

Costa Rica Trip Report, 13-25 April 2026

Introduction

I had wanted to visit Costa Rica for a long time, and this April I finally got the chance to explore it: a self-drive trip with occasional guides, that would take me from San José to Tarcoles, La Fortuna, Aguas Zarcas, La Selva OET (near Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí), San Gerardo de Dota and back to San José. I live in Spain and speak fluent Spanish, which made doing much of the trip unguided relatively straightforward.

Birds and increasingly mammals are my main interests — although I am not sure that I can be qualified as a mammalwatcher (yet) — but I also enjoy herps, particularly poison frogs, which were one of my principal targets in Costa Rica. As will be obvious from the few photos included in this report (mostly taken with my phone), I am not a photographer.

I was inspired by comments from Jon on a recent podcast about recruiting people under 35 into the community who write trip reports. At 30, I apparently qualify—although I cannot help with the suggested preference for female contributors! Consequently, this report concentrates on mammals (marked in **red bold**), mentions some of the herps I encountered (in **blue bold**), and occasionally includes bird highlights (in **black bold**). The latter were actually a much larger part of the trip than this report suggests: I recorded 256 bird species. But given that this is a mammalwatching report—and that Costa Rica already has plenty of excellent birding reports elsewhere—I will spare you most of the birding details.

In total, I recorded 17 mammal species. That number needs a little context: there was no trapping or netting whatsoever, little effort was made on night walks, and I was generally up at dawn for birding, so made little effort on night walks. I also had no field experience with thermal imagers. I had only recently gotten a Thermal Master T2 Max, about which I offer some comments below. In other words, this was very much an independent, mostly diurnal trip rather than a hardcore mammalwatching expedition. I still hope that this report is useful to give other independent visitors a realistic idea of what to expect. In particular, when preparing for the trip I have struggled to find detailed information on the guided excursions offered at La Selva, so I provide some details below in the hope that they are useful to future visitors deciding whether these are worth their money (and time!).

Day 1-2 A Slightly Rocky Start

The first day consisted of the flight to San José, picking up my 2WD hire car at the airport and making the short drive to my accommodation in Alajuela. I hired the car from Jumbo Rent a Car, had no problems at all, and would happily use them again.

In the next morning I was off to Tarcoles.

It was during a stop on this drive that I realized that my spotlight was gone. I searched the entire car, during which I managed to cut my finger on some sharp metal underneath one of the seats. It wasn't a serious cut, thankfully, but it was not a great start to the trip. I was particularly annoyed because I had been looking forward to using my new thermal imager in the field for the first time. After my car search had ended unsuccessfully, I contacted my accommodation in San José and after some time they came back to me with the good news that they found my spotlight... Fortunately, I eventually recovered it a few days later when I passed back through San José, requiring only a short detour.

Days 2–5: Tarcoles Area

For the next three nights I based myself in the Tarcoles area: two nights at *Cerro Lodge*, followed by one night in a bungalow overlooking the ocean on a hill near Tarcoles. Changing hotels in the Tarcoles area was necessary because a few days before I was scheduled to fly to Costa Rica, I received an email advising me that my flight had been changed. It would now leave one day earlier than originally planned. In principle this was no problem for me, but

required a few last minute hotel changes and changing the dates of the car hire. Cerro Lodge and the other nearby birding lodge were both booked out for that additional night, but that turned out to be fortunate. Driving to the alternative accommodation at night, I had a beautiful **Central American Milk Snake** right on the road. Not a bad consolation prize for having to change hotels.

Around Cerro Lodge

The area around Cerro Lodge proved productive for both birds and mammals. My first mammals



*Photos from Cerro Lodge:
White Nosed Coati,
Scarlet Macaw,
Panamanian White
Throated Capuchin
joining us for breakfast.*

were **Variegated Squirrels**. **Panamanian White-faced Capuchins** came to feed and drink at the lodge in the morning, along with the **Scarlet Macaws** that the lodge is known for, while a **White-nosed Coati** was seen further down the access road, in the vegetation.

Mantled Howler Monkeys could be heard calling near the lodge in the mornings, but I never managed to find them. This pattern would repeat itself later at La Selva. I didn't try too hard as I had already seen the species in Ecuador the previous year.

Carara National Park

At Carara National Park, I was guided by Jeison Hernández, who was excellent. The full-day outing was primarily bird-focused, but I also asked him to keep an eye out for herps and mammals.

The herpetological highlights were finding my first poison frogs of the trip: the conspicuous **Green-and-Black Poison Dart Frog** (*Dendrobates auratus*), which we encountered at multiple locations within the park, and the far less conspicuous **Eyelash Pit-viper**. We also found a Puffing Snake (*Phrynonax poecilonatus*) and a **Black Spiny-tailed Iguana**.

The mammals were excellent. We encountered a **Northern Tamandua** — a species I apparently have good luck with, having also stumbled upon one completely unexpectedly in Ecuador the previous year.

There were also two encounters with **Central American Agoutis**, and Jeison showed me a very cool **Northern Ghost Bat**. These mammals were all encountered on the trail leaving the park headquarters.

On the Meandrica Trail (mainly visited for biding), we found a group of **Geoffroy's Spider Monkeys**. The trail is not in advisable walking distance to the HQ and Jeison thought it was advisable to make sure there was someone watching the car — a volunteer from the community regularly guards the entrance to that purpose and we gave him a tip in exchange.

I will spare the reader most of the birding details, but the birding in Carara was spectacular. Even non-birders would surely appreciate the excellent views I had of male **Orange-collared Manakins** and **Red-capped Manakins**.



Photos from Carara NP. Left to right: Northern Ghostbat, Green-and-Black Poison Dart Frog, Eyelash Pit Viper

The Tarcoles River

I also took a very enjoyable boat tour along the Tarcoles River with Jungle Crocodile & Bird Watching Tours.

Waiting for the trip on their ground, I had a great views of my first **Common Basilisk** and my first **Green Iguana** of the trip.

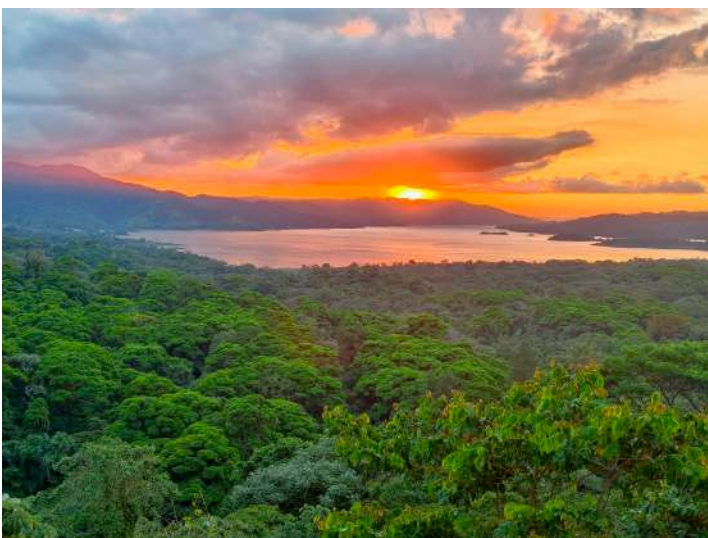
The tour itself was a generalist rather than specialist birdwatching trip, but it produced plenty of wildlife. Numerous **American Crocodiles** were encountered along the river.

A notable absence here were the Roseate Spoonbills I had been hoping for. I also didn't encounter any of the mangrove specialist birds.

Days 5-6: La Fortuna

Next came a long drive—around five hours—to Arenal Observatory Lodge, via San José, where I took my brief detour to recover the mislaid spotlight.

The lodge itself offers spectacular views and excellent birding. Particularly productive for antbirds was the waterfall trail, where I was proud to have found a pair of **Spotted Antbirds** and a **Dull Mantled Antbird**. Mammalwise, **Central American Agoutis** and **White-nosed Coatis** were regularly seen wandering around the grounds. I also saw a group of **Geoffroy's Spider Monkeys** at the lodge.



Nearby, in La Fortuna, I joined a tour at La Fortuna (Mariola's) Hikes and Trails, a private reserve that I enjoyed very much. The reserve is a reforested former plantation and attracts animals from the nearby biological corridor, as the guides explained. I had initially hesitated to go because I found the tour rather expensive, but ultimately thought it was worth the price.

The mammals of the reserve were great. I had memorable views of both species of sloth occurring in Costa Rica:

Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth and **Brown-throated Sloth**.

Photos from Arenal Observatory Lodge. Top center: Central American Agouti, Top right: Great Curassow



From left to right: Two-toed Sloth, Tent-making Bats, Brown-throated Sloth

I was also shown a slightly hidden **Mexican Dwarf Porcupine**, although I would improve considerably on this view later in the trip.

Another highlight were a group of **Tent-Making Bats** roosting under a leaf. These were my first tent-making bats ever.

I should also mention two excellent birds: **Boat-billed Heron** and **Russet-naped Wood-Rail**.

When the tour was over I was completely in awe. I had not expected so many great encounters. The only miss were strawberry poison frogs, which I had hoped for. They are regularly encountered there, but their guide said that it was simply too dry during my visit. I was beginning to worry that I might miss seeing these beautiful frogs. Fortunately, I would see them at La Selva later.

Days 6-7: Aguas Zarcas

I spent the following night in Aguas Zarcas, where I visited The Nest Nature Centre. A reservation is required here, and my main target was the spectacular **Black-crested Coquette**, a hummingbird that regularly visits flowers at the site and that I had missed at Arenal Observatory Lodge, despite the species being regularly encountered there.

Other birding highlights were the many lekking white-collared manakins, which I had also encountered at the Arenal Observatory Lodge, and my first **Spectacled Owls**.

In terms of herps, I added a **Green Basilisk** to the trip list.

The only mammals that I noted around Aguas Zarcas were a habituated juvenile **Variegated Squirrel** —if I remember correctly, it had been rescued—and some unidentified bats flying around at dusk.

By now I had accumulated a good number of mosquito bites, some of them rather nasty. Having been warned of the numerous mosquitos at La Selva, I stocked up on mosquito repellent and an antibiotic cream to put on any inflamed ones in a nearby pharmacy and was off to La Selva.

Days 6-10: La Selva

I spent four nights at La Selva. It was hot and mostly dry. Despite that, mosquitos were indeed numerous. Immediately after arrival, I thought I was off to a good start when I saw the first bird lifer in terms of **Black-faced Grosbeak** right outside my cabin, then ventured to the bridge where I saw one of the bird specialties of La Selva in the form of **Olive-backed Euphonia**. I also saw **Green Iguanas** in a tree, which was a regular occurrence. After crossing the bridge, I was up for

the first mammal encounters: first, I found some of the numerous **Collared Peccaries** — I would run into them at various times, but I saw the first ones right at the start of the first trail leaving to the left of the bridge. Upon return from the trail, I saw an **Agouti** on the big lawn area.

On the trail itself it became immediately obvious that the birding here was hard work — I had been warned, but it was harder than I anticipated, at times frustratingly so, with the trails turning completely quiet well before 10am. Still, every day produced highlights.

Naturalist Morning Walk

Day 1 started with the free Naturalist Morning Walk, which is included with every reservation on the first day. I had rather high expectations. Unfortunately, they were somewhat disappointed. There were no Honduran White Bats and no poison frogs — some of my main targets at La Selva — and no new birds for me. I had heard that Strawberry Poison Frogs had been seen on other days, so perhaps my timing was simply unlucky.

But there were still some nice sightings. First, the guide pointed out what he identified as **Black Myotis** roosting in a wooden post near the bridge, on the reception side close to a signpost. I have no particular reason to doubt the identification, although I had no way of independently verifying it. It was fascinating to see them through tiny cracks in the post, and I wondered how they had gotten in. There must have been some opening that I didn't see.

We also once again encountered **Collared Peccaries** and **Central American Agoutis**, the former of which I had seen the previous day for the first time and the latter of which I had seen regularly on the tour.

Despite the absence of frogs, there were two herpetological highlights on the walk: a **Northern Turnip-tail Gecko** and a very nice yellow-morph **Eyelash Pit-viper** (the one I had seen in Carara was of another less colorful morph).



Photo: *Eyelash Pit-Viper*

Rest of the day

After the end of the morning walk, I decided to give the access road a try. This turned out to be a good decision, as I found people (a guide, a client and the guard) near the guard hut watching a **Snowy Cotinga**. The guide was kind enough to allow me to look through his scope to see it well.

Next, after collecting some intel about the frogs from other people staying in the lodge, I hit the trails again after the tour was over. Following recommendations I hit the STR (Sendero Tres Rios) trail, and found some **Strawberry Poison Frogs** after a while. I was very happy, after having missed them twice before on the trip.

The afternoon was relatively eventless, and I spent a few hours resting in my room, which gave some relief from the relentless heat. An hour or so before dinner time, I headed back to the bridge, to see if I find something. I soon heard some characteristic loud calls — macaws, I immediately thought. I looked up and almost lost my hat in excitement: a group of **Great Green Macaws** was flying past. I had not expected this at all, as they don't appear on ebird. After dinner, I briefly searched for animals from the bridge (I was to wake up early for a guided morning birding session, so did not go to the trails), but came up empty handed. A **Common Pauraque** in the parking lot was my only encounter of this night.

2nd Day at La Selva: Guided Early Morning Birding Session

My second day started with a guided early morning birding session, organized by La Selva. Contrary to what I expected, this was mostly spent birding the reception area and the access road. This added a few birds to my list, although I had hoped that we would rather go look for some skulkers in the forest. This session also produced my second encounter with **Mexican Hairy Dwarf Porcupines** of the trip, which was found sleeping in some bamboo along the access road.

The rest of the day was once again relatively eventless: I spent a few hours wandering the trails, without much success, although I did see another **Strawberry Poison Frog**.

Guided Night Walk

For the night I had also booked a guided walk. This was, like all tours I did at La Selva, somewhat disappointing from my perspective. Much of the time was spent explaining facts about leaf-cutter ants and other insects. Some people will understandably find this interesting, but personally I prefer not to spend valuable wildlife-watching time on things I can read about myself or already know.

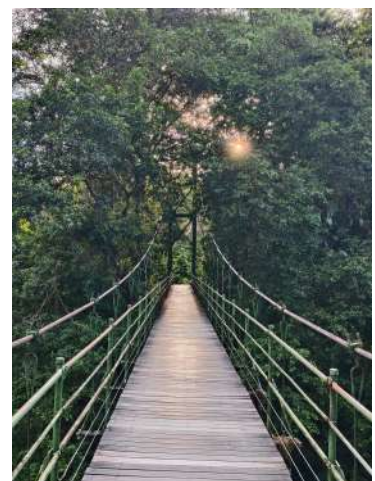
There were nevertheless many herpetological encounters: **Spectacled Caiman** in the swamp crossed by the boardwalk (on the trail leaving to the left after crossing the bridge), a **Banded Cat-eyed Snake**, **Savage's Thin-toed Frog**, **Masked Tree Frog**, **Hourglass Tree Frog**, **Brown Anole** and a **Leaf Litter Toad**.

Much to my chagrin, no particular effort was made to search for nocturnal birds or mammals.

An unidentified **opossum sp.** crossed a trail, although I only had my binoculars on it for a split second and couldn't obtain any useful details.

Upon return, the guide pointed out a cottontail behind reception was also pointed out. Based on geography, I think this should be **Gabb's Cottontail**.

3rd Day at La Selva



From left to right: Honduran White Bats, Strawberry Poison Dart Frog, the La Selva Bridge

I started the morning walking the trail, seeing very little. By this time, I had still not found of my principal targets of La Selva, which was the Honduran White Bat. These can also be seen at Pierella Gardens, which I had kept as a backup plan, so I sent them a message. If you have limited time and particularly want to see these bats, I would recommend arranging this in advance. It took a few hours for my message to receive a response. Fortunately, I didn't actually need the backup plan. By sheer luck, I saw the **Honduran White Bat** at La Selva before hearing back.

A last night walk yielded some **Red-eyed Tree Frogs**, another **Banded Cat-eyed Snake**, as well as a large tarantula on a tree. Heading back, happy to have seen the iconic tree frogs, I was joined on the bridge by a **Mexican Hairy Dwarf Porcupine**.



Left: Red-eyed Tree Frog. Right: Mexican Hairy Dwarf Porcupine on La Selva Bridge

Some comments on the Thermal Master

I had done some tests with the Thermal Master T2 Max in Madrid in early spring — in rather cold, dry conditions. In these conditions, it worked really well. I could clearly see people walking on the street from our balcony through the thermal imager. I therefore had high hopes when taking it to Costa Rica. However, its performance there was much weaker. Shapes appeared rather blurry,

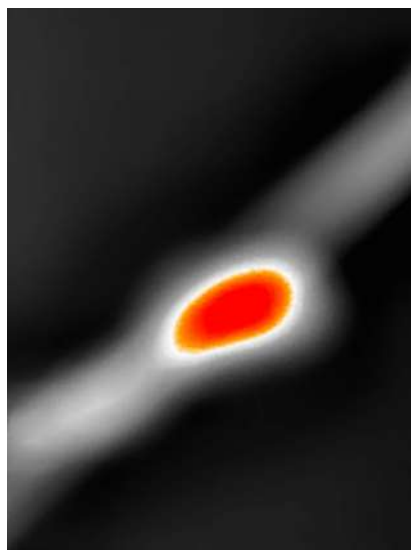


Photo: Thermal image of Mexican Hairy Dwarf Porcupine from Thermal Master T2 Max

which might have to do with humidity. I struggled finding animals with it that I knew were there, much less could I find animals with it that I hadn't already located. Subsequently, I did some tests in the dry summer heat of Madrid. Also in these conditions, the thermal master performed very poorly. In a 34 degree celsius night, the scope did not pick up heat signals from people on the streets. This is perhaps not too surprising.

Days 10-12: San Gerardo de Dota

My next destination was the highlands around San Gerardo de Dota. In preparing for my visit, I could not help but notice a few ominous sounding names in the vicinity: Salsipuedes (leave if you can) and Cerro de la Muerte (Death Hill). Nevertheless, I arrived without major problems — the road down to San Gerardo de Dota is very steep, curvy, and occasionally one has to maneuver a bit to allow uphill traffic to pass, but nothing I couldn't handle. Although going back uphill was only possible in first gear in my car, which didn't distinguish itself with high horsepower.... If you decide to visit the area, do remember to arrive with enough gasoline, because getting to the next gas station is not exactly a short or a pleasant drive (I was glad that I still had plenty of gas). Once in San Gerardo de Dota, I immediately noticed that the climate there was completely different. I was out of the tropical lowland heat of La Selva and far away from its mosquitoes — it was bliss, I thought. However, a different meteorological problem soon started to manifest itself: a steady rain, starting daily from around noon and only stopping in the late afternoon, curtailing most of my attempts at finding animals during the afternoon. Nevertheless, for a birder, the valley was a wonderful change of pace from La Selva. Birds were abundant and comparatively easy to see throughout the day, whenever the rain allowed for venturing out.

There was only one new mammal for the trip: a **Red-tailed Squirrel**, seen at Miriam's Quetzal. I had slim hopes of seeing a Neotropical River Otter, which I had seen reported at or near Savegre Hotel (which admits day visitors that do not stay at the hotel to their reserve against a small fee) by a bird guide shortly before my trip. While these hopes remained disappointed, my efforts of scanning the river regularly were rewarded with a pair of **American Dippers**.

Two of my major targets in the area were particularly memorable. A **Resplendent Quetzal** was seen along the road leading down to San Gerardo de Dota. Finding the bird wasn't exactly difficult — their location was effectively advertised by the numerous cars and even buses parked at a particular spot early in the morning.

The other major target here was the unique **Wrenthrush**, a monotypic family, which I saw close to the Paraíso Quetzal lodge on various occasions — a footpath that leaves the lodge's access road (a short walk from the lodge itself) and leads to an observation tower appears to be a particularly good spot. Paraíso Quetzal itself proved to be very cold at night — to the point that I could not bring myself to have my usual morning shower, having to shower instead in the milder evening — and the bed in my bungalow was so hard that my back hurt in the morning. They do provide a large number of blankets, so at least I wasn't cold in bed. Given these inconveniences, and despite the amazing food served in the lodge, I was somewhat glad to leave after two nights and was looking forward to get back home to my own bed. Mammalwatchers should also keep in mind that the lodge's rules did not allow to walk the trails at night at the time of my visit.

Day 12: Casa Dowii

On the drive back towards San José, I stopped at Casa Dowii for breakfast.

There, a **Dusky Rice Rat** was attracted to the feeders, providing the final mammal addition of the trip.

The hosts were extremely friendly and served an excellent breakfast. They do not, however, cater to drop-ins, as they want to keep the experience private, so anyone planning to visit should contact them at least a day in advance.

I would recommend the place to anyone with even a passing interest in birds. The star of the show here (for me) was the **Spangle-cheeked Tanager** — *tangara dowii* in latin — from which the place receives its name.