



## Central Mexico: Monarchs & Mexican Endemics Trip Report (March 1-10, 2023)

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**Guides: Héctor Gómez de Silva & Jared Clarke** Twelve excited birders took part in our Central Mexico adventure this year, along with leaders Héctor & Jared. Throughout our ten days together (March 1-10) we explored amazing and diverse habitats, hiked beautiful mountain trails, strolled quiet rural roads, experienced nature at its best and shared a wealth of wonderful birds. The 257 species encountered included a remarkable 26 endemic and 16 near-endemic birds - often with excellent views!

#### March 2-4

After an early breakfast in Mexico City on our first morning, we headed west towards Zitácuaro with several birding stops along the way. The tranquil wetlands at nearby Lerma provided to be extremely birdy, including fantastic looks at the very local endemic Black-polled Yellowthroat along with Striped Sparrow, Cinnamon-bellied Seedeater, our first Vermillion Flycatchers and dozens of other species. Hiking along an abandoned railway track through fir forest we found several Red Warblers - always a highlight! Other warblers included multiple Slate-throated Redstarts, Painted Redstart, Olive Warbler and our first Crescent-chested Warbler of the trip. Two Mexican Chickadees played hide-and-seek but eventually allowed us several quick glimpses.



*Black-polled Yellowthroat © Jared Clarke*



*Birding at Lerma © Jared Clarke*

After lunch, stops at a roadside pond produced numerous waterfowl including our best looks at Mexican Duck. At the border of the states of Mexico and Michoacán, another forest trail was highlighted by Rivoli's Hummingbird, White-eared Hummingbird and several Black-headed Siskins. As evening set in, we watched nearly two dozen endemic White-naped Swift circling over the hillsides preparing to roost. The following day was much anticipated - and it certainly didn't

disappoint. Morning birding at our hotel and then a semi-abandoned resort produced a myriad of marvelous birds. Violet-crowned Hummingbirds zipped around the flowers, a pair of Golden-cheeked Woodpeckers flitted from tree to tree, a Squirrel Cuckoo sat confidently in the open, two Blue Mockingbirds made a rare appearance, and a Happy Wren allowed fleeting glimpses as it sang from a thick tangle.



*Violet-crowned and Broad-billed Hummingbird © Jared Clarke*

Our afternoon was spent at the famous Monarch Butterfly wintering site of El Rosario, at 3100m above sea level. Millions of the beautiful butterflies were clumped together in the towering trees, flying down to drink or in preparation for their imminent migration north. It was a magical experience as they fluttered all around us on our short hike up the mountain. The walk back down offered several excellent bird sightings including White-eared and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, Mexican Chickadee and Hepatic Tanager. A Brown-backed Solitaire sang beautifully from the canopy, and was expertly spotted by Héctor sitting on a branch for everyone to enjoy.



*Monarch Butterfly © Jared Clarke*



*Brown-backed Solitaire © Jared Clarke*

The next morning, Spotted Wrens and both Hooded & Black-vented Orioles entertained us on the grounds of our hotel. We soon headed off to explore a lush pine forest close to Zitácuaro, which was hopping with birds as the sun and morning temperatures slowly rose. Two very unexpected Aztec Thrush were an early surprise, though unfortunately only seen by a few. Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo

was one of our main targets here, and two showed very well from high in the canopy. Other highlights included Mountain Trogon, Blue-throated Mountain-gem, White-striped Woodcreeper, Tufted Flycatcher, Russet Nightingale-Thrush, Hooded Grosbeak, Rufous-capped Brushfinch and Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer among many others. This beautiful forest was one of the most productive stops on the entire tour and a hands-down favourite of the group. Our afternoon plans were “side-lined by a rear-end” when our van was involved in a minor traffic accident. However, the cool head of our driver Jorge got us back on the road in no time and on the way to our next destination at Cuernavaca (Morelos), with nothing but a story to tell. Dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and founded by Hernan Cortés himself, our lodgings here were both historical and spectacular.



*Spotted Wrens © Jared Clarke*



*White-striped Woodcreeper* © Jared Clarke



*Black-headed Siskin* © Jared Clarke

### **March 5-6**

The following day we birded the tropical dry forest of Cañón de Lobos, with a fantastic diversity of birds. Stars of the outing included Plain-capped Starthroat, Dusky Hummingbird, Golden-crowned Emerald, Thick-billed Kingbird, Black-chested Sparrow, Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrow and Yellow

Grosbeak. After lunch, we headed off to explore a farmland and surrounding hillside near Río Hormiga. Despite the afternoon heat we found a great variety of birds including two Lesser Roadrunners, Common Ground Dove, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Lark Sparrows and several near-endemic Stripe-headed Sparrows.



*Birding at Rio Hormega © Jared Clarke*

Breakfast the next morning was serenaded by a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl somewhere unseen in the hotel gardens. We soon packed the van and headed to one of the very few places where Sierra Madre Sparrow can be found. This critically endangered sparrow is confined to just a few square kilometres of bunchgrass habitat - and despite their rarity, it was one of the first birds we heard and saw after arriving. A single bird sat atop the dense grass and sang for us, allowing great looks and even scope views in a surprising show of cooperation. A hike through the nearby pine-oak-fir forest also started with a bang when as many as seven typically hard-to-see Long-tailed Wood Partridge sauntered across the road in front of us - one of the most rare and exciting encounters of the tour! We also enjoyed the local (unspotted) race of Spotted Towhee, several Green-striped Brushfinch, Golden-browed Warbler, and a flock of Elegant Euphonia at the summit of our hike - among other fantastic birds.



*Sierra Madre Sparrow* © Jared Clarke

Much of the hot afternoon was spent driving to our next destination at Fortín de las Flores. Arriving at our lovely accommodations, we were greeted by a whole new suite of birds including Plain Chachalaca, Red-billed Pigeon, White-fronted Parrot, Band-backed Wren, and Yellow-winged Tanager. Altogether we added more than a dozen new species before even checking in to our rooms.



*Plain Chachalaca* © Jared Clarke

## March 7

Our hike this morning was arguably the most challenging of the week - but also offered up one of the highest species counts. At Amatlán, we climbed a rough cobblestone path through an abandoned coffee plantation and tropical evergreen forest. Our key target was Sumichrast's Wren - a unique and locally endemic bird that dwells among the limestone boulders and crags here. After hearing two and trying in vain to see them, we pushed a little further uphill until we heard yet another calling. It took time and patience but eventually found it popping in and out of crevices in the hillside, allowing everyone there to enjoy good looks. Even three participants who opted not to do the big climb were able to spot one briefly at the base of the hill - a coup with this often secretive species! Other exciting species seen on this hike included Wedge-tailed Sabrewing, Lesson's Motmot, Laughing Falcon, Red-lored & White-crowned Parrots, Masked Tityra, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Euphonia, Common Chlorospingus, Montezuma Oropendola, and Rufous-capped Warbler. We also heard, but unfortunately did not see, Keel-billed Toucan, Gartered Trogon and Collared Trogon.



*Sumichrasts Wren © Jared Clarke*



*Rufous-capped Warbler © Jared Clarke*

Back at our hotel, we enjoyed lunch and a guided tour of the property's amazing gardens. Among several birds seen during the walk was an Audubon's Oriole - rather unexpected for the location. Our afternoon excursion was to a place Héctor likes to call the "Magical Pastures", and it sure was. Among the many cool birds were several Acorn Woodpeckers, a surprise Smoky-brown Woodpecker, three Elegant Euphonia and a Black-throated Green Warbler. From here, we headed east to our first views of the coast in the state of Veracruz.



*Audubon's Oriole © Jared Clarke*

## March 8

Birding started fast & furious this morning, over a picnic breakfast beside a farm road near the tiny community of Playa Juan Ángel. Over the next two hours we encountered dozens of species - many of them new for the trip. A flock of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks flew over, and a Magnificent Frigatebird soared high above the road along with at least one Crane Hawk. While a pair of Roadside Hawks felt a little overdue, a Collared Forest-Falcon was a complete and very exciting surprise. Both Couch's & Tropical Kingbirds were perched along the road, several calling to help us differentiate these very similar species. Two Rose-throated Becards showed especially well, and a Rufous-naped Wren (the unique Veracruz race) obliged us with prolonged looks as it sang from a bare treetop. Other highlights included Altamira Oriole, several Painted Buntings, our first Yellow-throated Warbler of the trip, White-eyed Vireo and Gray-crowned Yellowthroat.



*Roadside Hawk © Jared Clarke*

Just down the road from here, we hit the beach - looking for birds, of course. Several Royal and Gull-billed Terns coursed back and forth, while a single Laughing Gull was our only gull of the entire tour. Eight species of shorebirds were spotted, including a Long-billed Curlew and at least ten handsome Black-necked Stilts. A Least Grebe was diving in the shallows, while an Osprey fished from on high.



*Black-necked Stilts © Jared Clarke*

This afternoon, we turned back inland and drove to our last major destination at Tehuacán. Before heading to our hotel, we stopped to go birding in a prime example of high elevation desert near Azumbilla. While a Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay sat nicely at the top of a Joshua Tree, the skulky Ocellated Thrasher was not nearly as cooperative - belting out its beautiful song from a dense patch of brush and cactus, but never popping out to allow us a look.

### **March 9**

Our last morning of birding was spent in an impressive and very unique habitat - a dense forest giant columnar cacti! The Zapotitlan Botanical Gardens is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, protecting a prime example of this rare ecosystem. While waiting for the park to open, we enjoyed a scrumptious breakfast and some fantastic birding just outside the gates. Our key targets of Gray-breasted Woodpecker, Bridled Sparrow, Boucard's Wren and White-lored Gnatcatcher were all in the bag before even entering the gardens, along with a brilliant male Yellow Grosbeak. The park itself hosted a Virginia's Warbler and Varied Bunting for the list, along with a brief encounter with a very striking Tarantula Hawk (a large parasitic wasp). Even our more "touristy" stops at local onyx shops offered up great birds in the form of Phainopepla and Black-headed Grosbeak among others.



*Cactus Forest © Jared Clarke*



*Boucard's Wren © Jared Clarke*



*Bridled Sparrow © Jared Clarke*

Our final stop of the tour was at the Cacaxtla archaeological site - a sprawling palace and nearby temple that was once central to the Olmeca-Xicalanca people well over a thousand years ago. While we admired the ancient architecture and remnants of colourful murals, we also spied numerous birds including two last additions to our lists - Scott's Oriole and Chipping Sparrow. Back in Mexico City, we enjoyed a final dinner together - sharing "best birds", highlights and funny stories before parting ways for our homes across Mexico, Canada & the USA. It was a fantastic trip shared with wonderful people!