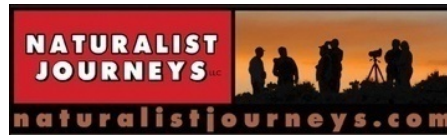
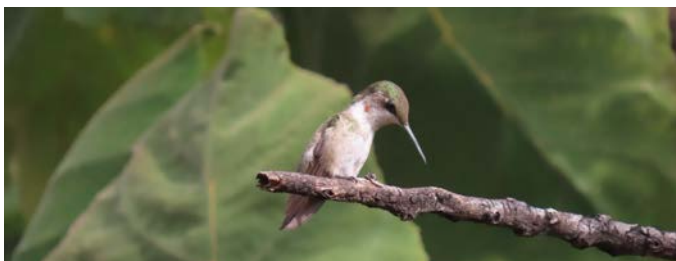


Oaxaca Valley: Birds, Culture & Crafts

Jan. 11-22, 2026 | Trip Report by Barb Jording



Guides Eric Martinez and Barb Jording with guests Liz, Cathy Leah, Deanna, Nora, Diane, Lori, Woody, Denise and Bill



Sun., Jan. 11

Oaxaca City | Welcome Dinner

Our Naturalist Journeys *Oaxaca Valley: Birds, Culture & Crafts* tour began Sunday evening with dinner at Restaurante El Tule at our Oaxaca City base, Hotel Victoria. Over good food we toasted one another, shared well wishes for successful birding, and took time to get acquainted as a group.



Eric reviewed the plan for the next day, and with early mornings ahead, we turned in ready to rest and reset. With Oaxaca—the fifth largest of Mexico’s 31 states—stretching out before us in all its ecological and cultural richness, the adventure was just beginning.

Mon., Jan. 12 Teotitlán del Valle | Presa Piedra Azul | Rancho Zapata

After a 5:30 a.m. breakfast of plentiful Mexican coffee, omelets, and fresh fruit, we hit the road in our spacious white Sprinter van with Ramón at the wheel, heading east toward the hills under a beautiful red sunrise. We passed through the small town of Teotitlán del Valle —Eric’s hometown— the oldest in the valley established around 900 BC, which we would return to later in the day.

We began birding the arid, scrubby valley at elevations between 5,600 and 6,100 feet, searching for—and finding—our first Oaxaca endemics. These included the noisy West Mexican Chachalaca, handsome Bridled Sparrow, rather plain Dusky Hummingbird, White-throated Towhee, and the skulking Oaxaca Sparrow. Despite more than 200 years of birding in Oaxaca, the nesting habits of the Oaxaca Sparrow have never been observed, though it is thought to be a ground nester.

A short stop at an agricultural pond added many ducks and a lively group of Cassin’s Kingbirds, flying snag to snag and calling their familiar “cha-peer.” From there we continued to Rancho Zapata for lunch, where we also learned about chapulines and the process of making mezcal. A stroll through the restaurant’s cactus filled garden netted us two endemics loving thorny locations: Gray-breasted Woodpecker and Boucard’s Wren.

Chapulines—grasshoppers—are a favorite snack and traditional ingredient in Oaxaca. They’re collected from alfalfa or cornfields where no pesticides are used. We also sampled several flavors and varieties of mezcal produced by Benevá, a company native to Oaxaca that uses 100% agave. Both offerings were met with mixed reactions, though Leah quickly became a chapuline aficionado and continued sampling throughout the trip.

The afternoon was spent in Teotitlán del Valle at El Tono de la Cochinilla, a fourth-generation, family-owned weaving studio. We enjoyed an engaging explanation and demonstration of traditional rug weaving, including the use of natural dyes derived from Spanish moss, dodder, pecan shells, marigold flowers, acacia seed, cochinilla, and the fruit zapote. Leah, Bill, and Barb each tested their skills at the spinning wheel, working to create an even strand of yarn. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the visit, and several beautiful rugs and wall hangings found new homes.

We returned to Hotel Victoria for dinner and tallied an impressive **71 species** for our first full day in Oaxaca.

Tues., Jan. 13 La Cumbre | Corral de Piedra | Yagul

Settling into our birding routine with a hearty 5:30 a.m. breakfast, we departed at 6:30 for the high-elevation



(9,700') misty white pine and oak forests of La Cumbre in Benito Juárez National Park. At this altitude, the understory is lush with ferns, mosses, bromeliads, and wildflowers. We enjoyed a tender moment watching two Gray-barred Wrens huddled together on a branch, quietly preening one another. A Rivoli's Hummingbird, its iridescent purple crown catching the light, fed on towering monocarpic agave flowers reaching nearly 30 feet high.

The non-migratory Red Warbler—found only at this forest elevation—proved challenging to track as it moved quickly through the interior branches, very different from the typical warbler foliage gleaner. Several aptly named endemic Dwarf Jays also made appearances, calling and moving high in the pines.

A brief roadside stop near a stream delivered exciting looks at several Trochilidae, including Mexican Violetear, Amethyst-throated Mountain-gem, Calliope Hummingbird, and White-eared Hummingbird.

Cups of warming hot chocolate—a traditional Oaxacan drink—welcomed us at Colibrí Restaurant, with Diane and Leah especially savoring the cinnamon-accented treat. Feeders there provided exacting views of Blue-throated Mountain-gem, while Chestnut-capped and Rufous-capped Brushfinches flitted through the surrounding bushes. A fast-moving mixed flock of passerines swept through, testing everyone's quick spotting skills.

The afternoon combined culture and birding at the Zapotec archaeological site of Yagul, meaning “old tree.” Inhabited after the fall of Monte Albán, Yagul sits atop a volcanic outcrop some 300 feet above the valley floor, once a lakebed. The site is dotted with impressive candelabra and opuntia cactus, and Eric shared the fascinating history of this fortified refuge.

Dinner that evening was at Casa Oaxaca Reforma in the Reforma district. The varied, traditional dishes further expanded our appreciation for Oaxacan cuisine and rounded out another rich day in this remarkable region.

Wed., Jan. 14 Santo Domingo | Tomaltepec

This was a day full of excitement as we birded along roads in the agricultural, semi-arid zone just east of Oaxaca City in the Central Valley—an area rich in Zapotec history. A small reservoir that provides water for nearby farms and communities, along with an adjacent stream, produced an impressive variety of species, though not without some effort.

A cooperative endemic Ocellated Thrasher perched high atop a distant tree, holding still long enough for everyone to enjoy excellent scope views. We spent time along the stream watching small flocks of warblers, redstarts, and flycatchers, along with a Northern Waterthrush, coming to drink and forage. As we made our way



back to the van with 49 species tallied, we spotted a Tarantula Hawk Wasp on the ground and joked that we might have to count it to reach 50 before lunch. Fortunately, Eric's exceptional ear picked up the call of an endemic Pileated Flycatcher from the brush—a rare find, as this species is typically present only in summer. With that, our morning wrapped up with an excellent mix, including nine warbler species, nine flycatchers, and our only Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush of the trip.

A short drive brought us to Santa María del Tule for lunch and a visit to the historic Tule Tree (El Árbol del Tule), located on the church grounds. This Montezuma Cypress (*Taxodium mucronatum*) has the stoutest trunk of any tree in the world and is thought to be up to 3,000 years old. Standing beneath it together, we were reminded just how small we are in comparison to a living witness to so much history.

Ramón then ferried us back to the hotel through busy Oaxacan streets, steering the van with the patience of a glacier as he navigated each potentially bone-jarring speed bump.

That evening, Eric led us on a historical walk through part of Oaxaca City, sharing insights into the region's past and its influential figures, including Francisco Toledo (1940–2019)—the visionary Zapotec artist, activist, and philanthropist. In 2002, Toledo famously halted the opening of a McDonald's on the Zócalo by organizing a massive tamale festival. Many of Oaxaca City's small museums and galleries continue to benefit from his lasting legacy.

We ended the day dining on the rooftop patio of a century-old Oaxacan home at Las Quince Letras, a Michelin-recognized restaurant known for preserving and showcasing the region's complex flavors—especially its renowned moles.

Thurs., Jan. 15 Monte Alban | La Presa de Monjas

This morning, we said goodbye to Oaxaca City and began making our way into the mountains toward our next birding destination: the Sierra Madre del Sur, at roughly 8,000 feet near San José del Pacífico. Before climbing higher, we made a cultural and birding stop at Monte Albán.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Monte Albán is one of the most significant archaeological sites in Mesoamerica and served as the preeminent Zapotec capital for more than a thousand years. Founded around 500 BCE, it flourished until roughly 850 CE. At its height, the city was a major religious and political center, with an estimated population of 115,000. The Zapotecs dramatically flattened a mountain ridge to build the city, which sits 1,300 feet above the valley floor and offers sweeping, 360-degree views. The site is oriented north–south and includes a vast central plaza surrounded by pyramids, temples, and elite residences; an unusually shaped structure thought to be an astronomical observatory; an I-shaped ball court; and hundreds of carved stone slabs depicting Zapotec writing, hieroglyphs, inverted heads, war captives, and—according to most recent theories—



panels recording medical procedures. We thoroughly enjoyed exploring the site, carefully navigating ancient stone steps while imagining the noise, movement, and life that once filled this remarkable place.

Our home for the next two nights is La Puesta del Sol, a collection of comfortable, cozy cabins near San José del Pacífico. Each evening, Victor lights the corner fireplaces in every cabin, taking the edge off the mountain chill.

San José del Pacífico turned out to be a larger town than expected, its growth fueled by its location midway between Oaxaca City and the Pacific Coast. It's also world-famous as a "magic mushroom town," where the use of psilocybin mushrooms is woven into local culture and tourism. Dinner at La Taberna de los Duendes featured enormous plates of pasta with a variety of mushrooms—though none, we were assured, of the psychedelic kind.

Today's bird species featured White-tailed Kite, a flock of Bronzed Cowbirds, and a Golden-browed Warbler.

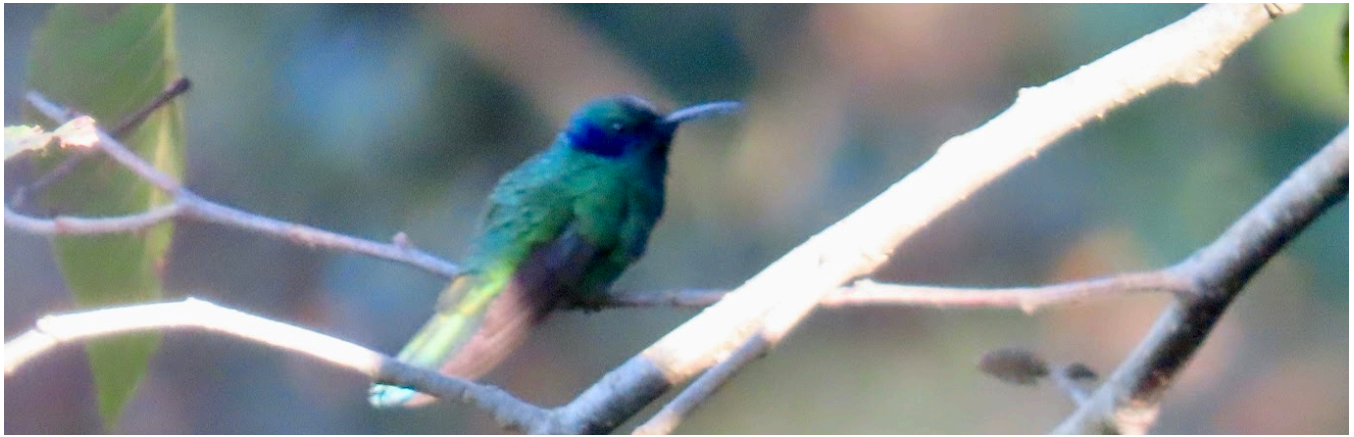
Fri., Jan. 16 Road to Manzanal - Miramar

After an early breakfast at La Puesta del Sol—including unlimited cups of excellent Mexican coffee—we began our search for one of the day's primary targets: the endemic and vulnerable White-throated Jay. Considered the second most difficult bird to find in Mexico, little is known about its movements or range. Eric picked up its call and skillfully coaxed it in, allowing everyone at least a brief but satisfying look at this beautifully patterned and elusive species.

Another high-priority bird for many guests was the Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo. This species, along with a Flame-colored Tanager, appeared high atop a distant pine, providing a welcome double treat. Barb spotted a Spot-crowned Woodcreeper working a fence post, while Woody picked out a Broad-winged Hawk sitting quietly, low in a tree beside the road. Eric later coaxed in our only Mountain Trogon of the trip, giving all good views.

Trochilidae put on a strong showing along today's route, with eight hummingbird species recorded, including the endemic Bumblebee Hummingbird—the second smallest hummingbird in the world. At Oaxaca's latitude (15–18° N), flowers bloom year-round, providing continual resources for hummingbirds as well as the region's remarkable diversity of butterflies. Leah and Deanna photographed 41 unique butterfly species during our Grand Oaxaca tour.

On a quiet side road we encountered the striking *Chiranthodendron pentadactylon*, also known as the "Devil's Hand Tree." Native to the forests of the Sierra Sur, it is best known for its striking red flowers whose stamens resemble a small human hand with clawed fingers, the reverse dusted with pollen. We even noticed a



hummingbird with yellow pollen on its forehead—a perfect demonstration of the hummingbirds’ role in pollination. This tree was revered and protected by the Aztecs, who believed it possessed medicinal properties.

After another delicious dinner—once again, without psychedelic mushrooms—we settled back into our cabins, warmed from the cool mountain air by crackling fires.

Sat., Jan. 17 San Pedro: El Alto | La Soledad | Road to Pluma Hidalgo

We got an early start today for a long, winding drive descending through the Sierra Madre del Sur to our final destination at sea level—Huatulco, on the Pacific Coast. Once again, Ramón’s excellent driving made the road feel far gentler than it looked, and everyone traveled in comfort. We made several stops along the way, birding at different elevations and adding new species as the habitats shifted. At our first stop, we watched in awe as a Broad-tailed Hummingbird bathed in dew pooled on a large leaf.

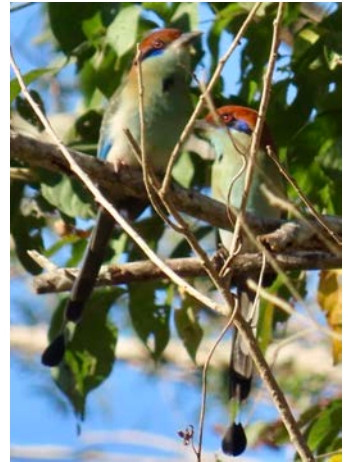
Lunch was at Finca Don Gabriel, a coffee plantation in Pluma Hidalgo at 4,200 feet. The views across the Sierra del Sur were exceptional, and we watched four species of hawks glide past as we ate.

Hummingbirds continued to shine, with good looks at the endemic Mexican Hermit and Blue-capped Hummingbird. We also encountered the Wagler’s subspecies of Northern Emerald-Toucanet, its blue throat and striking bill pattern of yellow, black, and white varying subtly by region. A Pine Flycatcher was carefully separated from the similar wintering Hammond’s Flycatcher by its entirely pale, orangish lower mandible. Other highlights included the endemic Red-headed Tanager, Red-legged Honeycreeper, and Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer—fitting farewells to the high-elevation species as we made our way toward the coast.

Huatulco greeted us as a lively resort town, filled with Canadians escaping northern winter weather. Our home here, Hotel Villa Blanca, has a distinctly tropical feel, with a welcoming interior courtyard pool surrounded by lush plants and trees. Large, comfortable rooms and an extensive, varied menu at the hotel’s restaurant, Jacarandas, checked all the boxes for another excellent stay. With the mountains now behind us, we’ve happily shed our layers for short sleeves and shorts.

Sun., Jan. 18 Road to Magdalena | Pluma Hidalgo Area | Oro del Sur

This morning, we left sea level and climbed once again into the hills above Huatulco, beginning with a roadside stop around 500 feet. We were now birding low tropical deciduous forest on the flanks of the Sierra del Sur, a landscape of small trees, shrubs, and thorns—no more acrobatic scanning of towering forest giants.



One particularly interesting tree here is the Bullhorn Acacia (*Vachellia cornigera*). These trees produce swollen, hollow thorns—called domatia—that provide shelter for symbiotic ants. In return, the ants defend the tree, and the ants themselves attract birds that feed on them. One such species, the endemic Russet-naped Wren, was found working this habitat.

Nora spotted a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl perched just off the path—our first owl of the trip. Sitting quietly at eye level, it allowed careful study before we moved on. We also enjoyed good views of the endemic Citreoline Trogon and a pair of Russet-crowned Motmots, their long-racketed tails wagging as they reacted to our presence. Another standout endemic was the Green-fronted Hummingbird, the cinnamon-sided subspecies found only in a narrow strip of Oaxaca. A noisy flock of Orange-fronted Parakeets flew overhead, identified in flight by their long, pointed tails.

Lunch took us to Café Pluma Oro del Sur, a family-run, high-elevation (4,800') coffee finca and roastery. Reaching it proved a challenge for our long Sprinter van, so Eric surprised us by hiring a fleet of tuk-tuks to ferry us up two by two. With *Hotel California* blasting from one vehicle and laughter echoing from all, the ride was far too short. Lunch—chicken in red mole with rice and fresh tortillas—was prepared on a wood-fired comal by the women of the family, accompanied by cups of freshly brewed coffee. Judging by the number of people returning for seconds, it was a clear success.

Señor Ramírez, a fourth-generation coffee grower, shared—through Eric—the journey of a coffee bean from plant to bag. We learned that lighter roasts contain more caffeine and that it takes only about 20 minutes to produce a dark roast. The finca also produces a second crop: when coffee plants grow too tall and old for easy harvesting, vanilla is planted beneath them, where it climbs and intertwines with the coffee plants.

It was also a big day for butterflies. A small leak in an irrigation hose created the perfect puddling spot, drawing in multiple species and delighting photographers.

Another lively tuk-tuk ride and a smooth van descent brought us back to Huatulco, wrapping up another excellent day with 63 species, including our only Long-billed Starthroat, an endemic Gray-crowned Woodpecker, and a Masked Tityra.

Several guests capped the day with a relaxing dip in the pool before yet another enjoyable dinner at the hotel restaurant.



Mon., Jan. 19 **Pelagic Trip: Santa Cruz Bay, Huatulco**

Today found us leaving the Huatulco harbor by 7 a.m., heading into a beautiful red sunrise. We were immediately surrounded by Laughing Gulls, Royal Terns, Brown Pelicans, and Magnificent Frigatebirds. A lone Peregrine Falcon stood sentry on a rocky perch, carefully watching the activity around it.

Mobula, or manta rays, with their upturned fin tips visible above the water's surface, occasionally leapt clear of the water. Why they leap remains something of a mystery—possibilities include mating displays, communication, parasite removal, hunting, or perhaps simply play.

Equally entertaining were Pantropical Spotted Dolphins and Long-beaked Common Dolphins, bow-riding on the pressure wave at the front of our 40-foot boat or leaping in coordinated pairs and trios just off to the side.

We frequently spotted Olive Ridley Sea Turtles, which Eric explained was due to the timing of females moving toward shore for nighttime egg-laying.

By far the most abundant bird was Red-necked Phalarope, with hundreds resting on the surface. Additional pelagic highlights included Least Storm-Petrel, Pink-footed and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, a few Red Phalaropes, and a Pomarine Jaeger.

We returned to shore around noon, refreshed yet thoroughly tired from a morning of wind and salt air. It took a while for everyone to regain their land legs, and the afternoon was left free to relax before dinner.

Afterward, we headed out for night birding, searching for owls, nightjars, and pauragues. We joked that it felt as though Eric had scheduled each species to appear on cue as we quickly added Mottled Owl, Common Pauraque, and Buff-collared Nightjar to our list. Once again, Eric proved he truly knows the landscapes—and night skies—of the places he guides.

Tues., Jan. 20 **Las Ninfas: Private Reserve | Parque Chahue**

Omelets, fresh fruit, granola, and irresistible little cinnamon rolls—along with plentiful coffee at 6 a.m.—once again fueled us for a morning in the field. Our destination was Ecoturística Las Ninfas, a private conservation area near Huatulco founded and managed by César Martínez.

Historically, the land that now makes up the reserve represents a slice of the low deciduous jungle characteristic of Oaxaca's Pacific coast. Much of it was once used for growing corn, but Las Ninfas has since been reforested to



protect local biodiversity from encroaching tourist development and to provide a place for studying both resident and migratory bird species. During our visit, we identified 47 species.

Eric once again demonstrated his remarkable ear, picking out the sweet, whistling call of one of Las Ninfas' star birds—the colorful endemic Red-breasted Chat. Despite its shy, skulking nature and preference for dense underbrush, Eric managed to coax the chat into view, allowing everyone good looks.

We also watched a pair of Orange-fronted Parakeets preparing to hijack an active arboreal termite nest for nesting. Using their powerful bills, they bore through the exterior and excavate a tunnel to a central chamber. Surprisingly, the termites simply seal off the invaded section and continue living in the rest of the structure. In an ironic twist, the aggressive termites then serve as an effective “security system,” deterring predators such as snakes and small mammals.

Adding to our Strigidae list, we found a Pacific Screech-Owl peeking from its roost in a snag on the property. César first discovered this owl nine years ago and led us along the trail to the viewing spot, explaining that the snag had been blown over during Hurricane Erick in June 2025. Rather than lose the owl's roost, César and his team dug deep into the rocky soil to reset the snag—an inspiring example of his dedication and care for the land.

Other highlights included the striking Orange-breasted Bunting with its turquoise-blue back and bright yellow-orange breast, an endemic Turquoise-crowned Hummingbird, and the large, boldly streaked Ivory-billed Woodcreeper.

We returned to the hotel for a relaxing early afternoon, with some guests enjoying the pool, others napping, and a few checking the nearby park for birds. Before dinner, we walked through Parque Chahué across from Hotel Villa Blanca, following a path along the concrete channel of the Río Chahué, where Denise spotted a Yellow-throated Warbler in a palm tree.

Dinner that evening was at Mercader, a local Thai-inspired restaurant owned by friends of Eric—a welcome change of cuisine, capped off by homemade ice cream that was a hit with everyone.

Wed., Jan. 21 Copalita River in Bocana & Beach | Hautulco NP

Our last day of birding—certainly not to be taken lightly—began once again with a 6 a.m. breakfast of our



familiar and delicious fare. We headed to the Río Copalita and the point where it empties into the Gulf of Tehuantepec, adding a new suite of waders and shorebirds to our growing list.

We watched Reddish Egrets fish with their heads held perfectly still, pointed downward, while their bodies twisted and wings flapped to startle prey. Lori patiently scanned a group of roughly 50 Laughing Gulls resting in the shallows and singled out one bird that looked different—a lone Franklin’s Gull. Nearby, a Peregrine Falcon perched, quietly observing. In an instant, the resting gulls exploded into flight as the Peregrine struck, and we watched it reposition its prey in its talons while flying toward the trees. Moments later, another Peregrine zipped past carrying a gull in its talons—clearly a successful hunting day for the falcons.

Along the sandy edges, Woody spotted an Amazon Kingfisher while Barb picked out a Roseate Spoonbill. Northern Jacanas and a Wilson’s Snipe worked the margins of the reeds, adding to the excitement.

A brief roadside stop near the golf course produced a Zone-tailed Hawk cleverly concealed among circling Black Vultures, employing its classic “prey-can’t-see-me” strategy. We also enjoyed good looks at Cinnamon-rumped Seedeater, Olive Sparrow, Banded Wren, and several other species.

Eric had promised a beachside lunch and today delivered. Right on the sand at Ve el Mar, we enjoyed excellent seafood. Diane was surprised with a massive platter of grilled colossal shrimp, while Lori and Denise tackled plate-sized coconut shrimp hanging from the side of a hollowed coconut filled with dipping sauce. Eric took on a whole grilled fish. Spirits were high as we shared sunshine, surf, and great food.

One final outing in Huatulco National Park to try for Colima Pygmy-Owl proved elusive. We heard two owls calling across the path from one another, but despite careful scanning by all, the birds remained unseen.

Our farewell dinner back at the hotel was filled with good cheer, toasts, and heartfelt thanks—especially to our wonderful driver Ramón and to Eric for his exceptional organization and guiding. Each of us shared personal highlights: special birds or butterflies, memorable meals, cultural experiences, and new friendships.

In 11 days, we traveled through ecosystems ranging from nearly 10,000 feet to sea level, learned about ancient Zapotec traditions and foods, and recorded more than 250 bird species. Oaxaca is a country rich in color and sound, and it’s a place that will stay with our guests for many years to come.

Photos: Group (Barbara Jording - BJ), Red Warbler (Leah Moffatt - LM), Broad-tailed Hummingbird (LM), Bullock’s Oriole (LM), Gray-breasted Woodpecker (LM), Collared Towhee (LM), Chestnut-capped Brushfinch (LM), Curved-billed Thrasher (LM), Monte Alban (BJ), Tufted Flycatcher (Woody Wheeler - WW), Mexican Violetear (LM), Citreoline Trogon (LM), Russet-crowned

Motmot (LM), Rio Magdalena near Huatulco (BJ), Iguana (LM), Goove-billed Ani (LM), Pacific Screech Owl (Eric Martinez), Magnificent Frigatebird (LM)