Central America June –August 2013

In the summer of 2013 I spent eight weeks in Central America travelling and volunteering with my girlfriend. It was a truly life altering experience, with beautiful scenery, amazing local culture, wonderful people and of course, spectacular wildlife. I have to thank Mark Dawson and Joe Cockram for all of their help with regards to where to go, and to those who responded to my posts on Birdforum, though the biggest debt of gratitude must go to my partner Kathi, for her endless patience, insane organisational skills and excellent Spanish, without her I believe I would still be looking for the bus station in San Jose!
Locations

21/06/13 Toronto, Canada to San Jose, Costa Rica
22/06/13 San Jose to Tortuguero, Costa Rica
23/06/13 – 25/06/13 Tortuguero, Costa Rica
25/06/13 Tortuguero to Moin, Costa Rica
26/06/13 – 8/07/13 Costa Rica Wildlife Sanctuary
8/07/13 – 10/07/13 Puerto Viejo District, Costa Rica
10/07/13 – 15/07/13 Bocas del Toro, Panama
16/07/13 – 19/07/13 Boquete, Panama
18/7/2013 – 19/7/2013 Boquete, Panama to Osa peninsula, Costa Rica
19/7/2013 – 21/7 2013 Bolita lodge, Costa Rica
22/7/2013 On the road to La Palma
23/7/2013 Corcovado National Park, Costa Rica
24/7/2013 Osa Peninsula to Uvita, Costa Rica
25/7/2013 Uvita, Costa Rica
26/7/2013 Uvita to Montezuma, Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica
27/7/2013 – 29/7/2013 Cabo Blanco National Park and Montezuma, Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica
2/8/2013 Monteverde, Costa Rica to Ometepe, Nicaragua
The trip

21/06/13 Toronto, Canada 05:30am

An overnight stay in Canada allowed me exactly 45 minutes birding before our transport for the connecting flight arrived. First up were Red winged Blackbird and American robin, which were singing in the pre-dawn gloom outside the hotel. A familiar call increased my confidence, especially as I knew the next bird was likely to be a lifer. A soft trilling from a group of low bushes had me instantly looking around for one of my favourite birds, Waxwing, but as I clamped my eyes on the bird, the slicker facial pattern and lemon undertail coverts confirmed my suspicions that I was watching Cedar waxwing. Next up were Ring billed and American herring gulls leaving their roosts and flying overhead, whilst a Common grackle and a pair of Mourning doves left the protection of their roost in some bushes. A Tree swallow bombed about overhead, whilst a pair of Savannah sparrow fed in an area of rank grassland. In a nearby tree a fine Eastern kingbird occasionally sallied out in pursuit of flies, whilst below recently fledged American robins were fed by worn looking adults. A House finch flew into the same area of cover briefly, but was chased away by the anxious robins. I looked at my watch and with 10 minutes to spare I jogged back to the hotel to collect my bags and rouse Kathi, who sensibly opted to lie in!

One last sighting in North America involved an empidonax flycatcher that stunned itself against the window of Toronto airport, this species group is notoriously difficult to assign to species level, but I believe it to be Yellow bellied flycatcher.

Nottingham’s finest cotoneaster-feaster: Cedar waxwing

21/06/13 San Jose, Costa Rica (sometime later that day)

As the plane touched down on the tarmac of the runway at San Jose International Airport, a large long tailed bird flew up from the grass and away. Boat tailed grackle, my first bird in the Neo-tropics and ID-ed at about 190mph, nice! As the taxi left the airport I noticed several raptors circling overhead, all mostly black, but some with pale “hands” and some with pale flight feathers –Turkey and Black headed vultures. At the hotel our room overlooked the Parque Central (no prizes for who
had booked this one!) and several more species were noted including **Tropical kingbird, Great kiskadee, Clay coloured robin, blue-grey tanager, White winged dove** and **Crimson fronted parakeet**. After a long day an early night was in order ready for another long day of travelling.
An early morning stroll around Parque Central added Boat billed flycatcher to the list, but a brief woodpecker and a swift species couldn’t be assigned to species level. The main aim of our first full day in Costa Rica was to leave the bustle of San Jose behind and head to Tortuguero on the Caribbean coast. The first order of the day was to survive the manic driving skills employed in San Jose, with taxi’s, buses, cars, motorbikes, scooters, pushbikes and dogs all using every inch of the road surface, our taxi (a 25+ year old Toyota complete with a unique rope operated boot closing system) weaved around the various obstacles at break-neck speed, and deposited us at the Grand Caribe bus station. Here we said goodbye to our luggage and climbed aboard a bus. At this point I have to admit I was somewhat disappointed to find a new luxury coach with air con and toilet, as I was hoping for a painted ex- USA school bus. The journey took us through our first glimpses of primary rainforest, and along the way we saw Northern rough-winged swallow, Ruddy ground dove, Variable seedeater, Northern Jancana, Passerini’s tanager and the now ubiquitous Tropical kingbirds and Great kisadees.

Ruddy ground-dove

We boarded the Lancha at La Pavona, and set off on our two hour voyage down the river through thick rainforest to Tortuguero. Our first notable sighting was of American crocodile, but avian highlights were Broad billed ani, Amazon kingfisher, Great blue heron, Green heron, Anhinga, Montezuma oropendola, Bare throated tiger heron, Ringed kingfisher and Chestnut mandibled toucan which all suddenly hit home that we were a long way from Europe! Entering the village of Tortuguero we encountered many tour guides offering their services, but we decided that we would unload our belongings first then decide on a guide. A wander around the village produced the first two species of hummingbird – Blue throated Goldentail and the soon to become regular Rufous tailed hummingbird, both of which showed very well. We decided to go with Kulchus Tours and arranged a three part all day tour for $50 each for the next day. A few more species were added around the hotel before we turned in for an early night including Red billed pigeon, Red lored
parrot, Great and Snowy egrets but the most interesting species was a Fork tailed flycatcher which according to my guide was either a range restricted resident or a passage migrant. Either way it wasn’t meant to be in this area at this time of the year, so I imagine it would either be a late migrant or a non-breeding bird. Interestingly this species was also noted at Puerto Viejo two weeks later on the 9/7, is it possible that a small number of non-breeding birds choose to summer in the Caribbean?

23/06/13 Tortuguero, Costa Rica

We were up at the crack of dawn again today, ready for our early morning river cruise. There were to be many highlights today, and not all of them were avian. Our first stop was to watch Howler monkeys as they fed (and howled) from some trees on the edge of the village. Next up was Tamandua or Collared anteater, which was climbing about 15 metres up a giant tree, I must admit I found this somewhat odd as I had always imagined anteaters to be terrestrial rather than arboreal, but our guide pointed out the 3m termite nest that the anteater was obliterating. This was a rare sight indeed, and represented the only anteater of the trip. A few birds were up next, with Great egret, Common tody flycatcher, Northern Jancana, Green ibis and Green kingfisher all seen in a small area nearby. The first real standout bird of the day was a stunning Keel billed toucan, which showed extremely well as it fed on palm nuts. Continuing further downstream we saw Green iguana, Emerald basilisk and Caiman. The latter was seen lurking in bankside vegetation, and allowed a close approach giving us the perfect opportunity to appreciate its beautiful patterning and to take some close-up shots. As we admired the handsome reptile, I noticed a small bird easing along the edge of the opposite bank – a Sungrebe. This was one species I had hoped to see, and a closer look proved we were in even more luck, as on its back was a chick! Other birds encountered included our first Bare throated and Rufescent Tiger herons, Laughing falcon, Long billed hermit and a stunning Collard acari which practically exploded out of the rainforest like a feathered firework. Further mammal sightings included our first Three toed sloth and White faced capuchins.
Back again on dry land we added Grey crowned yellowthroat, House wren and Streak headed woodcreeper to the ever growing list. A walk down onto the beach to have lunch provided a preview of what we hoped to observe the following day, as some twenty or so Green turtle bided their time offshore waiting for the cover of darkness before coming onshore to lay their eggs. Whilst watching these Brown pelican and Magnificent frigatebird were noted.

Another trip in the afternoon took us to observe Poison dart frogs, with Red poison arrow and Green and black frogs present. Also we saw a fresh footprint of Jaguar, which was approximately 12cm across, sadly (though not unexpectedly) we didn’t see the prints owner, but it was great to know that this top predator was still present and that the ecosystem was fully functional.

A few more species were notched up before we retired – Tropical peewee, Black headed tody-flycatcher, Pale vented pigeon, Bananaquit and Palm tanager.

24/06/13 Tortuguero, Costa Rica

Today was spent wandering around the village in a fairly relaxed manner. We browsed the craftwork shops and enjoyed a lunch of rice and beans, which at this point in the trip, was still something of a novelty. Something that we noted later after visiting both Panama and Nicaragua was the cost of goods in local shops and supermarkets. The cost of everyday items was equal to those back in the UK, and in a country where a good hourly wage is $3, it quickly became apparent why rice and beans - or casado as it is more exotically named – is a staple of Central American food. Anyways, back to the birds.

New birds today included Golden hooded tanager, Royal tern, and Yellow crowned night heron. The main event today however, was to be our night walk to see the Green turtles coming ashore to lay their eggs.

Yellow crowned night-heron
We met our guide just after 9pm, and walked the 1.5km from the village towards the area where the turtles were coming ashore. Our guide then received word that a turtle was currently in the process of laying her eggs not too far away, but if we hurried we may just make it in time to see her covering the eggs before returning into the Caribbean. We rushed off silently parallel to the beach, and our guide disappeared into the bushes. He returned a few moments later and ushered us onto the beach.

Illuminated in the moonlight was a 2m turtle with her back to us. Steadying herself with her front flippers, she used the rear flippers to push the sand she had cast aside earlier back into the hole, covering the eggs. We stood mesmerised by this sight, as this is something that neither of us had expected to see. She worked quickly, and after smoothing the area over as to camouflage the nest, she spun her bulk around and headed slowly back towards the sea.

What followed next was something that will stay with me forever, but first we had to endure a 3 hour wait in complete silence before we could see the finale.

Kathi had just about fallen asleep when our guide’s walkie-talkie crackled and something incomprehensible in Spanish rasped out of the speaker. Our guide signalled to us as we were off into the darkness yet again. We again walked out onto the beach, but this time our guide motioned us to keep a distance until he signalled us over. We could just about make out a dark flat shadow on the edge of the strandline, more obvious though was the sight of sand being tossed into the air. After some 5 minutes we were summoned over.

When laying eggs, female turtles go into a state of trance. I hadn’t thought about the mechanics behind this process until now but I understand why they do so. Thousands of years of evolution have made turtles a highly specialised marine species, but an evolutionary throwback of their ancestry is that they must return to land to lay their eggs. A creature that can grow to the same size and weight of a Ford Fiesta, and spends 99% of its life in the ocean undertakes a huge burden to return to land. Flippers, incredibly efficient in the ocean, become an inconvenient appendage on land offering little in the way of grip. Being a large animal may offer a degree of protection in the water, but on land all of that bulk weighs down on vital organs. The stresses involved in the reproductive cycle of sea turtles are overwhelming. A state of trance must be something similar to a huge dose of diamorphine, allowing the animal to forget all of these factors and to concentrate on laying eggs.

As a result of all of the above, absolute silence is observed, and only a single red filtered torch can be used when observing them. The merest hint of unnatural noise or light can cause the turtle to become distressed and abandon the cycle, returning to the sea for another 4-6 years before attempting again. Here on the beach was a miracle of evolution, a creature with lineage as old as the dinosaurs, which could live to be over 200 years. When in a state of trance, the female’s hind flippers can be parted and our guide carefully did just this. We could see beautiful ivory coloured eggs the size of a golf ball dropping into the nest. It would be fair to say that all present were awestruck and humbled to be able to witness this event, and I am sure that the level of emotion on the beach meant there was not a dry eye in sight. After 20 minutes or so, the female suddenly “came-round” and juddered, then began to backfill her nest, before returning to the sea. This was one of the standout moments of the trip, and an experience I will never forget.
Today was our last day in Tortuguero, and we left on the 10am boat for Moin. We were heading south to spend two weeks at Costa Rica Wildlife Sanctuary, where we would be working on both a rehabilitation and a sea turtle reintroduction project. The boat journey there produced more birds though, with Collared swift, Amazon kingfisher, Green and Tricoloured heron’s, Mangrove swallow, Turnstone, Grey plover and a further two Fork tailed flycatchers. As we waited in a tremendously heavy downpour in Moin docks, a Common paraque suddenly appeared and flew into a tree above us, a strange site at midday!

Arriving at Costa Rica Wildlife Sanctuary we were greeted with rain and “Elvis” – a captive two toed sloth who had been confiscated from some poachers and who sadly couldn’t be returned to the wild. We were to be based at the lodge for the next two weeks, and in that time I was able to add many birds typical of the Caribbean lowlands to the list. With just a couple of hours of daylight left we had to make sure that we had unpacked and fed the animals, by this time the rain had stopped and the clouds had lifted. With just 45 minutes of daylight remaining I clocked up an impressive list of species: Black cheeked and Rufous winged woodpeckers, Passerini’s, Golden hooded and Palm tanagers, Bronzed cowbird, Black striped sparrow, Long billed hermit, House wren, Ruddy ground dove, Grey capped flycatcher, Squirrel cuckoo, Orange chinned parrot, Black headed saltator, Black cowled oriole, White throated manakin and Common and Lesser nighthawks. Phew! This was high octane stuff, and a fantastic diversity of species for such a short time period.
Over the next two weeks my birding was confined to the immediate area around the sanctuary, which wasn't too bad as this included primary rainforest, river, scrub and even a beach! The reason for the restrictions on movement was due to the brutal murder of Jairo Moria at the end of May. Jairo had been the Sea turtle conservation officer for the sanctuary, and on the night of 31st May during a night patrol he and a group of 4 volunteers were kidnapped by local egg smugglers. The 4 volunteers were eventually released after being robbed, but Jairo was not so lucky. This really brought home the dangers of being involved on such a project, but also highlighted how it was more important than ever to support such conservation projects.

Our daily routine consisted of cleaning and feeding the various rescued animals, though by far the most enjoyable aspect of our day was exercising the monkeys, sloths, kinkajous and dogs in the care of the sanctuary. I was often to be found wandering around birding with a three toed sloth attached to my hips, a unique look! Avian highlights over the next 14 days included (but were not limited to): Black crowned tityra, Collared acari, Collared and American Golden plovers, Wood stork, Band tailed barbthroat, Slaty tailed and Black throated trogons, Grey breasted martin, Black-blue grosbeak, Common black hawk and Lineated woodpecker.

The real highlight of our time at CRWS came on the 06/07 when one of our rescued clutches of Leatherback turtles hatched! This was huge news as this was one of the last clutches rescued by Jairo and their release would be broadcast on television across the planet in his memory as an affront to those still active in the illegal egg trade.

The afternoon was manic as ABC, Reuters, Channel 7 and Costa Rican television stations arrived ready for the big release. Several people were interviewed (not me as my Spanish is dire!) and we all
posed with a memorial banner before we released the 83 three and a half inch long turtles back to
the ocean. Understandably there was a sizable public turnout to show solidarity and Jario’s family
were present, and his two younger brothers released the first two hatchlings in memory. It was a
very moving moment and yet another moment that will remain with me for the rest of my days.

I should mention also our day trip to Cahuita National Park on 29/06 as this was a very enjoyable
trip. We left at 5am and arrived at the park just after 7:30am. This park gave us our first taste of the
“true Carribbean” – that is white sandy beaches edged by palm trees and Coconuts – and also gave
us great views of some fantastic wildlife. Mammals included a confiding Agouti which looked like a
cross between a rat and a Reeve’s Muntjac, Two toed and Three toed sloths, but the pick of the
mammals was a family party of Coati who fed along the footpath just a few metres away. These are
smart looking creatures, almost raccoon like in their appearance and colouration, but with a pointy
snout and shining eyes. We got great views as they moved and reeled off lots of photos, I even
managed to grab about 20 seconds of video, clearly showing adults and a platoon of youngsters. I
decided that I’d delete the crappy photos and keep the video, a bad move. I somehow managed to
delete the video and most of the half decent photos! It would be another month before we got good
enough views to get satisfactory images.

I suppose I should also mention the birds: White tailed kite, Shining honeycreeper, Western slaty
antshrike, Dusky antshrike, Black throated and Bay wrens, Slaty tailed and Violatious trogon (Kathi
can only say how excited to see this species I was!) Yellow crowned night heron and Royal tern. Yet
more quality birds, the Lowlands were delivering!
After a couple of weeks at the Sanctuary we were ready to pick up the pace and really begin our adventure. We planned to head down the Caribbean and into Panama to the Bocas del Toro archipelago, then cut across inland to David, before heading up the Pacific coast and north into Nicaragua, a journey of about a thousand miles in total which we thought wouldn’t be too much of a push with the time we had.

Our next stop was Puerto Viejo where we wanted to soak up some of the Caribbean vibe and enjoy some culture and explore the area a bit. We spent our time pottering about the town having drinks and a few meals out (my Rum Coconut quest was sadly unsuccessful here…) and sampling the beaches and even a bike ride. Although I was attempting to keep the birding to a minimum here, I couldn’t help but notice species such as White lined, Passerini’s and Golden hooded tanagers, Bananaquit, Green heron, Keel billed toucan and Rufous tailed hummingbird.

Golden hooded tanager; another bad photo...

Sadly try as I might, I totally failed not to do any birding on the day we did a 14km bike ride. We were aiming for a nearby National Park, but between the inclines, the humidity, our consumption of water, our rental bikes having only a single gear and not to mention my stops to look at various exotic species; it quickly became obvious that we were never going to make it!

A stop at one of several beaches saw Kathi and I part ways, with her hitting the surf and me hitting the bushes and rainforest behind the beach. I had said that I would meet her in an hour, but my, does time fly when you’re having fun… two and a half hours later I emerged out of the greenery having added Yellow billed and Red rumped cacique, Northern barred Woodcreeper, White necked Jacobin, Chestnut rumped woodpecker, Grey necked wood-rail, Tropical gnatcatcher and Stripe throated hermit to my now quickly expanding list. Needless to say that my tardiness wasn’t appreciated, and Kathi didn’t seem to share my delight at having hand-fed Grey necked wood-rail...
Grey necked wood-rail; not as skulking as its Palearctic cousins

On the Morning of the 10\textsuperscript{th} July, we said our goodbyes to Costa Rica and headed for the Panamanian border at Sixaola, the next leg of our trip included a few days in the mountains north of David – this was the part I had been eagerly anticipating since we booked our flights back in March. Would it live up to my ever optimistic aspirations?
Our first impressions of Panama were not particularly positive: On the Costa Rican side of the Sixaola River was a fairly affluent community and dockyard. Across the river was another story though, as far as the eye could see stretched a shanty town. The living conditions for the people opposite were obviously appalling; sewage flowed freely into a dirty river mixing with rubbish and deceased canines, whilst much of the housing was constructed out of corrugated iron.

We set off on the hour long transfer across to the archipelago, on the way we saw Brown booby, whilst at the docks tens of Magnificent frigatebirds fought over scraps with Brown pelican. Whilst we watched this chaotic scene a smaller bird appeared, my first thoughts as it approached was that it may be some kind of gull, but as it approached it transformed into the familiar buoyant shape of an adult Arctic skua. This struck me as odd, given our location and time of year, but here it was, a bird I had seen hundreds of times before in Europe, flapping about with the Pelicans and frigatebirds! This is an extremely rare vagrant to Central America, and is probably the rarest bird I have ever found, though I’d rather swap the skua here for a frigatebird back in Norfolk!

Magnificent frigatebirds

Bocas was a really enjoyable leg of our journey, and we even went out drinking one night, with a beer costing less than a dollar, and cocktails costing $3! We also went on a few excursions where we snorkelled and sunbathed. One of our trips took us to the “world famous” Red frog beach, unfortunately for us however, the beach didn’t look quite so beautiful in the persistent drizzle on the day we visited, but we did see a few new birds: American black tern, Tawny crested tanager, Blue dacnis, White collared seedeater and Tiny hawk.
American Black tern perching on a shoe

Before we knew it our five nights in Bocas had come to an end, and we boarded a boat at 10am for the mainland. We then headed straight inland from the coast, and up into the mountains aboard a minibus. It took us 6 back breaking hours to reach David on the Pacific side of Panama, but my excitement was tangible. Firstly we were heading for the Cloud Forest and (hopefully) what would be the birding experience of the trip, and secondly after nearly a month we climbed aboard an old American school bus. All I needed now was a new bird and I would be content for the rest of the journey. Looking out of the window, it seemed that today would be my lucky day, as Crested caracara and Swallow tailed kite appeared in quick succession.

No prizes for guessing this raptor...

We arrived around 6pm and checked into out hostel for the evening, as we handed over our passports another new bird hopped down into a nearby bush to welcome us – Rufous collared sparrow – and our owner offered us a cool beer. We relaxed for a while, and he invited us to play poker with him. We politely declined as we had an early start the next day and we were very tired.
The scenery on the way up to Boquete was sublime, and I had astronomical hopes for our time in this area. Would it deliver?

16/07/13 Boquete, Panama

This was it, the big day of the trip (for me at least!), Kathi had very kindly hired John Tornblum of Boquete Custom Tours and we had a full day’s guided birding in the cloud forest ahead of us. Or at least we would have done if we hadn’t have been locked in our hostel. The owner (who had been up playing poker and being generally loud and obnoxious the night before) had closed a one way door in a drunken stupor the night before and we were now trapped inside. After being kept awake for much of the night despite telling the owner we had an early start AND asking him to keep the noise down three times, I was already in a less than chirpy mood. Our situation was not only a serious breach of fire regulation law; it also had the effect of transforming me from a mild mannered scruffy guy from Norfolk into the most enraged man in Western Panama. Outside I could see John’s car, but despite shouting out of the window he couldn’t hear me. It was now 07:20, twenty minutes later than we had arranged to meet. At this point I sort of blacked out. Kathi said that I kicked the door so hard not only did the lower part of the door split, but the doorframe actually moved releasing a fine stream of cement dust onto the floor. My birthday had been ruined by a drunken Canadian, a day before it was actually my birthday! I am still a bit fuzzy on what actually happened but apparently my “upset” had attracted the attention of a member of staff who let us out and didn’t even mention the structural damage out of pure fear. For those of you reading who don’t know me I look a bit like an unshaven Harry Potter, quite the terrifying prospect!

I felt very embarrassed not only of Kathi having to see me like this, but also of them fact that poor John had been sat outside for half an hour. As we greeted him, all the mornings’ events faded away. John is a great chap, with a soothing nature and a dry sense of humour, he told me not to worry, and that the Quetzal’s would have long gone. He winked. Today was going to be great.

We climbed up into the mountains, and higher still until we reached a bridge that lead to a track through the cloud-forest. We had our first birds even before John had turned off the engine, with his sharp eyesight picking out Silvery throated and Common bush tanager’s in some bushes in front of the vehicle. Immediately out of the car, a hummer appeared at some flowers to our left, its glossy purple plumage and down-curved bill could mean it was only one species: Violet sabrewing a real stunner, which zipped off into the forest as quickly as it had appeared from it. John led us over the bridge and straight into the action, the vegetation was alive with birds. More Silvery throated tanagers were flicking around, and mixed in with the group was Prong billed barbet and a Woodcreeper sp. that disappeared before we could get a clear view. John drew our attention to a sooty coloured passerine with a black mask and bright orange beak – Black faced solitaire – what a beauty! Next up were several hummingbird, each more spectacular than the last. A Bee hummingbird sp. zipped around us calling, but didn’t settle long enough to be pinned down. Its minute proportions were smaller than some of the wasps we had encountered! Up next was Purple mountain gem which not only has the eponymous purple throat, but a turquoise cap complementing its green plumage and white eyestripe. A White throated mountain gem also put in an appearance, but all of the above were outdone by the White crested coquete, which was one of my target species. On any other day this would easily have been bird of the week, but the day was still young. In between all of these miniature hyperactive beauties we also saw Slate throated and
Collared redstarts, Yellow thiged finch, Tufted and Yellowish flycatchers, Black billed nightingale-thrush and Sulphur winged parrot.

The next bird we saw was “the Holy Grail” bird for me. Whilst watching the hummers, Kathi and John saw an unmistakable flash of metallic green and vivid red fly over; “QUETZAL” they both called in excited tones. Sadly I missed this initial sighting (a female), but John told me not to worry, and that good things will come to the patient. Walking slowly back down towards the car for breakfast I suddenly saw a bright green a red bird, roughly the size of a woodpigeon flying towards me. This could only be one bird, and for the second time today I exploded and the valley was filled with the worst language uttered since that last time Jim Davidson did stand-up (minus the racist bigotry!). To my amazement here in real life and Technicolor was a male Resplendent Quetzal. Such a name and such a bird I will write it again. Resplendent Quetzal. Even more amazing than seeing this bird however, was the fact that this otherworldly creature perched up less than 5 metres from us, despite my loud, unrefined English vernacular. I enjoyed scope filling views and even managed some half decent shots, but this was too much for me, and tears welled up for the second time today as I thanked John and Kathi for sharing this experience with me.

Resplendent Quetzal; It doesn’t get better than this.

If you have not seen an image of this bird (you have now, look up!) before I suggest you check it out, but I warn you that if you do, I won’t be responsible when you find yourself booking a trip to Panama the very next moment. This really was one of those moments that transcend bird watching, and it becomes a moment where you marvel at the pure beauty of this creature, clinging on high up in pristine remnants of forest in the roof of the world and you almost feel unworthy to be observing this bird as you are part of a species responsible for the decline of not only this bird, but many others across the globe.
Back to the other birds, and atop a tree we saw a stonking **Black thighed grosbeak**, a vision of black and gold, with an outrageous bill. A **Mountain robin** sulked in vegetation along the path, as did a **Southern Nightingale-wren**. A pair of **Hairy woodpecker** shot across the footpath, whilst a **Spangle cheeked tanager** joined a group of **Common bush tanagers**. This was another stunning species, with a black mantle, face and throat, purple wings, green rump, an orange-red mark on its crown, red underparts and fine white “spangling” on its cheeks. New birds came thick and fast; **Golden browed chlorophonia** - which looked every bit as impressive as its name sounded - **Yellow bellied siskin**, **Brown capped vireo**, **Golden bellied flycatcher** and **Chestnut capped nightingale-thrush** all vied for our attention as we headed back to the car. We stopped and had lunch sitting on some rocks next to a fast flowing stream; more birds appeared with **American dipper** and **Torrent tyrannulet** dipping and flycatching respectively from rocks mid-river.

*Spangled cheeked tanager, another species that is more beautiful than my images suggest...*

Our next bird was to be a real toughie, and sadly it was our only dip of the whole trip. We climbed ever higher into the cloud forest until we reached a rangers station. Here John hopped out to get some gen whilst we birded the car. Whilst I was straining the greens, Kathi saw a green hummer with a really long bill – **Green fronted lancebill**. Sadly for me this species didn’t reappear, though I was happy enough to find a pair of **Acorn woodpecker** by means of consolation. John reappeared, but with more bad news, apparently our target bird – **Three wattled bellbird** – hadn’t been seen for a couple of days due to a higher than usual number of hikers in a regular area for the bird. It was a shame to miss out on this unique bird, but I didn’t want to get greedy after the Quetzal-fest earlier, and besides it’s another reason to return in the future.

As we descended back down the volcano, John picked out a green flash in a tree across the road – we surely couldn’t be this lucky could we?! A quick scan revealed that the birding gods were smiling down on us today as a female **Quetzal** had landed in a tree just 5 metres away. We crept forward in our 4x4 until we were some 6 feet away and just took the bird in. Kathi leaned forward and whispered in my ear “does a female usually have such a long tail?” and it was at that point we realised that there was a pair in this tree, this was unbelievable! We watched the birds for about 10
minutes, taking as many photos as we dare, before we carefully pulled away to let them continue going about their business. Magic.

*A pair of Resplendent Quetzal; ethereal beauties*

Our next port of call was to be another site where John said we could find Bellbird and Flame throated warbler, but sadly we never made it there as a seal on the cooling system popped and the car ground to a halt. John was understandably upset, but I really didn’t mind as I was in birding heaven, and having seen no less than seven Quetzal nothing was going to dampen my mood. Whilst we waited for the replacement car to arrive I scanned the coffee plantations and located **White winged tanager**, **Lesser goldfinch** and **Yellow faced grassquit**. By the time the replacement vehicle had arrived we were feeling rather tired and decided to call it a day, there was no way we would top the Quetzal. We went back and freshened up and then went for a fantastic meal and a few drinks to celebrate. What a day.

*17/7/2013 Boquete, Panama*

With today being my birthday, I was given a free pass to do whatever I wanted to do. After the intensive day yesterday I opted for a more relaxed ramble along the tracks leading up into the rainforest. This was put forward as a less “birdy” day for the long suffering other half, but would also allow me to catch up with a few species found at lower altitudes.
As we wandered along the tracks we quickly added **Swallow tailed kite, American dipper, Torrent Tyrannulet, Dark Peewee** and **Plain wren** as the first species of the day. New birds encountered over the course of the day included **Red crowned woodpecker, Orange billed nightingale-thrush, Yellow-Green vireo** and **Scarlet thiged dacnis**.

![American dipper](image)

**American dipper**

We had planned to walk along the valley before branching off into the cloud forest to once again look for Quetzal, but sadly we were unable to find the route. We did encounter a fantastic rope bridge however, which wouldn’t look out of place in an Indiana Jones film.

We rounded the day off with a fantastic meal overlooking a stream and the mountains. We decided that we would leave Boquete the next day in order to allow enough time to fit in the whole of the Pacific Coast, as we were still unsure about logistics at this point. We had researched (roughly) our route for the trip, but between the Borders of Panama in the south and Nicaragua in the north there were stretches (sometimes several hundred km long!) where we could find no information about local buses.

18/7/2013 – 19/7/2013 **Boquete, Panama to Osa peninsula, Costa Rica**

We left early in the morning to make sure we reached the Costa Rica border, as we had heard that the process of getting through could take several hours. As it turned out it took us all of 40 minutes to traverse the customs officials, we needn’t have left in such a rush! As the bus ground to a halt on the CR side of the border I stared out of the window across a field, where I immediately recognised the white blobs pecking around the horses – **Cattle egret**. Slightly less expected was the shocking yellow, black and brown passerine less than 2 metres the other side of the glass – **Western meadowlark**.

We eventually arrived in Golfito – the gateway to Osa – in time for lunch. As we sat down to the obligatory rice and beans, Kathi disappeared from her seat with the camera... odd. She was staring up into an almond tree, and frantically waved me over. In the depths of the branches, and surprisingly well camouflaged, were five **Scarlett macaw**, happily cracking their way through the
crop of almonds. We watched the birds whilst we ate lunch, and soon enough it was time to board the ferry for the crossing.

Scarlet macaws having a cracking time

Arriving at Puerto Jimenez you immediately get a sense that things are very different here, and there is almost an island feel. The peninsula is connected in the north, but it remains one of the least explored areas of Central America, second only to the infamous Darien Gap. At the heart of the area is Corcovado National Park, and it was this area that was to be the focal point of our stay in this area.

Getting to the park itself is an adventure, as we were to find out later, and it involves either a 2 hour boat trip down the coast or a 7 hour hike through thick jungle and crossing crocodile infested rivers. Understandably we took the former option!

In Puerto Jimenez we found a comfortable but rustic hostel at the back of the town, and set about exploring our options for our time on Osa. We had pencilled in a few days at Bolita Lodge (thanks to Joe Cockram for his recommendation!) on the borders of Corcovado before we headed in properly, but we were unsure about the logistics of getting in and out of the park. As we wandered around town, I couldn't help but notice several new species; Cherrie's tanager, Golden naped woodpecker, Hudsonian whimbrel, White ibis, Yellow headed caracara, and Black hooded antshrike were all present around the town, along with many other species.

One of our hopes for our time on Osa was to see Humpback whales, which come into Golfito bay in order to calf. Sadly for us there had only been a handful of sightings in the last week, and the cost for a whale-watching trip was over $100 each! We did travel mostly by boat in order to increase our chances, but the only cetaceans we managed were a few bottle nosed dolphin. Maybe next time!

We decided on a day tour into the park including a guide for $90 for the both of us, but first we were going to spend a few days at Bolita.
Getting to Bolita lodge is rather challenging. First one must get onto Osa peninsula which requires catching a bus to Golfito (5 hours from the border), then a boat across the bay (1 hour) then a 20 minute walk from the dock to Puerto Jimenez. To get to Bolita one must catch a local minibus (twice a week!) to the tiny gold-mining settlement of Dos Brazos, where you then walk about 20 minutes to the office. Our journey to Dos Brazos was broken up by a puncture, which took about an hour to fix due to us having to wait whilst somebody on a pushbike appeared with a pump!

Once you get to the office, you find a note saying to leave anything you don’t require, as there is a hike up through the rainforest to the lodge. To reach the trail up to the lodge one must cross not only 3 narrow wooden bridges (RE: planks of wood) but also 2 rivers, adventurous stuff indeed, particularly with a 18kg rucksack!

As was generally the case every time we entered a new area, I noted a few species on the hike up to our accommodation, including chestnut mandibled toucan, white necked Jacobin and Laughing falcon. It was a bit of a slog through the forest, and not easy going even on the relatively well maintained paths, but we eventually reached the lodge about half an hour before sunset and we welcomed by the fantastic eco-lodge (a unique place to stay, I can’t recommend it highly enough) and a cracking view down a forested valley to the Golfito Bay. The lodge itself is about as green as you can get, made out of materials harvested from the forest and a local refuse centre, the only electricity is via solar power, and there are plans afoot for the fuel supply to be entirely man-made – methane gas collected from a container under the toilets!

We relaxed and watched a beautiful sunset, whilst I sneaked views of Orange billed sparrow, White necked Jacobin, Turquoise cotinga and Rufous tailed jacamar. All these species had jewel like qualities to their plumage, and with a beer in hand as well it was a great end to an exhausting 48 hours of travelling. It was a truly wonderful experience to go to bed with only the sounds of the rainforest and starlight overhead.

*Rufous tailed Jacamar: my photo really doesn’t do this beautiful species justice!*
I awoke before dawn for our first full day at Bolita, as I wanted to experience the dawn chorus – primary rainforest style. It certainly didn’t disappoint, but most of the calls were new to me, and I enjoyed picking up the call and then locating and identifying the species responsible. Amongst the 20 or so species I could confidently identify I located three new birds – Dot winged antwren, Bay headed tanager and white tailed dove, though the star of the show was a very showy male Turquoise cotinga which posed beautifully for me whilst my camera was on charge, typical!

After breakfast we headed out to explore the trails. We had been warned that there had been a landslide affecting part of our route, but it shouldn’t be an issue. After about an hour walking the narrow, steep trails we reached what we thought was the landslide and we laughed. A tree had fallen over and had displaced some soil forming a 3 metre scree slope, which we casually scrambled across. We continued for about another kilometre and then as we rounded a bend we saw the landslide proper.

Rain had caused several trees to displace and loosened the soil, then further rain had exaggerated the movement to the point that about 20 giant trees and about 100 tonnes of mud and boulders had tumbled half a km down to the valley floor, this was going to be interesting! We slowly began picking our way across the debris, conscious of the small avalanches that occurred each time we slipped, until at one point I lost my footing and sent several large rocks crashing down into the jungle! It took us about 20 minutes to cross, but at least we wouldn’t have to come back this way... we thought. As we continued along the trail it became increasingly overgrown to the point where we couldn’t distinguish between the edge of the ledge and the vegetation. This was crazy. After a heated exchange with me unable to continue and Kathi unwilling to run the gauntlet of the scree again, our minds were made up as I lost my footing and nearly fell several hundred metres into the rainforest. Swearing and sweating profusely I turned tail and stomped back to the landslide. It took us about half an hour to cross back, but Kathi slipped several metres at one point and by the time we made it back onto the trail we were thinking about leaving the next morning.

Despite our experience on the slope, I had managed a few birds including Long tailed hermit and Orange collared manakin. By the time we arrived back at base it was lunchtime and after our ordeal we were famished. As we ate lunch our luck turned, and we were told about a walk down to the waterfalls where we would be able to cool off and swim, which sounded like the perfect solution to such a stressful morning. An astonishing run of birds also appeared over a twenty minute period: Chestnut crowned antwren, white hawk, shining honeycreeper, Riverside wren, white shouldered tanager, fiery banded acari, masked tityra and Brown hooded parrot. The bird of the day however, was a stunning King vulture, which soared gracefully over the rainforest with the Golfito bay in the backdrop. Even at a distance I could make out its multi-coloured head, which contrasted beautifully with its white body and black flight feathers. In terms of rarity this was surely one of the best sightings of the trip, and a bird I had hoped to see but hadn’t expected to encounter.
Shining honeycreeper; a very active species so I was lucky to get this shot

After lunch I hung up my bins for the day, and we had a very enjoyable ramble down the mountain to see the waterfalls and to absorb being in such a pristine environment. This area ran the very real risk of being destroyed during the 1980’s when gold was found in the river. Dos Brazos was established as a frontier town - complete with brothel, saloon and presumably swinging doors – and areas of the rainforest were dynamited to locate gold. The area has now been afforded some degree of protection, but there are still gold miners here, though environmental damage is limited to river course diversion and a small amount of rubbish. It is still staggeringly beautiful and incomparable to anything I have seen in Europe or North America.

Our last day at Bolita was to be spent with the other guests undertaking the longest route around the area, and walking/swimming back down a river. I added Yellow throated euphonia to the ever growing list during breakfast, but birding was more or less impossible for the rest of the day. If you ever find yourself at Bolita I cannot recommend the long route highly enough, and we had a fantastic time scrambling, swimming and climbing our way along the way. Sadly we were literally 10 seconds too late to see a Jagarundi as we hung back to see more wildlife, but it didn’t matter. The only new bird was a Buff rumped warbler that we flushed from a side stream, but as we saw it down to a metre I didn’t mind not having my bins or camera.

We departed in the darkness on the morning of the 22nd at the ungodly hour of 04:00, carrying the heavy rucksack back down the mountain by torchlight, it was a surreal experience, and with the highest density of Jaguars in Costa Rica we had the uneasy feeling we were being watch for much of the journey. Next stop: Corcovado!
22/7/2013 On the road to La Palma

Little did we realise as we boarded the bus at half five that morning, but the 30km journey we were about to make would be an adventure in itself. Our minibus headed north along the semi-tarmac road. As the ancient vehicle chugged along the road become less tarmac and more compressed rock and loose gravel, and we were soon bouncing along in a huge cloud of dusk. As we headed north I noticed a few raptors perched along the roadside, most I was unable to identify as a result of the dust and back-breaking bumps, but the three individuals I did see well were the aptly named **Roadside hawk**, though it seems likely that 99% of the birds I saw were this species. We crossed over a river, where my attention was drawn to a flock of pink birds wading in the shallows – **Roseate spoonbill** – and a few **Black bellied whistling-duck** were present in wet fields.

![Bird](image)

*Black bellied whistling duck; not classic habitat for a duck!*

Our bus began to climb steeply up a wooded hill, and at several points the noise of the engine was so loud we couldn’t hear each other as we bellowed to one another. Despite the noise, the bus seemed to moving at what can only be described as glacially slow, and at one point we were overtaken by an elderly man and his donkey...

The road suddenly switched and now we were heading downhill, with the driver rolling down the hill, occasionally tickling the brakes as we rounded a hairpin bend. At several points I swear we were on two wheels! After descending for 20 minutes or so we reached a wide river where our bus stopped. Here we were ushered aboard a heavily modified Land Rover in order to cross the river. As we entered the water, a couple of locals pointed and laughed at a young European tourist about to wade into the river, and it transpired that the river held a high density of crocodiles, some of which had a penchant for tourist meat; somebody had been killed here a month before. We continued across the river, unsure of the fate of the tourist!
After another half an hour in the Landy, we finally reached La Palma, which was to be our base for exploring Corcovado. As we wandered around the town looking for accommodation I couldn’t help but notice Violaceous trogon, Black hooded antshrike and a new bird, Groove billed ani flying around. We settled on Martina’s Place, which is a well-appointed hostel owned by a German lady, Martina who is really friendly, and crucially was able to give us a great deal on a private room and a tour into the park. Not only that, but we also had our first hot shower in exactly a month! We had an early night ready to head into Corcovado the next day.

23/7/2013 Corcovado National Park, Costa Rica

We awoke early the next day, and headed down to the docks in the predawn light ready for our 7am boat into the National Park. Corcovado has a reputation as being a unique experience in Central America due to its confiding wildlife and the vast area of unexplored habitat. In the middle of the park is a huge lake and wetlands, but due to the inaccessibility of the area there have only been a handful of expeditions to this area. It harbours some enigmatic and rare species, with jaguar, tapir, four species of monkey and many reptiles. Corcovado offered the only possibility of one of my dream birds for the entire trip though, as it is rumoured that Harpy eagle breeds. They are certainly resident in the area, as they have been monitored for 15 years, but try as I might I couldn’t get any information about the population of this super-raptor from our guide; probably a good thing as this species is very rare in Costa Rica. Needless to say in our 5 hours on site we didn’t see one, though we saw a staggering diversity of other wildlife.

Getting to the reserve is quite the adventure; an hour long boat ride takes you south along the coast, with the possibility of whales and dolphins along the way. A few very lucky folk have even seen whale shark on the commute, though we only saw Bottle nosed dolphin and a large fish that may have been a tuna. Once you arrive at the entrance to the reserve, the boats weigh anchor on a reef, and you wait for 10 minutes for the tide to drop before wading through the shallows to the shore. Our entrance was made more “entertaining” by the presence of a metre and a half long Bull shark. I must admit I hadn’t hoped for my first wild shark to be carving the waters around a boat as I was jumping into the sea. Also of note, we later saw something more sobering in one of the river deltas about 100 metres from the boats – a monstrous 3m American crocodile. These prehistoric beauties were common in the waters around and in the park, and it is not beyond the realms of the imagination to think several could have been lurking unseen in the shallows as we waded through the surf. That said all the visitors made it off the boat and onto the shore safely, which was a bit of shame as these included one chap in a bright pink shirt, who announced everything, no matter how obvious, at about 100 decibels. Luckily he wasn’t in our group, otherwise it is likely I would have used him to get better photos of said 3m crocodiles...

The park didn’t disappoint, and immediately we noticed quite a few species milling about on the beach including American oystercatcher, Yellow headed caracara, Brown pelican, whilst in the bushes next to the beach were Chestnut mandibled toucan, Common bush-tanager, Cherrie’s tanager and Short billed pigeon. Our first stop was for monkeys, and we c locked all four Central American species in a matter of minutes; Squirrel, howler, spider and white faced capuchin. It was a pleasure to watch our cousins in the wild, and we stood underneath as they fed overhead, dropping less delicious leaves and fruit onto us. Magical.
Next we headed for a river area which was a good area for tapir, a species very high up on Kathi’s must see list. We found the huge prints in the sand, along with those of a large feline, possibly Jaguar based upon their size, but no Tapir. Leaving this area we could hear a Black throated trogon calling nearby, and our guide, Carlos, called the bird in, where we enjoyed fantastic views of both male and female birds. We also noted a few other goodies, including particularly good views of Long tailed hermit, Green kingfisher and Black hooded antshrike.

![Long billed hermit](image)

Long billed hermit

As we continued further into the jungle, we became aware of something creeping about in the shadows of the understory. Carlos stopped us, and motioned for us to be silent and still. A tense few seconds followed as the obscure shape edged closer, and rattled around in a bush next to us. The forest was silent. As the tension bordered on unbearable the shape emerged from the bush, and a huge smile spread across the faces of Carlos and I as a male Great curassow strode into the dappled sunlight of the trail. This fantastic bird is a bit like a huge black chicken with a hoopoe’s crest, and is generally a difficult species to catch up with as it moves silently about in undisturbed patches of understory.

A few more metres along a track, we stopped to admire a showy Coati, when Carlos spotted some movement high in the trees, he quickly set up his scope and motioned me to look. Perfectly clear in the scope was a cracking Crested guan, another new bird. These birds appear to be an unlikely arboreal specialist, but despite their long tail and grouse-like appearance they are great climbers, and hugely capable of lifting off and twisting their way through the tangled canopy with grace. Try as I might to locate the bird with my bins in the canopy, I simply couldn’t. It became more apparent as the day drew on that Carlos was either magic or knew his patch extremely well.

A bit further down the trail, and it was Kathi’s turn to impress, as she peered into a bush and simply said “I guess that is a new bird!” as she pointed to a male Red headed manakin! We stopped to watch this beautiful little bird with its velvety black body and wings, eponymous red head, and golden thighs, and we were rewarded with it demonstrating it’s wonderful courtship display, whereby the male steps quickly from side to side along a branch, throwing his head back in the air.
As we watched a female flew in to witness this impressive display, but she had clearly seen it all before as she flicked off into the undergrowth, with the eager male in hot pursuit.

We continued towards a river where Carlos said we had a good chance of seeing both Bull shark and American crocodile, but this time from the safety of the shore. As we neared the river we noticed several groups of tourists eagerly pointing cameras in the same general direction, and as we drew closer we quickly became aware of the cause of the excitement as we made out the huge semi-submerged shape of an adult Tapir! This was the mammal Kathi had hoped to see and she was delighted. Slightly disappointing for us, the beast was facing away, and enjoying its mud-bath so much that it didn’t turn its head once, though we did get probably the best photos of the back of a Tapirs ear that the world has ever seen...

We continued onto a riparian area, where Carlos has said we stood a good chance of seeing some large crocodiles and also Bull shark, this time from the safety of the shoreline. We encountered Black hawk and Green kingfisher hunting along the edges of the area, and soon enough we noticed a “log” moving upstream against the current. We watched as the log transformed into a huge 3+ metre crocodile, which cruised casually upstream oblivious to our presence.

Alas, our time in Corcovado was drawing to an end, but it had been a fantastic day. Although we didn’t see a huge diversity of birds, the amount of other wildlife and spending time in such a pristine ecosystem was a real privilege. The next day we were to leave the Osa Peninsula to head further north along the Pacific to Marineo Ballena National Park.

24/7/2013 Osa Peninsula to Uvita, Costa Rica

Another early start today, and we left Osa at dawn with a boat north along the coast to XX, where we would catch a bus north along the Pan-American highway to Uvita. First of all we had to get of Osa, and our old friends – the giant American Crocodile – were present on the beach to bid farewell to us. At first we thought they were wooden flotsam, but a look through the scope confirmed the presence of several large crocs, making for yet another “exciting” boarding onto a boat! We continued our hour and a half long journey north in a large speed boat flying past the mangroves and rainforest on one side, and the open ocean on the other. Sadly we didn’t manage to connect with any Humpback whales, but as he have both seen them before and had witnessed the areas other biodiversity riches we couldn’t be disappointed.

We changed onto a bus, carrying us further north, and arrived at Uvita by mid-afternoon. Kathi was tired after all the travelling so she decided to hang about at our lovely accommodation (the Flutterby hostel) and read a book whilst I went for a wander.

The area has suffered somewhat as a result of increased tourism, with more development and a higher incidence of crime. It was this latter aspect that I was mindful of, as wandering around with expensive optics and a camera in an area where folk suddenly appear out of the vegetation wielding machetes can be an intimidating experience, but with my broken Spanish I offered a friendly greeting and explained I was looking for birds.

It quickly became apparent that moving north along the Pacific coast was going to bring about a different suite of species, and the scrubby area just outside the hostel didn’t disappoint. First up was a handsome Blue-Black grassquit, which excitedly sang, fluttered upwards in the air about 2 feet
then landed back on the same perch. A King vulture drifted low overhead, allowing for much better views than at Bolita, and I even managed to make out the detail of the colouration on the head with binoculars. Some frenzied activity and some odd calls coming from a roadside tree brought me a new, unexpected species in the form of Grey headed chacalaca, moving actively through the branches, but staying barely airborne between the trees. Commoner species included Red crowned woodpecker, grey necked wood-rail, black striped sparrow, White collared seedeater, Plain wren, Boat billed flycatcher, Cherrie’s tanager, Orange chinned parrot and Yellow headed caracara. Further down the track towards the borders with the National Park, I encountered more new species; Cacao Woodcreeper, Tawny crested greenlet, Inca dove and a stunning species – Red legged honeycreeper. The bird of the day however, was a small unassuming Piciforme an Olivaceous piculet. This diminutive species feed just a few feet away as I sat under a tree, and I watched as it crept up and down branches, occasionally hammering with its stubby bill. Not bad going for a 30 minute wander down a road!

25/7/2013 Uvita, Costa Rica

Next morning I decided to walk the same route before breakfast, and I saw similar species to the day before, but I was lucky enough to find a mixed feeding flock which contained two new species. First up was a beautiful Yellow throated euphonia – a vision of blue and gold. Secondly was Yellow tyrannulet, which had me puzzled for a while as it bears more than a resemblance to some of the North American wood-warblers in non-breeding plumage.

I returned to our accommodation, and we decided to walk along the beach into the National park to its euphonious whale’s tail shaped peninsula. The weather looked a bit touch and go, and there were large threatening looking clouds moving towards the coast from the sea. The beach was practically deserted as we walked along the flat expanse towards the rocks. The weather had done me a favour, as it seemed to signal the start of a good passage of waders, all heading south. First up were Grey and Semi palmated plover, and whilst watching these a small flock of mixed waders appeared. Sanderling was the main species, but careful scanning revealed Least and Baird’s sandpipers were also present. We continued along towards the rocky outcrop and it soon became apparent that there were quite a few shorebirds roosting and feeding in this area. First up was a stunning Spotted sandpiper (complete with spots!), whilst a Brown noddie moved north offshore. Further onto the rocks a pair of Short billed dowitcher flew in briefly. There were more Least sandpiper and Sanderling feeding in the area, whilst a familiar call announced the presence of three Hudsonian whimbrel. We headed back for lunch when I spotted some Godwit type birds flying low over the waves towards us. As they turned alongside us, a large amount of black and white on the wing confirmed that these were Willet.

We spent the rest of the day wandering around the town looking in the local shops, and enjoying the goods of a local bakery. Kathi picked out a Chestnut mandibled toucan feeding at the top of a huge almond tree, and we enjoyed watching the bird effortlessly cracking almond nuts with its huge bill.

Later in the afternoon, I again spent a short period of time wandering near the National Park border, and saw many of the same species, though I did add the stunning Purple crowned fairy to my list. This is an extremely distinctive hummingbird, with emerald and white plumage, a short bill and a disproportionately long blue and white tail. Other species encountered included Black crowned tody-flycatcher, white ibis and Fiery bellied acari.
Another day spent mostly travelling north resulted in only a handful of species, mostly glimpsed from either the bus or at a toilet stop! Best birds included Crested and Yellow headed caracara, Roadside hawk and Black bellied whistling duck.

We arrived at Puntaranes just after lunchtime and boarded the ferry for the trip across the bay. The sea was flat calm, but we had chosen to sit next to a bar playing possibly the worst music of the trip – Meatloaf, Queen, INXS and George Michael all set to a thumping drum and bass mix, as you might imagine not quite to the tastes of a confirmed folkie! Kathi enjoyed herself dancing along with a few other folk, but I just leaned over the edge waiting to be sick. It was a huge relief when we arrived on Nicoya an hour or so later. We were then treated to another bone-shaking ride for another two hours on a hot minibus, though at least this time the driver was listening to The Beatles and Pink Floyd – much more to my tastes, and seemingly the perfect music for Kathi to fall asleep to!

Arriving in Montezuma in the afternoon, it took us several hours to decide where to stay, as this was an area we hadn’t researched well and we were somewhat taken aback by local prices, including a $5 beer! We eventually settled on a reasonable hostel overlooking the beach where we had our own private bathroom – a real luxury! As we wandered into town for some food and something to drink, I couldn’t help notice two birds perched overhead on the power lines; Bare throated tiger-heron and a new species, White throated magpie-jay! I took a couple of quick snaps and we headed out to enjoy the evening.
Another early start for us to head into another National Park: At least that was the plan! The buses running into Cabo Blanco run twice a day, with the first at quarter to eight. I wasn’t surprised when the bus didn’t arrive until after eight, but I have to admit, I was somewhat miffed when the bus driver refused to leave until one of the regulars was on board. Whilst this may seem like a friendly gesture, we were not so happy when we learnt that the regular was a woman who had been idly chatting on the other side of the road for the last hour…

Delays aside, we eventually ended up at Cabo Blanco National Park and we were raring to go, though first we had another complication to deal with; we were told by one of the wardens that we wouldn’t see any wildlife without the help of a guide, not a problem we said, we are both biologists and have proven field skills and have travelled around Africa, North America, Canada and Europe so we would definitely see something. Next we were told we needed to hire binoculars – we both use Swarovski kit so there is no way we were going to hire some crap old porro’s – so again we thanked the chap and tried to make a break for it. Next we were told that there was an interest charge for getting to the park early (we were an hour late) and it became apparent that we were going to be unable to enter the park unless we gave the “officials” some additional money. Kathi argued in Spanish and they backed down, and we donated an additional $2 into their conservation fund (not too sure what amount goes back into local conservation) and headed into the park before they could come up with another purpose to fleece us out of cash!

That was only the beginnings of our troubles in Cabo Blanco, as later in the day we had misjudged the scale of the park and had dangerously low supplies of water, which led to a rather heated argument in the midday heat. Luckily we found a stream and filled up our bottles, and when we eventually made it to the beach, there was a fresh water tap where we were able to refill for the return leg.
On a more positive aspect, the park was obviously heaving with birds, with calls coming from every direction, and a constant stream of activity throughout the day. New birds included Stripe throated hermit, Rufous naped wren, Ivory billed and Ruddy Woodcreepers, Streaked flycatcher, Rufous capped warbler, Grey headed tanger, Barred antshrike, Red crowned ant-tanager, Long billed gnatwren and Lance tailed manakin. Other highlights included Great currasow, Dusky antbird, White billed woodpecker, Lesser greenlet and Short billed pigeon. Mammals were also obvious and included all four monkey species, Coati and Agouti.

Rufous naped wren – about 5x the size of our Wren

This was a really amazing place, but I think it is best to point out that this is certainly a challenging area to visit. The logistics of getting to Nicoya are fairly straightforward, but then one must travel to Montezuma and from there onto the national park. I would recommend paying to use one of the private shuttle buses to the park so that you can be there early, and also because these leave on time, rather than on the whim of some old bag finishing her conversation! Secondly take plenty of water with you, we had only 2 litres between us, and this was nowhere near enough. The terrain is hard going with several steep ascents and descents, so allow plenty of time if you plan to walk all the way to the beach.

The next day, we opted to just hang about in the local area, and our main aim was to visit the cascades just out of town, making for a much more relaxing day. I again took the opportunity to sneak out before breakfast to do an hours birding, as this area would again hold a different suite of species. I managed five new species in 20 minutes; Melodious blackbird, Rufous and white and also Banded wren, Cinnamon hummingbird and Hoffmann’s woodpecker. By this point in the trip I had recorded some 250 species, of which all bar 10 or so were new to me. The main wildlife highlight of the day was a troop of Capuchin raiding the fruit in the hostel garden, whilst a large Black iguana looked on from a large flat rock outside our window. We visited the rapids after breakfast and they were indeed great fun, and allowed for some great swimming and relaxation.
We had planned on staying longer but the call of our next destination was too strong, it was time to move on, and the next morning we left for Monteverde.

30/7/2013 - 2/8/2013 Monteverde, Costa Rica

We had been on the road now for nine hours. The travelling was beginning to catch up with us, as was the switch in altitude. We had left Montezuma at half 6 in the half light of the morning, though even at that time it was a tropical 28°. We were now twisting ever higher into the cloud forest on yet another minibus, and the temperature had dropped by 10° or more. After a month in high temperatures and even higher humidity it felt a lot cooler than that. We wearily disembarked the bus in Santa Elena (we didn’t realise for two days that we were staying in Santa Elena and not Monteverde!) and were ushered towards a hostel by some touts. With minimum effort we said that we didn’t want to pay more than $8 per person per night, and they told us that not only was it $7p.p.p.n but there was breakfast - and more importantly, coffee - included. We were sold!

After a cup of coffee we wrapped up and ventured out to have a look around the shops, and to price up a few activities we wanted to do. Santa Elena is a small town, but it is rather bustling and seemingly filled with adrenalin junkies, and with the surrounding area boasting death plunges, high wires, bungee jumping along with more mundane activities such as white water rafting, zip-lining and mountain biking it is easy to see why. As we wandered around I noticed a sign which read “jardin de colibri’s” which Kathi attempted to steer me away from, unfortunately for her I knew this meant “hummingbird garden” and couldn’t help but pop in for 10 minutes.

Up until this point hummingbirds had been these brief flashes of colour, lost to sight in a fraction of a second in the forest, but here they were just inches away in all their iridescent glory!

Left: Steely vented hummingbird Right: Violet sabrewing

In a few minutes we saw Steely vented, Rufous tailed and Stripe tailed hummingbird as well as Violet sabrewing, which was rivalling Resplendent Quetzal for sheer beauty. These were all present in the centre of town, and were an exciting precursor for what was to come.

After a long day travelling, and with yet another 6am start lined up, we bought hot chocolate and crepes, and headed back to the hostel for an early night.
For our first full day in Monteverde we had decided to visit the Selvatura skywalk reserve. This is one of the most popular attractions in the area, but we had decided that a canopy skywalk was one of the things that we must do during our trip. We had read some mixed reviews with regards to the park, but most of those referred to the zip-lining, which looked really quite fun.

We arrived just after half eight in the morning and I had already seen Emerald toucanet on the journey to the park, I was really looking forward to the day. We entered the park and made our way up the well-marked trail to the first skywalk (an iron bridge high above the canopy to the uninitiated). Some of the “classic” cloud forest species we had seen in Boquete were present here also; Slaty throated redstart, Yellowish flycatcher, Common bush tanager, Purple throated mountain gem and Swallow tailed kite were all seen in good numbers, but there were also exciting new species, seemingly every few metres; Spotted barbtail, Eye-ringed flatbill, Three striped and Golden crowned warblers and Black banded Woodcreeper.

The views we enjoyed from the bridges were fantastic. It was a unique experience to be above the canopy and looking down on the wildlife. Perhaps one of the biggest revelations was the diversity of both flowering plants and butterflies above the canopy level. This was the first time we had access to this aspect of the rainforest, and we were enjoying the sights and smells of the flora.
Further along the way, we could hear a **Resplendent Quetzal** calling in the distance, though it remained elusive. Whilst waiting to see it we could locate the Quetzal, Kathi alerted me to a black bird in the tree next to us – a cracking **Black guan**!

![Black guan](image)

*Black guan; not an easy bird to locate as this picture demonstrates!*  

We continued onwards along the trail, taking our time to look for wildlife, and also to let big family parties past. We did hear some groups complaining that they hadn’t seen much wildlife, but given the noise emitted by some of the people present that came as no surprise!

By the time we had reached the final trail, we had seen **Black solitaire, White winged kite, Sulphur rumped flycatcher** and another new species, **Slaty backed nightingale-thrush**.

![Slaty backed nightingale-thrush](image)

*Slaty backed nightingale-thrush; an extremely confiding individual*

We had had a really enjoyable day at Selvatura, and we were really impressed by the Skywalk, with its unique views over and above the canopy. The next day we had decided that we would head into the world renowned Reserva Biologica Monteverde, and explore the trails and the areas wildlife.
We awoke for yet another early start, today was a day that I had been looking forward to for the entire duration of the trip. I had high hopes for the day, and I wanted to see as many species as I possibly could. Kathi and I decided that we should split up for the morning, and meet again at lunch, and by doing this she could explore as much as possible without having to move glacially through the undergrowth!

The day started with a flash of colour, as I hung out by the hummingbird feeders for twenty minutes or so. First up was a Magnificent hummingbird, fully justifying its title. Equally impressive in both name and appearance was Green crowned brilliant. These were joined by Purple throated mountain-gem, Violet sabrewing, Green violet-ear and Coppery headed emerald. A truly fantastic start, and things were only going to get better as the day progressed. Time to hit the trails.

A flurry of activity revealed several Common bush tanager, Eye-ringed flatbill, three striped warbler, Black solitare, Collared redstart, Prong billed barbet and a Rufous winged Woodcreeper! Phew! I worked my way through the trails checking every bit of activity and listening out for calls. At the top of some very tall trees, I ’scoped several Golden browed Chlorophonia, which were associating with a small party of Elegant euphonia. It was a real shame that these birds were so high up, as they were out of reach of my camera. I continued further and saw both Collared and Slaty throated redstart, smoky brown woodpecker, silvery throated tanager (a real stunner of a bird), Spotted woodcreeper and a showy Spangle cheeked tanager. I also came across a pair of Grey breasted wood-wren, who produced a range of weird and wonderful calls as they hopped through the undergrowth.

At one point on the trail I came to a tree which had a number of hummingbirds moving about it, but not as a result of some flowers, but because there was some damage to the bark and a small amount of sap was seeping out. I watched as several species I had encountered earlier came in to feed, and eventually a new species appeared; Green hermit. This is a rather chunky hummer, which is mostly green with a white tail and a very long bill. The area revealed more birds; Plain ant-vireo, Orange billed and Black billed nightingale-thrushes, and yet more Common bush-tanagers and Slaty throated redstart. Somewhere off in the distance another Queztal called, but remained unseen. It was time to meet Kathi and have lunch.
After we had eaten we decided to check out the hummingbird gallery. At this point I would like to say that if you are lucky enough to find yourself in Monteverde, **DO** check out the gallery as it is an incredible experience. There were birds everywhere and the views of the hummingbirds are unlike anything I could have imagined. I’ll let my photos give you some idea of what the place is like:

![Above: Coppery headed emerald](image1)

![Left: Green crowned brilliant](image2)

![Right: Green violet-ear](image3)

Incredibly, the hummers are so intent on getting to the sugar feeders that they perch very close, and if you hold your hand close to the feeders they will actually perch on your finger and lap up the nectar. This provided us with unbelievably intimate encounters with the birds, and we were able to enjoy the birds plumage literally at our fingertips. This was an incredible experience and we felt very privileged to have had such a close encounter with these beautiful little creatures.

After the Hummingbird gallery, we decided that we would have a wander around a few of the other trails and attempt to locate snakes, as up to this point we hadn’t seen a single one! We wandered around and made our way towards a stunning waterfall right in the centre of the forest. We didn’t encounter any snakes unfortunately, but we did see a giant snail which was impressive.
On our way back we had one very lucky encounter with a very unlikely mammal, as the bus driver slowed down and motioned for everybody to look out and to the left. There running along the side of the road was a **Nine banded armadillo**! What a fantastic and unexpected sighting to end an incredible day in the field.

*2/8/2013 Monteverde, Costa Rica to Ometepe, Nicaragua*

After checking our funds the previous night, we had a bit of a shock. We had spent a rather huge chunk of our budget in the last fortnight, and now we were going to struggle to stay in budget. We decided that we would cut our losses and as we had done everything we wanted to do in Monteverde, we would make for Nicaragua where we hoped living would be a bit cheaper.

The next morning marked the earliest start of the trip. We woke up at 03:45 in order to get a bus at quarter past four in order to reach the border before the big rush at 10am. We descended down the mountain, still in darkness, and we were rewarded for our early start by a spectacular sunrise over the mountains.

We were dropped off at the Pan American highway, and told to wait for a bus heading north. By now it was half six, and I was desperate for the toilet. I decided that I would run across the road to a petrol station and use the facilities, leaving my bag with Kathi. As I entered the cubicle I somebody banged on the door and began shouting “Dan, Dan!” I burst out of the facilities and an American chap told me that he had come to fetch me as there was a bus waiting and was about to leave without me! I thanked the chap and we ran across the highway and straight onto the bus, just my luck!

Along the journey I noted a few birds outside; **Red winged blackbird, Black bellied whistling duck, Cattle egret** and **Green heron**. I thought that with such a huge journey to undertake today there would be little chance of any birds.

We arrived at the border at around half nine, and it took 2 hellish hours to make the crossing into Nicaragua, with several different people attempting to rip us off. We had to exchange our currency in the bus station in order to have the correct money to pay the entrance and mayoral taxes (which I wasn’t very happy about), and then we had to fight our way to a counter, there were no queues here! The heat and strong sunlight was bearing down on us as we waited at the Nicaraguan bus station, but two things lifted my spirits; firstly were several highly colourful hand painted buses in the bus station – rather sad, but I had hoped to ride on one of these! – and the second was a grackle that flew down to take a scrap of my empanada, a **Nicaraguan grackle**. The birds more black appearance and shorter tail gave the species away, but I spotted some pallid females nearby as well, just for confirmation.

We boarded the bus, and continued heading north for the port of David, from where we would head out into Lake Nicaragua and onto Isla Ometepe. First signs in Nicaragua proper were encouraging, with an hour long bus journey for the two of us costing under $3, then a 20 minute taxi ride to the dock cost us a whopping 50¢! Lunch and a couple of beers set us back another $3. This was more like it! Whilst we waited for the ferry to arrive I idly scanned the shore (I was having binocular withdrawal symptoms) and spotted a couple of **Laughing gull** loafing about on the trip, whilst further along the beach was a **Great egret**.
Great egret; Ometepe, Nicaragua

The boat journey over to Ometepe was rather exciting as we went for the budget option on the supplies boat for 70¢ each. We shared the craft with other dishevelled looking travellers, several huge sacks of potatoes and carrots, a few chickens and a few local folk. The lake was very rough and we were tossed up and down, so I opted for the window seat (I suffer from extreme sea-sickness) whilst Kathi slept to overcome her own bought of motion sickness. As it turned out I had picked the only seat on the boat which came with an added responsibility, as a hole the size of an apple transferred the contents of the lake into the boat, and more precisely into my trainers. I opted to sacrifice my comfort and wedge my foot into the hole to stop the systematic soaking, but instead picked up a nasty fungal infection on my feet. Great stuff!

All of our concerns and stresses faded away as the mystical form of Ometepe appeared through the rain. The island was formed when the area two giant volcanos was flooded. The volcanos are active, but we didn’t encounter any signs of activity except for at dawn and dusk when escaping gases could be seen hugging the peaks. Eventually the boat docked, and we boarded one of those magical painted buses, which even stopped so that Kathi could get cash out of the bank, escorted (naturally) by the driver! We had heard mixed reviews about Nicaragua, and our first impressions at the border had put us off a bit, but our Nicaraguan friends in Costa Rica told us we had to go. We encountered nothing but helpful friendly people on Ometepe and indeed in the other areas we travelled through, though obviously border crossings will always attract those looking to make money. Our bus set off, and in classic Central American style, took a very leisurely two and a half hours to travel the 22 miles to our intended destination, though given the condition of many of the roads, this was no surprise!

At five in the afternoon, some thirteen hours after we had left Monteverde, we collapsed into a pair of deck chairs with a litre of beer each and watched one of the most incredible sunsets we have ever witnessed. As the sun rolled down the side of the volcano and into the lake, we finished our beers and headed for bed after an exhausting day.
We awoke the next morning and I admit I was very happy to see my watch read 08:45, our first lie in for many days! We didn’t really have a plan for when we got to Ometepe, we had just heard it was a beautiful place and that there was plenty to do. We had a great breakfast of omelette, and chatting to the owner, he suggested that we might like to rent a canoe and head along the shore and to the wetlands. That sounded like an excellent suggestion, and within half an hour of eating breakfast, I was rowing the Kayak over the glass-like waters of the lake, whilst Kathi pretended to row and took photos...

This wetland area was a haven for wildlife, and besides the bird which I will detail shortly, we had some amazing encounters of Caiman, which appeared very relaxed towards our approach in a kayak. On several occasions we managed to get within a metre or so of one of these beautiful reptiles, and watched as they sunned themselves or sank below the surface. We also saw a terrapin species but only its head was visible above the water.

The avifauna was extremely confiding, with many species allowing approach to less than a metre. Ardeidae were very well represented with Great, Snowy and Cattle egret, Green, Night, Little blue, Bare throated tiger and Great blue herons all present and in very good numbers. Northern jacana and American purple gallinule performed well in the reeds, whilst Southern lapwing, Black necked stilt and Neotropical cormorants hung out on the muddy banks.

A family party of Smooth billed ani moved through the reeds, and inquisitively approached our craft to within just a foot or so. I hadn’t really appreciated these birds before, but now I was up close I could see they have a very characterful appearance, and look almost mischievous (If I can indulge my anthropomorphising self just for a second!) and were somewhat reminiscent of Starlings back home.

We did have a couple of fun encounters whilst in the canoe, as firstly I needed the toilet and Kathi had to anchor the craft to a tree whilst I knelt and urinated off of the back whilst eyeballing a Caiman! More ridiculous than that was when we somehow managed to get a submerged branch through one of the floatation holes and pin the canoe to the riverbed. There was a moment of extreme panic as Kathi said that a branch had come through a hole in the boat. Immediately I thought that the branch had pierced the vessel and that we were about to sink into the Caiman...
infested depths, but after some confused shouting, I realised that the hole was already there and that we were only stuck, rather than sinking. We waited and eventually a guide with a few tourists went by, and he bravely plunged his arm into the murky waters and released us, though there was much embarrassment and laughter all round.

We set off back as it was now beginning to cloud over, and we didn’t fancy being caught in a thunderstorm when we were in a canoe on a lake. As we were heading back I noticed a raptor perched in a dead tree at the side of the river, and took the opportunity to take a few shots of a juvenile Roadside hawk.

Roadside hawk; Isla Ometepe

By the time we arrived back, we had decided to move onto a more central location on the eastern end of the peninsula which joins the two volcanoes. The only problem was that we had missed the bus (once a day!) and now we were going to be unable to get anywhere. We decided that as there was a lovely view and cheap beer we would be more than happy to spend another night, and make tracks the next day.

Early the next morning we packed up our bags and set off for the road. Our host had been unable to tell us when the buses leave in a western direction, but he thought that there may be one along at around 9am, so we headed for the bus stop. We waited until about half past nine, by which point a man had told us that the next bus would be along at 2pm. We decided rather than getting stranded in this area we would begin to walk in the direction we were heading. Between us we were carrying the best part of 50kg, and progress was slow. An hour in we collapsed at the side of the road and had to have a break and a drink. As we sat there we could hear the strain of an engine heading our way, and after a five minute audio introduction, a painted ex US school bus crawled into view. We flagged the bus down and prepared to board, but it appeared we were out of luck, as the next bus heading west was at six AM the following day!

This left us feeling dejected, but we were halfway to our intended destination now, and we may as well carry on. Another hour in and the strains of another engine was audible, this time coming from behind us and heading our way. An American family pulled up alongside us, and said that we looked tired and also asked if we wanted a lift, what luck! We thanked them and climbed aboard their old
The kindness of strangers is an underrated thing indeed.

We opted to stay in a relatively new place, which was offering a private room and en suite for an amazing $10 per night for the two of us. It was perfectly situated and the room was clean, and the shower cold. We went across to the local bar and had Nicaraguan rum and spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing.

The next few days were a mixed bag, as rain became a persistent feature, though occasionally we snatched the odd morning or afternoon of sunshine. We hired bikes and visited a natural bath (Ojo de agua) and checked out local markets which was good fun, and on another day we had such heavy rainfall that we simply went across to our now regular bar, ordered a couple of bottles of rum and played cards with the locals for much of the day, great fun. I did catch up with a few species between the drinking and frivolity including; Common ground-dove, Inca dove, Nicaraguan grackle, Tricoloured heron, Yellow naped parrot and Hoffmann’s woodpecker. The most pleasurable pastime from a birding aspect was watching large numbers of Turkey vulture kettling together in the sky, then descending to squabble over road kill. I really came to enjoy these raptors with their velvety soft black plumage and their bright white under-wings.

Kettling Turkey vultures; Isla Ometepe
We decided that we would have a luxurious night at the *Finca Jardin Lodge*, from where we could explore the cloud forest on the volcano. This was a lovely place to stay, with impressive mature gardens filled with wildflowers and butterflies. The area was also pretty good for birds too, with *Bat falcon*, *Grey hawk*, *Blue grosbeak*, *Brown crested flycatcher*, *Spot breasted* and *Banded wren and Grey crowned yellowthroat* all observed.

*Bat falcon; Isla Ometepe*

*Spot breasted wren; Isla Ometepe*
Eventually our time in Nicaragua had come to an end, and we had decided that we would return to Costa Rica Wildlife Sanctuary and spend our last week there. We boarded the boat to take us back to the mainland and then from there over the border to San Jose and back to the Caribbean coast. We were treated to the sight of thousands of Barn swallow streaming south as we crossed the lake, with many groups of over 100 individuals flying low over the water, all heading in the same direction. We had had such an incredible time so far, that I had forgotten about the constant shifts in the cycles of the natural world, only to be reminded that some birds were already for their wintering quarters in Central and South America. Would our last week on the coast reveal any interesting and unexpected birds?


It had taken us 50 hours of travelling to get from Isla Ometepe to Moin, with an overnight stay in San Jose breaking up the journey. We had even ventured out into the city at night in order to try to find the Chinese district for some food (rice and beans for seven weeks gets a bit dull…) but we were unable to locate the area and had to settle for fast food.

We arrived at CRWS in the afternoon and we decided that the very first thing we wanted to do was to head to the beach and go for a dip. This turned out to be rather fortuitous from a birding point of view, as huge numbers of Northern and Rough winged swallows passed south in waves along the coast. This was a spectacular movement and I estimated that in 45 minutes some 10,000 individuals moved through. I also noted an Osprey which passed high south overhead and small groups of Sanderling and Grey plovers moving offshore, whilst a few Collared plover, Hudsonian whimbrel and a single American golden plover fed along the strandline.

The next morning it was obvious that it had rained overnight, so I decided to have a walk around the immediate area to look for any downed migrants. The first bird that attracted my attention was somewhat unexpected; a Band backed wren which is a secretive resident. I listened to the bird as it scolded a Squirrel cuckoo. Also moving about in the general area were Black striped and Orange billed sparrow, Long billed hermit, Passerini’s tanager and White collared manakin, but sadly no sign of any hoped-for North American migrants. I continued onto the beach and I was rewarded with American golden plover, Spotted sandpiper and Collared plover feeding along the strandline. It was time for breakfast and then onto duties, so any birding would have to wait until the afternoon.

Later on in the day whilst I was working, the call went round that one of the Capuchin’s had escaped, and as is usually the case we all scrambled to hide our belongings, as Simona has a penchant for collecting and hiding volunteers belongings! I went to look for her in an area where she usually turns up next to a muddy pool, and I had the briefest of glimpses of an olive and white passerine as it shot off into the undergrowth, sadly I couldn’t follow that up as I had found Simona and had a firm grip on her tail… Later on I returned to the pool and I was not entirely shocked to see that the passerine I’d seen earlier was a waterthrush sp, but which one? I initially identified the bird as Northern waterthrush, but as it was still present the next day I ‘scoped the bird and noted an unspotted white chin, a supercilium which was broader behind than in-front of the eye and a buff suffusion which extended down the flanks and onto the undertail coverts… this was a Louisiana waterthrush!
Louisiana waterthrush; scarce passage migrant to the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica

The following day whilst taking (albeit terrible) photos of the waterthrush, I noted a few species of interest in the immediate area; Red throated ant-tanager, Nicaraguan seedfinch and several Golden naped tanager all performed well in the understory, though the light was rather too low for photographs of these species. A quick look over the coast produced the same suite of species, but a Hudsonian whimbrel was also loosely associating with the waders. The next few days produced a Northern Barred woodcreeper on the 13/08/13, whilst a huge movement of swifts and hirundines on the next day produced Barn and Cliff swallow, Grey rumped, Chimney and Lesser swallow-tailed swifts in addition to good numbers of Grey breasted martin.

Mangrove swallow at Bocas del Toro; One of many hirundines seen during the trip

One of the experiences of the trip occurred during the final few days at the sanctuary, when we received a call that the police had raided a poacher’s house in Limon, and they had managed to rescue six adult Green turtle, though sadly two were in such a terrible state that they had to be euthanized, and they were on their way to us so that we could assess them ready before they could be released. The turtles arrived mid-afternoon, and appeared to be in relatively good condition with the exception of an eye infection and holes in each flipper where they had been bound. It was
decided to keep the turtles overnight whilst Vanessa (who runs the sanctuary) arrived from San Jose to assess them before release early the next morning. We spoke to the coastguards and police who had attended the scene and they described in detail what they had found, and what local poachers practice.

The next paragraph details what they told us, and although some may find it gratuitously detailed. **Be aware what is detailed below will be distressing, but nonetheless it is important that people understand what is happening to these beautiful creatures should they be unfortunate enough to find themselves in the clutches of poachers.**

The scene at the house was horrific. Those turtles still alive had been kept in a child’s swimming pool which had been filled with sea water. The water was green as it hadn’t been refreshed, and had filled with excrement and algae. Two of the turtles had succumbed to such a terrible level of infection that the only humane thing to do was euthanize them **in situ.** All the turtles had holes drilled through their flippers using an electric drill, and then were bound using nylon ropes to stop them struggling. The coastguards believe that some of the turtles had been “stored” like this for over a week. None had been fed, but had received water via a drip. On a nearby table was what appeared to be a large bowl filled with blood and entrails, which upon closer inspection proved to be a turtle’s shell. The animal had been turned onto its back and hollowed out, possibly while it was still alive in order to keep the meat as fresh as possible. We were also told about the practices carried out on pregnant turtles. These are caught just as they are about to lay, then their cloaca is sewn up, in order to keep the eggs inside. The animal is taken back, where the chest cavity it opened using a coping saw. The eggs are extracted whilst the animal is still alive so that freshness of the eggs and meat can be ensured.

All of the practices detailed above were undertaken at just this one location, and it is estimated that as many as 12,000 turtles fall victim to poaching each year.

Early the next morning the press had been informed that we were due to release the turtles. The involvement of the press is pivotal to turtle conservation, and it is a useful tool to portray both positive and negative aspects of what is happening in Costa Rica. The release was always going to be an emotionally charged affair, as all of the volunteers had been directly involved in the rescue and release. All four turtles were transported down onto the beach, and returned to the sea to a rapturous applause. The last 12 hours had been an emotional rollercoaster, but we were elated to see them return to their element, and seeing the turtles pause as the surf washed over them was a moment none of us will ever forget. If the coastguards and the police had not interfered none of these animals would have felt the water immerse them again.

The final day of the trip had arrived, and I spent some time in the early morning in one last effort to enjoy the avifauna. The only new birds I located on my last day were **Yellow bellied** and **Alder/Willow flycatchers** (more migrants), though I also enjoyed my last views of **Montezuma oropendola,** Eye-ringed flycatcher, Black cowled oriole, Black cheeked woodpecker, Palm, Golden hooded and **Blue-grey tanagers,** Collared acari, Clay coloured robin, Chestnut backed antbird, **Collared swift,** **turkey vultures** and many more.
Over the course of the eight weeks I had observed over 300 species of bird, including a number of endemics. We had experienced plenty of wildlife and culture first hand, and we had seen the pure beauty of the pristine ecosystems that are present in these three diverse countries. It was the trip of a lifetime, and I cannot recommend at least one trip to this area highly enough.

The big question now is; where to next?