

FLIGHTS OF FANCY ADVENTURES

COSTA RICA

JANUARY 7-15, 2010

TRIP REPORT

As the bird turned toward us, its iridescent emerald green waistcoat revealed a scarlet tunic that would be the envy of any star walking the red carpet. Add to that a two-foot long streaming train of blue-green feathers and even Dennis Rodman would have boa envy.

Our group of thirteen was at Savegre Mountain Lodge, 7500 feet high in the cloud-enshrouded Talamanca Mountains of Costa Rica, witnessing a spectacle that caused empires to rise, religions to flourish and currencies to be minted. The elegant male Resplendent Quetzal, perhaps the most famous of all neo-tropical species, was excavating a nest hole in a dead tree not 50 feet in front of our well-aimed scopes and cameras. With train feathers fluttering like prayer flags in the gentle breeze, the male repeatedly entered halfway into the cavity, spewing a wad of wood chips on every pass. Madame Quetzal sat motionless nearby, watching her greatly overdressed mate get his beak dirty. After a half hour of observation amidst whispered commentary, we couldn't tear our eyes away from the spectacle. This is what we had come for and to be rewarded so grandly was almost beyond our expectations.

Our trip commenced a few days before as we all landed in San Jose, capital city of Costa Rica, and were escorted to the lovely Buena Vista Hotel in the suburb of Alajuela. Surrounded by gardens and a panoramic view of San Jose in the valley below, birding was quite good right on the property, especially on the short Coffee Trail (Sendero Cafe'). Hoffman's Woodpecker and Rufous-naped Wren were the highlights, but Squirrel Cuckoo, Masked Tityra, Blue-and-white Swallow, Streak-backed Oriole and the national bird of Costa Rica, Clay-colored Thrush were no slouches. Plus we got to enjoy our own wintering neotropical migrants, especially the abundant "nevermind" bird, Chestnut-sided Warbler. At our Welcome Dinner at the hotel's charming restaurant, everyone got to know each

other and we met our local guide for the trip, Alfonso “Fito” Downs. To our total amazement, Fito had coincidentally also been our FOFA guide on a trip to Bolivia in 2001!

We departed the next morning after a delicious breakfast at the hotel, and headed east through the city over the mountains toward the small town of La Suiza, on the flanks of gently erupting Volcan Turrialba. En route, we stopped at a small pond and found Northern Jacana and Black-bellied Whistling-duck and also passed through the pilgrimage city of Cartago, where hundreds of thousands of devout Catholics walk the journey each year to offer their prayers. We arrived at *Rancho Naturalista* Lodge in time for lunch, served on the veranda and accompanied by astonishing swarms of hummingbirds at the lodge’s feeders, not to mention all the other birds coming to the fruit feeders. The Lodge bills itself as “The Home of the Snowcap” and we were not disappointed. This tiny and highly unusual deep red-colored hummingbird, sporting a pure white cap, reminded me of Ben Hogan on a bad clothes day. Not to be outdone were Violet-crowned Woodnymph, Green-crowned Brilliant, Green-breasted Mango, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Long-billed, Stripe-throated and Green Hermits. And then there were the tanagers: Passerini’s, with its incredible ebony and scarlet plumage, Palm, with no plumage, the tiny but colorful Golden-hooded and the delicate and subtle tones of the Blue-gray. Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, Collared Aracaris and Montezuma and Chestnut-headed Oropendolas thronged to the fruit feeders, interrupted only by hordes of Gray-headed Chachalacas.

We walked the lodge’s forest trails several times, seeing many species that were not at the main feeders. Pale-billed Woodpecker at its nest hole; Brown Violet-ear and Bronze-tailed Plumeleater hummingbirds; Streak-headed and Spotted Woodcreepers; Great and Russet Antshrikes; Chestnut-capped Brush-finch, Paltry Tyrannulet; Band-backed Wren; Buff-throated and Black-headed Saltators; Collared and Violaceous Trogons; White-winged Becard; Slate-throated Redstart and Golden-crowned Warbler; and Yellow-throated Euphonia. After lunch, we boarded the bus and dropped down to the rocky and boulder-strewn rapids of the Rio Tuis. Despite the intermittent rain, many birds were around, especially feeding at a fruiting fig tree, blanketed by exquisite Bay-headed Tanagers. Along the stream, we searched for large wading birds, like Sunbittern and Fasciated Tigerheron, but all we saw was a “Fasc Ti-he”, or was that a “iated er-ron”, as we only saw the southbound half of a northbound bird. Small flocks of White-crowned and Brown-hooded Parrots shot screechingly by overhead. Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, a bird smaller than its name in size 12 font, reluctantly gave itself up to a dozen adoring binoculars. Both White-collared and White-ruffed Manakins were

seen near the upper reaches of the river, while Bay and Stripe-breasted Wrens skulked through the thickets. We saw more Golden-winged Warblers than in years of searching in the US northeast. A treetop pair of Black-crowned Tityras posed nicely for the scope. In the evening, by the lodge, Common Pauraque were closely observed but vocalizing Mottled Owl remained unseen.

The following rainy morning, a couple of hardy birders went and checked the white sheet that had been hung behind the residences to attract moths. Not only did they find gobs of moths, but were gob-smacked with Tawny-chested Flycatchers and Buff-throated Foliage Gleaners! After breakfast *al fresco*, allowing us to catch a final glimpse of the wildly active feeders, we boarded our 22 passenger bus and drove east, then south into the central cordillera, the Talamanca Mountains. We made a quick stop at a roadside market, where, in an adjacent weedy field we found Fiery-throated Hummingbird. In very cloudy, rainy conditions, we almost got above the storm at 10,500 feet at Tower Mountain, or more descriptively, *Cerro de la Muerte* (Mountain of the Dead), atop the Costa Rican *paramo*, very similar to the eco-zone one would find at similar elevations in the Andes Mountains of South America. In wind-driven cold rain, we started walking and fortunately quickly found our sole target - Volcano Junco. We then retreated to the high elevation Rio Savegre Valley, a dense cloud forest that is part of the Pacific watershed and was first settled only 50 years ago. Once again, our efforts to eat lunch and check in to our lodge were disrupted by zipping throngs of hummingbirds - Violet Sabrewing, Green Violet-ear (angrily showing its "ears"), White-throated Mountain-gem, Magnificent and the two tiniest members of their clan, Scintillant and Volcano Hummingbirds.

After a delicious lunch in the beautiful main lodge, we birded the grounds where we had our first encounter with the nesting pair of Resplendent Quetzals. Of course, many other birds were seen: Yellowish Flycatcher, Acorn Woodpecker watching us from its nest hole, Mountain Thrush, Ruddy Pigeon, Sulphur-winged Parakeet, Mountain Elaenia, Collared Redstart, Sooty-capped Bush-tanager, Flame-colored and Silver-throated Tanagers, Orange-billed Sparrow and Yellow-bellied Siskins roosting in a tree next to the lodge HQ.

The next morning we were treated to a mountaintop walk with Marino, grandson of the man who originally settled the valley and started the lodge. First walking the roadway and then a well-maintained path along mountain ridges and valleys, we steadily ascended through this magnificent primary forest that has never been cut. The sun was actually shining and whenever that happens in this cloud forest, there is a 180 degree rainbow!* From our high vantage point, the

double 'bow was below us in crystal clear and vibrant colors. Marino pointed out two nests in the roadway cut bank - a Yellowish Flycatcher and a Volcano Hummingbird, both with females actively incubating eggs. We encountered a nice variety of high mountain birds here - incredible views of more quetzals, Black-thighed Grosbeak, Large-footed and Yellow-thighed Finches, Tufted Flycatcher, Ruddy Treerunner and Buffy Tuftedcheek, Streaked Xenops, Silvery-fronted Tapaculo, Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Ochraceous Wren, Black-cheeked Warbler, Spangle-cheeked Tanager and many more. A Mexican Prehensile-tailed Porcupine slept quietly in the valley below. Jay and Jamie continued up the mountain, where they were almost turned into a squash when a giant tree fell right in front of them! Later that afternoon, everyone was off on their own, but the birds remained numerous. Long-tailed Silky-flycatchers became common around the lodge. Fito took a small group along a valley trail and found Black Guan. Black-faced Solitaires, singing their wind-chime songs, were amazingly photographable. Of course, the one mountain bird that always sings beautifully is the abundant Rufous-collared Sparrow, and it did not disappoint, making music all around the lodge. Several people walked to the *catarata*, a powerful waterfall that allowed close and undersided views for the not faint of heart or foot.

Rain, of course, greeted us the next morning, but we got in a little birding before heading out of the mountains toward our next destination. Lo and behold, as our bus began its ascent on the winding mountain road, the sun broke through and the sky cleared. We stopped for a quick visit at the glass-walled Dantica Art Gallery that cascaded down the slope with the natural fall of the land, near the crest of the mountain, for an appreciation of its beautiful architecture and crafts, not to mention the wonderful birds we saw taking a short walk up the road. A complete surprise was a covey of seven Spotted Wood-Quail, an often loud, but always elusive denizen of the forest floor. Spot-crowned Woodcreeper was spotted and allowed close views. A Black-billed Nightingale-thrush led us down the road for a short while as a Black-capped Flycatcher hawked insects at a nearby meadow. Then the rain once again commenced and we proceeded north through San Jose, over the mountains, a stop for lunch at the delightful *El Yugo Restaurante* along the highway and down to the lowlands near Chilamate that would be our last birding location for the trip.

Before proceeding to our lodging, we stopped for a couple of hours' birding among some fields near the entrance to world-famous La Selva Biological Station, introducing us to a an entire new array of lowland species. Both Keel-billed and Chestnut-mandibled Toucans croaked and yelped their calls, Pale-vented Pigeons zoomed by, Ruddy Ground-doves perched on fence lines, a flock of noisy Red-

lored Parrots was considerate enough to perch conspicuously for great scope looks, miniscule Common Tody-flycatchers flitted through nearby trees, stunning Red-legged Honeycreeper, striking black and yellow Black-cowled Oriole and Mourning and Golden-winged Warblers put in appearances. When it was time to put in our own appearance at the lodge, we were caught in a bit of snarled traffic from an overturned truck. The driver must have been birding. Our home for the next two days would be Selva Verde Lodge, a large development of modern cabanas on stilts next to the Rio Chilamate. The lodge is very “green”, doing all it can to fit in with the natural surroundings of the lowland rain forest. And it had been raining! The raging river was 15 feet above normal and was the color of cafe’ au lait, or rather, *cafe’ con leche*. In the intermittent rain and mist, we scattered about, finding all sorts of things, including bugs, frogs, birds and mammals. The lodge has an amazing narrow see-through suspension bridge built high above the river, providing an excellent vantage point to observe riparian activity, as long as you didn’t look down into the swirling water. No bouncing allowed! From here, in the evening, we saw Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift, waves of Cattle Egrets going to nighttime roosts, and an incredible Sunbittern floating on outstretched wings low across the river. After relaxing with cocktails and a very nice buffet style dinner, Fito showed us the “frog pools” near the *bar y restaurante*, where red-eyed tree frogs are often found. The rooms were large and comfortable, with each affording exceptional views into the surrounding forest.

We boarded the bus early and made the short drive to La Selva Biological Station, where we would spend the day at one of the most famous birding destinations in the world. Despite having just been completely flooded, the water had receded just enough for us to tour a portion of the massive reserve. Before we even started, Crested Guans were common and Leslie came across a Great Curassow on the way to the ladies’ room. Just outside the dining hall, a Crimson-collared Tanager sat for a moment. After breakfast at the dining hall, we walked, with misty rain falling, through lightly forested areas and it was perhaps the best tropical birding I have ever experienced. Ordinarily, in a tropical forest, you hope to see a bird here and there and if you’re lucky, a feeding flock of birds moving through the forest. During our walk, it was non-stop birds for three hours! Our guides at the Station, Lenin (“Lenny”, who took one-half the group on a more natural history oriented walk) and Rofolfo (birding), were expert in every aspect of life in the forest. Walking was easy because all of the main paths at the station have been paved with concrete. Otherwise, with all the rain and foot traffic, every walkway would be a complete mud hole. There were so many highlights during our morning that they are difficult to recount, but several stand out. Great Green Macaws are one of the most endangered of all the parrots, with only about 80 pairs

in the wild. We were thrilled when two flew over, but completely blown away when one of these gigantic parrots, uttering its loud harsh squawk, sailed in just over our heads and perched in front of us to preen, only 20 feet up! It was just flat-out jaw-dropping stunning to see, even for the guides. A Semi-plumbeous Hawk perched in a distant tree long enough for great scope views. A pair of ordinarily secretive and shy Gray-necked Wood-rails followed us through the forest for several hundred yards, crossing our path on multiple occasions, once with a group of Collared Peccaries. A large flock of huge White-collared Swifts flew low overhead. Black-throated and Slaty-tailed Trogons sat quietly while we appreciated their multi-colored beauty. Rufous-tailed Jacamars appeared at several locations, displaying their iridescence and stiletto bills. A study in chocolate, a Chestnut-colored Woodpecker slowly worked a tree, calling softly. Northern Barred Woodcreeper and Fasciated Anshrikes crept through the understory. Squirrel Cuckoo floated into nearby trees and ran through the branches. We saw several of the often elusive Rufous Mourner. The dark and mysterious Black-throated Wren proved difficult to see, since it is so dark and tends to lurk in dark surroundings, but eventually we all enjoyed its presence. A flock of Black-faced Grosbeaks made sure we all saw them. The tiny Long-billed Gnatwren serenaded us with its “finger down the comb” song as we finally picked it out amidst the vines it tends to frequent. Pied Puffbird sat quietly atop a tall tree. Pale-vented Thrush was another bonus bird, although they tended not to sit very long for close study. Eventually, we returned to the buildings, slightly sodden but overjoyed with our morning’s work. Silver-throated Tanager was there to greet us.

We lunched under an outdoor canopy while Passerini’s Tanagers and Basilisk Lizards tried to snatch our crumbs. Afterwards, we walked across the river and into the deeper more mature lowland rain forest, where, of course, it was raining. Drenched Orange-chinned Parakeets sat placidly for our viewing pleasure, as did a Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer. Rodolfo heard a weak call from deep in the vine-tangled vegetation and proclaimed it to be a Vermiculated Screech-owl. Now all we had to do was find it, which, after much searching, he did and put the scope on the little sleeping rufous morph bird. Quite amazing! Western Slaty-antshrike, Chestnut-backed Antbird and Dusky Antbird were quickly recorded in the darker than ever understory. Fito had left us briefly, so I ran back to show him where the screech-owl was sleeping. he said, “This is a good area for Great Tinamou.” One second later, he pointed out a large gray football with a pinhead sitting motionlessly on the hillside just above us. I ran back to the group to get everyone to see it. Buff-rumped Warblers, with the light spot on their rumps glowing like fireflies, sashayed along the dark stream edge.

Before returning to San Jose on our last day, we were able to bird the verdant grounds at Selva Verde Lodge until 3:00 PM. We walked the trail along the raging river in the morning, getting great views of Snowy Cotinga perched high in a tree across the river. Strawberry and Green-and-Black Poison Dart Frogs were seen in the heavy wet underbrush. Fito found a group of four fruit bats nestled together in a “tent” they had constructed by snipping the spine of a heliconia leaf. Then we crossed the street to the formal gardens maintained by the lodge, seeing Violet-headed Hummingbird along the way. Many birds were attracted to the flowers and fruiting trees, including Long-billed Hermit, Rufous-winged Woodpecker and Wedge-billed Woodcreeper. Both White-collared and Red-capped Manakins were seen in the same tree. Flycatchers were common, as Ochre-bellied Flycatcher flicked its wings for us, and Bright-rumped Attila, White-ringed and Gray-capped Flycatchers hunted insects. As evening fell, a Sunbittern was spotted walking around “under the boardwalk”, suspiciously humming an old Coasters’ tune. Carrie opted for less high intensity activity.

We gathered at the reception area for a group photo and departure back to the city in our trusty bus, expertly piloted by Guillermo or “Mamo”. A bright breeding male Green Iguana provided final instructions. It was a fantastic trip, with 278 bird species recorded, 15 mammals and 19 other notables (see separate list). We fed a few chiggers, got our money’s worth out of our rain gear and saw a bit of sunshine. No one got frostbite. All this trip did was to totally whet my appetite for a return to Costa Rica, probably a survey of the Pacific Coast and watershed. Perhaps next year! Thanks to everyone who participated and I hope to see you all again soon on another fantastic Flights of Fancy Adventures tour.

Best wishes,
Sam