

Costa Rica

5–21 April 2013

Participants

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Silver-throated Tanager

Leaders

Steven and Magda Easley

A personal report by Martin Tribe

On Friday 5th April two people set off from Canada, one from The Netherlands and six from the UK, all heading for San Jose in Costa Rica for Birdfinders second tour in 2013 of this wonderful and bird-rich country. Unfortunately, due to large numbers of people in the immigration hall of Miami airport, five of the UK contingent were delayed and didn't make the connecting flight to San Jose.

I was lucky enough to get through Miami and caught the plane to Costa Rica. On arrival at San Jose I met Steven and Magda Easley and those of our group who had not gone via Miami. Sadly, it soon became clear that the others hadn't made the flight so our always-cheerful driver for the tour, Coca, drove us to our first hotel whilst Steven and Magda sorted out how to handle the arrival of the others the following day. Our first Costa Rican bird was Pauraque, heard calling near the hotel.

Next morning, nice and early of course, we met Steve and Magda for a walk around the gardens of the Hotel Bougainvillea. However, before they arrived Jaap and I had already notched up Greyish Saltator, Rufous-collared Sparrow, White-winged Dove, Tropical Kingbird, Great-tailed Grackle, White-tailed Kite, Crimson-fronted Parakeet and Yellow Warbler, all from the hotel carpark.

Our walk around the extensive and well-planted gardens began with Yellow-green Vireos calling from the trees, a Melodious Blackbird and overhead the *richmondi* race of Vaux's Swift. Our first hummer was the common Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, soon followed by a few migrants heading for North America: Grey Catbird, Scarlet Tanager, Baltimore Oriole, three Tennessee Warblers and two Swainson's Thrushes. Swainson's Thrushes were seen in many places we visited in Costa Rica. Of a more exotic nature we soon found two Rufous-capped Warblers and then a beautiful bird, White-eared Ground-sparrow. Sadly the hotel is no longer a site for Prevost's Ground-sparrow due to the development of the area this species favoured. Another migrant was then located, Eastern Woodpecker, quickly followed by Hoffmann's Woodpecker and then Plain Wren. An Osprey flew over and we located Inca Dove and Blue-grey and Palm Tanagers.

We were to meet up with our delayed colleagues later that day so we got into the spacious (even when we were all together) air-conditioned bus and headed towards the Guanacaste region of Costa Rica.

Our objective was to drive to the Pacific coast and look for mangrove specialties. En route we noted the expected Black and Turkey Vultures and Great Egret. Magda spotted a bird as we drove over a bridge so we stopped and walked back a little way to admire a fine Bat Falcon. A quick check of some scrubby hillside added Olive Sparrow, Blue-black Grassquit and White-tipped Dove, and another migrant, Northern Waterthrush.

Continuing on we made a stop at the now-famous square in Orotina. Famous because this is where a pair of Black-and-white Owls have chosen to day-roost. It didn't take long before Magda spotted one, then the other, and we spent quite a while admiring these superb birds. Another new bird here was Cinnamon Hummingbird and we saw more Yellow Warblers and Yellow-green Vireos. A pretty Variegated Squirrel was also seen.

Next stop was on the coast, at a small sandbar covered with gulls and terns: 600+ Laughing Gulls, 20+ Royal Terns and a few Franklin's Gulls. Magnificent Frigatebirds flew overhead.

Not much further on and we stopped for longer, this time at the edge of the mangroves. It wasn't long before we were admiring the beautiful chestnut-headed race of 'Mangrove' Yellow Warbler, which came in and showed well. This was quickly followed by a female Painted Bunting and a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak, both birds resting in the mangroves en route to more northerly climes.

Next we tracked down one of our target species: Mangrove Hummingbird. It whizzed about around us for a while then settled close by so we could study it. Not a stunning hummer but a very good bird to get.

We walked along the edge of the mangroves finding Hoffmann's Woodpecker and Social Flycatcher when Steven spotted another hummingbird, this time a Plain-capped Starthroat, another target species. Soon after this we found Nutting's Flycatcher and as we watched this bird added more species: Streaked Flycatcher, Common (Mangrove) Black-hawk, Stripe-headed Sparrow and yet another target species, Banded Wren.

A short walk back into the mangroves and we were soon watching Mangrove Vireo (another target species here). Out of the mangroves and up the adjacent hillside added two superb Lesser Ground-cuckoos, calling and showing exceptionally well.

Back down by the mangrove edge birds kept coming: male and female Rose-throated Becard (the male does not have a rose throat in the Costa Rican race), a stunningly green Canivet's Emerald, two Common Ground-doves and a Northern Beardless-tyrannulet.

Next stop was some salt pans to look for migrant waders. We were quite successful with Whimbrel, (Western) Willet, Marbled Godwit, Short-billed Dowitcher, Grey Plover, Black-necked Stilt, Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers and Semipalmated Plover. Also present were Little Blue Heron, White Ibis, Franklin's Gull and Sandwich (Cabot's) Tern, and on the nearby trees a pair of White-lored Gnatcatchers were nesting.

A short walk down the track took us to a new area of mangroves and to more excellent birds. We were hoping to see the extremely-elusive Rufous-necked Woodrail, a bird that likes to hide deep in mangroves. We heard the bird but didn't see it so we repositioned ourselves, a fortunate move as it gave us Panama Flycatcher! We walked a little way into the mangroves, a rather muddy experience, and found a Northern Scrub Flycatcher showing well. After some effort we then saw a Rufous-necked Woodrail, trying it's best to see us without being seen by us. Thanks to Steven it failed and we

succeeded! Nearby we took a quick look at a river and added Neotropic Cormorant, Anhinga, Ruddy Turnstone and Mangrove Swallow to our list.

Next stop was to meet our delayed colleagues. En route we did a fast stop because Steve spotted a Streak-backed Oriole flying across the road. We piled out to admire this bird and were soon having a great time as a Ferruginous Pygmy-owl came in which was then mobbed by Streak-backed and Spot-breasted Orioles, Yellow Warbler, Yellow-green Vireo, Palm and Blue-grey Tanager, with a Yellow-throated Vireo in a nearby tree. Orange-fronted Parakeets flew overhead and a Squirrel Cuckoo was found. A Black Howler Monkey was also spotted nearby.

Getting our first of many Ruddy Ground-doves on the way, we then drove to meet with the rest of the group (who became known as the newbies). We met up and headed to a mudflat. Driving past a grassy field we saw ten migrating Scissor-tailed Flycatchers perched up on small bushes.

The now complete group disembarked by a large expanse of mudflat and we all began scanning for birds. Least Sandpipers were quite common and we also saw Semipalmated and Wilson's Plovers, a couple of Collared Plovers, Western and Spotted Sandpipers, Marbled Godwit, American Golden-plover, Greater Yellowlegs, Willet and Whimbrel. Also here were Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, White Ibis, Little Blue Heron, Gull-billed Tern and a bit of a rarity, Reddish Egret, a white-morph bird doing its distinctive running around in a rather mad way. An Osprey flew past and a Belted Kingfisher hovered over a small creek.

On the drive back to the hotel we add three Turquoise-browed Motmots, albeit in silhouette, Orange-fronted Parakeet and White-fronted Parrot, Groove-billed Ani, two White-throated Magpie-jays feeding on and around cows, and a male and female Blue Grosbeak.

The night was spent at Solimar Ranch and next day we did a drive around the ranch, an area that usually has a lot of water but at the end of this dry season was very dry in most places. Hundreds of Barn Swallows were migrating through, joined by a few Mangrove Swallows, a long way from mangroves. Around the lodge we found Rufous-naped Wren, Northern Caracaras, a pair of Rose-throated Becards plus Orange-fronted Parakeet and White-fronted Parrots.

Driving around the ranch we saw lots of Bare-throated Tiger-herons and Northern Jacanas around the few areas of open water that were present along with a couple of Solitary Sandpipers and two Black-bellied Whistling-ducks. Driving further along dusty tracks surrounded by dry grasslands we found a pair of Double-striped Thick-knees, Laughing Falcon and Eastern Meadowlarks. In a small area of trees we added Plain-breasted Ground-doves, Streak-backed and Spot-breasted Orioles, Bronzed Cowbird, Mourning Dove, and a Ferruginous Pygmy-owl. An adult Harris's Hawk flew from its nest and three Yellow-naped Parrots dropped in to feed on a fruiting tree. A Brown-crested Flycatcher was located but this was soon overshadowed by good views of Turquoise-browed Motmot.

A little further in, in an area a bit wetter than most of the ranch, we found a fine adult Jabiru, not bothered by our presence at all. Also here we had another Laughing Falcon and a Common Black-hawk.

Another stop was more heavily wooded and held a shaded water course. Boat-billed Heron was the first bird to be added here, quickly followed by Black-crowned Night-heron and male and female Black-headed Trogons. A roosting Lesser Nighthawk was found just by one side of the path and a Green-breasted Mango fed over the other side. A fine Mangrove Cuckoo was next to be found and finally a spotted Spotted Sandpiper. A Pacific Basilisk lurked on a branch hanging over the water.

Back at the ranchhouse for breakfast and then a look through Steven's 'scope at two roosting Pacific Screech-owls. As we were leaving for our next bit of birding a Lineated Woodpecker was located and seen well.

We drove to another area of the ranch, en route stopping for 10 Crested Bobwhites, keeping to the shade of the trees as they walked past us by the side of the road. A Northern Beardless Tyrannulet called from the trees around us.

Another stop, another piece of woodland, this one larger than others we had so far stopped at. Lesser Greenlet was seen immediately, quickly followed by another Lesser Ground-cuckoo, a great catch-up bird for the newbies. A woodcreeper turned out to be Northern Barred-woodcreeper and another Black-headed Trogon was found. Moving into the wood two Olive Sparrows were found, and then a fine male Long-tailed Manakin. Next two White-necked Puffbirds were located perched almost directly over our heads. These were followed by good views of a pair of noisy Barred Antshrikes, then a Greenish Elaenia and a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Two Tropical Gnatcatchers put in an appearance as did a Great Crested Flycatcher. As we left the wood Sue spotted some euphonias that were the ones we were looking for: Scrub Euphonias, three in a tree along with Common Tody-flycatcher, Yellow-olive Flycatcher and Yellow-throated Vireo.

Next stop involved a ten minute walk along a cattle-made track and into another area of woodland. Within a few minutes we were all admiring two superb Spectacled Owls at day roost. After many photographs we left the birds in peace and noted Boat-billed Flycatcher as we walked back to the bus. Our final ranch bird, as we headed to a new location, was a Short-tailed Hawk hunting over the road and nearby fields.

We were heading into the mountains to Monteverde, but before we went in that direction we dropped by another area of salt pans getting much the same as other salt pans and mudflats plus Lesser Yellowlegs, Stilt Sandpipers and four Stripe-headed Sparrows. The heat was intense and we were looking forward to the cooler climate of the mountains.

We drove for a while until we had ascended some distance, then stopped at another of Steven and Magda's sites. Thicket Tinamou could be heard calling but from within a wood set on a steep hill. We assessed the situation and four of us decided it was worth a try so we clambered down the hill and into the forest. We tried various spots and eventually I looked over my shoulder and saw two Thicket Tinamous walking higher up and behind us. Thanks to Steven we tracked them down and all of us saw this hard-to-see bird that most tours only hear. Back on the level road we added Keel-billed Toucan, a male Yellow-throated Euphonia and some catch-ups for the newbies: Rufous-capped Warbler, two Plain Wrens and Canivet's Emerald.

Our final stop in daylight was another well-researched site that looks no different from many others but which produced the birds: Band-tailed Pigeon, Piratic Flycatcher, four Boat-billed Flycatchers, Vaux's Swift, Grey-crowned Yellowthroat, two White-eared Ground-sparrows, a superb White-naped Brush-finch, Yellow-faced Grassquits, Variable Seedeaters and three Grey-headed Chachalacas. From here we drove to the hotel for dinner.

After dinner we went in search of Mottled Owl and it didn't take us long to find one bird that showed well in the torch light.

Next morning was cool, certainly much cooler than the lowlands. Many of us wore jumpers. We were in a new habitat zone and new birds were to come thick and fast. In the morning mist around the hotel we started the day with noisy Brown Jays and a lone Black Guan. Then we moved to the entrance to Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. First birds were four Emerald Toucanets and two fantastic-looking Golden-browed Chlorophonias. A Slate-throated Redstart was soon followed by two Golden-bellied Flycatchers. Stephen then declared that the noise we could hear nearby was a calling male Resplendent Quetzal. We soon found this sough-after bird showing beautifully, long tail and all. Nearby a Mountain Elaenia showed, followed by two noisy Prong-billed Barbets. A Chiriqui Quail-dove was heard and seemed not far away but, as is often the case with quail-doves, did not deign to make an appearance. However, a close Golden-crowned Warbler was much admired as, soon after, was a Chestnut-capped Brush-finch and our first Purple-throated Mountain-gem.

We walked down the road a little and soon added Orange-bellied Trogon and Yellowish Flycatcher. Then Steven heard and Magda found a male Elegant Euphonia and a migrating Summer Tanager.

After breakfast we drove to the nearby Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve, another area of wonderful highland forest. We took a slow walk through the forest starting our birding with Common Bush-tanagers and Spangle-cheeked Tanagers, a Palty Tyrannulet and a migrating Black-throated Green Warbler. A Lineated Foliage-gleaner was spotted, soon followed by what turned out to be quite a common bird, Ruddy Treerunner. A Spotted Barbtail showed well but the Silvery-fronted Tapaculo behaved as a typical tapaculo and skulked in cover or shot across small gaps to skulk elsewhere. Two Red-faced Spinetails high in the trees showed better and we found a bird we would often hear calling in the cloud forest: Black-faced Solitaire. Next an Ochraceous Wren showed, a bird far more chestnut in colour than showed in field guides, followed by two Tufted Flycatchers and a Three-striped Warbler. Steven called in a female Slaty Antwren and then a White-throated Spadebill and a Grey-breasted Wood-wren. A little further on a pair of Barred Becards was located as was a pair of Collared Redstarts. Another North American migrant in the form of a Wilson's Warbler was found, quickly followed by a large Streak-breasted Treehunter. An Olive-striped Flycatcher was heard then seen and as we were near the end of the trail a Slaty-backed Nightingale-thrush was heard. After a minute or two hunting for it, it was found behind us and showed well. The final Santa Elena birds of the morning were the local race of Northern Rough-winged Swallow and a Green Hermit.

After lunch we were back at Santa Elena where we found Rufous-capped Nightingale-thrush and then had excellent views of a Grey-throated Leaf-tosser – a tough bird to see well. We then found Sooty-faced Finch and Stephen had a fleeting view of a Buff-fronted Quail-dove as it quickly moved from the trail into the forest. Most of the group then concentrated on seeing a Pale-vented Thrush but I wondered if the quail-dove would go through the forest and come back onto the trail later on. I walked on a bit and then frantically hissed to the others to get over here as the Buff-fronted Quail-dove was feeding in the middle of the trail only a few metres away from the group round a corner. Stephen plus torch (it was quite dark in the forest) soon appeared and we all admired this truly beautiful bird. However, this wasn't the end of the birding for today. A Green-crowned Brilliant was located, after which we stood expectantly as Stephen called in a Bare-shanked Screech-owl that showed superbly. A Mountain Thrush was the last bird of the day.

Next morning dawned cool and misty and we did a walk around some of the hotel gardens. We heard our target before we saw them, and an extraordinary noise it is too. Then they appeared, five Black-breasted Wood-quails walked across the path in front of us, stopped just within the trees and called loudly. Walking further around the grounds we located a pair of Elegant Euphonias, another Olive-striped Flycatcher and had flyover Brown-hooded Parrots. Two Melodious Blackbirds were catch-ups for the newbies but Red-billed Pigeon was new for us all. A Collared Forest-falcon was heard but

wasn't seen but a Streak-headed Woodcreeper did show for us as did a fast-moving Rufous-and-white Wren.

We left the hotel and went to a reserve named Curi Cancha. Our first new bird here was Chestnut-headed Oropendola as they nested here and we also saw Giant Cowbird, which parasitizes the oropendolas. White-fronted Parrot, Piratic Flycatcher and Mountain Thrush were seen but not new, but the Rufous-browed Peppershrike we found was a new bird as were nearby Red-legged Honeycreepers. An Olivaceous Woodcreeper was found soon followed by a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper close by. Some nearby hummingbird feeders had plenty of good birds including the endemic Coppery-headed Emerald plus beautiful Violet Sabrewings, Purple-throated Mountain-gems, Green Violetears and Stripe-tailed Hummingbirds. In the background we could hear the distinctive call of Three-wattled Bellbird and we left the hummer feeders and were soon admiring a male bellbird through Stephen's scope: a much-wanted bird for us all. In nearby bushes Magda found a Philadelphia Vireo and another Elegant Euphonia put in an appearance.

Back into the forest and we were soon watching a pair of Plain Antvireos moving quickly around us. Not long after we located and saw well a Tawny-throated Leaf-tosser and then an Eye-ringed Flatbill. Mountain Tinamous could be heard calling and we eventually worked out where a couple were and all managed to see this elusive species. A female Resplendent Quetzal was found followed by our first Tawny-crowned Greenlet. We walked down into a stream valley where we found a Spotted Woodcreeper followed by another Chestnut-capped Brush-finch and then our third species of nightingale-thrush, Black-headed Nightingale-thrush. As we walked along we could hear the shock in Magda's voice when she said she had found a Chiriqui Quail-dove. It was sitting silently on a log right next to the path, in the open. It didn't seem bothered by us at all and many, many photos were taken.

Our final stop in the Monteverde area was a little coffee shop back at the entrance to Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. Here many more photos were taken as Coppery-headed Emeralds, Stripe-tailed Hummingbirds, Violet Sabrewings, Purple-throated Mountain-gems, Green-crowned Brilliants and our target bird, Magenta-throated Woodstar, all showed exceptionally well on feeders. It was tough when we had to leave to head for Arenal, a few hours' drive away.

The drive was uneventful, although we did see Crested Guan and Swallow-tailed Kite. We stopped by Lake Arenal for a spot of birding and this new habitat immediately began to add to our ever-growing list of birds. A Ringed Kingfisher sat by the lakeside and Golden-hooded Tanagers fed in nearby trees. A flash of red gave us our first Crimson-collared Tanager and Black-striped Sparrows hopped by the roadside. A Stripe-throated Hermit whizzed past, unseen by most, but later we were to see more.

A little further on and the rain had set in. This, of course, did not deter us and we were soon admiring a Buff-rumped Warbler, whose buff rump was very obvious in the dim light under the trees. A stop by a steep downward-facing bank added good views of two Dull-mantled Antbirds, their red eyes showing clearly as they moved about the undergrowth, and then we all had a chance to admire the hardest to see of Costa Rica's motmots: Keel-billed. One bird came in and sat nicely for us, easily viewable in Steven's scope. Nearby a Purple-crowned Fairy flitted high in the trees and a Broad-winged Hawk flew past. The final few miles to Arenal added a lone Black Phoebe on a river close to Arenal volcano itself.

The 10th of April dawned cloudy and cool. We were out before the sun and standing by a lone street light on the road up to the hotel. This light attracted moths, which in turn attracted birds and animals.

Whilst we were there a family of five Coatis happily hunted through the grass, seemingly having great success in finding food. Birds attracted to the moths around the light included two Russet Antshrikes, Chestnut-sided, Wilson's, Buff-rumped and Golden-crowned Warblers plus Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher and Carmiol's Tanagers. A briefly-seen Spotted Antbird was found, our second species of antbird, soon followed by a Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner.

We walked further down the road and new species just kept on coming. We found our first Orange-billed Sparrow and a pair of Green Honeycreepers. A Band-backed Wren was found in a small vine-covered tree and a few minutes spent looking down into a scrub-covered area mostly surrounded by trees added White-breasted Wood-wren, quite a skulker, and a Stripe-breasted Wren, also not a bird that favours sitting in the open. The flowering bushes in this area hosted both Bronze-tailed Plumeleater and Violet-crowned Woodnymph and a Yellow-bellied Elaenia sat quietly on a nearby tree. White-crowned and Red-lore Parrots flew overhead and a fine pair of Long-tailed Tyrants sat on telegraph wires. We saw our first Montezuma Oropendolas as they flew past as we overlooked a wooded valley looking towards Lake Arenal. Close-by bushes yielded a pair of Slaty Spinetails and a Rufous Mourner was found after Steven heard it calling. This was clearly a good area in which to look for birds as yet more and more were added to our list: Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Buff-throated Saltator, Tropical Parula and two Black-cowled Orioles. We lured out a male Fasciated Antshrike then walked only a few metres to the edge of the forest. Antbirds could be heard calling and it was long before we had good views of both Spotted and Bicoloured Antbirds. The Steven said he could hear Ocellated Antbird. His guidance for seeing this bird was 'be quick... if you need to be told where it is you've missed it'. We were all primed. Amazingly an Ocellated Antbird did come in, as did another. They circled us, sometime stopping to be admired and even photographed. A very tough bird to get and we saw it very well. We were all extremely delighted by this experience: three antbirds in as many minutes! Our final birds seen as we headed back to the hotel were also new: Passerini's Tanager and Grey-capped Flycatcher, and we heard a calling Ornate Hawk-eagle but couldn't track it down.

After breakfast we spent some time standing on the large hotel balcony, with the huge Arenal Volcano overshadowing everything, looking at the feeders. Montezuma Oropendolas, Blue-grey, Palm and Passerini's Tanagers, Red-legged and Green Honeycreepers, Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Brown Jay, Baltimore Oriole and Bananaquit all came in to the fruit. Flowering shrubs and trees provided food for an excellent variety of hummers: Steely-vented Hummingbird, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Violet-headed Hummingbird, Bronze-tailed Plumeleater and Stripe-throated Hermit. I spotted a raptor not too far away and Steven identified it as Ornate Hawk-eagle. As we watched this another flew right over us and towards the first. We could see the rufous on the head and the barring underneath. An excellent bird to see. White-collared Swifts flew high overhead and an Eastern Wood-pewee sallied forth from an open snag to catch flies.

The hotel gardens are extensive and a walk around them proved fruitful. Our first new bird was the tiny Scale-crested Pygmy-tyrant, next followed by the somewhat larger Rufous Motmot. A female White-ruffed Manakin was found as were Dusky Antbird and a Grey-chested Dove. More of the same hummers we saw earlier were found but we added two Brown Violetears and a pair of Blue-throated Goldentails. A first and then a second King Vulture flew across the face of the volcano; a male and female Great Curassow were found feeding by a roadside with a Crested Guan in a tree above them. Nearby a Bay-headed Tanager showed well and we added a pair of Scarlet-thighed Dacnis and two Smoky-brown Woodpeckers to the list.

We then drove down the mountain a little way to a fast-flowing, rock-strewn river, the one where earlier we had found the Black Phoebe. Here we again had White-breasted Wood-wren and a new

wren species: Bay Wren. A little further along the road and an emergency stop was made as a White Hawk was spotted flying over the road ahead of us. A short walk along the road gave us another Broad-winged Hawk, Black-headed Saltator and an elusive but finally-located Bright-rumped Attila. A toucan high in a bare tree turned out to be Black-mandibled Toucan.

Driving back up to the hotel, after a quick stop for three Eastern Kingbirds, we had the slightly surreal experience of driving through a cloud forest with Steven playing the Beachboys' Barbara Ann and us singing along.

A part of the road bordered by steep banks held nesting Southern Rough-winged Swallows and Rufous-tailed Jacamars, both of which were happy to pose for us on wires strung across the road.

After lunch and a bit of a break we went for a mid-afternoon walk. We found Black-headed Tody-flycatcher, Grey Hawk and Short-tailed Hawk. A tip from the guard at the hotel grounds entrance allowed us to see Great Antshrike, and we saw four Keel-billed Toucans in nearby trees.

Driving on further another fast stop added Collared Araçari to our list, along with more Keel-billed Toucans and Grey-headed Chachalacas (Arenal Ground-chickens as they became known by the group) feeding at the roadside.

At another of Steven and Magda's site we stopped to look for Olive-crowned Yellowthroat but were distracted when Stephen heard White-throated Crake. At first we thought we had it as there was movement at the entrance to a small culvert but it turned out to be a rat. However, with judicious positioning and crake-call playback we all saw the bird as it came towards us and walked across a nicely-open area of mud and grass. Then back to the yellowthroat, which soon showed very well.

Another stop, another river. This time we found a pair of nesting Sunbitterns, feeding amongst the rocks, flying under the bridge, calling, copulating on their nest, generally showing many aspects of Sunbittern life to a most appreciative audience. Also, Sue found three Green Kingfishers here.

Our final stop of the day added yet another motmot, this time Broad-billed Motmot. A suitable end to an excellent day's birding.

Next day we quickly checked the feeder area, seeing a tiny female Black-crested Coquette, then did another walk around the gardens and associated forest. Highlights were a very attractive Tawny-capped Euphonia, a stunning male Green-breasted Mango, and a Streak-headed Woodcreeper on a telegraph pole. Two Lineated Woodpeckers were found as was a Smoky-brown Woodpecker. We also found Dusky Antbird and a beautiful Violet-crowned Woodnymph plus many species already seen. We walked a little way into the forest and stopped to try for Thicket Antpitta. Magda spotted one coming in just as I did but we were looking in different directions. We focused on Magda's bird and each of the group got a view of the antpitta sitting and calling deep in cover. Soon after this we had our first White-necked Jacobin and our final bird, a real goody, a White-tipped Sicklebill that came in to feed on a Crab-claw Heliconia.

We had to leave Arenal for Caño Negro. Our first stop was a bit of a tourist trap, Arenal Hanging Bridges. A trail through a forest that included various bridges, large and small, some stable, some suspended and very wobbly. We found a Slaty-tailed Trogon and then Spotted Woodcreeper. Carmiol's Tanagers moved through the trees and we found Russet Antshrike and another new, good bird, Long-billed Gnatwren. A Strawberry Poison-dart Frog was found, and Tropical Parula and Black-headed Nightingale-thrush were enjoyed as were two Tawny-faced Gnatwrens that moved like

lightning but we eventually seen well. A female, then a male, Spot-crowned Antwren were found followed by Slaty Antwren and a migrating Canada Warbler. We found three adult male and a juvenile male White-ruffed Manakin and a Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner. Black-throated Trogon was admired from close range and then we got to see, and hear, lekking White-collared Manakins. The wing snaps and clicking were an integral part of the experience. As we headed towards the exit two Ochre-bellied Flycatchers were found as was Tawny-crowned Greenlet. Mere metres from the exit Steven got very excited when he found a Rufous-winged Tanager a couple of metres above us in a leafless tree. This is a beautiful bird and field guides and even photographs do not truly capture its colours.

En route we picked up White-collared Seedeater, Tropical Pewee, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Masked Tityra, Grey-breasted Martin and finally, for me as I'd missed it earlier, House Sparrow!

At Caño Negro we were back in the heat. A roadside stop added Cinnamon Becard and Pied Puffbird to the list, quickly followed by Short-billed Pigeon and the very-attractive Scaled Pigeon. A Cocoa Woodcreeper came in for all to see and we picked up Yellow Tyrannulet and Olive-throated Parakeet. A group of Black-faced Grosbeaks showed well and we had our first Mealy Parrots. A Sharp-shinned Hawk was the final new bird of this stop.

Heading onwards our journey was interrupted by the shout of 'white bird'. This turned out to be a superb male Snowy Cotinga sitting on top of a bare tree. A planned stop a little later added Yellow-crowned Euphonia and another unexpected stop gave us a perched Plumbeous Kite.

That evening we went for a drive in the dark with Magda and Steven shining their torches either side of the road. First bird found was a good catch up for the newbies: Black-and-white Owl. Soon after a Pacific Screech-owl was found soon followed by a Great Potoo on a road sign. A little later we added Common Potoo and a calling Pauraque. A good evening's night bird hunting.

Next morning it was misty. A short walk in the hotel gardens gave us Grey-headed Dove, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Spot-breasted Wren, Black-crowned Tityra and White-winged Becard. Then it was off for a boat trip on the Rio Frio. We quickly found one target species: Nicaraguan Grackle. The birds come here to breed then return north to Lake Nicaragua for the winter. We also found our only Peregrine Falcon of the trip as well as a Blue Ground-dove and Plain (Canebrake) Wren. As we moved slowly down the river we stopped at various spots for particular birds. We added Yellow-billed Cacique, Black-throated Wren and Purple Gallinule as well as seeing the expected herons and waders we had seen earlier on the trip. Both Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers we seen well on wires over the river. A stop near a small wood saw us leave the boat for a short trip ashore. This was a good stop as we added Southern Lapwing, Olivaceous Piculet, Plain Xenops and the superb-looking Chestnut-coloured Woodpecker. Back on the boat two Grey-necked Wood-rails were seen lurking under the mangroves at the water's edge.

A short stop a bit latter added a flock of migrant Pectoral Sandpipers feeding alongside the more expected Northern Jacanas and Least Sandpipers. As ever, herons, egrets, spoonbills and ibises were easy to find.

Back in the boat and almost immediately Magda spotted a Sungrebe, feeding by the river bank under the mangroves. Soon after we had a flyover Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, coming quite close to the boat, and found a Yellow-crowned Night-heron. A few Blue-winged Teals we found along with a small flock of Lesser Scaup and a lone Glossy Ibis. At the end of the boat ride, just after leaving the

boat, we found a Slate-headed Tody-flycatcher, Bare-necked Tiger-heron and about 20 Black-bellied Whistling-ducks.

Leaving our Caño Negro hotel we drove to an area of dry fields and we soon admiring a male Nicaraguan Seed-finch, with an impressive a bill as we were led to believe. Also here we found more Nicaraguan Grackles, Ruddy Ground-doves and Variable Seedeaters.

An unexpected stop for a tree full of Tropical Kingbirds birds added three Fork-tailed Flycatchers to our list.

Next stop was an area of wetland that was much reduced in size due to intentional burning of the vegetation. Green Herons were abundant here and we picked up another Grey-crowned Yellowthroat. Our target species proved easy to find as one was standing in the open on top of a small grass clump, panting and apparently feeling the heat. It was a Pinnated Bittern, not a bird we expected to see in the open. At the end of the track we found a migrating Willow Flycatcher, and as we sat in the bus about to leave a great surprise in the form of a beautiful male Ruddy-breasted Seedeater. This species is hard to see as they are nomadic and wander over huge areas so there are no sites where one can have any degree of certainty of seeing it. Happy with our latest birding we started to drive back to the main road when another sudden stop had to be made to admire male and female Red-breasted Blackbirds.

Now we had to drive over some hills to get to La Selva. We stopped at another of Steven and Magda's sites and Magda quickly found a White-throated Flycatcher. Another quick stop as we descended from the hills was made for a day-roosting Great Potoo, then onto our hotel. At the hotel we almost immediately saw Red-throated Ant-tanager as it came to the hotel's feeder area. A quick trip out from the hotel added a pair of Shining Honeycreepers and a nesting pair of Great Green Macaws.

We had now reached our eighth day and were spending it at La Selva Biological Station. Leaving the main road we saw Bronzed and Shiny Cowbirds feeding in a grassy field and heard a loudly-calling Collared Forest-falcon. Before long the forest-falcon was seen and added to the list. Three Black-faced Grosbeaks and a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak were found along with a few other already-seen species including Blue-grey, Passerini's and Scarlet Tanagers and Grey-capped Flycatcher. A flock of 27 Eastern Kingbirds was seen heading determinedly north to the US but this didn't distract us from our search for and subsequent finding of a pair of Cinnamon Woodpeckers. We hadn't yet actually made it to the entrance of La Selva and before we did there was more to come. Stephen said he could hear Bare-crowned Antbird, as with Ocellated Antbird this species is another 'if you need to be told where it is you've missed it' birds. However, in line with our success so far a female Bare-crowned Antbird came out from the forest and showed very well in front of us. We really were doing stunningly well with antbirds.

Continuing to walk down the entrance road to the entrance of La Selva proper we admired three Collared Araçaris but were then distracted by Olive-backed Euphonias. A pale bird on top of a tree was a female Snowy Cotinga and, to Stephen's long lasting amusement, was used as a guide point to show one of the group where to find a Palty Tyrannulet! Closer to the entrance we then found two Rufous-winged Woodpeckers, two Black-cowled Orioles, a Squirrel Cuckoo and had flyover Grey-rumped and Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts, then a female Slaty-tailed Trogon plus some Collared Peccaries wandering across the road. A Long-billed Hermit was found, which had a strange white mark on its back and its breast – possibly some La Selva-added tracking device? Crimson-collared Tanager, Long-tailed Flycatcher, Shining Honeycreeper and Cinnamon Becard showed up before we actually made it to the official entrance of La Selva.

We finally reached the entrance to La Selva and had a short break as we all registered our presence in the research facility. A Striped Basilisk was seen on some plants just by the entrance. We were joined by a local guide (sadly I didn't note his name but he was a good birder) who was to accompany us during most of our time here. We began our walk through the forest soon finding a head-height, stationary White-whiskered Puffbird with an enormous bug in its beak. Nearby a Great Tinamou was watched moving slowly in the undergrowth, then Steven heard the sound of Dusky-faced Tanagers. The birds seemed to be heading away and behind us so we moved back along the path to a small bridge and looked from there. However, the birds changed direction so we went back to where we first heard them and after a little wait we saw at least three Dusky-faced Tanagers quite close before they flew across the path in front of us and disappeared into the forest.

Moving further along the trail we added White-ringed Flycatcher, quite high in trees over the path, two Purple-crowned Fairies and a Yellow-olive Flycatcher. A stop to peer into the woods added a female White-collared Manakin, soon followed by fine views of a Gartered Trogon, plus another Bright-rumped Attila. We made a brief stop to look at two White Tent Bats roosting under a palm leaf before spending some time trying to work out where a calling Slaty-breasted Tinamou could be found. Our local guide tried one spot and the rest of us moved further along the trail. We weren't having much luck until the local chap appear and beckoned us to follow him. I charged off with him, with the others following behind. We rounded a corner and he said I should look through his 'scope. I assumed his 'scope would be in the forest but it was on the trail. I looked through and saw an almost full scope view of a calling Slaty-breasted Tinamou, which wasn't that far from the trail itself. Another bird easy to hear but very tough to see; a great bird to get.

After admiring the tinamou, and even getting some photographs of it, we went back to our walk but had a sudden stop when a raptor was noted a few metres up in a tree over the trail. It was a Semiplumbeous hawk and seemed unbothered by us as we 'scoped it then photographed it.

We continued on, by now heading back to our starting point. We found two Northern Barred-woodcreepers, a Cocoa Woodcreeper and then had good views of our first and indeed only Pale-billed Woodpecker. Our last birds were two high Swainson's Hawks migrating north with a party of Turkey Vultures.

We returned to our hotel for lunch and some of us saw White-lined Tanager at the hotel's feeders.

After lunch it was back to La Selva where, before we started walking the trails, we found a Green Shrike-vireo calling from a nearby tree. A very hard bird to see but we all got it. Also in this open area by the reserve entrance we found Blue Dacnis, Olive-backed and Yellow-crowned Euphonias, Black-capped Tityra and flyover White-collared and Spot-fronted Swifts, Brown-hooded Parrots and Olive-throated Parakeets and five Black-mandibled Toucans moving from tree to tree. We were after one particular species here and soon found it: Plain-coloured Tanager, two birds seen.

Walking the grounds toward a new area of forest we had another close Great Tinamou and a few slumbering Collared Peccaries. In the forest we saw a Western Slaty-antshrike and could hear others calling. Two Mealy Parrots were a brief diversion before we found a male White-collared Manakin, the white throat shining in the dark forest. Golden-hooded Tanager, White-whiskered Puffbird and one male and two female Great Curassows were seen as we left the forest and then the rain set in – proper tropical rain. We said goodbye to our guide and waited for the rain to ease and daylight to fade. The rain did ease and as light faded we walked a short distance to a bridge over a river to wait. Two Green Ibises flew in calling loudly, settling about 30 metres from us at the top of a tree. Then our final target was located as it flew this way and that over the river: Short-tailed Nighthawk.

On the way back to the hotel Magda and Steven kept their torches searching for owls but we didn't see anything until we were close to the hotel when a large owl was seen on roadside telegraph wires. Coca stopped the bus and had the challenge of turning in on a busy main road. As he did the bird flew. Coca stopped turning the bus and drove up the road a little way to a side road where we disembarked and scanned with torches the nearby trees. In one of them, not too far away and easily seen in the 'scope was a fine Striped Owl. A superb end to another excellent day.

The next day dawned overcast and a bit damp but as ever felt hot. After breakfast, just before we left the hotel, we walked all of about 10 metres and waited by a patch of heliconias. After a short while a Bronzy Hermit came in to this, his regular feeding ground, and after some typical hummingbird whizzing about settled on a tree for all to admire. After a last look at Passerini's Tanagers, Boat-billed Flycatchers and two Buff-rumped warblers in the car park we left the hotel and drove to another of Steven's sites where we found Plain (Canebrake) Wren and our target bird, Thick-billed Seed-finch. Also here were three noisily-calling and somewhat unexpected Helmeted Guineafowl!

A stop at another site, after a tip-off from a birder Steven knows, saw us checking a row of trees separating two large fields near a marsh. Four Red-lore Parrots flew over as did a lone Black-bellied Whistling-duck. Our target bird, the tip-off bird, was another of those species that wander over large areas and are so hard to pin down, in this case Slate-coloured Seedeater. It didn't take long to track it down, a young male, and it showed in high trees although tended not to stay still for long. Also here we found a few species we had seen before: Variable Seedeaters, Blue-black Grassquits, Collared Araçari, Rufous Mourner, Masked Tityra and one for the newbies, Greyish Saltator.

Our next stop was at a boulder-strewn river where we found an immature Fasciated Tiger-heron, with an adult found a little further down the river and two more Green Ibises nearby.

We then drove to part of Braulio Carrillo National Park where we spent some time by some flowing plants watching for hummingbirds. An aggressive Rufous-tailed Hummingbird patrolled the bushes but didn't chase off everything. A male Violet-headed Hummingbird avoided his attention as did a beautiful male Black-crested Coquette that perched for us. A female Green Thorntail was found and also showed well as did another White-necked Jacobin. Then the shout we had all been waiting for... 'Snowcap!', a male appeared suddenly and was almost immediately chased off by the Rufous-tailed Hummer. The Snowcap put in another couple of brief appearances but never managed to stay for long.

In trees across a small valley Steven spotted a euphonia, a new one for us, a male White-vented Euphonia. As we watched this some tanagers appeared: Speckled Tanager at first and then Black-and-yellow Tanagers were found plus Emerald Tanager. Another new bird, a Double-toothed Kite, was seen perched up across a different part of the valley. Five Black-mandibled Toucans moved through the trees and we watched a pair of Black-faced Grosbeaks nest building. Then Steven heard another interesting call and we were soon watching two Scarlet-rumped Caciques, one showing off its scarlet rump for all to see.

A small group of us elected to do a short walk into the forest and a few decided to stay behind. Those of us who went into the forest went in with the usual 'watch where you're walking, snakes' warning in our ears. Our first new bird was a pair of Tawny-crested Tanagers. The female was seen first and then the male, the tawny crest of the male was bright and obvious in the forest light. A female Green Hermit was found, then Steven lured in a male White-flanked Antwren. A Canada Warbler was seen working its way through the canopy and we heard Nightingale Wren. This wren is another tough bird

to see but we gave it a go, and were successful as we found the bird perched and singing its song comprised of strange seemingly-random notes. Another good bird was found and after some hunting we were all admiring a superb male Lattice-tailed Trogon. We then had to start back to the bus and the rest of our group but on the way we found more news birds in the form of two Checker-throated Antwrens and a Streak-crowned Antvireo.

We caught up with the news from the others who reported they'd seen a Barred Forest-falcon but that the Snowcap had not put in another appearance.

We were then back on the bus for some longer travel time, stopping briefly at a small pond where we found Blue-winged Teal, American Coot, a lone Northern Shoveler, two Common Gallinules and a Least Grebe.

We were now back on the central plateau and on the hunt for Prevost's Ground-sparrow. Our first stop gave us a nice group of warblers: Golden-winged, Rufous-capped and Mourning. White-eared Ground-sparrow was seen again and we found an Ovenbird and two Roadside Hawks.

At the next stop we spent an hour or so hunting and occasionally seeing glimpses of the elusive Prevost's Ground-sparrow, a bird, it seems, that does not know how to stand still for more than one second and dislikes being seen by more than one or two people at a time! Also here we had another Mourning Warbler. Northern Waterthrush, another White-eared Ground-sparrow and a Short-tailed Hawk.

We began the next day walking the road at Tapanti National Park, a mid-level mountain area. Two Silver-throated Tanagers and two Bay-headed Tanagers started the birding: we saw nine Bay-headed during our time here. A beautiful male Blackburnian Warbler showed well followed by two others later. We had our first White-bellied Mountain-gems here, our first Collared Trogon and views of birds we'd seen before: Spotted Barbtail and Grey-breasted Wood-wren. Two Streak-breasted Treehunters were a good find and we had only our third and fourth Pale-vented Thrushes. We heard Azure-hooded Jays but they remained hidden in the forest. Two Brown-capped Vireos were seen as was Lesser Greenlet and a Slaty-capped Flycatcher. It was a hot and sunny day and butterflies were abundant, Blue Morphos were particularly eye-catching and Steven pointed out a Short-tailed Morpho. As we looked across an open patch, cleared for electricity pylons, we could see into the high parts of trees below us: Red-faced Spinetail was found as was a very bright Tropical Parula and a not-so-bright Western Wood-pewee. Walking back we found a female White-winged Tanager and two male and one female Tawny-capped Euphonias. Our second Ochraceous Wren was located soon followed by a pair of Immaculate Antbirds, elusive but viewable if you're fast enough. A small female hummer was identified as our first Scintillant Hummingbird but we didn't find the hoped-for Black-bellied Hummingbird. Two Golden-bellied Flycatchers were found as were two Dark Pewees. Three Golden-browed Chlorophonias put in an appearance, an Ornate Hawk-eagle was seen overhead and a Tufted Flycatcher was found.

Our second stop in Tapanti immediately gave us a stunning male Flame-throated Warbler and we had Chestnut-collared Swifts overhead. An Emerald Toucanet was admired before we located a fine male White-winged Tanager. As we looked down a hillside where the vegetation was slightly more open and some small flowers were present we found a hummer: our sought-after Black-bellied Hummingbird. Our final bird at Tapanti was a raptor seen over the road that Steven immediately identified as a Barred Hawk.

We now had quite a long drive to Savegre. We stopped for lunch at a restaurant on a hillside with eye-

level vultures cruising past. There were some small flowering plants outside the restaurant and Dave and I noted a hummingbird coming in that turned out to be male Garden Emerald. We alerted the others but the male didn't return in the time we were there, although a female did come in to feed.

We next drove to the head of the Savegre valley and where to drive down into the valley to stay at Savegre Mountain Hotel. At the top of the valley we saw our first Sooty Thrushes, a common bird in this area. We stopped for some birding and pretty well immediately found a pair of Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers perched on top of a tree whose base was down the hill so the birds were at our eye level. As we admired these beautiful birds and enjoyed the cooler air we found other specialties of this lovely area: a female Volcano Hummingbird, a Yellow-winged Vireo, close views of Sooty-capped Bush-tanager, Black-capped Flycatcher, two Black-billed Nightingale-thrushes and some more migrants heading for North America: Wilson's and Townsend's Warblers.

We drove further down the valley and stopped at a small coffee shop that had feeders in its back garden. We spent a happy half hour or so watching the excellent birds that were coming in to the feeders. Yellow-thighed Finch was first, the yellow thighs being very obvious, followed by, over time, three adult and a juvenile Flame-coloured Tanagers, more Sooty Thrushes including one very speckled juvenile, Rufous-collared Sparrows, two Large-footed Finches and a couple of Acorn Woodpeckers. The hummer feeder hosted Magnificent Hummingbird and a male White-throated Mountain-gem, with a stunningly white throat. There was also a cat making the birds seem a bit nervous so the laser pointers of Steven and Magda were used to lure it away as it seemed quite happy chasing the light rather than bothering the birds.

Rather than go further down the valley to the hotel Steven made the decision to go back up the mountain, which we duly did, and found ourselves standing overlooking an area of open grassland and scattered trees with a denser forest adjoining it. It wasn't long before we were watching a calling Dusky Nightjar (and hearing others), which then flew up towards us, closely around us and back down to its perch. It was now almost dark so we headed down the valley to our hotel, finding another two Dusky Nightjars sitting on the road as we drove down the valley.

Next morning we were, as usual, up early and enjoying coffee on the hotel balcony. The balcony had three hummer feeders around it and overlooked the entrance road to the hotel as it wended its way down towards the Savegre River. The feeders held numerous Green Violetears and Magnificent Hummingbirds, along with occasional Volcano and Scintillant Hummingbirds and male and female White-throated Mountain-gems. Nearby trees held male and female Flame-coloured Tanagers, a Yellow-winged Vireo and two Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers.

We went for a walk through the hotel grounds and along the river finding our first Slaty Flowerpiercers feeding on flowers, and seeing six Sulphur-winged Parakeets flying overhead and a Ruddy Pigeon perched in a tree. Yellowish Flycatcher and Stripe-tailed hummingbird we found as were Collared Redstart, Black-billed Nightingale-thrush and Melodious Blackbird. On boulders in the river we found Torrent Tyrannulets and from a bridge saw an American Dipper fly up river. Ruddy-capped Nightingale-thrush was found near to two Spot-crowned Woodcreepers and a Grey-breasted Wood-wren. The local rufous-bellied race of Hairy Woodpecker was next to fall to our searching followed by more Slaty Flowerpiercers, male and female, and the local race of Red-tailed Hawk flying across the hillside of the valley.

After breakfast two of the hotel's jeeps took us up the mountain and dropped us off so we would walk further up through the oak forests of this area. Acorn Woodpeckers were the first birds seen here before we had started on our trek. As we walked up the trail Black-faced Solitaires could be heard

calling, a very distinctive thin whistle. A sudden stop was necessitated by Steven spotting close-by Spotted Wood-quails, a specialty and much sought-after bird of these forests. Western Wood-pewees were not uncommon and we found a few Tufted Flycatchers. Some effort went into seeing the calling Silvery-throated Jays we could hear, birds that favour the canopy and can be elusive, but we did see them. Heading back down we found a small flock comprising three Ruddy Treerunners and six Sooty-faced Bush-tanagers. Buffy Tuftedcheek could be heard but did not show. Also heard but not seen were Wrenthrushes (*Zeledonias*). Our first Black-cheeked Warblers were found as was another Yellow-thighed Finch and a Silvery-fronted Tapaculo flew from almost beneath our feet and landed not too far away although, as ever with tapaculos, it stayed pretty well hidden most of the time. The trail ended at the hotel where we had another two Ornate Hawk-eagles overhead and a female Resplendent Quetzal.

The afternoon saw us heading higher to the Paramo zone. A bird flew across the road and Steven ordered a quick stop. We were soon watching two Buffy Tuftedcheeks flying to and fro across the road. They are surprisingly large-looking birds. Mountain Thrushes were seen as was a perched Band-tailed Pigeon. We found a male Peg-billed Finch and had very close views because, unfortunately, it was dead, presumably a victim of a car as it flew across the road. Walking along the roadside we could hear Wrenthrushes calling and eventually some of the group had a few glimpses of one bird. A little further up we heard another but it didn't seem keen to show itself. However, as we were about to leave close movement was noted and the bird found. Over the next ten or so minutes the whole group had excellent views of this lovely bird as it sat low in bushes singing. Next to be added to the list was Timberline Wren, we saw two and heard more, and found a single Fiery-throated Hummingbird.

Higher up in the mist and cloud we made a quick stop for Volcano Junco. A chunky large-looking junco feeding by the roadside. It was very cold at this height, around 10000 feet, and very misty so we didn't hang around long. We did find Black-throated Green and Townsend's Warblers, Slaty Flowerpiercer and a flash of what might have been a live Peg-billed Finch but who knows?

Our final stop of the day found us on the road down the Savegre Valley where we tried for Costa Rican Pygmy-owl. The light was failing but we had torches. We were about to give up when one called so we tried again. A small bird shot in and stooped in a tree above us for a few seconds before flying to another tree. Eventually it stayed still long enough for us all to admire this tiny owl.

Next morning we were back on the balcony looking out for another new species. Eventually we found one individual, a young male Yellow-bellied Siskin. The usual species were in evidence and we made a short walk into the forest where we found another Buff-fronted Quail-dove walking along the path. Back by the river we again found Torrent Tyrannulets and a most-surprising Prothonotary Warbler, a late and lost bird. Two Flame-throated Warblers were found along with a similar species list to yesterday plus a male Resplendent Quetzal and a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak. A final walk around the hotel and river added, after quite a lot of searching, the one species we still needed: Black-thighed Grosbeak.

After leaving the hotel we drove to another, smaller, hotel higher up the mountain. Here we spent quite a long time admiring the extremely close hoards of hummingbirds: mostly Magnificent and Fiery-throated but they were very close (sometimes only a few centimetres away) and kept catching the sun to show off their iridescence. An occasional Volcano Hummingbird was seen and a Hairy Woodpecker was found nearby.

Some of the group elected to stay by the hummingbird feeders but most of us went for a short drive further up the mountain in the company of a local guide. We were dropped off and were left to walk back down to the hotel. Almost immediately we were watching Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatcher, one of our target birds here, and more Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers were also seen. This area, lower down than the Paramo, is a site for wintering Peg-billed Finches and we found two males and a female that showed well. As we watched the Peg-bills three Swallow-tailed Kites flew over, always a great bird to see. Our other target species, for which we'd been looking since we got to the Savegre area, was Ochraceous Pewee. We checked all flycatchers but all were Western Woodpeewees or Tufted Flycatchers. However, after a short while we did find and see very well an Ochraceous Pewee and later found the nest, probably only the third ever found and in the same area as the first ever found. Three Large-footed Finches were also here and a low but unseen Barred Parakeet was heard over the trees that surrounded us.

We then drove into the lower hills heading for the Pacific lowlands, being slightly delayed on the way due to a lorry attempting to pull a car from a field where it had crashed. We left the bus and walked past the crash to some flowering eucalyptus trees where hummingbirds could be seen feeding. There were at 20 or so hummers here, about 10 White-necked Jacobins, six Snowy-bellied Hummingbirds a couple of Garden Emeralds and a very brief glimpse of a White-crested Coquette. Red-legged Honeycreeper and Bananaquit also availed themselves of the nectar.

Driving around the outskirts of a town Magda spotted two Fiery-billed Araçaris so we stopped to admire them. Barn and Cliff Swallows were common and we found some Cherrie's Tanagers. Also here we found our first Red-crowned Woodpecker, a close Olivaceous Piculet, White-crowned Parrots and Grey-headed Chachalacas.

A little further on we stopped again, this time at a planned stop and again Barn and Cliff Swallows were much in evidence. We saw 1000s of Cliff Swallows migrating north. This stop was fast and furious birding. As soon as we had left the bus a Tropical Mockingbird was found. Blue-black Grassquits and Variable Seedeaters were feeding in tall grass and Steven spotted a Yellow-bellied Seedeater that flew but then settled so we could see it properly. Chestnut-collared Swifts were overhead and Pale-breasted Spinetail was seen well and so added to the list. A Lesser Elaenia perched in a small tree and a Streaked Saltator was found in another tree. A Thick-billed Seed-finch was located as were Bronzed Cowbird and great views of a Scaled Pigeon. Yellow-faced Grassquits completed our seedeater haul at this spot.

We overnighted at Talari Mountain Lodge, at about 900m altitude. Our first birds here were Yellow-green Vireo, Red-crowned Woodpecker, a pair of Red-legged Honeycreepers and a Green Honeycreeper. There is a very steep tarmac road leading to the hotel and as well walked up we found male Orange-collared Manakin. Another of our target species, Rufous-breasted Wren, was heard within metres of the manakin and subsequently found. We walked up a steep road and through a small copse of trees to stand on a grassy slope overlooking a valley. Migrating swallows were still common and a Fork-tailed Flycatcher was found. Steven scanned the trees and shouted 'cotinga'. He set up his 'scope up and we all took turns admiring the startling blue of a male Turquoise Cotinga. The bird stayed in the tree for quite a while and people were continually taking peeks through the scope at this extraordinarily-coloured bird. Tearing our eyes from the cotinga we found our final nightingale-thrush, Orange-billed Nightingale-thrush.

During a short wander around the garden to a river we found Blue-crowned Motmot, Black Phoebe, Streaked Flycatcher, Two Bay-headed Tanagers and new (and potentially splittable) races of Scaly-breasted Hummingbird and Orange-billed Sparrow. That evening before dinner we tried for

Tropical Screech-owl with no success. But Steven knows these birds and after dinner we tried again and found one, much to the excitement of another hotel visitor who took a considerable number of photographs.

Next morning we left the hotel and headed for the Pacific coast. A stop on the way gave us another Fiery-billed Araçari, four Smooth-billed Anis and sitting Pearl Kite that caused a lot of excitement.

We stopped at another reserve and straight away found Charming Hummingbird. We were joined by a local guide and walked a short distance to a well-kept garden and waited, watching flowering shrubs. Rufous-tailed and Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds and Long-billed Hermit were seen and a couple of the group saw a Grey-necked Wood-rail. A Yellow-bellied Flycatcher was spotted and our local guide found our second Green Shrike-vireo. A Cryptic Morpho flew past, a very brilliant azure blue butterfly, but this was soon eclipsed by a target, a tiny male White-crested Coquette – a stunning little bird. Once the coquette had departed we concentrated on another specialty here and were soon watching a Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet.

After this success we went for a walk into the forest where we found Stripe-throated Hermit, heard Ruddy Quail-dove, and saw Rufous Piha. A male Baird's Trogons completed our trogon list and we tracked down a Golden-crowned Spadebill. We then a male Red-capped Manakin and a pair of Blue-crowned Manakins within seconds of each other. A woodcreeper flew in and we added Tawny-winged Woodcreeper to our list. Two Grey-headed Tanagers were found followed by an Eye-ringed Flatbill and the last of the antbirds, Chestnut-backed Antbird. All the antbirds, all seen well: quite a haul. We also found two White-whiskered Puffbirds of the Pacific race. Back at the garden where we had started we saw Lesser Greenlet and yet another species of euphonia, a pair of Spot-crowned Euphonias. As we were about to board the bus and leave we stopped to admire a Blue-winged Helicopter, the world's largest dragonfly and, like all helicopters, wonderful to watch in flight.

We then drove down to the coast, right to the shore, where it was hot and raining. We stood on a sandy beach to see if there was anything flying past over the ocean. Magnificent Frigatebirds were seen and 16 Brown Pelicans flew past, low over the waves. A bird came in from the right, not too far out, and we added Brown Booby to our list.

We headed north up the coast, stopping at another of Steven and Magda's sites in search of a specific bird or two. Swifts overhead were Costa Rican Swifts, a Roadside Hawk sat within a small tree, Red-crowned Woodpeckers were heard and seen. A Tropical Gnatcatcher was found followed by the hoped-for Golden-naped Woodpecker. A Southern Beardless-tyrannulet called and showed and a passing person pointed out a Pauraque sitting on the ground only a few metres from where we stood. Black-hooded Antshrikes could be heard and we saw a male Violet-crowned Woodnymph and another Tawny-winged Woodcreeper.

Continuing on north we saw Common Black-hawk, Roadside Hawk and White-tailed Kite, had a pair of Green-breasted Mangos at our lunch restaurant, saw Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers on roadside wires and had fly-past Scarlet Macaws. We reached the Tarcoles River and went for a boat trip a little way up the river, down the river to a side river edged by mangroves and then out towards the mouth of the river. Mangrove and Barn Swallows and Grey-breasted Martins flew low over the water, Green Kingfisher and Yellow-crowned Night-heron were seen as was Purple Gallinule and a total of four Common Black-hawks. A sandy bank had a pair of nest-building Turquoise-browed Motmots and we saw five in all, all in excellent light: superb-looking birds.

Four Scarlet Macaws flew past, heard before they were seen, and the usual herons and egrets fed by the river's edge. American Crocodiles were common.

An Osprey was found in a tree as we headed to a tributary to check the mangroves. As we cruised up this river the tropical rain really began to come down. Despite this we found two rufous-headed 'mangrove' Yellow Warblers and a female American Pygmy-kingfisher sitting within the mangrove roots and only a couple of metres from our boat.

Back on the main river 10 Yellow-naped Parrots and more Scarlet Macaws were seen. We found a particularly huge American Crocodile and watched as another tour boat got close to it, a person got out of the boat and fed this monster. The gape of the croc would easily have taken him in whole!

We then headed out to more open water and sandbars separating the lagoon from the ocean. The sandbars held Royal and Sandwich Terns and a Sanderling or two. As we motored back to the dock an American Golden-plover was found and Lesser Nighthawks hunted for insects low over the river.

The entrance road to our final hotel was long and mostly edged with forest. The next morning Coca took us some way along this road and dropped us off where Steven directed. In a very short time we were watching two Riverside Wrens as Blue Morphos regularly flew down the road. A pair of Black-throated Trogons were found as was a male Red-capped Manakin. Our next new bird was a pair of noisy Black-hooded Antshrikes followed by a bird we had tried for three times before and not yet seen, Northern Bentbill. We walked slowly down the road, always wary of passing cars that tended to move pretty quickly, and at our next stop we found a pair of Dot-winged Antwrens and soon after, in branches overhanging the road, a pair of Blue-black Grosbeaks, a species we had previously only heard. A Great Tinamou was found just inside the forest next to us and another White-whiskered Puffbird showed up. Our next stop added an attractive Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher and nearby two Chestnut-backed Antbirds. The forest by the road continued to give us great birds with our first Scaly-breasted Wren being next to appear. A pair of Slaty-tailed Trogons was found as were Yellow-crowned Euphonia, Masked Tityra, Red-legged Honeycreeper and Bay-headed Tanager. Four noisy Scarlet Macaws flew through the trees then settled so we could admire them.

After breakfast we went to visit Carara National Park. We stopped in a small car park to pay the entrance fee and as Magda sorted out the money Steven found a male White-shouldered Tanager and a Plain Xenops. On the path was a fast-hopping Green-and-black Poison-dart Frog.

We drove away from the car park to access a slightly part of the park. A short walk down the trail took us to a small clearing over a tiny stream. Above the stream was the nest of a pair of Royal Flycatchers and we saw both adults with their hammer-shaped heads. A little further on we stopped to admire two beautiful male Orange-collared Manakins at their lek. I asked Steven about the possibility of Black-bellied Wren and his answer was basically 'you should be so lucky'. Soon after he heard the wren and we gathered in another open area and gave it a go. The luck that had been with us the whole tour did not desert us and a Black-bellied Wren came in and showed to us. Other birds seen from this trail were two more White-shouldered Tanagers, Charming Hummingbird, Dusky Antbird and a female Red-capped Manakin.

On a different trail we found the Pacific race of Grey-chested Dove, another potential split, and three Dot-winged Antwrens. Three Central American Spider Monkeys completed our monkey list.

On the way back to the hotel we diverted up a hill road where Western Tanagers have been known to spend the winter. We were too late for these birds as they'd already migrated north but we did see yet

another pair of Slaty-tailed Trogons, Blue-black Grosbeak, our first Alder Flycatcher, a female Painted Bunting, a young male and two adult male Long-tailed Manakins, a Northern Bentbill showing its bent bill well and a distant, perched White Hawk.

After lunch we returned to Carara. Two Agoutis and a Spot-crowned Euphonia opened the batting followed by another great bird, Ruddy Quail-dove, first seen deep in the forest but later two birds, an adult and a juvenile, were seen on the trail. Another Orange-billed Sparrow was found followed by a most elusive Black-faced Antthrush. We stopped by a small stream to see what would come in to bathe. A Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher was noted followed by, in order of appearance, female Blue-capped Manakin, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Grey-headed Tanager and a male Blue-crowned Manakin. A Stripe-throated Hermit fed nearby and a Bicoloured Antbird was heard calling. We waited until it was almost dark then headed back down the trail to the bus. One final bird was found, feeding on the edge of the trail: a Streak-chested Antpitta. A superb end to another great day and to fourteen days of amazing birding in Costa Rica.

However, we weren't finished yet. Although the next day was the day we left Costa Rica Steven and Madga took us for a short trip to look for some final species. We started on the road to the hotel getting Golden-naped Woodpecker, Riverside Wren and Black-hooded Antshrike. A Long-billed Starthroat was a new bird and we enjoyed Bay-headed Tanager, Mealy Parrot, Red-capped Manakin and Pale-billed Woodpecker. Another new species found was Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet, a bird of the canopy that indeed stayed high up. Black-mandibled Toucan and Fiery-billed Araçari were also seen here. A short drive again as we added a lone Muscovy Duck to the list, then to another new site for short visit where we found three Striped Sparrows, a Grey Hawk perched by the side of the road and two Scrub Greenlets, another new species. Our penultimate stop of the trip was a bridge over the Tarcoles River. American Crocodiles were common but nothing else was noted. Our truly final stop was by the side of the road. Eight Scarlet Macaws flew around, looking lovely in the morning light, two Crested Caracaras also flew past and we heard, then Sue found, our final new bird for the trip, Striped Cuckoo.

So, we were done. The previous record, for Birdfinders and perhaps for any tour company, for a two week (14 days) trip to Costa Rica was 548 species. An impressive total. Steven and Magda's triply-checked total for our trip was 564 species plus 14 heard-only! Extraordinary. Rumour has it that a Birdquest tour about the same time of the year, for three weeks, had 555 species, including heard-onlys. On our fifteenth day we added another five species. Our success is testament to the organisation of Birdfinders and Costa Rica Gateway, and to the truly remarkable birding skills of Steven and Magda Easley. Without their hard work throughout the year finding good birding sites, and their knowledge and talent at hearing and seeing things we would have seen far fewer birds. If you are thinking of visiting Costa Rica I strongly recommend you ensure the company you use themselves uses Costa Rica Gateway. You will certainly have a great tour. And the stories you hear about it being unnecessary to take a 'scope are true. I didn't believe this and took mine. It was a waste of time and effort, I strongly suggest you don't bother. Binoculars, stamina and enthusiasm are all you need.