



Southern Mexico Trip Report 2023

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The number of species and of Mexican endemics and specialties was spectacular. A total of 337 species seen and 29 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 21 species of hummingbirds, 4 species of trogons, 11 woodpeckers (plus 2 heard-only), 6 species of jays (plus 1 heard-only), 9 wrens (+ 5 heard), 30 warblers (plus 1 heard-only) and 8 species of orioles! 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 Green Parakeet sinkhole near Tuxtla Gutiérrez, 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. 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, Boucard's Wrens 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.



Teotitlán weaving and dyeing demonstraton

We started the next morning with Gray Silky-flycatchers, a pair of Elegant Euphonias and many others birds in the dry scrub of the Oaxaca Valley, before spending 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, Mexican Chickadee and great views of Blue-throated Mountain-gem at a hummingbird feeder in our lunch restaurant.



Lunch at La Cumbre

On Day 4 we visited the Montealbán archaeological site, which produced the trip's only Pileated Flycatcher as well as seeing the spectacular ruins while Jorge our driver provided a brief explanation of the archaeology.



Montealbán



Lunch en route to the Sierra

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. We tried four spots for White-throated Jay and saw many birds in the process, including a couple of great looks at the beautiful songster that regaled us with its song all morning, the Brown-backed Solitaire. We had a close encounter with White-throated Jay at one spot, the whole group was able to hear it but only one participant was able to see it fairly well, with just glimpses for a few others in the group. But at lunch stop we had good luck with endemic and near-endemic hummingbirds, seeing White-eared, Garnet-throated and the cute and tiny Bumblebee Hummingbird. After a picnic lunch we drove to Huatulco with a couple of very productive birding stops (and a washroom stop). The next morning was spent in tropical dry forest near Huatulco, where we found Turquoise-crowned Hummingbird, a flock (!) of Citreoline Trogons, Banded Wren and more. After lunch, we stopped at a place on the way between Huatulco and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, this latter stop including a pair of Golden-cheeked Woodpeckers, and looking out over the Pacific Ocean to a rocky islet surrounded by seabirds (with a surprise view of a pair of Humpback Whales!). In Tehuantepec, we had a field breakfast and a cooperative Cinnamon-tailed Sparrow, then very productive shorebirding (including a Collared Plover and a few Reddish Egrets of both color morphs) and, after an unexpected detour, a few Orange-breasted Buntings. After lunch we drove east into Chiapas, where we would spend 2 nights in the town of Arriaga. We had another field breakfast at a birdy spot where we eventually found our main target, Giant Wren, and after that, well, the original plan was to visit a place east of Arriaga where we would take a mangrove boat ride to look for Agami Heron and a few other special birds, but drug trafficking was recently causing social conflicts in the area and we had to make an alternative plan. Instead of driving east to Mapastepec and then downslope to the mangroves, from Mapastepec we drove upslope to the foothills of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas. There we found White-bellied Emerald and a Tody Motmot. The following day we had good views of Rosita's (Rose-bellied) Bunting in the early morning, first a female and eventually a very cooperative male; they both seemed to be eating nectar from the flowers of a certain type of vine.



Rose-bellied Bunting



Looking for Rose-bellied Bunting

Then, another birding stop which included an unusual-plumaged Baltimore Oriole that had us stumped for a while 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. 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, Black-capped Swallows, Garnet-throated Hummingbird and the blue-backed race of Steller's Jay also seen in Oaxaca.



Birding in San Cristóbal



Field breakfast in San Cristóbal

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. 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, many warblers and vireos, and had a prolonged, breathtaking view of a male Gartered Trogon in perfect viewing conditions.



Sumidero Canyon lookout



Field breakfast and van

Half-way back to Tuxtla from the lookout we first stopped in the haunts of Belted Flycatcher, which we saw very quickly (not always is this bird so cooperative). Lower down the mountain, we stopped at another site in the national park where we had a gorgeous view (excellent light, again) of a male Canivet's Emerald as well as Buff-bellied and Rufous-tailed Hummingbirds, many vireos and warblers --including a great view of the Nashville Warbler look-alike, the Lesser Greenlet, and a

surprise Cape May Warbler (accidental in most of Mexico). After lunch in Tuxtla, we visited La Sima de las Cotorras, a limestone sinkhole where Green Parakeets often fly in to roost...and we were not disappointed! The next day was going to be the longest drive of the trip. And an unexpected rain fell most of the day. Our planned field breakfast in Navaland had to be changed for a picnic under a roof at a gas station nearby and we drove to Navaland to wait for the fog to rise and the rain to stop. The fog did rise somewhat but it continued to rain, and a subset of the group persevered and went birding for a while and were rewarded with hearing Nava's Wren and the lovely song of Slate-colored Solitaire, seeing the very interesting karstic limestone/tropical rainforest, and seeing or glimpsing a few of the rainforest birds of this area west of Tuxtla Gutiérrez. We continued driving and stopped at what turned out to be most participants's favorite restaurant of the trip in off-the-beaten track Huimanguillo; the rain even stopped for a while and we saw a few birds while waiting for our meals to be prepared. Then we continued driving to Palenque. On the following day, at and around Palenque, we were rewarded with a diversity of birds, many amid the breathtaking ruins, most memorable perhaps being the recently reintroduced Scarlet Macaws, a nice view of "Pinocchio" (Long-billed Gnatwren), and we saw large Black Iguanas and heard and saw Yucatán Black Howler Monkeys.



Birding in Palenque



Our group in Palenque

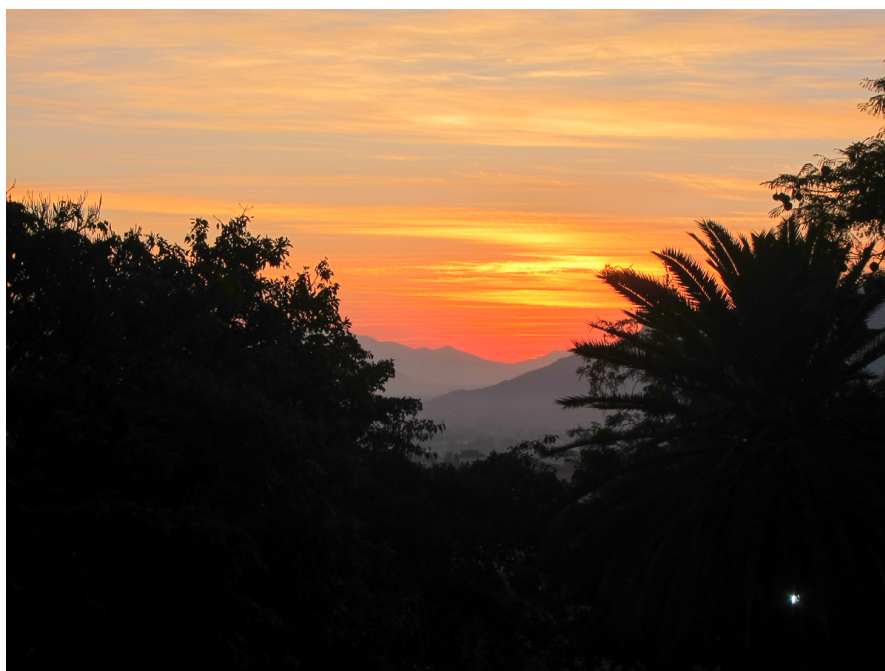
Finally, we spent the last birding day driving the “long route” between Palenque and Villahermosa, visiting what I call “Mexico’s little Pantanal” at the junction of northernmost Chiapas, a bit of Campeche and the state of Tabasco. This route is always special. We added a number of species to the trip list in this last day, including Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Grassland Yellow Finch, Pinnated Bittern, Yucatán Jay and a Jabiru (the latter is very rare in Mexico).



Jabiru, rare in Mexico

All in all, it was a memorable 2-week tour. We practically did not encounter chiggers, mosquitoes or

uncomfortably warm weather.



Sunrise from Oaxaca Hotel