

Costa Rica 2009. Part One.

Contributed by Jos
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My three weeks in Costa Rica began with explorations of the far south. After flying to the Osa Peninsula for a fantastic trek through the rainforests of Corcovado, it was then onto a ferry to Golfito to enjoy more rainforest delights, before thereafter travelling north again to the high altitudes of Cerro de la Muerte. In amazing landscapes, this first week of the trip was just one highlight after another - Scarlet Macaws at Puerto Jimenez, Black-cheeked Ant-Tanagers in Corcovado, Fiery-billed Aracari at Golfito and Volcano Juncos and Silver-throated Jay in the mountains to mention just a few.

24 August. Airborne.

Getting to Costa Rica from Eastern Europe involves a lot of flying! From home to final destination, including an internal hop, a spectacular seven flights!!! So it was the journey began, take off in Vilnius at 06.30, a few hours lying under a tree in Warsaw enjoying a Great Spotted Woodpecker and assorted crows and then another flight to London. Totally birdless, I think I forgot to look at any windows, it was then onto American Airlines for a seven hour hop to New York, unfortunately arriving after dark, so also totally birdless. With the time already 8 p.m. local, and my next flight at dawn, I decided I couldn't be bothered to hack it into downtown New York, so kipped at the airport.

25 August. Alajuela.

05.30, take off, out over Jamaica Bay, down the American East Coast. Two hours later, touchdown in Miami, three hours to wait, plenty of time to tackle the dreaded immigration and customs queues that this airport is famed for ...so I thought. However, it went far smoother than I expected - disembarking, I happened to notice American Airlines had another flight to San Jose, leaving from the same gate in just 60 minutes. 'Hmm', enquired I, 'Might I be able to take this earlier flight?'. Very friendly they are on American Airlines, discovering I was travelling with just hand baggage, they swapped my ticket and I merely had a coffee at the nearby cafe and returned to the gate - no immigration, no customs and no airport queues, super! And I would arrive in San Jose late morning, thereby allowing the birding to begin. So at last I arrived - 11.10 local time, bumping down into San Jose, towering volcano to the south, a few clouds overhead and the first birds - Great-tailed Grackles around the airport. No big plans for the first day, so headed off into the nearby Alajuela. Dumped my one bag at a hotel and had a quick look around their garden - Buff-throated Saltators, Blue-grey Tanagers, Clay-coloured Robins, Inca Doves and Common Ground-Doves, the birding had begun. Nice garden though it was, there was not enough to get me occupied for long, so off I went, seeking out an area of mixed farmland and scrub nearby. A good introduction to Costa Rican birds, this was splendid stuff - swarms of grackles and Bronzed Cowbirds, flocks of Black Vultures overhead. Soon I was bumping into species by the dozen - Eastern Meadowlarks in rough pasture, Northern Jacanas and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks in a damp patch, a mass of Blue-and-white Swallows on wires and then three White-tailed Kites hovering over meadows. Also, noisy Orange-chinned Parakeets and, along an excellent wooded avenue, two Squirrel Cuckoos, both Hoffmann's and Lineated Woodpeckers and a migrant Yellow Warbler, all splendid birds. However, star of the day, and the only one recorded during the trip, one male Crested Bobwhite pottering across a field, an excellent bird for day one.

With three dozen species recorded, it was then back to the hotel - early to sleep, another flight planned for early next morning. Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl called in the hotel grounds. 26 August. Corcovado.

Off to the Osa Peninsula and Corcovado National Park, a vast tract of Pacific lowland rainforest - one of the most remote and most important wildlife localities in all Central America. Day started at 6 a.m. in San Jose, all aboard for the one-hour flight in a Twin-Otter sixteen-seater plane, courtesy of Nature Air, the world's only carbon-neutral airline. Over the high Cordilleras, over deep ravines, first stop was a hairy plummet onto a small airstrip at Golfito, a mere slither of land surrounded by pristine rainforest - Plumbeous Kite alongside, Grey-capped Flycatchers zipping about. Dumped off a couple of passengers, then airborne again for the ten-minute hop over the sparkling waters of Golfe Dulce and to the final touchdown in Puerto Jimenez. What a superb little town - abundant Cherrie's Tanagers and Bananaquits around its leafy lanes, squadrons of Scarlet Macaws overhead and hurtling White-collared Swifts too. I, however, had little intention of staying long - 30 km down the road was La Palma, the starting point for my trek of many kilometres. Missed the local bus, so strolled on out of the town and stuck my thumb out - minutes later, in a dilapidated jalopy, and in the company of one jovial lady and rather a lot of shopping, I was trundling north. A Bare-throated Tiger-Heron beside a river, flocks of Black Vultures rising on the early morning thermals, in we rolled to La Palma and I thanked my lady.

Now began the hard slog - hiking with all supplies into the heart of Corcovado. Stocked up in the local shop - tortillas, fruit and peanut butter - then began the walk, destination Los Patos. For seven kilometres, though it felt far more, steep stony roads took me upward through scenic hills, a patchwork of local agriculture and woodland remnants. Red-crowned Woodpeckers, two Southern Lapwings, Eastern Meadowlarks, Smooth-billed Anis and yet more Scarlet Macaws, the delights deserved more time, but ahead lay the true treasures. At the seven kilometre mark, the road came to an abrupt end - ahead lay a river and hints of a path edging towards the looming slopes beyond, forests carpeting the hills horizon to horizon. The true hike was now to start. Following an exquisite valley, for three hours more I trudged - wading through rivers no less than 23 times, gazing into pristine forests and through grasses over my head, classic stuff ...not to mention

a tad hard going - the sun was now high and temperatures sat at a pleasant 30 C. Both Green and Amazon Kingfishers decorated riverside snags, flocks of White Ibis paddled the shallows, surrounded by Spotted Sandpipers, a lone Greater Yellowlegs, plus Neotropic Cormorants, another Plumbeous Kite, six superb Swallow-tailed Kites in a flock, not to mention passerines weird and wonderful.

Finally, as my feet began to moan the frequent river crossings, the path veered to the side and up a steep slope into the darkness of deep forest. Another kilometre and I staggered into Los Patos, a small ranger station hacked out from virgin forest, dripping in birds and home for the next days. Three Blue-crowned Motmots, most impressive beasties welcomed me in, a couple of Buff-rumped Warblers flitted in a damp patch. This was near paradise, a cacophony of sound - frog, bird and insect echoing from trees all around. Said a quick 'hola' to the two rangers, both basking in hammocks aside their wooden cabin, pitched my little tent on a strangely flat patch beneath a towering tree, then set off to explore, all routes naturally involving another stream crossing. Jeepers, the slopes beyond were steep!

Narrow, slippery tracks on red clays, a dampness hanging in the air and vegetation just sublime - a canopy rich in epiphyte and creeper, the undergrowth a dense tangle of greenery obliterating everything. Into this the birding began - a major challenge merely to see a bird, let alone identify anything. Slowly slowly, separating frog croak from bird, the first species began to reveal themselves - a Long-tailed Woodcreeper edging up a trunk, a Sulphur-rumped Flycatcher deep in a patch of gloom, a Plain Xenops in a flock. It was now, however, approaching 2.30 p.m., time for the afternoon rains - thunder was rumbling around the hillsides, an ominous darkness replacing the sun and lightning beginning to lick the skies yonder. I began to scurry back, a pause to watch some Spider Monkeys, but I had no wish to get totally drenched. I cut it fine, darted back across the stream just as the first drops began to fall. The heavens opened, absolutely torrential rain bucketing it down. I soon discovered the reason for the 'unnatural' flat patch that I had chosen to pitch my tent - it rapidly filled with water and was about to see my tent becoming submerged by an emerging lake! Quickly decamped, moved up the slope and, before I drowned, dived into the tent.

Day over, rained till dusk, I snoozed quite content. 27 August. Corcovado.

5.30 a.m., woke and peered out of the tent - much dripping, rather boggy ground, but not a cloud in the sky, a superb day in the offing. Had a quick look around the ranger station - Orange-billed Sparrows, right corkers, hopped about, a small lek of Band-tailed Barbthroats chased and harried, a single Blue-crowned Motmot sat and looked rather bedraggled from the night of rain. Before the sun was even up, I was across the river and beginning my day - three Swallow-tailed Kites graced the early morning skies, Black-striped Sparrows in riverside vegetation. A large clearing then occupied my next half hour - big chunky Chestnut-mandibled Toucans in tree tops, a buzz of hummingbirds eventually evolving into several Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, a smart White-necked Jacobin and a fantastic Stripe-throated Hermit. White-shouldered and Cherrie's Tanagers flitted through, a bunch of noisy Brown-hooded Parrots winged over, shortly followed by more Scarlet Macaws. A few metres more, White-tipped Doves strolled the trail and Pale-vented Pigeons zoomed overhead.

Then I entered the deep forest. Total bird-free zone! A full hour, I walked along - a few little chirps, occasional whistles, even a peck-peck-peck here and there, but not a sausage to add to my burgeoning list for the day! The irony of birding the tropical forests ...birds by the billion, but usually nothing to see!!! Yet plug away and slowly the treats reveal themselves, a stunner every so often, then a sudden mad panic as a massive mixed flock moves through, the entire canopy to ground a mass of flitting birds and noise. And so it was, time to time, suddenly I was rushed off my feet - birds everywhere, a brief glimpse of yellow here, something brown diving into cover, birds chattering above your head. Flock one was dead easy, it was noisy squawking parrots - feasting on a fruiting tree, both Brown-hooded and Mealy Parrots, eyeing down as I peered up. Next up came a very long wait to see what was bashing one tree - from a tangle of creepers and plants hanging on, splinters of wood flying. But could I see the bugger? Took me near 20 minutes, then the thing emerged - one splendid Pale-billed Woodpecker, a big stunner of a species. Then all went crazy again. Suddenly two more woodpeckers appeared - Red-crowned Woodpeckers - but before I had time to take a glance at them, the trees came alive! Fast-moving, mostly middle-elevation, loads of birds - a Buff-throated Foliage-Gleaner, both Wedge-billed and Cocoa Woodcreepers, several Plain Xenops, Chestnut-backed Antbirds grubbing around on the ground, a Russet Antshrike and a couple of Rufous Mourners that got me scratching my head for a while. Then, vocal and sticking to dense cover, a real star - endemic to the Golfo Dulce and Osa Peninsula, at least two Black-cheeked Ant-Tanagers, one of the key birds to find in this quarter.

Fresh Ocelot tracks kept me alert whist waiting for the next flock, but then I arrived at an old ranger station - a patch of grassland a hundred metres or so across, a few fruit trees out back and views of the canopy all around. A splendid place to pass an hour or so, I found an old chair and sat out in the sun - here the birding was a breeze. A pair of Blue Ground Dove favoured an orange tree, Bananaquits bred in the next, but the joy was simply watching the canopy - on exposed branches, birds would periodically appear - all the usual Social and Grey-capped Flycatchers, more Chestnut-mandibled Toucans, but better was to arrive. All in the same tree, first two Golden-hooded Tanagers, then a Black-crowned Tityra and finally, spending a good ten or fifteen minutes sunning itself, a fantastic Turquoise Cotinga, not a species I expected to see. Wiggling round in the chair, scanning the tree tops in the other direction, an even bigger surprise - Three-wattled Bellbirds!!! Not males, but I was most impressed, I did not even suppose I would see them in Osa.

Many butterflies and big spiders in this clearing too, but all too soon the lure of the forest took me back into the deep dark gloom. Red-capped Manakins popped up here and there, zip-zip-zip in lek, but not a single a male in classic plumage.

Blue-crowned Manakin too, also not a breeding male. But now, however, the day was ticking on - the afternoon rains weren't so far away, so I begin my trek back to camp. A male White-throated Shrike-Tanager appeared, saw both Green and Shining Honeycreeper, plus Spot-crowned Euphonia. Cloud began to build, thunder echoed from afar, it was time to run!

Sloshed across the river and, for the second day in a row, on the dot of 2.30 p.m., the heavens opened. Retired up to the ranger station, lazed the afternoon away in a hammock watching the rain lash down. As darkness approached, just as I pondered retiring to my tent for peanuts and tortillas, the rangers invited me to join them for dinner, a most splendid spaghetti dish, very tasty.

Day Two at Corcovado over. 28 August. Corcovado.

Another sun-sparkled morning, began with wander along the same trails as the day previous. Had got all of three hundred metres when a movement grabbed my attention - there, emerging from waterside vegetation, a midget White-throated Crane, certainly a classy bird to start the day! Another called further back, then into the reedy stuff he went, gone.

Into the forest I went, a re-run of the adventures of the day before - but with added 'Ant-action', no Army Ant swarms, but antbirds regardless, the very essence of the Neotropics. Started with the Chestnut-backed Antbirds again, but then scored a whole bunch of them in an excellent mixed flock that moved through early morning. Leading the pack had been White-lined Tanagers, Green Honeycreepers and Wedge-billed and Cocoa Woodcreepers, but then they arrived, first a stunning male Black-headed Antshrike, then a Plain Antvireo and, leading up the rear, five highly engaging Dot-winged Antwrens. A Blue Dacnis added flavour, the parrot flock reappeared in its fruit tree. At the clearing, again the Blue Ground Doves settled in their tree and Chestnut-mandibled Toucans adorned the tops, but extra on this day were the 15 Costa Rican Swifts wheeling in the skies above. Ambling back, more flocks added both White-vented and Spot-crowned Euphonia, whilst a stop to watch Spider Monkeys resulted in the surprise sighting of a White Hawk perched beneath them, allowing at least a grab of a photograph. It has to be said, however, if birding in the rainforest is hard-going, photography is a right swine of an activity! A perpetual darkness forcing low shutter speeds and high ISO, brief glimpses of birds and fast moving monkeys, the whole thing makes you wonder why you're bothering lugging the camera with you! Next came an obliging Ruddy Quail-Dove, then I arrived back at camp. Three hours to the rain, I supposed, what to do? Then I had a brainwave, leave and try to get to Golfito by dawn next morning. No sweat - only 18 km to walk, 30 km to hitch, one hopeful connection with a ferry and then I would sit back for a cruise across the Golfe Dulce. I hoped the rain might hold off!

I packed my tent, shoved it on the camera bag, tied on my spare clothes, off I went. The Buff-rumped Warblers pumped their tails to salute my departure, then it was back into the river for the first of the umpteen crossings. Green Kingfishers were as common as ever, an occasional Amazon Kingfisher too, but this was hot work, I trudged onward. Two kilometres on, I noticed a slight absence ...my clothing bundle had fallen off! Rats, I was already travelling extremely light, but now it was ridiculous - my only long trousers, my only long-sleeve shirt and one tee-shirt had vanished! The sum of my clothing now amounted to one pair of shorts being worn, one spare pair, two tee-shirts including the one upon my back, one light rain coat and a pair of Gore-Tex trousers. Being a right lazy sod, I didn't even consider going back.

A flock of seven Swallow-tailed Kites appeared overhead, more Costa Rican Swifts hawked down the valley, then I got to the end of the river crossing trail. I was back at the rough track, only seven kilometres more to go - but then I rubbed my eyes, there was a car there! Not only a car, but a taxi of sorts, waiting for someone from a nearby indigenous reservation to take him into town. My feet thanked their lucky stars and a quick chat secured me pride of place on the bench in the back of the pick-up. Had to wait near 20 minutes for the other guy to emerge from the forest, but this was hardly a punishment - a family of Smooth-billed Ani popped up, Scarlet Macaws numbered a dozen and a swirl of hirundines included both Southern Roughwing and Mangrove Swallows. And then we bumped down the track, a Red-breasted Blackbird encountered in the fields near La Palma and a welcoming cafe-type place waiting in the village. This miraculous appearance of a car had not only saved my blistering feet and got me back to civilisation before the rains hit, but opened up real chances of catching an afternoon boat to Golfito. A little bus trundled past, I jumped on. 40 minutes later I was in Golfito, it was 2.15 p.m., the skies were going a horrendous shade of black, the Rain Gods were sure going to have a party this afternoon!

And that they did, just as I discovered there was indeed a ferry making the run, a gusting wind whipped the sea into a minor fury and the rain lashed down like never before. I darted for cover, the ferry people said they wouldn't attempt a crossing. I pondered heading off to a hotel, but a mere hundred metres would have seen me absolutely drenched. I stayed where I was. One hour later, with the rain almost stopping, I wandered back to the ferry. With the winds dropping, they would go again - after one hour. I looked around, Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised over the pier, juggernauts of the bird world, a few Brown Pelicans loitered beyond. Squinting through the still damp airs, an inter-tidal mudflat was visible, full of little dots moving about. Excellent, some bonus birding! Hurried over and had a right treat - one stonking Ringed Kingfisher on wires, squashed up with about 40 Grey-breasted Martins and a few Mangrove Swallows. And down below, the little dots were waders, North American migrants already southbound. Semi-palmated Plovers, Western Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstones, a half dozen of each, plus a single Willet and a single Lesser Yellowlegs. Great White Egrets and

Snowy Egrets paddled for good measure, Cattle Egrets flew over.

Off went the ferry, a fast and bumpy crossing, but as dark approached, into the lagoon of Golfito we arrived. One Yellow-crowned Night Heron, more Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans, two humble House Sparrows at the terminal. Another excellent day was at its close, I stayed in a little hotel above the pier. 29 August. Golfito.

A former banana port, Golfito is strung along the shores of an enclosed lagoon and, for the birder, offers the idyllic base for exploring the steep forested slopes rising from the town. A gravel track winding up some seven kilometres to radio towers allows easy access, albeit a long steep walk. Out at 5.15 a.m., I had but two targets on this day - Fiery-billed Aracari, an endemic toucan, very localised and hard to find, plus Central American Squirrel Monkey, an endearing monkey now with a global population of perhaps 3000 individuals, all in this small south-western corner of Costa Rica. Had considered taking a taxi to the top of the track and walking down, but dawn taxi drivers seemed to require very large incentives to get their cars going, so opted for another day of punishing my feet.

Walked south of the town for a couple of kilometres and there started the track upwards. Had yet to enter the forest, but already birds were out and about - dozens of Social Flycatchers and Great Kiskadee, Bananaquits and Cherrie's Tanagers in abundance, two Palm Tanagers too. As the town faded into forest, a Ringed Kingfisher sat upon a washing line (!) and then, right as the trees began, I encountered a mother of all flocks - dozens and dozens of birds flitting between two massive trees and neighbouring secondary growth. With the slope in my favour, perfect viewing with most at eye level or near. A Yellow-green Vireo appeared just above my head, two Golden-hooded Tanagers too, but what was most incredible was the sheer number of flycatchers of assorted type and variety! Off I ticked them all: amongst the masses, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Black-capped Flycatcher, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, plus Tropical Kingbirds and an Alder Flycatcher type-thing, though it may have been a Willow Flycatcher! Also in the flock, Northern Barred Woodcreeper. Long-tailed Woodcreeper and Plain Xenops, plus Red-rumped Woodpecker. A good half hour I enjoyed this spectacle, then wandered on. A period of total silence then followed, punctuated only by a small flock of Chestnut-backed Antbirds and, right stunners, several Riverside Wrens sneaking about in the low trackside vegetation. Upward, upward, Orange-billed Sparrows appeared, then a Black-striped Woodcreeper, followed by two Black-headed Antshrikes, nice birds. At a sunny clearing where the track did a hairpin climb, a Squirrel Cuckoo sunned in the low canopy and both Green and Shining Honeycreepers flitted about. A hundred metres or so further, a very civilised little picnic area was perched just perfect to give grand panoramic views across Golfito down below and the blue waters of Golfo Dulce beyond. A very suitable place for a rest - I sat and admired, a spiral of vultures was climbing over yonder. One scan and a mighty white splash was amongst them - about 200 Black Vultures and one fantastic adult King Vulture just above them. 'Super', thought I for the umpteenth time on this trip!

I had now been in the forest for half the morning, however, and a certain two targets were still proving elusive. Peeling myself off the bench, resuming the sweat-drenching walk, I continued up. Red-crowned Woodpeckers appeared, a Pale-billed Woodpecker not long after. And then success, a tell-tale crashing in the canopy suggested monkeys - could be any of the species, but my luck was in, a troop of inquisitive Squirrel Monkeys was prancing around, jumping and chasing, even allowing a photo or two. About 15 in all, these really were fantastic little creatures, certainly the best mammal of the trip to date. And, just when I was getting spell-binding views, the incredible happened - six Fiery-billed Aracari swooped in! How lucky was that, both my main targets in the same tree! A few minutes more and off they went.

With that I continued my climb - Red-capped Manakins, Tropical Gnatcatcher and White-shouldered Tanager all in short succession, then a weird calling noise which I eventually tracked down to a Chestnut-mandibled Toucan. Sat and admired this one, as much to catch my breath as anything else, then heard a tap-tap-tap. Off I went again, the result a pair of Golden-naped Woodpeckers at the nest. T'was now approaching midday. Mindful of the 2.30 p.m. rains, I decided to quit whilst ahead - almost jogged back down the mountain, Violet-crowned Woodnymph in my wake, Costa Rican Swifts and a Short-tailed Hawk at another viewpoint, then a Spot-crowned Euphonia further down.

Back in town, now seriously hot and the humidity climbing, I had a quick poke around by the shoreline - Willet, Semi-palmated Plover and Amazon Kingfisher along a creek, numerous Black Vultures lazing, one Panama Flycatcher in a mangrove tree and a Green Heron in a palm. I decided it was time to leave town - I headed for the bus station and discovered a bus was headed for the capital San Jose at 2.30 p.m., how perfect, leave just as the rains should arrive. I lay in a park for an hour - over my head, Magnificent Frigatebirds, three Swallow-tailed Kites, one White Hawk and several squawking Orange-chinned Parakeets.

2.30 p.m. arrived, the rain started and I bid the southern Pacific goodbye. The bus was headed for San Jose maybe, but I had no intention of staying on board quite so far. Near five hours later, well after dark, I disembarked into a cold misty world. Jeepers it was a shock to the system, in my shorts and tee-shirt I now shivered as the thermometer logged just nine degrees ...I was at the Cerro de la Muerte, the Mountain of Death. And stay out there, it would be the death of me, into wonderful roadside lodgings I dived. La Georginas cabins would be home for a couple of nights. 30 August. Cerro de la Muerte.

5.05 a.m., wake to semi-darkness, wondering what that racket it, loads of scrabbling about above the window - giant rats trying to get in, thought I!

From the depths of blankets, cuddling myself against the cold nights of this high altitude, I swivelled in bed and took a glimpse out of the window ...new bird number one! Flitting up to a fluorescent light immediately above the window were a half dozen Sooty Robins, all gobbling up the assorted bugs of various size and shape. Ah, this was easy birding - as dawn began to edge over the mountain tops, a Rufous-collared Sparrow joined the Sooty Robins, oh groan it was time to get out.

Ten minutes later, wrapped in all my remaining clothes, including Gore-Tex trousers, I stumbled out into the garden behind La Georginas and took my first gulps of the cold air, altitude 3100 metres. 'Coo, what's what?' A big chunky finch-like thing was kicking up the leaves in the flower beds. Whacking great size 12 feet, the identification was easy - Large-footed Finch! Then a right wizz of action, new birds at every turn. Desperately trying to ignore the quadrillion hummingbirds homing in on the feeders behind me, I continued down the garden. Black-billed Nightingale-Thrushes hopped about, subtle but exquisite things, plus the first Mountain Robins, Sooty-cheeked Bush-Tanagers in noisy flocks and both Peg-billed Finch and Slaty Flowerpeckers, the latter little floral pirates, ripping open flowers at the base and sipping their nectar. Large-footed Finches appeared everywhere!

The glory of La Georginas, however, is not the garden, but the trails that fork off into the fantastic cloud forests beneath. Truly amazing, large oaks coated in hanging mosses and epiphytes, a gentle mist evoking an almost mystical atmosphere. I first tried a short trail that dropped steeply to a small pump house submerged in stands of bamboo and rank vegetation. Another Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush and a tsee-tsee call from something creeping in the deep bamboo. Ten minutes this thing moved, barely a glimpse I got - a very brief hint of shape here, a suggestion of colour there. But all I saw suggested one thing, the Zeledonia of the forest, Wrenthrush. I persevered, the result a split second of confirmation, indeed Wrenthrush. Views were rubbish, but one of the major targets had fallen! Fortunately, two weeks into the future, I would encounter the bird again, the views then quite superb. Having had my fill of squinting into bamboo at a bird pretending to be a mouse, I clambered back up the slope and chose another trail, one that wound through the extensive forest for as many kilometres as you fancied. Top birding here - many flocks, many birds. Though the species total in these forests is not astronomical, virtually every single one is an endemic, occurring only in the highlands of Costa Rica and neighbouring western Panama. Within minutes, I was surrounded by birds - if not Sooty-capped Bush-Tanagers, then Black-cheeked Warblers and Collared Redstarts (the latter a real misnomer, not sporting a dap of red on its entire body, merely an assemblage of brilliant yellows, offset by a black chest band and splotch of rufous on the dark crown. Impressive birds though they were, they had stiff compensation - amongst the next birds to pop up were Flame-throated Warblers, a Parula family superstar, along with an absolute stunner, a Black-and-yellow Silky-Flycatcher. Some dirt-grovellers too - Grey-breasted Wood-Wrens, smart Timberline Wrens and yet more Large-footed Finches.

Flocks came and went, more and more birds encountered, most with weird names - Tuffy Tuftedcheek, Ruddy Tree-runner, Yellow-billed Cacique. Then a tremendous amount of noise down the trail, something big ahead. Sneaked forward and the sight ahead was super, a flock of big dramatically-patterned birds - deep blue blending to black, a stunning white throat and another flash of white over the eye. Silvery-throated Jays, an uncommon resident of these remote upper reaches, again an endemic and certainly bird of the morning. One landed a mere few metres away, a quick photograph and then I simply admired. Off they went, swooping down the slope, the njaa-njyaaa-njyaaa echoing long after their departure.

It was time for breakfast, up the slope I returned. Ahead lay another treat in store. As many who have had the misfortune to travel with me might testify, pausing for meals is not one of my strongpoints, a quick grab of a drive-by coffee and tucker is just about it. At La Georginas, however, there are good reasons to linger over your morning breakfast - as a feast of steaming coffee and banana cake descends your gullet, an even greater feast, but for your eyes, displays mere centimetres beyond your nose! Aside panoramic windows, the owners of La Georginas have hung a collection of hummingbird feeders, all abuzz with non-stop action, up to 30 or 40 birds zipping in and out at a time. With iridescences of deep blues, greens, golden bronze and burning red, barely a second was spent pondering the food! Superb stuff, stunning Fiery-throated Hummingbirds predominating, perhaps as many as 40 at the feeders and on nearby 'waiting twigs', plus as the eyes got accustomed, regular ins and outs of Magnificent Hummingbirds and the occasional Green Violetear. For all the hummingbirds buzzing within a few centimetres, however, the real star was not actually at the feeders, but at the abundant flowers nearby - small, exquisite and yet another endemic, Volcano Hummingbirds squabbled over territory, the males flatly countering the presence of another nearby. This was birding at its easiest - heck, even the Rufous-collared Sparrows popped in through the window and landed on the chair backs! Barred Parakeets zoomed over, a Black Vulture rose on the morning thermals, breakfast time was over, I reluctantly removed my nose from the window pane. Just five kilometres to the south, but an impressive 400 metres higher in altitude, lay the 3491 metre summit of Cerro de la Muerte - bleak, treeless and prone to swirling fogs and creepy glooms. I fancied a visit, not least for a certain highland endemic which made home only on these highest scraps of land. 'Only 5 km' I thought, 'must be a breeze to hitch-hike', so out I strolled to the near-deserted Pan-American Highway. One sodding hour I stood there, occasional growling trucks straining as they climbed the giddy gradients, packed cars staring as they sailed by. Would have got bored, but just adjacent a wooded grove was non-stop bird action - Flame-throated Warblers and Yellow-winged Vireo, Black-billed Nightingale-Thrushes, a family of Yellow-thighed Finches and other bits and bobs. However, as the hour threatened to edge into a second, 'sod this' thought I and turned to begin to walk there. And typically, that is exactly when a truck decided to stop. Yippee, two friendly truckers, Latino music blaring, up the hairpins we wound. Got

to the summit, jumped out and headed up the gravel track that headed the final half kilometre. Then the fog descended!!! One minute sun, next a dense fog that left visible varying from 100 metres down to about ten! Oo er, it sure seemed the Mountain Gods were having a laugh, they'd let me suffer to get here, now were playing games with their weather! In this high paramo, a thick shrub-like vegetation, birds were few and far at the best of times ...and thick fog was not the best of times. I could no longer see summit nor road below, but continued up - four Peg-billed Finch rose from trackside, a Volcano Hummingbird sat and looked glum. I saw no other birds.

At the summit, as the track seemed to open into a gravel plain, perhaps workings to radio towers nearby, I decided this would be where my target birds would be. Perfect habitat, perfect location. And indeed it was, there in the mist, not far from my feet, two little chunky things feeding quietly. Click, click, click, sneaked in and got my photographs. Volcano Juncos, no stunning colours, no stunning behaviour, but what very nice birds they were.

Back at the road, I realised I might have to walk all the way back - hitch-hiking in dense fog is no fun, I was struggling to see ten metres now, even in the clearer moments! But luck was in, a bus went by, slammed on the brakes and gave me a lift, waving off my offers to pay the fare. very nice folks there are in Costa Rica. back down at La Georgina, no fog and, unlike on the Pacific coast, no rain. the birding continued, back into the forest I went, photographing Hairy Woodpeckers and others.

It had been a superb day, overall one of the most enjoyable localities in Costa Rica. I had late afternoon tea with the hummingbirds, then as the night chills approached, did a fruitless search for Dusky Nightjar before retiring to the warmth of blankets. 31 August. Into Bedlam.

05.00, the scrabbling again, then pesky Sooty Robins jumping up on the fluorescent light for early morning breakfast. A few shivers, then out I clambered, back down into an approaching dawn in the cloud forest. All the familiars from the day before in the garden - Large-footed Finches, Black-billed Nightingale-Thrushes and Rufous-collared Sparrows by the dozen. Wandered deep into the forest, down, down, down - from mature oak to dense bamboo, flocks of birds throughout. Amongst the best, a Streak-breasted Treehunter rooting about in a clump of moss-laden epiphytes, the same flock also sporting three Buffy Tuftedcheeks, a Ruddy Tree-runner and a nice selection of Black-cheeked Warblers, Collared Redstarts and, still stunners, Flame-throated Warblers. Down further, the first of two Acorn Woodpeckers, then a big black thing rising into a tree. A quick shift of position, then I was squinting up - down glared a super Black Guan, another noted just moments later. Timberline Wrens and many other birds followed, then it was the slog back up the slope for breakfast and hummingbirds. More Magnificent Hummingbirds and Green Violetears today, but still the stunning Fiery-throated Hummingbirds were the predominant, wave after wave of them flocking into the feeders, a pure wonder to just sit and admire them.

On this day, I did have ideas of venturing down to the San Geraldo valley, some 20 km yonder, but with the palaver of hitching just 5 km the day before I decided I would leave this treat for the very last day of my trip, so instead spent the morning photographing Volcano Hummingbirds and other bits and bobs on the garden.

Early afternoon, it began to get rather dark - a horrible cloud obliterated the sun and I thought, 'eeks, time to get out of here'. And actually it was, at 6 p.m. I had an appointment in San Jose, to collect a car for leg two of my trip. Another advantage of La Georquinas is that all the buses stop here for refreshments, so in no time at all, I had a quick chat with a driver and off I went - the heavens opened and as the rain ashed down, up over the Cerro de la Muerte we went, then downhill for close on 50 km before cruising across the Central Valley to arrive in San Jose. The rain stopped just before the bus did, I was disgorged into downtown San Jose and then ambled aimlessly westward, block by block till I found where I was headed - the local bus to Alajuela. Great-tailed Grackles and Bronzed Cowbirds occupied roundabouts, rubbish and litter most of the sidewalks. Jumped aboard, 30 minutes later out again near the airport.

A few papers to sign, a quick once over of the car and out I drove, proud owner of a jeep for two weeks ...so I thought, the car was not going to make it! Anyhow, for now it was fine - which is more than I can say for the traffic! Just getting dark, horrendous queues of cars as the evening rush-hour hit its peak and, to cap it all, the rain returned with a vengeance. Abandoning ideas to stay in Alajuela, I found the little road that twisted up the mountainside towards Volcano Poas and, just 5 km short of the summit, arrived at the dark, and what appeared closed, Lo Que Tu Quieres Lodge. Oops, thought I, preparing myself for a night in the car.

Just then a sleepy guy appeared, rather bleary-eyed. Huh? said he, or at least the Spanish equivalent. Eh? said I. So arranged was a room, another day over. 1 September. Volcano Poas.

How drab a start - only bird seen from my cabin window was a Rufous-collared Sparrow, not a good enough excuse for a sneaky lie-in. So it was, 5.20 a.m. again, out into the morning chills for an exploration of the forests towards the lip of Volcano Poas. A national park, the gates don't open till 8 a.m. but I was not too worried as (a) an excellent side track winds up through forest just before the park entrance and (b) feeling a right stooge that morning, I had no real desire to enter the actual park anyhow. So off I went, up the five kilometres of exceptional scenic road that separated my cabin and the summit. Sooty Robins on the slopes, Rufous-collared Sparrows hopping here and there and then a big thing swooped across the road and flopped into a tree. 'Hmm, what was that?' thought I, reversing back. Out of the car, strolled a few metres more and there sat my first Resplendent Quetzal of the trip, what a little corker, a male with half-

length tail. Still too dark for any meaningful photographs, so remembered the spot and continued upward.

Parked near the entrance and began my walk in the cloud forests, a mean wind whipping round the top of this exposed peak, whisps of mist and cloud licking the tree tops, occasionally submerging all into a spooky gloom. Black-faced Solitaires popped up, feeding on berry bushes, plus many of the birds familiar from Cerro de la Muerte the day before - Black-billed Nightingale-Thrushes, Sooty-capped Bush-Tanagers, both Large-footed and Yellow-thighed Finches. Occasional flocks flitted through - Black-cheeked Warblers again, Collared Redstarts and Flame-throated Warbler. As the sun struggled to subdue swirling mists, new birds began to appear - right nice Purple-throated Mountain-Gems, a Mountain Elaenia and then a Brown-capped Vireo. A Black Guan cast a beady eye from aloft, splendid Black-and-Yellow Silky-Flycatchers sat upon overhead wires, yet more Black-faced Solitaires appeared. As 8.00 a.m. approached, I feared I may have actually ventured into the national park, so before I got nabbed, I beat a hasty retreat - back to the small parking area. A Purple-throated Mountain-Gem sunbathed in a low bush, a Golden-bellied Flycatcher flitted out.

Unfortunately, time today was not on my side - 1 p.m. would see me waiting an incoming flight at the international airport, traveller number two arriving. Before that I did however have a few hours, so I decided to see how far I could go on the road up to Cinchona - a year previous, this would have taken you to a couple of superb cafes sporting some of the best hummingbird feeders in the country. An huge earthquake on the 9th January put an end to all that - the cafes are no more, destroyed along with hummingbird feeders and the entire road leading to them. Twenty kilometres I got, then the road came to an end, massive diggers and excavators clawing their way north, cutting a new path through the precipitous mountain slopes, currently a scene of devastation. Where patches of habitat remained, did a little birding along here - one absolutely stunning male Blackburnian Warbler, the only one I would see on the trip, plus both a Violet Sabrewing and a Scintillant Hummingbird.

Time to leave the slope and head for the airport, one Red-tailed Hawk on route, two Squirrel Cuckoos too. At the Resplendent Quetzal spot, I was pleased to find the single bird had morphed into a pair, two stunners for the price of one! Down at the airport, however, I was not so lucky - the incoming plane had been cancelled! Oops.

So followed a wonderful afternoon, chats with American Airlines to eventually discover when my friend might arrive, then a lengthy stop in Burger King, followed by the news that the second scheduled plane was now delayed. Peered across the airport grasslands, saw nothing but Black Vultures, basked in the sun and essentially wasted the whole afternoon. Eventually a big metal bird lumbered in, out trotted my friend and off we went, straight into the San Jose evening rush hour! Drat! However, though our arrival was late, our destination made up for all delays, the next leg of my trip was the fantastic La Selva, pristine Caribbean lowland rainforest. *** Part Two, the delights of La Selva, Monteverde et al *** - coming soon -