

AMAZONA

SOCIETY

PARROT

TOUR

COSTA

RICA

2006

BY SHERYL ROBERTS

From my travel journal:



March 5, 2006

Flew in a day early, because I tend to get air sick. Staying in a plain, but clean motel in Alajuela. I lust after some air conditioning, but I knew I was coming to a third world country. What is it like? Mountainous, verdant green for sure, but there are also things here I see at home; Mourning Doves, squirrels, and mosquitoes.

But I really know I'm not at home when I have dinner served to me on a banana leaf.

March 6, 2006

Woke up to the sound of the Great Kiskadee announcing that it's morning. I discovered that once the day cools off and we run the ceiling fan, things are quite tolerable here. More things look familiar to me; Plantains, Palms and Airplane Plants. Some trees and plants are radically different and exotic. I suspect that the familiar interspersed with the exotic is contributing to the disjointed way I feel.

My goal today was to go to Poas volcano and to buy some coffee. I bought 10 lbs. of coffee, but we missed the volcano due to clouds and fog. We had a beautiful drive; the volcanic slopes are dotted with brightly painted houses of aqua, pink and yellow. Flowering bushes and Yucca line the highway.

Did I mention that everyone from the Amazona Society Tour that was already here decided to go with us? Yeah, we rented a bus and away we went! These are some very nice people. I am sure I am going to have a great time.

The high point of the day was a little stop we made along the road. The home made sign read "Quetzal Viewing" and you all know the entire bus had to stop and look. Much to our delight, the male and female Resplendent Quetzal were both there. We got great photos of the female, but we'd only see the male with his long, floating, blue-green tail when he'd dart between the trees.

I caught a fleeting glance at an Amazon parrot tonight at dusk at the hotel. This is going to be an extraordinary adventure!

March 7, 2006

Some of us went on an early bird watching stroll this morning and we saw 5 Guatemalan Yellow Crowned Amazons flying by. They are certainly out of place; they must not have followed the road map! We spent the morning at Zoo Ave, a privately owned bird zoo. There we saw a Quetzal pair feeding chicks in a nest, and saw a rare lutino Yellow Lored Amazon (he was yellow and red, like a large canary) trying to put the mack moves on his mate. Sitting in the jungle, sitting listening to the Macaws doing contact calls across long distances of the park was just magical. It made me imagine that I was somewhere in the mid Jurassic period, listening to the dinosaurs.



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The afternoon was spent at the Waterfall Gardens, which included a hummingbird garden and butterfly hatchery. The hummingbird garden only contained Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds this time of year, but we saw several butterflies hatching, including the Blue Morpho. The Waterfall Gardens consist of a series of 5 high, cascading waterfalls. We even got to walk behind the last one.

March 8, 2006

We are in Boca Tapada, on the Atlantic side of Costa Rica, up near the Nicaraguan border. We are, officially, in The Middle of Nowhere.

We spent two hours bumping along a gravel road, where the bus driver slowed down, and carefully looked outside his door as we crossed over precarious bridges while the rest of us held our breath and wondered if we'd make it. Our spirits soared, however, when someone shouted, "Macaw sighting, Macaws in the air" and we all scrambled for our binoculars and looked. Two Great Green Macaws in full flight, seemed to stream across the sky to welcome us.

Now, we are at a place where the actual road to Nicaragua is red dirt. We are at the Lagarto Lodge, where the wildlife is the decoration. I call it The Land of the Cartoon Birds, but my husband has deemed it The Toucan Farm. The place is crawling with Keel Billed Toucans, Collared Aracaris (who look like they might be from Mars), and Montezuma Oropendolas. The bird watching at dusk is spectacular. We spotted more Great Green Macaws, Brown Hooded Parrots, and Red Lored Amazons coming in to roost for the evening.

I might be able to overlook the bathroom in the hallway and no air conditioning for this!

March 9, 2006

We started out the morning watching the Lodge people put out fruit for the cartoon birds. One of the Keel Billed Toucans landed on the rail of the open air restaurant and started hop-hop-hopping along the rail. Next thing I know, someone hands me a piece of papaya and I feed it to the wild Toucan. He snipped it neatly out of my hand. How amazing!

But the day was just starting...we all put on rubber boots

and trooped our way down the red mud road to look at Great Green Macaw nests. It was a strenuous hike, consisting of steep hills, ending with a cut off into the jungle. We had to be very quiet as we crept up onto the nest. Daddy Great Green was vigilant, though, and caught us all gawking and taking photos. He was NOT happy. He told us so, too. I shall translate:

"Bertha! You stay down there in that nest cavity and don't you *dare* poke your head out complaining that you are hungry or hot! There are ENEMIES at the gate! ENEMIES, I tell you! And I shall drive them all off with my macho macaw warnings! SQUAWK SQUAWK SQUAWK SQUAWK SQUAWK..."



He did drive us off with his macho macaw warnings.

We were also gamely walking along, when one of our fearless tour leaders told us, "There are no Scarlet Macaws on this side of Costa Rica." We top a rise, and we see 4 Scarlet Macaws sitting in a tree. Another one of our tour guides asks the local guide about them, and he says, "Oh, yeah, they nest waaaay over there." So apparently there are Scarlet Macaws migrating into Atlantic Costa Rica from Nicaragua.

Tonight at dusk we saw a Red Lored Amazon escort his mate into her nest hole and then climb up to the top of the tree to stand guard. That just about sent the entire crowd of us into joyful spasms.

March 10, 2006

We got up at 5am to go look at more Great Green nests. It rained overnight, and I think our tour guides took pity on some of us yesterday, so we drove down the red mud road instead of walking. If it was muddy yesterday, it was positively swampy today. Only one of us wore the rubber boots again, and that one person wasn't me. We saw the non-existent Scarlets as we drove down the road. We sloshed out to some new Macaw nests, and we were very quiet, standing under the foliage, sneaking peeks at this nest. We had heard a Macaw squawk, so we were peering around and being really quiet.

Next thing we heard, was "Timber!!!!" and "Run, run for your lives!" and we scattered out of the way as this rain forest tree majestically crashed to the ground. Apparently some of our party leaned too heavily on it. Oops. After that, there was no chance in the world of seeing those Macaws, so we started the Mud Walk back to the trucks. I lost my hiking shoe in the mud, but I finally managed to pull it out, and I limped back to the truck. That was better than some of the others, though...they got lost, and had a longer Mud Walk back. So no Macaws, but we saw lots of Toucans. We are now officially sick of seeing Toucans.

After that expedition, we were hot to get onto the bus and go to Carara National Park, so we did. After a long drive that wound through the mountains of Costa Rica, we arrived on the Pacific coast. There's one decent bridge in the whole of Costa Rica and we stopped by it outside of Carara National Park. We were hanging on the bridge and looking at the large crocodiles lounging on the side of the Tarcoles River, when one of our members exclaimed, "Macaws, Macaws flying." We looked up to see 2 pairs of Scarlet Macaws, flying overhead, and squawking amongst themselves. This started the Roosting Parade, and when it was over, we had seen 38 Scarlet Macaws flying across the bridge. This made up for the lack of Great Green Macaws earlier in the day.

We called it a day and headed to the hotel, which was a fancy resort hotel which managed to foul up our reservations. Eventually it got straightened out and we got into our rooms.

Air conditioning, glory hallelujah!



March 11, 2006

Air conditioning, glory hallelujah! I slept most of the day.

When we did venture out, we could hear parakeets up in the trees. Lots and lots and LOTS of parakeets, and they were very noisy. However, we couldn't see the parakeets, even with binoculars. Very annoying.

Of course, a little thing like air conditioning couldn't stop us from being at the Tarcoles River Bridge at dusk. And wouldn't you know it, there we were, waiting for the Macaws, and it started to rain. Not hard, but enough to deter some Macaws from flying. We did, however, see a beautiful rainbow when it finished raining and 20 Scarlet Macaws flew to roost as kind of a consolation prize.

March 12, 2006

We are now on the Nicoya Peninsula. If I thought it was hot at Carara, it was positively pleasant compared to the temperatures here. At least our little hotel room has a wall unit. No hot water, but a window unit.

We spent the morning hiking around Carara National Park. We caught glimpses of Scarlet Macaws in the park, but nothing more. We did, however see an entire troop of White Faced Capuchin monkeys pass by, and caught a Slaty Tailed Trogon sitting quietly in the bushes.

We attended an informative talk at the park visitor's center given by one of the rangers involved in the Scarlet Macaw Conservation Project. During the talk, we learned that Scarlets fuss and feud in the wild, just like in captivity. As if to punctuate the point, later we were out looking at artificial and natural Macaw nests when a pair flew overhead, flat out fighting as they flew. We jokingly translated the argument into something about directions.

Then the ranger decided that we should go 600 meters down the road to look at a Macaw nest box that no one was using, last he checked. Most of us blithely followed along, in the heat of the tropical noon. I got about 300 feet down the road, felt my skin broiling, and told my husband, "Honey, take lots of photos, I'm going back the visitor's center." The visitor's center wasn't cold enough. A couple of us convinced the bus driver that we REALLY needed the air conditioning in the tour bus turned on. We sat in the cool air and waited. Everyone else came back hot and disappointed. This was officially deemed The Bataan Death March #1.

March 13, 2006

We spent the morning in the privately owned Curu Wildlife Preserve. We hiked the monkey trail. We got a really good look at black Howler Monkeys, who actually bark like great big gruff dogs,



and we had White Faced Capuchins follow us down the trail a ways and pose. After the hike was over, I was really hot and sweaty, but it was all good, because I discovered the open air shower that they had at the beach. A couple of times under that wasn't terribly good for my hair, but it was great for my peace of mind.

Do you know that those old cartoons about the vultures circling over people in the desert are actually true? We haven't done one hike out in the rainforest without some raptors circling around, just in case one of us keels over. We shake our fist at them and proclaim, "Not dead yet!"

After our hike, we all waded onto this little boat, and motored out to the Tortuga Islands, home of the Yellow Naped and White Fronted Amazons. They roost in the Tortugas at night, and they also nest out there, due to no natural predators. We ate lunch on the island, and as we were eating, we discovered that we were directly next to naked people.

In fact, the beach was incredibly beautiful, with crystal clear aqua water and powdery white sand, but what you couldn't see was the dead, sharp, white coral that was directly under the surf...except by the nude beach.

So, the bird people paraded down by the nude people and went out into the water. We all swam and talked together. All was good.

Later in the afternoon, our fearless tour leader wanted everyone to hike up to the top of the island, to look for Yellow Naped Amazons. I, noting the heat of the day, and the height of the island, quickly volunteered to watch everyone's stuff, and told my husband, "Honey, take lots of photos!"

The first person down from that hike proclaimed the minute she got down, "It was another Death March." They had seen one pair of Yellow Napes flying, and my husband actually caught them on camera, but I also saw them from the beach.

We swam some more, took some staged damning photos, and someone also got brave and removed their swimming attire in the water. Will I name names? Of course not! I'm no stool pigeon. What happens in Costa Rica stays in Costa Rica! That which doesn't end up in Bird Talk.

We went back to Curu, watched some Yellow Naped Amazons fly back to the islands, and went back to our hotel rooms to take ice cold showers. The less said about that, the better.

March 14, 2006

We were up at 5am, in the bus at 5:30am, and in Curu at 6am. Our bus driver dropped us off and drove back to the hotel for more sleep, like a sane person. The rest of us started to walk down the long, gravel road leading to the beach. It was so worth it, though...walking in the



hot dry forest, listening to the Howler Monkeys bark hello to one another across the canopy, looking at the birds that were starting their daily foraging. First we spotted a brilliant red Hepatic Tanager, and then our tour guide showed us a pair of Yellow Naped Amazons, eating seeds in a Guanacaste Tree. The Napes blended in so well with the green, that we could only spot one of the pair. Next the White Fronted Amazons arrived. One, in particular, was as interested in us as we were in him. He preened, he turned, and he obliged us by letting us take a ton of photos. He was enjoying the attention.

The White Front was very unhappy when the Scarlet Macaws landed in the palm tree with the Crested Caracara and our attention was diverted. He screamed at us while we took photos of the Scarlets and the Crested Caracara. The two Scarlets turned out to be juveniles from the Curu Scarlet Macaw Reintroduction Project. We know this because there was a third Macaw that was following them around. The flock rejected this third Macaw because he was of a different bloodline. Anyway, the juveniles seem to like him, and it's hoped that one of these juveniles is a female and will like him even better as time goes on.

We spent the morning in the park, then headed back to the hotel, loaded up, took the ferry back across the Gulf of Nicoya, and headed back to Alajuela. On the way back, we saw a Toucan. We officially like Toucans again. The evening was spent having a wonderful dinner, and then a couple of our crew read a list of memorable quotations from our trip, which were as funny as they were cryptic to those not in the know. It was very painful for me the next morning when we all went off in different directions.

Collectively, we saw 136 different bird species, among them 5 Great Green Macaws, 69 Scarlet Macaws, and numerous Amazons. It was an adventure I will cherish for the rest of my life, Mud Walks and Bataan Death Marches included.

And now, when I am channel surfing and run across Survivor: Panama, Exile Island I shout, "Hey Honey, THIS is where we're going with the Amazona Society NEXT year!" and cackle. ■

