Eagle-Eye Tours



Central Mexico Birding Tour Trip Report 2022

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Eight days of birding and 285 bird species. This included 16 species of hummingbirds (one of which, unfortunately, was leader-only), 12 species of wrens (two of which were heard-only) and 31 species of warblers (two of which were heard-only). Also seen was some great scenery including a cactus forest similar to Arizona (but denser), central Mexico's belt of high-rising volcanos and an abandoned shade coffee plantation on a limestone hill. Our first day of birding was intended to make a few stops on the way to Zitácuaro, one of the towns that is closest to the wintering spot of most of North America´s monarch butterflies. After a 5 am breakfast and driving across Mexico City, the first stop, at the marshes near Lerma in the state of Mexico, permitted us to find the very local endemic Black-polled Yellowthroat and dozens of other neat species. Then we birded for an hour and a half along an abandoned railroad track through fir forest, with outstanding views of Red Warbler being one of the highlights. After lunch we made stops to bird a roadside pond and a short hike in a forest trail which produced Rivoli's Hummingbird, White-striped Woodcreeper, Cinnamon-bellied Flower-piercer, Black-headed Siskin and many other species. On the second day, we first birded the grounds of our Zitácuaro hotel where we saw the Mexican endemic Spotted Wren as well as three beautiful species of orioles. Next up was a semi-abandoned spa set in tropical dry forest. Here we found Violet-crowned Hummingbirds, a Canyon Wren singing its beautiful song, a very elusive Blue Mockingbird and many other species. One participant had an accident and was taken to a clinic by one of the leaders while the other leader led the group up to the Monarch Butterfly wintering site of El Rosario at 3100 m asl. Millions of monarch butterflies were flying down to drink at a stream or clinging to the trees and each other, making the section of forest they were in look haunted and orangish. This involved a hike uphill on horseback, but the hike downhill was on foot, which allowed us to see a few birds including White-eared Hummingbird and Mexican Violet-ear. We spent the next morning birding in pine forest close to Zitácuaro, seeing Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, a surprise Bumblebee Hummingbird and so many other birds that we were entertained non-stop for 3 ½ hours. Then we drove to Cuernavaca via a part of Mexico City, stopping in a small reserve surrounded by

tall buildings where there is an ancient pyramid from 450 B.C. and flowering Erythrina coral trees that attracted Scott's Orioles (this time we were not lucky with the Black-backed Oriole usually found here).



Zitacuaro pine-oak forest © Héctor Gómez de Silva

The following morning, we birded in the state of Morelos at Cañón de Lobos. The Cañón de Lobos area is always full of Mexican endemic and near-endemic birds; on this occasion we saw Dusky Hummingbirds, Golden-crowned Emerald, Golden Vireo, Black-chested Sparrow, Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrow, Thick-billed Kingbird, Rufous-backed Robins, Yellow Grosbeaks and had a remarkable encounter with a Lesser Roadrunner that came into playback.



Lesser Roadrunner © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Another amazing find was a pair of Great Black Hawks (very rare in this part of Mexico). In the afternoon we visited a recently discovered birding spot near Cuernavaca and although afternoons are usually not as productive as mornings, we did see a great variety of birds including the trip's only Stripe-headed Sparrows. The next morning was spent at one of the very few remaining sites where Sierra Madre Sparrow occurs; this is a critically endangered species practically confined to 8 km^2 of bunchgrass habitat between Mexico City and Cuernavaca. This time they were not as cooperative as usual, but in the end we did get to see two individuals. In the pine, oak and fir forests surrounding the bunchgrass habitat of the sparrow we saw the trip's only Green-striped Brushfinch and (unspotted) Spotted Towhees, and heard a couple of Long-tailed Wood-Partridges. One of the Spotted Towhees showed signs of hybridization with Collared Towhee in the form of a white throat and malar streak –the hybridization or not between Spotted and Collared Towhees in Mexico is a complex and fascinating enigma. The rest of the afternoon was spent driving (and stopping for lunch in Oaxtepec), heading to our hotel in Fortín de las Flores for the night. From Fortín we drove the short way to Amatlán, hiking up a rough cobblestone road through an abandoned coffee finca with shade trees left over from the original tropical semievergreen forest. Sumichrast's Wren was the main target bird. We tried the wren in the lower section of the hill but it did not respond at all. We had to hike up to the core of its habitat. This was a tough hike, three people decided they couldn't go any further and stayed part of the way up. But up at the core of its habitat the wren responded, at first by singing unseen and eventually by approaching so silently and secretively that only half of those who made it up were able to see it. As usual, we saw a good number of other birds on this hike and during our picnic breakfast prior to the hike, including Golden-crowned Warbler, Olivaceous Woodcreeper, a White-winged Tanager and many North American migrant warblers.



Rocky trail at Amatlan

At our hotel we had lunch and then a 1-hour walk of the wonderful plant-filled garden. Our next destination was a place I call the magical pastures, and it was indeed hopping with birds during all the time we were there.



Birding at the magical pastures

In the Cardel area, we saw a number of tropical residents, migrants and waterbirds, including gorgeous Altamira Orioles, rare Rufous-naped Wrens (Veracruz race), a beautiful male Painted Bunting, and many many others. In the afternoon, we witnessed the vegetation transition, along 2 minutes of driving, from cloud forest at Puerto del Aire to Joshua-tree and cactus-studded desert of the Valley of Tehuacán, and then stopped at a semidesert site and found the rare Oaxaca Sparrow and Ocellated Thrasher. On the tour's final day of birding we started at a beautiful cactus forest in Zapotitlán de las Salinas. Here we saw Bridled Sparrow, Boucard's Wren, Gray-breasted Woodpecker, White-lored Gnatcatcher and others. We later stopped at the onyx shops at San Antonio Texcala, then back to the hotel to check out and we broke the drive to Mexico City by first stopping for lunch in Puebla and then spending a couple of hours at Cacaxtla archaeological site, seeing the wonderful murals and a few birds.



Cacaxtla murals

Overall, we encountered a wide range of scenery and habitats and a good number of endemic birds in this part of Mexico, with almost no biting insects.