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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-dez, 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.

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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.

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

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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 Hernández, 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 Gavilán Lodge. But suddenly Hernández 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, Hernández 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 Hernández 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 Gavilán, 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 Hernández 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 Hernández 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 Gavilán, 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 Hernández hustles us back up the road away from the spray. The children continue to play, oblivious to the plane's purpose.

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 Sarapiquí 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.

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 Sarapiquí 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.

Hernández 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 Óscar 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.

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