

WEALTH OF WILDLIFE; COSTA RICA ...

The name Costa Rica - Spanish for "rich coast" - seems particularly apt at Manuel Antonio National Park on a sunny morning during the rainy season. As I walk through the park, its entrance a mere coconut's throw from the day-glow tourist shops of Quepos, to my right lies the most picturesque beach I've ever seen, an expanse of white sand fringed by leafy tropical trees. Rocky, tree-covered islands loom in the turquoise waters of the Pacific Ocean, and for a moment I long to shed my backpack and lounge with the other tourists.

But I'm not in Costa Rica for a suntan. In the trees above me, another of the country's exotic denizens beckons. A White-faced Capuchin Monkey traverses the branches of a tropical almond tree and works its way down to investigate the fruit slices being eaten by humans at a picnic table. The most obviously anthropomorphic of animals, the monkeys gaze with simian indifference at me and my companions as we greedily point our camera lenses in their direction. The encounter, one of many lasting moments during a recent, 12-day photo safari, confirmed that many of Costa Rica's greatest riches are zoological. And as we discovered on other days, the treasures extend far from the coasts of the Central American country bounded on the west by the Pacific and on the east by the Caribbean Sea. Our group of 11 traveled much of the country, circling from the Northeast to the Southwest, in pursuit of treasures, and particularly animals, not found in Florida. We found virtually all the quarry sought by our trip leader, Reinier Munguia, perhaps Polk County's foremost nature photographer. Though birds dominated the agenda, we also encountered a thrilling dose of mammals, reptiles, amphibians and, of course, insects.

BIRDS

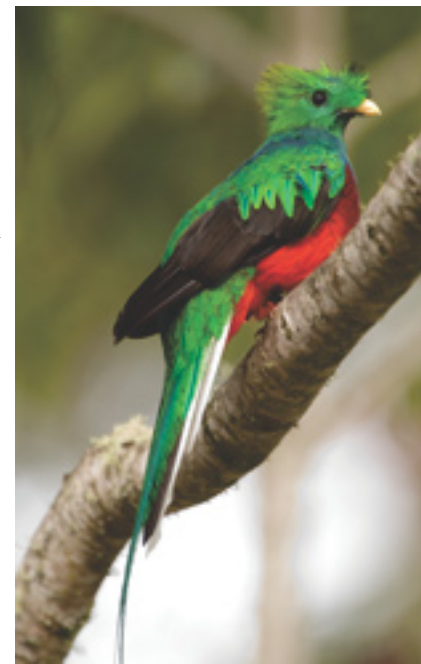
We saw the full spectrum of birds in Costa Rica, from diminutive hummingbirds to several of the large and spectacular species:



VIOLET SABREWING HUMMINGBIRD

Keel-billed Toucans, the deliriously spangled fruit-eaters with cartoonishly large beaks; Scarlet Macaws, most memorably a pair nuzzling on a branch near Jaco Beach; and the Blue-crowned Motmot, a green-and-yellow bird marked by a dramatic azure

forehead and an extended tail with two protruding feathers. While all of those were thrilling sights, Reinier anointed another bird as the "holy grail" of our tour: the Resplendent Quetzal, a beauty entirely deserving of its adjectival appellation. The male quetzal is one of those delightfully ostentatious avian designs found in tropical locales: a jade and aqua body, with spiky head feathers, prominent, teddy-bear eyes and a crimson chest. Its forked green tail projects about three times its body length. After a first roadside glimpse of a male Quetzal on the road to San Gerardo de Dota, the birds appeared on the grounds of our hotel the following two mornings. On our final day, a male perched on a tree limb, patiently sitting for portraits as our crew set up tripods and snapped away.



RESPLENDENT QUETZAL

Costa Rica holds 54 species of hummingbirds (51 more than Florida), and we glimpsed a dozen of them. Hummers abound from the beaches to the mountains, ranging from the Volcano Hummingbird, a tiny specimen suggesting an oversized bumblebee, to the Violet Sabrewing, a rich purple beauty the size of a small banana. Our first mass encounter came at a shop tucked away on a hillside we passed during a drive to the town of Fortuna. Despite a drenching rain, we found hordes of the energetic yers darting to several liquid feeders hanging just outside the shop's opened back windows, which overlooked leafy gardens. The hummers hovered at the feeders even with humans a couple of feet away, and several times during our stay one zoomed a few inches from my head. The drizzle enhanced the metallic iridescence of the birds' feathers. During breaks from feeding, the birds perched on nearby branches, sometimes shooting stringy tongues out of their miniature bills. Time spent among hummers vying for sugar water dispelled any notion of the diminutive birds as bashful or delicate. Even the smallest species revealed themselves as pugnacious, attacking larger rivals at the feeders, and I quickly became accustomed to the sound of hummers colliding at high speed.

MAMMALS

We had several meetings with Howler Monkeys, black creatures whose chesty grunts carry far in the cloud forest. We found a trio of howlers grazing on the fruit and leaves of cecropia trees, two of them clutching babies to their chests. The monkeys' climbing display made ample use of their prehensile tails, and one howler



UNKNOWN GRASSHOPPER

used the fifth limb to catch itself after a branch snapped under its weight, soon resuming its eating while hanging upside down. The trees of Costa Rica can get crowded with mammals. The country is home to sloths of both the two- and three-toed varieties, somnolent, comically lumbering creatures that spend almost all their time above ground, descending about once a week to pass waste. Sloths are so immobile that fungus grows on their backs, blending green into their shaggy, gray-brown fur. A resident sloth at our first villa dozed upside down in a tree with a baby partially concealed beneath an arm. Sloths typically raise just one offspring a year, and our host, Alex Martinez, said if the young one happens to fall from the tree, the mother often leaves it to perish. Several other mammals popped up at various places during our trek. I saw an agouti, a cat-sized rodent, on a shrubby hillside in Carara National Park. We glimpsed a lesser anteater, a fluffy critter with panda-like markings, clinging to a tree at our cabins just outside Manuel Antonio National Park, and a porcupine balled up high on a branch in the park.

INSECTS

It's no surprise bugs proliferate in Costa Rica's rainy and humid lowlands. Alex warned us on our first day about Bullet Ants, inch-long, black jokers so named because their sting supposedly has the impact of a bullet. Alex recalled his first rendezvous with a bullet ant, whose venom waylaid him for a good 24 hours. We saw Bullet Ants several times during hikes, usually on tree trunks, and one morning I found a dead one on the floor of the bathroom at our hotel in Monteverde.

Leaf cutter Ants bear no such menace and, unlike Bullet Ants, are thoroughly social creatures. The small red insects harvest chunks of leaf they carry back to their nests, cultivating underground fungi as a food source. Leafcutter processions are common in Costa Rican forests, often stretching down the trunk of a tall tree and along the forest floor, providing the surreal sight of ragged green shapes that at a distance seem to float along the ground. Leafcutters tote foliage sections far exceeding their own weight, and close inspection revealed the cargo is often occupied by one or more fellow ants. As a naturalist explained, these apparent freeloaders are actually chaperones ready to take over should the laborer fail.

AMPHIBIANS

Costa Rica is a frog paradise, and our group

contained a professional herpetologist in Fernando, a professor from Puerto Rico, and an ardent amateur in Reinier, his former student. A night hike shortly after our arrival yielded the first of several glimpses of the spectacular "Blue Jeans" frog, or Strawberry Poison-dart frog, one of several



GREEN & BLACK DART FROG

species that emit toxins through their skin to ward off predators. The small frog, whose scarlet body contrasts with indigo-hued legs, hides out in shadowy regions of thick forests, as does a larger relative we encountered, the Black and Green Poison-dart Frog.

Name aside, the frogs are largely harmless, as Reinier, along with his frog-wrangling daughter, Steffanie, 12, showed us. Father and daughter captured the amphibians with their bare hands on several occasions, placing them on leaves for easy photo opportunities. The only danger, Reinier said, involves allowing the frog's poison into an open cut or inadvertently spreading it to your eyes or mouth after handling one, and even then it's not deadly. Reinier made a ritual of stalking frogs each night, stashing his live quarry in moist plastic bags for photo sessions the following morning. Steffanie made one of the most stunning finds, a parachuting Red-eyed Leaf Frog, plucking it off a column at our hotel in Quepos. The handsome frog is lime green and marked with blue-and-yellow vertical stripes on its sides, and like the closely related red-eyed tree frog often depicted on T-shirts, it has prominent and bulbous peepers.

REPTILES

One of Costa Rica's odder inhabitants, the basilisk, is a large lizard with a menacing head plate and dorsal fin evoking its prehistoric forebears. The creature is sometimes called the Jesus Lizard because its webbed back feet allow it to scamper on the surface of water. I didn't witness such a feat, but we did see several earthbound basilisks. Iguanas were a more common sight. We found juvenile ones sleeping on shrubs at night, their verdant hides matching the plants' color, as well as mature specimens with brick-red heads and long, banded tails. Reinier and company managed to snatch several iguanas, including a three-foot green specimen that ventured too close to the open-air restaurant near Quepos where we stopped for lunch. After some close observation, the iguana got loose and skittered across the restaurant's tile floor. Other diners seemed considerably less alarmed than one might have expected.

As a Florida native, I long ago became

jaded toward alligators, but crocodiles remain a novelty. One of the surest places to see them in Costa Rica is at a bridge over the Tarcoles River, a popular tourist site despite the vehicles speeding past a foot or two from the walkways. During an afternoon visit, we found about a dozen crocs congregating in the river and on a small island, their greenish hides contrasting with the muddy water. The largest appeared about 14 feet long.

A group of locals on the bridge tossed several chicken breasts into the river, prompting an explosion of tails and jaws that made it clear a human unlucky enough to fall in the water would never make it out. Some 130 species of snakes reside in Costa Rica, including the Bushmaster; Eyelash Viper; and, most deadly of all, Fer-de-Lance. But as Reinier reassured us, only 17 of the species are venomous.

En route to the Arenal Volcano National Park, we stopped to admire the gaudy carvings of a craftsman named Freddie, who directed us to a snake nesting in a tree just outside the park's entrance. It turned



AMERICAN CROCODILE

out to be an eyelash viper, a poisonous species with a variable appearance. Ours was about a foot long and reddish brown, its coloring helping it blend with that of the tree trunk it occupied. After Fernando assured us a snake that size had a striking range of only about nine inches, we all maintained a distance of at least a foot as we gathered to snap its photo.

A lasting impression from the trip came one night as we drove a hellishly bumpy and thoroughly dark road following dinner at a restaurant near Dominical on the southwestern coast. Reinier, driving the van, punctured the drowsy mood by stomping the brakes and yelling, "Snake," and in an instant he and Julio, a collegian from Puerto Rico, were out of the vehicle and plunging into the thick grass along the road.

Reinier's wife, Nyleen, watched from the back seat, concerned but after 13 years of marriage to the Cuban Steve Irwin, clearly not surprised. As I surmised to Nyleen, the percentage of people who, upon seeing a snake at night on a desolate road in Costa Rica, would go after it with their bare hands must be rather low. Even in Costa Rica, a baroque zoo without cages, the oddest and least predictable creatures are the humans.



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Gary White is a full time writer for The Ledger, a New York Times publication and local newspaper in Polk County, Florida. Besides writing, he's an avid photographer and enjoys spending time outdoors either kayaking or hiking. We had the opportunity

to have him in our most recent photo expedition to Costa Rica, which he turned into this award winning article you just read.