FAR AFIELD
by Linda Gartz

Birding Immersion
Costa Rica

When I left for Costa Rica to join my birding enthusiast friend, Katy, I didn't know the difference between a flycatcher and a thrush. The names tanager, manakin, and trogon might just as well have been Swahili, and "rufous" was a word for which I had no reference. I was an innocent—a virgin birder. But because Costa Rica is a nature lover's paradise where a stunning 28 percent of the land is protected, I learned in a spectacular environment.

I have returned after a week in Costa Rica not only wiser in the ways of exotic birds, but with a life list of more than 130 different species. For the novice who would like a crash course in birding—who would like to be totally sucked into the joys of stalking, hearing, finding, and identifying scores of birds—nothing can beat a week in Costa Rica.

We planned our trip for the first week in May simply because that worked best with our kids' schedules. Katy had organized the trip to go to two renowned birding locations. The first was Rancho Naturalista, a three-hour drive from San Jose to the premontane rainforest in the Caribbean zone at 3,000 feet.

Our second birding destination was Savegre Hotel de Montaña, located in San Gerardo de Dota, a small community in the Talamanca Mountains, three hours from Rancho Naturalista. At an elevation of 7, 220 feet, it is considered a cloud forest and home to

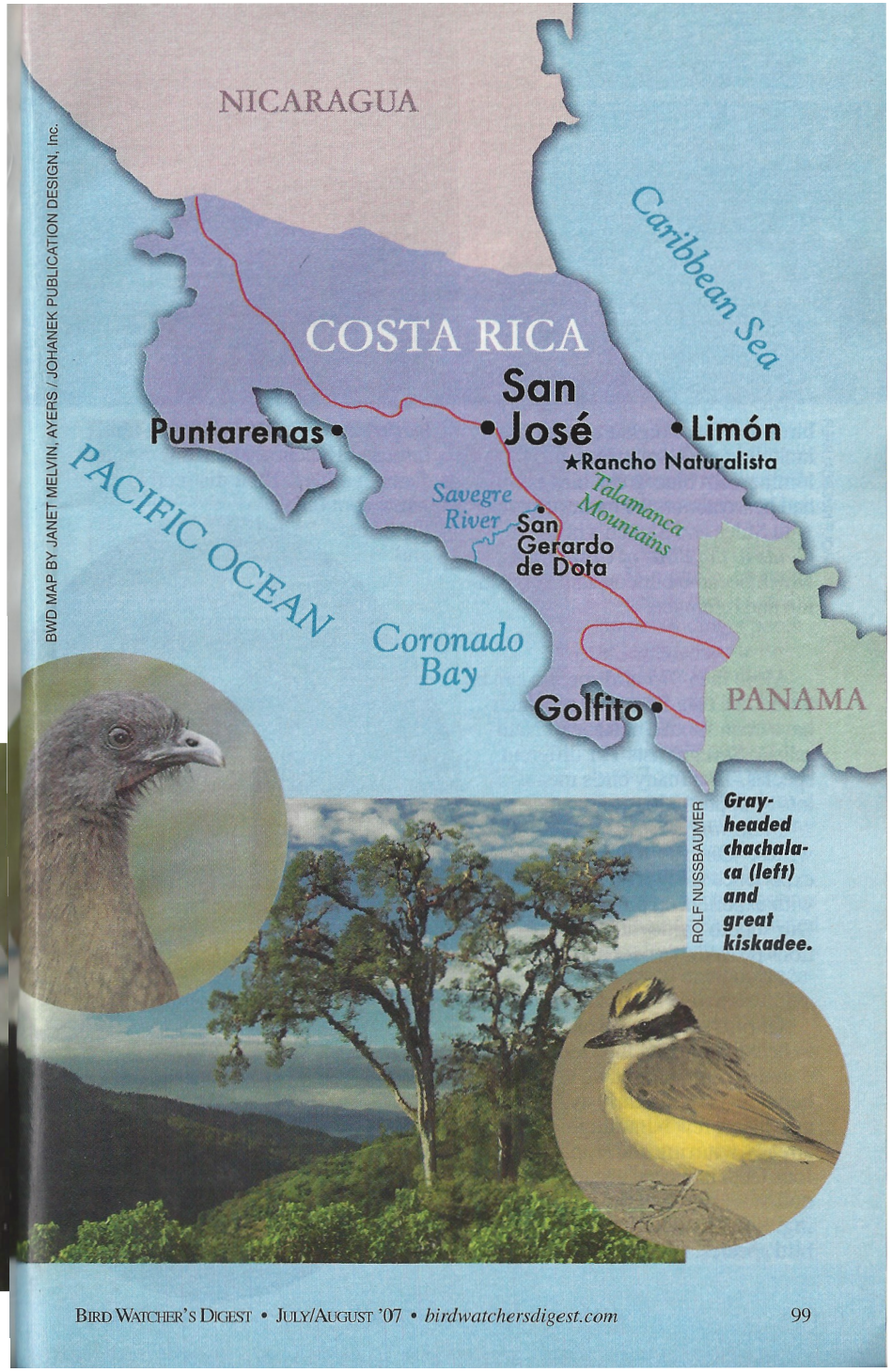
MARIE READ

A white-necked Jacobin (one of Costa Rica's many hummingbirds) sips nectar from a flower.

GLENN BARTLEY

A Costa Rican valley; a spectacular example of the country's diverse habitats. Costa Rica boasts more than 875 bird species.

BWD MAP BY JANET MELVIN, AYERS / JOHANEK PUBLICATION DESIGN, Inc.



ROLF NUSSBAUMER

Gray-headed chachalaca (left) and great kiskadee.

ROLF NUSSBAUMER

DAVID FERRY/KAC PRODUCTIONS

Far left: A jungle walkway. Middle: A ferruginous pygmy-owl. Near left: The dry grassland of the Guanacaste Province in Costa Rica.

birds that favor higher elevations, including the resplendent quetzal—a luminescent blue-green bird even I had heard about. We came armed with Stiles and Skutch's book, *A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica*, which became our constant companion and reference.

Why Costa Rica?

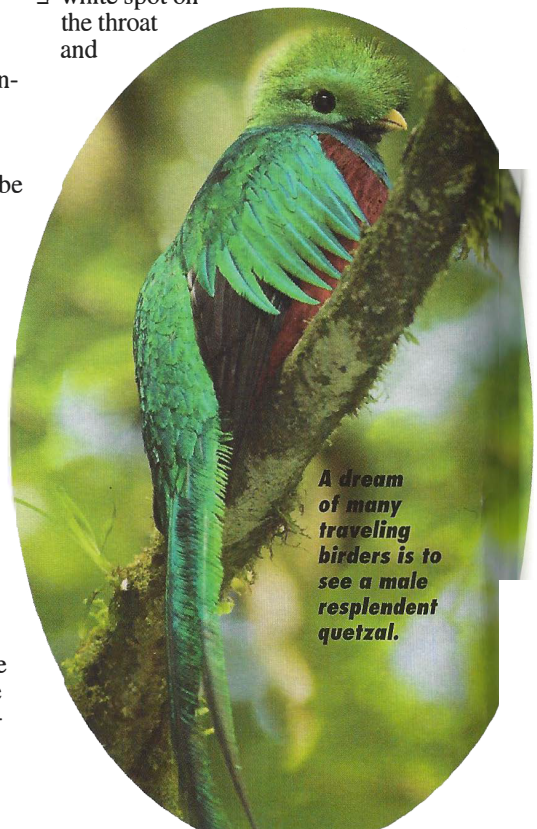
More than 875 bird species can be found in Costa Rica, 400 of which have been spotted at Rancho Naturalista; Savegre lists 171 different species. That many birds means lots of opportunities to practice.

In *Birding Basics*, David Sibley writes, "One shortcut to gaining experience is to go out in the field with experienced bird-watchers." Our superb guides at both locations proved this over and over.

Rancho Naturalista

Our first day, we awoke at 4:30 to beat the birds to the feeding station. In the gray light we saw the beginnings of the early avian arrivals. A few hummingbirds were already whirring and sipping at the four feeders placed around the second-story porch of the main building. Katy knew several hummingbird species, and the first one she helped me name was the most ubiquitous at Rancho—the white-necked Jacobin males. Their distinctive white spot on the throat and gallant display of mostly white tail feathers, spread out like a twirling skirt when they hovered, made them the easiest to identify.

LARRY DITTO



A dream of many traveling birders is to see a male resplendent quetzal.

The brown violetear hummingbird looked just brown until the rising sun revealed its eponymous marking—a dash of violet on each side of its head that protruded like little purple ears when the bird was defensive.

Feeding Frenzy

Our guide, Herman Vanégas, met us on the main building's porch at breakfast time (all meals are included at Rancho, and the food is plentiful, fresh, and deliciously prepared). It was 7 a.m., and we began peppering him with questions, starting with the hummingbirds. It wasn't long before we were tossing out names like crowned woodnymph, green-breasted mango, green hermit, and one of our favorites, the tiny (2½ inches) snowcap.

Below us, on several short trees with horizontally splayed branches, Rancho's staff had laid out dozens of plantains for the scores of birds that came to peck and pull

If You Go

We booked this entire birding trip through Costa Rica Gateway (**costaricagateway.com**) info at:
crgateway@racsa.co.cr
Phone: 888-246-8513
Fax: (011-506) 433-4925

Rancho Naturalista, southeast of San Jose in the central Caribbean foothills:
ranchonaturalista.net
Phone: 888-246-8513; book through Costa Rica Gateway, per website

Savegre Hotel de Montaña, located in San Gerardo de Dota:
savegre.co.cr
Phone: 506-740-1028
Fax: 506-740-1027

Clothing: Think layers; we went the first week in May, the beginning of the rainy season, but had only a day of rain. It's much less crowded than the more popular earlier "high season" times.

Temperate climate in the foothills; take zip-off pants that become shorts; T-shirts, tank tops, and light jacket for morning to remove later; backpack to store water and extra clothing. Lightweight waterproof (Gor-Tex) hiking boots are important. Even groomed trails have exposed roots, and, especially on Cerro Silencio, the ground was very rough, often muddy, and uneven with hidden holes from cows' hooves.

Savegre is in the mountains and much cooler. We needed fleece jackets or vests most of the day; raingear is a must.—*L.G.*

GLENN BARTLEY

at the fruit. It was a perfect introduction to identifying birds. In my first hour of birding we saw more than two dozen species right there at the feeders.

The most common birds feeding on the plantains were the Montezuma oropendolas, so named for the pendulous nests they build that look like long sacks (up to six feet), and the gray-headed chachalaca, a brownish bird about the size of a chicken and with a similar strut.

I was introduced to my first flycatchers and tanagers, a great kiskadee with its plump yellow belly and white feathers forming a crown around its otherwise black head, a white-crowned parrot, a black-cheeked woodpecker, and a masked tityra, to name just a few.

Being close to birds that basically stayed in one location for minutes made learning easy. We could get a sense of the way they moved and to see them from different angles. It gave our guide a chance to talk about them in detail. I was beginning to absorb the vocabulary of a birder.

On the Trail with an Expert

Every day was total immersion in practicing the skills needed to bird watch. It was rather like a hunting expedition. We moved quietly and stealthily, always listening and scanning the foliage for movement. We often lured our prey with taped bird songs or calls, and we shouldered scope and binoculars to get a bird in our sights. But without Herman we would have been at a total loss.

Being in the company of an expert was key to my learning and enthusiasm for the hobby. Herman knew where to find the birds; he was familiar with their calls, their habits and habitats. Frustration was reduced (but not eliminated) as we saw most birds we sought, and Herman always knew their names.

Bird Calls

Most often when Herman found a bird, it was because he heard it first. Lesson learned: Recognizing calls is a crucial skill in becoming a successful birder. At first the air seemed filled with disparate trills, whistles, tweets, and songs, but after repeatedly hearing some of the bird songs, I actually began to differentiate. The sound of a large twig cracking was the song of the white-crowned manakin. A single whistle alerted Herman that a dark pewee wasn't far away. A gurgling plopping sound, rather like large drops of water dripping into a metal water-filled bowl meant that a Montezuma oropendola was near.

To attract a bird he had heard, Herman played a tape recording of its call. Listening over and over, we became better at recognizing the songs, but I was a long way from competence. The white-breasted wood wren is the bane of the bird listener—it has eight different calls. I never got that one straight.

Field Marks

On our third day we headed up Cerro Silencio (Silent Mountain) hoping to catch sight of the lovely cotinga (the name alone had a magical ring) and perhaps a resplendent quetzal, both of whom prefer higher elevations.

With each bird identified, I learned more about field marks, those detailed traits that distinguish one bird from another. We headed up through pasture before the sun broke the mountaintop and identified our first bird—a tawny-capped euphonia. I learned to love the capped birds, so jaunty and cool with their stylish and colorful chapeaus, so aptly described and a key to identification.

Later we saw a rufous-collared sparrow. By this time I could apply the term "rufous" with conviction, and moved on to zeroing in on the notable field markings: striped wings, gray belly, and, of course, rufous collar. It was starting to sink in.

In quick succession we saw a yellow-bellied elaenia (I learned it was a kind of flycatcher), a slaty spinetail (rufous crown and wings), and a male tropical parula (we noted his yellow belly, black mask, and bicolored bill. I also learned that he's a species of warbler, which meant he never sat still). The male golden-browed chlorophonia was a cheery treat. This stout little guy has a bright yellow streak above his eyes—the supercilium (a good addition to a novice birder's vocabulary). He was colored as if someone grabbed a can of sky blue paint and daubed it on his head, then stroked yellow above his eyes and on his belly, and finally, mixed the two cans to make a clear green and painted his back, tail, and throat.

We moved from boggy pasture to dense jungle where we crossed gurgling streams on slick rocks and fallen trunks, finally arriving at an open pasture. We gratefully sat down on the bumpy ground to eat not far from a group of cows and their calves. We spotted a tropical flycatcher and noted the wing bars (another new word that I got to practice over and over during the week).

We came to love the flycatchers, and observed more than 20 species on our trip including yellowish, ochre-bellied, tufted, tawny-chested, and olive-sided. Usually perched on top branches, they stayed still a long time for us to observe their field marks, then dashed off to catch an insect before returning to the same spot. Lesson learned: Bird behavior is a big clue to bird identification.

We met the farmer of this land, Marvin, who told us the lovely cotinga and quetzals weren't nesting there this year. The avocado trees they fed from hadn't done well. We were only slightly disappointed. After all, we had seen so much.

On the long trek down the mountain we saw a red-faced spinetail and a paltry tyrannulet with yellow wing bars, more flycatchers, and the masked tityra again. We relived our hiking and birding adventure over dinner and prepared to leave Rancho the next day.

On Wednesday afternoon we said goodbye to Herman from whom we'd learned so much and began our three-hour drive to the higher elevation of Savegre de la Montaña.

Savegre de la Montaña

The next day, after a 6:30 breakfast, we met our legendary guide, Marino Chacón, whose father had discovered this mountain valley in the 1950s. At 53, Marino combined the savvy and knowledge of a man who began learning about the birds at age 17 with the enthusiasm of a kid. He was a walking index to every bird we saw, calling out its plate and number from memory in our *Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica*.

On our first day we joined a group of three other birders and drove up to 8,000 feet. At this elevation, we no longer were in jungle as we had been

Habits and Habitats

As we crossed the bridge over the churning Savegre River, we saw two birds whose names reflect their affinity for water. The American dipper sat on rocks by the stream, hopping around for insects. Moments later we saw the torrent tyrannulet, a tiny bird sitting on a big rock flicking its tail, then making bold sallies perilously close to the surging water in quest of its prey. These birds prefer hunting insects near water, so we wouldn't have mistaken them for anything similar that prefers, say, hunting from trees or eating berries.

We saw many aptly named spotted-crowned woodcreepers poking around for insects in the clinging moss or tree bark. It was impossible to get a scope on them because they darted so swiftly from one spot to another, sometimes hanging upside down on limbs, sometimes moving horizontally or vertically, busily foraging.

The Resplendent Quetzal

Marino knew just where to look for the resplendent quetzal. This land that Marino's father had discovered and nurtured 50 years ago is now a natural preserve. About 20 quetzal pairs nest here, and Marino knew the location of at least one nest. We had our hopes set on seeing perhaps one quetzal but we got way more than we bargained for.

At the nest—a hole about 20 feet up the side of a tree trunk—there were no quetzals in sight. "We will wait," Marino said. "They will come to feed the babies. The male and female take turns." About 15 minutes later, in flew the female quetzal, perching on a branch about 20 feet away from the nest. Her colors were iridescent, sometimes emerald green, sometimes blue-green as her covert feathers wrapped around her breast like widespread fingers. We stared at her in awe for as long as 10 minutes. She seemed to be posing regally, as if to say, "Yes, I am truly gorgeous; admire me." We moved around for a more frontal view and saw the white and black stripes on the underside of her tail and the bright red on her belly.

Minutes after she flew away, the male flew in, startling in his beauty. His magnificent tail hung iridescent blue-green as he, too, sat for minutes. When he lifted off, he moved through the air like a kite, his body and tail undulating in graceful, glittering green waves. The parents returned repeatedly, bringing first a dragonfly, then a beetle, then a grub to feed their babies, always pausing first for minutes on a nearby tree. When the male finally disappeared into the nest, his tail hung out like a shimmery ribbon.

More Birds and Perseverance

After our quetzal fest, we felt we had seen one of the world's most glorious birds. But Marino actually got more excited about birds he hadn't expected to find for us, like the ferruginous pygmy-owl. He heard it calling *whoo, whoo, whoo* and called back. The nervous chatter from other birds was another tipoff for where to look. "They're upset because of the owl," Marino said. We followed him down hills and up, stopping and listening, Marino making owl calls for a good 20 minutes until we came to a clearing.

"I've got it!" He beckoned to us with urgency and enthusiasm.

at Rancho Naturalista, where we dressed in shorts and T-shirts. Here we wore fleece. Palms with leaves the size of tabletops were few, and trees tended to be deciduous. Moss and ferns were still common, but not as abundant. "Let's stay in this open area," Marino advised. "It's easier to see the birds." He was right. A couple minutes later we spotted a band-tailed pigeon and an olive-sided flycatcher. Marino identified the musical song of the ruddy-capped nightingale-thrush. Within moments, Marino had found him, and all binoculars snapped into focus on its cute rusty crown.

As we moved to another open space, we saw an acorn woodpecker, who sat cooperatively for minutes on the top of a dead tree branch so we could observe every feature. Its red forehead and crown were obvious at first glance, but the extra time meant I could notice the white wing patch and rump and the streaked breast. I was beginning to feel more competent.

Field Marks at Savegre

Marino was determined that we would not just see a bird, but would identify its essential field marks. In the afternoon we were making our way to a quetzal nest when Marino stopped near a mass of bushes. "A yellow-thighed finch. You see it?" he asked. "Look for the yellow thighs." Many times I caught a glimpse of the bird, but not the yellow thighs. He kept after us. After about five attempts, I saw puffy thighs as yellow as a ripe banana—the only speck of color on this all black bird. I'll never forget them.

"Come, come, come. Oh, this is a good bird. So unusual to see it at this elevation." And he trained his scope high up in a tree. The owl sat there, like a brown-and-beige puffball, only six inches high, turning its head 180 degrees and causing a ruckus among its would-be prey. Marino's perseverance had paid off.

The trip provided the unexpected, like the owl, and the expected, like parakeets. I learned that parakeets tend to fly in flocks, usually screeching as they go, so pretty soon I'd look up, train my binoculars, and shout out, "Sulphur-winged parakeets." We saw emerald toucanets (a mostly green tiny version of a toucan) eating fruit in the trees, and a buff-fronted quail-dove, which Marino said he hadn't seen there in years. But for me everything was new, from the birds themselves to learning the joys of birding.

Shortly after my return to the Chicago area, I was leaving a bakery one morning when my ears picked up the distinctive sound of bird song. It was a series of lovely notes moving all over the scale range. I scanned the tree planted on the sidewalk until I saw a diminutive bird, brown-striped belly, and a beautiful red throat. Another similar in size but without the red throat landed nearby. "Probably the female," I thought. I tried to memorize the markings so I could look it up when I got home. "I'll have to bring along binoculars next time I go out," I said to myself. I paused to ponder my new way of thinking. Birding immersion had taken hold.

Linda Gartz is a writer, and documentary and video producer who lives in Evanston, Illinois.