Birds in Paradise

Species Rare and Common Flock Together on New Costa Rican Trail

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I've just plopped my luggage down at the lodge in the Costa Rican rain forest when the first yell of "macaws" goes out. Like a bird-watching rube, I watch as others scurry from their rooms, binoculars at the ready. By the time I stir, the endangered great green macaws have disappeared behind the towering tree line.

The next day, the macaw assembly is repeated as we sit down for an open-air dinner. "Macaws, macaws," yells our guide, Yehudi Hernandez, as he races to a clearing. No longer slow, I nearly trip over a chair in my zeal to get a glimpse. But again, no dice.

By the fourth day, when our two other guides, Holly Robertson, 26, and Raquel Gómez, 30, jump up from a sound sleep to the now unmistakable calls of the raucous birds, I come close to sprinting outside in my underwear, toothbrush in hand. Cooler heads prevail, and my quarry again escapes.

Enough already. I am tired of the macaw drill. If those feathered teases ever deign to show their beaks again, I vow success. But with fewer than 35 breeding pairs left in the entire country, victory is not assured.

Our group of 11, from Wisconsin, Minnesota, Oregon and Virginia, hadn't traveled to the central lowlands of northeast Costa Rica just to see the macaws. Willing lab rats, we'd signed up with the nonprofit Rainforest Biodiversity Group to be among the first tourists to explore the newly created Costa Rican Bird Route, set to open officially in February. Created partially with funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the route, which covers a dozen sites and has 520 bird species, is modeled on similar trails in the United States that promote conservation through tourism.

We would test an ambitious, week-long itinerary developed by Robertson, president of the Rainforest Biodiversity Group, and Gómez, the group's Costa Rican coordinator, that would include numerous jungle hikes, hours of travel via small bus on rutted dirt roads and visits with local families. We'd traverse the bird route's 10,500-plus acres in search of such exotic flora and fauna as walking

palms, bromeliads, motmots, trogons, toucans, poison dart frogs, sloths and howler monkeys. Some also hoped that our journey might serve a larger purpose: namely, fortifying the gamble taken by the route's private landowners to host tourists instead of hacking down the rain forest for cattle farms or pineapple plantations.

Sloths, Vultures and Pesticides

We ease into the trip with an overnight stay at Hotel Bougainvillea, a property just outside the capital city of San Jose that combines conveniences, such as free Internet and a fully stocked bar, with 10 acres of gardens that host hordes of birds, bugs and frogs.

Arriving in late afternoon, I grab my binoculars and head outside, anticipating adding a couple of new names to my not-so-impressive life list of 340 bird species that I've seen over the years. Within moments, I spot an unfamiliar sparrow, a vaguely robinlike bird and a loud, yellow-bellied bird with a black mask. Trouble is, I apparently don't know a motmot from a potoo. Just as I am about to exchange my field glasses for a field guide, I knock into Bob Hunter, one of our group's members, whom I quickly peg as an expert birder. "Rufous-collared sparrow, clay-colored robin, great kiskadee," he rattles off, as I point to my mystery birds. I'll stick close to Bob for the trip's duration.

During the night, I keep waking to a high-pitched, repeating whistle. Frog? Human? Bird? At 6 the next morning, we gather with Hernandez, our 29-year-old local birding expert. I get my answer as the mystery whistler (a ferruginous pygmy-owl) lands his six-inch body in a nearby tree.

We get on the bus, heading over the mountains toward our first stop along the birding route, El Gavilan Lodge. But suddenly Hernandez yells, our driver yanks the bus to the side of the road and we spill out, a routine that we will soon have down pat. With an uncanny ability to spot animals from long distances and in impossible hiding places, Hernandez has found a sloth lounging in a tree. We get clear views of the male brown-throated three-toed sloth, algae on its fur giving it a decidedly green tinge, as Hernandez explains that they leave the trees for the forest floor only once a week to defecate and that several species of moths live within the animal's fur. Who knew?

At Gavilan, we are greeted by a welcoming staff and dozens of colorful tanagers and orioles eating fruit from a wooden platform. Within moments, our first chance of seeing the great green macaws is over, but a short time later we are rewarded when Hernandez points to the sky, saying simply, "Migration." Tens of thousands of turkey vultures, Swainson's hawks and broadwing hawks pass high overhead in a seemingly unending river. My neck hurts as I strain to keep track of the massive kettle. But Hernandez is already moving us along to hike the adjacent trails, where we are quickly mesmerized by another stream of creatures: leaf-cutting ants that march in a steady line balancing jagged bits of leaves 20 times their weight.

Along the road outside Gavilan, small children play around us, waving and posing happily for pictures. We walk until we come to the start of a banana plantation. Gómez explains the environmental downsides of mono-crop cultivation, including deforestation and pesticide runoff. A crop duster passes low overhead, and Hernandez hustles us back up the road away from the spray. The children continue to play, oblivious to the plane's purpose.

Election-Day Break

It's Election Day back home, and we're off to La Selva Biological Station, run by the Organization for Tropical Studies, a consortium of 63 universities and research institutions from the United States, Latin America and Australia. The site welcomes tourists, but its main purpose is to support scientific research projects that involve everything from carbon cycling to arthropods.

Its 3,988 acres of tropical forests, about 60 percent of it old growth, receive more than 13 feet of rainfall annually. "Our seasons are rainy and rainier," jokes our local guide, Rodolfo Alvarado. He points out a black-faced grosbeak, saying, "You've just seen the most beautiful bird in Costa Rica." With a wink, he adds, "You'll see lots of them today."

The place is sick with birds: Within minutes I see dozens of new species, including a violaceous trogon, green honeycreeper, pied puffbird and a white-collared manakin. Our money bird for the day is a great potoo, disguised to blend almost perfectly with the tree bark. We also spot pulsating tree frog eggs, which will hatch prematurely to escape if attacked by a snake, and a giant, blue morpho butterfly, which turns a dull brown as it folds its wings to rest.

The mood in our group of absentee voters grows restless as discussions keep coming back to the election and how, without the Internet or television, we may not get results. Gómez and Robertson surprise us with plans to visit the home of Andrew Rothman, the 31-year-old founder of the Rainforest Biodiversity Group who is now the director of the Sarapiqui Conservation Learning Center. We sit on folding chairs, watching CNN and slurping beers beside international college students who volunteer with Rothman's group. At 10 p.m., Barack Obama is declared the winner and we are back on the bus. A 5:30 wake-up comes early.

Over the River in a Basket

Our fourth day promises challenges. We jump onto a boat to travel to Bosque Tropical del Toro, a 500-acre site with no electricity where we will stay that night. Most of our group are hardy backpackers used to roughing it. For me it will be a stretch.

It's a three-hour journey from the town of Puerto Viejo along the clear Sarapiqui River and the brown, sulfur-rich Sucio River. We get our first look at a family of howler monkeys, the alpha male with an insolent stare hanging from a branch on one long arm. Dozens of new birds, including an Amazon kingfisher and a bare-throated tiger-heron, and some I know well from home, including great blue herons and northern waterthrushes, line the shores.

Hernandez points out huge iguanas draped languidly over branches; a spectacled caiman that blends in with the beige riverbank; a bright green basilisk lizard, more commonly known as a Jesus Christ lizard because of its ability to walk on water; a family of curious white-faced capuchin monkeys; and a couple of 10-foot-long American crocodiles. As we pass a banana plantation built right to the shoreline, a frustrated Robertson says, "They're supposed to be 50 meters from shore." Erosion from banana plantations has many adverse effects; along the coast, for example, the resulting silt blocks sunlight, damaging coral reefs in Costa Rica's Cahuita National Park. I may never enjoy eating bananas again.

Suddenly, an older man in a hand-carved canoe appears and gestures for our boat to follow him down a small tributary. We spook a snowy egret, which swoops across the narrow and dark river, and the air is suddenly cooler, smelling of damp earth. We exit the boat onto a small banana field and are led to a conical roadside hut made from cane grass, where we are greeted with a delicious meal of rice and beans, fruit, meat, fried plantains and tortillas. Our overnight host, Guido Quesada, arrives, acknowledging that he is slightly nervous at the thought of sleeping 13 on his land. "Tourism here is not there yet," he says. "It's not for everybody." He laughs, adding, "It's very, very exclusive."

We need to cross the river to get to our lodging, and we all opt for transport via a zip-wire basket rather than by boat. By threes, we make the exhilarating ride, then hike to the Crayola-colored huts. My only cranky moment of the trip comes as I search my bag for a head lamp I've left behind, sweating profusely as mosquitoes buzz my ears. But soon, cold beers arrive and Quesada pulls out a guitar and starts singing traditional Costa Rican love songs. We eat barbecued beef by candlelight, telling stories of our lives. Our bios of college, work and marriage pale as Poncho, one of Guido's workers, talks of fighting Contras in

Nicaragua, fathering 13 children and being cured of alcoholism by a magic potion.

Later, I climb the ladder to my sleeping loft, which is usually inhabited by an 18-year-old worker named May. I jump under my mosquito netting as the howler monkeys crank up for the night, and am oddly comforted by May's open, well-worn Bible.

The next morning, it's a four-mile, 45-minute ride, with a couple of birding detours, along the rutted road to the 800-acre Pinca Paniagua, another remote site on the bird route. The working cattle farm is situated amid undisturbed forests, evidenced by the barks of howler monkeys vying with bawling cows. Owner Oscar Paniagua, whose father settled the property 50 years ago, takes us on a long, hot hike across his red-clay land. Like other landowners who have joined the bird route, he has ambitious plans that involve construction of an eco-lodge that would dish up food produced on his farm. We are served another delicious meal, a flask of tequila materializes and a couple of hours later, after heartfelt goodbyes and good lucks, we are on the road again, headed to Selva Verde Lodge.

By now, our bus smells ripe with sweat and mud-and-manure-encrusted boots. Our arrival at the 500-acre resort, with its upscale bungalow accommodations and riverside restaurant, is an almost jarring return to civilization. But as I walk through the grounds, whiptail lizards and geckos scamper at my feet and a family of howler monkeys moves overhead. We are still in the rain forest.

At 6:20 a.m. the next day, we are gathered at the river for a bird hike when the macaw call goes up. Two groups of several birds fly along the river, their macaw-shaped bodies unmistakable, even in silhouette. "The only time I've been happier on this trip is when Obama won," quips group member Janice Waters. We are all affected by this glimpse of a bird that may not exist in generations to come. Almost totally dependent on the almendro tree for food and nesting sites, the couple of thousand macaws that remain worldwide are struggling against humans who make money turning the trees into flooring.

I'm ready for some non-birding fun as we are dropped off about 10 miles from Selva Verde for whitewater rafting. Just as we start to paddle, the skies open, thunder booms and we almost immediately hit Class III rapids. Suddenly the rafters in front of us are pointing to a large tree, and there are the macaws, perched and easy to see. As they take to the sky with loud squawks, I note the red on their tails and the blue-tipped wings. We raise our paddles joyously, tipping

them together in a high-five. The silhouettes of this morning were good enough, but now I can say that I have truly seen the great green macaw.

That evening, we meet with Rothman, Gómez, Robertson and Hernandez to discuss the various initiatives and groups working to save the macaw. Rothman notes that while the majestic bird draws attention, it is an umbrella species: If it does well, so do many other species. The battle comes down to convincing local landowners that their livelihoods can be positively linked with saving habitat, he says, adding, "Are they going to invest in restoring habitat if it doesn't put food on the table?"

On our last day, we visit Albergue el Socorro, a property near the village of San Miguel that, at an altitude of about 3,000 feet, places us in a cooler ecosystem with different flowers and birds. Owner Jose Miranda proudly takes us on a tour of his guest lodging and self-sufficient farm, with such neat contraptions as a bio-digester, which turns cow manure into methane for cooking. Like Paniagua and Quesada, he has plans to house even more tourists, which will allow him to preserve the 350 acres, 80 percent of which is old-growth forest.

We hike down a narrow trail carved into the side of a mountain and are rewarded with flocks of migrating warblers. A shaft of sunlight catches a golden-winged warbler, a new bird for me, that has flown thousands of miles to this spot, likely from Minnesota or Michigan.

After yet another ample and tasty meal, we head on to one last night at Hotel Bougainvillea, stopping at the Cinchona Hummingbird Station, where dozens of feeders attract a dizzying array of argumentative hummingbirds. I add a few more birds to my list, including a violet sabrewing and a green-crowned brilliant, but I am put off by how contrived this seems compared with the farms we have visited.

The next morning, I am airborne, mulling the 191 species of birds, the red-and-blue poison dart frogs, the peccary, the family of coatis and the myriad other strange creatures I encountered. By afternoon, I am home, walking my dog around Burke Lake in Fairfax Station. I search for the familiar bald eagles that frequent the area, thinking of how they returned from the brink of extinction to become almost commonplace. If people such as Hernandez, Rothman, Gómez, Robertson, Paniagua, Quesada and Miranda have anything to say about it, perhaps the great green macaw will enjoy the same fate.