A Morning Birdwalk at Los Cusingos

Roy H. May, Jr.

San José, Costa Rica

2015

Los Cusingos, the home of the late Neotropical ornithologist Alexander Skutch, is a birding jewel in southwest Costa Rica. Receiving no more than a thousand visitors a year, the approximately 175 acre bird sanctuary is seldom on birding tour itineraries. Yet with its many birds and historical significance, Los Cusingos—the popular name for the endemic fiery-billed araçari-- should not be overlooked.

Now owned by the Tropical Science Center in San José, Los Cusingos remembers Dr Skutch (1904-2004) with commemorative activities on his May 20 birthdate. Although a botanist by training, he was perhaps the most important Neotropical ornithologist of the last century, judged by the enormous quantity of ornithological knowledge he produced. He concentrated on the life histories of birds. But he also wrote much philosophy. His bibliography lists more than thirty books and over 260 articles. At Los Cusingos, a farm he acquired in 1941, he studied birds and plants, and lived very frugally, even without electricity or indoor plumbing during most of the 63 years he lived there. This year I was invited to give the principal address about his work and importance for ornithology and philosophy. I’ve been to Los Cusingos various times over the years but I´ll never turn down the chance to make another visit!

I arrived early in the afternoon the day before the scheduled event. I spent a couple of hours looking through Dr Skutch’s library and then I went for a walk, but heavy rain cut it short. However the next day dawned with brilliant sunshine. I was on the trail before 6 am.

A noisy house wren outside my window woke me, a very good sign I thought. A great kiskadee repeatedly yelled *Cristo fue*--Christ-went-away, as they say here, and a resident black vulture basked in the morning sun. A couple of agoutis scampered into the woods as I started on one of the forest trails not far from Dr. Skutch’s house. These large, lovable-looking rodents are quite common here. But I want to see birds. I hear them…endemic black-hooded antshrikes are cawing in the distance and somewhere not far away a couple of great tinamous are trilling their shrill voice ever upward. Maybe I´ll see them somewhere on the trail.

In the rain forest it’s often difficult to see birds. There’s too much vegetation! You hear birds more than you see them. I hear the incessant chirping of the ochre-bellied flycatcher. Where is it?, I wonder. Its deep olive color means it’s almost invisible as it flits around the upper understory among lots of leaves and vines. There’s some movement. I catch glimpses of it flitting among the branches. How frustrating, only glimpses! Finally I spot it, perched on an open limb. Then it’s off again. Well, I finally saw a bird! Oh wait, something else is flitting around. It doesn’t want to be still either…I think this is a manakin. Yes, there it is perched, a red-capped manakin. This is a good start!

I continue along the trail, one that Dr. Skutch himself opened years ago. On a gentle curve I hear the clear, whistled song of chestnut-backed antbirds. There’s more than one and soon I’m in the middle of a marvelous morning chorus. There must be six or eight, singing all around me. Surely I could see one! Oh no, they love to stay close to the ground and they’re the same color as the leaf-littered forest floor. But they hop around a lot…yes, there’s one…out in the open on a dead tree stump. Ah ha! I see it with binoculars, but not for long. But then, there it is again, then another one flashes by, then I see another perched on a low limb. They seem to be everywhere. Finally they fade into the forest.

A rufous-tailed humming bird checks out a flower above my head and then rockets back into the woods. I take a step or two when movement on my right catches my eye. The oversized bright orange bill gives it away fast: an orange-billed sparrow. Usually foraging on the ground in pairs or small flocks, this one is content to move back-and-forth on a low, dead, horizontal branch. It’s easy to watch. A squirrel climbs a nearby tree. At first I thought it was a large woodcreeper. There are lots of woodcreepers in these woods, but I don’t see any today. I look to the other side and there, quietly watching me is a gartered trogon. Surely trogons are among the most beautiful of birds. This is turning out to be a good walk!

I move on. Near the trailhead leading to ancient Indian petroglyphs I spot the great tinamou meandering on the trail ahead of me. This chicken-like bird of ancient lineage prefers to walk rather than to fly. This morning it’s in no hurry, nor does it seem the least bit perturbed by me. What a treat. After a while it wanders off the trail and into the woods, so I too wander on. From somewhere back in the woods to my left I hear the resounding double knock of the pale-billed woodpecker. I’d really like to see it, but it´s way up high in a tree. Oh well.

Several times now I’ve heard the harsh, rapid *per-rreeck* of the blue-capped manakin. I’ll pass its lek soon. Like the red-capped, it flits back-and-forth with high velocity. You can see a black spot speed among the branches, but really seeing the little bird is hard. Fortunately it perches, and when it does, it often stays put for several minutes. I´m lucky. There it is, perched. The deep, sky-blue cap is elegant.

The pale-billed woodpecker double-knocks again. Where is it?…that dead tree is perfect, yes, it´s there, way up high! I barely get my binoculars on it before it flies, but at least I really did see it. More chestnut-back antbirds are singing. Yes, they´re everywhere. Another agouti rummages the forest floor. Suddenly a crowned woodnymph hovers and perches over the trail, then it´s off to only it knows where.

My time is running out because the day’s program will soon begin, so I hurry on. I spook something big, deep rufous color, on the trail ahead of me, but I’m not watchful enough to see it well. It was probably a ruddy quail-dove. I wish I’d seen it. There are usually grey-chested doves on the ground around here too, but I don’t seem them today. Especially in the evenings, black-faced antthrushes scamper along these trails. A flock of crimson-fronted parakeets pass overhead, but I can’t see them for the forest canopy. Also a bunch of noisy parrots perch in a tree beyond view. They’re either brown-hooded or white-crowned.

I haven’t had breakfast nor shaved, so I have to hurry on. I’ll give my talk in about two hours. But I’m finishing the trail, coming now into the gardens around Dr Skutch’s home. In-a-hurry or not, I stop to watch a couple of grey-headed tanagers on the trail’s edge, then a pair of buff-rumped warblers; the Peñas Blancas River is just a few yards away. A purple-crowned fairy flits by, its white tummy gleaming in the morning sun. Cherrie’s tanagers, another endemic, flock into the bushes, making a lot of noise. They’re about the most numerous birds here. That’s fine with me. The males are coal black with strikingly red rumps, and the females are lovely burnt orange.

Previously here I’ve seen flocks of white-shouldered, golden-hooded, blue-grey, palm, and bay-headed tanagers, along with buff-throated saltators, green honeycreepers, and plain xenops. On a walk here a month ago with my friend Tomohide “Tomo” Cho, I was treated to see a green shrike-vireo and a couple of endemic turquoise cotingas. The cotinga is rather easy to see at Los Cusingos, but the shrike-vireo is not!

I’ve got to finish-up. I walk on by Dr Skutch’s home, now a museum, cross the gardens and move up to the cabin where I spent the night. A roadside hawk peered at me, then flew off. Dr Skutch would approve of its leaving. He was no friend of hawks or any other predator! He wanted nature to be cooperative and caring, like the songbirds that came to his many feeders. A long-billed hermit hovered over some flowers. The charming hummingbird, endemic to this area, usually is here too, but I don’t see it this morning. I finally shave, and sit on the porch to eat a couple of hard boiled eggs. A female long-billed starthroat perches on a dry limb a few yards in front me. She preens until I finish breakfast. A swallow-tailed kite sails in the distant sky. More agoutis are slinking around the gardens. It’s been not quite an hour-and-a-half since I started my walk. There are a lot more birds to be seen at Los Cusingos, but it’s been a pretty good morning! I can’t complain.

Los Cusingos is part of the Alexander Skutch Biological Corridor, an effort by civic agencies and community organizations to connect area national parks and other protected areas. Today’s activity brings representatives of these groups, school children, and the local association of women to Los Cusingos. The museum is open and guides will take all who want to along the sanctuary’s forest paths. This is a fun day. Alexander Skutch inspires us all.