For nearly 30 years Audubon Naturalist Society 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 ANS 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 ANS 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 ANS, she has a great knowledge of butterflies, plants, and tropical ecology. She and Charlie have worked together to lead 18 previous ANS 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. The highlands forest at El Toucanet Lodge, our 2nd stop, harbors rich flora and fauna—including the elusive Resplendent Quetzal. 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; La Cusinga, near Marino Ballena National Park; and Hotel Sierra, near the Golfo Dulce.

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 nearly 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 the trip. Our group will travel together in a private mini-bus driven by a professional driver, who is also an excellent birder and 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.

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.)

**Friday, February 16**

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 Tropical Kingbird. (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, we recommend extending your stay by a day or two at either end of the trip.

**Saturday, February 17 (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: 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 the Hotel Bougainvillea. You may, however, chose to pass on the morning’s museum outing and stay back at the Hotel Bougainvillea to rest and relax in the tropical warmth. Late in the day, we’ll meet our Costa Rican guide, Charlie Gómez, for an orientation to the trip and a welcome dinner. *(Overnight at the Hotel Bougainvillea)*

**Sunday, February 18 (B, L, D)**
This morning we leave the Central Valley and head up and over the Continental Divide to our first destination in the Caribbean lowlands. 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 out 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 Sarapiqui, 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. *(Overnight at La Quinta)*

**Monday, February 19, and Tuesday, February 20 (B, L, D)**
We have scheduled two full days to explore the Caribbean lowlands. Much of our time 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. We will also explore the rainforest that surrounds our lodge: ask Charlie if he’s heard the neighborhood Spectacled Owls. The climate is hot here in this 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. (Overnights at La Quinta)

**Wednesday, February 21 and Thursday, February 22 (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 head up to the El 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, Dusky Nightjar, and/or nocturnal mammals (our ANS group saw a Central American Ringtail in 2013 and 2015), but it’s sure to give us some great opportunities for star-gazing, 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. (Overnights at El Toucanet Lodge)

(*High Elevation*: Our lodge is at about 6400 feet, and we will plan to visit areas above that elevation, up to 9200 feet and even higher on our transfer day (see below), in the tropical alpine zone. If you have a heart or respiratory condition, or feel uncomfortable and/or ill at high altitudes, please consult with your doctor to determine if this trip is for you.)

**Friday, February 23 (B,L,D.)**

We climb back out of the Dota Valley and head south along the Pan-American Highway. We’ll drive to the very highest point of the road, around 11,000 feet above sea level, and plan for a stop to look at the tropical alpine meadow habitat called *paramo*. Here we can search for Timberline Wren, Volcano Junco, Flame-throated Warbler, and Fiery-throated Hummingbird among the native grasses, heath-family shrubs and cushion plants. It’s possible to see both the Pacific coast and the Caribbean Sea on a perfectly clear day, though it’s usually cloudy and chilly at this lofty elevation. (Note that this stop is a tentative one, and will depend on the weather, the timing of the day’s schedule, and other factors as determined by the leaders.)

Next we 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, elevation 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 of fruit feeders from your table. (Overnight at Talari Lodge)

**Saturday, February 24 (B, L, D)**
We’ll leave the Valle de General this morning, but not before visiting the Alexander Skutch Los Cusingos Bird Sanctuary. 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)

**Sunday, February 25 (B, L, D) and Monday, February 26 (B, L, D)**
We enjoy two full days 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. (Overnights at Las Cruces)

**Tuesday, February 27 (B, L, D)**
We leave the hills near San Vito and head south to the Pacific Coast where we’ll make a stop at Golfito and enjoy a boat trip in the waters of the Golfo Dulce. On the water, we’ll explore mangroves, small inlets and river mouths in our search for wildlife including birds such as Mangrove Warbler, Ringed Kingfisher and Boat-billed Heron, in addition to reptiles and mammals. (Overnight at Hotel Sierra)

**Wednesday, February 28 (B, L, D) and Thursday, March 1 (B, L, D)**
Today we continue traveling through the Pacific coastal plain, our destination being the southern Pacific lowlands. Here there is vibrant rain forest habitat filled with interesting birds, butterflies, lizards, and more. Our home for the next two nights is a small and lovely lodge called La Cusinga, tucked right into the pristine coastal rain forest at the Marino Ballena National Park. We will explore the rainforest surrounding the lodge and at 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. We work to build some down-time into the schedule to enjoy the breathtaking ocean views from the lodge. Or, if you want to burn off some calories from all the delicious food we’ll have been eating, you can take trails from the lodge down through
beautiful coastal forest with towering trees to a secluded Pacific Ocean beach. *(Overnights at La Cusinga Lodge)*

Friday, March 2 (B, L, D)
It’s time to pack up and make our way back to the Central Valley, but we’ll plan for a stop along the way to explore Carara National Park, located in one of Costa Rica’s most biologically rich areas. This park straddles the boundary between the tropical dry forest of the northern Pacific lowlands and the rain forest communities of the southern Pacific lowlands so plants and animals from both biomes are found here. Eventually we’ll check in to the Trapp Family Country Inn, where we’ll celebrate with a farewell dinner. *(Overnight at Trapp Family Inn)*

**Saturday, March 1 (B):** Our tropical 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 flight, so consider that when you make your flight reservations once you’ve received our Trip is On. Letter. If you have a mid-day flight or an early afternoon flight, you can sleep in, or spend the morning relaxing on the grounds or swimming in the hotel’s small pool.

**Leaders**

**Stephanie Mason** is Senior Naturalist for the Audubon Naturalist Society (ANS). This will be her 21st trip to Costa Rica and her 19th co-leading a trip here with Charlie Gómez. She leads many adult classes and field excursions for ANS, both in the mid-Atlantic and farther afield (Nova Scotia, Yellowstone, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, Rocky Mountain National Park, South Florida). She has taught classes in the Graduate School USA Natural History Field Studies Program., and she retreats to the Colorado Rockies 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 nearly 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.