Eagle-Eye Tours



Southern Mexico 2024 Trip Report

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The number of species and of Mexican endemics and specialties was spectacular. A total of 409 species seen by the participants plus 3 leader-only and 22 additional ones heard; many of these are endemic or nearly endemic to Mexico, including the highly sought after Bumblebee Hummingbird, Garnet-throated Hummingbird, Rosita's (Rose-bellied) Bunting, Nava’s Wren and Giant Wren. All in all we saw 28 species of hummingbirds (plus one heard), 4 species of trogons, 10 woodpeckers, 9 species of jays (plus 1 heard-only), 14 wrens (+ 1 heard), 36 warblers (plus 1 heard-only) and 9 species of orioles (+ 1 heard)! Highlights included a variety of habitats and scenery, wonderful meals (including the opportunity to sample grasshoppers, arracheras, quesadillas, tlayudas, mole and other Mexican specialties), the Montealbán and Palenque ruins, the Sumidero Canyon (like the Grand Canyon but greener) and the "rock gardens" in the karst rainforest which are the habitat of Nava's Wrens (which belongs to a Mexican endemic genus). Birds seen every day or almost every day were Cattle Egret, Black and Turkey Vultures, Rock Pigeon, White-winged Dove, Great Kiskadee, and Great-tailed Grackle.



© *Terry Best*

The trip starts in the state of Oaxaca (pronounced “Wahaca”). This is the Mexican state with the largest number of bird species (around 770 species; 70% of the total for the whole country). While in the state of Oaxaca, we birded in cloud forest, pine woodland, semiarid scrub, tropical deciduous forest, middle-elevation humid forest, wetlands, and a beach with a rocky islet offshore. We also visited one of the trees with the greatest girth in the world, the “árbol del Tule”, a Montezuma cypress that is not unusually tall but has a very thick trunk with a circumference of slightly over 117 feet (it’s in the Guinness Book of Records). And the spectacular Montealbán archaeological site on a hill overlooking the Oaxaca Valley. After meeting in our Oaxaca hotel in the late afternoon of Day 1, on Day 2 we started out by having a field breakfast and birding on a road in a cactus grove near Yagul archaeological site, seeing Gray-breasted Woodpecker, Beautiful Hummingbird, Bridled Sparrow, and others; then we visited the Tule tree, followed by the reservoir above Teotitlán del Valle. Then after lunch and a weaving-and-dyeing demonstration we birded in and near a riparian grove in pine-oak forest above Teotitlán del Valle and on the drive back we found an unusually very cooperative Oaxaca Sparrow.



Bridled Sparrow © Paul Prappas



Oaxaca Sparrow © Paul Prappas



Weaving demonstration © Héctor Gómez de Silva

We started the next morning with Elegant Euphonias and many others birds in the dry scrub of the Oaxaca Valley, including a great view of a Boucard's Wren, a bird we failed to see yesterday although we heard it. Afterwards, we spent the rest of the day further up in the humid pine-oak forest at La Cumbre. Birds up at La Cumbre included Red Warbler, Rufous-capped Brush-finch, and great views of Blue-throated Mountain-gem at a hummingbird feeder in our lunch restaurant.



Elegant Euphonia © Paul Prappas



Boucard's Wren © Olivier Barden



Red Warbler © Greg Laverty

On Day 4 we visited the Montealbán archaeological site, which produced the trip's only Pileated Flycatcher and Ocellated Thrasher as well as seeing the spectacular ruins while Jorge our driver provided a brief explanation of the archaeology. Later we had lunch at a nice restaurant, had a short stop at a workshop specializing in carved wooden fanciful animals (alebrijes) and said farewell to Oaxaca City and the dry central valley, making our way to the Sierra Madre del Sur where we'd

spend the night in order to look for one of Mexico's toughest endemics, the White-throated Jay (as well as other birds) the following morning.



Ocellated Thrasher © J Golumbek



Lunch en route to the Sierra © Héctor Gómez de Silva

We tried our favorite spot for White-throated Jay and some of the participants were able to see it (heard-only for the rest), and we saw many other birds in the process. Driving further toward

Huatulco we had good luck with endemic and near-endemic hummingbirds, seeing Garnet-throated and the cute and tiny Bumblebee Hummingbird (which showed how the normally magenta gorget sometimes shines green!). After lunch we continued to Huatulco with a washroom stop and a very productive birding stop group including a group of Giant Cowbirds (a species that was not found on the Pacific Slope of Mexico until very few years ago).



Birding near Hotel Puesta del Sol © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Bumblebee Hummingbird © Olivier Barden

The next morning was spent in three sites in tropical dry forest near Huatulco, where we found Turquoise-crowned Hummingbird, Citreoline Trogons, Golden-cheeked Woodpeckers, Banded Wren, both Altamira and Spot-breasted Orioles, Rufous-naped Wren, White-lored Gnatcatcher, a male Red-breasted Chat and more. After lunch we stopped at a place on the way between Huatulco and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, this latter stop including Orange-breasted Buntings, and looking out over the Pacific Ocean to a rocky islet surrounded by seabirds (with a surprise Elegant Tern and Heermann's Gull) .



Heermann's Gull © Joel Golumbek



Royal Tern standing beside Elegant Tern (right) © J Golumbek

In Tehuantepec we had a field breakfast and a cooperative Cinnamon-tailed Sparrow, then very productive shorebirding (including a few Collared Plovers and Reddish Egrets of both color morphs). After lunch we drove east into Chiapas, where we would spend 2 nights in the town of Arriaga. Arriving early, however, before checking in at the hotel we detoured to our favorite spot for Rose-bellied (Rosita's) Bunting. We listened out for it in the dry forest spot where it's usually found, played recordings of its song, tried again 50 m up the road, and nothing! Starting to worry, we continued up the road, and we found a pasture in the roadside and … there were more than a dozen Rose-bellied Buntings in the pasture! (most of them females and young males, but there were a few adult males too).



Cinnamon-tailed Sparrow © Olivier Barden



Rose-bellied Bunting © Olivier Barden

The next day we had another field breakfast at a birdy spot where we eventually found our main target, Giant Wren, and many other birds. Afterwards, we drove east to Mapastepec and then coastward to take a mangrove boat ride to look for Agami Heron and a few other special birds. The road from Mapastepec south was so birdy that we arrived a little later than planned to where the boats were waiting for us. One of the birds we saw in the last few kilometers of the drive was a pair of Southern Lapwing, a recent invader from Central and South America to this southeastern corner of Mexico.



Giant Wren © Olivier Barden

We were a large group and the water level in the mangroves was particularly low, so few people fit in each boat –we had to take 5 boats in tandem; however, the boatmen know their job and most people were able to see most of the birds. We found a few Agami Herons, Boat-billed Herons, a roosting Northern Potoo, an American Pygmy Kingfisher, a White-necked Puffbird and others.



Black-collared Hawk © Olivier Barden



Northern Potoo © Greg Laverty



Mangrove boat ride © Héctor Gómez de Silva



Mangrove tour © Terry Best



Americn Pygmy Kingfisher © Paul Prappas

The following day we had our picnic breakfast at a birdy spot on the way to Tuxtla Gutiérrez and after some driving we stopped for lunch in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of Chiapas, and finally continued driving just over an hour to San Cristóbal de las Casas, where we had a free afternoon to explore this town's cultural riches. After dinner, we hooked up with a local bird guide and had an optional owling trip in which we were successful in finding a Bearded Screech-Owl.



Bearded Screech-Owl © Olivier Barden

Most of the following day we birded the forest edge and forest at Montetik, where we saw San

Cristóbal's most wanted bird, Pink-headed Warbler, as well as the beautiful Unicolored Jay, Rufous-collared Robin and others. After lunch we birded in a couple of other places at the edge of town and added White-naped Brushfinch, Rufous-browed Wren and a rare Blue-throated Motmot. In the late afternoon we drove back to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, where we'd stay for 2 nights in order to make the most of our time in the central valley of Chiapas before the long drive to Palenque.



Picnic breakfast at San Cristobal © Héctor Gómez de Silva

From Tuxtla we visited the Cañón del Sumidero National Park. The Sumidero canyon is a breathtaking sight from the lookouts. We had a field breakfast at the most spectacular of the lookouts, and we saw Olive Sparrow and many other birds. Half-way back to Tuxtla from the lookout we first stopped in the haunts of Belted Flycatcher, which we saw after some time. Lower down the mountain, we stopped at another site in the national park where we had a Russet-crowned Motmot and many other birds and a group of White-nosed Coatis. After lunch in Tuxtla, we visited La Sima de las Cotorras, a limestone sinkhole where Green Parakeets often fly in to roost from late January to October. This year, however, they hadn't arrived yet –but we saw many other birds including Montezuma's Oropendola and a pair of Bat Falcons.



Our group at Sumidero Canyon © Héctor Gómez de Silva

The next day was going to be the longest drive of the trip. After a field breakfast we drove to Navaland and entered the haunts of Nava's Wren in a special karstic limestone/tropical rainforest comination, seeing a lot of birds including a skulky pair of Nava's Wren and hearing the lovely song of Slate-colored Solitaire. We continued driving and on the way to our favorite restaurant in off-the-beaten track Huimanguillo we found a pair of Jabirus; in the restaurant, a pair of Barn Owls was roosting under the thatched roof. Then we continued driving to Palenque, finding a troop of Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys on the way. On the following day, at and around Palenque, we were rewarded with a diversity of birds, many amid the breathtaking ruins.



Palenque © Héctor Gómez de Silva

Finally, we spent the last birding day driving the “long route” between Palenque and Villahermosa, visiting what I call "Mexico’s little Pantanal" at the junction of northernmost Chiapas, a bit of Campeche and the state of Tabasco. This route is always special. We added a number of species to the trip list in this last day, including Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Pinnated Bittern (very rare throughout its extensive range in the Neotropics, but not so rare here), and Yucatán Jay (at the northwestern most tip of its range). All in all, it was a memorable 2-week tour.



Pinnated Bittern © Olivier Barden

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