Costa Rica: The Forest Jewel of Central America Tour Report 2024

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by Inger Vandyke

I always thought it would be wonderful to go to Costa Rica for photography. A few years ago I joined a Birdquest tour to see the country's birds and I felt completely beguiled by it. Where else in Central America can you find such vast expanses of completely unexplored rainforest filled with charismatic and wonderful wildlife? I always remember asking about how many Bare-throated Umbrellabirds there may be left on earth and our lovely guide, Leo, said he didn't know because so much of where they live is inaccessible for humans.

Yet despite the fact Costa Rica sits on the edge of these incredible wilderness areas, it is surprisingly accessible. The country is committed to providing great walking trails, comfortable lodges and a good road infrastructure amongst so many things.

Leading a wildlife photography tour there was a sheer delight. On this, our first tour to Costa Rica with Wild Images, we saw no less than six different owls species, Resplendent Quetzals on the nest and we managed to find and photograph one of the harder glass frogs to see in the world – Ghost Glass Frog.

In total we recorded an incredible number of species on this tour including over 130 birds, at least 10 different insects and arachnids, 19 species of reptiles, 1 mollusc, 11 amphibians, 13 mammals and 3 fish – and that was just what I could identify as their tour leader! I'm sure we saw many more but the sheer number of species to photograph was overwhelming, even for an experienced tour leader. In the end it was hard to narrow down my favourites!

Our group met at the wonderful Bougainvillea Hotel in San Jose at the start of the tour. Located on the outskirts of the city, this beautiful hotel has incredible gardens that are filled with a myriad of fascinating tropical plants, some very tame Turquoise-browed Motmots, Mottled Owl, Hoffman's Woodpecker, Red-lored Parrots and Clay-coloured Thrush, Costa Rica's national bird. Spending some time in these gardens was a fantastic way to whet our appetites for what lay ahead of us on tour and after a welcome dinner on our first night, we left the following morning for the rainforests.

Sarapiqui

Our drive to Costa Rica's lowland rainforests took us over a forest-clad mountain range dotted with stands of gigantic Gunnera and waterfalls. We arrived at our lodge in time for lunch and we spent the afternoon wandering around the network of trails in the lodge grounds, searching for creatures. We managed to find our first Strawberry Poison Frogs and also displaying White-collared Manakins.

Nestled at the edge of the untamed wilderness of Braulio Carrillo National Park, Sarapiqui is an area of dense lowland rainforest that feels more like a garden of eden when you explore it.

We spent our first day with the leading naturalist of this area who provided us with a stunning introduction to what might lie ahead on our tour. In the grounds of his home alone we photographed a diverse number of bird species including White-necked Jacobins, American Pygmy Kingfisher, Blue Grey, Palm, Crimson-collared and Scarlet-rumped Tanagers, Montezuma Oropendola, Green-breasted Mango, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Grey-cowled Wood Rail, White-tipped Dove and Clay-coloured Thrush. Close by we photographed a pair of White-throated Crakes with their chicks as they emerged from long grasses on a neighbouring block of land.

We also enjoyed stunning photography chances with a habituated Variegated Squirrel which was a delight since they are normally quite difficult to capture while they run around in bushes. It was becoming hard to tear ourselves away but our guide wanted to show us some wildlife in his nearby forest so we drove a short distance, stopping at a school to photograph a Yellow-bellied Elaenias feeding their chicks at a nest. Into the forest we went and finally we chanced upon a few lines of meandering Leafcutter Ants, a brown Kaydid, Central

American Wandering Spider, Golden Orb spider and our target for the first half of the walk, a pair of Spectacled Owls at a day roost with their near adult chick. What a highlight! On our way back to the bus we stopped to photograph the first of two colonies of Honduran White Bats we would see on the tour.

After a brief break at the bus, we alighted and saw a beautiful Dappled Daggerwing Butterfly fluttering around near the door of the bus.

Crossing the road another stretch of forest produced a stunning day roosting Crested Owl – quite a hard species to see! Finally we stopped to photograph some White-collared Manakins before we all took a break for lunch.

Within an hour of returning to our guide's home for more photography we spotted four species of reptiles including Yellow-headed Gecko, Bighead, Great Green and Pug-nosed Anole! To our delight the Great Green Anole we found was actually contentedly digging a potential nesting hole right in front of us while we photographed him.

Insect highlights of the day came in the form of both a like this Crenulata Sylvan Leaf Katydid and a fantastic Fine-dendiculated (or Peruvian Shield) Mantis.

We spent a little time photographing hovering hummingbirds including White-necked Jacobin and Green Mango at a ginger flower.

The true highlights of this incredible day were with amphibians. We first saw a tiny Strawberry Poison Frog carrying her precious tadpole on her back. In one stunning encounter we all got to photograph Ghost Glass Frog – one of the hardest to find glass frogs in Central America. This tiny frog is best known for it's spangled eyes that look similar to some geckos. As a tour leader I had long wanted to show my guests one of these but I had zero hopes of actually seeing one on this tour as I knew how difficult they are to see in the wild. What a fantastic climax to an almost overwhelming day with so many incredible creatures to photograph!

That night we joined a local naturalist guide at our lodge for a night walk on the lodge trails. Activity had improved on some of these by nightfall and we found a Central American wandering Spider, Giant Green Anole, Common Dink Frog, Common Rain Frog, a wonderful Spiny Cochran Frog and its baby. We saw a Bullet Ant Nest which we avoided for the danger of being bitten! The streams produced catfish and Tiger Bass. Finally we went to visit some of the lodge's Red-Eyed Tree Frogs for photos. What an incredible end to a mesmerizing day! It was hard for all of us to imagine we were only on our first day of the trip!

The following day we spent an entire day at a carefully managed conservation project for frogs and snakes at Sarapiqui. Although these were our two main targets we actually saw three species of bats when we first arrived, including an adorable family of Honduran White Bats with their young, Long-snouted Proboscis Bats with their babies and White-throated Round-eared Bats in a tiny nesting hole, also with their babies. Our guides showed us a Mexican Hairy Dwarf Porcupine but he was asleep high in a happy plant and very difficult to photograph. Before we even started to photograph frogs for the morning we saw Great Green Macaws eating fruits in the rainforest canopy. sleeping Brown-throated Sloths and more White-collared Manakins at a large lek, displaying.

The frog highlights of the morning included photography of Strawberry Poison Frog, Green and Black Poison Dart Frog, Splendid Leaf Frog and Red-eyed Tree frog, perhaps the most iconic of all of Costa Rica's frogs.

We took a break for lunch and on our return we spent an afternoon photographing some wonderful snakes including Boa, Side-striped Pit Viper, Hog-nosed Viper and a beautiful yellow morph of Eyelash Viper. One of the more entertaining snakes we met was Brown Vinesnake who, when agitated, opened his mouth to reveal a beautiful navy blue colouration!

While we were photographing snakes one of the local guides exclaimed that he had found two male Green and Black Poison Dart frogs fighting each other over territory so we went off to photograph and video these amazing little creatures as they fought.

As we left the project we found a slot but he was also difficult to photograph. We did see, however, a pair of White-tipped Doves attending to their young on a nest as we walked out of the reserve.

What a tremendous couple of days in Sarapiqui!

La Cinchona

Before we continued our exploration of Costa Rica's lowland rainforests, we made a slight diversion to visit a wonderful café at La Cinchona for lunch. This café had numerous feeders so we spent some time there photographing species we may not have been able to see easily elsewhere on the tour including Red-headed and Prong-billed Barbets, Silvery-throated Tanager, Bay-headed Tanager, Violet Sabrewing, Purple-eared and Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis and Emerald Toucanet. Across the valley from the café is a giant waterfall and it was beautiful to watch the rainforest mist shroud it then reveal it while we visited. A tall tree stump allowed us to capture our first photographs of Costa Rica's vultures as we watched Black Vultures tussle over the best perching spot on top of it.

Alajuela

From La Cinchona we descended once again to the lowland rainforests and the wonderful lodge at Laguna Lagarto.

Before we arrived I had heard that the previous three groups visiting the area had not seen any toucans. The huge abundance of wild fruits in the rainforests was blamed for the lack of sightings so I started to get a little worried. The other groups had local naturalist guides constantly with them. We had none. Would we see any? I could only hope.

Shortly before we reached the lodge I saw a Collared Aracari sitting high in a cecropia tree so I stopped the bus and we all got out to photograph him. Even though he was quite some distance from us it was still great to see him!

Well he turned out to be a good omen. Not only did we see Keel-billed Toucans each day we were at the lodge, we found a pair at a nesting cavity and we also photographed them with fruit in their bills in the lodge's trees. Each day a Keel-billed Toucan visited the lodge feeder and we saw Collared Aracari at the feeder in the end also. Phew! Persistence (and a little luck) pays!

Over the course of the next two days in this area we all enjoyed some wonderful wildlife encounters including watching a local Agouti forage for coconuts in the lodge grounds and curious White-nosed Coatis scrounging around fallen bananas.

Some of the bird highlights included nesting Great Green Macaw and Rufescent Tiger Heron. We saw three species of owls – Spectacled, Middle American Screech Owl and Central American Pygmy Owl at a nesting hole in a palm trunk. The latter put on a good show for us on our final day when he turned up with his prey of a Black-throated Wren, only to be turned away with it by the female on the nest who we think scowled at him for bringing in prey too large for their chicks!

Nesting near to the lodge we found gorgeous little Black-crowned Tityras displaying and Red-lored Parrots at their nesting holes. We also enjoyed a fantastic encounter with displaying Red-capped Manakins who were doing their high pitched whistles to attract a mate!

The lodge feeder and nearby fruiting trees attracted Brown-hooded Parrots, Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, Montezuma Oropendola, Blue Grey Tanager, Golden-hooded Tanager, Buff-throated Saltator, Blue and Green Honeycreepers, Scarlet-rumped Tanager and Yellow-throated Euphonia.

A highlight of staying at Laguna Lagarto is a chance to spend a time in their dedicated bird hides to photograph King Vulture. On the morning we planned to see them, however, an Ornate Hawk Eagle arrived and scared most of them off! We went to photograph the Hawk Eagle but we had to deploy a bit of patience as we waited for him to leave and the vultures could descend on their vulture dinner in safety. When they did we spent a lovely couple of hours photographing King and Black Vultures in the heat of the afternoon. At one point our wonderful driver showed up to see how we were going and I jokingly declared it was 'beer o'clock'. The next thing we knew he went off to get us some cold beers from the lodge to drink in the hide while we were taking photos! What a treat!

One of the more interesting additions to the lodge since we last visited were Moth Cloths. These illuminated sheets are designed to lure moths and insects out of the forest to be viewed. Although we didn't spend a lot of time at them, the lodge did accidentally leave the outside lights on one night and when we woke at sunrise to take photos we were quite astounded by some of the beautiful moths that lingered on the lodge balcony well after dawn. In a race to photograph them before a local Kiskadee had them for breakfast, we managed to secure the futures of some really pretty ones like the red and white Ripha Flammans Moth, Automeris moth and I managed to find a Variegated Cracker butterfly, a unique species that cracks its wings like a firecracker when they take flight.

Another great addition was a shower over the feeder. On one hot afternoon the lodge staff started it and instantly a Black-cheeked Woodpecker flew down in order to take a bath. It was so relieved to find an impromptu shower that it bathed long enough for us to

practice fast and slow shutter photos of this lovely bird in what looked like a tropical rain shower.

That evening, at sunset, we caught some wonderful photographs of a male Great Curassow who visited the feeder at dusk.

Oddly, primates were conspicuously absent from Lagarto in comparison to our previous experiences there but we did have a lovely encounter with some White-faced Capuchin monkeys on one of the forest trails. They were quite hard to photograph but we all delighted in watching one drink from a pool of water in a large canopy bromeliad which was fascinating to see!

Lagarto is always an amazing place for photography. The more you look, the more you find. Even in the lodge carpark there was a fantastic Clerodendrum bush in flower with its giant Christmas Tree-like red flowers.

As always it was hard to leave such an amazing place but the more remote part of our trip was waiting and after a final sunrise morning of photography, we packed up our bags and headed north towards the border of Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

Cano Negro

The drive to Cano Negro passes through a large tract of agricultural area in Costa Rica. I wanted to make a quick stop at a spot I knew from my last visit that had gigantic Green Iguanas and thankfully they were still at the same place but we couldn't linger on the way north due to time.

The wilds of the Rio Frio were waiting for us so we continued on to the Cano Negro area where our small family run lodge was ready for us to have lunch. Kept in the same family for several generations, our lodge in this remote part of the country has the most wonderful food, friendly staff and a homey atmosphere. We enjoyed a wonderful meal but just as we were finishing our driver alerted us to the fact there was a troupe of Geoffroy's Spider Monkeys playing in the trees across the lodge. We all quickly devoured our last mouthfuls of food, grabbed our cameras and went to check them out. What happened next turned out to be the best encounter I have ever had with this species anywhere. We communed with several families of monkeys eating fruit, caring for babies and scrambling around in the trees. At one point a bold youngster grabbed branches and sat on a palm seed pod almost posing for us. It was very special and we all had a hard time tearing ourselves away from them.

We had to leave though. Our boat driver was waiting to take us on a sunset cruise for wildlife on the river. After stopping to purchase our park permits for the trip we went down to our comfortable motor boat and saw our first Nicaraguan Grackles. Just nearby we watched some Red-winged Blackbirds having a bath at the water's edge in full view of some Neotropic Cormorants and Northern Jacanas. These birds were just the start of some wonderful wildlife we were to encounter that afternoon.

Staying out until sunset we enjoyed encounters with Mantled Howler Monkeys, Nicaraguan Slider Turtles, kingfishers, ibises, anhingas, Limpkin, Sun Grebe, Roseate Spoonbill, Black Skimmer, Broad-billed Heron, Spectacled Cayman and iguanas, amongst so much more.

As we returned to dock we amusingly watched a Neotropic Cormorant wrestle with his catch of a Tchupapiela fish. Like many cormorants his eyes were bigger than his belly we thought – until he actually managed to gulp it down!

Linda's Birthday

That night after another wonderful and intense day of wildlife photography we sat down to celebrate Linda's birthday with cocktails and a birthday cake from the lodge. Not a bad place to celebrate if I must say!

The following morning we were due to go back out on the river at sunrise but once again we were distracted by the troupe of Geoffroy's Spider Monkeys. This time they didn't linger as long so we enjoyed a few moments with them before returning to the river. The photography in the soft morning light was truly wondrous. We enjoyed encounters with Black-collared Hawk, Purple Gallinule and a variety of other waterbirds including herons, egrets, anhinga and cormorants. Even smaller birds delighted us this morning as we saw Barred Antshrikes, Bright-rumped Attila, Black-headed Tody Flycatcher and Southern Rough-winged Swallow.

On the reptile front we saw iguanas, Spectacled Cayman, crocodiles and we had some spectacular encounters with several Emerald Basilisks including one very confiding male who was sunning himself on the river bank!

The stillness of the river that morning was magical. The reflections we saw with some animals produced photographs that almost didn't look real. It became quite hard to tear ourselves away from one lagoon that had near perfect reflections of cayman and waterbirds.

As we were faced with a rather long drive to our next location we reluctantly got off the river and drove towards Arenal area, stopping to photograph some gigantic iguanas and do a little souvenir shopping en-route.

Arenal Volcano

We arrived in the bustling tourist town of La Fortuna around noon and we drove out to our spectacular lodge at the foothills of Arenal in time for a break and some lunch while we waited for our rooms to be ready for check in. That afternoon was a free afternoon, allowing us time to wander around the lodge grounds taking photos of the resident wildlife.

It was here that we found some very tame White-nosed Coatis and we saw Great Curassows with little chicks that were adorable!

Hearing about a nesting pair of Yellow-throated Toucans we went to check that out but the afternoon was a little quiet. Other members of the group went in search of Black-crested Coquette without luck and I went off for a wander until I found Linda. Just as we met we spotted some spider monkeys scrabbling around in the cecropias above our heads. We looked at each other and made a quick, joint decision to see if we could get better views of them from the lodge's canopy tower so we scaled the numerous stairs to try and catch up with them. Once we were up there we realized the tower wasn't very stable for photos but we did catch the tail end of the monkeys and enjoyed seeing one pregnant female dining on cecropia fruit in the canopy.

Since it was quite a tiring climb we stopped at the top for a while to see Yellow-throated Toucans also feasting on cecropia fruits. The rain threatened our photos, however, so we descended and joined the rest of the group for a lovely dinner.

The following day we spent the morning once again taking photos around the lodge. We found some very obliging Crested Guans to photograph and we finally located the Black-crested Coquettes. We also checked out the lodge's frog pond and found Brilliant Tree Frogs active there. The nesting hole for the Yellow-throated Toucans was also more active and we were surprised to find a pair of Black-cheeked Woodpeckers sharing the same truck and excavating their nesting hole too. We lingered for a while waiting for the toucans to fly in and out of the nest to take photos which was challenging, given the nest's location, but fun nonetheless.

For lunch that day we dined at a wonderful local restaurant in La Fortuna and just as we were finishing eating, some of the restaurant guests alerted us to a pair of Boat-billed Herons and some basilisk lizards in the restaurant grounds so we briefly checked them out. Realising they were harder than we thought to photograph, we went off to a nearby rainforest stretch known for its good sloth encounters.

Once there we met our guide and went off on the forest trails. While we saw both two and three-toed sloths that afternoon, we also had so many other wild encounters including watching a Yellow-throated Toucan take a bath in his own 'plunge pool' in a tree trunk, a baby Rufous-tailed Hummingbird on the nest, Black and White Owls with their chick, Yellow-spot Lizard, agoutis, a Boa, Proboscis Bats, a Crested Guan with her three chicks, Orange-chinned Parakeets at a nesting cavity, Rufous-tailed Jacamar and finally a wonderful chance to photograph Red-eyed Tree Frogs on heliconias before our tour ended. What a fabulous afternoon! While the sloths were great, we never expected to see so many other things. It was a wonderful experience.

Back at the lodge we enjoyed some sunset photography at the lodge's frog pond where we encountered numerous Red-eyed Tree Frogs, a Green Pit Viper, Yellow Tree Frog, Brilliant Tree Frog and also a pretty Ringed Tree Boa.

The rain began to fall so we decided to head back for a later dinner and we found a Giant Toad on the side of the trail which was truly massive in size.

On our final morning at Arenal we enjoyed some final photography in the lodge grounds. A couple of our group members found a pair of White-nosed Coatis with NINE youngsters following them around. Myself and other members of the group returned to the Yellow-throated Toucan nest to try and get photos of them flying out. We also found a pretty Drymaeus snail which we photographed on the lodge's heliconias.

After finally packing our bags, the rain began to fall and as we left our lodge we spotted some Chachalacas on the side of the road before La Fortuna.

San Gerardo

By the time it was sunset we had reached our final destination of our tour at San Gerardo.

Located high in the cloud forests of Costa Rica, this region proved to be a literal high point of the tour. We spent three days here enjoying our mornings taking photos at an active nest of Resplendent Quetzals. Although I say 'active', we still needed a lot of patience while we waited for this pair of birds to exchange, bringing food for their chick, but I'm happy to say we all had enough encounters with both the male and female to get some wonderful shots of them in flight, with food and on their perching branches as they went to and from their nest. While we waited we also photographed Long-tailed Silky Flycatchers, Chestnut-capped Brush Finch, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Black-faced Nightingale Thrush and Spot-crowned Woodcreeper. Of course, the Quetzals were a huge highlight of this tour with so many wonderful and photogenic encounters.

At one point while we waited we were also shown a redundant Quetzal egg to see what it looked like and also one of the wild avocadoes – their favourite fruits.

Each afternoon at the lodge we spent time photographing some of the hundreds of hummingbirds that visited the lodge feeders including Volcano, Talamanca and Fiery Throated. At one point we set up some flowers and drenched them in sugar syrup to attract birds and this was wonderful for shots.

The lodge grounds were home to Large-footed Finch, Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Slaty Flowerpiercer and Long-tailed Silky Flycatchers. We also had encounters with Hairy Woodpecker and another Resplendent Quetzal on our photography afternoons.

Miriams

On our last morning of the tour we drove around to Miriam's, one of the most famous cafes in the entire country for their bird feeders and we enjoyed a final morning of photography with some very tame Emerald Toucanets, Acorn Woodpecker, Flame-coloured Tanagers, Slaty Flowerpiercers and some cheeky Bang's Mountain Squirrels.

We finally enjoyed lunch at the café before returning to San Jose where our tour ended.

Some final thoughts....

Costa Rica beguiled me after our first visit there prior to the pandemic. It's hard to imagine a rainforest filled country with more or better diversity of photographic subjects. The entire experience of travelling there, including the wonderful lodges, great food, friendly local and abundance of wildlife, all truly make for an astounding photographic experience.

With such a wonderful group, my only real complaint was that the tour simply didn't last long enough! What a true feast for the senses. We can hardly wait to return in 2025!