

***Snowcap, Quetzal, and Umbrellabird-
Costa Rica Birding Tour
November 11-19, 2005
Tico Tours™
Leader: Mike Boatwright***

This tour stayed at Hotel Bougainvillea, Rancho Naturalista, Savegre Mountain Lodge, La Quinta Country Inn. Other locations visited included Lankester Gardens, C.A.T.I.E., Rio Tuis, Cerro-de-la-Muerte, Providencia, La Georgina, La Paz Waterfall Gardens, Cinchona, Selva Verde Lodge, La Selva Biological Station, Rio Sarapiquí Boat Ride, Braulio Carrillo National Park.

Total bird species encountered = 319

[Composite Bird List follows this trip report.](#)

Day 1:

Four of us departed Reagan International Airport in Washington, DC very early and flew to Atlanta, Georgia where we met 3 more members of our party arriving from Newark, New Jersey. The seven of us continued on to Juan Santamaria International Airport in San Jose Costa Rica where we met up with the eighth member of the party coming from Newark via Miami, Florida. After clearing immigration and customs, we met our driver outside the airport and loaded into our van for a 20 minute ride to Hotel Bougainvillea in Heredia north of the airport. Along the way we saw a ***Black-shouldered Kite*** hovering above a roadside field and spotted a ***Masked Tityra*** along with the ubiquitous ***Great-tailed Grackle***.

After checking in and dumping our stuff in our rooms, we headed to the lush tropical gardens behind the hotel. Here amid the myriad tropical plants we got our first taste of tropical birding. One of the first birds encountered was the beautiful ***Blue-crowned Motmot!*** Birds which followed included ***Rufous-tailed Hummingbird***, ***Clay-colored Thrush*** (the national bird of Costa Rica), ***Blue-gray Tanager***, ***Hoffman's Woodpecker***, ***Inca Dove***, ***Great Kiskadee***, ***Tropical Kingbird***, ***Brown Jay***, ***Melodious Blackbird***, and ***Grayish Saltator***. We also had killer looks at the rare and local ***Cabina's (Prevost's) Ground-sparrow*** feeding on the open grass lawn with several ***Rufous-collared Sparrows***. We heard but could not get a look at ***Ferruginous Pygmy-owl***. ***Blue and White Swallow*** and ***Crimson-fronted Parakeet*** flocks flew over our heads as we walked the paths through the gardens. Thoroughly satiated bird wise, we headed in for a delightfully prepared dinner and a good night's rest.

Day 2:

We arose well before dawn tingling with anticipation of the great birding, which lay ahead of us. From the balcony of our rooms, we once again heard ***Ferruginous Pygmy-owls*** calling and briefly heard ***Spot-bellied Bobwhite*** calling deep within the wooded area surrounding the hotel gardens. Pre-breakfast birding around the grounds of the

Bougainvillea once again produced some very good views of **Blue-crowned Motmot**, and **Cabina's (Prevost's) Ground-sparrow** along with its more common cousin **White-eared Ground-Sparrow**. We also had glimpses of **Plain Wren, Orange-billed Nightingale-thrush, Bronzed Cowbird, White-tipped Dove**, and saw most of the birds encountered the previous afternoon. The most surprising bird of the morning was a **Gray-necked Wood-rail** calling deep within the thick coffee plantation adjacent to the gardens.

After breakfast we set off for Rancho Naturalista in the Caribbean foothills. Along the way, we made a brief stop at Lankester Gardens near Paraiso. Here we picked up **Northern Jacana, American Coot, Common Moorhen, and Gray-crowned Yellowthroat**.

One more quick stop at C.A.T.I.E. agricultural research station yielded great looks at **Boat-billed Heron, Purple Gallinule, Band-backed Wren, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Northern Jacana, and Cocoa Woodcreeper**.

We arrived at Rancho Naturalista shortly before lunch and checked-in. Soon we were birding from the famous balcony where we had incredibly close views of numerous hummingbirds including **White-necked Jacobin, Green-breasted Mango, Green-crowned Brilliant, and Violet-crowned Woodnymph**.

After a wonderfully prepared lunch, we headed into the forest and soon encountered a whole new variety of birds. At the hummingbird feeder station in the forest, we had nice looks at the huge **Green Hermit**, the dainty **Green Thorntail, Red-footed Plumleteer, Brown Violetear**, and the signature bird of Rancho Naturalista the tiny **Snowcap**. **White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, and Violet-crowned Woodnymph** were also in abundance. Near the lodge, we found **Golden-hooded Tanager, Bananaquit, Black-crested Coquette, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Social Flycatcher**, and the ever present **Clay-colored Thrush**.

Back on the balcony, **Hoffmann's** and **Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Montezuma Oropendola, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Passerini's, Blue-gray, and White-lined Tanagers** entertained us in the rain while we caught a glimpse or two of Volcanoes Turrialba and Irazu in the distance.

After dinner, a brief break in the rain gave us the opportunity to take a short walk where we successfully found our target a **Common Paraque** sitting in middle of the entrance road. Later that night a **Mottled Owl** called briefly from the woods behind the cabins.

Day 3:

We arose before dawn and made our way to the balcony where the feeders were filled with bananas and other fruits and hot coffee was brewing. Over the next hour, we witnessed the marvelous morning routine of numerous species coming in to feed just feet from us. Highlights off the balcony included **Brown Jay, Blue-crowned Motmot,**

Violaceous Trogon, dozens of *Grey-headed Chachalaca*, *Montezuma* and *Chestnut-headed Oropendola*, *Collared Aracari*, *Tropical Parula*, *Black-throated Wren*, *Black-striped Sparrow*, and *Palm Tanager* along with most of the birds seen the previous afternoon. A *Little Tinamou* was heard deep in the forest below while flocks of *Crimson-fronted Parakeets* flew overhead.

Once we had consumed a wonderful breakfast, we followed our guide Vincent de Boer and my good Tico friend Bernardo Navarro on a morning walk in the forest. Birds in the forest this morning included *White-ruffed* and *White-collared Manakins*, *Plain Xenops*, *Keel-billed Toucan*, *Yellow-crowned*, *Olive-backed*, and *Tawny-capped Euphonia*, *Rufous-tailed Jacamar*, *Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant*, *Plain Brown*, *Olivaceous*, *Wedge-billed*, and *Spotted Woodcreeper*, *Green Honeycreeper*, and *Golden-crowned Warblers*. Chasing an army ant swarm, we managed to hook up with *Russet Antshrike*, *Dusky* and *Immaculate Antbirds* and the highlight of the morning a very cooperative *Spotted Antbird*! We also heard *Stripe-breasted Wren*, *Long-billed Gnatwren*, and several of the many songs of *White-breasted Wood-Wren*.

After lunch, we returned to the forest trails in search of more tantalizing birds. We were not disappointed with good looks at some great birds including *Brown-hooded Parrot*, *Southern Rough-winged Swallow*, *Groove-billed Ani*, *White-crowned Parrots*, *Squirrel Cuckoo*, *Dusky-capped Flycatcher*, *Variable Seedeater*, *Yellow-faced Grassquit*, and *Black-headed Saltator*. In the late afternoon, we worked our way to the famous hummingbird pools in the forest where we were delighted to find a female *Purple-crowned Fairy* bathing. We also saw *Slate-throated Redstart* in the trees above the stream here. Before dinner, both *Great* and *Little Tinamou* were heard calling near the trailhead behind the upper most cabins.

Day 4:

We woke very early this morning and enjoyed a specially prepared early breakfast before loading into the van and a Landrover for a birding excursion to the Rio Tuis Valley. Along the way, we stopped briefly at the river and marshes near Platanillo. Here we had good looks at *Black Phoebes* catching insects over the river as *Torrent Tyranulets* played in the road of all places. *Buff-rumped Warbler*, *Louisiana Waterthrush*, *Roadside Hawk*, *Golden-olive Woodpecker*, and calling *White-throated Crake* and *Black Hawk-eagle* made the side trip very worthwhile.

Once we arrived at the Rio Tuis valley, we climbed out of the vehicles and began hiking along the river. Here we encountered several new species including *Olive-stripped*, *Black-capped* and *Yellow-olive Flycatcher*, *Paltry Tyranulet*, and *Crimson-collared Tanager*. Birds seen overhead included *Keel-billed Toucan*, *Blue and White Swallow*, *Brown Jay*, *White-collard Swift*, *Montezuma Oropendola*, *Broad-winged Hawk*, *Black* and *Turkey Vulture*. A beautiful male *Collared Trogon* posed long enough for all to get great scope views. Alas, we did not spot the much sought after *Lanceolated Monklet* and

only our guide had a fleeting glimpse of a *Sunbittern* that flushed from a roadside puddle.

Lunch provided much needed nourishment after our long morning hike. Having restored our energy reserves, we birded near the lodge and finally nailed down the magnificent *Violet Sabrewing* working the feeders behind the lower cabins. Other birds of note within easy walking distance of the lodge included *Stripe-throated Hermit*, *Cinnamon Becard*, *Olive* and *Bay-headed Tanager*.

Another late afternoon trip to the hummingbird pools yielded a *Scaly-breasted (Southern Nightingale) Wren* singing its traditional long, drawn-out song. A *Short-tailed Nighthawk* fly over the valley and *Chestnut-collared Swifts* were seen overhead.

Day 5:

Today, we left Rancho for our next location, Savegre Hotel de Montana high in the talamanca highlands. First though, we had one last cup of coffee while we enjoyed birds from the balcony. In addition to birds seen here over the last few days, this morning we managed to pick up a few new species including *Rufous-winged Woodpecker*, *Masked* and *Black-crowned Tityra*, *Yellow-billed Cacique*, and *Buff-throated Saltator*. At the edge of the forest, we finally got good looks at *Tawny-chested Flycatcher* and heard *Rufous Motmot*. Bidding Hasta Luego to our hosts and guides, we set off for Savegre. Our route today took us by Rio Birris and Cachi Dam near Orosi. We missed the usually reliable *Bat Falcon* here but had nice looks at several *White-tailed Kites* along the way. We left the dam and made our way west and south towards Rio Savegre. Our travel route took us through the Central Valley cities of Paraiso and the colonial capital Cartago. Heading south on the Pan-Am Highway, we climbed in altitude to approximately 12,000ft at Cerro de la Muerte (literally Mountain of Death). Brief stops along the highway revealed to us not only a drastic drop in the temperature but also the thinness of the air at this altitude. These stops also produced some interesting birds such as *Black-billed Nightingale-thrush*, *Sooty* and *Mountain Robin*, and the Chiriqui highlands endemic *Spot-crowned Woodcreeper*.

We decided to skip lunch at Savegre Mountain Lodge and instead headed south to the roadside restaurant La Georgina. Here we enjoyed a great buffet lunch while watching *Fiery-throated*, *Magnificent*, *Green Violetear*, *Scintillant*, and *Volcano Hummingbirds* feeding mere inches from us.

Upon reaching Hotel Savegre de Montana, also known as Cabinas Chacón, located in San Gerardo de Dota, we checked-in to our heated rustic rooms. After checking-in, we birded the grounds near our rooms. Almost immediately, we began to see some of the highland specialties including *Sooty-capped Bush-Tanager*, *Flame-coloured Tanager*, *Tufted Flycatcher*, *Slaty Flowerpiercer*, *Yellow-bellied Siskin*, *Acorn Woodpecker*, and *Yellowish Flycatcher*. Outside the restaurant area we came across our first true Costa Rican endemic of the trip, *Grey-tailed Mountain-gem* accompanied by *Green Violetear*, *Magnificent*, *Volcano*, and *Scintillant Hummingbirds*.

Day 6:

Before breakfast we hiked one of the trails high on the mountain. As we ascended the mountain, we again began to run into mixed feeding flocks containing specialty birds. We found the bizarre *Yellow-thighed Finch* (we nicknamed them pom-pom finches), an all dark bird with bright yellow thigh tufts, and *Flame-throated Warbler*, a drab little bird, until it turns to face you with its flaming red throat! We also encountered *Ruddy Treerunner*, *Silver-throated Tanager*, *Black-cheeked Warbler*, and *Gray-breasted Wood-wren*. At the top of the trail, we found a strikingly beautiful *Black-faced Solitaire* perched on top of a trail marker!

After hiking back down to the lodge, we enjoyed a splendid breakfast with plenty of café con leche to knock off the morning chill. Warmed and full, we met our local guide Marino Chacon and piled into the back of his pickup truck for a full morning of birding in these fabulous highlands. We didn't have to travel far before Marino began locating great birds. *Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher*, *Black Guan*, *Emerald Toucanet*, *Ochraceous Wren*, *Black-capped Flycatcher*, *Common Bush-tanager*, *Mountain Elaenia*, *Large-footed Finch*, and *Rufous-browed Peppershrike* came easy with the highly skilled Marino. We also found a *Townsend's Warbler*, a bird not commonly seen here.

As beautiful and entertaining as these birds were, they were nearly forgotten when Marino called out "Quetzal"! Arguably the most beautiful bird in the world, the *Resplendent Quetzal* is at home year-round in the extensive oak forests of Savegre. We soon had fantastic scope views of a young male and a female of these marvelous creatures. It took a little longer to nail down the real prize an adult male bird. But boy was it ever worth the search. We found the magnificent male feeding on avocados within 12 feet of us! The bird stayed close for quite some time providing extraordinary photo opportunities for all. Words alone can never begin to describe just how beautiful this bird is, it will leave you breathless and really need to be seen to be believed!

We made a concerted effort to located one of the really difficult to see species in this area *Buffy-crowned Wood-partridge*. Although we heard at least two coveys calling loudly close-by, rain sent the birds under cover and apparently out of sight for us.

We drove back to the lodge for lunch then headed out again with Marino. The afternoon birding was nearly as spectacular as the morning had been. With Marino's help, we soon located *Brown-capped Vireo*, *Dark Pewee*, *Black-billed Nightingale-thrush*, *Collard Redstart* (Amigo de Hombre or Friend of Man), and *Sulfur-winged Parakeet*.

Day 7:

We arose very, very early this morning, dressed warmly, and headed out for a rendezvous with sunrise at 11,400 feet on the summit of Cerro de la Muerte. As we traveled up out of the valley in shear darkness, we made several strategic stops along the way in hopes of connecting with the uncommon and local *Dusky Nightjar*. We were not to be denied this

morning as Marino heard a calling bird then put it in the spotlight for all to see. When we reached the Pan-am Highway, we transferred from our warm bus to the cold damp bed of Marino's pickup truck for the 5-minute bumpy ride to the summit of Cerro de la Muerte. Although the cloud cover obscured the sunrise and only allowed brief views of the highest point in Costa Rica, Cerro Chirripo, it was well worth the ride as we had killer looks at our target species *Volcano Junco*, *Timberline Wren*, and *Peg-billed Finch* in this paramo habitat.

We descended to the Pan-Am Highway and made our way to the area know as Providencia. Here Marino once again worked his magic helping us find a pair of *Black and Yellow Silky-flycatchers*, *Barred Becard*, *Ocharceous Pewee*, *Buffy Tuftedcheek*, and gave us great looks at both *Zeldonia* (Wrenthrush) and *Silvery-fronted Tapaculo*! These last two species are much sought after but are more often heard than seen. We also found *Olive-sided Flycatcher*.

From Providencia, we headed north back towards San Jose driving up between Volcanoes Barva and Poas with La Paz Waterfall Gardens being our lunchtime destination. Upon arrival at La Paz, we headed for the restaurant where we satiated our hunger while we watch humming birds and other birds do the same. We had ludicrously close views of our second endemic of the trip, *Coppery-headed Emerald*. Other hummingbirds present at this location included *Violet Sabrewing*, *Brown Violet-ear*, *Black-bellied Hummingbird*, *Purple-throated Mountain-gem*, and a *Magenta-throated Woodstar*. We also had incredibly close views of *Silver-throated Tanager*, *Prong-billed Barbet*, and *Emerald Toucanet* all eating fruit at the bird tables!

After leaving the waterfall gardens we continued our journey to La Quinta Country Inn. A few roadside stops near Cinchona produced some nice birds such as *White-bellied Mountain-gem*, *Red-headed Barbet*, and *Bat Falcon* (spotted by our driver Pablo, awesome!).

We arrived at La Quinta Country Inn shortly after dark and settled into our rooms. After getting settled in, we gathered near the restaurant for libations and fellowship. We inquired of the local security guard about locations for the resident owls. A few minutes later, the guard approached our group and, with spotlight in hand, urged us to "follow him". Within minutes, we were enjoying great views of a *Spectacled Owl* along a trail behind the restaurant! Thoroughly satisfied with the owl, we enjoyed a terrific buffet dinner. It just doesn't get much better!!

Day 8:

Pre-breakfast birding on the grounds of La Quinta yielded some very nice birds. *Black-cowled Oriole*, *Plain-colored Tanager*, *Red-throated Ant-tanager*, *Red-legged Honeycreeper*, *White-winged Becard*, *Tropical Pewee*, *Gray-necked Woodrail*, *Bronzy Hermit*, *Ruddy Ground-dove*, *Gray-rumped Swift*, *Streak-headed Woodcreeper*, *Ochre-bellied Flycatcher*, *Bay Wren*, *American Redstart*, and *Green Heron*, all showed well.

Following an early breakfast prepared especially for us, we loaded into our van for the short ride to La Selva OTS. The morning was spent birding the La Selva Biological Station grounds. A day spent here is a truly remarkable experience; it is not only the birds that form highlights but also the plants and other animals.

First stop on this morning's route was the La Selva entrance road, a very interesting walk that produced many good birds. The highlights being *Pied Puffbird*, *Long-tailed Tyrant*, *Gray-chested Dove*, *Double-toothed Kite*, and *Black-faced Grosbeak*.

Although we only had one morning to spend here, we were not disappointed. At the OTS we walked the trails with our expert local guides and found many good birds. We had *Chestnut-mandibled Toucan*, *Pale-billed and Chestnut-colored Woodpecker*, *Olive-backed*, *Tawny-capped*, and *Yellow-crowned Euphonia*, *Shining Honeycreeper*, *Broad-billed Motmot*, *Western Slaty Antshrike*, *White-ruffed Mankin*, *Cinnamon Becard*, *Bright-rumped Attila*, *Rufous Mourner*, *Collared Aracari*, *Osprey*, and *Wood Stork*. The best birds by far were several perched *Great Green Macaws*. We all had excellent scope views of these majestic and endangered birds as they actively feed on almonds. We also managed eye-level views of the miniscule *Black-capped Pygmy-tyrant*, the world's smallest passerine. These tiny birds generally spend most of their time high in the forest canopy. Today however, at least one of these little beauties was gracious enough to descend to our level! Non-avian highlights included Green Iguana, Strawberry Poison-Dart Frog, Central American Agouti, Golden Orb Spider and Collared Peccary.

We regretfully returned to our lodge for lunch before piling back into the van for a short ride to the boat dock on the Rio Sarapiquí. Here we boarded a covered boat for a two-hour ride. Before boarding, we noted many *Mangrove Swallows* skimming the water. Once onboard, we headed down river and soon encountered many new birds including *Green* and *Amazon Kingfisher*, *Spotted Sandpiper*, *Northern Waterthrush*, *Orange-chinned Parakeet*, *Green Ibis*, *Anhinga*, and *Gray-capped Flycatcher*. Heading back up river, we went in search of some of the mammals of the area all the while keeping our eyes glued to the banks in hopes of spotting the rare and local *Sungrebe*. Mammals encountered included a small troop of Mantled Howler Monkeys, sleeping Long-nosed Bats, and Neotropical Otter. As we headed back towards the dock, the boat driver suddenly slowed and then performed a rather rapid 180-degree turn. He's got the bird we thought. Sure enough he soon slowed the boat and we enjoyed very close looks at our target bird *Sungrebe*! Exhilarated, we returned to the dock and disembarked while getting nice looks at a *Gray-breasted Martin* sitting on the wires above us.

Back on shore, as a late afternoon storm approached, we decided to try our luck at Selva Verde Lodge and the 'Sunbittern River'. Here fantastic looks at a *Fasciated Tiger-Heron* were a great consolation for the lack of *Sunbittern*. We also had good looks at *Neotropical Cormorant*, *Ringed Kingfisher*, and *Amazon Kingfisher*. As dusk approached, we had brief but good looks at the bat-like *Short-tailed Nighthawk*

hunting above the suspension bridge.

Day 9:

Before breakfast, we again birded around the grounds at La Quinta seeing most of the birds observed the previous morning and adding *Barred Antshrike* to the list. An early start this morning took us to the Braulio Carrillo National Park and the Quebrada Gonzalez trail system. En-route we stopped off at a flooded field which produced some nice birding for a half-hour with highlights including *Purple Gallinule*, *Short-billed Pigeon*, and the star of the show, a female *Red-breasted Blackbird*.

Once at Braulio it wasn't long before we started to connect with mixed feeding flocks. Highlights here included *Black-faced Grosbeak*, *Emerald*, *Blue and Gold*, *Black and Yellow*, and *Bay-headed Tanager*, *Purple-crowned Fairy*, *Green Shrike-Vireo*, *White-breasted Wood-Wren*, *Stripe-breasted Wren*, *Rufous-winged Woodpecker*, *Squirrel Cuckoo*, *White-ruffed* and *White-collard Manakin*. We heard the resident pair of *Ornate Hawk-eagles* but despite diligent effort we could not get a look at the birds calling from the canopy just above our heads.

Afternoon flight schedules beckoned us to depart Braulio around eleven A.M. so we regretfully climbed into our van and headed for the Juan Santamaria International Airport. Our group was unusually quiet on the ride to the airport as individuals reflected on the fantastic experiences of the past eight days and fought the internal urges to stay a little longer in the marvelous tropical paradise!