

## Rio Grande Valley versus Costa Rica

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In August 2023 we enjoyed 16 days in western Costa Rica. We spent some time exploring nature around our condo in the northwestern coastal area and in the central, mountainous part of the country on guided trips. The wildlife was amazing! I was fascinated by the beauty and variety of the plant life, the animals that I'd never seen outside a zoo, the amazing birds, and the sloths. We knew it was a lot different just from the road signs.



Wildlife crossing sign in Costa Rica

Both Texas and Costa Rica have tropical/semi-tropical environments, mountains, and coastal areas. Costa Rica is closer to the equator, so its climate, even at higher elevations, is different than the climate in our state. Can you imagine traveling up into the mountains of West Texas and finding lush, tropical foliage growing everywhere? When we drove into the mountains of Costa Rica, the weather continued being hot and humid or just rainy. That wasn't surprising, since it was the beginning of the rainy season. Short, sudden torrential downpours were common during the day.



Howler monkey in Costa Rica

After we settled into our condo, we heard the loud call of howler monkeys hanging out in the trees above us. We watched them daily, although they were difficult to photograph in the trees. Our guide helped us get a photo of a howler monkey in the park using his spotting scope and my cell phone. Sloths, trogons, a coati, iguanas, and agoutis were just a few of the wild creatures we encountered during our travels through the northwestern part of this beautiful country. We saw iguanas in several parks near the river and the coast. On a guided boat tour we were surprised to see kingfishers, spoonbills, egrets, and night herons that looked like the ones we see in the Rio Grande Valley.



If you get a chance to go to the nature parks in the mountains of Costa Rica, take advantage of their outstanding guide services. We avoided the large tours and booked a tour for our group of three. It was well worth the cost. All our Costa Rican guides had advanced degrees in biology from colleges in the United States. Our guides were very knowledgeable about all the flora and fauna, not just the birds. Even when rain kept the birds in hiding, we

learned an amazing amount of information because our guides were extremely knowledgeable about the entire ecosystem.



Green Kingfishers (*above*) and Black-crowned Night Herons (*left*) are found in both Costa Rica and the Rio Grande Valley

The most interesting days were spent visiting wildlife areas. As we recovered from the long plane trip from Denver to Costa Rica, we kept an eye out for species that were new to us in our back yard, and we planned three major excursions. First, we signed up for a river trip with a local guide where I saw my first crocodile in the wild.

I've been explaining the difference between alligators and crocodiles at the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center for 14 years, however, I got a much clearer understanding of their differences once I encountered crocodiles in the wild. On the river-boat tour I really got to see the differences size, color, and behavior. Several large crocodiles were swimming in the water or basking in the sun along the shore. I was surprised to see that the several species of birds along the river were like the ones we see in the Rio Grande Valley, such as roseate spoonbills, various egrets, and black crowned night herons, However, others, like the tiger heron, looked quite different.

Since the rainy season had begun, we started our second excursion exploring the jungle at Arenal Volcano National Park wearing plastic raincoats. Because it's hard for me to keep up with a tour group, we decided to book a private tour. That was a great idea! Our guide, who had an advanced degree in biology, did the tour at my pace.



Eyelash viper in tree along trail

Because it was raining, there were few birds visible during the first part of our talk. In addition to the birds we saw, our guide pointed out numerous plants, insects, and animals as we walked along the trails. There were few birds until the rain stopped, but the entire trip was filled with fascinating things. For example, there was a line of 11 bats clinging to a tree trunk; a snake was coiled on a tree branch near the trail; and spider monkeys showed their displeasure at our arrival yelling and throwing small branches at us from above.



There are 10 Trogon species in Costa Rica



Coati short for coatimundi searching for a snack

In the mountains we watched a young sloth slowly move through a tree below its mother while a group of tourists took lots of photos. Later, when we pulled off the road, a coati approached our car looking for a handout. The next day there was a roadside stand at that location. It looked like the coati sometimes was looking for handouts from people who shop at the stand. Guess it didn't know it wasn't a weekend. During one of our tours, the guide pointed out the trogon (bird) in the forest. The agouti we spotted near our motel reminded me of large, brown guinea pig. I did not even know they existed.



We saw a red fruit that depends on only one kind of pollinator for its survival. There was a tree that looked like my grandmother's lace tablecloth. We saw so many species of plants, animals, and insects that were new to me! There were numerous insects that surprised me. The butterflies were amazing! In fact, there are more than 1,500 different species of butterflies and 1,200 different species of moths in that country. The butterflies were plentiful near our condo, but there were even more varieties of these insects in the mountains. In fact, there is a butterfly preserve.



Interesting caterpillar observed in Costa Rica

On Google I learned that 90 percent of all Central American species and 18 percent of the total earth's population of butterflies can be found in Costa Rica. At our September chapter meeting, I was not even surprised when the presenter talked about stingless bees. I had just seen them on our trail in Monteverde. On that trail we stood close to a nest swarming with stingless bees. For the first time in my life, I was not frightened by bees. Knowing they would not sting, I stood on the trail and calmly watched them go in and out of their hive.

My favorites animals were the sloths. They just took their time moving in slow motion, as tourists stood in the road watching their unhurried progress. I was able to capture a photo of a young sloth making its way toward its mother who is at the top of this tree. The slow motion journey was being observed by a crowd of tourists who were blocking traffic.



Unfortunately, we did not have enough time to see everything we wanted to see. I wish we had spent some time at the butterfly sanctuary. I wish we'd had more than a brief glance of the quetzal before it went out of sight. I regret not actually driving up to the volcano, although we watched it from our motel balcony each night. Next time we'll have to stay longer.

Young sloth on a slow motion move in Costa Rica