

Costa Rica's Raptor Spectacular

Naturetrek Tour Report

20th September – 4th October 2025



Blue-chested Hummingbird



Boat-billed Heron



Russet-naped Wood Rail



Rufous-tailed Jacamar

Tour report by Peter Booth



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Tour participants: Erick Castro (leader) with ten Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 20th September

Due to a cyberattack impacting some of Europe's airports, including London Heathrow, two passengers sadly missed their flight, and only one of the remainder of the group successfully acquired his luggage upon arrival at San José. Once the lost luggage forms had been completed, the group were met in the arrivals hall by Erick. We were then transferred to Hotel Bougainvillea on the outskirts of the city. A few of us enjoyed a snack and a swift drink at the hotel bar, before retiring for an early night in readiness for the next day's birding.

Day 2

Sunday 21st September

Hotel Bougainvillea is renowned for its beautiful gardens, which provided an early opportunity to become familiar with some of the more common Costa Rican birds. The group therefore met Erick for a pre-breakfast scouting mission. Favourable weather conditions allowed us to view a wide range of birds, including Red-billed Pigeon, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, Lesson's Motmot, Social Flycatcher, Tropical Mockingbird, Brown Jay, Rufous-backed Wren, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Chestnut-capped Warbler and Costa Rica's national bird, the Clay-coloured Thrush. Erick, exhibiting great patience and excellent spotting skills, found us two well-disguised Mottled Owls roosting in a bamboo tree.

Following our first hearty breakfast of the tour, we set off towards the Arenal Observatory Lodge, our base for the next three nights. The first stop was at a supermarket so that the group could acquire some additional clothing, footwear and toiletries until their luggage caught up with them. A drinks stop en route at Café Soda y Mirador Cinchona provided us with our first close-up views of numerous hummingbird species and their amazing acrobatic skills. These included White-bellied Mountaingem, Crowned Woodnymph, Green-crowned Brilliant, Black-bellied Hummingbird and Blue-vented Hummingbird. Yellow-throated Euphonia, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Scarlet-rumped Tanager, Blue-grey Tanager, Blackburnian Warbler and Buff-throated Saltator frequented the fruit feeders.

All three egrets (Great, Snowy and Cattle), Black and Turkey Vultures, in addition to Crested and Yellow-headed Caracaras, were seen during the journey. We arrived at Arenal in time for a late lunch. and met up with our final couple, who, having missed the previous day's Paris flight, had managed to complete their journey via Colombia. The afternoon was spent around the lodge's gardens and restaurant viewing veranda, where a well-stocked feeding station attracted a range of birds and mammals. A number of new hummingbirds were seen, including Brown Violetear, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer (with its distinctive orange legs), Green Hermit and Scaly-breasted Hummingbird. The most common was the feisty Rufous-tailed Hummingbird, which ruled the roost through its aggressive behaviour.

The beautifully-maintained gardens and lodge trails were extensive, and we gained our first views of Great Curassow, Crested Guan, Grey-headed Chachalaca, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Social Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, Great-tailed Grackle, Variable Seedeater, Southern House Wren and Cinnamon-bellied Saltator. Yellow-crowned and Yellow-throated Euphonias, Green Honeycreeper, Bananaquit, and Scarlet-rumped, Palm, Golden-hooded and Silver-throated Tanagers were present at the fruit-feeding station.

As was customary after a busy birding day, the group met up to list the day's sightings before heading to the restaurant for our evening meal.

Day 3

Monday 22nd September

As was to become the norm, an early pre-breakfast meet-up, this time on the viewing veranda, again allowed a wide array of wildlife to be seen. Howler and Spider Monkeys swung from the trees, Variegated Squirrels scampered around the feeders, and coatis and agoutis wandered around the lawns. As the light increased, more and more birds joined the party. The early morning mist shrouding the Arenal Volcano soon departed, allowing us to gain our first full view of this magnificent geological feature. Erick assured us that it was currently in a dormant phase and had not erupted since 2010, which was just as well bearing in mind its close proximity to the lodge.

Following breakfast, we took the waterfall trail. Forest birding was always a challenge due to the narrow trails, close-knit canopy and relative darkness. When one considered the wide extent of these forests, one sometimes had to be lucky to chance upon some of the birds. We did catch glimpses of Buff-rumped Warbler, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Slaty Antwren and Northern Tropical Pewee, but it was only once we reached the waterfall and the trail opened up that we started seeing more birds. Numerous flycatchers, including Western Wood-pewee, and a Bat Falcon were sighted in between the rain showers. A Laughing Falcon, with its distinctive cry, perched close, and was then seen to dive to the ground to tackle its prey.

After lunch, we were greeted by severe storms and torrential rain; it was the wet season after all. We all boarded the bus, and our driver braved the ever-rising floodwaters on the road in the hope that the deluge might subside. Apart from a quick glimpse of a Fasciated Tiger Heron at the river, there was sadly little to be seen in such conditions, and after an hour, we called it a day and drove back to the lodge.

Day 4

Tuesday 23rd September

With an improvement in the weather, we all met before breakfast in the lodge gardens. The hummingbirds were active around the flowers, and we were able to add Green Thorntail, Purple-crowned Fairy and Magenta-throated Woodstar to our ever-increasing list. At the fruit feeders, we saw Bay-headed Tanager, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Tawny-capped Euphonia and Grey-capped Flycatcher. On the mammal front, we had brief sightings of Northern Tamandua and Tayra, and one of the lodge guides pointed out a tiny and well-disguised Eyelash Pit Viper nestling on a leaf. These vipers came in a number of different colours, and although we would see numerous yellow vipers later in the tour, this particular one was white.

After breakfast, we set off to explore another of the lodge's trails. A new set of species was identified, including Slaty-tailed and Gartered Trogons, Keel-billed Toucan, Wedge-billed and Spotted Woodcreepers, Slaty Antwren, Boat-billed Flycatcher, White-collared Manakin, Trilling Gnatwren, Black-and-white Warbler, Red-eyed Vireo, Russet Antshrike, White-throated Ant-Tanager and Hepatic Tanager. An agitated female Mistletoe Tyrannulet kept flying in and out of a clump of bushes. We could hear constant chirping, and eventually we spotted a recently-fledged juvenile perched close to the ground. The star sighting of the morning, however, was a pair of Spectacled Owls, brilliantly found by Erick.

Returning to the lodge for lunch, the group received the good news that their lost luggage had finally arrived! After a welcome change of clothing, the group mounted the bus once more and headed down the road. Just prior to the river stop, we caught sight of our first Rufous-tailed Jacamar. At the river itself, we struck lucky and saw Sunbittern, Little Blue Heron, Black Phoebe and Spotted Sandpiper. Continuing down the road, we braved some heavy, frequent showers and spotted a White Hawk drying itself off in a tree by the roadside. Additional sightings here included Collared Aracari, Collared Forest Falcon and better views of Buff-rumped Warbler. With the light fading, we made our journey back for the last of our three nights at the wonderful Arenal Lodge.

Day 5

Wednesday 24th September

A shorter-than-normal pre-breakfast walk around the gardens was nonetheless rewarding, as we had our first glimpse of Snowcap (hummingbird), as well as closer views of Scarlet-thighed Dacnis and a pair of Yellow-throated Toucans. Following breakfast, we packed up and set off for the Selva Verde Lodge, situated in the tropical lowlands of Sarapiquí, where we would stay for the following three nights. En route, we stopped off at the Bogarín trails adjacent to La Fortuna, where the additional heat and humidity were already noticeable. The trails comprised essentially secondary forest with a small pond adjacent to the car park. As there were only Scarlet-rumped Tanagers and Russet-crowned Wood Rail around the small feeding station, we quickly ventured into the forested area. Here, our sightings included Crested Guan, Barred Antshrike, Black-throated Wren, Olivaceous Piculet and Canada Warbler. We had a flyover of four Great Green Macaws and, at the pond, saw numerous perched Boat-billed Herons. Also on the trails, we had seen both Hoffmann's Two-toed and Brown-throated Sloths, as well as a very obliging and curious Northern Raccoon.

We continued our journey to the Selva Verde Lodge, arriving just in time for lunch. The lodge feeders were unusually quiet, but Chestnut-headed Oropendola, Red-throated Ant-Tanager and Summer Tanager were added to our ever-expanding bird list.

The Sarapiquí River flowed at the bottom of the lodge grounds, and here we viewed Spotted Sandpiper, Neotropic Cormorant, Osprey, Turkey Vulture and numerous fly-pasts of Cattle Egrets going to roost. A fairly confident White-tailed Deer walked only metres from us, and then started feeding on the vegetation.

A walk at the front of the lodge grounds provided close-up views of Black River Turtle and Common Caiman in the small stream, while a Pale-billed Woodpecker was busy hammering away on the tree above our heads. We spotted our first Green-and-black Poison Dart Frog to add to the Strawberry Poison Dart Frog we had seen earlier in the day at the Bogarín trails. Other reptiles added to the list included Green Basilisk (known as the 'Jesus Lizard' due to its ability to run across water), Green Iguana and Common House Gecko.

After the evening meal, we successfully located a number of Red-eyed Tree Frogs, as well as Masked Frog and Cane Toad, the latter almost getting squashed as we fumbled around in the dark. Finally, to everyone's surprise, a Kinkajou was spotted hanging from the branches around the fruit-feeding station.

Day 6

Thursday 25th September

Following breakfast, we took the fifteen-minute drive to La Selva Biological Station, which was run by the Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS). Used primarily for research, education and studies into sustainable

forestry, the 1500ha reserve boasted a wide range of trails. In addition to primary and secondary forests, there were rivers, creeks, swamps and agricultural land.

We met our local guide, who was affiliated with the reserve, and he provided an interesting explanation of the reserve and the surrounding geographical features. We then spent the morning around the reserve gardens, where we viewed Ruddy Ground Dove, White-tipped Dove, Slaty-tailed and Black-throated Trogons, Common Tody-Flycatcher, Rufous Mourner, Bright-rumped Attila, White-whiskered Puffbird and Cinnamon Becard.

A lunchtime siesta back at the Selva Verde Lodge ensued, and Bay Wren, Long-billed Hermit, Blue Dacnis, Shining Honeycreeper and White-breasted Wood Wren were spotted in the lodge gardens.

After lunch, we returned to La Selva Biological Station and crossed the river via the suspension bridge to follow one of the main trails. While on the bridge itself, we saw an American Crocodile basking at the side of the river, and then, amazingly, a large Green Iguana fell from its treetop perch into the river. It was not as elegant as our Olympian Tom Daley, but it survived the fall and climbed back up the riverbank. A Sungrebe was slowly floating on the current down the river, clearly keeping a close eye on the crocodile. Highlights on the trails included Fan-tailed Barbthroat, Olive-backed Quail-Dove, White-fronted Nunbird, Black-crowned Antshrike, Stripe-breasted Wren and Blue-black Grosbeak.

Once back at our lodge, we went through the day's bird list and sat down to another wonderful evening meal.

Day 7

Friday 26th September

Following breakfast, we again ventured across to La Selva Biological Station, where we followed a different trail from that of the previous day. A group of adult Collared Peccaries with youngsters in tow wandered in front of us in the gardens, and we saw Groove-billed Ani, Green Ibis, Gartered Trogon, Lineated Woodpecker, Olive-throated Parakeet and Swainson's Thrush. Erick pointed out a Bullet Ant, definitely to be avoided, as its name gave away the excruciating pain one would suffer if bitten. On the raptors front, we saw a perched Black Hawk-Eagle, and overhead both Double-toothed and Plumbeous Kites.

After lunch, half of the group decided to take advantage of the lodge's swimming pool, while the rest took a short drive to a new trail local to the lodge and adjacent to the river. Here, we saw Northern Jacana, Masked Tityra and Tropical Mockingbird. Three kingfishers were present, Amazon and Green, as well as the largest in the Americas, the Ringed Kingfisher. We then caught brief glimpses of a Neotropical River Otter.

Day 8

Saturday 27th September

Another hot and humid day greeted us as we had breakfast, packed our cases and boarded the bus for what was essentially a travel day to the Caribbean coast and our hotel in the tourist hotspot of Puerto Viejo. Before our departure, two of the group had one last look at the lodge's feeding station, and struck lucky, seeing our first Red-legged Honeycreeper and getting our only glimpse of the relatively rare Northern Royal Flycatcher. The long journey was punctuated by a comfort break and a lunch stop relatively close to our destination. This excellent restaurant proved very popular, and was subsequently frequented by the group for lunch on the following two days.

On the journey, especially once we were following the coastline, we spotted Semipalmated Plover, Cabot's Tern, Hudsonian Whimbrel, Brown Pelican, Black Vulture and Great-tailed Grackle. By the time we had checked into Hotel Caribblue, the light had already started to fade. There was just enough time to explore the gardens and local beach area, allowing some of us to dip our toes in the Caribbean Sea.

Day 9

Sunday 28th September

Prior to breakfast, we undertook an hour's birding in the hotel gardens, where we picked up Long-billed Hermit, Northern Barred Woodcreeper, Red-lored Amazon, Bay Wren, American Yellow Warbler, Tropical Kingbird, Great Kiskadee, Social Flycatcher and numerous Eastern Wood-pewees. Overhead, there were swathes of American Cliff Swallows travelling on their southerly migration, which were quite a sight.

The primary reason for travelling to this area of Costa Rica was to view the north-to-south raptor migration. Following breakfast, we boarded the bus and travelled further down the coast to an area where a short uphill walk took us to a viewing platform. Birding on the way up, we came across Snowy Cotinga, White-browed Gnatcatcher, Scarlet-rumped Cacique, Black-crowned Antshrike, Dot-winged Antwren, Bicoloured Antbird, Olive-sided Flycatcher and Tawny-crested Tanager. Halfway up the trail, there was a small building affiliated with the reserve, and here we saw roosting Long-nosed (Proboscis) Bats. Once at the viewing area, we heard the unmistakable call of the Purple-throated Fruitcrow, of which we eventually had close views of a group of four. A Blue-chested Hummingbird flitting amongst the flowers kept us entertained as we patiently waited for the raptor display. The level of raptor activity was perhaps not as high as we had all hoped, but we gained overhead views of Broad-winged Hawk, Osprey and countless Mississippi Kites.

After a late lunch at our now favourite restaurant, we travelled back down the coastal road to a beach area, not far from Cahuita National Park. Although we did not enter the reserve due to its early closure time, we nevertheless gained good sightings of both familiar and new bird species. These included Hudsonian Whimbrel, Spotted Sandpiper, Magnificent Frigatebird, Yellow-crowned Night Heron and Common Black Hawk. A Black-cheeked Woodpecker was spotted perching next to its nest hole, feeding a juvenile which kept popping its head out. It made a nice end to another interesting birding day.

Day 10

Monday 29th September

A slightly cooler and less humid day greeted us as we rose from our beds. Following another short pre-breakfast birding session, where we often dived for cover to miss the frequent showers, we gained views of our first Cocoa Woodcreeper, in addition to Eastern Kingbird and both Keel-billed and Yellow-throated Toucans.

After breakfast, we drove north from the hotel to one of the local reserves. Sightings included White-necked Jacobin, Roadside Hawk, Slaty-tailed Trogon, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Trilling Gnatwren and Prothonotary Warbler.

In the afternoon, following another wonderful lunch, we drove back down to Cahuita National Park, as we had not managed to gain access the previous day. Boat-billed, Tricoloured and Yellow-crowned Night Herons were perched in the trees adjacent to the lagoon, and in the forested area we saw White-collared Manakin, Olive-backed Euphonia, Northern Waterthrush and Black-striped Woodcreeper. Additionally, we gained closer views of both

Hudsonian Whimbrel and Spotted Sandpiper. Within the forest, we had a close encounter with a small troop of White-faced Capuchins, one of which posed nicely for the photographers in the group.

Day 11

Tuesday 30th September

Another travel day beckoned, and we checked out of the hotel and followed the coastal road northwards, before heading inland towards La Pavona. Here, we boarded a boat which took us on the one-and-a-half-hour journey through the waterways of Tortuguero to Laguna Lodge, located at the edge of the Caribbean Sea. The journey time was completely dependent on the water levels of these waterways, and the helmsman had to carefully navigate the various sandbanks and shallows. Our three-night stop would allow us to take numerous boat trips around the Tortuguero National Park waterways. Tortuguero had higher humidity levels than the previous locations, but luckily for us it was marginally cooler than normal for this time of year.



Mottled Owl



Little Blue Heron

Once checked in at the lodge, we had lunch, and during our short siesta we explored the gardens and adjacent beach area. Here, we saw Montezuma Oropendola, Great-tailed Grackle, Common Tody Flycatcher, Variable Seedeater, Chestnut-sided Warbler, and Blue-grey and Palm Tanagers. An extremely young Brown-throated Sloth was pointed out by one of the lodge's gardeners, sleeping in a tree by the beach.

We then took our first boat trip around the waterways. Due to the conservation status of the national park waterways, we were required to register the boat and pick up a permit at Tortuguero each time we entered the park. We were soon acquainting ourselves with a tranche of new bird species, in addition to some with which we were already familiar. Our helmsman was highly adept at manoeuvring the boat right into the mangroves and floating vegetation. This allowed us to gain close views of Bare-throated Tiger Heron, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Green, Tricoloured and Little Blue Herons, Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets, Northern Jacana, Anhinga and Neotropic Cormorant. Amazon, Ringed, Green and Belted Kingfishers perched along the banks, and a

Peregrine Falcon passed overhead. Mangrove Swallows sat on their favourite perches, completely unperturbed by our presence.

Numerous noisy parrots and parakeets also flew overhead, including White-crowned Parrot, Red-lored and Mealy Amazons, and Olive-throated Parakeet. We also gained further sightings of Great Green Macaw, a positive sign, as we had been told that they were becoming somewhat endangered. As the sun started to set, we made our way back to the lodge, where we went through the daily bird listing and settled down to our evening meal.

Day 12

Wednesday 1st October

There was a buzz of anticipation as we woke this morning, because in the evening we were hopefully going to encounter Green Turtles laying their eggs on the beach. However, a full day's birding in the gardens and along the waterways lay in front of us first. Quietly walking through the gardens so as not to wake the other residents, we were soon spotting Stripe-throated Hermit and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. A Squirrel Cuckoo landed close by, while other sightings included White-whiskered Puffbird, Common Tody Flycatcher, Lesser Greenlet, Swainson's Thrush, Olive-crowned Yellowthroat, Summer Tanager, Red-eyed Vireo and Eastern Kingbird. A beautiful Keel-billed Toucan flew into a tree next to the restaurant, providing us with extraordinary head-height views.

Two boat trips took place that day, one before and the other after lunch. We mainly viewed the same herons, egrets and kingfishers as the previous day, but additionally gained good views of Prothonotary Warbler, Groove-billed Ani, Purple Gallinule, Green Ibis and Sungrebe. While navigating the narrow creeks, we glimpsed the tiny American Pygmy Kingfisher, and the Green-and-rufous Kingfisher in flight. A bit of patience paid off, and we eventually caught sight of both of them perched in the murky undergrowth.

Following our evening meal, we were introduced to our turtle guide, who provided us with information about the turtles and the methodology we had to follow that evening. Costa Rica approaches the viewing of these turtles in a very sustainable way. First, we were allocated into groups and had to wait until the spotters had found a turtle. The beach area was split into zones, and the walk from the lodge could take between ten and thirty minutes, depending on which zone the turtle chose. Once alerted to the turtle's presence, we then walked to the beach, and from there we had to advance in a line, with only the guide using a red torch. The turtle was already laying eggs when we arrived, and we had to kneel behind her to watch the laying spectacle, so as not to traumatise her. Once the eggs were laid, she covered the area with sand, and then tried to add further material in order to disguise the area, hopefully to reduce the chances of predation. She then hauled herself back into the ocean. We all went to bed that night as exhausted as she must have felt, but thrilled and privileged to have seen a spectacle one normally only sees on television.

Day 13

Thursday 2nd October

That morning, we met at the jetty for the last pre-breakfast boat trip of the tour. The usual suspects were on show, including all the herons and egrets, Northern Jacana, Hudsonian Whimbrel, Anhinga, and Neotropic Cormorant. However, the star sighting was a Common Dolphin, which breached on numerous occasions beside the boat.

After breakfast, we took the boat down to Tortuguero, but instead of collecting our permit, we got off the boat and walked the nearby Jaguar Trail. Here, we spotted White-whiskered Puffbird, Great Curassow, Northern Barred

Woodcreeper, Ochre-bellied and Common Tody Flycatchers, Red-capped Manakin, Black-and-white and Chestnut-sided Warblers, Red-eyed Vireo, Black-crowned Antshrike and Dot-winged Antwren. Erick spotted a tree with claw marks down the side, and confirmed that they were indeed those of a Jaguar!

After lunch, we met at the jetty for our final boat trip. In addition to the species we had seen in the morning, we also caught sight of Spotted Sandpiper, Royal Tern, American White Ibis, Lesser Nighthawk and all five kingfishers. Gaining photos of the tiny American Pygmy Kingfisher was a thrilling end to our Tortuguero experience for the photographers.

Day 14

Friday 3rd October

Sadly, our tour was almost at an end, and following breakfast we boarded the boat for the return journey to La Pavona, and then by bus onwards to San José. Heavy storms over the previous days had caused severe disruption on the mountain roads due to flooding and landslides. Although the traffic was busy, we managed to navigate our planned route safely; a detour would have added an additional three hours to the journey back to San José.

We stopped for lunch and were treated to close-up views of a Black-throated Trogon as we ate. The journey was broken up further with a visit to Donde Cope, the private residence of José “Cope” Perez. Cope was an artist and photographer who had set up his backyard as a birding hotspot, with a viewing area and natural pond. Both fruit and hummingbird feeders, as well as the pond itself, attracted a wide range of birds. The hummingbird feeders pulled in Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer and Rufous-tailed and Scaly-breasted Hummingbirds, while the pond attracted a pair of bathing Russet-crowned Wood Rails. The photographers among us had a wonderful time, as the nearby fruit feeders attracted Pale-vented Pigeon, Collared Aracari, Great Kiskadee, White-collared Manakin, Clay-coloured Thrush, Chestnut-headed Oropendola, Melodious Blackbird, Summer and Scarlet Tanagers, Green and Red-legged Honeycreepers, and Scarlet-rumped, Blue-grey and Palm Tanagers. All in all, it was a wonderful variety of birds in such a small setting.

Although it was hard to drag ourselves from the viewing area, Cope then took us to a nearby trail where we had good views of a Crested Owl and a small colony of Tent-making Bats hiding underneath a large leaf. With such hospitality, it would have been rude not to purchase some of Cope’s beautiful paintings of typical Costa Rican birds.

We eventually arrived back in darkness at Hotel Bougainvillea in San José, where we conducted the final daily bird count of the tour and said goodbye to our fantastic guide, Erick.

Day 15

Saturday 4th October

As our return flight to Paris was not until the evening, most of the group took advantage of the first opportunity during the tour to have a lie-in. However, a few hardy souls got up again at sunrise and ventured out into the gardens for a final birding quest. While we could not catch sight of the Mottled Owls on this occasion, we viewed Squirrel Cuckoo, Rufous-backed Wren, Hoffmann’s Woodpecker, Melodious Blackbird, Baltimore Oriole, Eastern Wood-pewee and Lesson’s Blue-crowned Motmot. A Crested Caracara flew in to one of the trees and started devouring its own breakfast, and a Grey Hawk mewed overhead. It was a really good end to an interesting and

rewarding holiday, during which we had seen almost 250 bird species, numerous mammals, snakes and other reptiles, and amphibians.

Lunch was then taken in the bar, and once checked out, we departed for the airport. The evening flight back to Paris departed more or less on time, and we all settled down to get some well-deserved sleep.

Day 16

Saturday 4th October

We arrived safely back in Europe, and took our respective UK flights home for the final leg of our Costa Rican adventure.

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