



The “Curious” Case of Costa Rica:

THE PERFECT INTRODUCTION TO BIRDING

Text by Caitlyn Connor

Resplendent Quetzal (*Pharomachrus mocinno*)

As the plane begins its descent into the Kong-like fog over Costa Rica, my heart beats with excitement as I wait with anticipation to get my first glimpse of what will be my home for the next three weeks. As an amateur bird enthusiast and proud owner of a quirky Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata* [formerly *Poephila guttata*]) named Dwaine, I did not understand nor could I simply imagine just how much of an avian paradise the canopies of Costa Rica could be! As an undergraduate student attending the University of Georgia, I found the opportunity to study Avian Biology in Costa Rica through the Department of Poultry Science, which offers the program as a capstone for their Avian Biology majors. Despite some previous experience in other Avian Biology courses, I was not prepared for the overwhelming benefits of studying avian species in the field.

Costa Rica is a country located in Central America that is similar in size to West Virginia. Its culture is rich with indigenous history. The Ticos’ particular appreciation for the natural beauty of their country reveals itself through the unimposing construction of their towns and cities as well as through their reverence for both the rich, fertile land of Costa Rica and the native animals that inhabit it. During our three-week journey exploring the country, we discovered not only the amazing range of landscapes, animals, and people, but also with it, a wide variety of avian species. As home to over eight hundred bird species, every day in this beautiful country exposed us to unimaginable glimpses of a wide variety of birds. During our stay, we were fortunate enough to see well over two hundred and fifty bird species! Having the opportunity to study and observe these creatures in their natural habitats made me appreciate their majestic beauty and peaceful nature even more.

Our program started off in the eerie and fog-covered peaks of Monteverde, a cloud forest filled with hemi-epiphytes, creeping figs, and ferns, the size of which reminded one of Jurassic Park. In the week we spent there, we observed adult and juvenile Resplendent Quetzals (*Pharomachrus mocinno*). The unmistakable iridescent colors and dressed tail feathers of the male quetzal made it a treat to watch as he fed on avocados in the cloud forest. During our hikes in the cloud-enshrouded forest reserve, we grew accustomed to the mysteriously hinged call of the Black-faced Solitaire (*Myadestes melanops*) and the unique vocalizations of the Emerald Toucanet (*Aulacorhynchus prasinus*). It was also at this location that we found a nesting pair of Orange-bellied Trogons (*Trogon aurantiiventris*) and the threatened Three-wattled Bellbird (*Procnias tricarunculatus*), a truly unique experience. I looked forward to ending each day in the local Jardín de Colibrís (Hummingbird Garden) at the reserve. The garden is the feeding center for over twenty different hummingbird species, from Violet Sabrewings (*Campylopterus hemileucurus*) to Green Hermits (*Phaethornis guy*). Enjoying the erratic flights and unmistakable chattering calls of these creatures was an unforgettable experience.

In addition to giving us the opportunity to see an amazing array of avian species, the trip allowed us to learn the basics of field ornithology. When asked how to identify birds in the wild, all



Chestnut-mandible Toucan (*Ramphastos ambiguus swainsonii*)

students responded by saying “color!” However, we learned that in actuality, the worst way to differentiate between avian species is by this characteristic. Contrary to popular beliefs and practices, spotting birds based on size, wing span, beak shape, and flight pattern actually prove more helpful than trying to identify them by their color first. So in addition to learning how to use the high definition video cameras, spotting scopes, and digital SLRs provided to us by the University, Monteverde also introduced us to this new and more effective manner of bird watching.

With our departure from Monteverde, came the new landscape of the Heliconias Lodge, which is tucked away in the forest near the base of a mountain that offers an incredible view all the way to Lake Nicaragua. With this new habitat, came new bird species we had yet to discover including: Chestnut-mandible (*Ramphastos ambiguus swainsonii*) and Keel-billed Toucans (*Ramphastos sulfuratus*), the Collared Aracari (*Pteroglossus torquatus*), Pale-billed (*Campephilus guatemalensis*) and Lineated Woodpeckers (*Hylatomus lineatus*), Tody Motmot (*Hylomanes momotula*), and the unbelievably Ornate Hawk-eagle (*Spizaetus ornatus*). There are no words to describe the splendor of waking to the multitude of arias from the birds inhabiting this beautiful landscape, owned and protected by a group of local families determined to conserve the incredible biodiversity of the reserve while improving the local community.

Heliconias was followed by a one day visit to Cano Negro Wildlife Refuge to explore the wetlands by boat. The leisurely boat ride was anything but leisurely due to the multitude of wildlife species constantly bombarding our visual and acoustic

senses. Watching the successful fishing styles of Anhingas (*Anhinga anhinga*), Neotropic Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*), several species of kingfishers, and various herons was a once in a lifetime treat, as was viewing countless basking basiliscus and crocodiles.

The next leg of our journey was spent on the Gulf of Nicoya at La Ensenada Lodge. This was our first chance to become better acquainted with Pacific coast seabirds, including the Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*), White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*), Great Egret (*Ardea alba*), Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*), Mangrove Swallow (*Tachycineta albilinea*), Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), Mangrove Black-hawk (*Buteogallus anthracinus*) and various gull and tern species. On our boat ride out into the bay, we got very close to frigatebirds catching the unmistakable sights of the males’ red throat patch as they cooled off on nearby White Mangroves (*Laguncularia racemosa*). We also saw a group of Roseate Spoonbills (*Platalea ajaja*) feeding in the shallow waters. Exploring this new ecosystem allowed classroom discussions on the incredible array of physiological and anatomical adaptations as well as nutritional strategies that avian species indigenous to Costa Rica possess to limit their competition with one another. It was fascinating to consider how different two species within the same animal kingdom could be. When we weren’t cruising the waters of the Nicoya Gulf for birds and taking in the views of the mangroves, local fishermen, and crocodilian species, we also walked along the shores and inland forests of the lodge to observe a multitude of wildlife species. In addition to horseback riding, a walk to the local salt production fields was highlighted by observing a mother Great Black Hawk (*Buteogallus urubitinga*) and her chicks, Inca Doves (*Columbina inca*), Orange-chinned Parakeets (*Brotogeris jugularis*) and Orange-fronted Conures (*Eupsittula canicularis*), and a very rambunctious Northern Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*). We concluded the walk

by watching an indescribably beautiful sunset from a hilltop lookout that encompassed a nearly 360° view of both land and sea. At the Ensenada Lodge, Turquoise-browed Motmots (*Eumomota superciliosa*) seemed to follow us everywhere, and we became acquainted with a very friendly White-throated M a g p i e - J a y



Northern Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*)



White-throated Magpie-Jay (*Calocitta formosa*)

(*Calocitta formosa*) that sat with us every day at breakfast and lunch waiting for a handout. The deep, throaty howls of Mantled Howler monkeys (*Alouatta palliata*) residing in the trees around our accommodations accompanied the 4 a.m. sunrise every day and almost made the local crowing roosters pale in comparison.

At the end of our stay at Ensenada, we took a short morning excursion to Hacienda Solimar, a privately owned finca (ranch). A bus tour through the marshland cattle pastures yielded close encounters with Snail Kites (*Helicolestes hamatus*), Wood Storks (*Mycteria americana*), Limpkins (*Aramus guarauna*), Black-bellied Whistling Ducks (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*), Bare-throated Tiger Herons (*Tigrisoma mexicanum*), Green Herons (*Butorides virescens*), Boat-billed Herons (*Cochlearius cochlearius*), Purple Gallinules (*Porphyrio porphyrio*), Northern Jacanas (*Jacana spinosa*), and Double-striped Thick-knees (*Burhinus bistriatus*). The highlight of the tour was seeing five of the roughly estimated 100 Jabirus (*Jabiru mycteria*) present in Costa Rica. After leaving Solimar, it was a short trip to our next location, the Arenal Volcano. Here we were able to hike along the old lava flows and swim in the crisp clear waters at the base of the La Fortuna Waterfall.

Next, we ventured to La Selva where we stayed at its biological station. La Selva is one of the most important sites in the world

for research on the tropical rain forest, with over 200 scientific papers published yearly from research conducted at the site. We spent several days hiking some of the over 50 km of trails within this 3,500 plus acre reserve. Despite the oppressive humidity that made residing there very interesting, we improved our familiarity with more fauna in Costa Rica and saw a mother White-nosed Coati (*Nasua narica*) and her babies, Two-toed Sloths (*Choloepus hoffmanni*), iguanas, Collared Peccaries (*Pecari tajacu*), and assorted frogs. There were also several varieties of snakes, which our group elected to avoid. This location also held a great number of tanagers as well as honeycreepers, jacamars, toucans, parrots, Great Curassow (*Crax rubra*), guans, and White-collared Manakins (*Manacus candei*) whose unmistakable wing-clapping courting dance of the male could be heard resonating throughout the depths of the jungle. There were also several Social Flycatchers also known as Vermilion-crowned Flycatcher (*Myiozetetes similis*), one in particular that was very social and a common Tody Flycatcher (*Todirostrum cinereum*) who had no problem taking his time to enjoy the morning by sunning himself right outside the dining hall window. During our stay, we met some avian researchers doing a population study of La Selva. Birds were counted and measured, and the day we met them, they happened to catch a Royal Flycatcher (*Onychorhynchus coronatus*) whose plumed crest was magnificent. Undoubtedly, the highlight of La Selva was watching the playful antics of three Great Green Macaws (*Ara ambiguus*) in the trees lining the river that courses through the reserve. Watching their carefree playtime and hearing their loud squawks belied their overall highly threatened population status. As rich and fruitful as La Selva was proving to be for our group, our next location awaited, and we bid the reserve a fond farewell as we boarded the caravan.

Upon leaving La Selva, we headed for our last location of the trip, Hacienda Baru, a national wildlife refuge and lodge. Along the way, we were able to stop and watch two separate flocks of Scarlet Macaws (*Ara macao*) socializing in the canopy of trees lining the road. Hacienda Baru is a unique blend of breathtaking highlands, lowlands, and coastal habitats. The rookery was full of nesting Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) during our stay, and sloths seemed to be found around every corner. On one of our walking tours,

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Fiery-billed Aracari (*Pteroglossus frantzii*)

we stumbled upon a large troupe of White-throated Capuchin monkeys (*Cebus capucinus*) enjoying their daily siesta. However, we quickly learned that despite their size and affable appearance, these creatures are fiercely territorial, and so we admired them, but from a distance. The diversity of birds seen here was extensive, and we were able to add to our already impressive bird species list such notable birds as the King Vulture (*Sarcoramphus papa*), Mealy Amazon parrot (*Amazona farinosa*), Red-lored Amazon parrot (*Amazona autumnalis*), Common Potoo (*Nyctibius griseus*), Violaceous Trogon (*Trogon violaceus*), Slaty-tailed Trogon (*Trogon massena*) and the Fiery-billed Aracari (*Pteroglossus frantzii*).

As has been proven time and again, all good things must come to an end, and this international study program was no exception. As our caravan took us back to San Jose, I thought about all that I had seen and experienced. From tasting sugar cane juice at a farm co-op and zip-lining through the canopies of Monteverde, to horseback riding in Ensenada, to walking the kilometers of pristine, private Pacific Ocean beach at Baru and swimming at the base of a waterfall in Arenal, I decided that Costa Rica was probably the perfect place to begin as a novice ornithologist. The accessibility to the forest locations that remained mostly undisturbed was remarkable. Even as a struggling college student, the entire three weeks was surprisingly affordable, making this trip not only an amazing cultural experience but an educational one as well. Although many of us were fortunate to have learned about birds beforehand,

there is nothing more effective or striking than applying what we learned to our surroundings. Having the opportunity to experience firsthand the numerous species of birds in Costa Rica, made what we learned all the more prevalent and memorable; and we had so much fun in the process! Although I obviously did not see any Zebra Finches among the two hundred and thirty avian species I did see and record, it was still indescribable seeing these birds in their natural environment. I appreciate the graceful creatures' beauty all the more for it! If you have ever considered a venture such as this or maybe have simply been curious about the origins of your own feathery friend, I highly encourage you to pursue it, because I did, and it was completely worth it!

Caitlyn Connor graduated from the University of Georgia with a bachelor's degree in Biological Science. She will graduate with her DVM from the University of Florida in 2014. Kai Wang will graduate from the University of Georgia in May 2014 with a bachelor's degree in Biological Science and will enroll in medical school in the fall of 2014. If you would like more information about the Avian Biology Program or the Avian Biology Study Abroad Program at the University of Georgia please visit <http://www.avianbiology.uga.edu/>

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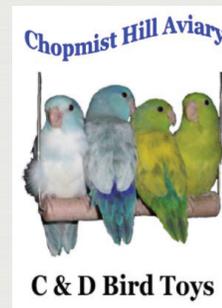
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