didn't see a lot until we made it to the tower which gave us sweeping views of the forest. Some of the highlights included a **King Vulture** and **Black Hawk-Eagle** circling high overhead, hearing the laugh-like call of a **Laughing Falcon**, another **Woodpecker** – **Golden-naped**, a **Crowned Woodnymph** and **Charming Hummingbird**, both new hummers for the trip, and good looks at **White-shouldered Tanagers**. We even had a **Fiery-billed Aracari** alight on the Cecropia tree next to the tower giving us great looks at that amazing bill! As the heat became a little too much we started to head back to the lodge, but we of course saw some great birds along the way. We found a group of birds that indicated that there might be an active Army Ant swarm nearby – **Gray-headed Tanager**, **Bright-rumped Attila**, **Gartered Trogon**, **Cocoa**, **Black-striped**, and **Streak-headed Woodcreepers**, and **Black-faced Antthrush**. When we reached the lodge, we spied the resident **Squirrel Monkey** troop traveling along the canopy highway. It's amazing how acrobatic they are, especially the mums with babies on their backs.



Squirrel Monkey © Toby Ross

After another amazing meal and a short siesta, we met once again for a birding outing. Jose Pablo provided an introduction to our general location in relation to the rest of the Osa Peninsula, and some of the history of the lodge. Despite the start-stop heavy rain, our small group ventured out hopeful for a surprise. We encountered a small posse of **Gray-headed Chachalacas** winding their way through



Varagua Caecilian *Gymnophis multiplicata* © Toby Ross

some palm trees. We passed the workshop where all the building materials for the lodge were created, and although we didn't really find any unusual birds, we did find what we thought at first was a massive worm. I picked it up and instantly knew it was something way more interesting, a Caecilian! Not a denizen of Sicily, but a limbless amphibian that spends most of its life underground or in water in tropical regions. Despite their eel-like appearance, they are most closely related to frogs and salamanders and are rarely encountered. They have poor eyesight but use

sensitive, retractable tentacles between their nostrils and eyes to sense their environment and locate prey. A truly remarkable creature.

Jose Pablo also provided an orientation on the process for making chocolate, introducing us to the plant's flowers, seed pods, seed pod contents, and how we get from bean to the flavoring in our food. It's such an awesome process, and in my opinion, well worth the effort.

With the rain falling harder we returned to the lodge and took time to relax. Yet another glorious dinner was followed by checklist review. Unfortunately, the rain was so loud JP had to shout the birds we'd seen so we could hear him. It was quite comical!



Jeremy with his quarry © Toby Ross

We all got soaked heading back to our rooms and were relieved to have a bit of an evening off from our regular nocturnal wildlife forays. However, this extra time provided Jeremy with time to think about how to catch a Caiman. After lots of discussion over strategy, whether the mum Caiman was nearby or not, he decided to just go for it, Aussie style! With a very bright flashlight directed at the staring eyes of our target, Jeremy slowly tip-toed into the water and suddenly pounced. There was a wild skirmish, a flailing tail, the animal was scooped on to the bank, then a pin of the head, and he had him. It all took about 10 seconds, and we were in possession of a gorgeous living dinosaur. They really are extraordinary reptiles, and it was a real treat to hold one and closely admire the details of its scales and eyes. After a few minutes of photos, it was safely released back with its brothers and sisters unharmed.

The rain DID NOT STOP that night! It was like a river was falling from the sky. It did make a fantastic white noise machine, however.

#### **DAY 14:** 4 May, 2025

This morning we wanted to head to the canopy tower early so we could improve our chances of a few more interesting species. As we met at the dangerous red bridge (sorry Margaret 😞) we were distracted by a couple of **Marbled Wood-Quail** and followed them down the trail. Some of us had great views of their dumpy bodies and red orbital ring (skin around the eyes). We were also startled by the raucous calls of the **Gray-cowled Wood-Rail** whose voices carried really far through the forest. We didn't encounter a lot of birds on the way to the canopy tower, but just as we approached another group of antbirds stopped us in our tracks. There were many **Chestnut-backed Antbirds** busily flapping around, a **Northern Black-throated Trogon** perched for good views, we all got to see **Black-hooded Antshrike** which was great for this skulky bird, and then slightly up the trail a **Black-faced Antthrush** nonchalantly walked across the trail as if no one were there.

The canopy tower gave us a great perspective of the surrounding area, allowing views of **Costa Rican Swifts**, a **White-necked Jacobin**, **Yellow-throated Toucan**, lots of **Red-lored Parrots**, **Brown-headed Parrots**, and **Orange-chinned Parakeets** painting the sky with their amazing colors. At the top of a tree, we heard a couple of **Scarlet Macaws** complaining loudly about something which turned out to be a **Short-tailed Hawk** (dark morph). Other birds included a **Red-crowned Woodpecker**, **Orange-collared Manakin**, **Scarlet-rumped, Blue-gray, Palm**, and **Golden-hooded Tanagers**, with a pair of gorgeous **Blue Dacnis** to add even more color.

The sun was starting to get hot and so we made our way back to the lodge for final packing and breakfast. The group naturally split as the pace changed, and I found myself alone on the trail when suddenly the call of a **Little Tinamou** blared out from just a few feet away. I stopped still and stared at the undergrowth hoping to get a glimpse of this hard-to-see species (actually the whole family is exceptionally hard-to-see). It called a few more times and I was able to get a recording, but could I lay eyes on it? Nope! I needed Jose Pablo!!

It was time to say our goodbyes to the Caiman, the staff, the Squirrely Monkeys, the Three-toed Sloth that came to wish us well and set off for our next and last lodge of the trip – Esquinas Lodge. It was a couple of hours drive away, but before we left the nearby community, we dropped off some school supplies with the vice president of the local community association. She was very appreciative of our donations and told us that the soccer balls would be used in that day's sports day that they were holding – perfect timing! Thank you everyone for taking part in this generous activity. It's small actions like this that send messages to the communities that live adjacent to important bird habitats, that by preserving these natural places, people like us will come to see the birds and other wildlife supported by the habitat and spend money to do so. Long term conservation can = \$\$ to small communities through ecotourism.



Donating School Supplies © Toby Ross

After a couple of hours driving we turned off the main road and started down the smaller roads that lead to the lodge. We stopped the bus a couple of times and picked up a number of cool birds. In one field there were a couple of very cute **Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks**, in another we found a **Green Heron** hunting in the grass, a **Red-crowned Woodpecker** was perfecting her nest hole in one of the living fenceposts. We had great views of **Orange-chinned Parakeets**, finally showing us their chins, we saw at least three groups of **Wood Storks** flying in formation overhead, a **Red-breasted Meadowlark** was demonstrating where he got his name from, there were a couple of **Bronze-headed Cowbirds**, although Horsebirds might have been more appropriate in this case, and we also had a couple of **Fork-tailed Flycatchers** with their amazing tails. It was a great stop for the side of a country road.

Further down the road we stopped again, this time for a pair of **White Ibis**, a pair of **Southern Lapwing**, **Green Heron**, **Purple Gallinule**, juvenile male **Little Blue Heron**, and three **Northern Jacana**, all within 30ft of each other – it was a busy and productive field. Nearby was another **Red-crowned Woodpecker** nest building in very close proximity to an active **Common Tody-Flycatcher** nest. In the same area a **Yellow Tyrannulet** was seen and an **Isthmian** (get your teeth around that!) **Wren** flashed past.

We arrived at the lodge in perfect time for lunch. Feeling more refreshed after a good meal, we checked into our rooms. Some of the group ventured around the grounds until the afternoon rain came. Highlights of that foray were seeing and hearing a **Baird's Trogon**, getting good views of **Dot-winged Antwren**, as well as seeing a giant **Black-striped Woodcreeper**. We also had two **Flatbills** – **Eye-ringed** and **Yellow-olive**, watched a **Riverside Wren** busily gathering nesting materials, and found the nest of an **Orange-collared Manakin** with a couple of eggs inside. We were close to seeing the endemic **Black-cheeked Ant-tanager**, our major focus for this location, but we hoped to get views the following day.

Before our delicious dinner, JP reported to Jeremy and I that he had found a **Fer de Lance** snake outside his room. We rushed to the spot and found it curled up next to a bench on their porch. We'd been looking for one the entire trip, and so it was super satisfying to see one sheltering from the torrential downpour. Jeremy and I also explored the grounds in search of frogs and finally found **Glass Frogs** - the cutest frogs ever!



*Emerald Glass Frog © Toby Ross*

#### **DAY 15: 5 May, 2025**

An early start as we explore the grounds of the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge. A **Green Heron** was very focused on catching his breakfast on the pond next to Reception, **Crested Guan** were high in the trees, a female **Orange-collared Manakin** perched on a palm frond next to the restaurant, and a trio of **Blue-black Grosbeaks** perched nearby too. A soundscape of a **Great Tinamou's** spooky call, **Short-billed Pigeon's** “Ja esta Café” (the coffee is ready), and **Lesson's Motmot's** woot-woot accompanied us



*Green Heron © Toby Ross*

as we walked the entry road. **Carrot(Orange)-billed Sparrows** were busy looking for breakfast as we passed by, a couple of hummingbirds perched nearby – **White-necked Jacobin**, and both **Charming**



Black-cheeked Ant-Tanager © Toby Ross

and **Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds**. A **Gartered Trogon** perched nicely for everyone to see while it called with pulses of its tail, and we had a brief view of a **Swallow-tailed Kite** overhead. As we turned a corner with shaded forest edge ahead of us, we saw our target for the day – **Black-cheeked Ant-Tanager**. There were a small flock of them, and everyone got good looks. This species is one of Costa Rica's four mainland endemic species, and so it was satisfying to see them.

We delved deeper into the forest and found **Chestnut-backed Antbird** and **Black-faced Antthrush** in the murky undergrowth, as well as **Black-bellied Wren** gathering nesting material. JP heard a **Red-capped Manakin** but couldn't bring it in for us to see. On the way back to the lodge we had excellent looks at **Fiery-billed Aracari** and a **Great Curassow** with her chick being shielded by mum's tail. Other hummers that were seen on our return were **Long-billed Hermit** and **Band-tailed Barbthroat**. Our last hummingbird of the morning was a **Bronzy Hermit** that had actually flown into our bus, clearly wanting to come with us today. Very gently, JP released the little guy who flew off looking none the worse for the experience.

After a great breakfast we were on the road for a couple more targets. After a bit of driving we pulled onto a very rural road next to large paddy fields; the water level was quite low, but there were lots of water birds to be seen – **Great and Snowy Egrets**, **Southern Lapwing**, **Northern Jacana**, **White Ibis**, and **Black-necked Stilt**. There were also a number of shorebirds in attendance, including **Greater Yellowlegs**, a herd of **Least Sandpipers**, a couple of **Solitary Sandpipers** (not being solitary), **Pectoral Sandpipers** and some agonizing over **Dowitchers**, final decision was **Long/Short-bill!** A **Fork-tailed Flycatcher** flew through the scene, a **Red-crowned Woodpecker** was heard calling behind us, as well as an aptly-named **Roadside Hawk**.

Further down the road we found a flowering tree that provided nectar for hummingbirds so we stopped to see who would come along – **Scaly-breasted Hummingbird**, **White-necked Jacobin**, **Veraguan Mango**, and **Sapphire-throated Hummingbird** were all seen. We also saw our first **Great Blue Heron** for the trip (quite common in the US), a **Bare-throated Tiger-Heron**, **Western Cattle Egret**, as well as a flyover **Anhinga**. Other birds included **Crested Caracara**, **Streaked** and **Rusty-margined Flycatchers**, and a surprise **Mourning Warbler** that should have left for North America by that time. After spying a secretive **Mangrove Cuckoo** we hopped back in the bus and made our way to the next site.

Our last location of the morning was in search of the final vulture on our list – Lesser Yellow-headed. They don't behave quite like **Turkey** or **Black Vultures**, and prefer to fly low, just below the horizon –

maybe their eyesight/olfactory senses aren't so great – JP and Rodrigo searched and searched along the road checking out every flying dot. We saw a **Roadside Hawk** predate a lizard directly in front of the bus, a **Northern Tropical Pewee**, both **Crested** and **Yellow-headed Caracaras**, **Tricolored Munia**, **Smooth-billed Ani**, **Ruddy Ground Dove**, but no Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures 😞 - better luck next time.

Back to the lodge for lunch and beautiful sunshine, but by the time we had finished eating the weather had changed drastically and the heavens opened which put an end to the birding for the day. A few folks enjoyed the pool, some birded a little – **Common Pauraque** – others generally took advantage of some enforced down time. All in all, a great day.

**DAY 16:** 6 May, 2025

Our last early morning birding excursion of the trip was another great walk around the grounds of the lodge. We barely left the parking lot when we saw two **Fiery-billed Aracaris** perched high in a tree, a **Gray-capped Flycatcher** was fighting itself in the side mirror of a car, a **Southern House Wren** was calling nearby. As we walked down the road, we heard a **Slaty-tailed Trogon** and **Short-billed Pigeons** in the distance – “Ja esta Café!”. We walked the same trail as the previous day and had dark glimpses of **Chestnut-backed Antbirds** skulking in the undergrowth, as well as **Orange-billed Sparrows** (a couple actually without the orange bill = juvenile). JP then tuned his ear to a call in the near distance – after some analysis he decided it was a **Blue Ground Dove** which are very secretive and hard to see. Shortly after, another tricky bird that fooled JP with its call was a **Brown-billed Scythebill**. This species is not well known on the Pacific side of the country, and this was the first time JP had seen it in this area. We had the full cast of hummingbirds – **White-necked Jacobin**, **Bronzy Hermit**, **Long-billed Hermit**, **Crowned Woodnymph**, and **Charming Hummingbird**. On the way back to the lodge a magnificent male **Great Currasow** showed off its delightful crest; we also found a Kiskadee (“party”) of **Black-cheeked Anttanagers**.

It was time to leave the rainforest and we headed to Palmar Sur to see basalt stone spheres that were created by the Diquís culture that date back to 500-1,500 CE. It is unclear why they were made, but it's hypothesized that they may represent solar systems or various stages of the sun. The park where the spheres were location contained a tree with a roosting pair of **Black-and-White Owls**. JP also showed us a Cannon Ball tree with its amazing flowers, and another tree with incredible seedpods. We then hit the road and stopped at a couple of coastal spots. We had some great **Brown Pelicans** flying in classic formation, some delicious fresh coconut water direct from the nut, and a small group of **Scarlet Macaws** having a Kiskadee. We finally made it to our final hotel – Robledal and said our goodbyes to JP and Rodrigo. What a pair of complete stars! Both amazing at what they do, both making the trip as perfect as can be, both incredible ambassadors for their country. One final checklist and coconut flan, and the trip draws to a close.

THANK YOU ALL so much for such an amazing trip.  
I hope to see you on another Alight Tours trip someday soon.



Our intrepid group with Rodrigo and Jose Pablo – Arenal Observatory Lodge

### SPECIES SUMMARY

Across the entire trip we encountered 395 bird species which is approximately 45% of the possible species found in Costa Rica. A really quite impressive tally. Follow the link for an [eBird Trip Report](#) that includes all the species seen and heard, locations of sightings, and photos submitted by Margaret and Richard, and a few by me – I’m STILL processing my images!

We had some great mammals on the trip like Three-toed Sloth, Squirrel & Howler Monkeys, and Coatimundi. We also spotted a number of reptile species including Anole lizards, Basilisks, Iguana, Parrot Snake, Fer de Lance viper, Snail Sucker snake, and of course Spectacled Caiman and American Crocodile. We had some very cool amphibians also, like Glass Frogs, Poison Arrow Frogs, Red-eyed Treefrog, and the Caecilian.

Bugs also brightened our days with Forest Giant Owl Moth, Spiny Katydid, Bullet Ant, and Shimmering Golden Sugar Ant.

Spiny Katydid, Fer de Lance, Red-eyed Treefrog, Yellow-headed Gecko

