

RELAXED BIRDING IN COSTA RICA by Robbie Fischer

The last week in January, Joe Morlan and I visited two ecolodges in Costa Rica. We chose the foothills and the mountains as our habitats. We were not planning a listing trip but rather a birding vacation with ample time for Joe's digiscoping. January is noted to be the beginning of the dry season although we did have showers many of the eight days we were there.

We booked the trip through www.costaricagateway.com and I highly recommend them. They arranged our lodging and drivers to and from the airport and between each of the two lodges.

We spent our first five nights at Rancho Naturalista southeast of San Jose in the foothills. The room rates include a bird guide each day and we enjoyed Chris's enthusiasm and knowledge of the local birds. Chris was willing to accompany us on day trips, walk the local trails or just let us do our own thing if that's what we preferred. It was a nice change from the go, go, go of a birding tour.

Rancho Naturalista is a great place for hummingbirds; especially the Snowcap, Violet Sabrewing, Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer and Violet-crowned Woodnymph. At dusk each day a Purple-crowned Fairy could be seen bathing in pools in a stream gorge near the lodge. Besides hummers, one evening we were lucky enough to see both a Tawny-throated Leaf-tosser and a Dull-mantled Antbird in the gorge.

We took a morning trip to the Tuis River valley, encountering Bay Wren, a pair of Buff-rumped Warblers wagging their tails, Russet Antshrike and Yellow-bellied Elaenia among other tropical species. Another day we visited CATIE Botanical Gardens for Jacanas with chicks, Boat-billed and other Herons and a Green Ibis.

The lodge feeders used bananas to attract birds like Crimson-collared and Passerini's Tanagers, Collared Aracari, Hoffman's and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers. The large covered deck was a great place to wait out showers while watching Green-breasted Mangos and White-necked Jacobins jockeying for position at the hummingbird feeders.

From Rancho we traveled into the mountains to stay three nights at Savegre Mountain Lodge. Here selasphorus hummingbirds included Volcano and Scintillant, which Joe was able to photograph feeding young. We quickly learned the "song" of Green Violetear, the most abundant hummer. Savegre has a trout farm and we spent many happy hours at the forest edge near the trout pools, discovering mixed flocks of songbirds. Collared Redstarts, Flame-throated Warblers and Silver-throated Tanagers always caught our attention. The richly buff-colored Tufted Flycatcher and the diminutive Torrent Tyrannulet vied for flying insects with Dark Pewee and Black-capped Flycatcher along the Savegre River. Each day in the late afternoon we enjoyed the song of the Black-faced Solitaire, purported to be a bird of the forest but we always saw one near the trout pools.

The target bird for these mountains is the Resplendent Quetzal. One morning we caught a ride to a reserve a couple miles from the lodge. Joe and I each paid \$2 to enter the area and were led a couple hundred yards uphill to where a male Quetzal was feeding in a fruiting tree close to the dirt road. We watched it for close to an hour although digiscoping was a challenge. It was daunting to try to get the entire bird in the scope thanks to the long, streaming upper tail coverts. We consider that a high class problem. Costa Rica is a wonderful country to relax and revel in the diverse habitats and warm welcome to birders.