

BEGINNERS' COSTA RICA

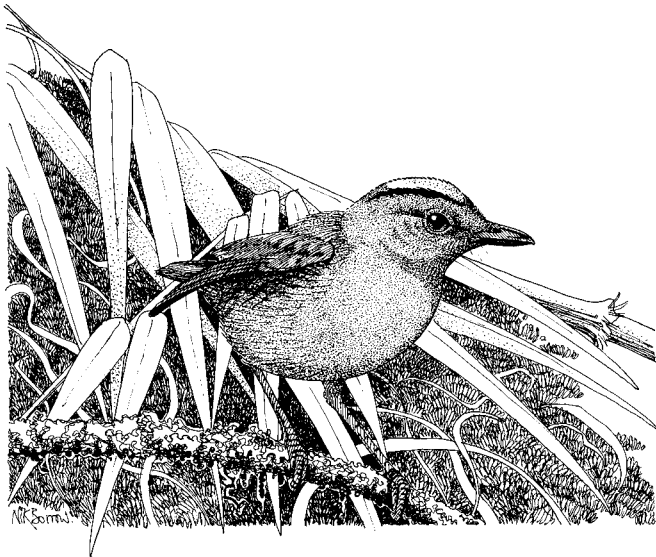
Quetzals, macaws and hummingbirds

Wednesday 15th February – Sunday 26th February 2012 (12 days)

Leader: **Matt Denton**

Group Size Limit: **9**

Tour Category: **Easy**



Zeledonia or Wrenthrush (Nik Borrow)

Maybe you are a beginning birdwatcher ready for your first trip to the Neotropics (or a more experienced birder that visited Latin America quite some time ago and would like to return and learn more)? You have long imagined how enjoyable it would be to take your first steps into the rich wonders of tropical birdlife. However, the idea of birding outside of your home region seems an overwhelmingly rich yet somehow a rather frightening experience, and this worries you. This easy-paced beginner's tour visits Costa Rica's three best birding spots, each one with a different set of birds. In this manner, we will enjoy less travel time and more field time in a destination perfectly suited for this purpose. Along the way, we will ensure that you not only absorb the varied birdlife, but we will also show you how to become a better birder. While in the field and through evening discussions, we will emphasize field identification and natural history over getting a huge

bird list. This will help you to separate the different bird families through techniques that you can go on to apply anywhere in the world. By the end of the trip you will have gone from being a tropical novice to a tropical aficionado, and admittedly in a country like Costa Rica we can't help but see a wealth of birds!

Costa Rica is now well-known as one of the best areas for birding on earth, for a series of stunning wildlife films and the many glowing reports from visitors have made people realize what a treasure house of nature this gem of a country really is. Costa Rica is one of the most prosperous countries in Latin America with the highest literacy level in the region, no army (it was abolished as unnecessary in 1949!), stable democratic government, excellent standards of public health and the highest percentage of land area devoted to national parks and reserves of any country in the world.

For the birdwatcher the factor that makes Costa Rica so attractive is not simply its astonishingly rich avifauna, but the fact that it is packed into such a small area. In Costa Rica one could, if one wanted, drive from the Pacific lowlands up over the central highlands and down to the Caribbean lowlands in a matter of five or six hours, passing through every major habitat zone found in Central America! Most of these same habitats and bird families also occur further south into Latin America making Costa Rica the perfect stepping stone to future Neotropical birding endeavors.

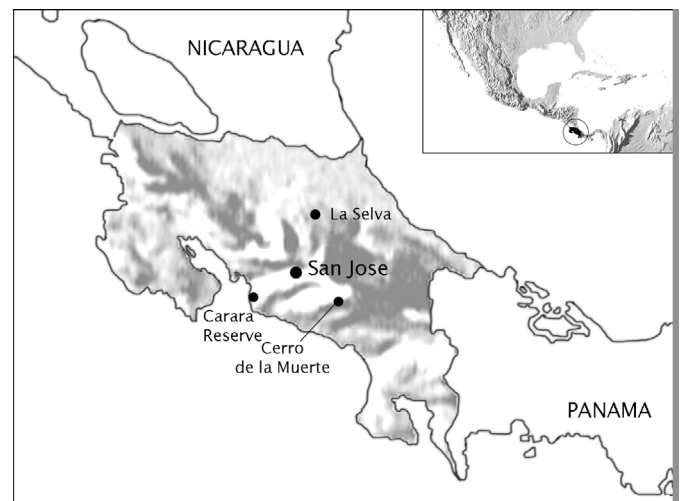
This carefully crafted itinerary of under two weeks duration takes in the best birding that Costa Rica has to offer. The tourism infrastructure of Costa Rica is excellent. Superb, mostly easy birding, good accommodations and quite good roads make birding this small but incredibly rich country a real pleasure. During the trip we will enjoy two separate boat rides on either slope to add to our birding experience.

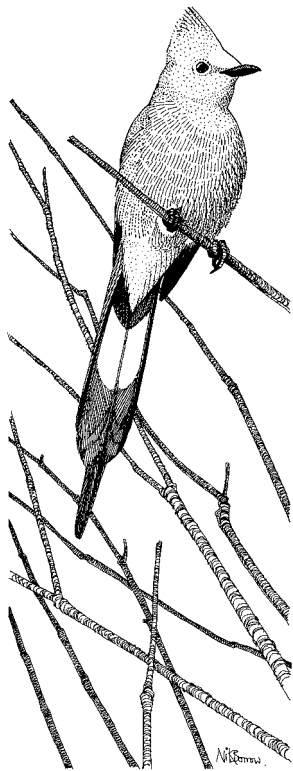
We shall begin near San Jose in the gardens of the Hotel Bougainvillea, before driving over the Caribbean slope to experience the wonders of cloud forest hummingbirds. Our first lodge is located in the unforgettable, bird-rich Sarapiquí region in the Caribbean lowlands. Here

we will spend much of our time at the world-renowned Organization of Tropical Studies' reserve at La Selva. With arguably the best birding in Costa Rica, La Selva is also one of the most accessible rainforests anywhere, with an abundance of birds and wildlife easily seen at this state-of-the-art research facility.

Next we will continue into the central highlands of the Cerro de la Muerte region of the Cordillera de Talamanca. The San Gerardo valley is the best place anywhere to see the distinctive Chiriqui endemic avifauna, and is doubly famous for the incomparable Resplendent Quetzal. Here we will experience representatives of many of the genera found further south into the cloud forests of the Andes, from Buffy Tuftedcheeks to Slaty Flowerpiercers, making this idyllic site an ideal place to experience Neotropical montane birding.

Our final destination will be the famous Carara Reserve where we will explore beautiful white sand beaches, mangrove swamps and some of the best remaining areas of lowland rainforest along the Pacific coast. Here, the magnificent Scarlet Macaw is still quite common and we will enjoy the host of other birds, including such stars as Boat-billed Heron at one end of the size spectrum and the endemic Mangrove





Long-tailed Silky-Flycatcher
(Nik Borrow)

Hummingbird at the other.

Birdquest has operated tours to Costa Rica since 1987.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins this evening at San Jose, where we will stay overnight.

Day 2 This morning our birding will begin in the picturesque garden of the Hotel Bougainvillea located in the verdant upland basin known as the Meseta Central. Rimmed by volcanoes, its elevation of roughly 1,150 meters (3,800 feet) creates a pleasant climate which is neither too hot nor too cold. The gardens are meticulously maintained with dozens of bromeliads and orchids spread out over its ten acres, providing a lovely setting to start with the common countryside birds. The country's national bird, the Clay-colored Thrush, will likely make an early

appearance along with the fancy Blue-diademed Motmot, and flocks of noisy Crimson-fronted Parakeets. There will also be Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds defending their flowers from other hoped-for hummers such as Steely-vented Hummingbird and Salvin's Emerald. A day-roosting Tropical Screech-Owl is usually to be found in the garden, and with luck we shall see the shy White-eared and Prevost's Ground-Sparrows. Here and in the nearby coffee plantations, we shall likely also see Red-billed Pigeon, White-winged, White-tipped and Inca Doves, Hoffman's Woodpecker, Great Kiskadee, vociferous Plain Wrens, Blue-grey and Palm Tanagers, Greyish Saltator, and the ubiquitous Great-tailed Grackle. After breakfast, we will then journey by comfortable bus over to the Caribbean slope to visit a set of hummingbird feeders overlooking a spectacular waterfall in the cloud forest. Here we will enjoy lunch as we study a variety of montane hummingbirds including the endemic Copper-headed Emerald, as well as the exquisite Black-bellied Hummingbird and White-bellied Mountain-gem. We will also explore the short trail system here in hopes of seeing some middle elevation cloud forest species such as Azure-hooded Jay and Spangle-cheeked Tanager. Later we will arrive at the La Selva Biological Station in the tropical Sarapiquí lowlands, where we will stay for three nights. Golden-hooded, Crimson-collared, and Passerini's Tanagers, Red-throated Ant-Tanager, Black-striped Sparrow, Black-headed and Buff-throated Saltators, and Montezuma Oropendola frequent the forest edge around the station.

Days 3-4 We will have two days to explore the varied lowland habitats and trails centred around the world famous La Selva Biological Station. This is the most

accessible tract of humid lowland rainforest on the Caribbean slope of Costa Rica. Most of this superb reserve is primary forest, whilst other parts consist of secondary growth, swamp forest, river margins, former plantations and abandoned pasture. The area is now maintained as a natural laboratory by the Organization for Tropical Studies and an excellent network of trails allows access to every habitat. Over 400 species have been recorded from the area and a great many of the birds we will not encounter during the rest of our travels. Rainforest birding is always extremely rewarding, but one must cultivate patience and keep a vigilant watch from ground-level to the canopy high above our heads. The easiest birding is to be had around the clearing where the research station is situated. Here the fruiting and flowering trees act as a magnet for many different species of hummingbirds and tanagers. Just some of the species we will likely see from the entrance road and station clearings include Olive-throated Parakeet, Short-billed Pigeon, Blue-chested Hummingbird, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Pied Puffbird, Chestnut-mandible and Keel-billed Toucans, Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, Rufous and Broad-billed Motmots, Cocoa Woodcreeper (split from Buff-throated), Slaty Spinetail, Great and Fasciated Antshrikes, Long-tailed Tyrant, White-ringed Flycatcher, Masked and Black-crowned Tityras, the handsome Snowy Cotinga, Black-cowled and Yellow-tailed Orioles, and Scarlet-rumped and Yellow-billed Caciques.

As we walk the easy, paved trails we will hear the plaintive whistles of ground-dwelling tinamous, whilst after a quiet period we may suddenly be surrounded by strange calls and have to play hide and seek with an antbird flock amongst the tangled vegetation. Suddenly the

popping sound of lekking male White-collared Manakins erupts as they perform their wondrous wing-snapping display around a beam of sunlight. Overhead in the canopy gaudy tanagers, honeycreepers and cotingas are attracted to flowering and fruiting trees. Among the superb selection of birds we also expect to find here are Great and Slaty-breasted Tinamous, Semiplumbeous Hawk, Band-tailed Barbthroat, Black-throated and Gartered (split from Violaceous) Trogons, Plain Xenops, Western Slaty Antshrikes, Common and Black-headed Tody-Flycatchers, Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, Yellow Tyrannulet, Band-backed, Bay and the near-endemic Black-throated Wrens, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Olive-crowned Yellowthroat and Olive-backed Euphonia. We should also be able to enjoy the awe-inspiring Great Curassow and with some luck the shy Agami Heron. Mammals are elusive, but we will see Collared Peccary and Central American Agouti on the station grounds, and may be lucky enough to see a sloth or a Mexican Hairy Porcupine. At a nearby marsh we will be able to observe Thick-billed and Pink-billed Seed-Finches and with patience we should be able to observe the shy White-throated Crake. On at least one evening we will go out for an optional nighttime excursion in search of Great Potoo, Guatemalan Screech-Owl, Common Pauraque, and Short-tailed Nighthawk.

On one afternoon we will enjoy a boat ride along the forested Rio Sarapiquí in search of birds and other wildlife. This boat ride will likely feature waterbirds such as Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, as well as Ringed, Amazon, and Green Kingfishers, the ornately patterned Sunbittern, and the much-wanted Sungrebe, which is the only Neotropical representative of the finfoot family. Passerines seen from the boat will likely



Resplendent Quetzal (Nik Borrow)

include Buff-rumped Warbler and Dusky-faced Tanager, with other wildlife such as Mantled Howler and Central American Spider Monkeys featuring, as well as Spectacled Caimans, lazy Green Iguanas and the Crested Basilisk lizard.

Day 5 This morning after an early breakfast, we will depart for the central highlands, stopping to bird the humid foothill forests of Braulio Carrillo National Park en route. We will concentrate on the lower foothill elevations where we will start out by birding from clearings or the roadside's forest edge for early morning activity. At roadside flower patches some of the visiting hummers we have seen in the past have included Red-footed Plumeleteer, Green Thorntail, Violet-headed Hummingbird, and even Snowcap and Black-crested Coquette. We

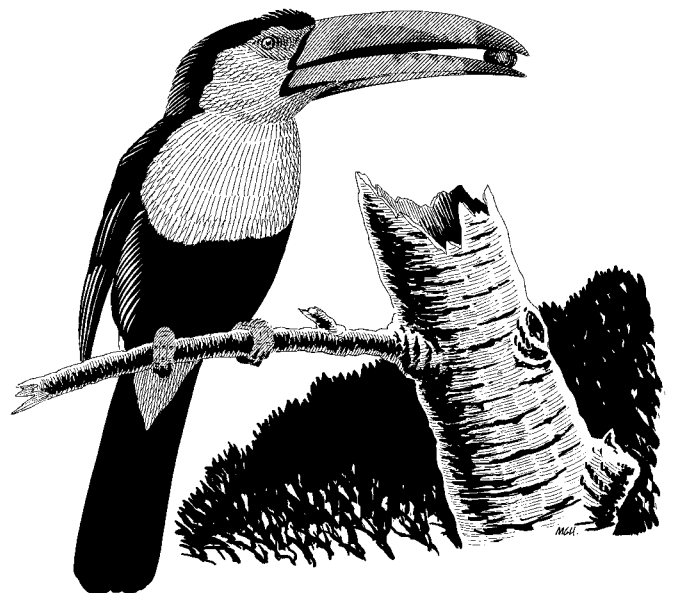
will then walk a wonderful forest loop trail in hopes of experiencing one of the roving mixed-species foraging flocks this area is famous for. Some of our hoped for species include Lattice-tailed Trogon, Yellow-eared Toucanet, Spot-crowned Antvireo, White-throated Shrike-Tanager, Western Woodhaunter, and a bevy of tanagers that might include Blue-and-gold, Emerald, Tawny-crested, Olive, and Black-and-yellow Tanagers. The abundant vegetation makes birding more challenging here, but seeing some of these foothill gems is worth the extra effort. Depending on weather conditions, we may also spend a moment scanning for perched and soaring raptors such as Ornate and Black Hawk-Eagles, White Hawk or Bat Falcon. Our journey will then continue along the major highway that winds up through the park's impressive mountain topography to return us to the Meseta Central. Here we will make a brief detour to look for White-throated Flycatcher and Sedge Wren before connecting with the Pan American highway.

By mid afternoon we will reach the refreshingly cool highlands of Cerro de la Muerte, where misty rain and fog can be common at the upper elevations. We will have time for some initial exploration before we begin to wind our way down the road that leads to our lodge. At 2200 meters (7260 feet), the San Gerardo valley enjoys a much better climate than the high paramo, and though cool nights and mornings prevail, early mornings usually dawn bright and clear. Tomorrow will bring the excitement of experiencing an entirely new set of birds in a superb setting of gorgeous flowers and vegetation on the grounds of Savegre Lodge.

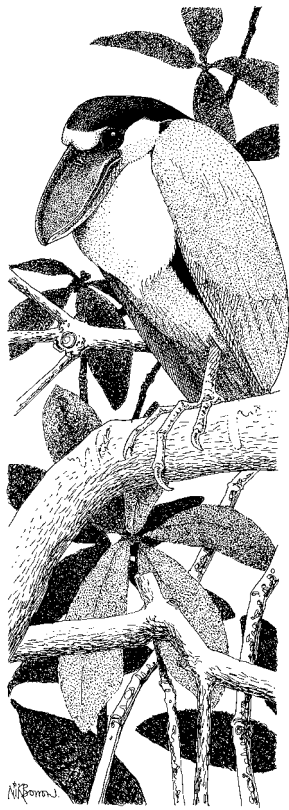
Days 6-7 Cerro de la Muerte or the 'Mountain of Death' was so named because of the many people who died of cold whilst crossing it en

route between the Central Valley and Valle del General to the south. Nowadays the Pan American Highway crosses the mountain at over 3300m (10,890 feet) and a comfortable lodge ensures that it no longer holds such fears. Here we will be birding the temperate oak forests with their thick bamboo understorey, and the chaparral-like paramo above the treeline. At these altitudes many of the birds seem remarkably tame, and while the number of species is not great, most are confined to the high mountains of Costa Rica and adjacent Panama. Here lives one of the world's most spectacular birds, the Resplendent Quetzal. This is one of the few places where these wonderful birds can be seen without difficulty and we will be able to watch in fascination as they fly from tree to tree with their incredibly elongated uppertail coverts dancing along behind them. On our first morning we shall visit a nearby site where we hope to see the quetzal, followed by a hot buffet breakfast. Then we will be transported in the lodge's 4x4 up to a trail beneath the impressively tall oaks. We will begin by walking a bit higher into the forest for the shy Spotted Wood-Quail,

Costa Rican Pygmy-Owl (split from Andean) and the scarce Silvery-throated Jay; birds we will be unlikely to see elsewhere. The trails here are somewhat narrow, and can be steep in places, but we will be moving at a slow pace and most of our walk will be downhill. Our walk then descends to a lovely stream where mixed flocks are likely to be composed of Ruddy Treerunner, Buffy Tuftedcheek, Yellow-winged Vireo, Collared Redstart, Flame-throated and Black-cheeked Warblers and Yellow-thighed Finch. We will arrive back at the lodge in time for lunch where many of us will no doubt enjoy an afternoon coffee at the lodge hummingbird feeders. Here we will have excellent opportunities for studying Green Violetear, Magnificent, Scintillant and Volcano Hummingbirds, and Grey-tailed Mountain-Gem. In the afternoon we will likely take a gentle stroll along the valley road looking for species such as Sulphur-winged Parakeet, Emerald Toucanet, Long-tailed Silky-Flycatcher, Black-capped Flycatcher and Sooty and Mountain Robins. We shall also keep a lookout for Dark Pewee in the nearby treetops. Some of the more widespread species we should encounter here include Band-tailed



Keel-billed Toucan (Michael Hodgson)



Boat-billed Heron (Nik Borrow)

and Ruddy Pigeons, Acorn and Hairy Woodpeckers, Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, Mountain Elaenia, Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush, Flame-coloured Tanager and Rufous-collared Sparrow. During the northern winter period, Black-throated Green and Wilson's Warblers are present.

After breakfast on our second morning, we will drive up to the higher elevation forest along the Pan American highway. Here we will bird our way down a scenic road through luxuriant mountain vegetation. We shall concentrate our efforts on finding such birds as Barred Forest-Falcon, Fiery-throated Hummingbird, Ochraceous Pewee, Black-capped Flycatcher, Timberline Wren, Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush, Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatchers, the curious Wrenthrush (or Zeledonia), which was formerly often placed in a family of its own, and Large-footed Finch. Afterwards we will enjoy the

feeders of a nearby café where sparring Fiery-throated and Magnificent Hummingbirds will provide us with a fantastic spectacle. Following lunch we will drive up into the paramo zone where in the dwarf bamboo we should see Volcano Juncos hopping about near the road and Volcano Hummingbirds making their amazing aerial display flights. A night time excursion should reveal Bare-shanked Screech-Owl and Dusky Nightjar.

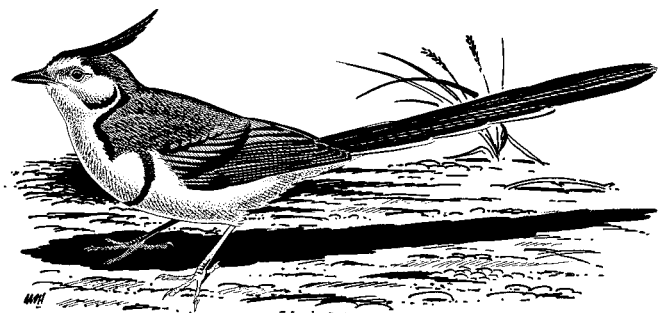
Day 8 After a final breakfast at Savegre, we will begin our journey south down the slope to the warm climate of the San Isidro area. Our first stop will be a small roadside café with feeders that often attract Red-headed Barbet, Cherrie's, Silver-throated and Speckled Tanagers, and whose flowering trees are visited by the localized White-tailed Emerald. We will then continue to a family-run country lodge where we will have lunch. Some of the birds we may find here in the garden include Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, White-crested Coquette, Scaly-breasted Hummingbird, Olivaceous Piculet, Streaked Saltator, Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush, and Black-headed Brush-Finch. In the afternoon we will continue our journey up the newly paved coastal road making stops near the sea for waterbirds, including possibilities such as Brown Booby and Wandering Tattler. Eventually we will reach Carara where we will stay for three nights.

Days 9-10 Carara National Park lies in the heart of a so-called 'transition zone' between the dry tropical forest to the north, and the wet and humid rainforest to the south. The park preserves a large amount of pristine forest, and best of all its birdlife and other animals are remarkably confiding. We will spend at least one full day in the park returning to our hotel for lunch and a siesta in the afternoon. In the morning

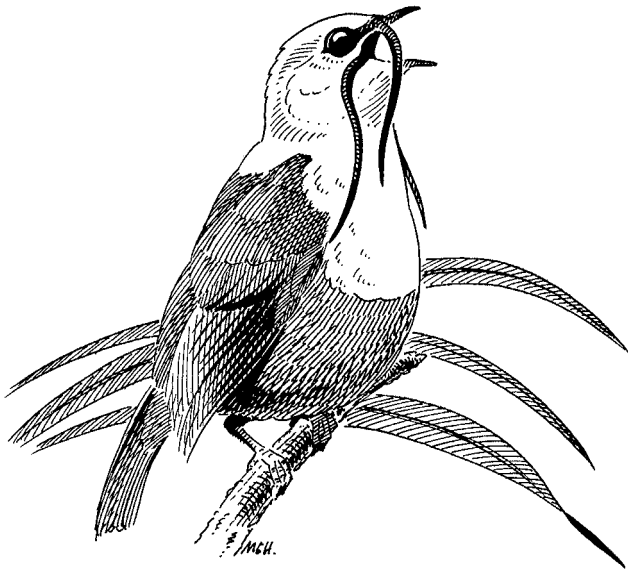
we will likely start out along a wide, easily-birded track through more open forest. Many of the region's special birds can be found here including the magnificent Scarlet Macaw. These raucous, gaudy, long-tailed parrots are the park's star attraction as they fly effortlessly amongst the large fruiting trees or flap slowly across to the nearby mangroves where they roost. The Carara area also protects nearly all of the birds endemic to the wet southern Pacific forests, many of which are threatened with extinction due to habitat loss. These birds have very small ranges and include such species as Baird's Trogon, Fiery-billed Aracari, Golden-naped Woodpecker, Orange-collared Manakin and Riverside Wren. In the early morning hours we will be alert for birds perched at the forest edge such as Collared Forest-Falcon, Gray-chested Dove, White-whiskered Puffbird, Pale-billed Woodpecker and Northern Royal Flycatcher. Fruiting trees in the canopy are likely to attract Slaty-tailed and Black-headed Trogons as well as Red-lored and Mealy Parrots, while in the understory we will hope for interior forest birds such as Northern Barred and Tawny-winged Woodcreepers, Chestnut-backed Antbird, Black-hooded Antshrike, Northern Bentbill, Golden-crowned Spadebill, Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher, Blue-black Grosbeak and Grey-headed Tanager. We will also hope to experience the excitement of our first mixed-

species foraging flock in the subcanopy with energetic insectivores such as Dot-winged Antwren, Greenish Elaenia, Lesser Greenlet and White-shouldered Tanager demonstrating their different foraging techniques. Mammals are not conspicuous, but we should encounter Mantled Howler and White-nosed Coati. In the afternoon we will visit a series of forest pools where forest gems such as Blue-capped and Red-capped Manakin can be found bathing. With patience and a bit of luck we could also see a variety of other forest birds coming to bathe here. During our walk back from the pools we will hope to encounter a Streak-chested Antpitta hopping along the path or the rail-like Black-faced Antthrush strutting through the leaf litter as it utters its loud song.

One of the highlights of our stay will no doubt be our relaxing boat tour through the mangrove-fringed Tárcoles estuary. The area attracts many waterbirds, typically including Brown Pelican, Neotropic Cormorant, Anhinga, Magnificent Frigatebird, Great and Snowy Egrets, Great Blue, Little Blue, Tricoloured and Green Herons, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, Wood Stork, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Northern Jacana, Black-necked Stilt, Semipalmated, Wilson's and Collared Plovers, Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Spotted and Western Sandpipers,



White-throated Magpie-Jay (Michael Hodgson)



Three-wattled Bellbird (Michael Hodgson)

Laughing Gull, Royal Tern, Ringed, Amazon and Green Kingfishers, and Mangrove Swallow. One of the main attractions is the strange Boat-billed Heron, whose huge eyes and massive, ridged bill create a strange, almost prehistoric appearance. A search of the mangroves should reveal Plumbeous Kite, Common Black-Hawk, the threatened endemic Mangrove Hummingbird, American Pygmy Kingfisher, Panama Flycatcher, Northern

Scrub-Flycatcher, Mangrove Vireo and Mangrove Warbler. During the winter period, migrants from North America include Yellow Warbler, Northern Waterthrush and American Redstart.

We shall also spend time birding the scrub woodlands and nearby open country where we will expect to encounter Crested Caracara, Pale-vented Pigeon, Yellow-naped Parrots, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Lesser

Nighthawk, Barred Antshrike, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Grey-breasted Martin, Tropical Gnatcatcher, Scrub Greenlet, Grey-crowned Yellowthroat, Cherrie's Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Stripe-headed Sparrow and Scrub Euphonia. A nearby hilltop provides a scenic view over the immense Pacific ocean, providing us with an ideal vantage point for soaring raptors such as Grey, Short-tailed and Zone-tailed Hawks. After dinner one night we will venture by bus to our nightbird stake-outs where we should be able to spotlight Striped Owl and Pacific Screech-Owl from the road.

Day 11 After some final birding in the Carara area, we will depart for San Jose making several good birding stops en route. Just north of the Carara area the scenery changes to the seasonal dry-forest typical of the northern Pacific lowlands of Guanacaste. We shall gently make our way through this distinctive habitat looking for such charismatic birds as White-fronted Parrot, Orange-fronted Parakeet, Cinnamon Hummingbird, the clownish White-throated Magpie-Jay and the stunning Turquoise-browed Motmot. Later we will stop at one of the villages along the way where we

will look for the lethargic Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth and roosting Black-and-white Owls in the village square! Finally we will arrive back at the Hotel Bougainvillea in time for some final packing and our farewell dinner in the evening.

Day 12 The tour ends this morning at the San Jose airport.

Accommodation & Road Transport: The hotels/lodges are mostly of normal Birdquest standard. At the modern biological station of La Selva we will use the cabins with private bathrooms. Road transport is by small coach and roads are mostly good.

Walking: The walking effort is easy almost throughout.

Climate: At low altitudes it is generally hot, but at higher altitudes conditions range from warm to cool (even cold at the highest levels). Periods of sunny weather alternate with overcast spells. There is regular rainfall on the Caribbean slope, but elsewhere rainfall is less frequent and more irregular. It will be rather humid at times.

Bird Photography: Opportunities are quite good.