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LIVING

Less travelled treasure trove

El Salvador is a safe, friendly avian haven eco-tourists might not think of first

Our birds of summer were alive and well in El Salvador last week, as they migrate northward. Yellow warblers, Baltimore orioles, barn swallows and spotted sandpipers, however, were only a few of the many species my wife and I encountered during our seven-day stay at the Royal Decameron Salinitas resort on the Pacific coast of this small, Central American country.

The rich bird life is a result of the diverse habitats to be found right on the grounds including lagoons, flower gardens, small parcels of forest, shrubby field, sand beach and rocky tide pools –



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

not to mention the many large specimen trees scattered throughout the property. Just on my morning walks alone, I was able to easily find 60 species. Looking at the lists of birds that other visitors to the resort have recorded, I would think that at least 100 species are possible. When you add the birds that can be seen at other, close-by destinations such as Cerro Verde, a trip to western El Salvador has a lot to offer.

Bird activity was especially intense between 6 and 8 a.m. with many species almost oblivious to my presence. Some of the most common birds included rufous-naped wrens, social and tropical flycatchers, great kiskadees, blue-gray tanagers, clay-coloured robins, white-winged doves and the ubiquitous great-tailed grackle. Overhead, barn swallows, northern rough-winged swallows and orange-chinned parakeets were a constant presence as they coursed back and forth all day long. Many species were carrying nesting material. Birds in the tropics appear capable of using the slight changes in day length to initiate reproductive behaviour in advance of the food-rich rainy season in early May.

AVIAN SOUNDSCAPE

The soundscape at Royal Decameron was dominated by the gentle, owl-like “who cooks for you” calls of the doves and the raucous “KREE-taperr” of the kiskadees. At sunset, we were also treated to the croaking sounds of hundreds of snowy egrets as they flew in from nearby beaches and tide pools to roost in the trees bordering the lagoon right behind our room. Maybe the most bewildering sounds, though, belonged to the white-bellied chachalacas. These chicken-sized birds produce a loud, raucous “cha-cha-LAW-ka,” often given in a rhythmical chorus from high in a tree in the early morning.

My favourite bird of the trip, however, had to be the turquoise-browed motmot. This is a fairly common but wonderfully exotic species that is also the national bird of El Salvador. Not only does it have a striking, multi-coloured plumage, but it sports two large tail “rackets” at the end of ridiculously long, naked feather shafts. Salvadorians call it the “torogoz” in reference to its call, while people in the Yucatan call it the “pájaro reloj” (clock bird) because of its tail-wagging behaviour. The pendulum-like wag display is not related to mating, however. It is believed to have evolved as a means of communicating with predators such as hawks. By wagging

the tail, the motmot is telling the predator “you have been seen and I can escape if I want to, so it is futile to attack.” The benefit to the motmot of course is that it doesn’t need to waste time and energy fleeing.

FRUITFUL LOCATIONS

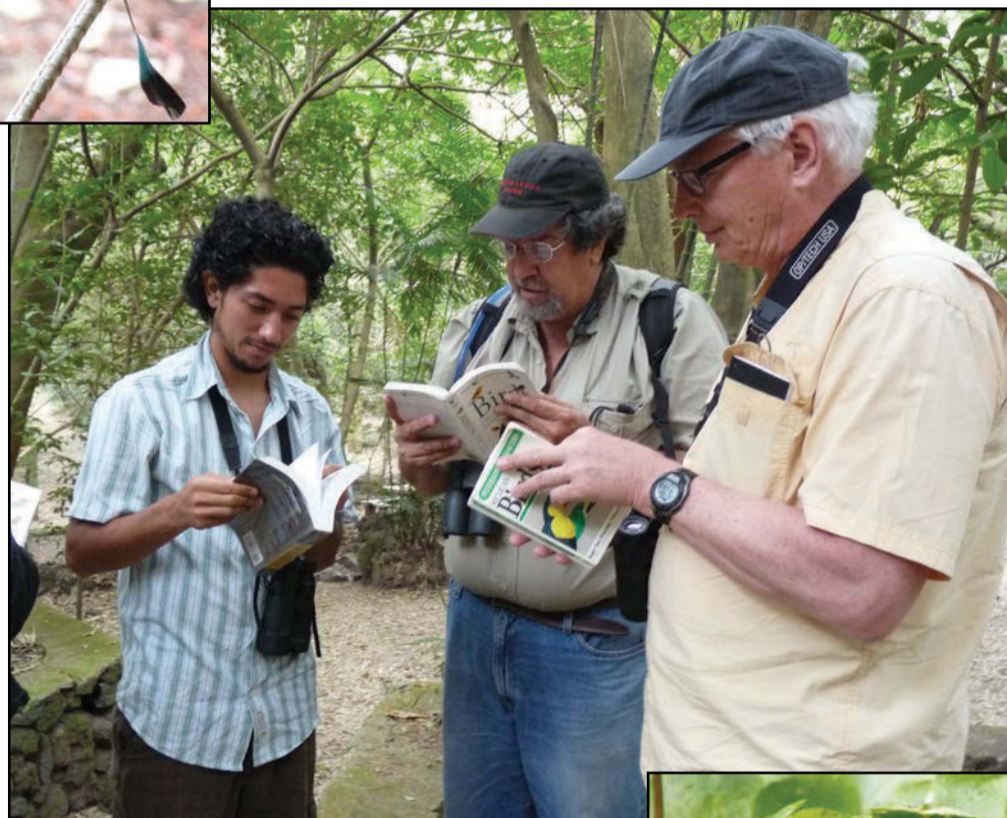
A good birding strategy in the tropics is to look for fruit trees that are attracting a lot of activity and then to simply stand there watching for a while. One morning while having breakfast, we noticed that all kinds of birds flying in and out of one medium-sized tree, only metres away. The branches were laden with small green fruit that proved to be an irresistible magnet. The tree was alive with tanagers, golden-fronted woodpeckers, various flycatchers and 20 or so clay-coloured robins. Later, in a tall, “look-out” tree with many dead branches, I counted no less than 12 species coming and going in just 10 minutes. The tree had caught my attention because a pair of yellow-winged

caciques had built their nest there. The nest consists of a two-foot long, hanging pouch that is not unlike the nest of an oriole.

Mixed-species flocks, usually dominated by North American warblers, were also common most days. I came across a particularly diverse flock one morning that was very receptive to the “pish-pish” sounds I was making. One by one, a parade of curious birds approached me including yellow and Tennessee warblers, summer tanagers, white-collared seedeaters, hooded orioles and even a Swainson’s thrush. What showed up next, however, was the real pay-off. A pair of scrub euphonias – the male decked out in glossy blue-black and bright yellow plumage – suddenly appeared and afforded excellent views.

HERONS ABOUND

Some of the easiest birds to see at Royal Decameron were those that frequented the lagoons and waterfront.



DREW MONKMAN Special to The Examiner
Drew Monkman (right) and guides Marvin and Robert confer on the identification of a bird species during Monkman's recent trip to El Salvador. Among the birds he and his wife spotted during the trip were (clockwise from top left), the turquoise-browed motmot, emerald toucan and northern jacana.



Both green and little blue herons were a constant presence, usually hunting in the shadows along the shoreline. Also regular were gorgeous yellow and brown northern jacanas, which delicately picked off food from floating vegetation. Most days, a least grebe was also easy to find as it dove for fish in the middle of the lagoon. The beach and tide pools were also rich in bird life. Numerous shorebirds that nest in the Canadian Arctic scurried up and down the beach and were easy to approach. Among the most common were least sandpipers, semipalmated plovers, willets, whimbrels and yellowlegs. Snowy egrets could almost always be seen hunting for small fish at low tide, along with the odd little blue heron.

After a number of trips to the tropics,

I've learned that it is always best to hire a birding guide if you hope to see the less common species. We therefore made arrangements to spend a day with Robert Broz (www.elgringo-suchitoto.com), an American who has been living in El Salvador for almost 20 years. Not only is Robert a great bird guide, but he also possesses an encyclopedic knowledge about El Salvador in general and is very involved in helping to develop the country's tourist industry. He brought along his son-in-law, Marvin, who was very talented in finding, identifying and photographing many of the birds we saw. Robert had also arranged for two local guides to accompany us at our first stop, an old volcano called Cerro Verde. He is anxious to provide people such as these with opportunities to develop their birding and English-language skills in order to provide themselves with an additional source of income.

TOP OF THE HEAP

Cerro Verde offered up a number of interesting high elevation species. Two very vocal birds, the brown-backed solitaire and the bushy-crested jay were a constant presence. Western tanagers and rufous-collared thrushes foraged in the dense canopy above us, while Wilson's warblers, ovenbirds, slate-throated redstarts and a pair of singing quail moved quietly about in the undergrowth at eye level. The highlight, though, was a pair of emerald toucans that greeted us the moment we arrived in the parking lot. In the afternoon, Robert took us to Tazumal and Joya de Ceren, two important Mayan ruins. The latter is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

We also visited the “Ruta de las Flores” which takes you into the mountainous coffee growing part of the country and winds its way through charming small towns that sell beautiful handicrafts and textiles.

To be clear, El Salvador does not have the extensive tropical forest or highly developed eco-tourism to be found in places like Costa Rica. However, I would still recommend a stay at Royal Decameron Salinitas for anyone wanting to do some easily-accessible birding,

enjoy the amenities of a beautiful resort and, at the same time, be able to take advantage of a wide range of day trips – either with Decameron Explorer at the hotel itself or with private guides such as Robert. Despite its checkered past, we found El Salvador to be a safe and very friendly destination. The people there are wonderful. Package vacations are available from mid-November through late March through Nolitours.

Drew Monkman is a retired Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year: Changing Seasons in Central and Eastern Ontario. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com