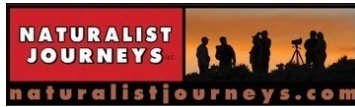


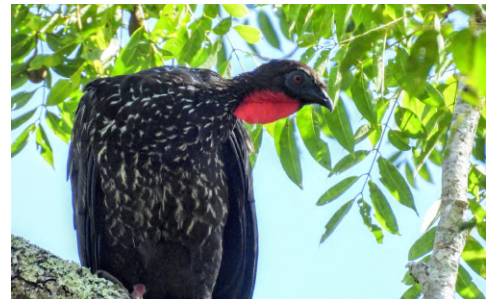
Best of Guatemala: Birding & Culture

March 10 - 20, 2026 | w/ Tikal Extension

Trip Report by Stephen Grace



Naturalist Journeys Tour Leader Stephen Grace with Local Guide Roland Rumm and Clients Betsy H, Betsy R, Dave, Trisha, Tony, Pete, Anne, Bill, Walter and Leslie

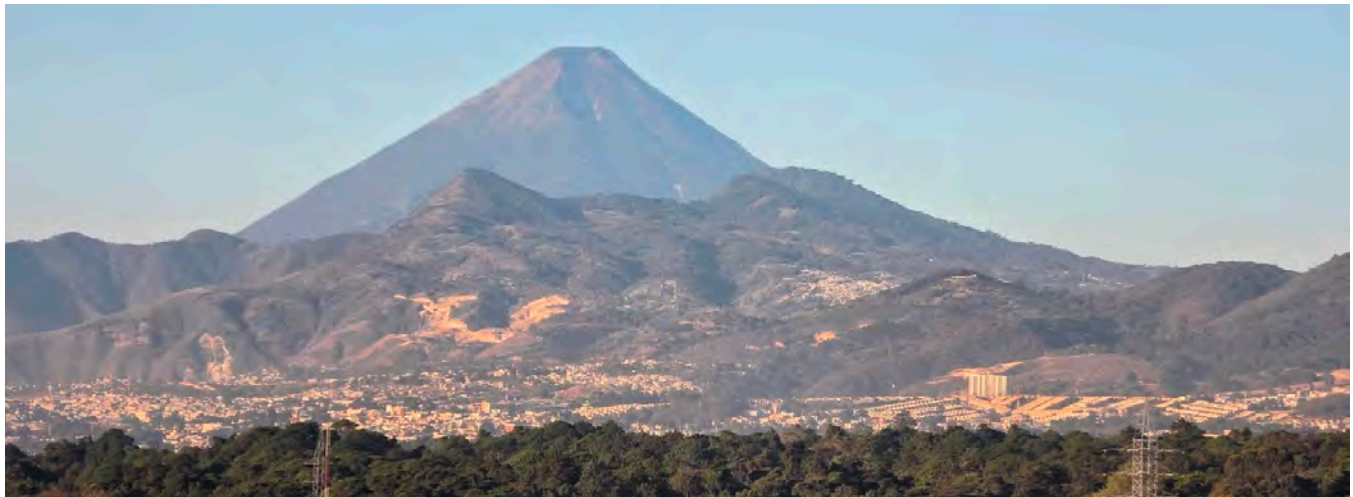


Tues., Mar. 10 Arrival in Guatemala City

We gathered in Guatemala City—ten guests, along with Roland Rumm and me—arriving in waves throughout the day. Almost immediately, the group began to cohere. There is always a moment on these journeys when strangers become something more, and here it happened quickly—over shared meals, first conversations, and the easy recognition of common purpose.

Three travelers were already familiar faces: Walt and Leslie, whom I had traveled with in Guyana and admired for their easygoing nature, flexibility, curiosity, and good humor; and Betsy, whom I had traveled with on an Olympic Peninsula tour. Betsy is an avid reader, and I had enjoyed exchanging book recommendations with her and her husband John on that earlier trip. Those prior connections helped seed the group dynamic, but it didn't take long for everyone to find a shared rhythm.

That evening, we came together for our official welcome dinner at a modern, comfortable hotel in the heart of this sprawling metropolis—Guatemala City, where deep geologic forces and layered human histories converge.



And then, Roland.

Our local guide is as compelling a person as he is a birder—which is saying something. Born in Germany, he moved with his family to Honduras at age twelve. “Mad,” he says of his parents, who sought adventure in the pre-internet 1990s. That spirit clearly carried forward. Roland moves fluidly between German, English, and Spanish, navigating cultures as deftly as he identifies birds. He seems to know everyone, everywhere we go, and reads both landscape and human context with equal fluency.

It’s a rare combination—linguistic agility, cultural intelligence, and field expertise—and it set the tone for the journey ahead.

By evening’s end, the outlines of the group had begun to take shape. Tomorrow, we would step beyond the city and into the landscapes that have drawn people—and birds—to this region for millennia.

Wed., Mar. 11 Guatemala City | Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena and the Museo Popol Vuh | Crazy Gas Station at Coteles | Los Tarrales Natural Reserve

We met our driver, Luis—an essential figure on any tour. Safe passage underpins everything we do, and navigating Guatemala City’s dense, kinetic traffic is no small task. Luis proved immediately to be both an expert driver and a warm, steady presence—an excellent ambassador for the open, welcoming culture of Guatemala.

From the outset, the day revealed one of the central themes of the journey: the interweaving of culture and nature.

Our morning took us to the campus of the Universidad Francisco Marroquín, where we visited two outstanding museums: the Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena and the Museo Popol Vuh. Together, they offer a compelling introduction to Maya culture—textiles as living expressions of identity and place, and artifacts that trace deep histories across the world we had just entered.

Before stepping inside, we birded the beautifully landscaped grounds—an early reminder that in Guatemala, natural history is never far from human spaces. Familiar species like Acorn Woodpecker, Baltimore Oriole, and



Wilson's Warbler anchored us, while for many in the group, the morning brought a wave of lifers: Band-backed Wren, Bushy-crested Jay, and Spot-breasted Oriole, all seen well.

Bushtits moved through as well—familiar in form but subtly different from those at home. Here, males showed a distinct black mask, a regional variation that stood out immediately—an example of how species shift across geography while retaining their core identity.

Behavior quickly emerged as a central theme. A Summer Tanager was seen capturing bees, repeatedly striking them against a branch to subdue them and remove the stinger before consumption. This set the tone for the kind of close observation that would define the days ahead.

Vocalizations drew our attention as well. A Clay-colored Thrush—the national bird of Costa Rica—sang with clarity and resonance, in contrast to its relative quiet on a recent Costa Rica tour. Nearby, Melodious Blackbirds delivered varied, intricate calls. All of this unfolded within a botanical setting alive with tropical texture: red ginger in bloom, jacaranda trees adding soft lavender color—a cultivated landscape that nonetheless pulsed with birdlife.

The museums rewarded a slower pace. At the Museo Ixchel, we moved through a remarkable display of Maya textiles—each pattern, color, and weave tied to specific communities, languages, and traditions. More than 20 Maya languages are spoken in Guatemala alone, representing distinct cultures, each with its own style of dress and identity. One persistent myth is that the Maya “disappeared.” In reality, Maya societies transformed after the Classic period but endured. Today, more than six million Maya people live in Guatemala, and over seven million across Mesoamerica—their languages, traditions, and textiles remaining vibrant expressions of identity.

Across the courtyard, the Museo Popol Vuh grounded us in deep time. Ceramics, carvings, and artifacts connected the present to the ancient Maya world. The museum takes its name from the Popol Vuh, the sacred narrative of the K'iche' Maya, recorded in the 16th century but rooted in a far older oral tradition. At its heart is the story of the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who descend into the underworld—Xibalba—to confront and outwit the Lords of Death.

Archaeology has provided compelling confirmation of the story's antiquity. Scenes associated with the Hero Twins appear on Maya ceramics and monuments dating back 1,500–2,000 years, to the Late Preclassic and Classic periods (ca. 300 BCE–900 CE), demonstrating that the core elements of the Popol Vuh long predate its transcription and were embedded in Maya cosmology for centuries.



After lunch, we left the traffic-clogged metropolis behind and descended toward the Pacific slope. A stop in Cocala at what Roland calls the “Crazy Gas Station”—an unassuming roadside pullout—offered surprisingly productive birding in a patchwork of fields and second-growth forest tucked behind the baños.

Almost immediately, we were rewarded. Orange-chinned Parakeets moved through the trees, along with both Scrub Euphonia and Yellow-throated Euphonia. Euphonias are small finches (family Fringillidae), specialized fruit-eaters that rely heavily on mistletoe berries. Despite their bright coloration, they are often quiet and easily overlooked. Yellow-throated Euphonia shows a clean yellow throat and underparts contrasting with a darker blue upper body, while Scrub Euphonia has a dark throat.

Then a Turquoise-browed Motmot perched in the open, its pendulum tail catching the light—a dry forest specialist and, for this itinerary, our best opportunity for the species. A vivid introduction to Pacific slope avifauna, and a reminder that even the most unassuming places can hold remarkable life.

From there, we continued to Los Tarrales Natural Reserve.

Immediately, the tone shifted.

A White-bellied Chachalaca greeted us on arrival, a lifer for many. Overhead, flocks of Orange-fronted Parakeets moved through, joined by Pacific Parakeets. White-fronted Amazons called from the canopy, their heads marked with flashes of red, white, and blue. Golden-fronted Woodpeckers were conspicuous, many attending nest cavities in standing dead trees.

That detail matters. At Los Tarrales, dead trees are intentionally left in place—snags that provide essential nesting and foraging habitat, a clear example of how land management decisions shape biodiversity.

Once a working coffee plantation, Los Tarrales has evolved into a private reserve where shade-grown coffee persists within a broader conservation framework. The mosaic of habitats—coffee understory, regenerating forest, riparian corridors, and intact dry forest—creates exceptional structural diversity. Reduced hunting pressure and habitat protection have allowed wildlife not only to persist, but in some cases to become remarkably tolerant of human presence.



That was immediately evident. Central American Agoutis moved through the grounds with little urgency, and White-tailed Deer appeared unusually confiding—a behavioral shift likely reflecting generations with little or no hunting pressure.

The deer were also noticeably smaller than those in the United States. This pattern is consistent with Bergmann's rule, the ecological principle that populations in warmer climates tend to be smaller-bodied than those in colder regions. Smaller bodies dissipate heat more efficiently, an advantage in tropical environments, while larger bodies retain heat in colder climates.

Together, these patterns—reduced wariness and smaller body size—offer a glimpse of how both behavior and physiology respond to long-term environmental conditions and protection.

In a region where so much of the landscape has been reshaped, Los Tarrales stands as a living example of coexistence—agriculture, restoration, and biodiversity held in balance.

A short walk produced an impressive diversity. Cinnamon Hummingbirds nectared along a flowering hedge, while Yellow-winged Tanagers moved through the canopy, their soft blue-gray bodies offset by a bold yellow wing patch. Red-billed Pigeons perched quietly above—the “red” subtle in the field. Overhead, Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts traced elegant arcs through the dusky sky, silhouetted against palm-fringed fields and Volcán Atitlán rising beyond.

This stratovolcano is part of the Central American volcanic arc, formed by the Cocos Plate subducting beneath the Caribbean Plate—a tectonic engine that builds these steep-sided cones while fueling earthquakes and volcanism across the region. Atitlán last erupted in 1853, and its fertile volcanic soils support the landscapes we were exploring.

The day closed, as many would, with an exceptional meal: fresh, locally sourced ingredients transformed into tasty dishes—salads, fresh fruit, soups, caramelized chicken, lasagna, vegetarian fare, and generous bowls of homemade guacamole. A fitting end to a day that wove together culture, ecology, and our first deep immersion into Guatemala's remarkable landscapes.



Thurs., Mar. 12 Los Tarrales

Our first of two full days at Los Tarrales began with an ascent at dawn. We were joined by local guide Eve, a deeply experienced field naturalist who has spent decades honing her craft. She and Roland share a long professional history, and the ease between them—fluid communication, shared intuition—was evident from the start.

In two four-wheel-drive vehicles, we climbed from the dry lowlands into the foothills, rising toward cloud forest. In a relatively short distance, Guatemala reveals one of its defining characteristics: extraordinary habitat compression. Elevation, moisture, and geology combine to create a mosaic of ecosystems—dry forest, mid-elevation woodland, and cloud forest stacked along a single slope. This diversity underpins the country's remarkable biodiversity, including a suite of regional endemics shared with nearby Chiapas.

Our primary target this morning was one such species: the Azure-rumped Tanager. This striking bird has an extremely limited range, found only on the Pacific slope of southern Mexico (Chiapas) and southwestern Guatemala, and is considered globally threatened (currently listed as Vulnerable) due to ongoing habitat loss. Its restriction to a narrow elevational band is not arbitrary. At these mid-elevations, a specific set of ecological conditions comes together—consistent humidity, moderate temperatures, and a particular composition of forest structure and plant communities. These forests support the fruiting trees that form the core of the tanager's diet, supplemented by insects, along with the structural complexity it requires for foraging and nesting. Move too low, and the forest becomes hotter, drier, and structurally different; move too high, and the plant community shifts again. The result is a species finely tuned to a relatively narrow ecological window.

We entered the cloud forest on foot, hiking uphill through a landscape shaped by persistent moisture—what is often described as horizontal precipitation, where clouds condense directly onto vegetation. Bromeliads were everywhere, draped along branches and clustered in the canopy.

For Bill, a bromeliad enthusiast with more than half a century of experience growing and studying these plants, this was familiar ground in a very different context. He pointed out Tillandsia inflorescences—often marked by vivid, long-lasting bracts that can be more visually striking than the flowers themselves—and the structural elegance of larger bromeliads like Neoregelia, whose rosettes form living reservoirs. In many species, the true blooms are relatively small and short-lived, emerging from within or just beyond the colorful bracts that serve to attract pollinators.



Most of these bromeliads are epiphytes—plants that grow on other plants without taking nutrients from them. They are not parasites. Instead, they use their roots primarily as anchors, securing themselves to branches and trunks. Water and nutrients are obtained from the air, rainfall, and organic debris. Many species, especially in genera like *Tillandsia*, are covered in specialized scales called trichomes that absorb moisture directly from fog and rain. Others form “tanks” with their overlapping leaves, collecting water that becomes a miniature ecosystem—supporting insects, larvae, and even small vertebrates, while also providing the plant with dissolved nutrients from decomposing organic matter.

In this way, bromeliads are not just passengers in the canopy—they are ecological hubs. They increase structural complexity, create habitat, and play a meaningful role in nutrient cycling, all without harming their host trees.

Before focusing on our target species, we paused for a picnic breakfast and a productive bout of birding. One of the highlights was our first of many Gartered Violaceous Trogons—a striking male, blue and gold with a prominent yellow eye-ring, perched quietly in the midstory. White-winged Tanagers flashed through the canopy, their brilliant red bodies and bold white wingbars catching the light against the green foliage. Roland picked up the soft, ventriloquial call of a Maroon-chested Ground Dove—heard but, as is typical, not seen. These birds are notoriously difficult to observe, moving quietly along the forest floor and freezing at the slightest disturbance. Roland pointed out Barred Parakeets passing overhead—small, fast, and easily overlooked.

Then the search began in earnest.

We moved upslope, stopping at a site where Azure-rumped Tanagers had been seen recently. Nothing.

A pair of Northern Emerald-Toucanets offered a welcome consolation, their oversized bills glowing yellow against the foliage. Warblers—Black-throated Green, Tennessee, Nashville, Magnolia—moved through the canopy, species familiar from home patches to many in our group, now encountered on their wintering grounds, adding depth to their life histories and the journeys that connect these landscapes.

Higher still.

A Bar-winged Oriole appeared—one of our targets, and a special bird of this region. Its range is slightly broader than that of the Azure-rumped Tanager, but still quite limited—occurring in the highlands of Chiapas, Guatemala, El Salvador, and extending marginally into western Honduras. Like the Azure-rumped Tanager, it is



associated with montane and foothill forests, part of a regional avifauna shaped by elevation, climate, and long-term geographic isolation.

And then, suddenly, everything shifted.

Eve called out—*Azure-rumped!*—and we moved quickly downhill to a stand of trees we had studied earlier. This time, they were there. Exactly as described, the deep azure tones catching the light. A bird with a very restricted range, and one of the primary reasons we had come here. A moment of focus and reward.

Not long after, a large bird appeared overhead. Roland had been whistling for Ornate Hawk-Eagle, and for a moment the possibility hung there—but as the raptor resolved, it proved to be a Black Hawk-Eagle. Still a superb bird, and a reminder of how unpredictably things unfold in the field.

As we made our way back to the vehicles, the diversity continued. Red-legged Honeycreepers fed in a flowering tree overhead. A Long-billed Starthroat hovered at long-tubed lobelia flowers, well matched to its nectar source. We caught a glimpse of a Golden-olive Woodpecker as Baltimore Orioles—males nearly fluorescent—moved through the trees.

We paused to admire pink rain lily blooms and watch stingless bees moving in and out of a cavity in a tree trunk. These native bees are important pollinators in tropical systems—and notably, the Maya practiced meliponiculture—the careful tending of native stingless bees for honey and wax, often in hollow logs—distinct from apiculture, which involves Old World honeybees introduced much later.

The habitat we were birding was shade-grown coffee, part of a broader mosaic that supports both biodiversity and agriculture. Coffee is largely self-fertile, but yields increase with pollination, which is driven primarily by insects—especially bees, including native stingless bees. Farms embedded within diverse, intact ecosystems tend to be more productive, offering a compelling example of biodiversity supporting agriculture.

On the way down, we stopped to search for a Tody Motmot. We clustered quietly along the trail as Roland hung his speaker and used playback, and we stood motionless, listening with intent. The bird called—soft, low, unmistakable—but remained hidden, as it so often does in the dense understory. Nearby, Long-tailed Manakins vocalized as well, close but equally elusive.



And then, a shift. While our attention was fixed on what we hoped to see, something else revealed itself. Another regional specialty, found only in the Pacific foothills and highlands of Chiapas, Guatemala and El Salvador, stepped into view: a Gray-crowned Ground-Sparrow—a handsome bird that brought a visible spark of delight from Roland. Like the motmot, it is an understory species, often heard more than seen, and not easily found.

It was a useful reminder, one the field offers again and again: when we narrow our focus too tightly on a single target, we risk missing what is actually being given. Birding—and more broadly, natural history—is as much about awareness as it is about intention. The species we set out to find matter, but so do the unexpected ones that appear when our attention is open. Often, it is these moments of serendipity that become the most memorable.

After a satisfying lunch and a short siesta, we set out again to explore the grounds of Los Tarrales. Pete, ever the consummate naturalist, drew our attention to several notable plants, including *Tabebuia*—those striking trees with pink trumpet-shaped flowers that seemed to glow against the surrounding greenery.

A shed feather on the trail caught our attention—a Lesson's Motmot feather, the distinctive bare shaft and paddle-shaped tip lying on the ground. We examined it closely, and within minutes, as if on cue, a Lesson's Motmot appeared. It perched quietly just feet away, then dropped to the ground to take an insect, so close to Roland it nearly landed on his foot. He remarked it was the closest encounter he had ever had with the species. The bird's bright blue crown and long, pendulum-like tail made for an unforgettable study.

A Lineated Woodpecker called, then came into view—but Roland prompted us onward with some urgency. The reason soon became clear: a Northern Potoo on a day roost, perched motionless along a branch, perfectly mimicking a broken limb. Once located, it resolved from abstraction into form—an extraordinary example of camouflage and stillness.

Other highlights followed. A Spot-breasted Oriole glowed with improbable brightness. Melodious Blackbirds filled the air with varied calls. White-throated Magpie-Jays—what Leslie aptly dubbed the “blue and white pompom head”—moved through in animated groups. Masked Tityras and Rose-throated Becards added to the mix.

And then, a familiar species in an unfamiliar context: Ruby-throated Hummingbird. For many in the group, a backyard bird during the breeding season, yet here we were observing it on its wintering grounds—a small bird undertaking an extraordinary migration, now feeding quietly among tropical company.



By day's end, our checklist had grown rapidly—not just in numbers, but in depth. Patterns were emerging: elevation shaping communities, behavior revealing ecological roles, and each habitat adding another layer to the story. Another excellent dinner followed, and then rest—preparing for another full day in this remarkable landscape.

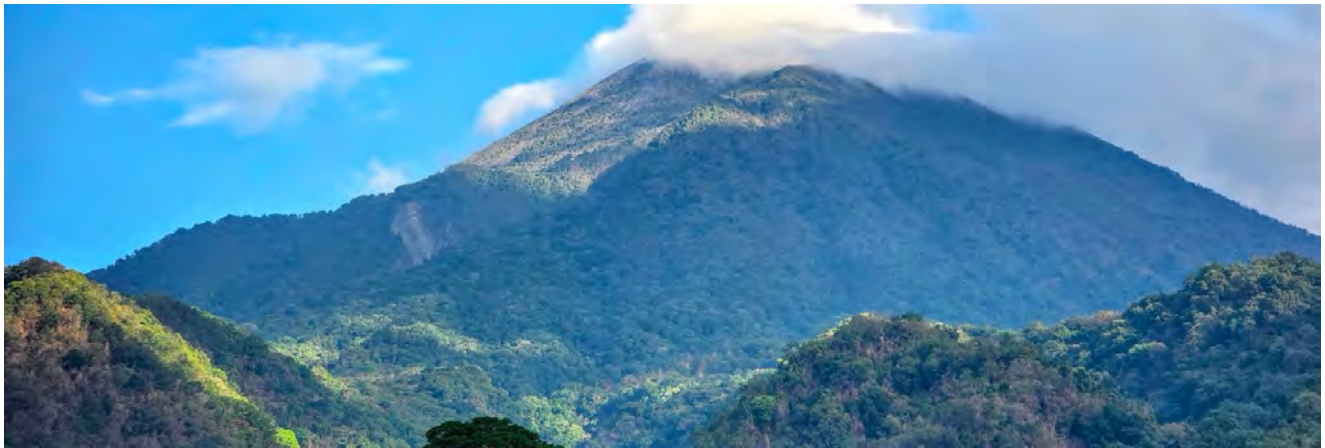
Fri., Mar. 13 Los Tarrales

An early start and another breakfast in the field set the rhythm for the day. Once again, we loaded into two four-wheel-drive vehicles and headed upslope—but this time we stopped short of the cloud forest, working instead in the band below it: tropical premontane forest. This transitional zone, less saturated than cloud forest but still shaped by moisture and elevation, holds its own distinct community of species.

At a roadside stop, Roland used playback for Barred Antshrike. The response was immediate—a sharp, almost maniacal, laughing series of notes. This species is typically found in pairs, and like many Neotropical birds, pair bonds are maintained through vocal duets rather than the more territorial, seasonal singing patterns familiar in many North American species. After some patient searching and shifting positions as the birds moved through dense cover, we were rewarded with excellent looks at the male—boldly patterned in black and white, a “jailbird” appearance. Later, in a different area, we found the female, rich cinnamon in tone—strikingly different, a clear example of sexual dimorphism.

At an overlook with expansive views of Volcán Atitlán and the forested slopes of Los Tarrales, a Yellow-faced Grassquit gave us an unusually cooperative moment. Typically a furtive species, the male perched in the open, singing from a prominent perch. We had prolonged looks and photos of this handsome member of the tanager family, and Roland even captured video—something he noted was rare.

Continuing along the road, a Highland Guan was spotted in the shadows. We stepped out for a closer look. This species ranges across the highlands of southern Mexico through Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and into northern Nicaragua, wherever suitable montane forest persists. Its distribution may appear fragmented on a map, but that pattern reflects the naturally patchy, island-like nature of these cloud forest habitats strung along the Central American cordillera—not political boundaries. Birds, of course, pay no attention to those. Large, dark, and deliberate, this bird carries the quiet presence typical of cracids—an ancient lineage once far more widespread before hunting reduced their numbers across much of their range.



From deeper in the forest came the haunting, low whistles of Thicket Tinamous. We heard them well, but as is almost always the case, did not see them. Tinamous are part of an ancient lineage, more closely related to ratites like ostriches and emus than to most modern flying birds. Though capable of short bursts of flight, they live primarily on the forest floor, moving silently through dense cover. Their voices carry; their bodies remain hidden.

A Rufous-browed Peppershrike sang from within the foliage overhead—another species far easier to hear than to see. While we searched for it, a Chestnut-capped Warbler appeared, a resident species, in contrast to the migratory warblers moving through these forests before heading north to breed in North America. Overhead, a Blue-throated Goldentail hovered and fed at flowers with quick, precise movements, then paused to perch, offering us excellent views.

We stopped at known Tody Motmot spot, and the bird gave us a fleeting encounter—just a flash, as is often the case with this elusive species.

From a ridgeline overlook, we turned our attention skyward. Raptors rode the thermals: Short-tailed Hawks in both light and dark morphs, and a Great Black Hawk soaring among Turkey and Black Vultures. White-collared Swifts sliced through the air like big boomerangs, mixed with the smaller, darker Vaux's Swifts. A juvenile Crested Caracara flew in and perched, giving us extended views.

Notable mammal encounters added to the morning. Two Collared Peccaries—also known as javelinas—crossed the road, the first Roland had ever seen at Los Tarrales in all his years here. Earlier, we had stopped to watch a Gray Fox at close range. It yawned, licked its lips, and moved with unhurried ease before slipping into the brush.

Eve somehow spotted a Lesser Nighthawk roosting along a tree limb while our vehicles were in motion—an extraordinary piece of fieldcraft. We stepped out for good looks. A White-faced Ground-Sparrow appeared along the roadside as well, a handsome regional endemic of the foothills and highlands of Chiapas and northern Central America.

Back at the lodge, we paused for lunch and a siesta before heading out again for an afternoon walk.

A Common Tody-Flycatcher showed well at close range, small and animated. Its name reflects a superficial resemblance to the todies of the Caribbean—particularly Cuba—compact birds with bright plumage and relatively broad, flattened bills. Though unrelated, early naturalists noted this similarity, and the name persists. Like other tyrant flycatchers, it is an active insectivore, constantly flicking and sallying from low perches.



One of the highlights of the afternoon was a pair of Collared Aracaris attending a nest cavity. Aracaris are small, slender members of the toucan family, and their name—like “toucan”—traces back to Tupi languages of the Amazon. “Aracari” is thought to be onomatopoeic, echoing the birds’ distinctive calls, while “toucan,” from Tupi *tukana*, is also widely believed to imitate their vocalizations. Together, they offer a reminder that Indigenous knowledge and long familiarity with these species are embedded in the names we use today.

Rose-breasted Grosbeaks appeared among the foliage, familiar migrants to many in our group now far from their breeding grounds. We worked the edges of a field for Rufous-breasted Spinetail without success, but were rewarded with views of another elusive species, Spot-breasted Wren.

Then, as if to close the day with a subtle flourish, a butterfly drew our attention—a Queen, closely resembling a Monarch. Anne and Pete, both keen lepidopterists, quickly noted the distinction. This resemblance is no accident. Monarchs are chemically defended through toxins acquired from milkweed, and species like the Queen share similar defenses, reinforcing a shared warning signal—a classic example of Müllerian mimicry, where multiple unpalatable species converge on similar patterns to educate predators more efficiently.

Tired from a full and rewarding day, we made our way back to the lodge as the light softened—ready for dinner, and for whatever the next day would bring.

Sat., Mar. 14 Los Tarrales | La Playa | Santiago Atitlán | San Juan La Laguna

We began with one final morning of birding at Los Tarrales, early light catching Volcán Atitlán and setting its slopes aglow above the surrounding landscape.

Yellow-naped Amazons perched low in a tree—loud, unmistakable, and sobering. This endangered species has declined sharply due to trapping for the pet trade and habitat loss. Seeing them here, still part of the living soundscape, felt both like a privilege and a reminder of what is at stake.

Groove-billed Anis showed well in a flowering tree, the only anis of the tour—what Merlin aptly calls “bizarre, coal-black cuckoos with long floppy tails and unique, curiously tall, flattened bills.” Around us were the now-



familiar companions of the past few days: Cinnamon Hummingbirds, Pacific Parakeets, Black-headed Saltators, and White-bellied Chachalacas. A quiet farewell to the dry forest.

From there, we drove into the highlands, stopping for a hike at a place called La Playa before continuing to Lake Atitlán.

Almost immediately upon stepping out of the van, we were met with a surprise: a Blue-and-white Mockingbird in the open. Roland could hardly believe it—this is typically an elusive species, far more often heard than seen. Everyone enjoyed excellent looks at this striking bird.

Not long after, another difficult species revealed itself. An Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush appeared in a tree, perched and visible—an unusually cooperative encounter for a bird that usually stays hidden in dense understory.

Tyrant flycatchers added complexity to the morning—Hammond’s Flycatcher, Greater Pewee, Least Flycatcher—subtle, often frustrating, and always instructive. Then a pair of Elegant Euphonias caught our attention, living up to their name with rich color.

We made a concerted effort for Slender Sheartail. Pete ventured into the brush and managed a glimpse of this elusive hummingbird—never easy, but satisfying to connect with even briefly.

At one point, we realized we had wandered into a field planted with corn, beans, and squash—a traditional milpa. This ancient agricultural system, still widely practiced today, is often established through slash-and-burn: vegetation is cut and burned, releasing a pulse of nutrients—especially phosphorus and potassium—into the soil. Crops are cultivated for a few years, then the field is left fallow to recover, allowing forest regeneration to restore fertility over time.

This sparked a discussion of the Maya agricultural system, in which these three crops are grown together in a mutually supportive arrangement. Corn provides the structural framework, its stalks serving as a natural trellis for climbing beans. Beans, in turn, fix nitrogen in the soil, enhancing fertility. Squash spreads across the ground, shading the soil, reducing evaporation, and suppressing weeds.



Nutritionally, the system is equally elegant: corn provides complex carbohydrates, while beans supply protein, and squash contributes vitamins and micronutrients. Together, they form a highly efficient and complementary system—one of the most enduring examples of sustainable agriculture.

Maize, in particular, holds deep cultural significance—central not only to sustenance but to identity. In the Popol Vuh, the K'iche' Maya creation story, humans are described as being made from corn dough, underscoring its foundational role in Maya cosmology.

This cultural importance extended into many aspects of Maya life. Cranial modification—achieved by shaping the heads of infants—was practiced widely, especially among elites, and is best understood as a marker of identity, status, and aesthetic ideals. Some scholars have suggested that the elongated head shape may symbolically echo maize, so central to Maya life and belief.

By midday, we continued to Lake Atitlán—often described as “the most beautiful lake in the world,” a phrase frequently attributed to Aldous Huxley, though he never quite said that. Writing in *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (1934), Huxley instead described the lake as “too much of a good thing,” comparing it to Italy’s Lake Como but with “additional embellishments of several immense volcanoes.” It is a more nuanced observation—and perhaps a more revealing one. The landscape is not just beautiful; it is overwhelming.

Huxley was traveling through Guatemala in the early 1930s, part of a broader journey through Central America, observing landscapes and cultures with the same probing curiosity that would later define his work on perception and consciousness. Years later, he would write *The Doors of Perception*, drawing on William Blake, which in turn gave its name to the band The Doors—a chain of ideas linking landscape, perception, and human imagination.

Lake Atitlán also tends to attract another familiar name: Alexander von Humboldt. Given his foundational work on elevation, climate, and the distribution of life—what we now think of as life zones—it is easy to see why. This is a profoundly Humboldtian landscape, where ecological communities shift dramatically with elevation over short distances. But despite that intellectual connection, Humboldt never actually visited Atitlán. His name has simply become attached to places that so clearly illustrate the patterns he described.

Standing on the shore of the lake, it becomes clear that this beauty is not accidental. Lake Atitlán occupies a vast volcanic caldera formed roughly 84,000 years ago during a catastrophic eruption along the Central American volcanic arc, where the Cocos Plate is subducting beneath the Caribbean Plate. That eruption emptied a massive



magma chamber, causing the overlying land to collapse and form the basin that now holds a lake more than 1,100 feet deep.

In the millennia since, volcanic activity has continued within the caldera itself, giving rise to the steep cones that define the skyline today—Volcán Atitlán, Tolimán, and San Pedro.

But the story of Atitlán is not only geologic—it is also archaeological. Beneath the lake's surface lie the remains of ancient Maya sites, the most well-known being Samabaj, sometimes referred to as the "Maya Atlantis of Atitlán." Discovered by divers in the late 20th century, Samabaj sits on a submerged ridge, with stone structures, altars, and ceremonial features still visible underwater. It was likely occupied during the Preclassic period before rising lake levels—possibly driven by volcanic or hydrologic changes—gradually inundated the site.

The comparison to Atlantis is evocative, if imperfect. Rather than a lost civilization, these submerged sites are part of a continuous Maya presence that persists around the lake today. They offer a glimpse into how dynamic this landscape has always been—shaped by shifting water levels, volcanic forces, and long human occupation.

The result is a place where deep time—geologic and cultural—intersects in a single view. The same tectonic forces that generate destruction also build extraordinary beauty, fertile soils, and the conditions that have supported Maya communities for millennia.

It made for a fitting story to share with the group: a lake so visually overwhelming that even Huxley—who spent much of his life exploring the limits of perception—found himself reaching for language equal to what he was seeing.

We arrived at Bambu Lodge for lunch, where Azure-crowned Hummingbirds and Orchard Orioles moved through the foliage around the open-air dining area overlooking the lake.

In the afternoon, we crossed the lake by boat to the town of San Juan La Laguna. Despite being a popular destination, the atmosphere remained relaxed and unpressured—Roland noted it as one of the few places in Guatemala where vendors do not actively approach visitors.



We visited a women's weaving cooperative, where Roland's friend Ruth guided us through the process. Using natural dyes derived from plants and insects—cochineal for reds, indigo for blues—she demonstrated how threads are transformed into intricate textiles.

The cooperative is made up of thirty-five single mothers, and their work reflects both cultural continuity and resilience. These cooperatives not only preserve traditional knowledge but also provide meaningful economic independence for women in the community.

Many of us left with beautifully crafted pieces, each carrying both artistry and story.

Bird life continued even here. At the dock and along the lakeshore we noted Bronzed Cowbird and our first Rufous-collared Sparrow—common species across much of Central and South America, yet surprisingly scarce on this tour. On the water, Common Gallinule, Lesser Scaup, American Coot, and both Snowy and Great Egrets were present, along with an Osprey moving overhead.

An absence was also notable. Lake Atitlán was once home to the Atitlán Grebe, a flightless, endemic species found nowhere else on Earth. Similar in form to a Pied-billed Grebe but larger and more robust, it had evolved in isolation, losing the power of flight in a lake without native predators and becoming highly specialized for life on the water.

Its extinction in the late 20th century was driven largely by the introduction of non-native fish—especially largemouth bass—which preyed heavily on chicks and disrupted the food web the grebes depended on. Changes in water level and shoreline habitat compounded the pressure. The lake has no surface outlet, and its level fluctuates naturally through rainfall, groundwater flow, and tectonic influences. Earthquakes in this region—part of the same active system driven by the subduction of the Cocos Plate beneath the Caribbean Plate—can alter subsurface drainage and shift lake levels, subtly reshaping shoreline habitats over time. Unable to fly and restricted to a single lake, the species had no refuge.

These same tectonic forces that can destabilize ecosystems are also responsible for creating them. The eruptions that formed the Atitlán caldera blanketed the region in ash—initially destructive, but over time weathering into nutrient-rich soils. Those soils, in turn, supported the intensive agriculture of the ancient Maya, including the milpa system we had seen earlier—corn, beans, and squash grown together in a finely tuned ecological partnership.



The story of Atitlán, then, is one of both creation and loss. The same geologic engine that builds volcanoes, enriches soils, and sustains human life can also drive sudden change—reshaping landscapes, altering habitats, and, in the case of the grebe, contributing to the disappearance of a species found nowhere else on Earth.

By the time we returned across the lake, the day had stretched full. We turned in early, preparing for what lay ahead in the highlands above Atitlán.

Sun., Mar. 15 Santiago Atitlán | Chichicastenango

We began early, crossing the lake in first light as dawn lifted over the encircling volcanoes. The water was calm, the air cool, and the silhouettes of Atitlán, Tolimán, and San Pedro gradually resolved into form—an elemental start to a day that would be shaped as much by culture as by natural history.

On the far shore, a Spotted Sandpiper greeted us as we stepped off the boat. From there, we walked across the beautiful grounds of Hotel Atitlán to our vehicle for the drive north into the highlands, arriving at Chichicastenango—known locally as Chichi—home to one of the most famous markets in the Americas. Held twice weekly, and at its fullest on Sundays, the market draws people from across the region. It is often described as the largest in Central America, but what matters more is its continuity: a living system of exchange, tradition, and identity that has persisted for centuries.

Color and movement defined the scene. Textiles, flowers, masks, produce, incense—everything layered together in a dense, shifting mosaic. But Chichi is more than a market.

At its heart stands the church of Santo Tomás, built in 1545 directly atop the foundations of a Maya temple. The broad stone steps, worn smooth with time, were lined with offerings—flowers, candles, and pine needles arranged with care. Inside, the air was thick with smoke.

A Maya priest moved through the space, tending fires, chanting softly, working with candles and copal incense. The ritual was unmistakably alive—not a relic of the past, but an active expression of belief.

The steps themselves remain a focal point of ceremony, used in rituals tied to the Maya calendar. Ceremonies follow a repeating 20-day cycle—the core rhythm of the Tzolk'in—an ancient timekeeping system that continues



to shape spiritual life. Offerings reflect a deeply symbolic cosmology: candles of different colors correspond to directions and elements—white, black, yellow, and red—often associated with the cardinal directions and the creation of humanity from maize. Corn, incense, candles, flowers, and liquor are all used in ritual practice, each carrying layered meaning. Copal smoke rises as an offering, a medium through which prayers are carried.

Inside, purple cloth and adornments reflected the approach of Easter, a reminder of the Catholic liturgical calendar layered onto the space. Catholic iconography surrounds the interior—saints, altars, and crucifixes—yet the structure and rhythm of what unfolds remain deeply rooted in Maya cosmology. It is often described as a blending of traditions, but standing there, it feels less like a division and more like layered continuity—two systems occupying the same space, each reshaping the other over time.

From there, we moved uphill toward the smaller Calvario Church, part of the same ceremonial landscape. Along the way, Maya worshipers tended fires outside—rituals often performed beyond the church interior, in spaces that allow for open flame, offerings, and direct connection to the earth. The Calvario complex itself reflects centuries of change: like much of the region, it has been shaped by repeated earthquakes, including major events in the 18th century that damaged colonial structures and led to rebuilding and adaptation over time.

From a nearby overlook, we looked out across the cemetery, its bright colors set against the highland backdrop. Along the walls were Maya glyphs—part of one of the most sophisticated writing systems in the ancient world. This logosyllabic script combines symbols representing whole words with phonetic elements, allowing the ancient Maya to record history, astronomy, and dynastic events with remarkable precision.

Closely tied to this was an equally sophisticated numerical system. The Maya used a base-20, or vigesimal, system, likely rooted in counting both fingers and toes. Numbers were expressed using dots and bars in a positional system, and—critically—they developed the concept of zero, represented by a shell-like symbol, more than a thousand years before it appeared in Europe. This made true calculation possible, allowing them to distinguish place values and work with large numbers—an essential foundation for their astronomy and calendar systems.

That knowledge was not abstract. Maya astronomers tracked the movements of the sun, moon, and especially Venus with extraordinary accuracy, integrating these observations into interlocking calendars—the 260-day ritual cycle, the 365-day solar year, and the Long Count, which allowed them to reckon time across vast spans.



Just beyond, the cemetery itself became a point of reflection. Graves painted in turquoise, yellow, lavender, and green created a landscape that felt open and expressive rather than somber.

Nearby, we watched traditional ceremonial attire being prepared and worn. One of our local guides demonstrated a full costume—intricately embroidered, layered, and surprisingly heavy, weighing 14 kilograms, he told us. These garments are not merely decorative; they are expressions of identity tied to specific communities, ceremonies, and histories, with patterns and techniques passed down through generations. Watching a man carefully sewing and assembling such a costume offered a glimpse into the continuity of that tradition.

While waiting for our driver, we also enjoyed the steady passage of Guatemala’s iconic “chicken buses”—brightly painted, highly personalized former North American school buses transformed into public transport. Each is unique, adorned with vivid colors, chrome, religious symbols, and names, reflecting both artistry and livelihood.

By late morning, we began the return journey to Panajachel, arriving for a relaxed lakeside lunch at Hotel Atitlán. The gardens here are lush and carefully maintained, offering excellent birding in a cultivated setting. Azure-crowned Hummingbirds gave prolonged, close views as they moved through flowering shrubs. Baltimore Orioles were present as well, and among them, a more localized species: Black-vented Oriole—our only opportunity on the tour to see it, and one we were able to study well as it moved among its more familiar relatives.

We crossed the lake once more in the afternoon. The wind had risen, and the calm surface of the morning gave way to waves—making for a lively, bouncing ride that felt at times more like a rodeo than a boat crossing.

Back at Bambu, we had time to regroup before gathering for the checklist and dinner. Another early morning awaited, with two highly sought-after species ahead. We turned in early—rested, reflective, and carrying with us the layered impressions of a place where culture and history remain vividly, actively alive.



Mon., Mar. 16 Santiago Atitlán | Volcán Atitlán | Mirador Rey Tepepul

The day began well before dawn.

Around 4:00 AM, one group—Leslie, Walter, Dave, Betsy, Anne, and I—set out with our local guide Cruz, hiking up the slopes of Volcán Atitlán in search of one of the most sought-after birds in the world: the Horned Guan.

We began in darkness, climbing steadily along a narrow trail. At one open stretch, we paused and looked up. The sky was brilliant—stars sharp and abundant, the Big Dipper suspended above the silhouettes of volcanoes encircling the lake. A quiet, grounding moment before the climb resumed.

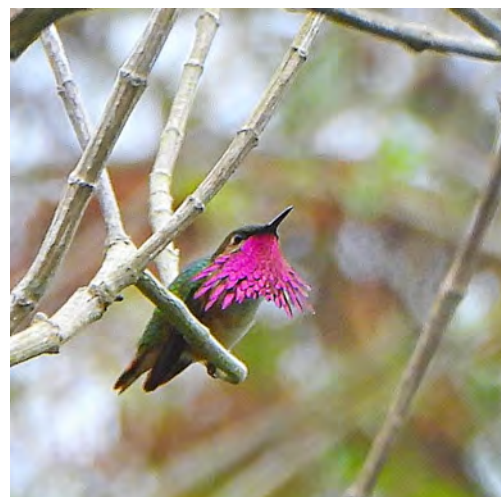
From the forest came the calls of Fulvous Owls, their voices reminiscent of the familiar “who cooks for you” cadence of their close northern relative, the Barred Owl, but subtly different in tone and rhythm. Soon after, we saw two at close range, illuminated by our lights—big, dark eyes fixed on us, the birds remarkably confiding and curious. Their plumage echoed the barred pattern of a Barred Owl, but with a warmer, buffy, more cinnamon-brown tone—true to the name *fulvous*, meaning tawny or reddish-buff.

Not long after, we heard the call of a male Resplendent Quetzal—the target species for the other half of our group on a different hike at Mirador Rey Tepepul—but we could not linger. The trail steepened, and our focus shifted fully to the climb ahead.

The Horned Guan is unlike any other bird. A member of the cracid family—chachalacas, guans, and curassows—it represents one of the most ancient and evolutionarily distinct lineages within this already ancient group, and is among the most distinctive birds in the Neotropics. Large, arboreal, and highly specialized for life in cloud forest, it feeds primarily on fruits and leaves and nests high in the canopy.

Its most distinctive feature is the bright red horn projecting from the crown—an extension of bare, keratinized skin rather than bone. Its exact function is not fully understood, but it is thought to play a role in visual signaling, likely tied to mate selection or social display in the dim, layered light of cloud forest.

The species is also exceptionally range-restricted. The vast majority of its global population occurs in the highlands of Guatemala, with a smaller extension into Chiapas, Mexico. Even within that range, it is difficult—often extremely difficult—to see. There are only a handful of sites where it can be encountered with any



reliability, and even there, success is never guaranteed. The combination of rarity, restricted range, and the physical challenge required to reach its habitat has made it one of the most coveted birds in the world.

The climb grew more demanding as we entered cloud forest—dense, humid, layered with moss and epiphytes. Cruz moved ahead with purpose, Dave close behind, as everyone worked to keep pace. Around a bend, Cruz suddenly stopped.

There it was.

A Horned Guan perched briefly along the trail ahead—its distinctive horn rising from the crown, a bird both ancient and improbable. Dave had a good look, but it flushed just before the rest of us rounded the corner, disappearing into the forest. We pressed on.

A sudden, powerful whirring sound—like a drone or small aircraft—cut through the forest silence. It took a moment to register: the guan in flight. We caught only the sound as it passed overhead, but the encounter heightened the tension.

Higher still, we paused near a sign marking Horned Guan habitat. While Cruz scouted ahead, we scanned the canopy. This species spends much of its time high above the forest floor, moving deliberately through branches, rarely revealing itself for long.

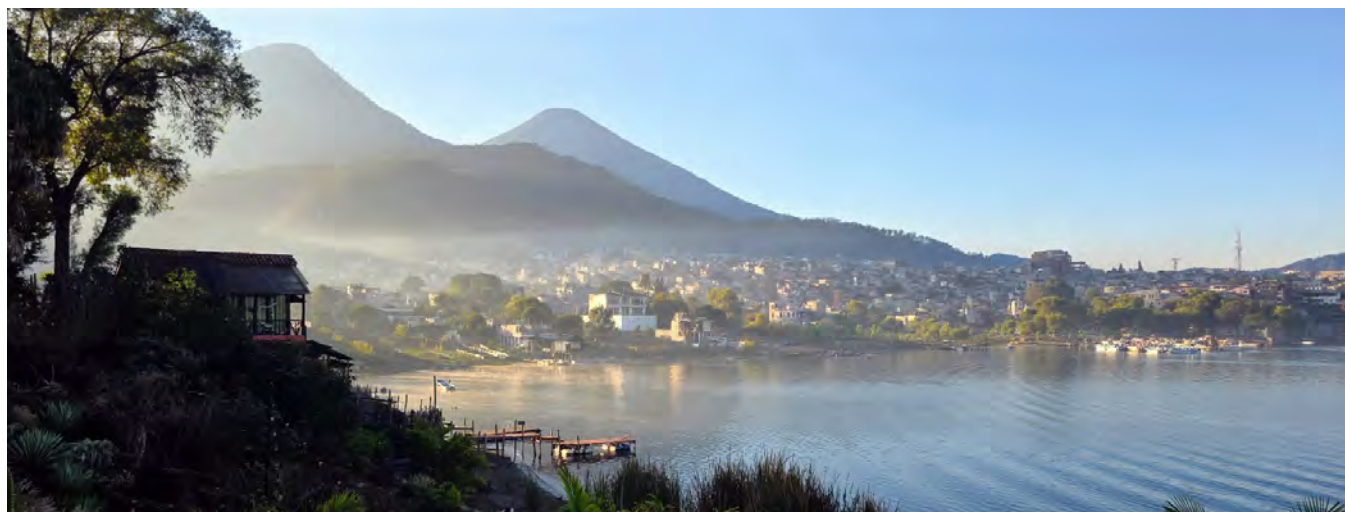
Then, a commotion above.

We looked up.

Directly overhead, a large bird crossed the canopy—a white band flashing in the tail. We checked with Cruz when he returned. No doubt: Horned Guan.

It was not the prolonged perched view we had hoped for the whole group, but it was an electrifying glimpse of one of the most enigmatic birds in the Americas.

The descent was long, and fatigue began to set in. Then, just when it was most needed, Cruz motioned us off the trail.



A tiny shape hovered among the vegetation.

Wine-throated Hummingbird—a male. His gorget flared, catching the light—an explosion of color against an otherwise subdued body.

Among the smallest hummingbirds in the world, it weighs just 2–2.5 grams—second only to Cuba’s Bee Hummingbird—and is similarly diminutive in length. In the dim, cloud-filtered light, it appeared almost shadowed, but when it turned just right, the gorget ignited—a sudden flash of iridescence.

We had been told we were too late in the season, that this spectacular species was no longer a possibility. And yet, here it was.

A reminder, again, of the value of openness in the field: not everything can be planned, and not all rewards come from intention. Sometimes the most memorable encounters are the ones we never expected.

Back at the lodge, we reunited with the rest of the group, and the energy shifted immediately. Their morning at Mirador Rey Tepepul had delivered one of the great prizes of Neotropical birding: a male Resplendent Quetzal.

That encounter opened the door to a deeper conversation—because few birds carry such layered importance, biological, cultural, and aesthetic. Even structurally, the bird is remarkable. The elongated “tail” is not the tail itself, but dramatically extended upper tail coverts, which can stream far beyond the body in adult males. Northern populations found in Guatemala often show especially long, extravagant plumes compared to those typically encountered farther south, including in Costa Rica, making sightings here particularly striking.

But the significance of the quetzal extends well beyond its form.

For the ancient Maya, those feathers held profound meaning. Quetzal plumes were among the most prized materials in Mesoamerica—symbols of status, power, and the divine. They were closely associated with Kukulcan, the Feathered Serpent, a deity linked to wind, rain, fertility, and the cycles of renewal that sustained agricultural life. The shimmering green of the quetzal’s tail evoked the vitality of the forest and, more broadly, the life-giving forces central to Maya cosmology—making the bird a powerful expression of both earthly abundance and spiritual force.



That symbolic power was reflected in how the feathers were used. They were reserved for rulers and elites, woven into headdresses and ceremonial regalia that signaled both authority and sacred connection. Importantly, the birds were not typically killed; instead, they were captured, their long tail coverts carefully removed, and then released—allowing the feathers to regrow and the relationship to continue. In this way, the quetzal became not just a symbol of beauty, but part of an ongoing exchange between people, landscape, and belief.

This perspective on value differed sharply from that of the Spanish, for whom gold was paramount. In the Maya world, beauty, rarity, and symbolic meaning defined worth. Alongside quetzal feathers, the brilliant plumage of macaws and the iridescent forms of birds like the Ocellated Turkey were incorporated into regalia and ceremony, forming a visual language of color, light, and status.

That legacy persists today. The modern currency of Guatemala—the quetzal—takes its name from this bird not because its feathers functioned as everyday money, but because they symbolized wealth, power, and prestige. In the Maya world, quetzal plumes circulated as elite tribute and ceremonial exchange goods rather than as true currency.

Reflecting on that morning's Resplendent Quetzal encounter, it was clear this was more than a beautiful bird. It was a living thread connecting ecology, culture, and history—still moving through the forests where it has held meaning for centuries. It felt like a fitting convergence: two groups, two extraordinary birds, each emblematic of these highland forests.

Tired but elated, we regrouped before heading out again in the afternoon to experience local cultural traditions. We visited a nearby home that houses an effigy of Maximón—a complex figure in highland Maya belief systems, particularly among the Tz'utujil people around Lake Atitlán. Both trickster and intermediary, Maximón represents a blending of Indigenous spirituality and introduced Catholic elements, serving as a go-between for people seeking guidance, protection, or intervention. Cigars, alcohol, and offerings surrounded the figure, evidence of an active and ongoing relationship rather than a symbolic one.

We then visited the church of Santiago Apóstol in Santiago Atitlán. "Santiago" derives from *Sant lago*—Saint James the Greater, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. Carried to the Americas by the Spanish, Santiago became one of their most important patron saints, and his name marks towns and churches across the colonial world. Here, as elsewhere, the church was built atop earlier Maya structures, using their stone—a physical expression of conquest, and also of continuity.



Among the Tz'utujil Maya, Santiago has been reinterpreted and absorbed into local cosmology, much as Maximón has—an example not of replacement, but of layering. Inside the church and in the plaza beyond, these traditions continue to evolve, shaped by centuries of interaction.

In the plaza, we encountered a woman in traditional Tz'utujil dress whose image is represented on Guatemala's 25 centavos coin—a stylized profile of a Maya woman wearing a headdress. This stands as a national symbol of Indigenous identity, a quiet but powerful acknowledgment that the Maya are not relics of the past, but a living presence—millions strong, speaking more than twenty languages, and maintaining distinct cultural traditions across the country.

As evening approached, we returned to the hotel for dinner, the day's experiences still settling into place—cloud forest, ancient birds, living traditions, and the satisfying effort of reaching deep into these landscapes and peering through windows into enduring cultural practices.

Tues., Mar. 17 Tecpán | Antigua Guatemala

After breakfast, we headed into the highlands near Tecpán Guatemala, climbing to Finca Caleras Chichavac at roughly 8,200 feet. The air was cool and crisp, the forest a mix of pine and oak—a montane environment distinct from anything we had experienced so far on the tour.

This was one of the most anticipated birding sessions of the trip.

Our target: Pink-headed Warbler.

Roland was fully locked in—focused, listening, reading the forest with the precision that comes from decades in the field. We moved slowly and deliberately, letting the landscape reveal itself in layers.

Before the main event, a series of familiar-but-different species set the tone. A Sharp-shinned Hawk—of the white-breasted Central American form—passed overhead. A Northern Pygmy-Owl of the Guatemalan highland form, a population that may one day be recognized as its own species, called from a treetop and gave us good views. Steller's Jays moved through the canopy, but these were not the birds we know from the United States. Here, they showed reduced crests and bold white markings above the eyes—same voice, different look, a reminder of how geography shapes form without erasing identity.



A Mountain Trogon appeared, the male luminous in the filtered light.

And still, we searched.

Roland paused. Listened. Tilted his head. Cupped his hands behind his ears.

“Sounds promising,” he said quietly.

We moved a few steps forward.

And then—there they were.

Pink-headed Warblers.

This species held particular meaning for the group. Trisha had shared early on that this was the bird she most hoped to see—the one that drew her to the tour. She and Tony had been gracious and appreciative throughout, the kind of travelers who find value in every moment, and it made the encounter all the more rewarding to share it with them here.

At first, good looks—then better. The birds shifted into a shaft of light, their improbable coloration coming alive: a soft rose head and chest set against darker wings and body. The color—like spilled grenache wine, as Leslie aptly noted—seemed almost unreal. They moved around us—behind, in front, above—offering sustained, immersive views. One of those moments where anticipation gives way to presence, and the forest seems to reorganize itself around a single species.

Success, in the fullest sense.

Other birds continued to add depth to the morning. A Pine Flycatcher—uncommon and often overlooked—revealed itself only when it vocalized, answering Roland’s call. A Brown Creeper worked its way up a trunk in classic fashion, beginning at the base and spiraling upward—behavior identical to birds we know from home, though its voice here carries a slightly different cadence.

By midday, we descended to a roadside restaurant along the Pan-American Highway. Crepes and tacos made for a satisfying lunch.



From there, we continued to Antigua Guatemala.

Arriving in this UNESCO World Heritage site, the tone shifted once again—from forest to city, from natural history to human history. Founded in the 16th century as the Spanish colonial capital of Central America, Antigua—then known as Santiago de los Caballeros—was one of the most important cities in the region. But its location came at a cost. Repeated earthquakes, culminating in the devastating 1773 Santa Marta earthquakes, led the Spanish to abandon the city and relocate the capital to what is now Guatemala City.

That abandonment, paradoxically, became its preservation. Rather than being rebuilt into a modern urban center, Antigua remains a city suspended in time. Its low-slung colonial architecture, thick adobe walls, interior courtyards, and Baroque façades endure not because they escaped destruction, but because they were never fully replaced.

We checked into our hotel, centered around courtyards, carved wood, and shaded corridors that hold the cool of the evening.

The city invited exploration. The Santa Catalina Arch framed views of Volcán de Agua down a cobblestone street—one of the most iconic scenes in Central America. At La Merced Church, its ornate yellow Baroque façade stood in contrast to the deep blue sky. In the central park, jacaranda trees cast soft color over the square as people moved through—locals, travelers, families, vendors—life unfolding in layers.

Some of the group found their way to a chocolate shop, drawn by Guatemala’s tasty cacao history. Others wandered as dusk settled in, the city softening under warm light—cobblestones, colonial facades, and the quiet presence of centuries embedded in the architecture.

We gathered later for checklist and dinner, the day’s highlights still fresh—highland forests, a near-mythic warbler realized, and a seamless transition from ecological richness to cultural depth.

Wed., Mar. 18 Antigua | Finca El Pilar | Jocotenango

After breakfast, we headed to Finca El Pilar, a private reserve and shade-grown coffee plantation just outside Antigua. The morning was cool and clear, the forest a mix of second growth, coffee understory, and taller canopy—an inviting mosaic for birdlife.

Almost immediately, we found ourselves in one of those moments that becomes both observation and wordplay. An Azure-crowned Hummingbird chased an American Kestrel across a clearing, passing in front of a Gumbo Limbo tree and a blooming Queen of the Night. Saying it out loud—Azure-crowned Hummingbird, American Kestrel, gumbo limbo, Queen of the Night—felt like a linguistic exercise as much as a natural history observation, the rhythm and cadence of the names nearly as entertaining as the scene itself.



The behavior raised an obvious question: why would a hummingbird chase a kestrel? The short answer—no one knows for certain. But hummingbirds are famously aggressive, often defending feeding territories against anything they perceive as a threat. Size matters less than proximity. A kestrel passing through the same airspace may simply have triggered that response—less a calculated decision than a reflex shaped by constant competition and vigilance.

The Gumbo Limbo, often called the “tourist tree,” is well known for its smooth, reddish bark that peels away in thin layers—uncannily like the sunburned skin of visitors to the tropics. Native to tropical regions of the Americas, it is a hardy, fast-growing pioneer species that thrives in dry forest and disturbed habitats, helping to stabilize soils and initiate forest recovery.

Queen of the Night refers to a group of night-blooming cacti, whose large, fragrant white flowers open after dark and often last only a single night. These blooms are typically pollinated by moths or bats, their timing and scent tuned to nocturnal visitors. By morning, the flowers collapse—an ephemeral display, easy to miss unless you happen to be in the right place at the right time.

It was a perfect reflection of the group: deeply curious, attentive naturalists, but also playful, quick to appreciate the joy in both language and landscape.

The birding itself was excellent. A Guatemalan Flicker made us work—glimpses at first, then better views as we stayed with it. And then, one of the most anticipated species of the tour: Blue-throated Motmot. It perched for an extended time, allowing us to study it in detail—rich colors, steady posture, and notably lacking the racket-tipped tail of many of its relatives. A bird both familiar in form and distinct in its evolutionary path.

The hummingbird feeders were especially productive. Rufous Sabrewing, White-eared Hummingbird, Berylline Hummingbird, Green-throated Mountain-gem, and Rivoli’s Hummingbird all came in regularly. Rivoli’s, once grouped under the name Magnificent Hummingbird, is now recognized as a separate species—a reminder that taxonomy continues to evolve as we better understand these birds, even as the birds themselves have always been what they are, their magnificence unchanged.



Hummingbirds represent one of the most remarkable evolutionary radiations in the New World. Evolving from swift-like ancestors, they radiated into more than 360 species, each adapted to specific ecological niches. Their evolutionary history, however, holds an unexpected twist. The oldest known fossils of true hummingbirds have been found not in the Americas, but in Europe—particularly in Germany—dating back more than 30 million years. Yet today, hummingbirds are found only in the New World, where they later diversified spectacularly, especially in South America. That diversification was likely driven in large part by the uplift of the Andes, which created a vast array of habitats and elevational gradients, fostering specialization and speciation across relatively short geographic distances.

Their physiology is equally extraordinary: heart rates that can exceed 1,200 beats per minute in flight, wings beating dozens of times per second, and metabolic demands that require near-constant feeding. Watching them at close range, all that complexity condenses into motion—hovering, darting, pausing, returning.

After exploring the trails and feeders at El Pilar, we drove to nearby San Cristóbal El Alto. As we climbed, the landscape opened to sweeping views: Volcán de Agua rising prominently above Antigua, with Volcán de Fuego and Acatenango nearby—three volcanoes defining both the skyline and the geologic story of the region. At a scenic overlook above the city, we paused for birding. A Western Tanager—new for none, appreciated by all—set the tone here. This was not about chasing rarities or adding to a list, but about slowing down and simply enjoying the beauty of birds in place.

Roland and I found ourselves in a moment of spontaneous levity, juggling avocados that had fallen to the ground—an unexpected bit of fun that drew laughter from the group and opened the door to a conversation about food webs in these highland forests. That, in turn, led us back to one of the region's iconic species: the Resplendent Quetzal. Despite its brilliance, much of its life centers on something humble—small, avocado-like fruits known locally as *aguacatillos*, produced by laurel trees that define cloud forests. Rich in oils, these fruits are swallowed whole, the seeds later dispersed through the forest, a quiet but essential partnership between bird and landscape that has persisted for millennia.

At this high viewpoint, appreciation, learning, and laughter came together in equal measure—hallmarks of a Naturalist Journeys experience. We paused for a group photo with Antigua spread out below us, volcanic peaks rising beyond. The smiles were easy, unforced—earned through shared experience rather than summoned for the camera. While taking our photo we were joined by a friendly local man carrying a machete—an unscripted and memorable addition to the moment.



Next, we shifted from natural history to culture with a visit to a cooking school in the town of Jocotenango, near Antigua. Set in an open-air rooftop kitchen with sweeping views of coffee plantations and surrounding volcanoes, the setting alone invited attention.

Dario, our host, conducted the experience like a symphony—guiding, encouraging, and orchestrating the group into a cohesive whole. Even those who claimed not to enjoy cooking found themselves fully engaged.

Together, we prepared a meal rooted in Maya tradition: *sopa de cinco verdes*, a richly layered “five greens” soup; *tamalitos*, small, delicate corn tamales served as an appetizer; and chicken pepián, one of Guatemala’s most iconic dishes. Pepián has deep roots in Maya cuisine, later shaped by Spanish influences—built on a complex sauce of roasted tomatoes, chiles, seeds (especially native pumpkin seeds, along with sesame introduced during the colonial period), and spices, all ground together into a thick, deeply flavored base. It is a dish that carries both history and place in every bite.

Tortilla-making proved to be its own lesson in humility. What looks simple is anything but. We tried our hands at shaping them and produced a memorable array of misshapen, uneven attempts, while Dario, with practiced ease, formed perfect rounds every time.

For dessert, we made *rellenitos de plátano*—mashed, cooked plantains formed around a sweet filling of refried beans, sugar, cinnamon, and chocolate, then fried to a soft, caramelized finish.

It was hands-on, collaborative, and deeply enjoyable—a cultural experience that matched the richness of the landscapes we had been exploring.

We returned to our hotel in Antigua with time to unwind. Some set out again into the city’s streets—drawn by the soft evening light, shops, and plazas—while others visited the Santo Domingo museum complex, a former colonial monastery transformed into a series of museums that house Maya artifacts, colonial art, and archaeological collections, all set within beautifully restored ruins. Others chose a quieter pause.

Either way, the rhythm of the journey held: a balance of observation, learning, and shared experience, each day adding depth to the last.

Thurs., Mar. 19 Antigua | Cerro Alux | Cerro de la Cruz

After breakfast, we returned to the nearby hills above Antigua for one final morning of birding. Cerro Alux, a protected ecological park preserves remnant pine–oak forest on the slopes overlooking the city. These upland forests play an important ecological role, capturing moisture and helping recharge the region’s groundwater, while growing on volcanic soils shaped by the same tectonic forces that built the surrounding landscape.



The morning delivered quickly. A pair of Barred Antshrikes—male and female—showed well, their contrasting patterns easy to appreciate in the open. A MacGillivray’s Warbler, typically a skulking species, stepped into view long enough for everyone to get on it. Rufous-collared Robins moved through the understory, and a Crescent-chested Warbler gave us good looks. Despite the name, the chest marking of this resident warbler reads more like a diffuse blob than a crisp crescent—something we noted with a bit of humor.

Several Northern Emerald-Toucanets appeared, their compact forms and bright bills glowing against the foliage. Two Rufous-browed Wrens—reminiscent of Southern House Wren but richer in tone and more elusive—required patience and persistence. Roland worked them carefully, and in the end, we were rewarded with satisfying views of a species that often remains only a voice in the brush.

We then made our way to Cerro de la Cruz, a hilltop overlook just north of the city. From here, Antigua spreads out in a grid of tiled rooftops and church facades, framed by surrounding volcanoes. The iconic Santa Catalina Arch is visible from above, and from this vantage, we could even pick out the bougainvillea-filled courtyard of our hotel.

Birding continued even in this busy park. Gray Silky-flycatchers showed well—members of a small, distinctive family restricted to the Americas, related to species like the Phainopepla of the southwestern United States. A Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl gave us excellent looks, alert and composed despite its small size. A mixed flock moved through, with highlights including Grace’s Warbler and, notably, a Yellow-throated Warbler—a species Roland remarked he rarely encounters in this region.

After lunch, Roland guided us through Antigua, and we took time to appreciate its remarkably well-preserved Spanish colonial architecture. We visited La Merced Church, its ornate yellow façade a defining feature of the city, and passed beneath the Santa Catalina Arch, originally built to allow cloistered nuns to move between buildings without being seen.

Along the way, we paused at public wash basins—stone structures fed by diverted spring water, once central to daily life in Antigua. These communal spaces were where women gathered to wash clothes, exchange news, and maintain social ties—functional infrastructure that also served as a cultural hub.

At the ruins of the old cathedral, there was a birding surprise: an American Barn Owl tucked into the stonework. A Black-headed Siskin added another note along the way—a reminder that the principle holds everywhere: always be birding, even during cultural exploration.



Dave, Betsy R., and Betsy H. attended a chocolate-making class and returned with their handiwork, which was later sampled and savored by the group.

Back at the hotel, we gathered for our final checklist of the main tour—species tallied, highlights revisited, the arc of the journey coming into focus.

We then walked together to dinner, carrying that sense of completion with us into the evening.

That evening, we walked together to a farewell dinner at an elegant restaurant named Welten—a German word meaning “worlds”—an apt setting for reflection. We revisited the worlds we had crossed—from lowland dry forest to cloud forest on volcanic slopes to highland lakes—and the cultural experiences that gave those landscapes meaning, deepening our connection to a country layered in history and alive with tradition. We shared favorite moments and memorable birds, the conversation moving easily between laughter, stories, and quiet appreciation for all we had experienced together.

We also said goodbye to Dave, who would not be joining the extension, heading instead to meet his Rotary Club for philanthropic work—a fitting continuation of his own journey.

We toasted the experience, glasses raised—some filled with a complimentary pour from the restaurant: Zacapa, Guatemala’s celebrated aged rum, distilled from sugarcane and matured at high elevation through a system of blended barrels that imparts a smooth, layered character, with notes of caramel, vanilla, and a hint of spice.

By night’s end, the main tour had come to a close—its multifaceted richness carried forward in memory, shared experience, and the quiet satisfaction of time well spent in a remarkable place.

Fri., Mar. 20 Antigua | Guatemala City

After breakfast, Dave remained in Antigua, where he would meet his Rotary group, and the rest of us returned to Guatemala City for the Tikal extension.

A short flight carried us north to Flores, and notably, Roland continued with us, bringing continuity and deep regional knowledge into this next phase of the journey.



Tikal Post-tour Extension

Fri., Mar. 20 Flores | El Remate | Tikal National Park

From Flores, we met our driver Chindo and transferred toward Tikal, stopping for lunch at El Remate along the eastern edge of Lago de Petén Itzá.

Out on the lake lies the island of Nojpetén—today the site of modern Flores—the last independent Maya stronghold. While much of the Maya world fell to Spanish conquest in the 16th century, the Itza Maya here resisted for nearly 170 years. It was not until 1697 that Spanish forces finally subdued the city, making it the last major Indigenous polity in the Americas to fall—a reminder that the story of conquest was far from swift or uniform.

Our lunch setting at El Remate was idyllic—wetlands, open water, and forest edge—and it quickly produced a suite of new species for the trip. A Limpkin moved deliberately along a swampy margin, probing for apple snails, its specialized bill perfectly adapted for extracting them from their shells.

A Pied-billed Grebe drifted nearby, occasionally diving, then resurfacing with its distinctive call—a hollow, gulping *kuk-kuk-kow-kow-kow*, like water being pumped through a hollow vessel, or a small engine struggling to turn over—an oddly mechanical sound that carried cleanly across the still water.

Purple Gallinules moved through the vegetation, including a chick—impossibly long-toed and already navigating the swampy world it had hatched into.

Nearby, Northern Jacanas stepped lightly across floating vegetation, their elongated toes spreading their weight with remarkable efficiency. In wetlands that seem impassable, they move where others would sink. The jacana family is known for its polyandrous breeding system: females—larger and strongly territorial—maintain territories that encompass multiple males. Each male tends a clutch, incubating the eggs and caring for the young, an inversion of the more familiar avian pattern.

Farther out on the lake, Neotropic Cormorants gathered in numbers, joined by Laughing Gulls and Royal Terns moving over the water.



Near the restaurant, feeders added another dimension—Blue-gray Tanagers glowing in the light as we enjoyed fresh fish tacos and other local dishes.

From El Remate, we continued toward Tikal, stopping along the roadside to search for birds in the surrounding forest. A Mayan Antthrush called from deep in the understory. We worked for it, but despite our efforts, it remained unseen—a bird more often heard than observed.

Other species were more cooperative. White-necked Puffbirds gave excellent looks, perched quietly for prolonged study. A male Red-capped Manakin provided one of the day's highlights—its brilliant red cap and black body striking in the dim forest. Though we did not witness its famous courtship display—the rapid, sliding “moonwalk”—it stood as a reminder of the remarkable and often elaborate mating behaviors found among manakins.

By late afternoon, we arrived at Jungle Lodge, situated within Tikal National Park.

The lodge has a long history, originally established to support archaeologists working at the site. Today, it offers an opportunity to stay within the park, surrounded by forest, with the ruins just beyond.

Tikal was once one of the great city-states of the ancient Maya world—a powerful center of politics, culture, and architecture. At its height, it supported tens of thousands of people, its temples rising above the canopy—a landscape shaped as much by human hands as by natural processes.

As evening settled in, the forest grew louder. Geoffroy's Spider Monkeys—also known as Black-handed or Central American Spider Monkeys—called from nearby trees, their voices carrying through the canopy. Unlike many parts of their range where hunting pressure has made them scarce and wary, here they are protected, and their behavior reflects it—visible, vocal, and at ease in the presence of people.

These are extraordinary primates: long-limbed and highly agile, with elongated fingers and a reduced or absent thumb, an adaptation for brachiation—moving fluidly through the canopy. Their prehensile tail functions like a fifth limb, capable of supporting their full body weight as they reach, grasp, and swing. Social, intelligent, and wide-ranging, they are among the most charismatic mammals of the Neotropical forest.



And then, after dinner, as we walked back toward our rooms, movement in the trees overhead stopped us in our tracks.

A Northern Tamandua.

An anteater moving deliberately along a branch, its curved claws and elongated snout unmistakable. Our local guide, Byron, mentioned he had seen them only a handful of times in years at Tikal; Roland was equally astonished. Word spread quickly, and several members of the group returned from their rooms to share the moment.

This arboreal anteater feeds primarily on ants and termites, using powerful forelimbs to tear open nests and a long, sticky tongue to extract its prey. Despite its strength, it moves through the canopy with quiet precision—a shy denizen of the rainforest.

It was an unexpected encounter—one of those moments that cannot be planned, only received.

At first light, the ruins would offer another.

Sat., Mar. 21 Tikal National Park

We left well before sunrise, carrying packed breakfasts. Roland and Byron had arranged for us to be driven into the park, and from there we climbed in darkness toward the top of Mundo Perdido—the “Lost World.”

The name dates to early archaeological work, when this section of Tikal, separated from the central core by dense forest, appeared isolated and enigmatic. We now know it as one of the oldest ceremonial complexes in the city, centered on a large pyramid and an eastern platform likely used to track the sun’s position at key times of year.

We ascended the steep staircase in near silence and emerged at the top into open sky.



Above us, the constellations were sharp and complete. The Summer Triangle—Vega, Deneb, and Altair—hung high overhead, a luminous geometry against the darkness. To the north, the Big Dipper pointed toward Polaris. It was one of those rare mornings when the sky feels fully legible.

Roland noted how uncommon such clear dawns are at Tikal—and then realized the timing.

The vernal equinox.

An equinox occurs twice each year, when the sun crosses the celestial equator and day and night are nearly equal in length. This one—vernal, marking the beginning of spring in the Northern Hemisphere—held deep significance for the ancient Maya. Their calendars, agriculture, and ceremonial life were closely tied to solar cycles, and architectural complexes like Mundo Perdido are aligned to track the sun's movement across the horizon. On the equinox, the sun rises due east—an event that would have been observed and understood from this very place centuries ago.

As light built, the forest revealed itself in layers.

Temple IV—also known as the Temple of the Two-Headed Serpent, built around AD 741 under the ruler Yik'in Chan K'awiil—rose above the canopy, a monumental statement of dynastic power and ceremonial authority. From our vantage, we could see multiple temples emerging from the green expanse. For many, the scene carried a familiar resonance—this is the view made famous in the original *Star Wars*, where Tikal stands in for the Rebel base on Yavin 4. The camera looks out from Temple IV across the forest canopy toward the great temples of the central plaza, their stone forms rising from the jungle at dawn, while the Millennium Falcon arrives at this remote outpost.

Then: a species that defines Tikal for birders.

An Orange-breasted Falcon perched on Temple IV—a rare and highly prized raptor in this region, and a defining species of Tikal for birders. We watched as it shifted, took flight across open airspace, and then settled again—an extraordinary encounter.



Parrots moved constantly across the skyline—Red-lored Amazons, White-crowned Parrots, the heavier Mealy Amazons, and Brown-hooded Parrots, the least common psittacid we encountered at Tikal. Keel-billed Toucans crossed at eye level and perched—sometimes several in the same tree—their bills catching the first light.

Below us, two Roadside Hawks attended a nest near Mundo Perdido. A Brown Jay landed repeatedly on the railing—common here, but striking at close range. This was an immature bird, its yellow-orange eyering, bill and legs standing out against its darker, duller plumage—different from adults, and more eye-catching.

For a time, we had the entire space to ourselves—an hour of exceptional birding. When others began to arrive, we shared the experience, setting the scope on the falcon. There was a quiet recognition among all present: this was a rare morning.

We descended slowly, birding our way back and stopping at intervals to observe primates.

Some searched for Scaly-throated Leaf Tosser—heard well, but unseen. In contrast, Slaty-tailed Trogons were abundant—at least eight individuals, an unusual concentration. A male Montezuma Oropendola performed its dramatic bowing display, while a Crested Guan moved deliberately through the trees.

Yucatán Black Howler Monkeys gave voice to the forest, their deep, resonant calls amplified by an enlarged hyoid bone. Nearby, Spider Monkeys moved fluidly through the canopy, their long limbs and prehensile tails allowing effortless travel through the upper layers.

In the Main Plaza, we stepped fully into Tikal's human history. Some climbed Temple II, looking across to Temple I—the Temple of the Great Jaguar—built to honor the ruler Jasaw Chan K'awiil I, whose victory over the rival city of Calakmul marked a turning point in the long-standing network of competing Maya city-states. Warfare, alliance, and shifting power defined this landscape as much as ceremony and architecture during the Classic Period (ca. AD 250–900).

Yet Tikal's story reaches back much further. The site was first occupied as early as the Middle Preclassic (ca. 800–300 BC) and grew steadily in importance over centuries. By the Late Classic (ca. AD 600–850), it was at its height—home to tens of thousands of people, perhaps approaching 100,000 across the surrounding landscape. It requires imagination to see the city as it once was: temples coated in white plaster and painted red, the surrounding forest cleared, a dense and active metropolis rising from the limestone plain.



But between roughly AD 800 and 900, the city entered a period of terminal decline. Monument construction ceased, population dwindled, and the great ceremonial center was gradually abandoned, the forest returning to reclaim the built landscape.

From that vantage atop Temple II, we observed Masked Tityras, oropendola nests swaying below, and Giant Cowbirds parasitizing those nests. Black-crowned Tityras added to the list.

By midday, the heat returned us to the lodge for rest.

After a siesta, we headed back out for an afternoon walk.

Almost immediately, we encountered Olive-throated Parakeets feeding in a nearby fruiting tree. And then, not long after, one of the most unforgettable birds of the trip: Ocellated Turkey.

At close range, it hardly seemed real—iridescent blues and greens, intricate patterning, and those unmistakable ocellated “eye spots” across the tail. Less like something evolved than something imagined, rendered in pigment and ceremony.

For the ancient Maya, this was not just a bird, but a cultural presence—depicted in art, associated with power and the supernatural, and likely woven into ritual life. Standing there with them, it was easy to understand why. Less like a typical bird, more like a vision—something conjured, almost unreal in its intensity.

We spent a long time watching and photographing them—one of the clear highlights of the tour.

Continuing along an old airstrip cutting through the forest, we reached a wetland. A Least Grebe floated quietly, its piercing yellow eyes catching the light. Roland noted that crocodiles are often present here—though none appeared. He joked that perhaps the grebe had chased them off, recounting a story of one boldly confronting a crocodile.

Nearby, a Green-breasted Mango led us to a nest, which we studied through the scope. Then, another moment of brilliance: a Purple-crowned Fairy.



Fairies are real.

One of the most luminous hummingbirds of the trip, it hovered with quick precision—its long, mobile tail flicking as it moved. The purple crown flashed against a clean white underpart and rich green upperparts, a striking combination of contrast and iridescence. Seen not at a feeder, but in the forest, the encounter carried a different weight—more intimate, more earned.

White-whiskered Puffbirds were unusually cooperative, allowing extended views. At one point, we passed a tree that seemed to be growing toucans and aracaris—birds lifting off one by one in a cascade of color and motion.

At a second wetland, we finally found a Morelet's Crocodile. Unlike its larger marine relative, this species is well adapted to freshwater systems and can be found far inland, inhabiting lakes, rivers, and wetlands across the region.

As the day wound down, a Russet-naped Wood-Rail appeared—its red eyes, yellow beak, and long, hot-pink legs unmistakable.

We returned to the lodge as the forest shifted once again toward evening.

Tikal continued to reveal itself—not just as an archaeological site, but as a living, layered landscape where deep time, culture, and ecology remain inseparable.

Sun., Mar. 22 Tikal National Park

Our final full day at Tikal unfolded across the vast grounds of the park—less a single site than a sprawling mosaic of forest, ruins, and clearings, each with its own character.

We quickly added Plain Chachalaca, a new species for the trip, to our list. Not far beyond, we again encountered Ocellated Turkeys, their impossible colors catching the morning light—no less astonishing on a second encounter.



As every birder knows, some of the least appealing human spaces—sewage ponds, dumps, landfills—can produce exceptional birding. We began at one such productive stop: a refuse area alive with Black Vultures. In the dim understory nearby, a standout: a female Great Curassow. In this species, the female's intricate barring can be more visually compelling than the male's stark black-and-white contrast and bright yellow casque. This large, ground-dwelling cracid is increasingly rare across much of its range—and always a privilege to see well.

Turkey Vultures perched nearby with wings spread, drying in the early sun—dark silhouettes against the light, waiting for the first thermals to rise.

We moved among the ruins, pausing at stelae—upright stone monuments carved by the Maya, their surfaces bearing the faces of rulers and the glyphs of time. These were not relics, but records—history fixed in stone.

Then the forest changed.

Alarm calls—Spider Monkeys. Sharp, urgent, reverberating through the canopy.

Moments later, another signal: the clear, ringing call of a Black-throated Shrike-Tanager, cutting through the tension—a sentinel voice.

We were still searching for it when everything broke.

A raptor exploded through the trees—fast, powerful, unmistakable. Wings driving, body cutting cleanly through the understory. We swung to follow, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared.

Then—movement above. A large form dropped from a branch, falling for an instant before catching air and lifting again.

Ornate Hawk-Eagle.

Not one—a pair.

Hunting.



In an instant, it resolved. The monkeys' alarm, the shrike-tanager's call—threads of the same event, a network of signals rippling through the forest. Predator and prey, each responding, each shaping the behavior of the other.

We had not simply seen a magnificent bird.

We had stepped into an interaction—one of the forest's deeper conversations, unfolding in real time. One of the most compelling moments of the trip.

We continued on, adding species—Sepia-capped Flycatcher, Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher, and excellent looks at Northern Schiffornis, a bird more often heard than seen, its distinctive “*heyyyyy, rickee!*” call echoing through Neotropical forests.

After lunch at a restaurant near the ruins, we walked back toward the lodge and encountered a mixed flock—Neotropical residents including Tawny-winged Woodcreeper and several Ruddy Woodcreepers, alongside North American migrants such as Black-and-white Warbler and Worm-eating Warbler. Birds that breed in temperate forests now moving through or wintering in this tropical system—a living connection between continents, carried on wings.

A midday siesta offered respite from the heat. As the afternoon cooled, we set out to explore a different section of the forest.

We stood beneath a Ceiba tree—towering, buttressed, unmistakable. For the Maya, the Ceiba was the Tree of Life, a cosmic axis connecting the underworld, the terrestrial plane, and the heavens. Even without that context, its presence alone commands attention.

Nearby, Spider Monkeys moved through the canopy—fluid, social, and expressive—leaping between trees in what seemed like impossible acts of acrobatics, masters of the forest canopy.

We added more species: a large, bold Green Hermit and the smaller, shyer Stripe-throated Hermit, both associated with shaded forest interiors. A Barred Forest-Falcon was briefly located by Byron, but slipped away before the rest of us could see it, flushed by the sound of a passing motorcycle—a reminder of how thin the boundary can be between forest and disturbance.



Other birds lingered: Ochre-crowned Greenlet, Blue-winged Warbler, Long-billed Gnatwren, and a Red-eyed Vireo—Roland’s first of the year, a migrant moving between wintering grounds in South America and breeding territories in the United States and Canada, a subtle but telling marker of seasonal change.

In the tropics, seasons are not defined by temperature swings or dramatic changes in day length as they are farther north. Instead, they are shaped by rainfall patterns and migration cycles—subtle shifts that nonetheless structure the entire system.

That evening, our last at Tikal, as the light drained quickly—as it does at sunset in the tropics—the forest, now in shadow, settled once more into sound: layered, continuous, alive.

We set out after dark in search of night creatures, with a particular hope of finding tarantulas. It didn’t take long. Just steps from the lodge, along the pathway—there it was: a Mexican Red-rump. A male tarantula, identifiable by the hooks on his front legs—structures used to secure the female’s fangs during mating. Unlike females, which remain near their burrows, males roam widely in search of a mate, making them far more likely to be encountered on trails.

A striking arachnid—and a fitting final encounter, near the same place we had seen the tamandua the night before.

So many extraordinary forms of life in this tropical forest, growing atop the remains of a vanished metropolis.

A fitting close to our time in one of the most remarkable landscapes in the Neotropics—where past and present are deeply intertwined.

Mon., Mar. 23 Tikal National Park | Yaxhá | Guatemala City

After breakfast at the lodge, we left Tikal and headed toward the El Remate area, with a stop at Yaxhá—one of the great Maya sites, far less visited than Tikal and more powerful for its quiet.

Before reaching the ruins, roadside birding proved excellent. A Yucatán Flycatcher gave us a brief but satisfying look—an endemic of the Yucatán Peninsula region, closely tied to these limestone lowland forests.



At a small stream, we watched an American Pygmy Kingfisher perched low before dropping to the water. Soon after, we added Green Kingfisher and Belted Kingfisher—three species in quick succession, each occupying a slightly different niche along the same watercourse.

Yaxhá unfolds across a broad landscape of forest, plazas, and elevated structures. Less crowded and less compressed than Tikal, it invites a slower pace.

A flowering tree near the ruins held Red-legged Honeycreepers, their saturated colors vivid against the green. Nearby, a Pale-billed Woodpecker gave excellent views. The largest woodpecker in the region, it belongs to the same genus as the likely extinct Ivory-billed Woodpecker, long known as the “Lord God Bird”—a nickname inspired by the astonished exclamations of those who encountered it in the wild.

We stepped into a ball court and paused, imagining the space alive with motion—the heavy rubber ball in play, struck without hands, driven by hips and shoulders along the sloping walls.

The Mesoamerican ballgame was far more than sport. In Maya cosmology, it echoed the story of the Hero Twins in the *Popol Vuh*, their descent into the underworld and triumph over the forces of death. Here, play and ritual merged, the movement of the ball reflecting cycles of life, death, and renewal. In some contexts, the game was linked to ritual sacrifice—though not in the simple “loser dies” narrative often repeated. Instead, sacrifice may have involved elite captives or participants in specific ceremonial events, making the game a symbolic reenactment of cosmic struggle, political power, and renewal.

From the acropolis, some of us climbed to the top of a pyramid and looked out across the Maya Biosphere Reserve.

From that vantage, the scale becomes clear.

Forest stretching north toward Mexico, across Guatemala, and into Belize—the largest remaining tropical forest systems in the Americas outside the Amazon. Yet it is not untouched wilderness. The Maya shaped this landscape profoundly—clearing forest, cultivating useful tree species, and managing water and soils. What we see today is, in many ways, a regrown forest layered over an ancient human footprint.



After the Classic Maya collapse—roughly between 800 and 900 CE—the forest reclaimed these cities for nearly a thousand years. The ruins remained known to local Maya communities, but were largely absent from the broader world until their wider “rediscovery” in the 19th century.

Today, the Maya Biosphere Reserve stands as one of the most important conservation areas in Central America—vast, complex, and still teeming with life.

We had lunch at a lovely lakeside restaurant.

As soon as we arrived, a male Gartered Violaceous Trogon greeted us—brilliant, composed, and unmistakable. Nearby, a male White-collared Manakin added a burst of energy.

Then, at the water’s edge: a massive Morelet’s Crocodile, perhaps fourteen feet long, held our attention. At first it seemed almost unreal in its stillness—until it moved, closing its jaws with quiet force. A delicate damselfly settled atop its fanged jaw—an intimate, improbable moment.

While eating lunch, the birding continued. A Wedge-tailed Sabrewing—a large hummingbird of lowland forest—provided a final flourish.

By afternoon, we made our way to the airport in Flores and flew back to Guatemala City.

We returned to the Tikal Futura Hotel—back where the journey had begun, a modern space of glass elevators and the hum of a large city. That evening, over our final dinner, we shared favorite birds and moments—each of us carrying a different version of a shared experience.

As the journey came to a close, what lingered was not just a list of species or places, but a sense of continuity—landscapes shaped by deep time, cultures that have endured and adapted, and ecological systems still thriving as they have for millennia. From volcanic highlands to lowland rainforest, from ancient ruins to a modern city, each layer revealed something essential about Guatemala—and about the nature of travel itself: that its deepest value lies not in checking places off a list, but in recognizing the connections that bind them, unfolding less as a straight line than as a cycle—echoing the Maya understanding of time. What we experienced was not a sequence of destinations, but a connected whole.



Tues., Mar. 24 Guatemala City

Morning departures came quietly.

Taxis, flights—the mechanics of travel reasserting themselves.

But what lingered was not the logistics.
It was the layering.

Dry forests alive with motmots and parakeets.

Highland forests where Pink-headed Warblers moved through filtered light.

Cloud forests where tanagers and trogons emerged from mist.

Lakes framed by volcanoes, holding both beauty and geologic force.

Ancient cities rising from the jungle, their stones aligned with the movements of sun and sky.

And everywhere, birds—threading these places together.

Guatemala reveals itself as a convergence: of tectonics and climate, of culture and ecology, of past and present.

And, as always, just as important as the places and wildlife are the people we share them with. This group came together quickly and traveled well—curious, engaged, and generous with one another. That dynamic becomes part of the experience, shaping how each place is encountered and remembered.

In the end, what remains is not a checklist, but a sequence of moments—some quiet, some extraordinary—held together by attention.

A journey measured not only in distance, but in the depth of seeing.

Group photo above Antigua (Stephen Grace - SG), Crested Guan (SG), Tikal Temple I (SG), Guatemala City and Volcán de Agua (SG), Turquoise-browed Motmot (Anne Pierce - AP), Marine Blue (AP), Los Tarrales Natural Reserve (SG), Great Kiskadee (SG), Central American Agouti (SG), Yellow-winged Tanager (SG), Golden-fronted Woodpecker (female) (SG), Lesson's Motmot (SG), Black Headed Saltator (AP), Queen's Wreath (AP), Yellow-faced Grassquit (SG), Gray Fox (SG), Los Tarrales Natural Reserve (SG), Lesser Nighthawk (AP), White-throated Magpie-Jay (SG), White-bellied Chachalaca (SG), Squirrel Cuckoo (AP), San Juan La Laguna (SG), Ruth at Flor de Pericón Women's Weaving Cooperative (SG), San Juan La Laguna (AP), White-fronted Amazon

(SG), Chichicastenango (SG), Cementerio de Chichicastenango (SG), View of Volcán Tolimán from Volcán Atitlán (SG), Volcán Atitlán Horned Guan Hike (SG), Wine-Throated Hummingbird (AP), Woman on 25 Centavos Coin at La Iglesia Parroquial Santiago Apóstol en Santiago (SG), Lago Atitlán (SG), Northern Pygmy Owl (AP), Orchid Cactus (AP), Pink Headed Warbler (AP), Iglesia de la Merced (SG), Antigua (SG), Arco de Santa Catalina (SG), Rufous Sabrewing (SG), Blue-throated Motmot (AP), Cooking Class (SG), All smiles! (Trisha Baker - TB), Parque Central de Antigua (SG), American Barn Owl (SG), Arco de Santa Catalina (SG), White-eared Hummingbird (SG), Posada de Don Rodrigo Hotel (SG), Yellow-throated Euphonia (SG), White-necked Puffbird (SG), Northern Tamandua (SG), Tikal Temple IV (SG), Roadside Hawk (SG), Tikal Temple IV (SG), Indigo Bunting (AP), Group Photo at Mundo Perdido (SG), Geoffroy's Spider Monkey (SG), Keel Billed Toucan (AP), Ocellated Turkey (SG), Tikal Temple I (SG), Ceiba - Mayan Tree of Life (SG), Gartered Violaceous Trogon (SG), Pale-billed Woodpecker (SG), Morelet's Crocodile (SG), American Pygmy (AP), Yaxha (SG), Snail Kite (AP), Yaxha (AP), White Collared Manikin (AP)