



## **On a Wing and an Air Fare**

*A new birding route opens up the wonder of Costa Rica.*

*by Anne Kazel-Wilcox*

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### **Tourism Information:**

**Costa Rica:** [www.visitcostarica.com](http://www.visitcostarica.com)

**Costa Rica Bird Route:** [www.costaricanbirdroute.com](http://www.costaricanbirdroute.com)



I fell in love in [Costa Rica](#), a whirlwind romance. But it's not what you think. What swept me off my feet was birding. Yes, birding. It's among the world's fastest-growing pastimes, and one I had no idea could be so exciting and exhilarating. But there I was, prowling dawn and dusk in search of elusive birds, feeling like I'd won a prize when spotting a rare species. And there's no better place to be indoctrinated than in northern Costa Rica, home to over 800 bird species and the newly established Costa Rican Bird Route.

Birding is not new to this Central American country. Giovanna Holbrook, owner of the Selva Verde Lodge in Sarapiquí, tells me she first brought a birding group to the country three decades ago. She bought the land on which she built her lodge, ostensibly to "stop the cutting down of the primary forest," since such forests are a natural habitat for birds. Costa Rica has progressed much since then in terms of environmentalism, although some farmers still are tempted to cut down the gigantic Almond trees for their valuable wood, destroying important nesting and feeding sites in the process.

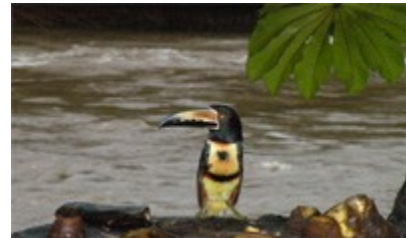
The Costa Rican Bird Route was born out of concern for such habitat loss. The Rainforest Biodiversity Group, with funding from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, established a "biological corridor" connecting birding stations with new "remote" reserves owned by local landowners, who now have an economic incentive to maintain habitats for birding enthusiasts. The United States wants to be involved, as a healthy number of birds winter or pass through Costa Rica en route to North America.

I started my birding at Selva Verde, which has basic but comfortable accommodations and 500 acres of lush preserves with groomed hiking trails and spectacular views of a long suspension bridge traversing the gorgeous Sarapiquí River. On the river's far side, Howler monkeys cavort, and a trail leads to the largest Almond trees in Central America, estimated to be more than 500 years old and a home to the rare and endangered Great green macaw.

My hike to the tree grove is filled with bird sightings, including three types of toucans: Chestnut-mandibled, Keel-billed and, with a beautiful multicolored bill, the slim Collared aracari. In their midst, our guide detects the squawk of a Rufous motmot and the call of the pretty Scarlet-rumped cacique, appropriately named for the red sash across its back. Experienced lodge guides, who record birdsong to entice birds into the open, lead complementary dawn and dusk tours.

Later, I partake in a boat tour and find gorgeous Mangrove swallows—tiny aqua-white birds fluttering like hummingbirds over the water—and flycatchers, the most diverse of Costa Rican bird families, with an astounding 78 species. The river area also hosts many migratory water-loving birds like the Baltimore oriole and tiny Spotted sandpiper. Summer here is hot in terms of both weather and birding excitement, as many tropical birds pass through then.

My next stop is an hour away to one of the trail's remoter sites, the Albergue del Socorro, where I meet farmer and lodge-owner, José Miranda. His 400-acre property is critical to the route, since it is a biological bridge between a national park and an area of volcanoes, as well as being the trail's highest point. All those unique points add up to some unique birds. A fellow, experienced birder tells me it would be "extra special" to see a Bay-headed tanager here, much coveted by binocular-wielders, and sure enough, we do.



Also on the trail is the 4,000-acre La Selva Biological Station, close to the Selva Lodge and one of the most important tropical research sites in the world, containing more than half the bird species in Costa Rica. Here, there's the distinct possibility of encountering the rare Bare-necked umbrella bird. The male of this stunning creature features a wide black hood and an orange-crimson throat that it inflates during breeding season.

Together with the nine other Bird Route stations, it's hoped that collectively the stations will become a major birding region promoting critical habitat preservation.

So get out your binoculars, buy a birding guide to Costa Rica and be prepared to fall in love. You might find the sweet call of a Bay wren draws

you in, or it might be that soaring flock of Mealy parrots that helps your mind soar. Throw in some monkeys, spectacular scenery and fellow birding enthusiasts with whom you're likely to become fast friends, and it'll be a Costa Rica vacation such as you've never experienced before.