

# The Bellbird

## Volume I, Issue 3

### From the Editor

In the northern hemisphere, millions of birds are on the move. Migration is in full swing and it shows with flocks of shorebirds feeding in and flying over wetlands, wood-warblers, vireos, flycatchers, and other small birds visiting local patches, and thousands of raptors steadily moving south. In Costa Rica and Panama, we are starting to see some of those first migrants although most of the small birds won't be here until late October. In the meantime, Plumbeous and Swallow-tailed Kites have already passed through, and most of the Yellow-green Vireos and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers are also gone.

However, large numbers of shorebirds are visiting the rich estuarine habitats in the Gulf of Nicoya and Gulf of Panama, and river mouths on both coasts. Species include Marbled Godwits, Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers, Western Sandpipers, and several others. Although several birds stay for the winter, a lot just make a quick stop to refuel before continuing on to South America. I always wonder how many rarities stop for a day or two and go unnoticed because no one is there to look. I bet the number is higher than we realize. Ideally, regular shorebird monitoring at the top shorebird sites in Costa Rica and Panama would tell us about rarities as well as give an indication of the numbers of shorebirds that migrate through or stay for the winter. Given the accessibility of Panama Bay, more or less regular monitoring probably does occur there but it's another story for Costa Rica. With that in mind, please remember to take a look at estuaries and consider paying a visit to Chomes. Most of all, submit the observations to eBird.

*Pat O'Donnell*

### App Updates

Major updates for the [Costa Rica Birds Field Guide app](#) and the [Panama Birds Field Guide app](#) are almost ready for release. These could be available for IOS in a week or two (a month or so for Android) and are free for those who have already purchased the app.

This next main update will put every species on the country list onto each respective app. There will be images for more than 800 species, vocalizations for more than 600, and range maps, and information for every species. Other new features include:

- eBird format for notes.
- A Similar species feature that allows easy comparison of birds that can be tough to identify.
- IUCN status shown for threatened species.
- Regional endemics noted.

Watch our [Facebook page](#) for the press release about this big update!

## **Birding Tip of the Month**

### **A Few Tips for Neotropical Raptor ID**

When it comes to issues with bird identification, there are a few avian groups that always come up. One of those groups are the raptors. Trouble with raptor identification, especially in flight, arises just as often as challenges posed by woodcreepers and tyrant-flycatchers. Part of the problem stems from the lack of opportunities available for seeing lots of raptors because although one can see thousands of Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks during migration, most of the resident species are scarce.

This means that over the course of two weeks of birding in good habitat, although a birder might log 15 to 20 species of diurnal raptors, most of those sightings will be singles instead of repeated views of the same species. Here are a few tips to help identify the raptor species you see while birding in Costa Rica and Panama:

**Know the few common species well:** Although most species are scarce, a handful are seen more often. These are species adapted to edge habitats and include Gray, Gray-lined, Roadside, Broad-winged, and Short-tailed Hawks, and Crested and Yellow-headed Caracaras (not to mention the two very common vultures). Study these ones the most to recognize less common species when they appear.

**It's all about the shape:** If you are used to raptor watching in the north, then you are already familiar with the importance of recognizing nuances in shape. The same goes for Central America. Since each species has a slightly different shape, note this before looking at tail bands or other features.



*This Double-toothed Kite can be recognized by shape= rather narrow wings, puffy undertail coverts, and a longish, thin tail.*

**Pay attention to habitat:** A lot of visiting birders wonder where all the raptors are in open fields and pastures. Some are in those habitats but since most raptor species in Central America are adapted to forest, this is the habitat they require and the older and more extensive the forest, the better. Some forest species range into semi-open areas near forest but in general, you need to bird in largely forested areas to see the most species.

## **Featured Birding Site**

### **Chomes, Costa Rica**

The Gulf of Nicoya is the most important estuarine ecosystem in Costa Rica. Mangroves grow along the shore, and at low tide, huge mud flats provide habitat for large numbers of shorebirds, egrets, and other aquatic species. During high tide, those mud flats are gone and many of the birds that use them hightail it to Chomes.



*A typical scene from Chomes.*

Chomes is an area of shrimp ponds and mangroves that act as one of the most important shorebird sites in Costa Rica. Visit at high tide during migration and the winter months and you have a fair chance of seeing Marbled Godwit, both yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitcher, Western, Semipalmated, and Least Sandpipers, Stilt Sandpiper, plovers, and various less common species. It's also a good place for Black Skimmer, terns, and one of the best sites in the country to look for rarities.

This site is free to visit and about an hour's drive from Puntarenas. The drive is longer if birding on the road in to Chomes and since this area is pretty good for dry forest species, you might want to make a few stops. The open areas, riparian zones, and groves of roadside trees can be good for White-fronted and Yellow-naped Parrots, the occasional Crane Hawk, Laughing Falcon, White-throated Magpie-Jay, White-lored Gnatcatcher, Black-headed Trogon, Streak-backed and Spot-breasted Orioles, and several other dry forest birds.

Interesting species have also turned up in the wide open fields close to the village of Chomes. Although entering the fields is prohibited, they can be scanned and birded from the road to look for Harris's Hawk, White-tailed Kite, and such rare and uncommon species as Aplomado Falcon, Buff-breasted and Upland Sandpipers, vagrant sparrows, and Cave Swallow (all of which have been seen there). When these fields are wet, they can also attract more shorebird species.

A bit further on, wetlands at the edge of the village can attract storks and other waders,

but the best wetland birding is along the road to the beach. To reach this, drive straight into and through the village to the end of the road and take a left. Follow this for one block to the end, take a right, and drive in to the ponds. Check each pond for birds, checking the mud flats as well as the edges of the ponds. Watch for Mangrove Rail in the wet scrubby mangroves in the ponds as well. This skulker is usually present where the short mangroves are located in a bit of standing water. If the ground is dry, the rails don't seem to be present and may have retreated back into the wetter heart of the mangroves.

Speaking of mangroves, all of the mangrove specialties can show in a couple areas of taller mangroves especially the track along the beach. At the beach, Collared Plover and other shorebirds can be present, and scanning the gulf can turn up Blue-footed Booby and other seabirds.

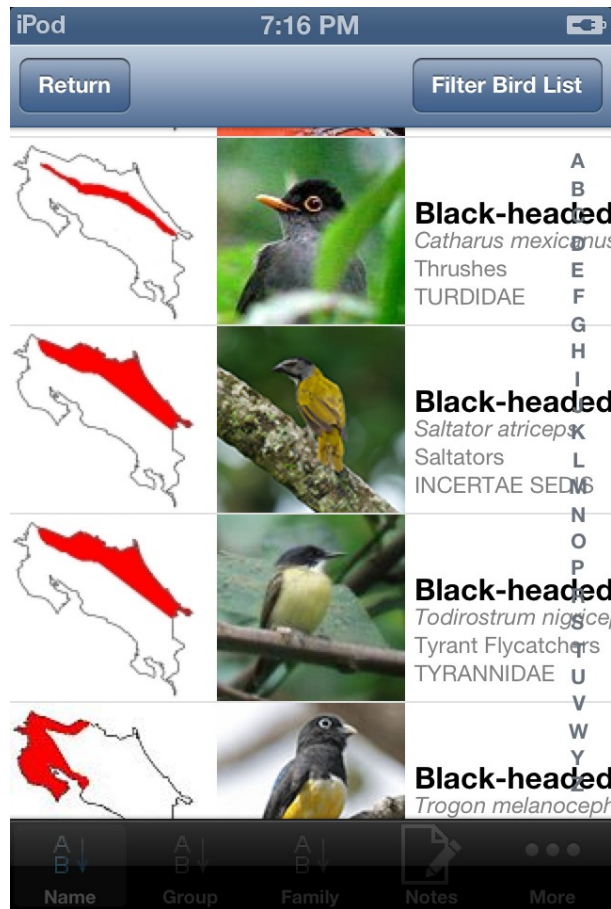


*Mangrove Vireo is uncommon but present.*

To visit Chomes, a vehicle is required as the site is 10 kilometers from the highway (watch for signs to Chomes between the main turn off to Monteverde and the turn off to Punta Morales). If you see the turn off to Morales, you have gone a bit past the entrance road to Chomes. A four wheel drive vehicle is often necessary but on a recent visit, the road was drastically improved and could be easily done with a two wheel drive. There aren't any services here (might be a small diner or two in the village) so bring plenty of water (it is quite hot), and snacks.

## App Tips

See a range map for each species by touching "Range" or going to the bottom of the text information for a bird.



A screen shot of the Costa Rica Birds Field Guide app with range maps shown.

## Combine filters

Are you coming to Costa Rica but only for ten days to be spent in the northwest and Monteverde? Or, maybe you are headed to Panama for a short trip to Boquete. If you will be visiting one or two areas, the search filter can show you what to expect. Just go to the filter, touch "Region" and pick the area of the country where you will be birding. Touch "back" and the app will only show the species from that area. To show all of the species again, go back to the filter and touch "reset". Combining the region filter and group filter can also help with identification. For example, if you saw a parrot in the North Pacific area, set the region filter for North Pacific, and the group filter for parrots, and this will show the only parrot species from that area.

## Don't be shy about using Which Bird is It?

Not sure what are you seeing or hearing in the field? Use your device to take a picture and record a sound with the Which Bird is It function. Find the function by touching "More" and then "Which Bird is It?" When the device goes online, your mystery photos and recordings are sent to us. We typically respond that same day.



Have you seen a bird, not sure what it was? Send us some details, description and location. Especially helpful would be an audio file of the bird's sounds and a photo. You can record and photo the bird. Just tap below.



## Three FAQs and Concerns

**Does the app need to be online to use it?** Nope. It only needs to be online to send us mystery images and sounds. Otherwise, our apps can be used as long as your device has power.

**How many species are on the Panama app?** The next update will include information and range maps for every species on the Panama checklist (over 970), as well as images for more than 800 species and sounds for more than 600.

**Can I use the apps on Android devices?** Yes, as long as the device is 2.3.3 or higher. Also, when purchasing the app, if for some reason it can't be used on your device, you won't be allowed to purchase it.

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