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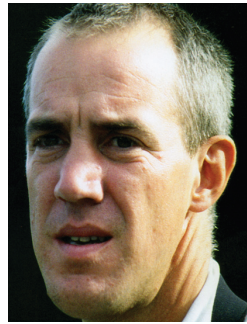
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## Pastures (agricultural land) near the Tropical Research Station La Gamba

A good number of widespread species of open country may be observed in the cultivated land near the Tropical Research Station La Gamba and along the roadside. Several species of egrets and rails are found but the latter are secretive and far more often heard than seen. The area also has a reputation among local birdwatchers as a good place to find vagrants to the country: Costa Rica's first (and to date only) records of Rusty-margined Flycatcher *Myiozetetes cayanensis* came from here and true rarities such as Southern Lapwing *Vanellus chilensis* and Wattled Jacana *Jacana jacana* are also occasionally recorded. The spread of open-country birds from the south has been promoted by the rapid deforestation along the Pacific slope of Central America, which is enabling species such as Brown-throated Parakeet *Aratinga pertinax* (not even mentioned in Stiles & Skutch's 1989 field guide) to become established in SW Costa Rica.

**Cattle Egret**  
*Bubulcus ibis*  
 Garcilla Bueyera

One of the most spectacular recent examples of avian colonization, the Cattle Egret was first recorded in Costa Rica in 1954. Since then its population has expanded dramatically (aided by deforestation) and it is now abundant throughout the country up to at least 2000m. The small, white egrets with short, thick necks and yellow bills that can be seen along the entrance road are Cattle Egrets. The species feeds mainly on grasshoppers and other insects that are disturbed by grazing livestock. Birds can often be seen hitching a ride on the backs of cattle, watching the ground for potential prey.



Cattle Egret



Cattle Egret



Wood Stork

**Wood Stork**  
*Mycteria americana*  
 Cigüeñón

Although much less common than the previous species, the Wood Stork is frequently seen in the marshy areas along the entrance road. Adults on the ground look white with greyish brown heads and necks; in flight the black flight feathers are apparent. The distinctive heavy, drooping bill makes the species unmistakable. Wood Storks eat fish and often feed in small groups, either in freshwater or in coastal areas. They are commonly observed overhead, flying between feeding and roosting areas.



Wood Stork

## Vultures Zopilotes

Three species of vulture are found in the area. The Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus* is extremely abundant in the vicinity of towns and over cleared areas throughout Costa Rica. In flight it appears entirely black except for a prominent white patch at the base of the primaries. Its characteristic silhouette, with its short tail and broad wings, renders confusion with other species unlikely. The other common vulture of the Esquinas area, the Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*, has a longer tail and longer wings and its flight feathers are grey when viewed from below. The Turkey Vulture has the keenest sense of smell of



Turkey Vulture



Black Vulture

any bird species and can thus detect carrion in deep forest; in contrast, the Black Vulture relies largely on its excellent eyesight to locate food and thus feeds mainly in open country (or by following Turkey Vultures, which give way to Black Vultures at carcasses). A third species, the King Vulture *Sarcoramphus papa*, is also found in the Esquinas forest, although it is much less common. In shape it is similar to Black Vulture, although its wings are broader and its tail even shorter. Adults are creamy-white in colour; juveniles look superficially similar to Black Vulture but lack the white patches on the underwings.



King Vulture



Black Vulture



Turkey Vulture

## Roadside Hawk

*Buteo magnirostris*  
Gavilán Chapulinero

Apart from the two common species of vulture (see previous page), this is the most frequently observed bird of prey of open country. The Roadside Hawk is a further species whose range is expanding as a result of forest clearance. Unlike many other species of hawk it rarely soars and instead hunts from perches, dropping onto reptiles, small mammals and large insects. It is often surprisingly tame and allows a close approach. When it does fly, the characteristic rufous primaries (see lower photo) confirm the identification. Immature birds look highly similar to immature Broad-winged Hawk *Buteo platypterus* and Gray Hawk *Buteo nitidus* but may be distinguished by behaviour and by their rufous thighs and buffy wash to the underparts.



Roadside Hawk



Roadside Hawk



Yellow-headed Caracara

## Yellow-headed Caracara

*Milvago chimachima*  
Caracara Cabecigualdo

The two species of caracara both show large pale "windows" in their primaries but the Yellow-headed Caracara is considerably smaller and as its name implies it has a yellow head. Caracaras are found in pastures and agricultural land and frequently walk on the ground in the company of cattle, waiting for mice, reptiles and large insects to be flushed. They also feed on carrion and can be observed along roadsides looking for road kills. The nasal calls are often the first clue to the bird's presence. Unlike the Crested Caracara *Caracara cheriway*, which has long been established in Costa Rica (especially in the drier areas in the NW), the Yellow-headed Caracara was first recorded in the country in 1973. Again, its spread through the Pacific lowlands correlates with the destruction of the lowland forest in the area.

## Laughing Falcon

*Herpetothes cacinmans*  
Guaco

The laughing falcon is an attractive, large falcon with a black "bandit mask" on a buffy head, giving it an appearance reminiscent of a Giant Panda. It is extraordinarily vocal for a bird of prey. A typical call is a nasal "o-ak" or "wac", given in many different rhythms and combinations, such as a fast laughing "wacwacwac..." (hence the species' name) or as a gradual crescendo "o ak --- o-ak --- o-ak --- o-AK --- o-AK --- O-AK --- O-AK". In the evening, pairs often duet for more than five minutes at a time. The Laughing Falcon feeds mainly on snakes. It is found from N Mexico to NW Peru and N Argentina.



Laughing Falcon

## Northern Jacana

*Jacana spinosa*  
Jacana Centroamericana

The Northern Jacana ranges from S Texas and N Mexico to W Panama, being replaced further south (to E Peru and N Argentina) by the closely related Wattled Jacana *Jacana jacana*, which is occasionally recorded in SW Costa Rica (along the Esquinas entrance road, for example) - sightings of the southern species are increasing as the forest barrier is cleared. Both species are found in ponds, marshes and flooded pastures. Their exceptionally long toes enable them to walk on aquatic vegetation. Their flight is highly distinctive, with a series of flaps followed by a brief glide; on landing they tend to hold their wings extended above their backs for a short period (see lower photo). When water levels are suitable, the species is abundant along the entrance road and opposite the Tropical Research Station La Gamba.



Northern Jacana - adult



Northern Jacana - juvenile



Brown-throated Parakeet

## Brown-throated Parakeet

*Aratinga pertinax*  
*Cotorra caresucia*

This extremely recent colonizer from NW Panama does not feature in Stiles & Skutch's 1989 field guide to the birds of Costa Rica. It is found in cleared areas from NC Brazil through Venezuela and E Colombia to W Panama and its range is expanding rapidly as a result of human activities; it is now common in the SW lowlands of Costa Rica. It is olive-green above with a greenish-blue crown and forehead, a brown throat and upper breast and pale green underparts (apart from an orange centre to the belly). In flight, the cobalt blue flight feathers can be seen. Adults of the race found on the Pacific slope of Panama and in SW Costa Rica, *A. pertinax ocularis*, have a distinctive yellow patch below and behind the eye.

## Smooth-billed Ani

*Crotophaga ani*  
Garrapatero Piquiliso

The Groove-billed Ani *Crotophaga sulcirostris* is common and widespread throughout Costa Rica except in the SW, where it has been displaced by the related Smooth-billed Ani. This latter species was first recorded in Costa Rica in 1931 and is now an abundant resident of the S Pacific slope. Flocks are found in scrubby areas and pastures, often together with livestock. In the early morning or following rain they frequently fan their wings and tail and perch on a fence post or shrub to sun themselves. They have a highly characteristic flight, with several rapid wing beats followed by a long and somewhat unsteady glide. The scientific name means "tick eater" and it is widely believed that the birds feed on ticks on cattle.



Smooth-billed Ani



## Striped Cuckoo

*Tapera naevia*  
Cuclillo Listado

The far-carrying, whistled call (two notes with the second a semitone higher than the first) is frequently heard along the Esquinas entrance road and the bird often responds to whistled imitations by flying in and perching prominently. Unlike the majority of American cuckoos, the Striped Cuckoo is a brood parasite, generally laying its eggs in nests of *Synallaxis* spinetails. It is common in open country with scattered trees and feeds largely on grasshoppers and other small insects. Like many other species in this chapter, the Striped Cuckoo is expanding its range as a result of deforestation.



Striped Cuckoo



Tropical Kingbird

## Tropical Kingbird

*Tyrannus melancholicus*  
Tirano Tropical

An abundant resident of lowlands and middle elevations throughout the country, even in cities, the Tropical Kingbird is frequently seen on exposed perches in all types of habitat, watching for insects, dragonflies and butterflies that it catches in aerial sallies. It is one of the first species to be active in the mornings and one of the last to go to roost and is fearless in its pursuit of larger, predatory birds, which it drives vigorously from its territory. Most medium-sized birds perched on roadside wires along the entrance road will probably turn out to be Tropical Kingbirds - but beware of confusion with Great Kiskadee *Pitangus sulphuratus*, which also hunts from similar perches, especially near water (the Kiskadee has a characteristic, onomatopoeic call, a broad white supercilium and a much more powerful bill).



Great Kiskadee

## Blue-gray Tanager

*Thraupis episcopus*  
Tangara Azuleja

Of the many species of tanager found in the Esquinas area, the Blue-gray Tanager is probably the commonest and most conspicuous. Its overall colour is greyish blue, although the wings and tail are brighter blue, especially on males. Females are duller and give a greyish impression. It is frequently to be found on scattered trees in cleared areas and is readily attracted to feeding stations. Pairs may also be seen feeding on fruiting trees at the forest edge. The species ranges from C Mexico to NW Bolivia and Amazonian Brazil; it is found throughout Costa Rica except at higher elevations and in the dry areas of the NW.



Blue-gray Tanager

## Variable Seedeater

*Sporophila aurita*  
Espiguero Variable

Several species of seedeater are commonly found in seeding grasses along the Esquinas entrance road. They are gregarious and often occur in mixed flocks. Although the females are brownish and extremely difficult to separate in the field, adult males have distinctive plumages and can be readily identified. Perhaps the most common is the Variable Seedeater, males of which are black above with white rumps and have black throats and chests and white bellies. They also have thin white collars, although these do not extend across the nape. Male Yellow-bellied Seedeaters *S. nigricollis* have black heads, dark olive backs and wings and yellowish chests and bellies; male Ruddy-breasted Seedeaters *S. minuta* are uniformly rufous below and on their rumps with otherwise brownish upperparts. Like Variable



Variable Seedeater - male

Seedeaters they show white wing spots, which are absent in Yellow-bellied Seedeaters. Both Yellow-bellied and Ruddy-breasted seedeaters are fairly common; care should be taken not to overlook rarer species such as Slate-colored Seedeater *S. schistacea* (males of which are highly distinctive, with prominent yellow bills) and White-collared Seedeater *S. torqueola* (males of which are superficially similar to Variable Seedeater but with unbroken white collars and generally buffier underparts).



Variable Seedeater - female



Ruddy-breasted Seedeater - male



Yellow-bellied Seedeater - males



Slate-colored Seedeater - male



## Streams and rivers

There are three main waterways in the near vicinity of the La Gamba Research Station, the Quebrada Negra, the Rio La Gamba and the Rio Bonito. The Quebrada Negra is the small stream that runs behind the Tropical Research Station La Gamba and the lodge; the Rio La Gamba and Rio Bonito are much deeper and wider but considerably further away. All three waterways are used, especially around midday and in the early afternoon, by a large number of species that visit to bathe and to drink. A few hours spent in the shade, at a time when it is often hard to observe birds in the forest, can thus be highly rewarding. But there are also many species that are found largely or exclusively along waterways and the most common of these are described briefly in the following section.

## Snowy Egret

*Egretta thula*  
Garceta Nivosa

The Snowy Egret is a medium-sized heron with totally white plumage and conspicuously contrasting black legs and yellow feet as well as a black bill and yellow face. These egrets use a wide variety of salt- and freshwater wetlands and also follow livestock in pastures, often congregating in small groups. Accordingly their diet is made up of various invertebrates and small fish. The Snowy Egret is widely distributed in the Americas. In the Golfo Dulce area it is a non-breeding resident, most common during winter and at migration time.



Snowy Egret



Snowy Egret

## Little Blue Heron

*Egretta caerulea*  
Garceta Azul

Little Blue Herons are medium-sized and the only herons of the region with an overall bluish-grey colour from head to toe, immatures are white with grayish, black-tipped bills. They are generally observed standing alone or in small flocks stalking for small invertebrates and fish at the edges of slow running rivers, freshwater marshes, estuaries and mangroves. When disturbed, they fly off with slow wing-beats. The species is widely distributed in the subtropical and tropical Americas. Most Little Blue Herons observed in the Golfo Dulce are on migration or wintering non-breeding residents.



Little Blue Heron - adult



Little Blue Heron - juvenile