



Yellow-breasted Crake

Costa Rica

Mountains, Marshes, and Mangroves

Tour Leader: Eric Ripma

February 10-20, 2025

February 10 – Arrival in San José

After everyone in our group arrived in San José and transferred to the hotel, we met in the lobby to take an afternoon walk around the grounds. We got our first taste of Costa Rican birding and had a chance to learn a few of the common birds in the area such as Hoffmann's Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, and Tropical Kingbird. We also had a very skulky Squirrel Cuckoo that eventually did show well, a couple of roosting Mottled Owls, and a pair of Yellow-naped Amazons - otherwise known as Parrots! It was a great way to kick off our tour.

February 11 – Ground-Sparrow Farm, Guacimo Road, Mata de Limón Mangroves, Cocorocas Salt Pans

We started our morning with a short drive to a coffee farm. The Cabanis's Ground-Sparrow, a Costa Rican endemic, uses many coffee farms in the area, since their native shrubby habitats have mostly been cleared for human development. The Ground-Sparrows were very shy on this morning, and we only heard one give a couple of brief vocalizations. The cold and windy weather was comfortable, but not great for bird activity. A couple of Lesson's Motmots popped up on a roadside fence for good looks, a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl eventually showed well, and large flocks of Crimson-fronted Parakeets zipped by overhead, but the Ground-Sparrow was not to be on this morning.



Tropical Royal Flycatcher

After breakfast back at our hotel, we got packed up and started our drive towards the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica. The traffic made it a longer drive, but we eventually made it to our first birding stop, Guacimo Road. As we were driving to our first spot on the road, we came across a pair of

White-throated Magpie-Jays. After we all had great looks, we continued on to our first planned stop. As soon as we were out of the vehicle, we started picking up many species. Brown-crested Flycatchers foraged along the road as Scarlet Macaws flew overhead. With a little coaxing, a couple of Turquoise-browed Motmots emerged from the scrubby habitat and a couple of Olive Sparrows showed well. We were hoping for Long-tailed Manakins here, but they were a no show on this morning. A side trail produced a few nice species, and our group was lucky to have great views of a few Tropical Royal Flycatchers! Another short walk down the road and we were looking at side-by-side views of Gartered and Black-headed Trogons, a couple of Turquoise-browed Motmots, and great looks at our hoped for Long-tailed Manakin. First up was a female manakin, but just seconds later the male perched out showing off his long tail streamers.



Long-tailed Manakin

We had worked up an appetite while watching all of these birds along Guacimo Road, so we continued on to lunch where we enjoyed a delicious fish meal while overlooking the Mata de Limón Estuary. After lunch, we made a brief stop in some nearby mangroves, but the midday heat kept bird activity low. We did see several Yellow Warblers (Mangrove) with their chestnut hoods, a Panama Flycatcher, and a glowing Prothonotary Warbler. Our last stop of the day was at the Cocorocas Salt Pans where we picked up many shorebirds, Black Skimmers, and Gull-billed Terns. A pair of Spot-breasted Orioles also provided nice looks and a rare (for this area) Lesser Goldfinch perched in the open. On our way out, we made one more stop along the road to look for more dry forest species. We were glad we did. A Lesser Ground-Cuckoo perched in view for almost our whole visit! We also had good looks at a Rose-throated Becard, White-lored Gnatcatchers, Blue and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, and a Painted Bunting. After finishing our drive, some of us enjoyed the pool and all of us enjoyed a beautiful sunset over the Gulf of Nicoya.



Lesser Ground-Cuckoo



Ensenada Sunset

February 12 – Ensenada Reserve

After sipping some coffee before sunup, our group headed down to the dock to board a boat. We had an early departure due to some extreme tides. We would have a hard cutoff time to get back to the dock or we would have to wait hours until the tide came back in. So, we focused on a few of our main targets in the mangroves. Our first two spots produced Mangrove Hummingbirds, a Costa

Rican endemic, and we had great looks at one at our second spot. We quickly moved to another area where we saw a roosting Lesser Nighthawk and a Mangrove Cuckoo came out for good looks! On our way back, we stopped along a couple of sand bars which produced several species of terns including a Common and a couple of Marbled Godwits. Unfortunately, it was time to get back to the dock at this point. When we looked out over the bay a couple hours after getting back, there were mudflats almost as far as the eye could see. After breakfast, we took a hike through more mangroves and eventually into some dry forest. We were still missing Mangrove Vireo, so it was nice to have good looks at one that was singing nearby. Other highlights on the hike included looks at Common Black Hawk, Banded Wren, and a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron. At the end of the hike, we had close views of a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl.



Banded Wren

After a break and some lunch, we made a short drive to the salt pans on the property. We started with birding from some shady spots along a trail and picked up quite a few species including a close Hook-billed Kite and two higher flying Plumbeous Kites. We also had good looks at Black-headed Trogon, Turquoise-browed Motmots, and Streak-backed Orioles before making it to a small pond with marshy habitat where we picked up Northern Jacanas, Purple Gallinule, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, and a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds. When we made it back to the salt pans there were many more birds present than when we had driven by an hour earlier. We had hundreds of shorebirds including Red Knots and Stilt Sandpipers. We started our short drive back to the lodge and most of the group got out at the end to walk the rest of the way back. On this walk, we enjoyed great views of Stripe-headed Sparrows, a Nutting's Flycatcher, Crane Hawk, two troops of Howler Monkeys, and a White-necked Puffbird. After a short break it was time for another delicious dinner at our lodge.

February 13 – Ensenada Lodge, Curi-Cancha Reserve

We started our morning with a walk around the trails from our lodge. It was a birdy walk, and we added several species and had better looks at many species we had already seen. Early on we had great looks at a Gray-crowned Yellowthroat as it perched in the open. As we continued, we came across a couple of flocks that contained Black-crowned and Masked Tityras, a couple of Blue-vented Hummingbirds, Black-headed Trogon, and Streak-backed and Spot-breasted Orioles. We ended our morning walk with a low soaring Magnificent Frigatebird and Short-tailed Hawk flying in circles overhead.



Magnificent Frigatebird

After breakfast and packing up, we started our drive to the higher (and cooler) elevations around Monteverde. We took a longer route to look for Double-striped Thick-knee and it paid off! We also added looks at a Gray Hawk, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and a couple of Thick-knees. We arrived in Monteverde at lunchtime and after lunch drove a short distance to Curi-Cancha Wildlife Refuge. Our main target for the afternoon was Resplendent Quetzal, but on our way to look, we were held up by Crested and Black Guans, Magenta-throated Woodstar, and Coppery-headed Emerald. Shortly after, we got word of a quetzal a little further up the trail. We had close, lengthy looks at this beautiful bird. A nearby female didn't show quite as well. Eventually we had to walk away from the pair of quetzals to look for other species. Our first toucan, a Keel-billed, provided nice views, before we ran into a flock of the stunning, Golden-browed Chlorophonias. A couple of White-eared Ground-Sparrows foraged nearby and after a few minutes an Elegant Euphonia flew in and joined the chlorophonias! We finished off our visit with a hike through the forest where we had saw and heard the beautiful singing of a Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush. In the evening, we enjoyed beautiful sunset views and a delicious dinner at our lodge.



Resplendent Quetzal

February 14 – Valle Escondido Preserve, San Gerardo Station Road, Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve

Before breakfast, our group gathered near the lobby of the hotel for a short walk. There was a lot of bird activity, and we had great views of several species. We started out with a female Collared Trogon right next to our rooms. Golden-olive Woodpeckers posed for great looks, a couple of Lesson's Motmots perched right above the trail, and a Rufous-and-white Wren approached closely all from the lawn and parking lot of our hotel. A Rufous-browed Peppershrike even provided nice views!

After breakfast, we headed higher in elevation to bird along the road/trail to San Gerardo Station. This was the cloud forest, and we experienced it how everyone should; we were in the clouds! A short way down the trail we came across a good-sized flock and picked up our first Costa Rican Warblers, Spotted Barbtails, and Slate-throated Redstart. The windy and wet weather made for some difficult birding, but we eventually added good looks at Golden-bellied Flycatcher and Prong-billed Barbet. Hearing the barbets singing their honking duet was a special treat. As we walked back, the weather improved, and the bird activity picked up. We had close looks at White-throated Spadebill, Ruddy Treerunners, Tufted Flycatchers, Collared Redstart, and a Slaty Flowerpiercer. Afterwards, we headed to lunch in Monteverde. There is always plenty of delicious food on a Sabrewing tour!

Our afternoon was spent birding at the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. We started with a check of the nearby hummingbird feeders where we had seven species including Magenta-throated Woodstar and Purple-throated Mountain-gem. A hike through the reserve was somewhat slow, but we did have close looks at a Black-faced Solitaire feeding low along the trail, brief views of a Streak-breasted Treehunter, and lengthy views of a pair of Northern Emerald-Toucanets at a nesting cavity. As the adults moved about, we could even hear the chicks calling from inside the cavity!

February 15 – Valle Escondido Preserve, Caño Negro Refuge

We started our day with a morning walk around the grounds of our hotel. We picked up a good number of species for the trip and enjoyed the gorgeous views of the valley leading down to the Gulf of Nicoya. A few of the highlights included finally seeing Lesser Greenlets, Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, our first Mountain Thrush of the trip, and a big mixed warbler flock at the end of our hike that had Golden-winged, Black-and-white, Tennessee, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Green, and Wilson's Warblers! As the flock moved through a large troop of White-nosed Coati strolled by right in front of us.

After breakfast it was time for our longest drive of the trip. During our four-hour drive, we picked up our first Gray-breasted Martins while at a restroom stop. Next up was a tasty lunch with a good view. Then we picked up our first King Vultures of the trip. There were lots of birds as we were approaching our lodge, but we continued on to make it in time for our afternoon boat ride at Caño Negro. As we were checking in to the hotel, we were distracted by their feeders which had plenty of Scarlet-rumped Tanagers with their glowing red rump patches. And then the sky opened up and it started to pour.



Our group on the boat.

Luckily, by the time we got on the boat, the rain had fizzled and a short while later it stopped altogether. The birding from the boat was spectacular. In two and a half hours we had racked up over 80 species. We spent the afternoon in the marshy portion of the refuge, but on the way, we came across a Gray-headed Kite, stopped for an American Pygmy Kingfisher and Boat-billed Heron, and had good looks at Russet-naped Wood-Rails. Once we reached the marshy habitat, we had great views of a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, a pair of Jabirus, and a nesting pair of Black-collared Hawks. The biggest highlight was when a Yellow-breasted Crake flushed to the side of the boat. We were able to



American Pygmy Kingfisher



Jabiru

follow it, and with a little coaxing, it showed extremely well for the whole group! A few moments later, a Pinnated Bittern flew by and a Yellow-tailed Oriole sat up singing on an exposed perch. What a great afternoon of birding!

After dinner, we headed out to look for some owls and potoos. Our strategy was to spotlight from the vehicle as we were driving a back road. All we saw were some caimans on our drive out, but luckily our drive back proved more fruitful! We had nice looks at a Striped Owl hunting from a powerline and a Black-and-white Owl sitting close to a street light which brings in its favored meal of large, flying insects.



Black-and-white Owl

February 16 – Natural Lodge, Caño Negro Refuge, Los Chiles, La Fortuna Area

We met at 6 this morning and spent the first 15 minutes of the day birding around the lodge grounds. Large flocks of birds were moving through, especially Orchard Orioles. We also had nice looks at our first Slaty-tailed Trogon and a Keel-billed Toucan! However, it was time to head to the boat and bird a different area of the refuge than we did the day before. This time we birded the gallery forests bordering the Río Frío (Cold River) which drains Lake Nicaragua, the largest freshwater

lake in Central America. In just a few hours we had over 100 species. The main highlight throughout the morning was spectacular views of a Green-and-rufous Kingfisher! This is the hardest kingfisher to find in the Americas, so it was especially rewarding to get some nice photos!

After our boat ride, it was time to head back to the hotel for breakfast, take a short walk, and to pack up to head to La Fortuna. The short walk was fairly unproductive, but we did have nice looks at family of Central American Spider Monkeys. After birding a forested patch in town, we started our drive and ran into our local guide who pointed out a roosting Great Potoo! We made another couple



Green-and-rufous Kingfisher

of stops along the way and picked up some more of our targets. In one of the fields, Nicaraguan Seed-Finches never came in close, but we had nice scope views. A couple of White-throated Crakes allowed for good looks, and we saw the previously reported Cattle Tyrant. It was only the second time Cattle Tyrant has been recorded in Costa Rica. After lunch on our drive to La Fortuna, we made one more stop before arriving at the hotel. It was a brief stop, but we picked up our first Broad-billed Motmot, Harris's Hawk, and Buff-rumped Warbler.

February 17 – Arenal Observatory Lodge, Peninsula Road

After a short drive to Arenal Observatory Lodge and seeing our only Rufous Motmot along the way, we spent a short time watching the feeders before having a quick breakfast. The feeders provided several new species for our trip and the Great Curassows really entertained our group with their punk rock hairdos! Collared Aracaris, Yellow-throated Toucans, and several species of tanagers provided the color for the morning. As we were birding from the deck of the lodge, we heard about a roosting Spectacled Owl, so after a few minutes we headed down to see it. We had great views

as the owl rested below eye level! Afterwards, we took a hike around the wooded trails and spent some time at the top of the tower. We had too many highlights to list, but running into a couple mixed flocks added many species to our list. As one flock moved through, we had great looks at the stunning White-collared Manakin, Smoky-brown Woodpecker, and White-browed Gnatcatcher. A deeper forest flock provided Fawn-throated Foliage-gleaner, Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher, Streak-crowned Antwreio, Slaty Antwren, and Stripe-breasted Wrens. Afterwards, we spent some time in the gardens where we added good looks at Black-crested Coquette, Violet-headed Hummingbird, several White-throated Thrushes, and a Pale-billed Woodpecker. An Eyelash Pitviper and a Jumping Viper were also great to see!



Female Great Curassow

After another great lunch, we spent some time birding along Peninsula Road. As soon as we got out of the vehicle, we had a small flock which had our first Russet Antshrike. A little way down the road, we were able to get good looks at two Dull-mantled Antbirds. We also came across a Thicket Antpitta singing close to the road, but try as we might, we could never get looks at this difficult-to-see species. At the end of our walk along the road, we had great looks at both a Keel-billed and Broad-billed Motmot!



Arenal Volcano



Keel-billed Motmot

February 18 – Sky Adventures Arenal, Papa's Place

After an early breakfast, we made a short drive to Sky Adventures Arenal. On the entry road, we had nice looks at Brown-hooded Parrots and a Red-lored Amazon. A couple of Rufous-tailed Jacamars also came in for good looks before we reached the park. Once we reached the park and started down the trail, we came across a small flock with our only Tawny-crowned Greenlet of the trip, several Tawny-faced Gnatwrens, and a Slaty-capped Flycatcher. Unfortunately, the birding was rather slow throughout the morning, but we did connect with a White-tipped Sicklebill, had nice looks at Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush, saw a soaring Ornate Hawk-Eagle, and had great looks at a pair of Spotted Antbirds!



Spotted Antbird

After lunch, we headed back to our hotel for a short midday break before going to Papa's Place on the outskirts of La Fortuna. The feeders were very slow here, but a pair of Olive-backed Euphonias visited, Great Curassows came in, and a Crested Guan showed up. A short walk up a dirt track yielded good looks at Gray-capped Flycatcher, Northern Tropical Pewee, and a Wedge-billed Woodcreeper. After a home-cooked dinner, we took a walk around their gardens and ponds with Gerald, the owner of the property. He pointed out many species of frogs and several snakes during our walk. The Red-eyed Tree Frogs and Central American Coral Snake were especially beautiful, and we were happy to see and keep our distance from a Fer-de-lance, the most deadly snake in Central America.

February 19 – Soda Cinchona, Poas Volcano, La Antigua Lechería Corso

This was our last day of birding for the tour, and we were heading to the highlands where there would be many new birds to see. On our way, we came across two Fork-tailed Flycatchers, which are

rare for this area of Costa Rica. It was a nice way to start our day. Once we reached Soda Cinchona, we ordered breakfast and enjoyed their fruit feeders. The hummingbird activity was slow, but the fruit feeders more than made up for it. As soon as we arrived, we had point-blank views of several Northern Emerald-Toucanets! We also had good looks at many tanagers including the beautiful Crimson-collared, a couple of Prong-billed Barbets, and a pair of Buff-fronted Quail-Doves feeding below the feeders. On our drive to our next spot, we made a quick stop and picked up a Torrent Tyrannulet below an impressive waterfall.



Fork-tailed Flycatcher

Our next stop filled in a few higher elevation species that we hadn't seen yet. Spot-crowned Woodcreepers provided nice views while Collared and Slate-throated Redstarts came in and out of view. A White-fronted Tyrannulet sang from nearby but wouldn't reveal itself. A little flock worked its way through, and we added Yellow-winged and Brown-capped Vireos and Red-faced Spinetail. We ended our birding here with a pair of Spangle-cheeked Tanagers, with their golden speckling on their cheeks. On our way back to the main road, we came across several Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers, one of the most stunning highland species in Costa Rica. Our lunch stop didn't have as many hummingbirds as we hoped, but watching two male Scintillant Hummingbirds flashing their gorgets will be an unforgettable memory from the trip!

Our last stop of the trip started with a downpour, but luckily it didn't take too long to let up and we were able to get some more birding in! As soon as the rain subsided, a large mixed flock started moving through and we added many new species to our list. The largest flock of Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers that I have seen provided nice views while one Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatcher tried to slip past. A pair of Flame-throated Warblers came by while a Volcano Hummingbird perched up behind us. As we walked back to the van, a pair of Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrushes

hopped around on the ground nearby. Unfortunately, it was time to head back to Hotel Bougainvillea for our flights out the following day.

All in all, we totaled 417 bird species (over 220 of which were photographed), saw a plethora of other wildlife, and enjoyed some great food! Big thanks to our group for being such a fun, laid back group of birders (and non/less-birders!) which helped make this a very enjoyable trip. Another thanks to Jehudy Carballo, our outstanding local guide, and Pablo Jimenez, our great driver who is also a great photographer and birder!



Crimson-collared Tanager



Scintillant Hummingbird



We had such a fun group on this trip!