

Central Mexico: Monarchs & Mexican endemics Itinerary

[Link: Central Mexico: Monarchs & Mexican endemics](#)

Tour Overview

Certainly one of the greatest ecological spectacles in the world is the wintering of up to 20 million Monarch Butterflies — most of the North American population — in a single area of forest in central Mexico. Along with this wonderful sight, we visit a variety of tropical and temperate habitats in search of up to 40 species of birds endemic to Mexico and 29 nearly endemic species. We look for these endemics in reed and cattail marshes, pine and fir forests, tropical dry forest, oak woodland, subalpine grassland, an abandoned coffee plantation in tropical semi-evergreen forest and a beautiful forest of giant columnar cacti. A portion of our target birds are species that are rarely or never seen on tours.

In the Lerma marshes we seek the beautiful Black-pollled Yellowthroat. In pine and fir forests we look for a number of species including the handsome Black-backed Oriole, flashy Red Warbler and elusive Long-tailed Wood-partridge. We listen to one of the most beautiful bird songs in North America, the rich warbling and tinkling of the Brown-backed Solitaire (which we also hope to see). Grassy meadows in the vicinity have Striped and Sierra Madre sparrows; the latter has been seen by few people and is one of the few birds in North America for which a photograph had never been published until recently (it first appeared in Eagle-Eye Tours' brochure and web site). In this season, the tropical dry forest that we visit is humming with hummingbirds, and we should see among others Golden-crowned Emerald, Dusky and Violet-crowned Hummingbirds. Golden Vireo and Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrows are also more easily seen than at any other season.

An entirely different and very rich avifauna is found in the abandoned coffee plantation at Amatlán, where Sumichrast's Wren and Fan-tailed Warbler are our principal target birds. Lastly, the unique cactus forest near Tehuacán will certainly produce a different set of species yet again, including Bridled Sparrow and Gray-breasted Woodpecker.

This tour, then, provides a wildlife spectacle, diverse and very interesting scenery and a large number of very sought-after birds.

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival and Orientation, Mexico City



Our Central Mexico birding tour begins in Mexico City. Our tour leader(s) will meet you in the hotel lobby at 7:00pm for dinner and to become acquainted, discuss the tour and answer any questions. Night in Mexico City, at a hotel adjacent to the airport.

Day 2: Drive to Zitacuaro



We drive to Zitácuaro, a town close to the Monarch Butterfly wintering grounds in Michoacán. We stop en route to look for our first birds of the trip in the Lerma marshes west of Mexico City, one of the last homes of the threatened Black-pollled Yellowthroat. Other stops are in pine and fir forest, where possibilities include Pine Flycatcher, Golden-browed Warbler, Red Warbler and Colima Warbler. Night at Zitácuaro.

Day 3: Dry Forest and Monarch Butterflies



In the morning we visit a tropical dry forest near Zitácuaro where Happy Wren, Golden-cheeked Woodpecker, Blue Mockingbird and many other birds are to be found. In mid-morning, we drive to the site where millions of Monarch Butterflies spend the winter, having a picnic lunch on the way. The late morning is the best time to enjoy the butterflies. We will not be alone here, because this is a very popular destination for Mexicans and foreigners alike. Around 15 to 20 million Monarchs, most of the population of the United States and Canada spend the winter here after travelling up to 120 kilometers per day in their October southward migration. During the early winter they spend most of their time dormant, with their wings closed, in dense clusters covering the fir trunks and branches. This is a spectacle in itself but the Monarchs are even more impressive in February and early March when they spend most of the day sunning themselves with their wings open, occasionally fluttering around to feed on nectar.

Day 4: Mountain Birds and on to Cuernavaca



We spend the morning birding a road through pine-oak forest near Zitácuaro, where the many birds we may see include the cute Tufted Flycatcher, White-throated Thrush and Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo. After lunch we will drive east to Cuernavaca, stopping at several places along the way to look for birds and to break up the long drive. Night at Cuernavaca.

Days 5 and 6: Around Cuernavaca



Cuernavaca is right in the transition zone between tropical and temperate regions, and short drives take us into a variety of different types of forests in both. First, we visit a trail through tropical dry forest a few kilometers east of Cuernavaca. This trail always produces a large number of bird species endemic to the lowlands of western Mexico. Although driving east to see birds of western affinities seems paradoxical, this is because an arm of tropical dry forest, the Balsas Basin, extends eastward for 500 km from the state of Colima, passing very close to Cuernavaca. In this season the forest will be dry, most trees leafless and the birds should be easy to see. More than 20 Mexican endemic birds occur here, and although it is difficult to predict which ones we will see, there is a very good chance of finding Golden-crowned Emerald, Violet-crowned and Dusky Hummingbirds, Golden-cheeked Woodpecker, Thick-billed Kingbird, Rusty-crowned Ground-Sparrow and Black-chested Sparrow, among others. We will also be able to practice identification of Myiarchus flycatchers, because four particularly similar-looking species are rather common in this forest. In the afternoon, we visit an oak woodland at Huitzilac (“land of hummingbirds” in the language of the Aztecs), where we encounter many birds of highland forest including, hopefully, Amethyst-throated Hummingbird and possibly even Bumblebee Hummingbird and, with a tremendous amount of luck, Aztec Thrush. Night at Cuernavaca. In the morning of Day 6 we visit a mountain meadow where the extremely local and endangered Sierra Madre Sparrow can be regularly seen (though few tours visit this site). Hector carried out the first study on the natural history of this species here. Another Mexican endemic sparrow is common here too, the Striped Sparrow. Nearby, we visit a temperate forest which often produces a large number of Mexican endemic and specialty birds, including Russet Nightingale-Thrush, Green-striped Brush-Finch, Elegant Euphonia, Strickland’s Woodpecker and many others. In the afternoon, we make a relatively long drive to the tropical Fortín de las Flores.

Day 7: Amatlán



A short drive to Amatlán puts us in a blend of tropical semievergreen forest and abandoned coffee plantation. The birdlife here is completely different from what we encounter elsewhere on this tour and the area is very rich in species including such tropical gems as Blue-crowned Motmot and both Chestnut-headed and Montezuma's Oropendolas. We spend the morning in this forest/plantation, keeping in mind that this is a special area for three birds that are rare elsewhere: Wedge-tailed Saberwing, Sumichrast's Wren and Fan-tailed Warbler. This is one of the few forests in Mexico where it is possible to see 3 species of toucans. In the afternoon, we drive to Cardel, stopping en route on a little side road to look for mid-elevation birds and at another area for Yellow-headed Parrots flying to their roost. Night at Cardel or Playa de Chachalacas.

Day 8: Cardel area



This morning we visit one of the few remnants of tropical dry forest in Veracruz to search especially for the tiny Mexican Sheartail and the very well-marked local subspecies of Rufous-naped Wren. White-bellied Wren also occurs here, though it can be quite elusive. In the afternoon we drive to Tehuacán, where we once again meet the eastern extension of Pacific tropical dry forest and associated West Mexican avifauna. Tehuacán is a XVII century town, but archaeological evidence indicates that it is in fact one of the earliest places where agriculture was practiced in the New World, 8000 years ago.

Day 9: Tehuacán



This morning we visit an impressive and unique ecosystem, a dense forest of giant columnar cacti (one usually doesn't think of cacti as forming forests!). When the early morning sun's rays hit the tops of the cacti we can expect to see Bridled Sparrow, Gray-breasted Woodpecker and Boucard's Wren perching on the tall plants. In the afternoon we drive back to Mexico City. Night in Mexico City.

Day 10: Departure, Mexico City

Our Central Mexico birding tour ends today. You can depart anytime today.

What to Expect

Overview

Our Central Mexico tour is primarily a birding tour, but we will also enjoy the spectacle of millions of

Monarch butterflies. The daily travel schedule varies to account for weather, bird species and habitat, but it is a fairly fast-paced tour. Most days we will be out very early in the morning (we may have dawn breakfasts or take a box breakfast into the field), and stay out birding all day long. On some days we may schedule an afternoon siesta after lunch.

Food

Breakfast and lunch will either be out in the field or at the lodgings restaurant. Dinner will be either at the lodgings restaurant, or on some evenings, we will arrange to go to a local restaurant, selected for good food and a comfortable atmosphere. During dinner we discuss the day's activities and review the list of birds seen and heard.

Accommodation

Accommodations during the tour vary from charming colonial hotels, to quite basic hotels in rural areas, where they are the best (or only!) option.

Walking

The tour involves generally easy walking, with some hill climbing. The most difficult hike is to go to the site for Sumichrast's Wren, which involves a steep, cobblestone road. The walks to see the Monarch Butterflies and La Cima Hill are not particularly long walks, however they will be at around 3,100m elevation. We are generally between 2000-3100m elevation throughout the tour. You may opt-out of any of these walks and stay with the van and driver or at the hotel.

Driving

We visit many fantastic sites on this tour, and as a result, there will be a couple of long drives (up to four hours), but these will be broken up with rest stops and birding stops along the way.

Climate

The tour will take place during Mexico's dry season, so rain is unlikely. We will spend three days at higher elevations where we will encounter cool weather.

What's Included

Tour Price Includes

- All meals
- All accommodation
- Transportation during tour plus a driver
- All park and tour fees
- 1 guide with 4 to 8 participants, 2 guides with 9 - 12

Tour Price Does Not Include

- Flights to and from start/end
 - Items of a personal nature
 - Travel Insurance
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