Eagle-Eye Tours



Top Birding Destinations to Escape Winter: Going south when the snow flies!

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Up here in the northern hemisphere signs of autumn are in the air. Days are getting noticeably shorter and the mornings have a crisp bite to them. In southern Canada we start to see these shifts in early September, a transition into a most pleasant time of year. Keen birders will find some exciting migration with concentrated flocks and maybe some fall colours. October brings more of the same, but alas, with diminishing returns: most species are long gone to their wintering grounds and the leaves are falling. Then comes November, a month when only hockey players and Netflix addicts rejoice. This seasonal tipping point is the best time for the majority of us birders to either be thinking hard about a getaway, or –even better—participating in one! The following are ten ideas for taking a birding holiday during the northern winter months. Of course, these only scratch the surface but they might also help to scratch an itch or two!

Costa Rica



Birding at Volcan Arenal National Park, Costa Rica © Steve Ogle

The “Rich Coast” has long been a favorite getaway for beginner to expert birders, with lots of habitats to explore over a relatively short distance. Costa Rica is truly a “must-do” for nature enthusiasts. It’s possible to see over 400 species in just over a week, which is a lot to wrap your head around and therefore hiring a guide is helpful. Despite the dizzying diversity, iconic birds such as the Resplendent Quetzal and Scarlet Macaw (not to mention sloths and other wildlife) are fairly easy to see. Cozy accommodation and infrastructure are two other reasons to gravitate toward this incredible country! Costa Rica is mostly about nature, so be ready for action-packed birding and wildlife experiences.

Belize & Tikal



Crooked Tree boat tour, Belize © Jared Clarke

Belize is an English-speaking country with a true Caribbean flair. This small and magical land hosts a high proportion of undisturbed rainforest, and with it some rare species that require space to roam (eg. jaguar, eagles and macaws). Wetlands and the corresponding photogenic birds like egrets, jacanas and storks are particularly well represented at Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary. Belize, in general, is a great introduction to the avifauna of Central America but you can also add a short excursion into Guatemala to the Mayan ruins of Tikal. Here, you are transported into the past. Imagine walking among (and upon!) these centuries-old ruins while scanning for rainforest birds, including tropical specialties and a large selection of wintering songbirds. One of the highlights is seeing the enigmatic Orange-breasted Falcon hunting parrots around the ruins.



Grand Plaza, Tikal, Guatemala © Jared Clarke

Cuba



Cuban Tody

No longer merely a beach getaway for Canadian “Snowbirds,” Cuba is renowned for hosting a large diversity of terrestrial and marine wildlife, including over 25 endemic birds (those found nowhere else!). It is a vast, alluring island paradise begging to be explored for its warm hospitality and rustic (and quirky!) infrastructure. Cuba’s authenticity is revealed around every corner and on every side street! Out in the forest, the Cuban affinity for wild, protected areas is also notable, with a large amount of forest and corresponding bird species on hand– such as the Cuban Tody and Giant Kingbird. Birds come in all sizes here, and who wouldn't want to see the world’s *smallest* bird? The Bee Hummingbird, endemic to Cuba, holds this ranking and weighs in at less than two paper clips!

Trinidad & Tobago



Scarlet Ibis in flight at Caroni Swamp, Trinidad

This two-island nation is only a stone's throw from the Venezuela coastline, a feature that allows for a South American experience with an island vibe! Indeed, birding here can be described as a one-two punch. The first one is the avifauna: "T&T" is the perfect introduction to South American birds, including a representative species from most families of birds on the continent (and that makes for a lot of species: over 450!). The second punch is related to the interesting island geography, which means it's never too far to search out birds in different habitats. This also allows for easy viewing of otherwise difficult species such as the Ruby-Topaz Hummingbird, Bearded Bellbird and even Oilbird. Endemics such as the forest-loving Trinidad Piping Guan and Trinidad Motmot are possible, while seabirds such as the Red-billed Tropicbird are not far off the coastline on Little Tobago Island. There is a third punch too, which is Rum Punch. This tasty refreshment is served, with corresponding high-fives, after watching the unforgettable spectacle of hundreds of Scarlet Ibis coming in to roost at the famed Caroni Swamp!



Boat tour in Trinidad © Jody Allair

Arizona



Elegant Trogon in Arizona © Skye Haas

This legendary state is one of the top birding destinations in the USA, offering a year-round nature experience. Winter, with cool mornings and pleasant days, is a special time. Migrants, residents, and rarities from south of the border are all possible during the winter months, when you can enjoy “retirement weather” and uncrowded State Parks. Arizona, a desert state, is a great place to find corresponding dry country birds, including Elf Owl, Phainopepla, Gilded Flicker and up to five

species of thrasher. So-called “Mexican specialties” show up too, even though most of them breed in Arizona (examples: Elegant Trogon, Yellow-eyed Junco, Mexican Chickadee and Olive Warbler). Aside from desert scrub, other habitats to search out include canyons, forests and so-called “sky islands,” which are isolated mountains and ridgelines. This varied habitat mix makes Arizona a dynamic birding experience.

South Texas



Roseate Spoonbill, Texas © Skye Haas

The other “best” birding destination in the Lower 48, Southern Texas offers excellent reserves, more cross-border birds, huge numbers of wintering birds, and of course, warm weather. February is an inhospitable month in many places, but not in Texas. Some resident birds are already starting to nest and others are migrating back north. Wading birds along the coastal lagoons include Whooping Crane, Roseate Spoonbill and egrets galore. People flock here for the south Texas specialties such as Tropical Parula, Green Jay, Altamira and Audubon’s Orioles, Aplomado Falcon and others, while the lower Rio Grande Valley is one of the “must do” birding sites in North America. Those who are into listing usually come here to add new species to their North American area lists, but anyone from beginners to experts can have a good time in Texas!

Mexico



Birding in Palenque, Mexico © Steve Ogle

This vast and varied country is only a step further south– a land rich in culture and natural history where Monarch Butterflies and hundreds of bird species drip from the trees. In the south, one can encounter a myriad of tropical species at the Palenque archaeological site, not far from drier pine forests in the precipitous Sumidero Canyon. In west and central Mexico, the highlands are home to many endemic species including jays, vireos, wrens, buntings and so many others. While beach resorts might be teeming with tourists, birders can enjoy a crowd-free experience at adjacent beaches and upland reserves such as the Monarch wintering grounds and the many archaeological ruins in the interior valleys. Any visit to Mexico will also highlight some of the other aspects of this country that make it so alluring: the food, the people, and the wide-open scenery. Flights are usually pretty quick and affordable too.



Monarch butterflies, Mexico

Hawaii



I'iwi, Hawaii © Chris Burney

It's not just to the south where you can wander on vacation in winter. Hawaii is an alluring destination for many birders given its many rare endemic species, including honeycreepers in the mountain forests on several islands. Some of these are in danger of extinction, while others are relatively common and particularly stunning, like the ‘I‘iwi and ‘Anianiau. Sea turtles are often

visible from shore. The vibe here is as different from the US mainland as anywhere, with a laid-back feel and an ocean breeze to cool you down. Marine birds are never far from shore and exciting species are found everywhere, but especially in Koke'e State Park on Kauai and Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge on the Big Island near Kona. Jumping between islands is straightforward via short flights, and getting to Hawaii itself is usually a breeze, especially for visitors from the western states and provinces.



Kilauea lighthouse and booby, Hawaii

Thailand



Crimson Sunbird

Another highly popular venue for beach and sun seekers, Thailand is also a go-to destination for birders with over 1,000 species possible! Colorful pittas, bulbuls, sunbirds, barbets, hornbills, minivets, kingfishers and more await the visiting naturalist. Habitats are varied and include rice paddies, rivers (like the Mekong), wet and dry rainforests and idyllic white-sand beaches. During winter, many species spend their time in Thailand including the ultra-rare Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Away from the birding scene, but never far, Buddhist temples are an important part of Thai culture. These are found inside or nearby many national parks- for example, Doi Intathon in the northern Chiang Mai province. Birding truly goes hand-in-hand with culture in this part of the world. A bonus of traveling in Thailand is the unbelievable Thai food, which varies depending on which part of the country you visit, but is always excellent in quality and taste. Most birders choose to sample both the north and south parts of the country to get a feel for the avifauna and, while at it, the cuisine and differing climate (cooler and dry in the north and wet and warm in the south). Bangkok is in the middle of the country and is a great city to explore at the start or finish of any trip.

Cambodia & Vietnam



Black-and-red Broadbill

Like Thailand, these two countries offer a huge diversity of birds but also other vacation-worthy features such as food, temples and yes- more beaches. On a north-south itinerary it makes sense to visit both Vietnam and Cambodia together. The scenery is extraordinary here; especially prominent are the towering karst (limestone) formations carpeted in dense jungle. Cambodia and Vietnam are truly jaw-dropping and offer great remnant forest habitats, mainly in the vicinity of these karst areas where farming has not prevailed. Cambodia hosts the largest contiguous area of dipterocarp forests remaining in IndoChina. Species such as Painted Stork, Giant Ibis, Silver Pheasant, Siamese Fireback, and a myriad of smaller forest species are possible– some are rare and elusive. Many endemics are found (for example, Edward’s Pheasant and Cambodian Tailorbird). One not-to-miss

attraction is Angkor Wat, the largest religious monument in the world and home to species such as Oriental Darter and Forest Wagtail. You can lose yourself to history in this place. A good idea is to base in Ho Chi Minh City and focus on the southern part of Vietnam continuing into northwestern Cambodia.



Angor Wat, Cambodia

Whether it’s an aversion to putting on winter boots or shovelling the driveway, there are many reasons to target warmer birding sites in the winter. Heading south–or overseas– to any of these getaway destinations might just be the best excuse yet, to melt away those winter blues and keep your binoculars from gathering snow or dust!