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Travel: New flight plan a pathway for avian survival

Central American protected zone first of its kind



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Staring up into the rainforest canopy, it's almost like looking into a living Impressionist painting, your eyes dazzled by the flash of colours, your ears picking up the extroverted squawks and screeches of green and blue coloured Macaws, orange and green Motmots, and multi-hued Toucans.

You're in Central America's first bird route. Now the 400-plus bird species that inhabits the Sarapiquí region of Costa Rica will have a greater chance of survival, and birders from around the world get a chance to see these grand winged masters of the sky.

A Pathway to Survival

At roughly the size of West Virginia, Costa Rica has a greater variety of bird species than all of North America. It is home to five per cent of all the world's known animal and plant species, including 850 bird species.

The Costa Rican Bird Route is the brainchild of the Rainforest Biodiversity Group, and partially funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The route consists of 12 birding sites, teaming up established and newly created biological reserves, to offer a variety of bird watching opportunities and programs in the San Juan-La Selva Biological Corridor of northeastern Costa Rica.

The birdwatching industry is a global phenomenon, and has seen the largest increase in participants over the last 10 years. Birding is the fastest-growing outdoor activity in the U.S., and according to a survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 51.3 million Americans report that they watch birds. And more are taking it up all the time.

The first of its kind in Central America, the Bird Route not only gives visitors access to primary rainforest, but also gives land owners access to tourism income and an alternative income to other activities that are not as environmentally sustainable.

“We want to be able to provide a way for locals to sustain their forests,” explained Andrew Rothman, president and founder of the Rainforest Biodiversity Group. “If we can take a little bit of pressure off of them by providing an economic alternative, we think that is a good thing.”

Andrea Holbrook, proprietor of Selva Verde Lodge and Rainforest Reserve, one of the established sites on the birding route, says there needs to be a way to maximize the potential of protecting the rainforest.

“Eco-tourism is a way for landowners to protect habitat, and it will be significant step toward protection of the rainforest, the habitat within Central and South America,” says Holbrook.

Selva Verde Lodge, a pioneer of the eco-tourism movement in Costa Rica, is strategically located in the vital biological corridor of the Sarapiquí – critically important in connecting rainforests in the region. It was founded in 1985 by Andrea’s mother, Giovanna Holbrook who purchased the 500 plus acres to protect and conserve the land.

Corridor Connections

Selva Verde Rainforest Reserve has been identified as a critical piece of the San Juan-La Selva Biological Corridor, part of the greater Mesoamerican Biological Corridor initiative in Central America.

The Great Green Macaw Project is part of the San Juan – La Selva Biological Corridor initiative. It is considered an emblematic species with less than 200 remaining in Costa Rica as its habitat is being destroyed.

At one time, Almendo (Almond) trees were quite common in Costa Rica, but illegal logging has cut the numbers down severely. This poses a formidable threat to the Green Macaw, which uses the tree for nesting and mating. Protecting the bird’s habitat also protects 515 bird, 139 mammal, 135 reptile and 80 amphibian, and countless plant species in the region.

Birding Safari

Established sites, such as Selva Verde, already offer comfortable accommodation and a myriad of activities, while the newly created sites will offer a more remote experience. Birders will get off the beaten path and be able to explore new areas and meet Costa Ricans not previously part of the tourism industry.

Selva Verde Lodge offers onsite birding, day trips to remote bird route sites and an extensive birding safari package where guests can see and experience the lodge's ultimate purpose.

"I call on everybody to come and support places like Selva Verde because it is only through visitors and usage that we can sustain the rainforest," says founder Giovanna Holbrook.