



Costa Rica

A Trove of Tropical Birds—and More

February 3-14, 2024

Optional extension to February 17, 2024

Leaders: Stephanie Mason & Carlos “Charlie” Gomez

For more than 30 years our members have traveled to Costa Rica on trips we have sponsored. Talk to any and you’ll probably hear similar stories. They’ll talk of this little country’s natural beauty and its friendly, hospitable residents. You’ll hear about great sightings of gorgeous birds, from toucans, parrots, and motmots to the incomparable Resplendent Quetzal, showiest member of the trogon family. Perhaps the conversation will turn to the wonder of seeing monkeys, iguanas, or sloths in the treetops, or tiny red and blue poison-arrow frogs hopping blithely across the forest floor.

Without a doubt, any who have traveled to Costa Rica with us will rave about the local guide. Carlos “Charlie” Gómez is an extraordinarily talented naturalist and leader. He can lure secretive birds out of hiding and identify them instantly by call. He knows the scientific names of the orchids. Everywhere he travels in his native country, he’s greeted with admiration and respect. Importantly, he understands what kind of trip our members like. He’ll find many birds for the group, but will take time to discuss ecology and conservation, and to point out mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and plants. He’ll put options into the schedule, offering full days for those eager to explore nature almost nonstop, while offering plenty of breaks for those looking for some time for relaxation or reflection. He’s quickly everybody’s friend.

Stephanie Mason brings many extra bonuses to the leadership of this trip. Senior Naturalist for Nature Forward, she has a great knowledge of butterflies, plants, and tropical ecology in addition to the country’s birds. She and Charlie have worked together to lead 22 previous trips to Costa Rica. Both have a superb record of delivering fabulous trips.



Our itinerary visits a great variety of habitats where lessons about tropical ecology will surround us and tropical birds will dazzle us. The Caribbean lowlands of our first stop are classic tropical rainforest, a lush, luxuriant environment brimming with diversity. We’ll make four stops on our loop

through the southern Pacific lowlands with stays at: Talari Lodge in the Valle de El General Valley; Wilson Botanical Gardens/Las Cruces Biological Station; Cristal Ballena near Marino Ballena National Park; and Villa Lapas near the Rio Tarcoles and Carara National Park. The optional extension into the higher Talamanca Mountains takes us to the land of tall tropical oaks, chilly nights, and the showy Resplendent Quetzal.

Costa Rica is a small Central American country whose natural areas support a dazzling variety of tropical wildlife. Land area is about the same as West Virginia (which is about the same as Vermont & New Hampshire combined), yet the country's bird list is over 900 species. Habitats in Costa Rica include mountain forests (the highest peaks are above 12,000 feet), rain forests, dry forests, mangrove swamps, tropical marshes, and coasts on both the Pacific and the Caribbean. The country's great species diversity is one benefit of this great habitat diversity.

Costa Rica is also a peaceful country with a social democratic system that provides reliable public education, public health, and reliable utilities to all of its citizens. The country's tourism infrastructure is excellent. Our group will stay in comfortable lodges surrounded by excellent natural habitat. All rooms have private hot water bathrooms. Food and water are reliably safe in all tourist areas, and almost all meals are provided throughout this trip. Our group will travel together in a private mini-bus driven by an experienced driver who will likely also be a good wildlife spotter.

Our goal is to visit many different habitats and to learn about tropical ecology and conservation while searching for birds and other wildlife. Activities will usually begin at or before dawn. Many days our early start will be optional, though you might not want to miss the vibrancy of a tropical morning. Days will be filled with active nature explorations, but there will often be opportunities to skip some activities to relax around the lodges and/or explore on your own. We urge you to do this now and then throughout the trip.

The following day-to-day itinerary represents an outline of our plans. Details and specifics may be changed at the leaders' discretion for any reason that they determine to be in the best interests of the group. (B, L, and/or D after the date denotes meals included in the trip fee.)

Saturday, February 3

Our journey begins with the arrival of flights into Costa Rica's international airport, located on the outskirts of San José, Costa Rica's capital. After passing through customs, you will be met by a Costa Rica Expeditions transfer guide, who will take you to the Hotel Bougainvillea, a garden hotel outside of town in the San Jose suburb

of Heredia. Those arriving on early flights can enjoy a stroll through the gardens, where one can find butterflies, tropical plants (many labeled) and a number of interesting birds, including Blue-gray Tanager, Baltimore Oriole, Blue-crowned Motmot, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, and Crimson-fronted Parakeets. (*Overnight at Hotel Bougainvillea*)

The capital city of San José is perched more than 3,000 feet above sea level in a mountain-rimmed area called the Central Valley or, more accurately, the central plateau. Three other major cities are nearby, making this easily the country's most densely populated area. The elevation results in a very comfortable climate. Scenery throughout the central plateau is impressive, as the high peaks of the central volcanic mountain range fill the northern and eastern horizons. The city has a number of nice museums and urban attractions, but it is a busy and crowded city. Our trip includes a short visit to one of the downtown museums. If you would like to spend more time visiting the city, you might consider extending your stay by a day or two at either end of the trip.

Sunday, February 4 (B, D)

We begin the trip with a leisurely day in the central plateau. An optional early-morning bird walk on the grounds will be followed by another optional activity: travelers can choose between a visit to either the Costa Rican National Museum of Natural History or the country's Gold Museum, both of which are located in downtown San Jose. A late lunch will be on your own dime back at Hotel Bougainvillea. You may, however, choose to pass on the morning's outing and stay back at the Bougainvillea to rest and relax in the tropical warmth. Late in the day, we'll meet our Costa Rican naturalist guide, Charlie Gómez, for an orientation to the trip and a welcome dinner. (*Overnight at the Hotel Bougainvillea*)



Monday, February 5 through Wednesday, February 7 (B, L, D)

This morning we leave the Central Valley and head up and over the Continental Divide to our first destination. It rains frequently on the eastern slope of the mountains, but if conditions are favorable, we will make one or two more stops along the way in Braulio Carrillo National Park. We'll get our first looks at tropical birds, butterflies and other wildlife amidst the lush tropical forests of this region. We'll arrive at our home for the next three nights, La Quinta de Sarapiquí, in time for lunch in their comfortable

outdoor dining room. Later in the afternoon, we'll explore the grounds of our lovely little lodge, located in one of Costa Rica's most bird-rich regions. Much of our time here in the Caribbean lowlands will be spent exploring the La Selva Biological Field Station, site of hundreds of pioneering studies of the American tropical rainforest. Our Costa Rican guide Charlie Gómez is former station manager of La Selva, and he knows every step of trail here intimately. Plant diversity is mind-boggling, birding is great, and other wildlife is abundant. Likely finds include epiphytic orchids, monkeys, bats, green iguanas, poison arrow frogs, agouti, blue morpho butterflies, toucans, a good assortment of antbirds, and tanagers, flycatchers, including Long-tailed Tyrant, trogons, and many other bird species. The climate is hot here in the lowland rain forest, so we'll want to be out at dawn and take a siesta after lunch. One evening we may stay out late for a post-sunset night walk at La Selva. We may also visit another site or two during our stay here in the lowlands. (*Overnights at La Quinta*)

Thursday, February 8 (B, L, D)

We'll leave the Caribbean lowlands, heading back up and over the Continental Divide, and then start climbing high into the Talamanca Mountains, following the Pan-American Highway south from San José. We'll descend into the Valle de El General, where our destination is Talari Mountain Lodge, located adjacent to the Chirripo River, whose clear waters pour down from Costa Rica's highest mountains. The habitats of the General River Valley are Pacific slope forests, with elevations at 2,000 - 3,000 feet. Birds we might find in this area include Turquoise Cotinga, Speckled Tanager, Green Honeycreeper, Charming Hummingbird, Pale-breasted Spinetail, and Streaked Saltator. We'll enjoy some afternoon time in the field, or you can relax and take a dip in the pool back at this small, rustic lodge. Rooms are very basic here, but Talari's restaurant features excellent food and wonderful views from your table of colorful birds at busy tropical fruit feeders.

Friday, February 9 (B, L, D)

We'll leave the Valle de General this morning, but not before visiting *Los Cusingos*, the Bird Sanctuary, established by the legendary Alexander Skutch. This North American naturalist and trained botanist spent most of his long life in Costa Rica studying and writing about the natural history of many species of birds and, secondarily, plants. From here, we'll return to the Pan American Highway and continue heading east and south before winding up in the hills of southern Costa Rica outside the town of San Vito, close to the border of Panama. Our destination is the Las Cruces Field Station of the Organization for Tropical Studies, located amidst the luxuriant plantings of the Wilson Botanical Gardens. Our rooms here feature views into the treetops and out over the valley. (*Overnight at Las Cruces*)

Saturday, February 10 (B, L, D)

We enjoy the full day here exploring Las Cruces. The Botanical Garden is full of a variety of tropical plants (many labelled) and there are also large stands of natural forest which are part of the Field Station. Elevation here is about 3,000 feet, high enough for the climate to be comfortable, but low enough to support a rich assortment of birds and other wildlife, including butterflies, reptiles and amphibians. We can expect to see a great variety of tanagers, flycatchers, woodcreepers, manakins, and other tropical species of birds, butterflies, and other wildlife. (*Overnight at Las Cruces*)

Sunday, February 11 (B, L, D) and Monday, February 12 (B, L, D)

We will leave the coffee-growing hills near San Vito this morning. Heading south through the Pacific coastal plain, we aim for our next destination in the southern Pacific lowlands. Here there is vibrant rain forest habitat filled with interesting birds, butterflies, lizards, and more. Our next destination is Cristal Ballena, a lodge located in the pristine coastal forest aside the Marino Ballena National Park in the Central Pacific Coast near Uvita. While staying here, we will explore the rainforest in several nearby natural areas. Be ready to see a lot of birds these days! The lowland rainforest is home to many flycatchers, tanagers, parrots, woodpeckers, woodcreepers, and many others. This is an excellent habitat for mammals, as well, with sloths, monkeys, and a variety of nocturnal species possible for us to encounter. Sometimes we're even lucky enough to spot whales during our explorations along the coastline. (*Overnights at Cristal Ballena*)

Tuesday, February 13 (B, L, D)

Today we head northwest along the Pacific Coast to our last destination near Carara National Park, located in one of Costa Rica's most biologically rich areas. The northern Pacific lowlands of Costa Rica are dominated by tropical dry forest, while the southern Pacific lowlands are rain forest. Carara straddles the boundary, and supports plants and animals from both biomes. The result is an area where an amazing number of species may be found. Villa Lapas will be our home base here. With the Tarcoles River nearby, we'll almost certainly see fly-by Scarlet Macaws and other stunning species. There's a small pool here, where you can cool off, as this environment will be very hot. Mid-afternoon, we'll head over to the nearby Tarcoles River, where we'll board a boat to look for crocodiles and a great assortment of wading birds, shorebirds, and other wildlife as the sun sets over the mangroves and adjacent bay.

(*Overnight at Villa Lapas*)



Wednesday, February 14 (B only if leaving today; B, L, D if going on the extension)

Today we say goodbye to the hot but vibrant lowlands. Those who

are staying for the optional extension will depart after breakfast with the leaders and head for the higher elevations and Toucanet Lodge. We'll expect to arrive in time for a late lunch. Those who are flying home today will be picked up from Villa Lapas by a different vehicle and taken to the airport separately. If you prefer early morning flights, you can be taken to a hotel near the airport to stay overnight on the 14th, and then get to the airport by the hotel's shuttle to fly home on the 15th. (***NOTE: do not buy/book airline tickets until we send you the TRIP IS ON letter and give you more instructions on advisable flight times based on our itinerary. And know that whatever time you're booked to fly out, you'll be picked up in order to arrive at the airport no less than 3 hours before your flight.***)

Optional Extension: February 14-17, 2024

*(*High Elevation*: Our lodge on this extension is at about 6400 feet, and during our stay there, we will visit areas above that elevation up to 11,000 feet in the tropical alpine paramo zone. If you have a heart or respiratory condition or feel uncomfortable/ill at high altitude, this extension is probably not for you. Please consult with your doctor.)*

Wednesday, February 14, through Friday, February 16, (B, L, D)

For those continuing on the optional extension, we ascend into the Talamanca Mountains, following the Pan-American Highway south from San José. We'll head up to the Toucanet Lodge, located at about 6400 feet on the Pacific slope just outside the tiny village of Copey de Dota. This small eco-lodge, located in a quiet, rural (dairy, vegetable, and coffee) region, will provide us with opportunities to see highland wildlife, including the Resplendent Quetzal, considered one of the world's most beautiful birds. We'll walk the local, gravel road, which follows the Rio Pedragoso, to search for other birds of this habitat such as Collared Redstart, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Scintillant and Volcano Hummingbirds, Silvery-throated Jays, and Long-tailed Silky-Flycatcher. A night walk may turn up a Bare-shanked Screech-Owl and nocturnal mammals, but it's sure to give us some great opportunities for stargazing, if skies are clear.

The plant community here might remind you of the mountains of the temperate zone, with tropical oaks and cousins of our blueberries, azaleas, and sunflowers. It will be chilly at this elevation, and at night you'll need a blanket. At some point during our visit here, assuming the weather cooperates and the schedule allows for it, we'll likely drive to the very highest point of the Pan-American Highway, more than 11,000 ft. above sea level, and explore the tropical alpine meadow habitat called *paramo*. Here we can search for Timberline Wren, Volcano Junco, Large-footed

Finch, Flame-throated Warbler, and Fiery-throated Hummingbird. We'll marvel at the native bamboo that dominates the treeless landscape. From here at the *Bellavista* Peak on the *Cerro de la Muerte*, it's possible to see both the Pacific coast and the Caribbean Sea on a perfectly clear day, though it's usually cloudy at this lofty elevation. (*The Cerro de la Muerte stop is a tentative one, and will depend on the weather, timing, and other factors as determined by the leaders.*) Mid-morning on Friday, February 16, we'll head back to the Central Valley and spend our overnight near the airport at Trapp Family Lodge. (*Two nights at Toucanet Lodge (Feb. 14 and 15) & our last night back near the airport at Hotel Trapp (Feb. 16).*)

Saturday, February 17 (B): Our extended journey concludes with transfers to the airport for flights home. You may need to leave the hotel as much as 3½ hours prior to your departure time, so consider that when you make your flight reservations *once you have received our Trip is On Letter*. If you have a mid-day flight or afternoon flight, you can spend the morning in the Hotel Trapp's grounds or swimming in their small pool.

Leadership team: This will be their 23rd year of working together to introduce Nature Forward travelers to the tropical wonders of Costa Rica. They will be joined by an experienced van driver who will likely also be a good wildlife spotter.

Stephanie Mason is Senior Naturalist for Nature Forward (formerly Audubon Naturalist Society). This will be her 25th trip to Costa Rica and her 23rd co-leading a trip here with Charlie Gómez. She leads many adult classes and field excursions for Nature Forward, both locally in the mid-Atlantic and farther afield. She has taught classes in our Natural History Field Studies Program, and she retreats to Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park each August to conduct a long-term butterfly survey.

Carlos "Charlie" Gómez is one of Costa Rica's most highly regarded naturalist guides. He has led tours for birding groups for well over 30 years, mostly in his home country of Costa Rica, but also in Panama and South America. Before guiding, he worked as the Station Manager of the La Selva Field Station, the cornerstone facility of the Organization for Tropical Studies, a consortium of 64 Universities in the U.S., Latin America, and Australia. *We will visit La Selva during our trip.* He also worked as field assistant to ornithologist Gary Stiles, principal author of *A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica*. He is an expert birder, and an exceptionally skilled all-around naturalist.

