

Two Dozen of Us Native Plants Folks Visited Costa Rica

We had a great time learned lots and even raised buck\$ for FNPS



By

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In February of this year, 24 FNPS members and their friends set off to experience Costa Rica. Each came with different objectives and expectations: some were avid birders, some were native nursery owners and wanted to learn about plant propagation, others were interested in seeing some of the rain forest creatures, and others just wanted to have fun and relax in this beautiful land. We were all interested in the forests and plants that make up the overstory, mid-story, and groundcover of Costa Rica's wondrous and increasingly rare natural habitats.

We quickly discovered that 40% of the forests in Costa Rica are second-growth forest because so much land was cleared many years ago to grow coffee, bananas, pineapple, exotic woods such as teak, beef cattle, and to house exotic plant nurseries. The country had to find ways for its people to make a living and to become part of the world marketplace with its exports. So we appreciated even more the primary rain forests that we visited.

The first days of our trip were rainy. It rained while we were in the National Park and while we rode through the canopy of the rain forest on the aerial tram. But no one complained. We all agreed it was a great experience to be in the rain forest in the rain. The sound of the raindrops on the foliage and the quietness of the forest lent a spiritual aura to the adventure.

This beautiful little country, about the size of West Virginia, enchants everyone who visits it. Inch for inch, it is the most diverse country in fauna and flora in the world. Part of the reason for its diversity is its location linking North and South America. We all took a little piece of Costa Rica home in our hearts and left a little piece of ourselves behind. We will share these memories for a lifetime.

The Relationship Between Birds and Plants in Costa Rica

There are more than 830 species of birds in Costa Rica. Species we saw range from the elusive and spectacular Resplendent Quetzal in the Cloud Forest of Monteverde, to the scarlet macaws of Carara near the Pacific Ocean, and the Montezuma Oropendola at Selva Verde near the Caribbean. Approximately 140 bird species were seen on the trip and even the non-birders in the group looked on in awe at the many beautiful birds seen.

The Resplendent Quetzal nests in the Highlands Cloud Forests in the cavities of dead tree trunks. Their main food source is fruit, particularly wild avocados (Lauraceae). Montezuma Oropendolas eat fruit and seeds, including ripe cultivated bananas and Cecropia spikes, and they drink nectar from banana, blasa, and norantea. Scarlet macaws are brilliant red, blue, and yellow. They feed in the tree canopy on the fruits and nuts of spondias, hura, terminalia, and various palms.

The white hawk nests high in trees, often in a mass of epiphytes which are abundant in the rain forests. Emerald toucanets use holes carved by woodpeckers for nesting. These birds are usually high in the canopy and not easy to see, but we were able to view a pair close up at their nesting site near one of the hotels where we stayed.

Thirteen species of hummingbirds were observed by the group during the trip. The largest was the violet sabrewing, whose favorite flowers include heliconias, bananas, and sometimes understory shrubs like cephælis.

We looked for the endangered green macaw, *Ara ambigua*, but since less than 100 remain, it is difficult to find them. However, the native almendro tree, *Dipteryx panamensis*, so necessary in the green macaw's habitat, is being slowly introduced to areas adjoining the existing forest in the hopes that with more food and nesting sites available, the green macaws will produce more offspring and increase their dwindling numbers. The relationship of birds and plants in Costa Rica, as everywhere else, is very fragile, and it was wonderful to see the effort the country is making to protect the environment.

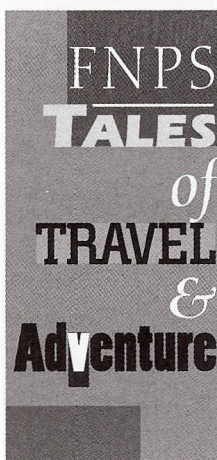
Monteverde Cloud Forest Sky Walk


With a half-day of free exploration time at Monteverde, some of us went to the butterfly garden, some went birding, and some of the more adventurous travelers set off for a "walk in the sky" in the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve, located about 8 km. from Santa Elena. This area is privately owned by families of the Monteverde community interested in education as well as protecting the environment. These property owners currently protect 663 acres of cloud forest. Over 2,000 plant species, 320 bird species, and 100 kinds of mammals have been observed in this area.

Our first indication that this was going to be quite a day was negotiating the road. It was a very narrow dirt road that ascended straight up and was filled with large rocks. At an altitude of over 4,000 feet, it was a climb to be remembered. Upon arrival, we were met with a 49-foot spiral staircase that placed us at the foot of suspension bridge one. The sky walk took approximately two hours and let us view many areas of the forest as we climbed to the top of the canopy. The wind was very strong as we swayed through the six suspension bridges. The bridges varied from 49 feet high and 90 feet long, to 150 feet high and 656 feet long. We had an exciting day playing Tarzan in the Monteverde Cloud Forest.

Monteverde Butterfly Garden

After a morning in the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve and our daily ration of rice and beans, seven of us, with our guide Paul Valenciano, set out down the rocky road from our lodge to the Monteverde Butterfly Garden. Paul pointed out the headquarters for the Children's Rain Forest, as well as identifying bird and tree



A black and white photograph showing a suspension bridge with a mesh floor, stretching across a deep, forested valley. The bridge is surrounded by tall trees and dense foliage. The perspective is from above, looking down at the bridge and the valley below.

**The
Monteverde
Cloud Forest
Preserve is
above 4,000
feet altitude.
Six
suspension
bridges
are from
50 to 150
feet high,
and 90 to
656 feet
long.**

species as we walked. (The Children's Rain Forest is land purchased by money gathered by children around the world.)

The day was warm, sunny, and windy enough to blow one over. We descended a steep grade and, perched on the side of a slope, we found the Monteverde Butterfly Garden. We met our butterfly garden guide on the porch of a building draped with blooming vines. The cloud forest was in the distance and below us was the medicinal plant garden containing over 100 plants.

The nature center displayed numerous local insects and beetles, alive and some good enough to eat (ask Jennifer Bruckler, Sea Rocket Chapter). The center had a microscope, mini-cams, butterfly pupae, chrysalises, and butterflies that were being placed in plastic tubs by a volunteer as they emerged from their chrysalises. Our guide gave us an informative lecture starting with water beetles and ending with the butterfly life cycle. Some of us were asked to carry the tubes into one of the four butterfly habitats for release. The Monteverde Butterfly Garden is a non-profit organization that raises over 50 species of butterflies strictly for educational purposes.

The butterfly houses were divided into habitats. The Lowland Habitat (sea level to 1,625 feet) housed the malachite, blue morpho, and owl butterflies as well as the common brown, white, and red cook butterflies. The Mid-Elevation Habitat (up to 3,280 ft.) represents the warm environment along the forest edges and houses the familiar longwing and swallowtail butterflies. The Forest Understory Habitat is cool, dark, and moist, and is home to the nearly invisible and exotic glasswing butterflies. What a treat! The fourth habitat was the Highland Forest Edge Habitat (4,225 ft), the largest and a screened area or flyway. Here we saw the monarchs, sulphurs, owls, and morphos, plus 20 other species of butterflies.

All the habitats were connected by paths through wooded areas. The plants in all the habitats were identified and the tour included a leaf cutter ant colony displayed under glass. We happily climbed back up the steep hill to our lodge, chatting about all we had seen, and resumed our bird watching.

Living Fences and the National Tree of Costa Rica

Along the roadsides, we saw living fences: fences made by planting certain species of trees several feet apart and attaching them together with wire. We saw a few different plants that were used quite often as living fences, such as our native gumbo limbo tree (*Bursera simaruba*). Also used were two different species of *Erythrina*, *Erythrina costaricensis*, with red flowers quite similar to our native *Erythrina herbacea*, and the other *Erythrina poeppigiana*, which has orange flowers. *Gliricidia sepium*, commonly known as blackwood in Costa Rica, appeared to be a medium to large tree with pink flowers. There were also shrub type plants used such as yucca and dracenas.

The country's national tree is *Enterolobium cyclocarpum*, commonly known in Costa Rica as *guanacaste*. It is in the family MIMOSCEAE (LESUMINOSAE) and is a very large tree with a wide spreading canopy that can reach 90 feet in height. The leaves are pinnate with 4-15

leaflets. The flowers are white 1-1.5 cm. in diameter. The fruit is a legume that resembles the shape of a human ear and can reach 8-10 cm. in diameter. The habitat in which *guanacaste* is found is usually low elevations with high humidity. It is native from Mexico to the northern

FNPS travelers in Costa Rica, on the first-ever international fundraising field trip. A second trip is planned for 2003.



part of South America. The diameter of the trunk can reach 2.5 meters. The name *guanacaste* is Indian for "ear tree."



First row, l-r: Judith Olah, Gayle Edwards, Leslie Veber, Jill Augustine, Lynne Shomaecker, Annette Artini, Marjory Bowser, Freda and Frank Dolci. **Second row, l-r:** Michael Kenton, Bill Sanders, Joyce Sanders, Sandra Campbell, Robert Augustine, Ellie Cherwick, Amy Mott, Rita Grant. Back row, l-r: Jesse Johnson, Donna Reynolds, Joe Reynolds, Joe and Jennifer Bruckler, Jo Anne Trebatoski, Paul Valenciano, our guide, and Greivin, our bus driver.

JoAnne Trebatoski, FNPS Membership Committee Co-Chair, organized FNPS' first-ever international fundraising field trip, a week-long tour of Costa Rica from February 23 to March 3, 2002, led by a local naturalist guide, Paul Valenciano Herrera. JoAnne's bubbly energy and enthusiasm resulted in a great trip and \$5000 for FNPS. **For info about a second trip in 2003, contact: JoAnne Trebatoski at 941-466-6711 or plantnative@msn.com.**