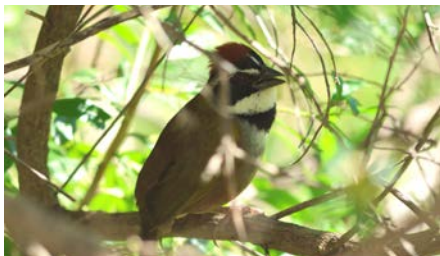


Oaxaca Valley Birds, Culture & Crafts | Trip Report | Dec. 1-9, 2024 | by James P. Smith



With local guide Eric Antonio Martinez, local driver Ramon, and seven wonderful participants; Bill and Barbara, Beth, Chris, Kathy, Lorna and Maryann.



Sunday, December 1st - Arrivals

Most of us arrived a day or two ahead of the tour to enjoy the delights of Oaxaca City while simultaneously adjusting to the local climate, and it was actually Sunday evening before we met for the first time as a group in the lobby of the Mision de los Angeles hotel. Eric Martinez, our local leader for the whole tour, escorted us to the restaurant where we got to know each other a little around the dinner table and enjoyed a variety of classic Oaxacan dishes, as well as some traditional meals. Eric patiently walked us through the menu translating and explaining, in detail, the local cuisine. It was especially wonderful to see old friends from past tours as well as having the pleasure of meeting new and good folks for this trip. With Eric primed and ready to guide us we were bound to be in for a fantastic birding and cultural experience, and retired to well-appointed guest rooms in keen anticipation of an early start the next day.



Monday, December 2nd - La Cumbre | Yagul

After an early breakfast we headed northeast out of town and drove up Route 175 to a recreational area of extensive pine forest known locally as La Cumbre, meaning 'The Summit'. The mountain air was cool and crisp, and it felt good to be out in the field. As we entered the forest Eric heard a feeding flock close to the road and asked Ramon to stop the vehicle. A Brown-backed Solitaire vocalized and it wasn't too long before Eric's sharp ears picked out the peculiar 'synthesized' calls of an Aztec Thrush, an uncommon bird anywhere within its limited range. A couple of Aztec Thrushes were actually present and Eric pointed out that it was only his third sighting of the species for the entire year....we were off to an auspicious start! From there we explored the higher elevations of this magnificent forest climbing to over 10,000 feet above sea level. Mexican White Pine (with some oak) dominated the forest and there was an abundance of Mexican Salvia and Pineapple Sage in the understory. The latter plants were flowering which, despite the chilly temperatures, attracted a proliferation of hummingbirds with Broad-tailed and White-eared being the most common though Mexican Violetear (an endemic) was seen and heard quite frequently throughout. The larger hummers included Rivoli's Hummingbird and Blue-throated Mountain-gem and Eric worked especially hard to show us an Amethyst-throated Mountain-gem. Red Crossbills were seen and heard too, these birds often 'teeing-up' high in the pines, their distinctive calls helping to identify them as the Sierra Madre subspecies.

There was no mistaking Eric's main focus...the endemics of the pine forest and, as we had no plans to return to La Cumbre, it was 'now or never' for a number of the most charismatic forest species not least of which was the much-desired Red Warbler. In the event we needn't have worried and had fabulous views of a pair directly alongside a pair of Olive Warblers! Later we found a large and fast-moving party of Mexican Dwarf Jays accompanied by an equally large group of Gray-barred Wrens. There was an unforgettable game of 'hide-and-seek' with a pair of Long-tailed Wood-Partridges, and we eventually secured views as they scurried between the sage bushes. Despite the name 'wood-partridge' it was impossible ignore the chicken-like gait of this elusive ground-dwelling gamebird with bright red bill and legs! A delightful pair of Crescent-chested Warblers could be seen foraging in the same little dell and a stellar morning was neatly rounded off by watching a pair of stunning Golden-browed Warblers as we bid farewell to La Cumbre.

For lunch we dropped down the northern side of the mountain to the Colibri Café. As well as their signature hot chocolate drink, the café offered lots of traditional Oaxacan dishes though a small number of the group (including Ramon) elected for the more basic but equally deliciously grilled chicken and fries. Blue-throated Mountain-gems buzzed around the feeders while Eric picked out another endemic in the form of a Collared



Towhee singing its heart out right by the balcony. This bird was so close it could easily be photographed and videoed by cell phone!

Lunch was followed by a lengthy drive to the lower portions of the Zapotec archaeological site at Yagul. The gate to the entrance was closed so we focused our attention on the fields and mesquite scrub along the approach road. A flurry of raptor activity got things off to an interesting start including fine views of a juvenile White –

tailed Hawk as well as a couple each of Cooper's and Red-tailed Hawks. Wintering Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were common place and the endemic theme continued with a couple of Dusky Hummingbirds. As the sun lowered over mesquite scrub hillsides we finished the day with fine views of Vermilion Flycatchers, Gray-breasted Woodpeckers (endemic), Curve-billed Thrashers and a couple of smart Black-vented Orioles before returning to the Mision de los Angeles for another fine dinner.

Tuesday, December 3rd - Teotitlan | Rancho Zapata | Rug Weaving and Mezcal tasting!

Another early breakfast found us on the road well before sunrise, first heading east and then north to Eric's hometown of Teotitlan. We drove through cobbled, picturesque streets, Eric reminding us that most local residents don't start their working day until around 8:00 a.m, hence the sleepy ambience. Once through the village a dirt road climbed up through the valley passing areas of extensive thorn scrub until we parked above a steep sided gully offering breathtaking views over the Oaxaca Valley. In the chill of early morning things seemed a little quiet but it wasn't too long before the sun highlighted the hillsides and the local birds warmed up accordingly. Western Tanagers and a couple of Ash-throated Flycatchers called from the scrub, several Gray Silky flycatchers flew over and Bob spotted a Tennessee Warbler down in the gully with several Warbling Vireos. A Greater Pewee flew in and conveniently perched on a dead snag allowing for scope views where Lorna noticed the striking wing pattern the bird's folded wing. In the warmth of the sunshine endemic Bridled Sparrows began to sing and a couple came close to the track for good views, as did a pair of Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays of the distinctive subspecies sometimes called Sumichrast's Scrub-Jay, potentially a species in its own right.

We continued up slope enjoying the sights and sounds of the valley while, almost subconsciously, Eric had been imitating the call of a Lesser Roadrunner. Not that we ever doubted Eric's field skills but can you imagine the surprise when an actual Lesser Roadrunner called back to him from the hillside just above us! The bird was even closer than expected and perched for a short while on a stunted oak before dropping down, running through the scrub, and then perching on the lateral branches of an old mesquite where had our best looks. For sure it was



the highlight of the morning although we did go on to be treated to a fabulous Tufted Flycatcher, and Lorna found a Hammond's Flycatcher, our first of the trip.

On the drive towards Teotilean we paused by Piedra Azul Reservoir finding quite a few water birds including Blue-winged and Green-winged Teals, plenty of Least Grebes and a locally uncommon Eared Grebe. We then headed east into the Oaxaca Valley to a cool spot for lunch, the charming Rancho Zapata in San Pablo Villa de Mitla. Eric guided us through an impressive menu of traditional Oaxacan dishes and then gave a brief tour of the grounds explaining the mechanics behind the centuries-old method of crushing roasted mezcal hearts using the giant tahona, a stone wheel weighing several tons powered by the ranch's horses. The same short walk also found a couple of Dusky Hummingbirds (endemic), Curve-billed Thrashers and Gray-breasted Woodpeckers (endemic) nesting in the cacti. After lunch a few of in our party sampled local Mezcal of varying ages with souvenir bottles duly purchased!

The remainder of the afternoon was dedicated to a wonderful demonstration of traditional rug weaving by Eric's friend Rosaria where the family business (El Tono de la Cochinilla in Teotitlan) is committed to using organic dyes and pigments in all their woven products. Many beautiful examples were on display and some subsequently purchased. Outside the store, looking down the main street, we had great views of a crisp adult White-tailed Hawk hunting above the town.

That evening Eric treated us to one of his favorite restaurants in downtown Oaxaca City, not only famed for its delicious Oaxacan cuisine (including the in-house salsa created right at the table!) but also quiet enough to catch up on the daily checklist.

Wednesday, December 4th – Presa Las Minas | Santa María del Tule | Zócalo Oaxaca

After breakfast we headed east to Presa La Minas, an area of mid-elevation oak-scrub with a smattering Mexican White Pine overlooking a fairly sizeable reservoir. The dawn air was chilly but as the sun warmed up the hillsides, so the bird song increased including a delightful chorus of Audubon's Orioles and a singing Happy Wren! A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was found in the pines while Beth spotted a number of American Coots and a Belted Kingfisher on the reservoir as well as a flock of 20 ducks that flew straight up the valley but would remain unidentified. Eric focused on endemics once more and after some effort managed to rustle up several Boucard's Wrens, Ocellated Thrashers and Oaxaca Sparrows. As attractive and important as these birds were, they were a



little usurped by the dazzling warblers hanging around the dam wall adding more than just a splash of color to the morning with Painted and Slate-throated Redstarts, Rufous-capped, Black-throated Gray and Wilson's Warblers all being seen close together over the next hour or so. Just before that a male Blue Grosbeak had 'teed-up', much to Lorna's chagrin and especially galling since 'Merlin' had chosen it as her "Bird of the Day"!

After a brilliant morning Eric brought us to one of his favorite lunch spots in Santa María del Tule. To get there we had to pass through a small village with more than its fair share of speed bumps! Naturally, Ramon was unfazed and dealt with the challenges with ease and poise. After lunch we walked over to the famed giant Montezuma Cypress in the church grounds right in the center of town to view El Árbol del Tule (The Tree of Tule) up close. With a circumference of around 42 meters it's believed to have the stoutest trunk in the world, even outmatching the Giant Sequoias of North America! Whatever the truth, it was impossible not to be in awe of this magnificent tree.

In early evening Eric escorted us on a walking tour through the pedestrian plazas and Zocalo district of historic Oaxaca City. We finished off a brilliant day with a flyover American Barn Owl (!) followed by a wonderful rooftop meal at La Qunices Letras, another one of Eric's favorites.

Thursday December 5th – Arqueológica Monte Albán | La Puesta del Sol

After breakfast we loaded up and departed from the Mision de los Angeles with a long day of travel ahead beginning with a much anticipated visit to Monte Alban and the Zapotec hilltop ruins. The morning commute across town proved quite busy but we still arrived on site relatively early at 7:15 am. The road to the visitor was closed to vehicle traffic until official opening hours so we birded along the roadside for a while finding a perched Red-tailed Hawk, several Gray-silky Flycatchers, and a skulking MacGillivray's Warbler. Eric seamlessly turned his role from birding guide to archaeological/historical guide once we arrived at the visitor center and we had a thoroughly enjoyable tour of the Zapotec ruins high above the Oaxaca Valley. With stunning vistas all around, it must surely be one of the most spectacular archaeological sites in the Americas! The ruins were not without birds either with an abundance of Western and Cassin's Kingbirds while other members of the flycatcher family came to the fore including Greater Pewee, Vermilion, Dusky-capped and Ash-throated Flycatchers. Western Tanagers seemed fairly plentiful on site and we saw a single Black-headed Grosbeak while a couple of perky Rock Wrens found a winter home in the pre-hispanic ruins of the Main Plaza. Towards the end of the tour one or two Crested Caracaras soared below us with the local vultures, a rare opportunity to look down on soaring birds of prey....we were so high up!



Back on the road, we had a superb lunch at Azucena Zapoteca (including a little retail therapy!) and then headed south along scenic route 175 marveling at Ramon's ability to avoid the prolific potholes and speed bumps along the way. South of Miahuatlán de Porfirio Díaz we embarked on the first serious ascent of the Sierra Madre range where the narrow mountain roads offered eye-level views of a swarm of Violet-green Swallows feeding above the pine forest. Arrival at the rather scenic Le Puesta del Sol in late afternoon was greeted by clear mountain air, stunning views towards the Pacific, and the calls of Long-tailed Wood-Partridges! The rustic mountainside cabins would be our home for the next three nights, neatly nestled amid enchanting pine woodland where magic mushrooms grow wild and place the town of San José del Pacifico firmly on the tourist map. Eric introduced us to his favorite Italian Restaurant in the heart of the town where we had a fine pasta-based meal in cozy surroundings. At 8000 feet above sea level, the temperature dropped significantly after dinner and we retired to those cozy cabins, happy to find a warm, open fireplace and a generous supply of firewood!

Friday, December 6th – La Puesa del Sol | San Mateo Rio Hondo | Magdalena Loxicha

After a light breakfast in the main lodge building we headed out through a sleepy San José del Pacifico to spend some time birding the San Mateo Honda Road. The road itself offered access to a nice range of habitats transitioning from humid pine forest to deciduous board-leaf forest further downslope. Things got off to a racing start with a fine male Bumblebee Hummingbird, not only an endemic but also the second smallest hummingbird in world! We had a nice Brown-backed Solitaire too, a species that had showed particularly well on this tour. The mournful calls of a Chestnut-sided Shrike-vireo haunted (and taunted!) us for a while but this bird stubbornly refused to be drawn to Eric's whistled imitations. On the plus side, we did have good looks at a handsome male Mountain Trogon, several Red Warblers, a Cinnamon-bellied Flower-piercer and a few familiar species such as American Robin, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Brown Creeper. The staccato song of endemic Mexican Violetears followed us throughout the forest and this attractive little hummingbird appeared to be common. Farther downslope it was the realm of the flycatchers, always a tricky group to identify, but by slowly pursuing through the call notes and plumage features we managed to identify Pine, Western and Hammond's Flycatchers all relatively close to each other. Warblers featured too with eye-catching avian gems such as Olive, Red, Townsend's, Hermit and Crescent-chested Warblers all on view. A smart male Bullock's Oriole 'dazzled' and, although it took a little while, we had great looks at a Common Chlorospingus working along a chain-link fence. There was genuine warmth in the midday sunshine as we returned to the lodge for a lunch break and couldn't fail to be awed by the sheer numbers of Yellow-rumped Warblers foraging in the taller trees around the cabins....the place was simply 'heaving' with them!



In the afternoon we ventured out to a rather similar road to the morning's session, this one leading down to the settlement of Saint Augustine. The species profile was similar but this particular site offered more in the way of large hummingbirds most specifically Garnet-throated (endemic), and Rivoli's as well as the smaller Bumblebee, White-eared and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds. We did find a Cassin's Vireo as well as several Hutton's Vireos but

it was the warblers again that caught the eye; Slate-throated Redstart, Townsend's, Crescent-chested and Red Warblers all gracing our binoculars. In the evening we dined at the lodge's on-site restaurant, Eric once again patiently guiding us through the menu and bird list.

Saturday, December 7th – La Puesa del Sol | Carretera 175 | Puerto Angel-Oaxaca | Café Pluma “Oro del Sur”

After a light lodge breakfast we began the southward journey south along the narrow mountain roads of Route 175. Eric picked out several “random stops” along the way based on instinct and feel. True to form, his instinct came up trumps as we paused by a steep sided valley with forest clearings on the hillsides. Among the first birds found was a young male Gray-collared Becard, an altitudinal migrant and scarce bird anywhere in its range. Red-headed Tanagers were seen here too, though quite high in the canopy and a Chestnut-sided Shrike-vireo teased us once again with its soft, plaintive calls. Greater Pewee and Tufted Flycatchers performed nicely and the valley was full of interesting hummingbirds including an Amethyst-throated Mountain-gem. Moreover, we'd been gifted yet another immaculate sun-filled day, something not to be taken for granted at elevation on the Pacific slope. Eric continued to focus on endemics and soon found a pair of Blue-capped Hummingbirds at the next ‘random stop’, a species with a world range restricted entirely to the Sierra Madre del Sur, and there was great excitement as we heard and then saw a pair of Northern Emerald-Toucanets of the Wagler's form, a potential future split. There was a MacGillivray's Warbler here too, a pair of Rufous-capped Warblers, and a couple of Black-throated Greens offering nice comparisons with a couple of Townsend's Warblers. Even without these wonderful birds, the butterfly show alone was something to behold with Ruddy Daggerwing, Malachite, Mexican Heliconian, Orange Mapwing, Anna's Eighty-Eight, White Peacock and several giant Blue Morphos, just to mention a few.

Gray Hawk, a singing Tropical Parula and a female Black-capped Vireo (uncommon) highlighted the next stop along the Camino Pluma Hidalgo, the gateway to coffee growing country. To make the most of the coffee experience, Eric invited us to a family owned business and organized a fleet of ‘Tuk-Tuks’ (too much fun!) to power up the road to the *finca* as the steep drag to get there was far too narrow and difficult for Ramon to tackle in his bus. A delicious chicken lunch was served by our hosts and, quite naturally, freshly brewed coffee of varying strengths was offered too. After lunch we had a brief but fascinating tour of the farm with Eric



translating and guiding us through the coffee roasting process. Birdwise the air was full of the peculiar screeching calls of White-collared Swifts and looking up we spied impressive swarms of them, perhaps up to 250 in all! With eyes on the skies, Eric also spotted a Short-tailed Hawk and skillfully photographed it against a clearly visible half-moon. A productive walk along the roads around the farm found more really great birds including a couple of Squirrel Cuckoos, several Flame-colored Tanagers and a gully full of Red-headed Tanagers, far more satisfactory than the distant canopy birds seen earlier in the day. Upon leaving, a few of us purchased bags of freshly roasted coffee beans before taking the 'tuk-tuk' journey back down the hill, meeting up with Ramon and embarking on the steady drive back to La Puesa del Sol for dinner. It had been another beautifully rich and rewarding day in the mountains.

Sunday, December 8th – San Pedro El Alto | La Puesa del Sol

The pre-dawn air was calm and still, a complete contrast to the previous morning's near gale force winds. As a result a few crepuscular species could be heard calling in the pinewoods with a nice chorus of Mexican Whip-poor-wills, particularly vocal just before we met for breakfast. There was also a mysterious owl and sound recordings taken at the scene would suggest there was a good chance it was a Stygian Owl, rare but most likely overlooked in West Mexico. The first of the diurnal birds heard was a noisy pair of Long-tailed Wood-Partridges!

After breakfast Ramon drove us over to a new site at San Pedro El Alto. The scenery was pleasant and more open than the wooded sites we'd visited previously. Once again, fortune came our way with crisp, clear blue skies as the day warmed up. This new site brought us closer the handsome Chestnut-sided Shrike-vireo, a species that had eluded us until this point. Eric managed to coax in a couple of individuals close to the road, but they promptly departed and flew upslope to join a feeding flock and became rather difficult to see. Brown-backed Solitaires sang as they had done throughout much of our high elevation experience and a fine selection of warblers included Wilson's, Nashville and Townsend's, all seen rather well.

A little farther up the road, a flurry of activity in the roadside vegetation suggested some 'mobbing' was taking place as a whole host of songbirds surrounded and scolded a fairly innocuous looking tangle of vines. The mobbing though, was unrelenting as we searched for what we thought might be a small owl, until Barb spotted a tiny snake coiled up in the tangles about 12 feet off the ground! Although small it appeared to be a pit-viper and showed two small horns on its head as we excitedly grabbed photos and cell phone shots for documentation. It wasn't long at all before one of Eric's friends was messaged and responded quickly with the identification. It was a Broad-horned Pit-Viper, endemic to the mountains of West Mexico! Just about every bird in the neighborhood came to mob this poor snake but it remained motionless and cryptically hidden throughout. Rufous-capped Brush-Finch, yet another endemic was a further highlight and, thanks to the pit-



viper, we all had decent looks at a MacGillivray's Warbler. Two endemic hummingbirds joined the action too, with Blue-capped and Bumblebee Hummingbirds both on view!

We finished off a beautiful morning near a stand of mature Mexican White Pine where we finally had good views of the much-desired Mexican Chickadees along with more Hermit and Olive Warblers, and a couple of Western Flycatchers. Then, alas, it was time to say goodbye to La Puerta del Sol and its gorgeous views overlooking the Pacific pine woods and after lunch we began the steady journey back to Oaxaca City. In the early part of the drive we so high up it was possible to look down on a hunting White-tailed Hawk, an adult bird showing off its broad white tail – very cool!

A welcome pit stop on the outskirts of Miahuatlán de Porfirio Díaz provided a nice opportunity to catch up with some roadside Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and, in the same area, Eric had one last stop in mind, a local reservoir with a decent selection of herons, several Least Grebes, a close Sora and our first and only Gray-breasted Martins of the tour.

Ramon drove us safely to Oaxaca City for a final night at the Mision de los Angeles. There was plenty to talk about at the farewell dinner, not only to reflect on the adventures of the previous week but it just happened to Maryann's birthday as well! We celebrated in style with locally made, delicious chocolate gateau!

Monday, December 9th – Departures

The week had flown by and it was time to leave the lovely Mision de los Angeles. We all had early morning departures out of Oaxaca City with staggered flight times for our respective journeys home. Flights were routed over the spectacular Oaxaca Valley and Monte Alban, a fitting finale to a trip that brought so much fun and was a genuine pleasure to be a part of.

Special thanks must go to our awesome group for sharing humor, generosity and camaraderie throughout. And, extra special thanks to our exceptional local guide Eric and our stoic, unflappable driver Ramon. We can't wait to return!

James P. Smith
Northfield, MA.

Photos: Collared Towhee (James P. Smith – JPS), Oaxaca Streets (JPS), Cacti (Lorna Hochstein - LH), Mules (LH), Gray-barred Wren (JPS), Red Warbler (JPS), Collared Towhee (JPS), White-tailed Hawk - juvenile (JPS), El Árbol del Tule (JPS), Street Decor (JPS), Monte Alban Ruins (JPS), Forest Scenic (JPS), Broad-horned Pit-Viper (JPS), Final Dinner (JPS)