



# Costa Rica

## A Trove of Tropical Birds—and More

February 7-18, 2020

Optional extension to February 21, 2020

### Leaders: Stephanie Mason & Carlos “Charlie” Gomez

For more than 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 in addition to the country’s birds. She and Charlie have worked together to lead 20 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. 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 Cerro Lodge, near the Rio Tarcoles. The optional extension into the higher Talamanca Mountains take us to the land of tropical oaks, chilly nights, and the showy Resplendent Quetzal.

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 7**

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 Crimson-fronted Parakeets. (*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 8 (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: travelers can choose between 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 Hotel Bougainvillea. You may, however, chose to pass on the morning's outing and stay back at the 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 9 and Monday Feb. 10 (B, L, D)**

This morning we leave the Central Valley and head up and over the Continental Divide to our first destination. 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 our 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 two nights, La Quinta de Sarapiquí, 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. Much of our time here in the Caribbean lowlands 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. 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*)

**Tuesday, February 11 (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, before descending 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*)

**Wednesday, February 12 (B, L, D)**

We'll leave the Valle de General this morning, but not before visiting *Los Cusingos* Bird Sanctuary, established by the legendary Alexander Skutch. 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*)

**Thursday, February 13 (B, L, D) and Friday, February 14 (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 of birds, butterflies, and other wildlife. (*Overnights at Las Cruces*)

**Saturday, February 15 (B,L,D) and Sunday, February 16 (B,L,D)**

We leave the coffee-growing hills near San Vito this morning. Heading south through the Pacific coastal plain, we aim for our next destination in 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. Sometimes we're even lucky enough to spot whales from the lodge's high perch above the coastline. We'll work to build some down-time into the schedule so that you can 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. (*Swimming is NOT advised here as the undertow is very strong and potentially dangerous.*) (*Overnights at La Cusinga Lodge*)

### **Monday, February 17 (B,L,D)**

Today we head northwest along the Pacific Coast to our last destination near Carara National Park, located in one of Costa Rica's most biologically rich areas. The northern Pacific lowlands of Costa Rica are dominated by tropical dry forest, while the southern Pacific lowlands are rain forest. Carara straddles the boundary, and supports plants and animals from both biomes. The result is an area where an amazing number of species may be found. Cerro Lodge, our small eco-lodge, sits on a hill overlooking the Gulf of Nicoya. The habitat is tropical dry forest, so the dramatic White-throated Magpie-Jays will likely be conspicuous. With the Tarcoles River nearby, we'll almost certainly see fly-by Scarlet Macaws and other stunning species. There's a small pool here, where you can cool off, as this environment will be very hot. Mid-afternoon, we'll head over to the nearby Tarcoles River, where we'll board a boat to look for crocodiles and a great assortment of wading birds, shorebirds, and other wildlife as the sun sets over the mangroves and adjacent bay. (*Overnight at Cerro Lodge*)



### **Tuesday, February 18** **(B only if leaving today; B, L, D if going on the extension)**

Today we say goodbye to our hosts at Cerro Lodge. Those who are staying for the optional extension will depart after breakfast with the leaders and head for the higher elevations and Toucanet Lodge, where we'll arrive in time for a late lunch. Those who are flying home today will

be picked up from Cerro Lodge by a different vehicle and taken to the airport separately. If you prefer early morning flights, you can be taken to a hotel near the airport to stay overnight on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and then get to the airport by the hotel's shuttle to fly home on the 19<sup>th</sup>. (**NOTE:** *do not buy/book airline tickets until we send you the TRIP IS ON letter and give you more instructions on advisable flight times based on our itinerary. And*

*know that whatever time you're booked to fly out, you'll be picked up in order to arrive at the airport no less than 3 hours before your flight.)*

### **Optional Extension: February 18 -21, 2020**

*(\*High Elevation\*: Our lodge on this extension is at about 6400 feet, and during our stay there we will visit areas above that elevation up to 11,000 feet at the tropical alpine paramo zone. If you have a heart or respiratory condition or feel uncomfortable/ill at high altitude, this extension is probably not for you. Please consult with your doctor.)*

#### **Tuesday, February 18, through Friday, February 21, (B,L,D)**

For those continuing on the optional extension, we ascend into the Talamanca Mountains, following the Pan-American Highway south from San José. We'll head up to the 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 and nocturnal mammals, 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. At some point during our visit here, assuming the weather cooperates and the schedule allows for it, we'll likely drive to the very highest point of the Pan-American Highway, more than 11,000 ft. above sea level, for a look at the tropical alpine meadow habitat called *paramo*. Here we can search for Timberline Wren, Volcano Junco, Large-footed Finch, Flame-throated Warbler, and Fiery-throated Hummingbird. We'll marvel at the native bamboos that dominate the treeless landscape. From here at the *Bellavista* Peak on the *Cerro de la Muerte*, it's possible to see both the Pacific coast and the Caribbean Sea on a perfectly clear day, though it's usually cloudy at this lofty elevation. (The Cerro de la Muerte stop is a tentative one, and will depend on the weather, timing, and other factors as determined by the leaders.) Mid-morning on Thursday, February 20, we'll head back to the Central Valley and spend our overnight at Hotel Trapp. (*Two nights at Toucanet Lodge (Feb. 18 and 19) and our last night back at Hotel Trapp (February 20)*)

**Friday, February 21 (B):** Our extended 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 departure time, so consider that when you make your flight reservations *once you have received our Trip is On Letter*. If you have a mid-day flight or afternoon flight, you can spend the morning in the Hotel Trapp's grounds or swimming in their small pool.

**Leadership team: This will be their 21st year of working together to introduce ANS travelers to the tropical wonders of Costa Rica.**

**Stephanie Mason** is Senior Naturalist for the Audubon Naturalist Society (ANS). This will be her 23rd trip to Costa Rica and her 21st 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 since 1998 to conduct a long-term butterfly survey.



**Carlos “Charlie” Gómez** (*on the left*) is one of Costa Rica’s most highly regarded naturalist guides. He has led tours for birding groups for more than 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.

**Marco Antonio “Nino” Morales** (*on the right*) possesses the eyes of a hawk which he puts to expert use as the safe and experienced driver of our bus—and as a wildlife spotter/birder extraordinaire. He and Charlie are inseparable as a pair of Costa Rica Expeditions’ remarkable (and good humored!) guides.

