



Winging It

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A Nicaraguan Sampler

BY KRISTI STREIFFERT

It is easy to understand why birding tours to Central America typically concentrate on Chiapas, Belize, or Guatemala in the north, and Costa Rica or Panama in the south: these are the areas most likely to produce specialties. And results-oriented independent birders usually follow the tour companies' lead. This leaves the countries in the middle virtually unbirded.

And that makes Nicaragua, the most overlooked of the Central American nations, practically virgin territory. The way the diversity cards were dealt, Nicaragua just can't compare with Costa Rica. But if you are willing to forgo a specialty or two, Nicaragua has something else to offer—the chance to be first.

Birding here is still in its infancy, and any observation is potentially a discovery: a new locality for Pearl Kite, for example, or that one sure spot for Nicaraguan Grackle. David Davenport, who runs birding trips to Nicaragua (www.ecoquesttravel.net), says that he has found a "first" on nearly every trip. With an area of 60,000 square miles, much of it still roadless, Nicaragua offers unlimited opportunities for discovery.

In the last few years, the mainstream press has regularly issued reports extolling the country's natural beauty, real-estate bargains, and

earnest efforts at democracy. It's all true, sort of, but there are caveats: Nicaragua is the second-poorest country in the hemisphere. The democratic process is still a struggle, the tourism infrastructure is lacking, and many Nicaraguans, well-meaning as they are, have no training in customer service or business management. For the curious traveler and the enthusiastic birder, however, these frustrations just add to the allure.

What follows is a list of places and contacts for exploring Nicaragua's birding opportunities. If your Spanish is lacking, I suggest hiring a full-time guide. For \$25-50 a day, plus accommodations and meals, you will be supporting one of the enthusiastic young ornithologists who are the future of Nicaraguan bird conservation—they need both the money and the encouragement!

The sites listed will produce many of Nicaragua's resident birds; I mention just a few in each section. Absent from my lists are such "trophy" birds as Harpy Eagle and Scarlet Macaw, which occur at locations that are difficult or expensive to reach. My remarks focus instead on the places with the best access to the greatest number of species.

Managua Area

Chocoyero Reserve is a small national park about an hour's drive from Managua. The dry tropical forest in the park harbors Great Curassow; Violaceous, Black-headed, Elegant, and Collared Trogons; and several species of woodcreeper (look for Plain-brown, Ruddy, Northern Barred-Woodcreeper and Ivory-billed).

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Ant swarms attract Barred Antshrike, Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, and a variety of wrens, saltators, and thrushes. The park's prime attraction are the hundreds of Green Parakeets that nest and roost behind a waterfall.

Find the park by driving from Managua toward Granada. At the traffic circle at 14.4 kilometers (look for small green signs marking kilometers), turn right toward Ticuantepe, then take another right at the first traffic light (3.5 kilometers farther). In another 3 kilometers, you'll find the sign for Chocoyero – El Brujo nature reserve. Leaving the pavement, you'll make a hairpin turn down a steep hill. From here, dirt roads wind through pineapple and banana farms (look for motmots and trogons). From the paved road, it is about 7 kilometers to the park. Watch for faded signs at intersections, stay on the well-used (though narrow) road, and ask locals to point in the direction of the *parque* (“par-kay”).

The turnoff for *Laguna de Apoyo* is on the right at kilometer 37.5 from Managua on the Managua-to-Granada highway; there is a sign here for Norome, a lake resort (www.noromevillas.com). Follow this road for 4 kilometers to the ‘T’ in a village; turn right. The road quickly begins to descend into the crater, and views of the lake are breathtaking; this is a very good area to look for Zone-tailed Hawk. At the bottom of the crater, a road to the right parallels the shoreline. You'll find a well-used foot-path on your right a little over 2 kilometers after this junction, just after passing a long rock wall on your left and then a steep, washout-prone creek crossing. Scramble up the embankment and follow the trail to look for Turquoise-browed Motmot,



Map by CIA Factbook.

and nial town of Granada. One of Nicaragua's most popular tourist destinations, with a relatively well-developed infrastructure, the area provides at least 3 days of excellent birding.

Lake Nicaragua (Lake Cocibolca) is the largest lake between Mexico and South America, important habitat for shorebirds, waterfowl, and resident species. The lakeshore is near Granada: drive east along La Calzada street from the central plaza; at the end, turn right to drive along the lake shore (a small access fee is charged). To

tour around some of the 350 small islands, drive south to where the road hooks inland to Asese Bay; here you can hire a boat and boatman. It is also possible to visit shoreline wetlands in the private La Calera nature reserve (e-mail Raul Lacayo, lacayo@invernica.com). Look in the wetlands for Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, and Black-necked Stilts. A recent hike in La Calera also yielded Spectacled Owl, White-fronted Parrot, and White-necked Puffbird.

A short drive along the wetlands farther north will produce Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Purple Gallinule, and Northern Jacana, along with the likelihood of finding Nicaragua's best-known near-endemic, the Nicaraguan Grackle. The grackles are most often seen with Great-tailed Grackles near cattle; look in the corrals on the left-hand side of the road. To find this area, take Santa Lucia Street or La Calzada to its end at the Lake Granada shoreline, and head north (left) in the direction of Malacatoya.

Volcan Mombacho is one of Nicaragua's best-known tourist destinations (closed Mondays). Take Highway 6 southwest out of Granada; turn left onto a brick road at the El Guanacaste intersection (marked by a sign to the park; the road straight ahead follows the Pan-American Highway to Nandaime, while the right turn leads to Diria and Diriomo). At the entrance station, stop and walk through the shady coffee plantation to look for Red-billed Pigeon and Black-headed Trogon. Orange-chinned Parakeets may fly over, and a variety of tyrannulets and *Empidonax* flycatchers will be present. Check flowering trees for Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer and Red-legged Honeycreeper.

If you have a 4WD vehicle, after birding the entrance station you can drive the steep paved road to the summit (fee approximately \$15). There is also a regularly scheduled shuttle to the top, which though convenient, does not permit you to stop for birds. Up in the cloud forest, hike the trails for Mountain Elaenia, plus Steely-vented, Cinnamon, and Magnificent Hummingbirds and Plain-capped Starthroat and Purple-throated Mountain-gem. Hummingbirds are especially abundant along the trail near the fumaroles.

For early-morning birding, stay overnight in the rustic hostel at the summit of Mombacho. Information is available at www.mombacho.org (mostly in Spanish) and at www.mombachotour.com (in English).

Domitila Reserve (www.domitila.org) is a privately owned ecolodge low on the south flank of Mombacho Volcano; the



A field trip on Lake Cocibolca (also known as Lake Nicaragua). © Kristi Streiffert.

Banded Wren, and Melodious Blackbird. The higher you hike, the more variety you'll find.

As you drive back up out of the crater, the area around the first big rock guardrail (at a little over 0.5 kilometer) hosts numerous species, including a colony of Montezuma Oropendola.

Granada Area

Less than an hour from Managua, birders with limited time and resources can visit a range of habitats around the colo-

rustic lodge is pleasant and the food very good. If you have an extra day, this area's second-growth tropical dry forest and riparian habitats are good for birds like Gray Hawk, Laughing Falcon, Lesser Ground-Cuckoo, Nutting's Flycatcher, and Great Crested Flycatcher.

Highland Areas

El Jaguar is a birder-owned reserve and coffee farm at an elevation of 1350 meters, 3-4 hours north of Managua. For directions and information on cabin rental, see www.jaguarreserve.org. Emerald-chinned Hummingbird, at the southern end of its range, feeds on blossoms just outside the cabins. Lineated and Pale-billed Woodpeckers and Golden-hooded Tanager are found on the cloud-forest trails. Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher nests here. Golden-cheeked Warbler is another gem spotted here year after year.

Finca Esperanza Verde is an ecolodge, coffee farm, and private reserve 3 hours from Managua. Directions and information are at www.fincaesperanzaverde.org (ask about lodging for individuals). Everything from Keel-billed Toucan to Long-tailed Manakin (and, more surprisingly, Bay-headed Tanager) can be encountered at this secluded site; Brown-hooded Parrot, Brown Jay, and seedeaters are easily seen from the open-air dining area.

Selva Negra, another coffee plantation and habitat preserve, is easily reached without four-wheel-drive. A bit run-down, it is famous for cool weather and German-style food and lodging (www.selvanegra.com). The Three-wattled Bellbird can be easily heard on the mountainous trails. Bushy-crested Jay is also easy to spot here, and Scaled Antpittas feed along the trails at dusk. Resplendent Quetzal has been sighted here.

Southern Nicaragua

Los Guatuzos, a large nature reserve and RAMSAR site in southern Nicaragua, is a logistical nightmare to reach, and mosquitoes, mud, and rain make it a challenge even after you

get there. But perhaps because of these obstacles, the place is magic for birders—birders with head nets and deep pockets, that is.

The most common access point is the tiny riverfront town of



The trails of Finca Esperanza Verde in Nicaragua's highlands. © Kristi Streiffert.

Papaturro, on the banks of the Papaturro River. At this village, where transportation is purely by boat (no cars), you can stay in a clean, comfortable hostel run by Friends of the Rio San Juan (FUNDAR, www.fundar.org.ni/centroecologico/index.php). From here, you can spot Agami Heron, Sungrebe, and Gray-necked Wood-Rail, along with three species of monkeys. Behind the hostel, dozens of American Pygmy Kingfishers ply the creeks, looking oddly like diving hummingbirds. Bronzy Hermit and Passerini's Tanager are easy to find, along with White-colored Manakin and Mangrove Swallow.

To get to Papaturro, you first have to get to the remote lake town of San Carlos, and the easiest way to do this is to take one of the daily puddle-jumper flights (www.tacaregional.com/costena/ing/coitinerarios.html) from Managua, landing on the dirt San Carlos airstrip. From San Carlos, I suggest hiring a FUNDAR guide and boat to take you across La Nicaragua and up the Papaturro River. FUNDAR's Raul Aquilar is a boatman who doesn't speak much English, but he knows the birds by both sight and sound and points them out in a field guide. There is a twice-weekly public boat (costing next to nothing) to and from Papaturro, but this would require an overnight stay in San Carlos. Hiring a private boat cuts a couple hours off the crossing and allows more flexibility in scheduling; budget at least \$100 each way. If you speak Spanish, FUNDAR will facilitate your trip. If not, hire a bilingual guide to help make the arrangements.

The author (wren_canyon@hotmail.com) is an American freelance journalist and frequent contributor to LIVING BIRD. She lived in Nicaragua from 2004 until June 2006, and is now living in Cyprus. Thanks to Paul Baicich, Jose Manuel Zolotoff-Pallais, and Jeffrey McCrary for their assistance with early drafts of this article.

English-speaking guides specializing in birds charge \$25-\$50 per day, plus the cost of their food and lodging if traveling. Each of these guides is well known to the author:

- José Manuel Zolotoff-Pallais (speaks English), zolotoff@ibw.com.ni.
- Salvadora Morales (speaks English), salvadoramoraless@hotmail.com.
- Alejandra Martínez Salinas (speaks English), todirostrum@yahoo.es.
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An extremely useful online literature database is www.bio-nica.org/Biblioteca/BibliAves.htm.