

Grand Oaxaca: Birds, Culture & Crafts

Feb. 1-12, 2025 | Trip Report | by Pat Lueders



**With local guide Eric Martinez, driver Ramon, and ten wonderful guests:
Bill, Bobbie, Eileen, Gary, Gwen, Jan, Kevin, Ann, Tony & Janet**



Sat., Feb. 1: Arrivals

All but one from our group arrived early to Oaxaca to spend time enjoying all the variety of activities available in the downtown area. Our hotel, Misión de Los Ángeles, was only a 10-minute walk from the center of the cultural activities, including many shops selling hand carved and painted alebrijes (traditional, hand-woven rugs), the historical Santo Domingo cathedral and a botanical garden. Numerous restaurants featuring local cuisine were available on the walk on the Alcala; a wide pedestrian street in the heart of downtown. In addition, our hotel had many trees and shrubs that attracted birds including Rufous-backed Robin, Vermilion Flycatcher, Inca Dove, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Lesser Goldfinch, many of which enjoyed swimming in their beautiful pool! We met before dinner on the patio to become acquainted, and then joined our local guide, Eric Martinez, for dinner and orientation. What a great beginning to our two-week visit to this area of Southwest Mexico!

Sun., Feb. 2: Le Cumbre | Ixtepeji | Yagul

We left the city early this morning to drive to the pine oak forest at 9,000' to find the many species unique to this ecosystem. All had brought warm clothing for this day, and we were met with low clouds and drizzle upon our arrival. Eric and Ramon planned our walks so that we were usually going slowly downhill to better find the birds. Soon Eric heard the striking Red Warbler feeding in a low bush for all to see - our first Mexican endemic.



We heard the diagnostic vocalizing of the Gray-barred Wren which meant the endemic Dwarf Jays were near by, and we weren't disappointed, seeing at least seven at the top of the pines. A pair of Brown-backed Solitaires was together on a low branch, a Russet Nightingale Thrush walked in the trail, and a Collared Towhee provided great scope looks. What a great morning seeing four endemic species!

Lunch was enjoyed at the famous Colibri Restaurante along with their delicious hot chocolate and feeders, where we got quick glimpses of the Blue-throated Mountain Gem and great views of the valley below. We then drove to the entrance road to the Zapotec archaeological site of Yugal, visiting the valley scrub habitat of cacti, yucca, and an agave farm in the plateau area. We walked the road finding endemic White-throated Towhees in good numbers, Greater Pewee, Black Phoebe, and Vermilion Flycatcher. Black and Turkey Vultures, the only two species we would see every day of the tour, were circling above. We were happily busy during dinner at our hotel adding our first species to the checklists.

Mon., Feb. 3: Teotitlán | Piedra Azul Reservoir | Local Weaving

This morning after another delicious breakfast, we drove to the village of Teotitlán, known for the heritage of weaving. We drove through the valley scrub and stopped at the Piedra Azul Reservoir, which was teeming with a multitude of birds. Blue-winged Teal, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked and Ruddy Ducks were quickly spotted, and Eric was surprised when I identified two Northern Pintail, a rarity for the area. Three species of grebe gave us all good scope looks. Excitingly, a Sora was in clear view at the edge of the grasses as were Wilson's Snipe. A Green Kingfisher was found among the many herons and egrets, and a Crested Caracara and an American Kestrel took turns resting on a nearby tree. We walked a short distance and Eric heard an endemic Blue Mockingbird which we saw hiding deep in the brush. Many warblers enjoyed this habitat including Wilson's, Orange-crowned, Townsend's, Black-throated Gray and Common Yellowthroat. But the star of this morning was the endemic Bridled Sparrow, which Kevin expertly spotted singing in a nearby bush. So similar to the Five-Striped Sparrow seen in Arizona, we enjoyed watching its behavior on the hillside. Lunch at Rancho Zapata provided delicious food and views of Dusky Hummingbird, Gray-breasted Woodpecker, Boucard's Wren, and Nutting's Flycatcher in their yard. We returned to Teotitlán for a fascinating demonstration from a local weaver on the process of preparing the wool from local sheep, the complex process of creating and using natural dyes, and the weaving of the wool into rugs and other items. Our group readily purchased many rugs and other items at this family owned and operated enterprise!



Tues., Feb. 4: Las Guacamayas | Santa María del Tule | Oaxaca City

This morning, we drove to a rural road to bird for additional species that prefer oak woodland habitat. As we walked on the dirt road, many local ranchers with their burros passed us while collecting wood for burning. We had good looks at a family of Oaxaca Sparrows and worked hard for quick glimpses of both the endemic and shy Dwarf Vireo as well as the Oscellated Thrasher, who continuously vocalized. Rufous-capped Warblers and Slate-throated Redstarts were seen in the understory. Bill spotted a perched male Grosbeak.

We drove to the town of Santa María del Tule for lunch and visited the Árbol del Tule (Tree of Tule). Considered the largest Montezuma Cypress tree in the world (1,000 years old with a circumference of 138'), the town's economy depends on its renown. After returning to our hotel for a short break, we walked through downtown Oaxaca, visited the Church of Santo Domingo de Guzmán, and enjoyed a delicious dinner at Eric's favorite restaurant, dining outside on the second-floor balcony with a view of the city and live music. What a memorable day!

Wed., Feb. 5: Monte Albán | Drive to San José del Pacífico

Today we traveled to San José del Pacífico, stopping in route at the archaeological site of Monte Albán, the largest and most important pre-Columbian archaeological site in the state, starting around 500 BC. Eric gave us an informative tour of the ruins as we birded while we walked. The history of the Zapotec people and the site was fascinating, and we saw Violet-green Swallows, Bewick's Wren, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and Canyon Wren during the tour.

We stopped for lunch at a restaurant and store that featured a large selection of alebrijes by local artists, and many in the group took advantage of the opportunity to purchase their art. We checked into our mountain lodge and enjoyed dinner at a local Italian restaurant before sleeping well in the quaint cabins, some with fireplaces!

Thurs., Feb. 6: San José del Pacífico

Today, we birded along local roads in the area, walking downhill with ease. We encountered many new species in this scenic area including four hummingbirds, Mexican Violetear, Garnet-throated and White-eared, and a group favorite, the aptly named and diminutive Bumblebee Hummingbird. We were able to watch a male moving around the low bushes and perching for lengths of time for good photos. We had our first good looks at Mountain Trogons, Common Chlorospingus, Chestnut-capped and Rufous-capped Brushfinches, Crescent-chested Warblers, and Black-headed Siskin. After lunch and a rest, we visited a different road to find Spot-crowned Woodcreeper, Red Warblers, and good looks at Mexican Chickadees. Gray Silky-flycatchers were



numerous. We returned to the lodge for dinner and marveled at the large number of new species we could add to the checklist. An added bonus, some heard the vocalization of Mexican Whip-poor-will later in the night.

Fri., Feb. 7: Drive to the Southern Coast | Birding the Sierra Madre del Sur

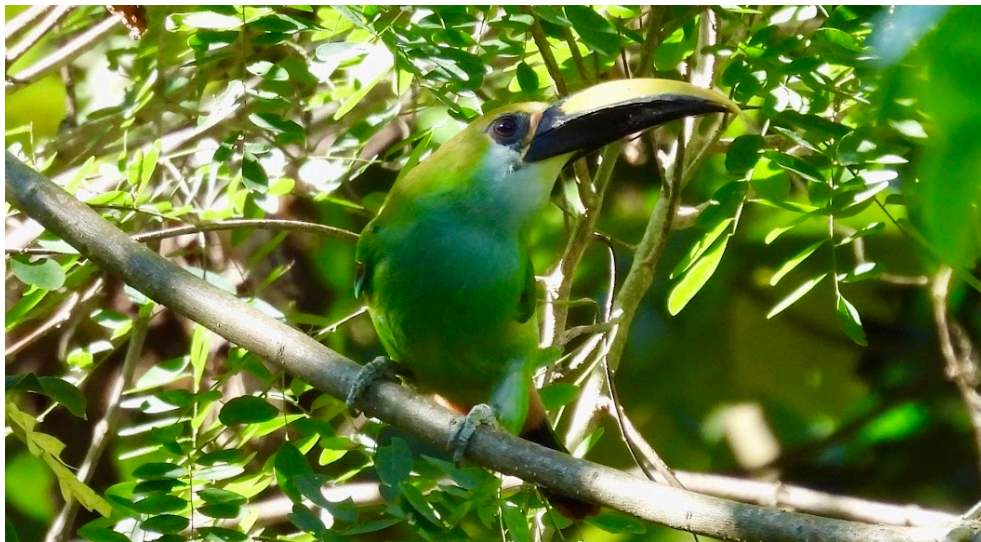
We birded at five locations on our journey down from the mountains this morning before stopping for lunch. Eric heard the elusive Chestnut-sided Shrike-vireo vocalizing high in the pine trees, and we eventually had good scope looks at this unique species. A Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer was not very cooperative, but gave quick glimpses. The next stop was very productive: Gwen and Gary spotted two Flame-colored Tanagers, a male and female Bumblebee Hummingbird sat close to us for great photos, and an Amethyst-throated Mountain-gem sat quietly in a tree. During lunch, a pair of Masked Tityras flew in near our table and we had our first Red-legged Honeycreepers feeding around the flowers. The lunch was delicious as usual! After checking into our Huatulco hotel, we had time for a swim or a short walk to the beach before meeting for dinner on the hotel's patio.

Sat., Feb. 8: Pluma Hidalgo | Birding Tropical Deciduous Forest

This morning, we would drive back to the mountains to visit a new ecosystem, the Tropical Deciduous Forest on the Pacific Coast. During our first stop, we saw four new hummingbird species, the endemic Golden Vireo, the exciting Russet-crowned Motmot and Northern Emerald-Toucanet, White-throated Magpie-Jays, and a flock of noisy Black-headed Saltators. Near the Toucanet, there was the largest group of butterflies than we had previously seen, and Bobbie took many of these photos. What a great stop! At the next location, we worked hard for good looks at vocalizing endemic Happy Wrens, added Greenish Elaenia, and a Tropical Parula. For lunch, Eric had a surprise planned for us; we rode in small three wheeled carts (called Moto taxis) up the hill to the Oro del Sur Café for coffee and a delicious meal. Birding after lunch around the coffee trees, we saw a female Red-headed Tanager, a soaring Short-tailed Hawk, and many Anna's Eighty-eight butterflies. After a break for swimming, we met for dinner and added many new species to our checklists.

Sun., Feb. 9: Lowland Deciduous Forest | Gardens near hotel & beach

We drove a short distance to a private reserve in another new ecosystem, the Lowland Deciduous Forest. We quickly had great looks at many endemic Orange-breasted Buntings feeding in the grass along the trail. What a beautiful bird! Nearby, we saw a female Painted Bunting, a Blue Bunting, a skulking Olive Sparrow, White-lored Gnatcatchers, a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, and scope views of Lilac-crowned and White-fronted Amazons. Wow! Continuing along the trail, we found Lineated and Pale-billed Woodpeckers. Jan spotted an Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, Banded and Russet-naped Wrens (new), and four species of Orioles feeding in a blooming tree. The manager led us to a known roosting tree for a Pacific Screech-Owl. Crane Hawk, Gray Hawk, and Short-



tailed Hawk were soaring above. Lunch was provided at the reserve after the walk; one of the best birding locations on the tour.

In the evening, the hotel hosted a Super Bowl party attended by some of our group, and Eric took the others on a walk to an area near the beach with fruiting trees, adding the endemic Citreoline Trogon to the days' lengthy sightings.

Mon., Feb. 10: Ocean Birding by Boat

A short drive brought us to a local marina to board a substantial boat for our ocean birding. We quickly realized what a memorable event this would be! The boat was steady, with a covered upper deck for easy birding. Shortly, we were surrounded by thousands of Wedge-tailed, Galapagos, and Black-vented Shearwaters feeding in a frenzy on fish stirred to the surface by two whale species; Humpback and Bryde's, and three dolphin species: Spinner, Pantropical Spotted, and Common Long-beaked. Unforgettable! Two species of Jaeger flew by (Pomarine and Parasitic), as did Royal and Elegant Terns, a distant Red-billed Tropicbird, and two Booby species (Cocos and Nazca). We followed this frenzy for a few miles, estimating 20,000 shearwaters were seen during the cruise! It was by far the most birds any of us had ever seen before on the water, and only maybe 5 miles from shore. We had lunch at a beach-side restaurant and a few of us swam in the quiet cove. We returned for an afternoon break and went looking for owls after dinner in the Huatulco National Park; seeing two Mottled Owls and hearing an endemic Colima Pygmy-Owl. What another wonderful day!

Tues., Feb. 11: Copalita River Shorebirds | Huatulco Golf Club

We walked the beach this morning to the mouth of the Copalita River, where the fresh water river met the ocean. Spotted and Least Sandpipers joined Little Blue and Tricolored Herons. Reddish, Snowy, and Great Egrets were feeding on fish. Two Black Skimmers flew low over the water, Eileen spotted an Orange-breasted Bunting on the hillside, and we had scope views of an American Oystercatcher on the ocean rocks. The next stop added 30 Black-necked Stilts, a Solitary Sandpiper, Green Iguanas, and a Northern Mockingbird. After an afternoon break, we visited the Huatulco Golf Club area and again hit the jackpot! Although this was sadly our last formal bird trip, it was exciting. As soon as we left the van, a mixed feeding flock was directly in front of us, and we saw too many species to count. White Ibis were feeding on the lawn, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were numerous, Melodious Blackbirds were vocalizing, we saw our first Blue-gray Tanagers, and two endemic Cinnamon-rumped Seed eaters. Another of so many memorable moments we enjoyed during this tour!



Our farewell dinner was delicious, and we thanked Eric and Ramon for all they did to assure we had a wonderful trip. We each picked our three favorite species of the tour. The ORANGE-BREASTED BUNTING and the RED WARBLER tied for first. And there was a tie for second place; the BUMBLEBEE HUMMINGBIRD and WHITE-THROATED MAGPIE-JAY. We enjoyed reminiscing and recalling the 248 bird species, 8 mammal species, 10 reptiles and amphibians, and 21 different butterflies registered on our checklists.

Wed., Feb 12: Departures

At breakfast, we bid farewell to each other. Five of the group left today to return to the cold winter in the U.S. Three remained for an additional day. This was a friendly, cheerful group, and all worked successfully together to see as much as possible during our delightful visit to the Oaxaca Valley and Huatulco area of southwest Mexico.

Photos: Cathedral of Santo Domingo (Pat Leuders - PL), Gray Silky-flycatcher (PL), Mountain Trogon (PL), Road to Yagul-Agave plants (PL), Bouchard's Wren (PL), Sora (PL), Montezuma Cypress (PL), Red Warbler (PL), Bumblebee Hummingbird (PL), Northern Emerald-Toucanet (PL), Orange-breasted Bunting (PL), White-fronted Amazon (PL)