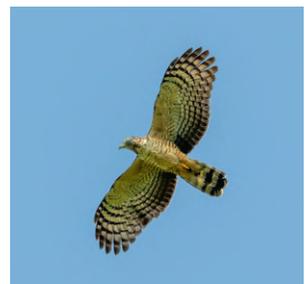


Veracruz, Mexico: River of Raptors & More

Oct. 16-27, 2025 | Trip Report by Vernie Aikins



**Local guide Kashmir Wolfe and NJ host Vernie Aikins, with clients:
Carol C., Matt & Carol S., and Diana**



I want to first start this trip report out with a few generalities, in case some don't make it all the way through. The state of Veracruz – its history, food, towns, and, most importantly, its people – is what will stick with us the longest. The birds were spectacular and the River of Raptors was awe-inspiring, but Veracruz was the star of the show. I think I can speak for the whole group in saying that each and every day between the marvelous birds and the people of Veracruz and their homes, felt welcoming, warm, and unique. We never left the state of Veracruz, but we could drive an hour and be transported to a new, fascinating town that felt truly different from the previous town. This is not something you get to experience in the US. The food, the culture, and the traditions would change as we moved from town to town and, yet, the kindness of the people never changed. I



think we all came here for a River of Raptors, but left with an ocean of appreciation for Veracruz. Don't come here just for the birds – they are not the star of the show; they are the award-winning 2nd lead to the Oscar-winning state of Veracruz.

Thur., Oct. 16: Arrival in Veracruz

The early group arrived at Mocambo the day beforehand, and we were able to take a nice stroll on the beach that is conveniently located right down the stairs from the hotel. We woke up to clear skies on the first day, and Orizaba was visible, providing our first looks at the highest point in Mexico. After a morning birding session, Carol arrived and the core group was all here. We were able to take another evening stroll around the grounds of our unique hotel and another walk along the beach.

Fri., Oct. 17: Cempoala Archeological Site | Cardel | Chichicaxtle

Our first full day, we headed north towards Cardel and our first dip into the river of raptors. Before we made it to Cardel, we made our first cultural stop at Cempoala. This is the Totonac city Hernán Cortés first visited after reaching the Americas. As we stood shaded under a massive fig tree, we were treated to a brief history of Cortés and the Totonacs. We also got to walk around this 1,000-year-old city, now taken care of by the local villagers and ruled over by the Mexican Spiny-tailed Iguana. After our exploration through history, it was on to Hotel Bienvenido for lunch under the “river.” As we enjoyed a wonderful lunch on the roof of the hotel, we all sat in awe while experiencing our first taste of the true River of Raptors. Thousands of Turkey Vultures, Swainson’s Hawks, and Broad-winged Hawks formed a beautiful river in the sky.

After lunch, we headed west to site #2 of Pronatura, Chichicaxtle, and their migration monitor stations. Chichicaxtle’s hawk tower was built by Pronatura for monitoring the raptor migration, but it has become more than that to this small community. Kashmir gave us a wonderful presentation about Pronatura’s work and hawk migration. As we were finishing the presentation, before heading up to the roof deck to look for birds, three young boys burst into the building, bouncing with energy, right over to the cabinet, where the loaner binoculars were located. Every day after school during migration, Kash said they show up to help look for raptors.

Pronatura not only has a monitoring station here in this small village, but it's also a classroom and gathering spot for some of the local kids. Twice a week - once at the tower and once in the local school - they put on workshops for the kids. These particular kids couldn't get enough and, so, here they are with their infectious energy spreading to our group as we all headed up the stairs to watch the skies together. Migration was slower this evening in Chichi, but it didn't matter; the local kids would burst with excitement with even the slightest sighting of a single Peregrine Falcon or Swainson’s Hawk, and that was all we needed. It was slow here, but we were treated to great waves of White Pelicans, a Canivet’s Emerald visiting the flowers planted by the staff, and great



looks at a Scrub Euphonia pair. As the evening drew to a close, and it was time for the raptors to roost for the night, it was also time for us to call it a day...and what a day it was.

Sat., Oct. 18: Cattle Ranch Birding | Villa Rica | River of Raptors | La Antigua

The next morning, we were up before the sun for breakfast. Then it was on the road, as we had a long day ahead of us. Not as long as the migration Swainson's have, but long enough. Target #1 was Mexican Sheartail. This unbelievably range-restricted hummingbird was a major target for the day and worth waking up early for. Our guide, Kash, and his group have been manning a feeder outside of town, in some cattle fields where the farmers have not fully clear-cut the native vegetation leaving the proper plants for the Sheartail to nest. As soon as we got out of the van, we were greeted by Yellow-headed Amazons flying overhead, Tropical Kingbirds buzzing, and a Northern House Wren singing away. As I got the Amazons in the scope, and we waited for the Sheartail to show, Kash headed down the road. He knew that Double-striped Thick-knees, the oddest-named bird of the tour, frequented the area and went to look. Sure enough, he found three and, so, the whole group trekked up the road to see these weirdly-named, oddly-shaped birds. It was the perfect distraction and amount of time because almost as soon as we returned, the first male Mexican Sheartail was perched. He put on a nice show for us, and we got to spend as much time as we wanted observing him. After a while, a second male showed up. It was the perfect start to the morning, but it was time to head out. As we were leaving, I spotted an Altamira Oriole that I had previously seen but that had flown off before anyone could get a look at him. This time he stuck around, perched on a wire for the whole gang to see. Now it was off to the next area.

We were destined to follow in Cortés' footsteps today, and we were headed for the beach area where he first made landfall in Mexico...or so we thought. Just as we were heading down the road, back to the highway, Kash yelled out, "Veracruz Wren" and threw the van in reverse. This is another extremely range-restricted wren. This large wren was split into 3 other wren species, the Veracruz only being found here in the state of Veracruz. Perched nicely on top of a bush in a lime grove, this absolute stunner of a wren gave us the best looks. We used the van for a blind and, with a little coaxing, we realized there was a family of 5, all dispersed in the bushes on the side of the road. After spectacular looks, it was back in the van and on the road.

Our next stop was the Villa Rica area and some mangrove habitat we wanted to explore. Kash had a certain bird, here, that we were after. As we pulled up, parked, and piled out of the van, I looked up the road and saw a wood-rail just moseying across the road. I called out the wood-rail just as it was about halfway across the road. Everyone got a look before it headed into the mangroves and perched in a tangle, making it hard to see. This was the bird Kash was after: the Russet-naped Wood-Rail, and it so kindly graced us with its presence one minute after arriving. This gave us more time to explore; and as we walked up the road, we were treated to



some feeding Olive-throated Parakeets and a Northern Jacana walking on water. Maybe the best part of this stop though was the raptor show we got. We were there to look for a skulky wood-rail but ended up with great looks at Hook-billed Kite and a Short-tailed Hawk flying very low. We also got our first Common Black Hawk, as well as multiple other raptors moving overhead.

With such nice raptor movement, it was time to scoot up the hill to a Totonac burial and lookout site. From here, we could see the beach where Cortés landed in 1519, and view what the Totonac used as burial markers for their shaman. We were also treated to a Great Black Hawk and a flurry of other birds migrating, all while sitting at a thousand-year-old site in the shadow of a volcanic upheaval hill, overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. Wow, we hadn't even had lunch yet!

As the temps began to rise, we made the journey back to Cardel. Our hotel here happened to also be one of two counting sites, and they served us enchiladas while we were overlooking the city 5 stories up. We took some time to enjoy our meal in the A/C as Kash and myself monitored the raptor movement in the distance. We could see a heavy wave passing through and I started the timer in my head; this movement looked promising. We finished lunch and headed out onto the patio, not fully realizing the spectacle that was truly unfolding above us. Over the next hour, we just sat in bewilderment as a non-stop River of Raptors flowed over our heads.

We watched these living creatures as they created this secondary living organism that truly felt like it had a life of its own. As it flowed past us, it slowed, kettled, and changed course multiple times. Just like any river, it was alive and creating its own path across this aerial landscape. We estimated this one movement had been happening for over two hours! There were times when our necks needed a break from looking up, so we followed the “river” as far out as possible and could see the most massive kettle of raptors off in the distance. Our binoculars were full, like looking into a swarm of mosquitos; they were so far out that it was hard to tell what species they were. But it didn't matter. Identifying the species was maybe the least interesting thing about the process. It seemed weird as a bird guide, on a bird tour, to not ID every bird we saw; but this was bigger than that. We just sat there in our chairs and took it all in. It was bigger than anything words can explain, so the moment just needed to be absorbed and enjoyed in everyone's own way.

After lunch, we took a short trip to see the first catholic structure erected on the mainland of the Americas and Cortés' house in the town of La Antigua. Then, it was a sunset ride down the Antigua, where we saw our first shore birds and an abundance of Green Herons. We were also treated to the only Black Skimmers of the trip and our first, very brief, glimpse of an Aplomado Falcon. Dinner along the river was fantastic.

Sun., Oct. 19: Playa Juan Angel | El Crucero

Today we headed to Playa Juan Angel. Along the way, we stopped along the road to bird the cattle ranches. The morning started off quiet, but we could hear a Collared Forest-Falcon calling in the distance. Though we struck



out on it, we were treated to great views of Altamira Oriole and Black-headed Saltators. After about an hour, we decided to head to the playa and, just up the road, encountered our first Brown Jays of the trip. We decided to get out of the van because they were new for the tour, and we were rewarded with not only them, but our first true mixed flock of the trip. As soon as we got out, we were dazzled and dizzied as Masked Tityra, Rose-throated Becards, and Squirrel Cuckoos moved through the trees above us. For some, this was their first mixed flock ever, and it was wonderful to experience that with them.

We headed to the playa and spent some time in a field that was lined with Grooved-billed Anis, looking for Tropical Mockingbird. Then it was on to the beach which was fairly quiet but provided the first looks at Black-bellied Plover and an American Kestrel annoying some Aplomado Falcons. After our time at the beach, we packed up and headed back to Cardel to see if the “river” was flowing with raptors and to enjoy more rooftop morsels. Movement was slow, but the food was great. We were slated to head to Chichicastle after lunch, but we got news that not many raptors were moving there, either. Kash decided to take us to a spot to see Boat-billed Herons, which we missed out on, but ended up with two of the birds of the day. Amazon and Green Kingfishers both put on a show below us as we watched them from a bridge. We also got our first Laughing Falcon, finally, after hearing a few (and me seeing one while on the highway where we could not stop). We wrapped up the day back in Cardel with dinner and an early night so we could pack for tomorrow's change of venue.

Mon., Oct. 20: Shade-Coffee Plantation | Xalapa

We were all excited to hit the road and head to higher ground today. We knew we were going to visit a local coffee farm, but none of us were prepared for how grand it was going to be. Rancho El Mirador is a shade-grown coffee farm owned by MG and Jorge. Jorge's family first arrived in Mexico in 1850, and they are 6th-generation coffee farmers. They have 95 hectares and grow 5 varieties of coffee, maintaining a biodiverse shade-grown operation. This was evident the moment we stepped out of the van, as we were greeted by not only the owners, but Keel-billed Toucans flying over their driveway, as well. The day just got better from there. After introductions it was time to start the tour. This was not just any tour; some of us got to climb into Jorge's vintage VW Bus, driven by him, as we went deeper into the property. Jorge is an absolute gem of a human. He caught the birding bug from his daughter, who was a raptor counter for Pronatura, and was delighted to show us his bird-friendly operation. The pride he has in his operation was evident in his smile when I asked him what his favorite bird is on his property. “Well, of course it's the trogon,” he told me, with pride, as we bumped down the dirt road in this VW Bus that knows every rut and rock on these roads. We spent some time at the first stop, birding along the road, as Jorge taught the group about coffee—the plant, the bean, and the process that goes into it all. The birding was a little slow, but no one noticed because Jorge was the attraction here. His knowledge and his love for what he does is endless. As we headed back to where we left the vehicles, we were bombarded



by a massive mixed flock of birds—warblers, woodcreepers, woodpeckers, chlorospingus were all around us. It kept us busy for at least half an hour picking through the flock...just enough time to work up a bit of an appetite. With the mixed flock passed, we cruised down the road to a spot where Jorge had a special treat set up for us. In the middle of his coffee farm, amongst the trees and coffee plants, sat a makeshift table, chairs, freshly-brewed coffee, and homemade bread. We were truly being spoiled. We were having the perfect day; none of us wanted to be anywhere else doing anything else. Here we were, enjoying coffee with amazing people in this magical place. And just to really hammer it home, after we finished our coffee, not even 50 yards away, we got our first trogon of the tour—a Gartered Trogon—perched up in the tree, sitting beautifully, for us all to get a look at it in the scope. By now, it was time for lunch and we still had a long journey ahead of us, but Jorge would not let us leave with an empty stomach.

We were invited back to his casa, where lunch was served—a traditional home-cooked Mexican affair. There were tamales, barbacoa, beans, rice, cold cervezas; even the farm dogs joined in. After lunch, we all bought some bags of coffee, said our farewells, and hit the road. It felt early still in the trip, and we had already had so many amazing experiences. But this one just felt different; it felt so warm and inviting. I think we were beginning to see how amazing the people of Veracruz were, and this experience really knocked it out of the park. Most of us didn't know it yet (maybe we knew), but this was one of the top 3 moments of the trip.

After lunch, we headed to Coatepec, our home for the night. Along the way, we had a Bat Falcon just surveying the river valley we had just crossed. Coatepec is the town where Kash lives. It's a vibrant city, dating as far back as the 15th century. We had dinner with Kash's wife, Diana, then they showed us the colorful, bustling city. We walked to the town square, where, even on a Monday night, it was full of people enjoying the shops, taking in the Dia de los Muertos decorations, or just enjoying a cooler evening in the plaza. Before the night was done, though, we learned one more valuable lesson: do not walk under the trees with the hundreds of roosting Great-tailed Grackles.

Tues., Oct 21: Highlands | Perote | Red Warbler

Waking up in Coatepec, at almost 4,000ft, was a great change in pace from the hot and humid lowlands we came from. Today, we were headed up even higher, to the promised land—the land filled with Red Warblers and pine trees. After breakfast at the hotel, it was time to climb. We spent the next hour winding our way up the mountain, through dairy farms, to the small village of La Joya. Here at a rock quarry, some of the land has been preserved for wildlife. This was our first foray into higher-elevation birding on the trip, and we started it out with a bang. Just a short walk from the van, with traffic still within earshot, we had some blazing Golden-browed Warblers. As we sat and photographed the warblers, we could hear some Brown-backed Solitaires calling in the distance. We gave chase, but had no luck. On our way back to the van, though, in the same meadow as the warblers, we had some spectacular views of sneaky Rufous-capped Brushfinch.



With the sun rising and the temps getting perfect, it was time for us to move on to the next spot, though not just any spot on the trip. This was THE spot a lot of us had been waiting for. The promise of Red Warbler habitat was just a short drive away, and we were excited. In the town of Cruz Blanca, we hung a right and headed down an old two-lane road, passing through some numerous block-making facilities, and pulled over at an unmarked spot along the side of the road. Nothing around but rows of replanted pine trees and an abandoned dirt road. I don't know what I was expecting. In the U.S. on any given day, when you arrive at a place where there is a known popular bird, there are usually other cars at the same location; not here. We shuffled our way down the dirt road, and the first bird Kash was able to drum up for us was the Red Warbler! It perched perfectly for us, with the sun bringing out the ruby red coloring. We had this dream bird all to ourselves, working the pine branches, singing, and giving no bother to us watching. It was a special moment with a special bird, just for us. Once the Red Warbler was done with us, it was on its way and we scooted across the street where we got a great mixed flock containing Mexican Chickadee, Olive Warbler, and a Brown Creeper.

With the Red Warbler fresh in our minds, Kashmir had one more regional endemic bird in the area we were after. The Hooded Yellowthroat was also known in the area, and we headed over to a spot for it. Shortly after arriving, we did hear it. But we were also able to spend a bit of time getting to see it. It would fly around us and then dive into the deep ferns surrounding us. It would climb up on a fern just out of sight and start singing again, then fly and hide again. It was flying circles around us. It knew it was the star of the show, but it just wanted to toy with us. With some perseverance and some not-super-distant looks, it finally made its way up a fern to sing. From here, it was actually visible to the group. This worked up our appetite, so we headed into the town of Perote—named after the Perote Volcano—for lunch. On such a gorgeous day, we were lucky to get clear views of this 14,049-ft. volcano today.

Once we finished lunch, we stopped at a few other spots before working our way back towards Coatepec for some downtime before dinner. For dinner, we headed out of town to a special restaurant overlooking Cascada De Texolo. The views here were stunning and we had the entire restaurant to ourselves. Band-backed Wrens and Plain Chachalacas were the only ones we had to share the place with.

Wed., Oct 22: Xalapa | Parque Ecológico Macuiltépetl | Anthropology Museum

Our morning started with breakfast and packing, as we were slated to leave the mountains and head back down into the lowlands today. We just had to make a few very important stops before all of that, though. Our first outing of the day started at an extinct volcano in the middle of Xalapa. As we walked in, we were treated to brightly colored murals (colorful everything was definitely a theme in Veracruz), grounds perfectly cared for, and the most exciting part – Pico De Orizaba - was finally making a true appearance. A few of us got to see this



mountain, the highest point in Mexico, on the very first day, but the whole group had not had a chance to take it all in. At 18,491 ft., this volcano is the highest point in Mexico and third highest in North America. As we walked the path winding up this massive, inactive volcano, taking in its beauty, we were treated to one of the most sought-after birds of the trip – the Blue Mockingbird. It was hard to decide whether to photograph the mockingbird or the volcano while it was still in view. These are the hard decisions one has to make on a Naturalist Journeys tour.

As we stood in awe of Orizaba, we could hear a bit of commotion just up the path. So, we sauntered up to investigate. The ruckus was being caused by a flock of Plain Chachalacas - a new chachalaca was trying to join the flock and they were not having it. We were treated to some fantastic chachalaca drama just feet away, then it was time to continue up the trail. Along the way, we saw some mixed flocks of warblers and a massive hummingbird, the Wedge-tailed Sabrewing. We were missing the target bird here, though—the Mexican endemic Blue-capped Motmot. Kash was looking as hard as he could as we continued up the path past its prime habitat, with no luck. We needed to turn around, as we had an appointment at the museum, but on the way down, we did not give up hope. Just as we were about three-quarters of the way back, he spotted it lurking in the trees! We got okay looks at the bird before it flew away. Then, with a little bit of prodding, we got it to return...this time for great views! It stayed, silently perched, just feet off the trail at eye level. It was one of those viewings where we didn't even need binoculars to see it. We got to spend some quality time with the motmot, but we had to peel ourselves away. We had a date with the Olmec and Totonac sculptures at the museum.

(*Parque Ecológico Macuiltépetl was voted favorite park of the trip and Diana, who has traveled extensively in Mexico, said it was even the best park she has ever visited in Mexico.)

The Xalapa Museum of Anthropology is a stunning building that houses some of the most amazing cultural finds in Mexico. It holds the second largest collection in Mexico, and the largest collection of Olmec colossal heads. These stone heads date back all the way to 900 BCE. They, themselves, would be worth a visit to the museum. Luckily for us, though, Kashmir had arranged for a private tour guide from the local university in Xalapa so that she could give us a brief history of the different civilizations that had been prominent in Mexico. The museum itself is even designed to take you through the time periods as you work your way down the tiered hall. There are a total of 6 rooms spanning the centuries from Olmec to Huasteca. We could have spent hours here, taking in the massive collection, but both our guide and our group were on a schedule, so we had to say goodbye to the Chanèques and head our separate ways.

After another delicious lunch, we headed back down into the lowlands. We had a stopover night back in Cardel before our big trek to Catemaco. This gave us one more stop at Chichicaxtle, the hawk counting station. Though



it was a slow day for counting, we did get to see some of our old friends, the neighborhood kids, again. We parted ways from Chichicxtle and got checked in before dinner in Cardel.

Thur., Oct 23: Las Barrancas | Laguna Mandingo | Catemaco

Today was the day I was most excited about. I love grassland birding and birding by car over large areas, so Las Barrancas was right up my alley. We had breakfast in Cardel, packed up the van, and headed south. We had a long day ahead of us with the drive to the Catemaco Lake and Tuxtlas Volcano region.

After traveling a typically bumpy Mexican highway, we arrived at a gas station to get supplies before heading out into the grasslands. Like everywhere in Mexico, there are street dogs whenever you stop. But this particular gas station had the world's cutest puppy guarding the entrance. After endless pets and watching it playfully wrestle with a stray cat, we had to pull ourselves away so we could get back to the business at hand. As we entered the Las Barrancas region, not even a half mile in, we were instantly treated to three Aplomado Falcons, one of our top birds, pack-hunting a dove, while still having the promise of Common Tody-Flycatcher at the end of the road. We slowly worked our way further from the highway, finding Tropical Mockingbird, Vermillion Flycatcher, and Plain-breasted Ground Dove. We took a side road that looked promising with fields of grazing cattle, each with multiple Western Cattle Egrets at their feet. As we took a closer look at the fields, we started to notice Double-striped Thick-knees strewn throughout the field. We got out of the van to get a better look at them with the spotting scope and were greeted by a nice herd of horses. One of the horses really took a liking to us.

As we back-tracked to the main road, Northern Jacana walked the marshy areas and Grooved-billed Anis occupied the fences. We even crossed paths with the Aplomado Falcons again as we got deeper into the grasslands. A ways in, there was a large marsh area with tall reeds from which a Pinnated Bittern flushed as we approached. We piled out of the van quickly to get it in the scope when, as we did, a mixed flock of Fork and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers passed right in front of us, slowly working the tall grass, posing in striking positions sideways on the tall grass, with their tails flowing behind them.

After the bitterns, we continued our journey further into the grasslands, stopping at a few locations along the way. At different spots, we collected a variety of new species such as Blue-black Grassquit, Morelet's Seedeater, and even great scope views of a Little Blue Heron still in its white phase. The species count was reaching 60 by this point, and it was almost time to head to lunch and our next spot. But we had one last target that Kash had been saving for the end of the road; Common Tody-Flycatcher was one of the birds we all wanted to see. We stopped along a random stretch of the road, with some large trees and shrubs, where Kash has seen them before. After a short time, he had roused one up. This tiny bird, full of energy, bipped in and out of the bushes and flew across the road, providing a tough viewing experience. This is their behavior though; they are just little



balls of energy working the shrubs, never stopping for more than a second—you have to be quick. Once everyone got satisfactory looks, it was time to head towards Mandinga Restaurant for lunch and our next boat journey. At Mandinga, we were treated to another amazing meal. Fresh fish tacos, ceviche, and soups abound in Veracruz, and every town has their own delicious version of these dishes, and we never got tired of them. One could eat fish tacos every day, at every meal, and almost never have the same actual style. It's one of the things I loved about Veracruz. After our lunch next to the lagoon, which had already treated us to a Great Black Hawk, it was time to board our vessel for the tour. Laguna Mandinga is known for its large Magnificent Frigatebird colony, and that was our last goal of the day before completing our journey to Catemaco. The captain of our little fishing boat piloted us past a wonderfully-perched Common Black Hawk overlooking the lagoon channel, and ushered us out into deeper waters. As we made our way out of the channel, off in the distance, we could already see the swarm of frigatebirds. Looking like tiny bats in the distance, we knew right where we were headed. With just a quick ride, we made our way to a mangrove-covered island and floated below hundreds of Magnificent Frigatebirds. The mangroves looked like an apple orchard bursting with apples, ready for harvest. But in actuality, it was dozens upon dozens of male frigatebirds displaying, with their dark red gular pouches inflamed as they tried to court a mate circling above. They were everywhere, flying above our heads, dotting the mangroves, and darting right by the boat. Some were carrying nesting material, with others stealing their nesting material in mid-air, as per their thieving behavior. It was a true spectacle. Being so close, birds unbothered, gave us all a real sense of how big these birds are, too. Normally when you see them along the coast, they are way up in the air, cruising. But here, in the boat, we were at eye level as they launched from their perch and took to the air. We had to pull ourselves away, though, as we had more to do.

We parted ways with our boat captain and were back on the road again. We headed further south to Lake Catemaco and the Tuxtla Volcano region. This was the furthest northern tropical rain forest and we were all excited about the change in habitat and our new digs on the lake.

Fri., Oct 24: Reserva Ecológica Nanciyaga | Estación de Biología Tropical Los Tuxtlas

Friday started with an early breakfast so that we could get birding early. Reserva Ecológica Nanciyaga was the first up today, and it was only a short drive away from the hotel. This is a private reserve that does parrot rehabilitation and has a small coffee shop near the water. One of our target birds today was Scarlet Macaw, which is known to frequent the reserve. The birding started early along the road into the park and we were greeted to an early morning White-bellied Emerald feeding on some roadside flowers. As we walked the road, it was fairly quiet; but we could hear some Lesson's Motmots calling in the distance in multiple directions. This ended up being a theme for us and the motmots over the next couple days. Kash mimicked the motmot and they came in a little closer, but didn't have any interest in showing for us. We continued down the road and eventually arrived at the parking lot of the preserve. Here we wandered over to where the reserve had the cages



for the rehab birds and talked with one of the handlers. As we were doing that, a ghost of the forest appeared—a Great Curassow. This behemoth of a bird, without any sound at all, strolled right by all of us, mere feet away. It crossed over the road, out in the open, and disappeared back into the jungle, leaving us all awestruck. At up to 3 feet tall, pure black, with a curly crest and bright yellow beak, this bird is an absolute stunner, and it just strutted right in front of the whole group. We were all left feeling very lucky to have such an amazing encounter with this bird.

Spirits riding high after the Great Curassow, we headed down to the water. There were many egrets, herons, and jacanas flying by over the lake. We spotted a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron in a tree not far away. As we were standing on the dock, taking it all in, we could hear a distant Ruddy Crake calling. We did a little playback to see if we could draw this very secretive bird in from out of the marsh. After a few calls, we had one just inches away in the marsh below us. It was so close, and we could see the grass and reeds moving, but never could get it to show itself. Still, it was very fun and exciting to hear it calling right below us. While we were distracted by the crake, we could hear macaws just over the tree line, not too distant. They were not wanting to show themselves, though, and were completely content staying just out of sight for us. I was able to spot a Boat-billed Heron in the distance for some brief looks. We had already had an early morning, so Kash and I decided to order some cold drinks for everyone at the coffee bar overlooking the water and see if we could wait out the macaws. We all sat, enjoying our cold aguas frescas, watching an Amazon Kingfisher hunt along the lake...but no luck with the macaws. Kash knew a little path to get us closer to where I had spotted the Boat-billed Heron, so we ventured over there and were treated to 10 of them scattered throughout the tree, with one Black-crowned Night Heron even mixed in. Just as we were about to wrap up with the herons, Kash heard a Scarlet Macaw call from somewhere not too far away, in the direction of the parking lot. With a little searching, we were actually able to see it from where we were; but we wanted to see if we could get closer. From where we stood, it looked like it was just over where the van was parked, so we made our way back that direction. Just as we had suspected, there sat a stunning Scarlet Macaw up in the tree, almost right above the van. Its bright red feathers looked like a beacon up in the canopy with its marvelously long tail draping down as it peered back over its shoulder at us; the blues and yellows on its back perfectly in view. It was a great parting gift, even with the Lesson's Motmots still calling in the distance, taunting us.

After Nanciyaga, we made our way around the other side of the lake for some lunch. We visited a very unique local restaurant called El Teterete Pozolapan. Teterete is a common name in Mexico for the basilisk lizard, or the "Jesus Lizard," because of its ability to move quickly over water. This restaurant is owned by someone that does survey work on the Tuxtla Quail-Dove. After another fabulous meal and conversation, we got back on the road. The plan was to head toward the coast and another reserve. As we were heading out of the village, though, tragedy struck as we got the van stuck after crossing a bridge and heading up a steep hill. This is Mexico, though.



And as Kash says, “Magico Mexica,” and within minutes, the whole village was there to help us get unstuck. Kids and grandmas were watching as a group of locals started to help push; the local taxi even chipped in with a rope and a tow. Within less than 20 minutes, we were unstuck, back in the van, and back on the road. Everyone in the village would likely have something to talk about for weeks about how a van full of bird watchers from the states got stuck in the road and needed rescue. It was kind of magical to see how effortlessly everyone was willing to stop what they were doing and help us get on our way. With no fuss and no asking for help, they just saw us in need and jumped right in. Mexico truly is a magical place.

With the excitement out of the way, we headed to Estación de Biología Tropical Los Tuxtlas. We birded the side of the roads in the preserve, having a nice mixed flock of warblers, our first Lesser Greenlet, and some very cooperative Gray Hawks. About 2 hours later, we were back at the hotel for some much-needed R&R before dinner.

Sat., Oct 25: Adolfo Ruiz Cortines | Camino Ruiz Cortines-Miguel Hidalgo

Saturday, the 25th, started like all the other days: breakfast in the morning and a plan to go bird watching. It was my birthday, but I did not want to let on about it. I am the type that likes to keep a low profile and just wanted to do some spectacular bird watching. The plan was to head to a small village and pick up a local guide. Braulio was from the village Rudolfo Ruiz Cortines and, years prior, went to a Pronatura talk about ecotourism and bird watching they had put on. This struck a chord with him, and so he started to learn the local birds; now he is a bird guide in the community there. Braulio is a genuine person, an amazing birder, and the perfect ambassador to his village. We picked him up in front of his mother’s restaurant in the morning and enjoyed a Red-legged Honeycreeper right there in the yard, working the flowers. The plan was to take us down a small road between this village and the next that was built and is maintained by the community. It had very little traffic but provided the perfect route into the forest here. Braulio has grown up here and knows this forest better than anyone and he had a special surprise for us. Braulio had a special spot located a few miles out of town, where his favorite bird likes to hang out. So, we all jumped in the van and made our way there. After parking the van, we started walking the road as birds flitted above us, way up in the treetops. Early into the walk, we got on a very cute Eye-ringed Flatbill as Spot-breasted Wrens sang in the background. We continued down a little further and got to “the spot.” Here, Braulio started mimicking the call of an Ornate Hawk-Eagle. This is his favorite bird and he can mimic the call perfectly. It’s also a bird we all wanted to see (and, really, every birder that has ever been has wanted to see). After a few minutes, nothing had shown up and we could not hear anything; even the forest had quieted down. We started making our way back, just a little bit, as Braulio continued to call, when all of a sudden, without notice, it flew in. I can’t remember if it was myself or Kash who called out Ornate Hawk-Eagle; we were all just so excited. It flew in and landed right on an open branch on a dead tree, way above our heads, almost straight up. It was perfect. So, I rushed to get my scope on it so that everyone could take in this elaborately feathered hawk. It stayed there, looking around, letting everyone get a great look in the scope. After everyone had their turn, I went last. Just as I started to look at this beauty in the scope, everyone started to sing



Happy Birthday to me. This special moment became even more special. I got to share this special bird and this moment with wonderful people, and that memory will be with me forever. I had no idea they even knew it was my birthday, so the surprise of it all made it that much more special. And how did they know to wait until this Ornate Hawk-Eagle showed up? Had they planned this with the bird, somehow, without me knowing? It truly was a special moment I will never forget.

Birthday wishes aside, we still had some exploring to do, so we started working our way back toward the van. Kash heard some Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaners and quickly found them way up in the trees, gleaning foliage. It took a bit of work, but they finally worked their way out into view a little more. Once in the van, we headed back toward town, stopping a few more times along the way. One spot where we stopped was in the area of a known nesting Tuxtlas Quail-Dove. This almost-never-seen bird is only found in this one range of mountains in the Tuxtlas area near Catemaco. There are fewer than 500 eBird reports, total, of this bird, so when we heard one, it was very exciting. We all had to stay quiet and listen as its call came from deep in the jungle, an almost cooing whistle. Just hearing a bird so few people ever get the chance to see or hear felt special. Back in the van, we had one more spot to check before heading to lunch. Just as the road exited the trees and opened into the cattle fields, we stopped. Two Yellow-faced Grassquits were working the tall grass in the field. As we were enjoying those, someone called out, "White Hawk!" We all looked up at what appeared, at first glance, to be an airplane flying by; but it was actually a White Hawk. It was so white that it appeared to look like an airplane reflecting sunlight. Just as quickly as it appeared, though, it was gone. The excitement was still there, however, as we got back into the van and headed into town for lunch.

Braulio's family owns the only restaurant in town. His daughter was our waitress and we were treated as though we were part of the family. Cold drinks were brought out and we talked about all of the wonderful birds we had seen today. The food was absolutely fantastic, as it has been everywhere in Veracruz. It sometimes felt like we were on a foodie tour and not a birdy tour, as the food has just been that amazing everywhere we went. We decided this was the perfect place for our group photo, which we had not yet taken for the trip. After the photo was taken, just before we were about to get in the van, I looked up—way up—and saw what I thought was a Black Hawk-Eagle. It was pretty far up, so I wanted Kash's professional opinion before we got too excited about it. Sure enough, he confirmed that was what we were looking at. Two hawk-eagle species on the same day, plus a White Hawk! Just what I had asked for for my birthday.

We had dinner in Catemaco after a little R&R at the hotel, then we wanted to see if we could find some Mottled Owls known to be on the property of the hotel before the day was over. As luck would have it, we did not have to go very far. After a little calling and having them sound like they were off in the distance, we ended up finding them right in front of our hotel rooms. Some of us probably could have even seen them from our beds.



Sun., Oct 26: Tlacotalpan | Papaloapan River | Veracruz

We started with an early morning bird walk around the hotel property after saying our goodbyes to Diana. As the sun was rising and light was filling the trees, we finally got our first looks at the Collared Aracari. There is a decent-sized flock that typically hangs around the hotel property, but with our busy schedule, we hadn't had a chance to see them until today. It was a nice start to the morning before breakfast and our journey back to Veracruz. We packed, loaded the van, fueled up, and said adios to Catemaco and the Tuxtlas Volcanoes.

As we headed south, with the Gulf of Mexico just feet away to our right, we exited the highway, crossed the Papaloapan River, and entered the Venice of Mexico—a region known as Tlacotalpan. We were instantly transported into yet another magical realm. This farming community sits on the banks of the river and is basically built in a swamp. Like a light switch coming on, the air and land were swarming with egrets, herons, and storks, like we had not witnessed during the entire trip. Cattle ranches are built right up to the edge of the two-lane highway, leaving little room to stop, but offering views of endless fields of birds. Finally finding our first place to stop, we were treated to dozens of Wood Storks and egrets lining the bank of the river. Mangrove Swallows buzzed overhead as more, and more storks coasted in, just yards away from us. Stopping also gave us time to truly take in the river itself. While driving we couldn't properly see the activity on the river. We came for the river of raptors, but here we were being treated to a river of egrets. This fast-moving river had floating platforms of plants flowing down it at a fairly fast rate, and sitting atop every few floating platforms was an egret. We were absolutely amused at the sight of these egrets zipping by, effortlessly, on these platforms. We dubbed it the “Egret Flotilla.” As we headed back to the van, we also got our first looks at Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture. After seeing Black and Turkey Vultures in the thousands, it was nice to see something a little different. These birds really favor being near the water and there was no shortage of that here.

Before heading to lunch, we skipped across town and out to some fields on the west side. We were on the hunt for one more raptor before the trip was up and Kash knew a spot where they frequent. Snail Kite was our target and, as predicted, there was one here. It was perching on a fence nearby and hunting this flooded field, along with a Green Heron and more Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures. It was already getting toasty and time for lunch, so we headed back toward the center of town. Kash drove us through the main part of town so we could see why they called it the Venice of Mexico. It's not just because of the fact that the town can be flooded in feet of water sometimes, but also for its gorgeous, colorful buildings, each painted differently like parts of Venice. We all shared another wonderful meal with fresh fish caught and cleaned at the front door of the small shop just across the street from the restaurant - it does not get any fresher than that. We had all seen many pineapple stands on the highway coming in, so we opted for a few pitchers of pineapple agua fresca to go with lunch, which on a hot day, really hit the spot.

After lunch, we made our way back to Veracruz and checked into Hotel Mocambo with full bellies, hearts, and minds. Veracruz had provided us with such a rich tour. We saw over 230 species of birds, had some of the most delicious seafood, met so many charming people, and experienced such a rich immersion into the culture of the state! At our farewell dinner at the hotel, it made picking a favorite moment of the trip very hard:

- Diana's favorite moment was seeing the excitement of the kids in Chichicaxtle counting the raptors.
- Carol S.'s favorite moments were traveling with guide Vernie and seeing the kids at Chichicaxtle, as well. She also enjoyed learning about Pronatura.
- Matt's favorite moment was the Ornate Hawk-Eagle. He loved the group dynamics, too.
- Carol C's favorite moments were the Keel-billed Toucan and getting to experience a true River of Raptors.
- Kash's favorite moments were getting the van stuck (and un-stuck), seeing the Red Warbler, and the Ornate Hawk-Eagle.

Mon., Oct 27: Departures

Everyone's least favorite part of the trip. Our small group only had two flights out, so we all had time to say our goodbyes and make our flights home on time. Veracruz is a special place and we all left happy.

Photos by Vernie Aikins: Group, Magnificent Frigatebird, Hook-billed Kite, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Groove-billed Ani, Canivet's Emerald, White Pelican, Mexican Sheartail, Veracruz Wren, Northern Spiny-tailed Iguana, Masked Tityra, Laughing Falcon, Gray Hawk, Rufous-capped Warbler, Red Warbler, Crescent-chested Warbler, Orizaba Volcano, Blue-capped Motmot, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Magnificent Frigatebird, Double-striped Thick-knee, Boat-billed Heron, Scarlet Macaw, Ornate Hawk-Eagle, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Wood Stork