

Costa Rica 2025: Story of the Trip

Scientific Research & Design Honors · Nolan Catholic High School

This year's Ecology Honors trip to Costa Rica asked more of your students than just showing up and taking pictures. For six days they were acting as field biologists in one of the most biodiverse regions on Earth, using iNaturalist and our EcoQuest Live platform to document what they saw.

Every observation tells that same small story: a student stopped, looked closely at something living, asked "What is this?", and turned that moment into data that can be used beyond our group.

Day 1: From Texas to the rainforest

On Sunday we flew from DFW to San José, then drove to Sarapiquí and checked in at La Quinta. It was a classic travel day, but even at the hotel the trip really started: new birds at the feeders, unfamiliar trees, and the first "Is that worth an iNat?" moments as students tested the app and their eye for detail.

Day 2: La Selva, Tortuguero, and the Sea Turtle Conservancy

Monday started early with a visit to OTS La Selva Biological Station, one of the world's best-known tropical rainforest research stations. Students got to see what a long-term research facility looks like in the middle of the forest: labs, study plots, infrastructure for scientists, and a suspension bridge that felt just bouncy enough to make everyone pay attention to each step. One of the biggest highlights was seeing a Fer-de-lance (*Bothrops asper*), the famous venomous pit viper of the region, under safe, controlled conditions with experienced staff. It was a powerful reminder that the rainforest's beauty and danger are often wrapped together.



After La Selva, we continued our journey toward Tortuguero by bus and boat. The canals quickly turned into a floating classroom, with herons, kingfishers, jacanas, basilisks, caimans, and proboscis bats along the way.

In the afternoon we visited the Sea Turtle Conservancy and toured Tortuguero village. Students heard about decades of sea turtle research and conservation work in the area, then walked the black sand beach that so many of those studies are based on.

Later, as we were walking through town, we passed a group of local kids playing volleyball. They invited our students to join in, and a completely impromptu game took shape. There was no formal plan, just a ball, a rough court, and a lot of laughing across language barriers. It was a small moment that said a lot about the friendliness of the community and the willingness of your kids to jump in.

Day 3: Life on the canals

Tuesday was our big canal day, with boat tours in both the morning and afternoon. This is where the observation count really exploded. Students saw:

- Green basilisks (“Jesus lizards”) sprinting along branches and water edges
- Spectacled caimans tucked along the banks
- Proboscis bats lined up under branches
- White-faced capuchin monkeys moving through the trees

By this point, students were not just chasing “cool animals.” They were noticing patterns: which species stayed near the water, which preferred certain trees, and how the same stretch of canal never looked quite the same twice.



Day 4: Cerro hike, service, and a very muddy soccer match

On Wednesday morning we hiked the Cerro trail, which gave everyone a feel for vertical rainforest: changing light, changing humidity, and rapid shifts in vegetation as we gained elevation.

Plants started to share center stage. Students were photographing heliconias, red gingers, palms, vines, and understory plants they had begun to recognize from trail to trail. The focus started to widen from “What animal is that?” to “What kind of forest is this, and who lives here?”



In the afternoon we visited San Francisco village and La Escuela de San Francisco. From your generosity, we donated bags of school supplies, Nolan shirts, and toys to the school. The teachers and students were very appreciative, and it was an important service component of the trip, reminding us that ecological stewardship and human communities are deeply connected.

After the visit, we played a soccer match with local students. The field was sloppy and muddy, and that only made it better. By the end, almost everyone was soaked, dirty, and smiling. The chicas who did not play soccer modeled temporary tattoos.



Day 5: Baby turtles and Caño Palma

Thursday started before sunrise with a walk on the beach. After days of heavy rain, we had been told not to expect much turtle activity. Instead, we



were lucky: we stumbled across a group of baby sea turtles making their run to the ocean. Watching students quietly line the beach and cheer them on (from a respectful distance) was one of those moments that will stick with them for a long time.

In the afternoon we visited Caño Palma Biological Station, a smaller and more remote research station than La Selva. It is a much more rustic setting: simple buildings, a very memorable non-plumbed outhouse, and mosquitos that made everyone understand why long sleeves and bug repellent matter.



While we were there, students watched researchers process a Common Blunt-headed Tree Snake (*Imantodes cenchoa*) for their long-term monitoring work, carefully measuring and recording data before releasing it. It was a clear look at what real field science actually looks like on the ground.

Day 6: The long ride home

Friday morning we packed up and began the long ride back to San José. After several days on trails and canals, hours on the road provided a different kind of perspective. Students got to see more of the countryside and, along the bumpier stretches, got a very real lesson in how much we take our own road infrastructure at home for granted.

At some point the ride turned into a rolling sing-along, with students and adults joining in on everything from Fleetwood Mac to Gracie Abrams. It was a good way to end a week that was both tiring and unforgettable.



We finished the day back in the city with a final dinner together and a chance to decompress before flying out.

Throughout the week, your kids represented Nolan and your families really well. They were curious, flexible with the weather, and consistently kind to the people we met.

If you are looking for a place to start the conversation at home, good questions to ask them are:

- What was it like seeing the baby turtles?
- How muddy did that soccer game really get?
- What was Caño Palma like compared to the other places you stayed?
- How did that volleyball game in Tortuguero start?

What the data tell us

Without going too deep into the numbers, a few things stand out from the iNaturalist project:

- Our group documented 971 observations in total!
- The group recorded hundreds of different species across plants, animals, and fungi.
- Many observations have already been confirmed by the global iNaturalist community as “Research Grade,” meaning they are good enough to be used in real biodiversity research.
- Observations are spread across multiple regions and habitats, not just a single tourist stop.
- Over the week, students documented many of the “bucket list” rainforest species they were hoping to see, including red-eyed tree frogs (*Agalychnis callidryas*) and tiny strawberry poison dart frogs (*Oophaga pumilio*).



During the trip we also used a tool I am building called EcoQuest Live to turn our iNaturalist observations into a friendly competition and reflection tool. It pulls in students’ wildlife observations, awards points for good data, and helps us talk about what it means to “do science” consistently over time.

If you would like to explore what your student helped document, you can see the full project here:

[Nolan Ecology - Costa Rica](#)

In simple terms: the students did not just visit Costa Rica. They left behind real, usable data that scientists and conservationists can build on.