

Oaxaca Valley: Birds, Culture, & Crafts

Oct. 7-18, 2025 | Trip Report | by Bryan Calk



Eric Martinez with Bryan Calk and participant Laura, Toph, Mary, Chris, Gerry, Vicki, David, Becca, and Dennis

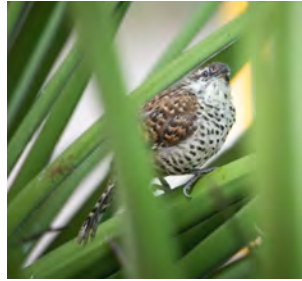


Tues. October 7

Arrivals

Most of the group arrived in Oaxaca by afternoon, settling into the Hotel Victoria on the hillside just above the city center. Earlier in the day, several participants took time to explore the city on their own, wandering through the markets, cafés, and narrow streets of the historic district. The scent of chocolate and mole drifted from open doorways, and the colorful stalls in the Mercado Benito Juárez were already alive with the energy that makes Oaxaca such a sensory place to begin a trip.

Back at the hotel, the gardens offered a calm contrast to the city below. Guests strolled the shaded paths, taking in views of the valley and enjoying their first glimpses of local wildlife in the warm afternoon air.



As evening came, we gathered at the hotel restaurant for our welcome dinner. Oaxaca's reputation for excellent food proved itself quickly, with rich flavors and generous hospitality setting the tone for the week ahead. Our guide Eric joined us to give a warm welcome and orientation, outlining the plan for the days to come and what to expect in the variety of landscapes we'd visit. Conversation lingered over dessert and mezcal before everyone turned in early, ready for the first full day in the field.

Wed. October 8 Teotitlan del Valle | Piedra Azul Reservoir

We woke before dawn, the city still quiet below as the morning began to take shape. Breakfast was served before sunrise, and the group gathered with thermoses of coffee, over shirts buttoned against a light chill, and a sense of anticipation for our first full day of birding in Oaxaca's diverse countryside.

Our destination was Teotitlan del Valle, often described as the oldest continuously inhabited town in the Oaxaca Valley, with roots reaching back more than two thousand years. We learned that the name Teotitlan comes from the Nahuatl language, meaning "place of the gods," a fitting title for a valley surrounded by dramatic peaks and deep cultural history. The drive east kept us mostly in the valley, passing open country dotted with agave fields, scattered mesquite, and the distinctive cacti of this arid landscape. The morning stayed overcast and cool, the mountains partially hidden under a steady layer of cloud that gave the valley a muted calm.

Our first stop came along a flowing creek just north of town, where Eric had arranged access to a stretch of private land. We walked slowly along the water's edge, taking in the first birds of the trip together. Elegant Euphonia, Gray Silky-Flycatcher, Bridled Sparrow, Gray-breasted Woodpecker, Dwarf Vireo, Streak-backed and Black-vented Orioles, and Rufous-capped Warbler all made early appearances among the oaks and acacias. The air stayed still and cool, perfect for birding. The mixed oak scrub and foothill vegetation with its blend of blooming shrubs made a striking backdrop and a wonderful start to the trip.

Our next stop was the Piedra Azul Reservoir, a small and calm body of water surrounded by thorn scrub. Least Grebes, Green and Belted Kingfishers, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, and several species of egrets kept us scanning the shallows, while a Rivoli's Hummingbird flashed briefly among the flowering trees. A few of us lingered to watch an impressive entomology moment unfold, a Flame Skimmer dragonfly hunted by a bright green Lynx Spider, while brilliant emerald scarabs clustered in the brush nearby. We spent time wandering the trails, taking in the plants, insects, and general feel of the habitat, settling into the rhythm of Oaxaca's birding.



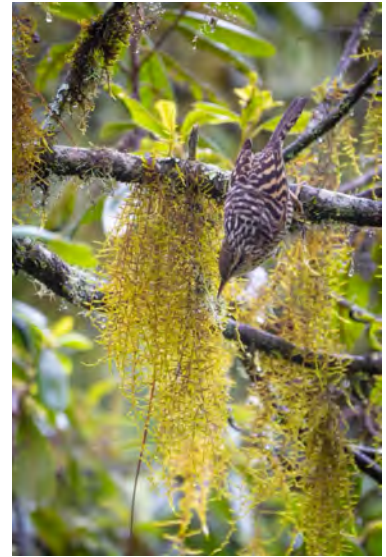
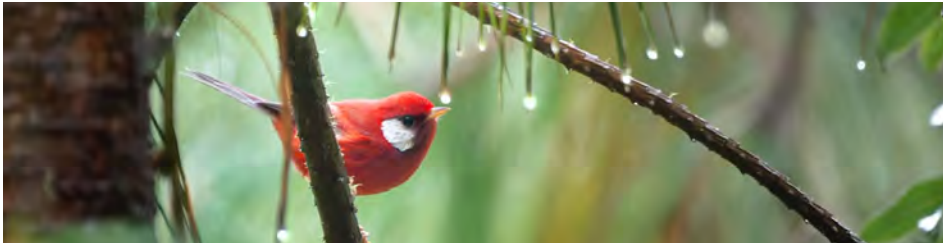
By late morning, we headed into town for lunch at Rancho Zapata, a local restaurant and mezcal producer. Here we learned about the traditional process of mezcal making, first brought by the Spaniards, who adapted distillation techniques to the native agave. Today, mezcal remains one of Oaxaca's most celebrated exports, but its growing demand has brought ecological challenges. Land is increasingly cleared for cultivation, and chemical fertilizers and pesticides are now used to accelerate growth of agave fields. Many wild agave species are now even harvested for small-batch craft varieties, putting pressure on native plants and the pollinators – especially bats and insects – that depend on them.

After touring the roasting pits and stone mill, we had the chance to sample several mezcals produced on-site. The smoky, earthy flavors reflected subtle differences between agave species and roasting styles, offering a real sense of place. It was a thoughtful look at how cultural heritage and modern industry intersect, and how deeply mezcal ties people to the landscape. As we walked through the gardens learning all of this, Boucard's Wrens bopped through the shrubs and low branches, playing hide and seek.

After lunch, we returned to Teotitlan for a rug weaving demonstration at El Tono de la Cochinilla Zapotec Weavers, a family-run workshop known for its dedication to traditional methods. The practice dates back to before the arrival of the Spaniards, who themselves influenced the process introducing looms and sheep to the valley. Over the centuries, Zapotec artisans have combined those European methods with Indigenous knowledge, using natural dyes from cochineal, indigo, marigold, and other plants.

We learned that the sheep are raised in the nearby mountains, where the cooler air helps produce fine-quality wool. The wool is first carded, then twisted and spun into thread (which we got to try our hand at!). Before dyeing, it's washed with the root of a plant called amole, which removes the natural oils and helps the dye absorb evenly. The yarn can then be colored using a variety of native plants, and its final tone depends on the dye source, the time spent in the bath, and even the original shade of the wool, whether pure white, gray, or brown, all of which influence the final result.

Cochineal, a scale insect that lives on prickly pear cactus, yields a rich red pigment once dried and crushed, and by adjusting the acidity, the color can shift from crimson to purple. Indigo, by contrast, is derived from fermented leaves that release a blue dye through oxidation, transforming from yellow liquid to vivid blue yarn in the open air. Watching these techniques in action was fascinating, the rhythmic motion of the loom, the earthy



smell of plant dyes, and rows of handwoven rugs hanging in the cool afternoon air. It was a vivid reminder of how art, ecology, and tradition are intertwined in this valley.

From Teotitlan we continued south, birding along a quiet rural road near a small field of agave and an ephemeral stream. The weather stayed overcast and calm as we scanned the trees and shrubs where a couple of small mixed flocks moved along the fence line. MacGillivray's Warbler and Nashville Warbler showed briefly well, moving through the brush, and a Rayed Pixie butterfly added a splash of color as it drifted past the road edge and lit under a leaf.

Farther along, a Crested Caracara gave excellent views both perched and on the ground, a striking sight in the open country. It was a peaceful end to the day's birding, the kind of slow, easy afternoon that lets everyone take in the surroundings and settle into the rhythm of the trip.

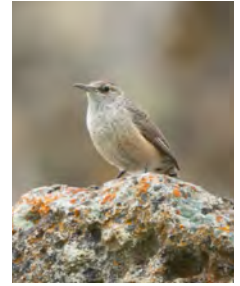
By late afternoon we made our way back to the Hotel Victoria for a bit of downtime before dinner and the evening checklist session.

Thu. October 9 La Cumbre | Yagul

Breakfast came early again at the hotel restaurant, a quiet meal shared over coffee and fresh fruit while a low gray sky hung over the city. The forecast promised another cool, overcast day, fitting for our climb into the highlands and a change in scenery from the open valley below.

Our route led to La Cumbre Ixtepeji, a community-managed reserve known for its mist-covered slopes and cool, fragrant air. Along the way we noticed the forest transition to pine and stretches of rocky hillside where massive Agave pulque plants rose from the soil. Some were even in bloom, their towering stalks reaching into the clouds that drifted through the trees.

At higher elevations the landscape transformed. White pines and ancient oaks formed a dense canopy heavy with mosses and bromeliads, the forest floor soft and damp beneath. It was hard to move quickly with so much to take in. Blooming natives like sages, beardtongues, dahlias, and lobelias added bursts of color, and it was a delight to see plants familiar from home thriving wild in their native setting. The flute-like song of Brown-backed Solitaire carried through the fog, clear and haunting, echoing off the slopes.



The temperature dropped steadily as we continued upward, and soon everyone was zipped tight in about every layer they had brought. The forest alternated between long quiet stretches and sudden rushes of activity as mixed flocks moved through the trees. One lively group held Red Warbler, Golden-browed Warbler, Hermit and Crescent-chested Warblers, Olive Warbler, and Mexican Chickadee, all adding quick flashes of color among the muted greens.

Farther along, another flock brought a burst of excitement with Gray-barred Wrens calling through the oaks and, at last, Dwarf Jays. They kept us guessing at first, high in the canopy and hidden in the mist, but patience paid off with wonderful views. Surrounded by fog and towering pines, their deep blue feathers stood out vividly, a striking sight in the gray air.

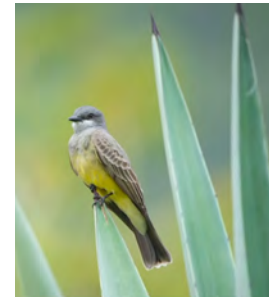
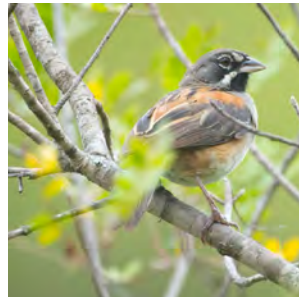
By midday we stopped for lunch at El Colibrí, perched on the mountain road among the pines with the canyon dipping away below. The food was excellent and the setting even better. Hot chocolate warmed us after the chilly morning, and the menu featured traditional ingredients and methods, including huitlacoche and smoked chiles. As we ate, butterflies and two brilliant Princely Tiger Moths worked the flowers beside the deck, while Blue-throated Mountain-gems hovered at the feeders, perfectly suited to the café's name.

After lunch we descended toward the foothills and valley for more birding, leaving the cool mist behind as the forest gave way to drier country.

Our final stop of the day was the archaeological site of Yagul, an ancient Zapotec city perched on a ridge above the Tlacolula Valley. The site once served as an important political and defensive center after the decline of Monte Albán, with a large ballcourt, intricate stone patios, and fortress walls built into the natural rock. Yagul, together with nearby prehistoric caves, is part of a UNESCO World Heritage landscape recognized for evidence of some of the earliest plant domestication in the Americas, including the oldest evidence of corn.

Walking among the ruins, we spotted a few birds moving through the open terrain. A Dusky Hummingbird fed at the blooms of tall columnar cacti below the paths, and a Rock Wren explored the old stone walls, its calls bouncing softly across the site. The mix of history, desert plants, and birds made for a memorable close to a full day in the field.

On the drive back toward Oaxaca we found ourselves sharing the road with the Carrera Panamericana, the famous vintage car rally that runs each October from southern Mexico north to Nuevo León. A stream of



beautifully restored Studebakers, Porsches, and Volkswagens came past us, each covered in racing numbers and sponsor decals. As we reached the edge of the city the cars became more numerous, engines roaring, and locals lined the streets to cheer them on and snap photos of the gleaming old machines as they rolled past.

By late evening we returned to Oaxaca for some downtime before gathering again for dinner at Casa Oaxaca, one of the city's most celebrated restaurants and a fitting place to unwind after a day that had carried us from cool mountain forests to ancient ruins.

Fri. October 10

Tlaxiactac de Cabrera | El Tule | Oaxaca City Life

We woke and had breakfast again at the hotel, the air still cool and gray outside. As we stepped out afterward, we discovered that many of the rally cars we had seen on the road the day before were parked right there at the Hotel Victoria. It was a fun surprise to find the parking lot filled with colorful machines from the Carrera Panamericana, all lined up and being tuned for the next stage of the race. Seeing the cars up close, some with hoods up and crews making adjustments, added an unexpected buzz of energy to the morning.

Once on the road, we headed toward the foothills for the day's birding. The overcast weather held steady as we drove, but by the time we reached Tlaxiactac de Cabrera the clouds had begun to thin and a few shafts of sunlight broke through. We set out along a quiet road north of town, winding through open country where the sounds of the village carried faintly up from below.

The mix of habitats here was lively and varied, with oak woodland giving way to open fields dotted with mesquite and acacia. It felt like the kind of place where everything overlaps, people, farmland, and foothill nature all blending together. From the road we could hear vendors calling from the streets below and the occasional bray of a burro. Cyclists and locals passed by, offering quick smiles as we scanned the brush and trees.

Birding was immediately rewarding, with a strong showing of Oaxaca's regional specialties. Slaty Vireo appeared early, flashing soft gray tones and a hint of green as it moved through the low brush. A distant Ocellated Thrasher sang from the hillside, its voice carrying down the canyon. Along the road we found an Oaxaca Sparrow working quietly in the grasses. Mixed flocks of Rufous-capped Warblers and Golden Vireos moved through the foliage, joined by a variety of flycatchers. Overhead, a Squirrel Cuckoo of the western Mexican subspecies glided through the trees, its long rufous tail catching the light.



Butterflies filled the air in dazzling variety. Metalmarks, hairstreaks, skippers, swallowtails, sulphurs, eighty-eights, and crescents drifted among the flowers, creating a living rainbow that rivaled the birds for our attention. The diversity and sheer abundance made this one of the most memorable mornings of the trip.

We stopped for lunch at El Milenario, a local restaurant serving hearty Oaxacan fare, then walked across the street to visit the famous Tule Tree. Known as El Árbol del Tule, this immense Montezuma cypress is thought to be over 2,000 years old and is one of the widest trees in the world, with a trunk circumference exceeding 130 feet. Standing beneath its sprawling canopy, it was impossible not to feel small. The tree filled the courtyard with deep shade and quiet awe, a living monument to time and endurance in the Oaxaca Valley. By midafternoon we returned to the hotel for a well-earned siesta, a quiet break after a morning of birding, color, and one extraordinary tree.

Later in the day we ventured into the heart of Oaxaca. The city felt electric, with vendors and artisan shops lining the streets, colorful textiles and alebrijes spilling into walkways, mezcal bars on nearly every corner, and musicians playing in the plazas. Murals covered the colonial walls, and papel picado hung above the streets in waves of color, casting shifting patterns on the cobblestones.

As we wandered, we came upon a wedding celebration at the Templo de Santo Domingo de Guzmán. The party had spilled into the street where a brass band with clarinets and drums played nonstop traditional music that brought everyone to dance. Towering mojigangas, giant papier-mâché figures of the bride and groom, swayed among the crowd alongside dancers in bright multicolored costumes. The whole scene pulsed with joy, laughter, and rhythm. Then, as the celebration reached its height, a light rain began to fall and a rainbow stretched across the sky over the cathedral. It was an unforgettable sight.

We ended the evening at a Michelin-awarded restaurant overlooking the city. The setting, music, and view were all incredible, and the food was every bit as good as the day had been. It was the perfect close to a day that carried us from quiet foothill trails to the vibrant, beating heart of Oaxaca.

Sat. October 11

Monte Albán | San Martín | San Jose del Pacifico

We started the day like we had every morning, gathering early for breakfast before heading out into a cool, partly cloudy morning. The clouds hung low over the valley at first but began to break as the sun rose, casting soft light across the hills. Our destination today was one of Oaxaca's most remarkable landmarks, Monte Albán, rising high above the city on a broad, leveled ridge.



We began birding along the entrance road where we found an Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush singing from dense brush, a few warblers moving through the hedges, and a Blue Mockingbird calling somewhere unseen. The slopes below were covered in dry scrub and cactus, with a few bright flowers already drawing butterflies. At the top we entered the archaeological zone, where the view opened wide to reveal the entire Oaxaca Valley and the city stretched out below. The morning light played beautifully across the ridges and distant villages, giving us one of the most impressive panoramas of the trip. Monte Albán once stood at the heart of the Zapotec world, a planned city built on a flattened mountaintop more than 2,400 years ago. It was one of the earliest urban centers in the Americas, occupied from around 500 BC until roughly 1200 AD, spanning the great arcs of the Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic periods. The site we walk through today represents only a fraction of the original city, perhaps ten percent, with the rest hidden beneath forested terraces that descend the surrounding slopes.

Eric told us that Monte Albán was named for the Ipomoea trees that once covered the mountain, their white blooms glowing in the dry season. He explained how the Zapotecs engineered this mountaintop city by cutting into solid rock, creating broad plazas, temples, and platforms that aligned with celestial events. At its height, Monte Albán may have supported around 25,000 people and served as both a political and spiritual capital. From here, the Zapotecs governed much of the valley and maintained contact with distant cultures through trade and diplomacy.

We learned about Building J, an oddly shaped structure that faces a different direction than the others. Archaeologists believe it was used as an astronomical observatory, its alignment marking key solar and lunar events. Other buildings show the influence of outside visitors, including those from Teotihuacán to the north and the Maya to the south, evidence of a vast and connected Mesoamerican world.

Monte Albán's decline likely came not from warfare or catastrophe but from slow change such as soil exhaustion, shifting trade routes, and the limits of sustaining a large population on steep terrain. As the city dispersed into smaller communities, new powers rose elsewhere, including the Mexica, who would later form the Aztec Empire in central Mexico.

Among the temples and stairways, blooming red-whisker clammyweed attracted small butterflies that danced through the ruins, flashes of color against the pale stone. Standing in the main plaza, surrounded by the remnants of temples and carved stelae with the sweeping valley below, it was easy to imagine the grandeur of the city in its time, ceremonies, markets, and thousands of people moving across this vast mountaintop space.



After leaving Monte Albán, we drove to the artisan town of San Martín Tilcajete for lunch and a look at its world-famous wood carvings. This is the birthplace of the vibrant figures known as alebrijes, hand-carved from copal wood and painted in bright detail. Our hosts explained that the figures often represent two animal spirits: the nahual, a protective guardian that reflects a person's inner nature, and the tonal, a spiritual guide tied to one's birth date and energy. Together these two spirits shape each person's connection to the natural and spiritual worlds. We each got to learn what ours were based on our birthdays, a fascinating glimpse into how deeply these traditions still live within the culture.

Lunch was cooked over an open fire under the patio roof, and we watched blue corn tortillas being pressed and laid on the comal while wood smoke drifted through the courtyard. The meal was rich and delicious, a perfect match for the setting. As we ate, an Imperial Moth caterpillar crawled across the patio, its green body and orange spines drawing almost as much attention as the artwork nearby. Afterward we had time to browse the shop and admire the explosion of color and imagination that filled every corner.

From there we continued south, leaving behind the bustle of the Oaxaca Valley and climbing gradually into the mountains. The air grew cooler and the forest thicker as we gained elevation, with mist beginning to form along the ridges. Our destination was San José del Pacífico, a small mountain town known for its clouds, pines, and sweeping views of the Sierra Madre. We settled into our rooms at Puesta del Sol and headed into town for dinner at a local Italian place with handmade pasta.

Sun. October 12

San Jose del Pacifico | Puesta del Sol

Some woke early enough to see the Milky Way sprawling across the sky before dawn, a dazzling sight in this remote mountain darkness. The air was cold and still, the smell of wood smoke drifting from the chimneys. Many had kept their fireplaces going through the night to stay warm. As light crept over the ridges, the sun rose into a clear sky, golden and calm after rain the night before. Breakfast was served with a view of the clouds parting over the forested slopes below, and it promised to be a perfect day for exploring.

After breakfast we headed out to bird along the winding mountain roads that trace the ridges around town. The road edges offered ideal birding, with dense vegetation meeting open sky and long views across the slopes. The weather was cool and bright, the air thick with the scent of moisture rising from the Pacific below. Here on the Pacific slope of the Sierra Madre, the clouds and sunlight seemed to mix constantly, giving the morning a soft, shifting light.



Along the way we passed a blooming Devil's Hand tree, *Chiranthodendron pentadactylon*, its deep red flowers reaching out like open fingers from the branches. Bird activity was steady and rewarding from the start. A Mexican Violetear perched in the sun, flashing its emerald throat as it sang. A Cloud Forest Monarch came down low to feed, being unusually cooperative for this usually high-canopy species. A Red Warbler g lowed in the morning light, feeding unbothered near the road, while a Mountain Trogon appeared up high in the pines. One of the biggest, yet smallest highlights of the day was the Bumblebee Hummingbird, a tiny male that perched and displayed for a nearby female, giving extended views as it sang. The Spanish name for this hummingbird, Zumbador Mexicano, translating to Mexican Buzzer, felt so fitting as we heard it buzz around just like a big bee. And as if that wasn't enough, White-throated Jays moved through the oaks and pines, their deep blue plumage catching the light. This species is among the most difficult to find in all of Mexico, and to have at least two in view was a rare and exciting experience. More butterflies became active too, with a Pine Satyr fluttering lazily along the roadside.

By midday we returned to the lodge for lunch and a bit of down time. Some relaxed on their patios, watching hummingbirds dart past in the sunlight, while others explored the grounds or painted the sweeping mountain landscape. And of course some of us kept birding, turning up nice looks at a Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, an adorable Tufted Flycatcher, and a mix of warblers and other species that made for a pleasant mid-day break. In the late afternoon we went out again, walking a different stretch of road not far from the lodge. The forest grew denser here, another stretch of forest with towering trees wrapped in lichens and draped with bromeliads. Cool, moist air drifted up from the Pacific, filling the woods with a faint mist that glowed in the fading light. The birding was gentle but steady. A mixed flock moved through with plenty of Crescent-chested Warblers, a Spot-crowned Woodcreeper worked a mossy trunk, and an Amethyst-throated Mountain-gem buzzed above us among the flowers.

While we birded, others explored the town of San José del Pacífico itself, wandering through small shops and bars, taking in the mountain air and the rhythm of life in this quaint mountain town.

As the light faded, we gathered again at the lodge restaurant for a warm dinner and our evening checklist. The camaraderie, good food, and mountain quiet made for the perfect close to a wonderful and full day among the clouds.



Mon. October 13

Sierra Madre del Sur | Huatulco

Today we said goodbye to Puesta del Sol and began our descent down the Pacific slope of the Sierra Madre del Sur, making a series of roadside birding stops along the way. The road wound steadily through the mountains, each turn revealing new views and new life zones. Our first stop brought great looks at Golden-browed Warbler and Western Flycatcher, a nice mix of resident and wintering species. It was a reminder of how these montane forests serve as a meeting point for tropical and temperate birds alike.

Our next stop was a short walk along the Río Jalatengo, a rushing mountain stream running high and murky after recent rains. Butterflies fluttered through air, including Anna's Eighty-eight and Frosted Mimic-White, both brilliant against the wet stones and greenery. Further down the mountain, we stopped at the Mantlazihua Creek, another lush corridor lined with tall trees and vines. The stream was lively and clear, and butterflies again stole much of our attention, but the birds held their own with excellent views of Collared Trogon and Olivaceous Woodcreeper. Another quick pause at San Isidro del Camino produced Gray Hawk perched on a mountainside snag and Tropical Parula feeding among the canopy. White Morphos drifted like floating light through the trees, and Banded Peacocks flashed their iridescent wings along the roadside.

By midday we reached Pluma Hidalgo, stopping for lunch at Finca Don Gabriel. The restaurant sat high above the valley with a sweeping view of the mountains, foothills, and a faint line of coast far below. Flowers bloomed all around the property, drawing in hummingbirds and butterflies. Boat-billed Flycatcher called from nearby trees, and a Broad-winged Hawk sat perched not far away. After lunch we walked the gardens and had two unforgettable sightings: the impressive Pale-billed Woodpecker working on a tree trunk, and the Blue-capped Hummingbird, the most range-restricted endemic of our trip, feeding on yellow heliconia in a light rain. Its colors glowed like a tiny jewel against the gray sky.

Continuing down the mountain, the road twisted through steep terrain, passing fresh landslides and scarred hillsides from a hurricane that had brought heavy rains about a month earlier. We crossed the wide Santa María River, filled with massive boulders carried down from the slopes over the years, and passed through a few small villages before the landscape began to open and the air grew warmer and heavier.

By mid-afternoon we reached Huatulco, a modern coastal city officially established in 1982 as part of Mexico's tourism development program. The surrounding area is framed by the Sierra Madre del Sur, whose steep ridges drop sharply toward the Pacific. This dramatic transition is the result of tectonic forces where the Cocos Plate is subducting beneath the North American Plate, uplifting the mountains while creating a very narrow continental



shelf. Because of this, deep water lies only a few miles offshore, making Huatulco one of the best places on the Pacific coast for pelagic birding, where oceanic species can be reached quickly by boat. The region's many bays and coves, several of which are protected within Parque Nacional Huatulco, give the city a unique mix of natural beauty and ecological importance.

We checked into our hotel, Villa Blanca, just a short distance from the coast. The white buildings surrounded a lush courtyard and pool shaded by palms, with Green Iguanas basking near the edges. After a long travel day, it felt wonderful to relax. Some took a swim, others simply rested on their balconies taking in the tropical air. We gathered that evening for dinner at the hotel restaurant, enjoying good food and conversation before turning in early for the morning ahead.

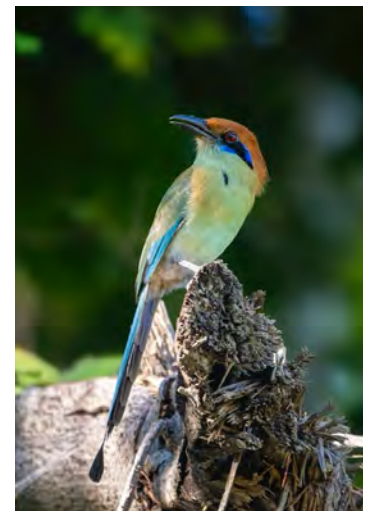
Tues. October 14

Pluma Hidalgo | Café Pluma Oro Del Sur

It was our earliest morning yet as we loaded up before sunrise to head back up into the mountains. The drive climbed quickly from the coast, and as the first light reached the hillsides, we began birding a winding road that followed the slope above the Río Santa María. Bird activity was immediate and nonstop. Happy Wrens lived up to their name, filling the air with their cheerful songs. A variety of orioles moved through the canopy, and a Scarlet Tanager, rare for this region, surprised our guides high in the greenery, hanging out with a couple of Altamira and Baltimore Orioles. A Masked Tityra chased Boat-billed Flycatchers between the trees while Yellow-winged Caciques, an endemic species, passed in small noisy groups. A mix of warblers fed high above us, and a Cinnamon Hummingbird perched out in the open, giving great views. Orange-fronted Parakeets sat noisily on exposed branches, their orange foreheads glowing in the morning light. Nearby, an Ivory-billed Woodcreeper worked steadily up and down the trunks, and Black-headed Saltators added their raucous voices to the soundscape. It was a tremendous show of birdlife, and the day had barely begun.

As we continued up the mountain toward Pluma Hidalgo, the stops along the road just kept getting better. One particularly productive spot gave us excellent views of Dickey's subspecies of Audubon's Oriole perched and preening, occasionally breaking into song. A Russet-crowned Motmot emerged from the forest and perched right in front of us, posing in perfect light. Masked Tityras continued to fly overhead, and our first White-throated Magpie-Jays appeared, noisy and unmistakable. Butterflies were everywhere—Heliconians, White Morphos, skippers, and others added flashes of color to the morning.

Farther along, another stop brought a real treat: the "Wagler's" Northern Emerald Toucanet, likely to be split into its own species, showing beautifully in the mid-canopy. Nearby, a waterfall spilled down the side of the mountain, framed by bright orange Mexican Sunflowers along the road. Metalmark butterflies shimmered in the



sunlight, and a brilliant Malachite paused briefly to bask on a roadside leaf. Every turn seemed to reveal something new.

We eventually reached Café Pluma Oro del Sur, a family-owned coffee finca nestled in a deep green valley surrounded by forest and running water. The final stretch of the road was too narrow for the bus, so we climbed into a caravan of small tuk-tuks that carried us the rest of the way up - an adventure all its own! At the top, we were greeted by three generations of the family who have been growing and roasting coffee here for decades. They welcomed us with incredible hospitality and a delicious meal of chicken in mole verde, fresh jamaica juice, and homemade coffee flan. Their coffee, roasted right on site, filled the air with a rich aroma, and we even got to taste their own coffee liqueur. Truly an experience that transcended any posh restaurant.

After lunch, we learned about the coffee-making process and watched part of a new batch being roasted. We then took a short walk around the finca, enjoying the sound of the stream, a small cascade, and the steady presence of butterflies gliding through the garden. The experience felt deeply personal and genuine, like being invited into a family gathering. Many of us left with bags of fresh coffee and handmade ceramics as reminders of the day.

In the afternoon we made our way back down the mountain toward Huatulco. Once back at the coast, everyone enjoyed some free time to relax. Some explored town or walked to the nearby beach, others swam, rested, or enjoyed a drink poolside. After such a full and memorable day, it was a welcome slow evening to take in the warm tropical air before dinner.

Wed. October 15

La Ninfas | Parque Hundido Chahué

We started the morning with a drive to Ecoturística Las Ninfas, a locally run conservation site near Huatulco dedicated to protecting native forest and wildlife. The morning air was damp and fresh from recent rains as we began walking along a mostly dry arroyo lined with blooming morning glories and bright Mexican sunflowers. The ground was soft and fragrant, alive with the smell of wet earth. We were greeted by Caesar, the owner of the reserve, who joined us for our walk.

Almost immediately we found our main target of the morning, the Orange-breasted Bunting. It was a breathtaking sight, with brilliant turquoise, green, and tangerine plumage glowing in the sunlight. This species is one of the signature birds of the Pacific slope, favoring low, scrubby habitat where it feeds on seeds and berries, often in pairs or small groups. A few males glowed among the bushes with several females nearby, creating a



burst of color among the dry branches. Painted and Blue Buntings joined them, adding even more flashes of red, blue, and violet that made the whole scene almost too much to take in.

White-lored Gnatcatchers moved quickly through the bushes, and a pair of Lilac-crowned Amazons flew overhead calling loudly. These parrots, found only along Mexico's Pacific slope, rely on mature woodland for nesting and are considered near threatened due to habitat loss and the pet trade. Around us, the forest was full of sound as Streak-backed, Spot-breasted, and Altamira Orioles flashed between trees, and a gang of Russet-naped Wrens chattered noisily from the thornscrub. West Mexican Chachalacas flapped from one treetop to another ahead of us, their heavy bodies and loud calls giving them away.

Then came a telltale soft clucking call from the thicket. Not long after, two Citreoline Trogons appeared, their yellow bellies glowing in the sun and their eyes bright and alert. They perched quietly for a while, offering everyone a good look before slipping back into the brush.

We continued on to the main buildings of the property where we rested in the shade and were treated to fresh jamaica juice, fruit, and warm conchas, a sweet Mexican bread roll. After a short break, Caesar led us up a narrow trail to a dead snag where a Pacific Screech Owl of the lambi subspecies roosted inside a hollow. Some authorities recognize this form as the Oaxaca Screech Owl, a potential split based on its distinct voice and coloration. Caesar told us he first found the roost by smell, noticing the scent of pellets and prey remains while clearing wood. That same hollow has now served as an active roost for these owls for over eight years.

Back at the headquarters, we sat down for a good, fresh lunch of homemade sopes with beans and cheese, meats and nopales, and salsa picante, all served on handmade and decorated traditional clay dishes. As we ate, Caesar showed us footage from the reserve's trail cameras, revealing some of the shy mammals that share these trails, including ocelots and jaguarundis.

After a long, pleasant morning in the field, we returned to the hotel for the afternoon to relax, swim, and enjoy the warm coastal air.

Later in the afternoon, we met again for a short walk to the beach by way of Parque Hundido Chahué, a city park filled with palms, open lawns, dense brushy lots, and shaded paths. We stopped many times along the way to look for some of the exciting local urban birds. Rufous-backed Robins hopped across the rooftops while Vaux's Swifts circled high overhead among large numbers of Gray-breasted Martins. Far above, vultures streamed south in steady migration, and with them we spotted a pair of Peregrine Falcons. The size difference between



the male and female was clear, and we watched as one stooped at a Martin but missed its mark. A Spot-breasted Oriole perched up beautifully, and a Cinnamon-bellied Saltator called nearby giving nice views.

We reached the beach just as the light began to soften, the air warm and breezy. Locals were out playing soccer on the sand, families gathered with some catching some nice fish, and the sea rolled in with a low rhythmic sound. Along a drainage canal beside the beach, a troop of Anis clambered through the vegetation, their antics endlessly entertaining.

We then went out to dinner at a local spot where we sat out under the trees, the warm glow of streetlights above us and the deep blue of the night sky beyond. It was a relaxed, peaceful evening that perfectly rounded out another full and beautiful day in southern Oaxaca.

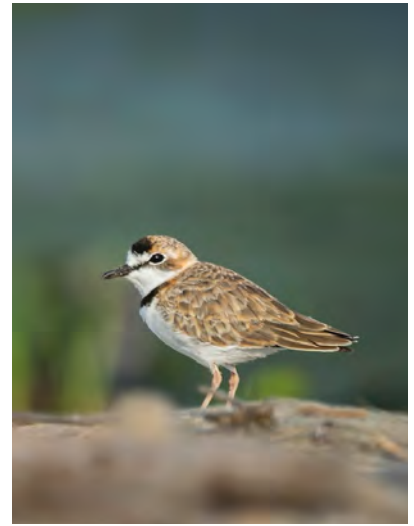
Thu. October 16 Park

Bocanas Beach | Los Parotas | Huatulco National

Our first stop after breakfast was where the Río Copalita meets the Pacific Ocean at Bocanas Beach. The sun rose over the ocean, casting soft light on the rocky shoreline dotted with cacti. The morning air was calm and full of the sound of waves and shorebirds. Herons and egrets foraged in the shallows, moving gracefully between pools and sandbars. An Amazon Kingfisher came and perched on one of the sea stacks before returning to the freshwater side, hovering and diving as it hunted. A Common Black Hawk surveyed the wetland from its perch, watching for crabs or other small prey moving below.

As we walked closer to the river mouth, the freshwater pools behind the dunes held Northern Jacanas stepping lightly along the shore with their huge feet and chartreuse wings, while the beach itself hosted a small group of Collared Plovers scurrying among the driftwood. Further along, Black-necked Stilts with their long pink legs foraged side by side with elegant American Avocets. A few Reddish Egrets performed their characteristic foraging dance through the shallows, wings spread wide as they chased fish. Magnificent Frigatebirds drifted overhead, and we paused to study the field marks between Elegant and Royal Terns resting on the sandbars. Then came the showstoppers, Roseate Spoonbills sweeping their bills through the brackish pools, glowing pink in the sunlight.

Our next stop was Las Parotas Golf Club, where we birded along some quiet side roads lined with dense vegetation. Almost immediately, Eric's whistling brought in a pair of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls, both perched



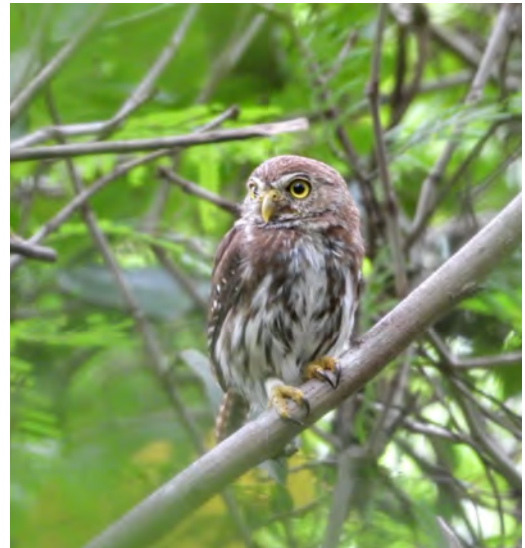
together for excellent scope views. A nearby patch of coral vine was busy with butterflies and hummingbirds, including a beautiful Elf Butterfly and a Turquoise-capped Hummingbird feeding among the blooms. Around the corner, a mixed flock of warblers included Yellow-throated and American Redstart. Along the roadside we found several Lyside Sulphurs laying eggs on Guayacán, a small native tree prized for its dense wood and purple flowers. Guayacán grows slowly and is considered near threatened in parts of its range due to overharvesting and habitat loss. Among the ornamental trees planted nearby were a few Mahoganies, impressive to see even outside their natural forest setting.

By late morning we returned to the hotel for a long stretch of downtime. Some went into town to shop or explore, others swam at the beach or relaxed by the pool, and a few went birding in the nearby green spaces. After dinner at the hotel, we headed out again for an evening excursion into Huatulco National Park to look for nocturnal wildlife. We almost immediately found a Common Pauraque sitting in a grassy field, its reflective eyes catching the light. Through the scope, we had a close look at its face and subtle patterning. A Buff-collared Nightjar soon followed, perched up on a rocky bluff and offering fine views after a bit of patience. As we continued down the road, a Virginia Opossum crossed in front of the headlights, and later a pair of Pacific Screech Owls called back and forth in the darkness. Fireflies flickered through the air, and above them the stars filled the sky. It was a quiet, beautiful night to close another memorable day in the field.

Fri. October 17 National Park

Foothills Birding | Faro de las Bahías | Huatulco

With a tropical depression forming just off the coast, we adjusted our plans for the day, trading the open ocean for the shelter of the hills and nearby coves. The morning began along a quiet mountain road where streams cut through the forest and lush vegetation crowded in from both sides. A Green Kingfisher perched on a mossy rock midstream, watching for fish in the clear, fast water. Ferns and broad-leaved plants arched over the roadside, their leaves glistening from the morning mist. The air was cool and dense with moisture, carrying the steady sound of water rushing downhill. Cloud hung low over the trees, giving the whole scene a hushed, tropical calm. From there we continued to the Faro de las Bahías de Huatulco, the lighthouse overlooking the series of bays that give the region its name. Built high on a rocky bluff, it offers a commanding view of the Pacific and the rugged coastline below. From the overlook, we could see Magnificent Frigatebirds soaring below eye level, their dark shapes catching the light as they cruised along the cliffs. The waves crashed far below, echoing against the rock face. The slopes were dotted with tall columnar cacti and dry shrubs, and Western Spiny-tailed Iguanas



sprawled across the warm stones, motionless in the midday heat. The mix of sea air, sun, and solitude made it an easy place to linger.

We left the lighthouse and stopped at a seaside restaurant for lunch with our feet in the sand and the ocean just a few steps away. Plates of fresh seafood arrived one after another, simple and full of flavor. A few people took a swim afterward, the water the perfect temperature and the sand smooth underfoot. The waves rolled in gently, and the whole setting felt like the calm before the storm that was gathering far offshore.

Later in the day we returned to the hotel for some rest before heading back out to Huatulco National Park for early evening birding. The park held a single broad wetland surrounded by dry forest, its surface flat in the low light. A Vermilion Flycatcher perched along the edge, glowing against the green reeds. Least Grebes paddled across the water, and the call of a Citreoline Trogon carried from the trees, giving some brief views. Barred Wrens chattered in the scrub and a soft chorus of frogs rose from hidden pockets in the water nearby. The light faded quickly, the sky deepening into gray and warm moisture began to move in.

We returned to the hotel for our final dinner together, gathered once more under the warm lights of the courtyard. Conversation turned easily to favorite moments and birds, the places we'd seen and the people we'd met. The evening had the quiet, satisfied feeling that comes at the end of a good journey - a fitting close to an unforgettable week in beautiful Oaxaca.

Sat. October 18

Farewell

Our last morning began quietly with breakfast at the hotel, the soft breeze from the ocean drifting through the courtyard. Bags were packed, binoculars stowed away, and we gathered for a final time beneath the palms. There were hugs and handshakes, laughter over favorite moments, and that familiar mix of contentment and reluctance that comes when a great trip draws to a close. We said our goodbyes to Eric and Ramón, whose knowledge and kindness had shaped every step of our journey through the mountains, valleys, and coast. The drive to the Huatulco airport carried an easy stillness. From the windows we could see the distant mountains fading into the morning haze, the same range that had cradled so many of our days. Conversation came and went, quiet at times, thoughtful at others. As we reached the airport, there was a shared sense that what we were leaving with went far beyond lists and photographs. It was the feeling of connection to the places we had explored, the people who welcomed us, and the friends we had become along the way. Oaxaca had shared with us its best parts, and we left with full hearts and lasting memories.

Photos: Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Red Warbler (BC), Blue-capped Hummingbird (BC), Oaxaca (David Welch - DW), Elegant Euphonias (BC), Boucard's Wren (BC), Weaving Carding (DW), Red Warbler (BC), Gray-barred Wren (BC), Dwarf Jay (BC), Giant Agave (BC), Princely Tiger Moth (BC), Rock Wren (BC), Scenic (Toph Welch - TW), Least Flycatcher (BC), Bridled Sparrow (BC), Cassin's Kingbird (BC), Tule Tree (BC), Oaxaca Streets (BC), Monte Alban (TW), Russet Nightingale-Thrush (BC), Garnet-throated Hummingbird (BC), Emerald Spiny Lizard (BC), Red Warbler (BC), Bumblebee Hummingbird (BC), Brown-backed Solitaire (BC), Chestnut-sided Shrike-vireo (BC), Townsend's Warbler (BC), Golden-browed Warbler (BC), Lunch in the sky (TW), Blue-capped Hummingbird (BC), Blue-capped Hummingbird (BC), Orange-breasted Bunting (BC), West-Mexican Chachalaca (BC), Pacific Screech-owl (BC), Groove-billed Ani (BC), Amazon Kingfisher (BC), Collared Plover (BC), Turquoise-crowned Hummingbird (BC), Ferruginous Pygmy-owl (Laura Jelemensky - LJ), Magnificent Frigatebird (BC), Green iguana (BC)