

LIVING

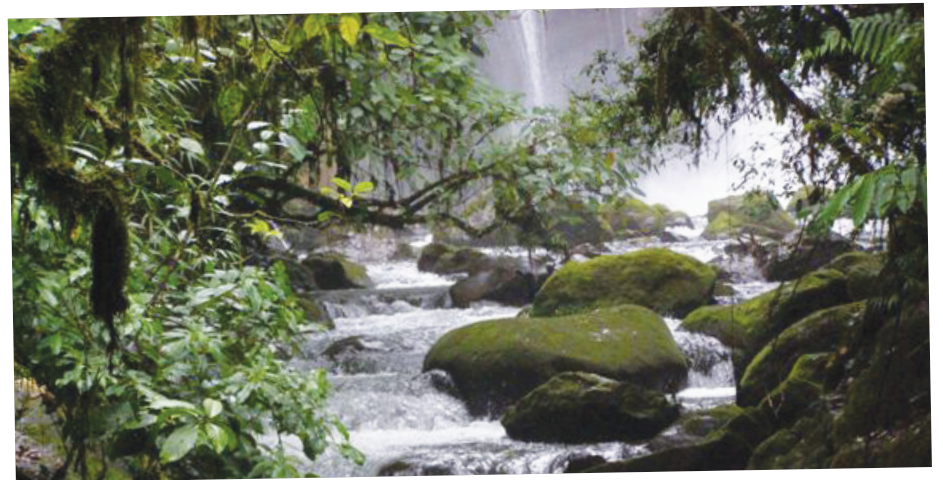
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Birds of
COSTA
RICA

Drew Monkman, special to The Examiner
Clockwise from top right, Silver-throated tanagers at a banana feeder at La Paz Waterfall Gardens; mountain stream flowing through moss-covered boulders (also at La Paz); and a keel-billed toucan.



Richard Garrigues, special to The Examiner

*Those unforgettable moments you hope for when travelling...***(Second of three parts)**

One of the many reasons Costa Rica has become such a popular tourist destination is the large number of active volcanoes.

Only 57 km north of San Jose and towering high above the surrounding valley, the verdant mass of Volcan Poas makes for a particularly impressive sight. The lower flanks of the volcano are mostly a patchwork of coffee fields. Higher up, however, screened-over plantations of Boston ferns dominate the landscape along with strawberry and dairy farms. The highest slopes and summit of the volcano are still covered with cloud forest and form Volcan Poas National Park.

Poas's main crater, which measures 1.5 km (1 mi) across and 1,000 feet deep, is one of the largest active craters in the world. I had hoped to see the smoking fumaroles, the gurgling sulfurous lake, and maybe even the famous geyser in action which hurls gray mud high into the air. However, the crater is often enshrouded in mist and such was the case on this particular morning.

Fortunately, Poas offers much more than just crater watching. The trees in the surrounding cloud forest are laden with epiphytes – plants that live on the trunk and branches – most of which are heliconias, ferns and different species of bromeliads. Bromeliads are rootless, long-leaved plants of which the pineapple is a well-known example.

Also interesting is the abundance of a plant known as sombrilla de pobre (poor man's umbrella) which has leaves that grow to five feet in diameter and provide a convenient spot to duck under in the rain.

Cloud forests in Costa Rica also attract a fascinating variety of birds including the famous resplendent quetzal. Amongst other species, I got great looks at sooty robins and yellow-thighed finches which were hopping about on the main path up to the crater.

My best cloud forest birding wouldn't be until a few days later, however, when I'd be in Monteverde.

In addition to the volcano, the day-long tour included the La Paz Waterfall Gardens, located on the edge of Poas National Park. Here, a trail leads down from the visitor centre through a series of superb exhibits that begins with a huge aviary of free-flying birds. Even though the aviary is screened in, the trees, flowers, wind and rain give the impression of being in a real tropical forest.

Iconic Costa Rican birds such as tanagers, toucans, parrots, macaws and motmots fly freely about and provide a great introduction to the country's bird life. After the aviary, the

path winds through Costa Rica's largest butterfly garden, a frog house, an orchid garden, and a superb restaurant.

Finally, a series of stairways takes you into the surrounding forest where you descend deep into a gorge to view five magnificent waterfalls.



**OUR
CHANGING
SEASONS**
Drew Monkman

It is quite common in the tropics for people to put out fruit – instead of seed – to attract birds. At La Paz, bananas had been set out on a tray beside the pathway and were being feasted upon by silver-throated tanagers. The birds were so tame that you get within several feet of them. Another section of the path had dozens of hummingbird feeders set among the heliconias and other flowers.

Swarms of multi-coloured hummingbirds of ten or more different species were constantly coming and going. You could literally feel the air move as the birds darted by your head. Feeders such as these are really the only way to see and identify most tropical hummingbirds; otherwise, it is very difficult to get good look at them.

Two of the more common species here were the green hermit, a large, iridescent hummingbird with a very long, decurved bill, and the violet sabrewing, a pugnacious species dressed in hues of glittering violet and sporting a flashy white tail.

Even though La Paz was very impressive and tastefully done, the fact remains that apart from the birds coming to the feeders, the other animals were in captivity and therefore not as satisfying to see as when viewed in the wild.

Unfortunately, deforestation, increased development and modern agricultural practices are exacting a toll on the country's wildlife and some species – the scarlet macaw and jaguar, for example – have been reduced to only remnant populations.

Environmentalists here are also concerned about how these pressures are impacting on temperate zone bird species that overwinter in Costa Rica such as Baltimore orioles, rose-breasted grosbeaks and numerous species of warblers.

For my second week in Costa Rica, sometimes called the Switzerland of Central America because of its uninterrupted century of democracy, I had decided to attend the C.P.I. language school in Monteverde. Located high in the mountains northwest of San Jose, the area was settled in the 1950s by Quakers, conscientious objectors from the U.S. who were drawn to this country partly because it had just abolished its army and

also because of the excellent climate for dairy farming.

They were also instrumental in creating the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve which has become a major eco-tourism attraction and centre for scientific research.

The steep, pot-holed dirt road that leads up to Monteverde meant our bus only crawled along in many places. This allowed for good looks at the birds, butterflies and magnificent scenery along the way.

"Living fences" – fences that use living trees as posts – lined both sides of the road, providing convenient perches to groove-billed anis and social flycatchers.

Flocks of white-throated magpie-jays occasionally flew over pastures where Braham cattle grazed. Impressive numbers of lemon-yellow sulphur butterflies and the occasional blue morpho flitted about the omnipresent hibiscus bushes. The road crossed numerous streams and rivers, all of which were running high since this was the rainy season.

As we climbed higher, we had a beautiful view of the Golf of Nicoya and the Pacific Ocean beyond. The amount of forest cover also began to increase, especially in the valleys. Before long, we were driving through clouds that covered the mountain tops. All of a sudden, someone yelled, asking the driver to stop the bus. Two magnificent keel-billed toucans were sitting in the top of dead tree right beside the road. This species is the "poster bird" of a lot of Costa Rica's tourist publicity and a real thrill to see.

Arriving in Monteverde, our first stop was the C.P.I. school, a beautiful, modern building with lovely gardens. I was then taken to my homestay family where I met Maritza, my "mama Tica," as she called herself.

That evening, Maritza told me about Monteverde's legendary three-wattled bellbird, a species famous for having one of the most unusual and furthest-carrying vocalizations of any bird in existence. In fact, the call is audible from nearly a kilometre away, and she said she could hear them right from the house!

Excited with the expectation of hearing and seeing a bellbird myself, I headed out early the following morning, invigorated by the cool mountain air. The first bird of interest was a red-legged honeycreeper sitting in a cypress tree. I also pished in a yellow-green vireo, gray-crowned yellowthroat and yellow-faced grassquit.

Walking along a quiet road that bordered a mixture of woodlots and pasture, I immediately recognized the far-carrying, metallic "bonk" call of the bellbird. In fact, I soon realized that there were several bellbirds calling. The effect was entrancing. As one author de-

scribes it, "the forest becomes a mountain-side of bell towers." Almost prehistoric in quality, it's a sound that seems to emerge from the mists of time.

In an attempt to actually see one of the birds, I jumped over a fence and wandered out into a meadow. Hoping that one of the bellbirds would eventually show itself, I decided to sit down on a rock and simply waited.

It was one of those unforgettable moments you hope for when traveling... the rising sun warming my back, the myriad shades of green of the ephiphte-covered trees, the constant butterfly and hummingbird activity, the flocks of chattering orange-chinned parakeets, sunlight flashing off their emerald-green feathers and, of course, the echoing calls of at least four different bellbirds. Unfortunately, however, the birds refused to show themselves.

The next morning I tried again, only to be forced to head back because of rain. My third attempt, however, proved to be successful. I took a different road this time that passed closer to where the birds were calling from. Hopping over a fence and crossing several fields, I saw a huge dead tree that looked promising. Sure enough, there was my bird. My only regret was that I had no one to share the excitement with.

The bellbird measures about 12 inches in length, has a white head and a chestnut-brown body. Three worm-like wattles – a sort of fleshy growth – hang from the base of the bill. When the male sings, he exposes a cavernous black mouth. In fact, the lower mandible of the bill almost touches the chest.

Fruit from trees of the Lauraceae (Laurels) family such as the wild avocado are the bellbird's favourite food. Not only do the bellbirds depend on the trees, but the trees also depend on the bellbirds.

They regurgitate the seeds after eating the fruit, in effect planting more trees. Sadly, however, the bellbird is experiencing serious population declines as a result of on-going deforestation in its non-breeding range along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

Next week

Next week, I'll talk about my venture into the Monteverde cloud forest itself.

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