Birding Costa Rica

A short guide to the birds, the zones and the trip



Birding COSTA RICA

From the team at My Costa Rica, in San José since 2004 · birdingcostarica.com



A birder in the cloud forest

How to use this guide

Most birding guides to Costa Rica are lists. This one is short on purpose. It tells you which ten birds people cross an ocean for and where we actually find them, what to bring, what a birding trip here looks like in nights and bases, and which lodges we use. The full list of the country's birds, all 944 of them, is a separate checklist you can print and take with you. It is waiting in your birding account, beside this guide.

We are not a tour company with a bus and a departure date. We are a destination management company based in Costa Rica, building custom trips since 2004, and birders have always been part of that. Everything in here comes from our own team and the trips we plan every week. Where a fact is somebody else's, like the official species list, we say whose.

Inside

1	Ten birds worth the trip	3
2	Ten things that make the birding better	5
3	What a birding trip here looks like	6
4	The lodges we use, by zone	7
5	Questions birders ask us	8
6	How we plan your trip	9

SECTION 1

Ten birds worth the trip

The same ten we have put in front of birders since 2017, with the names as the official list writes them today. Each one says where we go to find it. Costa Rica has 944 species on the official list and these are not the rarest, they are the ones that make a first trip.



Resplendent Quetzal *(Pharomachrus mocinno, resident)*

The bird most of our birding clients open the conversation with. A trogon, the biggest one here, the male with a red breast and tail streamers that can be longer than the rest of the bird. We send people to San Gerardo de Dota in the Highlands, where the guides work the wild avocado trees the quetzals feed on and know this season's fruiting trees. Monteverde is the other place many people first see one. With a guide, all year, best in the nesting season.



Keel-billed Toucan *(Ramphastos sulfuratus, resident)*

The toucan on every poster, with the rainbow bill. The Caribbean Lowlands and Arenal are where we see them most, usually in the morning at the top of a bare tree. One of six toucans on the Costa Rican list; the Yellow-throated Toucan, bigger and darker, is often on the same branch.



Scarlet Macaw *(Ara macao, resident)*

Loud, red, and flying in pairs. Carara National Park and the Tárcoles River on the Central Pacific are where we take people for them, and the Osa Peninsula further south has them in numbers. You hear them before you see them.



Long-tailed Manakin *(Chiroxiphia linearis, resident)*

A small black bird with a sky-blue back and two long tail feathers, famous for the dance two males perform side by side for one female. The dry forest of Guanacaste and the Nicoya Peninsula is its home on our side of the country.



Red-headed Barbet *(Eubucco bourcierii, resident)*

A stocky little bird of the wet foothills, the male with a red head that looks painted on. Rancho Naturalista in the Caribbean Foothills is where our clients most often get it, at the feeders.



Lesson's Motmot *(Momotus lessonii, resident)*

The 2017 guide called this the Blue-crowned Motmot. The official list split that bird years ago and ours is now Lesson's Motmot, so if your field guide is older than the name, it is the same bird. Common in the Central Valley, including gardens around San José, and the bird with the racket-shaped tail that swings like a pendulum.



Violet Sabrewing *(Campylopterus hemileucurus, resident)*

The biggest hummingbird you will see here, a deep violet male that owns the feeder it chooses. Cloud forest and highland lodges, San Gerardo de Dota and Monteverde among them.



Three-wattled Bellbird *(Procnias tricarunculatus, resident, a regional endemic)*

Three wattles hanging from the bill and a call like a hammer on an anvil that carries across a valley. You hear it long before you see it. A bird of the cloud forest, Monteverde above all, that moves to lower ground part of the year.



Snowcap *(Microchera albocoronata, resident, a regional endemic)*

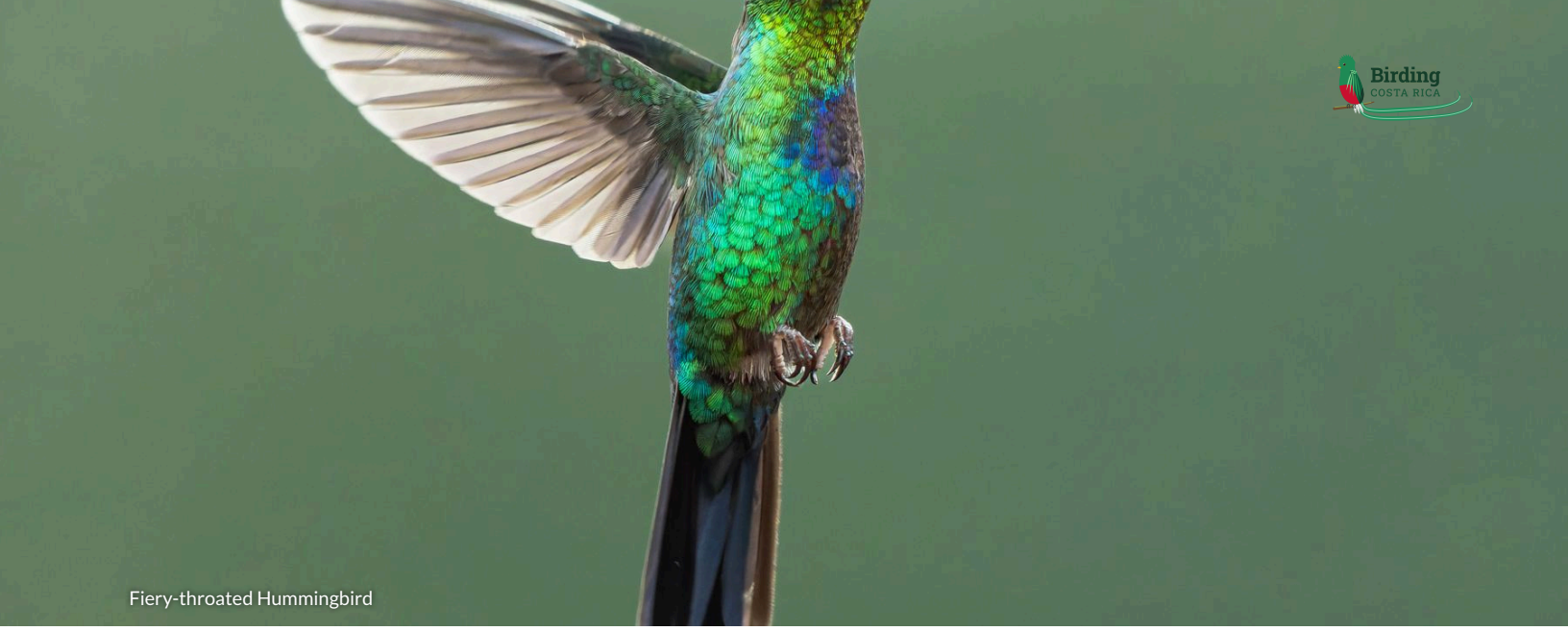
A tiny wine-coloured hummingbird with a white cap. Rancho Naturalista is the place: the forest pools below the lodge where it comes to bathe late in the afternoon.



Ornate Hawk-Eagle *(Spizaetus ornatus, resident)*

The crested eagle of the wet forest, and the one bird on this list you cannot plan for. The Osa Peninsula and the Caribbean Foothills give the best chances; a guide who knows the territories is the difference.

Names and status from the Lista Oficial de las Aves de Costa Rica 2025-2026, June 2026 update, by the AOCR's Comité Científico. "Regional endemic" is the list's END flag: endemic to Costa Rica and the region, not to Costa Rica alone.



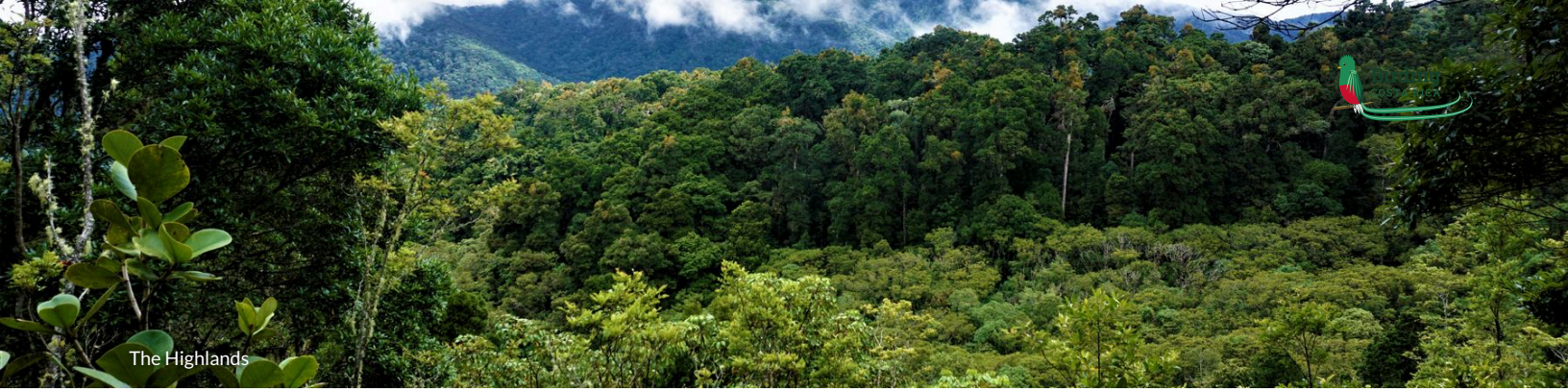
Fiery-throated Hummingbird

SECTION 2

Ten things that make the birding better

The 2017 list, cut to what we would actually say to you on the phone.

1. **Binoculars you trust.** This is the one piece of kit worth money. A guide's scope does the rest.
2. **A field guide, on paper or on your phone**, and look at the plates on the plane. Half of finding a bird is knowing what you are looking for.
3. **Fruit feeders and flowering trees.** Our lodges put bananas out before sunrise. Sit by them with your coffee and the birds come to you.
4. **Let the guide carry the scope.** Every guide we book has one. You do not need to fly with your own unless you want to.
5. **A camera you can lift all day.** Long days, humid air, early light. Bring what you will actually carry.
6. **Keep a list.** The checklist that goes with this guide has a tick box, a date and a place for every one of the 944 species.
7. **Book the guide.** A local birding guide knows the calls, this week's fruiting trees and the territory of the hawk-eagle. On your own you will see birds; with a guide you will see the ones you came for.
8. **Learn ten calls before you come.** The bellbird, the oropendola, the toucan. You hear most birds here before you see them.
9. **Apps with sound.** Load them before you fly; the forest has no signal.
10. **Start early and stop by ten.** The birds are busiest in the first three hours of light. So is our driver, which is why he leaves when you say.



The Highlands

SECTION 3

What a birding trip here looks like

Costa Rica is small enough to drive across in a day and varied enough that the birds change every hour of the drive. We work it as five zones: the Highlands, the Caribbean Foothills, the Caribbean Lowlands, the Northern Pacific Lowlands, and the Central and Southern Pacific Lowlands. A good birding trip is two or three of them in ten to twelve nights, each stop three nights so you get two full dawns in the same forest.

The shapes below are the trips our birding clients ask for most, and each began as a trip we built for someone. Nights and bases, not fixed departures: the dates, the lodges and the pace are yours. The first and last night are in the Central Valley, near the airport.

Highlands and the Central Pacific, 9 nights. San Gerardo de Dota for the quetzal, then down to the Pacific for Carara, the Tárcoles mangroves by boat and the Scarlet Macaws. The classic first birding trip, and the one with the easiest roads.

Three eco-zones, 11 nights. The Caribbean Foothills at Rancho Naturalista and the Río Tuis valley, the Highlands at San Gerardo de Dota, then Carara and the Tárcoles on the coast. Hummingbirds, the quetzal and the macaws in one trip, with the biggest list of the five.

The Northern Zone, 11 nights. Arenal, the wetlands of Caño Negro near the Nicaraguan border, then across to the dry side for Palo Verde and the Tempisque River. Water birds, storks and spoonbills, and the Arenal forest.

The Nicoya Peninsula, 11 nights. Poás and the Central Valley first, Arenal, then Palo Verde and the Nicoya coast to finish. The dry-forest birds, the Long-tailed Manakin and the motmots, and a beach at the end for whoever came with you.

The Caribbean Lowlands, 11 nights. Rancho Naturalista, the south Caribbean coast for the forest and the raptor migration ridge at Keköldi, then Tortuguero by boat and a last stop in the Braulio Carrillo foothills. The wettest trip and the greenest.

Top spots, coast to coast, 11 nights. Tortuguero, Sarapiquí, Arenal and Carara. Four of the country's best-known birding places in one line across the country, and the shape we build most often for a first visit that wants a bit of everything.

Flying into Liberia instead of San José opens the dry side first and the Guanacaste beaches at the end; tell us where you would like to end up and we will tell you which airport makes sense. Nine or ten days holds three zones. A week holds two.



The Caribbean Foothills

SECTION 4

The lodges we use, by zone

The Highlands. Trogon Lodge and Savegre Lodge in San Gerardo de Dota, Paraíso Quetzal Lodge up on the ridge, Quelitales for Tapantí.

The Caribbean Foothills. Rancho Naturalista, with the feeders on the balcony at dawn, and Casa Turire.

The Caribbean Lowlands. Arenal Observatory Lodge, on its own 350-hectare reserve next to Arenal Volcano National Park. Selva Verde Lodge in Sarapiquí. Laguna del Lagarto at Boca Tapada. Selva Bananito on the south Caribbean coast.

The Northern Pacific Lowlands. Rancho Humo Estancia on its own reserve at Palo Verde, and Tango Mar on the Nicoya coast for the end of a trip.

The Central and Southern Pacific Lowlands. Cerro Lodge and Macaw Lodge at Carara. Cristal Ballena and La Cusinga on Bahía Ballena. Hacienda Barú at Dominical. Esquinas Rainforest Lodge at Piedras Blancas.

What we look for in a birding lodge is simple: feeders and trails on the property, so the birding starts from the balcony, and a guide who lives nearby. A lodge that reads well online may be an hour of bad road from the forest it promises, and that is the kind of thing we know because we drive it.

SECTION 5

Questions birders ask us

How many species are there?

The official list, kept by the Asociación Ornitológica de Costa Rica, stands at 944 species on its June 2026 update. Of those, 655 are marked resident and 222 as migrants that spend part of the year here, with 105 flagged as endemic to Costa Rica and the region. The checklist that goes with this guide is that list, every species, in the AOCR's own order.

Which families should I expect?

Fifty-two hummingbirds, 19 of them regional endemics. Six toucans, from the Northern Emerald-Toucanet to the Keel-billed. Nine trogons, the quetzal among them. Six motmots. Eighteen parrots and macaws. Fifty-one tanagers and 51 New World warblers, most of the warblers migrants. Those are counts from the official list by family, not our guess.

When is the best time?

All year, honestly. Resident birds are here every month. The northern migrants pass through from August to December and again from January to May on their way back, so a trip in those windows adds the warblers and the raptors on the move. December to April is the dry season on the Pacific side; the Caribbean keeps its own calendar. If your dates touch a busy week like Easter or Christmas, you are right to be planning now.

Do I need a guide?

You can bird on your own at any lodge we use. But a local guide finds in a morning what takes a visitor a week, and for the quetzal, the hawk-eagle and most of the hummingbirds we book one every time. We contract the guides directly.

I am a birder, my partner is not. Does that work?

It is one of the trips we build most. The lodges we use have pools, hot springs or a beach nearby, the driver stops wherever you ask, and we put the non-birding days where they do the most good. Say so on the form and we plan for two people, not one.

How many nights do I need?

Three nights in a zone gives you two full dawns there. A week holds two zones, ten days holds three. Longer than twelve nights and most people want a beach at the end.

Which airport?

San José for the Highlands, the Caribbean and the Pacific south. Liberia for the dry side and the Guanacaste beaches. Have you looked into flights yet, or is there an airport you have in mind? Tell us and we will advise.

What do I need to bring?

Binoculars, a field guide, boots you have already walked in, a rain layer whatever the month, and the checklist. The rest, the scope, the local knowledge, the 5am driver, is what you book us for.

How does booking work?

Every trip is a custom quote: lodges, private transfers, guided birding days and the airport welcome built into one price for the trip. The deposit at booking is 25 percent and the rest is due before you travel; the dates and policies are in the client agreement we send you, and we recommend travel insurance.



Scarlet Macaw

SECTION 6

How we plan your trip

I first came to Costa Rica in 1999 with a paper map and the public bus, and I opened My Costa Rica in December 2004 because people kept asking me how to see the country properly. Twenty-two years on, the company is a licensed Costa Rican destination management company with its office in San José, over 25,000 travellers so far, and a team here that holds every booking while you travel.

I say this a lot and I think it is true: the planning is the easy half. The hard part is what our team does while you are in the country, and we are on call 24/7 for it.

Tell us what is on your list. A few minutes on the form at birdingcostarica.com, and one of our Costa Rica specialists comes back to you personally with a first itinerary. No fixed dates, no bus, no obligation.

Pura Vida,
Jason Bateman, Costa Rica Specialist and founder

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My Costa Rica (CostaRica.Org). Custom Packages to Costa Rica Since 2004. Licensed by the Costa Rican Tourism Board (ICT). Over 1,200 five-star reviews on TripAdvisor and Google.

Bird names and counts in this guide follow the official list. Garrigues, Richard, P. Camacho-Varela, J. Corrales, R. Jiménez, P. O'Donnell, D. Rodríguez (2026). Lista Oficial de las Aves de Costa Rica 2024-2025 – Actualización Junio 2026. Comité de Especies Raras y Registros Ornitológicos de Costa Rica (Comité Científico), Asociación Ornitológica de Costa Rica. https://listaoficialavesdecostarica.wordpress.com/